Tainted Evidence

An AU Brokeback Mountain Tale
The third lock clicked open. One shoulder shove to distressed wood, hinges grinding out a teeth numbing squeak and, leaving the fluorescent lights in the hallway to flicker its impenetrable version of Morse code to the dingy, peeling paint and the what used to be green carpet now flattened by 20 years of working stiff trampling, he stepped inside biding farewell to the soul eating tragedy of his work. After 14 hours of prostitutes, dealers, rapists and those who made all the rest look like Mother Theresa, he was finally home.

“Ennis? Ennis, is that you?”

As he climbed over the laundry baskets waiting in overflowing patience to be hauled downstairs, he wondered, for the umpteenth time, why the stupid ass question.

*Not like anyone else has keys to get in here. That I know of.*

He shimmied between the 12-seat dining table and matching china cabinet that he was guilted into buying on time because they ‘needed’ somewhere classy to serve their guests, even though the space was stall in a public restroom sized and they’ve never entertained once, not even the in-laws, making his way back to the kitchen, dropping keys on the Formica table that had served them just fine since the Stone Age, but hadn’t seen a true family meal in years.

*Unless she was expecting someone else.*

Didn’t want to go there, didn’t want anything to start an argument. He was too tired tonight. All he wanted was a beer, a soak and the blank of sleep.

*Not that we need something new to fight about. Shit, the loads of other stuff in our repertoire could keep us yelling for weeks.*

Wouldn’t be heard even if he did voice some of those suspicions eating away at his gut. Not over the noise suddenly blaring from down the hall.

*Christ! That loud, it’s going to make me go deaf.*

Beer opened too fast, alternately dribbling and sucking foam, he stormed down the hallway to pound on the last bedroom door.

“Junior! Shut that goddamn crap off!”

Rammstein muted, but was quickly followed by a muffled “Dad, you have no taste in music.”

“And neither do you, darling.”

In a cloud of perfume and hair care products, Alma appeared from their bedroom. Beautiful and petite in all ways despite two children and 35 years, she was dressed more like a debutante than the unit clerk for the seventh floor at Cedar Sinai hospital

“Sheesh, Ennis, you look terrible.”
A big, but passionless, kiss later, she heel-clicked her way by her husband heading to the kitchen to grab lunch - Slimfast shake and celery sticks - awaiting second shift in the fridge.

“Thanks. I try.” A mumble for the benefit of his empty beer can only.

“Ennis, the turntable in the microwave is stuck again, and the tub in the girls’ bathroom is still clogged. I told you to call a plumber. Even though we can’t really afford -”

He quickly dodged that arguing point and escaped into the living room, seeking his favorite recliner and some peace.

What he got was “Halo 2”.

“Hey, Dad.”

His youngest, to the untrained and un-online gaming-initiated, appeared catatonic, sitting there immobile on the floor propped up by the back of the couch, just staring straight ahead, save for the small but rapid movements of her fingers. Used to freak him out so much one night he shoved a mirror under her nose, all ready to call 911. Yesterday’s news now. “Franny.” He kissed her hair – more headset then head – then sank back to the comfort of worn corduroy and duct tape.

Now this is bliss. Only thing that could trump it would be another beer in my hand.

Wasn’t about to leave this moment of calm stolen from the maelstrom that masqueraded as his apartment for a Budweiser, though. A beer buzz just wasn’t worth the risk. Eyes closed, he concentrated on listening, positive that his daughter’s digital carnage would lull sleep faster anyway. Always had in the past, and frequently.

“Ennis, did you even listen to a word I was saying?”

No need to look at her; he knew exactly what she was doing right about now.

Standing there, hands on her hips, tapping one foot, her eyes big and brown and all filled with misery for her sad plight in life of marrying me.

He certainly didn’t have the strength to confront that one tonight.

“Yes, Alma. Microwave, tub, plumber, lousy provider. I got it.”

“That last one is very simple to solve, you know.” Flipping back auburn hair, she bent her head to the side, to slip in gold hoops, a tenth anniversary present she picked out herself. “There are plenty of departments just begging for -”

“Just drop it, Alma, please.” Looks like she wants to argue tonight, though. Number 2 on the list, right behind ‘What happened to our sex life?’ The beer can slammed to the end table with a pathetic tink. “Not moving to the burbs. Not moving upstate. Not moving out of the city. I like it here. I was born here.”

“And you’re going to die here leaving us with only a union pension that will barely cover the rent on this place, such as it is.”

“Making plans for the near future there, Alma?”
“Of course not! And your insinuations otherwise is not only rude, it’s insulting!” Angry like this, she always needed something to do with her hands. They fluttered over the bookcase, repositioning pictures of smiling people that bore little resemblance to their current mien, girlhood porcelain dolls, medals of accommodation. “But, considering your line of work, it would be foolish not to think about what might happen. You have no idea what it’s like, just waiting for that phone call, telling you…telling you…”

She hit the right button, pushing it with such finesse and style that even he – who had grown wise many years back to just what those hot issues were, and his wife’s penchant for using them at strategic moments – could not remain unmoved or seated when presented with her tears.

“Ah, come on, Alma, please, don’t, don’t cry, please?”

She melted into his arms, slim shoulders shaking. “I get so scared sometimes, Ennis. Scared that you won’t come back home.”

Strangling, her arms pushed the service revolver clipped further into his left pit. “I love my job, Alma. I love being one of the good guys.”

“But, you could…could…”

“That’s right, I could. But, after thirteen years without so much as a scratch, I don’t think -”

“But, it could happen, happens every day. You know the truth, Ennis.” She raised her teary - but not mascara smudged - eyes to his, imploring with a trembling lip. “A job in some small community where we could afford a house and there’d be no gangs and no dozen locks on the door.”

“Alma....” It was working. She was getting through his stubbornness, his family history, his dedication and desire to safeguard others. The walls were starting to crumble.

“It would mean better schools, a better life for our girls.”

Zing! His weakest spot, the one button that, no matter the subject, always had him giving in. He would do anything, absolutely everything for those two lights of his life. “Well, may-”

“Bye, Mom, Dad.”

“Wait just a damn minute, Junior.” He spun around, gaping at just passing through to the front door Junior and what she wasn’t wearing. “What the -? What the fuck is that?”

“Ennis,” A half-hearted arm slap, Alma's eyes completely dry now, “language.”

“Poetry reading with friends, Dad.” His daughter twirled a lock of razor straight hair and nonchalantly pulled on her skirt in a vain attempt to cover another millimeter of exposed thigh. “It is at a non-alcoholic club two blocks from here, there will be chaperones over the age of thirty, a free condom dispenser and I’m going with friends that you’ve already met and approved of. What’s the big deal?”

“That postage stamp of a skirt for starters. I don’t want my little girl looking like she works on the corner of Broadway and -” stop...blink. “Free condoms?”
An eye roll for the most dramatic effect of the put upon daughter. “Just because they’re available doesn’t mean I’ll use them. Christ, Dad, don’t go all fundie.”

“Not use one? Of course you’re going to use one! Haven’t I told you what you could catch if -” He blinked again. “What the hell am I saying?”

“OK, great advice, Dad, see you at midnight.”

“Erin Michelle, you get back here and change!”

“Come on -”

“Ennis, I'm late for work, so I'm -”

“– not going to use the lame ‘you’re stifling my opportunity for self-expression’ tactic with you, it's -”

“- laying out the Help Wanted section from the paper my sister sent me -”

“- a matter of economics. I work, I earn money, not much, mind you -”

“– can't miss it, it’s there on the kitchen table, and -”

“– this outfit, which is currently featured on page 238 of Vogue, I might add, I purchased on my own -”

“– idea to circle a few already for you, so -"

“- since I will be seventeen in three months, I believe it’s time for me to -”

“- just take a look, but not before the microwave and -”

Saved by the cell phone.

He didn’t even bother to answer it, just allowed it to vibrate then ring in his pocket while he grabbed his keys and bolted for the door using that long understood excuse of “Gotta go. Work.”

Shimmy, climb, squeak, grind, slam.

Can’t believe I’m thinking this, but thank God for crime.

“Bye, Dad,” the still motionless Franny to the empty room.
“Unbelievable.”

The loft was clean.

“Unfuckingbelievable.”

More like, the loft was cleaned out.

All that was left in the 2,000 square foot space – a Prouve Cite armchair sitting smugly on a very stylish and tasteful prayer rug, three kitchen stools, two misshapen wire hangers and a basketball. Even the shower curtain and accompanying bathroom accessories were gone. Behind the screened-off section, only the platform sans mattress remained, closets, mantle and tables wiped out.

“Even took my cappuccino machine.”

Jack had lost everything.

“Goddamn you, Daniel.”

Introduced by the judicial system of the City of New York – Daniel with the District Attorney’s office and Jack one of those, in his father’s words, ‘bleeding heart’ Public Defenders, sparks and libidos had ignited over petty theft and vagrancy. Together for over a year, some had called it a match made in heaven.

But, hell broke loose last night.

“You’re fucking someone else!”

Jack could almost hear his angry and heartbroken accusation echoing back from the deeply polished bamboo hardwood. As often as he had shouted his pain, he kind of figured they would be permanently imprinted on the stark Artic white walls.

“You’re fucking someone else, Daniel, and you didn’t even have the balls to tell me yourself. I had to hear it from Stephanie!”

The office’s Oracle at Delphi had hated being the bearer of terrible news, but she felt an obligation to Jack, being a fellow Breaking Bad junkie and all, didn’t want him to be the only one in the seven boroughs in the dark, so she had told him the truth as gently as possible while both were sneaking a smoke in their favorite spot in the parking garage.

Understandably, Jack had taken the news less than enthusiastically.

“None of her goddamn business in the first place,” Daniel had countered, avoiding any direct eye contact, “Got no sex life of her own. That’s why she’s so interested in where I supposedly put my dick.”

“And just where are you putting your dick these days, hmm, Daniel?” Jack already knew the answer; the betrayal of his partner had burdened him for 3 days while he waffled between complete
Republican style denial, Lorraine Bobbit kind a justice, and calling Dr. Phil for some couples therapy. Must have been something in the kappa-maki that had broken his last straw, because bitterness was now spewing forth all over their Parentesi table and sushi. “Because I don’t seem to have much of a sex life either these days and, just like Stephanie, I must live vicariously through those who have no problem giving it away like Altoids.”

“So, you’re ready to believe her without corroboration? Trust a faghag’s hearsay?”

Wouldn’t be the good attorney he prided himself to be if he had accused Daniel with only the one story told to him with sympathetic eyes and a sad smile. Jack had done his leg work, and after visiting three water coolers, five ADA shoebox offices, two bars and noting the writing on a certain bathroom wall, he was confident that his case against his together forever was solid.

“Joshua Leiberman.”

“Works over at NBC,” Daniel’s face – the epitome of calm collection, “We play squash on Tuesdays. You know that, Jack, you’ve even met -”

“Adam Brown.”

“Three floors down with the DEA. What about him?”

“Hector Ortega.”

This time something did flicker through Daniel’s eyes. “Don’t believe I know -”

“James Forrest, Timothy Chang –” Jack was on a roll, his closing argument stabbing deep to the jugular. “- Mark and Justin and Andre and Book of Mormon’s entire cast if you count the men’s room at the O’Neill as a credible witness. For Christ’s sake, Daniel, who haven’t who been fucking?”

The perfect mask of neutrality, honed inside countless court rooms stared back across the witness stand. “All circumstantial evidence, and you should know that, Jack.”

“Goddamnit!” Fists hit the walnut table so hard, the wasabi spilled and three shrimp rolls splatted to the floor unnoticed. “Just tell me the truth, please, Daniel. You remember that, don’t you? Just in case you don’t, it’s the opposite from the shit you’ve been shoveling at me for the past three months!”

The mask remained, pristine and unchanged, and Jack had instantly felt like the biggest kind of fool. What was sitting there at the other end of the table – graying and tan, eyes the color of Appalachian moss, simultaneously casual and impeccable, the superior smirk that never quite disappeared even in sleep - was the real Daniel Atchinson. All the rest, all the times they had laughed and loved and lived had been the lie.

“On the advice of my attorney, I plead the fifth.”

“Fuck you.” Jack had needed to stoke the flames, build up his fire, allow it to burn and scorch. The time for weakness and tears would be later, in private, in the dark, not here, where Daniel would witness just how much he hated himself at the moment. “No, wait. Got to take a number, don’t I? Now serving 235!”
“Your wit always was on the pedestrian side, Jack.”

Didn’t need Daniel’s condescending jokes to make him feel small. Right about now he was only pushing a few millimeters. “I’m leaving.”

“Wasn’t planning on doing this yet, tonight, but, you stay, I’ll go.”

The loft belonged to Daniel who was loaded with family money gobbled up in the dot com craze and, even though Jack’s personal checking account could only claim three figures thanks to his status as a public servant, he was damn sure not going to be the main topic for those gossiping harpies over at the Long Island Yacht Club when Daniel’s nouveau riche parents got wind of their son’s now ex-lover living on their dime.

“No fucking way.” Jack stood, firm in his conviction, just not sure how much he had in his pocket to bankroll his pride. “Not taking your charity.”

“Since this is my place, the decision is mine to make.” A vague wave of his hand. “ Doesn’t speak to me the way it once did.” As if this were an average evening, one in a long line of normal that always ended with a snuggle and ‘I love you’ whispered in the dark, unhurried Daniel wiped his mouth with the linen napkin, pushed his plate back and stood up. “Three months, I calculate, should be enough time for you to find your own place.”

Proficient in reading the subtext, especially when it bitch slapped, Jack had a light bulb moment. He staggered, shaken by his own naiveté. “You’ve got another place, you’ve got another -”

“Yes, and both are less like a prison.” Daniel walked away.

“What the fuck is that supposed – shit.”

Daniel returned from the bedroom, his pre-packed Jack free duffel bag stuffed with only the most important of things. “I’ll retrieve everything else tomorrow.”

“Not if I burn the shit tonight.” Jack, on hands and knees picking sticky rice and seaweed out of the Andy Warhol designer rug, gave Daniel the view he deserved, the finger an exclamation point.

“Remember, three months.” He walked right to the doorway, the metal thing open in a one motion tug. “Oh, and Jack? For safety’s sake, you should get tested.”

“You goddamn selfish prick.”

The loft door had slammed shut.

And left behind after Daniel’s loft sweep, the sum of Jack’s last fourteen months - a chair, a rug, a basketball and hope’s shattered pieces now too small and far flung to fit back together.

“Even took my goddamn fucking cappuccino machine!”

Which was technically Daniel’s – a first anniversary gift from Jack just two months ago – but, there were other missing things: the couch with the marks of his fingernails in the arms scratched there when not watching TV with Daniel, the computer desk that had required an engineering degree from MIT to put together and usually hugged the far corner over by the window with the perfect view of Daniel’s garden, the sleep number mattress permanently set on sixty-five for Daniel’s rugby injured
back, the kitchen stuff that lined the counters and hung from hooks that Daniel insisted be placed ergonomically for Jack’s comfort while creating culinary –

“Grow a pair, Jack,” The back of his hand swiped disgusted over his tear bleary eyes. “Your life is a pile of shit and you’re going veklempt over a George Foreman grill.” Messenger bag and trench coat dropped. “I need a drink.”

To his astonishment and delight, the liquor cabinet was still full. No glasses - not a problem. Jack just grabbed the first bottle to meet his palm and planned to up end the thing until the booze was gone and the voice rightly calling him a fool-sap-rube-ass-idiot was drunker then he was.

“Cannot get a fucking break even if I paid cash.”

Staring him in the face was the familiar black and white label of Jack and Daniel’s favorite whiskey. He snarfed the Absolute instead.

"I call back spoon position!"

With no couch to sleep on like he really didn't last night - not wanting to touch their bed ever again – and Daniel’s parting gift a quarry full of potentially fatal rocks in his gut, Jack had to improvise with the cushion from the chair as a pillow and his Christian Dior bathrobe as a blanket. He settled down in the middle of the rug, not caring that this was his last semi-clean suit, just slipped off his Versace tie, snapped off the lamp and wished with all his Peter Pan fairy reviving might that somehow sleep would out run all his mistakes. Barring that oblivion, he would be happy for some good old fashioned self-pity wallowing, positive that counting all of Daniel’s faults and skipping over the good things that he missed like he knew he would breathing even after less than 24 hours, would work even better than sheep.

Then there was always Tanqueray and Jose to turn to for guidance.

“Now I lay me down to sleep, and pray Daniel’s soul to the fiery pits of off the rack hell.”

The wallowing lasted all of 12.5 seconds. Cell phone never more than an inch from his hand, “Save a Horse, Ride a Cowboy” didn’t make it to the first chorus.

“John Twist,” he managed to say around a jaw stretching yawn. “Oh, really? That’s great.”

As small and petty as it sounded, Jack was actually happy his name was next in line. Meant he would be spending the single digit hours with someone whose life was more fucked up then his and not alone in his ‘luxurious’ loft talking shit about Daniel to a chair, a lamp and fermented counselors.

“There in about 45. Just make sure the file gets there before I do.”

Teeth brushed without toothpaste, water splashed on his face dried on his beat up and mostly faded college sweat shirt, Jack put his faith in the last bit of CK One to cover up a full day spent in the belly of NYC’s courts since both deodorants had disappeared as well.

“Fucking analy retentive asshole even took the travel sized.”

Suit rumpled, hair grumpled, in a face five o’clock shadow smudged, eyes bagged sagged exhausted, inward’s outward manifestation. Didn’t matter, though.

“Only going to Brooklyn.”
Didn’t even lock the door when he left. What was there to steal? Just painful memories, an uncertain future and a basketball.
Pushing through the doors, Ennis announced his arrival in his inimitable style.

“So, where’s the little shithead?”

“Say, weren’t you just here?” The man whose white short-sleeved shirt pitted to the extreme, pointed towards the back. “You weren’t gone long enough except to take a shit.”

“That or a quickie.” A beeline made for Room #4, weaving in and out of the huddle of paper strewn desks. “Oh, by the way, Bernard, your wife says hello.”

“Ha, ha, Ennis, funny as always. Everybody knows she goes for the good looking guys.”

A pig faced man snorted behind his racing form. “Then she’s just like Del Mar.”

“Fuck you, Aguirre.” A quick swipe knocked the desk propped feet to the floor. “Dickhead.”

“Oh, seems I hit a nerve!”

“Can you be anymore of an asshole, Joe?” Bernard asked, shaking his balding head.

“Always aiming to improve myself.” Unruffled by the two stony stares, porky snapped his paper and went back to picking one to win in the fourth.

“PD is in with him now, Ennis, but you can go and observe.”

Number 4 door opened quietly, and sticking to the back corner, hands fisted inside his pockets.

So, there he is. The little fucker who’s been preying on old women. Sick bastard likes to tie ’em up, make them cry, beg. Perverted twisted freak.

Ennis had walked over the white outlines, around the mutilated bodies of someone’s mother or grandmother, swallowing the sick his stomach couldn’t hold in when faced with all those frightened and dead eyes. Six women, aged 73 and up, the fucker could claim as his victims, the MO the same every time. Gained entry into the premises under false pretenses – the last one he pretended to be a Mormon witnessing the love of Jesus – then he would cold cock the granny. While unconscious, he would strip them, bind them, position them just right, then crawl into their laps, like some goddamn baby. After reliving some trauma from his past, looking for love he never got as a fucked up brat - or so blathered the SVU shrink - he would then rape them, usually from behind, strangling until he climaxed. Always grabbed a token before leaving the body to cool, also, vic's most recent picture usually – just a little memento to remember his surrogate grandmother by.

And he was smart – fucked in the head – but smart. All his victims lived alone, spent days, weeks alone and every one of them died alone. The last victim wasn’t discovered until her upstairs neighbor had complained about the smell.

Two months that section of Brooklyn lived in fear and for two months Ennis and partner, Don Wroe, had lived that neighborhood, knocking on every door, talking to every person, following every lead, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant, both determined to see this predator caught. And he
finally was, thank the Lord. Not quick enough for Ennis’ tastes, though; two more women had fallen victim since the file had landed on his desk.

*Like to see his balls cut out with a dirty, ragged spoon, then fed to him one bloody piece at a time.*

But, Ennis’ job was only to track and trap the scum. He had gathered the information, documented the evidence, crossed all T’s, dotted those I’s and he would punch the shit out of anyone who said his case wouldn’t stick like glue.

*Stupid fucker forgot to take his latex with him this last time.*

Only one suspect ever hit their radar, a little puke by the name of Newsome, lived above and worked in a local grocery story which gave him access to names and addresses of those who needed stuff delivered. Once they had the semen it was easy – from one DNA sample to the next, obtained in a room search thanks to his very cooperative boss and landlord, Mr. Kwon – to nab him with his pants down. Literally.

*Slam go the bars at Riker’s.*

Was sore as hell about not being there, but the shithead had disappeared, went under ground, not seen for over a week, obviously catching wind that the noose was tightening. After beating the bushes up and down those streets for three straight days, Captain had insisted, rather forcefully, that both Ennis and Don go home, rest, get reacquainted with their wives. Two uniforms got the collar, the fucker found taking a piss against an alley wall.

*Should have been there, should have told Stoutamire to fuck off and send him home to get reacquainted with Alma. Nah, wouldn’t wish that one a such a great guy.*

Stuck in his craw hard, missing the arrest, but he was here now and he could bask in the glow of a job well done.

*That is if that PD doesn’t fuck things up.*

Through the two-way all he could see was a wrinkled blue suit and hair that looked like it had just crawled out of bed. But, he had a clear shot of Newsome, his pasty, tear stained face, how his hands fidgeted, twisting and turning, fingers jumping across the gouged tabletop. The perv would listen, he supposed, to a question from that bleeding heart bloodsucker then shake his head, a violent ‘NO!’ every time.

*Exactly what every vic cried as you strangled them.*

The kid didn’t look older than nineteen - twenty tops - crew cut and clean shaven, and if he had seen the inside of a gym the last time was in elementary school.

*Weak little fuck. That’s why he had to go after old ladies. God, I wish there was a dull needle waiting for you!*

Fists clenched, picturing them around the pervert’s throat, eyes all bulging, tongue black, some old fashion own medicine giving, something happened in there Ennis didn’t like at all.

*The shithead smiled.*
The PD leaned forward, pointing to paper, a paper in the file spread out on the table. The kid’s smile got bigger and bigger, and Ennis’ gut twisting tighter and tighter.

*Oh, no you don’t, you little Ivy League weasel. This kid’s the one. He’s not getting off on some fucking technicality this time.*

Shaking hands now, still smiling, his lips mouthed ‘Thank you, thank you’ again and again as the PD walked towards the door.

*Willing to stake my whole damn career on this.*

“He’s guilty.”

“Christ!”

Papers went up, messenger bag dropped down, and the Ivy League weasel jumped right out of his skin.

Ennis found it very amusing. “Didn’t mean to scare you, bud.”

“You didn’t scare me!” The harsh words would have held more punch had he not been plastered back against the wall, blue eyes the size of half dollars. “Just…just wasn’t, I mean, I didn’t, I mean, I hadn’t…shit. I don’t know what I mean.” Poise returned, he stooped to gather what was left of his dignity along with his scattered papers. “When I went in, this room was empty, and you were standing over there in the corner, and I had my head down and -”

“You think he’s innocent, don’t you?”

Didn't do this normally, always stayed far back from the well-marked professional line. Not considered good form to confront the defense attorney like this. The guy was only doing his job, upholding the Constitution and all that. Despite his usual reticence for any interaction with lawyers except the bare minimum and only then with clenched teeth and terse responses - *This time, this crime begs for an exception* – and Ennis was ready to drag this PD into the squad room, shove his nose into a board full of crime scene photos, reading off the names of the victims, all six, and those that were left behind.

*Give this guy a dose of reality. Hard.*

“Don’t have to believe in them, just defend them.”

“But, you think the fucker is innocent.”

“Well, your opinion of my client is apparent, Lieutenant…” The rising inflection indicated an introduction was expected.

“Sergeant,” a five step trip across the cracked linoleum to where the other man knelt. “Sergeant Ennis Del Mar and this is an open and shut case. The little bastard’s guilty.”

“While a hackneyed plot devise for TV and Grisham alike, there is no such thing as- wait a minute. Del Mar.” A paper shift, all now a jagged edged jumble propped on his knee. “Del Mar, yes. Sergeant -” a look up, and a pause, just for a second, to allow a smile to take root and grow. “Ennis Del Mar. The investigating officer. Thought I recognized that name from the arrest report. Pleased,
very pleased to meet you.” His hand was offered in the proper manner. “John Twist, Legal Aid.”

Not wanting to appear rude even though he was feeling less than friendly towards this guy, Ennis took the man’s hand, gave it a cursory shake, then let go. But, not before noticing how warm and strong and soft around the fingertips it was. “Answer the question.”

“Like I said, doesn’t matter what I believe about my client.” Paper mound shoved not too neatly in the already jammed to capacity messenger bag. “No matter, I’ll still get paid and after taxes, I’ve got just enough to afford two loads of laundry this week.”

It was coming. Ennis could feel It. He watched the incredibly blue eyes twinkle with It, the full mouth smirk with It, the broad shoulders and chest carry It like a banner. He could even sense It in the air, smelling spicy and sweaty. It was there on the tip of that pink tongue running across a bottom lip.

“But…”

Bulging leather’s zipper forced closed, the PD stood, coming right up to meet face to face. “But… there are a few things that don’t look quite kosher to me.”

“Bullshit! Six women were brutally raped and murdered! The perp is in there right now shitting in his pants just thinking about which balls’ going to get tattooed first with a blunt Bic pen and how often his Daddy’s going buttfuck him in the shower!”

A chuckle, a deep throaty sound that rankled and soothed Ennis’ last nerve. “Wonderful imagery there, Sgt. Del Mar.”

“There were no mistakes made in this investigation. None! Not going to start second guessing myself because some Ivy League fuc -”

This chuckle creased with a sardonic edge. “Ivy League? Not unless Syracuse has come up in the academic world.”

He was getting flustered. He never got flustered, especially around one of these guys. Never worth the trouble to turn away and spit. But here he was getting all tongue-tied and angry. “Don’t, don’t give a shit where you, you went to school!” His rant paused briefly to allow the blink of long, dark eyelashes to pass by. “You’re still a…a…”

“A bloodsucking, motherfucking parasite that would drown blind kittens for giggling shits, steal a kid’s lunch money to cover gambling debts and sell his sister on the street for two rocks and a blow job?”

A one sided smile snuck in before Ennis could squelch it. “That sounds about right.”

“Yeah? Because I was thinking of using it on my business card instead of Attorney at Law. Don’t want to start out with a false impression of respectability. And now that I’ve managed to slip it so smoothly into our conversation…” Out of his rumpled jacket he pulled a plain white card, neatly stuffing it into the pocket of Ennis’ flannel shirt. “Would like to talk to you about the case. Number’s on the card.” This time the chuckle and the thousand watt smile seemed to promise something else. “Or you could just drop by my office.”

Not until he walked away and the absence made the room empty did Ennis realize their whole
exchange happened barely three inches apart.

A lawyer. He's a lawyer, a defense lawyer, a goddamn -

“Sorry, Ennis, got here as soon -”

“That's OK, Don, got it covered.” A breeze-by doorway just arriving partner.

- irritating -

“Isn't Newsome -”

“Be right back.”

- arrogant -

“Where are you -”

“Just need to look for -” Didn't really know what he was looking for, didn't want to know, but that didn't stop the headlong rush back out to the squad room.

- bloodsucking -

Glimpse caught – a long legs in rumpled pinstripes exit.

- fascinating lawyer.

The empty squad room front doors stare lingered long after.

The racing form hid Aguirre's all noticing smirk.
Chapter Four

Tainted Evidence
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“Well, ain’t you just yummy?” The words drawled out sticky sweet. “LD sure got lucky. If breakin’ the law got me you, I shoulda done it years ago.”

The anteroom was a milling mess of people on both sides of the law, no one paying particular attention but to their own troubles. And for that Jack was eternally grateful.

“Don’t think a yummy PD is a valid plea, Mrs. Newsome.” He moved to put the trash can between him and her grinding hips. “There’s a few quest -”

“Missus? I ain’t been a missus since I left Childress.” The trash can proved no impediment. She just changed her angle of attack to the right flank. “Just plain Lureen. No missus, no husband.” She smiled, full lips selling what was on her mind. “Guess that makes you the lucky one.”

Lady – and I use the term VERY loosely – luck and I parted company in the third grade, right after I won a Nintendo at a VFW raffle. And it seems my streak continues. “Now, about your son…”

Dodging feminine sexual advances was an art form Jack had perfected since high school. If the ‘for manner’s sake only’ smile didn’t send them away, they usually got the not so subtle “No, thank you, ma’am. You’re not packing the right equipment” hint, and went in search of more heterosexual prey. For the exceedingly dense, or drunk, he would actually be forced to say The Words before being left in peace to enjoy scenery more to his liking. The ones with the faulty gaydar would just shake their heads and say wistfully, “Why are all the cute ones gay?” Some did refuse to believe the truth, and Jack always came home with at least three or four numbers stuck in his pocket on the chance that he was just needing the right one to set him ‘straight’. There were others, however, that did not just walk away or cling to a false hope. Those faces would snarl with disgust, a condemnation in their eyes, ugly words spit out so fierce, claiming the ultimate judgment. Feeling only pity, he wondered how a human being could exist with that much hatred at the core.

And usually Jack’s clients were too worried about their own asses to care about his.

But, they also had never had a mother start yowling the mating call at the first meeting either.

She had not understood the polite smile, the ‘No, thank you, ma’am’ when the quiet drink in her hotel room invitation breezed next to his ear, or even the forceful way he continued to remove her grubby hands from his arm. It was a distinct possibility The Words would soon need to be voiced, and with Lureen being from Texas, which was far from the accepting LGBT Nirvana despite their unofficial “Steers and Queers” slogan, Jack was bracing for either blind hatred or to be handing the case to one of his heterosexual colleagues. Which would really suck on all levels. For LD because he deserved the best defense, something Jack could deliver. And this would give Jack a challenge, the chance to actually practice law instead of serving it up with fries McDonald’s style.

“When am I gonna get to see my boy? I tried, but the cops wouldn’t let me, said he was bein’ processed, whatever the hell that means.”

Jack supposed that little pouty schtick trapped many a cowboy, as proficient as she was in making it
seem genuine. “Fingerprinting, mug shot, that sort of processing. You will have a chance to see your son at the arraignment. Now, do you know...”

“Arraignment is where they set bail, right? Want to get my boy outta there fast, outta that nasty place. I heard what goes on in there, with those kinds of men.” She shuddered, just enough to make her boobs shake. “Disgusting.”

Well, THIS kind of man is attempting to help, but.... “I wouldn’t count on LD coming home with you today, ma’am.”

“And why not?” The petulant pout wasn’t any more appealing. “Isn’t that what you’re here for? To get him off?”

I’ve got some bad news. “Don’t believe the DA will be that accommodating considering we’re looking at multiple A felonies.”

Her plucked within an inch of their lives eyebrows came together. “Multiple? A? What the hell does that mean?’

And now the REALLY bad news. “Your son is being charged with six rape/murders, Miss Newsome, along with a host of lesser includeds. Murder means felony, Murder One means A felony, and A felony means life.”

“Sweet Jesus, no!”

Her timing was impeccable. Just as her arms flung about Jack, seeking a little more than a frightened mother should, the blinding light of a camera popped on and all those millions of New Yorkers taking a late breakfast with the TV were treated to the heartwarming scene of defense attorney comforting distraught mother. Or that’s the Hallmark spin Jack hoped they would take.

“Mr. Twist, given the tremendous amount of publicity this case has generated, do you feel that your client will receive a fair treatment?”

She wouldn’t let go, just hung on to his shoulders and waist like white on rice, no matter what subtle things Jack did to extricate himself from her claws. Nothing short of a WWF move would work, and that definitely would not look good to the viewing public whose sympathy and support Jack would need in the upcoming months. “PD Body Slams Mom!” is not the kind of pre-trial publicity he wanted. Also, he didn’t think Lureen would complain one bit.

Probably for her, foreplay. Jack shuddered this time.

He endured the woman’s clutch with as much aplomb as he could muster while asphyxiating on White Diamonds and hair spray, smiling his best for the camera.

Just give the speech. “As always, I will put my faith in the judicial system of the State of New York.”

“But the DA has come out saying that they will be seeking the maximum for your client, life without parole. As a Public Defender whose previous trial experience has focused mainly on petty crimes and misdemeanors, do you believe you are qualified to handle a case of this magnitude knowing a person’s life hangs in the balance?”
Well, gee, thanks for reducing my career to parking ticket fixer. Bitch. “My previous experience -”

“LD’s never been in trouble a day in his life!” Lureen butted in to the interview, her southern drawl and cleavage bait sitting this one out. “This is all a mistake, a terrible, awful mistake!”

Ah ha! Redneck slut just another fashion accessory for Msssss. Newsome!

One hand on the mic, the reporter’s other directed the camera in for a Jerry Springer closeup. “According my sources, though, the state’s case against your son is pretty solid.”

“Guess your sources didn’t count on this man right here, huh?” Her kiss left a red lip shaped splotch on Jack’s cheek. “I have the utmost faith in Mr. John Twist.”

The bailiff’s monotone announced the court session was about to begin. The camera shut off, the reporter went in search of more fodder, and Jack was left with sparkles. Oh, yes, and a cougar still hanging on tight.

“I’m so grateful to you, Mr. Twist, handling my son’s case.” French tipped fingernails slipped along the back of his neck. “I feel obligated somehow. Want to repay you for your services.”

“No, ma’am,” a public servant’s ecstatic moment, “that is definitely not necessary. No charge for my services.”

Bubble popped, it was drawn back into her Streetwalker red mouth by a quicksilver tongue. “I know. None for mine neither.” Spandex held on for dear life as she sashayed into the courtroom.

He let the crowd go by, wanting to put as many people between him and Texas bear trap as possible. And wipe off my face. Shit! The red now a red smooch down his cheek. Next time with her, I want a chaperone. And a taser. But right now, I need a shower, a long, hot –

And there he was. Over across the room, leaning up against the marble, somehow managing to smirk and frown at the same time.

Sergeant Ennis Del Mar.

He nodded in Jack’s direction, whether it was a nod of friendly acknowledgment to a recent acquaintance, or one of the ‘I’m going to kick your ass into goose pate if you mess up this case for me’ variety, Jack didn’t know. Nor did he have the time to discover which, the cop pushing off to enter the courtroom, no further looks his way. Like a little boy being offered carte blanche at the video arcade, Jack scrambled after. He wanted to get a look at something he had missed the last time.

And he wasn’t disappointed.

Levi Strauss is most assuredly sitting in a place of high honor in the rainbow section of heaven for his inestimable gift bestowed upon the gay man. Christ almighty! Del Mar in jeans!

Standing within waltzing distance yesterday, Jack had dined on chocolate brown eyes. Those hands were the right combination of rough and strong, and under all that faux lumberjack flannel, he was willing to bet ripped abs were just waiting to be worshiped.

But, those jeans. Those jeans hugging his hips, legs...his ass. Shit! One look at that and Michelangelo’s David would slip on Bermuda shorts to hide his inferiority.
“Oh, Mr. Twist!”

“Oh, Christ.”

Yoo-hooing from the first row, Lureen was making a big show of offering the seat right beside her. His decline was polite and understated. She did not take it. He tried again. Another refusal to accept his wishes. Yes. No. Yes. No. Yes! NO! Back and forth they went, Lureen standing in the front, Jack hovering in the doorway, all heads in the gallery tennis matching, waiting for the point break.

“Dude, you’re turning that down?” A biker sitting on the end seat in the back row, thumped on Jack’s chest. “You’re either pussy-whipped or a fag.”

“Her son’s lawyer.” Jack offered up the excuse that would most likely to keep the spit from flying, shaking his head yet again towards Lureen. “Besides, I like mine a little, uh, taller.”

“Then, you don’t mind if I…?” He was practically salivating.

“Oh, no!” Jack pulled the guy out to the aisle. “Please, be my guest. You’d be doing me a favor.”

“Thanks, dude!”

She was not happy about being thwarted, her eyes throwing poisoned darts, but Jack figured her new Hell’s Angels plaything would keep her busy for a while.

“This court is now in session, the Honorable Judge Ralph Milton presiding. All rise!”

In one big swoosh of movement, the entire courtroom was on its feet, showing their mandated respect for the sixty-three year old bald man with the lazy eye.

“Be seated.”

LD’s case wasn’t the first one on the docket, so Jack squeezed into the back row, far away from the deep fried widow's web, but with a clear view of Del Mar’s ‘don’t give a shit what they look like’ blonde curls in the third row.

Where was I…? Oh, yeah...ass. Love me some firm cheeks, always my favorite part, which is funny because Daniel’s as flat as a – fuck.

He did not want to go there. Not only was it unproductive, but it would bring out either a screaming fit of anger or Hamlet-sized melancholia, neither of which was very becoming to a defense attorney. Rogue and peasant slave suit at the cleaners. It was over. Period. Relationship had ended when the loft door slammed shut.

More like when his dick got the roving eye. When doesn’t matter, though. Still means I’m back to being just one.

“Docket number 867483739. State vs. Hull Markland Retail Group.”

Shouldn’t really be thinking about Del Mar either.

No ass peek yesterday, but Jack sure got an eyeful of the wedding ring shining in the room’s weak light. Any time spent in there was a waste; that ship had sailed even before Jack could log on to
Travelocity, headed in the opposite direction.

And thinking about Daniel AND Del Mar? All kinds of squick!

While some men’s fantasies, Jack did not need the stress of that many dicks to keep track of. Two was plenty in his mind. Just the right number for his heart, too.

So, it’s back to more appropriate fantasies for me.

“Docket number 48457693738. State versus Leroy Delacroix Newsome..”

Sorry, Mr. Jackman. Work calls. See you tonight, though.

Brought in shackled and stumbling between two guards, LD looked like he was about to hurl. Jack met him on the other side of the railing, guiding his frail body down to a chair. Not too terribly impressed with the kid’s physical condition upon their first meeting, Jack was actually shocked by the ghost of a school bully’s dream sitting next to him.

“What happened, LD?”

“Nothin’” He turned his head away, but the knot rising up out of the purple mass on his jaw and the red slit through his bottom lip hard to hide. “Just fell, I guess.”

“And just how many times did you accidently fall into somebody’s fist?”

“What did those perverts do to you, puddin’?” Lureen leaned forward from the first row, showing genuine concern by a hand to her son’s shoulder.

He shrugged it off. “Nothin’, mama. Just leave it, kay?”

“Mr. Twist, you better -”

Jack touched her this time, a gentle reassuring squeeze to a trembling hand. “I will take care of your son.”

Her look spoke of the consequences of failure to fulfill his promise.

“The charges: Six counts of Murder in the First Degree. Six counts of Aggravated Rape. Six counts of Felony Kidnapping, Six counts of Aggravated Battery,” the judge read the charges like a grocery list, “Six counts of Trespassing. Six counts of Breaking and Entering,” a long, expanding, compounding list, “Six counts of Burglary,” and with each item another punch delivered. “All sixes. At least you’re consistent. How does the defendant plead?”

“Here, let me help -”

“Don’t need none!” Jack’s assistance shoved aside, LD Newsome stood, swaying but upright, his reedy voice spoke clear and precise.

“Not guilty, your Honor.”

“Shit,” a mumble from the third row.
"Well, Mr. Newsome, you just gave all of New York something to obsess over for the next year. I'm sure the New York Post thanks you. Bail?"

The ADA, a severely dressed woman, all buttoned up and closed down, stood for the prosecution. "We ask for remand, your Honor. Considering the violent nature of the crimes and the defendant’s victims, we feel he is a clear danger to society."

"Defense, I'm sure you have something to say about all of this. Am I right?"

"Yes, your Honor." Jack knew he was blowing smoke with this; there was no way in hell that the DA would allow LD to walk out of here today. But, it was part of the game, the dumbshow before, and obligation made him a player. After this, the real lawyering can begin. "We request that Mr. Newsome be released on his own recognizance."

That drew another “Shit” from the gallery and a snort from the ADA.

"My client has no previous record, your Honor, not even an overdue library book. He has ties to the community in the form of employment —"

"Which gave him access to his victims,” the ADA shot in.

"- and will reside with his mother who will be present to monitor his daily activities."

Lureen gave a little too friendly wave to the bench.

"Your Honor, due to the disappearance of the defendant prior to arrest, the State feels less than confident about Miss Newsome’s abilities to properly keep track of her son."

Lureen gave the ADA a one fingered salute.

"And that makes him a flight risk, your Honor."

"A flight risk? No substantial resources to finance a trip. And where would he go? As I stated, his home and family are here in New York."

"He has extended family in Texas, your Honor."

Jack snorted at the ADA’s paranoia. “Run to Texas? That’d be trading incarceration for incognizance.”

That got a more vocal titter from the gallery, but the judge was not amused in the least.

“Very funny, Mr. Twist. I’ll be sure to pass along your opinion of the state of Texas when I go to my son’s next Aggie game. Bail is set at six million. One for each count. Next -”

“Your Honor!” Jack stopped the gavel a breath away from ending the arraignment.

“Looking for an opportunity to stick the other foot in, Mr. Twist?"

“No, your honor. Was wondering about, well, seeing as how we’re all present in court, and like that’s going to happen again anytime soon, this IS New York after all, and I’m thinking, there’s really no need to waste this opportunity, so, here, this is for you.” The blue enveloped stack of papers
pulled from messenger bag the first step of his defense strategy. “It’s just a Motion to Compel Discovery.”

The ADA did not take too kindly to this obvious slap. “More courtroom experience and the Public Defender would know not to bother the court with unnecessary motions. The District Attorney’s office has never withheld evidence.”

*And there’s step two.*

“Didn’t mean to waste the court’s time, just attempting a zealous defense.” The smile his cheeky best; the one that his mother always said would get him into trouble. *And it has, got the broken heart notches to prove it. Chapter Four, Criminal Defense for Dummies.*

“Perilously close to the line, Mr. Twist.” The judge asked the bailiff to deliver the motion into the seething hands of the ADA. “But, that was rather funny. Nothing further? Case -”

“Your Honor!”

“Yet again?” The gavel remained poised to strike. “Another dig at the DA’s office, perhaps?”

“No, your Honor.” His smile disappeared. “Seeing as how the ADA saw fit to keep a 133 pound, 19 year old incarcerated, I wanted to bring up the issue of my client’s personal safety.” LD fought him, but Jack held his chin firm, exhibiting the result of one night in jail. “Nothing like being the newest tetherball on the block.”

The ADA’s sneer made clear her opinion of Jack’s client. “Special treatment for this defendant is not required, your Honor.”

“Not special, just appropriate to insure his continued survival. This is a tremendous case for the DA, the kind that wins elections.” The cheeky smile made a comeback. “You wouldn’t want a homemade shank stealing your thunder, would you, ADA Thatcher?”

“I resent the implications, Mr.-”

“Resent away, Counselor, but let’s give the defendant a chance to have his nine weeks in court. He will be moved to solitary for his own protection. Now, if I may, Mr. Twist?”

Jack nodded magnanimously. “Of course, your Honor.”

The gavel smacked swiftly, loudly. “And without further ado, *next!*”

All the way up the aisle, and out of the courtroom, Lureen hung on Jack’s arm, singing his praises. “Oh, that was just wonderful, John. The way you handled them all. The judge, the snotty cunt. John, just wonderful!”

He didn’t have the time to wonder why they were suddenly on a first name basis when another red kiss smeared against his cheek, his ass groped, and an exploratory hotel key card front pocket stuff before she was off down the hall bitching into her cell phone about the bail-bond place putting her on hold.

“Breeder.”
Applause ricocheted throughout the empty hall, a mocking tone, hollow and flat. “Yes, wonderful job. Just wonderful.” He stepped around a corner, still looking like he wanted to punch the shit out of somebody. “I knew you’d do it.”

“Knew I’d do what?”

“Plead that fucker not guilty.”

Jack couldn’t help it. After the Roughrider Barracuda, condescension of any variety rubbed rough all the wrong ways. “Look, Sergeant, I’ll handle the defense any way I see fit. That’s what my client is not paying me for.”

“How do you sleep at night knowing you help put predators back on the street?”

“Spread across the middle of the bed on my back usually. But, I have been known to cuddle up on occasion.” Not last night, though. “I get it, Sergeant Del Mar. Noble cop hates sleazy lawyer. Crime drama trope number six.” In other circumstances, a less stressful day, pushing through all that macho bullshit to get to the creamy center was the sort of challenge that had his name written all over it in bold neon letters. But, not now. Not with LD’s reservation to concurrent life sentences a trial away. Not with tiptoeing through a minefield named Lureen. Not with a road kill flattened heart and test results that could come back with a… Not when all those headache producing problems had combined and started a conga line through his brain. No energy to spare on an archeological dig for the real Ennis Del Mar. His rush hour snarl of troubles just didn’t need another cutting in front, no matter how intriguing. Or adorable…or hot…or 32 on the David Beckham fuckable scale. “The courts or fate or God with his heteronormative warped sense of humor has thrown us together, so let’s just get through this and move on.” He shrugged on his black trench coat, his messenger bag sandwiched between his knees. “The time spent in each other’s presence will be relatively pain free, I promise.” The elevator dinged and Jack hurried to catch it going down. “Call my office and we’ll schedule -”

“Ennis.”

The elevator left without him.

“Beg pardon?”

“Ennis.” The end of one thumb worried against his teeth. “The name’s Ennis.”

Turning back, Jack didn’t even try to squelch the ‘why, yes, I am irresistible’ eating grin. Well, maybe I can squeeze him in – double word score entendre! - if he meets me half way. “OK…Ennis.” He really liked the way his tongue hugged the roof of his mouth when he said that name. “And you must call me -”


“John’s good. Jack’s even better.” He decided to test the heretofore storm tossed waters a little. “Friends call me Jack.”

“Was wondering, Jack.” No hesitation on joining the circle of intimacy. “You hungry?”

No, not really. Had a sandwich earlier, M &M’s right before court, and besides, got a shitload of
“Sure, yeah, a little. Why?”

“Time is money and all that shit.”

“The taxpayers appreciate your conscientiousness, I’m sure.”

“Yeah.” Could have burned a hole straight through the way he was staring at the floor. “I’ll drive. That is unless you -”

“No, that’s fine. Mine’s in the shop in about a million pieces.”

“Driving too fast for conditions.”

“That patch of ice just got lucky.”

“Rest of the drivers are the lucky ones, I suspect.” He headed for the nearest exit. “I’m parked out back.”

“Driving too fast for conditions.”

“That patch of ice just got lucky.”

“Rest of the drivers are the lucky ones, I suspect.” He headed for the nearest exit. “I’m parked out back.”

None too eager to follow close, Jack walked slowly, smiling goofy, just enjoying the view in front. “That cop was on a power trip. Didn’t know his head from – wait a minute.” He scrambled to catch up, suspicious and a little thrilled at the same time. “You ran my name, didn’t you?”

The smirk was undeniable. “Just wanted to know what kind of man I’d be dealing with.”

Wonder if a background check is flirting to a cop? “You know, some would call that an abuse of position.”

“Nah, just one of the perks of the job.” With one hand, he held the door for Jack. “That and the handcuffs.”

That zinged Jack right in a place fortunately camouflaged by his trench coat. Why, Sergeant Del Mar, witty sexual banter? Maybe not so married after – hold your fucking horses there, Jack. The man’s just here to do his duty, to talk to you about LD. He was just trying to be pleasant, joke a little, straight male bonding and all that. Don’t go all emo and start reading blow jobs where there’s only professional courtesy. Keep it in your pants and off your mind. No time, no energy, remember? This is nothing more than a fellow officer of the court offering –

“You, uh, missed a spot.” Ennis’ finger pointed, reaching out to hover a no turning back instant from Jack’s cheek, then retreated hesitantly to the supposed safety of his own. “Right here. Lipstick, I think.”

“Oh, thanks.” Oh, fuck! Oh, fucking goddamn fuck! This is not happening. No way. Straight men don’t wipe lipstick. Straight men don’t watch other men wipe lipstick. Straight men don’t gawk and stare and stand so fucking close I can count the freckles across his nose. Straight men don’t…but he is.
Several flights down, a door slammed; the shuffle of feet, the tink of chains, the hollow curses of the self-deluded. Ennis blinked, eyes retreating to the floor once more. He cleared his throat once, twice. “We better get going.” Reached the next landing in three leaps.

Danger, Will Robinson, danger! You do NOT need to go there. Shake it off, Jack. Forget his eyes, Jack, his ass, his smile. You’re only twenty-four hours single. Remember how shitty it felt to be left behind, Jack. This is unethical, involvement with the prosecution’s witness. Think of LD, think of your career, Jack. This will certainly get you disbarred, Jack. Nothing good can come of this –

“Jack, you like barbeque?”

“Well, actually...” Jack looked down and Ennis stared up. Eyes, dilated to accommodate the subdued lighting, lingered, chocolate inviting sky blue in. Not too long, but long enough for a moment of creation, a beginning. Oh, I’m such a fucking fool. “I love it.”
In my bathroom right now is a man so goddamn hot the unethical act would not be to grab him, kiss him, imprinting permanently the taste of my tongue on his mouth, but to abstain from even touching at all, thus depriving Con Ed of an August’s worth of electricity our naked, sweaty and fucking bodies would most assuredly generate.

And that was why Jack was sitting on the window ledge with the garden view sucking down his third double shot of whiskey in the broken handled mug ‘borrowed’ from the office, sporting a boner the size of Montana and aching with a soul begging want for someone who could never be his.

So what if he asked to come up? Should have told him to hold it until he got home. Should have told him to piss in an alley like the rest of New York.

Jack Daniel’s empty comfort consumed, it was Four Roses turn to offer up a solution to Jack’s problems.

Asking me to dinner, should have told him no.

It had been peppermint blow job good. Not the NY designer idea of the real West restaurant complete with menu items like ‘Get Along Li’l Hot Doggies’ and the choice of Rustlers or School Marm’s back at the bathrooms, or the waitress whose flirting was more stuffed twenties worthy than her service, or even the call from Lureen suggesting a “Strategy session for LD. Just the two of us. Alone. A long, hard all-nighter,” could snatch Jack down from his Ennis high.

“The one on the left is Junior, my oldest. And that’s Francine there, sticking out her tongue.” The card deck of pictures spread out between them. “Sixteen and fourteen respectively.”

Jack felt really lame pulling out the only picture remaining in his wallet – Daniel’s shredded bits enjoying the view of the East river from a garbage scow headed south, but if Ennis was sharing…

“This is Bobby, my Uncle Hal and Aunt Peg’s son.” Came stuck in last year’s Christmas card. “He’s a Junior. Or Senior. Plays football. Or is it baseball?”

“See the family resemblance. Got those same blue eyes. Good looking kid.”

Now, that was flirting. Elementary, routine and lacking panache, but flirting nonetheless. A Rhodes scholar on the subject, Jack had recognized the effort even if Ennis didn’t. He figured it was time to test the waters a little.

“Well, Francine looks just like you.”

“Fanny? You think?” Ennis’ finger traced his daughter’s goofy smile. “Guess that’s her burden in life.”

“Would classify it as more of a blessing myself.”

An immediate look down, Ennis had gathered up the pictures with a father’s care, expression hidden.
But, if the sweetheart rose blushing along his hairline was any indication, Jack knew his fishing expedition had caught the prize winner.

“So, no kids. Been married, at least?”

And just like that, Jack’s line snagged. “Uh, no.”

“No interest, or just no luck?”

“No, yes and…”

If Jack had been cruise director, today’s activity schedule would have included a less conspicuous location to announce The Words – which he honestly thought were already out of the closet considering the dinner invitation, the simple, yet endearing attempt at flirting and the ever increasing number of under the table leg brushes. But, the moment had arrived and he wasn’t about to hide the truth behind Ennis’ The Donner Party All You Can Eat rib platter no matter how petrified he was that soon he would be wearing BBQ sauce.

“….waiting for a two-for-one tux sale.”

He leaned forward in his chair, as if physical closeness to Jack would bring better understanding. “Huh? What…”

OK, he had hedged a bit because Katrina, their ‘let me lean waaaaaay over to refill your hardly touched water glasses’ server was currently hovering about for no reason except to send “You, me and a hot tub” suggestions at Ennis with her heavily lined eyes, and Jack did not feel magnanimous enough to give her any more ammunition to slip him something besides just her number.

“What the hell does that -” Realization hit like a brick upside the head. “Oh. Oh!”

No gnawed clean ribs, no empty beer bottles. No curses, rants or slurs. Not even indifference. The only thing Ennis was throwing - a look of profound surprise. A ‘Well, duh!’ moment was next, then the green flag waved, the wheels in his head burning rubber to reach the head of the pack, everything moving too fast to follow.

“So you’re…uh…well…you know…hmmm…”

“Believe the word you are so eloquently searching for is gay.”

Katrina’s eyes just jumped to a long weekend in Acapulco.

Understanding, acceptance, tolerance whizzed by the pole, bursts of blinding color headed for the first turn.

“You’re gay?”

“Got my membership card and everything.”

“You’re gay?”

Ennis was obviously pinned against the wall, so Jack moved in to help. “Look, if you have a problem with -”
What had finally taken the checkered flag sent Jack cartwheeling to the Winner’s Circle.

Possibilities.

Mug too inefficient, Jack took solace against his sea of troubles straight from the bottle this time.

*Oh, my god! I’m trapped in one of those trashy romances novels my mom hides in the utility room so no one discovers that the head of the Altar Guild gets her jollies from heaving breasts and turgid members. Lust denied, passion thwarted and all that crap. Yeah, but, in every one of those derivative smut rags – not that I’ve read that many, really – the hero always gets his heart and dick’s desire. But, in my jock strap ripper, Ennis goes home to his wife.*

At six o’clock, the rush had arrived. Every wood planked table filled, the noise level was loud enough in the restaurant to drown even the steel guitar twanging out atmosphere appropriate music. But, Jack didn’t mind at all. Just meant the water glasses remained empty and Ennis had leaned in a little closer.

“Been in New York all my life. Terrorized the neighborhood three blocks over from where I live now. And you’re from Syracuse, right?’”

“Only attended Syracuse University.” Jack preened a little that he had remembered that off-handed remark. “Grew up in a shit hole on the Canadian border. Lighting Flat.”

“Never heard of it.”

“Yeah, well, neither have the unfortunates who live there. Go back once a year to visit my mother and nothing ever changes. Fifty shades of desperate.”

“Just your mother?”

“John Senior has not spoken to John Junior in over five years.” Every word embedded with a self-deluded don’t fucking care anymore pain “Not exactly proud of his sleazy, parasitic faggot son.”

“His loss,” a low mumble soother for Jack’s bitterness.

“Well, fuck him.” A child’s anger and resentment spit out with a vengeance. “He can just stay in East Bumblefuck until the day he dies. I got out of there graduation night. Anywhere was better than home.”

“So, out of the whole United States you chose to move to Syracuse. Why?”

“Hey, don’t be shitting on my alma mater there. It’s a damn good school.” His indignation had lasted all of ten seconds, melting to a self-effacing grin in the warmth of Ennis’ ‘I’m just yanking your chain, bud’ smirk. “OK, OK. I got it. My first choice was NYU, but I fucked around in undergrad just enough to limit my choices.”

“NYU?” Face opened with commonality surprise. “I took a couple of classes there. Was going to work for the FBI.”

Ennis’ eyes were indeed feast-worthy, but it had been the way he caressed his long neck beer bottle – the form, the fingers, the fantasy potential - that had riveted Jack’s attention. “Just a couple?”
“Had to quit.”

“Why?”

“My wife.”

Jack had hated himself for asking. He didn’t want to know the details, didn’t want to hear the story. There was no room at their table for her.

“Met at a Laundromat on campus and, well…” the words spilled out fast, as if Ennis had needed to justify his actions to Jack. “Quit school, worked security jobs for a few years until I entered the Academy. Been a cop for thirteen years. A married man with kids can’t afford dreams.”

*I am a fucking idiot! So what if his ass should be enshrined in the Smithsonian as a national treasure? So what if the very sound of his voice makes my toes curl and my dick stand up and beg? So what if his knee touched mine five hundred and thirty-three times during dinner? So what if, with every breath, he’s questioning? Ennis Del Mar is the married investigating officer of my career’s biggest case and that not only makes me an idiot for contemplating anything, but a fucking nutjob, too. Oh, and might as well throw in masochist ‘cause I obviously so enjoy getting the shit kicked out of my…hmmm…a little S to go with that M might be…he did mention handcuffs…would he – Oh, just stop it!*

Lost, Jack wanted to stick a finger down his throat and purge his system of all the conflicts and complications, confusions and contradictions. He needed to stop new love’s stomach butterflies from taking flight.

*Piss, flush, and then he’s out of here. It’s the ethical thing to do. It’s the right thing to do. It’s the goddamn hardest thing I’ve ever had to do. Sorry, Ennis, but I can’t be your answer.*

When his pocket beeped, Jack didn’t have the energy to listen to another of Lureen’s off-target attempts at phone sex, but reached for his cell anyway – his thumb traveling the contour of his hard-on both in and out – because it might be important, it might be the office or his mom, or it might even be Daniel.

*Now, that would top of this stellar evening, wouldn’t it?*

First new message -

“Mr. Twist, this is Penelope from Dr. Nesmith’s office. Your test results came back and it was negative. All clear. Glad to be the bearer of good news this time.”

Lucky he was still sitting; kept him from falling flat on his face as release from the fear he had shunted away for his own sanity crashed down.

*Oh - my - god.*

His shoulders heaved ragged, with every labored breath exhaling unlived worst case scenario memories of the cocktail and viral loads, simple infections turning nasty and bed sores that refused to heal. Doctors and drugs. Hospitals and hospices. Feeding tubes. Farewells. Funeral.

“Thank you, fuck, fucking th-thank you.”
Head bowed, knees knocked, left foot turned on its side. A marionette with a few strings broken, his stubbly cheeks blossomed a death row pardon grin.

“I’m clean.”

Maimed mug slipped away to sing across the hardwood.

“I’m clean.”

He licked at the joy sneaking down his face to salt his smile.

_I’m thirty-five, and alone. In three months’ time, I’ll be out on the street, just me and my basketball. Going to spend the entire time working LD’s case hiding my raging woody, my life sucks big hairy ones, but, I don’t give a goddamn rat’s ass, ’cause now I know there’s a life TO suck._

“Fuck you, Daniel. I’m clean!”

“Who’s Daniel?”

The beers consumed over dinner tipped him lopsided, and his smile short-bus stupid. Eyes were an unfocused S’mores color and his staccato of belches wafted with BBQ sauce and Cole slaw. But to Jack, Ennis Del Mar was still pure sex wrapped in denim, and his whiskey lubricated heart couldn’t help but thump louder.

_Ah, such is the stuff wet dreams are made of._

“Daniel?” He bent almost in half - hiding his wipe of tears - to retrieve the mug, intent on making his next drink celebratory. _Hell, the rest of my very fucking long life! “A prick of monumental proportions, but of absolutely no consequence.”_

A tiny frown tried to dig its way between Ennis’ eyebrows over Jack’s cryptic answer, but lost its footing against whiskey pouring. “You sharing?”

“Nope. You’re driving.” _That’s it, Jack. You be the responsible one. You be the one with the clear head here. Stand behind your decision stay firm - which won’t be that difficult to do with Ennis only a few feet away._

“Off duty. Three days. Captain’s orders.”

“The Station wasn’t what I was alluding to, Ennis.”

“You mean home? Shit. Girls are spending the weekend with friends and the wife works nights.” His empty hand reached towards Jack. “Nobody needs me.”

Jack crossed his legs to hide the contradiction. _Ennis, you have no idea just how wrong you are. “It’s getting late.”_

A watch squint. “Only eight forty-one.”

“Oh.” _Damnit, Ennis! Stop being so logical! Got to get you the hell out of here before I make a complete ass out of myself by grabbing yours. “Was planning on heading into work early tomorrow, so –”_
“Hey, that’s right. All we talked about at dinner and we never once mentioned the case. What questions you got?”

*Oh, nice stalling tactic there, Sergeant.*

But, Jack had done some stalling of his own. If they didn’t discuss the case, then they weren’t really working together, and if they weren’t really working together then the whole ‘Defense attorney wants the prosecution’s witness to slather him with strawberry lube, fuck ‘em ‘til he sings “La Boheme” and not pull out until the Pope canonizes Elton John’ ethical conundrum didn’t exist. That’s why he never broached the subject at dinner, and, despite how childish and delusional, it was, that’s why he was reluctant now.

“Maybe we should wait to do this in my office.”

“Evidence, you said.” With no whiskey forthcoming from Jack, Ennis did an end run and found the liquor cabinet on his own. Bottle in hand, he did a sloppy, but passable, imitation of Captain Morgan on one of the two remaining kitchen stools. “Something didn’t look kosher.”

*So much for piss, flush, then gone.* “The evidence, right.” OK, Sergeant Del Mar, *if you want to do this, then its transforming time, Autobot Defense Screamer.* “Was wondering about the hair, the one that garnered the DNA.”

“What about it?”

“Where did you find it?”

“In the pervert’s –”

Jack coughed.

“- I mean, the defendant’s room.”

“The room above the grocery store where he works, right?” No notes needed, the discrepancy third eye pimple obvious. “Who told you that it was LD’s room?”

“Mr. Kwon, his boss and landlord.”

“Did you verify this, verify with another source that it was indeed LD’s room?”

Must have sounded like an insult. “What the hell does that mean? Of course, we did! Hair came right from his comb.”

“And you know that was his comb, how?”

“My partner found it in his room, on his dresser, among his things.”

“So, you had an exact inventory of my client’s possessions before you went in to search? You knew what and where everything should be?”

Ennis shook his head trying to see through his spiced rum haze to where Jack was leading him. “Since when it that a –”
“My client the only person that rents from Mr. Kwon?”

No, there’s several more rooms, several other renters up there on the store’s third -”

“Do you remember the hair in question’s color?”

“Brownish, reddish, dull -”

“And how long would you say that hair was? Not looking for exact here, Ennis, just a seasoned law enforcement officer’s best ish guesstimate. How long?”

Index finger and thumb seesawed a bit. “An inch, inch and a -”

“Huh. An inch and a half long brownish, reddish hair found in a comb.” A shark smile. “But, doesn’t LD have a blond buzz cut?”

“Well, maybe he just got it, you know, changed his appearance, that’s a possib -”

“Doesn’t match his state issued ID, but that possibility could still be up there in geosynchronous orbit somewhere. Now, about the condom -”

“This is bullshit!” Royally pissed at Jack now, Ennis took his professional pride in one hand, and the Captain in the other to storm towards the window ledge. “By the book, goddamnit, by the fucking book! No mistakes, no half assed work. We nailed him solid!”

“Welcome to my zealous defense, Ennis. Not that this case needs one, more like a Dorito snarfing, Dew guzzling couch potato -”

“Are you insinuating that we, that I fucked –”

“Hey, watch -”

The whole loft, all 2,000 square feet of the place, was practically empty, but, Ennis’ foot somehow found the basketball. “Oh, shit.” Lucky the wall was there to catch him, his slip-slide down beside Jack landing him ass hard. “Well, damn.”

“Interview over.” Criminal Defense Attorney deactivated. “You, Sergeant Del Mar, are shitfaced.”

“Am not, am not wasted, I don’t get, only had…had…uh oh.” A rum distilled breeze tilted Ennis right, the fall slow, the trip short, sloppy silly grin’s resting place on Jack’s shoulder. “OK, I’m drunk.”

Oh, this is bad, so very, very bad. Pepper salted curly summer wheat silked against cheek. Oh, this is good, so fucking very, VERY good. Ennis warm and pliable and henna tattoo close, an inch separated Jack from career suicide. Death by kiss? Death by grope? A mortal blow job? Back to static wall, ass on unforgiving hardwood, content Ennis weight burden humming tuneless, Jack knew comfortable. Package deal, though, we both go down if we both go down. And current snuggling aside, skunk drunk here won’t recognize informed decision for a good twelve hours. So… Cell phone chaperone kept them honest. It is a far, far better thing I do… “Calling you a cab.”

“No,” hiccup, a cheek puffing, green around the edges hiccup, “no cab.”

“I swear, if you puke on my floor -” You’ll still probably be sexy. Sexy even with the flu.
“Haven’t done that since my honeymoon. Just need some…some…” His feet could find no purchase on the hardwood, and hands fared no better on the Artic white wall. “some…air.”

“Fine, you get some air, while I call you a cab.” Jack grunted up, all elbows, knees and ass in the air inelegant, the room leaning slightly left. “But, no puking in the garden either. Daniel would have a shit - you know what? Go ahead. Blow chunks all over the schefflera.”

“Who is this fucking Daniel?”

How it happened was obvious. A drunk Ennis being pulled up by a drunker Jack. When it happened was simple. A strong, but off-balance Ennis pushing up against the pull of firm, but off kilter Jack. Where it happened was a surprise. The hand of Ennis trapped between collided with the protruding hard-on of Jack.

What happened next was destiny.

_His – his – is on my – my - bad, terrible, this is horrendous, though fucking ironic if one thinks about how it was a ball that sent him right to my - what – what should – what should I - nothing, do nothing, nothing, that’s what, just ignore, ignore completely, an utter The Bad Touch – unless invited - ignorance, I won’t notice and he won’t notice and we’ll be together in the not noticing exactly where he’s -_

A slow slide with the back of a hand. Up…down…up…

_He noticed. OK, Plan B - say something – say what? – say anything – say WHAT? – tell him, tell him ‘Unhand me, Sir, I am not that kind of man!’ Sort of. Tell him, ‘These advances are inappropriate’ – sort of – ‘and unbecoming of an officer of the court.’ Tell him ‘If you do not cease and desist this unsolicited’ – that’s a fucking lie – ‘personal private places pawing, I will be forced to -_

…down…up…

_OK, Plan C – Give up, give in, give whatever he wants. Kiss him, kiss him deep, kiss him sloppy, just lean in, kiss him and my career -_

The shove was hard, brutal.

“Get off me!”

“Ennis, I -”

“Shut up, shut up!” Darkened splotches glistened slimy on Jack’s shirt. “Don’t touch me! You – you -” savagery swiped _that_ hand across his chest again and again. “- faggot!”
The word simple and crude, the message clear. He spit on me. Old acquaintances, Jack and disgust, and he turned away, refusing to wear it this time, especially when it came accessorized with hypocrisy. Direct from amateurish hand job, that self-deluded son of a bitch spit on me! “Wait for the cab in your car.” Polished loafers hammered across the hardwood, heading straight for the bathroom and a hot shower, where he could scrub his skin raw in a futile attempt to exorcise the humiliation. Fuck you, Ennis, fuck your hatred, and fuck my naïve, cornball, childish, insipid notions that he would ever - “Thank you for your time, Sergeant Del Mar,” voice cross exam cold, “Should I have any further questions, I will forward -”

“Jack.” Soft and unsure.

“- them to the Precinct. There will be no need at all for -”

“Jack.” Flat, but strong.

“- any future contact between -”

“Jack!” A command.

“It’s time to play your ‘Get Out of Jail Free’ card. This evening never happened.” The bathroom three feet closer. Stupid, stupid, fucking stupid! “Go home, Ennis. Go home to your wife.”

“JACK!” His retreating arm captured, a brusque jerk brought them face to face. “Just listen to me!”

“WHAT!?” Locked and loaded with the entire evening’s activities as ammunition, with a full metal jacket of shame in reserve, Jack was well stocked for the confrontation he, as a gentleman, had just tried to avoid by pushing Ennis out the door. You wanna talk, you wanna explain? OK, that’s fine, we’ll have us a little chat. But me first, and it’s time to unleash the dogs of war. “What the hell do you want, Ennis? Huh? To call me some more names? Faggot was a good start, but lacks imagination. Surely you can come up with something a little more colorful than that.”

Vehement sarcasm thundered, and Ennis was without shelter from the storm. He let Jack go, and stood there dumbstruck, not a single coherent thought braving the journey from brain to mouth. “Try - trying to apolo -”

“No? Well, here’s a few suggestions I’ve had flung at me over the years. You can add them to your repertoire for those future gay baiting moments, for the next time you jerk some unsuspecting dupe around. ‘Homo’. It’s short and to the point, as is ‘fag’ or ‘fairy’ or ‘queer’.”

Shaking his head, he managed only a sputter. “Jack, Jack - don’t -”

“But, actually I prefer the ones that are more descriptive, have a touch of whimsy. You know, like ‘ass jockey’ or ‘butt bouncer’ or for the Across the Pond phobe that bloody good one, ‘jobby jabber’.”

From counter to chair to kitchen stool and back for another circuit, Jack was on a roll, his inward directed contempt cauterized by his indignation feeding his motion which in turn spurred on his rage. Push me away? Push ME away? Mr. Gay Syracuse 2008? Not only closeted, he’s blind!

“Then there are the really nasty names, the ones normal men shout, laughing until cheap ass beer snorts out their noses. ‘Hole licker’ and ‘fudge packer’. Course, if they’re so lagered up and can’t rub
those two synapses together, there’s that perennial favorite – cocksucker.”

“That’s it! I’m out of here.”

Oh, no, you don’t! Jack got in his way, in his face, cutting and blocking his exit. *Fuck ethics and fuck the law. Nobody touches my dick for free.*

“Got some good ones for you, too. Only fair, you know, a trade. Derogatory name for ugly epithet and all that. What do you think about ‘in the closet’? On the down low? How about full of shit homophobe? Any of those strike your fancy? Oh, I know! Cock tease!”

Two thousand square feet of nothing and, for Ennis, there was no safe hiding place from Jack’s nasty dose of truth. “Jack, for Christ’s sake, stop!”

He did at least cease fluttering; still, an Easter Island face glared across the room. *But, stop? No fucking way.* “Why did you come here?”

“Uhmm…” Standing center stage, Ennis was a man caught in the blinding spotlight of his own denial, the SRO audience waiting breathlessly for his confession, and he without any idea of his next line. “…to use your bathroom?”

“Bullshit.”

“The case, then, to talk, to -”

“BBQ and family pics your modus operandi for opposing counsel, then?”

“No, I just thought -”

“Thought spittle and cruel invectives a lovely house warming gift?”

“Jack, all I want is to-”

“Oh, I know damn well what you want, Ennis. Known since the court house, since the precinct house even. You’ve pondered, mused, fantasized, wet dreamed, fucking obsessed over what you want. Came sniffing around for what you want. Came up here to the loft looking for what you want. You’re sweating bullets just thinking about what you want. And it’s *this.*” Jack grabbed his evening-persistent hard-on. “You’ve wanted it all night. To touch it, feel it in your hand, stroke it hard.” The sensation of contact and pressure after so many hours of arousal – *hours of guessing, hours of wishing, hours of NOT falling ass over balls in* - flashed through Jack’s body. Tongue sneaking out a wicked smile sideways, his hips pushed in his rapt audience’s direction. “You want cock, *my* cock, but you’re too much of a pussy to do anything about it.”

A strangled moan was all the invitation Jack needed. *Let’s twist those door hinges all to fuck.* “Here, I’ll help you out, Ennis.” He closed the gap between them. “Give you just a taste of what you no doubt whack off to.”

“What the fuck are you -” A blur of motion and the sweat scorching Ennis’ palm soaked through to Jack’s boxers. “Oh…*god.*”

“You like that, don’t you, your hand on another man’s dick? The shape, the weight, the power.”
Christ! Like a deer in headlights. Staring, just staring. It is MY dick after all, of course he’s mesmerized by the sheer - not moving. Is he even breath-

Virgin fingers wrapped round for a test squeeze.

“Fuck!” Breathing AND a quick study. “That’s right, Ennis, hard and tight, just like the faggot you are.” Before events unfolded too fast, though, before self-delusion reared its ugly shame again, and spit and/or fist ducking season began, thus leaving him bereft after this maddening, humiliating, heart stomping, shitastic evening, Jack reached for his well-deserved – though probably all too fleeting - recompense. “And now, to complete your Jedi training – FUCK!”

His hand never reached its phallic goal.

“ENNIS!”

No contest, really. Jack, educated in the manipulative power of words, against Ennis, trained to subdue the criminal element. The struggle for freedom lasted all of ten seconds until Ennis wrenched Jack’s arm far enough up his back to have plenty of ass grinding room, his other hand returned front to rub with the flat of his palm, his hold secure. A New York cop likes it rough. Go figure. Jack melted into total submission when Ennis growled in his ear.

“Lead me to the Dark Side.”

“Oh…god!”

Own belt buckle, button and zipper vanquished with his free hand, Jack ripped away the pleasure to shove it down under wool and cotton, nails snagging through short curlies on the way. Skin on skin, a moan from Ennis’ chest rumbled out Jack’s throat. First contact. Nirvana.

“God, yeah, fuck, like that, Ennis,” a little micro-managing assistance from above, “fuck, just like that!”

Entwined hands pumped, the extra friction from behind shuffling Jack forward with each crack thrust, heavy, humid grunting under his shirt collar. “Didn’t – didn’t – didn’t know how – how good -”

“Only the beginning, my pada – what the fuck! ”

Fists closed.

“Shit-shit-shit-shit-shit!”

Slim hips alone were no match for gravity, drooping in the way pants, boxers and shoes kicked aside without one missed beat, AC goosebumping Jack’s naked thighs. Lifting his head from where hair plastered sweat mingled, he looked down his captive body draped back over, hard steel jabbing his side. Jerked off by a man with a gun. Internet porn fantasy come to life! Like a Versace divining rod, his tie pointed the way to the spunk oozing between their combined fists, making his cock slap and slurp. Arm bent in half, ass burning – Ennis’ cock, hardened to insanity, scratched denim and brass into his cheeks. His legs were shaking, his shoulders were screaming. But, just like my dick, I’m a greedy bitch!

“Want more!”
A sticky hand grab full of hair, and Jack yanked heads close, visualizing an open mouthed, jaw popping, tongue wrestling, spit swapping, uvula knocking kiss.

“NO!”

That never happened either.

Jack hit the floor with a thud, numb arm collapsing under his weight. Spread out flat in his jumble of makeshift bedding, he glared over his shoulder at Ennis standing there swaying and swiping at his mouth with a still dripping hand.

“Goddamnit! What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“I…I…"

A crossroads, a decision awaited impatient - Stop or continue. Kick him out, or fuck him blind. Two paths beckoned, two divergent directions. The straight – that other definition – and narrow, or sex with Ennis. Professional integrity or hot sex with Ennis. Smart, clear, unadulterous thinking or hot, crazy sex with Ennis. The way still scarlet slick and gooey from the less than a week ago heart shredding that took place in this very room because it always – fucking always! – opens too far, too fast, or hot, crazy, endurance testing, joint rending, spooge schmeering - and maybe something more? - sex with Ennis.

Will it make all the difference in the world?

“You just going to leave? Walk out, go home and take cold showers for the rest of your frustrated, closeted life? Or are you going to get down here, grab some of this,” - an ass wiggle to seal the deal - “and nail me into the floor?”

Ennis’ cock the brains of that corporation.

He dropped to his knees, yanking Jack up to all fours with one arm, a square foil packet pulled from his pocket ripping in his teeth. Spring loaded, his cock jumped out of the starting gate when he unbuttoned his jeans, the rapidly tugged on lubricated condom a very snug fit.

How and why he had one ready, Jack wasn’t about to question. Just means no naked dash to the bath – shit! “No fucking lube, just give me a second to -”

Ennis spit into his hand.

“Oh, fuck no!”

Jack didn’t get very far. Bruising hands pulled him straight back, Ennis driving his cock balls deep in one thrust.

“Shit, oh, fuck, Christ, EN - FUCK!”

Flailing hands somehow found the chair, something to hold, an anchor to white knuckle as he rode out the flash of pain. Never fucked OW! like this before DAMN! and now I SHIT! know why. Hurts like FUCK! a son of a -

“Shit, Ennis!”
- bitch! Almost like GODDAM! my first time.

Fingers dug into the tender spots just above hip bones, dragging and slapping ass to thighs, only to falter, stumble to a stop, biting a curse across Jack’s back.

Fucks like he’s got two left balls!

“What the hell are you doing back there? Conjugating verbs?” He released the chair to slap Ennis on his sweat drenched ass. “Fuck me!”

He answered with a slap of his own. “You want it, Jack?” His sex voice a brand new addition.

Let’s see a show of hands on that one.

“Fuck you hard?”

“No, with your dick up my ass, was thinking maybe we’d watch a little Ghost Adventures.”

Another slap, both cheeks stinging red. “You talk too much, you know that?”

“Then give me a reason to stop talking and start screaming!”

A change of angle, that’s all that was required, and cock was knocking repeatedly on prostate’s door.

“Oh…oh…yeah…OH! Fuck, fuck, SHIT, Ennis, fuck!”

The huge rug burn scratching into his cheek because Ennis held him down with a hand on his head -

“Fuck, yes! Ennis! Fucking fuck YES!”

“Just…won’t…shut the…hell…up… got to…plug…that hole…too.”

- and even the fingers lousy with Jack jizz that plunged into his own mouth, the gagging in time with rocking bodies - Loathe – despise – abhor – detest – the taste of my own - was incidental. They were at last dancing smooth, the tingle shivers were building up, Ennis soaked shirt streaming sweat down Jack’s ribs

“That’s…better.”

Legs pushed wider, Ennis changed the angle for a second time, Jack bucking, writhing - his frenzied plea for more. A hiss close to his ear. “You want cock, Jack? My cock?”

He could only whimper.

Ennis grabbed Jack’s shoulders, pulling back against chest, holding him there bouncing on his lap, his final thrusts deep and fierce and life altering, jarring teeth, jouncing cock, straining muscles and sending them both towards shrieking release.

“Uh…uh…uh uh uh uh UH UH UH UHUHUHUHEEEEEEENNNNNNNSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSS!”
After grunting a more subdued, but still equally enthusiastic “GRRRGHNH!” Ennis spilled, shuddered, smiled silly, then tipped over, taking Jack with him. “Goddamn, I – you – never – just… goddamn.” Didn’t even pull out before surrendering consciousness.

Sore in places never covered in Human A&P - so that’s what a new one ripping feels like - Jack snuggled in close, wrapping passive arms around him, not caring that there was nothing but hardwood and sticky carpet beneath their almost naked bodies. He really wanted to talk, usually did after sex. How lesbionic of me. But, he figured that the question of what the hell just happened, and what the fuck happened next was a better breakfast topic anyway. OJ and Ho Yay. He closed his eyes, content, well-fucked, with mind and a heart niche full of Ennis.


When he woke six hours later, he was empty and alone.
Chapter Seven

The dawn must have called in sick this morning, The City That Never Sleeps held in a drowsy limbo by drizzle that shook out sheets of droplets, random patterns of gray, flowing in disinterested harmony to the gutters with beer cans, classifieds, and cigarette butts floating towards reunion with kith and kin in Hudson Bay.

The street, grown tired of holding America’s need to never stand still, had long ago shrugged against its burden, leaving behind cracks and holes in the asphalt – a reminder that permanency, no matter the Visa Platinum card limit, was a man-made construct – greedy mouths all swallowing the rain.

A truck driver eager to begin this day of time and a half, took advantage of the light traffic miracle, his speed an unheard of 35 mph down Grand Street, sending up a shower spraying dirty water to splatter iron, brick and progress.

“Shit.”

Ennis didn’t bother to wipe his face; drizzle maturing to rain washing it away faster. It slithered under his leather jacket creating a reservoir-sized lake around the waistband of his jeans, molding to clammy skin his tucked in shirt sluiced rivers down his thighs, the waterfall cascading off his knees, to plummet towards the lagoon collected in his boots.

Damn. I fucking hate wet socks.

There was not an inch that wasn’t drenched; hair matted flat and drippy, fingers pruned, balls pulled in close. He was cold, tired, hungry, sore - and miserable.

*Then, why the hell am I out here? Get inside, shithead. This is the last place you belong.*

The shimmers of street lamp fractured – pieces of harsh light swimming frantically to escape the intrusion of the boots trudging through their puddle. Four hours of walking a water-logged Soho, and Ennis had yet to find exactly where that belong place was.

This was still New York City, *his* New York City and his pulse continued to beat to the same New York minute. The surroundings were familiar, he just couldn’t find his way from Point A to Point B or anyplace else, like he was looking on Mapquest and could ID the city at 5, but when the picture zoomed in to 1 – the precise location he wanted – that’s when the directions got jumbled.

So, Ennis wandered, the clear path obscured by his own troubled thoughts.

Grand to Elizabeth –

*Jack Twist. Damn Jack Twist. GODDAMN Jack Twist! He pushed me, pushed me too goddamn far! Knew I was drunk, said so himself, but he just wouldn’t stop. I wanted to walk out, tried to leave, but that fucker just kept on talking and talking, shouting and slinging one insult after the other, using those filthy words, and at me! The fucker was calling me those fucking names!*
Well, fuck you, Jack Twist! Think you know me, huh? You don’t know shit! Nothing! Just ‘cause we
had a couple of beers, some ribs you think you know everything. Just ‘cause I showed you my kids,
talked about growing up, the Academy, think you got the inside track into Ennis Del Mar, got some
secret knowledge, that you can see inside my head? Telling me I want it, telling me I whack off
thinking about it, accusing me of being scared shitless to admit what I want it.

Fuck you! You hear that? I’m not afraid! Not afraid to say it, not afraid of your cock, not afraid of
saying I want it!

“I WANT JACK TWIST'S COCK!”

Only a pigeon and a couple of parking meters heard the declaration, but he turned the corner quick
anyway.

Elizabeth to Houston -

Christ! What the fuck am I saying? I want cock? Jack’s cock? I can’t! I’m not gay! I’m married, for
fuck’s sake! Married seventeen years, with two daughters, so I’m obviously not gay. No, I’m not. I
like fucking women.

So what if I haven’t done it in a while. Doesn’t mean shit. I could. I could if I wanted. Go home right
now and grab Alma and fuck her, fuck her all night long. Could fuck her anytime, anyplace, any
way I damn well pleased.

Just ‘cause we haven’t in the past eight months – that don’t mean shit. Doesn’t mean I don’t want to.
Sure as hell doesn’t mean I want to fuck guys. Just means we haven’t had the time, yeah, both of us
working, me at the Precinct all the time, spending days and nights working ‘cause I’d rather be
there than home to see her sad eyes looking at me, watching me, pleading with me. “Come on,
Ennis. Please, Ennis. Need you, Ennis. What’s wrong with you? You getting it someplace else? You
hitting someone else? Don’t I look good to you anymore? Don’t I do it for you anymore? Don’t you
like it anymore?”

“No, Alma. I just don’t want to fuck you.”

Houston to West Broadway –

Why don’t I want to fuck her? That’s what men do, what Dad always said, supposed to want. Why
don’t I? She’s my wife. Yes, we’re married, which automatically cuts sex by two-thirds, I know, but
still - nothing? Why? Fucked her once, and that gave me a lifetime of fucking her. Wasn’t worth it
then and not once since. Of course, it also gave me Junior and Franny. Best part of my life. Alma
did make me a daddy, always love her for that, giving me my girls. But, that isn’t enough. Not
anymore.

Not ever, really.

That’s the real reason we haven’t done it more than three times this past year and each time sucked.
I don’t love her, not the way a husband’s supposed to. Don’t love her and I don’t think she really
loves me. Only stay married ‘cause of the kids, ‘cause of insurance and taxes, ‘cause it’s familiar,
routine and predictable and neither of us have the energy to change. So, we stay married and
pretend. Living together, but not loving together.
Don’t fuck her ‘cause I don’t love her. And I don’t fuck anyone else, even though I’ve had plenty of opportunity – tits in my face, hands down my pants almost every day. Like tonight, that bimbo from the restaurant, what was her name? Gave me her number. If I wanted a fuck I could call her up and be hitting that before breakfast. Her or a hundred other, could fuck on, could fuck ‘em all!

Now, I’m just lying to myself. Too old to be whipping it out just for a quickie. Seen the results of nameless, faceless sex, all around me, all the time. Two hours of pleasure, no matter how many beds hopped into, just isn’t enough to keep you living strong in this goddamn, messed up world. Too many things to drag you down, too many unwinnable fights, so many people if you let them that pick and scratch until there’s just pieces, unrecognizable pieces, pieces that ain’t even worth the trouble of squishing under your boot. Got to have something besides just fucking to hold on to, to stay sane, real and true, need someone who wants to hold on to you.

Don’t fuck Alma ‘cause I don’t love her. Don’t fuck anyone else ‘cause it’s just humping in the street, a waste of time in this short life.

“Then what happened tonight with Jack?”

“What happened tonight with Jack?”

“None of your goddamn business!”

The wino just shrugged and burrowed deeper under his cardboard.

West Broadway to Thompson –

What did happen tonight? I fucked a guy, that’s what happened. I jerked him off, them rammed my dick up his ass and fucked him. I fucked Jack. I didn’t just fuck him, I fucked him hard, into the floor, until he screamed, fucked him…until…until… he said no.

Oh, god. Jack said no. He said no, but I didn’t stop. Just grabbed him and fucked him and hurt him. And that makes me a rapist. A goddamn, fucking rapist, no better than the scum I hunt.

The rain washed away most of Ennis’ puke, but couldn’t cleanse his mouth of the bile, or the sick in his heart.

Remembered to use a condom, but not to listen. Didn’t fucking listen! Oh, Jack – the arm lock, around your waist, grabbing you, forcing you, taking you - I’m…I’m…I’m a goddamn, fucking piece of shit rapist. I raped Jack and then…I ran away.

A thumbnail flicked the corner of another foil packet in his pocket, his stash always ready to hand to that daily parade of hookers and hustlers with a death wish, as he crossed against the light to the opposite side of the street, the battle line between water and oil shiny slick.

West Broadway to Spring –

But, I didn’t start it, Jack did. No defense, no excuse, but it’s the truth. He put my hand on his dick. Not the other way around. Could have stopped it before it went too far. Should have told Jack to get bent, punch him maybe, then get the hell out of there. But…I didn’t. I stayed and it ended in rape.

Oh, god, why did I stay? Why did I stay even after what he did? Why the FUCK didn’t I just walk away?
Why the fuck did I go there in the first fucking place? That’s the real question – what the fuck was I doing in Jack’s loft? Could have just pissed in an alley like the rest of New York. Could have just dropped him off at the curb and drove home and none of this shit would have happened.

Why the FUCK didn’t I?

Because…shit…because I…fuck…because I…wanted it…wanted it to happen…wanted Jack.

He turned off his cell phone without answering Alma's call.

What the hell am I - I didn't want – I couldn’t want – I shouldn’t - shit, stop, just stop the bullshit and admit it, for fuck’s sake. Already screamed it to Soho. I wanted Jack. Jack and his dick. To feel it in my hand. Not like touching a woman. That's more like putting your hand into a warm ham sandwich. Touching Jack was…was…Christ! I don’t know! It was…hard and…and…heat slicking in my palm. It was...was...the most fucking amazing...it felt like...like...the perfect fit. Oh, shit and the way he smelled, him fighting back and his weight – solid and strong – and fucking him...

GODDAMN!

Like nothing else I ever felt before! Shit! Tight, so fucking tight and hot, wonder he didn’t burn my dick right off. And those sounds he made...well, when he stopped talking that is, and slapping into his ass and – oh god! His ASS!

A small detour to stand under a broken downspout in lieu of a cold shower was required.

Tonight I fucked a man and enjoyed it. No, I fucking LOVED it! If ever there was a better description of homosexual, I haven’t heard it. I’m gay. I fucked Jack Twist and I’d do it again in a heartbeat. And again. And again. And never stop fucking Jack - but I’d also fuck Jessica Alba if she even looked my way, so what does that mean? Straight? Gay? Bi, maybe?

Whatever sexual orientation, it nearly drowned under the pouring run off. Ennis coughed and spat, turning another corner.

Lafayette to Canal –

Don’t get it, though, don’t understand. I didn’t just suddenly turn gay, bi, whatever, doesn’t work that way. Not like there was something in the BBQ sauce tonight, or HRC flipped a switch and instantly my dick becomes an asshole-heat seeking missile. Never thought about it before tonight, never wanted...well, Frankie Segundo in the locker room, but we were just...that one guy in PT at the Academy, in his sweats, in the showers...and Sanchez over in Narcotics, and Tony behind the bar, and Neil in booking, the pizza delivery guy, and that actor in those Lord of the Rings movies, what’s his name? Not the blonde guy that Junior has plastered all over her walls, no the king dude, the dirt, the sword, the leather and Steve McQueen, and...shit.

Stopping dead, Ennis must have spooked the Escalade parked across the street. The driver screeched away, leaving his customer to find his fix someplace else.

OK. So I’ve always noticed, thought about it, maybe even wanted it but I never reached for it before. So, why the hell did I do it tonight? Why Jack?

The sun had finally rolled out of bed, sweeping back the blanket of drizzle, its yawn bringing a
lighter shade of gray.

Canal to Sixth –

Why Jack? Sure, he’s got a great ass, both in and out of pants, but other than that he’s still a blood sucker who stands for – OK, maybe his legs. But, he works to tear down - and his hands. But, Jack is a lawyer who - and the way he walks. Dresses pretty good. Needs to shave more, ‘cause you can’t really feel his smooth skin under all that - his smile. His teeth. His hair. Those fucking eyes! Almost spooky the way he looks at me – at me me, not what I can’t or didn’t, but might’s permissive possibilities. Why Jack? He’s intelligent, educated, witty, sarcastic, I mean, everything that comes out of his mouth. Wonder if the son of a bitch talks to all the judges the way he did at – “Criminal Law for Dummies”! Too fucking funny! Thought the ADA was going to shit a brick when he -

“FUCK! FUCK! FUCK!” His palm slapped his forehead, the squish an appropriate backbeat to his self-inflicted anger. “FUCK! FUCK! FUCK!”

“There’s another one! Harold, quick! Call 911!”

Harold held the Pooper Scooper, his wife the Pekingese and umbrella, all three brandished as weapons. “No! Stay back! We’re calling the police!”

“Ma’am, no need to do that.” He approached the bus shelter calmly, reaching past layers of sodden clothes for his identification. “I am the police.”

They seemed less than convinced. Neither did the dog.

“Just out here taking a walk, keeping an eye on the neighborhood.” His best PR smile had shrunk a little in the rain. This is the last thing I need right now.

After a thorough examination of the badge, Harold and company’s suspicions were anything by assuaged.

“Don’t recognize you, and I know all the officers that patrol this area.”

“No, ma’am. My Precinct’s over in Brooklyn. 81st.”

“Then what, may I ask, are you doing in Soho?”

*Been asking the same question all night long, lady. Don’t think you want to hear what I’ve come up with so far. “Can’t really discuss police matters, ma’am.”*

“Uh huh.”

The dog growled.

“Well, you be careful now. Rain makes people do crazy stuff. Bye.”

Uneasy about the firing range of that Pooper Scooper, Ennis walked by as casually and officially as his inner panic would allow.

“See, Harold, I told you the *Post* was right.”
Sixth to Sullivan –

Why am I in Soho? To screw up my case by screwing the defendant’s lawyer, that’s what. Over the line, way over the line, so far over the line, Jack and I crossed into the Pacific time zone. Oh, god! Oh fuck! Oh Christ! This is grounds for reprimand, grounds for dismissal. Both me and the case.

Me, I don’t give a fuck about. No, that’s not true. Don’t want to be fired, especially not for this, ’cause word will get out, everyone will know that I got dumped because I screwed a PD – a male PD, and I can just hear Aguirre laughing his fat face off. God, I hate that bastard! Won’t be able to provide for my girls, me getting fired and –

Oh, shit! Jack, too. We both could get tossed out on our asses because we couldn’t keep it in our pants. But the worst thing that will happen is the case against Newsome will be thrown out and that pervert will go back to the streets to hunt again.

An uneven front stoop provided emergency care when the dizzy from hyperventilating blacked out his vision. Ennis collapsed to hang his head between his knees, his jeans soggier than the cement.

Should have thought of all this before, why didn’t I think of all this before? Didn’t know I needed to think of this before, and there sure as hell wasn’t any thinking going on during. Did Jack know? Course he did, you moron! He’s the goddamn attorney! All those words coming out of his mouth and not one about this fucked up mess we’ve made.

“Goddamnit, Jack! What the hell do we do now?”

Know what the hell I’m going to do. Only thing I can do.

The sounds of cats mating alley screeched as he started to run, puffing out tiny clouds of resolve, his legs working fast, his mind spinning faster.

Sullivan to Thompson –

We only discussed the case once…OK, twice, but not in depth…well, maybe, but all we talked about was prior evidence and we haven’t talked since…well, since we fucked, and then I ran out like a fucking coward, but that’s a good thing, a real good thing, a fucking great thing!

His path finally clear, Ennis sprinted for the finish line.

First thing Monday morning, I’m off the case. Captain’s been wanting to pull me anyway, too emotionally involved, which is complete bullshit, but I’ll use that, walk away from the case. Walk away and leave the whole fucked up mess behind. Jack will probably have to withdraw, but he can handle that. Probably already knows what needs to be done.

But just in case, I should talk to him, at least apologize – like my lame ass words are going to make up for what I did, but I should still tell him.

Yeah, I’ll go back to his loft and we’ll talk –

Shit.

Can’t do that, can’t talk to him, can’t even see him. Not now, not soon, not until we’re so far off this case that there’s not a snowball’s chance in hell of it being tossed. No chance to question the
Evidence. That means no Jack until this clusterfuck is -

Knees gave out, stomach throat jumped, raindrops splashed in his eyes, downward spiral checked by grabbing a handful of Time.

No Jack? What the – where will – how do I -

“Hey, you! Yeah, you! Get the hell off my -” The newsie dropped his bundle of National Enquirer, hands blackened with what passes for the truth, to offer his handkerchief. “You don’t look so good there, bud. Got woman troubles?”

Concern shrugged away. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing, just a guy standing in the rain crying, dollars to doughnuts, it’s over a woman.”

“You don’t know shit! No woman, and not fucking crying!”

“Oh…a guy then, huh?”

His tone, the little lift on that one word, the insinuation of not normal, not right, not a man and Ennis’ head went under, new self-awareness floaties still underinflated and lifetime’s SOP denial dragged him down to the bottom again.

“What the hell are you saying, huh? HUH?”

The latest issue of Guns and Ammo became a shield. “Oh, OK, alright, whatever. No need to get all defensive.” He backed away slowly. “Do your not crying somewhere else then.”

The splashes his storm away produced would have done the most exuberant five year-old proud.

What the fuck? Calling me gay! Fuck, no! This is such bullshit!

So, I don’t ever see Jack again. Shit! Just a guy, just a fuck, just a lawyer! Didn’t mean shit! So what if it was the greatest sex I’ve ever had, so what if I had a blast tonight, felt completely comfortable with Jack, felt complete with Jack. Big deal. That’s nothing, meant nothing, can’t mean anything. Just a one night stand. A stupid, drunken one night stand that ends here.

Thompson to Grand -

Getting soft, Del Mar. Getting old and whiney and acting like a fucking girl. Nobody falls in love in just one –

Car keys! Where the fuck are my –

Every pocket turned out, he fought with fabric washing machine wet, searching for the easy exit.

FUCK! Must’ve left them in Jack’s loft, must’ve fallen out of my pocket when we – oh, god. When we – stop it! Do you hear yourself thinking this shit! Forget it, forget him. You’re probably out of his life anyway. That’s the way, that’s what guys like him do – fuck, then forget.

OK, no car keys, then I’ll just call a cab. Don’t need to go back up there, see him, smell him, taste - NO! Call a fucking cab and get your ass back to Brooklyn!
Cell phone out, Ennis punched in the number, his pace never slacking.

This isn’t me, isn’t where I should be. Home, Brooklyn. That’s my place, that’s what I know. I need to go home. That’s right, back to my girls, back to Alma. Back to my apartment, back into that life, that no love, no sex, just slogging through to the end life, when all I want to go back up there and follow his smile until -

The building’s glass reflected the morning and he looked up to the third floor, to Jack, everything too far from his comfort zone to reach.

Doesn’t matter what the hell I want, too late in the game now, these stripes can’t change. Going to Brooklyn, Bed Stuy. Done playing games, done playing around. Lived without before, can fucking do it again. Forever. Back home, with no key to get into the place, but Alma’s off work by now, she’ll be there to open the door for me. Alma…the woman I don’t desire, the wife I don’t love.

Going home so I can spend another seventeen years living a lie.

Got to go where I belong.

The rain had stopped, the night’s sins washed away, but Ennis wasn’t there to rejoice the blue.

*********

Three solid knocks, and he held his breath.

Where I belong.

“Brought breakfast…Jack.”
Eight

Tainted Evidence

Chapter Eight

Can’t afford to fuck this up.

He had practiced his speech. From bakery to loft, he had outlined, rough drafted, arranged all his note cards into exactly the right order, rehearsed inflections and pauses, expressions and gesticulations. Even threw in a joke to lighten the mood, relax his audience. He was primed, pumped and ready for Jack.

First – breakfast. My groveling admission of guilt will lose some punch if interrupted by my stomach upstaging me. Next – finally acknowledging that I’m gay, that I’m bi, that I’m something, including a round of applause for the person who made this moment possible, thank you, Jack, which will smoothly move to all the avenues now available to me, to us, segueing into the tragedy that immediate exploration is off limits because of the case.

He had had a few stumbling moments around Mulberry St. when the morbid idea of Jack’s biting laugh at the use of the pronouns we and us in the future tense, seized his gut. But, Ennis had pushed through the sick fear of rejection, to arrive at Jack’s door. And regardless of whether it opened or slammed shut, he was ready to lay his apology, and his heart, on Jack’s mercy.

OK, a slow, deep breath. Think calm…be calm…embrace the calm…just knock on the fucking door. Three sharp raps that sounded like gunfire. Have a better chance of surviving that than –

The loft door swooshed open.

Oh, fuck me.

Although he had followed every possible permutation of how this moment would play out to almost infinity, he had never in his wildest dreams, however, imagined he would be facing down a fresh from the shower, sweats hanging porn star low, shirtless Jack.

Look away, look down, look at something, ANYTHING else! Never going to make it through this if…God! Even his bare feet are sexy! Shit.

With a mouth suddenly dry enough to spit dust, Ennis slapped a sweaty palm over his eyes, and blurted out the one part of his apology speech he did remember.

“Brought breakfast, Jack.”

“Mnr bmn brmnrfmrn?”

A small peek between fingers. “Huh?”

With a smart tongue flick, Jack moved the toothbrush to the side of his mouth.

“You brought breakfast?”
“Yeah, I brought -”

SPLAT!

“- bagels.”

“Gee…thanks. And me with no cream cheese.”

From under Ennis’ fingers water oozed from what was left of the bag he held Vulcan Death Grip tight, each tiny drop a taunting snicker plopping down to his culinary peace offering now a kosher mess on Jack’s doorstep.

Well, that could have gone better.

“Ennis, what are you doing here?”

Without thinking of the consequences, he glanced up. Oh, shit. Caught Medusa style, he was a stone with an erection, unable to avert his eyes, his ‘no further contact because of the case’ resolve about as strong as the soggy scrap of paper in his hand.

Hair. Dark hair. Around his nipples…

“Ennis?”

…across his stomach…

“Ennis!”

Train wreck fascinated with the swirly pattern before him, some patches matted and clinging to the memory of the hot water, Ennis mumbled absently, while three quarters of his brain and nearly every pint of blood flowed south. “Yeah?” The hairy line from his collar bone to his…

“So, you brought breakfast. And…?”

“Poppy seed,” … belly button down past his hips… “and sesame.”

“Where the hell did you go for them? Queens?”

…to where it disappears... “No, La Rosa over off Elizabeth.” … under his sweats…

“And that took you five fucking hours?”

…and from there… “I walked, in the rain.”

“After you left your slimy condom, and me, behind on the floor, you walked a ten block neighborhood for five fucking hours to bring me breakfast from a place that’s only three streets away just to drop your rain marinated bagels on my doorstep? And then not even one of them raisin?”

…and he’s obviously going commando… “That about covers it.”

“Why?”

If he had been paying more attention to the blue ninja stars being hurled in his direction, or the coiled rattler body language, or the tone of voice warning of imminent reactor meltdown instead of calculating just how much force he would need to exhort on those bothersome sweats to bring the correct picture into glorious HD, Ennis would have answered the question that was really being
asked. Unfortunately for the upstairs neighbors, he didn’t.

“Left my keys here.” … *just a little two handed tug on each pocket and …*

“You came back for your fucking *keys*?”

… *the end of the line. Jack’s… “Yeah, sure, whatever.”*

Complete vacuum as the explosion sucked out all the oxygen in the hallway.

“EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEENNNNNNNHHHHHHH! WRONG! I’m sorry, you didn’t put your answer in the form of a question. The correct response – Who is Jack Twist, my best fuck ever. Funny you didn’t get that one since less than seven hours ago your balls were slapping my ass mighty fierce, and -”

*Wanted it to be special. Moonlight maybe, or a soft hello. Standing twenty-third in a Now Serving number seven line at La Rosa’s, all sorts of scenarios had vied for his suddenly gay, suddenly bi, suddenly something overloaded brain. He knew the notion was mushy and sappy and lousy with Disney sentimentality – and not anything he would admit to even under torture – *but I’m just not willing to throw it away during a frenzied fuck or pass it off as an afterthought. It’s too important and we only get one shot at this.*

“-you sure as hell were grunting up a fucking storm back there as -”

He ducked away from the flying toothbrush. *He’s not leaving me a lot of options, though.*

Before Jack’s way too much information for a public hallway tirade could gather spectators or tear out his recently planted self-acceptance by the shallow roots, Ennis moved to handle the situation. He didn’t bully Jack into silence, which was his usual MO; he didn’t storm off in a huff or try to out shout him. *That’s not possible anyway.* He simply grabbed bare shoulders and took the plunge.

“- you were ripping me a new one – shit! Ennis, what…hmmmmmmm!”

Clumsy, awkward with two noses constantly getting in the way, but the lack of finesse and style did not diminish the power or truth.

*Our first kiss.*

He couldn’t keep up with Jack’s tongue, the hard push of muscle that seemed to be everywhere at once – licking lips, tickling roof, skimming along top teeth, spreading minty freshness in its wake – so Ennis just stood there, supported by the door supporting Jack, and settled in to enjoy the ride.

*To hell with moonlight. Not the where, but the who.*

He couldn’t decide where to put his hands. *Too many choices, all of them fucking great!* So, they flitted about, from Jack’s face – unshaven cheeks scratching male into his palms – to his shoulders, bunching and writhing as Jack gave as good as he got. Down Jack’s spine was great because of the shiver it caused, but so was his waist, his ticklish giggle buzzing on lips. The winner by a landslide, though, was Jack’s ass. Not only did it give a handful of that most delectable part, it also brought Jack that much closer, hips and cock slamming up to meet his. He ignored the slow drip of combined spit, and just drank in Jack, knowing his thirst would never be sated.

*Never enough, never.*

Nose squished sideways, his mouth stretched and hermetically sealed to Jack’s, right where Ennis wanted to be - *Fuck! Damn inconvenient time to need to breathe!* - but there was no way he could
deny his lungs any longer. With a groan, he pulled away; only far enough, though, to let out the bad air and suck in the intoxicating scent of Jack’s skin.

“Christ, our first kiss.” That omnipresent and overachiever tongue licked the sweat from Ennis’ upper lip. “This is way better than bagels.”

“Good thing, ’cause you’re standing in them.”

“Shit.”

OK, he’s calm now. Not shouting, not throwing things, too busy wiping his foot on the back of my leg.

“Jack, listen, about last night…”

“Fucking amazing, wasn’t it!” His fingers had found curls, twining the damp hair until it spronged back out even curlier.

“No, no it wasn’t, and stop that!”

“Huh?” A pause of disbelief. “Perhaps our definitions of amazing differ. See, mine is incredible, fabulous, infuckingdescribable. And yours?”

“What I did, what I made you do, was -”

“Shoot nearly three feet.” He finagled his hands into back pockets and pulled. “A personal best.”

None of this was part of the plan. Maybe our dick tango down there is too distracting. Nah? You think? Ennis forcefully put his hands on either side of Jack’s head, two dull thuds on the door. “Jack! I’m sorry for what happened last night. I didn’t mean for things to go that far.”

The reactor was heading into the red zone again. “What are you saying?”

He sighed, adverting his eyes, ashamed of what he was about to say. I fucking raped you, Jack. “I forced you into anal sex and I apologize profusely.”

His apology became shredder fodder when Jack busted out laughing.

“Oh, shit! Ennis, god that’s…please, how Lifetime Movie can you get? ‘I forced you into anal sex.’ Christ! You’re killing me here!” He kissed a gaping mouth, tracing his tongue around the startled ‘o’. “I forced you kicking and screaming from the closet! I was a fucking bastard last night. Any apologizing should come from this side of the fence.”

Is that…can that…? “Then…then you’re not…pissed?”

“Fuck no! Like I said – amazing!”

Lightheaded with dumbfounded relief after hours of kvetching that he had screwed things, literally, he kissed Jack again, this time not tasting any guilt. I didn’t…oh, my god! I didn’t! “Yeah, it was pretty fucking amazing wasn’t it?”

“The stuff Nine Inch Nails sing about.” Nuzzling into Ennis’ neck, Jack whispered low, “Just one more thing before we move on though, kay?”

“Sure, what - Shit! Jack!”
He blinked back tears of pain, caught and immobile, left nipple twisted all the way to the right, and balls squeezed tight in Jack’s fist, menacing blue bearing down.

“If you ever try to fuck me without lube again, these –”

“Ah, AH!” That squeeze brought him up on his toes.

“- will be swinging in the breeze as my grandmother’s new wind chime! Got it?”

“Uh, huh.” A tiny, wide eyed squeak.

“Good.” He released his anatomical hostages to give a big, sloppy kiss, off center and with loads of Jack tongue. “And speaking of fucking -” Retrieving his toothbrush from over by the freight elevator, Jack walked back inside the loft leaving a trail of sticky footprints for a hunched over Ennis to follow. “- I wasn’t the only thing that took it up the ass last night.”

Still studying the hardwood floor, he managed to grunt, “The case. I know.”

“If word of this gets out, whatever this is…was…could be, fans on both sides of the Bridge will be working overtime flinging shit -” He disappeared into the bathroom.

The lightning bolts had moved on, leaving only a dull ache and new found respect for Jack’s fist. *Important safety tip, stay away from mad Jack. Another good use for my handcuffs.*

With the lonely without Jack in his arms keening softly, Ennis surveyed a room that should have been familiar, but didn't match the picture he had in his head of the place. *No, that'd be Jack's ass shaking to the rhythm of my dick.* With the morning sun singing through the wall of glass doors on the far end of the loft, he realized just how ginormous this place was.

*Didn’t notice this last night. Too drunk, on Captain and Jack.*

The walls were white, huge glaciers coming together in perfect symmetry at the corners. The polish on the floor reminded him that next Tuesday was league night. Recessed lights, tucked around pipes in the exposed ceiling, illuminated when the sun couldn’t reach, and the garden outside brought a little of Central Park three flights up.

It was a typical loft. Kitchen on one end, bed/bathroom on the other. A big rectangle with open in between.

*But, it's dull. Dead. Should be lousy with stuff. On the walls, in the corners, piled on every horizontal surface. Pictures and books and CDs and annoying little shit that's a pain in the ass to dust. Every day living stuff. This place is not Jack.*

*Of course, he could have recently moved, personal crap still in boxes, still in storage. But, a loft, a Soho loft, a Soho loft on a civil servant salary?*

A light bulb moment.

*Loft’s not his.*

A self-imposed kick all across the hardwood for not paying attention to what was right under his nose all along.

*Some detective you are, Del Mar. Jack’s name not on the mail box, no furniture except a chair and what looks like a tent - what the hell? Was that there last night? Just how drunk was I?*
In the bedroom –

No mattress, one side of the closet used.

Socks squished in boots pounding the other way.

No dishes in the kitchen, no personal touches, no touches at all.

All the clues pointed Ennis to one conclusion.

This is not Jack’s place. Then who...?

The oblique references to a name floated up from the bottom of last night’s fermented memory miasma.

Daniel? Was that the name that Jack...Daniel, yes, Daniel.

Stood in the middle, Ennis perused the space with new deduction eyes.


Processing that data nearly crashed his hard drive.

But, Daniel’s not here. Just out, just missed him, out for the day, out for the week? Away on an extended business trip? A second residence, maybe, an in the city space, separate from his normal suburban life, some place convenient, some place where he can hide –

Ennis stopped that train before any rails were jumped.

No, that’s not Jack either. A kept piece of ass? For a closet-case? No, no doesn’t jive with his rant last night. So, what the hell is this place?

A help him think, nothing else around, why the hell not boot toe nudge, and the basketball rolled unimpeded to the far wall.

No Daniel, no Daniel stuff. He hasn’t moved in yet? Would Jack really fuck someone else, fuck me, in another man’s –

Kind of shitty, really, his perverse glee for fucking Jack in the middle of this Daniel’s loft, but he couldn’t help it. His first gay, or bi, or something experience, Jack’s personal best even, spooging up what looked like a really expensive rug.

- no, no Daniel, no stuff because he’s already moved out. That’s it! Daniel’s moved out, taking everything, and I mean everything, with him.

Two sides to every story, of course, Det. Del Mar daily lived that, no conclusion reached until all the facts showed up, but staring at blank walls, empty cabinets, and a warren of furnitureless dust bunnies for-Jack proxy indignation echo bounced around anyway.

“What a fucking asshole!”

Daniel, whoever you are, you are one stupid motherfucker. You took everything except the one thing that should have mattered the most.

Didn’t know the dickhead, and pretty fucking sure he never wanted even a passing introduction, the loft’s current wide open spaces, however, did not instill confidence in Daniel’s magnanimity towards
ex roommates, lovers, whatever.

So, Jack's living here without Daniel, without Daniel's stuff, but...

“- a formal withdrawal, which is a bitch and would certainly piss my boss off royally -” Jack chattered back into the main room, heading for the kitchen to pull out the lone resident of the fridge – orange juice – gulping it down straight from the carton. “- and do a number on my career in the PD’s office. Stepping back from a case of this magnitude, the black mark will be as long as the New Jersey Turnpike, and just as fucking smelly.”

“How long did Daniel give you?”

Jack turned too fast, OJ spilling down his chin, splashing to the slate tile beneath his feet. “What – what did you say?”

“Not rocket science, Jack. Public Defender, prime piece of Manhattan real estate, basketball, puking on his schefflera.” All right there in a neat little row. “How long before you’ve got to be out of here?”

Ennis thought Jack was maybe going to deny it; belligerence flashed for a second, but then pretense and carton came down with a thud. “Three months. The fucker gave me three months.”

Oh, my god.

The path was clear now. No witty retorts, jagged barbs or jurisprudence to hide behind anymore. Ennis saw straight through to the core, saw everything right there in Jack’s eyes.

He’s there, I can see Daniel. That’s his pain, that’s his fear scaring you shitless that it’s going to happen again, that I’m going to fuck you, then walk away. Which I did. Oh, god, Jack!

“Probably going to have to schlep my ass over to Brooklyn to find a place that -”

This kiss was forceful – one bearing down, the other arching up, mouths meeting with a crash somewhere in the middle.

And some of Jack's pain is mine.

“Shit.” Jack broke away, first licking the blood off Ennis, before seeing to his own swollen lips. “The thought of Brooklyn really turns you – what?” He raised a brow at the close scrutiny. “I got eye crud, don’t I?”

“No…well…yes.” Perfect time to broach the last line item on his Return to Jack agenda. The future? Our future? "But, about what happens next, I've been -”

Jack dug at the corners of his eyes. “Suggest shirt first, then I wouldn’t mind a little pole action with those jeans coming off.”

“That’s not what I -”

“Or not. Whatever. Stupid idea anyway.” The OJ carton bore the brunt of Jack’s hurt embarrassment, the edges fraying under his nervous picking. “You know the case and all. Suppose you should go home now. It’s better anyway. Yeah, better. Keys are right there on the counter.”

The slip-by didn’t work. Jack snagged, then reeled in tight. “Forget the fucking keys.”

“But, don’t you need to go -”
Like a cocoon, his arms sought to offer protection from the past, revel in today, send a plea for tomorrow. Cradling Jack’s face, he jumped heart first into blue. *Still there, that son of a bitch. And so am I. Give me time, Jack, please. And I promise to take it all away.*

“I’m not going anywhere without you.”
“Hold on a minute there, Sparky.” Jack shoved away. “There are so many fucked up aspects to everything now, it’s a wonder the whole judicial system’s not lighting up for an afterglow cigarette. But, that I can handle. Of course, it may be back to Syracuse for me, which is bad, or even back to Lightning Flat, which is a fate worse than polyester, but I’ll deal with it. What I can’t wrap my head around right now is you.”

“Me?”

“Yeah. A not-quite-straight man less than twenty-four hours and you fall for the first piece of ass you get. Albeit a fine piece of ass, mind you, but how the hell can you give me a schmaltzy line like that when you’ve only just met me?”

“So what, you’re saying that you’re not charming, witty and hot enough for me to want to be with you?”

“You forgot brilliant. And humble. And no, that’s not what I meant. If I infer what you just implied, it doesn’t work that way.”

“Sure it does.”

“Not talking about 16th century Verona here, Ennis.”

“No, I’m talking about the 81st Precinct here, Jack.”

“You called me a blood sucking parasite.”

“That’s what you said. I called you an Ivy League fuck-up.”

“And from that you get to never leaving me with a stop over for ribs on the way?”

“Stopped over for an albeit fine piece of ass on that way, too.”

“And I had to practically show you a Power Point presentation to get you started!”

“But, I did catch on pretty quick, didn’t I? And it was the best fuck I’ve ever had!”

“Tell me, Ennis, how many women did you fuck before you married Alma?”

“Jack, what does that have to do with -”

“Please answer the question. If there’s too many, just give a rough estimate.”

“I don’t know, I -”

“What are we talking here? Ten? Twenty? Triple digits, maybe?”
“No! What the fuck do you think -”

“Less or more, Ennis? How many legs did you spread? Huh? Just tell me, how many women did you give it to hard and deep? How many pussies have creamed around your dick? How many did you have banging off the headboard? How many, Ennis? How many?”

“None, OK? None! Alma is the only woman I ever fucked!”

“And then you married her, and we all know how that turned out, ‘cause you’re here with me tonight, the first man you’ve ever fucked, whose side you say you don’t want to leave. Can you see a pattern developing here?”

“God, I hope not. Only married Alma ‘cause I knocked her up.”

That took the wind out of Jack’s cross-examining sails. He hit dead calm, staring deer-in headlights at Ennis. “Really glad you used a condom, then.”

“Listen, Jack.” Ennis approached slowly, hands held open in front, voice soft and unthreatening. “I don’t know what the fuck this is, or where the hell we’re going to end up, but all I can tell you is when I was standing on the street waiting for a cab to take me back across the Bridge, I thought of you and threw up in the gutter.”

“Now I know why you’ve only fucked two people in your life.”

“Shithead, it was the thought of not seeing you again that made me hurl. Couldn’t stand the idea of never touching you again. Never kissing you again.” He wrapped Jack up tight and kissed him full on the mouth. “Trust me, Jack, everything I thought I knew, my whole life, me, has done a 180 here. You can’t be anymore scared then I am.”

“Let’s whip them out and see.”

“Schmaltzy line still stands, Jack.”

**BBQ, bagels and a fuck, and he’s prepared to commit. Closing argument calls for a reality bitch slap.**

“OK, Del Mar.” Jack wrestled out of arms to latch onto face, yanking them closer. “You want this? You think this, you and me, will be worth all the shit we’re going to have to shovel just to keep our eyes clear of the pile? Is it worth stepping back from the case you cried, bled and sweated all over?”

“That’s inevitable either way, Jack.”

“I’m not going to be a married man’s secret cock. Yours, fantastic as it is – Webster and I are of one mind on that - is not worth feeling like left over tuna surprise shoved in the back of the fridge. You ready to make that call, have that talk? Sign the papers? Ready to be a weekend dad? That is if she allows the girls to see their father when there’s now two dicks in the family photo.”

Ennis may have tried to speak, but Jack stole the opportunity, clamping down harder

“It isn’t all rainbow flags and interior design on this side of the street, Ennis. Great strides have been made, but people still wipe their hands after you shake them, people get off elevators when you get on, people step between you and their sons. They point and stare and whisper. They will shun you, curse you, pity you, hate you, beat you, wish you dead, and some might even try to make that happen. Wearing the pink triangle ain’t for closet comfortable cowards, Ennis. You sure you’re up to being in Fred Phelps’ rifle sight?”
Fish-faced, he could only nod.

And now my final summation...

“I sure hope so, ’cause I want us so bad the answers to all my second, third and fourth guesses are you. And I swear on my leather-bound, gilt edged, and Barney Frank autographed copy of the Homosexual agenda, seventh addition, if you walk away from this, from us, from me, I'll go through hell, high water and Hyansport’s débutante season just to haul your ass back. Got it?”

Unable to break free of Jack, Ennis returned the fish-faced favor, a demonstration of feelings mutual. The two stood forehead to forehead, nose to nose, eye to eye, heart to heart. Puckered lips sealed the deal.

A unanimous decision!

“Now, for fuck’s sake, go get your skanky ass in the shower.” He shoved Ennis away again, but this one came with a skanky ass grope.

Making wide o’s with his mouth, Ennis tried to rub feeling back into his face. “You didn’t seem to mind a minute ago.”

“Yeah, well, the clock’s ticking on my wet dog grace period here, and unless you’ve perfected a way to fuck from downwind you won’t be getting any of this.” Jack displayed the merchandise just out of reach.

Made it to the bathroom in five seconds flat. “Uh, Jack?” Hesitation in the doorway. “Can I ask you something?”

Why, yes, Ennis, I’d be delighted to join you in the shower, where we will exhaust not only our soapy-slick bodies by redefining the term inter-departmental cooperation, but the hot water reserve for the whole building as well. “Sure, what?”

“Just curious.” He pointed to what sorta, kinda, almost, maybe looked like a tent in the middle of the loft. “What the hell is that?”

Shit! No shower. Baby steps, Jack. Just Out of the Closet Man needs to take baby steps before he discovers his gay super powers. “Nothing, just fucking around.”

“It doesn’t look right, whatever it is.”

“Had five fucking hours to kill waiting for you to pull your head out of your ass and come crawling back. And speaking of your ass…”

“Yes?”

“DING! Time's up!”

The bathroom door slammed with Ennis on the other side.

“Oh, fuck.”

The shakes dropped Jack, butt hitting baseboard. Up against the wall, he pulled legs to chest, chin to knees, mind to overdrive, heart already on Ennis.

I did it again. Opened mouth before engaging brain. I couldn’t have said, “You’ve got good taste, professional ethics must say no thanks.” Or “Why so serious? Let’s just keep this at dick level, faire
ne vous consentez pas?” Or even, “What? Are you fucking nuts?” Couldn’t have said what a normal, functioning adult would have in that situation. Nope, just opened my mouth and the Love At First Sight fairytale twinkles out.

“FUCK!” Fist slammed into floor.

I so suck at this. I can’t do relationships. It’s always – Ow! Fuck, that hurt! - the same. Green light, I jump heart first, but leave the parachute behind. Crash and burn. If practice makes perfect, than I should be Carnegie Hall headlining by now. Let’s go the board and see what the total is so far, shall we? Five – well, six, really, but since that Tequila Sunrised long weekend in Acapulco happened outside the forty-eight contiguous states, it’s ineligible.

Jeremy – freshman year in college. Met at registration and took first semester Latin together. He came to class, saw the TA, and conquered him two weeks later.

Brandon – summer internship before law school. That one lasted five months until I discovered he only wanted me for my literal legal briefs.

Tommy was on again, off again in 2000 at the PD’s office in Syracuse. Quintavious was an off again, on again court stenographer. Some tense moments at the courthouse Christmas party in 2002. Last I heard they were buying a house together in Vancouver.

Daniel. Smooth as twenty year old scotch. The man I gave up my apartment and everything when he asked. OK, it was only a two room walk-up in Chinatown, but it did have off-street parking. Daniel who made me feel special and wanted and loved and that maybe, this time, what I touched wasn’t going to turn to shit. The man who could have exposed me to HIV, then left me for someone else.

“Daniel, who is still my speed dial number one.”

And now there’s Ennis. Probably a terrible poker player ‘cause he can’t lie for shit. Carries a badge, protects and serves, with an unshakable sense of justice. Puts up with my smart mouth, but is no slouch in that department either. Ennis, whose every smile is genuine. He saw something in me worthy of turning his whole world ass over end. Ennis, who sometimes seems wound so tight diamonds could pop out his ass. Ennis, who hit on me, spit on me, fucked me, than ran away.

Didn’t think he was coming back. So, what the hell do I, an intelligent, educated, stunningly handsome professional, do? I rearrange the furniture.

“It’s not that bad. Really.”

Jack checked his handiwork examining things like aesthetics, integrity, ergonomics, feng sui. He leaned back, a decision reached.

“My Queer Eye needs contacts.”

Waking up with an ass on fire and arms empty, the customary twenty minutes of self-pity wallowing had commenced. Idiot, sucker, whore, straight-man-corrupter – just some of the hats he had drenched while trying to marathon shower wash Ennis away. Didn’t work. The shampoo, conditioner, body wash, facial scrub, toner, just purchased yesterday whirlpoled down the drain, all impotent against the recent memories.

But, my skin has never been smoother.

Self-pity over, the next of Jack’s twelve step Assholes Attractor program was anger. On this one he stood longer than the last time, stomping his feet fiercer than a mummy indulged since fetus three
year old told ‘No’ in FAO Schwartz, shouting every name and word in his extensive vocabulary of the vulgar at the man whose touch still tingled.

May have crossed the line at Republican, though.

The next two he stepped over - no Hagen Daas or whiskey within easy reach. But on step five – indulge in a secret fantasy – he lingered, enjoying the view.

Should have regressed for the Pralines and Cream.

He had never asked for much growing up, knew it was wasted breath with his old man anyway. The desire for an Atari and Rubik’s Cube vanished with acid washed jeans and Members Only, but one wish had withstood adolescence and his father’s insults to make the trip down state. He blamed Charles Dickens for planting the seed that now sprouted full bloom in the middle of the loft.

Good thing it wasn’t William Golding.

A winter holiday assignment for his ninth grade honors English class, Jackie Twist had exceeded his teacher’s expectations by reading A Christmas Carol ten times before school resumed in January. He thought the story simple and the moral thinly veiled for a writer known for such biting social commentary as David Copperfield and A Tale of Two Cities, but one thing had sparked his imagination enough to give him the courage to open his mouth at dinner one night and ask if he could have a bed with curtains just like Ebenezer Scrooge.

“You mean one of those girly things with lace and ribbons and shit?”

“Father,” the admonition aimed at a husband who gave little credence to his wife’s idea of proper dinner conversation. “Not at the table, please.”

“No, Ddddad, not a canopy bed. That’ssss sssstupid,” Jackie had tried to explain around a mouth full of stutter and braces, “A bbbbed with curtainssss. You pull them closssed at nnnnight. Holdsss in the heat, keepsss the sssleeper wwwwarm. All the Victorian ppppeople had ’em. Bbbboth in England and here. Maybe around the wwworld, too.”

“Queen Victoria’s dead, Jack, and there’s nothing wrong with the bed you’ve got now.”

The vision of a place he could escape to, close off the rest of the world, pull those curtains opaque and be king of a universe where nobody called him names on the bus, pantsed him in the locker room, or wrote “Jack Twist's a fairy!” on the science room blackboard, one place where his thoughts weren’t dirty and sinful, where he could feel normal and right, where he could be the Jack his body knew he was, gave him the courage to speak back to his father.

“Jussst thought it’d be kkkkinda cool, that’sss all. Make my rrrroom more like mmmme, you know?”

“Your room, huh? Calling it your room now?” John Twist pushed his meat loaf smothered with creamed corn aside to lean into his son’s face. “Who pays the mortgage on this house? Who’s the one out there busting his ass working overtime to put a roof over your head, food on the table, clothes on your back? Huh? Who is it? Huh?”

Fists, still too young to strike out, balled against Jack’s knees. “You, sssir.”

“Damn right it is!” His fist pounding the table once - a declarative gesture to show how much of a man he was to have won an argument over his fourteen year old son - rattled the silverware. “When you go out and earn some money, then you can get yourself one for those fruity beds. But, not in my house!”
Jack had excused himself from the table and his mother’s sympathetic, yet unsupportive eyes, to return to his room, flopping face first on the plaid bedspread that matched the one on the other bunk bed that, even after ten years and two miscarriages, still waited for the next Twist son guaranteed to make his father proud.

And that was the last time Jackie Twist had cried.

Standing in the middle of Daniel’s loft, ass still stinging from Ennis’ dick, and I was totally, utterly alone. In that moment, realizing a little boy’s fantasy became a moral imperative.

Two tarps in the Rubbermaid storage bin from the garden left over from when the kitchen had been painted, every stool, the chair, his shoes, and a basketball, and Jack crawled into his Ebenezer Scrooge bed. No Ghosts of Christmas Past, no old hags with cockney accents and claw like fingers. Only Jack and twenty years of tears.

“Jack! Where the hell are the towels?”

“Robe behind the door!”

But, nothing was solved inside. It wasn’t better, safer. Only dark. And Hot. And cramped. And lonely. Shit! I am so fucking tired of being lonely!

A kick at two stools and King Jackie’s universe floated flat to the floor.

Despite what dickhead Robertson thinks, I know you care, so please God, answer this gay man’s prayer. I know it’s fucking – oh, sorry – really crazy, but it feels right, feels so damn good to hold him inside. I want this. I want him.

“He even took the towels? Christ, Jack what the fuck did you…ever…see in…that – what?”

Wow. That was fast.

Beard, noticeable - blonde with a little gray. Slicked back hair showing lines scratched there by crimes’ rusty nail, eyes crinkling in triplicate at the corners. It was not a head turning face. But, it wasn’t a ‘send people screaming from the room’ face, either. If it weren’t for the splattering of freckles across his nose, it could be used in an ad for the average, middle-aged white male.

Certainly not fucking average in that robe.

Taller by an inch or two than Jack, and broader through the shoulders, too, the robe had to stretch to accommodate Ennis’ chest, which peeked out sun kissed skin between the deep V in front. Jack couldn’t see the back, but he was sure the terry cloth was hugging that work of art ass just as fine as it was hips and thighs. The belt, secured with a proper Boy Scout square knot, did not hang straight down, but took a slow curve at the same place that tingled in Jack as he stood there gawking.

OK, God, I’m sure there’s a Pee-Wee football team somewhere in Indiana that’s asking for your help, so I can take it from here. Thanks!

“You look good in blue, Ennis.”

He circled around, sex in his smile, and just like a compass to magnetic north, Ennis followed.

“Hope this is your robe, ‘cause I don’t want to wear anything that belonged to that fucker.”

“It’s mine.” Jack moved in heat shimmer close, walking the robe back, corralling his skittish colt
towards the chair. “You smell good in blue, Ennis.”

“Thank Marriott. You sure do travel - shit!”

The chair met the back of legs, one push and butt had the same introduction. Jack was on his knees spreading naked legs with his hips before Ennis could blink.

“Jack, what...”

Scorching palms flat to skin, the robe slipped open, exposing a flushed and heaving chest.

“You feel good in blue, Ennis.”

Jack slicked up his tongue plenty before starting inventory.

_Chest hair, not a lot, but still very sexy...collar bone and now the hollow between...Adam’s – Adam’s – Ad – “Stop swallowing!” Adam’s apple...scratchy chin...bottom lip – nope, sorry, not stopping, Ennis – top lip...crooked nose...dark eyebrow...straight to hairline._

“You taste good in blue, Ennis.”

But, wait! There’s more! Around his ear...the strong jaw line...all the way down his throat, then neck...back to his fabulous chest and over –

“Oh, god...Jack!”

And in our southern departments...

A journey of hands, inside both legs, pushing them further apart, massaging heat into already burning thighs, pressing nearer, closer fingertips always teasing.

“Bet you fuck good in blue, Ennis,” a mouth full of nipple, “but, due to technical difficulties, that program cannot be aired.”

“Why, uh, what?”

“Last night.”

Ennis crushed Jack to his chest, painting black with kisses. “God, Jack, sorry, sorry, Jack, I’m sorry.”

Took three tugs and a nipple tweak to break out of the apologetic stranglehold. But once free, Jack moved back in quickly, a whispering breath close. “Can still make it good for you. Want to make you feel good.” Teeth caught a bottom lip and eased back, tongue soothing the sting. “Let me make it good for you, Ennis.”

“Christ, Jack, you don’t need my permission to – fuck!” Up out of the chair when Jack palmed his cock.

_No wonder I'm sore! Damn!_

“Ah, yes, the hand job.” Lips breezed along cheek. “Gay sex 101.”

“Straight people do this too, you know.”

“So, I’ve heard. Dear Penthouse, I never thought it would happen to me, but...”
“Gay or straight. Technique’s the same. One hand, one dick.”

“Oh, really?”

“Not that I’m complaining, mind you – GODDAMN!” Hips pushed up seeking more of whatever the hell Jack just did. “What the fuck was that?”

“You mean this?”

One, two, three strokes, firm and long, then –

“Oh, fuck, Jack!”

A devil smiled into Ennis’ panting mouth. “Welcome to Jack’s Twist. You like?”

“You’ve got to be kidding me, right? Fuck, yes! Twist the damn thing off if you have to, just – GODDAMN! Just keep doing that…yeah that…SHIT!...again, Jack…again!”

Christ! This is killing my knees. That’s the first thing to go on a gay man, I’ve heard. I hate this –

“GODDAMN!”

- hardwood. Want to see him spread out flat, dick pointing to the North Star, but that –

“GODDAMN!”

- prick took the mattress.

It was easy to catch Ennis’ tongue, lolling out to the side as it was, and Jack set up complimentary rhythms between hand and mouth.

Up and in, down and out. Up and in –

“MGHRNVD!”

- down and out.

Heels beat the hardwood counter to hips thrusting, straining thighs knocking Jack off balance. He fell back on his heels, though Ennis’ hips continued phantom thrusts, seeking Jack and sliding further down the chair.

“What the – Jack!”

“You liked that?” The voice molten silk.

“Shit, Jack,” he pulled his body back up in the chair, orgasm-interrupted muscles shaking, “Stop asking stupid questions!”

“Then you’re going to love this.”

“NO! Don’t, Jack, stop!” He slapped away the hands at the robe’s belt.

Oh, he’s shy. Can fuck me doggie style, but won’t let me see him naked. You know, that’d be endearing if I wasn’t about to pressure wash the inside of my sweats.

“Ssssshhhhhh, Ennis, Hey, it’s OK.” Jack soothed his comfort against white line lips. “It’s alright, it’s alright.”
The fear ebbed slightly under that tender touch. “I’m sorry, Jack, so sorry, I can’t…”

“Do me a favor. Close your eyes.”


“Humor me.” He didn’t wait for compliance, kissing them shut instead. “And keep them that way.”

“Jack…”

“Trust me.” *Got to start somewhere, Ennis, or we don’t stand a cheesecake at a Weight Watcher’s meeting chance of lasting past this blow job.*

“You are so fucking hot, you know that? Noticed it the first time I saw you standing there.”

Jack’s words fluttered across skin, licking and sucking down, a sigh of admiration.

“Saw it even through the flannel. I knew I wanted you. To touch you, grab your ass – which is magnificent, by the way.”

“Thank you. I try.”

“It shows. Wanted your mouth, your hands, arms, your whole fucking body, Ennis. Wanted you so much, I fucking dreamed about it. Wanted you to fuck me right there.”

“Behind the two-way.”

*Well, my ever so shy sergeant wants to do it where we could get caught. Ennis Del Mar, the exhibitionist. Tuck that little tidbit away for future consideration.*

“Wanted to touch you, kiss you, everywhere, wanted to fuck your mouth, bite your ass, which is magnificent –

“Already said that.”

“Well,” tongue dipped into navel “It bears repeating.”

“Oh…Jack!”

“Wanted your dick, Ennis. Wanted you to stick it up my ass and fuck me. Really wanted you to fuck me, but, goddamn! I wanted this, too!”

Slow and breezy, just lips around the head, tongue falling into the slit, palm keeping the rest warm.

“Shit…Jack! Fuck, this is, you are, damn! Never before…” The pace never increased, only the easy slide of mouth around rock candy hard flesh. “Not like…Alma never…”

Then it stopped.

“Not that you’ll need this information in the future, but if you want to be invited back to the party, don’t mention a previous lover while your dick is in the current one’s mouth.” Just a hint of teeth. “Especially your wife.”

“Uhm…so-so-sorry.”

“S’kay. You can open your eyes now.”
Robe pulled aside, Ennis was wide open, completely exposed, and between his legs, there was Jack, mouth full of cock, cheeks sucked in, lips stretched and dripping spunk.

“Oh…fuck…Jack!”

Jack Hoovered up, lips smacking a kiss on the head. Swollen tongue lapped at the spit pooled in the corners of his smirking mouth, cock weeping pearlescent drops slicking the languid passage of his own hand.

*And now for the show stopping number.*

“Fuck my mouth, Ennis. I’ll take it all, taste it all. Ennis, fuck my mouth.”

“Jack, I -”

Jack pulled Ennis up to stand and knelt before him like a recalcitrant child, nuzzling into his stomach. “Want it, want you. Come on, Ennis. Fuck my mouth.”

“I don’t want…after what I…” A stroke for Jack’s cheek. “What I did last night…”

“This hole’s a little more flexible.” His tongue took Ennis and his cock on a little trip to the edge and back. “And I’m under warranty.”

The first thrust – like Jack was fragile crystal.

“Christ, Ennis! I promise I won’t bite. See?” Lips curled around pearly whites.

The second thrust – like Jack was his mother’s fine china.

*Gee, at this rate he’ll spurt by the time “Arrested Development” wins an Emmy. Needs a little jump start.* He grabbed a handful of ass up under the robe and shoved Ennis forward, until head met back of throat.

“Fuuuuuuuck!”

The third thrust – like Jack was a piece of asphalt under a jackhammer.

*Fuuuuuuuck!*

He went for the stranglehold – hands locked behind the head, spikey black sticking up between fingers. He slammed and continued slamming, his sweat dripping down Jack’s face, his pubic hair sucked in by Jack’s nose, his ass muscles bunched under Jack’s hand, his cock devoured by Jack’s mouth, his ankle slick with Jack’s release.

“Oh…oh…Jack…Fuck! Jack…Jack…look…fucking look…at me.”

One shot of mischievous blue, and it was all over.

“JACK!”

Load deep and strong, his climax soaring, and Jack swallowed every drop.

“OH, FUCKING SHIT! JACK!”

And it was Jack who was there to catch Ennis, gently guiding him to the floor, holding him through the aftershock, clutching him desperately, petting and stroking, whispering nonsense words of love
until sleep finally claimed him.

Shit. There may be some truth to this fairy tale after all.

Jack pulled the tarp over their tangled bodies, both Jack and Jackie holding Ennis safe.

Please, God, remember what I said and give me the chance to find out.

*****

The wind played with the smoke, batting it one way, then the other, the cat and mouse game circling Jack’s head. He shivered, the rumpled dress shirt no match for the twilight’s cool, coming attractions for autumn in New York.

Usually my favorite season.

He had left Ennis snoring to come out to the garden, unable to sleep himself.

If I don’t go to sleep then he can’t leave like the last time. If I don’t go to sleep I won’t waste precious minutes with him. If I don’t go to sleep I’m going to fall off the balcony and splat Grand Street.

Jack caught his swaying body on the banister, yawning until his jaw popped.

“Hey, I didn’t know you smoked.”

He stubbed it out in a Statue of Liberty ashtray. “Neither does my mother.”

Jack shivered again, not from cold, but from the contact of Ennis’ body pressed full onto his back.

Yup, there’s the gun. He put his clothes on, which means he’s leaving soon. Fuck, just not enough time!

“I got to go, Jack.”

“I know.”

“Figure four months. That should be enough time to keep away the appearance of impropriety.”

Four months…that’s November!

“I’ll talk to my boss first thing Monday morning.”

“Probably talk to Captain tonight. Get the easy one out of the way.” Jack squirmed nervous in his arms. “Whatever happens, Jack, I’ll handle it.”

“Feel like pond scum breaking up a family. I am pond scum taking dad away.”

“Not much there to break. But, I won’t lie to you, Jack. Going to be hard as hell facing my girls with this.”

“I’d think you were a cold heartless bastard otherwise.”

“Don’t let that get out on the street, OK? Got a rep to protect.”

“You never did use your ‘Get Out of Jail Free’ card. It’s still playable, you know.”
Ennis gently tugged until Jack was resting comfortable on his strength. “Nope. Looks like I’m in for life without possibility of parole.”

“Four months. That both suck and blows.”

*Hold it, memorize it, keep it always. This moment of Ennis and me.*

“Oh, hey. Thanks for the road map.”

Jumble pocket pulled, he held it out in front of their backwards embrace. Sheets from a legal pad, each one with an arrow scribbled, and found spread out Hansel and Gretel style on the floor, a 11x14 trail from sleeping Ennis to garden and Jack.

“Just didn't want you waking up, you know...wanted you to know where to find me.”

*Wonder how many I’ll need to scribble to go all the way across the Brooklyn Bridge?*
Chapter Ten

Tainted Evidence

“Del Mar.”

“Dickhead.” Ennis breezed by Aguirre’s desk – always the same, racing form, asshole, something’s missing, though - heading straight for Stoutamire’s office. Three knuckle raps on the glass of the open door. “Can I talk to you for a minute, Cap?”

“Sure, sure, Ennis. What’s up?”

This is it. Just grab your balls and say it.

“I can’t work the Newsome case anymore.”

The Marlboro Man blinked. Or at least that’s the face Ennis remembered from watching TV as a kid. A little softer around the edges, but slap on a cowboy hat, a horse and some sheep on the far hill and Stoutamire could be an advertising icon.

Which is fucking ironic, since he’s a Mormon.

He didn’t smoke, only slipped pamphlets for cessation programs on the desks of his men that did. He didn’t drink anything harder than cran-apple juice, and headed the Precinct’s AA program. Behind his cluttered, but organized desk, six smiling faces lined up according to age, all boys and carbon copies of their stay-at-home mom, and he still found the time to coach a Boys and Girls Club soccer team.

Choosing actions over empty rhetoric, Walter Stoutamire was a man who lived his faith. Good man, good husband, good father, good cop and even better boss.

And there isn’t another living soul that I implicitly trust with my life.

Ennis had yented once trying to get the oldest Stoutamire, Malachi, and Junior together figuring he just might be able to sleep on date night if his little girl was out with the president of his school’s Wait for Marriage club.

Didn’t go over so well.

“Eww, Dad!” Junior had pronounced sentence on the buttoned-down, clean-cut boy over a glass of lime sherbet punch at last year’s Christmas party. “Can he be any more boring?”

Ennis had resigned himself to cleaning his gun every Friday night.

“Why don’t you shut the door, Ennis.”

Heavy wood and glass rattled shut with the needed extra lift and push for the lock to find home. Through the blinds, he caught Aguirre staring, and flipped him the finger before snapping them
closed, too.

“Sit, and tell me what’s going on.”

Like the little kid sent to the principal’s office for cherry-bombing the girl’s bathroom, Ennis fidgeted, no comfortable spot to be found in the red leather chair in front of his captain’s desk.

*Only it wasn’t toilets I destroyed, but a capital case.*

“Need you to take me off the Newsome case.”

*I said it. Shouldn’t I be feeling better now?*

“Not much left to do with that one. He was arraigned yesterday. But, you know that, you were there.”

He remembered the one conversation he had had with Jack about the case, *Remember everything Jack says. Christ! But, that’s a shitload of words!* and tried to phrase his hint of impending trouble in the most obtuse way possible.

“Yeah, well, if the DA comes asking for any help, you know with clarification on evidence, procedural questions, I can’t be a part of it.”

“Are you saying there’s a problem with the evidence?”

*Not obtuse enough apparently.*

“No, no, no. Everything’s fine. You know lawyers, always looking for a way to accuse us of screwing their ‘innocent’ client out of their civil rights.”

Stoutamire chuckled, a gravely, fatherly sound. “Yeah, don’t understand why it’s got to be us against them.”

“At the arraignment yesterday, that PD – what was his name?”

couldn’t chance it. Let the name cross his lips and the ‘Hot damn! I fucked him last night!’ goofy grin would be so obvious that even Milton, the blind data entry clerk on the second floor, would notice.

*I smell like Jack. Like sex. Miracle Cap didn’t notice the minute I walked in. Or maybe he did.*

A flip or two in the folder already stacked in the solved pile. “Twist. John Twist, Jr.”

*He’s Jack to his friends, he’s Jack to me. He’s my Jack. I think.*

“Yeah, that’s the guy. Anyway, he filed a Motion of Discovery that bunched the ADA’s panties into a tight wad, so I’d be looking for more shit to roll this way.”

A pinch to the bridge of his nose, Stoutamire’s way of dealing with the less than gentlemanly way his officers talked sometimes, and the guilty student squirmed.

“Sorry. He’s just blowing smoke, but if the DA does send the case back to us, it’s going to have to be somebody else’s butt that takes the kick.”

“That’s not a problem, Ennis. I’m sure Detective Wroe can unruffle the DA’s feathers alone. Just wondering, though, why.” The chair leather farted as he shifted, propping elbows on his calendar, a
rainbow of markers, different colors keeping track of each child’s games and recitals. “No, the better question is why now? You worked this case hard, and when the rookie stuff comes, you pull out.”

His shoes became infinitely more interesting than looking at his boss while he told his lie of omission. “Just something that I need to do, Cap.”

“To be perfectly frank, Ennis, I wished this conversation had taken place three months ago. I nearly pulled you then myself.”

“But, you didn’t.” And I met Jack. Fate’s a cruel bitch sometimes.

“No, I didn’t. Too soft hearted to see one of my best officers lose a case he cared deeply about, and too chicken to face your temper if I did.” Chin rested on up turned palms. “And the damage is done.”

His world imploded. Dolly shot, quick and sharp, brought Stoutamire’s face close. He couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t move, stuck in that chair while the weight of his crime crushed inward. “Damage? What…what are you talking about?”

Oh, fuck, no! He couldn’t have found...Shit! Someone at the restaurant? At the bakery? On the street? Goddamnit! Saw us walk in and I didn’t come out until six hours later. And then I walked in again. Another eight hours. Fuck! That doesn’t prove shit, but it sure as hell doesn’t look like just a interview. Oh, god! Oh, my fucking god, we are so –

“Alma called me last night. Four times. Seems you didn’t go home after court, or at all yet from what I can see.”

The air whoosing back, inflating his life was too loud for him to think clearly. “Wh- what?”

“Been behind this desk for twenty-three years, Ennis, but I still notice things. You’re wearing the same clothes as yesterday. Only more wrinkled.”

The big bucket of Gatorade relief splashed over his head. Oh, god. Oh, shit, oh, thank you, thank you! I can’t do this again, never, NEVER again!

“Spent last night out. Walking and thinking.” And fucking Jack, and accepting I was gay...bi... whatever, and completely turning my world ass over end. How about you, Cap? “I haven’t been home yet.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.” Stoutamire stood and crossed in front, executing the perfect Cliff Huxtable desk lean, dangling foot gently tapping the MDF. “Look, Ennis, I’ve never been a personal life buttinsky. As along as the officers here do their jobs and not cause other departments more work on their days off, I’m fine. But, I do feel a sense of responsibility for any troubles between you and your wife stemming from my inaction over the Newsome case.”

To laugh at this moment was probably inappropriate, but one bone dry chuckle escaped unchecked. “Troubles were there long before he ever showed up.”

“And all the time and energy you poured into the case just exacerbated things. Good.”

“Good?”

“Good that you recognize the marriage is in trouble.” His Rolodex spun around to the C’s. “Good that you’re taking the initiative to step away from the flashpoint.” A quick copy job, and he presented a Post-It. “Good that there are people out there who can help.”
The chicken scratch was almost indecipherable; Ennis’ squint only managed to make out a Dr. somebody C something and a phone number. “What’s this?”

“A marriage counselor.”

This time he did laugh. Loud and bitter. “No thanks, Cap. No need to shut the door, when the horse is already Alpo.”

“Take it, Ennis. Call her, don’t call her. That’s not for me to advise. All I can tell you is that she helped Maureen and me.”

That admission of less than perfection slapped him hard. “What? You two, but I thought you guys were, you know, the storybook couple.”

“This job tears apart marriages. Even those with a firm foundation in God.” Stoutamire returned to his chair, his hand brushing the picture on the edge of his desk. “Whatever you do, you’ve got to talk to Alma. She’s your wife, your partner, the mother of your children. She deserves better than to be shut out.”

“I guess.”

“You’ve still got two more days off. Don’t want your usually sunny demeanor clouding up this place until Wednesday.”

“Yes, sir.”

Back to business, Stoutamire picked up his phone. “Oh, and close the door on the way out, please. Need this call to the DA to be private.”

Walking out of his captain’s office, Ennis retrieved his cell phone from his pocket, stuck in the middle of a wad of paper, and turned it back on, the dancing orange logo’s hello a musical confession to last night’s disinterest.

She left me messages. Checking up on me, keeping tabs on me, smothering me, leaving me twenty-three fucking messages!

But...what if something had happened, something bad, to Junior or Franny, what if she had really needed me, and I didn’t answer her. She called me all night while I was off cheating on her.

With Jack. Oh, god, Jack! I miss you already. Four months will be fucking torture!

Captain’s right, though. The mother of my children does deserve better than to be used as an excuse to cover my mistake. My girls deserve a father who can look himself in the mirror.

But, what about Jack! I don’t want to, I can’t...

Shit! What the fuck am I supposed to do! I can’t be two people!

“Read an interesting report.”

“That so.” Ennis purposefully took the long way from the Captain’s office just to keep Aguirre out of his sight line. “You’re reading now? Good for you. Hope your lips don’t get too tired.”

“Yup. Seems this old couple called in checking on an officer they met walking their dog early this morning. They said the guy was acting crazy and flashed them his badge.”
“Don’t you have kiddie porn to watch?” He's baiting me, that's all. Fucking ignore him. He doesn't know shit, and won't if I don’t react. Just fucking ignore him.

“See, I would have tossed it away as geezer garbage except, it was your badge number they reported.

That stopped a graceful exit cold. “So what? So I scared two old farts and their dog. Big fucking deal.”

The red plastic stick stirred a Starbucks grande in lazy circles. “That something you make a habit of, Del Mar? Terrorizing our senior citizens on the streets of Soho at five-thirty-seven am?”

“Fuck off!” Don’t! Don’t! Walk out! Walk out now!

“Oh, but you and your wife live in Brooklyn, right?”

“None of your goddamn business!”

“Must be something awfully compelling there on Sixth for you to take a midnight stroll from Bed Stuy. Or someone.”

A good two inches taller and more than the weight of his ego heavier, Aguirre was still no match for Ennis’ temper. His hand bunched a fistful of Sears polyester, the other cuddled up close with a nose.

“You going to shut your goddamn mouth or must I do that for you? Shove those sleazy insinuations right down with your teeth?”

“Is there a problem, gentlemen?”

Aguirre dropped quick, Ennis letting go at the sound of their captain's voice, the overstressed and ancient chair wonking sideways, coffee stain the shape of Brazil across his best shirt.

"No, sir. Just on my way out."

“Good.”

Office door closed and Ennis was right back in Aguirre’s face.

“You keep the fuck away from me!”

He made good on the exit this time, storming out before Aguirre could marshal a response. Joe did, however, have enough wits remaining to pick up what had fallen out of Ennis’ pocket. A legal sheet of paper scrawled with an arrow, the heart surrounded initials JTJR scribbled in the corner.

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His messenger bag didn’t even have the time to hit the desk.

“Mr. Stavros wants to see you, Jack.”

“Good or bad?”
“It’s eight-o-four and he’s called down here three times looking for you.”

His trench coat didn’t reach the chair it was aimed for.

“Coffee and a lemon poppy seed muffin?”

“Will be waiting when you get back.”

“If I were straight, Steph,” Jack teased as he slipped by with a kiss to her cheek.

“My chances with you would be about the same. Stairs!”

“Stairs!”

OK, this actually works in my favor. Need to see the big guy right away to dump LD’s case, and getting an appointment with him is like –

“Hey, Jack!”

“Margie, you’re wasting away to nothing!”

“Oh, Jack!”

- finding Paris Hilton’s talent. But, he called me to see him, summoned me upstairs, which can’t be good ‘cause the last time that happened was that little misunderstanding –

“Morning, Jack.”

“Suzanne, blonde is definitely your color.”

“Oh, Jack!”

- over in Queens. The courtroom needed a new window anyway, and I got the peeping tom charges dropped. He frowned so much, he looked like that eagle muppet, all eyebrows and nose –

“Good morning, Jack!”

“Emily, you’re getting married? Breaking my heart, you know.”

“Oh, Jack!”

Oh, Christ! His face will sink in on itself if he knows what happened over the weekend. I’m going to walk in there to see just a bad toupee sitting on top of an asshole!

“Hi, Jack!”

“Still not interested, Javier.”

“Oh, Jack.”

But, there’s no way in hell he knows anything, ‘cause all of the good stuff, the really good stuff, the fucking great stuff happened in the loft and unless Stavros was hiding behind the basketball –

Jack eased into the office at 8:07.

“Mr. Twist.”
Looking younger every day, Mrs. Katz.”

“Just go inside, Mr. Twist.”

Well, you can’t schoomze ’em all.

Beyond the oak double doors, the world turned a surreal black and red. A student of the ancient way of the samurai – or at least the ancient way of the samurai interior decorator – Stavros’ office looked like a bad Chinese restaurant on acid.

And you know, an hour after leaving here, I bet I’ll be hungry.

Mr. Antony Stavros himself…well, Jack thought it was the kind of face you see on those cheesy calendars that have the dates too small to see without a magnifying glass that tear off month by month until the end of the year where you find a personal message to “Dear Customer, time to review your insurance policy!”

“John, please come in. I believe you know –”

No introduction was necessary. His ass still held the bruises from their last meeting.

“Miss Newsome,” Jack stuck out his hand half expecting to get yanked into her lap. “Very nice to see you again.”

Lureen looked at his hand, then turned away.

Looks like someone got up on the wrong side of the Mason-Dixon line this morning.

“Please sit down, John. We have a serious problem to discuss.”

Damnit! I should have checked behind that fucking basketball!

The straight backed ebony chairs, while attractive and terribly expensive, allowed for only one posture – Puritan with a stick up his ass straight – and Jack felt just as comfortable under Lureen’s glare.

“I’m assuming you’re talking about LD’s case, Sir.”

“Yes, John.”

OK, I really didn’t want to have to do this with Miss Grab Ass turned ice princess present, but here goes…

“About that, sir, I’m afraid I will be forced to -”

“Are you queer?”

“Beg pardon?”

“Miss Newsome! I must ask you not to use language such as -”

“Cause LD was talking to one of the guards in that hell hole, and he said everybody knows about Mr. Twist here.”

I’m famous?
“I don’t believe hearsay is a valid reason to -”

“I won’t have my boy’s life in the hands of a faggot.”

*That’s a small bundle of sticks, so technically it has no hands.*

“The sexual orientation of the public defenders in my office -”

“He was appointed and now I’m unappointing him.”

*Gee, I wish I could do that with my Columbia House subscription.*

“Your son is nineteen, Miss Newsome. He’s an adult and any change must be at his request.”

“Don’t want him around my son. No telling what he’d try.”

Not really an appropriate time to laugh, considering he was the topic of their demeaning conversation, but a silly, giddy giggle burst its way out anyway.

“So, you’re dumping me because I’m gay? Oh, god! That is the funniest fucking thing I’ve ever heard!”

Stavros frowned, not reaching asshole depth, but pretty darn close. “Mr. Twist, this is hardly the time for levity!”

“I know…but you… I was… almost did… because I… I mean we… and then she… so now I don’t.”

*Just tie a string to my dick, and set me free in the wind! Holy fuck!*.

“Queer and crazy.”

“Miss Newsome, please.”

“It’s OK, sir, please.”

“It’s OK, sir, she can say that. I already know.”

Lureen stood up, fishing in a paratrooper’s backpack sized purse. “We’ve no more need of your services, Mr. Twist, as I have engaged another attorney. He will be contacting you shortly for any information you may contribute to the case.” A business card floated to the floor at Jack’s feet.

“Good day, Mr. Stavros.”

The door slammed, and the room was so silent, the soft trickle of the fountain in the Zen garden was deafening.

“God, John, I…I don’t know what to say. She had no right to speak to you -”

“It’s OK, sir, really.” The card was absently stuck in his pocket. “Least there were no nachos and beer bottles flying.”

“Was there something you wanted to talk to me about? Before Miss Newsome interrupted, you said something about being forced to -”

“Nothing relevant now, sir.” The 1,000 watt smile out shone all the strings of paper lanterns.

Jack left Shogunland still flying, amazed at his bullet dodging, feeling a little guilty, but not enough to go back in there and confess to a problem that homophobia already handled. *Does that make me chicken shit or realistic?* The euphoria over this unexpected windfall of good fortune lasted until the
I’m gay, so I get dumped from a case that I was going to have to dump because I schtupped Ennis which means I’m gay. The irony of that could feed Socrates for a month.

Oh, god! Ennis! He’s going to shit a brick when I tell him –

His buzz farted around in loopy circles to drop lifeless to the floor.

Damn. This huge chunk of good news and I can’t tell the one person who needs to hear it the most because of what this huge chunk of good news pertains to.

Christ! These circular sentences are making my head hurt. I need caffeine.

On his desk, Stephanie’s promise steamed. He tucked the muffin away for later, a different kind of hungry knotting his stomach.

Four months.

The view from his office window was air conditioning units. Beyond that the other wing of the building. On the other side of that a parking lot. It did face in the right direction though, and Jack knew that Brooklyn was out there somewhere.

He tipped Styrofoam east.

Morning, Ennis.

Even with the bobble head Warren Burger his mom gave him as his law school graduation gift staring jurisprudence daggers at him to get his ass back to upholding the Constitution from the dingy gray filing cabinet with the busted bottom drawer in the corner of his institutional beige 5x7 shoebox, Jack couldn’t help but wonder if the opportunity to whisper that greeting next to pillow kissed curls warmed by slumber’s spooning would ever come to pass.

He’s a stomach sleeper. Probably wears pajamas, too. God, I want to see him in the morning! Would start just watching him, the slow rise and fall of his back, his face calm and unperturbed by waking responsibilities. Kiss one shoulder – after running to brush my teeth first, of course – kiss one shoulder, just lips, a brush so to get a hint of his taste. Then maybe his ribs, kiss the mountains, lick the valleys, then up and over to the deep basin at the base of his spine. My tongue hike will continue, pushing aside cotton, delving into the great divide, the pass sultry and narrow, the air tangy with musk. The land would wake and the mountains would part, opening up the landscape. I can see the goal, the entrance winks in anticipation. My tongue creeps softly, not wanting to spook the natives, ever closer, almost there, the tip of my tongue on the rim of –

He swats me away, rolls over and starts to snore.

Head meeting window pane started Jack back to consciousness.

“Shit! Even in my fantasies mornings suck!” Closing his eyes, he tried again.

This time – no pajamas, and we’re both awake, Ennis on his side pushing his ass back into my morning woody. Without a word he takes my hand, the one draped over his chest, and presses it palm flat on his dick which is hard and dripping, coaxing a rhythm that soon draws a gut moan, exhaling morning breath into the mattress hanging just slightly off the box springs from last night’s festivities. With the other hand, he sneaks under his pillow to retrieve one of the several strategically placed tubes – depending on which position or inclination, lube is always just a fingertip brush away
– squeezing a more than generous, but definitely needed, amount in my hand that’s…

Crap… it’s trapped under his shoulders…OK, a bit of fumbling to get it out from underneath without spreading the lube on the wrong body and part…

Now, we’re back together, only a layer of sweat between us, chest to shoulder blade, raging hard-on to delectable ass. Slicked up with one pass, I touch his hip, letting him know that my dick is in position. He pushes back, one long, smooth motion to impale himself on –

……

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I recover from my blackout to start a cadence just like his, easy motions, slow and deep, no hurry, no rush, no other place we’d rather be than right here, connected body and soul. Big four poster holds our undulating bodies secure, just as I do my Ennis. Stroking and thrusting, the tingling thrill of orgasm surging forward. His head turns to me, and our mouths hover close – not kissing, only breathing for one another. Eyes lock and he shudders, spilling across my hand and our Egyptian cotton sheets. I follow him, as always, over the edge, everywhere.

Good morning,” my greeting nuzzles against his neck, and he kisses my palm before spreading it against his heart, sleep inviting him to return.

“Now, that’s a fantasy! Shit, I could write slash!”

“Jack?”

“What? What? Fuck!” He sat down too quickly, the squeaky chair wheels on his chair sliding across the floor, and barking a shin against the corner. “What, Steph? What do you need?”

She smiled, but didn’t mention how long she had been standing in the doorway. “Mr. Stavros would like the Newsome file to be forwarded.”

“Oh, oh, right, right. Just a sec.” He dove for his messenger bag, glad for the crappy metal desk for once. *Fuck! I’m not going to last four months if that was only the first day’s fantasy.* “Here you go. Send it to, uh…” the business card Lureen had so graciously provided came out of his pocket with ease. “Send it to Hatcher, Nevil, Strickland and York in Dallas. Attention Randall Malone.”
Chapter Eleven

“NYPD! Freeze! Freeze, dammit! Police! I said - FREEZE!”

The suspects went in opposite directions, and so did they – as usual, Don to the right, Ennis to the left.

Why do they always run?

“Move, police! Out of the way! Get out, out of the – fucking move! POLICE!”

The suspect fled up the sidewalk, Ennis dodging between upset emo kids aren’t they always?, dancing around pizza delivery guy - not going to make that thirty minutes, pal - stepping over Rolex knock-offs - not bad - Brooklyn bullied, shoved and tossed in his path.

“Out, move – shit!”

Apples and oranges, round healthy stumbling blocks, knocked free from a fruit stand, rolled underfoot

“Police! Stop, fucking stop – get that out of the – goddamnit!”

On his knees, under the swinging piano and out the other side.

Ow, shit! Hated these pants, anyway.

A woman screamed, thrown into a call box post, “Use it if you need assistance!” and Ennis ran around what was left of the dropped lap top.

Up on to a stoop, over the railing to avoid the dog walker and the spider arms full of charges. OK, more gym time needed.

“The end is nigh! Repent! Rep – goddamn!” Suspect plowed through, and Ennis batted away the shower of Watchtowers.

“Hey, Sergeant Del Mar!”

“One wave as he flashed by his favorite hot dog vendor.

Oh, Christ, a running tour of –

“NYPD! Put down your -” The warning metaled out by Poison.

The suspect jumped into traffic, up on the other side no problem.

How did he do that?

“NYPD! Freeze now – FUCK! Down! Everybody, get down!”

Bullet nicked brick mortar stung the side of his face.

 Fucking nuts firing into a - “You OK?”
“Definitely.” He crawled off the woman he tackled to protect, the business card pocket slipped just in time.

“Stay down!”

“That’s what I was hoping.”

Weapon now drawn, Ennis dove - Oh, fuck me! - in to follow his quarry.

**HONK! “SHITHEAD!” BEEP! “What the fuck are you doing?”**

“I’m pursuing here!”

“GET THE FUCK OUT OF THE WAY!”

His street performance not drawing rave reviews from the audience on the sidewalk – *but at least they’re out of the way.*

“That way!” A young boy in black pointed with his Torah.

The alley smelled of cat piss and Stromboli. Five quick shots sparked off the fire escapes.

“For Christ’s sake! Learn to fucking shoot!”

Two more shots, bullets dumpster diving, and the suspect disappeared, ducking through warped boards into darkness.

*FUCK!*

Don skidded to a stop at the other end of the alley, out of breath and pissed off, his prey going to ground in the same place.

*Sometimes these fuckheads make things too easy.*

Two staccato gun waves – *me back, you front.*

Pitch inside the warehouse save for sunshine slicing narrow shards sideways, life cutting in through blacked out windows broken by those with nothing better to do than to take out the vagaries of the human existence on something more down trodden than themselves, Ennis paused just inside in the left and down canted doorway to allow time for eyes to adjust.

*Can’t see shit. Sure as hell can smell it, though. Fuck! Where’s Don? Where the hell is Don? I’m back, he’s front, but where’s front?*

The air was rife with abandonment, and what he could see was a snake’s pit of cables and wires, frayed, tattered, going everywhere, nowhere. Bolts stuck out from floor, walls – rusty spikes that had once embraced tool and die machinery, but now only snatched at clothes and feet, a desperate attempt to draw attention to their once useful purpose. Insulation, folds of desiccated skin, hung down from the ceiling, the stalactites nearly touching brethren formed from trash, either original or contributed later, all forgotten, the crumbling walls not suited even for those without another refuge to turn to.

*Charming place.*

His weapon held close enough to chill cheek with steel, his breathing shallowed to tiny puffs of white, a nuisance in the November chill, Ennis peeked around the splintered wood, squinting into the
murky darkness.

Where’s the FUCK IS DON?

No movement, not even the air.

A ten count. One…two…three…Over in the corner just barely visible now, the outline of an office door ripped from its top mooring, listing dangerously. four…five…six…Boxes, smooshed and soggy victims of a leaky roof, slumped against the far wall, dusted with an anemic snowfall of packing peanuts. seven…eight…nine…Loading dock door with its chain looped and once again rattled, an unwilling participant in the wind’s tug of war.

ten. Slow…and…easy.

The weapon went first, Springfield Swat .45 held securely, hands in the tucked together and firing position, elbows locked, arms extended, each foot fall across the dirty floor directly in front of the other, soft and deliberate, ears attuned to the slightest noise. His seeing eye dog – the grimy wall – guided him deeper into the cavernous warehouse.

Goddamn, I need a flashlight!

His gun swept the empty, finger ready to squeeze back, his eyes detecting nothing but nothing.

Come out, come out, where ever you –

Shattered glass crunched.

Shit!

Could be the perps, could be Don. No way to tell.

The shafts of light rectangled bits of noon out on the floor.

Cold as a well digger’s ass in – fuck! Goddamnit! I just bought – fucking bolt ripped right through to my – great. My face, now my jacket, my shoulder, my – damnit, under the light of those busted windows – knees again. Fucking hotel was our last stop before lunch, too. Going to beat the shit out these fuckers when I –

The looped chain sang a deep monotone.

Perps, Don OR wind. Need a fucking score card to keep up – still can’t see shit – wait - box...box...box...box – head – box...box – arm – box – weapon. Aimed away. Stupid motherfucker doesn’t even know I’m coming. Good for me, VERY bad for him.

Six years and I even know the sound of his farts. Don’s there to the right, near the loading dock, fuckhead one straight ahead, fuckhead two, still unaccounted for.

Outside, a truck lumbering to keep capitalism afloat rumbled by.

Slowly…crawl by crawl – fuck! What the hell? Shit, antifreeze - slimy. Inch by inch…slowly I – keep your fucking feet in. Oh, Christ, wouldn’t that be fucking funny? Might was well just shoot myself.

Rustle, scrape, the scourge of New York City on the wing.

Down! Shitshitshitshitfuckshitshit – OK, OK, OK – he’s not looking, not looking this way…fuck! That was – give him time, time to calm down, time to settle down, time to sit back down …wait…
wait... wait...wa- OK, move forward...closer...don’t even need to see the fuckhead, just follow the smell of onions...crawl...crawl...ruin another shirt...inch – Fuck! Fucking fuck bolts, FUCK! Idiot doesn’t even have...almost...close...the gray matter to...near...just a few more...almost...to turn...

“I believe I told you the freeze, fuckhead,” a fierce whisper.

The barrel of his weapon sunk into the fleshy part of onion man’s back.

“Pissed me off, missed lunch because of –”

Office door kicked free.

“ENNIS!”

The thud of a body hitting dirty concrete, the exclamation point to the shots fired.


Subsisting on the crusty edge of society since bidding farewell to the Juvenile Detention Center’s hospitality thirteen years ago, Adrian Lockhart left behind only a filthy room at the Siesta Motel on East 26th, a novella sized rap sheet with a misdemeanor cast of characters, a sweat stained pawn ticket shoved in between lining and newspaper in his shoe, and the bill for his city funded burial.

Alarms bells had clanged loud the moment Ennis had walked into that Siesta dive two days ago. Adrian was just a petty thief – game day pickpocket, mall parking lot trawler - why then had he been murdered in grandiose style – strung up by his feet and balls, eyes shot out with a high caliber automatic, and left swinging from the fan with a sign duct taped to his forehead, the neatly typed words – “I’m always watching.” – almost unreadable through the blood.

It was a hit, no doubt about it, but a MO that even the guys over in Organized Crime hadn’t recognized. The crime scene wiped clean except for the detritus of a wasted life, the only leads – the pawn ticket turned in for a chintzy, gold-plated bracelet with Italian charms, the manufacturer bankrupt so no way to trace it, probably pinched anyway, and bullets that matched an unsolved homicide in the Bronx.

And the witness list was a short one, too. The hotel desk clerk thinking maybe he remembered seeing two tall white, brown-haired guys drive away in a blue-black-brown sedan, and sorry, couldn’t leave my post to get the license number and how was I supposed to know to do that anyway and I don’t want no trouble – Ennis and Don had started back at square one, Adrian’s hotel room, thinking perhaps something little was overlooked in the clean-up.

Seemed those two, tall, brown-haired guys had indeed left something behind after all. The meeting on the stairs was less than amicable.

Street chase on foot, warehouse shooting, the one in the hospital brought down by Don, the one in the morgue by supposed friendly fire, with the case now measured by the shushes of a respirator.

“The gun’s a wash - the serial number filed off - but ballistics will try to match the bullets with those pulled out of Lockhart’s brain, fingerprints and pics run through the national database – leave it
alone, Ennis.”

“All that running and we got shit.” The 7 button wondered what the hell it had done to piss this guy off so much. “Just a motel key card and a valet stub, the contents of the perp’s pockets.”

“And the Dentyne Ice, though I doubt that’s traceable, and stop messing with that!”

“Ouch!” The tape pulled out a chunk of dirty blonde hair. “Fuck!” ennis stormed off as the elevator rattletrapped open. “This comes off now!”

Don hurried to catch up. “The doc said you were supposed to leave that on!”

“Can’t see shit.” Fingertips gingerly probed the dotted line wound cleaned and butterflied at the hospital. The smile didn’t hide the wince at all. “Better already.”

“Once more with feeling, Ennis.”

“Don,” Bernard stuck his head out into the hallway, shirt damp despite the less than stellar job the building’s heaters were doing in the fight against the cold. “Your wife’s on the phone, or I think it’s Belinda.”

“Huh?”

“Sure sounded like her when she said, ‘Tell Detective Wroe that Miss Naughty Brown Sugar is calling.’”

Don coughed, studied his shoes, his wife the only living soul who could turn the 6’3”, 265 pounds former Marine into a stuttering adolescent. “She, uh, well, we, see, tonight is, uhm, the anniversary of, you know, our first date.”

“Oh, crap!” Bernard ducked back in.

“Naughty Brown Sugar?”

“Her screen name.” Buying a Snickers from the vending machine not a good embarrassment cover. “Met on one of those, you know, web sites. Every year we set up, uh, a date like that first time, go back to, back to the place where we, well, met.”

So that’s what a happy marriage is like.

“Do I want to know yours?”

“Supersized,” mumbled around peanuts, caramel and nougat.

“How comes I’m just hearing about this dirty little sex game now?” Ravenous ‘cause a raisin bagel for breakfast doesn’t stretch ‘til two, Ennis contemplated a Milky Way - maybe a Kit Kat? - then figured chewing would only exacerbate his headache. Hell, hurts even to think. Ow! Fuck! See? “Shit, you even told me about Rush Week at Georgetown. Would pay big bucks to see you in those coconuts.”

“Always took a personal day before. Wanted to concentrate on Belinda only.” His smile told the same story. “Leave the streets where they belong.”

I’ve never smiled like that in my life…or maybe I have.

“But, not today?”
“Couldn’t concentrate even on Miss Naughty with this investigation going nowhere.” The Snickers wrapper slammed into the trash can, the lid spinning twice. “And I sure helped a shitload with that today, didn’t I?”

A hand on his shoulder, about as demonstrative as the partners got. “Back at the warehouse, you saved my ass, Don.”

“Saving my partner’s ass, that’s my job.” This smile was signed with friendship. "Scrawny though it may be.”

*That’s not what I was told. Ow!*

“Thanks…for just doing your job.” And a squeeze for emphasis.

“Don! Miss Naughty is wondering whether you want starch in your underwear this week!”

Ennis winked. “Hey, that’s Supersized to you, Bernard!”

“Shit, I never should have told – coming!”

Dingy hallway empty, Ennis made a beeline for the cracked porcelain fountain, with the help of tepid water, knocking back the pain pill he said wouldn’t be necessary, but stuck in his pocket to humor the ER nurse anyway.

*Christ! That tastes like sour chalk! Brain’s pounding spikes out my eye sockets, knees sting, smell fuckhead’s blood on me, jacket’s ripped –*

He glowered into the squad room, the chip from a really lousy day since six this morning riding like James Cameron on his shoulder.

- *case is at a fucking stand still, got another one of those excruciatingly tedious and unproductive appointments this evening, STILL no lunch…and now somebody’s dumped their shit on my desk!*

“What the hell is this?” He held up the messenger bag and black trench coat invading his personal space. “Who the fuck does this stuff belong to?”

Bernard stopped negotiations with the florist to get two dozen salmon colored roses delivered before the end of his wife’s birthday today. “Some PD. Waltzed in here, like he fucking knew you or something. Just dumped his stuff on your desk and went back to Four.”

Ennis did the very same thing only faster.

*Oh, my god! Jack! Jack’s here! Here!*

“What the fuck do you want?”

Even Aguirre slouching there couldn’t bring Ennis down as he bum rushed the two-way.

*Not with Jack on the other –*

“Who the hell is that?”

“How should I know?” Aguirre spit into the corner. “Some PD puke.” A reptilian smile slithered round, making itself at home. “What, you were expecting someone else?”

Forty-five at least, pudgy with round glasses, the PD looked like he hadn’t smiled since Cheers shut
its doors.

No Jack. Fuck.

“No, I just…uh…” The valiant try to keep the disappointment out of his voice a miserable failure. “Why’d he dump his shit on my desk?”

“I dunno know. One horizontal surface is a good as the next.”

“I wanted to watch him, watch him when he didn’t know I was looking, watch him move, and smile and schmooze…just see his face.

“Tell that guy to get his stuff off my desk, OK?”

“Sure, Del Mar, whatever you say.”

In the hallway, the wall became Ennis’ prop as anticipation laced with desire drained out leaving a dirty ring of queasiness.

Eighty-three days! Eighty-three fucking days!

Eighty-three days and eighty-three nights on that fucking couch, staring at the ceiling, needing to sleep, begging for sleep, but not getting anywhere close until I…

Eighty-three times…no, eighty-nine. There were those mornings I didn’t have to go in until late.

Eighty-nine times I wrung it out, closing my eyes, hand finding my dick, thinking of him, remembering, reliving every second—Jack at the top of the stairs, Jack across the table, Jack screaming mad, Jack sleeping sound, Jack laughing loud, Jack saying goodbye - sheet to catch the evidence, pillow to catch his name…eighty-nine wanks on two days of memories stretched thin…

The plaster gave up without a fight, boot sinking in steel-toe deep.

Want to make new memories…

...in the shower, hot water dripping off my hands on Jack’s hips, licking his cheek while the other one stays plastered to the tile, my balls slapping his ass, driving in slow and deep, my name a soggy moan on his lips…

...back seat of my car, his legs up over my shoulders, head bouncing off the arm rest, watching him jerk off, the same rhythm as my thrusts, laughing out my name as we come together…

...in a field somewhere, me in the middle of a blanket, Jack on top, stretched up and back, sun haloing his hair, my hands on his ass, his cock dripping into my navel while he rides mine, thrashing wild, screaming my name to the clouds…

...on his side with me behind, arm over Jack’s chest, fingers mixed up, legs are too, me softly kissing his ear, too tired from the daily shit for anything more but a whisper—“Night, Ennis.” before going to sleep…

His pocket buzzed. Without even looking, he knew.

“What do you want, Alma?”

“Where are you?”
“The Caymans.” Sour sarcasm and sourer mood slumped against his newly remodeled wall. “And you?”

“Not funny, Ennis. You promised to be home by now, and traffic is always -”

“Imagine, the city's criminal element not following your schedule, the fucking bastards.”

“I wish you would watch your language, and I wish you'd take this seriously. What's the point if I'm the only one trying?” St. Alma in full martyr mode. “Aren't we worth even a little effort from you? For our daughters at least?”

ZING! Weak spot gouged yet again. “Yes, Alma, I'll be home in twenty.”

Fuck. Stretched thin memories maybe all I've got left.

*******

“Ennis, is that -”

Shoot. I'm supposed to stop doing that. Give him space. Don't crowd, don't smother.

Wet nails waved frantically in the kitchen.

Trust is the foundation on which a solid marriage is built. Yes, but what if nobody wants to live there anymore?

“Told you I'd be home in time.”

“God, what is that awful smell?” The chair squeaked the linoleum as Alma fled the coppery stench. “And what happened to your face?”

“A dead guy's blood, and I cut myself shaving.” The ripped jacket plopped on the chair. “Going to take a shower.”

“Better be quick. I will not be embarrassed by arriving late again.” But, he was not there anymore, so Alma's long suffering sigh was for her French tips only. “Welcome home, Ennis. Nice to see you, too.”

Despite three months of marriage counseling, a new day shift job in Central Supply - Thanks to Bill in Human Resources. He's such a sweet man!, - and more compromises on her part than she had shoes, the gnat of frustration that nothing had changed buzzed in Alma's ear. Ennis was still uncommunicative, moody, worked too much and the several attempts at rekindling their sex life, as directed by Chapter Six in their “Marriage Math: One + One Can Equal One!” workbook, brought to light a side of her husband that she genteelly, and for her own self-worth, tried to forget.

If that's what he wants, then he can just stay on the couch.

Like Dr. Cartwright had confided privately after her last session - Ennis had missed that one, too - even when present, he only brought the motions, not his Emotions. Like he was just waiting for –
His jacket buzzed the Formica – once...twice, then rang old telephone style. “Oh - oh – shoot!”
Gingerly – till a little tacky and if I bump them now it would leave a ridge and then I'd have to take
the polish off and start again, and that would take time, making us late for the appointment, but I
can't go out like this, a lady never goes out with naked nails! - Alma used two fingertips to pull the
cell phone out.

“Hello? No, this is his wife. May I ask who...no, he can't come to the phone right - uh, a message?”
Yes, I mind! But, a cop’s wife really couldn’t too much. “Of course, hold on a second.” Phone
trapped between cheek and shoulder, she picked a napkin out of the holder with her file, and held the
eyebrow pencil lightly with two white tips.

“OK...uh huh...right...yes...will my husband know what this pertains... whom should I say ...OK
...right...sure I will...goodbye.”

“MOM! Junior pissed off her science teacher today by melting a whole tray of Petri dishes!”

“Oh, thanks, Franny. Put it on the frigging message board in Times Square, why don't you?”

The sibling rivalry ruckus barreled down the hall, and Alma dropped everything, nail perfection
hurrying to referee. “Girls, girls! Proper young women do not use those vulgar words.”

Abandoned cell phone bounced down to leather jacket, the eyebrow pencil rolled until it found
mascara, and the napkin floated the phone message – table to chair to floor, finding a cozy hiding
spot by the corner baseboard.

Time's up. Hauling will commence on the twenty-fourth.

Jack
Chapter Twelve

Wading in the shallow end of the gene pool again.

Leaning forward so his pastrami on rye, extra mayo, pickle on the side, would splurt down to the napkin and not his lap, Jack’s months long routine of eating supper at his desk continued without missing a beat. Right hand busy with Katz’s finest, a legal pad covered with a shorthand developed in college and decipherable by himself, mom and a team of Egyptologists from the University of Cairo only, canted a sharp angle to accommodate his hook while his case load fanned out above.

Let’s see, which one, which one? Got the middle school teacher, the ad exec or the homeless guy. The cops at SVU are creepy, Narcs have no sense of humor, so by default – Jesse Whitfield, tacky memorabilia shoplifter.

Caught red-balled with an Empire State Building paperweight down his pants, Jesse Whitfield had kept himself in Mad Dog 20/20 and Nathan’s hot dogs by jacking knick-knacks that tourists buy for the snow globe exchange with co-workers and relatives near the bottom on their shopping list. I heart NYC bumper stickers, Times Square fridge magnets, Ellis Island key chains, all manufactured overseas and sent stateside to end up in the back of America’s junk drawer. Jesse would pinch a dirty ragged Army fatigue jacket full, then park on a busy corner selling New York memories at discount prices.

This being his first felony – the combined retail price of the items found in his palatial cardboard box under the Triborough Bridge overpass totaling over five grand – Boy, those foam Statue of Liberty hats really add up! - the DA was pressing for 5 to 7, possibility of parole in three, which Jack thought rather extreme considering it was a non-violent crime that hurt only the crap peddlers bottom line.

He wanted to use the sympathy angle – Gulf war vet reduced to stealing to eat – but that would only sway judge and jury if they could hear the heart wrenching story of hero to homeless in Jesse’s own words.

But, since he’s not talking, even to me…

A scintillating first interview, all of Jack’s questions received the same answer – a belch that sang the praises of that Riker’s delicacy, pork and beans. The next day, beef stroganoff.

Note to self: Don’t go on taco night.

Due in court in two weeks, Jesse seemed determined to let the DA’s offer plow over him without uttering a word in his defense. Jack dropped gel pen and crust, one rolling towards the other, frustrated that once again his legal practice would consist of showing up and standing there.

I’d try interpretive dance if I thought it would help. Christ, I need a vacation!

The pickle spear hovered a breath from his mouth.

Got a week coming up soon. Should go see mom. Got to make sure it coincides with His ice fishing trip, though. Spend a couple of days up there freezing my ass off pretending my ass doesn’t want to be some place else, with someone else. Weather's fucking wonderful, wish I wasn't here.

No offense, Mom, but if given the choice between a week dancing around my sexuality or a week celebrating it in the most obvious ways, the contest would never make good reality TV.
A week with Ennis. What would I do with a week alone with Ennis?

What wouldn’t I do with a week alone with Ennis? Let him get dressed for one. I’ve never actually seen him naked, not all the way naked, standing there in all his ripped glory, wearing nothing but a boner and a lustful chocolate twinkle. Ooo! I’d make him turn around so I could see his ass. Never beheld the perfection that is his ass without benefit of clothing. Ass in jeans, ass in robe, but not completely naked. Could spend more than a week worshipping at that temple. And while I’m on my knees I could…

- wonder what the fuck is going on. Cause it’s been two weeks and he hasn’t called me back and his wife answered his phone…If he has changed –

- “I’m not going anywhere without you.” Remember, that’s what he said, remember that, “I’m not going anywhere without you.”

He sucked in, the sour juice pooling against his lips.

A week-long naked Ennis needs a place other than New York to truly appreciate the gift. A different place, a special place…a cabin in the Catskills maybe? Necking under a mound of comforters, BJ’s by firelight, in his lap stirring up more motion than the hot tub jets, screaming loud enough to scare bears.

But, we can do all that here in the city, though. Even the bears part if we go to the right gay bar. Need exotic…need…

Tongue tickled the seeds, rocking one back and forth until freedom. It slid easy down his throat.

…warm, where you get sand in your shorts and rum in your antacid. Where everything smells like Hawaiian Tropic and everyone smiles. White sand and burning sunsets. Azure water and sultry breezes. We could just lie in bed all day…all night…nobody to bother us, nobody that needs us…just each other –

- and a carry-on sized supply of lube, ‘cause cocoa butter gives me hives and once I get Ennis naked there’s no way in hell I’m letting him out of bed - no way in hell I’m ever letting him leave me again – but, you can’t carry on lube anymore – thanks a bunch Al Qaeda – so, we’ll just pack it in our suitcases. Less room for clothes, but fuck clothes, fuck suitcases, don’t need anything except…

He sucked the pickle all the way in, holding it there, teeth scraping lightly on the underside.

…mosquito netting shadows drape lazy gray, the peeking moonlight sharpening the smooth line between pristine white sheets and sweaty tanned skin…

Once, twice, the spear rode out waves of motion, Jack swallowing, lips pressed tight.

…teakwood slats gouge, but ordered hands remain stretched above a body captured yet treasured, pleasure lavished as the giver takes – a salty lick of a knee, a firm stroke up hardened flesh, an always for you smile – motion of bodies as one constant and eternal as the schussing sea whispers…

Fuck! Enough of this romance shit, I want hard core porn!

He’s giving it to me like there’s no tomorrow, up on his knees, head back, arms around my thighs holding me in place, neck straining, balls slamming, hips bruising, his face all scrunches up, sweat flying, ‘Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!’ tearing out of his throat, I’m riding his cock rough, my ass up off the bed, shoulders slipping against the mattress, matching him, daring him to go at me harder, pulling him in deeper, “Fuck me, goddamnit! Ennis! FUCK ME!” fingers scratching welts on his back,
knees squeezing his ears, my cock bouncing against my stomach, bed shaking, world shattering –

“Hope that pickle’s appreciatin’ your technique.”

Spit out surprised, it landed on the tips of a pair of alligator cowboy boots.

“Oh, shit, uh, I mean, Christ, I’m…” Jack bounded around his desk to claim his spitty missile, tossing it away with none of the nonchalance he tried to project, landing in the trash can with a bland metal clang. “I was just, well, you know…” Giving head to a cucumber, idiot! “Never mind. I’m John Twist.” Pickle hand extended. Beat. Pickle hand swiped on pants leg. Hand out for another try.

“Randall Malone. I’m the attorney Miss Newsome hired t’ take her son’s case off a your hands.”

WHOO! WHOO! WHOO! Incoming! Incoming! Bogies at three o’clock!

Jack’s gaydar lit up like the twelve days of Christmas and all eight of Chanukah combined.

“Have you actually met her?”

“Old family friends. She n’ my wife, LaShawn, were sorority sisters back in college.”

Meeting a colleague for the first time, a fellow attorney, one that belonged to a well-respected and high profile firm while representing the Public Defender’s office of New York County, was not an occasion for levity. The belly laugh that burst out had its own ideas of professional decorum though.

“And the baracu, uh, Miss Newsome, picked you to replace me?”

Still attached to Jack at the palm, Malone smiled, and though most of it was lost underneath a face full of red curly hair, it confirmed that his detection device was in perfect working order, too.

“She wanted someone she was familiar with representin’ her son in this difficult time.”

“So…” Needing the handshake to be over in the worst way, Jack pulled away. Malone gave him a squeeze first, however. “That’s the explanation for dumping me? Wanting Texas instead of New York?”

“That, n’ Miss Newsome felt the limited resources available t’ a public defender would be a detriment t’ her son’s defense.”

Another laugh was bulling its way to the front of the line. “And nothing else?”

He frowned, tipping the gray Stetson forward. “Not that I know of. Why do you ask?”

“Oh, no reason. Just wondering, that’s all. Please, have a seat, Mr. Malone.” The return-to-his-chair turn gave the perfect cover for one hell of a face cracking smile. Lurene canned me because I’m gay, only to get a lawyer who’s as queer as a three dollar bill. Even in Texas, there’s some justice to be had.

“Please, call me Randall, better yet, Randy. More personal, more friendly.” He pulled the cracked plastic piss yellow chair right up to the front of Jack’s desk. “And, can I call you John? Or how ’bout Jack? See, my cousin’s wife’s nephew’s a John, but folks just call him -”

“No. No Jack.” The refusal sharp as the uneasy tingle at the back of Jack’s neck. “John will be fine.”

That took an acre or two off of his Texas sized ego. “OK…John it is then.”
“What can I help you with… Randall?” Desk neat-up job consisted of shoving and piling, take-out trash swept into a drawer. “I only worked the Newsome case for less than three days. All my notes were included in the information mailed to you back in August.”

“I know, I know.” The Bosca briefcase flipped open on his lap, gold tipped leather now binding LD’s case file. “’N’ I’ve read every word. Just wanted a chance t’ talk face t’ face. Up close n’ personal. You know?”

Yeah, I know, for Lurene told you the real reason why she fired me, didn’t she? In his stomach, Katz’s premier sandwich kicked into a fast mambo. “Should have stuck with Gmail. No new lights will be shedding ‘cause you’re sitting in my office.”

“You’d be surprised what can come from a little one on one.” Randall leaned on the desk and his innuendo hard.

Let me just say this now – Ewwwwww!

“Mr. Malone, you have my notes -”

“Hey, what happened to Randall?”

Bet his wife says the same thing every time he walks out the door.

“- there’s nothing I can, or wish to add. I suggest you continue your information gathering elsewhere.” Exit, stage left. Lap top shut down, case files messenger bag tucked, Jack reached for his overcoat – the universal body language for ‘I’m leaving now, so get the fuck out!’ “Now, if you don’t mind -”

Hearing must have been on the selective side today for he completely ignored Jack’s request. “Like the police? Seems that Sgt. Earnest Donlevy screwed up somethin’ somewhere along the way.”

“Ennis! Ennis Del Mar!” The need to protect moved faster than Jack’s decorum, and even the pickle in the trash can noticed. Step back, breathe…breathe. God, I hope I’m not blushing, too! “The investigating officer’s name is Sergeant Ennis Del Mar, and from what I could tell in the short time the Newsome case was mine, his job was solid.”

“Then why the Motion a Discovery?”

“Just did that to yank the ADA’s chain. Smug and I don’t get along very well. Now, I really need to be -”

“I learned early on never t’ trust the police. That badge they carry isn’t called a shield for nothin’.”

“This isn’t Texas, Mr. Malone. Here we do things sans a big stick and a beer can.”

And that took a couple of quarts out of his ten gallons. “So… you spoke to this Ennis Del Mar,” the emphasis loaded down with insinuating baggage.

Like a bratty child. “Briefly, yes.” A bratty child who’s 6’ 3” at least and outweighs me by two Calista Flockharts

“And your take on him?”

Last one was in the middle of Daniel’s loft. “His exemplary record speaks for itself. But, why don’t you talk to him yourself.” Sorry, Ennis. At the door, Jack reached for the light switch, the thought of
dark, alone and Malone staying his anxious to leave hand. *Once again – ewwwww!* “You’ll find him over at the Eight-first Precinct in Brooklyn. Any cab can take you there.”

“Nah, got the company limo at my disposal.”

*Bully for you.* “Good luck, break a leg and all that stuff, Mr. Malone. It’s time for me to go home.”

“Oh? Oh!” As if this was the first time he had heard of it, Malone played surprised to the balcony. “Sorry. Didn’t mean t’ over stay my welcome.”

*Don’t recall any welcome being involved in this.*

“Really do hate travelin’, ‘specially t’ a city where I don’t know anybody.” No rush was happening in his pack up. “Know what I mean?”

Left to right leg fidgeting. “Don’t do that much, uhm, traveling.”

“Only been up to Albany before.”

Jack actually had a pang of genuine pity for the man.

“Heard so much ‘bout the Big Apple n’ here I am with a night n’ nothin’ t’ do. Was kinda lookin’ forward t’ seein’ some a those places you only read ‘bout.”

“Take a tour, there’s hundreds of them.”

A cat stalking an unsuspecting canary smiled. “Was thinkin’ more a somethin’ on the personal side.”

*Do I have a sign on my forehead? Down Low itches scratched here? FUCK! Worked hard on cleaning out the only closet I want.*

“Where you staying? What hotel?”

A derisive snort. “The Four Seasons, a course.”

*Money doesn’t compensate for everything, asshole!* “Then may I suggest you try Marquee over in the Bowery. I’m sure you’ll find exactly what you’re looking for.”

“N’ you know what I’m lookin’ for?”

*From one gay man to another, it’s as plain as the erection in your pants.* The pastrami was begging to rejoin its pickle side dish. “Oh, I have a pretty good idea, Mr. Malone.”

“Oh, yeah?” The canary was devoured.

Yeah. You couldn’t wait to get your closeted ass on a plane to New York to hook up with that faggot PD expecting to get some cock.

*Well, this magnificent specimen is spoken for – I think. And even if it wasn’t – which it is – maybe – I wouldn’t bring it within National Debt range of your delusional Texas ass, and neither is your Rhode Island poking out there getting anywhere near mine.*

“Something that I cannot, nor will provide. Now, please *leave.*”

“Was only talkin’ ‘bout dinner.”
The hang dog really was exceptional, and Jack felt like applauding. *Yeah, sure you were, and Iraq is still lousy with WMDs.*

“But, if you have somethin’ more pressin’ t’ attend to…or someone…”

*“Not going anywhere without you.” “Yes…” “Figure four months.” “…maybe…” “My husband can’t come to the phone right now.” “…no.”*

“She there was this BBQ place over by the hotel, and -”

*Oh, Christ! They must give closet cases a discount! “Some other time perhaps.” Shit! Damn my good manners! Now, he’ll be thinking I –*

*“OK, that’s great!” Hang dog became Labrador puppy complete with tongue. “I’ll be leaving tomorrow for the holidays.”*

*See? Fuck! Why must I always be right? It’s a curse!*

*“- but I’ll be back next week.”*

*“Be sure to call first and make an appointment this time.” So I know to be gone.*

Small office means even smaller doorways, and when Malone joined Jack, it shrunk around them Alice in Wonderland style. “You got a car, or can I give you a ride?”

Straight ahead, all Jack saw was a bolo tie. *Thought I had explained myself on that me taking a ride bullshit.* “No, thank you. I’ll just take a cab.”

“OK. We’ll just leave the backseat sharin’ until next time. Have a great Thanksgiving…Jack.” The dick brush was completely gratuitous, giving the Texan his New York thrill and Jack about thirty seconds to rush to the men’s room.

*Damn! And I paid $12.53 for that sandwich!* 

The last one to leave, again, Jack turned off the lights and headed home alone. Again.

*Feel like a goddamn piece of meat, worth even less than pastrami.* Gravity seemed to increase the push on Jack’s shoulders exponentially with each of the five flights down. *But, pastrami at least has rye to hold it close.*

The building was dark, the sky was dark, and as he stood, messenger bag and spirits at his feet waiting for a cab to take him home to Roku, Lean Cuisine and watching his cell not ring, Jack inside was darker still.

*“But, if you have somethin’ pressin’ t’ attend to.” The accent was even broader in Jack’s head then Malone’s. Yeah, I’d like t’ have some pressin’ t’ do, but he won’t call me the fuck back!*

A cab passed him by preferring the Rastafarian on the corner.

*OK, I was early. OK, almost a month early. OK, over a month early. But, until Texas came walking into my office holding his dick in his hand, LD and the case had vanished. Nada. Zilch. Nothing. Not even in the parking garage smoking lounge. There was no need to wait the full four months, ‘cause people have moved on, so I figured we could, too.*

*And I expected him to call me back all happy and ready to go, ducks lined up outside the divorce lawyer’s office, lose ends making their way into tight square knots. Like we planned. Like he said he*
would do.

The shout of the street lights masked the falling snow, an early holidays treat melting to diamonds on Jack’s eyelashes.

*She answered. His wife answered his cell phone, took my message, and didn’t so much as bat an eyelash. So, he’s still at home...with her. He still should have called me back. Programmed my number in while he was sleeping. It’s there in his address book, or in his incoming calls. He has my number and should have called me back!*

Checker finally took pity on him, tire chains screeching up to the curb. *What if he doesn’t want to call me back, doesn’t want to talk to me? What if he saw my message, crumpled it up, and threw it away? “Not going anywhere without you?”.*

“Goddamn!” The cab door slam lessened none of his anger.

“Where to, buddy?”

“Twenty-fourth and Tenth.”

*_He never had any intention of leaving his wife. Just wanted a weekend of cock and Jack Twist, Manhattan’s most gullible gay man, was more than willing to oblige. Fucking son of a bitch! Ennis saw my message, had a good hard heterosexual laugh with his wife and then –_

Jack actually heard God music right there on West Broadway in the back of a stinky Checker cab with his feet squishing on something he could have sworn was moving at 8:17 at night.

“But, what if he didn’t get the message?”

“Huh?”

Scooching forward on the vinyl bench seat stained with what Jack really didn’t want to know, he used Herman Duncan – or so said the license posted – and the scratched Plexiglas as his sounding board.

“What if he didn’t get the message?”

Herman shrugged. “What message?”

“The one I left for him two weeks ago.”

“And he hasn’t called you back?” Now a Herman tsk. “Sorry to say this, buddy, but I don’t think he’s gonna.”

“I know, that’s what I thought, too, but if he didn’t get the message, he doesn’t know that I left a message, so there was no reason for him to call me back because the four months aren’t up yet.”

“Four months?”

“Time spent in exile.”

“Exile where?”

“Well, he’s in Brooklyn.”

“Gotcha.”
The back seat was too cramped to contain Jack’s mood anymore. After two weeks of fighting the hurricane winds of doubt, the sky was clear blue and calm again.

“Hmmm.” Tapping Herman fingers on the window. “And why didn’t he get the message?”

“I don’t know!” The possibilities were stacking up faster than Jack could sort. “It got lost, it never got to him, Alma never took it down in the first place.”

“Alma?”

“His wife.” An eye roll back to the Herman glare in the rear view mirror. “Yes, I’m gay, and so is he.”

“OK, OK, buddy, none of my business.” Herman’s hands off the steering wheel was none too comforting. “But, if it’s like you said, and this guy didn’t get the message, then he’s probably over there right now wondering why the hell you haven’t called him.”

Off the rack – *Ennis never received my message* – yet the fit was perfect, August born faith leap conclusion flannel jammies comfortable. “Ennis is over the Bridge right now waiting, waiting for me. He’s just got to be!”

“So, we still going to Chelsea?”

“Nope.”

“Let me guess…Brooklyn?”

“I’ve got a message to deliver in person.”
Chapter Thirteen

The night before Thanksgiving and Alma was having second thoughts.

They’re not all going to fit.

Each chair received its designation as her pride squeezed around the white elephant determined that one of the few sentences her husband said to her this week would not be ‘I told you so.’

Me, so I can get to the kitchen…Junior…Mom and right beside Dad…than at the heaaaaaad… A tight fit between table and window sill. Ennis…Franny…Dr. Cartwright…and then Bill. “There.”

Other years this night had always meant fridge finagling to make room for Tupperware bowls of three bean salad - her contribution to the family feast that always rotated between mom and two sisters - and filling up on envy so she would be too stuffed to enjoy Thanksgiving in a familial home big enough to hold two of hers. Tomorrow would be different, though partly because her sisters were doing in-laws this year and also their counselor had asked if she could observe the Del Mar dynamic in a more relaxed environment hoping for some insight into how to revive their flatlined marriage.

Relaxed, my foot. Short arms required shoving, the autumn themed placemats slipping easily across the table, then to the floor. “Crap!” How am I supposed to relax with dinner to prepare, and serve? And what about during the meal? I’ll either have my parents talking all about Sally’s new house in White Plains and Susan’s trip to New Zealand, one daughter brooding over a no to a belly button ring, the other just not speaking at all and a husband whose dinner conversation is less than appetizing. And with Dr. Cartwright watching it all. Should have bought more Tums.

The quickest route – under the table on hands and knees to retrieve the wayward decorations. But, Bill will be here and he’ll talk to me even if no one else will. And listen. He does to everything I say. Laughs at my jokes, asks for my opinions. He brings me coffee and walks me to my car. He always gives me respect and kindness. Snatched placemats in hand, she contorted out of the crowded corner. Now, that’s the way a woman should be treated, that’s the way a husband –

BUZZZZZZZZZZZZZ!

“OW!” Table edge, meet Alma’s head. “Shoot, shoot, shoot, darn, shoot!”

BUZZZZZZZZZZZZ!

“Ennis!” Fastest escape route – back the same way.

BUZZZZZ! BUZZZZZ! BUZZZZZZ!

“Ennis! There’s someone at -”

“In the kitchen, for crying out loud! You’re closer!”

A fist of ball of autumnal splendor accompanied her to the front hallway.

BUZZ! BUZZ! BUZZ! BUZZ! BUZZ! BUZZ! BUZZ! BUZZ!

Certainly impatient AND rude, coming by – step over the laundry – this time of night. I’m in no mood –
“Yes?” Silence. “Hello?”

“Uhm, yes,” from the speaker nervous trepidation, “Is Ennis home?”

Now, why does that voice sound familiar?

“Ennis! There’s someone downstairs for you!”

“I’m still busy here, Alma! Who is it?”

The wad of placemats rubbing her head bump helped neither the pain nor the irritation over this interruption.

“Who is this, please?”

“Uhm… Jack…Jack Twist.”

Now, why does that name sound familiar?

“It’s Jack somebody! Do you want me to tell him to -”

Brush-off aborted by her husband’s almost instantaneous arrival. His thumb replaced hers on the button, his body by the speaker.

“J-Jack?”

“Ennis.”

The thirty year old equipment was a piece of antiquated crap, but the emotion behind that one word came through crystal clear.

“Jack.”

And so did that.

Jack…Jack Twist…where do I know that – uh oh.

“Sorry to come by this late, but I was, uhm, just in the neighborhood, so I thought I would -”

“I’m buzzing you through. Seventh floor.”

What? He can’t be serious? “Ennis, is this really the time for visitors? We’ve got so much -”

That whine cut short by a napkin.

“When were you going to tell me about this?” Dust clung to the paper edges, but no denying her eyebrow pencil script. “Huh, Alma? When?”

Suddenly she didn’t want his undivided attention. “I forgot.”

“You fucking forgot?”

Her husband’s anger over one stupid message that was rather moot now because the guy was on his way up zinged her already Thanksgiving pin-pricked nerves. “I’m sorry, OK?”
“We’ll talk about this later.”

Squeak, grind, slam.

“Well…just fine!” Alma stood her ground against the closed door. “At least you’ll be talking to me then!”

Tears were counterproductive at this point. One, because as Dr. Cartwright had told her, the only thing gained by wallowing in our weak moments was a snotty nose, two, there was no one there to witness them. No matter how justified they are. Over a stupid napkin for pity sake! And three, she had an apartment to engineer onto a dazzling impression level and her husband’s latest snit be damned.

Let’s see, what next? Got to make this dumpy apartment look good. Better than good, great, fabulous, like my mother would. Table or turkey? Napkins or nut bowls? Wax the kitchen floor or shampoo the carpet? No. Mounds of dirty clothes in the front is not the way to greet your guests. “Junior! Franny! Going down to the laundry room!”

In response, disinterested silence.

Squeak, grind, slam.

The empty hallway was frown inducing. Said he would meet this Jack guy at the elevator. Which was another bonus for hauling the overflowing, broken wicker downstairs, the cumbersome weight making her drunk bump down the wall. Want to see this guy, this Jack Twist, the person whose messages are oh, SO important and has permission to drop by anytime he pleases…and can make Ennis smile like I haven’t seen him do in…well, never.

Arms burning, the basket dropped to the floor with a creak, Alma intending to kick her load into the elevator on seven then back out again in the basement.

“That is if it gets ever here.”

With one hand she pushed the button a third time, the other counting quarters in her pocket to make sure the change was sufficient to cover both washer AND detergent since Ennis had been ‘too busy’ to stop on his way home from work.

Expects me to do everything, like he’s the only one with – “Come on, come on! I don’t have time for this!” Got the china and dusting and gourd arrangements and now laundry and –

The elevator doors opened.

**********

The night before Thanksgiving and Ennis was having second thoughts.

This was a mistake. Should have moved out right away, told the truth, come clean. Been nothing but a goddamn waste of time. Two times a week, three and a half months of real expectations, non-judgmental listening, battle choosing, forgiveness coupons. Only thing reborn was Alma’s hope that
one-seventy-five an hour would fix something that wasn’t properly built in the first place. All a charade and now I get to wear my mask and play my part to a bigger audience.

Blanket, sheet and pillow were to go behind the couch – Alma’s shrill demand for any evidence that all was not wedded bliss in the Del Mar household be stashed away from the condescending eyes of tomorrow’s visiting dignitaries.

Yeah, like it’s not apparent to a corpse.

Reading glasses shoved under the den’s furniture wouldn’t be too much of a stretch should nosy in-laws go searching. Likewise with pencils, pens and highlighter, could all be crossword puzzle accoutrements, just normal items found beneath everyone’s couch.

But, not what I’ve been hiding. Where the fuck am I going to put it now?

Den - too risky for discovery no matter what nook or cranny. Bedroom – Alma’s prints all over everything. Same with kitchen, and the bathroom was just too small. Only one bastion of Ennis solitude remained.

Right. Car.

Out to the kitchen to retrieve his keys.

BUZZZZZZZZZZZZ!

“FUCK!”

Yellowed taped boxes of wedding china stopped his leg’s forward momentum, while upper body executed a perfect dive – degree of difficulty 3.2 – arms jarred by the impact, hands squeaking linoleum, bag, contents and receipt skidding out in a perfect line.

BUZZZZZZZZZZZZ!

“Ennis!”

BUZZZZ! BUZZZZ! BUZZZZZZ!

“Ennis! There’s someone at -”

The scramble to collect his night time reading material certainly was nothing close to poetry in motion.

Oh, shit! Oh, fuck! Fucking fuck – “In the kitchen, for crying out loud! You’re closer!” – fuck, FUCK!

BUZZ! BUZZ! BUZZ! BUZZ! BUZZ! BUZZ! BUZZ! BUZZ!

The kick off the china box just may have busted the sugar bowl that had lost its mate, creamer, when Junior was four. It propelled him forward to bag. The book required a belly flop – Gotcha!

BUZZBUZZBUZZBUZZBUZZBUZZBUZZBUZZ –

- the resulting gust of wind wafting the receipt out of reach and under the table.

“Goddamnit!”
He could have left it there and been content with just what he’d been able to capture, if it weren’t for his mother-in-law’s penchant for obsessive Monk neatness.

Martha will wash the dishes, clean the appliances, wipe the counters, sterilize the floors so you could do fucking surgery. No way she’ll miss that. ‘Course it just may be worth the expression when she finds a New Rochelle Barnes and Noble receipt for “The Joy of Gay Sex” under her daughter’s kitchen table.

A moment to imagine.

“Uh, no.”

“Ennis! There’s someone down stairs for you!”

Stretched to their limit, fingertips brushed paper – “I’m still busy here, Alma! Who is it?” – and came back with an added bonus.

“What the hell?”

Time’s up. Hauling will commence on the twenty-fourth.

Jack

“When…when did he…fuck!”

Bag and book reunited, and up off the floor, percolating anger affording him a grace absent before, Ennis shoved them both in the recycling bin under a New York Times Sports section, he and the napkin storming to the front hall.

Jack called and she didn’t tell me. Fuck. All this time, thinking that he…we…never…Christ!

“It’s Jack somebody!”

Still reeling from the napkin revelation and all its implications, his head near about exploded when Alma said that one syllable. He’s…he’s… His wife may have been speaking, wasn’t sure, couldn’t care, didn’t matter. Jack was on the other end of that speaker and he couldn’t get there fast enough.

“J-Jack?”

“Ennis.”

Thirty year old equipment was a piece of antiquated crap, but the emotion behind that one word came through crystal clear.

“Jack.”

And so did that.

“Sorry to come by this late, but I was, uhm, in the neighborhood, so I thought I would -”

“I’m buzzing you through. Seventh floor.” Jack’s here. He’s coming up. To seven. To my floor. Got to go – step over the laundry – meet him!

“Ennis, is this really the time for visitors? We’ve got so much -”

But, first…
“When were you going to tell me about this?” The evidence of her grievous oversight displayed before her eyes. “Huh, Alma? When?”

“I forgot.”

“You fucking forgot?”

“I’m sorry, OK?” The insincerity of that apology could hold the Guinness Book of World Records for years to come.

You forget to pick up trash bags at the store, to turn off the DVD when you’re done watching, to put the lid down, you forget…that Jack’s probably between floors three and four right now.

“We’ll talk about this later.”

Squeak, grind, slam.

Elevator on the other end of the hall, Ennis’s sprint puffed up tiny clouds of carpet dust.

Not four months, not the twenty-fourth, not – tuck in shirt, front…back – really smart, but I don’t give a rat’s ass right now ‘cause –

The elevator doors opened.

*********

The night before Thanksgiving and Jack was having no second thoughts whatsoever.

Well, maybe. Should I have gone with the jumbo size?

“Fifty-nine…sixty-one…sixty-three…” Squinting through the smudged front window of the cab – Herman had insisted on the move after a brief dash to the drug store for necessities now squished in their paper bag hope chest in a side pocket of the messenger bag – Jack read off the building numbers as they crept down the dark Brooklyn street. “…sixty-five…sixty – This is it! Nineteen-Sixty-Seven! Here, Herman, right here!”

Half way out before the cab even stopped, Jack handed over a hundred bucks for a $25 fare. “Thanks, Herman. For everything.” Messenger bag over his head in one fluid and well-practiced motion, he jumped over the ubiquitous gutter slush, feet on the sidewalk, spirit floating somewhere near the troposphere.

“Yo, Jack!”

A lean down to look through the open cab window, body trembling, but not from the twenty-three degree wind chill. “Yeah, Herman?”

“You, uh, want me to stick around? Not that you’ll need me to take you home or nothing, but, you know, just in case.”

Ever since owning the ‘Why Ennis Never Called Me Back’ conclusion, the possibility that he wouldn’t be welcomed with open arms had not blipped on any of Jack’s planes of existence.
Not home? Or busy? Or not want to – NO. No. I heard the Gay Men’s Chorus singing God music. If that’s not a sign…

“Thanks anyway, Herman, but I don’t think that will be necessary.”

“OK, whatever. But, I’ve got to check in with dispatch anyway.” The Off-Duty light flicked on.

“This looks as good a place as any to stop for a second. Have a great time stuffing that turkey, Jack.”

Clouds of winter breath sighed. *Oh joy, a straight man’s attempt at queer humor.* “Yeah, you too, Herman.”

1967 Sherman Street was about as picture postcard Brooklyn as it got. Window boxes, some with flowering plastic, others with brown sticks, dotted a crazy pattern across the dark brick, while a hundred or so eyes gave the night a peek into the occupants souls – the flash of TV lightning, the cheer of a single string of Christmas lights, the anonymous in a city of over eight million souls drawn curtains. The falling snow capped the wrought iron bars securing the first floor apartment, the layer on the front stoop undisturbed, and Jack offered his contribution, brushed off shoulders, shaken out of hair, to the vestibule by the frosted paneled entrance.

*Cold as fuck out here! Ennis better be ready to toast my buns.*

Fourth one down in the third row over he found the name that had been his evening vesper, morning homily and every devotion in between.

*Used the pink bead on my Rosary.*

Teeth pulled off the leather glove, freeing his thumb to …

*Deep breath…OK…OK…deep breath…OK…OK…shit. It’s not a prom date for fuck’s sake just push the damn button.*

Sweaty palm of a frozen hand swiped his wool overcoat.

*Three…two…*

**BUZZZZZZZZZZZZZ!**

OK. Any second now. Any second I’ll hear his voice, and I’ll say something witty, as usual, and then he’ll laugh, of course, and then I’ll come back with something suggestive and he’ll growl and then buzz me through and he’ll greet me at the door wearing nothing but a loaded gun and I ain’t talking about his forty-five, and then we’ll go back to his bedroom for a little target practice and then… OK…any second now…OK…in just a moment…OK…just a second…OK…

**BUZZZZZZZZZZZZZ!**

Not a problem, nope, nothing to worry about. He just…just, you know, just…didn’t hear the first one, yeah that’s it, didn’t hear it because he was…what? What’s he doing up there? Watching TV? In the shower? Taking out the…oh, my. Ennis in the shower…

The wind careened back into itself, whistling Jack lonely tunes, trailing his scarf out between icy fingers.

*In the shower, so he can’t hear with the water running, so I’ll just help him out here.*

**BUZZZZZ! BUZZZZZ! BUZZZZZZ!**
Got to have heard that one. Sure, yeah. So, now he’ll step out, water kissing his chest, and toss his head, shaking out his curls, grab a towel to wrap around his waist, but it doesn’t quite fit and as he walks to answer my call, one thigh shows with each step.

Towel, thigh, towel, thigh…

BUZZ! towel BUZZ! thigh BUZZ! towel BUZZ! thigh BUZZ! towel BUZZ! thigh BUZZ! towel BUZZ! Thigh

Jack stamped his blocks of ice against equally frozen cement, his blood needed there too.

Hands wet and a little pruney, so he wipes one on the towel, palm molding down the blue, hugging one cheek. He casually leans against the wall, the towel slit showing more – short curlies soft and Irish Spring clean straight through to –

BUZZBUZZBUZZBUZZBUZZBUZZBUZZBU –

“‘Yes?’”

That was not the voice he wanted to picture in a towel.

Uh…uh…uh…

“Hello?”

Say something, stupid, before she leaves, cause I’m not freezing my dangling bits off without getting at least a glimpse here!

“Uhm, yes. Is Ennis home?”

And can he come out to play? Christ, how idiotic can one subzero attorney sound?

“Ennis! There’s someone downstairs for you!”

The wrong voice had turned away, maybe shouting to the back of the apartment.

OK, he’s not alone, so he better be balls deep in only recyclables, that’s for damn sure!

“Who is this, please?”

“Uhm…Jack…Jack Twist.”

“It’s Jack somebody!”

The man who’s in love with your husband.

“Do you want me to tell him to –

“J-Jack?”

His spring thaw happened instantaneously.

“Ennis.”

The thirty year old equipment was a piece of antiquated crap, but the emotion behind that one word came through crystal clear.
“Jack.”

And so did that.

*Come up with a story, a plausible story, something that is suitable for all audiences.* “Sorry to come by so late, but I was, uhm,” *Think of a lie, dammit! You’re a lawyer for fuck’s sake!* “in the neighborhood, so I thought I would.”

“I’m buzzing you through. Seventh floor.”

Speaker shut off, the front door unlocked, and Jack sent Herman a thumb’s up, then stepped over the threshold into warmth.

*Oh, god! That feels so good!*

*OK. I’m in. Now, I just take the elevator up to seven, walk down the hall, knock on the door to be invited in for tea and crumpets with the Del Mar’s, is that it?*

Having had such success with conclusion jumping tonight, Jack took a flying leap again towards one that pissed him off royally.

*His wife’s in the apartment, which means they’re still together, which means he hasn’t told her, about me, about being gay, about nothing.*

Up arrow punched, the doors struggled open and Jack and his righteous indignation stepped into the faux wood paneled box.

*That’s why she answered his phone, that’s why she’s up there in the apartment right now, that’s why she’s still his fucking wife!*

He had to attack the seven button several times before the elevator got the hint.

*I told him I wasn’t going to be his cock side dish. Made that perfectly clear, didn’t I?*

The number two flashing by had to agree with him.

*And here he is still co-habiting, playing husband, inviting me up like we were just bowling buddies or something straight like that.*

Three brought up the good point that if all this were true, why was he even going up to see him?

*Because I haven’t changed. I want him just as much now than I did in August, and I think I deserve to hear it from him that he’s a fucking liar and coward.*

Admonishment from four about the true nature of love, giving the benefit of the doubt, reminding him that Ennis' sense of fairness was one of his most attractive qualities.

*That and his Lloyd’s of London insurable ass. OK, three and a half months is not enough time to get divorced. Not with attorneys involved. And maybe he’s not living there, just visiting. And if he wasn’t, then I wouldn’t have been able to find him and the thought of searching for my cop in a Brooklyn haystack is just down right Zoloft popping.*

Five had to agree with that assessment, it being the start of the holiday season and all.

*He’s here for his kids, probably, Junior and Terri being the experts at moon hanging for him.*
A question needed to be asked, though, and six spoke right up wanting to know where all this left him.

The same place I’ve spent the last ninety-seven days – waiting for Ennis. But, I can do that standing on my head – now there’s a position I’ve never attempted – as long as I can be with –

The elevator doors opened.

“Fuck. Jack Twist.”

You know, you think about a moment, work it over in your mind, building it up, rewriting, tweaking, editing until you have the one you know will win the Oscar, and then life steps in and snatches away your dream, ‘cause most of the time reality sucks.

But, tonight, me and the gold plated bald guy with no dick are going to one hell of an after party.

“Goddamn.”

The elevator had a schedule to keep here, lover’s reunion notwithstanding, but a strong hand on the doors intervened.

A wry half turned up smile.

“Ennis?”

Ow! Fuck!

Head smacked the wall, messenger bag knocked away, nose rammed sideways, cheeks smooshed, face immobile. Jack was caught, bound, trapped, saved by Ennis' kiss.

As clumsy as our first time.

No tongues, just mouths, hands and bodies, one breath seeking to be connected, snapping tight a bond stretched thin by circumstance. It wasn’t about sex or power. Something simple and plain.

Ennis and Jack. The greatest unification since Germany.

He smelled of sweat and longing, tasted like meat loaf and need. His body trapping Jack in the corner vibrated, a hot power line sparking and hissing across the elevator floor. They stopped on four, but not Ennis, he bore down deeper, clutched stronger, a frightened animal desperate to burrow home.

Oh, no. Not done with this Reunion yet.

Hands snatching fists full of hair, jaw cracking, content to be the object of Ennis’ frenzy, Jack kicked out – once, twice, three times, shoe finally convincing the elevator to move on – grunting into him, thrusting up, erections grinding.

OK. Maybe it is about sex. Sex with a soul mate codicil.

At the bottom, they rocked and this time Ennis did notice, pulling back a chin slick with spit, lips bruised, a marathon runner’s pant.

My turn.

Ennis bounced off the wall, right where he was tossed, Jack catching him by the back of the head
and hip on the way back out, combined body weights bumping and jangling the chains drawing them back up.

*Feels good, doesn’t it, Ennis? Me, you, our bodies like this. Together. One. Feels good ‘cause it’s right.*

Chaste was history now that Jack was in charge, making sure Ennis knew who had the upper tongue. Belt buckles clanged where stomachs collided, a thigh wormed in between legs, the helpless whimper in the back of Ennis’ throat – Jack’s favorite song.

*This is what I can give you, Ennis. What you want, what you crave.*

Another stop, another floor, but he was too busy to kick anything this time. Barriers blocked his path – bag and coat – he couldn’t get close enough, couldn’t crawl inside where he needed to be.

*Fuck! Get off, goddammit! OFF!*

THUD! Messenger bag at their feet, overcoat, scarf and jacket ripped free and away, mouths and tongues never parting.

*I’m all you need, Ennis. Right here. ME!*

Didn’t want the hand-vise to permanently fish face his cheeks, so he snatched them off, the protests to return wrestled by sheer force of lust and leverage, and slammed them up over Ennis’ head.

*Don’t care about rings, don’t care about vows. This is where you belong, Ennis. With me, only me.*

The sloppy tuck job made that much sloppier by Jack’s hand forcing down the back, fingers snagging, curling up full of ass, driving hips front and into his, Ennis moans reverberating in Jack’s mouth.

*Not letting up, not letting go. Never.*

Beneath, he jerked and twitched, fighting not against, but with, Ennis moving with Jack, a frantic tarantella, tempo accelerando, crashing towards –

*“Ahem.”*

The pop when their mouths finally separated was loud enough to flatten the Pug’s ears standing just outside the elevator waiting to go down to the street and his evening constitutional. Jack and Ennis, a pair of horny book ends on either side of the elevator with a handful only of non-lust flavored synapses between.

*“Uh,” Ennis at least made an attempt at sounding rational. “Going down?”*

Jack’s hysterical laughter scared the Pug into pee mode.

*Not yet, sweetheart, but give me a minute and I’ll be happy to give you a practical demonstration.*

“I think I’ll wait for the next one.” Urgency gone, the dog yawned.

Doors closed, *‘Bout fucking time!* and Jack resumed their program already in progress. *“Meanwhile, back at the ranch…”*  

“No, Jack, no.” A gentle withdraw towards the panel, a punch to seven to take them back to the beginning. *“Fuck!”*
Jack watched Ennis and his guilty nervous topped with an aggressive thumb chewing fidget. *Uh oh.* “What?”

“Nothing, nothing.” The shirt smashed back down into jeans. “This isn’t not the right place for this.”

“Right, we need something a little roomier.” A sidle up behind to nuzzle a neck nape. “More horizontal.” Ennis promptly did some sidling of his own, in the opposite direction.

The previous elevator conclusion jump came back for a return engagement. *Right the first time. Fuck. Time for a truth or dare, Ennis, the still married man.* “I’m all the way over in Chelsea, so what about your place? Where are you living nowadays, Ennis, hmmm?”

A half-assed hair fiddle. “Yeah, well, that’s an option, but -” Arriving on seven, he bolted off. “Let me go take care of something first, OK? Just, please, don’t leave. Please.”

*I knew it! I fucking knew it! The pussy’s still living with his wife.*

“Goddamnit, Ennis!” Coat, scarf, jacket, messenger bag jumbled in his arms, Jack hoofed it to follow the disappearing coward. That is until he reached the open apartment door.

*Don’t want to go in there. Don’t want to see that, what they have. In there, it’s real – Junior and Terri tangible. I want abstracts, I want sweet ignorant bliss. Should walk away, leave. Do the right thing here, and not take husband and dad away.*

A peek around the corner, a glimpse of an Ennis smile.

*I’m not fucking Spike Lee! I am going to destroy a family to get my heart’s desire. Now booking first class tickets on that downwardly spiraling hand basket.*

He was talking to someone; Jack couldn’t see who, but he knew anyway, the waves of tension setting his teeth on edge. The coat Ennis had snagged on the way in was a piss poor cover of the obvious.

*She’d have to be blind not to see that, not to notice the smell of sex and want, the way he keeps looking back at me, the way his eyes are screaming “I WANT TO FUCK JACK TWIST NOW!”*, the way mine are answering “BEND ME OVER RIGHT HERE!” *Stupid not to –*

A point, and Jack had no time to duck away before misery snared him.

*Alma.*

“…be back late, so don’t put the chain on the door.” Ennis walked away from his wife and straight to Jack.

Jack’s smile was his winning best, his wave friendly, if non-committal, but like a train wreck, he was unable to look away from Alma eyes.

*Neither blind nor stupid. She knows.*

And the door closed.

*****
“Fuck. Jack Twist”

“Goddamn.”

The doors tried to close, but he stopped them short, not ready to lose the vision before him.

*Jack. Standing here in my building, in my elevator, on my floor, looking like that first time I saw him. Like him better in those sweats. Like him best with nothing at all.*

A wry turned up smile.

“Ennis?”

The powerful fuel of three and a half months without ignited. No hesitation, just four strides forward, a two handed grab, one elbow shove of messenger bag, and Ennis had all he wanted right there in his hands.

*Jack, Jack, oh, fuck! Jack!*

No finesse whatsoever, he just attached mouth, body all over Jack. Nose cold, cheeks tingling in his hands, he pushed in – smother, devour, inhale – the scent of winter, the taste of pickle and Dr. Pepper, the sensation of freedom in his touch.


Jack was doing something, kicking, or something, he didn’t know why, didn’t care, he just pressed deeper, his erection like a magnet finding it’s opposite, not after sex, just a connection, just Jack.

*Never again, never going without this again.*

The sway of the elevator at the bottom floor broke them apart. *Need to tell him the truth*. In the blink of his dazed eyes, shoulders hit the other wall, *Ow! Fuck!* but he didn’t care – Jack was there again, his mouth, now his tongue, his teeth, demanding, entering, taking.

*He’s mine, I’m his. Nothing more to say.*

Hands snatched away from their anchor, held above his head, shirt torn away, ass scratched and grabbed and he was ready, offering up whatever Jack wanted to take.

*Not mine anymore, everything belongs to Jack.*

“Ahem.”

*Oh, fuck me.*

They were on twelve and so was Mrs. Nedermeyer and Bilbo, standing there and staring.

He couldn’t think, the taste of Jack with every lick of his lips took his brain off in the same direction as his dick – across the elevator to him, to Jack looking deliciously rumpled, bed haired and flushed.

*Christ! Caught necking in an elevator. Say something, dickhead!*
“Uh, going down?”

Jack’s hysterical laughter made Bilbo piss the carpet.

“I think I’ll wait for the next one.”

_Fuck. She’s salivating to get back to her phone, I’ll bet._ Ennis watched those beady, old lady eyes dialing up her gossiping cronies as the doors rattled shut. _Stupid, stupid, so fucking stupid!_

“Meanwhile, back at the ranch…”

Pulled Jack’s hand free, then the other, the first one again, second one, too. “No, Jack. No.” Retreat from the temptation of giving in conquered only by stepping away. _Why’d it have to be her, huh? Why not Mr. Sappatowicz? No one listens to his crazy stories. Or Number Eight who doesn’t even speak English? Lousy luck anger punched the button. “Fuck!”_

“What?”

Thumb chewing his answer to this stressful situation. _What, Jack, what? Lead story on the Nedermeyer News Service – Ennis Del Mar in 717, cop and family man, found in elevator lip locked with male lover._ “Nothing, nothing.” _Nothing except I’ve just been outed, but I can’t tell you that, ‘cause I’m supposed to be already there like I promised you._ “Isn’t the right place for this.”

“Right, we need something roomier. Something more horizontal.”

First inclination, melt back into Jack just to see where those warm kisses would travel next. _No, in enough fucking trouble by listening to my dick. Need to think and that ain’t happening with Jack’s tongue in my ear, Jack’s hands unbuttoning my shirt, Jack’s cock…oh, god! The eyes of Mrs. Nedermeyer and even Bilbo staring judgment burned when he closed his._ Shit! The other side of the elevator wasn’t far enough, either. _Never far enough where Jack is concerned._

“I’m all the way over in Chelsea, so what about _your_ place? Where are you living nowadays, Ennis, hmmm?”

_With Alma still, but you already figured that out, haven’t you, Jack? Shit, throwing lies around like I was feeding pigeons._ “Yeah, that’s an option, but -” Side stepping the question out through the just opened doors, he made a vain attempt to smooth his Jack stranglehold cramped hair. “Let me go take care of something first, OK?” _Got to go lie to my wife, so I can have the chance to explain the other lie to you._ “Just, please, don’t leave.” _Give me a chance, Jack, don’t leave. God, don’t you leave me! “Please.”_

“Goddamnit, Ennis!”


_NOW, that’s a plan!_

In the dining sort of room, that’s where he found her, sitting there folding what he could have sworn
was the dirty clothes.

Causal, low key, and half-truths only.

“Alma, I’m going out with Jack for a while. Just old friends stuff.” Nice euphemism for fucking another man there, dickhead.

“We still have plenty to do here, you know.”

The smile was fake, but unneeded since she never looked up from her unnecessary task.

“Just the cooking, and I know you don’t want me in the kitchen.”

“Whatever.” Her voice was as thin as tissue.

“OK…OK…well…” You know, now would be a good time to get the fuck out before she can ask me any –

“Don’t I get to meet this old friend?”

Alma, my wife, meet Jack, the man I love. Write that down in our daily triumphs journal. “Uh….”


For that, she did glance up from her busy work.

The smile, the wave and the concern of spurting right there in his jeans because Jack was within smelling range was very real. “OK, then, don’t wait up. I’ll be back late, so don’t put the chain on the door.”

Ennis walked away from his wife the past straight to Jack my future.

And the door closed.

*****

Hands white knuckled in a desperate clutch of dark hair, lips stretched tight, mouths warring for domination. Shoes were tucked perfectly in between with legs and knees and thighs and groins and chests spread out flat, one to the other, all fit together so tight even a prayer could find no room to whisper.

Oh…oh…oh…

There, right in front of her, on the elevator – her husband kissing with passion, lust and wild abandon another man.

Oh…my…god, Ennis…is…my husband is…
How she got back to the apartment before vomiting, and with the laundry basket no less, was nothing short of a miracle, her guts heaving up humiliation and disgust by the toilet bowl.

*Ennis was...is...that man had...oh, my God! That’s why he wanted...to do...tried to...with me!*

Dry heaving echoed off the rose tile.

*My husband is queer. The father of my children. He’s kissing men, that Jack, the one who called, who was pressing up against my husband. MY husband!*

Stomach empty, but heart still stained, she wandered trying to reconcile the last seventeen years of her life with the few seconds that irrecoverably altered it all.

*Ennis is...is...but he can’t be! We made love, made babies, had sex. He wanted me, a woman! He can’t be gay!*

Pumpkin trimmed napkin was the most readily available paper product for nose blowing.

*But, he was kissing that...that...and enjoying it. Eyes all squished shut, hands and mouth and pushing up into –*

A bout of gagging threatened to send her back to the bathroom.

*Seventeen years! Two beautiful girls. We made a life, we made a home, we were together and happy...or getting there thanks to...oh, my god. All that time sitting there, marriage counseling, Dr. Cartwright, session after session, he was sitting there lying, to her, to me, sitting there thinking about...*

The kitchen sink worked just as well as the toilet.

*What happened? What changed? He did obviously, wasn’t that way when I decided he was the man I would marry. Why now? Why does he want...was it me? Is this my fault? I’m not good enough anymore? Am I so repulsive that he had to turn to...that?*

“Alma!”

*You bastard. I want you out of here, away from me, away from the children. I want you gone, you lying, adulterous son of a bitch!*

The box of wedding china shoved into the corner stopped her cold.

*Oh...oh no! Thanksgiving...my family...tomorrow...how, how can I explain if he’s not here, how in God’s name am I going to tell them that Ennis is...How can I face them now? I can’t! I...just can’t!*

“Alma!”

She had to have something to do, with her hands, with her thoughts, something to keep busy, so she wouldn’t cry or scream and strike out at the man you had betrayed her. A dash to the find the laundry – just fold, and keep on folding and don’t look at him, don’t look at him. Work on this later, later alone, a plan, a way to deal, a way to cope with tomorrow and eating at the same table with my parents and Ennis, knowing he’s s wanting to...with him. She tasted his betrayal again. *Fold, just fold.*

“Alma, I’m going out with Jack for a while. Just old friends stuff.”

A bite to the inside of her cheek steadied her nerves. *God, he’s such a lousy liar. And I’m an idiot for*
not seeing the truth. “We still have plenty to do around here, Ennis.” *First the shirts, then the socks.*

“Just the cooking, and I know you don’t want me in the kitchen.”

*I don’t want you anywhere near me or the girls again!* “Whatever.”

“OK…OK…well…”

She didn’t want to ask, didn’t want to know any more than she already did, but her wounded pride spoke up before she had the chance to squelch it. “Don’t I get to meet this…Jack?”

“Uh…there. That’s Jack.”

She followed the point like an arrow down the hallway to her answer. The smile and wave made her skin crawl.

*Jack Twist.*

“I’ll be back, so don’t put the chain on the door.”

He walked away from her straight to Jack.

*I know the truth.*

And the door closed.
“Well…that was fun.”

“Follow me.”

“Hey, you’ve got some ‘splaining to – Ennis!”

“Later.”

Down the hallway and seven flights of stairs.

Arrogant prick! Not a fucking word, just expects me to follow him – which I am, obviously, down the stairs – quickly down the stairs – too goddamn quick – what was wrong with the elevator? It was a nice elevator. What I saw of it anyway. Christ! Seven flights of stairs, wool coat and Ennis. I’m shvitzing all over the place here! Need to get back to the gym, need to get back to playing racquetball, need a goddamn cigarette!

The door. Finally. Now maybe he’ll stop and – nope. Right through. Fucking fantastic.

“Where the hell – Ennis!”

“Not now.”

Across the sidewalk and street.

Oh, goody. More running. So I can break a sweat that will cosy up to the previous layer now a sheet of ice on my skin ‘cause it’s fucking freezing out here! And now he wants to play ‘dodge the irate New York driver’. He’s such a fun date.

“Ennis, would you just stop for a -”

“Watch out for that pot -”

“Fuck!”

I just bought these shoes! God, I hate wet socks, running in wet socks, climbing stairs, AGAIN, in wet socks, chasing a man I’m going to knock to the next Halley’s comet sighting if he doesn’t stop and –

Oh, OK. No wet sock problem anymore. The damn thing has frozen solid!

Through a parking deck and rows of cars.

Foot. Ice cube. Foot. Ice cube. Foot. Ice cube. Foot – nice kit on that Lexus! – Ice cube. Frost bite, going to lose all my toes. No hypothermia. They’re going to find my lifeless body – face grimaced in horror, claw like hands frozen in the act of begging, forever misshapen, but always fashionable - in fucking Brooklyn!

“That’s it! Not one more goddamn step until you tell me where the fuck we’re going!”

“Oh, really?”

Under messenger bag and overcoat, a hand grabbed crotch.
“Ennis!”

“Unless you want me to bend you over the hood, I suggest you get in right now.”

Uh...

... ...

... ...

Nah. The shrinkage would be epic.

Right on 18th Street.

Oh, god! Oh, yes! Heat, heat, glorious heat! Please, sir, I want some more!

“You ready to talk to me now?

“Soon. Want to get there first.”

“So, soon is off the Queens Expressway?”

“Soon is soon.”

“Fortune cookie philosophy. How clever.”

I-278 merge. “Now?”

Exit #36.

“Now?”

Left on 65th. “Now?” “Jack, I swear -”

“Just tell me where! Christ, I nearly lost my foot to frost bite!”

“Some place where I can spend the next eight hours listening to you fuck scream instead of bitch.”

“Can’t you drive any faster?”

63rd Street.

Hot fucking damn! A hotel! A big ass bed and tons of pillows and a mini bar and a Jacuzzi tub and –

“A HoJos?”

“There’s always the back seat.”

“You better pop for a king, dickhead.”

Check-in, elevator up to four.

“End of the hall?”

“Won’t bother the other guests.”

“Hey, I can be quiet!”
“God, I hope not.”

421 locked tight, curtains drawn shut, lamp clicked on.

“Ennis.”

“Jack.”

Twice in the same night, in the same spot, for the same reason, Jack’s head smacked a hard surface, this time the back of the door.

“Should be…pissed…as hell…at you.”

“Not what…it looks…like.”

“Still…living with…your wife?”

“Uh…yeah.”

Kisses, full of tongue and teeth, while hands battled against the thrusting urge and zippers.

“Not a…math whiz, but…husband plus…wife equals – fuck!”

“Let me – let me, Jack, let – stop!”

Not enough room for ten greedy fingers, four trembling hands and two weeping hard-ons.

“NO! It’s the different angle. Just watch and learn.”

With palms goal posting Jack’s head and a fevered forehead on his shoulder slipping grunts into his jacket pocket, cock emancipation happened almost instantly.

“Oh, Christ! You’re not wearing -”

“Batman boxers, Jack?”

“Spidey was in the dirty – oh, god!”

Heat slid together. Supernova.

“Shit…Ennis! Enn – no, no, NO! Your other hand!”

“Right-handed, Jack.”

“And I’m not, so just…just grab something that looks interesting and – Fuck! Oh, yeah, oh, hell, yeah! Oh, fuck!”

Left-handed circle pumped both cocks, free hands were full of ass, open mouths moaned a duet of peaking desire.

“Oh, god – shit! Jack! Do it! Fucking do it!”

“You…don’t…Fuck! You don’t…deserve…”

“Not above…begging…here.”

“Make it…fucking good…Del Mmmmmmmmmmm…”
Copious amounts of spit provided more than just dribble down their chins. Swirling between their mouths, Ennis’ fingers slide in, then out, then back in a different hungry opening.

“Fuck! Oh…godman…Ennis!”

“Please, Jack…come on…do it…want to…please, baby…fuck you…any way…you want…please, Jack! Do it!”

“Any…way?”

“Hard…easy…slow…top…bottom…sideways…bed…floor...Shea Stadium please…fucking do it!”

The circle’s rhythm stumbled when two fingers became three.

“Fuck! Ennis! Inap – inappr – bad time…to ask for…that…GOD!...in writing…”

“Jack, please!”

“How poor are they who have not patience.”

“JACK!”

The request for Jack’s Twist was granted.

“GODDAMN!”

THUD! THUD! THUD! THUD!

The door bouncing outward startled the couple sneaking in from the stairs.

“What the hell is goin’ on ‘n there?”

The hustler batted his heavily lined baby blues. “Same thing better be happening in Four-oh-three soon. Get a move on, cowboy.”

The john’s smile nestled lascivious in his beard. “God, I love New York!”

Behind the battered door, the pile of drained, semi clothed bodies was just beginning to stir. On his back, Jack looked down at the erratic motion of Ennis’ head, stomach resting, rising and falling to the pattern of gulping breaths.

“Baby?”

“Wh-what?”

“You called me baby.”

“I did not.”

“Come on…do it…want to…please, baby…” The imitation was spot on.

Rolling into a sitting position, Ennis punched Jack’s exposed thigh. “Get bent, asshole.”

“I believe that’s exactly what you promised me…baaaaaby.”

“Fuck off.”
“That, too.” Naked butt on cheap carpet was far from comfortable. *Floor fuck not happening here*, prompting Jack to join upright Ennis, his stiff fingers going to work on shoe laces. “In fact, you promised a veritable cornucopia of sexual positions, and I plan to exact everyone from your horn of plenty there.”

“Only paid for one night, Jack.”

Shoes off, socks followed. “And that’s a problem, how?”

“Cause it’s only one night.” Scrootching around, Ennis managed to pull up his jeans with no potential free peeks. “Let me get a wet washcloth or something.” Ass hauled up on shaky legs, morose trailed behind him into the bathroom.

“Like hell it is.”

Sock, shoes on the bottom, the pile of maniacally discarded clothing by the door grew in size. *Pants – to hell with the loose change, boxers – my favorite pair, thank you very much, Ennis, jacket – uh, this I’ll put on the chair with the stains of…I don’t really want to know, tie – honor a boy scout, save the knot, shirt and then I…shirt and then…shirt and…* “Fuck it.” Up over his head, it hit the floor only seconds before naked Jack jounced the bed.

“Here’s one for…fuck.”

Drip. Drip. Drip. Warm water tapped the tops of Ennis’ boots.

“Jack…you’re… you’re….”

“Lonely.” *And for his maximum viewing pleasure…the ‘come fuck me’ knee bend.*

“Christ…Jack.”

“Too many clothes spoil the fuck, Ennis.”

“Huh?”

“Strip.”

“Here!” The washcloth splatted to the teal and purple bedspread and laces started zinging through eyelets.

“Whoa! Whoa! Ennis, slow the fuck down! Fine art must be appreciated. Over here at the end of the bed.” Warmth stroked down his fingers. “You tease me now.”

Not very erotic, taking off boots. *Feet. No fucking way* and Ennis bumbled through that anyway. Coat shrugged off, out of the pockets came the trappings of his profession all laid to rest on the dresser. *Do cuffs rust in the shower? What remained was a simple t-shirt and Red Sea parted jeans.*

“Go ahead, you’ve got a captive audience already giving you a standing ovation.”

Fingers wiped, Jack’s sticky groin and cock were next and those ministrations to hungry-again flesh became Ennis’ focal point, with Jack mesmerized as well, creating a symbiotic relationship that was mutual beneficial and growing bolder by the second.

“Oh, god…Ennis.” A belly button wink as arms pulled free. “Could get wasted on just one of your six-pack there.”
“Guess that makes me the designated driver.”

“Uh…uh…” Witty retort lost The Game against the fluid tug of shirt, the hard muscles of abdomen, chest arms and neck at work. “Goddamn!”

Hair, now dried into sweat produced curls, scattered across Ennis’ forehead. Smile quirked, nipples casting an erect shadow on tanned skin, eyes dark Hershey’s, and Jack just gave up the pretense, the washcloth steamier now than when it was tossed to him, for flat out stroking when Ennis’ hand disappeared down jeans front.

“Oh, fuck, Ennis!”

“Don’t want to see? OK, then I’ll -”

“For the love of George Michael, don’t! Ow! Fuck!” Jack sat up so fast he nearly strained something very important.

“- turn around.”

“Oh, god…”

Front to back palms kissed skin, buried wrist deep in denim. A squeeze tightened thighs – and Jack’s grip – then the Holy Grail was revealed inch by incomparable inch to the babbling, dripping, penitent whacking off on the bed.

“Jack, stop. Let go of your dick now.” “But…but…” Naked ass only three feet away from his ravenous cock. “Butt…butt…!”

Denim completely out of the picture now, Ennis stretched – big and broad, hands up over his head, trapeziums to gluts stream rippling down. The three-way bulb couldn’t muster much enthusiasm, its yawn blurring the edges, and parts of Ennis remained on the dark side. *Already renewing my passport for an extended vacation there, anyway.*

“Stop now, Jack or the jeans are back on.”

“OK, OK!” His cock banshee screamed to be abandoned in its hour of need, but the Ass God wasn’t playing fair threatening to take away Prometheus’ gift. “I’m not touching, dickweed, I’m molesting the bed - wait, where -” *Oh, this angle is fine too! “- the fuck are you -”*

“Condoms are in my – Shit!” The newly sexual confident Ennis tripped. “Fuck!”

“What!” Polyester fisted. “WHAT?”

“No fucking lube!” Room service menu, along with the HBO guide for the month of October hit the wall.

“Messenger bag, in the – damn!” *He’s leaning down. A lunar eclipse!*

“Strawberry, Jack?”

“Three to five servings of fruit daily, you know.” Ennis turned around. “But, that’s not enough, never enough.”

Eyes and hips followed the bouncing balls back across the room, the song’s lyrics a strangled whimper.
Spontaneous human combustion. Nothing left but spooge on the ceiling and three molar crowns.

“Grab a pillow, and -” condom ripped open with teeth, foil edge spit to the side “- put it under your hips.” Condom rolled down easy, lube flipped open. “Do it, Jack, get the pillow.” Lube slicked condom, cock swelled to palm. “Jack!”

“Uh, what?” Cock hypnotized, Jack was unable to look away. “Oh, oh, right,” Pillows for head, pillows for hips, and now I’m a fucking ‘U’. A glance down. OK, more like an ‘E’. “I’m ready for my close-up, Mr. DeMille.”

The agonizing slow crawl up Jack began with his ankles, both sucked and nibbled. “You’re fucking incredible, Jack.” The push onward, tongue sliding up calves, hands up thighs. “Sex incarnate, that’s you.” Kneeling over, Ennis’ mouth was drawn with obsessive interest to dark trail swirling upward. “Every move, every word, every breath.” Hip bones to arm pits, the sweat of palms smeared up Jack’s skin, thumbs bumping over hard nipples. “I dreamed of this every fucking night.” One hand remained to pinch, the other returning below, fingers tickling the skin beneath tightening balls.

“Oh…OH…OH!” Instinct only arched up into the combination of pleasure and pain. “Ennis!”

“Touching you…” Finger skimmed the pucker. “Tasting you…” Tongue drew an invisible line between nipples, contact lost with each shuddered gasp. “Taking you…”

“Fuuuuuuuuuck…” It was almost too much – the sight of Ennis kneeling, the smell of Ennis excited, the sound of Ennis sucking, the sensation of Ennis pressing - Long story short – Ennis. Bodily sensory overload. Except…

“No!” Demand hissed into Jack’s open mouth, as he swatted Jack’s relief seeking hand away, bending in half and forcing grasping hands to latch on to the top of the bolted-on headboard, the head of his cock kissing Jack’s pucker.

Knees flopped out, an act of surrender. “Oh, goddamn!”

Hot breath scorched smirking lips. “You want that, Jack?” A little hip push and a sharp intake of breath. “I’ll take that as a yes,” tongue lapping its counterpart. “Know what I want, Jack?”

“World peace?”

Hips pulled back and a whimper exhaled.


CRACK!

“Goddamnit, Jack!” Ennis blinked back tears, the spot above his right eyebrow red where Jack’s head butt connected. “What the fuck was that for?”

“Where’d you learn all this shit, Ennis? Huh?” Hips bucked up, arms shoved back. Was a bumbling newbie three months ago and now he knows just how to melt me like butter in the microwave! “Not from me, ‘cause I would remember your fingers up my ass, that’s for goddamn sure!”

“Hey! Hey!” Tirade rode out using his superior body mass and strength. “Fucking stop this, Jack!”

“Ennis, I swear -” Please, oh god! Please not again! Not Ennis! “- if you’ve fucked -”
Hand on mouth, hand on cock and Ennis finally subdued his tornado. “Research, you shithead! I educated myself, or tried to, so I wouldn’t be such a fucking idiot our next time!”

You did that… for me? Came out “Mmmmbnrm…mr mmmm?” with saucered blue.

“Wanted to do this right, Jack, wanted us to be fucking fantastic. Wanted to be… worthy of you.”

Christ! Is it possible to love you anymore?

Ennis removed his hand. “What?”

“Just kiss me.”

No second invitation necessary.

“Fuck me, Ennis,” licked across front teeth.

“How, Jack?” sucked on a tongue.

Fingers curled over the top of the headboard, knees hugged waist. “Three and a half month’s worth.”

The start – slow and sensual – two lube slick fingers replaced cock for a moment and a languid hand job tingled Jack to his toes. The pace was easy, Ennis’ concentration fierce and Jack wallowed in the attention lavished.

“You’re a… a… sssssssss!” Cocks nestled in close. “A quick study.” Head back to open up the throat passage for a skin tracing tongue. “I am won… wonder… ing… though.”

Hot breath in his ear. “What’s that?”

“Well, books are good and – god!” Fingers spread out and deep. “But no – right there, Yes!” Tongue surfed through a swallow. “- goddamn book is this how-to.”

“Practical demonstrations were needed.”

“Ah… shit… oh… damn…” Wait. Thighs squeezed until brown eyes popped. “Ennis…”

“Of a… personal nature.”

“What the hell does – ” Ennis spanking it with his own fingers up – oh, GOD!

“Jack, hey, Jack, wait, wait for me!”

A harsh nipple tweak switched off mental porn, eyes blinking to realize he was fucking empty space while a bemused Ennis sat back and watched. “Oh… sorry. Took a side excursion there.”

Trembling at the starting gate, he brought Jack’s leg forward, with his lips only kiss lean in. “Stay here, Jack. Want you here with me.”

“Then take me, Ennis, and don’t ever let go.”

Another practical demonstration –

“FUCK!”

One smooth thrust, every inch accepted.
“Oh...Ennis!”

They lost the pillows under Jack’s hips first –

“Jack…need, want…Jack!”

- shoved aside by knees pushing forward seeking more.

“Ooooooooooohhhhhhhhhhh…”

The headboard was left to its own devices so Jack could grab a sweaty, clenched ass –

“Ennis, fuck, Ennis, over, Ennis there! Fucking right THERE!”

- a subtle request for a change of angle.

“Open…Jack, Jack, Jack…open your…open your goddamn eyes, Jack!”

Strawberry lube tube had a few minutes of trampoline fun until Ennis latched on to Jack’s cock –

“Oh, Christ! Oh, Buddha! Oh, Yahweh! Oh, L. Ron fucking Hubbard!”

- sending a Reciter Scale 10 tremor through body and mattress.

“Best student…you’re at the…head of the class…valadicktorian…come laude…summa come laude!”

Nice neat hospital corners gave up trying to stay regulation when an index finger disappeared inside Ennis –

“Jack, what the – oh, fuck! More, goddamnit, more!”

- spending their retirement flapping free as they were pushed further and further down.

“We’ve reached September at best here, Ennis.”

The introverted box springs were very concerned over possible exposure by Jack’s convulsing hips –

“Labor Day…ahAH!...Rosh Hashanah…uhuhuhuhuh…closing in on – fuck me, Ennis! Fucking fuck hard! – Columbus Day!”

- an involuntary reaction to the increase in the balls slapping ass tempo.

“So much…for...SHIT, JACK!...keeping quiet!”

Above the bed, the single bolt holding the cheesy New Mexico at sunrise bought bulk from a warehouse in Milwaukee print found it was hard pressed to stay secure when Jack’s teeth bit down on a nipple –

“JACKJACKJACKJACKJACK – OTHER ONE!”

- and Ennis responded with repeated head pounding.

“Not going to…not going to…not…soon…Jack, soon!”

Phone, phone book, lamp, lampshade, clock radio, complimentary sheet of stationary, chipped plastic pen AND the Gideon Bible hit the floor as he bent Jack in half, his final thrusts savage –
“Ennis, FUCK, Ennis, ME, Ennis, FUCK, Ennis, LOVE, Ennis, YOU, ENNIS!”
- all victims of a mattress fucked sideways.

“NOW, Jack, NOW –GODDAMNIT! NOW!”

“ENNIS!”

The stairwell was happy to shout the sounds of double orgasms –

“Shit. Good time in four-twenty-one.”
- the hustler counted his money on the way down.

“Everything’s bigger in Texas, my ass.”

********

Only an hour by Rolex time.

Chin tucked over Jack’s shoulder, Ennis sprawled dead to the world, snoring in his ear and sticking to his stomach. *Must have skipped over the section on condom removal before falling asleep.* Holding the head in place, for no other reason than liking the breeze along the back of his neck, Jack rocked his hips, letting gravity work its magic. Ennis slipped off without waking. *Spanish Inquisition could come through here, though one ever expects that.* Nimble fingers found the slick condom, peeled it off, tied it off, tossed it off.

*Nexy time, he takes out the trash. Pain! Pain, oh, pain!*

More ruching around to free his sleeping Ennis trapped arm, settling finally with him in the crook of his embrace and plastered wallpaper close.

*And just as sticky.*

In the quiet, he tuned out the dull shush of the heater, the faint mumblings of the TV next door, *The Daily Show, I think,* and honed in on the rhythm of Ennis – his breathing, his heartbeat – fingers brushing the arm over his chest and down his tanned back.

*This is the arm that embraced me, the elbow that barely missed my nose, the fingers that made me lose touch with reality, aaaaaaaaand back to the shoulders, which I apparently scratched, down to the waist that –*

Ennis murmured, shifting away from his touch, revealing a whole new view of naked skin.

- is very ticklish. Wonder where else? *Bet that spot right behind his –*

*Shit. When did I do that?*
Five finger-wide spread of red dots arced along one cheek, no doubts a matching pattern was bedspread hugging right now.

_Ennis Del Mar. Makes me do crazy things with his wickedly talented dick. Still…_

A kiss from fingertip placed on tender spots would have to carry his apology until different positional circumstances allowed for the real thing.

_Will schedule a time, oh say three to twelve hours of Ennis ass kissing should be – what the fuck?_ Just above the cheek swell and an inch or so from the small of the back dimple. He traced two large circles connected by a series of smaller ones. “Don’t fucking believe it.”

“Got stupid drunk one night. Five other New York’s finest are carrying the results of that dare.”

He leaned over to accept the waiting kiss. “You’ve got fucking handcuffs on your ass!”

His still sleepy over the shoulder peer watched Jack’s rapt ink fascination. “You like it so much, who don’t you have one?”

“Can’t be buried in a Jewish cemetery if you have a tattoo.”

That brought him up on one nonplussed elbow. “You’re _Jewish_?”

“No, just makes a more adult response than the truth.”

“Which is?”

“Needles scare the piss out of me.”

Awake enough now for some serious neck nuzzling, Ennis kissed down Jack’s lips pulling at the hairs dusting a collarbone. “Pussy.”

“Hey, that’s Rabbi Pussy to you.”

“Alma hates it -”

“- not that she’s looked at my naked – where’re you going?”

“Speaking of pissing –” Jack rolled away and off, his anger and hurt leaving a scorch mark behind. “- I’ve got to like a nine dicked weasel. Right back, and then it’s time for later, now _and_ soon.”

“Jack?”

_Goddamnit! Lying there covered in lube shmeer so his – Light switch attacked - dick would go into my – Door slammed. – ass over and over and over and – toilet seat shoved back to the tank – over and over and – ahhhhhhhh! - bladder very happy – over again. His mouth sucking on my neck, his cock humping my leg and - a savage flush. He brings up his fucking wife!_

Washcloths already gunked up, Jack ripped the two flimsy hand towels from their wannabe Tribeca but still hopelessly Queens triangular presentation on the rack and threw then into the sink. Next, hot water on full blast.

“Goddamn you, Ennis. Way to ruin a beautiful moment.”

Steam clouded a mushroom on the mirror before Jack turned the spigot off, the burn of the soaked towel wring out unnoticed.
"Thoroughly fucked, tangled – sssssssss!" Scalding cloth to tender flesh. "– up close, together – ow!" Towel swipe across his stomach pulled at strawberry lube matted hair. "– nothing but skin, and she still manages – shit!" Back of his thighs told the same story of woe. "– to crawl in between us."

The blue-eyed bleary reflection with dark stubble and right angle hair stared back an ‘I told you so.’

“I fucking hate unsolicited advice."

But, that mouthy yet alluring handsome buttinsky was right.

Ennis made a promise to me, still unfulfilled. ‘Bout time I did more with his ass then just deify. Second towel Shit! Still very hot! wrung out, Jack marched back into the room, hauling gear in tow.

“Ennis, we are way passed now, so you better be ready to -”


“Fuck.”

Jack’s Adonis spread-eagled dead center working on his second cord of wood, cradled in the innocence of sleep.

“Ennis?”

“Ennis.”

A couple of hand twitches.

“ENNIS!”

That got a mumble and a head turn.

“Fuck!”

He fell back to sleep! Goddamnit! Knew I wanted to talk, knew we needed to talk! Only gone for, what, five minutes? So wasted he couldn’t stay awake for – which is actually a compliment, now that I think on it. Fucked until there’s no gray matter left and he falls asleep after.

"Goddamn! I wore his ass out!"

The mattress was listing hard to port, but that didn’t seem to bother Ennis in the least, and he rode the waves of Jack’s grunting attempt to right the bed, sailing smooth through slumber’s peaceful waters.

“No, that’s OK, Ennis. Don’t get up. I got this.”

That must be my superpower. Jack Twist, able to fuck men into a stupor.

Jack’s magic trick – yanking out the sheets from under without disturbing a single dish, or Ennis – had an appreciative audience of one.

Ghhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh. Ghhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh.

Mild mannered, and impeccably tailored, defense attorney by day becomes – Ass Bandit! Champion of empty closets everywhere!

Jack’s sigh blossomed a jaw popping yawn.

With great power comes great responsibility.

With the towel, now cooled to hot lava, Jack sat down on the end of the bed. Though his touch gentle, it finally stirred Ennis, who mumbled a snatch of dream, rolling over and away. 

Alas, Ass Bandit’s career must be short lived for there is only one man he wishes to reap the rewards of his gift.

Sleep tugging at his eyes, Jack crawled in, pouring his body into the mold of Ennis' back.

Hope he soon realizes just how lucky he is.
Ennis actually slept in. And when he did wake up at a very lazy 5:30 am, he didn’t immediately jump up to race through dressing in the always the same kind of clothes, rush through his more necessary than air first cup of coffee, run through the door towards a day of possible death – his typical trapped life avoidance routine. No, today he lingered in the fuzzy between dreams and reality for this morning, luxuriating in the feeling as both wrapped him up warm and safe.

_All because of—_

“Jack.”

A two-fold day’s awakening salutation from the blast furnace barnacle attached to his back – an ear tickling mumble and a morning woody crack sneaking.

“Mmbnrmmnm…”

_I need to talk, to explain, to find the right words so he doesn’t fucking sucker punch me. I need to figure out what the hell I'm going to do next. I need to know how the hell we got under the covers._

“Hey…Jack…”

“Go back to sleep, Ennis.”

“Jack, we really need to—”

“Five more minutes.” This plea came with the added bonus of a forward snuggle, and a kiss with no umph on the spot where neck slopes to throat. “Please?”

“Five, that’s it.” The postponement granted was more for his benefit than Jack’s. _I'm a selfish bastard. I'm walking out of here soon, but I don’t want to leave him, be without his touch._

What could have been a thanks slurred Jack back to quiet.

Once awake, sleep’s door always remained resolutely locked to Ennis, so the five minute pause counted down one finger at a time, lightly skipping along the slender contours of what had slipped into his, an unconscious gesture of possession.

_His hand is…is…there’s no other way to describe it, but…beautiful. Such long fingers! Long, magical fingers. This one, maybe? Or this one? Index, got to be, ‘cause I felt it all the way up… Christ! Jack stuck this finger up my ass!_

Jack rode out the shiver without a stir.

_His finger fuck was…well…if one finger feels that fucking fantastic, what would more feel like? What would…Jack feel like?_

A push back, a tentative invitation.

_If being fucked by Jack is anything like fucking Jack…_

“Why, _Ennis._” The slope kiss repeated, second one more explicit in its implications. “Now this…” Slithering under cotton white, a knee caressed thigh. “…sure as hell…” Releasing its slumber talisman, palm trapped heartbeat. “…beats crappy…” Hips dance parted cheeks. “…cranberry sauce.
Goddamnit. It’s Thanksgiving. Alma’s going to be spitting nails by the time I get – SHIT! “Got to get up. I need to take a shower before -”


Never really liked turkey anyway.

Another minute flashed by and so did Ennis, his mouth connecting with Jack’s and all the points below lining up perfect.

Nothing, not in my whole fucking life has anything felt this good, this right.

Even the short distance between room and shower was too long to be separated. A backwards stumble – Jack latched on to shoulders, Ennis steering with hands on ass bumped vanity, “Shit!” bounced wall, “Watch where -” banged toilet, “Fuck!” – each tongue tangling, chest crashing, cock colliding step taken as one.

“Oh…goddamn.”

Head tilted back, Jack closed his eyes, allowing the shower to caress his face and throat, slick back his hair, fill his mouth while his palms joined in the adoration of his body, a languid pull on his cock the final flourish.

Yeah, go on, Jack, let me watch you, want to, come on, do it, jerk off for me, come on, Jack, fucking
“Hey!”

A long stream of water spit out from Jack’s mouth to Ennis’s ear further soaked the horribly inadequate hotel bath mat.

“Would you two like to be alone?”

Despite his cock stranglehold, Ennis was disinclined to follow up on that suggestion.

“Whoa!” Already wrinkling hands staved off the attack of horny Ennis. “Can we do this without slamming my head into something? Three is not a charm where the possibility of a concussion is concerned.”

He climbed in, closing off coherent thought along with the curtain. “What…huh?”

“Don’t always need to move at a Lohman’s bargain shopper’s pace, Ennis.”

That reference took its sweet time wandering the empty halls before running into understanding.

“Jack, what the fuck does…oh.”

Grace under pressure, an innate skill Ennis relied on while checking out bloody crime scenes, arresting tweaking perps, dodging bullets, just normal run-of-the-mill job stuff – none of which prepared him for the palms sweating, heart racing, adrenaline pumping agony of standing inches away from a wet naked Jack with steam haloing around his “Come fuck me, Ennis!” smile and playing nice.

Shit. Handcuffs are in the other room.

“So…”

“…so…”

Jack wants slow, I’ll give him slow. Give him anything, everything he wants.

One thumb circled a hip bone, the other explored Jack’s pout, both caressed with fragile and precious cargo care. The change of blue – was perfect summer sky, and now it’s, uh, that crayon Franny used to color the kitchen walls with. Starts with a C, I think – blinked, until heavy lids closed the window with a breezed sigh.

“Oh, Ennis.”

Not just his hands, the whole fucking package is goddamn beautiful!

Facing the spray, Ennis was blocked from its warmth, but was more than satisfied to watch it splash over Jack’s shoulders, sparking tiny points of brilliance on his skin, and to follow two rivulets wind their way down his chest, finding a path around his nipples, coursing stronger down his stomach to join forces at his navel, rushing down to his –

“Christ, Ennis! I didn’t mean for us to stand here until our dicks pruned! Fucking kiss me!”

Both hands slid around – small of back, nape of neck – the pull close easy, the touch of lips soft. A prelate’s pilgrimage, his tongue worshipped this sacred site, reverent and humble.
“Fuck….Ennis!”

Against his, Jack’s body trembled and Ennis drew him in, forever adored, glorified by his most devoted servant.

“Jack, I want you,” the prayer whispered into a waiting mouth “I want to make love to you,” the sincere supplication smoothed down skin. “I want to be inside you.”

That stared with C blue flashed open.

“What? I thought since, you know, before when we were, and you let me, I was thinking that…” Whatever the idea, it was shuffled aside in favor of a deep kiss that smacked a bathroom echo. “Never mind, doesn’t matter. Hand me a condom.”

He passed over, getting a smack on the ass when he leaned down to rescue it from the soppy mat, wondering if he had missed something somewhere between bed and bath. Did he think I wanted to…? Do I want to…?

Foil wrapper in Jack’s teeth, the package ripped open with a flick of his wrist. Ennis reached for the non-latex circle - his dick, his duty, as he saw it - but chivalry was swatted away. “No, let me.”

Without looking - a skill I’m not going to ask, or wonder, how he learned - Jack rolled the condom down over Ennis’ ready to get fucking ten minutes ago cock, teeth nibbling at his bottom lip a mild distraction.

“And next…”

For Ennis, the combination of watching Jack’s hand slick lube on himself, and feeling Jack’s hand slick lube on him nearly brought things to a rapid boil too soon.

“OK, OK!” A step back, a deep breath.

Another kiss, an ass grope and a smile, Jack turned around to the wall, positioning his body – legs spread, ass out, hands flat on the subway tile – ready and open. "Frisk me, Sergeant Del Mar."

But, he didn’t move.

“Please don’t tell you fell asleep again. Sheesh, my power knows no bounds.”

The tiny reservoir in the back dip fed by the water streaming from Jack’s shoulders that in turn drained away down between his cheeks keened as an oasis to a desert-lost man.

Got to taste it, drink it. Bet it’s sweet against Jack’s skin.

“Going slow still requires actually cock asshole interaaaaaaaaAAAAAAA!”

A tongue caught a drop at the end of its sojourn –

“FUCK, ENNIS!”

- then traveled back to the origins, up through the crack, swimming in the arched back pool, bumping along spine, up between shoulder blades, under sodden hair, each leg of the journey bringing Ennis closer until he touched both, beginning and end, body blanketing the entire path.

“Christ, what chapter was that?”
“Not out of the book.” A knock to be admitted. "Out of my dreams."

"You dream rimming?" The door welcomed him in. "How do I subscribe to that channel?"

One forceful tilt of his hips, and Ennis entered his temple.

"Oh...god!" A combined moan of ecstasy.

Ever mindful of Jack’s initial request, Ennis restrained their pace –

In….and…out…and…in…and…out…

- time measured in quickened breathes, lingering caresses, the patter of the falling water on burning skin.

In….and…out…and….in….and….out…

He swiveled Jack’s head, plastering cheek to wall, then licked, the stubble rasping his tongue. Jack snagged Ennis's hands, entwining fingers where they palmed the wall.

In….and….out….and….in….and….out…

A thrust spread forth, undulating through Jack –

“Oohhhhhhh, fuck!” A long sigh announcing the perfect angle.

- floating back down – “Shit, Jack!” A cry of appreciation for tightening muscles.

- to be pushed forward again -

“Oohhhhhhh, fuck!”

“Shit, Jack!”

- the riptide of pleasure growing stronger.

“En – En – En -” A fuck stutter. “- nis – nis – nis.”

“Yes, J-J-J-Jack?” Ennis similarly afflicted.

“T-t-t-touch mmmme.” He licked Ennis's lips. “So close. Need your hand to -”

One slicked down and around to cradle Jack.

“- do exactly ththththat!”

Still leisurely, unhurried and calm, Ennis matched rhythm of hand and hips, adding in kisses as a counterpoint and gently carrying Jack over the edge.

“Oh, oh, Ennis! I’m, shit, oh, I’m, Ennis, OOOOOOOOOOOOOOH!”

The shudder of completion that spilled over his hand, tugged Ennis to follow, a final thrust to release.

“JACK!”

... ... ...
“Ennis? Ennis? Hey, Ennis!”

Shoulder shrugs bounced a lolling head, but he wasn’t ready to move yet. *Too comfortable this close to Jack, inside Jack, connected to Jack.*

“Hate to be a fuck buzz kill here, but you’re not what I would call petite and the water is fucking cold!”

No response.

“ENNIS! GET OFF!” A clamp of ass muscles the wake-up call no one could ignore.

“Oh, Christ, Jack! I’m sorry!” Careful to hold on to important things, he stepped back and away, only to be splashed by a flurry of Jack motion.

“All in a day’s work,” he sputtered under the icy spray, washing away lube and spunk, “for the Ass Bandit.” A frenzied scrub of shampooless hair. “I forgive you.” A quick, blue-lipped kiss. “Fuck! It’s freezing!” And Ennis was alone with the cold shower.

“So, what do you say to some breakfast?” Jack’s suggestion filtered in from the other room. “I’m fucking starving!”

Colder than the pelting water, the chill of the words that needed to be said gnawed Ennis’s heart ragged. *Oh, shit. How do I tell him? Now, after we just –*

“Ennis? You OK?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m -” *A goddamn liar, to both Jack and Alma.* “ - fine. Just finishing up.”

“So, breakfast?”

The condom slipped off with a squish-pop. “Can’t. Got to do the -” *fake a family routine* - “Thanksgiving dinner thing. Got company coming, my girls expect me, and - ”

“Oh, yeah, sure, right, I understand.” The disappointment was palpable. “Tonight, then. You’ll come over, I’ll introduce you to my fish, then we’ll have a little -”

“Tonight’s not going to work either.” He stood squarely under the frozen spray, the atonement not sufficient for his crime. *Should have told him right at the beginning, taken his anger then. Now, his head's probably going to explode.*

“Tomorrow?”

“Nope.”

“The weekend?”

“I just don't know yet.”

“What about the third Tuesday of next month?”

“Listen, Jack, We need to -”
The curtain screeched back. “So, tell me, Ennis,” Jack stood there wearing a towel and suspicion, “How have you been keeping yourself busy the past four months besides memorizing The Joy of Gay Sex?”

**Thinking of you, missing you, wishing every fucking second that I could be with you.**

“Marriage counseling.”

“You worthless piece of shit.”

“Jack! Wait!” The plea came too late, shouted to an empty bathroom. *Oh, god, what the fuck have I done?*

His stomach could not contain the sick panic of a life without Jack; it burned his throat, seized his chest, rang in his ears, tunneled his vision, spewed out of every pore as he scrambled desperate from the shower, slip-sliding in the water, scratching for purchase on the door, screaming Jack’s name.

“Jack! JACK! Wait! Please, god! Let me explain!”

“Like I would believe one goddamn word you said anymore! ‘Not going anywhere without you, Jack.’ Fucking bullshit!”

In the room, Ennis faced his worst nightmare – a furious Jack pants hoping, obviously intent on walking out, leaving him with nothing. *This can’t be happening, Jack can’t...he can’t! “Jack, what-what are you doing?”*

Socks needed only to cover heel for shoes to be stamped into, just like shirt was ready for departure with only three buttons closed. “Leaving with what's left of my dignity.”

“I know, I know! I screwed up.” A grab at Jack’s arm. *Make this right, fix this now! "Jack, just look at me!"

“You fucked me, fucked me TWICE, knowing you’d be going right back to her!” A wounded animal shoved him away. “Back to a marriage you were trying to fix!” Jacket swung out to catch waiting arms. “And you didn’t even have the fucking guts to tell me!”

“It’s not her, not Alma, Jack. I don’t want it, not anymore, if I ever, but, Cap talked to me, and obligations, she deserves, Junior and then there’s Franny and the counseling thing was because, oh, fuck, I don’t know! I don’t know!” He had to find a way to make Jack understand, but the words were coming too slow to stop the end of his world. "Just please, don't go."

Humiliated Jack paused. "OK, Ennis, I'll stay. I'll stay if you do. No going back for turkey and dressing, no going back to happy heterosexuality. Call your wife right now and tell her everything. The loft, the promise, the Greatest Sex Ever Told. Tell her about me."

The out gifted was not one that Ennis could accept, though. *Seventeen years, the mother of my girls. It's not her fault she's not Jack. 'I'm sorry, Jack, so, so fucking sorry. But, I can't do that to her, not over the phone.'*

"But, you can do this to me. Got it.” Batman boxers and tie with its off kilter Windsor pocket stuffed. “I will not be someone's drive-by fuck. Not even yours.”

“Christ, Jack, what the fuck do you expect me to do?"

“Nothing, Ennis.” Messenger bag and overcoat snagged, loose laces flopped against the carpet.
"Don’t expect one fucking thing from you." The door opened. "Not anymore."

Oh, god, Jack, you just can’t! Please! Jack! I need you – do something! – Jack! I want you – Say something –

“JACK! I love you!”

“Goddamn you, Ennis Del Mar.”

The door closed with Jack on the wrong side.
BklynBabe: Thanksgiving sucks.
Roughneck: can’t be worse then mine.
BklynBabe: Wanna bet?
Roughneck: turkey shaped tofu that fell apart when step-dad cut into it.
BklynBabe: LOL
Roughneck: mashed rutabagas instead of potatoes.
BklynBabe: :o
Roughneck: still picking out stems from the organic cranberry sauce.
BklynBabe: Yeah, that sux, but not even close to –

“Oh, no! You’re not going to dump this on me, Alma!”

“You're saying this is all MY fault?”

“Stop putting words in my mouth!”

Her parents argument rolled down the hall towards their bedroom. Junior cranked up Poison.

- the screwed up mess that was my Thanksgiving.
Roughneck: what could be worse than pumpkin flavored soy protein pie?
BklynBabe: Divorce.
Roughneck: shite, jr. U OK?

“There’s a big difference between love and obligation, Alma!”

“Obligation? That’s all we are to you? An obligation?”

“That’s not what I meant and you -”

“Really like how you fulfilled your obligation there, Ennis.”

“If I’m such a lousy provider, why the hell are we even having this conversation?”

“You tell me. You started it.”

“Oh, that’s nice, Alma. Just walk the fuck away!”

And right back to the kitchen. It was time for the headphones.

BklynBabe: Yeah, just great.
Roughneck: talk 2 me, jr.
Roughneck: what’s the beginning?
BklynBabe: Place cards.
“Francine Martha Del Mar! Dining room! NOW!”

Franny sloughed her maternal rank pulling protest Converse sneakers, that actually did match the skirt and sweater the penalty for not wearing today would be a month long X-Box restriction, down the hall to answer her mother’s shrill summons.

“You bellowed?”

Tiny tents made out of cut up 5x7 note cards decorated with cherubic pilgrims, smiling turkeys and leaves in colors that no self-respecting tree would ever turn fluttered in Mom’s hands as she fussed over a dining room table that Hallmark apparently threw up all over.

“Why, why would you do this?”

“You’re the one that put her on sticker detail, mom.” Junior, who was sitting for napkin duty, reminded her. “That was your first mistake.”

Martha was right, but Dr. Cartwright wasn’t. Mom scurried to put her drive everyone crazy for weeks plans back into place. “I told you specifically not to rearrange them, didn’t I?”

A huge eye roll that would have resulted in the loss of a week of cell phone privileges if mom had not been flitting elsewhere. “This is not the UN, mom. Israel can sit beside Palestine, you know.”

“A little less sarcasm and a lot more cooperation from you, young lady.”

“It’s just family, for Christ’s sake. No big deal.”

“You have no idea just how big a deal, Francine. And watch your tongue. You know your grandmother can’t abide that kind of language.”

“So, what’s she do when grandpa watches football?”

“Prays harder.” She stood back to look at her corrections. “OK, good as new. Well, sort of.” A quick fluff up of her oldest’s handiwork. “Turkey tails, sweetheart, not phallic symbols.”

“Mom, you’re really starting to scare me here.”

Squeak, grind, slam.

“Dad’s home.”

“Oh, oh, look at the time, I’ve, uhm, got to, yes, and then there’s the, uh, the, what-do-you-call-it, and…”

Hands couldn’t find a safe place to land, simple sentence structure broke down, eyes dilated to imminent crash size.

“Mom, are you OK?”

“…never mind. Franny, you’re with me.”

“You want me in the kitchen?”

“Yes!” A quick arm snatch, and a totally confused daughter was dragged down the hall.

Dad appeared –
“Hey, darling.”

“Work?”

“Yup.”

– heading straight for the kitchen.

“Mom’s in there. She’s ballistic, so watch out.”

An abrupt change of direction. “Oh. Well, I’ll just, uhm, go and, uh, take a shower, then.”

“Good idea.”

He disappeared leaving a faint scent of strawberries behind.

Roughneck: mom wanted Franny to help cook & you’re dad smelled funky. so?
BklynBabe: He stayed in the bathroom for 2 hrs!
Roughneck: why?
BklynBabe: Not sure I really want to know.
Roughneck: LMAO!
BklynBabe: Knew things were kinda bad before, but both m&d were acting funny…
more than usual, I mean, & then that creepy guy from the hospital came & dad &
grandpa got into a fight.
Roughneck: fight? over what?
BklynBabe: The trash.

“You know, dear, if you put a little salt in the water that wouldn’t happen.”

“I did, mother. The stove doesn’t heat evenly, that’s all.”

“You should get one of those like your sister has. Henry, what’s the name?”

“Never noticed.”

“You’re no help. Anyway, it cooks like a dream! Susan made a bouillabaisse last week that was
heavenly!

“I must ask her for the recipe.” Sincerity missing in there completely. “You girls are done with those
yet?”

In the kitchen, the smallest room in the apartment – excluding the bathrooms, of course – three
generations of Beers women tried mightily to scrape up some holiday cheer. Grandpa Hank was
there, too, hovering in the doorway making rude noises with his Werther’s, ready to bolt should too
much estrogen fly his direction.

Grandmother Beers circled wanting just to help her daughter who was intent to prove she could
make the perfect meal which included the beans the granddaughters sat shucking while glancing
longingly at the can opener.

“They’ve never done this before?” Grandma tsked and Grandpa sucked. “But, veggies fresh from
the garden are so much more healthy.” She reached over Franny’s shoulder, snapping three beans in
quick succession into uniformly sized pieces. “Your cousin Madison has a beautiful garden. Even planted Brussels sprouts this year.”

“She should try cannabis. I hear it’s a better cash –OW!” A glare across the top of the table at her sister as harsh as the kick her shin took under it.

“I guess I’m done.” Junior held up a bowl of oddly shaped green bits.

Mom swooped in to grab before the grandma inspector could see and comment. “How is Madison? Been so busy with the new job I haven’t had the time to call.” No matter how carefully she poured them in to the pot, beans spilled out the sides and across the stove. “I told you I got a promotion, didn’t -”

“Alma!” The expert charged forward to help. “Here, dear, not so fast.”

“No, mother, I’ve got -”

“Let me, Alma, please. I’ll take care of this while you start the potatoes.”

“Oh, no!” A dash to the sink and a pile of unpeeled spuds. “The potatoes!”

BUZZ!

“T’ll get that!” A shout from both girls, but Franny was quicker out the door, sending a fingered forehead L back to her sister still trapped.

“I can’t believe I forgot the potatoes.” Water splashed out across the counter, the peeler moving at warp 10.

“Mom, if we’re done here…”

“When was the last time you checked on the turkey, dear?”

“The turkey!” Potatoes bounced about the sink, their urgency immediately forgotten. “God, if I burned it…”

“It’s somebody named Bill. Says he was invited.”

“Mother, you’re going to have to scoot, so I can open -”

“Don’t you try and pull that out of the oven by yourself. Henry, go and find Ennis.”

The oven door crashed shut. “No! I don’t want him -”

“OK. I guess I’ll buzz this guy through.”

“Let your father get the turkey, then.”

“It’s fine, mother. Just turn the oven off.”

“Can’t pick up the dang thing anyway. Too heavy.”

“Uh…mom?”

“Which knob, dear? All the words are rubbed off.”
“Emergency room is no place to spend Thanksgiving, that’s for damn sure.”

“Henry!”

“Something’s wrong with the sink, mom.”

“The big one in the middle. All the way to the left.”

“Bill, whoever that is, will be up in a minute.”

“Well, at least make yourself useful. Gather up the trash, Henry.”

“It’s a potato stuck in the drain.”

“Oh, shoot. Forgot a pot for the gravy.”

“No need to trouble yourself with that, Mr. Beers.”

When Dad sprinted into the room, causing Mom’s loud pan fumble, the kitchen reached maximum gross load.

“Turn off the water, you moron.”

“Turkey should come out now, dear, if you don’t want it to dry out.”

“Don’t mind at all, son. Glad to help.”

“I’m not sticking my hand down there to get it out.”

BUZZ!

“Really, the trash is my job.”

“Do I smell something burning?”

“The turkey!”

“Guess I’m answering that one, too.”

“Like to earn my keep, son.”

“Potatoes are filled with carbs anyway.”

“The beans just won’t boil.”

“Don’t like the idea of guests working in my house, Mr. Beers.”

“Well, turn them up, mother.”

Against OSHA regulations, one more person squeezed into the kitchen.

“Everything smells so good, Alma. I just knew you’d be a great cook.”

“Oh, Bill! You’re here!”

“I’m not cleaning up this mess.”
“We’re not guests, Ennis, we’re family.”

“Something must be wrong with this burner.”

“In case anyone was wondering, the shrink is here, too.”

“Got these for you, Alma.”

“Mr. Beers, I still insist. Let me do the trash.”

“Franny, you do it, come and get the potato.”

“Have a hard time finding the building?”

“OK, now they’re boiling.”

“Just use a fork, Junior.”

“Let’s compromise, then.”

“Your directions were perfect, of course.”

“You take the bags, Ennis -”

“Bill, hope you like chestnut stuffing.”

“- and I’ve got the recyclables.”

“It’s really wedged in there, isn’t it?”

“You made it, Alma, I know it will be wonderful.”

“No, Mr. Beers, I’ll take those.”

“Watch what you’re doing. Franny, you’re spilling water everywhere!”

“The burner knob is stuck, Alma. How do you -”

“I’ve got them, Ennis. Grab the bags.”

“Excuse me…?”

“Made my special cranberry sauce, too.”

“If you’d turned off the water before the sink filled up…”

“Just give me the bin, Mr. Beers.”

“And three bean salad.”

“OK, now that’s just gross.”

“What’s the difference? Trash is trash.”

“Just wanted to say thank you for -”

“Oh, I got it now!”
“Ennis, don’t be so stubborn.”

“Or was that the oven?”

“I love three bean salad.”

“Think I’ll pass on the potatoes this year.”

“Not being stubborn.”

“Uh oh. The beans are sticking.”

“OK, huffy, then.”

“Not getting huffy, either.”

“I’m so glad you could make it, Bill.”

“I wouldn’t have missed this -”

“The turkey needs -”

“Starch under my finger -”

“Is there anything I can help you -”

“Ennis, what’s the big -”

“JUST GIVE ME THE GODDAMN RECYCLABLES, OLD MAN!”

An irate jerk and out of the recycling bin, section by section, tumbled the New York Times. Grandpa Hank got the classifieds, Grandmother Beers the financial section. At the girls' feet the editorials and TV guide. World news, front page and a special ad insert for Macy’s Thanksgiving Day sale tomorrow – doors opening at 6 am – skidded between mom and Bill, and the sports section revealing a book underneath skidding to a stop by the pointy toes of a taupe pair of mules standing in the doorway.

“Uh, welcome to our home, Dr. Cartwright.”

Roughneck: book? what book? whose was it?
BklynBabe: Don’t know. She picked it up & shoved it in her coat so quick no one saw.
Roughneck: she didn’t say anything?
BklynBabe: Nope. Just took my dad out in to the hall to talk. Mom freaked out, Grandmother Beers took over, Grandpa Hank hurt his back pulling the turkey out of the oven which left that creepy guy Bill to carve it.
Roughneck: who’s this dr again?
BklynBabe: Marriage counselor.

Junior couldn’t hear the argument, but she was able to watch it juggle the books on her shelves as it raged on in the room on the other side of her bedroom wall.

& she SUCKS!!!!!!!!!!
Roughneck: what she say to your dad?
BklynBabe: Don’t know. Out there for almost an hour & when he came back, nothing had changed.
Roughneck: didn’t go back to the bathroom, did he?
BklynBabe: No, thank god. Just sat in the den watching Franny play her idiotic game, staying clear of the kitchen & mom.
Roughneck: this dr talk 2 your mom?
BklynBabe: Too busy with food & Bill (EWWWWWW!!!!!!)
Roughneck: so you still had dinner.
BklynBabe: What was left of it, yeah.
Roughneck: and?
BklynBabe: What’s worse than suck?
Roughneck: f’ed up.
BklynBabe: Thanksgiving dinner was f’ed up to the nth degree.
Roughneck: what they do, fight over the wish bone?
BklynBabe: If only.

Fork scrape. Ice tinkle. Someone cleared their throat.

“They say it’s going to be a mild winter.”

Knife knocked a plate. Fingers tapped the table. A mumbled request to pass the instant mashed potatoes.

“Yankees will go all the way next year, for sure.”

A pen scribbled across a note pad. A chair protested an awkward position shift. A burp not stifled far enough.

“In a recent survey of couples, both gay and straight, those showing a preference, chose as their number one way of doing it doggie style.”

A shower of spit takes.

“FRANCINE!”

“Well, the weather and baseball didn’t spark a conversation!”

Roughneck: your sister really said that?
BklynBabe: Yeah. She can be so gay sometimes. Thought Grandmother Beers’s eyebrows would never come down.

“Dr. Cartwright, I am SO sorry!” The turkey tail napkins might have added the right flair, but they didn’t do squat when it came to mopping up the mess. “We never talk about sex at the table, not that we talk about sex other places, I mean, we do talk about it, with our daughters, or did when it was the right time, gave them all the information, so they’d make informed decisions, showed them pamphlets, Junior got a perfect score on the STD quiz.”

“Gee, mom, thanks for sharing that.”

“Alma, please, this isn’t necessary.” The good doctor's dignity somehow remained intact as the frantic to please hostess wiped her down. “I’m fine, really.”
“We talk about other things, too, school and -” the table received the same rabid attention. “- shopping and, just the other day we were -”

“Dear, the spill wasn’t that bad. Why don’t you sit -”

“- at the store, mother/daughter time, you know, and oh!” The napkin was soaked, tinged with the fall colors bleeding from the centerpiece. “Tell that funny story, go ahead, about what happened at school, Junior, tell your funny story!”

“Don’t remember it, mom.”

“Had something to do with your locker – I should remember it because we were buying these decorations, even though we really couldn’t afford to, and I thought they would make the table -”

“Which is dry now, Princess.”

“- look so pretty, just make this Thanksgiving dinner perfect and it has to be perfect -”

“Damnit, Alma, stop! Nobody cares about the stupid decorations! None of this matters anymore!” A string of shouted, angry words - the first ones spoken to his wife today.

Uncomfortable silence was an understatement.

BklynBabe: Thought mom was going to implode right there. Or start throwing those little pumpkins.
Roughneck: did she?
BklynBabe: Sure Dad wishes she had now.

“Francine, go to your room.”

“Franny, stay.”

“What she said was inexcusable.”

“What she said was hilarious.”

“I am her mother!”

“I am her father!”

“Were you her father last night?”

Trenches quickly dug, the combatants squared off, the table filled with guests their No Man’s Land.

“Uh, no harm done.” Perfect blonde hair wasn’t anymore, and dark splotches dotted her silk blouse, but Dr. Cartwright’s smile was still dazzlingly genuine as she dumped the collected water on the bread plate into the glass she never touched again. “Suit needed dry cleaning. Remember lesson number six – first priority: family.”

“Family is important, isn’t it, Ennis?”

“When supportive, Alma.”

“So, Bill,” The doctor’s not so subtle swerve in the conversation, “You’re from the South, right?”
“Yes, ma’am,” his drawl as shy as his smile, “South Carolina. Columbia to be exact.”

“Your accent is charming.”

“Thank you, ma’am, I know it makes me stick out like -”

“Just love the sound of it when he talks at our lunches together every day. And what a new experience, a man wanting to talk to me.”

“It’d be new if you actually listened, too, Alma.”

Still hopeful of a peaceful conclusion, the doctor tried again. “What brought you to New York?”

“Wanted a change, more opportunity, more excitement. Don’t get much of that down -”

“And he found it in a big city. Imagine that, Alma.”

“But, Bill doesn’t live in the city, Ennis. He lives on Long Island. In a house. That he owns.”

“You work with our daughter.” Grandmother Beers, barely recovered from the teenaged outburst, braved the line of fire. “At the hospital.”

“That’s right, ma’am. Though not in the same -”

“Bill is the director of Human Services for the entire hospital system. Quite an important job.”

“Certainly not in the same league as protecting the welfare of the public, and putting your life on the line daily.”

“You have any relatives in New York, Mr. Monroe?” Junior asked, a right flanking movement by fresh troops.

“Ah, no, ma’am. That’s why I was tickled pink when Alma here invited me for dinner today.” His expression said he was regretting his acceptance of the offer.

“And why exactly did she do that, Bill? Invite you without telling me?”

“Would have if you were ever here, Ennis.”

“Maybe you should have left me a message.”

“Alma said she couldn’t stand the idea of anyone spending Thanksgiving alone – are you alright here, Sergeant. Del Mar?”

Help for his coughing fit was waved away.

Dr. Cartwright’s turn again to go up and over again. “Must have been a big change, South Carolina to New York.”

“Yes, Ma’am, but I’m adjusting. One thing that I don’t think I’ll ever get used to are the winters. Stays cold up here a long time.”

“Some places are colder than others.”

“Especially if you live in a crappy apartment.”

“I miss green, too. So many trees back home. And the mountains. Like to go hunting, mountain
biking, that sort of thing. Ride through Central Park, but it just isn’t the same as the Blue Ridge.”

“You should visit the Catskills, then. Only an hour or so drive from -”

“Bill owns a cabin near Belleavre. Wrap around porch, stone fireplace, Jacuzzi.”

“How would you know what his cabin looks…” Franny kicked herself this time.

“Ah, the Catskills.” Out of Werther’s, Grandpa Hank sucked on a toothpick instead, long years of practice in the gentle art of not really listening serving him well. “Used to take the family up there for vacation. Beautiful country.”

“The girls would spend hours on the slopes.” Grandmother Beers clung in desperation to that pleasant memory. “Alma loved to ski.”

“When was the last vacation we took, Ennis? Oh, yes. Three years ago. A long weekend to Atlantic City.”

“Easier to get away on vacation when you just sit behind a desk, Alma.”

“Easier to get away on vacation when you can afford it, too.”

“And what if you just want to get away?”

Across the insult pocked table, shell shocked and weary, blank eyes in sooty faces stared. Some were readying a white flag to ask for a cease fire allowing them time to escape the combat zone.

“May I be excused?”

“Don’t want to miss that pre-game show.”

“I don’t believe you will need to keep you next appointment, and thank you for a lovely dinner.”

“I’ll just start clearing the table.”

The high whistles of the incoming barrage was eardrum bursting.

“Seventeen years of being a cop’s wife.”

“Seventeen years of you complaining about being a cop’s wife.”

“Living paycheck to paycheck.”

“Which you had absolutely no trouble spending. That and more.”

“Raising our daughters, making a home.”

“A home that always embarrassed you.”

“If I knew I would end up living in Bed Stuy, I never would have -”

“What, Alma, what? Never would have lied to me about being on the pill, then tell your parents about the baby before me knowing full well what your father would do to me if I didn’t marry his princess?”

“I never would have let you walk out that door last night so you could go and fuck someone else!”
“Pie and coffee, anyone?”

Roughneck: OMFG!

BklynBabe: I always knew, I mean, I can do basic math, but to hear that my mom tricked my dad into marrying her because of me…:(

Roughneck: is it true? about your dad?

BANG!

The wall shook, the shelves shook – *Twilight*, *New Moon* and *Eclipse* all slipping to the floor – and Junior shook with rage.

BklynBabe: BRB, Kurt.

She closed her lap top, heading to the kitchen, not really sure what she was going to say or do beyond shriek at her parents to grow up.

*We’ve always had enough money. Don’t know why mom’s always bitching about it. Dad doesn’t deserve that. He works hard, too hard. And if anyone should be pissed, it’s dad, the way mom was all over that creepy Bill guy, made me sick, and in front of –*

“- can’t take the girls away from me, Alma. I’m their father!”

“After what you did, you’re not fit to be a father!”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“I saw you last night…kissing.”

The truth caught the hem of her robe, yanking Junior back to the shadows.

*OK…OK…sooooo, he had an affair…IS having an affair. That’s bad…very bad…really bad…horribly, terribly, outrageously bad! But, if mom thinks she can keep me from –*

“Right there where everyone could see, Ennis. The whole building. Our neighbors, our friends. Everyone! You humiliating me right there in the elevator!”

*That goes beyond bad to just plain tacky. Bad form, dad. Not very smart, either. What if Mrs. Nedermeyer and Bilbo saw you.*

“Pressed up against each other…mouths…”

“Alma…”

*Don’t think I should be listening to –*
“His hands on your – and holding – and you were -”

Don’t think I WANT to listen to – what did mom say?

“Old friends, my ass!”

“Alma, you have no idea what you’re -”

“Jack Twist! And I let him into my home! That vile, repulsive, queer -”

The truth spilled out of her eyes, closed her throat, buckled her knees. In that dark hallway, Junior’s safe world disappeared.

He is…dad…my dad is…

“Don’t talk about Jack that way!”

“He had his tongue down my husband’s throat! If that doesn’t make Jack Twist disgusting, then I -”

“Shut up, Alma!”

No, he just can’t be! He can’t be…that way! Dad’s not evil, dad’s not wrong! No, he’s strong and brave and funny and understanding and can lift me up on his shoulders, twirl me around, make me laugh, hold my hand when we cross the street, chase monsters out from under my …

“And where were you all night, Ennis? Huh? With him, right? With your old friend?”

Trembling hands over her ears offered no protection, her mother’s words, jagged and bloody.

“All night doing things with another man. Sick, perverted things. Things that you will burn in hell for!”

NO! NO! NO!

“Yes, Alma! Shit, YES! You’re right! I spent the whole night with Jack! Fucking Jack! This morning, too. And you know what? He’s the best fuck I ever had!”

“Get out! GET OUT! GET OUT!”

He stormed from the kitchen, down the hall, never noticing his daughter huddled on the floor.

“Daddy?”

The front door slammed and a little girl’s hero vanished.
Chapter 17

The messenger bag had exploded.

“It was right…here…a minute…”

Sex offender mingled with distribution of stolen property schmoozing with embezzlement.

“…where the fuck…did I…put…”

Law books teetered precariously, journals flopped open and over the table’s edge, newspaper clippings sprinkled liberally in between.

“…can’t…find a…goddamn…thing…”

Reams of legal sized notes scribbled on both back and front gaggled about, on the floor their crumpled rejects mourned their banished plight.

“…how could…I have…lost…”

Open and sucking precious battery life, the computer was indeed a lap top, the monitor lazily flipping through the screen saver – FDNY’s 2013 calendar – for its own enjoyment.

“…wasting fucking…time on…is this…?”

The suspected missing puzzle piece perhaps found close to the bottom of a stack checked at least four times.

“Come here, you fucker!”

The yank toppled the stack, the grab knocked the books, the dive tumbled the computer, the snatch banged the journals, the save shoved the notes, the scramble pushed the files, the jerk bashed the table and the rejects were no longer lonely, a full day’s work slipping to the floor, clippings floating down peacefully to a gentle kiss.

“Happy Thanksgiving, Jack.”

Shaking his feet free, he long stepped over his new filing system, heading straight for the fridge and his second bottle of chardonnay tonight.

“Well, fuck.”

On the counter, sitting all alone and free from any entanglements – the case file he had been looking for.

“Oh, goody. Now I won’t be forced to skip a moment of my thus far holiday fun.”

After being shoved out of the starting gate this morning, Jack had not stopped running, attacking anything and everything with desperation, managing to stay a half a step ahead of his thoughts.

A trip to Riker’s – Traditional fun with a thousand homemade tattooed men crouching in steel cages pulling names for this year’s Secret Santa bitch exchange – to meet with his current clients. The Sex Offender – No, I’m not lonely, and much too old for your tastes. The Embezzler – No, I don’t think they do upgrades to first class here. Stolen Property – No, I don’t mind talking to myself. Really.
A stop off at the deli – *Cornish game hen with a pine nut glaze. That’s what the gay Native American brought to the first Thanksgiving.*

Typing up notes – *Jesse finally says something and it means squat. “He’s always watching.”* Yeah, *I feel the same way about the NSA.*

A movie – *Every fight sequence on slow motion and zoom.*

And not one second spent on *Him.*

“Yeah, obese probability.”

He could close his eyes right now - *don’t do it* - and the whole room would come back - *don’t you fucking do it* - and play this morning on an endless loop - *DON’T!*

The cell phone on vibrate didn’t make this interruption more any welcome, though. *Unless it’s –*

“John Twist.”

“Happy Thanksgiving, Jack!”

*Damn.* ”You, too, Steph.”

“Completely stuffed?”

*Was first thing this morning.* ”No, I haven’t eaten yet. Just about to, though. You?”

“Hell, been back for thirds already. It’s not too late, you know, to come over. I think we’ve got a drumstick left. Maybe.”

”Thanks, but no thanks.”

“Just don’t like you alone, Jack. You should be around friends.”

*No, I should be around Ennis, naked and fucked out, but I'm not supposed to be thinking about that so... *"Netflix provided me with all the company I need.”

“Wolverine?”

”Special edition.”

“Oooo! Hugh Jackman in a wife beater!”

“Hugh Jackman in wet Levi’s.”

“Drumsticks pale in comparison, don’t they?”

”Oxygen pales, Steph.” *And I'd gladly give up the one to see Ennis in either.*

“No argument there. But, it’s just a movie, not real.”

“I’ve got HD. Looks pretty real to me.”

“I don’t mean to pry or anything, Jack, but I’m worried about you. You should get out more. Mix and mingle.”

“You're kibitzing, not prying.”
“How long has it been since…well…you know.”

_Fourteen hours, thirty-two minutes and twelve seconds, not that I'm counting. of course. “It's called a private life for a reason, Steph.”_

“OK, OK, backing off.”

“Thank you. Now, on Monday, I'm going to need -”

“And back on again. You deserve someone, Jack, and you’re not going to find him whacking off to Marvel!”

“Not kibitzing anymore, now you're just plain creepy. And if you must know -” _I have found someone and - la la la la - I'm not thinking about him! “I don't do that on the couch.”_

“Really?”

“Don't like certain things sticking to the leather.”

“And we’re backing off again.”

“Hey, you brought it up.”

“Backing waaaaaaay off!”

“That gave your Thanksgiving some interest at least.”

“And mental images I want to forget immediately, for sure.”

“My self-esteem thanks you for that endorsement.”

“I’m serious, Jack. You deserve to be treasured. You shouldn’t be sitting around waiting for him to come to you.”

_Truer words were never spoken. Yet, here I am on my ass – not missing him. “See you Monday, Steph. Night.”_

“Night, Jack.”

And with that conversation, the movie portion of the evening's festivities was ruined.

_So will spanking it for a while, too._

One item on his - keep busy as a twink at a bear convention - list remained. He attacked the deli containers with a vengeance, stomach protesting the day's neglect.

_God, I'm fucking starving! Skipped lunch - pressed turkey loaf and instant mashed lumps at Riker's – and wasn't in the mood for breakfast, not after –_

“Fuck!”

This morning looped back to the beginning.

_“What do you say to some breakfast? I'm starving! Ennis, you OK?”_

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine. Just finishing up."
“So, breakfast?”

“Can’t. Got to go do the Thanksgiving dinner thing.”

“Oh, yeah, sure, right. I understand. Tonight, then. You’ll come over, I’ll introduce you to my fish, then we’ll –”

“Tonight’s not going to work either.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Nope.”

“The weekend?”

“Still can’t.”

“What about the third Tuesday of next month?”

“Listen, Jack, we need to -”

“So, tell me, Ennis. What have you been doing for the past four months besides memorizing ‘The Joy of Gay Sex?’”

“Mar -”

This time he jumped at the interruption, trembling hands almost dropping the phone.

“John Twist!”

“JJ?”

Oh, shit. “Hi, mom. Happy Thanksgiving!”

“And Happy Thanksgiving to you!”

“I’m sorry I didn’t call, but I was working on a case, and…” I got so wrapped up in my own misery, I didn’t give one thought to you up there in the frozen north. I’m scum. The scum that grows on the bottom of scum. I’m the scum that bottom scum won’t have in their country club. “Well, did you have a good day?”

“Very nice. We had Uncle George and his family and…” her voice trailed off –

She’s sneaking into the pantry, the phone cord stretched out around the corner, so He can’t hear her talking to me.

- before resuming more subdued. “And Cousin Ruth and her girls, the widow across the street, a few from my bible study and two of your father’s ice fishing friends.”

“Gee, was there anybody in Lightning Flat that wasn’t there?”

“Darlene. You remember her, don’t you? From high school? She dropped by this morning to pick up the pies I made for the soup kitchen’s dinner, and she asked about you.”

Uh oh. “And what did you tell her?”

“That you were doing well, of course, handsome as ever, successful lawyer in New York City, still
“And still gay, mom.”

“Oh.”

*Break her heart again, and now I'm changing the subject.* “Why don't you take the rest of the night off, mom? Go put your feet up, drink some spiced apple cider or something. WTSS still start playing all Christmas songs today?”

“Got it on in the kitchen. Can’t you hear Bing Crosby?”

He had to strain, even though she was probably holding up the receiver of that yellow rotary wall phone to the crack in the door. *White Christmas.* One of your favorites.”

“White Thanksgiving, too. Got five inches on Tuesday.”

“Snowed here last night. Only it's all gone gray slush in the gutters by -”

Brute impatience rattled the pantry door open. “You done talking to It? ‘Cause your *normal* guests out here need some more coffee.”

Hand over the mouthpiece couldn't block out the spewing hate.

*Really racking up the blessings today, aren't I?*

“John, I’m talking to JJ.” “Like I said – it. And you hiding in that closet is the perfect place.”

“He’s your son!”

“I don’t have a son.”

The door slammed shut.

*Happy Thanksgiving to you, too, Dad.*

“You better get back to your guests, mom, and I've got a ton of work to do before Monday.”

“You’re coming up for Christmas, aren’t you? It would have to be only you, alone, you know, but we could -”

*Don't think that will be a problem for me, mom. That's exactly what I am. Alone.* “Maybe. Have to see. Love you, mom.”

“Goodbye, s – JJ.”

“Bye.”

Appetite lost, the Cornish game hen roosted with congealed pine nut. Concentration elusive, case files remained scattered. Attention preoccupied, Hugh Jackman was abandoned. A stalk to the kitchen, and Jack upended the chardonnay, not coming up for air until the line was halfway down the bottle.

“Well, at least I still have...”

Jack didn’t know much about fish, but he was pretty sure they didn't swim horizontal on top of the
“What a goddamn fucked up day.”

Jack grabbed cigarettes and hauled his pain out to the fire escape ready to scream it raw to November.

“I hope you're having a fantastic family time, Ennis, because I know I am! Want to hear how fucking fantastic?”

“No!”

“Well, I'll tell you! A pedophiliac sex offender finds me hot, my assistant thinks I jack off to superheroes, my father denies paternity, my mother’s still trying to marry me off to the local beautician and – drum roll, please...” the fire escape railing shuddered under his naked palms, “my fish has taken that schooner to the great beyond!”

“Who fucking cares!”

“Happy Thanksgiving to you too, Mr. Chen!” Jack flicked his cigarette to his downstairs neighbor for that extra friendly touch. “And Merry Christmas!”

“Fuck you!”

“I hate Thanksgiving! I hate my father! I hate peas and reruns and toll booths and the case and LD Newsome and homophobe Lurene and Randall, the gay blade, and fucking hate Alma for taking him away, and his girls for keeping him! You fucking hear that!”

“We all fucking hear that! Shut up!”

This time the ashtray went to Mr. Chen.

“And I hate you, Ennis! For HoJo's and falling asleep and cold showers and my dead fish and -” A trail reflecting the emergency halogens in the alley below slicked across Jack’s hand as he swiped at his nose, sparkling crystals icing down his cheeks. “Hate you for not needing us, hate you for not wanting us - for not wanting me!”

The loop jump started to life, stuck on that one horrible moment.

“JACK! I love you!”

“So what?”

“JACK! I love you!”

“SO FUCKING WHAT?”

“JACK! I love you!”

”AFTER WHAT YOU DID, IT DOESN'T MAKE A GODDAMN DIFFERENCE!”

But, it did.

Twenty degree weather gifted a clarity to things not understood while under the influence of humiliation, hurt and tattooed handcuffs, and that packed a vicious, ass knocking punch. “Oh, fuck me.”
“JACK! I love you!”

Not a rookie, called from bench warming for his game action debut, Jack was a well-seasoned, savvy, multiple wide receiver of that simplistic, yet soul defining word quartet. However he had not been tossed a meaningless thank you for a work-a-day gesture, or an ear grunt lubricated by alcohol and lust, as empty as the discarded foil wrapper, or even forever promised, the words pinned to his sleeve by an imposter, left to wither thin by ill use and neglect. Desperate, yes, manipulative, hell yes, but this Hail Mary pass, standing open, sack imminent, had been lobbed by a condemned man who offered no apologies, sought no block, desired no penalty called.

“Goddamn. And Ennis said them to me. Ennis loves me!”

“So-o-o-o happy for you both, now shut the fuck up!”

The ashtray looped up over the railing, landing right in Jack's lap.

_He loves me, and fucking putz that I am..._ Aching from bruises caused by those already forgiven inevitable future hurts, personal integrity stepped aside and Jack reached a decision already set in his heart that he had deluded himself for months into believing he possessed any power to deny. _Fool to believe I could ever walk away. He loves me and I love the nucleared familied man. So, now what?_ No need to magic eight ball, really. _Guiltless sleep and facing mirror’s reflection is so over –_

He almost didn’t answer it this time – _too busy opening the door to reveal my dream downlow -_ ignored his vibrating pocket for a good twenty seconds before his adult work ethic scolded his toddler avoidance.

“John Twist…yeah, I know – _what? Where? I’ll be right there!’_

A stiff-kneed and awkward climb in through the window, a snatch at coat, hat and gloves, free falling dash down the steps, a quick cab hail, with nary a look back and forty-five minutes of rock ’em ‘where's your pride, man, never take second place’ sock ’em ’but he’s the love of my life!’ robots later, Jack was asking Herman to wait for him.

The bar was noisy, stuffy and crowded with lonely souls who believed commiseration could be found on the rocks. _Just a belly up to the bar separated their Thanksgiving from mine._

“Whiskey, right?”

Jack almost missed her, the old woman barely able to see over the bar until she step-stooled and brought her beer mug polishing into view. “What?”

“That’s your drink. Forty-three years of pouring for the boys in blue and I ain’t never been wrong.”

_Fuck. A cop bar. A straight cop bar. I’m a gay defense attorney in a straight cop bar. And I thought wet boxers wedged up my ass was uncomfortable._

“That’s very astute, ma’am, but I’m not here to drink. I’m here to pick up a man.”

Amazing how quickly liquored up chatter can be switched off.

“Excuse me?”

_Time for Ass Bandit to slip on his Cloak of Passing._

“What’s da problem herah? Somebody fuckin called me, and I come down herah to do dem a favor
and I get this shit? Fuck off!”

Rude hand gestures and a heavy Bronx accent had the conversation flowing again in no time.

Owe everything to Meryl.

“You Jack?” The man with beer keg sized arms slid a foaming mug down to a slumping patron. “Here you go, Joe.”

“Yes, Jack Twist. But, I don’t quite understand why -” he had to play Dodge Drunk to follow the man as he walked to the other end of the bar, “- you called me, I'm merely an acquaintance -”

“Because he asked for you, and only you, that’s why. Got your number from his phone.”

That almost makes this little trip to The Cop and Barrel worthwhile.

“He’s in the back and his tab’s paid. Just get him home safe, kay?”

Really too dark to see much more then vague shapes illuminated by the blinking exit and Coors signs. And the blown Jukebox speakers were scratching out Bob Seager’s penchant for old time rock n’ roll to the exclusion of hearing. But, he sure as hell could smell the fine harvest of hops that turned sloppy sideways on the bench seat in the very back booth by the bathroom. My hero.

A kick to the boots he wanted to stumble over every morning. “Hey, shithead, rise and shine.”

Unfocused cherry covered chocolate peeked over the wobbly table. “Where’s your hair?”

“I’m wearing a hat, numbnuts. Come on.”

Never easy holding liquid still, especially the fermented variety. Thanks to Jack’s offered hand, it flowed out of the booth and up to stand on semi-solid legs, the smile half-cocked and silly, waves gently rocking, building speed and intensity until it crashed forward, spilling all around.

“Fuck!” The full frontal assault knocked him back, feet scuffling for purchase on the sticky floor.

“Jack! God, you feel good!”

“...to insist...” push away the neck nuzzle, “you make...” slap aside the grope, “...me feel fucking...” step back from the groin push, “...great, but I don’t think...” duck out of the hug, “...you want to be outed...” turn away the kiss, “...when in the next room a...” pull back from the body slam, “drunken horde of New York’s finest are – fuck it.”

Wasn’t so much a kiss as a sloppy slip-slide of mouths, but it zinged right to Jack’s heart and calmed Mr. Grabby Hands into acquiescence.

“Shit, Ennis, you are one lousy drunk. It’s fucking adorable!”

One arm under his armpit, the other securely around his waist, and Jack began the way too long trek to the front door.

“I fucking love you, Jack Twist.”

“And I love you, but let’s keep that under our hats for right now.”

“You can, but I can’t!” And that set off a round of giggles, the joke growing funnier as it was
repeated to every person they passed.

“See that he gets home safe now, Jack.”

“Yes, ma’am, I will.” *Smile and nod, and smile and – don’t notice that his hand is creeping under my…shit.*

“Need any help, Jack?”

“No, I’ve got him.” *And he’s got my ass.* Back room dark was completely different than mood lighting ambiance with an audience, and Jack knew it. *Seems I’m the one keeping you in the closet this time.* Elbow to the solar plexus and wandering hand was required elsewhere. "Thanks anyway."

“Get the door for them, Aguirre."

Icy night blasted in, pricking Jack’s eyes to tears, his cargo only mumbling.

“Have a good night, Jack.”

Under normal circumstances, that sleazy stranger smile should have tingled spiney senses, but he was just so relieved that it shut behind him and the cab door opened, he swept it under his other concerns, concentrating on what was now a complete drag job to the curb.

“OK, Ennis, in you go.”

Dignity was definitely not up for negotiations here. Jack was tired, cold as hell, and the patience to maneuver Ennis into the cab gracefully didn’t exist anywhere. A scoot out from under dead weight, a second to position his foot, then a kick to one plastered ass, sending it sprawling on the back seat. “There.” He climbed in the other side, peeling his coat off the sweat slick underneath. “Fuck. And to think I could be home conducting a toilet side service for Sleepy.”

“So, this is the guy?”

*GHHHHHHHHHHHHH.*

A passed out, wasted snore.

“Yeah, this is him.”

Herman looked less than impressed. “Hope he cleans up good. Where are we taking him?"

Ennis snuggled up, arm reaching out to pull himself closer, his "With you," a warm mumble on Jack’s cheek.

Small comfort for a man who was stepping knowingly into the dark foreboding labyrinth of the extra-marital affair.

*But, I’m willing to take whatever he has to offer, fucking love sick asswipe that I am.*

“Take us home, Herman.”
No finesse whatsoever, I just attach mouth, body, all over Jack. Nose cold, cheeks tingling in my hands, push in – smoother, devour, inhale – the scent of winter, the taste of pickle and Dr. Pepper, the sensation of freedom in my touch.


Jack’s doing something, kicking at something. don’t know why, don’t care, just press deeper, dick like a magnet finding its opposite, not after sex, just a connection, just Jack.

“Never again, never going without this again.”

Elevator hits bottom, and Jack’s gone.

“Need to tell him the truth.”

Blink, and my shoulders hit the other wall, thrown there by Aguirre sneering, “Queer!” holding me while Newsome pries apart the doors, taunting “Out the faggot goes!” while Alma and Junior and Franny drag Jack away, shouting, “Mine! He’s Mine!” and Jack’s begging, “Ennis! Help me!”

Can’t move, can’t fight back.

“Queer!”

Arms reaching out, to him, to Jack, snatched away, yanked back.

“Ennis! Help me!”

The doors open to empty.

“Out the faggot goes!”

Fingers shred clothes, rip flesh.

“Mine! He’s mine!”

“Ennis! Help me!”

One push and –

“JACK!”

Ennis shot straight up.

“Oh, fuck.”

Ennis and hangover flopped back down.

Jack arrived seconds later with a frantic high speed bounce off the open bedroom door. “What, Ennis? What?”

A full DOT crew, all ten guys, were jack hammering his skull, the inside of his mouth tasted like the floor of a back alley titty bar in Newark and his body, a tackle dummy for the Giants. About the only place that wasn’t screaming, ‘You’re way too old for this shit!’ was the top of his left foot.
“You fell down an elevator shaft.”

The sheet rustle of Jack’s sit down ear drum busting loud. “And Ass Bandit still made it back in time for breakfast.”

“Huh?” A tentative slit-eye opening met lethal sunshine stabbing in from the drawn curtains. “Shit!”

“Here, take these.”

Aspirins, two of them, from Jack’s hand to his. A glass of water was next and he swallowed what amounted to a single calm voice whispering reason to an angry, murderous mob.

“Coffee will be ready to scrape the crud off your brain in a few.”

Music to a death warmed over man. That and Jack’s voice telling me there’s coffee.

“Some eggs and toast, maybe?”

A stomach flip that would have impressed the Cirque du Soleil. “Oh, god, Jack…”

“Or, we could always opt…” A fingertip on his collar bone, traced a cool line. “for a more…”

innuendo silk in his ear, “protein rich breakfast.”

“I gotta piss.”

A breathy chuckle. “You can quote Shakespeare.”

Half the road crew took a smoke break, the headache easing off. It wasn’t the drugs working so much as the soft touch of Jack’s kiss on his forehead.

“Bathroom’s right across the hall, not that you couldn’t find it even in your condition.”

The bed and Ennis were less than complete without Jack.

“Jack…last night, well…” The up on elbows position was mastered with a struggle. “I, uh…”

A smile that could break a heart and mend a life. “I know”

The pillow welcomed Ennis and his overwhelming sense of unworthiness home. His memory was a rain soaked water color, but three things cut through the blur: he had finally spoken the truth to his wife, Jell-o shooters will fuck you up, and Jack had come to rescue him.

The how, a story he was certain Jack would revel in the re-telling, resplendent with sarcastic detail. The when didn’t really matter, the where and who were obvious considering it was Jack’s apartment, Jack’s bed and Jack’s arms that had sheltered him. And as to the why…

Either he’s mentally incompetent, deficient AND deranged, or he’s in…damn.

The urgent and increasingly dire need to tap a kidney finally roused the reluctant butterfly from its hunter green goose down cocoon. After falling - “Fuck!” - literally out of bed, Ennis did the Morning After shuffle in search of a depository to return what he had rented the previous night.

OK, think, think…last night…uh, yeah, last night I…and…then…started with…the fight. That’s right. The fight with Alma. Christ, I can’t believe I forgot that look on her face when I said…The Ass Bandit?
Illuminated by a pair of Art Noveau sconces, the bathroom – no more than four steps from the postage stamp sized bedroom and next door neighbor to the Fibber McGee hall closet – wasn’t big even for a change of mind, but it did have the essentials; shower, sink and, most important to his bladder, toilet.

*Stormed out…then…O’Malley’s. Shot the shit, had a beer. Talked shop, had a beer. Complained, had a beer. Laughed, had a beer. And here’s where it begins to get fuzzy…*

The seat already up, Ennis pushed down PJ bottoms, his recollection of the wrestle to put on a blotchy swatch at the corner of his memory’s canvas, and with bare feet regulation distance apart, he took a huge weight off his mind.

“Ahhhhhhhhhh…”

Flush, scratch and stretch - “Damn!” - the siren’s song aroma of fresh brewed coffee defeated by his drinking binge stench.

*Shower first, then life’s blood.*

Towels easy, below the sink neatly folded, but he really wasn’t awake enough to face the daunting task of picking out shampoo and soap from amongst the crowd milling about the suction cupped rack on the back of the shower stall. “Christ, does it make that much fucking…” He snatched the biggest bottle, squirting out a handful, “…difference what the hell you use to…this smells good!” While the shower spray lullabied his sore muscles, Ennis luxuriated in rich lather and, after the rinse, had to admit that his hair had never felt softer.

Out, with body and hair towel-dried, and nothing to wear except what he had just taken off, he stood bare-chested and warm-water pink, the alcohol punched bruises under his eyes and the red road maps scrawled across the whites accused back from the medicine cabinet mirror.

*Drinking contest, lime Jell-o, then...an argument? Back room...a line of petrified wads of gum in a line...Bob Seger...somebody kicking my boots... and…*

They had swapped spit and other bodily fluids, but use Jack’s toothbrush? No. Crest Vivid White on his finger would have to combat Newark alone.

*Jack...he was bald...no, a hat, one of those knit jobs...black just like his hair, pulled down around his ears, tight so the cold couldn’t –*

Finger reaching for his back molar, Ennis froze.

*He said it. Last night, right there in O’Malley’s. “And I love you, too, Ennis.”*

Foam rabid dog dripped, escaping from his ‘Oh, my fucking god!’ smile.

*Jack loves me? Jack loves me? Jack loves me!*

“Muck, yea- ACK!”

His trachea reminded him that it doesn’t accept toothpaste foam.

*Jack loves me!*

Spit, rinse, one more wet dog shake of his curls, and the lingering cobwebs of his hangover rushed for the coffee as fast as he raced towards redemption.
Jack happy, Jack smile. Every day, the same. Tell him, promise him.

“Jack, last night you...you...damn.”

Now, the kitchen was also small, but even in Madison Square Garden he would have noticed Jack lounging, stirring his coffee. He’s...he’s... Crossed at the ankle, a long, diagonal stretch of faded blue, a softer shade complimenting the supporting arm, and nestled just below the belt line - the keys to the kingdom.

“Must tell Herman that you do.” Tongue wound around the spoon, catching every bit of the caffeinated ambrosia. “You most definitely do.”

The roomy PJ’s weren’t so much anymore. Hangover? What hangover?

“Coffee?”

The offered cup not released until it steamed both faces.

“Breakfast?”

“Depends.”

“On?”

“The menu.”

“Got waffles.”

“No.”

“Cereal.”

“No, thank you.”

“Oatmeal.”

“No fucking way.”

“Fruit, then.”

“Much hungrier than that.”

A coffee gulp pause, knuckles, knees and cotton bulges brushing.

“Can whip you up some eggs.”

“I want lawyer.”

“You take him sunny side up or over easy?”

“Neither.”

“Oh, chapter seventeen!”

“Nope.”

“Eighteen?”
“Got something else in mind.”

“God, I hope you’re reading mine.”

“Something we both want.”

“That’s for goddamn sure.”

“Something we both need.”

“Like Pam Anderson and silicone.”

Hips, both sets, were conducting an experiment, trying to prove two objects could occupy the same space in time.

“Satisfying.”

“But, of course.”

“Life altering.”

“No pressure there.”

“Permanent.”

“We have to break for ‘Jeopardy’ sometime.”

Coffee tinged breaths mingled.

“So, can you recommend someone?”

“Not above self-promotion here.”

“Not what you practice.”

“Willing to start a rigid regime immediately.”

“Don’t want to get taken.”

“Isn’t that the point?”

Sweat dripped from one upper lip to the other.

“The point of what?”

“You needing a lawyer.”

“Need one to be free.”

“Like a certain public defender, perhaps?”

“No, like one that can handle my divorce.”

A mug dropped –

“OW!”
- on the top of Ennis’s left foot.

“Christ, that hurt!”

Snatching at the roll of paper towels on the counter, since Jack was still stationary and staring blankly into space, he knelt to clean up the mess.

“Are you shitting me?”

“No, it still fucking hurts!”

“About the divorce, dickweed. Are you going to leave your wife?”

“Use the past tense.” The brown, sopping mess in his hand was the perfect metaphor for what he had left behind. “Walked out last night.”

“I don’t…this is…goddamn.” Jack turned away, the sink supporting the rush of disbelief. “I was going to …”

“You were going to what?”

“Become someone that I despise.” Cold water splashed from spigot to face to counter. “Marriage counseling at dawn, divorce by cocktails. How did you manage that?”

“Alma saw us.”

“When?”

“Last night. On the elevator.”

“My good side, I hope.”

“Must have been one of the times we stopped.” Coffee mopped up, Ennis tossed the mess at the corner, paper towels flapping the trash can. “She shrieked, called me sick and perverted, I walked out for good.”

“Straight to a bar.” Jack tsked, a child scolding sound. “What a country song cliché.”

Beside Jack at the sink, Ennis rinsed his hands, swiping them dry on his butt. “I had the Thanksgiving from hell: outed as a gay man in front of my marriage counselor, outed as an adulterer to my family, outed as a gay adulterer by my wife in the kitchen. Where else was I supposed to go?”

“How about to the man that made you that gay adulterer?”

“You mean the man that told me to fuck off?”

And the legalese spin began.

“See, I told Married Ennis to fuck off. But, when you left your primary place of residence last night, while not legally, you were for all intents and purposes emotionally Not Married Ennis, so the fuck off order automatically was nullified.”

He needed coffee in the worst way. Caffeine, and maybe this will make sense. “And when did you send that memo explaining the rules of The Fuck Off, Jack?”

“Everything is codified within the Dating Laws and Statutes.”
Or not. “Well, my copy of the Dating Laws is the 1990 edition. And how was I supposed to find you? You never gave me your new address.” He poured two cups, handing one very carefully to Jack. “Don’t have your number.”

“Yes, you do. It’s in your phone.”

“Is not.”

Three spoons of sugar for Jack, straight leaded for Ennis. “OK, how do you think the bartender got in touch with me? He called asking me to schlep over and collect your wasted ass from your phone.”

That indeed was an interesting enigma, one that, for proper contemplation, more than a couple of sips of coffee would be needed. “Phone book.”

“No land line.”

“411.”

“Unlisted.”

A flaw in this Escher logic argument of Jack’s jumped out, catching Ennis’s sleeve. “Well, you schlepped over to Brooklyn when, to your knowledge, the Fuck Off was still valid.” His smile was insufferably smug.

“Since I was the original author, the option was mine to cancel it, which I did pre-schlep.”

“But, when you canceled, it was already nullified, and that’s a double negative, making it back into a positive, so the Fuck-Off was still on!” *What the hell I’m I saying?*

“I was not in possession of that knowledge at the time.”

“Well, neither was I! And that’s why I ended up drunk off my ass at O’Malley’s, because I thought I’d lost forever the best part of me!”


“I fucking love you, Ennis.”

“I know, told me last night.”

A loopier grin. “You can remember that?”

The coffee mugs were secured prior to Ennis's pull closer, hands finding the perfect resting place on Jack’s ass. “Don’t need to remember anything else. Just you, always you.”

Their kisses, the Sunday afternoon kind – lazy, dreamy, whispering with eternity.

“So, what about breakfast?”

“I make a bitching Belgian waffle.”

Tongue skimmed across Jack’s bottom lip. “Have a craving for your first suggestion of the morning.”

“Ah, the house specialty. A very wise -”

The counter buzzed.
"Fuck."

"Me?"

"No, you’re on the table."

Three Russian doll kisses – small, medium and large, the shivers they induced equal in size – and Jack reached for his phone.

"John Twi…he what? No, no, don’t…wait, let me get you that number."

Out of the post disaster mess on the table, he plucked the right file, holding up a ‘One second!’ finger as he disappeared back to the bedroom, the door closing to protect that most sacred of privileges.

Ennis couldn’t get to his phone fast enough. It flipped open to cheery musical tones, and with three button pushes he meant to prove Jack –

"Well, damn."

Speed Dial #5 – Jack Twist.

He was with me all the time. A retroactive comforting thought.

A convoluted series of steps that made sense to the manufacturer’s nephew only, and –

“There. Number one. Where he belongs, and where he’ll stay.”

The same cheer sang the phone closed.

“Time for more coffee.”

The intention was not snooping; the glance down was for mug retrieval only. But, he was powerless to stop when the words were right there in front of him.

11/23/06 11:17 am

Case No. 4815162342 Jesse Whitfield – Possession of Stolen Property with Intent to Distribute, Theft by Taking, Felony

This interview garnered the same results as all my previous trips to Riker’s. Any attempt to engage my client in a meaningful discussion concerning his defense was met with silence.

With one remarkable exception.

To my question – “Jesse, has someone threatened you?”

My client’s response - “He’s always watching.”

“Oh, fuck. Not again.”
“But, I was just there, yes ... he never said anything to ... not possible, my...” Knees should be kissing linoleum right about now. “Nobody looks good in ... he can bitch all he wants ... it’s out of my...” Hands full of Ennis ass. “Judge Petrovsky already hates ... I’m not going to file a motion just so ... no way, his...” Dick sliding against my tongue. “Not until ... have you spoken to ... not going to happen...” Unless I get off this goddamn phone! “OK... OK... I will ... yes, today... OK... OK!”

With the now on silent phone buried in the back of the second night stand drawer, Jack frightened the door hinges with the ferocity of his yank.

“ENNIS!”

Topsiders kicked under the chair. “Conferring complete!” Henley and t-shirt tossed on the back. “Breakfast!” Pile of O’Malley’s scented clothes scooped up – ‘Cause if I trip on them one more - “Come and -”

**CLANG!**

Jack looked from the handcuffs to the brass headboard back to the handcuffs to Ennis standing in the doorway.

“Lunch?”

Ennis looked from the handcuffs to the brass headboard back to the handcuffs to Jack standing two feet away,

“Brunch.”

*Oh, shit.*

In hindsight, throwing the pile of dirty clothes – not a strategically sound move. Neither was running. One served only to piss him off – the boot to the groin a major contributor to that – the other left the handcuffs unguarded and they were snagged in one expertly executed swipe of the hand as the other snatched Jack from his escape attempt - a convincing performance, to be sure - all three landing on the bed in a giggling heap.

“You do not have the right to remain silent, anything you say can, fucking better be, screamed loud. You have the right -”

“Evoking my right to self-counsel!”

“No, I’ve been appointed to handle your case!”

“Why does your hair smell like exfoliate?”

The wrestling match for dominance, while extremely enjoyable – lick right there, watch the knee! Up and over! You are happy to see me! To the left, no, my left! Oh, he’s very happy! And that’s my leg
that you’re – oh, shit. – was short-lived with Jack coming out the loser – make that winner – metal rings snapping on his wrists with a ratcheted ‘ka-ching!’ and strung up over his head, brass headboard a co-conspirator in his captivity.

“You fucking better have the key to these things, Del Mar.”

“Oh, I do,” the back of a hand wiped a sweaty forehead shining above a triumphant grin, “In my car, I think.”

“In your car? Which is in fucking Brooklyn?” The temper tantrum that followed severely challenged the bed’s structural integrity. “You fucker! I’m going to kick your ass!” A hollow threat, for any attempt to do so met with empty air as Ennis dodged each one.

“The key’s in my pocket, idiot.”

Relief collapsed back to rucked up pillows. “Not funny, shithead!” Although, if the positions were reversed, I’d be laughing my ass off, too. “So, what’s –

“This.” A tongue left a swatch of crotch denim wet.

“NO!” The scramble so fast, Jack was up hugging headboard and knees before Ennis’ next breath.

“Jack, what the fuck are you doing? Protein breakfast, remember?”

“Me, not you!” Christ, I don’t want to tell him, I’ve got to tell him, I should have told him four fucking months ago. “For you, Belgian waffles and screaming orgasm. For me, salty chutney omelet, remember?”

“What, you don’t like…?”

“Are you fucking insane? Mine’s one of the four out of five dicks surveyed that preferred suckage!”

“Just not my suckage, is that it?”

The slap of Ennis’ crestfallen self-flagellating disappointment stung, Jack needing to kiss away his doubt - Suck me dry - while wanting to escape his judgment – I lied to you.

“Fuck, Ennis, I’d move into your mouth right now if you had Google Fiber.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

He loves you. Just say it, dickhead, say it so he can hug me and kiss me and forgive me and fuck me and shove me away and run away screaming “You selfish prick!” grabbing the Brillo on the way out to scrub off any trace of me. Oh, I am so fucked.

“Jack?”

It was good while it lasted. “You see…Daniel…”

“That dickhead? What’s he got to do with…?” Disgust’s iron became anger’s fire. “Did he do something to hurt -?”

“Well,” He sure as hell tried. “Before he dumped me, he, uhm, warned me that,” I love you, Ennis! “I should get…tested.”

“Tested? Tested for -” The ice water just tossed dripped from his stare. “Daniel said…and the next
day we…” A shuddered breath. “If I hadn’t had one in my pocket, would you…?”

The shock of that blow rippled outwards, waves of furious disbelief shaking Jack to the core. “What? How can you fucking ask me that? I wouldn’t have stuck sunshine up there without a condom!” Jack had to close his eyes, that accusatory expression following him into the darkness. “And certainly not your dick even wearing the whole fucking Trojan army if I hadn’t tested negative!”

Ennis blinked. “Wait you’re– negative? You’re negative?”

“Yes, asshole!” A savage kick kept him from approaching. “The day after Daniel and again in October.”

“Then why are you…?”

Face scrubbing jingled the cuffs, Jack’s sigh whistling through his hands. “Because my doctor said there is a very remote possibility that it could take up to six months for the antibodies to appear and while protected sex is OK, contact with certain bodily fluids could expose my partner to the virus, and that’s just not a risk I’m willing to take. Not gambling with your life, using suckage as my ante.”

“Who said I was going to swallow?”

“Moot point, Ennis, because until January twenty-third, my dick is penis non grata to – why wouldn’t you swallow?”

A shrug. “Never have before.”

Taken so far aback, sarcasm had no chance to catch up. “What…when…who…?”

“No one, you dumb fuck.” He closed the gap, smooshed pillow, bunched sheet and tangled duvet between them, and Jack had nowhere to go except wrapped in understanding and acceptance.

“How remote?”

“Struck by lightning standing in a coal mine remote. But, remember, this is me we’re talking about here, and it’s just the curse that all with special sex powers must -”

The blistering kiss ripped Jack’s breath away. Mouth bore down, teeth smacking and scraping. Tongues slithered with Ennis’ striking out to sting the roof of Jack’s mouth, the inside of his cheek, almost down his throat. Catching a tongue deep, Ennis sucked hard, drawing it out, and planting a bite before sitting back with a satisfied smile.

“I, uh…” A voice crack and swollen lips turned up into an expectant smile. “And?”

“I’ll take those odds.” Then he just jumped off the bed and walked out of the room.

“Hey! Where’d the fuck…shit.” Jack had time to straighten the duvet, smooth out the sheets, ruche another pillow behind his head - which I did with just my feet because I'm hanging like a piece of meat from my own...that's prime rib, of course...or would I be top sirloin? No, more like rump roast if I don't get back to excer - “Ennis! I'm waiting...waiting for you to return...waiting patiently...waiting oh so -” Steel against brass made a marvelous racket when pissed off. “Ennis!” Where the fuck is - not bathroom...living room...wait. Cabinet...dish...fridge... “Apartment's a shoebox, but don’t flatter yourself into thinking your dick’s that big it can reach me from the kitchen!”

“Not my dick I’m thinking about.”
Whatever Ennis brought back disappeared out of Jack’s line of sight – *but who gives a shit about a stupid bowl when he is* – “Oh, god.” He strained against the metal, hands aching to touch the naked flesh revealed as Ennis, standing at the end of the bed, slipped off the PJs “I know what *I’m* thinking about.”

He scratched his head at the handcuffed Jack in jeans and how to lose one without the other conundrum. “Just like the Hojo’s? Backassward angles?”

“*Well, there's an ass in there somewhere.*”

Fumbling fingers at fly buttons, both exciting – *Yes! Again, rub the knuckles right – fuck! –* and excruciating. “Uh, you need some help there, Sergeant?”

“*Yeah.*” A smart swat to a smart ass. “Lift it.”

“You know a please goes a long way to -” Three tugs later, Ennis was laughing. *Not the best reaction when pants coming off.* “What’s so damn funny?”

“You accused me of self-delusion?”

The Incredible Hulk stretched to contain Jack’s erection.

“You don’t want to see him angry. You wouldn’t like him when…Ennis?” David Banner’s alter ego blocked the view. “Ennis, where the -?”

He popped back up at the bottom of the bed, crawling between Jack’s legs, mouth in a closed-lip grin.

“Beginning to think you were having a better time down by your – SHIT!”

Freezing water dribbled the contour of Jack’s ribs, and down Ennis's chin, an ice cube drawing a nipple instantly erect.

“Oh, god, *Ennis*…”

Goose bumps broke a sweat as lips trailed an icy line through his hair, back arching up off the dark splotched sheet.

“*Shit!*”

His mind instinctively shrunk from the cold, hands wrapped around the top bar, metal digging into wrists, dragging him away. *But, damn! It feels so…so…* “Fuck!” His body begged him to stay, sizzling chill to heat, pushing up into the relentless sting. “Ennis!”

Exquisite torture that left him shaking and bereft when the cube’s final frigid drops splashed to his navel.

“Book?”

“Internet.”

Another cube in place, Ennis poured over Jack – chin to chin, chest to chest, cock to cock – lips teasing, tonguing the ice out of his mouth and into Jack’s, hips mirroring the slow sway until only a tiny sliver remained, tongues taking over the see-sawing rhythm.

*More…I need more…*
A whimper did not bring it, he ground upwards trying to force it, wrapped legs around, clutching, grasping, squeezing, heels jammed into the back of Ennis' thighs, handcuffs biting into his flesh, stretching out further in search of it.

…more pressure, more weight…just fucking more Ennis!

Chasing after Ennis' mouth, Jack's tongue lapping at spit and water dribbling in the corners only to be forbidden his desire, it licking away to follow what streamed down his face, slipped into his ears, the pressure of hips grinding, teeth nipping at his lobe, lips scraping across a scratchy cheek, friction melting groins, hands forcing his head back, exposing his throat, cocks slipping in unison, brutal suction leaving the mark of his possessor.

“Fuck!” He bucked away his Ennis blanket, regretting the loss immediately. “Don't, I look shitty in a turtleneck!”

Another trip to the bowl. “How about really long sleeves?”

“Why?”

A nod towards the headboard as a cube rattled against teeth.

“What the -?” Red circles ringed his bound wrists. “Shit. French cuffs on Monday.”

Hands to knees demanded Jack spread further…further…further apart - “But, you’re mine until then.” – occupying his territory between.

“I have plenty of sssssss…” Icicles drizzled down from Ennis's lips, steam rising on contact. “…ick days to burn.” A weak cough strangled off by a groan approving the chilled finger tracing the line separating his balls. “Actually feeling a little bit puny hhhhhhhhere!” Wintry breeze wafted over the swollen head. “Flu’s going around, you knoooooooh, fuck!” The press of palm and he stole the first stroke, a spine popping arch lifting his whole body off the mattress, propelling his cock upwards. “Or maybe some…some…some…” The headboard protested the yank forward, “…thing serious like pneu -” arms battling to break free when a tongue drew spit along his shaft's pulsing vein, and Jack’s sanity ripped to shreds.

“GODDAMNIT!! EEEEEENNNNNNNNIIIIISSSSSSSSSSS!!!”

Heat and cold and mouth and fingers and dick and hole and Ennis ... Ennis ... Ennis ... suckingslidingprodingpoking...

“Yes! Yes! En – YES!”

Touch...Ennis...oh, god! He’s...slit...tongue and fingers...ice...more...him...want to...need to...let me...

“Uh...uh...uh...uh...uh...uh…”

Touch...want...Ennis...more...more...MORE...hi – no! Don’t...don’t...NO!

Head banged back against numb arms, steel gouging his wrists, his splayed legs quivering, hips held in place, his sweat-sheened body taut and stretched in the fight for freedom

“Please...please...Ennis...let me...touch...please!”

One finger – two - three –
“Ennis!”
Lips – tongue – teeth –
“PLEASE!”
Release…
“Oh, thank you!”
But, there was nothing left, no reason to thrust, no warmth, no wet, musk sultry air only, his cock
bouncing to his stomach, spit splattering his chin.
“Ennis – what – you-”
Blurry blue eyes stinging with sweat and tears blinked again and again flickering Ennis in silent
movie motion – the reach to the nightstand, the flip of the cap, the feral grin tearing foil, the glare of
lust.
“Ennis…I…you…”
Empty, now a slick finger. Empty, now rock solid cock
“Oh, GOD!”
The thrust was one push, hard and straight, not stopping until legs lopped over shoulders, ass left
mattress and Jack winced from the bite to his thigh.
“Jack!”
Headboard, handcuffs, mattress, Jack, Ennis – a cacophonous symphony of fuck sounds colliding,
weaving, erupting.
“YES!” THUD! “YES!” THUD! “YES!”THUDTHUDTHUDTHUD“YESYESYESYESYES!”
THUD! THUD! THUD! THUD!
Jack exploded.
“YESSSSSSSSSSSSSSS!”
Riding Ennis' cock, legs and arms stretched beyond endurance, surfing on the waves of hot pleasure
coursing through his body, Jack twitched and jerked, shouting and cursing, each convulsion giving
birth to another, another deep thrust in, another flash of ecstasy, another spurt across his chest.
“Oh, god, oh fuck, oh, Ennis!”
Warmth spread, Ennis unloading inside – “JACK! JACK! JACK!” thrusting until he collapsed
forward, shaking and gasping, rattling the handcuffs, Jack’s legs slipping away to the side, useless
except to cradle comfort for his spent lover’s body.
“I love you.” The nuzzling wasn’t required to demonstrate the veracity of that statement, but Jack


appreciated the warm neck fuzzies just the same.

“I love you, Ennis Del Mar.” Tender curl kisses brought the taste of salt to Jack’s tongue. “No more secrets, I promise.” *Bet we can be seen from space. A glowing beacon of sexual satisfaction.* The body semen and spit stuck to his lay still and silent, breaths measured evenly out. *Mr. Grabby Hands has the right idea. And Ass Bandit will join him as soon as I scratch my –*

**CLANG!**

“Oh, fuck.”
A red colon blithely blinked the final death throes of November 25, 2013, the alarm clock’s relentless march toward tomorrow. Body was running on fumes, but Ennis wasn’t ready to close up shop and give in to the tug of eyelids anxious to burrow beneath the blanket of sleep, the miracle of today still too new and exciting to hand over to capricious dreams.

Want to live every second.

Inexplicably, love had blindsided and branded - and gave me a new appreciation for raisin bagels - on those rain washed streets of Soho, and lust – to touch, to take, to possess - had consumed since… well…since the first flash of blue, if I’d had the balls to admit it - and showed no signs of abating no matter how many times he embraced the sun. Wanting, needing Jack – the Eternal Flame.

But, like?

Been too busy fucking to find out.

But, today he had, this first full day with nothing between them but them. The exact moment wasn’t pinpointable, the feeling gradually growing like Nature’s need to fill the empty lot vacuum with green and life. And now Ennis was teeming with Jack, the healthy lushness a shock to the previously arid and unaware of it ecosystem.

And now I’m ass over end in like with the man…drooling on me.

“This has got to be one of the best fucking days of my life. Except Jack’s knee jerk fit after we, after I nodded –

“Now I know why Spidey works alone. ENNIS!”

Sharp pain in the nether regions. “OW, fuck! Jack! I'm awake! What?”

“Pop quiz! I left my unbelievably sexy lover hanging from the headboard. Do I: A – Release him before he kicks my balls back to their nineteen-eighty-two position? B – Read him his rights, haul him in, book him, then get ready to have my ass kicked all the way to civil court for false arrest? Or
C – Take advantage of his untenable situation by sucking his balls, licking his ass and fucking him until he’s blind?"

“No D?"

“Not even you can do all of the above, Ennis.”

“OK, I guess I’ll have to go with…”

It had been a good thirty minutes before Jack began to notice light around the edges.

- and that goddamn phone call.

“Del Mar.” Answering his cell, tone curt and annoyed at the intrusion, Ennis had nearly toppled off the stool as he leaned to the right, trying to keep what was infinitely more interesting in sight – Jack’s ass as he bent to fill the dishwasher.

“Ennis.”

The stool and he both succumbed to gravity.

"Alma."

Breakfast dishes had clattered to the bottom rack.

"If you're calling -" the counter provided adequate support for his climb back to standing, a pointed blue stare his greeting at the top. "- to start condemning me to hell again, I'd just as -"

“I spoke my piece on that subject last night.”Harsh brightened to hopeful. “Unless you’ve…uh…changed?”

"Not happening." There was no way she could see what he was doing, but kissing Jack surprised at that moment was all kinds of satisfying nonetheless. "Why are you calling?"

Hopeful withered to dust. “To tell you I’m taking the girls out of town for the weekend”

"To White Plains to visit -"

“No, but we should return late Sunday night, since they’ll have school in the morning.”

"Where are you -"

“While we are gone, you may come to pick up your things, but I don’t want you to be here when we return.”

The audacity of that demand produced a chuckle of dismissal. "That's still my apartment, Alma. You can't tell me when and -"

“I’ve made a list. I’ll leave it on the kitchen table. Please do not remove any item not -”

Audacity was teetering perilously close to unmitigated gall. "You decided what I'm allowed to take out of my apartment?"

“- on that list thus forcing me to notify my attorney.”

"You've already got a lawyer?"
"Well, you did." Jack's sotto voce interjection and eyebrow waggle didn't help in the least.

"Should you wish to contact me in the future, please do so through – what?" Distraction came in the form of a voice in the background, interrupting her divorce recitation. "No, just a minute, I'm -"

"Who's there? Who the fuck is -" The distraction whisper drawled about suitcases and Hondas. "Is that – fuck, no – is that - that asshat from the hospit – we just, last - certainly wasted no time in -"

"And where are you exactly, Ennis?"

Add one point to the Alma column. "A return visit to his cabin, I suppose?"

"That's not your concern anymore."

The fist slam rattled the counter, all contents including Jack’s elbow resting chin, jumping about a foot in the air. "The hell it isn't, my daugh -"

"Please leave your key with the Super."

"Alma..."

"Goodbye, Ennis."

"ALMA! ALMA! ALMA!" The cell phone went dark. "Fuck." The other stool threatened to topple also under the sudden drop of Ennis weight. "Oh, fuck me sideways."

"Ah ha!" Up over the counter and in between thighs before the final ess had finished hissing. "Ass Bandit at your service!"

"I need a lawyer."

"Haven't we done this shtick?"

"I need a divorce lawyer."

"Course, I really did like that punch line."

"Jack..." Holding close by Jack's ass, hands rested in their appointed spot. "Any one you can recommend?"

"Divorce attorneys." A shudder. "I see scary people."

"Scary or not, I need one. Now." A sigh of frustration that reality had wormed its pollution under the front door of their fourth floor sanctuary. "After that phone call, I wouldn't be surprised if she insists the settlement include my left nut."

"Oh, no." A palm protected the disputed body part. "This is not negotiable."

Too weary to carry all the troubles alone, Ennis's head had tipped forward, a single bounce when forehead hit sternum. "I hurt her, Jack. I'm a goddamn selfish prick and I hurt her, and now she's angry. She's hurt and angry and lawyered up and after my balls and my dignity and she wants to hurt me back, make me bleed and suffer, while she goes to the where ever with that fucking weasel, and if she thinks he can just step in, take my place, take my -" A blast of fear shook him, tears of the impending storm welling up hot. "Oh, god, Jack, I love you! No regrets, but...what...what if I lose my daughters, my children? I can't - I don't - my babies!"
"Hey, Hey! Look at me, Ennis." Tender hands forced a meeting of eyes. "I don't know your
daughters – yet - but I do know their father." A tip of nose tapped the other. "And Junior and
Franny's Dad would take on heaven and divorce court hell to be a part of their lives."

A father's desperation found an anchor in that sea of blue. "Never give them up."

"Of course not." Feather kisses sought to ease the worry with each brushstroke of lips.

"Walked away from husband not father."

"Of course you didn't."

"But, what if they don't want..."

The brow kisses stumbled on that one. "Well, then there's not much anyone can say considering their
ages. Only," lips skipped over nose, down to try and kiss a smile to bloom. "Give time, respect
choices and reassure that we are home, too."

"We." Ennis had held no illusions about how this was all going to play out, amicable ripped out of
Alma's dictionary last night. She would extract her pound of flesh, feel justified, and demand more.
And he was prepared to give for fault wore his nametag. Two things, however, would always remain
beyond her reach – his love for his daughter's and the power in one simple pronoun. "We."

"Oui, oui? Oui, en effet!" Lips upon lips whispered soft. "Pourquoi faire nous n'oublions pas que
toute cette inquiétude et rentre pour coucher et traiter cela vissant la suggestion de travers."

"Uh, Jack. I don't speak French."

"Oh, yes you do."

Jack's tongue had enthusiastically demonstrated Ennis' bilingual prowess.

"Oh, merde."

And goddamn! Did we practice those linguistic skills!

There had been a brief tete a tete in the hallway between showers, Ennis going, Jack coming –

"Hey, that's my towel!"

"Sorry. Didn’t know. Here."

A cooking lesson on the correct way to peel potatoes over someone’s shoulder.

"Hey! Watch the wrists!"

"Sorry. Forgot."

"Slow and easy."

Cock grinding and neck nibbles an essential step.

Then a conversation about laundry.

"Hey! Is that...?"

"Shit happens. Bed Bath and Beyond stockholders are indebted to gay men."
“So, how many sheet sets do you have?”

“Ten, I think.”

A quick calculation. “Don’t mind bare mattress after.”

And at dusk they retired to the verandah to watch the sun set on the Rive Gauche, the language of love still whispering as they huddled close, sardined on a chaise lounge under Great-Grandma Spencer’s Wedding Ring quilt, a family heirloom sewn to withstand upstate New York winters, providing the bird watcher across the street a binocular full.

“Think there’s two now.”

Peeking over the quilt’s edge and Jack’s shoulder, Ennis had scanned the opposite wall of brick and glass. “Really?”

A tongue licked chilled lips before seeking warmer food right beneath a scratchy jaw. “Better than watching Mister. Chen doing Pilates.”

“Who’s mister -” Nimble fingers work jeans buttons free, teasing tips not waiting for the come in invitation. “Uh, Jack, should we be doing this out here?”

“We’re not,” head dips below the blanket, a nipple nibble, “doing it under here.”

“Yeah, but with them across the way and – shit!” Thumb and tongue, the lick/flick double team wins again, Ennis’ moan pressing up into for more. “What was I talking about?”

“Hot tubs.”

His smiling silly high on endorphins synapses were no help with this one. “I was?”

“Yup.” White breath puffed around Ennis’ ear.

He figured hot tubs were as good as any topic to ignore in favor of Jack’s ministrations. “What about them?”

“Well, just thinking out loud here, but -” A little squeezing stroke. “I’m tired of freezing my dangly bits off. Think our next apartment should –”

So much for ignoring and just enjoying. “No, Jack, I - Christ!”

Winter blasted in when Jack sat up, peaking some parts and shriveling others.

“What, you have some objection to staying warm?”

“Huh?”

“Relaxation?”

“What?”

“Increased blood flow to particular body parts?”

“No, of course not, don’t be -”

“So, it’s just hot tubs in general that you find abhorrent.”
“That’s not it, Jack, I just -”

“Jacuzzis against the constabulary code of ethics? Chlorine rust those brass knuckles?”

“Jack, that’s not what -”

“You have no idea just how deeply, deeply wounded I am that you don’t want to lounge in warm bubbly water with this hot effervescent man.”

“If hot effervescent man would stop yapping about warm bubbly water, I might be able to sneak in an explanation!”

Swinging legs out to either side, taking most of the quilt in the process, Jack settled back on Ennis' thighs, crossed arms ready to ward off any challenge to his plan. “I’m listening.”

“OK.” There weren’t many choices of places to look while he delivered his bad news. Jack’s crotch, Jack’s face or the window across the alley now crowded with five glass pressed faces. As he stared he noticed they were taking notes. “I have absolutely no moral objections to increased blood flow, bubbles, or the idea of you naked anywhere. But, I can’t move in here with you.”

“I know the place is cramped…small…tiny…OK, as fucking minute as Intelligent Design’s claim on science, but the lease is only for six months, three of which have been spent in abject missing you mode, so we’ll just put the fork and coaster she lets you keep in storage, you move in here with me, and the next three months can be spent waking up to this –”

A hip wave crashing cock against cock began eroding Ennis’ resolve.

“Alma would shit a brick if I -”

“Fuck Alma. Non-biblically, of course.”

“The commute to Brooklyn, Jack?”

“Traffic flows both ways on the bridges, Ennis.”

“My daughters aren’t moving.”

“See previous answer.”

Their alleyway audience had been holding up a Get Naked! sign by then.

“I know, I know, it all sounds fucking great, but…” Part of the problem was that he really wanted to share the newspaper with Jack, find space in Jack’s bathroom, take out the trash with Jack, buy groceries, watch TV, pay bills, sleep, eat, live, everything with Jack. “I don’t know.”

“Well, I do know, us together here, perfect.”

“Maybe after the divorce.”

“Yeah, because we all know how fast those four-sided wheels of justice spin.” The pout was adorable. “I know patience is a virtue, and a barista at the Starbucks on the corner, but, come on, Ennis, please? Even our professional interests are no longer conflicting.”

Yeah, well maybe not.

And he had said no more secrets. Didn’t mean to see it, “He’s always watching.” Wasn’t snooping.
Not going to use the information, not going to risk careers and another four months apart on what is probably just coincidence. Fucking weak excuse, Del Mar. Still should have told him before you said –

“Fuck me, Jack.”

“Are you, uhm,” an adolescent voice crack had perfectly matched the wide-eyed wonder stare. “Are you sure?”

Ennis had unfolded the Pro/Con Anal Sex list he had been compiling since the hotel. With a caress of Jack’s cheek, he crossed off disgust. A brush of Jack’s lips, nervous was next. Hand shushed a curve down Jack’s chest and anxious was gone. Along his thigh worry disappeared. Scared, frightened, petrified vanished with a kiss. That left curious, intrigued, excited, thrilled, horny, ready, oh, and at the very top in big bold letters, the word that trumped every one – Jack.

“Yes, I’m serious.”

Christ! A gentle squeeze of his cheeks, a burn tingling through his groin. I can still feel him!

“Remember to breathe, Ennis.”

He had scratched out, nails digging into the mattress, frantic to find purchase - self, memory, reality - anything to keep from tumbling out of control, floating free, diving over the edge, to keep him there as Jack’s shallow thrusts deepened.

“Oh, goddamn - Jack!”

He had pushed into the stroking of Jack’s hand sending him back onto Jack’s cock, further and further with each thrust, zings to body parts he hadn’t thought about ever.

“Oh, fuck, Ennis! You are – so – fucking - tight!”

It was painful – a searing iron pole plunging over and over again. It was fantastic – a pleasure growing, building, cascading everywhere. It was liberating – the freedom to be held, to give, to let go. It was unbelievable – the bond, the connection, the fuck.

“Jack - you - no - wonder -”

“I – I – I- know!”

Living heat shivered against his back, fire blasting across his chest as Jack’s teeth dug into his shoulder, lines of perspiration snaking down from chest to chest, grunts of exertion scorching his skin. The slap of hip to ass resonated in the small bedroom, the slip-slide of cock in and out accentuated by sweaty skin, frantic bodies, the loss of control.

“En..En...EN...NNNNISSSSS!”

The feelings too new, the sensations too real to stop, his orgasm burst out with a wail, “Jaaaaaaaaaaaaaaack!” semen spilling out over Jack’s hand, across the mattress, dripping to the floor, hips jerking, twitching, writhing.

“Oh, fuck!”

And it only got better when Jack reached the top, “Uh – uh – oh – OH – OH - AH – AH – AH – AHAHAHAHAHAHAAAAHAAAAHHHHHHHH!” and his warmth exploded, bodies celebrating the
ecstasy as one.

“Oh, shit, Ennis.”

The pull-out wasn’t without pain or a sense of loss, and his asshole felt about as wide as the entrance to the Holland Tunnel. None really enjoyable. The dead fish flopped on his back, staring blankly at the ceiling, worn and fucked out, however, was.

“Come here, Jack.”

Condom stripped off, tied off, tossed off before curling around an equally sticky body.

“Well?”

“Well what?”

“You know.”

“I do?”

“I did?”

“You know.”

Several minutes of intense French tested the endurance of even those master tongues.

“So, which?

“Bottom or top?”

“Bottom and top?”

“Top with bottom.”

“Bottom with top.”

Jack rescued the duvet from the puddle at the end of the bed, while Ennis retrieved the pillows from banishment on the floor.

“Hot tub?”

“Hot tub.”

Ennis had spread out on his back, and Jack spread out alongside, head rested on shoulder, thigh cradled leg.

"Night."

"Good night."

"Love you."

"Always."

Hearts beat together.

The perfect day.
Razor thin lines bisected the duvet, halogens that cut in through drawn curtain slits to extend alleyway protection to their shadowy bedroom, the red colon on the dresser blinking 11:58.

*There’s still two minutes left, though.*

A fingertip took the bumpy trail down to the small of the back, causing an arching shiver, Jack’s instinctive move towards the touch. Lube within arm’s reach, Ennis stretched out to end this wonderful day in the best way possible.

“Jack, I -”

His hand was slapped away.

“Go away. Wanna sleep.”

He just smiled - *My lover, my friend, my Jack.* – arm thrown over a slumbering shoulder.

*Who’s the Ass Bandit now?*
“Del Mar! There’s someone here to see you.”

“Shit.” Faded, grimy tile bounced the curse around, a heavy sigh trailing behind. “Be right there.”

He waited to unlatch the door of his sanctuary, listening for the sounds that signaled empty, not in any kind of mood to interact in any way with anyone on any subject at all.


The stall door creaked, Ennis pulling up the weight of the world, the installed in the 70’s metal too tired to muster up a decent protest to the slam open, banging the scratched and dented beige into the toilet paper dispenser, swinging back out to give an anemic push to the disgruntled ass of the former occupant, coming at last to rest at an indifferent slant, the hinges drifting low with decades old apathy.

“Christ, will this day never end?”

Filled with tepid water, cupped hands met face half way, droplets escaping down to the stained old dentures sink, splashing onto a plain, black tie, slipping under shirt cuffs, sliding along until the curve in the road, wet blotches at the elbows of white cotton.

The streaked mirror with two corners missing, and someone hearting Jose scratched deep, did its level best to reflect a pleasing image, but with only the face of an exhausted and shell-shocked man to work with, the goal fell way short.

And it’s only a quarter after nine.

Ennis was talked out, his stockpile of words run dry, his mind only capable of those automatic functions like breathing, eating and wallowing, too weary to even contemplate any of the suggestions scribbled on the scrap of paper Jack had shoved into his pocket this morning at 6 am, hand lingering longer than necessary and garnished with a few stubble prickly kisses before shuffling back to bed, a complaint that if he had wanted to be awake at milking time he would have leased a two-bedroom so the cows could have their own closet, a yawn muffled “I love you, Ennis” tossed back over a blanket shrouded shoulder.

God, I could use some Twist sarcasm right about now.

Wet handprints swiped on gray pants, darkening the wool, fingers needing to be dry before digging into his pocket for the umpteenth time today for the torn and ragged touchstone filled with looping, canted to left, almost indecipherable scrawl.

834 24th St. Apt 405 New York, NY 10011-1108

Remember – tonight you’re coming home to WE.

And below that, more round words explaining exactly what welcome he would receive this evening,
complete with stick figure diagrams that, even if turned upside down, still looked impossible without a tennis racket, some maple syrup and a whole lot of duct tape.

Don’t think mine bends that way.

Driving in this morning, one Ford in a cast of thousands among Manhattan’s legendary chorus line, Ennis had braced himself for today, this first day back to work after, his first day back to work after and soon-to-be-divorced, this first day back to work after and soon-to-be-divorced and living with the man that made his dick stand at attention just by walking in the room, his heart flip-flop at the sound of his voice, his life complete by loving in return and all the inevitable shit that would no doubt soon be flying his way worthwhile.

Just didn’t think the shit flinging would start even before I got off the elevator.

“Del Mar.” Gloves had made for clumsy fingers, Ennis juggling the phone as he shouldered his way out on to the fifth floor, early for work by thirty minutes, but still rushing to get there just the same.

“You took something that wasn’t on the list.”

Stopped dead, right there in the middle of the hallway, parting people as they jostled to avoid the monolith in gray wool and black corduroy suddenly thrown in their path, curses and dirty looks churning the flow white.

“Didn’t even look at your goddamn list.”

He never even went into the kitchen yesterday, just left it stewing in its vindictiveness, refusing to be ordered, bullied, guilted into exactly what memories he could keep. He had stuck to the basics like books and clothing, the whole scene in the bedroom husband and wife had shared while Jack picked through their seventeen years of marital accumulation surreal.

“Christ, Ennis! I’m revoking your First Amendment right of free speech because of this fashion statement.”

A glance from dresser to closet. “Never wore that ugly thing, Jack.”

“But, wait - oh, goody, there’s more.” Jack had showcased two cotton shirts pulled from the closet - one powder blue, the other sunshine yellow - stitched vertically with fancy flowers and indeterminate geometric shapes and lines. “Got your sandals, black socks and metal detector around somewhere?”

He had snatched the offending garments out of Jack’s hands, tossing them on the - Fuel for Alma’s Closure Bonfire - pile. “A Christmas gift from my father-in-law.”

“That is one seriously straight man, then.”

“Just grab the garment bag all the way in the back and the box above. Leave the rest.” The bottom drawer kicked shut, Ennis had dumped an armful of socks into the last empty box. “Don’t need or want the rest of it.”

“Don’t tell me – a lime green leisure suit for your – well, hello!” The smile had been pure sex. “Not quite jarhead dress blues, but I can work with this.”

The garment bag never left Jack’s side, fiercely guarding his prize, even giving it a place of honor on his lap for the drive back across the Bridge, relinquishing possession only when Ennis had agreed to demonstrate that there really is just something about a man in uniform.
And now I’ve got to get the damn thing dry cleaned. Hat, too.

“I only took my things, Alma.”

“The picture. I want it back.”

The item in question – an 11x17 Valentine’s Day photo of the girls taken this year – now sat proudly on top of the Ennis’s Faux Hetero Things seven box stack that blocked one window and made the reach for the thermostat dicey.

“No. My daughters, my picture.”

“Oh, so you remember you have children now? Should have been on your mind when you were -”

“How’s Bill Monroe, by the way?” He had cut her right-on-the-money accusation short with one of his own. “Have a fucking great time in the Catskills with that big Jacuzzi of his?”

The seething pause. “OK. You can have the picture.”

“Gee, how gracious of you.” The scoreboard showing him in the lead for this round, Ennis headed towards the squad room. “So, is that the only reason you called?”

“No. I need an address. Well, my lawyer needs your address, and not a PO box, someplace to deliver -”

“I know how the system works, Alma. Just a -” The wall was needed to help with this maneuver. Back against the cracked and peeling plaster, he balanced cell phone with cheek and shoulder while teeth yanked off a glove freeing his hand to reach for Jack’s note, the contents already the cause of a near ten car pileup on the Williamsburg Bridge this morning. “- second – here – it’s – uh - HA!”

“What’s so funny?”

He didn’t think she really wanted to know, and wasn’t quite sure just how to explain Number 2 without first discussing a Mobius loop. “My current address is: eight-three-four twenty-fourth Street, Apartment four-oh-five, New York, New York, one-oh –”

“That’s Manhattan.” The envy in her voice alone ate up his rollover minutes. “You’re in Manhattan? Wait - that’s his apartment, isn’t it?”

He let her hateful emphasis pass. “One-oh-oh-one-dash-one-oh-eight.” The note returned to his safe place, gloves to their appointed pocket, and the cell phone was once again held properly, easing the crick that had been ready to make a home for the day in his neck. “Either there or here at the Precinct are the places to reach me.”

“I can’t believe – I was right - not even two – and now you’re with -”The stutters popped in Ennis’s ear, an unsteady stream of imploding Alma. “- with – him! You bastard!”

“One of the nicest things you’ve ever said to me!” Insult portion of the program over, Ennis had moved to the feature presentation. “Now, about Franny and Junior, I want to talk to them my -”

“NO!” So loud, it drew the stares of two uniforms heading for the copy room.

“Alma, don’t think for a second that you can -”

“I will not have my daughters exposed to that – that – FLITH!”
This time neither the word nor the emphasis went unchallenged. “And I will not have Jack spoken about -”

“Don’t! Just – I don’t even want to hear that name!” Tears were right there behind her venom. “My lawyer will see to it, as long as you are with that,” spite peeked through now, “there will be no contact whatsoever with -”

“Try again, Alma, the girls are old enough to make their own decisions.”

“Then I will just have to use my influence in other ways.”

Ominous clouds appeared on Ennis’ horizon. “Alma, what are -”

“Goodbye.”

And I stepped from the hallway wearing that shit, right into a big pile from Texas.

“Hey, Ennis!” A much too happy greeting from his partner. “Good Thanksgiving? Mine was typical – too much family, not enough turkey. In court this morning, and if I don’t leave now I’m going to be late, and Judge Moss values punctuality above all, so that means you’ve got to handle this – Sergeant. Del Mar meet Newsome’s attorney – should be back this afternoon, is that a new tie? Later!”

Beard, teeth and condescending smugness wearing a bolo tie. “Randall Malone, nice ta’ meetcha’.”

A preoccupied with watching the doors swing shut with Don Wroe on the other side handshake.

“Uh, Del Mar. Sergeant. Ennis Del Mar.”

“Won’t take up too much a your time, Sergeant.” Fancy leather briefcase already in residence on a desk clicked open so an even fancier leather file could be put on display. “Just have a few things that I was wonderin’ bout, that’s all.”

Hadn’t even bothered to sit down ‘cause that would have given the impression that this conversation would take some time – only ten seconds in, and it had already lasted too long for Ennis. He had never trusted lawyers as far as he could throw them, (except one and he would trust him even as the bottom in example number three on the note burning a hole in his pocket), especially when they wore $3,000 suits and gold tipped cowboy boots in Brooklyn. And considering who this down home poser represented, buried deep for six months now, he wasn’t about to resurrect that particular professional interest conflict zombie. So, he just stood there, coat still on, his most winning ‘you’re skating on thin ice, pal’ expression as body language screamed ‘Go the fuck away!’

“I haven’t been working that case since August. Detective Wroe should be the one that -”

“Don’t worry, Sergeant.” The smile slithered in and out of his accent. “I won’t ask anythin’ too detailed. I promise.”

Legal pad pages flipped up, then over – one right after the other – quick, crisp, so fast Ennis had stopped trying to keep up, just let the yellow streak by, counting down the remaining ten seconds he was going to give this - then it stopped, the blur abruptly stilled, and right there hanging upside down – loopy, canted to the left almost indecipherable scrawl.

“Thinkin’ on somethin’ pleasant, Sergeant?”

“Yeah, uh...” A swipe of the hand banished his Jack smile, “what I’m going to have for dinner.” Almost. “Look, Mr. Malone, I’ve been off this case officially for months now, and -”
“Only be simple questions. I’m just feelin’ my way around here, ya know?” The self-deprecation did not match his other diamond accessories. “Never handled a criminal case up here in New York before.” A creepy smile and a wink this time. “Ya don’t mind indulgin’ a beginner now, do ya?”

“Actually -” Since brusque crusted politeness hadn't work, Ennis had decided to try distance, weaving in amongst the desks to leave this guy behind, “I’m heavily involved in a case right now that needs my attention, so why don’t you come back when my partner is -”

Mr. Fake Cowboy Even in Texas didn’t take the hint. “The condom.” He followed Ennis' every twisting step. “Where at the scene was it found?”

“I, uh, well,” Coat shrugged off, he plopped down in his chair deliberately turning his back to the question. “I don’t remember.”

“Forensics was unable to match the brand specific spermicidal to what was recovered from the victim, is that right?” Seems this guy didn’t mind talking to the back of somebody’s head.

“Look it up in the file. Now if you don’t mind -” Had no urgent call, but he grabbed the phone anyway, as a signal, an excuse or something blunt with which to take a swing at the lawyer who was now back in his face.

“No other DNA from any a the other crime scenes was collected. You know, fingerprints, skin scrapin’s, blood?”

A yearning for rescue glance to the left, Dave not the only thing absent. Something different about his desk, something’s off. See his desk every damn day, and I know there’s something missing, but what...

“And that DNA sample matchin' with the hair is what led t' my client’s arrest?”

“And Mister Malone, if you don’t -”

“And the hair provided t' the New York City Police Department by one Mr. Kwon?”

Couldn’t help it, one too many still raw nerves, that one in particular, plucked all kinds of wrong by some smarmy redneck with a five-hundred an hour sense of justice, and unresolved emotions yanked Ennis up and right into bearded smug. “That hair was obtained in a lawful search of the suspect’s room, picked from the red comb with the busted out teeth sitting on the dresser right beside the tin stuffed with movie stubs! Mr. Kwon did NOT provide the hair sample! Just made sure we didn’t miss it by showing my partner exactly where to -”

“See there, Sergeant, you did help me after all.”

Ten, no, twenty times the fool dropped back down to his chair. He could have been standing on the stage at Carnegie Hall with the expert way he had just been played. And this was the maestro defending Newsome now.

That dickhead thinks he can get him off, because of what I didn’t - what I couldn’t - what I shouldn’t have - God, I love Jack, love him so much it fucking hurts - but, I don’t know if I’ll ever forgive myself if –

Still reeling from Alma's ultimatum, Dickhead Cowboy’s sneak attack and the all the different permutations spinning out ad infinitum from both, the next wave of Monday morning hit before he could even get a cup of crappy coffee and a stale Danish.
“Ennis, may I see you in my office for a moment?”

An order in the polite guise of a request.

“What’s up, Cap?”

The Marlboro man had been nervous, anxious, uncomfortable even, as he futzed over his immaculate desk, eyes looking at everything except the officer sitting across from him, an equivocating behavior heretofore never observed by anyone in this Precinct or the entire NYPD, which should have been Ennis' first clue to duck.

“Well, I wanted - glad to have you back, by the - and I thought I should - considering I -that is to say, it’s -”

“Captain, is something wrong?” He had picked up on the stuttering, however, concern growing with each dangling participle. “If this is about that bastard lawyer, I tried to tell -”

“No, Ennis. Not work related at all. Not really.”

“What’s not really?”

“Just got off the phone with my wife.”

“Maureen? What, is she hurt? Or one of the kids? Something I can -”

“And she just got off the phone with Alma.”

The shrapnel tore flesh from bone, poisoned the water, stripped the land to useless dust, laying waste their battlefield, Alma’s preemptive strike, in which Ennis was sure she had cried on the Captain’s wife’s - a woman she only spoke to three times a year at awkward holiday parties, and about in envious tones the other 362 – shoulder, painting him as the adulterous slime – which he was – and herself as a martyr sacrificed to his profligate ways setting the tone for their upcoming war.

*Waterloo, Shiloh, Verdun, the Battle of the Bulge all rolled into one.*

It had been his plan to do things by increments, in steps, small increments, small steps, allowing each new life development to find acceptance from his peers, and his own inner strength, giving time to prepare for the next, more shocking, reveal.

“Gradually, Jack. Let me take it one step at a time.”

Slumped on the couch last night with Jack’s head in his lap, fingers running absently through dark hair, neither really paying attention to *Homeland*, Ennis had explained his “Coming Out of the Closet at Work” outline, each section labeled and cross referenced, the time table written in indelible Sharpie.

“Ennis, it’s been my experience the shelf life of most secrets is practically nil. Especially when it involves sex. And dick. In this case two dicks. And a handful of balls. What were we talking about?”

Fingers drifted towards a jaw line, thumb falling over cheek’s edge to dip into an open and waiting mouth. “Divorce first, then membership in the Gay Officers Action League.”

Jack had shifted to his back to take full advantage of the opening to bare flesh he had discovered during recent expeditions under the hem of a shirt, his other hand pressing Ennis’ idle one into service below his equator. “So, no storming the straight beaches of Precinct Eighty-One and Iwo
Jimaing the rainbow flag. Got it.”

“Nobody’s business but ours.”

“And Mr. Chen’s when it’s handcuff time again.”

Ennis had not believed that Alma had confessed to everything - actually shocked that she had gone this far, shining the spotlight on their less than E-Harmony.com marriage, opening herself up to failing grades on the test that he had always been unprepared for – just to lay the foundation for her threat of only thirty minutes ago.

But, he wouldn’t know just how far her Destroy Ennis campaign would go until he asked.

“So…what did my, uh, she say?”

When the Captain grimaced, a disgust infested expression, he had his answer.

_Fucking far enough. With one call, my homophobic wife outed me to the anti-gay wife of my Mormon boss. Even in New York, I didn’t think there was that much shit._

“Have you told anyone else?”

“Ennis, it’s not my place to say any -”

“Wasn’t Maureen’s place, either.” Things began to tilt in from the top down, like he was sitting inside a Chinese to-go box, the walls clamping down over his head trapping him in with the sesame chicken. “Or Alma’s.” The last place he had wanted to be was there, under the scrutiny of a man whom he admired, a man he had looked to for guidance and advice. A man who believed what Ennis knew in his soul as truth was unnatural and sick. “OK, thanks for telling me. Can I go back to work now, Cap?”

“Uh, sure, sure, that’s fine, if you -” a non-plussed by that uninterested response Stoutamire, “Wait – don’t you even want to know what your wife -”

Looping, canted to the left, almost indecipherable scrawl bled black streaks, sweat and ink marking his skin, Jack’s note pocket clutched, his We lifeline.

_Had me channeling some of that Twist chutzpah, too._

“Soon-to-be-ex-wife, and she probably said that I was a faggot who cheated on her with another man. Am I right?”

That hit the Captain hard. “That’s a repugnant word, Ennis, and certainly not the one she -”

“That’s surprising. I figured Alma would say whatever it takes to keep me and my daughters apart.”

“Then it’s all a misunderstanding, a domestic squabble of some kind, what she revealed to Maureen was not what you…?” The look in the man’s eyes had been tragically humorous, his bulk wrapped around that miniscule straw of hope.

“No, it’s all true.”

“Then you are...homosexual?”

“Still the same person as yesterday, Captain, the same man, the same dedicated officer. Not a damn thing has changed except who’s behind my closed doors now. And that is not the department’s
“business, am I right?” Ennis walked out of the office, not waiting for the union approved affirmative answer. “Oh, and for the record, I’m bisexual.”

Empty stomach bile clamoring to come up to celebrate his coming out needing the bathroom versus the adrenaline rush over the actually coming out evaporating quickly had both held Ennis’ body at cross purposes hostage. His desk collapse, a mid-way compromise.

“Here you go, Del Mar.”

He lifted his cotton filled head as a business card sailed by his out-of-focus eyes. “What the hell is this?”

“The name of a divorce lawyer. Used him three times. Got me out of paying alimony. Nobody goes for the jugular like a Jew.”

Ennis had tossed Leonard Goldfarb back. “How the fuck do you figure I need a divorce lawyer, Aguirre?”

“Those O’Malley’s Jell-O shooters will fuck you up.” Greasy crackling disappeared behind a racing form. “Like making you accept cab rides with the wrong people.”

O’Mall – Jell-O shoot – oh, Christ, Aguirre was there that –

Passing on the bathroom, not an option this time. The beige, slanted 70’s metal pushing out of his way, just in time.

The decor so appealing, Ennis had soaked up the bathroom's ambiance and distinctively male latrine odor in favor of stepping back out into the world again.

_Alma, Lone Star schmuck, Stoutamire, Aguirre. My divorce, my failure, my reputation, my misconduct. Not bad for an hour out of the closet. Let's see, any shit I’ve misplaced?_

“Hey! Del Mar!” The bathroom door rattled, three knocks of impatient annoyance. “You’ve got folks out here, remember?”

_Oh, yes. Probably the IRS, or IAB, or maybe I’ll get lucky with a change of pace and just get a kick in the nuts._

Reaching to hold his piece of Jack - now smeared, crumpled, tattered, dirty, curled around the edges and destined to be shoved into his wallet for keeps – Ennis pushed the door open, armed and ready for Shit Flinging Monday to continue unabated.

Fortification wasn’t necessary, though; this one he could handle all on his own.

“Hi, Dad!”
A six-year-old boy stands in the corner, his crime – urine soaked flannel – it sticks to his stomach, pools sodden on his feet. From the open window cruel slices of five am February sting, tearing bites out of the red and purple crosshatched swift and furious on his bare legs and above, the belt expressing a father’s disgust fifteen times. To cry, a violation of his nasty boy punishment, would cause the air to whistle again with leather, even though his shivering body is ignored in the frenzy to dismantle his bed, making room for the crib brought down from the attic, a better place for babies who piss in their sleep, as are the pleas on his behalf sobbing in the doorway. Instead his haunted eyes trace the orbit trail of the Apollo rocket that banks around the NASA emblem 327 times across his bedroom walls while in his head confusion and terror, pain and hatred banshee wail his sanity’s survival.

In a race with the sun, determined to reach the top of the hill first, an eleven-year-old boy pedals faster, the humid July dusk a firefly star field whooshing by. The insults from a full day of working in his dad’s shop are no match for the speed achieved on his Huffy - stupid, idiot, mama’s boy, can’t do nothing, what good are you, scoured away in the wind to pollute a boarded-up hardware store, an empty bakery, the graveyard of a recession ravaged upstate small town. A hand swipe across his mouth salt stings cuts and scrapes, the sharp angles and edges of car engines unforgiving to the knuckles of unskilled labor, and bumps his split lip, the familiar taste of copper bursting tangy, the usual result when a father’s order is questioned. Gravel bits fly, the skidding flourish of the perfectly executed slide-stop, and he arrives ahead of his adversary, Daylight Savings Time his unwitting accomplice. The winner’s circle is his only for a few moments though, as he watches the Sailor’s Delight sky folding down unfathomable black velvet over a ribbon pointing south, the pocked and faded asphalt lonely for his dream. Some day.

The plaid rips, a shirt bought two weeks ago, but now is too short for the growth-sputtering and gangly teenaged arms of the fifteen-year-old boy battling to reach the fire, to save even one before the colorful pages curl up, blackened and consumed, innocent victims of a purge perverted pictures not prevented by the pristine Sports Illustrated: Swimsuit Edition decoy mattress tucked in plain sight. He breaks out, unrealized strength suddenly altering their long accepted pattern of his silent acquiescence. Fists and fear now impotent, a father wields his last weapon, shredded fabric and shouted faggot hurled at the tear and snot smeared mess huddling on the ground. A September chill taunts the dying fire, swirling sparks and ash, those gray bits of Superman, Spiderman and Batman wafting skyward. An adolescent sanctuary destroyed bringing a child’s wish closer.

Tassel turned less than an hour ago, a purchased new for the occasion Kodak camera filled with proud mother memories slips away to smash to the gym floor. The promise to keep private matters locked tight behind family doors sworn as she had straightened National Honor Society, Beta Club and valedictorian stoles about her all grown-up boy’s shoulders is nullified by one snide ‘think you’re something special now, dontcha’ queer’ too many. The black robed eighteen-year-old young man throws his first punch, the pain of impact a curse inducing shock, but compared to the emasculated father knocked on his ass in the middle of the post-commencement crowd by a disowned and disavowed son, the pain is inconsequential for the freedom just claimed is euphoric.

The courtroom is the stuff of claustrophobic anxiety attacks, the huddled mass packed gallery sucking out every molecule of oxygen the overworked and under-funded HVAC system can pump in through rusty and bent ducts. Nodding with the proper legalese non-expression, a thirty-five year old defense attorney, confidence in a black double-breasted pinstripe with purple tie, stands silently
beside his client - the paunched and combed-over middle school teacher gnawing on a non-existent nail and sweating right through his bought off the rack at Sears polyester masquerading as a suit ensemble - listening to the judge pontificate over the motion in question, his unpopular with the crowd motion, this court appointed task almost complete. When the judge finally runs out of steam, his stamina and knowledge of precedents fading fast, a legally sound conclusion is drawn, and the defense attorney’s protect the powerless, give a voice to the silenced, no child left behind, truth, justice and the American way, Lightning Flat inspired ideals take a hit as the gavel comes down with a verdict.

“Case dismissed.”

*God, sometimes I fucking hate this job.*

The courtroom emptied immediately, awry justice outrage spilling out right into the clutches of hungry cameras ravenous to feed on the sorrow. The well-oiled doors swung shut, cutting off the most obnoxious sounds of the media circus devouring a little girl’s tragedy.

“Oh, thank you, Mr. Twist, thank you! I never thought, I mean, I never dared to hope that things would work out this way. It’s a miracle!”

Jack shook the man’s hand, he didn’t *want* to shake the man’s hand, but he did – a brief, lax meeting of dry to moist. “No miracles here, Mr. Tate,” the overwhelming compulsion to wipe his hand clean barely squelched by his professionalism, “just the US judicial system at work.”

“I know you’ll get paid for all your hard work on my behalf, but I wish there was something I could do personally to -”

The case dead, though not even room temperature yet, Jack swallowed his ethical qualms took a running start and jumped WAY over the line. “Yeah, there is something you can do for me, Mr. Tate. Stay the fuck away from your daughter.”

“Thanks to you, Mr. Twist,” an unbowed and unrepentant smirk, “even the courts can’t compel me to do that now. Hey, I might even be able to have my teaching certificate reinstated.” Flagitious, but not foolhardy, he chose to exit the courtroom out the back.

“Goddamnit!”

A furious at the system he represented arm swipe, and the case file that would soon bear the mark of his success, relevant law books decorated with flying Post-It flags marking precedents and procedures, a legal pad slathered with stick fingers playing tennis and eating pancakes - Jack’s official courtroom appearance belongings – crashed to the floor

“Sometimes I fucking HATE this job!”

The chair drop a stellar example of undignified, his slump Nobel Prize Laureate for despondency material, Jack leaned forward with elbows on knees and scrubbed his face hard in hopes that a little friction would re-kindle some of that before the verdict pinstriped confidence.

*The defense won without ever presenting its case. I’m supposed to be happy, I’m supposed to be fucking Tom Cruise couch jumping ecstatic here. Can’t even muster an anemic huzzah for what I did today. It was the correct action for the case, for my client, so why do I feel like a piece of gum stuck on the bottom of a shoe in the Bronx. Because I knowingly defended a guilty man, and aiding him to take a walk on the charges was a morally bankrupt thing to do.*

“Oh, fuck. WWAFD?”
Adopted back at Syracuse, this little post-court appearance exercise helped Jack to sort through his thoughts, analyze his performance, gain perspective and clarity, his learn-by-example rubric.

Yeah, what would Atticus Finch do? Defend the defenseless, which I didn’t. Safeguard the innocent, which I couldn’t. Remember his oath and construct an unimpeachable defense, regardless of guilt and the lack of remorse, mount an air-tight case even if the client makes him nauseous, just to look at him, to be in the same room with him, even if his very existence is so unnerving in his similarities, and he makes me anxious, and uneasy, and stupid, and useless, and I start to remember things, things that I thought were forgotten, worked through, conquered, accepted, things that I’m ashamed of, bad things, things that I’ve never spoken about, never told anybody else ever - I swear! - things that chase me in dreams, laughing and taunting, and the sound of the belt and the switch and even when I break free, and I’m pressed up close to the love of my life, in his arms, sheltered safe, surrounded by his strength, his protection, his love, the laughing doesn’t stop, the laughing never –

“Mr. Twist?”

A girly scream – “AAAAAHHHHH!” and his startled jump knocking over the chair. “Shit!”

“I want to ask you a question.”

Heart’s pounding escape attempt aborted, Jack turned a chagrined face to greet the soft voice that - “How may I help…” sent adrenaline rush Number Two fanning out the troops.

Oh, shit. Oh, this is not good, not good at all.

“Ma’am,” legal pad, law book, case file and a handful of pens, all chewed by his former client on the top into grotesque facsimiles of what passes for modern sculpture and bound for the incinerator at the first possible nanosecond, frantically snatched up and crammed into his messenger bag, their haphazard placement not even remotely important as the need to get out of the courtroom NOW! Please, don’t, don’t talk about your daughter, don’t make me look into her eyes again, don’t make me see something I’ve tried every fucking day of my life to forget. Please! “My representation of your ex-husband was his Constitutional right.” He focused on his retreating feet disregarding the hushed sobs behind him. “To have done anything but my best on his defense would have been unethical.” The Bastard burned my whole col – DON’T! Don’t go there! Don’t you let Him in! “Any complaint you have over the trial’s outcome should be directed at the District Attorney’s office.” Three hundred and twenty-five, three hundred and twenty-six, three hundred and twenty – NO! “They failed to present a credible case against my client.” His hand on the door was shaking visibly. “I do sympathize -”

“Do you have children, Mr. Twist?”

“No.” Sexual orientation aside, a darkness - highly improbable, but statistically speaking, not out of the realm of possibility - lurked inside, and Jack was determined he would be the end the Twist line and that soul killing cycle. “No children.”

“Then you can’t possibly understand, so just keep your empty words of sympathy, and drag them back with you under your rock.”

“Ma’am, whether you believe this or not, I am truly sorry, but the law requires -”

“The law? The law? That law just let that bastard walk out of here free and clear!”

“The case was dismissed, ma’am, he wasn’t acquitted. He can, and probably will be, charged again. The DA just needs to take the time to -”
“And what do I tell my Emily in the mean time? What do I say to her when she can’t go outside, or play with friends, or do all those normal little girl things because she’s too afraid he’ll be there and it will happen all over again? What do I say to calm her when she wakes up screaming, if she gets to sleep at all? What do I tell her to give her peace?”

Eviscerated by a mother’s helpless anguish, each breath became harder and harder to force out, his lungs rejecting any attempt to exhale the guilt.

“How can I make her pain go away?”

No panacea was his to offer, only a piece of advice from a certain six-year-old boy. “Trust me.”

Why, daddy, why? “It never does.”

Out of the frying pan, into the muck of the six o’clock news.

“Hey! There’s the PD!”

“Mr. Twist! Over here!”

“Are we still on?”

He almost asphyxiated on the hate, it coated his mouth, clogged his nose, rammed down his throat to meet the bile rising up from his stomach. No way through the outrage was offered, forcing Jack to shoulder his way out.

“Mr. Twist, how do you -”

“No comment.”

“- you plan -”

“Excuse me.”

“- plan a defense -”

“Talk to the DA.”

“ – a defense that involves-”

“No comment!”

“ – involves a father -”

“I’ve got nothing to say.”

“- a father who -”

“Please! Excuse me!”

“- a father who abused –”

“Allegedly abused.”

“- a father who abused his -”

“The judge’s decision, not mine.”
“- a father who abused his own -”

“Please, let me through!”

“- a father who abused his own child?”

“Get that thing out of my face!”

Saved by the ding.

“Mr. Twist!”

The doors opened, Jack fell in. The doors closed, Jack fell apart.

“Those fucking assholes! With their cameras and their lights and their goddamn questions! Ever heard of the Constitution, dickweeds? Ever heard of the Sixth Amendment? How about Gideon v. Wainwright? No? Oh, I see this is the remedial law class. I’ll make this simple then. If you cannot afford an attorney – yes, that’s it! Miranda v. Arizona you do recognize! Hollywood to the rescue! Come on, let’s say it together, then! If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be appointed to you. And - TA DAH! - that’s me! Jack Twist, Public Defender! So this shouldn’t come as any surprise when I tell you that -”

Jack’s voice was on eleven, shouting through the crack in the doors, but it’s doubtful that anyone, on any of the passing floors, heard his pain.

“I WAS JUST DOING MY JOB! Is it my fault that the ADA thought she could slack off on this one? No! Is it my fault that she didn’t prep her witnesses? No!”

The points counted off, fingers and frustration thrust out to the empty air.

“Is it my fault that I was able to poke Oprah Winfrey sized holes in her case? No! Is it my fault that I’m such a brilliant jurist on my cross? N – well, yes, but that’s still MY FUCKING JOB!”

The folks on eight did hear that.

“Which as a legal defense is not valid. Certainly didn’t fly at Nuremberg. But, since my actions, or inaction, did not cause an actual crime to be committed, I would ask the court that the charges be dropped as baseless. See? What did I tell you? Brilliant!”

He was too hot, this arguing in front of the court of self-worth was hard work. He sent the wool overcoat flying, purple tie loosened, top button released, suit jacket stripped. He looked and felt like Clarence Darrow in his shirt sleeves and braces driving home the inanities in scriptural literalness and the importance of the First Amendment to our nation’s survival. Only a lot younger…and more dashing…and with better dental hygiene.

“What the fuck did they want me to say, huh? That I’m sorry? That he should have been tried in the court of popular opinion and sentenced to a life of lousy food, shitty clothes and his asshole ready-on-demand? They wanted me to say let’s string him up by one ball and leave him hanging from the spikes on Lady Liberty’s crown? That each and every minute I spent with him my flesh actually crawled – no, really – crawled right up my arms, which made it uncomfortable to wear a tailored shirt. They all wanted me to say that, YES, the bastard did it, did everything he was accused of! Told me himself. Proud he was, spoke in graphic detail how, after sexually molesting his five-year-old daughter, when she said she would tell mommy, he tried to dissuade her by taking his fist and punching her like this!”
Bones may have cracked –

“This!”

- but it was hard to distinguish that first sound –

“This!”

- of Jack’s fist slamming into the metal wall –

“This!”

- from the next four.

“THIS! And he wouldn’t stop, just kept hitting and hitting, the motherfucking, goddamn son of a whoreson bitch, didn’t matter, wasn’t good enough, I was never good enough, He just -”

“Uh, you going up or down?” A custodian and his rolling bucket on the other side of the open doors wanted to know.

Obviously up, for Jack’s tirade was brought to a screeching halt on twelve, but it wasn’t until sixteen that, shock bleeding away, he mustered the strength to shirt sleeve his tears, stutter in a few cleansing breathes, go in search of his not really flung that far articles of clothing, and notice just how fucking much his left hand hurt.

Oh...ow. There goes stick figure number six.

The custodian quietly whispered the story to each new passenger about the red eyed, nose blowing guy in the corner with his hand swallowed by a wad of institutional brown paper towels that looked post IRS audit, affording Jack some time for quiet contemplation, soul searching and just a bissel of kvetching,

Self-pity – To summarize - I ran out of the courtroom to get away from the accusations only to be attacked by a wild pack of rapid Fifth Columnists with a ‘if it bleeds it leads’ agenda to narrowly escape into an elevator that had the unmitigated gall to run into my fist four times.

Self-hatred – What fucking hubris. To take this case. What, did I think my reputation would be trashed if I passed on this one? That I would be shunned? Pitied when I explained why? Or did I have something to prove by defending a man just like Him. That I was stronger, smarter, BETTER than He will ever be? That I was the one that would be saving his ass? That’s it! Right there! I wanted Him to be beholden to me! I wanted Him to know His miserable, pissant, fucking nothing life was in the hands of a faggot.

Self-Realization – I’ll never escape my past, I’m taking the stairs from now on, a trip to the emergency room wouldn’t be a bad idea, and barring the elevator turning into a TARDIS and traveling back three months ago so I could refuse the Tate case, there’s only one thing that can dig me out of today’s shit pile.

“I need me some Ennis.”

His call for help was answered on the third ring.

“Ennis Del Mar -”

“Hey, you! Was just think -”
“- is unavailable.” The creepy computerized woman joined Jack’s shit shoveling brigade. “Please leave your name, number and a brief message at the tone. If this is an emergency, please hang up and dial 911.”

An emergency? An emergency - yes, operator? I would like to report an incident of police brutality involving a nightstick. Seems a particular officer left this morning without properly storing his. Oh, yes, I do agree a reprimand is in order, which, as a concerned citizen, I feel is my duty to volunteer to conduct. Don’t worry, I know just how the handle him. I will roll him, uh, call him on the carpet with stinging slaps to his, uhm, wrist. Oh, and a brutal tongue lashing that will leave him speechless, and little wet, followed by vigorous physical training – squats, lunges, push ins, I mean, ups, guaranteed to have him screaming for more – mercy - more mercy. Then I’ll force him to practice, long and hard and deep, his body all sweaty and tight, and I’ll hold him down, his nightstick plunging over and over and over and over and - now my nightstick is in need of proper storage.

“It’s, uh, 9:43, and I’m in Queens right now. And I thought, since I have a few people in Brooklyn that I need to talk to about a case, I thought I would swing by so we can - shit.” The paper towels came in handy when Jack got something tear inducing in his eyes. :The truth is – I – I - I just wanted to hear your voice.”

Only two others remained in the elevator waiting for the top floor – two Sisters that looked old enough to have shouted “Mazeltov!” at Jesus’ bar mitzvah, but their combined, “Awwwww!” was louder than the Phil Collins’ cover on the Musak.

“So, just call me. Bye. Love, you, Aar – oh! For supper what would you say to -”

Call ended.

“- Chinese.”

_Cue sad, lonely guy music. No quickie for the Ass Bandit._

With nothing but an afternoon of time on his hands – “Ow! Fuck!” – hand, Jack reached to get the list of retailers in his left coat pocket from the right, intending to visit each one and ask them to drop their complaints against Jesse in exchange for the return of their merchandise – “Wait – stop – can’t – fuck – hold – reach -” - his reasonable impression of a dog chasing his tail greeting the elevator’s newest patron from the top floor.

“Hello, Jack.”

Seems his libido never got that memo from four months ago, the reaction usual and instantaneous when faced with this situation – sweat to palms, blood supply to cock, brain winging its way to Acapulco.

“Daniel.”
“Hey! What about knocking first? What are you – did I say you could – get out! I didn’t – what – and now you’re sitting on my bed. Junior, what the hell?”

“Mom and Dad…they’re…they’re…”

“Fighting, I know. Old business. Thanks for stopping by. Now -”

“They’re…Mom and Dad…divorce…”

“About damn time. So tired of listening to their screamfests. You can leave now.”

“No, it’s not just…Dad…he’s…he’s…”

“Getting some on the side. I know. I was at the table, too, remember? Make sure the door hits you on the way out.”

“I just heard them…standing in the…Mom said…then Dad said…he’s…he’s…”

“Junior, get the hell out of my -”

“Dad’s gay!”

Ditching school had been Franny’s idea - *No duh* - too impatient to wait for a more appropriate time, a less public place, and Junior had come along to watch out for her. That and to take advantage of her sister's guilt as instigator should mom ever find out.

“What…what did you…no way!”

“He told…I heard him say…”

“No way!”

“Mom saw…in the elevator…she saw…”

“What?”

“She saw Dad…and…Dad and…”

“What, Junior, what?”
“Dad and...he was...and he was – Oh, I can’t even say it!”

“You better find a way to say it!”

“That’s so pathetic!”

“What?”

“Our dad is suddenly gay and all you want to hear about is him kissing in the elevator!”

“He was kissing? A man? In the elevator?”

“Yes, OK? Mom saw him kissing another man in the elevator! Satisfied?”

“Who?”

“How the hell should I know?”

“Because you were standing right outside the kitchen in the hallway in your usual snooping spot, I bet, and heard everything they said. So, who was Dad kissing in the elevator?”

“OK, OK. Jack. Some guy named Jack Twist.”

Over 5,000 Google hits for Jack Twist – or John Twist as Junior had suggested when the nickname garnered nothing but sites for some really disgusting porn - they found out over the weekend. He was a thirty-five year old lawyer, who had passed the Bar on the first try, was a public defender for New York County, had been written up in several law journals and was smoking hot, according to Franny, at least in his pics on the Mr. Gay Syracuse site. Junior hadn’t want to look – that would make this whole nightmare real, make him, real, this man that Dad had defended, that Dad had cheated on mom with, that Daddy had chosen over his own daughters – but, after being forced to look by a little sister who threatened to tell mom about Kurt and what actually had happened after the homecoming dance if she didn’t, Junior did have to admit that she really liked his eyes, the prettiest color of blue, the kind that brought on happy just by looking at you.

“Oh, and by the way, you can’t suddenly turn gay.”

“I know, I know! But, he’s our dad! How did we happen if he’s always been gay?”

“Well, when a man and a woman have had too much to drink…”

“No! Don’t! Don’t want those mental images in my head! Mom and Dad doing…disgusting!”

“Mom and Dad doing anybody!”

“EWWWWWWWWWW!!!”

The cabin in the Catskills was big. Big and roomy. Big and roomy with lots of open space for sound to bounce around no matter how many pillows you were buried under. From the moment they had arrived on Friday night – after a long trip made interminably so by Mom’s litany of Dad caused woes that made him out to be not only a terrible husband and father, but the reason for the hole in the ozone, too – it was apparent to Junior, Franny and the pot holders that Alma Del Mar had already set up housekeeping. Whatever mistakes Dad had made in their marriage, including infidelity, Mom spent three days shouting “Yes! Yes! Oh, Bill, yes!” to every one of hers.

“Not like Mom and Dad were happy. And now we know why.”
“Why couldn’t he be a normal man and run off with the bimbo hostess at the IHOP like Jason’s dad?”

“So, you’re saying that Dad’s not normal?”

“No, just that…he’s…Dad’s…gay! How can he -?”

“Well, when Dad and Jack have had too much to drink they -”

“Francine!”

“Sorry. Bad mental images again.”

“What are we going to say when, I mean, how are we going to tell...?”

Mom had made her position, and that of her lawyer’s, very clear, very loud and very often over the weekend. They were not to see their father. Speak to him, email him, even talk about him, at home or to anybody else. If the subject of why their father had suddenly moved out came up, they were to change it. If pressed for an answer as to where their father was living now, they were instructed to excuse themselves from the conversation. If a reason for the continued appearance of another man picking up the morning paper outside their door was demanded, say like from Mrs. N德ermeyer and Bilbo, their smiles were to be as demure as their brush off. Mom was refusing to be gossiped about, pitied or humiliated over the fact that her husband left her for a man by insuring that no one – especially her family - would ever find out. As far as she was concerned, Ennis Del Mar would only be the name on the alimony and child support checks. Nothing more.

“Who cares? Who cares what anybody says?”

“How can you say that? What about your friends? Won’t they -?”

“Oh, you mean Tiffani who has two moms? Or Jamal, my friend who lives with his mom and step-dad and his three children from two previous marriages and their kids? Or how about Astrid and her brother who are living with second cousins because their dad’s in prison and their mom’s in rehab?”

“Tiffani has two moms? Really?”

“Yes, Junior, and nobody bothers her about it.”

“But, this is OUR dad. OUR dad that cheated, OUR dad that just walked out the door. OUR dad that is probably on his way to that Jack guy right now.”

“That’s right, he is our DAD.”

“I know, but…”

“We should at least talk to him.”

“Mom would go ballistic.”

“And since when has that ever stopped us?”

And that’s how they came to be standing in the hallway on the fifth floor of the 81st Precinct outside the men’s bathroom on the Monday morning after Thanksgiving. They couldn’t call without mom finding out, and they didn’t know where he was living now. So this was Mohammed and the mountain Brooklyn style, according to Franny. The two Del Mar daughters - not worrying how
much their mother’s panties bunched because they had skipped school and spent their allowance on cab fare to get here just to see their father, their gay father, their gay father who was quite possibly doing all those things in the yaoi mangas that Franny had tricked her into looking at.

*Can my Dad even bend like that? Do I want to know that my Dad can bend like that? EWWWWWWW!!!*

“Whatever you do, just don’t start crying, OK?”

“I don’t cry!”

“Please! Franny, you cry at commercials!”

“But, the horse remembered his trainer!”

The door opened, and Junior held her breath.

*This is it, going to see Dad. First time since the argument in the kitchen, with all those things he said that I never told my sister, all those things that I wish I’d never heard. This is it. Will he, can he, please, god, let him still be –*

“Hi, Dad!”

Junior was the one that starting crying.

“Oh, Daddy!”

His arms were still strong, his cheek still scratchy when he hugged them both. His voice was still deep, his demeanor still calm when he scolded them for skipping school. All the fears and worries that had plagued her into breaking out, and not just in the normal T-zone, had been a total waste of energy and lost sleep.

*I’m such a loser! Of course he’s still my father!*

And when Franny opened her big mouth and asked the question they had both decided it would be best to tackle in private, she watched her hero’s face shine.

“So, who’s this Jack Twist guy?”

*********

“Holy Mary, Mother of God.”

Ennis pushed by the catechism reciting Aguirre to step over a body face down, quickly scanning the interior for the first response uni, an unknown face in the roiling blob of blue with gold letters working the scene.

*Three. Three in one day. Shit.*
“Don’t move!”

One foot suspended mid-step, Ennis froze, his balance and dignity teetering precariously.

FLASH!

“Thanks.” The forensics team camera refocused for the next shot. “Be careful where you walk. Not done documenting the patterns.”

Not much pattern to it, not that he could see anyway. More like gallons of red paint maliciously spilled across the floor and walls, five in all, the victims in varying shapes and sizes, age and ethnicity, their common denominators – time of death and two holes in the back of their head, exit wounds for bullets and eyes.

“Where’s the -?”

“Over there.” A quick shoulder shrug towards the back and the blob’s middle. “Sussman and” FLASH! “her partner, Trevino” FLASH! “were the first.” FLASH!

He blinked away tiny white sparkles. “Thanks.”

Eggshelling a zig-zagging route to Sussman, his size 11 D-width Doc Martin’s a literal bull in a china shop, crystal and glass crunching under the street-worn soles, Ennis gave less than a rat’s ass whether he was followed.

Gonna kick Supersize’s ass for getting me into this.

No one goes out alone, that’s the rule. With Don in court, Bernard taking a statement, and the other detectives similarly engaged, Captain Stoutamire had had no choice but to stick the Aguirre thorn in Ennis' side, the perfect addition to a day that had seen only two bright spots so far.

My girls and stick figures.

Not that he was a bad cop, wouldn’t be on the Captain’s team otherwise. Aguirre followed the rules, did his job, a nine-year veteran decorated only once when circumstances jumped onto his unimaginative and methodical path forcing uncharacteristic quick thinking that saved a fellow officer’s life.

Still don’t want him riding with me, though.

This morning, the three blocks from Precinct to the first scene hadn’t provided much conversation time, not that Ennis would have engaged in such a friendly occupation with the asshole sitting in the passenger seat rummaging through the glove compartment searching, he said, for gum, and was disappointed when a pack of Big Red was his only find.

Which he’s smacked all goddamn day!

On the way to the next call, they reached a shaky unwritten truce of silence for the sake of the job at hand, and their asses with the Captain should obvious hatred impede an investigation. Or, if it was absolutely necessary, kept any words exchanged to bleached bones work related subject-verb sentences only, which succeeded in containing the white-knuckle clenched fist of tension that had parked itself on the console between them from swinging away. Barely. The one time it did look possible that a thought germinated in Aguirre’s swamp of a brain might try to ooze its way out, Ennis had grabbed his cell phone to have a reason for silence – checking his messages - and for something to do with his non-steering wheel hand besides punching the shit out of the gum smacking dickhead
fouling up his car.

“You have one unheard message.”

He couldn’t help the smile or the other automatic reaction to the sound of that certain voice.

“It’s, uh, nine-forty-three, and I’m in Queens right now. And I thought, since I’ve got a few people in Brooklyn that I need to talk to about a case, I thought I would swing by so we can…shit. The truth is…I…I…I just wanted -”

“Shit, Del Mar! Phone sex while on the job? What would Cap say?”

The cell snapped shut, Big Red smacked, and that fist of tension had ground tighter.

“Sussman!”

Politeness stripped off with the latex at the last scene, Ennis bellowed to penetrate the conversational din of the Times Square station platform at five sized crowd packed into the small interior, his gruff impatience to be recognized snapping heads and stares around, which was just perfect if it meant quick answers to already asked twice today questions.

“I’m Sussman.” Black marbles, heavily lined and advertised with flitty, long lashes goal-posting a hook nose, narrowed at the abrupt summons. “Who wants to know?”

A stab at the shield clipped conspicuously on the lapel of his peacoat. “Sergeant. Del Mar, homicide. That’s -” a vague gesture at the door. “- Aguirre. What do we have, as if it isn’t self-explanatory.”

“Keep those people back!”

FLASH!

Sussman blew at a stray lock of curly, dark hair, a rouge that had dared to break free from the strict bun that held its brethren prisoner. “Call came in at two-thirty-three. Me and Trevino were only two blocks away.”


“Daughter of one of the vics. She was across the street in the book store while mom picked up a present for her niece’s wedding. Walked right in to see this.”

Front of the counter on the floor - an African-American woman – mid-40’s, fur coat, expensive shoes, huge diamond ring – slumped on the floor, legs tucked demurely under, eyeless sockets staring at the Am-Ex in her hand, sign push-pinned into her throat.

“Oh, Jesus.”

“Had to sedate the daughter. Bus took her to Vic Memorial.”

“Others?”

FLASH!

“Coming through, coming through!”

“Well, there,” Sussman indicated the body by the door, “and there.” A white haired gentleman
whose blood had sprayed all over the gift registry station, and where Aguirre schmoozed a short, dumpy blonde who was supposed to be bagging evidence. “And these two.”

FLASH!

Badge ticked the glass as she leaned over to look behind, careful to keep gloveless hands off the yet to be dusted counter. “There by the register is Mahavir Venkatappa. Brother Ajeet here,” the body right below her pointing finger, “was probably caught either coming or going from the back room.”

A quick trip around the end, Ennis snapped on a pair of gloves pulled from his pocket reservoir, giving the vic on the floor – no one falls that neatly. She was moved post mortems – and her crimson pool a wide berth. “Look at his position.” He knelt down close to Ajeet, immune to the sight and smell of death by a longshoreman father’s obsessive need to show a son the consequences of a life eroded on the docks, his desperate attempt to see unskilled labor’s footsteps abandoned. “Flat on the floor -”

“ME and the bus are here!”

FLASH!

“And the curtain to the back,” parted for at least a six footer’s broad shoulder width. “He was going in. Probably heard a noise in the – make sure somebody checks the back entrance for signs of forced entry!”

“I’m on it!” A windbreaker clad couldn’t have been more than 18 year old kid jumped at this chance to contribute.

Ennis' fingers probed the back of the vic’s head with only the slightest of tilts. “And for slugs in…” He stood up, one foot on either side of the body facing Ajeet’s last sight, pointing back, an awkward thrust of his arm, his red stained finger indicating a display of untouched Wedgewood. “…that wall. Two, nine milimeter, FMJs through a silencer, if they’ve stuck to their MO.”

“Wait.”

FLASH!

A moving target replacing used gloves with new required Sussman to lean out further across the glass. “You’ve seen this before?”

“Yeah.”

Lockhart and his ceiling fan last week were first, of course. Then today started with the call that had pulled Ennis away from his girls and stuck him with the gum smacker instead, sending them to a mom and pop over on Marcy, the neighborhood hang-out, two elderly vics caught in the back room, unaware of the danger before it no longer mattered. Next, lunch interrupted – kraut dogs with extra onions tossed after one bite – by a convenience store on the corner of Clifton and Franklin and a Pakistani couple, one counting the mornings receipts, the other re-stocking the candy aisle. All adding up to five bodies shot twice in the head, five bodies with no eyes left, five bodies adorned with the same words.

I’m always watching.

“Three times. But, never this many at once.”

The owners of the store, Ajeet and Mahavir, just like the other vics today, were the most likely
targets. Refused a protection shakedown, mob related, smuggling even, maybe, all were caught up in the same scam.

But, this was even worse, because here at The Place Setting, the perps had taken out what Ennis was sure they viewed as acceptable losses – the mother, the old man, the guy by the door – who had probably not crossed any line, not made any enemies, but were just in the way, an annoyance to be swept aside as forgettable. Their cause of death – shopping for china.

Nobody’s off-limits to these guys.

“And,” he picked up something caught under Ajeet’s thigh, a single shell casing dropped into a small plastic evidence bag pulled from his other pocket, “this time they were sloppy.”

Now, I’m really confused, cause this doesn’t match with the other scenes, all so neat and tidy, with a quick in and out, no witnesses, no evidence, nothing but blind dead bodies and their cryptic message. What the fuck happened here? What am I missing? What’s the difference? What’s Jesse Whitfield’s connection to - wait a sec.

“Here,” bag shoved into Sussman’s hand, “hold this.”

I just said it. ‘But, never this many at once.’ There’s no way in hell only –

Time for a recreation of the crime with mind and body. “Shooter from the back,” Ennis ducked behind the curtain, then right back out, gun drawn, “one…” he took out Ajeet, “…two.” Down went Mahaveer. “Around the counter to three…” the vic at the registry, “…then four,” the woman at the counter, “…then five,” the body by the door. “Ten shots inside of what had to be less than fifteen seconds to catch all by surprise. Ten shots that require a steady hand and target. Nobody tried to run when the first two went down, not even this…unless…Hey. Hey! HEY!” Nothing appropriate in hand, Ennis scooped up a stand-up ad formerly prominent within the Limoges display and lobbed it across the room, the wooden easel bouncing off camera guy’s shoulder.

FLASH!

“Shit. Who did -?”

“You done with this guy?”

The affirmative wave accompanied the pissed-off glare.

“What’s going -”

“Del Mar, have you -”

“Why is -”

Sussman and Aguirre, along with most of the blue with gold letters blob arrived at Ennis’ elbow, peering over his shoulder, breathing down his neck as a foot nudged the by-the-door body.

“The two behind the counter…” The squishy-slurp of blood gone tacky when it released the inanimate object, “…and the two in front here…” Knuckles rapped the hardwood, death weighted arm flopping away as the body rolled over. “…facing the opposite directions…” The final sigh of trapped air and the lifeless head titled to the side. “…means there just had to be…” an open and vacant pair of gray eyes. “…a second shooter.”

FLASH!
“No sign either.”

Way to state the obvious, dickhead.

“Going out on a limb here,” the ME squatted down, the job’s most useful tool – a sense of gallows humor – right beside her, “but I’d say this -” a poke at the large and gaping hole in the man’s chest “- was the cause of death.”

“But, who shot this guy?”

Didn’t bother to run around this time, Ennis just vaulted over, excited, thrilled - fucking ecstatic! – that they just maybe had a break in the case this time. A glance between brothers. Ajeet was the first to drop, so that means... “Mahavir, you’re the man!” Because of your distraction we now have a shell casing, fingerprints and a body! A tug on the posthumously decorated hero’s arm. Nothing. Another tug. Still nothing. Now, a yank, but Mahavir didn’t want to move, the blood smear on the wall marking his crumpled spot by the register. “Fuck. He’s wedged in tight.” A quick drop down on his stomach, and Ennis strained to reach under the counter for the Magnum that was holding the corpse in place. “Sussman! You pull on his arm!”

“Say what?”

“Pull on his arm so I can dislodge -”

“Del Mar, think you might want to see this.”

From under the counter, Ennis spotted Aguirre’s cheap slip-ons standing by the shooter’s body. “Just handle it, for Christ’s sake! I’m busy doing -”

“You need to see this, Del Mar.”

Levering up from the floor – Can’t do anything by his goddamn self! – it was impossible to avoid the blood, - Can’t go out alone, my ass! – so he didn’t even try. One glove slimed with Mahavir – Might as well be alone with that asshat here – the other grimy from under the counter crud, Ennis stormed over, his displeasure, while not voiced, was certainly evident in his scowl and the way he snatched the blood soaked paper from his colleague’s hand.

“What the fuck is this?”

“Pulled it from the shooter’s pocket, Ennis.”

A plain, what used to be white business card marked across with a black X. “Now, why would I need to see -”

John Twist, Jr., Esquire

Public Defender
“Ladies and gentlemen, vis a vis physical evidence, eye witness and expert testimony, the prosecution will present their care before this court in an endeavor to impugn the veracity and integrity of my – shit. Lost them on the vis.”

Long cigarette drag followed by a sigh expelling billowy gray pique into Chelsea’s night.

“Hell, I lost me by the a.”

Opening argument rehearsal was a little premature considering the case may not even go to trial, not if the psych eval ordered came back with happy words like Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or Dysthymia or, if they got lucky, schizophrenia beside Jesse’s name. But, now that Jack knew what and who he would be facing should the DA’s inexplicable desire to see this case added to the schedule come to fruition, any chance for mistakes or opportunities to be pantsed by the prosecution had to be anticipated and the appropriate thwarting strategy in place.

And what else is there to do? Nothing on TV, no Ennis, nothing from Netflix, no Ennis, crossword puzzle finished, no Ennis, laundry folded, no Ennis, trash bagged and shoved down the chute, no Ennis, DVDs alphabetized, keep busy so I'm not thinking about, dwelling in, obsessing over – where the fuck is Ennis? Shit. No Mr. Grabby Hands is Ass Bandit’s kryptonite.

So, after a take-out dinner for two that ended with one dirty plate going in the dishwasher and the other wrapped in foil keeping warm in the oven, cigarettes, Jack and his legal Muse retired to the fire escape to compose an opening argument that would make the rest of the trial academic.

“Ladies and gentlemen, each of you is here to fulfill your civic duty by participating in this time honored tradition…so please take the time to locate the exits marked by the red exit signs, both in the front and rear of the courtroom.” Jack Twist, flight attendant, completed the by-rote speech with the customary apathetic hand gestures. “Should this trial experience any turbulence, your crappy wooden chair is of absolutely no help, so just grab your ankles and kiss your -”

“Jack!”

Cigarette suck paused between open lips, brows furrowed in concentration trying to catch a sound he thought maybe was there a second ago…but, no, probably just the wind keeping its winter schedule of whipping chill through the metal slats and chasing those with any sense back to seek warm.
Too long on my Fire Escape of Solitude, 'cause I'm hearing things now.

One last drag and the stunted cigarette brought life to the next, three-quarters of a pack gone inside of two hours, the pile of crushed butts in the ashtray the physical manifestation of his continued oneness kept hydrated by a very piquant zinfandel.

“Allright...a more personable approach, maybe.” He cleared his throat and tried again. “Jury duty sucks, doesn’t it? You’re worried about work. You’re going to miss a dentist’s appointment that’s been scheduled for six months. The dishes and laundry are probably piling up at your house.” The all but empty bottle of wine perched precariously on the railing, his aunt’s housewarming gift frog, his silver ball held high, reflecting the sliver of tonight’s moon, and a scraggle of brown sticks encased in a tomb of starlighted ice delusionally clinging the idea that it was still a Wandering Jew became the twelve men and women of Jack’s jury, all spellbound by his legal acumen. “A damn inconvenience serving on a jury, putting your lives on hold. And for what? For the sake of a civic duty you couldn’t squirm your way out of? For the sake of keeping our bloated, unwieldy, out-of-control court system lumbering on? How about for the sake of a man who risked his life to serve his country so that you, you, and -”

“Jack!”

There it was again.

“OK, the wind doesn’t pronounce consonants that precisely.”

A glance down to the alley – hand safely tucked from flash freezing to the railing – empty except a boy band of stray cats dumpster diving for their evening nosh, first floor’s Kip Peters’ Vespa chained up like a Houdini escape trick and the belongings of the latest Mr. 6D that had exited the window of the apartment around 7 pm when Mrs. 6D stepped in and discovered someone doing the very same thing to her husband.

“Jack!”

Couldn’t be the Binocular Brigade, their sign of ‘Back in an hour. PLEASE don’t start anything without us!’ plastered on the inside of the closed window. Mr. Chen was at work, the couple to the right on their Montreal wedding/honeymoon, so...

“Who in the hell is -”

“JACK!”

“Ok, that’s who.”

A bend to peer in the window just in time to watch the front door fly open, knob gouging a hole in the entryway drywall –

“Jack!”

- and a rushing cop disappearing down the hall.

“JACK!”

“Ennis! Shit, Ennis, what’s the -”

Clumsy, sore, stiff and now alarmed fingers fumbled at the window, the frightened and desperate shouts of his name yanking Jack through even before there was barely contorting room.
“JACK!”

“Ennis! I’m in -”

Stompstompstompstompstompstompstompstompstompstompstompstompstompsto –

“Oh, fuck me. You’re alive.”

A wonder the glass didn’t shatter, Jack’s head hitting the pane with the same force of Ennis’ rush forward.

“Christ! Must you slam my head every time -”

Jack’s complaint was swallowed whole.

That hermetically sealed, jaw dislocating, bridge of the nose bruising, one body trying to climb into the other, no breathing possible, classic dictionary definition of sucking face that left the Ass Bandit fuzzy, giddy and ready to roll melted into a soft murmuring of kisses, no spot on his five o’clock shadowed, nearly frozen, loopy grinning face unadored, his head cradled secure, his body pinned in the most delectable way.

Mr. Grabby Hands should be late more often.

“Oh, god…Jack! Jack!” The taste of relief was sweet on Ennis’ lips. “I…when…I saw…oh, Jack!”

“Enn– hey – E -” Any attempt to verbally console through his obvious distress was cut short every time by a mouth that was unwilling to be interrupted.

And who am I to stand in the way of his preferred method of venting?

“And when…I couldn’t…you didn’t…answer…your phone…”

“Oh, sor – I broke da…damn…ding…” A tongue butting in the way of Jacks’ t’s. “…doday.”

“Broke…how?”

“Drop – drop – drop-” As much as he appreciated the worship, Jack wanted at least one sentence free of any speech impediment. A turn of head opened up just enough room to speak around the attention being lavished on the corner of his mouth. “I dropped it when Daniel punched me.”

“What?”

Blue opened to brown a nose length away.

“Only because I punched him first.”

“You punched him – why?”

“Because he hit on me.”

“But you said you – WHAT!!????!!”

“Calm down. Nothing I couldn’t handle. Happens to me all the time.”

“WHAT!!????!!”
NOT talking is good sometimes too, Jack.

“Ennis, I -”

With one step back, he went from ‘Oh, my god, you’re here!’ ecstatic to ‘You better tell me what the fuck happened now!’ pissed off. “That son of a bitch! Should beat the shit out of him for – thinking that he can – somebody touching you -”

“Uh, reel it in there, oh, noble Moor, cause we all know what that leads to.” Face well cultivated from all that Ennis love, Jack strongly suggested those wonderful hands to take a trip down to the neglected back forty. “Now, if you’re talking about doing the beast with two backs -”

“When? Where?” Hands squeezed and Jack winced. “At your office?”

“No, in an elevator at the courthouse in Queens.” Flattered, miffed and bit disconcerted by that staring daggers anger flashing in Ennis’ eyes, Jack was rethinking his no secrets policy. Well, since that policy doesn’t apply to our pasts, at least on my copy it doesn’t…well, it does now, that means I’m never exposing him to my…and this technically relates to…that, in a round about, semi-pseudo-quasi, six degrees of separation kinda way. So, I don’t really need to delve into the whole thing, just give highlights, just brief over…rationalization, thy name is Jack. “Ennis, nothing -”

“Tell me.” Make that a whole bunch of disconcerted. “The entire thing.”

The white slash of Ennis’ lips made it rather obvious that the dinner in the oven, pleasant conversation, wild sex, outrageously wild sex, raucously outrageously wild sex – all stops along the way of the evening he had originally planned – and the blood flowing back into his ass would never come to pass until he gave Ennis some satisfaction. That’s what the uninhibited, raucously outrageously wild sex was meant to do. A resigned sigh. “Well, I was in the elevator when Daniel walked in and …”

“Hello, Jack.”

His libido never got that memo from four months ago, the reaction usual and instantaneous when faced with this situation – sweat to palms, blood supply to dick, brain winging its way to Acapulco.

“Daniel.”

“I was hoping to run into you, Jack. It’s been far too long. And now I hear congratulations are in order.” The open hand displayed was tanned and muscular, just as Jack remembered, the gesture’s sentiment carrying as much sincerity as Daniel ever offered. “Score one for Legal Aid.”

The handshake invitation was ignored, Jack choosing to engage in a more useful activity like punching down repeatedly and picturing a particular set of handcuffs glistened by his spit instead of playing with the fire of Daniel’s touch. “Your team lost.”

“Ah, yes.” The hand retreated smooth and unflustered by the snub, as if empty the original plan. “The ADA’s job was less than exemplary.”

“Which could be the only reason for the judge’s dismissal.” Jack nibbled on the bait, his foul mood craving a better outlet than the elevator wall, intending to dart away before the hook could imbed too deep to wriggle free. “It had nothing to do with my skills as a defense attorney, right?”

6’2” of neatly pressed Armani casually leaned, positioning the smile of hunter about to push all the right buttons between the floor numbers and his so easy to read prey. “From my observations, I would say the ADA never had a chance.”
“Because, god knows, the idea of anyone, especially me, could – you were in court?”

The smile leaned in closer. “In the back, yes. Here to see you, Jack.”

The still on the surface attention starved kid excited by this one time authority figure’s approval jumped and snatched at the compliment before the worked through self-esteem issues adult in a life affirming relationship could snag a handful of plaid shirt and hold back the unhealthy transference. “But, you’ve never come to court before!”

“A grievous error on my part, to be sure, for I have obviously squandered away many rich opportunities to observe your...” gray eyes dipped low, beginning the visual undressing, “jurisprudence in action.” The innuendo smoothed along the wall, the one in the crosshairs backing into the corner. “The way you work a witness, the way you handle the opposing counsel, the way you move the jury with your arguments.” Lips licked away the lingering taste of the erotic memory shivering Daniel’s eyes closed. “God, I fucking love the way you move!”

The aroma of Azzaro ‘Chrome’ did the yawning stretch, sneaking up and around, releasing from Jack’s sensory sub-basement vivid tactile memories of complete surrender, the Nirvana of slave to master’s touch, of being taken and used, played like a fine instrument created solely for the purpose of giving pleasure to the virtuoso that returned the same rapture ten-fold. In that bed, in that embrace, under those hands, under his control, Jack was the act of sexual intercourse, and it was that sheer physical perfection his body remembered even as his heart sang of Ennis and his mind dribbled that damn basketball.

“Get the fuck away from -”

“Let me make you move, Jack. Move like you crave. Move with me inside of -”

“GET OFF!!!”

The blood on Jack’s left hand smeared a four-humped print on Daniels chin.

“You little fucker.”

The punch that had knocked Daniel back to where he stood wiping his face clean with an Egyptian cotton handkerchief and looking less than amused by this unexpected turn of events, also wrung shrieked curses of “GODDAMN! SHIT! FUCKING HURTS!!!!!” from Jack and his really, truly, for sure this time broken hand.

“Shit, Jack, I just wanted to have some fun. But, Christ, you punched me. Why did you fucking punch me?”

“January Twenty-Third!”

The eye roll didn’t help matters much. “Let me guess, Peter Parker’s birthday.”

“No, you motherfucker!” Blind fury outvoting common sense, Jack advanced on Daniel, right up into his face. “My partner and I can’t bareback until January twenty-third because of your disease infested prick!”

“Your partner?” Neither did the ridiculing chuckle. “Oh, sweet Jesus, Jack! What’s happened? You’re talking like a breeder! Your partner! Fuck!”

“Go to fucking hell.” The pain swerved Jack’s steps as he boat deck on rough seas walked back to his corner.
“Let me guess, this partner of yours is some little nebbish from over in accounting that likes to collect stamps and you picked up because you knew he’d be too grateful to ever cheat. Or a librarian with a nancy little lisp, his bottom to your top so you can feel like a man.”

Jack reached into his messenger bag for his phone, the need to hear Ennis' voice – not just his voice mail this time – palpable. “Not even fucking close.”

“Or is he a stable man, a straight acting man, one in a position of authority, or power.” Daniel closed in on Jack and his weakness, compassion, if there ever was any, devoured by pride. “Hard and strong and unwavering, a man who expects things done a certain way – his way.”

“Shut the fuck up.”

“A man who won’t put up with any bullshit, a man who knows just how to handle you, a man who wants control, a man who takes control, and man like me…” The rawest nerve pierced. “A man like your father.”

“COCKSUCKER!”

The bloody fist just missed Daniel’s chin, but not his anticipatory grab, Jack’s punch stopped mid-flight, stretching out his reach, tipping him off balance.

“And I see I’m right.”

Red-blue-purplish circles around Jack’s wrist.

His next punch required no fist, however “Just his dick made me spurt three feet the first time he fucked me. Something you never -”

Cheek received a sharp elbow for that remark, temple, hand and cell phone connecting with the wall. Jack crumpled to a heap, injured hand trapped beneath his stunned body. The price of his pain, however, was more than worthy of his prize.

Daniel knew he wasn’t the best any more.

DING!

“You’re small town trash, Twist.” A straightened tie, a quick finger comb of hair, a shake to regain composure. “A nice piece of ass, an amusing fuck. But, not much else.” ADA Daniel Atchinson’s taken down a notch smugness exited the elevator. “Oh, by the way, I will be lead counsel when the Whitfield case goes to trial.”

“...he made vague references to getting me in the sack, I said I had a partner, he tried to feel me up, I punched him, he punched me back and then he walked out. Told you it was nothing.” If I say it’s nothing, it’s nothing. See that works. All gone. Everything. Just like that. I hope.

Eyes opened into a ‘Why don’t I believe you?’ brow raise. “And that was it?”

“Yes, Ennis.” The formatted for your TV version anyway. “That’s it.”

The ‘hold on to him for dear life’ grip on Jack’s ass eased up. “I fucking hate that man now. And if I ever meet the bastard…”

Evil grin. Oh, I’d have some serious fly-on-the-wall envy if that ever happened. “Just introduce yourself as that guy I told him about, kay?”
“Yeah, right, like I’m going to want to talk to the dickhead.” A kiss to a nose that was just begging for attention. “Just how about avoiding him in the future.”

*Fuck. Ass Bandit can dodge bullets, too!*

“How about the rest of your day?”

“You know, lawyering and all. So, why were you all crazy nuts to find me? Something I should know about here?”

“Nothing, just missed you, that’s all. Does this hurt?” His thumb brushed over Jack’s knot turning an uncomplimentary shade of purple and Jack’s question.

“OW! Watch it!” Left hand moved to protect the tender spot. “Of course it fucking hurts!”

“You hit him how many times?” The cast still wafted with that distinct hospital smell.

“Only once.”

“And you did *that* with one punch?”

“Actually did most of the damage when I punched the elevator wall.” An artful dodge of reaching hands, Jack darting for the kitchen. *FYI, another example of when not to talk.* “Have you had supper?”

“Wha – you punched the elevator?” Ennis blinked around that sharp left turn in the road. “*Why?*”

“Had a case dismissed in court today. I’ve already eaten, but there’s a plate in the oven for you.”

“And that made you punch the elevator? See, I thought that would be a good thing for a defense attorney.” He sagged down to one of the kitchen stools, a days’ worth of weary unable to keep up with Jack at the moment. “Since all your clients are innocent. He was innocent, right?”

“Nope. Guilty as homemade sin. Grilled salmon, rosemary potatoes, asparagus with -”

“*Jack*…”

“*Ennis*…”

On either side of the counter, they leaned in to each other, determined, stubborn and nose to nose.

“You going to tell me why this case made you punch the elevator?”

“You going to tell me why you were expecting to find me dead?”

………


………

“Think I’ll go take a shower.”

“Good idea, Ennis.”

A quick snatch of NYPD sweat shirt, and Ennis planted a solid one, their lips smacking on the break.
“Oh, yeah, I saw my girls today.”

“Shit, that’s great! That is great, isn’t it?”

“Definitely. We talked for about an hour before I had to…well…” Another firm kiss before he swung off the stool, heading for the bathroom. “They can’t wait to meet you. Youngest thinks your smoking hot.”

“Very intelligent girl, that Franny.” The mitted hand stopped mid oven door reach. “Wait, how does she know -?”

“Mr. Gay Syracuse Two Thousand Nine!” The bathroom door didn’t close quite fast enough to hide all of Ennis’ laughter.

“Hey, I was smoking hot in that suit!”

Neither did the running water of the shower.

“And I was smoking hot out of the suit, too!”

Two hours of waiting and apparently the asparagus felt obliged to accompany the salmon to mushy, a lump of lemon butter blanketed green huddled next to a perfectly seasoned pink blob. The only survivor – starch.

But, rosemary potatoes – no matter how delicious – a meal alone did not make. A quick, noisy rummage through the cabinet, Jack’s sauté pan clinking to the stove top.

“Eggs.”

Shitake mushrooms, green and red and yellow peppers, black olives, Romano tomatoes and mozzarella cheese, all pulled from the fridge, queued up on the counter beside the cutting board, ready and eager to join forces to create a garden omelet to die for. And if they would only be willing to voluntarily jump onto the knife Jack was clumsily holding in his right hand – his left plaster bound one devoid of any dexterity – culinary magic would occur.

“Scrambled eggs.”

Which Ennis would have to break and whisk and pour and cook, unless he didn’t mind picking the shells out of the yellow goopy mess Jack’s uninjured hand had managed to achieve in its attempt to crack open just two.

“Goopy eggs.”

He tossed the yolk slimy towel and the turncoat vegetable into the sink with disgust, unable even to completely wash his hand. Not with this. Two hollow knocks to the six-week 24/7 reminder of his emotional snap and just why it had happened.

The only sounds in the apartment – Ennis splashing. The only sounds Jack could hear – accusing voices in his head.

“Thanks to you, Mr. Twist, even the courts can't compel me to do that now.”

“What do I tell her to give her peace?”

“You’re small town trash, Twist.”
“You can get yourself one of those fruity beds. But, not in my house!”

“A nice piece of ass -”

“Beat it out of you!”

“How can I make her pain go away?”

“I won’t have my boy’s life in the hands of a faggot.”

“I don’t have a son.”

“A man like me…” “Worthless, useless, nobody!” “A successful lawyer in New York City, still single -” “…in the hands of a faggot…” “A man like me…” “Not in my house!” “A man like your -”

“OK! Music time!”

A frantic dive towards the CD changer. Didn’t matter what – Hell, I’ll even listen to the Wiggles – as long as it was loud, obnoxious and overpowered his demons.

Ha-Ha! Well, now, we call this the act of mating. But, there are several other very important differences between human beings and animals that you should know about.*

The Bloodhound Gang beat against his chest, the bass buzzing the soles of his shoes, his hips moth to flame drawn to the rhythm.

I’d appreciate you’re input.*

God, I miss this. The music, lights, people. No time now, no - shit, I haven’t been clubbing in - not since - back in June at Splash with –

The volume was thumbed up to thirty-five.

God, I love this! Move and feel and forget. Should go, Ennis and me – that is if I haven’t fallen in love with the worst dancer in all of Gay America – Push and slide and spin - Ennis and me out there, on the floor – I bet he’s fucking hot when he – Hips and stomach and ass - rubbing and grinding, all sweaty, and he’ll take his shirt off, chests slipping against, dicks pressed in, tongues licking lips, grab my ass and –

You and me, baby, ain’t nothing but mammals, so let’s do it like they do on the Discovery Channel. Do it again now. You are me, baby, ain’t nothing but –*

Jack’s top-of-his-lungs singing and the Bloodhound Gang paused abruptly when Ennis appeared in the living room.

“Oh fuck me. You’re naked.”

Ten swallows at least as he followed Ennis and his hard-on walking…walking to the table…the table and pulling…pulling out the chair…the chair and turning it around…around to sit…sit and. – “ Fuck!” - slap a fifty down.

Oh, please. For what you’re about to get, that’s not even a fifteen percent gratuity.

Slow slide of shirt up and off – a little fumble with the cast - teasing unbuttoning of the fly, shoes kicked off, Jack pushed his way in between Ennis' thighs as the second verse began.
“Love, the kind you clean up with a mop and bucket,” (lick palm) “Like the lost catacombs of Egypt,” (hand down chest) “only God knows where we stuck it.” (hand down pants)
“Hieroglyphics?” (hip roll) “Let me be Pacific,” (hip roll) “I want to be down..” (knee drop) “in your south seas.” (face to dick) “But, I got this notion that the motion of your ocean.” (dick lick) “Means small craft advisory.” (head suck) “But, if I capsize,” (deep throat) “On your thighs, high tide,” (suck up and off) “B-5, you sunk my battleship.” (push off and up) “Please turn me on I’m Mister Coffee with an Auto -” (hand on crotch, hip push) “-matic –” (hand on crotch, hip push) “drip.” (hand on crotch, hip push) “So, show me yours.” (dick tug) “I’ll show you mine.” (torse roll, pull jeans)
“Tool Time.” (torse roll, pull jeans) “You’ll Lovett just like Lyle.” (torse roll, jeans off) “And then we’ll -” (turn around, hands up hips) “-do it doggie style.” (ass up, boxers down) “So we can both watch ‘X-Files’.” (ass push).

A clear strip club violation –

“Ow! Fuck, Ennis!” Jack jumped away, rubbing the teeth marks on his ass

“Jack!” A feral growl, then biter in pursuit as the chorus thumped on.

You and me, baby, ain’t nothing but mammals, so let’s do it like they do it on the Discovery channel.*

“What, I don’t get to finish my dance?”

The chase, half-hearted at best for both participants, lasted for two musical bars of the interlude, several dodges and fakes to both left and right, and one determined lunge and snatch bringing it to a satisfying conclusion.

“In a manner of speaking”

Caught, spun and pinned face down, rhythmic counter digs matched the tempo of Ennis's dick slipping through his crack, the nibbles to his neck a zinging backbeat. “My – mes – sen - ger – bag – in – my – mes – sen - ger – bag!”

You and me, baby, ain’t nothing but mammals, so let’s do it like they do it on the Discovery Channel.*

Jack watched a teeth ripped strip of foil fly past his head, and landing on the counter a flash later, an empty tube of strawberry lube. “Next let’s try blueberrrrrEEEE - SHIT!”

No prep, no warning, just the pressure, push, and Ennis was inside.

You and me, baby, ain’t nothing but mammals, so let’s do it like they do it on the Discovery Channel.*

“Oh, fuck - Jack!” -

“Shit, Ennis – uh – uh – uh - there! Fuck, YES, right there!”

Pushed so hard, each thrust brought dick to prostrate, hips to edge, Jack to tip-toes, the head of his weeping dick to the underside of the counter, and shoved him sideways, his one good hand not enough to hold him balanced and still, the fuck traveling around the corner.

“Jack – love – Jack – love – Jack - lo – where the fuck are we going?”

“No, Ennis, coming, coming, work with me here, not going, we’re coming.”
“Even with a dick shoved up it -” Ennis became the anchor, a solid, stationary base by covering Jack’s quivering body with his own. “- it’s still a smart ass.”

“You should hear it do Christopher Walken.”

“Sound anything like this?”

A fierce barrage of thrusts –


- balls slapping to ass hard.

You and me, baby, ain’t nothing but mammals, so let’s do it like they do it on the Discovery Channel.

“Jack, promise - me, fuck, you’re so – so - promise, no more – punching -”

“The fucktard - more, Ennis, give me, more - DA?”


“Only if they’re, oohohohohohohohoh – asking for it.” An ass shove back for harder. “And I’m asking for – yes – yes - YESSSSSSS!”

The character ass slapped by balls sound increased, dick plunging again and again, grunting and shouting did, too. “And, ah – don’t - ah, ask me why, ah - but, FUCK! stop giving out - business cards all over Brook – ah, shit JACK!”

“Don’t – tell – me – what - to -”

“OW! OW! Cramp! Cramp in my back!” Ennis dropped out and down, somehow finding a chair to land in. “Goddamn!”

Oh, thank you! Got a line across my stomach proclaiming no to navels now. “Hey, hey, Ennis, calm down, it’s alright.” Settling across sweaty thighs, Jack’s kisses soothed an embarrassed brow. “I love you. Listen, seeing as how you’re still on the same program with me -” a quick slick slide of palm and dick - “ there’s nothing wrong with my legs. You can just sit back and allow me to do all the work, kay?”

“Like that’s going to be any – oh, yeah!”

Jack melted around Ennis, taking his dick in full, his prostate thrilling to this new angle. “Oh, fuck, yeah!”

The pace was slower now, the fuck less frenzied, but the thrusts were deeper, and mouths could explore, soft kisses filled with joy and passion, tongues, lips, teeth, nibbles and licks of throat and nipples drawing first sighs, then yelps, nothing disturbing the rhythm that brought ass to groin, body to body, heart to heart.

“God, I fucking love to watch your face when we fuck!” A hovering stop at the top, the head of his dick just inside. “So you’re just so – so - beautiful!”
A hip roll tightening the muscles inside, Jack broke free of Ennis' ass grip to plunge down and steal away his breath, diving in to suck on his vulnerable throat when he arched back, the chair, and Ennis, groaning. “I know you like to watch.”

A risky maneuver in the chair fucking position to begin with, what with the constant motion of bodies, the shots of pleasure taking the mind to places where rational thought was not welcomed, the lack of any real stable footing, the thrusts up combined with the down, the absence of proper mooring to hold you steady, all still a challenge when using the dominant hand. All I got is my right and a boner that’s willing to experiment. But, Jack was confident that he could do this, he wanted to do this – do this for my love and lover. Not to mention a dick so hard it would be the darling of Brussels for its diamond cutting capabilities.

“Watch me, Ennis.”

Jack let go and wrapped his right hand around his cock.

“Oh, god, Jack! Jack! JACK!”

There wasn’t really anything Jack could do, but give into the feeling. “Ooooo - yes!” Stroke and thrust...stroke and thrust...There really wasn’t anything Jack could do, but to float on the sensations. “Ooooooo - yes!” Stroke and thrust...stroke and thrust...There really wasn’t anything Jack could do, but to give into the inevitable. “Oooooo - shit.” Stroke and thrust...stroke and –

“Oh, fuck me. We’re falling.”

It could have been much worse, the fall from the chair when Ennis, overtaken by the sight of Jack’s dick weeping in his fist, Jack’s body stretching before him, Jack’s ass clenching around his own cock, and caught up in the moment, thrust a little too enthusiastically, tipping the chair over on to two legs, while Jack arched back, confusing the hell out of everybody’s and everything’s balance until… well…

“Christ,” Ennis peeled the split condom off, a sticky sheet of wasted latex, “maybe we should just go whack off on opposite sides of the room. Less dangerous.”

It took three kicks before the chair let loose of Jack’s legs. “When in doubt, go back to the basics.” On the living room rug, his arms, legs and body spread out an open invitation, a plea to be taken and finished this time. Can’t give up, just can’t. Come tell me I’m wanted, Ennis. Come show me I’m needed. “Got a jumbo box of condoms, three more things of lube, and a burning desire to lose consciousness courtesy of my lover’s dick.” Please, Ennis, come convince I'm worthy.

Ennis' solace found by melting skin to skin, hips to hips, dick to dick, their lips and mouth teasing the game to back to start. “At the rate we’re going, it could take all night, you know.”

Jack hit the repeat button on the remote.

“Can one desire too much of a good thing?”

You and me, baby, ain’t nothing but mammals, so let’s do it like they do it on the Discovery Channel.*
*Denotes *The Bad Touch* by The Bloodhound Gang
“You think you know a person after riding with him for six years. But, Christ, Ennis! Have you gone fucking nuts? I used to trust you! Now I…this is just wrong! Sick and perverted! I mean, goddamn.”

The passenger door slammed, the non-descript police sedan shrugging off a fine layer of late November cheer unwelcomed by commuters, street sweepers and pigeons alike. Don stared at his partner, the disbelief and dismay over the vehicle’s roof stark and crisp like their Tuesday morning, Brooklyn wide awake and shouting around them.

“- a lawyer?”

“I know, I know.” The trip from car to curb required a moment of feet stomping to clear off the clumps of gutterfied snow hitching a ride to the sidewalk on Doc Martin’s. “Even worse – a defense attorney.”

“Fuck.” The groan wreathing Don’s head in wispy disillusionment followed Ennis up the front stoop. “You’re in collusion with the enemy, you know that.”

_Three times last night alone. And when we finally made it to the bedroom… “Haven’t changed, you know. I’m still the same son of bitch I always was.”_

“No, not the same.” Don raced up the steps two at a time, stopping his partner with a hand to his shoulder. “Not the same man at all.” The intense scrutiny making Ennis squirm. “Now, you’re happy.”

His All Because of Jack smile warmed a winter stiff face. “Yeah, I am.”

“A happy son of a bitch that needs to buzz the super before I freeze my balls off.”

“OK, OK.”

Don blew into his cupped hands while Ennis riddled out just how to do that, the Kennedy era security system with Carter-aged pieces of paper announcing the residents that had lived there under Reaganomics a crap shoot at best.

“Don’t believe all that religious bullshit, you know that.” Don’s icy blast avoidance shuffle tuck him further into the alcove and Ennis. “Don’t care if you fuck sheep.”

“Think they might care. Which one is – fuck it.”

_BUZZZZZZZZZZZ!

“But, I do believe that a man isn’t one if he doesn’t take care of his family.”

“I’ve spoken with Ju – _shit!_” Bitter wind freight-trained through all his layers, peaking some things, shrinking others. “- my daughters. They understand the situation. Not walking away from my responsibilities, Don.”
“Glad to hear it. Wasn’t looking forward to kicking your ass.”

"Like you could."

"Handcuffed and high, my friend."

'Yeah, right" Not in a hurry to test that theory, though. “Having dinner with the girls tonight so they can meet him.”

“That’s great and all, but, what about your wife? The way she was shrieking on the phone last night, I don’t.”

“Yeah?” The famous New York hospitality barked out through the dented metal. “What youse want?”

“Police.” The speaker huddle had more to do with putting the wind at his back than the need to hear the melodious tones of the building’s super. “We need access to an apartment in this building.”

“Which one?”

“Four – G.”

“You got a warrant?”

“Right here in my pocket, but I can’t serve it until you open the door.”

“Not opening shit until I see some ID.”

Garbage can, mail box and fire hydrant whisked clean courtesy of the blasting chill, their white caps swirling with the new arrivals, tasting once again the freedom of flight.

“Come to the door and we’ll have us a little show and tell.”

An annoyed sigh. “Just a sec.”

Unclipped shields ticked against the grimy glass, held there by wind-chapped and cold reddened hands.

“Getting a divorce.”

“I figured that.”

“Sorry about Alma calling you.”

“That’s alright. She talked to Belinda mostly. Though I did hear some of it. Damn, but that woman can scream!”

“Had seventeen years of that shit. She called Cap’s wife, too.”

“Bet that went over swimmingly with Brigham Young.”

“Oh, yeah. He’s very happy about the non-heterosexual element in his squad room now.” A fast swipe at a runny nose. “I wanted to tell you first, but with court yesterday…”


“That sucks. What case again?”
“The one from last year, I worked with Bernard.”

While his regular partner’s guts were busy being twisted by the stomach flu.. “Scumbag father molesting and abusing his own – but, you said that was a slam dunk.”

“Shoulda, coulda, woulds, if the ADA hadn’t screwed up. The fucking PD jumped on it like a cheap…”

CLICK! SCRRRRRRRRRRRRAAAAAAAP…

The door opened to C’s.

More like D’s. Fuck, look at the size of those things!

“Sergeant. Del Mar, ma’am and this is Detective Wroe.” And they’re right in my face.

“Sergeant, huh? You got something for me?”

Not what you’re looking for, lady. And you’ve got nothing that I want, either. Cozy and warm in his pocket, the warrant needed some coaxing to leave its nest, Ennis tugging and pulling, a final yank bringing the crinkled legal document out with some lint. “You’re not the, uh, the person we spoke with before.”

Five zebra striped nails teased the warrant away, “That was my husband. The lazy bastard didn’t want to get off his ass,” the finger touch underneath a suggestion, “So, he sent me instead,” the paper stroked through the hand blatant, “and now I’m glad he did.”

Don’s chuckle stifle was half-hearted at best.

Oh, shit. Not again. So fucking awkward. It’s always the same… “May we see the apartment now, ma’am?” She’ll start with the hair –

Raven black flipped back over her shoulder. “Well, give me time to read this.”

“Certainly, ma’am.” Then a little laugh –

Giggles rang against the peeling paint on the entryway walls. “You are so polite!”

“That’s my job, ma’am.” A touch to my arm –

Fingers crowded with metal and semi-precious stones fondled a peacoat. “Wish all cops were like you.”

Don’s chuckle stifle broke down all together.

“May we see the apartment now, ma’am?”

“Oh, no!”

Ah, here comes the little girl pouty lip bite. “Something wrong, ma’am?”

“Randy Miller’s dead?” Ennis could almost hear the anguished cries of the cashmere as the woman sighed, stretching the sweater across her rack. “He was one of the few that always paid on time.”

“Sorry for your loss. May we see the apartment now, ma’am?” She’ll try either the lip lick or the tit tap –
Cashmere brushed wool as she turned. “I’ll show you the way.”

Tits. “After you, ma’am.”

“Got to take the stairs. Elevator’s busted.” The warrant’s torture – smothered in the back pocket of sausage casing jeans. “Follow me, gentlemen.”

“Yes, ma’am.” SOS, different desperate housewife.

Don held the stairwell door for their guide - “Damn your rugged good looks!” – and whispered to Ennis as he passed through, receiving a – “Bite me!” in return.

It’s like I’m walking into some bad porn movie here. Lonely and oversexed wife, two cops and an empty apartment. Only thing missing are those sleazy electric guitar riffs.

Four flights up, and two doors down, the super’s wife lounged seductively in the doorway, not budging an inch when Ennis tried to squeeze through. “Anything I can help you with, Sergeant?”

And now she’ll slip me - “No, ma’am, just allow us to do our job.” – her number. A red-lipped kiss on a scrap of paper now buried in his pocket. If I had a dime...

“So, what do you want?”

“You take here, I’ll check out the bedroom.”

“Oooo!” Predatory feminine glee squealed. “I’ll come help you!”

“NO!” Oh, god, no! The almost panicked shout stopped her cold. “Ma’am. You need to stay out here.” Leave the gay, bi, whatever man in peace. “Stay out here, please.”

Now, that pout was genuine. “Alright, if you say so.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I am SO fucking saying so! He didn’t breathe a sigh of relief until his ass was completely out of sight no matter how far into the room she leaned. Even if I was straight, I wouldn’t be hitting that. A shudder to shake off the creepy.

“OK, Randy, tell us about yourself.”

Now lying face up with a toe tag in the morgue, Randy Miller, the shooter on the china shop floor, was a twenty-five year old from Muncie, Indiana. He had graduated from MIT with a degree in Electrical Engineering and Computer Science, but was currently unemployed, according to the IRS, at least. There were no fingerprints on file, so he had never been arrested or bonded. He did have a driver’s license, but no car insurance. Paid his bills on time, carried a small balance on his Discover card, and had a sizeable data plan with Verizon. He volunteered at the library, worked out at the gym over at Brooklyn Heights Fitness, got his movies from Netflix, his pizza from the dive on the corner, and every year sent his mother flowers for her birthday.

“And none of that gives me you.”

The bedroom was small - but neat – makeshift platform bed, milk crates for night stands, computer desk – printer, scanner, headphones, but, no computer - though the dust free rectangle probably meant – a missing laptop. One dresser with a couple of broken knobs, a bean bag chair in the corner, all cluttered with the usual personal stuff – books, alarm clock, spare change, Chapstick, gum - Like a dorm room – tickets and pencils and –
“Pictures.”

Smiling out from the photo in the center of the display, four young men, obviously drunk off their asses, silly, stupid and having the time of their lives posed on the front lawn of the Sigma Nu house, celebrating life and friendship and Slamfest 2000. *Whatever the hell that is.*

“That’s you on the right, and if I’m not mistaken…” Gloves slipped down over his hands before he picked the frame up for a closer look. “Our dead warehouse guy is next to him. That’s two out of four. Coincidence? Not in my line of work.”

The other faces he didn’t know – *one Caucasian, skinny with bad complexion, and the other Asian, nerd glasses* – and unfortunately there were no names on the photograph, only the line. “The Three Stooges plus One.”

He pulled out an evidence bag - “I wonder which one was -” Something floated to the floor, a worn yellow square stuck in the back of the frame.

Squatting down, Ennis picked it up as carefully as his latex hindered fingers would allow. “Well, what do you know? A pawn ticket, the same place as Lockhart’s.”

Two evidence bags snapped out, the clues to Randy Miller sealed up tight.

“Some of those blanks are starting to fill in.”

The other photographs, six in all, were gathered, too, as were several magazines – “Lives alone and still hides his porn” – found stuffed under the sagging mattress – and a wad of notebooks filled with equations and diagrams of what looked like theoretical problems, drawings and schematics for – got no fucking clue.

The rest of the room search garnered nothing. Dresser, nothing. Closet, nothing. *Guess it was too much to ask for some bloody clothes or a gun or a journal entitled “Here’s How, Why and with Whom I Did It.”* Only the young American male’s wardrobe – t-shirts and jeans all crammed into an overflowing laundry basket. *Typical, ordinary, boring.* “Nothing to explain why you shot two people in the head.”

CSU would be here any minute to crawl over every inch of Randy’s place with their tiny brushes and exacting tweezers and glow-in-the-dark sprays. *If there’s anything here, they’ll find it.*

“But, this –” he smoothed back the plastic, concentrating on the two unknown faces. “- gives us a place to start.”

“Hey! Del Mar! Out here! Need you to hear something!”

Still waiting, the speed with which Mrs. Super transformed from schlumpy hausfrau holding up the door frame to sultry sexpot advertising her attributes when Ennis answered Don’s summons was nothing short of miraculous. Even the temperature in the apartment rose several degrees just from all the smoldering looks she was sending out towards the police officer more intent on his job than what she was trying to give away.

“Whatcha got, Don?”

“This.”

“Damn. Haven’t seen one like that in years.”
The fossil discovered— an answering machine, big as a bread box, wood toned plastic, clunky dial to toggle and two full sized cassette tapes. The caller ID beside was at least from this century. Barely.

“Well, not since Seattle Slew won the Triple Crown. Where can you even find something that old anymore?”

“Pawn shop, maybe?” Evidence bag with ticket stub passed between partners. “Better question is why would a computer science MIT grad have this no-tech -”

“Can’t be hacked.”

“Say what?”

A small, bespectacled man in a blue jacket with gold letters appeared out of nowhere to answer that better question. “Voice mail can be hacked, digital anything can be hacked. Cassette tape, not so much. And any messages are easy to destroy, permanently. Yeah, this dinosaur is low tech, but it’s also high security.”

“And Randy needed that much security because…?” Ennis’ gloved hand toggled to play.

**BEEP!**

“Twenty-two, thirty-eight, twenty-seven at twenty-four. Heghlu’meH QaQ jajvam!”

“What the hell was that?”

Clicked to rewind.

**BEEP!**

“Twenty-two, thirty-eight, twenty-seven at twenty-four. Heghlu’meH QaQ jajvam!”

“Is that German?” Mrs. Super drifted into the room, confused as the police over just what they were listening to. “Russian, maybe?”

**BEEP!**

“Twenty-two, thirty-eight, twenty-seven at twenty-four. Heghly’meH QaQ jajvam!”

“Obviously some code there at the beginning.” The numerical sequence written down exact in Ennis’ notebook. “But that last part – how do you spell what sounded like coughing up a hairball?”

“Klingon.”

The glasses and windbreaker fount of knowledge again.

“Klingon?”

“The Klingon Empire, rivals during Classic, but problematic allies during Next Gen and DS9? Anyone?”

“And that relates to the message how?”

The eye roll demonstrated the crime scene tech’s incredulity at their pitiful lack of sci-fi education. “You’ll find a translator at the next Star Trek convention. I’m starting in the bedroom.”
The gibberish part of the message was kinda’ scribbled down in his notebook. “Too busy playing baseball when I was a kid to watch TV.”

“And I bet you looked scrumptious in your uniform.”

The come-on purred in Ennis’ ear, down his neck, slithering across his skin – “Ahhhhhhficer Wroe, why don’t you go get Miller’s paperwork,” - sending him scurrying to the other side of the counter, intently checking, but not really noticing, the incoming numbers on the phone, “while I finish up here?”

“I want to stay here,” those zebra nails reached out to graze across Ennis’ hand, “with you.”

“Oficer Wroe will happy to accompany you -”

“But, I haven't finished checking out the kitchen, Sergeant. Del Mar.” The look was one of pure innocence.

Don’t you do it! Don’t you dare!

“And then there’s the bathroom.” Pure innocent evil.

“Oficer Wroe...” He was doing it. Out of Alma shriekfest spite, test Ennis’ newly out of the closet waters, or – ’cause he's a royal, raving dickhead, that’s why! - but, Don was about to nix their long established, often executed, nearly foolproof Plan B that separated prey from pursuer thus abandoning his partner to the shewolves. “I NEED you to go with her.”

“Or maybe I should check the hall -”

Like flushing out the roaches that inevitably lived in the walls of five boroughs worth of buildings , the Crime Scene Unit descended, turning the once quiet one bedroom apartment into a jabbering cacophony of technical jargon sweeping Mrs. Super and Ennis to opposite river banks.

“Come on, ma'am,” collecting that starved libido by the elbow, and marching the 'Call me, sweetcheeks!' glare out the apartment door, Don brought an end to his Ennis chain yank, “let’s go get that paperwork.”

“You asshole!”

Thrown like a missile at his head, Don was able to snag the flying notebook out of the air before impact. “Meet you down at the car!” Tossed back over a shoulder, it landed with a counter plop and a disappearing laugh.

“Fucking asshole.” That’s why we have a Plan B. That’s why we need a Plan B. He wasn’t going to go to Plan B! Notebook snatched back, each harsh page flip to find an empty one a testament to his anger. He knows I don’t like that. He knows I hate when women do that. Always have, always will. So degrading, so humiliating! One gloved thumb worked the caller ID, scrolling through the numbers to find those marked unlisted, or name withheld or unavailable for the phone company to research, the other clicked his pen, a sharp tick-tick the voice of his displeasure. Even creepier now, now that I’m, now that I know, now that I have, now that there’s Jack. Only two numbers to write down: a long distance number with an area code that he was willing to bet was Indiana, and a local number – 683-2202. Now why does that sound familiar?

“Are you done with that?”

A grey-haired woman holding up a tiny brush excited to dust the phone and answering machine.
“There’s a message on there that needs to be sent to cryptanalysis.”

“Sure thing.” Dancing on her tip-toes now.

“Bagged several items back in the bedroom, and I’ve got a few I’m going to take with me. They’ll be properly catalogued, of course.”

“Have complete faith in you.” Practically salivating to get near the counter.

“Didn’t find anything else of -”

One step to the side, and she dove in, dusting and brushing, dusting and brushing, chasing the loops, whorls and arches of individuality out of hiding.

“So, if there’s nothing else you guys need…” No dead bodies, no bullet holes, no suspects or victims, Ennis was a superfluous outsider to the crowd of hunched over shoulders and bowed heads of the CSU swarm. “…just going back to the station.”

Six-eight-three, two-two-zero-two. Three flights of stairs. Six-eight-three, two-two-zero-two. The sharp slap of the morning air. “Where the fuck is Don?” Six-eight-three, two-two-zero-two. The tomb of the car. Where do I know that number from?

Ignition turned on, engine turned over, he sat shivering, waiting for his partner, praying for heat. He pulled the picture out of his pocket, holding the frame up close in his shaking hands, memorizing those new faces, every angle and curve, trying to imagine what they would look like now, the glasses exchanged for contacts, acne cured by adulthood.

*Call MIT or Sigma Nu, they should have a record of these guys, where they are now, who they are now. They look so young, so untainted. How did they go from frat boys to dead men? What the hell happened?*

The defroster now blazed heat, relaxing, soothing, melting Ennis back into the seat, warmth picking away at the chill, sagging his tired muscles, dragging his eyes closed.

*Fuck, I'm tired! And this is what happens with only three hours of sleep. Three hours of sleep that followed five hours of Jack. Five hours of fucking Jack. Five hours of fantastic fucking with Jack. Not five hours straight. Hell, I’d be dead. We took a few naps, a rest or two. Had some quiet time when we made it back into the bedroom.*

*Back in the bedroom, just us, doing nothing, just us, doing…*

A shift seeking more comfort, a sigh, memory spinning out to a dream.

*Comfortable, relaxed, just natural for my hand to rest there. We’re only lying in bed – Jack on his right side, me on my back beside. Jack reading, me watching TV. Jack with “Superior Spiderman”, me with ESPN. Quiet, calm, boring.*

*Until he sneezes –*

*“Bless you.”*

*“Thanks.”*

- and under my hand, his ass moves.

*It’s not like I haven’t felt it before. Christ, less than an hour ago it was bent over the edge of the*
couch swallowing my dick, Jack moaning, low and throaty, animal sounds pushed into the leather as I pushed into – Shit! The noises that man can make when we fuck! But, he’s actual quiet for once, just a tiny sheet scrape of the page turn. Don’t want to disturb the peace. I’ll just be content with a small thumb brush, barely making the comforter move, lazy and soft, absentminded and easy…back and forth…back and –

Then he sneezes again.

“Bless you.”

“Thanks.”

- and under my hand, his ass jumps.

Fuck! Forget the Colt’s Superbowl chances, to hell with the thumb brush, I got to see it now!

“Shit, Ennis! You made me lose my place!”

Watch as it moves, my hand on his ass, fingers mapping the contours, fingers tracing the lines, fingers taking possession - over the curve, firm and tight, down to the crack, smooth and ripe, under the cheek, soft and full - Jack's trembling, shivering, panting and I watch my hand on his skin, my touch to his skin, my claim to his skin, electrifying, intoxicating, hypnotizing.

Another sneeze.

"Bless you. Cold?"

“Thanks. Well, I wasn't until somebody swiped all the covers, something you don't usually do until we’re asleep.”

And under my hand, his ass stings.

Pink is spreading across white before I notice the bite, my palm hovering above its reflection, and Jack is laughing, rolling over to his stomach, shoving up into my hand, his ass pushing hard, an invitation, a dare, a plea for more, and as always, I can deny him nothing.

One…two…three…four…left…right… Jack’s flesh bouncing, Jack’s skin red, red from my hand, my touch…five…six…seven…eight…right…left… Jack’s breathe hitching, his face buried in the mess of tangled sheets …nine…ten…

“Oh, fuck…sssss…Ennis!”

…eleven…twelve…it hurts, my hand tingling, from the slap, for the slap… thirteen…fourteen…

“Yesssss…do it, Ennis! Yesssss!”

…beads of sweat in my eyes, sliding down his back, pooling in the curve…fifteen…

sixteen…left…right…

“Oh, god, oh, god, oh, GOD!”

…he’s not reaching up anymore, not seeking anymore…eighteen…he’s pushing down, pressing down…nineteen…humping the mattress, fucking the bed, and I don’t like that, I don’t want that, that’s for me, his dick, his spunk, it’s mine, he’s mine!
“Jack!”

...twenty, twenty-one, twenty-twotwenty-threetwenty-fourtwenty-FIVE!

And I stop.

“Ennis…I…fuck.”

I feel it, what I’ve created, what I’ve done to him, coming off his skin, the heat, the burn radiating from my touch, red and bright and hot, and now I’ve got to feel it, up close, feel it not with my stinging hand, with something else, I put my face down, and...

“Oh, Jack!”

...the warmth is hot against my cheek, I can smell the heat off his skin, the sweat, the semen, the lingering odor of me, and I need to taste, his skin, my Jack...

“Ennis, what are you…never mind, won’t interrupt…shit!”

Lips start to kiss, tongue begins to lick, around and around the pain I caused, over the hurt, the red and dark, and he’s squirming again, trembling as I lick his skin, the skin with my mark, skimming, sliding, over and above, and down and through, down and down and...

“Oh, my!”

...in, I push in, my tongue into his hole, pink and stretched, stretched from my dick, my tongue tasting Jack where we connected, my tongue flicking and teasing and rimming and pressing in and oh, fuck! Jack! This is so...so...weird...my tongue in your asshole, my tongue sticking in, my mouth sucking, my lips making you thrash and buck and the heat of my spanks warming my cheeks as I force yours apart to get more, to get more, to take more of you, my Jack, MY Jack, I have you now, in my hands, under my hands, and your calling my name...

“Ennis.”

...pleading my name...

“Ennis!”

...and I won’t let you go, Jack, I can’t let you go! I’m sucking your hole, breathing in your scent, you are open to me, naked and wide, I can do anything for you, everything to you, all that I want, you will give all to me, cause you’re mine, you’re mine! Jack, you are mine! Jack, you are mine!

“Ennis, I fucking love you!”

A sob, a wrenching sob, and now I’m crying, crying like an idiot, crying like a fucking baby, my tears sizzling down our spanked ass, dripping down your crack with my spit, and I can’t stop, I can’t...

“Ennis?”

...he’s reaching for me, dragging me up, pulling me close, drawing me in, and I’m still crying. He’s wrapping his body around mine, holding me, cradling me, whispering my name again and again...

“Ennis?”

...and the tears are still coming, still flowing, I’m weeping into his chest, ’cause now I know, now I
understand…

“Ennis.”

…I don’t take, he gives…I don’t control, he grants…I don’t own, he allows. Jack is not mine… I belong to **him**!

“ENNIS!”

“What! Huh?” Up so fast, disoriented brain smacked fuzzy head right into the visor. “Fuck!”

“Been sitting here for five minutes. Must have been one hell of a good dream.” Don’s gentle laughter did nothing to assuage Ennis’ embarrassment.

“What the hell took you so long?” Sleep and the lingering sensation of Jack’s arms roughly rubbed away. **Don’t want a dream. Need the real thing. Need Jack, only Jack.** “I’ve been out here for a half an hour.”

A rumpled stack of forms pulled from an inside pocket. “The worst filing system I’ve ever seen. Had him under E for Edward, his middle name.”

Seat belt smartly clicked, Ennis did a cursory check of his mirrors before jerking the car out into traffic. “Anything in there that we can use?”

“Contact numbers of parents, job history, that sort of thing.” He thumbed through the papers, skimming and checking for pertinent information. “There’s a few – oh! Before we go back, do you mind stopping at a grocery store? Belinda called me and asked if I would pick up – ”

**SCREECH!**

Don bounced off the dashboard as the car jumped forward, Ennis stomping on the gas. “Ennis! What the fuck are you doing?”

“Hand me the bubble.”

“Huh?”

“Come on, come on! Hand me the fucking -” Didn’t give him much of a chance to comply with his demand, Ennis just snatched it out of his hands. “Hold on!” The car lurched, another bounce for Don.

“Now he tells me.”

Window rolled down, not slowing for the left turn, Ennis slapped the light on the roof, hit the siren, and sped up.

**WEEEEOOOO! WEEEEOOOOO! WEEEEOOOOOOO!**

“What the hell are you -”

“Out of the way!” His angry shouts illustrated with wild sweeps of the hands, the car’s speed up to 60, the open window leeching out the heaters output. “Come on, fucking come on!”

“Ennis!”

*It can’t be, but I know it is! Fucking no way, but it is. Goddamn, this is unbelievable, but it isn’t!*
The engine whined, the bumper scraped, the tires squealed around another corner.

“Do you mind telling me what – watch out!”

**HOOOOOOOONNNNNNK!**

“You fucking moron! Watch where you’re going!”

*Six-eight-three, two-two-zero-two. Six-eight-three, two-two-zero-two. Six-eight-three, two-two-zero-two.*

**WEEEEOOOOOO! WEEEEOOOOOO! WEEEEOOOOOO!**

Pass the cab, between the truck and the Volvo, around the Delta 88 –

Fwomp, fwomp, fwomp, fwomp.

Road construction barrels streaked by.

“Police! Police! Get out of the -”

“Christ almighty!”

The side of a delivery truck – sharp right turn – sparks flying from the under carriage dragging the sidewalk.

**WEEEEEOOOOOOOO! WEEEEEOOOOOO! WEEEEEOOOOOO!**

“Ennis! For fuck’s sake, what the hell is going on!”

*This is fucking nuts, crazy, insane, the worst kind of luck.*

**HOOOOOOOONNNNNNK! BEEEEEEEEEP! WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAN!**

Heads hit the ceiling, butts crashed to the seat, front quarter panel clipped a trash can.

“I swear to fucking GOD, if you don’t tell me what’s the fuck is going on, I’m going to – WATCH OUT!”

**WEEEEEOOOOOO! WEEEEEOOOOOO! WEEEEEOOOOOO!**

Left-right-left

The motorcycle and its driver passed within a second coat of paint distance.

*If I’m right, but I could be wrong, and I don’t mind being wrong, even when I know I'm right.*

**WEEEEEOOOOOO! WEEEEEOOOOOO! WEEEEEOOOOOO!**

Car went airborne pulling into the Precinct parking lot.

“Now will you tell me what - Ennis! Come back here!”

He didn’t, just tore open the door and kept on running – across the parking lot, *six-eight-three, two-two-zero-two*, through the front doors, *six-eight-three, two-two-zero-two*, up the four flights of stairs, *six-eight-three, two-two-zero-two*, down the hall, *six-eight-three, two-two-zero-two*, into the squad

“You Ennis Del Mar?”

Only a nod, he didn’t have time or attention to give to anything else.

*Where is it, where is it, where IS IT? Six-eight-three, two-two-zero-two. I know it’s here, I know it’s –*

A blue bound heavy stack of papers dropped with a thump on his desk. “Consider yourself served, Mr. Del Mar. Your divorce papers.”

*It’s got to be in this notebook, six-eight-three, two-two-zero-two, this is the one I used during the investigation, six-eight-three, two-two-zero-two, it’s got to be –*

“Oh, shit.”

It was there, right where Ennis knew it would be.

“Six-eight-three, two-two-zero-two. Mister Kwon’s private telephone number.”
Damn. And me without a vagina.

From the doorway, the Homicide Division of the 81st Precinct appeared to be in the final throes of chaos. Around a monitor, a pack of shirt sleeves and holsters hunched shoulders all sharing that same David facing Goliath with an empty sling expression; the coffee maker enthralled its fan base – three men holding stained and chipped mugs standing in line needing something to boost them to the next crisis despite the weak and lackluster jolt of its most recent offering; phone cords stretched from 20th Century technology to ears so attuned to bad news hope had become foreign language babble. Files traveled from desk to desk, carried by hands trained to serve, now stained by society ills, reports were typed, the two-finger method documenting the life of yet another fallen soul. With professional detachment tattered and frayed from overuse, a bowed head delivered the truth to a tearful relative, everyone breathing the same stale air reeking of sweat and grime and Don Quixote ideals.

And there he sits, my Ennis, and I can’t go in there and give him the greeting he, and we, deserve.

Unnoticed going on five minutes now, Jack had watched him working, each second that ticked away leeching away polite manners until the scales tipped towards injustice, the basket dropping with a clang, spilling anger over outmoded and discriminatory mores across the pocked marked and well-worn wooden floor.

If I had tits, no one would think twice about me walking in there and planting a hot, wet one. There would be the ubiquitous horn dog howls, back slapping and other hetero male bullshit posturing. But, not if we both come equipped with dicks, so a handshake – the gay man’s in a straight world gesture – is the best that I can do. This fucking sucks balls!

Oh, sucking his balls! Sucking his dick! Why the hell am I being so genitally specific? Sucking Ennis' everything!

He was on the phone, receiver trapped tightly by both cheek and shoulder, an arrow of worry lines – eyebrows concentration scrunched – the sign post showing the way to his frown, conversation topic apparently dragging everything down.

A plain kiss. No tongues, just lips and smack. That’s it, that’s all I want. A 'Hey, how you doing?' kiss. A ‘Gee, I missed you!’ kiss. A ‘I spent my entire day thinking about you – yeah, every time I sat down, I thought of you! – I love the way you taste, can’t wait to see you naked, we’ve got to watch for low hanging wires when we fuck, I’m just a lonely half without you by my side' kind of kiss.

Released from captivity in Ennis' crushing fist, a wad of crinkled paper pounded to the desk, an obvious punctuation mark to an emphatic statement in what was clearly a contentious argument.

Uh oh. Looks like he needs an ‘I’m going to ride you ‘til dawn’ kiss and a ‘So tight together, trouble can find no room between us’ hug.

But, neither was about to happen; not here in the squad room, nor anything below or above the waist within the next four hours or so, for tonight over Chinese Ennis would try to piece the two disparate ends of his life together, hoping for a perfect fit with his side order of fried rice.
That would make one hell of a first impression, wouldn't it – introductions made with their father’s
tongue down my throat.

Bad conversation ended in receiver and cradle meeting with a loud plastic SLAM!, Ennis’ face
seeking solace in the anonymity of his hands, the dejected cant of his shoulders telling a tale of
frustrated woe.

What if they don’t like me? I know what Ennis says – ‘I love, therefore they love.’ He’s one hundred
proof positive that before the green tea arrives, Junior and Franny will be singing my praises with
girlish squee.

Shit, girls. That’s three continents away from my comfort zone. Women. Now, women I know.
ADULT women I can work. Flatter, fawn and flirt. A touch, a baby blue wink, a ‘maybe you ARE
the one to turn me straight’ smile gets me free drinks, shared cabs, and, on one occasion, an all-
expenses paid trip to the Bahamas as an envy tool between best friends.

But, girls? What do I know from teenaged girls? Just one more subject lacking in the curriculum of
FDR High. High school…girls…high school girls…fuck…Emily Dozier.

“Water…I need water.”

Jack fled down the hall towards the fountain, the institutional dull gray rectangle lousy with Precinct
history written in a shorthand of scratches and dents, his throat constricted, mouth spitting dust dry.

Emily Dozier. First chair violin, yearbook editor, AC Andrews freak. Red hair, freckles, New York
Times by-line dreams and the only girl I ever had sex with. Or tried.

He slurped at the fountain’s tepid response, the water sloughed off metallic and flat flooding the
spooge encrusted drain, a tiny reservoir with bits of candy cellophane, sucked on cough drops and
cigarette ashes swimming by his chin.

We matched – tie and dress, corsage and boutonniere - purple and gold to fit with the lame ass
Arabian Nights theme. She had asked me, senior taking a sophomore, asked me in French III,
leaned right up and asked me, telling me she liked my eyes and my smile and I said yes ‘cause that’s
what normal guys do, right? Go out with pretty girls, especially with a sure thing like the prom, a
guaranteed way to get some quality pussy time.

And it was my chance, my golden opportunity to stop the Jackie Twist is queer rumors, to prove to
everyone that I wasn’t that way, to show my parents that they could be proud of their son. Fucking a
girl, that’s all I needed to taste - soft and pliable, tits and snatch - to shut down the constant burn for
unnatural things – hard and strong, dick and balls – getting inside a girl’s pants would make me a
real man, not one who dreamed about them.

He watched the candy wrapper float, the cough drop sink and the ashes mingle somewhere in
between.

But, after all the rum and Coke I managed to sneak when Mrs. Strickland and Mr. Jackson weren’t
looking, a whole night with Emily’s tits plastered to my rented Mitchell tuxedo, the whole house to
ourselves ‘cause her parents were away for the weekend, keys to the liquor cabinet and three
condoms, the only one who got any pussy that night was Nick Williams, the guy she called while I
was dressing to come and finish the job I was unable to do.

“You done hogging the water yet?”

Jack side-stepped away from the fountain - a thirsty, impatient uniform the next one to enjoy the
lukewarm rewards of years of budgetary cutbacks – and directly into the conclusion to his one disastrous trip to the state of straight.

_Masturbating with a fucking pillow in my mouth so the name I called, a boy's name, Nick Williams' name, as I came wouldn’t carry through the bedroom door and to my father’s listening ears._

_Fuck. Emily AND my father in one internal monologue. Let’s hope Chef Wang’s General Tso’s Chicken comes with self-esteem._

Schlepping back to his squad room watching post, Jack leaned in the doorway adoring the halo of blond curls peeking over the row of desks as Ennis bent down ransacking the belly of the coffee station.

“Goddamnit! Why is there never any sugar?”

_I wonder if his daughters are like him – hard shell on the outside, with mushy marshmallow center. And if they are, then I’ve got a shot. HE fell in love with me, so why shouldn’t they?_

Splendra, six yellow packets dumped into the brown liquid murking up Ennis' Calvin and Hobbes mug, was a piss poor substitute apparently, and the caffeine martyr made damn sure some guy behind a racing form got a long, hard look, his disgust reiterated in the snipe, “This tastes like shit!” as he stormed by.

_And really, what’s not to love? I’m witty, charming, intelligent, sensitive, well-read, and let’s not forget smoking hot. Why shouldn’t they like me?_

_Everybody likes – well…Stephen two offices down from mine who obviously had his sense of humor stapled when they did his stomach…and the dry cleaning lady who thinks double starch for my shirts is tantamount to a human rights violation…Mr. Chen, but that’s just because I’m one of the twenty million New Yorkers breathing…Daniel…well, he likes certain parts of me…and then there’s my fa –_

“Excuse me?” Jack’s presence finally acknowledged on a return bathroom trip, the dumpy, bald man wiping hands and moping brow with the same damp, limp paper towel, the smile just as winning.

“May I help you with something?”

“I’m here to see -”

“Jack?”

From the doorway, he must have kissed approaching Ennis a baker’s dozen, eyes the mouth’s proxy.

_They will like me. They’ve got to like me. I’ll do whatever. I can’t, I won’t disappoint him._

“Thanks, Bernard, I’ve got this.” He waited until the limp paper towel departed before tugging Jack by his elbow out into the hall. “Jack, what are you doing here? I thought we were going to meet at the restaurant.”

“Well, the DA got a continuance, so I thought I would come a little early and watch you step all over people’s Constitutional rights.”

“Just missed it,” Ennis smiled over a crappy coffee sip, his eyes playing the proxy game, too. “The Fourteenth Amendment – completely trashed. Pizza and beer after.”

_OK, we’re staring, staring at each other, and our eye kisses have now become frisky little buggers. Nibbling, we’re neck nibbling, nibbling down his throat and – Oh! There go the hands, right to my_
ass! And I’m pulling his shirt off, rubbing up his chest, across his back, the muscles hot under my hands – that’s right both hands because this is my ocular make out session and there’s no cast to get in the way of unbuttoning his – hell, no cast, no clothes! And I’m lying back on his desk, he’s taking my legs, spreading my legs, wide, wider, fucking widest! His dick is right there and he’s pushing in and –

“Hey, Sergeant Del Mar.” They blinked when the deli guy breezed by.

Fuck, orgasm cut short by a tuna on wheat.

“Well, I, uh…” It was nervous and embarrassed, and Ennis couldn’t seem to stop either the stutter or his fidgeting, “You stay right here, and, and I’ll go and, uh, get my stuff, so don’t go, uhm anywhere, and I’ll come, uh, right back here for you, you out, you know, here.”

Call me Paranoid Patty, but I think he’s trying to keep me out here in the, uh, uhm, you know, hallway, and away from his… an involuntary response to the Ennis walking away stimulus – head turning, smile growing – fuck me sideways, that’s a fine ass! – eyes following until –

“Hello,”

Jack looked left. Nothing. Jack looked right. No one. He alone stood in the hallway. Now, should I be happy or concerned that the voices in my head are friendly and polite?

“Nice to see you again.”

OK, there is somebody there. That’s a relief. Maybe. A search for that disembodied voice wandered Jack from his designated spot and further away from Ennis. “Uh, hello?”

Out from the shadows near the stairwell advanced a most disingenuous smile. “Hello, John Twist.”

Oh, goody, he knows my name. “I’m sorry.” His entire catalogue of faces flipped through with no match. “Do I know you?”


“Jack!”

The smile walked right by.

The wind knocked out of his sails, his lungs, his mind, Jack staggered, weak and wousy and disoriented. What the hell just happened?

“Thought I told you to wait -” Worried voice was not as concerned as face. “Jack?”

“Did you see that -” Jack looked left. Nothing. Jack looked right. No one. He and Ennis stood alone in the hallway. Where the fuck did he –

Messenger bag rag doll flopped as Jack dashed to Ennis, shoes skidding across the floor, then beyond, racing into the squad room doorway, looking for, determined to find, not sure if he really wanted to – Not here.

“Jack, what are you doing?”

Tripping on Lortabs, apparently. “Nothing, never mind.”
“You ready to go?”

An unknown man calls me by name, quotes my client verbatim, and gives me the fucking willies so bad I’m shaking in my entire shoe collection. Fuck, yeah, I’m ready to go!

“Lead on, MacDuff.” Jack rushed to catch up to Ennis on his forced march towards the elevator hoping to outdistance those eyes staring prickles crawling up the back of his neck.

“Why were you down the hall?”

Curious, nosy, stupid, delusional, take your pick. “Admiring the fine decorating acumen of the NYPD. I just love what’s been done with the place. Unimaginative beige paired with uninspired off-white. I mean, that’s so edgy and out there.”

“You know cops, we’re trend setters.”

A playful nudge sent a zinging jolt flashing from Ennis's hand brush, a bloodless coup over those neck prickles. I'm thinking Chinese take-out now.

“And the bold accents of years of dirty handprints and other, uh, body part prints on the cracked plaster, why that’s genius!”

Jack in the hallway beside Ennis –

“I never would have thought you would– oh, shit!”

Jack in the broom closet under Ennis.

“Oh, shit - I never would have thought you would!

"Not much free space, most of the almost pitch black 12 x 12 filled with janitorial supplies, but Ennis managed to find room next to the shelves of paper products to pin Jack against the wall while he worked to strip away messenger bag, overcoat and breath with fierce kisses and frenzied hands.

“Got to be quiet…very quiet…can’t make…silent.”

“Did…you…lock…the…door?” Jack whispered his question against burning lips.

That might have been a nod yes, or just Ennis moving his head from mouth to neck.

“Did you lock the door?” Jack breezed his question against the shell of an ear.

That might have been a grunt of affirmation, or just Ennis enjoying the taste of Jack’s skin.

“Did you lock the fucking door?” Jack’s question hissed at a crazy man tugging on his coat.

That might have been a positive hand gesture, or just Ennis' attempt to yank a sleeve over Jack’s cast.

“Ennis!”

“Quiet! And, yes! Yes, Jack, yes!” He stepped back peeved and frustrated. “I locked the goddamn door!”

“Well, in that case.”

A different head did the hard surface slamming this go round, Jack taking charge of their afternoon
“Shhhhhhh! Shhhhhhh!” Buzzed from mouth to mouth, right hand petting a pounding heart. “Shhhhhhhhh,” until Ennis’ fevered pitch subsided. “There, that’s better.”

Digging through the lopsidedly worn overcoat, hands eventually managed to find Jack’s ass, one tug bringing bulges together to produce a combined groan and shiver.

“God, Jack, when I saw you standing there, knowing I couldn’t touch you, wouldn’t be able to touch until after and all I wanted to do was to grab you and do this.”

A hazy and mumbled with desire, “Huh?”

Black wool trench coat hanging off his left hand shown as Exhibit A.

“Oh, right.”

Squatting down, Jack looked forward to a slow, teasing unveiling – - a fully erect and twitching cock waiting for him when he arrived.

“Shit, what took you so long?” A circular lick around the swollen head and salty juice dripped on his tongue. “Oh, my mistake. Not going to take long at all.” Especially when I do this.

Ennis bowed out from the wall, his cock buried nose to pubic hair deep in Jack’s mouth.

“Ohhhhh….Jack!”

“Sssssshhhhh!” Tiny nibbling head sucks. “Silence is golden.”

Three long pulls from root to tip. Silent or not, what was coming from Ennis' mouth bore no resemblance to any UN recognized language outside their bedroom.

This is… can’t get…rhythm…can’t do…no – fuck!

Right handed blow job wasn’t working for Jack. Oh, Ennis was enjoying the hell out of the suction on the ups, the tongue twirls on the downs, hissing through the swallowing, the humming, the attention Jack lavished through the slit, around the head, the flat tongued lick up the underside.

But, where’s the technique, the finesse, the style! This is so humiliate –

The only stability Jack had, a hand wound with a tight fist of black hair, disappeared suddenly, leaving only a wildly talented mouth and tongue to take up the slack of his unskilled right hand.

What the hell is he – Jack squinted up, able to make out blurry shapes by the hard line of light cutting in under the door – No, that is humiliating. He’s checking his fucking watch!

Ennis popped out, leaving a smear of spit and spunk across Jack’s upturned cheek, the words, ‘What the fuck?’ mouthed broadly trickling the mixture down his neck.
An abrupt and frenzied hand gesture for Jack to ‘Just wait!’ while Ennis performed an awkward, bendy sort of stretch around the toilet paper and just to the other side of the bucket with wheels that sent his ass into the wall and his cock bouncing close to an eager mouth.

*I – can’t – almost – reach – need –* Open and salivating, it bobbed about, prize just out of reach. *If – stay – Ennis – shit! I’m the best, but even my BJ’s require a dick/mouth connection.* "Quit moving!"

"Wait just a damn second, will you?"

"Which is all it would take if you would just stay -"

An Ennis sway nuded Jack into the path of the swinging up messenger bag dangling from two determined and horny fingers catching head's side knocking him off his precariously balanced squat and right into an impressive array of mops.

“Oh, shit!”

A diving catch managed to outwit the janitorial supplies that felt obligated to alert the rest of the fourth floor to the actions taking place within their usually quiet and sex-free domain, Jack’s body landing with a grunt between handles, broken hand and hard wood.

*But, of course, the Ass Bandit is quick on his knees!*

“Be quiet!”

“I thought you liked it when I made -”

His collar was yanked up, which snatched the rest of his coat which pulled on his shoulders which jerked the rest of his body to standing.

The mops decided to huddle together on the other side of the closet. Loudly.

“Shit, so much for clandestine closet copul -”

Ennis kissed Jack, tight in and hard, body crushing body, mouth bruising mouth, tongue shoving tongue, breath stolen and given right back, passion combining to create a larger whole –

One minute…two minutes…three…

- Jack finally breaking it, coming away with a fuzzy head, swollen lips, a stupid ass grin, blueberry lube and condom.

"Huh?" *Clunk! Clang! Clink!*

The sounds of gun, handcuffs and badge, all muffled by jeans when Ennis pushed his to the floor.

*Thud! Thwang! Thump!*

The sound of Jack’s jaw dropping to his feet, his cock imprinting with zipper and his heart pounding to orgasm level already when Ennis turned to face the wall.

What? *Here?* “We can’t -”

His tie was snagged this time, Ennis reaching back and pulling Jack cock to crack close. “Want you, Jack,” the not really an invitation, but a demand licked the dried smear on Jack’s cheek, “Fuck me now.”
Wait, confused here. From squad room barring and no me intros to hiding fifty feet away from probably typical straight boorish posturing colleagues while bare bottom begging ass? Words, Grasshopper, we're going to have words, like shame, avoidance –

“Jack...” Cheek crack clutched cock. “Stop thinking and fuck me!”

*But, first...*

Chin to Ennis' shoulder kept him from melting amidst the disinfectants. “Condom and lube. Help again.”

*Glad it’s dark, ‘cause if I had to watch Ennis slicking up his –*

A long, low shuddering groan that Jack, a step away futzing with his belt, had no part of.

*Oh...god!*

And he kept his eyes squinched tight as the condom rolled down, lube palmed, and Ennis positioned himself ass up and rubbing, ready to be taken, the tactile sensations almost overwhelming the now bloody bite inside his cheek.

“Come on, Jack...fuck me.”

But, the dark neither masked his excitement of taking a desperate Ennis, draped over back, grabbing hip, nor squelched the sounds of ecstasy as he slipped in, tight and hot and –

“Ohhhhhhhhhhh...ssssssssshhhhhhhiiiiiiiiiiittttt!!”

“Wait. Did you hear that?”

“What? I don’t hear nothing.”

He stopped – moving, breathing, thinking *oh my god oh my god oh my god* panic and lust and fear and desire all tripping over themselves to be the first one to get things started again.

“I thought I heard...coming from the closet, sounded like...”

Sweat stuck cheek to cheek, tension held shirt front to shirt back, blueberry lube slicked groin to ass, and they stood in the dark closet listening to the voices outside in the hallway.

“I still ain’t heard nothing.” “Maybe I should just check to see -”

The door knob turned...

**OHMYGODOHMYGODOHMYGOD!** Ass push back drew Jack further in, the anchor hand on Jack’s ass an encouraging force for deeper penetration.

**OHMYGODOHMYGODOHMY – wait...the door's locked. Nobody can get in here! So...**

A graceful undulation, a smooth natural flow in...out...in...out, a ribbon on the breeze, a sloop riding gentle waves, in...out...in...out, no stops and starts, no beginnings or ends, an endless stream of thrusts, in...out...in...out, one continuous motion, bodies conjoined, lovers complete, Jack hip rolling them both towards climax.

“Quit farting around and come on.”
“Yeah, you’re right. I’m just hearing things. So, what did your wife say when she...heard...baby....dog...”

Mouths emulated the rhythm, in…out…in…out, tongues weaving an intricate pattern, around and over and under and down, in…out…in…out, soft lips touching, teasing, tasting, breath, in…out…in…out from one to the other, sharing sighs and gasps and prayers and promises.

*Not fucking here, not screwing, nailing, hammering or schtupping. Ennis and I are making love.*

Slipping through the niche created by the now useful right hand, Ennis’ cock reveled in the friction, out…in…out…in, an answer to the sway of their bodies, out…in…out…in, semen sleek fingers coaxing, enticing, inviting, out…in…out…in, release.

“Shit…Jack…this is…better…fuck…”

“Come with…Ennis! Come with…me!”

In…out…in…out…in…out…in –

“I love you!”

Orgasm achieved together, Jack spilling inside, Ennis out, the gentleness belying the sensual eroticism created by slow thrusts, easy rhythm and the highly charged chance of getting caught while doing it. “Oh, fuck! That was…was…fuck.” Cheek content in the nest of sweaty curls, Jack’s arm hooked over and dangled, cast bumping Ennis’ chest on the inhales. “Would like to pause for a moment, though, to bask in the irony of two men fucking in a closet.”

Each finger, both broken left, and slimy right were kissed, individually and with great attention. “Sorry, can’t. We’ve got to go, Jack, we’re meeting my girls in twenty minutes.”

“I know, I know.” However, Jack needed the persuasion of a bucking shove from below to get his ass in gear. “Off to meet my partner’s children for the first time.”

Since sneaking in, silence held sway in the 12x12 that now smelled of sex, both men utilizing the advantage of their location, both men grabbing a handful of paper towels for clean-up, only one man dressing quickly.

“Fuck!” The cast a major impediment in detail fly work. “Has it been six weeks yet?”

“Here, let me help.” Ennis nudged Jack’s free hand out of the way, taking over button and belt duty. “So, I’m your partner?”

*There is such a thing as a stupid question.* “Friend, lover, partner. All three. But, I can only pay you for one. Civil servant, you know.”

“That’s OK,” a not so subtle or accidental push with the back of a hand up Jack’s cock, “I’ll do you for free.”

The embers of passion and lust still smoldered in the kiss, Ennis cradling Jack’s face, Jack leaning in to Ennis, their love binding them forever.

“We’ve got to go.” Ennis put his ear to the door, listening. “Going to be late as it is.”

“And what excuse are you going to give them?” An off-handed quip as he felt around for messenger bag. *Where the hell did Ennis throw it?* “Something work related, I bet.”
“Nope. Something *partner* related.”

All quiet, the door pushed open and Ennis walked out into the hallway.

*Son of a motherless goat. The door was unlocked.*
Chapter 27

The girls walked away from the table and Jack slumped further down, exhausted from the last hour of fried dumplings and questions. Sucked dry. And not in the good way. Not in the scream inducing, lip stretching, ear grabbing, spit dribbling, hips pounding, spunk swallowing Ennis on his knees with his hands tied while I fuck his mouth way either. “Christ! Only thing they didn’t ask – boxers or briefs.”

“Boxers, of course.”

“Sure they’d love to hear that answer from their father.”

“The real question is which ones.”

The pout happened of its own accord. “You don’t remember?” This was the unkindest cut of all.

“Too dark.”

Well, in that case… “In honor of this very auspicious occasion, I went with dignified navy blue.”

“Really?” His shift made a fart noise against the booth’s semi-circle vinyl bench seat. “Because I’m going to find out in about an hour anyway.”

“In about an hour, they better be coming off, making this a moot point.”

“Let me guess. Spiderman.”

Caught in my own web – of bad comic book allusions. Sheesh. I need to get some new asides. “OK, OK. Figured I could use an extra boost from Spidey tonight.”

“Ass Bandit not powerful enough?”

“His contract prohibits any show of strength near partner’s progeny… or cutlery. Of course,” he slumped a little more, “we could always take a trip to the john, too.”

“Public bathroom, Jack?”

“Janitor’s closet, Ennis?”

“Couldn’t wait.”

“I noticed.”

Napkin used for dinner came in handy for wiping the sweat dripping down Ennis’ face. “And if you don’t stop, it will be under the table next.”

The grin held all kinds of possibilities. “Thought that’s what long table cloths were for.”

“Not when my daughters will be back any minute.”

“Fuck, I hate it when you’re right.” He sat up straight, slipping away from Ennis and the dinner
cultivated erection his foot had just begun to appreciate fully. “Especially about matters of product placement.”

The server brought orange slices and fortune cookies, the check and to-go boxes. “Whenever you’re ready, sir,” discreetly not noticing how the tablecloth was skewed all to one side.

“Tip him big, Ennis.” A quick grab for a cookie, Jack snapped the brittle thing to get to the slip of paper inside. “Oh, I’m counting on this.”

“What?”

A twinkle of expectation - “Patience is a virtue worth cultivating.” - and a little danger – “in bed.”

American Express and 22 percent gratuity slipped into the check protector, Ennis fumbling with cookie wrapper and his words. “Jack, I, well, this is, just…thank you.”

Juice running down his chin, he looked over the orange peel, confused. “For what? Haven’t done anything noteworthy except manage to eat egg drop soup with my right hand and not spill any on my tie.”

“You’re here.”

“You’re here.” Where else would I be?

“Junior and Franny, they like you. I can tell.”

“Really?” Did I do it? Did I really make them like me and now my leg is bouncing, and my foot is tapping, I’m bouncing and tapping and the table is shaking and I wish I could make it stop like before by making Ennis squirm, but I can’t because his daughters are coming back and please, let a father’s intuition be true! “I like them, too. How could I not? I mean, they’re your daughters.”

“They are probably in the restroom talking about you right now.”

Oh, wow. That would be a first. My name bandied about in the ladies room.

“But,” wiped clean, Jack did some bench seat farting of his own as he swung around the semi-circle. “Do you mind if I ask you a question?” Oh, yes! The tablecloth. Can’t allow this opportunity to pass without making one. Under the cloth, up the thigh, Jack’s hand found Ennis’ reception quite appreciative. “About this afternoon, in the hallway?”

“Sorry about that, no invite into the squad room. Didn’t introduce - AH!” A little ball squeeze caught him off guard. “Because my partner – oh, shit!” Ennis and his eyes were slowly slumping into Jack’s touch, “was the arresting officer of your dismissed case yesterday, and the scene would have been messy.”

“Oh. Well.” Jack blinked at the unintentional non-sequitur. A mis-diagnosis. Not ashamed, just protective -awwww! That's so passive-aggressive adorable! “But, that’s not what I wanted to ask. See,” Fingers worked on the top fly button, “while I was waiting for you, out in the hall,” fingers worked on the zipper, “there’s was a man, and he said to me -”

A pocket beeped. “Shit. Excuse me.” A quick grab for his phone, a quicker glance at the incoming number. “Oh, shit.” Ennis put himself back to rights with some stuffing trouble. “I’ll be right back.”

Oh, nononononononono! “Hey, where are you going?”
He stepped out of the booth, jacket tucked in front, eyes scanning for a quiet place to talk. “It’s work. Need some privacy, Jack.”

“Junior and Franny will come back… and if you’re gone…” a panicked glance towards the restrooms, “…there’ll be more questions.”

“Just talk about being a public defender.”

“Ennis -”

“Leave out the way I like to fuck him hard, though. And tonight,” the words whispered hot in Jack’s ear, “looks like both our fortunes will come true.” A lopsided, around the cast left hand squeeze and Jack was watching Ennis weave his way to the bar.

And watching his ass…watching his ass…watch – gone. OK. He almost tore the scrap of paper Ennis had slipped him in haste to unfold it. And tonight will bring me…oh, god.

“OK, girls, where are you? Hurry up, come on, time is foreplay here. Come on!”

Expect the unexpected…in bed.

*************

BANG!

“Stupid thing!”

“Quit spazzing, dweeb!” Junior checked blush levels in the mirror, right against left. “Just pull out another one.”

“Wow, thanks! Never would have thought of that. Silly me. I’m so glad you’re my sister.” Wet hands moved under the towel dispenser trying to coax out another ten inches of thin white paper. “So…what do you think?”

“Good.”

“Good?”

“So far.”

“Yeah.” Two chintzy towels was apparently the limit, forcing Franny into air drying, big, clumsy arm swings that nearly cold-cocked an arriving lady accented with fur and smelling like hairspray. “Oh, sorry. I mean, he is here.”

“Yeah.”

“He’s trying really hard.”
“Yeah.” Lashes needing just a little touch up, Junior dug to the bottom of her make-up bag where the mascara liked to hide. “And he’s smoking hot.”

“I like his smile.”

“I like his eyes.”

“Those eyes!” The back of her jeans came to the aid of her still damp hands. “Have you ever seen a more bitching color?”

“He’s really funny.”

“And very intelligent.”

“Well groomed.”

“Well educated.”

“Nice hair.”

“Talked metal with you.”

“And knew about Final Fantasy eighty-seven.”

“Only been fourteen, Junior.”

A huge eye roll interrupted liner refreshing. “Whatever.”

“Only child. From upstate.” Big Sister’s lip gloss was just too tempting not to experiment. And since she wasn’t looking… “Favorite color -”

“Chocolate brown. Favorite food -”

“Raisin bagels. Birthday -”

“September twenty-fifth.”

“Prefers cats, had a fish once, birds only good for using old newspapers, thinks he might want to learn to fly someday.”

“Loves Shakespeare, read all the Harry Potters, has been known to write a dirty limerick or two and did I say you could touch my things?”

“Sorry.” Franny dropped the tube in the flowered and compartmentalized bag, her lips now shiny with what tasted more like old candle than the promised watermelon, sticking in lumps to the corners of her mouth. “This stuff is so gross! Why do you wear this crap?”

“If you have to ask that question, Franny, the answer’s irrelevant.”

“Any guy that’s looking for slimy, fruity lips over brains,” the goop eradicated with a disgusted swipe of her hand, “can just keep on walking.”

“You’re going to be standing there alone a loooooong time.”

“Better alone, than prissy.”

Junior brushed out a few tangles. “Guess you’re going to find out.”
Hand now tainted with silly girl, the back of her jeans came to the rescue again. “Least I won’t be smelling like fake watermelon.”

“Excuse me, please.” Business complete with a flush, the Hairspray lady wormed her way to the sink, the girls stepping over to the paper towels to give her, and their sinuses, breathing room.

“OK, let’s add this up.” Franny pulled their “List of Pertinent Question to Ask Over Chinese” folded into sixteenths by nervous hands out of her jacket. “He’s a lawyer.”

“Bad.”

“Speaks French fluently.

“Good! That was so sexy!”

“But, what did he say?”

“Who cares? It was French!”

“Excuse me, please.” The Hairspray lady needed to dry her hands now, so it was back to the sinks.

“Yeah, good luck with that. Hey!”

Junior snagged their list. “He wants to visit Ireland, Denmark, Australia, and spit off the Great Wall.”

“Votes Democrat, is an organ donor, recycles, but admits to owning several items containing fluorocarbons.”

A quick spritz of Victoria’s secret Pink, and Junior walked through dragging her sister behind.

“Hey! Now I smell prissy!”

An older sister sigh. “No, you smell like a girl.”

Irritated at the perfume trick and at herself for liking it, Franny yanked the list back. “That’s it. No more questions.”

"Well?"

"Well, what?"

"Do you?"

"Do you?"

"Yeah, I like him."

"I like him, too."

"And they seem to like each other."

"Understatement there, Junior."

"I know! What’s with the feet?"

"Couldn't concentrate on my Kung Pao with all that under the table action!"
"Dad and Jack should just sit next to each other from now."

"No, Dad and Jack should leave us the American Express and just go get a room."

"What?!" The scowl in the mirror behind them was obviously not new, the hateful lines on Hairspray Lady's face creasing into place with practiced ease. "Your father and another - your father is - your father should be ashamed!"

"I beg your pardon, ma'am?" Franny was at least polite under that sarcasm.

" Flaunting his perversion in public, in front of his daughters! You should walk away before he stains you, too."

Indignation and outrage balled her fists. "Yeah, right. Like I'm taking advice from a lady wearing a dead animal."

Make-up tossed in her bag any which way, the urgency to leave more important than organization. "Time to go, Franny." Junior dragged her sister again, this time through the restroom door.

"God, that pisses me off!" Anger fumed down the hallway, plowing through the mellow circles of paper lantern light. "Who does she think she is, anyway? Talking about Dad that way. Needs to be told a few choice things herself!"

"Yeah, she'd listen to a lesson on moral issues from somebody wearing a Breaking Bad t-shirt."

"Like to knock her on her superior attitude!"

"No, I'd like to knock her on her ass." An elbow tug stopped them by the sushi bar. "But, this won't be the last time that happens, and you know it."

"And that sucks! Just wish there was some way I could teach her -" The hairsprayed, dead vermin wearing lady from the restroom walked by, intolerance looking down her nose at the Del Mar sisters.

"But, I'm thinking karma can do it better."

As she disappeared around the corner, so did the long, trail of toilet paper stuck to her shoe.

“How can anyone think that,” Junior pointed to their table, “is wrong?”

Hidden behind a palm that was twice as tall and three times as big around as them both, the girls saw their father lean in to whisper something to Jack, squeeze his hand, then walk away, Jack cocking his head sideways to catch every glimpse of their father’s ass before disappearing into the bar.

“Not wrong, just… a little, uh…”

“Yeah, I know.”

Their parents as real people shudder shook the palm.

“But, Jack’s finally alone now. And you know what that means.”

Franny pulled out their ‘Questions to Ask When Dad’s Not Around.’ List. “First one: Mr. Gay Syracuse 2002 – what was his talent?”
“Leave out the way I like to fuck him hard, though. And tonight,” the words whispered hot in Jack’s ear, “Looks like both our fortunes will come true.” A lopsided, around the cast left hand squeeze, and Ennis was weaving his way to the bar. I bet Jack’s watching my ass, too.

“Yeah, Don, what’s up?” A finger in the ear was necessary to hear his partner over the Christmas office party in full swing, even the doors to the private dining room across the hall were insufficient to hold in their holiday cheer.

“You’re not going to like this, I’m afraid.”

“Already predisposed here, Don. This is interrupting my dinner with the girls.”

“Oh, sorry. Then I’ll make this quick. Ran the prints on Randy Miller through SAFIS. Came back with a match.”

“That’s not bad news. That’s fucking great!”

“Depending on how you look at it, I guess.”

Apparently somebody named Michael was a real crowd pleaser, because chants of his name and Elvis’ “Blue Christmas” pushed Ennis further into the bar. “And how should I look at it?”

“I’m hoping with a sense of humor.”

Coyness didn’t sit very well with Lo Mein, his stomach knotting tight. “Don, what’s going on?”

A sigh crackled with ‘You asked for it’ resignation. “Prints match one of the sets of unknowns lifted from Newsome’s room.”

Oh, fuck. Suddenly, Ennis couldn’t hear anything except the rushing wind of his past catching up with him. “Goddamn. Goddamn, son of a fucking bitch.” This can’t be happening, fuck! No! Not again!

“Oh, it get’s better. ID’ed the other two guys in the photo taken from Miller’s apartment.” A pause of shifting papers. “Jeffrey Lockhart, nephew of our first victim, and Hyun Kwon, son of Newsome’s landlord.”

“Fuck! Fuck! FUCK!” He shouted above the Christmas party, above the tacky Asian music twangy from the speakers, above the idle conversations blathering around as he ran back to their table, above his anger and fear. Some kind of cruel cosmic joke? Karma? Fate? Is that it? I fucked up once and now the universe is coming back to bite me in the ass? “I’m coming in.”

“Ennis, your daughters, that’s not necess -”

“The hell it isn’t!” Our biggest lead and it points right back to the grandmother raping pervert, and maybe slide into Jesse Whitfield, which smacks right into - FUCK! “Call that lawyer, what’s his
“You mean Newsome’s?”

“Yeah, Dickhead Texan. Call him.” Have to go back to the case that started it all, back to the case where we met, back to the case that gave me Jack. “Want to talk to his client tonight.” Back to the case that took Jack away.

“That may not be possible, Ennis, may not even be in town any -”

“Just call him!” Not doing it again. Not again! “I’ll be there in twenty!” With a End Call button push and skidding stop, he cut both Don and Jack off short.

“Uh…sort of an interpretive dance to The Bad Touch by -”

“We’re leaving.” All the coats snatched as one. “Now.”

“OK, Dad.” Good cop kids, Junior and Franny scooted out immediately, needing no other reason than their father said so.

Question everything, especially when it came to cops, good or otherwise, Jack, however, hesitated. “Ennis, what’s wrong?”

Everything, Jack, could be everything. “Nothing. Just got to go back to work.” Got to see if I can’t pull our asses out before this rekindled fire burns them to a crisp. He headed straight for the door, his assumptions about being followed trailing behind, struggling on their coats. “I’ll take you home first. Hurry!”

“Ennis!” Jack managed to catch up by the front door, by not putting on his coat, the black wool flapping wild. “Tell me what the fuck is going on.”

“I told you already, Jack.” I’m taking care of things, of you. The door pushed open to late November, and late November pushed right back, stealing all warmth with a single gust. “Something at work I need to handle, that’s all.”

Jack’s pause clanged a resounding ‘You are SO fucking lying to me, Ennis.’ “OooooK, if you say so, and, since it’s such an emergency, I guess I’ll take your daughters,” he teased his partner’s forgetfulness right under his nose, “and your Am Ex home.”

“Shit. Tha –” His reach came up empty, Jack whisking the credit card away. “Jack.” Another reach, another empty hand. “Stop it, Jack.” And again. “Quit fucking around.” And again, until they were nose to nose.

“You should never leave home without either of us.”

“Oh, Dad, think we’ll go catch a cab.” Junior’s suggestion retreated to the curb.

Franny shuddered. “Yeah, good idea there. Right behind you.”

“Ennis, you’d tell me if – shit!” This blast crept up from below, knocking flesh senseless.

“Christ, Jack, you’re not wearing your – here.” In a routine still needing some rehearsal, Ennis fumbled Jack’s cast through the coat sleeve, taking advantage of the proximity, the wool camouflage and the cast handicap to warm a hand with a little crotch friction.

“Oh, oh, OH! Thought Mr. Grabby Hands had to get back to work.”
His thumb made several cock head circuits, each one wider as Jack pushed into his hand. “Thought this was Mr. Grabby Hands’ work.”

“Hey, Ass Bandit’s not complaining.” The cold tapped them on the shoulder, just a sledgehammering reminder they were enjoying its hospitality out on the street. “Maybe your choice of locations, though.” Ennis’ pocket beeped again. “And your timings a bit off, too.”

“I know.” The phone went unanswered just this once. “You see my girls home safely.” Taking Jack’s collar, he brought their mouths together, cold turning to hot as tongues said goodbye for now. “Home to we as soon as I can.”

“Both of us,” a hip thrust against thigh, “will be waiting up for you.”

“Be careful.”

Ennis stayed there on the corner just watching him walk away – over to the curb, around to the front door, cursing the parentage of the BMW that splashed street slush all over him, his final wave before climbing in.

*God, I love you, Jack Twist. My mission - to spend the rest of my life showing just how much.*

Ennis raced time and his own sense of nagging trouble to the car.

*********

“Here we are! Nineteen-sixty-seven Sherman.”

Out of the front seat a split second after the cab pulled to the curb, Jack raced around to open the girls’ door, performing the gentleman’s duty. “Here you go.” Junior out first. “Watch your step.” Then Franny. “It’s slippy.” Head ducked in – “Be right back, Herman.” – slammed the door, then offered two arms, “May I?” walking Ennis’ daughters right up to their front door. *Gee, my mom would be so proud!*

“Thanks, Jack.” Junior’s teeth chattered through the pocket diving for the key. “Had fun tonight.”

“Yeah,” the younger agreed, lending a frozen hand in the search. “Maybe this weekend we can go see a movie or something. All four of us.”

“That would be great.” *I shouldn’t ask. I want to ask. Impolite to ask. I need to ask. Pathetic to ask. It’ll kill me if I don’t ask. “Hey, guys, what do you think about .”*

“Found it!”

“Great! Gimme!” Franny swiped the key right out of her sister’s hand. “Night, Jack.”

“Yeah, night.”

“Goodnight, Junior, Franny.” Jack and his missed opportunity to ease a troubled mind turned to
schlep down the steps. *Shit, now I’ve got to go home and wait for my fortune to get done with –*

“Jack?”

On the third step down, he and Junior met eye to eye. “Yes?”

“I just wanted to say, well, to say, uhm…”

The cold held no sway over Jack anymore when her arms wound around his neck.

“Thanks for making Dad smile like that.” Tiny puffs of teenaged gratitude in Jack’s ear. “He deserves your kind of happy.”

*Oh, my GOD! They like me, they really like me!* His hug back nearly knocked her off the stoop. “My life’s mission is to keep him that way, Junior.”

The lips on his cheek were like two icicles, but I don’t give a flying fuck because –

“Junior? What are you doing?”

Oh, shit. Please tell me it’s not –

“Oh, hi, mom.”

*Alma.*

Jack jumped back, Junior dropped like a stone and the worst luck stalked up the steps.

“You told me you and your sister were at the library studying, and I come home to see you hugging some strange…you.”

*Guess I should be flattered that she remembers me.*

“What are you doing here? And with my daughter?” So intense, Alma’s radiating hate, it scorched Jack’s face, her anger shoving him back to the railing. “How dare you? How DARE YOU? After what you did? What you did to this family? HOW DARE YOU?!”

“Mom, Jack was just bringing us home, that’s all,” Junior tried to assuage her mother while still keeping a safe distance. “We had dinner with Dad, and he got called into -”

“You had dinner with your father and…” The front wave of the storm passed over, the wind and rain falling silent and still, gathering thoughts, gathering wits, gathering strength.

*Just in the eye of Hurricane Alma.*

“Bill, will you please take Junior upstairs?”

A man that up to this point Jack had not even noticed - and probably never would have standing right in front of me - walked up the steps –

“Hey, Bill Murphy.” A brief pause for courtesy

“Hi, John Twist.” A brief pause for surreal.

- answering Alma’s bidding. “Come on, Junior. I’m feeling like some hot chocolate.”

“Night, Jack.” She tried to send as many good thoughts as possible to Jack before the door closed off
her encouragement.

“Listen, Alma,” The best defensive being offensive, Jack took the initiative, and the opening of Junior's exit, to try to state his case. “We just took the girls to eat Chinese, that’s all. And since Ennis had to go back to work unexpectedly, I -

“No, you listen, Jack Twist.” Just like her daughter, Alma only reached Jack’s height when on the top step. Unlike her daughter, however, she had less than glowing words to say about her husband’s new relationship. “Don’t you ever come near my daughters again. One advantage of being a police officer’s wife is I know how the system works. One phone call and you’re in need of a defense attorney.” She turned to the door, but there was one more storm cloud left to dump its destruction. “Tell Ennis that it’s my turn to ruin a few lives.”

Numb, speechless and - a little scared - Jack returned to the cab, climbing in to the front, Alma’s threat still ringing.

“That’s your ex?” Herman expertly handled the cab through the slide out onto the street.

“Uh, what? Oh, no, that’s Ennis.’”

“Like, I said, your ex.”

The cab was toasty warm, the heat blasting up from the floor, doing its best to thaw the cold ache from Jack’s bones, getting passing grades every place but his hand. I should have taken something at dinner. Fuck. It hurts!

“The girls seem nice. Took a real shine to you, Jack.”

“I’m shining over here for them, too. If only Alma hadn’t shown – watch out!”

THUMP! “Fuck!” Jack against the dashboard. THUMP! “FUCK!” Jack against the door - Herman swerving to miss the car that cut in front of him getting on the Bridge.

“ASSHOLE!” The driver’s side window was down so fast, Herman sticking his head out, screaming like the New York City cab driver that he was, “FUCKING ASSHOLE!”

SHIT! Now my hand really hurts! And my head and my shoulder and my knee and my Chinese and –

“Hey! That’s the same car that splashed shit all over me before!” Jack’s window was down so fast, him screaming like the transplanted New Yorker that he was, “GODDAMN FUCKING ASSHOLE!”

The taillights of the black BMW disappeared into the dark, apparently not hearing, or caring, about their displeasure.

“A city of twenty million people and you had a run in with the same asswipe twice in one night.” Herman chuckled, rolling up the window at a decidedly more sedate pace.

Three times. That memory sliced cold. When I went in, that BMW was parked across the street from the Precinct.

“What are the odds? Hey, like maybe somebody’s following you.”

“Yeah.”
Like maybe somebody's always watching.
Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay in posting. Real Life stepped in the way again. Well, Cosplay Real Life.

Hope you enjoy!

Metal slammed to metal, trapping them inside.

“God, I hate this fucking place.”

The yellow Visitor’s badge with apathetic edges peeling apart ticked against Ennis’ shield, keeping time with his steps, he and Don walking the path marked by lines of dingy wax build-up hugging resigned walls while complacent light hanging in cracked frosted rectangles yawned them further into Riker’s overcrowded and underfunded revolving door complex.

*No weapon, no windows. Depressing and dirty. And dark. And small. I don’t like small, I don’t do small. Not in rooms, not in beer mugs, and definitely not in cock.*

“As long as you promise to return the favor with your Miss Naughty Brown Sugar exploits.”

“Your idea, remember?” Temporarily on hold due to the separate cars drive to the island, Don made up for time lost in traffic, his point belaboring dragging the dead horse along by its tail. “Your idea to come to this hell hole. Your idea to spend the evening surrounded by society’s finest. Your idea to be frustrated by an uncivil prisoner. Your idea to get screwed by an uncooperative lawyer. Of course, you may like that last one there.”

*No, tonight it’s me on top and looking straight in Jack’s eyes. But, the uncooperative part does sound intriguing. “Well, now that you mention it…”*

“Oh, no! Don’t want to go there! Ever!”

“As long as you promise to return the favor with your Miss Naughty Brown Sugar exploits.”

“And speaking of Belinda, have fun explaining to her why I’m not home right now with my head under the sink fixing the garbage disposal.”

“You didn’t have to come, ya’ know, one of us here would have been fine.”

“And two of us is here, even better.”

“Give up family time to humor me?”

“I did mention busted disposal, didn’t I?”
Answer on hold for the check point, the corrections officer who could give the broad side of any barn a run for its money, examining badges, passes and faces before unlocking the door to the interview hall.

“So, you didn’t tell your wife.” Ennis nudged his partner into the beige drab wall. “Pussy.”

And Don nudged right back. “That’s something else I’d rather be doing tonight.”

“Yeah, me, too.” *Dive dick first into the continuing adventures of Ass Bandit.* “Different equipment, though.”

“Perilously close to going there, Del Mar.”

“Just following you, Supersized.”

Another pause, another pass check, the keys clanging between the cell’s bars as the door was unlocked for the officers.

“I’ll get Newsome.” This corrections officer had to duck his head going in and out, the silo that went with the barn at the other door. “Lawyer wanted a few minutes alone.”

It was easy to see what the powers that thought themselves to be reformers, not punishers were going for in the design of this place - minimal furnishing, subdued lighting, deserted hallway, all to lend a potentially tense situation such as a police interrogation an air of calm and peaceful quiet. What the years of New York City crime’s degradation had dragged out of that lofty ideal was a crack den lit room where a table scarred by countless handcuffs squatted on a 20 x 20 stained concrete floor that never warmed up surrounded by steel representations of the words ‘wrong’, ‘never’ and ‘failure.’ No reforming ever occurred between this cell’s bars, and no punishing, either, except to the legal system when deals were struck in the name of squeaky wheel justice.

“So, what’s his name?”

Ennis took off his coat, draping it over the back of a chair. “That guy? Name tag said something like Warbler – Warther – Warsomething.”

“Warrington, my far sighted friend.” Don kept his on, lounging in the back corner. “But, that’s not what I meant. What’s his name?”

“Oh. His name.” *Knew he would ask some time. And what do I tell him?*

“Yeah, that his. The one that makes your smile go all school girly when you think about him.”

He could feel the corners of his mouth curling up, but was powerless to stop it. *Those thoughts make me more than just smile.*

“Which is all the time, apparently.”

*Can’t stop the smile when I think about him, can’t stop the flip in my stomach when I look at him, sure as hell don’t want to stop the dick twitch when I touch him. And I will never stop loving or living for him.* “Jack. His name is Jack.”

“Jack. OK, Jack. Does Jack have a last name, or should your Christmas party invitation be addressed to Ennis Del Mar and Jack, the defense attorney?”

*Would work for him, if you stuck an ‘incredibly handsome’ or ‘impeccably tailored’ in there.* “Yeah,
that’s good.”

“Ennis, come on, what’s his -”

Saved by the clank of approaching chains.

“Please step away from the table, officers.”

Between Barn and Silo, LD Newsome was a twig. A small, thin, brittle twig washed out gray like
the prison coveralls that swallowed him, a listless, hunched twig shuffling through the cell door,
hands bound to waist linked to ankles, head and spirit bowed. With an accused serial murderer, the
security was standard, police over to the side, defense attorney hovering nearby, all waiting for the
prisoner to be seated, still and locked to the table.

_Time to cover my ass and hope it doesn’t get chewed right off._ “Hey, Don.” Turning them away,
Ennis kept his voice low, the subject for their ears only. “Want to keep this on Miller and that case
only. OK? No straying while I’m in the room.”

“But -”

“Not on Newsome’s anymore.”

“Which I still don’t understand.” His confusion whispered back. “You voluntarily walk away?
Bullshit.”

“Four months old news, and I just don’t want to waste the time re-hashing.” _Walking a tightrope
here, I know. A thousand feet in the air with only Jack to break my fall._

“OK, yeah, sure, Ennis, whatever you say.” The words gave their consent, the conviction just didn’t
quite reach the eyes.

“He’s all yours, officers.” Barn stepped out first, Silo ducking right behind. “Just call us when you’re
done.”

“Sergeant Del Mar, Detective Wroe,” Randall Malone shook hands in turn, a cursory gesture for
appearances only. “I agreed t’ this meetin’ only because my client insisted. But, I must caution you t’
keep your questions within proper bounds.” A Texas-sized superiority smirk pulled a chair
uncomfortably close to the shackled young man. “Any deviations will not be tolerated.”

_Christ, how does he sit with that stick so far up his ass?_

“Thank you, Mr. Malone.” Don chose the chair on the left, tipping it back on two legs, rocking and
squeaking…rocking and squeaking…rocking and squeaking… “We appreciate you taking the time
on such short notice to help us in this investigation.”

“Frankly, that is what has me a little puzzled, since my client has been incarcerated for the past
several months -”

“It’s been four months,” the twig spoke for the first time, the words mumbled at the floor. “Not
several, four fuckin’ months.”

“We just need him to identify some people, that’s all. Look at a few photographs.” _Need this puke to
tell us just what the fuck is happening out there and why._ “Give us a little background.” Standing
only half concealed by thin vertical shadows, Ennis presented the first one - a bleached out head shot
from the morgue – right under Newsome’s nose. “You know this guy?”
In the dim light, LD's eyes disappeared into the pits dug Riker's deep. "Randy. Randy Miller. At least I think that's his last name." Yellowed teeth chewed on a piece of skin flapping off his bottom lip. "But, he don't look so good." Hands laundry duty raw pushed the picture back. "He sick or somethin'?"

"No, he's dead. How about this guy?" Ennis snapped the next Polaroid on the metal table. "You know him?"

LD squinted, deepening the lines that had no business on a nineteen year old face. "Sure, this here's Adam. Don't know his last name. He dead too?"

"Yes."

"Whoa." Nubby fingers pushed stringy hair off sallow skin, the fading bruise losing its hiding place. "Damn. Both those guys are - How? Why?"

"That's what I was hoping you could tell me."

"Oh, NO! Nononononono!" The metal chair screeched across the concrete floor, LD bolting away from the table until the handcuff lead went taut. "Didn't have nothin' t' do with that! They was alive when - been in this fuckin' place - not me! NOT ME!"

"We know that, Newsome! Calm down!" The last picture - the frat party one from Miller's apartment - slid to the other side. "That's Randy and Adam there and there," a tap to the dead, "the other guys are...?"

Trust, a commodity not available at Riker's, kept Newsome's wrists steel gouged as he warily leaned in to answer the cop's question. "One's Jeff, a pissant fucker with a dirty mouth. The other's Hunnie."

"Hunnie?"

"Mr. K's son. Why you askin' 'bout him?"

"Yes, Sergeant, I was wonderin' that myself." With a smooth glide of one foot, Malone pulled his client back to the table, back to his side, never breaking eye contact with the two police officers facing him. "Since I don't recall any a these names bein' a part a the investigation that railroaded my client."

Ennis let that train go by, answered only by the grinding of his molars. "You saw all four of these guys together?"

"Yeah, lots a times."

"Sergeant, I must insist you tell me -"

"Where?"

"Up in Hunnie's room mostly, playing video games. His right next to mine, blastin' GTA: San Andreas so loud kept me awake all the fuckin' time." He picked at a knuckle, ripping away what was too new to be called a scab, watching the blood pool red. "They'd come down t' the store, too, sometimes, but only when Mr. K was gone."

"And why's that?"

Attorney bent close to Bo's ear. "I advise you not t' answer."
"They'd bother the customers, pesterin' 'em, chasing em' down the aisles, thought it was funny. That fucker Jeff did it all the damn time, mostly the women, touchin' n' sayin' things that...well..." Hand to mouth, the knuckle was sucked clean. "Sayin' things that just weren't right."

“But, this guy, this Jeff, didn’t have access the store records, did he? Like order addresses and delivery schedules?” Don leaned into the conversation. “Not like you, am I right?”

“I dunno. Weren’t supposed to.”

“This is the guy?” Ennis snagged the questioning line back, pointing to the last frat boy on the right with a Corona in his hand, smiling a mouth full of crooked teeth, eyes closed behind Coke bottle bottom glasses, arm around dead in the warehouse Adam. “This the guy you’re talking about?”

With a graceful swoop, Malone popped his client’s knuckle free. “He already answered your question, Sergeant.”

“Yeah. Used t’ make fun a me ‘cause I’m from Texas, the way I talk, the fact I didn’t go t’ college.” A rattling laugh coughed out a racking wheeze. “Some big college man, havin’ t’ corner women by the produce. Fuckin’ asshole.”

“LD, I think you’ve said enough.”

Don wandered off the straight and narrow path again. “But, you never saw Jeff bothering women outside the store, following any of them home?”

Not stepping into that, can’t step into that. A kick to the shins to remind his partner about the tight parameters they were stuck in. My tight rope is shaking too much as it is.

“They have jobs? Or was their sole employment video games and sexual harassment?”

“Sergeant, will you please tell me what all this as to do with -”

“Supposed t’ be writin’ some computer program.”

“What kind of program?”

“How the hell should I know, that kinda’ stuff all bullshit to me.”

Don tried to interrupt. “Ennis, we got the ID, maybe it’s time to -”

“But those MIT geniuses couldn’t get the damn thing t’ work no matter how many new parts Mr. K bought.” The flap of chapped skin tongue twirled round…round…round. “Even had a bunch a ’em sent over from Korea.”

“Korea?” What, he couldn’t get what he needed here in New York?

“Yeah, that’s where he’s from.” The eye roll said ‘stupid ass cop.’

“Just computer parts from Korea, or did Mr. Kwon import other things?”

Randall Malone tried to interrupt. “Is this actually relevant to -”

“Sure, I guess.”

And Ennis ignored them both.
“What other things?”

“Just stuff.” Little flakes were bothered out of a scratch in the table, gun metal gray and rust. “Mugs and picture frames and bumper stickers. Ya’ know, cheap tourist shit.”

_OK, wasn’t really expecting this to come up, but travel through any opening they give you. _Cheap tourist shit,” an evidence bag pulled from his pocket dropped in front of Newsome, “like this?”_ 

Don wasn’t pleased. “Ennis, you can’t -” 

“Don’t worry, evidence chain’s still unbroken. So, Newsome, what about it?” 

Randall wasn’t pleased. “I really must protest to this line of -” 

“One of Mr. K’s special orders.” Held out between shadows, LD watched the bracelet tumble, jumble, turning the bag over and over, corner to corner. “Where’d you get this?” 

And Ennis ignored them both. 

“Adrian Lockhart.”

“Asshole Jeff’s skuzzy uncle? Figures. He used to steal stuff off the shelves all the time. Bet Hunnie never knew ‘about this, though. Would’ve got him beat up like that homeless guy.”

“What homeless guy?” The left turn in the conversation screeched by on two wheels. 

“Used t’ live in the alley ‘cross from the store. Real nice guy, though he was all kinds a crazy. Messed up in the war, I think.”

“And Hunnie beat him up?”

“Nah, Randy. Found out he had jacked one of these -” the charms shook in the plastic “- right out of the shipping crate. Grabbed a bat and went over and beat the shit out of the poor bastard.”

“You never reported this?”

“After what they did t’ my room for just tellin’ Mr. K ‘bout them liftin’ things off the store shelves?” LD went back to his knuckle, pulling at the jagged skin. “No fuckin’ way! Hunnie pissed on my bed! Had to stay at the bus station!”

Don forgot about sticking just to the Miller case again. “How do you know it was Mr. Kwon’s son?”

Ennis yanked it right back. “You witnessed a man brutally beaten and did nothing?”

“LD, don’t you dare answer that!”

“Damn straight, I did nothin’! They was always watchin’! That’s what they told me! Always watchin’. N’ I sure as hell wasn’t gonna end up like Jesse with my -”

“Wait a minute.” Ennis was up and in Newsome’s face before the cell rang with tipped over metal chair. “Did you say Jesse?” 

Don’s chair made it a duet. “Unsubstantiated accusations will not help you, Newsome.”

“That’s it!” Figuratively and literally, the defense stepped between client and question. “This interview is -"
“JESUS CHRIST! WILL YOU JUST SHUT THE FUCK UP!”

The pause was twelve months pregnant.

“No, LD, there’s no reason t’ get angry here.” The voice would have been more convincing if it hadn’t been curdling with animosity. “I’m just lookin’ out for what’s best for you, that’s all.”

“What’s best? Fuck.” The splat of spit on concrete. “The only reason I’m still in here is ‘cause mama spent my bail money hirin’ you.”

The hand, also meant to placate, would have been more soothing if it hadn’t been curled into a claw.

“She only wanted to give you -”

“N’ fuckin’ stop touchin’ me!” A savage jerk away rattled the chains all the way to his ankles. “Dumped that first guy ‘cause he was queer, but you’re the one always touchin’ me!”

Oh, shit. “Let’s get back to Miller.”

Don was curious. “Hold on, this guy’s your second lawyer?”

“Yeah, handsy worthless sack of shit, lucky me.”

Randall was pissed. “I resent the implications, Mr. Newsome. I am a well-respected attorney who -”

“N’ maybe if I had talked t’ the cops ‘bout all this before like that fag PD wanted, I’d been outta here months ago.”

And Ennis had nowhere to hide.

While posed to the prisoner - “Who was your court appointed attorney again?” - Don’s question bore a hole right into his partner.

Oh, fuck. He knows. “Don, I -”

“The original attorney assigned to LD from the public defender’s office was…” Malone consulted his files as if he needed to be reminded of the name that was hanging right there in the room like a Las Vegas Strip sign chasing the letters in bright pink. “…John Twist, Junior.”

“Yeah, that’s him. Twist. Only he told me t’ call him Jack.”

“Jack, the defense attorney.”

So, this is what it feels like to be kicked in the balls by fate. “Don, I -”

“You’re right, this interview is over. Officer Warrington! Officer Warrington!” The name shouted even before Don reached the cell door, “Officer Warrington!” and continued until Silo and Barn were running down the hall.

“What…what’s goin’ on here?”

“Nothing, Mr. Malone.” Nothing except a six year partnership coming to an end. A clumsy swipe sent the photographs and evidence into a disorganized pile in Ennis’s arms. “Thank you for your time.” A grab at his coat dragged the chair out into the hall. “If we have any more questions, we’ll call. Don!”

“That’s it? Ain’t we gonna talk deals?”
“Don! Don!”  *Shitshitshitshitshitfuck!*  “DON!”

Furious storm-off impeded by the locked door, Don refused to even look at his partner as they waited for the keys to catch up.

“Let me explain why -”

“Oh, you’re going to fucking explain, alright. Outside.”

Any return trip never seems to take as long as the arrival, but for Ennis, the trek back through all the bars and check points, where he returned his pass and retrieved his weapon, the long cheerless hallway being stared at by long dead wardens, dour expressions caught perfectly in oils and gilded to ridiculous by tacky gold frames, the push through the grease streaked front doors, the shiver out to the parking lot and their cars constituted both a lifetime of worry over what awaited him, and a blink as he struggled to find the right words to express his heart.

_Fuck, I was right! Thought fate was just gnawing on my ass for being a horny, selfish bastard for… usually think all this is just bullshit, but the universe or karma or The Force… even if I had walked away, if he had turned me down, even if nothing had happened, we would have been bitched slapped back into…I mean, look - Newsome. Miller, Jesse, even Don’s molester. Somehow, some way, some time, Jack and me were going to be. Not going anywhere without each other._

"Don, will you please let me explain!?"

_Because I understand now. It’s Jack. It’s always Jack. It’s always going to be Jack. Everything leads to Jack. My everything leads to Jack. My everything IS Jack._

“I should borrow Miller’s bat and beat the shit out of you, Del Mar!” A harsh shove bounced him into Don’s Chevy Traverse. “You jeopardized our case so you could embrace your inner cocksucker?” Anger shot out billowy white. “And for that lawyer? For that bastard who weaseled a dismissal for the child molester? What the _FUCK _were you thinking?”

The parking lot was almost a blank slate, with a smattering of cars all tinged rock salt white on the bottom, the night shift’s ride home in the morning. Coming from the east, a frozen slap of Hudson river raced across the tarmac, nothing to stop its dominion until spring. The two men argued their future in starlit solitude.

“I dropped the case, didn’t I?” Ennis stayed put, even though his butt was flash freezing to the frigid metal, allowing his partner to vent righteous fury over his betrayal. “Dropped it immediately!”

“How immediately?”

“Started on the Friday after he was arrested, and talked to Cap the very next day.”

“But, you still stuck it WHEN it didn’t belong there!”

“I know! I know!” _And I do it again, if it means my Jack!_

“And then you go back in there, and sat down at the table with – Fuck!” Another shove, grunt inducing, Ennis pinned to the hatchback. "You involved me in this now. You know that, don’t you?"

This time it was his gut that got kicked. “Yeah, I know.”

“Our jobs, our careers, our pensions, our – MY family!”
“How was I supposed to know that the cases would collide?” A holding down hands shake off, a step forward, Ennis not willing to take on all of destiny’s guilt. “How was I supposed to -”

“Why, Ennis?” A question mourning the loss of trust. “Just tell me why.”

A third evidence bag emerged from the back pocket of his jeans. “This.” The plastic fluttered in the wind as he held it out towards his partner. “I’d risk it all, everything, for this.”

“Like anything’s worth criminal ethics charges -” A quick snatch, the thin bag tilted to catch the dull street light’s attention. “Oh, shit. Where’d you get this?”

“Aguirre found it in Miller’s pocket.” Shoulder to shoulder, the partners watched the black X disappear and return in the glare off the wind teased bag. “And Jesse, that beaten up homeless guy?”

“Yes?”

"Jack's client, too."

“Goddamn!” Don walked away, clumps of petrified week old snow spraying out from his savage kicks. “How much shit can - goddamn!”

“So, now you see? Now you understand why? I had to know exactly what, and who, I’m dealing with here. Had to know, so I can protect him. Had to know so…” The tears clung close to burn and blur, but his voice broke with the silent sob of imagined sorrow. *He dies, I die.* “I…can’t…just can’t…lose him, Don.”

“This Jack, the defense attorney, must be something fucking special.”

“That’s what he’s constantly telling me.”

“OK, then I - we won’t let that happen.”

Deal done. Argument over. Forgive and forget checked off the To-Do list. No other whys, wherefores or thank you’s necessary between partners, between friends.

*I owe him, owe him big time.* “Thought I’d cross reference all three cases, see what red flags, and we go from there.”

“But, not tonight, not right now.” A brief, yet intense single arm hug was his signal of solid support, a gushy, showy, flagrant deeply held emotional display for the usually stoic police officer. "Now I’m going home. Home to the garbage disposal, home to my kids, home to Miss Naughty who better be waiting with her black lace teddy.”

*Ah, he went there.* “And Ass Bandit is waiting, too. Sans black lace.” *Sans everything, I hope.*

“Ass Bandit?” He hesitated with the key in the lock. “Really?”

“Only superhero I truly believe in. But, first, I’ve got some shopping to do.”

“Now? Why?”

Ennis tucked the plastic protected business card in his pocket, watching a black BMW enter the parking lot. “I’ve got a birthday present to buy.”
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

Please accept my humble apology for the huge gap between chapter postings. Many compelling reasons for my AO3 absence, but none really worth bothering you with, gentle readers. Just know that, from here, chapters will be posted on time and on schedule, every other week until story's end.

Thank you for your patience and continued support.

B

Tainted Evidence

Twenty-Nine

It had started amicably enough.

“Both waiting up, my ass.”

With iPod attached, wire-rimmed reading glasses at half-mast, Jack was ‘working’ diligently amidst bed pillows – six in all, varying in size and fluffability, with duvet, electric blanket and flannel sheets – a mixed up, turned about, jumbled together fruit basket of linens - and a stuffed lumpy childhood ‘I will NOT throw him out!’ memento – The Thing looking less than fantastic, the conscientious legal advocate for society’s voiceless composing an opening statement through closed eyes, each easy breath scrunching the pen awkwardly wedged between cast and fingers across the yellow legal pad propped on his stomach.

“He’s…he’s…” Ennis' heart skipped about ten beats. “…goddamn!.”

“In an open mouthed, slack jawed, nasal snoring kind of way.”

One knee on the bed, he leaned in, pulling out an earbud, Panic at the Disco blaring into their pillows. “Hey, Jack…Jack.” Hair mussed across a clammy forehead was soothed away, Ennis bending in closer. “Hey, baby, wake up.” Lips brushed that open mouth, tongue tasting dreams. “Jack…Jack…”
“En...?” A nose away, confused blue fluttered. “Wha...where...you...shit.”

But, somehow this –

“I missed you, Ennis. Bed’s too lonely without you. Missed this -” Another kiss, but with more tongue. “Missed this -” A prompted hand strategically placed to X-Men pjs, Jack’s throaty yummy sound humming. “Mmmmmmissed this -” A hip roll connected ass crack to a growing very interested cock. “But, I missed this -” Jack’s palm warmed Ennis’ heart. “- most of all.”

“That holds you close where ever I go.” He met Jack half way, the heat created in that kiss melting one into the other’s arms.

- became this –

“Fuck you, Del Mar!”

“You’re a fucking asshole, you know that, Jack?”

- all because Ennis crossed the line, while Jack did stand-up.

Maybe it was Jack’s broken hand –

“Still fucking hurts.”

“Take your pain medication, then.”

“Damn pills don’t do shit.”

- or the mention of an unpleasant and guilt laced subject –

“Not only your nuts she wants now. Alma’s training for the Twenty-Sixteen Olympic Bocce Ball team.”

“I know. Got the divorce papers today.”

“Oh, and I had the pleasure of meeting that plain piece of copy paper she’s dating.”

“Monroe? Asshole.”

“Junior seemed to like him, though.”

“Fucking asshole.”

- but with their last nerve frayed to ribbons, that straw’s better days gone by, all the had it up to here's traveling way beyond, begat a nuclear meltdown not seen since Chernobyl or when the All You Can Eat buffet at Red Lobster ran out of crab legs.

“Herman had to swerve out of the dickhead’s way.”

“Herman?”

“Herman Duncan. You remember, the cabbie that drove us Thanksgiving night.”

“Only one memory of that night worth keeping, Jack.”

“Yeah, Mr. Grabby Hands was born.”
“Do I want to know?”

“Probably not.”

“That’s what scares me.” A quick, yet full force kiss, then Ennis had angled off the bed, anxious to strip away the cop to get to the horny man in love underneath. “So, did you get the plate number? I could run it, charge the jerk with reckless driving.”

“Too busy playing the pinball.” A ruch around, Jack spread out on his stomach, head at the foot of the bed, the closer to an undressing Ennis the better. “Too busy dripping slush the first time, too.”

“Wait. The same car? Twice in one night?”

“Fucking weird, I know.” With the promised land still in front of him, Jack’s lazy double thigh brush made possible. A little clumsy on the left, though. “And with that hallway sign post up ahead incident earlier.”

“What hallway incident?”

“Fucking weirder.” Right thigh brushing hand went out of bounds on the north side of the playing field, but the referee didn’t call the penalty, pushing into the touch instead. “But, it’s perfectly understandable considering the view.”

“Translate, please.”

“Some guy just told me he’s always watching – OW!” The game was called on account of abrupt interference. “Ennis! Watch the hand!”

“Who? Who said that to you?”

“You tell me.” Set free from the death grip, the broken hand and its owner moved away to sulk. “Probably one of your fellow brothers in poly-cotton blue. It happened outside the squad room when I was waiting for you.”

“What did he look like? Describe him.”

“He walked by so fast, I -”

Knees to Oriental rug, Ennis' face hovered over up upside down Jack’s. “Just try.”

“OK, but I only got a fifteen, twenty second look at my fan.” Eyes closed, memory skipped back to Chapter Ten: The Precinct Hallway. “He came out of the stairwell, I guess. Nondescript clothes – jeans, sweat shirt, denim jacket. Young, twenty-three, twenty-five tops. Five-ten, five-eleven, maybe. Brown hair, brown eyes set too far apart, needs to shave, two red marks on either side of his nose. No scars, no birthmarks, but in serious need of cosmetic orthodontia.” He blinked up at Ennis. “That’s it.”

“You got all that in fifteen seconds?”

“I notice men. Gay, remember?”

“You just described – he was - in the – right there where – and I didn’t – shit!” Ennis pushed up with a grunt. “Why didn’t you tell me about this there at the Precinct?”

“Well, your tour of the custodial facilities of the Eighty-First was somewhat of a distraction.”
“And after that fucking amazing distraction?” Weapon, handcuffs and shield tucked away in an empty underwear drawer. “In the car? At the restaurant? Christ, Jack, you waited six hours to -”

“I tried! When the girls went to the restroom, but you -” Jack sighed to the ceiling, what’s the point fatigue out voting the desire to prove his innocence. “Never mind. I told you now. Do with it what you will.”

And what Ennis did with it resulted in sarcasm –

“Pray tell, Nostradamus,” Jack wobbling to a middle of the bed sit, the move not indicative of his usual fluid style hampered as it was by body position, broken hand and childhood memento. Nonetheless, he was up and facing that cryptic remark. “Why do you see my court schedule as clear in the coming days?”

One…two boots clumped to the floor. “Isn’t it obvious?”

“Not as obvious as Chase Crawford’s orientation, no.”

No need, really, for specifics here, no need to overload right now with messy details and facts, just cover the basics – Jack was a target - and cover up knowledge of Jesse, colliding cases and lie’s omission. “No clients, no cases, no court.”

- snide remarks –

“Two incidents with the same vehicle.” Shirt, unbuttoning task aborted as wasted energy, pulled off, tossed at the hamper forgotten and, if Ennis had been playing horseshoes, he would have scored two points. “The encounter in the hallway -”

“An ominous trend does not make.”

“OK, what about -” It was time to play his trump card. The evidence bag traveled from back pocket to bed in a graceful arc. “- this.”

Jack’s response - the most hurtful word in the English language. “So?”

“So? So?” Ennis sputtered around the room, surprised, nonplussed, flabbergasted, poleaxed, taken aback, thrown for a loop, knocked down flat by Jack’s cavalier attitude over what he deemed the crux of their conversation. “Don’t you know what the FUCK that means?”

“Shit, Ennis, I’m an attorney. Even Shakespeare sent me a death threat.”

“Shake…what does he…JACK!”

Reading glasses reflected the black X. “But, this is actually more Thomas Kyd.”

Now Ennis was moving to his miffed, incensed, infuriated place. “What!”?

“And rather hackneyed.” Jack skipped it like a stone across a pond, the bag bumping once…twice…three times to finally fall to the floor. “What self-respecting hitman relies on seventies cop show schtick?”

Brute force reality time. “The kind that taps his marks with two bullets through the eyes!”

“Oh, a NCIS plot twist!”

- and Webster’s definition of boorish.
“Goddamnit, Jack! This is fucking serious!”

“NO!” Zuckerman slammed on top of Kunibayshi, Whitfield shoved into Santorelli, Jack cleaning his work files off the bed, an emphatic statement about Ennis’ dismissive attitude over what he deemed the crux of this conversation. “Because some stiff who possessed no imagination beyond his TV Guide had my business card in his pocket is an asinine reason to expect me to recuse myself from my professional obligations!”

“But, you could be kill -”

“You are in that situation every day!”

“That’s my job!”

“Well, give the man a round of applause! He finally gets the point!”

By this time, even though both men were still talking…well, shouting –

“What’s your fucking problem?”

“My problem is that everything I say becomes a fucking joke with you!”

“Say something not dripping with drama queen angst and I will attempt to contain myself!”

- the real listening had ceased all the way back at Herman.

When Ennis said, “Stop acting fucking ridiculous!” Jack heard, “Blood sucking parasite!”

When Jack said, “Only ridiculous if juxtaposed against your dogma!” Ennis heard, “Stupid cop!”

Pride deafening, truthful subtext was utterly pummeled in the death match struggle of two male egos.

Jack’s scream of, “You think I’m some kind of nelly bottom who can’t protect myself!” was actually his insecurities pleading, “I want you to be proud of me!”

Ennis’ bellow of, “Oh, yeah! Ass Bandit, keeping the world safe from elevators!” was in reality his fear of loss begging, “Your life is more precious to me than my own!”

“Fuck you, Del Mar!”

“You’re an asshole, Twist!”

No hidden meaning in there, though.

“I’m out of here!”

“Don’t you fucking walk away from me!”

Ennis chased Jack to the kitchen, the change of venue not having much of an impact on their moods.

“What the hell is this?”

In a line across the counter – champagne, cake box, plastic bag – an impromptu, late night birthday party.

“Nothing. Just forget it.”
Of course, Jack didn’t. “It looks like a cigar butt.” Water magnified blue stared through the plastic. “That is the ugliest fucking fish I’ve ever seen.”

“You’re welcome.”

“And this?” Swimming dirt ball sloshed down sideways in favor of the square, white box, Jack thumbing open the lid. “Happy seventh, Jonathan?”

“When we were apart, I missed your birthday, shithead.”

“We’re celebrating Nineteen-Eighty?”

“You try and find a bakery open at -”

SPLAT!

Red gelled JO slid down the side of Ennis' face.

“Here’s what I think about your -”

SPLAT!

Red gelled that was once JO slid down Jack’s cheek.

“You’re wel -” A slow lick of tongue caught icing before it reached chin and Ennis' attention. He had to see that again.

SPLAT!

Red gelled NO landed on Jack’s other cheek. A slow lick of tongue dragged the confection in and Ennis around the counter. He had to taste that.

SPLAT!

Red gelled THAN hit Jack’s shoulder. A slow lick of tongue drew a wet line, the flavor of icing and skin bursting in Ennis' mouth. He definitely had to taste that again.

Two fingers loaded with white icing and red gelled HAP reared back…

Cake salvo intercepted by the slow lick of tongue wound around fingers, the dessert sucked clean in Jack’s mouth.

“I’m still pissed as hell at you, Ennis.”

“And you’re still an asshole, Jack.”

There, that was settled. Still angry, still hurt, still nothing resolved or agreed upon – except their current mutual dislike - but it was time to move on to more important subjects, like Ennis standing only in jeans, his skin brushing close. Like Jack standing bare-chested, his scent overwhelmingly near. Like how their bodies moved and clicked together without conscious thought or words, like how their heartbeats were in rhythm, their breathing in sync, like how they could see themselves reflected out from the other’s soul. But, most important - like how store bought birthday cake would taste on certain other body parts.

“My turn to sample some -”
“No.” A firm grip to the back of his neck stopped Jack short of cake. “I’m still hungry.”

“Oh…fuck.”

Held tight and Jonathan smeared, Ennis' canvas trembled, broad brushstrokes spreading the icing – ear and mouth, throat and collar bone – Jack moaning when a tongue followed the same path, swirling patterns of lust in white.

“Ennis!”

“This is…the best…best damn…cake…” The culinary review of Manny’s Dainty Delectables and Pool Parlor scorched the long line of tendon jutting out, Jack’s head forced to the side, clear access to the vulnerable spot offered and taken. “…I’ve ever…fucking tasted.”

Cigar Butt had a front row bag to the mess that would be a crumby, crusty, sticky bitch to clean up in the morning. So recently arrived, he knew nothing about his new roommates except they were loud, had no table manners and were inordinately fond of birthday cake. And each other.

“Ennis, it’s my cake. When do I get to taste of -”

Right then apparently, Ennis grazing up over jaw right into Jack’s mouth, plunging in a goopy sweet tongue, lips sealing the kiss watertight, jaws moving and flexing, pushing inwards, shoving Jack against the counter.

“Mmmmm mmmm mmmm!” Jack floundered until he found an anchor in broad shoulders. “Mmmm mm mmmmmmm!”

“Well, what do you think?” Ennis licked the combination of spit and icing off, Jack’s tongue more than eager to help in any way possible.

“It better be trans-fat and GMO free.”

Behind them and still within easy reach, the cake, top bare down to the first layer and tilting off the bottom one, looked rode hard and put up wet, but the sides were still white, around the bottom rainbowy rosettes, and after another uvula swinging kiss – Jack released swaying woozy and senseless – Ennis picked two, lemon for the left, periwinkle for the right - pinching the pure sugar petals onto hard nipples, yellow and blue coated fingers circling and twirling, nubs hitching with Jack’s anticipatory gasps.

“Was really hoping for a spirited game of pin my tail on – Ennis!”

View blocked now by a straining, arching back, Cigar Butt listened to the moans, hisses and other sounds of intense pleasure, wondering if it would always be like this – all hours of the night, in bizarre places, noisy, messy and rough. If so, he would need a simulated mountain with three openings, two cubby holes adorned with a smattered of snow fortress to hide out in. And some ear plugs.

“Oh, god…oh, god…oh, god…oh, god!”

Jack’s simple repetitive response to the nipple suck-lick-nibble routine, the nub stiff and slimy, flicking and rolling in Ennis' mouth.

“Oh, god…oh, god…oh, god…oh – FUCK!”

A bite. An honest to god, certified, ain’t no doubt about it teeth into flesh bite. Fingers lousy with
icing snaked through sweaty curls, pressing down, body bowing up, ‘cause he just had to feel that again.

“Oh, god…oh, god…oh, god…oh – FUCK!”

Left one bore teeth marks, too.

“Shiiiiiiiiiiit!”

Hands not idle by any means while he bent down, face buried in hair, breathing in sugar, mouth closed around a nipple, tongue twirling and lapping, the sounds of Jack’s rumbling in his ear. No, they were quite busy, slipping the drawstring knot, easing the gathered flannel, tugging on the unnecessary fabric until it fell down and Jack’s cock bounced out free - hard, wet and right into a ready to grope hand.

“Oh, god…damn…oh, god…damn…oh, god…damn…oh – FUCK!”

The new and improved routine of licks, strokes and bites.

“Ennis…I…Ennis…want…taste…”

Now, Jack wasn’t a lazy bum either, right hand fingers going to town on Levi's 501s, buttons wrenched free with only a small amount of discomfort –

“OW! Jack!”

“Sorry.”

- for the occupant, damp denim pushed open as far as possible, even taking the bite of zipper on the back when it plunged into the dark, rewarded for its bravery with a palm full of Ennis hard-on.

“Want…to…taste…this.”

Exposing everything, however, was beyond the limited scope of the plucky right hand, and if Jack’s desire to actually eat something – a tantalizing combination of butter cream, double fudge and Ennis – his nipples would be forced to sacrifice their lavished attention and his cock turned out to the cold.

“Oh, god…damn…oh, god…damn…”

“Oh, god…damn…oh, god…damn…”

Real soon now.

“Oh, god…damn…oh, god…damn…”

In just a second.

“Oh, god…damn…oh – FUCK!”

He just wanted one more for the road.

“My turn!” Reaching back, knocking the champagne bottle off the counter, jostling the plastic bag – which the newest addition to the family did not appreciate in the least – Jack dug down deep into the white square, coming up with a handful and presented it and his lascivious smile to Ennis. “Jeans off! NOW!”
Truly amazing, just how fast those rowdy new roommates of his could move when properly motivated. Cigar Butt’s perfect view restored in an instant – one against the far cabinets, white knuckling the porcelain sink while the other, on his knees, swallowed him whole, icing, cake and all, in one mouth stretching gulp. He thanked his lucky deep sea diver that birthdays come but once a year.

“Oh, shit, shit, shit – Jack!”

He couldn’t look, couldn’t look down to see it happening, look down to see his dick disappearing… appearing…disappearing…appearing…disappearing inside of Jack’s mouth. It would have been too much, would have sent him spurting right down the back of Jack’s throat that was currently swallowing –

“Fuck – Jack – fuck!” - and right into a gut wrenching, ball emptying orgasm. The sensations flooding up from this connection were piercing his determination to last all on their own – wet heat friction coaxing, tongue whips beguiling, ball fondling enticing, breaths puffed through his pubes sweet talking him into screaming “JACK!” to the kitchen light fixture, pounding out his release, Jack taking everything. Add in the visual stimulus of Jack’s blow job, blue winking up at him, and Ennis knew he wouldn’t last a nanosecond more. Eyes squinched shut, tight and determined, bringing out the floating stars, clinging to his sanity, riding out the paradise of Jack’s mouth for one more in…one more out…one more in…one more out…

“Jack – goddamn…you…you…”

…one more in…one more out…one more in…one more –

“FUCK! Jack, what are you – FUCK!”

The answer was simple, Cigar Butt recognized the tune the naked one on his knees was humming right away. Guess the guy not so much standing as sprawling, and sweating, and cursing and flushed wasn’t really in the mood to listen.

“Well, since you didn’t seem inclined…” flat tongue up the side, Jack kissed his way back down and around and under, tongue and lips teasing the wiry hairs. “I need to do it myself.” Deep throating, Jack started the traditional song, and Ennis’ cock from the top.

“God - Jack – don’t – you – fuck!”

Now, he was looking, watching the into Jack slip-slide, feeling his cock slip-slide into Jack, hearing his cock slip-slurp into Jack, slip-sliding to the tune of Happy Birthday.

“Shit…Jack…I’m…I’m…”

But, he didn’t want to, not here, not here in the kitchen, not here in Jack’s mouth.

“No, Jack, stop!”

“Shit, Ennis! I was on the last stanza!”

“You want Happy Birthday? OK, then…”

White knuckles from sink to kneeling shoulders, Ennis snatched Jack up, forcing him to walk, a clumsy, klutzy, bumping, banging backwards march of grappling limbs, battling mouths and tangling
dicks. Off sink into to fridge – Ennis' arm clearing the magnets, pizza coupons spilling across the floor. Fridge to counter –Jack’s elbow plowing into what was left of the cake, white box falling to tile with a plop. Counter to table, Ennis' thigh catching the edge, trench coat, message bag, cell phone tipping off and away. Table to wall – Jack’s ass colliding with the plaster, knocking teeth, noses and chins, finally separating them.

“Give it to me.” Jack teased his lips to Ennis'. “Give me what I want.”

“Happy Birthday to you, happy birthday to you...” The kiss was a soft lingering one, Ennis taking his own sweet time on those blow job swollen lips, holding Jack to the wall – sweat pinning sticky – his steady strokes keeping him a guttural cry away from orgasm. “Happy Birthday, my love...” He used Jack's sighs to breathe, tongue forcing the words of his serenade deep. “Now, I'm going to fuck you.”

Hand full of Smithsonian caliber ass, Jack smiled. “And many more!”

“Not here. Bed.”

“Call position!”

And that was the last Cigar Butt saw of his raucous roommates until morning. But, even out of sight they had still managed to disturb – the yelling and screaming and shouting and shrieking, the common wall thudding so loud he thought plaster would soon be cracking – his restful floating and staring blankly at the stove anything but. If tonight was indicative of normal from now on, first thing tomorrow, he would demand a sound proof bowl. With shutters.

“God, Ennis...don’t, please! Shit!”

The stuffed behind to guard against metal cushion was fast falling away, Jack atop in a blur, hand latched to brass, exertion dribbling down, splashing against bunched muscles, shaking the whole damn bed.

“Don’t do - that to - me!”

Ennis slurped in and out, hand and fingers digging in, mouth and tongue wrapped around a nipple, spit a steady stream parting hair, molding to contours, teeth holding it in place despite the bumpy ride.

“I want – want – need -”

Knees shoved into arm pits, ass slapping thighs, each impaling bounce smacking his cock to both stomachs, dribbling wet to sticky.

“Please!”

That is until Ennis encircled the root, squeezing tighter and tighter.

“We do - this together, Jack.” Even tighter. “As - one.”

“Fuck you!” He let go of the headboard, stretching up, a long, lean line originating from Ennis' lap. He let go of the headboard to recline back, over taxing legs, a sinuous curve supported by bent for more depth knees. He let go of the headboard, releasing control, a gift to his lover offered, to be taken, to be consumed. “Now, FUCK ME!”

“Jack...Jack...Jack – Jack- JACK!”
Only one bobble, sweaty palm slipping off slick knee, Jack caught quickly, his cock the fulcrum, up and down never faltering, Ennis thrusting, Jack pushing, a teeth-rattling rhythm.

“En-En – Ennis! N-n-n-n-now!”

“Almost…there…” Up off the bed, his ass up off the bed, lifting them both off the bed for more, more, more. “Almost…there…” Cramping and straining and tearing and damaging, Ennis couldn’t stop, couldn’t stop pounding and shoving and driving and embedding Jack, Jack, Jack. “Almost…there…”

He could see it, hear it, smell it, taste it, the blinding light of climax scorching him inside out, Ennis scorching him inside out, inside him, Jack could see him, hear him, smell him, taste him, holding it just out of reach, the blinding light of –

“Almost…there…”

“N-n-n-n-n-ow!”

Hands occupied, hands full, hands keeping his lover, his life safe, “Almost…there…” none could be spared to swipe the salt stinging, blurring, obscuring, “Almost…there…” but he had to look, he had to watch, had to see his Jack, his Jack, whimpering above him, shrieking around him, giving to him, “Almost…there…”

“Ennis!”

“Jack…Jack…Jack-Jack- JACK!”

Two gazes into one body, one heart, one soul.

“Now – Ennis - ”

“NOW!”

He let go, Jack’s cock free, release screaming up and in, “JAAAAAAAAAAACK!” hips still not satisfied, hips still battering, still pounding, his body moving on its own, moving to explode the ecstasy. He let go, so Jack could, too, pumping out, pouring out, spurting out, “Ennis, oh – oh – oh – fuck, fuck, fuck, FUCK ENNIS!” long streams of milky white, a fountain of semen rushing out all over, coating and inundating, his cries of bliss and emancipation exquisite.

"Oh, shhhhhhhiiiiiiiiittttttttt!

“Fuck…Ennis…”

Strength sapped and sucked dry, Ennis' legs collapsed, taking Jack, both flopping useless on the bed. “Goddamm…”

Nothing for long minutes, nothing but panting, hearts slowly returning to normal, the sounds of two men nearly fucked to death.

“Well…”

“Well…”

"You made a fucking mess, you know."

"A mess that you're cleaning up."
"Like hell I am!"

"My birthday!"

Jack raised his head, a sloppy move, tipsy and off kilter, to gaze up at Ennis, the two of them laying there, spent, dripping, slimy, sticky, tangled, neither having the energy to do more than blink. “Just so you know, I’m not resigning as counsel.”

Ennis needed the help of the pillow stack to hold his head where he could catch of glimpse of Jack on the other end of the bed, a rubbery, loose blob of sticky fucked out man. “Yes, you are.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes.”

“No.”

Oh, goody, argument’s coitus intermission apparently over, though the second act was remarkably less animated than the first, used dishragged as the characters were.

“Ennis, while I appreciate your concern, my professional integrity will not be sacrificed on the altar of your paranoia.”

“You’re committed to your job, I get it, but is your integrity bullet proof, ‘cause that’s what you’re gonna need if -”

“What I need is less trivialization of my zealous defense obligations and more -”

“No, a wake-up call, that’s what you need, a swift kick to the ass, to the very real possibility that someone wants you -”

“Swift or otherwise, a kick to your insufferably superior one would result in a concussion since head is so far up there.”

“Like to see you try.”

“More than happy to oblige.”

“Come here then, dickhead.” A half-hearted wave.

“No, you come here, asswipe.” A lackluster grab.

“Middle?”

“Race you.”

Sunning walruses moved faster, Ennis utilizing the inch-by-inch scoot, while Jack just rolled gathering moss on the way, battleground reached eventually.

“OK, I’m here.”

“Yeah, me, too.”

Nose to nose, the combatants faced off, shoulders touching, legs brushing, hips, that a few scant moments ago had pounded relentlessly, one upon the other, the crescendo reverberating still though bewitching hour’s thrill.
“And, now?”

“Now what?”

Now the schooling, the take down, those afore twice threatened thrashings, both guaranteed to bend attitude and break will on the rocks of self-righteous rigidity, thus bestowing upon the champion the testosterone encrusted title of Supreme Stupidly Stubborn, would commence at last!

“Christ, I’m tired.”

“Fucking exhausted.”

Or maybe not.

“It sucks when we fight.”

“It does incite fabulous make-up sex, however.”

“We have fabulous sex without all the arguing.”

“That we do, Ennis, that we do.”

Pillows rearranged in a more comfortable configuration, linen fruit basket dragged from the crumpled pile where sex had shoved it, their smack in the middle, makeshift cocoon snuggling them both secure.

“I’m sorry, Jack,” the apology murmured next to black hair, “You’re right, I am an arrogant asshole.”

“Not more chagrined than I,” the admission of guilt breezed by a warm neck, “says the patronizing prick.”

“Will you at least think about it, taking some time off, cutting your work load? The idea of you, out there, unprotected, I can’t –”

“Prepared to offer a conciliatory compromise, an equitable consideration of specific performance.”

“And in the Jack’s English that means…?”

“Caseload will remain crippling, however, I will advise you daily of my schedule, where and when.”

“And you’ll call me if anything changes?”

“Immediately, if not sooner.”

A moment to weigh pros against cons. “OK, deal.”

A New York minute to close negotiations. “OK, done.”

Childish tantrums defeated, male posturing deflated, huge chasm bridged by a bargain of empathy, common sense, and sleep’s incessant tug.

“By the way, thank you. Cake, Cigar Butt, best birthday ever. Way fucking better than my real seventh. Got baseball cards.”

“You hate baseball.”

“Not the uniforms.”
Ennis rolled over, aiming for much desired sleep, Jack following in behind, their spooning inseparable. “I’ll have to dig mine up from the police league for you.”

“With you wearing it,” one last yawn, one last kiss, “I promise a grand slam.”

Equilibrium realigned, now peace for relationship, and quiet for neighbors and newest roommate could gratefully be restored, this night of extreme drawing to a close.

And what of love?

"Adore you, Counselor."

"Worship you, Constable."

Yeah, like there was ever any doubt about that last one there.
“I fucked up, Atticus. Big time.”

That wasn’t his name, but the pigeon took the peanut anyway.

“Or maybe I should be talking to you.”

The light dusting of this morning’s early snow yet to melt on the pumpkin breeches, however, did not lend an air of authority.

“Yeah, yeah. You are not bound to please me with your answers.”

He had come here to think. To weigh his options. To review. To mull. To brood, to sulk, to wallow, surprising the hell out of Herman, instructing a right turn out of Bellevue and not left, the direction of his office.

“Where?”

“I’m sure you’ve heard of the place. It’s in all the travel brochures.”

“Don’t you need to get back? I mean, I’m sure you’ve got -”

“Cab driver as personal assistant to a public defender. What a novel idea!”

“You don’t need to get pissy, Jack. Was just asking.”

He had been fresh out of civility at that moment, that moment two plus hours ago, the empty packet crushed and tossed about noon today, right about the time that four months of work lost out to a love sick fantasy.

"What, now?"

Hot breath had murmured in Jack’s ear that yes, this was the time, the place, the perfect opportunity. That yes, it had to be now, no more delays, no more stalling, no more waiting. That yes, it was what he wanted, what he needed, what he just had to have. Here, now, John.

*Talk about lousy timing, talk about inappropriate, talk about showing my –*

"Your Honor!"

That had stopped the courtroom dead.

"Yes, Counselor?" Judge McKinley had glanced down his 'No bullshit in my courtroom!' nose,
through his 'By the book only!' glasses to fix a 'Let's see how fast I can slap contempt charges' stare at the man who had had the temerity, chutzpah and checking account balance to interrupt his proceedings. "You have something to share?"

Jack had stood up - smooth the tie, buttons one...two...three, forward fig leaf - show the cast for sympathy, solid eye contact, proper conciliatory expression, square shoulders, deep breath - GO! - "Begging the court's pardon, but at this time, my client would like to change his plea."

"What, now?"

The prosecution's first witness - left hand hovering just inches away from swearing to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, the ADA - forensic accounting evidence stacked three wide, Exhibits 1 through 93, the jury - schedules rearranged, work and kids and transportation, the court reporter, the bailiff even the gallery were all asking that very same question.

"Yes, your Honor." Slight shrug, hand in pocket, just a touch of chagrin in the smile. "Now."

Ten minutes later, it was all over. Witness excused, jury excused, gallery more or less excused to wander off in search of more exciting examples of jurisprudence, the revised plea of guilty was accepted, and Byron Zuckerman was led away by deputies to await the Probation Office’s report before sentencing, making Judge McKinley available for an earlier tee time, allowing ADA Paul Saunderson, barring any unforeseen traffic snarls between there and Washington Heights, to see his daughter play the Snow Princess in her Montessori school’s non-religious, non-ethnic, non-controversial, non-everything Celebration of Winter! pageant, and leaving Public Defender John Twist, Jr. with no client to defend.

“Call me crazy, call me paranoid, call me Nancy, but McKinley hates me now.”

The Bard called him all three.

“Oh, really?” Standing up, shaking out his limbs, warming up his instrument, Jack closed his eyes, cleared his mind and began the Journey, digging for true motivation, seeking a vivid sense memory, reaching to get inside, to connect, to become, to live in The Moment of Embarrassment. “And I quote – 'I never forget a face or a name, especially of the incompetent. Try counseling your client next time, Mr. Twist, before coming into my court,” a spot-on interpretation of the Honorable Judge James McKinley who still sat in lower court after twenty-three years due to his 'mentoring techniques', an eighteen year old blonde intern elephant in the corner, “instead of wasting the taxpayer's money on foolishness like this.’”

Jack’s audience showed their appreciation for the street Theatre by doing what pigeons are famous for all over the stage.

“FYI, Judge McKinley, I did counsel my client! Counseled the shit out of him for four months! Take the DA’s deal, Byron. The evidence against you is overwhelming, Bryon. The comb-over really doesn’t fool anyone, Byron. But, did he listen to the one educated in the law, the one experienced in the law, the one whose innate sense of style is only enhanced by his gayness?”

Atticus went out on a limb – metaphorically, of course – and said no.

“That’s right! He didn’t! He insisted on going to trial, firmly convinced he would be exonerated of all charges against him – or so said his physic - for the nefarious plot to embezzle from his brother-in-law’s discount tile company – with showrooms in Queens and Newark – lining his pockets with thousands and his studio apartment with TiVo. But, in court today, without so much as a by your leave, Counselor, Bryon Zuckerman did a one eighty -” the physical demonstration of that maneuver
fanned out the trench coat, shooing away the feathered townspeople, “making me look like a complete and utter, though fashionably attired, schmuck. All because he couldn’t put his little Ray-Ray through the pain of a trial. And, who’s Ray-Ray, you ask?” Nobody did, but Jack’s roll was much too powerful to be stopped by that minor detail. “Why, that’d be Rachelle Abromovitz, of the Flat Bush Abromovitz’s, Zuckerman’s Kosher Flooring installation division dispatcher and queen of the Strike it Big women’s Thursday night bowling league. The love of Bryon’s pathetic and deluded life, even though she only knew him from his twice daily and always turned down flat for three years running dinner invitations. Christ!” Final curtain down, Jack plopped on his cold bench insulator – the political section of the NY Times – drained and disgusted. “Brought down by an accountant. Al Capone, I feel your pain.”

And the foul mood created first thing this morning by Byron Zuckerman’s grandstanding for unrequited love at Jack’s expense had hung about like Pig Pen’s cloud, dogging heels and making the smart ass edge of his tongue Ginzu knife sharp.

“Expecting a test, are we, Herman? A pop quiz on my life’s details that really aren’t any of your fucking business?”

“You don’t want to talk? Fine!” Herman’s bristling had jangled the beads of his abacus seat cover. “Just tell me where to exactly and I’ll leave your Highness alone.”

“Doesn’t matter. Corner of Fifth, I guess. That’s closest.” Jack had squirmed to find a comfy spot on the bench seat, mein’s disgruntlement binding in all the wrong places. “I need some air.”

He had needed crisp to cleanse the smell of piss and vomit and blood from his nose. He had needed chilly bite to scour the taste of unwashed bodies from his mouth. He had needed harsh to freeze the hopelessness from finding purchase.

But, most of all, Upstate Jack had needed trees.

Never mind that it was the very end of November and the only green in sight were concrete chained trash cans and gray filmed street signs. Never mind the oak and maple skeletons reached out gnarled and crooked fingers begging mercy from a snow heavy sky. Never mind there were no tucked away nooks and crannies reachable only with scraped knees and scratched knuckles, safe hiding places that smelled of respite, tasted of summer, whispered the laughter of the breeze, where tears were never wrong, dreams never belittled and, season after season, confidences were never betrayed. Central Park slumbered deep, but it was the promise underneath the Winter’s sway that Jack had needed to be near, that reaffirmation of Nature’s cycle, Persephone’s return to the sun, that even in this city that never closes its steel and stone hollow eyes, life would continue to thrive. He needed old friends to help him with the pain of being Jack.

“You want me to wait?” The cab had eased curb hugging close, Herman incurring the wrath and finger from at least two cut in front of drivers. “Don’t mind. Won’t even charge you for the time.”

“No, but, thank you anyway, Herman.” Cramped quarters had required a dashboard kiss to reach between feet for his messenger bag, a cheek to the permanently grime streaked window to bring it around, and a body down in the seat scrunch to slip the strap over his head. “I don’t know how long I’ll need to stay.”

“But, how are you getting -”

“This might be sacrilege, but I could always take another guy’s cab.”

A personal effrontery indeed. “You wouldn’t dare!”
“No, you’re right. They’d probably expect me to tip. Thanks again, Herman.” Jack did tip though, always did, shaking a twenty into the cabbie’s hand. “Sorry about snapping at you before.”

“That’s OK. Something’s bothering you, I can tell. Don’t tell me trouble at home?”

_Not unless blowing through a jumbo box of Trojans in less than a week is trouble._

“Where…huh…oh…god.”

5:15 AM and Thighs had made the perfect frame for the wink, a ‘Good Morning, Jack!’ lip-stretched smile orally replacing that annoying and impersonal alarm clock.

“Ennis, you…shouldn’t…too…”

Too close, too near, his ticket to Paradise – upgraded to First Class when Ennis had sucked up hard – “Oh…god!” - already punched before waking up, and now the train was preparing to leave the station, but that couldn’t happen, not with him doing…not this way, he couldn’t – “I can’t… not…no.”

Spit dribbled down the line between his balls, swirled around by thumb while tongue lapped through the slit, teeth nibbling at the head, blow job refusing to relinquish control, refusing to heed the warning.

“I’m not…I’m about…Ennis, no.”

Jack had shoved away, pulling his orgasm barely on hold body from Ennis’ mouth - “I can’t - can’t - won’t -” - heels digging in, fingers scratching out from under, sheets ripping from their moorings, head, shoulders tipping over the edge in his mad scramble to save his love from danger – “Ennis - not in - not in - your mouth!”

“Shhhh, Jack, I know,” tender kisses and licks up quivering legs - calming, soothing, pacifying. “I know, baby, shhhhh.” Ennis, the early riser in all respects, staved off Jack’s complete bed tumble by grabbing knees, bringing them up and over his shoulders – a few wet kisses there, too - holding Jack secure, keeping Jack safe, positioning Jack right. “I know. Just wanted your taste in my mouth while we did…” A protected, lubricated and erect cock pushed in. “…this.”

“ENNIS!”

Thighs, the backs sweaty against equally slick palms, the only handhold Jack could reach in time, his body had needed only three Ennis thrusts to spasm out release, spurting semen out across his chest - “Fuckfuckfuckfuckingfuck!” – a few drops spritzing nose, chin and cheek.

The other train, the one huffing and puffing and grunting, had followed the first Bullet, barreling out of the station a short time later, Jack watching the reflection of upside-down Ennis fucking him – face squinched, muscles taut, skin glistening, mouth open and calling his name – “Jack…Jack…oh, SHIT! JACK!” – in the bedroom window.

No, domestic troubles were definitely not the reason Jack was sitting on Literary Walk in the late Wednesday afternoon chill, his butt numb an hour ago, seeking advice from Shakespeare, feeding peanuts to Atticus and the white one now dubbed Boo Radley.

“You know, Will,” Jack dispensed his wisdom and peanuts liberally, “In hindsight, we probably should have closed the curtains. Lost two neighbors across the alley. Long drop from that balcony.”

Something about fools and mortals, Jack really didn’t catch it all.
“Excuse me, sir. Do you have the time?”

“Sure, sure, it’s…” If Jack looked really close, up under the mound of blankets, inside the puffy down coat and under the pink hat with ponytail tassels, two bright blue eyes peeked out above a red cold-nipped nose from a stroller so big the clock watching nanny’s employer probably had to pop for a separate parking spot. “Five-twenty-two.”

“Thank you!” The pair rolled away quickly, eight rubber tires crushing through the trodden down snow, towards whatever appointment the infant obviously could not afford to miss.

“My mom wants one of those, you know.” Didn’t look like either the esteemed jurist or the reclusive neighbor were paying much attention now, locked as they were in a heated battle over an empty shell. “Well, she wants me to have one of those. Baby, not nanny.” Cracking open the last handful in the bag, Jack halted the pecking, head-bobbing argument, tossing out peanuts for all, including Gem, Dill and a tomboyish, yet still feminine, Scout. “No, what she really wants is for me to have both.” Little brown flecks of peanut skin all over gray wool gave Jack something to concentrate on, picking his coat clean OCD style, the other stains there nothing could clean. “Though, one is so far from the realm of possibilities as to be Sarah Palin for President ridiculous, so the other’s not happening, even in the turkey baster way.”

I can’t make her Nana Twist, or Gramma Lou in the Vatican approved method, but I do know two wonderful girls that are a grandmother shy.

The memory of Junior’s hug warmed Jack’s neck and heart.

If only she would accept the truth.

“How’s my favorite son?”

“Hardly a resume bullet considering I’m an only child.” Wishing to make excellent scarce from Judge McKinley’s courtroom Jack had excused, beg pardoned and, in the case of one particularly recalcitrant and unyielding pizza delivery guy, bullied his way to the corner of the huddled mass yearning to breath free cramped courthouse elevator, talking into the chrome shiny walls offering the illusion of privacy. “What’s wrong, mom?”

“Now, JJ,” a bit of motherly umbrage, “does there have to be something wrong for me to call? Especially since that fancy schmancy phone of yours doesn’t seem to be able to call here.” With a slap of motherly guilt.

“Well, since it’s -” the paralegal who had received an elbow in the ear when Jack looked at his watch waved off the mouthed apology, but scooted closer to the territorial pizza guy nonetheless. “Twelve-forty-five. I know you’re not missing The Young and the Restless for chit-chat.”

“Well, no.”

“So…”

“Your Aunt Sylvia’s dog died. She’s very upset.”

“Toodles was sixteen, blind, deaf and smelled like rotten eggs. I thought it was already dead.”

“She’s having him stuffed.”

The perfect doorstop. Cramping fingers had forced Jack to spin, moving phone from left hand to right, messenger bag between knees and nosy passengers further away with a ’Do you fucking
“Jarrad’s is closing after thirty-five years. Can you believe that? Now we’re going to have to go all the way to Messena for a Ford dealer.”

“You both drive Chevys.” Knowing it was wrong hadn't helped stop the irritation over his mother’s idle gossip interruption from buzzing along his Bryon Zuckerman shredded nerves. “Please say you have something more substantial to tell me than what passes for breaking news in Lightning Flat.”

“Well…” She paused to search outside of her fifty-seven year old sphere of influence, but didn’t get very far. “Your father can’t seem to shake this year’s cold. Hacking and wheezing all night long. I think it could turn into pneumonia.”

Irritation buzzed into anger right down his spine. “I don’t care.”

“John Zachary Twist, Junior! This is your father we are.”

“Exactly, mom. Just following your Golden Rule.” The elevator dinged, arriving at the courthouse lobby, the huddled mass inside now salmon swimming against the stream of oncoming passengers. “Look, I’ve got to go now, mom.” Messenger bag dangling from his cast hand, Jack had drafted the pizza delivery guy as a way of compensation, squeezing out into a bigger milling crowd, hundreds of voices echoing off the marble. “I promise I’ll call you very soon, but now I’ve -.”

“What about Christmas?” The point of her call finally worked up the courage to speak out.

Not really a subject he had given much thought to, still basking as he was in the testosterone glow of Thanksgiving, that is except for bow placement on Ennis’ life sized, anatomically correct, remarkable animated and alluringly handsome Ass Bandit doll. “Don’t think I’ll be able to make it this –”

“Your uncle will be here.”

That got Jack’s attention. “Really? Uncle Hap?”

“Yes, Harold, Peg and Bobby will be coming in on the twenty-third.”

Now, this was substantial news. “I haven’t seen Uncle Hap in over a year.” News that cleared away the residue left by the mention of his father.

See, very early in life he had figured out God’s sick sense of humor, making him a John, Junior instead of a Hap one. His father’s younger brother, five Twist boys in all, was the free spirit of the family, choosing the Peace Corps over the Army, moving to Boston to marry a Catholic, an equally establishment bucking Margaret Riley, in essence telling everyone in the whole damn family to get bent when his decisions didn’t fall into line with the established way of doing things. The only one in that generation until Bobby came along – two Twist brothers perished serving their country in Vietnam, and the other married a widow unable to have children – Jack had wondered every time his father would use mistake in the same sentence as his name, every time the belt or switch or fist would illustrate his worthiness, or when Uncle Hap would pull him aside at family reunions to talk, to listen to Jack answer questions like “What’s going on at school?”, or “What’s Spiderman up to these days?” or “You’re thinking about being a lawyer?” or “When are you coming out to your parents?” what life would look like if his regular bed time wish of ‘I want Uncle Hap to be my daddy’ had ever been granted.

“OK, I’ll think about it.”

“Oh, good!” The joy in his mother’s voice had spread sunshine across his face. “On Saturday we’ll
have a big dinner here, family, friends, open presents, everything! And then we can go to church to hear the choir’s Christmas concert and -”

“Uh, mom…” The last time Jackie Twist had attended The Good Shepherd Lutheran Church across from the Post Office in downtown, he was a fifteen year old acolyte who walked out, his candles still burning, in the middle of the sermon about God’s modern day retribution, AIDS. “I don’t know about -”

“And then we can come back and have hot cider and egg nog and sing carols and -”

“Mom! Pull out of Martha Stewart gear and listen to me!” Jack’s shout, one among many, had gone unnoticed. “I said I would think about it. Still need to check my calendar, talk to Ennis, see if -”

“Ennis? Who’s Ennis?”

Easy, natural words that sprang off his heart without thinking – “Ennis Del Mar, my partner.” – brought clouds to the Twist’s sky real quick.

“Partner?” A taken way aback pause if there ever was one, male lover name dropping not her son’s usual style. “What kind of partner?”

A joke – “Bet you’re hoping I say squash, aren’t you?” – is not always the best way to deal with a stressful situation.

“John Junior…” A weary sigh as one more line in the asexual abstract Louise Twist had created to represent a life, her baby’s marked with evil life, was forced into focus. “I was hoping we could all be a family for Christmas.”

With the others, Daniel even, a boyfriend/lover/other colorful euphemism mention not worth the energy, angst and obligatory hellfire damnations raining down, just easier to stay silent, easier to obfuscate, easier to remain celibate, at least in his mother’s mind. But, then came Ennis. And, oh, god, he’s worth a whole Twist family reunion of condemnations. “A family with a gay son and his partner?”

“As I’ve told you before, you are always welcome here, JJ.” There was the ‘Now, you listen to me, young man!’ edge that at one time could make him shake in his Red Ball Keds. “This is your home, but -”

“Ennis is my home.”

Then there was someone at the door, whether real as Louise declared – a fellow Altar Guild member and a notorious gossip, or manufactured – an excuse to drop this uncomfortable subject and slip back on her rose colored and ‘My son’s not really gay’ glasses – as Jack figured, the mother and son conversation drifted into pleasantries –

“You take care of yourself, JJ.”

“I will, mom. Don’t you shovel the drive. Make Him do it.”

“Of course, dear. Take your Vitamin C. You can’t afford to get the flu.”

“Every day, bossy.”

“Love you, JJ.”
“Mom, I love you.”

- then ended, not with the needed bang of ‘I accept you,’ but with the usual whimper of ‘Talk to you soon.’

“It’s not like partner introductions would have been on my holiday agenda to begin with. I know the boundaries, I know the rules. I’ve lived looking from across the street long enough to know my place with my parents.” Peanut supply exhausted, Jack kept the troops happy with little bits of uneaten bun, the hot dog twenty minutes ago tossed to a passing Weimaraner taking his owner out for a drag. “But, now that I think about it, it would give me some high class, perverse entertainment to watch Him try to stare down - oh, shit! Ennis! He still thinks I’m at Bellevue.’ A mad scramble through his messenger bag to finish what a cabbie’s concern had distracted.

Cell phone out, and ready to fulfill his part of the bargain struck on his “birthday,” Jack had lingered by the curb, scrolling through the menu to get to his photos. “Now, which dirty stick figures should I send him this -”

“Hey, Jack! Shut the door why dontcha!”

Scraping a line in the sidewalk, Jack had slammed the passenger door closed, leaning in for his apology. “Sorry, Herman. Not all here.”

“So, if it’s not home, then I bet the trouble is work.”

“A sea of troubles, Herman, but I can’t talk about them.”

“Sure, sure, I know. Just trying to help.”

“Thanks again, Herman. Bye.” A friendly slap to the car door, and Jack had pocketed his phone, promised communication forgotten, and walked into Central Park looking for solace, answers, guidance, or maybe just another oar to help him row out the coming storm.

“Hey, mister. You want that?”

“What - this? “The NY Times loitering next to him on the bench. “No, here, sure, you can have it.”

“Thanks, but you can keep the snakes.”

Front page became insulation for her chest, classifieds went to plug a half dollar sized hole in her shoe. Arts she folded away for bedtime reading and Sports was reserved for her cat snuggled in the middle somewhere of the shopping cart.

_Really wish I had a Killian’s to help wash down that big chunk of perspective._

"I'm the quintessential JAP. Except that I'm a gentile. And male. And far too fond on non-beige ceilings."

_Kvetching only about myself when there are others in the really deep end of troubles. Like her, like millions, like Jesse._

“'I’m only trying to help you, Jesse, you know that, don’t you?’

The answer had been the same as Riker's - a blank stare.

At least he was clean. Gray, washed out, sunken in, paper thin and empty, but his hair and nails were kept trimmed, someone shaved him once a day, brushed his teeth twice, and he wore new pjs
donated by the Pink Ladies Auxiliary. In place of the thin cotton robe seen on the patients shuffling down the halls, Jesse had slouched inanimate in what Jack had insisted the Gulf War veteran be able to keep – his fatigue jacket washed, pressed and de-loused, with all the patches of rank, company and campaign reattached. It swallowed him up now, the doctors concerned enough about Jesse’s lack of nutritional intake to consider the drastic measure of a feeding tube, but it still lent an air of dignity to a man who had more than earned it through his service.

“But, I can’t do that unless you talk to me, can I?”

The same answer – a blank stare.

As part of New York University’s Medical Center, Bellevue provided quality care through a knowledgeable and compassionate staff. To Jack, however, this place was less than desirable. It was drafty, utilitarian, bland, impersonal, stark, loud, crowded and reeked of everything medicinal and organic. Jack still hated coming here with a phobic’s passion, his hatred for hospitals cultivated by countless visits to the county facility when he was a child, each time the same questions, the same side glances, the same sad, pitiful expressions, that never did anything except fill out the pink form, the green form, no, this one in triplicate, writing down, explaining away, believing in all those stories of normal boy misadventures that eventually stopped about the same time he grew five inches and learned to make a fist.

“Bet you’ll be glad to get out of here, won’t you, Jesse?”

The same answer – a blank stare.

Some good news finally - the psych eval had confirmed PTSD, making a defense of Diminished Capacity a twofold blessing. First, Daniel would be denied a showcase using a homeless man’s tragedy to further his career, and secondly, Jesse would not be spending time in prison, a request for psychiatric treatment at a Veteran’s facility almost a given.

“Not that another hospital, *any* hospital would be a blessing.”

There was no question posited this time, and still the stare remained constant – straight out at an indeterminate point on the far concrete block wall, a dull brown gaze that never waved, never changed, never stopped, but for ten involuntary and automatic moments of oblivion, eyes blinking robotic, the body at least continuing to function even though the mind had apparently switched off.

“Oh, Christ, these are damn uncomfortable!” Knees stiff from inaction, butt imprinted with the four bolts holding the legs on the chair he had been sitting in since two-thirty, Jack groaned up from the table, Jesse not acknowledging the departure, Jack not really expecting him to anymore. Over by the paneless window, there was a stunning view of the air conditioning units on the roof of the adjoining building all cut up into tiny wire embedded diamonds. “God, I hate fucking hospitals. What about you?”

The same response – a blank stare.

Future visits really wouldn’t be necessary, not-talking with his client. Motions filed, there was really no case pending now, no court appearance that obligated Jack to Jesse – the doctors’ findings and recommendations already accepted and entered into the records. It was up to the paper work mill now to care for Jesse Whitfield, and for that, no John Twist, Jr. Public Defender face-to-face was required.

“I wish, just once, you would answer me, Jesse. Just once.”
Still one bit of unfinished business that needed to be cleared up, however.

“Who, Jesse, who is always watching you?”

The same response – a blank stare.

Frustrated, tired, sick to his stomach from holding in the scream, Jack leaned his forehead against cold glass relief, closed his eyes to the glare. He needed to get out of there, shortly, soon, now.

“Who’s watching you, Jesse? I need to know, please!”

The same response – a blank stare.

“Who’s always watching you? Who is it? Tell me, Jesse, because he’s watching me now, too!”

The same response – a blank –

Ten seconds, that’s all. Ten seconds he had his eyes closed. But, that’s all it took.

“What are you - hey, don’t touch that - what are you - Oh, God Almighty!”

The preliminaries concluded that the spoon must have been hidden in the lining of the fatigue jacket, bent over and over again, probably against the steel frame of a cot until it broke off in a jagged edge, just sharp enough to puncture a femoral artery given the right amount of force from a determined and disturbed person.

“Guard! Doctor! I need help in here! PLEASE!”

So much blood, across Jesse’s leg, bubbling to the floor, pumping through Jack’s hands, the crisis team arrived only a minute later, bum rushing him away, to the side, out of the room, going to work on Jesse with skill and efficiency.

“Jesse, why - god, why did, did you - shit!” “He can’t see me anymore, Jack, can’t see me anymore! Only you, Jack. He’s only watching you now!”

A full investigation would need to be conducted, of course, security camera tapes reviewed, but, those present on the scene all attributed Mr. Whitfield’s self-inflicted wound on a psychotic break of unknown origins, a manifestation of paranoia in severe cases of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Jack was assured that the Army was on top of the matter.

_A man nearly slices off his leg off, and the Army is ‘on top’? Of what? The same Army that allowed a veteran to live in a cardboard box?_

"But, I was the one there, I was the one in the room with him. I should have done something more, should have been able to divert his attention, calm him down, wrestle the spoon away, _something!_"

A consensus was taken, everyone getting one vote, one head bob. Except Shakespeare, he got ten beats. There was nothing else that Jack could have done to help Jesse, short of a medical crash course inside of thirty seconds.

_Which would be as about as long as I would have lasted before passing out._

“Where the hell is it?” Files, legal pads, the latest edition of _Batman Zero City_, "Still, I should have seen it coming, should have watched him more closely, should have...” crumpled up paper towel, a ticket stub from _Hedwig_, “found a way to get him to - Ennis is going to be so pissed if I don’t -” but not what he was looking for until –“Finally!” Cell phone found, but cell phone dead.
“What the fuck?” Jack shook the damn thing, irritated that today’s lousy pile continued to grow. “I put it on the charger last - oh, yeah.”

*Off sink to fridge – Ennis’ arm clearing the magnets. Fridge to counter – my elbow plowing into what was left of the cake. Counter to table, his thigh catching the edge, cell phone tipping off and away. In the future, might be a good idea to move the charger to some Fuck-Free Zone. Like Nebraska. Trash gathered, “Need to get off at the Twenty-Third Street station,” messenger bag slung over, “run like hell for six blocks, maybe I can beat him -” foot up on bench, “but, first…” Jack paused to tie his shoe lace. “Don’t want to trip and fall on my -”*

“Hello, Jack."

"Shit, what are you doing -"

He didn’t feel anything until the bullet exploded out the other side.
Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

Well, I said I wouldn't miss a week in posting, and then my computer died, taking everything - and I do mean everything - down with it. Then I broke my foot. So, how was your month of May?

Back now, finally, and as a way to apologize for my second long absence for A03, for making my readers sit on that horrible cliffhanger so long, this is the first of two chapters posting today.

Hope you enjoy!

B

Contents:

One photograph – Janet and Ethan 1990. ‘Come home soon, Soldier! We love you!’

On Zippo lighter, military issue – Semper Fi.

One book, paperback – Ayn Rand looking a little worse for wear.

One cloth box, velvet lined – Bronze Star and Purple Heart.

One rubberbanded stack, newspaper clippings – Hundreds – New York Times, The Post, Village Voice – folded, scribblings in the margins – “She gave me lunch” and “Smells like my piano teacher” and “That’s the wrong guy, idiots!” – dates circled, names underlined – Maise Sullivan, Isabelle Santore, Eighty-First, John Twist, Jr. – Newsome’s case as told by the press.

That was it. Just those five things, the sum of Jesse Whitfield’s life stuffed in a 10 x 10 cardboard box, shoved on the third shelf in the basement of Precinct #20, Upper West Side, stamped with only #404933342 on the outside.

Don’t know what I expected to find.

Atlas Shrugged back into the box.

Yes I do. It. The one thing. The answer to solve the case. The Smoking Gun pointing right at the ones responsible. Expected irrefutable, undeniable, incontestable proof that would nail the bastards to the
wall before they could murder again. Anything to keep my Jack safe.

And what did I get?

AAAAAPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPFTTTTT!

Mold allergies.

The clippings complained about their return to confinement – Goddamn waste of time – latex trapped fingers rubbing knuckles with plastic – Shouldn’t even be here in the first place – Ennis trying to fit newspaper and guilt back into the evidence bag. It was wrong not to tell him. Lumpy and misshapen, it bounced off the edge of the box, landing upside down, forming a right angle in the corner.

But, when was I going to spring this on him? Slip it in during the argument? Hey, Jack, guess what? You know you’re client, Jesse Whitfield? Well, this is just too fucking funny, but it seems that he’s involved somehow with the case I’m investigating.

Nothing else to work with, Ennis blew his nose on a napkin left over from lunch sometime earlier in the week.

Dropped it in while I was licking icing off his nipples? Hey, Jack, I hope you don’t mind, but I’m going to be looking at a client of yours, ‘cause when I was talking to Newsome tonight, he gave me Jesse’s name.

Now at least, he couldn’t smell the musty basement, just feel the cold creeping up from the concrete floor.

Whispered it as I said goodnight? Hey, Jack, tomorrow I’m checking out the evidence of your client, Jesse Whitfield. Why? Because I’m thinking there may be something in there that could help me solve my case.

AAAAAPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPFTTTTTTT!

“Shit.”

How about when I was fucking him this morning? Or playing with his ass while he made bagels? Or watching him in the shower when I was supposed to be shaving? Or kissing him goodbye at the door? Or telling him I love him? Or one of the other million times today that I’ve thought of him? Hey, Jack, we’re back in the same situation we were before.

Napkin full, his nose would just have to forgive the receipt for lunch he used next.

And now I’m wasting time rationalizing. Yes, I should have told him, should have found the time to tell him the truth, should have MADE the time to be honest with him. But, what difference does it make now? None, it’s all academic because there’s nothing here, nothing but leftover remnants of a man’s life. So, let’s just cross Jesse Whitfield off the list, and return to square one. And I’ll just tell Jack after. When were not kissing, or touching, or fucking. Which means it just may be a long while before he hears this story.

The lighter was heavy, a cold weight in the palm of his hand, thumb tracing the Marine emblem. His Grandpa Sherm had served in Italy during WWII, a Jarhead cook full of stories that grew more outrageous with each telling, but exciting to a ten year old boy, and labeled bullshit by his other Grandfather – Earnest Del Mar stuck Stateside as an indispensable to the war effort employee of Ma Bell. Always outside of Sherman Allgood’s hearing, of course.
“Damn.” Lighter dropped back into the box, his sleeve the only avenue left available to him.

_Mold and dust and frustration. No shots for that last one, except Jose's kind._

The lighting was pathetically crappy back here in the corner, the black metal shades hanging down only 100 watts five feet apart, but Ennis could see the happy that once was, held up to the side, tweaked left just an inch, plastic wrinkles shooed away, mother and son smiling hope and trust in a war's return of husband and father.

_Pretty wife you had there, Jesse. Cute kid. Nice family. What happened? They couldn't, you couldn't, nobody could handle what came after? Fucking useless war. Wife loses a husband, son without a father. Ethan, he can't be more than eleven, twelve, in this picture, not much younger than –_

“Come and eat your oatmeal, sweet pea! Your body needs plenty of fuel today!”

“Oh, shit.”

Never failed. Whenever he would peek in this particular door, the movie would always be in the exact same spot – December Twenty-First, 1983. The day everything changed.

“But, I hate oatmeal, Ma!”

“Don’t argue with your mother, Squirt, or she’ll make you eat two bowls.”

“Ewwww, gross!”

_Sunshine yellow kitchen trimmed in cut apple halves, green accents to match the appliances. On the stove, Dad’s eggs and bacon, coffee’s percolating up into the glass knob on top, red light glowing underneath. Mom’s humming some stupid song about ‘Honey, I miss you’ and Dad’s reading, reaching around the sports section for the toast, can do it without looking, not brushing a single crumb._

“Why can’t I eat eggs like Dad and KE?”

“Because you’re a dweeb, and dweebs eat oatmeal.”

“KE, don’t call your brother a dweeb.”

Mom sets down a steaming bowl, raisins all plump, the milk bottle and sugar scooted closer, and tussles my too blond hair.

“OK, Ennis, you’re a dork.”

“Takes one to know one, Kennedy.”

_That wasn’t too smart, ‘cause I know just how he’ll react. Born in Nineteen Sixty-Four to two Camelot dreamers, Kennedy Earnest doesn’t like to be called by his real name. Yeah, like KE’s much better. He hates when anybody calls him that especially his younger brother and that’s exactly why I do it._

“I ought to pound you into -”

“Sit down.”
And Dad doesn’t miss a beat, doesn’t even flip down the edge of the paper when he’s yelling at Kennedy. Doesn’t need to. Sound of his voice is enough.

“Expect a pounding later, doofus.”

Who’s the doofus thinking that just because he whispered Dad can’t hear him two chairs away.

“Shelly Lynne Del Mar! You get down here now! Don’t believe the world can stand it if you make yourself any more beautiful!”

Laughing at a sister is something two brothers can do together no matter what just happened between them. This time, Dad does turn down the paper.

“You boys have something to say about your sister?”

“No, sir.”

“No, sir.”

“That’s what I thought.” Paper goes back up.

I can always tell when Shelly’s coming, the smell of hairspray making my eyes water first.

“Jesus, Shelly! Some of us are breathing here!”

“KE, that’s not right using the Lord’s name in that way.” Shelly gets oatmeal too, but she hates raisins, so she picks them out to flick across the table when Mom goes back to the stove and Dad to the obits. “But, Shelly, dear, he does have a point. Breakfast shouldn’t taste like Aqua Net.”

Shelly flips a slab of hair away from her face, rolling her eyes, all behind Mom’s back, of course. “Just don’t want it to fall flat before third period. I would just die!”

“Because Nick Piccone’s in her third.”

The raisins start flying.

“Four scrambled eggs with a side of bacon.” Mom delivers Dad’s plate like one of those diner waitresses, towel over her shoulder, smacking fake gum. “I expect a big tip, you know, mister.”

“Well, how’s about I give it to you right now!”

One arm, that’s all Dad needs to pull Mom into his lap. She fights him, pushing back and yelling about not bothering the help, but not too hard ‘cause she’s giggling like stupid cousin Connie who never stops that terrible noise no matter how hard you pinch her.

“Oh, Tommy! Not in front of the children!”

“Oh, so you’re saying you want to go back upstairs? Alright, Susie Q!”

He stands up, straight up, right from the chair with Mom in his arms, and she’s laughing and slapping him with the towel, one of her slippers falling off to the floor.

“Put me down, Thomas Del Mar! Put me down this instant!”

Of course Dad doesn’t. He does what he always does, just starts tickling her, tickling her so hard her head’s shaking all her curlers loose, her face all red and smiling.
“Ennis, get your – Tommy! – lunch. We’ll drop you – I swear, Thomas Alvin Del Mar! – at school on the way – Tommy! – to your father’s work – Stop it!”

Dad doesn’t do that either. This is when the kissing starts, on her neck making fart sounds better than George Finkel’s arm pit, even with his hand wet.

“But, I didn’t brush my teeth ‘cause Shelly was hogging the bathroom, and I got to get my baseball cards to show the guys and I can’t find my shoes and my homework is -”

“Well, you best get moving then, son.” A really loud fart noise. “Or you’re going to make me late for work.” No more farts now, only real kissing that’s making Mom sigh.

“Gag me with a spoon!” Shelly flicks one more raisin at me before leaving the table to wait outside for her ride, but not taking her hairspray with.

“Don’t forget, dweeb.” KE lands a preview on my arm of what’s to come later before he leaves to jump in the shower. “Pounding tonight.”

“Get a move on, boy!”

“Yes, sir!”

I take the stairs two at a time, listening to Mom say, “Oh, Tommy!” between all those non-fart, spoon gagging noises.

Scene change to PS 122:

The word comes right in the middle of Science class, the principal calling me to his office, which is never a good sign, even when I hadn’t done anything wrong. Well, that they could pin on me anyway.

His face is all dark when he tells me, his eyes full of pity and I want to punch it in, want to shout at him, call him a liar, ‘cause it’s not true! Dad said, “See you later, Squirt!” when he dropped me off. And my Dad never lies. NEVER! They will be there when I get home, Mom in the kitchen talking back to Phil Donahue, Dad smelling like sweat and diesel and he’ll ask me what I learned today, telling me that a good education is what will keep me from ending up at the docks like him and they can’t be dead, they just can’t! Don’t care what the police say, don’t believe there was any cement truck, coming around the corner with bad brakes on the slippy street, killing them instantly just because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time ‘cause they were only in that wrong place because I was –

“Hey! Youse almost done back dare?”

“Yeah, yeah.” The film slipped loose, always too short for a reel the size of three successful children – KE a plumbing contractor in Philly, Shelly a First Grade teacher in Tarrytown – and eight grandkids, the oldest just graduating from Princeton. “I’m almost done.” With hands trembling slightly, knowing that the projector will be re-threaded instantly, Ennis picked up the remaining item to place back in Jesse’s box. “Just give me a frigging minute.”

It doesn’t matter where I stop it, doesn’t matter if I try to stop it. It’s always the same. It always ends the same. With my parent’s death that was all my –

“Fuck!”

Must have been those damn allergies making his eyes all cloudy, his reach into the box misjudged by
a wide margin, the bag holding the cloth case banging into the metal shelf, crashing to the concrete floor.

“What? You bother something back dare?”

“No! No, everything’s OK!” Shit! Oh, fuck! On his knees, he quickly scooped up the bag, hoping he would be able to somehow fix the stupid thing now that it was hanging open at a weird angle and the medals were jangling in the bottom of the –

“What the hell is that?”

Bronze Star, Purple Heart and something he really didn’t think was Government Issue.

Well, fuck me.

The Ziploc parted with ease, Ennis’ latex covered hand reaching in to retrieve this new found enigma. Broken case set to the side, he held it up to make sure, but even in this pathetically crappy light there wasn’t any way to mistake what tinkled between his fingers.

A charm bracelet. Just like –

Out of his pocket he pulled another evidence bag, Adrian Lockhart’s bracelet still with him from his interview with Newsome last night. A side-by-side comparison confirmed it.

And this was worth being beaten to a bloody pulp and murdered for? A tacky bracelet made in Korea with shitty charms of the Empire State Building, Statue of Liberty, Times Square, Museum of Modern Art, St. Patrick’s Cathedral, Greenwich Village, Central Park, Broadway, Staten Island F –

No. No Staten Island Ferry on Jesse’s. He looked again.

Empire State, Lady Liberty, Times Square, MOMA, St. Paddy’s, the Village, Central Park, Broadway, Staten Island F –

No. Still no Staten Island Ferry on Jesse’s. He took Adrian’s from the plastic to hold the two close, each charm scrutinized against the other.

Empire, Liberty, Square, Art, Saint, Village, Park, Broad, F –

No. There was no Staten Island Ferry on Jesse’s. He shook the bag thinking maybe against the floor it had broken, falling away into the bottom. Nope, no Ferry. He shook the bag three times and still no Ferry.

It’s just a cheap charm, there’s nothing there but…unless…

Jesse’s bracelet safely back in its bag, Ennis examined the Ferry charm on Adrian’s. It looked normal, from what he could tell, just like all the other charms on both bracelets, just like all the charms on all the tacky tourist stuff sold on the streets. Nothing new and interesting about the damn thing at all. Just two pieces of cheap as shit metal with a blurry picture sandwiched between.

OK, I’m crazy, really lost it here, all the spores no doubt, but seeing as how there’s a picture in there between, maybe…

Fingernails unable to help, Ennis turned to his pocket knife, the smallest blade used to pick at the charm’s edges. It was probably another waste of time in this day filled with useless activities, probably just a stupid feeling that there just might be something –
I’m tampering with evidence, scratching up evidence, irreparably harming evidence here, so if there is something under there, it fucking better be worth –

The top popped off and away to places unknown and unreachable even on your stomach and stretching your arm as far as possible into the dark under the shelves. But, at this moment he wasn’t really interested in the top, but what small piece of eureka that had hidden beneath it.

Now, I’m not a whiz or a geek or anything close to an expert, but if I’m not mistaken, that’s a computer chip. Is it the only one, or are there others inside of –

“This is almost?” The desk clerk’s impatience preceding him around the first row of shelves, “Ten minutes is almost?”

Don’t know what made him do it – rushed for time, the need to hurry, his pounding headache, the light, cottony haze in his head, the idea that this was exactly what he had come here looking for, the devouring need in his gut to protect its anonymity – but, everything did not go back into the box, the lid slammed shut just as the clerk came into sight. Ennis broke the chain of custody when he walked back to the desk with no intention of mentioning he had Jesse’s bracelet stuffed into his pocket.

It wasn’t on the manifest, nobody knows it was even in there, so it won’t be missed, it won’t ring any alarm bells, and it won’t be admissible evidence, you dumb fuck!

“So, what’s the big hurry?” The remark casual enough to pass for idle conversation, just the right amount of nothing to cover up the fact that he was a shitty liar, his beaming face able to bring ships safely home in a storm. “You got someplace more important to be?”

“Only get an hour for lunch, that’s why.” The desk clerk buzzed Ennis back out through the door, his “Be Back in an Hour. Give or take a week” sign already posted. “I need proper digesting time. I’m assuming you didn’t remove any evidence.”

“Well, I -” Cut off before he could actually speak a falsehood. Still doesn’t make this stomach churning, bile swallowing, I need to go home a take a shower because I feel filthy feeling any easier.

“Good. Just sign here….and here…and here…” Flip. Flip. Flip. The desk clerk’s enthusiasm for his job showing in the way the pages on the clipboard created a breeze bordering on dead calm.

“…here…and…” RING!!!!! RING!!!! RING!!!!

“That’s you, Sergeant.”

“What?” Just don’t look him in the eyes, just sign, just sign your name.

“Your phone -” Flip. “- and here, is ringing.”

Preoccupied with signing the forms, concentrating hard on keeping his face from giving away the crime, mind on the burning hole in his pocket, where it would lead him next, he answered without thinking, without glancing at the incoming number, without realizing he had just hit speaker.

“Del Mar.”

“I want you inside me now.”

The phone dropped, maniacal laughter skittering across the counter.

“Oh - shit, I – damn - come back - shit!”
Saved from a plunge off the other side, the cell was returned to its beet red owner compliments of the desk clerk and his smirk.

“Uh...I’ve got to take...” A vague wave to anyplace but where he was standing right now.

“Yes, I heard.”

He took phone, burning embarrassment and the clerk’s wink over to the far corner. “Don’t ever fucking do that again!”

"Not into phone sex, then?"

"I'm working here!"

"All work and no play makes Jack a very horny boy."

"No work and all play makes Ennis a very unemployed boy."

"Just file form sixty-nine."

"Form..." Jack plus inside me plus horny plus sixty-nine equals...equals...who needs fucking math anyway? "What?"

"Incident report for non-lethal discharge of an officer's weapon." Jack’s voice finessed the innuendo, words doing what fingers and lips could not. "But, I've got to warn you."

"About what?"

Sex whispered hot against Ennis' ear. "It must be filled out in triplicate."

“Oh, god...” Jack, what you do to me. What I wouldn’t do for you. “Did you just call to torture me or what?”

“No, just fulfilling a promise I made to the naked man in my bed last night.”

“Oh, so you’re going to stop leaving that damn basketball out in the middle of the hallway for me to trip over in the dark?”

“Do not believe that was a part of the negotiated deal, Constable. And why would I give up such a source of early morning entertainment?”

“Because next time my toe hits that fucking thing, Counselor, I’ll be double dribbling on your ass!”

“So, now you want phone sex?”

Ennis' purest truth. “No, Jack, I want you.”

“Good. Because if you didn’t, it would be very awkward explaining away your devilishly handsome stalker.” Off in the distance, rising above the background noise, a voice called his name.” OK, Herman! Be right there! I’ve got to go, Ennis.”

“Go where?”

“Bellevue, got to see a client of mine.”

“He’s in the hospital?”
“Psyche ward, and that’s all I can say. After that, I’ll drop by the office just to pick up some work, and then head home. What about you?”

Off to discover if this evidence I just tainted is worth the price of my career. “Got to check in with forensics, and that may take a while.” If it keeps you safe, though, it is worth all that I am.

“Any thoughts on supper?”

“Already said what I want.”

“Oh, I believe I will be able to serve all your favorites tonight, starting and ending with Jacques au jus.”

“Guess I’ll be going back for seconds, then.” The heat of that inevitability would burn inside him until temporarily quenched by blue flame.

“Are you sure you’re not into phone -” His name was shouted again. “OK, OK! Shit, Herman, what, is your cab going to turn into a Seventy-Seven Nova at the stroke of noon, or something? Ennis, I’ve got to go, and I always lose service going through the Tunnel.

” Sudden inexplicable fear gripped his throat – Don’t let him go! Don’t let him leave! Keep him safe! Keep him alive! - the words struggling to be heard, to make sense. “Jack, I, don’t, you, please, just, I -”

“Yes, mon ami, I’ll be careful.” Sweet smile's sound wrapped Ennis up tight. “I love you. I’ll call you when I get home. See you tonight.”

Jack hung-up before a response could be mustered.

***************

“Sergeant, don’t hover!”

“But, what does that –” the finger pointing at HTML gobbledy-gook on the monitor was slapped away.

“If you would give me a chance to actually read the code, without interrupting me with questions every ten seconds, I might be able to give you an educated answer!”

“Fine, alright, whatever.” Ennis and his exasperated gesture walked away from the IT forensics tech once again to resume his pacing and glowering at the back of the beleaguered head. “But, you’ll tell me as soon as you -”

“I wouldn’t dream of leaving you in the dark, Sergeant.”

Ennis felt he had every right to bother this guy. Brought him the computer chip, he told me it would be no problem to figure out what it contained, and now, four hours later – bupkis. The first twenty minutes or so he had kept busy while his fortuitous find waited in the lab's queue by prying open all
the other charms on both bracelets, all empty. Which made the one he had found of paramount importance. That one chip, whatever was on it - I know, just know - it would be solid enough to build their floundering case upon. The less than legal way it was obtained notwithstanding.

“Anything?” The vulture had returned to roost.

“Yeah, you’re standing on the mouse cord.”

Normally a very patient man at work – perfectly content to sit in his car in February weather for a twenty-four hour stake out, just watching and waiting for one guy to show up with a paper bag, a day that Don had vowed never to repeat – these past four hours of nothing, like fingernails on a chalkboard, the Dixie Chicks and Alma’s complaining all rolled into a huge bullhorn pressed to my ear. He had crawled out of his skin around 2, reached his limit at 3:17, by 4:06 he was fit to be tied, and now at 6:22, thumbnails chewed down to the nub, the tech and chip were finally talking, to each other, but not him, and anticipation over getting that break in the case they needed, but what if he had guessed wrong about the importance of the chip and just spent an entire day chasing a ghost, any shred of forbearance and propriety he still possessed was much too weak to stem the logjam of anger roiling, ready and raring to flood the unsuspecting countryside.

“Well?”

“Deep subject, but I still don’t have an answer for you.”

And to add insult to anxiety, Jack had not called him yet. Bellevue, office, then home. How long does that take? He should be home by now. Jack had not called, so Ennis had called Jack. Fourteen missed Mr. Grabby Hands calls. Fourteen times he had connected with Jack’s voice mail, fourteen messages each one growing in terseness exponentially. Not looking good for the Ass Bandit. He had chalked that paralyzing fear back at evidence room in the “Over Reacting to Flushing My Career” column, that and his lie to the desk clerk and his little worse day of his life trip to the movies would make even the most stalwart borrow a little from the paranoid. But, as the day turned to late afternoon becoming early evening, as his patience eroded and his anger increased, his worry over Jack – Where the fuck he is? – took on a life of its own, raping, pillaging and plundering his confidence until he called Jack a fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth time. The results were less than journal worthy.

He said he was going to back to the office from the hospital, I’ll just start there.

They had agreed that calls to each other’s office should be kept to the barest of minimums, at least until Newsome’s case is completed. Which might be fucking soon if anyone realizes our connection. Phone not out of his hand for a second since 3 o’clock and his tenth call, Ennis hit #2 and listened to the rings skate with spikes up and down his nerves. Please be there, Jack, please be there so I can bite your head off making me go nuts without cause. Be there, Jack, be there!

“Sergeant, I think I have something.”


“So, you see this section here?”

The tech pointed to what amounted to swearing symbols on a monitor lousy with them. “Yeah, so?”

“Legal Aid, how may I direct your call?”

“John Twist.”
“One moment, please.”

“It’s a tracking program. Simple really, hidden amongst all this other garbage.” The tech’s opinion of the author’s lack of style apparent. “This program chip is meant to be installed on a computer, and all the information gathered and sent to another location, all of it untraceable.”

“Information, like what?” The phone was ringing again, this time two quick rings, then silence…two quick rings, then silence, two quick rings –

“Anything really, but I’m guessing financial. Credit card numbers probably, and there would be no way for the companies to track back to find who had jacked their customer’s info.”

“Holy sh -”

“John Twist’s office, Stephanie speaking.”

“Is he there?” Short and to the point.

“I’m sorry Mr. Twist is not available at the moment, may I take a -”

No time for pleasantries now. “Where the hell is he?”

“Who is this?”

“Uh oh. There’s some really serious shit in this code. Damn!”

“What do you mean serious shit?” to the tech, and “Sergeant Ennis Del Mar, if you could just tell me where -” to the phone.

Oh, yes, Sergeant, Jack told me all about you, in confidence, of course, so happy for him, and you, and I know he would’ve wanted you notified immediately, and I’m sorry, I would have called you, but I didn’t have your cell phone number, and things have been so crazy around here, that I just -”

“Snarking credit card numbers is so low tech compared to this.”

“Crazy?” He didn’t like the sound of that. “What are you talking about? Where’s Jack, and what the hell is snarking?” He didn’t know who he was speaking to anymore.

“Snarking?”

“High-jacking, pulling things right out of the air, that’s what!”

“Are you still there, Sergeant?”

“Yes, yes! What about Jack?”

“Well, he was taken to New York Presbyterian, and -”

“This is Federal Government, Homeland Security shit!”

“WHAT?!”

“Jack’s been shot.”

Nothing after that. Ennis heard nothing except those three words. Jack’s been shot. They played over and over and over and over and over and over and over – Jack’s been shot. Jack’s been shot.
shot. Jack’s been shot.


He said nothing after that. Not a word. All the way over the Bridge, all the way through town, speeding and careening and screaming, his bubble blaring away for personal reasons and he didn’t give a shit, a flying fuck, a great goddamn, everyone swerving to miss the police sedan hell bent on getting somewhere ten minutes ago. Jack’s been shot. Jack’s been shot. Jack’s been shot.

He cared about nothing. Not the case, not his job, not his life, not when he was rushing into the hospital - shoving through people, bullying through, dismissing all – not when he was facing his night terror, not when he was living his hell, not when his world had stopped. Jack’s been shot. Jack’s been shot. Jack’s been shot.

“Hey! Hey! Where is he?” Fists pounded the counter, Ennis running along the length and back again. Jack’s been shot! Jack’s been shot! Jack’s been shot! “Hey! Where is he? Somebody fucking talk to me! WHERE IS HE?”

“May I help you?” Another desk person exhibiting exuberance for their jobs.

“Jacksbeenshot!” Jack’s here, Jack’s hurt, Jack needs me!

“Jack?” The nurse at ER reception frowned. “He have a last name?”

“Twist, Twist, his last name is Twist!” Coming, Jack, I’m coming!

Checked her computer, checked her situation board, checked her – “Oh, John Twist, yes, gunshot wound. He’s in Trauma four.”

“Trauma Four, right.” Perpetual motion Ennis headed for the large double doors, headed for Jack, headed for redemption. Jack, you’ve just got to be, you fucking hear me, you listening? You’ve just got to be –

“Excuse me, where are you going?”

To Jack, going to my Jack, going where I belong! “Trauma Four, you said,” already half way there.

“You a member of his family?”

Of course, I’m family! More than his father, more than his mother, more than any Twist out there. And I am his! “Well, not legal, I mean, not married, but we live, we’re part -”

“Oh. He has another one of those. Typical.” The disgust was palpable. “Then you’re not family.”

The double doors swung shut, Jack and Ennis on opposite sides.
Chapter 32

O, that this too, too solid flesh would melt, thaw and resolve itself into a dew!

Somewhere between there and here, Jack had lost some pieces, moments edited out, events sliced up, minutes trimmed, memories cut, his movie jumping and jerking forward.

He remembered the beginning –

**EXT. – CENTRAL PARK – LATE AFTERNOON**

JACK TWIST, dressed like he belongs on the cover of GQ, is leaning over, tying his shoe, one foot on the bench when he is approached by a man who oozes charm with a hard edge.

“Hello, Jack.”

*Christ! Just what I need. What other life mistakes are walking through Central Park today? Brandon? Jeremy? The clown I tried to pick up in that cowboy bar? “What are you doing -”*

A nudge, nasty, brutal, biting, a maleficent punch that shoved, slapped, slammed him back, bullied him sideways, bludgeoned him down, shoulder smacking to the asphalt, the white, hot sear of pain exploding, burning away reason and thought.

“Oh, my god! Jack!”

**FUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUCK!**

There was Daniel - stoic, cool, unflappable Daniel with fear-saucered eyes, kneeling close, leaning over, bending near, his hands not finding a purpose, a place to rest, his voice pinched and strained and harsh, his words panicked, broken. “God, you – fuck - shoulder – out - god!”

“Wha – wha – wha -” Will Shakespeare was in the wrong place, bench and lawn off kilter, the sun skewed to an out of balance angle. “Where – why -” The trees too tall, Boo Radley and Atticus too close. Cold and hot. Intense pain and leaden numb. *Not…right… not…*

“Oh, Christ, look at – at all the – shitSHITSHIT!” Overcoat stripped off, suit jacket as well, rolled, balled, smooshed small, smaller, smallest. “Got to stop the…the…”

Flames flashed outward to consume and destroy, slashing nerve and muscle to shreds when Daniel pulled him close, holding, cradling, pressing deep against the two points where Jack’s sanity began to unravel –

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHYYYYHHH!!!”

- pressing so hard the two hands seemed to meet in the middle of the conflagration.

“Wha – fuck – wha – wha – doing -”
“You were shot, you fucking idiot! Got to stop the bleeding! Help! Help! Somebody, help! PLEASE!”

Some…body…shot…some…body…me…some…body…always…watching…

CUT TO:

INT – HERMAN’S CAB – LATE AFTERNOON

Behind the wheel, HERMAN DUNCAN, barrel chested, Marine buzz cut, flannel shirt and attitude, the quintessential New York cabbie, is tense and on edge as he weaves in and out of busy Manhattan traffic. He is sweating, he is nervous, he is apprehensive about his two passengers.

DANIEL ATCHINSON, the charm oozer from Central Park, is crowded into a corner, holding JACK TWIST still as possible, who is pale and in pain, yet still handsome in a hero facing adversity sort of way. There is blood seeping out around DANIEL’S attempt at first aid – his coat and body pressed to JACK’S wounds.

“No! NO! Presbyterian! That’s closest!”

“Jack, where do you want to –”

“I – I – fuck – I – you -”

Too loud, the world was too fucking loud, mind overtaken with a cacophony, a deafening bedlam, anxiety and pain and terror bellowing, barking, caterwauling, screeching - Shut up, shut up, fucking shut up! – each sound pounding and pummeling into his skull.

Swerve and BUMP! to the door.

“GODDAMN! FUCK! FUCK! SHIT! FUCK!”

“Watch what the fuck you’re doing!”

Too bright, lightning flashes of headlights and street signs, neon and halogens, dissecting, slicing, hacking away at the shadow of control he scratched and clawed to cling onto. Stop it, just stop it all, please!

“Should have waited for an ambulance.”

“And let Jack bleed to death? Are you fucking nuts?”

Fuck…I AM bleeding. Ass Bandit just lost his Superhero union card. I’m bleeding and tired, tired and bleeding all over goddamn everything – myself, Herman’s back seat, Daniel…Daniel?

“Why…why were you…?”

“Doesn’t matter now, Jack, just damn lucky that I was.”

Lucky? No, lucky is an impartial judge and jury. Christ, why am I so…tired? Lucky if that fucking bullet had missed me…lucky means Ennis instead of…fuck. Ennis.

“Left! Left! Turn fucking left!”

“You just hold on to Jack, Mr. DA. I know what the hell I’m -”
Swerve and **BANG!** to the seat back.

“**FUCK!** Herman!”

“Sorry.”

*He was right...he'll never let me forget...'cause I didn't take...seriously, didn’t believe...didn’t call...tired, so fucking tired...sorry, sorry, Ennis...so fucking...*

Too cold, chilled fingers brushed his skin, caressed his body, gnarled fingers sneaking, creeping, insinuating around his bones to grip and strangle, whispering of quiet and dark, empty oblivion.

...sorry...sleep...

“Jack? Jack? Shit, he’s going into – Jack! JACK! Wake up! Wake the fuck UP!”

“Stay with us, Jack! I’ll get you there!”

A shake, violent and stringent – Ennis...I’m...sorry - and it wouldn’t stop, wouldn’t leave him alone, allow him to drift off, let him give in. ...sleep...

“JACK! You can’t! NO! JACK!”

...sleep...sleep...sorry... “Ennis...”

“Who?”

It wasn’t Herman’s driving tossing him around this time, but Daniel. His insistence, his loud voice, his irritated and annoyed stare that Jack blinked open to see.

“Wha...?”

“You just called me Ennis.”

“Ennis? En...**fuck**! Ennis!” *He still thinks I’m...he’s still waiting for my...he’s still doesn’t know I’ve been...**FUCK**!* “Call him! Daniel, call him! Daniel... Daniel... you’ve got – got to...”

“That’s him, isn’t it? Your...your...” Not even uttered and that word twisted cruel lines on his face. “Your...”

“Yes, yes!” Right hand snatched a fist full of bloody coat. “And you can ridicule me all you want for being a weak pussy with delusions of breederhood after you call him!”

Any kindness, any tenderness, any love that had previously brightened Daniel’s eyes dimmed to a dull, stony green. “*His number?*”

“In my – **FUCK**!” The curse for the unthinking move to retrieve his phone and the memory of the dead battery. “Eighty-first precinct. Brooklyn.”

“A **cop**? Oh, Jack, what happened to your standards?”

Herman sent his frown and two cents to the back seat. “Don’t say anything against the sergeant, now.”

“Just call him, asshole! Sergeant Ennis Del Mar. Tell him what happened, where I’ll – Steph, too, call my office, and -”
“New York Presbyterian!” Herman’s arrival announcement, the yellow cab screaming up to the ER entrance.

“You’ll call Ennis, Daniel. Promise me. Promise!”

CUT TO:

EXT – NEW YORK PRESBYTERIAN HOSPITAL – EARLY EVENING

At the ER entrance, HERMAN DUNCAN and DANIEL ATCHINSON struggle to pull JACK TWIST from the cab, but he is resisting.

“No! Herman – get – get off me!” The snared fish flopping across a dock towards unattainable freedom while the sun boils away life’s precious final gasps cut a more elegant figure than Jack and his frantic scramble to avoid those helping hands. “You can’t, I’m bleeding!”

“Weren’t complaining when I helped you into the cab, Jack.”

“Oh, god, no, no, no, Herman, no!” Floundering foot found purchase on the opened car door armrest, pushing back out of the cabbie’s reach and further into Daniel. A possible death sentence just for giving me a ride. “I maybe – you could have – no, no, no!”

“Cut the shit, Camille!” The noble gesture brought to a screeching halt by one well-placed arm, Daniel catching Jack and holding him in place. “No protection required, OK?”

“But, you said I should…you told me I needed to get…”

“Was just yanking your chain.” A quick kiss, sharp and smacking loud right on the mouth. “Do you think I’m insane? Only barebacked with you, Jack.”

“You son of a…” A joke? A joke that made me believe I could maybe…that made me believe I risked…every time we…every time he…all a fucking JOKE? “You son of a whoreson bitch!”

“Always thought your sense of humor was a bit prosaic, Twist.” A scoot to the door, near dead and seething mad Jack weight levered up from Daniel’s fulcrum. “Herman, catch!”

“AAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!! Jack had no choice but to tumble on rubbery legs to waiting arms. “My bag, get my – fuck!” That was Herman shifting him around for ease of transport inside.

“Messen – shit! Get it!”

“Don’t worry, Jack It’ll be safe in my cab.”

“No, I need my, Daniel get my – Goddamn!” That was Herman’s two armed hug securing Jack for transport inside.

“Christ, Jack, there can’t be anything of import in there. This is your work, after all.” Daniel complained, but nonetheless complied, the bag – worn soft black leather spotted with congealed red splotches – swinging deftly over his head to shoulder rest. “Please hurry, gentlemen, I didn’t ruin a Bottega Veneta overcoat just so Jack could exsanguinate in the parking lot.” He marched off, reaching the entrance before one of Jack’s with Herman’s assistance shuffle/stumbles forward.

“Fucking bast – FUCK!” That was Herman cutting to the chase by hefting Jack off the ground to transport him inside. “Fuck…fuck…fuck…fuck…”

“I know he saved your life and all, Jack, but if the Sarge doesn’t kick his ass, I will.”
CUT TO:

INT – NEW YORK PRESYBETERIAN HOSPITAL

The EMERGENCY ROOM is bright and busy, the quintessential metropolitan hospital: medical personnel darting back and forth, the PA announcing, TV blaring unwatched in the corner, vending machines wearing Out of Order signs, people sit and stand, waiting...waiting...waiting for their turn to see the doctor.

DANIEL ATCHINSON, however, refuses to wait.

“Help! I need some help here, people! Got a GSW! My friend is - can I get some fucking HELP!”

The stench of hospital made Jack wretch even more than the stink of his own blood. *I fucking hate this place, I fucking HATE THIS PLACE!!!*

“We've got him now, sir. We've got him!”

Too big of a hurry, too many hands, too much help - Herman and Daniel and orderly and nurse and –

“AAAAAAAAHHHHHHH!!!” Jack hit the stretcher hard. “FUCK!” He imploded, his entire body clenched against the pain that expanded, extended, enlarged exponentially with every breath. “Wound in shoulder, wound in shoulder!”

“Trauma four and get the on-call surgeon down here!”

“I'm sorry, sir,” desk nurse and her unbendable rules stood in the way, “but you can't go back there, only family, and since you are obviously not fam -”

“ADA and durable power of attorney,” Daniel currently with even less time for bigots than usual, “so get your fat ass out of my way NOW!”

Herman disappeared behind the swinging doors, rooms flashed by, people whizzed past, lights blipped in a patterned sequence overhead – “Daniel, call Ennis!” - and Jack traveled in style, six solemn faces as his escort, one even riding up top with him to keep up the pressure on his seeping wounds. “Ennis! Daniel, call Ennis!”

CUT TO:

INT – TRAUMA ROOM FOUR

DOCTORS and NURSES are intently working on our hero, JACK TWIST, who is lying on a stretcher in the middle of it all, amazing blue eyes alert, razor sharp wit intact despite his untenable and precarious situation.

“Get those clothes off.”

“Type and cross match. Hang packed cells. Ringers wide open and piggyback antibiotic. When did you break your hand?”

The pinprick of the needle. “Shit. Last week.”

“Having a rough month, aren’t you?”

“Not as bad as my medical insurance provider. Daniel!” He was somewhere behind the sea of white and scrubs green. “Call Ennis!”

“Mr. Twist, are you allergic to any medications?”

“Aspirin.” Daniel filled in the medical history holes for the Nursing Tech, since Jack was otherwise occupied with cursing the chrome off the stethoscopes bobbing around him. “And adhesive, breaks out in a truly hideous rash. Must use paper tape on any dressings.”

“Is he currently taking any medications?”

“No, that I -”

“Yes, I took a - FUCK!” The temperature of the saline wasn’t bad. In fact, the cool liquid refreshed his burning skin. It was what the nurses were doing with said saline - cleansing away dried blood, dirt and sweat from the entrance wound - that had Jack arching up off the stretcher. “Does ‘First do no harm’ mean squat to you guys?!”

“Got to see what we’re working with here, Mr. Twist.”

“Allow me to self-diagnose - TWO FUCKING BULLET HOLES IN MY SHOULDER!!!!”

“What medication did you take, Mr. Twist?” The Nursing Tech leaned efficient compassion down to Jack’s eye level, "Mr. Twist?” but she never got a glimpse of his blue. It was too busy rolling to the back of his head, squinching shut hard and burrowing into the thrashed from the stretcher edge sheets –

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!”

- as they rolled him on his side to get to the larger, messier, bloodier exit wound.

“Breathe, Mr. Twist. We’re almost done. Just breathe.”


“Good, Mr. Twist, very good, you did very well.” The snapping sound of latex calling it a day. “A clean through-and-through. Can't see any bleeder, but there's possible fractures of clavicle and left scapula. We need to get a look inside just to be sure.”

Wound cleansing completed, his body began to retreat from rigid Threat Advisory Status Red, back down to an OMFG orange. At least – the cast of “Grey's Anatomy” – has stopped – hacking away – at me - with dull – meat cleavers. “That mean – I get a – lollipop – Doctor?”

“Morphine flavored, OK?”

“Better fucking be - of the all-day variety.”
“Let’s get a pressure dressing on him and an immobilizer. And call Radiology for the portable CT.”

Seems the meat cleaver wielders had only taken a short trip to the craft service table, returning in full force to assist the nurses as they poked and prodded and pulled Jack and his wounds into pressure dressing compliance. *Fuck – not – a – gain!* “Dan – iel - CALL – EN - NIS!!”

**CUT TO: INT – TRAUMA ROOM FOUR – PRESENT**

An ER NURSE, late 50’s grandmotherly type, attends to her favorite patient, JACK TWIST, who is now covered to the waist with blankets, shoulder encased in the pressure dressing, his sophisticated good looks showing the strain of his injuries. DANIEL ATCHINSON, rumpled and rung out, sits in a chair by the door.

*Oh, god, yessssssssss…*

The vile of morphine slithered out seductively, its additive sledgehammer cooing him back from his white-knuckled grasp on the thin receding Lortab taken with hurried lunch at three PM ledge. It knew right where to look, too, the heavy warmth fuzzying out from his strapped to a board right hand, buzzing up from the IV to gently nudge the wisps of the preceding narcotic imposter to retire, enfolding all of Jack in the promise of sweet nothingness.

“What time is it?”

Toe opened a trash can, wrist flipped to check. “Seven-oh-eight.” Empty and flat IV bags swallowed by stainless steel. “You’ll be upstairs soon, Mr. Twist. Just waiting on a bed.”

7:08? *That’s almost…almost…* Apparently the morphine frowned on clock watching, the strong suggestion to just lie back and enjoy its industrial strength buzz very hard to ignore. …*a long ass time. Where is he?* “Daniel, you did call, right?”

The oft practiced, honed to perfection, patent pending, never failed to cut Jack down to the size of a microbe Daniel eye roll had lost its power, but none of its theatrics. “For the third time - I called the eighty-first, left a message with the singularly unpleasant Ag-something. Called your office and spoke with the cow. Called your mother, your uncle Harold. Would have even called your hair stylist, but his salon is closed on Wednesdays.”

“Yeah, yeah. Agsomething and cow.” *OK…OK…Ennis knows. Between message and Steph, he knows. He knows…he knows…Ennis will be here…he'll be here soon. Be here soon. Here soon… and all I’ve got to do is stay…awake until he gets…which should be soon…soon ‘cause Daniel called…Daniel called…but, it’s been a…long ass time since…why isn’t…isn’t he…why the fuck isn’t he…the girls, traffic…work, yeah, probably work, that’s what it is, work…he’ll be here, ‘cause Daniel called…but he’s tied up with…oh my. Apparently, fantasies are so much more fun when viewed with a pain killer buddy. Tied, caught, can’t move…like me in this fucking…only it’s Ennis and…handcuffs and…naked and…*

“Jack, why are you smiling like that?”

Never you mind was the correct response to Daniel’s sour question. Jack wasn’t so far indoctrinated
into the morphine’s cult that he couldn’t recognize a ‘none of your goddamn business, so let’s change the subject’ moment. Unfortunately, one word did manage to slip free during the switch from public to private, and “Ass” hung out there in the Betadine scented air.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Jameel.” And from whence that name came, only Astra Senneca knew for sure. “That Radiology tech who was just in here, the one with Dick Cheney style interrogation techniques.” Not as perfect as the one that Jack had truly been mentally admiring - and fondling and licking and suck... ain’t sharing my Mecca with nobody - but not a bad specimen, in a neckline, tattooed, pierced, straining his pink scrubs intestinal fortitude muscle mass kind of way. *Didn't look, really, I swear, but...right there for fifteen...or twenty... a long fucking...had to watch something!*

“Mr. Twist! Behave!”

“Ah, come now, Alice, don’t tell me you haven’t noticed.” *Oh, the lady’s protesting a shitload, me thinks.* Somewhere at the other end of yards of plastic tubing spider legging from his arm, behind Ringers Lactate flushing enough fluid in to make him piss Lake Erie, beside the squat square force feeding packed cells, Type B Negative, under the sidecar of Levaquin – the all-purpose antibiotic - and futzing with the IVAC producing a tune reminiscent of the dance mix version of Cher’s “Believe” was his ER nurse. *And she’s smiling! Saucy little minx! “I’m the one with extra orifices here, and even I noticed.”*

“I’m a professional.” Three buttons, three beeps. *And a grandmother.***

“What, the AARP frowns on ass admiration now?” Head flop to the left didn’t quite make it there thanks to what the blankets wedged against his spine cocking him sideways, the pillows next to his ass and knees to keep him there, the implement borrowed from the KGB’s toy chest immobilizing his left shoulder and the nursing staff all laughingly referred to as a comfortable position. “Daniel, you noticed, didn’t you?”

The ADA shifted, nouveau riche sensitivities oil to chintzy plastic chair water, Jack’s messenger bag between his feet, Jack’s blood crusted on his shirt. “Don’t know who you’re blathering about, Jack.”

“Jameel. Don’t tell me you didn’t notice his – what the fuck am I saying? No doubt you’ve been there, hit that...” - a prolonged moment of concentration to pry the snarky comment out of the morphine mire – “moved up one floor to PT.”

“Not talking out of your ass is always an option, Jack.”

*Oooo! A direct hit! One more and...I’ve sunk his...his...battle...thingee!*

“I think not talking at all would be advisable, Mr. Twist. You need to rest, jumpstart the healing process.”

Though whispered from the other side of the pharmacological chasm, Jack still heeded Alice’s suggestion of peace, snuggling under his narcotic comforter to wait, the absence of pain - or any sensations really, except for the hazy weights tied to his limbs with cottony, but unbreakable threads – soothed iron clenched muscles, quieted the high pitched shriek of fear, lullabied thoughts away from hospitals and Jackie’s memories to wander more pleasant meadows.

Daniel noticed, I know he did...watched him watching...the whole time Jameel was in...and then when he went...I know Daniel was...not that I give a flying...don’t care where he...not my, not anymore, ’cause I got...now there’s an ass! Should be one of the seven wonder...much finer than
that… overgrown…'lonian backyard garden…don’t want Daniel looking at…tell him to…it’s all mine…can’t have…can’t take…Daniel will look and what Daniel wants… goddamnit!…he’s mine…

“Keep the fuck away from Ennis!”

“Oh, goody. Ennis again.” The chair not even marginally working for him anymore, Daniel stood up to pace the hobbit-sized trauma room, five steps one way of irritated tension. “Haven’t heard that name evoked for all of five minutes.”

“Allow me to recti…recti…” Jack was experiencing some difficulty in accessing his extensive vocabulary, opiates bogging down the connection. “…fix my oversight. Ennis, Ennis, Ennis, Ennis…oh, yes,” a sloppy, silly, sideways, simple and pure smile of unabashed love and devotion, warming Jack from the inside out. “…Eeeeeeeennnnnnniiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiissssssssss.”

“Ennis?” A quick notation in her patient’s chart. “Who is Ennis?”

“Ennis is…he is…”

How does one describe perfection? The reason, the answer, it? Jack squeezed in tight, curling toes, clenching fist, squinching eyes, willing his floating on a drug cloud mind to focus on one thing, the only thing - Ennis this morning in their doorway, he and Jack nose to nose, clinking belt buckles, palms resting on the small of his back, denim frictioning wool, lips slick with kisses and turned up in the way that Jack knew was for him alone.

"Ennis is..." curls and freckles and brown – “…is...” - BBQ and whiskey and raisin bagels and Chinese and birthday cake – “…is…” – basketball, Cigar Butt, handcuffs - “…is…” - waiting and dreaming and hoping and needing and completing – “…is…” - sweat and semen and spit and sex and sex and sex and fucking incredible sex - “…is…” – truth and strength and honesty and light and joy and life and home and me – “…Ennis is…”

“I’m Jack’s partner.”

ONE SHOT of JACK’S face, his smile, goofy and redeemed.

And all was right with the world, well, Jack’s world, well, Jack’s immediate world, well, Jack’s world that had pushed aside the pain and fear and Daniel and medicinal stink and childhood’s memory nightmares to narrow focus on the now open door because - “Ennis is…here.”

CUE - QUIET ROMANTIC MUSIC

FADE TO BLACK
“Then you’re not family.”

Susie Del Mar had insisted, both her boys were raised as gentlemen. Ennis could never hit a woman. Not his sister, no matter how many times Shelly had touched his stuff without asking, or picked on him after mom and dad were gone. Not Alma, never a single thought of physical violence through a troubled marriage filled with disappointments, accusations, lies, and button pushing, blame flinging, ego mangling screamfests that had peeled the paint off the walls and produced nothing but bitter resentment. Not in the thirteen years on the force, never an angered hand to any female suspect. Sure, some had jeered, taunted, cursed and insulted him, but he had never felt the need to. Some had slapped, kicked, punched and scratched him, yet the situation had never warranted it. Even when he had been bitten on the arm, kneed in the nuts, and his front teeth knocked out with a steam iron – his Hundred Acre Woods whistle entertained his elementary school daughters for two weeks before implants - because that socialite with the manicured nails and quick reflexes had a differing opinion on what constitutes cooperation with a police officer, he had neither contemplated nor deemed justified in cold cocking a member of the opposite sex.

Fucking bitch slap that smug right off her face!

That is…until now.

Tell me I can’t see Jack, tell me my rightful place isn’t with Jack, tell me it’s unacceptable to love Jack? Fuck her! And her moral superiority!

“No. I’m going in there to Jack.”

Non-compliance to her directive layered anger over the disgust already pinching her sneered up face. “What is it with you people? Always trying to change the rules.” A clipboard, her talisman of ER front desk supremacy, jabbed at Ennis’ chest, the thin veil of civility slithering back to tolerate, but not accept make-believe land. “Going to tell you once more, than I’m calling security. Only le-gi-ti-mate family members allowed.”

Reality check, cunt. “THIS -” all bright and shiny with authority, his talisman clipped to his lapel.

“- makes me a member of everybody’s family, lady.”

Big globs of incredulity troweled heavy over her expression, smoothing out smug, disgust and anger into one that was infinitely more pleasing – fear. “You’re a…a…a…”

The homophobe’s worse nightmare – a queer with a badge.

“Yeah, I am. Now, get the hell out of my way.”

Ennis, his shield and a ‘Fuck you!’ smile brushed by, pushing open the last barrier hard.

Hope the swing back smacks her on that fat bigoted ass.

Bright white sterile chaossed about, up and down the hallway, running and rushing to hold fragile
pieces together, to heal, to restore, to flip a finger at fate, the joy of success and the mourning of failure measured in the hurried steps to the next patient, the next crises, the next chance to cheat death.

“Trauma Four?” Where’s Jack? The question was tossed out there to the scrubs ebb and flow as he ran, Doc Martins squealing and sliding – “Trauma Four?” Where’s my Jack? – twisting and turning and spinning along the buffed to an eye squinting sheen linoleum, passing room after room – file, medication, supply - no luck, no peace, no Jack – “Where’s Trauma Room Four?” – asking person after person - looking for answers, searching for explanations, begging for comfort - I’m coming, Jack! I’m coming! "Trauma Four? Trauma Four?"

Modern medical science only had time for a general ‘That way’ wave as it scurried off to perform another miracle. The returned thanks for nothing just as demonstrative.

Jack was shot, and he was alone. Jack was shot, and he needed help. Jack was shot, and I wasn’t there.

Nurse’s station, unisex rest room, bereavement area and Ennis was still running.

Jack was shot because I couldn’t protect him. Jack was shot because I failed. Jack was shot – Laundry, water fountain, housekeeping closet.

- and I can’t even find him!

"Where the fuck is Trauma Room Four?"

"Ennis? What on earth are you doing here?"

Oh, fuck me. Not now.

Frantic worry protested any delay – already wasted too much time – But, frantic worry had no fucking clue where it was headed – Got to find Jack, got to be with Jack! – So, it stutter-stopped on a dime, feet skipping one over the other, to catch this piece of familiarity amid complete unknown, twirling her around in the momentum of his frenzied search – “Business. I’m here on business.” - willing to grasp irony’s straw - Need help from my marriage counselor to find my gay partner - if it could point frantic worry in the right direction. “Where’s Trauma Room Four?”

“Nice to see you, too, Ennis.” Blonde French twist and a peeved frown bobbed out the needed information. “Second door on the right around the corner.”

And frantic worry was off like a shot. Bad choice of words. The only nicety he had time for – a backwards running, “Thank you, Dr. Cartwright!”

Tenacity in a starched white coat wasn’t ready to accept the briefness of their encounter. “Ennis!” The staccato click of Prada in pursuit. “We need to talk!”

“Later, Doctor, later!” Around the corner to Jack. Second door on the right is Jack.

“Ennis!”

Corner taken wide and sprawling, he skidded to a squeak stop – Second one on the right – by a metal door, painted with dings and scrapes, a long rectangle of glass off center, steel knob, cracked and smoky gray file holder to the side. I’m here, Jack! Jack! I’m here! Simple, ordinary. Nothing, in fact, to distinguish this door from any of the others standing in the ER line. Nothing that could cause
the pit of his stomach to suddenly fall straight down to the subbasement, his heart to instantly jump to redline speed, or the abrupt wind tunnel rushing in his head. Nothing that could explain his brittle dry mouth, sweat dripping palms, knees that were demanding to buckle, vision that blacked out on the edges or the scream of abject terror curdling in the back of his throat.

Nothing except Jack is on the other side and he...could be... It also could provide physical support, catching a slumping Ennis. If any other kind were required though, he was on his own. Oh, my god, he could be...

Too consumed with Get to Jack now! NOW!, Ennis had not allowed imagination to venture far from Jack Was Shot territory, the landscape beyond too murky and fraught with borrowed trouble to go wandering about with only What-If’s as a guide. Frantic worry would have mutated into insane panic had he succumbed to his ignorance of Jack’s condition, whispered temptation to extrapolate, goading him to follow possibility to the end of its realm.

But, I’m fucking doing it now, that’s for goddamn sure. Because I know, I’ve seen... I’ve picked up the pieces...mopped up what’s left behind, and I’m picturing him lying there all...and he can’t...and he’s...and there’s nothing - oh, god, Jack!

There be dragons out there on reason’s edge. Cruel, ugly monsters in the shape of Jack scarred, Jack disfigured, Jack unrecognizable. Creatures that belched smoke and flame scorching a Jack forever in pain, a Jack chained to cane or crutches or walker, a Jack condemned to a life experienced from a wheelchair. Evil demons sustained by fear and flesh that gnawed away on Jack’s limbs, Jack’s strength, Jack’s mind. Foul miscreants, nature’s abominations, their hunger to devour and destroy insatiate, even the lifeless body of –

“NO!”

“No, what?”

That sure yanked him back from hyperbole’s morbid ledge. “What?”

“Is no your answer?”

“Answer to what?”

“My question.”

“What question?” He pushed off the door, blinking back the ER, thrilled to return to this harsh reality instead of the one of his making.

“Oh, for pity’s sake, Ennis. Weren’t you listening?” One purple pump tapped out irritation’s theme song. “I asked if you knew him.”

This conversation would make a shitload more sense if I had known one side of it was my responsibility. “Look, Dr. Cartwright, I’m working here, and I don’t have time to -” Out of the corner of his eye, movement behind the sliver of glass. Gray hair standing by the...nurse, must be a nurse, who is futzing with...

“He said he knew you.”

….the IVs for some reason, and now is walking to...

“And I said I couldn’t help him.”
“Asked too many questions, impertinent questions. As a lawyer, he should know about doctor/patient confidentiality.”

Bare feet sticking out of blankets. That’s all he could see of the man who had fucked up his life so royally it would take millions of kisses to repay the debt owed. And it was enough.

*My Jack. My Jack is alive.*

“Even in Texas I’m sure that rule of law ap-”

“Thanks, Doc. I’ll look into it.” The dismissal quick, brusque and final this time. “But, I’ve got to go.” And he pushed open the door that meant nothing other than an opportunity to begin this chapter of his life’s ‘I’m not going anywhere without you, Jack’ journey, and stepped inside.

“Ennis is…”

Quick three point scan of the small, cramped room – an investigation technique perfected by too much practice – gave a first impression snapshot of the situation.

Left – a wall of instruments and beneath a pile of Jack’s discarded, cut and bloody clothes. *I helped him put on that trench coat just this morning.*

“…is…is…”

Middle – still only his feet visible – *God, they are so fucking sexy!* – but back there somewhere behind the gray head – *Nurse, definitely. Fifties, Sixty, maybe. Grandmother type.* – IVAC machine – *pumping morphine, no doubt. Jack wasted, this should be good.* – and a spaghetti dinner of IV tubing – *Christ, he’s got enough fluid running wide open to piss Lake Superior!* – was his Jack. *Still talking, of course.*

“…is…is…”

Right – man leaning up against counter wearing a ruined expensive suit and a sour expression – *Mid-forties, handsome in a pompous ass sort of way. He’s obviously familiar with Jack, seeing as that’s probably his blood all over that fucking expensive suit, but I don’t know this guy from Adam’s housecat, so why is the back of my neck tingling and my stomach going tight and why is he staring at me like he wants to rip my balls out through my – Daniel.*

“…Ennis is…”

Only one way to fill in that blank. Only one description that he wanted to claim. Only one person that needed to be told the truth of things. He stared right back, steel edged his voice, even added in a feral smile to help push the point home, all for *his* benefit.

“I’m Jack’s partner.”

The point settled deep between Daniel’s green eyes.

“Ennis…is here.”

“Oh, well.” The nurse turned to greet the room’s new arrival with a soft smile. “Pleased to meet you, Ennis. Mr. Twist will be going up to his room shortly, so I must prepare his chart for the floor nursing staff. If you will excuse me.” Her very graceful exit paused at the opened door. “Mr.
Atchinson, may I speak with you for a moment…out in the hall?”

“But, of course, Alice.” Smooth, suave and sophisticated despite the condition of his attire, Daniel oozed by statue solid Ennis, breaking their male challenge for domination stare only once, a glance toward the prize dozing on the stretcher. “Back in just a moment, Jack.”

“Like hell you will.” It tumbled out before he could stop it, not that he tried too hard to contain his displeasure at the idea of the dickhead’s return, mind you. “No need for you to stick around now.”

“That’s right, Sergeant Ennis Del Mar of the NYPD is here. Jack is utterly protected with you by his side.” From one arm to the other, Daniel flipped his overcoat, the fluorescent corridor lights tingeing the red splotches green. “Look at the job you’ve done so far.”

“Mr. Atchinson…please?” Polite to a fault, Alice’s tone brooked no refusal, not backing down from her request until the ADA had exited the room “Ennis, I’m very glad you’re here. You watch over my favorite patient now.”

“Yes, ma’am, I will.”

Another soft smile before the door finally left them alone.

I like, no, I love her. At least someone got it right in Human Resources.

One breath…two…Ennis preparing before he moved to the end of the stretcher and a first look a more than just Jack’s feet.

Oh…my…thank you, god.

Only a small dragon tilted there, left shoulder obscured by a mountain of tape and gauze with a red bull’s eye, the announcement of what would be hellacious bruises peeking out from under, left arm and cast, strapped close to his naked chest. He could follow the plastic lines from right hand to IV bags and back again, arm stretched out and tape heavy, too, inert across the blankets that covered from the waist down. Dark circles punched violet under his eyes and his skin was ashen, pale even, despite his ubiquitous dark five o’clock shadow. Wrapped in morphine’s gravity, Jack slept peaceful and pain free. The scene was almost unremarkable, leaning towards the mundane, except that it was Ennis’ heart lying there, broken and bloody, and there wasn’t fucking thing he could do to make things right again.

Yes, ma’am, I will watch over Jack. I’ll watch him, and care for him, and protect him, and love him, and cherish him, and treasure him, and live for him, and, if need be, I’ll die for him.

Right then, it was imperative that he touch. He wanted to gather him up in his arms and squeeze his love right in through Jack’s pores. He wanted to smother with his body, rip that unworthy blanket right off and share his warmth and devotion. He wanted to be connected to Jack, be with Jack, breathing and moving and living as one body.

Talk about an inappropriate woody.

He kissed Jack’s forehead instead, a coppery stench of dried blood gag lodged in his throat.

“Hey…you…” Foggy focus managed to roll out from under the morphine. “…missed…my…”

Just like a tango, a see saw and a blow job, it takes two to kiss properly. Ennis did his part for the cause, cradling Jack’s head, bending over the handrail to bump Jack’s nose, scratching thumbs through Jack’s dark stubble, even winking suggestively for the benefit of Jack’s fragile because of
his plastered to one side hair ego. “This more on target?” But, the lips under his never quite reached a firm pucker, hindered as they were with the lack of cooperation from a slack jaw, limp cheek muscles and a stupid grin that refused to step aside and allow the lovers’ greeting.

"Oh, god, Jack, I love you!"

“Ennis…you…I…too...”

Even though it was a flaccid, amorphous, off-center, spit slicking sloppy kiss, Ennis wanted a forever of more. Jack, the sweetest taste I know.

"You're...uh...uh...late."

"And you're high."

Jack tugged both mouths towards a broader, sillier grin. "Oh, fuck...yeah."

His solar plexus was not enjoying this draped over the handrail position at all, but Ennis was damn sure not going to give up his breath mingling with Jack's spot over a whiney ass complaint of sharp, stabbing pain. "You want to tell me what happened?"

"I...was shot."

“That would explain the huge ass bandage, then.”

“You can…thank that…Nazi doctor for…they wanted…to take…my Batman box…ers.”

“But, you didn’t let them.”

“Fuck, no…only want…you…touching my…dark…knightfuck…” Through the handrail, Jack’s fingers reached out, tugging on leather jacket. “I’m so… goddamn… happy you’re…”

“Me too, baby, me, too.” With Jack unable to even take a stab at kissing anymore, Ennis was more than happy to fly solo. “I came as soon as I heard.”

“Your office…or mine?”

“Yours. Spoke with Stephanie, I think. She told me.”

“Well, damn…he…really…oh, I…for…” Long, dark butterfly kisses fluttered on a narcotic breeze, sleep eager to claim dominion over blue. “…you can…swallow now.”

Ennis had to sprint to catch up to that non sequitur. “I, uh, can? Why’s that?”

“I never was…no H…I…V…”

“What? Jack…Jack.” Felt like a dirtbag rousting him awake again, but if he weren’t under the painkiller’s spell, pretty damn sure that Jack would want this particular point clarified. “What do you mean, ‘No HIV’?”

Eyes never re-opened, but he was alert enough to lick Ennis’ bottom lip. “Never was…Daniel…his idea of…a goddamn joke.”

Joke? “A fucking JOKE?” Put Jack through hell thinking he was, causing him to wonder about a life with, that he could possibly, every time we fucked that maybe he…”I’m going to kill the son-of-a-bitch!”
"Time to go upstairs, Mr. Twist." The door opened abruptly, a swarm of orderlies and nurses stomping the few moments alone to dust. "Got seven-twenty-eight all ready for you."

"Hey, it’s Jameel…and his ass. But…don't look..." Other limbs on the injured reserve list, Jack kneed Ennis in the back to show the seriousness of his warning. "It...belongs to...Alice."

"Oh, Mr. Twist, behave!"

Diamond studded wedding ring clicked against the handrail. “Actually, it belongs to Mikell.”

“Sorry…Alice.”

"Give us about fifteen minutes, Mr. Del Mar, to get him all tucked in, then you can come up." Patient secured, wheel locks disengaged with a simple one-two-three-four steps, stretcher expertly threaded through the door, and the parade of Jack pushed by Jameel, followed by Alice dragging IVAC, student nurse carrying supplies, orderly delivering personal belongings and Ennis walking along beside headed for the elevators. "And you, too, Mr. Atchinson."

Oh, yes. We cannot forget Daniel Atchinson.

“I’m going…to a…private…room?”

“Yes, Mr. Twist.” The parade halted at the elevators, Jameel calling to take only Jack and part of his entourage up. “Private with a corner view of the Park.”

“Hear that…Ennis…pri…vate.” The silly grin was back in spades. “Bed moves…in very…interest…ing…po…si…”

“Really, Jack, now?”

“Ass Ban…dit is…always…fully loa…ded.”

“Maybe tomorrow, when you’re feeling better.”

“Pussy.”

Too vklemp to be embarrassed, Ennis just leaned over to fill his mouth with Jack again.

DING!

Jameel pushed the stretcher into the elevator, tearing Jack from his arms.

“You be…right up, En…nis?”

“You bet.” Empty, they hung limp, useless at his sides. “As soon as they tell me it’s OK.”

“Bring…Jell…O, but not…green…and nothing with…chunks…worship you…Consta…ble.”

“Adore you, Counsel -”

The doors slipped shut, Jack and Ennis on opposite sides.

“My, my, wasn’t that touch -”

Definitely not a PR coup for a police officer to be holding an ADA up against the wall by his throat in such a public location, but giving a damn wasn’t on Ennis‘ agenda at the moment, only watching Daniel’s eyes bulge out when his forearm pressed in harder.
“No contact whatsoever with Jack. Got that?” In the face close, he chomped down on the consonants, making certain there was plenty of flying spit. “Walk out of this hospital and his life.”

Taller than Jack, taller than Ennis, Daniel looked down over the arm lodged against his neck, pinning him to the wall, blocking his airway and somehow still managed a condescending rasp. “You’re welcome, you know.”

“What the fuck for?”

“For knowing Jack better than you.”

“Goddamnit, you motherfucker!” Left fist was locked, loaded and on its way to the intended target. “Beat the shit out of -”

“Is there a problem here, gentlemen?”

Must have been the Security officer’s third party interference that broke Ennis’ pummel Daniel concentration, just a hairline fracture along the I want to keep my job edge, which the ADA took full advantage of, gathering arms between their leaning in and supporting each other’s’ bodies and shoving up, out, sending his attacker stumbling back, Ennis hitting the far wall with a breath stealing bang.

“Do you need assistance, sir?” The not a prime specimen of the male form security guard hovered over Daniel’s bent over and coughing body. “Should I call the police?”

An accusatory point across the hall. “That is…the police, you…imbecile.”

“Really?” An incredulous stare at the man doubled over and wheezing against across the hall.

“I’m fine, I’m fine.” Daniel waved the ineffectual guard away. “Go back to your National Enquirer and Yoohoo.”

The uber confused guard departed the scene, taking the small mass of congregating lookeeloos with him.

“Aren’t you the least bit curious why I was there with Jack?”

What air Ennis had managed to scratch back into his lungs burned, silencing any response but a sharp head shake. Don’t give a rat’s ass why, you lying sack of shit. Only care that you’re never there again.

“I was informed about Jesse Whitfield’s suicide and that Jack was present when it happened.” Daniel shuffled to his adversary, finding the spot on the wall right beside him better real estate than the identical one from whence he came. “I knew he would go to Central Park, Literary Walk to confer with Shakespeare. That’s his brooding place and I went to make sure he was alright.”

The breath was knocked out of Ennis once more, this time figuratively, by the truth of Daniel’s words. Jack has a brooding place? He confers with a statue? I didn’t know. I didn’t fucking know! Daniel did, but not me. If he hadn’t checked, Jack could be…This dragon was new, young and virulent, slithering with self-recrimination and doubt. What else don’t I know about… “Stay the fuck away from my Jack.”

“Oh, bravo, Sir, bravo! The possessive pronoun!” An elegant shrug into his Jack stained overcoat. “You may fuck him silly twenty-four/seven, settle down and play house, buy matching cock rings, tell bedtime secrets, bare your soul while planning for retirement, gush out breeder sentiments until
you choke on the pathetic attempt to be one of them. But, remember,” Daniel leaned in tight, wafting with the scent of sweaty, grimey blood, the smile a mirror of his victory. “There will always be some of Jack that you will never be able to touch, some of Jack that you can’t claim, some of Jack will forever remain mine alone.” Away he sauntered, whistling. “Pleasant dreams, Sergeant Del Mar.”


**BUZZ!!!**

Wallowing time over. Plenty of possible down moments coming soon that he could spend pondering Daniel’s parting shot – *and at the same time rack up a lifetime of Jack that he will never touch* – but not now. Now he had less than – *Fuck! Twelve minutes!* – to grab a case of not green Jell-o and get his ass upstairs. *Just one quick side conversation on the way.*

“Hey,” he stuck his head in the nurse’s station window, “which doctor worked on the GSW in Four?”

“That would be me.” A shaved head to mask the fact that he was actually going bald appeared above a blue, plastic chart. “How can I help you, officer?”

“Recover a bullet?”

“No, it was a clean through-and-through, downward angle, shattering clavicle and left scapula on the way.”

“What caliber would you say, then?”

“Not an expert on this, by any stretch of the imagination.”

“Best guess will do, Doctor.”

“OK, then I’d say something small.” His fingers illustrated the size of Jack’s wounds. “Twenty-two, nine millimeter, maybe?”

“Could you determine how far away the shooter was from -”

“Doctor! Doctor Hess!” Approaching rapidly, the voice got louder and shriller with each syllable. “She’s crashing! Your patient is *crashing*!”

“Ficken sie.” Stethoscope held firm, two healing hands kept it from flopping off as he ran to cancel the Grim Reaper’s collection. “Sorry, officer!”

Not all the information he was after, but enough to start forming a hypothesis. *Nine mil. Matches the others. But, not the MO. Jack’s shoulder, not his eyes – thank god! From a distance, I’d say, not point blank. Outside, not in. A stranger, maybe, not an – shit! Ten minutes!*

But, as Ennis rushed to the public elevators, one side conversation became two –

“Sarge! Yo, Sarge!” His name bellowed across the waiting room. “Sarge, wait up!”
The face that lumbered to catch his hurry to Jack was familiar. But, from where?

“How’s Jack? He is going to be OK? Surgery? Any broken bones? What’s up with Jack?”

Coming closer and the answer continued to nag just outside of his memories reach. He knows Jack. Friend, maybe? A colleague I’ve seen at court? Even closer, and Ennis also recognized blood stains, dried to rust. A random act of kindness, then. Only met Jack today?

“That bitch at the front desk won’t tell me shit.”

Right in front now, and the nag skipped from second to fifth. I know this face, I know this face! Think, Del Mar, THINK! “Have we met?”

The face laughed, rumbling in the depths of its barrel chest. “In a manner of speaking, I guess. The last time I saw you, you were passed out piss drunk in my back seat, Jack holding on to keep you from falling on the floorboards”


“In the flesh!” And he extended a big chunk of it for the shake. “I’m the one that brought Jack in. With the help of that fucker DA.”

The grip on the cabbie’s hand tightened. “Thank you, Herman, thank you.” He had two reasons to show his gratitude: Jack’s life, and his similar opinion of Daniel.

“Won’t say that it was my pleasure, but, well, you know what I mean, and you’re welcome. So, how’s Jack?”

“Doctor thought he was patched up enough to be sent to a room. Seven-twenty-eight. I’m on my way.” Shit! Seven minutes! And still no Jell-o! “Hold that elevator! Sorry, Herman, I’ve got to – thanks again!”

“Say hello to Jack for me!”

“I will!” The last one in a sardine packed elevator, Ennis had to scrunch up tight between Pink Lady and a balloon man, the I know that face nagging thing refusing to quiet down even when supplied with the name Herman. From somewhere other than Thanksgiving night’s cab ride? Couldn’t possibly, but I do know that face. What the hell is the right answer?

Two conversations became three –

“No, Junior, don’t come down here.”

“But, Dad -”

“No, not for a couple of days.” All he really needed to exit the elevator was lift his feet and allow the mass of people to drag him along. “Jack’s not really up to seeing visitors just yet, I’m sure.” Jack’s not up to much of anything but drooling on his pillow right about now.

“OK.” She conceded the point with a angsty, teenaged sigh. “But, on the weekend we’re both coming to the city to see him. A hotspot created out the joy over his daughters’ concern and affection for the man he loved should have burned a dinosaur killing meteor crater in the center of his chest. I am too fucking blessed for my own good. “Alright, this weekend, then.”

“Tell him we said hello – what, Franny? Oh, and give him a kiss for us. Like you need her lame
prompting, going to do that anyway, am I right?”

“Uh…” awkward subject, even if rhetorical, “love you, Junior.”

“You, too, Dad.”

So, by the time Ennis reached Jack’s floor, he had accumulated three side conversations, two requests for hellos, one proxy kiss and still had a minute to spare.

But, no fucking Jell-o!

Fourth, and final side conversation caught him pinching strawberry flavored gelatin from the seventh floor kitchen.

“The tech said something about a tracking program,” three cups of that disgusting stuff fit rather nicely in each jacket pocket. Don’t forget the spoon. “On the computer chip I found in Adrian’s bracelet. Didn’t tell you about…no, guess I didn’t, haven’t spoken to you since…no, don’t have the time now, sorry.” Look left, look right, look left, look right, the coast was clear, Ennis slipping from the kitchen unnoticed. “Credit card fraud, he said, snarfing numbers and the…no clue, I’m thinking it’s a made up computer geek word…yeah, all untraceable.” Round the corner, waiting area and vending machines behind him, the room count could now commence, searching ahead for Jack’s at the end of the hall.

Seven hundred...seven-oh-two...seven-oh-four...

“Then he started babbling about Homeland Security,” a nod to the trio of nurses reading Cosmo at the station, “didn’t hear anything after that. Had my own problems to lose my shit over.”

Seven-oh-six...seven-oh-eight...seven-ten...

“No, haven’t contacted the guys in the Central Park Division, but my instincts tell me…yes, got to be the same…” Somebody had Bill O’Reilly on high, sharing the narcissistic drivel with everyone. “You go over to forensics, Don, then call me when you’ve deciphered…”

Seven-twelve...seven-fourteen...seven-sixteen...

A door opened at the other end of the hall - “No, I can’t…staying here tonight.”

Seven-eighteen... seven-twenty...seven twenty-two...

“Probably be here the rest of the week.” – out of a patient room, backward, a figure in scrubs, an employee looked like – “yeah, and more than likely next, so if you could tell Cap, I’d appreciate…”

Seven twenty-four...seven twenty-six...Jack’s -

– those scrubs glanced down the hallway, then headed for the stairwell.

“Oh, fuck.”

The face a bit older, heavier, more sober than his drunken frat boy picture, but still unmistakable. The guy that LD bitched about, the guy that beat Jesse to a pulp, the guy that’s suspect Number One is every single fucking case it seemed, that same guy just came out of Jack’s room -

“Hunnie.”
Chapter 34

The Rules of “The Game”:

1) Any police officer wishing to participate must first identify themselves -

“Police! Freeze!” The Seventh floor hallway reverberated with Ennis’ panic. That’s Jack’s – Jack’s room!

- and the declaration must be accompanied with a presentation of their identification, if not prominently displayed prior to initial introduction. Then only may he/she state the demand to halt. 2) Suspect must acknowledge the police officer’s request to initiate The Game – a hand gesture, a verbal response, anything that is clearly visible to the officer –

A snap of a dark head, and a “Run, Run Fast as You Can” smile.

- before it may commence. 3) Police officer may now choose to either, A) Repeat the original order, or B) Proceed directly to the active phase by moving at an accelerated rate towards the suspect –

Don went into his pocket, concerned and startled questions – “Ennis? Ennis! What’s hap-” – unanswered. Weapon unclipped and drawn, Doc Martins sprinted forward. How, how, HOW did he find out which room so fucking fast? “Police! Don’t you fucking move!” - with the obvious intent to apprehend and detain. 4) Suspect is now required to ignore any and all warnings, orders or demands of approaching officer by departing the scene with all due haste in a manner that leaves no doubt as to the route of escape.

Apparently the Gingerbread Man didn’t feel up to playing chicken with Rampaging Cop, so Hunnie turned tail and ran.

“Goddamnit!” Who knows, who knows where Jack was supposed to be?

But, in order for this round to be regulation, the suspect’s path should be one of the following:

a) Crowded with NPCs (non-playing character), i.e. civilians or innocent by-standers –

Shouts in the otherwise subdued and relatively mundane world of a med/surg floor had enticed the curiously bored to each open door, caretaker and cared for alike forming two parallel lines of potential targets.

“Everybody! Back in your rooms!” The staff, here and ER –
The authority and urgency was quite apparent in the voice, yet the possible casualties were still reluctant to relinquish their vicarious claim on this rare piece of excitement.

“Damnit! BACK IN YOUR ROOMS!” And Daniel…and Herman –

Perhaps it was civic duty that pricked their consciences into action, or the sight of a single man barreling down the hall – crazed cop with gun or no - had a very short shelf life that sent the rubbernecker scurrying to safety. More than likely, though, it was Ennis' over the head, over exaggerated weapon cocking and the whiz of a series of bullets flying that missed his head by a whisper.

- and the whole fucking hospital 'cause I shouted it across the waiting room! “FUCK!”

An off-beat and frantic rhythm of slamming doors, all gone to ground except –

“You!” A feminine figure in white froze, her retreat hesitating a moment too long, and mid-flight, Ennis latched on to a thin arm, dragging the unfortunate nurse along with. He had no time, no time to – “Sergeant Del Mar, NYPD. Come with me!”


“Here!” A pause only to shove his cargo at the door of 728. “Check on Jack!” Jack is fine, Jack is OK, Jack, please, please be - Then back to the chase.

b) Dangerous, providing numerous possibilities for pursuing officer to be injured or incapacitated in the line of duty.

The stairwell door clicked shut, Ennis ten yards short.

“Fuck!”

Junkyards, parking lots, abandoned buildings all hold great potential, anything that provides obstacles the officer must climb over, under or around, and places of concealment for the suspect. (Note: At night, unless in a well-lighted area, all routes qualify).

The heavy door, a metal firebreak per code, jarred Ennis' kicking leg to the hip, pain biting sharp when he jumped on to the concrete landing, weapon leading the charge. The first set down and the switch back – empty, but the stairwell snitched, echoes of Hunnie’s retreating steps, not distinct enough, however, to gauge what floor he had reached.

Just where the fuck do you think you’re going? Not dealing with a rookie here, you know.

c) Officer-as-Target – This only applies if the fleeing suspect is armed –

Side step…side step…the door shushed shut…side step…right thigh utilized banister as anchor, sneaking a glance over, line of sight the path along his extended arms to locked together hands to Springfield .45 and down. You think I haven’t chased thousands of pukes like –

- if so, the route must grant the suspect ample opportunity to fire –

The light exploded, covering Ennis with plastic and glass and darkness.

“Oh, fuck.”
- directly at the chasing officer with intent to, not only dissuade and/or maim, but also kill, thus bringing The Game to a rapid conclusion.

(NOTE: The officer may return fire, seeking a similar outcome. However, while the suspect may fire his/her weapon with impunity, or to the limit of ammunition available, the officer will be obliged to report as to all actions, those leading up to and including the pursuit, as well as after - should he/she survive – the legality and causality for said officer’s use of deadly force, whether all steps to avoid the discharge of their weapon were attempted. In addition, the officer’s weapon will be examined if fired, and all ammunition used must be accounted for.)

A head shake, and tiny tinkles sang against the concrete, Ennis actually grateful. *Gives me cover at least down to the next level, you stupid fucker.* Back to the wall, he stepped down, a smooth foot over foot maneuver, graceful and silent, as ears tuned to the stairwell’s voice, listening for...*any breathing...gun reloading...door opening...* somewhere below, something that would give Hunnie away. *He’ll fuck up, they always do.*

5) If all criteria have been met, The Game may proceed.

The slide down continued, Ennis moving from seven to six, from shadow to light, from covered to exposed.

*I’m coming for you, fucker. If you mussed one hair on his head...*

6) It is permitted for the pursuing officer to request help – in the vernacular, back-up - or accept it when offered, ideally from other law enforcement personnel.

A door opened, the stairwell telling cryptic secrets.

_Not Hunnie ‘cause it came from –_

“Hello?”

_Ssssssssssh! Keep fucking quiet! Who the fuck is – oh._

The bobbing on a chain shield and NYPD issue piece emerging from seven’s shadow was all the introductions necessary.

“Del Mar.”

“Nguyen.”

“Eighty-First.”

“Central Park.”

“How?”

“Nurse.”

“Jack?”

“Wasted.”

“Alone?”
“Partner.”

“Suspect?”

“Briefly.”

An entire conversation of mouthed words, details conveyed by hand gestures, Det. Nguyen following Sgt. Del Mar’s lead down.

“Maybe on four.”

“Why?”

“Murder.”

“Vics?”

“Nine.”

“Armed?”

“Ye -”

“FUCK!”

Plyer of coy clues no more, the stairwell shouted with exuberance, providing a head’s up to everyone’s location indiscriminately. Footsteps thundering to reach bottom faster than humanly possible.

“Sergeant! You’re hit!”

“No! Really?”

The thiiiiip of a silencer spitting out a clip’s remains, the pops of bullets writing abstract graffiti on the wall.

“Sergeant!”

“Hunnie, you fucking bastard! STOP!”

A door banging to the wall as it opened, slamming to the frame as it closed.

“GODDAMNIT!”

Only a floor too late, Ennis trailed after Hunnie, a crimson river slicking his cheek, sweat stinging with a salty vengeance, hair grayed by concrete dust, anger and anxiety and fear all yanking him forward, shoving him hard, bellowing curses that - if he believed in that place, would most assuredly punch his ticket south - scratching at his throat, Jell-O cups plopping about his feet, and he burst out –

“Oh, my sweet Jesus.”

- his cocked weapon aimed directly at a Pink Lady and her flower cart.
New York Presbyterian was a major medical center in the most populous city in the US, and even at this evening’s hour, the main lobby reflected that premiere status, the crowd of people to-ing and fro-ing a fair representation of NYC’s diversity. Men, women, seniors, children, black, white, all walks of life and some only New York would claim spilled out of the kicked over Melting Pot, Big Apple stew splashing bodies everywhere, panoply of color and sound and movement and life that reached out to the horizon and the twenty-four hour café serving goulash and empanadas. And dotting the wave caps in humanity’s choppy seas – an inestimable count of green scrubs, some disappearing, still more joining the recipe as he stood there gawking.

Oh, Christ…this is fucking impossible…this is fucking insane…this is for Jack.

“Move! Out of the way! POLICE! MOVE!”

Ennis Mosesed through the crowd, the waters parting, colors trickling away, exposing barren floor and hospital seal mosaic.

“HUNNIE!”


A dizzying circle in the center – scrubs and sweaters and coats and robes, brown hair, blonde hair, gray hair, no hair, visitor or doctor or patient or nurse – erratic, lopsided, frantic, hopeless.

Info desk he was following Jack – gift shop he was in Jack’s room – hallway he was alone with Jack – waiting area he wants Jack dead – front –

“Is there a problem, officer?”

- security guard.

“Sergeant Del Mar, Eighty-First, Homicide.” Shaky and stiff fingers returned the live round to the clip, engaged the safety, weapon slipping back home on his hip. “Did you see a man in scrubs running through the lobby?”

“This is a hospital, sir. People in scrubs are always running. But, none within the last five minutes or so. You did know you’re bleeding, right?”

“Shit!” A potted plant felt his fury and frustration. I had him, I fucking had him! And then I lost him. “He had to come through - I just chased a murder suspect down from seven and -”

The security guard, Devon Jackson according to his name tag, did what all efficient security guards do – he reached for his walkie-talkie. “All units, all units. Secure the exits. Nobody in or out. Repeat, secure all exits. We’ve got a situation here.”

“Well?” Disheveled, out-of-breath and pin-wheeling to a stop, Det. Nguyen arrived. “You catch the perp?”

“OK, Sergeant.” Officer Jackson stood proud of his security forces quick reaction times to any emergency. “All exits are secure, closed up tight.”

The miasma of people milling about the lobby had thinned, but could still count as a small crowd, a well-attended gathering, or a mob just waiting for their torches and pitchforks. “Which doesn’t mean
shit if he walked out before…I…got…wait.”

“Sergeant Del Mar, what are you doing?”

A brisk retracing of steps, half way across the lobby, Det. Nguyen skittering behind. “Twenty-five yards, wouldn’t you say? Give or take a first down.” A rough estimate of the distance between stairwell and front door.

“More like thirty I’d -”

And back to the lobby’s center. “No way he got out just walking casually. Not enough time.”

“You got a description of the guy you’re looking for?”

“And no fucking way with all of the Upper East Side between him and the front door, so he had to…and dressed in scrubs he could -” Oh, Christ. Jack. “Description - ask her.”

“Wait, where are you going?”

“Seventh floor!” Hunnie’s still here and Jack’s alone. Hunnie’s still in the hospital and Jack’s –

“Hey, Del Mar!” Long, black bangs swished with the head turn, her shout a nasal tap on the shoulder of the streaking like a bat out of hell cop. “Send my partner down, will you?”

- not alone. OK, Jack's with Nguyen's partner, Nguyen’s coordinating with Jackson, Jackson’s got security, hospital’s locked down tight. They’ll find the bastard, they’ll find Hunnie. He’s safe, Jack’s safe.

Ennis pulled up to a trot, changing direction from stairs to elevator, his legs and back sighing with gratitude.

Bet he’s wondering what the hell I’m doing, why the nurse tossing, where’s the Jell-O. Bet he’s lying up there talking, babbling and shit, drugged up and silly. Bet he’s smiling, lips tipped crooked, tongue peeking out, daring a guess as to what he’s thinking which is more than likely dirty as hell. Smiling with dimples and crow’s feet, smiling and - God! I fucking love his mouth! I love fucking his mouth. I love him. And I could have lost him. Twice.

Still headed for the elevators, his pace quickened again.

No more risks, no more chances. Won’t, can’t lose him. Where Jack is, that’s me there, too. Joined at the hip, night and day. With us, though, more like joined at the dick and ass. Oh, god…Jack’s ass.

A vibrating phone gave Ennis a socially acceptable reason to stick his hand in his pocket, instead of the one that caused a hitch/jump in his stride. So what if he left it ring two more times before answering. Probably Don pissed that I hung up on him. Shit, if he knew what I was doing with his call. “Del -” Fuck! He switched to his right ear. “Mar.”

“Sergeant, this is Matt from Forensics. You got a minute? You really should hear this.”

“Sure, Matt.” Ennis was one of ten people, and the only one interesting enough for stares, each pre-passenger waiting to take a turn at pushing the already illuminated button to call the elevator to the lobby, an exercise in futile hope that no one ever seemed to tire of. Not Don. Still need to call him when I get to Jack’s room. But, not before I kiss that mouth, though. Hand went back into his pocket as Jack caused woody camouflage. Might have to put off Don until tomorrow. “What about?”
“About that chip you brought in. It’s…it’s…wow!” The prepubescent voice crack added in just the right touch of awestruck excitement. “I’ve never seen anything like this!”

“Like what?” An elevator finally did arrive with a cheery ding, but Ennis was suddenly too exhausted to run to the other side. Why is it never the one I’m standing in front of?

“The fucking program! A Trojan horse high jacker that bypasses security protocols on closed systems via WIFI to allow third party, remote location access.”

“And that means…?”

“Fucking brilliant!”

“Wait a minute. I thought you said this thing just stole credit card numbers.” DING! ‘Bout damn time.

“Yes, it does that, too. Fast and untraceable.” Neophyte stuff by Matt’s tone of voice. “But, the program underwritten in the code is that serious shit I mentioned. I just didn’t know how serious until now.”

“And how serious are we talking about here?” The flow of the getting off at the lobby passengers spring thaw strong, Ennis holding back until he was the last to enter so he could stand and look at the doors only, and not all the other people and think about their combined weight stressing a single cable and all the oxygen they were using up in that small, cramped space and that had nothing to do with claustrophobia. Nope. Just his little peculiar ritual. “Homeland Security. Isn’t that what you said?” And if I didn’t need to see Jack, be with Jack, hold Jack and feel his breath on my skin, count his heart beats, watch him living, if I didn’t need to love him...but I do. I need Jack always.

“All a person needs is a laptop, a wireless connection and this program and they could open bank vaults, shut down Wall Street, reroute subway trains, confuse air traffic controllers and there isn’t one thing to stop them.”

“Holy fucking Christ.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Get on the phone to the FBI and Homeland Security, then. Call them, tell them to get their asses -” A hand stopped the door short of kissing its mate, a pause for a shield on a chain to bounce by the elevator, the dumpy, balding in a rumpled black suit cop schlepping away from the elevators, out to the lobby, and right up to Detective – Oh – god - my Jack is now –

A flash. Brilliant, blinding, brief. A mirror reflecting, an object shining, light bouncing off glasses from the waiting area snagged Ennis’ attention.

Goddamn. That’s...

The suspect is, of course, also permitted to obtain help from what, where or whomever they choose, legality of any parties’ actions not an issue.

Sitting there in the far corner looking nerdy and completely dismissible as harmless - Adrian's nephew, Hunnie's frat bother, Jeff Lockhart and his laptop.

“Can it fuck with Con-Ed, too?”

“You bet. Would have this city by the -”
And everything went dark.

**********

All he wanted was some non-green Jell-O.

Red or yellow or blue or...I like orange...orange is good. Nana Spencer always made me orange...liked going to Nana and Papa Spencer's...took me fishing and let me use a hammer and stay up past my bedtime and...He wasn't...orange in that white bowl with blue flowers on the...and Cool Whip...Cool Whip...Cool Whip makes everything good...pie and cookies and cherry cake and...but not green...not even Cool Whip can make green...tastes awesome right out of the container, big spoonfuls...two...three...can't let mom see me 'cause she'd get...if He catches me, belt for sure, beat me so hard I...I hate green...that's the only color they had, that other place, that other hospital, nurses bringing me green all the time...green, green, green...only there because He...so mad He broke...told me to lie, or it would happen again...so, I did, but it did again...and again...and again...and no chunks...chunks feel weird in my mouth, chunks get caught in my throat, chunks stick in my braces...even bananas are gross...bananas belong in pudding and Cheerio's, not Jell-O...just Jell-o...just non-green Jell-O...and Ennis.

"Mr. Twist?"

"What's...left of...me."

Non-green Jell-o and Ennis...and cool whip...oh...Ennis and Cool Whip...Ennis wearing just Cool Whip...me eating Cool Whip right off...wait for it...wait for it...wait for...damn...morphine kills pain and boners.

"OK, I'm just here to check on your IV's."

Want Ennis, even with no Cool Whip...even with no non-green...not this guy...this guy's too short...too skinny...no ass...has it been fifteen...feels like hours since...how long does it take to get up here from...shit.

"You might feel a little sting for a moment."

Ennis was...and Daniel was...a thorough ass kicking takes at least - "Wait...what're you...doing to...my -"

“Mr. Twist? OK to come in?”

Such a curse...being so popular. “And...you...would be?”

“Detectives Nguyen and Schneider from Central Park division. Mind if we ask you a few
questions?"

Didn't need to see badges – flashed too high anyway, out of his listing on the right side, lost behind plastic tubing, sightlines Too fucking...sleepy...move my... - to peg the new arrivals as cops. Shoes, can always tell by...scuffed and sensi...ble. “Sure...but not a...bout...chemi...stry...I suck at...chemi...”

“Oh, shoot. I forgot something.” It abruptly stopped, that annoying tug on the hairs of his hand smothered in the tape holding the IV in place. “I’m sorry, Jack. I'll be right back.”

Third pair of shoes walked into view – “Don't...expect me to...wait up.” – steel tipped biker boots paused at the chair near the door. Biker boots...and Bluetooth leaning into...one of these...things just...doesn't belong here...looking at my - what - fuck is he – “Hey, ski...nny ass guy, what -”

That out of place footwear exited the room immediately, door closing with a shush click behind.

Fuck...er was rife...ling through my...Christ, I'm...just going to...close my...only a se...cond...got case files in...there and...so tired, and wallet, cre...dit...cell...tic... … ...

Whites…darks…socks, t-shirts, boxers, towels…one cap full in the washer…four quarters in the dryer…pick up Ennis’ ass…in the laundry room at my…parent’s house? I’m having a Freudian dream, a Freudian dream with major appliances…in my parent’s house and I’m fucking Ennis, and I’m fucking him…he’s over the dryer - on heavy load, of course – ass up and begging for me, needing me to fuck him, wanting my...and I’m fucking him...slow, deep, hard...fucking his ass with my dick and fucking his mouth with my tongue...jerking him off as I slide in and out...he wants me to go faster, harder, but I don’t…want this to last...want to stay inside, my dick happy to be right where it is...fucking Ennis while the dryer spins under us, the heat making us sweat, the fuck making us crazy...fucking Ennis, taking Ennis, topping Ennis while my father –

“Mr. Twist?”

...tacs. “Uh?” A stuttered blink back to almond eyes peering between the handrails. “Wha?”

“Can you tell us what happened?”

My brain...is ferment...and she’s ask...ing stupid... “I was...shot.”

Though none was offered, the detective accepted the non-invitation to pull a chair up close, hunkering down in the beige vinyl, not losing the tenuous thread of eye contact or questions skipping a beat. “Yes, sir, we know. That’s why we’re here to investigate. What were you doing in the Park?”

He had never liked Picasso. Or Pollack. Or even Degas, for that matter, preferring the crisp clarity of Ansell Addams photographs, or the deep detail of the human body of Steve Walker. Pointillism, Impressionism, Cubism, all just intellectually bogus words invented for critics' paycheck justifying and excuse making over artists who obviously needed either glasses or possessed less talent than a second grader. Probably both. That was exactly the gallery he was trapped in now, though, eyes not quite able to focus on the earnest expression swimming inches away, brows nearly bumping heads in the middle of his frown, the effort Herculean to concentrate on finding the answers requested, morphine the docent to his freakish modern art show, recent memories a giant canvas of splotchy blobs, places washed out and fuzzy edged, faces distorted, skewed to almost unrecognizable.

You know...both eyes on...one side act...ually suits Dan...iel. “Talk…ing.”

“To?”
“Will…and…Boo…and Atti…cus.”

“Atticus…Finch?”

Now she’s…being…sil…ly. “No, Atticus pid…geon. And I was ty…ing my shoe and…” May…be if I…close my… “Dan…iel walked…up and…Herman…drove…Nazi doc…Ennis…En…nis…En…
 … … … …  …”

He can’t see me…doesn’t know we’re watching him…watching him as he undresses, watching him tweak his nipples red, watching him lick his palm, watching him on the other side of a two-way mirror and he’s touching him – wait. This is his fantasy, not mine. What the – Ennis is naked and hard and spanking it, so just go with it, OK? On the table, his legs falling open, his dick pointing to the shitty light fixture…body stretched, muscles defined by the shadows, sparkling skin and he’s wearing a cowboy hat…hips rise with his hand, tight ass off the table, flat stomach sucking in, veins popping, tendons taut, rough strokes that make him gasp, harsh strokes that make him tremble…one hand on his dick, dripping wet and slick, the other squeezing his balls… and I’m right there with him, matching his hand, following his lead, mine just as red, just as hard, just as ready, and now they’re watching us both, watching us jerk off and he’s pulling and pulling…shuddering, shaking… and I’m pinching the head…he’s tasting himself…and we’re stroking and stroking…he’s screaming my name with every –

“Chloe, go now!”

“Be right back!” Sensible shoes darted for the corridor.

“Oh?” A shout, Jack snapped back, the door opened and – in flies a… “Hel…lo.”

“I’m supposed to – told to. A cop in the hallway – Sergeant. Del Mar – check on Jack.”

There had to be a smile somewhere there, smooshy and syrupy, lost in his pillow. “Ennis…” Who is a…parent…ly in the hall…toss…ing nurses. “My part…he can…swallow…he have any Jell…O?”

“A police officer? Some kind a trouble in the hall?”

“I don’t know! I heard him shout, then he was running after somebody, there was shooting -”

“Christ! Miss, you stay here!”

Now I got…no cops…and no…

“Uh…Jack…how are you feeling? OK?”

“Define…OK.”

“Any discomfort, any pain?”

Even my short…curlies are…numb, and every…too…damn…it…’cause I still…got Cool…Whip on my… “Ask me…on St. Pat…rick’s…Day.”

“Comfortable? Are you cold?”

Yes…no…yes…yes… “No.” …yes…you know…she’s got the…same shoes as…Alice…

“Can I get you anything?”
Yeah… “Ennis…” … and… and… and… “Ennis…” … and… and… and… “Jell…O.” … and… and… and think… I’ll… just… … maybe… sleep… until he… won’t mind… if… I…

“Coming right up! Think we have some lime in the fridge.”

Fuck… ing… hate… hos… pit…………………

My head slams to the car hood, hot engine burning my cheek – Hey! It’s my Mustang! - can’t fight back… he’s holding me, pressing me down… handcuffed… trapped and caught… I’m his to play with and we both know it. ”Why didn’t you listen to me, goddamnit!”… jeans unbuttoned by a harsh hand, pulled down, ripped off, torn away… legs kicked apart… further… further… further, and the wind scratches dirt across my bare ass, gravel from the abandoned parking lot, newspaper sticks to my naked leg. “Said you would call! Said you would be careful!” Ennis’ shouting as he mounts me… ramming in, quick, hard, unrelenting… dick searing, splitting me in two… no warm-up, no grace period… just pounding… pounding… pounding…” I love you, Jack!” Head snatched back, his tongue plows in, teeth biting for the taste of blood… his hips beat my thighs to fiberglass, his dick, feel in my throat, his hand stings my ass… punishment for being foolish, a lesson to teach me…”Only one place where you belong, Jack!” … and I want this, I need this… I want him, I need him… Each thrust, he’s yanking me up, dick pulling me up off the ground, filling me completely, punching my sweet spot, dick bullying me towards the edge…”With me, Jack, you belong with me, to me.” Nasty hand jerks on my dick, impatient, demanding, wrenching me to come, to explode in his hand as he unloads inside me. “Ennis without Jack is death. Ennis with Jack is -”

“Mr. Twist?”

Christ… don’t I get to… to shoot my… not in my… not even once? “Uh?”

“Told you I’d be back.” A stuttered blink back to almond eyes peering through the handrail. “And now I want to talk about you and Jesse.”
"And now I want to talk about you and Jesse."

There had to be one in there somewhere. A response, a comment, a coherent thought of acknowledgment.

Perhaps stuck between *Mapp v. Ohio* and *Lawrence v. Texas*, exculpatory and habeas corpus, in there with law school, Court of Appeals justice clerking, six years at New York’s benches, or squeezed on the pleasure reading book shelf, tucked up with Dickens, Heinlein, King, McCullough and Stewart, the Complete Works of William Shakespeare, sonnets and plays listed alphabetically and in iambic pentameter. Or it was mixed in with the recipe for bouillabaisse, paella, sachertorte, his Nana Spencer’s super-secret, extra special, don’t ever tell the Widow Jenkins, JJ, winner of the blue ribbon at the annual Our Wounded Savior Lutheran Church Fourth of July Jamboree and Rummage Sale for Orphans and Misguided Girls five years in a row meatloaf. Possible that it could be lingering in the current events section of *The Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, *US News and World Report* and *The Advocate* editorials, or dishing the gossip with *Towelroad*, *PITNB* and *E! News*, too. Even sulking through the shadows of Gotham City or Metropolis maybe, swinging between skyscrapers high above NYC by a silvery, spun thread. Surely in his Ennis file then, for that program was always running, memory capacity infinite, the catalog of folders always expanding – ‘hands and chest’, ‘legs and ass’, ‘sighs and moans’; ‘Ennis as he sleeps’ and ‘Ennis as he eats’ and ‘Ennis as his smiles scrub the dark place within clean.’ And there was Sex with Ennis and all of its subfolders – ‘positions, locations and technique’, ‘top and/or bottom,’ ‘handcuffs and/or spanking,’ ‘the sight of his dick,’ ‘the taste of his dick,’ ‘the fucking amazing, toe curling, name forgetting, never get enough if he fucks me 365 plus leap year days until our surprise 40th anniversary party feeling when Ennis drives in deep’, that last one receiving the most hits.

Though the brilliant mind of John Zachary Twist, Jr., Esquire was exhausted, overwrought and under poppy’s soporific influence, there should have been at least two designated driver synapses left to rub together.

“You…boots…bag…huh?”

Apparently not.

“Ah, come on, Jack. Jesse, Jesse Whitfield. You remember, that crazy, homeless bastard?”

“Of course…I remem…Jess…but…” Confusion had joined morphine, two against not really even one at this point, the formidable tug-of-war team determined to see lucidity covered in sloppy, slimy mud. *Why is…IV guy…Jesse…? “Who…are you?”*

“A friend. What did youse talk about when you saw him today? What did he tell you?”

Ah, well, no more energy to focus or figure out needed to be scraped from his on empty batteries now. With that one question from the insincere smile at the other end of his nose, this bizarre and off-putting conversation pulled up short. “Sorry, can't say...” He had better places to be anyway then knocking on this conundrum’s door while wearing cut-offs to a black tie soiree. "...attor… ney/cli… ent….” Lashes went a’visiting, bumping once…twice…to stop for an extended stay with their
southern kin. “…pri…vledge. Now, if…you will…ex…” Where were…Mustang…empty…lot…Ennis fucking…Ennis spank –

“Oh, no you don’t, Jack.” Four slaps, quick and sharp, against a slackened jaw. “No falling asleep on me now. Where is it?”

“Fucking ass…hole…” Anger stepped up, taking the anchor spot for the home team, a one-handed yank, and the marker flag returned to the middle of the mud pit, fuzzy and stupid retreating to the concessions stand for nachos and a slushee. “Don’t you fuck…ing touch…” Fish flopping time again, Jack struggled against drugs and fatigue, pillows and blankets, IVs and immobilizer to reach a less beached whale, tied to the tracks, deer out in the open on hunting season’s first day, helplessly vulnerable position he found himself in. Skinny ass…guy is in…serious need of…some bed…side manner…interven…tion. “…me a – hey, get – away - put that – god – damnit!”

“Where is it, Jack?” Case files, legal pads, law books, Post-It notes, newspaper, take-out menus, boxers, condoms, pencils, pens, Tic-Tacs, the hands violating the messenger bag indiscriminately dumping his life across the floor. “Where is it?”

“Stop – what -” Jack could take comfort for help was but a convenient thumb press away, the call button ready and eager to summon an angel of mercy in SpongeBob scrubs from the nurse’s station just a few scant yards down the hall. This is...so going on my...com...ment...card where...where...is... Help to retrieve said call button the fish flopping had bounced out of reach of his IV imprisoned hand to dangle by a slick white cord off the side of the bed was but a few scant feet across the room turning his messenger bag inside out, demanding answers to enigmatic questions and all Jack could take from that was panic. “Shit.”

“Where is it?”

“What…the fuck…” Push off...push...up, move, move...MOVE...to...to...you know, now would be...to...top of...my hand can...“...are you -”

“We turned his dump of a room at Bellevue. Nothing.”

“I don’t…know…” Fin...gers, fin...gers...feel...where...where...a fucking great time...where is... got to...be...“...what you...want from-”

“Only bullshit scribbled on the fucking walls.”

“Why do…you…” Al...most, al...most...fingers reach...reach...to get your ass...reach...al...most... “...think I -”

“Bullshit and your name.”

“I can’t...help -” Inch...up...inch...up...got it...got it...in here, En – “MY...name?”

“Jack Twist understands, Jack Twist believes, Jack Twist knows, Jack Twist will – FUCK!” With no more secrets to tell, the messenger bag fell silent, a mute lump hurled in the far corner. “We know you have it, Jack. We know Jesse gave it to you. So, I’m going to ask you one more time…”

“Ho…ly sssssshit…” That’s a…that’s a… Call button retrieval abandoned for the knee jerk reaction to the inclusion of a firearm in this fucked up conversation.

“Where is it, Jack?”

“It…it…” The frantic flight clumsy, ill prepared and short lived – EnnisEnnisEnnisEnnisENNIS -
safety blocked by a handrail at his back. “…what... ththhthtte ffffffuck is -”

“What, Jeff, I’m - shit!” Bluetooth’s voice delivered alarming news, the gun waving agitated just on the other side of miles of plastic IV tubing. “I don’t care what you do, just don’t let that fucking cop get -”

Power failure, the room went black.

“Goddammit! Not that!”

Where is…can’t see... gun and I...can’t – A foot scrape. There! He’s – The rustle of cotton walking. No there! By the…can’t move, can’t see, can’t – Voices in the hall, muffled, concerned, efficient. Help, oh, god, help, he – The bleached light slicing in under the door flickered. Over at the - Shit, I’m...where...where...Ennis, I need you...now, Ennis...now ‘cause I’m...where the – Close...very close...too close. Breathe, hear him...shit...ENNIS! NOW! I can’t –

“AAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHH!!!”

The contract morphine had signed with Jack to eradicate any discomfort from his injury had not included a clause covering a direct assault. It apologized for any inconvenience this may in the present and future cause, then stepped discreetly aside until the hand grinding its heel into the open wound in question ceased.

“Wha – wha – wha -” Breath stuttered in, “- fu – fu – fu -” words skipped out, “-you – you – you -” the pain on a constant round trip, “- wa – wa – wa –” Jack’s brilliant mind taken down completely by the power surge.

“Only what belongs to me, that’s all.” The coo was slippery hot and thick in Jack’s ear, the boy who probably pulled wings off flies, burned ants with a magnifying glass, tied bottle rockets to cat’s tails, compared blood splatter distances between left and right eyes of all his victims wiped away cold sweat, his silencer clammy cheek caressing smooth and slow. “Just nicked you the first time, Jack. No thanks needed. Consider it a gift.”

Out in the hall, “Check….Twist….twenty-eight,” those SpongeBob angels still too far away.

Steel rested against temple, hand pushed down, “But, you only get one.”

I’m…I’m…I’m… “ENNNNN -”

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The foil ripped uneven, jagged, too-sweet apple juice slopping out, over fingers, on rumpled denim, a dribble of sticky dots across the floor.

“Fuck!”

The mattress under his propped up feet snuffled, blanket rippling as the body beneath sleep shifted,
and he held his breath until the waves of white and green calmed to still.

*Sorry ‘bout that, Jack.*

Opportunity’s carrot was dangling out there again, the chance to follow the man nasal snoring’s lead, the chance to turn off stress, tune out worry, to set aside the panic that was as familiar now as the IV bruised hand curled into his, the chance to fill in a few of those sleep deficit notches the past two days of Jack recuperation had gouged deep.

And the vote was unanimous. Gritty eyes wanted to close longer than the time it took to be rubbed raw. Lead heavy limbs, longing to stretch, relax, something other than interminable hours of bedside waiting and endless room pacing, agreed. Bored with the single thought ‘Keep Jack Safe!’ mantra, a repetition forced sharp by a forty-eight hour line of Styrofoam cups and fear, his mind came in on the same side. Even spine and back, though both would be subjected to The Rack — a fold-out chair for stay over family members provided with a smirk by hospital staff — shouted their affirmative, his body as a whole was cajoling, pleading, *demanding* some serious horizontal down time.

But, this hospital room was not a democracy, deprivation without representation, Ennis trapped under the cruel totalitarian regime of his dreams.

*Red, always red…blood red.*

Sleep deficient because of sleep denied, Ennis was forced to seek peace elsewhere - schlumping in a chair that didn’t give an inch, strict frame uncomfortable regardless of position, caffeine jittering the rough-lipped plastic container to his mouth, sugar to add to the other filmy layers wallpapered there, watching the Weather Channel mumbling from the wall, Local on the Eights the same as yesterday – cold as a well digger’s ass - and watching the steady movement of the blanket, his Jack’s alive reassurance.

Inhale...exhale...inhale...exhale...that bruise on his temple is a nice shade of purple. Sling’s bothering him, rubbing a red line on his neck. Swelling’s almost gone, though. Inhale...exhale...inhale...exhale...don’t need a haircut, Jack. I like it long...he’s smiling...lips are...meant to be kissed, when they’re not busy...doing fucking amazing things to...dreaming, he’s dreaming, smiling and dreaming...what’re you dreaming about, Jack? Me and you...me doing you...you doing...inhale...exhale...inhale...exhale...want to crawl into...into bed with...be with...hold him as he sleeps...hold him as he dreams...hold him and never let...his legs between mine...ass pressed back to my...in the crook of my...listen to him...inhale...exhale...feel him...inhale...exhale...inhale...ex...

“Jack!”

Damn near stroked out hauling ass back up here and he isn’t even – drugs, it’s the drugs, it’s got to be . Wasted, that’s what Ngyuen said, wasted and I bet he’s passed out and didn’t know anything was going –

“Jack.”

Only see the bottom, only the bottom of the bed, bottom of the bed from the doorway, emergency lights only coming in so far, and it’s quiet, quiet in here, goddamn loud in the hall, but quiet in here, quiet, too quiet, so fucking quiet and I don’t hear him –

“Jack?”

*Breathing, at least, I should hear him breathing, shit, I’m five feet away, in the room, walking in the room, towards the bed and I still can’t hear him, still can’t see him, still can’t – what the...What am*
I…what the fuck am I stepping in? On the floor, all over the floor…slimy, sticky, on my boots, on my jeans, on my…smells like…looks like…it’s… it’s…

“Jack!”

“Sergeant, I knocked, but I didn’t -”

“Shit!” He regretted it immediately, the vise clamping in his neck cranking a few ticks tighter thanks to his chair jumping, body jerking, shirt drenching, Jack stirring, damn embarrassing start back to alert. “Shit.” Fucking fell asleep sitting - stupid, so stupid and fucking weak – what if – and they – Jack could have –

“En…nis…” The voice pillow slurred, drowsy ribbons binding it still. “…care…you?”

At his side instantly, fingertips soothed a stubbly cheek. “I’m here, I got you, you’re safe,” tender forehead kisses coaxing slumber’s return.

“You…cow…hat…hot…”

“Sssshhh, baby, ssshhh.” A stray lock of dark hair was scolded back in place and a non-existent blanket wrinkle received a smooth down before a hand motion and an ill-advised nod of the head retired the conversation to the bathroom doorway.

“I didn’t mean to wake you.” The barely above a whisper apology conciliatory and sincere, “I’m sorry, Sergeant.”

“No, no, Kisha. I shouldn’t have been - wait, is it already -” Neck knot kneading hand paused for a time check. “Antibiotics at nine.”

“There’s no need to wake him, though.”

“But, doesn’t he need, I mean, how is Jack -”

“Incredibly hot, brilliant and in love with you.”

The lines of his Jack smile crinkled, the grooves deep from copious amounts of practice. “He told you to say that, didn’t he?”

“Even wrote it down for me.” The 5x7 card pulled from her pocket flashed loopy, round words in red Sharpie. “To avoid a misquoting faux pas.”

“Self-diagnosis by Dr. Twist. He write his own prescriptions, too?”

The other side of the card presented Jack’s one word cure-all: Ennis.

“And I do believe one will make the other,” a tiny, thin paper cup was placed in his care, “go down easier. But, soon, with food. And don’t give into his Bambi eyes this time.” A wee, wisp of a little thing, and not much older than Junior, Kisha had proven to be remarkably immune to that fatal condition that afflicts most women when exposed to the Twist Charm. “No matter how much he whines.”

“Jack whine?” Mock protestation defended his partner’s honor. “No!”

“Yeah, right. And how long has he been my patient?”

Since Wednesday night, introductions made, thanks to Hunnie’s powers of persuasion, over blood
“So, you guys need anything in here?” Red gel pen counted Jack’s liquid intake, the number of empty juice containers in the trash, marking the total on his chart. “Last chance before shift change.”

A quick scan of the room – ice, water, apple juice, graham crackers, Carmex, crossword puzzle books, TV Guide, Jell-O. Check for everything on Jack’s Must Have to Survive This Fucking Hospital list. And a single check to my Must Have to Survive – Jack. “No, thank you. We’re set.”

“Well, goodnight, Sergeant. You take care of my favorite patient.” Perhaps not so immune after all, Kisha and her wink slipped out the door.

And there was another of Ennis’ sleep thieves.

No locks on patient rooms.

No knobs to speak of either. Just handles – flat, blunt, metal flaps more than halfway up – nullifying the wedged chair sh t i c k. There wasn’t even any furniture bulky enough, except the bed - and Jack didn’t much appreciate the lack of a view from that side of the room - to block danger’s brute force and determination.

Not that locks helped Cigar Butt.

“Every drawer, every file, every everything!”

“Christ.” Thursday morning wound check had had Jack surrounded by stethoscopes, Stephanie’s call interrupting an urgent kitchen errand, Ennis receiving this bad – yet, given yesterday’s revelations, not unanticipated – Legal Aid office news surrounded by Jell-O. “Anything missing?”

“In that mess, who can tell? Even overturned Jack’s desk. Mr. Stavros is not pleased. Think his face is going to implode.”

Two hours later, Ennis had eased the door closed, shielding Jack again from Stephanie’s second disaster call of the day and himself from the ‘No talking! Ellen is on!’ nasty looks. “Where are you now?”

“Standing in the hall, watching the knob get dusted for prints.” All her idea, to use the ‘In Case of Jack Shitfacery’ key tucked in the former tenant’s mezuzah to run in and grab a few comfort things – laptop, glasses, X-Men pjs – her contribution to Jack’s speedy recovery, before her hospital visit. Bathroom two bar reception had been clear enough to convey what had awaited behind their apartment’s front door “I’m so sorry, Sergeant. A basketball is about the only thing that’s salvageable.”

“Nothing?” No surprise here either. A perfectly straight line – Jack to Office to Apartment, the search progressing logically. Only the severity had given Ennis pause, and another beat to the rhythm section pounding in his head. “Nothing at all?”

“Even Jack’s fish, poor little guy. Smashed the bowl right in the middle of the kitchen floor.”

“Shit. That was his birthday -” And what happens at the end of that empty-handed line? It becomes a circle, returning to its starting point? “Just - shit.”

“What’s going on, Sergeant? First Jack’s shot, then his office, and now…” a frightened, frustrated sigh searching for something to knock things square again. “Who are these people? What the hell are they looking for?”
You know, that was the exact same question, but with less colorful adjectives, angry impetuous and brittle shrillness, that Jack had posed upon regaining consciousness Wednesday night. And Ennis, while watching impotent from the corner as assault re-opened wounds were tended, had done the math - Hunnie(murders)9 + programs / \ hospital - IT x Jesse(Charm/Shoplifting) + Client =

“The Staten Island Ferry.”

Lack of measurable shut-eye reason number three.

“What - the hell - is that suppo – goddamn!”

There had been no time – between entering, discovering, freaking, and calling for help to explain.

“That fucktard – IT - where was IT – that’s all he – SHIT!” Sodden gauze peeled away. “You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

“It’s what I live for, Mr. Twist. Just wait until it’s time to change that IV site.”

“Kisha de’ Sade, BSN.”

Not really the right place either, covered up as Jack was with medical intervention and blood.

“I’m almost done.”

“What, so - soon? Still have - some chest - hair you haven’t ripped – FUCK!”

“Sorry.” A sweet, innocent smile wrapped the bandage tighter.

So, Ennis had just held on – to Jack’s foot, the only place reachable, to their love, needing its strength desperately, to battered hope, the good guys do win in the end – listening to ‘What I Got Instead of Non-Green Jell-O’, punctuated liberally with rude commentary about the skills of the nursing staff, and waited for the right moment for his confession – how suspect connected with client, how case collided with case, how destiny clutched them both by the balls, and how he had kept all of this to himself for almost a week.

Make that no rest reason number four.

Morphine blurred Wednesday into Thursday, monosyllabic Jack conscious until the Jell-O cup was empty, Ennis unable to squeeze in any quality come clean time. After twenty-four hours, Jack banished the IV, the dazzling allure of pissing in a plastic jug not equal to the shaky legged stumble-shuffles to the bathroom. Subsequently, his meds were administered in pill form, the option of fast delivery injections nixed immediately.

“The only person that’s going to be sticking me in the ass is him!”

The weak wave from the doorway had introduced Ennis to the student nurse on her first, and only, visit to the room.

For what remained of Thursday, Jack was more often than not asleep and healing, the loss of the pump only freeing up his spoon hand, and a tiny spot on the right, Ennis’ learning curve for how to balance with half of your body off the bed abbreviated and, to his tail bone, painful.

Those conversations, whispered into greasy bed hair and bleached to death pillow cases, were too thin and airy to bear the weight of a falsehood admittance, containing more sighs than substance, Jack particularly enamored of repeating Ennis’ name followed by slumber slug kisses to the hand he
had just extolled the virtues of in hesitating, mind wandering detail.

After consuming as much rationalization as Jack had Jell-O, Ennis had concluded that to tell the complete truth when Jack was expatriated from coherency, a man without a short term memory, would be cowardly, if not damn near impossible. So, full disclosure continued to cool its heels, the appropriate moment on Will Call, the lie of omission winding tighter, deeper, blacker inside his heart.

Friday dawned bright and so did Jack, the first words out of his mouth – well, after “Bet I could fuck you with one arm strapped to my chest,” and ten minutes of “Good Morning, you,” kisses that the day shift nurse recorded as an accelerated pulse – were, “The Staten Island Ferry, huh? Would you care to enlighten me, or should I just draw my own conclusions.”

Mouth and throat suddenly Saharaed. The moment that he had been contemplating, planning, rehearsing, dreading for the past two agonizing days had finally arrived. “Jack – I -” And in one short paragraph, the time it took to spill his guts, Ennis had traveled from cherished lover lounging in Jack’s arms to piece of shit asshole exiled in shame to The Rack.

“You lied? You lied?”

Unimaginable as the pain of Wednesday night was – his Jack broken, unconscious, life seeping away – what stared back at him then, razor sharp blue disappointment and disillusionment, had been unbearable.

“Jack, I know I should have -”

“Shut up.”

“I’m sorry, Jack, I -.”

“Shut the fuck up.”

He had fucked up; in trying to safeguard and shield, he had discounted and belittled, not trusting the Jack he adored to be the man he fell in love with, and Ennis had been ready to accept it all, take everything on, to sign his name of the dotted line of complete culpability.

What he hadn’t been ready for was Silent Jack.

Nurses came and went, so did breakfast and lunch, Ellen, Dr. Phil, the ABC news at Noon, and still Jack had remained a shut down, closed up, facing away lump, who stopped even the terse rebuffs of Ennis’ apology attempts right after pain meds.

So, he refused to talk. He refused to even look or acknowledge. And after two days of mind shrieking, muscle cramping, heartburn bubbling, sleep destroying, ulcer producing worry over Jack, tending to his every need, every whim, suddenly freed from that exhaustive watch for the duration of Jack’s snit, what did Ennis do? Did he watch a little ESPN, catching up on the teams he had ignored? Did he make a few phone calls, touching base with his shut out family and friends? Did he go get a cup of coffee, get out of that cramped, stuffy prison cell of a hospital room, stretch his legs, clear his head? Did he close his eyes and rest, setting aside constant care and vigilance to show a little kindness to himself? Did he even take control and force a confrontation, as was his usual style, shouting, demanding to be heard? As the empty hours of the brooding tantrum collected dust, what had Ennis accomplished with that golden opportunity of long overdue peace and quiet?

He had sat there, chewing on his thumbnail, and kvetched with mind shrieking, sleep destroying, muscle cramping, heartburn bubbling, ulcer producing worry over Jack.
Talk to me, goddammit! Just talk to me! Come on, Jack, where’s the sarcasm, where’re the quips, where’re the sixty-four dollar words strung together in a convoluted sentence said in a tone of intellectual superiority? I know you want to, I know you’re probably over there just thinking about ways to dump on me. Come on, Jack, yell at me, scream at me, cut me down, insult me, abuse me, just fucking TALK TO ME!!!

He’s pissed at me, fucking pissed at me, goddamn, motherfucking pissed at me - but, I’m still here - still with him. He could have told me to fuck off, he could have told me to get bent, he could have told me to - he loves me - he loves me, and, oh, God, how I love him! We love each other - in love with each other and nothing can change that, right? Nothing can harm that, not even my stupid ass –

Then let me apologize, for Christ’s sake, let me tell you how fucking sorry I am for lying. Let me apologize, please, PLEASE, Jack! For not telling you, for not trusting you, for not believing in you, for doubting you, for dismissing you, for fucking assuming that I should be the one to make your decisions, for making you less than –

Oh, fuck, what have I - my fault, all my fault. I should have told him already, should have told him in the ER, I should have told him on the phone - before or after the birthday cake - at the Chinese Restaurant, when I found his business – Fuck! I should have told him that morning when I first saw Jesse’s file. Instead I fucked him. And fucked him. And fucked him. I handcuffed him to the headboard, then fucked him. I licked icing off his nipples, then fucked him. Janitor’s closet, living room floor, hanging off the bed, I fucked him. Shower, kitchen, elevator, I fucked him. Fuck, fuck, fuck –

“I know why you didn’t tell me.”

Elbow had slipped off the chair arm. “Wha - what did you say?”

A slow roll over, or as far as Jack could, a blue stone stare catching Ennis fast. “I know why you didn’t tell me.”

Crazy that he could still stand up seeing as how strength had whoosed out from the bottoms of his feet at the sound of Jack’s voice. “You do?”

“Yes, and that’s the only reason why I’m not adding this lie to my frequent flier miles accumulated over the years.”

Ennis hadn’t even known what end to start the wrapping around his brain process on that one. “Jack -”

“Protect and serve, that’s you, with a fucking HUGE emphasis on the protect.”

“I just wanted to -”

“I know precisely what you wanted to do. But, let me ask you this, Ennis, when did I ever ask you to protect me?”

“Jack, I love -”

“And I love you. But, I’m your partner, equal partner, not your child. Don’t need you soccer momming me every time there’s a bump in the road.”

“This is more than just some bump, Jack. You almost died.”
“Embellishment is not your usually modus operandi, Ennis.”

“Christ, Jack, you were.”

“Are you angling for an argument here? ‘Cause one can be provided should you desire to suffer an ignominious defeat.”

“Why must you always.”

“Or would you prefer to get your ass over here and apologize to me properly, and by that I mean with lots of tongue, leading to even more foreplay.”

From The Rack to the bed – minimum of five steps. Ennis made it there in two.

“Oh, god - Jack.”

“Please, please promise me.”

“ Anything and everything.”

“No more.”

“Well, if you want me to stop, I –”

“You do, and I’ll cease and desist what I’m -”

“Point taken.”

“No more lies. One Daniel was bad enough.”

“One Daniel is too fucking much.”

“Don’t want to live that again. Can’t. Won’t.”

“I could try and make that up for you, too.”

“Just your fuck-ups will be sufficient, thank you.”

“Only sufficient?”

“Well, you haven’t really done anything here that could warrant – goddamn!”

Bed position number three, the most accommodating for dangling ass, immobilized arm both. And apologies it would seem had been accepted, for Ennis’ went on quite some time, resulting in several hickeys, four bruised lips, a deep beard burn on two opposite cheeks, a lover’s reconciliation and a bunch of calls to complain about the noise from the patient next door.

“OK, Constable, had enough of the protect, how’s about a little serving now.”

Oh, yes, and that’s when Kisha had learned a valuable lesson about knocking before entering a patient’s room.

Antibiotics placed on the bedside table, next to the sweating ice pitcher and cup with the bendy straw, an ugly ass mustard yellow matched set that came with the room and a $27.53 price tag, Doc Martins schlepped to the window, Ennis ignoring the worn out, beat down, used up old man’s reflection, focusing instead on the view, the falling snow’s game of hide and seek in the lights from
the street below.

Two, maybe three days and Jack’s released.

Change of rooms and floors, all info withheld, all inquiries rebuffed, no phone calls, no visitors, twenty-four hour Ennis and security watch, Jack anonymity cocooned since Wednesday night.

And then what? Out there?

Friday night Manhattan scurried by on a twenty-two shopping days ‘til Christmas time schedule.

Can’t take him home to crime scene tape and a dead fish. Lightning Flat is –

Jack’s opinion of the idea - “I’d rather go to an Exodus International group meeting wearing a 'Hi! My name is Mervin' sticky tag slapped sideways on a short sleeved neck buttoned Target special, polyester blend khakis highwatered above Hush Puppies, and stand there in my white socks and clip-on tie sipping Hawaiian Punch and ginger-ale out of Bible verse Dixie cups, munching of Fritos and Fiddle-Faddle talking about the mysterious wonders of pussy than stay with my fucking parents!”

- definitely out. Can’t ask Don, don’t want to involve him and his family, any more than my fuckups already have, be fucking crazy to ask Alma. Won’t put anyone’s family in the line of fire. Hotel, then? That one night at HoJo’s in Queens wasn’t so – can’t imagine after a month’s recovery time what the room would look like.

Actually he could, and had, after broaching the subject of the where to convalesce, thanks to Jack brewing, to fill the stagnant healing hours.

Jack’s special homegrown porn -“Deep thrusting in the deep end. Swimming, good physical therapy, you know, help we work on my, uh, range of motion.”

Thinking a hotel out of town.

This all might be academic, though, the worrying search for affordable, comfortable, indestructible lodgings. Still have a couple of days. We could catch a break. Right? There were now six precincts – #20 of Jesse’s original arrest, Central Park on the shooting, #17 for the hospital attack, #10 in Chelsea, and #1 for Lower Manhattan for the B and E’s and the #81 in Brooklyn – all basically on the same thing. Homeland Security added the Feds to the mix, bringing the total to over thirty police officers working on the case that kept Jack caged up and out of sight.

But, I’m no longer one of them.

“Suspended with pay until the conclusion of the IAB investigation.”

Naked, adrift - vulnerable as his shield and weapon had disappeared into Captain Stoutamire’s overcoat pocket. “I understand, Sir.”

“Never thought I would ever be doing this.” Could have issued a warrant when the original order to appear was refused. Would have been more than happy, those viciously smug Internal Affairs bastards, to haul Del Mar in, cuffed, humiliated, and not thought twice about the truth. Captain Stoutamire had had compassion, however, and chose to come to the hospital on Thursday afternoon giving a colleague some dignity, saving him from the embarrassment of so public a laundering of his alleged behavior. “Never in a million years.”

Was running on borrowed time...too many connections...too many people...
Just outside Jack's door, slumped and dejected shoulders had held up the wall, a foot tapping a nervous Morse Code on the tile, and hands had wanted in, then out, then back in again, knuckles rubbed red from stiff denim friction. Eyes had chosen a safe focal point - the baseboard on the far wall - no chance of making eye contact all the way down there, down there where Ennis had wanted to crawl. "I'm sorry, Cap."

What the fuck do I do now? I'm a cop, that's what's inside my head. I'm a cop and will always be. A cop without a shield or weapon now. Fuck, no weapon. How am I supposed to protect him if I don't...

“Ennis, this is just wrong! A thirteen year, distinguished career ruined over some… some…”

Out for about a week, disgusted in even less time, Ennis almost would have preferred to be slammed by the shouted "Faggot!" and "Queer!", those pathetics you could slap a placard on - Bigot, Homophobe - and be done with them. Quiet, silent, 'Love the sinner, hate the sin' type of non-acceptance that slithered on a soft underbelly, much worse, the intolerant using hate-filled looks and snide comments to ease their personal distaste of society's PC rules. Take Captain Stoutamire. He had never come right out and said he was disgusted. No, it was his inflection, that slight downwards press on the word some, turning, twisting, perverting, the word to now undesirable, dirty. And that had been unacceptable when that some represented his heart.

"Some, what, Cap?"

"You know, that...that..."

“Miracle.”

“Oh, come on, Ennis, we’re not talking about -”

“Love.”

“It can’t be, he’s -”

“Life.”

“Be serious, this is your -”

“Jack.”

Not much to say after that, and according to his smoking hot, if slightly under the weather, attorney, he shouldn’t have said anything at all. The end result would be the same either way, though – the investigation would be damning – collusion, evidence tampering top of the list - leading to a dismissal from the force, a loss of pension, the destruction of a lifetime of dedicated service.

Is he worth it? Just ask him, I’m sure he would be delighted to field questions. Any regrets? That I didn’t meet him and fall ass over end sooner. Think of all the joy lost just holding his hand. What did I get in return? Love, life, my miracle. My –

“I know your view is not as fabulous as mine.”

The old man reflection still creased worry and stress, but the eyes burned with something more powerful. “You’re awake.”

“And you’re over there when you should be here.”
Biding the swirling snow a goodnight, Ennis turned from the window, walking the very short path to bedside and bent down to kiss the leaning to the right, matted down haired, three days past a five o’clock shadowed, bed rumpled, sleep toasty, pure embodiment of sex and reason for it all in sore need of a shower. “I didn’t wake you, I hope.”

“Certainly not,” a cupped hand to the back of a neck gave a needy, greedy incentive to deepen the kiss, “and I just had the hottest dream.” An earlobe nibble, a sweeping tongue trace of the shell. “Tell me, what are your thoughts about western wear?”

“What the fuck are you –” Upright one second, sprawled across legs the next. “Jack! Stop it!” The protest was perfunctory, meant only to assuage guilt and definitely not to stop what Jack was accomplishing with one arm strapped across his chest. “You need your strength to heal, not hand jobs.”

“No, what I need is to take advantage of this opportunity. Please, Ennis, please.” The perfect imitation of a distressed soul, complete with distraught hand to furrowed brow, sad eyes begging for a savior. Only things missing – trains tracks, a Mountie, and a moustache twirling villain. “Take advantage of me, come on, take advan – oooo! Since when does your dick vibrate? Do that again!”

“Shit. Better get that.”

“Well, while you’re still in touch with the big, wide, wonderful, world, I’ll just get my passport here and visit the bathroom.”

Roll off the end to answer a cell phone goes awry when the roller is too busy watching another as he shuffles to the bathroom, **scrubs hugging a sweet ass** - to pay attention to the number calling or exactly where the bed ends. “Shit!” Floor achieved, he decided to stay there for a while, allow his elbow and knee to quit bitching. “Hello?”

“Sergeant Del Mar, don’t you think you’re a little too old to be doing that sort of thing? Though, falling off the bed like that was fucking hilarious.”

“Who the fuck is this?” Stupid question since his neck danger prickles never missed. “And how’d you get this number?” **This private number, this unlisted number, this brand, fucking NEW number!**

“You know, we’ve looked and we’ve looked and we still can’t find our property. I’m thinking Jack put It someplace secret, someplace safe.”

A screaming steamy stream of obscenities almost didn’t wait for permission to speak before blurring out a curse that would curl a middle schooler’s toes. “Mother -” then Jack sighing victory over IV from the bathroom revoked their permit. **Fuck, he can’t know Hunnie found, he can’t hear me talking to, he can’t – “What the fuck do you -”**

“How’re your daughters, Sergeant? Certainly got a great view of Sherman Parkway from up there on the seventh -”

End call. Speed Dial #3. **Come on, come on, pick up, pick up** – blanket, sheets and pad ripped free, a linen Rapunzel escape route from the floor - **answer, answer, damnit, answer the goddamn –**

“Hello?” Drowsy and not quite all there.

“Get out of the apartment. Grab the girls and get out now!” **Now, now, NOW!**

“Ennis? What are you -”

“Listen to me, Alma, just fucking listen!” **They know who you are, they know where you live, they**
know and they're coming, they're coming and they won’t hesitate to do what they did to –

Toilet flush, water running in the sink.

“You’re crazy, Ennis, if you think you can call up here and tell me to -”

“You’ve got to get out of the apartment now, tonight, now!” Get them away, get them out, get them – Shit! They’ll recognize the – “A different car, take Bill’s, unless he parks on the stre -”

“What do I do now is none of your -”

“Get out of the city, someplace away from here,” Someplace they can’t find you, someplace they can’t follow you - the phone slipped from his hand, swimming in cold sweat - someplace they don’t – “The Catskills! Go there, go to the cabin in the Catskills! And no cell phones, they can track cell phones, and cash only, no credit cards, track those, too.” My daughters, my girls, my babies!

“Ennis, you’re scaring me! What’s going -”

“Just trust me, Alma, trust me and do it! Take the girls and run!” They won’t stop, they’ll never stop, not until –

The bathroom door opened and the room phone begin to ring.

“Jack, don’t answer -”

“So, he's there -”

Of course, Jack did. “Hello?”

“- and you have the gall to talk to me about -”

“It’s for you, Ennis.” Handing off the receiver, Jack made sure there was plenty of finger brushing, and sweetened it with a lick of his bottom lip.

“- trust. If this is some kind of sick game -”

The communication juggle, Ennis balancing two phones, one and a half of Jack’s wandering hands, and an ark floating on after forty days sized panic.

It’s somebody from the hospital, that’s it, nurse or doctor or pharmacist, that’s got to be the reason. They asked for me, not Jack, me. People know me around here, people have seen me around here, people would be calling for me, not Jack. Jack is still safe, Jack is still anonymous, Jack is still –

“- you’re playing, I'm telling you right now, not funny and -”

“Alma, shut up and –” to cell, and to room phone “– hello?”

“Now, that was very rude, Sergeant Del Mar, why did you hang up on me like that?”

NononononononononoNO!

“- I'm sure my lawyer won't find it amusing either, so -”

“Must say, if I was into guys, that Jack would be one fine piece of ass. You like it when he licks your ear like that?”

Same voice, same condescending tone. Called him on his cell to threaten his family and now on the
room phone, the name withheld phone, the not on the records phone, the turned off for the past two
and a half days phone to –

“Don’t ever forget, I’m always watching.”

Ennis knew he would never sleep again.
Chapter 36

The handcuff jingled, a wrist flick to ease steel’s bite.

“So, what’s my motivation?”

At cuff’s other end, Det. Nyugen glanced around prisoner to partner. “Your turn.”

The sigh of a man dragged out of bed at 1:06 in the morning after crawling in at 12:33. “Motivation for what, Mr. Twist?”

“How should I play this? Am I irate over what is obviously an egregious error on the part of the NYPD, an act of extreme prejudice aimed at an esteemed and highly regarded officer of the court, vocally and physically demonstrating my displeasure? Am I smug, confident in the knowledge that I will be quickly exonerated of these bogus charges, mentally composing open arguments for the inevitable civil suit naming the department and arresting officers for their complicity in my false arrest?” Sling adjustment bumped feminine manicured nails along his chest. “Or am I distraught, despondent that my impeccable reputation as an attorney will be sullied, my position in the legal community irrecoverably damaged by what the public will perceive as unimpeachable evidence of the rampant and flagrant corruption that permeates our bloated judicial system?”

Another sigh from the man who now wished he had just ignored the damn phone. “You’re walking to the car.”

The eye roll played to the back of the balcony. “Some people have no appreciation for the craft.”

With its theme misdirection, the script opening, and closing, tonight had a bold, edgy performance art kind of a concept, mixing improvisation, melodrama, farce, Shakespeare, Agatha Christie, and Tony Kushner thrown in there to make it socially relevant, the plot leaning heavily on stalker arrogance, win the jackpot with your last quarter luck and the continental shift speed of some bureaucratic paper pushers, and promised a surprise reveal for the conned, and momentary safety for its beleaguered writing team, Del Mar and Twist.

No, that’s Twist and Del Mar.

The beleaguered writing team of Twist and Del Mar.

Our first literary collaboration. As fucking painful as our other first. Only this time he tried to fuck me without exposition.

“Shit, Ennis!” The wobbly dance of a person who had spent the better part of the last two days sucking down Jell-O and pain meds while in a slouchy grouchy recumbent position, Jack avoiding stampeding Doc Martins. “Bare feet here!”

Ennis hadn’t apologized, never acknowledged, just slammed the phone home and continued bear trapping his cell, the veins on his forehead a bold road map to his state of agitation. “Goddammit, Alma!”

Our perfect gay Hallmark moment ruined by the wife.
“Will you fucking shut up for one -”

He had needed something, to do, to look at, to be busy with, something, anything, would be an improvement on just standing there with faux non-interest in the shrilling cell phone voice and modeling this season’s finely and personally tailored ensemble of guilt and shame. “Oh, look! Kisha was here!” Jack grabbed a straw, figuratively and literally, stabbing an apple juice, the sickening sweet a matter of survival against the fucking chalk taste that lingered like a bad haircut. “And she left me a gag gift.”

“Just because I…this has nothing to do with…don’t you talk about him that…”

Gee, pouvoir ils parle probablement de moi?

“Alma…Alma…Alma…” Ennis walked the name across the room. “Alma…Alma…Ed- Bill!”

“Bill?” Thumb and fore-finger stopped short of mouth, antibiotic hovering mid-air. Deja ‘Revenge’.

“Bill, did she tell you…yes, tonight. Now. No time to ex…I would, but Jack is…yes…no… no… yes…no bullshitting here, Bill, you’ve got to do what I…talking about my…thank god. Don’t know for how…I’ll come and get…tell Junior and Franny I love them so fucking much and I’m so sorry I can’t…thank you, Bill, thank you.”

Ennis and his cell phone had at last divorced, allowing a sleeve across forehead sweat swipe and a mumbled prayer – “Please keep them safe.” – to crawl its way out.

“So, we’re on for a Thursday Pictionary foursome?”

“What?” Confusion blinked cherry covered chocolate at Jack slipping a small yellow pill under the tissue box. “Were…you…” Didn’t last long, though. Confusion to adoration to fear to steel. “Get dressed.”

“Shouldn’t there be an UN in that sentence somewhere?”

Three steps to the window. “Get dressed, Jack.” The blinds wouldn’t crank closed any tighter, but he sure as hell was trying. “We’ve got to get out of here.”

Now, Jack was as ready as a college freshman virgin at his first frat party to get the hell out of medicinal Dodge, flipping the finger to pointy things and painful memories. He thought it prudent at this juncture, however - as Ennis stuffed Jell-O, graham crackers and a healthy handful of bendy straws into the much maligned messenger bag - to voice a few of the questions prickling up the back of his neck “There’s something rotten in the state of -”

Five steps to what masqueraded as a closet. “Hospital’s not safe anymore.”

“When did this – in the time it takes to piss?”

“Get dressed, Jack.”

“Ennis, I -” He managed to dodge the flying pants. “There’s blood on -” And the tossed trench coat. “Can’t wear -” But not the shoes. “Shit!”

“You’ve got any cash on you, ’cause I only have about thirty.”

“Yeah, about the – Jesus H Christ in a banana hammock! You’re doing it again!”

“Doing what again?”
“Playing stupid is only sexy in a cabana boy, Ennis.”

A dive for the bandage stockpile. “Jack, we don’t have time for -”

“Ennis, STOP!”

And he had. Only a roll of gauze, that apparently hadn’t read the email about heeding Jack’s “He Who Will Be Obeyed” voice, plowed forward, skipping, slipping, bumping, bouncing across linoleum, to wave a two inch wide white flag, Ennis to –

“Jack…”

*Didn’t listen to a goddamn thing I* - “Don’t correct me if I’m wrong, but didn’t you promise full dis –”

“You don’t understand what we’re -’

*Had waaaaaaay too much of his macho* - “I would if you would fucking enlighten -”

“I can handle this, Jack, I don’t -”

*Hey, shit for brains, remember* - “Let’s review the definition of equal, shall -”

“This is my job, what I do, you need to -”

“What?” *Patronizing son-of-a –* “Remember my bottom place while my over protective -”

“Goddammit!” The floor now lousy with bandage supplies. “Not this time! Not going to happen again! This time I can stop it, this time I can prevent it, this time the people I love won’t – you can’t – I’ve got to save -”

*God music reprise, please, ‘cause a fucking miracle just occurred. I love him even more. “You dickhead.”* Jack wobbled forward, straight to Ennis' pain and arms, his own anger and hurt discarded to the bullet violated and rust splattered nightmare reminder pile on the floor. “Don’t you understand? You already have.”

“But -”

Even without tongues, their kiss recited a love sonnet. “Jack and Ennis. We, remember? *Tell me.*”

A hug and a sigh. A right side only hug, and a breeze through Jack’s hair sigh. A 1,000 PSI hug, and a 100 kiloton sigh. “Hunnie.”

*Hey, that name’s on my ‘Folks I’d Like to Chat Up’ list, right behind dear old dad. “Yes, I’m somewhat familiar with that fucking prick. What about him?”*

“He called me.”

“*WHAT? How did he -”*

“Twice.”

“Fuck! When?” A pull back until chin stubble scratched. “And if you say ‘Oh, Noonish, I think,’ Nana Spencer’s front porch will -”

“Five minutes ago.”
Another step back for a full face view. “That’s when – on the bed we – then bathroom – but, you were talking to -”

“After I hung up on him, I called Alma.”

“In the name of all that’s queer, why?”

“Hunnie said he liked the view of Sherman Parkway from the seventh floor.” Hard to tell which had angered Ennis more, what he was saying or the fact he was still standing idle while saying it.

“Your apartment was on the seventh - oh, shit!” A jump back, and if the bad news kept on coming this fast, Jack would be out in the hallway in seconds flat. “Your daughters! Are they -”

“On their way out of the city, somewhere safe, going to the Catskills.”

“The Catskills?”

“Bill has a place up there, pretty posh from what Junior tells me.”

“That crustless piece of white bread has a posh anything?”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Oh Christ, Ennis,” in for a commiserating hug, “that’s – wait.” Then back out to arm’s length for the confused frown. “Twice. You said he called twice. Twice on your -”

“No. Second one on the room phone.”

“On the room – meaning I – then handed to -” the step away this time involuntary, with some heebie jeebie shivers on the side. “What dddid he say ttttto you?”

Jack had demanded the truth, well, here it was with no artificial sweeteners. “Wanted to know if I enjoyed your ear lick, and told me that you are a fine piece of ass.”

“He – he – he - he -”

Ennis had waited patiently for the shitty news to be processed, for turning the wrong way events to be assimilated, the fucked up situation to be accepted, quietly kneeling, stroking, comforting while Jack had dry heaved revulsion and degradation into the toilet.

Washed my hands red, scoured my face raw, brushed my fucking teeth five times, and I can still feel – a full body shudder drew stares, shifted sling, rattled handcuff – his eyes on - “Shit.” Wrist flicked again, hands, bound to physics mandate of action/reaction, did a surreal kind of sloppy hokey-pokey. “These things didn’t hurt so much the last time.”

An incredulous arch of a perfectly shaped eyebrow. “You’ve been arrested before?”

A wink and a naughty smile. “No.”

Det. Schnieder leaned on the down button. “Can’t this thing go any faster?”

The cast for this evening’s performance, while it would eventually boast residents from all five NYC Burroughs and even a surprise out-of-town guest appearance or two, at the moment the curtain was about to rise on only three. Jack – trussed up with bulky bandage and stiff sling wearing a two bullet-holed gray wool trench coat with dark crimson accents over a hideously out of style and all wrong for his coloring shirt dug out of the Left Behind box, faded about two inches short of a crisp top of
the foot crease blue scrubs with a fraying waistband as well as a left knee bleach stain and, adding ultimate insult to mortally injured fashion acumen, Central Park wallowing scuffed up shoes with donated by an intern white socks, all of it shackled to one of his two law enforcement book ends dropping from five to lobby.

*And Ennis, who conveniently wrote his first entrance well into Act Two, has disappeared catching a ride with a bus going out on a bar fight call. Should have pushed for a re-write.*

Before the first word had even hit the page though, the plot had divaed out, demanding direction from those timeless playwrighting standards, and was quite content to await non-knee jerk rising action by lounging in the dressing rooms, refusing to budge no matter how dazzling Ennis' ‘Got to leave, got to leave fucking NOW!’ anxiety Riverdance. And although Why and When were waiting in the wings, pumped and ready to roll, Where was busy negotiating a commercial deal with Carnival Cruise Lines, What and shill were working on a PR scheme to counter all the gay rumors, How was kvetching and threatening to sue over the marquee billing order, and the should have stayed in rehab longer Who – or to be grammatically precise Whom, as in Whom can we trust? – sprawled piss drunk and passed out, Paps flashing away, blocking any attempt to move forward.

“Nursing staff, Doctor Singh, Sammy in the pharmacy, Sally in housekeeping.” Legs bed edge dangling, Jack’s gaze had tennis matched, Ennis pacing an eight linoleum square route, the distance arms could stretch and hands remain clasped. “The Dietician Sandra, Physical Therapist Sarah, The vampire LeStat.”

“Wha – who?”

“Unsuspecting mortals know him as Sean, the phlebotomist.”

“So, basically the whole fucking hospital. Shit!”

“Don’t believe the snitch wears scrubs, Ennis.”

“Why the fuck not?”

“Goes to motive. Assassin informing is rather counterproductive to patient care, don’t you think?”

“Everyone has their price, Jack.”

“Christ, what a cop thing to say.”

“You willing to stake your life on innocent until proven guilty, Counselor?”

“You have anything to present except circumstantial or anecdotal evidence, Constable?”

“You have another plausible explanation?”

“A room search.”

“No fucking way, Jack, I was here the entire -”

A glance to the now blinds sealed, curtain blocked, sheet shrouded window. “He’s always watching.”

“You mean from – one room at a - that’s fucking crazy, Jack!”

“No rational thought check required to purchase binoculars, Ennis. Hey...hey...HEY! Get over here.” Down one working arm, Jack compensated with alternate limb usage to drag him in close –
giving cast and sling their due, for course – locking ankles to keep him there. “The hospital staff are not the ‘droids you’re looking for.”

“Even the Prince of Darkness in the lab?”

“He does need live victims on which to feed, after all.”

Careful not to disturb healing wounds, hands rubbed knotted back muscles while a two day abed hair slicked head propped chin and conundrum. “If not here, then how? How did the bastard find you?”

“Well, since you shot down my technologically advanced voyeuristic theory, and rather harshly I might add…” Ear to chest, Jack listened to his name repeated 76 beats per minute. “And the hospital staff being exonerated -”

“Jury’s still out on that.”

“Oh, Ennis. A legal metaphor!” An exuberant collar bone smooch. “Oy! My boychick is growing up!”

“Jack…” Voice cozied up to his quit fucking around serious tone, yet his top of the head kiss expressed an opposing viewpoint. “Your room number was leaked, I just fucking know it. Somebody said something to someone.”

“Not the hospital staff, and certainly not the Prisoner of Zenda here. Fuck, I wasn’t even up to blinking twice in an hour until Friday morning.” Face smooshed into a sleepless bedside vigil wrinkled shirt, the scent of his lover’s body – tangy, pungent, familiar, intoxicating. “And I know you didn’t say a fucking word to anyone, you never left my side, you…” Sweat and hospital and fatigue and… “…smell, oh, god! Would it be bad form, considering our dire predicament, to drop right here and…have you give me twen…Ennis?”

Cold. Stiff. Stone. Just like that, he had become Medusa’s latest victim.

“Ennis?” An awkward shimmy out from underneath inert arms, stomach knot jumping up, good ‘we’re together’ mood plummeting down – “Hey.” – to witness what he had always believed to be the hack writer’s device, a cheap ass way out when words and talent fell short. “Ennis, are you…?”

Pale as a ghost, white as a sheet, drained of color, bleached out like a desiccated bone.

“Captain Stoutamire.”

And that had crossed off one hopeful from the alarmingly short ‘Trust Implicitly’ list of potential performers.

Which left two.

“Nope, Stephanie’s supposed to be in Florida this weekend for some breeder bachelorette party. She’s probably in South Beach right now poolside, begging Mr. Cuervo for some hook-up advice.”

Make that one.

“No questions, no qualms. He’ll help us without a second guess and take it to his grave. I trust Don more than any other person in the world.”

“Mendier votre pardon?”

“Present company excluded, of course.”
Bien sûr.

The kiss had tasted like back pedaling, but Jack had chosen instead to concentrate on Ennis' ever improving mastery of the ‘French’ language.

*He speaks just like a native, without a hint of an accent.* “Mon dieu, quels exploits de Ennis de prodige sexuel et sa langue peuvent executer!”

Det. Schnieder continued his intense scrutiny of the elevator door seam. “Do I want to know what he said, Nyugen?”

“My French is a little rusty, mind you, but,” a wink and a naughty smile for a certain attorney. “no, you really don’t.”

Certain attorney blushed pretty in pink. “Merde.”

The supporting cast – people trustworthy to a point and for safety’s sake given only sides of the script, like Kisha with her cell phone, Dr. Markham and his socks, the detectives of Central Park Division and Bernard from the 81st – had previously signed non-disclosure contracts binding them to secrecy, yet to twist the plot in the direction it needed to go, one more featured player was required. That audition process was brief and contentious.

“He’s a lying sack of shit, Jack!”

“Only about sex.” All the cast foisted one-handed practice worked in good stead, Jack and his borrowed socks getting on famously as one slipped into the other, although ankle bunched, with a minimum of fuss. “And, believe me, I would revel in yanking out one by one each pubic hair with wonky, greasy, marinara encrusted pasta tongs until he was bald as the cocksucker he nailed on our two-year anniversary and start a blog just to share the digital shots with all his future conquests so they can see exactly what will be getting into them, but I cannot fault his professional integrity.”

“I can fault him all I want.”

“For saving my life?”

“No, for fucking with it.”

“You know, Ennis, the jealous thing is so last sea - shit!” Shoelaces, however, were well beyond right hand’s scope and breadth.

“Here, let me.” Balancing on one knee, Ennis propped Jack’s left, then right foot on the other, tying regulation Daddy double knots. “He’s a dickhead, Jack.”

“But, a uniquely qualified dickhead, nonetheless. Not like we can rely on our bullpen here, Ennis.”

A shocked, but pleased as shit smile beamed up at Jack. “Was that a *baseball* metaphor?”

“Consider it a concession, oh, my sports obsessed one, from your uniform perving partner.” *Note to self: get him in that position again, sans clothing, post haste!* “We need him, Ennis.”

“Fuck.” Resignation, furious to be staring down the barrel of a loaded gun, heaved a making a deal with the devil sigh. “Call Daniel.”

The final spot filled – after the tedious phone conversation with Ennis demanding to know ‘What the fuck is that prick saying to you?’ every time Jack smiled – it was finally time to call places:
Kisha reunited with her cell at the nurse’s station, a handsomely reimbursed for his tube sock contribution Dr. Markham rushing to answer a page, Don skipping out on a Christmas party, Bernard coming over from Brooklyn, Daniel retrieving the most necessary element, Detectives Nyugen and Schnieder waiting patiently in the hall, and the leads biding reluctant farewells.

“Good luck, Ja – shit! What’s with the spitting?”

Three times between his fingers, one for each spin round. “Bad luck to say that, Ennis!” Spit not really a component of the Theatrical superstition remedy, but the shtick – Levi Lowenstein, eleventh grade AP biology partner, his Bubbe would do it every time I stepped in their house – to warn off the Evil Eye seemed appropriate under their present circumstances. “You say break a leg!”

Three raps on the ever intrusive hand cast. “Think you missed a little high.”

“It’s not wise to mock the old ways.” Jack did Tevye, the milkman, proud.

The circle of arms drew in, back to front puzzle pieces, eyes meeting, greeting, embracing in the mirror. “The shirt’s not really that bad, you know. Won’t be in the dark, anyway.” Eyes that couldn’t hide the joke or his love, narrowed. “If Hunnie squints.”

“Shit, in this fucking thing, I can guide the space shuttle in for -”

“Sorry, gentlemen.” An almond eyed interruption through a cracked open door. “If you want Waskowski at Booking, we better get going.”

“Be right there, Nyugen.” Time for the circle to be broken temporarily, but not before a kiss, brief, intense, saying goodbye for now, and a lifetime of good morning hellos. “So, you’re straight with everything?”

“Don’t let this get out because I’ll be ruined down at View Bar, but, yes, Ennis, I’m straight.”

He’s leaving, leaving me alone, alone to walk out, walk out in the dark, in the dark where the prick is always, and Ennis is...

A side step swipe for a chair crouching coat. “And no fucking around, no in the moment improvs, resist the urge to follow your muse. No deviations, Jack, just stick to the plan.”

“You’re suspending my artistic license?”

Did it just get cold in here, ‘cause I’m cold, fucking cold, should be shvitzing under this goddamn trench coat, but I’m not, I’m freezing here, and Ennis is...

The hand that reached for the door handle trembled. “No screwing around, Jack, promise me.”

“No fucking OR screwing? What ever will I do for a closing number then?”

I can do this, I can do this. Won’t be for too long, two hours, that’s what Ennis said, two hours tops, I can make it for two hours, fuck, two hours is nothing, Ennis won’t be there, but at least I’ll have something to occupy my time – booking and fingerprinting and strip searching and posing for headshots and looking over my bullet pierced shoulder for the prick and anyone else who might be in his pocket, but I won’t know who I’m looking for, because if you can’t trust a Mormon, and Ennis is...

Their safe haven’s last defense swung open, the rest of the world peering in. “No baiting the officers, either. They’re doing us a favor, remember.”
“Trust me, with two cops, I don't anticipate any snappy repartee.”

And now I can’t breathe, can’t catch my breath, Ennis is leaving and I’m fucking freezing cold and suffocating and Ennis is...

A shuffle, one shuffle, one reluctant, regretful shuffle out the door. “You get to the Precinct in one piece, baby.”

“Don’t worry, this piece will be waiting for you.”

*I can do this, not a fucking Nancy, of course I can do this, courage is firmly screwed to my sticking place and Ennis is...*

“Adore you, Counselor.”

“Worship you, Constable.”

*And Ennis...*

An empty doorway

...was gone, I got handcuffed, escorted to the elevator and the overture began to play.

Fourth Floor...

In a few moments, *Duck and Cover*, or *Always Watch This, Asswipe!* or Jack’s personal favorite, *Ass Bandit: The Last Stand*, just a few of the bandied about working titles, would have its world premiere.

Third Floor...

The very select audience - by speaker of death threats invitation only - hopefully by this time had taken his seat, found it comfortable with an excellent view of the performance space, perused the Playbill for troupe personnel bios and ads from the sponsors, and was anxiously awaiting curtain’s rise.

Second Floor...

The excitement backstage was palpable, each person on the elevator privately centering, focusing, moving into that space, that special head space where the lines between actor and role blur, guaranteeing honesty and –

**DING!**

House lights down on a slow count of five...four...three...two...one. Cue Sound #1, plays throughout...and go.

A small handcuff tug off to Jack’s right. “You ready to do this, Mr. Twist?”

*Ready to walk out of here? Ready to trust strangers? Ready to be a fucking target? “Could we reschedule if I sssssaid no?”*

Bring out the Curtain Warmers on three...two...one.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Twist, we’ll protect you.” Det. Schneider’s eyes, desperate to be any other place then looking at his ‘perp’ since Eighth floor introductions, demanded Jack’s attention now. “You’re a
fellow officer’s family, so, you’re our family, too. And we take care of our own.”

Lights Cue #1 – bump up to 6, #2 at 8…and go.

*I’m going out there a not so humble with a multitude of reasons why Public Defender, and I’m not coming back…without my family.*

“It’s show time, folks!”

The elevator doors open revealing a hospital lobby. Sitting in various spots, people – in small groups or alone – pass the pre-dawn quietly, some sleeping, others reading or praying, all unaware of the spectacle to come.

Act I, sc 1 – A Very Public Arrest.

“John Zachary Twist, Junior., you are under arrest for conspiracy to commit fraud. You have the right to remain silent, anything you say can and will be used against in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney…”
Eyes snapped open.

What was…

Fear alert and up instantly.

*Howhowhowgoddamnit* *HOW did he find* –

Cop and weapon, his natural extension, aimed instinctive vengeance at the bedroom doorway.

*Kill you, motherfucker, for what you did to my* –

*What the*…

His challenge met murky grey, and beyond only bulky furniture blobs, mortar’s fireplace scribblings and a green light saluting vigilance by the front door.

*Know I fucking heard some…*

**Plonk…plonk…plonk…** Adjoining master bath’s spigot was in deep conversation with the furnace - **Grrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr** and disgruntled and stormy Atlantic had to offer up an opinion. **shshshshSHSHSHSHshshshSHSHSH** But, it was the wind on a cruel campaign of December domination that got the last word, loose shutter its tongue right outside. **bbbbBANG!**

*Fuck.* Rigid arm gave way for a stiff elbow bend. *Nothing, nothing but the fucking wind.* Finger eased, thumb uncocked, safety re-engaged. *Alarm is on, house locked down tight.* Unfettered relief gully washed a full body slump, unrealized failure released with a full force sigh. *Jack is safe…safe.*

Half mast interior shutters slashed slits, anemic winter schlepping across hardwood, rag rug, clothes pile to right angle up bed frame, its narrow rectangles stretching out over local artist’s quilting expertise, the six foot squirming lump burrowing in its warmth, and the gentling hand that craved some tactile confirmation.

*Jack is safe, safe and sleeping, sleeping right beside me, sleeping and has been since…since…*

Wrist’s wide white stripe less than forthcoming with information.

*Shit, left my watch in the – what time is –*

The grandfather clock answered from the living room – **BONG BONG BONG BONG** - ambiguously chiming the hour’s three-quarters, and illuminated hands of the wind-up alarm clock shyly peeking around the shell encrusted lamp on the white rattan nightstand filled in the rest.

*Oh, fuck me.*

Mattress and goose feathered pillows caught him, lace canopy above dancing joy for the weary traveler’s return above.
Four hours. Four fucking hours.

His original plan had suffered irreparable damage, Twist stubbornness had struck a fatal blow –

“I’m driving.”

“No, you’re not.”

“You’re fucking exhausted, Ennis!”

“You’re fucking one-handed, Jack!”

“Well rested supersedes uber-zombie no matter the number of viable appendages.”

- and that unexpected, yet still groused about for the first fifty miles gift, had afforded him the luxury of five or so hours of down time. To tap one measly chink, however, in the by his own design, mile thick, worry and duty sleep deficit wall holding him a groggy, foggy prisoner, a higher caliber of artillery would be required than front seat squished pretzel napping and on high alert dosing combined.

Four fucking hours of sleep. Behind ecru Battenberg, the coy ceiling blushed at the sudden scrutiny from below. And what am I doing? Hearing things…jumping at…head hurts…back’s killing…even my hair is fucking…comfortable bed…naked Jack…should be dreaming…bouncing one off the –

Ploink…ploink…ploink…

But, now I’ve got to piss.

Greasy, dark spikes the recipient of a tender ‘Be right back, baby’ kiss before Ennis slipped out, careful to include a in his absence blanket barrier tuck, injured arm pillow prop fluff, all followed closely by the instantly urgent full bladder funny walk.

Bathroom, then right back to Jack and…an hour, maybe two if I’m lucky before he wakes…fuck, not enough, need a shitload more sleep if I’m…Jack is more important than, what Jack needs is…bandages, they’ll need to be, change the…meds, all of them…eat, more than just a fucking…whatever he’s hungry for this time, whatever he wants I’ll try to…could finish heating up the…find a skillet for the…open that jar or…as long as it’s not…

“Sauerkraut.”

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

Arm draping waist, chin nape of neck snuggled, all other parts matched up to their appropriate slots, Ennis had melted into mattress’ cradle, linens’ warmth, his salvation’s skin, awaiting the beat of two hearts as one before closing up shop.

“Dire que?”

Routinely not required for anteunconscious pillow chatter, his higher brain functions – those necessary to keep mouth free of any inserted feet – had slipped out the back several hours previous.

What a fucking stupid answer to Jack’s question.

“Sauerkraut. Used to eat hot dogs with relish only, just like my old man. Until Rudy.”

“Rudy?”
“Guy with a stand on Lafayette and Steuben.”

“Oh, THAT Rudy. How foolish of me not to recognize the name, especially when the Times gave him such a glowing review.”

An ear bite that, with the blessing of circumstances’ alternate, could and would have led both parties down the oft traveled sweaty, sticky, semen slicked, satisfied and temporarily sated path. Looking back on body’s limit though, the finish line had been a mere dot on the horizon, neither lobe nor mouth had possessed the wherewithal to grant the overture with much more than a shallow shudder.

“Rudy was forever telling me sauerkraut was the way to go. Never listened, just kept eating relish only. Then one lunch when I was covered up with a case – nothing going right, Cap on my ass for results – too busy to notice and too hungry to care, guess what he did.”

“The suspense is killing me here.”

“Rudy gave me one smothered and dripping with it. Nothing but kraut dogs since.”

“And the point of this gastric cautionary tale?”

“Relish – bland, ordinary, empty. Thought that’s all I wanted, the way it had to be. Sauerkraut – exciting, alive, fucking fantastic. Know that’s what I want, the way it should be.” A blanket rumble, Ennis had sought the impossible, a way to scooch in closer. “Jack, you are my sauerkraut.”

“Dear diary: today my man told me I was old, fermented cabbage. Has there ever been a ‘mo in the history of the rainbow world as lucky as me!”

“Fuck you, Jack.” A blanket quake, Ennis retreating from sarcasm, a way to protect his maligned metaphor. “You expect poetry when I can’t even think -”

“Kiss me, Ennis.”

To be obeyed – and no other option could, or wanted to, be entertained – the command had required some awkward neck and body stretching, a scrape to exit wound’s nearly day old bandage avoidance imperative, but he had managed admirably, to find Jack’s mouth wanting, lips open and wet, his tongue desiring a slow dance this time, lazy circles and dips in sensual harmony with pleasure’s hummed tune.

“Now, you answer your own damn question.”

“How could I improve on your penchant for obvious gay man analogies?”

“Jack…”

“Your eyes.”

“Shit brown does it for you, huh?”

“Not the color. Though, I must say I’ve always been rather partial to enigmatic smolder.” “You fell in love with my smolder?”

“My dick was certainly captivated by brown smolderage, but no. The truly, madly, deeply occurred because of what lived within.” Thumb caressed what a kiss previously had possessed, as if, even in that briefest of breath pauses, the connection continued essential. “What I saw in your eyes, standing outside the loft, in that fucking elevator, HoJo’s, Chinese, hospital, now, was never there before,
never present, never...all my life, never in anyone else's eyes. Ever.”

“What, Jack, what?”

“In your eyes I saw...” Unadorned truth streaked soul's blue window panes. “...me.”

“Jack...I...fuck it.”

Words – clumsy, inadequate – had summarily refused to participate in any ass showing activities again. He had asked for romantic, he got fucking sauerkraut. Constrained by no such non-churlish appearing prohibitions, however, their stalwart companion – action, its persuasion prowess confident and cocksure – had stepped into the whisper width silence.

So, I kissed him. Hard. Kept on kissing him. Hard. That had been Ennis’ attempt to repair the past, solidly reiterate the present, and erotically rejoice in a future lousy with fermented cabbage and shit brown smolder. Kissed him until lips went numb, beards burned chins, tongues cramped and Jack was moaning for –

“Christ!”

Ennis had passed from the bedroom space heater's sphere of influence.

Bathroom's brass balls in a blizzard cold! A pink rose and lilies of the valley bedecked mat his life raft on the black and white tiled ice flow. Christ, and the remodel must have cost them more than our whole fucking apartment. A yawn, a stretch, a deeply and soulfully satisfying pubic scratch, and second verse of four cups of coffee, two Cokes and a bottle of Dasani streamed into the WC. Like pissing in a fucking museum.

Escorted by a pair of bauble heavy sconces, the antique mirror lamented its inadequacy to reflect the overpowering entirety of the ginormous claw foot tub as it dwarfed the etched glass screen obscuring the fiberglass –

Shit! For the polished ebony seat, matter in hand attention restored just in the nick of time. Quit sightseeing and watch the aim.

Anally exact in every detail, all anachronistic 21st Century blights drawered, closeted or banished, the bathroom screamed a The Dickens, You Say! Designer’s English country wet dream. Too prissy, too sterile, just too...definitely using the other one come dump time.

The self-invited guests had, however, managed in their short bungalow occupation to besmirch Victorian sense and sensibilities, vanity’s horizontal surface piled with: a watch forgotten across the roll of duct tape, both thoughtlessly tossed on a pearlescent porcelain corner, and in the pedestal sink, slippery transparent, crumpled and folded over, diamond dotted and shimmery streamed as it collected the result of minds turned to more pressing matters –

ploink...ploink...ploink

The plastic bag.

“ Dumped out your laundry.” No attention had been wasted on unessentials, ennis had streaked in from the kitchen, and right straight through to the bathroom, a man on a save Jack from himself mission. “Just like at home, that’s how we’ll do this. Tape up the cast before the...” Step Two supplies, tape and plastic gallon Zip-Loc bag, pulled from pocket A and sink placed until needed. “I'll start the water...” watch off in anticipation, “...’cause is takes fucking forever to warm up.”
Lighthouse tumbler that had been grabbed from the cabinet over the dishwasher filled up halfway, Pocket B gave up Step One – medication - as Ennis’ concerned sprint returned him to the bedroom. “You are going to eat, and no…bitching…holding your cast out a little far, aren’t you?”

“Houston, we have a problem.”

Ten minutes prior he had had me pinned against the door, and there he was, a deflated balloon on the side of the bed. A balloon with one arm mucked up in his shirt.

“Thought undressing was your best event.”

“Only when I’m playing doubles.” A human frailty realized and accepted sigh. “FYI, priority re-evaluation complete, and I’ve been found wanting.”

“Was that before or after the shirt/sling snag you got going on there?”

Ignominious defeat’s flag of surrender stretched out white, Jack attached at both ends. “They’re evil.”

“They’re tube socks.”

“Demon spawn of Wal –” the unsuccessful removal attempt pitched forward, “oh, shit.”

And I caught him just in time.

Double-timed to forestall a face first floor fall, and Jack bounced once…twice – “DeNewarkification aborted, headlines read - ‘Ennis was right.’” – and in gratitude, he landed a kiss to his abdominal safety net. “This overly optimistic and arrogant asshole apologizes. Still love me?”

Even brilliant, he can ask some stupid ass questions.

“Am I still breathing? And I’ll see your asshole,” four days of five o’clocks roughed up a caressing palm, “and raise you a controlling dickhead.”

“A pathological obsession, I’d say.”

“When it comes to protecting you, fuck yeah. Still love me?”

“Am I still catabolising? Ah, your dick, my ass. A consummation devoutly to be wished.” A shared sigh of indeed with but not quite yet undertones.

“Here.” Paper towel passed from worrier to worree. “Eat, meds, sleep. In that order.”

“What’s this?”

“This time only a strong suggestion and,” tumbler nightstand secured, Ennis knelt for sock duty, “Supper.”

“This is it?”

“Well, you said quick. Don’t like it, there’s always Jell-O.”

“Consumed so much non-green, my shit is wiggling.”

The forces of darkness were quickly dispatched to the corner. “And there’s always chicken noodle, you know.”
“A sandwich, salty water and Vicoden.” A bite chewed with a chagrined smile. “Yummy.”

Before tackling his next foe – polyester - Ennis had snuck in a peanut butter flavored kiss. “Thank you, Jack, for indulging my inner kvetch.”

“Smooth. How bourgeois.”

_Had no fucking clue, though –_

“How bourgeois.”

“Tried that, how it ended up pulled over my -”

- _how he had managed –_

“Maybe if you put this through -”

- _to get so tangled up –_

“Nope. Stuck on -”

- _in so short a time, but –_

“And now you’re choking me!”

- _there was no way in hell that shirt was coming off._

“Just rip the goddamn thing!”

“Are you sure?”

“Please, rid the world of this fashion atrocity.”

“You don’t have another one, Jack.”

“My plan for the next several days is to wear you.”

_Like I was supposed to concentrate with THAT image sweating and grunting in my head._

Task leverage had required a close lean-in, fabric bunched in opposite pulling clenched fists. “Oh, god, Ennis! We are definitely revisiting this scenario.” A wet, wanton and wily tongue took proximity’s advantage – “Only when, natural fibers for me…uniform for you…handcuffs…” – licking nasty in an otherwise engaged, yet extremely receptive ear. “…a blindfold.”

Shirt ripping paused for a tongue shoved down Jack’s throat moment, his one working hand, tufts of dirty dirty blond hair sprouting between fingers, insisting on a series of pause extensions.

“Been thinking, Jack.”

“How?”

“Where.”

“And?”

“I know.”

“Any relocation involved?”
Had tossed the shirt somewhere...corner, under the bed, just away and...started at his shoulders...uh...shoulder... Jiggle, shake and tap for stray drops, Ennis pulled the above the head chain, flush echoing around history. ...hands skimming muscles...

“No, only a position change.”

“I’m officially intrigued.”

...tight and bunched with all the shit he’s carried...down his back, always moving under my hands, trying to drag me closer...closer...

“Here, Jack, right here, in this bed. Face-to-face. For our first time, that’s how it should be.”

...biting, he bite me...my tongue, my lip, didn’t even stop... Bathroom sink cold water tap torqued – ploink...ploink...plo – and torqued again for payback. ...wouldn’t let me pull back, kept licking, sucking, devouring...not that I was complaining...

“Want to watch you...watch me fucking you.”

“Shit...Ennis.”

“Want to taste you, taste me fucking you.”

...hands slipped under...

“Want to breath you, breath me fucking –”

Mirror told the unadulterated truth, the haggard reflection reminiscent of a certain dockworker two decades past the calendar’s pace ...fucking love those scrubs! Nothing to get in the way, straight down to grab handfuls of Jack’s...

Then the silent bedroom spoke.

“No...no...I...no...”

Oh, god, please. From United Kingdom to the States in five frantic steps. Not now, not this time, please, just –

Peace was not irrecoverably damaged, however, blanket barrier still crisply tucked, propping pillows still on the job, Jack burrowed, still sleeping the shick of the dead.

“No...boxers...defi...Matthew...box...”

Shit. Calm down, calm down. Not THAT one, not the fucking awful one. Just talking, talking in his sleep, that’s all.

Bottom four poster was happy to oblige the lean, Ennis snatching this chance to indulge in one of his new found and hospital honed hobbies. God, look at him, just...just sleeping and he’s so...and I... Joy, lust, unworthiness, adoration, disbelief, love, protectiveness and all their cousins twice and three times removed, gathered in throat’s confined space for a raucous, blow out, annoy the neighbors, call the cops rave. Fuck, what the hell did I ever do to deserve Jack’s brand of happy? A fucking stupid answer, but it’s the truth. He IS my sauerkraut. And my triple play, my open and shut case. Summer night’s thunderstorm sex, warm towels from the dryer, and why the hell couldn’t I have thought of this when he asked me, and what the fuck am I doing standing here watching him sleep when I should be in that bed holding him close, hot skin next to mine, dick pushing into his –
Sub Zero’s mating call from the kitchen received an enthused reply. 

Now I’m fucking starving.

Snagged from the back of the bathroom door hook, Ritz Carlton off-off-off-off Broadway deep Merlot terry cloth enveloped chilled naked skin. *Shit, last time I ate, Exit fourteen, when we were thinking Arby’s.*

One more lingering moment, eyes memorizing the lines of Jack – *shoulder and arm and back and legs and ass and – oh, fuck!* – and a serious case of blanket envy turned away. *Just grab something quick and be right…Matthew?*

Rag rug to hallway runner – “Shit.” Runner to living room Oriental rug – “Shit, shit, shit!” Oriental rug to lighthouse adorned front of the sink mat – ‘Shitshitshitshitshitshit!’ Ennis’ bare feet running the gauntlet of cold terra cotta tile, hardwood and Travertine.

What should I…

A full meal, like what was left forlorn and bereft of purpose on the stove for finer pursuits, would go a full day’s forced marched journey to quiet the rumblings, ease the shakes, erase the cobwebs, 3D the pale and drawn stick figure clinging to the mat for feet’s sake.

*No, take too long, take too much time, time away from Jack. Don’t want…don’t like…can’t cook…can’t –*

Empty calories dangled a quick fix carrot, Ennis digging down into the maximum gross load wicker basket, through granola bars, instant oatmeal and sugar packets, tuna, Ritz crackers, a container of cinnamon, a bottle of Paul Newman’s finest, an out of place and a teeth rattling shudder disconcerting tube of KY – *fucking creepy* - to reach his yuletide goal.

*Hope Jack enjoys the irony.*

“No! I said no more!”

“Did you just slap my hand?”

Though it had been cranked up to ninety upon arrival by creature comfort disciple Jack, Carrier heat pump had yet to evict the squatting since October chill puffing out conversation misty white.

“Kisha would bust my balls if she knew you were eating only junk.”

“Don’t recall packing that petite Inquisitor with my blood encrusted clothes.”

“No more cookies.” Father Christmas had been snatched away, and tin became buried treasure at the basket’s bottom most regions. “Going to have a full meal.”

“Not up to cooking right now, Ennis.”

“Fine, you go lie down. I’ll make something.”

“Oh, yeah, your culinary skills, just what I need to make me *all* better.”

“Bite me.”
“Gladly, but…” the game to catch the suddenly domesticatedly over zealous had been futile “…you won’t stand still.”

The pantry had contained nothing on the scavenger’s list – only red beets, applesauce, a box of Lipton’s Onion Soup mix, a jar of Prego Chunky Garden and a pessimist’s full can of brown rice.

“Forget it. Not even in my destitute law school years did I ever stoop so low.”

The search had ended at the start, Ennis once again rummaging through their wicker basket reserves. “There’s got to be something…”

A Jack smirk had lounged against the counter, while fingers traced Levi’s back pocket stitching. “Find my palette inclined towards an afternoon of liquid protein, actually.”

An irritated Ennis side step. “Knock it off, Jack. You need something more filling.”

“OK, then – no foreplay.”

“Thought you were feeling Flemish.”

“More into the Manhattan Project range now.”

“Then the last thing we should be doing is - yes!” A mason jar sloshed into kitchen’s shadowy view. “Soup!”

“Fuck, I don’t want soup.”

“Of course, you want soup. Who doesn’t want soup? I know you like soup.” A noisy cabinet search commenced, appropriate saucepan the objective. “You’ll have soup.”

“Careful there, your matzo balls are showing.”

“Not matzo, the label says – here!” Tarnished copper bottom clattered to the Jenn-Air.

“Ennis, I love you more than Elvis did gravy, but, please, cease and desist.”

“Two bullet wounds, Jack. Two.”

“Yes, my shoulder and I seem to vaguely recall the incident.”

“GSWs are nothing to fuck around with. You’re not indestructible, Jack, you’re still healing. What if something happened, what if you…I wouldn’t be able to…when I think about how…close you came to…in your room, you in that…blood all over…your face when…” One trembling with could have beens fear hand had raced to aid the other similarly inflicted one, Mason jar poised on the brink of slip away shattering. “No. If you’re going to be fucking childish, not take your recovery serious,” chicken stock splattered, egg noodles slithered, carrots, celery and pearl onions, all had slopped into the pot, “then I will. You need your meds, you need real food, you need…”

Surprised the hell out of the mud room door, that sneak attack.

“Wha – fuc – Jack!”

“Four fucking days!” Untainted shoulder had ground in deep, pinning a loudly complaining Ennis to the equally vocal wood. “Four fucking days in that goddamn hospital!”

“And you’ll end up right back there if you…” Caught between anger and concern, seething Jack and
frigid door, the caution of barely begun to heal wounds careful and sincere ministrations spurned lash out, Ennis had kinda’, sorta’, almost, maybe struggled for freedom. “Get the fuck off me!”

“That goddamn hospital where my own mortality was trotted out in a dazzling hourly display. That goddamn hospital where your ass hung off the linguini width bed and mine brought kudos from the motherfucker that put it there.” Unplaster-encased hand latched cold fingers to belt buckle, a second line of defense pushing in. “That goddamn hospital where I lost not only my chest hair through cruel and inhumane means, but my dignity as well wallowing in blood and piss soaked sheets, terrified and useless, too fucked up stupid to defend myself when he…”

“Oh, god.” Guilt landed a solid solar plexus punch. “Jack, I’m sorry, so sorry, I never should have left yoAHHHHHHHHH!”

Thigh angled up to ball squishing height. “That goddamn hospital where, on my account, you wound tighter and tighter in self-inflicted, totally unfounded blame, and on my account said goodbye to your daughters for a second time.”

And another one straight to the heart. “Jack, I…”

“So, after four fucking days of fear, pain and humiliation, what I need is NOT a detailed lecture about the lack of cooperation in my after discharge care, NOT a discussion with my cheese blintz hyped up Jewish grandmother channeling partner over the fucking lunch menu, and most definitely NOT any reminders of the lying in wait for a clear shot gun still pointed at my head.”

“I was only trying to…”

“I know precisely what you were attempting to accomplish, and the semi-altruism will not go unrewarded. However, right now, my dear Constable, I request, ne’ demand -” A three point touch – foreheads, noses and chins – riot act buzzing between mouths - “The opportunity to enjoy breathing sea instead of disinfectant and vomit scented air, the chance to revel in the knowledge that my privacy, schedule and veins are once again my own, the time to rest secure in the fact that the always watching one is, at least temporarily, blinded, and,” a subtle shift, shoulder to chest became hips to rising interest, “my most immediate demand is…”

A conflict of interests – on the one hand there had been Jack’s health, the urgency and import of food, rest and medication. In the other, Jack’s ass, the warmth and weight of his body pressing down – the need to caretake, or to take care of need, the choice immobilizing. “I want…you need…”

“A shower.”

Whiplashed watching that one fly in from the far corner of left field. “What…now?”

“Four fucking days, Ennis.” Cold on all sides now, Jack pushing off with a bottom lip nibble. “I stink with cheap ass au de Newark.”

“And that’s more important than your…got some fucked up priorities there, Jack.”

“Priorities perfectly aligned, thank you.” Gray flannel ditched to the couch, Jack had been on the way to clean and human again. “My hair is one ingredient away from a tangy, yet woodsy vinaigrette.”

“What about your cast? You can’t get it -”

“Inconvenience solved. I’ll just hold it out the curtain.”
“And Hiroshima in your shoulder there?” Though grown wise with stubborn Jack experience, Lost cause had still felt obligated to give a rational behavior suggestion one more shot. “What about your meds? You still need to eat.”

“If you are still inclined that way, something quick, but nothing heavy.” Order placed from the master bedroom doorway. “Oh, and one more thing.”

“No, I’m not going out for texturing gel.”

“Perfectly capable of roughing it. For a day or two. No, I’m just curious if you’ve given any thought to our maiden voyage.”

Facing another conundrum, this one with less sexual gratification in the balance, but perplexing nonetheless - which to tackle first, quick and non-heavy or cast saving – had listening tuned to half volume. “I don’t…what are you…huh?”

“Where, Ennis?”

“Where what, Jack?” The pain pinching Jack’s blue eyes narrow had tipped the scales to sandwich, Ennis returning to wicker. “Towels? In the linen closet probably. Shampoo, I suppose is in the shower. As to body wash and face stuff, try -”

“I know, the medicine cabinet already snooped in.”

“You need something else then?” Jif jar screw off stopped. “What can I -”

“Tell me where. Where do you plan to fuck me bare –”

Oh…god.

Ice cold floor a boon to the instantly overheated, cookie tin and Ennis seeking help to stave off the inevitable when thoughts of Jack inundated.

“- back.”

Travertine was completely flummoxed, however, on how best to service the flushed and panting man in the tented terry cloth.

Four fucking days is right. We can’t hardly manage four hours, and it was four fucking days! Four fucking days in that shitty bed. Couldn’t, not when he was…wouldn’t, not when the door didn’t…wasn’t planning on, not when he hadn’t…four fucking days without and there he was asking me to decide where I wanted to bare –

A little self-service, a few edge taking off strokes, to help the overwhelmed with Jack lust kitchen tile.

Fucking Jack bareback…bareback…nothing between us…connected completely…one…dick sliding in…thrusting…pounding…his ass swallowing me whole…and the heat…and the pressure…and the sounds…and why does it feel like I’m cheating on Jack with my own hand? Slimy swiped against terry cloth. Walk it off, not what he needs right now, walk it away, dickhead, not helping him right now.

Cookie tin followed his lead to cooler pastures – Neither the time, nor the place for jerking – kitchen tile to living room hardwood – survived those four fucking days, those four fucking long days – to the Thebidoux Family and all of its satellites smiling familial joy out across the twelve seater cherry
wood dining room table – *those four fucking long, incredibly frustrating days* – by the sun room busy with the futile task of gathering the day’s last shreds of warmth from its namesake’s brief seasonal visit – *four fucking long, incredibly frustrating, boring, uncomfortable* – an irrational check of the obviously still functioning properly security system – *anxious, terrifying, and I can’t feel my feet anymore. Fancy ass bathroom, but a shitty furnace.*

**Grrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr**

*Damn thing’s been running non-stop since we arrived.*

“Close the door.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

An armload of stuff had grunted to the kitchen, the basket blocked view’s bamboo and glass coffee table side step perfectly executed. “How’s the shoulder?”

“Belgium, circa nineteen-fourteen.”

“Told you I should have driven.” Load had dropped on the counter, but not the subject’s chip. “Too much, too soon.”

“You also told me you wouldn’t fall asleep on the way up here, but the drool on your shirt, prima facie evidence.” Dom Perignon taste tragically plighted to live on a Korbel budget appraised the Del Mar Witness Protection program’s improvised accommodations. “Must say, I am very pleasantly surprised. Very Vern Yip for an on the opposing side of the arrest warrant civil servant.”

“Uh…what…” Ennis and his just woke up brain cells hadn't been quite up to multitasking at that moment, forcing a pause in the mud room door check in order to concentrate on his Jack translation skills. “Oh…no, not Don. Belinda, his wife.” Back to the door – dead bolt and chain secure - windows in kitchen and French doors facing out to sea next. “This place belongs to her.”

“Like I said,” Jack shed a few lights against the shuttered and drape drawn gloom, “all this on a teacher’s salary?”

“Bought it from her parents,” and what Jack turned on, Ennis had turned off, “they retired to California, and she insisted on keeping it in the family.”

Thwarted, but not deterred – although working on a mighty pissed off – Jack looked to alternatives, an old fashioned way to create some atmosphere. “And Belinda agreed to this? Considering the circumstances of our encroachment?”

“Well, uh, we’re here, aren’t we?” Dodging that question as deftly as the coffee table, Ennis relieved Jack of the gas starter key. “Not exactly low profile, is it?”

*Should start one anyway, to hell with the chimney smoke, the cold’s not good for…Jack in the firelight…his eyes, his skin, his - and I’m walking…I’m walking…*

“Precious bits are in serious danger here, Ennis, so please tell me you’re suggesting instead the friction of two sticks rubbing together to generate much needed warmth.”

The not even attempted to veil innuendo had missed high and outside. “Thermostat’s over there by the bar. Knock yourself out. I’m going to pull the car around back.”

“Wait.”
Keys jingling, hand on the knob, anxious to hide obvious evidence of their presence, impatience had tapped a foot. “What, Jack?”

“First, this.”

*Lucky our lips didn’t freeze together.*

“You did it. We’re safe. At ease, Sergeant.”

All too cognizant of his actions thus far – to put over three hundred and twenty seven anonymous miles between resources, back-up, medical care and Jack – the only defense against the inconceivable still had many more to go before the notion of downtime could be offered a passing thought. “And the second?”

“Bathroom.”

“Down the hall, second door on the -” No need to prompt Jack twice, the shouts had chased after a gray flannel blur. “Past time for your meds, so start thinking about what you want to eat, and I don’t mean -”

*Shit.* A pair of sugar cookies, two dozen’s last remnants, stared accusingly from the crumbly bottom of the tin. *How many were…did I really eat that…fuck. He’s going to kill me. Death by terse, verbose sarcasm.*

In the kitchen once more, this time feet chilling Travertine, the damning evidence of his wandering cookie snarf bought a few extra seconds from discovery by cowering underneath microwave popcorn, Easy Mac and Ramen. *Not like there’s nothing left in here for him to eat…blueberry muffins…apple turnovers…wow – pound cake…*

A quick money drop, in and out - like the very early morning side trip to Jersey City to hand Ennis’ cell phone to the Starfleet captain on the corner washing windshields with explicit instructions not to turn it off, *ever* – that’s what the rest stop detour had looked like on paper anyway. There could be no signpost, no breadcrumb trail leading out of the city, and that meant no substantial ATM withdrawals. What was in their wallets, however - plastic or paper – couldn’t be counted on to bankroll their subterfuge.

“My partner, Sergeant Del mar. Ennis…”

Enter a thousand dollar loan down from Quincy.

“…my Uncle Hap.”

*Do all the Twists look alike?*

“An honor to meet you, Sir.” The handshake had been firm, the shit eating grin eerily familiar. “Thank you for meeting here. I know it was an incon-”

“Forget about it.” A wave of a fingerless-gloved hand had scattered Ennis’ concern. “Never a bother when it comes to JJ.”

“JJ, huh?” Tease tidbit tucked away for tomorrow.

“Silly, I know, but I’ve called him that since he was in Huggies.”

A toss-up which had reddened Jack’s face more – temperature or embarrassment. “From introduction
“Keeping you humble, JJ, is just one of the services provided. Get your ass over here.” Two bodies, three arms in a spine popping bear hug. “Goddamn, I’ve missed you, son.”

“Me, too, Uncle Hap,” a little boy’s smile, lopsided with love, held on tight, “oh, fuck, me too.”

A manila envelope, gill stuffed with more than requested, slipping into Jack’s pocket without fanfare or mention, the last thing Ennis had viewed before turning to examine closely the chickadee patterns on the sidewalk snow, giving the moment the respectful privacy it deserved.

Why couldn’t Uncle Hap have been Jack’s father?

“Pop the trunk there, JJ, got a little something for you two,” the teary eye swipe went unnoticed as well, “and that back seat’s not big enough for a Beckhead to flip his position in.”

That little something had been a basket of goodies that included, but not limited to: three loaves of bread-machine wheat berry, put up this September strawberry jam, buttermilk pancake mix and real from Vermont maple syrup, a can of Folger’s Dark Roast with all the essential Jack fixings, peanut butter, hot chocolate and a still slightly warm to the touch pumpkin pie.

“You know, Sir, this wasn’t neces – GHNH!” The basket’s joke had been an old standard – coyly appear light until picked up, drawing an exclamation of surprise, an exaggerated body jerk from the dupe, a belly laugh from the audience, and Ennis had played the part to perfection, even ad libing a head knock on the open rear hatch for greater comic effect. “Definitely not necessary, Sir.”

“Hell, all I did was put the basket in the damn truck. All my wife’s idea, which no amount of telling her otherwise would have done any good.” Husband’s glow of thirty-five years together found June bride across the parking lot. “Stubborn old broad, my Peggy-Sue.”

“You still shouldn’t have – GHNH!” Wrong decade, but just the same, a wistful smile at the Top 40’s term of endearment remembered as bounty struggled from truck to car. “Gone…to…all…this…trouble…Sir.”

“Yes, they should have.” Jack lent the one helping hand he had to offer by conducting a backwards walking on the fly inventory – “Just wait until you taste Aunt Peg’s – damn!” – and lightening the load by one Santa Claus tin. “Oh, my god! Are these her – YES! They're so - almost forget how - like an orgasm in my - here, you've GOT to try one.”

“Jack, I -”

Enthusiasm over sharing a traditional family recipe had gleefully popped one right into an unprepared mouth. “Even better than Nana Spencer’s, I think.”

“Mbmbnbvrmmbmm.”

Sugar cookies are good, but the Jack kiss after was much sweeter.

“Thank you again, Sssssir.” An arm stretching swing deposited everything and maybe even the kitchen sink basket in the backseat size equivalent trunk, handle shape stiffened fingers slamming the lid. “But, we really should be getting back on the -”

“Say, why don’t you go help your Aunt with Brady there, JJ. Damn dog’s gonna knock her on her Irish ass. Ennis and me will finish up here.”
“What – oh, sure…right.” A dubious smirk for favorite uncle, a sly wink for favorite person – “Be sure to sprinkle liberally words like witty, charismatic and brilliant throughout your conversation about me, m’kay?” – and the last pinched cookie had disappeared, Jack sprinting after the Dalmatian dragging the laughing woman in the Sox cap between picnic table shaped snow drifts.

“So…”

“So…”

Carhartt’s finest took a load off thanks to Dakota’s back bumper while Doc Martin’s fidgeted with gray slush and a combination of we’ve stayed here too long anxious and first time meet the parents jitters.

*Just like being introduced as the new soon-to-be son-in-law sitting on a plastic covered sofa beside the Pike’s knocked up princess.*

“JJ’s very special to me, like he was my own. Tried my damndest to help him, but… well…God knows, he doesn’t need any more pain in his life.”

*And totally different, for this opinion truly mattered.*

“Sir, I love Jack.”

“And he’s obviously fallen ass over end for you.”

“I would never hurt -”

“And just when is your divorce final there, Ennis?”

Awkward silence as eighteen wheels of American commerce had whined by. Next, a Winnebago full of Sunshine state bound Snowbirds, a salt truck going back for thirds, all watched but unseen by the man in Jack’s heart, and the father figure questioning his right to be there.

“Know you’ve got to go, so I’m cutting to the chase here. My nephew in serious trouble?”

“Yes, Sir. Very serious.”

“Won’t ask what kind of trouble ‘cause it’s none of my damn business.”

“Couldn’t tell you regardless, Sir.”

“That’s what I figured. My JJ will be safe, you’re gonna see to it. And, Ennis,” steel blue would brook no failure, “that’s not me asking either.”

A subject on which he could speak with soul’s authority, he had met square the face that crystal- balled who’d be snaking Raisinettes on movie date night in thirty years. “With my life, Sir, for there is none without Jack.”

“A subject on which he could speak with soul’s authority, he had met square the face that crystal- balled who’d be snaking Raisinettes on movie date night in thirty years. “With my life, Sir, for there is none without Jack.”

“Good.” A curt nod, a doting uncle’s simple and hard to come by stamp of approval. “Good. That’s what I wanted to hear. And the Sir ain’t necessary, ya know.”

“For what you mean to Jack, yes, Sir, it is.” The person in question had been at that moment rearranging December’s decorating by swooshing single amputee angels in the snow, Aunt Peg contributing to the heavenly host as well, hers two-winged, but a tad under her pampering day spent at Maude’s Sassy Shears enhanced five foot one, while Brady loudly terrorized the local squirrel population. “Who is witty, charismatic and brilliant, by the way.”
“He’s gonna ask.”

“I know.”

“Got to say JJ’s taste in companions has vastly improved. That last guy -” He spat, the slimy glob flash freezing instantly to a three seasons past faded yellow parking spot line. “Damn! What a pencil-dicked asshole he was!”

A second opinion on Daniel’s character asphalt splatted. “Yes, Sir, that he – OW! FUCK!”

The upside the head snowball had brought the conversation to an abrupt close, and Ennis and his cold melting down shirt collar retaliatory mood moving faster than a New York minute –

“Jack, you son of a bitch!”

- to chase the giggling perp around the trash barrels, through a snow plow gauntlet, by clumps of naked trees, to the far side of the cement block rest rooms where, behind a bank of Coke and candy machines, along with a fistful of snow and an evil smile, a comeuppance occurred.

“Payback’s a bitch, Jack.”

“Would you consider an alternate form of restitution?”

_He had tasted like cookies and cigarettes and Jamocha shake and Jack and – oh, FUCK! What he did with just one hand! But…_

“No.”

_Fucking LOVE those scrubs! Snowball straight down to his –_

Grandfather Westminstered – **BONG BONG BONG BONG** – _Shit – tradition’s timely tune – fifteen minutes – prompting an Ennis scurry – fifteen minutes away from Jack. BONG BONG BONG BONG – to a sloppy job of soup preservation in Tupperware – Who knows how long we’ll…can’t afford to waste - BONG BONG BONG BONG – a few gulps from the spigot, washing down his pinched snack – Cookies need milk, not water – BONG BONG BONG BONG – a quick look at previously checked doors, windows, locks and alarm – So, this is what paranoia feels like? BONG! - to the final leg, a bedroom dash - BONG! – Open door…close door – BONG! – Robe ditched, covers slipped under – BONG! – what walking had failed to discourage pressed in close to the cause – BONG! – Ennis back where he belonged, settled in and just waiting for Morpheus’ arrival before the last – BONG!_

_Oh…fuck…yeah. Bed and warm and sleep and Jack...Jack...Jack...and his bandages, he needs fresh ones...Jack...and his meds, antibiotic and pain...Jack...and his sling, can wash with his scrubs...Jack...and his scrubs...scrubs and snowball...snowball and crotch wet spot...wet spot and Uncle Hap’s priceless expression...priceless expression and Aunt Peg’s welcome to the family, her kiss on the cheek...kiss on the cheek and hugs goodbye...hugs goodbye and keys...keys and arguing about driving...arguing about who’s driving that goddamn –_

- oink…ploink…ploink…

_Got to be fucking kid –_

_bbbBANG!_
A back flop, ripples sent out to mattress’ edge, and the ceiling was once again the main attraction.

And NOW I’m wide awake.

The room was quiet. Too quiet. Well, except for the ploink and shshshSHSHshshsh and BONG and grrrrrrrrrrrrr and Ghhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh.

The last one was pulled close, providing snores a lean-to, and another voice was added to the mumbling crowd – fffFFFFFfffFFFFF – elbow smoothing sheet as fingers played through dark hair.

Way too fucking quiet.

An oppressively palpable quiet. A waiting for the drop of that other dangerous shoe, the calm before the feared storm, stalker and butcher knife lurking just around the corner quiet. A quiet black hole determined to entropy squeeze the room and all its occupants to nothing.

God, I miss New York.

The noise of eight million people jockeying for position, the slap of air choked with East River, subway and greasy all-nite spoons, headlights, searchlights, neon lights bellowing the rainbow - that’s what he missed. Five months shy of a complete thirty-seven years spent in the city, and he was lost without the song that had always rocked him back from sleep’s skipped beats.

Even miss his stupid Thing pillow and Spiderman nightlight.

Here there was only salt and sand, the lingering nudge of stale potpourri. Ocean and damp, furniture that worked three weeks out of everyone else’s fifty-two. Open space, blank sky, empty horizon – bbbBANG! – And that fucking loose shutter – surrounded by the absence of anything familiar save the snoring dead weight numbing his arm, and the prick of a missed something of vital importance thorn.


Here in the bungalow on the very end of Black Pond Road in a coastal tourist town way, way out of season, and as isolated as possible in this Google Earth trapped world.

The perfect hole to hide in. And only one person knows right where to look.

“Here.” Shadow had outsmarted fluorescent again, X’s blacking out most of the oil stained parking deck game board, the plain, unassuming white envelope, the brightest spot within their anemic circle, exchanging hands. “And remember, only one we’ve got.”

“You tell Belinda about this?”

“No, and I expect you to take the inevitable ass kicking about lying when she does find out.”

“Not a big incentive to hurry home, Don.”

Insomniac traffic had passed overhead, NYC’s slogan rumbling on down, pre-occupied minds oblivious to the intrusion, numb feet immune to the vibrating buzz.

“Here.” A .38 revolver, well-oiled and spotless, the instrument of rookie accommodations that shared the place of honor in a bottom left hand drawer tucked away as yesterday’s news, double timed out
of Army issue olive drab to parade rest in a chapped, cracked knuckled palm. “No other ammo than what’s in there, though. Sorry.”

“Anybody see you?” Cartridge snapped out, spun around, snapped in, the back gap of rumpled, grumpy jeans and hem of a soul weary leather jacket complicit in the concealed weapon transformation. “Cap in his office?”

“Nope. Squad room empty. Did have to bust your desk to get the damn drawer open. Sorry ‘bout that too, Ennis.”

“Not really my desk anymore, Bernard.”

*And then you walked out, talking some shit about shoes –*

“I’m telling you, Ernie.”

“I don’t know, Jack.”

“Trust the gay man. It’s cordovan this season.”

- and looking like it, but still sex on a stick and I wanted to haul ass over there and grab you and kiss you ‘cause it had been too fucking long since I had touched you, but then Don stopped me –

“Ennis – communications?”

“I’ll call you.”

“Alma and the girls?”

“Away, safe, Catskills.”

“Still think this whole damn idea is nuts. Break your suspension, leave the city, the investigation, the only way of catching these -”

“Got to, got to protect him.”

“We have resources here, ya know.”

“No. Not safe.”

“I’m sure if you explained, Cap would -”

“Always watching.”

- and Bernard stopped me –

“Oh, yeah, and this, too.” A pink While You Were Out rectangle dated four days ago was finally delivered to the intended recipient. “Thought it might be important. Found it on Aguirre’s desk when I went looking for something to pry open yours.”

“On Ag – son of fucking BITCH!”

- and you were standing over there, licking your bottom lip, biting it, sticking out your tongue and smiling, and giving me that “Fuck me into Leap Year” look and then –

“You ever find that Atchinson guy?”
- fucking Daniel showed up.

“Unfortunately.”

And the first thing he did? Jumped out of the car and hugged you. The fucking bastard hugged you, complete with ass squeeze!

“So, you going to tell me?”

“No, I can’t.” Crappy, still fingertipping the edge only by the grace of six cups of scalding coffee demeanor that had started to tumble exponentially with each separation second ended the conversation with walk away finality. “Go home.”

Too bad Bernard hadn’t been so quick on the brush-off uptake. “What? No explanations, no thanks?”

“Can give you my thanks, Bernard, but that’s all I got!” Never stopped, never slowed down. Couldn’t. I was heading home.

“Not even a fucking doughnut?”

“I wasn’t here, you weren’t here, you didn’t see anything.”

“Well, Sergeant Del Mar,” Daniel’s smarmy greeting breezed right by, “you’re looking less than human as usu -”

It wasn’t a sloppy gesture, of no purpose or meaning, not a mindless habit on par with checking the mail or starting the dishwasher after scraping supper’s plates. It wasn’t the most passionate, it neither stoked devourous fires, nor slaked unquenchable thirst. Nothing to write home about, alert the media to or throw in the towel because no where in the sexual annals could there be one to outshine it. It was a kiss. Just a kiss, that’s all. A kiss that normal standards would define as demure. A simple kiss that shouted in a tender touch of lips the love of Jack and Ennis.

“Uh, I definitely saw that.” The last word from the Bernard peanut gallery.

Schnieder returned inside to bury you under paperwork, Don had managed to drag Bernard home with the promise of chocolate sprinkles, leaving only me, you, fucking Daniel –

“Next time you wish to mark your territory, Sergeant, might I suggest something more subtle, like pissing on his leg.”

- and the goddamn Mustang.

“I’m driving.”

“No, you’re not.”

“You’re fucking exhausted, Ennis!”

“You’re fucking one-handed, Jack!”

“Well rested supersedes uber-zombie no matter the number of viable appendages.”

“Just give me the damn keys, Jack.”

“This is a five-speed. Do you even know how to drive a stick?”
“It’s been a while, but I’m sure I -”

“Ah, you see, Jack does. In fact, your partner there, Sergeant, is very proficient in stick handling.” Insufferable smugness – crisp, alert and immaculately attired at that god still in his jammies hour – lounged across Ford’s finest cherry-red muscle. “And I speak from personal experience.”

Like with any troll whose sole purpose was to goad and annoy, Ennis had wisely chosen to ignore the taunts, energy better spent on winning the stupid ass argument with Jack. “And you’re going to drive a five-speed with one hand how?”

A ‘Well, duh!’ moment. “Use my knees.”

“And those knees have seen many hours of practice, believe me.”

“Why are you still here, Daniel?” Another scuff added, Jack not giving a rat’s ass anymore oxfords kicking Daniel in his Berluti’s. “Don’t you have a four o’clock fuck waiting?”

“Jack, give the damn keys. You’re not driving, and that’s final.”

“That’s final? That’s final? What, now you’re my fa-” an uncharacteristic word stumble, “…uh…uh... it’s my fucking car, Ennis, so I’m -”

“Well, technically since I purchased the vehicle that you picked out, and footed the repair bill after your unfortunate mishap, and I’m storing the vehicle for you, and -”

“Daniel, you fucking ass -”

“Jack, you let him buy you a goddamn CAR?”

The smile was oh, so sweet. “And I pay for the insurance, too.”

“Ennis, it’s not what -”

“Oh, don’t worry, Sergeant, I was fully compensated. Though, not in a financial way.”

Should have knocked him on his arrogant ass, right there in the garage, his fucking nasty implications of Jack and…should have finished what I started at the hospital…the hospital…the hospital where he… no time then, or since...got a shitload of that on my hands now…the hospital where he told me…

Ennis really should play attention to the road signs warning of cliff ahead as he barreled around that hairpin thought process curve.

‘There will always be some of Jack that you will never be able to touch, some of Jack that you can’t claim, some of Jack will forever remain mine alone.’ Well, what some would that be, I wonder? You know, Jack? Huh? The some he paid cash for maybe? The some he fucked over and walked away from? The some that keeps him sniffing around?

Too late.

The some that still wants and needs? The some that can’t forget? The some that watches you and sees naked sweat and tangled sheets?

He was free falling, no bungee cord, no parachute, no awake Jack to catch him, nothing to stop the plummet to the spiked and jagged rocks below.
He knows! The motherfucker KNOWS! The sound of your moans...taste of your skin... burning heat when inside you, the sweet torture when you squeeze...he knows the gift you give, the joy you offer up willingly...the thrill of taking you, the ecstasy of possessing you...knows to have your pliant body spread – captured, caught, conquered – under his hands is to be...to feel... omnipotence unimaginable.

He knows what gets you off, what makes you scream, what makes you crazy. He knows because he bought it, he knows because he took it, he knows because you –

“No...no...no...”

Insane Jealousy Over the Ex internal monologue paused, prone Ennis elbowing up. “Jack?”

“Stop...no...dddon’t...”

“I’m sorry...sssssorry...don’t...” Eyelids twitched and rolled, legs fought the twisted quilt, good hand scratched out, clutching desperate at the mattress, crabbing the cold sweat slick sideways. “…jjjjust don’t...again...nnnno!”

Just once, can’t he leave you in peace?

“Please...please...don’t punish mmmme...please!”

Daniel dumped back in his rightful place, the irrelevant and in the past bin, Ennis reached for Jack and their nightly routine. “Just a dream, Jack, just a dream.”

“I promise...promise...”

Curl ed up bandage tape pinched his nipple – “Sssshhh, baby, ssshhh.”

 “…promise to be...gggggood...”

Spit oozed down his arm – “I’ve got you.”

“Stop...hurts...hurts...sssstop...”

Shins smacked, nuts knocked, thrashing head connected with nose, sparking pain and silver blobs – “I’ve got you now.”

“Don’t...don’t...don’t...ppplease!”

But, he held on - “Ssshhh, baby, you’re safe” –

“Why...why...why...why...”

- a solid arms and leg cradle rocking Jack’s demons back to the shadows. “You’re safe with me.”

“...why dddon’t you...”

“Let it go, baby.”

“...love me...”

Legs began to quiet, arm gradually lost steam, and the trembling, tense body stilled, the nightmare loosening its grip.
“…Dddaddy?”

“Let him go.”

The customary Round Two waiting period, counted down with exertion heavy breaths, had to pass with no return visit before Ennis dared to move. Where is…when did that…can’t see…how am I supposed to reach…fuck. Unable to restore bedding to the previously acceptable condition, he had to settle for a twisted to the right, half under blanket, edge of a pillow position when Jack settled on him.

Oh, yeah, this is comfortable.

But, Jack was, and that’s all that mattered. He was calm, breathing evenly, face placid with slumber’s anonymity, bright scarlet dots on weary white the only remainder of his childhood haunting.

Lucky, not too bad this time.

Another two inches bullied away from the bed’s end blanket wad stash, enough to warm back and slack jaw tuck.

Luck being a relative term, of course.

The scars were there - thin lines along shoulder blades and spine, tiny crescents, buckle size, on hips and ass - noticed their first night, placards of Jack’s horror moving under his hands. The marks were not red and thick and crooked, nothing that screamed to the world “Child abuse victim!” all easily masked by clothing and explained away with klutzy growing boy tales of misadventure.

I knew, though. Carried a shield thirteen years, seen it too many times before.

And he had wanted to help, give support and acceptance, anything and everything Jack needed to heal. But, since his initiation at HoJo’s, kicked out of a sound sleep, skin crawling, stomach queasing to hear, “No, Daddy, mnnnot the belt!” shrieked right next to his ear, Ennis had spoken of what intimacies he was privy to, the varying degrees of nightmares, the depth of soul stripping, the lengths needed to restore peace only once, and Jack’s response was a ‘none of your fucking business’ expression and quick topic change that explicitly drew the line not to be crossed again wide and sharp, resulting in every night’s sleep interrupted to hold on when the wounded child was chased by the unpardonable and cursing John Twist, Sr. to his own very special and commensurate place in hell.

And I regret that I didn’t send the bastard there yesterday.

Though as likely to come to fruition as sixth grade Yankee MVP aspirations, that idea sparked Ennis’ vivid, sub-basement dwelling imagination. Just once, like to meet the bastard just once, want to look him in the eye…look him straight in the eye as I strangle him…feel his clammy flesh under my fingers, watch the coward scratch and claw for air…look him in the eye and tell him I’m doing this for Jack…that I love Jack…that a faggot is squeezing away his pathetic life. And that act of chimerical revenge buoyed a grisly euphoria, gleefully morphing into additional fantasies about destroying all those who sought to harm and denigrate.

Hunnie and Lockhart and Daniel and all those other shitheads, that fucker Malone and Newsome’s bitch of a mother and Mr. Chen and…and…oh, god…

The loathsome role call wouldn’t be complete, though, without one more name.

…and me.
Aunt Peg’s cookies curdled when mixed with hypocrisy, the plain truth geysering up to burn throat and mouth.

I fucking spanked him! Spanked him, beat his ass red. I know and understand and fucking die inside when he cries out in terror and I – Oh, Christ!

Trailing his shame, the sinner fled, ran away, scrambled off, Ennis and tears falling to the floor.

I…enjoyed it…fucking loved it…and I want…need…and - please, forgive me, Jack!

The unrepentant receives no absolution, however.

…will have your ass under my hand again.

“Ennis?”

Shit. The top sheet skewing off the corner was as good a place as any within reach, Egyptian cotton banishing the tears but not the self-disgust. My fault he's awake. “Down here.”

“What the…” Over the edge, pillow swept hair and sleep muddled eyes peered. “Scoping out a Where Else, are we?”

“No.” Not the where, but like the sick bastard I am - “Just thinking.” – about the how.

“Oh oh.” Free hand tugged hair, coaxing head back to reveal misery. “The car, isn’t it? My explanation about compensation from the family for legal services rendered somehow insuf -”

“No, Jack.” Daniel – been there, over reacted to that.

“No.”

“The argument.”

“No.”

“The shirt.”

“Hell, no! Jack, just give it a -”

“My one phone call.”

“- fucking – wait…what?”

“Never mind.” Hair and eyes made a hasty retreat.

His one phone call? Who did he…Stephanie…mother…office? He wouldn’t have told them any…but fucking Hunnie is always…that computer chip can trace…he could know…he could find…just my revolver, that’s all…what am I going to do if –

“Hey, Sergeant, your sauerkraut is getting cold.”
That's right... **My sauerkraut.** A contented sigh puffed out his burning at both ends candle – *Fuck all the rest, doesn't matter, really. What am I going to do* - the wisps of smoke carrying mental tour de' force depleted Ennis back to bed – *is fulfill the promise made to Uncle Hap and, for as long as I am able* –

“Adore you, Counselor.”

One fit into the other, Ennis to Jack - seamless, flawless, complete.

“Worship you, Constable.”

And finally sleep gathered him in -

**bbbbBANG!**

- for that was all the lullaby he would ever need.
Chapter 38

Where decided upon – under the canopy four-poster – bearbacking became a question of when.

Not after Ennis woke up, which was actually about an hour after Jack, who – wearing nothing but a sling and a buoyant feeling of well-rested anticipation that even a nocturnal visit from Him couldn’t squelch – concluding a temperature inspired dash to the Queen’s facilities stealthily reversed the usual, watchee nor that watcher, and following an exhaustive perusal of eyelashes, cheeks, freckles, curls…scar above eyebrow…all the grey sneaking in to beard… the slight tip turn up of nose …a face that was calm…no worry, stress or fear - was unable to refrain any longer from kissing his knight’s pillow drooling mouth.

“Ja…Jack?”

“Thank you.”

“What are you…what did…what?”

“For wanting me, for needing me. Thank you for loving me.”

“You make it so goddamn easy, baby.”

The make-out session that went from Jack behind spoon to Ennis atop missionary in three kisses flat prematurely ended by a wince.

“Pain?”


“Food.”

Breakfast in bed, paper towel for plate and cookie sheet for tray, sideways propped over Jack’s stretched out legs, as the sea bid farewell to the shore, the shutter danced through wind’s waltz and the moon waxed a midnight smile.

“Well, how is it? Meet your high, exacting standards?”

Third degree toast and plaster of microwave oatmeal complimented by thirteen years of finely honed squad room brewing expertise.

“Perfection.”

When didn’t happen before clean either, Jack – who faced situation’s adversity with his usual panache –

“And what in the name of Paul Mitchell is this?”

“Since it says shampoo on the bottle, Jack, I’m thinking it’s shampoo.”
“Pert Two in One. Only from the mind of a straight man.”

- insisting on the reclamation of his rightful, albeit less moisturized, place amongst the world’s unskanky prior to any activities that involved the spreading of sweat, spit or spunk. And though more inclined to utilize the tub for not only its injuries out of spray’s harsh direction potential, but the relaxed and malleable Jack lounging back in his arms possibilities, Ennis was made to see reason, embracing his partner’s “Right now, dammit!” determination when the shower started to flow, the steam began to billow and a pulled back curtain revealed a water snake patterned Happy Trail.

“Fuck…Jack.”

“Not if you don’t get your ass in here.”

Naked sudsy slip-sliding, interrupted by bouts of tongue warring, mouth sucking, teeth marking, hips banging, tattooed handcuffs grabbing that sorely taxed the structural integrity of the fiberglass coffin, resulted in a ripped plastic bag –

“Oh, so *now* you want me to hold it out?”

- a truncated game of charades –

“First word sounds like – I got goddamn bi-polar shampoo in my eyes!”

- and a tangle of limbs beating a hasty retreat, pushed out by hot water heater’s clichéd prank.

“Yup, the boys are now in their pre-pubescent upright and locked position.”

And When certainly could not occur until all wounds, front and back, had been secured, Jack – who was the epitome of teeth grinding, butt squirming, nails digging crescents into palm stoicism – presiding over the sultry bathroom from the throne, flexing his heretofore untapped, yet urgently desired, telekinetic powers on the knot of white that taunted and teased of more stunning vistas than the diminutive beefeater disguising extra toilet paper in the far corner, his erotic thoughts cajoling the towel to abandon Ennis’ right hip.

“Swelling’s almost gone…bruises not so much, and it’s going to itch like a motherfucker when the hair starts to grow -”

“Fuck! Don’t yank!”

“Sorry, but the tape was stuck to -”

“Must you emulate all of Kisha’s dominatrixing ways?”

“If it means you back to perfect, then in a word – yes. Now, quit your bitching and let me finish.”

The knot remained impervious to Jack’s voyeuristic mental demands, however the consolation prize – a tanned muscular thigh framed by white - and the opportunity it presented to make an end run – a handful of tight, glorious ass – soothed being less than extraordinary disappointment and the dwindling inventory of body hair.

“You are too good to me, Ennis.”

“Yet it’s always less than you deserve.”

Next there was cinnamon Scope in lieu of toothpaste, a fruitless search for deodorant, a pass on the dust covered Jergen’s found cowering behind a box of feminine hygiene products, a futzed over
finger comb and a tepid water shave - Ennis only though, Jack saved from a right hand wielding disposal razor face scrape by an inexorable edict –

“No, beard stays. Want to know I’m kissing a man.”

- sending feigned maligned pride and snagged Ritz Carlton robe retreating to the bedroom, the bathroom surrendered to Schick and hack job.

“My dick thanks you for that ringing endorsement, Sergeant.”

Dirty laundry, creature comfort and dumping out postponed When yet again, Jack and Ennis saving time by mixing foreplay with chores.

Gropes gathered sheets, jeans, flannel shirt, tube socks, The Dark Knight and sling –

“Here.”

“But, you’ll need it.”

“Not with my legs over your shoulders.”

- all bound for washer’s agitation. A nipple tweak arranged logs, coddled kindling –

“Want some help?”

“Tell me, Brooklyn boy, when was the last time you started a fire?”

“Well, you were on your hand and knees that time, too.”

- learned early and often skill sparking flames to combat the chill. Answering nature’s call, male ego posturing kinked up the hallway –

“You in the bathtub.”

“You and the back of the couch.”

“You pressed to the kitchen counter.”

“You spread atop the dining room table.”

“You over the running dryer.”

“You against the wall, arms held behind your…the dryer?”

“On high.”

“Really?”

“You fucking loved it the last time.”

- simultaneous flushes hitting a lazy backbeat for grandfather’s tune. A quick lip touch, stretching into a three nose bump, back of head tug, deep throat purr, sent one to the bar for something more palatable than what the spigot offered –

“Not advisable with pain medication, Jack.”

“I’m not the one who will be operating heavy equipment.”
- and the other to the dark to satisfy paranoid vigilance.

“Going to check on the car.”

“While wearing my coat and not much - fuck, Ennis, it’s freezing out -”

“Be right back.”

He did check on the car. He checked that it was still tarp covered, checked that it couldn’t be seen from the front, couldn’t be seen from the street. He also checked on the possibility for forced entry success through French doors, back door, bedroom and bathroom windows. He checked on wires coming in – power, phone and cable, the lights coming out – kitchen, laundry and fireplace. He checked on the crawlspace, its combination lock, its access to inside. With both celestial bears peeking over hunched and hunkered down shoulders, wind whipping tears to eyelash icicles and snatching lungs’ staccatoed white prematurely, Ennis and his stiffened flashlight claw – the other picked a left pocket hole, grateful to be spared front line duty – checked nook, niche, corner, casement, side and shingle, anything and everything a rational mind could to assuage an irrational heart’s fear. Twenty minutes and three D batteries later, the anonymity contract with Black Pond Road valid still, winter’s blast returned an Ennis Popsicle to a not so patiently waiting Jack blanket bear hug.

“Christ! What the fuck took so long?”

“Ccccheck…hhhhouse.”

“No hat, no gloves, no scarf, no shirt?”

“Hhhad…sssssure.”

“Sometimes you don’t have the sense JK gave Ron.”

“Yyyou…sssssafe.”

“In your arms, aren’t I?”

“Wwwwell, ttttechniccccccallllly…”

“Don’t worry, the screenplay will block it right.”

Then it was defrosting that usurped When’s place in line.

“Sit. There. Now.”

Doc Martin’s removed from sockless feet, soon-to-be dumpsterized grey trench coat tossed, snow soggy scrubs stripped, as Jack, bundled up his man in one blanket, added more wood, served a decreed highball of liquid heat, and, with the assistance of the bed borrowed quilt, couch cocoon temperature raised by a snuggling in from behind 98.6.

“In this LoJacking quest to protect and serve, has a thought to your safety ever been entertained?”

“This isn’t about me.”

“Correct, it’s about we.”

“Jack…”
“And my vested interest in its continued plurality.” A casted hand to tip chin up, blue imploring the preservation of brown. “Please, no me without you.”

“Exactly.”

The planted kiss hit the mark square, another rising to match it, tongues sucked in between. And that should have been When’s cue to make a frenzied body slamming entrance. But, blood flow could not be spared, numb extremities pulling rank on other more voracious – satiability dependent upon Jack’s stamina and their lube supply – locations. So, as frustrated and blue-ball verging When cooled heels in the wings, Ennis – content to watch eternity lazily finger-mapped around his nipple – and Jack – obligingly giddy to provide the robe only clad prop-up – sprawled and entwined, together erasing some of their five day Just Be deficit and covered some sorely neglected exposition.

Like business card –

“Having trouble here fitting one swatch of blue into this five thousand piece open sky jigsaw puzzle. No, two pieces…three…OK, four, but that one has a wispy bit of cloud on -”

“Head back this way, Jack.”

“Right. Ceiling fan guy -”

“Adrian Lockhart.”

“- and all the other victims’ manner of death.”

“Eyes…always watching…?”

“Yes, Ennis, though an enigma of Alan Turning stumping proportions, I somehow managed to decipher the subtle Oedipidal symbolism.”

“So, what’s the question?”

“The obvious opinion of the NYPD’s competence notwithstanding, for one so watchful, a rather sloppy crumb trail left behind, n’est pas?”

“A trail I didn’t know how to follow until Randy Miller pointed the way.”

“Ah, yes, the china shop fallen co-conspirator.”

A momentary pause to reflect on, whether under the guidance of fate or chance or the divine sticking a nose in, that day’s seemingly random and rash series of events, and the difference made by ten minutes.

“The convenience store couple, may they rest in peace, were both very gracious. Breezed in and out, but they agreed to drop the charges against Jesse, and filled an ice bag for my broken hand.”

- and what happened at Bellevue –

“Over by the window, eyes closed, chair scrape, eyes open, hand on my stuff, I shout, spoon stabs, spurt…spurt…spurt, I scream, spurt…spurt…spurt, doctors and nurses and guards, ‘Only you, Jack!’ , spurt…spurt…spurt, room closes in, ‘He’s watching only you now!’ , spurt…spurt…spu – my cheek kept from splatting to tile by an intriguing six-two, cerulean blue eyed, strawberry blonde orderly with a – Ow! What the fuck, Ennis? Now it’s the hair on my legs?”

“Sorry, must have slipped. What do you mean by stuff?”
“Case file, notes, messenger bag, coat. You know – stuff.”

“Where exactly?”

“Table, table, table, back of chair respectively.”

“And he didn’t have time to pass you the chip?”

“Don’t see how, bag flipped closed, and back turned for only a few seconds.”

“In his room, then.”

“Ransacked. Not there.”

“How do you know that?”

“Hunnie, while he did likewise to my bag at the hospital. Chipless with both.”

“Not with Jesse, not with you. Where the fuck is it?”

“Stashed in a coffee can perhaps?”

A momentary pause to contemplate the size of a New York City dwelling homeless Gulf War veteran’s backyard. “If only Detective Schnieder and his paperwork could bury you that deep.”

“And speaking of burying and deep…”

“Still can’t feel my feet.”

“Not the usual tab A that goes into slot B, although -”

“Jack…”

“Damn.”

- and finally Jack’s phone call.

“Randall Malone.”

“What?! That prick?”

“Oh, you’ve met, I see.”

“Came by the station to talk Newsome, wouldn’t fucking shut up, twisted everything around until I screwed up and told him about – why the FUCK would you call him?”

“The prospect of our in absentia reputations resting solely in the slimy hands of IAB was less than appealing. So, I asked for his assistance.”

“Assistance from Malone? Bullshit.”

“He will work diligently on our behalf, believe me.”

“Bullshit.”

“A mutual acquaintance met through the Legal Aid plea bargain process guarantees his cooperation.”
“Another fucking lawyer, I suppose?”

“Not even close. Though, if this Howard Johnson’s regular were to disclose certain damaging information concerning a certain esquire, legal counsel would probably be - you’re bleeding again.”

A momentary pause for a temple swiped hand to smear red.

“Shit.”

“Constable, stop picking thyself.”

“I’m scratching, not picking. Scratching ‘cause it fucking itches.”

“Same action, same result. And do you really think it wise to argue with a black belt in semantics?”

“I’m not arguing, just like I’m not picking.”

“As a man whose voice can make my dick go adamantium hard just by reading a light switch once said – ‘GSWs are nothing to fuck around with.’”

“Not a GSW.”

“So, Hunnie’s snappy repartee missed lodging in your brain by mere millimeters, then?”

“Gee, Jack, hyperbole much?”

“Only exaggerate during non-R months. He could have killed you, Ennis.”

“The bullet only grazed -”

“Yes, a bullet S from a G, and if you don’t stop picking -”

“Not picking, dammit!”

“- the W will never heal.”

“Leave it, Jack.”

“You would deny me a chance to return the bandage/hair yanking favor?”

“Said it’s fine.”

“But, it looks like it’s becoming infected and -”

“No. Mine to deal with. Alone.” A pull away from the concern, a sit-up damaging their cocoon’s structural integrity. “So, why didn’t you call your mother? Sure she’s worried sick.”

To describe Jack’s post brush-off expression as displeased would be a disservice to the hard edge slicing out from his glare. “Smooth conversation re-direction there, Ennis. Completely unnoticeable.” Retrieving a leg from the back of couch cushion trench, Jack swung around to proper, hands in lap, both feet on the floor, eyes ramrod straight ahead, a playground brawl combatants waiting outside the principal’s office distance away. “And for clarification purposes, I did. Called her first.”

“You had two one phone calls?”

“Well, I asked politely.”
“Of course you did, Jack. How did your mom take the news?”

“Wouldn’t know.”

“You didn’t tell her?”

“He answered the phone. The conversation lasted all of twenty dehumanizing seconds.”

“Oh.” This topic was as verboten as the last. “Well.” Yet, it was hanging out there now, that heavy shroud of uncomfortable silence, and to squander this opportunity – no work to interrupt, no cellphones to snatch attention away, stomping off in a huff space finite - awaiting a more ideal one to broach the pain’s demons made about as much sense as Jack’s R months reference. “About your father, I -”

“Leave it, Ennis.”

“But -”

“No. Mine to deal with. Alone.”

Then again, maybe not.

“Jack, you, we, need to talk about -”

“No, what I need is a refill.” Jack bolted up and off, the indelible brand of shame sizzling hot. “I’m still thirsty.”

“Christ, Jack, you’ve had -”

A Goldberg series of events that even old Rube himself couldn’t have designed more intricately. Stepping out with left, Jack headed for whiskey, his right leg - the one still lead and sleep tingle prickly from a half an hour under Ennis – caught on the quilt pooled on the floor, the trip causing a stumble forward only checked by the grab to robe’s hem that was originally executed to hold the escapee in place which worked for a brief tottering moment until a petulant side jerk to be rid of the busybody millstone hindering distilled amnesia brought still awake leg stuttering to find purchase for the off-balance thrown weight and finding only more tossed aside quilt requiring wobbly leg to pick up the slack, a job hampered by a pair of bare sized twelves that when stomped upon produced a yowl of pain and an instinctive dive to protect that took the robe still clutched in his hand south and dragged the wrapped around hips forward while discarded quilt skated left foot towards sun room and the frantic attempt to check said tumble connected pinwheeling cast with leaning over chin snapping head, body and plush terry cloth grasping hand back that rescued one foot from its quilted prison, slid the other into the couch leg and cancelled what was surely headed towards a painful wishbone by unceremoniously dumping one onto the other, the mouse caught in the trap, Jack sprawling across Ennis.

“What the fuck were you -”

“Goddammit, why did you -”

Burned one too many times, When was cautiously optimistic at this sudden change of events. So, instead of facing rejection yet again by the direct shtupping suggestion only to be shot down by some other lame excuse, When wisely went with patient, non-confrontational time biding this go round, content to just sit and watch, for surely one of them would notice that bandaging and de-thawing had been completed, showers taken, that the perimeter was secure, and the washer agitated away without need of direct supervision. Surely someone would recognize the potential dangling there, and all
When need do was wait for it.

“What, one cast isn’t enough for you? Trying to break my neck as well?”

“Trying to stop you from drinking too much, that’s all.”

“My limit is still many miles to go.”

“You’re shitfaced already, can’t even walk straight.”

“Not when my robe is assaulted.”

- and wait for it…

“I love you, Jack.”

“And I fucking love you.”

“So, no more whiskey.”

“If I’m not mistaken, that bore a striking ill-favored resemblance to a command.”

“If it stops you from fucking around with your health, than yes, it IS a command.”

“Gee, hypocrite much, Ennis?”

“Now you’re making even less sense than usual.”

“A Spark Notes summary: Going all Carrie Nation, Ennis conveniently overlooks his own transgressive picking.”

“I am NOT PICKING!”

“And I’m not your child!”

- and wait for it… “No, but you can be fucking stupid sometimes.”

“This from the bleeding brain trust.”

“Stupid and stubborn.”

“Bleeding and bossy.”

“Superior.”

“Belligerent.”

- still waiting…

“Scared.”

“Ennis...”

“Shamed.”

“Don’t go there.”
“Let me in, Jack. Please! I can help, I want to help.”

“Substitute the name Ennis in that sentence, and then ditto.”

“What do I need your help with?”

“Unbuttoning your hair shirt.”

“Quit talking out of your -”

“How apropos for the individual who claims responsibility for trouble and problems omnipresently spanning time and space to sport a permanent, visible penance of his self-flagellatory and important guilt.”

“Well, you’d know all about scars and guilt wouldn’t you, JJ?”

“Fuck off, Constable!”

“Fuck you, Counsel…uh…Jack?”

About damn time someone became aware of the weight of body trapping body, the fevered friction of naked skin, shared breath of mouths only a warm, wet lick away, the way knees squeezed in, spread out wide, thighs flexed and contracted rubbing hardened cocks upon sweat sheened flat stomachs, and the heat of balls nestled proton to neutron close.

A absolutely perfect George Takei. “Oh…my.”

“Skip over the argument and right to the -”

“Make-up sex?”

“Yeah.”

“Couch?”

“What about…”

An upward glance. “Twenty, twenty-five maybe, steps.”

An upside down gaze. “Thirty seconds tops.”

When, that late bloomer, sighed for a job well done, sending out thoughts, an apology – sincere, yet unrepentant –

“Too far.”

“Take too long.”

- for Where’s usurpation.

“Here, then.”

“Lead on, MacDuff.”

Teeth clacked, foreheads collided, chins crashed, and somewhere in the rush to get there last week, a septum was possibly deviated, mouths stretching around tongues primed to fulfill this most pleasurable of evolutionary purposes – to lightning sting and taste, spit plunder all with reach, tangle
and tease, twirling and twining, wiggle and whip, the suck-pop slurp corner of the mouth dribble, the race on to be the first to draw the throaty plea for more.

“Oh…Christ…Ennis…you…”

“You…Jack…you…”

Hands, while not idle, did have a larger landscape to roam, too many potential targets to hone in on a constant, three to find their place instead of just two. A cheek received urgent palm’s nudge to angle change, fisted hair became an anchor to delve in deeper, the possessive clasp dug into soft flesh, ten fingers ordering ass into motion.

“So…so…so…”

“…fucking good.”

Bodies rocked, pleading to be used, tested, pushed to endurance’s limit, craving abuse beyond, stuttering frantic to connect, combine, the rhythm of ravenous desire immediacy.

“Oh, god…Jack!” A lover’s nibble, teeth and force and desperation, aimed right where neck bows to shoulder’s sway, “Want to… want to…” missed wide, the target tipping over, tongue skipping skin’s surface straight down to cast. “…know what the hell you’re…”

“This.” From the always conveniently placed messenger bag, necessity retrieved. “Here.” What the tube farted out in Ennis’ palm, shared through clasped hands - “Yourself. Do it.” - the last of the strawberry lube fist pumped and fingers scissored into place - “I’ll hold,” warm from within met heat from without, the reach around keeping impatient hips steady, “you guide.”

“Change…should change…” nails that scraped across ass – pushing, bullying, driving down – deaf to the suggestion, “…positions…watch…want to…”

“No, Lap Fuck is good…” Eyes squinched shut, and forehead found a shoulder to rest upon, casted hand grateful for the support a heaving chest provided. “…Lap Fuck is great…” Anticipation, salty sweet licked to swollen lips, shivered, anticipation that had adder coiled since waking two hours ago, since death sentence as a punchline reveal, since birthday cake, O’Malley’s, loft, since interrogation room’s handshake, for this man, this man groaning and squirming with a Munch reminiscent expression beneath, this man determined to call bullshit on sight and kiss away the sting, this man who loved not in spite of the stains and tatters, but because - “…Lap Fuck isssssssshhhhhhhiiiiiiiiii!” – as head breached hole, anticipation for this man – heady, fervent, voracious for now, tomorrow, next week, a month, five years, twenty, forever – avariciously consumed, tripping and stumbling over pain’s razor thin pleasurable path, the steady, sinking slide unceasing until sweat skin squished and bodies melted into one.

“Now, fuck me, mon amie, fuck me fashion senseless.”

Four thrusts –

“Ghhhhhhnnn!”

- a grunt and it was all over.

“AH!…Ah!…ah!” Nearly parallel to the floor, Ennis eased ambush orgasm locked muscles back to the couch, ass down to the foreplay jumble, the deluge of post coital endorphins leaving a high water mark on involuntary functions – lungs hiccupping for air, legs twitching and hips ghosting, brain a victim of those first thunder boomers – “Oh, god…oh, god…too much…too fast…too you…” - Jack
nearly drawn under by the storm surge.

“Ennis, it’s OK, OK, Ennis, OK.” A shift, tossed and tumbled about, cushion piping gouging into knees, Jack’s keep in place handhold exacting white knuckled revenge above. “It’s OK, just don’t -”

“I couldn’t…” A wet warmth tickle, Ennis trickling down, on inner thighs. “I didn’t…”

Ten lines in the blanket beneath, Jack’s bent back toes scratching for purchase, for situation control. “It’s alright, it will be all -”

“Alright? Alright? Our first time, our first time and I …” Ass strangling stiff hands swiped drenched face up into equally dripping hair. “Fuck! FuckfuckfuckfuckfuckFUCK!”

He had to think, he had to focus, channel bricks…a ton of bricks…a ton of bricks immersed in uranium…Oprah eating double fudge peanut butter cheesecake blasting Rammstein sitting on an uranium lousy ton of bricks. He had to become heavy – while still maintaining his svelte Mr. Gay Syracuse figure, of course – to hold Emo Ennis in place. “Just stay calm, don’t pull out and I’ll take care of .”

“And you…did you…did you…you…” Down in the Lap Fuck valley, an extremely interested party stomach slapped hello. “Of course you didn’t ‘cause I shot too fucking soon! GODDA -”

“ENNIS!” Cast to throat the ideal deterrent against continued performance angst struggle. “Shut the fuck up and listen to me!”

A wide-eyed wheezy “What?”

“Give me your hand.” A cautious-eyed wheezy “Why?”

“Resurrection.”

A ‘you’ve got to be fucking kidding me–eyed’ wheezy “Seriously?”

“Yes, seriously. Trust me. Your hand.” Impatient right led incredulous right to precisely the right spot. “You – hand job,” an elementary rhythm initiated, “basic jerk-off, nothing fancy-schmancy,” simple, easy strokes, slow and smooth, “while Ass Bandit works his magic.” Up and…down, up and…down, up and…down, up and…root to tip, sweaty palm to silk slicked cock. “Oh, yeah…fuck, that’s…” A sloppy smile let loose a shuddered sigh, internal muscle motion rolling up, hips to stomach to chest to shoulders to neck to tongue tucked in mouths’ corner, “…good…good…goo – oh, god!” Basic graduated to both fancy and schmancy with an improvised thumb to slippery slit flick. “Why, Sergeant Del Mar, if your technique is any indication…fuck, do that a – oh, god! – it’s safe to assume you’ve done this before.”

Jack was wrong, a point that would remain exclusively between Ennis and the nearest lamp post to avoid the inevitable pouting, but he was. Not the monkey spanking, no, that he was quite familiar with, the weight of Jack’s cock in his hand, the contour of pulsing veins and smooth skin, the way it twitched to every stroke, dripped slick, balls wrinkled up against his thigh, the from the soul’s depth moan when head was pinched –

“Uuuuuuuuiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiniiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiisssssssss!”

Yeah, like that.

But, neither he, nor his cock, had EVER experienced this entrancing, entrapping melody of rocking hips’ Siren song, a cajoling, coaxing cadence of push and pull, pressure and heat, the relentless
serenade of temptation and surrender that he and his cock were honor and hormone bound to answer. Just had to take care of one minor thing first.

A glassy about to pass out thus rendering any re-awakening ministrations, regardless of how erotic or successful, moot-eyed “Cast?”

“Hmm?” Pleasure’s concentration dawdled closed eyes to half. “Oh.” Crises adverted, subject placated and busy wanking, pull-out restraint no longer necessary. “Sorry.”

A cough, a swallow, a quick check of affronted Adam’s apple bobability. - “Jack, you – you - and I’m - I’m -”

**Attack!**

Jack’s head yanked down, full force and brutal, countered by Ennis' face throttled in place, open mouths fumbling to find and fit, tongues first, then teeth, lips at last cemented fast, skin’s pungent aroma of sex, the immutable desire for all, everything, erratically inhaled, arousal and lust and need, control and domination in constant flux. While Ennis’ hand could grant freedom for Jack to thrust, to seek friction, to follow shiver’s lead to the edge, it could also snap the leash back, cruelly petulant and perverse - an open palm, a closed fist, the cessation of movement, all wrenching whimpering pleas of mercy from his pawn’s throat, Jack held his prisoner with sweet undulating torture, hips and thighs and body rocking, swaying, the incessant, insistent tug and squeeze, inside and around and through, drawing Ennis out and up, swelling, inundating, choking, primed once again, the absolute power of mastery nearing absolute corruption.

“FUCK!” They parted for air, silver dots sparking on the outskirts of blurred vision. “That was – is – you -”

“For whom do you believe the term ‘power bottom’ was coined?”

Hand slimy with Jack traced the smirk above. “Amazing.”

“So, Ennis, at the risk of sounding presumptuous, now that your dick is back amongst the horny,” a challenge, a directive, a sultry gravel whisper, mouth to mouth, “are you going to fuck me or what?”

As a matter of fact, that was the next line item on his agenda – a crazy, blind, speechless, into the couch, hang from the ceiling fan, walk funny for a week, name forgetting, hot monkey love scream fest fuck. However, *this* time when he fucked his Jack, when he fucked his lust, *this* time when he fucked his passion, his contentment and belonging and laughter and purpose and peace, *this* time –

“Oh, shit.”

An evenly placed two-handed on the chest shove, and Jack tumbled sideways to the couch.

- he was bloody well going to watch.

"My, my, but you are a pushy bastard."

"And you fucking love it."

But, watch what exactly?

The lean lines of Jack’s legs, trembling muscles and goosebumped skin, left tossed over couch’s back, right shoulder looped, the tale of their glorious fuck so far written in dark-haired lube and spunk sticky hieroglyphs from ass all the way to sucked big toe? Or the curve of Jack’s stomach,
perfect hand hold hips sloping away to camouflaged navel, hollowing out with each nipple brush
gasp? Watch instead Jack’s cock, bereft of palm, severe, scarlet and straining, its screams for release
dotting slick where it bounced as blanket re-arranging to protect unScotchguarded fabric brought
bent at knee legs a spread and ready thigh’s width apart? Or perhaps Jack’s hands, such tenderness
and strength, ten, long fingers of innovative nimble caught up in an epic battle with extraneous throw
pillows, banishment to the floor decreed for leverage’s sake? Then there was Jack’s face, crowned
by plastered black dripping wet kisses on flushed, frustrated skin, jaw line and spit soggy beard
cocked cheeky, mouth open for labored breath’s ease, tongue touring and highlighting, relishing a
swollen, nicked and thoroughly used ‘yours for the taking’ grin, and the eyes, feral and raw, crystal
blue bright with need, possessive, mercurial, vulnerable, offering acceptance, then begging
forgiveness, adoration and defiance, haughty and unworthy, the hook that plunged through lighting
fast, merciless and deep, rending rhyme from reason, splintering and destroying head, heart, life, each
broken, busted, battered piece immediately mended, soothed, caressed, restored and renewed, rebirth,
an eternal part of their greater whole.

No contest, really.

“Goddammit, Jack,” He held fast to eyes, Jack to Ennis' soul, as glistening bodies reconnected for
the Obtuse Angle Never Mind the Few Stray Lines Fuck with a slow, searing – SLAM! slide. “I
love you!”

“Oh, god - oh, god – not - not going to last -”

True to his word, after slow, searing – SLAM!...slow, searing – SLAM! SLAM! SLAM!, a
masturbatory Jack’s Twist, neck stretched back spanning tendon steel cables from chin to collar
bone, spine popping in a contortionist’s arch up, and a gaping, breathless, silent shriek of his lover’s
name, Jack climaxed, a shower of milky white splattering, raindrops to dusty road fat, across
convulsing body and chest scratching for meaning.

“I can’t - I can’t – fuck - can’t -”

“Jack, hey, Jack!” Ennis talked him down, words – nonsense and sweet, and touch - hands smoothed
to trembling legs, a kiss placed on right knees’ knob. “Breathe, Jack, breathe, baby, I’ve got you, just
breathe.”

“Oh, Ennis…Ennis…” Shaking subsided with dilatatory speed, lungs rasping into jagged rhythm,
head unburrowed from the corner springing out spikes that pointed in all directions at once, Jack
floating back to earth and the couch on a blissed out sigh, the epitome of fucked silly. “Damn. You
are good.”

“Oh, yeah?” A finger, more recently engaged in hip circling, skipped across Jack’s chest, a zig-
zaggy, looping path painting swirlies and curly Q’s, peaks and plains in the hair that had escaped the
razor’s wrath. “How so?”

“Don’t fuck gloat, Ennis, it’s -”a look down over a doubled chin. “What are you doing?”

Busy writing his name, a nipple for I’s dot. “Labelling what’s mine.”

“Well,” a wriggle to find common comfort, splayed, his noodly and otherwise utterly spent at the
moment, yet tingly content and happy in Ennis' care body at the mercy of couch arm, “any mess,
young man, is your responsibility to clean.”

“OK.” The finger slimy to the second knuckle from signature underlining found the tickle spot on the
third rib –
“So not fair!”

- then up and straight in, the first real taste ever of Jack exploding in his mouth. “You…I like.”

“Better than sauerkraut?”

Another swipe, another finger full, second taste sucked and forbidden fruit savored on the palette. “You…fucking great.”

“Well, I do try.”

Third swipe offered away, but rebuffed with a shake of the head.

“No. Thank you. Squick. Too Walt Whitman for me.”

No matter, more for him, enthusiastically devoured as the others. Ennis had the sight of Jack – a naked, boneless, breathtakingly beautiful lump, his small gruntlets –


- Jack’s scent of sweat and spunk and shampoo, Jack’s heat surrounding, smooth and firm under palm’s caress –

“Yoo. Who. En. Nis.”

- and now on his tongue, the texture of French’s golden mustard, or warm icing, the kind drizzled on Bundt cakes and turnovers, heavy, goopy, the essence lingering, opposites – bitter and sweet, tangy and salt – so strange, licking fingers clean of another man’s semen, so exciting, wanting to suck it straight from Jack’s cock, so –

“HEY!”

And he also had, apparently, Jack’s foot upside his head. “What the hell was that for?”

“To. Con. Tin. Ue. This. Need. To. Change.” Jack’s fault, really, that monster of his own creation, stuttering his words, banging his head into the couch back. Hips were powerless against it, body unable to cease the march forward, Ennis' rejuvenated to nineteen again cock thrusting, awake, hard and still up for more party time. “My. Shoul. Der.”

“What, your - Shit!” Horrified, by what he had done…doing…was about to do, Ennis scrambled out and off. “Did I – are you – FUCK!”

“Ennis!” There were many places that he had no desire to revisit – childhood, Daniel’s betrayal, low PD on the office food chain, that whole early 90’s blonde highlights phase – but right now with his man more than a slicked and hard dick’s distance away – overly cautious, overly protective, overly wrought about the dangers of an overly exuberant fuck grandmother Ennis was unquestionably his least desirable destination. “Step away from the ledge.”

“Oh, fuck, Jack, I’m sorry, so, I didn’t, and then when you did, and I couldn’t help, wanted to see, watch you, and I just, we never should have -”

A kiss bolted up and smacked right into the babbling before those words could be released for the capricious bitch of a universe to toy with. “Bite my tongue, Ennis! Don’t say that!”

“But, if your shoulder is -”
“My shoulder is still here. Just a bit stingier.”

“Then we should definitely -”

“Look.” No use reasoning with the big head obviously, so the appeal changed tacks and went straight to the real brains of the operation.

“Oh...” Ennis shivered, soft around the edges became granite once more in Jack’s hand.

“You’re still hard, I’m always hot, and there is the unresolved issue of a first bareback.”

“But, didn’t we...didn’t I...?”

“A fuck mulligan.”

One eye closed in rapture opened. “A what?”

“A sexual do-over, if you will. Watch your head.”

Ducked just in time to miss Jack’s swinging leg. “And my...my, uh, you know, never happened then?”

“Right. Move so I can...” Blanket tugged and toiled into another protective configuration.

“Doesn’t work that way, Jack.”

“My ass, my rules. Your record will be completely expunged. And speaking of my ass...” A wink come hithered back over an uninjured shoulder.

It took operation’s brains a negative .0382 seconds to respond, “Jaaaaaaaack!” sex smeared bodies connecting once more for the Cause the Hayes Committee to Grave Roll One Foot Always on the Floor From Behind Fuck.

“Are you sure about your -”

“Shoulder’s fine, shoulder’s peachy. No sting. Sting all gone.”

A lie, of course. A lie that teeth rattled by speed’s intensity attempted to grind to inconsequential.

“Any other ass decreed rules I should know about?”

A gritted lie that thrusts and skin’s friction sweat surfed left, couch cushion becoming a quicksand foundation under a sinking knee.

“Astroglide, my personal favorite.”

“Any flavor?”

“Rimmer’s choice.”

A gritted surfing lie that penetration prodded forward, recoup and regroup still tacky in places, orgasm shredded nerves singed sooty black by sweet spot sparks, cracked and pocked marked with encroaching need.

“Sex. At least once a day.”

“Only once?”
“Including President Clinton’s definition.”

A gritted surfing sparking lie that was sustained and bolstered by pride, frightened of failure, as forehead was pressed into service against the couch, their completion demanded, this breaking of the last barrier, long withheld through spite, postponed by tribulation, and, dammit, after all the shit slogging, they were deserving of a far more fitting commemoration than a premature – though perfectly understandable – guttural grunt.

“Toys.”

“Handcuffs.”

“Cock rings.”

A gritted surfing sparking hopelessly romantic lie that counted on the resiliency and stamina of a strenuous foreplay exercised, liquor and Vicoden lubricated, all too brief respite rested, responsible for eight straight hours of steering wheel and gear shift, loathe to admit but still recovering from hospital trauma, go to for just about everything else thanks to cast dodgy right arm.

“Games.”

“Five minutes.”

“Hands. Off.”

“Strangers.”

“Cow. Boys.”

And the right arm actually acquitted itself admirably.

“But. Most. Im. Por. Tant. Ly…”

Until the angle change, that is. A shifting weight distribution, settling in for the sprinting finish line kick, and it all proved too much for right to maintain, pitching the two backed beast forward, the total collapse of the Hayes Committee Fuck imminent.

“Love. Me. Alwa – oh, shit!”

And just as his kiss had promised, he was there –

“I’ve got you, Jack.”

“Oh, shit…fuck…my…my…fuck!”

“Shoulder?”

“Willing spirit’s nemesis.”

- strong arms rescuing, catching, gathering in, pulling to, sitting up, back against chest, arms secured and safe in front.

“Rest for a second, Jack, OK? Rest.”

“So sorry, Ennis. I thought, I believed, but I’m – so sorry.”
“And you’re apologizing for?”

“Can’t do over a do-over. Ripples, time shifts. Are you prepared to deal with the ramifications of creating a sex paradox?”

“Do over’s not done yet, though.”

A frown demanded clarification, and an eyelift indicated the answer lay straight ahead, at the bar, towards the Ennis and Jack in the Perfect for Cock Riding and Ass Pounding Straight Backed Reverse Lap Fuck reflection.

“Keep your eyes open, Jack. Keep them open and we can both watch as I fuck you.”

The sensual –

A sigh, breathy, shallow catches - hitches, in its stead escapes a moan, this low and earthy, the sound of flesh’s surrender, as a drop, a single bead of sweat, its fleeting grip on a blond curl lost, falls, splashes to an arm, elbow crooked and head clasped, slipping along gravity’s predestined course, divots, bumps, the crease of collar bone, to collect in throat’s hollow, the pool that feeds the steady stream south.

- intense –

A line cuts reflection vertical, blurry, fluid, the dark bleeding into sheened red, firelight’s dregs disappearing blessing to bodies in motion - rising, sinking, stained by anonymity’s ink, calf and thigh, backs’ ebb and flow, the point of meeting piercing deep.

- frustrating –

So much, too much, for sanity’s sake eyes shut out sensation’s twin, this offense corrected swiftly, a hair yank, a fist squeeze, firm discipline for such a blatant offense soothed by a lick, a kiss, punishment answered by teeth, retaliatory and equal, neck sucked, nipped by a smile, out of a shirt’s camouflage bounds, the mark’s statement obvious.

- maddening –

A hand, framed by Grey Goose and Tanqueray, fingers curved, tight, their journey repetitive, firm, around a cock, stiff, wet, anxious in its confinement, matches the rolling rhythm, strong hips’ steady metronome impervious to muscles’ trick, the squeeze, the clench, pull and tease, the cry for deliverance.

- slow fuck.

“Oh…god! Look, just…you are so…just look at you, Jack!”

“Christ, would it kill me to once in a while visit a tanning salon?”

A searing mouth would brook no more, closing down hard, smothering breath and thought. Not now, not as the mirror sang of such unfathomable beauty to wrench the sob of inadequate adulation echoing in their kiss. Not now with it all – soul’s yearnings, heart’s comfort, his question and solution – straining, sweating, slicking, rocking and mewling against his body. Was in no mood for sarcasm, especially of the self-effacing variety, even if the words snapped off the tongue currently swiping across his front teeth. No, now Ennis was all about heading home, the light brilliant, blazing, beckoning, and he wasn't going alone.
“Let go, baby. Just let go.”

“Ennis…Ennis…”

No fanfare, no pomp or circumstance. No furniture broken, no linens rended or ripped. No bodies skewed out of alignment, or minds sent to an alternate dimension. Backs didn't arch, toes didn't curl, nails didn't scratch red lines of uncontrollable passion. There were no shouts, screams, shrieks, cries or wails of expletives, deities, nonsense or names. Just Ennis holding Jack, Jack embracing Ennis and, with a kiss, the climax erupted, pouring forth with silent joy, reached and shared together. Eternally We. One.

“Jack, I love…”

“…you, Ennis.”

Right where he knelt, like the middle-aged lawn chair that had picnicked at one too many Fourth of Julys, Ennis folded, boneless, brainless, backwards, with nary a comment or complaint when head thunked to couch arm. Shoulder burning, ass aching, hole stretched in the very best way and leaking, Jack managed to turn around despite muscles’ rubbery consistency, on their third swipe fingers snagging the quilt from the floor before his total collapse, a sun bleached dry piece of driftwood washed to shore between sprawled legs.

“So, what were we…?”

“Before the…?”

“Yeah.”

With strength miraculously found from what by all rights should be doornail-equse considering, and an exhausted hmph, Ennis tugged Jack up, off squished balls and spent for the foreseeable future cock, settling the adorable inanimate object with unruly hair and silly grin closer, tucking head under his, the quilt coming with.

“Argument.”

“Right.”

Again fingers went seeking, this time for a more fitting place to rest than down with the under the cushion crumbs, tips itsy-bisty spidered cast northward over rapidly cooling skin until greeted by soft lips and a brushing tongue.

“You’re an ass…”

“Such a dick…”

Without retiring to the bedroom, without cleaning up, Jack snuggled and Ennis cradled. Without tending to rumpled bandages, without stoking the dying fire, Jack listened to a heartbeat, Ennis to lazy snores sighed across his chest. Sated, in love, bareback virgins no more, Jack and Ennis slept peaceful content.

And across Black Pond road, the silent, smiling shadow, always watching.
It has been a long lapse between chapters, I know, a VERY long lapse, and for that I humbly apologize. A new job, cosplay competitions, the holidays and an original fic (that I may post a few chapters here soon for AO3’s opinions), just a few reasons that piled up between me and "Tainted Evidence." But, I'm back now, and should be straight on through to the end.

So, if you are of a forgiving nature and are still willing to follow my Ennis and Jack, here are my most appreciative thanks.

B

“Del Mar.”

An involuntary response, like immediately deleting offers for cheap Canadian Viagra from the inbox unopened, or first waking moment spent in IPhone cuddling, or counting on the infallibility as destination guide of Google Map, all The Digital Age’s involuntary responses.

Like, regardless of a present that relied upon continued anonymity of location, when the mind is toiling over an extremely vital decision, one that could have lasting either positive or negative ramifications, answering a vibrating pocket.

“Hello?”

Another involuntary response, though this one millenniums aged, before Microsoft users grumbled about Ten, or travelers counted on a wandering spirit to lead them west, or neighborly marketplace gossip was all the endorsement a product needed for success – a father’s heart swelled at the sound of his daughter’s voice.

“Junior?”

“OMFG! Daddy! When that sheriff dude came to the door, you know, I was so – yes, it’s Dad – I just KNEW something terrible had happened to – no, I’m talking to him – ‘cause, like, there we were sitting, bored out of our freaking minds with dial-up and – you’ll get your turn – and Mom’s non-stop ‘your pervert father’ mantra driving us – if you’d give me a second – and we don’t have a clue where you – I can so ask important questions, Franny!”

Ennis plotzed. Right there in the Barnstable Shaw’s. Q-Tips by his elbow, Band-Aids at his feet and
reaching for the Crest Vivid White, he went all misty-eyed with the sheer joy of listening to his daughters snipe.

*My beautiful girls!*

“Calm down, Junior. Tell your sister to give us five minutes, and then she gets me.”

“Dad said to give us five, Franny, so back – she’s timing me now. God, you can be such a TWAT sometimes, you know that?”

Despite the obviously appropriate parental admonition, the TWAT was allowed to stand unchallenged, circumstances being what they were, his correcting voice not the one he wished to hear. “Then I guess we better start talking quick.”

*Goddamn! I’ve missed them! Thinking about them all the time, all day, every day, on the drive over here, just now, and here they are! My girls! Arguing and talking and calling…calling me…calling me on a phone that –*

Ennis paled. Right there in aisle seven. Surrounded by Clean and Clear, Preference by L’Oreal and cinnamon flavored dental floss, blue plastic basket with script letters appreciating his patronage white fist strangled, he churned with sickening dread.

*Oh, dear God…no.*

“How did you get this number?”

“That sheriff dude.”

“What sheriff dude?”

“The one who came to the door.”

“A deputy came to the door?”

The long suffering with inattentive adults teenaged sigh almost angsty enough to ruffle the hanging card of shower caps bringing gaudy 70’s flower power and synthetic lace trim sunshine, courtesy of Goody’s, to the Health and Beauty section that suddenly lacked sufficient oxygen for more than a shallow gasp and had squeezed down to the eyes of the world upon him in-a-nutshell proportions.

*Makes no sense, who got this, where they got this, how they got this, makes no sense!*  

“A deputy came to the door and, since there’s no phone here at the cabin – so lame – and, per your orders, cellphones ALL the way back at the apartment, he suggested we come to the station to make this call.”

“Who was this guy? Does Bill know him?”

“I don’t think so, but you told us to always co-operate with local law enforcement, remember?”

A father’s pride at the civic duty lesson learned tasted remarkably like pancakes with real from Vermont maple syrup, his breakfast coming up to haunt the back of this throat.

*Used it once, just once – school, cover absences, no question trail – which means untraceable phone fucking is, which means they now know where to look, which means Jack’s not safe, which still doesn’t explain how this number ended up in the hands of the sheriff in –*
“Besides, the sheriff dude said the request came from the NYPD.”

_NYPD? How could anyone from the department –_

Ennis panicked. Stomach and basket fell to the floor, one twisting into blind fear knots, intricate with horrifying probabilities, the other landing with a plastic splat, sideways and silly, contents skidding out across linoleum, forgotten.

_Captain Stoutamire. Jack’s room number, calling Jack’s room, and now - what have I done? Should have seen this coming, should have known! Stupid, so fucking stupid and lazy and irresponsible and the cabin is too close, New York is too close and he found them, Cap found them, don’t know how – followed them, figured it out, fucking lucky guess – they ran, I sent them away, away from me and now Cap has found them._

“Your mother, I need to talk to your mother. Or Bi -” _No names! Don’t use proper names! Someone could be – shit! Said Junior, said her name! “- her, uh, friend? Is he there? Need to talk to either one.”_

“Franny’s next and she’ll be pissed if -”

“Your mother. I’ll explain the reasons to your sister later.” _And I will. Explain later, ‘cause there will be a later, there just has to be a later!_”

“Mom’s in the restroom and Bill? Don’t know where he is, don’t really care where he is.”

_Fuck. No Alma, no Bill. Sorry, Sweet pea, so sorry, but it’s up to you._ “Then you need to listen to me, very carefully. Don’t react to what I say. Stay calm, act normal.”

“Is something wrong? Oh God, what’s, what’s wrong, Daddy?”

“Calm, stay calm.” _What’s wrong? You’re all in danger and I’m shopping for fucking deodorant!_ Faux rapt attention on the Puffs Plus with Aloe a less than ideal innocuous shopper cover, the attempt to blend into his grocery store environs not helped by the Wayfarers and bucket hat lousy with fishing lures. “Did youse ride with the deputy, or drive to the station?”

“Bill drove, but what does -”

“Good, that’s good. Can dump the car later.”

“Dump the car?”

“You need to leave the station now.”

“Leave the station?”

“Grab your mother and sister and just walk out.”

“Walk out?”

“Walk out quietly and drive away. And stop repeating everything I say. Someone is probably listening to this conversation.”

“But, there’s only Franny, and – give it a rest! – she’s holding up two fingers.”

“Listening and watching.”
“Someone’s watching me?”

“He’s always watching.”

“Daddy, you’re scaring me.”

Arms ached to hold her, fold her up tight to whisper ‘I’m here, baby, I’ll protect you’ promises into sweet smelling auburn, body hurt with want to see smile crinkled freckles after his closet clean and under the bed sweep everything’s safe kiss. *But, I’m not there, am I, not there to chase away the monsters that I created. Not there ‘cause I choose Jack over my children. Selfish prick.* “I know, Junior, and I’m so sorry, but this is important. Need you to be strong, for me, your mom, even your sister. Get in the car and drive away. But, not the cabin, can’t go back to the cabin.”

“But, all our – my clothes!”

“No cabin.”

“No cabin. Why not?”

“Not safe.”

“Not safe?”

“Not anymore, and what did I say about the repeating?”

“Sorry, Daddy.” Tears, right there on the edge of her voice. “Bu, where are we supposed to go?”

*Like a knife, cutting me open, blade slicing in…* “No cabin, no family or friends. Too easy, too predictable.”

“Why can’t we be with you?”

…*twisting…* “No, better if youse aren’t anywhere near me.”

“But, Daddy -”

…*deeper…* “NO.”

“At least we can call you now, talk to you, right? We’ve got your number and -”

“No. Never again. Don’t ever use this number again.” …*straight to the bone.* “Youse need to find somewhere, when this is all over – and it will be soon, Junior, I swear – I can still find you.”

“Can you find us in Hawaii?”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“Worth a try.”

“Can’t use credit or debit cards, they can be tracked.”

“Someone is listening, watching AND tracking me?”

“How much cash does your mother have? Does she have enough?”

“Enough for what?”
“Gas.”

“To go where exactly?”

“I don’t know! Still thinking. Just go, drive - far, away.”

“Oh, Daddy, please! I am not going to spend endless hours riding around in some crappy Honda!”

“Got to be some place unfamiliar.”

“And, she’ll probably deny it later, but Franny agrees with me.”

“Somewhere they won’t know where to -”

“What about Detective Wroe?”

That name a huge cow on the track in front of thought’s train, breaking the intense for appearances only concentration on the finer points of facial tissues. “What, what about Detective Wroe?”

“You could ask him.”

“Ask him what?”

“Where.”

“Where what?”

“Well, since he’s the one who called, I just thought -”

“Wait. What? He’s the one who called?”

“Daddy, now you’re the one repeat -”

“Tell me.”

“The message with your number, I saw it on the bottom, it came from Detective Wroe.”

Ennis nearly passed out. Exlax and Advil backstroked through his vision’s field, head swoosh louder than the store’s speakers could crackle out David Hasselhoff’s cover of ‘Livin Vita de Loca’, relief’s round off kick landing right behind the knees begetting an impressive and patriotic impression of amber grain waving, which, if not for the quick thinking of Dr. Scholl’s that ironically offered a hand, would have had ass kissing linoleum. “It was…was…Don?”

“Mom hates your cheating husband guts, but she still trusts Detective Wroe’s. Not that his guts are cheating. Not that I know of, that is. Anyway, she wouldn’t even open the cabin’s front door until she heard his -”

“Time’s up!”

“Franny, you can’t just grab -”

A shuffle, the one dimensional sound of a conversation in transit, a phone changing hands, ears – in this case forcibly from sister to sister – were muffled, distant compared to the cacophony of calm’s re-asserting gasps, the pounding protest of a heart clocking out after double overtime, and incredulity stumbling towards the light.
“Dad?”

“Fr...Franny.” And just as winter’s cold season is relieved by Spring’s allergies, the weaky shakes hit next, down frigid sweat slicked torso to still iffy legs, socks collecting the no longer needed sloughed off anxiety. *Don...Don.* Ennis closed his eyes, prayerful thanks wet on his cheeks. *It was Don.*

“How...how are you holding up?”

“Just great. OK, Junior. Important questions. Watch and learn.” Throat cleared, a deep breath to center, and the interrogation by someone who had learned from the best commenced. “Who was it?”

“Who?”

“That threatened us, Mom and Junior and me. That’s it, isn’t it? The call, the escape, Mom’s hysterics, the dork’s cabin? Someone threatened us and you had to act fast. So, who was it?”

Important questions apparently came equipped with some spot on answers, answers rendered irrelevant by ends justifying means. *You’re alive, you’re safe, you’re hidden, that’s all that matters.*

“You don’t need to worry about that.”

“Nice non-answer there, Dad. The how and why are easy, at least.”

“They are?”

“Classic tactics, kinda’ clichéd, actually. What a whack way to get to you, bringing in the family, to use us against you. They should know that never works.”

The block smiled at the chip. “Law enforcement is so in your future.”

“As if. You know I don’t do uniforms. Too bourgeois conformist. But, what did they want? The objective, the goal? Convince you to stop an investigation, or not to testify, maybe make something disappear?”

*Would you believe The Staten Island Ferry?* “You know I can’t talk about an ongoing case.”

“I know, I know, just thought since, you know, we were involved you could...” resignation in the face of regulations sighed, “Guess I can read about it in the Post.”

“Sorry, Pumpkin.” *So fucking sorry about everything.* “I’ll make it up to you, I promise.”

“Damn right you will, Sergeant. You owe us big time. In a cabin, in the woods with Mom and the dweeb, AND no X-Box?”

“Whatever you want.” Unadulterated pandering aimed to soothe away the guilt. “Just name it.”

“Anything?”

“Anything.”

“Where are you?”

Now, that really was an important question. *Where...where the hell...* Eyes opened to corn pads. *Fuck.* A push off to stop his shoulder from Magellan gellin’ and his knees knocking dusty Epsom salts. *Way to keep a low profile, dickhead.* “Anything, but that. The less you know the better.”
“Yeah, well, I figured as much. You’re OK, though, right? Not hurt, eating, sleeping and all that other healthy stuff?”

“Fine.” Errand spread out by his feet, hiding from murderers essentials scattered across and down the aisle. *Having the time of my life.* “I’m fine.”

The sound of a door – open, then close – other voices entJuniorg the room. “And Jack?”

“Jack is -” The plastic basket retrieval stoop stopped. “What makes you think I’m with Jack?”

The eye roll must have been magnificent. “Oh, please, you called from his hospital room, Dad, so he’s obviously involved. And since you’re not here with us, where else would you be?”

Franny’s knife sliced in right beside her sister’s. *Goddamn selfish prick.* “Look, I wanted to be there for, I mean, no one is more important than you, it’s just that I couldn’t, two places, one time and he needed -”

“It’s OK, Dad, really.”

“Don’t…just don’t.”

“This whole thing sucks. It sucks big, hairy ones. And I hate it, that you’re there, that we’re here, that all of us aren’t together. I hate it, but, it’s not your fault.”

“I should have, could have found a way to -”

“We’re safe, we’re coping, sort of, and I understand, we both do. Don’t you, Junior? She does, she’s shaking her head. We both understand why instead you’re with – wow. The end times are certainly nigh, we just agreed twice in one day.”

With the precision and expertise of a seasoned veteran, head bowed, eyes examined feet, shoulders canted to a shame slump, the indelible burden of forgiveness crushing. *Don’t deserve it, don’t deserve them.* “Pumpkin, I…” *What else was there to say? Cause, for Jack, I’d do the same thing again.* “I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be. You love him, and that’s what counts,” the child comforting the parent, “So, repeat question - Jack is…?”

*Jack is complications, Jack is distractions, Jack is trouble. Jack is…* Doc Martin swiped under the far shelf, not on the list texturing gel kick out of hiding. *Everything.* “…fine, too.”

“He most certainly is.” Voice rose in pitch and volume, compensation against the surprise and anger in the background. “Know you’re going to do this anyway, so the next hug and kiss, say are from Junior and me, kay?”

*My girls are all grown up.* “Will do.”

“Guess you can’t tell me when we can come - Yes, I’m still talking to -” Not Dad, though, talking to someone else, someone not happy at all. “But, I’m not…OK, OK, give me a chance to say good… geez, don’t get your tightie whities in a…oh, please, Mom, I’ve been out to the hot tub.”


“Bill. He NEEDS to talk to you.” Sarcasm noted. “Stay out of trouble unless it’s with Jack. Love you, Dad! Bye!”
“I love -”

“What did you say to Junior?” No preamble, no pleasantries, just straight to business. “Can’t make head or tails out of what she’s going on about, and it’s upset Alma something fierce, in fact this whole thing has, and I don’t appreciate having to deal with all of this especially when I don’t even know what the heck all of this is, and now we’ve got dumping cars and people always watching and -”

Oh, shit. “Forget it. What I told her, what I said doesn’t matter, just me over reacting, that’s all. Before she told me about the message, who it came from.”

“So, I can keep my Accord?”

“Yes.”

“And Alma and the girls, they’re still safe at my cabin?’”

“Yes. But, the sheriff checking up frequently wouldn’t be a bad idea.”

“Already covered.”

“Good.”

“OK, then.”

“OK.”

Painfully awkward a thrift store clearance definition for the full Rodeo Drive retail price tag silence that hung between.

“So, you going to tell me why? Why we’re here, why I’m doing this?”

“The less said the better.”

“No time frame either?”

“Wish I could. Soon, though.” And that had the weight equivalent of an echo. “Soon.”

“And we’re to just sit and wait for your call, I suppose.”

“The best I got at the moment. Sorry.” It waited to be filled, that missing part of this conversation, where life saver, above and beyond, don’t know what I would have down without gratitude was expressed through compensatory for the actions words. But, none were extant, neither in Ennis’s vocabulary, nor any language. What equals my daughters? He had nothing, inadequate stumbling out instead. “Listen, I just wanted, I need to say, to say -”

“Ya know, Ennis, I never wanted to, thought never crossed my mind. Wouldn’t’ve been right, not my place. With Alma, sure, but not Junior and Francine. Now, however, now that you put me there, you ASKED me to step in, I’m there to stay. I’m going to be here, for those girls. Unlike you, I’m going to be a father.”

Even if a counter argument had been available, a precise statement of such pith and power, the edge of logic surgically severing until what remained of the presumption reminiscent of spun out fantasies, empty and inconsequential, a scorched earth comeback guaranteeing even a fleeting notion of paternal usurpation would never take root, it would have been solely for Nyquil and Zyrtec’s benefit for Ennis stared at a blank phone.
“…thank you”

No statement existed, of course. He’s right. He’s there for them, I’m not. Bill’s fucking right. However, as hands went to work – Degree, Dial shower gel, toothbrushes, one blue the other red, medium bristles with non-slip handles – gathering up his scattered to the aisle’s two sides shopping list, the one thing he could not seem to find was remorse.


“S’cuse me, mistah.” A broad feminine New England accent interrupted the damning truth as it stomped towards the checkout. “Ya missed something.”

“Wha - huh?”

He followed the direction of the pointing Birkenstock to the bottom shelf. “Ovah theyah.”

Sure enough, there was something peeking coyly out from under a mound of bagged-up cotton balls.Fuck. The scooping up blush generated enough BTUs to singe the contact solution shopper’s smirk. “Uh, thanks.”

“My plesya. And yours apparently.”

It dropped unceremoniously to the basket, contents shifting around as he rush walked to bring a quick end to this uncomfortable with too much truth errand, what was list item number one sinking to the bottom.

I’d embarrass the shit out of myself grocery shopping for Jack.

A critical situation stood Ennis there in line waiting his turn, avoiding eye contact, pondering spearmint or peppermint Altoids. Wasn’t the lack of food – Aunt Peg’s magic basket of plenty would last at least another week. Wasn’t for health reasons for pharmacologically they were set until the twenty-second. Not even personal grooming issues, Jack not once complaining about the lack of shine as he finger combed his hair, though there were a few grumbles over manageability. No, it was a true dire emergency of epic proportions that had the self-imposed for life/death purposes hermit don clothes for the first time in three days and head out with a list that had ballooned with since you’re going anyway got to haves, for this very morning, Ennis screaming nonsense obscenities as Jack took him against the bedpost, the KY had run out.

Better get used to it, though. Lube shopping, that’s life with Jack.

Whom had come down to three deciding factors:

1) Like a walking beside each other billboard, a ‘Look! Here we are!’ advertisement of two out of town men together – one tall and lean with curly blondish hair, the other Calvin Klein model handsome sporting a sling – exactly what the always watching and those that could be always watching for the always watchers were watching for, and that determined the shopper would go solo.

2) Jack alone, out in the open, in unfamiliar territory without the back-up of another set of eyes to see trouble coming, to hell with the damn clutch, no way, not going to fucking happen, end of discussion.

3) Jack’s refusal to be seen in public ever again with the tube socks from hell and his point of a single
shirt between them – though intriguing the idea with foreplay possibilities, two wearing one, Barnstable P’town was not.

So, with the house locked up tight as he could security system triple check manage, directive that silent running meant no lights, no fire and definitely NO hot tub, and Jack's fully clothed plus robe to protect against cooking's wicked sense of ironic humor, the comprehensively exploratory snog as added incentive get your ass back here quick, Ennis had ventured out into the Cape Cod cold to procure the essential item.

“Find everything you needed, Sir?” The disinterest of the cashier in a genuine answer to her question was truly awe inspiring.

“I guess.” Purchases set down, the belt brought the basket to the employee disinclined to reach a foot.

“May I swipe your frequent shopper’s card?”

“Don’t have one.”

“Would you like to fill out an application? Only takes a -”

“No, thank you.”

“Paper or plastic?”

“Whatever.”

Required by management Q & A completed, Casey – though according to the name tag, she spelled it with two y’s and a k – scanned the items with the same level of overflowing enthusiasm previously exhibited.


**BOOP!**

*Manhattan instead of Brooklyn.*

**BOOP!**

*No favorite duct-taped recliner.*

**BOOP!**

*Even less room in the closet.*

A cursory glance at the customer not thorough enough to even determine species let alone age, and Casey – sorry – Kaysey double bagged the bottle of Merlot.

*Not on the list, but since Jack said he was cooking something special…*

**BOOP!**

*Life with Jack definitely means I’m eating better. No take out.*

**BOOP!**

BOOP!

And conversation while we eat, while we dress, before bed, in bed and after. All the time. Real conversation, no talking at, but to, both of us talking and sharing and laughing and listening.

BOOP!

Well, with Jack it’s more listening.

BOOP! BOOP!

Shampoo and separate conditioner inaugurated a third bag.

*Jack means more stuff in the bathroom to shave around. Different stuff.*

BOOP!

*No earrings to step on with bare feet.*

BOOP!

*No toilet seat war.*

BOOP!

*Nail polish remover.*

BOOP!

*Nice n’ Easy spills.*

BOOP!

*Nair smell.*

BOOP!

*No scrunchies, barrettes, headbands, scarves, pins, clips or combs.*

BOOP!

*And, Hallelujah! No PMS!* 

BOOP!

The girlish giggle traveled as far as the bag - gentle warming, strawberry scented, economy sized Astroglide by itself in a third – and a little beyond.

*Ah, yes. The sex. Life with Jack means sex. Lots of sex. Lots of incredible sex. Lots of incredible fucking HOT sex. Lots of sex that’s fucking HOT incredible because we love –*

“Have any coupons?”

Whilst visiting briefly with naked Jack, a mental image he was loathe to leave behind – *pun intended* - Ennis obviously had missed scan phase completion. “Excuse me?”
This eye roll was a beauteous thing behold. Not only did it express her impatience with an inattentive customer, but also her working conditions right by the door that blasted the cold in whenever it swooshed open, the lame green and white checked smock management insisted she wear, that the creepy bag boy with the lazy eye and leer who wouldn’t stop staring at her breasts with maybe a little left over for the plight of rain forest. “Do you, like, have any coupons?”

“No, no.” A head dip for the wallet reach covered the ‘God, that looked so familiar’ smile. Just like - “How much?”

A flip of the magenta tipped ponytail. “Sixty-three nineteen.”

And Franny. Uncle Hap’s generous gift counted through to find a fifty, handing it over with smile fading. My daughters.

“Six-eighty-one your change.” The coins surfed atop the bills, receipt crinkling when he pocket shoved all. “Have a -” transaction complete, Kaysey returned to what he had interrupted, register leaning and Cosmo flipping, “- a nice day.”

Bags gathered up, Ennis exited Shaw’s, the automatic door not hitting his melancholy on the way out.

My daughters…and life with Jack.

The afternoon sun had worked an exhausting eight hour shift to reclaim the parking lot from last night’s white smattering over last week’s now blackened-edged dump, but the recalcitrant thermometer’s refusal to budge from its seasonal job description thwarted the commendable effort, each step taken towards the car a slush sloppy schlep.

Squish.

Support checks.

Squish.

Alternate weekends.

Squish.

Penciled in, scheduled around.

Squish.

An outsider in my daughter’s lives.

He stopped, dirty water fast reclaiming the space displaced by intruding boots, for a stiff-fingered from dangling plastic bags rearrange to fish out keys moment.

Know what Jack says, don’t let it happen, we won’t let it happen, Junior and Franny WILL be a part of us.

Squish.

Course, that was before Hunnie.

Squish.
And the hospital.

Squish.

And Bill being right.

Squish.

And the fake arrest, and asshat Daniel, and fucking Aguirre screwing with my messages and Don, and –

“Fuck!”

Squishes instantly accelerated, the ricochet of rapid fire splats returning off the strip mall – Don’s call answered by a lock popping whoop-whoop – and Don – panic in full flight across the parking lot.

Don found the cabin, but I never told him where to look.

Don told them to call me –

- cellphone discarded to dirty slush, daughters’ only link to father a victim of Doc Martin’s heel.

But, I never gave him my number.

Thoughts lapped him, racing to the car and back, up and down the rows, taunting faster…faster, around and around in ever tightening circles, those bitter enemies – trust and doubt – locked in a battle of accusations and sentence fragments, the prize – a man’s faith.

I’ll kill – he would never – go find the girls – partner, friend – don’t know where they – he knows where Junior and – why have them just call if – I didn’t tell him the new – untraceable cell phone – one call and they got – goddamn computer – they know and he knows – his house – Jack’s alone – known all this time - four days, he could have – watching, watching and waiting until I – Jack’s fucking alone – why help us in the first – I didn’t tell –

Door snatched open, bags hurled to passenger floorboard, long legs folded into seat adjusted for arm length, door slammed shut, Ennis out of breath, soaked to the knee and pissed off -“Fuck!” - pissed off at the weather, the situation, himself – “It’s Don, for fuck’s sake! Don! I told him! I told – how did he know my goddamn number?!?” – doubt the hands down winner.

That night, the night we left, can’t be before, didn’t have - Don gives me the envelope, Bernard my weapon, Daniel arrives with the Mustang – fucking Daniel – then Jack with Schnieder. No number.

But, it has to be then, has to be there, there in that fucking freezing –

A watch check confirmed what the darkening horizon foretold.

Five-ten…gone for over an hour. Too long, too fucking long. Jack’s alone, should be with Jack.

Safety first clicked the seat belt, keys stabbed at the ignition.

Just go back to the house. Go back to the house and drop it. Forget and go back and…and…and let dinner go cold and the wine unopened and Jack’s in the shower making those moaning sounds as he MUST condition his hair right then, and I’m watching…I’m with him…I’m licking the water as it slides…slides down his shoulder, his back…slides down his ass… the ass that’s warm and wet and shivering under my tongue, the ass that tastes like Jack and sex, the ass that drives me fucking
nuts, the ass that Daniel groped when he got out of the car in the parking garage that night I didn’t give Don my –

“Christ, I don’t have time for this.”

Leather farted around the awkward reach to the glove compartment, the second of three obviously falsely guaranteed anonymous cell phones retrieved, then ass tipped to the other side for the wallet dig, speed dial blunted memory needing a jog from a yellowed, bent, torn and creased from nine years partnership index card, Doubt’s benefit finally dialing the fourth one down.

“But, I’ve just got to know for sure.”

Staring acknowledgementless at the lousy parking job of a Wise potato chip truck three rows over, anxious for and dreading any answer, Ennis steering wheel drummed, a four finger countdown, the call and his conundrum beating with the same rhythm.

I need to know. Need to know how. Know how he knows. Deserve to know. Hear it from him. Let him explain. Let him tell me. Tell me how he...knows my untraceable number...when I didn’t...fucking give it...to him. Let him...tell me who –

“Wroe.”

Diplomacy was needed now, an unthreatening conversation of innocuous pleasantries and easy banter designed to gather information without reciprocity, that delicate balance of leading questions and vague responses, to utilize secrets known to catch and trap, to cause hand tipping while not revealing his own, a well-used and standard technique of interrogation especially imperative now given the importance for time to react should doubt’s accusations prove true.

“You goddamn son of a bitch.”

Ennis opted for the storming the Bastille approach instead.

“Honey, got to take this…I know, but its work again.” Level, professional, no tell in inflection or tone of who was on the phone, or the insult just hurled. “Might be a few minutes, so don’t hold – Turner, put the phone away, you know the rules about basketballs at the table, Robbie, and girls? I’ll be checking napkins for peas when I get back. I’ll be in the office.”

Which was an easy trip through the Wroe home, ever expanding doubt coming with. Out through the kitchen...suppertime, has the whole family, ALL his family safe and healthy around him...past the laundry...not my family, though, not my daughters, my Jack...mud room...my family is hiding, in danger, hurt and scared...to the garage, which I helped him remodel, remodel two Augusts ago, hot as hell, fucking dry wall dust up my...fucking helped him, believed him, trusted, and he turned on –

“We’re going to start this conversation again, OK?” Level and professional still clicking the door shut. “How are you, Ennis? Find the house no problem?”

Oh, no. Not going to happen. Too late for nice playing. Time for faux innocent concern to meet sarcasm learned at the Master’s knee. “My daughters called me.”

“No answer to my question, but that’s great. How are they -”

“Said it was you, you called the sheriff with my number.”

“Yeah, thought it was the safest way to -”
“Using my girls like… “Funny about that ’cause that was a brand new phone. Brand fucking new untraceable phone.”

“Right, bought it before you -”

“Though, now that I think about it, probably easy for a computer program that can hack security systems and shut down power grids to find.”

“Has Homeland Security pissing in their jammies, that’s for – oh, no. Ennis, did someone, did – did they get your number?”

“You tell me.”

“Uh, shouldn’t it be the other way around?”

“What’s even more fucking hilarious, I kept that number to myself.”

“Except for me.”

“No.”

“Oh, yeah, and your defense lawyer, I suppose.”

“Not even Jack.”

“What, don’t you trust -”

Silence.

Gotcha.

“Think carefully of the consequences before answering, Ennis.” Even with the undertow of dark, the words were calm, even, pure Don. “Just what are you implying?”

“Take a fucking guess.”

Yeah, and with that, calm and even jumped right out the mini-blinded garage door window - “Fuck you, Del Mar!” - making plenty of room for usually held under Belinda lock and key, however still snazzy in dress blue’s, ex-Marine colorful expletives. “I’m your friend, goddammit, your friend!”

Good. Now this was more like it. Kind, companionable, loyal Don, the man he respected and cared for, too awkward, too uncomfortable for pointing fingers to gain momentum. But, this, false indignation across the ring from justified betrayal was something Ennis' anger could sink its teeth into. “A friend who fucking played me!”

“And just how is lending you two fuck space playing you?”

“You sent us here!”

“To help you! To risk my career again for you! Why the fuck would I -”

“The goddamn chip.”

“Well, does he have it?”

“As if that matters to you motherfuckers trying to kill him!”
“Oh, yeah, so much more efficient to erase your cum receptacle in my vacation home three hundred miles away then here where he’d be just across the bridge.”

“Chip or not, regardless of where, you need Jack dead.”

“Jesus fucking Christ! Are you listening to yourself? What kind of fucked up scenario have you -”

“Only fuck up was involving my daughters, you bastard!”

“Thought you’d be worried about them! Thought you would want to hear they were OK!”

“No, you thought I would be so relieved I wouldn’t figure all this shit out.”

“No thinking at all, ‘cause too much dick has fucked with your head, that’s what. All this because of a fucking phone -”

“My fucking number that I didn’t fucking tell you!”

“Yes, goddammit, Ennis, you did!”

“Think I remember something like that!”

“OK, you remember calling me in the middle of the fucking night, asking for my help? You remember the fucking freezing parking garage? You remember me lying to my wife for you?”

“Remember everything about that night!”

“Apparently not the piece of paper you gave me, the one you said nobody could see, the one I tucked behind my shield!”

“Going to say that paper had my number on it, I fucking bet.”

“Yes! You gave the number -”

“Bullshit! Why -”

“- so I could contact you about progress on the goddamn case! So you could have backup! So you wouldn’t be all alone out there!”

Silence.

Oh, shit.

“Sweetheart?” A knock that didn’t wait for entry permission. “Everything OK in here?”

“Yeah, yeah, B, I’m…” A pause, a deep exhale, an attempt to regain characteristic composure. “Just working something out.”

“Well, let’s keep that something down, please. Tender ears tend to repeat.” Admonisher closed the door on the warning.

HEAVY silence.

“Ennis, you’ve -”

“I…I…can't remember."
"You're wound so fucking tight over that goddamn lawyer of yours to remember shit."

The images flicked by – Don…Bernard…envelope and weapon…Daniel and Mustang…ass grope…Jack. No paper, no number. "Can't remember giving you -" "It’s the truth, Ennis. On our friendship. The goddamn truth."

However, since Junior’s OMFG! - Backup, a contact, eyes and ears, a way to stay in touch - it’s the first thing that made any kind of screwed up sense. It’s DON! “But, if you say -”

“Been saying that from the beginning, shithead.”

Scared for Jack, for my girls, and I was so sure, so fucking sure he… Indeterminately destructive, doubt, that tiny malicious seed when mixed with fear. What have I done? “Don, oh, Christ, I’m so – so, I’m so sor -”

“Leave it.”

“But, I just can’t -” What was I think – wasn’t thinking, that’s for goddamn – whole thing’s got me so fucking – Jack, those threats, always watching, can’t remember giving - accused him of – oh, god, what have I done? “I just can’t -”

“Not about you, Ennis!” A minor flare-up only, equilibrium quickly restored. “And I said leave it. We’ll deal when you get back.”

“Whatever you -” Got to fix this, got to – fuck! How do I fix this? Can I fix this? Never forgive myself, but I’ve MUST fix this! “Don’t deserve -”

“I know.” Something there that wasn’t before, a disconnect, a distance, a chilly empty that a simple apology would be hard pressed to cross. “Did me a favor, though. Not all that bullshit, of course, which will most definitely mean some sort of your beat down, but I was planning on calling you.”

Face buried so deep in his hand and self-recrimination, only eyebrows peeked above fingers in surprise. “Really? You were going to -”

“Yeah, right after supper.”

And one more reason to kick his own ass. “Interrupted, sorry.”

“Don’t be. It was Belinda’s meatloaf.”

“Oh, right.” Now, that was something he did remember.

“Needed to tell you the New England honeymoon is over.”

“What - what are you -?”

“That you and the lawyer can come home. They’re all dead.”

The bar clicked down, the car clacked forward, the track climbed up, the emotional roller coaster taking Ennis for another spin. “Dead? What - who?”

“Kwon, Lockhart’s nephew, that other one, Kwon’s son, what’s his name?”

“Hunnie.”

“Yeah, that’s him. Oh, and warehouse guy. He’s dead, too. Never regained consciousness in the
hospital, so nothing from him, not even a name.”

“But, how - all of them? When did - what the hell happened?”

“Night you guys left. The store’s a burnt out shell with four crispies inside.”

“They all - in a fire?”

“No, the fire only gutted the place. Chests full of nine millimeter Largo was the COD.”

“They were - then what’s with the fire?”

“Not my case, took the weekend off, only read the file this morning. Probably never know the full story, but the best the forensics guys and the Fire Marshall can figure is that during what must have been one hell of a cross fire battle, that apparently no one in the neighborhood heard, a stray bullet pierced a kerosene space heater in the corner, and either they were all dead before, or too far gone to do anything when the fire started, they and, here’s the pisser, any conclusive evidence complete toast.”

“So, they’re all - all of the bastards that - positive IDs for every body?”

“All but one, it was burned too badly, and with his only known relative on the slab beside him, one hundred percent’s not available.”

“Who?” This detail was very important. “Which one?”

“The son, Hunnie, you said.”

Not the answer he wanted to hear. “Fuck.”

“But, according to the file, a DL was found upatairs, along with cell phone, keys and the location was enough to convince the ME.”

“And you?”

“Oh, so you're back to trusting me now?” A sugary tease with a mocking filling. "It’s him, Ennis. The fucker’s dead. They’re all dead, the threat’s gone and you guys can come back.”

The view from the top was breathtakingly beautiful, the air crystal clear. Don’t fucking believe…can it really be… “Wait. You said four bodies? Who’s the -”

“Bernard.”

And just like that, he started down, the ground a quickly growing solid object. “Shit. What the fuck was he doing there?”

“The ME picked slugs fired from his weapon out of Kwon.”

And now the track just did a 180. “What are you saying?”

“Obvious, isn’t it? Cop charbroiled along with extortion and murder suspects?”

“He could have -”

“Suspects that had been privy to confidential information about an Eighty-First precinct investigation?”
“But – but – this is Bernard, BERNARD, you’re talking about here!”

“He knew your home address and the hospital your lawyer was taken to. He served on the DMZ for two tours, there’s your Korea connection. And, how he got things into the country illegally, his brother-in-law works for the Port Authority. He even accessed your files, Ennis, hacked into every one, everything. God knows the information altered or deleted in the course of his betrayal.”

He looked and looked, under and around and through, scoured every corner, yet no motive could be found to offer up an explanation. “This makes no fucking -”

“Checked his financials and he was in deep, seven figures deep, bad real estate investments gnawing at his ass whole.” And before the charge of all circumstantial could be slapped down, coffin’s final nail. “Two hundred-thirty K withdrawn from his account, private jet reservation to Rio, and a new name on his passport.”

“Bernard was - it was him?” The descent stole breath, watered eyes, head pounding with epiphany. “Fuck. Never saw that - thought, believed, fucking convinced it was Cap that was dirty.”

“And me, too, don’t forget about that.”

BANG! Body jerk violent, teeth rattling at the bottom. Like I’ll ever be able to. “Never saw this, never on my radar, never in a million years would I - now, Aguirre -”

“Hell, no. That would’ve required him to form an original thought, then actually put down the racing form. Of course, he does hate your guts enough to try something like this. Swear he blew out those three veins in his forehead when that lawyer, Newsome’s lawyer, dropped the complaint against you.”

Lungs tasted sweet, clean air again, the car striving towards the next summit. Well, fuck me, Jack was right. “Dodged a fucking bullet there.”

“Not with IAB, though. Parasites are parked in the squad room twenty-four seven ready to attack any info about you.”

The dip was slight, inconsequential, expected. Always knew that would swallow my ass. “They’ll take my shield.”

“Probably. And cut Newsome loose.” And now a reminder of who else friendship had dragged in front of the firing squad. “Among other things.”

Ennis bottomed out again. “Won’t let them touch you, Don. I’ll make for damn sure it’s me going down alone.”

“Yeah, well, you shouldn’t make promises, and you shouldn’t keep the IAB bastards waiting any longer for their pound of flesh. Leave tonight?”

“Sure, sure, as soon as I get back to the house.” The car reached the crest, an opportunity to gaze back at the twisting, tumultuous, treacherous journey traversed to reach this position of clarity and peace. It’s over…over. They’re dead and it’s over. Jack’s alive and it’s over. It’s fucking over, and when I tell –

“Back? Back from where? Aren't you at the -”

“Barnstable. Grocery store. Had to get -’ exact accounting at this juncture imprudent, “stuff. Half an hour tops. Then we’ll start down.” Maybe not right away, though. Got the wine, got the house. Got
time for a celebratory fuck. Or three. And despite a few patches of dark clouds below, the height and possibilities displayed made Ennis giddy. Then in the morning, we’ll return, and I’ll deal with IAB’s shit, and Aguirre’s shit, and any other shit that’s thrown my way, then when my girls re –

Violent lurch, straight down looming again. "How did you know where to call? Which sheriff’s office?"

“You can thank B for that.”

“Belind – shit. You told her about -”

“Only after the fact and fire, and only in a roundabout way.”

“How round about?”

“Casually wondering out loud last night about a safe place out of the city for Alma and the girls to go should you be, uh, unavailable, and she came up with the cabin.”

“But, how the hell does she know where it is? I don’t even know where the fuck it is!”

“All those phone bitch sessions of Alma’s she listened to. Learned more than she ever wanted to about Bill, including his cabin in the Catskills.”

“Good, good. Well, not good that she had to -” Suddenly a new dark cloud appeared down below, menacing in its unavoidability. “You mean she knows about Jack and - about where we - ”

“Yup. Told her everything. And she has the four inch stilettos she used on me all ready and waiting for your ass.”

Shit. Belinda mad, worse than IAB.

Even on such a picturesque and perfect tableau as Ennis', the sun was only a day visitor, the pop-hiss-hum of halogen security lamps preparing for night’s vigil, reminding that hours were soon over. “Well, I better, you - you know, better -”

“And I need to get back to supper.”

The termination a polar opposite from call’s beginning. Such a fucking asshole. Angry shouts to stuttered hesitations with an unpardonable breach in the middle. Never forgive myself. Just add this one to leaving my daughters. But since the ‘Fuck you!’s and ‘Goddammit!’’s, since the impugned integrity of nine solid years of friendship, since Ennis took that jumped to conclusion and ran with it all for love’s sake, the banter, the jokes, the easy back and forth of a shared history, could there be a sign of making amend’s groundwork? God, I fucking hope so.

“Call me when you reach the city and I’ll meet you at the station. You know, for backup.”

“Yeah, sure, I will, thanks.” Don, shit all over him and he’s still my partner. And friend. Don AND my daughters. How did I get so fucking lucky? Don, my girls and – “One thing you’re wrong about, though.”

“This will be a first.”

“Can never have too much dick.”

"One conversation, you can’t go one conversation without mentioning – you are disturbed, Del Mar, disturbed and sick. Goodbye.”
And Ennis laughed. He laughed until his sides hurt, his nose snotted, and he had to piss. “Fuck, YEAH!” He laughed until he couldn’t breathe, remarkable considering within the last hour, the last four days, the last six months, the total of frequent emotional’s Death Trap rider miles he had racked up. “IT’S OVER!” He laughed in spite of, because of, and it felt good. He kept on laughing as he started the Mustang, checked his mirrors and pulled out of the parking lot. “It’s over.”

Doubt’s residue, though, did toss the cell phone out the car window, slush puddle and Lexani tires its ultimate demise.

Barnstable chosen for its distance away from the bungalow hideaway, Shaw’s because it was on the right, the drive back – or more accurately the jerk and – Goddammit! Go into – **Rrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghgh** grind, followed return route rules, trip time shorter, twenty minutes of sports talk radio drone to Wellfleet and Black Pond Road passing quickly.

**Leave first thing in the morning, call that sheriff’s office, call and bring my daughters –**

“Try using a turn signal, you fucking idiot!”

**Return in the morning to…what, apartment’s out…where the hell are we…hotel, Waldorf-Astoria, that’s where Jack’ll want to…a few nights, at least…we deserve it, no matter the cost, after all the… huge fucking beds just perfect for –**

“Don’t slow, don’t slow, damn it, got to make it through this – shit.”

**Wonder what else will IAB try to take…not my pension, fucking hope…must payback Uncle Hap, with interest, reimburse Bill, settle with Don, Daniel for the – he can just fuck himself - great, like I needed that mental –**

**Rrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghghgh**

“God, I hate this car!”

**Need to find an apartment quick, though, a bigger one with two baths… and room for when my daughters come to…after the divorce, after Alma, if there’s anything left…a new place, our place, the way we should have started…**

“Rangers dropped another one. And to Philly! ”

…be living with this shit for a long time. They’re all dead, but the shit will stick around for…all dead, every last one of the…what the hell happened…what set off…why did they all…don’t really care why, just as long as they are…Bernard. Goddamn. Now there’s a why I give a fuck about. Why did he…why do any cops turn…Don’s right, though, Bernard knew where I lived, my home phone, access to public records, court schedules, easy to follow Jack, probably got the room number from… shit, did Bernard shoot…I asked him in, trusted him enough to…bastard stood there, right there that night, smiling, acting like nothing...helping me, giving me my…oh, fuck, yes, my…

Fellow travelers on the road to Wellfleet - mini-van mother shielded her son’s innocent eyes and a NRA, Romney declaring Bronco sped away quick while an Audi A5 with the rainbow disco ball rear view mirror dangling slowed down to appreciate Ennis’ remembering lascivious leer.

**“Here.”**

**“No.”**

**“Jack.”**
“No, thank you.”

“No leaving you alone.”

“Security system not working on religious grounds?”

“What?”

“First night of Chanukah starts at sundown.”

“That’s great to know, but not helpful in this situation.”

“Just wait until I spin your dreidel.”

“Jack.”

“Ennis.”

“I’m not leaving you without protection.”

“Which brings us back to the security system and its mitzvah.”

“Not a force field, Jack, someone can still break in and what would you do then, huh?”

“Run like hell?”

“In what? A towel? To where? The ocean? How? Faster than a friggin’ bullet?”

“I’ll zig-zag.”

“For Christ’s sake, Jack, just take the fucking weapon!”

_He was standing there in the bedroom like some goddamn two-year old…_

“As a matter of policy, a standard rule, a life credo, if I may be so bold, my long established ethic code based upon the immutability of a principle set not incongruous to the statutes governing intrapersonal conduct in ancient -”

“JACK!”

“I don’t do guns.”

_An adorable two-year old with a sexy pout…and warm skin…bare feet…hard nipples…_

“Shit, is that it? Come here, I’ll show you. Taught Junior and Franny. See this? That’s the safety. Won’t fire unless it’s in the off position. The weapon is already loaded, so no worries there, but since this is a -”

“Smith and Wesson Thirty-Eight Special, originally introduced at the turn of the Twentieth Century, is a rimmed, centerfire cartridge handgun with a forged hammer, trigger, chamfered charged holes and bossed mainspring. It has a six round capacity, and may be loaded with three-fifty-seven ammunition, which even from this slow speed and low pressure cartridge, can result in considerable damage to human tissue. The Thirty-Eight Special was a favorite of law enforcement agencies for its small, lightweight design and low recoil well into the nineteen-eighties, but fell out to the superior efficiency and higher capacity of semi-automatics, though remains a bestseller for those of a concealing ilk.”
Grabbed the fucking thing – open, closed, spun, cocked and aimed right at me.

“This is you not doing guns?”

“Hello! Have we met? John Twist, Junior, Public Defender in New York County where thousands of weapons related crimes were committed last year?”

God, he was fucking hot!

“Del Mar, NYPD, and you, like that, standing there with…I so want to kiss you right now.”

I did. Then he did. Then we did. Oh, fuck did we!

“Interesting. What other kinks, I wonder, are just a lube shortage substitute blow job away from discovery?”

How he managed it, how he always manages, don’t know, don’t care…so fast, fucking amazing, jeans open, dick out, licking my balls…

“For your protection, Jack, that’s all and that’s GOOD!”

“Don’t do guns…messy things happen…bleeding…dying.”

“Don’t want to come back to find those messy – fuck, why’d you stop?”

Not entirely, just sat back, smiling up at me…

“You are aware that you’re counting on the shot accuracy, when not hampered by cast, that is the stuff of Lightning Flat unmolested barn broadside legend?”

Still stroking…Jack’s Twist…

“Not doing too bad with the right – JAAAAACK!”

Mouth and tongue…fingers and hand, sucking and slurping and –

A blaring horn was kind enough to alert Ennis to his daydream weaving traffic faux pas.

“Shit!” A quick jerk, and the Mustang was once again on the correct side of the double yellows.

Concentrate, dickhead, concentrate on driving, the road, shifting into second without –

rrrrrrrrnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnmghghghghghghgh

“Hate this fucking car!”

Concentrate on getting to the house, getting back in one piece, back to Jack…getting… piece…

Jack…

“Stand up and lose the fucking towel.”

“Speak to me again, Ennis, your words of love.”

“The towel and come here.”

I wanted him. The bed, it was there, used it.
“Fuck, Ennis, your…your mouth is coffee…warm…fuck.”

_ Jeans ripped off, on my stomach, perfect height, Jack right there, dick wet and hard sliding on my tongue, hands full of ass pulling him in, revolver against my cheek._

“Oh, yeah, fuck, Jack, that’s…that’s…”

“Police sergeant Ennis Del Mar, gun fetishist. Who’d a thunk? At the Academy, weapons handling learned often and -”

_PINched him._

“Shit!”

Right turn onto Black Pond Road, Ennis took at 40 mph.

_Fingers with a big chunk of his smart ass, pinched him, dick driving back so far I gagged. Pinched him because I wanted that, too._

“Not solely a gun thing, though, is it, Ennis? Oh, no. It’s also control. It's all about control. You like it, you must have it. And while I’m usually enthusiastically accommodating, not this time.”

_And he had stepped away._

“Come on, Jack!”

“Roll over.”

“What the fuck are you -”

“Do it.”

_Thirty-eight’s barrel had been inches from my face._

“This is you still not doing guns?”

“Ennis…”

“OK, OK. As always, whatever the hell you want, Jack. There. On my back. Now what?”

“Now, mon ami, control, and you, are mine.”

_Looking up…prissy canopy…prissy, useless canopy…prissy, useless, dusty cano – Jack. Jack’s face…Jack’s chest…Jack’s stomach…Jack’s…_

“And for the official record, I expect nothing less than screaming orgasmic perfection.”

_Jack on elbows and knees, Jack staring back between us, Jack hanging right there, red and hard, his dick brushing my lips –_

“Had a fucking fantastic blow job going until you…oh.”

- while his kissed mine.

Quarter of a mile to go, to the bungalow, to Jack.

“Ah, yes, the only true prime numeral.”
And then the fucker deep throated me.

“JACK!”

And again…and again…

“Ennis…”

…and again….and…

“Ennis…”

...again…

“Oh…fuck…Jack, you’re…you’re…sooooo…”

...cold air.

“Huh?”

“There is an assumption of reciprocity in this carnal exercise, you know.”

“You expect me to be able to…think…suck…anything when you’re -”

…...and again.

“JACK!”

“Take this as a performance incentive, then. At least one weapon -”

Just the head pushed in, into my mouth, come and my spit dribbling across my cheek, while the gun stroked down…down…

“ – has the safety disengaged.”

Another deep throat, me this time, swallowing Jack whole.

“Fuck…Ennnnnnn…”

Destination in sight, Ennis squirmed in both memories and in anticipation of making more of them very soon.

Thought he had me, hips slamming, dick banging, balls slapping my forehead, the rocking rhythm squeaking the bed, screwing up the covers, driving him deeper...harder, different angle, difficult to breathe, face surrounded by ass, by his scent...thought he was the shit, with his mouth working, sucking up, twirling down, feel his spit slipping down my crack, tongue now flat and licking, whatever the hell he was humming, me moaning right along...when he nibbled, just the edges, smiling around my dick, thought he had control...

SMACK!

…he was wrong.

“Oh…god!”

SMACK!
And I was wrong.

There, the house, Jack, up on the right, only seconds now.

Heat off his ass, heat of my handprint right next to my cheek…the heat with the chill of steel pressing into my –

“Oh, fuck…no.”

The bungalow door was wide open.

Logic dictated explanation’s existence: Jack went out for a smoke, Jack went out for a walk, Jack hadn’t noticed yet the wind had played mischievous. And logic denied explanation’s exactitude: Jack ran out of cigarettes, Jack doesn’t have a shirt, and Jack should have noticed the fucking alarm blaring.

If it were indeed screeching away, alerting one, all and the Atlantic Ocean to the perimeter breach.

But, it wasn’t.

No alarm, no lights, no movement, no…nothing.

The house a shell, an empty box with shutters and a wrap-around porch, no more occupied than a flat picture real estate ad, no more alive than last summer’s landscaping, in the muddling twilight, vacant wisteria limbs, and door, rattling dead by the wind.

JACK!

First instinct – blast into the drive, tires spewing up sand and gravel, race across the yard, feet pounding up the steps, storm into the house, terror screaming Jack’s name, a full frontal assault of the highest magnitude and drama.

Why is – when did – where’s he – dead, all dead, how – Neck prickles, those tiny very bad feeling about this indicators, offered up their opinion on the situation, and sick stomach, sweaty palms and a heart on fast forward concurred, this wince inducing, forehead slapping, never contemplated, too close to the case, but thirteen years’ experience should have seen it coming situation.

There’s another one, more than just Hunnie and Jeff and Kwon, someone else involved, another we missed, another not dead and they found Jack.

Second instinct – use the one thing available – anonymity’s surprise – to its maximum advantage.

Drove right by the bungalow, the longest 750 yards of Ennis’ life.

Or am I over reacting here, jumping at nothing, to conclusions, worst case scenarios, seeing things, making up shit, people, out of paranoia. He’s probably in there right now, alone, sleeping or taking a shower again, or making one hell of a mess in the kitchen with no lights on anywhere, the entire house is…going to laugh at me, months of ninja Ennis jokes over a turned off security system that he knew I’d kill him myself if he fucked around and didn’t –

Refusing to be squelched suspicions preened with I told you so’s, for at the end of the road, off to one side, part in sea oats, other asphalt, giving the finger to a No Parking sign – a black BMW.

This time I fucking hate being right.

The almost full octane dark became Enemy Number One, no street light at road’s end, Ennis banged
and bumped his way through a rushed rummage, searching under seats, the back, the glove compartment for anything he could use – wrench, mace, pocket knife – anything helpful, anything at all. Nothing…zip…glow-in-the-dark, Kahula and cream scented ribbed condoms.

“I hate this GODDAMN PIECE OF SHIT FUCKING CAR!”

The cold came in at Number Two, drive from Barnstable stored up warmth and then some whisked away upon exit, destination unknown, icy gusts down right insulted by leather jacket’s simple challenge.

“Christ almighty! Fuck!”

However, time usurped the top spot, the commodity precious in its finite fragility, the mental stopwatch ticking.

One minute and thirteen seconds since the open door discovery.

License plate recognized as a competent fake, the veiled opaque windows also illegal, a cupped hands to frozen glass gaze garnering no new information as to who, but did serve up yet another question to dump in the jammed full above the fill to here line blender whirring away.

_Salt crusted on the hood, sand drifted up by the tires. Been here at least a day. Maybe two. But, it does mean he’s still here._

Two minutes and two seconds since open door discovery.

Middle of the road, neither left nor right clear of snow, Ennis jogged back, panted white puffs keeping pace, blender working on puree.

_Two days. Been right here, down the road, two days. Why, what the fuck were they doing for two… watching, of course, always watching, watching Jack, watching us, watching…_

Big gulps of frigid air needed to suppress the encroaching, insistent, ignominious sick.

_And what's with the two days? Just watching. Why now, after two days? What the hell was he waiting –_

Ignominy gagged, sputtered, splattered, Ennis’ knees and guilt sinking into the county maintained plow pushed aside snow.

_Waiting for me to leave, waiting for Jack to be alone._

Two minutes and fifty-four seconds since open door discovery.

As good a place as any on this road of no cover and limited visibility, Ennis stepped around his steaming regret, heading straight for a two story four down in season only Cape Cod, the plan to approach the bungalow from behind, from the least likely direction to be watched. Still damp from parking lot puddles denim sparkled with stiffening icy crystals, Doc Martin’s good for inner city shit kicking, but not going snowy in country, his front yard stumbling one step towards Jack for every two keeping him away. With a face an ice cubed mask, lungs none too happy either, and ears nipped just about off by a vicious Mr. Frost, he couldn’t feel his hands anymore, but they itched all the same to be occupied with something other than breaking his falls.

Nothing, got nothing, Jack has my weapon, and I’ve got nothing. Fucking Daniel, not even a shitty penlight. What the hell am I going to…something in the house then, grab something in the house
when I get…what’s there…front porch – chairs, ashtray and a hammock. Right, strangle the bastard without him noticing with a goddamn rope…inside, inside the main room…bar full of bottles, poker over by the fireplace…both make noise, both not enough force to incapac – where in the house, where is he? Back, front? Bedroom, kitchen? Might not have time to search, might not have time to find anything, might not have time to do shit when I get – where’s Jack? Unconscious, injured…dea – NO! Fuck NO! Don’t go there! Don’t even think about it! Of Jack being anything but alive and breathing and smiling and sarcastic and fucking hot and waiting and wondering where the fuck I am and how I’m going to help him when I got absolutely fucking nothing to –

“Fuck, yes!”

On the other side of Cape Cod’s carport, tucked away in a corner, behind a tiki torch and for rent sign, holding up a teal and orange fish with summer pining streamers wind sock – the itchy hands antidote.

“Fuck, yes.”

I’m coming, Jack…hold on…I’m coming.

Turning right, directly into the wind, Ennis and shovel headed across the beach.

Four minutes and five seconds since open door.

Bernard, fucking Bernard. Dead, last night, he’s dead, on a slab, in a drawer and whoever the hell broke in may not know that his fucking scumbag friends are charcoal briquettes…been here for two days…not that that helps, not that that means shit right now, but it sure has hell will be sweet to tell the motherfucker right before I b-b-b-blow his –

AAAAAAAAAFFFFFTTTTTT!

The snot froze before it could be swiped away.

Armed, no doubt, ‘cause he didn’t come all this w-w-w-w-way to…to fucking chat. Armed, here to kill…kill Jack and I’ve got, got a fucking shovel. Great th-th-thinking, dickhead. What the fuck good is a s-s-s-shovel against a…from behind, got to get him from behind, kn-n-n-n-nock the shit out of him before…

AAAAAAAAAFFFFFTTTTTT!

This batch joined the first, a cheek swatch that was only rivaled in its crustiness by the sand the wicked wind shared with tearing eyes. The surf grumbled somewhere off left, above the moon had yet to claim dominance, only Venus, dusk’s early riser, twinkled for the oblivious hunched figure struggling for every step, each breath.

Jes-s-s-sus fucking Chris-s-s-s-t, it’s c-c-c-cold! Few more yards, just a f-f-f-few more…what if he’s…and Jack is…shovel, use the shovel to…hit…from behind, if-f-f-f-f I…can’t be far n-n-n-ow…surprise, not going t-t-t-to be expecting…use that…enter quick…quick and-d-d-d qui –

AAAAAAAAFFFFF -“FUCK!”

Should have seen it, what with eyes only for the ground. Should have been obvious, the way the sand dipped from shadows to oblivion. Should have noticed the hole dug by The Peterson’s chocolate lab when they visited on Thanksgiving weekend, mom worrying over SPF counts, dad shopping stock tips with his I-Phone, and the twins complaining about missing the Hannah Montana marathon on Disney, all too busy enjoying some family togetherness time to pay attention to exactly
what Dakota was doing over there by the dunes near the small bungalow with the wraparound porch. But, Ennis' foot paid very close attention, the snap-POP! audible even over wind’s shout.

“FuckfuckfuckfuckFUCK!”

Mouth full of sand and snow, already ice-covered jeans soaked for another freezing go round, swelling ankle held secure by Doc Martins, but not pain’s sharp slashes, he scratched for purchase, up to elbows…knees and elbows…ass, cheeks now able to commiserate with unfeeling hands.

This just k-k-k-keeps getting better and-d-d-d…goddamn hole in the...s-s-s-stupid fuck for not looking where I – shit! Fucking hurts like…the house…goddamn...the house...I’m….still dark-k-k-k, still silent…good, that’s g-g-g-good, can sneak up and…get the motherfucker, get to Jack…how the f-f-f-fuck am I –

Might not be worth squat, a few dams, or even a whole passel of flying fucks against any weapon that waited for him inside, but right now, as a walking wounded helpmate, that shovel served quite well.

Jack...J-J-J-Jack...I’m coming, coming, Jack.

Eleven minutes and 36 seconds since open door.

Never had four simple steps posed so great an obstacle, and never had achieving victory, the top, through a combination of handrail and hops, been so celebrated.

Yes! Fuck, yes! I’m up, I’m up! Jack, I’m here, I’m here, Ja - OK, now w-w-w-w-what?

The front door, Ennis' goal, faced Black Pond Road, and on the side, the triplet French Doors looked out to the porch, his gauntlet. If eyes were always watching, or just casually glancing towards the drive, his approach would make for amusing fish in a barrel entertainment. If those eyes were otherwise occupied, say holding a gun to a particular temple, his stealthy shovel – curse – shuffle gait that wooden planks resonated deep and was generic slasher film boogeyman reminiscent, ears could have picked up other sense’s slack and gone wooden container angling, too.

Christ, quiet, quiet, be – FUCK! – got to be quiet!

But luck, perhaps waiting for the most opportune and beneficial moment for its intervention, granted Ennis closed drapes and a furnace chugging away.

Oh, thank you, thank-k-k-k you, thank you! Jack, you l-l-l-listened to me! Can’t see out from inside, and the n-n-n-noise will cover my – FUCK!

Round the battened down for winter wicker chairs, round the corner with a duck under for sunflower themed thermometer, round the wrought iron and ceramic tiled plant stand, nerves set for a nasty welcome, shovel held at the exact right bludgeoning angle – I’m home, motherfuckers! - through the door that had lain open for –

Only empty there to greet.

Twelve minutes and 58 seconds.

A wholly selfish moment just inside to luxuriate – ah, heat and no goddamn wind - to adjust – from dark to darker – and to plan – whatever it fucking takes for Jack – before Ennis limped forward.

Everything’s quiet, still, heavy, there’s nothing, like a fucking – don’t, don’t go there. Won’t help,
won’t - stick to the basics, stick to what you can see and touch. Stick to - no signs of forced entry, or struggle. Main room empty. Exactly like I left it.

If a ceiling hugging cloud of smoke was there before, that is.

*What is that stench?*

Shovel, billowing steam and Ennis headed to the kitchen, the epicenter of the offending odor, a sort of quick time hobble that availed the rug of its footfall dampening expertise.

*Shit! Why is –*

The oven, source of the black cloud, turned off, and three copper bottomed pots – two sauce pans and a Dutch oven – rescued from the range’s heat and single minded purpose when contents within had long since been consumed, stench’s origin.

*Our special dinner.*

Conclusive proof that all was not right in the bungalow, for Jack inattentive food preparation tantamount to just eh sex, both a feast for palette and libido, and neither ever happening whilst he was cruise director.

*Surprised in here, then. Surprised in the kitchen when the fucker came through the front door. Would know it wasn’t me, no key in the lock, no car pulling in the drive. Would know and then what? Try to run, take a stand, strike first? Back door still locked, so he didn’t…or maybe…*

Options there in the kitchen limited to say the least, unless bottom cabinets could be included.

*Don’t think even Jack is that flexible. So, that leaves…*

Over by the fridge, the door waited. Ennis didn’t. *Makes sense, he hears someone at the door, he’s in the kitchen and he hides until…doesn’t want to come out in case…waiting for me…* Good foot planted on Travertine, one hand flat on the fridge, the last good limb reached for the door, with a beloved name forming on his smile. *But, if I noticed the cooking, then so did…*

Possibilities trembled a paused fatal assumption’s distance from the knob.

*Someone else.*


*Could be in there.*

Lick lips. Blink.

*In there…with Jack.*

Breath. Blink. Prayer. *Please…oh, fuck, please!* Shovel again ready and willing to show its mettle as worthy in battle companion, with ripping Band-Aid off speed, the pantry door opened to –

“Shit.”

Ennis turned away from the cans of red beets, and towards the back of the house.

Fourteen minutes and seventeen seconds.
Four days – well, technically three and a half days, give or take a couple of hours – was not sufficient to competently familiarize oneself with the layout of the place, especially when it was drenched in night save for a slice of moon by the open front door, and only within that short time span two rooms had received any detailed attention, with a single piece of furniture in each recalled intimately. That lack of notice to locations not utilized for wrenching screams of ecstasy, in the pursuit thereof, or breathing in the soft moments after a decided detriment to his progress, the need for haste arguing with the importance of silence.

*He’s still here…car’s here, so the motherfucker’s…not in the kitchen, not in the main room, so… Jack’s here…not in the kitchen, not in the…Jack…Jack…where are…*

And the slow, shuffle, creep through foreign surroundings would have been announced to said motherfucker several times over – edge of oriental rug, sofa’s side table with lamp, grandfather clock, open laundry room bi-fold doors, that glass shelved cabinet holding a begun before adolescence collection of tourist trap decorated spoons against the main room’s back wall – thanks to thawing clumsy injured foot, elbows and ass if not for the inviting beacon that flickered safe passage from the bedroom.

*Two rooms – under the bed, in the closet, shower stall, behind the doors - too many fucking places in there to count.*

It was open to the hallway at least, no need to relieve pantry anxiety, Ennis allowing shovel to take point as he entered.

*Oh, fuck….Jack.*

The romantic milieu was nearly extinguished, but there were still a few that steadfastly burned on, a hodge-podge mixture of aromatherapy lavenders and emergency white, short, tall, squat and glass contained, the room’s air at odds whether to entice sweet or spicy, every horizontal surface, and a meandering line on the floor bathroom beckoning, covered.

*Dinner and all this.*

The turned down duvet and conveniently placed handcuffs echoed the candles’ anticipation for an evening destined for greatness, to rival Howard Johnson’s and make-up sex and, most recently, first bare –

*There.*

A sound, a noise, a movement, no more than a whisper, but undeniably real. Something was out there. Someone was waiting.

*Jack or…*

Fourteen minutes and forty-five seconds.

Tabula rasa, where Ennis crept, heel-toe over toe-wince, sweaty shovel grip readjusting, uncaged dread hovering by his shoulder, breathing rapid, hot, doom - *What’s down there, who’s…* - a life weathered borrowed bungalow vacation memory of tucking in toddler Junior and Franny with promises of tomorrow kite flying his only heads-up. *Bathroom on the right, I think and…one bed, no…two… dresser…rocking chair…maybe.* The other end of the hall, never ventured, never needed, the destination now, that shrouded, double framed black hole of secrets, sucking him inevitably forward.

*Walking into…could be…probably is…fucking sure…a trap…but, Jack…*
Bedroom candles tried to help, continue to give comfort and aid for the dangerous journey ahead, but amber glowing fingers' reach was limited by architecture, hope of what should have been slipping away with each step, their farewell wave of encouragement reflected by hall tree’s mirror.

*Going in blind…injured…unarmed…no back-up…fucking insane…Jack, I’m almost - Christ, I look like - what the fuck is –*

A crack, right by his double’s cheek. A crack, right on the edge of illumination. A crack and a hole.

*A bullet hole.*

Fifteen minutes and four seconds.

*A bullet hole…and another…* Hand pressed flat to wall in absence of light, hand pressed flat to wall as guide, hand pressed flat searching …*and another…* fingertips eyes substitute, a trembling uncontrolled forensics lab probing caliber, velocity, angle of entry.

*Can’t tell…shit, could be…thirty-eight or nine, can’t…Jack…Jack…are you…three…three bullets…three that I can…a line…Jack, where are…back down the hall or…fired right about chest…Jack, I’m - oh…no, fuck no.*

Wet, slimy, sticky, unmistakable.

**Blood.**

Fifteen minutes and thirty-three seconds.

Another open door, another unknown, Ennis pleaded over the threshold.

**Jack – Jack – Jack – please, Jack – please be, fucking, please, God, please – Jack!** Petite windows, a corner klatch of yellow frills and bows, offered their gauzy version of clouded moon’s rising over oval rug…quilt stand…cedar hope chest…doilyed arm chair…dresser with seashell lamp…double bed adorned by pillows and bolsters…nightstand for wind-up alarm clock and – feet…legs…body lying prone near the closet.

**Shoes, black shoes…white socks…blue scrubsnonononononononono –**

Fifteen minutes and –

“**FUCK!”**

By his head, by his ear, by his skin, the sound, the spark, the force of metal slamming into metal, blade spinning in startled hands.

**Click. Click. Click.**

“**Ennis?”**

It must be the sorrow. The grief, the despair. Gotta be the anguish of loss trick playing. **Too late, too - failed, failed him - Jack is - 'Cause the dead don't speak, they don't move –**

"**A shovel. Iron Man's lube?**"

- and they certainly don't do sarcasm.

"**Jack?”**
In the closet, in the corner, aimed to fire again, saucer eyed, blood spattered, in shock and trapped under the body that wasn't –

"Jack!"

"Ennis, oh, fuck, Ennis, you'll never in the kitchen I was you know wanted it to be no rosemary though sauce wouldn't front door not you knew it wasn't left it on left the goddamn thing on the bed - " and the goddamn thing traveled the highways and byways of Jack’s gesticulations, scraping the wall, gouging the floor, a near miss of Ennis' leaning in nose, "had no place bathroom fuck no could hear hallway right behind - told you I could zig-zag - bathroom again hide here... " A look of wonder, surprised and bemused, at discovering a dead man in his lap. "Chased...me...and...closet...and...GET OFF! GET OFF! GET HIM OFF!"

In shock and hysterical.

"GET HIM OFF ME!"

"Jack, Jack, let me have, have the -" Another near miss. "The gun, Jack, let me have the -" For nose's, and entire face's sake, Ennis took matters, and gun, into his own hands. "That's it, I've got it now, calm down, Jack, calm."

"Off, Ennis, off me, Ennis, please, fuck, please, off, Ennis, off!"

"OK, OK, Jack, just give me -" Warm and pliable corpse rolled aside, crimson deep soaked carpet was the only space available, and without complaint, or thought to ruined crime scene, he took it and Jack, his shaking clammy cold to his body. "I'm here, baby, baby, I'm here." The rocking sweet and gentle. "It's OK, you're O -"

"No, no, no, not OK, not OK, I...I...

"Sssshhh, baby. You're alive, that's all that fucking matters. You're alive, he's dead, and -"

Eyes watched them, huddled, entwined on closet's floor, legs askew, hands clutching for and giving comfort, lips pressing safe to unruly hair. Ennis - filthy, exhausted, responsible for and fulfilled just to have Jack - numb, haunted, relieved to be in his arms. Eyes that never moved, never blinked, never focused. Watching, but not seeing eyes framed by carpet and moonbeams.

Hunnie.

"- now it's over."
Chapter 40

Chapter Summary

Please Note: This chapter contains the lyrics of a song, "Foxtrot, Uniform, Charlie, Kilo" by The Bloodhound Gang. They are denoted by **. I do NOT claim these words or any part of the song as mine. This is a work of fiction and is intended for entertainment purposes only.


More succinctly – the apartment was trashed.

Unfuckingbelievable.

Oh, Ennis had warned him. “Jack,” he had told him, “You don’t want to do this. Trust me.” Which Jack did, of course, implicitly. Without question or pause. In fact, Jack had said just that. “I do trust you.” But, Jack had had enough. “Enough of borrowed clothes, store brand shampoo, enough of jumping to someone else’s fucked up agenda.” “At least wait, OK?” Ennis had tried, sliding a little honey on the compromise through a kiss, “Wait until I can come with you.” While the kiss had been appreciated and returned in kind, much to the McDonald’s guy surprise, Jack had refused to budge. “More sitting around waiting for you to return? Done with playing the war widow.” An analogy that had escaped Ennis completely. “But, Jack,” he had purred, passing off the window handed white bag and vanilla latte, “baby…” hoping endearment’s term would soften that which kiss had not sweetened, “Told you before, I’ll be at the precinct. Do you know how long it will take to deal with IAB’s shit?” Well, how could Jack know the precise timing required for an IAB shit slog? “Fine, you can meet me there when you’re done,” he had countered, a sense of triumph for standing his ground, “then we’ll go to the Waldorf together,” that had turned to annoyance over blatant incompetence, “Where the hell are my hash browns?” Through a window knock and a less stringent inquiry, Ennis had procured the missing breakfast item. “Jack,” he then went on to further explain his concern while blowing on his blast furnace black coffee, “It’s not good there, the apartment. They really fucked it over.” Jack didn’t care. “I don’t care, Ennis. Home,” a hitch had formed around the McGriddle in his throat, “I want to go home.”

And here he stood.

Home.

“Or what’s left of it.”

A William Sonoma service for eight, with accompanying soup and serving bowls, he and AmEx had purchased as a housewarming, I can afford expensive shit without Daniel, gift to self crunched under foot.
“Et tu, Cigar Butt?”

Beloved pet of a whole forty-eight hours at last interred with dignity, final resting place – Ultra Flex Hefty bag.

And that had been Jack’s plan. “You’ve got IAB,” he had informed Ennis after jumping back in the Mustang from the forced under threat of a blow job moratorium if he didn’t immediately pull into that Shaw’s right there stop, “so for me, DYI.” Now, Ennis had applauded Jack’s enthusiasm, enjoyed immensely the rebirth of living’s excitement that recent events had sucked from blue, however he felt compelled to temper it with some naked reality. “A Swiffer mop and Febreeze ain’t gonna make a dent, Jack.” Always the forward thinker, and savvy shopper, Jack had been sure he would be prepared for any and all cleaning scenarios. “You underestimate me. Also purchased one of those magic eraser thingees.” Jack and the earringed bald man had both smirked confidence for competent job completion. “Oh, and a huge ass box of trash bags.”

The first into the fray hung limply from his hand as the draft from the splintered front door tousled the spring meadow of couch stuffing within its slashes.

“Not huge ass enough.”

Ennis’ solicitude had continued despite Jack’s firm resolve, eating up highway miles, crossing into Rhode Island, dogging drivers as they switched, spilling out all over a familiar rest stop. “Jack,” he had said, stretching this way and that, spine popping out behind the wheel hours, “You really don’t need to do this. The department contracts with people, you know, people who clean up crime scenes.” “Yet another cavalcade of unknowns blundering about? No thank you,” the reply had been muffled, Jack reaching in to readjust seat to the correct for his legs accelerator distance, “Besides, I know firsthand the speed at which bureaucracy schleps. We can’t afford the Waldorf on the city’s calendar.” Appreciation for Jack’s frugality had had Ennis’ smile quickly growing - brooding on their bottom line had kept pace with his Jack worry - then the from behind pocket dive for keys caused the burgeoning of something else, a cruel reminder of what he had turned down at return trek’s start. “Jack…” “Nor can the budget withstand all new West Elm,” Jack had unleashed the charm for Ennis and an octogenarian out dog walking alike, one with a fuzzy neck nuzzle just because, the other a cheeky wink for staring, “Unless you’d settle for Ikea’s mass produced breeder idea of interior design which this self-respecting queer would most certainly take issue - ” “Please, Jack, just listen,” forgoing pleasure, the sustaining comfort of Jack’s touch, to block what he knew to be a mistake, “really listen to me, OK?”, Ennis had spun around to hold chilly expectant face in his hands. “You don’t want to go there, do this. There’s nothing, fucking nothing left worth trying to salvage - “ ME!” Vehemence that had erupted, raised his voice, made fists out of gentle hands, sent Ennis back a stumble of steps wearing confusion’s open mouthed gape, surprised even Jack. “OK, Ennis?” A text originally designed to remain forever sub had sucker punched the psyche it whispered to for immediate attention, Jack reacting with desperation’s anger. “Me!” Regardless of its bullying and unorthodox mode of arrival, though, the personal pronoun’s purpose had been explicit. “Trying to salvage me!”

So, here Jack stood, knee deep in what had until recently been his apartment.

Me.

“Or what’s left of it.”

Not a mathematician by any way imagination wished to stretch, even Jack understood that 1 + 1, Ennis + Jack, could never be solved to the desired answer of 1 if his side of the equation stood to the
right of a decimal point. So much, so much had been subtracted – *Won’t do the ocean now, trust locked doors, the thought of pancakes, Chinese, J-Ello, any color, the sight of candles nauseating. Parking garages give me the fucking creeps. And pigeons. And Tic-Tacs. Never going back to Central Park. And as for cooking, standing there in the kitchen, with my back to the...no. Too many, too many pieces missing – No more unfounded trust in the strength of friendship, in man’s inherent kindness. No more fucking stupid naïve faith in the Law, my place, question the why and how, demand to understand what’s the fucking point of pledging honor and duty if the goddamn system can’t even protect - Countless essentials altered or lost – trust, faith – sleep! Just closing my eyes, when I blink, if I get distracted, forget for only a moment, let the wall slip and - it’s right there, the sound, THAT sound - as the bullet tears through...second, third - the sound of surprise and anger, the sound of his...falling to the floor, the sound of – oh, fuck – the whimper of his last breath. Conducted without forethought or design, the shattering of Jack had been complete.

Traumatized insomniac with no appetite. Well, as long as I have my health...and my sadistically ironic wit. And Ennis. Oh, Ennis, I can’t, fucking can’t lose you, too!

He couldn’t purchase trust, barter for faith, beg, borrow or steal sleep’s refuge,. Nor could he expect peace of mind to be gifted no matter the giver’s sincerity or willingness to help. No, must be a solo venture and his first step was here, here in the apartment, here where he could take back.

Take back, so the truth returns to a constant, dreams stay confined to suck and fuck kinks, danger means wearing white on the subway and fear can never again paralyze and emasculate.

Not all, of course, sanity’s rationale accepted the futility of that Annie Sullivan sized task, both ex and in. Total restoration not important, though, not at this stage. Proactive reclamation’s success only required elbow grease, Clorox and love bolstered hope to carve something amidst the mess, a place created for and by, a Jack niche, if you symbolically will, a sweat and tears tidied up sphere of influence at the epicenter of the destruction where Jack could begin to rescue Jack, the prior Jack, the already fucked up Jack, so Ennis wouldn’t be waiting alone at the plus sign.

Take me back.

And that’s why he stood here, ready to begin the search for the Jack buried under there somewhere.

One crunchy piece down, only about eleventy billion left to –

“AAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!”

The window had rattled and Jack girly screamed.

“Fuck.”

Under normal’s watch, the disturbance would have warranted a comprehensive ignore, the building old, the sashes loose, the wind winter’s noisy neighbor. But, that luxury, the one of safety in home’s quiet assurance, belonged on the flotsam and jetsam that Jack climbed over, shoes a size too big testing the tensile strength of what better times called his coffee table. *It’s nothing, I’m four stories up. It’s nothing, nobody knows I’m here. It’s nothing...probably. Usually assuming the innocent replaced by always anticipating the calamitous after the bungalow, didn’t matter the apparent innocuousness or expediency , if something outside caused portal to beep or bump or bang or generally make a noise unspecific and unknown, it was worthy of a look-see. A breeze, a gust, only the wind, yeah, that’s what it was, what it sounded like, just like the wind. Sweaty, shaky, not breathing Jack with Hefty bag shield leaned towards the window. Just like what I thought was the wind at first when the front door...and then he –
“Fuck.”

It was the wind alright, and its flurry of lightning fast jabs tossing underdog rain against the glass. Droplets, jagging streams in the making, prisms silver the fire escape, the bricks across the alley, a dot patterned view of 7:34 PM Chelsea and nothing more.

*Can a brain aneurism be self-induced? ‘Cause I swear before this night is over I’m going to be blowing grey matter all over the inside of –*

No, there was something…color, shapes, movement from the next building.

*What the…well, if that don’t fuck all.*

Three rectangles, hastily lettered, haphazardly displayed – “Welcome Home!”; “We missed you!” and “Getting Naked Soon?” – cardboard tugs on fond memories’ sleeve.

*Impressive. Been here, what, ten minutes and the bills are already waving. They must have been watching the windows, watching for days, always watch –*

*“Don’t go towards the light!”*

A breath. A gasped breath. A gasped, shallow breath and a palm slammed for pane’s frozen focus slap. *You can do this, you can do this, you must do this.* Closed eyes would have helped – *But, not if I do that!* – so staring, worldly possessions crush crumbled about a suitable stand-in for blank while Jack WWF death cage matched down his flight reflex.

*Stop it, stop it, STOP IT! No more threat, no more watching, no more fear. Here, apartment, that’s all. Apartment and me. Me and apartment. Me and my apartment and Cigar Butt. Cigar Butt and an obliterated coffee table. Cigar Butt, my obliterated coffee table and a Hefty bag to keep me company…none of which are great conversationalists…none of which are actually animate…none of which could be McGyvered into anything useful if…alone…I’m alone in an apartment anonymously…alone in an apartment with an unlockable door…alone with nothing but a fish corpse, a pile of teak kindling and an drawstringed environmental menace… alone with Ennis across the bridge…alone with no Ennis…no Ennis…Ennis…think I’ll just call En –*

*Palm curled inward, chilly glass shuddering under fist.*

*Jesus fucking Christ! What, am I four years old now? Can’t even go an hour without – just like at the hospital, just like at the - screaming for him at the first sign of - what a fucking pussy! Living up to those high expectations, aren’t I, hell yeah, just like He said I – get the fuck out of MY anxiety attack, Dad – Stop it! It’s over! They’re dead and you’re not! They’re dead and there’s nothing out there, nothing, nothing! Nothing but the rain. Rain and wind and rattling windows and cardboard signs and they don’t want to hurt me, they don’t wish me dead, no, they only want me naked, they only want – pussy paranoid gets emotional props from stalking fangirls. Yeah, well, work with what you’ve got.*

And what did Jack have?

*A numb hand, sandpaper eyes and a crumpled to Ziploc size trash bag.*

Nevertheless, composure sauntered back – *I’m OK…OK…semipsudoalmostmaybe OK* - if a bit brittle in spots. A waved farewell, a pane kiss for his sixth story admirers – *Next time, fire escape fuck, I promise* – followed by a flurry of blinks, a trio of deep breaths – *I’m OK…gotta do this…do this for Ennis* – and Jack was ready for another crack at re-discovery.
Only where to start…

*On my right* – Palm fronds hung lifeless by canvas threads, cascades of Steve Walker’s artistry shading drifts of white while springs broken from their moorings dotted the leather horizon. Its frame pointed north and east, another disjointed arm reaching towards a four story building of silver screen dreams, vacant and toppled, empty and stomped, all high water marked by detritus of spite shattered discs, a washed up jumble of the places and people and adventures and melodies once shared.

*Or to my left* – Violence, fiery and indiscriminatory, Shakespeare and King, “A Christmas Carol” and “An Inconvenient Truth”, Marvel and DC collector’s editions, torn from the polished bookshelf, tumbled from the literary display, purpose only to vent, to harm, a set of matching notebooks, color code tabbed and cross referenced, drug out, ripped and shredded, three years of law school torn asunder from the spirals, innocent victims all, a statement made in carnage and rage.

*And my third choice* – A giant fist had slammed down, an omnipotent reminder of existence’s thin line, a warning against complacency, against hubris and forgetfulness, the aftershock rumbling to the very ends of the kitchen, along the breakfast bar, appliances and countertops, magnitude measured by skewed magnets and splintered mugs, pots, pans and pasta maker unhoused and dislodged, platters and plates, stemware and sorbet cups, material gain’s fractured remnants left behind to dust linoleum crystal.

“Gonna need a bigger bag.”

It was a tough decision, each direction offering the utmost in cleaning opportunities, each rubble pile a potential Jack find triumph. Pulling down poly-cotton shirt tails, futility’s unconscious attempt to meet sweat pants half way, obtuse clean-up triangle points dutifully considered. Living space, work area, culinary station. Destroyed electronics, ransacked library, smashed kitchen. Where the real Jack had dreamed, where the real Jack had served, where the real Jack had created. Nothing recoverable, nothing retrievable, nothing redeemable.

“So, what do you think, Cigar Butt?” May not say much, but the dead fish did know his Jack. “Right. The soul of this man is in his clothes.”

Jack headed to his bedroom and closet.

'C*ourse, this is assuming that the asswipes that Terminatored in here wouldn’t - look what they did to Wolverine - and the melancholy Dane - and the best fucking frying pan I’ve ever - and the –*

A required for nerves and skull’s interior decor sake detour, if he was bedroom and back of the apartment bound, the problem of an open to hallway and unwanted entrants front door perplexing in its creaking hinges and no lock enormity.

“This is New York, crime scene tape is curb appeal, so…”

Dining table, saved from the wrecking ball to serve as a message board – “Where is it, faggot?”, the second G Jack scratching in with an editor’s ruthless paring knife – *no need to insult me twice* – hip pushed down the small entryway and up against the seen better days door.

*That should do it. Although…*

Ottoman sans lid took hand and hip to lift, the stubby legs sliding neatly to cover six more inches of broken inward wood.

*Better. More weight will help. Although…*
Bar stools, reminiscent of just out of the box pre-assembly condition, heaped behind the ottoman.

Even better. The door opens, they fall, I come running. A homemade alarm system. Although…

Two of Ennis’ boxes, the ones dumped and forgotten since his late November move-in, ripped open and contents molested, five books of varying size and number of intact chapters, dining chair back, double boiler and wok, floor lamp, kitchen timer, all four remotes and the globe Aunt Peg had sent from their anniversary cruise on the Delta Queen, paddlewheel churning up Mississippi and snow.

“There. Tight as Beckham’s abs.”

Down the road, in a little while, whenever didn’t matter. Yes, it will be a pain in the ass to move all that, and, yes, no doubt Ennis will start some shit about the wisdom of blocking the only exit as he stands waiting on barricade’s other side for admittance. But, striding back to the bedroom, Jack was disinclined to give either, a shit or an ass, especially of the rodent variety, their due for at this moment, no matter its shelf life or aesthetics, through his own ingenuity and hand, he had, all by his lonesome, achieved safe.

As long as I don’t close my eyes.

The closet at the end of the hall had never looked more organized what with nine tenths of the contents on the floor. A ragtag platoon of bed linens and towels, vacuum cleaner and mops, gift wrap and bows, all those little things that held future potential, but right now had no other everything place, with the basketball silently taking point.

So, that’s where I put my leather chaps.

If hurricane, earthquake and mob mentality had redecorated apartment’s front, back here it was Kansas in May, the bedroom Fujita scale F5 twister slammed. Drapes emulated their horizontal Venetian brethren, duvet and sheets and pillows mere hunter green blotches that dotted the ravaged landscape. Mattress and box springs stared blank PTSD at each other from opposite walls across a field of bottomed up night stand and dresser drawers with a trail that started near the door, lamp, alarm clock and TV parts winding through to somewhere unknown. And the capper, the crowning blow, the ransacking coup to end all de graces - the closet had exploded outward, clothes flung to all points and surfaces until slashed summer mingled with wrenched winter, torn t-shirts merged with distorted dress shirts and tattered tuxedo palled around with pulverized pajamas.

It was a fashion salmagundi of epic proportions.

“Quelle surprise.”

This could work, though, this was doable. Shambles all around him, career a big question mark, a solitary inmate straightjacketed by thoughts and dreams, but here amid total loss and rock bottom, Operation Take Back Jack could actually establish a tenuous foothold. Here was the beginning. For on top of the debris, turned inside out and crumpled, yet miraculously whole, lay hope. And shattered Jack smiled.

My Spiderman boxers.

Wardrobe pile panning turned up several gems – BLACK socks – uncovered the priceless – cashmere sweater to match my eyes – and finally, the motherlode – Fuck, yes! My best ass hugging jeans! All wearable, if slightly mussed. Hiking boots used only once, a long Arizona rock climbing weekend to fulfill Daniel’s need to prove his superiority in all things manly, out with the other hall closet clutter, would finish off the look.
Too LL Bean for this neighborhood, perhaps?

This is not to say Jack didn’t appreciate the clothes he was currently wearing. He did, truly a generous gift from the Wellfleet police in all their ill-fitting, mismatched Goodwill reject glory. Of course, at the time, he would have welcomed a pair of purple parachute pants and an open meshed stomach revealing muscle shirt, anything to rid his body of the scrubs, stiff and caked chaffing scrubs, bungalow borrowed robe heavy and stained, the metallic odor pore and nostril lingering even as he had stood hours under the water, skin turning the color of what disgust had been attempting to eradicate.

Fuck. I still smell like blood…his blood…Hunnie’s blood as it seeped from the –

“So, what do you think, Cigar Butt?” Dead fish intuition a step ahead once again “Right. Why half ass this.”

A step over the basketball and Jack was shower bound.

Comparatively speaking, about kitchen and bedroom, that is, damage to the small room was minor. The rod still dangled rings, just no curtain. Contents emptied, the mirrored cabinet delivered a second message, same question, different denigration – Gee, managed to get all three letters correct this time – and the floor brought back memories of Syracuse nights spent peeling away from houses, laughing hysterically, no thoughts to the soggy morning clean up, looping round rolls easily added, touch avoiding the pissed on parts, to Cigar Butt’s mausoleum. No, the room was relatively unscathed, except for the horror of a film with pearlescent streaks sliming around the tub drain.

“Those bastards!”

Jack turned away from the graveyard of hair care bottles in grief.

“Well, shit.” Shower a pointless endeavor now without my…wait. What about… Clean was not a lost cause it seemed, not if an alternative was still available – not if they didn’t find… Jack on his knees, Plan B rummaging to the very back of the under the sink cabinet, through split open toothpaste tubes, Band-Aids emancipated from their box, squeezed out expired muscle ache creams, unspooled Ace bandage, a crowd of cotton balls, enema bag with the snapped off nozzle to brush fingertips to…

“Thank you, Jesus.”

Granted the bottles were small, one application only, and formulated for oily while he leaned towards the normal end of dry, but Stephanie’s free after dropping eighty-five bucks on American Crew for August’s Match.com soul mate gift that had plopped on his desk with a sob and a story of wrong name climax screaming, Jack chose to view as another forward shuffle started in the right direction by Spidey.

“Blessed are those with good grooming habits for they shall inherit travel size.”

ConEd was still supplying the apartment and radiators were currently banging out a stuttering warm Morse Code, so the assumption of hot water wasn’t too far afield. Shower’s going to happen and, if the sweater isn’t the only things matching my eyes by the end, well, than Ennis can just warm…

No other reason but the main need compel Ennis the next time any foreplay commenced because over Jack’s outstretched hand, after several minutes of anxiety cold splashing sweat pants, spilled warmth.

“Follicle orgasm imminent.”
Next, towels. Towels to handle the dry off, towels to catch the no curtain run off – *bathroom’s mishegased enough already* - Jack out to the hallway – *step over the basketball* – the Bill Blass navy blues yanked out from under the kicked over dresser called up to service – *step over the basketball* – towels on the floor, towels on the toilet – Jack back out to the kitchen for an empty Hefty – *step over the basketball* – returning to the disaster area, aka bedroom – *step over the basketball* - to strip, an essential part of the pre-shower checklist. Now, if normal had been anywhere in the vicinity, this simplistic maneuver would have had Ennis’ hands all over it. Times being what they were, though, and his wingman over the Bridge, Jack was forced into his first solo flight in days.

*Don’t panic. It’s just like riding a bike. Or rolling on a condom with my tongue.*

Shoes were the easiest part, just a leg snap…again – “Fucking foot Tupperware.” - and the black and orange Crocs kicked off, their invaluable service remembered, their immediate removal rejoiced. Then it was tube socks, doorframe propping up ass for Jack’s one-handed chagrined at the learned mastery yank of the only original post hospital items not sealed inside forensic paper bags. That only left sweats with couch potato waistband, the short sleeved redneck idea of a dress shirt, and…

“A dodgy proposition with one good hand, inside out and cast stuck the few times Jack had tried himself. But, with no Ennis, a sling to impede movement and a still very opposed to even a heavy sigh tender spotted shoulder that had been wondering here recently just where the pain meds had swaned off to, if shower was happening – *and it is, as sure as my dick points due Ennis* - he had two options from which to choose: spin a fantastic tale of heated battles, daring escapes and a last minute victory over broken bathroom pipes as a way to explain answering the barricade in couldn’t wait shower soppy soggy grey wool, or…

“Fucking love this coat…one hundred percent of the fastest sheep on the farm…Discover card’s still not recovered…looked fantastic in it, bullet holes and blood notwithstanding…my coat…my hero coat. A pre-toss away check - one pocket dive for cell phone, apartment key, Ennis’ number – *on an apropos torn off slip of police report* – other pocket look-see by force of habit – *damn, haven’t been in here since that joyous ride…in…that…eleva –

“A hand/thigh tag team worked on the sloppy, slippey, slidey customary for a burial at trashed center pile bunch up. “Purchased one day shy of two months ago and there’s a fucking hole in the – and now…”

“Don’t believe this. A hole. A fucking hole.” A hand/thigh tag team worked on the sloppy, slippey, slidey customary for a burial at trashed center pile bunch up. “Purchased one day shy of two months ago and there’s a fucking hole in the – and now…”

Right there, trapped between palm and knee – hard where it shouldn’t be.

“See, Cigar Butt, *this* is why I don’t pay full retail.”
Suppose he could have let it go, complete the throw away and be done. Should have let it go, the finite supply of hot water waited for no man. What did it really matter now, now that the coat was just so much satin lined rags destined to take a leisurely barge trip down the East River? Whatever was jammed in there along the bottom of the coat had nil importance to either apartment return’s mission or shower, thus deserved the same attention that befits a losing lottery ticket.

But, this was Jack we’re talking about here, a man who never met an OCD fashion moment he couldn’t schmooze.

“A fucking hole, and now…” From entry’s point, through the pocket, into the lining, following trajectory’s path, fingers probed towards the foreign object, “there’s something stuck in the hem.” The possibilities, while not endless – wrong shape for a key, too small for the lost top of my Mont Blanc – still intrigued as Jack’s fishing expedition within a fishing expedition wound further into the hero coat’s bowels – a cuff link…a quarter…a Tic-Tac…or maybe…something even – step to the side for the Déjà vu to stroll by - that shitty second-hand suit, all polyester and itchy…a size too big…wouldn’t pop for a new one, fuck, no, just me, why waste the money, just me reading my winning Fifth grade essay for the Rotary Club…What It Means to be An American…didn’t even bother to show up…right there in the restaurant bathroom, ripped the fucking thing to shreds…pretending it was Him, wishing it was Him, praying it could be Him…destroyed the fucking thing…and there it was…stuck in the middle of the shreds…waiting for me, wanting me to find it, right there in the hem of that goddamn suit jacket, I found –

“And the Oscar goes to…”

Few, if any, moments in life could claim sheer perfection, where alignment drew the straightest of lines, where time paused to gaze in wonder, where the words uttered reflected that singular decisive point with such exactness as to be descriptive epitome pinnacles.

This was one of those moments.

“Oh, fuck me.”

Jack stared at his palm, and from his palm the Staten Island Ferry stared back.

The whole time, Central Park, the hospital, up in Wellfleet - with me. The entire time. Oh, well played, irony, well played.

Jesse did give it to me, Jesse did slip it to me. Didn’t see, didn’t know. Jesse to pocket to hole to hem to me. The entire fucking time. Goddamn. Thought It would be…I mean, he made it sound so…like It was this - but, no. A charm. A fucking charm. Just a fucking tacky, synthetic, cheap ass, shitty picture charm. And for this the girls were terrorized? For this all those people died? All that pain and anger and fear?

“That cheap ass suit’s gumball machine Batman ring was way cooler.”

Didn’t want to look at it any more – can’t look - not and retain the Dutch boy finger poke advantage he had gained against the raging despair lapping shutdown over dyke’s edge.

For this I’m now a murderer?

To exact the out of sight discard, the toilet flush, disposal mangle, and the heave with a soul emptying wail from a fourth story window all eagerly and earnestly volunteered. Another pocket, a jeans pocket, a pocket checked nine ways to Sunday plus one for structural integrity, served instead as the never truly out of mind hiding place. For, although lousy with personal moot, discovery’s
timing recent history re-write impotent, in the scheme of an investigation all but closed, that tiny piece of tourist kitsch still had its share of admirers, one that was only a scribbled down number away.

Hope he’s appropriately located for brick shitting, ’cause when he hears that Hunnie was right all along, Ennis will – “Damn.” The last of the untraceables passed Jack off, and not even by that beloved voice, just the slightly snooty computer telling him to do the same old, same old.

“F*ck, Ennis, you’re never going to believe what -”

It was small, a spot, a nugget, a kernel, the residue of lived with for far too long caution and fear that interrupted message’s mid – don’t, never know who’s – Jack switching from excited to enigmatic in the space of a dramatic pause.

“ - I’m holding in my hand right now. While highly prized, and eminently sought after, it’s reserved for only you. Call me. Je vous, aime.”

No other impediments now - save for shirt, sling and sweat pants, all quickly dispatched, hems uninteresting and flat, with a resounding “Owowowowow – Shit!” - Jack, cell phone – you know, an Ennis call back just in case - and Hefty bag cast wound as tight has one-handed humanly possible headed to the bathroom – step over the basketball - and the shower’s dwindling fast supply of damned spot removal.

“The patient must minister to himself.”

And he had this going, too. Brace for the barely squishy towel step off into the left leaning – just like Ennis – shower, directly to bliss’ gentle arms. New Skin kept the shoulder GSW wounds dry promise – not surprisingly unooffered by the Marquis de Kisha – when a wet the hair turn around sent Hefty bag out straight and a water stain drew a New Yorker’s cloud watching substitute notice – either a tequila twofer night alleyway deposit or…that would certainly curl some papal ruby slippers, Virgin Mary appearing on a gay man’s ceiling - head tilted back at a swallow impossible angle, open eyes against shower strays insurance policy. Shampoo bottle flip top, another bullet on Ennis’ customary duty roster, on the fly teeth dispatched – mangoes, my ass – left hand squeeze out, directly to scalp application and finger scrub, plopping sudsy dollops working magic on mood, split ends and Wellfleet’s police station Dial soap’s ineffectual masking of blood and shame. American Crew would have worked for even you, Mrs. Macbeth. Yes, Jack had it going like a big ol’ slab of triple tiered red velvet with melt in your mouth cream cheese icing. That is, right up to the rinse cycle.

“Shit.”

For even as one as limber as Jack - mind blowingly erotically limber, an Ennis marveled at, stunned by and copiously thanked God for attribute – there was no fucking way he could bend far enough. Not to mention shoulder’s persistent piercing overused and abused cry. No, to guard against shampoo sneakiness, he had to close his eyes. Maybe if I tilt to the side a little. Unless renter’s insurance had a flood clause, the shower’s curtainless state and head angle nixed that idea. Straight down, then. Stinging stuff round the sides experiment fail. Right only? Both eyes warranted equal protection. What about - Prevarication slipped suds south, ever nearer to the point of academic shuttering for the shampoo dig out. I’ll just leave them open. Red would clash with cashmere’s blue. No, don’t want to. Got an all you can shower water heater, do you? Can’t make me. Eyes really should be closed. No. Eyes kinda’ need to be closed. But, he’ll be – Eyes shut, NOW!

OK, fine. Closing my eyes...for a moment...for a second...for a nanosecond...for an attosecond...and whatever happens will be in your –
And, as they say, it only takes any one of those…

“Foxtrot, Uniform, Charlie, Kilo…Foxtrot, Uniform, Charlie, Kilo!”**

Kitchen. In the kitchen. Singing in the kitchen. Singing in the kitchen to fill the silence, to fill the empty space, to keep busy, hands busy, mind busy with something other than clock watching, wondering what’s taking so long and why the fuck isn’t the sauce, never mind that it’s actually from a can, canned soup, condensed, canned soup, chunky tomato soup, that no amount of stirring, or mushrooms from a jar or quantity of salad dressing packets or ignoring rosemary’s conspicuous absence, or disregarding affronted culinary sensibilities, or maybe he had trouble with the clutch, or maybe trouble finding a store, or maybe just fucking trouble, and with limited basket options, and not doing pancakes yet again, and Ramen a special dinner does not make, and Spam is strictly verboten in the gay man’s bylaws, and it’s just grocery shopping, and only a short trip, and not New York, and he’s Chuck Norris capable, so served with olive oil dipped bread, so no utensils, so naked presentation, so dinner will cease to matter, so will everything else, so it’ll be breakfast once again, so have faith, so stop drawing his white pavement outline and just wait patiently…just don’t think…just stir…just keep singing.

“Power drill the yippee bog with the dude piston…pressure wash the quiver -”**

The door.

Moved. The front door. Moved, shook, jiggled, coughed heavily. The front - he’s back! He’s back and I haven’t undressed for dinner. He’s back and the bedroom’s still unambianced. He’s back and the fucks over special dinner prep incomplete are flying around in signature Blue Angel formations for Ennis is back – appear open - Ennis is here – look inviting - Ennis is safe – project spontaneous fuckability - Ennis, oh, god, my Ennis is…my Ennis is…is…fumbling with the key? Shaking the snow off his boots? At long last reflecting my intense tutelage by making a proper grand entrance as befits a gay - fuck. No opening door.

No Ennis.

“Premium wild, wicked and wanton wasted on a wooden spoon.”

No Ennis. So, it’s back, back to stirring, back to singing, back to not thinking up even too twisted for NCIS scenarios.

“In lieu of the innuendo in the end know my intent though…”**

…the door did move. Didn’t it? Yes, heard it, watched it. So, why? Yes, why, indeed. Why did the door clear its throat? With no knock, even of the cookie selling or Watchtower varieties, no omnipresent, potent, incense eyes around to foul up the zip code, no Ennis, which certainly does not bode for anything other than studious lube selection - let’s hold on to the thought of exhausting new supply Guinness record setting - right, let’s depend on the same clear thinking that came up with a Campbell’s sodium jihad entrée for dinner, as if the water here wasn’t retentifying enough – the door either moved of its own accord, which means I’ve got a heretofore undocumented Amityville problem on my hands and rosemaryless pseudo-sauce is the very least of my worries, or it was…was…the wind? The wind, yes, the howling wind, the wind, aka Mariah, the wind that has been
known to do some plain sweeping on occasion. Only the wind fucking around.

“An unsatisfying fucking around. On so many levels.”

So, where was I? Ah, that’s right – the sauce. The fake sauce, the fake, runny, which no amount of stirring, cream of mushroom adding, ta-da serving or sleight of naked ass will be able to obscure its aluminum origins. Inefficacious stirring of an insufficient simulation and singing.

“Put Ennis’ you know what, in Jack’s you know where…put Ennis’ you know what, in Jack’s you know -”**

The bedroom! That’s where. What time is…fuck. Almost an hour gone. Can’t be much longer… oven, you warm the bread…he promised not much longer…while the sham sauce simmers…please, God, not much…and now - Ennis by candlelight…me by candlelight…fucking by candlelight…Ennis fucking me by every goddamn one in the house, strategically placed, precisely positioned, a welcome back, a love you, missed you, separation sucks and if it wouldn’t be so awkward in court or annual urologist appointments, never to part again, which, now, after draining lighter and scorching digits looks less like the romantic milieuiness envisioned and more like a political statement, an all the Tea Partiers down in Whoville protest. Ooo! Dr. Seussing…on the floor, against a door, by the bed, on my head, I would like Ennis here AND there, I would like Ennis any –

The door.

Again. This time open. Wide open and no alarm. Not the wind, nope, Nor’easter possesses neither key nor code. Calling upon that impeccable condensed logic once again, unless the houses’ owners have arrived to conduct an impromptu and bizarrely timed property inspection, in which case I’ll be hard pressed to explain away both bedroom’s inferno and the finger width scratches marring their dining room table, the safe conclusion and one that’s a definite dick attention grabber - waiting for me out in the main room is –

“Hello, Jack.”

“No.” No. No. No. NO. NO. NO. “No.”

“Long time no see. Well, for you, anyway.”

This is not…this is…not kosher…more than not kosher…it’s…it’s…what’s the complete antitheses of kosher, wrong, that’s what this is, so wrong, all kinds of fucking wrong, shitloads of steaming piles of wrong. Not here, not HERE. Supposed to be safe, supposed to be unknown, supposed to be Ennis, not…not…

“Had to wait until that goddamn cop left. Took long enough, too.”

Hunnie.

“Waiting out there in the cold for fucking forever.”

Hunnie. Here.

“Though, could tell you were enjoying the hell out of it, weren’tcha, Jack?”

Hunnie. Here. Watching.

“And now that I’ve finally got you alone…”
“We’ve got some unfinished business, you and me.”

Gun.

Out. Out. Got to get out. “I don’t have it!” Front door, kitchen door, French doors, out, only way out. “Not then, not now, not ever!” Front, kitchen, French, fuck, too far, shit, can’t, no way, not fast enough, not good enough, he’s between. “Don’t! Me! Never!” He’s between, it's between - no way out, no way out, no way - “NO!”

“Well, that sucks for both of us, doesn’t it?”

Hunnie here…gun and I’m…I’m…wouldn’t be if…Ennis…through the door…Ennis…any minute…Ennis…in a second…Ennis…will…better…Ennis…

“To come all this way for nothing, and for you, well, it’s -”

...was…right!

“OK. OK! I lied, OK? You’re right, you’re right. I am in possession of…It.”

“Fucking knew it! Knew it!”

“Just don’t…don’t…”

“Get it, give it to me.”

“In here, in the bedroom. Just let me…”

Know how to do this, don’t want to do this, remember how to do this, shouldn’t be doing this, could never forget learning how to do this, fucking hate to do this – got to do this, Jack - makes me no better than, makes me the same as…

“Of course, in the bedroom, always the fucking bedroom with you guys.”

Pillow, under the pillow for later, under the pillow for…still cold – feels good, doesn’t it - for Ennis, don’t want to do, Ennis isn’t and I’m…

“Course, you’re still -”

BANG!

(What the hell was that?)

Stopped him, didn’t it? He’s down, he’s unconscious. No need for more, in the shoulder, no need for anything –

(What did I tell you? Don’t wound, Jack.)

No. NO. Out, that’s all, he’s down, I’m out, out of the bedroom, out of the house, out and away and –

“You fucking faggot!”

FUCK! Pain, fuck, can’t, breath knocked, landed, floor, my arm, hand, floor, fingers around ankle,
grabbed my, pulled me –

(Always go for –

“No fucking way you’re -”


- the Kill.)

“Make you suffer - fuck!”

Get up, get up, up, up and run, run, run, where, anywhere, not the door, he’s there, between me and the, can’t reach the, run away, where, RUN, hallway, anywhere, down, RUNRURUNRUN!

“OK, queer boy - ”

RUNRURUNRUN

(Kill him now!)

Zzzzzzzfff!}

Zig...

“I’ll just shoot you - ”

Zzzzzfff!

...zag...

“ - in the back.”

Zzzzzfff!

...zig...

“Like a fucking coward!”

Bedroom, fuck, another bed, what was I think, end of the line, dead end, where, where, oh Christ, Ennis, where, where do I, window, try the window, small but I could squeeze –

“Going to catch you, Jack.”

No time, no window, another, no other, run, keep running, no way out, as far as I can –

(Don’t be such a pansy.)

“Empty a clip into that fucking smirking face of yours.”

- the corner, the dark, maybe he won’t, can’t, Ennis, Ennis, where are, the only place left...

(In your sight, got it, see him?)

“You are too damn funny, ya’ know that, Jack? A fag shitting his pants, and in a closet no less.”
(Level and steady, now just squeeze the trigger.)

“Stop! Don’t, don’t come, stop, swear, fucking swear, I’ll - ”

“You’ll, what?”

(Do it, Jack.)

No, no! “Fucking swear I’ll – NO!! Don’t come any -”

“You gonna shoot me? Like the first time? How’s that working out for you, huh, Jack?”

(Don’t just stand there, shoot!)

No, don’t want, Ennis, Ennis, why aren’t you – “Stop!”

“Too easy. You’re taking all the fun out of it, shaking and blubbering. This is just too ea -”

**BANG!**

“FUCK! FUCK! My - my, you shot my – FUCK! - my hand!”

(Goddammit, Jack!)

Warn, scare, stall – Ennis - don’t want to –

(Quit wasting bullets.)

“My hand! FUCK!”

(One or the other, Jack, choose one or the other.)

“Cocksucker!”

(Head or heart, him or you, remember that, Jack, to make it count, it’s either head or heart.)

Shut up, no, just shut, don’t want, can’t, Ennis, please, please, Ennis, don’t want to –

“You are so fucking dead!”

(Head or heart, head or heart.)

Don’t want to, don’t make me, Ennis, where are, Ennis, need you, Ennis –

(Head or heart, boy.)

“Going to enjoy this so fucking much.”

Ennis, please, please, Ennis, stop me, stop me, Ennis, I’m –

“Goodbye, Ja -”

(Head or –

**BANG! BANG! BANG!**

Heart.)
Oh, god, god, god, is he, falling, falling on, blood, so much, Christ, everywhere, so much, not moving, not breathing, not...did I, god, what did I...I...I –

(Finally! You finally did something right!)

Yes, finally, I listened, finally, I acted, finally, just like you taught me, Daddy.

Jack wept. Erratic hot, memory’s tears burned, tale’s truth, anguished shame owned.

“You bitch.”

Self-defense, that’s what Ennis had decreed after a sort of sense returned, that’s what the responding officers called in, after examining the crime scene, that’s what the sheriff typed up after the story, with pertinent details omitted, had repeated a baker’s dozen: self-defense during a home invasion.

He knew better, though. Jack knew what had actually happened in the bungalow. Despite all attempts to the contrary, fighting back, walking away, refusing the hate, accepting the self, in a life defining moment, he had made his father proud.

And that’s with me...forever.

There was good news, however. The burden needn’t be carried for long, forever’s end coming up fast, and it’s said that death by hypothermia wasn’t that too terribly –

“Fuck!”

More than just precious familial items emulated sweater’s hue when Jack scrambled from the stone cold water.

“FUCK!”

Towel couldn’t work fast enough, thick terry absorbing skin’s freezing moisture, a chill stubbornly clinging, Jack’s one-handed flurry of motion.

“Advantage. No Ennis means no shrinkage obsfuca – Ennis!”

Right there keeping the sink company the whole shower time and nary a note of cowboys not riding horses, but Jack checked anyway, one slipshod quick towel hang on hips, the second working on American Crew pampered hair. On silent, maybe? Shower too loud? Trip down memory hell deaf to ring – “Damn.”

No missed calls.

No matter. Indicative of nothing. Needle not buried in bode meter’s red. Skin friction warmed pink, hair towel dried to immediate salon appointment imperative impish, Hefty cast condom interred with Cigar Butt and daily beard on the lumberjack scale check – two flannel shirts and one buttered scone with tea – all abulated, Jack retraced steps to the disaster across the hall –
Twenty minutes, though. Not long when measured against our averaged fuck length, I know, but, the possibilities within that twenty minutes are...perhaps I should – no. No yenteing. Let's not forget the architect of this current bridge twain predicament. I needed time, which he graciously bitched about until drop off. So, I shall, too. Reciprocity him time.

- ready to face the next potentially insurmountable – jeans.

A finite dressing completion reciprocity.

Challenge never materialized, however. In fact, when compared to boxers and the performance of the foot caught on the waistband choreography, Jack tripping with more pluck then poise, jeans proved the easiest of the wardrobe so far. With the proper sequence, legs stepped in, a right hand, elbow and wall tag team holding them steady, pliable from multi-adorative wearings, denim remembered fondly and welcomed back the familiar Jack curve and bulge.

Only Ennis’ hands hold my ass tighter.

Socks off had been accomplished standing, socks on, no such luck, a mattress and box springs kick down creating seatage. For narrative purposes conveniently pre-laced boots and that aforementioned limberness rescued a pre-destined failure, teeth understudying left hand commendably, so what if the knots were single and a trifle spitty? Travel sized deodorant not free basket included, and the desire to pick through the cluttering about mess to find his reaching well into negative numbers – a one pit only job anyway – so, it was forward onto the cashmere gauntlet.

Shoulder volume’s on eleven now, how much worse could it –

“FUCK!”

And that was only one sleeve.

“FUCK…FUCK…FUCK…FUCK…” And that continued for a while, so for brevity and internal pacing’s sake, let’s just skip ahead to…

“FUCK!”

OK, cashmere’s original shape unrecognizable, but both arms were in, left yanked over cast, across elbows and up to shoulder. Now came the really fun part.

Over the head.

A deep breath, a ten count for courage and, you guessed it –

“FUCK!”

The sweater was over, the sweater was atop, the sweater was on its way down, and Jack had survived. Of course, so caught up in clenching against the glass grinding pain levels, he forgot an important dressing detail: when objects by pass the face, out of deference and protection, optically speaking, certain things are obliged to close.

No! Goddammit, no!

But, this is also necessary.

“I don’t want to go back -”
Singing. I'm singing, what am I singing, not really signing, mumbling, nonsense, nothing, and it's dark, dark and cold and sticky smells like, and he’s still dead, and how long, don’t know, how much longer, I don’t know, why, I’m alone, except for Hunnie, singing nothing in the dark –

What was –

Not alone, not alone anymore, there’s - stop! Stop singing - sounds…out there…noise…who, who the fuck is - don’t let them, won’t find, can’t find, oh, god, what if they - closer, coming closer, coming - and that’s wrong - that’s bad, small, in the corner, hide! Don’t let them find – but Hunnie can’t because he’s - scared – coming…coming close - so scared - here, in the room, now, and not again, not again, I know what to do, head or heart, I know what, head or –

BANG!

“FUCK!”

Head or heart, squeeze the trigger, and squeeze, and squeeze and – that voice, voice, I know that – “Ennis?” Ennis, it’s Ennis, oh, my, Ennis, MY Ennis, Ennis is here, finally here, Ennis and – “A shovel. Iron man’s lube,?”

“Jack? Jack!”

And Ennis is here, the rest doesn’t matter, everything else doesn’t mean shit, Ennis is with me, Ennis’ voice, and Ennis’ smell, and Ennis’ hands, and Ennis’ body, and Ennis’ calm, and Ennis’ strength, and Ennis’ love, love, his love, surrounding, holding, keeping, sustaining. Not alone anymore, never alone again.

Ennis.

Tears returned for his tale’s epilogue, still fevered, still mercurial, with blessings, not inward pointing obloquy, but huzzahed instead. Ennis. From closet to couch to police cruiser, Ennis had been there. At the station, demanding and receiving, blanket and coffee and shower, Ennis had been there. Through three long, tiring, frustratingly inane in its questions repetition interrogation in a room that hope had never been introduced to, Ennis hadn't been there, but pacing zooed cheetah style just on two-ways’ other side. And the promise to continue being there where, when and however was repeatedly kissed sweet, chaste, permanent on preoccupied numb, yet gratefully ensnared lips.

He carried me, since the hospital, since the bungalow, through this whole fucking mess he’s carried me. Shit, since we met and Ennis carries me still.

And what did I do? Shut him down, shut him out.

Of course, that’s been SOP, only show the dashing side, only share the spectacular surface. Come hither – but not too close! Be with me always, but keep out! Lest the cracks in my imperfect perfection show deep. Give my heart, give him my everything, only stay away from my insecurities,
from my foibles and flaws, never come near the childhood memory cesspool.

Well, mission accomplished, pack up the equipment, big boned lady with the glandular problem can start belting ‘cause Jack has indeed been located, and he’s a fucking hypocritical coward who expounds ad infinitum about together, commitment, speaking in witty metaphors of elementary arithmetic problems, while hiding, lying, convinced it's not important, no worries, nothing to see here, I’m dealing, leave it alone, no help necessary,

But, I can’t do this, obviously, don't want to do this, don't want to be afraid anymore, ashamed anymore. He loves me, LOVES me, loves ME. And I love him. About time I lived that responsibility.

Shoulders, while still shrieking for narcotic consolation, their load lifted lighter, a lifetime’s first.

“Thank you.”

All in a day’s, month’s, year’s, and year’s, and year’s work.

Revelations and resolutions aside, watered eyes and snotty nose's mark left on last year's fashion must-have, fully clothed meant reciprocity’s contract had expired. Twenty-five minutes. Re-dial tapped, Jack listened to the buzz…silence…ring. Twenty-five minutes and the same again as many possibilities of bad –

“The number you have reached is unavailable. Please leave a message at the tone. To page this person, press -”

“Shit.” Still not answering. Busy, he’s busy, of course he’s busy, asshat, he’s at work. That’s my Ennis. Work, work, work. That’s why no call back in twenty-six –

BEEP!

Blank. A complete blank. A nihilist’s Disneyland. And it stared Jack right in the eye.

Christ, what do I say? No call back, so I was worried about you, worried about me, fucking crazy worried about me, and you were right, this was a bad idea, a lousy idea, the Pulitzer Prize winner of bad, lousy ideas, and I want you here, soon, NOW, so I thought I would call you there at the precinct where your career’s teetering on one chair leg to read you the next chapter in” Chicken Soup for the High Maintenance Partnered”, entitled ‘With Their paranoid Bullshit You get Eggroll’, when I should be here for you, should be supporting you, but supporting you in what exactly, where do I place the beams? Yeah! They’re not going to prosecute, or, Boo! I have an in with the DA’s office, oh, and speaking of Daniel, I ever tell you about his emails, his almost daily emails, the ones he’s sending me still, Google mailbox full of them last I checked at the police station this morning, his provocatively suggestive emails, his explicit emails, his emails with a standing invitation to – FATAL RELATIONSHIP ERROR! Reboot to safe mode.

“You and me at the Waldorf. You, me and those large windows at the Waldorf. Those thick drapes at the Waldorf, the heavy cored drapes, and the incredible view of Manhattan at the Waldorf. Me tied spread eagle against the freezing cold glass while all of New York City watches you fuck – oh, that’s right, you don’t do phone sex. Sorry to bother. Call me. Please.”

Phone pocket deposited, fingers brushing the square, a sharp edged reminder of recent strife that needn’t have bothered.

Never forget.

The piece of whatever he kicked to closet’s curb wouldn’t either.
So, to recap: freak out by the window, Staten Island Ferry, soul stripping shower, self-evaluation and redirection, two messages left, and still no Ennis, which sucks, Christ, I need to take my pain meds, which leaves at least another hour here, so…

“Now what?”

Well, that punted piece of alarm clock would be fine place to start. Or why not begin with bureau reassembly, or reuniting bed parts, or –

OK, OK, I get it, that’s why I’m here, after all, supposed to be on a Jack finding mis – oh! Ennis and sucks, rather think on that - his mouth, his lips, his smile stretched around my –

“Stop that! Need to clean the mess, not add to it!”

Sounds like a job for magic eraser thingee and Hefty. Out to the kitchen, plan of attack marching to the fore.

Ennis said there was nothing here to salvage. Wrong! Found Spidey, didn’t I? My jeans, cashmere, with a little truth along the way? So, I’ll start there, the bedroom, my wardrobe – step over the basketball – perhaps other clothing articles escaped the four horsemen of the a...poca...lypse…

A confused pause by the counter.

That's weird.

A look down the hallway…a glance at his feet.

Wasn’t it…

A hallway look, a feet glance.

And now it’s…

Hallway…feet.

“Shit.”

The basketball had moved.

Pulse sped up just a tick.

How did, the floor’s level, it didn’t just roll by its – not how - who.

Pulse qualified for the Beijing Olympic track and field finals.

Not me, in the shower, so –

Pulse took the first outside turn, leading the pack, at Talladega.

Someone, someone ELSE in the apartment, while I was –

Head snap to the windows.

One blocked, the other locked.

Head snap to the front door.
No fucking way.

Pulse achieved exit velocity and would reach Jupiter in a little over ten days.

Here, before, someone, while I, NOW.

A sickeningly familiar mantra began its frenzied chant – Get out, get out, GET OUT! – undermining any rational plan formation.

Who the fuck is, doesn’t matter, someone is in – get out – Ennis, no Ennis, again, so I must, again – get out – I know, but they don’t know I, must keep it that, calm, collected – GET OUT! – natural.

“Oh, darn. It seems I underestimated the destruction wrought. My, my, what a mess!” A sort of sidle to the right. “I am in sore need of further supplies.” A stilted shuffle to the door. “I will, therefore, go and purchase them.”

A bar stool.

Jack casually de-barricading the front door. Convincing Keanuesque performance there, Jack, if that wasn’t a clue to what – don’t turn your back!

A couple of remotes. A kitchen timer.

Jack casually, determinedly de-barricading the exit. Why did I build it so fucking, keep people out, but they were already –

A wok, a floor lamp, Delta Queen snow globe, paddlewheel spinning.

Jack casually, determinedly, pointedly de-barricading the way out. Watching me, watching all this time, watching right now, any second, any moment, it could and I’d never know, I’d never see –

Torn books ripped boxes chair back DVD sottoman scratched table.

Get out, get out –

Shoved so hard, so fast, it toppled end over end, message board table landing on the teak rubble pile in cartoon corpse position.

Get –

What little cling the door hinges had left in them capitulated when confronted by the berserker opening yank, toppling inward, a wood on wood frenzied exclamation point to –

- OUT!

And he was – Fuck, yes! - but escape was far from complete, for the hallway presented two choices: this way or that, left or right, elevator or stairs.

Elevator.

To the left.

Straight down, to the lobby, to the street, away, the elevator will take, elevator, a small box, small space, a small, boxy space that they could stop and I’d be trapped, no way out, easy shot to –

To the right, then.
Stairs, run, faster, all the way down, run down the stairwell, the stairwell that's lighted and open, in
the open, no place to hide, from the landing up here, easy shot to –

Back to the left.

Elevator, come on, come on, behind me, could be right, doors fucking, right behind –

DING!

Oh, god.

The doors barely opened before the bum rush, Jack collapsing in the far corner.

Safe. Safe. Alone in the elevator, no way someone can, unless –

A look up. Ceiling trap door.

“Shit.”

Lobby button attacked.

Down, down to the lobby, to the lobby, out to the street, then - where?

Proof that there is such a thing as a stupid question.

“Ennis, you were right, shouldn't have, alone, and now there's -” Jack out of the elevator, out of the
building, phone out of the pocket, out of patience with voice mail,” - someone, up there, while I was,
shower, they were, someone in the -” Leaving the building, leaving the apartment, leaving his coat in
the apartment felt immediately, the rain slashes horizontally cutting through cashmere – “Fuck!”

Leaving the apartment without anything, save for his fear and what thigh gouged as he paced the
sidewalk – around the old couple - between the emo kids - right by the wasted suits - a wide fucking
berth of that stroller - a pathetically drenched, manically agitated, constantly moving target. Someone
could still, in the open, no cover, from any window, from the door, they could, anyone out here, oh,
god, any, all of these people could be – to resolve even to a halfway decent solution would require
either inspiration or a miracle. Do it now, tell him, tell him about, may be my only chance if -”Listen,
Ennis, need to talk to you, about what happened, what I did, Wellfleet, the house. Why, and I
should've told, should've trusted, soon, now, before, if any – oh, Christ, thank you!”

The later arrived first, the door opened before the psychic yellow revelation gutter splashed to a stop.

“And I'm dumping my paranoia when you're – never mind. Sorry. Don't move, should be to you in
thirty. And don't worry, coming to you, via Herman.” Door closed, fear left curbside. “Worship you,
Constable. Oh, and on a Lemony Snicket note, I’ve got the fucking -”

“Well, hey there, Jack! Long time no – what’s, Jack, what’s wrong, you’re shaking like damn leaf!”

“Wouldn’t fucking believe me, Herman.” Phone squeegeed into his jeans pocket as the wading pool
on the front floor board that Jack built filled up nicely. Don’t want to fucking believe me.

“Try me.”

Hand swiped away lingering rain – He was up there, watching me, always watching me, in my
apartment, my trashed apartment, apartment trashed by the one who wanted what’s in my pocket,
by the someone who shot me, by the one who wanted me dead, by the one who I shot, the one who is
now dead and it’s all over, there’s no fucking way he was up there, there’s no one left to be
watching, there’s no one left to - fuck - and behind, a sardonic smile. “Because of a goddamn basketball.

“Never took you for a hoops fan, Jack.”

Without the manic properties of terror zinging, keeping him wired and wound tight, the passenger seat held only a slouching, slumping lump of soggy cashmere and chagrin. Over reacted, jumped at fucking shadows, didn’t think, couldn’t think, and now I’m running away, running from, a paranoid nancy boy just running - will I ever get beyond this, will I ever feel truly safe again? “Only for the sweaty men.”

“Don’t say any more, Jack, please don’t ruin the game for me.”

“Gladly keeping them all for myself, Herman.”

“So, where to, as if I didn’t know.”

No point in reneging now, the message was inbox sitting. No delicate way to beg pardons for the intrusion on Herman’s time, and there was certainly nothing left upstairs that a walk through the rain again warranted. “That’s right, Brooklyn, eighty-first precinct.” Familiarity and stale warmth bred content, eyes shuttering even before Herman traffic merged. To the end of this nightmare - “To Ennis.”
“A name, just give me a name.”

“Don’t touch that!”

“It’s not printing.”

“Sit down, Sammy.”

“But, I gotta take a piss.”

“Want my phone call!”

“Forgetting to recycle is not a crime, ma’am.”

“Why isn’t it printing?”

“B & E at bakery on Mission.”

A mess. A mass of mess. A huddling, teaming, stinking, shouting, perpetual motion mass of mess. More succinctly – the Eighty-First’s detective squad room was insane busy.

And then the lights went out, power cut, technology dead, emergency back-ups etching stark outlines of right and wrong alike, the twilight tableau immobile the length of a long suffering sigh…

“Yes, ma’am, I agree climate change is a serious issue.”

“So much for printing.”

“Want my fucking phone call!”

“This one, transfer to Rikers.”

“Let’s go, Sammy, if you need to -”

“Not no more.”

“Well, shit.”

More succinctly – SOS down at the Eight-One.
God! It’s good to be back!

Jack had had difficulty grasping the why of going back. “Immediately?” he had asked, presiding over the Mid-December wind whipped trunk packing of Aunt Peg’s basket, “I don’t understand.” And he didn’t, not when a single phone call, emphasizing two bullet wounds, had handled Legal Aid for another week. “We’ve got a late arrival, the Waldorf and unchristened Astroglide waiting for us.” “And they will still be there, Jack,” with a lid slam the final Wellfleet duty done, Ennis had been anxious to depart, to give the finger to this place, to start knocking down those rowed ducks, “you know, after.” “But, Ennis…” Resistance even of the single minded variety had proved futile against the charms of a Jack car leaning long line, Ennis pausing in hurried departure preparations to match bodies from the bottom up, placing pleasure pressure points precisely, then, upon achieving the seamlessness desired, kissing the petulant pout on top. “Ignoring it won’t make the problem disappear.” The only things of Jack’s that had were hands inside of coats intent on warmer and sweeter spots. “But…” Correct phrase turning, to be sure. “…mon ami…” The not tonight precinct visiting persuasion had attempted through a hovering wet, whisper, “…the king size bed…” the lip nibble and soothe, “…strawberry scented…” and the tongue suck while mouths still sealed with simultaneous hand heel stroke down on - “No, Jack,” failed, resolve for once standing firmer than other Jack inspired things, Ennis actually stepping away. “Wait. You’re saying no to the Waldorf? To economy sized? To me?” Jack Twist, incredulity’s poster gay. “Thought comic relief was my schtick.” Ennis hadn’t been joking, though. “Not a fucking joke. I’m going to the precinct,” he had said, not just walking away from, but towards an end putting and a life together start. “I’m going. Sooner I get this over with the better.”

So, here he stood.

Doing nothing.

 Barely recalled badges and vague faces of other department necessary fill-ins milling about – six. Brooklyn’s scum – fifteen. His people, the people he had rushed here to see, the ones he had left Jack alone for - zero. The Captain was holiday schmoozing with the Mayor, Don, a so far no show, Aguirre hadn’t been seen or heard from since yesterday, and Bernard…well, his absence not surprising.

Wasn’t expecting much. But, this?

He had walked in here unbowed and unbidden, more than ready for the case closed, for the blame to be Righteously pinned, the remorse over the against his oath what's, but none for his heart whys explained. Re-gaining position and rank, the restoration of his fought fucking hard for reputation, for Jack, his daughters, to be worthy of their trust and love, for the courage to face mirror's image unashamed, to deserve honestly his father's name, that was here and now insistence’s motivation. He had come to the precinct tonight to be that man again. And the whole scenario of his responsible return, of the shocked surprise and thwarted smug satisfaction rewind, replayed and relished on the drive over. Ennis had been gagging for re-justified pride, and to beat the Don relayed vulture squad room skulking parasites to the bad cop in custody thrill. And his reception?

“Hey! I’m walking here!” Not the tweaked out frat boy convinced the spiders in his boxers were trying to communicate, but the ICP t-shirt that had him handcuffed. “Do youse mind?”

Useless now.

“Oh, sorry.”

“Park it somewheres, why doncha’, Sir. Out of the way, safe, ya’ know, while youse wait for the Captain.”
Sir. He called me sir.

“Here, I guess.” The closest empty desk indicated with a touch of octogenarian wave of the hand. 

_Fucking useless and ancient._

“Whatever.” A shrug. “He’s not using it.”

Not his desk, though. No, that was currently occupied by the leather wrist straps, metal head shirt, saggy ass jeans and eyeliner wearing Det. Lowery – _Vice recruiting from the junior colleges now?_ - who had convinced frat boy and his spiders to sit and be cuffed to the battered chair with a foot on the chest. Just a desk, a crappy piece of institutional furniture that had screechy drawers, two handles missing, and wobbled without the thrice folded over matchbook shoved under the front right leg. The number of times it had almost splatted on the pavement out front rivaled only by the dents, dings and divots pock marking its gone to primer when greed was good surface. And he understood – _fucking hate it, but I really do_ – with crime stopping for no man’s suspension, the luxury of staked out personal places the first to go.

But, that’s still MY desk he’s sitting at. Detective Lowery. Detective Hedd Lowery. What the fuck kind of name is Hedd? He’s got one, that’s for sure. As Jack would say, a five-head and BJ handles sticking out on the – Jack. _Jack._ Just had to go, had to go to the apartment. Our fucking trashed - salvage me, he said. What the fuck does that mean? Salvage me. What’s to salvage? Sure, he’s confused, hurting, scared, scarred, but he was fucked up before, and I, not possible to love him anymore than – god! Fucking miss – what time – eight thirteen. Wonder what he’s –

A phone dig out, a jacket pocket burrow for the last of the untraceable cells, as another crises came in - a domestic hostage situation with kids, guns and smack – one more filled set of handcuffs headed downstairs to central booking, as Det. Lowery stomped on ‘spiders’ to calm shrieking frat boy enough to get at least a first name.

A quick one, that’s all, to check his progress, to see how he’s holding up, to see what he wants for – just fucking admit it already. I want to hear his voice. Got used to hearing him, all that time spent together, living with him, being with him, doing - don’t want to be talking, though, when, Don will be here, or Cap, or the IAB asswipes, somebody better fucking show up soon or I’ll – well, damn.

I missed call – Your sex toy.

Somewhere between Wellfleet and talking to Junior and Franny to give them the all clear, the phone’s address book had obviously been programmed.

_In my pocket the whole, how did I – fuck. The Tunnel dead zone. When I was passing through, that’s probably when he –_

New voice mail.

_Good._ Appropriate sequence pushed, and Ennis waited for his mailbox to pick up. _Left me a message instead of calling me back, so can’t be too important, can’t be too, unless something happened, how could anything happen, unless something DID happen and he couldn’t call me back, and I wasn’t there for him and –_

BEEP! “Fuck, Ennis, you’re never going to believe what… … … I’m holding in my hand right now. While highly prized, and eminently sought after, it’s reserved for only you. Call me. Je vous aime.”

If any spare attention was to be had in the squad room, it would have raised an eyebrow towards the man sitting at the desk over in the corner, his wonky smile sending up red flags that questionable
amiss was happening over there by the mug books. Attention was covered up, however, scrambling to stay only three steps behind, so the grin was allowed to go unchecked, evil larcivious burning hot enough to re-warm the five hours old coffee pot sludge.

Highly prized...only for me...in his hand. SHIT! He’s spanking it, fucking spanking it while he was… oh, god, Jack’s dick, hard and red, wet and slipping in...out of his –

“Fuck.”

Vicarious slippage, the phone tumbled from vividly imagining fingers, a bounce off a greatly encouraged lap to the floor, landing by feet second guessing their part played in the walk away.

“You say something to me, Sergeant?”

“No, no. I’m -” listening to my partner fuck his hand “- fine.” The retrieving bend over proudly executed without a grunt. “Just making a few calls.”

“Whatever.” Det. Lowery’s shrug returned to shaking the crashed down hard frat boy awake.

Call him back, not doing anything but sitting here, go to the bathroom, have time to do that, go to the bathroom, then call, and Jack can tell me again exactly what his dick was – damn.

Incoming call – Your Other Less Fabulous Partner

“Del Mar.” If the answer was less than enthusiastic, Ennis came by it naturally.

“Where are you?”

“Where do you think?”

“Not the, no, you didn’t – shit! I told you to call me first!”

“Doesn’t matter, I’m here now.”

“Christ, Ennis, you were supposed to wait – who’s there, Cap, union rep? Did you talk to anyone yet, tell me you didn’t talk to IAB.”

“No, no talking. Just a lot of sitting and -” For Ennis’ benefit only, a pleasant, yet insistent beep announced an incoming call. Shit, fucking hate when – shit! “Listen, Don, got another call, so I need to -”

“Continue sitting and not talking, Ennis, until I get there.”

“And how soon will that be?” Come on, come on, fucking come on!

“Got stuck in Manhattan, uh, Christmas shopping, and now I’m stuck in traffic, so twenty minutes at best.”

How do you fucking answer another call on this - “If something happens before then, I’ll -”

“No! You don’t do shit! No talking until I get there!”

Agree, just fucking agree, so he’ll - “OK, no talking, got it.”

“I’m serious about this, Ennis. Want to help you, but I can’t do that if I’m not there to help you. So, wait, wait for me.”
Unless I’m in the bathroom listening to Jack and his dick, but can’t do that until this conversa – No more pleasant and insistent beep. Fuck. “Just get your ass here.”

“As soon as I can.”

“Good.”

That call finally ended, but still too late for the other.

1 missed call – Your Sex Toy.

That’s two, two in a row. Probably pissed that I – shit.

New voice mail.

As he connected to his mailbox again, Ennis wasn’t sure exactly which trepidation he should hide behind – ripping him a new one scathing sarcasm, or torturing him vivid detail. Or both. In all cases, a turn around to the dingy wall a solid preemptive move.

BEEP! “You and me at the Waldorf. You, me and those large windows at the Waldorf. Those thick drapes at the Waldorf, the heavy corded drapes, and the incredible view of Manhattan at the Waldorf. Me tied spread eagle against the freezing cold glass while all of New York City enjoys you fuck – oh, that’s right, you don’t do phone sex. Sorry to bother. Call me. Please.”

Bathroom only a pipe dream now, euphemistically speaking. No fucking way I’m walking across the room with – my luck, now’s when they’ll show up, now when I’m and it’s – need to calm down, need to relax, need to think about something else, something else besides –

The perfect buzzkill arrived with a phone call.

Incoming call – Your Ball Squeezer.

Shit.

“Hello, Alma.”

“So, this is your new number? How come redial had to tell me?”

“Sorry. Just got busy with -”

“Yes, I know just what you’re busy with, Ennis.”

Culpability throughout, perhaps, for the life upheaval shabbiness he had tossed her way swallowed sour – OK, I own it, my selfishness, my fault. But, not like she didn’t, and hasn’t since – ah, fuck it. Life’s just too damn short - yet perspective a poignant souvenir of Wellfleet. Sure, a royal pain in the – but, also wife, mother, human being. No matter our history, she deserved better. If so, then new leaf turning by design should follow, the mistakes of the past learning curve steep, yet lasting. So tired of arguing, the same shit again and again, fighting and bitching like a winner will be crowned. Won’t change anything, can’t, don’t, won’t go back to the way things were. So fucking tired. Or was it just the exhaustion of the last no sleep thirty-two dulling his appetite, the taste of oft traveled confrontation pointless ash. For my daughters, for her, for ME, must be different from now on. Pick any rationale, or choose none, nevertheless, the bait cast out remained untouched.

“Youse guys on the way back yet?”

“Uh…” adrift for a moment without accustomed rancor’s lead to follow, “no, I mean, yes. Soon.
We’ll be back in the city soon. Maybe in about an hour.”

“Good, good. Know the girls will be happy to be home.” The squee when the good news had been delivered sorely tested the phone’s tiny speaker and tiny speaker’s listening ear.

“Only we’re not going home, not to that apartment, at least.”

“What does that mean, Alma?”

“I can’t, after all that’s, after what’s happened, after what you…can’t go back…there.” Voice tremored with the unspoken, yet the message was crystalline. “Too many memories…I just can’t.”

“I know.” With his stuff, he had packed up the only ones worth keeping – pillow fights and cheese toast, movie nights and new clothes, homework, first date, snowmen, birthday cake, chicken ‘pops’, toothy fairy, footy pajamas, Halloween candy, Monopoly and Candyland, cross the street hand in hand, some dreams, even more wishes, a few fears, and every last one of the goodnight kisses. What remained, discarded chaff, his those years memory box reverently placed right next to the new one just beginning. *Time for her to do the same.* “I know. So where…?”

“Long Island.”

“Bill’s, I assume.”

“He offered, I accepted.” Surface bristle only. “And the girls seem happy there.”

“And you, Alma?” No future hinging on the answer, of course, but it would definitely be brighter with no lurking spurned skeletons behind that particular closed door. “Are you?”

“Yes, I’m happy.” Slight, but genuine, the smile in her voice.

*Thank you.* “You always did want a house.”

“A house, with a pool, and a sun room, and a huge walk-in closet, and -” her mood sewn with a 50/50 happy/gloat blend fabric. “- and a two car garage, and a club membership, and –”

“Sounds like you’ve got everything now.” *Me, too. I’ve got Jack.*

“Yes, so it would seem. Uh, Ennis.” A pause, the weighty sound of indecision. “Uh, well, I, that is - oh, crap, told myself I wouldn’t ever ask this, but for peace of mind I just must know. Was it me, is that why you, did I do some - or were you always – oh, you’re awake.”

A mumble, a male mumble in the background, and Ennis had yet another reason to thank Bill. *Stopped her from going where she probably didn’t, not really, want to.* “Alma, I need to get back to -”

“What you’re busy with, I know.” A lingering death for old habits apparently. “One more thing. You got something to write on?”

“Something to write – why?”

“Our new address. The girls made me promise. They have some crazy idea about spending next weekend with you and…you.”

“Oh, right, just, give me a -” Now, at his desk, the reach could have been executed without even a glance or thought, both write on and with always in the just to the right of the phone same spot. Working with unfamiliar territory, however, and in the semi-darkness, the search became a
searching, digging, drawer pulling gamble. Got to be something I can - want to see my daughters, sure, but - OK, pen, now scrap paper - next weekend, too soon, probably still at the – how the hell does he find anything on this –

“Ennis…”

“Just a second.” One day, though, that would - Saturday, yeah, spend the day, lunch, movie - maybe even apartment hunting, that is if my ass isn’t in – finally! A folded over, innocuous stapled wad yanked from the back of the drawer. “OK, go ahead.”

“Twenty-two, forty-seven…Van Cott Avenue…Farmingdale. You got that?”

The address, yes. The traded up attitude, not so much. “Yeah, got it. Thanks.”

“Good. Coming into traffic, so I’ve got to go. If you don’t change phone numbers again, the girls will no doubt be calling you soon.”

“Tell them we’re looking forward to it.” Emphasis his. “Roads are slick, what with the rain, so be careful driving on the…”

“No worries. Bill’s here. Goodbye, Ennis.” A farewell that finally contained a dash of closure.

She’s finally accepting - I hope. Junior and Franny on Saturday – I’ll see. Jack’s hand no doubt job over by - fucking missed, so that leaves me with –

Seven minutes spent engrossed in helping what once was come to grips with what will be – fun phone time with Alma - while the what’s now had continued unabated crazy. More noise, more movement – a subway accident near the Meat Packing district screaming for any available helping hands - more bodies even since he had last watched from his superfluous side seat, just not the noisy, moving bodies he waited for.

 Fucking ridiculous, if everyone was so goddamn anxious to get to me, then why the hell aren’t they - ten minutes, that’s all, not waiting here any longer, ten, and then I’m out of here and back to Manhattan, and the Waldorf’s big windows, and Don and Stoutamire and those IAB fuckers can damn well call and make an appointment, and maybe, MAYBE, I’ll see if I can squeeze them in, find a free moment to clear my…OK, fifteen, tops.

So, besides being a sullen, irritated, impatiently waiting – and slightly sexually frustrated - extraneous figure in the squad room’s corner, what could occupy while the imposed deadline ticked down?

Can find something else to copy the new address on, something not this, something – huh.

Added to the superfluous sullenly irritated impatience – a peeved curious confusion.

Ran it a month ago, just about the time I moved in with – no, that was Thanksgiving, like I’d ever forget that night – actually I do forget most of what came after the disastrous dinner, fight in the front of the in-laws, storming out, O’Malley’s, shooters, and that’s all, oh, and Jack, of course, always remember after’s after – so before we hit the radar, before Alma called Maureen, before I left and came out, he ran Jack’s info.

OK, why?

Not outside his authority, public records of a public servant. Not SOP, though, neither investigating nor arresting officer of any of the perps/clients. Not current or recent past or ever. Yet here it was, Jack’s case load, five months’ worth hidden in Aguirre’s desk.
Five months is back to September – no, August. That’s when we first met over Newsome’s arr – bingo!

Surreptitious snooping produced results, from the very back of the bottom left desk drawer, and aided by a teeth held pocket Maglite, under take-out menus, stack of past due collection notices, and weeks old losing OTB tickets – a manila folder.

OK, what am I looking…

Reports, case notes, records, for Adrian Lockhart and LD Newsome, all of his own words staring back from the pile.

Again, why? Why hide official documents when they’re saved on the department’s –

His own words highlighted and underlined, handwritten comments chicken-scratching up the margins – condom placed, idiot, distraction worked, what was he thinking, wrong, suspect AWOL, comb/Mr. Kwon, a big, red GOTCHA! shamming from the top.

So, he thinks, that fucker thinks, I – bullshit! By the book, did everything exactly, the investigation was conducted – OK, Newsome’s probably innocent, know that now, but we had the DNA match, the used condom to the hair that Don convinced me was obtained legit –

“Uh, Sergeant…sir?”

“What?” The lopsided lunge across desktop to cover up his less than marginally kosher activities hopefully passed off as casual disinterest, the head in hand lean the imitation cherry on top. “I’m only, you know, only -”

“Sure, yeah, whatever.” Det. Lowery’s shrug continued by with a TP roll for the now blubbering frat boy. “Your phone’s ringing.”

“Oh, oh, thanks, yeah, thanks.” Lightheaded relief snatched the buzzing, sleeve in its haste knocking folder files askew, effort too late, though, to be answered.

Missed Call – Your Sex Toy

New voice mail.

Going to fucking kill me.

Reluctance to access voicemail yet again, listen to his manner of execution for the heinous crime of missing three Jack calls in a row was offered a helpful procrastinating hand first by confusion, then concern, and by the end of folder’s revelations, crazy fear.

Citizen’s report from SoHo, and now it’s Jesse Whitfield’s file. Not his case, not even his precinct, why the hell would he have – Lockhart, Newsome and Whitfield. Murder, rape and theft. Jack worked on two, but not the other, just like me. So, what was he hoping to – why these particular, where’s their connect –

Fuck.

Hunnie. And the charm with the chip.

But, he wasn’t in the loop, not anywhere near, didn’t really work on, how the fuck did he even know to put them altoget -
His epiphany one of Zeus’ best throws.

*It’s him. Not Bernard. God fucking dammit, it’s HIM!*

The breadth and scope of their operation – extortion, racketeering, international smuggling even, goods from a combatant nation across US borders – to remain unnoticed, undetected for so long, essential for payroll to list someone to run interference, someone uniquely qualified and positioned to put out fires, pass along memos, a director of information flow, willing to grease or halt both palm and poking in nose, the NYPD badge a powerful incentive for cooperation.

*The world’s third oldest profession – a cop on the take.*

And it wasn’t until greed or revenge or Jeff Lockhart’s dick that the unraveling began, the bodies washed ashore in the ensuing bloodlust acceptable collateral damage to the man who had vowed to protect and serve.

*And I didn’t see it.*

The second guessing marathon may now commence.

*I’m a good cop, intuitive, instinctive, notice the subtle, detect the pattern. Yet, every day, right here, three desks away, all that time spent in this room, all the man hours logged on the cases, not once, not a single spark or red flag, Newsome, Lockhart, on ANY case, pointed Aguirre’s way. Not so good after all.*

*Should have seen it, seen right through him. No one can be that complacent, that incompetent, that much of a dickhead, and remain on Cap’s team. Though he was stupid enough to leave an incriminating paper trail.*

Yeah, a paper trail found by rifling without permission, or suspicion, buried beneath and at the very bottom back of his police department property desk drawer, a file of official documents that he had the authority, if not an official purpose, to possess, their connecting thread only immediately apparent to the one sitting and waiting to be charged with dereliction of duty, obstruction of an ongoing investigation, tampering with evidence and ethical misconduct.

*Not so stupid after all.*

*Should have seen it, but I didn’t. Too busy doing my fucking job…too busy fucking over my career…too busy fucking – gotta listen to Jack’s voicemail – should have seen it, but didn’t. OK, admit it, didn’t because I didn’t want to, as little attention thrown that way as possible, the very sight of him could set me off sometimes, even the few times I rode with the fucktard gave him less than a half-assed thought. But, I wasn’t working those cases alone, not the only one he ticked off on a daily basis. If I didn’t notice what was going on, neither did anyone else.*

*Watch out, rationalization’s coming up lightning fast on the outside, threatening to overtake.*

*What, was I supposed to be the squad room nanny, charged with making sure everybody washed hands after taking a piss? Eat your veggies, file your paperwork, and engaging in criminal activity, that’s a time out! Not my job, goddammit, not my responsibility. Stoutamire’s, Captain Stoutamire’s, that’s why they pay him the big bucks. Instead of handing out marriage counselors he should have been paying closer attention to his team. Not my job, hell, not even my partner. No, that was Bernard’s torture – and it finally all makes sense. Bernard did see, confronted and –* 

The murder of a fellow officer, especially to cover up, to silence, Ennis guilty of wishing the opportunity to do the same thing.
Got lucky, though, in the partner department, couldn’t ask for a better man, a better friend. Always have each other’s backs, each other’s lives. Aren’t I waiting here so my partner can try to pull my nuts out of the fire? If he turned traitor – like that would ever happen – yes, I’d know! Mutual respect, genuine care, that’s our relationship on and off the street, absolute trust, except that one time where I didn’t, actually believed he, then accused him of –

With so many others to vilify over past judgment mistakes, at this pressing moment those of a more personal nature need not complicate matters.

Well…anyway, somebody should have noticed something! So obvious it’s all Aguirre, all the time, all over this. God, it’s so fucking clear! He worked the grocery store fire, and no doubt falsified the report Don told me about, lied about the crispies’ IDs. Must have been keeping tabs on my investigation, on Jack’s legal process, making sure we never got too close, reporting back to – who? Kwon, Hunnie, maybe, since it was his death that was – wonder who that body really was, thinking homeless, nobody out there missing him, dead before the fire, poor bastard – but, where’s that connection, dirty cop and punk ass sociopath, shiftless, jobless, mooching off his father, no money, and I’m willing to bet that money was involved, there’s always money, Aguirre’s no stop gambling, racking up tremendous de – goddamn.

As if the top layers weren’t incriminating enough for the court of Ennis Del Mar, what lay underneath pronounced sentence, slammed the bars tight and threw away the key.

My address, Jack’s address, Bill’s address. Brooklyn, Chelsea, Long Island. Bungalow in Wellfleet and Catskills cabin, he has them all. Schedules, timelines, maps marked, daily lives logged. All of us, for weeks. Phone numbers and emails and –

Grainy, composition crappy, off set and some poorly lit, but what came next twisted stomach sick, the images unmistakable.

Jack leaving a courthouse, me entering the apartment building, Alma and girls walking into Bill’s – shit! Even Daniel’s loft!

Beyond, waaaaaay beyond tab keeping on a fellow officer. This was following, stalking, insinuating, invading.

My daughters, Jack, knew where, knew when, he -

“Where’s Del Mar?”

Time’s a capricious little thing, isn’t it? Generous to a fault when there had been nothing to do, waiting and worrying, dismissed and disappeared. But, just when the newly discovered truth begs for a few scant seconds to process and digest the horror and rage, it Scrooges, snapping up short, Time delivering to Ennis the most inopportune Not now, dammit! moment ever.

“He’s over there,” Det. Lowery’s opinion snarl showed, “and what a treat, a visit from a scum sucking minion.”

“Believe me,” Lt. Jensen and his career destroying, and relishing in it, smile oozed their way to the back of the room, “this is the best part of the job.”

Tactically speaking, perhaps choosing to cool heels at the desk in the farthest away from the door corner not the smartest of decisions. Shit! IAB asswipe’s here, and Don’s not. Told me to wait, not talk, to anybody, just wait, wait for him. What the hell do I do now? Of course, thanks to that decision a hasty and a no comment until back-up arrives escape not the only option for the
forthcoming confrontation with Internal Affairs. *But, that was before I rifled through his desk.*

Room’s riveted attention and instantaneous hush parted rapt for the officious strut. “I am so going to enjoy this, you know.”

*And I’m going to fucking orgasm when I cut you off at the –*

“Ennis Del Mar, you need to come with -”

“Not so fast, dickhead. Not me you want.” Secret malfeasance dropped in front with the flourish. “There’s your dirty cop.”

“Grasping at straws, Del Mar?”

“No, just doing your job for you. It’s all in there, what you need to nail Aguirre to the wall.”

“If this is some kind of pathetic attempt to -”

“Just read it, for fuck’s sake!”

Jenson did have the decency to at least look in the folder, titled to the emergency lights, a half-hearted bordering on patronizing decency, yet he did thumb through a few pages. “Scribbled up division reports and shitty pictures. Supposed to impress me, this evidence of yours?”

“What, are you blind, we can bury the asswipe under all this -”

*Fuck! All this evidence that in no way proves to the unfamiliar, and dimwitted, of his culpability in relation to any of the Staten Island Ferry charm committed crimes. Unless I can produce something, here, now, to convince dickhead, I’m so fucked, no investigating from an interrogation room. “Hold on, just a sec, there’s more,” pillage and plunder of the other drawers commenced – Don’s still not here, goddammit, need to play for time, stall, STALL! - “right in here, just give me a second.” Need a direct link, the smoking gun would be nice, unequivocal evidence that won’t be chewed up by a goddamn defense law - Jack!*

Desk drawer treasure hunt went on a momentary hiatus so Ennis could snatch up his phone.

“Calling your mommy for help, Del Mar?”

*Never listened to his – Aguirre’s been watching, and Jack’s in Manhattan, in a trashed apartment, all alone, he could be -*

BEEP! “Ennis, you were right, shouldn’t have, alone, and now there’s – someone, while I was, shower, they were, in the – FUCK!”

Head down, hands busy digging, cheek and shoulder fumbled, nearly dropping the phone, when Jack’s fear sliced through.

“Listen, need to talk to you, about what happened, what I did, Wellfleet, the house, why - and I should've told, should've trusted, soon, talk, now, before I, if any – Oh, Christ, thank you! And I'm dumping my paranoia when you're – never mind. Sorry.”

“Don’t mind me,” Jensen twirled his at the ready handcuffs instead of an absent railroad track tying villain moustache, “getting a kick out of your desperation.”

*Got to be, got to be, just has to be something – fingernails screech scraped along the metal – fuck, fuck, fu – wait. Stuck in the crevice between side and bottom, Ennis yanked out his very last hope to*
be heard, to clear his good name, to avoid arrest today. What he prayed would be the crucial exonerating piece presented. “Here!” Whatever the hell it was.

“That’s your big wow? A two-year old newspaper clipping?”

“Don’t move, should be to you in thirty. And don’t worry coming to you via -”

In all fairness, it was a New York Post clipping, laminated for posterity, and one that had been shown around the squad room with annoying persistence for weeks after publishing. A nice little write-up about a club, a group of friends who shared a common obsession, the accompanying picture with a Saratoga race track backdrop, a trio of smiling gamblers in Yankees caps.

_A bad cop, a dead Korean grocer, and –_

“- Herman.”

“Quit wasting my time, Del Mar.”

_Herman. In this picture. Jack’s Herman, in this picture. Goddamn! Fucking crazy coincidence, huh, Aguirre and Kwon and Herman._

“Enough stalling. You’re coming with me.”

“Can’t, gotta wait for my partner.” _I knew I recognized him, on that fucking horrible day in the hospital, knew it! “And union rep.”_

“Think they can find IAB by themselves.”

“No, not leaving until -” _Wait – what? Missed that last part there, final sentence he didn’t quite catch, must have misheard over all the background noise. Lemony Snickett and …? Jack’s voice mail message replayed for more detail attentive ears._

“Del Mar…”

_Someone shower…yeah…talk…trusted…OK…_

“Oh, Del Mar…”

“Just a minute.” _Thirty and coming and Herman and –_

“No, not a minute,” Jensen didn’t wear his anger well, face all red blotchy and bugged eyed, “NOW!”

_And here’s the part I miss –_

“I’ve got the fucking ch-”

Brain stuttered, tripping and stumbling all over, the multiple choice of letter combinations possible to complete the consonant, Jack’s inchoate last word, tumbling ass over end, reality to surreal, to land him square on the one that current context and the nightmare thought conquered proclaimed as well, duh, obvious.

_The – the – Jack has – the – the chip?_

“Everybody sees this, right?” Jensen to the other law enforcement officers in the emergency lights only squad room - “How I gave him every opportunity to cooperate and he refused? Youse guys are
my witnesses.” - none of which seemed inclined to give testimony much less piss on the Internal Affairs rep, though a few did have lighters at the ready.

Jack has the chip – how – WHY – the chip he could’ve died for, the chip that so many others did, the chip that Hunnie – that Kwon – that Aguirre – that clipping with them and –

The Mount Olympus Commander-in-Chief was on a roll tonight.

Oh, god, no.

“I gotta go.”

“Finally!” The snatch grab onto a bat out of hell exiting Ennis twisting around for a creepy close face-to-face. “Don’t think for a second this little stunt of yours will be -”

“No, got to -” In that clipping, picture, Kwon, Hunnie’s father, complicit in framing Newsome, Whitfield battery. Enabled Jeff’s crimes? Ordered Lockhart’s murder? The china shop and convenience store? Now dead, toast, just like Bernard whose partner was – “Let go – let me -”

Jensen didn’t, of course, much to his amusement. “Just digging your grave deeper, Del Mar.”

“Don’t understand, I -” Aguirre and that file, Aguirre who’s been stalking, Aguirre who fucking hates me, Aguirre who has disappeared, Aguirre in the picture standing right beside – “need to go, Jack, MY Jack’s in trouble, he -”

A unique sense of compassion kept right on ‘escorting.’ “He ever heard of Nine-One-One?”

“Please listen, just –” Herman, good, old Herman, never off duty, out of all the drivers in New York, he’s the only one that’s perpetually available, always there since…when, Central Park, before that… fucking creepy, right time, right place at the exact right moment Jack – “I’ll come back, promise, just let me -”

Desks and chairs and people, no problem, with his Ennis battering ram, Jensen even whistled while he worked. “Coming through, out of the way, dirty cop walking here!”

“But, Jack is with – and he has the - he might be – could be -” Like HE’S always been watch – “don’t know how much time -”

“Considering the circumstances, your actions, why I’m here, can say with the utmost sincerity, this Jack of yours,” in door’s proscenium, Jenson summed up his truth, “I don’t give a good goddamn -”

In retrospect, professionally speaking, a regrettable remark.

“Get the fuck off -” Fist flew fast gathering steam in the wide arc swing – “ME!” Intended target faster still, damage missing Jensen’s jaw to further tarnish an already edge teetering career.

“That’s it!” The one arm Ennis hold became the two behind Ennis back, clamped there by patience long past running on empty. “Thanks, you just made my day.” Handcuffs jingled, ready and overjoyed to get to the slapping on part. “Ennis Del Mar, you are under -”

“MOMMY!”

One second triumphant, the very next covered up with stink snotty frat boy intent on returning to that beloved maternal embrace.

“What – what the -”
“Hold me, Mommy”

The “Get off me!” mantra on the other cop now.

“Oh, Christ!” Det. Lowery quick to action, running to retrieve his runaway.

“I’ll have – your badge -” idle or not, the threat hissed out through clenched teeth, Jensen in a fight of keep kisses away. “-for this!”

“Only looked away for a – stop, Justin, stop, not your -”

“Mommy, take me home!”

The wrangling, restraining and containing, while messy and loud, not to mention a bit of perfect physical comedy when a stray flaying elbow knocked Jensen’s breath away, there wasn’t anything to see really there, nothing that unusual or noteworthy – though the fracas and the particular participants were dinging the bell on the departmental gossip scale – just routine, regular, run of the mill Bed Stuy mayhem.

“Sorry ‘bout that, Lieutenant,” escapee at his feet once more unmoving and unconscious, Det. Lowery cautiously free to give out apologies, “Whew, some night, huh?”

A single handkerchief insufficient to scrub off frat boy slobber and Jensen’s fury. “A night that will be your last! A full report on the incompetence of this entire precinct when I get back to -”

Uh oh.

“Where is he?”

The wide-eyed blink of innocence. “Where is who?”

“Right here when -” not in the squad room, “before that thing -” Hallway empty.

Uh oh.

“Did you lose something, Lieutenant?”

Cap feather, bragging rights, that anticipatory accommodation medal, the one he had worn down wife and kids talking about, the one already with a prominent place reserved on uniform blue, the one a three paycheck wager with the whole IAB office rode on when he alone stomped out corruption by nailing to the wall -

“DEL MAR!”

Swishclick.

Ennis in the stairwell alone.

"Fuck you, Jensen." And for that bogus diversion and cheeky wink, a silent thank you to Det. Five Head.

Four flights, four flights to conquer, down four flights of half-assed glowing emergency lights and then across the garage to the Mustang, Mustang to Broadway to Williamsburg Bridge and into Manhattan to find Jack, get to Jack, Jack!, thoughts already searching for a Chelsea parking spot while body was still rushing to leave square one.
Jack’s with Herman, Herman and Kwon, and why didn’t I recognize HIM? Remember the cabbie, but not the material witness, that Don handled mostly, only spoke with him once, in Newsome’s room - no excuse, should have remembered, the clipping, ’cause THAT’S my job, Good cop? Bullshit! Forgot Kwon, dismissed Herman’s suspicious behavior, for months sat in the same office with Aguirre, Aguirre and his file, with pictures, and schedules, and addresses, bungalow, Catskills cabin, Bill’s house on -

Phone came out on the third floor switchback.

“Hello?”

“Alma, youse can’t go to Bill’s house tonight.” Knew cabin, knows about Long Island, Jack, Jack, Jack -

"What's, what's, oh god, Ennis, what's wrong now?"

Can't tell, she'll freak, panic, bad. "Nothing, nothing's wrong." Except Jack's in trouble, Jack's in danger, Jack - "What makes you think -"

"Your voice, I know, it's and you're -"

Hurtling down the steps times two - my fault, my fault, my - miscalculating the turn to second stairs, full body wall slam - Shit! – right back to running, singular focus never noticing the pain, only the precious Get to Jack seconds lost.

"I'm fine," Not fine, not fucking fine, Jack - "everything's fine." Too much, been through too much already. "Quit worrying."

"Then why can't we go to Bill's?"

"I was thinking," Jack, where's Jack, Jack, safe, safe, where will my children be safe, my Jack - "it would be - better if youse -"

"Oh, my god! Don't believe this! You're still trying to -"

Run faster, and even faster - fucking faster - pumping legs, pounding Doc Martin's, gravity's due diligence all insufficient, the bottom unachieved, Mustang unreached, destination still too far away - now, should be there now - Jack's hand unclasped leaving his so bereft working the railing instead, drawing, dragging, terror demanding action for hauteur's mistake.

My fault, fault and I don't need bitch either. "Listen, Alma, I -"

"No, you listen, Ennis! No more, those decisions, not yours, not since you -"

"The Waldorf." Didn't tell him, Aguirre doesn't know, used sheriff's phone to make the reservation. 

"- walked out on - what did you say?"

"Go to – to - the Waldorf instead."

"Seriously? Why would you -"

Take the last set of twelve in three, refuse to heed lungs' burn, disregard stress stretched scraggy body's protest - can't stop, can't slow down, Jack, Jack, Jack needs - AHHHHHHH! - swallow the shriek when taped only ankle did so first upon landing, burst out and through to a garage of cold and shadows - just keep moving, keep walking, keep going, got to keep going - attention forwards,
forward to Jack, when clueless where to, planless what to, weaponless how to - my fault, my fault, my - limped forward to cherry red impotency parked in visitors - fault.

"Al - ready got a - room, my - name," but it's ours, ours, for us, for Jack, Jack -

"So you're just giving us the Waldorf? Why?"

"To make up for - for, you - know, last week's cluster – cluster - fuck." Still choose Jack.

"And you think a fancy hotel will do that?"

"Order room – service – movies - massage, anything you - want, our treat. Just stay - there," stay there safe, while I -

"Are you sure everything's fine, 'cause you really don't sound fine, in fact, you sound terrible."

"Just - busy, that's - running to - " Jack, Jack, to my - "Do this, Alma, for - me?"

"The truth, Ennis. Are we still in danger?"

“No.” No, I don't know, don't know what, know what I'm, if Jack is - "No, you're not. Now, will you go?"

"Oh, alright. Girls, we're going to the Waldorf courtesy of your father!"

"Good." Good, they're safe, my girls safe, but, Jack, is Jack -

"And while we're raiding the mini-bar, you'll be -"

Ending the conversation without a goodbye, pocket digging for keys, ankle shredding insane rush down to an Igor shuffle, as one thumb pressed for car door entry while the other queued up his Favorite Sex Toy, Ennis praying for miracles from a denied existence deity.

Not too late, not too late, call Jack, warn him, get him out of that cab, get him away from –

“Lousy fucking timing.”

“JACK!” Oh, god, Jack, it's Jack, he's OK, he's -

“Where are you?"

“At the -" not where I want to be, need to be, with you, with my - “precinct. You still in the -”

“Come get me.”

Concern as much as ankle agony screeched insane rush down to a schlepping Igor shuffle. Something’s off, doesn’t sound, wrong, something’s – “Jack, is there something -”

“Can’t stay here.”

Whisper, and he’s whispering, why is he – “Why are you -”

“Going to turn around.”

“What’re you -”

“Just get your ass here!”
Not good, this is not - “Well, where are you?”

“Weeds...and a puddle.”

Weeds and a – he’s outside, got out of the cab, Yes! Got away from – “Care to be more specific?”

“The High Line.”

Out of a cab headed to Brooklyn and he ended up on the High – “What the hell are you doing...”

“Meat Packing, I think, not sure, not really – shit!” Squishy sounds, splashing frantic and futile, “Find me, Ennis, please, hurry, find me, now, NOW!”

“Goddammit, quit fucking around and tell me what’s -”

“Tell the Sarge I said hello.”

That’s – that’s – “Jack!”

“Here, here! You want it? Take it! See, here it is, this is me giving you the -”

“Don’t bother, Jack, easier to just get it myself after you’re dead.”

“No!” What – what – what the fuck is happen –

“Now, tell the Sarge goodbye.”

“Ennis, you -”

“NO! NO!”

“- made me – you gave me – you are - simpathico here Napoleon, and some Joan, sans God, the English and smoke inhalation – raison d’etre. So what if our time together was so brief, it was brilliant, fantastic and when we – well, so gauche to fuck and tell, but let me just say my d’etre a VERY appreciative Powerball winner. Won’t say don’t grief, want you to be devastated, I’ll be if you’re not, will be distraught if some monument, nothing too ostentatious, a little marble here, an eternal flame there, daily viewings from ten to two, a memorial to what could have been, what should have lasted at least until Medicare kicked it if -”

“Jesus Christ! ENOUGH!”

“Don’t!” But, one bridge, two boroughs, and more than a New York traffic hour away – not this way, not him, not – wretched pleas for pity shrieked into a cell phone concrete echoed impotent. “PLEASE!”

“Shut you up once and for – wha – wha - FUCK!”

PFFFFFFFFFTTTTTTT!

“JA -”

The first punch stopped him.

The second punch staggered.

The third stunned.
And he never saw any of them coming.
“Uh…Herman?”

“Yes, Jack?”

“At this juncture, would a simple inquiry be an imposition?”

“Of course not. Ask away.”

“An errand of yours need running first?”

“Nope.”

“Requested destination slipped your mind?”

“That’s two questions, but it’s also a no.”

“Experiencing a lapse of directional memory, perhaps?”

“Memory’s just fine, thanks.”

“Then please excuse this breach of fare deferring to driver’s territorial knowledge and route discretion courtesy, but where the fuck are you going?!”

A silenced nine millimeter automatic fielded that one.

“Jesus Christ! Herman! That’s a rather ham-fisted tip guaranteeing tactic, don’t you -”

“Jack, goddammit, just SHUT UP! God! That felt so - been wanting to say that for the last - talk! That’s all you fucking do, talk! Christ! No more questions, no more fucking talk. Now, Jack, I’m going to drive while you just sit there, quiet, and enjoy the ride.”

The quiet part, no problem. The loaded weapon armpit shoved sufficiently persuasive to keep silence golden. It was the ride enjoying command that Jack was having a wee bit of trouble with.

Got to be fucking kidding! My New York initiation now? NOW? Lived here almost four years and it happens NOW? Escaped the basketball to get mugged NOW? By a cab driver, by Herman, NOW? Now after all this time, now after all the rides, now with no cash in my wallet, only my ATM card, and direct deposit won’t hit until Friday, and the utilities were sucked out last week, and Verizon, and MetLife, there’s my AmEx Blue, can give him that, and the Chase card, that’s in my wallet, not much room left on either, but maybe if I throw in my Starbuck’s card with the – fuck that shit, not giving up free Pumpkin Spice Frappacino, not after the week I’ve had, the week from hell, the week
from hell’s skid row, the week from hell’s skid row piss reeking back alley glory hole amateur porn –
oh, god, he’s not going to the Bronx, is he?

South on 24th, the cab crept, bumper to bumper and mirror to mirror, wipers metronoming inner
city’s slam dance.

Fuck, FUCK, FUCK! Can’t just sit here, like a putz, like a pussy, cowed into silence, dripping on
the floor mat, must do something, can’t allow this to just happen, happen to me, not again, no more
damsel in distress, it’s time to do, take steps, embody proactiveness, grab destiny’s balls and how
exactly will this self-actualization miracle come to pass? Fuck if I know. In a cab, a moving cab,
with a slencer along for the ride – which I just know will bruise – what would Ennis do? What
would Jason Bourne do? Shit. I know what the fuck they’d both do.

Smile and nod, smile and wave, smile and finger flip, perfectly normal, yawningly typical, the
quintessential New York cabbie Herman hummed monotones, eyes never leaving the road, gun
never leaving Jack.

Been ages, I know, since circumstances warranted its use, so a memory dredge might be
necessary…let’s see…the exact words, if I recall, go something like – get out, GET OUT, GET
OUT! Only one way, when he stops at the light, get out, just grab the handle, only one way, fast and
dirty, get out, tuck and roll, only one way, land on my good shoulder at least, only one way, will hurt
like a motherfucker, GET OUT, had enough, only one way, no more helpless victim, only one – I do
NOT talk too – way out of here…N –

Click.

Fuck.

All doors locked. “No, Jack, you’re going with me.”

And a parking deck, that’s where he was going, a parking deck on the edge of the Meat Packing
district, a crummy, crumbling, crippled Meat Packing district parking deck, Herman one-handed
weaving the cab through the dragon’s tail turns towards the bottom level.

“What an incredible view you’ve discovered, Herman, one of New York’s finest.”

“Ten minutes, Jack. Kept your mouth shut for ten whole minutes.” The choices were plentiful this
time of night, if all a bit oil slicked trash strewn, Herman’s back in the far corner spot, headlights
switched off, engine idling. “Must have fucking killed you.”

Bad turn of the phrase.

“Wha - what? Herman, listen, just listen to me, will you listen to me?” One hand did the panicked
gesticulating of two. “We’re both reasonable adults, aren’t we? Of course we are! I know I am,
reasonable -”

“Jack…”

“- love reasonable, reasonable to a fault, fucking MADE of reasonable, and you, well, besides the
kidnapping, and the threatening, and the choice of locale -”

“Shut up, Jack.”

“- which I’m willing, and if you’ll notice, this is where the reasonable kicks in, to set aside,
completely overlook, flat out ignore in favor of a little cool conversation, a deliberate debate, a
judicious discourse weighing -"

“JACK!”

The attorney’s last, and best, defense. “Can’t we fucking talk about this?”

“Christ! No more words!”

“ What about some numbers, then? Huh? Like ten to fifteen, as in incarceration years for armed robbery, unless you can work a plea bargain, citing first offense or diminished capacity, and the calendar is heavy, and you get a dim bulb ADA, both a distinct possibility, but tack on murder two on a weapons felony and you’re looking at no less than twenty-five, though I’d counter with manslaughter, stressing mens rea would be impossible to prove without exculpatory evidence of the crime’s original intent, but, since the actus rea in question will put this savvy representation six feet under, expect to be decorating a nine by twelve upstate cell with an aluminum toilet and an extremely attentive cellmate, all for what’s in my checking account, a measly three hundred and sixteen – what’s so fucking funny?"

“ You think – think I -” Herman was having a difficult time breathing, which would explain the red face and teary eyes. “ - wanted to - mug you?”

“ Then what? What? What the fuck is happening here?”

“Criminy, Jack! Calm down!”

“Jack, gun and calm, all mutually exclusive.”

“Just wanted to show you something, that’s all.”

“ Wanted to - to show – me - ” Maybe it was his energy sapping lack of sleep, or the uncomfortable rain blamed state of sweater and jeans inviting the squatter cold to bone sit a spell, or even the spiking pain of twisting a non-medicated wounded shoulder against the seat belt, a full on body tense held in place by imminent death’s potentiality and a stained stretched strip of stitched cloth. Perhaps even the adrenaline rush over shower induced revelations and narrow apartment disaster escape evaporating under detour from desired destination. Of course, if could also be the waiting for a little gunpoint invited parking deck dungeon venued show and tell that finally produced the stumble, bumble, tumble, brain going splat, frontal lobe first into a gooey monosyllabic schemer. “… thing… huh?”

“Show you something, why I brought you here.”

“ Here…me…you…gun…HUH?”

“ Got something I really want you to see.”

Focus, that’s what was called for now, recommended, advantageous, a bottom line essential wit gathering that would snap Jack to tack sharp, all faculties online, fiber optic speed sarcasm, to process quickly and react according to one piece staying protocol. And he tried, really hard, understanding the imperative nature of the reboot, a blink here, a jaw clench, a fist ball, even a head shake to clear the nonplussed and fucking crazy away, staring intently at the under the driver’s seat reach. Seems, though, that frontal lobe was instead misdirected to danse the macabre.

*Something…something he wants…something he wants me…under, under his seat…something best viewed in a…something that requires a gun to…the Watchtower…pics of the grandkids…a unique
opportunity to become a Monavie – rope, heavy rope, and duct tape, to bind me, gag me, render me
un – a plastic bag, over the head in an instant, held there while I gasp for – brick, poison, Colonel
Mustard in the billiard room with the candlestick – he’s reaching, he’s dragging out…up a – knife,
one of those with the serrated edge, the blade flesh shreding as it slices deep – he’s got – maim and
torture and – Ennis! – until I’m shrieking for –

“A Macbook?”

“Yup.” The super thin Pro settled in Herman’s lap, opening with a delicate tone, wallpaper boo-
yahing Semper Fi.

“You – me – for a – a -”

“No, Jack.” Tick Tick Tick Tick Tick Tick Tick Tick Tick Gun unoccupied left-handed fingers
scattered across the compact keyboard. Tick Tick Tick Tick Tick Tick Tick Tick Tick “Brought you
down here to see -” Tick Tick Tick Tick Tick Tick Tick OS X equations gobbled-gooked across the
17 inch screen. Tick Tick Tick Tick Tick Tick Tick “ – just what the Staten island Ferry can do.”
Enter.

Oh…god…no.

Brooklyn still unreachable, now Jack sat soggy in a cab with vital organs puree a finger’s flick away
at the bottom of a gang decorated, middle schooler rock deal established, crashing hard ice tweak
vomit splattered, ‘But, I’m straight, really!’ Connecticut Hummer driving ten dollar blow job shithole
tasting location’s anonymity, back-flashing a little to those, by a current circumstances and present
company comparison, tranquil and idyllic days when Jello-O was aplenty and every care was
attended to by the gentle hands of angels in scrubs, back to a confessional conversation, back to the
last time he had heard New York’s most famous boat name dropped in a non-commuter context.

“You – YOU – have -” Just as the fog had begun to dissipate, lucid horizon peeking through, it
happened again, the frontal lobe smack down, second drop hard enough to turn off the internal
monologue, this time by the attempt to diagram his always watching sentence with a before
reputation and life staked unconscionable addendum. “You – have – Herman – YOU – a -”

“Four, actually.”

“Four? Four? YOU have -”

“And the one you got makes -”

“Don’t have it!” No processing required, however disingenuous, that accusation’s response still on
autopilot. “And you obviously don’t need it to…to…”

“Using a single chip tonight, and it’s got limited range, limited snarfing capacity.” Black, ominous
and impenetrable, swallowed the cab whole. “I just knocked out Twentieth to the Battery for you.”

“Gee, you shouldn’t have.” No surprise there, what was the first to recover.

“But, the original idea, the way the kids designed it, well, imagine everything in all five boroughs
shut down like that!” The snap was jump inducing. “No power, nothing.”

“Big fucking deal, happens every July. We sweat, shout obscenities, shoot at our neighbors to fill the
down time.”

“Just think about it, though, all those people stuck, in the elevators, on the bridges, places overhead,
stranded underground. Dark, cramped, no circulating air. What’re they going to do?”

“IDK, LOL, text their BFFs?”

“Nope, communications out, too.”

Now, that was an attention grabber, frontal lobe shoving aside acerbity for a better view. “That’s, that’s not what I was – ConEd and NYTEl, cellular networks, disparate, unrelated systems.”

“Aperature, the chip, its program, that’s what they called it, god knows why, some inside nerdy joke, I guess. Anyway. If computer controlled, scheduled, monitored or managed, they’re mine. See?” Herman graciously tilted the screen to share the interactive map with Jack. “Told you, everything’s out, right down to - crap.” Tick Tick Tick Tick Tick Tick Tick “Oh, well, landlines and cells still hot. Supposed to work together, all five, backups, better coverage, no holes. Just too much, too many networks for one to handle, I guess. Now, if I had your -”

Apparently heard the name dropping, for inside Jack’s pocket, the chip burned for recognition. “I do not have the fucking – what’s that?”

A squint check to where Jack was map pointing. “Well, you should know.”

“It’s -” For once, the borough’s status, on the monitor at least, equaled Lower Manhattan. “It’s - you said the fucking thing had limited range, here, Battery, that’s it.”

“I did, and one chip does.”

“Then how is -”

“Four, remember? And my business associate did say something about a promise to fulfill.”

“Business associate? Thought they were all - you’ve got more of them, too?”

“No man is an island, Jack.”

“But, who…?”

“Let’s just say he ensured complete police cooperation.”

“Police…Brooklyn…” Infer pinged imply, both bookmarked conclusion, then dread, fear and borrowed suspicion phished them all, the whole team bitch pharming brain back on line, with all programs restored.

ENNIS! Didn’t answer, didn’t return, at the precinct, one cop up in flames, what if he’s in -

Distress turned to calm, uncertainty to resolve, personal safety abdicated priority status, and heart’s schemed up two-pronged plan was a go. First – Keep Herman busy, and second – Keep my cell from Herman.

“Try as I might -” Interest, show interest, lean in, lean ov – Unhook seat belt – ver... “- and trust me, talking about some intensive head wrapping here -” Feign the fuck out of interest... “- after attending this conscripted premiere, I’m apparently missing a key element of this something.”...to cover the reach back...

“Yeah, what’s that?”

“A point.” Intense monitor stare, ease close the enthral, body for the block as it slips out... “Why
“Always thought of you as a Big Picture person. Disappointed, Jack, truly.”

“Sorry, but even this self avowed size queen’s not seeing it.” And neither is he, thanks to the dark, the shadows, using the shadows, befriending the shadows, frenching the shadows so hard and deep they’ll expect morning after breakfast in bed… “You flipped Manhattan’s light switch. At the risk of fucking obvious stating, so can a mischievous squirrel when rodent devices sit unattended.” …up and…

“Alright, Jack, can a squirrel do this?” Tick Tick

Oh, shi – FREEZE! Deck lights, such as they were, returned to not really illuminating. “Snap on.”

“And this?” Tick Tick

Back to black. “Snap off.” And we’re moving again…out…and…“Brilliant. An Apple clapper.” …hold it away, aim it down, towards the floor, mask the display, and push gently… “Is that what your ‘business associate’ s doing, playing disco with the power grid?” …gently swipe it open…passcode…icon second on the left bottom…

“Nope, fifteen minutes solid, looks like, off since eight-thirty-nine.”

“Before Manhattan?” Should remember how, by touch only, did it in court all the time, under the table, in my lap…yr ADA dik my PD mouf 3rd fl%r jon n 10… yeah, time to expand thumb’s vocab… “Before you?” …but what…what do I …sending this to Ennis, so KISS…keep it simple, sexy… “Dare I say thunder stealing?” …chp + hrmn = PFFFFT!

Prior situational experience should have proven a boon here, affording valuable practical first-hand knowledge, thus governing appropriate and level-headed actions.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHH!”

Guess not.

“FUCK!” Bullet straight down, right through and out between LL Bean treads. “FUCK! What - you – FUCK!”

“This.” Automatic titled in hand, Herman retrieved the floorboard abandoned in favor of pain clutching cell phone, tossing it out the opened cab window, Ennis saving message skittering across the concrete to oblivion unsent. “No texting the boyfriend.”

“Fuck, Herman, FUCK!” An interesting juxtaposition, agony flashing brutal along nerves’ highway against the tickle, the sensual slide, a thick syrup caress bubbling hot through fingers. “Why’d you – FUCK!”

“Had to get your attention somehow.”

“My attention? My attention?” Boot on, boot off, look, don’t look, death grip, tourniquet search, fuck, or for a change, goddamn, so many decisions, too few options, last breath’s ultra uber important lost amid pain’s confusing noise. “The throat clear, the shoulder tap, the bright and shiny object wave. Those are attention grabbers. You fucking SHOT MY -” A second parking deck epiphany appearance, equally cold, harsh, unforgiving. “Oh, god, you… it was you… Central Park.”
“I was the one that took your bleeding ass to the hospital, remember? Not me, that was Kwon’s kid.” He shoved aside Jack’s hunch over, opening the glove box, digging right in. “Wasn’t necessary, I told him, had you contained just fine. But, no, had to send a message, he said, all about sending messages, that one, the sadistic bas – here.”

“What…”

“For your foot, tie it off, stop the bleeding. Oh, and there should be some wet naps in there, too. You know, for your bloody hands.”

“Uh…” Now, this was an awkward situation. Society’s rigid rules dictated some response to show appreciation to the man offering you aid. But, what if said man caused the aid requiring in the first place? And same said man had kidnapped, threatened, terrorized, and generally and acutely bullocksed up your evening plans regardless how impromptu and pathetic? Get Bent seemed inadequate, Go to Hell milquetoasty, and fuck yourself with the splintered end of a jalapeno lubed Louisville Slugger, while sparkingly witty and imminently gratifying, could be interrupted by the same same said man still holding the implement that had started this manners conundrum spinning as a less than cordial repudiation of his hospitality. Although the urge to swing away mighty tempting, and the platform that royally pissed off personal integrity stood firm upon, perhaps best to err on the side of no more bullet wounds. “…thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.”

_Now he tells me._

Herman’s glove box gift - one of those old lady handbag staples, convenience store end cap dust collector, most would rather get drenched than be seen publicly wearing, four yards mechanically folded down to baseball card size and shoved into a cheap even for the discount bin plastic sleeve that, once contents into the wild released, would cease all returning to its primordial properties. That was to serve as emergency triage to Jack’s most recent GSW.

_A rain poncho. Irony is such a fucking bitch._

Tick Tick Tick Tick Tick Tick

Not cheap ass plastic after all, though Coleman reminiscent and a color nature summarily refused to certify as viable olive drab, the tacky fabric tacky unveiled more like flimsy beach umbrella, stiff and smooth and reeking like New Jersey water.

_Oh, joy. Wound care by Dupont._

Tick Tick Tick Tick Tick Tick Tick

Wasn’t the poncho that started the grumble, though. Wasn’t the fumbling, drop, muffled curse and try again, managing only to smear it with slick blood blunder wrapping foot hands in a dark shrouded cab, or that he was still sat in a dark shrouded increasingly claustrophobic cab at the mercurial mercies of its pod person driver. Neither was it the causational foolhardy when hindsight examined actions themselves, current predicament pointing the finger right back, nor usurpation of rescue plans when pain receptors attacked, sending already staggering from the shoulder into the troposphere. Not the number of elbow and door handle meetings, the shrink drying properties of denim, or even the panicked moment of perceived paralysis - Ferragmos, the occasional squash game and fifty bucks naked Ennis lap dances believed forever lost - that turned out to be only blood soaked floorboard suckage, when foot refused to move. While certainly all sufficient indeed to provide inexhaustible material on which a self-knighted righteously legitimate grumble could draw boundless
inspiration for days, should the opportunity by nightmare’s conclusion still be applicable, none of the above could claim sole proprietorship on the not seen since the salad days of AD – After Daniel – days grumble, as sweat heavy expression and on fumes fumes intestinal fortitude scrunched up, breath gulped in to hold, against the unavoidable when other boot anchored ready for the tight knot tug.

One…two…

The current grumble blaring inside, a sold out, over capacity chagrinpalooza.

...oh, god, I miss Kisha!...three!

“FUCK!”

“You OK there, Jack?”

“All things considered -” Foot throbbing at accepted tempo, and exsanguination temporarily bottlenecked, it was clean-up time, the small square package opened with a well practiced on other certain small squares teeth rip, drippy paper accordianing out to instantly inundate the dark with the tangy, fake lemony, disinfectanty scent of memories. Pool, summer vacations, Dreamsicles melting faster than I could lick…KFC supplied shower for a perpetually broke Law student…janitor’s closet, mops, toilet paper, the unlocked door, making love up against the – oh, Ennis, I tried, I did, tried my best. But, Ass Bandit’s out of his depth, can’t, just don’t do hero, I’m not, not you. Ennis, please, please, be safe, where ever you are, Ennis, please, be alive! “ - should have taken my chances with the basketball.”

“Didn’t matter, Jack. So, he didn’t snag you at the apartment. No problem. You’d’ve still ended up here, with me, next time you called for a cab.”

“Ah, yes, your preternatural availability to my schedule.” White scrubbed scarlet, bunched, balled and tossed to the blood squishy carpet. “How did you manage it, how did you know precisely when and where I -”

Tick Tick Tick Tick Tick

“All the – even when I – don’t tell me since that first time over to Brooklyn to rescue - you’ve been -”

Tick Tick Tick Tick “Oh, I’ve been a lot longer than since Thanksgiving.”

“So fucking stupid!” Though it was probably redundant given the bullet in his foot, sitting on death row predicament, “So obvious! Same cabbie, no matter when, no matter -” the self-immolation still greatly satisfying. “So – god – damn – fuck – ing -”

“Cut it out! Hurt yourself!” Herman, and strangely timed concern for his continued health, swatted the dashboard banging head to stop. “So, you didn’t catch on, BFD. You had your mind on other things, other people…other person.” Tick Tick Tick Tick Tick Tick “And then there’s your sense of entitlement and ego.”

“Bullets and insults?” And now a blinding headache. “Going to trash my taste in music next?”

Tick Tick Tick Tick Tick Tick “Nah, listen to Panic at the Disco myself.”

A shouldn’t be surprised, not after recent revelations, nonetheless a Herman known I-Pod play list still fucking creepy shiver. What else? Favorite food? Laundry detergent? What I sometimes do
when alone with the egg timer? Another wave of fucking creepy, full body from head right down to – Fuck! “Any other useful things in here?” Crimson mooned fingers explored the glove box. “Like Oxycontin?”

“Now, that would be illegal, Jack.” An own joke chuckle. Tick Tick Tick Tick Tick “Help yourself. Some Advil in there, maybe.”

An ice scraper. A tire gauge. A grungy straw. EZ-Pass. Empire State brochure. More Wet Naps. A building schematic, one particular place highlighted, for Legal Aid’s offices. I KNEW McHenry’s was bigger than – Bingo! A dusty, creased deep, stuck under Rand McNally’s version of the Eastern United States, was fifteen months expired Extra Strength Tylenol. “No beverage cart or open bar, I presume?”

“ Nope, and travel mug’s empty.” Tick Tick Tick Tick Tick Tick Tick

“Then, dry it – what are you doing?” Against further involvement, curiosity’s resistance was futile. Tick Tick Tick Tick Tick Tick Tick Tick Tick Tick “Said I brought you here to show you something.” With both hands keyboarding, weapon beside door tucked, the ticks picked up speed. “First attempt didn’t impress, so…” TickTickTickTickTickTick

“What, something else that naturally occurs in New York? Like potholes?”

“Even Apeture can’t get the DOT to actually work.”

Small package teeth rip maneuver employed yet again, the taste of old stale gas lingering. “OK, than what?”

“Everything’s stopped, right? Nothing moving?”

Two gel caps, well, one really, seeing as they were melted together, plopped into Jack’s Wet Nap flimy palm. “That’s what the monitor is telling me.”

“ Well, what if one subway train, only one, did start to move again - ” TickTickTickTickTick

What did…Pause wasn’t feasible, not mid toss, anyway, Siamese Tylenol already in flight, hit the breathe out square – but, if that happens – objections unavailable whilst choking.

“- continued on down the track towards the next station - ” TickTickTickTick

Jack tried, though, forgoing mouth cover hacking up a lung courtesy to strike out – He can’t, can’t, don’t, DON’T! - Mac grabbing good hand easily batted away.

“ - reaching normal cruising speed, the operator unable to change directions, to slow down, to stop - ” TickTickTick

Swallow, had to swallow, get the damn things unstuck, down, out of his throat, out of the way before even a rasp had sufficient space to scratch. “don’t…please…”

“ - to warn what’s dead ahead…until…” TickTick

“NO!”

Tick

The ground heaved, a rumble menacing out from its core.
“What - what have you -” The unthinkable. “Oh…my…god.”

“Yeah, probably a mess down there right now. Maybe I should reverse the pumps holding back the Hudson, you know, to help with the fires, put them -”

“MOTHERFUCKER! WHY?” Disbelief and despair clawed, enmity savaged throat raw. “WHY?!”

“To show I mean business, to show who’s in control here, to show there will be no more lying, playing games, or fucking around.” The line in the sand drawn, and it was obvious amorality was ready to step over it again at any time. “Did it, all those people, because of you, Jack, just to show you.”

“Going to - gonna be - sick.”

Three bouts of dry heaves, violent and volatile, too impatient to even wait on an opened window. Three bouts, muscles distorted, contracting, convulsing, distended and strained, the burning ache of a body betrayed, guttural, gagging, barren retches indifferently tossed between hidden concrete. A soul seeking to expunge anger, shame, hubris, the indentured culpability for the result distant sirens were answering after three bouts of dry heaves.

“You’re going to kill me.”

“Yes.”

“Whether you get the chip or not.”

“Yes.”

“That’s no incentive at all, you know.”

“You don’t have it, then your loved ones probably do.”

Head broken stemed out cab’s window, the dull air gasped in haphazard and shallow, teary snot, spitty bile, streamed and stringed together, mucky trails in beard, off chin, left to stretch and splatter to the dark. Tired…just so fucking…tired. Mind scrambled, searching for solutions, running from room to room, shouting for assistance, begging, but finding only boarded up doors. Now where to…no one…alone. Shoulder and foot reminded, hand reminisced, as weak flesh, squeezed between hard place and its inexorable crime partner, demanded a battered spirit’s acquiescence. No more…can’t do this…anymore…over…done…finished. And chip passed from pocket to pocket, Jack to Herman, victim to murderer. At least…this time…I saved Ennis.

“So…what…?”

“Supper.”

OK, if there was an annex to the outskirts of the suburbs for the expansion re-model on the far side of two area codes away from left field, that word moved there from out of town.

“You made reservations?”


crusty, a grunt return to the cab seat fish flop brought Jack that much closer to death. “Go ahead, take 
ALL the time you need. I’ll just be over here enjoying the compensatory life review.” Scene 
selection...childhood, as if...college, meh...Daniel, fuck no...August, yes...Ennis in jeans!

Herman crunched – “Like the smooth better.” - Jack coped with the pain – Another Tylenol? Does it 
matter? Too gauche to ask for an ETM? - and absurdly quietly acquiesced the cab to bizarre.

“I liked you, Jack. No, really, I did. Well, except for the talking. Dedicated lawyer, good heart. And I 
didn’t mind one bit about the gay.”

“Toasty heart cockles here, Herman, that my sexual orientation hasn’t offended my executioner.”

“No, never. Really like the Sarge, too. Probably the best thing you ever did, hooking up with him.”

“Truer words, Herman.” And I won’t even be able to say goodbye. “Truer words.”

“Yup, great taste in men you’ve got there, Jack. Wish my son did.”

Jack preferred something else - something with a lot more Naked Ennis - but as last acts go, a 
resigned giggle wasn’t bad. “Your son...is gay?”

“Yeah, Timmy’s that way. Or was. He died. Only twenty-three years old. Died in the hospital. 
Never regained consciousness. So, he felt no pain Kwon told me.”

“If you’re waiting for a ‘That’s so tragic,’” a cashmere mouth swipe, “don’t.”

“Was a good kid, loyal, strong, a real hard worker, that’s for sure.” Mouth roof sucked, teeth picked, 
plastic wrap folded away. “Just couldn’t seem to find a good man.”

“Oh? You mean like his mother?”

“Ha, ha, Jack. Always got his heart broke, going after the bad ones, the wrong ones. Like that 
Newsome puke.”

“Wait...LD?” Interrupted poncho saturation level check. “And Timmy?”

“Yeah, I never saw it, but he wanted him. Said the accent was sexy. Followed him around for 
weeks. Treated my son like dirt.” Herman’s spit hit the concrete with a juicy splat. “That six-pack 
queer. Too stupid to throw away his used condoms.”

Moot, meet academic and both mourn the loss of what could have been an intrinsically rewarding “I 
fucking told you so!” moment. Relevant uselessness and revelation’s assumed what happens in the 
cab, will no doubt stay in the cab catalyst aside, this reprieve was fortuitous indeed. Herman was 
talking – Yes, who’s the chatty one now, hmmm? –and, if he was talking, he wasn’t shooting, and 
if he wasn’t shooting, the scythe remained stalled in the upswing position. And maybe...just maybe... 
enough time for a mira –

“Hey! What the fuck, Herman!”

“Sorry.” Minute Maid OJ juice box sucked dry. “Forgot I had it.”

“Nice, real nice. Holding out on a condemned man.” A cough, pitiable and fake.

“No use wasting it, then.”

Even really nicer. I am so sending insulin coma vibes right now.
“That skinny assed Texas twink deserved every – I say something funny?”

Precarious situation or not, that could not pass for the priclessness unnoted. *Herman, and queer speak. A Queen Bee just lost his wig.* “And Jesse Whitfield? Did he deserve it? He was too stupid to duck the bat?”

“Not stupid, just angry about those bleeding heart old ladies.” Sun Chip fingers trawled pea coat for missed Sun Chip bits. “Don’t get me wrong here, what they did was bad, terribly bad, him being a veteran and all, but so was stealing from me.”

“ Stealing from you? Not Mr. Kwon, not Hunnie, nor your, uh, business associate. But, from you exclusively?”

“Damn right. My money, my property.”

“International smuggling cyber extortion domestic terrorism on a cab driver’s paycheck?”

“Market don’t care what color the money is, blue or white. Bookie's neither.”

“Would still require a tremendous amount of green, though.”

“Just got to know what and when, and have the stones to take a chance.”

“My stones too busy risking other chances.”

“Too bad, Jack. Little investment, big returns. Like what I bought yesterday, got in real cheap, some new internet thing, promises to be real big.” After twisting, Herman ate the blank side, saving the not on his strict diet Oreo icing lick for last. “Something doing with a submarine, or maybe a meerkat or - anyway, you should look into buying a few – what am I saying?”

After a good run, bizarre was overtaken by surreal. *Last seconds on this earth and I’m getting portfolio advice. And diabetic cabbie stand-up.* “So, all the others, the other victims, they were stealing from you, too?”

“A couple, or should say, they tried. Like those China guys, thinking their two percent skim wouldn’t matter. Yeah, right. About the rest?” Lives waved away with the cookie crumbs. “Let’s just call ‘em window dressing.”

“And me? My classification? Am I thief or embellishment?”

“Still looking for that point, aren’t you, Jack. The answer to the big why?”

“Don’t you fucking say forty-two.”

“What if I say nothing?”

“Come on, Herman. Greed. Revenge. Love spurned, love psychotic. Drug or dogma of choice. There’s always a motivation lurking in there somewhere.”

“Took you as more of a pragmatist, you know, considering your line of work and all. Go figure, can watch a person for weeks, twenty-four seven and still don’t really know them.” Repast consumed, a very tidy Herman took great pains to crumple up the bag nice and neat, then toss it on the floorboard. “Hate to break it to you, Jack, but sometimes in this world there ain’t one.”

Yeah, not a spiritually uplifting Final Unction. “Don’t tell me that!”
“You asked. Saw the opportunity and I took it. No fault in that. All comes down to a simple because I can. Alright, feeling more like myself again. So, where were – oh, that’s right.” Resurrected from the trench beside the door, silenced automatic angles teased, illumined by screen’s stare. “Tying up a loose end.”

No miracles today. Time, luck and hope, Jack had just run out of all three.

“Herman, look, look, you don’t, don’t - ” Too soon, too, not ready, so not fucking, talk, talk, keep him talking, engage, dialogue, query, yes, questions, ask more questions, got a fuck load of questions… “ - don’t have to do this.”

“Yes, I do. Don’t move around so – will make a damn mess if - sit still, Jack – don’t make me waste – OK, cower over there by the door, but I can still reach.”

Questions like…like…“What if I gave my word not to say -” Life as thin as the distance between temple and barrel. “I won’t tell anybody! I promise!” Pain or nothing? Instant or linger?

“You not talk? Yeah, right. You’d go to the Sarge first thing.”

“We’ll leave, then, go underground, disappear, poof, we’re gone! Never heard from again.” Was Mom right? Should I be worried?

“Exactly what I plan after your body hits the incinerator.”

Did I do good? Make a difference? “Herman, god, don’t, Herman, don’t…please!”

“Might want to close your eyes, you know, so when you’re found, no dead fish stare.”

Will Ennis remember m –

Lights.

“Shit!”

Bright spots arcing over scrunched up black.

“Shit!”

Temple cold pressure relieved.

Oh…oh…oh…oh…fuck. Breathless limp, Jack stumbled back from the firing line. Again… happened…was…gun right…but…still alive…again…unbeliva – you know, this waffling can’t be good for my blood pressure.

“Saw me, the cab, the plates. Shit!”

A peek, just the slightest of one sight slivers – rectangles of red and yellow, cab shunning on the opposite wall. Is that a… Two slivers. Goddamn. Two saucers of blue. A carbon footprinting deus ex machina.

Well, maybe miracle did have a free moment to spare.

“Schedule’s tight as it is, now I’m gonna have to dump your body someplace else.”

“May I suggest the Eighty-First Precinct?”
Reaction reflexes – scared shitless. Distance – about fifty yards. Bullet velocity to about fifty yards ratio – no fucking clue. Projected success of attempt to cross about fifty yards in what was guaranteed to be a bullet firestorm for the scared shitless hampered by fatigue, inside vehicle start position, and a foot wrapped blood soaked rain poncho – …uhm…

As miracles go, this one left much to be desired.

“Going to talk to them,” Click “to handle this.” And by handle, Herman meant peacoat tucked nine millimeter. “No shouting, horn blowing, nothing, Jack, ‘cause I swear if you – and don’t even think about trying to run.”

“What, and skip out on the party before the brain piñata?” Palm to floorboard, forced compliance displayed black. “Besides, I do anything, whoever’s over there, you’d kill them, too.”

“You’re damn right.” A door handle fumble, glance down. “For screwing things up, I just might any –”

CRACK!

Cast struck head square.

CRACK!

And again.

CRACK!

And again.

CRACK!

And again.

CRACK!

Under the chin, dazed eyes snapping back.

CRACK!

Nose smashed on the bounce back, red spraying, tiny dots all over the inside windshield.

CRACK!

Cast striking the unconscious because it could.

“MO –” CRACK! “- THER -” CRACK! “- FUCK -” CRACK! “- ER!” CRACK!

And Jack was out of the cab.

Run, run, RUN! Over there, to them, to the Hummer, get to the Hummer, call, call the police, what if they don’t have a cell, of course they have a cell, everybody has a cell, call Ennis, tell him, tell him what –

And Jack was back in the cab.

Can’t leave, not yet, not without, need this, evidence, physical evidence, prosecute, convict, fry his
ass, take it, the computer, take the fucking Mac, no more innocent peo – other one, other chip, too, MY chip, pocket, shirt pocket, just do it again, another place, another computer, another subway, must stop –

“Mnbrnblrrrnn – ack?”

**CRACK!**

Cast again, the effective silencer for re-awakening mumbles.

“ Because *I* can, Herman.”

And Jack, chip and laptop were out of the cab.

“Hey! Hey!”

*Run to the Hum – fuck!*

“I need help, some help here!”

*Walk to the Hum – fuck!*

“Help me, hey, HELP!”

*Limp to the Hum – FUCK! Fifty yards, my – shit – goddamn – too – can’t – fucking Herman – fucking foot, I can’t –*

“FUCK!”

Scuffs, crimson wet, smeared concrete, from shadows to headlights’ halo to shadows.

“ Help, help me, *please!* I need .” there…something in pathetic shuffle’s path, scratch skittering away. *What the…* Reaching for the unknown, other optionless faith was rewarded, cast as bludgeon bruised fingers seizing familiar. *No, no fucking…can’t…no fucking – “Fuck, YEAH!” Thank you, Christ, oh, god, THANK YOU! “My fucking phone!” Which still works, and don’t care what Apple says, Thank YOU, Samsung! Call Ennis, call him right now, no bother, no borrow, call him and he’ll come, he’ll come for me and –

Engine rev.

*No…no…*

Red and yellow rectangles thrown into reverse.

“**NO!”**

**SCREEEEEEEENNNNNCH!**

“**NO!”**

Jack ran. Yes, really, a full out sprint, the last remaining of that fifty and then some, laptop in right, phone in left, blood blobs dots denoting his broken shortened stride. Jack chased the Bad Samaritan Hummer across the deck, up the ramp, a cause greater than agony, foot and hand and shoulder, body protesting, even the healthy parts now, sense and caution and rational thought trumped, mind in a frenzy shrieking wail, Jack sought the impossible, to stop, to reach, to catch up before the Connecticut plates disappeared around the corner leaving him –
“Fuck.”

Blind.

“FUCK!”

Blind and alone.

“THAT’S RIGHT, NO BLOW AND GO FOR YOU, BUT I GET ROYALLY FU…oh…shit.”

Wall would have offered to help, make the landing less breath knocking at least, if the collapse could have waited. Instead it became floor’s job to give what cold, damp comfort it could muster.

Oh…good…good…Escape Plan B…a bit of a lie down…right here on the…on the…here.

Blind and –

On.

Not so blind.

Off. On. Off on on off on off on off on off.

Several feet up, left side stairwell, an emergency light battery sputtered with DMV worker enthusiasm.

On on off off off on off on off off off on. Off. On.

Ambiance. Nice touch.

Computer safe for the moment beside, shaky hand moved down to inspect the excruciating damage. Jeans soaked, up to the knee…poncho soaked, off with that…and boot…soakedest of them…ewww. Drippy squishy. With desire as sketchy anemic as the blinking, but the unavoidable accepted, Jack fetaled closer in, bringing knee up to chest, cast to tug calf near and dirty scraped cheek lifted for the look…

God, do not fucking want to see what -

Off off on off on off on on off.

Blind.

Les petites faveurs, non, and that was a bad idea.

Movement, slight and horizontal at its extreme extent, still toggled the valve closed, strength over-hazed by queasy faint, Jack recognizing the wisdom displayed by the brace of beer cans, stale stench placing them off to port, embodying their discarded stationary state.

Plan C, go back to Plan B.


Plan B, subsection one - call Ennis.

Flicked open, a minimum of concrete prostrate jostling brought valiant soldier phone into view.

Off off on off on on.
Call Ennis, and he’ll come here, where ever the fuck here is.

Off on off on off on off off on off.

Thumb knew exactly what to do, where to go to find Speed Dial #1.

Somewhere below 19th, I think. He can GPS me, and if that goddamn light doesn’t –

On.

Thank you.

Not so blind and -

“JACK!”

Not so alone either.

“Goddammit, Jack! Where are you?”

Currently, scrambling to rise, but two limbs down, there wasn’t so much up, but instead plenty of wallow.

Christ, fuck, Herman! Got to, got to, can’t be here, can’t be, he’ll, shit, he’ll, can’t move my – fuck!

“Left me a pretty obvious trail to follow, you know. Can’t have gotten very far, not with that amount of blood loss.”

Through a combination of back flopping, sideways scratching, and the one-legged crab scoot, he had gotten as far as the wall.

Get up, use the wall, the wall, get up, get up, got to, he’s, he’s -

“Pissed me off, that little stunt of yours. I mean, come on, what the hell were you thinking?”

With Herman, by voice volume, just around the corner and safe scraped raw fingertip holds at a premium, the no safety net climb of mold slithered shear concrete block mountain face, faint queasies and dead weight leg ballast determined to stay where it crumpled as anchors, Jack’s present thoughts not significantly different than before.

Now! And - now! Fucking better be - now! Shit, won’t happen, can’t do it, not fast enough, not strong - now! He’s coming, he’s right there, he’ll see, he’ll – goddammit – NOW!

Off.

Oh, wow. That really work –

“I know you’re there, Jack, can hear you moving around.”

On off off on on.

Herman at the bottom, Jack kneeling by the wall.

Off off on off on off on.

Herman at the bottom, Jack standing by the wall.
Off on on off off off on off.
Herman five steps up the ramp, Jack in the middle.
Off on off on off on.
Herman in the middle, nine millimeter aimed true, Jack five steps back.
“And this time, I won’t be so nice about it.”
Off on off off off off on.
Herman five steps closer, and Jack –
Off off off off off off. On.
Herman standing alone.
“Shit.”
If it was dark before, here behind the door was a completely accurate representation of pre-second day Creation, and it was most definitely not good.
So much for a lateral move.
“Jack! Shit, JACK!”
Fuck, run, run, climb, fucking go!
No beacon, no prize for the eyes, not even letters, four of them on edge charred misshapen melted plastic, basement level’s apathetic compatriot winking above this way to nightmare’s end. Just nothing, a whole lot of it, Jack trip stumbling through the indifferent vacuum devoid of spark, sympathy or solutions.
“Jack! Jack, come on!”
Run, go, run!
Motivation pushed rather than pulled, the reality of below more terrifying than the unknown blank he climbed toward. Didn’t know exactly where he was going, or what awaited arrival, but he knew beneath’s fate, and felt the pain of before with each step up.
Keep going, going, faster…faster, step…step…step…need distance, faster, fast –
“Jack!”
On three – or four? – even over lungs and legs’ labor a new sound bounced around the blank.
Swwwwwwssssssshhhhhclick.
“Jack.”
Blind, lost and no longer alone.
“OK, Jack, now I’m really pissed off.”
Up and railing and go faster and ignore the pain and the damn deck wasn’t this high driving in, the
sequence repeating – one more step, don’t let go, he’s right behind, goddamn foot, inside the fucking Tardis – repeating – one more, don’t let, he’s behind, damn foot, fucking Tardis - repeating – one, don’t, he’s, foot, fuck – and still nullity’s escape remained unattainable.

“How’s that foot of yours doing, Jack? Got to be killing you. Ah! Killing you! Me, too!”

One, don’t, he’s, foot, don’t quit your day job, fuck.

Couldn’t call for help –

“This is going to end badly, you know that, don’t you?”

- an obvious aberration, that square of light to his oblivion, easily followed, easily -

PFFFFFT!

- FUCK! Schooled on five – or six? – bullet lodging in the steel door an epidural slough from knob holding hand, Herman’s dark shot aimed at where the onerous step scuffles ceased.

“No body dump needed now. So, thanks, in here, you won’t be found for days.”

One, don’t, he’s, foot, running out, nine lives minus four, fuck.

Couldn’t deviate –

“Top level? That’s where you’re going? Maybe I’ll just toss you off, then.”

- passing doors he knew existed, but prohibited to try, doors leading to chances untakable.

One, don’t, he’s, foot, maybe light, maybe see me, out in the open, other people will die, fuck.

Rubicon crossed with the bottom threshold, Jack had no other choice but to continue upwards, always upwards –

“Can’t win, Jack. I will catch you.”

And always the sound of death climbing closer.

One, don’t, he’s, foot, I know that, Herman, fuck.

Foolhardy, yes. Plan D, What Happens Next, not even in the development stage. Deleterious health wise, in spades, shoulder’s torment in competition with foot’s torture, side spasm stitched in the middle. But, hopeless…

“Damn!”

One, don’t, he’s, foot, Herman can’t see shit either, fuck.

What a cheeky bastard miracle was sometimes.

“Better still have it. Dropped a bundle on...on that laptop.”

One, don’t he’s, foot, tucked inside my sling, fuck.

“Screwing up my...schedule here big time...Jack.”
One, don’t, he’s, foot, Brooklyn was on mine, fuck.

“Miss my flight…discount…tickets…no re…fund.”

One, don’t, he’s, foot, slowing down, fuck.

Miracle came equipped with a beer gut, too.

“Because of you…this…making me…the Sarge…suffer…too.”

One, don’t, he’s, foot, don’t you fucking touch him, fuck.

“He’s got…two…daughters…right?”

One, don’t, he’s, foot, oh, god, no, fuck.

“Usually don’t…like ‘em…that…young, but…”

One, don’t, he’s, foot, Junior and –

Out.

Goddamn.

Out, body slamming the heavy door, the collapsible bar bruising hip. Out from the pitch black rushing to New York night.

“Goddamn!”

Wet, body drenched from breath to gulped breath, torrents racing before the wind, fat almost ice drops stinging, caught the eyes, the ears, an open mouth drowned in cold.

“God -”

“JACK!”

“- damnit!”

Hunted, body trembled, stairwell ascent sweat skin freezing, twitched, pushed too far and now needs beyond farther still, took action, terror blundering about, skating on slicks instantly crimson, seeking a minute, a few seconds, begging for only a moment, anything that could stop time.

Shut the door, shut the fucking – bar the door, keep it, keep him…trash can and…butt can and can’t feel my fucking – and traffic cone and…McDonald’s bag and not enough, not fucking – what, what, need, what, Christ, I can hear him and should be running, coming up, should be hiding, coming up the last, shouldn’t be standing right here when he – there! Fuck, not going to ask, not going to wonder, not going to, just position it, he’s right there, stick it, fucking hard work, goddamMit, up under the handle and –

“JACK!”

Breath held terrified.

BANG!

The door bowed out, Herman attacking from within.
“Jack, goddammit, open this – Jack!”

Cans knocked about, bag jumped back, cone just giving in immediately. But, the crutch rigged door held.

“JACK!”

Breath released reassured.

OK…where do I…?

Jack’s limp turned from the door, sleet deluged re-group moment courtesy of miracle’s sense of humor, scanning his escape options. Shit. Better and fucking better. Not many as far as he could see, sodden hair swipe neither helpful nor permanent, which wasn’t but a few feet, the city still held captive by the Apple millstone tucked against his shivering.

“Fucking –” BANG! “- goddamn –” BANG! “- door!”

Over the edge…?

Seven stories straight down to become one body amongst many, subway carnage circus slashing the rain blue and red.

“ Jack! Where ever you go, I will -” BANG! BANG! ‘- you are dead!”

Back to the bottom…?

A respite from the storm, at least, the cold, heading for the exit ramp, a step re-trace to the nothing. But, altitude hadn’t change things, stairwell reasons for not taking this route still valid, and beer gut notwithstanding, any zig-zagging attempt would be specious at best.

So, that leaves only -shit. Once more unto the up.

Ascension avenue, six thin, well-traveled, ice slick gathering, unacquainted with Rustoleum’s restorative praises, three bolts shy of a firm foundation wrought iron steps, Jack running to the ladder pointing the way clinging for dear life on the outside stairwell wall as fast as his sodden, exhausted, blood crusted, frozen self could shuffle.

And if this leads to nowhere –

BANG! BANG! “Goddammit, JACK!” BANG!

- I’ll host a block party and volunteer for the neighborhood watch!

Good foot, scraped bruised knuckles raw hand – pull. Bad foot – fuck! – hand in cast attached to shoulder with re-opened wounds in sling with tucked away laptop – Yeah, right. First rung.

BANG! “JACK!”

BANG! BANG!


BANG! “JACK!” BANG! BANG!


A pause for breath catching and dripping face to be wiped on rain-logged cashmere.

*Going to make it through this, Ennis is safe. Going to make it through this, Ennis is –*

BANG! bang BANG! bang BANG! bang. Door bowed out, the door bounced back, but crutch’s hold concrete slipped with each from the inside assault. “JACK!” BANG! bang BANG! bang BANG! bang BANG!


BANG! BANG! BANG! BA –

Crutch gave way -

SLAM!

Door exploded out -

Goodraw – *fuckingPULL!* Bad – *F* – castshoulderlaptop –

“JACK!”

Stomach hit the roof, hard splat, dangling over the edge legs yanked in.

“JACK!”

*Oh my god, oh my god, oh my* – a fish fountain spit stream – *god.*

“JACK!” Splashes blundering about.

*Stay still, stay down.*

“JACK!” Door slammed the concrete, name bounce echoing in the stairwell.

*Doesn’t know, can’t see.*

“Hiding from me like a pussy!” More splashes, more frantic.

*Pussy's good, pussy's fine, ‘cause pussy's still alive.*

“Running away isn’t going to work either!” Pursuit splashing away.

*One...two...three...counting, waiting, listening...four...five...six...breathes, heartbeat, rain...seven...eight...nine...shit.* Alone. Miracle finally taking up some of the slack.
Clueless bastard, down...me, up.

Where it actually led, what awaited him on the other side of chest high, broken off, curled out, chain link guarding deck’s skyward edge, inconsequential. There wasn’t here, and since here sucked, there logically didn’t.

Don’t care, it’s out.

Gut to knees, easily handled, one-handed and swift. One... Knees to propose position, wobbly, but managed, that one hand again, catching the over tilt... out and... Propose to standing... not so much, Jack and the screech as foot scraped along the concrete rising upright at about the same speed. ...out and -

“FUUUUUUUUCCCCCCCCKKKKKK!”

A moment to breathe through the woozy nauseous pain laced head spinners threatening to send him back to knees beginning. OK... OK... nothing left to puke... and up was off and gimping to the opposite corner.

Fence... get to the fence... just get to the... soaking wet and fucking freezing and bleeding won’t stop... fence... Herman and chip and subway... get to the... attorney here, a fucking attorney, a fucking brilliant attorney, suits, I wear suits, bitching suits and ties, and smile, prevaricate and plea bargain for asshats... almost to the... this is not me, I don’t Jack Bauer, that’s Ennis... to the... Ennis's the hero, my hero, and I want, oh, god, want him so fucking... hold me, comfort me, surround me, want Ennis, need Ennis, get to Ennis, must first get to the -

Fence. From the looks of it, or what up turned looks could blink discern around the pelting rain, this was a keep out that had grown derelict over the years on duty, nails originally commissioned to hold the link barrier concrete ledge secure gone AWOL, unfriendlies breaching the defense line an obvious common occurrence.

Unsafe, unscalable, and apparently illegal. Alright, brilliant attorney... WW -

“JACK!”

China shop bull splashes smashing an unwelcome return.

- AFD? Get – fuck – OUT!

“JACK! Heard you scream! Know you’re up here!”

Which was why Jack was working on not being up here much longer.

Now, under, go under now and – won’t fit, not that small, should of South Beach’d, not enough room for –

“JACK!” Dull thumps of five rounds, shots in the dark stairwell. “Come out, you chicken shit!”

Fuck room, go under the goddamn fence to – what the... too high, the wall’s too, can’t step, can’t jump, one handed here, can’t pull –

“Other side then.” Splashes circumventing closer.

Right, pulling up... push off good foot... good hand reeeeeeeaaaaachinmnnmmng... yes, yes, grab wall, yes, yes, throw bad foot ov – fuckfuckfuckfuckfuckFUUCK... foot’s there... nothing left to
puke…just a second, just a…rest –

“Probably hiding in the corner like a - ” If so inclined, from hanging precarious position directly above, a hocked lugee would have hit Herman’s bruised bald spot. “Goddammit! JACK!”

All rested…hand, body, leg…not foot – puuuuuuullllll – uh, what, what’s, shit, caught, caught on, fucking sling, fuck, fence, on the – off, off, get off, get, get, off, getmonononono, grab it, get it, before –

Corner…end roll…other corner…slip-slide along puddle…over the edge to –

SPLAT!

Top of the line remarkably inclement weather resistant Macbook pieces littered parking deck concrete.

Oh…

And the City opened its eyes.

…no.

Halogens pop hissed back to life, office floors fluttered awake, street lights and traffic lights work resume ready, neon blaring its open all night brash hued influence. Rain drops backlit bright, primary colored advertising reflections on neatly rowed oil slicks, graffiti scarred stacked concrete, about feet the scattered black squared alphabet and, directly above, spotlighted a drowned rat missionarying the wall.

A nasty, triumphant smile. “Gotcha.”

All that, all the trouble and fear, all the climbing, running, stumbling, the pain and rain and strain, the wishes, prayers, pleas, all that just to be here once again – facing his muted nine millimeter demise

Worship you, Consta –

PFFFFFFT!

Rain pouring down, Herman looking up, one into the other, no wonder shot went wide.

“Goddammit!”

Miracle apparently hadn’t yet left the crisis.

Only three lives re – GET-FUCK-OUT!

Just a sit-up, squat-up, stand-up, with a dodgy moment or four, big arm circles compensating for gravity calling him home toe-heel wall see-sawing. Shit-shit-shit-shit – and, as crazy mad splashes raced round to ladder, computer unencumbered, Jack faced the next stay alive hurdle – riveted steel.

It’s like…like…they look like…I can do this…they’re just like…fuck, yeah, Robach Elementary’s Monkey Bar King can so do –

A testament to Union labor, built strong and surly, a crisscross pattern of girders just beyond finger’s touch, but not hope’s.

“Jack!” Third rung, by the sounds of the anger.
Playground’s weren’t so big…push off good foot so good hand can – so thick – so good hand can – slippery – so good hand had better fucking -

Crazy, incensed, irate, gasket and artery blowing mad splashes across the roof.

- or filthy – Ewwww, what is - bad foot up and ov- fuckfuckfuckfuck – foot, fuck, foot, hurts too, can’t, try again, go back, move back, retreat to - what, no, what, no, no fucking, stuck, foot won’t, can’t, stuck, stuck – looooooooong way down - shit! Robach’s MB King stuck with no Nurse Clavell and her Bactine if I -

Chain link rattle. “Jack!”

Not in the ass, not in the ass, PLEASE DON’T SHOOT ME IN THE –

Why waste ammo when your target is only an arm’s reach away, fingers clamped around an ankle, with just a tug -“HA! End – of- the- line – Jack!”

“ Get – get –” Hold, don’t let, hold, fingers, foot – FUCK MY FOOT – hold, don’t, hold, hold –“FUCK OFF!”

“ You – are – ” Jack stretched swung high above Manhattan, balls to the brutal wind as rain followed the creases of a bloodied joyous smile. “ – dead!”

Hold, hold, FOOT, hold, don’t let, hold, don’t, can’t, can’t, fingers, can’t, ohshit -

The struggle, the rain, the ice, the slip taking foot out of harm’s way.

Handbodylegnot footpuxuuuuuuulllll!

“JACK!”

Beer gut fence wedged snatched out in desperation, managing only an untied bootlace as tug-of-his life coil spring sprung Jack across, Robach’s MB still undefeated King scrambled scrabbled up steel’s side to fall flounder over the edge on –

Weeds.

Weeds and water.

Weeds, water and …

From underneath, Jack yanked – Famous Dave’s take-out box.

Always, right to my ass.

Back flop to belly flop to grinding elbows into the glass lousy gravel. Where the… An over the weeds peek. Well, fuck me, I’m –

“JACK!” This wasn’t over quite yet.

Elbows to knees to – Head rush, head rush! – wobbly standing, the rain bullying wind an equal opportunity tormentor, and it was fleeing direction decision time, The High Line offering two simple suggestions -

Right…left…run, which way…right…left…run right, run left, does it really fucking matter, right or -
“GODDAMMIT!”

Left, side where Ennis sleeps.

Not running away per se, more like a shuffle – hop – drag – schlep, Jack moving as quickly as his Lon Chaneying could carry him.

He’s there, Herman’s there, right behind, he’s coming, he’s - don’t look back, move, run, keep moving, salt pillar so unbecoming, not good, just follow the track to -

“JACK!” Herman monkey bar playing now.

…where, where am I, what’s at the end, what if there’s not, no escape, no place, Herman’s right behind and – don’t, DON’T, move, just move, keep running, follow the track, the track ahead, safe, end, Ennis is that way, going to Ennis, going to safe, going home, keep going, keep going straight – my mother’s dream come -

For all purposes’ intents dead foot caught the rail lip, Jack now going straight down.

OK, I’ll swim, OK, enough running, moving, let’s swim for a while, like to swim, better start swimming ’cause, with all this fucking rain, I’m drowning –

“JACK!”

And as one had body weed collapsed, another popped up over the ledge.

Shit, shit, shitshitshitfuckshi – can he see, he can see, can he, he can’t, no, weeds, shadows, in the shadows, can he see, don’t move, don’t move, like I could move, quiet, keep still, silent…dead.

“JACK!” The wind shredding holes in the echo. “You couldn’t have gotten too far, not with your foot.”

Please, please, please, god, please, just go the fuck awa –

“Which that means…”

PFFFFFT!

SHIT!

“You screwed up my schedule.”

PFFFFFT!

“Broke my laptop.”

PFFFFFT!

“Busted my nose.”

PFFFFFT!

“I’m wet, dirty, and goddamn tired of chasing you.”

PFFFFFT!
“And it’s way passed time for this bullshit to be over!”

Shadows, clumps, bumps, Herman was firing at clumpy bumpy shadows, methodically, systematically shooting at every potential attorney sized hiding weedy spot, and he was heading Jack’s way.


“You have something that belongs to me, Jack.”

**PFFFFFT!**

*Run – run – can’t – run – can’t – now way out – no way out – can’t -*

“My property -”

**PFFFFFT!**

*Coming – coming – closer – coming – closer – he’s –*

“- and nobody -”

**PFFFFFT!**

*Shoes – shoes – see his – next – I’m – next – he’s –*

“-steals from -”

ENNIS!

“Well, shit.”

Stop. Stand still. Three, four yards away. Sleet pelting the weeds flat, Herman and revenge quest just stood there.

What – what is he – communing with nature, taking in the night air while I lie here putting the finishing touches on the phlegmiest cast of pneumonia – why is he –

“JACK!”

What, what do I – what the fuck do I do – can’t move, can’t fight – just a hop, skip and a rhumba step away, he turns and it’s – wait, just wait, stay here, stay down and silent – won’t find me, won’t catch me, won’t – wait for a clear coast, to be alone, before any running like hell the other way, I’ll wait for him to walk – ‘cause he has to eventually…give up and go…and second now…in just a –

shoo! SHOO! Go a –

“Not yet…find…minute…” conversation, important bits erased by the subway accident chaos below, but wind did manage to snatch snippets to fling back Jack’s way. “…worry…”

He’s talking – talking – to whom? Is there someone else up – oh, god, he could, he would, if they witness anything he will – should I – I can’t – I can’t NOT warn the innocent of –

“Have you…the way…bridge…”

No, not here, no one else up here. He’s on the phone? On the PHONE? In the middle of my death pursuit, he’s on the fucking –
“Have you…no excuse…” One-sided conversation began to weaken, Herman shooing away at last. “Whatever… … … stop him!”

Is he gone? Is he…he – now, now! Moment is now – get out, out, get the fuck out, off, down, I’ll get away and Ennis and get the police and Ennis and give up the fucking chip and Ennis and the nightmare ends and some dry boxers ‘cause my ass is all kinds of chafe –

Miracle was finally –

**Incoming Call** - “and everybody says, save a horse, ride a cowboy!”

- played out.

*Oh…*

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