



Loose Id

HEART AND SOUL

A SEQUEL TO THE ASSIGNMENT

EVANGELINE ANDERSON

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Dedication

Dedicated to the readers who asked for another story about Valenti and O'Brian. Keep e-mailing, and I'll keep writing. I think I might have one more in me after this. In the meantime, please enjoy Heart and Soul, and thanks so much for taking the time to let me know you care about the guys.

Author's Note

While Heart and Soul may be read as a stand-alone book, readers would probably enjoy it more if they took the time to get to know Detectives Valenti and O'Brian, starting with The Assignment, followed by I'll Be Hot for Christmas and then Fireworks. All preceding books are available at Loose Id.

Chapter One

LA, the early '80s

“I'm takin' it.” His partner's words rang in Detective Nick Valenti's head as he walked purposefully up the broad marble steps, adjusting the gray coveralls he was wearing that said *Chuck's Emergency Plumbing—We fix it fast!* in red letters on the back. His heart was beating a quick rhythm in his chest, and the toolbox he carried had more than just tools in it. Under the wrenches and wire and the long metal snake to unclog drains was a snub-nosed Viper with a full clip—a deadly surprise for anyone who crossed him. Valenti had considered wearing the gun on his body instead of hiding it in the toolbox, but he was afraid that a suspicious bulge under the coveralls would give the game away too soon.

The disguise was necessary to get him into the huge white mansion of porn kingpin James Talbert. A huge white mansion where unspeakable things went on, if you believed half the rumors and all the conveniently absent witnesses—most of them slender, hot little twinkles who had checked into the Talbert mansion and never checked out again. Even now those same unspeakable things might be happening to Valenti's partner, Sean O'Brian.

Valenti shook his head. He didn't want to think about that—couldn't afford to think of it if he wanted to get O'Brian out alive. If only the stubborn bastard hadn't been so determined to jump headlong into danger! His mind went back to their argument the month before, when Captain Harris had offered them the risky assignment. Well, had offered it to O'Brian, anyway. And again, O'Brian's words repeated in his mind...

* * *

“I'm takin' it. I'm takin' it, and that's the last I wanna hear about it.” Sean O'Brian drew himself up to his full height of five feet nine and turned the blazing power of his sea green eyes on Valenti.

“It's not safe, O'Brian.” Valenti raked a hand through his thick black hair and frowned at the man who was so much more than his partner.

For over two years, since the dangerous undercover mission at the RamJack, a resort that represented both the most glamorous and the most sordid aspects of gay life, Valenti and O'Brian had been lovers as well as best friends and partners. Circumstances had forced them to admit their true feelings for each other—feelings that had come as a complete surprise since neither man had ever had a same-sex attraction before in their lives. But the relationship they shared was about more than the ravenous lust that sparked between them when they touched. It was rooted in a loyalty and trust so deep, it transcended the boundaries of ordinary love and friendship.

It was this trust that Valenti felt his partner was violating now by agreeing to take the mission Captain Harris had offered him without even taking Valenti's professional concerns into consideration. Fearing for his partner, Valenti had dug deeper into the details than anyone, and he knew the assignment was fraught with danger. Going undercover at the mansion of James Talbert—the man who was single-handedly responsible for more illegal porn than anyone else in the country—was going to be risky business indeed. Valenti wouldn't have let the danger stop him if both he and O'Brian were going together. But there was only one spot open at Talbert's mansion, and Captain Harris had decided O'Brian was perfect for the job, which left Valenti out in the cold and unable to watch his partner's back.

“It's not safe,” he said again. “I wouldn't mind if we could go together, but you're going to be on your own in there. For God's sake, O'Brian, Talbert makes gay snuff films.”

“Which is exactly why I'm takin' this case.” O'Brian leaned closer, so that his reddish blond locks brushed against Valenti's dark hair. They were arguing in the men's room of the downtown PD, commonly called the Metro, and voices tended to carry in the tiled space. “I'm takin' it because even though we can't admit...what we are, there's no way other guys—guys just like us—should be gettin' killed for what they are. Which is what *we* are. Sort of, anyway. See?” That was as close as O'Brian ever came to admitting he was gay, because gay wasn't how he thought of himself. As he had told Valenti before, he was just a straight guy who was in love with his partner, who just happened to be another guy.

Gay or straight, hetero or homo, Valenti knew their relationship was more complicated than any label a homophobic society might try to paste on it. The love between him and O'Brian

went deeper than blood or bone. They weren't just partners or lovers; they were soul mates. Which was exactly why it was so hard for him to let his partner take this dangerous case on his own.

“There *are* no other guys like us,” Valenti told his partner, frowning. “I see what you're getting at, but I'd bet even money we're the only two closeted cops in LA who are partners in more than one sense of the word, O'Brian. And if you go trying to take down the guy who's killing twink and making movies of their final moments, there're going to be two *fewer* closeted cops, because I swear to God, he'll have to kill both of us if things go south.”

“If things start to go south, I'll call you in. Hell, I'll call the whole damn LAPD,” O'Brian promised. “But you can't come with me on this, Valenti. I'm sorry, but there's no way anybody could mistake you for a twink. You're way too tall and butch. Besides, I have experience playing the part... Got plenty of that at the RamJack, remember?”

Valenti sighed. He did remember the RamJack, all too well. At the time his partner had been angry that he had to play the more submissive role of the “boy” to Valenti's “daddy.” But there was no getting around the fact that with his diminutive height and compact physique, Sean O'Brian looked the part. He could easily pass as one of the twinks Talbert had invited into his mansion, even though he was much less effeminate than most. Valenti's tall frame and serious brown eyes, along with his more uptight attitude and assertive nature, ruled him out of the submissive role. He'd been happy at the time that he wouldn't have to play the more flamboyantly gay man at the RamJack, but he'd never dreamed that Sean's experience playing a twink would come back to haunt them.

“Sean, please,” he said, trying one last time. There was no one else in the men's room, so he dared to cup his partner's cheek. “Please,” he murmured. “Don't do this. I love you. Don't...don't know what I'd do if something happened to you. Please don't go where I can't follow. Don't take this case.”

“I love you too, Nicky. God, you have no idea how much.” O'Brian leaned into the touch. “But I havta do this. I'm sorry if you don't understand why, but I just havta. Besides”—he gave Valenti a crooked smile—“I'm just gonna play Talbert's pool boy. I'll scoop the pool and look around for evidence on my off hours. You know that unless we find something, no judge in LA

will issue a warrant to search the place. Rumors aren't good enough, and every witness we had has done a disappearing act.”

“I know. That's what I'm afraid of.” Valenti searched his partner's eyes, his heart pounding. “That you'll disappear, just like them. What if you run into trouble, and nobody will back me to get you out of there? What if by the time I get something on paper, it's too...too late for you?” He swallowed a lump in his throat, almost unable to get the words out. He couldn't believe his partner was really going to do this, was really going to take this case, no matter how Valenti felt about it.

“That's not gonna happen, babe. I'm gonna be just fine.” O'Brian leaned up and gave him a lingering kiss on the mouth. “I swear I'll check in with you every afternoon at five, when my so-called shift ends, so you'll know I'm A-OK. All right?”

Valenti was finally forced to admit defeat. “All right,” he acknowledged angrily. “But I want you to know I don't agree with this. You're putting your life on the line and mine too. Because damn it, Sean, there's no way I could make it without you.”

“Hey, don't say that. I'll be out before you know it,” O'Brian promised. “And then we'll celebrate all night long. Valentine's Day is comin' up, ya know. I already got a special surprise planned just for you, Nick, and I plan ta be here to give it to you in person.”

“I'll hold you to that.” Valenti pulled his partner into a bear hug, relishing the feel of O'Brian's lithe, compact frame against his taller one. He reflected bitterly that anyone walking into the men's room at that moment wouldn't have mistaken what was going on for simple comradely affection. O'Brian was plastered against the length of his body, their arms entwined, their pelvises grinding together in a way that would never happen in a hug between two straight men.

But at the moment he didn't give a damn if anyone saw their display of more-than-friendly affection. All he cared about was that his partner was going someplace dangerous—someplace where Valenti couldn't watch his back—and it was killing him to let Sean go. But as angry and upset and betrayed as he felt, he had to trust that his partner knew what he was doing and that he'd come back, just like he promised.

But before he let him go, there was one more thing he had to do.

“Come on.” He grabbed O'Brian's hand and pulled him toward the far end of the men's room, where a small janitorial closet filled with supplies was located.

“Whatcha doing?” O'Brian complained, resisting the tug on his hand. “Captain Harris said if I want this gig, I have to be in costume and out to Talbert's place pronto.”

“I know Captain Harris said you have to leave immediately, but I can't let you go like this,” Valenti insisted. He dragged his protesting partner into the dark closet, which smelled strongly of bleach and ammonia. “You don't understand, Sean,” he said, shutting the door securely behind them. “If you're really determined to do this, really determined to put yourself in danger despite my begging you not to, then there's only one thing I can do.”

“What's that?” O'Brian looked puzzled in the faint light filtering in from under the door.

“Give you something to remember me by.” Dropping to his knees onto the cold tile floor, Valenti had his partner's skintight jeans unzipped in a heartbeat. He heard O'Brian try to muffle a moan as he palmed the heavy cock that was suddenly erect at his touch and pulled it free.

“God, babe! Ya don't...don't have to do this,” O'Brian gasped, but the strong fingers working their way through Valenti's hair told a different story.

“Want to.” Valenti leaned forward, eager as always for the taste of his partner's cock. He remembered the first time he'd sucked O'Brian at the RamJack, remembered the way O'Brian had trembled and gasped and begged. It was an incredibly powerful feeling, bringing a strong man like Sean to his knees this way, even though it was Valenti who was doing the kneeling. He took the thick shaft in one hand and placed a soft, hot kiss on the broad, mushroom-shaped head. O'Brian's familiar musk filled his senses, and he felt his own cock grow achingly hard in response. There was a time when his partner's scent hadn't affected him this way, a time when a casual touch between them was just a touch. But since their time at the RamJack, everything had changed—for the better, in Valenti's opinion.

“God! Please, babe, I'm goin' crazy here!” O'Brian's voice was hoarse with need, but Valenti made him wait awhile longer as he lapped the pearl of precum that was beading at the slit of O'Brian's cock. Suddenly he wanted to draw this out, wanted to torture his partner with pleasure the same way O'Brian had tortured him the Christmas before last, when he'd abducted Valenti from a charity event, handcuffed him to the bed, and fucked him until he couldn't see

straight. Of course, he'd already gotten his partner back for that little number—on the Fourth of July, no less—but it was still good to let O'Brian know how he felt.

In fact, that was what he needed, Valenti told himself. He needed to get O'Brian alone and fuck some sense into him, needed to show him that he wasn't just putting his own life on the line by taking this dangerous mission, but that he was risking everything that was important to *both* of them. But since there was no bed or handcuffs handy, this would have to do. He sucked the head of his partner's cock between his lips, relishing the salty, bitter taste that was entirely Sean, rolling the flavor on his tongue as he took his partner deeper into his mouth.

“Nicky, please...please, you're killin' me,” O'Brian groaned, and Valenti felt his partner's fingers tighten in his hair as the blunt head rubbed over his tongue. He ovaled his lips and took more, deep throating his partner with sudden, surprising ease that left O'Brian gasping. This wasn't something he'd ever expected to be doing with another man, not even a man he cared for like O'Brian. But there was no denying the passion between them. The way his cock was standing up hard against his pants, begging for relief just from sucking O'Brian's, was a testament to their mutual feelings.

Valenti drew back and surged forward again, feeling the rough scratch of O'Brian's blond fur against his face. He drew the heavy cock down his throat. *Not gonna let you go without showing you how I feel. You want to go put yourself in danger? Fine. But not until I taste you one last time, let you know what you're going to be missing while you're gone.*

“God, Nicky!” O'Brian was pumping furiously now, the thick shaft thrusting between Valenti's lips with bruising force. “God, that's so good. You suck me so good!” He moaned. “Love the feel of your tongue on my cock, babe. Love to come in your mouth.”

Valenti felt the throbbing pulse as his partner swelled even bigger between his lips. O'Brian was close—teetering right on the edge of orgasm—and all he had to do was keep up the steady suction to make it happen. Part of him wanted to do that, wanted to press forward and drink his partner's hot load until O'Brian collapsed, spent, against him. He wanted to see the sweet look of completion on his partner's face and know that he had put it there. But there was a lesson to be taught here, and Valenti was doing the teaching. With one quick movement, he wrenched his head free of O'Brian's grasping fingers and got to his feet.

O'Brian was left gasping in confusion, his rock-hard cock still jutting from between his thighs. "What...?" He looked up at Valenti, frowning and obviously perplexed. "What the hell didja do that for?" he demanded. "You're not gonna finish me?"

"Finish yourself." Valenti crossed his arms over his chest and frowned at his partner as coolly as though he hadn't just been on his knees deep throating him a moment before. "Or come back for the ending when you're done with this goddamn case. Come back to me."

With that, he turned the knob of the closet door and let himself out, leaving O'Brian with his cock still hanging out of his pants and a dumbfounded look on his face.

Chapter Two

Valenti rang the tasteful, silver-inlaid doorbell and heard an elaborate classical chiming in response—the opening strains of “Air on the G String.” Very funny. Was Talbert trying to make a statement about his refinement despite making his fortune in the raunchy end of the porn industry? Or was he just being ironic? After all, G-strings and the taking off of same had made him a very rich man. Valenti didn't know and didn't care. All he knew was that his partner was somewhere inside Talbert's mansion, and he intended to get him out. Harris could talk all he wanted about not blowing the case—Valenti's gut told him that O'Brian was in trouble, and he wanted his partner out of danger.

It had been an entire month since their conversation in the Metro's men's room, and as promised, O'Brian had called him every afternoon. He hadn't had any luck finding enough evidence to put Talbert away yet, but he was hopeful that he would get something soon.

In the long, dry month since his partner had been undercover, the daily phone call was all Valenti had had to hang on to. He had never been a very verbal man, but he longed to tell his partner exactly what he wanted to do to him once O'Brian got home. But the line wasn't secure, so he didn't dare do it, even though the memory of what had been done and said between them the last time they had seen each other lay like a thundercloud over each exchange. He had to content himself with small talk and then jerking off later to vivid fantasies of tying O'Brian to the bed and sucking his cock until he moaned for more, until he begged to be fucked instead.

And then came the fateful day when O'Brian didn't call.

Valenti had waited as long as he could and then phoned their captain. Captain Harris was one of those men who didn't like to be bothered at home, and he hadn't appreciated the call in the least...

* * *

“There's something wrong,” Valenti had told him, ignoring his superior's obvious irritation. “O'Brian didn't call in this afternoon. We need to get a warrant and get him out of there.”

“Come on, Valenti. You really expect me to bother a judge in the middle of his dinner because your partner is a couple of hours late with his check-in?”

“Hell yes, I expect you to *bother* a judge,” Valenti had barked. “It's not like O'Brian to be late. He's called me every single day this past month, and he's never been more than a few minutes late or early. Now it's past eight, and he was supposed to call me at five.”

“Three hours.” Captain Harris's voice was flat. “Your partner is only three hours late, Valenti. I know you and O'Brian are close—maybe too close after what happened at the RamJack—but I have to ask you to check your hysteria. O'Brian is under deep cover over at the Talbert mansion. If we go barging in there with a bunch of uniforms, we'll blow his cover and any chance we ever had of pinning these snuff films on James Talbert. Be reasonable.”

Valenti had made an effort to keep his voice low and steady. “I *am* being reasonable, Captain. And if you knew O'Brian the way I do, you'd understand that. He knows how important it is to me to get that call every day letting me know he's okay. He wouldn't miss it unless something was really wrong. And the fact that he hasn't called tonight means he's in trouble—deep trouble.”

Captain Harris had sighed loudly. “All right, Valenti. If you think something is wrong, you can check it out yourself. Go undercover, and go easy. Once you lay your eyes on O'Brian, get the hell out, and don't blow his case. Is that clear?”

“Crystal.” Valenti had nodded even though he knew his captain couldn't see him. “But Captain, you better get working on that warrant,” he said, gripping the phone tight. “If I don't call you in a couple of hours, I don't want to be left hanging with no backup.”

“I'll get you what you need, but you've got to give me a little time.” Captain Harris had sounded more alert at that point. “I'll wait by the phone, Valenti. If I don't hear from you in an hour, I'll send in the backup as soon as I can get the warrant. Just don't be surprised if you don't get a warm welcome back at the Metro if you blow this case. A suspension is the very least you can expect.”

“At this point I'm more worried about O'Brian than my career. You can throw the book at me when this is all over, Captain. I don't give a damn. I just want to get my partner out of there alive,” Valenti had told him and hung up the phone.

* * *

And that was how he'd ended up outside the Talbert mansion at nine o'clock at night in a plumber's uniform, cursing his partner's stubbornness for the thousandth time. It was about time someone taught O'Brian a lesson about being too cocky, about going into dangerous situations where Valenti couldn't cover his back. But that was for later. Right now he had to get his partner out of Talbert's mansion alive.

Valenti flicked a speck of dirt off the wrinkled gray coveralls, grateful that he had saved the plumber's costume, which was left over from another undercover assignment he and O'Brian had done a couple of years back. He was about to ring the doorbell again, when one of the huge mahogany double doors swung inward and a small balding man in the livery of a traditional English butler appeared. Well, Talbert really *was* putting on airs. As if hiring someone like this could mask the fact that his money was dirty, Valenti thought contemptuously.

“Yes?” The man had the accent to go with his appearance. His voice was what O'Brian would have called “snooty.” Just thinking of his partner made Valenti's heart ache, but he kept his face blank and his manner calm and collected.

“Here about the pool,” he said brusquely, shouldering his way past the dapper butler and into the huge parquetered entry hall. “Got a call that one of your pumps is busted.”

“I beg your pardon? I placed no such call.” The butler sounded even snootier, if that were possible, and the look on his face said that he thought Valenti was so far beneath him, he wouldn't bother scraping him off the bottom of his shoe.

Valenti frowned, letting the butler know he meant business. “That's 'cause I didn't talk to you, buddy. You got a live-in pool guy here. Goes by the name of Sean?” As he asked the question, his heart quickened in his chest.

“Oh, yes.” The butler sniffed disapprovingly. “The master does indeed employ such a person. Is he the one who placed the call?”

“Sure did.” Valenti shifted impatiently. “Ya know, this toolbox is heavy, and my overtime ain't cheap.”

The butler looked down his nose. "I am certain the master can afford whatever paltry sum you charge. Give me a moment to speak with him."

Valenti waited, trying to look nonchalant while the little English twit picked up a fancy princess phone and spoke a few words too low for him to hear. Was O'Brian okay after all? Where was he? Every muscle in his body was tense, every instinct crying out that he had to run, that he had to search this whole house from top to bottom until he found his partner. But he made himself be still and wait. Soon enough, the butler put down the phone and turned to face him.

"The master has assured me that it will be possible for you to see our pool person," he said in a frosty tone. "Despite the late hour."

"Well, good." Valenti felt a surge of relief. "You mind pointing me in his direction, then? Unless you want this whole fancy house flooded with pool water."

The faintest of smiles appeared on the butler's thin, liver-colored lips. "Oh, I believe I can do better than that. I'll take you to him myself. Come." He turned without another word and led the way deeper into the sprawling house. Valenti followed, eager but anxious. He told himself that he would simply make sure O'Brian was okay and then leave, just as he had promised the captain. But despite his easy entry and reception, he couldn't shake the feeling that something here was very, very wrong.

The butler led him down long corridors and through richly decorated rooms, the furnishings of which could have bought and sold the meager apartments of either Valenti or his partner many times over. Looks like dirty money buys a lot of pretty things, he thought cynically as he followed the silent butler. And hopefully Talbert still thinks Sean is one of them.

All James Talbert knew was that he had hired O'Brian from a modeling agency that rented out pretty boys to do easy but menial household tasks. Since the rich and famous enjoyed being surrounded by the young and beautiful, it was a lucrative business. It was rumored that two of the last eight stars in Talbert's latest snuff films had come from that same agency, but since no one could produce the films, and since the witnesses who had come forward had all conveniently disappeared, there was no evidence of foul play. After all, pretty male hustlers came and went with alarming regularity in a city as big as LA, and most of them didn't have anyone who was concerned enough to miss them.

But O'Brian did. He had Valenti, and Valenti was determined to get him out of here, or he would die trying. Just as the thought crossed his mind and his hand tightened on the handle of the toolbox, they came to the end of the hall. Or what looked like the end of the hall, anyway. It was actually a floor-to-ceiling marble fireplace with a pristine heap of logs laid in the hearth just waiting for someone to strike a match.

The snooty English butler picked up an elegant gold box of matches that lay on the mantel beside a long, tapered candle in a silver sconce, then delicately picked one out with one white-gloved hand. Striking it expertly, he lit the candle. Then he stood back and motioned for Valenti to do the same.

Uncertain of what to expect, Valenti took a step backward. Was the damn butler trying for ambience or something? He certainly didn't need to put on the dog for him. Valenti came from money, and he and O'Brian had spent time at the ultra-luxurious RamJack, but neither his family home nor the decadent resort had anything on James Talbert's mansion.

“Look, what—” he began to say, and just then the fireplace moved. It swung inward like a hidden door in a cheesy horror movie to reveal another room behind it.

The butler gave him a thin-lipped smile. “I believe you'll find what you're looking for in there, *Detective Valenti*.”

“What the hell?” The use of his real name registered at once, and Valenti reached for the clasp of his toolbox, wishing he'd decided to risk hiding the Viper in his coveralls instead of at the bottom of the box. He'd known something was really wrong; why hadn't he listened to his gut?

“I'll take that, thank you.” His only defense was suddenly snatched from his grip.

“Hey!” Valenti turned to grab back the box, but a sudden *click* by his ear stopped him. He looked up to see a tiny handgun, no bigger than the palm of his hand, had suddenly sprouted from the butler's white-gloved fist.

“What the hell is this all about?” Valenti asked, trying to stall for time. “I told you, I'm just the damn plumber.”

“Oh, I think you are more than that, Detective Valenti. Much more indeed.” A smooth, urbane voice carried from the other room. From behind the marble fireplace, a small, dapper figure suddenly appeared. James Talbert didn't go out in public much, but his pink-cheeked face

and slightly rotund physique were immediately recognizable to Valenti; he had seen various pictures of the man taken by police surveillance cameras. Barely hiding his thin gray hair was a black beret that he wore cocked at a jaunty angle, and his small round belly was covered by a maroon satin smoking jacket.

“You'll have to excuse me,” Talbert continued as Valenti eyed his over-the-top outfit. “I'm in directing mode right now, and I like to dress the part.” He gave a light, affected laugh that instantly grated on Valenti's nerves. “In fact, I think you may know the star of my latest drama, Detective.” He stepped to one side and made a sweeping gesture. “Do come in.”

With the gun still pointed at his head, Valenti had no choice. He stepped through the small corridor created by the fireplace and into a large, well-lit room. And then he couldn't stop himself from uttering a hoarse cry.

Kneeling naked in the middle of a large four-poster brass bed was O'Brian.

Chapter Three

The bed O'Brian was kneeling on eerily resembled the one in his apartment. His hands were tied behind his back, and a black blindfold obscured his eyes. Pulled tight around his strong neck was a slender black noose. It was so similar to the way Valenti had found him at the RamJack that his heart squeezed in his chest as if it were about to burst. *Oh, Sean, what have they done to you?*

“Well, Detective, you appear to have caught us in the middle of a production.” James Talbert's tone was pleasant and calm, as though he didn't have murder on his mind at all. “I'm sure you've heard about my little, uh, masterpieces,” he continued, nodding at an expensive-looking camera mounted on a tripod and pointed at the bed. “So you know how they all end.”

“Yes, we know all about your sick films,” Valenti assured him, trying to keep his voice hard and steady. “That's why I'm here, Talbert. And it's the reason there's a whole squad headed here right now.” He spoke with more confidence than he felt, hoping that Captain Harris was holding up his end. If not, he and O'Brian were in big trouble.

At the sound of his voice, O'Brian's head jerked up. “Valenti?” he called hoarsely. “You here, partner?”

“I'm here.” Valenti started to go to him, but the sudden feel of cold metal shoved against the side of his head kept him in place.

“I don't believe Master Talbert has finished speaking to you yet,” the butler murmured in his ear in his snooty British accent.

Valenti bit his lip to keep from cursing. If and when he got out of this situation, he intended to feed the little English bastard a knuckle sandwich so big, he'd need several pots of tea to wash it down. But in the meantime, he was stuck. So even though his heart ached for O'Brian, he held his ground.

“Let my partner go now, and we might be able to cut some kind of a deal,” he said to Talbert, who was still smiling pleasantly. “Otherwise you're about to be in a world of hurt, Talbert.”

“Oh, I don't think so, Detective Valenti.” Talbert chuckled. “Your partner is going to be the star of my latest production, so I couldn't think of letting him go now. And as for your 'squad' that is supposedly coming to swarm down on me at any moment, I can smell a bluff a mile away. We've been monitoring the police band constantly since you arrived, and there's not a whisper of any such avenging force headed in this direction.”

Valenti bit his lip again, knowing they were trapped. Captain Harris must be taking his time, not wanting to blow the case. All he could hope was that his captain would decide to get serious when he didn't hear from Valenti. But by then it might be too late.

“Now you're beginning to see things my way,” Talbert said. Turning to the butler, he murmured, “Saunders, you may go. Please continue to monitor the situation, and let me know if anything changes.”

“Yes, sir. Of course, sir.” The little English butler bowed low and began to back out of the room, taking his gun and Valenti's toolbox with him. Seeing his only weapon about to disappear, Valenti couldn't help but follow the bulky box with his eyes.

“Wait.” Talbert held up a hand to stop the butler and smiled at Valenti. “Leave the box here,” he said when Saunders halted. “It appears to contain something the good detective wants very badly. It will be amusing to watch him watching his partner die while he is unable to reach whatever it is.”

“Very good, sir.” The butler placed the toolbox containing the Viper at Talbert's feet and exited the room.

The huge fireplace swung back into place, blocking the only exit. But the toolbox was right there, the gun within Valenti's reach. Seeing what he thought was his chance, he surged forward, only to be stopped short by a choking sound from the bed.

“Not so fast, Detective.” Talbert smiled. “Just because there is no longer a gun pointed in your direction doesn't mean I no longer hold the advantage. Direct your attention to Detective O'Brian.”

Valenti turned to see his partner gasping for air, the black noose tight around his neck. His gaze followed the slender cord from its origin at O'Brian's throat and saw that it looped over a beam across the vaulted ceiling above. Valenti couldn't see who was holding the other end until a huge figure stepped out of the shadows at the far end of the room.

He was the kind of guy who would have given the toughest bouncer in LA nightmares. Six feet nine if he was an inch and all rippling muscle under his thin white cotton wifebeater, he looked more than capable of hoisting the weight of O'Brian's body at the end of the black cable with one hand. He grinned and nodded when he saw Valenti watching him, then casually tugged on the cord, cutting off O'Brian's air supply until he choked and gasped, trying to breathe.

"Stop it!" Valenti roared. "Stop it, you son of a bitch! He can't breathe!" He rushed to his partner's side, heedless of his own safety, and tried to pull the cord encircling O'Brian's neck loose, but it was useless. The noose, incredibly strong, was also too slender to get a good grip on. His fingers scrabbled uselessly where it cut into O'Brian's flesh. Giving up on that, Valenti grabbed the cable above his partner's head and pulled, trying to give O'Brian some slack.

It was like playing tug-of-war with a giant. The nightmare in the wifebeater let out a burst of trollish laughter and tightened his grip. He had the advantage of not only size and strength but also of leverage of the cord against the ceiling beam above their heads, Valenti realized. He felt as if a cold hand were squeezing his heart; Sean was dying, and he was helpless to stop it! Well, if he couldn't free his partner with brute strength, the least he could do was be sure that Talbert died too. He lunged off the bed at the little man in the smoking jacket and beret, but just then a gun no bigger than the one the butler had been packing suddenly appeared in Talbert's hand. Valenti was about to charge him anyway, when Talbert shook his head at the giant holding the end of O'Brian's noose.

"Let him go," he said, still smiling calmly. "Or at least give him some slack, Teddy."

Looking disappointed, the giant obeyed, and O'Brian collapsed, coughing and gasping onto the bed. Valenti ran back to his partner and tugged at the noose. It was in a running slipknot, and he swiftly pulled it off his partner's head, then stripped off the blindfold. After a moment of fumbling, he was able to untie the cord that bound O'Brian's hands. He then held his partner tight and close to him.

“It's okay, Sean,” he murmured in a low voice for his partner's ears only. “It's okay. I'm here now. Not going to let anything happen to you.”

“You shouldn't—” O'Brian broke off, coughing. “You shouldn'ta come, Valenti. He'll just kill us both now.”

“Perhaps not.” Talbert gave them a nasty grin. “After all, when I'm done with the both of you, I'll have some scenes on film that will make for excellent insurance against any kind of prosecution. But I'm not letting either of you go before I have a little fun.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Valenti demanded with one arm still protectively encircling his partner's shoulders.

“I'm talking about a little role-playing. As you can see, I have no shortage of toys.” He pointed, and Valenti's gaze followed his finger. On the wall behind the bed was a rack that he hadn't noticed before. Whips, paddles, floggers, riding crops, ball gags, dildos, and vibrators too numerous to count filled the shelves, along with several devices he couldn't even name.

Valenti caught his breath at the display and felt a hard knot of anger rise in his chest. “I swear to God, Talbert, if you've used any of these on my partner—”

“Relax, Valenti. He hasn't done anything but string me up—so far,” O'Brian assured him.

“No, indeed, but I certainly intend to. And we'll capture it all on film for posterity.” Talbert laughed as though he had just told a good joke instead of revealing his plan for sexual torture.

Sick bastard! Valenti was furious. *Have to stop him before he does anything else to O'Brian. Before he really hurts him.* His gaze kept returning to the collection of implements on the rack, especially the vibrators and dildos. In a consensual relationship, they would be toys, as Talbert had called them. But here, they were obviously intended to be instruments of torture. Just the thought of someone violating Sean for his own pleasure made Valenti so angry, he could kill. O'Brian belonged to *him*, and no one else was going to lay a finger on him as far as Valenti was concerned.

Their only chance, as far as he could see, was to lure Talbert away from the gorilla protecting him and then jump him. If he could disarm Talbert and get the bastard in a headlock, he was sure the fat little director would be singing a different tune about who was in charge around here.

“Come on, then,” he said, glaring at Talbert. “Come try it, you son of a bitch.”

“Oh, I'm not going to torture your partner, Detective Valenti,” Talbert said mildly. “No, indeed. If I did that, who would run the camera? No, *you* are going to do the honors yourself. And remember, the longer you make it last, the longer you keep him alive. If I see you slacking off, I might have to get Teddy here to make a quick finish. Do you understand?” He waved the gun. “Or I may take matters into my own hands. Now, please proceed.”

Valenti stared at him, his heart in his mouth. God, how could they have gotten into such a situation? He couldn't believe Talbert really believed he would do this, but he could see by the man's eyes that he did. He really expected Valenti to hurt and violate the man he loved until O'Brian couldn't take it anymore.

I can't do it. No way in hell.

He opened his mouth, not sure what would come out, and heard himself say, “Me. Do it to me instead.”

“I'm sorry?” Talbert asked politely, raising an eyebrow in obvious confusion.

At the same time, O'Brian murmured, “No, Nicky!”

But now that the words were out, Valenti knew what he had to do. “I said let it be me.” He spread his hands. “Look, we'll do anything you want. Just don't...don't hurt my partner anymore.”

Talbert's eyes narrowed and then widened. “Well, you two appear to be closer than the average dull detective duo—considerably closer. How very touching. Very well.” He motioned with the gun he was still holding. “If you're so intent on taking your partner's place, go ahead and place the noose around your neck.”

“Fine.” Feeling sick, Valenti lifted the slender but deadly black cord and began to slip it over his head, only to be stopped by O'Brian.

“Babe, no. Don't do this.” O'Brian's eyes pleaded with him.

“I have to.” Valenti put the noose around his own neck and then hugged O'Brian tight. “Gun at the bottom of the toolbox,” he whispered into his partner's ear. “You're a better shot than me, and you know it. We just need to distract Talbert long enough to get it. Or get his gun. Whichever.”

O'Brian nodded his understanding, but when he pulled back, his eyes were bright with unshed tears. "Don't wanna do this, Nicky," he murmured, stroking Valenti's cheek. "Don't wanna hurt you."

"It's okay, Sean." Valenti smiled reassuringly—he hoped. "Just do what you have to, and we'll get out of this. We always do."

He couldn't say it aloud, but there was another reason besides his partner's superior marksmanship that he wanted to trade places with O'Brian. The memory of the first time they'd ever had sex loomed large in his mind. It had been at the RamJack, and he'd been forced by that sick bastard Conrad to fuck his partner or else see Sean raped by Conrad's goons. He'd chosen to do the deed himself, of course, but even though the outcome had been positive, the guilt had nearly ripped him apart. Valenti couldn't—just *couldn't*—go through something like that again. He was ready and willing to stoically endure anything Talbert dished out, but he couldn't bear to hurt his partner, the man he loved more than his own life.

"Let's get on with this." Talbert's effeminate voice surprisingly cracked like a whip. "I don't have all night for this particular effort, and Teddy here gets paid by the hour. Don't you, big boy?"

In answer, the huge goon grinned and yanked at the black cord. For the first time, Valenti felt the noose tighten around his neck. But before he could gasp for air, it went slack again. Apparently Talbert wasn't ready for the coup de grâce just yet.

"What do you want us to do?" O'Brian, still completely naked and defiant, faced the little man, hands planted solidly on his hips. Valenti felt his temper rise as Talbert's gaze traveled greedily over Sean's sculpted chest and abs, then down the muscular columns of his legs. But Sean seemed immune to the hungry stare. "Well?" he asked again.

"Let's get him undressed to start with," Talbert directed. "I'd like to see if he's as delicious naked as you are, Detective O'Brian. And besides, we'll need easy access for the scenes I'm planning."

Valenti felt himself go cold at the menacing words, but he tried not to show the dismay on his face as Sean began to strip him of the gray coveralls and the clothes he wore underneath.

"Slow," he murmured in O'Brian's ear when his partner got close enough to hear. "Buy some time. Harris is working on a warrant."

O'Brian gave him a slight nod to show he understood, and moved as slowly as he could, pretending to have difficulty with the zipper on the coveralls and then with the fastening to Valenti's pants. But he could draw it out for only so long, and sooner than he would have liked, Valenti was down to his bare skin. He just hoped that what he'd told O'Brian was true and that their captain really was lining up some backup. If not, he was about to lose two of his best detectives to the lust of the evil little man who was watching them so intently with greedy eyes.

At last, when Valenti was nude and shivering in the middle of the big brass bed, Talbert seemed satisfied. Now it was Valenti's body his gaze crawled over so avidly. Valenti tried to suppress a shudder at the naked hunger in the twisted pervert's face. He felt like a side of beef ready to be carved up into tiny pieces.

"Now what?" O'Brian demanded. He was standing in a deceptively relaxed pose, slouched to one side as though he didn't have a care in the world. Only Valenti knew from working with him for so many years how he could explode into action, moving faster than seemed humanly possible when provoked. Sean was waiting for a chance to get either Talbert's gun or the one at the bottom of the toolbox, which still sat at Talbert's feet.

Unfortunately for them, just because he was obviously busy lusting over both their bare bodies didn't mean the psycho asshole had lost track of business. His grip on the tiny gun and his aim at the two of them remained unwavering and accurate.

"Kiss him," he suggested with a leer. "Like you mean it, Detective O'Brian."

Valenti let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. Kissing O'Brian was no problem for him. In fact, he'd been waiting to do just that for the entire past month. Apparently his partner felt the same way, because he barely had time to take another breath before O'Brian's mouth was on his, hard and demanding.

He opened his mouth willingly, inviting his partner's tongue inside, eager for the taste of O'Brian after so many long, lonely nights without him. He felt his partner's arms twine around his neck, and he wrapped his own arms around O'Brian's back, pulling him close, loving the feel of his partner's naked body against his own. For a moment, he didn't care that Talbert was getting all this on film, didn't care that they were in a life-and-death situation. What mattered most was the warm, solid feel of O'Brian's firm body in his arms, the taste of his mouth, salty and delicious, the warm musk and clean sweat scent of his skin...

Suddenly the noose tightened around his throat, choking him, abruptly cutting off the kiss like a knife.

“That's enough, Detective O'Brian,” Talbert said just as Sean pulled away.

“What the hell is wrong with you? Let him go! We did what you asked!” O'Brian sounded half enraged, half panicked as he pulled ineffectually at the tight noose around Valenti's neck.

Valenti gasped for air and tried to help, glad his arms weren't tied behind his back as O'Brian's had been. But two sets of hands weren't any better than one. Neither he nor O'Brian could loosen the slender black cord that was choking the life out of him.

Can't...breathe...God...can't... Just as everything was going gray around the edges, Talbert made a casual hand motion, and the giant holding the other end of the cord relaxed his pull. Valenti collapsed facedown on the bed, gasping for breath, trying to pull enough oxygen into his lungs to survive. He felt his partner's hands rubbing large, soothing circles on his back.

“Breathe,” O'Brian seemed to be saying from far away. “Just breathe, babe. God, I shouldn'ta let you trade places with me.”

“No...” Valenti coughed and shook his head. “No, I...I'm glad it's...me instead of you.”

“Well, I'm not.” O'Brian sounded terribly unhappy. “God, if I could just get my hands on that son of a bitch...” he murmured, low enough that only Valenti could hear.

“Take it easy, partner,” he answered in a harsh whisper. “Bide your time. You'll get your chance.” He just hoped what he was saying was true. Despite the pain, he still couldn't bring himself to be upset he'd switched places with O'Brian. He would much rather endure this himself than see the man he loved go through it. Trying not to show how much he was hurting, he struggled to his knees.

“If you gentlemen are quite ready to continue...” Talbert's pretentious voice cut through Valenti's thoughts, and he lifted his head to see the would-be director frowning at both of them.

“What'd you do that for, anyway?” O'Brian asked, glaring at Talbert. “We did what you wanted, didn't we?”

“As a matter of fact, you did. A little too well.” Talbert was still frowning. “I was hoping my impression that you two are more than partners was wrong, but I see now that my earlier assumption was correct.”

“Yeah, Valenti's a hell of a lot more than my partner. He's my lover too. So if you hurt him, you're gonna answer to me, one way or the other,” O'Brian growled.

Talbert waved dismissively. “Empty threats don't concern me. What I get on tape does. And though your confession of love for your partner is most illuminating, I also find that the end product of that nauseating emotion makes for a poor-quality film.”

“What?” O'Brian frowned, his confusion obvious, but Valenti thought he was beginning to get it.

“He doesn't want us doing anything we enjoy,” he said. “He liked the idea of making us kiss when he wasn't sure we were together, but when he saw that it didn't bother us...”

“How very perceptive of you, Detective Valenti. You are, of course, completely correct.” Talbert smiled nastily. “So let's continue, shall we?” He grinned at O'Brian, a malicious glint in his tiny eyes. “Slap him,” he directed coolly. “And put your back into it please, Detective. If I detect any slacking, Teddy here will give your partner cause to regret it. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yeah, I get it,” O'Brian said. They were kneeling in the middle of the bed, facing each other, and he turned back to Valenti, a grim look on his face. “Babe, you know I don't wanna do this.”

“We don't have a choice.” Valenti lifted his chin. “Don't think about it, Sean. Just do it.”

The look on O'Brian's face was terrible to see, but he had always been pragmatic, and Talbert wasn't giving them any option. He slapped Valenti across the face. At the very last instant he pulled the slap just a little; the blow was still hard enough to leave a mark, but at least he didn't break any skin.

Valenti shook his head as though stunned. He was well aware his partner hadn't hit him as hard as he could have. Unfortunately Talbert seemed to know it too.

“Now then, Detective O'Brian, that was a very poor effort. I know perfectly well you can hit harder than that.” Talbert frowned. “You're wasting my film, and it's going to cost you. Teddy?” He nodded at the giant holding the end of the noose, and suddenly Valenti couldn't breathe. He gasped and choked and struggled frantically, scratching at his throat and heaving for air when there was none. Dimly he could hear O'Brian shouting and Talbert laughing, but everything was going black, and he couldn't see...

Just as the world was fading away completely, the noose loosened around his neck, and he was able to choke in a breath. Once again he collapsed on the bed. God, his head was aching and his lungs were burning. He wasn't sure how much more of this he could take, and yet he was dismally aware that they were just getting started.

Talbert had O'Brian punch him next, right in the gut. This time his partner didn't dare pull the punch, and Valenti had the wind knocked out of him for real. But the physical pain was nothing compared to the anguish he saw in his partner's face. This was killing O'Brian; his eyes were dark with sorrow, his full mouth set in a grim, hard line. And still Talbert had worse things in store.

“On the shelf with the other implements you'll find some nipple clamps,” he told O'Brian after a few more punches and slaps, when he seemed to think that Valenti had been tenderized enough. “Put them on your partner, if you please.”

O'Brian walked stiffly over to the rack filled with whips and chains and ball gags and every other imaginable device and looked at the baffling array. “What the hell? I don't see any nipple clamps. Whatcha talking about?”

“Just there. The silver ones connected with a chain. Beside the large black dildo.” Talbert gestured impatiently.

O'Brian shook his head. “Sorry, not seeing 'em. Maybe you should come show me.”

Valenti realized his partner was trying to buy them some time, but he was afraid it was going to backfire. Sure enough, their director was not amused with O'Brian's willful blindness when it came to the clamps.

“I think you're being deliberately obtuse, Detective O'Brian,” Talbert growled. “You *will* find the clamps I'm talking about in the next five seconds, or Teddy will give your partner's neck another stretching. And while you're over there, get the black dildo as well. It's time we had some *real* fun.”

Great. Like what we've been doing up till now has just been a warm-up. With an effort, Valenti got upright again as O'Brian picked up the implements in question. With a worried look in his eyes, he quickly walked back before Talbert could make good on his threat. Valenti tried to keep a poker face when he saw the equipment up close, but it was difficult. The nipple clamps were heavy-duty. In fact, they looked more like something you'd see at the end of a pair of

jumper cables than a cute little sex toy. And as for the black dildo Talbert had asked for... *That damn thing is twice as thick as O'Brian, easy. No way it'll fit. No way in hell!*

O'Brian's thoughts seemed to be running in the same direction, because he was staring with horrified fascination at the items in his hands.

"Well, what are you waiting for? Put the clamps on Detective Valenti. *Now!* Unless you want your partner to get all choked up again." Talbert laughed viciously.

"Fuck you." O'Brian glared at him and then looked at Valenti. "Nicky...babe..."

"Do it, O'Brian." Through his cracked and bleeding lips, Valenti gave his partner a smile that he hoped looked better than it felt. "Hey, you already tenderized my liver. What's a few nipple clamps after that?" He was trying to joke, but he could see O'Brian wasn't buying it. Still, there was nothing they could do but continue and hope that it would be over soon. Where the hell was their backup? He tried to calculate if enough time had passed for Harris to sound the alarm and send in the troops, but everything from the time after he had slipped the noose over his head blurred together.

"I hate this," O'Brian said fiercely, coming forward to attach the clamps. "Can't stand much more of this, Valenti."

"Hopefully you won't have to," Valenti murmured, looking away as his partner attached the sharp silver clamps to his sensitive flesh. It hurt like hell, but he'd expected nothing less. Moaning about it would only make his partner feel worse, so he was stoically silent throughout the short yet painful operation.

"Happy now, you sick little fuck?" O'Brian snarled, looking back at Talbert, who was still holding the gun on them with a perfectly steady hand. It occurred to Valenti that he must have had a lot of practice threatening people. All the hapless gay twink he'd killed while making his "art" had no doubt gone along with him until the end, afraid of the gun and the noose, hoping like hell to draw things out, to make their brief lives last just a little longer by obeying the sadistic director.

"I will be shortly." Talbert gave them a grin that was pure evil. "As soon as you insert that lovely black phallus into your partner's ass, that is."

"What? No fuckin' way!" O'Brian was about to lose it. "This thing is fuckin' huge. There's no way Valenti can take it."

“Oh but he must, Detective O'Brian. You're going to *make* him take it. Because if you don't, you're going to be very dead very quickly.”

“Fine.” O'Brian held his arms away from his body in a gesture of surrender. “Go ahead and shoot me now, Talbert. That'd be better than letting you make me hurt my partner anymore.”

“O'Brian, no!” Valenti hissed. “Don't do that. Don't give up. Give it a little more time.” He pleaded with his eyes, trying to make his partner understand. Even a few more minutes might be enough—if Harris was holding up his end. Given the choice between suffering excruciating pain for a little while and living, and watching Sean get shot, Valenti would take the pain anytime. Now if only he could convince his partner of that.

O'Brian started to shake his head, but Valenti caught his gaze. “Do it,” he said in a low voice. “Just do it, Sean.”

“No fuckin' way, babe. Can't do this. Can't hurt you like this.” There was a broken note in O'Brian's voice that Valenti couldn't ignore.

“You *have* to. Please, partner,” he urged quietly. “This will all be over soon, one way or another.”

“Yeah. Never thought it would end like this.” O'Brian looked with disgust at the thick black latex shaft in his hand and then back up at Valenti. “Nick...”

“Sean,” Valenti answered. They saved first names for important times, times of love or stress. This definitely qualified on both counts, he thought dismally. “I love you,” he murmured, his voice for O'Brian's ears only. “No matter what he makes you do. No matter how this turns out. Don't forget that, partner.”

“Love you too, babe.” There were tears in O'Brian's eyes, but then they hardened to a dangerous emerald green as he looked up at Talbert. “Where's the lube? And don't tell me there isn't any, you son of a bitch, or I swear to God—”

“Easy, Detective O'Brian.” Talbert motioned casually with the gun. “You'll find some a shelf down from where you found the clamps. Of course, I don't normally allow such niceties, but you and your partner are putting on such a beautiful display of agony, I quite think you deserve it.”

“Yeah, and you're gonna get what you deserve too, asshole. Don't doubt it for a minute.” O'Brian went and got a tube, then came back to Valenti. “Gonna make this as easy for you as I can, babe,” he murmured.

“Do what you have to do.” Valenti was kneeling upright in the middle of the bed, and now he widened his stance considerably to give his partner room to work. This wouldn't be the first time they'd used toys. After the memorable Fourth of July when Valenti had taught his partner an erotic lesson, O'Brian had agreed to include them in their sexual repertoire. This was, however, the first time they'd use something so obviously unsuited for either of them. Also the first time we used toys with a gun pointed at our heads, Valenti thought sardonically. Talk about upping the ante.

“Just try to relax,” O'Brian murmured, breaking into his thoughts. Valenti felt his partner's fingers, coated with the lube, slick and cool, slide between his legs, and he bit his torn bottom lip to hold back a groan. There was nothing remotely erotic about this situation—they were fighting for their lives and losing. And yet he had missed his partner's touch so desperately that, even under these terrible circumstances, he couldn't help loving the gentle way O'Brian prepared him.

“God, Sean,” he murmured as O'Brian scissored two fingers inside him, trying to stretch him out.

“You're so tight.” O'Brian sounded worried as he added more lube.

“It's been a while,” Valenti reminded him. “Over a month. Did I mention how much I missed you?”

“You shouldn'ta come after me,” O'Brian said morosely. “I hate that I got you into this.”

“You knew I'd come. How could I do anything else?” Valenti tried to smile. “Had to make sure you didn't run off with some cute pool boy with a hot ass.”

O'Brian snorted. “Yeah, right. Never gonna happen, and you know it, babe. The only ass I'm interested in is right here.” He added another finger, and Valenti bit back a moan. God, he *was* tight. He tried not to look at the black dildo lying on the side of the bed, but his gaze kept returning to its ridiculous length and impossible girth. Was there *anyone* out there who could comfortably accommodate a monster like that? Maybe in an X-rated circus sideshow, but not in real life; of that, he was sure.

“That's quite enough preparation, Detective O'Brian.” Talbert's annoying, high-pitched voice broke into his reverie. “Please insert the device now.”

“He's not ready yet,” O'Brian said stubbornly. “Give me a minute.”

“We're wasting film.” Talbert's voice hardened. “Do it now, or your partner will face the consequences.”

“Do it, Sean,” Valenti murmured. “I'm as ready as I'm going to get.” Have to take it, he told himself, trying to brace for the inevitable. Just deal with it.

“You'll never be ready for something like this,” O'Brian objected, but he picked up the latex instrument and positioned it at the entrance to Valenti's body.

Valenti tried not to tense as he felt the cold, blunt probe press against him. O'Brian had coated it with lube, but all the lube in the world couldn't help him accommodate something this large.

“Easy, babe,” O'Brian murmured, still sounding concerned. His chest brushed against Valenti's back, and the taller detective thought he detected a slight tremble in his partner's body, which belied O'Brian's soothing words. “Just try to relax and take it.”

“Trying...my...best,” Valenti said through gritted teeth. Already he could feel a stretching pain that was only going to get worse, and O'Brian had barely put an inch of the thick black shaft inside him. Have to take it, he told himself again. Take it and don't let Sean know how much it hurts. He feels bad enough already. Indeed, the tremble he'd thought he felt in his partner's body was more pronounced now. Valenti could only imagine how hard it must be for O'Brian to do this. For a minute, he felt guilty. As painful as being on the receiving end was, he would still far rather be in his position than Sean's. The latex torture device was only tearing him up physically; it was shredding O'Brian emotionally.

“Faster.” Talbert had moved closer, his eyes greedy for Valenti's pain. “Put it in faster, Detective O'Brian. Really give it to him.”

“Fuck you,” O'Brian spat out, glaring at the effete little man who held their lives in his pudgy, manicured hands. “Valenti's my partner. I'm not gonna rip him up just so you can get off on his pain.”

The tiny gun in Talbert's palm made a surprisingly loud *click*. “That was an empty chamber, Detective,” he said in a menacing voice. “The next one is loaded. Do as I say, *now*.”

“You sick son of a bitch.” O'Brian's voice was thick with agony as he pushed the huge device deeper into Valenti's body.

Valenti tried to keep quiet, but he couldn't help the hoarse shout that escaped his lips as a sharp, burning pain lanced through him. He heard an answering noise from O'Brian and realized it was a sob. Something wet and warm slid down his bare back. *Tears?* Was his tough-as-nails partner actually *crying*? He wondered uneasily how this was going to affect them when they got out of here. If we get out of here, he amended to himself dourly. And just then O'Brian pushed the device deeper into his already abused body. He gasped, all thoughts forgotten in the overwhelming agony as he felt something inside him tear.

The pain was sharp and almost unbearable, but Valenti knew he had to bear it. “All the way,” he heard Talbert say gleefully through his daze of pain. “Ram it home, Detective O'Brian. Now!”

The voice was right by Valenti's ear. He turned to see that the rotund little director was so excited, he had actually come to stand right beside the bed. Making a cameo in his own movie, Valenti thought woozily, and then everything happened at once.

O'Brian, despite his anguish, had apparently realized that Talbert was close enough to jump. Letting go of the dildo he'd been forcing into Valenti, he launched himself at the sadistic director, knocked the gun out of his hand, and locked his fingers around Talbert's fat neck.

“You son of a bitch!” Valenti heard O'Brain growl in a tone so thick with rage, he could barely understand the words. “I'll kill you. I'll fuckin' kill you for what you made me do.”

“O'Brian, no!” Valenti tried to yell, but it came out as a hoarse whisper instead. “Take him alive. We need him for the case.”

But his partner was well past rational thought. His fingers were tightening around Talbert's throat as surely as the noose had tightened around Valenti's.

And now would be a good time to get out of it. But just as Valenti raised his fingers to slip them under the cord around his throat, Teddy apparently realized his employer was in trouble. Instead of running to Talbert's aid, he pulled on the noose again. Valenti was yanked from his knees up to his tiptoes, his head bent at an awkward angle as he choked and gasped for air.

“Valenti! No!” O'Brian's voice was a low murmur in his ears, as if someone he could barely hear talking in another room. The world was fading away at an alarming rate, and this

time Valenti was convinced it wasn't coming back. *Sorry, partner. Sorry I didn't plan this better. Sorry I can't—*

A gunshot, which also sounded strangely distant, cut through his thoughts, and then everything went black.

Chapter Four

“Babe? Nicky, wake up. Wake up! Are you all right?”

O'Brian's voice seemed to be calling him from a long way away, and Valenti was tired...so tired. He wanted to tell his partner to leave him alone, to let him sleep, but O'Brian wouldn't stop. Stubborn son of a bitch, Valenti thought irritably. But he knew his partner wouldn't give up until he answered. Slowly and with great effort, he forced his heavy eyelids open and tried to focus on the man in front of him.

“O'Brian?” he asked and wondered why his throat was so sore and his voice was coming out in a hoarse rasp.

“Thank God.” O'Brian's voice was hoarse too, with emotion. “I was so afraid...” He shook his head, apparently unable to finish his thought. “Anyway, the paramedics are here to take you to the hospital.”

“The hospital? What—” Valenti broke off, coughing. “What are you talking about? Not...not going to the hospital.”

“You have to, babe. You're hurt—hurt bad.” O'Brian reached out as if he was going to touch him, but then pulled his hand away at the last minute. “And I should know,” he muttered. “I'm the one who did the hurtin'.”

The desolate look on his partner's face finally jogged Valenti's memory, and everything came back. His abortive attempt to rescue his partner; the torture session, which had probably been harder on Sean than it had been on him; and last but not least...

“Ow,” he muttered, shifting tentatively on the bed he was still lying on. *No wonder my nipples feel like someone skewered them with toothpicks and my ass is on fire.*

“Yeah, that's why,” O'Brian said grimly, and Valenti realized he'd spoken his last thought aloud.

“Hey, Sean, no—” he began, reaching for his partner, but O'Brian pulled away before Valenti could touch him.

“I took everything, uh, off you before the backup got here,” he said, looking down at his hands. “Didn't want them to see you that way, babe. Figured you'd feel the same way.”

“You figured right, partner,” Valenti said with feeling. Damn, he was sore! “So Harris finally came through?”

“Yeah, finally.” O'Brian's voice was bitter. “Said he had trouble gettin' a warrant, but I think he just didn't want to blow the case. Guess I blew it for him, though. Talbert's dead.”

“You shot him?” Valenti was surprised. O'Brian had a hot temper, but he'd always been able to keep it in check—up until now, at least.

O'Brian nodded. “Yeah. But I think he mighta already been dead from the way I was, you know, chokin' him.”

Valenti winced. “Damn, O'Brian.”

“Shot that goon Teddy too, but he's still breathin'. Skull's too thick to crack, even with a bullet. IA is gonna have my guts for garters.” O'Brian looked morose. “But damn it, Valenti, after all that shit he put us through... After the things I did to you...”

“You mean the things Talbert *made* you do.” Valenti reached for him again, and again he found himself touching empty air. “Look, where are my clothes? I'm ready to get out of here.”

O'Brian shook his head. “Like I told you, you gotta go down to the hospital first.”

“What, for a few cuts and bruises? No way.” Valenti tried to sit up, but O'Brian pushed him back down. “Cut it out,” he said, annoyed. “I said I'm not going.” He was becoming aware that there were other people in the room besides himself and his partner. Crime techs and fellow officers were bustling around. He was glad O'Brian had thought to throw a blanket over him and to get dressed himself.

Standing at the edge of the elaborate room that was supposed to have been his and his partner's coffin were two paramedics who were watching O'Brian alertly. Obviously they were planning to whisk Valenti away as soon as his partner gave the okay. But the last place Valenti wanted to go was to a cold, sterile hospital.

“O'Brian—” he began again, but his partner cut him off.

“You havta go.” O'Brian's voice was bleak, and he looked down at his hands again as though he couldn't bear to look at Valenti. “You havta let them check you out. There could be... There might be internal injuries.”

“That's crazy.” Valenti refused to believe it was possible. Now that the whole horrible incident was over, he wanted to go home and relax in a hot bath and forget it. But from the haunted look on Sean's face, Valenti could see it would be a cold day in hell before his partner would be able to forget.

“Babe.” O'Brian looked up at him, and Valenti saw tears glinting in his long red-gold eyelashes. “You...you're *bleeding*.”

Somehow Valenti knew his partner wasn't talking about his cut lip. “Sean,” he started to say, but O'Brian was already standing up and motioning the paramedics to come over.

“I'm sorry,” he said as he stepped away from the bed. “So goddamn sorry, Nick.”

“Sean,” Valenti said again, but by the time he got the name out, his partner was gone.

* * *

Valenti spent several days in the hospital. Not that he wanted to be there that long, but he had a goon of a nurse watching him, who would hardly let him take a leak by himself, let alone grab his clothes and sneak out. He had several visitors, but none of them mattered to Valenti, because the most important person in his life wasn't there.

O'Brian didn't come.

Valenti missed him horribly. It wasn't the first time he'd been in the hospital, but it *was* the first time since he and O'Brian had partnered up that he'd been there alone.

From the time he'd had an emergency appendectomy to the time he'd been winged by a bank robber's bullet, O'Brian had always been right there by his side. He'd bring copies of comic books and *Guns & Ammo* and read them out loud. He'd smuggle in snacks when Valenti couldn't stand the hospital food anymore. He would even stay the night, despite the fact that it often meant sleeping in an uncomfortable hospital chair, just so he could stay close and keep an eye on Valenti's condition. He'd charm the doctors into translating Valenti's chart into layman's terms and con the nurses into giving Valenti special privileges. In short, he made being in the hospital bearable—almost fun.

But this time there was none of that, because there was no O'Brian.

Valenti tried not to feel hurt. They'd been through the meat grinder at Talbert's hands, and though he had been physically tortured, he was pretty sure O'Brian had suffered more in anguish. In fact, he knew exactly what his partner was going through—it was the same thing he himself had gone through when they first got back from the RamJack. Behind the doors of the opulent gay resort, Valenti had been forced to sexually assault his partner, and he'd hated himself every bit as badly as he supposed O'Brian was hating himself now.

Of course, there was no need for self-loathing; they had been in a bad spot and had done what they had to do to survive. Valenti tried to convince himself that O'Brian would see that and get over being upset eventually. Apparently he just needed a little time alone to process things, which was why he hadn't come to the hospital.

But the longer he was out of touch with his partner, the more anxious Valenti became. It wasn't like O'Brian to brood for so long; he usually snapped back almost immediately from just about anything. Valenti had known him to order a pizza and suggest they go bowling after a hostage situation where they'd both been held at gunpoint. If something like that didn't bother O'Brian, the brief interlude with Talbert ought to be water under the bridge by now. He was also worried that O'Brian wasn't answering his phone, at work or at home. Maybe Captain Harris had given him some leave time, but still...

On the third day, when he was about to be released, the nurse came in and told him he had a last-minute visitor. Valenti breathed a sigh of relief, sure that it had to be O'Brian. His partner had finally come around, and now things were going to go back to normal.

But instead of O'Brian's sparkling green eyes and reddish blond hair, it was the solid form of Captain Harris that Valenti saw when he looked up.

“Captain?” he asked uncertainly when the older man sat down on the hard wooden chair placed next to his bed. “What are you doing here?”

Captain Harris sighed. “I'd like to say I'm just paying a visit to an officer injured in the line of duty, but I'm afraid there's more to it than that, Valenti.”

“What are you talking about?” Valenti was beginning to get a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach. “Is everything all right, Captain? Is...is O'Brian okay?” He had a sudden horrible

thought—what if Sean had killed himself? What if he'd eaten a bullet while Valenti was lying around in this damn hospital?

Captain Harris must have seen the fear on his face, because he patted Valenti's blanket-covered knee awkwardly. “Take it easy, Valenti. Your partner isn't dead.”

“Thank God.” Valenti felt as though a huge weight had rolled off his chest.

“Neither, however,” the captain continued, “is he your partner anymore.”

“What? What are you talking about?” Valenti sat straight up in the bed, instantly upset. “You can't separate us now, Captain. We need each other. We work as a team.”

“Tell that to O'Brian. He came in today and gave me this.” Captain Harris held up a gold detective's badge. “Said he doesn't deserve to carry it anymore. Or to be your partner. In...in any sense of the word.” He cleared his throat uncomfortably.

“This is crazy.” Valenti snatched the badge from his captain's hand and stared at it as though it held the answer to his partner's strange behavior. “O'Brian wouldn't quit. He loves the force. It's in his blood.”

“I thought the same thing,” Captain Harris said quietly. “But some things...they change a man. I, uh, saw the *movie* Talbert made of you two.”

“You did?” Valenti's mind started to race a hundred miles a minute. If the captain had seen the movie, that meant he knew... *Shit, shit, shit! Maybe O'Brian quit before Harris could fire him. That makes more sense than him walking out on the PD on his own.* But his captain's next words blew that theory out of the water.

“I did.” Harris nodded. “And I want you to know I'm not, uh, judging you or O'Brian for it. After all, it's kind of my fault in the first place. I'm the one who sent you two to the RamJack to begin with.”

“It's nobody's fault and nothing I would change, Captain.” For the past two years he and O'Brian had been hiding what they were, what they meant to each other. Well, no more. Valenti lifted his chin and looked his captain in the eyes. “I love Sean O'Brian, and I don't just mean in a brotherly way. He's my other half, and I'm not ashamed to tell you so, even if it means I lose my job.”

“Wait a minute now. Nobody is losing his job over this,” Captain Harris blustered. “Well, O'Brian did, but not because I fired him; he left on his own. And I think I know why. What

Talbert made him do to you was...” He cleared his throat again. “Well, it was pretty bad, Valenti.”

“Not as bad as what I did to him at the RamJack,” Valenti said calmly. “I’m telling you, Captain, if we can get over that, we can get over anything.”

“Tell that to O’Brian. Give him back his badge. Maybe he’ll listen to you.” Harris shook his head. “He wasn’t interested in anything I had to say; that’s for certain.”

“I’ll bring him around.” Valenti was already getting out of bed and reaching for his clothes, which the horrible nurse had finally released. He really did feel rested and refreshed, and nothing hurt anymore, which was good. He was going to need all his strength to tackle O’Brian’s bad case of guilt and convince him to come back to work.

He was pulling on his pants when he noticed from the corner of his eye that Captain Harris was looking uneasy. Inwardly he sighed; the cat was out of the bag now, at least with Harris. And as much as he’d probably suspected the truth before, this put a whole new slant on how he saw both Valenti and O’Brian. Well, no time like the present to address it, Valenti told himself.

“Captain,” he said, tucking his shirt into his pants. “Is this going to be a problem for you? The fact that O’Brian and I are together? Because I don’t want to go and convince him to come back if he doesn’t have a job to come back to.”

“No. No, really, it’s not a problem,” Harris protested, a little too quickly. “Or, well... Maybe it *is* a little, uh, awkward,” he admitted.

“Sure it is. It was for us at first too.” Valenti tried to keep his tone calm and even. This was probably a new situation for his captain to deal with, and to the man’s credit, he seemed to at least be *trying* to understand. “O’Brian and I are exclusive, you know,” he continued, and he reached for his belt. “I mean, we’re not interested in any other guys, if that helps any.”

“Really?” Captain Harris looked mildly relieved.

“Really,” Valenti assured him. “And if you don’t mind, we’d prefer to keep our relationship quiet, as much as we can, anyway, after what Talbert got on film. Maybe someday the kind of love we have won’t be a problem for anyone, and neither of us will be ashamed of it. But as things stand right now, we’d rather not discuss it with outsiders.”

“Of course not.” Harris looked even more relieved. “I’ll keep it to myself. And you should know that the film Talbert made was accidentally destroyed.”

“It was?” Valenti raised his eyebrows in disbelief. “That’s a pretty big piece of evidence to just go missing.”

“Damnedest thing. There was a fire in the evidence locker where it was being held.” Harris coughed into his hand. “Melted everything before anyone besides me could get a look at it.”

Valenti ran a hand through his hair. “Thanks, Captain. I appreciate you getting our backs like that.”

Harris dismissively waved a hand. “Least I could do. I dragged my feet on getting that warrant, because I was so afraid to blow the case.” He shook his head. “I’m damn sorry about that, Valenti. If Talbert hadn’t had as much time to work on you two—”

“Water under the bridge,” Valenti interrupted, though he wondered privately if he would feel so forgiving after talking to O’Brian. Assuming he could get his partner to talk to him at all, that is.

Harris nodded. “You’re two of my finest, Valenti. And what you choose to do on your off hours, well, that’s your business. Tell O’Brian I said we need him back on the force and not to worry about IA. I’ll keep them off his back as much as possible. Even without the film, we have the hospital reports on you, and it’s a clear case of kill or be killed.”

“Thanks again, Captain.” Valenti slipped on his shoes and pocketed O’Brian’s gold badge. “I’ll tell him. Right now, if I can find him.”

He left the hospital room feeling genuinely good about the state of his and O’Brian’s careers for the first time since they’d come back from the RamJack. It had been a long two years keeping their feelings under cover. Now that Captain Harris knew and didn’t seem to mind, he didn’t have to be nervous every time O’Brian gave him a neck rub or sat on the arm of his chair. Those simple gestures of affection had never bothered him before he and O’Brian took their relationship to the next level, but after the RamJack, it had always seemed a lot more risky to be publicly affectionate with each other.

Right now what I want is some private affection, he thought, remembering the hungry kiss he and his partner had shared before Talbert really began to work them over. God, it had been so long since he and Sean had been together. He just wanted to be naked and close—it didn’t even have to be about sex, although that would be nice. But the feel of O’Brian’s muscular body and

furry chest pressed against his own longer frame would be enough to make Valenti feel that all was truly right in the world once more. Now if only he could get O'Brian to agree...

Chapter Five

“Yeah, who is it?” O'Brian's voice from the other side of the door sounded morose, the exact opposite of his usual irrepressible personality.

Valenti frowned. *Jeez, gotta do something quick before he really goes over the edge.*

“Got a delivery here,” he said, disguising his voice. “For Sean O'Brian. You him?”

“Yeah, that's me. I'm not expecting anything, though,” O'Brian said in the same tired, unhappy tone as he unlocked the door.

“Well, you should be,” Valenti said, reverting to his normal voice as the door to O'Brian's apartment swung open. “You can't duck me forever, you know.”

“Valenti!” O'Brian looked stunned. “What are you doin' here?”

“What do you think? Making sure you haven't fallen off the face of the earth. I mean, since you're not answering your phone, and you never came to see me once in the hospital.” Valenti shouldered his way past his partner into O'Brian's place, which was decorated in '70s minimalist style—the wallpaper was obnoxiously loud, but the place was surprisingly uncluttered.

O'Brian shut the door and leaned his back against it as though for strength. “I woulda come, but...but I didn't think you'd want to see me. Not after—”

Valenti cut him off by striding forward and covering his mouth in a hard kiss. O'Brian's lips tasted every bit as delicious as he remembered, and for a moment he was awed that after years of knowing the other man inside and out, he could still want him so badly. But before he could really get into the kiss, O'Brian pushed him away.

“Cut it out.” He walked past Valenti and into his living room, where he sat on the couch and put his head in his hands.

“Why?” Valenti came to sit beside him. “I missed you, Sean. I was hoping you missed me too.”

“Course I missed you, Nick.” O'Brian's voice was hoarse. “Haven't spent a day since that night at Talbert's that I didn't think about you pretty much all the damn time.”

“Been thinking about you a lot too, partner,” Valenti said softly. “So what's the problem?”

O'Brian gave him an incredulous look. “How can you ask me that? The problem is what I did to you.”

“You mean the way you saved my life?”

“A little bit before that,” O'Brian said drily. “Damn it, Nicky, stop acting like nothing happened. That asshole Talbert... I mean, I damn near beat you to death, and then I...I...”

“You did what you had to do, and I don't blame you for any of it.” Valenti rubbed warm, soothing strokes across his partner's shoulders. O'Brian was wearing a plain white T-shirt, and his hair was a wild red and blond tangle around his head, but he looked wonderful as far as Valenti was concerned. “I missed you so much, partner,” he murmured in O'Brian's ear. “Can't we just let it go?”

“Maybe *you* can.” O'Brian shook his head. “But I... You don't understand, Nick. Every time I close my eyes, I see it—see what he made me do to you. See your pain, and *I* caused that.”

Valenti nodded thoughtfully. “Yeah, you did.”

“Good. Glad to see we're finally on the same page.” O'Brian frowned.

“You caused it by taking that damn assignment in the first place.” Valenti poked a finger in his chest. “I begged you—*begged* you not to. But no, you had to have it. Had to go into a situation where I couldn't get your back. And for *that* I am righteously pissed at you, partner.”

“That's all?” O'Brian let out a sharp bark of unhappy laughter. “What about the other stuff?”

“The other stuff is something you should try to forget.” Valenti put an arm around his shoulders and was relieved when O'Brian didn't pull away. “You know how I felt after the RamJack, before I realized you wanted me the way I wanted you? I *hated* myself. I felt like I'd forced you into something you didn't want, like I'd ruined the most important relationship of my life.”

“C'mon, babe. You had to know that wasn't true,” O'Brian protested.

Valenti shrugged. "That's how it seemed. You have no idea how relieved I was when I found out you wanted it as much as I did. That you still wanted *me*."

"Yeah, but you can't argue that you wanted what I did to you at Talbert's," O'Brian objected.

Valenti shook his head. "You're not getting it, partner. What I'm saying is that I still want *you*. In fact, I've been missing the hell out of you. The hospital was awful without you there to smuggle me chili dogs from Harry's and give the nurses hell."

"I wanted to come see you so much." O'Brian's voice was hoarse again, and when he looked up, Valenti saw that his eyes were bright with unshed tears. "I just figured that once you remembered everything, you wouldn't want me anywhere near you, babe."

"Of course I want you near me. Right now that's *all* I want." Valenti pulled him into a tight embrace. "Love you, Sean."

O'Brian pulled back and looked at him uncertainly. "So you really forgive me?"

"I do—on three conditions." Valenti counted them off on his fingers. "First, that you forgive yourself and let this go. It was rough, but we got through it together."

O'Brian nodded. "Can't promise anything, but I'll try."

"Good enough for a start," Valenti decided. "Two, I want you to come back to work with me. Captain Harris stopped by the hospital and told me you'd turned in your badge. What were you thinking, O'Brian? You *love* being a cop."

O'Brian shrugged. "I guess I figured you'd want a new partner after what happened, and I didn't want to be a cop with anybody else."

"Now what made you think a stupid thing like that?" Valenti asked softly.

"I dunno. Maybe the same thing that made you ask for a transfer after the RamJack 'cause you thought *I* was gonna want a new partner?" O'Brian looked at him innocently, and Valenti cracked up.

"Yeah, we're a mess, aren't we? That's why we belong together; nobody else could put up with either one of us."

"You got that right, partner." O'Brian grinned. "So what's number three? I gotta give you a back massage every night or something?"

Valenti remembered the nude back massage his partner had given him at the RamJack, before they had been together, and felt a bolt of pure lust go straight to his cock. God, he'd missed O'Brian! And it was damn good to hear him sounding like his old self again. "Not quite," he said, smiling. "But I don't want you taking any more solo assignments. If you want to do the dangerous shit, fine, but I get to go with you. No more going off where I can't get your back." At first he thought O'Brian was going to disagree, but after a moment, the other man reluctantly nodded his head.

"All right. Done."

"Good." Inwardly Valenti let out a sigh of relief. O'Brian had always been extremely hardheaded when it came to their job and too fearless and careless of his personal safety to suit Valenti. He felt good knowing he was going to get some input on what assignments O'Brian accepted in the future.

"Is that all?" O'Brian asked.

Valenti nodded. "I think that about covers everything. Except this." He pulled his partner close again and inhaled the warm musk that was O'Brian's unique scent. "God, you smell good. And you *feel* good in my arms. Could feel better, though...with fewer clothes," he added, nipping O'Brian's earlobe suggestively.

O'Brian pulled back, frowning. "Wait a minute now. There's no way you're up for sex after—"

"Got a clean bill of health from the doctor," Valenti interrupted him. "Nothing seriously wrong in the first place, anyway. It, uh, looked a lot worse than it was."

"Still..." O'Brian frowned.

"God, Sean." Valenti ran a hand through his hair. "Do you have any idea how much I want you right now? It's been way over a month. This is the longest dry spell we've had since that Christmas I had all the problems with IA. And you remember how *that* ended."

O'Brian grinned. "Yeah. I kidnapped you, handcuffed you to the bed, and pounded your tight ass until you begged for mercy."

"Exactly." Valenti had been sort of pissed off at the time, but now all he could think about was how hot it had been feeling his partner inside him as O'Brian practically forced him to

submit to their mutual lust and need. He kissed O'Brian again. "I could use a little of that right now."

"Are you kidding me? No way!" O'Brian shook his head vehemently. "After what happened at Talbert's, there's no way I'm doing that to you again."

"What? Never? Come on, Sean. You can't tell me you don't like being on top sometimes."

O'Brian cleared his throat. "Well...yeah. But after—"

"Just like I enjoy being on the bottom sometimes." Valenti leaned forward and nuzzled his partner's strong neck, breathing in O'Brian's scent. "Please, Sean. I want you in me. More than that, I *need* you in me."

A look of indecision mixed with one of lust in O'Brian's eyes. "C'mon, babe. Why does it have to be that way? You wanna make love, fine. But you do me this time."

"That's not how I want it," Valenti insisted. "That's not how it needs to be." He couldn't explain to his partner, but it seemed very important that O'Brian be on top. He wanted to show his partner how much he still loved and trusted him by opening himself to him, and this was the only way to do it. But from the look on his partner's face, he didn't exactly agree.

"Why, Nick?" he demanded. "Why are you doin' this?"

"Because I want you." Valenti nipped his neck sharply and then lapped gently at the spot he'd bitten, soothing the small pain. "I want you to fuck me," he murmured in a low, suggestive tone.

O'Brian groaned, and Valenti knew his resistance was almost at an end. Between the two of them, his partner was definitely more sexually needy. So if Valenti was eager to have sex, O'Brian was probably crawling out of his skin from wanting it so badly.

"Come on, babe. *Fuck* me." Valenti slipped his hand down to cup the ridge of his partner's hard cock, pushing his advantage to the hilt.

The tension coiling O'Brian's tight body suddenly exploded into action. He stood, dragging Valenti up with him until they were nearly eye to eye. Then he threaded his fingers through Valenti's dark hair and pulled the taller man down for a searing kiss.

Valenti gave back as good as he was getting. He pressed forward, lapping at the inside of O'Brian's mouth, sucking his tongue, letting his partner know how much he wanted and needed

him. God, it felt good to be doing this again, felt good to have O'Brian in his arms, to feel his heavy cock rubbing against Valenti's aching hard shaft. But just as he was really getting into the kiss, O'Brian ended it and pulled away.

"Fine," he growled, glaring at Valenti. "You wanna get fucked, babe? I'll fuck you. But on *my* terms and in *my* time. You got that?"

"Don't care how we do it," Valenti admitted breathlessly. "As long as we do it soon. God, I missed you, Sean."

O'Brian's expression softened a little. "Missed you too, babe. Like crazy. C'mon." He tugged at Valenti's hand.

"Where to?" Valenti asked as he followed obediently.

O'Brian gave him an incredulous look. "Bedroom. You think I'm just gonna do you over the side of the couch?"

"I think I need you in me soon, or I'm going to explode."

"Well, you're just gonna havta wait. Not doin' anything until I'm good and ready." O'Brian kicked open his bedroom door and pushed Valenti down onto his big brass bed. For a moment, Valenti had an uncomfortable memory; the bed at Talbert's had been exactly like this one. O'Brian seemed to sense his unease.

"Yeah, I know," he said quietly. "I've been havin' a hard time sleeping here too. I, uh, got up and moved to the couch the last couple of nights. You wanna go someplace else? Maybe your place?"

"Hell no." Valenti frowned. "We have a lot of good memories of this bed. I'm not gonna let that bastard Talbert ruin it for us. And besides, if we have to get in the car and drive all the way to my place before we make love, I'll spontaneously combust."

"If you mean you feel like you're gonna burst into flames 'cause your dick is so hard, I have news for you, buddy. It's gonna be a while before that changes." O'Brian pointed at the bed. "You wanna stay here? Fine with me. Strip and lie facedown."

Valenti was more than happy to comply, but he noticed that O'Brian was still wearing his jeans and T-shirt. "What about you?" he asked as he pulled his shirt over his head and unbuttoned his pants.

"I'm waiting." O'Brian gave him an enigmatic look. "Not gonna get all ready to go until I'm sure you're fit for duty, so to speak."

"Aw, Sean, didn't I just tell you I got a clean bill of health?" Valenti complained. "I told you I'm completely ready for this."

But his partner didn't move. "Since I'm the one on top, *I* get to say if you're ready or not. So just relax and spread your legs."

"Why?" Valenti asked, even as he did as he was told. A slight breeze from O'Brian's ceiling fan made him shiver, the cool air caressing his naked body.

"You'll see." O'Brian was kneeling on the bed beside him now, and he leaned down to tenderly kiss Valenti's nape.

Valenti shivered again. "Uh, partner, you're at the wrong end for business," he pointed out.

"Don't worry about it. I'm right where I need to be, and so are you," O'Brian growled. "So be quiet and let me work."

Obediently Valenti shut up. He didn't know what kind of "work" O'Brian intended to do, but it appeared to involve lots of slow, hot, tantalizing kisses across his shoulders and down his back. By the time O'Brian dragged his tongue down the groove of Valenti's spine, he was ready to jump out of his skin, he was so hot.

"Come on, Sean. Stop teasing," he murmured breathlessly as O'Brian nipped the top of his left buttock. "Driving me crazy here."

"Me too," O'Brian admitted. "But we're takin' it slow this time, partner. Real slow and easy. So just relax and try to enjoy it."

"That's the thing. I'm enjoying it too much," Valenti admitted. "All I've been thinking about for the last month is being with you again. Fucking you. Letting you fuck me."

"Keep up the dirty talk, Nicky. You know I love it." O'Brian's voice was a hoarse growl of lust. But Valenti's dirty talk seemed to do the trick, because at last he stopped kissing and positioned a pillow under Valenti's pelvis. "You feel that, babe?" he murmured, wrapping his fingers around Valenti's hard shaft and pumping from root to tip in long, slow strokes as he got his partner situated on the pillow. "Feel my hand on your cock?"

“God, yes!” Valenti gasped, thrusting into his partner's palm. It occurred to him that there was a time when the idea of another man's hand on his cock would have been frightening or disgusting. But here and now with O'Brian, the man of his heart, he couldn't think of anything more erotic than his partner's calloused fingers wrapped around his throbbing shaft. Soon enough, however, the hand was gone, and he had nothing but the pillow to rub against. Still, at least they were finally getting started. Valenti felt like he'd been wanting this forever, and he couldn't wait to feel Sean slide inside him. He sighed with delight and anticipation as O'Brian spread him wide, revealing the tight entrance to his body.

But instead of lubed fingers or the blunt tip of O'Brian's cock, he felt another gentle kiss at the top of his ass, just above the cleft. And then O'Brian began to move down. It wasn't until he felt the soft, tentative pressure of lips against his rosebud that it registered with Valenti what his partner was doing.

“Hey!” he said, startled into craning his neck around to try and see what was going on. He caught a glimpse of O'Brian kneeling between his thighs, still holding him open, and when his partner ducked his head again, there was another soft kiss in that most forbidden spot.

“Hey, what?” O'Brian responded after the second kiss.

“Hey, what are you doing?” Valenti clarified, frowning. Rimming was the one thing his partner had taken a firm stance against ever since they'd taken their relationship to the next level. He was willing and eager to lick Valenti's balls or suck his cock or do any number of other things, but he absolutely wouldn't kiss or lick that part of his partner's body, and he didn't want Valenti doing it to him either.

It had never been a big deal to Valenti; he knew O'Brian was resistant to this particular act because it somehow seemed more gay than anything else they could do—at least to the Irish Catholic-raised O'Brian. And since O'Brian didn't identify himself as homosexual—he claimed he didn't like men in general, only his partner, whom he had happened to fall in love with—rimming was completely out of the question for him. Until now, apparently.

“You don't like it?” O'Brian asked, kissing him again and breaking Valenti's train of thought.

“No, *you* don't like it,” Valenti reminded him, a bit breathlessly. “You said it was, uh, too gay. That doing it would make *you* gay.”

“Ya know, partner, I've come to a realization about that.” O'Brian kissed him again, and Valenti bit back a gasp.

“And what's that?” he nearly moaned.

“That I wanna be with you every possible way, and that includes this.” O'Brian kissed him again, long and lingering. “And if that makes me gay, then hell, I'm gay. I don't give a damn anymore, as long as I can be with you.”

“Aw, Sean...” Valenti was torn between wanting to hug his partner and telling O'Brian to hurry up and fuck him. The soft, intermittent kisses were really getting to him, and he was finding it surprisingly erotic to be explored in this area by his partner's mouth as well as by his fingers and cock.

“Besides”—O'Brian kissed him again—“I want to make sure you really are all better. And show you how sorry I am.”

Valenti frowned. “Jesus, O'Brian. I don't want you doing something you don't want to do just to show me you're sorry.”

“Who said I didn't want to do it?” O'Brian gave him a seductive smile and kissed him again. This time Valenti felt the warm, wet brush of his partner's tongue over his tight opening. “Truth is, I've *always* wanted to do this. Was just afraid it would make me too much of a fag, you know?”

“And now?” Valenti asked breathlessly.

“Now I'm finding out I like it—a lot. It's kinda dirty, ya know? But in a *good* way. And I don't care what that makes me.” He kissed Valenti again. “Now relax, babe. Just relax and let me make you feel good. 'Kay?”

“Okay,” Valenti agreed finally. He laid his head back on the mattress and moaned softly as he felt his partner's lips part against his skin and his tongue take their place. God, this felt *incredible*. And he knew from experience that there was no telling Sean “no” once he'd gotten an idea in his head. When his partner decided to do something, he went after it with single-minded attention to detail that was uniquely him. Case in point, he was currently exploring Valenti with his mouth like there was no tomorrow.

Valenti moaned and bucked as he felt his partner's warm, wet tongue glide over his opening and then pierce his rosebud. God, he couldn't believe O'Brian was actually willing to do this, that he was actually putting his tongue *inside*, but it felt wonderful.

O'Brian probed gently for a long, long time, giving Valenti time to get used to being penetrated by his tongue. Then he drew back and nibbled and licked, tantalizing the nerve endings around the sensitive entrance until Valenti was clawing the bedspread and practically sobbing for release.

"God, Sean, so good!" he gasped, thrusting his hips ineffectually, wishing the pillow he was humping had more substance. "But I need...need more. Need you inside me."

"I know what you need, babe, and I promise, you're gonna get it," his partner replied in a low, husky voice. "Gonna fuck you long and slow tonight, but I need ta make sure you're ready first."

"If I were any readier, I'd be halfway there by now," Valenti protested. "Come on, Sean. Don't make me beg."

"Maybe I like makin' you beg," O'Brian murmured. "Maybe I like it a lot." But despite his teasing words, Valenti heard the rough purr of his zipper coming down at last.

"Then you're a sadistic bastard," he growled. "Now hurry up and fuck me! I need you bad, damn it!"

"Need you too, babe," O'Brian said hoarsely. And then, finally, Valenti felt two cool, lube-slicked fingers slide into him.

Despite his recent trauma, O'Brian's intimate tongue bath had made him more than ready to be entered. He took his partner's fingers easily and begged for more. For something longer, something thicker. "Your cock, Sean," he gasped, surprised at the neediness in his own voice. "Put your cock in me. God, I need you so bad. Want to feel you inside me."

"And I wanna be inside you, babe," O'Brian murmured. After several long, excruciatingly pleasurable moments of stretching Valenti with his fingers, he withdrew, and at last Valenti felt the blunt probe of O'Brian's cock pressing against his entrance.

He wanted his partner to ram it straight home and start fucking—that was how deep in need he was. His own rock-hard cock was leaking against his belly, and he was practically

quivering, he wanted O'Brian inside him so badly. But when he tried to buck backward and get his partner inside him quickly, he felt O'Brian grasp his hips and hold him in place.

“Easy now, babe,” O'Brian murmured as first the head and then a single thick inch of his cock slipped into Valenti's body. “Need to take it easy tonight. Just want you to lie there and let me do the work. Just let me fuck you.”

His partner's erotic words inflamed Valenti. He tried to hold still as O'Brian had commanded, but it was hard—damn hard. He kept wanting more of that deliciously thick shaft he could feel sliding slowly into him, kept wanting to be filled to the hilt with O'Brian's cock.

But while O'Brian could be hot tempered and impatient at times, there were some things he refused to rush. He kept a firm grip on Valenti's hips, clearly showing who was in charge of the situation. No matter what he tried, there was nothing Valenti could do to hurry the process. At last he went limp, submitting completely to his partner, offering himself utterly to the long, demanding cock that was slowly breaching his entrance and entering his body.

Finally he felt O'Brian's trim hips flush against his ass and knew that his partner was all the way in. But once he was firmly seated inside Valenti, O'Brian still didn't move. He just stayed where he was, his warm hands stroking Valenti's trembling back and hips as though he was unwilling to continue.

“For God's sake, Sean, *please!*” Valenti felt like he was going to die if he didn't get fucked soon. He was literally shaking with need, his cock throbbing for release, and he knew he'd come as soon as his partner started stroking in and out, hitting his sweet spot along the way. But still, O'Brian didn't move.

“Slowly, babe,” he murmured, reaching around to gather Valenti's aching cock gently in his hand. “Wanna really enjoy this. Wanna fuck you nice and slow...make it last.”

“Fuck that,” Valenti said hoarsely. “I'm not made of china, Sean. I won't break. Just fuck me!”

“That's exactly what I'm doin', babe.” There was amusement as well as lust in O'Brian's voice as he slid slowly—oh so slowly—out of Valenti's body until only the head of his cock remained inside. Then, just as slowly, he thrust back in, pressing as hard as he could over that sensitive spot inside, making Valenti jerk and cry out.

“You bastard,” he moaned as O'Brian repeated the process while stroking his cock. “Can't believe you're doing this to me.”

“Believe it, babe.” O'Brian sounded slightly breathless with excitement himself, but he didn't speed up any, although by now he had developed a kind of rhythm. “Not takin' any chances with you tonight. I told you if you wanted to get fucked, it would be on my terms. Well, these are my terms.”

“Your terms are insane,” Valenti growled, trying again to push back and capture more of his partner's cock inside his body. “And you're making me crazy.”

“Then we'll be crazy together,” O'Brian snarled, keeping a firm grip on Valenti's cock. “Uh-uh-uh, babe. Don't forget. I'm the one on top, so what I say goes.”

Valenti tried to relax and let himself be open to his partner's shaft and his excruciatingly slow penetration, but it was nearly impossible. He felt as if he'd been on the bed forever, spread open for his partner's tongue and cock, and if he didn't come soon, he was going to explode. “Sean,” he rasped finally, after another half dozen long, slow strokes. “I swear to God, if you don't hurry up and really fuck me, I'm going to make you so damn sorry the next time we make love.”

“Oh yeah? What're you gonna do?” There was definite interest in O'Brian's voice, and had he sped up just a little bit? Valenti thought maybe he had.

“Gonna tie you facedown to the bed,” he said, grasping for inspiration. “And then I'm going to do exactly what you're doing to me. But first, I'm going to lick you and suck your cock until you think you're going to explode. But I won't let you come. Just like I didn't let you come in the closet at the Metro before you took the Talbert assignment.”

“You really left me hurtin' there, babe. Go on.” O'Brian was definitely speeding up now, much to Valenti's relief. He was sure he couldn't take much more of the slow, sensual torture his partner had been inflicting. It was certainly different from what he'd endured under Talbert's direction, but no less nerve-racking for all that. He continued his dirty talk.

“You think you were hurting *then*? Just wait,” he returned. “Because after that, I'm going to go down on your ass and put my tongue so deep inside you, you'll beg for my cock. But I won't give it to you.”

“No?” O'Brian was really beginning to pound him now, and Valenti arched his back and opened his legs wider, giving his partner easier access to his ass.

“No.” He gasped. “Going to...use the tail on you. The same one I used last Fourth of July when you were wearing those chaps that framed your cock and balls so nice. I'm going to tease you with it for hours and not let you come.”

“You wouldn't,” O'Brian objected. He was gripping Valenti's cock and stroking it in rhythm with every thrust of his cock into Valenti's body. Valenti moaned, knowing he was finally closing in on his orgasm. God, he needed to come! And he wanted to feel O'Brian coming inside him at the same time.

“I sure as hell will, partner,” he growled. “I'll tease you for hours, so that by the time I finally let you have my cock, you're half crazy with lust. You'll come so hard, you'll black out.”

“Gonna come right now,” O'Brian admitted hoarsely. “God, Nicky, gonna come so hard. You wanna feel me filling your sweet ass with my cum?”

“God, yes!” Valenti moaned, bucking up into his partner's hand. “Come in me, Sean. Use me hard and fill me up. Fuck me!”

With a low roar, O'Brian pressed deep inside him, filling Valenti to the hilt with his cock. At the same time he fisted Valenti's cock, finally letting up on the pressure he'd been applying to keep his partner from coming, and they exploded together.

Valenti gave a hoarse shout as the orgasm came boiling up from his balls and hit him like a sledgehammer. And then he was coming, shooting so hard into O'Brian's palm, he saw stars. The fact that he could feel his partner pulsing deep inside him, filling him with his cum, only intensified his orgasm, making him moan and beg for more. “Yes,” he moaned again. “God, *yes*, Sean...harder...*more*.”

“I got everything you need right here,” O'Brian told him, still milking Valenti's cock with long, almost rough strokes. “And I'll give it to you anytime you need it, babe.”

“I always need it from you.” Valenti arched under his partner, feeling the aftershocks of orgasm hit him, making his body spasm like a fist around O'Brian's cock and milk every last drop of cum out of him. For a long, shining moment, the world seemed to spin around them, and then, finally, the tide of pleasure ebbed, leaving Valenti shaken and gasping and completely content for the first time in well over a month.

“God, babe...” O'Brian was panting as he withdrew carefully and flopped on the bed beside Valenti. “That was... God, that was *intense*.”

“The best ever,” Valenti agreed, rolling on his side to face his partner. He took a moment to catch his breath and then frowned at O'Brian. “Were you really that worried about hurting me?”

O'Brian shrugged. “Yeah, at first. But then I figured it might be fun to, you know, draw it out a little.”

“You certainly did that.” Valenti grinned. “You bastard. You had me practically chewing the sheets, I wanted you so bad.”

O'Brian looked serious. “Sorry if it was hard on you, babe, but I *needed* to see you all worked up. Wanted to be sure you weren't just gettin' me to fuck you to prove you were all right, when you really weren't.”

“Well, I trust you could tell I wasn't faking any of that,” Valenti said drily. “I can't remember the last time I wanted you that bad. Maybe the first time at the RamJack, but I was so conflicted then, it was hard to say.”

“Yeah, I hear you.” O'Brian gave him a tired smile. “All that conflict wears you out.”

Valenti snorted. “Whereas *this* was a walk in the park.”

“Speak for yourself, partner.” O'Brian grimaced. “I'm beat. You made me do all the hard work. Got me so sweaty, I need a shower.” He dragged himself out of bed, despite Valenti's protests.

“Yeah, I'm such a bastard that way.” Grumbling, Valenti joined his partner in the bathroom. Once under the spray of heated water, however, he began to think a shower wasn't such a bad idea. Despite having bathed at the hospital that morning, he hadn't felt truly clean until now. Washing the last of the antiseptic smell of the place off him felt great, and soaping his partner's naked body felt even better.

“You better stop that, babe,” O'Brian murmured as Valenti stroked his cock with a soapy hand. “Just because I filled you full of my cum a minute ago doesn't mean I can't go another round. It's been over a month, and we've got a lot of catching up to do.”

“I'm counting on it.” Valenti stroked him harder and was pleased to find his partner growing erect again. It had always been like this for them—they couldn't get enough of each

other. “You know what this makes me think of?” he asked, looking O'Brian in the eye as he fisted his cock.

“No. What?” O'Brian's voice was thick with need.

“Unfinished business.” Valenti dropped to his knees and pulled his partner toward him, allowing the spray of warm water to wash O'Brian's shaft clean of soap.

“What are you talkin' about?” O'Brian asked breathlessly as Valenti leaned forward and took a long, loving taste of his cock.

“Remember what I was saying about how I teased you and left you wanting back at the Metro? Before the Talbert case?”

“Uh-huh.” There was a glazed look in O'Brian's light eyes, but Valenti could tell he was still with him—barely.

“I told you to come back for the ending. Well, the case is over, and you're back. So here's what I promised you.” He leaned forward again and took O'Brian deep down his throat, loving the musky, clean taste of him.

It seemed to take forever, with the porcelain tub cold under his knees and the warm rivulets of water running down his back, but at last O'Brian moaned and bucked against his lips. Valenti swallowed the hot river of cum, loving it, loving every inch of the man in front of him. He was half hard again himself from the erotic act he'd just performed. It reminded him of a fantasy he'd had back at the RamJack, before they'd even been together as more than partners.

Finally O'Brian tugged gently at his hair, pulling him away. “Enough, babe,” he murmured hoarsely. “You damn near sucked me dry, and the hot water doesn't last forever here.”

“True.” Valenti climbed stiffly to his feet, grimacing as the lukewarm water began to turn cold. “Bigger water tank at my place. Maybe you should move in with me.”

O'Brian barked laughter as he got them both towels. “Yeah, right. And we'll just sashay down to personnel and ask for a change-of-address form. Captain Harris would love that.”

“I don't think he'd mind as much as you think. He knows,” Valenti said quietly. “About us, I mean.”

“Yeah, I know.” O'Brian was suddenly sober. “He saw the sick little movie Talbert made. How could he not know?”

“He knows, but he doesn't mind.” Valenti threw an arm around his partner's shoulder and led him back to the bedroom. “I told him we weren't ashamed of it, but that we'd rather keep it to ourselves.”

O'Brian collapsed on the bed, an incredulous look on his face. “And he was okay with that?”

Valenti laughed. “Okay with it? He practically breathed a sigh of relief. As far as he's concerned, it's business as usual when we get back. So if the captain doesn't mind, why *shouldn't* we move in together?”

O'Brian looked thoughtful. “Something to think about. I'm glad we're out in the open now, at least to Harris. I know how tryin' to hide how we feel has worried you.”

“That's an understatement.” Valenti nuzzled close, resting his cheek on his partner's furry pec. He'd always loved the mat of red-gold curls that covered O'Brian's chest; it was so different from his own smooth, dark tan skin. Even during their time at the RamJack, when O'Brian had been playing a twink, he'd refused to shave it.

“Mmm. This is nice.” O'Brian threaded his fingers through Valenti's damp hair in a gentle caress. “Just you and me together again.”

“Us against them, partner,” Valenti agreed. “Always.” He yawned. “You know, I just thought of something. Today is Valentine's Day.”

“Yeah, it is.” O'Brian sounded surprised. “Been so upset lately, I completely forgot. Man, we didn't do much to celebrate this year, did we?”

“Are you kidding me?” Valenti half raised his head to look at O'Brian. “What do you call what we just did in the bed and the shower, if not celebrating?”

“Don't get me wrong, babe. I love fucking you, not to mention getting blown by you. But I dunno...” O'Brian shrugged. “I wanted to do somethin' special.”

“Like last year? When we spent the entire evening on a stakeout and missed the reservations you made at Four Tables?” Valenti grinned.

“Hey, I thought you'd like a fancy joint like that,” O'Brian protested. “If it was up to me, we could just eat chili dogs at Harry's.”

“Harry's sounds great.” Valenti realized his stomach was rumbling. “In fact, we should go get some now. I've been living on hospital food for the past three days—unsalted instant mashed potatoes and lime Jell-O. Yuck.”

“Sounds good to me. But ya know, now that I think of it, I *do* have something for you.” O'Brian sat up suddenly, dislodging his partner.

Valenti grumbled in protest, but he could see the light of excitement in O'Brian's eyes. His partner had a childlike love of gifts—both giving and receiving them—so if he had remembered he had something for Valenti for Valentine's Day, he wouldn't be happy until he got it.

“What is it?” he asked obligingly.

“Can't tell you; gotta show you. Hang on.” O'Brian leaped nimbly off the bed and began rooting around in his closet, which was neatly organized but packed to the brim. “I know it's in here somewhere,” Valenti heard him murmuring. Then with a muffled “aha!” O'Brian finally emerged holding a wrapped package over his head. “Here.” He handed it to Valenti and sat back on the bed, his eyes eager. “Open it. Got it just for you.”

“I feel bad, though. I didn't get anything for you,” Valenti objected.

“You kiddin' me? You just gave me your sweet ass, babe. Couldn't ask for a better present than that.” O'Brian wiggled his eyebrows and gave his partner a lascivious look. “Now go on. Open it.”

“Can't wait to see this.” Valenti grinned, and he tore into the red wrapping paper. His partner's love of gifts was infectious.

“It's not much,” O'Brian said apologetically as a small bag of hard candies fell into Valenti's lap. “But it did come all the way from Colombia.”

“Menta Helada!” Valenti couldn't have been more surprised as he stared at the traditional mint-flavored candies. “I haven't seen these since I was a kid! My *abuelita* used to give them to me.”

O'Brian grinned. “I know. I really wanted to make something for you. She gave me the recipe for *docinhos de abóbora* too, and I was gonna cook you a big batch, but what with everything that's been happenin'...” He shrugged. “I haven't exactly had my mind on tryin' to make candy.”

“Completely understandable.” Valenti put a hand on his partner's shoulder and squeezed. “And to tell you the truth, I'm really glad you *didn't* make any of that nasty pumpkin-coconut crap.”

O'Brian frowned. “What? But she said it was your favorite. 'Mi little *corazón*, he loved the docinhos de abóbora. Couldn't get enough of it,” he said, doing a perfect impression of Valenti's grandmother's high, scratchy voice.

Valenti laughed. “Yeah, well... I let her think that because I didn't want to hurt her feelings. Actually I was feeding it to the dog. Poor animal had the runs for a month every time she made it.”

O'Brian snickered. “Nicky, you bad boy. Never figured you to be the cruel-to-animals type.”

“Hey, the dog loved it. Besides, that stuff has coconut in it. You *know* how I feel about coconut. It's disgusting.”

“Didn't know you felt that way, babe.” O'Brian looked thoughtful. “Funny... Even as long as we've been together, there's always somethin' new to learn. Well, do you at least like the mint candies?”

“I love them.” Valenti tore open the bag and unwrapped one to pop in his mouth. He offered one to O'Brian, who took it and sucked on it thoughtfully.

“Mmm. Pretty good. Not as good as you, of course, *corazón*.” He gave Valenti a leisurely once-over. “But then, what is?”

Valenti sighed. “I knew bringing up my grandmother would make you want to call me that.” O'Brian had always loved to tease Valenti with his Colombian grandmother's pet name for him.

“You know it, babe.” O'Brian suddenly got serious. “But it's not just teasing, ya know. I call you *corazón* because that's what you are—my heart. Without you, I'm empty inside.”

“Aw, partner...” Valenti reached out and cupped O'Brian's scratchy cheek. “If I'm your heart, then you're my soul. My... What's the word?” It was a joke between them that O'Brian knew more Spanish than Valenti did, despite his Colombian heritage.

“*Alma*. That's soul.” O'Brian smiled and cupped his hand over Valenti's. “Say, are you really that hungry? All this sweet talk has me wantin' you again. And I think I read somewhere you can give a hell of a blowjob with a mint candy in your mouth.”

“Sounds good to me.” Valenti lay back on the bed, his heart filled with love for his partner. “Love you, Sean. More than anything. More than ever.”

“Love you too, babe.” O'Brian was already getting into position between his thighs, but he stopped for a moment, his eyes locked with Valenti's. “Ya know, if we got through what Talbert did to us, we can get through anything.”

“That's what I've been trying to tell you.” Valenti reached down to run a hand through O'Brian's curls. “We belong together. Always have, always will.”

“Heart and soul,” O'Brian agreed. “Us against them. That's the way it's always gonna be.”

Valenti's answer turned into a groan as his partner leaned down and sucked his hard shaft deep into his mouth. O'Brian was right; the mint candy made a delicious difference. Cool, tingly chills, a direct contrast to the heat of O'Brian's tongue, were traveling down his cock.

Threading his fingers through O'Brian's thick mane, he thought he had never loved his partner more than he did right now. He and O'Brian had gone through a hard time, but they had come out of it together, as they always had in the past.

And as he stroked into O'Brian's warm, wet mouth, Valenti was flooded with a certainty that they would always get through. No matter what obstacles stood in their way, as long as he and O'Brian stuck together, nothing could get them down. Valenti loved his partner—heart, soul, body, and mind—and he was determined to never lose him again.

THE END

Loose Id(R) Titles by Evangeline Anderson

Dangerous Cravings
Eyes Like A Wolf
Heart and Soul
Hunger Moon Rising
Marked
Outcast
Picture Perfect
Slave Boy
Sweet Dreams
The Assignment
The Last Bite
The Punishment of Nicollet

Marked
Co-written with Jay Douglas

INTERLUDES

The Switch
(featuring characters from *Dangerous Cravings*)

Fireworks
I'll Be Hot for Christmas
(featuring characters from *The Assignment*)

Evangeline Anderson

Evangeline Anderson is a registered MRI tech who would rather be writing. And yes, she is nerdy enough to have a bumper sticker that reads “I’d rather be writing.” Honk if you see her! She is thirty-something and lives in Florida with a husband, a son, and two cats. She had been writing erotic fiction for her own gratification for a number of years before it occurred to her to try and get paid for it. To her delight, she found that it was actually possible to get money for having a dirty mind and she has been writing paranormal and Sci-fi erotica steadily ever since.