



STRIKING SPARKS

a PSYCOP novelette

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BY JORDAN CASTILLO PRICE



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Andrew circled the block for the fourth time. He hadn't realized parking would be so horrible downtown. He thought he would get there in plenty of time if he left work at three, but he'd had no idea he should have given himself half an hour to find a parking space.

He went one block deeper into the side streets and spotted a gap in the parked cars. He was halfway in before he saw the fire hydrant beside the curb. He stared at the hydrant in disbelief, as if it had just appeared there to make his life miserable. Didn't it know how important today was? Didn't it realize that by this time next week, Andrew would be married?

Didn't it realize that he was scared to death?

The blast of a horn snapped Andrew back to attention. He glanced in his rearview mirror. The guy behind him was Mexican, or Hispanic, or whatever the correct term was. He looked tough. And not very happy to be waiting around while Andrew tried to park his car.

Andrew circled for eighteen more minutes before he found a spot. He walked as fast as he could. Even so, when he got to the storefront he'd been circling and circling, by the time he reached the front door, the rectangular fluorescent sign that said "open" had been unplugged.

The *Tarot Card Palm Reader* sign was off, too. "This can't be happening," Andrew pressed his face to the plate glass window and cupped his hands beside his eyes. There! There were candles burning inside. That meant the psychic wasn't gone yet. Because nobody just left candles burning, not with the possibility that they'd start a fire and burn down the whole building. Right?

Though this psychic, from what he'd heard, was real. Why shouldn't she leave candles burning if she knew the building would be safe?

Something moved inside the storefront, maybe—or maybe people passing him on the sidewalk were casting reflections that he mistook for motion inside. Andrew pressed his face into the glass harder, ignoring the gritty feel of the grime-coated glass against his forehead. "Hello?" he tapped on the glass to see if maybe the palm reader was still there, and maybe he could get her attention. Nothing moved. No lights came on. Andrew knocked harder, with his knuckles now, rather than his fingertips. "Hello?"

"It's closed."

Andrew jumped and spun around to face whoever had snuck up on him. His hand went to

his wallet, patted it to make sure it was still where it was supposed to be, in his pocket.

The man who'd scared Andrew half to death wasn't even looking at him. He had a hand cupped around a cigarette and was busy attempting to light it despite the wind. He wore a leather biker jacket covered in safety pins and small, round badges with band names on them Andrew might have heard of, might not, and his bleached blond hair was spiked out stiff like dozens of sharp nails.

He stopped flicking his lighter and glanced at Andrew. "What?"

Andrew had been staring at his silver nosering. "Someone might still be in there."

"Nope. Saw her leave." The unlit cigarette bobbed as he spoke. "Lydia hates to miss the 5:07. You'd need to shove a big wad of money into her hand by five to keep her off that bus." He cupped his hand around the end of the cigarette and started flicking his lighter again.

"Damn it." Andrew kicked the building's concrete foundation.

The smoker stopped flicking the lighter for a moment, raised his eyebrow, and then went back to trying to light his cigarette. "What're you so stressed about? Having your palm read is usually something people do for fun, you know."

"It's just...I drove all the way here from Arlington Heights. I had to get time off to leave early and everything. And now this."

"What's the big deal? Just come back tomorrow. You don't work Saturdays, do you?"

"Oh, Forget it." Andrew turned toward the sidestreet that led to the other sidestreet where he'd eventually parked his car. Obviously, he wasn't going to get a reading.

"Hold on," said the smoker. "Help me get this thing lit." He handed the lighter to Andrew and shielded both sides of his unlit cigarette from the wind. Andrew flicked the lighter; the metal wheel was already warm from striking sparks. He managed to get a small flame. The wind blew it out.

"C'mon, I won't bite. Block the wind."

Andrew repositioned himself and flicked the lighter a few more times. Cigarette met flame, and the edge crackled as the smoker inhaled. He blew a stream of smoke over Andrew's shoulder. "Want one?"

"No, I don't sm...I never really picked up the habit."

"It's never too late to learn. How about a drag?"

Andrew stared at the glowing cherry of the cigarette. The fingers of the other man's hand were stacked with silver rings. Some had esoteric-looking symbols etched into them, and others were set with stones. There was a gigantic hunk of jade on his forefinger, pale green, the color of the sugared almonds that Meredith had been bundling into tiny mesh

bags all week. Two green, two blue, and a white, tied with a pale green bow and a pair of fake plastic wedding rings. There was even a poem that went with them:

Five sugared almonds for each guest to eat.

To remind us that life is both bitter and sweet

Five wishes for the new husband and wife

Health, wealth, happiness, children, and a long life!

Andrew took the cigarette, placed it to his lips, and inhaled. His fingertips smelled like butane.

“Don’t bogart,” the smoker teased as Andrew took a drag. He was a few years older than Andrew, maybe thirty, if that. Andrew held the burning smoke in his lungs for a moment and then turned his face to one side to exhale. He felt nauseated within seconds.

“If you need a cup of coffee to go with it, I can scrape one up for you. Name’s Crash, by the way.”

Andrew suddenly felt incredibly stupid and out of his element, standing there on the sidewalk and smoking with a total stranger who called himself *Crash*. “No, I, uh...here you go.” He tried to give the cigarette back, but “Crash” was tapping a new one out of the pack for himself.

“Don’t worry about it. New pack—just bought it. Plenty for both of us. You’ve got a name, right?”

“Andrew.”

Crash stepped aside and gestured toward the door. “So, about that coffee. You do drink coffee, Andrew, don’t you?”

“Yeah, but—”

“Good. ‘Cos if you were gonna say, ‘No, but I like coffee flavored ice cream,’ I’d have to push you into traffic. Just so you know.”

“But...that’s the palm reader’s door.”

“No, that’s the door to the building. It leads to her shop, and my shop, and the apartments above us where a bunch of illegals from El Salvador stack themselves ten to a bedroom and three in the closet. But who’s counting?”

Andrew took a deeper drag from the cigarette as Crash pulled open the door and motioned him inside. The vestibule was a small, cramped space. All four walls and even the mailboxes had been painted a deep, glossy red. Two of the mailboxes had been smashed open, and small pitchforks and crowns, gang-style, had been carved into the paint. But other markings decorated the paint job too, less sinister than the gang symbols. Lavender dots that looked like they’d been dabbed on with someone’s fingertips decorated the second mailbox, trailed off the edge, and pointed in an undulating dotted line toward the

narrow stairs.

The stairwell smelled of incense and cigarettes.

Andrew followed Crash and the dots up to an old wooden door on the second floor. It was painted in blue and yellow stripes. A chalkboard hung over a hand-lettered sign with rocks and twigs glued to the border. The sign read “Sticks and Stones” and the chalkboard said “Back in 5.” Beneath that, the store’s hours were scrawled on the door in marker. Crash reached around Andrew, grabbed a piece of chalk that had been perched on top of the doorjamb, erased the old message with the side of his hand, and scrawled, “CLOSED.” The store was supposed to be open until seven.

Crash unlocked the door and held it open. “Abandon hope,” he said, “all ye who enter here.”

It was a reference to something, but Andrew couldn’t recall exactly what. It wasn’t very surprising, the feeling of disconnectedness. His own hand felt foreign, holding the cigarette just so, as if it were someone else’s hand, someone else’s body.

Crash flipped on the light, and rows of things—strange and intimidating things—candles and herbs, statuettes and brightly labeled bottles, appeared all around them.

“I take it they don’t have too many *botanicas* in Arlington Heights,” said Crash. He took a deep drag off his cigarette and blew the smoke towards the ceiling.

“This is real magic?” said Andrew.

“As opposed to what? Fake magic? Like parlor tricks?”

Andrew didn’t know what he’d meant. He’d heard of the various psychic disciplines, but he hadn’t even realized that he thought some might be superior to others, that some might be more useful, more tangible, while others might simply be smoke and mirrors.

“The palm reader—I heard she was real.”

“She’s not an actress or a cardboard cutout, if that’s what you mean.”

“That she can really tell the future.”

Crash went around the counter and pulled a lime-encrusted carafe from a coffee maker behind the cash register. “Do you think she’d be here if she was really precognizant? Wait. Hold that thought. I’ve got beer if you’d rather have beer.”

“I can’t. I’m driving.”

“Then coffee it is.” He disappeared through a beaded curtain behind the counter, and a moment later Andrew heard water running. He put the cigarette Crash had given him between his lips and held it there, feeling even less like himself than he had in the hallway. His heart was pounding from the nicotine. The smoke drifted upward and burned his eyes. He inhaled, removed the cigarette, looked at it, and blew out a stream of smoke.

Crash came back into the room and started the coffee maker.

"You sell fortune telling equipment here," said Andrew.

"Equipment? That's a funny way of putting it, like this is a hardware store or a camera shop—but yeah, I guess that's as good a word as any."

"If it's not equipment, then what do you call it?"

"Me?" Crash barked out a short laugh. "A meal ticket."

"No, really."

Crash stubbed out his cigarette and picked up a crystal ball from the countertop. It wasn't big and glassy like a movie prop. It was small, like a baseball or a paperweight, and it fit perfectly in his palm. He hefted it like it was heavy for its size. "Props. Paraphernalia. Tools. Depends on whether or not the user's got any real talent or if they're just playing games. Fooling themselves."

"You seem like you know a lot about it."

Crash tipped his chin down and gave Andrew an exaggerated look that was just short of "duh."

"I mean...." Andrew groped for words. "You know. Like maybe you're psychic."

"Maybe I am."

"Really? Oh, man, what a relief. That's awesome. I really need you to look into something for me."

Crash tapped a fresh cigarette out of his pack and rolled it between his thumb and forefinger. "I didn't say I gave readings."

Andrew felt his stomach drop. "But...but you have to. I came all this way...."

"Right. I think we established that on the sidewalk. It's not my fault you didn't let your fingers do the walking."

"How did you...?"

"If you slip the guy at the barber shop five bucks, he'll let you park in his lot. Lydia would've mentioned that if she knew you were driving in from the 'burbs."

"But I never told you I ran late because I couldn't find a parking spot."

Crash looked at Andrew through fringe of his eyelashes, and a slow grin spread across his face. He'd been caught, and he knew it, but still he denied that anything extrasensory was going on. "Why else would you have been so late, seeing as how hard you were jonesing to have your palm read?"

“Look, if you don’t help me, I don’t know who else will. I’ll pay you. What does, uh, Lydia charge?”

Crash poured two cups of black coffee and slid one across the counter to Andrew. “I’m not Lydia. She makes her living doing readings. I’m just a lowly shopkeeper who sells equipment.”

Andrew took a gulp of the hot coffee and scalded his tongue. He hardly felt it. “Okay, I’ll buy something. Whatever you say. Just point it out to me.”

“Unfortunately, I’m fresh out of clues. Another smoke?”

Andrew looked at the cigarette he’d been holding. It had burned down to the filter and gone out. He shook his head. “I don’t get it.”

“You don’t say.”

“You *can* do a reading, can’t you? Why won’t you?”

“Did it ever occur to you that the last thing you need is a reading?”

Andrew narrowed his eyes and did his best to see between the lines. “Okay,” he said, choosing his words more carefully. “Maybe I don’t need a reading. What else have you got to offer?”

Crash stared for a long, long moment and then shrugged. “This would be so much easier with a beer. Or better yet, a few shots of tequila. You got anywhere to be tonight? You can stay.”

“Meredith would be wor—”

“What, she doesn’t have a phone?”

“Well, yes, but I’ve never stayed downtown before.”

Crash stubbed out his cigarette and drank his coffee in a few swallows. He then ducked down behind the counter, straightened up, and placed a bottle of tequila on the Plexiglas countertop with a loud, solid thunk. “Newsflash. People do what they want to do. You want to stay? You will. You want to go? Then leave. End of story. All that other stuff is just a bunch of excuses. If you don’t want a drink, then just say so.”

He twisted the top off and took a huge pull straight from the bottle.

Andrew watched his throat work as he drank. The tendon on either side of his windpipe met in a vee between his collarbones. A tattoo snaked up one side of his neck, the top of a black spiral. His Adam’s apple rose and fell, and Andrew lost himself in the movement, hypnotized.

His mouth watered.

"I want a drink," he said.

Crash nodded once. "There. Was that so difficult?"

He slid the bottle across the counter. Andrew wondered what he'd been expecting. A chilled shotglass? A salt shaker? A slice of lime? He looked down at the bottle's opening. The glass circle gleamed with moisture. Andrew glanced up at Crash's lips. They looked wet, too.

"When you have readings done," Crash said, "the so-called psychics really are doing just that—reading you. They read the clues you give them, verbal and nonverbal. They tell you a bunch of things you already know, and they take your money, and you go around telling all your friends, 'Omigod, you won't believe the things she knew about.'"

Andrew glared at Crash. He raised the bottle to his lips and drank. The warm tequila tasted revolting, as if he were sucking on an innertube in a hot shed in July, but he could hardly spit it back. He braced himself, and he swallowed. "I don't talk like that," he said.

The corners of Crash's lips curled up in an evil little smile.

Andrew felt his cheeks flush. Maybe it was from the tequila. Or the cigarettes. Or maybe he hadn't realized he'd be so easy to bait. "But how can you say that psychics are phonies when they're certified?"

Crash pulled the bottle toward himself and took another slug. "What, you never used a fake I.D. to get beer when you were in high school? How do you know that every certification you see hanging on the wall of every shop is real? You think some government agency sends quality control agents around to check?"

Andrew's cheeks burned. He hadn't actually thought about it. But Crash didn't have to make the possibility sound so ridiculous. Crash shoved the bottle into his hands. He drank, and shuddered.

"So." Crash raked his eyes from the top of Andrew's head, to the spot where his body pressed against the countertop, then back up again to meet his eyes. "What do you really want?"

A reading. That's what Andrew wanted. He wanted a reading. But he didn't think he'd get one by asking for it directly. "I don't know."

Crash grinned. "Because it's not looking like tequila's your very favorite thing. And no, my sixth sense isn't telling me that. You turn a little green every time you take a sip."

Green. Like the sugared almonds. Andrew forced down another swallow, just to make sure he didn't care for warm tequila. "I want...a lime?"

"Well, that's a start. No limes, but I think I might have some pop in back. Come on." He turned and disappeared through the beaded curtain. Andrew watched it sway. It was too dark in the room beyond the beads for him to see the interior, but the half-dozen steps he

took between the customer side of the counter and the clacking strings of beads felt more real, more important, than any of the travel agents, florists and invitations he'd been dealing with for the past several months.

Andrew closed his eyes, and the cool beaded curtain brushed his shoulders as he angled through it.

The room behind the curtain had just as many shelves lining the walls as the retail area of the store, but they were crammed with books and binders.

A computer desk in one corner held a flat-screen monitor covered in sticky notes, with books and used coffee cups piled all around the keyboard. An entire wall was taken up by a bank of dented metal filing cabinets with hundreds of poetry magnets coursing over the front. Andrew almost paused to read them, but he couldn't quite determine where a sentence might begin.

The opposite door let to a narrow galley kitchen with ancient appliances in brown and avocado. Only the microwave looked like it had been manufactured anytime after the turn of the millennium. "It's your lucky day," said Crash. "I found some ginger ale." He'd set a pair of mismatched tumblers on the countertop and filled each one halfway with soda. Andrew never liked ginger ale; it reminded him of recovering from the stomach flu—but he figured it would at least take the edge off the tequila.

Crash divided the rest of the tequila between the two glasses, and raised his in a toast. "Salut."

Two

Andrew took a tentative sip. The mixed drink was only marginally better than warm, plain tequila. He wondered if he was still turning green.

"Better call your girl before you start slurring," said Crash.

"How do you know I...?"

"You mentioned her. Meredith."

"Oh. Uh, right."

Andrew stared hard into his glass and watched bubbles rise to the surface of the drink. He could feel Crash staring at him.

"Need a phone?"

"No, I've got one." Andrew took another big swallow. He was starting to feel the tequila, maybe just a couple of shots so far, sip by sip. It wasn't a bad buzz. "So...how about you?" he ventured.

"How *about* me."

"You have a, uh...a girl?"

Crash snorted. He reached under the microwave cart and into a green plastic recycle bin, and pulled something off the top of the stack. He dropped it on the countertop in front of Andrew. It was a DVD catalog. An adult DVD catalog—with a cover full of men wearing next to nothing. And holding each other.

Andrew stared at a DVD cover with a pair of men on it who had impossibly sculpted bare chests. They stood together, posing. The guy in front was clasped to the guy behind him, and both of them stared at the camera with strangely neutral expressions. They looked like they were wearing lip gloss.

He moved to back away, but Crash was there against him, just like the glossy-lipped guy on the catalog cover, his body fit against Andrew's back from thigh to shoulder. When he spoke, his voice was a low purr in Andrew's ear. "Girls are great. They smell good and they laugh at my jokes. But I don't sleep with 'em."

Oh. Andrew kept that response to himself. It was just as well. Crash didn't seem to be looking for a reply. He'd used the tip of his tongue to tease Andrew's earlobe into his

mouth and catch it between his teeth.

Andrew steeled himself against the countertop with both hands. He drew a breath and held it. Crash's hand found its way around his middle, just beneath his ribcage, and clasped their bodies together more firmly. Just like the guys on the cover.

Crash's other hand came around and slid along the front of Andrew's pants, down his thigh, and back up again to his belt. Andrew exhaled. His breath came out in a series of halting gasps.

"So what's your big hang-up?" said Crash. "You buy into the whole true-love-and-monogamy party line?"

"I don't have a hang-up."

"Sweet. 'Cos when I saw you looking through Lydia's front window, I thought to myself: 'I'm totally tappin' that.'"

"No. I mean, uh... It's just... I'm not... not that there's anything wrong with it..."

Andrew felt Crash's stomach move in silent laughter against his back. "Right. No hang-ups at all. Never let it be said that I go where I'm not wanted."

Crash started to pull back. Andrew let go of the countertop and pressed his hands over Crash's. "Wait."

Andrew felt Crash breathing against the back of his neck. Crash held himself still for a long moment, and finally he said, "I thought so." He placed his lips against Andrew's neck, and a shiver crept down Andrew's spine. "I can always tell when someone wants to hook up."

That had not been what Andrew was looking for. All he'd wanted was a reading. And a lime.

Crash trailed his teeth over the back of Andrew's neck. His rings felt hot and smooth against Andrew's palms. His hands moved in firm, broad strokes, touching Andrew from chest to hip. But not between the legs. Not quite yet.

All the while, he rocked himself into Andrew's ass. Andrew's heart started to pound. Fear, but more than that. Want?

"It's just...I've never...with a guy...."

"Never?"

"No, I mean...."

Crash's hand burrowed down the front of Andrew's waistband, past his belt, and cupped the front of his boxers. Andrew's whole body stiffened.

"As in, never-never?"

"No."

"You mean you never even kissed a guy?"

Crash's hand petted Andrew's cock through his boxers. Intense. The tequila wasn't sitting right. He was queasy from the cigarette. He couldn't think. He couldn't breathe.

"You have. And who can blame you? How about porn? What kind of porn do you download?"

Did Crash know, or had he just guessed? Andrew ground his teeth together. It had to be a lucky guess. Andrew always cleaned out his history and cookies religiously. And no one knew about that kiss with Raymond—maybe not even Raymond himself, judging by how drunk he'd been, and the fact that the next Monday at work, he'd acted like nothing had happened.

"What about dick—you suck dick?"

Andrew shook his head. He didn't trust his voice anymore.

"Your hard-on throbbed when I asked you that. Plenty of guys get off on sucking dick—especially if they've got it in their heads that they shouldn't. Otherwise, it wouldn't be any big deal."

His hand—Meredith never touched Andrew like that, so aggressively, so fast. She always teased her way up to it, stroked it with feathery touches until he had to ask her to do it harder. But Crash just wrapped his ring-stacked fingers around Andrew's cock—right through his boxers—and pumped.

"If you keep doing that, I'm gonna—"

"I know," Crash said. "You're, what, twenty-two, give or take?" Andrew was twenty-three, actually, but he had one of those faces that would probably keep getting him carded for the next ten years. "You're a jackrabbit. Get the first one out of the way and then we can go longer."

The first one? Andrew groaned.

"Then again, what's the challenge in that? If I make you ache for it, you'll come so hard you won't know what hit you."

Somewhere along the way Andrew had closed his eyes, and all he could do was feel that strong pair of hands exploring his chest, stomach and thighs like they owned him, and that male body pressing into him from the back, hard and tall, smelling of leather and cigarettes and tequila. And the bulge that kept rubbing his ass crack, the hardness that he could feel right through his pants.

"Maybe you'd get off on being so stiff that it hurts, without actually spurting. I can wrap

some electrical wire around your nuts if you wanna play it that way. Nothing like a shiny, ruby-red dick that's so hard it could fucking burst. And when you do come, eventually, it's like molten lava."

Andrew whimpered. Not loudly, but the sound was still audible.

"I'm scaring you? Come on, I'm harmless. Mostly. So how 'bout it? You gonna tell me what you actually want?" Crash jerked him off more purposefully, up and down. Hard. Fast. Each stroke threatened to drag an orgasm from the bottom of Andrew's balls. "No? Fine by me. I kick ass at Twenty Questions."

Three

Crash pulled his hand out of Andrew's slacks. Andrew's knees were like rubber. He breathed out loud and tried to focus on the yellowed kitchen wallpaper. Crash planted his hands on the countertop on either side of Andrew and pressed himself into Andrew's back.

"Let's see..." Crash's voice was right in his ear. Andrew could feel his hot, moist breath. "Kissing. Yeah. Blow job. Oh yeah. I'll bet you pretend it's a dude sucking you off when your girl gives you a hummer. And then, that you kneel down in front of him and open wide for a big, salty, veiny mouthful."

Another whimper. Andrew wished, briefly, that he could die on command. This was not the reading he had been looking for.

"Tonight's your lucky night, pretty boy. You're hungry for dick? I got some right here for you."

Crash stepped back and grabbed Andrew by the shoulder, and yanked him around so they were facing each other. "I could take you to bed..." he narrowed his eyes. "But you want it on the floor. Dirtier that way." He shrugged, and smiled. "I can do dirty."

Crash pushed down on his shoulder, hard. Andrew's knees folded. The linoleum was old and worn, with dusty baseboards and cobwebs in the corners. Was it true? Did he want it dirty? He was so hard he could feel his pulse in his balls, but that was just from the aggressive hand job. Wasn't it?

Crash stepped in front of him, feet planted wide. Andrew stared down at Crash's combat boots, and felt his cock throb again. "Get busy," said Crash. His voice was low, and less playful than it had been up until that point.

Andrew's cock ached. Dear God, that was how he liked it. His erection was caught in the fly of his boxers, and he adjusted himself, attempting to relieve the pinching of his underwear and pants.

Crash grabbed a fistful of his hair. Tears prickled Andrew's eyes. "No touching yourself. Just me. And don't make me tell you twice." He nudged his crotch into Andrew's face. Andrew forgot how to breathe for a moment, and when he remembered, he sucked air in a great, shuddering gasp.

Andrew reached for the button on the fly of Crash's jeans in a daze. They were his hands, and yet, somehow not. Disconnected. Like a shot from an online porn video. But with him in it.

Except the porn actors' hands didn't shake like that when the men touched each other.

Crash didn't offer to help him. He just stood there and waited with his hand in Andrew's hair, stroking Andrew's head with his thumb. He said nothing while Andrew fumbled with his fly. The jeans were old and soft and peeled down easily. He had no underwear on beneath them. His pubic hair was trimmed short. Andrew blinked. He'd never had another man's pubic hair just a few inches away from his face. Or another man's cock.

Crash's cock was mostly hard—thick and engorged. It just needed a stroke or two to make it stand away from his body. He nudged Andrew in the face. His cock was hot and musky against Andrew's cheek.

"Go on," said Crash. "Do it. Or were you hoping for some teabag action first?"

Andrew felt like he'd lost the ability to speak in sentences, or even words. Crash grabbed him by the hair and forced his face closer. Andrew struggled to breathe. More heat, more muskiness, and then the feel of bristly, loose skin slid over his mouth. "Gimme something to go on," said Crash, pressing his balls into Andrew's lips. "Either you're on cloud nine, or you're ready to hurl."

Andrew's head spun. He wasn't sure which way he felt, either.

Crash stopped humping Andrew's mouth and simply held himself there, his fingers spread over the back of Andrew's head. "Okay," he said, after he'd been still for what seemed like hours. Or at least a minute. "Get your cock out and give it a few strokes. But don't come."

Andrew unzipped his fly and touched himself. His own erection was so stiff it felt like his balls had been wrapped in electrical wire.

"That's right...good...why are you keeping your eyes shut so tight? You've got sexy eyes. I'd sure like to see 'em when I sink my cock into that pretty mouth of yours."

The thought of a man calling him pretty—a tall, tattooed, smoke-smelling man—made Andrew's head spin. Girls said Andrew was "cute." Never handsome, just cute. But...pretty? And sexy? He was learning all kinds of things about himself today.

"Maybe you'd like to see that, too."

Andrew felt Crash lean away. He kept a firm hold on Andrew's head while he did it. As if Andrew were even capable of getting up and walking out of there.

Andrew opened one eye, just a little. Crash reached toward the wall, where a bunch of objects hung on bare, construction-grade nails: a spatula; a rotary phone; a cork board covered in notes. Crash pulled a small mirror from the center of the collection. "Never knew this feng shui crap would have any practical application." He exhaled on the tiny mirror and buffed it on his shoulder, never letting go of Andrew's head. "Okay, eye-candy. Have a look."

At first, all Andrew could see was a reflection of the refrigerator behind him, which was covered in take-out menus. Then Crash shifted the mirror's angle, and he saw lips, and a cock. His lips. Again, like a porn video, only so much more real he could hardly think. "See it now? All right, then—it's showtime. Lick it, Andrew. Get that cockhead good and wet."

Crash's voice was calm and low, almost matter-of-fact. Andrew wondered if it was possible Crash saw what it was doing to him. Some telltale sign, a facial expression, a tic, must have been giving him away. Crash was reading him, just like a fortune teller would. How else could he know the types of things Andrew thought when he touched himself in the shower, and wished it were someone else. A man.

Andrew opened his mouth, and the mouth in the mirror opened, too. He saw a tongue, pink and wet. And then...a cock. Crash held it at mouth-level, stroking it gently. Andrew touched it with the flat of his tongue. Salty. He hadn't expected it to have a taste, had never really thought about it. His breath came faster and he wondered if he'd end up hyperventilating.

"Shh, take it easy...."

Crash let go and stroked his head. Lovingly, Andrew would have said. If they hadn't just met twenty minutes ago. Crash's cock rose and aimed itself at Andrew's mouth without the help of a hand.

"Now suck on the tip. Don't worry, I won't jam it all the way down 'till you're ready. I got all the time in the world to watch you tonguing my shaft. Mm, yeah...." Crash sighed, and his fingers pressed into Andrew's scalp.

Salt. Skin. Deeper smells. A crotch—a man's crotch. Andrew's pulse surged in his throbbing groin, and he stroked himself as he took a deep breath in through his nose and lost himself in the scent of cock. He tilted his head so he could see in the mirror—his mouth, wrapped around a shiny, wet, hard dick.

"Don't get off," Crash reminded him, and he stopped stroking. Crash rocked his hips, and started a gentle rhythm in and out of Andrew's mouth. Andrew stared at the tiny mirror, and his hard cock throbbed in time with the rhythm of the blow job.

"Pretty kid like you, hell, you can have your pick of anyone you want to go home with, y'know. If you decide you're queer. Or even if you don't, and you just wanna dabble. There's bars on Halsted, and a couple around here, too. I don't know about Arlington Heights. But I'm guessing you don't want mom or dad or Bob the janitor to see you going in or out of a gay bar."

Crash sank his cock in deeper. Andrew's mouth was filled with it—and then it retreated. In, and out. The image in the mirror slipped. He caught a glimpse of his eyelashes, his hair, the refrigerator again.

"You never know. Meredith might be hot for a threesome."

Andrew made a choking noise.

“Come on, if I was a chick, I’d wanna be the middle of a boy sandwich with a stiff dick up both holes. Wouldn’t you? Might as well float the idea by her. Sneaking around like this—it’s fun while it lasts, but eventually you get caught and all hell breaks loose.”

Crash had been pushing in just a tiny bit deeper with each thrust he took, and now Andrew’s lips grazed his pubic hair. He watched in the mirror as the ruddy, veined shaft disappeared into his mouth, felt it bump the back of his throat, and go deeper.

“God, you’re a fucking natural. Suck harder, baby. Oh, yeah. How d’you like that mouth full of dick?”

Andrew’s cock twitched.

Crash set the mirror on the countertop and took Andrew’s head in both hands. He spread his fingers through Andrew’s hair and his thrusts picked up speed. Andrew grabbed Crash’s thighs and braced himself against them. They were hard with muscle, and dusted with coarse hairs. Nothing at all like a woman’s thighs.

“Where’ll I come first?” said Crash, his voice breathy. “On your face? In your hair? In your virgin fucking mouth?”

Andrew’s cock throbbed—hard, but Crash was plunging into his throat so steadily that he didn’t dare let go of Crash’s legs to beat off.

Crash clutched Andrew’s hair so tightly it hurt, and Andrew tasted a tang at the back of his tongue. Three more deep thrusts, and then Crash pulled back. His cock had been buried so deep it seemed to pull out, and out, and out, and he let go of Andrew’s head with one of his hands so that he could stroke his cock in Andrew’s face. “Watch,” he commanded, and he held Andrew there, by the hair, while his cockhead appeared and disappeared inside the spit-wet tunnel of his fist, the slit just inches from Andrew’s eyes.

Crash’s breath caught. His pumping fist stilled with his glans just showing beyond his fingers. And then, a shock of warmth. Semen hit Andrew’s forehead and cheek. It dripped down to his mouth, which felt swollen and tender.

And the smell—bitter and sweet. Like his, but not. He’d never thought about another man’s semen having a different smell. He’d never thought about lots of things.

Crash let out another careful breath, and stroked Andrew’s cheek with his come-slicked cock. “You’re so fucking beautiful.”

Andrew moaned and closed his eyes.

He felt the spongy, hot touch of Crash’s cockhead as it painted semen across his lower lip. He realized he was shaking.

Crash let go of Andrew’s head and knelt on the floor with him. He draped his arms around Andrew’s neck and pressed their foreheads together. “You still turned on?”

Andrew focused on his cock. It was stiff. “Yes,” he whispered.

“How come you’d go all head-case on yourself if I was nice to you?”

“What do you...?”

“Just the impression I get.” He pressed his lips against Andrew’s in a slow, deliberate kiss. The come on Andrew’s mouth had gone sticky. Their lips pulled at one another and then released as Crash sat back. “C’mon, we’re going to bed. This floor needs to be swept and I’m sick of looking at it.”

He stood and hitched his jeans up with one hand, took his tumbler of tequila and soda in the other. “You want more practice? You can suck me off again while I smoke. I love that.”

Crash walked out the far door. Andrew picked up the mirror from the counter and looked at himself. His lips were red and swollen, like a woman’s lips, and semen glistened on his face. And Crash had said he was beautiful.

No, wait... “so fucking beautiful.” That’s what it was.

Four

Andrew looked up. Crash lounged in the doorway, naked, watching him.

Andrew froze. Of course he'd seen naked men before—but not like that. Crash's arms, legs and chest were covered with tattoos. The word *Mattie* curved over his stomach, and a black Virgin Mary prayed above it, on his chest. He wore a handful of necklaces, and all his rings, and bracelets stacked on both wrists. Andrew couldn't figure out where to look first.

And, of course, there was his cock, hanging there boldly between his legs. It was no longer erect, but it was still thick and flushed—ready to get hard again without much coaxing.

"You coming to bed?"

Andrew nodded.

"Don't forget your drink. Or a beer. Like I said, there's beer. Have some if you want. Or whatever's in the fridge." He turned and walked away. His ass—Andrew tried to burn the sight of it into his memory. A tribal tattoo on one of Crash's thighs wended up the side of his leg, whorled over part of his unbelievable ass. The thought of licking those curving black lines made Andrew's hard-on twitch, which reminded him that it'd been stiff nearly forever.

Andrew stood and went to the refrigerator. He didn't really want a beer, but he figured that holding it would give him something to do with his hands. He pulled out a tall, brown bottle and tried to screw off the cap, but it didn't budge. He looked around for a bottle opener. There was none.

"I'm starting without you," Crash called out.

Andrew stared at the doorway Crash had gone through. The afterimage of him standing there, all tattoos and jewelry and nakedness, was permanently seared into Andrew's mind. Maybe that was all he needed. He could visit that memory whenever he wanted, and no one would ever know. There'd be no files to erase, no cookies to clear.

"And bring my smokes, wouldja?"

Andrew glanced at the pack of Camel Lights on top of the microwave. He could just leave, and take that image with him. He could drive home slowly, or maybe just get a hotel room in the city and sleep off the few shots of tequila he'd had. And maybe his mouth would look like his mouth again if he gave it a few hours to cool off.

He felt the semen on his face tighten as it dried. He could do all those things. But his cock ached so badly with the need to come that he wouldn't. He picked up the cigarettes, pulled up his pants awkwardly with the hand that held the beer bottle, and shuffled through the door at the far end of the kitchen.

The door led to a cramped bathroom, and through there, the bedroom.

The room was small, chaotic. The walls were covered with clippings and drawings, some of them penned directly on the walls themselves. The floor was buried so deep with piles of clothes and books that Andrew couldn't tell if it was carpet or hardwood. Crash lay on the bed, watching Andrew approach. He had one arm tucked under his head. His other hand was stroking his cock. He was hard again.

He gave Andrew a lazy half-smile. "Light me a cigarette."

Andrew put his unopened beer on the bedside table, wedging it between a clock radio covered in dust, a full ash tray, and a stack of papers and books. He pulled a cigarette out of the pack. His hands were still shaking. A mangled book of matches leaned against the ash tray. He picked it up and ripped out a match. He struck the match against the back of the cover, repeatedly. It seemed to take forever to light the cigarette, and all the while, Crash just watched, stroking his hard cock.

Andrew took a drag, got an immediate head rush which he instantly regretted, and handed over the lit cigarette. Crash inhaled, and blew out a stream of smoke, never letting go of his dick. His eyes stayed on Andrew's. He smoked some more, and kept on stroking, unhurried and matter-of-fact, just like his voice had been when he'd said all those dirty things to Andrew in the kitchen.

Andrew wondered if Crash was going to say anything at all, or if he was just going to lay there and masturbate. And smoke. And stare. But finally, when Andrew was ready to scream just for the sake of filling in the awkward silence, Crash said, "Take off your clothes."

Andrew unbuttoned the front of his shirt, and then his cuffs. His face felt like it was burning up. Meredith never stared at him when he got undressed, not like that. And she was perfectly happy to let everything happen in the dark, too. But now, Andrew felt like his every move was being analyzed. He had no idea if he should try to act sexy—whatever the hell that would entail—or if he should strip down as quickly as possible and just pray that he didn't fall over while he was taking off his pants.

Crash picked up the ash tray, set it on his stomach, and moved closer to the wall. His pillowcases and sheets were all different colors and patterns than the duvet, and different from one another, too. There was no headboard. The plain mattress was just pushed against the wall on two sides. "I meant what I said," he told Andrew. "Get over here and blow me while I smoke."

Andrew climbed into the bed. It felt nothing like his bed. Or Meredith's bed. And Andrew's head spun at the sight of that totally naked tattooed body sprawled out in front of him.

Crash stopped stroking himself and pointed his cock toward Andrew. He raised his eyebrows expectantly.

Andrew bent down and lowered his mouth onto Crash's cockhead. He felt a dull throb in his jaw, an ache as if he'd been chewing an old piece of gum too long, and realized that he was sore from giving head. He might have moaned over the thought that his jaw ached from a man's cock being crammed down his throat...if his mouth weren't full.

The smell of sex was even stronger now, but again, entirely different than it was with women. Crash's cock dragged at his lips and tongue until he dredged up some saliva and gave it a few licks, and then it slid home easily. Andrew worked past the ache and went deep—that was how he liked it, as deep as possible, so he figured it was the thing to do—and Crash said, "Mm...sweet."

Andrew felt Crash's fingers on his back, tracing down his shoulder blade and ribs, then back up again. Crash sank his fingers into Andrew's hair and encouraged him to go even deeper, all the way down. Andrew heard Crash exhale. "Fuck, baby, that's so hot," he said.

"Baby" again? Andrew shivered. It was strange and he didn't know what to make of it, but hearing it said in a man's voice seemed to push his buttons. Crash was grunting his encouragement in a steady stream of noises, and Andrew felt bold. He sucked harder, and ran his hand up Crash's thigh—he'd had no idea thighs could be such a turn-on. He pressed his fingertips into the hard muscle, and Crash's hips twitched his cock even deeper down Andrew's throat. "Play with my nutsack."

Andrew cupped Crash's balls and stroked them while he sucked. Crash made louder noises and squirmed beneath Andrew's mouth and hand. Andrew ground his hard-on into the bedcovers and kept on sucking. He heard the crunch of a cigarette being stubbed out.

Crash's hand tightened in his hair again. "Okay, okay. Damn. That mouth of yours is a lethal weapon."

Crash set the ashtray aside. He patted the mattress. "C'mon, up here."

Andrew shifted awkwardly. The bed wasn't really big enough for both of them. He stretched himself onto the narrow strip between Crash and the edge of the bed, and held his breath so that he didn't touch either of them. Once he positioned himself, Crash smirked and grabbed him. He hooked his heel around Andrew's calves and rolled, so that he came out straddling Andrew's legs. Andrew was acutely aware of how *naked* they both were.

Crash leaned forward and dragged his ringed fingers down Andrew's chest. "Are you a tit man, Andrew?"

Andrew had thought they'd established that all of his fantasizing lately had centered around men. And then Crash grabbed one of his nipples and twisted.

Andrew's back arched up off the bed.

“Hoo, yeah. I hit a nerve.” Crash clamped his strong thighs around Andrew’s hips and went at his nipples two-handed. “That’s right—squirm. You ain’t going nowhere, and I’m gonna play with you ‘til you beg for mercy.”

Andrew tried to suppress another whimper, and failed. Crash rolled one nipple, then the other, then both. He alternated pressure and rhythm, and every squeeze sent a jolt straight to Andrew’s balls. Andrew’s eyes were shut tight, but every time he cracked one open to get a peek at the guy who was torturing his nipples into a state of flushed numbness, he found Crash staring right back at him, gazing down into his face.

“I feel your stiff dick against my ass crack,” he said.

Andrew whimpered again.

“You’re so wound up that you’re leaking precome.” He gave his hips a little grind. “Feel it?”

Maybe there was something slippery between Crash’s thigh and his hipbone, maybe not. All Andrew knew was that his nipples were on fire.

Crash let go of one nipple, and the sensation of the release exploded over Andrew’s aching chest. Andrew gasped and his hips thrust upward. Crash smiled to himself as he reached into the drawer of his bedside table.

“What do you think? Can I make you scream before the night’s over?” Crash brought a condom to his mouth and tore the wrapper open with his teeth.

“Oh God.”

Crash raised his eyebrows. “You know you’ve been fucking too many pagans when the singular starts sounding weird.” He spit the wrapper onto the bed, swung his leg over Andrew’s thighs so that he had one foot on the floor, gave Andrew’s other nipple a final hard squeeze and then let go of that, too.

Andrew clapped his hands over his nipples. They were ridiculously hard. They stung.

“We’re not exchanging anything other than spit, got it? That’s why I didn’t shoot down your throat, back there in the kitchen. Well—that, and I was dying to come all over your gorgeous red lips.”

Andrew’s head reeled. He wouldn’t have stopped Crash from coming anywhere he damn well pleased. Crash grabbed Andrew’s cock and stroked the damp slit with his thumb. Andrew stifled a moan as Crash rolled the condom over his hard cock, and then gave it a few more quick strokes as if to test the fit. Andrew felt the strokes reverberate from his nipples to his balls.

“Please let me come.” Andrew mumbled it, mashed it all together into one long word. But Crash heard it. He stopped with his hand on Andrew’s cock and swiveled his head to stare Andrew in the face.

"You're fucking crazy hot when you beg," he said. His voice was low too, and totally serious. "And that's about the first honest thing you've said all night." Crash stood over Andrew, still holding his cock, and grabbed him by the wrist with the other hand. He pulled Andrew's hand away from his chest and shoved his arm into the mattress. He was strong. The thought of being overpowered sent a pang of need rushing down to Andrew's stiff cock. Crash bent his head to Andrew's sore nipple and flicked it with his tongue.

"That's not true...oh God, oh God."

Teeth. Not hard. Just there. Pressing.

"Oh, fuck." Andrew's voice sounded high and wild.

Crash held himself, poised to bite, for another one of his painfully long pauses, and then the teeth were gone, and he finished off his torment with another tongue flick. He stood up and stared down into Andrew's face, and stroked his cock with only enough pressure to maintain Andrew's arousal. "I think you're masochistic. Not that there's anything wrong with that."

Andrew jerked his head back and forth. The pillow smelled like hairspray and cigarettes.

Crash let go of Andrew, both his wrist, and his cock. He rummaged in the drawer of the bedside table and pulled out a plastic bottle. "You don't think so? Here's what I got so far. You have a girl in the 'burbs, but you come home with a total stranger because you supposedly want your palm read."

"But I do—"

"Every time I play nasty with you, you get ten times hotter than you would if it were candy and flowers and hugs and kisses." He squirted some clear gel into his palm, then tossed the bottle onto the bed. He smoothed the gel over the condom, and Andrew struggled to keep from flexing his hips toward Crash's slippery hand. Crash reached back and gave his ass a quick, careless swipe. Andrew wondered if he could breathe with his heart pounding up in his throat. Crash straddled his hips.

"It's not a criticism, just an observation. Who am I to judge? I don't mind playing rough when everyone's head is on straight."

Crash took Andrew's cock in his hand and stood it up. Aiming. He glanced back over his shoulder and adjusted his stance. He sank down.

Tight. Andrew squeezed his eyes shut, and clenched his teeth, and gripped the sheets with both hands. So tight.

Crash grunted, and shifted his hips. He let his breath out slowly. "Yeah...how do you like your dick up my ass?"

Andrew scrunched his eyes shut harder.

Crash rose up on his knees, then sank back down. Small motions at first, grinding their

bodies together. He found Andrew's nipples with both hands and started playing with them again, pinching, rolling, tugging, only now one hand was slippery, and the sensations built and built until Andrew's whole chest felt flushed and tingly. Crash rocked against him, slow, deep fucking, and beneath him, Andrew lay back and strained to keep quiet.

"Aren't you gonna look at me—watch me ride your hot, young cock?"

Crash stroked Andrew's face. The lubricant on his hand smelled like cherry licorice. Andrew opened his eyes, just a slit, as if that would allow him to close them that much faster if he couldn't bear to watch anymore. Crash smiled, and raked his tongue stud over his lower teeth. Andrew's eyes went to his tattoos. A dragon. A skull. Shapes and colors that blurred together as the muscles beneath them bunched and released and his body rose and fell, rose and fell, up and down Andrew's hard cock.

Crash reared up, almost to the point where Andrew worried that he'd slip out. Crash raised his eyebrows. "Now that everything's good and wet, how 'bout you take the wheel?"

Andrew grit his teeth in frustration. He'd been close, really close. He needed to come.

Five

Crash rolled off, and Andrew's dick flopped onto his stomach. "Tell me you've never thought about jamming your meat up some guy's ass."

Andrew rolled onto his side. He could visualize his favorite videos—the locker room, the pool hall, the space station—well, that one was silly, but one of the actors had such an amazing body, a swimmer's build.... There always seemed to be plenty of room to maneuver in adult videos. Big beds, thickly carpeted floors. Crash rolled Andrew's nipple between his fingers and Andrew felt his cock twitch. "Lay back," Andrew said. His voice sounded husky and strange.

Crash grinned wider. "Yeah? Gonna stick it to me?"

"Yeah."

Crash rolled Andrew on top of him. Andrew found himself kneeling between Crash's legs and wondering at how completely, utterly naked they both were.

"Gonna fuck me good and hard?"

"Yeah." It was almost a whisper.

Crash pulled one of his knees up to his chest. "Then let's get down to business." There were tattoos on his hips and thighs, abstract, thorny-looking things. Andrew looked between his thighs and stared at his ass. It glistened with lube.

"C'mon, stud. I know you've got it in you."

Andrew brushed his fingertips over Crash's anus. Goosebumps sprang up on Crash's thighs.

"That's right, baby. Tease it."

Andrew swallowed hard. He'd never figured out how to open his beer, and he didn't think he could keep down another mouthful of the ginger ale-laced tequila. He pressed his fingertip against the pucker of Crash's ass. Crash shivered. "Touch your cock," he said. "Touch it while you play with me."

The condom felt slimy and strange. Andrew gave himself a few strokes anyway.

"Tease my hole with the tip of your dick. Rub it all around."

Andrew worked his way into position. He was acutely aware of the way Crash's thighs encircled him, tattooed and hairy, wiry with muscle. His own cock even looked strange in his hand. It wasn't his usual brand of condom, and it was gleaming with lube. And it was positioned under another man's balls.

He steered his cock so that the tip of the condom played over Crash's hole. Crash squirmed. "Look how hard I am. I bet I can come again while you fuck me."

Andrew paused while the words sank in.

Crash nudged Andrew's cock with his ass. "You're thinking too much. Tab A, slot B. Insert."

Andrew stroked himself some more, and drew greasy circles around Crash's asshole.

"If you're tripping—don't. I like getting fucked. It feels good, especially if you angle it right. Sure, the first few times it can hurt, depending on the way your partner's hung, and whether or not he's got any finesse."

Andrew had stopped moving, and was staring hard at the condom's reservoir tip.

"I can fuck you, if you want. I promise, I'll be gentle."

Andrew's thighs clamped together, and a sick thrill shot up his spine. He snuck a look at Crash's face. Crash was grinning. "So, are you gonna tease me all night, or are you gonna—"

Andrew pushed in.

Tight. So tight. Tighter than before, when Crash had been on top.

Crash's eyes were closed. He'd caught his lower lip between his teeth and he groaned. "Aim your dick toward my balls," he whispered.

Andrew settled his hands palm-down on the mattress and pushed in.

"Mm, nice." Crash wrapped his long legs around Andrew's waist. "C'mon, come closer. Fuck me good." Tattooed arms slipped around Andrew's neck and pulled him down. Their naked bodies ground together. Andrew felt Crash's hard cock brush his lower belly, and Crash's breathing was damp in the crook of his shoulder. Andrew wanted to go faster, to fuck harder, to get the whole thing over with and come.

Crash took Andrew's face in both hands and twisted his neck until their mouths lined up. "Kiss me," he said. He pressed his lips against Andrew's, and parted them with his tongue.

His mouth tasted of cigarettes and tequila, and Andrew's did too—but Andrew's face was taut with dried semen. He probably tasted like come, on top of everything else. Crash's ass squeezed his cock tight as he thought this, and he shivered all over. Crash stroked Andrew's body with his thighs, and his tongue darted in, entering Andrew's mouth while

Andrew rocked into his ass.

Andrew tried to turn his head, but Crash held it firm. He kissed Andrew deeper, and his tongue stud clattered against the insides of Andrew's teeth. Andrew's hips flexed and his cock sank in, right down to the root. Crash moaned into his mouth and sucked on his tongue. Crash kissed deep and hard, nothing like a girl, and nothing like Raymond, either, who'd been tentative and kind of sloppy.

Crash's grip loosened. He kept his hands on Andrew's face, but gently now, as his tongue moved slow and sure, like it could pry all of Andrew's secrets from him by probing through his mouth. Andrew could have turned away, but he didn't. He focused on the feel of a stranger's mouth pressed against his—the teeth, the tongue with its hard metal stud, the solid, masculine lips and the gentle scrape of stubble against his chin.

They moved together, mouth to mouth, body to body. Thoughts of the strangeness of it all began to slip away as Andrew focused only on the sensations, the smell of smoke and old hairspray and Crash's musky sheets, the taste of tequila, and the hot, sweet tightness of his ass, and Andrew began to experience it for what it was, rather than what it was not.

Andrew's thrusting grew steady and deep as he found a way that the two of them seemed to fit together. Crash moaned into his mouth and kissed him more urgently. His fingers wove through Andrew's hair, and he flexed his back so that his ass met Andrew's thrusts. And suddenly, everything felt so incredibly right.

Andrew broke their kiss, but only to hold Crash against him harder. They both encouraged one another with wordless sounds, gasps and moans, and their tongues trailed over each others' cheeks and jaws. Andrew sucked Crash's collarbone. Crash breathed—deep, shuddering breaths—loud and wet in Andrew's ear. “Aw, yeah, I'm gonna...yeah....” His breath hitched, and Andrew could feel his orgasm coursing through him. Crash clenched his ass tight when he came, and the tension and the heat, and the moaning and the arching, and the fingers grasping his hair, all of it brought Andrew straight to the brink, and then, over the edge.

Their mouths found each other again as Andrew peaked, and their tongues twined as he let go and gave in to the unstoppable waves of pure, hot pleasure.

Andrew came hard, and his body shook with tremors long after he was done shooting. Crash wrapped his long limbs around Andrew's body and held him, and pressed gentle kisses into his hair, and didn't speak.

Six

Crash actually drifted off like that, if Andrew judged correctly by his breathing, which left Andrew alone with his awkwardness, his guilt, and a soggy condom. He counted cigarette butts—twenty-eight in the ashtray, and another that had spilled over the side. He rolled his eyes down as much as he could without moving his head and tried to determine what the tattoo under his cheek was supposed to be, but Andrew was too close, and the design just looked like a blur of color and line. He watched the digital clock go from 6:59 to 7:00. It felt so much later than that. About ten years later.

But eventually the uncomfortable need to urinate prompted Andrew to try to peel his body off of Crash's. He held on to the condom and pulled out, and looked around for somewhere to throw it away. He wished he could wrap it in a tissue first, but there wasn't one. There wasn't a garbage can, either. He headed for the bathroom.

"Don't flush it," said Crash. Andrew hadn't realized he was fully awake. "The pipes in these old buildings are lousy. There's a garbage in the kitchen."

Had Crash been reading his mind? There had to be some real psychics in the world; Andrew had been hearing about it on TV ever since he was a little kid. Maybe Crash was one of them.

But if he was, would he really be living in this dangerous part of the city, in a run-down apartment with curling linoleum and bad plumbing, where you had to pass through the bathroom to get to your bed? After all, what else would Andrew have been thinking about, standing there with a used condom dangling from his hand? He threw the condom away and came back into the bathroom. He tried to close the door and it didn't budge. About twenty pairs of shoes, sneakers and combat boots were piled in the way.

"Don't worry. I've already seen your unmentionables," said Crash.

Andrew peered through the bedroom door. He could see Crash's bare feet. They were very male feet—with long toes and a dusting of hair across the top. His legs had hair on them too, brownish hair, and the thorny tattoo wound down around one of his ankles.

Andrew stared for a moment, and then realized that the longer he stood there without using the toilet, the dumber he'd look. Crash couldn't see Andrew unless he sat up and made a point of looking, but even so, the bed was only a few yards away from the bathroom, and every last splash had to be clearly audible. A bug crept by on the wall. Andrew told himself it was just a water bug, but he strongly suspected it was a roach. He wondered if he'd end up bringing roaches home in his clothing, and if Meredith would then see them, and somehow piece together where he'd been. What he'd done.

That stuff about him being a masochist? That was totally off the mark. Andrew had just been caught up in the heat of the moment. That was all. And Crash couldn't have been reading his mind. He'd just been "reading" Andrew's mannerisms or facial expressions, in the way that a palmist or a tarot reader would have.

"Are you gonna drink your tequila? 'Cos if you're not, I want it."

"Go ahead." Andrew made a fist with his free hand, and squeezed it so tightly that his nails dug into his palm. He was able to urinate, finally, and he stifled a sigh of relief that Crash probably would have heard over the sound of his pissing.

He washed the slimy condom residue off as best he could and dried himself with the tattered hand towel that hung beside the sink. He wondered where his clothes had landed. He wished he'd undressed in the bathroom. Then they'd be right there, and he could put them on and slip out the door.

When Andrew returned to the bedroom Crash was still naked, and smoking a cigarette. He had a tumbler of tequila in his hand. It rested on his bare stomach. He watched Andrew with heavy-lidded eyes, and he took a slow drag. "Don't go," he said. Smoke curled out of his nostrils and mouth when he spoke.

Andrew looked into his eyes and waited for the sarcastic remark that would surely follow. But it never came. Crash was serious.

"I mean, I won't stop you. If you want to go, you can. But what is it that you actually want? Other than a lime? The palm reading...you can get that in the morning. We'll hear Lydia unlocking the door. It sticks. It always sounds like the cops are raiding her when she kicks it in." He took another long drag, and a swallow of his drink. "I want you to stay. We can just hang, watch a movie. Or..." he glanced down at his cock. "I can probably be ready for action again in a few." He met Andrew's gaze and smiled. It wasn't an entirely innocent smile. "I think you should stay."

Andrew raked his gaze down Crash's body one more time. His nipples were small and taut. Andrew wondered how he'd like them twisted and licked, and how they'd look once they were flushed and rock-hard from being sucked. A line of hair started just under Crash's belly button and led down to his pubes. And his hipbones made the most interesting curve on either side of his flat stomach. Andrew hadn't gotten the chance to explore any of that. And he was dying to run his hands over those lean, hard thighs just one more time.

Crash patted the mattress. "C'mere."

Andrew knelt in a pile of clothes and rested his elbows on the bed. Crash placed the lit cigarette between his lips. The filter was damp at the edge. Andrew took a drag and blew the smoke over Crash's shoulder.

Crash picked up the beer and struck the cap against the edge of the dresser. The cap spun away, and landed somewhere among the books and shoes. There was a small gouge left in the dresser, one of many. Beer foamed out of the bottle and rolled down the side.

Crash licked the foam from the edge of his hand, then leaned forward to pass the bottle to Andrew. He pressed the bottle into Andrew's hand, and then he leaned in closer.

Andrew held the cigarette in one hand and the sticky bottle in the other, and he looked into Crash's eyes, the eyes of the man he'd just slept with. Andrew stretched forward to fit his mouth against Crash's for a long, slow, smoke and tequila flavored kiss.

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