

## 22 No Escape

Trevor pried his eyes open. Slits of gray merged into a field of double vision. Yellow dashes on the road ahead drew into a single line. They penetrated fog drawn across their path. He blinked the blur away. He turned his head, a rolling boulder. He saw Arthur at the wheel, shoulders hunched. The man focused on the road, squinting into the distance. Diamond yellow signs revealed broken pretzel curves.

Trevor's head fell back, his eyes lolling up like a doll's. Soft white upholstery lined the roof. "Nice car," he thought. Trevor felt the car skid slightly on the wet road. He used the head rest to right himself. He glanced down. His hands were free, folded neatly in his lap. The seatbelt and shoulder harness strapped him in place. He tried to move his right arm, felt the paralysis of waking from a nightmare. Muscle would not follow thought. He was as frozen as a supermarket turkey. Trevor thought harder, cursing numb fingers. 'Move, oh zombie hand,' he commanded silently. The thumb twitched as he watched; the index curled a fraction of an inch. He closed his eyes and exerted will. He looked again, saw his right hand slide off the left. He shifted a glance to the doctor driving. The man seemed in a deep, meditative state of premeditated murder.

Trevor shut his eyes quickly, began now to pour thought into each hand. One by one, fingers moved. He flexed muscles imperceptibly. Satisfied that he could sense his skin or loosen a locked joint, he concentrated on the next part of his body. He inched his consciousness along, arms to shoulders and chin, neck to torso, hips to ankles. He wriggled

his toes in his shoes. Trevor let his eyes open to scope the driver and the road. The speedometer lingered at fifty, too fast to jump free. He pictured flying into a tree, spilling brains and blood across the rustic landscape. If he made for the door handle, Arthur would grab him and hit the power lock. He would have to wait. Somewhere a stop sign had to emerge, a red light would blink. Something. If not? If they pulled into some desolate drive; if Trevor tried to run? No chance. Doom. Trevor choked back a wave of nausea. Arthur stared ahead, in a trance.

'Why did I have to go for strong, manly guys? If I live through this,' Trevor promised himself, 'I swear I will only look at stroke victims. I'll get porn showing naked men lying paralyzed or comatose. I will date only the stricken, the halt, the blind, the vegetative.' Perhaps too late, Trevor had decided on a fetish.

As Trevor thought these things, Dr. Wax turned and stared at him for a second, then returned to the road. "Almost there, my dear," he said. Trevor's pulse sounded in his ears. "We're going to start a roaring fire. Won't that be nice? We'll lie together on the rug until you wake up. I'll give you an injection. This time you'll remain conscious, but you'll be helpless, unable to move. Then I'm going to have my way with you, doing whatever I want. Won't that be fun? First I'll torture you, very slowly and very carefully. You know, I've studied torture in depth. Trust me. I know what to do. I can give you the longest, most delicious amount of pain you've ever experienced, without actually killing you. You might of course pass out, but I have many drugs around to wake you up again. The fun could last all weekend.

"After that I will have to kill you, with regret. I've never killed anyone I cared for in the same way. I think I'll try something new. The scalpel to the throat — don't get me wrong — I like it. I'll experiment with a slower, more agonizing death that doesn't need so much cleanup. You'd think that chopping up a body, wrapping it in plastic, driving miles and miles to dump the pieces would be the worst part, but it isn't. First I have to soak a body, scrub the skin for fingerprints, traces of evidence. I lay out plastic, do the deed, slice the body up. I hardly get to admire the severed head, the body parts. I can't have decomposing flesh lying around. Some neighbor might wander down the road. That's why I like taking a few samples home from the morgue every now and then. I have time to enjoy the sculptural lines of the human form. You took that all away from me. I've never forgiven you for it, and I'm a forgiving man. I don't kill out of malice, but from love of beauty.

"You see, I don't like to kill. I have to, or I'd go to prison, and wouldn't that damage my career! With you, Trevor, I've had to break pattern. You could have been my lover, taken my mind off murder. I thought that's what you wanted." Trevor heard Arthur's voice break. "I think it's what I wanted." Small tears formed in his eyes, streaked his face.

"I think I fell in love with you the night we met. There. I—, I said it," Arthur stammered. "Deep down, I have to admit that I'm hurt that you had to throw it all away, like I didn't mean anything to you." Arthur's pitch rose in accusation. "That's the trouble with people today: no commitment. Make one mistake and they're gone, on to the next one. No one matters to each other. No one cares. It's all what they can get from you, then

they move on." He took a long right curve. "That's why you've got to end things before the relationship starts to get serious." The curve twisted left. Arthur overcompensated, swerved over the double yellow line. "That's what people like you drive me to. That's the only way. The only — who is that? God-damned townie, driving with one beam."

A single white circle burned ahead. Arthur leaned on his horn. "Get over! Get the f—"

Trevor moved.

Like a frenzied banshee, like a dervish in a tornado, Trevor spun, shrieking and flailing. He punched Arthur, kicked him in the thigh and grabbed for the wheel. Trevor strained against his safety straps. Arthur let out an oof and struggled. The car swung into the far lane. Trevor saw, behind the oncoming light, the shapes of two people on a motorcycle. Arthur, stronger, pushed Trevor away, slamming him against the side window. Trevor tasted cold glass.

Trevor came back at Arthur. He covered his face with his hands, dug fingers into his eye sockets. Arthur howled, let go of the wheel for an instant and threw Trevor off again. Trevor saw the faces of the people on the bike. They were screaming. Trevor saw them go down, braced himself for sudden impact. Arthur swerved away from the bike, then lost control of the car.

The smooth feel of the road went rough as tires rolled off the asphalt. Trevor heard the crunch of rocks as the car bottomed out on a ledge. The back wheels spun a rotation or two in loose dirt. Nose down, front wheels free and turning on air, the hood tipped down.

Trevor looked over the dash into a dry ravine illuminated, a pit of earth, scarred and rutted. The car wobbled over the abyss. Arthur's foot slipped off the break. The car lost equilibrium. Almost gracefully, the car slipped down the incline. The front bumper caught a piece of the terrain. The car pitched, rolled over. A large gray rock rose toward the windshield, smashed through the crackling safety glass. The inflating airbag hit Trevor in the face, a sack of wet cement.

Trevor heard gravel scrape the hood. Metal ripped and buckled. Time expanded. Seconds slowed as the car settled on the driver's side. Trevor hung in the air, suspended by his harness. He gaped at Dr. Wax, scanning the man for signs of life. Arthur's upper lip twitched.

"Monster, maniac, madman, murderer. Must get out." He reached for the door handle. It was stuck, useless. The lower door accorded inward. He tried the window button. The mechanism whined. The window jerked with a hiccup. Nothing. He scrunched himself up, got his right leg over the dash. He kicked at the glass with the heel of his boot. Piece by piece the window broke away. Falling shards of ice glinted in light reflected back from white birch trees beyond. "Oh, pretty trees," he thought, the drug not yet out of his bloodstream. Trevor reached toward the trees, forgetting his buckled-in position. He hit the release button. The buckle clicked, the straps swung away. Trevor fell into the body of Dr. Wax, which gave out a grunt. "Run. Get out. Save yourself, dear Trevor," Trevor said to himself.

He braced against the front seats, now vertical. Shimmying and squirreling, he managed to plant his feet on Arthur's hip and chest. The muscle and bone beneath shifted. Trevor lost balance. He grabbed the rear view mirror, put his left foot inside the steering wheel. The horn sounded, loud and shrill through the dense quiet of the night. A jagged steel edge sliced through his shirt, cut into his shoulder as he pulled himself through the windshield opening. The horn stopped, replaced by the groans of the waking doctor. Trevor fell head first. He sprawled on the dirt, rock and broken glass.

He crawled up the side of the gulch foot by foot, digging fingers into mud. He grasped clumps of weeds and grass. Protruding roots gave way as he pulled. His feet slid against the wet earth as he swam uphill. Reaching the top he touched the sand and gravel of the road edge. He hooked his elbows over the rise, pulled his weight up, and turned himself around to plant his butt on the ledge. He looked down. Arthur Wax was moving slowly inside the car, struggling to consciousness. Trevor heard the trickle of fluid, sniffed the air. "Gasoline," he said. "A manly smell." He reached into a pocket, produced his silver cigarette case and opened it. He placed a black cigarette between his split and swelling lips. He found the antique lighter he had always treasured. Trevor flipped its top wide, flicked the flint roller and lit the cigarette. He took a long drag of tobacco and gazed into the orange-tipped blue flame. "Love how this thing stays lit. So sad to part with it," he mused, and let the lighter fall into the ravine. Its steady glow descended, picked up in the flickering mica of the native rock below. Fascinated, he watched the edge of a dark pool catch, then flare.

Trevor heard a bruised and broken voice yell out "No." He saw serrated flame reach the back of the car. Trevor shielded his face. In a second the gas tank exploded, showering sparks and chunks of car. A hubcap caught the wind and spun away like a flying saucer. Black smoke billowed over the small inferno of the car. Trevor listened rapt to the shrieks and screams of the man trapped within. Within the smoke and he made out the blazing arms and charred face emerging through the windshield. The motion of the body stopped. The form disappeared in savage jets of white and yellow.

Trevor sank back, cradling his knees in his arms. Shaking, shocked and chilled, Trevor held up his hands. He warmed himself in the radiant heat. He followed the rolling smoke as it ascended toward the hard cold stars. "Bye bye," he whispered. "I'll see you in heaven, because I've watched you burn in hell." He puffed idly on his cigarette, then remembered. 'What about the people on the motorcycle?' he wondered. 'I hope I didn't kill them too.'

Aching and stiff, Trevor raised himself to his feet. He turned away from the fire and crossed the asphalt. Earthworms that had squirmed from soggy ground squished underfoot. "Yuck," Trevor exclaimed. He traced the faint line of rubber down the pavement to its edge. There a softer, greener gully gurgled with runoff. The light of the fire wavered and dimmed. He followed a trail of broken shrubs. The cycle rested casually in a bed of ferns. Beyond were two depressions in the weedy growth. Bushes groaned. Ferns sighed. Trevor clambered down this smaller bank and staggered toward them.

He saw the two, lying still, still breathing. Belle came to, staring at the sky. Trevor felt helpless. Not a man with first aid training, Trevor had never cast himself in the role of a hero. Should he comfort her? What was that they always said, never touch someone lying in pain? He approached, decided to do whatever she might ask.

He knelt next to Belle. He lifted a broken branch and peered into her face. "Hello," he said. She looked at him, not startled, but unsure. He held out a hand. "I'm Trevor." Belle moved her left arm slowly across her chest, put her hand in his.

"Belle," she croaked. "Where's Valerie?"

"I'm sorry. I can only handle one at a time here, but I heard a noise. I think your friend's alive. Can you feel everything? Is anything broken, bleeding? Can you move? Don't try, I think. By the way, do you know any first aid, lifesaving, any of that?"

"Not really. Wait a minute. I think I can feel all of my body." He saw her eyes go up to the sky as she ran a mental check. "Hurt like hell, but don't think anything's busted. I'm wet, but it's a cold wet, not like blood. Probably scraped up, bruises tomorrow, but it was a kind of slow-mo fall. Let me think. We skidded, hit the edge. Val pitched over the front of the bike. I made a jump so I wouldn't get mangled in the metal."

"Good choice there."

"Yeah."

"The car I climbed out of was crushed like a soda can. Driver burned alive."

"Thought I smelled flesh burning. Oh! Sorry. Your friend. How horrible for you., for him. I mean," Belle said.



"Don't worry about me. I'll bounce back," Trevor assured her. She looked back, bewildered, trying to read his features, getting nothing.

"I've got to find Valerie." She took a breath. "Valerie? Val!" she called.

"Yeah, what?" the voice croaked.

"Are you okay?" she yelled,

"I don't think so. Who wants to know?" they heard.

Belle turned to Trevor. "Go see about Valerie."

He got up and trod the growth down until he saw the figure reclining on an elbow. Val frowned at Trevor. "Am I dead? Is this hell? Feels like it, but I didn't expect weeds. You look awful. Who are you?"

Trevor stood upright, shocked, shook his head and took a second look. "I know you, don't I?" Trevor said. "I mean we've met, haven't we? You know, people have been looking all over for you, Mr. Val D'angelo. Am I right?"

Val brushed hair aside and peered through the dark, where the ambient light of the stars and the moon took over from the dying flare over the hill. Val blinked, looked again, face changing in slow recognition. Val sneezed. "Tr—, Trevor? Trevor Holloway? Gee I loved your monster movie show. I'm really a big fan."

"Your *are*?" Trevor perked up. "How wonderful. I caught you too as Valvolina de Mylar last Spring. Loved the dildo stuck on the power drill."

"You did? I had an inspiration. I sold the paintings I did with it, too."

"I came over to ask you if you're okay. Are you okay, Val?" Trevor kneeled down, placed a hand on his shoulder.

"I guess so. I think I fell or something. Like, my hip hurts and stuff, but I think it's okay."

"You fell off the motorcycle you were driving."

"Don't be silly. I don't know how to ride a motorcycle. Never been on one in my life."

"That could be part of the problem."

"I am lying in the dirt. It could explain a lot. Trevor, sweetheart, do you have a cigarette?"

"Yes, but I'm afraid no light."

"Too bad. By the way, do you have any information on what I'm doing here?"

"Not a clue. We could ask your friend Belle over there." Trevor gestured in her direction.

"Is that who was calling?"

"I'll leave that one alone, but yes."

Trevor hunkered down next to Val. "Now, Val. What's the last thing you remember?"

"Oh!" Val winced. "I was lying on my floor in Brooklyn. My boyfriend, I guess now my ex-boyfriend, he beat me up. I swear if I ever find him again, I'm gonna screw up his life for good. And where am I now," he looked about, "besides the fact it's a ditch?"

"On a lonely road in upstate New York. Has this sort of thing ever happened before?"

"The blackouts? I get them every once in a while. What month is this?"

"November."

"Warm for November."

"It's the heat from the burning wreckage."

"Oh. Tell me about that again."

"Not much to tell. Escaped with my life. The driver's charred beyond recognition. My only regret: no marshmallows."

"Oh, that. I've had dates, I can't tell you." Val squinted. "You know, Trevor. You have lovely eyes."

"Contacts. Tomorrow they'll be green." Trevor heard a rustling of plants. The two turned. Belle crept toward them on hands and knees. "I told you to stay still," Trevor said.

"Val?" Belle crept toward Val. She sprawled next to him, reached out to touch his cheek. "Oh, Val. You're all right."

"I guess I am," Val said, looking into Belle's eyes. "Have we met?"

"Met!" Belle was wide-eyed. "Valerie. I'm pregnant with your child."

"Who's Valerie?" Val and Trevor asked in unison.

"You are, Valerie. What's happened to you? Don't you remember? The farm? The FBI? We were escaping together on the motorcycle."

"If you say so," Val said, perturbed. "All news to me. Do you know who she is?" he asked Trevor.

He shrugged. "No idea."

Belle broke in. She was breathless, agitated. "Val. We've got to get out of here. The accident. Police will show up. You want your baby born in prison?"

"Baby? Prison? Lady," Val said. "I'll take your word that we're running from the cops, but honey, if you've got a baby, I'll wait for the blood test before I say it's from me. Then again," he looked down, "I am wearing overalls. I guess anything is possible." Belle began to cry. Trevor sniffed the air. "And you do smell familiar."

"It's your perfume," she sputtered. "I borrowed it."

"Splendour? Oh. That's why." Val bit his lower lip. "If it means anything, I already think you're a lovely person."

"Look," Trevor said, fumbling for his wallet. "If you two are okay, I think it best you get out of here. Take my card." He handed Val his card. "Come into the city. You can stay at my house on the folding couch until we work this all out." He handed him the keys. "I'll try to be back sometime after this is over. I'll get checked out and get to a commuter train as soon as I can. If you feel up to it, you could do me a favor after you fix yourself up, Val. Tell my roommate, Philip, what happened and that I'm alive and walking. I can't contact him because he's going to the Cavern Club sometime around one or two. I'll need him to come home and take care of me. I'm feeling needy at the moment. After all, I did it for him after his crack-up."

"I'll be sure to get there." Val took pocketed the keys. "Very good of you. Isn't it good of him, um, um....?"

"Belle."

"Belle, right. Belle? You're sure about that? It doesn't ring one for me."

"Well, it's not my real name exactly." Her voice broke with emotion.

"No. Of course it isn't. It wouldn't be, would it?" Trevor put in.

"Belle. I hope you don't take this the wrong way, darling, but did we consider an abortion as a possible option here?" Val examined her face for reaction.

"Val. You, you said you wanted the baby, that you wanted to be a mother." Belle sniffled.

"Of course. Can't wait to change a stinking, screaming, puking infant. I don't know about the breast feeding, though." Val looked down at his chest. Belle wailed to the sky.

"Okay, now. No more tears, sweetheart. I was only asking. We'll raise whatever it is, as long as it comes out human. After all, it's a wonderful way to say you're thinking of me, even if a card from the drugstore might have done the trick. By the way, how far along are we?"

"About eight weeks."

"This accident thing, the spill on the bike. You don't think it might make you, maybe, lose the baby?"

"I don't feel any pain," Belle croaked.

Trevor left them. He ambled over to the motorcycle lying on its side. He turned the ignition key. It started with a cough and a whine. He turned it off, grabbed it by the handle bars and stood it upright. He toed the kickstand into place. "Anyone know how to ride?" he asked.

"I'll give it a try. I was watching Valerie do it," Belle answered.

The two labored to their feet. They walked to the bike, leaning against each other timidly. Belle seated herself in front, twisted the handlebars to get the feel of the steering. Val threw his leg over the back of the ample seat. Belle kicked back the stand. "See you back in town," Trevor said to Val.

"Thanks for everything, sweetheart." Val kissed Trevor on the cheek. Belle gunned the engine. Val gave a quick look back. He shrugged. Val lurched backward, grabbed Belle's shoulders. The two rolled back on the road. Trevor watched the red tail of the bike disappear behind curtains of mist.

He walked back to survey the damage. The flames were out. He made out the black mass of the car, a swath of scarred earth and not much else. He counted to thirty. Blue and red flashes licked the tar of the road. Help had arrived. He squinted into the pulsing beams. A cop climbed out of his car, approached him in a slow swagger. "Are you all right?" he asked in a deep voice. Trevor nodded. "Was there anyone else in the car?"

Trevor paused. "Yes. There was," he said. "Arthur's dead, burned alive in the crash. I heard him screaming. It was horrible! There was nothing I could do." He brushed a tear away with a bruised hand.

"I'll get the paramedics down there, just to make sure. Who was he?" the policeman asked.

"His name was Dr. Arthur Wax, my friend, and a great humanitarian."

Belle posed uncomfortably on the couch. "Why can't we go to your apartment?"

"Honey. Joey's going to be there waiting for me."

"No he's not." Belle frowned. "I don't know how to tell you this. You killed him. He found you and you shot him. At least, Valerie did, on the farm. We hid his body."

"I did? I killed Joey?"

"Yeah."

"Good for me. Where did I get the gun?"

"You hid that in a drawer."

"Don't tell me where. What if the FBI goes digging around the farm?"

"I doubt they will. They were on a child custody case, not a murder."

"Let's hope they don't grow imaginations."

"Then, we can stay at your place?"

"Belle, sweetheart. I don't think I have it any more. Not unless Joey kept up the rent. We'll check that in the morning. Anyway, with Joey disappeared, his wife's going to start asking questions."

"Did the people on your block know him?"

"No. He just came and went. I don't talk much to my neighbors there."

"So, he's another missing person."

"Belle. I guess you're right. I don't know. Anyway. I've got to leave you and go to this club and tell the guy all about what happened."

"How are you going to know him?"

"Honey, it's like it happened last night. I went to sleep last night and woke up three months later. I guess I better go to a shrink for it. I know I do drag, but mostly I'm a quiet person. I stayed at home and waited for my man to come around. Guess I won't be renting his favorite movies and ordering the pizza no more, since you say I shot him. I don't want to be up for murder when I have no memory of killing the guy. Then again, he'd have probably done it to me if I hadn't done him. So, partly it's a good thing, but now I've got a kid coming. No offense dear, but I'm not even attracted to women sexually. I've got this crazy lesbian inside of me who shoots guns, rides motorcycles and gets women pregnant. I think I have a few issues to deal with here, like what am I going to wear? You better excuse me, girl. I have to run out to a boutique. I'm having a crisis."



## 23 Party for GMSMLA

Mark and Philip got out of the car. The Cavern Club was down by the Hudson River. The bitter winds hammered them. Hazarding a glance around, they walked arms around shoulders. "Run," Mark said and they broke, dashing down the block to the indigo neon entrance. The red velvet ropes contained no queue. "Off night, I guess," Mark said, escorting Philip up the wide steps. "Who'd come out in this cold?"

Inside they paid, checked coats, strolled maroon carpets, let their eyes adjust to the dimness. A number of doors led out of the lobby. A muscled staff member in the club's T-shirt came along. Mark accosted him. "Where is the party for the Gay Male S&M Lawyers Association?"

The man smiled. "Down those stairs." He indicated a smaller exit, which they took.

"You could get lost in here," Philip said, starting down the stairs ahead.

"What are you talking about. I bet you know every inch of the place." Mark patted his butt.

"I'm not a club kid. At least, not now." They turned down flights of stairs.

"You grow up or you die one. I used to go too, but I don't know, they seemed more fun then, like crossroads for different tribes. Do these stairs stop before we reach the earth's core?"

Philip stopped. "Now what?" he asked, and scried a door in the darkness. He grabbed the latch. "They could at least put a sign up."

"A sign? How gauche. You mean you don't know? Like, if I want anything in here, I know where to find it." Mark said in clipped fashion.

The room was vast and black. Purple and yellow beams stirred fog machine vapor. Music they had never heard before enveloped them. The beat throbbed low and boomy; the keyboards wafted in and out; an oily bass line oozed through.

Men, ordinary enough looking, strode up and down, each sporting some leather ensemble: black leather visor caps, leather black studded belts and straps, black leather vests, briefs, boots. "A lot of cows had to die to make this night so special." Mark took Philip's hand as they went toward the bar. This sign of tenderness provoked scowls from a few men. "Friendly crowd," Mark turned to the bartender and ordered drinks. They surveyed the place. Wall of wire mesh framed the room. The place was neither crowded nor empty. No one danced on the dance floor. Men milled through it. Mark gestured. A pair or two talked in the corners, paying no attention to the world around them. "These lawyers — always negotiating. 'Now, you tie me up and whip me seventeen lashes, I'll sign a contract stipulating that I will indeed spank you on three separate occasions over a fourteen month period.'"

"Stop," Philip said. "What's going on on those platforms?" He gestured toward large cubes breaking through the mulling crowd.

"Dunno. Let's go look." Mark and Philip walked around a metal screen to get a better look. Along the wall they stopped with other spectators. On a cube a man lay wrapped like a mummy in black cloth. A leather mask hid his head. "There's no one really

in there." Mark knocked on the mask. "Hello? This is your wake up call, Pharaoh Ramses." He waited. "Nothing. Build a pyramid around the guy. Let's try the next one."

On a perch a few yards along the wall, a naked man was sitting down on an orange construction cone. A group gathered to watch cheered him on in low tones. They applauded as, inch by inch, it disappeared. "That's more like it." Mark nodded approval. Another small stage presented a handsome, handcuffed, red-haired man in chain mail briefs. He hung from the hook of a steel chain pushed through a central ring attached to the leather harness he wore. Face up, back arched and legs shackled, he strained against his bonds. His body twirled idly around the pivot point. Below him a sullen blond in a three-piece, black leather suit watched. The man reached up, pushed his feet to spin him. When he slowed, the man climbed the stage, held an arm up to stop his rotation. He began to pet and stroke him, from his legs to his chest. He paused to pull his nipples. The man opened his eyes wide in enjoyment. His mouth gaped, sound covered by the music. The sound system issued a track cut in with fake erotic moans. "I wonder what the outlay is to duplicate this stuff at home," Mark said, bending to speak into Phillip's ear.

"I think hanging from the ceiling is something I'll wait on until I'm all the way healed."

"Healing? What? Come on. Be a man." Mark watched Philip roll his eyes at this. "So, where are these bastards?"

"Oh no," Philip answered, one hand to his mouth, the other pointing. Mark followed. Across the room, Pinely and Peter Herald stood on display. Herald's wrists and

ankles were cuffed. His arms and legs hugged a white stone pillar. Pinely, in a leather vest and skirt, whipped his back and thonged ass in sharp strong jerks. Herald bent and twisted his body, able to move but not free himself. As he struggled, he circled the column.

"Guess we were looking at their rehearsal video," Mark said, shouting over the rising thump of the music.

"I don't get it," Philip said. "Why would they do this here where everyone can see?"

"Code of honor? Besides, no one here knows the whole story," Mark said.

"Personally, I don't care." The music stopped. "Let 'em fuck each other in the middle of Grand Central Station," he said in a voice suddenly too loud.

Everyone turned. Philip saw James Pinely recognize him. He caught the intense hatred and desperation in his eyes. Pinely threw down his whip, jumped from the stage, pawed people out of his way. Herald tried to turn his head to see why Pinely was deserting him, but he could not. He snaked around the pillar, straining to see. A man climbed the stage with a wooden paddle, grabbed Herald at the shoulders, and proceeded to whack him repeatedly on the butt. Pinely pressed on, either not hearing or not heeding Herald's distinct yowls of pain. Pinely reached inside his vest.

"Uh-oh," Philip said. "I have a feeling we'd better get out of here."

"Yeah, okay," Mark agreed and pulled Philip to the exit. They stumbled up stairs.

Mark caught sight of Pinely, half a flight below. He produced a silenced gun, aimed quickly. The shot whizzed by Mark's ear. They heard it ricochet around the stairwell.

"Philip. Move!" he yelled, pushing him up the stairs ahead of him. They climbed, heads



down. On the next flight they saw sparks as another bullet hit the support rail. "Move!" Mark shouted. Philip pulled the handle of a door.

Mark slammed it shut behind them. Philip and Mark found themselves surrounded by aqua tile. "Men's room," Philip noted to Mark. A few men and women with drinks sat on beauty chairs before mirrors. To the left urinals lined the wall, unused. Beyond, men obviously up from the legal leather event waited for stalls. On the right a gaunt male couple perched between sinks. In their private universe, they shrieked amusement as they passed a small vial of white powder back and forth, fiddling with frantic fingers to get its delivery device right, scrunching nostrils as they sniffed. Low lounge music played, punctuated by the sounds of plumbing.

"Do we run?" Philip asked.

"No." Mark declared. They walked a few steps in, leaned as casually as possible on a tile ledge and faced the door. "We stay."

Pinely entered, whip in his left hand. He sauntered over. "Hi, guys, lovely evening," he said casually. Pinely's right hand was in his inside pocket. The gleam of metal showed through its open slit.

"Lovely, yes, isn't it?" Mark replied.

"I believe you have something of mine."

"We may or we may not." Mark sneered.

"Okay. Play it your way. I turn you in right now." He turned to the room. "You know what we have here? Wanted criminals!" Applause broke out. "They don't believe

me or they don't care. Perhaps the cops will. I call security. They hold you until you're in custody. Is that what you want?"

Philip raged. "I'll tell them that you killed Alex."

"That's right, Philip. You tell them that and I'm sure they'll believe you."

"Hold it right there." A voice boomed from inside a stall. Startled, the three looked up to see a man emerge. He was dark, bearded, leather capped. Philip saw Pinely's shoulders sink.

The man motioned to a leather-corseted man waiting in line. "Billy!" he called. The other man pulled a gun from his pocket. The room cleared quickly.

"Who are you?" Philip asked the bearded man.

"Ted Torvin," he replied, "Assistant District Attorney for the State of New York."

"Oh," Philip said. "How nice for you." Mark scowled in Philip's direction.

"And this is Detective Reddick of the New York Police Department."

"Good to meet you." Philip said.

"We were just saying what a lovely evening it was," Mark put in leadenly.

"Exactly what is going on here?" Torvin asked.

"These two are men you've been looking for in connection with a murder," Pinely stated. "I found them and I'd like the reward."

"Billy," Torvin said to the detective, "search this one first." Detective Reddick found the gun at once, handed it to Torvin, who looked it over. "You always carry a gun on a night out."

"It's legal," Pinely said. "Got the permit on me. I have the right to hold a criminal until the police get to the scene."

"Hmm." Torvin shifted weight. "And you guys?"

They tried to speak at once, stopped. "You go," Mark prompted.

"I'm Philip Hayes. This is James Pinely, my attorney."

"We've met already," Torvin said.

"He shot at us when we were on the stairs. He also killed his secretary, I mean his former secretary, Alex, because he had a tape of him and the guy chained up downstairs, that's his lover, Peter Herald. They've been bilking my father and my boyfriend Mark's insurance company," Mark waved, "out of money on my case. You see, I'm suing Mark, well, not any more. We're settling that, but ... " Philip trailed off. "Actually, Alex had more stuff on him, but I don't know what it was. He's probably burned it all."

"Anything to add, uh, Mark, is it?" Torvin asked.

"Not much. Except that I'm implicated in an assisted suicide but I have some papers to prove that the doctor did the whole thing, so I guess I'm off the hook in all this. Can I go home?"

Philip glared at him meanly. "That's right. Leave me here between a murderer and the law."

"Hey, babe. Someone's got to go get the bail money together."

They heard someone enter the room. Valvolina de Mylar posed, a radiant vision in form-fitting gold lamé. She stretched an accusatory finger toward Mark. "There he is!



That's the man you're looking for. I saw it all. He ran the other guy down in the car. You are Philip, right?"

"I guess I am," Philip answered. "However, we're a bit past that now."

"Oh, sorry." Valvolina dropper her arm. "By the way, your roommate Trevor got into a terrible car wreck. He's okay. Banged up a little, but the guy driving the car died. Oh, and I'm staying at your house with my girlfriend, I guess, who I just met, because I, like, went into this alternate lesbian personality named Valerie for a few months. Anyway, she's pregnant now. Belle, that is, not Valerie. Trevor said we could sleep on your couch. I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all," Philip replied. "I celebrate motherhood."

Torvin spoke up. "I'm sorry to break in, but I think we all need to go to my office shortly, unless of course you all prefer a holding cell at Central Booking."

"No. Your office will be just fine," Mark said, gathering murmurs of assent from the others.

"Billy. Would you be a dear and cover these good people for a moment? I'm going to make a call for detective backup. I don't think any of us wants to call too much attention to the situation. One photo and we're all dead here."

"Whatever you say." Billy motioned them closer with his gun. Torvin left the room, shaking his head. "Now, I want your cooperation. Everybody take a stall and get into it. And keep the doors open so as I can see you. Try anything and they'll be mopping up blood in the morning."

## 23.1 Downtown

The two night guards at the D.A.'s office blinked at a hallucination. They watched Torvin enter, escorting a detective and another guy in full leather. Two more gay guys and a drag queen followed. "Evening," one guard said to Torvin.

"Evening, Fred," he replied as the assemblage entered the elevator.

"That's some undercover work," Fred said. "Some undercover work."

John, his partner at the desk, nodded. "It's that designer knock-off ring they've been looking for."

"And a good thing too. They're a menace. That Rolex I bought on the street broke the next day."

"You knew it was fake when you got it."

Fred became perturbed. "Okay, right. I knew that, you know what I'm saying? But if they're gonna build an imitation, at least make it reliable, so the customers don't start complaining. That's all."

"Anyway, they got 'em, so you can go upstairs and ask for your money back. Hope you brought the receipt with you." John laughed at Fred.

Fred put up his fists. "Come on. Come on." The two touch boxed.

Valvolina sat on a long oak bench. Detective Billy Reddick leaned against the wall, reading a magazine. She raised her hand. "Yes, Miss," Reddick said.

"It's been three hours since they talked to me." She paused. The detective said nothing. "May I smoke? My cigarettes are right in my handbag, the one you confiscated."

"I'm sorry, Miss. There's no smoking in the office," he said.

"Come on. It's after hours." She crossed her legs. "I'll give you a blow job in the bathroom."

His expression did not alter. "I'm sorry Miss, and I'll have to ask you not to try bribery on me again."

"Bribery? You got me wrong. I think I like you. You're big and strong, kinda manly."

"Then don't try to pick me up again, Miss."

"No smoking. No picking people up. You police are so rule-oriented."

"It's what we're paid for, Miss."

"By the way, I'm a boy," Val contradicted.

"I know that, Miss." Billy brushed his mustache.

Torvin ushered Pinely past Val. "You sit right here." Pinely complied. "Billy? Watch him while I go into a brief meeting."

"Should I cuff them both?" he asked hopefully.

"No. He knows he'll make bail, and she can't run in heels," Torvin responded.

Pinely glared. "Where's Joey D.?" he asked under his breath.

"Who?" she whispered back.

"Your boyfriend. Joey. What did you do with him?" He was quiet but angry.

"Obviously, you've got me mixed up with someone else. I don't know any Joey."

Valvolina examined a chip in her nail polish. She reviewed for a moment. 'Let's see... Only Aunt Lucille knew about Joey's arrangement with me. Good thing for me he covered up his other life so well. I'm okay there so far. If this Pinely guy talks about it, the cops ask him how he knows Joey. How does he know Joey?' she wondered.

"You think you'll get away with it, sister, but I won't let you.," Pinely growled softly. "I know where he was going when he got lost."

Detective Reddick cleared his throat. "No crosstalk between parties to the investigation," he said.

"Good rule," Valvolina said. She grinned at Pinely.

Torvin consulted a thin featured man in a flannel shirt. "Sorry to get you out of bed, Greg. It was important." Torvin had changed into a backup suit, leaving off the tie and jacket.

Greg sipped coffee, held out a file. "It's not a problem, Ted. You called and I came. I always do. See for yourself."

Torvin flipped through pages of graphic printouts. Greg narrated. "The preliminaries show that the impact marks on shell casing in Alex Gray's house match the casing found at the club tonight, and the casings fired at the police range. Pinely's gun is the murder weapon. Idiot, not to get rid of it. That's what happens when law abiding people

try to do crime. They make my job too easy. He's tried and convicted. Bang the gavel.

Let everyone else go home."

"I've still got the attempted suicide."

"The guy produced the papers. You talked to upstate. The doctor's dead and his last statement's notarized. Case closed. Free the bound masses."

"Greg. Excuse me. You're only the technician. Would you not do my job for me this once?"

"I'll go home then," Greg said coolly.

"No. Wait an hour and we'll take the car service together. You know how much I hate waking you up when I come in the door."

"I won't wake up." Greg crumpled the coffee cup and tossed it in a waste basket.

"You always say that, Greg, and you do wake up, every time."

"Ted. Let's not have this discussion again. I'll be in my office, having phone sex on the taxpayer's dime." Greg padded sleepily down the corridor.

"Like you wouldn't use another office if you were doing that?" Torvin called after him.

Philip drummed his fingers on the table. Torvin walked in. "So, Mr. Hayes. Sorry to keep you waiting."

"Where's Mark? Are we getting arrested? What's been happening?"

"Listen. I think I have good news for you. I'm not at liberty to discuss the details, but I'm putting James Pinely under arrest for the murder of Alex Gray."

"Peachy." Philip smiled.

"I will recommend a high bail, but I'm afraid he'll be able to raise whatever it is. His lawyer's in with him now. He'll likely be out by the afternoon."

"So, you mean, he'll come after me and kill me."

"You're still a witness, so you can't leave town. We'll post an unmarked car outside your building. If you want to stay somewhere else."

"I'll give you Mark's address."

Torvin stole quietly in on Pinely, who faced away from the door. "Boo!" he said.

Pinely faced him coolly. "You can't question me until my lawyer gets here."

"I'm not here to question you, James. I've come to tell you that we have you cold." Torvin gloated slightly.

"Don't be so sure. We've got months on this show, perhaps years."

"I wish I could keep you in for a few weeks and watch you go through some serious withdrawal. Perhaps in time I'll get my wish."

Pinely covered his alarm. "You're a cruel man, Torvin."

"Only when I want to be." Torvin opened the door to go. He snapped his fingers.

"Almost forgot. There's a certain video tape that might go into circulation, underground that is. It should prove rather popular."

Pinely started. "You can't."

"You don't comprehend the situation, do you? It really gives the legal profession unbelievably bad press when we start going around murdering our secretaries," Torvin said.

"Alex Gray was a thief and a blackmailer. Are you no better?" Pinely sneered.

"Maybe no one is any longer." He started to leave, then paused. "Okay, James Pinely. I'll take that last one back. The moment I do it, that's the moment you win." Torvin closed the door and locked Pinely in the room.

Mark, Philip and Valvolina shared a taxi uptown. Mark glanced back. The cop car, unmarked but hulking in an official way, followed them. "You think you're downtown in the Village," she said, "then you realize there's a lot of Manhattan left below." They traveled up the F.D.R. drive in the twilight before sunrise. The bridges strung with gleaming pearls, the gray water, the huddled buildings of Brooklyn glided past them.

"We'll drop you off, Valvolina," Philip offered. "I've got to check in and see if Trevor's left a message."

"Thanks. I'll try to go back to my apartment. If I can." She pursed her lips, took the makeup kit from her purse. She opened it. A tight wad of hundred dollar bills appeared. 'How did that get there?' she thought and quickly shut the case. She looked again. Metal glinted. 'The key to Joey's safe deposit. I'm a wealthy widow.' She collected herself. "I don't know about being Valvolina. I think I need a change, a whole new

persona. I was thinking of a cable show called 'Shopping with Phylene de Basement.' You like it?"

"Only if I can do the camera work," Philip said.

"Sure, honey. Why not," she said. "I think I can even pay you."

### 23.2 Pinely Hits the Streets

Pinely walked out of the system at one in the afternoon. Still in evening wear he sauntered through the lunch hour crowd past state, city and court workers, through thronged Chinatown, west across Canal street. He stopped off at Volcano Chili in Tribeca and consumed a bowl. The waiters walked around in yellow vinyl coats and plastic firemen's helmets. When they brought food to a table, red lights on the ceiling flashed and sirens sounded. Pinely enjoyed incredibly hot cuisine. When he felt pain, he knew that he existed. He walked home, full. He belched loudly and often, disturbing a proper-looking couple to his amusement.

Pinely arrived home in his Soho coop. He sat in his barber's chair. He dialed a number. "I need you to get me out of the country. I mean tonight," he said, and waited a moment. He set the phone down and picked up the remote and turned on the large screen television. He flipped past several experts propounding their political analyses and settled on a rerun of Real Life Rescue. On his giant screen, paramedics were using the jaws of life to extract an elderly man from a home that had fallen in on him during an earthquake. 'Not



enough blood,' he thought and waited for the next emergency. The commercials featured car locks, burglar alarms and cartoon characters selling life insurance. 'Really tapping into that paranoia market,' he thought.

Pinely felt a large pang of indigestion, then another. "Ugh!" he said aloud. "Why do I like these hot foods?" His nostrils flared. He sniffed the air. "Smoke," he said, and noticed a large puff of it materialize in front of his eyes. The pain in his stomach was building in intensity. His body had begun to shake in spasms. He tried to move, found that he could not. He looked down. His clothes had begun to burn. He felt the vinyl of the barber's chair begin to melt into his back. He screamed. A burst of flame shot out of his mouth, charring his tongue. The flames broke through his skin. Through the thick black haze he saw fire trucks coming to rescue someone else on the screen. His smoke detector's alarm went off. Its high-pitched wail covered his now faint yells for help.

His coop's ceiling sprinklers doused his flaming body. The first drops of water boiled off into steam that rose from his burning flesh. He blacked out as the indoor rain reduced his body to a steaming, smoldering goo. Only his right arm remained, still gripping the remote of his home entertainment center.

Philip picked up the ringing phone. "Hi, Trevor. Are you all right?" He waited. "What? What! You're joking. I mean I saw him this morning and he was fine. Yeah, brunch tomorrow morning it is." He hung up the receiver.

"Mark. It was Trevor." Mark looked up from the newspaper. "There was a fire in Pinely's apartment. He's dead."

Mark turned the page. "Nothing about us. I'm upset."

"Mark. Listen to me. Pinely's dead. They think it was spontaneous human combustion."

"Spontaneous human combustion?" Mark mused. "I suppose it's the sort of thing that's hard to plan much in advance."

## 24 Mark's Father Forces the Issue

"Glad you came to visit," Mark's father said.

"Yeah, well, it's Thanksgiving tomorrow and we heard you'd take us out for dinner."

"Like I get holidays off? I thought I'd make you cook."

Mark halted. "You did line up the delivery, right?"

His father gave nothing away. "What delivery? You boys want a drink or something?" "That would be good," Philip answered and the man got up and entered the kitchen.

"I like your dad," Philip said. "You want to trade?"

"Not on your life, and I've never met the man. Probably never will."

"Yeah he's like that." Philip flipped the remote idly, stopping on cartoons.

"And now," Mark said. "I'd like to show you a dance I made up. I call it the Suburban Sprawl." He stretched further on the sofa, placed his bare feet on Philip's lap.

"Mark. Not in front of your dad."

Mark withdrew a fraction. His father returned, handing Philip a drink. "You kids ought to go to this law firm down the road. I see their ads on TV all the time." He sat down. "You know, if you're going to live together, you shouldn't start out with a dispute between you."

"Good point, Mr. Milano."

"Hey. Wait a minute. Is this a conspiracy?" Mark protested. "I like living alone."

"Have it your way." Victor Milano stared at the framed photo of Mark's mother that rested atop the television.

"Dad. Don't do it." Mark warned. "Don't guilt me into this." The man continued staring at the picture. Mark followed his gaze at her lost warm smile, pressed behind glass. "All right," he said choking on his words. "I give up. Philip. You can move in with me if you want."

"I accept. I guess that's as romantic as you get," he returned. Mark leaned forward and gave him an awkward hug.

"And if it's not too much to ask," his father said. "I'd like a ceremony or something. She'd have liked that very much for you." Mark saw tears form in the man's eyes.

Philip climbed out in the parking lot. Tired women rolled groceries and children toward old cars. The sign in the shopping center read:

1-800-INJURY

Free Consultation on Job Injuries,

Medical Malpractice, Equipment Malfunctions,

Product Defects, Toxic Chemical Poisoning, Physical Attacks,

Accidents, Broken Bones, Paralysis and Death.



The office elbowed a dry cleaner and an ice cream store for attention in the shopping center. Mark and Philip walked in. Old wood paneling bulged in the front room. A receptionist sat at her desk. A figure from a museum case, her skin was a waxy pale, her blonde wig tied in a bun. She wore a red polka dot blouse and square small glasses with chain. Bauble earrings hung from stretched lobes. A dictation headset covered her ears. Copper and gold bracelets clanked against each other as she typed with pink nailed fingers. The screen she faced glowed red, lending her a hellish tint. Mark closed the glass door. Philip crossed the brown carpet. "Hello?" he said. She did not notice him.

Mark came up and knocked on the ledge in front of her. Her head jerked up. Her glasses fell to her chest, tangled with strands of tourmaline and garnet beads. She pulled off the headphones. "Just a minute," she said, as a metal strip got caught in an earring. Wincing, she unhitched the earpiece and tried to thread the headphones under her glasses.

"I want the free consultation," Philip said.

She creased her forehead, and reached for her phone. The metal bracelets brushed her computer's mouse onto the floor. "Excuse me a second," she said, holding up an index finger. She rolled backward. The chair wheels snagged on the mouse wire. Her knees hit her keyboard drawer. The keyboard bounced into her lap. In a reflex motion, her feet knocked the foot pedal of the dictating machine into the path of the rolling chair. The woman tipped over and fell in slow motion as Philip and Mark watched idly. A necklace broke. Beads flew and scattered. As she hit the floor, her chair fell apart. Pulled by the headset snared in her glasses, the tape machine bounded across the desk and landed on her







stomach. The cassette inside ejected, hitting her in the face. Her wig slid off. She struggled. Tangled wires entwined her legs and arms with chair parts. Equipment components pinned her torso. Her face, wreathed in attachments, turned an alarming violet-red.

"Mister MARSHALL!" she yelled from her supine position.

A gruff voice issued from an open door. "What is it Emily?"

"These two GENTlemen are here for a free consultATION!" Her voice was shrill and grating.

"Send 'em in, and why'n'cha use the phone anyway, instead of screaming at me like a dying water buffalo?"

"I CAN'T!" she said. "I'm flat on my BACK here! I'm HURT!"

"Like I care. You got any witnesses? Heh, heh heh."

She dropped her volume. "Go right in, gentlemen. Mr. Marshall will see you, the bastard."

Philip and Mark stared as she tried to wriggle free. "You want us to help?" Philip asked.

"Naw," the woman assured him. "You'll only make it worse. This happens all the time."

Mark and Philip edged through the open door. A round man sat eating a sandwich. The aroma of pastrami and mustard filled the room. "You'll pardon me," he said, munching. "I like to work right through lunch. I'm Dodd Marshall and I'll be your lawyer for the

evening." He sipped at a straw in a can of creme soda. He waved them into chrome and green vinyl chairs.

Mark spoke up. "We've got a law suit we want to settle."

"Settle?" Marshall sputtered, slamming down his can. Soda frothed out of the straw. "Settle! Now, now. Wait one minute, guys. You obviously haven't considered all your options here. Who are we suing?"

"*We* are not suing anyone," Mark said.

"I'm suing him and I want to settle the case." Philip put in. "All I want you to do is draw up the papers and we'll sign." Philip took a folder out of his bag. "Here's the file. There's a note in there about what we want to agree to. You call the insurance company and take care of the details." The man took the file gingerly. He opened it and perused.

"Okay. We'll do it nice and amiable, like. No fighting; no going to court; no pain and suffering; no anguish of the heart. The we'll go off and skip through the daisy fields. What a wonderful world. La, la, la and LA!," he said in disgust. "Call me Monday. I'll have Emily get it all together for you. In and out like that and thanks for the business."

"What did I tell you, Philip?" Mark said. "No problem at all."

A thud came from the next room. "I hit my HEAD!" they heard Emily scream, then another crash. "Mister Marshall?" she asked, sounding weak.

"What is it?" He frowned.

"Could you call me an ambulance?"

"All right, Emily. You're an ambulance! Now get up and get back to work," he shouted.

Mark and Philip left Marshall's office. They tiptoed through the front room past the struggling woman. "I want my typewriter back," she sobbed. "I want my typewriter."

## 25 Brunch in Byzantium

Trevor, Val, Belle, Mark and Philip occupied a round table in the solarium of Restaurant Byzantium. Plants hung in jungle lushness. Azure tiled walls and pink marble columns encompassed them. From a brass cage a mechanical bird offered up a repertoire from the avian songbook. In a pool huge goldfish busied themselves at the nothing goldfish do so well. Sun sifted in through the safety glass pyramid above. Plates, mugs, glasses, condiment bottles, creamers and sweetener cups filled the table.

"So," Trevor asked, "have you set a date?"

"I'm moving in with Mark soon. I'll have my stuff out by the end of the month. You'll have to get yourself another roommate." Trevor looked around the room.

Val raised his hand. "I'm here."

"No you're not," Trevor said. "No bringing babies into the house. I have a rule."

"That's okay," Val sulked. "I checked about Brooklyn. My aunt, Lucille, she paid the rent all the time I was gone. I can move back in any time. We called a neighbor of Belle's mother who ran next door and got her. Wiretaps, you know." The table murmured assent. "Anyway April's okay. She's in this other place with Harrie and Shela. Her mother's going there in secret to stay. Belle's coming with me until we figure out a plan."

"No I'm not." All faces turned to Belle.

"I'm giving myself up. I can't live like this any longer."

Val sat in shock. "My baby born in prison," he said quietly.

Trevor chimed in. "Belle, darling. This may be the time to rethink that rule against drinking during pregnancy. Are you sure you wouldn't care for a bloody Mary?"

"What about your daughter?" Philip questioned her.

"I'll never tell them where she is. She's safe with my mother. You're not going to change my mind. Val will have to raise the child. I can't bring up a child afraid of everyone."

Val stared up at the glass pyramid, white with morning. "I couldn't raise a sunflower, much less a baby."

Belle glowered at him. "Then I'll give it up for adoption. I won't have it live in fear."

"Honey, we all live in some kind of fear," Val answered. "Toxic chemicals, terrorist bombs, muggings, those bicycle food delivery guys running you down on the sidewalk. At least here it comes packaged up ahead of time." Belle crossed her arms. "You're not going to listen, are you? Then I'll have to take care of it. Maybe Aunt Lucille can help out. She may be an old lady, but she's a tough old lady. I'll visit you in prison. By the way. You want to get married? I'm free this weekend. It might help with the who's what to whom with the authorities. We've confused them all enough already, I think."

"Sure," Belle replied. "Saturday would be good."

Trevor stared in shock. "I thought someone would ask me first."

"Oh, Trevor, darling," Val said. "Things are a bit complicated but, if you want, when they settle down, would you like to go to a movie?"

Trevor brightened. "I'd like that very much. Thanks for asking."

Mark, posing thoughtfully to the side, broke his silence. "Trevor, would you come with me to the phone? There's a call or two I think we should make together."

## 26 Warm Fusion

Judge Farrel arrived, out of breath. Victor Milano greeted and took his coat. Torvin ushered him into the living room. The judge surveyed the group assembled. He saw two brides, two grooms, then blinked. "Val D'angelo?" the judge called.

"Here." Val, a vision in chiffon, raised his hand.

"I've talked to the Governor. You know he's rather conservative, but we've had a lot of abused women with orders of protection killed. It may be political, but he's not going to extradite. He's got the feds to drop the unlawful flight across state lines to avoid prosecution charge, since they don't look so good either. Your friends are out of custody and back on their farm. We'll get your case reheard in Massachusetts, then we'll see about reuniting your family, Ms. Evelyn Comstock."

"Who?" Val asked him.

Belle blushed. "My real name. Actually my married name. I go by Eva, but you might as well keep calling me Belle. I was born —"

"Evelyn Kimberly Dean," Mark interjected, pulling out a five-by-seven card. "I traced your fingerprints from a glass I took at our brunch. No criminal record. Husband booked for a number of brawls. The most recent happened last week. Should help your cause. Daughter Yvette, five. Pretty name."

"Aren't you the sly one?" Trevor remarked.

"Oh, and," Mark said, "your mother stopped for gas on the way to wherever she is.

I guess they told her not to use her credit cards by now. You want her shoe size?"

Philip gave Mark a second look. "What am I getting into?"

"I had some free time at work. What can I say?" Mark replied. "Did you talk to your parents?" he asked Philip.

"I tried," Philip replied. "My mother wouldn't even take down the address."

Mark's father put his hand on Philip's shoulder. "Give them time. They'll come around when they get old."

They heard tires screech. Mark ran to the window. He saw a red van pull up on the front lawn. A lanky man emerged, then several more, all in tight orange and yellow vinyl outfits. "Trevor. It's your friend Jason and his band. I forget. Are they playing or catering?"

"Both," Trevor answered.

Mark watched them unload instruments, coolers and beverage cases. He approached Philip. "Take a walk with me, Philip." They skipped out the back door. The yellow parachute tent, big as a house, billowed in the breeze. Discretely placed heaters made it comfortable. Round tables with floral displays hugged the area near the house, set for the reception. Beyond the tables folding chairs faced a platform.

"Tasteful," Philip said. "Trevor and Jason really threw this together fast."

Mark slouched. "Don't forget me. Guess you wanted more. Sorry."



"No. I love it. I mean, I didn't want gaudy. Been to too many of those. Always felt uncomfortable at weddings, since I figured I was cut out of the action. You know, family members you never see ask you about your own relationship status. You make up some story. No one believes it, then they all get drunk and forget about it. I wish my family were here but," he sighed, "the way they are I wouldn't like that either." The storm door closed. They turned. "Hey there, Jason," Philip said.

Jason embraced him. "I can't talk. Lots to do. We're playing after the ceremony. Have a good wedding." The band started setting up long tables.

People poured into the tent. "Hard time finding this place," Rozena said to Mark. "And you can't get a taxi at the train station for all the people."

Inside the house, Mark's father opened the door. "You Victor Milano?" a woman asked cagily, glancing over her shoulder.

"Who wants to know?" Victor smiled and held out his hand.

"Lucille D'angelo. Pleased to meet you."

"Aunt Lucille?" Val ran to the entryway.

"Val?" She moved to hug him, stopped. "I'll wrinkle the dress." She shook her head. "Val. I know you're doing this for the kid, but I've never seen you more beautiful." Her voice choked.

"Stop that, Lucille. We'll have to do all the makeup over if you keep it up." Val smiled.

The judge had on his robes. Jason guitar-soloed the couples down the aisle with dulcet strains. He went through the preliminaries, got Val and his bride's answers, pronounced them wed by the authority vested in him by the State of New York. Turning to Mark and Philip, receiving their I do's, he broke form and said, "I can't make it legal, but by the strength of your love, and the good will of all assembled I pronounce you," he paused for effect, "husbands."

"That's all it takes?" Mark asked.

"Shut up and kiss me," Philip answered.

Mark and Philip kissed. The crowd broke into wild applause. Jason played them off. Usual formalities ensued. People ate. People drank to excess. While the couples sliced the cakes, Trevor remarked to Rozena. "Jason sawed two bride and groom figures in half and recombined them."

Rozena nodded. "I've done the astrology on this. Philip and Mark work out as far as I can see into the future. Belle divorces Val in three years so that she can remarry. They stay very close and share custody of the son. It's a boy, you know. Val has some good things coming, too. He—"

"Halt, Rozena. That's more than I want to know," Trevor answered.

As the band began to play, the two couples danced together.

Victor Milano took Lucille's hand. "People might talk," she warned him.

He examined the atypical crowd. "Are you joking?" They danced a slow number.

Most joined in as the tent glowed orange with sunset.

Torvin spoke to Greg as he held him. "What do you say we do it up proper-like, sweetheart?"

"You think we've been living together too long to get married?" Greg questioned.

"Couldn't be." Torvin answered. "We haven't killed each other yet. That must count for something."

"Marry him, Greg," Detective Reddick said as he whirled by with Trevor, whose voice Torvin heard saying "Tell me more about crime solving. Take me, for instance. Do you think I'm capable of murder?"

Philip served Mark breakfast at their table. "Fresh orange juice," Mark noted as Philip poured.

"I ran out to buy it at a restaurant this morning." Philip set down full dishes and raised his glass. "Welcome to the first day of happily ever after," he said.

They clinked glasses, sipped and kissed briefly. Mark examined the presentation. Airy blueberry pancakes stretched before him, garnished with sliced strawberry, banana and kiwi. Cinnamon dusted the surface of a central lake of syrup. Sprigs of mint floated lazily along.

"Take a picture," he said. "It will be gone in a moment."

Feeling full from breakfast, they settled in on the sofa. Philip turned on the television. The big zero rotated once more. "In other news," the announcer said, "a judge of the state supreme court came under fire when it was revealed that he performed a gay

wedding in Long Island yesterday. Cardinal Khan has condemned this as an official sanction of an immoral and illegal practice. He has called for the judge to resign."

"Turn it off," Mark said leadenly, and turned. "I'm picking up the phone. I'm calling my boss at home, then a travel agent. We're leaving tomorrow for two weeks. Where do you want to go?"

Philip noticed streaks on the window. Snow was falling. "It's cold. Any stunning beach in the tropics will do."