



Acquisitions and Mergers

A Torquere Press Arcana
by *Lucius Parhelion*

I

A hand smacked Trip's wingtip shoe, hard. "Get your feet off your desk. We're going to be late."

Trip looked up from his copy of *Galaxy*. Cornered, and in the middle of a story by Cordwainer Smith. "I was getting ready."

"Which is why you're hiding in your office with most of the lights off, reading." Bob reached over and whisked the April 1960 issue of *Galaxy* out of Trip's hands. Trip didn't resist, but he did watch the magazine go with what he knew must be a mournful gaze.

Not that, mournful gaze or no, Bob would have mercy. Not when this much money was at stake. After picking up a memo about Research and Development's operating expenses from Trip's inbox, he marked Trip's page, opened the top drawer of Trip's desk, dropped in *Galaxy*, and slammed the drawer shut with the flourish that he added to any gesture meant to make a point. "Stop stalling. You only have to fake an interest in matters financial until we're done with negotiations this evening, and at a nightclub at that. There'll even be a floor show to distract the B.T.C execs from your evident discomfort."

"I hate nightclubs." Trip stood up and reached for the hanger on the coat rack that held his suit coat.

"Oh, really?" Bob raised both eyebrows. "What a surprise." His tone was ironic, his expression miffed in a way that resembled FaLa, Melinda's Siamese. No, FaLa was Bob's Siamese now. In either case, annoyed cat was an expression that suited Bob's dark and polished looks. A youngish George Macready without the scar.

With the ease of many years of practice, Trip derailed his train of thought and concentrated on donning his suit coat. While he adjusted his cuffs, Bob said, "You also hate business politics. For once, you'll have to cope. And behave. Our dinner partners are both senior executives at their firms, so no wild speculations about the future, none of your notions about politics, and no hobby talk aside from fishing, baseball, and racquetball."

Trip looked up, irritated. He wasn't that bad. "I guess I'll just have to tell them tales about my relaxing visits to the Everard Baths."

"Oh, how amusing. I'm dying from the laughter. So would the deal." Bob's features softened from annoyed to surprised. "What the hell did you do to your tie?"

"What?"

Stepping forward, Bob seized both ends of Trip's rep tie between forefinger and thumb, and flapped them. "The thinner end is on top of the thicker end."

Trip stepped back and yanked his tie free. Then he picked up the ends so that he could examine them. "Huh. You're right."

"Astonishing."

"It didn't start out reversed. I wonder how I did that."

"R&D later, important business dinner now. Fix it."

"I must have done something complex to the knot. Let's see. I was thinking about Gould's optical pumping paper again while I worked, and I--" Letting go of the ends, Trip started moving his hands through the motions needed to tie a four-in-hand knot.

Bob stepped back in and hooked two fingers under the tie where it disappeared beneath Trip's shirt collar. "Do it again; no creativity this time." He was a few inches shorter than Trip, and, at close range, he had to tilt his head up for his dark blue eyes to meet Trip's gaze. Almost any man would have had to: Trip still had the build of the linebacker he'd been at prep. Bob wasn't intimidated, of course. Instead, he was trying to seem stern and not quite succeeding. "Look, do you need me to retie it for you?"

Hastily, Trip stepped away, lifting his chin to slip the tie off of Bob's fingertips. "No, I'll do that." He pulled his tie loose, turned up his shirt collar, and fixed the knot as Bob studied his Swiss wristwatch and muttered about Manhattan uptown traffic this time of night. "Done."

Bob inspected the result. "Better."

"I warn you. This is how it looked before I came to work."

"We'll have to take our chances. If we don't get downstairs and catch a taxi, we really will be late."

"You came to fetch me early?"

"I know you. Oh, how I know you."

"Right, fine," Trip said. He'd bet he was still looking glum as he reached for his Burberry, hanging from the rack. That Cordwainer Smith story had been good, darn it.

"Come on, the evening won't be too bad. Just play the brilliant scientist who can talk about the Yankees. I'll take care of the rest." Bob punched Trip lightly on the upper arm.

"I'm not actually trying to duck this, you know." Trip slapped his chest. "Brooks Brothers suit. My Brass Rat." He wagged the finger that held his gold class ring from M.I.T. "And note that I'm wearing reading glasses like you suggested. My back-up pair."

"Good choice. Those horn-rims would frighten a burlesque dancer. They'll go a long ways toward toning down the brawn and playing up the brain." Bob tossed Trip his fedora. "We have to be careful. Not everyone knows that you'd have been the pride of the M.I.T. football squad if they'd had one. We want them to see valuable researcher, not Cro-Magnon man."

"Cro-Magnon, nothing. All this social gamesmanship makes me feel more like a gigolo. And the setting won't help." Trip held his office door open for Bob before he shut and locked it behind them.

The lab was dark and empty; a quick glance reassured Trip that none of the remaining equipment had been left out on the benches when the technicians had gone home earlier in the evening. Instead the lab was filled with boxes, packed for the move on Friday. He and Bob went through the swinging doors and past the emergency shower toward the elevator.

Trip pushed the button to bring it up. "I still don't know why this corporate blow-out's at a nightclub. Why not a dinner party?"

"Courtesy. Lets them keep the party stag."

"Why in the hell-- Oh." Great, now Trip felt anything but brilliant. Considering the size of this deal, Business Tech and Com must have researched backgrounds. They'd know that Bob had only been widowed for a year and change, fifteen months and five days to be exact. Bob wasn't even back to surveying the female landscape yet, let alone dating. Coming up with a dinner partner would have been a strain.

This time Bob's glance at Trip was both sardonic and affectionate. "That's right, Dr. In-House Genius, 'Oh'. You see, they're not so bad."

"Ha. Not so bad, nothing. They're worried about our deal."

"Given how badly they want the assignment of your patents to clear their own, they'd better be." The elevator doors opened and Bob fell silent as they stepped inside. Trip wasn't surprised to see two of the fellows from accounting already in the elevator. Selling their company to B.T.C. was leading to lots of late nights for the employees of D&E Optical Engineering.

"Good evening, Mr. Eck. Good evening, Dr. Doyle," the guy on the right said. He was the older of the pair, a senior accountant, and Trip couldn't remember his name.

"Mr. Eck, Dr. Doyle," the junior harmonized. Fred Ceretti, Trip recalled. He handled cost accounting for R&D. He was also a trim and amazingly lush-assed brunet. That helped along Trip's memory, maybe more than it should.

"Evening, gentlemen," Bob replied. His smile was formal but warm. He'd turned on the fake patrician charm. "I hope you're not having to spend too many late hours apart from your families."

Mr. Senior smiled in return. "Not at all. We in Accounts want the acquisition to go smoothly."

Fred nodded vigorously, and Bob dialed up the warmth of his smile before he said, "Not much longer, now. Our side of the paperwork will be done by the end of the week."

Both the accountants beamed. The bell for the ground floor dinged. How was it that Bob could tell people what they already knew and still leave them acting like he'd taken them deep into his confidence?

Bob strode out of the elevator, and Trip trailed in his wake through the lobby feeling like a troop transport being escorted by a very determined destroyer. They went through the revolving door, and Bob raised one hand. To no one's surprise, a cab immediately pulled up to the curb. Bob opened the rear door, slid across the back seat with his typical, swift grace, and told the cabbie, "The Copa up on east 60th," while Trip was still folding himself into the remaining space.

For all of Bob's dire predictions, the uptown traffic was fine. They reached the Copacabana without a hitch, and were handing over their coats to the hat-check girl five minutes before they were supposed to arrive. While Bob collected the checks, Trip blinked, bemused, at the cheesecake photographs on the display board in the lobby that advertised the floor show. As far as he was concerned, it was a huge waste of feminine pulchritude.

He hadn't told Bob the complete truth about hating nightclubs. Trip could handle the smaller clubs like the Village Vanguard; jammed rooms with tiny tables where you ordered a hamburger and bottle of wine, and settled in to listen to a single comedian or a couple of musicians. It was these old-fashioned places that only survived on expense account money that made him nervous, big, luxurious clubs complete with cigarette girls and costumed bands. To tell the truth, Trip was sometimes at sea in normal company even with Bob along to help him out.

"Bob!" Trip turned to see a heavy-set, beaming fiftyish sort in an expensive suit approaching Bob with hand outstretched. "Good to see you!"

"Mr. Barber," Bob said, his tone neatly compromising between deferential and hail-fellow-well-met. "I hope we aren't late."

"No, right on time." Barber looked over at his companion, who had the sleek and deadly look of a rising investment banker and had been talking to the maître d'. "Everything okay with the reservation?"

"Yes," his companion said. He turned to Bob. "Hello, Bob." They shook hands. And here it came.

"Of course, you've both heard all about Dr. Doyle." Bob moved over to the display board to clap Trip on the shoulder.

Barber turned. For a brief moment, upon seeing Trip, he looked startled before he beamed again. "Of course. A pleasure to meet you, Doctor. I've heard great things about your work." He extended his hand and Trip stepped forward for the shake, making his grip neither hard enough to crush nor gentle enough to seem sissy.

"Thank you," Trip said. "A pleasure." Not really.

"This is Michael Harkness," Barber said. He indicated the likely investment banker. "He's from Lewis and Sterne."

"How do you do?" Trip asked, shaking again. Just fine, he'd bet. That was a Dartmouth class ring on the fellow's right hand, no surprise there.

"Let's get seated and order some drinks. I'm driving with the needle on empty," Mr. Barber said. The maître d', who had waited patiently through the glad-handing, guided them through the leather-covered doors into the main dining room and around the edge of the dance floor.

Steaks, show girls, and many too many dry martinis later, Trip had had more than enough. He'd talked about the Yankees, refrained from saying anything significant about the Mercury Redstone Booster, and even descended to discovering the inevitable mutual acquaintances with Harkness. He'd flirted with the cigarette girl. He'd laughed at Barber's jokes, one of them a stupid chestnut involving a Scot, an Irishman, and a Jew. And all of this, to Trip's dismay, had taken place while they were being served by a waiter he recognized.

It had taken Trip a while to identify the vaguely familiar features. During their recent encounter at the baths, he'd been much more interested in the waiter's cock than his face. However, the friendly glint in the fellow's eyes every time he served Trip had been a giveaway. Not that Trip had responded or been expected to respond: the unspoken codes of gay life in Manhattan were strict. If the waiter had been asked, he'd have claimed they'd never met. Trip was a little unnerved, was all.

Trip tried to follow Bob's instructions about negotiations as they ate. He even succeeded for the most part. Bob had only had to kick him under the table once, when Trip started to say what he really thought about inheritance taxes during the discussion of the financial arrangements for selling the company he and Bob had begun together soon after the war. That was okay. However, when Barber eased back, lit a cigar, and started complaining about the upcoming election, Trip was done.

Leaning over to Harkness, he murmured, "Excuse me. I realized I have to call one of my assistants about an experimental run tomorrow," and got up from the table. Then he worked his way past the palm trees and over toward the pay telephones, veered into the corridor that led to the restrooms, and was soon locked into a stall in the men's room. This way of hiding was a juvenile tactic that he'd used too often as a teenager at prep, but it still worked. Three minutes of alternately studying the stall door and the back of his

hands, and he was ready to return to the table and reinforce Bob again. But just as he'd pulled himself together, he heard the sound of the door, footsteps, and voices. Barber and Harkness had come in to use the urinals.

Trip didn't identify them until Barber said, "--the Doc's right about Mickey Mantle. Hard to believe he's a fag, what with that build and all. I would have fingered Eck, maybe, but not him."

"No, Mr. Eck is fine. As for Dr. Doyle, he was a linebacker at Exeter, and he had a good war, but he doesn't try as hard as he might to hide his preferences." That was Harkness. "It's not unknown. Some of them overcompensate."

"Yeah, I'd heard that. Well, as long as we have first dibs on anything else Doyle comes up with about the gain medium problem, we're fine. Too bad we can't bring him in-house, but Defense would throw a fit if they found out. Might as well be a Red to their way of thinking." Barber snorted. "I'm surprised the Feds successfully managed the Manhattan Project, given the way they shriek like spinsters at the crazy crap highbrows enjoy."

Harkness laughed. "All the more opportunities for B.T.C."

"You've got that right," Barber retorted, now sounding good-natured. There came the sound of a zipper, and the urinal flushed.

A few seconds later, Trip heard the noise of running water from the direction of the sinks, and Harkness said, "In any case, walling up Dr. Doyle in the laboratory that he and Mr. Eck will retain will shield B.T.C--"

That was all Trip heard before the door swung shut behind the pair. Sighing, he stood up and reached down for his trousers. Seemingly, his old hiding place no longer worked as well as he'd thought.

The floor show was over and couples were out on the floor dancing. Back at the table, all three men were chatting about the U2 incident, but Bob's comments sounded absent-minded. As Trip sat down, Bob was gazing at the entwined pairs of dancers, his expression shuttered. Trip had to nudge him with an elbow before Bob asked, "Everything okay?"

"Yes," Trip said and smiled. "Lin told me how promising the new run--" He didn't think that the way he stopped himself was too clearly phony.

"Glad to hear everything's peachy back at the lab," Barber said and smiled. Like Mack the Knife, his smile displayed all too many teeth. "You'll have to let us know what you're working on."

Before Trip could fake any hemming and hawing, his waiter acquaintance from the baths showed up at the table, along with the maître d' and one of the showgirls pushing a trolley. Trip looked with horror at the trolley's burden: a cake, complete with forty candles, all burning brightly.

Barber removed his latest cigar from his mouth and said jovially, "Happy Birthday, Doc! Champagne and cake all around! Hell, the needle's only on half-full."

"Happy birthday, Dr. Doyle," Harkness added more sedately.

"Happy birthday, Trip," Bob said, his most brilliant and charismatic public smile firmly in place.

"Thank you," Trip said. "Thank you very much." He had to wait through the showgirl's rendition of "Happy Birthday," to lean close to Bob and murmur, "Of course, you're a dead man."

"Too bad. You should have been born in June, after all this'll be over, like I was," Bob murmured back, before he turned to laugh at another of Barber's jokes.

Sprawled out in the back seat of the taxicab, Trip tried throwing his forearm over his eyes. All the smoke and noise in the nightclub had given him a headache. And wearing his reading glasses the entire evening had been a mistake. With a sigh, he groped around with his free hand and rolled down the window. The air outside was cool and smelled like rain, asphalt, and automobile exhaust. You couldn't call the Manhattan streets at two a.m. quiet, but at least they weren't loud enough to make his head worse. And the breeze was nice even if the arm over his eyes didn't help as much as he'd hoped.

"Headache?" Bob asked.

With closed eyes, Trip nodded. "I shouldn't have worn reading glasses for that long."

"Why don't you let the cab go? Come in for a couple of aspirin." Bob's voice was low and soothing.

"Sure. You only want me for your postmortem."

"That's right. I'm going to perform the autopsy on our coffee table. You and your love of cheap thrillers." Now that they were out of the public gaze, Bob was back to the sarcasm he saved for his intimates. "I already know how the evening went: the way I wanted."

"And how. I heard Barber and Harkness in the head. Their motives are as you predicted. About the company, I mean."

"Oh?" There was a brief hesitation, and Bob said, "Tell me what you overheard when we get inside. We're turning the corner."

Bob and Melinda had bought a nice brownstone in Murray Hill, mostly with her money, years before her death. The neighborhood was predictably quiet this time of night, unlike Trip's block on the east fringe of Greenwich. A few minutes in the brownstone might be easier on his headache than time spent in his own place, too close to both a bar and a coffee-house. Trip dropped his forearm. "Fine, okay."

They got out and Trip paid for the taxi. Bob plucked the receipt from his fingers to save for accounting, and then went up the five steps to the stoop to unlock the door. He'd barely had time to close and lock the door behind them before FaLa came bounding down the stairs, complaining all the way.

"Yes, I can see you're starving," Bob told the cat.

"Wasted away to a shadow of his former self," Trip agreed. The noise of FaLa's complaints felt like twin ice picks shoved beneath the frontal bones of his skull, but that wasn't the cat's fault.

Distracted by a new, if familiar, voice, FaLa hoarsely meowed his agreement and then attacked Trip's trouser cuffs.

"Oh, so very helpful," Bob told him, and scooped the cat up. Once in Bob's hands, FaLa turned into a limp, dangling bundle of fur, a habit that had always made Melinda smile. Still holding FaLa, Bob turned to Trip and said, "Park in the front room. I have to feed the nitwit before I make some coffee to wash down those aspirin." He snorted. "We-- I still have a bag of that god-awful brand you like in a cupboard somewhere."

Trip's head was hurting too much to argue. He wandered into the front room, parked on the couch, untied his shoes, and dumped them on the oriental rug. Then he propped up his feet on the coffee table. Last winter Melinda would have come in to check on him and pushed Trip's feet off the table, leaving Bob behind to brew the coffee. Now Trip sat in the dark, his eyes closed, wishing for last winter again.

A few minutes later he heard the footsteps as Bob entered. "You'll have to open your eyes to take these."

"I was thinking of trying telekinesis," Trip said. He looked up to find Bob standing over him with a cup of coffee on its saucer in one hand and two aspirin held out in the other. The front room was dim, its only illumination from lights on the street outside sifting in through the half-drawn curtains. He could barely see Bob's faint smile.

His mission accomplished, Bob went and took the armchair across from the couch. He waited for Trip to use more coffee to chase the aspirin down before he asked, "The report?"

"You were right. The offer to leave us most of research is meant to keep me away from their defense contracts. That's about it, aside from a mention of my unfortunate inclinations."

"Bad?"

"No. I think Barber prides himself on being some kind of egghead zookeeper, so he was mild. He'll cope."

"Good. He'll be the one supervising what was our company. You'll see him again."

"Here's hoping he prefers the manufacturing facility out in Jersey to the city building." Trip shook his head and wished he hadn't. "God, he's hale-fellow. I bet they love him at the toastmaster's club."

"Whatever works."

"Sure." Bob should know. He'd bootstrapped himself up from a rough neighborhood in a bankrupt mill town into this elegant townhouse. And, as good as he was, he might have climbed still higher if not loaded down with a few morals and sentiments. Efficient social climbers didn't fall deeply in love with their marital targets, for example.

"I know what you're thinking." No, Bob didn't. "Don't get shirty. This deal will make you very rich rather than merely comfortable, and most of it you'll have earned, not inherited."

After this deal went through, most of Bob's money would also be earned, not married. No, damn it, also earned-not-inherited, given Melinda's death. Trip's head still pounded although the nausea was receding. Cautiously, he tried rubbing his temples.

"That doesn't look better."

"Getting there."

"Oh, obviously. Look, take the guest bedroom."

"We have work--"

"Your good suit the morning after is better than what you usually wear. And you still have a toothbrush and shaving tackle left in there." From the bad months right after Melinda's automobile accident, Bob meant, when Trip had stayed over enough times to lose count. "Mrs. Brown will be here early the next two days. I thought I might need the help after tonight's and tomorrow's celebrations. She'll make breakfast."

"Jesus, I hate nightclubs."

"You've told me that, several times. Drink your coffee. No, first give me those."

"What?"

Leaning over, Bob plucked the folded-up reading glasses from Trip's shirt pocket, and pitched them neatly into an antique umbrella stand that now served as a trash can. Bob had played baseball in high school. State champions. One of his keys to college. "What, no protests?" he asked.

"My needle's on full," Trip retorted, and Bob snorted appreciation. "Anyhow, I do need new glasses. At least this way, you'll be the one obligated to see I get an optician's appointment." He didn't shake his head. It might fall off. "As to the staying here part, I saw you watching the dancers at the club tonight." Having been both Melinda's cousin and close friend, Trip knew how much time Bob and Melinda had spent together on dance floors.

Bob didn't say anything, but his eyebrows went down, visible even in the dim.

"Don't bother deploying the scowl. I'm not getting sudsy. I want some quiet, and you want a little noise. Not a big deal."

Of course, Bob couldn't let anything go without a jab. "Sudsy? Not a big deal? As street slang, those are off, you know. Honestly, it's a pity we can't swap childhoods. Neither of us gets the vocabulary of our preferred guises quite right."

"We might as well swap our faces and gestures while we're at it." Bob frowned in incomprehension, and Trip hid a grin. Got him.

Then Bob caught on and glared. Trip let his grin show. At least, he did until Bob asked, "Barber said something?"

That sobered Trip. "Not really." Bob raised his eyebrows and Trip shrugged. "He would have fingered you instead of me as a homosexual, is all."

"Ugh. Even if I was, his words, taken literally, would be scarring."

"No argument here. Don't worry, Harkness set him right."

Bob rubbed his eyes and muttered something, of which Trip caught, "...never understood why people..."

Trip interrupted with, "Maybe you should start dating again." He might as well have staked their banter through the heart and buried the remains at a crossroads. Bob stared at him, his lips pressed thin. This time Trip suppressed a sigh instead of a grin before he picked up his cup and drained what was left of the coffee. "One homosexual in a

partnership risks rumors. Rumors about both of us would be worse. Why am I telling you this? You've been telling me this."

"I am not a homosexual."

"You're not dating, either. And, as someone said when discussing the price for this buy-out, appearances matter."

Bob settled for a glare.

Gently, now. Bob could almost smell a lie, even a white one. Jesus, Trip stank at this. "You don't need a replacement for Melinda. Only a -- a reminder to spur people's memories. You have female friends that you could ask."

"Married, most of them. And I'm not gaming the ones who aren't."

"Tell them you're only out for some company. Be honest, for once." The glare hadn't lessened. "Bob, let me remind you of something. I date. Your suggestion." That was better. The glare had faltered. "Okay, yours, Melinda's, and a few others. But I do date, and it's in part for the sake of the job. Not exactly an agonizing experience, I promise you."

"No." The admission was grudging, but there. "No, of course not. It's just-- I'd thought--" Bob paused and added, "I guess I keep thinking she might be back. Stupid, I know."

A truly hopeless expression was a damned ugly thing. For this, Bob didn't need an audience. Trip fidgeted with his coffee cup to give Bob a few seconds of privacy. Then he glanced up to see Bob had a hand shielding his eyes.

Trip got up and wandered over to the mantelpiece. He picked up a silver frame without looking at the contents -- he needed no help remembering the old Holyoke photograph of Melinda laughing and Trip scowling at some of Bob's overly smooth coaxing -- and put it down again hastily when Bob said, from behind him, "All right."

"Maybe some day--"

"Hush. Right now I'm thinking of this as a job that I need to do for work. A job where I'm being rushed."

Putting the photograph back, Trip turned. At least Bob's tone was now drifting back toward miffed. "There's nothing wrong with having a good time. Taking in some entertainment. Going out on the town. Returning to exercising your libido."

Bob held up a hand, palm out. "Stop right there. I'm all too familiar with your notions of exercising libido. You don't need..." His mistake was in trailing off when he noticed his accidental double-entendre. No, his mistake was clearing his throat after he trailed off. At

any rate, he sure shouldn't have stopped dead and pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger as he said, "Christ."

Trip's mistake, on the other hand, was in asking, rather than thinking, "You--remember?" The question sounded hoarse to his own ears.

"And that tears it."

Trip's retort of, "You started this," was almost a reflex. A spinal reflex. However, going over to sit back down on the couch was a sensible precaution. Sitting there put the coffee table back between him and Bob, who'd gone from miffed to seriously annoyed in five seconds flat.

Bob snapped, "Sure, but you didn't need to finish the job. There's such a thing as being too honest, remember?"

"If I didn't, you'd remind me. A lot."

Letting go of his nose, Bob said, "For good reason. Drop it. Just drop it."

"Glad to."

"Fine."

They glared at each other for a few seconds. Trip's head was now pounding again, which may have been why he broke the silence to blurt out, "Everyone knows consoling the widower doesn't count."

Bob slowly clenched both hands. "I hate you. I hate you. You are a one-person traffic accident."

"And you were drunk."

"Don't make me ask how the hell drink excuses anything, ever."

"People want all sorts of wild things when they're that drunk and that miserable. Oral sex is nothing."

Apparently, words failed for a few seconds. After covering his mouth with both hands, Bob stared at Trip, wide-eyed over them. At last he lowered them to say, "You are incurable. You are also never talking to any executive from any other company ever again."

"Great. I like this new plan."

"Your keeping quiet is the old plan, the very old plan." Bob's eyes narrowed. "Wait a minute." Trip refused to ask for an explanation, but Bob kept going without prompting, "Do you, for some mad reason, think that, ah, er, event is what's keeping me from dating?"

"Don't be dumb," Trip said. Then he frowned. "Huh." He considered. "It might be a contributing factor, you realize." He steepled his fingers. "Confidence sapping, I mean. Really, it shouldn't be. Single, opportunistic requests mean nothing, especially in such extreme circumstances. Doesn't mean you're a six-shot queen."

"So much for the old, old plan." Bob took a deep breath and puffed it out again. "Trip, I haven't told you often enough how much I appreciate your kindness during this past year. You have become my friend in a way I never expected back when Melinda first forced us together. But if you ever, ever bring up that god-damned blow job again, I'm going to smuggle FaLa into your apartment, bed him down in your underwear drawer, close the drawer, and leave."

Somewhere out in the kitchen by his food dish, alerted by his name, FaLa yowled. Then he came running to join the party, commenting as he came.

"That was your fault," Trip told Bob. Okay, maybe his crack was a little spiteful.

Bob reached down and scooped up FaLa, who dangled. "Yes, and you deserve this." He stalked over and dumped FaLa into Trip's lap. FaLa went into ecstasies of raucous enjoyment over his new dominion, promptly claiming possession of Trip's good suit. Now, that was a lot spiteful.

Trip picked up FaLa, who was determinedly stropping his tie pin. FaLa sagged. "Your daddy is a witch," Trip told him. "Soon everyone will know. Especially after they see my tie." FaLa purred.

"You, you--" Briefly, speech left Bob. Then it returned with a rush. "Fine! And you're a bigmouthed social nitwit and what else is new! I'll call Sonia Hertzog and this conversation is over!"

"Good. Should I leave?"

"Oh, please." Seemingly already starting to cool, Bob waved a hand impatiently. "You obviously still have your headache, although now you've earned it." He pointed with his usual flourish. "Go to bed, would you? I'm out of words for tonight."

Alone in the guest bedroom, Trip rubbed his forehead and sighed. He felt better, really. The aspirin was catching up with his headache. More importantly, he felt like they'd defused the bomb they'd buried, unexploded, eleven months ago. Eleven months and six days ago, to be exact.

Maybe now Trip could enjoy all the fun, fun, fun celebration that was supposed to be pepping up his schedule over the next few days. Either that, or he could hide, hoping that Bob was too distracted to find him.

II

Bob did seem distracted the next day, but his preoccupation did Trip little good. Trip's real birthday fell on Thursday, two days after his reluctant celebration at the Copacabana. He knew he'd have been doomed to another celebration even if his birthday hadn't been the day D&E turned over the last of its financial documents to B.T.C. for the acquisition. However, any other year, his birthday party would have been confined to Research and Development, where at least he knew everyone.

As it was, he passed the hours around lunch moving from department to department, clutching successive paper plates of cake and Dixie cups of punch while smiling awkwardly at congratulations and farewells from employees he barely knew. After spending five minutes desperately trying to remember the name of a payroll supervisor who turned out to be a fresh transfer from B.T.C., he gave up and retreated upstairs.

Back in the emissions laboratory, he was greeted with, "Don't forget the dinner this evening," from Doris, his secretary.

"Uh?" Trip asked. "Sorry, too much frosting. Today is like the Christmas party come early."

"Almost," she said primly. "Dr. Davis didn't make her spicy fondue."

"Thank God," Trip muttered. Then he asked, "Which dinner are we referring to?"

She was used to him. "Those personnel who aren't transferring to B.T.C. are touring our new building this afternoon before a company dinner at Ollie's. The dinner party's to celebrate our move."

"Right."

"Also, Mr. Eck would like to see you in your office."

Trip moaned, keeping it down. A cluster of his techs were only ten feet away from them, arguing about who had the best HiFi system.

Doris tilted her head. "Would you like a cup of punch first?"

"Has Stan been anywhere near the punch bowl?"

"No, I stood guard."

"Then it wouldn't help. Keep holding my calls."

She blinked false eyelashes in the way that was her equivalent of rolling her eyes. Trip smiled weakly and went into his office.

Bob sat in the armchair by the bookcases across from Trip's desk, reading the May issue of *Scientific America*. At the sound of the door, he looked up and said, "There you are."

"I was mingling." Trip left his door cracked open, in case of either debates spinning out of control or minor explosions.

"So I should hope." That jab was just reflex, though, because Bob smiled when he asked, "Are you ready for our field trip?"

"I have my galoshes and my lunchbox." Trip sank into his own chair and shifted piles of journal reprints until he could see his desktop. Sure enough, there was a three-day old note about today's events beneath the layers. He really should have packed this stuff by now. "To tell the truth, I'd forgotten about the grand tour until Doris reminded me."

Bob waved a hand in dismissal. "For once, you have an excuse, given how much time you've spent over in the new building supervising the set-up. This tour can't be too exciting for you."

"Maybe, but I haven't seen everything. Not the business floor. Have to be able to find all the departments. That'll be important come Christmas," Trip said, and grimaced.

Bob laughed. "You won't get lost. Three small floors. The new building isn't exactly Bell labs."

"I wish."

"Do you?"

"No. If I did, I would have nixed this deal." Leaning back in his chair, Trip propped his shoes up on the cleared-off patch of desk top. "We need to shrink. Research companies run small, especially ones without government funding. Splitting off half our labs from production and all the rest wouldn't work without B.T.C. to play our sugar-daddy."

His phrasing earned him a smile. Bob said, "I'm looking forward to seeing their faces when you start rolling out those innovations you and your squad of junior geniuses have been sitting on."

"That'll have to be soon. They won't be innovations much longer; everyone else is catching up with us. We're too independent, the competition's too tough, and I'm getting old." Trip headed off the inevitable crack by adding, "Cutting-edge research is like a beauty contest. You peak early and then spend the rest of your career carping at your successors."

"You've already warned me. And warned me. As I've told you, a few more years and B.T.C. will believe you do miracles. They'll get in the habit of farming out projects to us and their inertia, along with our good hiring, will take care of the rest."

"Yeah, and the guy who built a small empire from a crazy cousin-in-law and the remnants of a bankrupt electronics firm will then settle in to sign paychecks and put his feet up on his desk." Trip thumped a heel in illustration.

"Empire builders peak young, too."

"Uh-huh." Silence fell. Trip let it stretch before he said, "I believe you absolutely and without question," and then added more silence. He'd learned a few verbal maneuvers from Bob over the years.

Bob stirred restlessly. Then he said, "I'm done. I win."

Trip frowned. "I don't get--"

"I win. I have the degree, I built the company, I earned the money. I live in Manhattan, I wear proper suits, I'm invited to the cocktail parties. I married the beautiful, charming heiress." He closed his eyes, opened them, and continued, "My children would go to the same sort of schools you did. I win."

After a pause, Trip said, "Okay, you win. Now what?"

"Senility, golf, the Hamptons?" Bob waved a hand. "I don't know any more." His expression was distant. "A few months before she died, Melinda and I decided we were going to adopt."

Trip pulled his feet down off his desk. He'd been her closest confidant, but he hadn't heard this. "More time off if you're only running a small firm?"

"Uh-huh."

"You two would have been good parents."

Bob's gaze was sardonic. "Maybe. I'm sure I would have tried to win a Father of the Year award." His focus shifted to someplace far beyond Trip. "The best laid plans."

There was no sense letting Bob gut himself out about something that wouldn't be happening now. "If you launch into an aria about ambitions being vanity, all vanity, I'm leaving."

"Do I look like a lyric tenor? Don't answer that. In any case, I have every intention of gloating over my victories until the day I die."

"Sure." Trip studied him. "So you just need another hobby. Or something."

"Or something, yes. A penetrating analysis, Doctor."

Trip ignored him. "Maybe it's good you agreed to start dating again."

Judging by the ominous way Bob's eyebrows rose, maybe it was also good that they were interrupted by Doris. She knocked, pushed the door all the way open, and said, "It's three o'clock, sir."

Bob checked his wristwatch and frowned. "I'm surprised Sue didn't call up to remind me."

"We're splitting duties, Mr. Eck. Mrs. Meyer is making sure everyone assembles in the foyer."

"Where she'll collect our permission slips," Trip said. His public face back in place, Bob smiled tolerantly. Trip would have preferred his snotty look.

The tour went well. The new laboratories were purpose-built, which would eliminate D&E's current need to jam things in beside other things where they didn't belong. The utilities and lighting were state of the art. This building also had more windows, which would reduce the status wars when office space was assigned. As head of research and co-owner of the firm, Trip was getting a corner office with more bookcases. Hooray.

What with one advantage and another, it was a cheerful group that assembled in the big banquet room at Ollie's Italian Garden. Even with a couple of men and most of the female clerical staff jumping ship to go home to their families, about thirty people were left to eat spaghetti and listen to Bob congratulate them on choosing to stay with the new D&E Laboratories, Inc. rather than accepting offers from B.T.C.. By the end of Bob's speech, he'd charmed them all into believing they'd made a heroic decision, even though several of them hadn't had an alternate offer to choose. "Tomorrow, the movers descend," he concluded. "Enjoy your day off because Lord knows what new battles will face us when we open the boxes on Monday."

"Good speech?" Bob asked Trip under the cover of the laughter and applause.

"Smooth," Trip said. "Very smooth. And short. I like the short aspect since I want my spumoni." He wondered if he sounded as sour as he felt. He could almost feel Bob's assessing gaze.

Trip wasn't surprised when, after the last of the diners had departed in good cheer, Bob announced, "I'll walk home with you."

Trip eyed him, but said nothing. There were quite a few blocks to cover into the Village, but he and Bob both walked when they could. Bob had a lot of nervous energy to burn off

and Trip-- Well, Trip was In The Life and newly forty. Keeping in shape increased his exciting opportunities. However, he'd bet this walk was more about business than exercise.

After a block, Bob asked, "Any last minute resignations to join B.T.C.?"

"No."

"Then tonight's was the final roster. How did we do?" Bob knew. He just wanted to make sure Trip knew, too.

"I owe you five bucks. We kept Richardsen, Davis, and Lin. I'm surprised B.T.C. didn't at least have enough sense to make a play for Lin."

"Barber might have, but he takes advice from his own head of R&D, who is but a man." Bob smirked. "And Dr. Green's a Scarsdale man, at that. You know my methods, Watson."

"You've told me often enough." Trip imitated Bob's sardonic tone when he said, "'Hire the ones who, for dim-witted reasons, they won't. Your new employees will cost the same, work much harder, and won't be stolen away from you.'" With a headshake, Trip said, "You are such a Machiavellian S.O.B., telling me that. I'm the biggest example of your 'methods' in the company."

"You showed me the road paved with gold."

"Yeah, well, you showed me right back." Shaming, but true. On his own, Trip might not have hired Davis five years ago, let alone Richardsen two years back. It had taken Trip months to get used to hearing Davis' soprano voice and then seeing Richardsen's dark complexion around the labs. These days, he felt like an idiot remembering his qualms, but that was now, several successful projects later, not then. He hated wondering if he'd screw up again on something else: this lost bet was a cheap reminder to try and avoid B.T.C.'s mistakes.

Stopping by an all-night deli, Trip took out his wallet and handed Bob a five dollar bill.

"Money, lovely money," Bob said, gloating. Trip resisted an urge to shoot an elbow into his ribs as Bob tucked the bill away. "The barbarism of others is my folding green."

Trip started walking again. "I thought you were now beyond all such worldly considerations."

"Don't be naive. Just because I've already won doesn't mean I'm quitting before the game is over."

Looking at him sideways, Trip decided he couldn't resist. "I take it back the S.O.B. crack. After all, you could choose other kinds of Machiavellian maneuvers than the ones you do. Under the layers of smooth and cynical, you're a good guy, Bob Eck." Bob's offended noise was cute, very cute. However, Trip had indulged himself enough for one evening. "You going to stay so noble and pure at the courts next Tuesday?"

Bob snorted disdain. "You can but hope."

They talked about racquetball and movies amiably enough during the rest of their walk into the Village. Not that the trip went without incident. As usual, there was a clutch of would-be bohemians loitering outside of the coffee house next to Trip's building. One of them, a skinny guy of about twenty in dark shirt, tight beard, and twill cap, looked up as they passed and said, "Oh, hey Trip."

Trip swallowed a sigh and turned back to say, "Hello, Tony." He added to Bob, "Upstairs neighbor." Even as he spoke, Tony was saying something low-voiced to the couple with whom he'd been talking. Trip could guess what he was saying. Tony couldn't have missed all of Trip's occasional visitors.

"You know each other?" Bob asked. His tone was a little too amused to make the question delicate.

"If you have an upstairs neighbor who has parties, you know him," Trip said, refusing to rise to the lure.

"That's certainly true."

At almost the same moment, Tony asked, "Hey, Trip? I'm having a party, on Saturday? Music and suchlike. Do you want to come?"

"No, thanks. But good timing: I'll be out of town at a house party for my birthday."

"Hey, happy birthday," Tony said, and, "Yeah, happy birthday," his friends chimed in. To give them credit, they sounded sincere. Birthdays seemed to cross most social boundaries. "You have to come and have a cup of celebration," Tony concluded.

"I'm not sure--" Trip said, but somehow the girl had gotten Bob's arm and was towing him toward the door of the coffeehouse.

"So, what's your name?" she was asking while patting his arm with her free hand. Bob looked amused.

By the time they escaped back outside, they'd drunk coffee laced with rum that the place was not supposed to serve, Trip had heard Tony's and his friend's theories about Allen Ginsberg and nuclear disarmament, and the girl had tucked a scrap of paper with her phone number on it into Bob's breast pocket. When Bob and Trip had walked the few

remaining feet to the lobby door of Trip's apartment, Trip paused. "Sorry about that," he told Bob.

"No, it was fine. Nice kids. I'm merely not used to being admitted into the inner councils of Bohemia."

"I was your passport. Given what he thinks he knows, Tony believes I can't be as square as I look."

"You aren't. You merely aren't the least bit hip."

"Gee, thanks."

"As always, you're welcome." Shoving his hands into the pockets of his overcoat, Bob smiled. "So, are you inviting me up?"

"Why, do you need coffee?"

"Couldn't hurt."

Trip studied Bob critically. As always, he looked good. More importantly, not noticeably lit, just loose. Bob probably wanted a little more company before returning home to an almost empty brownstone. "Okay, then. Come on up."

Tony and his friends must have come upstairs soon after Trip and Bob did. Bob had barely taken off his overcoat and settled back on the couch before they heard footsteps creaking overhead, followed by an all-too-familiar noise.

Bob sat up straight. "Bongo drums?"

"Yeah," Trip called from the kitchen. "Put something on the stereo, would you? I'm brewing your brand. You want cream and sugar?"

"This time of night? Of course. Dark brown and one lump."

By the time the coffee was ready, Trip could hear that Bob had chosen Ella Fitzgerald. Her take on Cole Porter sounded strange combined with bongos, but oh, well. Trip returned to the living room with a pair of mugs.

Seeing him enter, Bob reached over and grabbed two coasters to put on the table in front of the couch. "I don't know why I'm bothering. Everybody at Amherst had this kind of leather-topped table in his room, but you're the only guy who keeps one in his Manhattan apartment."

"What else would you expect?" Trip put down both mugs and sat on the couch by a coaster. He'd meant to take the armchair, but at least this way he could prop up his feet.

"Not Danish modern, that's for sure. You could try for a consistent style."

"You have no idea how often I hear that kind of comment from my visitors." Trip kept his face straight.

Bob took a sip before he got the joke, put down his mug, and said, "Screw you."

"Yeah, sometimes, after they've criticized my decor," Trip said. There was no way he wasn't going to laugh.

"And sometimes you're ten years old," Bob said before taking another sip of coffee. Then he said, "Busy bachelor or not, you might as well get some decorating help. Aren't you prosperous these days, or so I've heard tell? This place is false advertising."

"I hate the new styles. They're like bad industrial design."

Bob spread one arm out across the back of the couch. "All right, why don't you do something with what you have? Your art is good. Weird, but good." He gestured with his mug at the painting by Kay Sage. "Some of the furniture is excellent, too. It's the overall effect that's a traffic accident."

If Trip hadn't heard more bedroom details from Melinda than Bob knew about, not to mention the tales from Amherst when he'd asked around about Bob at the beginning of the courtship, he'd wonder about the guy sometimes. "Great, everyone wants to rearrange my furniture." On the LP, Ella was singing "I Love Paris," to the accompaniment of a calypso beat from upstairs. "Me, I think it suits this place."

Busy emptying his mug, Bob put it down on the coaster before he said, "I hear what you mean." He grimaced at an impassioned flurry upstairs. "So much for mood."

Trip made an inquiring noise around the last of his own coffee.

"Look. Trip." Bob turned a little toward Trip on the couch. His voice had dropped in pitch and shifted into the rich tones he'd used for his speech at dinner. His gestures, as he spoke, were smooth as silk. "There's something I want to talk about with you. Something important."

Trip stilled, mug in hand. What the hell?

"I've been thinking, thinking hard, for the past few days. For the past few months, to be frank. And I've reached some interesting conclusions." Bob paused, looked miffed, reached over, took Trip's empty mug from his hand, and put it down on the table. On the

available coaster. Then he smiled warmly and continued, "Ones I want to discuss with you."

"That's-- nice." Trip said. He really wanted to finish his sentence, "--nuts." Why did he suddenly feel like he was starring in a Doris Day movie? Okay, too much red wine at Ollie's, not to mention rum and coffee following.

Bob studied him. His blue eyes seemed to darken. Voice like black velvet, he almost murmured, "You see, I've been thinking about that night you were so good to me." He shifted his arm on the back of the couch to lie across Trip's shoulders.

"Gah!" Two seconds later, Trip was clear across the couch, pressed against the far end. Bob's expression was as startled as Trip felt. Trip blurted, "Was that move supposed to be smooth?"

Those words brought back the miffed look. "Romantic. That was intended to be romantic. Christ, Trip."

"And who are you meant to be, Rock Hudson?" Trip shoved fingers into his crew-cut. "No, forget that. He's gay, you're not."

The next word out of Bob's mouth was a weak, "What?"

"Forget that, too. I didn't say that." Rattled, Trip said, "You need more coffee. I can make more--"

"Would you stop?" Bob pointed a forefinger like God on the roof of the Sistine Chapel. "Goddamnit, you are the hardest guy to talk with--"

"That's because I'm not a girl. And you're not a gay, er, homosexual. It makes drunken blow-jobs tough to discuss."

"This. Isn't. About. Blow-jobs." If FaLa had worn Bob's current expression, Trip would have been grabbing up anything on the floor that couldn't stand being pissed on. "I'm trying to talk about the way I feel."

Trip blinked. "You feel like you want another blow-job?"

"No! Yes!" Now Bob was the one rearranging his hair. He used both hands, though. The result was weirdly compelling. "I hate you. God, I hate you."

"Yeah?"

"No." Bob took a deep breath of his own. His eyes narrowed. "This isn't going well."

"Uh-huh."

"Too late to start over, though. Fine, here it is. I've realized I'm in love with you."

"Okay." Trip swallowed. "So, do you or don't you want another cup of coffee?"

"Sure, why not?" Bob asked. He disarranged his hair some more. "Light brown, two lumps. I think I'm getting a stomach ache."

Trip took refuge in the kitchen. His wasn't a complete escape: as Trip poured, Bob kept talking, his voice veering frighteningly between snotty and sultry. Still, if Trip didn't pay attention to what sounded like a brilliant snow job, he had time to pull himself together. Unfortunately, his brain kept reaching Bob's declaration and skipping like a needle on a scratched 45. In the end, Trip squared his shoulders, picked up the mugs, and came back into the living room on, "--almost hypnotic. Once I'd started looking, I couldn't stop. Then I realized why I was obsessed."

Putting Bob's coffee in front of him on the table, Trip sat down a careful eighteen inches away.

Bob's eyes narrowed. He picked up the mug, drank, and put it back down again. "Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"I'm not certain." Not having listened.

"What's the problem? I think the evidence is clear." Bob had never sounded more earnest, more persuasive. "Given my history, it's obvious that I'm not a homosexual. I'm merely in love with you."

Trip stared, his hands wrapped around his mug. It must have taken him a good five seconds to find his voice. "Jesus. That may be the stupidest excuse for another blow-job ever."

If Trip could have somehow harnessed Bob's glare, he would have licked the gain medium problem single-handed and come up with the first room-temperature LASER. Then, abruptly, Bob smiled sweetly and said, "Obviously, Shakespeare is right. Love is blind. Also, deaf."

"Yeah. Sure."

Silence fell. Bob reached for his mug of coffee and drank in a manner that could only be called pointed; Trip guessed he was supposed to say something now. He sipped his coffee, thinking fast. Shock treatment: that was what was needed here. How could he break Bob free from his weird delusion? His brain churned desperately and then clarified. Putting down his mug, Trip said, "Look, I have an idea."

Bob examined him, expression dubious.

"More of a deal, I guess. But the deal is also an idea."

Without a word, Bob raised his eyebrows.

"I know this is a cliché, but what you said was awfully sudden."

"I don't think so." Bob's voice was mild, but the accompanying stare was cryptic.

Trip glared. "Well, I think it was awfully sudden, and I get to choose." He waited for a few seconds to see if he was going to get any more back chat before continuing. "How about this? You and I do something to, uh, clear the decks this evening, and tomorrow you come with me to a house party on Long Island, where we'll have lots of time and room to talk."

"By clear the decks you mean--" Bob started, and Trip reached over to put a hand on Bob's thigh.

Trip's move may have been born of desperation, but the result was not. Seeing his hand resting on the familiar, strong leg, feeling the unfamiliar warmth of Bob's flesh and muscle beneath the fine wool, aroused sensations that fell somewhere between daydream and wet dream.

Bob looked down. He looked up and said, "That's not any smoother than my attempt."

"If I shift and you're not at least a little persuaded, you'd better think about your feelings some more." Trip moved his hand, touched, rubbed. Beneath his hand, he felt firm and rising interest. At least Bob's cock understood what was really going on.

"You actually think you're going to distract me with oral sex?"

"Sure." He was undoing Bob's belt with his free hand.

"God, I hate it when you're right." Bob's lip-licking was probably a symptom of nerves, but the result was gripping. "Fine. A deal. You're on." His hips were moving. "Could you just--"

"Uh-huh." Trip moved fast. He unzipped the fly and worked Bob free from his trousers and boxers. The cock in his hand was thickening and lengthening with arousal, already dark and flushed in a way that Trip liked, a lot. He stroked, admiring, even as he worked his jaw to gather some saliva. Then Trip slid across the couch, planted a hand on the other side of Bob's hips to help with the weight, and leaned over. As he closed on his target, parting his lips, he caught a fast glimpse out of the corner of his eye of Bob's expression, both heated and disconcerted.

Trip sucked Bob in, ran his tongue up and down the shaft, drew back to the soft, slitted tip, and then slid back down to work up more suction. The taste of Bob's skin and his scent were more intoxicating than red wine or illicit rum. Rhythmically, Trip moved his head, savoring the cock he worked in his mouth.

Bob neither yanked on his hair or gagged him by thrusting. But he didn't sit like a lump, either. Instead he stroked Trip's back and shoulders, his hands too urgent to be called caressing. He also spoke, saying nonsense like, "Oh, Christ. Please, more tongue, yes. So goddamned good." There was nothing smooth or clever about his words, which made them hotter.

Trip realized dimly his own hips were working, trying to get some friction going against something better than fabric. But that minor frustration didn't matter when Bob said, "No, going..." and clamped hands on Trip's shoulders to push him away. Trip resisted, sucked hard, and swallowed quickly as Bob came, cursing. That taste wasn't great, but the way Bob squirmed as Trip finished him off was.

Even before Bob was done softening, Trip was urgently yanking at his own belt and fly with his free hand. He let Bob's softening cock slip from his mouth, sat up, and started stroking his own cock, his hand shaking as it worked. He was taken by surprise when Bob moved to drape an arm around his shoulders again. Bob's face was a mess: his hair was disarranged, his eyelids heavy, and his lips swollen as if he'd been biting them in his excitement. As if from a distance, Trip heard himself groan at the sight. He squeezed his cock hard, and then pumped again. The rush of his orgasm hit him. As Trip came, Bob muttered something low and incoherent, squeezed his shoulders, and ran his hand up and down Trip's arm in what could only be called a caress.

They sat together afterward, without speaking, for a long, silent minute. At last Bob took a deep breath, and released it in a weary sigh. "That won't help your dry-cleaning bill," he said, voice husky and mellow. He paused before asking, "May I stay?"

Very gently, Trip肘bowed him. "What are you, nuts?" He forced himself to his feet and away from the arm around his shoulders.

Ten minutes -- and some fast scrubbing with a washcloth -- later, he'd bundled a sleepy and protesting Bob down to the street to help him find a taxi. It wasn't nerves that made Trip so determined. No, as he told Bob on the stairs, "Some of us have more to worry about with overnight guests than others."

When Bob seemed inclined to say something sentimental after being put into the cab, Trip interrupted with, "Don't forget. I'll be over at eight tomorrow to pick you up for the house party."

"What?" Bob said, and "Trip--"

"Eight o'clock. Be ready," Trip interrupted ruthlessly, and waved the cab away from the curb.

His tactics were all very practical. Trip wasn't panicking at all.

III

Trip tried not to coddle himself. However, he'd admit that his car was an exception to this rule. He didn't need an automobile, living in Manhattan. He certainly didn't need a sports car. Nonetheless, even though the garage fees were atrocious, he still kept a MGA that he drove whenever he had the chance. The sports car helped his reputation, he'd told Bob, letting him join a motor club and regularly take part in road rallies. How manly was that? Bob hadn't seemed convinced.

Today Trip's hobby was paying off in a brand new way. Taking the train might have warned Bob about their weekend destination sooner than Trip wanted him to know. As it was, Bob wouldn't be happy to realize that, for once, he'd been the snow-jobbee rather than the snow-jobber.

They were heading for a Long Island house party, all right. But what the amazing distraction of sex had let Trip skip past was that they were also heading for Fire Island. Trip figured that, if anything could yank Bob out of the bizarre romantic fantasy he'd somehow wandered into, the gay life of Cherry Grove would do the trick.

Friday morning dawned clear and bright, and Trip waved cheerfully at the cabbies who gestured their dislike at having to share the road with him on his way uptown. He even found a parking space two doors down from Bob's brownstone. When he extracted himself from behind the wheel -- always a struggle for a guy his size even with the modifications he'd had done -- he was whistling.

Trip rang the doorbell, and Mrs. Brown, Bob's housekeeper, opened the door. "Oh, it's you," she said. Given her usual attitude toward life, she got along well with Bob.

"Good morning. Is he ready?"

"Come in, would you, before that cat--"

Hastily, Trip stepped inside, just in time to foil FaLa's dash for freedom. Mrs. Brown slammed the door shut with an air of triumph. FaLa complained, but Mrs. Brown told him, "Too bad."

Bob came down the stairs into the hall, inserting his second cufflink. "Mrs. Brown, was that--" Seeing Trip, he came to a stop. "Trip. Hello." He cleared his throat.

Trip suppressed a sigh. Could Bob make it any more obvious that something had happened? "Are you ready to go? And why are you wearing-- Never mind."

"Some people don't rejoice in looking like a scarecrow." At least Bob recovered fast. "Let me get my coat and suitcase." He disappeared back upstairs.

"Is there a telephone at this place you're staying?" Mrs. Brown asked.

"Not really."

"That figures." She shook her head.

"Why, do you think FaLa will set fire to the house while Bob's gone?"

"Don't give the cat ideas."

Involuntarily, Trip looked down at FaLa, who was chewing on both his shoelaces at the same time. "Okay, I see what you mean." He fished in a pocket and found a receipt for packing tape that he should have turned in days ago. "In an emergency, the woman at this number will send a message to me." Taking out his ballpoint pen, he wrote the telephone number for the house in Sayville where he paid to garage his car.

"Thanks," she said. Taking the paper, she leaned down, and scooped up FaLa. Without another word, she went back into the kitchen, the cat dangling from one hand.

Bob came downstairs a minute or so later. As he donned his cap, he asked, "Where are you parked?"

"Two doors down."

"A miracle."

"That, and a small car." They went out. "Good thing we're leaving early since it's Friday."

"I'm sure the timing will make for a nicer than usual journey." Bob looked at Trip as if expecting him to respond with something more noteworthy than the normal chatter. Trip smiled blandly.

Bob was one of the few men Trip knew who'd never struggled for control of the steering wheel, not even with Melinda. He did have a passion for giving directions, though, which was fine by Trip. Bob's directions were good even when they were redundant, were well-timed, and were accompanied by details like coins for tolls as needed. Which reminded Trip. "Have you ever considered road rallying as a hobby? I could use a good navigator."

"Yes, you could. And no. Queens Midtown Tunnel coming up. I have the change."

"You need to get out more. Get the wind in your hair."

"I'm wearing a driving cap to avoid exactly that." There was a pause, during which Bob was probably studying him, and then Bob said, "I haven't lost my mind. I'm in love with you."

"Sure."

"I'm not pretending you're Melinda, either. You're not-- weren't much alike, in spite of being cousins and so close."

"True. Listen, can we talk about this later?" They were slowing for the tunnel in an open-topped car.

That killed the conversation, at least until they hit Queens. Then Bob said, "Okay, now I need to know exactly where we're going."

"Sayville first."

"Right. You'll want to begin by--" Even when Bob was slow, he wasn't all that slow. "You son of a bitch." Given the parties he and Melinda had attended and thrown, he was fairly knowledgeable for a guy not In The Life. "Cherry Grove. For the weekend."

"Yeah. We'll have no difficulties talking about your feelings there." Trip grinned and shifted into fourth. The sun was shining, his car was ticking over as sweetly as a well-made stopwatch, and he'd managed to put one over on Bob. What a beautiful day.

Bob was good, though, very good. It only took him about half a mile to come up with, "I hope you get sunburn where the sun doesn't usually shine."

"Not me. No nude sunbathing. I have the company's reputation to think about."

Trip was surprised, and a little impressed, when Bob laughed. "All right," he said when he was done. "Fine. We're going to Cherry Grove for the weekend. So, in the meantime, explain to me why I might enjoy a hobby that requires being squashed into this tiny seat while you drive around like a maniac."

Trying to persuade Bob of the delights of road rallies kept them busy until Sayville. At least for Trip, the conversation was preoccupying. He was sensing weakening: the prospect of winning trophies by telling Trip how, when, and where to drive must have been like catnip for Bob. And he would make a great navigator. At least, he would if Trip could patch up this current tear without shredding the rest of their friendship. Trip had disarmed mines during the war that were less challenging than Bob's sudden lurch into romance.

They parked at Mrs. Shuyler's place, where Trip paid a premium to get a spot in what had once been a barn. Her daughter Laura drove them over to the ferry landing in the family's old Ford. Bob flirted with her the entire way and she flirted right back. Trip ignored them, rolling down his window to enjoy the breeze.

"Nice girl," Bob commented as he toted his suitcase toward the line waiting for the ferry.

"The family rents out property in the Grove. They have reason to act tolerant no matter how they really feel about us boys. Catch Junior Shuyler after a couple of beers, though, and you'll get an earful."

Bob nodded. Little about the human side of economics surprised him.

The ferry was crowded on the way over to the island. From the bemused way Bob regarded his fellow passengers, he might as well have been visiting the Bronx zoo. He still didn't think of the boys as having anything to do with him.

Trip ignored Bob, smiling out at the water. No matter how he was acting now, Bob would soon have to cope with a well-established community where his wasn't the important opinion. Trip was interested in seeing how Mr. Charm would react.

Although the days were long gone when everyone would turn out to discover who had come over on the ferry, there was still a crowd of residents and renters at the Cherry Grove landing to greet their visitors. Trip looked for the familiar face, waved, and saw with pleasure the wave in return that was too vigorous and joyous for the mainland.

"Is that Rudy Gallagher?" Bob asked, for once sounding bewildered.

"Yes. Why, should he be someone else?"

"I didn't know you two knew each other. I mean, he's a Broadway producer. You're an experimental physicist."

Trip turned to Bob, ignoring the passengers who were jostling past them in their hurry to disembark. "We've been friends for years." Bob still looked surprised. "Do you have problems with him as a host?"

Bob's "Don't be dim," was probably automatic. But the familiar, miffed look wasn't. "He's been a guest at our dinner parties more than once. I'm sure he'll be a wonderful host. I'm just--" He broke off, shaking his head.

Now Rudy was within hailing range of the ferry. He cupped both hands around his mouth and called out, "My dear, what are you doing, lingering up there? Are you developing a strange taste for ferries?" That won cheers and laughter from the disembarking passengers. Then he must have spotted Bob because his eyebrows rose, visible even at a distance.

Trip called back, "We'll be right down." He picked up his sea bag.

Bob sighed and picked up his suitcase. Trip looked at him, and Bob said, "If I'd had some warning that we were going to a place with no automobiles..." He stopped dead on the gangplank. "My God, is there even water here?"

"Umm, the Atlantic Ocean?"

"My God," Bob repeated, and started moving down the gangplank again.

Trip relented. "Yes, there's piped water. Although I don't think the new power grid is complete yet."

"This is one hell of a payback for a b--" Bob said, and snapped shut his teeth on the end of his sentence.

Bob was still looking peevish at his own near slip when Rudy swanned up to him and extended a hand. As Rudy took in Bob's expression, his eyes widened slightly; right, he must not have met any version of Bob but Mr. Affable Socialite yet.

"Hello, Rudy. Thanks for having us over for the weekend," Bob said, managing a tone somewhere between annoyed and his usual smooth geniality.

Rudy's eyes flicked down to the wedding ring still on Bob's left hand and back up to his face again. "My pleasure, dear boy." His head tilted. "And a true pleasure it is, to see you out and about once more. You've been missed."

Bob's smile warmed a little. "I'll admit, getting out of the city is nice." The smile sharpened. "I hope you don't mind the late addition to your house party. This was," he yanked a thumb at Trip, "his idea."

"Well, I did invite him to bring a friend. I'm a teensy bit surprised by his choice, but pleased. Very pleased." Rudy's smile was wide and obviously sincere.

"Yes, I was taken by surprise as well." The glance Bob shot Trip was speaking. "My apologies for the overly formal dress and the suitcase."

"Oh, don't worry about that." Rudy stuck two fingers into his mouth and whistled.

Up on the walkway, in a group of chattering young men, two heads turned toward Rudy. A few seconds later, their excuses made, the pair approached. One of them was as blond and sleek as a Connecticut lifeguard. The other was a husky, dark-haired kid who could have earned a living as an extra in horse operas. Both were handsome, and both were dressed in T-shirts and cut-off shorts.

"Peter, my dear," Rudy said to the brunet, "would you be a darling and carry Bob's suitcase up to the house? Michael, if you would help Trip?"

"Sure," the brunet -- Peter -- said amiably as he reached for the suitcase. The blond merely smiled and curled a forefinger in demand. Trip suppressed a sigh and gave up his sea bag.

Rudy said blithely, "I invited the boys to camp out in my other guest room since I thought Trip wouldn't bring anyone along, the party-pooper. They're also helping with the natal festivities tomorrow. Alas, that will leave you two sharing a room."

"Festivities?" Trip asked faintly.

"Sharing?" Bob added, a little less quietly. Slowly, he turned to look at Trip. Then he turned back to beam his best, and warmest, public smile at Rudy and his sidekicks. "A birthday party. We can hardly wait."

It took unpacking and a stiff gin and tonic at lunch to calm Trip's nerves. By the time he was out on Rudy's deck with a second G&T, leaning against the railing and looking across the dunes toward the sea, even Bob joining him on the deck wasn't too disturbing.

Bob tilted his Scotch to indicate the house. "This place isn't the pioneering effort I'd imagined, even with the kerosene lamps and stove."

"Rudy likes his comforts."

"That he does," Bob said. "His dinner parties are legendary. Although I'm still surprised by how well you two know each other. When did you meet?"

At least this topic was safe enough. "One of my graduate professors at Columbia introduced us. They were old friends. Since my prof and I were friendly, too..." He trailed off at Bob's pleasantly neutral expression. "Hey, get your mind out of the gutter. The guy was my teacher, so we were just friends." Trip paused and considered. "At least, we were just friends then. When it mattered. After the grades go in doesn't count."

Bob seemed like he was chewing on a new dish and wasn't sure about the flavor. "Your social rules are different. Hooking up with, well, lovers so much like you."

Trip looked at him. "That's the idea, yes."

To give Bob credit, he was obviously thinking as he worked on his Scotch. "Isn't it strange, screwing folks who could cause you real trouble?"

"You tell me. Melinda could have paid to have your legs broken."

Bob shrugged. "We understood one another, right off the bat. Like you, she knew when she was being gamed, but, unlike you, she thought it was funny." He shook his head. "Besides, I was in love with her."

"What about her roommate?" That was how Bob and Melinda had met. Bootsy had never forgiven Melinda for confiscating Bob. "As I remember, she was rich and vindictive. Kind of a witch."

"It was just a matter of handling her right. I'd learned the correct maneuvers by then, how you country club types-- I see." Bob's thoughtful look turned determined. "I'm ready for another finger's worth. Anything?"

"No," Trip said. He was alarmed, but not surprised, when Bob didn't reappear after he went back inside for a refill. Through the open French doors, he could hear Bob's rich, public tones alternating with the lighter voices of Peter and Michael. Also, there was quite a bit of laughter. Shaking his head, Trip slowly worked his way through more of his G&T.

Rudy joined him a few minutes later. "Look at you, actually drinking." He leaned over to quickly kiss Trip on the cheek. "Rough trip over?"

"You have no idea." Trip took another sip. "What's he up to?"

"Charming the boys. Michael's already offered to read his cards for him."

"God. I don't think Bob's really clear on what he's getting into. "

"Is that the pot calling the kettle black that I hear? I thought it was darling Melinda you loved so well." His fingers brushed across Trip's forearm. "I was very sorry to hear about the accident."

"Thank you. We all were. No, Bob and I have been close friends for years. We tried to hate each other and failed miserably. So when Melinda strong-armed us into working together, we gave up pretending."

Rudy widened his eyes. "You are playing with fire."

"More than you think." Trip provided a fast run-down of the mess he'd made since Melinda's death, winding up glumly with, "I'm sure she'd have asked me to watch out for him, but I'd bet this wouldn't have been what she meant." Rudy's lips twitched. Trip said, "Go ahead, laugh. I'd think this was hilarious, too, if it wasn't my problem."

"Poor, darling Trip. Are you absolutely sure he's not a she?"

"Barely, if at all." Given the surroundings, Trip let himself roll his eyes, expressively. "Melinda used to gloat over his talent and enthusiasm."

This time, Rudy did snort out a laugh. "What is the problem, then?"

"Nothing, I think, if he'd get over the idea that he has to swear true devotion rather than admit that he doesn't care as much as he thought he did about who's on the other end of his blow-jobs."

"Hah. Hence this trip."

"Yeah." Trip rattled the ice cubes in his now empty glass. "He's not getting that 'in love' implies repetition, repetition implies homosexuality, and homosexuality implies The Life." Briefly, he wondered if he looked as glum as he felt.

Rudy's voice was gentle when he asked, "Are you sure it's Bob we should be worrying about?"

"Have I looked like I've been nursing a crush these past two decades? I'm not the sort of girl who gets hung up on big manly men, thank you."

"Now, there's a taste that you, of all fellows, shouldn't be complaining about." Rudy blinked wisely. "Besides, for all his gloat-worthy domestic talents, Bob is hardly a--"

Trip interrupted, frowning at another burst of laughter from inside. "No, really, I'm fine. I'm beginning to feel sorry for your young friends, though."

"Oh, don't worry about them. As I'm sure your party tomorrow will prove, they're quite capable of taking care of themselves." Rudy's smile was mischievous. "They seemed very enthusiastic about my request that they try to make your birthday a truly memorable occasion. I'm sure they'll advance Bob's education immensely."

Ever so gently, Trip pressed his glass against his forehead.

When Trip and Rudy came back inside, Bob was asking Michael genially, "So, this is the important card?"

"No, this one." Michael pointed down, the gesture portentous. He was sitting cross-legged on the rug in front of what seemed to be a scavenged linen tablecloth. Across it were arranged a number of what Trip recognized as tarot cards. Michael picked one up and waved it around. "Your final outcome."

Peter, who was lounging elaborately on the sofa, announced, "Behold Madame Blabs-at-he," to the room at large.

"Hush, you," Michael told him. "The four of wands. Upright, the reward for hard labor. A place of refuge in the country. Gatherings and celebrations. An end and a beginning." He looked up through his eyelashes at Bob. "It can mean unexpected love."

Bob's expression was a mixture of judicious consideration and amusement. Only long experience let Trip know he was also disconcerted. "I can hardly complain about an outcome like that."

"I surely wouldn't," Michael said, gathering his cards. He smiled dazzlingly. Bob's face went quizzical.

"Well," Rudy said, bustling forward. "That was wonderful. Who's up for a walk?"

They all strolled up and down the Grove, with Michael and Peter vying to point out the sights to Bob, and other owners and renters calling out greetings to Rudy. Then they had dinner at the Sea Shack, a small place with a menu that ran to adequate hamburgers and chili, if amazingly high prices. Even this early in the evening, with the sun still setting, someone had fed quarters into the jukebox, and customers out on the deck were dancing the Madison in the evening breeze. A line of dancers, four men and a woman, moved across the planks, stepping, turning, and clapping.

"They're good," Bob said, pausing to watch on the way out.

"They should be," Trip said. "It's been popular around here for years. Gives the boys a chance to dance together."

Just outside the restaurant, Peter waved, resuming his role as tour guide. "That siren over there sounds if there's trouble. Like creeps from the mainland."

"Creeps?" Bob asked, eyebrows raised.

"Local toughs coming over in packs to beat up visitors." Trip said, voice dry. "The bell's a warning."

"At the Sea Shack, the cashier hand out rolls of coins for any of us boys who want them," Peter said, miming a loaded uppercut with more enthusiasm than experience.

Bob digested this. "Is the siren for anything else? Medical emergencies? Storms? To call the police?"

After a brief silence, Rudy was the one who answered. "No." Lacing his arm through Michael's, he said, "No. We don't sound the siren to call the police." For a moment, he looked as regal as Queen Elizabeth. "Rude things that they are, they wouldn't acknowledge any of our summonses. They prefer to gate-crash."

In their room that night, Bob sat down on the edge of his bed and bounced gently. "Good mattress."

Trip paused in removing his T-shirt. "You expected otherwise?"

"Not once I'd seen the rest of the house." Falling silent, Bob watched Trip finish undressing. His gaze was thoughtful rather than sultry, but Trip still turned around before he shucked his briefs and reached for his pajama bottoms.

He'd already extinguished the lamp when Bob said, into the dark, "You're different here. More certain, more focused."

"You're surprised?"

"It's how I thought you'd be the time you dragged us off to that convention of rocket ship and bug-eyed-monster fans at the Biltmore, to meet your writer friend. You weren't."

"In the Grove, the boys who know I like reading science fiction think I'm amusing or a schmo. At the Biltmore, any guy who knew I liked the boys might think I needed psychoanalysis. More likely, from what I've heard said, he'd think I should be arrested."

There was a pause. Outside, Trip could hear the voices and music from a party three doors down the row of cottages. Faintly, behind the rise and fall of chaotic celebration, the ocean provided a deep, untiring accompaniment. At last Bob asked, sounding snide, "Is this entire visit one of Trip's little fables?"

Trip smiled up at the darkness. Affection made his tone gentler than his words when he said, "What would you need a fable for? I thought you were merely in love with me."

After a long, smoldering silence, Bob produced an almost pained hoot of laughter. "God help me, I am. Okay, you win. I'll think about the moral to your story. But not until tomorrow, after I've gotten some sleep."

The next noises from his direction made it obvious that he'd rolled over and pulled up his bedclothes. A few minutes later, lightly but unmistakably, he started to snore. Trip punched his pillow, wondering how long party clamor plus purring wheezes would keep him awake. The next coherent thought he had was wondering who was shaking him.

The voice that went with the shaking was horribly cheerful. "How about a swim before breakfast?"

Beneath his blanket, Trip's eyes opened and then narrowed. Without warning, he sat bolt upright, throwing aside his bedclothes as he said in his most enthusiastic voice, "Hot dog! A swim!"

Bob lurched back, letting go. His eyebrows went up. He said, "Oh, that's very good."

"Thanks. I look to your example."

Miffed shifted toward amused. "Well, stop looking and get out of bed. If I'm by the ocean, I want to take advantage." Bob smiled, and there were teeth involved. "Not to mention, I believe somebody owes me a talk."

"Great," Trip said. "That's great."

Trip had packed swimming trunks. Bob settled for wearing cut-offs he'd borrowed from Michael the previous evening. They crossed the dunes on a walkway, hiking out to an ocean shining with the glinting, rippling reflections of early morning sun. While they saw others swimmers on the beach, the company was scattered; most of the neighbors were still sleeping off the inevitable toll of late and boisterous Friday celebrations.

Without much discussion, they swam for a while, breasting the small waves and fighting the currents until Trip's muscles burned pleasantly. As he came ashore, he felt like he'd sluiced out the rubbish of a long and chaotic week. Standing on wet sand, waves licking past his feet and receding, he turned to gaze back out to sea. Bob, who'd swum further from the shore, was also wading toward the beach. His borrowed shorts, now soaked and dark, clung to his legs and groin as he emerged from the water in a fashion Trip had to admire. Not bad for a guy who was Trip's age.

Even though he knew from experience that the dry sand would stick to his skin, Trip sat down just above the high-tide line. Bob joined him, muttering about sandy beaches as Trip watched him out of the corner of an eye. Bob was raking back his wet hair with his fingers, only to have the breeze disarrange it again. Seawater trickled down his chest and arms, tracing trails along the skin and hair, outlining musculature. Complaining or not, he seemed more relaxed than he had been for months. Fifteen months and nine days, to be precise.

"Okay, talk," Trip said, breaking the half-hour's silence to divert his thoughts.

Bob raised both eyebrows in an expression more supercilious than huffy. "I get the impression you're expecting me to change my mind during the next forty-eight hours."

"Sure. As far as I'm concerned, it's weird you're making this mistake in the first place. You're a smart guy. For the most part, not as smart as me, but usually smarter than me when it comes to other people."

"I'm certainly smart enough to know when I'm in love. After all, which of us has the experience?"

"I've been in love. A couple of times."

If Bob was surprised, you couldn't have told it from his expression. "None of which came to much, or I would have heard." Trip glowered at him. "Melinda," Bob said.

Trip looked away. "The odds were stacked against me. Another thing you should be worrying about and aren't."

"Why worry if, as you claim, I'm not in love?"

Good point. Trip glanced around. Nobody was within hearing range. "I don't think you are. You're used to close company and regular sex. You haven't had either for over a year. I'm not surprised you're all mixed up."

Bob snorted. "You do realize that you're talking to one of the rare men in modern America who doesn't confuse being in love with being in lust?" Unlike Trip, his snide expression implied. "If all I wanted were comfy, friendly blow-jobs, I could find a girlfriend from the Village with unconventional tastes. I wouldn't need a boyfriend etcetera and so forth."

"Exactly." Trip let his own exasperation show. "So get out there and start searching, and stop telling me that mine is the cock unlike all other cocks, the cock that somehow doesn't count." He stretched his arms out wide. "I promise, walk around here for a while, and you'll find guys who'll tell you my cock matters. Ask as smoothly as I know you can, and they won't even wonder why you're asking. It's a great town for that kind of research."

A long silence followed. At last Bob said, "Fine, Dr. I-have-a-significant-cock, I comprehend the moral of your weekend-long fable. Being in love with any other man, including you, is more or less lavender. And society does not approve."

"About time."

"Just because you were partially right doesn't mean you get to gloat." His tone shifted subtly. "And I don't think you can altogether blame me, either."

Trip sat up, alerted. "Why not?"

"As you, yourself, pointed out, we're talking about new rules at forty. Hard enough playing the game as a poor kid from a bad home, two strikes against me that weren't my fault." Bob shook his head. "Sure, I had some advantages. Finnish in Massachusetts isn't exactly Negro in Mississippi. But I've done a lot with my advantages, and we're talking about something that will cancel them all." He puffed out air, obviously exasperated. "Even though I've wondered for years now why such matters should. I swear I could come up with better social rules than the ones we have."

"Huh. You probably could." Trip considered. "Now I remember why I like you so much, even if you are a schemer. And really sarcastic."

"What lovely compliments. Done interrupting? In conclusion, I still don't think I'm a homosexual. But, okay, I'm not normal, either."

"I bet Michael would help you confirm your hypothesis."

"Christ, you truly are ten years old." A comfortable silence fell. Off along the shore, three friends were tossing around a football in the surf, and laughing. A few sea birds flew overhead, adding their own calls to the background.

At last Bob said, "I can see why you'd want to visit here. You get to be more yourself. The sea's nice. Even the company's enjoyable if you don't mind an awful lot of sloppy drinking and social noise."

"Don't forget the abundant intimate opportunities."

"Ugh." Bob shuddered. "The Hardy Boys instructed me that one wanders off into the tall grass for casual entanglements, out there with all the bugs. Even if I was interested, I have enough bites on my legs already."

Trip craned, interested. "Are those bites? I was thinking gooseflesh."

"That, too. Let's go back and get some breakfast." Abruptly, Bob got up. Trip stayed seated, lazily enjoying the show as Bob brushed sand off of his legs. About halfway down his left leg Bob stopped, examined Trip, and then went back to what he'd been doing with more deliberation. When he was done, he stood with one hand propped on a hip and a knowing smile on his face. "Your turn."

Trip was torn between wanting to kiss Bob and punch him. Since they were on the public beach, he did neither. Instead, he got up and said, "Quit leering."

"I'm not leering. I'm gratified by your interest. After all, I'm in love with a wonderful guy. Why shouldn't I be pleased by his attention?"

"Wait." Trip paused in his own brushing. "Did you just quote *South Pacific* at me?"

Bob's smile went evil. "Yes. Yes, I did."

"That's it. I'm boarding the afternoon ferry. I've been wrong all these years; homosexuality is catching."

"Not before your birthday party, you're not going. I've already been told I will be required to wear a costume." At Trip's mute look of horror, Bob said sweetly, "Which, I might add, is entirely your fault. The least you can do is suffer along with me."

IV

"I thought the weekend went really well," Trip said, raising his voice to be heard over the noise of the MG's engine.

Bob gave him a scathing look, and then returned to contemplating the Long Island traffic, his arms folded.

Trip tried again. "Rudy said we were amusing guests. He'd be happy to have us back. He'd even let us borrow the place while he's in Europe."

Bob stared out through the windshield.

All right, then. "Okay. I'm sorry. I'm sorry you ended up dressed as a Martian."

Without a word, Bob held up one hand and extended his fingers. The nails were green.

Trip suppressed a wince and continued doggedly, "I'm sorry their particular dye was so effective on keratin. And I'm sorry I went and hid, leaving you at the mercy of Michael. I did warn you about Michael."

"Not. Enough."

"How'd I know he'd try moving in right then and there with my party going on?"

"Moving in? Is that what it's called?"

Well, no. "At least he didn't do anything on the deck."

"He wouldn't have gone so far on the deck."

Trip considered. "Maybe. Although there was this party two doors down and a few summers back when this one guy kept kneeling down in front of guests and--"

"No. Stop. Too close for comfort."

"At least you now know it's not just me. That was a fairly impressive display--"

"Trip," Bob said, his voice a low growl, "I've already agreed with you on the Bob-not-normal clause. I didn't need verification from a young man dressed -- undressed -- as a space ranger." He seemed to slide down in his seat, and his voice was harassed when he said, "Besides, I was lathered up by sharing a room with you. It didn't take much effort to get me going whether I wanted to be going or not."

Hastily, Trip said, "You were dealing with the matter pretty well when Rudy and I came in."

"Oh, please. The kid was an octopus. I felt like the cutest secretary in a steno pool trying to take dictation from a V.P. who thinks he's Casanova." Bob pursed his lips sourly. "I'll have to remember this when such crap occurs in-house."

Trip couldn't resist freeing a hand from the wheel long enough to lightly punch Bob's shoulder. "Watch it. Your morals are showing again."

Bob rolled his eyes and then, with obvious reluctance, smiled. He was cooling off; he probably wouldn't have stayed so mad about Michael's seduction attempt if he hadn't woken up this morning with green fingernails. Those would be a treat to explain at work tomorrow.

For the next few miles, silence reigned. Bob stayed slumped in his seat, his chin almost on his chest. Trip had known him long enough to tell he was thinking hard.

He wasn't too surprised when Bob said, "Speaking of my morals."

"We're speaking of your morals?"

"We don't have time for a long conversation, so my morals. Morally speaking, there is an offer I should make to you."

Because of the traffic, Trip couldn't turn to study Bob's expression at any length. Too bad; any offer from him had to be approached warily. "Yes?"

"If you tell me, word of honor, that you'd never consider me as a lover, I'll never bring up my being in love with you again." Bob sounded almost prim when he said, "After all, I don't want to be a pest."

"Jesus, Bob."

"What?"

"Do you think I haven't learned anything from you in the past couple of decades? Your offer's useless. I wouldn't have done what I did Thursday evening if I'd never consider..." Trip realized his mistake and trailed off. "Which was what you wanted to hear me say. Your offer's not useless."

"Yes."

"Bastard."

"Yes."

"Crap. Sorry."

"No, I'm glad you forget."

"I shouldn't." Trip shifted gears and slowed for traffic. He took the chance to change the subject. "I don't even know why we're talking about this."

"Perhaps because we're accomplished, well-educated vets aged around forty? We've matured enough that just getting drunk and wrestling won't work."

Trip winced at a memory. "Add wild punches, and it didn't work when we were twenty, either."

"Sure it did. Melinda intervened, didn't she? That let us blame our friendship on her." The words seemed raw when Bob said, "God, I miss her."

Taking Bob's hand would be nothing but trouble, especially in a stick-shift car. "Me, too."

"Somewhere, right now, she's laughing at me so hard she's making that hiccupping noise." Bob's tone had grown wistful.

Trip settled for a noncommittal grunt. His views of death were considerably bleaker, but they were nothing that needed to be shared. After all, everyone would learn better -- or not be able to care any more -- sooner or later. He downshifted again. The traffic was thickening.

Bob must have misinterpreted the grunt. "You think she'd be upset? She never minded giving away what she was done with."

"Your cock's not last season's little black dress," Trip said while he braked hard as the traffic finally slowed to a stop.

It was difficult to tell if Bob sounded more prissy or annoyed when he said, "You need to work on this obsession of yours with talking about--" An open Chevy convertible stuffed to the brim with Mom, Dad, kids, and Rover pulled up in the lane beside them. Without missing a beat, Bob finished "--the details of your hobbies in public."

"Why?" Trip asked sweetly. "I though you liked fly-fishing."

"Depends on what I'm trying to catch," Bob said, just as sweetly.

In revenge, Trip lectured on science fiction, mysteries, tying a good fly, and the Yankees all the rest of the way back to Manhattan. Bob shook a fist in mock fury as Trip pulled away from the curb in front of the brownstone. He was smiling, though, so Trip didn't chalk up their drive as a victory in the one-upsmanship stakes. Something about Bob's smile had been too pleased.

Nonetheless, the emergency educational weekend seemed to have done Trip some good. When he arrived at work at half past eight on Monday, he didn't flinch at the piles of boxes filling most of what was to be the library and conference room. All the senior researchers' new offices opened off this central room, and seemingly the movers had found it too challenging to carry the boxes destined for those offices the extra fifteen or twenty feet. When Trip entered, his lab supervisors were trying to handle the mess.

Trip paused in the doorway and said to the room at large, "At least we had the sense to put our names on our boxes."

"You'd think they'd used an algorithm to randomize these," Richardsen said, sounding harried. He'd obviously tried to sort through some of the stacks and given up; between the boxes that should be in the conference room and the boxes that shouldn't be, there wasn't enough free space to finish.

Davis was using an opened pair of scissors to slice packing tape, a mournful expression on her face. "My mistake was in my methodology. I didn't label which of my boxes holds what." She pulled apart flaps and looked inside the top box on a pile. "I should have known. Nice, heavy books. CRCs, in fact."

"Stacked on the box containing my coffee pot and mugs," Trip noted.

"And the box with Dr. Richardsen's framed diplomas and pictures," she said sadly. Trip went to help her shift the book box onto the floor.

"A very bad randomizing algorithm," Richardsen said. He picked up another box from a short stack on the conference table and carried it into his office. "Seems like I kept on in school to get away from toting loads," he called back.

Davis cut open another box, reached in, and pulled out a piece of painted cardboard. Her expression shifted from mournful to relieved.

Trip looked over her shoulder. "What's that?"

"Barry's birthday gift to me." She was a widow; Barry was her kid. "I thought it would look nice on my wall, now that I'll have some space."

"Good work." It vaguely resembled a geometric Stonehenge or maybe a cover for *Worlds of If* as envisioned by a seven-year old. "What is it?"

Sounding pleased, she said, "The integers."

"Really? Huh." Trip studied the painting with renewed interest. "What are the purple ones?"

Her smile glowed with pride. "Prime numbers."

"That so?" Richardsen stopped behind them and adjusted his glasses. He examined the work. Then he asked her, "Are you considering extra math or more art classes?" He had two young kids of his own.

"Both."

They'd just started talking schools -- a topic Trip had learned fascinated most parents -- when Dr. Lin came into the conference room from the hall, clutching a blue pot that contained what seemed to be a small rubber tree. When Trip looked at him inquiringly, Lin said, "My *Ficus Elastica* was in the steno pool."

Trip nodded. "The day's going just about how Bob predicted that it would."

"Very much so. Mr. Eck opened a box with a leaking bottle of ink in it. His fingernails are presently quite green."

Trip was forced to grab the box holding his coffee supplies and retreat to his office before he could laugh.

He moved and unpacked boxes for a while -- ninety-six minutes, to be exact -- before settling down to work on the list of administrative chores Doris had left for him that he'd been putting off because of the move. Right on top of the list, she'd written and underlined, "Dr. Green."

With a sigh, Trip reached for the phone. Green, the head of research and development for B.T.C., wasn't as bad as Bob made him sound, but he did love the taste of his own words. Any phone call to Green would consist of two minutes of business followed by thirteen minutes of saying, "Uh-huh," and "That's interesting," as Green talked. Still, the chore was the worst on Trip's list, so the day would be brighter when he was done. Since Trip knew Doris would also be unpacking in her office across the hall, he took care of his own dialing and introductions to Green's secretary.

Four minutes later, Trip asked Green, "Really?" as he reached for his copy of *Galaxy*. Then he put it down again. Reading would be going too far. Instead, he unfolded the memo Bob had used to mark Trip's page and reached for a pencil.

If Trip wasn't going to pay attention, he should have been working on notes for the afternoon's senior research staff meeting. Instead, he doodled. Such sketches had long been a way that ideas floated to the surface of Trip's mind. He drew idly while he listened to Green tell him the gossip that masqueraded as keeping up with the latest work in their field.

A good ten minutes later, with Green still going strong, Trip checked his work. Nothing to do with coherent light. A car, a tombstone. Obvious enough. And a compass. A bag of

money? Those smiling stick figures holding squares were he and his colleagues with their boxes. They were below a hand. He stared at the rough sketches, confused, as he listened to Green drone. Then, suddenly, he put the paper down on his desk as carefully as he would've set down a proximity fuse.

"Listen, can I call you back?" he asked Green during the next pause for breath. "I think I heard a small explosion."

Green tsked, and said, "Of course, of course. Lab technicians in a new facility. Why, I remember when--" It only took another two minutes for Trip to get off the phone.

After he'd hung up, he picked up the memo again. Melinda's death in a car crash. Navigation: the road rallies. Money from selling the company. Trip and his remaining merry men, well, merry researchers. And Bob's hand. That circle was meant to be Bob's cufflink. Once again, Trip's subconscious had won through, this time to tell him that Bob had been gaming him these past few months like a Yankee peddler selling a cheap clock to a frontier farmer.

Bob had wanted Trip to ask him to navigate during Trip's road rallies; Melinda had been killed in a car crash. And he'd gone back to the negotiations to sell the company after she'd died not because he wanted the distraction but because he wanted Trip to have the insulation of money, the freedom from administrative duties, and the joy of doing work he loved with fellows he preferred. And then there was Bob's renewed worry about Trip giving himself away, getting hurt-- Trip's mind raced back across the events of the past year. Seemingly, Bob had switched his focus after Melinda's death. Now, when he wasn't winning the game for himself, he was winning the game for Trip.

Crap. Maybe Bob was shifting toward some state like love. No, he was. Otherwise, he would've snidely pointed out all the favors he'd been doing for Trip during one of their arguments. That meant Trip couldn't stall, hoping the whole matter would go away. Double crap. Trip looked down to see that he was already dialing Bob's extension.

"Yes?" Bob's tone was non-committal.

"Could you make your pitch any more of a screwball? Just how long would you have gamed me without explanation if I hadn't brought up the blow-job, anyhow? You know I stink at spotting social clues."

"We're on a company line," Bob said. There was a suggestion of clenched teeth around his words.

Trip blinked. Crap to the nth, he wasn't usually this careless. "Sorry. But you sure don't muster your strongest evidence. I don't know how you got Melinda to believe you when you told her you were in lo--"

"Oh, Christ, fine." There was a brief pause. "You're coming over this evening at seven. Happy tiny, spontaneous, additional birthday celebration. Right now, I have work to do." There was a click.

Thoughtfully, Trip hung up his own phone, leaned back in his chair, and put his feet up on his new desk. After a few minutes, he steepled his fingers. *Galaxy* stayed closed.

His supervision at the staff meeting that afternoon was noticeably improvisational. Luckily, between reports of the liquid nitrogen tanks that had been left by the movers in the lunchroom and Green's interesting rumors from Hughes Research, nobody cared. Also luckily, Trip had unearthed the box holding his late night at the lab supplies. He used the safety razor inside for a surreptitious second shave before he left the new building for Bob's brownstone.

Trip wasn't worried about their two-man last-minute celebration getting awkward. He and Bob didn't have awkward conversations, only argumentative ones. However, he was wondering how Bob would choose to play this latest game. Trip spent the taxi ride trying to predict Bob's tactics although that turned out to be a waste of time.

When Bob opened the door, he seemed frazzled. "Get in here." He pulled Trip inside and shut the door. "How are you at coaxing?"

"So-so, unless we're talking electronics. You know that. What am I supposed to be persuading you of?" Trip took off his Burberry as he spoke and hung it and his fedora on the coat rack.

"Not me, him." With an exasperated flourish, Bob pointed down the hall.

FaLa was sitting by the door to the dining room. On his head, perched between his ears, secured with a little red cord, was a doll-sized party hat, one decorated with sequins and teensy-tiny bells. The Siamese looked smug.

"Jesus. That's evil."

"It's supposedly in honor of your recent birthday. It's actually Mrs. Brown's revenge for being instructed to find a birthday cake an hour before she'd usually leave on a Monday morning." Bob shook his head. "I know I'm overreacting, but I can't stand all the goddamned tinkle-tinkle-tinkling."

FaLa meowed. He sounded smug, too. Then he got up and trotted up the stairs, jingling all the way.

"Why didn't you take the hat away from him?"

Bob held out a hand. Scratch marks had been added to the pale green nails.

"You should have tried tuna."

With an exasperated huff, Bob grabbed Trip's arm and steered him into the front room. Two slices of cake on dessert plates and two cups of coffee were waiting on the coffee table. They'd known each other far too long for Bob to expect anything but punctuality if just the two of them were meeting.

Trip sat down and considered the cake. Devil's Food: his favorite. "No candles?"

"I'm the one wanting my wish to come true, not you." Bob sat on the couch, picked up his own plate and fork, and took a bite.

After a reverent pause for eating cake, Trip asked, "How long have you known?"

Bob put down his plate and fork. He didn't pretend to misunderstand. "Maybe a few days consciously. Months, subconsciously. Certainly since before my drunkenly tragic request for you-know-what-and-don't-start-again."

"The oh-blay ob-jay?"

"You are ten. Yes, that."

He looked good and pissy. More good than pissy. For once, Trip didn't bother switching mental tracks when he noticed what annoyance did for Bob's looks. Instead he said, "Fine, you like my blow-jobs. Bizarrely, they whisper to you of romance. At least you're willing to admit this isn't exactly normal."

"Obviously I was stupid. Thank you, Dr. Doyle."

"I'm still not sure what else you're after. It's not like I can help you throw dinner parties, or raise kids with you, or kiss you goodbye at the door each morning."

"Yes, I understand this would be an affair rather than the marriage I'd prefer." With his usual shrug, graceful and disdainful at once, Bob said, "At least it wouldn't be the sort of adulterous affair everyone else in our circle goes on about. You know me; I can't stand all that self-deceiving melodrama."

Trip considered him, finishing the last bite of cake. Without noticing, Bob had spoken words that explained a lot about his romantic ambitions. Trip did know Bob, and not just the brilliant social gamesman, either. Few others did. Melinda had. Maybe such knowledge mattered more to Bob than girl or boy did, weird as that was. Huh.

He put down his plate, steepled his fingers, and said, "Okay, if you're trying to start an affair, you'll need to offer me more than a cock to blow. Those, I have access to."

Bob studied him, seemingly surprised by the sudden capitulation. Then he said, "I can learn."

"Somebody's confident."

"I have a resume."

"Not with guys you don't. Or do you?"

"No, the good-looking sorts always made me queasy." Before Trip could point out that this wasn't precisely a promising sign, Bob misunderstood Trip's raised eyebrows and said, "Oh, don't give me that look. I know my reaction should've warned me I wasn't as normal as I thought. If I didn't care about other men at all, I wouldn't have, well, cared." He glowered. "You were the worst, you know. Even back when I was courting Melinda, you were the worst. Positively nauseating, saw right through me, and a grind to boot. No wonder I wanted to knock your block off."

Trip laughed so hard his stomach ached. Bob just rolled his eyes.

After one last snort, Trip asked, "Ignoring the female staff for a minute, who's the best looker on the business side?"

Bob paused, confused. Then he said, "Fred Ceretti, I suppose. Why?"

Huh. Interesting choice. Fred wasn't movie star handsome. In Trip's opinion, a couple of the other guys looked better overall. Fred merely had that incredible ass. "Does he make you queasy?"

"I don't get queasy these days. He makes me nervous. For some reason, he's too compelling. Is this your idea of a quiz show?"

Standing, Trip dropped a hand onto Bob's shoulder. "Sort of. Here's your final question, qualifying you for the grand prize. Would you like to try giving it to me up the ass?"

Bob's jaw dropped. He swallowed, his expression for once uncertain, vulnerable. Trip squeezed the shoulder he held, which was all the help Bob needed.

"Forget about ten years old. You are seven," he said. He reached up and gently knuckled Trip's hand. Then he stood and his voice lost its usual sarcasm. "Let's go."

As they headed up toward the bedroom that Bob had moved into after Melinda's death, the silence between them thickened. Maybe it was just as well that they were ambushed by FaLa in the upstairs hall.

A few minutes of jingling, swearing, and yowling later, Trip was dabbing iodine on his hand while Bob disposed of the party hat. Raising his voice in the bedroom, Bob said, "I can hear him complaining downstairs. Watch out for your fedora; he might be plotting an eye-for-an-eye revenge."

"I will." Done with first aid, Trip unbuttoned his shirt. The heat prickling across his skin, the tightening in his groin, even the quickening of his pulse made him force himself to move in a measured fashion. He wanted to grab, and this needed finesse.

"Good." Bob was silent for a while before he asked, "Am I correct in assuming I'll be the one, ah, pitching?"

Trip had to take a deep breath before he could say, "Yeah, I like catching. Don't think that means you also get to drive."

"Yes, because I always try to drive when I don't know what I'm doing." The sound of Bob's voice had approached as he spoke; Trip turned from stripping off his underwear to see Bob standing in the bathroom doorway, dressed in nothing but tight, black briefs. The bulge of his arousal was obvious and nicely set off by the fabric.

Trip took time to enjoy the view. Then he stepped forward and said, "Let me help you, here." He put two fingers in the elastic waistband of the briefs to tug.

Bob seized Trip's face with both hands and kissed him, hard. When he broke away, after a long, wet duel of tongues and lips, his voice was husky as he said, "I love you."

"You Machiavellian nut." Trip sounded pretty husky himself. "Let's get to the bed before I'm down on my knees, which wouldn't demonstrate anything." He reached over to pick up the hand lotion he'd found in the medicine cabinet while searching for iodine and tossed it to Bob. "We'll need this." He picked up a towel.

"Right," Bob said. His expression became determined. "But we won't need these." He stripped off his briefs. Without conscious thought, Trip stepped forward, and Bob backed up, raising a hand. "Hold on, I'm going." He moved fast.

"Don't worry," Trip told him a short time later. "Rough's good. Civilized some other time." Suiting actions to words, he rolled Bob onto his back and pinned him down against the soft cotton sheets. Trip wanted to see his reaction. Trip wanted to see him. Wanted him.

Beneath him, smooth and sinewy, Bob heaved up hard, pushing his cock against Trip's stomach as his arms clamped around Trip's back. His expression was urgent, eager enough that Trip slid across him, enjoying his choked noises. Then Trip stropped his own cock along the crease between Bob's leg and groin. Christ, that was good. So was the taste of Bob's skin. Soon Bob was proving his pleasure against Trip's skin, leaking in a

way that showed he couldn't last much longer. Trip's own cock felt hot, tight, and too close to coming. He pulled away from Bob's embrace.

"Fuck!" Bob said. His hair was a mess and he was sweating even in the cool of the bedroom. He looked great.

"Good idea." Trip sat up and reached for the hand lotion.

As Bob watched Trip lower himself onto his own slicked-up fingers, unhurriedly penetrating himself, Bob's eyes darkened. Briefly, Trip rode his fingers. He smiled to see Bob's cock shift.

"Comments?" Trip managed to ask. "Questions?" Bob watching was making him burn.

"If anyone says that during a meeting tomorrow and I get a hard-on, you die." Bob's words were breathy.

Trip pulled out his fingers, squeezed some more of the lotion into the palm of his hand, and reached for Bob's cock. Bob made a guttural noise when Trip wrapped his hand around the shaft, so Trip worked quickly. Then he got up on his knees and elbows, offering his ass.

Bob's hands on Trip were firm and confident. His skin, the warmth when he crouched over Trip, felt right. Trip enjoyed the searching pressure as Bob guided his cock to Trip's asshole. Then Bob pushed in a little before he paused, panting.

"Pitch, would you?" Trip's question was almost a growl.

Bob drove his hips forward. The ache of his cock's abrupt, deep entry was more pleasure than pain. "Fuck," Bob said, almost conversationally this time. "Oh, so good. Christ, Trip."

Trip closed his eyes, maybe to concentrate, maybe in relief. "Go."

Not perfect: Trip had to reach back and smack at Bob once to get him to change angles. But Bob learned fast, even as he muttered a complaint at the smack. His hard thrusts took Trip most of the way even before Bob tightened his grip, his rhythm broke, and he came. He didn't pull loose afterward but waited, hips slowly working, as Trip stripped the last of the pleasure out of his own cock, spending until his blood roared in his ears.

Bob eased out with care and then flopped down onto the sheets on his back. "Okay?" he asked.

"Yeah," Trip said. Slowly, gingerly, he also rolled onto his back, onto the towel he'd left to catch the mess. Ouch: he'd be feeling this one for a day or two. He wasn't surprised to find that he really didn't mind.

They'd kicked the covers onto the floor. Now that they'd disentangled and rolled apart, Trip could smell their sweat mingled with the odors of sex. He liked the scent, even liked the sticky feeling of his own spunk drying on his stomach: both good signs. Without a word, Bob reached out and took Trip's hand. A couple of minutes passed.

"Maybe with more practice," Trip told the ceiling. His free hand was tucked between his head and the pillow, and he desperately wanted to sleep, but he didn't think he should. Not smart in the long term, sleeping over.

"What?"

"Maybe I can be in love with you. With more practice. I think maybe is the word I want."

Bob released Trip's hand and pushed himself up from the sheets to stare down at Trip, which did nice things for the muscles in his arms. His expression mixed wariness, hope, and amusement as he asked, "Is it?"

"Yeah." Trip considered. "'Maybe' with an admixture of 'probably', to be exact."

After a noise of exasperation that would have done credit to FaLa, Bob leaned over and kissed Trip. Trip was already getting used to this kind-of-ordinary approach. He wrapped his arms around Bob and spent some time indulging in the sort of heated arguments and agreements best negotiated by tongues and lips.

What with cleaning up, and more coffee, and appeasing FaLa, and a lot more necking than he was used to, Trip wasn't in a cab heading home until well past one. He only realized he'd been humming "A Wonderful Guy" for most of the drive when they passed the arch in Washington Square. Guilt made him over-tip.

A fast teeth scrub and he was ready for bed. He reached for the chain on his lamp, hesitated, and reached for the telephone on the bedside table instead. Bob answered on the third ring.

"Did I wake you?" Trip asked.

"I don't hate you right now, so no. I'm up being nervous about this evening."

"Given how well things went, you might as well save the nerves for future sneaking. Listen, I wanted to ask. Should I talk to Rudy about our visiting the Grove again?"

There was a pause before Bob asked, "What excuse could we give for being away at the same time?"

"Don't you have a birthday soon?"

"I suppose I'm owed some celebration after all my hard work on the B.T.C. deal." There was another, longer, pause, before Bob asked, voice musing, "I wonder what the real estate market is like on Fire Island?"

Trip resisted the urge to smack his forehead with the receiver. Now what had he unleashed? "Don't ask me."

"I won't. I'll talk to Rudy. Although your name should be on any leases." Bob cleared his throat. "Oh, and Trip?"

"What?"

"Don't forget we're having lunch with Barber and Harkness tomorrow, to sign the final papers. I hope you dry-cleaned your good suit."

Trip hung up, making it loud. But he couldn't help his soppy grin. Apparently, he'd have to scratch that "maybe" and move his chances of falling in love up to "very likely".

Curses. Snowed again.

Mergers and Acquisitions

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