



The
Solitary Knights
of Pelham Bay
Book 4

Stardust



Claire Thompson

ROMANCE UNBOUND PUBLISHING

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Presents

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The Series

It started as a joke. Several guys burned by love decided to create a club they dubbed the Solitary Knights. A safe haven for the romantically disinclined, the guys meet once a month to drink a beer and renew their vow to avoid love at all costs. Yet beneath the laughter and bravado, each man hides a broken heart.

One night, Drew Kensington, owner and bartender of the Pelham Bay Pub, issues a challenge, “Why don’t you *find* that one guy—the one that got away, the one you’ve never quite let fade from your dreams? Track him down. Reconnect. Then come back here and tell us what you found out.”

Book 4: Stardust

The woman had to be over six feet tall. She was heavily made up, her lips painted a deep red, her eyes ringed with long, false lashes. Her sequined satin gown was ripped, revealing the edge of a lacy bra. Her long blond hair was partially obscuring her face, and she was screaming.

“Get up there! Hurry! They’re killing each other! Oh, sweet Jesus, Juliet’s been cut!”

Dennis became aware his mouth had fallen open. He snapped it shut and turned to Gordon, who said tersely, “She’s a he.” Dennis looked back at the woman, noticing now the blonde hair was askew—a wig knocked a bit out of place, and beneath the heavy pancake makeup was the trace of five o’clock shadow.

“This way, gentlemen.” A stout man in a dark suit and conservative tie hurried toward them. The gold pin on his jacket pocket read, *Manager*. “The medics from the other ambulance are already upstairs.”

Hoisting their emergency bags, Gordon and Dennis followed the man to a small elevator located in a corner of the large, elegant hotel lobby. The manager used a key to unlock the polished wooden door, which slid silently open.

“Something has occurred in the penthouse suite,” he said, his voice quietly urgent. “Yves Chantel, the clothing designer, was having a party for a few of his friends, but apparently things have gotten out of control. I do *not* want the police called if at all possible. We really can’t have this kind of thing at the Rosendale.”

He glanced back toward the drag queen, who was being gently but firmly led away by a bellhop. "That, uh, person," the manager's voice dripped with barely concealed distaste, "is causing quite a fuss. I'm hoping to keep whatever's going on up there contained. I've sent my security in as well."

Dennis and Gordon didn't speak as they rode up, though Dennis could tell by the way Gordon was fidgeting that he had more on his mind than whatever havoc was being wrecked in the penthouse suite.

When the call had come in on the radio to the private ambulance company about an incident involving possible minor injuries at the upscale Rosendale Hotel on Fifth Avenue, Gordon had just finished his shift and was about to head home. Dennis, who still had a few hours to go, was surprised when Gordon piped up, "I'll go."

"Your shift's over," Dennis said, though he didn't mind the idea of another assignment with Gordon. He didn't mind the idea of being anywhere with Gordon.

"I heard Ben Ryder is staying at that hotel right now. If there's any trouble, he might appreciate a friendly face." Gordon's had shoved his hands in his pockets and was bouncing lightly on the balls of his feet. Dennis recognized the tamped down excitement in Gordon's eyes that always appeared whenever he talked about Ben Ryder, the famous movie star he'd once gone to high school with.

Dennis suppressed a sigh, the pleasure at the thought of more time with Gordon evaporating. Otherwise perfectly sane, when it came to that Ben Ryder guy, Gordon turned as starry eyed as a gushing teenage schoolgirl.

"That okay with you, Kevin? If I take this call with Dennis?" Gordon addressed this to the other medic on call, who was sitting splayed on the couch in the corner of the ambulance corps rec room.

"No problem. You want it, it's yours," Kevin replied without taking his eyes from the TV screen.

Because they'd been told the injuries were minor, they took the SUV rather than the ambulance. Apparently there was already another ambulance at the scene anyway, which would no doubt handle any necessary hospital run. On the drive over, Dennis couldn't help but probe, though he knew whatever he heard would hurt. It was like a toothache. He couldn't keep his tongue from going to the sore spot.

It was bad enough that billboards and magazine covers routinely featured the rugged, blond, impossibly perfect good looks of the thirty-something action hero. Dennis could deal with the fact Gordon and Ben had once gone to high school together. He could even tolerate the idea they'd been lovers, of a sort, back then—teenagers experimenting, barely able to admit their sexual orientation, much less act on it.

What Dennis hated was the way Gordon used Ben as a shield, as a way of keeping himself aloof from the rest of the world—well, more specifically, from Dennis. Gordon played down his obsessive attraction for the movie star, but Dennis knew better. The few times he'd been to Gordon's place, he'd seen the signed photo hung on the wall in

the living room, and the movie posters featuring the action hero tacked to the walls in Gordon's bedroom.

Gordon claimed to appreciate the guy's acting ability, but he wasn't fooling anyone, at least not Dennis, who was clued into every nuance of feeling and desire when it came to Gordon Flanders.

Not that he let Gordon know the depths of his feelings. Dennis knew he didn't have a shot in hell. How could he, a forty-three-year-old nothing special guy of average height with an average face and an average life ever hope to compete with the gorgeous, perfect, brilliant Ben Ryder?

Dennis could feel Gordon's underlying thrumming anticipation. As far as he knew, it had been a few years since Gordon had seen or even spoken to his supposed good friend, though Gordon was always quick to make excuses for the actor when they didn't manage to hook up. "He's only in town for a day, doing a promo for his new film. I'm sure we'll connect next time," Gordon would say in that breezy tone he adopted to hide that he'd been hurt.

Dennis hated Ben Ryder.

Not because he was handsome, rich and famous, or even because Gordon had that ridiculous, abiding crush on him, but because of the hurt in Gordon's eyes that appeared whenever Ben ignored him yet again.

As they drove toward the scene, Dennis remarked, "I hear Ben's got a serious girl friend. That actress what's her name. Ariel something? What's that about?"

Gordon chuckled. "Just a cover. Don't believe the tabloids. He just puts up the straight front to sell more tickets at the box office. It's got to be hard, living your life so publically like that. It's not like you and me. Nobody gives a fuck about us, and even so, neither of us exactly advertises our sexual orientation on the job, am I right?"

Dennis nodded, keeping his eyes on the road. When he'd taken the job as a medic at the private ambulance company where Gordon was already employed, he'd been instantly attracted to Gordon, with his quirky smile, sunny disposition and full head of brown curly hair. It had been a few months before he'd learned Gordon was gay, and even longer before he admitted to Gordon that he was, too.

Early on Gordon had stated categorically that he never got involved with guys he worked with, and Dennis had pretended to agree. He told himself it was for the best that Gordon and he didn't hook up. The old adage was so often true that sex ruined a good friendship. Gordon was funny, thoughtful, generous, kind and a good friend. Not to mention Dennis loved his large golden brown eyes and the way his thatch of thick, dark hair fell over his forehead, and his big, capable hands. When Dennis lay alone in his bed stroking his cock, Gordon was the one he imagined beside him, reaching out to take Dennis into his arms. But that, he knew, was destined to remain only a fantasy.

Gordon liked to play the field, and was even a member of that Solitary Knights thing he'd tried to talk Dennis into joining. He referred to it as a support group for the romantically disinclined.

Dennis had actually attended a few of the meetings, mainly because it was a chance to go out with Gordon, but he had no interest in joining a group specifically created to avoid love. Dennis still held a secret hope in his heart that one day he'd find a man he would want to grow old with.

Still, he did enjoy the atmosphere and company at the Pelham Bay Pub. He could be himself there, and he was learning to play darts. There was always a game going, or sometimes just a friendly face with whom to share a beer.

He would listen sometimes from the sidelines as the Solitary Knights recounted their latest exploits and cheered each other on. Gordon never talked about his sexual escapades at the meetings, at least when Dennis was around, and for this he was silently grateful. He knew he couldn't have Gordon, and he didn't want to hear about anyone else who had, however casual the liaisons.

It had been a long time since Dennis had been in any kind of serious relationship with a man, longer than he cared to admit. It was so hard to meet people in the city, and the usual bar scene left him cold. The occasional times he did go out with someone, it was on such a casual basis sometimes he barely remembered the name of the guy he was with, which left him lonelier than when he'd started.

The elevator doors opened onto a huge room, in which utter chaos was ensuing. The air reeked with the smell of cigarette smoke, blended with undertones of alcohol and sweat. The place was a mess, with food splattered everywhere, tureens and glasses overturned, and articles of women's clothing hanging from the chandeliers.

Small groups of men, some in drag, some not, were huddled together, some consoling the others, some cawing with drunken laughter, some still tossing bits of food, though the effort looked half-hearted compared to what must have been going on before hotel security got there.

"Over there." Gordon pointed toward a large sofa, where someone dressed like Marilyn Monroe in her *Seven Year Itch* white dress lay sprawled back against the sofa, blood streaming from his forehead and staining the front of his clothing. A uniformed medic was kneeling in front of him, applying pressure to the wound.

As Gordon and Dennis approached, the medic looked around and, taking in their uniforms and medical bags said, "We've got this one under control. Just a superficial head wound but he'll need stitches. My partner's down getting the gurney. We've checked out the main rooms and hotel security just hauled away two of the worst offenders. There are no other apparent injuries, but you should reconnoiter the area, just to be sure, now that things have settled down somewhat."

Dennis and Gordon stepped carefully through the mess to have a look in the adjoining rooms. There were two large bedrooms off the main suite. There were more disheveled partiers sitting and lying on the sofas and beds, many of them holding crystal flutes half filled with champagne. Dennis briefly wondered which one was Yves Chantel, as they quickly but carefully surveyed the bedrooms and bathrooms for anyone that might have been missed in need of help.

"In here," Gordon called. Dennis followed his voice back into the other bedroom. Gordon stood just outside a large walk-in closet. "I hear something," Gordon said, pulling the door open. The room was dark, the sound of moaning audible as Gordon flipped the switch.

A handsome blond lifted his hand to his face, squinting at the sudden flood of light. His mouth was slack, the moaning they'd heard coming from his lips. He was dressed in a black leather jacket over a black shirt. His trousers were in a puddle around his ankles. A very large man in pink satin and stiletto heels was bobbing his head at the man's groin.

"Holy shit," Gordon whispered, his voice ripe with shock. "That's Ben! Ben Ryder."

Once Gordon had identified him, Dennis recognized him immediately. Dennis couldn't help but grin, though he tried to hide it for Gordon's sake. Here was the guy *People Magazine* had only the week before labeled as one of America's top ten most eligible bachelors, with his pants down around his ankles, being sucked off by a guy dressed like an eighties Madonna look-alike.

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Gordon sat in the back of the vehicle with Ben Ryder, who was slumped against him, his head resting on Gordon's shoulder. Having Ben so close was like a weird, wonderful dream. Gordon fought with the host of wild feelings tumbling inside him.

For years he'd been in love with Ben, from age seventeen and their first fumbblings in the dark at Ruth Ann Page's senior party, to well into his twenties, when he'd still harbored the ridiculous idea that someday, somehow, Ben and he would end up together. Though he hadn't actively thought about it in years, the memory of that first time leaped into his brain as if it were only yesterday.

How Gordon's heart had pounded when Ben pulled down the fly of Gordon's jeans and reached for his cock. He'd been embarrassed that he'd come on the spot, but Ben hadn't seemed to mind. He'd let Gordon return the favor. Even now Gordon could remember the hot thrill of touching Ben's hard, thick cock. He could almost feel the thrumming of Ben's pulse beneath the smooth skin as Ben ejaculated into his hand.

Though Ben had moved from New York to L.A. right after high school, they'd stayed in touch for a while, with email and the occasional phone call. Ben still sent Gordon a Christmas card each year, and he'd saved every one, even though the last five or so were signed with what looked to Gordon like a computer-generated signature.

Hey, he could hardly blame the guy. He was one of the most sought after celebrities in Hollywood. Gordon had read that he did most of his own stunts. His schedule had to be crazy, with talk show appearances, magazine spreads and a new movie out every year. Gordon sometimes wondered if Ben even remembered him, but he kept this feeling closely under wraps, taking it out only late at night on the rare occasions when he was feeling sorry for himself.

Though Gordon had feigned vagueness to Dennis about their meetings over the years, he knew precisely the dates when Ben and he had seen each other. He

remembered what Ben had been wearing, what they talked about, and how his heart had pounded the whole time they were together. He remembered too the fierce, humiliating ache when Ben would invariably cut the exchange short, taking a phone call and rising with barely an apology. "Sorry, have to run. Great to see you..."

Ben stirred beside him and Gordon felt his heart clutch. All the years of dating other guys, of pretending at the Solitary Knights meetings that his heart was hard as granite, seemed to evaporate. It took all his self-restraint not to pull Ben into his arms and finally kiss him again after all these years.

He glanced toward the front seat, where Dennis was softly cursing at some driver who had just cut him off. It was against company policy to transport someone for personal reasons. Thank goodness Dennis was the one with him tonight. Good old Dennis could always be counted on to come through in a pinch.

Gordon had assessed the situation in the penthouse suite at once. It was clear Ben had been so wasted he didn't know what he was doing. Though why, for a guy who claimed to be so into keeping his sexual orientation a secret, Ben thought he should go to that kind of party was more than Gordon could understand.

It had been an unpleasant shock to see Ben getting sucked off by some guy in fishnet stockings, but at the same time Gordon's heart had gone out to him. He knew, once Ben sobered up, he'd be panicked to find himself in such a situation. And, Gordon couldn't help but think, wouldn't he be grateful that his old pal, Gordon, had come to the rescue?

They'd nearly been caught by the paparazzi as Dennis and he half-carried, half-dragged the staggering Ben between them. Once in the lobby, they'd moved as quickly as they could past lurking men with cell phones and cameras who were trying to make their way up to the penthouse suite. At least one had held his camera in their direction, but Gordon was reasonably sure Ben was hidden between the two of them as they moved.

Would he appreciate what Gordon had done for him? Was it possible, once they were alone together, for the old flame that had once burned between them to be rekindled? Just like in a movie, Ben would turn to him. "I hadn't realized—it was you, Gordon, you all along that I loved..."

Who was he kidding? Ben Ryder was a major celebrity with his own action hero dolls on the Walmart shelves. No way he'd give the time of day to a NYC medic, high school connections notwithstanding.

Still, Drew's words from the last Solitary Knights meeting continued to haunt him. What if, after all these years, they connected again, this time for keeps?

Ben murmured something in his sleep and Gordon leaned down close to hear him. "'Sokay, Arl', jus' a frien', I shwear..."

"What's that? You need something, Ben? Some water?"

Ben didn't answer, except with a soft snore and a snuffle. He turned his head so that his face was inches from Gordon's own. All Gordon had to do was lean down just a

little more and their lips could touch. He could kiss the man he'd dreamed of for so long...

"You okay back there?" Dennis called from the driver's seat. "Still want to take him to your place?"

Gordon jerked his head upright, wondering suddenly what Dennis could see in the rearview mirror. Thank god he couldn't see the erection bulging in Gordon's pants. "Yeah, thanks. Hey, I really appreciate your helping me get Ben out of there. We saved him from a major fuckup with the media, that's for sure."

There was no answer, but Dennis was probably focused on the city traffic, still snarled even at midnight. When they were nearing Gordon's apartment house, he shook Ben's shoulder. "Hey, Ben. You need to wake up. We have to get you inside. Wake up." He patted Ben's cheek and shook his shoulder again.

"Mmmph," Ben muttered incoherently. But he sat up and opened his eyes, beautiful, brilliant blue eyes that seemed to focus on Gordon's face, making his heart skip several beats.

Ben put his hands to his head and groaned. He ran his fingers through his hair, looking way better than a man who was just waking up from a drunken stupor had a right to. After a moment, he stared at Gordon in concentration, his head tilted. "I know you. Right? Don't I know you?"

Gordon was caught off guard by the sharp slash of pain in his gut at Ben's telling question. Never in a thousand years, no matter how drugged up or drunk he was, could he have forgotten Ben. Was this what stardom did? Make you forget your oldest friends?

"I'm Gordon. Gordon Flanders." He couldn't bring himself to identify himself further – it was too humiliating.

"Nice ta' meetcha," Ben slurred, his head lolling to the side as his eyes closed again.

"Pulling up now," Dennis called from up front. "I have to double park so make it quick, okay?"

"You got it," Gordon called back. He hopped out of the vehicle and hurried to the other side to get Ben out. He was anxious now, worried how Ben would react when he came back to his senses and found himself at Gordon's place. Hopefully it was only because he was so out of it that he'd forgotten Gordon. You never forgot your first, did you?

Supporting Ben with one arm, Gordon tapped the passenger window until Dennis lowered it. Gordon leaned in. "Thanks, Den. I owe you one, for sure."

"No problem. Forget it. I'll sign you out." Dennis' voice was cool, even distant, and Gordon glanced sharply at him. Dennis' face was blank. Gordon knew something was bugging him but he didn't have time to dig deeper. He had a famous and still somewhat impaired celebrity to hustle inside before anyone noticed.

"Okay, I'll catch up with you later. Thanks again, buddy."

Ben leaned heavily against Gordon as they moved slowly across the wide sidewalk toward the apartment building. As Gordon fumbled with the building key, Ben nestled his head against the crook of Gordon's neck, sending ripples of desire through his frame.

The elevator was out of order as usual, but somehow the two of them managed to get up the two flights of stairs and down the hall into Gordon's place. Once inside, Ben sank onto the sofa.

"Hey, you don't look so good," Gordon observed. Ben's face was turning a rather unflattering shade of pea green. "Shit," Ben groaned, bringing his hand to his mouth as he half-rose from the sofa. "I think I'm going to be—"

He didn't manage to finish the sentence, covering his mouth with both hands. Gordon was beside him at once. Putting his arm around Ben's shoulders, he propelled him toward the kitchen.

He got Ben to the sink just in time and held him while he vomited. When Ben was done, Gordon reached around him, turning on the water. "You'll probably feel better now," he offered, when Ben finally stopped heaving. "Here, splash some water on your face and we'll get you to bed."

Ben did as directed, and allowed himself to be led from the kitchen, through the small living room into Gordon's bedroom. Ben still looked pale, though a good deal better than before he'd thrown up. "Let me get you a glass of water. You probably want to get out of those clothes." Gordon prayed his voice didn't sound insinuating, even though he had to admit he'd have liked nothing better than to have Ben Ryder naked in his bed at last.

He moved to the dresser, pulling out his best pair of pajama bottoms, which he set on the bed beside Ben, who was in a daze. "I'll be right back," he said, hurrying to the kitchen for some water.

He returned to the bedroom with the water. There he found Ben flat on his back on the bed, arms and legs akimbo, mouth gaping, head lolling to the side. He hadn't changed his clothes or even managed to remove his jacket.

Gordon pulled the leather jacket from the inert man. He took off Ben's shoes and covered him with a spare sheet. "Pretty ironic, eh, Ben?" Gordon said to the unconscious man. "I finally have you in my bed, after twenty years, but you're passed out cold. You never could hold your liquor." Gordon shook his head and sighed. He clicked off the bedroom light and went out into the living to make up the sleeper sofa.

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Ben took a sip of the coffee and made a face. The cherry pastry sat untouched before him. "What's in this? Milk?"

"Uh, yeah. Is it a problem? I could make you some tea."

Gordon had filled Ben in on the situation when he'd finally woken up. Ben had the grace to appear somewhat embarrassed over how shit-faced drunk he'd been, caught with his pants around his ankles. At least he'd remembered who Gordon was, and

thanked him with such sincerity for saving his ass that Gordon had felt somewhat mollified.

Now Gordon tried not to stare at Ben's sharply defined pecs and abs. Ben was shirtless, his hair still wet from his shower, sexy dark blond stubble on his manly jaw. Unlike some stars on the big screen who didn't look nearly as hot in real life, Ben looked even better. He'd been good looking in high school, but the years had only improved him, lending a maturity and ruggedness to his features. His eyes remained the same brilliant, captivating dark blue. His teeth were almost too white, and perfectly straight, but everyone in Hollywood had their teeth done, Gordon knew that. His hair, which used to be a dirty blond in his youth, was streaked with gold and white, the darker blond still evident beneath. It suddenly occurred to Gordon it was dyed. Well, he could understand that, he supposed. After all, Ben was thirty-seven years old and had an image to uphold. Who could blame him?

"I don't do dairy. I can't drink this." Ben pushed the cup away. "I don't do processed sugar either. Do you have any fresh juice? And I'll need an herbal pain remedy. I have a splitting headache."

It was noon and Ben had only been up long enough to take a shower. Gordon had been awake since eight, checking every few minutes on Ben, wondering if he'd ever wake up. He had nothing he could offer Ben for breakfast, as he rarely ate breakfast himself, but he didn't dare leave the apartment in case Ben woke up.

Instead he'd called good old reliable Dennis, who lived only four subway stops away, to ask if he would mind picking something up from a bakery. When Dennis had dropped by with the pastries, Gordon said, "Thanks, you're a lifesaver." Dennis stood uncertainly for a moment, prompting Gordon to add, "I'd ask you in, but I have no idea what kind of shape Ben's going to be in when he wakes up. I think it's best if just I'm here."

What a waste of time that had turned out to be. He should have figured the hard-bodied movie star wouldn't "do" processed sugar. Well, at least Gordon had orange juice to offer. He returned to the fridge and retrieved the carton. He shook it as he got a glass, and placed them both triumphantly beside the rejected coffee. Ben stared at the carton with a look of horrified bewilderment.

"You can't be serious. You drink that poison? Do you have any idea what's in that?"

"What?" Gordon said, confused. "It's just orange juice. One hundred percent pure. Says so right on the carton."

"That's what *you* think. You have no *idea* how those oranges were grown. Covered in pesticides, handled by disease-ridden migrant workers." Ben shook his head vehemently. "I only drink fresh squeezed. And the oranges have to be certified organic and guaranteed for freshness."

Annoyed, Gordon shoved the carton back into the fridge. "Sorry. I don't have any certified guaranteed oranges lying around." Annoyed, Gordon picked up the pastry and took a huge bite. It was delicious.

Ben made a face. "Have you got some organic oats or some sub-acid fruit?" As Gordon shook his head, Ben brightened. "I know. Make me an egg white omelet with shallots. Surely you can handle that? The eggs have to be free range, of course."

"You sure have changed since the guy I used to know who lived on pop tarts and orange soda," Gordon remarked, unable to keep the dryness from his tone.

Ben winced and then flashed his signature grin. "This bod is up on the big screen, fifty times larger than life." He patted his flat abs. "I gotta work it, babe. Every day. Speaking of which, I'll need to borrow your weight set, once I can get some protein."

"I don't have a weight set. I don't have egg whites or shallots or any fruit. I don't have herbal pain remedies. I have some aspirin in the medicine cabinet and I have a twelve-pack of beer and some ketchup in the fridge, plus the poison O.J." Gordon grinned to soften the sarcasm he couldn't stop from creeping into his tone. "Sorry. I don't cook much. But this is New York. I'm sure we can find what you need."

There was a buzzing sound from the bedroom. "Your cell phone," Gordon said. "It's been buzzing all morning."

"Shit, that's probably Bette. I better get it. She's probably frantic with worry. I always check in before now." He looked around the room, wrinkling his nose with barely concealed distaste. "I have to get out of here. All my stuff is at the hotel. My masseuse is going to wonder where I am. I simply can't function without a full body massage at least once a day."

"Who's Bette?" Gordon asked, trying to ignore the diva display.

"My agent. She's not going to be happy to hear what happened." Ben pushed back from the table and loped to the bedroom. Gordon followed, halting just outside the bedroom door.

"Hey, Bette." He could hear Ben say. "Yeah, okay. No, yeah. I understand. Sure. I'm at a friend's. No, it's a *guy*. Look you have to get me out of here. Relax, Jesus. I got out in time. Nobody saw me there."

More chatter from the line, and then, "Chill your bones, babe. This dude would never do that, we go way back. No, I promise. Yeah, I'll make sure. Calm down, will you? What? Oh, okay. Yes, I promise to forward my calls to you so you can handle them. Okay. Just a sec', I'll find out."

Ben called out from the bedroom, "Where the heck am I, anyway? What's the address here, Gordy?"

Gordon, who didn't want to admit he'd been eavesdropping, waited a moment before entering the bedroom. He gave Ben the address, while Ben repeated it slowly into the phone. "Thanks," he mouthed silently, flashing Gordon a warm smile. Speaking again into the phone, he added, "Yeah, yeah. I promise not to step foot outside until the car gets here. Yes, I'll call you, I promise."

"Everything okay?" Gordon asked. Ben ignored him a moment, punching the keys on his phone, no doubt forwarding his calls as directed. Was it Gordon's imagination, or did this agent person keep a pretty tight rein on Ben? It was hard to reconcile the browbeaten guy he'd just overhead on the phone with the sexy, always-in-control superstar on the screen.

"Ben?" Gordon said softly. Ben looked up, his face easing into a warm, sexy smile. Gordon found himself falling into those blue, blue eyes. Ben stood and stretched languidly. Gordon's cock twitched and he swallowed as he admired the sacred geometry of Ben's perfect body.

Ben sat again, patting the bed beside him. "Come sit next to me." He smiled that neon-bright smile as his eyes landed on the movie posters. "Those were two of my best films," he said approvingly. "You know I got an Oscar nomination for *Bad Men*."

"You should have won, too," Gordon said, sitting beside the star, his heart beating rapidly. Was this it? Was it actually going to happen, after all these years?

Ben dropped a hand to Gordon's thigh. "It was really good of you to rescue me last night. Bette said the place is swarming with paparazzi today and there are a lot of compromising pictures in the papers. If it weren't for you, I might have been in one of them, splashed across the society page." He squeezed Gordon's thigh and Gordon felt a warmth suffuse him.

"Thing is," Ben went on, "I still have a rep to keep up, ya' know? You knew me way back when, when I was, uh, experimenting. Bette reminded me how important it is to my career that nobody knows about that, uh, time in my life. Before I discovered, uh, women."

Gordon forced a laugh. He didn't like that Ben pretended to be straight, though he certainly understood his reasons. But why pretend with his oldest friend? "You're kidding, right? I mean, that's all just a front for the media."

Ben looked uncomfortable, even embarrassed. "Well, I don't know. I think I'm probably bi, you know. It's easier that way."

"Easier? Last time I checked, sexual orientation wasn't something you got to choose, easy or not."

"Relax, babe." Ben's voice was deep and smooth as whipped cream. "It's all about the image, that's all I'm saying." He took his hand away from Gordon's thigh, which continued to tingle from his touch.

"So, listen, Gordy, is it okay if I hang out here for the next twelve hours or so? Bette wants me to lie low until she can get me out of the city. Apparently there's talk that I was seen at that party. She's pretty pissed off about it."

Gordon hated to be called Gordy, but forgot his irritation as Ben's fingers again settled lightly on his thigh. "Sure. Absolutely. I have the day off. We can catch up on old times."

And more, way more, please god. Gordon couldn't deny the fact that every particle of his being was energized by the idea of kissing this man, of stripping him naked and

licking his cock and balls until he sucked him dry. Imagine, Ben Ryder in his bed at last, at last...

Ben's hand fell away and he leaned back, smiling while Gordon struggled for self control. "Maybe you can do a little shopping? Get us some real food. I can give you a list of what I require for my diet. I'll also need some aroma-therapy candles and some special oils for my bath. You can cook me supper. And after...well...who knows?"

~*~

When Dennis' cell phone had rung earlier that morning, he'd been both excited and anxious as to what Gordon might tell him. It had been something of a letdown to be asked to run an errand, and even more of a letdown not to be invited in for breakfast and to properly meet the celebrity, but he tried to tell himself he understood.

He tried to take Gordon's words that Ben was still asleep at face value, and not read more into them. But he couldn't stop the image of Gordon and Ben Ryder having sex from rolling like a bad porn movie through his brain.

Would Gordon tell him the truth if it had happened? Could Dennis stand to hear it if he did? Dennis realized he was clutching the phone receiver so hard his fingers were cramping. He forced himself to relax his grip. It was none of his business what Gordon did or didn't do. That realization was the saddest of all.

"So, he's finally up?" Dennis said, his voice neutral.

"Yeah," Gordon replied. "He didn't even wake up till noon. He has a hangover. He went back to bed after I found him some organic apple juice down at the deli. He has to be very careful about what he puts in that million dollar body of his." Gordon snorted while Dennis tried not to wonder just how much of that body Gordon had seen last night.

Gordon went on, "His agent has advised him to lie low until late tonight, when she's sending a car around to whisk him away to the airport. He's turned into this total diva – he expects me to cook him a fancy meal with all kinds of weird ingredients. He wants this special bath oil that he says is essential for his olfactory wellbeing or something. I have no idea where I'm supposed to find all this stuff, much less pay for it."

"He expects you to pay for it?"

"Oh, he's good for it, I'm sure." Gordon sounded slightly embarrassed. "Says he never travels with cash or cards. His agent and personal assistant take care of all of that for him. He seems kind of lost on his own."

Dennis snorted but refrained from comment. He was standing at his kitchen counter, which he drummed with his fingers while Gordon continued, "I'm going to do a food and wine run. Any idea where I can find..." there was a pause and Dennis could hear a piece of paper rustling. "...free range quail and a pound of dried shitake?" Gordon pronounced it shit-take.

"Shit take? That doesn't even sound right. What the hell is that?"

“Some kind of mushroom. I don’t know. He also wants a particular kind of nitrate-free red wine and some organic seaweed body wash, plus a dozen candles with a fragrance I can’t even pronounce. I figure all this fine dining, wining and bathing could lead to something.”

Dennis bit his lip, saying nothing. Gordon went blithely on. “I have no idea how long it’s going to take to hunt down all this stuff, much less cook a freaking quail. The guy’s only going to be around till midnight. So I was hoping maybe you could track down the nondairy, sugar free chocolate mousse he says he wants for dessert.”

“Can’t he get his own stuff?” Dennis sputtered. “Or call his personal assistants or servants or whatever he keeps around him to handle this crap?”

“Oh, he can’t. No one’s allowed to know where he is till all this has blown over. He says he’s really lucky I saved him. I knew it, Dennis. I knew if we just reconnected that he’d remember the old attraction. And it’s happening! This might be it, Dennis. My chance with Ben Ryder, after all these years.”

Dennis leaned heavily into the counter, closing his eyes, almost dizzy with longing. “It’s strange,” Gordon went on, his words like spikes through Dennis’ heart. “I guess I never really stopped wanting the guy.”

“I know the feeling,” Dennis muttered.

“What? You’re mumbling.”

“Nothing.”

“So will you help me?”

Dennis’ emotions were ricocheting through his brain. On the one hand, he was miserable with jealousy, not of Gordon, but of Ben. On the other hand, he was glad Gordon was calling him for help. He wanted to be a part of Gordon’s life, even if it meant watching him woo a famous movie star. That Ryder asshole better not hurt him, Dennis thought, worried for his friend, despite his jealousy.

“Dennis?”

“Yeah,” Dennis answered. “Sure, I’ll help you. What are friends for?”

~*~

Gordon held up the wine glass to the light and then wiped it carefully with a cloth. He set it down on the table, hoping the wine he’d picked would suit his guest. The scented candles were lit all over the apartment, the cloying smell not to Gordon’s taste, but it was what Ben had asked for – what he *needed*, he assured Gordon, for purification.

Gordon had spent several hours trying to hunt down the seaweed body wash Ben had insisted he had to have, but to no avail. He’d found seaweed bath salts that had cost a ridiculous amount, but Ben had waved them away, saying they’d be terrible for his skin regime. To add insult to injury, he’d added, “I couldn’t possibly bathe in that tub of yours. It must be the original iron tub that came with the place. Don’t tell me you actually bathe in that thing. God only knows what toxins are seeping into your water.”

Gordon was in fact quite proud of that tub, one of the only things in the tiny apartment he truly loved. It was an old-fashioned cast iron claw foot tub that could easily hold two. He'd had fantasies while buying the salts and candles of the two of them soaking together, Ben leaning against Gordon, who reached around Ben to stroke his cock while Ben twisted back for a long, lingering kiss.

He checked his watch and then carefully eased the cork out of the wine bottle. Ben had been very specific about how long the wine needed to breathe before it was suitable for consumption. The quail was roasting in the oven and he'd even managed to find the strange looking mushrooms with the horrible name, which were sautéing in extra virgin olive oil on the stove. He had to admit he felt pretty proud of himself, making this gourmet meal when usually all he could manage was salami or cheese and crackers washed down with a bottle of beer.

Ben was in the bedroom, where he'd spent most of the day sleeping. He was awake now, watching *Hardball*, his biggest grossing movie ever, on Gordon's laptop. Gordon had heard most actors didn't like to watch themselves on film. He knew no way would he want to see himself up on the screen, though maybe if he looked like Ben, he'd feel differently.

He had been embarrassed but pleased when Ben had complimented him on his movie poster choices, though it almost seemed as if he took it as his due that they were hung in Gordon's bedroom. Gordon found himself wondering at how Ben had seemed to change over the years, especially since he'd become so famous. He supposed it was inevitable, with so many people constantly fawning around you, hanging on your every word.

Ben was probably glad for this enforced day off, hiding out with Gordon, safe from the paparazzi and the squealing fans. He could have offered to help out with the cooking, but Gordon made allowances for that too – the guy moved in a different world now. He wasn't used to doing anything for himself. Probably all really big celebrities were like that.

Gordon's cell phone rang and he pulled it from his pocket. It was Dennis. They'd talked maybe twenty times over the course of the day, consulting each other as they ran their separate errands, trying to acquire all the stuff Ben said he had to have.

"Hey, Dennis," Gordon said, while he stirred the mushrooms, wondering how he'd know when they were done. "What's up? Did you find the..." Gordon fished a crumpled piece of paper from his pants pocket and read, "...organic Sumatra Mandheling coffee beans, whatever the fuck that is?"

"No," Dennis answered. "That's why I called. I got this other stuff. The guy at the coffee store said he won't know the difference. Very similar, he said, same nutty finish, whatever the hell that's supposed to mean. I think they make all this stuff up to sound impressive and charge three times what regular coffee costs."

Gordon laughed, agreeing. "Just make sure it's ground. I only have a Mr. Coffee. What about the dairy free mousse thing. You got that?"

“That I got. I had to do an online search to find a bakery that carries it. This guy sure is high maintenance, Gordon. You sure he’s worth it?”

Gordon thought of the man stretched out on his bed right now, wearing pajama bottoms and nothing else on his hard, perfect body, and his mouth actually watered. He swallowed. “I sure hope so, Dennis.”

~*~

Dennis hadn’t planned to spend his first day off in ten days roaming the city in search of exotic foodstuffs for some diva movie star. But then, he wasn’t doing it for the star, he was doing it for Gordon.

How ironic, he thought, to be helping the man he wanted for his own to get some other guy in bed. Did Gordon really think a fancy dinner and some scented candles were enough to get into the pants of the famous Ben Ryder?

Dennis had a bad feeling about this. He went along with it for Gordon’s sake, but all he knew was, if that bastard hurt Gordon, he’d have Dennis Wilson to deal with. Not that it would make any difference.

He thought sadly of the Bonnie Raitt song that always reminded him of Gordon:

I can’t make you love me, if you don’t – you can’t make your heart feel something it won’t...

Stop it, Dennis admonished himself. This gets you nowhere.

The sun was setting, it was cold out and he was tired. Forgoing his usual thriftiness, Dennis flagged down a cab to ride to Gordon’s apartment. He had the dessert, the coffee beans and French mineral water, all of which had cost more combined than he spent in a week on groceries.

When he got out of the cab, he noticed a striking woman in a long red coat and very high heels impatiently stabbing the intercom button to Gordon’s modest apartment house. A sleek black sedan was double parked in front, the driver inside idling the motor. Dennis suspected the woman and the car were a package deal, but what were they doing there?

“Dennis, that you?” As Dennis moved to stand beside the woman, he heard Gordon’s voice, tinny through the intercom speaker.

Before he could reply, the woman said, “This is Ariel Paige. Is Ben Ryder up there? Let me in this instant.”

There were muffled sounds and then the buzz and click as the front door lock was released. Dennis entered behind the woman, watching as she repeatedly punched the button to the small elevator, even though the sign on it said, “Out of Order.” She finally appeared to figure out it wasn’t coming, and began to clatter up the old marble stairs in her high heels. Dennis silently followed her to Gordon’s floor. If she was aware of him, she gave no sign.

So this was Ariel Paige, the actress who had been paired with Ben Ryder in the tabloids. Was she really his girlfriend, or just a beard? Whatever she was, Dennis could tell by her body language and the tone she’d used on the intercom that she was pissed

off. Vaguely he recalled stories of her being difficult on the set, a typical diva. It seemed to him she and Ben were perfectly matched – both entitled assholes who thought the world revolved around them.

When they reached Gordon's floor, the actress glanced down at the Palm Pilot she held in her hand and then at the numbers on the doors. When she came to Gordon's, she rapped the knocker sharply against it.

After a moment, the door was pulled open and there stood Gordon, looking so hot in his white linen shirt tucked into black trousers. Gordon stared at the woman a moment and then saw Dennis standing just behind her. Before he could say anything, the woman pushed past him.

"Where is he? Where is Ben? Bette said he's here. Ben!" she called, her eyes darting around the living room. Ben came out of Gordon's bedroom wearing nothing but pajama bottoms. Despite himself, Dennis found his body reacting favorably toward the shirtless man, with his broad shoulders and smooth, bare chest, the nipples like light brown coins against it. Ben looked disheveled, as if he'd been sleeping, or making love... The thought slashed through Dennis like a knife.

"Ariel, baby. What're you doing here? How'd you find me?" Ben was smiling but he didn't sound especially glad to see his supposed girlfriend. He sounded nervous.

Ariel glared at him. "Where is she?"

Ben looked confused. "Where's who?"

"Don't give me that shit. I've been calling you all day. Clever move to have your calls forwarded to your agent. Don't think I buy the cock and bull story about you having to lay low because of some fucking party. Since when did *you* shy away from publicity?"

"Ariel, it's true. I swear. Ask Gordon –"

Gordon and Dennis made eye contact. Gordon shrugged, looking confused and miserable. Dennis shrugged back, at once amused at what was unfolding and sorry for Gordon.

"Don't change the subject," the woman snapped. "Where is she? I know the signs. Beside the fact you're practically *naked*, you've got the damn candles burning, a table set for two, mood music, the whole bit. Is it Johanna Wallace? That bitch has been just waiting until my back was turned to get her claws into you, don't deny it. *The Star* claims to have exclusive photos of the two of you together." She put her hands on her hips.

"Come on, Ariel, You know better than to believe that crap," Ben whined.

Her eyes flickering suspiciously over the room, the actress finally seemed to notice Gordon, though she still gave no sign she was aware of Dennis, who stood quietly just inside the door. He set down the items he'd brought and waited.

Narrowing her eyes at Gordon, Ariel demanded, "Out with it. Where's the whore you hired for Ben's *entertainment*?" She spat the last word.

“Look, ma’am,” Gordon began. “You’ve got it all wrong. Ben and I—”

“Are just friends,” Ben interrupted, his tone urgent. “Old high school pals. *Nothing* more. He’s just letting me hang out until Bette sends the car later tonight to take me to the airport.”

So the beard didn’t even *know* she was a beard. The bastard had led her to believe he was straight. *Payback time, Ryder*, Dennis thought.

“Fine. Have it your way. I’ll find her myself.” She pushed past Gordon and Ben, sweeping into Gordon’s bedroom. All three men followed. She peered around the room, taking in the mussed bed and Ben’s clothing folded over a chair. She walked to the small closet and wrenched the door open, but there was barely room inside for the few items of clothing Gordon had hung there, much less a human being. She clacked into the bathroom and returned a moment later.

“Where is she? Don’t lie. I know you, Ben Ryder. Patchouli is your seduction scent. If there’s not a woman in here...” She trailed off, a look of incredulous realization coming into her eyes.

“Oh. My. Fucking. God,” she said, pausing between each word as if it were its own sentence. “*The Observer* and the *Hollywood Celebrity* printed rumors you were...but I didn’t believe...” She stared hard at Gordon now, and even turned around to take in Dennis. “A ménage,” she said in a horrified whisper. “It’s even worse than I thought...”

“Stop it!” Ben shouted. “I’m not gay! Jesus, Ariel. Don’t believe everything you read. You know better than that.” His tone shifted into the righteous indignation only really good liars can muster. “I can’t believe you have the gall to stand there and accuse me like that. We’ve had sex, for chrissake!”

“Only when I bully you into it,” Ariel shot back, while Ben flushed a deep red. “I figured it was just our schedules, timing, your exhaustive regime. But in the two months we’ve been dating, we’ve barely spent a night together.” Again she glared at Gordon and Dennis, and if looks could kill, they’d both have been dead on the floor, no possible hope of resuscitation.

“It’s them!” Ben waved wildly toward Gordon and Dennis. “They’re gay. Gordon’s doing this dinner for his lover,” he paused, apparently trying to come up with Dennis’ name. “That guy,” he finished lamely. “Right, Gordon? This dinner is for you and your gay lover.”

Gordon was staring at Ben, his mouth open, a stunned look on his face. “What the hell are you talking about?” he sputtered.

“Fuck this,” Ben snarled. Moving quickly, he grabbed his clothing from the chair and went into the bathroom, slamming the door behind him.

A moment later he emerged. Pointedly ignoring Gordon, Ben focused on Ariel. “Look, this is just some guy I used to know. He offered a place to hang out. Nothing, zero, nada is going on. End of story. I barely know the dude, for god’s sake.”

Ariel was tapping her foot angrily on the floor, her lips compressed into a thin, angry line. Ben held his arms out to the starlet, but she flounced out of the bedroom.

Ben followed, his voice pitching higher into a whine. "Babe, don't let these faggots ruin a good thing. Whatever you're thinking, babe, you got it all wrong. Is it my fault these fucking pansies are attracted to me? He's just one of those loser groupies who think, just because they once knew you when, that they have a shot in hell. Shit, it just goes with the territory, babe. You know that. Do I get all bent out of shape when guys send you roses and diamond bracelets?"

"I don't stay at their houses and sleep in their beds," Ariel retorted.

Gordon and Dennis had followed the pair into the living room. Dennis glanced at Gordon, wondering if he was as shocked and angered as Dennis felt by the dismissive, gay-bashing betrayal of Ben's denial. Dennis realized he was clenching his fists. If Gordon didn't react, he would.

Gordon's face was a study of emotion — moving within a few seconds from stunned pain to a gathering rage. In a quiet but furious voice Dennis had never heard him use, Gordon said, "Ben Ryder, you *bastard*. You lying son of a bitch." His voice rose on a tide of incredulous anger. "It's bad enough you lie about who and what you are. But how *dare* you smear the rest of us with your twisted hate and lies. I'm gay and proud of it, you sniveling little prick. Now get the hell out before this fucking *pansy* beats the living crap out of you."

Ben stared open-mouthed at Gordon, his face blanching. "You heard him," Dennis said, his own fury pulsing through him like a drug. "Get the fuck out before these two *faggots* grind your hypocritical pretty boy face into the ground." He clenched his fists, aching to smash that strong, square jaw and break a few of those bleached-white teeth. Both Gordon and he took a step forward at the same time, as if they'd practiced the move.

Ben and his girlfriend took a step backward. Ben turned abruptly, pushing the woman ahead of him as they stumbled out the door. Gordon reached the door in two strides and slammed it shut.

He slammed it so hard the autographed headshot of Ben that hung in the small alcove fell to the floor, the glass shattering in the frame. Gordon turned to stare at it a moment, his face mottled with rage. He kicked the frame aside.

"Gordon, calm down," Dennis began, but Gordon wasn't listening. He stomped into the bedroom and ripped at the posters on the wall, pulling them to shreds. He stormed through the living room to the kitchen.

Grabbing some oven mitts, opened the oven door and pulled out the pan that contained four small roasting quails. While Dennis watched in stunned silence, he flung it to the floor. The small carcasses careened over the linoleum, leaving a trail of melted fat sprinkled with seasonings in their wake. Grease splattered over Gordon's pants and shoes. "Jesus, Gordon, you're making a mess. Cut it out! The guy's not worth it."

"You are so fucking right," Gordon fumed. "He's not worth shit. That fucking rat bastard is not worth shit." He glared at the kitchen table, at the place settings and the

candles and the opened bottle of wine waiting beside the two glasses. With one sudden movement, he swiped at the contents, knocking the glasses and the wine to the floor.

The bottle shattered, the red liquid spilling over the floor. Droplets of wine splashed over Gordon's clothing. He just stood there, breathing hard, not seeming to notice the huge mess he'd made. Alarmed, Dennis moved toward him, taking him by the shoulders. "Gordon. Get a hold of yourself. You're acting crazy. I tell you, that asshole isn't worth it."

Gordon stared at him, not seeming to register for a moment, his face still contorted with anger. All at once, he slumped inward, dropping his head to his chest. "Fuck," he whispered. "Fuck."

Dennis was relieved to see some of the rage subsiding, though the defeat evident from Gordon's posture and expression were almost worse. "Come on, let's get out of this disaster zone."

Dennis put his arm around Gordon and steered him carefully through the debris that was all that remained of the carefully planned and clearly much labored over meal. He was relieved that Gordon allowed himself to be led. They moved toward the sofa, where Gordon slumped heavily down.

Dennis walked around the room, blowing out the candles as he went. Satisfied he'd got them all, he sat down beside Gordon, who had dropped his head into his hands.

He put his hand lightly on Gordon's back. Gordon lifted his head and stared straight ahead. "God, I'm an asshole. I can't believe what just went down. And to think, all these years..." Gordon trailed off, looking miserable.

"Ben Ryder is a stone cold bastard," Dennis asserted firmly. "That kind of guy takes advantage of people to get what he wants. He used you, and he's using that woman, too. Worse, he's a hypocrite and a liar."

Gordon said nothing for a while. When he spoke, his voice was so sad it nearly broke Dennis' heart. "He was my first, you know. He was so different back then. We promised each other we'd never lose touch. I never really got over him. I kept clinging to this dumb idea that one day we'd get back together. This time I thought...I thought it was a second chance..."

Dennis wondered at the power of self-deception, that Gordon could have actually imagined that pompous, self-absorbed diva would have wanted to start something with Gordon Flanders, who was, apparently for Ben, just some kid he'd known back in high school. Now wasn't the time to point this out, of course. Whether or not he'd fooled himself, Gordon's pain was real.

Dennis put his arm around Gordon, forcing himself to ignore his own longing for the man beside him, the man who needed him now as a friend. Gordon leaned into him and they sat that way for a long, sweet minute. It felt so good, their bodies close, Gordon's warm breath on Dennis' neck. He ached for more.

Dennis was the one to break away, aware if he didn't, he was going to pull Gordon's face to his and kiss him. Instead, he forced a laugh. "So, now that the quail is history, what's for dinner?"

Gordon looked sheepish. "I guess I kind of lost my mind for a while."

"Yeah," Dennis agreed. "Good thing you weren't having spaghetti and meatballs." He smiled and ran his finger over the wet wine stains on Gordon's shirt.

Gordon looked down at himself, shaking his head. "I'm a mess, huh?"

"Why don't you change your clothes, and I'll clean up a little in the kitchen. You got anything else to eat? I'm starving."

"Yeah, now that you mention it, so am I." Gordon thought a moment. "I picked up some salami and cheese while I was out hunting around for all his gourmet shit. Rye bread too. Sandwiches and beer sound good?"

"Sounds perfect," Dennis agreed.

He went into the kitchen while Gordon changed. He swept up and mopped the mess as best he could. Gordon joined him while he was in the process. "Holy shit, I sure can make a mess, huh?"

"You sure can." Dennis smiled, feeling happier than he had in a long time, despite what had happened. Gordon had replaced the stained shirt and grease-spattered slacks with a black T-shirt that showed off his broad shoulders and tapering waist. His jeans fit just right, showing off the sexy bulge at his crotch. Dennis looked down, not wanting Gordon to see the lust in his gaze.

"I'm doing a pretty lousy job at this," Dennis said, gesturing toward the still greasy kitchen floor. "Maybe we should eat in the living room."

"I agree. I'll have the maid clean this. As soon as I get one." Gordon stepped carefully across the floor, retrieving the food and beer from the refrigerator. Dennis grabbed the some plates, cutlery and napkins. They went into the living room and settled on the sofa. Gordon picked up the remote and flipped until he found a football game.

They made and ate their sandwiches, neither saying much as they watched TV. Gordon, Dennis noted, drank three beers in the time it took him to drink one.

Gordon set down his third empty bottle on the coffee table in front of him with a decided thunk. "That was weird, wasn't it? Listening to him deny he was gay, right in front of us. I felt, I don't know, I was pissed as hell but he still made me feel negated, erased somehow, while he was talking. What a prick he turned out to be."

Dennis ached for his friend. "A real creep, all right. At least now you know who he really is – not the hero you admired, but just a punk who plays the part on the screen."

Gordon nodded. "The whole day was surreal. I felt like this guy's personal valet or something. The stupid thing is, I wouldn't let anyone else treat me like that. I mean, you know me, right? I'm a Solitary Knight! I don't put up with shit from anybody. Yet when it came to Ben Ryder, I don't know..." He paused, staring off into the middle distance.

He stood abruptly. "I have some scotch in the cupboard. Want some? I need something stronger than beer."

"No thanks," Dennis replied. "I'll stick with beer."

"Suit yourself." Gordon moved toward the small bar beside the entertainment center and extracted a bottle of scotch from the cabinet, along with a glass. He poured several fingers into the glass and drank them in one grimacing gulp. Then he poured himself a refill.

"Whoa, take it easy there, my friend," Dennis cautioned.

"Why?" Gordon demanded. "It's Saturday night. We're off tomorrow. I want to get drunk. Blind drunk. Blot that motherfucker right out of my head." He took a drink from his glass, slopping some of it onto the front of his shirt, though he didn't seem to notice.

"Here I thought he was someone special, but it turns out I had the guy confused with the characters he plays. I thought he was a hero, someone to be admired and loved, instead of just some jerk I once knew, reading his lines."

He shook his head and snorted, a bit of the old fire coming back into his eyes. "In the hours he was at my place, when he wasn't asleep, all he did was talk about himself. He didn't ask me one thing about my life or anything about me. He barely seemed to remember our relationship in high school."

Gordon took another slug of the scotch. "I can't believe I've spent my entire adult life obsessed with a cardboard cutout of a person. You scratch the surface, and there's nothing there. He's just hair dye, capped teeth, a thousand hours at the gym, expensive organic foods and a good script."

"A case of the man being less than the sum of his parts. Way less, it turns out." Dennis shook his head. If it hadn't been for Gordon's feelings being trampled in the process, in retrospect the scene with the outraged girlfriend had been pretty hilarious. Hoping to lighten the mood, Dennis offered with a laugh, "The look on his face when he came out of your bedroom and there stood Ariel Paige, hands on her hips, demanding to know where the other woman was — it was priceless."

"Yeah." Gordon began to chuckle. "Just think if she knew the other woman was actually a guy in drag." They both began to laugh harder.

"Too bad she didn't track him down one night earlier. Imagine that diva walking in on that wild party. She would have fucking flipped. These celebrities like to pretend they're so liberal and accepting and cool, but not when it's their boyfriend getting the blow job," Dennis managed, between guffaws.

The laughter took on a life of its own, tumbling over itself, unstoppable like water released from a pent up dam. Each time one of them paused to draw a breath, the laughter tapering, the other would catch his eye and they would be off again, holding their stomachs, tears rolling down their cheeks.

The laughter finally subsided and they were both quiet for a while. Gordon poured himself another drink. It was clear to Dennis by the way he was pouring that he'd

already had way more than enough, but Dennis refrained from comment. Instead he found himself asking, "I always wondered. Why are you in that Solitary Knights club?"

Gordon shrugged. "I don't know. Steve Cohen got me into it. I met him at the gym I used to work out at. You remember him from the pub?"

"Yeah, I think so. The dude who was so deep in the closet he married a woman?"

"Yep, that's the one. Long story short, after he divorced, he used to pick up pretty boys who were more into his wallet than him. He got burned pretty bad by one guy in particular and swore off relationships. When I met Steve, he told me about the Pelham Bay Pub and invited me to a meeting. He uses it as a kind of recovery group. I just went because it sounded kind of fun."

Gordon's face became serious and he added, "It's not that I'm especially against falling in love, but I have to admit, my track record kind of sucks. I mean, I'm thirty-seven, and what do I have to show for it in the romance department? It's pretty fucking depressing to admit it, but I think I've spent the last twenty years waiting for Ben. Waiting for a guy who really only existed in my head. How pathetic is that?"

Dennis silently agreed. But was what he was doing any better? He'd never told Gordon of his feelings for him. He'd never had the nerve to come out and say it. The thought of Gordon's rejection, he supposed, was too much to risk. Better to stay quiet and live in his dreams.

"So what's your story?" Gordon asked. Dennis jerked his head up, suddenly irrationally certain Gordon had been privy to his thoughts. But Gordon's expression was open, a little goofy as a result of the liquor, no doubt. "You've never really told me much about your past. You refused to join the Knights, so I know you're a romantic at heart."

Dennis ducked his head, but didn't deny it. He shrugged.

Gordon persisted. "So what happened? Why is a forty-three-year-old good looking guy like yourself still single? You still holding out for Mr. Right?"

Dennis smiled, warmed by Gordon's words, even if he was only being polite. "I don't know about that good looking part. As to Mr. Right...well..." Dennis paused. How could he tell Gordon he was sitting next to Mr. Right? Suppressing a sigh, he looked down at his lap, plucking at a loose string along the seam of his jeans.

"Go on," Gordon prodded. He put his hand on Dennis thigh, which caused Dennis' cock to perk to immediate attention. Embarrassed, he angled his body away, though Gordon's hand remained where it was.

It took awhile to figure out what to say. Finally Dennis offered, "I don't know. I'm nothing special. I guess when you get down to it, I'm kind of shy. Takes me a long time to warm up to someone. Usually by the time I get there, they're already gone, emotionally speaking. I'm the one who sits on the sidelines, watching the action. I'm the friend, the sidekick, the one the guy calls to commiserate with when the one he really wanted has fucked him over. I guess you could say I'm a good listener, but not such a good talker – not when it comes to saying what I really want."

Which is you, you, you.

Dennis looked down, the words sticking in the back of his throat. How could he say that he wanted Gordon, had wanted him since forever? The thought of Gordon's dismissal, his refusal, would take away the last, secret hope that there could ever be anything between them.

"You know," Gordon said softly, "when I'm around you, I feel most like myself."

"What do you mean?" Dennis asked, glad the focus was off him.

"Well, not that I planned it this way, but I kind of put up a front for the world. You know, jaded tough guy, too savvy to fall in love, my idiocy over Ben notwithstanding."

His hand, which still rested on Dennis' thigh, squeezed and began to inch its way higher. Dennis took a breath, aware of his beating heart. Gordon was drunk. That's all this was. The guy was a little plastered.

Gordon continued, "When I'm with you, I don't know, it's just so much easier. I don't have to be anything except who I am. I've always just chalked that up to us being such good friends, but tonight... I don't know...you've got me wondering now. This whole thing has made me step back and think about what really matters – *who* really matters."

Gordon looked deep into Dennis' eyes and Dennis found he couldn't turn away. He felt something electric arcing between them like live current. Gordon leaned forward, closing his eyes, parting his lips, the invitation clear.

Dennis pulled back, though his lips were actually tingling with anticipation. "Ah, Gordon. I can't..."

"You can't kiss me?" Gordon opened his eyes. He moved his hand from Dennis' thigh to his crotch, resting it lightly over the bulge. "Why not? I want it. I want to kiss you. Come 'ere..." His voice was slurred.

"You're drunk." Despite himself, Dennis' cock swelled beneath Gordon's touch.

"So? Here." Gordon picked up the scotch bottle and waved it toward Dennis. "Have a few mouthfuls of this. Then you'll be drunk too." Dennis stared at Gordon, at his eyes hooded with lust and the promise in his sensual half-smile.

All at once Dennis grabbed the bottle and tipped it to his lips. Why not? Why the fuck not? The liquor burned going down, hitting his stomach and spreading rapidly to his limbs. "God damn you, Gordon Flanders," he said softly. "How the fuck can I say no?"

He closed his eyes against the look of triumph in Gordon's, needing the kiss too much to care. His hands and mouth seemed to have a mind of their own. He reached blindly for Gordon, catching him in a strong embrace as their lips met. Eagerly, almost desperately, he explored Gordon's mouth.

Gordon was stroking his back and shoulders as their tongues moved together. Greedily, Dennis ran his fingers through Gordon's thick, curling hair, at the same time

pulling him closer. He was aware of his heart banging against the curve of his ribs. Ah, god, this mattered too much, too much.

Dennis pulled back, trying to compose himself, to catch his breath. Gordon opened his eyes, his lips still parted from their kiss, gleaming in the soft light. His eyes were shining. He reached out, again putting his large hand over Dennis' crotch. Dennis was achingly hard, and Gordon's touch triggered a shudder of lust he couldn't control. He tried to fight it, but knew he was going under.

Gordon reached for the bottle again. He poured, completely missing the glass and dumping several ounces over his lap and splashing a little on Dennis as well. "Shit," he said, laughing. "I guess I'm thinker than I drunk I am." He offered a goofy grin.

Dennis stood abruptly, taking the bottle from Gordon's hand. This was not how it was going to happen with Gordon. If it happened at all. "You've had enough. You're a mess. I'm going to go—"

"No!" Gordon grabbed Dennis' arm. "Don't go. Please. Don't go. I'm sorry. I was fooling around. I'm not that drunk."

"Yeah, right," Dennis snapped.

"No, really. Look, I'll just jump in the shower. That'll sober me up. Two seconds. Don't go, please?" Gordon reached for Dennis' face, running his fingers down Dennis' cheek and pressing them lightly against his lips. "Wait for me, okay?" His voice was filled with promise.

Dennis sank back down against the sofa, feeling dizzy. Though he hadn't had as much to drink as Gordon, he'd had enough. What did Gordon want from him? Would he still want it if he were sober? If he hadn't just been denied and ignored by the big star he'd obsessed over all these years? Was Dennis just a distraction, no different than the liquor Gordon had consumed to drown his sorrows?

But that kiss...oh that kiss. It had been impossibly sweet, achingly right. He looked up at Gordon, who was watching him, his gaze so intense Dennis had to look away, his heart thumping, his body hot with longing. He felt himself losing the battle, knew he'd given in when their lips had first touched.

"Yeah, okay. I'll wait."

"Good man." Gordon's smile curved seductively beneath hooded eyes. As Gordon walked back into the bedroom, Dennis reached for the bottle of scotch and poured himself a stiff one.

~*~

Gordon stood beneath the shower head, letting the hot spray drum against his shoulders. He was drunk, yes, he was. But that didn't alter the fact that something had changed between Dennis and him.

Why hadn't he noticed before how good looking Dennis was? Had his obsession for Ben blinded him from the guy right in front of him all this time? Though Dennis was in his early forties, he still had a full head of gingery blond hair. Deep smile lines were

etched at the corners of his eyes. There were lines bracketing his mouth that indicated his age, but his jaw remained firm. But he understood now it wasn't those things that made Dennis appealing to him.

It was his character, his compassion, his humor, his loyalty. He was a real friend, the best friend, in fact, that Gordon had ever had. But tonight something was different. He looked...sexy. Very sexy. Closing his eyes, Gordon conjured the image of the man waiting in the other room and felt himself grow hard.

Dennis looked hot tonight in his dark blue button-down shirt, the sleeves rolled midway up his forearms. Gordon liked the corded muscle in Dennis' arms, the dark reddish blond hair on them adding to his masculinity. A curl of the same gingery hair had peeked at the opening of his shirt. Gordon imagined unbuttoning Dennis' shirt and pressing his hands against Dennis' chest as he pushed him back against the bed...

The kiss had taken Gordon by surprise. Not the act of it, but the intensity of his own reaction. He had wanted Dennis bad right then. He still wanted him. His cock was hard and he gripped it, stroking it with soapy fingers, his mind fixed on Dennis.

Was this just scotch and a desire to blot out the humiliation of Ben's final rejection? He honestly didn't think so, though he knew Dennis thought that was all it was. He hadn't realized until tonight that Dennis was into him. He'd never shown a hint of interest before. Or maybe Gordon had just been too blind and stupid to see it. But that kiss – something connected between them with that kiss. It wasn't just lust and loneliness, was it? Dennis had felt it too, he was sure of it. He'd seen it in his eyes, he'd felt it as surely as if Dennis had said it out loud. *I want you.*

And I want you, Dennis Wilson.

Rinsing quickly, he turned off the shower and reached for a towel. He heard Dennis call, "Look, Gordon. I think I should go now."

"No, don't go yet, Dennis. I'll be right out."

"Shit, Gordon. This isn't right – you've been through a rough experience and you're drunk on top of it. Look, we'll talk tomorrow and –"

Desperate to keep him there, Gordon said the first thing he could think of. "Help! Emergency!"

It worked. A second later, Dennis burst into the bathroom. "What?" he said breathlessly. "What happened?"

Gordon dropped his towel, revealing his erect shaft. "I realized if I don't fuck you, I'm going to die," he said, grinning. "Come here, you."

Dennis stood stock still, his eyes moving from Gordon's face, down his body and back up again. He didn't look amused, or even turned on. He looked angry. "You're drunk. You don't want to fuck *me*. You just want to get laid. Go to bed. Sleep it off. You'll be in your right mind in the morning and I'll just be the friend on the sidelines again, the one you can call to cry about what a bastard Ben Ryder is."

He turned on his heel and walked out, pulling the door shut hard behind him.

~*~

Jesus god, the man was gorgeous. Despite himself, despite his anger and humiliation, he'd instantly memorized Gordon's naked body, strong, smooth and dripping wet. While Dennis' mind railed at Gordon's cheap trick, his cock had responded with a vengeance, engorging instantly, his mouth watering, his knees aching to feel the tile in front of Gordon as he took the perfect shaft deep into his throat...

He wanted Gordon as much as he ever had – more.

But not like this.

No way was he going to be one more thing Gordon regretted in the morning. He stumbled through the bedroom into the living room and toward the foyer. Grabbing his coat, he yanked the front door open, slamming it behind him as he rushed out.

“Dennis! Stop! Come back!”

Dennis, already halfway down the hall, turned back, stunned to see Gordon standing there, completely naked, his hair dripping. “Gordon, what the hell...?”

“Don't go. I'm sorry, that was a stupid thing to do. I couldn't just let you walk out. Not now.”

“Gordon, get back into your apartment. You're drunk.” Dennis moved toward him, anxious lest any doors opened. Gordon didn't move. Dennis's body ached with longing and he had to steel himself to keep from pulling the naked man into his arms.

Gordon crossed his arms over his chest. “I'm not going back in unless you come with me. Please. Just hear me out. I have something to say.”

Dennis shook his head. “Gordon, you're behaving like an ass. You're going to feel like a fool in the morning.”

“I feel like a fool now! I'm not going to make the same mistake twice, Dennis. I've been blind to what's right in front of me.” Gordon's voice boomed down the hallway. The sound of a lock scraping in the door to an apartment down the hall made Dennis stiffen.

“Damn it, Gordon, you're going to get yourself arrested!” He heard the door behind him opening and lunged toward Gordon, pushing him by the shoulders and forcing him back into the apartment. As Gordon stumbled inside, Dennis closed the door and leaned against it, breathing hard.

“I don't know what the hell you think you're doing –” he began.

Gordon cut him off. “Hey, I got you back inside, so mission accomplished.” He grinned.

“Put something on, you're distracting me,” Dennis ordered, unable to keep his eyes from Gordon's naked body.

“That's okay, I like you distracted, as long as it's by me,” Gordon quipped, but he picked up the towel he'd dropped and wrapped it around his waist. He moved toward Dennis, reaching for his coat. “Please, just stay a while. I need to talk to you.” The drunken slur was gone from his voice and his tone was serious.

Against his better judgment, Dennis let Gordon take his coat and hang it again. He sat on the couch, waiting. He expected Gordon to sit beside him, but instead, Gordon pushed away the coffee table and knelt on the rug in front of Dennis.

He put his hands on Dennis knees. "Listen to me, Dennis Wilson. A lot of shit went down tonight. Yes, I've had too much to drink, but no, I'm not too drunk to focus on what matters. I made a big mistake. Fucking huge. I realized tonight that I've spent my entire adult life obsessing over some guy who barely knew I was alive."

He fixed his beautiful golden brown eyes on Dennis and Dennis felt his heart seize. "Dennis, I spent twenty years thinking I was in love with the wrong man. You're my best friend. You've always been there for me. You know me. You care about me. And I care about you. I haven't been very good about showing you that, and I'm sorry. I know we're taking a chance here. Yeah, we work together, and this could fuck things up. And yeah, I admit I don't have a crystal ball about how things will turn out between us, but damn it, Dennis. We owe it to ourselves, to each other, to find out.

"That is..." he paused, looking down. Slowly he looked back up, his expression humble, tentative. "...if you feel the same way. I know it was just one kiss but..."

Dennis stared at him. He realized at that moment that Gordon didn't know the extent of his feelings. He'd been quietly, achingly in love for so long he'd forgotten that he'd never articulated his feelings, not once, to the man now kneeling before him. So certain it was a lost cause, he'd never voiced his longing – he'd never made the slightest move in Gordon's direction.

Perhaps Gordon mistook his silence for rejection, because all at once his face crumpled and he sagged as he knelt. "Fuck," Gordon swore softly. "I'm sorry. I – I got it wrong, I guess. You've never said word one about wanting me and here I went, just assuming. That kiss...I thought it was something more. I thought..." He trailed off miserably.

"Gordon." Dennis reached for him, pulling him up onto the sofa beside him. "I do," he whispered, his voice ragged with compassion and longing. "I do want you. I've always wanted you."

They kissed, their mouths crashing together, not in a sweet exploration, but rather a desperate search for something nearly lost, for something essential. Dennis felt as if all his life had been tipping toward this one moment. At last, at last...

Gordon was tugging at Dennis' shirt as they kissed. He jerked hard against the fabric, ripping it open in a spray of buttons. He pulled at Dennis' fly and Dennis lifted his hips, allowing the other man to tug down his pants and underwear. They kissed as if the other provided the very breath they needed to stay alive. Their hands were flying, moving desperately over bared skin. Gordon's flesh was warm and damp, his touch urgent. He dipped his head, licking along Dennis' throat, lightly biting his neck, growling in his lust.

Dennis responded with the same ardent fury, his hands roaming the perfection of Gordon's body, perfect not because of physical beauty, though there was that, but because of Dennis' own passion.

"Jesus, I want you. I've always wanted you," he murmured, the words wrenched from his throat before he'd realized he'd spoken them aloud.

"I want you," Gordon said with such fervency Dennis had to believe him, even if it was only the scotch talking.

Gordon dropped from the sofa to the floor again, breathing hard as he pulled at the laces of Dennis' work boots. Once Dennis' shoes were off, he knelt up, taking Dennis' shaft in one hand. With his other, he dragged his thumb over its tip to capture the large drop of clear pre-cum. He lifted his thumb to his mouth, sucking it while he stared into Dennis' eyes.

If it was possible, Dennis' cock grew even harder at this sexy display. Gordon lowered his head, causing an explosion of intense pleasure to streak through Dennis as his mouth closed wet and hot over Dennis' cock. He sighed his pleasure, reaching for Gordon's head and entangling his fingers in the damp curls.

Was this really happening? Or was it just another in a series of wet dreams he'd had over the years, reaching blindly in the empty bed for the man he thought he would never have?

Gordon milked his cock while stroking his balls and Dennis groaned. This was real, all right, and he never wanted it to stop. Gordon bobbed up and down over him. "Oh, man," Dennis moaned. "Gordon. I'm gonna come...fuck...god..."

Gordon didn't pull back. He stayed locked on Dennis' shaft, his hands almost too rough as he gripped Dennis' balls. He lowered his head farther until Dennis' entire shaft was buried, the head pressing hard against the back of Gordon's hot, wet throat. Dennis shuddered, gripping Gordon's hair as he spasmed and spurt his seed.

He fell back against the sofa, trying to catch his breath. His heart was pounding, thick, heavy beats he could feel in his throat. Gordon sat back on his haunches, a wide grin on his face. His cock was fully erect, pointing like a divining rod toward Dennis.

"I want to fuck you, Dennis. Would that be okay?"

Dennis didn't respond immediately.

Two years. For two years he'd fantasized endlessly about this moment. He'd imagined himself lying flat, Gordon leaning up over him with a look of tenderness in his eyes as he eased himself inside, while lowering himself to kiss Dennis' lips, to whisper how much he wanted this. He'd imagined himself behind Gordon, grabbing his hips, slamming inside, their bodies slick with sweat, panting together as they moved in that timeless, syncopated dance, joined and for that moment one body, one entity, no longer lonely or alone. And after, the holding, the sweetness, the murmured whispers of love.

Of love...

I want to fuck you, Dennis.

He gazed at the naked man. Gordon was standing now, the smile still on his face, the invitation clear in his eyes and body language. He was stroking his cock, which was thick and veined, curving in a slight arc. Gordon wanted to fuck him. That was a good thing, right? No, it wasn't love, but it was lust and desire, and even if it was misplaced, even if Gordon was using Dennis to drown his own disappointment and humiliation from Ben's treatment, it was more than Dennis could ever have hoped for.

He held out his hand, allowing Gordon to hoist him up and they moved, arm in arm, to the bedroom.

~*~

Gordon drifted in that twilight place between dreams and consciousness. His body was warm, cocooned and completely relaxed. He realized he was smiling. A sense of wellbeing he hadn't experienced in years pervaded his being.

He felt like he'd sloughed something off, peeled it away, let it go. It was, he realized, his lifelong obsession with the wrong man. With a man who didn't exist, except in his fantasies. He felt free. He felt released. He was...he struggled to define the feeling...happy.

He opened his eyes, waiting for the blinding headache of a hangover to pierce his brain like an ice pick. He'd had too much to drink last night, no question about that. Yet, oddly, there was no pain. He recalled now Dennis' bringing him aspirin and a glass of cool water in the night and smiled. Good old Dennis.

He lay still a while, bathed in the golden pink glow of a barely risen sun, a sense of wonderment pervading him. He turned toward Dennis, who was lying on his back, eyes closed, lips lightly parted, one arm flung over his head. The covers had slipped to his waist, and Gordon pulled them up to cover his torso. An unexpected feeling of tenderness washed over him as he gazed at the sleeping man.

He wasn't used to having anyone else in his bed, not in the morning. His usual M.O. was to have sex with them at their place and then hit the road. He liked his solitude, his privacy, or so he told himself. The rare times he did bring a man home and allow him to stay, there was invariably alcohol involved, and lots of it. In the morning, he would turn with vague resentment toward the person now invading his space and wish that he could just zap him back to where he came from.

He felt no resentment now, however. What did he feel? Tenderness, desire, excitement, a sense of something new and wondrous. He reached toward Dennis, drawing a line along his sandpapery jaw with the tip of his finger. He wanted to kiss him, but at the same time, he didn't want to disturb him. Dennis' hair was tousled and his face was relaxed, making him look younger than when awake. At Gordon's touch, a half smile flickered over Dennis' mouth, and slowly he opened his eyes.

"Hi," he said, turning unfocused eyes in Gordon's direction.

"Hey," Gordon replied. "Sleep good?"

"I'm still sleeping," Dennis answered, and yawned. He rolled away from Gordon, who rolled with him, tucking his body along Dennis'. They lay that way a while and Gordon began to drift again into the peaceful space between sleep and consciousness. His cock, he realized, was hard, and he nudged it against Dennis' ass. Dennis pushed back gently, and Gordon realized he was awake.

"I want you," Gordon whispered against Dennis' neck.

Dennis rolled onto his back and Gordon's cock twitched with anticipation. But Dennis didn't reach for him. He didn't echo Gordon's words. Instead he lay still. Gordon could feel the tension radiating from Dennis' body. He was biting his lower lip and staring at the ceiling.

"What? What is it, Dennis? Is something wrong?"

Dennis closed his eyes, saying nothing for so long that for a moment Gordon thought he'd fallen back asleep. Finally he opened his eyes and turned his gaze to Gordon. He looked so sad, which made no sense, not when Gordon felt so happy.

"Talk to me, please. What's going on in that head of yours?" Gordon smiled, trying to ignore the sense of worry, the barely articulated fear that this moment of hard won happiness wouldn't last.

"Ah, Gordon." Dennis shook his head, offering a small, sad smile.

Gordon barked a nervous laugh. "What? You regret what happened last night? You're thinking that was just a one-night-stand, a meaningless fuck brought on by too much booze and an effort to drown my sorrows? Or do I have it all wrong, and you were just offering a mercy fuck because I was so messed up, and now you wish to hell you could just disappear?"

Dennis lifted his hand and put two fingers over Gordon's lips. "Shh, stop it. Hush. I don't exactly know what I think, Gordon, but not any of that. Last night was... amazing. It was wonderful. If there was mercy involved, it wasn't on my side, I assure you. But Gordon," Dennis turned toward him, hoisting himself up on one elbow, "I'm too old to mess around anymore. I'm going to level with you. I'm going to put myself out there so you understand what you're dealing with here.

"I have feelings for you. That's putting it mildly. I've..." he paused and swallowed. "I've been in love with you almost since we first met." He shook his head, clearly embarrassed but determined. "I know, I know." He held up a hand. "That's nuts, right? We worked together, you were very clear from the outset about your boundaries, and besides, I'm nothing special, don't think I don't know it."

"You *are* special," Gordon interrupted. "You're the most special guy I ever met. I can't believe I was so fucking blind to that. I can't believe you were right there in front of me all this time, and I just plain wasn't looking."

Dennis shook his head. "You say that now, and it makes me feel good to hear it, believe me. But I'm not a kid, Gordon. We had sex last night. Great sex, despite how drunk you were." He smiled and Gordon offered a sheepish smile in return. "But, as much as I enjoyed it, it's not enough for me, Gordon. I'm forty-three. I'm ready for

something serious. Something that matters. Something that's real. I'm not willing to go back to work on Monday and pretend this never happened. Nor do I want a fuck buddy. I want a real relationship with someone. And as much as I care for you, no offense, but I'm not sure you're capable of that."

"And you think you are?" Gordon blurted, hurt at this assessment.

"I think I'm ready to try. That's what's changed for me. For the last couple of years I realize I've been in a kind of holding pattern, just drifting through my life, dating occasionally, jerking off alone to fantasies of you, not really focused on anything except getting by.

"Something changed last night. Not my feelings for you. If anything, they're stronger. Our physical connection was incredible—it was even better than in my fantasies. But I'm ready for more. I don't plan to spend the rest of my life watching from the sidelines anymore. I'm ready to be a star player. I'm ready to seek someone not only to love, but who loves me in return. And not just because I'm handy, good old Dennis, the reliable pal turned lover when it suits you."

"Dennis, no," Gordon entreated. "You've got it all wrong. If this had happened last month or even two days ago, I could see where you're coming from, maybe even agree in a way." He put his hand on Dennis' arm. "But things have changed. *I've* changed. The guy I thought I wanted turned out to be a total asshole, while the guy I now realize I want is right here beside me."

"You say that now, but—"

"Yes, I say that now. Listen to me," Gordon said earnestly. "I'm nearly forty myself. I'm done with that starry-eyed bullshit. I've been with a lot of guys while I was waiting for Ben Ryder to wake up." He gave a mirthless laugh. "I want something real too. I'm done fooling myself, Dennis. I want a real man, a good friend, a lover I respect and admire. You're that guy, Dennis. You're the one I want."

He pulled Dennis into his arms, silently willing him to believe him, to understand how much he meant it. But was it too little, too late? Dennis allowed himself to be held, and slowly he brought his own arms around Gordon.

"I want to believe you," he whispered against Gordon's neck. "You have no idea how much." He pulled back to look into Gordon's face, as if searching for something there. "But face reality, Gordon. You're a Solitary Knight. You guys make it a life's mission to stay unattached. You were blown off last night by the supposed love of your life, and I'm your rebound."

"No!" Gordon shouted. He swallowed and took a deep breath. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to shout at you. But man, you've got it all wrong. And speaking of the Knights, I think the group might have outlived its usefulness. Things are starting to happen, weird stuff. Remember Eric Moore? He's got this new guy, or rather an old guy, a guy he went to college with. I saw them at the pub the other night and something serious is going on there. Apparently Eric took Drew at his word and went back to find the one that got away.

"Then there's Ryan. Ryan Kennedy? He's hooked up with his old college professor, a dude he apparently lusted after in his youth, when the age gap was way more significant than it is now." He shook his head as he thought about it. "I don't know, something about Drew's challenge shook everyone up. There's more stuff going on with some of the other guys too, I'm sure of it.

"Jack Harris, the most jaded of the bunch, has had some kind of epiphany. I don't know what else to call it. The dude has changed. Ever since I bandaged up his hand, he's, I don't know, calmer. That angry edge he always used to have is gone. I asked him what's up when we played darts last week, but he just smiled and shook his head. I'd be willing to bet whatever it is, there's a guy involved." Gordon laughed. "Shit, who knows if any of these guys will even show up at the next meeting. Maybe we're going to have to reconsider the mission of the group. Change our names to the United Knights or something."

Dennis laughed and Gordon's heart warmed. He could hardly believe himself how much this mattered. "Listen, Dennis. I don't pretend to have all the answers. I don't know if you and me are going to ride off into the sunset and live happily ever after. All I know is, I feel *right* around you. I feel happy. I want something real with you. I don't want a one night thing. I'm not on the rebound from that dickhead, because there's nothing to rebound from. He was a ghost of a dream, and maybe a way to keep my distance from other people." This silenced Gordon for a moment, as he realized just how true this was.

And yet now, somehow, that need he'd always felt to keep guys at arm's length no longer seemed to apply. "Last night with you changed all that," Gordon said emphatically. "I don't want to keep my distance with you. I want to get as close as you'll let me. Please. Give me a chance. That's all I'm asking. Let me in."

Dennis' features softened and he reached for Gordon. Their lips touched and they pressed their bodies against each other, cocks rising, hands moving over warm flesh. Gordon reached for Dennis' shaft and was pleased to feel how hard it was. "You want me, huh?" Gordon murmured, happiness zipping alongside the lust rising in his blood. "You want to fuck me?"

"No," Dennis replied, his voice husky. "I don't want to fuck you. I want to make love to you."

Gordon smiled. "Thank you," he whispered. Dennis reached for a condom, rolling it over his erect shaft and adding some lube. Last night it had been Gordon on top. He'd taken Dennis from behind, probably too fast, probably too rough, because he'd been drunk and over-excited. He was ashamed to admit he barely remembered the actual act, though he remembered the explosive orgasm that knocked him into a stupor.

Gordon started to shift, to rise to his hands and knees, but Dennis stopped him. "No, stay like you are, on your back. Just scoot down a little." Gordon obeyed, watching while Dennis maneuvered on the bed until he was kneeling on his haunches in front of Gordon. Gently he guided Gordon by the hips, pulling his legs over his own thighs until Gordon was straddling them, his knees on either side of Dennis' body.

Gordon lay against the pillows, his ass lifted by his position, the cheeks spread. He could feel Dennis' cock beneath him, hard and hot, nestled at the crevice between his ass cheeks. Gordon's cock strained with need, his balls tight. "I want you," he said in a low voice. "Now."

Dennis shook his head, a small smile curving his lips. "Slow down. We have time." Dennis moved one hand lightly over Gordon's erect shaft, pressing the palm of his other hand against Gordon's chest. "Your heart's beating so fast," Dennis murmured. He was staring into Gordon's eyes, his pupils dilated.

His cheeks were covered with a gingery stubble. Without thinking what he was doing, Gordon reached for his face, stroking along Dennis' jaw line. Dennis closed his eyes a moment, wincing.

"You okay?" Gordon asked, confused.

Dennis opened his eyes and smiled, though a flicker of pain remained in his eyes. "Yeah. I'm okay. It's just...this matters so much to me, Gordon. I've dreamed of this moment a hundred times. A thousand times. I never thought it would actually happen."

Gordon nodded, wishing there was a way to reclaim the time lost. "I can't believe I let two years get away from us before I finally figured out my own head. I don't want to waste another second. Please...make love to me, Dennis. Show me how it's done."

Dennis stared down at him, a sudden flash of pity mingling with the raw desire. Gordon closed his eyes, shame and regret overtaking him. He realized in that moment he'd never had a man make love to him. He'd had plenty of sex – he'd fucked and been fucked in every possible position with any number of guys, but this was the first time in his nearly forty years that he truly understood the concept of making love. Of being in love, not just with a fantasy, but with a real flesh-and-blood guy, as fallible and imperfect as himself.

The shame was replaced by gratitude as he opened his eyes to see Dennis gazing at him with a look of such unabashed tenderness it took his breath away. "We'll show each other how it's done," Dennis whispered.

He reached beneath Gordon with one hand, slipping a lubricated finger gently into Gordon's ass. It felt good, and Gordon pressed against the digit. Dennis added a second finger, easing open the entrance, preparing it for his cock. "Yes," Gordon sighed, aching for what was to come. He closed his eyes, savoring the hard press of Dennis' cock against his opening.

"Open your eyes." There was a command in Dennis' tone Gordon had never heard before. He obeyed. "Keep them open if you can," Dennis added. "I want to look into your eyes while I make love to you."

Holding Gordon's hips, Dennis carefully eased the head of his cock inside. "Yeah," Gordon encouraged. Dennis moved slowly, carefully, his eyes fixed on Gordon's. Gordon found himself literally shaking with desire as Dennis pushed up inside the passage, filling him completely.

Gordon's cock was rock hard against his stomach. Dennis curled his fingers around it, stroking as he began to move his hips in a slow, sensuous thrust. Gordon's eyes slid shut again and he sighed with pleasure.

"Look at me." Dennis urged softly. Gordon forced himself to open his eyes. Focusing on Dennis' face, he found himself holding his breath, captivated. Dennis' eyes seemed to be lit from within, as if a fire raged within him, kept tamped down only by sheer force of will. Dennis stared into his eyes, and Gordon had the oddest feeling Dennis was seeing past all the walls he had erected over the years, staring straight into his soul.

The words were pulled from him before he knew he was speaking. "Dennis, I've been waiting and I didn't know..."

"I understand. I've been waiting too." Dennis stroked Gordon's cheek. His hand moved down, gripping Gordon's shoulder, as he thrust upward inside him, dragging a moan of pleasure from Gordon's lips.

They began to move together, the friction perfect, heating Gordon's blood until he was burning with it. Dennis rocked inside him, his fingers digging into Gordon's shoulder muscle, his other hand pumping Gordon's cock.

"Oh, god...oh..." Gordon heard his own panting and was aware of his writhing body. He could feel his climax rising, swooping, taking possession of him. He was powerless to stop it, even if he'd wanted to. He heard a guttural moan and realized he himself was the source of the primal sound.

"Open your eyes while you come for me," Dennis whispered throatily. Gordon forced his eyelids open, trying to focus on Dennis, trying to give him what he wanted. He stared unseeing at the man looming over him, overtaken by the thrust of Dennis' cock deep inside, and by Dennis' hand stroking him with unerring skill.

"Oh, god," he cried. "Dennis...Dennis...Dennis..." He couldn't seem to stop himself from repeating Dennis' name over and over with each move of Dennis' pelvis and hand. But it wasn't the hand or even the cock that were sending him fast over the edge. It was the man himself – it was Dennis.

"Dennis...Dennis..." Gordon felt the streams of cum spurting through his shaft in a series of seismic eruptions. At the same time, Dennis shuddered, gasping as he climaxed deep inside Gordon, his eyes still fixed on Gordon's.

He held his position for several long moments as Gordon watched him struggle to recover himself. Finally the fire that had raged in his eyes was banked, and he smiled down at Gordon, shaking his head as if he couldn't believe what had just happened between them.

Gordon held out his arms, his body suddenly aching to feel the heavy warmth of his lover. Dennis gently disengaged and lowered himself over Gordon. Gordon could feel Dennis' heart beating like a drum.

He held Dennis close, stroking his back, a new feeling, as tenuous as the dawn just barely peeking over the edge of the horizon. He let the feeling fill him, let it warm him while he pondered what it might be.

All the years of misplaced infatuation, masquerading as love, seemed to fall away. The man lying now in his arms was the one he'd really been waiting for, though until now he'd hadn't known it.

They held each other a long time, until their hearts and breathing slowed to normal, and then slower still as they drifted into a quiet, peaceful place. Dennis eventually rolled off him, and Gordon let him go. Dennis lay on his back, turning with a sleepy smile toward Gordon.

Gordon spoke into the easy silence. "I never got it before. I never understood what they meant by making love. I get it now." He stared at the man lying beside him and realized the lingering ache over Ben's betrayal had shrunk to insignificance. The man he wanted was beside him. He wanted to be with Dennis. Not just as friends or even lovers. He wanted more. He wanted a life with this man.

But what happened next? Where did they go from here? "I have no fucking clue what we do next," he said.

Dennis laughed. "We take our time. We recognize this is new for us both. Like you said before, we don't have to pretend we have all the answers. But I think we both agree we want to start the journey, and we want to take it together."

Dennis sat up, resting his head against the pillows piled at the headboard. He took Gordon's hand in both of his. "Here's my promise to you, Gordon. I will keep my heart and mind open. I'm ready for something real with you. For something that lasts. If you want that too, that's the first step."

Gordon nodded, nearly overwhelmed with quiet joy. His life had been opened suddenly, like a book that hadn't been read for so long, he'd forgotten its story. What would the guys down at the pub say when he showed up with Dennis?

Suddenly he recalled Jack's words when they'd been bantering about the Knights. *Dennis is so into you it isn't even funny.* Gordon reached for Dennis, stroking his arm.

"What?" Dennis said. "You look upset."

"Nothing. It's just...it's just you've been here all along and I couldn't see it."

Dennis smiled. Gordon began to laugh.

"What's funny?" Dennis asked, laughing too.

"The Knights. I was just thinking about the guys down at the pub. Remember, Eric bringing his new guy around, and Ryan reunited with his old flame, and even Jack." He laughed again. "I have a feeling Marcos Savakis has something to do with that serene smile on Jack's face, though Jack swears he can't stand the guy."

He thought about the men sitting around the table at the pub, raising their mugs as they swore never to get involved. He began to chuckle again. "Let's go together to the meeting next time, Dennis."

“What? I thought you’d quit that silly club. Aren’t you and I supposed to ride off into the sunset now?” Dennis’ eyes were dancing.

“Yeah, but think what a hoot it will be when they see you joining us for the first time at the table. They’ll probably all be thinking you’ve finally come around to the dark side.” He laughed. “When in fact it’s me who’s finally seen the light.” His laughter quieted, though his smile remained.

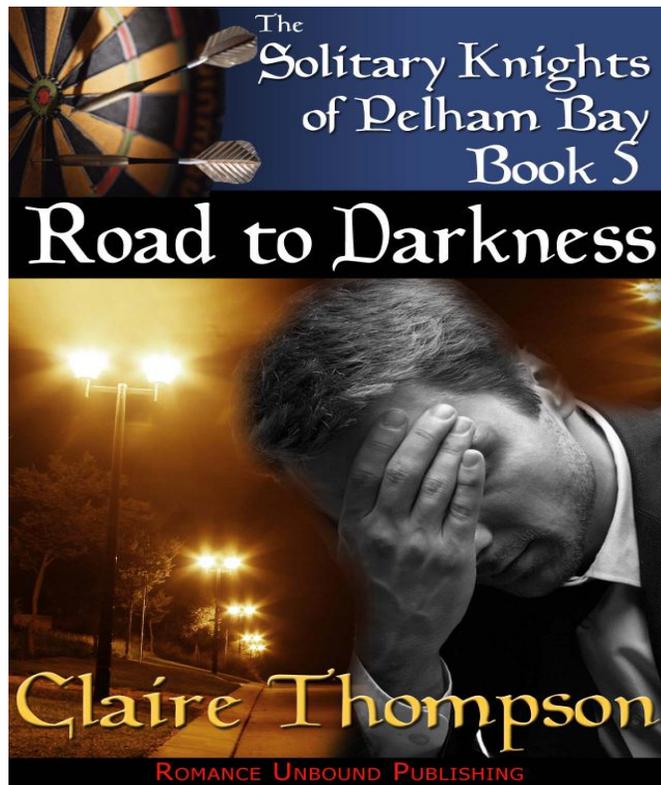
“Thank you, Dennis,” he said softly.

“For what?”

“For sticking with me. You hung in there all this time while I was chasing a fantasy.”

“Hey, don’t thank me. You’re the one who finally let the stardust fall from your eyes.” Dennis grinned.

“Yeah, that’s about right.” Gordon laughed but then quickly sobered. “I finally figured it out—the star that I want is right here.” Reaching for Dennis, he took him into his arms.



Coming Soon:

Bitter over the loss of love and perceived betrayal by Jules, Steve has spent the last ten years drowning his sorrows with the pretty boys and casual sex of the New York City gay nightlife scene. When he is faced with the prospect of looking up the one that got away, the last thing Steve expects to find is that he's too late.

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