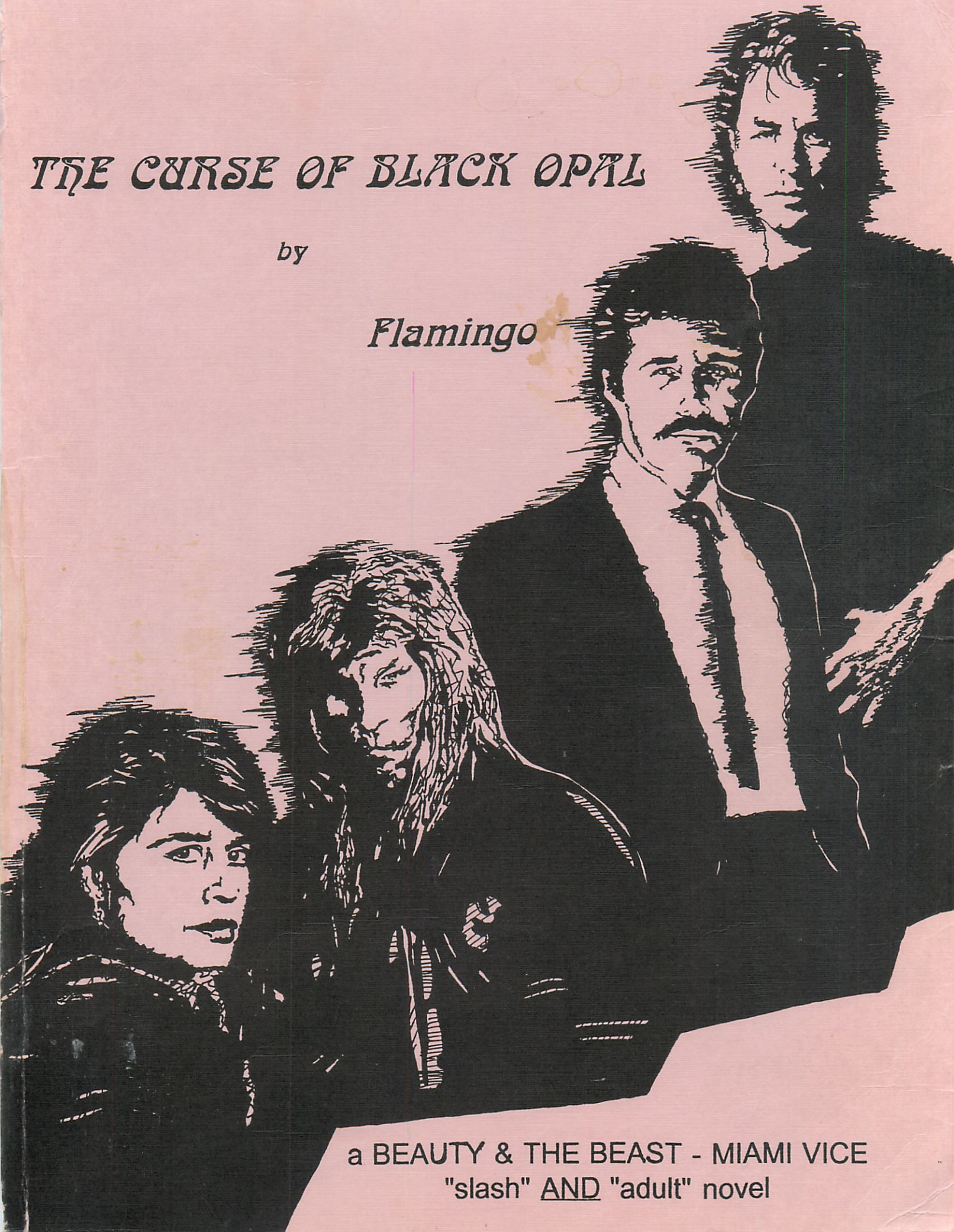


THE CURSE OF BLACK OPAL

by

Flamingo



a BEAUTY & THE BEAST - MIAMI VICE
"slash" AND "adult" novel



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Two cents... and five years... from the editor...

First, I want to express my extreme and undying admiration for Flamingo. She is one persistent, dedicated, hard-working lady! Despite other writing commitments and sick baby birds, despite cruel weather and long years of working on this novel, she has not only persevered with the project, but triumphed in the beauty of the final product.

This is one superbly excellent story.

Two miracles were produced by Flamingo in this novel: 1-Once again, she made me like Rico Tubbs (NOT an easy thing to do!) and, 2-she turned the usually simpering Catherine Chandler into a strong, independent, admirable, likeable woman who can stand up to anyone, even Father, Martin Castillo and Sonny Crockett! To my mind, there isn't a single whine or whimper that passes Catherine's lips in this novel; a rarity in B&B fandom, indeed!

For those of you unfamiliar with either BEAUTY & THE BEAST or MIAMI VICE, Flamingo has explained and described both universes in such detail that you'll slip right into the visuals with no difficulty. But for those who want faces to put to the characters you may not know, a list of who played whom is below.

Last, but never least, I have to thank Alexis Fegan Black for her typesetting skills. Without her, THE CURSE OF BLACK OPAL would be over 400 pages long and would have cost you all of next year's zine budget! Despite being out of fandom and fully occupied with her own writing projects, Alexis found the time to help me out in taming this lovely beast. The novel would not exist without her.

I hope you all enjoy THE CURSE OF BLACK OPAL. I've read it over and over and still am not tired of a single moment of it. I certainly hope, when you're finished, you can say the same!



Dovy Blacque

All comments are welcome, encouraged and will be passed along to Flamingo or you may write to Flamingo directly at the address at the end of her Afterword.

The Cast

Diana Bennett: Jo Anderson
Elliot Burch: Edward Albert
Martin Castillo: Edward James Olmos
Catherine Chandler: Linda Hamilton
James "Sonny" Crockett: Don Johnson
"Father" (Jacob Wells): Roy Dotrice
Jack Gretskey: Dean Stockwell
Joe Maxwell: Jay Acovone
Mouse: David Greenlee
Rico Tubbs: Philip Michael Thomas
Vincent: Ron Perlman

JUST A LITTLE NOTE FROM YOUR SPONSOR

As Elliot Burch learns in this story, in this life, timing is everything. So, a word about the timing of this twisted tale.

In the *MIAMI VICE* universe, the events of this story take place after the first season two-parter "*Golden Triangle*" and the second-season two-part opener "*Prodigal Son*", but several months before the second season episode "*Bushido*". For those who might be unfamiliar (or just fuzzy) about the events in those episodes, "*Triangle*" introduces Castillo's ex-wife, and the events of the massacre at Mai Sa, while "*Prodigal Son*" takes Sonny and Rico to New York for the *first*, but not *last*, time. (The significance of "*Bushido*", to those unfamiliar with it, will be discussed later. You wouldn't want to ruin the surprise, would you?)

As far as the *BEAUTY AND THE BEAST* universe is concerned, events are not as cut and dry. I propose that the story takes place near the end of first season, so, let's just ignore the last episode of that season. Consider it an alternate universe tale. I know that the "years" in real time do not match up.

How Martin Castillo came to be a Tunnel Dweller in my mind happened as I watched reruns of *VICE*. In the episode "*Bushido*", a CIA agent prods Castillo on his mysterious past, and how he and Jack Gretskey have no backgrounds to check after a certain point in

their lives. The agent wondered why that was, and as he did, I suddenly *knew*. Of course they had no background — because they'd grown up in the Underground with Vincent and Father. It made such perfect sense, I couldn't shake it. Maybe with some decent therapy....

This one's for all the mad Miamians and New Yorkers (in spirit) who encouraged me on this bizarre project, read a thousand drafts and flogged me into finishing it. You know who the guilty parties are.

Thank you to Dovyta who offered to publish this behemoth on the strength of two chapters. I'd always imagined this odd story would spend its life as a dog-eared manuscript being passed around to a select few. You were its advocate when everyone else was saying, "a crossover between *what* two universes?"

*What we can do
Is to try something new
If you're crazy, too....
— Triad — Jefferson Airplane*

Enjoy. I did.

Flamingo

"We checked it. You guys go back. You go way back. To the Golden Triangle. To Cambodia. Further. But the real funny thing is that neither one of you even existed before VietNam. You just drop out of sight, right out of the computer, even deep background.

"Why don't you tell us about that — ?"

CIA agent Carter addressing Lt. Martin Castillo
about his past relationship with Jack Gretskey
in the *MIAMI VICE* episode Bushido.

PROLOGUE

*Give me more love, or more disdain;
The torrid or the frozen zone
Bring equal ease unto my pain;
The temperate affords me none:
Either extreme, of love or hate,
Is sweeter than a calm estate.*
— Mediocrity in Love Rejected
— Thomas Carew

Catherine Chandler fumbled with her keys, struggling to open the four complicated locks on her apartment's front door. "Damn!" she swore at the portal impatiently. *I told him I'd be home long before nine. Suppose he doesn't wait?* Damn! The petite blonde woman dropped the keys in her haste, finally realizing that if she removed her heavy winter gloves, she'd have more dexterity. She grabbed the expensive leather with her teeth and yanked the glove off. *Okay, she told herself, unlocking the fourth deadbolt, he knows I'm out here. He'll wait. He'll wait.*

She flung open the door, threw her overstuffed briefcase onto one of her pale sofas and jogged through her bedroom to the French doors that led to her balcony. Yanking them open, she stepped onto the open-air terrace with its eighteenth floor view of Manhattan. Her face was flushed, her heart expectant.

"Of course I'd wait," a familiar, husky voice said from the shadows.

Grinning, she grappled the massive, cloaked figure in a ferocious hug. "Thank god you're here. I just had to see you tonight. It's been two weeks, Vincent!"

His arms encircled her, his warm, softly furred face pressing against her sandy blonde hair. His breath blew against her ear as his own long, blond mane fell around her face. "I've missed you as well, Catherine. Terribly."

She pulled back slightly to look into his leonine features. His feline flat nose and the split lip that couldn't quite hide his powerful fangs might be terrifying to strangers, but to Catherine, he was beautiful. "I'll bet you've been here for hours. And it's freezing!"

The corners of his wide-muzzled mouth turned up in its unique, odd smile, the tips of his fangs glinting in the city lights. "It's been — bracing. I didn't mind the wait. I could *feel* you thinking of me."

She smiled as he referred to the unique mental "bond" they shared — a bond that had developed after Vincent had saved her life over a year ago.

"The closer you came to your home, the more you thought of me. Those warm thoughts chased the chill away."

"If that's the case, then the last few minutes must've singed your eyelashes!" she joked. A sudden gust of bitter winter air swirled around them and she flinched. It was only twenty degrees and dropping. December in New York could be bitter, and these last few days had been terribly cold. "Vincent — won't you come inside?"

He looked away and tensed. The balcony had become, over the last year, their refuge from both their

worlds — worlds that were alien to each other. Vincent lived Below, in the extensive subterranean tunnels that twisted endlessly below the streets of New York. Catherine lived Above, in the city itself. The balcony that ran the width of Catherine's apartment, with entrances off her bedroom and dinette, was neutral territory, belonging to them alone. For Vincent to leave the balcony and step *inside* was to enter her world. It was something he never did easily.

"It's so cold out here," she said rapidly, sensing his reluctance.

"And you haven't had any supper yet," he realized. "I should go."

"No!" she said, firmly. "Don't! Please. I'll make us some soup. I'm starved, and I'll bet you are too after standing out here. It's going to be a long winter, Vincent. We can't spend all of it on this cold balcony."

He paused for an interminable moment, then finally conceded with a small smile. "Some hot soup would be welcomed," he agreed and she grinned again.

"What caused your delay?" he asked casually as he entered the apartment cautiously. He always moved so carefully here, Catherine noted, as though he were stepping on eggshells — as though he were only seconds away from disaster.

"It's this terrible case we're working on," she said, moving to her freezer. She'd made a hearty vegetable soup just a month ago and had the foresight to freeze the leftovers. That with some cheese and bread — "These illegal arms merchants are organizing and have set up their headquarters in New York."

"The Black Opal," Vincent said, frowning. It wasn't the first time she'd talked to him of the group.

"They're becoming stronger and more unified," she explained. "The last federal agents that went undercover to infiltrate them were killed horribly. Almost all leads have dried up."

"Almost?" he asked as she put the frozen soup in the microwave. He watched her curiously. Vincent always viewed modern conveniences with unabashed interest.

"We've just discovered there are two undercover detectives working out of the Organized Crime Bureau in Miami that have infiltrated the southern branch of the group down there. Moreno, my boss, is going to contact them in the morning, see if they're willing to work with us, give us some help. We don't have much information on what they've accomplished — " She noticed that he was watching her oddly. She pulled out two soup bowls and set them on her counter.

"Miami?" Vincent said, with a strange expression. "Where in Miami? What precinct?"

"Metro Dade," she said. Vincent knew more about geography than anyone she'd ever met — it was a way for him to experience the world he would never travel — but she found it hard to believe he went to the trouble of memorizing the entire country's police precincts.

"You don't have the names of these officers, do

you?" he asked, plainly curious.

"No. They're undercover. We're contacting their superior."

"And his name?"

She paused. She had a razor sharp memory but the long day had dulled her, and she hadn't communicated with the man herself. "It's Hispanic — uh, Castillo, I think. Yes. Lieutenant Castillo." The microwave beeped and turned off. She opened it and carefully removed the soup, pouring it into individual earthenware cups. "Do you know people in *Miami*?"

He smiled enigmatically. "Yes. As a matter of fact, I do. I know Lieutenant Martin Castillo."

Catherine blinked at him in plain amazement. "How could you know him?" She placed the steaming cups on her dinette table, then sliced the crusty bread and placed it and the cheese on a board before taking the seat beside Vincent.

"Martin grew up Below," he said quietly, remembering back. "Like Devon, he's my brother. He left us when he was quite young, though." Vincent looked through the French doors and out onto the brilliantly lit, cold city. "He and Father... had a disagreement. But he's always kept in touch with us. I haven't seen him in many, many years."



"It's nearly one a.m.," Vincent murmured into Catherine's hair as they embraced on her couch in front of a small fire. "I really must leave. You're so tired. You should sleep now."

She smiled and burrowed against his broad chest, wishing he would stay, wishing she could just drift off to sleep in the safety of his powerful embrace. She knew he could "hear" her wishes and looked up to see his reaction. He smiled at her as if to say "some day," and gently moved away. "I'll return soon," he promised as he stood, pulling her up with him.

"I'm so busy these days," she said, regretfully. "I'm afraid 'soon' won't be soon enough for me." She held onto his arm as they walked through her bedroom to the French doors.

Before stepping into the cold, he looked at her one

last time, his eyes traveling over her as if to memorize her every feature. "Catherine," he whispered huskily, and she could feel a thousand unspoken things in that one word, as he again pulled her into his arms and hugged her tight to his chest.

She squeezed her eyes shut, willing him to stay, knowing it was impossible, but wanting it all the same. When she opened her eyes again, the first thing she noticed was the nearness of her own bed. She fastened her gaze on it. In a sudden rush of fantasy, she could feel him lifting her, carrying her to it, placing her on it so very gently —

"Catherine." His deep voice jerked her back to reality.

She gazed into his blue eyes, her own deep green ones glittering with wanting and embarrassment. Of course, he knew how she felt. He always knew.

"Vincent," she whispered softly. "Why don't we ever talk about this?"

He touched her mouth with one furred finger. "Don't, Catherine. It's been such a lovely evening."

That was why he dreaded coming into her home, she knew. There was no enticing bed on the balcony. There was safety on the balcony. She swallowed.

"I love you, Vincent," she sighed. *And I want you, she thought. Why can't we talk about this? Don't you want me?*

He winced visibly and turned his head away.

"I'm sorry," she said, even though she wasn't sure why or for what. It *had* been a lovely evening. She didn't want it ruined now. "Will you come back soon?"

"I'll try," he promised. "Will *you* not work so hard?" He smiled again gently, but there was a bittersweet quality to it now.

"I'll try," she replied, and returned his smile.

He opened the balcony doors and left, and the harsh cold that gusted through the bedroom drove out all the warmth he'd brought to her home.

Catherine turned away from the view of the cold, bright city and faced her empty bed with a hollow sadness.

*We close a circle by means of our gazes,
and in it the tangled tension fuses white.*

— On Love and Other Difficulties — Rainer Maria Rilke

CHAPTER ONE: THE BLACK OPAL

*You had something to hide
Should have hidden it, shouldn't you?
The Policy of Truth — Depeche Mode*

"So," Detective James "Sonny" Crockett concluded, glancing at his notes, "Cooper and Burnett will try to set up a meet for later this week, but I doubt if they're gonna bite. These mouth-breathers are only an offshoot from the main Black Opal organization. Their big boss in New York wants to meet *our* main money man. If we could produce that mythical person, we might get inside the national network. Otherwise —" His intense green eyes looked over at his lieutenant, waiting for his input.

Martin Castillo frowned, considering the information. He looked around the featureless strategy room at his top detectives, interested in anything they might have to say.

"It's awfully ambitious," Switek warned from the other end of the table. "These guys are no light weights. We haven't been able to run a successful tap on their lines, or pick up anything good on the directional mike, despite using state of the art equipment. We start messing with their national network, we could be in over our heads, and *without* adequate surveillance."

His partner Larry Zito agreed. "They've got heavy duty jammers, stuff we can't override — must be Pentagon issue. Love to know where they're getting it."

"The trouble is, these guys know Cooper and Burnett are small time," Ricardo Tubbs, Sonny's partner, said, referring to their cover identities. "Now that they've started getting direction from New York, they only want to deal with the *big* money. They've set up a national network by terrorizing every other small time arms dealers on both coasts over the last year. Any time someone does something they don't like, they find a bomb planted under their butts. But if we could get in —"

"It's so dangerous," Gina Calabrese said quietly. "I mean, these guys are *crazy*. They've tortured and killed anyone that's gotten in their way. This should be the feds case, anyway. We're in over our heads."

She was right, Martin knew. But the last operators the feds had sent in had been blown to smithereens in their own car. They'd barely been able to find enough to bury. After their deaths, the Black Opal had proudly taken credit for the bombing and sent glossy photos of how the agents had been sadistically tortured first.

"Well, we can't just walk away from it now," Trudy Joplin remarked. "We've put so much work into this, and we're in too deep. But if we just bust these guys

on a small buy, the department's gonna be marked. We'll *all* be wearing those funny beepers Larry and Stan made for Sonny and Rico." She was referring to the vibrating detonator detectors that the two detectives had been wearing on their hips since this undercover operation began a month ago. They looked like nothing more than standard phone beepers.

"So, what do you want us to do?" Sonny asked his boss neutrally, his green eyes fastening on Castillo.

Martin released the breath he'd been holding. *What do I want you to do?* he thought at the handsome younger man, his top detective — who was also his lover.

It had been little more than four weeks since Castillo had found himself, against his better judgment, physically and emotionally involved with his senior detective. Their relationship had started six months after Martin had discovered his former wife, May Ying, was not dead as he'd been led to believe, but still alive, and married to another man. It had taken him time to absorb that emotional bombshell, and as he tried to adjust, he'd found himself gravitating towards Crockett's easy warmth, his friendship and understanding.

There were more than a few things about Sonny that reminded the Cuban of his old partner and lover, Jack Gretskey. Sonny had Jack's *joie-de-vivre*, his passion for life, his eagerness to live the moment. He had a lot of Jack's intensity, too. The similarities had helped attract Castillo. But Sonny's openness and obvious willingness to get entangled with a domineering lover with a dark past after that past had caught up with him again pushed their relationship past the nice safe boundaries Castillo usually established with subordinates.

No, Martin had not planned, nor expected, his friendship with Sonny Crockett to lead to his own bed, but it had. And from the moment that had happened, Castillo had suffered regrets. The secret affair compromised the working relationship both between themselves and among their Vice squad partners, it jeopardized their careers, and it placed an unimaginable strain on their private and professional lives. At least, that's what Castillo told himself.

Sonny was far less concerned. But that was Sonny.

It was one of the many things that had drawn the private lieutenant to a man who was as different from him as he'd ever known. The night he and Sonny had discovered their feelings and desire for one another had been a night of intense emotion and sexuality.

Sonny Crockett was not a shadow substitute for Jack Gretskey, that paid assassin, that ronin who had shaped and colored so much of Martin's young life. Sonny was himself, and, while far more principled than Gretskey had ever been, there was a dark side of him as well — the side he called "Burnett" — that had that same dangerous power that Gretskey had. Martin was not only drawn to that darkness, there was something in him that yearned to tame it, conquer it, make it his. It was a part of him he'd fought all his life. He'd never lived easily with his passions.

Castillo knew he'd had no business allowing the relationship with Crockett to develop. He also knew

he was unable to bring himself to end it.

But at times like this, with Sonny teetering on yet another undercover precipice, the Latino had to wonder how he'd ever dropped his guard enough to allow his feelings for the younger man to get so involved. This case, in particular, was turning into one of the most dangerous their Organized Crime Bureau had ever undertaken.

What do I want you to do? Castillo thought worriedly, frowning. *I want you to get a less dangerous job. I want you to spend the rest of your career at your desk. I want you to die of old age in my arms in our bed.*

His dark eyes shifted, caught the copper eyes of Ricardo Tubbs, and Sonny followed his gaze.

As if his life wasn't complicated enough by his affair with his senior detective, this good looking, well-built black man was Sonny's *other* lover.

Rico's relationship with the handsome, bisexual blond detective had begun right before Martin had been put in charge of Metro Dade's Vice squad. It hadn't taken long for the lieutenant to see what was going on, but when he realized Crockett was *also* courting Gina Calabrese, Martin knew that Sonny's rapacious sexuality was another thing he had in common with Gretskey. It might have been because of his years with Jack, but Sonny's hyperdriven sex life didn't bother Martin. Jack had broken him of any feelings of possessiveness years ago.

What *did* surprise him was Rico's attitude. The New Yorker had not only been good-natured about Sonny's attraction to Martin, Castillo was aware the dark detective had actually *encouraged* Sonny to find out how far Martin's interest went. The Latino still didn't understand the New Yorker's motivation, but he was profoundly grateful for the lack of conflict. On the streets, Rico and Sonny were one of the best police teams in all of Miami. They were different enough to compliment each other's strengths and weaknesses, yet similar enough to ad lib any impromptu undercover scenario with little planning. When one of them was hot, the other was cool. When one was emotional, the other scientific.

Martin knew he could rely on the dark detective to act cautiously where Sonny was concerned. It was not as good as being on the streets with Sonny himself, but it was good enough. Rico loved Sonny as unconditionally as Martin did and their mutual concern for the quixotic blond had forged an unusual connection between them — a connection Castillo still found uncomfortable.

Finally, Martin spoke to his team. "I received some new information just before our meeting that I need to evaluate. I want you to hold off on any contacts for now. I'll let you know as soon as I've made a decision." He stood to leave, signaling the end of the meeting. The detectives said nothing, just exchanged glances and filed obediently out of the room.

Once alone in his own office, the lieutenant sat behind his neat, spare, black and gray desk. He slid open a drawer and removed two items. The first was a memo faxed this morning from the New York's District Attorney's office.

The DA acknowledged the work Miami's OCB had

accomplished in their latest operation with the Black Opal arms dealers and requested any information about the dealers Martin might be willing to share. Caches of arms had recently been found around the city, with the dealers own brand of insurance on it — a sensitive electronic detonator strapped to enough explosives to destroy whoever tampered with it. So far, two abandoned buildings had been leveled and two bomb squad experts killed. New York was tense with fear, waiting for the next cache to be found. The DA's office had good reason to believe the Black Opal's leader was centered in Manhattan. The feds were willing to do whatever they could, but everyone knew that right now Martin held all the cards, that he had the only men who were deep inside and who had somehow managed to survive.

Castillo had been studying the memo ever since it first arrived, trying to decide what to do. It wasn't that he didn't trust the New York DA's office — he didn't trust *anyone* when Sonny's life was involved — except Rico.

That's the way things had been between Martin and Jack when Jack had been with the CIA and Martin with the DEA. It was what had kept them alive for so long, limiting their trust to one another. As Martin considered the New York DA's request, his eyes traveled to his other communication.

He opened the small, neat box and took out a long, chatty letter, and touched the leaves of paper covered with a spidery scrawl.

"... It was wonderful hearing from you," part of it read, "and wonderful to know you are still well. I cannot tell you, however, how distressing it was to hear about May Ying. My heart goes out to you, Martin. Heaven knows you've had more than your share of heartache. Please, don't allow this cruel loss to become another excuse for you to wall up your love. Surely, there is someone out there waiting for you...."

Martin smiled wryly at those caring words.

Later on, it read, "...I know it is probably impossible again this year, but it does no harm to ask, and so I shall. Besides, the children *insist* I do. Might you consider coming to New York for the holidays? It's been so very long since we've seen you and...."

But the part of the letter that concerned him was near the end. "... Our contact at the DA's office says that they have no way of knowing where those dealers might cache their dangerous cargo next. The last building that was destroyed was so close, all of us are concerned. I don't know why I'm telling you this, except to share my fears for our children, our community — as if you didn't have enough to worry about in Miami."

There was a knock on his door and Martin looked up to see Sonny, with Rico close behind him. He gestured at them to enter. Tubbs closed the door as Crockett approached the desk.

"Listen, Marty," the detective began, "Tubbs and I were thinking — on this Black Opal meet, maybe we could —"

Castillo held up a hand and handed Crockett the memo. Rico read it over his partner's shoulder.

"So, what are you gonna tell 'em, Lieutenant?"

Tubbs asked.

"*Nothing*, I hope," Sonny growled. "We don't know who might have access to this DA. If there's a leak on that end, this whole building could end up looking like Hiroshima."

Martin leaned back in his chair watching the two men. Suddenly, he knew exactly what to do. He should have thought of this before. He wondered if his involvement with them had begun to cloud his judgment.

"Make arrangements with Switek to take care of the boat," he told Sonny without preamble. "Ricardo, call fiscal and tell them you need an emergency travel advance. Tell them by the time they cut the check, the Commissioner will be calling with approval. You'll need plane fares, a car, and hotel accommodations." He scribbled information on a piece of paper and handed it to Tubbs. "This hotel, specifically. A suite — two bedrooms."

"Hey, partner, good news!" Rico grinned, showing Sonny the name of the hotel. The paper had the word *Plaza* written in Martin's small, neat script. "We're goin' to N'Yawk!"

Sonny shot Rico a venomous look. "New York? Now? It's goddamned *December*!"

"That's why you'll need clothes," Martin said, dryly. "After the arrangements are made, tell your Opal contacts your money man will be in New York ready to deal large. We'll set it up through the DA's office once we get there."

"And who's this money man?" Sonny asked.

"A right wing Cuban liberator," Martin said softly, meeting his eyes, "with serious financial backing from U.S. patriots."

"You?" Sonny asked, surprised. "Marty, this is too dangerous —"

Castillo's eyes flashed angrily as he rose slowly to his feet, hands thrust deep in his pockets. This was just the thing that concerned him about his relationship with Crockett — that they'd allow their personal feelings to get in the way of the work. "Too dangerous for whom?" he asked quietly.

"Hey, partner," Rico said warningly to Sonny, "we're the ones in over our weight. Our chances for survival just increased about a hundred percent." "Sorry, Marty," Sonny said, backing off. "I just — worry."

"I know," Martin said, consolingly. "Let's get together tonight after you've made your contacts and I've set things up with New York. We'll make our plans then. My house, at eleven."

Sonny nodded, then looked sideways at his lieutenant, his green eyes flashing mischievously. "Will we be staying?" he asked brazenly. Rico shot him a look and nudged him. They both knew Martin's standing rule — they were *never* to openly discuss any aspect of their personal relationship at OCB.

But the truth was that Martin had used that and their intense involvement with the Black Opal case to keep Sonny at arm's length. Castillo still hadn't completely come to grips with his feelings for the blond man. As new lovers, they were hardly intimate, having only been together once, and that nearly a month ago. Sonny was chafing at the restraints, at Martin's over-

cautious concerns. This was his way of fighting back.

The lieutenant banked his anger, his black eyes boring into Sonny's green ones.

"I need to know if I should bring a toothbrush," the blond insisted chidingly to Rico, as the black man tried to usher them out of the office before Crockett could make the situation worse. But before Sonny allowed himself to be pulled away, he returned the DA's memo to Castillo's desk. "Hey, Marty, what's this?" he asked, reaching into the small box the second communication had come in. He pulled out something colorful. "Early Christmas present from a secret admirer?" he quipped. Rico took the object from Sonny's hands.

"It's beautiful, Lieutenant," the New Yorker said, handling the lovely multi-colored taper. "Look, it's handmade, Sonny, each color dipped individually. You don't see candles like this anymore. Whoever did it is an artist."

"So, where'd it come from, Marty?" Sonny asked curiously.

Martin turned his back, looking through the glass blocks at the bright Miami day. "The past," was all he said.



"You're really pushin' him, partner," Rico warned later, when he and Sonny drove away from OCB in the black man's big Cadillac.

Sonny clenched his jaw and looked over the side of his lover's car. "Well, what the hell am I supposed to do? I've tried sitting and waiting him out. He's still having trouble dealing with this. With us. If I *don't* push him, he's just gonna ease me out of his life. I can't let him do that."

Rico looked at Sonny askance. He didn't want to provoke the high-strung detective, but felt he couldn't be silent any longer. "He's right about bringing this up at work. If IAD —"

"*Fuck* IAD!" Sonny snapped, angrily. "I'm *sick* of hearing about IAD. Does he really think Internal Affairs has nothing better to do than worry about who's fuckin' who down at OCB?"

"Well, they'd have a helluva time keepin' track of you, Crockett," Rico admonished lightly, looking straight ahead. "In the last week you've been pretty active on the strip, not to mention wearin' my ass out. You only do that when you're unhappy."

"You feeling neglected?" Sonny asked irritably.

"Hardly neglected, but I'll tell you — I'm not real crazy about being part of a *stable*. And I'll tell you something else, lover. It's not going to do much for your relationship with Castillo, if, when you both finally do get back in bed, you give him something more than exhaustion and sweet memories."

That brought Sonny up short. He looked over at his partner, his face drawn. "I hear you," he said grudgingly. "Listen, Rico, you're not part of a stable. What we have together is — special. I love you, man. I mean that."

"I know you do, Sonny," Rico assured him, quietly. "I just wish you could get everything you needed from me, but I know you can't. I've accepted that. I know there's something you need only *Martin* can give you. That's okay with me, but you're going to have to have more patience with him. This last week, especially, you haven't been real discreet. It puts him off, Sonny. You know how private he is. We've been under a lot of pressure lately workin' this Black Opal thing, but you're just going to have to handle it better."

"Okay," Sonny agreed with a tired sigh, as they pulled up outside Rico's apartment. They left the car and walked to Tubbs' place, Rico's loose gait contrasting with Sonny's tense stride. Crockett moved forward, shoulders hunched, hands buried deep in the pockets of his pale pants.

Tubbs didn't like to see Sonny get like this, as tense and edgy as his cranky alligator, Elvis. In the last month, the New Yorker had had plenty of time to question his own judgment for encouraging Crockett to get involved with Castillo. But, damn it, he'd gotten sick of watching the two of them dance around each other day in and day out. Rico had never been the jealous or possessive type — it just wasn't his style. Besides, he figured whatever was meant to happen, would happen. And he cared about the Cuban, not just as his boss, and a damned good investigator, but as a human being who'd had more than his share of heartache. It had never occurred to him that *Martin* might not be able to cope with his feelings for Sonny. It had been so easy for Rico.

But ever since Castillo and Crockett had become lovers, Sonny had been on an emotional roller coaster. Some of Crockett's irritability was no doubt due to his frustration with their lack of progress on the Black Opal case, but Tubbs knew most of it was centered around Castillo. He couldn't believe this whole thing had been his idea. Somebody must've drugged one of his pina colodas.

Suddenly, the blond detective asked casually, "When we get to New York, are you going to call Valerie?"

The last time they had gone to New York, Rico had once again enjoyed a brief affair with the attractive female detective. He'd loved Valerie Gordon once, when they'd both lived in the Big Apple, and part of him still loved her. However, she'd never been able to make a commitment to him. But the biggest surprise to Tubbs had been what he'd discovered about himself when he awakened in Valerie's arms to find that he was about to miss his flight — that Sonny would be going back to Miami without him. He'd found at that moment, that leaving Crockett was simply not possible for him now. He'd felt half-crazed, racing through that airport, jogging up to the desk with his ticket, frantic that the plane had already left — till Crockett sidled up to him with that sly smile that always made him lose all judgment and purred, "Fancy meetin' you here."

Rico looked at Sonny intently. Was his partner now feeling insecure about *him*? "Hadden't had a chance to even think about Valerie. Why? Would you rather I didn't call her?"

Sonny shrugged and looked away, in spite of the fact that his eyes were hidden behind his Ray-Bans. "I don't know. It's just that — last time we went to New York, you nearly stayed."

"Don't even worry about that, Sonny," Rico assured him as they entered his apartment. "Even if I did see Val, it would only be for old time's sake." He wondered if Crockett was on the verge of asking him to be monogamous. So far, neither of them had felt the need for that kind of commitment. "Hey, I'm not leavin' you, Crockett. I told you that before."

Rico went to his refrigerator. "Listen, we won't get a return call from those turkeys for a few hours. Have a cold one and relax."

Sonny nodded as Rico handed him a frosty bottle while the black detective chose a fruit seltzer. They migrated into the bedroom where Crockett made himself comfortable on Rico's double bed, leaning against the headboard. Tubbs started packing things in a bag for their trip. As Sonny downed his beer, Rico watched him, concerned.

"You know," the black man said, "you and Castillo have too much unresolved stuff going on between you. If the lieutenant's that paranoid — justifiably so — about the future consequences of your physical relationship, what's he goin' through about the *emotional* side of it? The two of you are as diametrically opposite as you can get, and there's this huge psychic tug of war going on between you." He gave a short laugh. "And I'm caught in the middle. You've both got to learn to communicate better."

"Tell him that," Sonny said irritably. "Except for that night at his house when he talked about his relationships with Jack Gretskey and May Ying, he doesn't tell me shit. It's like he's scared to let me in too far. He wouldn't even come clean about that candle, and how heavy could *that* have been? I know almost *nothing* about him, but I'm an open book to him."

"You two need more balance in your relationship," Rico agreed.

"What *relationship*?" Sonny said, exasperated. "I thought that's what we were going to have after that first night, but now...? Hey, Rico, you think this is God's way of punishing me for all those one night stands, all those women I never called back?" Before Rico could answer, Sonny was waving the whole issue away. "Fuck it. I ain't worryin' about it anymore. I don't know why I worried about it in the first place. Not when I've got you standin' beside me, buddy."

Rico watched the expression on Sonny's face change. "Crockett, you're lookin' at me the way Elvis looks at a bucket of fish," he complained. "You wore me out last night *and* this morning! I need a break, partner."

Sonny smiled, a feral look on his face. "Gettin' old on me, Rico?"

"Not hardly," the black man said softly, "but I'm beginning to feel like a substitute for who you really want."

The blond detective looked as though he'd been slapped.

"I'll tell you, Sonny, I never expected to have to act

as a marriage counselor between you and your *other* lover, but this stuff you two are puttin' yourselves through is affecting *us*. And we are *not* goin' to New York without resolvin' some of it, or the dynamics between the two of you are gonna end up getting *my* ass blown off." Rico zipped up his bag.

"I hear you," Sonny said, subdued.

Rico sat down beside him on the bed, his annoyance ebbing in the face of Sonny's unhappiness. Crockett looked as dejected as Rico had ever seen him. He slid his arms around the blond.

"I never meant to make you feel like a substitute for *anyone*," Sonny said, contritely, returning the embrace.

"I know," Rico assured him, pushing some stray hair out of the blond's face, "but you gotta find a more reasonable response to your insecurities than trying to screw them away." He leaned over and kissed Sonny tenderly on the mouth. Crockett returned the kiss gently. In spite of his protests, Rico felt his cock stiffen. This did not escape the blond detective's notice, and his green eyes glittered wickedly.

"I told you I wasn't gettin' old," Rico murmured as Sonny captured his mouth again, his tongue forcing its way between Rico's lips. The black man groaned under Sonny's assault, and soon the two of them had fallen back onto Rico's bed, still unmade from this morning's exercise in passion.

Sonny was deftly separating Rico from his clothes and managing to shrug out of his own at the same time. Rico smiled at the double thump their guns and holsters made falling out of the bed. Soon they were nude, relishing the feel of their masculine bodies pressed tightly together, as though they hadn't loved each other for weeks.

It didn't matter how much they hassled each other, or what kind of disagreement they were having. All Sonny had to do was touch Rico, and the black detective responded. Tubbs thought that should probably bother him, but he decided to worry about it at a more convenient time.

Sonny pulled Rico against him as they lay on their sides. The blond's body was shaking with urgency, trembling. Gently, he ran his hands over his lover, as though wanting to be sure he was really there. Lovingly, he took hold of Rico's hard cock and using the bead of fluid sitting on its tip as a lubricant, carefully massaged the dark organ until it was aching, until its owner sighed deliciously. No woman had ever had the effect on Tubbs that Sonny did. "I love you so much, Rico," the blond purred. "I need you."

The New Yorker dug a hand into Sonny's luxurious hair and pulled his mouth to him, kissing him slowly, languorously, as he reached for his partner's manhood with his free hand. Soon the two were stroking each other, playing, teasing and delighting one another. But before long Rico needed more.

He kissed Crockett's ear and whispered huskily, "I need you inside me, baby."

Sonny gasped aloud, and Rico could tell his lover was nearly overcome by the sensuous suggestion. "Oh, *yeah*," he breathed, taut with excitement. Roughly, he pushed the black man over onto his stomach.

"Hey, easy there, partner," Tubbs warned, laughing

nervously at his lover's urgency, "it's been awhile."

"Too long," the Southerner agreed, pulling one of Rico's knees up. He reached for the lubricant they now kept on the nightstand.

"Sonny, slow down," the dark detective warned, reaching back to stroke the blond man's thigh. He could feel an odd tension in his lover's body, an almost frantic need, and began to wonder about his own sense of timing. The older cop could be rough and impetuous when he was tense, but normally Rico could control the situation, diffuse Sonny's heat and slow him down. But this time, Crockett seemed more wired than usual.

Suddenly, a large hand slid between Tubbs' buttocks, massaging his perineum and anus, coating him with lubricant. The familiar, strong hands shook and Rico heard his lover draw in ragged breaths. "Talk to me, baby," Tubbs asked, concerned by Sonny's silence. Crockett usually chattered all through their lovemaking and his gravelly voice excited Rico. The New Yorker missed it now.

Sonny rubbed Rico's anus teasingly, threateningly, and finally said throatily, "I'm achin' for you, man."

The dark detective exhaled in a rush. Then, suddenly, strong teeth captured his shoulder and bit down hard. Rico cried out and bucked just as a slick finger slid inside him.

"Oh, man!" the New Yorker moaned, "Sonny, please—"

"Please, what?" the blond whispered darkly, biting Rico's earlobe, tonguing Tubbs' earring. His hand pumped deeper into the tense ass, as his weight pressed against the black man's back.

Tubbs thrashed under Crockett, protesting the pain. "Don't *hurt* me, baby," he warned through clenched teeth, genuinely worried about his lover's unusually rough behavior.

"Don't *hurt* you?" Sonny repeated, rudely thrusting a second finger into the dark detective.

Rico clawed the bed as the pain rocketed through him. He tried crawling out from under Crockett but the blond leaned heavily against him, holding him in place. Tubbs stiffened all over, which only caused him more pain. Angrily he asked, "Are you gonna make love to me, Sonny, or do you have to *rape* me to get off?"

The Vice cop stopped instantly, the powerful words yanking him back to reality. "Oh, Rico," he breathed, "I'm — I'm *sorry*, man. I don't know what came over me." He pulled away from his lover and fell onto his back, covering his eyes with one arm.

Rico watched him, concerned, his anger dissolving in the face of Sonny's anguish. He was really disturbed now. He'd never seen his lover like this before. With a sigh, he pulled Crockett into his arms. "It's okay, man, it's okay. But I'm telling you, we're not leaving for the Apple till we talk this stuff out."

Sonny gazed at his lover, his jade eyes full of regret. "Why do you even put up with me, Rico?"

The black man kissed his partner's eyes and cheeks tenderly. "'Cause I *love* you, man. I really love you." He'd said that the first time he made love to Crockett over a year ago, only weeks after they'd become

partners. He didn't think Sonny believed him then, and he wasn't sure he believed him now. After his divorce, Crockett's trust in love had been badly shaken. That was okay. Rico was patient. He'd just have to keep saying it till Crockett got it through his thick head that he meant it.

He touched his mouth to Crockett's and felt Sonny kiss him as tenderly as he ever had. Rico couldn't resist the handsome Southerner, couldn't imagine life without him. "Some days, you *are* a head case, Crockett, but you're *my* head case."

He leaned over Sonny's body, and before the cop could stop him, gently took his friend's aching, rigid phallus deep into his warm, pliant mouth. Crockett cried out in surprise, digging his hands into Rico's hair as Tubbs lovingly sucked his lover's tension and inner demons away.

"Oh, Rico, I don't deserve you," he sighed, then wriggled around until he could capture Tubbs' dark, turgid organ between his own lips. The dark detective shuddered as Sonny went down on him. Soon the two of them were moving synchronously, pulling one another closer and closer to climax, their mouths and tongues playing their sensitive shafts like fine instruments, as their hands stroked testicles and thighs and gently teased sensitive perineums.

Sonny whimpered and twitched with need, thrilling Rico. He had to force himself to release Crockett, even though the blond cried out in regret. Pulling his lover up, Tubbs made the blond yield possession of his prize. He'd never known anyone that loved oral sex as much as his partner.

"Rico, no," Sonny protested gently, trying to reconnect with Tubbs' rigid flesh.

"Sonny, listen," the black man breathed, his lungs heaving, "I meant what I said before. I still want you inside me. Don't make me wait anymore."

The Southerner touched Rico's cheek with the utmost tenderness and his eyes glittered. "If that's what you want." Pulling Tubbs into his arms, he kissed him slowly, tenderly, until Rico was helpless with desire.

"Come on, baby," Rico begged.

Crockett's mouth traveled over Tubbs' neck while Sonny's hands teased the dark nipples hidden under Rico's curly fur. The darker man sagged against the Anglo weakly, aching hot. "Sonny, *please!*"

"You gotta want it, Rico," Sonny told him huskily, his hands traveling down Tubbs' body to the handsome, erect shaft rising from the thick, dark hair curling around his groin. Sonny licked his hand, then stroked the bobbing organ with his slick palm. His other hand toyed with Tubbs' scrotum until it shrank against his body. "You gotta want it more than anything. Do you?"

Rico labored for air, struggling to find his voice. "Yes. Yes!"

"I don't know, Tubbs," Crockett said dubiously, sliding his hand back until he was stroking the taut, puckered anus.

Tubbs shivered, his body going limp in anticipation as his lover gently invaded him. Gone was all Sonny's anger, his urgency. This was the man Rico had fallen in love with so long ago, the man he trusted complete-

ly, the only man he'd ever considered yielding to this way.

"Sonny," he groaned helplessly.

Crockett's second finger intruded, and Rico's body opened, taking them in and moving against the incredible pleasure only this man could give him. "Sonny," he hissed, swallowing Crockett's hand as deep as he could, moving rhythmically against those powerful, magical fingers.

"Oh yeah, baby," Crockett breathed, and Rico could hear his intense excitement, could feel his desire building like a storm. He pulled his hand out slowly and Tubbs rolled over onto his stomach. Eagerly, he played himself for his lover's convenience.

The Southerner climbed between Tubbs' strong, welcoming legs. Spreading the dark cheeks, Sonny slathered lubricant on Rico's hidden entrance, then on himself.

Leaning over, Crockett held himself up on one arm then positioned his flaring glans against the New Yorker's tight orifice. Rico trembled. Even though he was frantic with need, this telling moment was always the hardest for both of them. It was as if this one powerful act redefined them as men and as lovers, with every reenactment. As much as they both loved it, it was both ritual and dark magic, too meaningful, too scary.

Rico always expected Sonny to change his mind at this point, and he imagined Crockett expected him to end it, say no, beg off. And part of him wanted to every time. But not the part of him that shuddered and clutched the sheets, and pressed his lips gently against the pale skin of the forearm Sonny used to hold himself up.

"I love you, Rico," the blond whispered, gently kissing his spine. That was the invocation, the special mantra that changed everything, had changed everything between them so long ago. Rico's whole body reacted to that small sentence, sagging in desire, ready to yield, needing to be taken. As if understanding that, Sonny slowly rubbed his silken glans against Tubbs' hypersensitive sphincter.

Rico gasped. "I love *you*, baby — and I want you. More than anything."

Crockett growled in excitement and leaned down to tenderly bite the back of his partner's neck. The intense sensation of that act of possession shot down the black man's spine and he cried out his lover's name as his body opened, blooming for this man. Crockett slid into him in one long, slow, sweet act of ownership and Rico rolled his head and arched his back to meet the powerful thrust. The Floridian groaned low, his mouth nipping the dark neck and shoulders, his tongue tracing paths of hot sensation on the cocoa brown skin. All the while, the older cop surged into Rico's body until resistance forced him to stop. He pulled back just as slow until he was nearly out, then plunged back in again with the same strong, slow, powerful thrust.

"Take it, baby," he grumbled against Rico's ear, "you gotta take it."

"Yes," Tubbs gasped, meeting the assaulting motion with his own. Instinctively, he contracted around the

invading phallus, fighting his possession. His desire hit an insane peak, wanting this more than anything, but his body had its own reservations.

Then Sonny's hands slid under him, against his chest, running through the peppercorn curls there until he found the nubs of Rico's small nipples. The touch of his fingers against Tubbs' sensitive aureoles was more than the dark man could take and his resistance melted as he accepted his sweet invader completely.

Sonny swallowed a sob as he lowered himself to Rico's back, wrapping his strong, lean arms around the New Yorker.

That was what Rico loved best, to feel Sonny's negligible weight blanketing him, to take him deep inside, to be totally enveloped by Crockett's incredible capacity for passion.

Sonny held him, licked him, kissed him, bit him gently, then harder, all the time pumping into him slow and easy, the way Rico loved it. He knew Crockett wouldn't be able to hold his powerful need back forever, but he relished every second that Sonny's control lasted.

"Baby, it's so right, so right," Rico purred, as the blond's fucking grew more intense. His rhythm started to change finally and Rico braced himself. Soon, Sonny's flood of passion would become a tornado and all Rico could do was hold on, a willing sacrifice in its path.

Crockett's hands roved the dark chest, pinching Rico's nipples, tugging the hair there, then finally traveling lower, eventually capturing Tubbs' own aching erection and sensitive testicles.

"No, Sonny, please, no, not that," Tubbs begged, even as he surrendered to the double onslaught. He pumped, masturbating into Crockett's satin grip, as the blond cruelly kneaded Tubbs' tender scrotum. The New Yorker grew frantic from the overload of sensation. "No. No!" he begged.

"Oh yes," Crockett insisted, even as he began to take Tubbs from behind with a power and strength that always amazed the darker man.

The sweet abuse the blond inflicted on Tubbs' groin only made him tighten down harder around his pounding lover, pulling him in deeper, holding him tighter — which was just what Crockett wanted.

With every thrust, the Southerner's glans stroked Rico's prostate, lighting him up inside, convincing him with every stroke that the next one would make him come. Still, he didn't, even though the need was killing him.

"Sonny, end it!" he begged helplessly. "I need it. You gotta end it."

"Oh no you don't, baby," Crockett whispered wickedly, and reared back on his knees, pulling Tubbs erect with him. "Not yet. Not yet. We're not nearly done."

He shoved up into Rico even as the New Yorker knelt, legs spread, arms reaching up over his head to bury his hands in Crockett's hair. "Sonny, Sonny," he gasped as his partner took him ever harder, never tiring as he pumped deeper and deeper into his lover.

Crockett worked Rico's cock like an instrument,

forcing Tubbs to pump against the wonderful sensation of his roving fingers, his big palms milking a pleasure out of him he had never known before. Rico was so hard he ached, fearing that the skin of his cock might split from the strain as he kept humping hard into Sonny's hands while Crockett synchronously took his ass. And the dark, beautiful magic built between them to a frightening, wonderful crescendo.

Soon, Rico forgot where he was, who he was, how he'd gotten here. All his world was Sonny, owning him, taking him, meeting out the most intense pain, and insane pleasure he'd ever had. He gave into it, knowing it would never end, knowing he couldn't last another second.

At last, Sonny's cock swelled larger inside him, stretching him, splitting him in half. He moaned low.

"Now, Rico," Crockett gasped frantically, "give it to me *now*!" Only then did he allow himself to yield to his own desires.

They came almost exactly together, Rico taking Sonny as deep inside him as the blond could go as jets of hot semen splashed his prostate, bathing him in pleasure. Crockett strangled on a roar. Gripping his lover's agonized organ, he used it to pull Rico up hard against him. With one last seductive stroke, Rico gasped and came, fountaining against Sonny's hands and his own chest as Sonny continued to pump him until every last microscopic seed had made its escape. Then they collapsed back down on the bed, gasping, exhausted.

Sonny kissed Rico tenderly where he'd bitten him, and told him he loved him. Before Rico could respond, the blond sagged into sleep, still blanketing his lover. Tubbs quickly followed Sonny into slumber, enjoying the warmth and security of Sonny's body over him.

They dozed for awhile, but finally awoke. Shifting in the bed, Sonny held Rico comfortingly, the two of them just enjoying this time. It was as if they had to ease back into the real world, as if the power of their love was so intense, their every day lives couldn't mesh with it.

Rico wondered if the intense sexual release might help Sonny discuss his conflicting feelings. When he finally kissed the blond lightly and eased out of bed to bring Crockett a post-orgasm beer, he approached the subject again, hoping his lover might be more open after their intense lovemaking.

"Is it just me, Tubbs?" Sonny asked tiredly, after a while. "Am I the problem?"

"Nah, man," Rico assured him. "You're only part. The lieutenant's part, and I am, too. That's why we've got to resolve it together. Like partners."

"I just wish I knew how he felt." Sonny looked meaningfully into Rico's eyes. "I always know how you feel. I just have to look at you. Sometimes it's like we think with the same brain! But Marty —"

"I know how he feels," Rico said quietly.

"How? How can *you* know, when I can't figure him out," Sonny asked, leaning on one elbow.

Rico shrugged. "By lookin' at him, watchin' the way he looks at you, or me. Did you see him give me the eye this morning in the meeting?"

"Yeah, I saw it," Sonny admitted.

"That's his way of telling me to watch out for you, to take care of you."

"I need a baby-sitter now?" the blond asked, his anger flaring hot and quick.

"Sonny, anytime you love somebody you want to wrap them in cotton," Rico explained patiently. "What did you say later on when he told us he was coming to New York. You tried to tell *Martin Castillo* — former DEA agent in the Golden Triangle — that the job might be too *dangerous* for him. You got in trouble treatin' Gina like that. You're lucky he didn't take your head off. You think it's easy on him, watchin' you runnin' deals with these psychos we're workin' while he sits in that office and waits for the call. 'Lieutenant, one of your officers is down, it's your lover, Sonny 'takes-too-many-chances' Crockett.' At least I'm with you most of the time when shit happens. I can back you, stand by you, do what I can to make sure you get out okay. That's why he's comin' to New York."

Sonny looked confused as though he'd missed something.

"He's coming because he *loves* you. He wants to do whatever he can to make sure you *survive* this case." Rico pulled his lover close, Crockett's slim, tanned back resting against Tubbs' lightly furred chest. "After your marriage ended, you must've put a cage around your heart for safekeeping, Crockett. You don't trust your own feelin's anymore, and you sure as hell have no faith in anyone else's. When I tell you I love you, I see the disbelief plain on your face. And you won't let yourself see the love in Castillo's eyes when he looks at you. He loves you so much, it's scarin' him to death."

Rico kissed Sonny's ear and Crockett leaned into it. "How is the lieutenant supposed to love you and keep sendin' you out to do this job? How can he love you yet keep the brass from finding out and busting us off the force? I really feel for him, Sonny. I got the gravy spot — we're with each other all day, and frequently all night. Tell me, in the last month, the month you've been so *neglected* by our boss, have you tried calling him at home, or goin' over there?"

Sonny shook his head. "At first, we were too damn busy every night on this Opal thing. Then as the month went by I got too pissed off to just show up there."

"We've *all* been too busy. But if you had called him, you would've had trouble reaching him. He's been at OCB till all hours, tryin' to stay two steps ahead of the Black Opal. Makin' sure he's doin' everything he can. To keep you alive."

Sonny turned his head to look at Rico. "How come you know all this shit about Marty, and I don't?"

The dark cop shrugged. "Maybe he and I have more in common now. After all, we're both in love with the same man."

Sonny nodded, thinking about what Rico had told him. He glanced back at his friend. "I trust your feelings, partner," he said softly. "And I believe in them. I have to. I trust *you*." Then his green eyes glittered with amusement. "But you really did miss your call-

ing, pal. You *should've* been a marriage counselor."

Rico gritted his teeth and tried to suffocate Sonny with his pillow, just as the undercover phone rang. The two men sobered instantly, as Sonny reached for the receiver.

"Burnett," he said to the Black Opal contact.

We are all outlaws in the eyes of America

In order to survive

We steal, cheat, lie, forge — cut quite a deal

We can be together, you and me....

Outlaws — Jefferson Airplane

CHAPTER TWO: MARTIN'S HOUSE

"I've been alone all the years

So many ways to count the tears

I'll never change

I never will

I'm so afraid of the way I feel

I'm So Afraid — Fleetwood Mac

Martin was pouring hot water into a simple earthenware teapot when he heard the Cadillac pull up into his gravel driveway. He heard a key turn in his door, heard the two men enter. His face showed no emotion, but his heart beat lighter once Sonny was in his home.

"Hey, Marty," the blond detective greeted him, smiling warmly, capturing Castillo's ice-black eyes with his intense green ones.

It had been a long month since Crockett had last been here. Castillo allowed a slight smile to crease his face. He observed the two detectives and decided they must have had time to make love this afternoon. He could think of no other reason why Sonny was so much more relaxed than he'd been earlier.

He envied Rico his daily closeness with Sonny, but he worked hard not to resent him for it. As far as Martin was concerned, his own relationship with Crockett would always have to be secondary to the blond's partnership with Tubbs, the man his life depended on in the streets. Most of the people who knew him now would have been amazed to find the staid lieutenant involved in such a strange triangle. But it was not strange to Castillo — nor was it the first time he'd been so involved.

"Sonny," the Latino said in greeting, "Rico, some tea? Sake?"

"I'll have tea, Lieutenant," Rico said, sitting at the dining room table. Tubbs glanced over at the suitcase by the door. "You're all packed?"

Martin nodded silently, pouring the fragrant tea into a handleless Japanese cup.

"We went over to Property after we made the contact," Sonny said, pouring himself some rice wine. "There was a real dearth of sharp winter wear. Funny, how most of the slime balls we bust aren't prepared for below freezing temperatures. We did find a few items, though. Rico and I took the liberty of picking up some things for you. We've got a voucher for New York's Property division, which the D.A. should sign for us, so we'll be able to complete our wardrobe there."

"Sonny was worried we'd freeze to death before we ever stepped off the plane," Rico teased, grinning. "Wait'll you see what he picked out for *you*."

The lieutenant glanced at the younger man suspiciously.

"You're supposed to be a serious arms dealer," Crockett protested. "The big money man. You gotta look the part! Let me show you." He went to the garment bag he'd brought in, pulling out a heavy black, double breasted cashmere coat trimmed with Persian lamb. Eagerly, Sonny helped Martin try it on. An elegant black cashmere scarf accented the coat and in the pocket were black kangaroo skin gloves.

"And I've got the perfect hat!" Sonny said, opening a box.

Rico, Castillo noticed, had to cover his mouth to keep from laughing. Sonny produced an exquisite, low-brimmed black fedora and perched it on Martin's head at a rakish angle. The Hispanic felt his skin darken in a blush.

"Oh, Lieutenant," Rico snickered, "you look *bad*!"

Martin decided he looked like a refugee from the "The Godfather." He'd consider himself lucky not to be accosted by every animal rights activist in Manhattan.

"Come on, pal, it's *your* look," Sonny assured him, as his boss shrugged out of the items.

"They'll do," the lieutenant agreed, "if Ricardo can keep a straight face during the meet. What happened when you talked to the contact?"

The two detectives relayed the conversation they had had with the Miami branch of the Black Opal. In two days Sonny, Rico, and Martin would meet with the mysterious head of that organization in New York and exchange ten million dollars in cash for a huge cargo of illegal arms. Of course, most of the money would be counterfeit, but if the bust went down as planned, the Opal would never be the wiser. In fact, if things went right, none of the Miami Vice team would even blow their covers. If it went wrong, it wouldn't be just their covers that were blown.

"Plane leaves at noon tomorrow," Sonny said. "At two thirty p.m. we'll be mappin' strategy with the D.A. and the feds. And I'm *still* worried about a leak on that end."

Castillo nodded. He was concerned, too. If they were made, there'd be little chance of their ever seeing warm Miami again. "We'll just have to be careful. We'll carry the beepers at all times. If there's any questions, the deal is off. We can't accomplish anything if we're killed."

They shared more tea and wine and fine-tuned their undercover operation. Finally, they finished their

plans.

"Well, since we've got that out of the way," Rico said, "I think there are a few other details we need to work out."

The Cuban peered at the darker man, confused.

"Rico has ambitions to become the Dr. Ruth of OCB," Sonny warned.

"I told you we were going to iron this out," Tubbs said seriously to the blond man, "and I meant it. I've got a big stake in this operation, mainly my beautiful behind. The two of you have been real edgy with each other lately. It would be to all our benefits to work it out before we hit the Apple."

Martin gazed at his ceramic wine cup. Ricardo was right, but that didn't make it any easier. "This is exactly why personal involvements among staff are discouraged."

"Oh, come on, Marty," Sonny admonished gently. "It's a little late to start quotin' the book at us. And don't think I haven't figured out what you're up to. What'd you think, if you held out long enough, I'd just forget about bein' your lover?"

Castillo gave the tanned man a long suffering look.

"I'm not letting you cut me off like this anymore," Sonny said decisively, before he could add anything. "You've very carefully made sure we're never alone together even for a minute at OCB. Don't you think *that* looks weird? Marty, I can't live on the scraps of your feelings."

"It didn't seem to me you were that concerned," the Hispanic heard himself say tightly, almost against his will. "It certainly didn't slow down your activity level."

Rico gave Sonny a meaningful look.

"I'm sorry about that, Marty," Crockett said sincerely. "I guess I was trying to show you that someone wanted me, even if you didn't."

Martin looked away, realizing how hurtful their actions had been to each other. It disturb him that they could care so much for one another and be so out of touch with each other's needs. Even more disturbing was the way his relationship with Sonny echoed the disastrous one he'd had with Jack. "I was wrong, too. Let's just forget it. Start over."

Crockett nodded and smiled.

"Well, that's a start," Rico said, sounding relieved. "For the record, though, I don't intend to spend the rest of my life patching things up between you two." He caught the lieutenant's eyes. "We've got to be together for this gig in New York, or we'll all be history, with only little bits of ourselves left to be planted in the Tomb of the Unknown Cop. We've got to take care of each other."

The Latino nodded slightly, recognizing the wisdom of Rico's words.

"You never answered my question this morning," Sonny said to his lieutenant.

Castillo turned to him, confused.

"Are we staying tonight?" Crockett asked softly. "I brought my toothbrush."

Before he could answer, Rico chimed in. "I'm not. I need a good night's *sleep*, in my own bed." He gazed at Sonny meaningfully. "Alone. Besides the two of you have business to resolve. I'll meet you on

the plane." He stood to leave.

"Well," Sonny asked his lieutenant pointedly, "am I staying?"

Castillo inclined his head, while watching Rico curiously, surprised at how much concern he'd shown for Sonny and *Martin*.

"I'll come out to the car with you, pal," Sonny said to his partner. "I need to get my bag."



In the driveway, Sonny removed his things from the Caddy. Placing them on the ground, he took the black man in his arms. "I don't deserve you, Rico," he murmured and kissed his lover warmly on the lips.

"You got that right," said the dark detective with a grin as he returned the kiss.

"You okay?" the blond asked solicitously.

"You kidding?" said Rico. "I meant what I said. If you came home with me now you'd have me up all night. I need my beauty rest, partner. And that man needs you bad. I'll see you on the plane, and, uh, don't hurt yourself tonight."

Sonny laughed easily and waved as his partner drove away.



"You want to know how it will be
Me and him —
Or you and me
Triad — Jefferson Airplane

When Crockett reentered Martin's home, he seemed unsure of how to behave now that Rico was gone. Was this the way it was always going to be between them, Martin wondered — tense and uncomfortable, unless they were in bed together? How long could any relationship last that way?

He cleared away Rico's cup and emptied the earthenware teapot as Sonny watched his every move. His throat tightened. The Vice cop took another sip of the rice wine, and made a face as it burned its way down. The Cuban approached to refill his cup.

The two men stood silently, observing one another.

Finally, Sonny whispered, "I missed you."

Martin touched his face gently, his eyes fastening on jade ones. "And I, you."

"Marty, are we only going to get together *once* a month?"

"I don't know," the lieutenant admitted. "When I'm near you I have trouble thinking straight."

"You'll *have* to think straight for the next few days," Sonny reminded him. "Our lives will depend on it." He moved closer, almost leaning on Castillo, as though the darker man's desire pulled him like a magnet.

Castillo's mouth twitched in a smile. "I'll be highly

motivated in New York."

Sonny moved against him, brushing his lips lightly against the Cuban's mouth, obviously enjoying the rough touch of the mustache on his upper lip.

The contact was electric for the Latino, and he closed his eyes, slowing his breathing with an effort.

"Who am I sleeping with in New York?" Sonny rasped against his lover's mouth.

Castillo's eyes snapped opened. "With *Rico*," he said firmly and moved away.

"Every night?" Sonny asked teasingly.

"We'll only be there a few days," the Hispanic reminded him.

"I'll be sleeping with Rico — with you right next door?"

"And you'll be *quiet* as well," the lieutenant ordered, his temper rising irrationally. That's just the kind of thing Jack would've said to goad him.

Crockett lifted an eyebrow. "I will? You know, I don't know if I can do that, Marty — *fuck* quietly. I haven't had to since I was, oh, thirteen. Out of practice."

Martin's black eyes blazed under hooded lids as he walked away from the detective and entered his kitchen.

"Rico says one of the rooms has a king-sized bed," Sonny offered cheerfully, following him. "Why don't we all share it?"

"Because I'm *your* lover, not Rico's," Martin said, his voice low and dangerous. "We're *working* in New York."

Sonny slid his arms around him from behind. He couldn't believe how good it felt; he couldn't believe how chaotic his mind, his emotions were. He had to get a grip on himself.

"Why are we doing this to each other?" Sonny asked plaintively.

"It's my fault," Castillo whispered. "Some of it's because of my past. Things... I can't talk about."

"Hey, pal," Sonny said softly, "you can tell me anything. *Anything*."

Martin only shook his head. He couldn't say more, couldn't even tell Sonny why. It was all rooted so deep in his origins, and he could never tell anyone about that. He turned in Sonny's arms, embraced him. "Be patient. I'm used to being alone."

He met the Anglo's mouth lightly with his own, relishing the intimate contact.

"I wondered for awhile if you would ever touch me again," Crockett breathed.

The lieutenant looked deeply into the sea-green eyes of his lover. Part of him — the no-nonsense, all-business part — wished that were true, that he'd never again touch the beautiful man in his arms, or had never been introduced to the feel of his full lips, had never discovered the dark, addictive pleasure of being inside him. But the other part of him — the part that loved, and loved fiercely — knew he could never again turn away from the love and the light that was Sonny Crockett.

"Never wonder about that," he said huskily.

"Marty, I missed you so much. Couldn't you feel me longing for you?"

Castillo tightened his embrace and felt Crockett's heart rate pick up. He could feel it all right — in every strategy meeting, every time Sonny passed him in a doorway and used it as an excuse to brush against him, every time Crockett would fix those emerald eyes on his. Sonny's sexuality was so blatant that Martin imagined *everyone* could feel it. But in response to the Vice cop's question, all he could do was nod tersely.

"I need to *know* you want me, Marty."

"Know it," Martin said, taking the other man's mouth more urgently.

"I can't read those eyes of yours," the blond cop said breathily, pulling out of the kiss. "I can't tell what you're thinking, feeling —"

"At OCB, I see a detective, nothing more," the Cuban said firmly. "Only when you come through my door can I see my lover. We've got to keep it separate."

He kissed Sonny deeply again, his tongue running over those full lips, strong teeth and around his tongue. Martin could feel his tight control crumbling. How could Crockett affect him so easily? "We're here now, my love. What do you see in my eyes?"

Green orbs gazed deeply into Martin's black eyes, searching for the love and need plainly there. The Southerner's arms tightened around the slight built man and he returned the kiss with everything he had. Castillo folded the cop into his powerful embrace.

"Marty. Marty," Sonny gasped, "I love you."

"And I, you, my love." He led his detective towards the spiral staircase that rose towards the bedrooms.

"Don't do this to me again," Crockett whispered huskily. "Don't make me wait so long."

I'm the one who's been waiting, Martin thought, as they climbed the stairs. *For your footfall on my rugs, for your step on my stairs. I've watched the ceiling every night waiting to hear you open my bedroom door.*

Once inside the bedroom, the two men released each other to undress. But as Castillo reached up to loosen his tie, Crockett grabbed for his lapels, playfully, to pull him close. The Latino easily deflected his detective's hands, his face easing into a smile. Grinning, the blond grabbed Martin's shoulders, but Castillo slipped out of the hold. Then, with a cat-quick move, he snatched the younger man in a tight grip, pinning his arms, holding him helpless. He could tell Sonny found it both disconcerting and intensely exciting.

"That's the way you like me," the younger man breathed, smiling but still struggling. "Defenseless. Totally under your power. Isn't it?"

Martin swallowed, not at all comfortable with that image of himself, but he couldn't deny it. That was the other thing Crockett brought out in him — an aspect of his personality he thought he'd successfully buried, along with the man who'd helped shape it.

He remembered with startling clarity their first night. Crockett had worn away his carefully constructed defenses with brutal honesty and blatant sexuality until finally, Martin could no longer deny his desire, his need, his *love* for his senior detective. He'd lost so much in his life he could no longer con-

tinue to turn down the joy that Sonny offered.

He remembered, too, how their long lovemaking evolved from blissful hours of incredible tenderness, to raw, rough passion. By the end of the night, he'd completely dominated Sonny, taking him as hard as he could. Crockett had not only endured it, permitted it, but had recklessly urged him on without realizing the force he'd unleashed.

It had surprised and alarmed them both, but for Crockett, dancing with the devil was an old game. For Martin, it had released old memories he'd hoped had been forgotten and habits he'd thought long dead. He thought again of Jack Gretskey and the legacy Jack's love had left him.

"You *like* dominating me," Sonny taunted, delighted to find a chink in Martin's armor.

Castillo released him, his expression somber again, and went back to removing his tie. "We need more balance in our relationship."

Sonny looked startled. "Funny. Rico said the same thing this afternoon." He moved closer and helped remove his lover's white shirt.

"It's true," the lieutenant admitted quietly, pulling Sonny's peach colored top over his head. The honesty came hard to him, but Crockett deserved to know. "I enjoy dominating you. I'm sorry."

Sonny touched Martin's cheek. "It's okay. It doesn't bother me."

"It will. Eventually."

Crockett tossed Martin's white tee shirt to the floor and moved into his arms. His eyes glittered wickedly, recklessly. "Stop worrying. Just love me — any way you want."

Those words inflamed Castillo and he crushed the detective to him, kissing him hard, pinning him to the bedroom wall. Sonny gasped and yielded to the intense power of Martin's passion.

Castillo's mouth traveled uninhibited over the blond's throat and smooth chest, his tongue leaving a slick trail. He stopped at Crockett's left nipple and circled it leisurely, until the slowly drawn sensations made Sonny's knees sag with desire. Crockett's head fell back as he breathed open-mouthed. Castillo carefully took the hardened nipple between his teeth and slowly applied pressure.

The Vice cop gasped, then moaned, as the pressure increased until it was a sweet agony of pleasure. Crockett's hand slid through Martin's thick black hair, and when the pleasurable pain became too much for the blond detective to bear, he clenched a fist in the ebony strands. Castillo's teeth opened readily and he gently sucked the offended nipple to help ease the pain. Sonny's cock stiffened unmercifully, and was now tightly trapped in his pants.

Martin smiled to himself, wanting Sonny to ache for him.

He bit the other nipple, but this time, when the younger man pulled his hair he did not respond. Crockett tensed, twitched, and pulled harder, his face a mask of fear and excitement. He cried out, and Martin finally eased up, gently sucking the tender nipple.

"Oh, god," Sonny gasped senselessly.

Castillo undid the button at the waistband of Crockett's pants, then pulled down the zipper. The Southerner watched every move, shivering in delightful anticipation as the Hispanic sank to his knees. Carefully, the long-fingered hand reached into the pale pants and extracted his prize.

When he gently kissed the flaring head of Sonny's engorged penis, Crockett looked like he might faint. Then Martin wrapped his full mouth around the angry organ and all the blond could do was bury his hands in the thick black hair and hold on.

It was Martin's pleasure to suck Sonny into a frenzy of desire and need, nibbling his head, taking his shaft deep into his mouth, until the younger cop had to push himself against the wall to remain standing. Crockett moaned helplessly, his head rocking back and forth. Every time the Cuban thought Sonny might come, he'd back off until his lover regained control. Then he'd go down on him again with renewed passion.

After a long time, all Sonny could do was babble, begging Marty to stop or let him come before he died. Martin ignored the frantic pleas and did what he wanted, and all he wanted to do was suck his lover into a delightful madness.

Finally, the Vice cop's legs gave out and he started sinking to the floor. The Latino stood quickly, grabbing the blond man's stiffened phallus, using it to pull his recalcitrant lover back to his feet.

"Marty, no, please," Sonny mumbled, "I can't! Can't do it. I can't stand up any more."

The black eyes glittered darkly, making his detective suck in a breath. He reached into Crockett's pants with his other hand, fondling his scrotum, holding both testicles carefully.

Sonny's eyes widened and he hissed, standing up perfectly straight. "Easy. Easy!"

"Can you stand now?" the lieutenant's grit-edged voice asked softly.

"*Shit!* Be careful," the tanned man begged, now nearly on tiptoe as Castillo manipulated him.

Finally, Martin released the sensitive organs. "How many times can you come?" he asked darkly, his hands continuing their gentle torment.

Sonny had trouble finding his voice. "I dunno, twice, three times. Depends. Why?"

The Cuban smiled slyly, but said nothing.

"Oh, come on, man, take it easy! You're not playin' fair," the cop protested, suddenly anxious. He licked his lips and examined his lover's rough face. "Stop trying to kill me and take me to bed," he whispered. "I need you."

"I know what you need," the Hispanic assured him.

Trembling, Crockett shut his eyes, as Martin knelt again and swallowed his lover deep into his mouth. The Vice detective braced himself against the wall, yielding to the sweet torture. The Latino's eager sucking changed now, and Sonny relaxed into it.

Crockett's pulse hammered through the large vein running alongside his shaft, the heat of the blood pulsing in Martin's mouth. The Southerner's breath dissolved into frantic panting, his tightly muscled hips moving automatically, fucking the demanding mouth.

Martin loved when Sonny did that, when he became lost to the sensations Castillo gave him. Every now and then Crockett would glance down and look surprised, as though he couldn't get used to seeing his lieutenant, the icy cool leader of their unit, on his knees, blowing his brains out.

In spite of his own needs, Martin's lovemaking became slow and languorous. There was no need to hurry now. He could do this for as long as Sonny could take it. But finally, the hot organ swelled even larger and the Latino knew he couldn't take it much longer.

The blond pulled Martin's hair hard, trying to force him to take his mouth away as he edged nearer to climax.

"Don't! I can't hold out!" Crockett warned, tensing. "Damn it, Marty!"

He came so suddenly and so hard it must've surprised even him as he ejaculated deep into the willing mouth, roaring as if in pain, clutching Martin's hair desperately, bowing over his head. Castillo drank him deeply, gratefully, until his lover was spent. He swallowed the bitter seed as calmly as if he did this every day, grateful for the unique intimacy he'd been denied so long. Sighing heavily, he rested his forehead against his lover's strong thigh.

The detective couldn't speak, couldn't move as he leaned back against the wall, his legs trembling uncontrollably, his body shaking. He stroked the black hair lovingly, tiredly. That was worth everything to Castillo.

"Now, we can go to bed," the lieutenant said as he stood.

"Now?" Sonny said weakly, nearly tripping on the pants that had pooled around his ankles. "Why do I have a feeling this isn't such good news for me?"

Martin helped his lover step out of the clothes as they made their way to the austere futon. As the tired Vice cop crawled under the Japanese bed's dark sheets, the darker man rid himself of the rest of his clothes. Sonny watched him, his eyes roving Castillo's body in a way no one had in a long, long time.

"I haven't even touched you yet," Crockett complained, "and I already need a nap."

"Sleep is always best if it's earned," Martin murmured.

The younger cop rolled his eyes. "Seems to me I've at least made a down payment."

That made Castillo laugh, and Crockett grinned when he did. He joined the blond on the futon, nude now, taking his lover into the shelter of his arms.

The blond detective sighed deliciously and kissed his lover's jaw. "I love you, Marty. I can't say that enough."

"Which one of us do you need to convince?" Martin asked softly.

"You," the blond insisted irritably. "I'm convinced, but I can tell you still need some persuasion."

"Persuade me," Martin challenged.

Sonny grinned, his eyes lighting up eagerly. Lightly, he ran his fingertips over Castillo's golden skin, roving over his chest, outlining his nipples until they hardened, tracing the contours of his muscles. As his hand traveled its sweetly torturous path, Sonny

pressed himself against his lover and moved his mouth close to Martin's ear. Castillo felt Sonny's slick tongue reach out and lightly rim the shell. It jolted him, but he showed no reaction, knowing that would only challenge his lover more. Crockett insinuated his tongue deeper into that ear, breathing warmly into it. Still, Castillo showed no effect in spite of the delightful sensations washing over him.

"What's the matter, Marty?" Sonny whispered teasingly. "Not affected unless *you're* torturing *me*?"

The smoky voice was more than Martin could resist, and a flush of goose bumps traveled over his skin, even as he struggled to regulate his breathing.

Sonny didn't miss it. He grinned. "Can't get off unless I'm *helpless* beneath you, pleading and begging?"

The sensuous imagery almost made Martin moan, but he swallowed it. Sonny licked his ear again, and ran a hand teasingly down Martin's thigh and back up the other. It was impossible for Castillo to repress the shiver that ran over him.

"You love me like that," the blond hissed. "Flat on my face, with your cock deep in my ass, fucking me blind."

The vivid memory seared Martin, making his eyes roll up. He gasped just as Sonny took his earlobe between his teeth. "Crockett!" he warned, clenching his jaw, his control dissolving in the face of his lover's seduction.

"What?" the younger man challenged him, suddenly taking hold of Martin's hot shaft. He began massaging the large organ teasingly, slowly. "I made it too easy for you last time, lover, just rollin' over like a hungry whore. You loved that, didn't you?"

Castillo's heart pounded as his lover's rough palm moved leisurely over his silken head, rubbing it around and around.

"If you want my ass tonight," Sonny whispered, "you'll have to work for it."

"You're pushing it, Crockett," Martin hissed, barely able to get the words out. Sonny knew it was hard for him to talk while in the throes of passion. Crockett's expression was gleeful.

"You'd like me to beg for it," the cop murmured seductively, stroking the Latino seriously, his eyes taking in Castillo's every reaction. The darker man lifted his hips in time with Sonny's stroke, and had to pull in his breath in huge gulps. "Maybe I will, but you're still gonna have to work harder, Marty — to take me."

Martin moaned softly, his control slipping, leaving him nothing but his need for this man — a dark, desperate need.

"If you're gonna *own* me, Marty," the blond continued, "you're gonna have to earn me." Then he slid down the bed until he loomed over his lover's midsection. Without slowing his sensuous stroke, he gently took the dusky glans into his moist mouth.

Castillo went rigid, sighing deeply as Sonny swallowed as much of him as he could. Big, powerful hands kept stroking the length of the shaft, as the Anglo's full lips roved the wide, flaring head. Castillo could do nothing but groan throatily and run his fingers through Sonny's silken hair. He became so

overwhelmed by the sudden flood of sensation, that he tried to shove himself down Crockett's throat.

Sonny jerked away, grabbing Martin's wrists in a tight grip, yanking the lieutenant's hands away from his head.

"Hey, pal," Crockett reminded him, *breathing hard*, "you said we needed more balance in our relationship. It'd be a good start if you didn't try to choke me to death, okay? Next time you start pushin' me around, I might have to shave a little off this big boy. Got that?"

Martin smiled at the bold threat and nodded. Once more, the younger cop went down on him. Gently, Castillo stroked the thick, blond hair. Soon, his lover was lost in the intimate pleasure of sucking Martin's weeping cock. He felt Sonny take him deeper and deeper into his mouth while stroking and teasing his shaft and densely furred testicles.

Every time Martin's cock wept one of its bitter, salty tears, the blond cop moaned, as though the taste of his lover was driving him wild. Soon, Sonny's own organ came to life again, stirring and swelling where it rested against Castillo's leg. The Cuban bit his lip to keep from sobbing aloud at the incredible pleasure Sonny was giving him willingly, lovingly.

Finally, it became too much for him, as his body moved dangerously close to orgasm. He couldn't allow that, not yet. "Sonny," he rasped, barely able to get the words out, "stop. Please."

Crockett ignored him, sensing what the tension in Martin's body meant. The blond moved his free hand under Martin's ass and lightly stroked his perineum and anus. Martin bucked at the touch, gasping. The younger man seemed delighted by this surprising reaction, and stroked him again.

Martin melted into those sensations for a moment, unable to resist the seductive touch, but soon he had to pull away. "Sonny, stop!" he ordered clearly, when Crockett refused to relinquish his hold.

His lover ignored him and for one dangerous second, Castillo thought he was about to lose control completely, but then he recovered. There would be no second chance, he knew. He grew rigid all over, and reaching down, grabbed Sonny's arms.

Crockett was clearly surprised by Martin's strength as he hauled the blond up beside him.

"I said, *'stop'*," Martin hissed, nearly overwhelmed. He breathed hard, pulling himself back from the brink, reclaiming his weakened control. The power of Sonny's love disturbed him.

The blond only laughed, plainly delighted at the effect he could have on Castillo. "You can dish it out big time, lover, but you can't *take* it."

"Sonny," he growled warningly.

"What are you afraid of?" the Southerner taunted, rubbing himself against Martin's throbbing cock. "Coming someplace other than in my ass?"

Castillo tensed and sucked in a breath. Clenching his teeth at his partner's coarse playfulness, he buried a hand in Sonny's hair and roughly pulled his head back. Levering a strong leg between Crockett's he used his weight to flip the blond detective onto his back, covering him with his slight, strong body. Crockett chuckled and struggled to escape, but Castillo had

him. His futile attempts only made Martin's passion flare hotter. He nuzzled Sonny's throat and felt the younger man sag in desire as Crockett's nails raked his buttocks. Sonny hugged Martin and moaned his name.

"I'm not *afraid*," Castillo growled against Crockett's ear. "I'm concerned. But not for myself."

"Is that right?" Sonny murmured, looking at him askance.

"We know so little about each other," Martin whispered, nibbling the juncture of Sonny's neck and shoulder, tasting the salt of his sweat. Their organs were brushing against one another, making the cop smile and undulate his hips. It was a sublime sensation.

"I know I want to give as much as I get from you," Crockett whispered.

Martin shut his eyes as the gentle, loving statement filled his heart. "But we're not the same," he reminded the blond.

Sonny looked confused.

"You can come several times?" Castillo asked.

"On a good night," Crockett said with an elfin grin.

Martin smiled back. "They'll all be good nights. But if I come now, it will be hours before I can again."

Sonny raised an eyebrow teasingly, and Martin flinched. Crockett had finally found something at which he could excel over his lover. "One trick pony, huh? Gee, that's too bad, Marty."

Castillo gave the younger man a dark look. "Don't misunderstand. I didn't say I lost my desire or my ability. If you're ready to find out how long you can last under me -- be my guest."

The Anglo sucked in a short breath. "I see," he said quietly, reconsidering. "You sure know how to throw down a challenge, lover." The detective watched him for a moment, and Martin wondered if he was remembering some of the things Castillo had told him about his relationship with Jack Gretskey.

Martin and Jack had been together a very long time. Both of them could last for hours, giving or taking. Sonny wasn't ready for anything like that, he might never be.

Finally, Crockett's teasing look returned. "You never know, Marty, I might call you on that in the future."

"I'll look forward to it," Castillo assured him. He kissed Sonny gently and Crockett relaxed, squirming with delight under the security of Martin's body. Sonny's cock was hard and hot, pressing against Castillo's.

"Mmmmm," the cop purred when the demanding mouth freed him, sliding again to his throat. "Of course, you're still assuming a lot about our evening. I said you'd have to work harder for me."

Martin's eyes glittered darkly. "Day after day, I watch you arriving with Rico, leaving with Rico, or Gina. I overhear you on the phone with other women. You arrive at OCB the next morning, obviously sated, who knows by whom. Tell me, Sonny, how much harder do I have to work for you now that you're finally in my bed?"

"Hey, a lot of that was for your benefit," Sonny con-

fessed defensively. "You were so unresponsive, I wanted to get a rise out of you. Make you jealous if I could. It worked, huh?"

"It worked," Castillo said quietly, and rolled off the detective. He rose to his feet, and held out a hand. "Let's take a bath. I need to relax."

"Now?" Sonny said, surprised.

"Why not? The flight doesn't leave until noon -- and we can always sleep on the plane."

*"Now you're standing there tongue tied
You'd better learn your lesson well
Hide what you have to hide
And tell what you have to tell
Policy of Truth -- Depeche Mode*

CHAPTER THREE: THE JAPANESE TUB

*"Lover to lover, no kiss,
no touch, but forever and ever this."
At Baia -- H.D.*

I'm beat! Catherine thought wearily as she trudged to her kitchen and turned the flame on under her teapot. This damned Black Opal investigation was getting more and more complicated, with constant meetings with Moreno, Federal agents, local police, bomb and weapons experts, ad infinitum. Because of the multitude of laws and jurisdictions involved, it felt like everyone and their brothers, aunts, and uncles were involved. She rubbed her forehead distractedly and leaned against the counter.

There was a light tap on the glass of her balcony door. Her head snapped up. *Vincent?* she thought, moving quickly to him.

He greeted her with a smile and an odd bundle.

"What are you doing here?" she asked him delightedly. After last night, she didn't expect to see him again for days. "It's almost eleven!"

"You felt so exhausted," he explained in his softest voice, "so disheartened *and* so hungry. I couldn't bear to think of you coming home to this empty house and no supper. Mary and William sent this for you. It's still hot."

"Come in," she urged, pulling him out of the winter wind into her dinette. Her pleasure at his surprise visit made her tiredness slide off her shoulders.

He moved to the small table and unwrapped the patchwork blankets from the heavily insulated package. "It's from tonight's meal, a rich vegetable bean stew. There was a goodly amount of leftovers. With everyone hurrying to prepare for the holidays, not many are at supper these days." He unscrewed the tops of the old fashioned Ball canning jars and an

aromatic steam wafted into the air.

"Oh, it smells *heavenly!*" she declared, reaching for bowls. "You'll have some with me?"

"Certainly," he agreed, uncovering a fresh loaf of dark bread. "William made this expressly for you. He says it's a special recipe, a high protein bread with lots of energy." His blue eyes twinkled at her with amusement. "William fears that you're too thin."

She laughed easily thinking of the enormous, good hearted cook. "Oh, he shouldn't have gone to so much trouble — but, I sure am glad he did!" She carried the plates and flatware to the table, and Vincent ladled out the stew. "Isn't this a little out of the ordinary? The Tunnel Dwellers supplying the Helpers?" She smiled warmly at him as she sat and sampled the savory stew.

"A little," Vincent agreed, dipping his spoon into the broth, "but Father's worried about you, about the work you're doing against the Black Opal. The last building they blew up was so close to one of our major entrances, that route may be permanently damaged. I've been telling Father about your late hours, and he suspects you might be applying yourself harder because of your involvement with us. He says the least we can do is make sure you don't starve to death while you're working yourself into an early grave."

Catherine giggled, her green eyes shining with delight. It hadn't been so terribly long ago when Father was none too thrilled about her involvement with Vincent. His recent acceptance of her had made things so much easier for them. Still — there were barriers and Catherine often wondered what role Father's influence played in them.

"I have some interesting news," she said, as she buttered a healthy slab of the still-warm bread. "Your friend Martin Castillo is coming to New York."

Vincent stopped, looking at her in shocked amazement.

"He is still your friend, isn't he?" she asked hesitantly.

He nodded, his golden mane reflecting the dinette's overhead light. "Yes. Of course. An old and dear one."

She glanced at him suspiciously. "I thought you'd be *happy* to hear this."

"I am. It's just that — Martin has been away a long time. He left when he was only fifteen, and returned only once after that when he was injured overseas. He spent some time with us then, recuperating Below. But he no longer really belonged there, and as hard as we tried to make him feel welcome, we all sensed it. I was never really sure what it was that made him leave again — but that was over five years ago. I haven't seen him in all that time."

"But he writes?"

"Very regularly. But when you haven't actually *seen* someone in so long, someone you've been so close to —"

"I understand," she said softly, touching his arm.

He turned his attention back to his stew. Finally, he asked, "Have you spoken to him directly?"

She shook her head. "He communicates with Joe

or Morino."

"So, he doesn't know about your connection to us?"

"Not unless you or Father have told him in a letter. I wouldn't say anything like that over the phone anyway. If I get a chance when we meet, I'll tell him, of course. But when he comes here, he may be too involved in this case to visit."

"I imagine so."

"You know, Vincent, I've never heard you mention Martin before. Why *did* he leave the Tunnels when he was so young?"

Vincent peered into the stew for a long time, then finally said, "Forgive me, Catherine, but that's a very private matter between Martin and Father. I don't feel at liberty to share it."

"Of course," she agreed instantly. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pry."

He smiled reassuringly and they returned to their meal.



Martin took Sonny's hand and hauled him to his feet, leading him to the dark marble Japanese hot tub that sat in the bathroom off his bedroom.

The last time Crockett had used it was after their first lovemaking session. Sonny had goaded and teased the tightly controlled lieutenant until he'd gotten what he'd gone after — the total breakdown of Martin's self control. It had turned out to be a lot more than the Vice cop had bargained for.

Martin had known that the Anglo was an avid lover of both men and women and once they were in bed, Crockett had insinuated broadly that he was a devout practitioner of anal sex — however, he'd always been the dominant before. That was not the way the Cuban saw their relationship.

When it was over, Castillo nearly had to carry Sonny into the tub. Without its soothing jets, the blond might not have made it to work the next day. The Floridian had kept his sense of humor though, telling his lieutenant the next day that he'd never realized just how uncomfortable Ferrari's could be.

They walked down the marble steps until the steaming water swirled around their shoulders, slicks of spicy scented bath oil coating them with a sheen. As the water enveloped Castillo's body, his tensions slid away. He could tell by Sonny's face that his lover felt the same. The tub had been a costly extravagance when he'd had it installed, but he'd never regretted the indulgence.

"Oh, man, Marty, this thing is *heaven*," Crockett sighed.

"Only when you're here," his boss said softly. "The rest of the time, it's merely a tub." He pulled the blond into his arms, rubbing some of the oil onto his tanned shoulders and back.

Crockett closed his eyes and dipped his head, wetting his hair so that it stayed out of his way.

Wiping the long, water-slicked hair out of his lover's lean face, Martin realized how the last few

years at Vice had aged the younger man. Too much stress, hard-drinking, and sun had taken their toll on the youthful features. But the green eyes still had the spark, the fire. He kissed those eyes lovingly, wishing things could always be this way between them, easy and gentle. But he knew it was useless to try and wish his demons away.

Crockett moved against him in the water and ran strong hands over his slight, compact body. Martin hissed, his need barely repressed, and clutched Sonny, suddenly kissing him hard. He swallowed, pulling himself together, looking deeply into the green eyes. He couldn't remember ever feeling this needy, this desperate — not even with Jack or May Ying. It worried him.

"You're really hungry tonight," Sonny said softly.

"You've been teasing me for a month," Martin reminded him, knowing even as he said it that that had little to do with it. Castillo had voluntarily suffered celibacy for years without having this reaction to a new lover.

"So hungry," Crockett murmured huskily, "just for me?"

"For you," Martin confirmed. "Only you." And took his mouth again. Sonny returned the kiss with equal urgency, biting Martin's lips, capturing his tongue.

"I'm hungry for you, too," the blond detective breathed, "and you know it. You held out on me on purpose, just to see how desperate I'd get."

Martin shook his head. Their kissing became more serious, more urgent. The lieutenant could feel his desire boiling inside him. For once, the tub was not soothing away his tensions, but only adding to them.

"Marty, I need you so bad," Sonny gasped. "Some days, all I can think about is having you inside me."

Castillo swallowed and tensed, profoundly affected by his lover's words. "But earlier... you and Rico —" he murmured, wanting to stop himself from saying it, but unable to, "you did it with him. Today. This afternoon."

Sonny got that look of sly amusement on his face, the look that infuriated Castillo whenever it was directed at him. "So that's it. That's what all this has been about. Marty, you're jealous of Rico."

"Answer me," Castillo ordered, as though they were in his office and not nude in his hot tub. He felt an irrational fury building inside him as Sonny touched on what he feared was the truth.

The younger man chuckled brazenly. "Marty, Marty, Marty — you could tell just by looking at us, huh? We're that obvious? Or am I walkin' funny these days?" He laughed harder.

Martin banked his anger, gritting his teeth.

"And you let it get to you," the cop taunted. "I'm surprised at you. A month ago you said you loved me enough to *share* me. Rico would be really *hurt* if he knew about this, especially after the way he's worried about you."

"I meant that," Martin insisted, unwilling to admit to his human failings. "I just — need to know."

"Yeah, I fucked Rico," Sonny said simply, "and it was *great*. But it's not something we do every day." A

strange look passed over Crockett's face as he said softly, "Does it make that big a difference?"

Martin sighed wearily, unhappy with the turn of conversation. "I don't know," he said honestly. He took Sonny's mouth hard, clutching him as though he might escape. Water splashed around them as Crockett yielded under the onslaught. "Is it good for you — with Rico?" He couldn't stop himself from asking.

The blond licked his bruised lips. "It's better than good. It's wonderful, but different than what happens between us. Is this going to drive us apart?"

Castillo shook his head.

"Marty," Sonny was suddenly serious, pushing against the darker man to be released. Castillo obliged and stepped back. "I can't explain how I feel about you and Rico. I don't know how this happened. I don't know why I need you both. And I don't know how to reassure you. I *love* you, Marty, *all the time*, whether I'm here with you, or fucking Rico, or balling some nameless player on the strip because I've told myself it might get me the information I need to do my job. I *love* you — *and* Rico — as much as I can love anyone. My heart's divided and maybe — maybe I've got it caged for safety, like Rico says, to keep it from being torn in half. You told me you loved Jack and May Ying at the same time, so you've got to be able to understand what I'm going through."

The Cuban shut his eyes as Sonny pulled those memories up. He nodded, unable to say anything. He remembered it all too clearly, remembered the anguish and turmoil he went through. His mutual love for those two people was the main reason he was able to accept Rico as Sonny's other lover. Martin was determined not to pull Sonny apart the way he'd been. He couldn't make him go through that pain.

"Look, Marty," Sonny continued, "sometimes my body lives a life of its own, and my heart lets it. It doesn't mean anything. When I'm with you, I'm with *only* you. Shit, Marty, you're all I can *handle*. And I'm willin' to do *anything* you want, *anything* that'll please you, satisfy you. I love you and that's part of it," Sonny's face became hard, "but I'm not Jack Gretskey. He agreed to give you up so you could marry May Ying. I wouldn't do that. I'm not giving up Rico. Don't ask me. I *can't*. If he asked me to give you up, I'd say the same thing."

Is that what he wanted Sonny to do? He turned his back on Crockett, trying to sort out the turmoil of his feelings.

He could still remember that terrible moment with Jack when Martin had to tell him he wanted to marry May Ying. May Ying had been incredibly understanding about Jack, even accepting him as a friend. But Martin knew that had to change if they married. He had to make a commitment to her, one that excluded all other relationships. He knew he would have to end his physical relationship with Jack, the man who'd been his first, and for many years, his only lover.

He could still see the pain etched in Jack's eyes as he smiled bravely and said, "Sure, Marty, if that's what you want. I'll always be here for you if you need me — or if you change your mind. And I'll always love you."

They had never spoken of it again. Fifteen years of love, packed up and put away, just like that. Except for one last time, that night in a small temple, after they'd defeated the Hmong assassins. That one last time.

"Marty," Sonny said, softly, slipping his arms around the Latino, pulling Martin's back tight against his sleek chest, "if May Ying left her husband — what would you do?"

Martin shook his head and prayed he'd never find out.

"Would you ask me the same thing you asked Jack?" Crockett asked, gently persistent.

"I don't know. Don't know if I could."

"Marty, I'm not Jack," the Vice cop said firmly, "I'm not givin' you up, not for May Ying, not for *anybody*. I ain't givin' Rico up, either. That's me. That's the way *I* am. It's one of the reasons you fell in love with me, because I'm *not* Jack. And I'm not gonna let you screw up what we've got together because of things that happened in your past, or because of our jobs, or for any other reason."

Martin turned, took Sonny in his arms, stared into the deep green eyes.

"I love *you*," the blond said fiercely. "Stop worryin' about what I do with Rico. Just worry about what we've got together."

Martin was surprised to feel his eyes threaten to fill from the power of his lover's words. He blinked, and took a deep breath, crushing Sonny to him desperately as water sloshed everywhere. He found his detective's mouth, and his urgent need made their tongues dance wildly as their teeth clashed. Castillo suddenly wanted Sonny with a frightening desperation. Gripping the seal-sleek body in a tight embrace, he cupped Sonny's buttocks with his hands and lifted the detective off his feet.

Instinctively, Sonny wrapped his strong, lean legs around Martin's waist, clinging to him. Martin pulled his mouth from their frantic kiss, his dark, enigmatic eyes searching jade ones. Martin's gaze glittered dangerously.

"Anything?" he asked darkly.

Crockett shuddered in his arms. "*Anything*," he whispered. "Anything I can endure."

Castillo shut his eyes to get a grip on his emotions. Then, he looked over his shoulder, locating the earthenware jar he kept at the tub's edge. Holding Sonny tightly around the chest, he reached for the jar, digging out a handful of the thick, solid lubricant. Pulling his hand underwater, the Latino slathered the scented, soothing gel in the cleft between Crockett's cheeks, using it to sensuously massage his perineum and tease the tight ring of dark muscle.

Sonny moaned throatily and clung to Martin harder, burying his face in his neck.

Castillo took more lubricant and coated the younger man's hard cock. Crockett gasped as Martin stroked him. "I *need* you," the lieutenant whispered against his ear.

"And I, you, my love," Sonny whispered back, parroting Castillo's own words.

The Cuban could feel Crockett's heart slamming in

his chest, could hear him drawing in desperate, ragged breaths. Martin reached down, took hold of his own impossibly hard shaft, then slid it up and down the oiled cleft. "Hang on," he growled, pulling them together with one arm, so that Crockett's swollen organ wedged snugly between them.

Sonny trembled expectantly and used his powerful legs and arms to clutch Martin hard against him.

"Relax, Sonny," Martin whispered, "relax."

The cop swallowed and started pulling in deep, regular breaths, while Castillo continued to rub the head of his rod teasingly against the younger man's sensitized perineum.

"That's so good," Sonny sighed.

Martin squeezed his eyes shut, forcing himself to concentrate as he prepared his lover. The hot water made Sonny buoyant, as if they were making love in a huge womb.

"I belong to you, Marty," Sonny murmured huskily in Castillo's ear. "You own me. Sometimes I escape for awhile, but I'll always be back — cause I need you to own me. To take me."

Martin groaned softly, and moved his oiled cock head so that it nestled gently against the dark opening. As soon as he did, Crockett froze in his arms. "Oh, *damn*!"

Castillo released his organ and brought that arm up to support his lover. "Take it," he ordered, rubbing Sonny's back comfortingly. "Just take it, slow and easy."

The younger man moaned and clung to the Latino, then slowly pushed down against Martin's cock, swallowing it bit by bit.

"Yes," Castillo whispered encouragingly, forcing himself to speak, knowing his rough voice excited Sonny. He rooted himself in place, fearful of moving, of hurting Sonny again.

"Can't," Crockett gasped, his chest heaving. "Can't take it. Too much."

Sonny's body tightened spasmodically, his hips and legs clamping down. Castillo could almost feel his lover's pain himself as Crockett's spine stiffened. The heat and tension surrounding his sensitive flesh was exquisite and he had to bite his lower lip to keep from being overwhelmed by it. If he moved now, he'd tear the younger man apart.

"You can," Castillo's dark voice demanded huskily. "Let me own you, my love. I need you —" His voice cracked. "Need to be inside you."

Crockett cried out, but sank lower onto Martin's pulsing organ. Castillo squeezed his eyes shut and fought for control.

"*Fuck* me, Marty," Sonny begged helplessly, unable to move, "please, just fuck me, damn it."

Carefully, gently, Martin moved his hips, easing Sonny down lower onto his aching shaft, until he was half-way sheathed inside the tense, heaving body. The sublime sensation was more than he could handle and the emotions washing over Crockett's face only inflamed him further. He began pumping slowly in and out of that convulsively tight ass, feeling as though he were trapped in a velvet vise.

"No, Marty, no!" Sonny pleaded, tensing in Martin's

arms. "I can't. I can't!"

"You said — anything," Castillo breathed, the effort of speaking almost too much for him now.

Sonny resisted, spasming painfully around Martin's cock. "No. Damn it! Too much this time. The pain...!"

"You like it," Martin whispered darkly.

Sonny trembled and relaxed slightly.

Castillo swallowed, realizing the effect his thick voice could have on the detective. "You like being taken by me."

Sonny moaned and sagged in Martin's arms.

The Cuban sighed at the irony. The hardest thing for him to do during lovemaking was verbalize. "You can love the whole world, but only *I* can love *you* — the way you *need* it. The way you want it. Hard. Deep."

Sonny cried out and dug his nails into Castillo's back. "Yes," he gasped, "Yes. Marty, what you do to me! Damn."

Castillo couldn't force another word out so he rimmed Sonny's ear with his tongue and the cop leaned into it. Then he grabbed the earlobe between his teeth and bit down hard. Sonny shouted, clawing Martin's back, as his body opened up completely, swallowing the hot, hard organ in one smooth move, until the Latino's flesh was buried to the hilt in the lithe, strong body. Martin captured the blond's full mouth as they began moving together. Crockett's oiled cock slid between them, and Castillo knew that Sonny was overwhelmed by what was happening to him.

"Oh Marty, I'm yours," Crockett gasped, pulling his mouth away. "You own me, baby, all of me."

"Yes," Martin hissed and took his mouth again, unwilling to relinquish the pleasure of kissing Sonny while penetrating him. Sonny's tongue searched his mouth frantically, desperately. Unable to stop himself, Martin pumped harder.

"No. No," Sonny begged, tensing at the new onslaught.

"Easy," Martin soothed, never slowing his stroke. "Just take it. You want it. Just take it."

The blond moaned throatily and came down hard on Castillo's cock, making him sigh. Suddenly, Crockett took control of the situation, lifting and impaling himself onto Castillo's erection harder and harder. Martin struggled to keep his eyes open, not wanting to miss a second of Sonny's face, his body, his intense expression, the play of his muscles as Martin possessed him.

"How long?" Sonny breathed. "How long can we do this?"

"As long as you want," Martin assured him, holding him tightly.

"Forever," the Southerner whispered. "Fuck me forever, Marty. Don't ever leave me."

"Forever," Martin whispered back, his ability to speak or think crumbling in the face of their incredible passion.

"It's so good," Crockett whispered so softly Martin almost didn't hear him.

"Still hurt?" the lieutenant managed to ask.

"Yeah," the younger man sighed throatily, his eyes

glittering green and hungry.

"You like it," Martin said ominously.

"Oh, *yeah*," Sonny admitted breathily. He took Martin's mouth then and wouldn't let go. They fucked and kissed for an endless time, relishing the ability to be face to face.

Finally, after what seemed an eternity of exquisite sensation, Castillo could feel Sonny's rod growing between them. He smiled, feeling his lover inch towards climax, knowing he was responsible.

"Marty! Marty!" Sonny cried out suddenly, sounding frantic.

"It's all right," Martin soothed.

"No!" Sonny begged, his voice cracking. "Don't let me come first, please!"

Castillo didn't understand.

"Last time, I came first, then there was nothing left for me but pain. I can't take that, it's too much."

"Ssshh," Martin comforted him, feeling a rush of tenderness for the detective. "We'll come together. I promise."

"Marty, I can't hold out."

"Neither can I," he reassured him. "Kiss me, Sonny."

Crockett obliged, trustingly, capturing Martin's mouth just as Castillo's cock swelled inside him. The younger man stiffened and tried to pull away, crying out loudly. "Damn it, Marty, goddamit!"

Castillo growled low and thrust hard into his lover once, twice, three times. On the third thrust, both men came, Sonny arching back and roaring madly: Castillo exhaling in a rush. Martin pumped semen deep into Sonny's body, even as Crockett emptied himself into the tub.

The blond cop dissolved into quiet sobs in Martin's arms, as the lieutenant hugged him tight, kissing his bristly cheek gently. The detective buried his face against Martin's neck and struggled to control himself, pulling in shaky, ragged breaths. Martin rubbed his back, full of love for this man, his lover.

"Marty, that was perfect," Sonny rasped through his tears. "Absolutely perfect. I love you so much."

Slowly, carefully, Martin lifted Sonny off his still erect organ. Crockett clung to the Latin desperately and muffled a small cry of pain against his shoulder. Then the younger man sagged, still weeping, his legs going limp as Martin continued to hold him close.

Castillo groped with one hand for the side of the tub, finally finding the controls for the Jacuzzi jets. He turned them on, feeling the hot water swirl around them in a comforting massage. Sonny sucked in a harsh breath, but soon relaxed.

"Your arms must be numb," Crockett mumbled as he recovered.

Martin shook his head slightly, then touched the unshaven cheek, turning the lean face to him. Even with his wet skin, Martin could see the trail of tears.

"You all right?" he asked tenderly. The same thing had happened last time, and Martin felt consumed with guilt for the pain he caused his lover, and the intense pleasure it gave him.

Sonny only sighed and pressed his damp cheek against Martin's. "You're the only one that's ever made me weep, Marty. No one's ever affected me

like that. Sometimes it's so intense when you're inside me — I think I just might die."

Castillo winced. "Don't say that. Our love is a celebration of life."

Slowly, Crockett unwrapped his legs from around his lover's waist and planted his feet on the tub floor. Martin continued to hold him close.

"Was it any easier this time?" the lieutenant asked.

"A little," the blond said. "Tell you the truth, I'm not sure I'd want it to be much easier. Might take the magic out of it."

The Cuban stroked the side of Sonny's face. "We still need more balance." When he'd been younger, when Jack and he had first been lovers, there'd been some of this between them, though not nearly so intense. Jack had dominated Martin completely, taking him every time. That's the way they'd both wanted it. But after awhile, it affected every thing they did.

Sonny was much older than Martin had been then. He was a mature man in a dangerous job. He had to be his *own* man. The Latin didn't want him to feel like he belonged to anyone when he was undercover. It could affect his ability to make decisions. It could cost him his life.

Castillo thought about the Black Opal, about the work they would have to do in New York. And he thought about all the things he could never share with this man — the one human being with whom he wanted to share everything.

"So, what do you think we should do about it?" Sonny asked.

Smiling slightly, the darker man kissed the blond softly. "Nothing now. At least not until we take a nap."

"Oh, thank god," the blond murmured gratefully.

"Sonny?" Martin asked.

"Mmmmm?" Crockett replied, relaxing back in the tub's soothing jets.

"Did I work hard enough?" Castillo asked innocently, suppressing a smile.

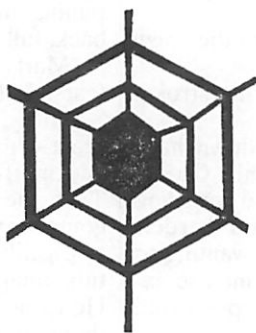
Sonny grinned and splashed him rudely, his delighted laughter ringing through the room.

"Never again"

Is what you swore

The time before

The Policy of Truth — Depeche Mode



CHAPTER FOUR: NEW YORK

*"New York, open your eyes to me
Let me be what I want to be
Tell me, tell me it's not too late
Empire State — Fleetwood Mac*

Sonny Crockett looked around the dingy New York strategy room curiously. The architecture was different, and the paint certainly no brighter, but the feel of the room was the same — it was just another place for the good guys to plan war strategies against the bad. The only real difference was the cold.

It was fifteen degrees outside and Crockett was convinced it was no more than fifty degrees inside this ancient building. Cranky steam pipes clanked and chugged as the Southerner cuddled a rapidly cooling styrofoam coffee cup between his hands and shivered. He doubted he'd feel warm again until he returned home. This morning the weather man had promised a bright day of eighty degrees in Miami, he recalled wistfully.

He glanced at his lieutenant and wondered how the Latino was faring under the chill. Sitting at the low end of the long, rectangular table, Marty looked his usual, somber-faced, unflappable self. His black dealer's clothes surrounded him with an aura of sex, mystery and intrigue.

Sonny had a sudden memory of waking earlier that morning, slowly, drowsily, finally realizing that Martin was already making love to him, going down on him before he was fully awake. Crockett remembered each exquisite sensation as he'd gone from sleep to delicious, excited awareness, and finally, insane ecstasy. He could still hear himself begging futilely for Marty to stop, but, of course, Marty didn't, until the blond detective was arching, bucking, screaming in a frenzy of desire. He came like a rocket, and had to shut his eyes as the memory washed over him. For a moment he felt warm.

He had laughed when it was over, and said, "You know, a cup of coffee would've been just fine, pal." And Castillo had laughed, too, and then left the bed before the Anglo could return the favor.

"We'll be late for the plane," the lieutenant had warned. "We both have to shower. Dress. No time now."

Crockett had felt irrationally angry at his lover, as though Marty was determined to keep their relationship always uneven, out of balance.

So the cop had waited until Castillo was well into his shower before stepping in with him. "Talk about a time saver!" he'd chided his lieutenant. "Saves water, too!" And before the Cuban could stop him, he was

on his knees under the warm spray, taking his lover in his mouth and hands, determined to give him back at least a small amount of the pleasure he'd bestowed this morning.

It was the first time he'd ever gotten Castillo to come without having to get fucked for it, he suddenly realized with a rush of pleasure. It hadn't even taken that long. He remembered the slight, slick body, rigid with tension, hot water sheeting over them, as he devoured the huge cock, sucking, biting, milking the wonderful organ. He could still hear Martin's soft sighs and groans, the intense expression of delight on the roughened face. He could still hear that dark voice murmuring his love as Castillo came, feel the Latino flooding his mouth, nearly drowning him with his bitter semen. *Sharper than Black Jack*, Sonny had thought, as he forced himself to swallow, *and much more intoxicating*.

Someone coughed, and the cop jerked his attention back to the present. He glanced over at Martin and caught his eyes for a second, feeling a blush creep up his neck, as though Castillo could read his mind. The lieutenant's expression remained undecipherable as he returned to the file in front of him. Then, Crockett's eyes moved to Rico as he realized it had been his partner who'd coughed, trying to keep his friend's mind from wandering. Sonny grinned across the table at the handsome black man as Rico's sultry copper eyes eyed him wryly.

Tubbs gave him a sly, knowing smile and unobtrusively touched his foot with his own. Ricardo had been wearing that same expression ever since Sonny and Marty had gotten on the plane. Was it just because they were the last passengers to embark, or because they arrived within seconds of missing the flight altogether? Or was it because he and Martin kept dozing off during the trip?

Rico had made sure Sonny sat in the middle of the three seats, and had already pushed up the arms of the chairs to allow for maximum body contact. Sitting between his two lovers in such tight quarters had made the blond feel more excited and alive than he had in a long time. Throughout the flight, Tubbs would surreptitiously touch Sonny's left thigh, even as Martin would occasionally brush his right. Only his wonderfully exhausting night and morning had kept him from having an erection all the way to New York. The Vice cop felt more loved, more protected, than he ever had in his life.

The Southerner licked his lips and nodded at his partner. Rico was in his element now. Sonny could almost see the black man's aura strengthening, his attitude sharpening, as soon as they'd landed at Kennedy. He loved this dirty, beat up, cold city and missed it like an old lover. Crockett could appreciate how Rico felt, even though he himself held little regard for the Apple. They'd nearly gotten killed the last time they were here, and Sonny hoped that wasn't previews of coming attractions for their newest gambit.

He blew on his hands and rubbed them together just as the door to the room opened and a man and woman entered, holding folders and a pot of steam-

ing, fresh coffee.

"Good afternoon," the man said briskly, his face somber. "There's some fresh-brewed here if anyone needs a hot refill. Sorry about the heat — or lack of it. They're having some problem with the boiler. We've had a long, cold spell and some of these old buildings can't take the pressure." He paused, looking at the Miami Vice team.

He was a good looking man, Sonny thought, around his height, brunette, maybe Brooklyn Italian. His off-the-rack suit hung well on him — probably a racket-ball player, the detective thought. He seemed straightforward, a man's man. He might feel comfortable with this guy if the circumstances were different. Sonny could see himself sharing a beer with him and talking football.

"I'm Joe Maxwell," he introduced himself, "the Assistant District Attorney, and this is *my* right arm, Attorney Catherine Chandler."

Martin stood and held out his hand. "Lieutenant Martin Castillo, head of OCB for Miami. This is Detective Ricardo Tubbs and Detective Sonny Crockett."

Sonny leaned forward, the last to take the woman's hand. She was small, with a nearly perfect body. Bright green eyes and full lips accented a beautiful face and soft, sandy blond hair framed it perfectly. She looked completely out of place here, the cop thought, with her too perfect looks and clothes that his practiced eye told him were much too expensive to be purchased on an assistant lawyer's salary. Alarm bells started going off in his head. He caught her eyes, and squeezed her hand a little longer than was necessary. Could she be a liability? Was she stupid enough to take graft money and flaunt it around the office? Crockett turned on his not inconsiderable charm.

"Hello, Miz Chandler," he purred warmly. It might not hurt to get closer to this interesting woman. It certainly couldn't be very painful. She held his eyes for a second, then looked right past him.

"Detective Crockett," she said neutrally and released his hand. She gazed at Martin for a long moment, then pulled her eyes away. Sonny smiled, more intrigued by her rejection than he ever would've been by her interest. Maxwell gave him a dark look, making the Vice cop wonder if those two were an item. Then he caught Rico's eyes. His lover's expression clearly said, "Not again!" Crockett gave him a slight shrug.

"I was expecting to meet with the District Attorney himself," Martin interjected bluntly, "and a representative from Washington."

"That *was* the original plan," Maxwell conceded, "but after discussing it again, Moreno and the Feds decided the fewer people who actually met you the better. Cathy and I were chosen as the liaisons between your undercover operation and the government for a variety of reasons. One, that we've both been working on this Black Opal ring since the beginning, and two," he paused and stared meaningfully at Crockett and Tubbs, "because she and I had to handle the paperwork the last time your two detectives dis-

mantled this town."

Oh, Sonny thought sheepishly, catching Rico's eye, *that*.

"I've been dying to meet you both," the Chandler woman said too sweetly. "After all, it's not everyone that shoots down a helicopter in mid-town Manhattan," she stared at Crockett, "or blows up half a city block."

"Believe me," Maxwell told Castillo, "the last people on earth this office, the government people, or NYPD wants to see loose on our streets is Butch and Sundance here."

"Now, wait one minute," Rico said evenly, "the body count on that case would've been a hell of a lot lower if we'd gotten *any* support from NYPD, *or* your office for that matter. We were out there on our own. We were damned lucky we even survived!"

Maxwell nodded, yielding the point. "Believe me, I raised a lot of questions about how that matter was handled. And, off the record, I'd like to say that while I can't condone your methods, I, for one, was incredibly grateful that the Revillas' organization was dismantled."

The tension in the room eased slightly with that honest admission.

"However, after the fireworks," Maxwell said, meeting their eyes, "I took the time to look into your records. While you both have impressive arrest and conviction rates, I couldn't help but notice that many of your suspects *never* go to trial."

He paused. "But, that's the past. Things will be different now. I have to insist that you stay in close touch with myself or Ms. Chandler. Likewise, we'll keep you updated on anything we find out. We intend to fully cooperate with you in every way. We hope you'll do the same."

The two detectives nodded in affirmation.

"My detectives and I are here on a dangerous undercover assignment," Martin's rich voice said quietly. "We will do whatever is needed to get the job done."

There was an uncomfortable pause until Sonny finally grinned. "Well," he drawled amiably, "I'm sure glad we've got all the social amenities out of the way. Now, how about we get down to business? The meet is set for oh-two hundred tomorrow morning —"

The five people proceeded to work out the details of their interaction with the Black Opal, their surveillance needs and back up.

The first meet would be only to establish contact and work out arrangements for the exchange of goods. The second meet would be the critical one — that's where they'd exchange the cash and receive the arms. That's when the bust would go down. In between the two meets the hardest thing would be not to blow their cover.

"How many people will be given these details?" Castillo asked.

"Only Moreno and Walsh, our Federal contact," Maxwell said.

"Good. We'll call you after the meet," the lieutenant said, then stood, indicating this meeting was at an end.

"One more thing," Maxwell said as he and Chandler

moved to leave. "Please, be careful. These guys are nuts. I'd hate to have to scrape you three out of a basement somewhere."

Martin nodded acknowledgment of the Assistant D.A.'s concern.

As the three detectives descended to the street in an empty elevator, Sonny asked his boss, "How much do we know about that Chandler woman?" He caught Rico's smirk out of the corner of his eye and seriously considered kicking him.

"Enough," Castillo said dryly.

"She can be trusted?"

The Cuban looked at the cop as though his previous statement should've sufficed.

"Come on, Marty, don't you think her clothing allowance is a little steep for an assistant to the Assistant D.A.?"

"The Chandler woman is no concern of yours, Detective," the lieutenant insisted, his voice carefully neutral. "Stay away from her. That's an order."

Sonny frowned, surprised at his lover's reaction. "We're not havin' a problem with some personal politics, are we, Marty?"

Rico raised his eyes and shook his head even as Castillo's gaze fixed on a spot on the elevator doors. "Are you questioning my professional objectivity, Detective?" he asked quietly.

Time to back off now, Crockett's inner voice warned. "No, Marty. Sorry. Forget it."

Rico looked at him as if to say, *Good thinking, partner*.

As the elevator opened, the New Yorker cleared his throat and said, "Lieutenant, if it's all right with you, I'd like to meet Valerie for dinner, catch up on old times."

Sonny gave Rico a droll look, but Tubbs only grinned at him in response.

"We're going to have a late night tonight," the Hispanic warned.

"Hey," the dark detective chided gently, "I got plenty of sleep last night. And it's just a dinner date. Really. I'll be back at the hotel early. Long before the meet."

Martin gave him a slight nod as he and Crockett hailed a cab back to the Plaza.

The two remained silent on the trip. It wasn't until they were inside the privacy of their suite that Sonny turned to his Latino lover. "I didn't mean to push you about Cathy Chandler. I'm sorry. I was only thinking about the case, about keeping our cover secure."

Martin nodded, accepting the apology.

Crockett's mouth turned up in a boyish smile. "So, what's on the agenda now? Rico's off with Valerie, the airline food has ruined me for eating, probably forever —" He approached his boss and slid his arms around the small, dark man.

To Sonny's delight, Castillo smiled and returned the embrace willingly. When Crockett kissed him, the lieutenant opened his mouth eagerly, his tongue reaching for the Anglo's, searching, sliding over his teeth. The blond sighed deliciously. "So, what'd'ya say, pal? Shall we try out your nice king-sized bed for a few hours?"

"No," Martin said to his surprise, and pulled away gently. "We both need sleep. We're not teenagers anymore, Sonny. We can't be active all night and get through the next day with no problem. I'm exhausted."

Crockett could plainly see the dark circles under his lover's eyes and imagined he had some of his own. "Well, okay, but can't we at least sleep together?"

"We won't sleep if we're together, you know that." Martin's face split in a rare, honest grin. "Stay in your room. I'll stay in mine. We'll sleep till Rico returns, then have a light dinner."

"You're the boss," the blond cop said quietly. It was a reasonable request, and he *was* tired. He kissed the Latino gently. "It'll be hard dozing off with you so near. You sure?"

Martin took Sonny's hand and placed it on his hardened cock. "I'm sure. If I *don't* leave —" He pulled away and went into his own room, shutting the door.

Crockett watched him till the latch clicked, then sighed disappointedly and fell back on his own double bed, closing his eyes to the waning afternoon sun.



"Vincent, thank God you're back," Father said urgently, as the large man entered the library-like chamber.

"I was with Mouse, checking on one of the steam pipes," he explained. "We heard your message and came immediately. What is it? What's wrong?"

The old man was visibly agitated. "It's the Black Opal. They've invaded the upper tunnels. The sentries spied them."

Vincent frowned. "I shouldn't be surprised. There are so many police searching for them, they're running out of places to hide."

Father approached his son. "They're moving *weapons* into the tunnels. Tons of weapons."

Vincent sighed tiredly. "The network of tunnels is so vast, even *we* will have trouble finding all their storage chambers. The sentries know not to approach the arms?"

"Yes, of course. They know about the bombs."

The Tunnel Dweller mused on this latest, dangerous development. "Well, the arms are actually *safer* here than Above, since it's unlikely anyone will stumble upon them and set off the detonators. Have the sentries draw me a map, showing the locations of the caches. Tell them to be *extremely* cautious. These people are terribly dangerous. If they discover our community —"

"We've already posted more guards and we'll be putting up two new false walls here and here." Father showed him the critical junctions on his ancient schematics.

"Good," Vincent agreed. "Once the sentries bring me the map, I'll take that to Catherine when she returns home tonight. She'll need to know."

"Will this mean Catherine will have to bring the police *into* the tunnels?" It was one of Father's biggest fears, having the authorities become too inter-

ested in New York's twisting maze of chambers. Sooner or later, he fretted, some official would feel the need to map the Underground, and they would be discovered.

"I don't know how she'll handle it, Father," Vincent admitted honestly, "but we can trust her to do what's best for all of us."

"Yes, of course," the elder agreed.

"Father," Vincent said hesitantly, "Catherine gave me some interesting news last night."

"Oh?" said the patriarch.

"She tells me Martin is coming to New York."

Father's eyes widened. "You can't be serious. *Our* Martin? In New York?" His face brightened for a moment, then fell. "You know, I invited him for Winterfest, as I always do — but I have the feeling that's not what's prompting this visit."

Vincent sighed. "Martin's working undercover, against the Black Opal."

The old man sat tiredly on a battered chair. "This is *terrible*. First Catherine, now Martin. These people are like a disease infecting the people we love. I fear for them, Vincent."

"As do I, Father, as do I. Catherine warned me that Martin may well be too busy to visit while in the City."

"If he's working against the Black Opal, I imagine so," Father agreed, nodding.

"However, I know Martin. If he can find the time at all, he will come."

"There's something you're trying to tell me, Vincent," Father said, cocking a suspicious eyebrow. "What is it?"

"I was just thinking — this might be a good time for you to try and clear the air between you."

Father sighed. "I *have* tried to do that in the past, Vincent."

"Only by letter and only after Martin left here after Mai Sa. So much time has passed, yet this pain sits between you like a boil. You must resolve it together, face to face. But first, Father, you must resolve it within yourself."

The old man started to protest, but then fell silent for a moment. "That's the trick then, isn't it, Vincent? First, I must resolve it within myself."



Martin watched the seconds tick by on the small digital clock by his bed. He hadn't completely lied to Sonny, he *was* exhausted, but before he could rest, there was something he had to do. After half an hour, he rose, slipped on his shoes and black suit jacket. Moving silently, he walked to the room Sonny and Rico shared. His lover was sleeping deeply, one arm flung over his eyes, his blond hair splashed across the pillow.

He looked so innocent, Martin was nearly overcome with tenderness for the man, the one who'd brought light back into his life after so much darkness. It pained him to lie to Sonny. It felt wrong, somehow

lessening their love, even though Crockett wasn't aware of it. But there was nothing Martin could do. There were some things he couldn't share, even with Sonny.

Martin returned to his room, leaving by his own door. He would have to get back before Rico returned and woke his partner up. That should give him several hours. He left his heavy winter coat and hat, but took the gloves. The thick, black wool sweater he wore under his suit jacket should suffice where he was going.

He walked past the elevators until he got to the service stairs. Glancing around to be sure no one was watching, Martin slipped catlike into the stairwell to descend.



Sonny heard the persistent alarm and swung an arm out to knock it off the shelf. He was too tired, it couldn't possibly be time to get up for work. His mouth felt dry and gummy. Had he been drinking last night? He couldn't remember. The alarm stopped for a few seconds, then blared again.

"Rico, get that goddamned thing, will you?" he mumbled, before realizing Tubbs wasn't beside him, that the bed wasn't rocking, that he wasn't on the *St. Vitus Dance*, that he wasn't even in Miami.

"Wha...?" he grunted, sitting up. It wasn't even an alarm, he finally realized, looking out at the dark night of Manhattan. It was the phone. He caught it on the third ring.

"Burnett," he croaked.

There was a pause, then a woman's voice carefully asked, "Is Mister — Mendez there?" That was Marty's cover name, Sonny remembered, but the voice was so familiar. He took a chance.

"Miss Chandler?"

"Yes," she replied.

"This is Detective Crockett."

"Oh, good," she said, relieved. "I wasn't positive I'd dialed correctly. Is Lieutenant Castillo available?"

"Hold on, he's sleeping. I take it this is important?"

"Very," she said emphatically.

"I'll get him." He stumbled barefooted over to the lieutenant's room, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. "Hey, Marty, rise and shine. Cathy Chandler's hot for you —" The joke died on his lips as he stared at Castillo's unrumpled, empty bed. They'd barely gone to sleep two hours ago. He thought of all Martin's protests about exhaustion and needing to rest alone.

"Marty?" He crossed over to Castillo's bathroom. Empty. On impulse, he stuck his head out the door into the hallway. Checking the closet, he found the heavy coat and fedora. That meant the lieutenant had left in just a suit and sweater. It was ten degrees outside and dropping. *Must've gone down to the restaurant*, Sonny thought with a stab of annoyance. *Or did everyone have a date tonight but me?*

"I'm sorry, Miss Chandler," the Vice cop apologized, "but I was asleep when you called. It

seems Lieutenant Castillo stepped out for awhile. I don't know where he is."

"Oh?" she said, wondering no doubt what kind of undercover operation these Miami boys were running if they couldn't even keep track of each other. "Is Detective Tubbs there?"

Sonny grimaced. Obviously, Miss Chandler would rather deal with anyone but him. "Rico's a New Yorker, Miss Chandler, and it is Friday night. He had a date. I'm afraid you're stuck with me."

"Oh," she said, not sounding very happy at the prospect. "Well, this is important. I'll need to see you right away. Can you meet me at my apartment?"

A fleeting memory flickered over Sonny's mind of Martin's stern warning, but the lieutenant wasn't here. What was he supposed to say — sorry Ms. Chandler, my lover doesn't like me spending time alone with beautiful women? Besides, the Anglo knew very well that had nothing to do with Castillo's attitude.

"Sure, give me the address," he said. It was on the west side of the park, not far from where he was now. It was definitely the *expensive* side of the park. "Be right there."

Sonny looked at the address and smiled. He considered leaving Martin a note, then rejected the idea. He hadn't left Crockett one.

Besides, this was shaping up to be a marvelous excuse to find out just how trustworthy Ms. Catherine Chandler really was.



Martin went past the basement into the sub-basement of the old hotel. It occurred to him that it was possible the old passageway had been sealed. It had never been a commonly used route, even when he was young.

He walked through the dimly lit sub-basement in silence, counting his steps until he felt the old grate beneath his foot. He knelt, tugged and lifted the aged iron carefully so as not to make a sound. Lowering himself into the black pipe, he found the ladder with his feet, then replaced the grate over himself so that no one would know he'd been there.

The narrow drain led to another and then another and finally he was on familiar territory.

Familiar territory.

He touched the wall of the underground tunnel and marveled that it was still familiar after all these years. He felt his throat tightening. It was more than familiar — it was home.

He started off down the tunnel, remembering the route as if he'd walked it yesterday. Voices from the past echoed through his mind, the voices of people who'd loved him, of children playing, of himself and Jack Gretskey — innocent children....

He passed a darkened chamber, not more than a

niche, really, and stopped to sit within it and touch the walls. This is where it had started, in innocence — his love for Jack Gretskey.

They were just kids, but soon, the innocence was gone as their love, their youthful passion, overcame their fears of recrimination, of ostracism, even punishment.

Martin swallowed as he was assailed by powerful memories. This was why he rarely returned — because whenever he did, he'd have to pass this niche, have to remember two young boys discovering something everyone said they had no right to learn.

Jack.

Jack.

He shook his head and sighed. Jack was dead. Martin's love for him lived on, would live forever, but Jack was dead and gone. Jack dead, and May Ying married to another —

But Sonny —

Sonny loved him.

And once again, if the others found out, there would be a new price, new recriminations, new punishments.

But Sonny loved him, with a love powerful enough to light up these dark tunnels.

Martin took a deep breath and left the niche. He stopped after awhile, far ahead of the first sentry point. He looked around, found the short length of metal sitting on the ground under the main pipes running along the walls. He lifted it, the weight and feel familiar, like a favored piece of clothing. He hefted it, then tapped it against the main. One. One-two. One-one-two-one. The code was as fresh in his mind as if he'd used it yesterday.

"Need an escort," he tapped. "Home for a visit." Then he signed with his signature, a coded tap only he had ever used. Would anyone even recognize it?

He continued tapping the message patiently, knowing what a long walk it was from the inner chambers to this place. But then he felt a presence near. He turned.

The old man was behind him, looking not terribly different than when Martin had seen him last. A little grayer, perhaps, a little heavier. The staff, the patchwork clothes that belonged to another era, were all still the same. Martin swallowed, afraid he'd lose his voice.

"You know, you gave Pascal quite a start," the elder said genially. "He had to do some quick research to figure out that old code name. When he told me, I — I could scarcely believe it. I do believe I flew through the tunnels —" The old man's voice cracked. "Well, you're a little early for Winterfest," a fat tear slid from the patriarch's eye as he held open his arms, "but, thank god you've come home. Martin, my son!"

Castillo felt the tug as an almost physical pull as he dropped the bar and moved toward the other man, embraced him and was embraced in return. He did not shake away the tears that came, even as the old

man wept shamelessly and kissed his head. He hugged the oddly dressed character to him tightly, reeling in the delightfully familiar smells of leather scraps, old wool, and dusty books. He hugged the man harder and tried to find his voice, but all he could do was whisper "Father," to the only father he had ever known.

*"Has this been thus before?
And shall not thus time's eddying flight
Still with our lives our love restore
In death's despite,
And day and night yield one delight once
more?"*

Sudden Light — Dante

CHAPTER FIVE: CATHERINE

*"I'm waiting for ignition,
I'm looking for a spark
Any chance collision
and I light up in the dark
There you stand before me,
all that fur and all that hair
Oh, do I dare... I have the touch
I Have the Touch — Peter Gabriel*

Cathy Chandler smiled guardedly at the blond detective as she let him in her apartment. "The door man didn't want to let you in," she said, amused. "He thinks you're a gun runner."

Sonny grinned self-deprecatingly. "It's amazing what the right clothes can do for your image."

The woman was dressed informally in jeans, boots, and sweater, but the detective noted the quality of even those simple clothes screamed money. He looked around the expensive apartment.

"Some digs, Miz C.," he said as charmingly as he could. "You get a raise recently?"

She looked at him wryly. "You don't know about me, do you? That's right — you're from out of town."

Wasn't that just like a New Yorker, Sonny thought. To them, the whole damned world is nothing but 'out-of-town.'

Suddenly, he had a flash of memory, of a story in the newspapers, and something coming across his desk — something about a kidnapping in New York. It was tied in — he had to think a minute — with the picture of a woman's face, horribly slashed. He frowned.

"Wait a second," he said, remembering. "You're that Cathy Chandler!" He stared at her face. "You were kidnapped, gone for days. Yeah, now I remember." He remembered, too, how she'd turned up just as mysteriously as she'd disappeared. There was no scarring on her face now, but Sonny could see those

first pictures clearly in his mind's eye. The plastic surgeon that did the repairs must've been a genius.

"That must've been a terrible ordeal for you," he said sympathetically.

She shrugged and made a face that said, "It's over now."

"I remember the write up," he continued. "Just about every cop in the country saw notices about that." He smiled warmly. "Your father's a *big* corporate lawyer." Nodding, he looked around the apartment. "Well, that explains a lot, except — why a woman of means, like yourself, would want to spend her career in a dingy D.A.'s office instead of daddy's comfortable nest. Especially after what *you've* been through."

"Maybe the same reason a quick thinking young man like *yourself* would be happy dodging bullets in a futile drug war in Miami," she said. "Because it's the right thing to do?"

He grinned, feeling foolish over his suspicions about how she might have acquired her money. No doubt Martin already knew, which is why he warned him off. It would've been a lot easier if Castillo had just told Sonny what he knew. For that matter, it would've been a lot easier if Castillo had told his lover he had some private business to attend while they were in New York. Crockett yanked his mind from that train of thought.

"So, Miz Chandler, now that I'm here, what can I do for you?"

"This is serious, Detective Crockett," she said. "An informant came to me a short time ago. We've found where the Black Opal is storing more of its goods."

The detective's brows knitted together. "This informant lived to tell you about it?"

"He knew about the booby traps from the papers. He didn't go close to the detonator or touch anything. Can I take you there?"

"Of course. Is it far?"

She shook her head. "We won't even have to go into the street." She slipped a jacket on and ushered the cop out of the apartment. They took the elevator down to the second floor, then left it for the service stairs. The route intrigued Crockett, especially since Chandler seemed so practiced at taking it. Finally, she led him into the basement of her apartment building. She moved some boxes away from a door he'd have overlooked without her help. The door led to a pipe ladder into a sub-basement and Sonny followed, quietly closing the door behind him. Both he and Cathy were moving stealthily now. He was impressed with her caution, how silently she moved, how she paid attention to everything around them — almost like a cop.

She stepped out of the sub-basement through a hole in the building's wall into an underground tunnel that stretched away in two directions.

"How'd you find this place?" he asked softly.

"I didn't. My informant did. The city has a huge network of old tunnels running beneath it — hundreds of miles. No one even knows where they go, or who built them. It's not unusual for homeless people to live in them."

She walked assuredly, knowing where she was going. Sonny followed. The tunnels were dark; dim shafts of light filtering through from somewhere. It smelled cool and damp like wet stone, and felt chilly, but not uncomfortably so. Edgy in the strange, other-worldly place, the detective drew his *Bren 10* from his shoulder holster, but kept the safety on. Cathy noticed the gun, but said nothing.

Finally, after myriad turns, they came upon a large chamber hewn out of the surrounding stone. Cathy pressed herself against the wall and indicated Sonny should look in. He could hear no voices or see any indication anyone else was nearby. In the center of the chamber were piles of unmarked crates. Standing innocently near the pile was a small, black box with a blinking red light. Crockett looked down at the "beeper" on his hip. It vibrated silently, indicating the presence of an electronic detonator. If they got within five feet of that thing, their body heat would set it off. He nodded to Cathy and they silently returned to her apartment the same way they had left.

"My informant tells me there are at least six other such caches through the network of tunnels," Cathy said as she locked her apartment door behind Sonny. "Who knows how many more there could be that he hasn't yet found?"

Sonny wondered momentarily about the kind of informant who spent so much time in those tunnels he could've actually located that many strongholds. But after knowing Izzy Moreno, who was he to question the lifestyles of informants? He exhaled in a rush. "If those piles should blow —"

"It could undermine the very foundation of the city," she confirmed. "Something I'm sure they were well aware of when they placed them there." She sighed tiredly. "Can I at least offer you some coffee, Detective, now that I've dragged you from a comfortable bed for such good news?"

"I'd love some, Miz Chandler —" he hesitated, then added, "fortified with some bourbon if you have any."

"You're a southern boy," she said genially. "Jack Daniels okay?"

"Oh, perfect," he agreed, grinning, and followed her into the small kitchen. "Can I use your phone?" Martin could be back from dinner by now, and wondering where Sonny was. Cathy nodded towards her wall phone and he punched in the number. No answer.

"Everything okay?" she asked, handing him the coffee and shot of Black Jack. "You look worried."

He leaned against her kitchen counter, and lifted the shot to his lips. "Sure would like to know where my lieutenant slipped off to," he grumbled. "He needs to know about this before the meet."

"I thought you people were a team, Detective," she chided.

"We are. Damn good one, too. That doesn't mean we don't operate independently when it's needed."

"Well, maybe he has friends in New York he wanted to visit," she offered.

Sonny shook his head. "You don't know Marty when he's workin'. He wouldn't take time off to socialize." He took another sip of the Black Jack, enjoying its familiar fiery warmth as it traveled through

him. He chased it with some coffee, then looked at the cup, surprised. Unlike the strong Cubano brands he favored, this was light, cinnamon tasting. Some gourmet type, he decided, but a nice contrast to the bourbon. He looked at Cathy Chandler. "You know, on second thought, you could be right. I really don't know much about the lieutenant outside of our jobs. He keeps his private life pretty private."

"Well, I can appreciate that," she said sympathetically, "but it bothers you."

The cop smiled. "Yeah, I guess it does. I'm a detective. I like to know things about the people around me — Miz Chandler." He gazed at her appreciatively for a long moment, and she boldly met his stare. "Any chance of our getting past the Miz Chandler-Detective Crockett stage any time soon?"

Nodding, she smiled easily now. "My friends call me Cathy."

"Sonny," he said, and held out his hand. She placed her small one in his and for the second time he held it too long, catching her green eyes with his. After a long moment, she pulled her hand away and dropped her gaze.

"How sure are you of your informant?" he asked quietly.

"Very sure," she said firmly.

"Could be a set up for me and my partners."

"No chance," she assured him.

There was a long pause as they both sipped coffee and eyed one another. Sonny was encouraged that she wasn't making "time-to-go" noises at him. He decided to change the tone of the conversation.

"Cathy, are you involved with Joe Maxwell?" he asked softly, watching her expression intently.

Her face hardened and for a minute, the Southerner expected her to tell him it was none of his damned business. But finally she said quietly, "No. Joe and I are good friends. That's all."

"Surely, you're aware he's in love with you," Sonny said. "Of course, it would be hard for any man to work with you long and not be. You've got it all. Looks. Style. Brains." He laughed. "Even money."

"Joe and I are friends," she said firmly. "I care about him a lot."

He could tell she was irritated with the turn of the conversation, but she made no attempt to deflect it or ask him to leave. That was part of his charm, he knew. Women found it easy to open up to him, to be attracted to him. He used that ability now to get closer to Cathy.

"So, you don't love Joe Maxwell," he said, sipping the coffee. "Who do you love, Cathy?"

She hesitated a beat, then finally answered softly, if reluctantly, "Someone. Someone very special."

"I'll bet. He'd have to be." He smiled, keeping a light teasing banter in his voice and waited to read her reactions. He could feel his cop's intuition working overtime. There was something hidden in Cathy Chandler's life. Something she didn't want anyone to know. It intrigued him. "So, why isn't this special someone here, asking me what the hell I'm doin' taking up so much of your time?"

"I'm working," she reminded him. "Just like you."

You know, lawyers are good at asking questions, too. What about you, Detec -- Sonny? Are you completely unattached?"

He shook his head. "No. My heart's got strings on it."

"More than one?" she asked teasingly. "No wonder you look so tired."

He grinned and nodded at her, giving her the point. "Always room for one more." He moved closer and she stood her ground. "So, tell me about this special man of yours."

She looked at the floor, suddenly drawing into herself. "I have a feeling I'd get along well with your lieutenant, Sonny. That's really very personal."

"Most women love to talk about their men, Cathy," he insisted, taking her chin in his hand, tipping her head back to look at him. He moved closer. "What's the big mystery?" He caught her green eyes with his own and studied them. He could see something there, something.... He clenched his jaw, trying to figure it out.

The way she was looking at him, the tension in her body --

Suddenly, he was overwhelmed with a flash of insight. A hunch. A *feeling* --

"You really love this guy," he murmured, inches from her face. "So... why aren't you lovers?"

Tears filled Cathy's eyes and Sonny was flooded with sympathy for her. He found himself taking her in his arms, pulling her to him, touching his lips to her sweet, full ones. For a second, her mouth opened and their tongues touched gently. Then she stiffened in his embrace and jerked her head away.

"Don't," she begged hoarsely.

Crockett could feel the pent-up desire radiating off her. Her need was like an aphrodisiac scenting the air around them. His cock stiffened and he found himself wanting her fiercely. He pulled her to him tightly, as she pushed feebly against him. "How could any man love you and not want you?" he asked, his voice thick with desire. "Why is he doing this to you?"

"Stop," she rasped. "You don't understand. You can't. Let me go, Sonny."

"Cathy, you deserve to have someone love you, really *love* you," he whispered. He bent, kissed her again, felt her resist then respond. She opened her mouth, her tongue touching his in a deep, sensuous kiss. Then just as suddenly, she pulled away. This time he let her go.

"You have to leave," she said softly.

"You're afraid to be alone with me."

"Yes -- *no*. No. I'm not afraid." Her voice became stronger, more assured. "You're a very attractive, sexual man, Sonny. You're almost magnetic. It's been a long, long time since I've felt myself drawn to anyone the way I am to you. But I can't do this. It would be a betrayal of everything important to me. I couldn't do that."

"To *him*," Crockett finished.

"To *us*," she said firmly, meaning herself and her man.

"This guy must be crazy," Sonny growled irritably. "Any sane man would be keeping you glassy-eyed with

satisfaction. Why do you put up with it?"

She fixed him with a cool glare. "Maybe for the same reason the people who love you are willing to *share* you. I wouldn't."

He nodded. "Got me there." Glancing at his watch, he lifted the phone again. Still no answer. Suddenly, Cathy was looking at him meaningfully and Sonny wondered if he hadn't tipped his hand, calling Martin so soon after talking about his lovers.

"Look," he said, tossing back the remainder of the Black Jack, "there's still enough time for me to get some shut eye before the meet. Call me if anything else comes up that we need to know."

She nodded curtly, blinking back her unshed tears.

"Cathy," he said softly, "I'm sorry -- for pushing."

"It's okay," she assured him with a wan smile. "Once in awhile a woman needs to know she's still desirable."

"Never doubt that, darlin'," he said quietly.

But before he could move to the door, Crockett was suddenly overwhelmed with the feeling of *something* -- *something* near -- a strange, threatening presence. The hair on the back of his neck stood on end and every nerve in his body was taut, alert, wired. He looked past Cathy's shoulder, out through the French doors onto her balcony. There was a shadow there, a huge looming shape that hadn't been there a second ago. Instinctively, he grabbed her and pulled her down behind the counter, even as he reached for his *Bren*.

"There's someone out there," he hissed, unsnapping the safety and cocking the gun. He grasped it in both hands, pointing it at the ceiling and started slinking around the cabinets when Cathy grabbed his gun hand roughly.

"No! Sonny, no! Don't shoot!" she begged, her eyes wild with fear.

The shadow disappeared as quickly as it came. The cop stared at her incredulously and yanked away, dashing for the balcony. He flung open the doors, and stepped outside, gun extended, swinging right to left, eyes wide, ready for anything.

Cathy was right behind him. "Sonny, no, please!" She moved around beside him, her eyes taking in the empty balcony. A look of incredible relief washed over her face.

Crockett grabbed her arm roughly. "What the hell's going on here, Chandler?" he spat. "This balcony's eighteen *fucking* floors up. Is this guy of yours one of the Flying Wallendas, or are you settin' me and my partners up?"

She yanked away from him angrily. "This has *nothing* to do with the Black Opal case, nothing, I swear it. And I'm a little tired of you questioning my integrity. Where do you get off invading my life this way?"

Crockett looked at her long and hard, but as much as he wanted to, he could feel no dishonesty in her. He looked over the edge of the balcony, then up at the roof. There was nothing. He holstered the *Bren* and smiled, his expression pure Burnett.

"Let me tell you somethin', toots," he warned, "I *ain't* Joe Maxwell. I'm a detective, and a damned good one. I'm gonna find out about you Chandler,

and about this guy who can climb like Spiderman onto your balcony, but ain't man enough to get it up and love you the way you need it." And without waiting for her response, he strode out of the apartment.



Once in the street, Sonny crossed over to the park, wondering with grim amusement if he could do what he wanted without getting mugged. He slid back into some shrubbery and took out his small binoculars and tried to focus them on one eighteenth floor balcony. He would've given anything for his night scope. He waited patiently in the darkness, confident he would see what he wanted if he could just tolerate the cold long enough. The bitter wind frosted his ears and blew his long, shaggy hair around. He could barely feel his hands.

Finally, he saw it. A shadow moving like a spider over the face of Cathy's building. *How does he do that?* Sonny marveled, as the indistinct shadow clambered over the balcony railing. *Shit, he's huge,* Sonny realized as the figure enveloped the small woman in his arms. *Hair like a rock star — longer than mine.* He couldn't make out either the color of the hair or the type of clothing. He could see nothing of the face.

And I can't stay either, he thought regretfully, glancing at his watch. The guy had come down from the roof. If he had time, Sonny could stake out up there, follow this clown —

Come on, Crockett, he admonished himself. *You don't really think this has anything to do with the case, so what would be the point?* The point was, that he'd *felt* this guy before he'd ever seen him. The point was, this character had Sonny's sixth sense on fire. Besides — he couldn't help himself. He wanted to know what kind of a man could love that woman and not want her.



Martin took a sip of the same Chinese herbal tea he'd grown up on and savored its familiar, comforting taste. He looked around Father's study, the stacks of old books now nearly to the ceiling of the huge chamber. It didn't look terribly different than it had from his childhood — a little more cluttered, a few new book piles perhaps. He eyed the chess game in progress at the nearby table. Looked like Father was losing again.

Already, he and the patriarch had settled into the familiar patterns of the past. On the long walk back, they'd made small talk, about each other's health, the health of the other Tunnel Dwellers, about the children. The topics were general. Safe. As happy as he was to see Father, as happy as he could sense Father was to see him, the old barrier was still between them. It seemed bitterly unfair to Martin that his past in the Tunnels was something he had to keep

secret from the world Above, and that he felt obliged to keep much of his life Above secret from his family Below. He wondered if he'd ever live long enough to find a place where he could be totally honest, totally himself.

"Where's Vincent?" Martin asked, quietly.

Father looked suddenly uncomfortable and the Vice lieutenant felt immediate concern. "He's all right, isn't he?" he asked, keeping his tone neutral.

"Yes. Yes. He's fine," Father said hurriedly.

"But," Castillo prodded.

"Martin. There are many things I never told you in my letters. Things... I didn't feel comfortable putting on paper."

"I understand." *All too well,* he thought. The things Father felt uncomfortable discussing could fill volumes. Few people who lived Below communicated in the blunt, outspoken manner that people Above did. Down here everyone was painfully aware of one another's feelings, of an almost Victorian propriety, of the *right* way to do things. He could still hear that lesson being hammered home.

You must always do what's right, Martin. No matter the cost.

"And," Father continued, "I've discouraged Vincent from writing about it as well, even though he very much wanted to tell you." The elder took a sip of his own tea, as though looking for the correct words to say. "Tonight, Vincent is — Above. Visiting the woman he loves."

The Cuban couldn't have been more surprised if Father had said Vincent was out dancing the ballet. "That's wonderful!"

"Is it?" Father said somberly.

Castillo leaned forward, suddenly concerned. He couldn't believe Father would discourage Vincent, the child of his heart, from finding true love. "Yes," he hissed, "it is wonderful. To live a life without love is a terrible thing. You of all people should know that."

"You're right, of course," the patriarch agreed. "And I'm sorry to be so blunt about my concerns, but — every time he goes Above I fear for him."

"Tell me about her," Martin insisted.

"She's *beautiful*," Father said, with genuine admiration, "and intelligent. Quite a prize, really. They met when Vincent saved her life. Something happened between them. You know how empathetic Vincent always was?"

Oh yes, Martin knew.

"Well, the two of them have developed an empathic bond of some kind. It's a terrible burden for Vincent. He always knows everything she's feeling through it. Of course, it's had some advantages as well. He's saved her life on occasion, and once she saved his *and* mine during a cave-in down here. You met her today. Her name is Catherine Chandler. She's our contact with the D.A.'s office."

The Latin inclined his head. "That explains something. When we met with them earlier, she looked at me as if she knew me. I knew of her because of the kidnapping. I had no idea Vincent was her rescuer. Of course, it makes so much sense, now."

"Well, she doesn't know much," Father reassured

him. "Just that you lived with us in the past."

The lieutenant smiled slightly. They never did like to talk about him much — the black sheep of the underground. And of Jack they spoke not at all.

"Catherine is working with me and my detectives on the Black Opal case," Martin said.

"So I understand. There's a good chance she's trying to reach you tonight. Earlier today, the sentries found that those maniacs are using some of the upper tunnels to store their lethal goods. Vincent went to tell her in the hopes she could do something about it."

Castillo frowned. If she called the hotel, she'd wake Sonny, and he'd find out Martin was gone. He sighed. "I'd better get back. I'm sorry to miss Vincent."

"It'll break his heart," Father confirmed. "But surely, we'll see you again? You'll stay for Winterfest?"

"I'll try," he said. "This case is the most important thing right now. To have all those arms in the tunnels — the danger to Below and to the city Above —" He shook his head. "You've sealed off the living quarters?"

"And posted extra sentries," Father assured him, standing up. "Let me walk you back at least part of the way."

Martin nodded agreement and the two of them began the return trip.

After other less personal conversation, Father suddenly hesitated, then asked, "Martin, what of you...? Have you recovered yet — from losing May Ying again?"

Castillo wondered not for the first time what had urged him to write of his latest encounter with his ex-wife in such detail to Father. Perhaps he just needed to tell someone of it, someone who really knew him. "As well as I ever will," he said simply.

"Is there anyone in your life now?" Father asked gently.

Anyone. Martin noted the careful choice of words. *Not any woman.* He smiled. He had never been able to lie to Father.

"Yes," he said neutrally, "there's someone."

"I'm so glad," Father said sincerely, but asked nothing more.



Catherine turned and watched Vincent land deftly on her balcony. She wanted to fly into his arms, but hesitated. Of course, he'd know about her kissing Sonny. He always knew. He could feel the turmoil in her as easily as she could feel it herself. She was suddenly afraid. Afraid of Sonny's threat. Afraid of his magnetism. Afraid of her own desires. Not since Elliot Burch had she felt this way about a man, not since she'd met Vincent. Her mind, her soul struggled with the turmoil of her feelings as she faced Vincent.

His blue eyes stared at her, full of pain. Her pain.

Unable to hold back any longer, she ran to him, falling into his strong arms, hiding from the night, from her fears.

"I'm sorry," she whispered into his chest. She meant she was sorry for the kiss, for the pain it caused him, for nearly exposing him to danger — for everything. She didn't have to explain. He'd understand.

"Don't, Catherine," he murmured, his voice thick with anguish. "Don't apologize. You have a woman's needs. I'm the one who should apologize. If not for me —"

"Stop!" She couldn't bear to hear his self-recriminations. To him, everything was always his fault, yet he was the most completely innocent person she knew. She felt as though her desires for him endangered him, as though they could corrupt his purity. Her heart wrenched. As he hugged her tightly and she became more and more aware of his body, she felt her need for him like a voice screaming inside her.

"Vincent, I love you so much," she whispered into his broad chest. She stared into his eyes, feeling that this time she could not hold back the words. "Must I spend my life kissing other men because you won't let me kiss you?"

He tossed his lion-like head and looked at the sky as though the question caused him physical pain. "Catherine," he gasped.

She felt as if Sonny's kiss had opened Pandora's box, that his bluntness had forced her to face the truth of her feelings. The truth was, she could barely stand to be with Vincent without thinking of their future together, without fantasizing that he would someday be her lover, as though her desire for him had reached a peak she could no longer ignore.

"I want you, Vincent, the way any woman wants the man she loves."

He pulled away from her. "We can't keep doing this to each other," he whispered hoarsely. "This conflict will destroy everything we have, everything we are."

"Then love me, Vincent," she pleaded. "Please, love me."

"I do," he swore.

She closed her eyes in exasperation. "Come to bed with me," she demanded. "Be my lover."

He shook his head, wincing at the words. "I cannot. I dare not. The danger —"

"Everything worthwhile in this life comes with risks," she insisted. "Vincent, *feel* my feelings, then deny me!"

He squeezed his eyes shut as her desire thrummed along their bond. "Catherine, stop," he begged. "I cannot, I will not do this. We *must* separate before this need destroys us. Remember my love, Catherine. Find a man who can give you what you need. Go to him and forget me!"

He was off the balcony before she could stop him and she was left, alone and wanting in the cold night.



Rico stood outside the restaurant and checked his watch. It wasn't like Valerie to be late. He glanced down the street looking for her. There was nothing but strangers wandering by quickly, hurrying to get out of the cold. He felt the bitter weather tug at him. He'd almost forgotten what it was like to be chilled to his bones. It was something he never thought about in Miami. He smiled to himself. Since he'd become lovers with Sonny, he never thought he'd be cold again.

He wondered what his lover and *Martin* were up to, but only for a moment. Then he wondered how he'd feel when he saw Valerie again. Would he desire her? Would she be able to tell there was something different about him? Would she know he was in love with someone else?

As he was musing, an attractive, red-haired woman approached him. He tensed. She came straight to him, caught his eyes.

"Mister... Cooper?" she asked softly, large blue eyes capturing his.

"Maybe. Who are you?"

She opened her palm surreptitiously, flashing an NYPD detective's badge. "I'm Detective Diana Bennett, Detective Tubbs," she said softly, glancing around them to be sure no one was near enough to overhear.

Rico was more startled by her using his real name than he had been by her using the cover alias. No one was supposed to know he was here working undercover, except Valerie, and he had told her nothing about the case.

"Valerie asked me to meet you. She's terribly sorry, but something came up at work that she had to respond to right away, and then she couldn't reach you."

"I was probably in transit," Rico remarked, trying to swallow his disappointment.

"Well, Val sent me for two reasons," Diana continued. "One, to apologize, and the other —" she glanced around again. "There's some information I've received about your current assignment. Can we talk?"

Nodding, Tubbs felt cold inside. How could she even know what his current assignment was? "Have you eaten? This restaurant was one of my favorites when I lived here. Why don't you let me buy you dinner. This way, my male ego will be assuaged, and I won't feel completely stood up." He flashed one of his most charming smiles.

"I've got a better idea," she said, returning the smile hesitantly. "We need more privacy than this restaurant can provide. I don't live that far from here. Let's send out for a pizza and talk there."

He hesitated. It could be a set up, designed to trap him into blowing the meet, the entire undercover operation. He gnawed his lip, then decided to go for it. If she did have information he needed, he'd better get it. If it was a set-up, he'd never get back to the hotel, and Sonny and the lieutenant would know some-

thing had gone wrong.

"Lead the way, Diana," he said pleasantly.

She nodded. "I'm sorry, but Valerie never gave me your first name."

"Ricardo," he said softly, taking her elbow as they crossed the street. "But my friends call me Rico."

"This is the working hour

We are paid by those who learn by our mistakes

And fear is such a vicious thing

It wraps me up in chains

The Working Hour — Tears for Fears

CHAPTER SIX THE CONFRONTATION

"Why don't you ask him if he's going to stay

Why don't you ask him if he's going away

Why don't you tell me what's going on...."

Tusk — Fleetwood Mac

Sonny was sitting brazenly on Martin's bed, glancing through the garish headlines of the *Daily News* when the lieutenant finally slipped silently back into his room. Castillo didn't even have the grace to look surprised to see him.

Crockett slapped the paper down, barely suppressing his anger. "You *lied* to me," he said in a tone dripping hurt and betrayal. "You handed me a song and dance rather than tell me what you had to do, where you had to go. We're supposed to trust each other, now more than ever, and you straight-out *lied* to me."

"I'm sorry," Martin said, quietly, no emotion in his voice. "I had to."

"You *had* to?" Sonny came off the bed and got nose to nose with his lieutenant. "That's *bullshit*. You can tell me *anything*. I'm your lover, goddamnit, there shouldn't be any secrets between us. I wouldn't keep anything from you. Where the hell *were* you? You've been gone for hours."

Castillo refused to answer, and Crockett could tell by the drawn look on his face that he was quickly losing patience with Sonny's anger.

After a few uncomfortable moments of silence, the Vice cop began pacing, running his hands through his long hair, talking more to himself than to Martin. "This whole thing is getting weirder by the moment. You disappear into the night without a coat in ten fucking degrees weather, and Cathy Chandler's in love with some bozo who visits her balcony without benefit of an elevator! Am I in New York, or in the Twilight Zone?"

Martin's hooded eyes flashed. He looked around the room, anywhere, but at Sonny. "You were with

Catherine Chandler." It was not a question.

"She called. Wanted you, but you weren't here. She had to tell us about some new information on Black Opal. They're storing arms in these abandoned tunnels under the city —"

Castillo nodded.

"You knew?" Sonny asked incredulously, wondering, not for the first time, if his boss was psychic.

"Yes," Martin said simply. "We'll have to be more careful."

"And we need to *trust* one another. You know things about Chandler you haven't told me. You know things about the case you haven't told me, and now you're making secret journeys into the night. What the *hell* is going on with you, Marty?"

"You know everything you need to know," Castillo growled, his dark eyes flashing. "Catherine Chandler's personal life is none of your concern unless — Are you becoming personally involved with her?"

Sonny's breath caught in his chest. How could Martin tell that so easily about him?

"I see," said Martin softly. "I would advise against your having an affair with her, not for my sake, but yours. But you're a free adult. You can do as you wish."

"I wish to trust *you*," Sonny said, plaintively. "I wish to love you. I won't lie to you, I am attracted to Cathy, but it's all physical. I know she's in love with someone else. But there's something not right there. She's in love with this guy, but he's not her lover. Can you imagine that?"

The lieutenant looked at his detective oddly, and Crockett realized that for the first time since this confrontation started, he'd told Martin something he didn't already know.

"How did you learn that?" Castillo asked.

The blond shrugged. "Same way I figured out you wanted me a month ago, after working with you for months and not feeling that from you. Maybe my cock's some kind of weird divining rod, searching out hard luck cases wherever I go. She pretty much admitted it. It's his problem, not hers." Sonny examined the subtle play of emotions crossing Castillo's face. "And you know more about this than you're telling *again*. You know this guy?"

Martin swallowed. "Sonny. Stop asking me all these questions. Accept the fact that there are things I'll never tell you. Things I *can't* tell you. It doesn't mean that I don't love you, that I don't trust you."

After a long, tense silence, the Southerner finally shook his head. "I don't know if I can accept that. I just don't know." He glanced at his watch. "It's eleven thirty. We can still catch a quick nap before the meet. If I wasn't exhausted before, I'm completely wrung out now."

He stared at Martin intensely, suddenly wanting him so bad he hurt. He wanted to take him in his arms, love his pain and fears away, as though by loving him, he could convince Castillo to trust him completely, convince him that there was nothing he needed to hide from him. He could tell that right now Martin needed him, too, wanted him just as fier-

cely.

But it was late. They were both tired, and now there was a barrier between them, something that hadn't been there before.

Martin nodded and Sonny left for his own room. The distance between them widened with every step.



"Valerie and I have worked together before," Diana said, handing Rico a snifter of *Grand Marnier*.

Scraps of pizza littered the cardboard box that'd been delivered just a short while ago. Rico had forgotten just how good New York pizza was, especially a good old, plain one with extra cheese.

"We're not close friends," she continued, "but we know each other well professionally. I've got a lot of respect for her, and she for me. Right now, she's really worried. She's afraid you're involved with the Black Opal, and she thinks you're in danger of being made."

"What made her think I'm involved with that case?" he asked, sipping the smooth liquor as he settled back on the plush couch. His mind was working overtime. If Valerie had figured it out, others could have also.

"Well, actually, I figured it out, after Valerie gave me some information regarding a case I'm working on. As we talked, it became obvious that could be your only reason for coming to New York." She walked over to a wallboard covered with pictures, clippings, notes. "This is not just where I live, it's where I work. I'm a specialist, taking only one case at a time until it's resolved. Right now, I'm working on the kidnapping of the Morganstern heiress, in cooperation with the FBI."

"She's been gone for about six weeks, hasn't she?" Rico asked, wondering what that could possibly have to do with the Black Opal.

Diana nodded. "And everything I've been able to find out points to a planned conspiracy, not a kidnapping. I think Ellen Morganstern has ambitions to become the largest illegal arms dealer in the world."

"That doesn't make any sense," Rico protested. "She's already one of the richest women in the world from one of the richest families in the world."

"Yes, but Daddy controls the money. And he's a major arms manufacturer — one of the world's biggest. With a taste for his own daughters."

Tubbs whistled. "Pretty big revenge. Fake a kidnapping — make the old lecher pay through the nose —"

"Then use the money to take over a ragtag group, call them the Black Opal, and give them ambition. Most of the arms are coming right out of Daddy's warehouses. And he can't say anything or she'll tell all. Daddy still has an eight year old and a twelve year old at home that he's very *fond* of."

"That's *sick*," the black man said, in disgust.

"She was his first," Diana said. "Her mom died when she was eight. He's been alone with her since then, and now she's twenty-five. From what I hear, she's practically certifiable, but brilliant. Best educa-

tion money can buy. The two other daughters are by other marriages long since ended. He practically bought them from their mothers. He's kept all three girls apart so they couldn't develop any relationships, any loyalty among themselves."

"That explains a lot of stuff, though," Rico said thoughtfully. "Like those grisly tortures."

"That's right. So far, all her victims have been male. Even the guys working with her are afraid of her." Diana sighed. "While I was digging up all this stuff around the Morgansterns, FBI Agent Walsh came to me, to see what information I had about the Opal. That's how I found out about your connection. See, I was ready to move on Daddy. I'd gotten search warrants, wire taps, all my ducks in a row. I'm ready to bust him on multiple counts of child abuse, endangerment, statutory rape, and just about anything else you can think of. Walsh confided in me about your connection, without naming you, of course. He asked me to wait on Mr. Morganstern, to keep everything in place, but not move until your team had time to make its play."

Rico nodded. "He'll do a lot more serious time if we connect him with the Opal's arms deals, than if you just take him in on this child abuse thing. It's sad, but he could even get out on a psychiatric release on those charges. He's got the money to grease the right palms."

Diana clenched her jaw. "I know. And I want him. Bad. It's been horrible having to watch him — listen to those tapes — to those girls crying." She swallowed and looked away from the black detective.

Tubbs felt for the attractive investigator. She was standing in the same place he and Sonny had been many, many times. It was cop hell, and no matter how many years you worked the streets, cases like this could always bring you up short.

"Well," she continued, "all of that is to tell you this. After my talk with Walsh, I happened to get some information from Valerie, and suddenly, I realized the cops coming in from Miami that she knew had to be the same team Walsh was talking about. It was a hunch, but my hunches are usually sound. I'd known Valerie long enough, and could tell her feelings for you were involved, so I trusted her. Told her what might be going down."

Diana moved closer to Tubbs, as though her nearness could convey her concern. "The woman heading the Black Opal has a huge organization. With all the low-lives under her thumb, there's a good chance that there's one or two you might've put away while you worked in New York. That's Valerie's and my big concern. We've been trying to find out, but so far, we've only been able to confirm about half her staff. She was meeting you tonight to tell you to absent yourself from any further dealings."

Rico shook his head. "That's not possible. The people we were courting in Miami have come up here to make our introductions. They'll be expecting me, they know I'm here already. If I back out at this late date, they'll know something's wrong. I'm just gonna have to take my chances."

Diana nodded, her expression one of deep concern.

She crossed her arms. "I'll keep looking into it, see what I can find out. I'll get in touch with you if I hear anything."

Rico stood and went to stand by her. "Why the long face? There's just as good a chance we won't be made."

She shook her head. "I just have a bad feeling about all this, Rico. I don't want to jinx you, but a lot of what I do depends on instinct. I've got real good instincts and they're working overtime right now. There's something waiting in the wings for you, and I can't find out what it is. I'm worried." She smiled wanly. "Valerie speaks well of you. You're a good cop. I'd hate to see anything happen to you because I couldn't get the right information in time."

He laughed lightly. "You and my partner would get along great. He's saved my ass on instinct alone on many occasions." Then he turned more serious, wanting to allay her fears. "Look, Diana, it's all part of the job. You're doing all you can. We knew the risks involved, and because of what you've told me, we'll be even more careful. I appreciate your concern. It never hurts to have a beautiful woman worried about you." He smiled disarmingly, waiting until she returned it. "Didn't Valerie give you any other message for me?"

She looked confused. "Like...?"

"Like — 'give Rico a big kiss for me'?" He grinned brazenly.

One side of Diana's mouth turned up. "No. In fact, she specifically did *not* ask me to do that."

"I think I know why," he said softly, and reached for her, pulling her into a warm embrace, kissing her softly. Slowly, hesitantly, she put her arms around him and within minutes was returning the kiss.

Suddenly, his watch alarm went off and reluctantly he pulled out of her embrace. *It's a wonder any cop ever gets laid*, he thought wryly. "I've got to go," he murmured huskily, "or my lieutenant will have my butt on a platter."

She smiled. "What an interesting mental image."

"Maybe if things work out we might have time to try that."

"Whether we do or not, Rico — please be careful." She touched his face and looked concerned. Her expression made him suddenly uneasy, as if someone were walking on his grave.

"I will. We all will. If something comes up," he scrawled a note on the back of his card, "call me at the Plaza. Ask for Cooper."

She nodded, and exchanged her number with his. "If you need to reach me —" she couldn't hide the smile in her eyes, "about the case."

He kissed her again quickly, and grinned as he walked to her elevator. "Keep it warm," he said, as the grate closed.



Father heard the crash of glass from Vincent's room and hobbled towards his son's chamber as quick-

ly as his bad hip would allow.

"Vincent!" he called, passing the threshold. "What's happened?" Objects were strewn everywhere; the room looked as though a tornado had swept through. In the center of the havoc stood Vincent, hands covering his face, shoulders bowed as though under a great weight. "Tell me — whatever is wrong?"

"What's wrong?" Vincent hissed furiously, yanking his hands away and advancing on the old man. "I'm wrong, *all* wrong. These hands, wrong! This face, wrong! This body. All, all wrong."

Father flinched in the face of Vincent's terrifying anger, but stood his ground. "What is it, son? What's happened to cause you so much pain?"

The big man dragged in a shuddery breath. "Catherine — loves me."

Father looked at his son, baffled.

Vincent laughed harshly. "She *wants* me. Can you imagine? Wants *this*." He shook his head, indicating his body. "It's tearing us apart."

Father felt a twinge of guilt as he remembered his prophetic warning of so long ago, *She can only bring you unhappiness* — and Vincent's furious retort — *Then I'll be unhappy!* Sometimes Father hated being right.

"Have you tried explaining to her why you can't — ?" the elder began reasonably. "Father, Catherine is an adult, modern woman," Vincent explained none-too-patiently. "She has no interest in my *explanations*. She doesn't believe I have a dark side. She doesn't believe I could ever hurt her. She believes our love is powerful enough to overcome any mere *physical* difficulties."

"Oh, no," Father said softly, before he could stop himself.

"It's quickly becoming the only issue between us," Vincent said, still angry. "It mars all our time together. All we do is struggle over this. And every time I see her, my desire, my need for her grows. Each time I find myself thinking, 'maybe. Why not?' before reality takes over. Before I reach for her — with *these* hands." He stared at his furred, clawed hands as if they belonged to someone else. "If this keeps up, I'm afraid of what might happen."

Father watched his son's struggle with his heart breaking. It was all too reminiscent of a past scene, one he'd long wanted to forget.

"Tonight Catherine met a man." Vincent struggled with the words, barely breathing them. "She wanted him terribly — even more than she wanted Elliot Burch. I could feel it through the bond. But her feelings were so torn. She wanted him. She wanted me. When he responded to her and kissed her, I could feel her desire, her need. Her *agony*. As much as she craved that kiss, she felt everything about it was wrong — the touch of normal lips on hers, the feel of smooth skin, hands without claws. Teeth without fangs. All that turmoil was in that kiss. Her desire for me pulled me onto her balcony like a magnet, even as she kissed *him*, even though I knew he was still there. I couldn't stop myself. I felt rage! Jealousy. I wanted to explode into her home. For a moment I actually wanted to kill that man — for daring to give Catherine what I

can't."

Father said nothing as Vincent sank into the nearest chair, exhausted from his emotional ordeal.

"He almost saw me. He had a gun. If not for Catherine's quick thinking, he might've killed me. She sent him away. When I went to her, she begged me — to love her. I had to leave. Even now, her pain is tearing me apart."

Father sighed, helpless in the face of his beloved son's agony. For a moment, he wished that Martin was here, to see the pain Vincent's love was bringing him. But, of course, Martin was no stranger to the pain love brought.

"She's wearing me down, Father," Vincent said tiredly. "And I'm terrified of what might happen if one night I can't refuse her. And yet, how am I supposed to leave her, when her every feeling is as real to me as my own? How am I supposed to live, experiencing *first hand* her making love to normal men? Father, what am I going to do?"

The old man leaned over, took his son in his arms and hugged him, rocking him as if he were still a child. "I don't know, Vincent," he said, honestly. "I truly do not know."



Rico entered the suite he shared with Sonny and the lieutenant with a spring in his step and a song on his lips. His meeting with Diana had not only been physically exciting, but the knowledge she'd been able to give him could only work to their benefit. He couldn't wait to share it with his partners. In spite of the danger facing them tonight, he was actually looking forward to the meet. They were gonna bust these chumps, put 'em out of action, not just in New York and Miami, but across the country. He was full of confidence — until he opened the door and saw Sonny's face.

Crockett scowled at him from one of the double beds in their room, his face a mask of sullen anger. "I was beginning to think you were gonna stand us up, pal," the Anglo said, his voice and tone so reminiscent of Burnett it made Rico shiver.

"I'm kind of surprised to see you here, Sonny," Rico said softly. "I thought you and the lieutenant might've spent the evening — together."

"Is that any concern of yours, Detective?" a deep, quiet voice said behind him. He turned to see the lieutenant straightening his black silk tie. Castillo's face was like a stone carving. His eyes were hooded and dark.

Tubbs looked at his two partners, noting the way they held their bodies, the tension between them, the way they avoided eye contact. He thought of them on the plane, just hours before, the love radiating from them like heat from the sun.

He shook his head. "I was only gone a few hours," he said quietly. "What the hell happened here?"

"Like the man said," Sonny answered coldly, "is that any of your concern?"

"You're damned right it is!" the New Yorker retorted, aiming the statement at both of them. "Somethin's happened that's splitting you two apart, just before we have one of the most critical meets of our careers — a meet *I'm* involved in. We've got to be *partners* on this, or we're gonna be nothin' but a bloody footnote in a file somewhere. I can't believe the two of you are doin' this to each other. You *love* each other, remember? And you're letting some bull shit piece of business get in the way of that. *Damn*, I wished I'd never left!"

There was a long uncomfortable moment, then finally Castillo broke it. He sighed and captured Sonny's gaze. "Ricardo's right. We're letting our personal problems get in the way of our work. It'll get us killed."

The Southerner swallowed hard and nodded. "Yeah. I hear you." He stared into the Cuban's eyes. "I love you, Marty, and you're still my lieutenant. I *trust* you. I really do."

Castillo nodded and Rico could've sworn he sagged in relief. Sonny stood and held out a hand to the other two men. It must've been an old football routine, Rico realized, as they each grabbed hold and he pulled them into a huddle.

"*Partners!*" Sonny said, fiercely. "We're partners."

"And lovers," Rico reminded him, not wanting to let it go. "That's something to be *proud* of, something that makes us stronger!"

Finally, Castillo's husky voice said, "And lovers."

Sonny nodded.

"And *nothin's* coming between us," Rico said to them firmly.

The lieutenant and Sonny bobbed their heads obediently.

"Dr. Ruth strikes again," Crockett murmured, smiling wanly as he released their hands.

"Hey, we got a lot to talk about," Rico told him. "Wait'll you hear what I found out about the head of the Black Opal —"

The three men sat on the double beds and exchanged information as they prepared for their meeting.



Vincent pushed his food around on his plate and sipped some tea.

"I wish you'd eat more," Father prodded, hovering over his troubled son. "You need to keep your strength, especially when you're unhappy."

The shaggy head nodded and Vincent managed to take in another bite. His soul felt wrung out. At least Catherine was sleeping now, tossing with troubled dreams, but sleeping at last. No longer begging him subconsciously through the bond to forgive her, to come to her, to come to her bed. He was exhausted.

"In all the excitement," Father said gently, "I forgot to tell you. We had an unusual visitor today."

Vincent lifted his head, looked at Father quizzically. "Martin was here."

The blue eyes widened. "He did come after all? That's wonderful!"

Father nodded. "Unfortunately, he didn't stay long, and he couldn't wait for you."

Vincent didn't know whether to be happy or sad. To know Martin was near was wonderful, yet to think of him working against those dangerous sadists was terrifying. "Where is he staying? Perhaps I can go see him?"

Father shook his head. "No, he's at the Plaza, with two detectives he works with."

Too bad, Vincent thought. There were no balconies on the Plaza. *He must be using that old sub-basement drain to get to the tunnels.*

"He's meeting with the Black Opal tonight," Father said. "In fact, in just a half hour or so. He's working some undercover scheme. Sounds terribly dangerous."

"Where's the meeting? Did he tell you?"

Father hesitated noticeably, only now realizing where the conversation was leading. "Well, yes. He wanted to make sure none of our people intruded."

Vincent nodded. "Martin would set the meeting near the tunnels, in case he needed an escape route. Where is it? I must go there."

"You must *not!*" Father snapped. "You could interfere with everything he's planned!"

"I will be merely an observer, Father. A little insurance for our friend, should things not go his way. Besides, I want to see these people who think our tunnels are warehouses for their implements of death. Where is the meeting?"

The elder sighed, knowing he could not resist his son's demands. "Near the Alice in Wonderland statue. Not far from the R-13 drain pipe."

Vincent stood to leave.

"I *beg* you," Father implored, "be *careful!*"

Vincent kissed the old man and was out of the chamber with a swirl of his black cloak.



"Intense silence

As she walked in the room

Her black robes trailing

Sister of the moon

Sister Of The Moon — Fleetwood Mac

The cold was unbelievable, Sonny thought as the frigid air gusted around him. He'd lost the feeling in his ears a long time ago, and was convinced another five minutes out here and his dick would surely drop off. Of course, Rico had been right. He should've remembered to pack socks. Socks, hell, he should've brought complete arctic gear, fuck these stylish, drafty clothes. His body shivered violently and he wondered if the *Bren* would freeze and jam if he needed it.

He glanced at Martin and Rico. Neither of them seemed affected. Maybe his blood was thinner, having lived his whole life in warmer climates. Damn, but he was cold.

Suddenly, figures moved around the statue of Alice in Wonderland. Five figures, he counted. He hated big meets like this. So much could go wrong. Three to five. Not the best odds, but they could handle it. Unless there were shooters hidden in the shadows. That wouldn't surprise him at all.

A sixth figure came from around the statue. The woman, Ellen Morganstern, if Rico's information was correct. Not much of her could be seen under her ultra stylish black leather wear, except for her hair, which was the color of a raven's wing, and her skin which was a stark, flawless white. Over her heart sat a large, dark gem. He squinted. Of course. The murky stone could only be a black opal.

In spite of the late hour she was wearing sunglasses – but then, so was Marty. *Like a goddamn vampire meeting*, Sonny thought, shivering.

It was impossible to tell who she was looking at from behind the black shades. After a few minutes, though, Crockett's instincts warned him the exotic looking woman had focused on him. He stared back at her unflinchingly, but her eerie beauty and cool demeanor unnerved him not a little. He'd seen photos of what she'd done to undercover Federal agents, and after what Rico told him, he did not doubt that she took joy in her work.

One of the five cohorts came forward. "Mr. Burnett. You look uncomfortable." There was a smile in his voice.

"It's five fucking degrees out here, Vasquez," he snapped, having no trouble fitting into the Burnett persona under these circumstances. "I wanna make this deal and get my narrow frozen ass back to Miami. I deserve a bonus for hardship conditions."

"But first," said Vasquez laughingly, "we'll make introductions." He indicated the three detectives, one at a time, and identified them to his employer, starting with Sonny, and ending with Castillo.

"How nice to meet you at last, Mr. Mendez," the heiress said in a cultured, modulated voice.

Rico translated what she'd said into Spanish. It was part of Marty's cover that he did not speak English.

"Mr. Mendez is pleased to make your acquaintance as well," Tubbs translated back, after the lieutenant had spoken to him in Spanish. "He only regrets that he does not know your name."

"You can call me – the Black Widow," she said without a smile.

I'll bet, thought Sonny, remembering the pictures of the tortured men.

As soon as Rico translated the phrase, Martin's face broke into an easy, uncharacteristic grin. He said something brief.

"Mr. Mendez says he feels fortunate that he is not a marrying man," Rico translated.

The chilled Floridian grinned as Morganstern's somber expression lightened and she allowed a cold smile to touch her lips. Her henchmen all visibly relaxed. *Life must be a lot easier when Momma's amused*, he thought wryly.

"Tell me, Mr. Mendez, what services can we provide for you?" she asked.

Without warning, Sonny was overwhelmed by the sense of a new presence nearby, for the second time in a day. Someone was behind the Alice in Wonderland statue, someone who hadn't been there before. He showed no emotion on his face or body. Glancing quickly at Rico, he saw no recognition there. He tensed, which only made him feel colder, but his intuition was nearly on full blown panic now and he itched to reach for his gun. He could see or hear nothing.

He supposed it could be an extra henchman for Morganstern. It could be a random mugger trying to see what all the action was about. Whoever it was simply stayed and observed. Sonny's attention was riveted to the statue, waiting tensely for this new player to make his move.

Rico and Martin were talking in Spanish, then Castillo handed Tubbs a list, which he, in turn, handed to one of Morganstern's boys. Finally, it reached her.

The Widow read the list painfully slowly. "Interesting," she purred finally. "These detonators," she mused, tapping the page with a long, blood-red nail, "and the long-range trigger devices. Those are very hard to get. But I think we can – satisfy you."

Rico and Martin spoke together. "Mr. Mendez says he needs documentation on them as well, for the operators."

She nodded. "Bilingual, I assume."

Tubbs smiled charmingly and nodded.

"How much?" Martin said directly to her, in heavily accented English.

She grinned now. It was a frightening sight, Sonny thought. "You're sure you're not the marrying kind?"

Rico relayed that and Martin chuckled evilly.

"Ten million," she said, then turned her head towards the Southerner. "Or eight million – and him." She pointed right at Sonny. He felt his soul shrivel.

Martin laughed again when Rico translated her wish. "Mr. Mendez can't imagine why you would think Mr. Burnett is worth two million dollars. For that kind of money, he'd consider marriage himself."

Everyone laughed then, except Crockett who only managed a wan smile.

"But we are two of a kind, Mendez," Morganstern purred, still watching her prey. "We are as cold as winter, as cold as death. I need the contrast of a hot, summer blond to heat my blood. And this one looks so *healthy* with his sun-colored hair and his incongruous tan here in cold New York. He looks like he could last a long, *long* time."

Sonny clenched his jaw, feeling like a beef being eyed by the butcher.

Martin rattled off something and Rico said dryly, "You should be aware that Mr. Burnett's reputation for stamina is not so well thought of in Miami."

The blond detective glared at his partners, but they ignored him.

"Well, Mr. Mendez, so much of that depends on the right partner, and the proper circumstances," she insisted. "He looks talented enough for my needs. You could leave him here as a down payment; come tomorrow with the *seven* million remainder."

Oh great, Sonny thought, *she's upping the ante*.

Martin rattled off a long speech, still looking amused. For one nervous moment, the cop wondered if he was negotiating the price.

"Mr. Mendez says that he hopes to someday become the liberator of the enslaved Cuban people, and expects to make many more purchases from you. However, his price for the current list is ten million. He wouldn't feel right freeing his people when the cost was another man's slavery — even as pleasurable a bondage as you offer. Also, his financial backers might renege if they were to find out he had bartered with the life of an American — even as questionable an American as Mr. Burnett."

There was a long silent moment as she appeared to consider this. Finally, she turned away from Sonny and said, "Ten million. Agreed. There will be three tractor trailers parked at pier twelve, with your shipment in them, at midnight tomorrow. I hope the three of you can drive. Arrive with the money, and you'll get the keys."

"Will the trucks be gassed up?" Crockett asked brightly, needing to contribute something — the last protesting bleat from the lamb on the block.

She looked at him and smiled a smile that froze his soul, then turned away and stepped back behind the statue and disappeared, her henchmen filing out behind her one by one.

But the *presence* Sonny sensed did not leave with them. Instead it lingered in the area, watching the three detectives. The Vice cop's eyes took in everything, but he couldn't see it. When the Black Widow and her cronies left, Sonny reached into his coat for the *Bren*, grabbing its familiar handle, and lifting it from the cradle of its holster. Suddenly there was a hand on his elbow staying his arm.

"What is it?" Martin asked softly. He was standing at Sonny's right, Rico having taken up a cautionary position on his left. They were surrounding him, covering him.

"There's somebody out here, Marty, almost since the meet began. I can't see him, but I can *feel* him watchin' us. Think we've been made?"

"No," Martin said assuredly.

Sonny realized his lieutenant was staring at him, worried, as though the Anglo might psyche out on them. Rico's eyes were taking in the area, trying to find the elusive body.

"I'm tellin' you, someone's out there watchin' us," Sonny insisted.

"One of Morganstern's?" Tubbs asked, searching his lover's eyes.

Of course, he thought, *who else...?* But then he stopped. "No," he said, sure now, "not hers. Don't know who. Somebody."

"Let's go," Castillo said softly.

"Maybe I'm so cold I just can't think straight," Crockett grumbled, walking away from the meeting place, but still throwing occasional glances behind

him. "But I'm not so cold I've forgotten that remark about my *stamina*." He continued to look around at the dark park. At three in the morning, the city was almost quiet, the trees painting ominous black shadows against the granite boulders.

Near the entrance of the park, Martin turned to them. "I'll meet you upstairs in an hour," he said. "There's something I have to do." He gazed into Sonny's eyes, as though waiting for the confusion, the hurt, the anger.

The Floridian stared at him, incredulous. It was three in the morning! It couldn't be more than five degrees out! What could he possibly have to do at this hour? He felt all the arguments rise to his lips, then he swallowed them. He had to stop being so possessive. He had to let Martin do things his way. But *damn* it was *hard*. Suddenly, he felt Rico's reassuring grip on his right arm. *I hear you, partner*, he thought.

"We'll have dinner sent up to the room in one hour," the fair detective said as neutrally as he could. "Don't let yours get cold."

"I won't," Martin assured him, a small *Castillo* smile gracing his lips.

"Be *careful*," Sonny hissed, then turned on his heels and, shoving his hands deep into the pockets of his heavy coat, walked towards the Plaza.

"That goes double for me, Lieutenant," Rico said quickly. "Remember where you are. This is *Central Park*, in the middle of the night!" Then he followed Sonny, jogging to catch up with him.



Martin kept his eyes opened and his attention focused as he strolled silently across the park. It would indeed be a hollow ending to his career if he was killed by a random mugger.

He felt the tug of memories as he passed the locked-up carousel. Finally, he came to a large drainpipe. Glancing around to make sure he wasn't being followed or observed, he stepped into the pipe, following it to its juncture.

There was the old gate, still intact. He touched the hidden lever and watched as the heavy door rolled aside. He stepped inside the secret tunnel, closing the gate behind him, hearing the door slide shut. Before him stood the person he came to see. Before him, stood Vincent.

*Two evils, monstrous either one apart,
Possessed me, and were long and loath at
going:
A cry of Absence, Absence, in the heart,
And in the wood the furious winter blowing.
Winter Remembered — John Crowe Ransom*

CHAPTER SEVEN

VINCENT'S PASSION

*A thin ice
Covers my soul
My body's frozen and my heart is cold
And still
So much about me is raw
I search for a place to unthaw....
Outside Myself — k. d. lang*

"I gotta get warm, Rico" Sonny complained, his teeth chattering as they entered the suite. "I just gotta get warm."

"Go stand under the hot shower, partner," the darker man suggested, hanging up his coat. "I'll have some Black Jack sent up and bring it in to you. Go on."

The Vice cop nodded, rubbing his hands together, and went into their bathroom. Turning the shower on until clouds of steam rolled out, he stripped hurriedly.

The hot water on his skin hurt, and he grimaced until the beating water loosened his chilled muscles. His feet were white from the cold, as were his hands and ears. He couldn't stop shivering. Well, at least it was keeping his mind off Marty's latest adventure! Tubbs rapped on the door, then opened it. "Whoa!" the black man called out, wading through a fog of steam. "You're gonna shrink in here, Crockett! I got something for you."

Sonny pulled the curtain aside and reached out. Tubbs handed him a standard hotel glass with about an inch of amber liquid sloshing in the bottom. He took a mouthful of the potent bourbon and felt it sear its way down to his gut. Normally, its comforting heat traveled all the way to the soles of his feet, but not this time. He faced his partner as Rico stood there, watching him solicitously. "I'm just so damn cold!"

"It was that woman," the New Yorker said softly, "the Black Widow. She turned those death eyes on you and sucked all your heat right out. I got the shivers when she started barterin' for you."

"You got the shivers?" the blond said with a bitter laugh. He tried not to remember the way she bargained for him as if he were just another product to deal, like coke or guns, as if he had nothing to say about it. "For a minute I was afraid Marty would think it was a good deal."

Rico shook his head. "I was standing a lot closer to him than you were. His whole body went tense when she brought that up and his voice — changed. He was *pissed*. For a heartbeat, I thought he might plug her right there."

"Y'know," Sonny said honestly, "I can't remember ever being afraid of a woman. Not *really* afraid — but I'm afraid of her."

Handsome copper eyes stared at him worriedly, then Tubbs said, "You're still shakin'. Drink more of that bourbon."

Crockett nodded and drained the glass. "That's goin' down good, partner, but I'm still cold." That was putting it mildly. In spite of the hot water sluicing over his body, he felt like he was standing on a polar cap.

"You need skin-to-skin," Rico decided, stripping out of his clothes. He took the glass from his partner's hand and stepped into the shower with him. "Damn, Sonny, you're as cold as *ice*." The black man rubbed his lover's arms, his back, his thighs, as the hot water pounded against them. "We're gonna have to get you some thermals."

"Oh, that'll be sexy," the Floridian commented. "I might do a little better if I'd just remembered to pack some socks." He winced as soon as the words left his mouth.

"You weren't wearin' *socks*? You're not in Florida, pal!"

"Don't bitch me out, man, just hold me. I'm freezin'."

Rico cranked the water temperature up a notch and hugged the fair man closer to him. Crockett settled into the strong arms and tried to make himself relax and absorb Tubbs' heat.

"So," Sonny said, teeth chattering as the water soaked them both, "where do *you* think Marty's gone to?"

Rico looked thoughtful. "I haven't got a clue. Secret meet with your mysterious presence?"

"That's what I think. That's why I was so pissed earlier." He told Rico about Martin's strange insistence on sleeping alone, then his equally unusual disappearance. That led to Sonny's sojourn to Cathy Chandler's place, and what had happened there.

The black man chuckled. "So, Cathy Chandler turned you down for a guy who's not even her lover. If the Black Widow hadn't made such a big play for you tonight, I'd say you were losing your touch."

"I *am* losing it," Sonny grumbled petulantly. "One of my lovers won't be straight with me about his secret life, I'm rejected by a celibate lawyer, only to be hit on by a ghoul who isn't really interested in me, but wants my testicles for earrings —" He looked at Tubbs through slitted eyes, "and I think there's something you want to tell me about Diana. Or did you think I didn't notice your entrance this evening? The only time you start singing old Smokey Robinson tunes is when some sweet young thing has taken a shine to ya."

Rico laughed heartily and confessed his stolen kiss. "If I'd had just one more hour —" he sighed wistfully. "I do *love* N'Yawk." He and Crockett stared at each other and laughed about their misadventures. "We're both incorrigible," Tubbs decided. Then he looked at Sonny sideways. "Does the lieutenant know about you and Chandler?"

The Anglo rolled his eyes, remembering that scene. "He called me on it. Was *not* happy."

"Come on, Sonny. He didn't approve of that stuff *before* he was involved with you."

"I know," the Vice cop confessed. "But, hey, I didn't plan it — and nothing's gonna come of it, so —" He was suddenly sorry he'd brought the whole thing up.

"You feeling any warmer?" Rico asked solicitously. Crockett nodded. He was still cold, but not frigid. "Good," the New Yorker told him. "Cause I'm about parboiled. That pizza with Diana was a long time ago, and I'm hungry again."

Sonny looked at his lover with a wry grin. "For food?"

Rico gazed back at him sternly. "For food. And I'm *not* interested in having the lieutenant walk in on us while we're in the clinches, if it's all the same to you."

The blond looked exasperated. "Oh, you two are somethin' else. At this rate, I'll be lucky if I ever get laid!"



Martin felt Vincent's arms crush him to his strong, wide chest. The lieutenant couldn't even encircle his brother, but he tried.

"I couldn't believe it when Father told me you were here," the Tunnel Dweller confessed.

"Believe it, little brother," Castillo whispered. He pulled back to examine his friend closely. "You're no one's little brother now. It's *good* to see you!"

"How long has it been?" Vincent asked.

The Cuban shook his head. "Let's not count the years. I'm feeling — too mortal these days."

Of course, Castillo knew exactly how many years it had been. Over five. He'd come home to the underground when he was sufficiently recovered from the injuries he'd received in the Mai Sa ambush to be shipped back to the States. He'd come home then, after the loss of both Jack and May Ying, to be near the only people left in the world who loved him.

He hadn't stayed long — just long enough to renew his close friendship with Vincent — a relationship that Father never quite trusted. It had been that visit that convinced Martin he no longer belonged Below — or even in New York. He and Jack had gone to Miami after leaving the first time — so that was where he had returned.

Devon had already disappeared. Vincent told him they all feared he was dead, but Martin didn't believe that. Devon had long chafed under Father's harsh discipline, and Martin and he used to talk for hours about how someone could disappear without a trace into the world Above.

It was ironic, Castillo thought, that Devon had vanished. Martin had not found it necessary to do that. At fifteen, he had simply walked out the gate with a small satchel of clothes, and had gone to find Jack — who'd been asked to leave on his eighteenth birthday the day before. Father had only half-heartedly tried to talk the young Latino into staying. Castillo had always believed the old man was inwardly relieved that the Cuban wanted to follow his lover. It had removed the pressure from the patriarch of trying to cope with a relationship he was ill-equipped to understand.

"I felt your presence in the park," Martin said.

Vincent smiled his unique, crooked smile. "I thought you would. I sensed you easily as well. The quiet, secure feeling of your soul was always so strong to me, so steady, in spite of whatever chaos raged around you. You were the first person I learned to empathically sense. And we're still connected, in spite of the years we've been apart."

The dark head nodded slightly. "The years haven't lessened my feelings for you. You're still my little brother." *The only one that stood by me.* Devon had too, but now Devon was gone.

What does it matter who he loves, Martin could still hear the young Vincent argue. *What's important is that he loves!*

Fine sentiments, Vincent, Father had retorted, *but there are larger issues. There are the standards of our community to consider, and the influence on others, on the children!*

"Martin," Vincent said soberly, "there was one other man in the park, a man you couldn't see. He was hiding nearby, where he could observe without being seen himself. I kept a close watch on him, fearing he might do you harm."

Castillo nodded. "I expected there to be a few men hiding there. He didn't see you?"

His brother's odd lips turned up in a smile. "He didn't see me."

"And the meet went well. Tomorrow night, this nightmare may be over."

"There are so many things I want to ask you, so much we have to talk about," Vincent said, "I scarcely know where to begin."

"I can't stay long," Castillo told him regretfully. "The others with me are worried about my strange absences. Walk with me to the Plaza drainpipe and we can talk on the way."

They began the journey through the underground tunnels — two incongruous people — a lion-being from another era, and a man in black who belonged in the tropics.

"Tell me," Martin begged, a glint in his dark eyes, "about *Catherine*."

Vincent sighed, a slight smile curving his lower lip as his golden hair fell forward over his face. "You've met her?"

The lieutenant inclined his head.

"Then you know everything. Could you not love her?"

Martin smiled. "Spoken like a man in love. And she, you?"

Vincent bowed his head. "Too much, I fear."

Castillo stopped, waiting until his brother faced him. "You once told me you can never love too much," he said softly.

The big man looked at him curiously. "Yes, you can. Or so I am learning."

"Little brother," Martin took one of Vincent's great hands in his smaller ones, "what is wrong between you and Catherine? Why aren't you and she...?" He hesitated, remembering how it was Below, remembering how hard it could be to ask the truly difficult questions. "Why aren't you — together?"

Vincent peered at his friend, as though the answer

was obvious. "She has a life Above. Important work."

Martin sighed, realizing he hadn't asked the question quite right. "Little brother," he said bluntly, borrowing a page from Sonny's tell-it-like-it-is book, "why aren't you *lovers*?"

Vincent drew back sharply, pulling his hand away. "Father had no right to tell you that," he growled angrily.

"Father didn't tell me," Martin assured him.

"Then how could you know?" the Tunnel Dweller asked, baffled. "You can't read me *that* well."

"No, I can't," the Cuban admitted.

Vincent looked at him oddly. "One of those men near you — the light-haired one. I thought he looked — *felt* — familiar. For a moment, I thought I even *sensed* him, felt his presence, even as I felt yours." Realization dawned on the long, cat-like face. "Tonight, with Catherine —! It was him! He tried to —"

Martin could see the turmoil on his brother's face and placed a gentle hand on his arm. "That man is very empathic, very sensitive. He *felt* your presence tonight at the same time I did. He was at Catherine's apartment because of the work we're doing together. While there, I think he *felt* her unhappiness, her wanting. Sonny can't help but respond to others' needs. It's the way he is. It's one of the reasons — I love him." Castillo watched his brother's expression change.

"You — and that *man*?" Vincent asked, holding his head to one side, as if he couldn't imagine what Martin was saying.

The lieutenant swallowed, suddenly fearful that his friend would finally do what he hadn't done so many years ago — reject him because of his choice of partners. "We are lovers. He is *everything* to me."

Vincent looked confused. "This man is not faithful to you — not in his heart, not with his body."

"That's not what I ask of him," Martin said, simply. "He loves me. He fills me with light. That's enough."

Vincent nodded. "Then, I'm happy for you. I'm more than happy, I'm joyous."

The Hispanic almost sagged in relief. "It was he who told me about you and Catherine. He sensed it." He watched his brother's face, the anguish there. "Tell me what the problem is. Let me help you."

Vincent shook his shaggy head. "There is no help to be had," he grumbled.

"When I discovered my feelings for Sonny," Castillo said patiently, "I pushed them away. But he wouldn't let me hide behind excuses. He forced me to face my love for him. Our relationship is far from easy, and there are many difficult moments, but I'm thankful every day that he's part of me, now."

"Martin," Vincent said patiently, "I appreciate your analogy, and while your relationship with this man is fraught with difficulties and violates many of the tenets of both your world and mine — at least you are both the same *species*. At least, your love does not endanger his life."

"Doesn't it?" the Cuban asked, wondering how easy it might now be for one of them to make an error in judgment that might cost them their lives.

Vincent shook his head. "You don't have a dark soul lurking within you, a darkness that kills."

"Don't I?" Martin asked pointedly again, peering at his brother.

"Not like mine," Vincent insisted. "Who knows what could happen if passion looses the beast within me."

"This is what Father has been telling you all your life!"

"It's *true*! You haven't been here, haven't seen what I can become. What these hands can do."

"Stop," Martin ordered softly. "Those are Father's fears. You're a man, Vincent, who loves a woman —"

"Hardly a man," the lion-being growled.

"True," the lieutenant agreed suddenly. "*More* than a man. And Catherine loves you. Stop running from her love. You couldn't hurt her. You *couldn't*."

Vincent looked deeply into Martin's eyes. "If I could only be as sure as you."

"Be sure. You're living with Father's fears, a man who came here because of a failed love. His inability to understand my feelings for Jack is little different than his inability to understand your feelings for Catherine, or the need you two have for each other. Your fears are his legacy. Leave them here when you go to her Above. Love her, Vincent. Don't fear this."

The Tunnel Dweller had plainly run out of arguments.

"Have I ever given you poor advice?" Martin asked, as they began walking again to the drain pipe.

"Never, big brother. Never in my life."

The Latino nodded, as if nothing more need be said.



"Soup's on," Rico announced, relieved. He'd made sure Sonny was bone dry before seeing him slide under the blankets of one of their double beds, but within seconds, the blond detective was complaining again of the cold. Tubbs didn't like the way his lover looked, the way he couldn't stop shivering. He'd ordered dinner and made sure that the minestrone soup would be particularly hot.

"You should've waited till Marty got back," Sonny complained, teeth chattering. He threw back another shot of the Jack Daniels.

"Well, he said he'd be here in an hour." The dark cop checked his watch, wheeling the small cart between the two beds. "And it's been an hour, now."

"I'm here," said the familiar, husky voice. Rico caught Sonny's relieved-yet-annoyed expression then looked into his lieutenant's eyes. The Cuban stared back questioningly as Crockett huddled under the blankets.

Castillo moved around Tubbs before the New Yorker could say anything. As he did, Rico noticed that the Latin was not carrying an aura of cold around him. His coat was cool, but not chilled. His face showed no evidence of even being outside.

Tubbs had to push his natural curiosity aside.

"Sonny's having trouble warming up," he told the lieutenant.

Castillo's mouth turned down, and he impersonally slid a hand against the blond's neck. "You forgot socks."

The Southerner just shrugged, tired of being scolded. "Man, you're hands are *warm*."

The Hispanic checked the food cart. "Minestrone?" he asked Rico.

Tubbs smiled.

Then Castillo spied the open bottle of bourbon and the empty glass beside it. "You've been drinking?" he asked the fair cop neutrally.

"Rico had it sent up," Sonny said. "Feels warm goin' down, but —"

Castillo gave the dark detective an ominous look. "Don't they teach emergency first aid to the police in New York? You never give alcohol to anyone suffering hypothermia."

Tubbs flinched, chagrined. "Are you serious? I thought it'd warm him up --" His boss's expression stopped him. "Then why do those St. Bernards in the Alps carry around those little kegs?"

The lieutenant's mouth turned down, but he didn't respond. "Before you eat," he told Sonny, "I'm taking your temperature." Then he left for his own room.

"Come on, Marty, I'm not sick," Crockett called irritably after his retreating form. "I'm just cold. The two of you are gonna nursemaid me to death."

Castillo returned shaking down a thermometer. Only the lieutenant would travel with a complete medical kit, Rico decided.

"Open your mouth." The Cuban's grim expression said volumes about the alternative, should Sonny refuse; Rico had to smile behind his hand.

The Southerner obeyed reluctantly. The lieutenant had deposited his outer wear in his own room and now sat beside Rico on the other bed. The three of them sat there in uncomfortable silence for several minutes before the lieutenant removed the thermometer. He frowned when he saw the reading. "Your temperature's depressed."

Rico handed Sonny his minestrone. "This should make a difference. If those monks were smart, they'd fill those doggie kegs with this *fine* New York stew instead."

"Well," Crockett complained, shivering, "if I am hypothermic, it hasn't affected my appetite."

The three ate ravenously, and discussed how they would handle the following night's meet. Rico was pleased that the Floridian refrained from badgering Castillo about his unusual late night stroll. He was also aware that both his and the lieutenant's attentions were firmly riveted on Crockett, bundled under a pile of blankets.

"Are you warm yet?" Tubbs asked, clearing away dishes.

"Warmer," Sonny agreed, hunkering down in the bed.

Castillo looked somber — more so than usual. He approached with the thermometer. Crockett rolled his eyes, but took it.

"It's improved, but still depressed," the lieutenant

announced, after checking it.

"I'll be fine by morning," Sonny promised. "I've been cold like this before. In 'Nam."

The Cuban looked at Rico. "He needs skin-to-skin."

"I already did that — put him in a hot shower, and got in with him. He's still cold."

"You *can* feel your feet, can't you?" Castillo asked Sonny, pushing the blankets away from the foot of the bed and checking for himself. "Any pain in your toes?"

"My feet are *fine* — just cold," the Anglo confessed, pulling his feet farther under the blankets.

The Cuban's expression was strained as he turned to Rico. The black man nodded, realizing they'd run out of options. "Get up," Castillo ordered Sonny.

"Come on, Marty, no parlor games," Crockett grumbled. "I'm cold. I'm exhausted. I just want to sleep."

"Not till you're warm," the lieutenant sighed tiredly. "Bring the blankets," he told Tubbs. "We'll sleep in my room."

Rico saw Sonny's expression change into wry amusement, but before he could aggravate the situation with a smart comment Tubbs shook his head slightly. He didn't think the lieutenant was in the mood for it. "Come on, partner, I'll help you."

"I can manage," Crockett growled, gathering the blankets around his nude body and trailing his boss obediently into his room. He dumped the blankets on top of the king-sized bed and scrambled under the sheets. The other two men smoothed Sonny's blankets over what was already there, and Rico removed his robe and climbed in next to his lover.

"God *damn*," the dark detective complained, as he pressed his bare flesh against the tanned body. "This is like cuddling up with a corpse, Crockett. You are *cold*."

"Hey, with deductive reasoning like that, you ought to consider going into police work, pal," Sonny grumbled, teeth still chattering.

The lieutenant killed the lights in the room, except for one small bedside lamp, and finally stripped. Rico could see he was plainly uncomfortable with the situation. Sliding into the bed on the other side of the blond, he made a small sigh of protest when his lithe, nude body touched his chilled lover's.

"We'll laugh about this in the morning," the Southerner told them and was rewarded by one of Castillo's rare smiles. The three men turned on their sides, sandwiching Crockett between them, spoon-like, for maximum contact. "Man, you two are so warm," Sonny sighed, sliding his frigid arms around Rico, even as Tubbs felt the Cuban enclosed the blond's chest in his strong embrace.

Rico pressed himself closer to his cold lover and realized his lieutenant was doing the same. He found himself hoping that this would not turn out to be one of those stories Sonny circulated around the squad room that got bigger in the retelling. Only Crockett could've gotten him into a situation like *this*. Would he even be able to sleep with the dour lieutenant, Sonny's *other* lover, not two feet away?

Castillo's strong forearms brushed the small of his back, where they embraced Sonny. The unusual con-

tact raised goose bumps across Tubbs' chest. Rico clutched Sonny's arms, pulling them tighter around him, as if needing that contact to remember where they were and why.

"Yeah, that's nice. Nice," Sonny murmured sleepily, as if this was something they did all the time.

Slowly, Rico felt the tension ease out of the Southerner's body, felt his frosty flesh grow warm where Rico's touched it. Gradually, Crockett absorbed the heat from Tubbs' brown skin, and drifted off to sleep while Rico and the lieutenant warmed him with their body heat, and their love.

*So here we lie against each other
These four walls can never hold us...
On our way to some other place
But I don't know where you go
Do you climb into space
To the world where you live?
World Where You Live – Crowded House*

CHAPTER EIGHT: THE DESIRE

*Come to me in my dreams, and then
By day I shall be well again.
For then the night will more than pay
The hopeless longing of the day.
Longing – Matthew Arnold*

Catherine opened her eyes in the darkness, wondering what time it was. She turned to her digital clock, squinting, but couldn't quite make out the numbers. *Must be near dawn*, she thought tiredly, feeling as though she'd barely slept. She was breathing hard, open-mouthed, as though she'd been running. Her dreams of late had been disturbing, upsetting, even though she couldn't remember them on waking. She ran a hand over her breasts; her nipples were hard, aching. Falling back on her pillows restlessly, she squeezed her eyes shut.

Maybe she should take a vacation – get out of New York for a while. *Away from Vincent*, a small part of her mind said. She clamped a lid on that thought. *Someplace warm*, she thought, hearing the winter wind gust against her balcony doors. *Somewhere where it's always summer*. Suddenly, she wanted to feel the tropical sun on her body, warming her, burning her. *The Islands, perhaps, or Florida. Miami....*

There was a click from the balcony doors and she sat bolt upright, expecting Vincent, feeling guilty about dreaming of sunny climes where he could never go. The balcony doors swung wide – and Sonny Crockett stepped into her room.

Her brow furrowed as he stood there, outlined in New York's late night glow. He wore a pale linen suit, thin, peach colored pullover, and deck shoes.

Tropical wear, totally out of place here. His long, sun-bleached hair gusted around his handsome, beard-stubbed face as warm breezes blew around him into Catherine's room, hot breezes from the tropics, heating her room, taking the winter chill away.

"Sonny?" she asked, as he closed the doors behind him. "How did you get here?"

"Sssh," he admonished, smiling gently as he approached her. "It's okay. Everything's going to be okay."

He sat on the edge of her bed and took her arms in his warm hands, then pulled her to him. His touch was like a bit of sun, brightening her and the room, and everything around them. She slid her arms around his neck as though it were the only thing she could do, and pressed her mouth to his. When his tongue touched hers she felt sunlight pour into her mouth, into her soul, banishing the dark. She pulled him down on top of her in the bed, running her hands over his well-formed body, relishing the feel of his long, smooth, swimmer's muscles, his crisp scent of spice and saltwater.

She sighed as he rolled onto her, enjoying the feel of his weight, spreading her legs to make him comfortable. How long had it been since a man pressed her body against her mattress, since she felt a strong, hard phallus throb against her thigh?

"Sonny," she breathed as he took her mouth again, digging his hands into her hair. When he slid his large hands over her breasts, she moaned, arching against him, searching for him in spite of the clothing between them. "Please," she begged.

His strong, calloused hand slid under her silken nightgown, traveling confidently along her slim thigh, until his fingers tangled in the soft hair of her mons. She whimpered under him, clutching his jacket. His mouth blew a gentle breath against her ear, as his tongue reached out, touching the lobe, then traveled smoothly down the skin of her throat. She felt herself becoming helpless under him, falling under the spell of his hands, his mouth. Her hips arched up as he continued stroking the tangled fur.

"Cathy," he whispered, as he slid one finger into the moist petals of her vagina.

"Sonny...!" she gasped breathlessly, rising against his sweet touch, arching, bucking against his expert hand. He stroked her gently, teasingly, finally running the tip of his finger around her painfully erect clitoris. "Love me," she begged shamelessly, aching for him.

"You sure?" he whispered huskily, kissing her jaw, her eyes, her throat. "You sure?"

She groaned. *No*, she thought, *no, I'm not sure, I'm not. Vincent?*



Vincent dozed fitfully, then finally awoke. It had to be near dawn Above, but he wasn't sure. He was panting, his body tense, his hands clutching the patchwork blankets. His organ was hard, throbbing, tormenting him with its own wants and needs. Sud-

denly, he realized it was Catherine's desire waking him, through the bond, through her dreams. He felt as if she were in the room with him, almost as if he could feel her small, delicate hands on his body, smell her sweet woman's scent. He growled and tossed in the bed, wanting her terribly.

Inside his soul, he felt the Other stir.

Hesitantly, he reached out through the bond, wanting to know what she was experiencing that had her so aroused. As he focused on her, he could sense her body stretched out on her bed, panting even as he was panting, sweating even as he was sweating. Her hips lifted slightly in time to the rhythm of a phantom lover, even as she slept. Feeling like a voyeur, but too needy to deny himself, Vincent slid effortlessly into Catherine's dream, to experience — at a safe distance — a small part of her passion.



"Sonny, please," she gasped, clutching his light summer clothes.

He shook his head regretfully, his green eyes full of sorrow. "Cathy, you're not sure. You're just not sure." He faded away like moonbeams, like the summer heat, until she was clutching nothing but air.

"No," she moaned, then felt Vincent's touch through the bond. He stood in the open balcony doors and the breeze that blew now was cool like fall. His great cloak swirled in the wind as he came to her. "Vincent," she sighed happily, and let her need thrum along the bond until he could no longer resist and came to sit on her bed.

"Love me, Vincent," she begged. "You're all I want." She ran her fingertips over his odd mouth, his furred muzzle, his high cheekbones. "Love me, please."

Without speaking, he bent, took her mouth with his, kissed her firmly — their first kiss of passion, of need.

The bond between them was like a living thing, surging with power, electric with the heat of their love, as Vincent slid into Catherine's bed and pulled her into his arms. The bond heightened everything as she experienced their kiss with her own desire and with his. It made the moment eternal, as their mouths seemed welded one to the other. When she boldly slid her tongue between his lips to tickle his mouth, he gasped, and she did, too, and she felt his surprise even as he felt it.

She fumbled with myriad lacings and buckles as she skimmed his sharp teeth fearlessly. When he nipped her tongue gently, she moaned and he growled and each shared the sweet pain and delight. They struggled, then finally were nude. She explored the sleek dusting of fur that covered his body as she writhed against him.

He managed to pull his mouth from hers to slide it along her neck, tasting her skin, feeling the pulse so close to the surface, as the predator did his prey. She arched against him, panting, desperate.

"Please," she begged, with all her need and his, "oh,

please." She said it over and over and every time she did, he growled low in his throat. His mouth captured her breast as his blue eyes caught her bright green ones. She saw it then, behind the cerulean eyes, the hint of the Other lurking, feeding on their passion.

She smiled boldly and pressed against him. "I love you, Vincent," she whispered, weakening the Other. "I love you with all my heart."

He growled louder and she pulled him up to taste his mouth again even as her hand searched for his male flesh.

"I love you so much," she whispered, finally grasping him firmly, shocked at his size, but so very eager. "This is part of my love, Vincent," she told him as she guided him against her, nestling his large glans against her moist opening. "It's part of your love, too."

She dug her fingers into his rump and pulled him into her, thrusting her hips forward, sighing with a deep pleasure as he penetrated her, forcing his way in, filling her completely. She opened herself to him physically, mentally, and emotionally, pouring her wants and needs through the bond, taking all that he was as deeply inside of her as she could, giving all of herself up to him. The bond vibrated as each of them felt each other's passion.

She felt the growl build deep inside him, saw the glint of the Other in his eye as he took her, plunging into her needy body again and again. She met his eyes, searching for Vincent, not the Other, and sent a wave of pure love and passion through the bond.

Vincent gasped, shutting his eyes, locking the Other away. He took the power of her love into his soul, into his flesh.

He pumped into her cautiously, feeling her love for him grow with every stroke. Enveloping her in his powerful arms, he crushed her to him and was rewarded by her deep sigh of contentment.

"Love me, my Vincent," she begged, "just love me."

He moved harder inside her, the bond guiding him, showing him what was enough, what was too much.

Soon his fur was slick with sweat, even as her sleek skin was, as they moved synchronously in a rhythm as old as time, as old as love. She moaned and purred, urging him on, reassuring him that he was sublime, wonderful, the most perfect lover. She could feel his amazement at the power he received from her desire, her love, how the bond heightened everything, how it doubled each exquisite sensation. She wrapped her lean legs around his hips, making him grumble.

"Now," she encouraged breathlessly, "give me — give me —" The words were broken, she wasn't sure he understood what she meant, until she felt him recognize the force of her orgasm building inside him, pulling his along.

They erupted together, the bond stretching the sensation into an eternity of feeling. He crushed her to him, even as she buried her hands in his hair and screamed his name. He roared, his claws tearing into her mattress, then finally collapsed against her, feeling as though her orgasm had been his, and his hers.

He woke suddenly, hearing his impassioned roar echo through the rock walls of his room, as he clutched his torn pillow as if it were a living body.

"Catherine?" he whispered, looking for her, feeling the hollowness of his empty arms. Then he remembered touching her dream, falling into it. He remembered loving her with his mind through the bond.

He looked down at himself, at his now flaccid, peaceful organ, and the pool of ejaculate gathered on his thigh. Part of him felt profoundly disturbed and guilty, but as he searched through the bond for her, he realized she was sleeping soundly, dreamlessly. She was smiling in her sleep, satisfied by her dream orgasm. The relief he felt overwhelmed him.

He fell back on the bed, confused and concerned. Could Catherine's love really control his Other, drive it back? Or was it just holding it off, so that it might emerge at some later time, some later place, to destroy them?



*Let me take you on a trip
Around the world and back
And you won't have to move
You just sit still...
Now let my body do the moving
And let my hands do the soothing
Let me show you the world in my eyes.
World In My Eyes — Depeche Mode*

Martin awoke with a soft groan of desire. His body was tense, sweating, aching — his cock rigid and painful. He blinked, tried to get his bearings, but it was too dark — as dark as the Tunnels. He was gasping, pulling in great lungfuls of air. He was alive with wanting.

Something — someone — was inside him. Calling. Teasing.

He felt his passion stirring like an alien thing growing within him, as though something outside himself, outside of his control had taken possession of his basest needs. *Jack?* he thought, wildly, trying to remember where he was. No, not Jack.

Someone called to him again, softly — in his mind.

Vincent? He shut his eyes, trying to clear his fuzzy thinking. No, not Vincent. Or, was it? It was just out of reach. He was too sleepy, too disoriented to be sure.

Something warm and familiar stirred against him, brushed against his agonized cock. He shuddered at the sensation. It happened again.

Sonny.

The desire flooded his mind, his soul, and he moaned against his will. He didn't understand, couldn't comprehend how it was happening, but something outside himself was exciting him, teasing him, touching all the right places in his mind, like a seductive siren's call. It was a dark, frightening passion, but not unfamiliar to him. It was the side of him he feared the most. The side he couldn't always control. If he had not known Jack was dead he'd have thought Gretsky was somehow responsible.

No! Castillo ordered himself, finally realizing where

he was. *Not here. Not now. Please.* The passion ignored him, flooding his soul with a dark need. *No,* he pleaded softly, swallowing the moan that struggled to escape.

Crockett moved against him, snuggling against his warm skin. Martin felt his lover's breathing increase. *No.*

Yes.

His eyes snapped open as another's thoughts touched his. He knew the touch, could almost hear the drawl.

Please, Marty. I need you. Here. Now. The younger man's desire, all hot and white, thrummed into his brain, impossible to deny.

No, Castillo pleaded feebly, even as his arms encircled the tanned Southerner, even as his tongue reached out to taste his salty skin. Sonny's scent of seawater and soap rushed through Martin's nostrils, inflaming him. *We can't. You don't understand.*

He could feel the blond purring in his mind as the Cuban licked his neck, nibbled his shoulder. He could feel the Other overwhelming him, urging him on, and suddenly he ached to bury his teeth into his lover until the Anglo screamed. He pressed his lips against the smooth skin as gently as he could.

Do it! Sonny begged in his mind. Crockett's passion was wild, out of control, he ached for his lover, his need as hot and dark as Martin's own.

Get out of the bed! Castillo ordered his body. *Get out!* But at that moment, his lover's hand slid back and grasped his burning shaft. *Don't!*

The Latino felt as if a fire ignited in his gut as his detective's hand encircled him, his palm wet with saliva. Castillo dissolved, felt another take over his mind, his heart, his desire, as the strong, slick hand tortured him. *No,* he thought feebly, staring at the back of Sonny's head.

Do it! Crockett's mind begged as his hand expertly teased the hypersensitive organ.

Castillo struggled to speak, but could only growl. Someone moved his hands and he captured the Southerner's wrists with them, pulling the teasing fingers away from his painfully swollen staff. Crockett struggled weakly, but the Other filled Martin with all the strength he needed. He pulled Sonny's arms crosswise across the tanned chest, gripping the wrists tightly, painfully, yanking the blond's body as close to his own chest as he could. With blind instinct his cock found its mark.

The part of Castillo that was still himself fought helplessly against his dark side. Somewhere inside him he knew the Vice cop was still asleep, that his sleepy desire was not prepared for what was about to happen to him. If Martin couldn't stop this, Sonny would know. He'd know about this darkness within him, this part he couldn't always deny. Martin shuddered and wished Jack were here. Jack would love this. But for Sonny —

Please, the Anglo's mind begged seductively. *Please, do it.*

Castillo felt the last vestige of his control crumble as Sonny slid against him, the blond's dark opening moving against the lieutenant's aching, weeping glans

like a hungry mouth.



Sonny opened his eyes as soon as Martin penetrated him. The room was dark, the curtains closed against any invasion of light. Crockett was on his right side, Castillo behind him, the two still laying spoon-like in the bed. Slowly, carefully, the older man eased his cock into the Floridian's still form. Crockett blinked, feeling the delightful invasion, moving against it, accepting it, even while his mind warned him something was not right.

There was no pain as Martin took him, no pain at all, as the wide cock head pushed its way past the tight sphincter. Sleepily, the blond detective tried to understand that. For the first time, he felt no resistance to his lover, no tension. His body opened to the darker man easily and Sonny sighed deliciously as Martin buried himself to the hilt inside him.

His heart raced. He moved against his lover, squeezing his buttocks, loving the way Castillo was fucking him. He wanted to tell Marty how good it was as the powerful cock pumped into him, but couldn't find his voice. He sighed again as slender legs wrapped around his, pinning him in place. Then he realized Castillo's steel-hard arms had already snaked around his chest, that the Latino's small, strong hands had captured Crockett's wrists, pulling his arms crosswise across his own chest, holding them firmly, leaving Sonny helpless.

Marty liked him that way, the blond knew, loved it when he had Crockett helpless in his strong arms. Sonny adored it as well, adored being owned by Marty, possessed by him, taken completely. The detective knew just how powerful Castillo's slight body really was — he'd seen the elegant grace in his cat-like movements, had seen him defeat a professional Thai assassin with his bare hands. To touch that power, to have it possess him, was the most sexually exciting thing the younger cop had ever experienced. He lay back in Castillo's powerful embrace and delighted in his captivity as he allowed himself to be fucked by this man.

Sonny's chest heaved as Martin continued his tireless, thrilling stroke. He knew how long the Hispanic could last, knew he could fuck him for hours, and wanted him to more than anything. But something about this — as wonderful as it was — something wasn't right. Then he finally remembered Rico. Realized Rico was still in bed with them, pressed against Sonny's front.

Crockett's brow furrowed. This was not like Marty. He was so private. He'd been actually embarrassed when the three of them, because of Sonny's touch of hypothermia, had to share his bed. Marty had to know Rico was still with them. And *no one* slept that soundly.

As soon as the detective thought that, Rico turned and caught his green eyes with his own large, copper ones. Tubbs was smiling, his eyes glittering as he

watched Sonny being fucked. Then he leaned forward, capturing Crockett's mouth, lapping at his tongue, nibbling his lips.

Rico's hands ran through the blond shaggy hair, stroked the handsome face lovingly, caressed his neck, and wandered over his chest, searching for his nipples. Tubbs' tantalizing touch was maddening, making Sonny pant furiously. He was so excited now he was in pain, his cock aching with need. He yearned to touch Rico in turn, feel his soft brown skin and the tightly curled hair on his chest. But every time he moved, Castillo gripped him tighter, as though he might escape.

Tubbs kissed Crockett gently, lovingly, while he examined his body as though they had all night. Rico's hands discovered his captured wrists, his tightly crossed arms. Sonny tensed, wondering what his partner would think, how Marty would react. Rico's hands traveled from his captured arms to Castillo's imprisoning ones. The black man began stroking those hands, the wrists, the arms sensuously, as only he could. Even as he did, his lips were on Sonny's, never tiring of the blond's kiss, unwilling to yield his lover's sweet mouth.

Rico pressed against the blond, and slid his hands over Martin's body, his fingers gliding teasingly over the Latino's golden skin, over his back, down to his tense buttocks, still slowly fucking the Anglo. As Rico touched Martin intimately, Sonny felt the Cuban relax, felt his possessive grip ease to a more comfortable hold.

Rico purred as Martin responded to him. Finally, Tubbs pulled away from Sonny's mouth, only to lean past Crockett to meet Martin in a deep, passionate kiss.

To the Floridian's amazement, Martin moaned throatily and returned the kiss hotly. Even as he did, he moved harder into Crockett's body. Sonny reeled under the assault as Rico's and Martin's kiss became more intense, more frantic. Finally, Tubbs pulled away, gasping, as though it was too much for him to handle. Immediately, he kissed Sonny again, as if he needed the cool touch of Crockett's mouth to bank the fire of Martin's ardor.

Sonny almost fainted from the power of Rico's kiss and the heat of his lips. Then suddenly, Tubbs pulled away and slid down in the bed.

Realizing what his lover was about to do, Sonny panicked. Eyes widening, he struggled in Marty's grip, fearing he couldn't take anything else, feeling like his body was burning up from his lovers' dark passion. But Castillo only held him tighter when he struggled and fucked him harder until Sonny had to yield to the intense sensation. He wanted to beg Rico, plead with him not to do this, but no sound would come from his throat, not even the moans of delight he normally made.

He felt Martin's warm breath against his neck, felt the scratch of his mustache as Castillo's tongue rimmed the edge of his ear at the same time Rico took Sonny's cock deep into his hot, wet mouth. The Vice cop tried to buck, struggled to cry out, but he could do nothing in Martin's grip, as though the

Latino not only had a stranglehold on his body, but on his vocal cords as well.

At the moment Rico swallowed his cock, Martin growled low in Sonny's ear, as though it were happening to him. He'd never heard Marty make a sound like that and he turned his head to look at his Hispanic lover. Crockett was suddenly fearful, as though he might discover it wasn't Castillo inside him at all but some malevolent spirit, sucking his soul out, taking his life away.

But it was only Marty, eyes squeezed shut, mouth half open, panting against his neck, fucking him with the same wonderful rhythm he always did. Then Marty looked up, and Crockett's heart almost slammed to a halt. Cerulean blue eyes looked out from Marty's roughened face. The blond was overwhelmed by the sense of a strange presence — the same presence he'd felt in the park — the same presence he'd felt on Cathy's balcony. He looked away, wanting to scream, but couldn't. When Marty growled at him again, he glanced back fearfully and found the familiar ice-black eyes staring at him, the passion banked in there like a furnace.

Rico's mouth was driving Sonny mad as the black man sucked him hard and passionately, his expert tongue winding slick patterns against the blond's throbbing organ. His cock was so hard it ached, the pain giving an exquisite edge to every delightful thing Rico's mouth did to him. Crockett gave up the futile shreds of his resistance and stopped trying to speak or struggle. Frightened, confused, and more sexually excited then he could ever remember, he let his lovers possess him, since he had no choice, and waited for the inevitable, knowing there was no way he could hold out long under their dual assault.

But the time stretched on and on, Martin still inside him, Rico still sucking him and yet Sonny couldn't come. Finally, it became too much to endure. He needed the release, needed it like air. Soon, he started to cry, then weep, the tears turning into silent sobs erupting from deep inside him.

His lovers only became more passionate, Martin taking him deeper, harder, Rico licking and sucking him more languorously.

Please, his mind screamed at them, help me. Oh god, help me. I can't take anymore.

Then he felt Martin's mind touch his, searing his brain. *Yes, you can*, Castillo thought at him, the inner voice full of anger and need.

No, Sonny thought weakly, burning with the heat of Martin's passion, *if you love me, Marty, please, help me.*

Castillo growled like a lion and bit Sonny's shoulder painfully. Crockett exploded soundlessly, sighing heavily, feeling like a bomb had gone off in his testicles. He ejaculated hard into Rico's mouth and the black man devoured him, groaning in delight, even as Rico's cock spasmed against Sonny's calf and shot hot jets of semen against his leg. At the same time, Martin roared and pumped into the blond, filling him with liquid heat. They came for long, drawn out moments, spasming hard, emptying themselves, then everything stopped.

And before Sonny could wonder what had hap-

pened to them, or why they had done what they'd done, or imagine how that presence could've possessed Marty, Rico had pulled himself back up on the bed, Martin had released his legs and wrists and slid out of him, and the three curled back up, spoon-like again and resumed their interrupted sleep.

But before Sonny lost awareness, he realized he was warm — really warm, for the first time since he'd come to New York.

*Something in me
Broods love into fear
It veils my vision leaves my thoughts
unclear
My eyes
From blue turn to grey
Hoping to mask what they say
Outside Myself — k. d. lang*

CHAPTER NINE: RICO'S DECISION

*Your mother's ghost stands at your shoulder
Face like ice, a little bit colder
Sayin' to you —
You cannot do that, it breaks all the rules
You learned in school....
Triad — Jefferson Airplane*

By the time Sonny awoke, it was almost noon. For the first time in months, his initial thought was *not* a craving for either sex or the cigarettes he'd only recently given up. Mornings had never been the high point of Crockett's day, but today he felt — *terrific!* Not achy, not tired, needing neither cigarettes nor coffee, he felt — He felt — Secure. Happy. Satisfied. No, not a typical Crockett morning.

He turned and watched Rico stretch extravagantly against him as he woke, and enjoyed the tautness in his partner's broad, furred chest, the rippling of his strong shoulders. The two men smiled at each other and kissed gently. But as soon as Sonny tasted himself on his lover's lips, the dream came back to him in a rush. As if Rico shared that thought, his face changed and he frowned, looking disturbed.

Sonny rolled over to look at Martin, who was laying on his back, arms behind his head, staring at the ceiling. His face was an expressionless mask, a Mayan carving, his black eyes unreadable. Wetting his lips, Crockett started to ask Marty if he'd dreamed, but Castillo slid out of bed before he could frame the question. Discreetly, the Latino slipped on a black kimono he'd placed near the bed and moved to open the curtains, but the gray New York winter daylight only accented the strange atmosphere in the room. Castillo stared out into the park as Sonny felt a pang

of homesickness for some bright Miami sun.

Desperately needing to know, Crockett finally asked, "Marty, did — did you dream it, too?"

Rico was watching him worriedly, but the black-robed man kept his back to them. The Hispanic rubbed a hand over his forehead, then stroked an eyebrow — the kind of self-conscious nervous mannerisms he only did when he was considering something really serious, something he didn't have all the answers for.

"Talk to me, pal," Crockett begged.

"It — wasn't a dream."

The lieutenant spoke so quietly, they could barely hear him, but his simple statement rocked the younger man and he could see Rico was rattled by it as well. Details suddenly came flooding back to the blond Vice cop, and he finally understood his inner mood, his sense of total satisfaction. It would've made him laugh if — it hadn't been so damned *weird*. He remembered complaining to Rico about never getting laid again but, hell, he'd been laid, re-laid, and *par-laid*!

"I'm sorry about what happened." The Cuban's voice was tight with anguish. "I — couldn't stop it."

"Hey, wait a minute," Rico interjected gently. "First off, you don't need to apologize to me. I'm a consenting adult. I could've left —"

"Could you?" Martin asked.

Rico must've reconsidered his statement and decided there was something to that. Finally, he shrugged. "Doesn't matter, man. *You're* not responsible for anyone's behavior but your own. Besides, we're all *lovers*. You're more conservative than we are — but it's not the first time Sonny and I have partied together. If it bothers you, well, it doesn't have to happen again. But for the record — I don't regret it."

Castillo sighed wearily, as though Tubbs were missing the point.

"Hey, pal," Crockett interjected, "there's a whole lot *more* to this than you're saying. *You* couldn't stop it. Why was it *you're* job to stop it? Why should it have been stopped at all? Marty, what really happened to us? I felt like we'd been blasted with a hormone overdose. And one time last night I felt like — you weren't really *you*."

Rico looked genuinely confused. "Hey, come on, partner. We were overtired, stressed to the max —"

"Uh-uh," Crockett rejected that argument. "This is *all* tied in somehow with that *presence* in the park. The *presence* you *met* with last night, Marty. Then, when we were at it — I could *feel* it in this room with us. It's all connected with your mysterious disappearances." The Floridian stared at the black-clad back and willed his lieutenant to turn and face him. "I only wish that this was all about an old lover of yours you don't want me to know about, but that's not it at all, is it?" Castillo stood rigidly by the window, accepting Sonny's hard questions in patient silence.

"Or *is* that it?" the Southerner wondered. "That presence was at the meet — *watching* over *you*, Marty, keeping you safe. That's what I couldn't figure out, why it was there. It all falls into place, now." He squinted at Castillo through slitted eyes, his face har-

dening. "And it goes back farther than that, to Cathy Chandler — the way she looked at you at the D.A.'s office — the feelings I got from her at her place — her familiarity with those weird tunnels — and the presence on her balcony."

Martin said nothing, just stared at the floor.

"Crockett, you're losing it," Rico interjected irritably. "You're acting as flaked-out as that phony psychic South Beach used on that sicko homicide last year."

Sonny shook his head. "Come on, Marty, give it up. I'm on to it, and you know it. Tell me, pal, this guy — this presence — he's got *blue* eyes, doesn't he?"

Finally, Castillo's head swiveled, his black eyes capturing Sonny's green ones and for an instant the Latino's tortured look made the detective profoundly regret his questioning.

"Marty, what is it?" he begged, flooded with sympathy for the pain the silent man was enduring. "Share it, man. Let us help you *carry* it."

For a moment Castillo looked as if he might speak, but then he just gave a slight shake of his head, and quietly walked into the bathroom to shower. Sonny watched incredulously, feeling that his ability to relate to this man, to help him, to even trust him, was just slipping away.

Rico's warm hand squeezed his bare shoulder. "Be patient, partner. This is a powerful secret he's carrying. It's weighing him down. And it looks like he's been shouldering it a real long time. You're just gonna have to trust him, man."

"Do you trust him?" Sonny asked.

The black detective nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, I do. Whatever's goin' on with him, it has nothin' to do with us. It has to do with his past — and that's his business."



"Okay. So far so good!" Joe Maxwell said, as Martin examined the contents of their briefcases. The bogus ten million was laced with enough real money to look authentic. There were sophisticated homing devices on the briefcases and small microphones to pick up conversation. Joe, himself, was supervising the electronics experts that were now outfitting the Miami Vice team with hidden "wires".

Castillo had looked over the surveillance equipment and was satisfied with its quality. He stood patiently as he was fitted with a tiny microphone at the same time as his two detectives were.

"Hey, Miami," Maxwell chided Sonny with a grin, as he assisted the surveillance team, "having a little trouble with the weather here in brisk New York?"

Somewhere, Rico had found Crockett a pair of thermal underwear and woolen socks, and he and the lieutenant both insisted the blond detective wear them. The electronics team was having trouble deciding whether to fasten the sensitive mike under the thermals, or on top of them.

Crockett gave Maxwell a wry look, accepting the ribbing in good nature. "That's what you call it —

weather? And here I thought I'd made it to hell just in time to see it freeze over. Hey, pal, you should come on down to Miami during some of your 'weather' just to remind yourself what the sun looks like."

Sonny's good mood was nothing short of amazing to the Cuban. The blond detective had managed to shrug off his anxiety by the time Martin had finished his shower. He suspected Rico had something to do with that.

The lieutenant glanced sideways at the dark detective, remembering in a vivid flash the sensuous touch of his soft mouth, the gentle strength in his hands. He jerked his eyes away from Tubbs and calmed his mind.

He was still disturbed by what had happened last night, by how easily he'd been overpowered by the passion of Vincent's dream. He couldn't recognize it while still half-asleep, but as soon as he woke this afternoon, it all became clear to him. His minor bond with Vincent had been responsible for their bizarre coupling. And if that was what could happen to him during the course of his brother's *dreaming*, Martin would have to get out of New York before Vincent accepted his advice and tried the real thing. He didn't want to find out what would happen to his mind, his body, when Vincent discovered *real* passion.

Crockett and Tubbs were testing their equipment, joking casually with each other. Martin couldn't get over how they so easily accepted last night's disturbing encounter. They were relaxed, loose-limbed, the way any physically active man might be after a night of glorious sex. Rico, in particular, seemed delighted to have been included in their lovemaking.

Lovemaking? The lieutenant couldn't honor what had happened with that word.

He could still remember everything, every mind-wrenching second of it. He had never had a moment like that in his life, when he felt so lost, so out of control. Vincent's uninhibited passion had simply flooded his mind through their weak bond, as though there was so much power racing through the Tunnel Dweller's dream that it had to be channeled out of him to prevent an overload. And when Vincent's Other touched his brother's mind, Castillo felt for a brief, terrifying moment that he might actually go insane. It had taken all his will, all his training and inner disciplines, to keep the Other at bay. That was why he didn't have enough strength left to resist the sexual urge Vincent was radiating.

It was through Martin, through his struggle with the Other, that Sonny was affected, and through Sonny, Rico. Castillo suspected that Tubbs's reactions were the least of the three, but to feel Crockett fall under that power was terrifying to him. They *had* to get out of New York as quickly as possible.

There was a knock on the strategy room door and a woman's voice called out, "You guys all decent in there?" Then, before anyone could answer, the door swung open and Cathy Chandler walked in. "Awww, too bad, you are!" she said brightly. Her face was flushed, her cheeks rosy. Martin eyed her suspiciously, wondering.

"We got these guys wired for light and sound," Joe

told her as the electronics team filed out.

"I just talked to our back-up," Cathy said, "and everything's set. But there is a new wrinkle on the case."

Martin tensed. Sonny and Rico glanced at each other, sobering.

"The head of the back-up team was given some late breaking information from a detective who's working on the Morganstern kidnapping. She says that the Black Widow carries a special detonator on her person. If she's busted, all she has to do is press a button, and all those ammo dumps in the tunnels are triggered to blow at once. She does that and there's a real chance this island's going to suddenly look like Venice."

Rico and Sonny turned to their lieutenant. He frowned. He didn't like the choices he was being handed. "What about a sharpshooter?" he suggested. "If she's killed, she can't set it off."

"It'll be dark," Joe said, "lot of people at the meet. You're talking about a one-shot chance."

"Forget the shooter," Sonny said quietly. "I'll distract her."

Castillo stared at his lover, surprised. He had to force himself to be still, to not protest what his detective was suggesting.

Sonny shrugged and grinned as all eyes turned to him. "She's got the hots for me. I'll play up to her, get real close. When the bust comes down, I'll grab her, keep her away from the detonator. Her people won't shoot me, cause they'd have to risk shooting her and they're scared of her. Besides, Marty and Rico'll be covering me, and all your people will be there."

Castillo's instincts were going wild, warning him that this was a bad idea. But no one had any others, and it made sense. Everyone turned to him.

He looked at the floor. "Do it," he said huskily.

Rico's face paled. "Lieutenant," he protested softly, ready to argue, but Castillo fixed him with a hard look and he remained silent.

"Will you, uh, be on the scene?" Sonny asked Cathy Chandler quietly.

She nodded, meeting his eyes. "Joe and I will be in the surveillance van. It'll be parked at the next pier."

The Cuban's brow furrowed. If Catherine was coming along that meant, in all likelihood, that Vincent would be somewhere near. He wasn't sure if that was good or bad. He considered protesting then decided against it.

"The good news," Cathy continued, "is for you, Detective Tubbs. Most of the Black Widow's staff has been checked, and so far, there are no connections between you and any of them. Of course, there are still a few that haven't been cleared, but so far, things look good."

Rico nodded and gave Sonny a thumbs up.

"Okay, one more time," Joe interjected. "All the warrants are in place. Diana Bennett will be standing by the Morganstern residence, and as soon as the bust goes down, she'll arrest Daddy Morganstern for both child abuse and trafficking in arms, jeopardizing national security, etcetera. Any problems with the bust and we'll hold off on the arrest and regroup to decide

when's the best time to move against him."

Joe paused for effect. "And *remember — be careful*. This is no time to get overconfident. I don't want my first trip to Sun City marred by having to attend a memorial service for three good cops. Lieutenant Castillo? Since we seem to have everything under control here, would you follow me to my office? I need your John Hancock on a few forms. Your —" he gave the two detectives a wry look, "*sidekicks* here can babysit the money."

Exchanging a glance with his men, Martin followed Joe out of the strategy room.



"We're looking mighty chipper this morning," Sonny said teasingly to Cathy Chandler as Maxwell and Castillo exited. He checked his ammunition clips and tried to sound disinterested. "Must've had an interesting evening."

"Not until you *left*," she retorted, arching an eyebrow at him as she crossed her arms.

"Bang," said Rico softly with a chuckle. Sonny gave him an ominous look.

"Actually," she said with a peace-offering smile, "all it means is that I got a real good night's sleep, Detective."

"Oh, we're back to 'Detective' again," Sonny said regretfully.

Rico cleared his throat. "Uh, listen, partner, it's time for me to visit the little boy's room. Don't let anybody walk off with the briefcases while I'm gone." Before Cathy or Sonny could protest, Tubbs left the room.

"Funny you should mention sleep," Crockett said, fixing Cathy with a sly look. "I didn't get the impression when I left last night that you were planning to retire. I thought you were planning to entertain."

Cathy pursed her lips and held her head to one side. "Had a hard night, Detective, sleeping alone in such a big, cold city?"

The Southerner laughed knowingly. "Oh, I didn't sleep alone, my dear. Hardly alone. I guarantee I saw a helluva lot more action in *my* bed, Ms. Chandler, than you saw in *yours*. What did you say your guy's name was?"

"I didn't," she said smoothly.

"Aw, come on," Sonny wheedled, "you can give up his *first* name! Hey, tell you what — let's trade information. You tell me his first name, and I'll tell you what he looks like! Like that trade?"

Cathy's face froze. "You're reaching, Crockett."

"Am I?" Sonny narrowed his eyes as if remembering. "Off hand I'd say he's close to six feet four, maybe taller. A big guy, broad in the shoulders like a fullback, narrow in the waist. Long legs. Probably a great body, but who can tell under all those clothes? Does he share a tailor with Aerosmith or what? That was some get-up! Anything else? Oh yeah, he's got long hair that goes past his shoulders — and blue eyes." He fixed her with a piercing look. "Incredibly

blue eyes."

Cathy's face fell as the cop described her mysterious suitor.

"Hey, relax," he said softly, "I'm not gonna give your guy up, Chandler. It's just you and me here. So, what's his name?"

She shook her head. "You know too much already."

"Cathy," he said warningly.

"Why do you *need* to know? It's of no concern to you."

"Oh yes, it is, darlin'," he said irritably. "This man of yours has some connection to my lieutenant, a connection he won't tell me about. Why is that? I'll bet *you* know."

"Why should it matter? Sounds to me like that's your lieutenant's business, not yours. Or are you just an equal opportunity busybody?"

"It matters," Sonny hissed. "It just does. All I want is a *name*. Cathy...?"

She peered at him for a long moment. "Ask your lieutenant if you think he has some connection to — my friend. I think you're hiding something from *me*, Sonny. If you were more honest with me, I might cooperate. What is this bizarre obsession you have about your lieutenant's private life?"

He laughed, then looked hard into her green eyes.

"Cathy, did you *really* sleep well last night?"

"Yes, I did. Better than I have in weeks."

"Did you dream?"

She almost answered, then stopped to think about that. She looked at Sonny quizzically. "Why?"

"I'm not sure, darlin', but I've got the feeling we were together last night in our dreams, doin' things we had no business doin', considerin' how we feel about our significant others." He grinned boyishly. "But I won't tell if you don't."

Suddenly the door opened, and both Cathy and Sonny tensed.

Rico stepped back inside and smiled at his partner knowingly. "Castillo's on his way," he warned.

"Cathy?" Crockett asked again.

She shook her head firmly. "Be careful tonight, Sonny. I wouldn't want anything to happen to you." She glanced over at Rico and smiled. "To any of you."

As she left the room, she passed Castillo in the doorway. He nodded slightly to her and she caught his black eyes and smiled warmly at him, then left.

Damn, Sonny thought, giving Rico a look. Tubbs' mouth turned up slightly and he cocked his head. *I know, partner*, Crockett thought at him, *I know. Patience!*



They barely touched their dinner. Rico wheeled the cart outside their door with hardly a glance at the food remaining. He didn't think the lieutenant had eaten more than a bite or two and he never actually witnessed Crockett putting anything into his mouth. There was little conversation among the three, just some nervous pacing, some quiet introspection. The

hours ticked by slowly, as they waited for midnight.

At ten, Martin left to spend some time alone in his own room. Rico waited till he was out of sight then turned to Sonny.

"His name's Vincent," he said softly.

Crockett looked at him confused. "What?"

Rico put a finger to his lips and looked towards Castillo's room. "Chandler's true love. His name's Vincent."

The blond looked amazed. "How did you find that out?"

Tubbs smiled his most charming smile. "Got to have the moves, partner, got to have the charm. It also helps to get lost on the way to the men's room. I ran into a sweet lady named Edie. Turned out to be one of Cathy's closer friends. Told her you were struggling to get a date, and weren't havin' much luck with the ice queen. She told me all about this mystery man. Said she'd seen a book he'd signed 'Vincent' at Chandler's house once, but she can't get Cathy to say much about him. Gotta be the same dude." He grinned at Sonny's rapt expression. "Course that information will cost us — I promised Edie if she could get Cathy to date you, we'd go as a foursome."

"That sounds like a safe bet to me, pal," Sonny said, grinning. "Vincent, huh? Thanks. I'll look forward to seeing her face when I drop this nugget on her."

"Just make sure you drop it on Chandler," Rico said seriously. "I didn't give you that so you could hassle the lieutenant with it." He fixed his lover with a strong look. Rico didn't understand everything that was going on between Sonny and Castillo, but he knew that Crockett believed some of it had to do with bizarre, metaphysical stuff that Rico didn't have much patience with. Tubbs was convinced some of it was just another way for Sonny to avoid confronting his real feelings.

"Gettin' kind of protective about him, aren't you?" Crockett asked curiously.

"Just lookin' out for my *partner*, partner. You need to give the man a little more room."

Sonny nodded. "I hear you."

They lapsed into companionable silence again and waited for the time to pass.

Around eleven, on impulse, Rico walked quietly into Castillo's room, aware that Sonny, cleaning the thirty-eight caliber pistol he usually kept on his ankle, was watching him with a curious expression. The lieutenant was at the window, looking out over the park. Rico came up behind him, and waited until he'd turned his head slightly to acknowledge his presence.

"I just want you to know, Lieutenant," the black man said softly, "that I *still* don't regret last night. And whatever happens tonight, or in the future — we're still partners." His throat tightened a little, but he decided to plunge ahead. If Sonny couldn't cope with his inner self, at least Rico could confront his. "I trust you implicitly. I, uh — hell, Lieutenant, I love you. I just wanted you to know how I felt."

Castillo remained motionless, silent. Rico waited a moment, then turned to leave. The Cuban grasped his hand suddenly, stopping him. "Thank you, Ricar-

do," he said huskily. "That means a lot to me."

Tubbs smiled wryly. "The trust — or the love?"

"Both," Castillo said, turning to the darker man. "Both." He kissed his mouth softly, surprising Tubbs.

Rico reached out, put a hand around the lieutenant's neck and yielded to the loving kiss. The Cuban's silent passion spoke volumes to him, bringing back last night's interlude in sharp relief. "Okay," he whispered, dry-mouthed when Castillo released him. "Thanks, Lieutenant."

"I think it's time for you to stop calling me 'Lieutenant,'" Castillo murmured, and kissed the black man gently again.

"What's the chances of me getting one of those?" Sonny's raspy voice asked, amused. "Just for luck." He slid an arm around each of his lovers.

Rico, grateful for the break from the Cuban's intensity, kissed him lovingly, then Castillo did the same. The three men stood in the window together, embracing casually, enjoying the quiet moment.

Finally, the lieutenant broke the silence. "It's time to go."

Rico could hear the regret plainly in his tired voice.

*In the swirling, curling storm of desire
Unuttered words hold fast...
Darkness creeps in like a thief and offers no
relief
Why are you shaking like a leaf?
Come on, talk to me....
Come Talk To Me — Peter Gabriel*

CHAPTER TEN: THE MEET

*And a black widow spider makes
More sound than she
And black moons in those eyes of hers
Make more sense to me
— Sister of the Moon — Fleetwood Mac*

They walked in step towards the pier, three abreast, each of them holding a black briefcase. Sonny flanked Martin's left, Rico his right. The lieutenant walked in the middle, clearly in charge.

Crockett blanked his mind of all worries, all concerns, everything except the impending deal. He couldn't afford to be fuzzy or to hesitate in anyway. When the bust came down, he had to stop the Black Widow from tripping those detonators or hundreds of innocent and not-so-innocent people would die, and the very structure of the city might collapse.

Once his mind became a calm, cold, calculating place, Crockett called on the Burnett side of his personality. Burnett didn't worry about people's feelings, about right or wrong. Burnett only worried about two things — his wallet, and his own ass. Burnett, Sonny

knew, was the one mainly responsible for getting him out of tight spots in one piece.

He glanced sideways at Marty. As cold as Burnett could be, Sonny suspected he was no match for the stranger walking beside him. Castillo's black eyes glittered as he stared straight ahead through his dark sunglasses, taking in everything, missing nothing. On the other side of Marty marched Rico, the picture of cool calculation. Under his voluminous coat, Sonny knew Rico had his favorite double-barreled shotgun hooked to his holster.

They were ready. God knew, they were ready.

Parked by the pier sat three huge semi's, cabs facing the water. Standing around the semi's were a bevy of people all dressed identically in insulated, hooded, black jumpsuits, black pullover hats and sunglasses. Sonny couldn't even tell what sex they were, or if the Black Widow was among them.

Lotta bodies, the blond thought unhappily. *Too many fuckin' bodies*. Suppose some of these guys were part of the crew Diana hadn't been able to check out? Suppose one of them could make Rico for a cop?

Just then the Black Widow and two of her henchmen pulled themselves away from the crowd. The ominous stone hovering over her heart glittered malevolently in the glare of the street lights. On her belt sat a small black device with a tiny red telltale on it.

Must be the detonator, Sonny realized. The detector on his hip vibrated silently, as if confirming his suspicions.

Martin stopped about twenty yards from the Opal crew and his two detectives halted at the same time. Marty spoke rapidly in Spanish.

"Mr. Mendez says he regrets he was unaware that this was a family reunion," Rico translated. "He has a large family of his own and would've liked very much to have brought them *all* along."

Castillo spoke again, angrily.

"Mr. Mendez wants to know what he has done to show such bad faith that you feel it necessary to bring so much security to the meet."

"Most of these people are not security, Mr. Mendez," the Black Widow said assuredly. "Some of them are drivers, or people who were needed to load the goods on the trucks. Look around and you'll see they're not armed."

I'll bet, thought Sonny. *Most of these jokers could be carrying canons under that gear and we wouldn't know it.*

The crowd continued to mill around as Crockett's eyes scanned the mob. Three or four of them kept their backs to the Vice team, talking among themselves.

Wrong, Burnett thought at him, *all fuckin' wrong. Forget the deal. Watch your back.*

"I believe you have something for me, Mr. Mendez," the Widow said quietly. Sonny could feel her eyes raking him like sharp nails over porcelain.

The lieutenant handed the blond his briefcase and Crockett and Tubbs stepped forward to set the three cases on the ground. They opened them, exposing the

money and displayed it. The Widow nodded at one of her henchmen and he dropped to one knee to scan the cash.

"Looks good," he said, closing the lids and snapping the locks shut.

Sonny and Rico each put a protective foot on a case, and Crockett placed his hand on the third. Martin spoke rapidly in Spanish.

"Mr. Mendez believes you now have something to show him," Rico said softly.

The Widow nodded and three of her crew went to the rear of the semi's and opened them. The trailers were filled with crates, packed right up to the doors. The lieutenant nodded at Rico and he proceeded to climb into each trailer, opening random boxes, inspecting the wares.

Sonny used the time to stand and move closer to the Black Widow. He turned to her, aware that she had never stopped examining him, and smiled his most charming Burnett smile. Her cool look changed only slightly as the edges of her mouth turned up. If that was her idea of a smile, Crockett decided, he liked her better impassive.

Rico jumped out of the last trailer and spoke to Castillo in Spanish. Sonny recognized enough of it to know that the entire shipment was there.

Martin spoke.

"Mr. Mendez thanks you very much for the merchandise," Rico told her.

She held out three keys in the palm of her hand and extended it to Sonny. He walked over and once she handed him the keys, he gallantly took her hand and lifted it to his lips for a kiss, hoping to hold onto it for the few seconds it would take for the bust to go down.



*Lousy lovers pick their prey
But they never cry out loud*

— Gold Dust Woman — Fleetwood Mac

Martin watched Rico jump down from the last trailer. In Spanish, Tubbs assured him that all the goods had been delivered as promised. Castillo breathed deeply, calming his pounding heart. In the next few seconds everything would go all right — or all wrong.

He watched as Sonny approached the Black Widow, saw him take the keys from her hand. In spite of his best efforts, he tensed, as Crockett drew closer to the malevolent woman, moving to kiss her hand. *Good*, he thought. It was her right hand and the detonator was on her right hip. *Good, Sonny. Be careful.*

Now all he had to do was speak the password and the backup would arrive and take over. Then they'd be out of it. He paused just a second, keeping his two detectives in view and opened his mouth to utter the Spanish phrase that would bring down the wrath of NYPD, the FBI, and ATF on the Black Widow and

her entire Black Opal operation.

In that small part of a second, he felt the cold kiss of steel on his neck and a familiar, deadly voice behind him. "Don't do it, Marty."

Martin saw Sonny's head snap around, saw the Widow's head also turn in Castillo's direction. Without hesitation, the lieutenant spun on the balls of his feet, and used his elbow to knock the gun held at his head to the side. It fired wildly, killing two of the Black Widow's men immediately. The Cuban twisted his body, kicking high and hard, catching the gun with the side of his foot and disarming the man behind him. Instantly, he drove a fist into the man's gut and felt him fold over the blow.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Sonny lunge for the Widow's detonator and the two of them grappled for it. Rico shouted the password into his wire and pulled his shotgun up, letting loose with both barrels. Within seconds, armed police swarmed the area. Semiautomatics appeared and shots rang wildly. Sonny disappeared under a blanket of black-clad bodies as Rico was forced to take cover under one of the trucks.

Martin's opponent came up fast, preventing Castillo from paying any more attention to his two detectives. The big man chopped the lieutenant hard on the shoulder, numbing his right arm. Castillo pivoted and lashed out with a roundhouse kick, clipping the man smartly in the groin.

As his opponent hit the ground, doubled over, shots fired around them. Martin spun, crouched, searching for Sonny and Rico, but could see neither of them. Another shot slapped the hat off his head. Ducking, the lieutenant sprinted away.



The shotgun kicked in Rico's hands as he fired again. Yanking back the loader, he pulled two more shells into the chambers. He'd brought down several of the Black Widow's crew, but could still only watch helplessly as Sonny was gang tackled by her people and scuttled away. Rico was trapped under the semi by a barrage of the Black Opal's cover fire, and cops were pouring onto the scene. As Tubbs gaped into the darkness, Sonny and the Black Widow disappeared.

The dark detective turned to see Castillo fighting hand to hand with a tall, rangy man. The fire fight was getting hotter and Tubbs was forced back into the shadows. He was barely able to see what direction the lieutenant ran in when Castillo took off into the night. Rico saw his opponent quickly gain his feet and pursue Castillo. Sneaking around the chaotic milieu, Rico tried to follow them, hoping to help his Hispanic partner if he was forced to confront his attacker again.



Martin's lungs were screaming for air by the time he found the S-35 drain pipe. He hoisted the manhole cover with an effort and dropped inside its welcoming darkness. Landing on his feet, his ears strained for sound as he squinted in the gloom, every nerve wired. Satisfied that he was alone, he moved silently into the inky tunnel, fingertips skimming the walls to help guide his way. Soon, he was moving quickly along the familiar pathway until the black tunnel opened up into a dimly lit cavern. Martin hesitated at the mouth, letting his eyes adjust, listening, watching. As cautiously as a stag in hunting season, he stepped into the light.

"Hello, Marty," said the familiar, hated voice. The tall man dressed in black coveralls stepped out of a facing tunnel. He held up open hands. "I've come to talk."

"Reese," Martin hissed, stepping further into the light, his body rigid, his feet shoulder-width apart, his arms held stiffly at his side, ready for battle. This man was an old enemy, one Castillo had hoped never to face again. He was a mercenary in the intelligence community. For the right price, he'd do anything.

"Come on, Marty," Reese said cajolingly, his china blue eyes regarding his opponent coldly, "no more fancy footwork, we gotta talk. 'Sides, I'm gettin' too old for this stuff — and you were always better at it than me, anyhow."

"What are you doing here?" Martin demanded angrily. "What's your involvement in this?"

"Now, that's a pretty complicated situation," Reese explained almost apologetically. "But, you gotta know that this crazy bitch is causing our good government some real problems. Her daddy's a major defense contractor — who's developing a nifty new weapon. The boys at the Pentagon are so hot for it, they jerk off whenever they see the specs. And then sweet Ellen steps in and screws everything up. If it's found out Daddy's been giving her these little presents, he's not only gonna lose his contracts, he's gonna do time. The Pentagon won't get their toy, and the big boys will look very, very bad. That hurts everybody, Marty. So, they asked me to step in." Reese's cold, colorless eyes glittered at his old opponent. "Fraid I'm sanctioned this time, friend."

"If you were sanctioned by God, I wouldn't let you win this one," Martin hissed.

"No?" Reese purred, confidently. "You aren't thinking of making this personal, are you, Marty? That's not like you."

The Cuban clenched his jaw, fighting to keep himself under control. "We're closing the Black Widow down, and her father. He's been torturing children for years. He's compromised our national security. I'm putting him out of business, and I'm putting her away. Don't get between me and this, Reese."

The mercenary laughed softly to himself. "Marty, Marty, Marty. You only see one side of the issue here." His light eyes glimmered in the dim light. "Of course, now that you know I'm involved, maybe there's something else you want to add to the list?"

"You lied to me in Bangkok," Castillo whispered, "when I was in the hospital. You said Jack and May

Ying were dead. She's alive today, and you knew that then."

Reese nodded. "Just doin' my job, Marty. You should be able to understand that."

"Did you lie about Jack, Reese? Is he alive somewhere, too?"

The big man grinned wider, his white teeth sparkling. "Now, that would be a juicy secret to keep from you, wouldn't it, Marty? I have such fond memories of Jack. He was quite a lover, even if I did get him on the rebound. Never could see how you could let all that talent go for that skinny little girl — but you always did like 'em *real* submissive, Marty."

Castillo lurched forward in rage before he could stop himself, and Reese dropped back a step, raising his hands defensively. "Ah, ah, ah!" he admonished. "Temper, temper. You always get in trouble when you lose control, Castillo. The truth hurts, doesn't it? Jack was too much man for you — you couldn't dominate him, not like May Ying. Y'know, I tried to comfort *her* after the ambush, but she was grieving too hard. I mean, someone had to tell her how bravely *you'd* died in the ambush."

Martin darted forward again, but this time Reese produced a gun. "You're not thinking, Marty. Your weak spots were always very predictable."

"This time I'll kill you, Reese. You're over the line."

"Come on! You'd never kill a man just for telling you the truth. And don't talk to *me* about being over the line." He snorted a laugh. "A regular Mr. Morality, aren't you, Castillo? Believe me, old friend, I *know* better. Jack and I had long talks about you. You know, Jack always was bad about pillow talk."

The lieutenant moved slightly, and Reese cocked the gun.

"Don't push me, Marty. I'm havin' so much fun, I'd hate to end it too quickly. Besides, I've got your favorite detective in a very compromising situation, so *behave*."

Martin's heart turned to ice.

"Truth is, *Ellen's* holding onto him for me, so you don't want me to linger here too long. She's got the oddest notion of what makes a good sex toy. You know, I was kinda surprised when I saw him — when did you start going for blonds?"

Castillo's heart tightened. Reese couldn't know about his relationship with Sonny — he had to be just fishing.

"You're good, Marty," Reese said, " — aw, hell, you're one of the best, but love always made you soft. During that first meet, I was off in the shrubs, watchin' you real close. When Ellen tried to buy your cop, your body just about vibrated. Of course, no one would've ever noticed but me. You should've gone into business with me years ago, Marty. Together, we'd have been unstoppable. And besides, nobody knows you as well as I do — no one alive, that is."

The lieutenant was back in control now and refused to respond to Reese's taunts. He realized, though, that Reese was the man Vincent has watched in the park that night. If he'd only known —

"Your boy sure is pretty, though. And he still has so much *fight* in him. I take it you haven't been fuck-

in' him for long?"

Martin schooled his face into an impassive mask. "Get to the point, Reese."

"Y'know, you take all the fun out of this business. Has he seen your dark side yet, Marty? Has he seen that sweet streak of sadism you barely keep leashed? Or has he already learned to *like* it? Probably not — that takes time and *training* — doesn't it, old friend? Don't worry. I'll warn him. Hate to see you take a good, strong man like that and turn him into a pet. Before you're through with him, he won't be able to think straight. Won't help him much on the job, but that's the way you like 'em, Marty, isn't it? Submissive. Totally under your *charm*. Yeah, I'll be happy to warn him. I just hope he can still pay attention by the time I get back."

"The *deal*, Reese," Martin said quietly. "Get to the deal."

"Oh, you want to deal now," Reese said, nodding. "Didn't think you'd compromise your morals, even for a lover. Well, live and learn. Okay, this is the deal. I'll get your boy back to you alive — but I'm not making any promises about his condition. Ellen's takin' a shine to him, unfortunately for *him*. Once he's delivered, you forget all about Ms. Morganstern and her daddy. I'll take care of them. She'll stop being a problem, and he'll make his nice toys for the military. Then everybody's happy."

Castillo stood rigidly, wracked with concern for Sonny, torn by the unacceptable compromise Reese was handing him.

"Can't do it, can you, Marty?" Reese asked softly. "God, you're so predictable. You're not gonna leave that poor guy to *Ellen* are you? She's got it bad for him — she's talkin' about keeping him *alive*."

Martin swallowed, fastening his eyes on Reese's. "I'll deal. You bring me Sonny, *unharm*ed, and —" he frowned, furious at the position he found himself in, "I won't pursue this case."

Reese stared at Castillo unflinchingly. "Marty, you're lyin' like a rug. You'd say anything to get that sweet ass back in your bed, wouldn't you?" The mercenary shook his head, amazed. "You got it bad, man. You'd have never lied for *Jack*. Wouldn't *that* hurt his heart — if he were still alive?"

Castillo's jaw clenched so hard he thought his teeth would crack. "I'm — not lying. I'll deal. Sonny. Unharm. For the woman. You have my word."

"Now, that's something not given lightly, I must admit. But why is it I'm finding it hard to trust you these days, Castillo? Okay, I'll bring you your little friend. Five a.m. Alice in Wonderland. But if you try and fuck me over, Marty — I promise you, I'll *kill* him. In front of you. Maybe even in your bed. Someday. Somewhere." Reese stepped back into the shadows. "Don't forget. Your word. His life. Don't forget about me."

*Now you're standing there tongue tied
You'd better learn your lesson well
Hide what you have to hide
And tell what you have to tell
— Policy Of Truth — Depeche Mode*

CHAPTER ELEVEN

MARTIN'S BROTHER

*...And your quaint honor turn to dust,
And into ashes all my lust:
The grave's a fine and private place,
But none, I think, do there embrace.*
— To His Coy Mistress — Andrew Marvell

"What happened?" Catherine demanded as she stared at her boss. The crime scene was chaos, police everywhere, bodies sprawled like so many collapsed scarecrows, confiscated weapons in jumbled piles. None of the Miami detectives could be found. "Where are they? They couldn't just *disappear*."

Joe shook his head. "Believe me, Radcliffe, I'm as upset about this as you are. Best we've been able to piece together is that Castillo was pursued into the streets by an unknown party — whoever it was that blew his cover. All this time we were sweating that Rico would be made, and it was the lieutenant who was recognized. There's a possibility Tubbs followed them. We're getting nothing off their wires — it wouldn't have been hard to lose them in the scramble. It's as if the earth swallowed them up. As far as Crockett is concerned — it looks like he's been taken hostage."

Cathy clutched Joe's arm. "Do you know what that means? What she'll do to him?"

"I know. I know," Joe said, exasperated. "What do you want me to do? All we can do is wait for a ransom demand — if she makes one. She might, since we recovered all the money and the weapons. But for now, I don't dare move on those warrants. I've already called Bennett and told her to sit tight until further notice. I'm afraid this whole thing's gonna slip right through our fingers."

The woman turned, staring at the scene, terrifying thoughts of what Sonny might even now be enduring racing through her mind. Finally, Joe caught her eyes.

"This guy's really gotten to you, hasn't he, Radcliffe?" he asked quietly.

She automatically schooled her face. "No, Joe. It's not that. It's the Widow. She's got it in for Sonny — I'm afraid for him."

Maxwell sighed. "Yeah. I am, too, kiddo. I am, too." He patted her shoulder. "Listen, it's late. There's nothing else you can do here. Go on home. Get some rest. If I hear anything, I'll call you, I promise."

Just then, a police officer approached to speak to Joe, and Cathy used the opportunity to slip away. She knew Vincent was near, hovering, watching over her. She had to find him, convince him to find Sonny. That might not be the easiest thing, considering her own confused emotions regarding the handsome detective.

She slipped into an alley she knew had an entrance

to Below.

Vincent stepped out of the shadows, captured her arm and pulled her back into the darkness with him. "Are you all right?" he whispered.

She clung to him, trembling. Just having him close at a time like this meant so much, as if she could absorb courage just from his nearness. "Vincent, thank god you're here. You've got to help!"

"I know," he assured her. "I could feel the fear and turmoil in you — and in Martin."

She stared at him, confused.

"I never mentioned this, but — Martin was the first person I ever had a mental bond with. Our connection is terribly weak, it's nothing like yours and mine. But I know he's in the tunnels. I've never felt his mind like this — even in times of difficulty he's always been calm, resolute. His mind is filled with chaos, fear. Pain."

"He's afraid for his detective," Catherine said knowingly.

"Yes," Vincent agreed. "He loves him so very much."

This was the second surprising statement Vincent had made in as many minutes, and Catherine wasn't sure she'd properly interpreted this last. "Loves? They work together. What do you know about them?"

The big man glanced away, embarrassed. "I — misspoke."

"Don't lie to me, Vincent," she complained wearily, clutching his sleeve. "You're so *bad* at it. What did you mean?"

"You're right, Catherine," the big man agreed reluctantly, still looking abashed. "I'm so used to telling you everything. Martin and Sonny — are lovers. I have no way of knowing if they'd want you to know that. People can be so *odd* about that."

"Of course," Catherine breathed, "that explains so much!" She smiled. "It's okay that you told me. I think it's fine."

"Martin tells me that he loves this detective the way I love you. This is not a man who loves easily, and when he does — it's very powerful."

"Then you've got to help him find Sonny!"

"Of course," Vincent assured her. "But it won't be easy. With the condition Martin's in, it will be difficult for me to even locate *him*. The only hope I have of 'feeling' Sonny is through Martin — and for that he'll have to be calm, open to the other man's feelings."

"Then we have to hurry," the lawyer urged.

"Not you, Catherine. This is something I must do alone. I want you to go Below, to warn Father and help coordinate things there. If the Black Opal decides to blow up those munition dumps, our people could be terribly endangered."

She started to argue with him then realized how much valuable time that would waste. "All right," she said resignedly. "I'll do it. Father should prepare everyone to move on a moment's notice. I'll make sure Pascal clears the pipes and that more sentries are posted in case the Black Opal goes deeper Underground."

Vincent peered out of the shadows, and when com-

fortable that they were unseen, moved to the drain-pipe, lifting the manhole cover easily. He signaled to Catherine, and she stepped out of the darkness and clambered down the pipe.



Heavy persuasion

It was hard to breathe

She was the dark at the top of the stairs

And she called to me

— Sister Of the Moon — Fleetwood Mac

Crockett, you're in deep shit this time, Sonny's inner voice warned. A bead of sweat ran down the side of his face even though it wasn't more than sixty degrees in this damp, cold underground chamber.

"*WHAT DO YOU MEAN YOU CAN'T FIND IT?*" the Black Widow screamed at her crew.

The detective didn't find it very consoling to watch five of the toughest-looking sleezoids he'd ever seen flinch as she bellowed at them. His only consolation in this sorry mess was that during the scuffle, she'd dropped the detonator and he'd managed to kick it away. Now, apparently it was lost. He hoped the police had found it, and could render it useless. At least *she* didn't have it. No, all she had was *him*.

Marty? he thought desperately, *Rico?* *Where the fuck are you guys?*

"*DON'T COME BACK HERE TILL YOU HAVE IT. DO YOU UNDERSTAND?*"

The men nodded obediently and scurried away.

Great, thought Crockett. *Now it's just the two of us.*

She turned to him. Empty, gray eyes stared at him as he stood helpless, handcuffed against aged metal pipes that ran along the wall.

Wasn't that supposed to be a male cop's ultimate sex fantasy? Handcuffed by their own cuffs and held prisoner by a beautiful, oversexed woman? Why was it that Sonny didn't feel the least bit excited? A terrible smile graced the Black Widow's full lips. With considerable effort, the Floridian mustered his infelicitous charm.

"Hey, darlin'," he said, with what he hoped was an elfin smile, "now that we're alone, how about, you know, releasing me?" He laughed lightly, and quirked an eyebrow. "Being cuffed really hampers my technique."

"You want to be my lover, Mr. Burnett?" she asked coolly.

He smiled more warmly, in spite of the chill that raced down his spine. "Powerful women have always been a weakness of mine. I wouldn't mind makin' you smile. Wouldn't mind it at all."

"That's good. I'm glad you like powerful women. I'm glad you want to make me smile. I'm sure before much time passes, you'll make me smile — a lot."

It took a real effort for Sonny to keep his boyish grin in place when she said that.

She moved close to him, pressing herself against

him, and ran a cool hand slowly down his chest, past his waist. Tapered, perfectly manicured blood-red nails rested gently against the soft mound of his genitals. The gemstone over her heart seemed even darker in the tunnel's dim light, as if it could reflect her feelings like the once-trendy mood rings.

"Aren't you curious about my interest in you?" she asked. "Haven't you wondered why I wanted *you* and not your handsome, black partner, or even the Cuban, with his somber face, and powerful body?"

Sonny shrugged, hesitant to say too much.

"The answer is simple," she assured him. Running her long nails over his crotch, she slowly unzipped his pants. She nuzzled his ear as she slipped her hands inside the pale woolen trousers. "My darling *detective*," she purred, "you look just like my dear Daddy."



Face it, Ricardo, the black man thought, fighting a rising tide of panic, *you're lost. Completely. Totally. Irrevocably. Lost.* He leaned against the rough hewn rock wall of the underground chamber and tried to slow his heart. *You've been in this junction twice now. You're going in circles like a rat in a maze. A stupid rat.*

How could Castillo know his way around this place, Rico wondered for the thousandth time. He'd seen the Hispanic slip into the sewer pipe and had followed him only moments later, but had quickly become disoriented in the darkness. Soon he was lost, trying not to imagine himself dying down here, after being forced to live for days on the vermin he could catch.

Pull it together, Tubbs, he told himself sternly, gnawing his lip. *You've watched too many grade B movies!* He looked around at the facing tunnels and picked a different one to wander down. *Look at the bright side — if you meet any alligators, you'll be able to curry favor by dropping the name of one of their southern cousins.*

Thinking he heard a sound behind him, Rico yanked his shotgun up. The blast spray would be broad enough to catch anything in the narrow tunnel. But nothing was there. He lowered the gun, unfired. *You're hearing things, man*, he told himself, wiping a slick sheen of sweat off his face.

He could imagine Sonny saying, *You're losin' it, Rico*. But when he heard that sound again — like a footstep, but not really — he thought, *Then again, maybe you're not*. He swallowed, wanting to call his boss's name, yet afraid to. It could be any of the Black Widow's people. His mind's eye saw her black clad troops swarming Sonny, saw them dragging him away like ants wrestling a leaf. He'd seen, too, for one second, Crockett's face as he realized what was happening, as he, no doubt, remembered the coroner's report on the dead federal agents — and the pictures.

He shook those images away. If he thought too much about what could be happening to his lover, he'd be no good to anyone.

There was another sound — a clearer one — like an animal growl, low, throaty. Dangerous. A sound that would make Elvis tremble.

Man! thought Rico, swallowing. *Whatever that is, it's big.* He clutched the shotgun tightly. *Be cool,* he told himself sternly.

An ear-splitting roar suddenly echoed through the tunnels, completely unnerving the black cop. He thought he saw something out of the corner of his eye — a shadow, a movement of light. He spun and squeezed the trigger, blasting away at the empty tunnel. There was another roar from behind him and as he spun he pulled the loader back, bringing two more shells into the chambers. He emptied both barrels instantly, the loud report making his ears buzz.

But before he could bring up two more shells, a massive arm emerged from the shadows, smashing the shotgun out of his hands. Eyes wide in fear, Rico watched his weapon clatter away, as the huge arm descended on him. He went for his pistol, but before he could reach it, powerful furred hands grabbed his clothes at the throat, preventing him from getting to it. Then the being attached to the powerful hands stepped out of the darkness and hoisted Tubbs up, pinning him roughly to the cavern wall. The strength of the creature was incredible. Tubbs was yanked off his feet and hauled up as easily as if he were a stuffed doll.

Ricardo gaped disbelievingly at the bizarre clawed hands. He clutched at the being's wrists, trying desperately to pull away, but his strength was no match for this creature. Finally, he wrenched his eyes away from the hands to look into the face of the monster. Horrified, Rico stared at a visage that appeared to be an animal's face grafted onto a man's. A furred muzzle growled at him, with huge, gleaming fangs aimed at his throat, strings of saliva dripping from them. He had a terrifying flashback from the movie *Aliens* and whimpered weakly. What the hell was a "yeti" doing in New York?

The enraged creature roared again, and slammed Rico hard against the stone wall.

Tubbs could barely breathe or think. "No," he begged, "no, don't!" as the teeth moved closer. It was going to kill him, this living nightmare, and there wasn't a single thing he could do about it. He closed his eyes, unable to stare at that terrible face another second. The only hope he had of pulling his wits together was to block that sight — a sight his modern, practical brain simply wouldn't let him accept.

The tension in the powerful arms increased and Rico felt the deadly talons pierce his clothes and puncture his skin. Blood dripped warmly down his chest.

I'm sorry Sonny, Martin, he thought, knowing he was about to die. *I've failed you both miserably.*

The next roar ripped through him. He had not wept since his brother died and he was determined he would not weep now, not for his own death. If he felt sorrow at all, it was for Sonny and the lieutenant. They had both lost so many loved ones, it hurt him to contribute to their pain.

He felt the hot breath of the beast on his face just as another sound broke through that terrible animal

roar. It was a simple sound — a low, familiar, dark voice, saying one word softly, but firmly.

"Vincent!"

Lieutenant Castillo's voice rang clearly in the tunnels.



Pale shadow of a woman

Black Widow

— Gold Dust Woman — Fleetwood Mac

"Yes, Mr. Burnett," the Black Widow purred, "you look *just like* my Daddy." Her cold hand slid inside his woolen pants. "Sandy blond hair, same height, same weight. Your eyes are a little prettier, but the same color."

Sonny twitched as his stomach flipfopped. Of all the things she might've said, he couldn't have imagined anything he would've wanted to hear *less* than that.

"What the *hell* is *this*?" she asked suddenly, looking at his crotch. She'd been fumbling inside his pants for several seconds, but seemed unable to find the prize.

"You're wearing *thermals*?" she asked, amazed, and began to giggle.

Sonny shrugged eloquently and attempted a weak grin. "Sorry, darlin', but it's cold in the Big Apple."

She manipulated her hand expertly past the snug thermal flap until she'd worked her way inside his jockey shorts. "Ah, there we are!" she crowed, taking his limp cock in her hand.

Crockett couldn't remember the last time a beautiful woman touched him that he wasn't instantly at attention, but her cool fingers only caused him to shrink smaller, as though his cock, wisely, wanted to hide.

"What's the matter, *darlin'*," she asked sweetly. "I thought you *liked* powerful women?"

He swallowed. "It's the cuffs, baby. They're cram-pin' my style."

"I'll bet," she agreed in a flat voice. As her fingers slid around his lightly furred testicles, he flinched. He felt them tighten into his groin as she manipulated them. "You're a *cop*," she cooed maliciously. "And I *hate* cops. Especially cops that look just like my Daddy." Suddenly her sharp, red nails clamped down on his scrotal sac, piercing the sensitive skin, painfully pinching the testicles.

Sonny's whole body went rigid and he gasped in agony. His bad knee gave out and he sagged against the wall, catching himself by leaning his elbows against the pipes. "Don't!" he begged raggedly. "*Please*, don't!"

She tightened her punishing grip, her pink tongue tip peeking out from between her red lips as she watched him writhe. "I used to say that," she told Sonny, finally easing her painful hold, allowing him time to catch his breath. "Don't, Daddy, please, don't." He never paid any attention, either.

"Ellen." Sonny's raspy voice was thin. "Ellen, you

don't have to do this. You don't have to hurt me to get back at him. He doesn't even know about this. It doesn't touch him at all. I know how to really hurt him, Ellen. You help me and together, we can hurt him *bad*."

She hesitated, watching him skeptically with narrowed eyes as she rolled his painful testicles in her palm. "You'd say anything right now to save your jewels."

He shook his head, fighting a wave of nausea. "Listen, Ellen. He deserves to suffer, that bastard. He ruined your life. He's ruining your sisters' lives. We've got the goods on him this time. You help me and we'll put him away forever. And I don't mean some soft, white collar prison. His ass is goin' to Attica. You know what they do to child molesters, to 'short eyes,' in prison, Ellen? Especially a fat cat like him? He'll never have a minute to himself. He'll be passed around like a volleyball."

Her expression changed. She looked confused, torn. "What about me?"

"With your history of abuse, there won't be a dry eye in the jury box. A few years of therapy and you'll be able to put all this behind you. I can tell them how you saved me. How you cooperated to the fullest. Saving the life of a cop, that means a lot. Ellen, you're so young —" His voice dropped an octave.

She was listening to him, actually paying attention to the scenario he was painting.

Sonny knew he had to be the most sincere, most convincing he'd ever been. Her face was so close to his he was able to murmur in her ear. "You deserve a decent life, a second chance. You deserve to be happy, to find someone you can trust, to fall in love. You help me, Ellen, and I'll help you get past all this. You have my word."

She leaned against him, looking intently into his green eyes, searching for the truth behind them. "No one's ever worried about *me*, before," she whispered. "Not since — my mother died. No one's ever cared about me. They just *used* me."

"Let me help you, Ellen. You deserve this. You've been abused enough. Let's end that here and start over. Uncuff me, darlin'. Let's make our way above and start over."

She hesitated and Sonny could feel her tremble slightly against him.

Oh, please let her believe me, he begged whatever spirits watched over undercover cops. *Let her swallow it!*

"I'm not gonna let *anybody* hurt you ever again, Ellen," he murmured seductively. "I promise you that." He spoke with so much sincerity he knew he really meant it. Deep in her flat gray eyes he could see the years of hurt and pain, the child who'd been ravaged and abused. He appealed to that child, that hurting little girl. "I'll take care of you, honey, stay with you every step of the way. Trust me, Ellen. I won't let you down."

He saw moisture collect in her eyes and he smiled warmly at her, believing he'd done it, he'd actually reached her heart.

"It's gonna be okay, Ellen," he reassured her, as

though she were the prisoner and not him. "It's gonna all be okay."

"Sort of wishful thinkin' on your part, ain't it, Crockett?" a flat mid-western male voice said abruptly.

Sonny was so startled by the intrusion he jumped. Ellen lurched and pulled away, looking at him dazedly. The little girl disappeared. She turned cold, hard eyes onto the speaker.

"Reese!" she snapped. "Where've you been?"

"Takin' care of business. Which is what I thought you'd have been doin'." The tall man in black eyed Crockett up and down with soulless china blue eyes. "Didn't expect to find you cuddled up with this *cop*, listenin' to some line of happy horseshit. He really had you goin' there, Ellen, old girl."

No, Sonny begged futilely in his mind. *This can't be happening.*

"Believe me, Ellie, you could rescue the entire New York Police Department at this point and they'd still happily lock your pretty ass up for about a thousand years. And if you think for one minute your Daddy's ever even goin' to *court* for child abuse, you're dreamin'."

Reese sauntered over to Crockett, smiling malevolently. "Quite the silver-tongued devil, huh? Well, I shouldn't be surprised. Anyone that can melt that glacier Castillo's got for a heart must have some kind of talent. And here I thought it was just that sweet, full mouth, and that pretty ass."

He pinched Sonny's buttock cruelly, and Crockett gasped and felt his eyes water. The Vice cop ignored Reese as he watched Ellen slip further and further away from him. Bitterly, he realized his one golden opportunity had already ended before it'd begun.

"Who's Castillo?" Ellen asked suspiciously.

"Lieutenant Martin Castillo, ex-DEA agent, currently with Miami's Organized Crime Bureau — scourge of evil-doers everywhere," Reese explained cordially. "Otherwise known as Mr. Mendez. Good thing I came along for the ride as an observer, or you would've been *busted*, Ellen. And this fine young stud you've had a hankerin' for would've done the bustin'. This here is Lieutenant Castillo's senior detective, James 'Sonny' Crockett — twelve year veteran of Miami Vice — and Marty Castillo's very own personal piece of ass."

Ellen's face hardened, turning into a mask of hatred. "You're a *faggot*?"

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," Reese purred. "He and Marty haven't been together that long. *Next year*, he'd have been Marty's faggot — if he lasted. This year, he's just workin' his way into the role."

Sonny's temper rose as his hopefulness faded. This man was a nightmare dropped on him in an already desperate situation. Who *was* this guy? How'd he know about Marty and him? What the *hell* was going on?

"Sonny, we haven't been properly introduced yet," the tall man apologized. "I'm Edward Reese. Let's just say I'm with the intelligence community. Freelance. My job, at the moment, is to make sure nothing happens to Ellen."

"You're a lyin' sack o' shit, pal," Crockett said even-

ly, taking a chance. "Your job is to make sure nothing happens to Ellen's *Daddy* — he's a defense contractor, isn't he?"

The Black Widow's eyes shifted between the two men, as if trying to determine which of two liars she believed the most.

Reese seemed unperturbed by Sonny's outburst. "You know, me and Marty go back a long ways. All the way back to the Golden Triangle. You're probably wondering how I know so much about you and Castillo. Hell, boy, I knew Marty when he was still humpin' Jack Gretskey. Yeah, I knew Gretskey *real* well myself. You *do* know about Jack, don't you? I know Marty's not one for talkin' much about his past. Ever wonder about that?"

Sonny remained impassive. Pulling a page from Martin's book he swallowed his hot-tempered emotions and fixed his face into an expressionless mask. He felt Burnett settle over him like a protective blanket.

"Well, that's neither here nor there," Reese continued. "Your plight here sure has Marty in a stew. He's so upset about what dear Ellen might do to you, he's actually willing to make a deal with *me*. Can you imagine?"

No, Sonny thought, he couldn't imagine.

"Me, neither," Reese confirmed, as though reading the cop's mind. "I know he's gonna fuck me over. He always does. But as long as I have you, I've got an ace. Funny, Crockett, you just don't strike me as gay. Don't tell me it was all that Latin machismo that turned you? When faced with a man too much for any six *women* to handle, you thought *you* could? Or is it just *love*? That's too hard to believe. Marty doesn't give enough of himself up for that — or hadn't you noticed?"

Sonny stared straight ahead, fully aware of what Reese was trying to do. He'd known guys imprisoned in 'Nam who'd gone through stuff like this. The interrogators worked hard to tear the men apart, to break them, and most importantly, to destroy their loyalty to one another, to damage the trust and faith they had in each other. That's all this was, he told himself. Reese was doing his best to damage his feelings for Marty, to make him mistrust his lover, to doubt him. Crockett thought back to all the times Marty went to bat for him, backed his crazy schemes, indulged his wild plans. He focused on feeling himself enfolded in those powerful arms, feeling Marty's love pouring into him. He couldn't let Reese damage his feelings for Martin.

Reese walked around the detective, eying him speculatively. "What do you really know about him, Crockett? Where does he come from? Where's his family? I bet he knows *everything* about you, including every last one of your weaknesses."

The intelligence agent moved right up against the helpless Vice cop, pressing his groin against Crockett's hip suggestively. "And I'll bet I can guess who's fuckin' who in this relationship."

He chuckled as the blond's cheeks burned and he ground his teeth. Sonny could hear Rico and Marty both warning him that they needed more balance in

their relationship. But ever since they'd come to New York, their relationship had become less and less balanced, until it was so skewed the blond didn't know if it'd ever be right.

"Here's a little friendly advice, Crockett," Reese warned softly as he stroked Crockett's ass possessively. "Marty *always* has to be on top. *Always*. He likes his lovers *weak. Passive. Submissive*. He *loves* it when they beg, and especially when they can't *take* it, when he's too much for them."

Sonny stared at the opposite wall, fighting to tune out Reese's wheedling voice, the dangerous truths he uttered. His gorge rose in revulsion against the alien touch of Reese's hands.

"How many times have *you* begged him —" Reese whispered, pressing his mouth against Crockett's ear, "— to stop? To finish? To *take* you?"

The cop lost it then, lunging to the end of the cuffs, feeling them bite hard into his wrists, wanting only to hit this sadistic bastard with everything he had.

Reese only grinned, arms crossed over his chest. "Yeah. You two haven't been together that long. You've still got too much fire left. That won't last. In a year you won't be able to pick out a suit without askin' his permission. 'Marty, should I wear the blue or the gray?' 'Marty, can I go out tonight or not?'"

Sonny tried to clamp a lid on his anger, realizing he was letting Reese get to him, giving him too much satisfaction.

"I give it one year, Crockett. Then, you're Marty's faggot forever. He'll get bored with you soon enough, and start lookin' elsewhere. Probably won't have to look far. That black partner of your's is mighty fine lookin'. Good build. Sharp dresser. Nice, high ass —"

The Southerner's face flushed in rage, and he swallowed, trying to slow his breathing.

"Tell me I'm wrong, Crockett," Reese murmured. "Who's fuckin' who?" He pulled up his wrist and glanced at his watch. "Oh, look at the time. And I've got so much to do. Well, Ellen here can entertain you till we meet with Marty at Alice in Wonderland. I'm sure the two of you still have a lot to talk about."

Reese ambled past the Black Widow. "Have fun, but nothing too extravagant," he told her. "Don't mark him if you can help it. It'll only piss Castillo off, and he's gonna give us enough trouble as it is." Then he left the tunnel, leaving Crockett alone with the furious woman.

"Ellen," Sonny said softly, desperately trying to regain the ground he'd lost.

"*Shut up*," she ordered coldly, "you lying son of a bitch!"

He shook his head. "I *meant* everything I said, Ellen. Don't listen to him. He has his own agenda, he's covering your dad's ass!"

"And you don't have *your* agenda? You're not worried about *your* ass? A cop queer for his own boss? I'm supposed to believe you're worried about *me*?"

"Ellen, listen, please —"

"*SHUT UP!*" she screamed shrilly. Lunging at him, she touched him with something in her palm.

Crockett felt as though he'd been struck by lightning. His body jerked against the cuffs and he cried

out and fell hard, his bad knee taking the weight of the fall. Pain shot through his leg as, dazedly, he stared at her, trying to focus. She held out her hand. She was holding — some kind of weapon? It wasn't a Tazer. He couldn't recognize it; it was something he'd never seen.

"Oh, sorry about that," she hissed, "I had it on maximum. This is an electro-ejaculator. Some name, huh? They use it on stud farms to force bulls to ejaculate. They insert it in the rectum and adjust the power. Some animals only need a little buzz near the prostate and they come, just like that! Others need more." Her eyes glittered insanely. "Some need a lot. It must feel really weird — a shock up your ass that makes you come. Talk about pain and pleasure. We're going to do a little study, Sonny."

"Ellen," he begged, "don't do this. We can still walk away from it all. Listen to me —"

She acted as though he hadn't said anything, and instead, pulled him back onto his feet with amazing strength. "We're going to see if this thing is as effective on humans as it is on beef cattle. We'll start with the lowest setting. Now, I expect you to articulate fully as to the effect of the increasing power dosage."

The Black Widow feigned a look of confusion at the detective's stricken expression. "Hey, this should be *fun* for you, Sonny. According to Reese, you *like* having something hard up your ass!"

"Ellen, come on. You don't want to hurt me."

"Oh, you are *very* wrong about that," she said, her voice dripping hatred. "I can't remember the last man I met that I wanted to hurt as much." She glanced down at his pants as she started to remove them. "I'm sorry, Sonny, but you won't be able to keep your thermals."

Rulers make bad lovers

You'd better put your kingdom up for sale

— Gold Dust Woman — Fleetwood Mac



"Vincent. Put him down." Martin hurried to his friend's side as the lion-like head snapped around to face him. Castillo saw the fire of the Other raging in the blue eyes as Vincent snarled at him, out of control, unfocused. Castillo touched his arm, unafraid, and spoke soothingly. "Put him down, little brother. For me. Do it."

Rico's skin was gray, his eyes squeezed shut. He looked close to fainting. Castillo knew Tubbs' pragmatic mind couldn't cope with the reality of Vincent.

"He's a friend," Martin said huskily, shaking Vincent's arm. "Let him go."

Slowly, reluctantly, the massive arms lowered Rico to the ground, as the Other faded away. Rico's legs sagged as he touched soil and the lieutenant grabbed him, supporting him. Vincent pulled away, leaning against the far wall, looking dazed and exhausted. He glanced at the black detective and pulled the hood of

his great cloak up around his face and turned his back.

Castillo tapped Rico's face. "You're all right. You're safe, Ricardo. I'm here."

"Lieutenant?" Tubbs said weakly, opening his eyes.

"Yes. It's over. Look at me."

Copper eyes roved Castillo's familiar, roughened face and Rico started to grin, reaching up to touch the friendly visage. "Oh, Lieutenant. Where'd you come from...?" Then he remembered what had happened and his eyes searched the cavern, lighting on the hulking, dark figure across from them. He shrank back against the wall. "He — That — My god! It's--"

"Tubbs!" Castillo snapped, giving him a shake.

The detective blinked, looked at his lieutenant, stood up straight. "Yeah. Right. I'm okay, Lieutenant."

"This, Ricardo," Martin said firmly, "is my brother. This is Vincent."

"Vincent," Rico said softly, swallowing. "Cathy Chandler's Vincent?"

The huge head swiveled towards the black man, eyes blazing. Tubbs flinched involuntarily.

"Yes," said the Latino. "Catherine's Vincent. My brother." He turned to the broad-shouldered man. "And this, Vincent, is Ricardo Tubbs. One of my detectives — who's also Sonny's other lover — and mine, as well."

Rico looked at Castillo, as though surprised and touched that the Latino so easily named him lover.

Vincent's expression was startled also, as he lifted an arching eyebrow. "The *three* of you...?"

"The three of us," Martin said firmly. "They're my family, just as you are."

"Miami must be a most interesting city," Vincent remarked drolly.

"He *talks*?" Rico whispered at Castillo, amazed.

"Quite well, thank you," Vincent grumbled at the detective.

Tubbs couldn't hide his discomfort, and moved so that he stood slightly behind Castillo.

"I'm sorry for attacking you," the huge being apologized. "I never got a good look at you in the darkness, and thought you were pursuing Martin. Are you injured?"

"It's — nothin', man. Forget it. Can't blame you for protectin' your — brother?" He looked back and forth between the two incongruous people, confused.

"I'm adopted," Martin said dryly, with a small smile.



Rico checked his shotgun, assuring himself that it had suffered no damage from being bounced around the stone cavern. Besides, examining his gun kept him from gaping at Vincent. He was still trying to get used to the huge man, trying to accept that *Martin* Castillo called this half-mad monster "brother," trying to envision tiny Catherine Chandler sheltered within those powerful arms. *Man, Sonny, when you see this guy, your ego's really going to take a beating.*

But in spite of his terrifying experience, in spite of

the difficulty he was having in believing that Vincent even existed, Tubbs couldn't shake the feeling that there was something oddly familiar about this mythical-looking being. He almost felt as if he'd known him before, somehow — known him... intimately. He wondered if this were the kind of intuitive thing Crockett regularly went through. He'd never heard of that kind of thing being "contagious" before. He wasn't exactly comfortable with this new sixth sense.

The lieutenant was explaining to them about Reese, the intelligence mercenary, and the deal he'd promised him.

"You're not really going to let these people go?" Vincent asked incredulously. Rico couldn't get over the cultured, modulated voice that came out of that muzzle — the same muzzle that'd roared like a rabid lion and nearly torn his throat out. If he'd heard him over the phone he'd have thought he was an announcer for *Masterpiece Theater*!

Castillo's face was somber — more so than usual. Rico could imagine what it cost him to even agree to such an arrangement. "This woman's insane, and Reese can't be trusted. I'm afraid for Sonny, afraid of what she's putting him through now, even though I made Reese promise he wouldn't be hurt. We've got till five a.m. to rescue Sonny, or I'll have to meet with Reese — and live up to my agreement."

"How the hell can we hope to find him down here, Lieutenant?" Rico asked. "These tunnels are endless. We could spend our whole lives searching."

"There's a slim chance," Vincent told Martin, "that I might be able to 'feel' Sonny through you."

Rico looked at the two, confused. "Feel what?"

The lieutenant gave Rico a look he recognized. It was his patented "it-will-take-too-long-to-explain-now" look. "You think I might sense his fear?" Castillo asked his brother.

"You might not even be aware of it," Vincent said. "But I may be able to read it from you. You said he was sensitive, empathic."

Rico decided he'd be better off not asking anyway. He had enough to contend with just getting used to Vincent.

"True, but," the Cuban looked doubtful, "it's a long shot."

"Concentrate," Vincent told him. "Hold my hands and concentrate. We have to try."

"Rico," the lieutenant said. "You, too. You and Sonny are so close, it might help."

Tubbs hesitated. Hold onto *those* hands? And for what? He didn't even understand what was going on here. Vincent turned and gave Rico the full force of his compelling stare. Swallowing, the dark detective clasped his hands around Castillo's long, slim fingers and Vincent's huge, furred ones.

"Think of Sonny," the Cuban said huskily. "Think about — think about — last night — when we were all together."

Rico darkened with a surprised blush as the Hispanic reminded them of their strange coupling. Even more odd was Vincent's reaction. His expression changed as if he understood the reference.

Rico shut the distractions away, thought only of

Sonny, of his warm lips, his body that Tubbs could never get enough of, the way he laughed, how wonderful it was to see him smile, lay next to him, make love to him....

He could see Sonny standing before him in a pale linen suit, his blond hair blowing in a warm Miami breeze. He seemed so real, Rico could feel his cock stiffening at the sight of his lover. *Damn, Sonny, where are you?* he thought, urgently. *Where are you, man?*



Sonny lay on the cool ground, his arms stretched painfully overhead, a chilling pool of ejaculate drying on his bare legs. His pants and thermals, gathered around his ankles, were as confining as leg irons. He was gasping shallowly, trembling uncontrollably. But even with his eyes shut, he could still see the glittering swirls of the ominous stone that the Black Widow wore. The shards of gleaming darkness clustered in the opal seemed to dance behind his lids — or had he just imagined that the stone swirled and twinkled with malevolent glee every time she — Every time she —

Something cold touched his exposed buttock and he screamed.

"Calm down, Crockett," Ellen's hard voice ordered. "I've got to see to some business, so you get a break. Don't miss me too much, lover. As the man said in the movies, 'I'll be back.' Isn't anticipation half the fun?"

He heard her leaving the tunnel and pulled his knees under him, trying to get to his feet. His bad knee protested painfully, insisting it could no longer bend that way, but he forced it to. His arms were in agony, but no more so than the rest of his body. Weakly, he tried to stand, then had to give it up. At least he'd taken his weight off his arms.

He leaned his face against the cool pipes as he knelt, and prayed that someone would take pity on him and kill him soon. The very sight of that woman was now enough to terrify him, send him gibbering, pulling against the cuffs to get free. He thought of the wolves who chewed their paws off to free themselves from traps and wished he had the strength to do that.

Marty? he thought weakly, feeling tears of despair forming in his eyes. *Rico? I'm hurtin' so bad. Where are you? Get me out of here, please, oh god, get me out of here.*

He sagged, his shoulders shaking as he yielded to despondency and wept.

Then, suddenly, he sensed something, felt something inside his mind. Something calm, and soothing. Something with strength. Something with love.

It was as if Martin and Rico had each just touched his heart for the briefest second to give him stamina. He took a shuddery breath and the feeling evaporated. But it had been there. It had been real. He shut his eyes and rubbed his forehead against the pipe.

The pipe.

He looked at his hands, cuffed around the unyielding metal. Impulsively, he tapped the chrome cuff against it. Not too loud. He couldn't let Ellen or her cronies hear it. But not too soft, because it had to carry.

Dot-dot-dot. Dash-dash-dash. Dot-dot-dot.

Amazing how you could remember stuff buried in your mind years after you'd learned it. Like Morse code.

Marty would know Morse, he'd served overseas. But what made Crockett think Marty would even be in these tunnels? He didn't know, but he kept tapping. What else did he have to do anyway — while waiting for Ellen's return?

*Out of nowhere this gust of wind
Brushed my hair and kissed my skin....
— Pullin' Back the Reins — k. d. lang*

CHAPTER TWELVE: MARTIN'S PAST

*Every hour of fear I spend
My body tries to cry
Living through each empty night
A deadly call inside.
— Storms — Fleetwood Mac*

Castillo's eyes rolled up as he sagged forward bonelessly. Rico lurched to catch him at the same time Vincent did. The two of them held onto the dazed Latino as he blinked back to consciousness.

"What the hell happened?" Rico asked Vincent, his copper eyes wide.

The great shaggy blond head shook, unsure. "I don't know. There was *some* contact. I received one clear image. I can *almost* feel Sonny now. It's weak, and it may not last, but I know where to start looking."

The Hispanic groaned and put a hand to the bridge of his nose, rubbing it distractedly. His other arm covered his midsection as though he were in pain.

"Lieutenant...? *Martin*...?" Rico called softly. "You all right, partner?"

The Cuban's eyes fixed on Rico's, and the black detective was shocked to see they were full of fear and desperation.

"What is it?" Rico asked, almost afraid to know.

"Did you *see* anything?" Vincent asked gently.

The lieutenant shook his head gingerly. "No. I just... *felt* —" He shuddered. "Felt... Sonny —" he looked at Rico, "calling us. He's alive."

"That's the good news," Rico said worriedly. "And the bad?"

"Terrible pain," the lieutenant whispered. "Terrible. We've got to get him out of there. We can't

wait for the deal."

"That's fine with me," Rico assured him grimly. "Sonny'd never forgive us anyway if she got to walk after this — after hurtin' him." The black man's face hardened.

Castillo steadied himself, but the others held onto him as though they could lend him their strength. "I should've never approved his plan," the lieutenant murmured. "I knew it was a bad idea." He caught Rico's light eyes. "You knew it, too."

"Don't second guess," Rico told him. "Sonny would've done it anyway. And besides — his plan worked. She hasn't blown up the ammo dumps. That means she must not have the detonator anymore."

The Cuban's brow furrowed. "Then, who does?"

Vincent shook his head. "I must go. The link with Sonny is so weak. If I don't find him soon I may not be able to find him at all."

"You're not goin' *alone*," Rico said.

"I can move much faster through the tunnels by myself," Vincent insisted.

"That woman's got an *army* around her. You need back-up!"

"Enough," the Hispanic ordered softly. "You're both right. You *can* move faster alone, Vincent, but Rico's going with you. Remember, Sonny's never seen you; you'll need help. Besides, if we have *any* hope of making any arrests —"

Vincent nodded, yielding to his brother's logic.

"Aren't you coming?" Tubbs asked his superior.

The lieutenant looked incredibly uncomfortable. "If I don't do what I can to bring down the Black Widow's father before the five a.m. deadline, Reesc will be able to protect Morganstern from us forever. No matter what my personal feelings are, I've got to ask an old friend for a favor."

Rico could see what this decision was costing the tightly controlled man. "It's okay, partner," Tubbs said, trying to reassure him. "Vincent and I will find him. We'll bring him back. You be careful, *Martin*."

Castillo nodded, looking at the odd partnership. "Bring Sonny back safely, and yourselves as well."

Rico glanced at Vincent and smiled confidently. "Lead on — *partner*. I won't slow you down."



Catherine carried yet another stack of neatly folded blankets down the steep ramp into the large underground chamber. She'd never been this far below in the tunnels and was surprised at the number and variety of unused chambers and caverns here. She dropped the stack of bedding next to another she'd delivered earlier and paused to wipe the sweat from her forehead.

"This will do for now," Father said, thoughtfully looking over the piles of provisions that the large crew of adults had accumulated. "We're far enough below that we'll be protected from *anything* that happens Above. I'd hate to think we might lose our home Chambers, but at least we can find safety here."

He was trying to be optimistic, Catherine knew, but the truth was they were far from water now, and the air flow wasn't nearly as good. Plus, it would be that much harder to go Above and it was from the city overhead that most of their supplies came. She fervently hoped they wouldn't need to stay here long.

Catherine was restless, impatient with finding herself trapped Below while Vincent was left to deal with terrorists Above. She ached to be with him, wanting to *do* something, and anxiously worried about what was happening.

"I wonder how long it will be before we know anything?" Father wondered aloud, as though he'd read her mind.

He'd been angry and upset when she'd told him of Vincent's involvement, but he had not been surprised. He confessed he'd known this was going to happen the minute he discovered Martin was working on the case. Vincent could no sooner allow his brother to walk unaided into danger than he could allow Catherine. It felt odd for the lawyer to console Father's fears about Vincent's endangerment Above when, for once, she herself was not the cause.

"Father," she said softly, in an attempt to distract them both, "why haven't I heard you or Vincent speak of Martin before this? I'm always hearing elaborate stories of the many people who've lived here in the past — but you've never mentioned him. He seems to be a man anyone would be proud of — a moral man with a difficult job — an active Helper — yet, I've never heard either of you speak his name. Why is that?"

Father's brow furrowed. "Well — that's a rather long story," he admitted uneasily.

Catherine made herself comfortable on some bedding. "It seems to me we don't have much else to do right now."

The patriarch smiled. "I can't very well argue with that. Catherine, you're very perceptive. It was certainly wise for you to go into law."

He settled himself carefully beside her, and looked over the lower part of the chamber as the men and women of the underground community set up temporary housekeeping. "Forgive me, but I find it hard to talk about Martin — because I failed him so badly."

Catherine frowned, confused.

"Martin and his mother were two of the first to come live in our burgeoning society," Father explained. "She was a lovely, dark-eyed young woman, with a terrible addiction to heroin. She had no idea who Martin's father was, since she'd been prostituting herself for so long. He has her last name. But she adored him, and tried to be a good mother. Martin was eight when they came to live with us."

Father stared out over the chamber as though peering at it could help him recall the past. "What a *brilliant* child he was, but so somber, so serious. Just getting him to smile was quite the challenge. And no wonder. I can't imagine what he had already seen on the streets by that tender age. He was happiest when his mother would successfully kick her habit. At those times, she'd be a wonderfully active member of the community, and a fine parent. But then, some-

thing would happen, and she'd disappear back to the streets, using drugs, turning tricks. And Martin would go after her, to try and bring her home."

Catherine tried to imagine the anguish of that small, quiet child searching through a dangerous city for his mother. Her heart ached to think of it.

"When he was eleven," Father said softly, "she finally overdosed one night in the company of a — customer. Martin found her, cold and stiff. The man had taken all her money. It changed him — made him very hard, very alone. We did what we could to console him, but the only comfort he took was from the younger children, especially Vincent, who was around five at the time. Martin appointed himself a teacher, and Vincent and Devon's big brother. The little ones all adored him and it helped him get over that terrible time."

Father placed his hands on his knees and paused for a moment. "Then he met Jack Gretskey. Jack was a street youth who John Pater had taken under his wing."

Catherine frowned. John Pater was the twisted man who'd taken the name of the famed alchemist, Paracelsus.

"Jack was only a few years older than Martin," Father continued, "but very street-wise. Martin was hardly a soft touch after all he'd been through, but Jack was older, wiser — and so calculating."

The old man shook his head. "Jack and I didn't get along very well, I'm afraid. I must admit, a great deal of it was me. There was something about Jack that didn't sit right with me. I didn't believe he was honest, trustworthy. He would latch onto people, gathering knowledge from them not for the joy of learning, but for his direct benefit. Initially, that was his primary interest in Martin."

He smiled wryly, remembering that time. "Martin's thirst for knowledge and his willingness to apply himself was greater even than Vincent's. I've never seen a child absorb knowledge the way he did. He was fascinated with all the Asian cultures and became very close to our many Chinatown helpers. By the time he was ten he could speak fluently in *four* languages — English, Spanish, Thai and Mandarin Chinese. He studied Chinese herbal lore, Japanese martial arts — and swore he would always follow the Bushido, the way of the Samurai!" Father sighed. "It's a code I believe he follows to this day."

Catherine smiled at the elder's warm memories.

"But," he continued, his face darkening, "it was exactly those interests that drew Jack Gretskey. That was why he'd been attracted to John Pater — for what he could learn from that twisted mind. Soon, he abandoned John for Martin. The two became inseparable, much to my discomfort. Oddly enough, Jack's friendship seemed to lighten Martin's somber attitude. And even I had to admit Martin's influence was good for Jack."

Father looked at Catherine oddly. "Why is it parents always fear the effect bad companions will have on their children, and never have confidence that their good children will raise up their troubled friends? Ah, hindsight! I can admit now that Jack

changed as he grew closer to Martin. He became more stable, more kind. Martin insisted that he, too, follow the Bushido, the Way of Honor, and Jack did. But all I could see was the dark side of that boy. With all the pain Martin had been through, I feared Jack would infect him."

Father took a deep, weary breath. "And soon enough I felt I'd been proven right. It was around Martin's fourteenth birthday." He shook his head, remembering, and spoke in a low voice. "I discovered the two of them in a small chamber — having sex. Even now, I can barely discuss it."

He looked guiltily at Catherine and held up a hand before she could say anything. "I know that today's wisdom tells us that it's not unusual for adolescents to experiment sexually, and that a person's sexual preference is just something that *is* and should be accepted. But in those days, Catherine, homosexuality was an *illness* to be cured — and if not cured, then cut out like diseased tissue. Remember, I was a product of the nineteen forties' medical schools." He blinked rapidly and drew in a shaky breath.

"But the truth is that catching them — in the *act* — just confirmed my worst fears. Even before that, their relationship disturbed me. Martin was obsessed with Jack, totally in awe of him. Jack had become Martin's world. It felt — wrong. It felt —" He groped for the right word.

"Unnatural?" Catherine suggested gently.

Father nodded. He gazed around the chamber, an anguished expression on his face. "I must confess to you, my dear, if my personal feelings towards Jack weren't so negative, I'm sure I would've handled it better. But Martin *adored* Jack, allowed him to completely dominate him! It wasn't healthy! I couldn't tolerate it. Catching Jack using Martin as a catamite was just the final, terrible straw!"

He turned to Catherine. "I separated them, of course. They weren't allowed to be together at all, even at mealtime. Martin suffered terribly, but quietly. He insisted he and Jack were in *love*! He was *fourteen*! Jack was seventeen. I *knew* he was just *using* Martin. But Martin lost weight, stopped eating, stopped bathing. Stopped learning. Eventually, I allowed them to spend time together with other people chaperoning, but it wasn't a tenable situation. Jack would've happily disregarded my orders and found ways to be with Martin, but Martin had promised me that he would not have sex with Jack as long as they lived Below. And his promise was as good then as it is now."

Father rubbed a hand over his face tiredly. "A year later, Jack turned eighteen. I asked him to leave. He warned me that if he left, Martin would come with him. I didn't believe him. I knew I could talk Martin into staying. Imagine my dismay when Martin insisted he still loved Jack. He was only fifteen, but yet, seemed so much older. Vincent was barely nine. Martin left the next day, happy that he and Jack could now really be together. I assured Martin he always had a home with us."

The old man's eyes took on a faraway look as he remembered that conversation. "He looked at me

solemnly and asked, 'Does Jack?' I couldn't answer. He simply nodded and walked away. I thought Vincent would never forgive me for letting him go."

The patriarch blinked rapidly for a few seconds and swallowed. "It was because of Jack and Martin that I was so hard on Devon. He and Vincent were so close, there were times — when I was afraid." The elder lowered his head into his hands, and Catherine slid an arm around him, hugging him.

"I never heard from Jack again," he continued after a few minutes. "But Martin always kept in touch through his friends and teachers in Chinatown. He wrote every single week, faithfully, and sent money, gifts, supplies from all over the world, wherever he lived, whatever country or job. I've kept every one of those letters. We still use many of them and the things he sent to teach the children geography. The only time he stopped writing was when he was hospitalized after the ambush at Mai Sa, in Thailand. The silence lasted so long we all feared he was dead. But he had survived — physically, at least. That's where Jack was killed."

Father shook his head. "They were still together, after all those years! Together, yet not together. In Thailand, Martin had fallen in love with a woman named May Ying. They married. Jack was Martin's best man."

He stared at Catherine wildly. "I'd been so *wrong* about Jack. He truly loved Martin fiercely, like the Samurai's they'd always dreamed of being. When Martin fell in love with someone else, Jack was willing to step back, but still be Martin's brother. I can't imagine what that must've cost him! How few of *us* could've made such a sacrifice out of love."

Father blinked, and shook his head. "And then, Martin lost them both on the same day. He was told that the people who ambushed them also killed May Ying. It was actually a terrible lie, but he only found that out a few months ago. While May Ying still lives, she's now remarried. She'll never share her life with Martin again, no matter that they still love each other."

"How terrible for him!" Catherine said softly.

Father ran a hand through his hair. "His life has been so hard. And always, it seems, made harder by those professing to love him the most. Yet, he believes in love, believes in its power as fiercely as Vincent." He laughed bitterly. "As hard as I tried, it seems I couldn't kill that in them."

"You're being too harsh on yourself," Catherine scolded him gently. "You made the best decisions you could with the knowledge and experience you had. Very few parents would've done anything differently. You were trying to *protect* Martin."

Father shook his head. "When he came back from Mai Sa, he told me he'd forgiven me, and said some of those same words to me, then. Still, I couldn't speak of it, because of my guilt — my regrets and my inability to understand his feelings. You know, when he first wrote to me of meeting May Ying so many years ago, I was so *overjoyed*, so *relieved*. It was like a miracle that Martin would pull away from Jack and fall in love with a *woman*, perhaps have a *family*."

He sighed. "But all there was was more pain. He

has written of no one since Thailand, and I believe he has been celibate all this time, living alone, dedicating himself to his work, and especially to fighting the drug scourge."

"Because of his mother," Catherine said knowingly.

Father nodded, then said hopefully, "Yet, I risked asking him about it when he visited the other night. We've always had so much trouble discussing this subject, but perhaps the difficult conversations I've recently had to have with Vincent —" he smiled wryly, "regarding you and he have given me a new courage. Martin actually admitted there was *someone*, man or woman, he wouldn't say — and I couldn't make myself ask."

He looked Catherine squarely in the eyes, "But as God is my judge, my dear, I don't *care* anymore. I can think of no one, with the possible exception of you and Vincent, who deserves to be loved more than Martin. *Whoever* it is, I would welcome them with open arms and regard them as family if they could bring even an instant's happiness to that good man."

Catherine smiled warmly at Father's impassioned outburst. "You just might get your chance, Father. Martin's lover is here with him." She paused, trying to decide how much to tell the old man. "He's very dynamic, and *empathic* — and terribly attractive!" She grinned. "I'm afraid he might possibly be more than Martin's prepared to handle. His name is Sonny Crockett, he's one of Martin's detectives. Vincent tells me Martin loves him very much, but I don't think their relationship has had time to become stable yet. I'm not even sure if it's destined for stability. Sonny was very attracted to me when we first met. And I must confess — I was attracted to him as well."

"This wasn't the man who — kissed you the other night?" Father asked, surprised.

"So Vincent told you? Yes, I'm afraid so. There's more you should know. I think there may be something between Sonny and Martin's other detective, Rico. They're partners, and very close, but I sense deeper feelings between them. That's just a guess. Whatever it is, those three will have to work it out among themselves. I'm only mentioning it to you to prepare you, to give you time to get used to it. All we can do is accept them, support them — and love them."

Father lifted his eyes to the ceiling of the chamber. "And the three of them are up there now, risking their lives for all of us." He turned to Catherine. "The *four* of them, with Vincent. Do you think Vincent will be forced to reveal himself to those two?"

The lawyer shrugged. "To be honest, I hope so. Because Martin grew up down here, he must hide his past from Sonny. It's part of the problem between them. Once Sonny really knows who Martin is, I think it will be easier for him to make a commitment. I don't think Sonny can keep anything from Rico, so he'd have to know sooner or later. The strain of that secret, otherwise, would just tear them apart."

"And that is something you understand a great deal about, I'm sure," Father said. He looked at her oddly. "Catherine, I can't tell you how grateful I am to be able to talk about this difficult subject with you honest-

ly. It's a burden I've carried a long time, and sharing it with you — well, it's helped lighten the load considerably. I would like very much to exchange the favor."

She looked at him confused. "I don't understand."

He sighed. "There's been a new tension lately between you and my son. I can easily see the pain and turmoil in Vincent, and can only imagine what *you* must be going through — especially since you have no one to share this with."

Catherine drew back, reluctant to discuss this aspect of her relationship with Vincent.

"Please, my dear," the elder begged, "hear me out. Heaven knows this topic is a difficult one for me to broach. Catherine, you must be aware that Vincent's sexuality acts upon him like — violence does. It draws down the dark other side he has so much trouble controlling. You must realize his fears of harming you are *real*."

"Father, do you really want to *discuss* this, or do you just want to tell me why our love cannot be?" she asked bluntly.

"I was sincere in my offer," he insisted gently.

"Vincent could *never* hurt me," Catherine said confidently. "I *love* him. I want our love to be everything love can be between two people."

Father smiled at her passionate words. "You can't know how it warms my heart to see your determination, and to know it is only born of love. But, Catherine, I'd be dishonest if I didn't say that I am so afraid for you."

She shook her head. "I'm not. Vincent's Other is no match for my love for him. If I can just get past his fears, I know our relationship will transcend these problems, as it has already transcended every other problem thrown in our path."

Father looked at her for a long moment then nodded. "How could I not believe you? In that case, I give you my blessing, dear Catherine. Love Vincent. Tame his Other. Put his dark side to rest for once and all. No one but you could hope to have such power."

Catherine was both thrilled and amazed at Father's sudden acceptance. Her green eyes glittered with barely suppressed tears as she threw her arms around him. "Oh, Father, *thank* you," she whispered.

The patriarch gathered her in his arms and hugged her gently, kissing her head.

She pulled away and quickly wiped her eyes. She was about to say something else when a group of tunnel dwellers approached hurriedly, their faces drawn with worry. Collin, Winston, Mouse, Jamie and Pascal made up the small group.

"What is it?" Father asked, concerned. "What's wrong?"

"It's the pipes," Pascal blurted, clearly out of breath. The small, balding man was still clutching his favorite "tapper."

"I thought there was an all-silence on the pipes," Father said.

"There is," Pascal agreed. "But I've been checking them anyway, with my stethoscope, and just now, I started picking up a faint SOS in standard Morse. It

was so soft, I could barely hear it. I tapped back, 'who's this?' and the answer was 'Sonny.' Isn't that the name of the man the Black Widow kidnapped?"

Catherine shot to her feet. "Where's the message coming from?"

"I think its from the east side of the Park, close to the surface. But he can't help us with the location, he doesn't know where he is."

Winston, the large black man standing beside the Pipe Master, spoke up. "We thought a group of us could reconnoiter those tunnels, maybe get some idea of what's going on."

Jamie, a young, attractive woman not yet eighteen, was standing next to Mouse, the irrepressible inventor. "This man's a friend of Martin's," she said to Father. "And Martin's one of us. We've got to help."

"Have to hurry," Mouse said impatiently. "Too much talk. Go help Martin. Help Vincent. Hurry, now!"

"The danger!" Father warned futilely.

"The danger is to *all* of us," Collin, their craftsman, reminded him.

"They're right," Catherine agreed. "I'm going, too!"

They all turned to her, ready to protest. "Now, wait a minute," Winston began, brusquely.

She stopped him with a glare. "No arguments! I'm the only one here who even knows what Sonny looks like! Besides, if I'm there to witness, none of you will be needed if legal testimony is called for. I'm *going*!"

The small group glanced at one another and yielded to the inevitable.

"Well, like Mouse said," Winston declared, "let's hurry!"



*Some come dark and strange like dying
Crows and ravens whistling
Lines of weeping, strings of crying
So much said in listening*

— Joni Mitchell — Songs to Aging Children Come

Martin emerged from the lightless, narrow drain pipe into an unfamiliar, dimly-lit sub-basement. His expensive black cashmere coat and elegant ebony suit — necessary armor for his cover identity of wealthy Cuban gun runner — were only impediments to him now. He shrugged out of the coat and left it neatly folded by the pipe's entrance.

Straightening his midnight-colored designer suit jacket, black silk shirt and silver tie, he found himself subconsciously worrying about what his old friend might think of all this regal attire. It was a far cry from the outfit he'd worn the last time he'd dropped in unannounced. But then, this visit would be as great a surprise as that one had been. His friend would probably never even notice what he was wearing.

The lieutenant looked around in the dimness, found stairs and climbed them silently, entering the basement. Moving cautiously, he made sure there was no

one around, no watchmen, no cameras. He spied a small elevator and approached it, digging into his pocket for his leather key holder. Flipping through the keys, he picked out one odd-shaped, golden one. Smiling slightly, he rubbed a thumb over it, then inserted it into the keyhole on the elevator control panel, turning it until the mechanism engaged. There were no buttons to push, no instructions for operation. In minutes the doors slid open. He stepped into the mahogany lined cubicle and inserted the key into the interior control panel. The doors closed softly and the elevator ascended in smooth silence, the speed subtly accelerating. There were no indicators to tell him how many floors they were passing, but the trip took several minutes at high speed. Finally, Castillo could feel the elevator slow, then smoothly halt.

When the doors opened, he stepped onto a plush peach rug into a dimly lit large room. There were soft, neutral colored couches facing a massive wall of glass. Outside the glass, the brightly lit city winked at him, startlingly reminiscent of a different city view in another year. The view brought back too many memories, and the Cuban turned away from the panorama, glancing instead at abstract paintings that graced the other walls. The paintings were originals, and he recognized the artists. Expensive bronzes, new and old, stood gracefully on tasteful furnishings. And in one corner of the huge room, near the glass wall, stood a beautiful teak executive desk.

Behind it sat Elliot Burch, the man Martin had come to see.

Elliot had looked up as soon as the elevator opened and now stood, the soft light from a Tiffany lamp casting shadows that only made his handsome face all the more attractive. The Latino stared at Burch, struck by his fluid grace and striking good looks. He was still so handsome it took Martin's breath away.

The architect wore a full beard, and it gave him a rakish maturity. His brown hair was long. *Like Sonny's*, the detective thought with a worried pang. *Where are you, Sonny? What's happening to you?*

Burch's blue eyes were wide with surprise, but quickly softened as he stared at the black-suited man as if he were an apparition.

"Martin?" Elliot breathed. "Is it really *you*?"

The Latino inclined his head, unable for the moment to even speak.

The tall, handsome man abandoned the desk and moved towards Castillo. "I can't believe it! You're here? To see me?" He stopped about three feet from Martin, as though afraid that coming any closer might make his visitor vanish. He grinned amiably. "You look *wonderful*! I've missed you *terribly*, all these years."

Martin nodded again. "And I, you, my friend." He held up the golden elevator key. "Twice a year a new one comes in the mail, whenever your locks are changed. I never thought I'd use it, but I was always grateful you cared enough to keep sending them."

"I told you five years ago when you left New York that there'll always be a place for you in my home — and my heart. No strings attached. I'll always care

about you, Martin. No matter what else happens in my life — or in yours — I'll always care about you."

Deeply touched, Castillo opened his arms invitingly and without hesitation, Elliot moved into them, embracing the smaller man. Impulsively, Burch bent his head, touching his mouth to Castillo's.

The lieutenant felt himself swirled back in time, as he accepted the kiss and recalled their bittersweet past. He opened his mouth and Burch's tongue chased his, touching lightly, dancing around his teeth.

And he remembered....

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ELLIOT

...Martin was swept back in time, remembering the words to an old Bob Dylan song....

I was so much older then.

I am younger than that now....

It was 1979. He'd been Below for three months, healing from the wounds he'd received at Mai Sa, taking whatever comfort he could from the kind gestures and well-meaning intentions of the Underground community. He was almost completely recovered — physically, at least. Mentally, he had a long way to go.

And emotionally, he was crippled. The only feelings he had left were despondency and anger, and he seesawed wildly between the two. He was still fond of Father, and the friends from his childhood, but only Vincent could stir anything like love. He didn't even like to think of that word now.

After surviving the pointless death of his mother during his childhood, then watching Jack Gretskey die and hearing how his beloved wife, May Ying, had perished that same day, Martin never wanted to love or care for anyone else in the world.

But the people Below would not leave him alone with his grief and bitterness. They hovered over him constantly, trying to draw him out about his pain, wanting him to share the burden of it. If it were up to them, he would do nothing but talk — he, who was the most private of people, who'd always found it difficult to articulate any deep, personal feeling.

Soon, he found himself more concerned with satisfying their needs to nurture him than trying to work through his own anguish. He'd resorted to taking trips deep into the tunnels alone, trying to find something, anything to pull the memories away, to dampen the pain, but all it did was exhaust him.

This day, he decided he needed to see the spring sunshine, feel its warmth on his skin. He came up Above early in the morning, leaving Vincent and the others Below, and wandered Central Park for hours. The sun felt good, making him think of Miami, where he and Jack had settled after leaving the Underground. Jack had wanted to go somewhere where there were no tunnels, where it was never cold or dank. And Martin had willingly followed. From there they had traveled the world.

He gazed around the Park, now mantled in afternoon light, and enjoyed the fresh spring leaves and flowers. As the afternoon wore on, he remembered that there was someone he still had to see, someone he still had to tell about Jack. It was a good day to talk of the dead, he thought, staring at the burgeoning life around him. He headed out of the park, hands deep in the pockets of his old military fatigues. It was a long walk to the towering office building on Sixth Avenue, but Martin enjoyed it — enjoyed the fact that he *could* walk, that his body, despite its fresh gouges and sensitive scars was fully functional. In spite of his despondency, he could still relish life — such as it was now.

He perused the names in the lobby, and had no trouble finding the one he was looking for filed under a prestigious architectural firm housed in the penthouse offices.

When he'd first returned to New York three months before, he'd sent a note through a helper to his friend's old home, to his father, Stanley Kosmerik. The helper had returned, graphically describing the old man's hurt and anger about his son's abandonment and change of name as he'd moved up in the business world. Martin still wasn't used to this new name.

Elliot Burch, he read, shaking his head and wondering if he'd pulled it off a soap opera. Jack would've gotten a kick out of that. He and Martin had had to invent their backgrounds after leaving the Underground, backgrounds that would withstand the scrutiny of the CIA and DEA. The young Stanley "Stosh" Kosmerik had a perfectly acceptable, if humble, background, yet felt the need to invent a better one. That was Stosh.

Martin walked into an express elevator that would take him to the eightieth floor. Several expensively dressed executives stepped in with him. He ignored their quizzical looks as they rode in silence together. No doubt, they thought him a messenger or mailboy, but their thoughts mattered little to him. When the elevator opened, he walked boldly ahead of them to the luxurious work station that guarded the entrance of Stosh's — or rather, *Elliot's* office suite.

"Would you please tell Mr. Burch that Martin Castillo is here to see him," he said softly to the woman behind the counter.

She was an attractive brunette and expensively dressed, in her thirties, Martin thought. She raked him with a cold stare and didn't even ask if he had an appointment. It was her job to be completely familiar with all of Mr. Burch's appointments, and she was well aware that she had never heard of any Castillo —

and certainly none that looked like *this*.

Martin endured her cold eyed scrutiny, fully conscious of the appearance he presented. His short sleeved black tee shirt, drab olive vest, and army fatigue pants were faded and worn. His black hair hung in a long, thick ponytail to the middle of his back. And his face — his face had really taken a beating at Mai Sa. He had never considered himself handsome, but he now sported an angry diagonal scar across his right cheek, and a triangular chunk of his left cheek was missing and still raw looking. The shallow vestiges of burns pock-marked his skin. Even though clean-shaven, he looked exactly like the kind of person you wouldn't want to bump into in a dark alley. He wasn't even sure if *Elliot* would recognize him.

"I'm sorry," the woman said crisply, in a tone that assured him she wasn't sorry at all, "but Mr. Burch's appointment calendar is completely full." She handed him a card. "If you'll call tomorrow, we'll see if someone else can help you." She looked past him at the executives, ready to address them now that she'd dismissed the interloper.

But Martin didn't move or take the card, he merely clasped his hands in front of him.

"You will tell Mr. Burch Martin Castillo is here," he insisted quietly, fixing the woman with an icy stare. "He'll see me."

The woman saw something in those black eyes that made her back down. Perhaps it was the shades of Mai Sa, or just a hint of the emptiness that now encompassed Martin's soul. He didn't know — nor did he care. Taking a step back, she punched a number into her phone and murmured into the mouthpiece.

Seconds later, her boss bolted into the reception area to the bald shock of the guardian of his gate, and the waiting executives. He grabbed Martin's hand in both of his, shaking it heartily, grinning like a kid.

"Listen, Mary," he said off-handedly to the surprised woman, never taking his eyes off Martin, "I just finished negotiating with Tyler. Take him to Henry's office, talk nice to him and get him to sign everything. What's left for today?"

"Your four o'clock is here," she murmured indicating the cadre of suits that had ridden up with Castillo. "Reed Incorporated about that Park Avenue building—"

"Barbara can handle them," Burch said quickly. "She'll have them eating out of her hand in ten minutes. Call her and make the switch. Cancel my five o'clock. Hold all my calls. *All* of them. I'll be staying in the suite." He fixed her with serious look. "And don't bug me about *anything*. Understand, Mary?"

"Uh, yes, sir," she said hesitantly, unable to pull her eyes from the incongruous picture of her boss clutching the hand of what had to be a street person as he led Castillo back towards his office suite.

"No *exceptions*, Mary," he warned one more time as the doors closed behind them.



"I can't believe you're here," the architect breathed when they were behind the privacy of the wide mahogany doors. "I was afraid you were *dead*." He finally released Martin's hand, grinning foolishly as he realized how odd he must've seemed to the people in his lobby. "Come in, sit down, get comfortable." He waved Martin to a plush beige couch and carried over a silver coffee service with delicate cups of Lenox china on it. He poured hot, richly aromatic coffee from the silver pot. "Still like it black?"

Martin nodded, amused at Elliot's almost frantic graciousness. The tall, handsome man poured himself some coffee, then produced two Waterford cordial glasses and filled them with a heady courvoisier, placing one beside Martin's cup. Elliot's suit was a stunning dove gray and fit him perfectly. Martin marveled to himself at the change in the young architect. The last time they'd spent time together, the younger man was still in college.

"It's good to see you, Stosh," Castillo said softly.

The architect smiled warmly. "Stosh doesn't exist anymore, Martin. Even though I have fond memories of the time he spent with you and Jack — the rest of it, I'd rather forget. So, please, call me Elliot. It won't take long to get used to."

Castillo nodded. "Elliot. It's good to see you."

"I know about Jack, if that's why you're here," Burch said gently, as the Latino tasted the coffee. "Dad was officially notified right after it happened. We were his only living relatives, and, as Jack's uncle, Dad was next of kin. They wouldn't give us any details, said it was all classified, but they said he died in the line of duty, working with the CIA. I was surprised at how bad Dad took it — it's not like he and Jack were ever close — but he was pretty upset. He was even willing to discuss it with me, and we don't communicate much these days."

Elliot paused, then smiled selfconsciously. "I inquired about you, but never got a response. You and Jack were inseparable, so I could only think you'd been killed, too. As time passed and I didn't hear from you, I knew that had to be why. Having you show up *here* of all places — it's like seeing a ghost! What happened?"

Martin filled him in briefly, telling Elliot about their operation, how they planned to put the drug smuggler General Lao Li out of business, then how they'd been betrayed; by whom he didn't know. He talked about seeing Jack hit, holding him until he passed out or died, Martin wasn't sure. Then Martin had passed out himself, waking much later in a Bangkok hospital.

The first words he'd uttered had been about Jack.

The CIA rep, Reese, was there, waiting like a vulture with the bad news — about Jack — and May Ying.

Even now it was hard for him to believe that had happened over five months ago. The memories were as raw as yesterday.

"That must've been where you got all this?" Elliot asked, touching Martin's face gently.

Castillo nodded.

"We can get that fixed," Elliot assured him casually, which only made Martin smile. With Burch's perfect

looks, he would worry about that. The scars the Cuban needed fixing couldn't be seen so easily.

Castillo was still trying to adjust to Elliot's warmth. He'd known the younger man would see him simply because of the past they shared, but his undisguised pleasure at Martin's arrival was a surprise.

Jack, Martin, and Stosh had grown up in this city together, even though Jack and Martin had lived Below and Stosh Above. Stosh had never known where his cousin Jack and his friend Martin lived, but he had never pried, accepting Jack's vagaries over the years. The young man had probably thought they lived on the streets and didn't push them about it so as not to hurt their pride. Stosh's own background was close enough to poverty for him to understand that.

Stosh had been their most interesting connection to the strange world of Above. He'd always been a vibrant, energetic go-getter, who'd known from the start that he was destined for Greater Things. He somehow managed to always have enough money to get into places he had no business being and loved dragging Martin and Jack with him.

Martin could still remember how Stosh somehow produced false I.D.'s for the three of them that got them into some of the most interesting — and dangerous — bars in the city, gay and straight. That was no mean feat considering Stosh was a year or two younger than Martin with the face of a cherub. There'd been more than one night and more than one bar in which that fine face and body had nearly gotten them all killed.

Martin suddenly found it difficult to look into Elliot's intense blue eyes, so stared instead out of the massive windows onto the cityscape. It was odd for a Tunnel Dweller to look at New York from up high. The tops of the skyscrapers glittered in the bright spring afternoon like polished metal sculptures. He sought and found the beautiful Chrysler building, his favorite New York landmark. His black eyes fastened on it, wanting to block out all thoughts of the lush green beauty of the mountains of Thailand, where there were no buildings like these.

*I am not resigned to the shutting away of
loving hearts in the hard ground....
Gently they go, the beautiful, the tender, the
kind;
I know. But I do not approve. And I am not
resigned.*
— Edna St. Vincent Millay — Dirge Without Music



"Do you remember the night I turned twenty-one?" Elliot said softly, pulling Castillo's attention back.

Martin smiled in spite of his melancholy. "How could I forget? We barely survived it."

"Jack insisted we had to hit every leather bar in the city," Elliot reminded him.

"He used to do that just to aggravate me," Martin recalled grimly. "He knew I hated those places."

"You hated them, but I loved 'em. He was indulging my dark side."

"You barely looked seventeen, never mind twenty one," Martin murmured.

"And every chrome-studded, leather-clad testosterone case wanted a piece of me." Elliot grinned and shook his head as if he couldn't believe he'd ever been so reckless.

"But first they had to get through me and Jack." Martin smiled sadly, trying to remember why he'd ever agreed to such lunacy, such dangerous youthful foolishness.

"Not exactly," Elliot corrected the Hispanic. "They just had to get through you."

Martin glanced at the young man, confused.

"Jack set it all up just to see how far he could push you. He never really admitted that to me, but I knew what was going on. He got the biggest kick out of seeing you lose your cool."

"Well, I certainly did that night," Martin agreed, chagrined.

"Was it the fourth bar, or the fifth? I'd lost count. Jack and I were three sheets to the wind, anyway. I still remember the place — *The Chained Eagle*. We weren't there fifteen minutes before some six foot four Neanderthal tried to haul me away bodily. Not that that was unusual! It had happened in every other bar as well, but you'd always managed to diffuse the situation before. You'd throw the guy that *look*, say a few words in that quiet way of yours, and they'd give up and leave. Until this time —"

Martin shrugged. "It was late. I was tired of the game. I'd had enough."

"And to be fair, the biker did swing first — not that he connected — or the next guy — or the next." Elliot grinned.

Martin looked away. He hated when people glorified violence, especially his own.

"You must've taken out fifteen leatherettes before the other patrons got the message. But you never moved from the spot you started in. Hell, you barely worked up a sweat! Yet, the bodies were stacked at your feet like cord wood. And every man in the place still standing was in love with you."

"You exaggerate," Martin insisted. "It was only twelve."

The young architect laughed. "Jack's eyes were *gleaming* as we watched you and protected your back, but we never had to raise a hand. When the last body thudded at your feet, Jack turned to me and whispered 'Happy birthday, cuz.'"

Martin shook his head. "I was furious with both of you, but especially with Jack. We had a terrible argument about it after we left you."

Elliot snorted. "You mean, you got sullen and Jack teased you until you blew up."

Martin's mouth turned up wryly. "Something like that. You're right. He loved getting a rise out of me."

"Either that — or he loved making up with you later. I'd have given anything to have been a fly on the wall that night, when you finally forgave him. It

must've been glorious!"

Martin's skin darkened in a blush. "I seem to remember the gentleman you went home with that night was glorious enough."

"Yeah, well —" It was Elliot's turn to look away. "He was just a poor substitute, Marty."

Yes, Martin imagined anyone else would've been a poor substitute for Jack. Elliot had loved Jack. Castillo thought they would've been lovers in spite of their blood ties if it hadn't been for him. Jack would sometimes tease Martin about Elliot's good looks, his long legs, his high ass, and perfect face. Martin never could understand why Jack didn't leave him for the younger man. Even their temperaments were more compatible — Elliot was as fun-loving as Jack was. Martin never considered himself very attractive, had a bad habit of internalizing everything and never could completely relax. Whenever he asked why Jack stayed with him, his lover would just laugh and hug him.

What he wouldn't give to have Jack aggravate him now, drag him to the worst bars in the city, torment him into a raging fury. He sighed, the memories growing heavy.

His expression must've changed, because Elliot leaned forward, his face full of sympathy. "You loved Jack so much," he said softly. "It must've nearly destroyed you to see his death."

The weight of those caring words crushed Castillo. He paled and sat back, quickly downing the potent liquor in a swallow.

Taking a deep breath, he decided to tell Elliot about May Ying, and what she had meant to his relationship with Jack.

"I... did love Jack, but —" he looked into Elliot's china blue eyes, "we were no longer lovers when he died. We hadn't been for more than two years. After we left the States, we started to drift apart. Our work — our philosophies — sometimes we'd be physically separated for months at a time. We grew older. And — I met a woman named May Ying. She and I fell in love. We married. Jack was my best man."

Elliot seemed astounded. He had known from the beginning about Jack and Martin's youthful love, and, flagrantly bisexual himself, had been the only person the two lovers knew whom they could be open with.

"Jack and I still cared about each other," Martin continued. "There was so much between us — but I wanted to make a commitment to May Ying — so, Jack let me go. We were still friends. We still worked together." *I still loved him*, Martin thought.

"Is your wife here with you in New York?" Elliot asked quietly.

Martin shook his head and swallowed. "She was killed the same day Jack was. My cover was blown. My enemies grenaded our home. I lost — everything. Wife. Lover. Home. Job. I was two months in a Bangkok hospital before they could ship me back here. I've been recuperating three months in New York."

Elliot looked stricken. "She must've been a wonderful woman. Did she *know* about you — and Jack?"

"She knew everything. She understood and accepted it, but when I realized I was in love with her,

that I wanted to marry her — I knew I had to give Jack up as a lover. He agreed. She and I were married for two years. She *was* a wonderful woman."

There was a long silence. Martin had spent the last three months talking about May Ying to his friends Below. That was not why he'd come here.

"You never stopped loving him," Elliot said simply.

Martin shook his head.

"It must've pulled you apart, trying to please them both."

The darker man moistened his lips. It had been a wonderful, terrible time for him. Wonderful when he was with either of them. Terrible when he had to choose.

"And Jack? He still loved you," Elliot said gently.

Martin inclined his head. As he had held Jack in his arms, Gretsky's last words had been of his undying love for Martin, for the wonder their life had been together.

These were all the things he had not been able to speak of Below. There, everyone wanted to know of May Ying, to comfort him for the loss of his beloved wife, and he had been grateful to be able to speak of that terrible loss freely. But only to Vincent could he speak of Jack, without seeing heads turn away, eyes casting downward. But it wasn't enough. He ached to remember Jack, to speak of his guilt over the loss of his first, and for many years, his only lover.

Elliot watched him, as he thought of these difficult things, but did not murmur empty phrases of condolence. So, finally Martin began to speak, haltingly, with long pauses, sometimes broken-voiced, of his feelings.

Elliot was the one person Martin knew who could completely understand his feelings for Jack and May Ying both. To most of the world, Jack had *only* been a friend. To his family Below, he'd been a dark influence that had corrupted Martin's life. Only Elliot knew and appreciated the shining, powerful love that had been between the two men.

As Martin spoke, he was surprised to feel tears forming for the first time since the ambush. The tears fell now for Jack, for May Ying, for his injuries, his anguish, for the blackness that enveloped him now that he was without the two people he loved most. Here he could finally yield to his heartfelt grief — grief he'd been carrying like a cold stone inside him all these months.

But finally the weeping threatened to consume him, yet the quiet tears did nothing to wash away the terrible anger that sat so close to the surface of his soul. He sucked in a harsh breath, needing to regain his control, but it eluded him as despair smothered his heart.

Elliot moved slowly over to the couch, and gently surrounded Martin with his long, strong arms. He held the Latin, pressing his cheek against his forehead, rocking him like a child, assuring him it was all right, that it would be all right, that Jack understood.

"Come on, Marty," Elliot's silken baritone purred, as he rubbed the other man's back, "let it out. You've been holding it in for so long. And you're not alone."

Not anymore. I'm here. I'm here."

Martin pulled Elliot tight against him, clutching his expensive suit jacket, smelling his familiar masculine scent, while fighting to rein in his rampaging emotions.

The young architect comforted him for a long time, but after awhile, something about the friendly caress changed. Martin sensed a subtle shifting in Elliot's body, in his arms, the tone of his voice, the way he stroked Castillo's long hair. His hands slowly moved over Martin's shoulders and back — then Burch's breath suddenly caught in his throat. Martin felt him tremble.

The DEA agent never could remember who'd done what to whom first. Perhaps Elliot had tipped Castillo's chin up, or maybe the Cuban had pulled the younger man's head down. He couldn't recall. But suddenly he and Elliot were locked in a fierce, hungry kiss.

It was a gift, that kiss, a tiny ray of hope in all the darkness of his life, and Martin grabbed it as if it was a life raft in a storm-tossed sea. Elliot's lips on his were like a cool breeze blowing across his smoldering heart, fanning it into an inferno of anger and frustration. His hand moved of its own accord and dug into Elliot's stylishly long hair, yanking the handsome head back brutally. Martin surged forward, capturing the younger man's full mouth, his kiss now hot and angry. Elliot yielded instantly, sinking back onto the couch, moaning.

When Castillo finally realized what he was doing, he pulled away, staring into Elliot's startlingly blue eyes, shocked at the raw desire he saw there.

"Did you think only Jack could want you, Martin?" the young architect whispered huskily. "Did you have no idea how I felt? How I envied him all those years? How I wanted you for myself? You were the only one my talent couldn't win for me. The one man money couldn't buy."

"You wanted *me*?" Martin whispered, his throat constricting around the words. "I thought —"

"You thought I wanted Jack," Elliot said, smiling. "I know. We let you think that, so you wouldn't be embarrassed. If you'd known, you would've never been comfortable around me — and I couldn't bear the thought of not even *seeing* you — even if I couldn't have you."

"Jack *knew*?"

"And teased me unmercifully for years. Did you never notice my almost *obsessive* interest in slight, dark men?"

"I thought — Jack was slight, and dark."

"All poor substitutes — for you," Elliot assured him, smiling gently. "I never wanted Jack. And don't think it didn't irk him. You're the one I wanted then. The one I *still* want."

Martin tried to pull away, confused. His cock was aching hard, but he didn't love this man. He liked Elliot, had always cared about him but —

"I know you don't love me," Elliot said quickly, sensing his hesitation. "That doesn't matter. I never expected that from you. Right now you need someone to love. You need someone to love *you*." He smiled, touching Castillo's ravaged cheek tenderly. "Let it be

me, Martin. Please, let it be me. When you leave, at least I'll have these memories. And we'll be friends, always."

The Cuban's mind whirled with confusion, anger, sorrow and lust. His soul felt torn by an overload of emotions he was ill-equipped to handle. He wasn't prepared for this kind of surprise. For once in his life, he had no idea what to do.

He sat on the couch, his hands balled into tight fists, unable to move, to think, to do anything but *feel*. His black eyes fastened on Burch's blue ones.

"Marty, it's okay," Elliot said soothingly. "It's time to let someone else take care of you, just for awhile. You've carried all this weight alone long enough." He touched Martin's face, then slid his hand around the Latino's neck. "Let me carry it for you. I'm strong. I can handle it. And I care about you so much. Let me love you for awhile. I promise, it'll help." He moved slowly, as if a quick action might spook Castillo, and gently, lovingly, touched his mouth to the darker man's.

It was more than Martin could resist. Waves of sorrow and loneliness enveloped him. He craved the connection with another living being, needing it like air.

His hesitation vanished. Without a word he gave in to his rank desire, desire fueled with bitterness and despair. He was frantic with need, his passion rough and course — but Elliot loved it. He was no frightened virgin, but an experienced man, delighted by Martin's strength, the power of his dark need.

Castillo stripped Elliot frantically, wanting him nude, hungering to feel his smooth skin, his youthful, living body. He nearly choked the architect with his own tie, and popped most of the buttons off his expensive shirt in his haste. And the rougher he got, the more excited Elliot grew.

The younger man methodically pulled the drab olive vest off Castillo's shoulders, then tugged off the black tee. His large, smooth hands slid down Castillo's torso to the waistband of his army fatigues, unbuttoning them, sliding down the heavy zipper. The slight-built man lifted his hips cooperatively so Elliot could yank the pants over the slim hips, only to have them get caught around Martin's heavy army boots. It took both of them to remove the boots and the tangle of clothes.

The young architect removed his own pants quickly just as Martin finished freeing himself and reached for him. Digging a strong hand in Elliot's soft, brown hair, he pulled the architect's head down onto his swollen cock as if he owned him. The young man took the angry flesh into his mouth eagerly, sighing delightedly, and sucked Martin with a skill that surprised him. Castillo's arms trembled as he held Elliot's head with both hands, as though he might escape.

Even as he devoured Martin's shaft, Burch's hands explored his lover's body, as though he needed to memorize every inch. The Latino shivered under the confident touch, yielding to the sensations wracking his body and devastating his brain.

Castillo came explosively, nearly screaming before he remembered where he was and choked on the sound. He clenched his hands tight in Elliot's hair,

holding his head in place, making him swallow every drop.

Burch gasped with passion, clawing at Castillo's hips as he drank down the bitter semen like it was everything he ever wanted. Finally, Martin released him and Elliot slowly pulled away, kissing the still erect organ lovingly. Martin just stared at him blankly. He couldn't believe what they'd just done.

"You need more than that," Elliot whispered huskily, licking his lips.

The architect stood gracefully and moved to his desk. Castillo watched him as though he'd never seen him before. He was truly beautiful, the ex-agent realized, all long-limbed and sleek muscles. Elliot strolled in front of the wall of windows unselfconsciously and reached into his desk.

Martin glanced down at himself, at the road map of raw scars crisscrossing his body and wondered what he was doing here, what was happening to him.

Suddenly, Burch was before him, handing him a small tube. The startled Hispanic's eyes moved to the familiar lubricant, then back to the executive desk.

"Don't ask," Elliot murmured, grinning, and took the darker man's hand, pulling him off the couch onto the plush rug. The lanky architect rolled onto his stomach on the carpet, pulling his knees under him so his muscular ass lifted enticingly.

Castillo felt himself lose all reason, as he automatically slathered lubricant on his still hardened cock and then on Elliot's dark opening. He eased onto Elliot's back, pulling his long black hair free from its elastic, letting it fall around his face like a curtain. When he leaned over the younger man, the thick hair flowed over Elliot's muscled shoulders. Positioning himself against Burch's anus, he entered him forcefully, with a sudden, strong move.

Burch moaned loudly, "Yes, yes," as his body swallowed Castillo's cock. The young man pushed back against the Latin, until Martin was completely sheathed in his tight orifice. Burch's passion was frightening in its intensity, but still no match for Castillo's, whose need was fueled by pain and loss.

Martin was overwhelmed by the feel of his lover's tight ass; grasping Burch's slim hips, he fucked him hard, pulling him back onto his engorged cock again and again. The younger man's buttocks tightened, clamping down around Castillo as Elliot made soft sounds of pleasure. Martin bit his lover's back and shoulders savagely, and the tall man cried out, writhing, trying to escape Martin's punishing teeth. But even as Castillo hurt him, Burch kept whispering, "Yes, yes," and growing more excited.

It would take Martin a long time to come this second time, but that didn't concern him as he fucked Elliot. Everything he did only heightened the handsome man's desire.

They changed positions three or four times in the course of that long afternoon and finally ended up in a huge recliner. Martin was on his back, Elliot on his knees over Martin's groin, his muscular thighs lifting and dropping his ass over the dusky cock in a tireless rhythm. They were both exhausted, drenched in sweat, their eyes glazed in passion.

Martin watched his attractive lover with a dreamy expression, as though none of this was or could be real. Elliot's head was thrown back, his full, pouting lips open as he gasped for air. When Castillo felt his body finally climbing towards the peak, he moistened his palms with saliva, and enveloped Elliot's rigid, wine red cock in a tight grip.

Burch faltered and gasped, then resumed his stroke as Martin's hands matched it, teasing the hot, throbbing organ. Elliot tossed his head helplessly, as he clutched Martin's wrists, begging, "Please! Please!"

"Soon," Martin whispered. It was the only thing he'd been able to say since that first kiss. "Soon."

Castillo paid close attention to Elliot's body and didn't allow his own release till he felt Burch's cock swelling in his hands. They came together, so powerfully the Cuban called out and Elliot groaned and nearly fainted, collapsing against the supine man.

They were asleep in seconds and woke hours later, still in the chair, in each others' arms, Elliot blanketing Martin's smaller body. The city outside their window was alive with jeweled lights, a work of art, painted, it seemed, just for them.

Elliot stared into Martin's ice-black eyes and murmured, "That's what I call *glorious*."

But Martin could only blush in confusion and embarrassment.



Elliot had a large spa in the suite and they soaked in it for a long time, but they didn't talk much. Martin knew he should have felt ashamed at the coarse, brutal way he'd treated the young architect, but he couldn't. Not when Elliot was so obviously delighted by it.

Afterwards, Burch ordered an expensive, elaborate meal from *Elaine's*. At first, Martin thought that was someone he knew, until Elliot explained it was one of New York's finest restaurants. They ate nude on the carpet in front of the windows.

When they finished, the architect sat back, his legs crossed tailor fashion. "That was *excellent*," he declared, wiping his mouth on a linen napkin. He smiled as Martin's black eyes fastened on him. "What is it? Anything wrong?"

The Latino said nothing, merely slid onto his knees and crawled on all fours, cat-like, to where Elliot sat.

"What's the matter, Martin?" Elliot asked softly. "Didn't you get enough to eat? You can't still be hungry?"

Martin's hands took Elliot's shoulders in a gentle grip as his lips lightly touched the side of Burch's face, the corner of his eye.

"What can I give you," Elliot murmured huskily as Castillo kissed his cheek, then the edge of his mouth, "that you haven't had?"

"Dessert," Martin sighed, pressing his lips to Burch's, the tip of his tongue rimming his lover's full, lower lip.

When Burch's tongue touched Castillo's, the Latin's

mouth enveloped the younger man's, his tongue moving forcefully inside, invading the architect's mouth, making him groan and shudder. Gently, Martin pushed his shoulders back as they kissed, until Elliot was supine on the rug, Castillo hovering over him.

Burch reached up to bury his hand in the long black hair, but Martin captured that wrist, then the other, in a strong grip, pinning Elliot's hands to the carpet. The young man moaned, his helpless hands clenching into fists. Martin's mouth slid down the brunet's throat, leaving a slick trail of tender bites and kisses.

"Martin! Let me go," Elliot begged, writhing. "Let me love you."

"No," Castillo breathed huskily. "My turn, lover."

The young man shivered. "You don't know how long I've waited to hear you call me that," he whispered, just as Martin fastened his mouth onto one hard, brown nipple. Elliot arched, struggling futilely to free his hands as Martin licked, sucked and nibbled the sensitive aureole.

Burch's breathing dissolved into a harsh panting and finally Martin eased away from the tender nipple, only to devote the same attention to the other. Finally, his lips made their slow way down Elliot's long torso. His tongue teased his flat naval and inscribed lazy circles over his slim hips. His teeth gently nibbled the long muscles of Elliot's thighs. Burch's cock danced in the air, swollen and yearning for Martin's touch.

"No wonder Jack liked to aggravate you," Burch gasped.

Castillo looked at him questioningly.

Elliot declared, "You *deserved* it!"

The darker man laughed lightly and kissed the architect's furred scrotum, making him buck. He encircled the angry glans with his slick tongue and watched Burch thrash and gasp for air, his blue eyes searching Castillo's face, begging for mercy.

When Martin thought his lover couldn't endure another second, he finally enveloped the sturdy, hot cock in his mouth, swallowing it as deep as he could. The loud moan that erupted from Elliot was all the reward Martin needed as he began to slowly suck his lover into a delightful frenzy.

When he finally freed Elliot's hands, all the younger man could do was wrap his hands in Castillo's luxurious hair and hold on. Martin's long fingers played with Elliot's scrotum, stroked his anus, and teased the heavy shaft of his cock, which only heightened the pleasure Martin's mouth was giving him.

He tormented Elliot unmercifully for a long time with his lips, his tongue, his teeth until the younger man was nearly insane, begging and pleading for release, an end to the wonderful torture. Martin finally granted the architect's wish, ending it by swallowing the hot, bitter jets that splashed his throat, making Elliot a part of him forever.

They lay together in blissful exhaustion for a while, then the handsome New Yorker stood and pulled Martin to his feet, leading him through a heavy door, surprising him with an elegantly furnished bedroom

complete with a richly clothed king size bed.

"This has been here all along?" Martin asked with a surprised smile.

Elliot nodded. "I wouldn't dream of interrupting that fierce passion with such a mundane suggestion as going to *bed*. You know, I used to wonder if you were always so intense."

Martin's eyes glittered darkly. "You'll see."

"I certainly hope so," Elliot purred as he pulled Martin onto the bed with him.

It was an endless night for Martin as Elliot's passion matched his own. And every time he came, every time he arched, clutching the handsome, flawless body to his own lean, battered one, he felt some of his pain and bitterness purged away.

Finally dawn colored the sky a familiar hazy gray and Martin lay spent and exhausted in Elliot's arms, while the architect traced the raw scars that crisscrossed his body.

"We can fix *all* this," Elliot murmured lovingly, as he lightly rimmed the angry tissue with a gentle fingertip. "I can afford it, Martin. We'll take them all away — fix every one."

Martin touched Elliot's mouth with his own just before sleep took him. "You already have," he murmured and fell into a dreamless slumber.

*"...don't love me now, I am dead
I am a saint, turn down your bed
I have no heart," that's what you said
— Joni Mitchell — The Gallery*



He woke late in the day, encased in a soft comforter and down pillows. The grayness that passed for daylight in New York streamed into the windows. There was a wheeled tray by the bed with a silver tea service on it. He touched the pot and yanked his hand away. Still hot. Lifting a silver dome, he inhaled the hot and spicy scent of *Buddha's Delight* — one of his favorite dishes. He shook his head, amazed that Elliot had remembered. A spray of white cymbidium orchids sat in a silver bud vase. With Elliot, everything always had to be perfect.

He gathered the quilt around himself like a buffalo robe and poured himself some tea. Then he found the note.

"*Good afternoon,*" it read in Burch's spidery scrawl. "*Hope you like your lunch. I had it sent over from Hong Fat's in Chinatown. Told him who it was for, and the old man was quite annoyed you hadn't been by to see him in person. Told him it might be arranged — in a few days. I'm planning on keeping you a prisoner, at least for a while. You can't argue, either. I've got your clothes!*"

Martin suddenly recalled leaving all his worldly goods scattered over the rug and couch in Elliot's office. He had a sharp mental image of Mary coming in with the morning mail, and stumbling into a blizzard

of shirts, shoes, underwear. Mortified, he couldn't help but grin.

"Speaking of clothes," the note continued, "we've got to do something about your wardrobe, Martin! But right now, just lay back, rest up, eat lunch — and wait for me. I'll be free in a few hours. And whatever you do, don't leave this room! The only exit is through the office and I've got meetings all day. I'd lose my concentration if you came sauntering through in all your glory. God knows it's hard enough for me to keep my mind on work just knowing what's on the other side of this door!"

"If you need to let anyone know of your whereabouts, use the enclosed paper and envelope. Just address it and slide it under the door. Yours, Elliot."

No questions asked, Martin knew. He was grateful for the suggestion. Vincent and Father would be worried sick about him, since he rarely stayed away all night. He'd send the note to one of the helpers who could tap a message through on the pipes.

Don't wait up for me, he imagined himself writing. *I've fallen up the rabbit hole into a bizarre wonderland where everything is new. Beautiful. Perfect.*

In the end, Martin only jotted a vague message, reassuring the people Below he just needed time to himself, that he'd be home in a few days. That felt strange to write, but he was momentarily at Elliot's mercy. It was an odd feeling, and weirdly pleasant. He'd always felt so responsible, all his life — for his

mother, for Jack, for May Ying. He'd never known anyone strong enough to take care of *him*. Even with Jack, it had always been Martin who had guided them to maturity, kept them on the right path. It felt rather heady to suddenly let someone else worry about all the mundane things.

He crouched by the door, sliding the note under it, and paused to listen in on Elliot's meeting.

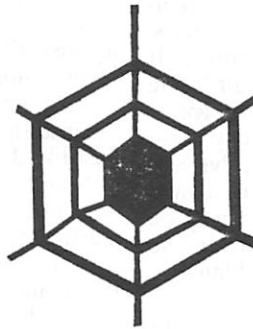
The young architect was in fine form, making it seem easy, wheeling and dealing with these heavy-weight executives even after a sleepless night of intense, powerful sex.

What was it Jack always said about Stosh? "If only he'd turn that wondrous mind to good." Of course, with Gretsky, that usually meant *Jack's* good.

Martin smiled and climbed back into bed, pulling the comforter up over his nudity and cradling the tea cup in his hand. He reached for an elegant pair of ebony chopsticks and attacked his meal. For the first time in months, he felt ravenous.

He wondered if he could get used to being a kept man.

*There's a sorrow in his eyes
Like the angel made of tin
What will happen if I try
To place another heart in him*
— Joni Mitchell — Tin Angel



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A LITTLE HELP FROM A FRIEND

*You keep your distance with a system of touch
And gentle persuasion
I'm lost in admiration. Could I need you this
much?*

— Head over Heels — Tears for Fears

Elliot finally sauntered in around five thirty, looking impossibly pleased with himself.

"So, what do I have to do to get my clothes back?" Martin asked, working hard to suppress a smile as he stretched luxuriously under Elliot's lustful gaze.

Burch grinned shamelessly. "Just your asking takes my breath away. You know, this is a hermetically sealed universe. You really don't need clothes."

"Elliot," Martin said with amused patience, "you won't be here forever. Someday, you'll have your own building, a more elaborate suite. Will you just leave me here for the next occupant? No doubt he'll be more discriminating in his choice of partners."

"Not if he's smart," Elliot retorted. "I've already taken care of your clothes, just relax. But you can forget those fatigues, they're too out of style. I had Mary pick up some things for you —"

"Mary?" Martin didn't try to hide his astonishment.

"That woman's my right arm. I'd be lost without her. And I pay her plenty to save my butt and keep things quiet. I think what she's had brought up for you will suit you a helluva lot better than that tiresome government surplus."

"Elliot —" Martin said warningly.

"Martin," Burch warned back. "How much compensation did you get from Uncle Sam for your injuries, for the pain you suffered in service to our country? It looks to me like they did the *minimum* repair." He sat on the edge of the bed. "Look, *all* I've got is money. It means a *lot* to me to do things for you, to be able to fulfill at least a few of the fantasies I've had about you for all these years. *Indulge* me." He leaned over the supine Latino and kissed him sensuously on the mouth. "The best things in life are free, lover," he murmured in a seductive baritone, "but everything else costs."

Martin returned the kiss and was amazed to feel his penis stirring. He wondered if Elliot was drugging the tea.

"Seriously," Burch said, stretching out beside Castillo, "when I started succeeding at this game I always imagined I'd be able to use some of my obscene salary to help you and Jack out. I've never forgotten the fun we had when we were kids, or the many times you two saved my behind — sometimes literally. I figured I'd set you both up in business, in Miami if you wanted, just to pay back a little of what you both had done for me. Now, Jack's gone. So let me do this for you, Marty. Just for awhile. Let me take care of you. It'll

be painless, I promise."

Martin enveloped the taller man in his arms then kissed him hard, for his kindness, his caring, his passion and for the outlet he was offering Martin to release some of his pain. He tugged at Elliot's tie.

"Slow down, lover," Elliot begged, gasping, pulling away slightly. "Mary does have her limits and one of them is sewing. You should've seen her face when she found all the buttons had been pulled off yesterday's shirt!"

They both laughed as they carefully stripped the architect of his expensive clothes until he was as nude as Martin. Soon, Castillo was straddling the tall man as Elliot lifted his ass, sighing happily as Martin entered him again.

"Oh, lover," Burch breathed, "I could barely *wait* till this day was over."

Martin surged into Elliot all hot passion and frantic need and the younger man met the push with his own as he swallowed Castillo's angry cock with his ass.

"Marty!" he cried out as Castillo leaned down to grasp Elliot's aching hard organ in a tight grip and began stroking.

Burch reached up as Castillo filled him and wrapped a hand in the sleek curtain of black hair that draped over him. It was a gesture so poignantly familiar, Martin forgot himself and moaned Jack's name. As soon as he did, he tensed and stopped moving. He was flooded with shame and regret.

"It's all right," Elliot said soothingly. "I *understand*. I only wish I could *be* Jack, if it would help. Don't stop, baby. Please, let me be Jack for you."

Martin squeezed his eyes shut at Elliot's loving words and hesitantly resumed his stroke, feeling confused and embarrassed. Yet, Elliot kept moving under him, and in so many ways, he was so much like Jack.

The next time Martin called Jack's name, he didn't pause, just closed his eyes and rested his forehead against Elliot's spine, letting his hair flow over his lover's shoulders. Jack had always loved that.

And like Jack, Elliot responded, rubbing his face against the fall of hair, sighing, "Yes, baby, oh yes." Just like Jack used to —

Soon Martin had trouble remembering where he was and who he was with as his lover urged him on. Castillo took the young man harder, deeper, pistoning into him frantically as if he could fuck the shades of death and loss away.

Finally, he came explosively, at the same time his lover did. The Hispanic felt hot semen flowing over his hand — then remembered with startling, ugly clarity, the last warm fluid of Jack's that had covered that hand. It had been blood. His heart's blood.

He started shaking, trying to hold back the memories, the frightening flashbacks. He called Jack's name, broken-voiced, and suddenly found himself enveloped in strong arms and held firmly, securely, until the trembling subsided and he came back to himself, back to New York — back to Elliot.

He started to apologize, but Elliot covered his mouth with a hand. "Sssh. Don't worry. It's fine. I'm here."

Martin shivered, unable to erase the powerful image of Jack's blood on his hands and arms, his own blood mingling with it — Jack struggling to tell Martin of his love — and Martin, typically, unable to say anything in return.

After awhile, he finally slept.

When he awoke, he and Burch lay in each other's arms and Martin started talking about Jack, about their life together and what it had meant to him. He talked for a long time.

When they made love again, it was slow and gentle and Martin never forgot even once who was with him.



"Will I be locked in here again today?" Castillo asked bemused, as he was kissed awake by his insatiable lover the next morning.

"If I had my way you'd spend the rest of your life in this room," Burch chided. "No. Today, I'm free. I cleared my calendar. Can't have you losing muscle tone from inactivity. I thought we might get out of here for awhile — go places. Do things. Walk. Talk."

"I'm not sure I can do all that anymore," Martin complained, wearily. "Where *are* my fatigues?" he called after Elliot who'd gone into the office.

"Probably in Staten Island by now," the younger man assured him, carrying in garment bags, boxes and shopping bags. He deposited them on the bed. "Isn't that where New York dumps its trash?"

Martin fixed the architect with a look, but Elliot was too busy pulling out new clothes to pay him any mind. He tossed a package in Martin's direction.

"Here. Fresh underwear. And I didn't do anything cute; just plain vanilla jockey shorts and white tees. I wish I could do *something* about your fashion sense. What do you think of this?" He held up a smartly cut, conservative black suit.

Castillo raised an appreciative eyebrow. "I like that."

"I know you better than you think," Burch warned him with a grin. He displayed several neat white shirts for Martin's approval. "And I remembered how you hate long sleeves. Take a look at this." He removed a slim black leather tie from a boutique box.

"Nice," Castillo granted.

"I didn't think the army boots would add much to the ensemble, so I've got a great pair of shoes that will. You'll look so smart, I won't be able to keep my hands off you."

Castillo looked at him sideways. "You mean I'll be in *more* danger *clothed*?"

Elliot was having such a good time, all Martin could do was get out of bed and shower, then don the clothes to please him. Soon, he stood before a full length mirror tightening the leather tie, trying to mask his amusement and failing. *Leather.*

Elliot stood behind him, gazing at his dapper visage. He lifted the dense, long hair. "You look like an Indian ready to renegotiate for Manhattan — and

cut a better deal!"

"An incongruous image," Martin agreed. "I've been thinking of cutting it. I'm a little old for it now. Besides — that was part of my undercover life in Southeast Asia — and that's over."

"I love your hair," Burch whispered. "I'll miss it, if you cut it."

"I'll leave it with you," Martin said.

"Ever consider a moustache?" Burch asked, running his knuckles over Castillo's already dense beard.

"Maybe. Short hair. Moustache. The change would go well — with this suit."

"Cut your hair tomorrow," Elliot asked. "Let me enjoy it for one more day."

Castillo reached back and touched Elliot's cheek. "Tomorrow, then. Today is yours."

"Martin, let me take you to a surgeon I know. I want him to look at your scars —"

"No," Castillo said firmly. "I'm not ready for that. A suit is one thing. My face, my body, that's another. I wasn't meant to be perfect."

Burch's eyes softened and he stroked Martin's hair. "But you already are, lover. Absolutely perfect. The rest is window dressing."

As if to prove his words, Elliot gently kissed the marks on Castillo's face and neck. Before long, Martin was shrugging out of the new suit and he and Elliot were back in the bed, Martin using his hair to tease Elliot into an insane frenzy, rubbing it over his body, wrapping it around his cock, his testicles, using it to torment and delight his lover.

I made a fire and watching it burn

Thought of your future

*With one foot in the past now just how long
will it last*

— Tears for Fears — Head over heels



They didn't leave the suite until almost noon. Martin shaved, but left the already dense growth over his upper lip. As they passed Mary she bid them both good afternoon as nicely as she could, as though Elliot always kept odd looking men prisoner in his office suite for days at a time.

"I imagine she has some interesting stories to tell," Martin said quietly as they descended in the elevator. The handsome young architect only smiled, Cheshire-like.

The day was long and invigorating as Martin discovered Elliot's Manhattan — a very different one than the typical Tunnel Dweller knew. He had to stop his lover from buying him everything in sight, like a kid in a candy shop with a pocket full of quarters. Yet, he enjoyed Burch's attentions, and he especially liked the feel of his new clothes. It helped him start thinking of himself in a new way.

Before this, he had always been part of a pair. Martin and his mother. Martin and Jack. Martin and

May Ying. Now he was just Martin. The somber suit fit him, like armor. It felt comfortable. Right. It would be odd in Miami — where everyone favored pastels.

That was when Martin knew he would return to the south, to the city Jack loved. He'd had enough of New York, and the double life he had to lead here. He would miss Vincent terribly, and even Father, but the person who'd grown up with them didn't exist anymore. He'd died in Mai Sa, with Jack and May Ying.

That's why he couldn't love Elliot now. No matter how kind, how good, how loving Elliot was. Martin knew suddenly there was a good chance he might never love anyone again. No. He wasn't meant for perfection.



*I know I am but summer to your heart,
And not the full four seasons of the year;
— Edna St. Vincent Millay — Sonnet XXVII*

He stayed with Elliot another whole day, allowing Burch to finish out his wardrobe and pick out some luggage.

"Can't have you packing these suits in a duffel bag, Castillo," Elliot growled, as they neatly folded the new clothes into an elegant black garment bag. "My barber's coming up at six tonight. You sure you want to do this?"

Martin nodded. His moustache was already dark and heavy. Cutting his hair would be the last break with his old life. Then he'd be able to say goodbye to Vincent and Father.



"I have one more gift," Elliot said quietly, as they lay in each others' arms later after their most recent bout of desperate lovemaking. This last time Martin had felt a tension, a sorrow in Elliot's body as their time together drew to a close.

"You've done too much already," Castillo protested.

"Not nearly enough," the younger man insisted fingering the gold chain around Castillo's neck and kissing his cheek. Elliot had surprised him with that this morning, insisting that *everyone* had to have at least *one* thing from Tiffany's. "I'd buy you the city if you'd let me. I settled for your plane ticket to Miami. First class, of course. That way you'll think of me all the way there. And I want you to have this." He reached over to his nightstand and pulled out a document.

"You said *one* gift," Castillo protested, but Elliot just waved his argument away as he handed him the paper. Martin looked at it curiously. "Elliot! This is a deed!"

"I've been holding onto this property for three years, hoping I could talk Dad into retiring down there. It's nothing fancy, just a middle class house in a nice location. Real estate values are depressed right now. I wouldn't gain anything by selling it. You'll be doing me a favor, taking this white elephant off my hands. And it would please me enormously if you'd take it and make it yours. I mean it, Martin. It'll buy you a little time while you decide what you're going to do with your career. At least, you won't have to worry about shelter."

Castillo shook his head. "I can't. This is too much—"

"Come on, Marty. Jack would want you to."

The Cuban's black eyes flashed angrily.

Burch shrugged apologetically. "Okay, that was dirty pool. Then do it just to please *me*. I want to know you'll be okay in Miami, that you'll have a refuge all your own. Please, take it."

Martin looked into his lover's eyes and realized how important this was to him. He sighed and capitulated.

Burch grinned foolishly. "Taxes are paid up through the end of the year. My barber can witness the transfer when he gets here. The papers are all drawn up and he's a notary!"

Martin tossed the deed on the nightstand and grabbed the architect in a crushing embrace, pulling the young man on top of him, wrapping his legs around Burch's longer ones and pinning his arms around his chest. "Do you always get your way?" he growled into the shell of his lover's ear.

Elliot's face fell as he touched Castillo's cheek lovingly. "Not always. Not on the — most important things." His voice cracked slightly and Martin hugged him fiercely, hating himself for not being able to love this man.

"You deserve so much more than I can give you," he whispered huskily.

Elliot just held him and said nothing, burying his face against Martin's neck.

"You have the keys to the Florida house?" Martin asked. Burch nodded. "Keep one. You'll visit me there." The architect nodded again, but Castillo knew he wouldn't.

There seemed to be nothing to say then, but still the Cuban kept the young man trapped against him. Slowly, he began to rub himself against his lover until he felt both their cocks stirring, growing. Martin shut his eyes; his organ was almost raw from over use and incredibly sensitive. He knew Elliot's had to be the same. He glanced at the clock at the same time Burch did. This would have to be the last time.

Martin's hands stroked the strong, lean back comfortably, as the architect's hands roved over his sides, his hair, his thighs. Elliot groaned as Martin touched his buttocks, and Castillo wondered how his lover could even walk after all the insane fucking they'd been doing. He looked into the architect's china blue eyes and saw his dark need — a mirror of Castillo's own. He sighed.

Impulsively, he reached for the lubricant and was pleased to find there was still some left. As Elliot

watched him a shadow passed over his face, but only for a second.

Martin knew the handsome man couldn't possibly endure another invasion. *But even so, you wouldn't refuse me*, he thought at his lover. Wordlessly, he placed the lubricant in the architect's hand, then released him, rolling over in the bed onto his stomach. He glanced at Elliot, who was staring mutely at the tube with an expression very reminiscent of Martin's own the first time he'd seen it.

"Elliot," Castillo said softly. The architect glanced at him guiltily. "You all right?"

The younger man shook his head but said nothing.

"Don't you... want me?" the darker man asked gently.

Burch opened his mouth then shut it. His eyes glinted for a moment, but he blinked and it passed. Finally, all he could say was, "Like air, Marty. Like air." He slid against Castillo and covered him with his body.

The Latino sighed at the comforting feeling as Elliot hugged him against his chest and rimmed his ear with his tongue. Martin slid his buttocks against Elliot's hard, sensitive cock and the architect jumped and moaned. Then the younger man grabbed a fistful of Martin's hair, pulling it aside so he could nibble the back of his neck. Castillo arched against the perfect body.

"How long has it been for you?" Elliot asked huskily.

"Years," murmured the Latin, with a bitter smile.

"Marty — you sure you want to do this?" The young man sounded hesitant.

"Yes."

Burch kissed Martin's shoulders and Castillo felt him handling the tube. He took a deep breath, using the mental disciplines he'd honed over the years to make his body pliant and relaxed. Elliot's hand stroked his perineum and anus and Castillo drew his knees up instinctively. Like the rest of him, Elliot's hands were perfect, big, strong, handsome hands. He had the touch of a magician.

The architect slid a finger into Castillo and the Latin moaned softly. He'd forgotten how pleasurable, how sensuous it could be to just yield to a lover. He gave himself up to Elliot's intrusion happily. When the architect slid the second finger into him, the pain made him gasp, but only for a second. Soon Elliot had him squirming, eager for more.

He looked over his shoulder at his lover's intent expression. He seemed so worried. Castillo licked his lips.

"Take me, lover," Martin whispered, his grit-edged voice deep and husky. "And make it last."

Elliot squeezed his eyes shut and shuddered as though the suggestion was more than he could handle. His hand slid out of Castillo at almost the same moment his glans kissed the dark opening.

Castillo felt as if his body wanted to reach for Elliot as the younger man gently penetrated him. Martin clutched the bed sheets and moaned into the mattress, completely helpless under the wonderful assault. Elliot moved carefully, cautiously, but Castillo wanted more. He thrust his ass up, trying to swallow his

lover's cock, but he moved too fast and was stabbed with pain. His breath caught with a gasp.

"So impatient," the architect scolded gently. "You're out of practice. Slow down." He eased himself farther into the tight orifice.

Castillo pulled his legs up higher, clutching the sheets, his arms and shoulders bowstring tight.

"Martin, don't," the younger man begged, kissing the back of his neck. "You've got to relax. You've got to let me in. Open up to me. Go easy."

Castillo took a deep breath and yielded, his body becoming almost limp and Burch slid into him completely with a moan. Soon, they were moving synchronously, smoothly, as though they'd always been meant to be lovers this way. Martin believed this would be the last time something like this might ever happened to him and he wanted every second of it burned into his memory. Who else would he ever trust the way he trusted Elliot? Who else would he ever care for this much?

Elliot breathed harshly, panting, losing himself in the fucking and Martin wanted that more than anything. The architect hugged the darker man to his chest, murmuring soft words Castillo couldn't make out, as he kissed the golden shoulders and neck, his lean, handsome body shuddering with every silken stroke.

Still, Castillo needed more. He captured the younger man's hand and drew it down to his hot, throbbing cock. Elliot was beyond the suggestion stage, so Martin had to guide him, wrapping the strong hand around his sensitive organ, covering it with his own smaller hand. His cock was weeping bitter tears and Elliot captured them with his thumb, rubbing the slickness over Castillo's cock head and down his shaft.

Martin thought he might faint as Elliot began stroking his tender organ smoothly, pumping into him at the same time.

"Is it good, lover?" Burch whispered, sounding desperate. "Is it?"

Helpless under the lean body, Martin's throat tightened. He gasped and tried to speak, but couldn't.

"Is it good, Marty?" Elliot asked again. "Please, tell me, baby —"

Martin moaned throatily and rasped out, "Yes. God, yes —" before he dissolved again into shallow panting.

"I just want to please you, lover," Elliot assured him, never ceasing his wonderful stroke. "That's all I want."

It was more than Martin could take. He lifted himself onto his hands and knees, as though trying to shake Elliot off, but that only made it easier for the architect to stroke him. Castillo clamped the muscles of his ass tight around the plundering cock and the younger man cried out loudly, and began pumping harder. The Latin tossed his head and called Burch's name which excited the architect even more. He started taking Martin harder, even as his hand gripped the dark, aching cock tighter. Castillo's mind short-circuited and he slid onto the bed, losing all motor control, succumbing to the power of his lover's

passion.

"*Madre de dios*," he murmured, just as Elliot's free hand grabbed a mass of his hair and pulled.

"Martin!" the architect shouted, "Martin! Oh, god--"

"Do it!" Castillo ordered, and Burch thrust into him and came and kept coming, and then Castillo came too, crying out in Spanish, telling Elliot how wonderful he was in a language he couldn't understand.

Finally, they collapsed together onto the bed, Elliot's taller body covering Martin's. The architect withdrew carefully, but the shock of it still made Castillo wince. The sudden emptiness he felt was a harsh reminder of what his life would be like when he left Burch's embrace.

"Martin," Elliot whispered, "I love you."

Castillo rolled over, stroked Burch's soft hair and gazed into his clear blue eyes. "I know," he said, gently.

"I'm sorry," Elliot apologized immediately, looking away. "I promised myself I wouldn't do that."

"Don't apologize. Who wouldn't want to be loved by you? Your caring has helped me so much, Elliot. You've given me back my soul. You've given me yourself. I'm only sorry there's so little left of me to give you."

The architect sighed. "In this life, timing is everything, isn't it?" He laughed lightly.

Castillo smiled and kissed his lover gently. It was a farewell kiss and they both knew it.



Martin Castillo gazed in the mirror as he ran a comb through his dense, shortened hair. He'd almost forgotten that he had a troublesome natural wave that defied his best efforts at taming. When it was long, the weight of his hair pulled it almost straight. Now, it argued with him about which way it would lay. He remembered that was part of the reason he'd kept it long.

He rubbed a finger over the short moustache. It itched, but that would pass as it grew out. He stared, getting used to his new image — his new self. He felt new. Different. He wasn't even sure how well he knew this man. Wasn't sure how much he'd like him. His face grew somber. But he could live with him.

For the first time in several days he looked within himself. The stone of anger that had been weighing him down was still there, but it was smaller now. Still heavy, still cold, still able to absorb most of his feelings and keep them from being exposed — but smaller. He could bear the weight of it now. In time, the stone would make him stronger. Impervious. Unapproachable. He could live with that, too.

Elliot was leaning against the bathroom's door frame. In his hand was a long, braided rope of jet black hair. "For a moment, I thought you might not go through with it."

Castillo smiled slightly. He tugged the black suit jacket in place, straightened the leather tie.

"It's you, Marty," Elliot said approvingly. "It's your

look. Black and white. Severe. Unyielding."

He slid his arms around the Latino and kissed his cheek. "But I know better. I know what's beneath. Whenever you need a break from the image — call me. I'll send a plane for you."

Martin shook his head at Burch's extravagance. He knew he meant it.

"What are you going to do when you get to Miami?" Burch asked.

"I'll check into the local police department. With my DEA background and undercover work, I could have a good career there. I like investigative work. Maybe in Homicide or Organized Crime." Having said it, he thought about that for a second. In a Vice squad, he'd still be able to work against drug trafficking. He focused on that.

"Still the Samurai." Elliot smiled. "Being a cop in Miami will never make you rich — but, it's the *right* thing to do, the honorable thing."

Martin inclined his head. "That's the way I am, Elliot. I can only do what I think is right. That's the code I live by." *And the code Jack lived by, too. And died by. In honor.*

"And no doubt, it's one of the many reasons why I love you," Burch said quietly, with a small sigh. "Part of me wishes I could be more like you — but I guess I can only be like myself. I don't know how honorable that is."

Castillo touched Elliot's cheek. "You have your own honor, Stosh. It's in there, and you'll pull it out whenever you need it. I know you."

The architect swallowed, then moved away from Castillo, as if wanting to shake off the somber mood. "Here are your house keys," he announced, dangling a key ring. "I kept one. And this one here is a key to this suite. When security changes the locks, I'll send you a new one. Never know when it might come in handy." He stared at Castillo, as if wanting to memorize his face. "You're always welcome here, Marty. No matter what happens in my life — or yours — I'll always care about you. There will always be a place for you in my home and in my heart. No strings attached."

Burch broke eye contact, then smiled casually. "Well, I know you must have other people to say goodbye to."

Castillo inclined his head.

"I'd like to send the car around to take you to the airport tomorrow morning." He looked questioningly at the slight-built man.

"Have it meet me at the Fifth Avenue entrance to Central Park," Martin said.

"Fine. Leave your luggage here. It'll be in the car. Marty — promise me you'll take care of yourself."

Castillo took Burch's chin, pulled his head down, kissed his full lips. "I promise. Elliot, if you ever need anything from *me* — if there's ever *anything* I can do for you — don't hesitate to call. I can't thank you enough for everything you've done. I'll always be your friend."

"I know," Burch said softly, smiling. They both knew that would never be enough.

The architect walked him out of the suite. He was

surprised to see Burch's aide, Mary, walking towards them.

"More overtime?" her boss asked.

"No. Forgot the Reed papers. I want to go over them again for the morning meeting." Her eyes traveled over Castillo appreciatively. "Very nice. I approve. You should be a big hit in Miami."

The Latin's skin darkened in a blush. "Thank you, Mary."

She glanced at Burch, saw the rope of hair. "Oh, don't tell me we're collecting *scalps* now," she said saucily.

"Good night, Mary," Burch said pointedly, grinning good-naturedly at her.

"Night, Elliot," she tossed over her shoulder casually and moved towards the elevators, a stack of printouts under her arm.

"She's in love with you," Castillo said knowingly.

"Yeah." Burch agreed sadly. "Who said God has no sense of humor?"

*Your presence and your favours, the full part
That you could give, you now can take away:
What lies between your beauty and my heart
Not even you can trouble or betray.*

—Edna St. Vincent Millay — Sonnet XIV



*I was so much older then,
I'm younger than that now....*

Castillo blinked, coming back to the present. Elliot pulled from his embrace and stared into his black, hooded eyes.

"How are you, Martin? Are you happy? Is there someone in your life?"

He thought of Sonny even now trapped in the tunnels so far below them, maybe hurt, maybe dead. He shook that thought away. *No. I'd know if he was dead. Rico and Vincent won't let that happen.*

"Yes," the lieutenant answered quietly. "I have someone."

Elliot's face lit up, genuinely happy. "That's great. You deserve it."

"And you?" Castillo asked.

The architect's grin changed, became wry, almost bitterly mirthful. Castillo's heart lurched. "Yeah. Yeah. There's someone." He walked back to his desk, picked up a framed photo and turned it around.

Castillo found himself looking at a picture of Catherine Chandler. He was stunned. In all this huge city, Elliot had to fall in love with *Catherine*.

"You know her," Burch said, unsurprised. He shook his head. "You and Jack used to drive me crazy that way. No matter what I ever discovered, you always knew about it before me. I don't see you for, what? Over five years? And you're still doing it. If you know her, then you know she's in love with some-

one else. And I can't find out who. I've tried detectives, private eyes —"

He caught Martin's changing expression.

"You know *him*?" Burch said, amazed.

Castillo looked at the floor.

"Who is he, Marty? Come on, I've got to know. It's driving me crazy. I can offer this woman the world, but —"

"Elliot, don't," Martin said, gently.

The architect hung his head. "It's the timing thing again, isn't it? In business, my timing has always been perfect, but in my love life —" He laughed bitterly.

The Cuban's heart wrenched for him. "Find someone else, Elliot," he begged. "Catherine's not for you."

The architect glanced at him, his brow furrowed. "She's not in love with *you*, is she?"

"No," Castillo assured him, with a small smile.

Burch grinned, boyishly. "Well, that's something at least. I'd really have to throw in the towel then, wouldn't I? Well, you didn't come here at —" he glanced at his solid gold Rolex wristwatch, "nearly three a.m. to discuss my feeble love life. Something's wrong."

Martin swallowed. It had been so long since they'd seen each other, it bothered him that he arrived only to ask a favor.

"What is it, Martin?" Elliot asked, concerned.

"How can I help you?"

Castillo glanced around the suite, spied the doors he assumed led to Elliot's lavish bedroom. "Are we alone?"

Burch laughed. "Are you kidding? Since I met Cathy Chandler I've been a *monk*!"

The lieutenant shook his head. That was too hard for him to imagine.

"And at this hour even Mary's gone. Yes, she's still with me, but she finally got tired of waiting. She's married. Two kids. And I'd still be lost without her. So, what's going on?"

"I'm undercover, working on the Black Opal case."

The architect whistled. "Still the Samurai. You promised me you'd take care of yourself, that you'd be careful."

"I am careful. That's why I'm here. It's... my lover who's endangered. I needed access to a phone I could be sure wasn't tapped. The streets are too dangerous for me now. And I needed someone with media connections — that I could trust."

Elliot raised an eyebrow quizzically.

"Washington's trying to pull the rug out from under me," Martin explained cryptically. "I can't let them do that. But the only real weapon I have is time. If I can't get this accomplished by five a.m. —"

"They're threatening to kill your lover," Elliot suddenly realized.

"Friends are working to save him. They might succeed —"

"He's a cop?"

"One of my detectives. It... only happened recently."

"Tell me what I can do," Elliot said briskly, all business. "We can use my private line."

Martin's heart swelled to hear his old friend's sincere offer. "First, I need you to call Joe Maxwell for

me. I'll tell you what to say. Then, who do you know in network news that trusts you as a source?"

*I believe that when the hurting and the pain
has gone
We will be strong, oh yes, we will be strong....
— Tears for Fears — I Believe*

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: TO RESCUE SONNY

*I'm going to take you to
My secret place.
It's a place that you
Like no one else I know
Might appreciate.
— My Secret Place — Joni Mitchell*

"Vincent!" Rico gasped, holding a hand over his chest. "Wait up, man. Hold on!" He sagged against a wall weakly. "Two minutes — to catch my breath — please — !" Tubbs had always considered himself in good shape, but the bitter truth was there was no way he could keep up with his huge, leonine partner. He tried to imagine Vincent on some collegiate track team, but couldn't visualize him in a tank top and runner's shorts.

Vincent's blue eyes examined him with concern. "Are you all right?"

"No, man, I'm *whipped*," Rico admitted. "We've been haulin' ass through these tunnels at breakneck speed for half an hour! We've had to slide down poles, crawl through tiny, dark 'shortcuts,' clamber over some *very* shaky bridges of questionable construction and catch *two* different trains — the *hard* way!"

Tubbs' whole life had flashed before him when Vincent had led him over that narrow, slippery catwalk and calmly explained that they'd be *jumping* onto the roof of the next passing train. He still couldn't believe they'd done it — not once, but *twice*. "It's been a long night!" the weary Vice cop complained. "I need a chance to catch my breath."

The blond, shaggy head turned as Vincent quirked an eyebrow. "You said you wouldn't slow me down."

"Come on, Vince! Give a guy a break. At least tell me if we're almost there."

"We're not far now. We were near the docks when we started. We've got to get back to the park. We're better than halfway."

"Still 'feel' Sonny?" Rico asked tentatively, not even sure what that meant.

"A little. It's faint. He could be sleeping."

Or *unconscious*, Rico thought worriedly. He rubbed his face and gnawed his lower lip. "So, you and Castillo grew up together," the detective said,

wanting to take his mind from his fears for his lover.

Vincent nodded his shaggy head.

"Must've been some neighborhood," Rico remarked wryly.

"It is," Vincent assured him.

"You know, the lieutenant's so closed-mouthed about his background, I think most of us thought he never had a childhood. It's hard to imagine him young, inexperienced."

"His silence must be hard for you to accept — considering your relationship," Vincent said tactfully.

"Truthfully, it doesn't bother me that much. But Sonny — it drives him crazy. It's a real problem between them."

Vincent looked pensive. "Once this is over, that may be a problem we can solve."

Rico brightened. "You think so, huh? That'd be great! But, first things first, partner. We'd better get moving. I'll be okay now. Lead on."

Vincent moved away from the wall, but then stopped abruptly. His head snapped around and he suddenly stared at the horizontal pipes hugging the wall.

"What is it, man?" Rico asked softly.

"The pipes. Someone's tapping."

"These old things? Can't believe they're used for anything."

Vincent held up a hand. "They're used for communication," he caught Rico's light eyes, "in *our* neighborhood. But, that's not our code — and the tapping's so faint." He knelt by the pipe and pressed his ear against it.

Rico couldn't decide what to think. Someone used these pipes to communicate? What the hell was going on down here?

"It's Morse," Vincent hissed. "It's *Sonny*."

"Where is he?" Rico demanded, lurching forward.

The big man shook his head. "Someone's asking him, but he doesn't know. But the sounds of the taps — the distance — I think I can find it. Come on!"

They jogged only a few more yards when Vincent nearly stumbled to a halt.

"Now what?" Rico asked frantically. This thing was getting weirder by the minute.

Vincent's expression glazed over and he blinked dazedly.

"Hey, Vince! Snap out of it! What's the matter?"

Suddenly, the huge being focused again and his face changed. For a second, Rico saw a hint of the creature that had nearly killed him. He tensed and took a cautious step back. "Vincent?" he said softly.

"It's Catherine," he growled irritably. "She knows of Sonny's message. She's on her way to help him. She's much closer than we are. It's too dangerous!" He clenched his huge, clawed hands.

"How can you possibly know that?" Rico asked gently.

"Catherine and I... are connected, by a powerful empathic bond. I know what she's feeling — what she's thinking. Martin and I are connected in a similar way, but our bond is minor compared to what I have with Catherine."

Uh-huh, thought Rico, nodding slightly, thinking

back again to last night and how he, Sonny, and the lieutenant were suddenly swept up in a passion that, to Rico, seemed to come from *outside* himself.

Vincent's eyes were almost wild now. "We've got to hurry!" They took off at a run through the tunnels.



Been dazed and confused for so long it's not true

Wanted a woman, never bargained for you

Lot's of people talkin', few of them know

Soul of a woman was created below

— Dazed and Confused — Led Zeppelin

Sonny's head sagged onto his chest, then snapped up. *No sleeping, Crockett*, he ordered himself, and resumed tapping his handcuff against the pipe. He'd barely been able to believe he'd actually gotten an answer to his SOS, but that short response had seemed so long ago. There had been nothing since. He'd probably imagined it.

He shivered as cold air blew across his bare legs, but at least the pain in his knee was only a dull ache now. Ellen might be coming back for him any minute. He shut his mind away from that thought. He wouldn't think about her, the sick passion in her eyes, her cold, hurting hands. He wouldn't think about what other toys she must have in her arsenal.

He heard a soft footstep and froze. He didn't dare look around to see if it was her. His heart hammered wildly and his eyes widened.

Relax, he ordered himself. *She won't hurt you anymore. She's just coming to collect you, to bring you to Marty. Everything's gonna be fine, pal. It's all over. No more pain. Really.*

The lies weren't working very well, he realized, as he started to tremble.

Don't do it, Crockett, he warned himself. *Don't fall apart. She likes that too much. It makes her worse.*

He felt a small feminine hand touch his shoulder and he had to bite his lower lip hard to keep from crying out. He glanced nervously over his shoulder.

You've lost it, pal, he thought, as he stared into the wide green eyes of Cathy Chandler. *You've gone completely over the edge.*

She smiled gently at him. "Where's the keys to the cuffs?" she asked urgently.

He blinked, his body shaking wildly. When he was in Country, they used to say you had nothing to worry about until the hallucinations started talking to you.

The apparition nudged his shoulder gently. "Sonny, snap out of it, we've got to move *fast*. Where's the key?"

He swallowed. "In a pocket... in my holster."

She came around in front of him, and lifted his jacket, looking for it.

He couldn't stop staring at her. *You're being rescued, stupid!* he barked at himself mentally. *Cooperate.*

Cathy found the small compartment and liberated

the key that unfastened the cuffs. Sonny fell forward as his hands were freed, and she caught him. He couldn't feel his fingers. His shoulders were in agony.

"Can you stand? Walk?" Cathy asked, sliding one small, thin shoulder under one of his arms. She acted like a trained soldier, all business, knowing what had to be done to get them out of here. Sonny was depressed by how little help he was giving her.

"Don't know," he rasped, finding his voice. He slid a leaden arm around her, but couldn't make his numb hand grip her shoulder. He was struck by her diminutive size. She was so *little*.

"Come on," she ordered. "We're going to stand up now."

He nodded, and managed to pull his trapped feet under him to rise stiffly. He leaned against the pipes and only then realized his pants were still bunched around his ankles, that he was fully exposed from the waist down. He blushed and grew angry all at the same time. This was *so* humiliating.

"You're not really seeing me at my best," he assured her, using humor to blunt his embarrassment. She smiled gently.

Chandler was as efficient and impersonal as a nurse, tugging his shorts up, then the thermals, then his slacks. But he caught sight of her stricken expression as she saw the blood on his scrotum and the dried exudate streaked with dirt on his thighs.

"Can that knee support you?" she asked. "It looks pretty bad."

"Darlin'," he drawled, "that knee carried me eighty-five yards to a touchdown in worse condition than that." He grinned weakly. "But, uh, you wouldn't happen to have an ace bandage on you — or a football?"

"Take a step," she suggested. "I'll support you."

He moved forward on his good leg, feeling stiff, but happy to be able to walk at all. He set the other foot down gingerly, feeling a stab of agony from his knee. He gasped, seeing stars for a moment. He was right. The knee had been worse during that eighty-five yard run. "I can make it," he insisted.

"You sure about that?" barked an angry female voice.

Sonny felt as if he'd been dropped back into hell. He wanted to weep. Now, she'd have *Cathy*.

"Who the hell are *you*?" Ellen demanded, advancing on them.

Cathy slid out from under Sonny's arm and he had to lurch to hold himself up. The small lawyer stepped away from him, so Ellen would have to divide her attention.

Good, Cathy, Sonny thought at her. *If you get the chance, run.*

"Where do you think you're going?" Ellen snarled at the woman and lunged, the electric probe still in her hand stabbing at the lawyer.

Sonny's eyes widened and he reached forward instinctively, but he was too far away.

At the last second, Cathy sidestepped neatly, then knocked Ellen's hand away. The weapon fell, spinning out of her reach. With her other hand, Cathy grabbed Ellen's jumpsuit and used her forward momentum to throw the woman head over heels.



Ellen hit the cavern wall hard, her head connecting with the stone wall with a dull thud. She lay motionless on the ground, arms askew.

Crockett just stood there, gaping.

Without pausing, Cathy touched the woman's carotid artery, then lifted an eyelid. "She'll be out for a while," she said smugly. Grabbing Ellen's hands, the lawyer hauled her over to the pipes. Picking up Sonny's discarded cuffs, she snapped them around the Black Widow's wrists, cuffing her to the same pipe Sonny had been chained to. Then Cathy patted her down.

"Check for the detonator," Sonny hissed, realizing they had a real chance now.

Cathy shook her head. "It's not on her." She paused. "Oh, but look at this!" She showed Sonny his own *Bren 10* pistol. He grinned as if she'd found an old friend. Then, she discovered the thirty-eight he normally kept on his ankle.

She handed Sonny the *Bren*. He had barely enough circulation in his fingers to handle it properly. *Where'd she get all this training?* he wondered, as he tried to grip the gun.

"Can I keep the thirty-eight?" Cathy asked.

He was busy checking his clip and started to ask if she knew how to use one. Then he watched her professionally break the weapon open, examine it, and snap it back together.

As she checked the safety he grinned and said, "Sure, you keep it, partner. You know, you're pretty handy to have around, Chandler. Ever think of becoming a cop? You could make even *less* money than you're making now."

She smiled back at him. "Never considered it for a second. Listen, Sonny, there are other people down here with me."

"What other people?"

"Friends," she said enigmatically. "They won't be in black jumpsuits. *Please*, don't shoot them!"

He nodded.

"You ready?" she asked.

He nodded curtly again and limped towards the mouth of the tunnel, the *Bren* held ready.

"I'll have to go first," she whispered. "I know the way."

He frowned, annoyed, then inclined his head. Pulling her in front of him, he held her protectively against his body. "Don't take any chances," he growled in her ear. "I owe you a lot for this. In case I don't get a chance later, I want to thank you now. Remember, no crazy stunts! That's *my* job. The least I can do is make sure you get safely home — to *Vincent*."

He smiled at her startled expression then followed as she stepped out into the tunnels.

Pale shadow of a dragon

Tough woman

— Gold Dust Woman — Fleetwood Mac

Reese walked through the empty tunnels, checking his pistol. There wasn't much left to do now but pick up Marty's cop and show up for their rendezvous. It had taken him weeks, a lot of money, and some crude, strong-arm tactics, but he'd successfully dismantled the Black Widow's operation from the inside out, without her even knowing it.

Those of her crew who'd survived the bust and made it back into the tunnels were happy to take Reese's payoff and abandon the operation. Ellen's preoccupation with Crockett gave him the time he needed to tie up all those loose ends. That's the way the big boys wanted it handled — quietly, discreetly — and that's what Reese did. He was pleased with the way things were going so far.

Now all he had to deal with was Ellen — and the wild card, Castillo. He was a lot more worried about Marty than that sick, insane bitch. It'd been a stroke of luck that had put him in a position to really observe the Latino during that first meet. When Ellen had tried to barter for Crockett, Castillo's body had tensed like a bowstring. Good thing Marty hadn't known he was there or it would have all been over before it started.

He wondered if he should have brought the whole thing to an end that night, but decided not to second guess that decision. He'd needed time to find out just how Marty was involved — and who the two young bucks with him were.

Yeah, he'd been lucky so far — and Reese hated relying on luck.

He turned into the chamber where he'd left Crockett and halted abruptly when he realized the person hanging from the cuffs was not the Miami detective.

"What the — ?" Reese mumbled. *Looks like my luck just ran out.* He crouched by the supine figure, lightly slapping her cheeks. "Ellen. Wake up. Come on, girl, come to."

She blinked and groaned painfully, pulling away from his touch. "What...? Where...?" She tried to pull her arms down then realized where she was. She blinked dazedly at Reese.

"Where's Crockett?" he asked calmly. "How'd you lose him?"

"Uh, some woman was here, taking his cuffs off. She threw me." The Black Widow winced, and struggled into a sitting position. "Get me out of here, Reese. I'll kill that sonofa —"

Reese's brow furrowed. *Woman?* Ellen had to be delirious from the blow to her head. Crockett could've only been rescued by Castillo or the black cop. He frowned. Everything would fall apart without Crockett. Without the detective he'd have *no* leverage with Marty, unless — He touched his pocket.

There was still one ace he hadn't played. He stood and started to walk away from the handcuffed woman.

"Where the hell are you going?" she demanded

angrily. "You can't leave me here!"

He turned, standing about fifteen feet from her. "I have no intentions of leaving you here," he said quietly and aimed his nine millimeter pistol at the dark gem that sat glimmering over her heart. "Not alive, anyway."

*Rock on gold dust woman
Take your silver spoon, dig your grave*
— Gold Dust Woman — Fleetwood Mac



"Where the hell is everybody?" Sonny hissed in Cathy's ear. "There should be an *army* down here." They crept silently along the tunnel paths, hugging the cool walls, Sonny holding his *Bren* in both hands, his eyes roving the dimly lit corridors. But the tunnels were eerily empty.

"That's the way it's been all along," she whispered. "I had no trouble getting to you. There was *no one* around."

"So, where are your 'friends'?" he asked.

"Here. There. Nearby. Hiding."

Like a damned trained team, he thought, wondering where they could be in this maze. "Where are we going, anyway?"

"To my apartment building. You can hide there, safely."

"No," he said, "we've got to meet Marty, or Reese'll be able to tell him any damned thing he wants. We've got to head for the Alice in Wonderland statue in the park."

Cathy frowned, considering that. "Okay," she finally agreed reluctantly. "I know the way."

Is that right? Sonny wondered, not for the first time. But before he could ask her about this, the loud report of a nine millimeter rang out through the tunnels.

Crockett's head snapped around; he stared wide-eyed into the tunnels. Cathy turned to him, confused, nervous.

"Has to be Reese," he decided. "That came from back where we were." He didn't want to think any further along that route. He didn't want to think about Ellen, cuffed, helpless, to the pipes.

"Let's go," he urged Cathy and they started moving faster through the tunnels.



Vincent slid to a halt as they entered an intersection of tunnels. Rico's chest was heaving and he felt as if his heart would explode if he took another step. He gulped air and swallowed.

"They're coming toward us," Vincent murmured, not even breathing hard. Only moments before, the

tunnel dweller insisted that Cathy and Sonny were together, escaping. "We can wait for them here —"

A shot rang out. It was muffled, far from them, and Rico knew it was a nine millimeter — but it wasn't Sonny's *Bren 10*.

Vincent's eyes widened. "There's danger *behind* them now!"

His huge head whipped around the cavern. It was a junction of three tunnels, the one they'd emerged from and two more facing them. The one on the east side was the one Vincent indicated Sonny and Cathy were in. But now, the one on the west had his attention.

He turned to Rico. "I can circle around through *this* tunnel," he indicated the west entrance, "and try to get behind them and whoever is threatening them. They must emerge from this east side exit, if they continue forward. You should stay here, hide behind this outcropping and wait for them. If I can't catch up with their pursuer, or if I fail to defeat him, you can surprise him at this end."

"Okay," Rico agreed. As much as he hated being left behind, he realized it was a sound plan. "You think it's that guy, Reese?"

"I don't know," Vincent said.

"Be *careful!*" Rico whispered as the huge figure charged into the mouth of the west side tunnel, black cloak billowing behind him. The Vice cop took up his position and slowed his breathing. He stood silently, waiting, ears straining for sound.

Come on, Sonny, he urged his lover, aching to see him safe. *You're almost home, buddy. Come on.*



Sonny heard something behind him and snapped his head around. He held his hand out to Cathy, who'd halted only a few feet in front of him, indicating she should stay put as he backtracked twenty yards. Peering into the gloom, he saw nothing, and turned back to tell the lawyer.

But when he did, he found her standing stock still, Reese behind her, his arm around her throat, a nine millimeter pistol pressed tightly against her temple.

Sonny sucked in a soft breath. It was as if the bastard had appeared from *nowhere*.

Then the detective looked past Reese. A few yards beyond the two, Sonny could just barely make out the mouth of another cave. Had Reese been able to move *that* quietly, that quickly?

"Nice to see you again, Crockett," Reese greeted him amiably. "Miss me?" He pulled Catherine firmly against his tall, rangy body and ground the muzzle of his gun against her head, just to be sure Sonny could see it.

Cathy's expression was one of frustrated fury, but she didn't seem frightened. That please Sonny. He knew her sharp mind was still working.

"Take it easy, Reese," the cop said soothingly, steadily holding his own gun aimed at the mercenary's face. "We can work this out."

"Sure we can," Reese agreed. "First, you drop your gun. Then you come to my arms, lover. I'm willing to trade her for you. Besides, we had a date, Crockett. I should be mad at you for cheating on me. And Marty's *dyin'* to see you."

Sonny never lowered his gun, keeping it aimed at Reese's forehead. "How about a compromise? You let her go — I let *you* go. I like the sound of that better."

"I'm getting tired of this game, Crockett," Reese growled. "Put down the gun and step forward. We're playin' this my way. And don't think I've got any qualms about pluggin' a woman. I've already taken care of your other girlfriend. It won't bother me none to make it a two-bimbo day."

Sonny swallowed. He'd been right. Reese had killed Ellen. He was surprised how much that bothered him.

Then, to his astonishment, an oddly dressed young girl stepped silently out of the tunnel behind Reese and Cathy, and aimed — he squinted — a *crossbow*? — at Reese's back.

"Stop looking over my shoulder, Crockett," Reese growled irritably. "I'm not that stupid."

The girl cocked the crossbow and it twanged.

Reese tensed.

"Drop it, mister," the girl ordered in a no-nonsense voice.

"Never heard a semi-automatic *plonk* before," the mercenary mused, not moving. He spoke to Crockett. "Tell her this broad's gonna buy it if she doesn't take her toy and get the hell out of here."

"He's got a gun pressed to Cathy Chandler's head," Sonny told the girl with the crossbow, since she couldn't see that. "He'll kill her if you fire."

"Can he kill all of us?" a rich baritone asked, as a tall, heavysset black man emerged from the tunnel, followed by three other men of various sizes. They were all dressed in the same bizarre, patchwork style, and armed with heavy staffs and pipes.

Sonny stared at them in amazement. They reminded him of Robin Hood's Merry Men.

Reese fell back against the tunnel wall, yanking Cathy with him, so he could see all his opponents.

"Probably," Sonny answered the black man's question. "Possibly." *It's not worth it*, he decided. "Let her go, Reese," Crockett said calmly. "I'll go with you."

The others seemed about to protest.

"No!" Cathy complained.

"It's *my* job," he told her, silencing all of their protests. "You're civilians. *I'm* the cop. Let her go, Reese."

The intelligence agent chuckled. "You're one of Marty's pups all right. It's that kind of thinking that always screws him up in the long run. The *gun*, Crockett. And you, Maid Marion, drop the crossbow, now!"

Sonny's brain protested, as he and the young woman mirrored each other's actions and slowly lowered their weapons. *Never give up your gun*, his training screamed at him, but he could see no other option as he moved to place the *Bren* on the ground.

Suddenly, a ferocious roar ripped through the tunnels, making Sonny jump. He whipped his gun back

up, his eyes snapping right and left. He couldn't tell from which direction the sound had come from, but his neck prickled with a familiar feeling. It was the *presence* again — and it was close.

"What the hell was that?" Reese asked Crockett as he glanced around.

Sonny shook his head. "Don't you know?" He glanced at the people milling at the end of the tunnel. They were — *smiling*? Cathy's face held a mixture of anticipation and concern.

Another roar ripped through again, this one louder, closer. It was deafening, terrifying, and Crockett's instincts were screaming. Reese's head spun to the left towards the group. His grip must've relaxed for a second, because suddenly Cathy bit him and stomped his foot at the same time, then jerked free.

Reese fired, but the shot went wild, narrowly missing Crockett, who had dived out of the way and rolled against the wall.

The girl with the crossbow yanked her weapon up and fired. The quarl glanced off Reese's shoulder, pulling out a chunk of meat and bounced off the rock wall. The mercenary grunted and swung his gun, firing at the girl. She went down limply.

As Sonny struggled to his feet in spite of the pain in his knee, the Merry Men charged Reese. There was another shot from his nine millimeter, a shout of pain, then a dull thwack and Reese's gun clattered to the ground. There was a mad scramble for it.

The cop pulled the *Bren* up to cover Reese, but in the next second, something erupted in their midst, some kind of animal, some monster, roaring, with huge fangs, a terrible face, and slashing claws.

It barreled past the grappling men, knocking them over and scattering them like so many bowling pins, then headed straight for Crockett, all fury and vengeance. The blond detective was flooded with terror, knowing he was finally looking into the face of his demon, the *presence* that had tortured his mind and his dreams. Gritting his teeth, he swung the *Bren* towards it and aimed.

Cathy screamed "*NO!*" and threw herself across him, knocking the gun to the side, making Sonny fire into the wall. Crockett struggled with her, fighting to bring the weapon up to bear.

Suddenly, she was off him, flinging herself into the monster's arms, blocking the massive body with her own small one. "*Don't shoot, Sonny,*" she shouted. "*Don't shoot! It's Vincent!*"

He hesitated, unable to fire safely around her, and tried to absorb the impossible thing she'd just said. Then something struck him sharply on the head and everything went dark.



Catherine's eyes widened as Winston cracked Sonny sharply over the head with his staff, and the detective crumpled to the ground. Vincent lunged towards the unconscious man, roaring wildly, but she grappled him, holding him back.

Behind her, she heard the sound of fist hitting bone and suddenly Reese was free, running to the side entrance from which he'd emerged. Winston moved to pursue him, but saw Catherine's frantic struggles with Vincent and joined her instead, grabbing the huge man's arms.

"Vincent, stop!" Catherine begged, "It's me! Don't hurt Sonny, please!"

Suddenly, the fire in Vincent's eyes dimmed. He stopped roaring and shook his head, as if he suddenly remembered what he was here for. "I — I —" He blinked, trying to collect his thoughts, and stared at Catherine and Winston. "I... *felt* his emotions inside me. They triggered so much rage — I thought *he* was the enemy." Vincent sagged against a wall. "Is he all right? Did I harm him?"

"He'll have a headache," Winston reassured his friend, "that's all. But that other dude's gotten clean away. At least, we've got his gun."

"He's going to meet Martin," Catherine warned Vincent urgently. "Who knows what he'll say about Sonny, what bargain he'll try to make? You've got to warn Martin, tell him Sonny's okay. They're meeting at Alice in Wonderland."

Vincent nodded, touched her shoulder and followed Reese into the tunnels.



Reese staggered away into the dimly lit side tunnel and ran as hard and as fast as he could back the way he'd come. Who the hell *were* those people — and more importantly, what the hell was that *thing* that went after Crockett? He gulped air, never slowing, wanting to put as much space between it and him as he could.

It was all crumbling. Without Crockett, he'd have to face Castillo empty handed. If Marty found out Crockett was dead, ripped to shreds by that — whatever it was — Reese had a feeling Castillo's feelings on the matter wouldn't be subjects of calm discussion. Shit, this was falling apart big time.

Then, he touched his pocket. He still had his ace. Would Castillo even care? He had no ties to New York, no reason to barter — but still, it was all he had. He'd have to try. He ran to make the rendezvous on time.



"Sonny. Sonny, wake up."

Crockett blinked, sharp pain shooting behind his eyes. He groaned. This was just *not* turning out to be one of his better days.

"Are you okay, Sonny?" Cathy was leaning over him, her expression etched with concern. He blinked at her, and tried to smile, then touched her cheek. She smiled back at him and took his hand tenderly, squeezing it.

"What happened?" he croaked, putting a hand to his forehead. He rolled cautiously onto his side and let Cathy and someone else help him sit up.

"I'm sorry, man," the large black man said to him. "I had to smack you."

"You're Vincent," Sonny said, then thought, *No, that's not right.*

"No, I'm *Winston*. I thought you were going to shoot Vincent, so I hit you with my staff. I'm *real* sorry."

Crockett nodded gingerly. "Don't worry about it, pal. I *was* going to shoot him." He winced and fingered the knot on his head gently. "In fact, I still might."

"What do you remember?" Cathy asked.

The cop couldn't answer. His mind didn't *want* to remember. Didn't want to recall that *presence*, that face, those teeth, those claws —

"Reese?" Sonny rasped, looking around. "Where the hell's Reese?"

"He got away," Cathy said worriedly. "He shot Jamie in the leg and Collin in the shoulder. He knocked Mouse out. We're tending them now. But in all the confusion, he got away from us."

Sonny sighed wearily and sagged against a wall. No, definitely *not* a good day. He caught Cathy's green eyes.

"What was that *thing* that attacked me, and why did you stop me from killing it?"

Cathy's mouth set in a firm line and she sat back on her heels. "That *'thing'* was the man I love, and Martin Castillo's *brother*. That was *Vincent*."

He looked away, unable to accept what she was saying. *That was Vincent, that animal?* No wonder they weren't lovers. The very thought of those huge, clawed hands on that small, delicate body was enough to turn Crockett's stomach.

"Sonny," Catherine said softly. "Vincent's my *life*, and he's part of Martin's, too. He's the reason Martin hides his past. They grew up together, as brothers, in these tunnels, with a whole community of wonderful people who work together and help one another. Winston, Mouse, Pascal there, Jamie, Collin, are all part of that community. They risked their *lives* to rescue *you*, someone they'd never met, just because you're important to Martin, and he once lived with them. Vincent was coming to save you, too, but when Reese showed up, there was just too much confusion. He couldn't tell who was who. After all, you *were* trying to shoot him."

Sonny nodded dumbly, trying to absorb what she was telling him. That *creature* was Marty's brother?

"Hey, man," Winston said gently, helping the detective to his feet, "you haven't seen Vincent at his best. He's a great guy. We *all* love him. He's the *heart* of our community, our family. You'll... get used to his appearance. See, we all grew up together, us and Vincent and Martin. We have our own city down here in the tunnels."

Marty, Sonny thought suddenly, pulling his mind away from things he could not understand or accept. "Reese. He's goin' to meet Marty."

"Vincent's following him," Cathy said reassuringly.

"I've got to be there!" Sonny protested. "Reese'll try to renegotiate, pretend he's got me somewhere. He might even try to kill Marty."

"Vincent will handle it," Cathy promised. "He and Martin — they have a special bond. Nothing's going to happen to Martin while Vincent's nearby."

Sonny's mind urged him to run to Martin's side, to hurry, save his lover, but his body was shaking from the accumulated abuse it had endured, his knee was killing him and he was completely exhausted. Nothing was going right.

"EVERYBODY FREEZE!" a loud voice shouted suddenly in the stillness, making them all jump. "MIAMI VICE!"

They all did as they were told, except for Sonny, who peered down the dimly lit tunnel, looking for the owner of that familiar shout.

"You all, move away from that man!" the voice demanded, as a shotgun-wielding figure moved out of the gloom. "Keep your hands where I can see them!"

"Rico?" Sonny called. "That you, partner?"

"I'm here, man. I've got you covered. Everybody stand clear!"

"Ricardo," Sonny said softly, bemused, "you can drop the gun, pal. These are the good guys."

Tubbs was standing in the light now, looking baffled as he stared at the assorted, oddly dressed, wounded people. He blinked, visibly confused, and held his gun steady. "But — I'm here to rescue you," he said to Sonny plaintively.

"It's all right, Detective," Cathy Chandler soothed him. "We're going to need your help getting these hurt people home. It's a long walk."

The black man's copper eyes fastened on Sonny as he drew nearer. "You okay, man? I've been worried sick about you, partner." Rico moved quickly to Sonny's side as he reholstered his shotgun. He caught Crockett up in a fierce hug. "For awhile there, I thought I'd never see you again, man," he murmured into Sonny's shoulder.

Crockett clutched his lover to him with the little strength he had left. He swallowed, too overcome to speak.

"You okay, Sonny? You're not... hurt, are you?" Rico asked gently, pulling away, staring into Crockett's eyes.

"You're damned right I'm hurt," Crockett complained hoarsely, "but not as bad as Jamie and Colin. Give them a hand, pal, will you? I can make it on my own." But as soon as Rico released him, Crockett started to wobble, belying his own words.

"You sure, buddy?" Rico asked.

"I'll take him," Cathy offered, sliding her shoulder under Sonny's. "The others need you more, Rico."

The little man Cathy called Pascal was standing by the horizontal pipes hugging the wall. Quickly, he rapped a staccato beat against them, and Sonny's eyes widened. He knew it had to be some kind of code, not Morse, but it had to have been Pascal who heard his message, who'd answered him. So, he hadn't imagined it.

"I'm calling for help," the little man told the Vice cops genially. "We'll get some stretchers up here in

no time to take you guys to the hospital chambers."

Rico and Sonny exchanged a glance, Tubbs looking more confused than ever.

Winston was supporting Collin, so Ricardo easily lifted Jamie in his arms. "What about you, man?" he asked the young, blond boy Cathy had called Mouse. "Can you make it okay?"

The youngster shook his head cautiously. "Mouse is good. Mouse is fine. But Mouse's ears —" He dug a finger in one ear and shook it. "Guns too loud for tunnels. Good thing Mouse knows sign language."

*I'm going to take you to
My special place
It's a place no amount of hurt and anger
Can deface.
I put things back together there
It all falls right in place —
In my special place
— My Secret Place — Joni Mitchell*

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: REESE'S DEAL

*Into this night I wander
It's morning that I dread
Another day of knowing
Of the path I fear to tread
— Obsession — Sara McLachlan*

The wind whipped under Martin's heavy coat and cut right through his clothes as he exited the drain pipe in the park. Glancing around, he moved cautiously around the bronze representative of Alice in Wonderland. The dim, antique lamps shining on the nearby walkways were inadequate, but they'd never been designed to provide the kind of illumination Martin wished he had right now. He shrugged off the cold as he positioned himself where he might have the best view; he had to be completely focused on only one thing — Reese. He couldn't afford to be distracted, not even for a moment. Reese was too deadly an opponent. He *thrived* on other's weaknesses, and he already knew Martin's.

Castillo could only hope that Reese had been too busy with his own agenda to pay attention to the news. Even now, front pages were being changed and emergency bulletins issued. Reese would never be able to trace Elliot as the leak; neither would Joe Maxwell. Joe would be unhappy with the unexpected coverage, but he'd live with it. The notoriety about Mr. Morgasterns' child abuse and his complicity in releasing dangerous arms was already travelling along the wire services. Someone in Washington was about to wake up unhappily.

Of course, the trick was to convince Reese Martin hadn't been responsible. Reese didn't make idle threats. He was perfectly capable of assassinating Sonny in Martin's bed.

The lieutenant checked his watch. Two minutes. He'd never known Reese to be late. He took a deep breath and found his center. He could not allow even Sonny's appearance, whatever that might be, to distract him. He focused on the cold.

Reese stepped out from behind the statue, alone. At the same instance, Vincent's presence touched Martin's mind. Vincent was on the verge of attacking, his Other demanding to be freed, to be allowed to kill this man. As much as he might want it to happen, Martin couldn't allow that. Nor could he risk allowing Vincent's dark Other to infect his own heart. Not now. Not with so much at stake. Not with Sonny in danger.

Martin's mind touched Vincent's. *No, little brother, you must be cautious. Reese's death will only cause more problems than it will solve. Be calm. Serene.*

The Cuban's eyes narrowed on Reese. The tall, rangy man was trying to hide it, but he'd been hurt. Had he been shot? And where was Sonny?

Focus, Martin told himself and Vincent. Just focus.

"Marty," Reese said quietly, "things — haven't gone exactly as I've planned."

Castillo said nothing, simply stared coolly at the agent.

"I don't have your boy with me," Reese admitted. "I thought about shuckin' you about that, trying to tell you I had him stashed somewhere, but I knew you wouldn't fall for it."

"Where is he?" Castillo asked softly.

Reese paused a fraction of a second. "Safe. He got away from me."

"You're lying." Martin's heart turned to ice. "You've killed him."

He felt Vincent's mind touch his, and even through the chaotic thoughts of the Other, Martin felt reassurance. Sonny was safe. But Reese did not know it. As relieved as he was to learn this, he did not allow it show on his face or body.

The mercenary held up his hands. "Not true. I swear it, Marty. I didn't kill him. Hell, that'd be like killing the golden goose, you know me better'n that. I'm bein' square with you, man." An odd shadow passed over Reese's face. "There's something down there, in those tunnels, Marty. Somethin' I've never seen before — and hope I never see again. It's down there with your boy. Hope he makes it out."

"Our deal's off, Reese," Castillo said in a cold, deadly tone. "You didn't live up to your end."

The agent reached into his pocket and Martin tensed, going for his gun. Reese slowed his motions, holding up a hand defensively. "Wait a minute, Marty, just wait a minute. You're gonna wanna see this." Reese pulled out a small, black, hand-held device. "You've been looking for this, haven't you, Castillo?"

The lieutenant felt a vibration on his hip. His detector was vibrating, notifying him he was in the presence of an electronic detonator.

"You've had it all along?" Castillo asked.

"It got lost in the scuffle, but everybody knew I offered the best finder's fee," Reese assured him. "New deal, Marty. Wha'd'ya say? I give you the detonator and you bury any action against Morganstern."

"Or — ?"

"Or I keep the detonator — and use it."

The lieutenant startled Reese by smiling. "Reese, you're going to be seriously unemployable if you blow up a healthy chunk of this island for such a flimsy reason. It's over. Give it up. You're not going to use that detonator, and I'm not going to deal. Morgansterns' already been arrested. Joe Maxwell acted on his own warrants without waiting for me. Check your sources."

"We can back track on that," Reese said. "One call to Washington —"

Martin shook his head. "There's nothing anyone can do to stop it now. Detective Diana Bennett is prosecuting Morganstern for child abuse. She has film. Wire taps. She was working independently of our organization. Someone in her office spilled it to the press. If your boss is an early riser, he or she has already found out. It's over, Reese. No bonus this time."

Castillo felt Vincent's Other surge against his mind. *Easy, little brother, easy.* He felt the beast momentarily subside.

Reese's face hardened into a mask. "You did this, Castillo, don't think I don't know it. I may not be able to find out how, but, if nothing else, you *wished* it on me. I guess this is my payback for lyin' to you about May Ying, and for givin' you the bad news about sweet Jack. You're right. It would cost me a lot to use this little thing, so I'm gonna leave it here for you and just walk away. And then we'll call it even. It's been a long hard night, and I don't have much to show for it."

Reese smiled, his white teeth flashing. "But at least, I got to take out the Black Widow — you won't be pulling any testimony out of her. And if I move fast, I might be able to salvage that weapons project anyway. That'll keep me busy for awhile — fortunately for you, old friend."

The smile faded, and the mercenary's voice became low and dangerous. "But I'm gonna remember this, Marty. You won this round, but next time we butt heads, it's gonna be *my* turn. You know, if Jack Gretsky was alive, he'd be real interested in hearing about your latest pet. If I run into him, I'll be sure to let him know. I wouldn't mind seeing ol' Jack again. Bet you wouldn't either, eh? Keep an eye on your blond, Marty — if you can find him alive in those tunnels. You ever interfere with me again, I'm going after him."

Reese placed the detonator on the ground in front of him, and backed away around the Alice in Wonderland statue.

Martin felt Vincent's anger swirling through his mind. It was hard for him to keep control over the huge man. *Let him go, little brother,* Martin urged. *It's over. We can all go home now.*

Castillo swallowed and allowed his body to relax. The cold bit him hard and he wondered where in the

tunnels his lover might be.

Vincent reached out with a comforting thought. He knew, Martin realized, exactly where Sonny was — because the Anglo was with Catherine! Castillo collected the detonator and headed for the drainpipe by the carousel.



"I've got the feeling we really have fallen down the rabbit hole this time, partner," Rico told Sonny as the battered group travelled down seemingly endless tunnels.

"You got that right," Sonny said, his raspy voice edged in fatigue as he limped along, one arm slung over Cathy Chandler.

Tubbs looked at the young woman riding patiently in his arms, her head nestled comfortably against his shoulder. "Where *are* we goin, Jamie?"

"Home," she said wistfully. "You'll like it there, Rico. No one will shoot at you when we get home."

"Not even you?" he asked, acknowledging the crossbow she held tightly to her side.

"Not even me," she promised, smiling wanly.

They heard voices round the curving tunnel walls, and the two detectives tensed instantly.

"It's okay," Catherine assured them both. "It's just more good guys."

Within minutes, a large ragtag group of men, women, and children emerged to meet them, chattering excitedly, all of them dressed in the same odd patchwork clothing. Several of them carried stretchers.

"More Merry Men," Sonny said to Cathy, bemused.

With surprising efficiency, they collected Jamie and Colin onto the stretchers. Sonny hesitated only a moment before yielding to reality and easing himself onto one of the carryalls. Rico walked along beside the now reclining blond detective, with Cathy flanking his other side.

"We're travellin' in style now, Tubbs," Sonny quipped, but it was obvious he was only staying awake with an effort.

"Just take it easy, partner," Rico soothed him, touching his shoulder. "Leave the drivin' to us." He looked up, caught Cathy's eyes. She was watching him with the oddest expression. He held her gaze brazenly, then gave her one of his killer smiles. She returned it. "Cathy, where *are* we goin'? And who *are* all these people?"

"This is Martin's family," she said simply. "You're going to his home, to his community."

"His — neighborhood?" Rico asked. "His and Vincent's?"

Sonny's eyes snapped open. He looked at Rico wildly. "What do you know about Vincent?"

"How do you think I got here, man?" Rico asked. "I may know the *streets* of New York like the palm of my hand, but these tunnels are a whole other thing. Vincent brought me here, left me guarding the exit in case Reese came that way — too bad he didn't. We

were both comin' to save you, but Cathy beat us to it." He grinned at her. "You cheated. You were a lot closer to start with."

"*Vincent* brought you to me?" Sonny asked, incredulous.

"Yeah. He and Castillo. They said they had some kind of mental 'link' with you. I never really understood it. They said they could 'feel' you through the link. It must've been real, because the lieutenant almost passed out when they made the connection. They said you were hurtin' real bad. I tried to help them, but I never felt anything."

To Rico's amazement, Sonny's eyes started to glisten. He clutched Tubbs' hand. "I *felt* you, man. I thought I was goin' crazy, thought I'd lost it. Just when things were so bad, I thought dyin' would be good news, I *felt* you and Marty *touch* me inside." Sonny had to swallow and blink to hold back his tears. "It saved me, that touch — that connection. It kept me from losin' my mind. It told me to tap the pipes. Shit, man, that touch *saved* my life."

Rico shook his head. "That was Vince's idea. I thought he and the lieutenant had gone round the bend. Thought we'd be callin' Shirley MacLaine next to bring her crystals and do some channellin' for us, but, hell, if it worked — ? Anyway, Vince said he could find you after we did it."

Sonny was searching Rico's face, his expression troubled. "You — talk about Vincent, like he was *anybody*. When you first saw him — ?"

"Oh, yeah," Rico admitted casually, "I was a little *surprised* by his appearance when I first met him — but, man, when you've grown up in N'Yawk, you develop a high level of *sophistication*, you learn how to handle new experiences."

Sonny glared at him, hiking himself up on his elbows. "You're a goddamn liar!" he declared, surprising Cathy and the stretcher bearers.

"You're right about that, partner!" Rico admitted, grinning. "That bro' scared the life out of me! Nearly wet myself. Lost about five years growth and grew at least ten new grey hairs. If I live to be a thousand I hope never to have an experience like that again in my life!" He laughed heartily, happy to be able to share this with Sonny. The blond cop laughed with him, weakly, then settled back down.

"What about you?" Rico asked his partner. "How'd you handle meetin' Vincent?"

"About the same way I usually handle anything new and startling that scares me shitless," Sonny assured him.

Rico's eyes widened. "You tried to *shoot* him?"

"He *was* trying to kill me at the time," Crockett insisted.

"I think we may have a little fence mending to do when we get Below," Cathy told Rico casually.

Suddenly, a brassy clanging rang through the pipes that ran along the walls.

"What's goin' on?" Rico asked Cathy.

She shook her head. "I'm not familiar with that code — it must be old. Pascal?"

"It's good news!" the small, bald man said brightly. "That's *Martin*! He and Vincent are safe." He lis-

tened raptly, his face brightening with ever clang. "And Martin's got the detonator! There's no longer any danger! We can all go home!"

Rico couldn't believe the intense relief that flooded through him just hearing that the lieutenant was safe, that he'd survived the meeting with Reese. He looked down at Sonny, and squeezed his hand, but said nothing for a long time. Finally he whispered, "We're home free, partner. We *did* it!"

Sonny grinned, and sagged back on the stretcher.

The joy on Cathy's face was plain, and the people around them were positively glowing, hugging one another.

"Okay, good!" Mouse piped up exuberantly. "Okay, fine! Now, Winterfest won't be late!"

Jamie looked up from her stretcher. "I knew you were going to say that."

"That means we can take these people straight to the Hospital Chambers," Winston declared authoritatively. "Father will meet us there."

"Hospital Chamber?" Rico asked Cathy. Sonny definitely needed a hospital, but in all of New York, Tubbs had never heard of a Hospital Chamber. "Where's that?"

She was still wearing that enigmatic smile. "It's not a hospital exactly, but, Sonny will get excellent care there. And Martin will explain everything when he sees you."



From where Father stood, he could see and hear the two detectives plainly, but with all the people milling around, he was, to them, just another oddly dressed stranger.

"Look, all I really need," the bedraggled blond man grouched, as his black friend eased him onto the old-fashioned twin bed, "is an ice pack, an ace bandage, a hot bath and about twelve hours sleep."

"You must be feelin' better," the dark detective commented dryly, as he gently settled the blond into the bed. "You've been bitchin' for the last ten minutes. What you really need is to see the lieutenant and know that he's well. I know that's what I'm needing right now."

"I hear you," the blond grumbled goodnaturedly.

The patriarch had already examined Jamie and Colin's wounds, and had ordered the appropriate treatments. Colin's wound was ugly, but the bullet had passed completely through. He'd need some stitching and antibiotics. Jamie still had her bullet, but her leg hadn't been broken, and the wound was clean enough. It shouldn't be too hard to extract. He doubted that she'd even have a limp once she healed. Even the lump on Mouse's head wasn't anything too serious. They'd all gotten off remarkably easy. He would operate on Jamie as soon as he tended to Martin's... friends.

Times change, old man, he scolded himself. Attitudes do as well. It's good for you to face your prejudices and be done with them.

He watched the blond detective and his darker partner. He saw how they interacted, how they *cared* for one another — how even now, they still worried about Martin. *You left the world Above because there was so little caring*, he reminded himself. *Yet, look at the love these men have for one another — and for your son, Martin.*

The black man hovered over his injured friend, fussing at him, tugging at his pillow, constantly touching him as if to reassure himself his friend was well, alive, really with him. And the fair one couldn't take his eyes off his tending partner, as though he might escape if the dark man left his sight. Yet, even as they chided one another in an old, practiced way, their conversation kept coming back to Martin. Both of them were worried sick about the Latin. No matter what they'd been through, no matter the strange circumstances of their current shelter. Martin, Father could plainly see, was their center. It warmed his heart.

The patriarch's hands tightened on both his staff and his medical bag as he took a deep breath. Suddenly, Catherine was beside him.

"I was checking on Jamie," she explained. She glanced over at the detectives. "How are they?"

"For two people who've been through what they've been through, and who've ended up here, they seem to be adjusting remarkably well."

"There was a bad moment in the tunnels," Catherine said hesitantly. "Sonny nearly shot Vincent, and Vincent attacked him. I don't think Sonny's really comfortable with the idea of meeting him again. However, Rico acts as if he and Vincent are old buddies, so that should help. And Father, Sonny was tortured by that woman. He needs medical care. Don't let him tell you he's all right."

Father's brow furrowed and he nodded. "I'll get him to talk of it, if he will. If he won't, he may confide in Martin."

Catherine looked at Father meaningfully. "Are you all right? About them?"

He gazed into her eyes, a warm smile lighting his face. "It's impossible to be in the presence of so much love and not feel good about it, Catherine. You should know that."

From the corner of his eye, Father spied Vincent and Martin at the same time Catherine did. The two were coming down the long entrance tunnel, and were out of sight of Sonny's bed. Catherine jogged up to meet them as Father followed her at more cautious pace.

Exhaustion was clearly etched on both their faces, Father noted with some concern. However, Vincent's fatigue seemed to lift the minute he took the young woman in his arms.

"Catherine," he growled into her hair, "I was so worried about you."

"Thank God we're all safe and home again," she murmured, burying her face against his massive chest.

"Are you both all right?" the elder asked worriedly.

"We're fine," Vincent assured him. "And the others?"

"Oh, Jamie and Colin were wounded, but they'll recover. Mouse got conked on the head, but I doubt

if it jarred anything important loose." He turned to Martin, saw the worry clearly on his face. That was so unlike him, the patriarch thought. This was a man who could school his expression to be completely impassive if he wanted. "I haven't seen your two friends yet. I was just getting ready to. I thought you might like to be with me when I did. I know they'll have a lot of questions."

The lieutenant inclined his head but said nothing.

"Martin," Catherine said, "Sonny's had a rough time of it. He managed to keep his wits about him and his sense of humor, but he's going to need some R and R — and some patience."

"I can't think of a better place for some of that than here," Father remarked to his Latin son. "We'll be having Winterfest on schedule, in two days. It'll be wonderful if all three of you were here for it."

Martin peered at the elder with some surprise but said, "That sounds inviting — but, unfortunately, I don't think we'll be able to stay in New York long enough for that." He avoided Vincent's eyes when he said that, and Father noted his younger son's strange expression.

Catherine's face fell and she pulled away from Vincent. "You *can't* be serious, Martin! You've got to stay for Winterfest — and you've got to stay for Sonny. He needs to *know* about you, to discover who you really are. And he needs to know Vincent."

Martin glanced at both Catherine and Father, plainly surprised at her frank talk in front of the old man. Vincent only looked away and the mention of the uncomfortable situation that now existed between himself and Sonny.

"Don't shy away from it," Catherine scolded Vincent. "I know it'll be a difficult meeting, but it has to happen." She looked at Father. "Sonny's terrified of Vincent now. He's got to get past that. Martin, you're *family* and Sonny has to become part of *that*. Don't throw this opportunity away. It may never come again."

Martin said nothing, merely turned away. It hurt Father to see how uncomfortable his son still was here. Below, a place that had once been his home.

"It's so late," Vincent said suddenly. "Catherine, perhaps I should escort you home." Father realized he'd been watching his older brother worriedly, and no doubt acted now in response to the subtle signals from their bond.

"That is a good idea," she glanced at her watch. "Joe'll expect me to make a report in —" her eyes widened, "two hours! I'll barely have time for a shower!"

The Cuban reached into his pocket. "Will you give him this, Catherine?" He handed her the detonator.

"My pleasure." She glanced apologetically from Father to Vincent. "I'll have to bring people into the tunnels in the morning, to collect the remaining arms, and the bombs — and the body of Ellen Morganstern."

Vincent nodded. "We've sealed off that part of the tunnels. Even if they travel too far, they won't find us."

"Tell Joe," Castillo said, "that I'll see him in twenty-four hours to make my report. But you and I will have to get together before that, to collaborate on our

stories."

She nodded. "If at all possible, I'm going to be taking most of the day off myself. I'll deflect as much curiosity about Sonny and Rico as I can."

"Tell him about Reese," Martin said. "He'll need to know since he'll be getting a frantic phone call from Walsh, the federal agent. But I think that situation has now successfully been taken out of Washington's hands." His eyes brightened slightly. "Try to get some rest. Don't let Joe keep you at the office all day."

Father watched Vincent and Catherine leave and then turned to lead Martin to where his friends were resting. Suddenly, he paused, realizing that he and his son were in a private place, far from the other hospital beds, and that they were alone. He put a hand on Martin's arm. The Latino stopped, and looked at him, confused. There was no point in putting this off any longer.

"Martin," the elder said hesitantly, his voice soft, "Catherine told me about you and your detective."

There was a momentary flash of dismay on the lieutenant's face as he must've wondered how *she* knew, but it passed. He set his mouth in a firm line. His shoulders stiffened. "And Ricardo? Did you *she* tell you about Ricardo and us?"

"She wasn't sure about that."

He nodded. "He is part of us, as well. You should know that." The Hispanic turned away to stare at the unyielding cavern walls, and Father could see his back grow rigid. "We'll leave tomorrow —"

"No!" the old man protested, taking his son's arm. "You *misunderstand*. I only mentioned it to assure you that you and your — *lovers* — are welcomed here. This is your home — and theirs as well. I want you to be comfortable, to be *happy* here. And I'm so happy *for* you, that you're not alone anymore. Please, believe me, son."

Castillo's face didn't change much, but there was a slight look of surprise in his eyes that quickly gave way to an undisguised warmth.

"I've been so wrong in the past," Father said softly. "Allow me some time to make that up to you, in the only way I can. Allow me to care for you and yours, to know them as you do, and make them welcome."

Martin looked as though he might speak, then only nodded and smiled warmly. Finally, he said, "I would like that very much, Father. We'll stay — at least until morning."

"Till morning then." The elder returned the smile and moved to guide Martin to his lover's bedside. "Perhaps then, I'll have the chance to argue my case again."



"You think Marty will ever find us down here?" Sonny asked Rico worriedly, his eyes roving the small tunnel chamber they could see. It was a good thing he'd never been claustrophobic, Crockett thought, as he stared at the rough-hewn stone walls of the low-ceiling, dark chamber in which they currently rested.

The metal cot he lay on was probably from the forties, he thought, as were the aged hospital-style freestanding curtained walls that limited his vision. He could see the mouth of their chamber, and the comings and goings of dozens of people carrying blankets and provisions, but that was all. It felt odd not to be able to see *out*, even onto the gray New York landscape.

Tubbs had parked himself on the edge of Sonny's bed as they waited. "You kidding? The lieutenant could find his way around this place with the lights out."

Suddenly, an elderly man with a limp and an ornate staff hobbled into view. Castillo appeared beside him as though it were the most normal thing in the world to be here in this underground world.

"Marty!" Crockett hiked himself up on his elbows as Rico shot to his feet.

"Lieutenant!" the black man said at almost the same time.

The black clad man moved forward, smiling, plainly relieved to see them. He gave Rico a strong, quick hug, then leaned over Sonny to stare into his eyes. Without speaking, he kissed him softly, and Sonny returned it unselfconsciously, incredibly relieved to be able to see and touch his lover again. After all they'd been through, he could not concern himself with social propriety now.

"Marty," Sonny said softly, clutching his clothes, "there were times tonight when I thought I'd never see either of you again."

"It's all right now," Castillo said, speaking to both Sonny and Rico. "We're home. We're together. We're safe." He turned to the elder man waiting patiently at the foot of Sonny's bed. "Sonny. Rico. This is my father. Father, this is my family, my lovers, James 'Sonny' Crockett and Ricardo Tubbs."

The old man stepped forward, took Rico's hand in a strong, friendly grip. "The pleasure is mine," he said warmly. He took Sonny's hand next and held it in both of his. His hands were strong and warm as they surrounded the Southerner's, and Crockett instantly felt that the love this man had for Martin had been extended to them.

"You're — Marty's *dad*?" Crockett asked, incredulous.

"Yes," the elder assured him. "And Vincent's. And everyone else's — anyone that grows up Below. Even yours if you'd like."

Sonny looked at Martin, who nodded reassuringly, then turned back to Rico, who was beaming, enjoying himself immensely.

"I know you must have a *thousand* questions," Father said, "but I really think Martin should be the one to answer them. What I would like to do now is tend to your injuries."

Sonny saw Rico tense up. "That's okay," the black man said diplomatically, "but, he really needs to see a doctor."

"Father is a doctor," Martin assured them. "Doctor Jacob Wells."

"Doctor *Father*?" Sonny asked, quirking an eyebrow.

The patriarch smiled. "I understand you're limping, James, but that you weren't shot?"

Sonny nodded, indicating his injured joint. "It's my knee. An old football injury." He hissed as Father palpated it. "It happened when... I fell on it."

"It's well traumatized," Father agreed. "But I can't feel any chips grinding. I can check it more closely after we get you in a hot bath and some clean clothes. Right now we'll put some cold on it." He looked meaningfully into Sonny's eyes. "Any... other injuries?" he asked tactfully.

Crockett's throat tightened. He'd known this moment was coming, he reminded himself, there was no reason to act surprised. Things could be worse. He could be in one of those impersonal, chaotic New York emergency rooms. Still, he didn't feel ready to talk about it.

He's a doctor, dope! Sonny scolded himself. *Who else are you gonna tell?* Crockett thought of all the times he'd advised victims of sexual assault, how reluctant they were to seek medical help. He'd always instinctively understood their feelings, but even so, none of that helped him much now.

"Partner," Rico said softly, pulling him out of his reverie. "Maybe the lieutenant and I should leave you in private with the doctor?"

Sonny sighed. No, that wouldn't help either. "Stay," he said to them. "I've spent enough time without you two. I want you here with me." He took a deep breath and focused on a chink on the far wall. *May as well begin at the beginning.*

"Well — when the Black Widow's men captured me, I got bounced around pretty bad, but I don't think any ribs are broken. And I never lost consciousness. They cuffed me to the pipes, so my wrists are bruised up good." He extended his hands to show the doctor, who gently fingered the mottled skin. Sonny swallowed and continued to describe his ordeal in the hands of the Black Widow as calmly and clinically as he could, as if he were working on a situation report. He didn't look at Martin or Rico, afraid that the concern and pain he'd no doubt see in their eyes wouldn't let him continue.

Father's face maintained a mask of detached professionalism, and Sonny submitted to his exam stoically. It was brief, but thorough.

"Well," the elder sighed, after finishing, "I would tentatively say there's been no internal injuries. You have some abdominal tenderness which is certainly understandable, but if there were serious damage, the pain would be much worse. The, uh, topical wounds on the scrotum are superficial and should heal up quickly. Unless the injury to your knee requires surgery, even that should feel much better in a day or so. James, I think with some rest, you'll be fine — physically."

Crockett finally allowed himself to glance at Rico and Martin. Tubbs looked gray, but Marty's face was set, grim. It was an expression Sonny had seen before. He smiled to himself, realizing he was worried about *them* now. He turned to Father. "And mentally?"

"Mentally, I think you should be patient with yourself. I'm not a psychiatrist, but I've seen a lot of trauma victims. You may have nightmares. You may

have trouble trusting. Even those closest to you. You're an experienced police officer, you've worked with people who've been severely traumatized. You must accept the fact that you've been tortured and threatened psychologically. You may discover a few new tics and twitches. Be as patient with yourself as I'm sure Martin and Ricardo will be with you.

"I prescribe a vacation. Take it easy while you're here with us. Let your friends take care of you — and by that, I mean all of us here Below. I'm trying to convince Martin that you should all stay for our major holiday, Winterfest. We've plenty of room and —"

Martin cleared his throat. "I've explained to Father that it may not be possible for us to stay."

Sonny looked at Marty's odd, strained expression quizzically. Crockett wanted very much to stay, not just to rest, but to get closer to the people who knew Martin better than any people on earth. But before he could ask Marty why they couldn't, Rico said quietly, "*Por favor — Martin...?* Could you and I take a little walk? I'd like to speak with you in private."

Sonny and Father exchanged a puzzled look as Tubbs and Castillo stepped away from his bed without even glancing back.



Castillo led Rico away from the hospital chambers, down the long walkway that led to one of the ornate waterfalls that graced the Underground. Most of the Tunnel Dwellers were busy tending to their new patients, so he felt comfortable they'd find privacy at the falls. He suspected whatever Rico wanted to say needed to be said to him alone.

"This is beautiful!" the dark detective said quietly as they drew alongside the magnificent waterfall. "This whole place — it's like falling into never-never land."

Yes, Martin thought. That it was. Whenever he returned here he soon began to feel as if he'd never grown up.

"And if you make Sonny leave here now — before he's seen this, and the other wonders of your world — you'll be making a terrible mistake. Sonny can't afford to be jerked around right now. He needs us to be here with him — and you two need to get some balance in your relationship. This is an opportunity for you to open up to him, show him who you really are. Why won't you let this happen?"

Castillo looked at Rico for a long moment. He realized if these two men *were* his lovers that he had to stop holding back from them. He had to start telling them the truth. That was why his relationship with Jack Gretsky had been so strong, because Jack really knew him. It was one of the many reasons why things couldn't work out between him and Elliot.

The Cuban looked at Rico and thought of everything they'd been through, of Rico's unquestioning support, his depth of caring. Then he thought of Sonny's ordeal, thought of the cool, clinical way Crockett had described what had been done to him. And Martin remembered feeling the stab of Sonny's pain

in his gut, in his testicles. It'd been everything he could do not to throw up at that second. He swallowed, remembering so many things.

This unconventional relationship with Sonny and Rico might be his last best chance to find what it was in his life that he needed the most. He had to do the right thing, the best thing for all of them. If he could only be sure of what that was.

"Don't you think I want you and Sonny to stay here?" Martin asked Rico painfully. "Don't you think I want you to know my Father, my family? All my life I've waited for Father to accept me, accept the people I love. That was something I thought would never happen." He sighed.

Rico looked even more confused.

"You remember," Martin asked, "when you, Vincent and I tried to 'feel' Sonny?"

Rico nodded.

"You really didn't understand that."

"Vincent tried to explain it to me — about his *bond* with you, with Catherine."

"You know," Martin said, "I've always believed in police intuition. It's one of the reasons I've always given you and Sonny so much leeway in your work, because of his intuition, and the way the two of you interact, your closeness, your singlemindedness. I believe in that kind of intuition, that mental bonding, because of Vincent. Sonny has so much empathy — you two work on instinct half the time. I've always had that kind of ability, too. Well, I think you and he, and now I, have developed a kind of bond, on a minor level, like Vincent and I have."

"Okay," Rico said hesitantly, "let's say I go along with that. What does that have to do with —?"

Martin's jaw clenched. He hated even bringing this up. "The other night. When we were both in bed with Sonny. What happened — happened because of my bond with Vincent. He dreamt of Catherine, of making love to her, and she dreamt of it, too. Their powerful desire was transmitted through me to Sonny and you. I was out of control for much of it."

Castillo's intense gaze captured Rico's copper eyes. "That was the effect of a simple *dream*, Ricardo. Vincent's and Catherine's celibate relationship is hovering on change — change *I've* encouraged before I realized what it could mean to me — to us. If they decide to consummate their love while we're still in New York, I don't know what will happen. That's why we *have* to leave."

To Martin's surprise, Rico only sighed, clearly exasperated with his superior. "Is *that* your only concern?"

The lieutenant's eyes flashed angrily.

"I imagine that for you," Rico commented thoughtfully, "that is *the* concern. The one thing you're afraid of — no, *terrified* of. Being out of control." He shook his head.

Castillo glared at him, growing angrier.

"Now hold on," the black man said gently, "just wait a minute. Let's think this out. Dreams are funny things. They effect the subconscious. They work on the mind when it's not protected by its conscious inhibitions. Did you ever think that the *reality* might be

totally different? That we might not even be affected? Or that, knowing about this, we could *do* something about it? We were caught unawares the other night, in our sleep, and Sonny and I knew nothing about Vincent or mental bonds, or anything. Besides, like I've said before — we're *lovers*. Nothing's going to happen among us that we can't handle."

The lieutenant's face tightened. Tubbs still knew so little about him. So little about the dark side of him. "Rico, you've seen the face of Vincent's beast, what happens to him when he becomes enraged, out of control. *That* was the part of him that flooded into *me* that night. It *knew* to lock onto the part of me that's dark, that's violent. Rico, there's a side of me that sometimes — I can't control."

He remembered that day in the strategy room when he faced Dale Menton; he recalled hearing that scum declare proudly that *he* had sold Martin's DEA company out, had caused the death of Jack Gretskey and all the people that worked with Martin in Thailand, and had helped frame the false death of May Ying. Menton, who had been Reese's handler in Thailand. Martin remembered realizing all of that in the strategy room, then hearing a loud humming in his ears. When he came to, he had one hand wrapped around Menton's throat, as the red-faced CIA agent kicked feebly while Martin slowly squeezed his throat closed. It had taken *both* Sonny and Rico to pull him off Menton, and they'd been able to only because Martin had let them.

"Rico," Castillo said, his voice barely above a whisper, "there's a part of me that can hurt without conscience — that *likes* to hurt. A part of myself I can barely face. That part was born when I found my mother dead. It was what attracted Jack to me. He loved that side of me and tried to *draw* it out. It caused constant friction between us." He paused, his throat tightening. He rubbed his eyes. "And Vincent's Other knows it. That night with you and Sonny — that was the part of me that kissed you. You pulled away, sensing the wrongness in me. Ricardo, I took Sonny by *force* that night. He didn't resist because he *couldn't*, because of the intense need I projected into his mind. You heard him tonight, heard him talk about what he's been through. Could he tolerate that treatment *both* from me again? Tonight?

Tomorrow? Ever?"

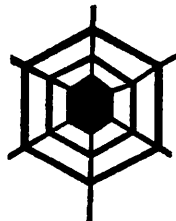
Tubbs shook his head, his eyes soft and full of sympathy. "You can't make me believe you have *ever*, or *would ever*, do anything to really hurt Sonny — or me." He faced Martin squarely. "Look, I saw Vincent's dark side, and it scared the hell out of me. Sonny's seen it too, and he's *still* scared. We've got to get him past that. That's important. More important than worrying about what *might* happen *some* night. I'm tellin' you, we can handle this together, Lieutenant. As lovers. We need to stay here. We need to get to know Vincent. We need to get to know you. All of you, including whatever monsters are hiding in there. We can handle them. Me and Sonny — we can *tame* them. Stop fighting us, *Martin*. Let us in."

Castillo stared at the black man dumbfounded. Did he really believe it was as simple as that? Did he really trust Castillo that much?

Rico approached Martin boldly and slid his arms around his lieutenant's slim form. "Sometimes, you just have to trust your partners." Then he bent and boldly touched his lips to the Latino's.

Surprised, Castillo hesitated, his body tense. Then, he yielded to the comforting, sensual kiss, opening his mouth, feeling Rico's tongue touch his lightly, gently. The taste of the black man's kiss was so different from Sonny's, yet Martin felt himself respond. Could he really love two people at once and *not* be torn apart by it? Could those two people confront the side of him he feared the most and not be repulsed? Could their trust in him conquer that dark Other? He took his detective into his embrace and returned the kiss, letting his love pour through it, and wishing with all his heart that his partner was right. That trust was all he needed.

*Your kiss
Has hindered the day
A longing
That won't go away
You just keep knocking
And waking my heart
Like daylight chasing the dark
— So It Shall Be — k.d. lang*



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

FOR A GOOD

NIGHT'S SLEEP

*You can hear the sound
Of the underground train
You know, it feels like distant thunder*
— The City Never Sleeps — Eurythmics

"I take it you've met Vincent," Father asked Sonny lightly, as they waited for Martin and Rico to return. The elder had obtained a cold pack from one of his countless assistants, and held it in place on the detective's aching knee.

The Floridian met the old man's eyes. He'd said he was not only Marty's father, but Vincent's as well. Crockett moistened his mouth and laughed wryly. "You could say that. I don't think either of us made the best first impression we could have. We tried our best to kill each other!"

"Was Vincent trying to kill *you* — or protect Catherine?" Father asked gently.

Sonny paused. "It was a pretty confusing moment. I suppose he could have been trying to protect her."

Father's eyes fastened on his patient. They were full of old pain. "Was his appearance so terrible?"

The cop shivered. He licked his lips, seeing that face again, and those fangs. "Yeah," he whispered. "Yeah, it was. What *happened* to him? How did he get that way?"

The old man shook his head. "We don't know. He was found as an infant, abandoned, outside of St. Vincent's hospital. He appeared much as he does today, except that he was weak, dying —"

Sonny tried to imagine Vincent as a baby, like some terrible kitten, mewling with a fierce hunger. "He's not really — *human*, is he?"

Father smiled sadly. "I believe Vincent is the most *human* being I've ever known. He's human enough to love Catherine. Perhaps, that's part of your problem?"

"Yeah, well — maybe it is. She's a very special woman."

"That she is," Father agreed. "And very easy to love. I love her. Everyone Below loves her. We love Vincent, too — and Martin. But I'll be honest with you. There was a time when I had trouble accepting Martin — because of whom *he* loved. I was wrong then. You might need to decide whom *you* love — and ask yourself if you can accept their loved ones. That's part of love, too. Vincent and Martin are brothers. And in Vincent's defense, I must say, whether or not he is completely human, *he* has never made the mistake *I* have. He's loved Martin *unconditionally*, all of his life."

Sonny considered the elder's words. Did he love Castillo that much? Suddenly, he wasn't sure.

Just then, his partner and his lieutenant returned to the chamber. Something subtle had changed between them. Something had happened to draw them closer.

They were in agreement; he could see it in their eyes, in their body stance. It made him glad.

"Father," Martin said softly, "we would all like to stay for Winterfest."

Sonny's face split into a grin as his eyes caught Rico's. Tubbs smiled confidently. It'd been a long time since they'd smiled together like this.

"Your room and Jack's have been kept as guest quarters," Father assured him, obviously pleased. "They're ready and waiting. All we have to do is round up some clean clothes for you three and you'll be all set."

"Hey, Doc," Sonny chimed in, "what's the chances of our getting a hot bath? I feel like water hasn't touched me in a month."

"That's part of my prescription, son. I think you'll enjoy our special spa. Don't you agree, Martin?"

Sonny was surprised at the look of undisguised pleasure on Castillo's face as he nodded.



Crockett and Tubbs gaped in plain awe at the massive cavern. It was alive with the sound of roaring waterfalls and deep, steaming pools of churning water. Martin was inordinately pleased at their expressions; it wasn't often that the jaded Vice cops were so impressed. The chamber with its millions of gallons of fresh water had been used for laundry and bathing for years by the underground dwellers and Castillo could still remember the first time he had seen it as a child. There were at least fifteen deep, hot water pools that were surrounded by five massive, cold water falls. Where the water came from and where it went, no one knew. Why the falls were cold and the pools hot, no one knew either.

Rico and Sonny stood close together, an arm slung casually around each other, partly to support the blond who was getting around with the aid of a crutch, and partly just for reassurance.

"And we're still in N'Yawk?" Tubbs asked in wonder.

The Cuban nodded. "Just below the center of the park. *Far* below it."

"But the light...?" the Anglo asked in a hushed tone. "Where does the light come from?"

"No one knows," Martin said. He saw movement from a side cavern and looked to see Winston approaching with a bundle.

"Hey, Winston, m'man!" Sonny greeted him, pleased to see someone he'd already met.

"What's up, bro'?" Rico chided, smiling at the rotund black man.

"Your duds, 'blood," Winston teased back, indicating his mound of fabric. He eyed the three with unabashed amusement. "This won't be your *usual* street ware, gents, but you'll find them well worn and comfortable, and you'll fit in a little better 'round here once you're in them. Also, they're clean and fresh, and there's dry towels here as well, along with soap and other toiletries."

"I think the man's tryin' to tell us we could use a little freshening," Rico said.

"Just a *little*," Winston assured him, leaving the bundle and going back the way he came. "Take your time, boys. The water's all yours."

"Come on," the Hispanic urged Sonny, moving to his side. "Let's get you in the pool."

"No arguments from me, pal," Crockett assured him as he balanced while his lovers helped him out of his clothes. "Nothin' I want more right now than to wash the dirt of this day away."

The lieutenant tried not to react to his lover's mottled bruising, knowing it would only make the detective self-conscious and uncomfortable. But as they eased the blond out of his pants, it was impossible for the normally sanguine man not to react to the crusted wounds on the detective's swollen scrotum. "Sonny," he hissed.

"It's okay, Marty," Crockett reassured him, as he stood on one leg. "You heard the doc say I'd be fine. Right, Rico?"

The black man nodded, but Castillo didn't miss his anxious expression.

"No biggee, guys," the Floridian said casually. "Just another day at the beach."

The lieutenant saw his jaw tighten, belying his casual attitude.

"Besides — Ellen got the worst of it." His face shadowed darkly. "Reese killed her where we left her — handcuffed to the pipes. Helpless."

"You *had* to do it, Sonny," Rico insisted. "You had no *choice*. Don't start second-guessing it. We're all damned lucky she didn't kill *you*."

The blond cop nodded, mustering a smile. "I'm okay. Really. I'm fine."

Rico's gaze caught Martin's worried expression, but Castillo only looked back at Sonny's face, the lines of exhaustion etched around his tired eyes. Slinging one of the younger man's bare arms around his shoulders, he helped him hobble to the nearest pool as Tubbs shed his own clothes before joining them.

"There are steps hewn out of the rock," Martin showed them, "and shelves to sit on. The pools are bottomless. The steps and shelves have always been there. No one knows who carved them."

Rico stepped onto the wide slabs leading into the pool and sighed as the hot water surged around his calves. "Oh, this is *perfect*," he sighed. "Crockett, you're gonna *love* this."

Martin stood at the pool's edge, handing Sonny over to the black man, as they eased the blond into the dark water.

"Oh, *man!*" Crockett grinned as he became immersed in the steaming pool. "This is like a dream come true. Come on in, Marty. You've got to be just as weary as we are."

Castillo needed no more encouragement to shed his things and slip into the familiar waters.

"Must be a lot of minerals in it," Rico surmised. "I feel so *buoyant*."

Sonny hovered close to his partner and as Martin moved near them, the blond gravitated towards him. He could tell the detective was plainly reluctant to be

too far from either of them. Castillo slid his arms around his lover, kissing the side of his face. "Are you really all right?" he asked worriedly. Rico met his black eyes, his own concern plainly evident.

Crockett looked at them. "I don't know, Marty. I really don't know." He returned his lieutenant's embrace tentatively, then slid out of his arms, easing himself onto the pool's shelf and closing his eyes as the hot water soothed his aches and pains.

Martin felt Rico touch him underwater, surreptitiously, as though to ease his fears. He took the New Yorker's hand and squeezed it.



"These clothes really *are* comfortable," Sonny remarked as Rico laced up his patchwork sleeve. "Don't think it'd do much for Burnett's image, but *I* like it." Castillo examined the outfit appreciatively as Rico helped Sonny dress. The pieced and repaired clothing was all creams and ecru with romantically full sleeves and a bodice of cream-colored leather. The pants were well worn buckskin and pale denim that fit Sonny like a glove, as though made expressly for him. Martin felt as if he were seeing his lover for the first time, and becoming enchanted by him all over again.

"Down here," Tubbs reminded the blond, "no one's ever *heard* of Burnett. He doesn't even exist."

The Southerner paused as if realizing that Rico was right. For once, he could shed his evil alter ego, and just be himself. Martin watched as he thought about that. He imagined Sonny was trying to decide, without Burnett — who *was* *he*? *He seemed to shrug it off finally, and finished adjusting his outfit.*

"It's *you*, partner," Rico remarked quietly, his copper eyes roving Crockett's body. "You as D'Artagnon, anyway. *I love it.*"

"You're looking pretty hot yourself, pal," the Anglo commented, eyeing the New Yorker's tight jeans, patched with dark leather accents. It was topped by a silky, midnight blue, billowing shirt.

"Yeah," Rico admitted, "but the lieutenant's outfit — now that's *class*."

Martin was surprised how well his old, black silk gi still fit him as he secured it with the black belt he'd earned so many years ago. He carefully donned the quilted, sleeveless, floor-length Japanese over-robe that had been given him by his sensei, and tied the cords that held it closed against the underground chill. A magnificent, stylized white crane with black wingtips was embroidered on the back of the black silk robe.

Sonny grinned at his boss. "I like that outfit better than the one I picked out for you in Miami."

The Latino was surprised at how much the teasing compliment pleased him. "Come on," Martin said, suppressing a smile, "we all need about twelve hours sleep. Our rooms aren't far."



"This was where you lived when you were a kid?" Sonny asked curiously as he hobbled into the underground chamber. It wasn't a very large area, but it was comfortable. There was an old oak chest and matching wardrobe, and a battered brass king sized bed with old-fashioned wooden end tables beside it.

"It was my mother's room," Martin admitted. "I slept in that small alcove over there." He indicated the cavern off to the right.

Crockett could see a few more pieces of unmatched furniture and a smaller, double bed. Both beds were well dressed with quilts and blankets. To the weary Southerner, they were far more inviting than the sterile hotel bed he'd last slept in. Right now, this odd, rough-hewn cavern looked like a home.

"After my mother's death, I moved in here, and later Jack took my alcove. However, these weren't our beds. They moved these in for guests after we left."

Sonny limped over to the large brass bed and eased onto it. This Tiny Tim routine was old already. He gave the mattress a tentative bounce. "This might just be the most *comfortable* bed I've ever felt in my life," he said tiredly.

The hot bath had sapped the last of his resistance. He wasn't even sure he'd be able to get out his clothes before he fell asleep. He glanced at the two men hovering over him. Their concern, while touching, was getting on his nerves. Sonny felt like he hadn't had a minute to himself in years, that he was constantly surrounded, enveloped, smothered. He rubbed a hand through his hair.

"Listen, uh," he began hesitantly. "Would it bother you two if I wanted to sleep alone tonight? It's just, well, I'm so beat."

"No, man, that's fine," Rico assured him quickly, touching his shoulder.

"I'll go into the alcove," Sonny offered, "and use the smaller bed."

"Stay," Martin said softly. "You're here. Just stay."

"If you need us, partner," Rico said, as Sonny started undressing, "we'll be in shouting range. Just holler."

"Sleep, Sonny," Martin said to him softly.

Crockett looked into the bottomless black eyes. As much as he loved Marty, he needed some time to be away from that look of concern. The detective wasn't used to his lieutenant showing so much emotion on his face. He was a little unnerved by it.

"Try not to think," Martin suggested. "Just sleep."

Sonny nodded, and slipped his shirt off, then slid out of his pants, and climbed under the patchwork blankets, pulling them up to his chin. Almost immediately, his body sagged and his breathing slowed. He never even heard Marty and Rico leave.

When the sun goes down, and the moon rises high

Honey, if you call my name, I will take away your pain

I will take good care of you tonight

— When the Sun Goes Down — Fleetwood Mac

"Do you think he's warm enough?" Castillo asked Rico. Already, Sonny's posture, the relaxed expression on his face told the Latin the blond was sleeping.

Rico turned to his lieutenant. "I think he's fine. He's safe, and he's asleep." He touched Martin's shoulder gently, pulling the lieutenant's attention away from his blond lover. "Come on, partner. We could use some sleep ourselves."

Reluctantly, Castillo nodded and walked with Rico to his old alcove, now furnished so differently.

The two detectives approached the aged four-poster, each of them moving slowly, their limbs heavy, their bodies aching with fatigue. Martin sat on the right side of the bed as Rico walked around to the left and began undressing. Castillo rubbed a hand tiredly over his face.

"This day had to be thirty-six hours long," Tubbs complained tiredly as he removed his tunnel dweller's garb.

The Hispanic nodded in agreement, slipping out of his quilted robe and folding it carefully over the back of nearby chair. He felt Rico sit on the bed, felt the bed move as the black man slid his long legs under the covers.

"Man," the tired detective sighed, "this is just what the doctor ordered!" Rico turned his back to Martin and settled in.

Castillo unbelted the top of his gi, removed it and folded it neatly, placing it on chair. He slid his pants off and smoothed them over the chair back on top of the robe. Lifting the covers, he eased into the bed, keeping his back to his dark partner.

"Good night, Lieutenant," Rico said quietly.

"Night, Ricardo," Martin replied huskily.

He took several deep breaths to relax his exhausted limbs and waited patiently for sleep. After several moments, he realized he was straining to hear Sonny, that his body was tense again, expectant. He willed himself to relax. He couldn't cope with the thought that he'd suffer from insomnia now, tonight. It was an old enemy, and he'd worked through it many nights in his office at OCB. It would be too cruel for him to have to endure it now, when he was so exhausted.

His mind kept flip-flopping between the present and the past, between Sonny and Rico and all they'd been through over the last few days, and then ricocheting over to Jack and May Ying, or Elliot and Reese, and finally to Catherine and Vincent. Like a boomerang, his thoughts careened around the crowd of people in his mind, all vying for attention. He kept coming back to Jack, no doubt because of where he lay now. It was a different bed, but the same room where he and Jack had learned about love, tremendously excited and yet wonderfully fearful. There was something about the fear of it that had drawn the young Martin like a lure.



Then the memory of Reese's flat voice taunted him. *Has he seen your dark side yet, Marty? Has he seen that sweet streak of sadism you barely keep leashed? Or has he already learned to like it?*

Castillo squeezed his eyes shut, willing the voice into stillness, shoving the thought away, not wanting to examine that. It was his worst inner demon, his fear of the Other lurking inside him that was much darker than Vincent's. After all, Vincent couldn't help his — it was part of what he was. But Martin's had been nurtured by his early life on the streets, then later, by Jack.

He'd almost followed Jack into the CIA, but had pulled back at the last moment. Jack had become a professional assassin, and Martin had, instead, gone undercover for the DEA. But his dark talents had been useful enough to his superiors and soon he was undercover in Southeast Asia, partnered with Jack again. The two worked so very well together — often much better than their superiors really wanted.

Martin thought of his and Jack's partnership in those years. Jack was right, of course. Had Martin chosen, he'd have been an excellent assassin. In the long run, it hadn't mattered much. He was quite good enough at the work he had to do. Quite good enough.

He sighed tiredly, just as the springs on Sonny's bed squeaked plaintively. Castillo tensed, and lifted his head.

When Rico touched him, he jumped in surprise.

"Hey, partner," Rico murmured softly, rolling towards him, "try to relax. You're wired!" The black man's big hands moved to Castillo's tight shoulders and gently kneaded them. "You'll never get to sleep that way."

The caring touch made Martin realize how tense he really was. He sagged a bit under Rico's urging and when Tubbs guided him onto his back, he yielded, facing the dark detective. The black man perched on one elbow and stared at his superior sympathetically.

"We've been through a hell of a lot today," Rico said quietly. "It can be hard to wind down when it's finally over."

Martin nodded, gazing into the handsome copper eyes in the room's dim candlelight. Rico was watching him oddly, warmly. Suddenly, he reached over and touched the Cuban's cheek tenderly, stroking his face. "Lieutenant, you all right?"

The Latino was startled at his body's reaction to the loving touch and was even more surprised when he found his arms reaching to embrace the larger man. He pulled him against his tired body.

Tubbs slid against Martin instantly and bent his head for a kiss. Without hesitation, Martin's lips parted and his tongue embraced Rico's, surging into the dark man's sweet tasting mouth. The black man's kiss deepened, became more intense, more insistent. His kiss spoke of passion unfulfilled, as though Rico had been waiting all this time to finish the lovemaking he and Martin had barely started the night before.

The Cuban's heart slammed against his ribs as his manhood came up hard and hot. His arms tightened around the broad chest and Rico returned the embrace with equal strength. Martin felt a warm

penis push against his thigh as his lover's nodded to life.

He sucked in a deep breath. They were too tired. It was too late. They were responding to a primal need, not an emotional one. He reined in his rampaging desire and pulled away from the black man. Just then, Sonny's bed cried out again as the blond rolled over, groaning in his sleep. As one, Martin and Rico both turned toward the sound.

When they caught each other's eyes again, Tubbs' smile was warm, full of affection.

"You know," the New Yorker said hesitantly, "we've never been that close, but some of that's been because we've had Sonny between us. He's our focus — the one thing we have in common. But a lot has changed since we hit N'Yawk." He rubbed the back of his fingers gently over the scar on Martin's right cheek.

Castillo swallowed, afraid to move, the touch igniting him.

"Right now," Rico continued, "last night feels like a hundred years ago. I told you then that I loved you. I meant that. And ever since I first touched you — I've wanted to finish showing you how much."

Martin measured his breaths carefully as he tried futilely to slow his heart. Rico pressed against him, rubbing his furred, smooth skin against the Latino's body. Almost against his will, Castillo's head turned back towards Crockett's room.

Rico took his chin and gently pulled Martin's attention back. "Sonny doesn't need us now," he murmured softly. "And if he does, we're right here. We're *both* so attuned to him we'll know right away. Stop worrying. We'll make him well again. Reese's gone, Ellen's dead, and your family's all around you now, loving you, accepting you, just the way you are. You told Vincent and Father that Sonny and I were your family, that we were lovers. Are we lovers?" The black man's handsome face hovered near Martin's. "Are we?"

"Is that what you really want?" Castillo whispered huskily, inhaling Rico's subtle musky scent, surprised at how much the detective's nearness had aroused him. He was barely holding himself in check.

"It's what I want, but you have to want it, too. In the past, you've loved two people at the same time — and it tore you apart. I could understand if you didn't want to risk that again, but Sonny and I aren't going to do that to you. You're never going to have to choose between us." Rico slid his large hands over the Latino's back and shoulders.

Castillo's mind swirled in confusion even as his tired body responded naturally to this man's loving touch. He sighed and shut his eyes, easing into the warm embrace, terribly grateful for the black man's caring, for having someone near to share his concerns and fears. "You really think he'll be all right?" he murmured against Rico's ear.

"How could he not be?" Tubbs responded. "He's got us to pull him through this. He's got our love."

Martin turned his face and Rico pressed his mouth against his lips. The detective sighed again, happily, as their tongues touched gently now. The Cuban's hands started to explore Rico's large, firm body as the

black man's kiss became more seductive, more passionate. His tongue reached deep into Castillo's mouth, running over his teeth, tickling his palate. In spite of his best efforts, Martin's pulse increased. He began panting.

Rico's kiss was totally different from Sonny's — there was none of that hot, impetuous need. Instead, these kisses were smoldering, slow, languid. It wasn't better — just different. But the difference intrigued Martin; he found it intoxicating, exciting.

"Lieutenant," Rico whispered, pulling reluctantly away from the Latino's demanding mouth, "make love to me. Be my lover." His large, warm hands traveled down Martin's slim body and over his tight buttocks.

"Still — it's 'Lieutenant'?" the Cuban asked huskily, as he responded to the sensuous touch. "Even here? Even now?"

Tubbs smiled warmly. "You'll always be my lieutenant. The man I trust to lead me. To guide me. Sonny's my partner. And you're my lieutenant. The man I trust to stand by me — like you always have, Lieutenant."

Castillo swallowed, his throat tight with emotion. "If you keep saying that here, when we're in OCB —"

Rico grinned. "And I call you 'Lieutenant,' you're afraid that maybe for a moment, you'll be back in this room? What's wrong with that? Remember this moment between us. When we're both warm, safe, comfortable, happy — and loving each other. Lieutenant."

Then Tubbs slid his hand between their bodies and carefully grasped Martin's erection, making him gasp. The black man's eyes widened in surprise as the Hispanic flinched in embarrassment.

"*Madre de Dios!*" Rico exclaimed softly. "That's a hell of a weapon to conceal."

The lieutenant's face darkened and he licked his lips, speechless. He had never learned to take pride in the size of his organ like some men did. After all, it wasn't anything he contributed to, it was genetic. And, if anything, it could sometimes be an unwieldy impediment in lovemaking.

Tubbs smiled encouragingly as he stroked Martin tenderly, watching his expression avidly. "It's all right," he reassured his lover. "It's fine. Don't get all sensitive on me."

Tubbs' eyes were filled with a delightful eagerness that Martin found hard to resist. His hips moved as he pumped into that comforting hand, and he relaxed in his lover's embrace, enjoying the comfort of Rico's warmth and strength. Martin was exhausted and he knew Rico had to be as well, but it seemed they both needed this contact to ease their concerns about Sonny and to cement their connection to each other.

Castillo ran his long fingered hands deftly over Rico's body, getting to know the feel of him, the clean definition of his muscular chest, the soft sensation of the curled fur covering his body, the strongly muscled back and broad shoulders. When his palms slid smoothly over Rico's firm, high ass, the black man moaned sensuously. Castillo felt Rico's hard phallus rub against his thigh; he reached for it even as his mouth once again captured Rico's in a hot, demanding kiss.

The lieutenant's tiredness slid away as the New Yorker's tongue invaded his mouth just as his fingers encircled Tubbs' dark, straining cock. The black man jumped and moaned as if he never expected Castillo's advance and his surprised reaction thrilled Martin. Aggressively, he rolled the detective onto his back and covered his broad body with his own smaller one.

Tubbs released Castillo's organ so he could clutch the Latino to him. He slid his smooth hands possessively over Martin's lean back and down to his tightly muscled buttocks. Clamping onto Castillo's ass, he pulled the narrow hips hard against him.

Martin shifted so his shaft was nestled firmly against his lover's and removed his own hand. Burying both hands into Tubbs' thick, curly hair, he lost himself in the luxurious growth. The darker man squirmed against Martin, rocking against his hot cock, exciting the Latino even more.

Castillo's desire was building dangerously. His hand tightened in Rico's thick hair and he pulled the black man's head back. His tongue ran a wet line down the long, dark neck. The black man sighed and arched against him. Martin nibbled the sweet skin where Rico's neck and shoulders met.

"Lieutenant. Oh, *Martin*," the detective gasped, his body taut, "*por favor...*"

Martin eased away, sliding off to the side and captured Rico's cock again in a tight, possessive grip. He stroked the man firmly, seriously, but with a maddening slowness.

The dark cop's hands never stopped roving Castillo seductively, lovingly, exciting him wildly. "Your skin is *golden*, lover," Rico sighed deliciously. "It's like silk against me." Tubbs reached for Castillo's organ, but Martin evaded his hand.

The New Yorker writhed and murmured, "Let me touch you, lover, let me please you."

Martin said nothing, but stayed out of reach. He was so excited and so exhausted that he feared an immediate release, and first, he wanted Rico's. He surrendered the grip he had on the man's hair and slid that hand under the tight, round buttocks. Tubbs quivered at his touch and Martin felt the black man's skin erupt in goose bumps. Castillo stroked his lover's anus and perineum with a light sensitive touch and Tubbs bucked wildly and choked back a cry.

Castillo smiled to himself and touched him again, delighted to feel him react so strongly.

Rico began panting, writhing, mumbling in Spanish. His reaction was intensely exciting to the Latino and Martin was suddenly flooded with the desire, the need to penetrate this man. He remembered asking Sonny what it had been like to fuck Rico, and recalled the expression on his face when he'd said "Different. Wonderful."

He could see Sonny taking Rico in his mind's eye — how beautiful they must have looked, moving together synchronously, sensuously, Crockett's fair, tanned skin contrasting against Rico's light cocoa-brown color. The imagery inflamed him. He ached to take the beautiful brown man himself, right now, this second, without warning. He could imagine himself shoving hard into Rico's attractive, high, round ass, imagine

himself coming deep inside his muscular body. It *would* be wonderful, of that he was sure.

He squeezed his eyes shut, and ignored his dark craving, despite its powerful pull. He was used to ignoring it, used to controlling it. He knew they were both too tired to take the time or the energy, but the desire to be that intimate with this man could not be completely denied.

Taking deep breaths to try and slow his racing heart, Martin stroked Rico's dark opening and gently slid a moistened finger inside him.

Tubbs tensed rigidly, his hands clutching, clawing at Castillo's back, his beautiful copper eyes snapping wide open. "No. No...!" he gasped, plainly alarmed, as Castillo moved deeper inside him.

The touch of fear in Tubbs' voice was incredibly exciting to Martin, disturbingly so. He could feel the ominous pull of his dark passion urging him again to take Rico, without caution, without care, by force if need be.

Has he seen your dark side yet, Marty? Reese whispered in Castillo's inner ear.

The Latin bit his lower lip hard and locked his Other away, ignoring Reese's hypnotic murmur.

Then, Rico's buttocks relaxed and he eased against Martin's invading hand with a passionate sigh. "Yes. Oh, please..." he begged. He turned his head to rim the shell of Martin's ear and Castillo moaned throatily and slid a second finger into his lover, even as his other hand continued its agonizingly slow stroke.

Rico's cock was impossibly hard and wept a pearly tear as the black man's hips moved in their own rhythm against the double assault.

"Let me," Tubbs sighed, as he reached futilely for Martin's now painful erection. "*Por favor, Martin.* My Lieutenant, let me —"

"No," Castillo ordered huskily, moving his hand deeper into Tubbs' body. He kissed a brown cheek and jaw and slid his tongue down the long, dark neck, tasting, smelling, licking the soft skin, tongueing the gold chain, relishing the power in the corded, straining muscles.

Martin brushed his moustache against Rico's dark nipple and felt the skin tighten until it was a tough nub. The detective arched in delight as Castillo licked the hardened aureole. His teeth clamped on the small pebble of skin at the same time he slid a third finger into Rico's ass. The black detective had to bite his lower lip hard to stifle his cry. The invasion was now more than he could handle and Martin knew it and smiled, thrilled. He wanted Rico to be overwhelmed, wanted him to dissolve from the intensity of Martin's passion and that's what was happening.

Has he seen that sweet streak of sadism you barely keep leashed? Reese whispered in Martin's mind.

There was an uncomfortable truth there, part of Jack's legacy, a reflection of the profound needs Martin had that he kept so tightly controlled. Jack liked working on that part of him. If this were Jack, the CIA agent would be begging for more, teasing Martin until he lost all control and took Gretskey roughly, even forcibly. Jack loved when that happened, even though it left Martin disturbed, upset and regretful. It

was when Castillo's control slipped that Jack urged that dark side of him to come to the fore.

The Cuban squeezed his eyes shut and bit Rico harder and moved his hand deeper inside him. His brain roiled in confusion and dark desire as he fought his inner demons.

Suddenly, he "heard" something inside him, a voice whispering in his mind, a voice that overrode Reese's hateful taunting. It felt like an old memory, yet, not *his* memory.

Are you going to make love to me — or do you have to rape me to get off?

They were not words that had ever been said to him, still, that strong message affected him, reminded him of who he was, what he was doing — what he wanted.

He stopped biting Rico, and instead, gently licked the wounded skin. He moved his hand more gently, more sensuously, and stroked Tubbs' flesh more lovingly, somehow knowing just how Rico liked it. The cop responded instantly.

Martin wanted desperately to ask if he were delighting his partner, but he could not find his voice. He shut his eyes, and was suddenly overwhelmed with the sense of Rico's passion. For an instant, he could "feel" the pleasure he was giving the dark man.

Tubbs lost all semblance of control, clutching Martin's thick hair, bucking hard into and against Castillo's hands. The black man's body was bowstring tight and Martin could tell he was fighting hard not to call out. His smothered cries were emerging as soft, desperate whimpers.

Then, suddenly, he gasped, arching against Castillo. Martin felt him come, felt Rico's semen surge against their sweating bodies.

The Cuban sagged onto the bed when his lover's orgasm was completed, almost as if he'd come himself. Slowly, he released the grip he had on Rico's flesh. Cautiously, he eased his hand out of his lover's body. Rico flinched, then sighed and gazed at Martin dazedly.

Castillo slid out of bed and went to a pitcher that sat in a porcelain basin on a nearby dresser. He poured some water into the basin and washed his hands, then poured more clean water over a washcloth and brought it to Rico.

"It's cold," he warned, before using it to cleanse the ejaculate off the detective's abdomen and now flaccid cock. "You all right?" he asked his lover solicitously as he towelled him dry.

Rico had an odd, enigmatic expression on his face. "Yes and no," he answered cryptically.

Castillo stopped, surprised. That wasn't the answer he'd been expecting.

Rico waited until Martin returned the washcloth and climbed back into bed. "You know what your problem is, *Martin*?" he asked quietly.

The lieutenant said nothing, merely gazed at Tubbs quizzically.

"You've been a *lieutenant* too long," Rico explained patiently as he folded the Hispanic into his strong arms. "You approach lovemaking like a case that's got to be solved. You want to control every aspect of

it — first, we do this, then we do that — you even want to control *my* feelings about what's happening to *me*. And everything happened *to* me. Making love is supposed to be a *cooperative* venture. You can't be the boss in bed — even if I do call you Lieutenant." He ran his hands gently over Martin as he spoke, as though he didn't want his lover to feel he was angry.

"Now, don't get me wrong," Rico continued, "I *loved* every minute of what just happened, but I imagine you know that. And sometimes it's nice to let your lover just run *over* you. But you've got to be careful about startin' out like that, partner. A relationship that *begins* that way can get *seriously* out of balance." He brushed his fingers lightly over Martin's scrotum and Castillo quivered, almost instinctively moving to stop the black man.

"See?" Rico said. "You're doing it again. It's *my* turn, now." His big hand deftly captured Castillo's sensitive flesh in a gentle grip, surrounding it, owning it. "This is part of the problem between you and Sonny, why you're both always buttin' heads. I never really understood it before, but I do now. I just kind of — 'know' it now. You've got to learn to yield a little — especially in bed, *Lieutenant*."

Rico's index finger found the bead of moisture sitting on Castillo's glans and teased the flaring head with its slickness. Martin trembled.

"Damn, you're big," Rico said admiringly as he began stroking the hot organ with a light, deft touch. "And so *hard*!" He shook his head. "For a moment, I thought you were just gonna *take* me. I 'felt' your need inside me — I mean, I thought I did. It was a pretty intense moment. You've got a lot of hurt in there, Lieutenant. And that hurt colors your desire — poisons your pleasure. It makes you think that overpowering your lover will please you, satisfy your needs. But all it does is hurt you more. That 'need', that sense I got — it scared me, I don't mind admittin' that. You're a lot of man. I don't know how Crockett handles it."

The New Yorker's expression softened. "*Martin* — I don't know what goes down between you and Sonny but, I'm *not* addicted to danger. I don't like surprises. And I don't like to be rushed. Me and Sonny, we're different." He kissed Castillo's cheek and continued his loving stroke.

"I think you'll like the differences once you get used to them," the black man assured him. "And someday, I *might* like to try it with you. But, don't ever *jump* me. I know you can probably take me if it comes to that, but I won't go down easy — and things would never be the same between us after that." He nuzzled Castillo's neck and Martin shut his eyes, allowing the sensations to wash over him.

Rico's full mouth began traveling over Martin's body confidently, licking, nibbling, teasing with the gentlest of touches. He was the exact opposite of Sonny, gentle where Crockett was rough, slow where Sonny was quick, languid where Sonny was impatient. The differences were exciting, each delightful in their own way. He responded to this lover easily, as if they had always been this intimate.

When the New Yorker's lips reached his naval,

Martin tensed and grabbed the black man's shoulders. "Ricardo. No. I can't hold out — !"

"So?" Rico said. "This isn't a marathon. I just want to please you. There'll be other times when we can make it last. Right now, it's enough for me to be able to satisfy you. That's what a lover is supposed to do. Let me give you this. *Relax*."

When the tip of Rico's tongue encircled Martin's glans, the lieutenant felt as though his head would explode. He clutched the sheets and moaned. Rico sighed in answer and took the large cock head into the silken heat of his mouth, as he captured the shaft with his hands. Castillo groaned at the intense sensation and had to breath open-mouthed. Rico went down on him so slowly, Martin thought he'd go insane as the sublime pleasure was drawn out to an agonizing intensity. He writhed as Rico teased his scrotum, stroking the furred sack and the sensitive organs within. He twisted, trying to free himself from the sensations that were overwhelming him, knowing he was ready to explode any second. Rico only took his flesh deeper into his hot mouth, his lips and tongue exciting Martin insanely.

As the handsome black man serviced him, Martin could sense the joy of his giving, could feel the delight Rico felt as he continued his loving act. There was none of the darkness Martin harbored inside him, just a bright, light sense of love, overwhelming him, giving him happiness and pleasure. Could he yield to something so wonderful, or would he lose himself if he gave up his power? And what would happen if the dark side of him got loose; could this man contain it? Could he control it?

When Rico penetrated Martin's anus with his small finger, Castillo's brain went nova. He bucked wildly, unable to think, unable to do anything but react. With a gasp, he gave up everything to this man, shutting away his darkness, his anger, his ferocious need. He yielded, understanding finally what Rico had been telling him.

He came so hard he cried out, even as he pumped semen deep into Rico's mouth. The black man never flinched, drinking the bitter flood down completely. Martin squeezed his eyes shut as his body spasmed and shuddered wildly.

Tubbs finally released him, then crawled up beside the Latin, wrapping strong arms around his limp form. "See?" he said softly, "there's got to be balance, lover." He kissed Castillo's lips and Martin could taste himself on the black man's mouth. His tongue reached out and Rico's met it and they kissed deeply.

He stared at the attractive cop and marveled at what he had done. Could he be the balance Martin needed so badly, the one element he couldn't have counted on? Could Rico really have the secret to salvage their odd, three way alliance? Could Martin have finally found a sanctuary, a refuge, in the arms of these two men?

As the New Yorker left the bed to take his turn washing his hands and fetching the cool washcloth, Castillo realized his questions would have to wait. His orgasm was the last thing his body could endure. Even as his lover washed and dried him, Martin felt

himself drifting off.

When Rico finally returned to bed, Castillo barely had time to settle into the circle of the black man's embrace before sleep claimed him. But even as his mind shut down, those questions wandered through his subconscious, searching for answers all through the night.

*Well, step out of the shadows,
Let the night begin
When you hear me knockin',
Let me in*

— When the Sun Goes Down — Fleetwood Mac

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN MARTIN'S LETTERS

*My hands are tied
My body bruised, she's got me with
Nothing left to win,
And nothing else to lose*
— With or Without You — U2

Martin's eyes snapped open before his mind could comprehend the problem. Beside him, Rico rolled away and quickly left the bed, slipping on pants and jogging toward the incoherent sound. Castillo's feet hit the floor and he yanked up his drawstring pants hurriedly as he followed Tubbs into the next chamber.

Sonny, he realized finally, as his consciousness caught up with his instinct.

Crockett's muffled shouts bounded off the stone walls as the lieutenant entered the candle lit room. The blond thrashed wildly in the huge bed, his eyes squeezed shut, his arms stretched over his head, hands clutching the metal bars of the brass bedstead.

"Wake up, Sonny!" Rico ordered, shaking his lover gently. He sat on the bed while Martin stood by, feeling helpless. "Come on, man, wake up." Tubbs grabbed the blond's shoulders and shook him harder until the tanned detective's teeth clicked.

Crockett opened his eyes, staring desperately at his partner then at Martin. His terrified expression cut into Castillo's heart.

"Get me out of here, man, please, get me out of here!" he begged. "She's crazy! She won't stop! Rico! Marty! Don't leave me here!"

"Sonny," the Cuban said clearly, wrapping his strong hands around his lover's wrists. "It's over. You're here with us, safe. You're dreaming." He tugged the taut hands until the blond released his tense grip on the bars. Martin clutched the hands, now balled into tight fists. "It's all over. You're fine. We've got you."

Crockett's eyes roved the chamber frantically. "Where's Cathy?" he mumbled. "Is Vincent with her?"

He'll kill her!"

"He's still asleep," Rico told the lieutenant and slapped Sonny's cheeks lightly. "Snap out of it, Crockett!"

"Huh?" Sonny said clearly. "What? Where — ? Oh, shit!" His body sagged as he looked at the two men, confused. "What a dream. Man, that was terrible!"

"Father warned you about them," Rico reminded him gently, helping Sonny sit up. He hugged his lover, patting his back consolingly.

"Yeah," growled the detective, rubbing his face, "and that one was a *beaut*. Sorry to wake you two, I know you must be beat."

Tubbs and Castillo exchanged a glance. Leave it to Sonny to worry about *them*.

"Do you want something to help you sleep?" Martin asked.

The Vice detective shook his head automatically.

"Not a drug," the Latin clarified. "Some herbal tea, to help you relax —" He turned, seeing something out of the corner of his eye.

"I'm way ahead of you," Father said, entering the chamber, carefully balancing a tray laden with a steaming teapot and cups.

Martin took the tray from him, staring at the elder in confusion.

"Did my yelling wake up half the city?" Sonny wondered disgustedly.

"No," Father assured him, "but your dreams woke Vincent some time ago."

The three men looked at Father in surprise. Martin was disturbed to see Sonny's color pale.

"How?" the blond asked flatly.

"Apparently," Father said, pouring the tea, "when Vincent, Ricardo, and Martin attempted to 'sense' you during your captivity, they did a better job than they had planned. You and my son seemed to have developed a minor 'bond.' Your dreams were so psychically powerful, they roused him. He woke me and we made you some tea."

"So, what can we do about this — bond?" Sonny asked, in that same flat tone.

"Nothing," Martin told him.

The blond shook his head. "You mean, this connection will last — forever?"

"It dims over distances," Castillo explained. "Vincent can't 'feel' me when I'm in Miami. The bond is weak. Not like what he shares with Catherine. It may fade in time. It's nothing to be concerned about."

The Floridian took the cup from Father's hand and looked disturbed.

The patriarch caught Martin's eyes and said, "May I speak with you in my chambers?"

Castillo nodded and the two men excused themselves and left. When they arrived at the small cubicle Father slept in, Martin wasn't surprised to find Vincent waiting for them.

"I'm sorry, little brother," the lieutenant apologized.

"Why?" Vincent asked. "It's not your fault that Sonny's dreams are full of pain, helplessness — and fear. Fear of me."

"It's not your fault either!" Martin said firmly.

"You'll meet with him. Once he gets to really know you —"

"I don't know if we want to do *that* right away," Father interjected.

"The longer we wait," the Cuban protested, "the worse his imagination will build this fear."

"Perhaps," Father said, and walked over to his desk. Sitting on it was a large, ornate wooden box decorated with leather inlays. "I have an idea. In this chest are all the letters you wrote to Vincent and me after you left us. It is, in many ways, a chronicle of your life. It gives a strong picture, not only of you and your activities, but of us as well. You often reminisced in your letters about how you missed us, and the things you and Vincent had shared. I think your James and Ricardo should read these letters. Through them, they'll learn who *you* are and who we are as well."

The lieutenant glanced at the container that held the secrets of his past, like so many genies in a bottle. He was suddenly intensely worried. He had never shared that part of himself with anyone, not even May Ying. Only Jack knew his true past. Could he really just let his two lovers see it?

"Father's right," Vincent's husky voice murmured, placing a comforting hand on his older brother. "After they read the letters, we can talk of a meeting."

"Take the box, Martin," Father urged. "Let those two men know you, and us."

Martin swallowed and carefully lifted the hefty container. Nodding at Father and Vincent, he carried it back to his chambers.

When he entered, Rico and Sonny were still sitting in the bed, nursing their tea, talking softly. The Anglo's face was still drawn and disturbed. Tubbs rubbed his back comfortingly, hovering over him and murmuring, looking worried.

"What's up?" the black man asked, looking at the carved box curiously. "What's that all about?"

Castillo placed the box on the table near the bed, and unsnapped its clasp. "The past," he said cryptically.

Both detectives looked at him quizzically.

"My past."

The two younger men exchanged a glance.

Opening the box, Castillo displayed the neatly folded letters within. "I've written home every week since I left at fifteen. They've kept them all. Father thought you might like to read them."

Sonny brightened noticeably. "You wrote all those letters? And you wouldn't mind us looking at them?"

"Not at all. My past is completely open to you now. I've nothing to hide anymore." It was a heady feeling for the reticent man.

The two Vice cops exchanged a surprised look, then Rico broke the silence. "Lotta paper there, Lieutenant," he said, a sly smile countering his clinical tone. "Couple days work at least. I should've known we weren't gonna get a free trip to N'Yawk without havin' to do our share of paperwork. Guess we'll start in the morning, eh, Crockett? Begin at the top, work our way down?"

"Sounds good to me, pal. Should be some interesting stuff in there."

Martin smiled slightly and glanced through the box, staring wonderingly at the past he'd chronicled himself. Jack had often teased him about his compulsive need to keep in touch with the people Below. Sometimes, he even wondered himself why, every week, he felt compelled to keep his family informed of a life they were no longer part of.

Their letters to him had been wonderful, if sporadic. It was far harder for the people Below to keep in touch with him. Many times, he could not even reveal his whereabouts. But he wrote anyway. It had been impossible for him to keep his family's letters.

"Yeah, tomorrow, we'll get started," Rico said. "But right now we all need a few more winks." He moved to leave the bed, tugging the covers up around Sonny as he did so.

Crockett captured the black man's wrist. "Don't go," he murmured anxiously. "Stay with me."

Castillo moved quietly to leave the chamber and allow them their privacy.

"Marty?" Sonny said. The urgency in his voice pulled the lieutenant back. "Won't you stay, too? It'll be a little tight, but — I want you both near me. I should've never asked you to go before. If I'm gonna have these damned dreams, I don't wanna wake up alone again."

Martin hesitated as he recalled the last time they'd all slept together. Then, he caught the look in Rico's copper gaze and put that experience behind him. Gazing at his Anglo lover, his heart felt full. He slid into the bed beside him, even as Rico nestled in on the other side.

"Kind'a cozy," Tubbs murmured, turning onto his side.

Crockett spooned up against the black man, as Martin pressed his own body tight against Sonny's back.

"That's more like it," the blond cop murmured dreamily, burrowing between the other two men. "Sides — I had to find some way to keep you two from humping half the night away. Your squeaky springs were driving me crazy."

Castillo closed his eyes and sighed in embarrassment as Rico chuckled evilly.

"Eat your heart out, Crockett," the dark detective taunted boldly. "Did you think you were gonna get to keep all that for yourself?"

"Once I'm rested up," Sonny warned, "it won't be my *heart* I'll be eating."

Martin raised an eyebrow at Sonny's lighthearted banter. "Promises, promises," he said dryly, then tried to hide his smile as both men turned to look at him in surprise.

"He *must* be tired," Rico commented, settling back down.



The lieutenant was not surprised by the almost compulsive interest Sonny showed in the aged letters. The blond detective read them through breakfast and

through lunch as he sat propped up in bed, an ice pack balanced on his knee. Occasionally, he asked a question to clarify some small point, but mostly, he read in silence, completely absorbed.

Rico and Martin eventually left him there with the letter box beside him. Tubbs wanted to see more of the Underground city and help with Winterfest activities, and Castillo fell into the habits of a veteran Tunnel Dweller and contributed to the day's work schedule. He was stacking canned goods in one of the huge pantries when Catherine found him.

"I wish you could've seen Joe's face when I handed him that detonator," she said with a smirk.

Yes, Martin imagined, that must've been some surprise. "He had a gazzillion questions," she continued, "but I forestalled most of them. When he found out I went into the tunnels after Sonny, he nearly had a stroke. I told him the three of you had a safe house stashed somewhere and wouldn't even tell me, just in case any of the Widow's troops proved to be loyal. I don't think he bought it, but he's sitting tight, waiting to hear from you. I told him you'd be by in the morning, to take care of the loose ends."

"Thanks for covering for us," Martin said genially. "I'll deal with it tomorrow."

"Vincent says you've been working like a stevedore all day. How's Sonny doing?"

"Fine — except for his fear of Vincent. In some ways, I think meeting my brother has him more disturbed than the painful ordeal he went through with the Black Widow."

Catherine frowned. "Would it help if I talked to him?"

He met the woman's green eyes with his own dark, hooded ones. "It might." Martin paused, sighing. "Catherine — I know what happened between you and Sonny."

She glanced away. "I figured you did."

"I only mention it, so that you'll know it's all right. It doesn't bother me. Sonny, well, his needs — he's not like other men." He sighed again, searching for the right words.

"I think you're wrong about that, Martin," the lawyer said, surprising him. "I don't think Sonny's very different from other men at all. He's afraid of making a commitment to you and Rico. He's afraid of being that much in love again. He needs to get over that."

Martin captured her gaze again, surprised at her frank talk.

"So, where's he hiding?" she asked, changing the uncomfortable subject.

"In the guest chambers, reading my old letters."

She cocked an eyebrow and grinned. "I wouldn't mind seeing *those*!" Leaning over, she gave him a friendly peck on the cheek and was gone, leaving Martin to stare after her and wonder how Vincent had resisted her for so long.



"Hey, lazy bones!" Cathy called brightly, entering the guest chambers.

Sonny looked up from the pile of paper on his lap. "Hey, yourself, partner!" He grinned easily, genuinely happy to see her.

She stared admiringly at his romantic Tunnel Dweller garb. "Boy, you can just wear *anything*, can't you?"

"Or nothing at all," he quipped with a laugh. "You're looking pretty good yourself."

"How're you *feeling*, Sonny?" she asked, suddenly serious.

He shrugged. "Shaky. Havin' the usual run of bad dreams. Woke half the tunnels last night."

"Vincent told me." She watched a shadow cross his face and he looked away from her. "He's worried about you."

Sonny's laugh was a short, sarcastic bark. "Yeah. Right. Sure." He stared into her deep, green eyes. "He's *worried* about me — and you."

"You're wrong about that," she insisted firmly.

"Am I? Why do you think he went after me in the tunnels? Reese was trying to *kill* us and he came after *me* like a hound after a rabbit."

Cathy shook her head. "There was so much confusion. Vincent's weak connection with you was flaring wildly with all your mixed emotions. He couldn't figure out what was going on — except that *I* was in your mind and near you. He thought you were the man we were all fearing. He thought you were Reese. You were confused, too."

"Well, I guess so!" Sonny protested, his face clouding. "I'd never seen any... anything in my life — that looked like *that*!"

Catherine sighed. "The first time I saw Vincent, I threw an ashtray at him. He forgave me."

Crockett rolled his eyes. "Yeah? Well, I was throwin' bullets, darlin'! And let's not forget that he tried to kill *me*!"

"Okay, so you're even," she argued. "Get over it! Vincent has. He's worried about *you*. He wants you to accept him. He's Martin's brother."

The blond cop looked away. "I, uh, I can probably accept that —"

"But, you can't accept him as my lover," she said knowingly.

Sonny swallowed and looked away. "He's *not* your lover."

"Yet. But, he will be. It's what I want. And only his fear of his own feelings is keeping us apart. You should understand something about that. Vincent and Martin are very much alike. You're not willing to give Martin up, or *Rico*, even though you know you might suffer severe consequences because of your love for them. You're not, because you know that loving them is worth the risks, the price, the problems. It's worth *everything*. Well, I know that, too."

Crockett laughed when she brought up Rico. "So, you figured out Tubbs was the other string, huh? You're not a bad detective yourself, lady lawyer."

She paused and sat beside him on the bed. "Sonny, for the first time in Martin's life, he has people he can share his past with. For the first time in his life, his

family Below accepts him exactly as he is. He wants you to *love* Vincent. You've got to try, if only for *him*. He deserves that effort from you. He loves *you* that much."

There was an awkward silence between them. Finally, Sonny looked down in his lap at the pile of letters there. "Y'know, Vincent's all over these. The love, the brotherhood — it's all there in Marty's letters to him. When I push aside what happened between me and Vincent, and just focus on Marty's love and caring, I think, this is someone worthwhile. Marty doesn't give his heart away real easy."

Catherine sat facing him. She stared at him, her intense gaze pulling his eyes to hers. "Look, Sonny, I can't deny that if you and I had met in another time, in another place — something special might've happened between us."

Sonny's face eased into a comfortable smile. "So, you're willin' to admit it, huh?"

She nodded, grinning. "But we met when we did — and we're both in love with other people."

"Yeah," Crockett admitted, a bit ruefully, "but are we committed to these people?" He raised a quizzical eyebrow. "Can there be commitment in a relationship like yours, where there's nothing physical, or in one like mine that's only working right when everything's physical?"

"I can't answer that for you, Sonny," Cathy said, "only for myself. If I'm wrong, and Vincent and I never do become lovers — it'll be hard to live with that, but I won't let it destroy what we do have. I won't let it destroy our love, our very real commitment. You made a commitment to Martin when you went to work for him. You made another one when you and Rico became partners. So, what's holding you back from making a commitment of love?"

Sonny shook his head wearily, not knowing. He patted the pile of letters. "Maybe this will help. It's hard for me to really *love* someone I barely know. Marty giving us these letters — it's like a window into his soul. They're wonderful images of an open, loving person I'm not even sure I ever met. He says so little, it's odd to hear him being so eloquent in here. But even with this, Cathy, it's just — So *much* has happened to me since I got here. Marty's odd behavior. Vincent. Meeting you —"

"And your *capture*," she reminded him.

"That's not such a big deal, really." He looked away as he said those words.

"Sonny!" she admonished him, "I *found* you. I've some idea of what you went through. Don't shrug it off. An experience like that can effect your whole life. And that man *ReeseMD*, the things he said to you. He was using an insidious head game to wear you down when you were so vulnerable."

Sonny stared at his knees, shifting the ice bag, drawing into himself. "Yeah, well, he said plenty — and I can still hear him. He tried to make me doubt Marty." Crockett's face paled. "Cathy, I think it worked. I don't know if I feel the same way about him anymore."

He swallowed, and Cathy could see he was struggling with the emotional impact of what he was trying

to say.

"I *know* everything Reese said to me was bullshit, but I just don't feel the same trust — the same confidence — I had before. I mean, maybe if Marty had been there when Rico came for me, but — I don't know."

Cathy took Sonny's hand. "Be patient with yourself. It's normal for you to feel that way. Martin *has* hidden his past from you, but now you know why. You need to talk to him about the things Reese said."

Sonny shook his head. "I couldn't. It would hurt him too much."

"You're lying," she said gently.

He laughed at her perceptiveness. "You're right. I'm *afraid* to. Afraid Reese was telling the truth. Afraid Marty won't lie about it. I don't want to know."

Cathy moved closer to him and turned her face, pulling aside the hair on the left side of her head. Taking Sonny's hand, she touched it to the skin near her ear. "Feel that?"

The Vice cop looked at the spot curiously and ran his fingers lightly over the rigid flesh. "That left over from the attack?" he asked softly.

She nodded. "It was the worst cut. They couldn't do much with it the first time. By the time it'd healed enough for them to work on it again, I'd decided to keep it. That attack changed my life, for good and bad. I was full of scars on the inside, so taking away the outside ones suddenly became less important. You've got scars, too, Sonny. You had them before you came to New York. I don't know what they were — a lost love, a broken marriage, the death of loved ones — but they're there. Don't be afraid to look at them. You've got to learn to live with them."

Crockett listened to her intently. His fingers kept brushing the scar until she cuddled her cheek in his palm, then kissed it. He slid the hand around her neck and pulled her down against him in the bed, sighing. She snuggled against him, her arms around him, and sighed back.

"Martin can't change his past," she reminded him. "Some things you may just have to accept, if you love him."

"That's the big 'if,' isn't it?" he said with bitter mirth. "Y'know, life was a lot easier before I got involved with those two." He snorted. "It was even easier than that before I got divorced. You're right about the scars, Cathy. Something happened to me when I lost my wife. I keep telling myself it was the job, but that was only part of it. It was me. It was my failure. Cause I'm never satisfied. For me, there's always got to be more. I've got a little boy, he's almost eight now. Not livin' with him — well, that's real hard. But when I *did* live with him, we weren't together that much, with the job, the hours. Yeah, there's a lotta scars. When I think of Rico and Marty, how much they mean to me all I can think of is losin' 'em sometime — through my failure, my inability to give them what they need — or to get what I need. I don't know, Cathy, I just don't know."

She looked up from his chest and touched his cheek. "You worry too much, Crockett. Have some faith in them — maybe half as much as they have in

you."

He smiled. "You know, Chandler — something *special* has happened between us."

She looked quizzically at him.

"We've become friends." He kissed her forehead gently, making her smile. "I care about you a lot, Cathy. I'll remember everything you've said. I'll think about it."

She sat up, pulling away from him. "Good. Just remember, there's no free lunch, Detective. But, there might be a free dinner, if you're up for it."

He raised an eyebrow. "Sure! Your place or mine?"

"It'll have to be yours," she said. "Mine's too far for someone on crutches." She fixed him with a steely eye. "Can I bring my lover?"

He stared back, hesitating. Finally, he nodded. "If I can bring both of mine."

"See you at dinner, then." She leaned over and kissed him lightly on the lips and left.

Sonny stared after her for a few minutes, mulling over the things they'd talked about, then reached for another letter from the box.



"It will embarrass him, having to face me in front of all of you," Vincent protested, as Catherine adjusted the lace that cascaded down the front of his best shirt.

"He's an adult," she insisted. "He can survive embarrassment. Can you?"

He grumbled quietly, then tried to pull away from her, but she stopped him.

"You know, you and Sonny have more than Martin in common. He can't face his inner demons — and neither can you. If you'd both just confront your fears —"

He sighed tiredly and gazed into her eyes. "Catherine —"

"All right. All right. This isn't the time, or the place. But this subject is *not* closed." She took his huge, clawed hands in her delicate ones and kissed them quickly before he could stop her. "Come on. We'll be late, and we still have to meet Father, to help him carry the food."

"You're so very beautiful tonight," he remarked as they strolled, arm in arm, through the tunnels.

She ran a hand over the sleek, green silk of the expensive dress. The low, gently draped bodice was especially becoming to her, she knew, and the color really brought out the highlights in her eyes. She'd hoped he'd notice.

"Did you dress for Sonny?" He asked the question slyly, as though she would not guess his feelings.

Catherine glanced at him teasingly. "If I did, would you be jealous?"

His face took on an odd expression. "That's such an ugly emotion."

"You didn't answer my question," she said pointedly.

They had drawn up beside a small alcove. Suddenly, Vincent glanced around, then stepped into it and

pulled Catherine in against him. The darkness of the alcove swallowed them, shielding them from prying eyes. He crushed her to him, enfolding her in his powerful embrace.

"Would you?" she whispered huskily, straining to see his beautiful eyes in the darkness, yearning to kiss him. Her heart was racing from his bold move and she sent her wanting boldly through their bond. He gasped in her arms. "Would you be jealous for me?"

He pressed his face against the top of her head as they hugged tightly.

"Yes," he finally whispered breathlessly in her ear. "Yes. I would."



"If I have to spend another day just sittin' on my butt, I'm gonna go nuts," Crockett announced grumpily as Rico and Martin helped ease him into a large chair at the head of the small table.

"He's feelin' better," Tubbs assured Castillo. "He's complainin' again." He looked at Crockett as the Cuban finished setting places on the small table the Tunnel Dwellers had supplied. "You didn't finish all those letters, did you?"

"No, but I made a good dent in 'em. You've had a hell of a life, Marty."

Castillo smiled slightly, and Sonny wondered about all the things he *never* wrote about. The details of his relationship with Jack; his connection to Reese; and his work —

"Father will look at your knee tonight after you soak in the pool," Castillo told the blond. "Maybe he'll let you put weight on it tomorrow."

There was a sound from the chamber's entrance and Sonny tensed, his heart suddenly racing. He saw Rico and Marty exchange a quick, concerned glance, then felt Tubbs' hand on his shoulder. Martin turned his face neutrally away.

"Hey, take it easy, partner," the black detective murmured encouragingly. "You weren't this nervous over meeting the Black Widow."

Sonny nodded curtly. That was true. Why was that? Because she could only abused his body — she couldn't trip around inside his head, making connections that might last forever. He shuddered involuntarily.

"I'll check it out," Rico said, referring to the indistinct sound approaching their chamber. He stepped around the table and glanced into the tunnel. Sonny could see him outlined in the dimness of the chamber's entrance.

Rico's face lit up with genuine delight. "My, aren't we *lovely* tonight! Miss Chandler, you light up this dark tunnel with your own glow."

They were here.

Sonny's throat tightened and he felt the blood drain from his face. *Pull it together, Crockett!* he ordered himself. A shadow fell across him and he glanced up to see Martin looming over him, his expression tight. *Look what you're doing to him, man,* he scolded him-

self. *Get a grip!*

"Sonny?" Martin asked, concerned.

"I'm okay, pal," the detective assured his lover, touching his hand. "Really."

Martin nodded, and stepped aside. Catherine had already entered and was standing behind Castillo. Sonny brightened to see her. She was especially beautiful tonight, so Crockett focused on the lovely woman, trying not to notice the tall, cloaked figure that was turned slightly away from her, speaking to Rico.

The Vice cop swallowed the hard lump in his throat and took a steady breath. Rico was talking animatedly to the huge figure that dwarfed him, his handsome, dark face relaxed, warm, actually happy. Just then the Southerner felt Castillo's warm, strong hand envelope his shoulder. That comforting touch, combined with Rico's easy acceptance, seemed to surround Sonny and fill him with a calm trust. He covered Martin's hand with one of his own. He exhaled as the lieutenant spoke.

"Sonny, this is my brother, Vincent. Vincent, this is my lover, Sonny Crockett."

The mountainous figure turned and pulled back the hood of his cloak, revealing the face that had haunted Sonny's dreams — the wide, animal-like muzzle, the strange nose, the glint of inhuman fangs peeking out from under the split lip. And the eyes — those incredible cerulean eyes, the eyes that had blazed out at him in blood lust — the eyes that, wild with passion, had stared out of Martin's face. The ominous sense of Vincent's presence filled him with fear, just as it had on Cathy's balcony.

His mind screamed in warning, even though he knew Vincent could "hear" it. He banked the terror, shoved it down. He'd faced fear a million times before, usually gun in hand, but now he was unarmed and the fear was still there, suffocating, crushing him. He squeezed Martin's hand, his palm clammy now, then forced himself to extend that hand out.

"I'm very happy to meet you, Vincent," he lied, swallowing hard. He hoped it was the same sincere tone he'd once used on Carolyn's father.

Slowly, with some surprise, Vincent reached for Crockett's outstretched palm with his huge, clawed one. The blond cop had to lock his elbow to keep from jerking back, but he held steady as the furred fingers surrounded his in a surprisingly gentle grasp.

"I assure you," Vincent replied in a husky, cultured voice that surprised Sonny, "the pleasure is all mine."

The cop started to withdraw his hand, but Vincent held it and involuntarily the detective flinched. He felt sweat break out on his upper lip.

"Please allow me to apologize for nearly harming you when we were in the tunnels," Vincent said.

Sonny looked deeply into those amazingly blue eyes and was surprised at the genuine regret there. More than regret, there was pain, and a touch of loneliness. The blond realized with a sudden flash of insight that they were the same emotions he'd seen in Martin's eyes so many times. Emotions he'd always wanted to erase with his love for the strange, secretive man.

The cop shook his head and tightened his grip on

the clawed hand. "No apology necessary, pal," he said honestly. "Things happen in combat. We were all lucky Cathy kept her cool in a tight spot. Let's forget it and start over."

Vincent clasped Sonny's hand more warmly and stared into his green eyes as if trying to ascertain if he really meant that. The Vice cop understood, and clasped the strange being's hand with both of his. "I mean it, Vincent. Really. Let's start over."

The odd face changed subtly, visibly brightening. Crockett could feel everyone around them relax.

"All right," Rico breathed. "Hey, let's eat! Chow's gettin' cold!"

Martin sat on Sonny's right as Vincent took the seat on his left, Catherine beside him. Rico sat across from Catherine, and Father took a place across from Sonny at the other end. Everyone began talking to one another, the sounds of genial discussion and plates being passed surprisingly familiar in this weird place.

Crockett had trouble taking his eyes off Vincent as they dined on a hearty stew, warm bread, and a heady wine Catherine had brought. The detective was mesmerized by the big man's cultured manners, refined demeanor, and the regal way he treated Catherine.

Those two belong together, Sonny was startled to find himself thinking half-way through the meal. The moment he thought it, Vincent turned and stared directly at him. Sonny boldly met his blue eyes and thought, *Well, it's true!*

Vincent smiled his odd smile, and so did Martin.

Throughout the meal, Rico watched Sonny like a hawk, not directly, but peripherally, though Sonny knew very well what he was up to.

And Father — well, Father watched everyone, obviously enjoying the different dynamics going on around the table.

Before long, Sonny couldn't imagine why he'd ever thought Vincent was odd looking. He was really quite handsome, in a different sort of way. Now, the only thing he still couldn't understand was why he wouldn't make love to Catherine.

"Do you remember when I was eight?" Vincent asked Father, as dessert was passed around, "and some of the older children found that volume of ancient Chinese pornography?"

Sonny's eyes snapped up in surprise.

"I most certainly do!" Father said gruffly. "We had to have a council meeting about the blasted thing. The pictures in it were incredibly graphic, but still, they were beautiful reproductions of classic works of art. We decided finally to keep the book — which I believe we still have — but to restrict the children's access to it until they were older. At the time, none of us were concerned with the text. It was in *Cantonese*!" Father fixed Martin with a stern eye.

"It never occurred to the *adults*," Vincent explained, "that Martin could translate it — which he did, surreptitiously, over the course of many weeks. His progress on those translations kept us quite entertained."

The corners of Martin's mouth lifted as he recalled that memory. "My proficiency with the language improved exponentially during that time."

Everyone smiled as Rico asked his Latin lover, "Your first 'undercover' assignment, Lieutenant?"

"Well, that certainly explains some things I've wondered about," Sonny drawled silkily, and the table erupted in shocked laughter.

"You're both quite fortunate that we turned these chambers into guest quarters," Father told Sonny and Rico when they had all recovered. "When Martin and Jack lived here, they insisted on sleeping on *futons* on the ground, like Samurai. They found two aged cotton mattresses somewhere and spent *days* hauling the sodden things down here. I tried to warn them about how hard they would be on a stone floor, but they wouldn't listen to me."

Martin nodded, smiling warmly. "It took us *months* to get used to sleeping on them."

"They would show up for breakfast stiff, exhausted, grumpy," Vincent remembered.

"He still shows up for breakfast like that," Sonny quipped, "cause he's *still* sleeping on that damned futon! Only now he's got an entire staff of poorly paid underlings he can grump all over."

"You're not so cheerful yourself after a night on that thing, partner," Rico reminded him, to even more laughter.

"When Martin left us," Vincent said directly to Sonny, "I think the thing the children missed the most was having him here for Halloween."

Modestly, Castillo stared into his plate, as though anticipating Vincent's story.

"He was legendary among the younger ones for his ability to knock on almost any door and be able to solicit the adults in their native tongue," Vincent told them. "It increased the bounty incredibly! Whenever Martin went with us, we were able to hoard the proceeds for *months*!"

"I never knew that!" Father protested.

"Of course not," Vincent assured him. "You would've never permitted it!"

"You should'a gone into evangelism, Marty," Sonny said, grinning. He suddenly realized everyone was clearing their plates, that the meal was ending. He found himself regretting that.

Vincent started to rise from the table, but Catherine put a hand on his arm. "Stay. You and Sonny have a lot to talk about. We can take care of the food and dishes."

"For that matter," Father said, "it wouldn't hurt our patient to have a warm soak in the pool for the benefit of his various wounds. Why don't you take him, Vincent, while we clean up here?"

"You get the feeling we're bein' thrown together, pal?" Sonny asked Martin's brother, *sotto voce*.

"Distinctly," Vincent agreed.

Sonny caught Martin's and Rico's concerned expressions. "Why don't you both meet us there when you're done," he said casually.

Castillo inclined his head.

Rico's eyes had a pleased glitter in them as he smiled and said, "Catch you later, partner."

Vincent handed Sonny his crutch and extended an arm. As the blond detective stood, he took the proffered limb. He had a sudden memory of seeing Vin-

cent for the first time on Catherine's balcony and being shocked at his size. Feeling the hidden strength in that body was sobering. If Catherine hadn't been there when Vincent attacked —

The tunnel dweller looked down at Sonny and the cop blinked the memory away. Instead, he imagined him out on the streets of New York, trick-or-treating with a young Martin, hearing all the people say, in so many languages, *What a wonderful costume, little boy! And it looks so real!*

Crockett smiled at his new friend as they made their way slowly to the hot pools.

*Watching for the different eyes — they
change your face —
they come inside
Watch the spirits laugh and cry, watch them
find a place to hide
— Kiss of Life — Peter Gabriel*

CHAPTER NINETEEN VINCENT'S TRUTH

*Do not believe that he who seeks
to comfort you lives
untroubled among the simple and
quiet words that sometimes do you good.
His life has much difficulty and sadness and
remains far behind yours.
Were it otherwise, he would never
have been able to find those words.
— Rainer Maria Rilke*

Vincent didn't strip completely to enter the pool, but went in with his jeans still on, after removing his other clothing. Sonny was surprised by his modesty, and wondered if he was embarrassed by his furred body, or if there was something very different about his maleness. As Vincent gently aided the detective into the pool, Sonny tried not to be disconcerted by the ease with which the big man moved him around.

"So, explain to me about this *bond* thing," Crockett said as he settled himself onto the hot pool's shelf.

"I'm not sure I can," Vincent admitted, easing himself into the comforting water. "It's just something that happens. I've always suspected that it requires a certain ability or empathy on the other person's part, or I'd be bonding with everyone. Yet, as close as we are, I have no such connection with Father." He looked at the Southerner oddly as the water bubbled around them. "The first person I ever bonded with was Martin."

"No kidding?"

He nodded his shaggy head. "It was very hard on me when he left and I could no longer feel that connection."

"And when you met Cathy, did you bond with her right away?"

Vincent smiled his strange, crooked smile. "We didn't exactly 'meet.' When Catherine was attacked, the criminals who abused her dumped her body near one of our entrances. I was out walking in the night and saw it happen. Of course, I immediately went to her —"

"So, *this* is where she disappeared to for all that time," the cop realized.

"Yes," Vincent agreed, leaning back against the pool's warm stone walls. "Father tended her wounds — and I, her broken spirit."

"You fell in love with her then, and the bond developed?"

"Yes," Vincent said softly, remembering.

Sonny shook his head. "You fell in love with her without even knowing how beautiful she was."

Vincent nodded. "After she left us, I didn't see her for many months. But, I could *feel* her the whole time — her dissatisfaction with her shallow life, her unhappiness, her aloneness. Finally, I could stay away no longer, and went to her balcony. I saw her face." He paused, going back in time. "The surgeons had fixed it, had taken the terrible scarring away. She was — so beautiful. I knew then, that she'd always be part of me — part of my life."

"She is a beautiful woman," Sonny said admiringly. Then, in a quiet tone he added, "What I don't understand, man, is — how you resist her."

Vincent's eyes hardened for a second, but Sonny never dropped his gaze. "With all my strength," he whispered. "With all my strength."

"But *why*?" the detective asked plaintively, throwing caution to the wind.

Vincent tossed his head angrily, and moved away. "How can you even *ask* that, when you have seen what I can be?"

"That was different. There was danger then, and confusion. That has nothing to do with —"

"It has *everything* to do with it. There is a side of me I can't control — a side full of danger and dark passion. It has always been there in me. I could kill her when that side emerges."

"I don't believe that for a New York minute," Sonny said flatly. "What happened between you and other women, in the past? Did your 'dark side' flair up then, too?"

Vincent fixed him with a firm gaze. "There were no 'other' women, but for a childhood romance that ended in disaster." He held out his clawed hands, then clenched them. "Would *you* trust these on that fine skin?" He dropped his head, and turned away.

The Floridian opened his mouth, then closed it in surprise. Vincent had to be only a few years younger than he was. Still virgin? Celibate all these years? He really was Martin's brother!

The blond set his jaw, waving his hand as if none of this were important. "Forget that. Let's talk about the real issue. I don't believe you're holding out to protect her, you're holding out because you're *scared*. You're afraid of making a commitment."

The big man spun to face Sonny, his blue eyes blaz-

ing.

"That's all it is," Crockett said boldly, ignoring the fierceness in eyes that were frighteningly familiar to him. "You're afraid to take the plunge because you don't want to make a real commitment."

"That's *ridiculous*!" Vincent growled. "Catherine is my *life*! She is *everything* to me."

"S'at so? Well, she can't be *everything*, pal. She's *not* your lover. But she wants to be. She loves you, man, she *needs* you. She needs you to be *her* man!"

"But I'm *not* a man," Vincent argued. "I don't know what I am."

"Aw, cut the crap," Sonny shot back. "Catherine doesn't care about that. She cares about *you*! You can't just leave her high and dry forever. Make the commitment. Stop hiding behind your gremlins!" "You dare to speak to me of *commitments*?" Vincent grumbled irritably. "My brother *loves* you. I can feel it in him; his mind, his body nearly *vibrates* when you are near. Yet, your partner, Ricardo, whose relationship with Martin is new and tentative, is able to make a far more substantial commitment to him than *you* have been willing to make. Let's talk of *your* commitment to this man, who *deserves* to be loved — who deserves to live a life free of the pain love has brought him in the past. All you're willing to offer him is your body. You hold your soul, your heart, free for yourself, regardless of his needs. Let's speak of *that*."

Sonny's breath caught in his throat. No one had ever caught him so totally flatfooted with such an insightful truth. "You don't understand me, or my relationship with Marty."

"Then, by all means, enlighten me."

"I love Marty — I really do. He means the world to me. And I love Rico, too — it's just — Look. I know you had to make a lot of adjustments in your life when Cathy came into it. Well, I'm still adjusting. And maybe I'm not adjusting that well. You gotta understand, pal — before Rico and Marty, I was straight — hell, I was *married*! I'm a father —"

"You couldn't hold a *marriage* together, a family?" Vincent asked with brutal frankness. "How will you hold your relationship with Martin and Ricardo together? This love you profess to have for them is spun of spider webs and dust, when it should be bound with steel cables."

Sonny shook his head, suddenly depressed. "I *swear* to you, I *love* them. The thought of living my life without them — I can't do that. But, me and Marty — we need more balance between us — and I don't know how to get that, Vincent, how to make that happen. But, man, I *want* to. I want it in the *worst* way. You gotta believe me. The thought of losing them — I can't face that. I won't."

Vincent nodded, his face softening. "Balance," he murmured.

"That's the same thing you and Cathy need," Sonny said determinedly. "I mean, you can't exactly live together the way things are. Your relationship with her is as socially unacceptable as mine with Marty and Rico. So, it's up to both of us to *find* the balance. Man, we've got to — or it's all gonna come tumbling down around our ears like a house of cards. And one

of these days, you and I are gonna end up sittin' in this hot tub, killing a bottle of Black Jack together and musing about the ones that got away."

Vincent nodded solemnly, holding Sonny's gaze. "Balance. I shall remember that. But — what is Black Jack?"

Crockett grinned and eased back into the pool. "A powerful bourbon. I'll bring you some, partner. Like love, it's one of those things that has to be experienced first hand."



"Martin," Catherine said softly, pulling his wandering attention back, "stop worrying. They're getting along better than any of us could've hoped."

She handed him another wet plate and he dried it automatically, then handed it to Rico who placed it in the huge wooden cabinets that stored the mixed, worn sets of discarded crockery.

"He can't help it, it's his job," Rico explained to Cathy, stretching to stack the plate in the tall cupboard. "Worryin'. He doesn't know how to turn it off. He and Crockett are a pair that way. That's why they need me. For balance. When they worry, I don't. When they don't, I do."

Castillo smiled slightly, the corners of his mouth lifting under his moustache. "Is that why we need you?"

"Uh huh. Balance. You and Crockett are at two extremes, and here I am in the middle, keepin' you both from flyin' off into the stratosphere. It's a dirty job, but someone's got to do it." He grinned charmingly at Castillo, who looked at him warmly.

Catherine watched their interplay, then handed Martin another dripping plate. "How long has it been since you've stayed for the holiday?"

Martin was quiet for a moment. "Ten years, at least."

"Vincent still tells your Samurai stories to the children," Catherine said, "but this year, you might have to do that yourself."

"You're a storyteller?" Rico said in undisguised surprise. "Cathy, we can't pull ten words out of him on the job."

Suddenly, Father appeared at Rico's elbow, holding a stack of rolled plans. "Oh, Martin does manage to tell a story more succinctly than anyone, but his tales do enthrall the children."

"Especially, if they're from the 'Carnal Prayer Mat?'" Rico quipped. Martin shot him a dark look, but the black man only grinned broadly.

"Ricardo," Father asked, "we could use some help in the Great Hall, setting up for Winterfest. Since Vincent's busy at the moment, could I impose on you?"

"No imposition at all," Rico insisted, stacking the last dish. "Need to do somethin' to earn my keep, anyway." He turned to Martin. "I'll catch up with you and Sonny later, partner."

"Much later, I'm afraid," Father interjected. "And Martin, James shouldn't stay in the pool too much longer. You might want to fetch him out of there."

As Rico and the elder left, Martin neatly hung the damp dishtowel and helped Catherine dispose of the dirty water. As she removed her patchwork apron, he asked, "When you visit your father, does he manipulate you so shamelessly?"

She grinned. "He tries. Father doesn't get to see you very often. He's got a lot of manipulating to catch up on."

"You talked to Father about my relationship with my detectives." It wasn't a question.

"Are you angry with me?" she asked, gazing at him, concerned. "No," he admitted, "though it feels odd to say that. Whatever you said to him certainly changed his attitude remarkably."

"He changed it himself, Martin, over time. Jack changed it for him, with his life, his death, and his loyalty to you. I just gave him a sounding board to realize it."

The lieutenant looked at her intently, his dark eyes shining. "I only wish I could return the favor — with Vincent. I tried."

She smiled and patted his arm. "Everyone's rooting for us now, even Father. And if you spoke to Vincent, I know your words carry a lot of weight with him. Whatever will happen, will. I'm ready — and I'm patient." She straightened her dress. "How do I look?"

"Like a vision," Martin said with a gentle smile. "An irresistible vision."

"Boy, I hope you're right," she breathed. "Will you tell Vincent I'll be waiting for him in his chamber?"

Martin nodded and headed towards the pools.



*And I would be the one to hold you down
Kiss you so hard
I'll take your breath away
And after, I'd wipe away the tears
Just close your eyes, dear.
— Obsession — Sara McLachlan*

"Huh," Sonny said, as he saw Martin approach, "the lifeguard's here. Must be time to clear the pool." Gripping the sides of the stone walls, he hoisted himself out, holding his leg carefully. He flexed the tender knee. "Y'know, it's feeling a lot better, Marty. Maybe I got lucky."

The lieutenant draped a towel over the detective's bare back. "You deserve some luck, Sonny." He handed Vincent the other towel they'd brought, and was amused to see it was a tourist beach towel from Miami. "Catherine is —"

"In my chamber," Vincent finished amiably as he towelled himself off.

Martin's eyes softened as his brother wrapped himself in palm trees and comical flamingos. Vincent would never see Miami — never see its glorious sunsets, its bright waterways —

"Hey, man, you're not gonna show up like that, are you?" Sonny asked worriedly, as Vincent started don-

ning his discarded clothing. "Your lady's waitin'. Spruceup a little." He glanced at Martin. "I don't suppose anyone down here's got a blowdryer?" Castillo shook his head, an amused expression on his face. Vincent looked at Sonny sideways.

"I'm serious," Crockett insisted. "Change out of those wet clothes, Vincent. Dry your hair. She'll wait. Trust me, I know women!" Martin seemed bemused, as he helped the blond to his feet and started toweling him dry.

"I could send Mouse for a change of clothes —" Vincent murmured.

"Do it, man," Sonny agreed. "Don't show up bedraggled! You gotta look *fine*. She does! Now, come on!"

"All right," Vincent agreed. "I'll go to Mouse's chambers and enlist his aid. Martin? Will you need me to help Sonny back to your rooms?"

Castillo shook his head. "We'll be fine. You go on."

Vincent gathered his things and padded from the chamber. Sonny didn't return his attention to Martin until Vincent was out of sight.

"You'll turn this place upside down," the Latino scolded softly.

Crockett grinned. "You know, Vincent's really okay once you get to know him. He's real people. Must've been somethin' growin' up with him."

"It was." Martin rubbed the towel briskly over Crockett's body, as Sonny supported himself by hanging on to the darker man's shoulders.

"What happened to Rico?" the blond asked.

"Father put him on a work detail."

"Taking up *my* slack," the Vice cop said disgustedly.

Martin's eyes softened. Suddenly, he caught Sonny's jade orbs and the two men held still, just watching each other. The lieutenant became painfully aware of Sonny's nudity. He swallowed.

"Why does it feel like we haven't loved each other in about a hundred years?" the blond asked huskily, tightening his grip on his lover.

Martin just shook his head. "You'll get cold standing here," he finally whispered, his throat tight.

"No, I won't," Crockett said confidently, and pulled Martin against him. "You'll heat me up, Marty, just like you always do." The blond bent his head and pressed his mouth gently against the Hispanic's.

Castillo shut his eyes, basking in the sensuous feel of Sonny's mouth on his, the way the younger detective put *everything* into that kiss. Martin pulled the Anglo into a crushing embrace as their tongues danced in each other's mouths.

Finally, they pulled away, both of them breathless. Martin opened his quilted kimono and enclosed Sonny inside it.

"So nice," Crockett purred, moving in close as Castillo surrounded him with the lush fabric. "I missed that, Marty. Help me get dressed, pal. Take me to our rooms."

Martin's breath caught in his throat. He wanted Sonny terribly, but wasn't sure if Crockett was really ready for this yet. Wordlessly, he helped him into the patchwork clothing.

"You look good in those clothes," he said quietly, as he handed Sonny his crutch. They moved slowly back

to their quarters.

"That's the first time you ever commented on my appearance," Sonny remarked. Martin nodded. "Just to see you looking at ease, comfortable — smiling at Vincent — You don't know what that means to me."

"It's nice to share your family with you, Marty. Makes me feel *closer* to you. And that's all I want, all I've ever wanted — to get as close to you as I can. I don't want there to be anything between us, ever again."

"There doesn't have to be, now."

They entered the guest chamber and Sonny moved to the big bed, abandoning his crutch. As soon as Martin had discarded his quilted robe, Crockett took his hand and pulled the blackclad man onto the bed with him.

The Hispanic moved carefully against the blond, aware of the mottled bruising that still covered the lean torso. "Are you sure?" he whispered in his detective's ear.

Sonny leaned against the Latin's warm mouth. "Sure that I want you? You kidding?" He pulled away for a moment to gaze into the onyx eyes. His face split in a feral smile. "Or are you just too *tired* after having fun with Rico all night? God knows, he's worn me out on occasion."

"I could never be too tired to love you," Castillo murmured huskily, sliding his arms around the slender man. He pulled the detective against him and hugged him lovingly, inordinately pleased with the blond's desire for him, how well he seemed, how much like his old self he was.

As if to prove Castillo's assumptions, Crockett burrowed against the Latin's chest, his fingers tugging at the knot on the black belt, opening it. He slid his hands and arms inside the loose top to stroke the golden skin. The lieutenant sighed happily, feeling his lover's need for him.

"Sonny," Martin murmured, kissing the blond's lean face, his cheeks, his eyes, "Sonny —"

"I'm here, Marty," the cop assured him, as he ran his hands over Castillo's spine, then down to the lean buttocks inside the black, drawstring pants.

Castillo lifted his hips as the younger man pushed the pants off him, and the old silk rustled down his legs. He kicked them off the bed and shrugged out of the top, his body now sleekly nude, his erection already straining.

The Latino's hand moved to the lacings on his companion's shirt, fumbling with the complicated jerkin until Crockett finally helped him, chuckling.

When the blond slid the garment over his head, Castillo winced to see the evidence of his abuse. He had a sickening memory flash of pain, the terrible gut wrenching shock he felt deep inside his bowels. He shuddered in spite of himself.

"Don't, Marty," the Vice cop said softly. "Don't look at me like that. It's okay now."

Martin pulled his gaze back to those sea green eyes and took the other man into his arms, kissing his mouth longingly. Then, he slid his lips down the strong jaw onto the elegant throat. He nuzzled the hollow there and Crockett's head rolled back.

Sonny sighed, running his fingers through Martin's

thick hair. Castillo slid his tongue past the hollow, onto Crockett's sternum; he bathed one small, hard nipple, then the other. The younger cop moaned happily, closing his eyes and laying back, basking in Martin's attentions. Delightedly, the Latino covered the bruised chest and torso with gentle, sensuous kisses, relishing Sonny's small groans and gasps.

The lieutenant's long fingers moved to the tight, light-colored buckskin pants and slowly unlaced the fly. Instantly, Crockett lifted his hips so his lover could slide the pants over his buttocks and down his thighs. Sonny's wine-red cock sprang free, angry and hot, like a sexual divining rod seeking a source of pleasure.

Castillo couldn't resist the beckoning organ and before he even finished removing Crockett's pants, he rubbed his lips and moustache sensuously against the pulsing organ, leaving the buckskins bunched up around Sonny's calves and ankles. The Cuban leaned over, kissing the flaring glans with all the tenderness he had.



*Well, did she make you cry, make you break
down,
Shatter your illusion of love?
And it is over now? Do you know how
To pick up the pieces and go home?
— Gold Dust Woman — Fleetwood Mac*

The Southerner moaned, his hips flexing automatically as Castillo's warm lips brushed against his sensitive cock head. He could feel Marty watching him as he tossed and breathed open mouthed. Castillo teased the aching organ with his lips, kissing it again and again, breathing warmly on it, watching it pulse with need.

"Oh, yes," Sonny urged him shamelessly, digging both hands in the dense, black hair. "Oh, please, Marty —"

Obediently, Castillo's tongue snaked out and rimmed the burning skin. Crockett exhaled and bucked, blindly thrusting toward Castillo's parted lips. The Hispanic smiled, obviously pleased to see his lover so eager for him. He ran his tongue tip lightly over the glans and down the shaft, as Sonny's hands clenched in his hair and his flat, swimmer's hips rocked. The Vice cop panted in need, wonderful need, and a relaxed smile played around his mouth as he watched his dark lover watching him.

Finally, the Cuban leaned over the blond's groin and took the hot, hard flesh deep into his wet mouth with an excited groan of his own. He sucked it lovingly, as if he wanted to swallow it whole.

Sonny's buttocks tightened and he cried, "Yes! Please! Oh, goddamn it!" He rocked up, fucking Castillo's incredible mouth.

Martin made him take it slowly, just like he always did. He lavished loving attention on Sonny, licking, sucking, kissing his agonized organ so slowly, so tanta-

lizingly, Crockett went weak with passion, delirious with desire. It was always so good with Marty. Sogood —

It seemed to last forever, Marty's loving, an endless ride through sweet pleasure as the darker man worked his lover tirelessly. Crockett forgot where they were, forgot the time, forgot everything except the world of sensation centered on his groin. He was sweating, aching, cresting wave after wave of passion as Castillo drew it out, made it last, longer and longer. But, finally, it was too much, too good, and even Marty couldn't slow it down anymore.

Sonny felt his cock swell even more and twitch, warning him.

Warning him.

He blinked. A powerful sensation gathered in his gut like a storm. He frowned, remembering.

"No," he murmured, his voice dissolving as Martin took him even deeper into his mouth.

The storm grew, roiling like thunderheads inside him, his muscles tensing around it.

He had to get away, get free.

Before it happened again.

Before it hurt. Like nothing else had ever hurt. Not like that.

He tried to move his legs, but they were trapped in his clothes.

Trapped.

He tensed all over. "No!" he insisted, needing to stop it, needing to end it before the pain happened again. The hands he'd buried in Martin's hair tightened spasmodically, pulling. "Stop!"

Castillo only took the organ harder, swallowing it eagerly, expectantly. He slid his strong hands over Sonny's buttocks, holding his tightly muscled ass in place.

"I can't — !" Sonny cried, his voice fading into a desperate whisper. He yanked the hair harder. "Not again. Don't make me — !"

Castillo winced from the pain and released his lover's ass so he could grab Crockett's wrists tightly and pin them to the bed. He continued his loving attention, deliberately trying to draw the orgasm out.

Sonny went rigid all over, finally finding his voice. "Marty, no!" he cried out frantically. "Don't do this to me, please! Let me go!"

Black eyes snapped up as his lover's voice went from passion to panic in a second. He released the detective instantly, and pulled away from him. "Sonny?" he said softly, confused.

Crockett sat up as if on springs and drew his knees to his chest, burying his face in his arms. He was panting shallowly and trembling all over, but not with desire. The fire in his groin ebbed and he glanced up, saw Marty's eyes staring at the bruising on his wrists. His lover's ravaged face was grim.

"Sonny," he rasped, "I'm sorry. I didn't think —"

"Not your fault," Crockett murmured, his voice firmer. Without looking at Martin, Sonny slid his feet out of the leather jeans still bunched around his ankles and tossed them away, then slid under the covers. Castillo didn't move, just watched him with concern.

"It was like one of those Post Stress Syndrome flashbacks," Sonny said tiredly. "She used my pants to trap my legs, handcuffed me to the pipe — then she used the prod. When I felt myself getting ready to come just now — when you pinned my hands — it was too reminiscent. I just couldn't handle it." He rubbed his face. "Shit, Marty, I used to love when you'd do that to me."

Martin reached over to touch Crockett, then pulled back his hand, unsure. "I should've realized — I wasn't thinking —"

The Vice cop felt a flood of irrational anger well up inside him, anger at what had happened to him, anger at all the things he'd been through that he didn't understand. It quickly became a tidal wave of unfocused rage threatening to drown him, suffocate him.

Somewhere inside he heard the insidious voice of Edward Reese murmuring, *Marty always has to be on top. He likes his lovers weak. He loves it when they beg. When they can't take it. When he's too much for them.*

The anger focused itself and spewed forth, out of his control. He turned cold jade eyes on his lover.

"Tell the truth," Crockett said, his voice low and bitter. "You *like* me like that. Helpless. Under you. Why is that, Marty?"

Castillo's dark eyes met his unflinchingly, but his expression changed. It closed down as if a chill stole over him. He said nothing.

"What do you want from me, anyway?" the blond cop demanded. "What's your real agenda? Total submission? You really want me like that? Completely dominated by you?" His voice was full of resentment.

Martin turned his eyes away, set his jaw. "I've admitted to you before how I feel when we're making love. I *do* enjoy dominating you. It's a side of me I've always tried to deny, but it's there." He turned his piercing, relentless stare back onto Sonny, but Crockett didn't back down. "And you like it. You're drawn to that side of me — just like Jack was. You're addicted to danger. So was he. And that side of me is dangerous." He paused, rubbed the bridge of his nose tiredly. "I warned you there'd come a time when it would bother you. But I didn't think it would happen so soon."

"What about Rico?" Sonny asked. "Is that the attraction with him? You've got me whipped into shape, on to a bigger challenge?"

Martin exhaled and shut his eyes. "Sonny," he said calmly, "what did Reese say to you?"

The question brought the detective up short. His mind reeled in confusion. He pulled his eyes away from Castillo's.

"This isn't coming from you," the lieutenant continued, "it's coming from Reese. You've always been able to deal with my desire for you before. You've always drawn the line at how much you'll give and how much you'll take — and I've never taken more from you than you've willingly given up. So, this is from Reese. His last gift to me. The man is an expert at psychological conditioning. If you let him, his words will tear us apart."

Crockett squeezed his eyes shut and shuddered. "I hear you, pal, I hear you. You're right. He worked on

me. He knew just what buttons to push, too. Told me you'd turn me into your faggot, your pet — that you wouldn't be happy till you completely dominated me — broke me down." Sonny looked around the rock walls as if there might be answers written on them. "He kept sayin' — 'who's fuckin' who, Crockett?' — and how much you liked it when you were too much for me — when you overwhelmed me. It was like he'd looked into our room — into my soul." The cop felt like he could barely breathe, as if the air pressure in the underground chamber were crushing him.

"I kept seein' myself under you," he whispered, barely able to get the words out, "helpless — and loving it. He said you'd get tired of me — and turn to Rico." Crockett shook his head, trying to organize his thoughts as Marty's eyes bore into him. "But I *wanted* you to be lovers with Rico. I didn't want to be pulled apart by the two of you, the way you'd been torn apart by your love for Jack and May Ying. I wanted us to be three, together, a team. But then last night, I dreamt it all up again. I came out of the dream and heard you and Rico making love — and I could tell you were running over him, just like you do me — and he was taking it, just like me. Loving it — just like me. And I could hear Reese —"

Crockett paused to catch his breath, to hold onto his nerve. "After he had his say, he left me with Ellen. The whole time she had me, all I could do was remember what he said, while I was chained like a stud bull in a stanchion."

The Vice detective held his head in both hands, exasperated. "Marty, I don't know anymore. Don't know what to think — what to feel. I just know I love you. And I want you. But what my body wants and what my brain needs is two different things. I feel — all turned around!"

Slowly, Martin joined Sonny under the blankets, then slid an arm around his shoulders and urged him to lean against his spare frame. "It's all right," he soothed. "It's all right. We'll work it out."

Crockett sagged against his lover, placing the flat of his hand against his hard sternum. "Think so? Think we can ever go back to the way it was? I don't know."

"Then, we'll make a new way," Martin reassured him. "I'm not giving you up, Sonny, not because of what's happened to you — or for any other reason. We'll find a way."

Martin sank down in the bed, gently guiding Sonny to lay on top of him. "We just need to find the balance. Right now you need to feel like you're in control of yourself and your environment. You may feel like that for a long time. We can handle it, you and me — and Ricardo. We can handle it."

The solidity of Martin's body was comforting to Sonny, and his tension eased slightly as he relaxed against the Cuban. After a few moments, he snuggled in tighter, resting his head under Castillo's chin. Lightly, Martin began running the tips of his fingers against his lover's spine.

"Would you like a back rub?" the Latin asked after a few quiet moments.

"Not yet," Sonny whispered. "This is nice."

Soon, Crockett found himself nuzzling Martin's

throat. He could feel the darker man sigh as the warmth of Sonny's breath blew over his skin. He brushed his lips lightly against Castillo's pulse. The blond cop could feel his own hard, hot erection pressing against Martin's hip.

Sonny moved slowly to his lover's ear, gently running a tongue around the shell. Castillo shut his eyes but never paused his gentle, teasing caress of fingertips along his detective's tanned skin. Up and down, the loving hands moved, and slowly, the blond relaxed into it.

"Marty," the younger cop breathed, "what are we gonna do?"

Castillo stared into the green eyes with his own iceblack ones. "Anything you want. We'll do anything you want."

Those words made Sonny suck in a harsh breath. After a moment he whispered, "Anything?"

Castillo smiled gently. "Anything. Anything I can endure."

"You'd do that for me?" he asked, surprised.

The question seemed to sadden Castillo. He brought a hand up and brushed Sonny's cheek with it. "You're my life. There's nothing you could want that I wouldn't give you."

The Vice cop felt his heart swell. "I want you."

"Then love me — the way you want to."

Crockett groaned at the seductive words and pulled Castillo to him tightly. Martin lay quietly in the tense embrace, continuing his maddeningly light touch. Sonny found that sweet, full mouth and kissed him roughly, bruisingly, as he rolled on top of him. He dug a hand in the thick, ebony hair and pulled the Latino's head back to more easily nuzzle his neck. His teeth skimmed the golden skin, then rested over the quaking pulse.

The lieutenant sighed deeply and arched against his lover, still stroking him tenderly.

"I need you," Sonny gasped, rubbing his hard, hot cock against Martin's.

Castillo brought his knees up to increase the contact and his eyes fastened on Sonny's. "I know what you need," he said darkly and the cop tensed. Martin moved his hips, increasing Sonny's stimulation. "You need to know you own me."

"No —" Crockett groaned, burying his head against Castillo's neck.

"Yes, my love. You do own me. Don't you know that?"

Sonny couldn't answer, could only run his hands down Castillo's slim body until he cupped the Latino's buttocks in his palms. The darker man trembled, shutting his eyes blissfully. Crockett dipped his head and bit his shoulder lightly. The lieutenant gasped at the surprise of pain and Crockett's eyes caught his, glittering ominously. "Sonny, I want you to be part of me forever. I know you want it, too — and now you need it — need to own me."

Crockett groaned loudly and sank his teeth into Castillo's shoulder hard.

Martin arched and choked back a cry. His fingertips slid down Sonny's spine to his high, round ass and gently skimmed Crockett's cheeks. "Don't you want to

be inside me?" his gritted voice rasped.

"How deep?" the blond detective whispered as his tongue rimmed his lover's earlobe lightly before capturing it with his teeth. The Cuban tensed, anticipating another raw shock of pain, but this time, Sonny only mouthed the tender skin gently. Castillo shivered and licked his lips.

"Am I a lot like Jack?" Crockett asked breathlessly.

Martin paused before he could answer. "In some ways. Others, very different. You both have the need, that dark need for danger. You want to be taken — and to take at the same time. And since you can't decide which you want more, you push — until you push too far." He smiled an odd, teasing smile. "I never really understood it till now." He fastened his eyes on his lover. "Sonny, please —"

"How deep?" Crockett asked again and bit down on the lobe again, harder this time.

"All the way inside me —" the Latino gasped and was rewarded with more pain from Sonny's punishing teeth. He moaned low and leaned against Crockett's mouth until the blond released him, kissing the offended skin gently, tonguing it tenderly. "Please," he whispered and Crockett's body tensed.

"Marty," the younger man murmured, his voice shaky, "I don't know if I can."

"You can," the lieutenant reassured him. "I'll help you."

Sonny hugged the slight body and kissed Martin's mouth tenderly. Then his eyes glittered again, and he grabbed the darker man's full lower lip between his teeth.

Castillo gasped.

"You like it," the Vice cop said, surprised.

"There's nothing you could do that I wouldn't like — unless you left me."

"That ain't happenin', pal," Sonny whispered, and took the mustachioed mouth again hard, his tongue invaded Martin roughly, eagerly as he rubbed his body against the Cuban. When Castillo's tongue slid into Crockett's mouth, the Southerner nipped it, making his lover buck.

"I've never seen you like this," Sonny said, his eyes softening. "You're right on the edge — so vulnerable — so open."

Martin touched the blond's face and Crockett kissed the palm resting against his cheek. "Last night, Rico helped me understand many things. I know we need more balance. I know I'm the one who has to change. I want you to be happy, Sonny. I want to please you. And I want you to trust me again."

The words washed over the Vice cop, overwhelming him. He yielded to his desire then, fondling Castillo's body with his hands, even as the lieutenant continued to stroke and please him. Tenderly, Sonny took the dusky shaft and teased it with his fingertips. The Hispanic quivered under his touch, groaning. His black eyes squeezed shut and Sonny could almost watch his control shatter. His own face split in a wicked grin as he began to seriously stroke the large, dark organ. Martin started lifting his hips, thrusting into Sonny's hand.

"I love when you do that," Crockett purred in his

lover's ear, then nibbled his throat.

Castillo swallowed and tried to speak, but couldn't.

Crockett knew his lover couldn't last long if he didn't stop the sensuous stroking. He leaned down and took a hardened nipple between his teeth and bit hard.

The Cuban cried out softly, inarticulately, and thrust harder into Sonny's big palm.

"I love when you do that, too," the blond murmured, "when you start losing it because of me, because of what I'm doing to you." He ran the flat of his hand over the straining glans and Castillo was forced to grip the sheets to hold on.

Suddenly, Sonny was overwhelmed with a shocking flash of insight, as though he had touched Marty's mind. The contact made him reel, made him disoriented, as if he'd been hit with vertigo, as if he'd touched the secret core of his lover's desire.

And Castillo's desire was hot, white hot, his need intense. He ached for Crockett, and clutched the sheets to keep himself from doing what his dark side urged him to do — to shove Sonny's head down on his cock, or roll him over and forcibly take him.

The insight made Crockett shudder, so powerful was the desire, so dark the hunger.

The Floridian ground his teeth, his anger surging again. "It's *killin'* you to just lay there, isn't it, Marty?" he hissed, his voice low.

Castillo fought to answer as he struggled with his inner demon. "Don't push!" he growled, not looking at Crockett.

Sonny breathed against his ear, continuing his impossibly seductive stroke. He couldn't help himself. He *had* to push. "Why don't you give in, Marty? You know I like it when you run over me, overwhelm me — just like *Rico* does — just like *Jack* did. You know I love it when you *take* me. You know it. I know it. Shit, even *Reese* knew it. And you're *dyin'* to do it!"

Castillo turned to him, searched his eyes, and suddenly Sonny could feel his despair, his sorrow, as Crockett stared back, his own eyes full of challenge — not trust, no love — just the challenge.

The Latin shook his head. "It's true. I *do* love that," he admitted honestly, struggling with the words, "but, that doesn't mean it has to be that way. I want to please *you*, not just myself. Sonny, it doesn't have to

be that way *ever* again if that's what you want. And it won't be that way this time. This time — I'm *yours*."

Crockett stepped up his stroke as Castillo gasped his words. He could feel Marty's sincerity through their odd connection and all it did was confuse him, torture him. And now he could feel the tension building in Martin's body, in his groin. "If you keep that up," the lieutenant gasped, "I won't be able to hold out."

Sonny smiled wickedly. "I know. And it's my party, pal. For this dance, *lead*." He rimmed Castillo's ear and murmured, "How was it for you with *Rico*?"

The lieutenant managed a wry smile. "How did it sound?"

Sonny gave him an amused look. "Oh, you're bad, lover. Wrong answer. Did you *fuck* him?"

"No." He smiled broader. "Too tired."

The cop chuckled. "But you'd like to, wouldn't you? You'd like a long, sweet fuckin' that high, round ass, wouldn't you?"

The lieutenant's eyes glittered darkly. "And *you'd* like to watch."

Sonny laughed, enjoying the saucy repartee. "You know me too well, lover — but right now there's only one thing I want to watch." He kissed Castillo's scarred cheek, then moved to his throat. "I want to watch you *come*, baby, *hard*."

"No," Castillo implored as Crockett's stroke grew stronger.

"My party," the younger man reminded him.

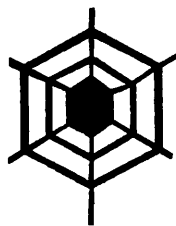
"Not yet — ! I need —"

"I *know* what you need," Sonny assured him. "You'll get what you need." He dipped his head, fastening his teeth in Castillo's shoulder, biting him hard. For a blinding second, Sonny could feel the sweet, sharp pain in his own body.

Then Castillo shouted, "No!" and arched. He came, ejaculating over his abdomen and his lover's hand. Sonny felt the pull inside him and groaned, stroking his lover to completion, even as he suppressed his own urge, his own need. He didn't stop until Castillo had finished spasming.

*Tied down to this bed of shame
You tried to move around the pain
but, oh, your soul is anchored*

— Ice — Sara McLachlan



CHAPTER TWENTY: RICO'S GAME

*When you look at me with those brown eyes
What do you want to do?
Do you have to have me
The way that I want you?*
— Brown Eyes — Fleetwood Mac

Father looked over the chessboard craftily before glancing up to watch his opponent. "This is quite a privilege for me," the elder said quietly. "I don't often get new challengers down here. I usually have to train the children and they all end up beating me! Of course, Vincent's the worst. Can't remember the last time I won a game with him."

"What about the lieutenant?" Rico asked, never lifting his eyes from the board. He fingered one of his rooks, then put it back.

"Oh, Martin was the only one who could ever beat Vincent. What a tactician!" The old man paused, remembering. "The last time I played him he was fourteen. Beat me roundly, too."

Rico chuckled and moved the rook. "I appreciate your telling that white lie to Castillo for me. You handled it just right, too. He never questioned you. You'd be good at undercover work!"

Father nodded. "It's good of *you* to go to so much trouble to grant James and Martin this time alone."

"They need it," Rico told Father. "*Martin's* not used to giving up the kind of things Sonny needs. If they're gonna make it — if *we're* gonna make it — they've gotta learn to meet part way on this stuff. They won't learn that with me holding their hands. They're just gonna have to butt heads 'till they work it out."

Father peered at the detective for a long moment. "You're — happy in this relationship?"

Rico thought for a moment, then nodded. "Oh, yeah. If you'd've told me a year ago I'd be into this, I would have said you were *nuts*. But now, I can't imagine bein' without those two." He laughed heartily. "Life sure won't be dull!"

"And you're not jealous of James? Of his love for Martin?" the elder asked, amazed.

"Nah," the cop assured him. "I mean, at first, I wasn't jealous because I kept tellin' myself we were just two good friends playin' around. In fact, I was the catalyst that got those two together, after watchin' them dance around each other for months. But, after awhile, I had to admit that my feelin's for Sonny were a lot deeper than that. And jealousy had no place in it. Crockett — needs more than other men. That's just the way he is. He needs me, *and Martin*. Castillo knows that, too. We'll work it out."

Father nodded, and perused the board. "How much time do you think they'll need?"

Tubbs grinned, "About the same amount of time it'll take me to win this game."

The elder looked up at the black man and frowned.

"Your move," Rico said, graciously.



"It's fun disobeying you, Marty," Crockett purred as he ran the tips of his fingers lightly over Castillo's glistening cock. The still erect organ bobbed under the teasing touch, as though trying to nestle itself in Sonny's hand.

Martin gazed at his lover, his eyes soft. "Not the best habit to let your detectives get into," he rasped hoarsely, making the younger man laugh. The lieutenant nodded towards the night stand nearest the blond. "I put clean towels in there." He indicated the spatters of ejaculate covering his chest and abdomen.

Grinning, the Vice cop reached for the small drawer. Martin's orgasm had been oddly satisfying to him. He felt happy, full of love for this man, almost as sated as if he'd come himself. "You didn't lie, Marty. You *don't* lose your erection —"

As he turned to reach into the nightstand, the words died on his lips.

There were several small hand towels just as Castillo had said, but sitting on top of them was a bottle of oil. Crockett felt his jaw tighten, felt his whole body grow tense, his stomach knot up. He pulled out a towel and palmed the little bottle. He turned back to Castillo, his eyes hard. It was as though that innocuous thing spoke of a cold betrayal, or put the truth to Reese's words. As he looked at Marty, he could see confused awareness on the man's face, as he, no doubt, picked up Sonny's changing mood through their odd connection.

Casually wiping the semen off his lover's golden skin, Sonny said tightly, "You'd already made plans for me tonight, hadn't you?"

Castillo still looked confused.

Crockett showed him the lubricant and watched his face change as he realized the source of Sonny's anger. "You're always *so* prepared, Marty, so predictable. We've *never* made love that you haven't been ready. You had every intention of fucking me tonight, didn't you?" The blond was really furious now, but Castillo only schooled his expression into a maddeningly calm mask.

"No," the lieutenant said assuredly. "That's not true. I was there when you told Father what you'd been through. We're connected now, Sonny. I *felt* your pain. I wasn't even sure you were ready to make love to *me*, remember? It could be weeks — months — before you're ready for intercourse again — if *ever*."

Castillo shook his head and wrapped a hand around the fist that gripped the guilty bottle. "I brought the oil to give you a back rub, if you wanted one. That's all. Believe that. I've never lied to you."

Crockett remembered Castillo stroking him gently, asking if he'd like one. He swallowed, sagging against the bed, sickened at how quickly his love could turn to mistrust.

"Sonny," Martin said softly, "I understand your fears. Try to remember that I've *never* done anything to you that you didn't want. I've never gone any further than you've let me."

Crockett's face drew down, the anger sitting like a

cancer inside him. He was suddenly swamped by memories both recent and old — and not all of them his. "That's not *quite* true, pal. The other night when I woke up — you were *fucking* me! You didn't ask, you just *took* me. You pinned me in place so I couldn't *move*, so I'd be completely helpless. You *love* me like that. Is that how you controlled Jack — by keeping his face in the mattress? You never liked it much when he wanted to reciprocate, did you?"

"Sonny, don't. None of us were in control that night, you must know that. It's true, I took you, but when I woke up, you were pressing against me, rubbing yourself against me. Your mind was calling to me — enticing me — whether you knew it or not. I didn't know you were asleep, responding to a dream, anymore than I knew I was. And when I took you, you accepted me far easier than ever before. You were excited — because you wanted me."

Castillo sighed sadly. "Later — I was afraid I'd raped you, that you were too sleepy, too overwhelmed by my desire to fend me off. Thinking that tortured me — but, I know now, because of our link through Vincent, that your desire for me was involved as well. You wanted it. You wanted me. I did *not* rape you. I — I could never hurt you, Sonny."

Crockett lay back against the bed, sick inside at what was happening to them. It was all falling apart, right in front of him. He wanted to weep.

"If you told me you *never* wanted that again," Castillo said quietly, "then, that's the way it would be. If you told me you never wanted me to touch you again — I'd accept that, and still love you."

The blond looked at the darker man, surprised.

"I was married to May Ying for two years, and Jack and I were together almost every day — sometimes all night — while May Ying and I were separated, often for weeks. Yet, Jack and I had agreed not to be lovers when I married her, and we kept our word. But I never stopped loving him, wanting him — or he, me. Whatever else happened between us, happened in our past, when we were young. It was between him and me, and has nothing to do with you and me."

Castillo's dark eyes fastened on Sonny's green ones. "I love you," he said fiercely, "not just your *body*. I've willingly spent years of my life celibate. I could do it again. The sex we share is wonderful, and I wouldn't want it to end — but, if you did, then it would. You *are* in control. Don't you understand that?"

Sonny licked his lips, the strong words wrapping around his heart like armor, shutting out the anger, wiping it away. "I don't want it to end, Marty. Ever. And I do want you. I love what you do to me. I love it when you're inside me. The intensity —" he paused, shook his head, "it's so incredible. I don't want to think we'll never have that again. Even now, while I'm still hurting inside — I want you *in* me. That's part of loving you — a wonderful part."

"We'll share that again," Martin promised, running his hand lightly over Sonny's forehead, "whenever you

want. As seldom or as often as you like."

Crockett nodded.

"Remember what Father told you," Martin reminded him. "You'll have trouble trusting now. Be patient with yourself."

"As patient as you and Rico are with me?" Sonny smiled. "I don't know if I can be *that* patient." The Anglo was still clutching the oil.

Castillo took it from him. "Back rub?"

Crockett grinned and rolled over willingly, pillow-ing his head on his arms.



"Ricardo?"

The black man blinked, focusing suddenly on his opponent. "Hmmm?"

"Is everything all right?" Father was watching the young detective with concern.

Rico started to reassure the old man, then stopped and reconsidered. He'd fugued out, but why? He'd felt *something*, something outside himself — something troublesome. He looked back toward the mouth of the chamber, toward the direction of Martin's rooms.

"I've seen that expression before," Father said sagely.

"Oh?" Rico asked, looking back at him. It wasn't like him to lose his concentration like that.

"On Vincent. Are you — feeling something through the bond?"

The detective started to shrug that suggestion away, but then paused. "I don't know. Maybe. I just had this sudden *hunch* that something was wrong. That I should go." He blinked. "Now, it's passed. It was — like intuition, only stronger. Is that what happens to Vince?"

"Oh, it's much stronger for Vincent. He can't stay when he's convinced Catherine has a problem."

"Maybe I should go. Check into it...?"

Father took hold of Rico's wrist. "You said they needed to work this out together, that they wouldn't learn how with you holding their hands."

The black man remembered and nodded. "Yeah." He focused internally. He'd started to feel a slight surge of desire, but that had soon been overwhelmed by a sense of conflict and anger. Now, all those energies were ebbing away. This "bond" business looked like it might be more trouble than he'd anticipated. He sighed and pulled his attention back to the chessboard.

"I see you've taken advantage of me while I've been gone," he murmured.

Father only smiled slyly and waited for Rico's next move.



*Hold on
Hold on to yourself
Cause this is gonna hurt like hell*
— Hold On — Sara McLachlan

"You *definitely* give the best back rubs I've ever had," Crockett sighed, as he sprawled luxuriously under Martin's loving touch. The darker man's strong hands rubbed and kneaded each individual muscle until the Southerner had no choice but to relax.

Castillo said nothing as he massaged the tension out of Sonny's spine, cracking his back in all its tense places.

"You've got to give Rico one of these some day," the cop murmured, snuggling against the comfortable patchwork bedclothes.

"You want to watch that, too?" the Latin asked playfully, and Crockett chuckled and reached back to slap his lover's thigh.

The blond hiked himself up on one elbow. "I still remember the first time you gave me a back rub." His eyes sparkled at the memory.

The Hispanic seemed to look inside himself, remembering. His eyes softened. "I should hope so. It was only last month."

The Southerner gave the darker man a long suffering look. "I'm talking about the first time we made love!"

"I remember," Castillo said quietly.

"I was scared shitless," Sonny reminded him.

"So was I."

The blond sank back on the bed and said nothing for a few minutes, remembering. "That was an incredible experience — though I was damned lucky I could *walk* the next day."

"You exaggerate," Castillo insisted. "When you woke up, you stretched like a cat — and then immediately reached for me."

"You were as hard as a pipe, pal, and you didn't resist!"

"How could I? You were insatiable." The lieutenant shook his head, amused. "I was late for work and spent the day at my desk trying not to get caught dozing. Every time someone knocked, I jumped and checked my zipper. *You* just went back to the boat to catch up on your beauty sleep. I couldn't believe you had the nerve to call in sick."

Sonny really laughed this time. "I'd've loved to have seen your face when Gina told you. I tried to get you to call in, too, but oh, no! The world would've ended if Lieutenant Castillo wasn't parked behind that desk all day."

Castillo shook his head. "If I'd have done that, we'd have never left the bed — and that evening you'd have had to call the coroner."

"Oh, listen to this! You can outlast me any day in the week, buddy, and I know it." Sonny grew suddenly serious. "Y'know, that's part of it, Marty — why I love you. I'm drawn to you because you're better'n

me at everything. It makes me strive to be better myself, but I don't think I'll ever achieve what you have."

"Interesting," Martin said in a low voice. "I'm drawn to you because of the things I *can't* do that you do so easily. You have your strengths, you just don't appreciate them."

"Like what?" Crockett said curiously.

"Your warmth. Your openness. The way you care about people, reach out to them. In spite of all the pain you've had in your life, you can still love. That's hard for me. Always has been."

Sonny listened to his lover's voice drop down, and knew he was thinking about Jack and May Ying. He'd learned a lot about this man from the letters he'd read, but there was still so much that wasn't there. He wondered about Jack, especially. What was there in Jack *and* Sonny that was so much alike it drew Martin? What was there in them that drew them to him? Those were things he might never have the answers to — but still, he wondered.

He wished irrationally that he could meet Gretsky face to face, talk to him, share this critically important information. Even more, he wished he knew what there had been in Jack that pushed Martin too far — that made the Cuban turn to May Ying, and eventually leave the CIA agent. Sonny ached to know, needed to know, so that he wouldn't make the same mistake.

Shrugging off his concerns, he rolled up on his side and stared at Martin. "I think I've been spoiled long enough, don't you? Let *me* rub you down."

Martin paused. "Father'll have my head if you put any pressure on that bad knee."

"I'll be careful. I'll sit; won't kneel at all. Come on, Marty." He reached for the oil and Castillo handed it to him as Crockett urged him to change places with him on the bed.

"You're still hard," the Vice cop said quietly as Castillo lay on his stomach. The darker man glanced at the blond's own unyielding erection but said nothing, just gave Crockett a sly look. The younger man grinned.

"Are we in a hurry?" the Cuban asked.

"No," Sonny said, smiling. He warmed the oil in his palm before applying it to his lover's back. Martin was all corded strength and wiry muscles and the Southerner loved being able to massage the tense man's cares away. Martin sighed as Sonny worked out the stiffness in his spine.

Crockett put his shoulders into the massage. It was a heady sensation to see his lieutenant laying so open before him, to know how much he was wanted by this man. Yet, Martin was willing to give him up as well, just to please him. Sonny didn't think anyone had ever loved him that much — except maybe Rico, who'd been willing to share him with Martin in the first place.

His hands began to rove the lieutenant's lower back and Castillo sighed blissfully.

"How long will it take you to come this time?" Sonny asked quietly, his own erection straining, aching for attention.

Martin looked back at him, his black eyes full of

need. "I may not be able to. Hard to say."

Crockett licked his lips.

"And you?" Martin asked in a low voice as Sonny kneaded his buttocks and thighs.

"Don't know," Crockett admitted. "Don't know if I can."

A long pause stretched between the men as Crockett worked, but finally, Martin broke it. "Want to try?"

Sonny stopped moving. He shut his eyes and shivered. He had a sudden, incongruous image of himself filling out forms in triplicate — a request for compensation for therapy to cure "sexual dysfunction acquired as a direct result of job-related activity." He could see Marty signing them as his lieutenant, then a more comical image of Castillo suing the department for "loss of conjugal relations." He blinked the images away. He looked at Castillo worriedly. "Marty — what if I can't?"

"There'll be other nights," Martin assured him. "Many other nights."

The blond cop nodded, forcing down the rigid lump in his throat.

The Latino held out his hand and glanced at the bottle of oil Sonny still held. Crockett hesitated only for a moment, then poured a small amount in his lover's palm. He watched, mesmerized, as Castillo wrapped the oil-slicked hand around his taut member.

Crockett's breath left him in a rush. "Oh, Marty —"

Castillo stroked him with a maddening slowness. The younger cop yielded to the sublime sensations for a few delicious moments, then he recovered slightly and turned back to his lover. Castillo was still on his stomach, moving nothing but that one expert hand, his intense gaze fastened on Sonny's face.

The Vice cop oiled his own palms and used them to massage Castillo's buttocks slowly, teasingly.

Martin shivered. His eyes closed blissfully; slowly, he drew up one knee.

That simple gesture excited Sonny so much, he had to pause to catch his breath. His mouth went dry as he slid one hand between the crack of Castillo's cheeks, his lubricated fingers sliding smoothly into that warm, intimate place. The lieutenant sagged under the touch, his body rippling with pleasure.

"Been awhile, Marty?" Sonny asked huskily.

The Cuban couldn't speak, could only nod.

Crockett wondered who and how many, but knew he'd never ask. He couldn't believe it had happened often. Jack Gretskey, he knew. Who else? Who else had been so fortunate? So bold? Just another of Marty's secrets — one Crockett knew he deserved to keep.

He moved his fingers carefully, gently teasing the tight sphincter, feeling it tense and relax under his touch.

Castillo began panting, his hips moving, enticing Sonny, encouraging him. All the while, the Latino's hand continued its own delightful manipulation, heightening Crockett's excitement, making him want the Cuban even more.

"You sure, Marty?" the Anglo whispered, almost hoping he'd refuse.

Now that the moment was at hand, he wasn't sure

he had the heart to go through with it. Wasn't sure if he wanted their roles reversed. There was something safe and comforting about Marty's domination of him, something addictive about his helplessness in the face of Martin's love. He could hear Reese's sinister chuckle in the back of his mind and he ground his teeth.

When he glanced at his lover's ravaged face, he saw the Latino watching him. The raw wanting in the black eyes startled the cop. He concentrated, staring into Castillo's unwavering stare, falling into the bottomless depths of those eyes, those eyes that said so much, so silently. Sonny opened his mind and fell into his lover's heart. Inside Castillo raged a maelstrom of desire, white hot and furious. It swept Sonny up, nearly overwhelming him and he groaned. There were startlingly vivid moments, images of things and people and scenes the younger detective had never experienced in his own life. He recognized snippets of passion with Jack, moments of tenderness with May Ying — a gentle, loving instance with a man named Stosh. The memories were in chaos, as were Castillo's emotions. Like a tornado, the memories and emotions swirled through the outwardly placid lieutenant, capturing Sonny and carrying him along on its tide. He reeled under the onslaught, shuddering.

He tried to concentrate, to focus on the physical reality of the dimly-lit, rock-walled chamber, their comfortable bed, Martin's grip on his flesh, the pleasure the darker man was giving him. But his mind was crumbling into chaos, the power of Castillo's dark desire overtaking him, touching his own darkness, awakening Burnett. He closed his eyes, trying to shut out the onslaught, but it was inside his heart, inside his mind. And Reese was there, too, coloring the moment between them.

Sonny growled angrily — wanting — needing — aching —

Then he felt — something else. A touch, like a cool spring breeze, clean and bright. A touch he'd felt before, when he'd desperately needed it. His brain reached out, grasped at that filament of light. It swirled through the cyclone of emotion and passion he shared with Castillo, slowing it, illuminating its darkness.

Rico? Sonny thought, blinking, and felt Castillo wonder, too.

His partner's mental presence was like a touch of gold, a ray of sunshine beaming into his and Marty's darkness. The maelstrom of their heat was still hot and urgent, but now it was tempered with the brilliance of Rico's love, shining as bright as the medalion the black cop wore about his neck.

Sonny sighed and thought, *Rico, I love you*. He felt Martin echo the emotion at the same time.

When he opened his eyes, he was still in bed with Marty, the two of them staring at one another, both of them a little dazed. But Sonny remembered the intensity of Martin's need.

For me, he thought.

"For you," Castillo whispered, his eyes glittering.

Crockett smiled, wanting to satisfy that need, wanting to make things perfect for this man. Carefully, he

slid an oiled finger into his lover's body.

For Crockett, this was always the moment when his body fought back, tensed up, but Martin's just relaxed, opening under him easily, as though the Latino's desire for him could be barely contained. The blond cop couldn't believe the electric effect that had on him. He moved his hand easily in and out of Castillo's dark opening, watching his own actions with fascination.

Martin's hips moved more assuredly, his buttocks tensing and relaxing around Crockett's hand, as though promising delights yet to come. The Southerner felt light headed, as he slid a second digit into the excited Cuban. Castillo moaned throatily and arched his back, clearly overcome with sensation.

Crockett could hardly bear it. "Oh, Marty," he gasped, incredibly excited, "damn!"

"Sonny," Castillo's husky voice sighed, "*por favor*." Then the dark man bit his lip as though he feared saying more.

"Yeah," Crockett sighed, unable to wait another second.

Castillo released his cock and Sonny fumbled with the oil, his hands, his body trembling. He coated his own phallus with the slick lubricant and poured some cold between Martin's cheeks.

Castillo tensed when the oil hit him, then relaxed again and drew up the other knee.

Slowly, Sonny withdrew his hand and slid his body over Martin's. Trembling, he grasped his now painful erection and rubbed it enticingly along the oiled crevasse, watching himself with disbelief and amazement. He could feel Martin consciously willing his body into a relaxed state and wondered if the Latin could teach him to do that.

When his glans kissed Castillo's tight sphincter, Sonny paused and swallowed, wanting to get a grip on his emotions. Cautiously, he pushed against the taut anus.

Martin's body yielded to Sonny's invasion, accepting him, swallowing the wide head easily before tensing tightly right behind the ridge. Sonny cried out, the sensation of sudden capture both painful and intensely pleasurable.

Castillo trembled and sucked in air like a bellows, trying to force his body to relax. His shoulders were bow-string tight, his back rippling in protest from the pain.

"Easy, baby," Sonny soothed his lover, stroking his spine, his sides. His voice cracked. "Easy. Slow. Don't rush it. Damn, Marty, that — that's wonderful." He kissed Martin's neck and shoulders lovingly.

His words seemed to help Castillo as the wiry body suddenly relaxed and the younger man was able to move again. Carefully, he pushed deeper into the Cuban's body.

All at once, Castillo sagged with a groan and opened up to him and Crockett slid into the darker man completely.

The shock of it was so sublime, the Anglo couldn't move, could only lay still over Martin, afraid to breathe, as he was assaulted by the incredible sensations surrounding his sensitive organ. He was dizzy

with desire, almost delirious with wanting, yet he still felt the need to hold back. This would take time. It might not even work. He had to be cautious.

"You okay?" he asked the Latino breathlessly.

Castillo nodded but otherwise didn't move. Sonny took a deep breath and slowly withdrew, then carefully thrust back in. Martin groaned and the sound was so thick with passion, the detective had to bite his lip to not lose himself completely.

"Oh, baby," he sighed as his hips developed a smooth rhythm. He watched his cock slide easily in and out of his lover's body.

The Hispanic's composure crumbled under Crockett's invasion, his hands clutching the sheets, his eyes glazed. It rattled the blond to see his normally cool lover so affected — yet it excited him at the same time.

Intercourse is always about trust, Martin had told him the first night they'd made love, and Crockett had given him that trust then. Now they'd come full circle. The younger cop felt the love and trust radiating from his lieutenant as the Floridian filled him and surrounded him.

Soon, he began losing himself in the fucking, his body working on automatic pilot, the old familiar motions almost instinctive as he slid in and out of Castillo's sweet tightness. Yet, he couldn't stop touching the Cuban, as if to reassure himself he was actually doing this. He brushed his mouth along the back of Castillo's neck and rubbed his face against his soft black hair.

"Marty," he sighed, wanting to tell him so much, yet not knowing where to start. "You don't know — you just don't know — oh, man." He was babbling, he realized, losing it, dissolving, melting into his lover.

"*Te amo*," Martin whispered quietly. "*Te amo*."

Then Castillo began pushing against him in rhythm, lifting and dropping his ass slowly, keeping the pace when Crockett faltered, overwhelmed by sensation.

"How long?" Sonny murmured in Martin's ear. "How long can we do this?"

"As long as you want," the lieutenant gasped.

"Forever," his detective whispered. "I want to fuck you forever, Marty. Don't ever leave me."

"Forever," Martin sighed, his voice trailing away as Sonny continued thrusting into him.

Crockett's brain urged him to move faster, harder, but he held back, wanting it to last.

Finally, after what seemed like hours, the Anglo felt it, the storm gathering in his gut, in his testicles. He was wrung out, streaming with sweat, but still, he ignored it, clamping a lid on his desire. But Martin's ass tightened around him like a soft, strong hand and his cock stiffened even more and twitched.

"No —" Sonny groaned softly, a wave of fear collecting in his gut as he felt his body move to orgasm without his consent.

The Cuban lifted his hips, tightening and relaxing around his impaler in an intoxicating rhythm. But the fear paralyzed the detective, panicking him.

"Don't!" the younger cop ordered through clenched teeth. "Stop!" He dug a hand into the ebony hair, yanking Castillo's head back cruelly. "Who's fuckin' who, Marty?" he growled angrily.

Castillo froze, his body going limp. His chest was heaving, his skin slicked with sweat.

"*Por favor*," the lieutenant begged, then licked his lips and switched to English, as if he had to remember how. "I'm just trying to please you, my love. Just as you please me when I'm in you. But I can be still — if that's what you need — if that's what you really want. Just tell me, Sonny. I'll do anything — anything for you."

Crockett's passion, his need to come, had ebbed and with it, his anger and fear. He released his grip on Martin's hair and kissed his neck gently. "Baby, I'm sorry. I just — I can't do it. I can't —"

"Sssh," the Latin murmured lovingly, reaching back to stroke the blond's hip. "It's all right. It'll work, Sonny. *Trust* me. I'd never do anything to hurt you. Just trust me. Hold me. Take me. *Own* me."

The Vice cop moaned at the seductive words. Capturing Castillo's wrists in his hands, he wrapped his arms around his lover's chest, pinning Martin's arms crosswise against himself. With a powerful pull, he hauled the Cuban up hard against him, drawing back on his knees, sitting on his heels. He winced as his injured knee protested, then ignored it.

"*Ay, Dios!*" Castillo sighed in his captivity.

As Crockett held his lieutenant helplessly in place, he began to thrust up again into the strong body. The darker man knelt, legs spread wide, and held perfectly still, open and receptive. Even his breathing had evened out.

But the Anglo tensed, still not wanting to completely yield to the sensations. "It'd take you two seconds to free yourself, if you wanted," he murmured in the Hispanic's ear, pounding into the yielding body angrily.

Martin grunted softly and shook his head.

"Two seconds. If you wanted. And I'd be on my face again, helpless, and you'd be deep in my ass."

"No," Castillo insisted, accepting the battering compliantly.

"You're too much man for me, Marty, let's face it. Why'n't you just *do* it, just take me. It's what we both want. I *belong* under you, baby, we both know it's true." In spite of his angry words, Sonny kept pumping harder up into his lover's body.

Martin moaned throatily but didn't move. "You own me. Sonny — take me. *Tomar mi, por favor* — anyway you must — anyway you need."

Crockett cried out, "No! Can't — !" He squeezed his eyes shut, his body moving in spite of his protests, his hips thrusting harder, slamming into the slight-built man.

The lieutenant only yielded further to his subordinate's assault.

"Damn, Marty, I *can't* —" Sonny insisted, his throat tightening as his need boiled within him again.

"You can!" Castillo whispered, the sound ricocheting around the stone walls, surrounding Crockett, filling him. "Do it!"

It was happening once more, the blond realized, as he felt the dark desire building inside him — Marty's desire and Burnett's too. He shuddered, but this time he didn't avoid the image. He felt the dark, ugly need, and the fear of pain. That was what he had to

get past. The fear of pain, and the need to inflict it. He searched the storm of their need, looking for the calm, the cool gold streaks of love and desire radiating from a man who wasn't with them — yet, still was.

Rico, Crockett thought, opening his heart, his mind.

And he felt that cooling touch, and knew that Castillo did, too. They slowed their frantic motions as Rico's love touched them, calming them, tempering their need.

Sonny swallowed. "Help me, Marty," he whispered, "please."

The Vice cop felt as if Castillo's body came alive against him when he said those words. The tightly muscled ass clamped down on his aching cock.

His arms tightened convulsively around the darker man, his fingers digging into Martin's wrists. He could barely breath and buried his face in his lover's hair as the Cuban moved in synch with him, tensing and relaxing around Sonny's sensitive cock in a delightful, maddening rhythm. He could feel the pleasure Martin felt, the pleasure of being taken, of being owned, by someone he so dearly loved. It was the same profound feeling Crockett always experienced whenever Castillo took him. It was sublime.

"Don't stop," Sonny ordered, fucking the tight orifice with a slow, powerful action. He should go easy, he thought, be more careful, but he couldn't. He was too close. It was too good, and the way his lover's ass milked him was about to drive him over the edge.

The tension crested again inside him and with it came a fresh flood of fear. Tears filled his eyes, but he bit his lip to keep them at bay. He felt like everything that was himself was centered at the base of his cock, waiting to explode. Still, he was convinced that if he came, he'd lose himself in a flood of pain and blood. He remembered the act of coming as nothing but a sense of agony and bliss all mixed together with fear and pleasure so that he couldn't tell one feeling from another.

Sonny, Rico's thought filled his mind, bright and clear. *You can do this, yourself. Find your strength and use it, man! The same way you do on the street.*

His strength?

Then suddenly, he felt Burnett touch his mind.

So, it'll hurt. So what? said his cold alter ego. *Since when have you ever shied away from pain? You dig it. So just eat this up, pal, 'cause it's gonna hurt like a mother. Trust me. You'll love it!*

Sonny grinned and took a deep breath just as Martin tightened around him again. He released his lover's wrists and slid his hands down Castillo's stomach until he'd wrapped them around the Cuban's straining erection. The Latin shivered, faltering in his movement, and let out a small moan. The lieutenant's hands closed over Crockett's wrists as if to restrain him.

"You close, baby?" the Anglo whispered in his lover's ear. Castillo nodded as Sonny stroked him smoothly. "Me, too. Let's do it. Now. Please."

Martin tightened around him.

At that moment, the blond felt as if his mind blossomed, as if he became three people all at once, with

three separate minds, all of them deluged with pleasure. Martin's rapture seared him, even as Rico's delight brightened everything around them. They surrounded him, protecting him, shoring him up.

Then he came.

Crockett felt as if someone punched him in the testicles as he was swamped with pain. But there was joy, too, an incredible shock of pleasure that lit up behind his eyes and finally buried the pain. "Goddamn!" he shouted, exploding into Martin's body, even as the dark lieutenant tensed and moaned, ejaculating into the air and over his lover's hand.

It lasted long, painful, pleasurable minutes as Sonny took forever to empty himself deep inside Castillo's body. The Latin's ass seemed to be sucking on his erection, pulling every last drop out, until they both collapsed onto the bed, exhausted and aching.

It was several minutes later when the Vice cop realized he was still clutching Martin's organ in a death grip. He had to consciously open his hands to release his lover. Castillo didn't budge. Sonny kissed his ear and one dark eye fluttered open.

Crockett started to giggle, then laugh. The laughter grew until he was almost speechless. "That was fun, Marty," he said weakly through happy tears. "Want to do it again?"

That made Castillo start laughing under him and soon the two of them were convulsed, roaring hysterically, eyes streaming. The Southerner rolled alongside his lover and took him in his arms, kissing his rough face. They were both still chuckling, giggling helplessly.

"I think you saved my life on that one, lover," Sonny sighed, as Castillo tiredly pulled the blankets around them and nudged them out of the wet spot. Martin kissed the handsome man's chin lovingly. "Bet you could use a hot bath," Crockett murmured, as his wet eyes drooped sleepily.

The Cuban nodded, but the two of them drifted off to sleep before either of them could do anything about it.



Rico felt a huge shudder travel through his body. He blinked, forcing himself to focus on the chessboard, on Father's last move. He had been somewhere — else. Not here. He wasn't sure what had happened while he was there, but there had been stress and conflict — then something wonderful.

"You all right?" the old man asked softly.

Yes, he was definitely all right. Better than that. He became dimly aware of his spontaneous erection. Surreptitiously, he adjusted himself.

Tubbs couldn't help but grin. "Looks like I'm about to be checkmated. 'Fraid I couldn't keep my attention on the game. Sorry I wasn't a better opponent."

"You were certainly an *interesting* one," Father quipped wryly.

"Maybe we should try this again tomorrow," Rico offered, "when I'm not — so distracted."

The elder raised an eyebrow. "You think that will help?"

The New Yorker laughed, then pointed a finger at his opponent and shook his head. He headed for his room.



Martin woke to Rico's warm hand gently touching his bare shoulder.

"Everything okay?" the black man asked softly. "I was gettin' some mighty strange mixed signals for awhile."

Castillo looked at Sonny sleeping soundly, dreamlessly, beside him. He turned to Tubbs and smiled warmly, touching his face. "Everything's fine. Perfect." He rolled away from the blond and reached for his kimono. "How was the chess game?"

Rico grinned. "You knew? Can't put anything over on you, Lieutenant. It was fun, but my attention was elsewhere. I lost."

Martin shook his head. "I'm sure that pleased Father no end. You ready to turn in?"

The black cop nodded. "Yeah. Whatever you two were up to, sure wore *me* out. You?"

"I need a bath, but I didn't want to leave him. I'm afraid he'll wake if he's alone. Stay with him. I'll be back soon."

Rico nodded, and kissed the smaller man. "Enjoy, *Martin*. I'll take care of Sonny."

*Here's someone now whose got the muscle
His steady hand could move a mountain
Expert in bed, but come on now
There must be something missing
That golden one leads a double life
You'll find out...*

— World Where You Live — Crowded House

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: TAMING BEAUTY'S BEAST

*..these soft
nights hold me like themselves aloft
and I lie without a lover.*

— Rainer Marie Rilke

Catherine wandered around Vincent's oddly decorated bedroom, touching the myriad cast-offs almost reverently. Some of these items were the first things she'd seen after pulling Father's bandages away from her eyes. She picked up the small, brass souvenir shaped like the Empire State Building and

smiled at it. Next, she lifted the metal ash tray she'd hurled at Vincent's head when she'd suddenly been shocked by his reflection when he'd come up behind her. The ash tray was silver, and had been unharmed, but she'd nearly cut Vincent's face — his face that seemed so hideous to her then, and now seemed so beautiful.

She turned around, looking at the room, the place where she'd been sheltered, nurtured — healed. The arching stained glass window glowed its rich, golden glow over Vincent's small bed. Catherine remembered coming to consciousness in that bed, feeling its comfort surround her, its warmth. She'd felt, for just a moment, instantly safe, then immediately terrified. She was in so much pain, and she couldn't see. But she could hear. Then, as now, there was the ever present rumbling of New York's subway trains. Their rhythmic clacking was almost comforting, and while she'd been hurt and blind, it had been the lone familiar thing she could cling to.

Until she learned to trust Vincent. His voice was far more soothing than the trains, full of kindness and caring. How he'd helped her, waited on her, nursed her. She suspected he'd slept on the floor beside the bed, aware of her every ache and fear. And there had been so much fear. Her first thought was that the men who'd slashed her face had decided to keep her for other games. She'd been terrified of being gang-raped while unable to see, but after a few hours, that fear dissipated. Eventually, she came to trust the seemingly kind stranger who shared his bed, his simple, cast-off things, his meager, but delicious food.

Eventually, she learned to trust Vincent with her life. With her feelings. She stared at the bed now, and ached to trust him with her body, ached to become to him the lover he never had, to give him something no one else ever had. She loved him that much.

She sighed impatiently and glanced around. So, where was he? Impatiently, she glanced at her watch. She'd been cooling her heels here for over an hour! Was Crockett going to occupy his entire evening? She was half tempted to storm into the pool area and pull Vincent out of there. She smiled to herself, imagining Sonny's wry expression. No, the blond would enjoy that too much.

Just then, Mouse entered Vincent's chamber in an obvious state of urgency. Catherine stared at him as he scurried about, glancing at her furtively as he began rummaging through drawers. "Mouse? What are you doing?" she asked curiously.

"Oh! Oh!" the young inventor moaned, clearly upset. "Mouse knew you would ask. Mouse knew. Said so. 'She'll ask Mouse,' Mouse said. 'She'll ask what Mouse is doing.'" He ransacked the drawers roughly, grabbing up garments at random.

"Well — what *are* you doing?" Catherine wondered, more perplexed than ever.

By now, the nervous little man had collected an armload of mismatched clothing.

"Is that for Vincent?" she guessed. "Does he need dry clothes because he's been in the pools?" It would be like Vincent to be so modest that he wouldn't undress in front of the Miami detective. Catherine

doubted if Sonny would have any such reservation.

"Don't ask! Don't ask! Oh, Catherine, I promised not to tell!"

She shook her head and removed the clothes from his arms. With a wry grin, she said, "Fine. Don't tell me. But you only need to bring him *this* shirt," she handed Mouse Vincent's lace and leather jerkin — the one she liked the best, "these pants," she picked out a pair of jeans that were faded *quite* provocatively, "and these boots." She handed the boy Vincent's thigh-high leather boots. "The underwear you can choose."

Mouse looked at the clothes wonderingly. Blinking at the woman as she carefully folded and returned the other, unneeded items back to their proper place, he blushed. "Needs hairbrush, too."

Catherine handed him the object. Then she put a finger to her lips. "It's our secret!"

"Our secret," Mouse repeated. "Mine and Catherine's." He looked at her again. "This just as strange as Vincent's secret. Don't you two tell each other anything?"

Catherine had to bite her lip to keep from laughing out loud.

Mouse started to leave with his treasures when he apparently had second thoughts. "Catherine?"

She approached him. "Yes, Mouse?"

"Mouse thinks you look very pretty. Very pretty tonight. That's what Mouse thinks."

She kissed his forehead tenderly. "Why, thank you, Mouse! You're sweet."

The boy's face turned a livid scarlet as he dashed from the room.

"I just hope your best friend agrees with you," she mused.



Vincent was still toweling his mane dry when his accomplice dashed back into his cluttered chamber. Mouse's raccoon, Arthur, chattered happily as his master returned. "Was she there?" Vincent asked, pulling the towel away from his nearly dry hair. "Did she guess?"

"No!" Mouse said too quickly, "No! She never asked Mouse anything!" The frantic tone of the boy told Vincent instantly that Catherine had quickly surmised what the hurried errand was all about. He peered through his tangled, damp mop to examine the clothing the young inventor had brought him. It was obvious to him that Catherine had chosen them. She'd always been partial to those boots.

"Well, Mouse," he assured his friend, "you've accomplished your mission well." He suddenly noticed a smudge of lipstick on his friend's forehead. He turned his eyes away to hide the smile in them. "Did you hit your head on the journey? You seem to have a bruise."

Mouse quickly picked up a small hand mirror laying on his work bench and examined his face. When he saw the telltale color, he scrubbed at it furiously, his fair face growing redder by the minute.

"Just dirt!" Mouse insisted. "That's all! Dirt on Mouse!" He nodded enthusiastically, as if he could force Vincent to agree with him.

The big man slipped on the warm, faded jeans. Whoever had owned these must have been built very much like him. The pants were tight, but perfectly broken in and felt as comfortable as a second skin. He donned the leather and lace jerkin. It had been a gift from Mary years ago and was so lovely and so ornate, he rarely wore it. It was, he knew, Catherine's favorite.

Finally, he slid the tall boots over the pants and pulled the battered hair brush through his tangled mane.

He approached his young friend. "It's all right, Mouse. To receive a kiss from Catherine is not something to deny." Gently, he pressed his own lips to the same spot on the boy's forehead.

Mouse blinked in undisguised gratitude. "Vincent not angry?"

"Of course not," the soft-spoken giant assured his friend.

"Has Vincent ever been kissed by Catherine?" Mouse asked shyly.

The question brought the underground dweller up short. "Only in my dreams, Mouse," he answered honestly. He was almost sorry he'd started the teasing.

"Vincent looks very handsome tonight," Mouse muttered. "Almost as handsome as Catherine is beautiful."

The tunnel dweller looked at the inventor in surprise. *Handsome*? That was not an adjective he would have ever used to describe himself.

"Tonight must be special night?" Mouse wondered.

Vincent looked away and thought for a moment.

Martin had rejoined his family, bringing his loved ones, and Father had accepted them. Their tunnels were safe again from a terrible threat. He recalled some of the difficult issues he'd discussed with Sonny in the pool. Even now, he could feel the detective and his brother making incredible, passionate love, struggling to resolve the complex issues between them — issues Vincent would never really understand. "Perhaps," he mused. "Perhaps so."

As he left Mouse's chambers and headed for his own, he tried to ignore the underlying distraction of Sonny and Martin's lovemaking, and concentrated, instead, on the emotions he was sensing from Catherine through their bond. Already, he could feel her anticipation at seeing him again, her eagerness. He marveled at it, the way she truly cared for him, desired him. How could he be so fortunate?

He was almost at the entrance of his chamber when he had to stop, suddenly overwhelmed with sensation. Confused, he shut his eyes, and focused.

A shock of desire traveled through him; it was so powerful he trembled, and had to pant to catch his breath. Sonny's and Martin's lovemaking had changed, had grown more intense, more powerful. He blinked, frowning.

He'd suspected that his and Catherine's dream of passion might have touched the sleeping detectives the other night, but that was the effect of subconscious fantasies. It had not occurred to Vincent that,

while fully awake *Martin's* passion might affect *him*. At least, not like *this*. This was not something he'd had to deal with when they were younger. He exhaled, realizing he'd been holding his breath.

He could not very well just leave Catherine waiting in his chambers; she'd been there long enough already. Besides, she knew him too well. She'd just come after him if he tried to leave. He would have to face this, deal with it. He nodded to himself. He could handle this. He was awake, in control. Straightening his cloak around him, he moved on towards his chamber.

She was sitting on his bed reading Shakespeare when he arrived. As she rested back comfortably against his pillows, her ankles crossed demurely, holding his aged book almost reverently, he thought that she had to be the most beautiful creature he'd ever seen.

Unbidden, the words of a Shakespearian sonnet came to his mind:

*"When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone beweepe my outcast state
And look upon myself and curse my fate
Haply I think on thee*

For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings."

But he had no memories of Catherine's sweet love. Without those memories could he "scorn to change my state with kings"?

His heart suddenly ached for her, yearned for her, with a need he'd never allowed himself to realize.

She glanced up at him. Her face lit up, radiant. "Vincent!" She swung her legs off the bed, and put the book down. As she stood, he watched her lovely green dress fall around her form perfectly, accenting her shapely body, her slight frame.

He made himself smile at her, so that he was not just standing there, staring dumbly.

"My, you *do* look handsome!" she said, appraising him as if she had no hand in his attire.

"I'm glad you approve of *Mouse's* taste in clothes," he retorted.

"It wasn't just your *clothes* I was referring to," she insisted, staring at his face.

He blushed and turned away. Somewhere in his mind, he felt Martin and Sonny's passion growing, threatening to sweep him up. Catherine moved into his arms as if she belonged there, as if it were the only place she felt safe, comfortable, wanted.

He allowed himself to hold her, gently, tenderly, pulling his cloak about her. Pressing his cheek to the top of her head, he felt a surge of need through his bond. Catherine's need. He closed his eyes. How could he resist this onslaught?

Distance, he thought desperately. Distance would help. It might dim the influence of the two lover's sexual energy. "Catherine, may I take you home?" Perhaps, in the time it would take them to return to her apartment, the two Miami detectives might finally complete their lovemaking. Surely then, the effect on him would dissipate.

She looked at him, puzzled, and he could feel her disappointment. Did he want to end the night already? Didn't he want to spend this evening with her?

"I can come to the balcony." He searched for a reason. "I think there will be more privacy for us in *your* home, than mine."

She smiled, the idea appealing to her. "Yes. We could use some privacy." She reached for her lace shawl and draped it about her shoulders, then took his arm in hers.



*'Love! thou are leading me from wintry cold,
Lady! thou leadest me to summer clime,
And I must taste the blossoms that unfold
In its ripe warmth this gracious morning time.'*
— Isabella — Keats

The entire time they walked through the tunnels towards her basement, Catherine felt as if something were distracting Vincent. She didn't know what it was, but she couldn't help resent it a little. They'd had so little time together lately, time to be really alone, that she'd craved to have this evening, no matter what it brought.

She would think positively! Once he was in her home, all the distractions of the underground would be left behind. Her balcony and her home had become their refuge. She would unplug her phones and light some candles as if they were still Below.

But once they had to separate so that Catherine could enter the world Above, she couldn't help but feel anxious. Suppose Vincent didn't come to the balcony?

He wouldn't do that, she scolded herself, but until she saw him waiting outside her French doors, she couldn't shake her apprehension.

She nearly flew through the bedroom doors, leaving them gaping in her wake, as she ran to his arms, rejoicing as his strong limbs surrounded her, crushed her to him. She suddenly thought of Sonny and his two lovers, and felt a flush of jealousy at their union, the joy they must take from each other emotionally — *and* physically. For just a moment, she could envision them together, loving each other with frantic abandon, proud of their passion, of their male need. Boldly, impulsively, she flung her long withheld desire at Vincent through their bond.

She looked up into his strange and wonderful face. Reaching, she touched his cheek lightly with her fingertips, then brushed them against his strange mouth. She ached to feel that mouth on hers, longed for it with a need that was palpable. "Would it be so terrible just to kiss me?" she whispered.

"Catherine," he hissed, as if the suggestion were physically painful to him.

"So terrible — to put flesh to our love?"

"Don't. Please." Even as he tried to deny his feelings, she felt his arms grow steely hard around her.

She pressed herself against his body, the thin silk of her dress rubbing against the soft cotton of his jeans, the worn leather of his jerkin. She felt one of his

thigh-high boots pressing between her legs and rubbed her calf against it, hungering for the feel of him.

"Would a kiss be so much, one kiss?" she asked again. He leaned over her, pressing his mouth against the top of his head, the way he'd done so many times. She wondered if this were a safety release for him, to touch her hair with his lips. Her heart nearly broke with need.

She nuzzled against his chest as he safely kissed her head. Brazenly, she loosened the leather ties of his jerkin, pushing her face past the lace, winding her way inside his protection, until her lips found the skin of his sternum. His chest was softly furred, as his hands and arms were, and she pressed her cheek against that delightful softness and sighed. Tenderly, she kissed him there and felt him tremble.

"Do you remember our dream?" she whispered, shocked at her own daring. They'd never spoken of it before. If Sonny hadn't asked her about it in the D.A.'s office that day, she might never have remembered it. But his speaking of it brought bits and pieces of it back to her until, over time, the entire fantasy had resurfaced.

Vincent didn't answer, so she prodded him again. "Do you?"

"Yes," he finally murmured, reluctantly.

She looked up at him, smiling, glowing with desire. "It was beautiful, that dream. I cherish it. I only wish I could have it again and again."

"Catherine," he said, and it was almost a moan.

"I know you shared it with me. You felt it. Didn't you think it was beautiful?"

"Yes," he answered, looking away, seeming ashamed.

"Is that all I will ever have of you — that dream?" she wondered.

He closed his eyes. "You have my heart. You have all that I am."

"Not *all*," she reminded him.

"No. Not all. Not my darkness. Not my Other. You will never have that, never."

"And you think that by not loving me, you protect me?" she asked. "Look into *my* heart, Vincent. It is my love that can protect *you*. Didn't you see that in our dream?"

He stared at her wildly. "That was a *dream*! My darkness is *real*!"

"I'll bring light to that darkness, my love. Don't you trust me?"

Her eyes captured his, demanding an honest answer. Didn't he trust her? Didn't he think their love powerful enough, good enough to hold back the dark? How could he have so little faith in them — in her? He just stared at her, his body coiled like wound steel. He was shaking, and she hoped it was with need for her.

He looked away again, as if he could not bear the pressure her gaze put on him. She lowered her own eyes, and pressed her face against the furred flesh of his chest again. She shifted slightly as the cold wind whipped around them. Her hip grazed his body, and she almost jumped when she realized he was erect. She'd never felt that before, not in all the times he'd

held her, sometimes for hours. Amazed, she moved again, deliberately rubbing herself against his maleness, and was shocked by his size, his bulk. When he didn't stop her, she did it again, more slowly, more seductively.

"Catherine, don't," he growled warningly, but never moved.

She realized then that he couldn't. That he was overwhelmed by his sudden need for her, that it was taking every ounce of his strength just to stand here, unmoving, feeling her desire thrum through their bond. He wanted her. He really wanted her.

She pressed her lips against his chest again, unfastening more of his jerkin. If he would not kiss her mouth, then he could kiss her head, and she would kiss whatever she might reach.

"We can't!" he hissed, even as he pressed his mouth desperately against her hair, her forehead, the side of her face, her ear.

She sighed, nuzzling his sternum, his pectoral muscles, the flat of his abdomen. She felt his lips touch the scar on the side of her face and she lifted her head to make it easier for him. He brushed his mouth against her jaw, her cheek, her eyes, her chin.

"Kiss me," she demanded. "Vincent, *kiss me!*"

"I *dare* not!" he insisted, pressing his mouth carefully against her forehead, the way he would to Mouse.

She slid her hands around his body, inside his cloak. She touched him, stroked him, ran her fingers over his chest, his arms, his spine. His muscles flexed and tensed under her palms, his shoulders tightened as he pulled her closer.

"You kissed me in the dream, I remember it," she told him. "It was so wonderful, so real. I could taste your flavor in my mouth. It was *real*. As real as *this*." She ran her palm over his swelling mound.

"You must *stop!*" he ordered, grabbing her roughly, pulling her face up to his. "Look at me! This is what's real! Even now my passion turns to rage. I want to rip you apart, climb inside you and feed on your heat. This feeling is no different than the madness that overwhelms me when I kill. Look into the face of your *lover!* See the darkness inside me! See the danger!"

She placed her hands on either side of his tortured face. She was startled to find his blue eyes had darkened, turned cloudy, as if someone had swirled black throughout them. She stared at his eyes unflinchingly and sent her love through their bond. "I see my beautiful, beloved lover. My lover who could never harm me. My lover who loves me more than life itself, as I love him." She smiled, as the color in his eyes lightened. "Vincent, everyone who has ever felt desire has wanted to climb inside their lover. And passion, all passion, is a powerful emotion. But you *can* climb inside me. I want you there. 'Thou wert not sent for slumber!'" she whispered, quoting the poet Byron, "'Let me be a sharer in thy fierce and far delight, — a portion of the tempest and of thee!'"

With a low moan, his resolve collapsed, and he pulled her to him, his mouth finding hers.

She met his kiss happily, wrapping her arms around his neck, hanging on to him for dear life.

Beneath her mouth, she felt his odd lips pressing against hers, felt the cat-like split beneath his nose, felt the soft fur on his face brushing her skin. She opened her mouth, tickled his lips with her tongue, expecting resistance. But his resistance was gone, and he sighed and opened his mouth, inviting her in. She skimmed his sleek teeth, played fearlessly with his sharp canines, tasted his unique, rich flavor, until finally, she found his tongue. Hesitantly, it touched hers, tip to tip. Tenuously, the two organs stroked each other, until finally he grew more bold and reached into her mouth to savor her taste.

She gasped, realizing the flat of his tongue was barbed, like a cat's. It's lush texture excited her, as he played with her tongue, her teeth, her palette. Their kiss grew more intense, as his differences surprised and excited her. She dug her hands into his thick hair, as if wanting to anchor his head in place.

They continued kissing, discovering the intoxication of this profound intimacy. So desperate were they to continue their oral discoveries, that they successfully ignored the winter cold for long minutes.

They finally broke apart, both of them gasping.

Catherine could only whisper, "Vincent, your kiss — I love your kiss."

"You — are not displeased?"

She knew he meant by his strangeness, the shape of his mouth, the feel of his rough tongue.

She murmured throatily, "Oh, no! I am very pleased. So very pleased." She found his mouth again and surged into it, wanting to fall inside him, or pull him inside her. She only dimly realized that he'd scooped her up into his powerful arms.

"Catherine. The weather. It is bitter out here," he breathed against her mouth.

She kissed his cheeks, his chin. "Is it?"

He held her easily, and kissed her again. "Yes," he whispered when he'd successfully pulled away again. "Bitter cold. You will grow ill out here."

He clutched her desperately, holding her small, fragile body tightly against him. She could feel his heart pounding against the skin of his breast.

"Then take me inside, Vincent," she asked finally, even though she feared that a change of scenery would shatter the mood.

As if waiting for her request, he carried her into her bedroom, where the French doors still gaped. He swung them shut with a foot. "It's cold in here as well," he commented absently, still holding her.

"It'll warm up," she assured him, and took his mouth again. He walked as they kissed making her wonder where he was taking them. She felt him lower her gently, ease her onto a soft surface. The couch?

She looked around. Her bed. Oh, god, he'd brought her to her bed. She couldn't believe he'd really done it. But he'd done that before. Brought her to bed when she was sleepy, and even occasionally tucked her in — then left. *Not this time*, she thought. *I won't allow him to leave this time.*

"How could I leave you now?" he wondered, and lowered himself to the bed beside her.

She pulled him onto her, wanting to feel his great weight pressing her into the bed, warming her, sur-

rounding her. She wanted to feel nothing but him; he was her world.

Her hands roved him wildly, as if she needed to continually reassure herself he was no phantom, no dream lover, that he was here, real, made of flesh — and loving her.

"I've waited so long — wanted you so long." She wanted to say something lovely, something poetic, but she could think of nothing but her need. It filled her mind, her mouth, stole her sense, her voice.

"And I, you," he assured her. "But for so long, I didn't dare dream. Not even dream. Even now, I fear — " He smiled wryly and quoted from Shelley's *Lines*, "Its passion will rock thee, As the storms rock the ravens on high: Bright reason will mock thee, Like the sun from a wintry sky."

She placed her fingers over his mouth. "There is nothing to fear. I want our passion to rock me. Our love will carry us safely through." A stray line from Shelley's *Love's Philosophy*, sprang to her mind. "Oh, what are all these kisses worth, if thou kiss not me?"

"Catherine. My love," he whispered, and lowered his mouth to hers again. He surrounded her physically, his body enveloping hers, and she melted under him, wanting him like she'd never wanted anything.



Martin eased into the heated pool gingerly. The hot water swirled around his aching, battered body, soothing his slight pains and discomfort. He was as tired as he ever remembered being; and possibly more satisfied as well. It would be wonderful to climb into bed with his two lovers and sleep for as long as he wanted.

The water covered him up to the jaw and he closed his eyes blissfully. In many ways, this trip to New York had been more eventful than any other occasion in his life. He lay in the pool and thought over the last few days and tried to absorb all that had happened to him.

After a short while in the soothing pool, he found himself suddenly breathing harder. He sat up, his brow furrowed. His manhood stirred in the warm water, and he stared at himself as if that part of him had no business being there. As he watched, it grew firmly erect. He felt a rush of sexual excitement.

Rico and Sonny? he wondered. Tubbs had been clearly affected by their intense lovemaking. Had Sonny awakened when the dark man entered the bed, and made love to him? No, Castillo thought, even Crockett wasn't capable of that quick a recovery. And Ricardo would not have asked it of him.

He concentrated, feeling his excitement growing, his erection twitching and pulsing with need.

Then he knew.

Vincent and Catherine!

Just as he'd feared, just as he'd warned Rico, Vincent and Catherine had begun to make love. This was no dream his body was responding to. He realized that he and Sonny and the passion they must have

projected through their bond with Vincent may have actually instigated this sooner than his brother might have wanted.

They were just beginning, he thought, wetting his lips. He felt a craving for Sonny and Ricardo that was powerful, overwhelming. And he felt the darkness, his own darkness, and Vincent's, too, trembling at the edge of his desire.

No, he couldn't risk it. Not now, not after they had all resolved so much.

He couldn't stay here. He pulled himself out of the pool in one move and grabbed his towel. Drying himself quickly, he donned his clothes. He knew where to go for privacy. He knew where no one would find him — where no one had ever found him. He would go there and wait this out, and struggle with his darkness, and his brother's — alone. He would wage this war by himself and win — if he could. He did not want to think what the price might be if he lost — or who would have to pay it.

Tying his quilted black robe with the embroidered white crane, he left the pools to hide.



Sonny opened his eyes onto the dim light of the nightstand's candle. He'd never get used to the subdued light down here, he thought, blinking. He was exhausted, and more sated than he'd been in a long time. So why was he awake?

Rico snuggled against his back, his arms around the blond as if protecting him.

Sonny felt the hairs rise on the back of his neck. "Tubbs!" he hissed into the silence.

The black man never moved, but his voice was clear, immediately awake. "Yeah?"

"Where's Marty?"

The New Yorker pressed his lips gently against the back of Crockett's neck and that comforting touch sent a ripple of pleasure through the blond. "He went to take a hot bath. He won't be gone long. Go back to sleep."

Suddenly, Sonny didn't want to sleep. His cock was standing straight up, and Rico's seductive kiss had awakened his desire. He rolled over and smiled at the dark detective. "Suppose I'm not sleepy?"

"Crockett, you're insatiable," Rico murmured, and smiled back.

Sonny realized that his lover was just as hard as he was, as he pulled him into a willing embrace. Their kiss melded together with the expertise of long practice as they touched tongues and battled with their lips. But, after a few long, delicious moments, the Anglo pulled away, confused.

"What is, baby?" Rico asked, seeing his odd expression. "What's the matter?"

"I don't know — but something is," Crockett confessed. "I shouldn't be this hot, man. I feel like I haven't made love to *anyone* in months. I mean, I feel this need — " He trailed off, unsure how to verbalize his feelings, and not wanting his lover to

misunderstand.

Rico only looked thoughtful. "I think I know what you mean, partner. I'm *aching* for you, and when I climbed into this bed, sex was the *last* thing on my mind. When I got here I'd already felt completely satisfied."

"Yeah," Sonny agreed, sitting up, looking around. "Yeah. Something's happening. Something's going on. I don't like it. Let's go find Marty."

For a moment Rico looked like he might argue with his partner, but then his expression clearly said he completely understood. "You got it," he agreed, throwing off the covers and reaching for his clothes.

*You know if I leave you now
It doesn't mean I love you any less
It's just the state I'm in
I can't be good to anyone else like this*
— Wait — Sara McLachlan

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO: JACK'S LEGACY

*The night is my companion
And solitude my guide.
Would I spend forever here
And not be satisfied?*
— Obsession — Sara McLachlan

Vincent thought he could spend the rest of his life kissing this woman. All the books and all the poetry and all the fantasies he'd ever had could not have prepared him for the reality of actually touching his mouth to Catherine's. Her lips were full and soft and yielding under his. Her tongue was sleek, not rough like his, and small and delicate; her smooth, white teeth were so different from his sharp, predatory ones. And her mouth — had he ever tasted anything as sweet as her warm, wet mouth?

"Vincent. My love —" she gasped around his kiss.

"Oh, Catherine," he moaned in answer, and their mouths were locked together again.

Her lovely, fragile hands were everywhere on him, touching, exploring, tugging at his clothes, as if those hands had their own agenda, their own needs. But all his great paws could do was hold her. He was terrified to release her, fearing she would disappear from under him like the dream she had to be.

Suddenly, she buried her hands in his mane, the mass of reddish blond hair that surrounded both their faces, hiding them from the world. Tugging at his hair, she moved her head, as if trying to guide him. He cooperated, wanting her direction, needing to know what would please her, how he might fulfill her. He found his mouth on her cheek, then her ear and realized with some amazement that she wanted to feel

his lips, his strange tongue, elsewhere on her body. Surely, her lovely, full mouth had to be bruised from his rough kisses, from his sharp teeth.

"Please," she whispered, shuddering under him. He obliged, sensing what she wanted through the bond.

Gently, he used his bristly tongue against her cheek, her jaw. She rolled her head and next he nuzzled her ear. She gasped and leaned into his mouth and he explored every crevasse of the delicate shell, the fleshy lobe, the soft skin beneath it. She arched under him, clutching his clothes, sighing. Could such a simple thing really be so pleasing to her? Could she really be enjoying his attentions so much? The sensations of pleasure and delight that raced along their bond could not be denied.

My Catherine, he thought, growling low in her ear. His mouth traveled down her impossibly long, elegant neck and she reacted delightedly, tugging at his clothes, shifting beneath him. He hesitated at the plunging neckline of the dress's bodice.

He tasted her perfume, its scent intoxicating him. Carefully, he lowered his tongue to the space between her breasts.

"My god, Vincent," she gasped. Tugging at the ties holding his jerkin closed, she opened it to the waist. She slid her hands into the shirt, touching his bare chest and back intimately, knowledgeably. The feel of her hands on his shoulders and spine made him dizzy with need. Boldly, she ran her smooth palms over his furred muscles. Deliberately, she used her thumbs to tease his hidden nipples.

He growled louder and moved his mouth as far into her neckline as he could, but he did not dare, could not imagine himself going any further. He found himself hating the beautiful dress.

"Tear it," she said clearly. "Tear the damned thing."

He stopped, staring at her in the dim light.

"I have a *hundred* dresses. Mary will use the scraps to make a lovely shirt for Jaime." She smiled at him. "It's just a *dress*."

He shook his head. He could not bear to see Jaime in it. It was Catherine's dress. And he was afraid — afraid that such a violent action would awaken something in him that even now he could barely keep at bay.

She seemed to understand, and gently pushed him away. "All right, Vincent. Just let me sit up, then."

He obliged, easing away from her slightly, as she rose and sat on her heels on the bed. In a well-practiced move, she reached behind herself and unzipped the dress. It fell away from her shoulders limply, pooling around her waist, revealing a lacy cream colored slip that was just as diaphanous, just as beautiful as the green dress. Catherine pulled the dress over her head and absently tossed it on the floor. She sat before him, enshrouded in soft silk and little else.

"You are so beautiful," he whispered, almost terrified to speak.

"So are you," she replied, and reached over to unclasp the cloak he still wore.



Martin stepped inside the small stone alcove, far from the underground chambers the Tunnel Dwellers called home. But this place was home to him. He touched the walls reverently, remembering how he and Jack had hidden here so many times, from chores they didn't wish to do, to share some new knowledge one of them had gleaned or secrets they'd overheard.

He smiled, remembering the night when he'd learned the most exciting secret of all, the night when he had learned to love. Deliberately, he recalled the feel of Jack's lips on his, Jack's hands on his flesh, teaching him of passion — and then later, Jack invading him, taking him, introducing him to his darkest, most wonderful needs.

His erection throbbed, as if it, too, remembered.

He would be safe here, and — so would Sonny. Vincent and he were still in control, but how long that might last, he could not know. He wouldn't risk jeopardizing all he and Crockett had resolved tonight; he couldn't jeopardize the fragile balance Ricardo had helped them find. They would all be safe here.

He leaned back against the cool walls, remembering Jack's touch, and shuddered with desire.



Sonny and Rico moved from pool to pool, but Castillo was nowhere to be found.

"Think he might be with Father?" Tubbs asked his partner.

Crockett considered that for a moment. "No. He's not with Father. He's alone." The blond's phallus was still hard as the tunnel's granite, but that was easy to ignore. What wasn't easy was this damned *feeling*. He couldn't understand it, he couldn't verbalize it, but Marty was off somewhere licking his wounds. He needed them, and hadn't gone to them. That really pissed Sonny off. Would this hard-headed Cuban ever learn to trust them; would he ever really treat them as his *lovers*? "Something — something's happening to him."

"You're right, partner," the New Yorker agreed. "Something's definitely happening. I feel like someone's crawling around in my soul, lighting me up inside. And — I'm afraid this might be my fault in a way."

Crockett stared at him. His partner's expression was strained.

"Remember when Castillo wanted to bail out of here and head back for Miami right away?" Rico asked him.

"Uh-huh. When I was in the hospital chamber."

"Yeah, well, he and I had a talk. He told me that the reason the three of us had that profound session in the hotel — was because Vince and Cathy were having a hot *dream*. I've gotta tell you, man, I really didn't believe it, but I humored him. Anyway, he was afraid that if Vincent and Catherine actually decided to 'do it' that something would happen to us — to *him*. Sonny, I've seen Castillo in plenty of tight spots and I've never seen that man afraid of anything, but

he was afraid of *that* — of two people making love in the same city he was in."

The dark detective looked around the pool area, as if trying to handle his distress. Finally, he said, "Man, I blew the whole thing off. Told him it would be no big deal, that we could handle it. I told him we were lovers, we could cope with anything. I tried to assure him he'd never do anything to hurt either of us." Rico's copper eyes captured Sonny's green ones. "Now, I think, maybe, it's coming to pass. Maybe Vincent and Catherine have finally found what they were looking for — and something's happening to the lieutenant. Something that's terrifying him."

"So, he'd go off to deal with it alone," the Floridian agreed, understanding everything with an amazing clarity. "He's scared he'll do something to hurt us. He's done this to protect us." The blond's face hardened. "What bullshit! He needs us now, more than ever. But would he admit it? Hell, no."

Something must have caught the corner of Rico's eye, because he turned suddenly and walked toward a nearby pool they hadn't investigated yet. "Look at this!"

There were drying footprints on the stone, but the Vice detective knew it was just another dead end. "He would've put his shoes on right here," Crockett mused. "There's no way we can know if he headed in the direction those footprints point."

Tubbs stared at his partner, his voice somber. "You can find him, Sonny."

The blond cop snorted. "With what? My secret decoder ring?"

"I'm serious. You can find him. You've got that sixth sense, and now, we're all — 'bonded.' I'm tellin' you, if you try hard enough, you'll be able to 'feel' Castillo, you'll be able to follow him."

"I can't believe you're tellin' me this, man," Sonny said. Tubbs had always been so skeptical of para-normal events.

"Vincent found you through me and Castillo," Rico reminded him. "And while the two of you were goin' for the gold in the World Sex Olympics, you dragged me right into the winner's circle with you. This is no time to go into denial about what's happened to us, man. I'll try and help you, but I'm not that good at it."

Crockett nodded, convinced by his partner's vehemence. The truth was, he was still skittish about "feeling" Vincent's presence. But he wouldn't think about that now.

Rico took both Sonny's hands. "You've got to really concentrate. Think about — think about the last few hours."

Tubbs shut his eyes, so Crockett did, too. He thought of their wild, rapturous lovemaking, and his aching organ twitched in response. Somehow, he felt like Tubbs had been there with them, and as he thought that, he felt his partner touch his mind lightly again.

Marty? Marty, where are you, man? It's just us, and we're worried about you. Let us find you, so we can help you through this, together, the three of us. He could feel Rico echoing his sentiments.

At first, he sensed nothing except his own thoughts

and his partner's solid presence. And then it happened, just as it had when he'd been chained to the pipes, trapped in pain and fear. A *touch*, a feeling from outside himself. A dark, bitter loneliness, a sense of loss and longing, and terrible fear. And overlying all of it, an incredible sexual presence. A dangerous presence. It rocked him, forcing him to open his eyes.

Tubbs grabbed his shoulders, preventing him from falling. "Sonny!" the black man cried out.

Crockett touched his head, felt the beginning of a headache. "Oh, brother! Now I know why they invented the telephone!"

"Did you feel it, did you feel *him*?"

The blond nodded gingerly, the headache already beginning to recede. "Yeah. You did, too, didn't you?" Tubbs nodded, still watching his friend worriedly. Then Sonny realized something. "Hey, Rico - I know where Marty is!"



Physical pleasure is a sensual experience no different from pure seeing or the pure sensation with which a fine fruit fills the tongue....

— Rainer Marie Rilke

As the heavy black cloak cascaded off Vincent's shoulders onto the floor, Catherine's hands moved to his partially opened jerkin. She moved slowly but assuredly, fearful that if she rushed things, he'd come to his senses and halt everything. He sat, watching her actions as if amazed, his chest heaving as he gasped for air, his mouth slightly open like a lion panting from the heat. His teeth glittered wickedly in the dim light and she remembered the feel of those powerful canines against her tongue. The memory made her shiver.

As the jerkin slid from his broad shoulders, she stared unabashedly at the broad expanse of his chest, the powerful muscles coiled under the tawny pelt of his skin. There was something frighteningly alien about Vincent's bare chest, the collection of muscles and ligaments testifying to a massive power, a strength unknown to human males. She imagined that energy surrounding her, overwhelming her and felt a flush of desire.

The fine fur covering his chest glistened gold in the reflected glow of New York's night. She reached out slowly, feeling it with her palm, tracing the outline of his musculature. He quivered under her hand, making her smile. "You're beautiful, Vincent," she whispered, and leaned against him to press her lips against the hollow of his throat.

She felt his head tip back, and a small grumble of delight vibrated through his body as her mouth left a trail of kisses against his clean, soft fur. She kissed his rigid sternum, and let her mouth wander over one

firm breast until, like a nursing infant, she finally found the tiny nub of his hidden nipple. As her warm mouth surrounded it and her tongue laved it to pebble hardness, he shivered under her, and carefully held her head in place, letting her know just how much it delighted him. But she already knew, feeling his excitement growing inside her, his desire and need cresting in her own mind, making her pant, making her wet.

He held perfectly still as she moved to the other nipple and tortured it just as sweetly. When she tenderly bit the sensitive flesh he growled warningly, but the thrill coursing through her told her he loved it. Her hands traveled boldly to his trousers and quickly undid the top button of his jeans.

He grabbed her shoulders, snarling. When she started on the next button, he pulled her away forcibly. His blue eyes were wild, angry, darkening with need. She stared at him defiantly, her own eyes full of their mutual desire. Slowly, he dropped his gaze, murmuring, "No! No!"

She sat there, his huge hands on her small shoulders, the heat from them searing her. She was shaking, panting, wanting him like she'd never wanted any man. It poured through her, that wanting, thrumming along the bond like a living thing. Her own nipples were rigid, almost painful, as they pushed against the thin silk of the slip.

Then his eyes fastened on them as if they were calling him. He growled again, as if protesting her beauty and its effect on him, but it was a feeble protest and they both knew it. She moved her head to one side, brushing her cheek against the hand on that shoulder, and deliberately exposed her neck, like the sacrificial lamb before the lion.

He bent his head, pressing his lips against the column of her throat, his tongue gently roving her throbbing jugular. She moaned softly, encouraging him, and closed her eyes blissfully as he began to lick her, the harsh bristles of his strange tongue exciting her wildly. He laved her throat, her ear, her shoulders and her flesh trembled under his mouth. She dropped her head back and went limp, forcing him to support her. He placed a hand behind her neck, holding her tenderly as he traced the contours of her collarbone with his lips and tongue.

His mouth traveled over the lacy edge of the slip onto her sternum, his nose pressing against her, inhaling her scent. She could feel the split in his lip through the thin fabric. Her own mouth was open as she panted, yielding under him. His heat and desire surged through her along their bond, as well as his restraint. And she knew it could not last.

His lips grazed her nipple and even through the fabric it excited her to a fever. "Please," she murmured huskily, just as he tentatively kissed the erect flesh. Slowly, he opened his mouth and took that tender part of her inside him. She could feel his unusual tongue exploring her sensitive flesh, feel him carefully begin to suck her through the slip. The barrier between them maddened her and impulsively she reached up and tore the ribbon-like shoulder straps that held the garment in place. Hurriedly, she tugged the fabric down, trying to expose herself, wanting so

much to feel his moist heat, his tongue, his teeth on her.

"Catherine!" he gasped, pulling away, as the soft mounds of her small breasts were revealed to him. And then he was lost, moaning, burying his face between them.

She pulled his head to her, burying her fingers in his tawny mane, refusing to release him. Then he was on her, pulling her against his mouth, taking her breast between his lips, lapping at her rosy aureole with his harsh tongue. The sensation was both brutal and exquisite as her nipple throbbed from his rough attention. She anchored his head in place and moaned, arching against him, whispering, "Yes, oh god, yes!" even as she wondered how long she could endure.

He sucked her raw, laving the erect aureole over and over as if he could pull nourishment from her. Each brush of those rough bristles was just this side of agony, and so exciting she felt her sex throbbing between her legs. Just as it became too much to bear, he sensed it, and abandoned that abused, swollen organ for its mate, pouncing on it, taking it into his mouth like food. He snarled, frantic with need, and she moaned in answer, pulling him hard against her. The sharpened ends of his teeth grazed the painfully sensitive tip and she had to bite her lower lip to keep from screaming in delight. He growled around her flesh and punished her for her desire, and she loved it.

He'd discovered the delight of her flavor now, and more. He'd discovered how much she wanted him, enjoyed him, ached for him — and used that discovery against her. When her second breast throbbed in pain, he left it, his mouth traveling downward, over her stomach, pushing the slip before him as he uncovered her.

Carefully, he eased her onto the bed, looming over her like a feeding predator, as she gripped his hair and surrendered to him. "Your mouth!" she whispered frantically, wanting to tell him how wonderful it was, how much it excited her, but all she could do was whisper, "Your mouth —" over and over.

He found her navel and licked it delightedly, even as he cautiously, slowly, pulled the slip over her hips. He nipped her hipbones, making her buck, and nuzzled the soft skin just above her panty line. She pushed herself up onto her elbows and looked down at him. "Vincent — what? What are you...?" she couldn't remember the rest of the question.

He pushed the slip down over her hips, past her thighs and off her legs. Finally, he stared hungrily at the tiny satin panties that were all that stood between them. She could feel the rumble in his chest vibrate through the bed as he slowly lowered himself to her groin. "My god, Vincent!" she breathed.

Tenderly, he kissed her mons through the sheer fabric and she trembled, actually shocked by the action. He turned his head and brushed his lips against the smooth skin of her thigh and she whimpered and spread her legs automatically. His tongue laved the tender flesh of her inner thigh roughly and she gasped and pulled her knees up. Stroking the outside of her legs with his palms, he began licking her seriously on

her tender inner thighs where his bristly tongue had the most affect. She moaned and twitched, unable to take the sweet punishment.

Pausing, he stared up at her, his eyes now almost midnight blue. She could do nothing but hold her breath as he dipped his head again, lower. The smooth tip of his tongue reached out, lapping at the cotton crotch of her panties already saturated with her essence. She cried out, feeling him touch her most intimate place. He leaned over to her hip and drew the satin fabric into his mouth, quickly gnawing through it, then did the same on the other side. Pulling the scraps away, he exposed her completely.

She stopped breathing, stopped moving, just as the prey freezes before its predator, knowing that the slightest motion will bring down disaster. He gazed at her, his expression a mixture of tenderness and sheer carnality. Slowly, he licked his lips, then lowered his head.

"No," she whispered, her voice so soft it never stirred the air. "You can't. No."

He slid his hands beneath the soft roundness of her bottom, and lifted her up to him as if raising a cup to drink. He inhaled her woman's scent deeply, as if savoring that unique perfume. Then he licked her slowly, sensuously, his smooth tongue tip discovering her ever so tenderly as he parted the delicate folds of her womanhood.

The groan poured out of her, the raw shock of pleasure rumbling through them both. He tasted her again, moving his tongue tip deeper into her secret place. Her own mouth watered as he savored her flavor, so new to him. She could taste it herself, the raw sexuality of it, as she poured forth her essence for him, like honey from a burst comb.

Growing more adventurous, he began to explore her. Waves of delight ripping through her, she collapsed against the bed, boneless and weak from the pleasure of it. Still, he took only the smallest sips from her cup, even though he could have drowned in her flow.

She felt open, totally exposed, as he held her so carefully to his mouth and teased her so cruelly. She clawed the bed as her excitement grew and grew boundlessly, and still he took his time, sampling her femaleness, gauging her delight as he so gently touched her lips, her mons, her perineum with the lightest licks.

"Vincent! Vincent!" she gasped raggedly, senselessly, her mind swirling with the intense sensations, incapable of coherent thought. His mind was there, too, hungering, lustful for this new experience, examining every facet of his new found passion. He frightened her with his predatory keenness, and that fear excited her, too. It was impossible to resist his desire; she craved him, ached for him to feed on her.

His hands tightened on her buttocks, and she knew he needed more. She tensed, anticipating his next move, reacting with both terror and need as the broad flat of his tongue stroked her labia. The coating of bristles ran over her most sensitive flesh, setting her hyper-alert nerve endings on fire. She arched, crying out and Vincent growled and buried his face in her,

lapping every inch, ever cell of her womanhood.

Her body twisted in his hands and he clutched her soft rump harder, his sharp nails tweaking her, as if in warning. She gasped and begged, burying her own hands claw-like in his hair as he continued pushing her to the very edge of desire. His tongue brutalized her, the bristles rubbing her raw, making her delicate tissues swell against his mouth. And his desire flowed over her now like a river, drowning her, submerging her, carrying her away, out of control. She bucked wildly against his mouth and he grumbled appreciatively and devoured her. His darkening eyes bore into her, watching her every reaction as he experienced it simultaneously through the bond.

His desire hummed through her, making her crave more abuse, more torture from his mouth, and he obliged, lapping her harder, more broadly. Then he found the tiny center, the small nub of flesh that was the most sensitive, most susceptible part of her, her aching clitoris, already swollen and throbbing.

"Oh, no, please, Vincent, no!" she begged even as he attacked it, his tongue tearing at it, igniting it. She shrieked and sobbed, and pulled his hair, tugging his face closer against her, wanting more and more and more until she was sure the fluid that ran like water from her body had to be blood, her blood feeding him, this terrible predator devouring her alive.

Then the bond grew incandescent, brighter and hotter than she could have imagined, and the pain and pleasure pulsing between her legs exploded into a sun storm of feeling. She burst into tears and came. He pulled her hard against his mouth and touched her expertly, perfectly, making her come again. She cried for mercy, demanding that he stop, that he continue, that he help her. He did and she came again, and again, wave after wave of luminous pleasure exploding between her legs and behind her eyes until she sobbed convulsively and kept on coming. His claws bit into her buttocks and that made her come, too.

Vincent growled furiously around her flesh, and she realized with a surge of fear that he was losing himself, that her own passion was so overwhelming, she had little reserve left to control him. She had to stop him before the delight he was bringing her made her heart stop, or worse — made him lose himself in darkness.

Using a strength she didn't know she had she shouted, "Stop! Stop! Vincent, don't!" and pulled his hair brutally, until she'd yanked him off her. She scooted away, her legs shaking violently as she struggled to catch her breath.

He was still hunched over her legs, gasping for air, his head bowed so that his hair hid his face.

Even though she was shuddering, Catherine had started to recover from the incredible experience. She wanted to kiss her lover, taste herself in his mouth, and cool his ardor for a moment. Then she wanted to give him pleasure, a gentler pleasure all his own.

"Vincent, my wonderful lover." Touching his chin, she lifted his face as she sat up to kiss him. But as his head rose, as his eyes met hers, she gasped in fright.

His expression was dark, foreboding, full of primi-

tive emotion. He looked crafty, calculating, emotions she'd never seen in him before. But the most terrible thing was his eyes. His beautiful eyes. They glared at her with all the hunger of the hunting cat. They gleamed wickedly in the darkness, intelligent and sly, like glowing obsidian chips.

He blinked as she gaped at him. His eyes had turned black.



Sonny leaned against the rigid stone of the tunnel and tried to catch his breath. His head swirled with feelings and images he knew were not his own. He fought them, wanting to focus, needing to find Marty, to help him. His knee was in agony, but he ignored it. Compared to what his mind and body were going through, that was easy.

He touched his aching priapus through his leather pants, willing it to sleep, but it had little regard for his commands.

"How you doin', partner?" Rico murmured encouragingly.

Crockett glanced at his lover. Tubbs was beautiful in the dim light of the caverns. His skin seemed to glow with a golden hue, and the odd, patchwork clothing he wore only made him more attractive. The dark detective rarely wore jeans, and Sonny relished the change those pants brought in his appearance. The worn fabric clung to Rico's muscular, well-shaped legs, and accented his beautiful, round butt. The blond's eyes roved the inviting, swollen mound pressing against the jeans' fly.

Sonny swallowed, completely forgetting why they were here, what they were doing. He reached for Tubbs, pulling him into his arms, and the black man didn't resist. "I love you, man," the Anglo whispered huskily, and met the darker man's mouth with his own.

Rico gasped happily, as their tongues clashed and wrestled wetly.

"I want you, baby," Sonny whispered huskily around his lover's lips. "Want to get *in* you."

"And I want you there," Rico assured him, his hands roving Crockett's slim body. "Need you so bad."

That's not why they were here, Sonny remembered dimly. Why were they here? Tubbs had taken hold of the blond's erection through the leather and was stroking him, making him crazy; then, he started to kneel.

Sonny shut his eyes and leaned back against the cool stone. *Oh yes, yes*, he thought, mentally urging his friend on.

Rico kissed his clothed mound, then rubbed his cheek against Sonny's burning, aching phallus. "Wait a minute," the dark cop gasped. "Wait, partner, wait —"

But Sonny couldn't. He ran a thumb over Rico's mouth even as he untied the leather thongs that secured the pale, buckskin and denim-patched pants. "I can't wait, baby, I can't." He fed his lover his flesh, and Rico ate him greedily, pulling him inside the shelter of his mouth.

Crockett's moan ricocheted off the womb-like walls, echoing hollowly around them. Deep in his mind, he heard Martin's answering cry. Blinking, he heard it again, in the recesses of his brain, a cry of such lonely wanting it rocked his soul.

Rico heard it too, and with a sigh, released the tantalizing hold he had on his lover's cock. "Sonny, what are we doing...?"

The Floridian wondered that himself, half dazed by the flood of sensations racing through him. He took Rico's arm, urged him back to his feet. "I'm sorry, man, so sorry. I should've never — I couldn't help it."

"It's okay," Rico assured him gently, kissing his mouth chastely, even as he tucked his lover's erection back inside his pants and yanked the leather ties closed again. "I want you so bad."

They kissed again more passionately, and soon were grinding against each other as they stood braced against the stone walls.

"What's happenin' to us, Rico?" Sonny asked, gasping.

"I don't know, but it's gotta be happenin' to the lieutenant, too. And he's *alone*." With an obvious force of will, Tubbs pulled out of Sonny's embrace and stood a few feet away, getting a grip on himself. His copper eyes searched the Anglo's face. "Where is he, man? We gotta find him."

Crockett nodded, dazed and disoriented. Find Marty? How the hell would he ever find Marty feeling like this? All he wanted was to throw Tubbs to the ground and fuck his ass off, bite him until he bled—

He squeezed his eyes shut and rubbed his face. *Concentrate, dammit! You're a cop! Concentrate!* And then he felt it again, the loneliness and the desperate hunger. He shuddered. He'd felt that force before. He'd been taken by it, he'd had it in his body, and had been made totally powerless under it. And it wanted him again. Could he endure it this time?

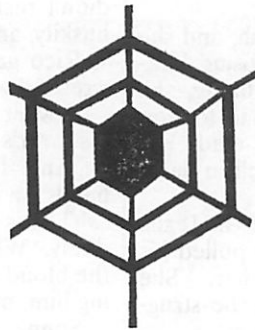
He swallowed. His ragged voice sounded tinny in his own ears. "This way, partner."

"I'm with you, Sonny. I love you."

He met Rico's solicitous gaze and took strength from it, even though his partner had not been able to save him before. He had to have faith in his lovers, and in his own strength. He moved forward, leading them to Martin's lair.

*We close a circle by means of our gazes,
and in it the tangled tension fuses white.
Already your unwitting command raises
the column in my genital-woodsie.*

— Rainer Maria Rilke



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE UNLEASHING THE BEAST

*Listen as the wind blows
From across the great divide.
Voices trapped in yearning
Memories trapped in time.
— Obsession — Sara McLachlan*

Martin huddled in the shelter of his great robe as he sat lotus-fashion on the dirt floor of the alcove. Sweaty and trembling, he was both hot and cold as he rocked back and forth to an inner music. Sweat dripped from nose and chin. His erection pulsed in agony.

"I don't know why you let these things bother you so much," Jack said casually.

Martin kept his eyes shut, refusing to look at him. If you spoke to an apparition, they would only stick around and haunt you longer. This, the Cuban knew from experience.

"Why resist? Go with the flow," the ghost urged him. "You should adopt my philosophy, Marty. 'Whatever turns you on.' And who knows better than me what turns you on?"

You're dead, Castillo thought, wanting to shut out the whispering, insidious voice calling him to madness. *You died in my arms, bled out your life's blood, and all my love could not keep your spirit on this Earth.*

"You always were obsessed with the details, Marty," Jack chided. "Why dwell on the past? I'm here with you now. And I'm wanting you. Wanting you bad."

You're not here, Castillo told his haunt, *You're dead in the hills of Mai Sa. And I'm alive in New York.*

"So sure of my death, are you?" Jack asked, his voice as cold as the skin of a snake. "Why? Because Reese told you?"

Reese. Yes, Reese had told him. He'd said Jack was dead. He'd said May Ying was dead. Because of that, Martin had left Thailand. He'd left Thailand, not knowing May Ying was still alive. May Ying — was still alive. But Jack was —

"That blond bombshell of yours has rattled your brain, baby," Jack taunted. "If you think I'm dead — just look up. I'm here, sitting right in front of you."

No, thought Castillo, squeezing his eyes shut. If he looked at him —

"Okay, so don't look," Jack purred. "Touch me, instead."

"No!" the Latin growled raspily. "No."

"Why not? We're lovers. We've been lovers since we were kids. You were fourteen when I first took you, and we'd been playing around long before that. Remember? First, I taught you — and then you taught me." The CIA agent sighed, as if recalling that time. "Man, how you taught me. The very first time you nailed me was right in this chamber. Boy, were you mad! You took me in anger, in a rage so violent,

I thought for a moment you really were gonna fuck me to death." He sighed wistfully. "Those were the days."

"Don't!" Martin ordered, but he was begging, really, and Jack knew it.

"You haven't changed. You always did have a love/hate relationship with your own sexuality. As much as you loved me, as much as you loved our passion, as often as you offered yourself to me willingly, still, you hated —"

"I hated the way you made me feel when you took me," Castillo interrupted. "You wanted me to hate it. You wanted to make me feel *used*, and I did. Every time."

Jack chuckled, a sound the Vice lieutenant both loved and loathed. "Yeah, you hated it. You hated *loving* it, you mean. Of all the lovers I ever had, Marty, male or female, no one ever touched your incredible passion. Only you brought to sex that magnificent response. I'd do anything to feel that again — just once more. I'd die for it. I'd *kill* for it."

Castillo finally glanced up, met the assassin's eyes. Killing had been no problem for Jack. He'd enjoyed it the same way the big game hunter did. That was the real issue that finally pulled them apart. Martin held life in too much reverence. Jack reserved that reverence only for himself.

"And you," Gretsky reminded him. "I revered *your* life." He cocked his head to one side. "And I never killed May Ying!"

At one time Martin had feared for her. Castillo recalled a young man in Vietnam that he'd become attracted to while he and Jack were separated for a particularly long stretch. They'd had a brief affair, and Martin had sensed this man could become important to him.

But the man had disappeared one day, and no matter what Martin did, he never could discover any trace of him. Two days later, Jack had reappeared. Martin always suspected that Gretsky had had something to do with it, but there had been no point in asking. He'd only lie about it. Yes, he had *let* May Ying live.

"Now, this blond bitch of yours," Jack said tauntingly, "I think this is one I'd have to eliminate. Him and his sexy black partner. Too much competition. Those two are *so* hot — and they love you so much. Too bad Reese didn't do the job for me."

"You can't hurt them, Jack," Castillo reminded him quietly. "You're dead."

The specter only grinned broadly. "Want to bet their lives on that?"

Martin's blood ran cold.

"You could buy their safety, Marty. I'm willing to trade."

Castillo gazed into the rich, brown eyes of his dead lover.

"Their survival — for one last taste of you."

Martin didn't budge, barely breathed, just stared at the face before him, so alive, so real. He missed Jack so much.

Gretsky's voice took on a low, husky tone. "Just once more, Marty, like that time in the temple, when we defeated the Hmong assassins —"

"Jack, don't —"

"You were so magnificent that night. You were already in love with May Ying, and you were racked with guilt about it. I knew you were getting ready to leave me, for good this time, and I knew I was going to have to let you go — if we survived. I didn't know whether to be happy or glad when we killed our enemies and stood triumphant. Part of me wanted us to die together there, that night." The assassins' eyes softened. "You were so beautiful, fighting with your sword, protecting my back —"

"As you protected mine," Martin reminded him.

"And then we got out of there and found that old hut. All the euphoria from the battle, all the energy passing between us culminated in the most incredible passion I've ever known. You were a little insane that night, Marty, our last night as lovers. And the rest of my days were spent trying to recapture just a glimmer of that night, just a hint of that feeling, that intensity. I never did again — but I guess you know that, don't you? My only consolation was that I knew that was a side of you that you'd never show May Ying; poor girl never even knew what she had." Jack swallowed hard, visibly moved. "But Crockett's seen it — hasn't he?"

Castillo bowed his head in shame.

Jack snorted a laugh. "And he loves it, just like me. You can't handle that, Marty, you never could. You never did know when to be happy."

The Hispanic shut his eyes again, willing the apparition away.

"You waste yourself on Crockett," Gretsky warned, "you know that, don't you? Even though he loves you, he keeps his soul locked away where you can't touch it. He'll never give it up to you; he'll never make that commitment. But I suppose you're gonna tell me you don't care about that, right?" He grinned. "Sure. You don't care. You, and Vincent, and Stosh — the three of you, hungering over whatever it is you can't have. Pathetic."

The Cuban's eyes turned cold. "That's something you should have some understanding of, Jack."

Gretsky's smile turned sly. "What about our bargain, Marty? For old time's sake. A lifetime guarantee on the safety of your boys. For just — one kiss."

Castillo glanced up. "You'd never settle for one. You always had to have more."

Jack nodded, agreeing. "Sometimes more than you wanted to give, eh, sweetheart? But look what you're getting in return. I'll be the perfect guardian angel for those two. They might even survive to grow old!"

Martin sighed. He'd forgotten how much he'd enjoyed their old banter, their on-going arguments.

"I miss you, Marty," Jack confessed. "I miss you so much."

"And I, you," Castillo admitted in a soft voice.

Jack leaned forward onto his knees and touched Martin's mouth with his, kissing him gently. Castillo let himself accept the gesture, the kiss of a dead man, even as he felt Jack's arms surround him, felt Jack's familiar, sweet tongue slide between his lips. He sighed as Gretsky ran his broad, blunt fingers over the painful erection uncomfortably trapped in his gi.

"Just once more, Marty, like that night in Thailand,"

Jack whispered around their kisses. "Just once more and I'll rest forever and never bother you again."

"You're lying," Castillo told him, even as he reached for this man he had loved so long ago. "You'll never rest, Jack."

Chuckling wickedly, Gretsky climbed into Martin's lap.



*Oh, you speak to me in riddles
and you speak to me in rhyme
My body aches to breathe your breath
Your words keep me alive
— Obsession — Sara McLachlan*

Sonny halted suddenly, and Rico nearly slammed into him. Tubbs was dizzy with need, and he couldn't stop sweating in spite of the coolness of the tunnels. "What is it?" he whispered.

Crockett stood poised, as if listening. Finally, he murmured, "He's right around this corner, in a small alcove." The blond turned to face his lover. "But he's not alone."

Instinctively, Tubbs reached for his gun, but it wasn't there. Martin had locked their weapons up in a special closet in Father's chamber. They supposedly had no need of them here. "Who's with him?"

Sonny shook his head. "I don't know. But I can feel him talking to someone. He's upset. Real upset."

"Reese?" Tubbs wondered, and Crockett looked alarmed.

"I just don't know," the Southerner was forced to admit.

"We'd better assume the worst and approach cautiously, partner," Tubbs suggested, "till we can figure out what we're dealing with."

Sonny nodded, then leaned over for a quick kiss. That simple touch ignited Tubbs so much he had to bite his lower lip to keep from moaning. Man, he'd never felt this hot in his life. Just keeping his mind on business while Sonny walked ahead of him had taken an incredible effort. Crockett advanced so stealthily, so cat-like, his beautiful body moving with such grace in the out-of-character old-fashioned clothes, Tubbs could barely stand it. Slowly, they worked their way around the solid rock corner.

Crockett found the opening to the alcove first. He gestured to Tubbs, and Rico moved beside him, crouching low, so they could both peer in at the same time. Castillo sat cross-legged, his back to the granite wall. His head was tipped back, eyes shut, his lower jaw sagging open. He was gasping, moaning softly, his lips moving as if he were talking to himself.

Crockett and Tubbs eased into the chamber, glancing around warily. There was no one. Castillo seemed oblivious to them.

"I swear I felt someone else, partner," Sonny insisted, but it was clear Castillo was now alone.

They approached him warily.

Rico glanced at Sonny questioningly, but the Anglo only shook his head. Tenderly, Crockett touched the lieutenant's shoulder. Tubbs couldn't help but notice the slight-built man's rapid breathing, and the way he was sweating.

"Marty," Sonny murmured, "you okay?"

Castillo didn't answer them, or even blink an eye to acknowledge that he knew they were there.

Rico's mind was still swamped with burning desire, a passion nearly out of control. He swallowed, trying to get a grip on himself.

"Marty, come on," Sonny urged. "We've come to take you home. Let's go back to our chamber. Let's go to bed."

Castillo groaned audibly, startling both men. He murmured something, and licked his lips.

"Was that Vietnamese?" Tubbs asked.

The blond shook his head. "No. I think it was some Thai dialect." The two men exchanged a worried look. "It's okay, Marty, we're here with you now," Sonny assured him. "Let's go home, to bed. We'll take care of you."

Rico recognized Sonny's tone; he'd heard him use it on many a whacked-out victim of bad drugs or hallucinogens. Crockett reached out, stroked his Hispanic lover's hair gently. "Come on, baby. We love you. We can't leave you here."

"*Cesar! Cesar!*" Martin gasped in Spanish, ordering someone to stop. "*Ah, Dios!*"

The two detectives glanced at each other, baffled. Rico spoke to Martin briefly in Spanish, repeating Crockett's offer of assistance, but the Hispanic would not respond.

"Okay, baby, come on," Sonny urged. "We can do this. We're gonna stand up now." He nodded at Tubbs to assist him, as Crockett carefully slid an arm around Martin's shoulders to help him up.

Castillo's head lolled forward and both detectives lurched to keep him from falling on his face. Tubbs began gnawing on his lower lip. He had a real bad feeling about this.

"Hey, Marty, wake up, man," Sonny said softly, holding the Cuban gently. He kissed one scarred cheek, and Martin sighed and leaned into it. The Anglo made a soft sound and kissed the Latino's face again, and this time the lieutenant turned towards it, like a plant searching for the sun. Their lips met and Castillo seemed to come to life, his body responding to Sonny's affection.

Something churned in Rico's gut. He couldn't believe how apprehensive he felt. As if Castillo grew aware of his concerns, he turned, eyes lowered, and found Rico's mouth with his. Tubbs gasped and yielded to his lieutenant's desire, even though he sensed danger all around him. Martin's tongue demanded entry and he opened up to him.

He could sense Sonny stroking the lieutenant's back, heard him murmuring, "Come on, man. We don't want to do this here. Let's go home to bed. We can run riot there. We can love each other all night if we need to. Marty, come on."

The passion pouring out of Castillo was like a tidal wave, Rico realized. And he realized something else.

He was experiencing the same overwhelming sensation he'd had that night in the Plaza when they'd both taken Sonny. Tubbs knew Crockett couldn't handle another scene like that. Castillo's warnings were bouncing around Rico's brain, trying to make themselves heard over his screaming desire. Martin was still kissing him, his need as thirsty as a desert. The New Yorker struggled to pull away from the demanding Latino.

Then Castillo opened his eyes and Rico's brain went into such an overload, he thought for a second he might faint. Martin's eyes were blue, a crisp, cold cerulean blue.

Tubbs swallowed and found his voice. "Sonny! Get out of here! Get out now!"

"What's the matter?" Sonny asked, confused. The Cuban turned and faced him. "Oh, shit!" Crockett breathed.

"Run, Sonny!" Rico shouted. "Get out!"

Crockett pivoted on his knees and tried to stand just as a powerful arm latched onto his shirt and hauled him back as if he were a doll. Castillo pulled the blond against his chest and pinned him there, holding both his wrists easily with one hand. "Rico! What the hell's goin' on?"

Tubbs could hear the growing panic in his partner's voice, and felt the fear mounting in his own soul. He couldn't lose it now! "The lieutenant — he's got Vincent's strength."

"Oh, that's just *great*," Crockett bitched. "A raging hard-on, a bad attitude, *and* Vincent's strength! Marty, you're starting to hurt me, man. Easy, easy!"

"Lieutenant," Rico murmured, tentatively stroking the black-clad man's arms, "you don't want to hurt us. You can't hurt us. Let Sonny go. Come home with us."

Crockett was panting, he realized, as Martin held him prisoner. Castillo was kissing the younger man's neck, his ear, murmuring to him, seducing him.

"What's he saying?" Tubbs asked, even as he took hold of Martin's steel-hard wrists and tried futilely to free Crockett.

"He's back to speaking Thai," Sonny rasped, struggling, his voice tinged with panic. "He — he's out of it. The only thing I can understand is a name. I gotta feeling he thinks he's in Thailand — with Jack."

Rico caught a glimpse of Crockett's stark expression. He blinked and took a deep breath. He had to stay calm. One of them had to stay calm. "He's not gonna hurt you, Sonny," Tubbs insisted, his voice soft, assured, "no matter who he thinks you are. I know he would never hurt either of us."

"You don't understand, man," Crockett tried to explain. Castillo was murmuring in the Southerner's ear, kissing it, tongueing it, and it was obvious Sonny was having more and more trouble resisting his lover's advances. "He and Gretsky — their affair was nothing like ours. Gretsky was half sadist, half masochist. He thought it was *fun* to work on Marty's temper till he'd lose it. The rougher Castillo got, the better Gretsky liked it. It was a sick control game he played. Their whole relationship was built on it. That's why it couldn't last. I'm tellin' you, man, if he thinks I'm

Gretsky — and he's got Vincent's strength — I'm in deep weeds."

Rico took it all in and read between the lines. "No, you're not, partner. You're not alone. I'm here, too, and I'm not gonna let anything happen to you that you can't handle. I promise you that."

He saw Sonny take a slow breath and try to calm down. "Okay, pal, okay. Just — get me outta this, will ya? The shit goin' on in my head — and in my heart — it's freakin' me out."

You're not the only one, Rico thought, gnawing his lip. He blinked, trying to focus. All he wanted to do right now was take advantage of Sonny's helplessness, just like that night in the Plaza. While Castillo held him pinned, he could finish the wonderful thing he'd started just outside this chamber. He could crawl around in front of Sonny and —

Tubbs slapped himself mentally and tried to focus on the problem at hand. He recalled that night in the Plaza, the incredible feelings surging through him, the profound desire he felt for Sonny, and the new, shocking interest he suddenly had in his lieutenant. He remembered leaning past Sonny as he was trapped in Martin's powerful arms. He remembered kissing the somber Hispanic, and feeling some of the tension leave his body.

"Sonny," Rico said softly, "if he releases you, you gotta promise me you'll leave. At the first chance, split, run, get clear of here."

Castillo had snaked a hand inside Sonny's shirt and was teasing a hardened nipple while murmuring seductive nothings in some unrecognizable foreign language in his blond lover's ear. Crockett was falling under the spell, his head resting back against the lieutenant. His eyes looked decidedly glassy.

"Sonny?" Rico demanded. "Can you do that if you get the chance? Answer me, man."

"I hear you, partner," Crockett said in a surprisingly clear voice. "I hear you. First chance I get, I'm outta here."

Tubbs moved around on the dirt floor until he was behind the lieutenant. Slowly, he began stroking Martin's arms, the same way he had the night they'd made love together. Castillo's muscles were rigid, the alien power flowing through him. What would happen if Vincent's fury suddenly overwhelmed him?

Rico had a sudden, shocking recollection of a terrifying monster holding him in the air by his jacket, roaring in his face, micro seconds from slashing his throat. And then he recalled that voice, that familiar, self-assured, commanding voice ordering the violence to stop. Both beings were now in this one body, the monster and the lieutenant. Rico's lieutenant. The man he believed would never hurt someone he loved.

That was a thought he would have to keep at the forefront of his mind, no matter what might happen in the next few minutes — no matter what Martin, in his madness, might threaten to do to him. Rico held onto his image of Castillo, a man who truly understood the strength in gentleness, and his belief that this man would never allow him to come to harm. He captured that conviction and thought of nothing else, as he murmured lovingly to Castillo in Spanish.

"You'd never hurt Sonny or me, Lieutenant," he whispered to his lover in their first language. "You'd never allow yourself to do that."

The power of his faith, he knew, might be the only thing that could save Sonny from an experience he would never be able to forget — or forgive.



She would not look at his eyes. She would not. Catherine dropped her gaze and stared at her bed sheets as she struggled to keep the panic out of her mind, out of their bond. She took a deep breath and thought of how much she loved him, how much she desired him — how long she had waited for him to become her lover. She closed her mind and focused on the gentleness he'd shown her earlier, and the wonderful pleasure he'd already given her.

"You *are* displeased," Vincent murmured.

It was his voice, and yet not. It sounded different, almost mocking, as if he were toying with her. *Like a predator*, she thought before she stop herself.

What could she do to bring her lover back? She'd been so confident her love could keep them safe from his darkness; she could not falter in that belief now. She lifted her head boldly, and met his eyes of jet.

"You could never displease me," she whispered. She reached out, gently touched his cheek. "My darling. Kiss me now."

He smiled a carnivore's smile as he leaned towards her and she had to force herself not to flinch. But when his mouth met hers, it was Vincent's mouth, the kiss, though strong and insistent, still Vincent's kiss. She tasted her own flavor and moaned softly as their tongues moved against one another.

Catherine's arms wound around Vincent and he returned the embrace. His claws never touched her bare back, her exposed shoulders. He seemed to relax under her kiss, and she prolonged the moment. She could show him gentleness, subdue his darkness with her own bright white passion.

Slowly, so as not to startle him, she ran her hands down his back, stroking tenderly, seductively. She would not focus on his size, his inhuman power, his claws that could open her soft belly from neck to pelvis with one swipe. Instead, she would think of the joy she could bring him, the good, sweet power one lover could have over another. Tenderly, she stroked his back, felt his body move under her petting hands.

They were both sitting sideways in the center of the big bed, Vincent's legs pointing towards the foot, Catherine's towards the head. She continued kissing him gently, letting him explore her mouth with his tongue, even as she explored his in return. She felt him concentrating on that kiss, on the lovely sensations her hands were giving him. She wanted to make him swoon from her love, make him weak under her hands. She could do that, she thought. She could.

Her hands trailed down over his back, over his chest, toyed with his nipples until he gasped, then followed his sternum to his navel. He *had* a navel, and

the normalcy of that helped her relax. Of course he had a navel. Of course.

She had a sudden image of him in the pool with Sonny. It was his image, she was seeing it through their bond. He was in the pool, still dressed in his jeans. That was why Mouse had to get dry clothes for him. Sonny had wondered why he hadn't stripped, but wouldn't ask. Catherine shrugged the image away, before it made her afraid.

It did not matter if he was different. She loved him for his differences, whatever they were. Her hands traveled to the waistband of his old, faded jeans. They had a button fly; she'd always loved the way they'd looked on him. She'd once fantasized pulling the buttons off, one by one. They were sewed on too tightly for that, she realized, but that was all right — she would settle for simply opening them the normal way.

She'd already undone the first one, but the minute she unfastened the next, he grabbed her upper arms roughly and growled threateningly. The sound ripped through her, raising the hairs on the back of her neck. She forced herself to ignore the warning, and deliberately undid the third. He pulled out of their kiss rudely, and held her away from him with so much strength she cried out. He shook her roughly, his expression dark, his face flushed. "You mustn't! You mustn't!"

She stared up at him in the dim light of the unlit bedroom. Gazing deeply into the now onyx eyes, she saw the turmoil, the pain, and the very real fear in them. In spite of his restraining grip she was able to touch his cheek with her palm. "Oh, I must!" she whispered back at him. "I must — and I will. And you will not stop me. You will be my lover, Vincent. You will let me please you."

They remained still for a moment, while she waited for him to either yield or harm her, and as they did, she had a stray thought.

"You could never hurt me, Vincent," she told him. "You would never allow yourself to do that." But it wasn't really her thought at all. It came from somewhere else, outside herself. It didn't matter. It was true, wherever it came from.

He blinked when she said that, and in the dark bedroom it seemed that for a moment, his eyes lightened, and sparkled blue again.

Boldly, she reached for him, and he released her, as if he had no control over her, or ever had. She unfastened the remaining buttons.

"Catherine, please!" he begged, his voice ragged, desperate. She could feel his sudden fear through the bond, the fear that she would be repelled by his appearance.

"I love everything about you, Vincent," she reassured him. "Everything. Please, trust me and let me love you."

His fear remained, yet, he made no move to stop her.

With the utmost tenderness, she slid her hand past his briefs, took hold of his hidden maleness and drew it out. Sound rumbled out of him, but he did not move. She touched him carefully, respectfully, her

hands barely contacting his most sensitive flesh. He shivered under her delicate touch and that pleased her. Kissing his chin, she whispered her love for him, then moved her lips to his throat.

He tipped his head back, obliging her, and the sound coming forth from him now seemed a deep, bass purr. She kissed the hollow of his furred throat, his collarbone, then each of his nipples in turn. She slid down in the bed as her mouth traveled lower, lightly touching his tense abdomen on its way to his so very normal navel. But she never quite reached her goal.

She realized finally, as she planted gentle kisses along his chest and stomach, that his organ, once freed from confinement, had continued to grow, now that it had the room. It filled her hand, and kept on expanding until she was forced to look at it, to finally see what she had unleashed.

She'd expected it to be larger than average; he was a big man. That didn't concern her. She thought, because of his shyness that it might be different as well. She hadn't expected that to bother her, either. She was, after all, a New York woman, no naive Southern Belle ignorant of men.

Once she saw him, however, she lost some of her confidence. He was huge, and now fully erect; but that was not what startled her. The shape and form were different, alien — simply not human. He was like a man, yet not. She wanted to banish all those traitorous thoughts from her mind before he could sense them, but she couldn't. It was, after all, the simple truth.

The head of his phallus was sharply conical, as it emerged from a protective sheath. The ridge that the sheath attached to flared wide, unusually so. And beneath the ridge, past the smooth sheath, along the heavy column of his penis, his manhood was covered with the same rough bristles as his tongue. These were longer, but not as dense, however, they pulsed and moved as if alive, as if they sensed things on their own.

She shut her eyes, understanding so many things now.

"We must stop," he whispered. "Let us end this now, and never speak of it again."

Catherine had never heard so much pain in anyone's voice before. She looked up at him and said in as strong a voice as she could muster, "But why? You are beautiful, my darling. More beautiful than I ever dreamed!" She spoke from the heart, and every word was true. She watched him sense that truth through the bond. His eyes, nearly blue again, filled with unshed tears.

Before he could protest, she lowered herself to his lap, and while massaging his flaring head, kissed the tip gently. He cried aloud, his voice making her French doors vibrate on their hinges. She reached out with her tongue, and boldly tasted him. His flesh was warm, and clean, and his musk was sweet smelling and fresh. Impulsively, she opened her mouth and took him inside, as much as she could, and laved her tongue over his crown. He gasped and sighed, trying to contain the sound that threatened to erupt, finally

murmuring over and over for her to stop, please stop.

But she was enjoying herself too much, and proceeded to give him something she knew he'd never even allowed himself to imagine. Through the bond, she could feel him watching her, mesmerized, fascinated, as shock after shock of pleasure ripped through him, pleasure she was granting him with the magic of her mouth. Her hands joined in, stroking him to the very base of his manhood, rubbing his sensitive bristles roughly, delighting him in unexpected and miraculous ways. He would never have allowed himself this fantasy — it would have been beyond his imagination.

That pleased her more than anything, to give him something he would never have dared dream of. Her mouth moved aggressively, sucking him, licking him, taking possession of him. He truly was her lover now, her man. She tantalized him with delight, and the sensual thrill she got out of it only enhanced it for him.

And through it all, he could only murmur his feeble protest, as if even this sweet victory brought danger. But she had no ear for his warnings any longer. As she purred around the wonderful flesh filling her mouth she remembered that he would never hurt her. He could never hurt her. How had she ever forgotten that?

She closed her eyes, pleasuring him with a joy she'd never known before. Little by little, she felt him falling into it, giving up his resistance, yielding to the experience.



*Oh, into the sea of waking dreams
I follow without pride
Nothing stands between us here
and I won't be denied
— Obsession — Sara McLachlan*

It was starting to work, Sonny told himself, as Castillo kissed Rico with an unflagging intensity. Tubbs' seduction was making the Latin's body relax. Martin had reached back with one hand to gently embrace Rico's neck, to keep him from pulling out of the kiss; with the other, he still held Sonny's wrists, but his hold had eased. Crockett was almost disappointed.

He was practically sitting in Martin's lap, his back pinned against his lieutenant's front. He sat, but not passively. Almost immediately after his capture, in spite of the dread coiling in his gut, he'd found himself rubbing his butt against Castillo's swollen erection. It was as if he couldn't help himself. He was so excited. If only Marty would touch him —

The blond wondered if that was how he could free himself. If he could convince Castillo to —

"*Querido?*" Martin suddenly purred in his ear. "*Amante? Como cono lo quieres?*"

The rapid dialogue exceeded Sonny's street Spanish. He glanced over his shoulder to catch Rico's attention.

"He wants to know what you want," Tubbs translated. "That is — he asked *how* you want it." The New Yorker's voice was ragged with desire, but somehow, Rico was keeping it together for Sonny's sake. How could you ever repay something like this? Crockett wondered.

Thank god he didn't ask in Thai, Sonny thought. He pulled his captured wrists lower, so that he could rub part of Martin's hands against his turgid, aching organ. "Marty, please, touch me baby. Just touch me. You know how." If Rico could just keep his other hand occupied enough —

"*Ah, Jack?*" Castillo whispered tauntingly, "*no chingar? No meterlo? No rabiarse?*"

"He said —" Rico began.

"I understood *that!*" Sonny snapped. He swallowed. This was not the Castillo he knew. He couldn't even imagine Marty using language like that in any tongue. The Latin had asked him, as vulgarly as possible, if Sonny didn't want to be fucked, to have his lover stick it in — to be hurt? In his head, Castillo was still with Gretskey. Crockett felt a cold bead of sweat trickle down the side of his face.

"No, Marty," he said, trying to keep his voice calm, "no. Not that. Not that."

"He's not gonna hurt you, Sonny," Rico insisted. "You gotta believe that. You gotta tell him, make *him* believe it."

But Crockett no longer believed that himself. He was swamped with images of violence and sex all interposed with one another. He thought some of the images might be Marty's memories of times he'd spent with Jack, but he couldn't see Jack in those thoughts — only himself. Himself in Jack's role. On his knees — on his face — under Castillo's driving passion.

But part of him was with Catherine, too. He remembered terrible dreams of Vincent slaughtering her in her own bed, and images of that dream kept wandering into his consciousness. He was afraid for her, afraid for himself. But he trusted Rico. He had to trust Rico. He shut his eyes.

"You won't hurt me, Marty," Sonny said aloud. "You can't hurt me. You wouldn't let yourself do that. I know that. I know you won't hurt me."

He felt Castillo's arm relax, his grip ease. All at once, Martin released his wrists, and slid his hand down, over Sonny's erection. The blond gasped as his lover touched him, stroked him with that masterful, knowing grip he always used. "Marty, damn," he sighed, losing himself to the feeling.

"*Martin, Martin,*" Rico murmured, enticing his lieutenant into another passionate kiss. Castillo seemed to give in to it for a moment. Rico's copper eyes caught Sonny's and Crockett felt the command clearly in his mind.

GO, PARTNER, GO NOW!

No — Sonny thought back, shuddering from the pleasure of Castillo's incredible touch. But then he saw it again, the Cuban's image of him as Jack. He inhaled sharply, drove an elbow into Marty's side and surged away from him. Peripherally, he watched Tubbs tackle the lieutenant.

Crockett was on his feet in one move, but his

second step put too much force to bear on his injured knee and he went down. He struggled to catch himself on his hands and get back up, but Castillo was on him that fast, and he was tackled to the ground, his face planted in the dirt. Martin twisted one of his arms cruelly across his back and he cried out.

Tubbs was there, yelling at Castillo in Spanish, getting no response at all, then physically trying to haul him off the prostrate Southerner.

But Sonny could sense Martin's blind rage, his irrational anger. Marty was hallucinating, combining bits and pieces of the worst of his relationship with Gretsky into a terrifying future for the man lying helplessly under him. Crockett couldn't make himself look into those unearthly blue eyes any longer. They'd come here to help Marty, save him from the darkness of his own tortured mind, and instead, everything wonderful that the three of them had shared was about to be destroyed.

If Castillo actually did this, actually raped him, Sonny knew that emotionally he would never be able to intellectualize it away. He would never be able to forgive Marty, never be able to forget how Rico failed him. He wouldn't want to, but he wouldn't be able to help himself. He would end up hating them both for their parts in this. He squeezed his eyes shut to keep from crying.

Castillo whispered to him angrily in a language he couldn't understand. Oh, man, how did they ever get into this?



After awhile, Catherine's physical self began to get lost in her mental self. And her mental self was being absorbed into Vincent's. She was him, almost more than she was herself. The very pleasure she was giving him soon felt as if it were being given to her. She found herself moaning at the same time he moaned, gasping when he did.

Then she began losing herself in mental scenes she could not understand — dark images of sex and violence so interwoven she could not tell where they began or ended. These were old memories of such bitterness, guilt and pain, they made her want to cry. Memories that were not hers, or Vincent's. He began to growl.

As the memories flooded her, she felt herself separating from him, and that separation tore her heart. Still the images flowed into her mind alone, she thought. She became herself again, but the alien thoughts kept on flooding her with fear.

But there was no need for her to fear, no reason. Her lover was here with her; she was satisfying him.

He shuddered, and she could tell he was close, so close. Oh, to give this to him.

He tried to pull her off, but she clung to him, in spite of the frightening pictures in her mind, in spite of the fear threatening to drown her desire. He cried out, his organ swelling even larger in her mouth, then roughly he pulled her away. She almost cried aloud,

she wanted him so much, but when she looked up at him, she recoiled.

The mental anger he'd received had intoxicated him, enraged him. His eyes were coal black, gleaming with rage.

The irrational terror flooded her mind. Her resolve to never fear him, to trust in his goodness, crumbled, and self preservation took over. She shoved hard against him, and tried to scramble out of the bed. He caught her quickly by the ankle and hauled her back easily.

He blanketed her with his body, pinning her to the mattress, his angry erection pressing suggestively against her thigh.

No! No! she begged him in her mind. This is not the way things were supposed to go. She could not allow herself to believe that all he had feared would now come to pass.

"I warned you," he growled in his ear. "I warned you. You would not listen, dear Catherine. And now the beast is on you; the beast is yours. Your lover." He curled his great paw and slashed the mattress near her face.

*And then my blood rushed to my face
And took my eyesight quite away....
Words from my eyes did start —
And blood burnt round my heart.*

— First Love — John Clarke

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR. THE DARK DESCENDING

*Has this been thus before?
And shall not thus time's eddying flight
Still with our lives our love restore
In death's despite,
And day and night yield one delight once
more?*

— Sudden Light — Dante

"Goddammit, Rico, get him off me!" Sonny yelled.

"I'm tryin'!" Rico insisted. Castillo had shrugged Tubbs off twice, almost casually, the last time nearly knocking him unconscious. There wasn't even anything around Tubbs could use as a weapon; the little alcove was bare of even a small stone.

With inhuman speed and strength, Martin had tied Sonny's wrists together behind his back with the leather thongs that had once kept the Southerner's fly fastened. Now, Castillo was struggling to methodically strip the buckskin pants off the Vice cop, in spite of Tubbs' attempts to stop him. It was all too horribly reminiscent for Sonny to even grasp. He'd never been so scared in his life.

"You gotta help me, Rico," he begged, trying to keep his voice from cracking. "I can't — I can't go through this again. You gotta do something."

It was futile and he knew it. They weren't dealing with Castillo anymore. Whatever this thing was on top of Sonny wasn't even human — it was some kind of crazed automaton running on twisted memories and unresolved anger. And it was systematically preparing to take all its fury out on Crockett.

"I — I can only think of one thing that might help," Rico offered feebly. His face was twisted with anguish and helplessness. He'd *promised* Sonny he wouldn't let this happen. He'd *promised*. "You've — got to give in, man."

Crockett stared at his partner in amazement. What was Tubbs saying? When rape is inevitable, relax and enjoy it? "You're as fuckin' crazy as *he* is," he spat.

"Listen to me!" Rico insisted.

But Castillo started speaking again, though they could no longer even guess what language he was using. He'd finished hauling Sonny's pants over his rump and now fumbled with his own fly while angrily threatening his victim in some obscure dialect. Crockett surged forward, trying to shrug Martin off his back, and for a moment, he nearly succeeded, but then his face was being ground into the soil again. Castillo growled furiously as the Vice cop felt a heavy cock press into the crack of his ass.

"I mean it, Sonny," Rico told him. "You gotta stop fighting him. That's what he's reacting to. He's on automatic pilot — he doesn't even know where he is. But you're playin' out some old scene in his brain, something with Jack. You gotta become Sonny again. And the only way you can do that — is to give in to him. To try and love him again. It's the only thing I can think of that might bring him back."

Crockett squeezed his eyes shut. "I can't. I just can't. Get out of here, Tubbs. This is gonna be bad enough without you *watchin'* it."

"Forget that," Rico told him, even as Castillo pulled the blond's ass into position. "I can't leave you alone with him! Please, try to hear what I'm sayin'!"

Crockett tensed his whole body and shifted suddenly, catching the lieutenant off guard. The younger man got his legs under him and kicked Castillo hard, knocking him off. He scrambled like a crab, five, then ten yards away. Rico tried to block Castillo's next rush, but was cast aside, nearly striking his head on a stone wall. Martin snatched Sonny's ankle, hauling him backwards as if he weighed nothing. Helplessly, Crockett watched his chin leave a furrow in the dirt.

In seconds, Martin was again pressed against his back.

"Crockett!" Rico demanded, moving around to face him. "Stop fighting him, please! You gotta give in. Sonny —"

He's just saying that because he thinks it might not hurt so bad then, the cop decided. It's the only thing he can think of to lessen the impact. Too late for that, pal.

"Sonny, I keep getting these bits and pieces of memories — his memories, yours — Vincent's." The New Yorker pressed the heel of his hand against his

forehead as if he were in pain. "It all keeps revolving around *commitment* — your commitment to the lieutenant, to me, to this thing we got goin'."

Castillo shifted and Sonny lurched hard to the side, unbalancing him, but the Latin quickly regained control. *Let him try to hit a moving target*, Crockett thought bitterly.

Rico just kept on talking. "I keep seein' Vincent talkin' to you about your feelings for the lieutenant — how you won't make a commitment."

Crockett never stopped struggling, but focused on Rico's face, really listening to him for the first time. He'd had that conversation with Vincent in the pool. Neither Marty nor Tubbs had been with him. He'd come down hard on Vincent for being afraid of making a commitment to Cathy — but the tunnel dweller had turned the conversation right around on him.

He could still hear Vincent saying, *All you're willing to offer my brother is your body. You hold your soul, your heart, free for yourself.*

"I gotta believe these things goin' through my head are coming from *Castillo*," Rico insisted. "And it's all mixed up in his mind with the problems he had with Jack. You're right. Jack loved to frustrate him into a rage, but in his head — so do you — the way you hold back from him. You hold back your heart. He hasn't had that much love in his life, Sonny. If you just — give in to him — offer yourself to him — if you just try —"

Rico finally ran out of words, realizing the situation was totally out of his control. He hadn't looked this upset when he'd watched his brother's murderer escape Miami and the law's justice. Then Crockett heard Tubbs' thought clearly in his mind. *Sometimes you just gotta trust your partner.*

The blond went limp with exhaustion. Shit. What did he have to lose?

Castillo was busy positioning himself again when the Southerner stopped moving. He leaned back and murmured softly, "Okay, Marty, okay, you win. You want me — I'm yours. I love you too much to fight anymore. If this is the way you want it — go ahead. I belong to you, man, heart and soul — don't you know that? Do whatever you want, baby, it's all right. I'll still love you. I'll always love you." The sad part was, Sonny realized, that was the cold truth.

The lieutenant's motions slowed, and some of the tension seemed to leave him. Rico came up behind his superior and put his arms around his tense shoulders. "Lieutenant, you're really hurting Sonny. Is that what you want to do?"

"Marty, won't you touch me sweet?" Sonny asked huskily. Castillo had stopped moving, simply held still, keeping his victim pinned. "Won't you please me, the way I know you can? I love you so much. I'm yours, Marty. I'll always be yours." Even as the words left his mouth he realized he'd never said anything in his life he ever meant as much.

There was a long, uncomfortable pause and Castillo suddenly whispered, "Sonny...?"

Crockett turned around. The Latin's eyes were darkening, his expression returning to normal.

"Sonny, why are you here? Rico — how did you find me?" Castillo's voice sounded weak, reedy.

"Don't ask so many questions, Lieutenant," Rico whispered back, and kissed his cheek, then his lips.

Automatically, Castillo reached up to stroke the black man's face. While the Cuban was distracted, Tubbs reached around him and with one hand managed to free Sonny's wrists. Once he was liberated, Crockett hiked his pants back up over his rump, then sat up and turned around to face Castillo. The blond pulled the Hispanic into his embrace.

"You can't stay here," Castillo warned them feebly. He seemed aged suddenly, worn and tired.

Crockett and Tubbs exchanged a glance.

"I'll hurt you if you stay here," Castillo insisted worriedly. "I'll hurt both of you. That's why I came here, to hide, to keep you safe."

"Marty, you need us now," Sonny insisted gently. "You need us to help you."

Castillo shook his head. "Too much danger. Catherine. Vincent —" He swallowed. "Jack's been here. He wants — He wants —"

"We know what he wants, Marty," Sonny assured him, hugging his lover tightly, even as Rico did. "But he's not gettin' it this time."

Castillo shut his eyes as if they ached. "I'm — I'm afraid. I don't want to hurt you, either of you."

"You're not gonna do that, Marty," Sonny insisted. "You could never hurt us. You could never allow yourself to do that." He met Rico's bright copper eyes, and found his partner smiling at him. For the first time he really believed that, and was ashamed. Tubbs had believed it all along. "We love you, Marty. We're not leaving you to battle your ghosts alone. Don't you know when you need back-up?"

"Lieutenant," Tubbs said softly, rubbing Castillo's back and arms comfortingly, "tell us about Jack."

Castillo stiffened, but Sonny ran his hand through Marty's thick hair, and over his chest. The Latin's passion was still surging through them; he needed to think about something else. "Yeah, Marty," he agreed, "tell us about Jack. Tell us everything." *Exorcise that damned demon*, Crockett thought. *Say his name. Let us know him. Then let him die.*

Martin seemed to consider it. Rico and Sonny were managing to successfully contain their lust, their desire for this man. If they could distract him with his memories, perhaps they could control his darkness until — until it all passed.

"I remember — I remember the first time I saw him," Martin began quietly. "He'd been living on the streets for months, stealing, conniving — selling himself. He'd already killed his first man, though Father never knew that. He was emaciated and filthy, and there was so much rage in his eyes they glowed. I'd never seen such passion in anyone. And that impressed me. Because I had already become someone who felt nothing. My mother had died, and with her, all my beliefs, all my love — all my feeling. Until I saw Jack that first time."

Sonny and Rico continued to hold Martin between them, gently stroking him, listening to him, consoling him, as the normally reticent lieutenant spoke of all

the things he'd never dared put in his letters.

*If I shed a tear I won't cage it
I won't fear love
and if I feel a rage I won't deny it
I won't fear love*

— Fumbling towards Ecstasy — Sara McLachlan



Catherine twisted in Vincent's grip, nearly panicked, as the huge man gouged her mattress inches from her face. She felt completely helpless, trapped prone beneath his great weight, waiting for him to either tear her apart or take her by force. How could this have happened? How could she have lost touch with his inner self, his true self, the gentle being she knew and loved? Swallowing a sob, she closed her eyes, resigned to her fate, whatever it should be.

He growled viciously, and clamped a huge paw on her shoulder, pinning her in place.

"Oh god, Vincent, please don't do this!" she begged. She tried to concentrate, tried to feel him through the bond, tried to send her love into him, tried to touch his real self. But the violent images were drowning them both. "You can't!" she insisted, feeling the tears flow. "You can't hurt me! I know you can't do it!" She clung to that belief, feeling it might be the only thing to get through to him.

You could never hurt me. Never. You would never allow yourself to do that.

She stopped struggling, stopped trying to escape, and just concentrated all her thoughts on that one mantra-like belief. He loved her, totally, completely. No man on this earth had ever loved any woman with the purity of heart, the goodness, with which he'd loved her. He would never hurt her. He could never hurt her.

He roared, and slashed the other side of the mattress, as if proving to her the folly of her philosophy.

She flinched, then forced herself to ignore it as she kept repeating, mentally, her belief in him. He would never hurt her. He would *never* —

Catherine shuddered suddenly, momentarily overwhelmed with the sense that someone else was in her mind, feeling her fear, praying her prayer. She could not have said who it was, or even if this odd sense of *otherness* were real, but it strengthened her resolve, as the *voices* — more than one, she decided — helped her focus. She projected all of it along the bond, as best she could with her limited ability. She threw it at him mentally, the chorus of belief, like a choir singing of the most profound love.

He growled angrily, but made no move to harm her, made no move to rape her, as if the sudden input of love and trust were forcing his anger back down into his soul. Slowly, she gambled, and rolled onto her back. He allowed that, lifting himself so that she could move.

Clinging to the strength she absorbed from the

sense of shared love she felt in her mind — love that was coming from outside herself — she stared up into his obsidian eyes and searched for the man she trusted more than any other. Believing he was still there inside, she sent through their bond the most powerful image she could of their gentlest love-making — their first kiss.

Slowly, his growl rumbled into a purr, and she lifted a hand to stroke his cheek. When his nose wrinkled with a snarl, she ignored it. Feeling as though she were repeating someone else's words, she whispered, "You could never hurt me, my love. Not ever."

He trembled, as if battling his demons internally. In her mind, she felt a swirl of emotions and pain that were not her own or Vincent's either, but nonetheless she understood them. And she understood whose they were. She closed her eyes for a second, nearly hearing Sonny's southern drawl, and Rico's honeyed voice. That meant that Vincent's pain was shared as well. It gave her hope, and not just for herself. This would not be the first problem they'd all solved together.

She smiled, almost relieved now, and gazed deeply into the black eyes, hoping to reach the agonized soul trapped inside them — whoever it might be. "How shall I hold my soul, that it may not be touching yours?" Oh, please, won't you kiss me?"

The familiar words of Rilke's poem made Vincent blink and pause. Gently, she guided his face down to hers, while he grumbled, resisting her. Finally, she rose to meet his lips, pressing her mouth against his. She could feel his hot breath on her face, feel his frightening teeth. But when his lips touched her, it was with Vincent's own tenderness. She sighed and returned the kiss with all the love she could project. She flooded their bond with her love, her faith in him, her wondrous desire.

Somewhere else, there was another raging soul touched by her gentle offering, an offering mirrored by other trusting loved ones. She could feel the sense of rage disappate, fade away like so much smoke.

Vincent lowered himself against her, and slowly wrapped her up in his huge arms, surrounding her with his warmth, his soft fur and taut muscles. The sounds he made now were filled with longing and love; there was no longer any anger in them. He was himself again, and as she realized that, she recognized that the only other presence in her mind was her lover. Their bond was pure, for them alone.

Catherine shifted and spread her legs. He tensed as she rocked her hips suggestively, moving under him, positioning herself. Rubbing the soles of her feet against the supple leather of his thigh-high boots, she ran her hands over his rump, pushing his jeans down over his hips. She felt his stiff member nudging her thigh, the soft, rough bristles tickling her sensitive skin. She shifted just so, still kissing him, and felt his turgid flesh rub against her furred mons.

He moaned around her mouth, the sound all too human.

"I want you," she gasped around his probing tongue. "I want you now, inside me, my lover, now!"

There was no fight left in him; she knew this

through the bond. There was only his need, his hunger to have her, a hunger she fed through her own unlimited desire for him.

"Vincent, love me, please. You're all I've ever wanted!"

"My Catherine, my beauty," he sighed, his voice again familiar. "That you would someday give yourself to me has been the fantasy of my heart. How I love you. How little I deserve you."

"Oh no, my love. We both deserve this happiness. Please, don't make me wait any longer for you."

He moved his head to gaze into her eyes. His eyes sparkled crystalline blue, as they always had. He moved his hips slightly, and found her.

Her voice caught in her throat as his phallus slipped against her tight entry. Then finally, she sighed and surged up, wanting him, needing him. "Oh yes, my god, yes," she gasped, and took him inside.

He cried out and bowed his head, afraid to move, afraid he would hurt her. He had barely nudged his way inside, and she ached for more of him, wanting all of it, wanting everything.

She pumped her hips and clutched his rump, digging her nails into the rounded, furred cheeks. He growled again, a low, seductive sound and pushed against her searching womanhood.

Catherine squeezed her eyes shut, as he began to penetrate her in earnest. His member was so warm it seemed to sear her delicate channel, which was tight from its long abstinence. "You can't hurt me," she assured me. "You can't. Oh, god, Vincent, I need you now!"

Nestling his head between her neck and shoulder, he arched his back, entering her strongly. He filled her, opened her; she tried to spread herself wider beneath him but couldn't. Digging her nails into his flesh, she urged him on with her mind, since she was breathing too hard to speak. *More, she thought frantically, more! All of you, my Vincent. I want all of you, body and mind!*

He sighed, then thrust powerfully.

It was like fire and ice inside her, tearing her, freezing her, burning her slippery channel as he pushed deep into her body, deeper than she'd ever taken anyone. He filled her like no one ever had, ever would again, as he possessed her with his flesh, his powerful maleness. She stifled a sob, then hitched her legs up high, inviting him in deeper yet. Hooking her ankles together over his back, she pumped up, swallowing him, taking him further inside. When he growled this time, she echoed it.

He began moving, slowly, smoothly, as if he'd done this with her a thousand times. The long bristles on his shaft stroked her, tortured her, tantalized her beyond endurance. She clawed his back, the intensity of it almost more than she could bear. But she knew now there would be no stopping him. And that was exactly what she'd wanted.

Mine. Mine. Mine, she could feel him thinking through the bond, *Now. And forever. And for all time. Mine. Mine. Mine*. With each smooth, torturous thrust, he thought it at her, and she collected each possessive thought and cherished it, magnified it and

sent it back to him. Hers. He was hers. Now and forever. Hers.

He lifted her rump, getting his knees under him for traction, and began taking her on his terms. She felt the power in his thighs, his loins, his taut abdomen, as his sturdy muscles channeled their strength into her. She tightened around him and he roared, loving it, so she did it again and again, and his bristly staff plundered her, rubbing her raw.

Growing more frantic with each thrust, Catherine dug her hands into his great mane and pulled his lips against her. He took her mouth as possessively as he was taking her womanhood. She fought him with her tongue, battling him wildly, even as her hips argued as to whom was taking whom. Her bed screamed in protest as they picked up the pace, their bond shrieking with passion, their bodies thrumming with need, their orgasm building inch by inch, climbing to a cataclysmic height. She began to sob as he pounded into her, losing himself, carrying her along with the power of his need, a need borne in dreams and fantasy and years of solitude.

Yes! Yes! her mind begged, do it! Give it to me. Give me all of it. I love you.

Then it all went incandescent. For a brief moment, she lost her vision, as her brain was overwhelmed with feelings and sensations, both hers and his. She could see and hear nothing, but she could feel *everything*. She bit her lip, trying not to cry out, as she had her first orgasm. It ripped through him as well, yet she was aware that he was holding back, keeping his at bay with the last shreds of his control. Her body tensed and exploded again as he surged back into her, then she came once more as he withdrew. He plunged into her once more, knowing each movement of his body would ignite her now, again, and again, and again, until she was babbling, crying, begging him to come inside her, to give her his gift, please, please, give it —

And then he did, lifting her off the bed, surging into her so deeply, growing so large inside she thought she would split in half. She felt every cell of his manhood, every inch of his magnificence as he filled every atom of her being. And when he erupted inside her, she felt that too, because he did. The flood of his essence drowned her, as she felt each individual swimming cell flow into her body, overwhelming her, filling her, satisfying a thirst, a need she'd had for so long, so very long. Her body absorbed the invading cells happily, as she sighed, feeling as though every part of her had been thoroughly plundered.

"Catherine," he gasped, sinking against her.

She could hear the incredible fatigue and the wonderful satiation in his voice. Turning to look at his beautiful face, she smiled, brusquely wiping the tear tracks from her face. She sensed him wanting to ask if she was all right, but the satisfaction she radiated through the bond could not be denied.

He was still in her, amazingly still livid, still erect. His blue eyes seemed worried as he asked, "You were not displeased?"

She chuckled, and kissed his nose. "Displeased? Oh, my darling, nothing, *nothing* could've pleased me

more."

He sensed her growing discomfort and eased out of her. The shock of sensation as he did surprised her and she clutched him, but then recovered. He kissed her cheek, and she could feel his concern — and his total fatigue.

He gazed out the French doors at the dark night. "...But at my back I always hear Time's winged chariot hurrying near..." he murmured, quoting an Andrew Marvell poem. "You will have to work tomorrow — that is, later today. I should leave — It's so late —"

She stared at him in amazement. "You would leave me now?" she asked plaintively.

He melted under her gaze. "How could I?" he wondered, carefully moving a lock of her blond hair out of her face. "You will have to send me away, I fear."

"That will never happen," she assured him. "Vincent. Take off your boots, and your jeans. Come to bed. Sleep with me."

"Sleep — with you." He said it as if it were the most amazing concept.

"I'll wake you before dawn. I'll have to go to work, and you can still get back Below. Come to bed now, and we'll sleep."

His face looked radiant, as he slid away from her to undress. Discarding his remaining clothes quickly, he moved to slip under the covers when he noticed her ravaged mattress. His face darkened in shame. He touched the parallel slashes. "That might've been you, Catherine."

"Nonsense!" she snorted. "You were just showing off, and I knew it. We'll flip the mattress over tomorrow night — and file your nails! I was never in any danger from you."

He lifted the covers and moved against her, collecting her in his arms, obviously contemplating everything she'd said. "It is still hard for me to believe —"

"That we could be lovers?" she sighed. "Believe it, my darling. You could never hurt me." She kissed his chin, and felt his body relax as sleep overtook him. Allowing herself the same pleasure, she cuddled her head against him, hearing the same comforting heartbeat she always had all the times he'd embraced her chastely. Together, she and her lover eased into sleep.

*No, nothing's better than love,
than to want and to hold:
to be lost in the flesh
and the light shining there:
— Age To Youth — Judith Wright*



"...And then he died," Castillo whispered. He stared at the rough hewn stone walls surrounding them, seeing that scene playing against them like a film. Jack laying in his arms, dead. "His blood was on

my hands, all over me. I couldn't stop the bleeding. His — or mine. I passed out. When I came to, I was in a Bangkok hospital. Reese was there. Waiting for me to come around. The first thing I did was ask about Jack — and my wife. He told me they were dead. I should've seen the lie in his hollow, colorless eyes. I should've gone back to the hills when I was well, found the place, read the signs — but, I believed him. Believed Reese. A man whose honesty could be purchased."

Gentle hands touched him comfortingly, stroking his hair, his face, his back, his arms. He could smell the two of them, their unique odors so familiar already, so delightful. He hungered for both of them. Hungered to fill them, to have them fill him, fill his soul, take away the emptiness he'd suffered since losing Jack and May Ying. He'd been talking for how long? He didn't know. It was so odd. He was a man who could remain silent for hours, days, maintain a conversation without ever opening his mouth. He never remembered saying so much to anyone in his life, since he'd lost his two loves.

Then he told them about coming home to the underground, told them about seeing Stosh again, relived it all, the sadness, the joy, that healing, bittersweet interlude. He realized finally that his face was wet, that it had been for sometime. He paid it no mind. He had to tell them. They needed to know. To know him. To know what they were getting involved in.

He loved them both so much. How had that happened?

"When I fled the Black Opal meet, Reese found me in the tunnels," he told them. "He — said things." He felt them exchange a knowing glance over his head, as they'd done several times during his narrative. "He implied — that Jack might still be alive. I told myself he said it just to gain an advantage over me — that's his way. But still — the thought that it might be true has been with me ever since. Then Jack came to me here, when I first arrived at the alcove. It's not the first time I've seen him — spoken to him. But it was the first time I've *felt* him — felt his living spirit."

Sonny looked at Rico, then asked softly, "If Jack was alive, Marty — what would you do?"

Castillo lifted his head, stared at his blond lover with red-rimmed eyes. "I would hold him, if I could. Embrace him just one more time. And send my love through that embrace, all the love I've kept inside me all these years — just as I did when I saw May Ying again. What else could I do?"

Sonny seemed confused. "Wouldn't — you want to be with him again? As his lover?"

Martin blinked, startled. "You're my lover now, *querido*. You and Ricardo." He smiled wanly. "How many lovers do you think I can handle?"

Sonny returned the smile hesitantly, as if he couldn't believe his good fortune. The younger man leaned forward and kissed him gently. He sighed softly when Crockett pulled away. His eyes glistened.

"It's almost over," Castillo murmured. "Vincent and Catherine — it's almost over." He was so grateful, so thankful it had all turned out so well. If his body

ached and his throat was raw, still, he had weathered out his possession with the help of these two incredible men. Now, if he could only lose his erection.

"I think I can solve that problem," Sonny murmured huskily, and suddenly slid his hand inside Castillo's gi, grasping his rigid flesh.

Martin gasped, stars lighting up behind his eyes. "Don't! I can't...!"

"Sssh," Rico soothed, stroking his chest seductively, kissing the back of his neck, pressing his own needy body against the Cuban's. "It's okay, just lay back, enjoy, Lieutenant. Let us please you."

He was too exhausted to resist their gentle loving, as they stroked him, kissed him, tenderly masturbated his aching erection. Rico's slick tongue wound its way around his ear, as the dark detective's mouth continued to nuzzle the Latino's throat and shoulders, even as the black man's strong hands tenderly toyed with Castillo's nipples. Sonny kept kissing him lightly on the lips, teasing him with his tongue, whispering of his love as his incredible hand kept fondling, petting, igniting Castillo's too human flesh.

"I'm yours, Marty," Sonny murmured, "now and forever. Never doubt my love, my commitment to you."

"How could I?" Castillo gasped around the blond's ardent kisses. He reached back, stroked Rico's smooth face, buried his hand in the dense, curly hair.

Finally, he was forced to yield as Vincent's passion pulled him along in its wake, a helpless victim of his brother's desire. He could do little but lay in their embrace as the two of them pleased him. It had been a long time since anyone had cared so selflessly for him.

The moment seemed eternal to the three men, as they grew connected by lips and tongues and palms and the feverish wanting of their joined minds.

Castillo shut his eyes, giving in to the wonder of it, the sheer animal hunger inside him. He was close, so close — as close as Vincent was to orgasm. His lovers, too, were perched on the same precipice, eager for the plunge, but unwilling to end the joy they were sharing.

Chest heaving, his limbs heavy with passion, still Martin managed to shift around so that he could eventually slide one hand into Rico's lap and another into Sonny's. It didn't take long for him to find what he was looking for, as each of his lover's cooperated hungrily. He marveled at their differences as he embraced both their male organs with his hands and felt their different reactions both physically and mentally.

Sonny cried out around their kisses, then began to pump hard into Martin's grip, his mind a maelstrom of exquisite pleasure and need. Tubbs gasped, then murmured encouragement, yet held back, allowing Martin to set the pace. His mind was filled with joy, a radiance of light that almost blinded the Cuban. Castillo moved his hands carefully, willfully, wanting nothing more than to thrill his lovers, to give them as much pleasure as he possibly could.

The ecstasy they continued to give him was indescribable, profound, as intense as anything he'd

ever known. And then they gave him more. Through their bond they gave him their purest love, all their passion, and the trust that cops so jealously keep for themselves and their own partners. He let himself give in to the moment, and absorbed all their emotions into himself, examining every feeling, exploring them, remembering what they felt like. He was drowning in sexual delight and an emotional flood, and that was fine — just fine.

"I can't wait, Marty," Sonny babbled, losing it, "oh god, I can't wait."

"*Por favor, Martin,*" Rico whispered, panting heavily, and could say nothing more.

"Yes," Castillo agreed quietly, "yes."

He sighed, and came, his mind and body erupting even as Vincent did. His brain was overwhelmed as he felt Sonny stiffen against him and cry out. The blond's ejaculation ricocheted in Castillo's brain as if it were his own, making him shudder from head to foot. Then Rico moaned and orgasm ripped through Martin once more as Tubbs' organ spasmed in his hand. The three of them shook and trembled and murmured weakly, clinging to one another, as they discharged their essence onto the floor of this small alcove.

Martin watched the dollops of semen as they anointed the ground and was reminded of the powerful orgasms he'd shared here with Jack. It made him smile. He really was home.

"Damn, Marty," Crockett's raspy voice intruded, "how much come do you think has watered this place in all the centuries it's stood here?"

Beside him, Rico took a deep breath then kissed his cheek gently. "Guess you've done your part, huh, Lieutenant?"

Castillo smiled at their banter. His detectives. Throw a little psychic phenomena at them; just another day at the beach.

Vincent eased into sleep, and as he did, his hold over Martin's mind dissipated. Castillo went completely boneless, and sagged against his lovers.

"Come on, baby," Sonny murmured, much as he had when they'd first arrived. "Let's go home. Let's go to bed." He and Rico helped the older man to his feet. He stood shakily, not at all sure he could handle the trip.

"One step at a time, Lieutenant," Tubbs suggested huskily. Castillo could see the two men were just as wrung out as he was. "You know the way, Sonny?" the black man asked.

Crockett thought for a moment. "Sure, I do — but if you think about it, partner, you'll realize you do, too."

Tubbs frowned, as though he only now recognized his new knowledge. "Like I lived here all my life" he said, wonderingly.

Martin kissed Tubbs' cheek, and then Sonny's. "Take me home," he ordered his men.

"Sure thing, Lieutenant," Crockett agreed, grinning.

"Can we hit the waterfalls for a cool shower first?" Rico asked. "I feel like I've sweated off five pounds."

"You got it, pal," the blond assured him, as the two larger men moved through the tunnels, supporting

their lover between them.

Martin looked up as they approached a junction. There in the entrance ahead of them he saw Jack, leaning saucily against a wall. Gretsky nodded at him, as if approving of his supporting staff.

Oh, they're hot all right, Gretsky thought at him. *You're a lucky bastard, Marty,*

I know that, Castillo assured him. He'd been lucky to have had Jack and May Ying, and luckier yet to have found love as powerful as theirs again.

And so are they, Gretsky added. *Hope they know it.*

Castillo looked at the two younger men, but sensed no recognition from them. They couldn't hear Jack.

I'll be seeing you again, Marty, Gretsky thought, slyly smiling. *Soon. Be ready for me.*

It was a warning, Castillo realized, his stomach knotting. *Jack, are you alive? Could you possibly be alive, hiding somewhere? Could you be alive — without telling me — without finding me?* He went cold all over, trying to envision Jack having survived, having lived for years without letting him know — because he'd left Jack for May Ying.

But Gretsky only touched his hand to his head, bidding a silent farewell. Moving into another tunnel, he disappeared in the darkness.

But not for the last time, Martin knew. Not nearly for the last time. He tightened his arms around the two men aiding him and drew strength from them for the future.

*...whatever we repent
of the time that we live,
it is never what we give —
it is never that we love.
— Age To Youth — Judith Wright*

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE: WINTERFEST!

*I feel you
Your sun it shines
I feel you
Within my mind
— I Feel You — Depeche Mode*

Sonny watched Joe Maxwell enter the faded conference room with both amusement and sympathy. As an undercover cop, Crockett was used to keeping a million secrets and telling a million lies. But Joe was an unusual guy — an honest government lawyer, a man Sonny sincerely respected. Yet, he, Rico, Marty, and Joe's own right hand, Cathy Chandler, had conspired together to present the District Attorney with a completely plausible, yet largely fictitious report of what had happened to them once the disastrous meeting with the Black Opal had collapsed.

Joe had just finished reading the report, and had called this final meeting to discuss it. He stood at the head of the table, while the rest of them sat, and tapped his fingers restlessly against the wad of paper. He looked as if he didn't know where to begin, what to say.

That was okay with Sonny. For once, he wasn't in any hurry. He and his lovers had slept for over twelve hours and he felt rested and confident. Cathy's physician, Peter, a friend and Helper to the Tunnel Dwellers, had referred Crockett to an orthopedic specialist. After seeing that doctor this morning, the Vice cop was now wearing a soft brace for his knee, but had been reassured that there would be no lasting injury. He'd be able to remove the brace after a month. The bad news was that he'd even have to wear it in bed.

Cathy sat across the conference table from the blond Southerner, studiously avoiding his gaze. Whenever their eyes accidentally did meet, Crockett would deliberately smile at her and watch the color rise in her face. He couldn't wait to get her alone, and *really* give her the blues.

The Vice cop took another sip from his coffee. They'd gotten it at some greasy little stand around the corner, and Sonny thought it was probably the best coffee he'd ever had in his life. The weather had broken while they'd slept and when they emerged from the tunnels this morning, the sky had been a brilliant blue, accented by large white, fleecy clouds. The temperature had finally climbed above freezing. The park had smelled like spring — or at least New York's version of it. Even the conference room they were in was warm now, almost toasty — especially compared to the chilly underground tunnels they had been inhabiting. Or maybe Sonny had finally gotten adjusted to the weather here. He tugged a sock into place, longing to be rid of them again.

Finally, Maxwell cleared his throat. "This — is a very *interesting* report," he said carefully. He moistened his lips, obviously choosing his words. "I don't believe a word of it — but it's very interesting."

No one around the table moved for a minute. Sonny watched Marty slowly lift his head and give Maxwell one of his patented *are-you-calling-me-a-liar,-gringo?* looks. But Maxwell wasn't buying it.

"Look, there's just the five of us here," Joe said softly, "and I've been in this business long enough to know when I'm getting the royal run-around. This report is good enough to fly, and so I'll pass it on as gospel. But I wouldn't want you boys to shuffle off to Miami thinking it's that easy to get over in New York. In my career, I've been lied to by local politicians, other lawyers, tons of cops, millions of defendants, the feds — you name it and they've lied to me. You guys are just another set of names on the list. I just wanted you to know — in this case, it's okay."

Sonny had to work to keep the surprise from his face. Neither Rico nor Marty, or even Cathy moved a muscle.

"I can't begin to know who's orders you were really following," Joe told them, "and I've got a feeling I'm better off in ignorance. All I do know is that you shut

down the Black Opal operation at great personal risk and," he turned a warm eye on Sonny, "I suspect, great personal sacrifice. If you're under orders to 'protect' me, okay, I'll play along and let myself be protected."

He stared at Castillo deliberately. "But I know about Reese. I know who he is and why he was involved. What I don't know, and can't *imagine*, is how you managed to secure Elliot Burch's — *cooperation*. Burch is known for looking out for number one — and *only* number one. But, somehow, you did, and managed to prevent Reese from covering up Senior Morganstern's child abuse and his connection to this case. I don't know how you did it, but I'm impressed. So, the report goes in as is." Maxwell looked around the room at the three detectives. "If you men ever need the feeble assistance of a worn-out, befuddled New York D.A. — don't hesitate to call. I figure I owe you guys. Maybe the next time you're in Fun City, we might have time to get to know each other better." He leaned towards Crockett, the nearest to him, and extended his hand.

Sonny stood and took it willingly, shaking it heartily, and patted the man on the shoulder. "Does this make up, just a little, for the helicopter?" the Vice cop asked, and everyone laughed. Still, he felt like a snake for the position they'd had to put Joe in. For the first time since Martin had introduced his detectives to his secret life, Sonny had a taste for the kind of stress the Cuban had been carrying around all his life. It was the same kind of stress Cathy would have to bear for as long as she loved Vincent.

Maxwell shook each of their hands in turn, and after a few shared pleasantries, the three men took their leave of him.

"Man," Rico murmured as they walked towards the elevators, "that was close."

"We're fortunate Maxwell is the man he is," Castillo said softly.

"Hey, wait!" a familiar female voice called, making them halt. Cathy was jogging towards them, trying to catch up.

Castillo paused until she reached them then glanced about to be sure of their privacy in the hall. "Does Joe think you — ?"

The lovely lawyer shook her head. "He thinks I believed what you told me." She smiled wryly. "I think he finds me hopelessly naive!"

The men exchanged a relieved glance.

"I was wondering what your schedule's like for the day," Cathy asked.

Martin met his men's gaze, then said, "We have an appointment this afternoon. Lunch at *Enzio's* around the corner. Why?"

She smiled openly. "Tonight's Winterfest. I have *orders* to make sure you three are there!"

Sonny watched Martin's face ease into amusement. Was it his imagination, or was that happening more often these days?

"I have our invitations," Martin assured her. "We'll be there. You can reassure Father on that score."

"It wasn't Father who gave me my orders," she quipped, then walked sprightly away from them just as their elevator arrived. Sonny grinned as he watched

her go.

When they entered the restaurant, Martin led them to a table by the windows without any help from the eatery's staff. A thirtyish man with longish brown hair, a beard, and exquisite taste in clothes, stood as they approached.

"Martin," the man said in a soft, rich voice. Without even trying, he managed to imbue that one word with a wealth of meaning.

So this is Elliot Burch, Sonny thought, eyeing the handsome man. Memory fragments flitted across his mind, images he'd seen during the unusual tryst he shared with his lovers in the tunnels. Marty had once walked away from this wealthy, powerful, good-looking man, this man that had once openly adored him. This man who still cared enough for him to lend him aid during a difficult time, no questions asked.

Crockett took a good, long look at Burch, then glanced over at Castillo. He had a sudden image of something about — He blinked and found himself staring at the familiar, thin, black leather tie Marty was fond of wearing. Crockett had always considered it intriguingly out of character for the Cuban. He glanced back at Burch, and found himself feeling insecure.

Rico's fingers grazed his elbow surreptitiously at the same time Tubbs' comforting presence fill his mind. That had been a long time ago. A long time ago.

He extended a hand to Burch as Martin introduced them.

"Elliot Burch, these are my detectives, Sonny Crockett and Ricardo Tubbs," Marty said quietly. "Sonny, Rico, this is my old friend, Elliot Burch."

Castillo sat beside Burch on one side of the table, facing Sonny and Rico who sat across from them.

So Marty can watch my face, Crockett decided, even as he felt Castillo's foot touch his lightly. Tubbs stroked the side of his thigh under the table, trying to reassure him, Crockett knew.

Burch stared at them, his face open, smiling. His expression told Crockett that he knew very well that they were more than Marty's "detectives".

A waitress approached their table, but before anyone else could speak, Burch said, "Barbara, these are the most important guests I've ever brought here. Tell Enzo to kill the fatted calf; we'll be here for awhile."

The bright-eyed, attractive waitress smiled. "Well, they're certainly the *handsomest* guests you've ever brought here, Mr. Burch!" she quipped in a thick Brooklyn accent. Winking boldly at Sonny, she returned to the kitchen.

Crockett and Tubbs exchanged a glance.

"Forgive me," Burch apologized. "It's my restaurant; they're used to taking care of me a certain way."

"Your restaurant," Sonny said, nodding. "How's the beer?"

"The best there is," Burch assured him with a smile. "Cold. And free."

No sooner had he said that than a frosty brew appeared at Crockett's elbow, with a shot of Jack

Daniels neatly beside it. Sonny had never even seen the waitress return. She gave Rico some fruity concoction and a flirtatious grin, and left Burch and Castillo with fragrant cups of coffee.

"So, how did Maxwell take the report?" Burch asked Castillo as Sonny wondered if the woman were telepathic.

Marty nodded. "He took it. He wasn't happy about your involvement."

Burch smiled. "No doubt. Joe doesn't have much time for me."

No, Sonny suspected he didn't. The Brooklyn-born lawyer had had to claw his way to his position. He'd see Burch as nothing more than another fat cat with political ambitions. Not many people knew about the architect's humble beginnings.

"I'm glad to see you survived your ordeal," Burch said to Crockett suddenly, surprising him. Rico and Marty both watched his reaction.

"Thank you," Sonny replied, meeting the attractive hazel eyes. "Both for your interest — and your help. I might not be here if you hadn't intervened."

Burch shrugged. "Just a little payback. I owe Marty a lot."

Castillo shook his head in protest.

"This little thing hardly makes us even," Burch insisted. Then he got this mischievous look in his eye. "For example — did he ever tell you about the night I turned twenty-one?"

Sonny could feel Rico grow more interested immediately, and couldn't deny that his own ears had perked up. "Marty's not usually the type to — kiss and tell," Crockett drawled.

Burch burst out laughing, even as Castillo shot the blond cop a warning glare. Sonny ignored it, smirking naughtily.

"I'm afraid that birthday wasn't quite *that* special!" Burch insisted, still chuckling. "Still, it was an interesting night. I'll bet he's never taken you to the *Chained Eagle*, either."

"Elliot!" Castillo protested, at the same time Rico nearly snorted up some of his fruit drink.

"*Chained Eagle*?" the black detective asked, coughing.

"It's a rather *intense* bar down by the docks, catering to men with certain — tastes," Burch told them casually.

"Oh, I'm *familiar* with it," Rico told him, then as everyone's eyes turned questioningly to him, stammered an explanation. "Hey now, remember, I used to work in this town! That bar was *notorious*! There isn't a cop in New York that hasn't either busted heads or had his head busted in that place! And you could consider yourself *lucky* if your *head* was the only thing that got busted! If you catch my drift!"

Sonny lifted an eyebrow, reminding himself to ask Tubbs later just what part of his anatomy was involved in his dealings with the *Chained Eagle*.

"Next time you come to New York, we'll *have* to go," Elliot insisted. As he noted Castillo's strained expression, he remarked, "Come on, it'll be fun. For old times sake, Marty!"

Sonny sat up straighter. This was getting *interesting*!

"See, the night I turned twenty one," Burch continued, leaning forward conspiratorially, "Martin, Jack Gretskey and I decided we would see just how many bars you could attend in one evening — and survive. Or rather, Jack and I decided that. Marty's only interest was in keeping us both alive."

Castillo's face darkened in a blush, but he did nothing to stop Burch's telling of the tale, which turned out to be only the first of many.

The hours slipped by as food was served and consumed, and finally the light waned and street lamps came on. Martin actually contributed to the tale-telling as he relayed a few humorous, less-than-flattering stories about Stosh Kosmerick as a young man.

In spite of his early reservations, Sonny was surprised to find that he was enjoying himself as he got to know this man who had been so important to Martin in the past. Still, he couldn't help but wonder how the Cuban had ever walked away from the good-looking architect. Finally, Castillo caught his gaze, and he saw the answer in those jet black eyes, at the same time as he felt the thought come to him from Martin's mind.

Because I didn't love him.

Crockett swallowed, and looked sideways at Rico. Tubbs' copper eyes were soft, watching him. No doubt the dark detective was wondering when Sonny would ever learn.

It was dark as they started to make motions to go. Elliot took the opportunity to excuse himself and head towards the men's room.

Sonny sat back in his seat, and looked at his lovers. "Interesting guy," he said softly. "Glad he's on our side."

Rico nodded. "You okay?" he asked quietly. "You looked a little funny there for awhile."

"I'm cool," Sonny assured him, meeting Martin's eyes brazenly.

Then an unexpected voice startled the three men. "I *knew* you guys would be *late*!" Sonny turned to find Cathy Chandler standing at his shoulder. "I saw you through the window as I headed for the park from home," she scolded. "Don't you know what time it is?"

Castillo frowned and glanced at his watch. When had he ever been late for anything? the Southerner wondered. This had to be a first. The Latino looked like he was about to say something to her when they all heard Burch's voice.

"Cathy! What a pleasant surprise!"

She turned, shocked to see him. Her face held a mixture of uneasy emotions, the least of them, surprise. "Hello, Elliot," she said quietly. "I didn't realize *you* were their afternoon appointment." She cast a significant look at Castillo, but he ignored it.

The architect made a small gesture with his shoulder, as if it wasn't important. "Martin and I are old friends. We've been catching up. Won't you join us?"

Sonny easily read the yearning in the handsome man's expression, his body language. It hurt Crockett to see the transformation in him. This was a man seriously — and hopelessly — in love. With Catherine Chandler.

The detective remembered how he'd been drawn to her, how mystified he was by her relationship with Vincent. But Burch didn't have a clue! And never would have, either. For him, Cathy's disinterest was nothing but bald rejection.

Suddenly, Crockett found himself heartsick for Burch. He had wealth and power, all right, the things everyone thinks they want. But the two great loves of his life, Martin and Catherine, both stood in this room with him at this moment, cruel reminders of how close he might have come to *real* happiness — and how far out of reach it would always remain. In both cases, money could not buy Elliot's happiness. Sonny swallowed and suppressed an urge to reach out and hug the man. Tubbs' fingers brushed his, and he knew his partner had understood everything at the same time he had. Martin looked at neither of them; his sorrowful eyes were trained solely on Burch — but Elliot was oblivious to all of them.

"Oh," Cathy stammered, plainly uncomfortable, "I'm sorry. I'd love to stay, Elliot, but I can't. I've got an appointment — " She turned to the detectives, hoping they would bail her out.

"Miss Chandler came to remind us of another obligation," Martin said smoothly. "I'm afraid we're late now, Elliot."

"Of course," the architect said graciously, his eyes never leaving the woman's face. "Please, don't let me keep you. We've had a wonderful afternoon. Martin, don't stay away from New York so long." He took Castillo's hand warmly and shook it, then did the same with the other two men. "Make him come up and visit again," he instructed Sonny and Rico, "and be sure he brings you with him. If he doesn't, I may be forced to come to Florida. And who knows how much trouble I could get into there — especially with you two!"

"It'd be good to have you visit, Elliot," Sonny assured him sincerely. The good-looking architect met his eyes, searching for, and finding, the honesty in them. His grip was strong, appreciative.

"Really, Elliot," Tubbs insisted, taking his hand in turn, "you could use some sun after this dreary winter. And who knows? You might find a few restaurants down there to buy."

Burch shrugged good-naturedly. "I already have several in Miami. We'd all eat well!" He turned a devastatingly inviting smile on Cathy. "I hope I'll see you again soon, Miss Chandler. After all, we live in the same city. I'll call you."

Before she could protest, he turned and left them.

Cathy gave Castillo a scathing look. "You could've *warned* me!"

But the Hispanic only inclined his head, as if acknowledging her complaint.

The four of them left the restaurant together. Sonny felt weird walking out without so much as leaving a tip, but Martin had insisted Elliot would only be offended.

"You said you had the invitations?" Cathy suddenly asked Castillo, as the small group entered Central Park.

Crockett and Tubbs turned to each other, con-

fused.

Martin reached inside his heavy overcoat and withdrew a slim package. It was wrapped in brown paper, and as he peeled back the wrapper, Sonny glimpsed something colorful. Castillo extended an object towards Sonny. Crockett took it, staring at it in surprise. The first time he'd seen this, it'd been in Martin's office. He remembered how furious he'd become when Castillo wouldn't explain its origins. Now, it was all so understandable. He couldn't have told them and kept his most important secret.

Sonny turned the lovely thing over in his hands, examining it. It was a beautiful, hand-dipped candle, layered in many colors — reds and oranges, peach and gold — each shade blending and melting into the next. It reminded him of a Miami sunset. The work of an artist. There were two more candles inside the package this time; Marty had to have picked them up after they'd arrived here. The lieutenant handed a wax taper to Rico who examined it admiringly.

"These, gentlemen," Castillo said quietly, as they approached the Central Park drain pipe, "are your invitations to Winterfest."

They were met at the drain pipe entrance by a pack of gaily-dressed, giggling children. The youngsters nearly pounced on Martin and Cathy as they entered the secret entrance, grabbing them by the hands and towing them along. Martin's expression melted as he yielded, a willing prisoner of his pint-sized jailers. Suddenly, Castillo and his swarm of kids disappeared as they turned a bend in the winding tunnels. Sonny and Rico both tensed when it happened practically in front of them, but not five minutes later, the Cuban and his captors reappeared, only now, Marty was wearing his "underground" clothes, magically cleaned and repaired. The great black robe with its ornate crane seemed to float before them as Castillo moved smoothly through the strange tunnels.

Cathy was also surrounded by children, just as Martin was. That disappointed Sonny, since he hadn't had a chance yet to tease her about her "conquest." That was all right — the night was young! Their little procession traveled deeper into the tunnels, meeting yet more children. Samantha, a lovely little girl with rich, auburn hair had taken personal charge of Sonny, holding onto his hand and assuring him that she wouldn't let him get lost. Rico was being led by a beautiful, mixed race boy of twelve with huge green eyes and coffee colored skin. Sonny noticed Rico shaking his head. He looked questioningly at his lover.

"I don't know," Tubbs said with a shrug, "it's just — with all the weird stuff we've had to get accustomed to, this may be just one weird thing too many."

"I'm not following you, man," Crockett replied.

Rico nodded toward Castillo, who, walking ahead of them, was smiling and teasing the horde of children hanging onto the sleeves of his heavy, black robe. "Look at him, the way he's dealing with them. He's grinning, he's open, he's radiating love to those kids. I've never seen him like this — never imagined this side of him. Our cold, calculating, hard-nosed, by-the-book lieutenant is a *pushover* for children!"

Sonny smiled. "You're right, pal, I never thought

about it. It is odd. I guess there's still plenty to learn about Marty. What surprises me is how interested the kids are in *him*. I mean, he hasn't lived here for years, hasn't even visited. Some of those kids were *infants* last time he was around. Why all the fascination with him?"

"They've all read his letters," Rico reminded the blond. "Those kids know the lieutenant a hell of a lot better than you and I do, partner."

Sonny nodded. He and Tubbs had spent every spare minute going over the letters themselves, but couldn't finish them. That was all right — it gave them an excuse for another visit.

As they traveled deeper and deeper into the maze of tunnels, Sonny realized they were being joined by others, both Tunnel Dwellers and people from Above — people in normal street wear. By their appearance, Sonny knew they were folks from all walks of life — cops, and doctors, teachers and construction workers, librarians and elderly Asian merchants. He recognized a well-known black politician and a notorious professional gambler. Every race, every class that inhabited the city above was represented, and there was more than one person who, like them, seemed to be from "out of town". The crowd grew and grew, each visitor being led by a Tunnel Dweller as they walked down and down, farther and farther into the darkening tunnels.

Finally, they hit a section of the tunnels that clearly showed the evidence of previous civilizations. There were Stonehenge-like ruins with odd hieroglyphics, and great vaulted chambers, much larger than the ones most of the Tunnel Dwellers claimed as their own. As they traveled through these tunnels, the air began to stir, growing cold. Then the wind began to pick up, until it blew fiercely, making all of them pull their coats and robes tight around them. Samantha huddled against Sonny, as Joey, Rico's guide, did to him. The two detectives hugged the children against them, even as they watched Marty gather two of the smallest ones under his robes. Still the crowd moved on. Finally, they came to a massive staircase. The wind was relentless, and the staircase dark, steep and ominous. Beyond the steps was a monstrous, black chasm.

"Don't look down!" Samantha warned, as Sonny tried to peer over the stairs. "It's bottomless! If you fell, you would just keep going, on and on and on!" He saw the fear of it in her small, pretty face and, hugging her tightly, thanked her for protecting him.

He turned to Tubbs. "So, what'd'ya think? You fall down that chasm and find yourself falling *up* into China on the other end?"

Tubbs just chuckled, but made no attempt to peer down the hole himself.

Finally, Sonny and Rico found themselves near the head of the crowd at the bottom of the staircase, near a huge junction in the tunnels, a place they had never seen before. The ceiling was many stories high here, and the crowd gathered around, facing two massive, wooden doors of inestimable age. The doors were locked shut by an enormous crossbeam. It would take three or four men to raise that beam, Sonny thought.

He looked around at the crowd. There were an amazing number of people gathered here, each holding a candle just like his. Sonny recognized many of the Tunnel Dwellers, but there were many more he'd never seen before. He leaned down and asked Samantha about the identities of the strangers in street wear.

"Those are our Helpers from Above," she explained. "Winterfest is a time for us to share our bounty and celebrate our community, which couldn't exist without the Helpers."

"You mean, all these people — the ones wearing street clothes — live above, yet know about your world?" Sonny marveled. "All these people?"

Samantha nodded. "They're our friends. We all help one another. Oh, here comes Vincent to open the Great Doors."

Even as she told him that, the huge man approached the doors that dwarfed even him. As Sonny watched, Vincent took hold of the crossbeam and, with a gigantic heave, lifted the heavy bar off the doors. Leaning the timber against a wall, he pushed against the doors, laying his shoulders into it, and with a groan, they yielded, swinging slowly open.

Turning to the crowd, he held out his hand to the lovely blonde woman standing beside Father. "Catherine," he said, "will you let me lead you through the dark?"

Grinning broadly, she replied, "There is no darkness when you're with me!"

"Isn't that sweet?" Samantha sighed dreamily. "They said that last year, too." Unconsciously, she squeezed Sonny's hand, making him grin.

He lifted her up, sitting her on his hip. "My dear Samantha," he whispered softly, "won't you lead *me* through the dark?" Tubbs had to hide a smile behind his hand.

The young girl's face turned bright scarlet. She started to reply, then was overcome with embarrassment and adolescent crush and just nodded, her eyes gleaming.

"Just can't help yourself, can you?" Rico muttered. "Gotta break those hearts, lady killer."

"You got some nerve chidin' me, bro'," Sonny murmured back, chuckling. "That young boy attached to you is as desperately in love as any youngster I've ever seen."

Rico nodded knowingly. "Yeah, but now, thanks to *Martin* resolving those issues with Father, growing up here will be just as wonderful for him as it will be for Samantha." He hugged the boy with brotherly affection, and the twelve year old nearly glowed.

Vincent and Catherine entered the darkened chamber beyond the giant doors and the crowd followed them.

Sonny and Rico found themselves directed to heavy wooden chairs surrounding a long table. They were next to each other, their young guides flanking them on either side. Martin sat across from them, though they could barely see him in the dark room. Peering through the gloom, they saw Father at the head of their table, with Vincent and Catherine near him. Sonny realized that there had to be many more tables in this room to seat all the people that were still enter-

ing. Finally, the great doors were shut against the wind, and an eerie silence settled on the room. The darkness was complete. Sonny couldn't even make out Rico's face beside him. The only noise was the lonely whisper of wind outside the secured doors.

"Don't be afraid," Samantha whispered to him. "It'll be light soon."

He smiled in the darkness and squeezed her hand.

Suddenly, Father's familiar baritone was heard above the din of the wind. "The world above us is cold and grey," the elder began, lighting his candle. The wan flame gave his face an odd glow. His speech had the earmarks of tradition and Sonny found himself caught up in the parallels the patriarch drew between the winter Above and the darkness Below. Father spoke of the origins of their community, during the time when only he and a few other desperate people began building a new life down here. Martin's mother was one of those people, Sonny realized. Perhaps if she had come when the community was well established and more secure, she might have been able to stay rooted in it. But things were too new then, still in too much turmoil. He wished he could see Marty's face and read the memories he was reliving now. The little bit he could sense from his mind was filled with bittersweet melancholy.

The litany Father had begun was picked up by Vincent as he, and several others lit their candles from Father's primary flame. Vincent talked of the ancient peoples who once must have lived here, as he lit Catherine's candle. She in turn lit Mary's, who talked again of this community's beginnings, when people huddled here in fear and isolation. Mary lit the candle of Peter, the doctor, and he turned to the person next to him.

As the flame was passed from one candle to the next, Vincent picked up the story, talking of a land of lost hope and twisted dreams, a land of despair. "...Where the sounds of footsteps coming down a tunnel were the sounds of terror."

The friendly light touched Rico's candle just as Father began to speak of people learning to put aside their fear. Sonny's candle was lit next as Mary talked of new trusts, and people helping one another.

"And we began to grow stronger," Vincent intoned, as Sonny carefully lit Samantha's candle. He watched her eyes glow with the beautiful light, as the bright, wax colors in the handmade taper glowed before her. It was a moment before she turned to the person beside her, to pass on her flame. "Those that took the help and those who gave it," she whispered at the same time Vincent said it.

"We are all part of one another," Father added. "One family, one community."

Sonny realized that huge chandeliers filled with candles were also being lit, that the room had been growing brighter and brighter during the litany, as taper after taper was set afire.

"Sometimes we forget this," Father continued, "and so we meet here each year to give thanks to those who have helped us and to remember, even the greatest darkness is nothing," he paused and looked meaningfully at Martin, then at the two men sitting across

from him, "as long as we share the light!"

At those words, the final candles were lit, and the great chandeliers were hoisted into the air, brightening the Great Hall like small suns. Music began, something baroque with violins, and people got up to dance.

Sonny glanced about — there were great tables laden with food, and wine being poured from heavy casks. He turned to Rico. "Did you talk to Cathy about — ?"

The dark detective nodded. "It's done, man. She got her doctor friend Peter to make the arrangements. They should be breaking it out any minute. There are the cases over there." He nodded towards the wine caskets and Sonny craned his neck to see.

There, besides the barrels, were three cases of *Dom Perignon* champagne.

Castillo must have seen him looking at them, and followed his gaze. He turned with a questioning glance to his detectives.

Crockett tried to look innocent, and Rico disinterested, but that didn't work.

Castillo frowned. "How...?"

Sonny shrugged as if it were nothing, a small thing. "Well, uh, you know, thought we should *contribute* something to the festivities. After everything everyone's done for us. Sort of our first official act as Helpers!" He nodded as if that made it all make sense.

Martin suddenly looked suspicious. "How did you pay for it?" he asked clearly.

The two cops glanced at each other, hesitantly.

"Not the expense account?" Castillo asked softly, almost pleading.

Tubbs had to bite his lip and look away.

"Hell, Marty," Sonny protested, "we'll pay it back with our travel vouchers! It's not like we even *touched* our *per diem*!"

Castillo's face darkened, but before he could respond, the children, including Joey and Samantha, gathered around his chair and drew him out of it, clamoring for a story. Helpless under their demands, he allowed himself to be led away, glaring at his lovers sternly. But as soon as his back was turned, the detectives only smirked and slapped each other's palms.

"Time to break out the good stuff, m'man," Sonny gloated.

"You got that right, pal," Rico agreed. The dark man stood up and caught Winston's attention, giving him a pre-arranged signal. Winston gave him a clenched fist in answer and he and William, the cook, moved toward the cases.

Crockett nudged Tubbs. "Come on, man, Cathy's ungarded. Now's our chance."

The two detectives moved away from the table and corralled the woman by surprise as she stood alone near the dance floor. She looked both wary and amused.

"Why, Miz Chandler," Sonny drawled with all his southern charm, "imagine findin' you heah at this pahty!"

She nodded, but remained wisely silent.

"Imagine," Rico agreed, "and *without* your beau!"

"Imagine!" she mimicked, trying to suppress a laugh.

Sonny draped an arm around the small woman. "So, tell us, darlin'," he peered around, as though to ensure their privacy, then leered lasciviously, "was it worth the wait?"

She blushed scarlet, but replied, "Oh, it most certainly *was*, Detective. Most certainly!"

Rico shook his head. "I dunno, man. She looks too smug about this!"

"Hmmm," Sonny agreed. "I guess us poor, mere mortal men haven't got a chance now, do we?"

"Not a snowball's chance in hell, I'd say," Tubbs decided.

"Tsk, ts, ts," Sonny commiserated. "Poor Elliot. Poor Joe. What a heartbreaker *you* are, Miz Chandler!"

Before she could answer them, Sonny and Rico felt heavy hands land on both their shoulders. They turned to find Vincent behind them. The two men grinned sheepishly.

"How wonderful to have you here at Winterfest with us!" Vincent greeted them, his eyes twinkling.

"Uh, yeah!" Rico agreed cheerfully. With a wicked gleam in his own eye, he said, "Sonny was just asking Cathy if she'd care to dance."

"That's right!" Crockett agreed too quickly. "I was — what?" He glared at Tubbs. Rico knew full well he hated to dance. Normally, he used his bad knee as an excuse, but his partner had made it sound as if this time it was *his* idea.

"And I had already accepted," Cathy told Vincent. Taking Sonny's hand, she smiled at her lover. "Excuse us." She proceeded to lead Sonny to the dance floor. "You *do* waltz?" she asked the Southerner once she got him out to the floor.

"I do now," he decided, making the best of it. "Besides, this is undoubtedly my last chance to hold you in my arms and get away with it."

"Things have changed between you, Rico, and Martin," Cathy gauged. "Something's happened. Something good."

Sonny nodded, as he lead her about the floor. "Yeah. One of those breakthroughs people in love sometimes make — if they're lucky."

"You made your commitment!" she realized.

He smiled back. "Yeah. Yeah, I did. And you were right. It changed everything. You give good advice, Lady Lawyer."

She grinned as they turned smoothly in perfect time. "You know, for an ex-jock with a bum knee, you dance pretty well."

"Hey, it's all part of workin' undercover, ma'am." He stared into her green eyes and asked softly, "Are you happy, Cathy? Really happy?"

She sighed, her face suffused with joy. "More than you could ever imagine, Sonny."

"Oh, I don't know about that. These days, I can imagine a whole *lot* of happiness." He felt Vincent's presence before the big man touched his shoulder, and turned to face him.

"Father is worried about your knee," the tunnel dweller said with a sly smile. "He suggested I cut in, so that you would not overtax it."

Sonny nodded. Everyone knew perfectly well that Father was deep into his first game of chess with the magician, Sebastian, and had eyes for nothing else. But, it was as good an excuse as any. Crockett stopped dancing and kissed Catherine's hand before allowing Vincent to take his place. "My lady," he murmured, "make sure you get some champagne!" Then watched the two lovers dance away perfectly, like a couple from a fairy tale.

"Crockett," Rico said quietly, suddenly appearing beside him, "come on, man, you've got to hear this!" The handsome black man grabbed Sonny's hand and led him through the room as if through a familiar maze. Finally they came upon a small section full of pillows, where a bevy of children sat, surrounding a solemn figure in black. Sonny and Rico took a place at the rear of the crowd, where Martin could clearly see them, and stood silently, leaning against a pillar, listening.

"Please, Martin," Samantha begged, "tell us a story about Toshi the Samurai!" The young girl no longer had eyes for Sonny, he realized, her attention focused solely on the story teller.

At the mention of the Samurai, Sonny felt something from Marty, a sadness, a bitter longing, and realized that the stories of Toshi were tales he and Jack had made up, fables of their imaginary life as great warriors. Castillo sighed, as Crockett and Tubbs glanced at one another. Then Martin began, his voice soft and compelling, filling the noisy room until Sonny imagined it to be the only sound there.

"Once there was a Samurai named Toshi, whose soul was filled with great sadness, because he had lost the brother of his heart in a great battle. That very same day, he had also lost his beloved wife to treachery. Toshi's heart was so sad, that he could no longer stay in the emperor's palace, so instead, he hired himself out to a small peasant village. The work was hard and not glamorous, but Toshi hoped it would help him forget.

"But nightly, his lost brother and his wife visited him in dreams, so all he could do was go on, day by day, year after year, living with his bitter memories, and working as hard as he could.

"Finally, Toshi worked so hard for the poor peasants, and suffered so much for his lost loves, that his karma overflowed. Even the gods feared that Toshi's karma would soon be so great, that he could become a god himself. The gods didn't like this, as they were very jealous of their power.

"So, they plotted against Toshi. They gifted one of the peasant's wife with great beauty, and sent her to tempt him. But when he told the woman about his wife, she wept with him, and left him alone. Next, they sent a young, handsome boy, hoping Toshi would fall in love, but the faithful Samurai taught the boy the Bushido, and told so many stories of his brother, the boy fell in love with that brave man's memory. The gods grew desperate.

"Finally, they sent two men to be trained by Toshi - Oda, the fair, and Tai, the dark."

For the first time since he'd started the story, Martin lifted his gaze to his lovers. The children followed

his eyes, and stared admiringly at the two detectives standing shoulder to shoulder against a pillar.

"Oda had lost his wife," Martin continued, his eyes trained on Sonny, "and his soul was bitter. He was a fine swordsman, but he had no heart.

"Tai had lost his brother to evil men," the Hispanic said, looking now at Rico, "and had sworn never to trust again. He was an expert at martial arts, but he had no faith.

"So, in their way they each reflected part of Toshi's pain."

That had never occurred to Sonny, nor apparently, to Tubbs, who's expression was one of revelation.

"But," Castillo went on, "when Toshi went to train these men, he found he could not reach them. They locked out his words with their pain, and his own pain kept him apart from them. So all three of them suffered, and the work they did together was pointless. As the months went on, they grew more frustrated, more angry, more bitter. And all their karma suffered for it; Toshi's most of all.

"When the gods saw this, they were glad. But one god was saddened by these events. He knew these three men held a deep well of love locked up inside, and it hurt him to see them so empty. So, he sent a dragon to threaten their village.

"The three heartsick Samurai pursued the dragon into its lair, a huge underground maze, where tunnels led to tunnels. Bravely, the men entered, mindless of the danger. For hours, they pursued the dragon, until they were so lost, they could find no trail. They were lost underground, without food or water.

"Immediately, they blamed one another for this tragedy, and nearly fought amongst themselves. Until Toshi came to his senses and realized that the only way they could hope to find their way out would be to trust one another and work together. But it was too hard for them to do this. They argued and quarreled and said terrible, hurtful things.

"Days passed. The god watching over them left tiny caches of food and water, just enough to keep them alive. These small supplies tortured them and they soon fought bitterly for these bits of nourishment. Toshi pleaded with Oda and Tai to realize what their challenge was, but they could not. Finally, he realized he would have to show them. When they found the next caches, he refused to battle for his share, willingly giving it to the younger men. This made them feel guilty, since Toshi was their teacher. At the next cache, after a moment's hesitation, the two men insisted Toshi eat and drink all this portion alone.

"But he would not. He insisted on sharing it equally all around. So they shared the cache without fighting for the first time. But Toshi was weak, and needed to sleep. When he did he grew delirious, and spoke to his wife and his brother and wept so sadly, that when he awoke, he found that the other two men were weeping, too. For they had seen the vision of Toshi's wife and his brother, and they had shared his pain. Now the two men told of their own losses, Oda of his wife, and Tai of his brother, and soon, all three wept together, and shared their terrible heartache. Before long, they were embracing, and calling each

other 'loved one,' and 'brother.'"

Castillo paused and gazed at his detectives, and the children glanced at them as well, whispering among themselves. "When they found the next cache," the Hispanic continued, "it was much larger, and they shared it equally, but not before giving thanks to the gods. They each told stories of their lives, and grew closer, sharing the great well of love each of them had. And when they finally found the dragon, they fought it together and defeated it, each of them contributing to its death. They took the dragon's treasure and shared it with the peasants."

"Well, when the other gods finally realized what had happened, they were furious. Not only had Toshi's karma grown, but he had raised the karma of the two men he now called brothers. But the god who had arranged it all was very pleased. For the love these three men felt for one another was more than the love of brothers — it was the love of good people who had shared terrible pain and had been healed."

"And Toshi and his brothers lived a very long time, and had many adventures!"

The children all cheered, and most of them leapt to their feet.

"Let's play Samurai!" Samantha announced. "I'll be Toshi!"

"I want to be Tai!" cried Joey.

"I'm Oda!" shouted another child, as the mob went charging off in a dozen directions, leaving Martin alone with his detectives.

Sonny moistened his lips, trying to think of something to say, when Vincent's voice interrupted his reverie.

"That was a beautiful story, Martin," the lion-man said softly. "I'm afraid the children will consider my renditions a pale substitute from now on."

Castillo modestly inclined his head.

Vincent held out a tray with a myriad selection of cups and goblets. He offered them to Castillo who took one, then realized the contents and glowered at his lovers. Vincent offered the tray to the two detectives who helped themselves to the fancy champagne. Sonny lifted his goblet to Martin with a brazen grin before taking a sip.

"When we were children," Vincent told them, putting down the empty tray, "Devon, Jack and I all vied to be Toshi's brothers. We felt honored when we were chosen."

Castillo smiled gently at the memories.

"It's still an honor," Rico said softly, "to be called Toshi's brother."

Sonny felt his throat tighten, and suddenly found he could not speak.

Vincent placed a great paw on his shoulder, and the other on Tubbs'. "It might not be as great an

honor," the big man grumbled low, "but I hope you know that you are my brothers as well. We have shared more than brothers of blood ever have. You will always be in my heart, both of you, no matter how far from me you live. You will be part of our family, our community, forever."

Sonny looked up into the alien face, his heart full. "Vincent, I have felt more at home here in your world, than I ever have in mine. I'm proud to be your brother!" His eyes misted, and he pulled the huge being into his arms in a ferocious hug. Rico took his turn next, murmuring similar sentiments to the tunnel dweller.

Martin had come to stand near them, as if waiting his turn.

When Rico released the big man, Vincent smiled at Castillo, then said, "You've chosen your partners well, big brother. And, I wanted to tell you — that everything you told me was true."

Sonny didn't quite follow the cryptic comment, but suspected it had something to do with a previous, private conversation.

Castillo nodded sagely and said quietly, "Little brother, have I ever given you bad advice?"

"Never," Vincent admitted, pulling his black-robed friend into a warm embrace, "never in my life."

Crockett heard a heavy sigh behind him and turned to find Cathy Chandler standing there. Her arms were crossed and she was attempting to look annoyed, and not quite managing it.

"Well, now that we've finished this soppy round of 'old home week,' is there *any* chance even *one* of these handsome men will ask me to dance?"

Rico coughed lightly, and adjusted his tie, prepared to move in on the action, when Castillo smoothly moved forward and offered his arm.

"I believe this dance is mine," he said softly, and without so much as a backward glance, abandoned his brother and his lovers as he escorted the lovely woman onto the floor.

"He can dance?" Sonny wondered, amazed.

"Oh, he can dance!" Rico agreed, watching the Hispanic.

"Of course he can dance!" Vincent assured them. "Father insists there can be no *civilized* courtship without dancing!"

Sonny and Rico nodded in agreement, as they watched Castillo's smooth moves.

"The things you learn in N'Yawk," Rico murmured appreciatively.

"Amen, brother," Sonny agreed. "Amen to that!"

*This is the morning of our love
It's just the dawning of our love
— I Feel You — Depeche Mode*

EPILOGUE

*You both stand there... Sayin' to me
What can we do, now that we both love you
I love you — two
— Triad — Jefferson Airplane*

"Dear Vincent,

It seems pretty weird, sitting here on my boat the *St. Vitus Dance*, writing a letter to you, but Marty thought it'd be good therapy for me. I'm out of action for another month (can you believe it?) because of my knee. Well — mostly for my knee.

The department therapist insisted on it as well, said I needed a vacation after everything I'd been through in New York. We're dealing with it — as much as I can. The therapist is a cool dude, and never pushes me too hard on anything. He says I've handled everything pretty well, considering. He almost makes me think that therapists have a purpose on this earth!

Of course, there's plenty I can't tell the therapist, so Marty thought it might help to defray some of that pressure by writing to you. Who knows — a few more of these letters and you might be able to hang out your own shingle! I can see you in a Park avenue suite now, in a three piece button down suit and little granny glasses perched on your nose. "Now, tell me about your mother, my good man." Just kidding.

The weirdest thing about this letter is my writing instrument. Marty gave it to me, of course. It's one of his old fountain pens. He said he's written to you with this pen for years, keeping it through everything he'd been through in 'Nam, and Cambodia, Thailand and every where! But as word processors go, this takes some mastering. My first two attempts looked more like Rorschach tests than letters, so I tossed them. (How come all my inkblots look like messy blobs instead of anything interesting like two men making love on the back of a bull? Don't answer that.)

So, while I sit here, working on my tan and being bored to tears (except when I'm fishing — which I'm doing at the same time that I'm writing to you) I'm trying to discover if there's a writer, or at least a letter writer somewhere inside of me. I'd better keep looking, huh?

It's almost sunset now. The sunsets in Miami are like nowhere else. The sky will slowly turn every kind of rose and gold and bronze, and the sea will take those colors and reflect them right back to the sky. The only way to enjoy a Miami sunset is on the beach or on the water. It's like the world is melting right in front of you, like the sky is on fire. The colors remind me so much of the Winterfest candles, I can't get over it!

I can see palm trees lining the beach from where I'm sitting. There's a nice breeze and it looks like they're dancing for me, swaying gently, waving to get my attention. The pelicans are hanging around, wondering if I've got anything for them, or if I'll throw

something their way when I clean the day's catch. They're so awkward looking, but when they dive straight down from the sky to catch a fish, they're as sharp as missiles honing in on their target! I wish you could see it.

I hope Joe Maxwell's not working Cathy to death, not that she needs his encouragement! I miss some of the talks I had with her (don't tell her that!). You know, I never had a sister before! Give her my love, will you? (As if I could stop you!)

Things have been kind of interesting with me, Rico, and Marty since we got back. I wish you could see Marty when he's at OCB. He's all business, no-nonsense, and totally focused. Since we've been back, neither Tubbs nor I have spent much time with him — something I fully expected. There's always too much work and not enough time.

Rico's been coming out to the boat every night, catching me up on our caseload, telling me all the gossip, trying to keep me in touch with everything — but Marty hasn't visited. See, the *St. Vitus* really belongs to the department, and it's part of my cover. Marty's convinced if anyone sees him on this boat it'll blow my cover. He's got a point, but after awhile, I can't help but feel it's just an excuse.

Frankly, I miss the closeness the three of us shared when we were underground in New York — and part of me wonders if this is Marty's way of pulling back, of drawing up boundaries again now that we're away from that loving, nurturing environment. As you predicted, our mental bond grew weaker and weaker the further we got from New York. By the time we touched down in Miami, it was completely gone — except for the kind of intuitive feelings I've always had. Now, that's no longer enough for me. In fact, the ending of that mental contact was kind of hard for me to deal with. I know Rico and Marty have missed it, too, but, for me it was worse. For a few moments in the plane I nearly lost consciousness and had trouble breathing. Frankly, it was everything I could do to keep from bursting into tears. Suddenly — I was so alone.

(I know it's weird, especially since I could barely deal with the bond when it first showed up! I'm telling you the airline staff nearly called the paramedics!)

I'm afraid, some days, that we may never have that emotional and mental closeness again unless we come back to the Big Apple, and that's not something we can do every weekend!

Rico tells me to be patient; it's his favorite song these days, and after New York I think I'm a little better about it — but there was something so special about the times the three of us were together in your world. I'm selfish enough to want that all the time, and if I can't have it all the time, I at least want it once in awhile! Am I being too selfish, too demanding? I guess I've always been the kind of man who wants it all — and then, some more!

And I know there's a part of Marty he's still holding out on me — a part he's saving — for Jack. It's become so plain to me since we've returned, but ever since his run-in with Reese, he's become convinced that Jack is still alive. As much as he loves us, as

caring, as devoted as he acts, there's a part of him just waiting for Gretskey to show up. As though that will complete a cycle in his life. Man, I resent the hell out of that! But I haven't said anything. I know I've just got to accept it.

So, part of me keeps waiting, too, waiting for a man I've never met, never seen. And what do I do when he shows? Step out of the way? Step *in* the way? Rico says that if that happens, we've just got to let Marty go and do his thing, whatever it is, and hope he comes back to us. What I want to know is where the hell did Tubbs get all this damned patience! And why can't he give me some!

I'll tell you the truth, man, (and this is something I could only tell to you) — I'm scared. Scared shitless. Scared Gretskey's going to someday show his face — and Marty will fall back in love with him, and things will be all over with us. I don't know if I can live with that, losing him to that guy! Even with Rico still here with me, I don't know if I could deal with it. I wouldn't be complete without Marty, anymore than I'd be complete without Rico.

Man, how did I ever get into this mess!

Hey, dig this! I can see my Scarab speedboat heading out towards me — and there are two people aboard! I just used my binoculars, and Marty's on the speedboat with Rico! Oh, Tubbs has got to be some slick talker to convince Castillo to put aside his reservations and come out to the boat. And it's Friday!

You think he intends to stay the weekend? Be still my heart! I've got this great king-sized bed in the forward cabin, a bed Marty's never shared with us! Im-

agine! The weekend, alone with both my lovers on my boat! I don't deserve it.

Oh, I sure as hell do! Well, I'd better wrap this up before they get here. I can't risk Marty reading over my shoulder.

I promise to mail this first thing tomorrow. I'm sending it to Cathy, but I'm assuming we can trust her. She won't read it will she? Hey, it's hard to learn to trust people in this biz. I mean, if I got a letter for Marty from you, I might have to read that! At least I'm honest about my snooping. Besides, it's my job, I'm a detective.

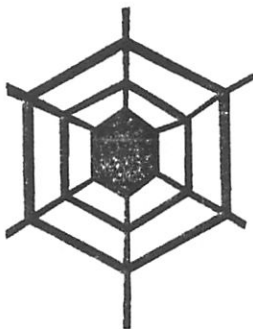
They're here. Hell, Marty's grinning! Rico's laughing at something he said. I think they've seen me wielding this pen. I don't think either of them thought I could write. Of course, why should they, they've seen my reports! This might be a pretty decent weekend, brother!

Kiss Cathy and Father for me. And Samantha! She sent me the cutest letter! And kiss yourself! I love you, man, I mean that!

Your brother,

Sonny

*We love each other, it's plain to see
There's just one answer that comes to me...
What we can do is to try something new —
If you're crazy, too
I don't really see
Why can't we go on as three?
— Triad — Jefferson Airplane*



A FINAL WORD FROM OUR SPONSOR...

For those of you unfamiliar with the MIAMI VICE universe, you should know that the major significance of the episode BUSHIDO is the reappearance of Jack Gatsby. Dean Stockwell plays this magnetic character for perhaps ten minutes, but that brief appearance has affected a great deal of fan writing — especially mine. So, Jack is indeed alive, and a reunion between Martin Castillo and him does occur. A revisiting of that episode from the standpoint of this novel may happen, as may several other spin-off stories, such as —

What does happen on that boat right at the end of this novel? (The very idea makes me tremble.)

How do the Miami Vice characters react to the death of Catherine Chandler?

Is Elliot Burch really dead — or might he show up in Miami to take Martin up on the offer of shelter he'd made so many years ago? And how will Sonny feel about *that*?

How does Sonny's marriage to Caitlin Davis affect his triad with Rico and Martin?

After Sonny's breakdown and amnesia, and his crime spree as Sonny Burnett, can Martin, Rico and Sonny possibly resume their relationship?

And, at the end of the Vice episode BORRASCA, does Reese try to live up to his promise to seek revenge against Castillo by going after Sonny who — having no idea of the events in Miami — is working on a court case in Fort Lauderdale?

Lotta stuff to work with, pal, hard to say where a body could begin. But, I'll be thinkin' about it — how 'bout you?

Ideas can be exchanged, or other Flamingo stories obtained, by writing to Flamingo, P O Box 823, Beltsville MD 20705.

I can feel it coming in the air tonight....

— Phil Collins