

A Novel by J.P. Bowie

## A PORTRAIT OF PHILLIP

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iUniverse, Inc. New York Lincoln Shanghai

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This book is dedicated to my own Phil
—who is very much alive.
—And to my friends who gave me
encouragement and support.
My thanks, J.P.

The darkness that surrounded him was almost palpable. It closed in around him, it enfolded him, and yet he was not afraid, for there was a feeling of comfort in this dark, warm blanket that swirled and eddied about him.

At times, he would tentatively reach out into the blackness hoping to touch something or someone, but there was nothing. Other times, he tried to call out, but he was unable to utter a sound.

Was this death...this strange limbo in which he now found himself?

Or was it just a dream from which he would soon awaken? Strangely, he felt as if he had just awakened from a long slumber. Why could he not remember what had brought him here? He felt as if he had floated in this darkness for a long time, but just how long he had no way of knowing. Had it been a day, a week? Longer than that?

His mind was confused, but yes, he thought, he was undoubtedly dreaming, for nowhere in reality could a place like this exist. It had no form, no walls, no borders of any kind. He could not tell if he floated of his own volition or if something supported him.

It was warm in the darkness and it induced a feeling of drowsiness, but now he fought to stay awake. He had to find out just where he was and how he had got here. The good thing about a dream is that he would most certainly soon wake up, and he would tell Phillip all about this, and they would laugh at how ridiculous dreams could be.

A feeling of incredible tiredness began to steal over him. He was falling asleep again...but how could he fall asleep inside a dream? In vain, he struggled against the darkness as it gathered even closer around him.

Washing over him like black waves in a sluggish sea, it carried him away once more into oblivion...



## Laguna Beach, California

Andrew Connor stretched out contentedly in the new king size bed he and his partner David Angelo had just purchased the week before. He rolled over and put his arm around the still sleeping David.

Andrew could not remember when he had been happier. He and David had been living in their town home in Laguna Beach for only a couple of months. The previous three years they had rented rooms from their friend, Rob Braden—a situation that had become almost comically tense in the last year or so ever since Rob had finally decided to marry Maggie, his long-suffering fiancée of five years. Maggie really did not want to throw Andrew and David out; she merely wanted Rob all to herself after waiting so long for him to finally commit. They could not really blame her for that.

Andrew smiled, remembering the look on Maggie's face when they announced that the purchase of their town house had, at last, been approved.

"She didn't know whether to say 'Congratulations' or 'Good Riddance'!" David had laughed afterwards. Of course, they had remained good friends and Rob and Maggie had been over the night before, bearing house warming gifts of plants and good wine.

Rob had introduced Andrew and David to each other almost four years earlier. At the time, David was a struggling architectural student living, out of financial necessity with his parents in San Clemente, and Andrew had only recently become a licensed physical therapist.

Andrew's parents lived in Fresno and so he roomed with an old college friend in a tiny condo in Tustin. David and he were grateful then, when Rob mentioned he had a couple of rooms he was going to let out in his rambling old house, in Newport Beach.

An elderly great aunt of his had died and left her entire estate to Rob, the only relative that had ever bothered to visit her in her dotage. Everyone thought Rob would sell the place but he had fond childhood memories of the house and had decided to move in, despite the fact it was far too big for one person.

"I'd rather have you guys there. I know you won't trash the place when I'm not around." That was Rob's way of inviting David and Andrew to move in.

The arrangement had worked well, for close to three years.

David had known Rob since grade school and his friend had not been fazed at all when he came out to him, early in their friendship. Rob had made sure none of the other kids made it difficult for his buddy and had even embarrassed him, several times, by trying to "fix him up" with guys Rob suspected of also being gay.

Rob was a big guy with a mellow easy-going personality which, along with his "little boy lost looks" that David swore he cultivated unashamedly, made him a magnet for women eager to mother him—and marry him. He was also a party animal and it was at one of his impromptu get-togethers to celebrate his recent recovery from a bad cycling accident that he had made a point of 'fixing up' Andrew and David.

When Andrew arrived, looking tan and handsome in a white polo shirt and khaki shorts, Rob immediately dragged him over to where David stood talking to Maggie. She had rolled her eyes as Rob, all smiles and slightly tipsy, introduced Andrew as "The guy with the great hands I told you about."

"I hope he told you they were being used in the name of therapy," Andrew had laughed, as he and David shook hands.

"Yeah, he told me you worked wonders after the accident. And by the way, he's right..." David had smiled into his eyes, "You *do* have great hands."

They had found a private spot away from the other guests and talked for hours. Andrew could immediately feel the allure of David's easy charm and found himself smiling constantly throughout their conversation. There was no doubt David was using all of that considerable charm on him and he fell for it hook, line and sinker.

As the party wound down and Andrew said he had to go due to an early morning appointment, David had kissed him gently on the lips and proposed a date for the next evening. They were inseparable from that time on.

They took a weekend trip to Mexico together and after the first time they made love, David asked Andrew to move in with him. Despite the fact neither one had a lot of money, they planned on getting their own apartment as quickly as possible.

When Rob offered them his home, it had seemed like the icing on the cake, particularly as Rob's job as a special events coordinator took him out of town a lot and they had the place to themselves most of the time. Now that they had their own home, things were even better.

Andrew stretched happily again and contemplated getting out of bed. He had a big day ahead of him with a new patient at the hospital, and a meeting with the patient's mother prior to the first session.

Eve Brandon had called him two days earlier saying she had need of a physical therapist for her son Peter, and that Dr. Hamilton had recommended Andrew to her at the hospital. The regular therapist had taken off suddenly for a new position out of state, and the hospital staff had been filling in until she found a replacement. Andrew had called Ed Hamilton to thank him for the referral and the doctor had apprised him of the situation.

"It's a really sad case," Hamilton had told him. "The boy's been in an extremely deep coma for the last three years. There's very little possibility of anything changing really, but Eve—Mrs. Brandon, clings to the hope that eventually he'll wake up. Initially, we set up a regimen of passive exercise and massage to prevent the muscles from atrophying. She's insisted on keeping it going through the years, despite the fact that there's little chance of recovery."

"What caused the coma?"

"He was beaten half to death by 'persons unknown' as the police put it. They never did find out who did it. It was an obvious hatecrime. The police report stated that there was no sign that their attackers intended to rob them."

"Them?"

"Yes, Peter's friend Phillip was attacked too. I'm afraid he didn't make it. He was dead at the scene."

"Jesus..." Andrew drew in a sharp breath as he recognized this part of the story. "Wait a minute—what did you say the last name was?"

"Brandon, Peter Brandon."

"Yeah, I remember reading about this. They never did find the bastards who attacked them, did they?"

"No...and it was extremely hard on Eve. Her husband, Paul, had died of a heart attack a little more than a year before this incident and she had moved in with Peter and Phillip at their insistence. Terrible really, Peter was an extremely promising artist; already had a couple of exhibitions in town and there was word of some New York dealers interested in his work. Eve won't part with any of it now, though she's had many offers."

"And there's no hope at all he may wake up eventually?"

"I'm afraid not. It's a miracle he's still alive really. Anyway Andrew, she's looking forward to meeting you. I've told her you're just the man for the job."

Andrew frowned as he remembered the conversation with Dr. Hamilton. What a god-awful thing to happen. He suddenly felt guilty about his earlier euphoria. Beside him, David stirred and slipped an arm around him.

"Good morning, my pretty," he murmured. "But tell me—where's my coffee?"

Andrew smiled, his good humor returning. He hugged David tightly, ignoring the feigned protests from under the sheet.

"Oh, thank God for you," he whispered. All thoughts of getting out of bed were forgotten for the moment.

Later, over some hastily prepared coffee David asked, "So what's on your agenda, this fine day?"

Andrew looked fondly at his partner, never tired of taking in the dark good looks bestowed on him by his Italian heritage. As always, Andrew wished they could spend much more time together, but he knew they both had a busy schedule ahead of them. David's job in a high-powered architect's office in Newport Beach demanded he worked long hours along with some weekends, but the money was good and he was highly thought of by the owners of the company.

"I have my first appointment with that coma patient I told you about—Peter Brandon. You know, the one who was beaten up in LA about three years ago? I have to meet his mother first. I guess she feels it necessary to explain what she expects, though Ed Hamilton filled me in on the history. He was one of the doctors initially on the case."

"Nice of Ed to recommend you."

"Yes, it was. Apparently, he liked the work I did at the children's clinic, after that school bus accident."

Andrew was referring to the after-care he had given to several school children after their bus had careened off the road into a ditch, on the Laguna Canyon Road. None of the children had been seriously hurt, but some had required therapy for a time afterwards.

David smiled at him, then said reluctantly, "Okay kiddo, got to go." He rose and picked up his briefcase. "See you around seven o'clock..." He gave Andrew a lingering kiss, then dashed out the door with a cheerful "Bye!"

With some time to spare before his meeting with Mrs. Brandon, Andrew cleaned up in the kitchen, then wandered into the large sunny living room they had fallen in love with when they first saw their new home. Located on a sloping vacant lot two blocks east of Pacific Coast Highway, and high enough to have an ocean view over the roof tops below, the townhouse was one of only six units built, terrace style. The builder had gone bankrupt and the units had been placed on the auction block.

David had heard about them through one of the senior partners at the office and immediately he and Andrew had put in a bid. To their amazement, they were successful in securing the exact unit they wanted. It had stretched their joint finances but they felt it was worth it. David's parents had given them some starter furniture until they were in a position to furnish it to their own taste.

Andrew walked out onto the deck, inhaling the fresh scent of jasmine that grew in abundance nearby. Leaning on the deck railing, he looked out across the carefully maintained trees that lined the street below to the blue of the ocean beyond. He lifted his face to the warmth of the morning sun and considered himself a lucky man.

\* \* \*

Two hours later, he pulled up outside St Margaret's Hospital.

Checking at the registrar's desk he was told that Peter Brandon was in Room 333, and that an appointment was necessary for visiting. Andrew assured the attendant that he was expected and showed his business card. As he waited, an attractive older woman approached the desk.

"Andrew Connor?" She held out her hand. "I'm Eve Brandon." "Oh, Mrs. Brandon...a pleasure."

"Please call me Eve...Andrew." She smiled and took Andrew's arm guiding him towards the elevators. "I expect Ed filled you in on some of the details of my son's condition?"

"Yes he did." Andrew felt himself warming to the woman immediately. "I'm so sorry there seems to be no improvement."

Eve gave him an almost defiant look. "Oh, but there will be one day. They all tell me there's no hope, but I'm convinced Peter is in there trying to come back to us."

Andrew glanced at the woman standing next to him in the elevator. She was chicly dressed in a taupe colored pantsuit and a delicate pink blouse open at the neck, revealing a gold chain. A pair of small gold earrings was the only other jewelry she wore, apart from a gold wedding band. Her light blond hair, natural as far as Andrew could tell, was cut short and framed a face that in her youth must have been extremely pretty. Now in her early fifties, she was still attractive, though fine lines creased the corners of her eyes and mouth.

She looks very tired, Andrew thought, trying not to stare at her too intently.

Almost as if she had read his thoughts, she said suddenly, "I didn't sleep too well last night. I kept dreaming Peter had come out of his coma, and there was no one there to help him. Silly of me, of course. He has round-the-clock attention when I'm not there." She paused outside a door marked Room 333. "Here we are."

Andrew pushed the door open for her and they went in together.

Peter Brandon lay on his hospital bed in the small room that had been his prison for the past three years. Andrew looked down at the young man, feeling a tug of emotion in his chest as Eve leaned over to kiss the cheek of her unconscious son and whispered,

"Good morning, my darling boy."

The duty nurse, who had just finished bathing the patient, shot her a look of sympathy, then excused herself.

After thanking the nurse, Eve turned back to her comatose son. "Peter, this is Andrew. He's your new therapist come to make you feel better." She looked at Andrew without apology. "I know it must sound loony, but I talk to him all the time. I think there must be some truth in the theory that people in a coma can hear you sometimes. I'm sure it's a comfort to them to hear a familiar voice."

Andrew had heard that theory also and while there was no positive proof he could see no harm in it. It obviously brought her some comfort. He looked around at the room, set up specifically to care for a coma patient. The bed could be turned over and with the use of restraints, the patient would hang face down periodically, so that the pressure on his spine could be released and bedsores kept to a minimum. An IV drip standing by the bed kept the life giving mixture of glucose and proteins flowing into his veins and a monitor, measuring his heartbeat beeped occasionally, but those apart, he was not hooked up to any other machine.

Eve said, "He's been able to breathe by himself for almost two years now. When they took him off the ventilator, I truly believed he would wake up at any time. I still have to believe that, Andrew."

Andrew nodded and looked back at Peter. He had his mother's looks, strengthened Andrew surmised, by his father's genes. A good-looking young man even in this state, his blond hair tousled and a couple of days' stubble covering his cheeks. His paleness gave him an ethereal look, like a sleeping saint carved from white marble.

"There's no brain damage?" Andrew finally managed to ask. He had, for a long moment, been lost in the poignancy of seeing this

young man cut down in the vilest way and left to languish in a hospital bed for what could possibly be the rest of his life.

"The doctors seem to think not. His skull was fractured and pressing on the brain when they first got him to the hospital. By some miracle the brain formed a protective bubble, which kept the bone from penetrating and causing permanent damage. Of course it's hard to tell as his brain waves are so faint, but it's a hope I have to cling to."

Andrew drew the sheet back that covered Peter to his chest. Beneath the sheet, his wrists and ankles were bound by canvas restraints in order that should his body spasm violently, he would not fall out of bed and injure himself. Andrew had received permission to undo the restraints, which he now did and began his session of therapeutic passive exercise.

Eve pulled up a chair and reached into her bag for a book. "I hope you don't mind if I stay, Andrew. I promise not to distract you with too much talking."

"Not at all. I'll enjoy the company."

Eve smiled. "You'd like him, you know, if you could speak to him. You're about the same age I think. Peter will be thirty this year, on October 17th."

Andrew smiled at her. "A Libran, like my friend David."

"Yes, the sign of harmony and balance. Peter was...is very Libran. Do you believe in the stars Andrew?"

"Only for fun. I think it's all too much a generalization, but there are one or two things that can be right about a person's various characteristics."

Eve seemed not to hear. "Phillip was a Leo," she murmured. "He was every inch the leader they say a Leo should be." She turned to look at Andrew, her eyes filled with sadness. "They killed him you know. Beat him and kicked him, until he died."

"Yes, Dr Hamilton told me. I'm so sorry."

"He was like my own son, as dear to me as Peter. His parents died in a car crash when he was still at high school. He and Peter were friends even then. Peter brought him home to us and he stayed till he went to college. Paul, my husband, loved Phillip too. I guess most people would think us strange, but we were happy to know that the boys loved each other. The saddest thing of all is, when Peter wakes up he will have to be told that the person he loved most in the world—is gone."

An icy shiver rippled down Andrew's back as Eve said those words and he looked at Peter's face, serene and composed, untroubled by events of which he had no knowledge.

"Here, let me show you them in happier days." She handed Andrew a photograph from her wallet. The two handsome young men smiling up at him from the picture had been snapped on a beach in front of a brilliant blue sky and ocean. Their arms were around each other's shoulders, their heads close together, their love for each other plain for everyone to see. Peter's blond wet hair was slicked back enhancing his the smooth planes of his face and the startling cobalt blue of his eyes. Phillip's darker hair was curled around his forehead and ears, which, along with his tanned skin, gave him an exotic look.

He looks like an Arabian prince, Andrew thought.

At the same time he felt a stab of anger at the realization of these lives so cruelly cut off. All their hopes and dreams for themselves and each other, smashed beyond repair. He shuddered as he imagined such a thing happening to David and himself. His face was grim as he handed the photo back to Peter's mother.

"How did it happen Mrs. Brandon? I'm sorry...Eve. I remember reading they were in LA when they were attacked."

"Yes. They had gone up to LA to see a show. I can't remember which one now, something a little risqué and controversial I think, in a small theater in West Hollywood. They were walking to their car. Apparently they had parked in some alley a little way from the the-

ater. They must have been attacked as they were getting in the car. They were found lying on either side of it. No one saw anything, or heard anything or pretended they didn't. There were no witnesses and the police dropped the case very quickly.

"GLAAD tried to pressure the police into more action, but they said without leads they had nothing to go on. One of the GLAAD representatives told me the LAPD was extremely homophobic despite their protestations to the contrary. They told me they had inaugurated "compassionate training" for all their officers...or so they called it. According to the media, it wasn't working very well."

She paused for a moment, remembering. "There was *one* young policeman who did seem genuinely concerned. He came to see me when he was off-duty. He wasn't part of the investigative team. A very nice young man called...Jeff. Yes, that was it. He was very caring and compassionate. We spent an afternoon together and he called several times after that to see how Peter was doing."

"Did you ever consider a private investigation?" Andrew had pulled the sheet away from Peter's legs and was now gently but firmly flexing each limb with a steady up and down motion.

"Yes, after Phillips funeral, Bob and Ralph, who had been with them on that terrible night, came up with the idea of hiring someone—and they interviewed a couple of investigators. However, no one seemed to think there was much more could be done, as there were no witnesses."

She stood up suddenly, smoothing out her clothes with impatient movements of her hands. "I'm going down to the cafeteria for some coffee. Can I bring you anything?"

"Just some water if you don't mind."

"I'll be back in a few minutes, Andrew."

After Eve left, Andrew sat on the edge of the bed holding Peter's hand and manipulating each finger with a gentle massage. He looked intently at the unconscious man's face, trying to see if he could dis-

cern the slightest flicker of an eyelash or the tremor of his mouth, but there was no movement whatsoever.

"Damn," Andrew muttered under his breath. "What a tragedy."

Eve was gone longer than she had predicted and Andrew was almost through with his first session when she came back into the room.

She looked depressed. "Sorry I was so long. Here's your water." She handed Andrew a paper cup. "I was talking to one of the doctors in the hall just now, trying to pick his brains you know, in case there's something more we should be doing...even at this late stage. He wasn't at all optimistic. They never are. Just keep telling me to keep up the therapy and pray for a miracle."

Her eyes were moist and Andrew took her hand to comfort her. She gave him a look of apology. "Oh, I'm just being silly. You'd think that after all this time I'd get used to this. But I never have...and I never will."

\* \*

That night when David returned home, he found a very subdued Andrew sitting on the deck, nursing a tall vodka and tonic.

"Hi honey, I'm home...what's for dinner?"

Andrew rose and hugged him. "Sorry, I haven't prepared anything. I've been in a bit of a funk, since I left the hospital."

"Oh yes, the coma patient. Why don't you fix me one of those?" David tapped Andrew's glass. "I'll go change. Then you can tell me all about it. Let's go out; we can try that new bistro on Forest, if you like." He ruffled Andrew's fair curly hair fondly and kissed him on the cheek.

As he watched David stride to the bedroom Andrew smiled, his spirits already rising as a result of David's unfailing cheerfulness and ability to make him feel better about almost anything. Later, as they sat waiting for service in one of Laguna's newest restaurants, David listened intently as Andrew related the story he'd heard from Eve

Brandon. Like Andrew, he was appalled at the triple tragedy that had befallen her.

Andrew shook his head sadly. "I think the saddest thing of all is the fact that here's this poor woman, suddenly losing all the men in her life she holds most dear. Gone, just like that, in the space of a year."

David touched the back of Andrew's hand lightly with his fingertip. "It makes me want to cherish each moment *we* have together."

Andrew's sadness made David decide his friend needed immediate cheering up. "What say we blow this joint...?" He pushed his chair back suddenly and got to his feet. "It's way too busy in here. We can grab a pizza, go home—and I'll show you just how much I cherish you."

Andrew could find no fault in this plan. He smiled happily as they pushed their way through the throng of would-be diners. "I'll race you to the pizza parlor..."



Three weeks later, on a Friday night, Andrew and David pulled into the driveway of Peter Brandon's house in Laguna Beach. Eve and Andrew had had formed an easy friendship since he had been treating her son and she had been delighted to know David was an architect.

She had suggested a dinner date at the house. "Why don't you and David come over for dinner, so I have a chance to meet him? I'm sure he'll be interested to see the annex Phillip built for me—'mother-in-law quarters' he called it—as a joke…I *think*."

The house was large and impressive with a Spanish tile roof. Set on the corner of the street, it was high enough to command an incredible view of the ocean and Catalina Island. A three-car garage was positioned beneath a huge verandah that made the most of the spectacular views.

Eve met them at the door and greeted them both warmly, making David feel instantly at home. She looked very elegant, in a pretty beige cashmere top and black silk pants. Inside, the house was light and spacious. A tiled foyer led to a step down living room with high whitewashed wood beamed ceilings and French doors leading out to the verandah. The room was comfortably furnished, decorated with a masculine flair with no sign of pretension. Above the brick fire-

place was a painting of a seascape, so intensely dark blue and wild, its presence dominated the room.

"My favorite of all Peter's works," Eve said, with quiet pride as the two men stood gazing at the painting, almost mesmerized by its beauty.

"It's magnificent." David found it hard to tear his eyes away. "What an incredible talent your son had...*has*, Mrs. Brandon."

"Thank you for that, David. Now, no more "Mrs. Brandon" do you hear? Eve, just Eve...or I'll send you straight home."

They all laughed comfortably and the men followed her into the kitchen where she set about preparing some drinks for them. "I know your Andrew enjoys a vodka and tonic. What about you David?"

"I think I'd like a Scotch on the rocks tonight please, Eve. The night before a day off always makes me feel like celebrating."

"Here's to the weekend, then." They toasted each other with a clinking of glasses. "Yes, Andrew says you work far too hard. Phillip did too. It must be the architect way. Come; let me show you the wonderful home he built for me."

She led them into the garden at the back of the house, round a curved paved pathway ablaze with a myriad of different colored flowering shrubs.

"This was all their idea after Paul, my husband, died. I really didn't want to be in the way, but they insisted and as it's turned out, it's just as well I'm here looking after it all, until Peter comes home."

David and Andrew exchanged glances as Eve opened the door to her annex. David gasped in appreciation as they entered. His appraising gaze took in the spaciousness of the living room with its high-beamed ceilings.

"I was expecting a comfortable apartment, but this is beautiful. He did a wonderful job here."

The walls were painted a soft white and hung, with what they surmised correctly, to be more of Peter's work. At the far end, French

doors led out onto an extension of the main house's verandah. Eve led them into the bedroom. A portrait of a young Eve hung on one wall.

"Peter painted this from a photograph taken just after Paul and I were married. I think he flattered me a little," she added modestly.

"How interesting that he does portraits also," David remarked.

"Yes, he has a photographic memory. I only hope that when he eventually wakes up, that will not have been impaired."

There was a moment's awkward silence, then David walked over to the dresser where there were several framed photographs. One of Eve and a rugged, athletic looking man he guessed, without difficulty, to be Paul, her husband. Another of Peter and Phillip in tuxedos, obviously taken on prom night. They looked so young and preppy. David felt his throat constrict as he gazed at their happy, carefree smiles. Quickly, he picked up another of the four of them looking relaxed and smiling for the camera.

Eve touched his arm. "That one was taken on a vacation we took in Europe. Peter had been there on a scholarship and we joined Phillip and him for a couple of weeks..." For a moment she was lost in her memories of that happy time.

"Do you live in here or in the main house now?" David asked, carefully putting the photograph down.

"Right here. I brought this furniture and some of my favorite things from our home in LA. I feel comfortable in here, but I didn't want to close up the main house so I go over there frequently, to do some cleaning, generally look after the place, and like tonight, when friends are over, I entertain there. Would you like to see their room?" She gave them a wistful smile. "Don't worry, I haven't turned it into a shrine or anything silly like that."

Together they walked back to the house and upstairs to the large master bedroom that, like the living room below, was light and airy and decorated with a casual, masculine touch. The king bed's headboard was polished antique mahogany. Over it, hung a landscape painting of rolling hills and neat fields.

"Peter painted this one when he and Phillip were in England, the first time," Eve told them as Andrew and David once again admired the work.

A large mahogany armoire stood against the wall opposite the bed. In front of the bay window there was a sitting area with two comfortable armchairs and a television.

Eve opened a door that led into a large, airy room with a skylight ceiling. It had obviously been Peter's studio. There were empty canvases neatly propped against the walls and in one corner, stood an artist's easel covered by an oilcloth, which Eve now removed. Under it was an unfinished portrait of a young man—unmistakably Phillip.

"I can't bear to look at this now, nor could I ever get rid of it. Peter began this just before..." She paused painfully, then continued, "And he must finish it one day." She dropped the cloth back in position and gazed about the room, blinking back her tears.

"Come on Eve." David gently took her hand. "Let's go down and finish that drink. I think we could all use one right about now."

In the kitchen preparing a bowl of salad, her good spirits returning, Eve was talkative and obviously happy to have such good company.

"Peter and Phillip used to have lots of friends over for casual dinners," she told them. "Phillip was an excellent cook. He loved to try out new dishes and experiment with variations of his own. Most of the time they were a success." She laughed gaily. "Peter never let him forget the time he misjudged a measure of some spice or other that sent everyone to the kitchen for gallons of water. He was so embarrassed. Peter called it Phillip's Volcano!"

"It sounds as if they were very happy."

"They were. They knew each other so well. Hardly ever argued. The only thing I ever knew Peter to get upset about, was Phillip's tendency to turn on the cold-water faucet when Peter was in the shower. The plumbing's a little faulty and it would make the shower water turn suddenly very hot. Peter would get so mad for the moment, and of course Phillip would act the innocent." She smiled at the memory. "Now, if you'd like to sit at the table, I'll serve the salad. By that time the pasta should be just right."

During dinner Eve and David kept up a spirited conversation, but Andrew was unusually quiet, strangely affected by finally seeing where Peter and Phillip had spent their time together, where they had made love, made plans for the future and from where on that fateful evening, they had set off, not knowing what lay ahead of them...not knowing that they would never again return home, together.

From where he was sitting in the dining room Andrew could look around the large comfortable living room. His eyes were once again drawn to the seascape over the fireplace.

He imagined a paint-spattered Peter, stepping back from the canvas and inspecting with a critical eye, the masterpiece he had created. Now, in his mind's eye, he could see Phillip entering the studio, wrapping his arms around Peter's waist, nuzzling the back of his neck as he admired his lover's finished work.

So caught up in his fantasy was Andrew that he sat very still as he envisioned Peter turning in his lover's arms, returning the kiss which quickly sparked desire in both of them. As Phillip removed Peter's shirt and bent to trail his lips across his naked chest, Peter's body arched in ecstasy, his head hanging back, lips parted...

"Andrew!"

With a start, Andrew looked at Eve and David now fixing him with quizzical stares.

"Where on earth were you? Eve was asking if you'd like some more wine."

"Oh, I'm sorry Eve..." Andrew felt his face redden. "Yes, please, I'd love some more. I was just lost in the seascape for a moment."

"It does have a hypnotic quality," Eve agreed. "No need to apologize, Andrew." She paused for a moment. "It was shortly after he finished it that his father died. Thank goodness Paul had the chance to see it completed. We had a little champagne celebration, just the four of us."

As if to herself she added quietly, "And then...there was one."

\* \*

Later, as they lay in bed watching some late night television, Andrew asked David if he thought Eve would be able to ever come to terms with the possibility that her son might never wake up. Dinner had been pleasant enough, thanks to David's quick wit and ability to enliven any conversation and draw people out, but Andrew was sure Eve was on the verge of a breakdown.

"There's no doubt she's stretched emotionally further than any human being should be," David agreed. "As time goes by without any improvement in his condition, she'll probably become more and more despondent. Frankly, I don't know how she's managed to handle all of this by herself for so long. She's a remarkable woman."

Andrew nodded. "Yes, she is...but it must be galling for her to know that whoever did this, is still out there running around scotfree."

David switched off the TV and slipped his arm round Andrew's shoulders.

"The sad thing is; the vast majority of hate-crimes go unsolved or even unreported, unless the bastards are caught in the act or someone turns them in. Look at the Mathew Shepherd case for instance, or Ernest Watts, the guy who was chained to a truck and dragged for miles. There wasn't any police sleuthing there. Just people who couldn't wait to brag about what they'd done."

Andrew looked at him sadly. "What kind of animals would deliberately set out to maim or kill someone they don't even know? It's just beyond my understanding."

David pulled him closer. "And beyond that of most people. But out there, there are lives and situations most of us could never dream existed. We're spoiled and sequestered and just damned lucky to be where we are and to have what we have." He took Andrew's hand and kissed it gently. "And I thank my lucky stars every day for having you in my life."

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Next day at the hospital, Andrew thanked Eve for inviting them over and for the dinner.

"It was all my pleasure," Eve assured him. "Your friend David is a delightful man and so handsome. I hope I didn't dull the evening too much, with my tendency to talk too much about the past."

"Not at all. We were both fascinated by your stories and it helped me get to know Peter better."

"Oh, you could all have been such good friends if only..." Her voice wavered and stopped. "Now I'm just being foolish again, I really have to get a grip..." She laughed, choking a little but then sat down, pulling her book from her bag and settling down to read. Andrew began his exercise session with Peter who slept on, completely unaware of everything around him.

He was falling now, twisting and tumbling in slow motion through the black void. He cried out as he braced himself for the impact that would surely be the end of him. Would he be smashed to pieces on the ground, or against whatever lay below? He flailed his arms around vainly, trying to stop his descent, but he was falling, falling through the darkness...a darkness that somehow, was becoming less impenetrable.

Was this just his imagination...or did he see a glimmer of light below him? Not light really, more a sort of grayness in the black, a kind of shifting of the darkness. Amazingly, his descent did not end in the sickening jolt his mind had envisioned.

Instead, he landed gently and he began to look around, but then he was propelled forward. There was urgency now in this movement...He could almost feel some force or other urging him on—but to what?

The ground was cool and soft under his bare feet. Certain now that he was being guided by someone or something he could not yet see, he plunged on ahead. He had to keep going toward what he was now convinced was the end of the darkness, and the beginning of...whatever lay beyond. He had to find his way out of this place.

"Phillip!" he called out, "Are you here too, somewhere? Phillip, answer me!"

His eyes peered into the dark swirling mass that still enveloped him, and he listened intently for some familiar sound. But there was no answer to his call—no echo—only silence. Again, a feeling of desolation crept over him. Weary now, he sank to the ground. He could go no further.

Giving in to the lethargy that now weighed him down, he slept.

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"Time to turn him over."

Eve put her book down and came over to the bed. Under ordinary circumstances Andrew could have managed this on his own, but with a comatose patient care had to be taken so as not to dislodge his IV, or catheter. Eve had assisted the other therapists almost since the beginning, having had the nurses show her how, and now she skillfully helped Andrew gently turn Peter onto his stomach.

Naked, except for a diaper, Peter looked pale and vulnerable in the sunlight that streamed through the window onto his bed. His once hard and sinewy body was now without definition. His pale skin soft and smooth as a child's. Eve sighed as she returned to her chair. Andrew began to massage and manipulate the flesh on Peter's shoulders and back.

Suddenly, he stopped. What was that sound?

He looked over at Eve but apparently she had heard nothing. He could have sworn he had heard Peter say something. He knew coma patients sometimes made sounds, but this seemed different—almost insistent. He bent more closely over Peter and looked at his mouth. One side of his face was resting on the pillow, his lips slightly open. Had it just been a sigh he'd heard? No, it had been more pronounced than that.

"Fil..."

There it was again!

"Eve...Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"I could swear Peter was trying to say something. Quickly, help me turn him over again. Gently now."

Now on his back, Peter showed no sign of making any further sounds and a disappointed Andrew was quick to apologize.

"I'm sorry, I could've sworn I heard something. I'm so sorry, Eve. I didn't mean to upset you."

"No no, you haven't Andrew. It was probably some kind of reflex to being turned over. You know, like a burp or something."

"Yes I expect so. I just thought for a moment that he..." His voice trailed off and he sat on the edge of the bed looking at his patient, smoothing back the shaggy hair that had fallen over Peter's forehead.

"He needs a haircut," Eve said gently, her hand on Andrew's shoulder.



"You know, it's uncanny," Andrew told David as he set the kitchen table for dinner. "I still have the feeling Peter was trying to say something, the other day."

They were expecting Rob and Maggie over for dinner that evening and David had planned on christening the new barbecue he had just purchased. He took a plate of marinated chicken breasts from the refrigerator and, after placing it on the counter, he turned to Andrew with a serious look on his face.

"Andrew," he said, carefully. "I know how involved you are with Peter and his mother and nothing would please us all more than if Peter were to wake up and have a full recovery—but it's almost an impossibility. The doctors have said so many times."

"Doctors can be wrong, David. If you'd been there, heard what I heard, you might be agreeing with me. The more I think about it, I'm convinced he was trying to say, 'Phillip'".

"God, Andrew...you didn't say that to Eve did you?"

"No, of course not. She said, he probably just burped."

David nodded, was about to say something when a loud voice boomed from the living room. "Hey you guys, we're here...are you two fooling around in the kitchen or can we come in?"

"Yes, but come in anyway," David laughed, glad of the diversion.

Rob leered at them. "Aha, a foursome!" He gave both men a bear hug. "Who's first?"

"Rob!" His wife, Maggie feigned dismay. "Try to have some manners now you're a married man."

"Okay, Mrs. Braden," Rob chuckled, pushing her towards David and Andrew. "You go first..."

Theirs was a relaxed and easy friendship, yet with deep bonds based on mutual respect. Rob was a carefree soul and had found in Maggie someone who loved him for that, but who could also keep him on the straight and narrow when necessary.

Maggie could only be described as "pert", an expression she hated, but one that suited her well. Petite and slim, with dark hair cut short and framing a sweet, heart shaped face, she exuded a warm and friendly personality that had won her many friends.

She now looked at them with a bright smile. "Guess what?"

"What?" Andrew and David asked in perfect unison.

"Let me tell them, let me tell them," Rob whined.

"Oh, for goodness sake Rob..."

"You *promised* I could tell them. We're pregnant!" Rob grinned triumphantly, pulling the wife he towered over, into his arms.

"No darling," Maggie admonished him "I'm pregnant—you just got me that way."

Andrew and David gave out with whoops of glee and congratulations and more hugs were exchanged.

Looking at the man who had been his best friend since childhood, David shook his head slowly. "God, Rob…I don't know…you as a Dad? The mind boggles."

"Indeed it does David, my boy." With a flourish, he produced a bottle of champagne from a brown paper bag. "And right now...we'll drink to that."

Later, at dinner, Maggie turned to Andrew and asked, "By the way, how's the coma patient doing...Peter...?"

"Peter Brandon. Actually, he's pretty much the same every day. No change really."

"Andrew thought he heard him try to say something the other day," David said, mildly.

"Really? Is that possible? What did he say?"

"Oh, I'm not sure." Andrew was embarrassed and a little annoyed that David had brought this up. "Coma patients make sounds now and then and that's what it probably was—just a sound really. It was that just for a moment, I had a feeling he was trying to, uh...say a name."

"What name, Sport?" Rob glanced at David to see if his friend was buying the story or not.

"I don't *know*. David says I'm being fanciful and maybe I am. Maybe I'm too wrapped up in the whole damn thing and I'm beginning to imagine things I wish *would* happen. If you could just see him lying there day after day...a young guy who had everything to live for and now, nothing."

Maggie tried o console him. "At least he's not suffering, Andrew."

"I'm sorry..." David placed his hand over Andrew's. "I didn't mean for you to get upset."

"That's OK." Andrew squeezed his hand in response. "I'm just too close to it all to view it objectively, sometimes."

"What happened to him actually?" Rob asked.

He and Maggie listened with interest as Andrew recounted the story, then he said, "Oh yeah, I remember this. His father was a big real estate wheeler and dealer. Made a killing in land deals—very wealthy. The guy was set up for life when his father died about a year before this happened."

His wife looked at him with surprise. "How do you know all this?"

"A friend of mine was a cop in LA, when the guys were attacked. He told me he was disgusted the way the department dropped the ball with almost no investigative work done due to the fact, they said, that there were no witnesses. Being gay himself, and worried that this kind of thing was so blatant, he went to his superiors and asked why there was to be no follow up on the initial reports."

"And?"

"And he was told to mind his own business."

It was Andrew's turn to look surprised. "Your friend is a gay cop?

"Was..." Rob replied. "I mean he's still gay of course, but he quit the force and opened his own business as a private investigator. Got an office in Santa Ana somewhere."

David chuckled. "Tell me Rob, do you know any straight men?"

"Course I do...But, you know who I'm talking about, Dave. We were all in high school together. Jeff Stevens, remember? I meant to tell you ages ago I'd run into him."

David sucked in a quick breath and his brown eyes widened as he looked at his friend. "Jeff Stevens...is gay?" he gasped.

He had a sudden memory of a night long ago while he was still in school...a night when...He became aware that Andrew was looking at him, a question in his eyes. Catching his breath, he quickly

blurted, "You mean the high school jock that all the girls fought to have him just *notice* them?"

"The same...and he never slept with any of them."

"How on earth do you know that?" Maggie scoffed.

"Because he turned them all over to me!" He laughed and ducked quickly to avoid the swipe Maggie aimed at his head. "Just kidding!"

"Did Jeff know Peter Brandon?" Andrew asked.

"No, actually he didn't, but he went to visit Mrs. Brandon after the incident. She must have taken a liking to him, as she filled him in on the entire story."

"Oh, right." Andrew turned to David. "Eve told me a police officer from LA visited her. So that had to have been him...your friend, Jeff."

Rob nodded. "He also told me the photographs taken at the scene were pretty gruesome and the autopsy report on the dead guy, Phillip, was sickening."

"So he quit because of this incident?" David asked.

"Not exactly, but some of the homophobic crap he had to put up with made him decide to get out and work on his own. I haven't seen him in a while as a matter of fact. He was involved with some dude, but not too happily from what he told me. Some closet case in the force."

"Rob Braden..." David could not suppress his grin. "Father Confessor to lonely homosexuals. You are a *trip*."

"You seemed shocked when Rob told you your school buddy was gay," Andrew said later, after Rob and Maggie had gone and he and David were cleaning up the kitchen.

"Oh, it was just a surprise I guess. I thought he was the terminally straight high school hunk everyone wanted."

"Including you?"

"Yes, if you must know—including me."

Andrew laughed. "Okay, okay. It's all right to have a past. I didn't think I'd met the Virgin David when Rob introduced us four years ago. By the way, that's four years next Friday, don't forget."

"How could I forget? You've been reminding me every day this week."

"Don't change the subject. Tell me about this Jeff Stevens and your love for him."

"Probably more like lust, now I think about it." David smiled nostalgically. "Of course, it seemed like unrequited love at the time. I was only seventeen."

"Did you do it?"

"Are you kidding? I didn't think he'd be remotely interested in another guy. God, I can't believe Rob never told me Jeff was gay. When I think what could have happened that night we slept together."

Andrew planted his hands on his hips. "What?"

"Yeah, he slept over at my parent's house one night. It was the worst night of my life. Him lying there next to me and me not being able to touch him in case he punched my lights out. I didn't sleep a wink all night...and *he* slept like a baby."

"Did you sneak a peek?"

"Andrew!" David affected mock horror. "Well, as a matter of fact..."

"Oh my God. You are shameless, David Angelo."

"Well, you wanted to know all the details."

They were both laughing now, at this shared memory.

"And...?" Andrew demanded.

"It was...fine."



A week later, when Andrew arrived at the hospital, Eve and Peter had a visitor. A tall jovial looking older man with silver hair, a ruddy complexion and twinkling blue eyes that twinkled even more as he introduced himself to Andrew. His name was Fred Olsen, an old friend of the family who apparently visited quite regularly, but had been on a trip to "London and other parts" as he put it, for the last couple of months or so.

"Eve tells me you do excellent work here, young man." He shook Andrew's hand vigorously. "I may need you to work over these poor tired shoulders of mine one of these days. You see they're in this slouched and despondent position most of the time, because this darling lady won't consent to marry me any time soon."

Andrew looked at Eve in surprise. She had never mentioned she had a beau. How great, he thought. However, he could see by the look on Eve's face that she had never even contemplated such a union.

"I'll put in a good word for you," Andrew said, smiling at the older man. He turned to look at Peter, and Fred followed his gaze.

"Poor lad. Look after him, won't you? Well Eve, I must be off. Don't forget our dinner date for tomorrow night." He kissed Eve gently on the cheek and was gone.

Eve met Andrew's quizzical look and smiled. "Poor old Fred. He never gives up. I met him before I met Paul. In fact, Fred introduced us at a party one night. He's always said it was the worst thing he ever did. He told me he wanted to pop the question, but Paul got there first. I never had the heart to tell him there was no chance."

"He seems like a nice man."

"Oh, he's wonderful." Eve smoothed the sheet around Peter's shoulders as she spoke. "He was the one who recommended Phillip for the position at Harley & Watson. He's an old friend of Don Harley's and really used the old pal's routine to get Phillip an interview. I will always be grateful to him. He's been a wonderful friend through the years. Once he got over his resentment towards Paul, they remained the best of friends till Paul passed away."

Andrew looked at Eve thoughtfully. "Do any of Peter's friends come to visit?"

"They used to...but of course, as time went by and the doctors gave no hope, they stopped coming. One or two call me every now and then and ask how he's doing, but it's actually been months now since I heard from anyone at all."

She suddenly smiled and reached out to touch a vase of flowers sitting on the windowsill. "Except for Rod and 'A', of course. How could I forget them?"

"Rotten who?"

Eve laughed indulgently. "Rod and 'A'...'A' is short for Arthur. They're two Englishmen who now live in South Laguna for the best part of the year. Rod was a dancer and choreographer, and 'A' a singer in their youth, back in London. They're retired now and do a lot of traveling. They're in England right now, as a matter of fact."

"How did Peter get to know them?"

"They commissioned Peter to do a landscape for their home after seeing some of his work in an early exhibition of his some years ago. Of course, then they met Phillip and they just all hit it off immediately. They are such characters. So much fun and so many stories. They were shattered when all this happened. So kind to *me*.

"They bought Phillip's car when I told them I was going to sell it. Phillip had made me executor of his estate in his will," she explained. "They said it would be a wonderful memento of him, but I think they were just making things easier for me. They send flowers to the room regularly, even from Europe, when they're away."

"They sound like really terrific friends," Andrew said, then turned his attention to Peter. Carefully, he pulled back the sheet that covered him. Slipping an arm under his shoulders, he quickly untied the fastening behind his neck and pulled the gown down to his waist, then lowered him gently back to the mattress.

Eve sat down and began reading her book, the conversation for the moment stilled as Andrew concentrated on his patient's therapeutic exercises. He gazed down at Peter's face, and almost subconsciously, began to will his patient to say something—anything at all that would make him believe that what he had experienced before had not just been his imagination.

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Now he could definitely make out a glimmer of light ahead of him. As hard as he tried to quicken his pace, he seemed unable to do so. I must hurry, he thought. I must reach that light...I must.

In the distance, against the light, there was a flicker of movement. What was that? he wondered. Was there something, or someone, there?

He tried to call out, but his voice seemed not to carry any distance at all. Around him, he could make out the shapes and forms of the walls he walked between. He was in some kind of long hallway with incredibly high ceilings.

He was tiring again...and filled with a sudden panic he struggled to stay awake, but then the light grew brighter and he could make out the shape of a man silhouetted against it...Could it be? It was...it was Phillip!

Thank God...thank God, his mind exulted. Everything will be all right now. He was able to stumble the last few steps until strong arms caught and held him.

"Phillip," he cried. "Thank God you're here."

Phillip smiled gently and stroked Peter's cheek with his fingertips.

"I've been here all the time Peter, waiting for you. You've been away, and now it's time for you to go home. Eve needs you. You mustn't stay here. You must go home."

Taking Peter's hand, Phillip guided him toward the light, which appeared to be shining around the edges of a closed door.

"But you're coming too, aren't you?" Peter pleaded, although he knew from the despair that now gripped his heart, what the answer would be.

With a sad smile, Phillip said, "I'm sorry; I can't come with you Peter. You must go alone. Remember that I will always love you, and no matter what, as long as you need me, I'll always be with you. Remember that."

And so saying, he gently pushed Peter toward the now open door. Peter tried to resist. He turned back clutching vainly at Phillip's hand, desperately trying to take him too...but he had gone.

"No-o-o-o!!" The despairing cry that was torn from Peter's lips shattered the silence of his hospital room.

"Jesus Christ!" Andrew jumped back in alarm as Peter flailed about on the bed, his eyes now wide open and staring about him in terror.

"Peter..." Eve jumped to her feet and rushed to his bedside. "Peter it's all right. Oh, thank God," she almost sobbed. "Thank God, you've come back!"

Peter stared up at them both, uncomprehendingly. "Where am I?" His voice was barely more than a whisper.

"You're in the hospital, darling." Eve grasped his hands and held them to her breast to comfort him. "You had an accident, but you're going to be all right now."

Andrew stared at Peter in amazement. It had actually happened...the miracle they had all hoped for was here. Peter was awake.

"Andrew quickly..." Eve took sudden control of her emotions and the situation. "Get the doctor, a nurse—anyone, in here, *now*."

Andrew ran to the door, but his elation was dampened when he heard Peter ask in a whisper..."Where's Phillip?"

He ran into the corridor yelling for a doctor for Room 333. Two nurses came bustling up. One of them scowled at him. "What's all the fuss about?"

"Peter Brandon woke up, that's all!"

"What? Sally; go get Dr Sanders right now." She pushed past Andrew into the room, then gaped in amazement at the sight of Eve holding Peter's hand and he gazing at her with wide-open eyes. When the doctor came in, his look of surprise was hard to mask, but he quickly started checking Peter's pulse and heart rate.

"All right nurse. Let's get him upstairs for observation, right away" He smiled at Peter. "Welcome back, young man, you've been gone a long time. We'll have to put you under observation for a time just to make sure all is well. May I speak to you outside Mrs. Brandon? We need to discuss his after care."

Eve was reluctant to leave at first but followed the doctor outside while the nurse went off to arrange for her patient's transfer to the observation unit. Andrew was left alone with Peter. He sat down on the edge of the bed and smiled at the man who had been his patient for the past two months.

"Who are you?" Peter's voice was still weak.

"I'm Andrew. I've been your physical therapist for the last couple of months."

"Couple of months...have I been here that long?"

"Much longer actually, but the doctors will explain all that to you."

"Have you seen Phillip?"

Andrew blinked nervously as he replied, "No, I haven't." He was about to add, "Not today," but the words died in his mouth as he realized he could not lie to this man. Nor could he find it in himself to be the one to tell him what had happened.

Despite his condition, Peter saw the flicker of despair in Andrew's expression. "What's wrong? Is it Phillip? Why isn't he here if all of you are?" A look of panic suddenly covered his face. "The dream...Phillip was there in the dream and he said he couldn't come with me. Why did he say that?"

Andrew looked around him, searching for an answer that might stem the other man's fears, but Peter's eyes had gone beyond him to the door that now opened, admitting Eve and the doctor. "Mom...why would Phillip say he couldn't come back with me? What's happened to him?"

Eve looked at Andrew then sat down on the bed and took Peter's hand in hers. "Later my darling," she said soothingly. "Please don't upset yourself now. You have to stay calm and rest."

The doctor hovered over him. "We'll give you a sedative to help..."

"No!" Peter interrupted him. His voice was growing in strength as he turned again to Eve. "Why would he tell me he couldn't come back with me? What's happened to him?"

Eve glanced up at Sanders who nodded his head sadly. Summoning all her willpower, she held her son's hands tightly.

"I'm afraid Phillip can never come back, Peter. He never recovered from the accident. He...died, Peter. I'm so sorry."

Andrew thought his heart would break as Peter's face crumbled with anguish. "No..." he cried. "No, he can't be dead...he just can't be d..." Eve held him as his body shook with shock and grief.

Andrew stood up, and fighting back his own tears, left mother and son to grieve together.



T rank Meeks was not a happy man. He had received two telephone calls that morning that had truly pissed him off. First, that loser Billy Bach had called, whimpering that the kid in the hospital had woken up out of his coma.

"What'll we do Frank? What'll we do if he remembers what happened?"

"He's not going to remember anything, stupid!" Frank snarled into the receiver. "He's been brain-dead for the last three years. He didn't see us. There were no witnesses. No one knows anything 'cept you and me, and you better keep your mouth shut!"

"But the report in the paper says a full recovery is expected."

"It doesn't matter, dummy. When I called the hospital, they said he had no memory of anything related to the attack."

"They told you that?"

"Yeah." Frank pulled on his cigarette and inhaled the smoke deep into his lungs. "I called yesterday soon as I saw the paper. Told them I was a reporter in LA and the receptionist gave me all the details, just like that. He's going to be fine physically, but they're still doubtful if he'll ever regain total brainpower. He has no sense of smell, he's sorta deaf in one ear, his vision's fuzzy—that kind of thing. But best of all, he can't remember anything about that night."

"Thank Christ." Billy blew an audible sigh of relief, and Frank mentally sneered at the man's weakness.

What a loser, he thought. Why the hell did he ever pick that dumb ass to run around with? Just as well that he, Frank, was in control of the situation. He hadn't seen Billy in almost two years, which was fine with him as the guy got on his nerves something fierce.

Ever since the incident Billy had been nervous and jumpy, and when he quit working with him, Frank hadn't missed him for a moment. He was a liability, no doubt of that and for a while Frank had considered getting rid of him, but figured rightly as it had turned out, that Billy was too scared to ever talk to anyone about what had happened. Billy was now working for the city somewhere down in San Juan Capistrano. Not far enough away, Frank thought, but at least he wasn't hanging around all the time the way he used to. A real pain in the ass...

"Okay," Billy was saying, "I guess there's nothing to worry about, if you say so."

"Right. Just keep your mouth shut and you'll stay out of trouble...got it?"

"Yeah, I got it Frank." He paused for a moment. "But what if he starts to remember things, like..."

"Shut up, Billy..." Frank roared. "I'm telling you to forget this now. If there's ever a problem I'll take care of it, understand?"

"Okay!" Billy yelped.

"Now get off the phone, I have another call coming in." He hung up on Billy and punched the call-waiting button. This conversation made Frank even madder than the first but this time he was unable to yell at the caller. No, this one had to be treated with kid gloves. He had to be assured there was no danger of discovery, and as calmly as he could Frank recounted the information he had received from the hospital. A few tense moments later, their conversation was over and Frank put the phone down, furious that his day was starting out so badly.

Damn these idiots. Any one of them could ruin his career and his life if they ever got cold feet about what they had done.

For three years he had felt safe from discovery after that night. The doctors had originally told him there was no hope of recovery for the Brandon kid. Well, obviously they were wrong there, and now? Were they right about his memory being blocked? There was no doubt he would have to keep an eye on the guy's progress and he had ways of doing that. Nevertheless, he felt secure in the knowledge there had been no witnesses and that they had worn ski masks to hide their faces. He just had to make sure that the others stayed silent.

He looked up as the front door opened and Susan, his wife rushed in carrying a large bag of groceries.

She smiled happily at her husband. "Got you breakfast sweetheart, if you have time."

Frank took the bag from her, set it down and took her in his arms, burying his face in her long blond hair. God, how he loved this woman. She was the only person in his life that meant everything to him.

When they met two years ago, it had been love at first sight for Frank. His sister Eileen had introduced them, reluctantly as it turned out. She was of the opinion that Frank was not the type of man who would look after a woman, having had some experience of his moods and temper over the years. However, she had needed someone to make up a foursome that night, and Frank just happened to be free.

"She's very beautiful Frank," Eileen had told him. "And intelligent. Not like the kind of girl you usually go out with. So please don't put any moves on her."

They had met at a restaurant in Hollywood, and from the first moment Frank saw her he knew he had to have her. But Eileen was right—he couldn't put any moves on her right away. She was much too beautiful and classy for that, and it had taken a lot of self-discipline for Frank to behave in the way he thought she would appreciate.

Susan was a legal secretary for a big law firm in Beverly Hills. He was impressed by that, but also a little intimidated, so he was on his very best behavior whenever they went out. She was good for him, showing him a different kind of life from the one he had previously known. He learned to control his temper. His mood and outlook lightened considerably in her presence and spilled over into his everyday life. The people he worked with noticed the change, and were amazed at how well he took some of the teasing from the other guys. You usually didn't fool around with big Frank.

Irish by descent, Frank was tall, big shouldered and handsome, with dark curly hair and blue eyes that had attracted many a woman in the past. Women he had worked his way through without much thought, beyond how good they were in bed.

Till Susan.

A year ago they had run off and got married in Las Vegas, infuriating her parents who disliked Frank on sight and hated the idea of his involvement with their daughter. Frank's mother, on the other hand, was happy her son had found someone as beautiful and kind as Susan, but secretly she worried about their future. After all, she knew her son very well.

"Oh baby," Frank now whispered into Susan's hair. "I do love you." He held her tightly, and she smiled as she felt his growing erection press against her.

"Oh oh, big boy..." she giggled. "None of that. You have to get to work."

"I know, I know," he groaned, releasing her.

She kissed him gently on the lips. "Just save that thought for later. Come on, I'll fix you breakfast."

During breakfast, Susan looked at her husband devouring the plate of scrambled eggs she had made. "You all right, honey? You seem a little tense." "Yeah, I'm fine. Just a couple of headaches to deal with at the station. Speaking of which, I'd better get going. I'll call you later, sweetheart."

He rose from the table and went over to where his wife sat. He knelt in front of her. "You know, you're the best damn thing that ever happened to me."

He pressed his face against her breast, and she kissed the top of his head. He looked up at her adoringly. "I'll never let anything come in the way of our happiness. I'd kill anyone that ever tried to come between us."

"What are you talking about, darling?" Susan asked, a little afraid of his sudden intensity.

"Nothing, nothing," Frank said quickly, aware that his outburst had made Susan nervous. "There's just so much crap out there. I see it everyday you know, and I just want to protect you from it."

"Nothing's going to come between us Frank. I love you, and that's all that matters."

She urged him to his feet clinging to him for a moment, feeling the strength and the hardness of his body. He held her in the protective way she loved, and they kissed passionately till he broke away reluctantly and headed for the door. She blew him a kiss as he turned to look at her.

"Oh wait, you're forgetting something." She ran over to him, and kissed him again as she handed him the badge that had been lying on the bureau. "Off you go, Detective Meeks. Have a nice day!"



On his way to the station, Frank's dark mood returned. There was no doubt Billy Bach could be a problem. He couldn't trust the guy to keep calm in a crisis and the jerk drank too much. He'd been a lousy police officer and Frank had been furious when they were assigned as partners.

Then there was that embarrassing scene with Jeff Stevens. That fag cop. God, he'd loved to have taken that pervert out. Scowling, he recalled the time when Stevens, an "openly gay" police officer was assigned to the station as part of the "compassionate training" the LAPD was trying to inaugurate.

He had hated Stevens on sight, and there was no way he was going to work with him or any one else like him. Frank had made no secret of the fact in front of the other officers, and even though he was warned to keep his opinions to himself he just couldn't help passing sneering comments, always within earshot of Stevens. He considered the policy weak minded and just plain toadying to liberals and other minority groups. Fags had no place in law enforcement—or anywhere else for that matter.

Of course, Billy had gone along with everything Frank said. Then, as if to prove he could be every bit as good a cop as Frank, he had gone out of his way to get in Steven's face and provoke him into a fight, thinking of course, that if this happened Frank would be there to back him up.

One night, Billy's taunting had just been too much, and Stevens, after giving him fair warning to shut up had leveled him with one punch. Billy had screamed in rage as he lay sprawled on the floor of the station and had yelled at Frank...

"Come on, let's get him!"

But Frank was far too clever to get caught in a station brawl while on duty, so Billy had charged in alone and had been totally humiliated by Stevens who cut him down with two easy shots, one to Billy's gut, the other to the side of his head. Billy, the fight all knocked out of him, had skulked away to the locker room while Stevens and Frank had glared at each other, the challenge silently put out by the one, and cunningly declined by the other. Instead, Frank had gone to the locker room where he listened to Billy whine about how homos were dirty fighters and why hadn't Frank come to his aid?

"You're an asshole Billy," Frank had told him. "Getting yourself whipped by a fag in front of all the other guys. You make me sick. You've not only embarrassed yourself; you've embarrassed me."

They hadn't spoken for several days after that, and Frank's fury was magnified by the fact that some of the guys really admired Stevens for what he had done. Their attitude toward Stevens, once cool and distant, now became friendlier. Some of them even included him in their conversations and kidded him about taking him on "real dates" with their women. Frank seethed inwardly at the memory of all that, and at the feeling he'd had at the time that some of the guys were laughing behind his back.

Unfortunately, Billy was the only one he could recruit for the hit job he'd been offered. It was just way too much money for him to turn his back on. He'd needed help of course and Billy was the only one stupid enough to do it just to get back in his good graces, and for the paltry sum of money he offered him. He need never know just how much Frank was being paid to pull off the job.

"No questions asked, Billy," he'd told the weaker man. "Here's your chance to get even with a couple of homos. We get rid of them, and you get paid to do it. No one will ever know it was us. See, here's the plan..." He detailed what he'd worked out from the information he'd been given regarding the two victims.

"It'll be easy, and from the evidence it's going to look like a couple of fags were bashed walking to their car. They're going to some homo show in Hollywood. We stake out where they leave their car—there's no real parking lot for this place—and we wait for them to leave the theater."

Billy had been nervous at first. "What if they're with a bunch of people?"

"Then we wait it out. Maybe, we'll have to follow them home."

As it turned out though, it all went according to Frank's plan. In a matter of minutes it was over. The two men lay bleeding on the ground. Frank and Billy had pushed their way through the door of

an empty warehouse, exited on the other end of the alley where their car was parked, and sped away. Billy was jumpy as hell, and kept muttering to himself infuriating Frank to no end; but it was done and no one had seen them...no one.

The next day, when he read the newspaper report on the incident, Frank's temper almost boiled over.

Damn that Billy...he was supposed to have made sure his target was dead. Now the guy was in hospital in critical condition. Frank knew he should have checked on both men before leaving the alley, but they'd been in a big hurry to leave the scene and truth to tell after the attack, Frank had indulged himself in the adrenalin charge the scent of violence always brought him.

He felt a rush of relief though, on reading that the victim, Peter Brandon, was in a deep coma and not expected to survive. He was in a local LA hospital and his mother was keeping vigil at his bedside. As luck would have it, when he reported for duty that day Frank was sent with an investigative detective Ralph Dooley, to the hospital.

Dooley, an old veteran cop, was solicitous and polite with Mrs. Brandon as he got her statement as to why her son and his friend were in LA that night.

Frank meanwhile, could not take his eyes off the figure on the bed. Brandon's head was swathed in bandages, both eyes were blackened, and the left side of his face was covered in bruises and contusions. His left arm was encased in a cast from wrist to shoulder. He was hooked up to every imaginable machine to keep him alive, but to Frank he already looked dead.

A young nurse entered the room and stood by Frank's side. "Terrible isn't it?" she whispered. "To think that someone could do something so awful to another human being."

Frank glanced down at her and assumed what he hoped was a sympathetic expression.

"Yeah," he said quietly. "But we see a lot of this kind of thing, you know. I guess he was just in the wrong place at the wrong time." He leaned closer to the nurse. "What are his chances?"

The nurse looked at him sadly, and slowly shook her head. Frank tried to look even more sorry, but his mind exulted at what she meant.

Brandon wasn't going to make it!

As the weeks went by, there was no improvement in his condition. The mainstream press stopped writing about the incident and the case, due to lack of evidence and witnesses, was closed unsolved.

Frank heard from a source that Mrs. Brandon had arranged for her son to be moved to a hospital in South Orange County, refusing to believe what every doctor had told her, that there was no hope.

Billy resigned from the force around that same time and Frank was glad to see him go. They had hardly spoken since the incident, but before he left, Frank cornered him and warned him to keep his mouth shut, or he'd do it for him permanently. Billy had quailed visibly at Frank's threat and had sworn never to say a word.

"I've got as much to lose as you," he'd whimpered, and Frank's contempt for him was never as great as when he watched Billy hurry away.

Billy, for his part was relieved to be leaving an environment in which he'd never really belonged, and even happier to be leaving the one friend he'd ended up fearing more than anyone in the world.

A year later Frank met Susan and his whole life changed. There were times after they met that Frank wished he could turn back the clock and refuse the offer he'd accepted. He knew that as much as Susan loved him, she would never understand or forgive that part of him that had made him a killer. Sometimes he didn't understand it himself.

Why had he so eagerly jumped at the chance to kill two people he didn't even know? Was it just the money? Or that, combined with his hatred for homosexuals?

Listening to Susan talking of bigotry and injustice had made him almost rethink some of his earlier prejudices. Susan even had gay friends. That had been difficult at first, but he could never let her see how he felt about that, and finally he had to admit to himself that one or two of them were pretty good company on occasion. He'd never be totally comfortable around them, but for Susan's sake, he'd put up with it.

And now this...after all this time it had come back to haunt him, and at the first hint of a possible problem, Billy had panicked.

Billy.

Frank's scowl deepened. He couldn't trust Billy to keep quiet. Whatever happened, Susan must never find out what he and Billy had done—never. Nothing must happen to make her not love him anymore. He wouldn't be able to handle that. He couldn't live without her in his life. No, that was inconceivable.

He was going to have to straighten Billy out—and quickly.

Billy meanwhile, was in a funk of his own. No matter what Frank had said about the kid not remembering anything, Billy had his own reasons to worry now that Peter Brandon was out of the coma.

He couldn't tell Frank about it; he'd kill him if he found out.

He wished he'd never got mixed up in this whole thing. Why had he listened to Frank? Why had he always been so ready to do anything Frank asked?

Billy paced around his shabby living room, pulling at his lank hair and chewing his bottom lip as he tried to think his way through this dilemma. He would have to take care of the situation himself. After all, it was his head in a noose if the kid remembered...not Frank's. Frank could talk his way out of anything.

No...Billy Bach would be the one holding the ball and doing time. He had to figure a way to off the kid without anyone connecting him to the crime. It would have to look like an accident, and there was no way he could get to him in the hospital. Too many people there right now. The cops, the reporters doing follow up crap...His mother always at his bedside.

Billy snickered at that. Probably the reason the kid was a fag, his mother always at his bedside. No, he'd have to wait till the kid was out of the hospital. Watch his movements and then spring his trap. Billy didn't quite know what that would be as yet, but he'd think of something. All he had to do was pray Brandon wouldn't start remembering, before he got to him!



Peter opened his eyes slowly, and for a few moments studied the long shafts of sunlight that filtered through the shutters and played on the wall of his bedroom. Reluctantly, he sat up in bed and looked around at the familiar surroundings that once had meant home to Phillip and himself.

Now Phillip was gone forever, and the house, the *home* that had meant so much to both of them, seemed empty and still. Everything was there in its place of course, and Eve had placed fresh flowers in all the rooms for his return. Still, the missing quotient was evident in every corner of the house. Phillips vibrant personality, his deep resonant voice and laugh would never again fill these rooms.

He'd been home only two days and already he could not bear to be here without him. The three weeks in the hospital after he had recovered from the coma had seemed endless. He had longed to be home where he thought he would be able to salve the ache he felt in every fiber of his being. Phillip had been dead for three years, but for Peter it had only been a matter of weeks since his mother broke the news to him.

News that was old to everyone around him, but to him, still searingly painful.

Today, Eve had promised she would take him to Phillip's grave. He had been buried alongside his parents in the cemetery at St. August-

ine's Church. Eve had made all the arrangements after reading Phillip's will.

Strange, Peter now reflected, how Phillip had insisted on them both writing wills. They were both so young. Had he suspected that he would die prematurely, or had it been just his organized way of preparing for all things unexpected? Peter hadn't even questioned it at the time, just went along with it as he always had with Phillip.

Slowly, he got out of bed and put on a cotton robe, then padded to the bathroom. After rinsing his hands and splashing his face with cold water, he looked at his reflection for a long moment. A solemn young man looked back at him, pale and unsmiling, his blond hair tousled and falling into his eyes. Impatiently he swept it back off his forehead and reached for a towel to dry himself.

Leaving the bathroom, he pushed open the door to his studio. For a moment, he stood in the doorway, gazing into the large well-lit space Phillip had designed and built for him years before. Almost with reluctance, he entered the studio.

He stood in the center of the room looking around at what had once been an integral part of his life. He remembered the countless hours he had spent here, creating the works of art that had made him a popular and sought-after artist. Now, it suddenly felt like an alien place to him, as if he had no right to be there.

He shivered slightly as that thought slid insidiously into his mind. A single easel stood in one corner of the studio, its canvas covered by an oilcloth. He lifted the cloth, and felt his heart stop for a moment as he looked upon Phillip's unfinished portrait.

He closed his eyes as he tried to remember the last time that he had worked on it—was it really three years ago? He had outlined the thick mane of hair that crowned Phillips' head, and had almost finished the eyes...emerald green eyes that now gazed back at him with the look of candor he knew so well.

"Phillip," he said softly, as he gently traced with one finger the outline of the young man's eyebrow. "How could this ever have happened to us?"

For a long moment he stood in front of the painting, unwilling to leave it, then, fighting back his tears he turned and walked slowly from the studio. Going downstairs to the kitchen to make some coffee, he remembered the countless times he had done just this one simple routine, only then it would have been to start the coffee for Phillip as he showered and prepared to get ready for work.

Flipping the switch on the coffee machine, he passed through the kitchen to the garden beyond and stood for a moment, head lifted, letting the rays of the morning sun bathe his face. It was late August, with no hint of coolness in the air. Yet, as he gazed at the Noble pine tree he and Phillip had planted after their first Christmas here—in their new home, his mind went racing back to that wonderful, happy time.

Phillip had been Father Christmas personified, buying gifts for all their friends and spending hours finding this perfect tree. A whole evening had been devoted to decorating it, at the end of which a champagne toast was drunk to celebrate its completion. They had stood side by side admiring the tree's beauty, then Phillip had kissed him and wished him countless more Merry Christmases together. Now, this distant happy memory brought him only a feeling of desolation and loneliness.

He sat down heavily on a garden bench and covered his face with his hands. His eyes remained dry, but he was sure his heart was breaking. His body shook with grief, and finally a sob was torn from deep inside him, as he cried out,

"Phillip...!"

For a long time, he sat silent and despondent. Then, resigned to the fact that he must begin the day he got to his feet, went back into the kitchen and poured himself some coffee. The jangling of the phone next to him made him jump, and he picked it up with an unsteady hand.

"Peter? It's Andrew."

"Hi, Andrew."

"Hi...listen, I'll be over later with the exercise equipment we talked about. Have you decided where you'd like to work out?"

"Not really. Oh, the garage I guess. There's plenty of room in there. We could clear a space, I suppose."

"Okay, sounds good. How are you feeling today?"

Peter wanted to yell... "How the hell do you suppose I feel? I've only been in a coma for the last three years after nearly having my brains bashed in. Then when I wake up I'm told my lover was murdered and no one ever bothered to find out who did it and the bastards are still going around probably doing the same thing to other poor homos in LA."...But all he said was, "I'm fine, really. We're going to the cemetery today, but we'll be back by noon I expect."

He could not, after all, yell at Andrew. Andrew had been the one he had leaned on both mentally and physically in those first few days, after he awoke. After the police had asked their few perfunctory questions and left, and the reporters had gotten enough to run their stories under banner headlines in the local press, Andrew had sat by Peter's hospital bed.

Over the course of the next few days, he had patiently filled him in on the happenings of the world during the past three years. He had brought him back issues of Time and Newsweek that dealt with the major issues of these, for him, lost years.

The one thing he could not bring himself to read, or have read to him, was the newspaper account of what had happened to Phillip and himself. He had been stunned when the police had visited him in hospital and explained what had taken place that night.

Of course, he remembered nothing. He was of no help to them, and they went away, relieved that they did not have to re-open the case.

Andrew had brought his friend David to meet him and they had warmed to each other immediately. David had visited often after that on his way home from the office and had helped escort him home, along with Eve and Andrew. Thanks to Andrew's skill and patience he had quickly learned to walk again, supported by Andrew and a nurse while Eve, Fred and David had stood by smiling and applauding.

He wished he could have shared in their happiness—if only Phillip had been there too.

"All right," Andrew was saying. "I'll stop over about one o'clock."

"That's fine. Look forward to seeing you. Eve's going to make us some lunch."

"Great. I'll see you then. Bye."

Peter put the phone down and took a sip of his coffee. It tasted bitter, and he reached for the sugar.

Eating and drinking real food was still a major problem. After years of IV feeding, his stomach would not accept solids right away. He had been put on a regimen of soft baby foods to begin with, along with ice cream and Jell-O. The doctors had explained that his digestive organs, after such a long period of time of disuse, might have trouble adjusting to a normal diet. However, after many tests they had pronounced him in good shape internally. Just before he left the hospital, they had brought him a roast chicken dinner to try, but he had not been able to keep it down.

"No one likes hospital food, anyway," the doctor had remarked, sympathetically. "Just take it easy for the next few weeks. Lots of protein drinks and the liquid vitamins we've prescribed. And drink lots of water."

Slowly, his sense of taste and smell had returned, and now he grimaced as the sugar failed to take away the coffee's bitterness. He pushed aside the cup and poured himself a glass of water. A tap at the door signaled his mother's arrival.

"Good morning..." Eve still could not contain the delight she felt having her son home. Despite his obvious sadness, she felt that with the passage of time, he would make a new life for himself eventually. It would all just take time.

"Hey, Mom." Peter made an attempt to return her smile. "Sorry I'm running a little late. I'll just have a quick shower and be right with you."

"Don't hurry darling. I have my book with me."

Peter kissed her cheek, then ran up to the bathroom as she settled down in the living room to read.

He did not know how he was going to feel visiting Phillip's grave. It was something he wanted to do very badly, but he knew it was going to be the worst moment of his life.

He could never have imagined this happening. They should have had so many more years together. They had joked about who was going to wheel who in a bath chair, when they were "old and gray".

"I'll still love you, even when you have to wear Depends honey," Phillip had laughed.

He could feel the tears rising in his eyes again at these memories, and quickly he turned his face up to the showerhead, to let the warm water wash them away. Even this simple act brought to mind the times when Phillip, forgetting Peter was in the shower, would turn on the cold-water faucet. The shower water would immediately get too hot and Peter would yell comic threats of reprisal at his friend, much to Phillip's amusement.

Now at the memory of it, Peter bowed his head under the water...and willed in vain for it to turn scalding hot.

\* \*

"You look nice, darling." Eve looked up from her book, as Peter came downstairs.

He was wearing a new pair of slacks she'd picked up for him, all his clothes being too big for him at present. The shirt he wore hung loosely on him emphasizing his thinness, but he didn't care. Phillip had liked it on him.

His mother rose and hugged him to her. "We should get going Peter, before the traffic on Coast Highway gets too miserable."

He nodded in agreement and she took his arm, leading him to the front door.

He hesitated before opening the door. "This is going to be bad, Mom. Are you sure you won't let me go alone?"

"I wouldn't dream of it. The doctors said you shouldn't drive for a while, Peter. You can't go alone."

"Then maybe Andrew could take me, or Fred..."

"No Peter, *I'm* taking you. I would be hurt if anyone else went with you. I know it will be hard for you...for both of us, but it's best I come with you."

Peter was silent as they drove north on the highway, staring straight ahead, his hands tightly clenched about his knees. The beauty of the California coastline they traveled along was lost on him this day.

St Augustine's churchyard was devoid of any other visitors as they slowly walked down the gravel path that led to the gravesites. The green lawns and sculpted shrubs were meticulously cared for and the entire area had a serene and tranquil feeling. The occasional bird chirped from the nearby trees. He was dimly aware of the hum of the traffic from the Coast Highway, the only other sound to break the otherwise overpowering silence that prevailed there.

Eve's hand on his arm told Peter they had reached the place where Phillip lay, and as she placed the flowers they had brought, he forced himself to look at the white marble headstone inscribed with the words:

## PHILLIP JENNINGS Beloved son of John & Elizabeth Jennings and devoted friend of Peter Brandon. R.I.P.

Peter looked down at the freshly raked ground in front of the stone. His mind reeled with horror, as the reality of Phillip's death settled round his heart like a cold and clammy fist. He felt his legs tremble and buckle beneath him.

He's down there, he thought, a quiet shock enveloping him. He's locked away from me forever beneath all that dirt. But I could reach him if I tried. I could dig away all that soil with my bare hands and find him and tell him I can't live without him...

Sobbing, he fell to his knees, his mind consumed by these irrational thoughts. He felt as though his chest would burst with the pain he now felt building inside him. His hands tore at his hair in an almost barbaric symbol of grief. Eve knelt beside him, sharing that grief, her arms seeking to protect him from what she knew she could not. As he knelt there, swallowed up by his emotions, somewhere in the deepest recesses of his mind he heard a voice gently say...

"Peter, I'm here."

He looked up quickly, his heart pounding with expectancy. For an instant he fully expected to see the owner of that voice standing by him.

"Phillip?"

Eve gripped his arm, startled by his cry.

"It's all right Peter," she said trying to console him.

He seemed not to hear her, but looked around him, his eyes searching the gentle grassy slopes of the cemetery. He jumped to his feet and stood, as though waiting for someone to meet him there. Beside him, Eve struggled to her feet.

"Peter, are you all right?"

"Phillip's here, Mom. He spoke my name. Didn't you hear him?"

"No son, I didn't."

For a moment Eve was afraid that Peter's grief had unhinged his mind, but as he took her hands in his a smile transformed his face.

"He said, 'Peter, I'm here', and I know he wanted me to understand that he's still here with me, that we'll never really be parted. He's still here."

Eve squeezed her son's hands gently to show she did indeed understand. She wanted to believe that what Peter had heard was indeed Phillip's voice, if that's what it took to make her son whole again and give him the reason to go on with his life.

"Mom, would you just leave me here for a few minutes alone, with Phillip?"

"Of course," Eve said, after a moment's hesitation. "I'll just walk on slowly and wait for you at the gate."

Peter watched as she walked away, then he knelt again at the graveside. Had he only imagined what had just happened? Was this just wishful thinking? An inability to let go of what had been?

Perhaps, but for the moment it was all he had.

He closed his eyes and remained still and silent for a while. Deep inside him, he knew that what he had heard was not his imagination. Phillip's voice had sounded as real as when he had been alive.

"Phillip," he murmured now, "I will miss you for the rest of my life, but I know now you want me to go on. So I will. And I promise you this...I'll find those responsible for tearing us apart. It may take a long time..."

He smiled sadly.

"Would you believe I don't even remember us going to the theater that night? But I will remember one day, I'm sure of it. Somehow, something will come back to me. You'll help me I know...I love you, Phillip."

He rose to his feet and turned from the graveside, gazing across the verdant landscaping of the cemetery to the azure ocean beyond. As he stood there, taking in the beauty of this incredible vista, a warm breeze sprang up and caressed his face, like a lover's touch. "Thank you," he whispered.

Then, filled with a determination he'd not felt before, he set off toward the gates where his mother patiently awaited him.



You're a lucky guy, Andrew Connor!" Peter was sitting astride a rowing machine and going into his fourth set of reps, breaking a fine sweat as he did so.

"How so?" Andrew was carefully monitoring Peter's progress.

"Having that handsome dude in your life. He's quite a catch. How did you do it?"

Andrew grinned at him. "Just was my sweet and sexy self—and he couldn't resist."

"Hmm. You sure you didn't tell him you were heir to a fortune, or something?"

"Hey!" Andrew pretended to take offense. "I'll have you know my charm is legendary."

Peter grinned at him and once more Andrew felt a quick surge of gladness at the change he had seen in Peter in the weeks since his visit to the cemetery. His whole appearance had somehow been transformed, as if a darkness had been lifted from him.

The most striking difference was in his eyes.

Clouded and lackluster with sorrow since his awakening, now their blue intensity Andrew had only seen in photographs had returned. Andrew wasn't kidding himself into believing that Peter had lain the past to rest. It was much too soon for that, but he had certainly attained some peace of mind, and that for the time being, was enough.

Peter had been happy to see David that morning when he dropped Andrew off at the house. Andrew's car had decided it needed a service and would not move until it got some attention, so David had come in for a cup of coffee before the two started their morning exercise program. David and Peter had become firm friends over the past couple of months since Andrew had first brought him to the hospital, and they had enjoyed some lively conversation before David had to leave for work.

"Like I said, you're a lucky guy." Peter slowed down, puffing slightly. "Whoa, I think I need a rest, already."

"Okay, you shouldn't over do it anyway. Go get a protein drink, then we can go for a short jog through the park."

"Yes sir, boss-man..." Peter grinned cheekily at him, bowing from the waist, hands clasped together. Andrew laughed, high on the positive change in his friend's attitude. Secretly, he hoped that it was not too much too soon, and that Peter would not give in again to the grief that he must surely still be feeling. He was not about to say, or do anything to dampen Peter's spirits however, and went along with the joke, swiping at him with his work out towel and shooing him into the kitchen.

"And bring me some water," he yelled at Peter's retreating back.

"Yes sir, ma'am!" Peter yelled back.

Chuckling, Andrew went back to the work out bench and started doing some bicep curls. He'd been pleased when the doctors had recommended that Peter keep up a vigorous exercise program and had happily agreed to become his full time trainer.

It had meant a bit of juggling with the appointments of his therapy patients, but he now devoted four mornings a week to Peter's well being and was impressed with the progress being made by his 'trainee'

"Won't be long before you give Arnold a run for his money," he had kidded him the other day, watching Peter flex his biceps after a training session. His body had regained much of its original tone and definition, and he seemed taller somehow.

"Yeah, not bad," Peter had agreed. "Phillip was the one with the muscles. He said I had a more aesthetic quality." For a moment he had been silent, remembering moments that could not be recaptured and Andrew's heart had ached as he looked at his friend, but could find no adequate words of comfort.

His thoughts were interrupted as Peter came noisily back into the garage, wearing his running shorts, sweatshirt and shoes—ready for their jog. Andrew quickly toweled off and slipped on his tank top.

Peter grabbed his arm. "Okay boss, let's go!"

They took off at a brisk pace down the hill toward the Coast Highway and across to the park situated on the cliff tops high above Laguna's rocky coastline. It was a beautiful day but the park was not as busy as at the weekends, so they were able to run an almost straight course through without having to dodge the usual droves of tourists that invaded Laguna on Saturdays and Sundays.

The annual Pageant and art festival were long over, and the town had returned to some normalcy after the madness of July and August when traffic was at a total standstill most of the time—and driving down the Canyon road was a torture best left to masochists.

They slowed the pace and then ran down the steps to the beach where they cooled down with a stroll on the sand. Both men were silent for some time as they enjoyed the sensation of breathing in the clean salty air and feeling the dash of the sea spray as the waves crashed in on shore. They took off their running shoes and cooled their feet in the sparkling water.

Neither was aware that they were being watched from the top of the cliff above them. Billy Bach had been watching their routine for some days now and had worked out a plan, which in his dull, defeated mind seemed the perfect 'accident.' He was dressed in jeans, sneakers and a hooded black sweatshirt. He had pulled the hood up and wrapped a towel round the lower part of his face. He had pretended to jog back and forth along the path at the cliff edge, never for a moment taking his eyes off the two men below him. He was convinced that he had to do this now. The Brandon guy looked way too healthy to him, and he was sure that it was just a matter of time before he read in the newspapers that his memory was returning.

It had to be today...all he had to do was wait for him and his sissy buddy to come up those steps to the cliff top—and little Peter was in for a big surprise. The fall he would take down those steep concrete steps would be enough to crack his skull or break his neck—or better still, both. Billy allowed himself a mirthless smile at the thought. Very soon, his problem would be over.

"Peter?" Andrew looked at his friend as they paddled their way back on to shore. "Do you mind if I ask you about something that's been kind of troubling me lately?"

"Ask away."

"You haven't ever mentioned getting back to your painting since you came out of the coma. David and I are just in awe of what you've done, and the exhibitions you've had. In fact, it was he who asked if you'd been painting."

Peter was quiet for a while, as if mulling over a careful explanation. Finally he said, "The truth is I can't anymore, I'm afraid. It's as if I've forgotten how. Wait...let me explain," he added, as Andrew drew breath to ask how that could possibly be. "You've seen that unfinished portrait of Phillip in the bedroom?"

Andrew nodded as Peter continued. "I have tried several times to finish it in the last few weeks...and I just can't. I stand there looking at his face and I don't even know where to begin. I don't even know

how to mix the colors anymore for his skin tones—for the face that I love so much.

"The first day I was home, I stood in my studio and it was as if I didn't belong there anymore. It's almost as if that part of my life had never existed." He stopped and looked out over the ocean. "None of what I just said makes much sense to you, probably. Sometimes, I don't understand it either..."

Andrew wished he hadn't broached this subject, as it was clear Peter was getting upset. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have brought it up. It's just that David and I thought it might be..."

"Good for me?" Peter finished for him, almost angrily. "I wish it were all as easy as that Andrew. 'Give Peter a canvas and some paint and he'll forget the horror of the past three years'. God, if only I could. If I could only forget what my life has become...an endless pretense at being back to my old self, when every day I think of the three whole years that are missing from my life. Every day, I long to have them back...to have lived those three years with Phillip. Not to have spent them in some god-awful limbo I couldn't escape from."

Suddenly, he ran toward the surf, pulling off his sweatshirt, tossing it away and plunging into the roiling waves. For a moment Andrew was transfixed with dread as Peter disappeared beneath the surface, and then he too ran into the pounding surf, yelling Peter's name.

Andrew was a strong swimmer but the currents by the rocks were treacherous, and he felt himself being tugged back to shore. He was making little headway, when right beside him a blond head surfaced, and there was Peter, grinning at him.

"Race you back!" he yelled madly.

Andrew laughed aloud with relief and followed his friend back to shore, determined to bawl him out for frightening him like that. They flung themselves down on the sand and Peter shouted to the sky, "I'm going out of my mind...I'm ready for the loony bin...take me now."

"Shut up Peter, you'll scare the gulls," Andrew laughed. "Not to mention that old couple sitting back there."

Peter jumped to his feet and started chasing the birds along the shore, waving his arms wildly and yelling at the top of his voice. Andrew lay back on the sand and waited for him to return. There was no point in trying to yell at him for his crazy behavior. It was something he obviously had to get out of his system. He had been much too calm, and if Andrew had touched a nerve by mentioning his painting, then so be it. Perhaps he would talk about it more freely. It had surely been pent up inside of him for some time, and he had not shared his frustration with anyone, not even Eve.

Peter finally returned and flopped down beside Andrew, looking flushed and endearingly foolish.

"Peter..."

Andrew was silenced by the beatific smile on Peter's face.

"I'm an idiot, I know," he said. "You and David only want me to be happy...and in some strange way, I am. The fact that I can't paint anymore has unsettled me, I can't deny that, but right now there are more important things in life. When I heard Phillip's voice that day, I swore to him that I would find out who did this to him...and I meant it. I will never have complete closure till I do. Deep inside me, I know that Phillip is going to help me remember that night. I'm not a religious person Andrew, but there's this feeling I get sometimes. I wish I could describe it to you, but it's too fleeting to find an explanation for."

"Like a memory?" Andrew was enthralled by Peter's revelation.

"Not so much a memory really, more just a...feeling."

Peter stood up and held out his hand to Andrew, pulling him to his feet.

"You've become a real friend to me, Andrew. Someone I can be myself with. You even put up with my craziness. Now, come on, you're going to be late for your afternoon appointments. We'd better get back."

He started to run back to the steps that led to the cliff-top park, pulling on his sweatshirt as he ran.

"Last one up's a big Mary," he laughed mockingly, as Andrew sprinted after him.

They reached the top of the steep steps, laughing and out of breath. Peter bent over, hands on his knees, puffing dramatically. Andrew swiped at him playfully with his towel and Peter affected a mock boxing pose.

"Put 'em up, put 'em up..." he yelled, imitating the Cowardly Lion in the Wizard of Oz.

Andrew's laughter turned to quick concern when he saw, over Peter's shoulder, a large ungainly figure in a black hooded sweatshirt bearing down on his friend.

"Hey, look where you're going," Andrew shouted at the man, but it was too late.

With a seemingly deliberate move the man sideswiped Peter and knocked him backward towards the steep steps.

"Peter..."

Andrew cried out in horror and leapt forward, just managing to grab a handful of his friend's shirt. His arm felt as if it were being wrenched from its socket but he held on, the two of them tumbling down a few steps, and although Peter's head made contact with the iron railing, he was able to sit up immediately and ask Andrew if he was all right.

"Yes, yes I'm fine..." He rubbed his shoulder ruefully. "What about you? What the hell was wrong with that maniac?"

A crowd had gathered and a young man with a cell phone asked if he should call 911.

"No thanks," Peter said.

"Yes," Andrew told him, then turned to Peter. "You must go in for a check up, after all you've been through."

Peter was about to argue, but he could see the sense in what Andrew was saying, so he relented. The man with the cell phone made the call then came down the steps.

"I saw that jerk knock you down," he said. "I couldn't believe it when he just kept on going. He looked back, saw what had happened—and then took off. I yelled at him but he just kept on going."

"Thanks for your help, anyway." Peter stood up and held out his hand to the man. "I'm Peter, and this is my friend Andrew Connor."

The man shook Peter's hand. "Bob Nichols. I should tell you I know who you are. I report for the Beach Register."

"What a coincidence," Andrew laughed wryly, as he too shook the reporter's hand. "You're going to make the papers again, Peter."

Peter frowned. "Just make sure you give the credit to Andrew for saving me from a really nasty accident."

"Oh, of course," Bob said. "People love a good drama, and you were quite the celebrity when you came out of the coma..."

Mercifully, the ambulance arrived quickly, and after a quick examination they bundled the two friends inside and raced off to the hospital. Ed Hamilton was on duty and came down when he heard that Peter and Andrew were in emergency.

"What's all this, you two?" he scolded them. "You're not supposed to be taking flying leaps down concrete steps."

Peter shrugged. "Tell that to the moron who ran us down. There we were, minding our own business, when wham! And the jerk didn't even say, sorry."

"Thank goodness it wasn't a lot worse," Ed said. "The X-rays are fine. Andrew, watch that arm for a couple of days. Here are some painkillers if it starts to really bother you. As for you Peter, you are very lucky. No concussion, just a few bruises on your backside."

"Well, no one's going to see those—except my physical therapist," Peter laughed as he jumped off the examining table. "Let's get out of here...I've had enough of hospitals recently."

\* \* 4

Later that night, David and Andrew sat outside on their deck, watching the sun sinking slowly below the horizon. They were always quiet at this moment, savoring that precious time together.

"Did you hear it hiss?" David teased.

Andrew smiled fondly at him. "I always do."

"How's your arm feel?"

"It's fine, really." He looked at David. "I need to talk to you about Peter."

"Okay. Let's go inside, it's getting a little chilly. I'll make us a drink and we can talk."

As David got the ice from the freezer and started to mix them a couple of drinks, Andrew put his arms around his waist and hugged him tightly. "I love you so much."

David laughed, juggling the glasses and turning to kiss Andrew's cheek. "I love you too, sweetie."

"No...really," Andrew said. "I'm serious. I am so lucky to have you in my life. I don't think I tell you enough. Sometimes things are taken for granted, and we don't say what we feel deep inside. These last few weeks being with Peter have made me realize just how fragile all our lives are. And after what happened today, it seems it all could be taken away from us in the blinking of an eye."

David carefully put down the glasses and held Andrew close.

"Don't worry kiddo." His lips brushed Andrew's ear. "Nothing's going to happen to us. I won't let it. Now tell me what's troubling you."

"It's not really trouble."

Andrew took the proffered drink from David. They walked back into the living room and settled on the sofa. Andrew drew his legs under him, and considered what he was going to say.

"It's just that...before all the craziness happened today, I asked Peter about his painting and he got really mad at me for just a moment. The next thing he's running off into the surf laughing like a loon. I honestly thought he intended to drown himself, and then there he was, challenging me to a race."

"Perhaps you're just beginning to see the real Peter."

"Maybe...there's no doubt he's a strong character, and not one used to keep his feelings in. I think he's trying to set aside his grief...so that he can begin to remember just what happened that night. He feels that Phillip is somehow going to help him do this, in a way that even he doesn't understand. I'm just afraid that it'll be come too much of an obsession and unhinge him somehow."

"What does he mean, Phillip will help him?" David asked, frowning.

"He said he sometimes gets these feelings that Phillip is guiding him to find an answer. Do you think he needs a counselor?"

"I thought he turned that down when they recommended it at the hospital."

"He did. He didn't want a total stranger, as he put it, trying to understand what he'd been through, when he didn't understand it himself."

"Hmm..." David got up suddenly and went into the bedroom. He returned a moment later with a business card in his hand.

"Rob gave me this the last time he was over. It's Jeff Stevens' phone number. Remember the guy Rob and I went to school with...the private investigator? What if we asked him to come down and talk to Peter about the incident? He knows the background, was even a cop at the time. He just might know the kind of questions to ask to help bring some details back to Peter's mind. Something that's locked away and just needs the right catalyst to trigger a memory."

"I don't know, David. Peter's awfully touchy talking about all this."

"Well, of course we wouldn't do it without his permission...but, if he's really serious about finding the ones responsible for Phillip's death, it seems to me Jeff could just be the answer. Why don't you ask him tomorrow? If he agrees I could go see Jeff in his office. I've been meaning to do that anyway."

"Oh yeah?" Andrew struck a menacing pose. "Planning a little reunion with just the two of you, were you? I think I'd better come along as chaperone, given your past history."

"Silly, silly..." David yelled and started to tickle Andrew unmercifully.

Andrew squealed for help, and the two of them were soon lying on the floor laughing helplessly.

"Seriously though..." David said, when their giggling had subsided. "What do you think? Surely there's no harm in asking Peter?"

"You're right as usual." Andrew rolled on top of him. "Now, make me forget my jealousy... *Ouch*, my arm...

Later, as they lay together on the couch, Andrew said, "You know, there is one thing that's still bothering me about this afternoon."

"And what is that?" David nuzzled Andrew's neck with his chin.

"When that guy ran into Peter, the more I think about it...I think he did it deliberately."

"What makes you say that?" David sounded skeptical.

"If you'd seen how it happened...He just charged straight at us. I yelled at him to watch out, but he just kept going right at Peter. That reporter Nichols, thought it looked deliberate too."

David was quiet for a moment, then he said, "Well, seems to me that's all the more reason we should call Jeff, don't you think?"



Peter and Eve were, at that moment, enjoying a drive down Coast Highway on their way to have dinner with Rod and 'A' at their home in South Laguna. The two men had just returned from Europe and were "over the moon" as they put it, to hear the wonderful news of Peter's recovery. Peter of course had downplayed the afternoon's incident, and had insisted they keep their dinner date despite Eve's worried objections. He had taken the top down on his convertible and although the evening promised to be a cool one later, there was still enough warmth in the breeze to make the drive very pleasant.

As they pulled into the driveway of their friends' house, which was situated on the coast side of the Highway, the two of them were standing in the front courtyard, holding a "Welcome Home Peter" sign between them and waving madly as the car approached. Peter smiled hugely at the sight of them. As always they made him feel special and very loved. He had known them for years, and he and Phillip had enjoyed endless hours in their company, listening to their tales of the London and provincial shows they had done in their youth.

Rod was still trim, and his hair a magnificent crown of silver waves, while 'A' was short, stocky and going bald, with a face that could be transformed from its usual jolly self into the brooding masks of Joan Crawford and Marlene Dietrich at the drop of a hat. He had an incredible talent for impersonation and comedy that would send Peter and Phillip into painful fits of laughter.

"Darling boy," he now cried, rushing forward to embrace Peter, holding him fiercely and sobbing for joy.

"Now, now, Arthur," Rod complained as he kissed Eve hello. "Don't drown the boy before I get a chance to say 'welcome back."

Pushing 'A' to one side, who promptly collapsed in Eve's arms, he embraced Peter warmly and said, "He's never stopped talking about this since we heard the news. So *wonderful* to see you looking healthy and well."

"Come along, come along. Inside everyone!" 'A' shouted, brushing away his tears. It's too bloody cold out here—and the champagne's getting warm."

He steered Eve into the house, fussing all the way and tripping over their cat, sending it screeching upstairs to the safety of the bedrooms. "Arthur for goodness sake, calm down," Rod scolded him. "Eve and Peter will think you've been at the bottle."

"Well I have," 'A' said brightly, "And I'll be at it all night. This is a celebration."

Champagne and glasses were produced with a flourish and, as they drank a toast to this long wished for reunion, Peter included Phillip's name as a remembrance. No one was uncomfortable with this reminder of their dead friend, for he was still very much a part of all their lives.

"We talk of him often," Rod said, as they sat down in the living room on comfortable wing chairs brought from their London home.

Peter looked around the room without sadness.

"The last time we were here, we watched "All About Eve", remember? And then 'A' did the most marvelous impersonation of Bette Davis saying, "Fasten your seatbelts..."

"It's going to be a *bumpy* night," 'A' finished for him in an uncanny likeness of the famous star.

"Yes," Peter laughed. "Phillip was going around for days after trying to get that voice right. Never did."

He looked around the comfortable room, at the walls of shelves crammed with books and videos of classic films, shows and star biographies, and felt almost as though he had come home for a second time. He and Phillip had spent so many happy hours here.

"Peter almost had a nasty accident today," Eve said, changing the subject none too subtly.

"Oh no," 'A' cried, "What happened?"

Keeping it as light as he could, Peter briefly recounted the episode at the beach.

"You'll probably read all about it in the local rag anyway. There just happened to be a reporter there who saw the whole thing."

"Oh my," Rod said, worriedly. "When you think what could have happened. Those steps are so steep. You could have been killed."

"Well, as you can see, I wasn't," Peter laughed. "I'm fine...really. Now why don't you tell us all about your latest visit to Europe? Did you have fun?"

"It's all become far too expensive," 'A' said, immediately. "I can't believe any restaurant in the world can possibly justify the prices they charge in London and Paris."

Rod laughed. "That's the Scot in him talking. And if you recall, my dear, the most expensive meal we had was in Edinburgh...your mother's hometown."

"Never mind that," 'A' sniffed. "We did see some wonderful shows there during the Festival—it's always a real treat."

"Indeed it is," Rod agreed. "And talking of treats, a little bird reminded us it's your birthday soon, Peter. We'd like to throw a party for you here to celebrate. Let us know who you'd like to invite—and we'll make all the arrangements."

"Oh guys, no. That's way too much work and trouble for you. Let's just go out to dinner or something."

"Nonsense, dear boy," Rod said, firmly. "This will be a most special birthday—the first one in three years. We insist on taking the credit for it being like no other!"

"Absolutely!" 'A' clapped his hands. "Please don't spoil our pleasure."

"That is so nice of you both," Eve said. "I can't think of any other two people who would go out of their way to make Peter's birthday so special."

Both Rod and 'A' beamed happily as Peter got up and hugged them both.

"You're the best friends Phillip and I ever had," he said as the two men each brushed away a tear.

"All right, that's enough of that," 'A' said, rising and running to the kitchen. "Dinner will be served in two minutes flat—and I don't want any of it getting cold!"



hen Peter started to think of those he'd like to invite to his birthday party, he drew a blank after the first few names sprang to mind. His mother and Fred of course, Dr. Ed and his wife Kay, Andrew and David—but what of his friends from before the coma?

Friends of his and Phillip.

So few had bothered to call when news of his recovery became known, and the ones who had, all seemed to have moved away—too far away to come to a birthday party. Bob and Ralph, the two friends who had been with them on that fateful night, now lived in New Mexico. They had talked for hours on the phone when they heard of his recovery, but it was probably too short notice to expect them to fly in from Santa Fe.

He'd give them a call anyway.

A shadow of depression fell over him, as once more he felt the emptiness the loss of Phillip had created in his life. Before all this had happened, when Phillip was out of town, Peter had been able to call on his best buddy Brian, to rid him of the blues. But Brian too was gone, an early victim of the AIDS epidemic.

Peter had never really been very fond of Brian's partner, Bruce. He had found him to be too self-involved and vain, and had actually thought Bruce had been using Brian for selfish ends. Peter had to

admit though, that when Brian got sick, Bruce had been very supportive and had stayed by his side to the end.

Bruce had read of Peter's recovery.

"I was going to call you when I read about you in the paper," he said when Peter called to invite him to his party. "But you were always so much more Brian's friend. I didn't think you'd want to hear from me. Would you mind if I brought my new boyfriend along too?"

"Of course not," Peter replied. "I'll look forward to meeting him and catching up with your news."

"Why don't we get together before that to catch up?" Bruce asked. "It's still a week to the party. Come over tomorrow night if you can. I'll make us a snack and we can kick back and talk about old times."

For a moment, Peter felt an awkward reluctance in accepting this invitation, but quickly brushed the feeling aside. He agreed to go over to Bruce's house the following night. It had been Brian's house before they met, and he had left it to Bruce in his will when they found out how sick he was. After their conversation, Peter found himself remembering that Phillip too had harbored reservations about Bruce, and suddenly he found himself wondering why on earth he had called the guy. He mentioned this to Andrew the next day as they worked out in the garage.

"Maybe you're just trying to fill in some of the gaps in your friendships," Andrew suggested.

"Well, Brian and I were best buddies right from the time we met at art school. Phillip liked him too, but never did take to Bruce...thought he was an operator."

"In what way?"

"Oh, kind of money hungry. Brian was pretty wealthy. His parents had invested in a large trust fund for him. That's how he bought the house for Bruce and himself."

"And you're going over to see him tonight?" Andrew laughed. "Be careful he doesn't put any moves on you...you're quite a catch you know."

"You must be joking. Besides, he has a boyfriend. I expect he'll be there too."

"By the way Peter..." Andrew said carefully, "David wanted me to ask you something."

"Oh yes?"

"Our friend Rob, you know the guy who actually introduced David and me? Well, it turns out that he and David went to school with a guy who was a cop in LA at the time you and Phillip were attacked. Anyway, he was pretty pissed off that the LA police didn't do more to investigate your case. He's a private investigator now in Santa Ana and David wondered if he might be able to help you."

"Help me...how?"

"You know—help you find whoever attacked you and Phillip."

"Did he say he could?"

"No, no. We haven't even talked to him yet. David wanted to make sure you'd be OK with this before he even called him."

Peter was thoughtful for a moment. "I don't know, Andrew. What would he have to go on? I can't remember *anything* about that night."

"Well, David thought that him being a professional investigator and an ex-cop, he might have ways to ask you questions that could maybe trigger a memory, or something like that."

"Yes, we haff ways..." Peter grinned, adopting a German accent. "You vill talk..."

Andrew chuckled. "Not like that. Besides, according to David, he's kind of hunky—at least he was in school."

"So?" Peter looked at him blankly. "Why would I care about that?" "Well..." Andrew said with a mischievous smile, and not sensing trouble ahead. "It can't hurt to have a good-looking PI working for

you. Who knows where it might lead? Sounds kind of romantic to me."

He was silenced by the cold expression on Peter's face.

"Look Andrew, it may seem to you that I am in need of some love and care, and you'd be right. But the one person who could give me that is gone. No one can ever replace him—no one. Don't ever get any ideas of trying to fix me up with anyone, ever."

"God...Peter," Andrew almost stammered. "I'm sorry. I was just kidding around. I had no intentions of upsetting you. Take it easy."

Peter's glare softened and he put an arm round Andrew's shoulders.

"No, no...it's me who should apologize. I'm way too touchy today for some reason. This is a fine way to repay the man who saved me from certain death. Forgive me?"

"Of course." Andrew smiled, but made a mental note not to broach this subject again.

"Let me think about David's plan," Peter said. "Maybe after my birthday I'll talk to this guy and see what he knows. Can't do any harm I guess."



Later that night Peter pulled up in front of Bruce's house.

He had almost called to cancel, but had thought better of it. After all, Bruce was a link to his past friendship with Brian—a friendship that had meant a great deal to him, and right now he needed something to remind him of those days, just as he had felt in Rod and 'A's company. That inexplicable feeling of intimacy that is shared among true friends. Something that even family cannot always provide.

Bruce waved from the verandah, and ran down the steps to greet him. He was still as tall and lanky as Peter remembered him, but his hair was a surprising reddish color instead of the brunet he used to be. He was wearing a sheer tank top, very brief shorts and had drenched himself with too much cologne. He wrapped Peter up in a big hug that the latter found strangely too familiar and from which he quickly disentangled himself. Bruce appeared not to notice, but gushed about how wonderful Peter looked and how excited he'd been to get his call.

"Al, that's my new beau, was coming over tonight, but I told him not to," he giggled, putting his arm round Peter's waist and guiding him up to the front door. "I said I'm having a friend over that I haven't seen in years, and want him all to myself. Poor thing, he was quite distraught and told me I'd better behave myself."

Yes, you'd damned well better, Peter thought as they entered the house.

Bruce was every bit as flamboyant as Peter remembered and had an annoying habit of touching him to accentuate a point in his conversation. Peter found himself putting as much distance between Bruce and himself as he possibly could, without seeming rude.

"A drinkie?" Bruce asked coyly as they entered the living room.

There was a large bar in the corner that Peter did not remember being there when Brian was alive. It was mirrored on every side and the glass shelves were crammed with crystal decanters and glasses of varying sizes and colors. It was quite ugly, and totally out of place in this room, with its beautiful old brick fireplace and oak beamed ceilings.

"I always wanted a bar like this, but Brian wouldn't allow it," Bruce said smugly. "What can I get you?"

"Just a glass of wine please...white, if you have it."

Peter wondered how he could politely make a fast getaway.

"Oh, you must have guessed I prepared a chicken dish for us," Bruce simpered, grabbing a bottle of Chardonnay from the fridge and pouring an alarming quantity into a huge balloon glass.

"You shouldn't have gone to such trouble, Bruce."

Peter walked over to the fireplace. "So, what have you been up to? Still working in the theater?"

Peter recalled Bruce had been an aspiring actor when he first met him, and for Brian's sake, he'd sat through a couple of very bad performances.

Bruce made a sour face. "Oh, there's just nothing I've been offered that I wanted to do...you know how it is, I'm sure. There's such a dearth of good plays out there these days."

Peter wasn't quite sure how to react to that statement without starting a barrage of theater criticism from Bruce, something Peter remembered he was all too capable of. Instead, he opted for a change of topic.

"Are you still in touch with Brian's parents?"

Bruce's face twisted into a look of disdain. "God no," he said. He paused to take a large gulp from his wineglass. "They never liked me from the start. They even tried to have me thrown out of here, after Brian died."

Peter knew that was not true. "Oh, I don't think they would have done that."

"Of course, because they *couldn't*!" Bruce snickered as he downed the last of his wine, then poured himself another. "Brian had left a will..."

"Yes, I remember..." Peter said sadly as he remembered Brian's last few days. He and Phillip had sat vigil by Brian's bedside and had been witnesses to that very will Bruce had just now mentioned.

"They couldn't do a thing about it!" Bruce said, waving the wine bottle over Peter's glass.

"No thanks, not for me."

"I just know it frosted them off to no end," Bruce continued. "They were so sure I would just go with out a fight. Well, I showed them!"

Peter felt irritated by Bruce's attitude. It seemed that the years had done nothing to change his blatant disregard for other people's feelings. It had always been all about Bruce...nothing had changed. Even Phillip, rarely one to criticize, had found Bruce to be just way too

much hard work. When Brian got sick, both Peter and Phillip had been surprised and pleased by the way Bruce seemed to throw aside his selfish nature as he took on the role of caregiver. It had all appeared to be so out of character for him—and of course, eventually it proved to be merely a means to an end. Bruce got what he wanted before Brian died...A will, leaving him the house and all of Brian's possessions.

Peter shook himself slightly to free his mind of those unpleasant memories.

"What does your boyfriend do?" he asked quickly, changing the subject once more.

"Oh, he works in a bookstore," Bruce replied, in a careless tone. "Quite the reader too. Bores the pants off me when he starts in on the latest thing he's reading. Don't know why he wants to share all that with me. I don't have any interest in books, do you?"

"Oh yes," Peter said, already feeling very sorry for Al. "Phillip and I were both readers. We used to enjoy discussing the stories after we had both read the same book."

"Really?" Bruce said, without even a pretense at interest. "Give me a good porno movie anytime. I have a whole library upstairs in the bedroom. Perhaps we could watch one together later?"

Peter could not believe what he was hearing. Was this idiot imagining that they would lie side by side in bed and watch a sex movie? He must be out of his mind. What the hell had he gotten himself into?

"Actually, I'm not too interested in watching other people do it," he said...then, as he watched Bruce's face dissolve into a lascivious leer, he realized he'd made a big mistake.

"Prefer the real thing eh?" Bruce rasped. "Well, you've come to the right place."

With that, he grabbed Peter in what he imagined was a passionate embrace, and began kissing him on the mouth.

"Jesus," Peter yelled, wrenching his mouth away and pouring his glass of wine over Bruce's head with his one free hand. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Bruce leapt back, wiping the wine from his eyes and screaming at the top of his voice, "You always were a cockteaser. Always leading us on...you, and your precious Phillip. Don't think I didn't see what you and Brian were up to behind my back. All those so-called friendly kisses and hugs. You were doing it with Brian and don't deny it!"

"Of course I deny it, you *ass*," Peter shouted, enraged by Bruce's stupidity. "Brian and I were friends, the *best* of friends, but that was all. We never went beyond that. I was with Phillip when I met Brian."

"So you say," Bruce hissed viciously. "Well, Miss Prim and Proper, your dead lover wasn't so damned particular."

Peter felt a rage cover him like an icy wave. "You had better shut up Bruce..." he said, his voice as cold as stone. "If you don't shut up right now, I may have to strike you."

"Oh my God!" Bruce shrieked in derision. "Please don't, I'm really scared!"

"You should be," Peter said as he pushed Bruce aside.

Bruce squawked as he took a clumsy, stumbling step backwards and sat down heavily on the floor, a look of total surprise on his face.

"Don't bother to get up," Peter said over his shoulder, as he headed for the door. "I'll see myself out."



T rank picked up his phone on the third ring. He had been napping on the couch on this Saturday afternoon, one of the few weekends he'd been scheduled off in months, and he was glad to be able to spend some time with Susan. She had just left to visit her mother. Frank did not accompany her on those trips, but she'd promised to be back by five so they could go out to dinner.

"Hello?" His voice was gruff, still thick with sleep. He grimaced as he recognized the smooth tones of the voice on the other end of the line.

"Our friend in Laguna just faxed me a newspaper article. Seems the Brandon boy was involved in what could have been a deadly accident."

Frank sat up quickly, rubbing his eyes.

"What?"

"The report says someone tried to push him down a flight of steps at the beach. Some reporter was actually at the scene and said it looked like a deliberate act. The perpetrator ran away, and no one got a clear look at him. Just that he was a big man in a black sweat-shirt with the hood up."

"Was Brandon hurt?"

"Not according to the report—just some minor bruising. He had a friend with him who apparently managed to break his fall."

"Too bad. If he'd broken his neck, it would have been good news."

"True, but we can't have any loose cannons running around bungling attempts to put Brandon out of the way. If it's to be, then it must be done correctly. I suggest you contact your friend Billy, and if it was indeed he who was involved in this, put a stop to it."

"Billy wouldn't do this without my say so. He's too much of a wimp to act on his own."

"Maybe so." A pause. "It could have been just an accident. But Frank—find out."

Frank frowned darkly at the voice's tone. He didn't like the fact that this man was still in his life. Shit...why the hell had he ever gotten involved in all this? Aloud he said, "I'll call Billy and see what he's been up to."

"Do that, and keep me informed. Am I to understand that Brandon still has not recovered his memory?"

"That's correct," Frank said, with conviction. "My contact at the hospital where he has his check-ups says there's little chance of that happening now."

He cursed as the line went dead. He hated these conversations. They put him on edge. He was always afraid Susan would overhear something. Thank God, she was out right now. Quickly, he picked up the phone again and dialed Billy's number.

"Billy," he snapped, as soon as he heard the other mans croaky voice. "The local Laguna paper had a report of an accident involving Peter Brandon. Tell me you had nothing to do with that."

"Frank! I...uh...I was nervous about him recovering..." Billy whimpered. "I...I figured it would be a good thing if I could get rid of him, you know?"

Frank felt his hot temper flare. "You asshole. You don't ever try something like that without me knowing. If we have to do it, it'll be even harder now to get close to him. He might be surrounded night and day. Don't you ever think?"

"I'm sorry, Frank. I thought I'd be doing you a favor."

"Don't do me any more favors. Listen, we have to talk about this. The man wants us to have some kind of plan just in case. You free Monday night? I'll come down and see you at your place."

"Yeah, that'll be OK, I guess." Billy's voice held no enthusiasm. His days of wanting to hang out with Frank were long gone. The man scared him—but he couldn't think of a good excuse fast enough.

"Fine. I'll see you around eight." Frank hung up, anger building inside him. He ran his hand through his hair in frustration.

"Fuck this," he muttered. If only he could go back three years and change everything. He had a sudden sickening sensation of everything closing in on him. He jumped to his feet and paced the room like a caged animal.

Get a grip, he thought. He couldn't let things fall apart now. He had too much to lose. If only he had known he was going to meet a wonderful woman like Susan, he'd never have gotten involved in any of this mess...if only he'd known. Frank put his head in his hands and groaned in frustration.

"If only..."

\* \*

Peter's birthday party was in full swing when Andrew and David arrived.

As commanded in the invitation, they had dressed in "smart casual attire". David looked particularly handsome, in a white silk shirt that set off his dark good looks to perfection. He had completed his outfit with a pair of black jeans and cowboy boots. Andrew had chosen a snug fitting ice blue T-shirt and white chinos.

All heads turned when they entered the crowded room, and for a moment they stood, vaguely embarrassed by the attention they were receiving.

They relaxed a little when 'A' bustled up, all smiles. "I thought I heard the doorbell. You must be Peter's friends Andrew and David. He talks about the two of you all the time. Welcome, welcome. This

*much* older gentleman," he indicated the silver haired man at his side...says he's my better half. This is Rod."

"A pleasure to meet you both," David said as he and Andrew shook hands with their hosts. They were immediately escorted to the bar.

"Where's Peter?" Andrew asked, watching the bartender flirt with David.

"Holding court, out on the verandah," 'A' replied. "They'll all feel that nip in the air in a moment though and come running in."

"Let me take you out to him," Rod said, rolling his eyes. "Arthur's a hot-house plant. You'd never know he was born in the frozen wastes of Scotland."

Walking out through the French doors to the spacious verandah beyond, they could hear the waves crash on to the beach below. When they reached the rail they could see the white caps gleaming in the moonlight, while far away, the lights of Palos Verdes twinkled in the darkness.

David said, "What a beautiful place you have here, Rod."

"We love it. It's quite a change from dreary old England. It never stopped raining the entire time we were there."

Peter spied them from the corner of the verandah, and excusing himself from the group of people surrounding him, rushed over to greet them. He looked fit and handsome, his newly acquired tan accented by the yellow silk shirt he was wearing.

"Happy Birthday," David and Andrew chorused and Andrew presented him with a small gift-wrapped box.

Peter hugged them both. "Thanks for coming. It wouldn't have been the same without you two."

Rod took the package from him. "I'll take this and put it with the others. You can open them all later."

"No sign of Bruce I see," Andrew said mischievously, after Rod left.

Peter laughed. "God, I hope not. I don't think even he would have the nerve to show up after I put him on his ass."

"Andrew told me what that idiot tried to do," David said. "How could anyone be that crass? If he shows up, I'll punch his lights out."

Andrew patted him on the arm. "Way to go, Butch!"

"Butch, but sensitive," David corrected him.

They were still chuckling when Eve came out onto the verandah looking extremely glamorous in a shimmering black top and matching pants. She wore a gold necklace and earrings and on her feet was a pair of gold-filigreed sandals.

"Eve, you look stunning," David said warmly, as she came forward to greet them.

She smiled at her son's two friends. "So good to see you again David...and Andrew. You both look so handsome."

She turned to Peter. "Don and Martha are here. Fred asked them to come by before they went to dinner and they want to wish you happy birthday. Why don't you go in and say hello?"

"Sure," Peter said. "See you guys in a minute or two."

Don and Martha Harley were old friends of his mother and Fred's. Don was the owner of one of the biggest architectural firms in Orange County and had been Phillip's boss. As he entered the room, he saw them talking to Fred and Rod.

Harley was a tall, distinguished man with hawk-like features and glittering blue eyes that never seemed to dwell too long on any one person. Martha, diminutive and slightly over dressed, was chattering madly to Rod about some show they had been to recently, and how she had adored it, and how he *must* see it. Rod was trying hard to look as though he were hanging on every word.

"There you are Peter," Fred Olsen exclaimed with some relief, drowning out Martha Harley's commentary and pulling Peter into the group. "Don and Martha wanted to wish you happy birthday, my boy. They have to rush off to dinner..."

He was interrupted by Martha, who pushed in front of him to grasp Peter's hand and gush, "Oh Peter, Don and I wanted you to know we're *so* happy that you have recovered, and well, we wanted to wish you a *personal* happy birthday rather than just send a card and when Fred mentioned this get together we just *had* to come despite the fact we have a prior engagement. I do hope you'll forgive us for not staying."

Peter looked at her with some amusement, as always at a loss to know why a woman as seemingly vacuous as Martha, was one of his mother's best friends. He smiled his thanks and murmured that he hoped they would have a pleasant dinner.

Don Harley impatiently pushed his hand passed his wife's bobbing head and said gruffly, "Glad to have you back from the dead, Peter."

Fred and Rod exchanged looks, somewhat taken aback by Harley's tactless statement, but Peter shook Harley's hand and smiled politely.

"Thank you, it's wonderful to be back...and thank you both for coming."

He frowned and paused for a moment.

"It's funny, but Phillip was only saying the other night that..." His voice trailed away as he realized he had no idea what he had meant to say. A shiver ran down his back as a quiet voice in the back of his mind said,

"No..."

Feeling dizzy, he stepped back, trying to regain his composure. "I...I'm sorry," he stammered, and Fred took him by the shoulder to steady him.

"Peter, lad. Are you all right?"

Peter leaned on him for a second. "Yes, yes. I'll be fine. Just give me a moment."

"Come over here and sit down," Rod said as 'A' came fussing towards them, concern written on his face.

"What's happening? Peter, are you ill?" There was a hint of hysteria in his voice. They guided Peter to the couch and he sat down, looking dazed and unsure of what was going on around him.

"Poor boy," Martha Harley murmured.

Don Harley looked at her. "Yes, poor boy indeed. He obviously has no attention span whatsoever. I don't think he's as well as everyone seemed to think."

He raised his glass to finish what remained of his drink, but also to hide from his wife the look of grim satisfaction that had appeared on his face.

Rod summoned Eve from the verandah and Andrew and David trailed in after her wondering why Rod looked so concerned. They were alarmed when they saw a group of guests surrounding Peter, who sat very still and silent on the couch, seemingly oblivious to everyone around him.

"Peter, what happened?" Eve grabbed Fred's arm. "Did you see what happened? Should we call a doctor?"

"Well, Ed will be here any moment," Fred tried to console her. "He'll be able to see to Peter, I'm sure."

Andrew sat by his friend and put his hand on his shoulder. "What's up Peter? Can you tell us?"

Peter seemed to focus at last, and looked around the room as if searching for something. Finally, he looked at Andrew and smiled shakily. "What's all this fuss for? I'm fine...really."

Everyone breathed an audible sigh of relief, and Eve hugged him tightly. "You frightened us there for a moment. Are you sure you're all right?"

"Totally." He got to his feet. "Come on, this is a party. Stop with the long faces already." His bad imitation of a Jewish accent got the laughing response he intended.

The laughter continued as 'A' pretended to swoon a la Scarlett O'Hara. "Oh, thank the Lawd," he cried, hand on brow, face up to the ceiling. "I was about to have a fit of the vapors."

Only David stood detached from the crowd, a thoughtful look on his face.

When Ed and Kay Hamilton arrived, Ed immediately sought Peter out. "We ran into the Harleys on the way in and Martha said you'd had an attack. I went back to the car and brought my bag. Let's go in the den and I'll take a look at you."

Peter started to protest. "No Ed, honestly I'm fine. Just a little dizzy spell."

"Please dear," Eve implored him. "Now that Ed's right here, it might be a good idea, just to make sure everything's all right."

Peter shrugged resignedly and let Ed lead him into the den. Ed shut the door and began to examine Peter, checking his pulse and blood pressure and listening to his heartbeat.

"Have you had the dizziness before?" he asked, shining a light into each of Peter's eyes.

"No, as a matter of fact, I've never felt as fit. Working out everyday and getting all that fresh air from jogging has been really good for me. *You* know I used to stay cooped up in the studio, painting for days on end. Now Andrew keeps me on my toes all the time."

Ed smiled as he put his stethoscope away. "Well, I can't find anything wrong with you. But take it easy for a couple of days and, no more champagne tonight."

"Wow, what a party pooper you are, Doctor Ed," Peter chuckled.

Ed looked at him seriously. "If you feel any recurrence of the dizziness in the next few days, call me immediately. We can't take any chances after what you've been through."

Peter nodded his assent as Ed opened the door and they walked back into the living room. To everyone's relief, Ed declared Peter to be one hundred percent fit.

"All right everybody..." Rod announced ringing a little crystal bell. "Dinner is served." He indicated the dining table that had been set up buffet style with so much food, it was a miracle it didn't collapse from the weight. "Come on now. Grab a plate, and tuck in!"

\* \*

After the gift opening ceremony, Peter stood out on the verandah enjoying the late evening balmy breezes that often spring up after sunset. David and Andrew joined him and he thanked them again for the silver box engraved with his initials they had picked up in one of the local antique stores.

"You sure you're feeling OK?" David asked him.

"Yes, but you know that was the darnedest feeling. I can tell you guys, but please don't mention this to anyone else, especially to Eve. I felt physically revolted when I shook Don Harley's hand and not just because it was a really clammy handshake. There was something else. Something I can't quite put my finger on. But whatever it was I was going to say to him...it was almost as if I was stopped from saying it. Like a warning of some kind. The crazy thing was...it seemed to come from Phillip."

Andrew felt a shiver run down his spine as he listened to Peter.

"In what way?" David asked.

"That's just it. I don't know, something he said...I could almost swear I heard his voice." He shook his head. "Am I going nuts?"

"No, of course you're not," Andrew said firmly.

"Listen, Peter..."

David had made up his mind to push the envelope.

"I really feel it would be a great idea if we got this friend of mine, a private investigator, to talk to you. He's an old high school buddy of Rob's and mine. I asked Andrew to mention him to you." Peter nodded and David continued, "He was actually a cop at the time you were attacked and knew about the incident."

"Yes, Andrew told me...But what d'you think he could do?"

Andrew jumped in. "David thinks he might be able to ask you the right questions that could somehow help you remember what happened that night."

"But couldn't the police have done the same thing?" Peter sounded dubious.

David grimaced. "If they were *interested*. They haven't shown any sign that they are. Jeff would have a different stake in this."

"Because he's gay?"

"No, because we'd be paying him."

Andrew and Peter both looked at David in surprise.

"Well, he's a professional. We couldn't expect him to do this for nothing."

"Oh right," Peter agreed, laughing. "What were we thinking? But I'll be paying him, not you guys. Okay, how do we get in touch with this *professional*?"

David grinned, ignoring Peter's sarcasm. "Rob gave me Jeff's business card, so I thought I'd make an appointment with him first to see if he'd be interested in taking this on."

"David wants to go see how his first major crush has turned out," Andrew said, with a wicked smile.

"Do not..." David colored slightly under Peter's intense gaze.

"Oho!" Peter picked up on Andrew's teasing. "An ulterior motive now rears its ugly head. And here, I thought this was all about me."

"Cut it out, you two." David joined in their laughter as Rod and 'A" came bustling out to announce that the blowing out of the candles time had arrived and that Peter was definitely needed for that occasion.

As they all went inside, he turned to David. "Call me after you've spoken to your friend. I think you're right. I should talk to someone about this. Who knows? Maybe he *can* help."

The cake cutting ritual over, Rod took Peter aside and whispered that he and 'A' would like to see him in the den alone, for a few minutes. Intrigued, he followed his two friends into the cozy room where

they immediately shut the door. Rod went to the bureau and brought out a brown paper package.

"We've kept this ever since the...uh, you know...since..." 'A' faltered in his explanation.

"Um...you know we bought Phillip's car?" Rod asked.

Peter nodded, puzzled by his friends' hesitation. "Yes, Mom told me. But what's worrying you both?"

Rod handed Peter the package.

"We found this in the boot—er, the *trunk*, when we were cleaning it out. We were going to give it to Eve. It's Phillips diary and appointment book. 'A', of course couldn't resist opening it, and there were one or two entries that we thought were adorable—about you. A bit risqué if you know what I mean. So, we thought it might be a good idea if we just held on to it until you got better. We put it away 'til now."

Peter looked at it in bewilderment...

Phillip's diary!

"That's so sweet of you both." Peter hugged them, fighting back the mixed emotions that surged through him. Could he ever bring himself to read Phillip's diary?

At that moment, he could not find the answer.



avid hadn't known quite what to expect when he called Jeff Steven's number, the Monday after the party. His heart, for some strange reason, was beating erratically as he dialed the number and listened to the first two rings. Then a woman's voice answered crisply, "Stevens' Investigations. This is Monica. How can I help you?"

"I...uh, is Jeff there?" David stammered, feeling vaguely foolish.

"No sir. May I take a message or schedule you an appointment?"

"Uh, yes. Is he free anytime this afternoon?"

"Let me see," Monica's efficient voice continued. "Yes. He's free at 3pm today, for one hour."

"That's good, I mean, can you put me down...uh...for that time?"

"Your name and phone number, sir?" David gave the information and put the phone down with a shaking hand.

"What the hell is wrong with you," he asked himself, angrily.

If Andrew could see him like this, he might not laugh it off as easily as before. He'd better get a grip. After all, he was only going to meet an old school buddy he hadn't seen in fifteen years. The fact that he'd been in love with him all those years ago had nothing to do with anything.

That was then—and now he loved Andrew very much—very, very, very much!

He had however, opted not to tell Andrew of the time when both he and Jeff were on the wrestling team and Jeff had offered to show him some moves to improve his performance.

David could still remember his embarrassment, when the effect of Jeff's body pressed against him and his arms around him had given him an instant erection. He had broken free and dived for his towel, holding it in front of him and stammering that he had to get home right away. Now he began to laugh quietly to himself as he realized how ridiculous these adolescent memories were.

Maybe by now, Jeff was fat and bald as a coot.

Now, *that's* being shallow, he thought. Slapping himself mentally, he put away his cell phone and returned to his work.

At a little after two he left the office and started the long crawl up the crowded freeway toward Santa Ana, as always, feeling very glad he didn't have to make this trip on a daily basis. He arrived only five minutes late and parked outside the gleaming glass building on Harbor Boulevard, feeling vaguely disappointed with the location.

He had expected a seedy address on a back street, a dark staircase leading to a shabby office where a blond secretary, chewing gum, would be sitting at an ancient typewriter doing her nails. Instead, behind the heavy plate glass doors there was an elegant desk with a very pretty young woman busily engaged at a computer keyboard.

She looked up and smiled as David entered.

"How can I help you sir?"

"I'm David Angelo. I have an appointment with Jeff Stevens."

"Oh yes, Mr. Angelo. Take the elevator over there to the second floor. It's the first door on the right. Have a nice day."

The elevator hummed smoothly to the second floor. David stood in front of the door marked—*Stevens' Investigations*—and, taking a deep breath, tapped on the door.

"David Angelo!"

The voice behind him made him jump almost a foot off the ground.

He swung round, and there was his friend, all smiles, taking him by the hand and shaking it vigorously. David felt weak, but from the shock of being scared like that or the sight of this incredible looking man in front of him, he was not sure.

"Jeff," he croaked. "You scared the shit out of me."

"Sorry," Jeff laughed. "I just had to run to the copy machine down the hall. Hey, you look great. C'mon in."

He opened the door to his office and ushered David in, his hand on David's shoulder. The office was small but bright and airy, with a large window looking out onto landscaped grounds. Jeff's desk, three chairs and two filing cabinets were it's sole contents. A framed picture of an old railway train hung on one wall and a single fern sat atop one of the filing cabinets.

Jeff beamed at him. "When I saw the name David Angelo on my appointment list, I wondered if it could be you and then, there you were in the hall. God, how long has it been?"

"Only fifteen years," David said, taking in the whole picture in front of him.

The tall, rangy youth David remembered had grown to be a man of impressive stature. The once unruly mop of dark brown hair was now neatly cut, though a wave still managed to fall over his brow. His gray, penetrating eyes gazed at David from a strikingly good-looking face that was enhanced even more by his dazzling smile.

"Sit down, David. Would you like some coffee or water?"

Jeff motioned to the chair by the side of his desk He seemed totally unaware of the effect his appearance was having on his old school buddy.

David gave him a feeble grin. "N-no thanks." Telling himself to pull it together, he sat down. "Gee, it's good to see you, Jeff. You don't know how many times I've wondered where you were and what had happened to you. When Rob told me he'd kept up with you all these years, I couldn't believe it."

"Well, actually there was quite a gap before we met up again."

Jeff eased his long, lean body into his desk chair and smiled at David.

"We ran into each other in a restaurant in LA about three years ago. He was with Maggie. Did they ever get married? I haven't talked to Rob for some time."

"They sure did...and Maggie's pregnant..."

"Wow! I'll have to get in touch and congratulate the happy pair. It's my fault we don't talk more. Always so damned busy."

"You look like you're in great shape," David said, admiringly.

"Part of the demands of the job. It pays to be in shape when you're face to face with some very angry husband you've just proved was cheating on the wife who hired you!"

"Sounds like a crazy business," David remarked.

"That it is sometimes."

"Strange that Rob never mentioned running into you until recently."

"Oh, you know Rob...he told me all about you and your friend..."

"Andrew," David prompted.

"Right, Andrew. Said you were both hot and heavy for each other."

"Rob has a way with words, all right. Yes, we're very happy."

"Good." Jeff looked at him still smiling, and David for a moment, was a kid again, lying beside the object of his passion, unable to do anything about it. He found himself almost mesmerized by that smile.

He cleared his throat. "What about you, Jeff? Anyone in your life?" Jeff frowned and his face took on an unexpectedly dark look.

He shuffled some papers on his desk then said, "No, not anymore. Not for some time really. I decided I'm better off on my own. Less to worry about. So..." he continued quickly, "What brings you here? Just for old time's sake, or did you need some help?"

"Not for myself, but for a friend of ours," David started to explain. "You'll probably remember the name—Peter Brandon."

"Peter Brandon?" Jeff looked at David sharply. "Yeah, I remember the name. He and his lover were attacked some years ago...you know him?"

"Well actually, Andrew's his physical therapist, but we've all become friends since he woke from his coma, a few months back."

"Yeah, I read about that. I was glad to hear of his recovery. The papers said he didn't remember anything about the night his friend was killed. How's he doing?"

"Really good, physically. He looks great, but...the fact he can't remember what happened that night, really gets to him."

Jeff looked thoughtful. "It's probably some kind of mental self-defense mechanism."

"You could be right, but here's the thing," David continued. "I have a feeling that it's all there, just waiting to come back to him. He has these...moments."

"Moments? What does that mean?"

"He can't explain them really, says there like feelings, like Phillip is there, trying to help him. He had one the other night at his birthday party."

"What happened?"

"He was talking to Phillip's old boss and he suddenly couldn't remember what it was he was going to tell him. He got dizzy and nauseated. Caused quite a commotion for a moment or two."

"I'll bet. What happened then?"

"Well, a doctor friend arrived at the party and gave Peter a check up. Said he was fine."

"You said this was a party. Had he been drinking?"

"Just a glass of champagne is all, as far as I know. He did have a fall about a week before. He and Andrew were out jogging on the cliffs and some guy ran into them. If Andrew hadn't grabbed him, Peter could have broken his neck. Those steps to the beach are really steep. The doctor gave him the all clear, but Andrew isn't sure that it was just an accident."

"What does he think it was?"

"He thinks the guy ran into them deliberately...and wanted to knock Peter down the steps."

"Oh boy," Jeff said quietly.

"What do you think?" David asked.

"I think anything's possible. He does have a kind of celebrity status since he woke up, and not everyone digs the gay lifestyle, you know."

"You mean someone might have just gone out of their way to hurt him, because he's gay?"

"Happened before, didn't it?" Jeff looked at David keenly. "Does he know you're filling me in on all this?"

"Yes. I got his OK to see if you would consider a private investigation. He really wants to remember—and he wants to find whoever did this to Phillip and him."

"Well, there's not much to go on...No motive other than hatred, no witnesses except the victim, who can't remember a thing."

David persisted. "If you'd just talk to him. Maybe, you could ask the right kind of questions that would help him remember something."

Jeff was thoughtful for a moment. "I wonder if what he experienced at the party was not a memory lapse, but the awakening of a memory?"

"What do you mean?"

"I may be off base, but sometimes the mind can act as a warning system setting off an alarm that tells you to shut up and say nothing. You know that feeling, when you start to say something, then you think better of it and you stop to save yourself from saying the wrong thing?"

"Oh yes," David said wryly. "I know that feeling well."

"It can be almost like a sixth sense. Do you know what it was Peter started to say?"

"No, he doesn't even know that himself. Only, that it involved Phillip."

"I see."

Jeff got up suddenly and went to one of the filing cabinets. He rummaged about at the back of one of the drawers and finally pulled out a folder, which he brought back to the desk.

"I don't know why I made copies of these photos and kept them for so long. These were taken at the crime scene and later at the morgue. Brace yourself—they're not pretty."

David picked up the first photograph and could not believe what he saw. He threw the picture down and turned away.

"Jesus, Jeff. Why show me that?"

"To let you know the kind of animal we'd be looking for if Peter Brandon ever remembers enough to go on. Phillip Jennings was so badly beaten around the head, that the force of it broke his neck. Lucky, really. If he hadn't died he'd have been a vegetable for the rest of his life."

David shook his head sadly, as Jeff went on angrily.

"Whoever did this, hated beyond all reason. I know all about that hatred. I saw it every day I was on the force. And not just on the street. Some of the guys I worked with...well, they don't just dislike us David. They despise us. And it's not just gays; it's everything they don't understand. Blacks, Hispanics, Asians. You name it."

"But they have black police officers," David protested. "The Chief of Police is black."

"That's right," Jeff said quietly, his anger subsiding as he saw how upset David had become. "Sorry man, I shouldn't have shown you that photograph."

He picked up the folder and put it back in the cabinet drawer, then sat down and looked at his friend. "Okay, let's do this. Since you're an old school buddy of mine, I'll talk to Peter Brandon. If I feel there's enough to go on, I'll let him know my fee and see if he wants me to take the case. If not, no harm done." He smiled at David. "Maybe you, me and Andrew can get together for dinner one night—I'll treat."

"That would be terrific...and, thanks for taking this on, Jeff." David prepared to leave. "Here's Peter's phone number." He hesitated for a moment and then said, "Do me a favor...Please don't ever show him that photo. He can't even bring himself to read the newspaper accounts of the incident."

Jeff nodded, but as he walked David to the door, he said with quiet conviction, "Perhaps it's time he did."



After David left, Jeff sat for a long time at his desk, his hands steepled under his chin, deep in thought. That short visit from an old friend had brought back many memories, some warm and pleasant, others he'd hope to forget for all time.

Now he cast his mind back to the days at school when he, Rob and David had all been such good friends, practically living in each other's homes, sharing everything, their toy guns, bikes, clothes, even their first orgasms.

Jeff smiled, as he remembered the first shock he'd felt as he watched Rob, always the extrovert, shoot his considerable load for the benefit of his two awe-struck friends. Rob had told Jeff that he thought David was queer, but that was all right, wasn't it?

Jeff hadn't been so sure.

He'd heard his Dad spout off about perverts and child molesters, and some of the other kids would make some pretty nasty comments about anyone they suspected of being a fag.

"Maybe you should keep that to yourself Rob," Jeff had said, alarmed by his friend's disclosure. "If some of the other kids find out..."

"Don't be a dope." Rob had thrown him a disparaging look. "Of course I won't say anything to anyone else. It's our secret." And so it had been through all their years of friendship. Finally, Jeff told Rob that he thought he too was gay.

Rob had looked slightly put out as he considered what he'd just been told. "I wonder why I'm the only one who's not?"

Jeff's father had only once shown any pride in his son—the day Jeff announced he wanted to be a police officer. Previously, he'd never thought his son would amount to much. Even when Jeff was captain of the football team, his father had few words of praise for him. Bob Stevens considered himself a man's man, and secretly he was ashamed of his son's good looks.

The night of the school prom, after Jeff presented himself in his tux for inspection and gone back upstairs, Bob had looked at his wife and said sourly, "Looks like a goddamned sissy. Takes after your brother Michael, if you ask me."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Rose Stevens had asked nervously. She hated it when Bob had had one too many beers and started laying into her family.

"It means he's a fag that's what it means—and you know it. Everyone knows it."

"Stop that, Bob. Michael is a decent human being. Just because he's never married..."

"Just because he's never married..." Bob had mimicked her. "He's a fag!"

Jeff had listened horrified to the conversation in the living room below. His father suspected he was gay...God, if he ever really knew. It would be the end of everything.

Rob had been a wonderful friend to him in those days. When he told him what he'd overhead his father say, Rob had launched what he later called the "Save Jeff's Ass Campaign".

He arranged for there to always be a couple of young girls hanging around Jeff and himself at the house when Mr. Stevens came home.

Rob didn't exactly have to beg any of the girls to do this as they all thought Jeff was 'dreamy', and were only annoyed with the situation when Rob would insist on being there at all times.

Bob was pleased that it appeared his son was at last feeling his oats and "getting some tail" as he put it to his drinking buddies, amid lots of chortling and knowing winks. It probably never occurred to any of them that it might be *their* daughters' tails in question.

After college he had enrolled in the Police Academy and knew from the first day that he was going to hate it, but he stuck it out, remaining deeply closeted through the years. He moved to Seattle and joined the police force there, finding in that part of the country a more liberated way of life than he had previously enjoyed. One of the main reasons for this had been Joey.

Joey Fernandez. Oh, how he had loved him.

A Puerto Rican of incredible beauty and charm, who could wind him round his little finger, and who led him on the biggest roller coaster ride of his life. They lived together for four tempestuous years, loving each other, hating each other, making love in a way that Jeff had never believed possible.

Even now years later, the thought of Joey made his body tingle with desire.

"Joey..." he whispered. "Where are you, I wonder?"

For Joey had disappeared one night without a goodbye, without any warning. He had just gone. Of course Jeff had tried to find him. He had used every resource he could within his profession to try and find one clue, one person who might know where he'd gone.

In the end he decided Joey must be dead, and somehow it had been easier to deal with his absence if he went on believing that. A year later, he had returned to California and joined the Los Angeles Police Department. His father had died the year before, and his mother had moved to her sister's in Arizona. He was in touch only sporadically, usually birthdays and holidays, and visited her once a year at Thanksgiving. He felt little guilt about this, as his mother had

never shown the slightest interest in his life. On the rare occasions he would call her, their conversations were stilted and impersonal.

For a time, he was involved briefly with a fellow police officer—the worst mistake of his life. Listening to someone as paranoid and self-loathing as Lenny had been a nightmare. In the beginning, Jeff had thought that he could make a difference in Lenny's life by listening patiently and caringly, holding him and telling him everything would be all right. But it was not to be. Lenny was obsessed with his own paranoia and no one, not his psychiatrist, not his mother, not even Jeff could ever reach him long enough to make a difference.

In the end, Lenny took the only way out he could—he got married.

After that, there had been a couple of attempts at relationships, but nothing had ever come of them and he had become disillusioned with the whole idea of ever finding anyone with whom he could be compatible.

The Phillip Jennings/Peter Brandon case had been almost the deciding factor that led him to leave the police force. It got to him in a way he couldn't quite understand. He'd seen victims of other murders, other beatings and he'd felt compassion for them, but somehow this case had been different.

Had it been Mrs. Brandon's anguish that had filled his heart with sympathy? Or had it been the sight of Peter Brandon lying in that hospital bed, so brutally beaten that he clung to life by just a slender thread? Or had it been the cold, officious handling of the case by the police department—an almost callous disinterest in spending manpower to look for the perpetrators of yet another gay bashing.

Whatever the reason, he knew he didn't belong in that environment anymore.

The cruelty and stupidity displayed by some police officers—particularly that Meeks guy and his sidekick Billy—had made him give up hope that he would ever be able to exact any change within the

police establishment. His friend, Joe French, had tried to talk him out of quitting, but by that time, he knew he had to get out.

He'd always wanted to be his own boss, so he'd given notice without regret and moved south to Newport Beach where he found himself a small apartment, got his private investigator's license and set up shop in Santa Ana. That was almost three years ago and he'd not regretted a day of it. He enjoyed what he did—and he did it well.

Now, he found himself thinking of that day when he had gone to see Peter Brandon in hospital.

He didn't know at the time why he'd felt the need to—perhaps speaking with the guy's mother, hearing of the wonderful life he and Phillip had enjoyed, feeling so desperately sorry for their lives cut off so abruptly, so needlessly...all these things probably, had led him to that hospital room, that day.

He remembered standing alone by Peter's bed, looking down at the young man who still bore the signs of the savage attack on his face and body. He'd been filled with a kind of impotent anger at the senselessness of it all; a deep rage that this kind of thing could still go unpunished. Where was the justice in any of this?

Trembling, he'd gently touched the other man's hand and whispered, "I'm sorry."

He stood up suddenly as he heard a knock at the door. His four o'clock appointment had arrived right on time. Clearing his throat, and giving himself a quick shake to free his mind from those memories, he picked up the piece of paper David had written Peter's telephone number on. He stuck it into his shirt pocket and went to open the door.



T rank could not believe his eyes when he pulled up in front of the house Billy rented on a deserted stretch near the railroad tracks, in San Juan Capistrano. Even in the dark Frank could make out piles of garbage in the front yard as he walked to the front door, and strewn everywhere were broken bottles and piles of empty beer cans.

"What a slob," he muttered as he rang the doorbell.

Billy's appearance was even more of a shock. In just two years he had put on about fifty pounds and aged twenty years. His belly hung over his belt, and his clothes looked like he'd lived in them for a month. He had grown a droopy moustache and let his hair grow long and lank.

"Hey Frank..." He grinned stupidly as he opened the door. It was obvious he was drunk. "Come on in. Sorry the place is a mess—never had company before. Getcha a beer?"

"No thanks." Frank looked around at the filthy room that stank of dog urine, and decided not to sit down. "Got a dog, Billy?"

"Used to. The stupid mutt ran off last week."

Probably couldn't stand the stink, Frank thought. Aloud, he said, "Okay Billy, explain to me what the hell you thought you were doing trying to off the Brandon guy by yourself."

Billy grew defiant, the booze giving him courage he usually never felt around Frank. "I had to look after myself. You didn't seem to want to do anything about it...so I decided to take the matter into my own hands."

Frank felt his throat constrict as he tried to control his anger.

"Did it ever occur to you that maybe, given the fact he couldn't remember anything at all...that just *maybe* we were in no danger of being discovered? Added to the fact that we were wearing ski masks at the time...So even if he did remember the attack, he couldn't describe us?"

The look on Billy's face made him pause. He stepped back a little, folding his arms and glaring at Billy's slack face that now wore an extremely guilty expression.

"Is there something you haven't told me, Billy?" Frank's voice had gone dangerously quiet.

Billy looked away from Frank's snake-like gaze. "No, no Frank..."

"You're lying, Billy." Frank reached out quickly, and grabbed him roughly by the front of his shirt. "Tell me what I'm beginning to suspect."

Billy roared with anger and pushed Frank away, causing him to stumble backwards and almost fall.

"Don't try to humiliate me again, Frank! I don't have to take orders from you no more. You got me into this thing and I'm the one with more to lose, so don't tell me what to do, man."

The two men faced each other glaring furiously. Frank was in much better shape than Billy and he knew he could take him down despite the bigger man's bulk, but right now he had to find out what Billy was hiding from him.

"Okay Billy, calm down," he said finally.

"No, I won't calm down." The drinks Billy had imbibed to give him courage, were now making him lose control. "The fag saw my face. Don't you understand? He *saw* me...he pulled the mask off my face before I hit him!"

"Christ!" Frank hissed through clenched teeth. "You asshole, you total asshole!"

He lunged at Billy and struck him across the face with the back of his hand. Billy staggered back with a cry of rage, reaching behind him for the gun he had kept hidden on the dining table.

"I thought I'd need this..." Billy's eyes blazed with fury. "You ain't in charge of me anymore, Frank. Now get out of here—before you need a new kneecap!"

Frank, breathing heavily, glared at Billy with such venom, that despite the fact that he held the gun, Billy started to lose his nerve a little. He was sobering up fast, and what Dutch courage he'd had was dissipating rapidly.

His hand shook as he yelled again, "Get out, Frank!"

Frank turned to go, then with lightening speed he spun round, knocking the gun away and landing a solid crunching blow to Billy's jaw. The man fell to his knees dazed, dropping the gun, which Frank now grabbed and leveled between Billy's eyes. Billy's face distorted with terror as he realized the mistake he had made. Frank would never let him get away with this—he was going to kill him.

"No! Please Frank..." he squealed, jumping to his feet and grabbing for the gun.

The two men struggled briefly, then with a deafening roar, the gun went off. Billy stood for a moment, a stunned and stupid expression on his face as he saw the blood covering his chest.

He pitched forward, dead before he hit the ground.

For a time, Frank remained perfectly still staring down at Billy's body. He felt no remorse. What he did feel was an overpowering rage. This stupid son of a bitch had probably ruined everything. Brandon had seen his face. If the kid ever did get his memory back and could identify Billy, they might just make the connection back to him.

Cursing, Frank threw the gun down and walked outside, his mind reeling with the implications all this now had for him. He had to straighten up this mess here, that was his first priority. Then he would have to take care of Peter Brandon. He would have to think long and hard about that one. It had to look like an accident and would take careful planning. Still, time was on his side. There was no immediate danger of discovery. The kid hadn't got his memory back yet—and maybe, never would.

First things first, though.

He walked back into the house, stepping over Billy's inert body without so much as a downward glance. Searching around the kitchen, he found what he was looking for. Taking the gun cleaning equipment into the living room, he set it down by the body. He wiped his prints from the gun, then forced it into Billy's dead hand. When he was eventually found, and who knew how long that would be, it would be presumed he had been cleaning a loaded gun, while intoxicated.

Not a smart thing to do.

Frank looked around but could see no evidence that Billy had had a visitor that night. As he stepped outside he heard the eerie howling of coyotes nearby. With a twisted smile on his face, Frank left the door wide open. Maybe a couple of them would come by and mess up the scene a little more.

Couldn't hurt any.



Two days after his birthday party, Peter left town.

He told Andrew and his mother that he just needed to get away to clear his head. He was still troubled by the incident at the party, and wondered if he could work some of this out by himself if he was alone for a time. He had been given the all clear to drive again, so he felt up to taking himself on the road and driving solo.

Of course, Eve had been worried, but he had promised to call her every day he was gone, and had sworn to Andrew he would at least keep up the swimming and jogging parts of his regimen.

He headed south and stopped first in San Diego.

He knew where some old friends of Phillips' lived and called to see if they were home, but the person who answered was a house sitter and informed him they had gone overseas for several weeks. He crossed the border and spent the night at Rosarito Beach.

In the morning he took a long walk along the shore, and ate breakfast in a local restaurant before moving on to Ensanada, where he stayed three days in a little downtown hotel. He could have gone to one of the many exclusive resorts, but he preferred the quietude of the less frequented places. He strolled through the bazaars, picking up one or two small pieces of pottery he found interesting.

His mind was firmly fixed on the reason for this getaway. He needed some time to think about the events of the last few days especially what had happened at the party. Try as he might, so far he had been unable to find a reason for the strange reaction he'd experienced on shaking hands with Don Harley.

What could possibly have made him feel so sick at that moment? Again, he could hear Phillip's voice, so close—a whisper only—but, so insistent.

"No..."

What had it meant? Had it been a warning directed against Don himself? But, that was ridiculous. His mind and imagination must surely be playing tricks—he was just being too fanciful.

At night, as he lay tossing and turning on the lumpy bed, he prayed that he might hear Phillip's voice again; that he might hear him say something, anything, that would make some sense of all this. But he heard nothing, save the noises of the city outside the window he kept open, in order to let the cool breezes enter the room.

Again, he began to wonder if what he had heard before had merely been a product of his own imagination.

After all the trauma he had endured, could it be that Phillip's voice had come to him simply because he needed to hear him? Needed to believe, somehow, that Phillip, though long dead, was still a guiding force in his life?

They had been so close for all those years, since that first day when Peter had bathed in the warmth of Phillip's unique smile.

"Phillip," he whispered now, his body yearning for his lover's touch, his heart aching as he remembered the way Phillip smiled after kissing him, that soft secret smile that carried a myriad of unspoken words. How could he ever overcome this emptiness he now felt? Phillip had been his only lover; his constant companion since they were both fifteen years old.

It was inconceivable that he was gone.

Sleep did not bring the comfort he so desperately sought. When he awoke in the morning, it was to a feeling of such isolation that it became an almost physical presence. In a sudden panic, he felt as though the progress he had made in the last few weeks had been stripped away, leaving him desolate and alone.

He could not bear to watch the young lovers stroll hand in hand through the town. He knew it was not jealousy, just a simple wish to be a part of them again. Just to have Phillip by his side, to be able to take his hand and feel whole, once more.

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Finally, he returned home.

After unpacking his bag, he wandered aimlessly into his studio and stood in front of Phillip's unfinished portrait.

For a long time he gazed into the eyes of the man he had begun to paint over three years before. He remembered the times when Phillip would come and stand by him to watch him at his craft. He remembered how he would murmur his admiration for what Peter was creating, how he would stand, his hand lightly on Peter's shoulder.

The two of them. Always the two of them.

Impatiently, he brushed away the tears that had welled in his eyes. "I can do this," he said aloud.

Filled with a new determination, he went to the cabinet where he stored his paints and brushes. Deftly, he mixed the oils to the color he desired, but had not been able to accomplish previously. He paused a moment in front of the canvas, his eyes closed, remembering. Then, with several sure strokes, he filled in the jaw line of the face he knew so well. He stepped back. Yes, that was it, now the mouth...and under his expert brushwork, the fullness of Phillip's lower lip appeared, the upper lip curved in his unique smile.

He stared at the almost completed work then whispered, "Tell me what to do Phillip. Tell me how I can endure all this without you?"

Now, seeing his dead lover's likeness brought to life by his own creative ability, Peter felt a deep emptiness at the core of his being. For a moment he was tempted to destroy the painting. How could he bear to look upon the face he loved so much, knowing that this was all he would ever now have?

But he knew he could never destroy what he had created. It was too painful to look upon, yet he could not tear his eyes away.

"Phillip," he murmured, as a tear slid down his cheek.

He closed his eyes to clear his blurring vision and, at that precise moment, a warm jasmine-scented night breeze stole into the studio. He was reminded of the day he had stood by Phillip's grave, feeling the affirmation that somehow, his lover was near. He felt it again just then.

A closeness, a connection.

He opened his eyes and looked at the portrait again. How could he ever explain to anyone the sudden feeling of warmth and comfort that now enveloped him? He could almost feel the despair and emptiness being pulled out of him.

Slowly, he returned Phillip's smile.

When he went downstairs some time later, he noticed the light on the answering machine was blinking madly in the semi-darkness of the kitchen. He pressed the 'play' button and listened to a few messages, one from Andrew—"Miss you. Call me when you get back!" One from Ed Hamilton checking up on him, and then, a voice he did not recognize.

"Hi. This is Jeff Stevens, Peter. David Angelo asked me to give you a call, regarding a possible investigation into the incident you and your partner were involved in, three years ago. If it's OK with you, I thought it might be a good idea for me to meet with you at your home. Please call me if you would like to set up an appointment. I'll look forward to meeting you at your convenience. Thank you."

The voice was masculine, crisp and professional. The message was timed and dated three days previously, so Peter made a note of Jeff's phone number and left it on the counter as a reminder to call him in the morning.

He then called Eve to let her know he was home.

"Oh good, darling!" The relief in her voice made him love her all the more. "I'll make breakfast for you in the morning."

"That'd be great, Mom. I'm off to bed now. That was a long drive home. Love you."

He climbed the stairs and went back into his studio, cleaned his brushes and put the oils away. Before he turned out the lights, he brought Phillips portrait on its easel into the bedroom.

"There, now I can see you when I wake up," he murmured.

The eyes in the portrait followed him as he walked across the room, and in the half light they seemed to fill with a sadness and longing unseen by Peter, even as he took one last look before turning off the bedside lamp.



He awoke from a terrible dream in which he was drowning in a sea of black miasma, held under it by invisible hands that gripped his legs and stopped him from rising to the surface of this dark, swirling pool. Gasping, he threw back the covers and sat up, his naked body damp with sweat. Moonlight streamed through the half open blinds casting dark shapes and shadows into the room.

He got up and walked to the window, opening the blinds all the way and gazing out to the ocean beyond, its calm waters reflecting the silver light of the full moon. He shivered as a breeze through the open window nuzzled at his bare skin. Leaving the blinds up, he went back to bed and lay on his back staring up at the ceiling, hands clasped behind his head.

What did the dream signify? Was he in danger of falling back into the coma again? They had said there was a slight possibility of it when he was still in hospital, but surely after all this time, he was beyond that. He shuddered at the thought that he might be returned to that state of perpetual darkness.

Could life be so cruel?

Of course it could...The answer pricked wickedly at his mind. Life could sometimes be immensely cruel to some people—it had been especially cruel to him, to Phillip, to his mother—why should he be spared now?

Why? Just because he was beginning to pick up a new life, find new friends, find again the will to resume his painting—why could that not all be taken from him again?

"Stop!" he shouted, sitting up and shaking himself, trying to clear his head of all these negative thoughts. He flopped back down again on the pillow. Stop now, he told himself. This feeling of sinking into low self-esteem was unlike him. He'd always been filled with a stubborn resolve to see things through.

Now could not be any different—especially now.

He'd made a vow to find Phillip's killers. Meeting with this private investigator would be the first step toward that goal.

Perhaps David was right. Talking with a professional—someone who actually dealt with solving crimes, finding perpetrators—per-

haps he *could* come up with something no one had before. It was a slight hope only—it had been so long—three years…three years…

Eventually he dozed, then fell into a blessed, dreamless sleep.

When he awoke again the room was flooded with daylight. Vaguely surprised that he had actually fallen asleep after all those turbulent thoughts, he turned over on his side and lay, for a while, looking at Phillip's portrait.

At least that had not been a dream. He had almost completed the portrait last night. With a sigh, he rose and stood looking at Phillip's image for a long moment. He remembered his earlier resolve to talk with David's friend, the private investigator.

"We'll find them, Phillip. We will," he whispered softly, still gazing at his lover's portrait.

He moved the easel back into a corner of the room, and went into the bathroom. After showering, he pulled on a pair of shorts and a light cotton sweater. He went downstairs, then walked down the garden path to Eve's apartment.

She was sitting outside on the patio, enjoying a cup of coffee. She rose and hugged him tightly in welcome, then looked at him with worried eyes.

"You look a little tired Peter. Haven't you been sleeping well since you've been gone?"

"I slept fine," he answered quickly.

What was the point of worrying her unduly?

He smiled at her and added in a matter-of-fact tone, "But I stayed up late last night and almost finished Phillip's portrait."

Eve quickly put down her coffee cup. "That's wonderful! You mean...you can paint again?"

"Well, it seems that way. I was just standing there looking at him as I've done so many times, but suddenly I knew I had to try again and it came back so easily."

"I must see it this very minute..."

Peter laughed as his mother took him by the hand, and almost dragged him back to the house and upstairs to his bedroom.

"Oh Peter," she cried, her voice strained with emotion. "It's incredible...you've even captured that little smile of his. You know, the one he'd have just before he told an especially wicked story." She started to cry. "I'm really not crying," she said, between sobs.

"It's all right, Mother. You can cry." He put his arm around her. "He knows how much we both love him."

Eve looked at her son. "Do you still hear his voice?"

Peter was still reluctant to tell her about the night at the party, and what had led to his feeling unwell.

"I think I do. Oh I don't know, perhaps it's all my imagination."

"Perhaps, but looking now at his dear face, I feel as if he's about to say something."

"That's because the person who painted him is so talented," Peter laughed to lighten the mood. "Come on now, where's that breakfast you promised?"

As they went back downstairs, the phone rang and Peter ran to answer it. It was Andrew checking to see if he was back.

"Yes, I'm back all right. Come on over when you're ready. I need a good work out, and I've something to show you."

Peter felt that Andrew deserved to be one of the first to know that his painting ability had returned. After all, Andrew had been the one to show he was concerned that day on the beach—and his only reward was to have his head almost snapped off.

After breakfast, and while he was waiting for Andrew, Peter remembered Jeff Stevens' phone call. He walked over to the kitchen counter and picked up the piece of paper he'd written the number on. He hesitated for a moment, then shrugging slightly, he dialed the number.

"Stevens' Investigations."

"Jeff Stevens?"

"Speaking. How can I help you?"

"Oh hi, this is Peter Brandon. You left a message. I was out of town for a few days. Sorry I didn't return your call sooner."

"No problem, Peter. Glad you called back. David Angelo seems to think we should meet and talk about a possible investigation into your case. How do you feel about it?"

"Well, of course I would like to see whoever killed Phillip behind bars, but I don't know if I can be any help. I really don't remember anything about that night."

"Well look," Jeff said evenly. "I told David that if it's all right with you, I could come down and talk to you about it, ask a few questions, maybe help you remember something that's just been out of reach. I can't promise anything, but there have been cases where people, with the right prompting, have remembered things they thought they had completely forgotten."

"Really?" Peter said, a trace of doubt still in his voice. "Well, I guess it can't hurt."

"Okay. How about tomorrow, around four?"

"Tomorrow sounds fine. The sooner the better."

"Good. I know where you live. I visited your mother there when you were in hospital."

"That's right. She mentioned you'd been really nice to her—for a cop," Peter said slyly.

"Ex-cop now, and I'm still nice...sometimes."

They both laughed.

"See you tomorrow then," Jeff said, and hung up.

Peter was smiling when he put down the receiver.

A loud knock on the door heralded Andrew's arrival. He breezed in, all smiles, happy to see his friend again.

"How was the trip?" Andrew helped himself to a sip of Peter's coffee.

"Boring for the most part. Absolutely nothing of interest to report." He put his arm round Andrew's waist and began to guide him to the staircase. "What's up?" Andrew asked, surprised, expecting to have gone to the garage to start their work out.

"You'll see..."

Andrew let himself be pulled up the stairs and into the bedroom, where in an instant he saw what Peter had told him on the phone he had to show him. Speechless, he gazed at the now almost finished portrait. Then, Andrew found himself smiling back at the face on the canvas.

"He's so...real," he whispered in awe.

Peter said quietly, "Phillip, this is my best buddy Andrew. You'll like him too."

Andrew looked at his friend. At any other time he would have considered this too spooky, but seeing the sincerity on Peter's face and still entranced by the beauty of his work, Andrew relaxed.

"Hi, Phillip," he said gravely. "You have a beautiful smile."

"That's the smile I fell in love with." Peter's voice was shaky and Andrew rubbed the back of his neck to comfort him.

"I'm fine," Peter lied, his eyes glistening.

They worked out for a couple of hours, working up a good sweat, then Peter asked for a shoulder rub before they jogged.

"Haven't been sleeping that well the last few nights. Maybe that's why I'm so stiff."

Andrew rubbed some oil into his friend's shoulders and began massaging them with an expert's care.

"Mmmm...feels good," Peter sighed. "Oh by the way, tell David I talked with his friend Jeff, today."

"Great." Andrew kneaded the flesh on Peter's left shoulder. "Boy, you have a knot in here. What did he have to say?"

"He's coming over tomorrow, to talk with me. I guess to see if he can help me remember. He sounds pretty nice."

"David says he's a total dreamboat. He was in lust all over again." Peter glanced round at his friend. "That doesn't bother you?"

"Not really. David's a bit of a flirt. He gets that from Rob, I think. The two of them used to hang out together a lot before we met. It's never been a threat to me. I know he loves me, and I trust him totally."

"That's great." Peter said, sincerely. "He'd be a damned fool to jeopardize his relationship with you, anyway."

Andrew patted him on the shoulders. "He's certainly not a fool. Okay, you're done. Let's go for that run now."

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Peter rose from his seat on the verandah when he heard a car pull up in front of the house. He saw a black Porsche convertible with the top down park near the driveway and a tall, wide shouldered man with chestnut colored hair climb out. The man moved with the easy grace of an athlete as he walked up the steps at the front of the house. Peter opened the door at the first chime of the bell and held out his hand in welcome.

"Hi, I'm Peter."

His proffered hand was taken in a firm grasp that sent a tingle up his arm as Jeff removed his sunglasses and smiled at him.

"Jeff Stevens," he introduced himself, his smoky gray eyes openly admiring the man in front of him.

"Come on in."

Peter's confident smile belied the strange flip-flop he felt in the pit of his stomach. They walked into the living room, where Jeff was immediately halted by the magnificence of the seascape over the fireplace.

"This is incredible. Is this your work?"

Peter nodded modestly. Even though he had heard this many times, he was always vaguely shy when people praised his work.

"I am impressed." Jeff turned to look at Peter. "There have to be 50,000 seascapes available in this town alone—but this one stands by itself."

"Are you a collector?"

"God no," Jeff chuckled. "My art collection is mostly from Pier One. It may be a hackneyed expression, but I know what I like...and most of the art I see in the galleries is not it."

Peter led him out on to the verandah.

"Can I get you something to drink?"

"No thanks, I'm fine."

Jeff paused for a moment admiring the view, then they sat opposite each other at the patio table. The sleeves of the white shirt Jeff was wearing were partially rolled up, revealing strong tanned forearms, lightly covered with dark brown hair. Peter suddenly found himself unable to stop looking at those arms, or the powerful body the conservative shirt and tie failed to hide.

"So..." He cleared his throat. "You're a friend of David's?"

"Right." Jeff smiled at him. "We went to school together. It was really great seeing him again, after all these years."

"I'll bet. Apparently he didn't know you were gay then."

"Don't think I knew myself, at that point. Our friend Rob was the only one I confided in. I was totally in the closet, doing the high school jock thing, you know. Eventually though, you just have to honest with everyone, especially yourself."

"Was it difficult?"

"Pretty much. My Dad was the epitome of homophobia. I never did tell him, and he died before I moved back to LA from Seattle."

"Seattle? Phillip was born in Seattle."

"It's a great town."

"Were you a cop there?"

"Uh huh. It was a walk in the park compared to LA. There's crime there of course, but it's a better place to live in."

"What brought you back to LA?"

"A couple of things. I thought my mother might need me around when my father died, and then there was a personal issue I wanted to put behind me...but, that's enough about me!" He leaned back in his seat. "I'm here to listen to you, remember?"

"Where do we start?" Peter asked, anxiously.

"Well, how about telling me what you do remember."

"That's easy. Nothing."

"Okay. Now, when you read the newspaper accounts of what they figured went down, nothing stirred in your memory? Even when you read the cold facts in print, you couldn't for maybe just one moment, get a glimmer of what perhaps happened that night?"

"I haven't read any of the reports."

Peter looked away from Jeff's steady gaze and the latter had to feign surprise, as David had already told him this at their meeting in his office.

"You've never read *anything* about the incident? I find that amazing."

"I couldn't bear to read them," Peter said, defensively. "I didn't want to know all the grisly details about what they did to Phillip. He's dead, and my reading about it isn't going to change any of that."

"That's true, but on the other hand it could perhaps provide the catalyst that might help you remember."

"I don't believe that."

"How can you say that when you've never attempted it?" He reached into his attaché case and pulled out a folder.

"Look," Peter eyed the folder in Jeff's hand with alarm "I'm not going to be forced into reading those newspaper articles by you or anyone else."

"Of course no one's going to force you Peter," Jeff said, quietly. "What I want to know is how you expect to ever remember anything that will help bring those guys to justice, and that's what you want isn't it, if you won't overcome your unwillingness to read about what happened?"

His voice hardened a little as he continued. "All this happened three years ago. Nothing has been done about it. It was just another hate-crime the cops didn't want to know about. You've been out of the hospital, for what, four months now? So far nothing has come back to you, and it probably never will if you don't do something to help it along. I certainly can't help if you're not willing to meet me half way. There's nothing to go on—you're the only witness."

Intimidated, Peter glared at him. "I just can't read all those horrible details they put in reports like that. Not when it's about Phillip. Can't you understand that?"

"Yes, I can understand that, but I also understand you want those guys to pay for what they did to Phillip. How can that be if you won't do your bit?"

"No, you *don't* understand," Peter started to shout. "How could you understand something like this? I woke up one day and found three years of my life had been taken away, along with the only person who meant everything in the world to me. Ever since then I have tried to remember. Everyday I try to relive that night, in the hope that something may come back to me, but it never does."

Jeff leaned forward and grasped Peter's hand, his gray eyes turning steely. "Because you won't go the extra distance and read about it. Because you're wallowing in self-pity, and you're afraid you'll get upset. For God's sake Peter, don't you see it's the only way for you to get at the truth? Face your demons. Don't be afraid of what you'll feel."

"Stop it!" Peter broke free of Jeff's grasp and strode back into the house.

Jeff rose from the table and with a sigh, picked up his attaché case and put the folder away. He went into the living room. Peter stood there, anger blazing from his eyes.

"I'm sorry Peter," Jeff said, with finality in his voice. "Sorry, I had to play devil's advocate, but I can't help you if you're not willing to help yourself. It's obvious to me you're not as anxious to solve this as you say you are."

"You son of a *bitch*," Peter railed at him. "What did you come down here for? Just to tell me what I already know? That I'm afraid to read those reports? That's why I haven't read them. There's no mystery there. I'm *afraid* to read them. There, I've said it. Now get out of here."

"You're going to give up this easily?"

Peter said nothing, but his angry, tight-lipped expression was answer enough. For a moment Jeff looked like he might say something else, but then he shrugged and headed for the door, Peter striding angrily behind him. The two men faced each other eye to eye.

Jeff said, "Here's my card if you change your mind."

Peter ignored his outstretched hand, so Jeff put the card back in his shirt pocket.

"Oh, and don't forget to bill me," Peter said nastily, at Jeff's back. "Tell me, what's the going rate these days for pissing people off for a living?"

Jeff shook his head as he got into his car and drove away. Peter slammed the door, and walked through to the kitchen where he stood, hands on the counter, head bowed as he seethed with rage.

"That jerk, that utter jerk..." Tears of frustration filled his eyes. God, how could he have been so stupid as to think that guy could be of any help? He kicked the baseboard hard in his fury and yelled at the top of his voice.

"Damned jerk!"

Jeff meanwhile, had pulled over to the side of the road on Coast Highway. He sat in his car, frowning. That is one stubborn guy, he thought. His mind was a turmoil of emotion. He had wanted desperately to help Peter. Had he come on too strong? Probably, he wasn't known for his tact. There was no doubt he had pushed, perhaps, too many buttons. But the guy had to start facing his fears or nothing would ever be resolved for him. He had been too sheltered by every-

one around him. Everyone trying to spare his feelings and in doing so, keeping him from the truth. He deserved to know. Deserved some kind of closure.

And—who knew he'd be such a wildcat?

Jeff smiled ruefully, then with sudden determination, he did an illegal U-turn and raced back up the hill to Peter's house.

Eve tapped on the kitchen door and peeked in. "Hello dear, I'm just off to do some shopping. Can I get you anything from the store?"

Peter looked up at his mother, and seeing the grim expression on his face she walked toward him, a worried look on her face.

"What's wrong, Peter?"

"Oh, that private investigator David recommended was here."

"You mean the nice young police officer? The one who came to see me when you were in hospital?"

"The one and the same...and he's anything but nice, Mom. He's a total jerk."

"Why, what did he do?"

"He tried to get me to read the newspaper reports of Phillip's death, and when I refused, he said it was time I stopped *wallowing* in self-pity."

"Oh, I'm sure he didn't mean that, Peter. He was probably only trying to help..."

She was interrupted by the doorbell ringing and Peter, still fuming, marched over to answer it, flinging it open. His eyes widened in surprise as he saw Jeff standing there.

Jeff looked at him impassively. "Okay, call me stupid, but..."

"Right," Peter interrupted. "You're stupid."

"Now, *look*..." Jeff paused in his retort, seeing Eve walk into the hall.

"Peter," she said sharply. "Don't be so rude." She came forward and held out her hand to Jeff.

"But Mom..."

His mother ignored him. "So good to see you again, Jeff." She shook his hand. "I told Peter you were very kind to me when he was in hospital."

"It's a pleasure to see you again Mrs. Brandon," Jeff said, smiling politely.

Eve could feel the tension between the two men, but as she looked from one to the other, she was also intuitive enough to sense something else beneath it.

"Well," she said brightly. "I must be off. You two obviously have some unfinished business to discuss." She kissed Peter's cheek, patted Jeff on the arm, and as she turned and walked down the steps, neither man could see the little smile that played around her lips.

Peter and Jeff stood looking at each other in an awkward silence for a moment or two.

"You'd better come in, I suppose," Peter said finally, and without much warmth in his voice.

"Thanks." Jeff stood stiffly in the hall, as Peter closed the door. "Look, Peter...I'm sorry if I came on like a charging bull earlier. Sometimes I get carried away trying to get my point across."

"Tell me. I'm still smarting from that 'You're wallowing in selfpity' line, you gave me earlier."

Jeff winced and seeing that, Peter felt himself thaw a little. "Well, I guess if my mother likes you..." He started to chuckle. "Come on; let's go in the kitchen. I could use a drink after all that, and I'm sure you could too."

Jeff followed him as he strode off purposely. "Uh...okay. I guess I can officially close the office, seeing it's approaching cocktail hour."

"Name your poison." Peter pulled two glasses from a cabinet and began filling them with ice.

"Scotch on the rocks, if you have it—and just a splash of water."
"That makes two of us."

Peter quickly prepared their drinks and handed Jeff his. They clinked glasses. Their eyes met as they took the first sip and Peter, despite the animosity he had felt earlier toward Jeff, once more experienced that little flutter in his stomach. Neither one spoke for a moment, but this time the silence was not as awkward as before. Then Jeff smiled and perched himself on a barstool.

Peter sat opposite him. "So, do you really think I'm wallowing in self-pity?"

Jeff gave him a rueful look. "Like I said, I come on too strongly at times. Forget what I said. No, I don't think you're self-pitying. I think you've been through a hellacious ordeal and you're coping with it the best way you can."

Peter looked at him steadily as he started to form the words he now knew he must say, but would find exceedingly difficult.

It was time.

"I know you're right about some of the things you said, Jeff. I should take your advice. Face my demons, like you said."

"Look," Jeff said gently. "Don't let me bully you into anything you don't want to do..."

"Hey. Don't try and talk me out of it now," Peter almost laughed. "Just do me a favor?"

"Of course."

"I don't think I could bear to read them alone. I would prefer to read them now, while you're here, if you don't mind."

They looked at each other and Jeff had to resist an almost overpowering urge to gather Peter in his arms and hold him tightly, protecting him from the horrors he was about to face...Instead he said, "I'll be right back."

He stood up and went out to his car. "Pull yourself together," he muttered to himself as he picked up his briefcase from the passenger seat. "You don't need complications at this time in your life." He slammed the car door. "And especially with someone as wounded as this guy is."

Returning, he opened his briefcase and pulled out a thick folder in which he had kept all the newspaper accounts of the attack.

"Peter, some of this is pretty graphic, so skip those parts. Just try reading the bare bones of the matter. I'll sit right here, till you finish."

Peter's hand shook slightly as he took the folder from Jeff and slowly opened it. He shuddered as he read the first garish headline—

## **GAY MAN MURDERED IN ALLEY ATTACK!** SECOND MAN IN CRITICAL CONDITION!

He read through the first article, trying not to read the parts that dealt with the extent of Phillips injuries, but he could not ignore them in the end and his mind reeled with anger and disgust as he read on, picking up the next report and then the next. The articles in the gay press were no easier to read as, while they dwelt not so much on the ghastliness of the crime, they exposed the ineptness of the police and their cavalier attitude toward this type of attack.

## **POLICE DROP BALL ON JENNINGS/BRANDON CASE!**NOT ENOUGH EVIDENCE, SAY POLICE, TO KEEP CASE OPEN.

The article went on to say despite protests from gay activists, the police department had decided to close the case due to lack of witnesses and evidence at the crime scene. A police spokesman even admitted that in most cases like this they relied on people coming forward with information, or from the suspects turning each other in. Very little investigative work had apparently been done, and that had angered a lot of gays who accused the police of disregarding their civil rights.

Peter's face grew white as he stared at a photograph in one of the newspapers taken at the scene. It showed him lying on his back by the side of the car, a pool of blood clearly visible beneath his head. He could just make out Phillip's outstretched arm, sticking out from behind the front wheel on the other side of the car. This proved to be too much for him. He gazed in horror at the photograph; his mind

stunned from the shock of finally seeing what had happened to Phillip that night.

"Oh God!" The paper slipped from his grasp. Tears streamed down his face as he rocked back and forth, whispering to himself, "Why? Why?"

Jeff sprang from his stool and put his arms round him. Peter buried his face in Jeff's chest, sobbing uncontrollably. Jeff held him and let him weep, instinctively knowing this was the cleansing the grieving man needed. Peter clung to him, oblivious to everything, save his need for comfort and solace. At that moment the furthest thing from his mind was that the man, who only a short time ago he had ordered out of his home, was comforting him.

As Peter calmed down, Jeff released him and went over to the paper towel rack, bringing several sheets back and handing them to Peter.

"Here," he said gently. "You could use a little mopping up."

"Thanks..." Peter hiccoughed, somewhat embarrassed by his emotional display. "I must look a sight, and look what I did to your shirt!" Peter stared at the wet stain on Jeff's chest.

Jeff laughed. "At least you don't wear mascara."

"Sorry?" Peter looked at him, puzzled.

"One of my other clients, a rather over-made up woman, was the last one to cry all over my shirt, and she left quite a mess."

Peter recognized Jeff was trying to make him feel better and he managed a weak smile, then took a long swig of his drink.

Jeff touched his arm. "How do you feel?"

"I don't know. Stunned, sad, angry as hell." He sat quietly for a moment then said, "But I still don't remember anything, Jeff."

"I didn't think you would right away. And maybe you never will. The brain can set up all kinds of defense mechanisms for self-protection, but if you agree, I'd like to take it one stage further. I'm going to ask you to do something you will probably hate me for."

Peter looked at him with some apprehension, but sat quietly, waiting.

"I want you to come with me to the alley," Jeff continued. "I want you to walk from the theater down the alley to where the car was parked. Just like you did that night."

Peter closed his eyes, turned his head upwards and was silent for a long moment. Then he finally asked, "And the reason for that would be...?"

"Not to cause you any more anguish, believe me. There's a theory, that if someone who was traumatized by a particular experience, such as yours, returned to the actual scene, it could perhaps trigger a memory of just what happened." He paused and looked at Peter with sympathy, before he went on. "Of course, there's not a lot to back this up, but I've a hunch it might help."

Again, Peter was silent, mulling Jeff's words over in his mind. "Okay," he said, slowly. "But not tonight. I think I've had enough testing for one day."

"No, not tonight," Jeff agreed, surprised and now feeling even more impressed by Peter. "It's getting dark anyway and the rush hour would make it a bitch of a drive. I have a couple of appointments tomorrow I can't really cancel. What about the day after tomorrow? I'll pick you up about two. We should miss most of the traffic at that time of day."

"Okay, but I'm not telling my mother about this. She'd have a fit...and," he added with a trace of returning humor, "She might not think you're so damned nice anymore."

Jeff laughed and finished his drink. "I'd better hit the road," he said, somewhat reluctantly.

Peter experienced a feeling of loss at that statement. Suddenly he didn't want Jeff to leave. This man, who only a couple of hours before, he had thrown out of his house. What was he thinking? Of course, Jeff had to leave. He had a life and probably someone to go home to.

Peter found himself not liking that idea at all.

"By the way," Jeff was saying. "This isn't the first time we've met. Or rather, that I've seen you. Something I didn't mention before...after I met with your mother at her apartment, I swung by the hospital. The nurses let me see you for a moment when I told them I was with the police department."

"Oh great," Peter said, rolling his eyes. "I bet I looked just ducky."

"Well, your face was still pretty bruised and swollen, and you were still on the ventilator." He paused. "I have to tell you, I was pretty mad when I saw what those creeps had done to you. Especially as I knew that the department wasn't going to go out of their way to find them. I felt kind of...helpless, in a way. I'm just glad that now I have a chance to maybe resolve this for you." His lips curled in a little smile. "You look a lot better now."

Peter colored slightly under Jeff's steady gaze, then Jeff picked up the folder and tucked it under his arm.

"Okay, I'll see you the day after tomorrow, then."

"Thanks for being so patient with me," Peter said, with a shy smile.

They walked slowly to the door, and for a moment it seemed they might hug goodbye, then Jeff held out his hand and Peter shook it solemnly. Jeff took the business card he had offered Peter earlier and with a smile, tucked it into Peter's shirt pocket. Peter returned his smile, trying to ignore the tingling he felt as Jeff's fingers lightly brushed his chest.

He stood watching as Jeff got in his car and with one quick wave was gone. He closed the door slowly then climbed the stairs to his bedroom. His mind was spinning with confusion as he walked over to Phillip's portrait and leaned his head against the canvas.

"Phillip," he whispered. "What's happening here?"

Straightening, he looked at his lover's likeness, at the green eyes he had adored, at the mouth he had covered so many times with his

own and with a guilty start, he realized that he had started to envision Jeff's wide and generous mouth.

Phillip smiled at him from the canvas and somewhere he heard a quiet voice say,

"It's all right."



ur friend in Laguna tells me the Brandon boy isn't doing very well."

Frank's nerves were on edge as he listened to the now only too familiar voice with its patrician accent, on the other end of the line.

"Really? That's good news isn't it?"

"If it's true." A moment's pause, and then, "One can't rely too heavily on that source, you know. He's been wrong before and if you remember, cost me a lot of money as a result. I'd like you to check it out, Frank. Find out for me if Brandon is really no longer a threat. Find out if what our source says is true or not."

"I'll go visit him at the weekend," Frank said resignedly. "I just got back to work and I can't take time off till then."

"Keep me informed. I must tell you, I don't trust him anymore."

"He's getting nervous again?"

"As a kitten. He's afraid the committee is going to do some investigating as to why the deal didn't go through as planned, and he'll come up smelling like dung. If he does, he'll squawk for sure."

"Seems to me he might be more of a threat than Brandon."

"Could be you're right, Frank. Well, we'd just have to take care of that now, wouldn't we?"

"It'll cost you a heck of a lot more, this time."

"We'll talk about that when the time comes. What about Billy?"

"He's no longer a threat," Frank said tersely.

Frank put the phone down and groaned inwardly. He really didn't want anything more to do with this guy. How many more dirty jobs was he going to come up with? He didn't want anything to screw up his life with Susan, and each time he had to 'take care of things' he felt one step closer to the danger of losing her. She'd never understand how he had got himself mixed up in this. The sweat on his back turned cold at the thought of her ever finding out.

"Damn," he said aloud, punching the payphone. "Damn it to hell!"

Andrew sat opposite Peter in the little coffee bistro they had found near the park on one of their runs. His face was a comic mixture of awe and surprise as he hung on every word Peter had to say about his meeting with Jeff the previous day.

"And you really told him to get out?"

"I'm afraid so." Peter looked a little shame-faced by this part of the story.

"Wow, I'm impressed."

"Impressed?"

"That he came back, I mean," Andrew laughed.

"Yeah, I was too, after I got over the shock of seeing him standing there."

"Okay, so tell me, is he the dreamboat David says he is?"

"I suppose so." Peter averted his eyes from Andrew's and suddenly for no good reason he could fathom, he felt vaguely embarrassed.

"Peter? Why are you blushing?" Andrew was now trying hard not to laugh at his friend's discomfort, but his efforts were in vain. "Come on, 'fess up," he giggled.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Meaning what?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;Meaning he shot himself cleaning his gun."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Unfortunate. Keep in touch."

"Stop that." Peter tried to look sternly at his friend, but failed. "Oh all right, yes. He's very good looking, and a really nice guy. Now stop behaving like a twit. I have serious things to tell you."

Andrew struggled to wipe the smirk of his face and concentrate on what his friend was saying as Peter continued, "We're going up to LA tomorrow. He wants us to go to the alley where Phillip and I were attacked. See if it brings any memories back."

Andrew gaped at him, all vestiges of merriment now gone. "You must be kidding," he gasped. "Is he insane? How could he want to put you through that kind of trauma?"

"Relax, Andrew. I think he knows what he's doing."

"You'd better hope he does. I don't like the sound of this one bit. What if you have a relapse or something?"

"Why on earth would that happen, Andrew? Stop being such a drama queen."

Andrew pouted. "Well, excuse me for caring!"

Peter smiled, and squeezed his arm affectionately. "Thank you for caring. Of course I'm nervous about going, but I think Jeff's right. I have to face this eventually and this just might be the only way."

Andrew, somewhat mollified by Peter's show of affection, looked at him gravely. "Please be careful."

"I will—and not a word of this to Eve, promise?"

"Promise."

When they got back to the house, the phone was ringing as Peter opened the door. He ran to answer it, while Andrew gathered his things and stuffed them in his work out bag.

"Hello?"

"Hi Peter, it's Jeff."

"How are you?" Peter could feel his pulse quicken.

"Good. We still on for tomorrow?"

"Yes. I'm a bit nervous, but..."

"That's to be expected, but don't worry, you'll be fine. I'll be with you every step of the way."

"Thank you. That's reassuring," Peter said, sincerely.

"Okay, I'll pick you up at two." He seemed reluctant to hang up, but Peter, suddenly tongue-tied couldn't think of anything to say to keep him on the line.

"Okay then," Jeff said again. "See you tomorrow."

"Right. Tomorrow. Bye Jeff."

"Bye."

Peter put the phone down slowly.

"Damn."

Andrew appeared in the doorway. "What's wrong?"

"That was Jeff, calling about tomorrow."

"And?"

"Oh, we're still on. He was just checking, I think."

"You're acting weird Peter," Andrew laughed, starting to hum the theme from the Twilight Zone.

"I am not. I just had a feeling he wanted to, you know, talk some more. Oh, I don't know."

"Well," Andrew smiled sweetly. "You'll have all day tomorrow, to find out."



The drive up to LA was a pleasant one despite the fact that Peter was not at all looking forward to the reason for the visit. He found himself enjoying Jeff's company as they kept up a steady stream of conversation, mostly steered by Jeff's skillful questioning.

A far cry from the stilted phone dialogue of the day before.

As they left the pleasant greenery of the Laguna Canyon Road behind and swung on to the ever-crammed 405 Freeway, Peter found himself comparing his own life with that of his new friend. It was apparent to both of them that they had led very different lives.

Peter, born an only child to wealthy adoring parents, and finding very young in life his sexual orientation and a monogamous, loving relationship. Blessed with an extraordinary talent, he had enjoyed fame and fortune as a gifted artist by the time he was twenty-one.

Jeff, on the other hand, had struggled with his homosexuality, desperate that his father should never find out. A father who showed no affection nor offered any praise for his son's athletic prowess. He told this side of his story without any appeal for pity, or a "poor me" sentimentality. He told it as it was, adding only that he felt some people just should never be parents. In his opinion, some adults just didn't have the capability to deal with a child's questions about life, or their yearning for love and support.

"There are so many of them out there Peter, who fall into bad ways and company just because their parents aren't listening to them. When I was a cop in LA, I volunteered at a gay teen's center, you know, to help out with some of the more troubled kids. It was sad to see so many of them who should have had decent ordinary lives, get caught up in drugs and hustling. All it might have taken to change that was a loving environment. Maybe I was naive, but the kids always seemed to be reaching out for understanding. I guess because of my family background, I could relate."

"But you didn't get caught up in all that," Peter protested.

"I was lucky. I had good friends at school. Rob and David for instance...I really missed them when I left and joined the police academy. Funny, how they've all come back into my life again."

"David thinks you're a dreamboat."

"He does? Well he's pretty cute himself. Too bad he's taken."

Jeff grinned at him, and before he could stop himself Peter felt a frown crease his brow.

"Just kidding," Jeff chuckled.

"It's no concern of mine who you find attractive," Peter said, tartly. He could have kicked himself for being caught looking annoyed by Jeff's remark.

Jeff glanced at him with an amused smile. "You are quite something."

They drove in silence for the next few blocks, and Peter began to feel annoyed that he had appeared so petty. He was about to apologize when Jeff said, "Here we are," and pulled over to the curb. "I'll park outside the theater, then we can make the same walk you did that night."

Peter looked out in alarm, his stomach churning with anxiety. Jeff got out and came round to his side of the car. Kneeling down by the window, he reached in and touched Peter's arm.

"You still up for this?" he asked, gently.

Peter nodded. "Yes, yes. Let's get it over with."

He got out of the car and stood looking at the seedy dilapidated theater. It was boarded up having been closed down two years prior. The walls were covered in torn posters and graffiti.

Peter stood gazing silently at the theater facade, hoping that by doing so, some memory of that night might come to him—but painfully, he had to admit to himself that he had absolutely no recollection of ever having been there before.

He turned to Jeff who gave him a quick smile of encouragement, then side by side, they walked down the street toward the alley. It looked like every other deserted back alley in the city, long and narrow with an air of decay, it's only inhabitants a couple of stray cats that lay sleeping in one of the doorways.

Peter hesitated at the entrance. He looked at Jeff with sudden apprehension.

"I can't do this," he said, his throat dry with a sick fear.

"Come on, Peter." Jeff took his arm. "I'll be right beside you, all the way. Don't be afraid."

Still he hesitated, although he knew it had to be done. He could not turn back now, when he had come this far. The gentle pressure of Jeff's hand on his arm urged him forward and he allowed himself to take the first tentative steps into the alley. As they walked slowly between the tall buildings on either side, Peter glanced nervously around him, at the same time willing himself to remember something of that night—a sound, a smell, a figure looming out of the darkness.

Nothing came to him.

Jeff stopped suddenly. "It was about here the car was parked." He indicated a spot on the dirty ground. "You were lying here...and Phillip, over there."

Peter walked forward, Jeff watching him intently. Peter stood very still, his eyes closed tightly against the tears he could feel welling up inside. He clenched his fists, as an anger he had never thought himself capable of, raged inside him. Behind his closed eyes a white light blazed as if suddenly turned on in a pitch-black room. Driven by an unknown instinct, he whirled around to face Jeff, his eyes now wide open, his left arm raised as if to defend himself, his right hand clawing at Jeff's face.

"Whoa," Jeff yelled, his fast reflexes getting him out of the way in time. "What's wrong Peter? What are you doing?"

Peter reeled back, his face etched with pain as though he had been struck a heavy blow. He looked at Jeff with a completely dazed and bewildered expression on his chalk white face. Jeff reached for him and caught him in his arms to prevent him from falling over.

"I'm sorry Peter," he muttered. "I should never have made you do this."

Peter clung to him, his mind a jumble of confused thoughts and visions. He had seen the darkened alleyway, as it had been that night, Phillip walking ahead of him, laughing and passing some comment about how gross the play had been...

"I saw him," he said, almost inaudibly, against Jeff's shoulder.

"What?" Jeff moved back slightly, but did not release Peter from his arms.

"I saw the man who attacked me. He had on a ski mask. I tried to get it off him, and I managed to lift it up."

"Yes of course," Jeff said, with mounting excitement. "Those movements you just made. You were defending yourself. Wait, could you see his face?"

"It was pale. The light from the wall over there, I think, made it pale."

"Would you recognize him again?"

Peter shook his head miserably. "I don't know."

Jeff's voice was gruff. "Okay, that's enough. I'm taking you home."

He led Peter out of the alley, his arm around his shoulders, ignoring the curious looks of a few passers-by as he helped a still trembling Peter into his car.

They were fairly quiet on the road back. Peter was exhausted by the ordeal he'd been through and Jeff let him rest. For his part, he was elated that a break-through seemed in sight.

He glanced over at Peter.

God, he found himself thinking, he is so beautiful. Jeff felt a surge of emotion and compassion flow through him as he looked at Peter's face, calmed now by sleep. Could he ever tell him how he felt? Was it too soon? Phillip had been dead for over three years, but in Peter's mind it was a matter of only months. Jeff was sure however, that Peter felt the attraction too...but, he must not rush this. Peter's psyche was way too fragile at the moment to deal with too many emotions at once.

First they had to find the killers—and that now seemed possible at least. If Peter could begin to remember more about that night. Wait a minute...slow down, he thought, the poor guy's been through enough for one day.

Peter opened his eyes slowly, focusing on Jeff's profile for a few moments. Not for the first time, he found himself admiring the strength in that face, the thick dark eyelashes and full, generous mouth that now curled in a smile, as Jeff turned to look at him. "Gosh, sorry I dozed off like that."

"No problem. After what you've just experienced, a nap was just what the doctor ordered."

The traffic on the I5 built up steadily and slowed their progress, so by the time they reached Peter's house it was already dark.

"Would you like to come in?" Peter paused, as he climbed out of Jeff's car. "I don't feel like being on my own right now, and I can't tell my mother about any of this yet."

Jeff smiled and nodded. They entered the darkened house and Peter ran around putting on some lights.

"Would you like some hot tea?"

"Sounds good."

They went into the kitchen and Peter busied himself preparing their tea. "I do this English style," he said. "As instructed by my friends Rod and 'A'. The water has to boil. They think it's barbaric the way we Americans make tea."

"What about their warm beer? That's pretty medieval."

"Funny enough, it tastes pretty good—especially when you're in a London pub," Peter said, smiling, "You should try it sometime."

"Never been to London," Jeff remarked.

"Well, that's something to look forward to."

How strangely comfortable this all suddenly seemed. They looked at each other gravely, then Peter said, "Quite a day."

Jeff's mouth twitched. "You can say that again."

Peter handed him a mug of hot tea. "I'm just glad you were there with me."

They sipped their tea in silence for a moment.

"You should know that something else has happened in the last few days." He put his mug down on the counter. "I'd like to show you something, upstairs"

Jeff put down his tea and followed Peter up to the master bedroom. Peter flipped on the lights, and walked over to the easel that supported Phillip's portrait.

"I started this as a surprise for his birthday, three years ago."

Jeff felt his breath catch in his chest, as he took in the full realization of those words.

"When I came out of the coma," Peter continued, "I couldn't paint anymore. No matter how hard I tried, how many times I came to this canvas and tried to mix the paints, I just couldn't. It seemed as if whatever talent I had, no longer existed. Then, when I got back from Mexico, I was standing here looking at him and...and it was as if he told me I could do it—and I could, Jeff. How do you explain a thing like that?"

"No more than you could explain what happened in that alley."

"Right." Peter hesitated, then said, "I'm beginning to think that Phillip is somehow guiding me towards the truth. Does that sound crazy?"

Jeff gazed at Phillip's portrait and before he knew what he was doing, he reached out and caressed the outline of Phillip's face with his fingertips. He shivered slightly, as he felt some form of connection. Almost a transfer of feeling, he thought, his eyes still locked on the man's face.

"He loved you very much," he murmured.

Peter, moved by Jeff's compassion, came and stood beside him. "Do you think he could be helping us?"

"Yes, I think he just might be." Jeff turned, smiling at Peter. "And with help like that, we're definitely going to find those bastards."

"There's more." Peter walked slowly to the armoire. "Something I should have told you before. On my birthday, two friends of mine who had bought Phillip's car gave me this."

He held out the diary, and Jeff took it from his grasp.

"It's Phillip's. I haven't been able to read it, but I think we should now, don't you?"

Jeff skimmed through the pages.

"Lots of entries and appointments. It wouldn't hurt to take a look at the few days before the incident. See if anything triggers a memory for you."

"Right," Peter said, and together they sat down on the edge of the bed, as Jeff flipped the pages to the relevant dates.

"Uh..." Peter put his hand on Jeff's arm. "Rod and 'A' said there were some personal notes in there, so if you don't mind, please skip those."

Jeff gave him a little smile. "You're no fun." He turned serious again as he found the entry he was looking for. "Here it is. *February 12th*, *8p.m.—Theater*." Then he backed up three or four days of pages. "Who's Don?" he asked, looking up at Peter.

"Don? The only Don it could be is Don Harley, Phillip's boss. You know, the one I had that strange feeling over."

Peter leaned forward to read the entry.

"Told Don of my suspicions that someone in the firm is dealing in some illegal land transaction—he said he'd look into it."

Jeff said, "That entry is dated February 8th. Did Phillip mention anything of this to you?"

"God, Jeff...I wish I could remember." Peter got up and paced about the room. "This sounds really important."

Jeff flipped to the next page. "Talked to Peter—told him I was worried about Don's reaction when I told him what I'd overhead..." He looked at Peter who had crossed the room, and was standing looking at Phillip's portrait, as if for inspiration. "I have to talk to this Harley guy. You sure you can't remember this conversation?"

Peter shook his head miserably, and Jeff walked over to where he stood.

"Hey, my friend," he said gently. "Don't beat yourself up right now. You've been through a lot in the last few hours."

Peter looked at him, his eyes glistening. "I don't know how I'd have managed all this...without you."

Jeff stepped closer and, cupping Peter's face in his big hands, he kissed him softly on the lips. For a few seconds neither man moved. Peter felt as though he could scarcely breathe. Gently, Jeff's fingers stroked the side of Peter's face. Then, abruptly he stepped back, letting his arms fall to his sides.

"Sorry, I got a little carried away there." He walked back to the bed and picked up Phillip's diary. "Why don't you give me Harley's phone number? I'll call him for an appointment tomorrow."

"What'll you say to him?" Peter sounded a little shaky, the shock of Jeff's kiss still with him.

"I'll think of something," Jeff said, once more in control.

He handed the diary back to Peter who returned it to the armoire.

"Remember," he continued. "We're talking about events that happened more than three years ago. He may not even recall any of this, unless it did cause a problem for his company. I'll take a look at some old local newspapers to see if there were any land deal scams going on at that time. Something to tie it in with what Phillip wrote here."

Peter wrote down Harley's phone number and address on some notepaper and handed it to Jeff, his hand trembling slightly.

They smiled at each other then Jeff said, "I'd better go. Sorry again, for getting a little ahead of myself."

"No harm done." Peter smiled shyly at him. They walked downstairs together and paused at the door.

"I'll call you tomorrow, if I have something to report."

"Call me anyway?" Peter opened the door.

"Okay..." He paused. "I'd like to take you to dinner tomorrow night."

"I'd like that very much." Peter touched his arm lightly. "Drive carefully."

"I will. Goodnight." With that, Jeff ran down the front steps and climbed into his car. Peter answered his wave, watched as he drove away, before slowly closing the door.

"Whew!" Peter leaned back against the door for a moment, thinking of what had just passed between the two of them. Then, with a little smile he went back upstairs.

\* \* \*

Jeff's mind was whirling as he sped up the Coast Highway. This Don Harley character put a whole new spin on the situation. If something shady had gone on in the company, and if Phillip had found out, his life might just have been put in danger. But what kind of deal could it have been to be worth murdering for?

No point in speculating too much till he'd talked to the guy, he thought. This could all just be coincidence. If only Peter could remember what Phillip had discussed with him—especially that bit about Harley's reaction to Phillip telling him he had overheard that phone conversation. There was still a great possibility that Peter's mind would unlock even more of the mystery. He had come a long way in just a few days.

They had come a long way...

He let his mind slip back to that moment when he had kissed Peter. He knew he was falling in love with him and he frowned as he thought of his track record in relationships. What was he thinking? Peter probably wasn't even interested in him. He didn't seem the type to give his affections too easily...but he hadn't seemed to mind the kiss. Even wanted to see him for dinner tomorrow night. Jeff smiled at the thought of them out on a date.

There I go again, he thought, trying to rush things.

"Okay, Jeff m'boy," he said aloud to himself. "Let's just take it nice and easy."

He was alone in the alley. He knew Phillip had gone on ahead, but the mists that now swirled around him obscured everything from view.

"Phillip!" he called out. "Wait for me...where are you?"

No answer came from the inside the dense wall of fog that separated him from his friend. He called out again and again. The fear that had been a mere tickle in the back of his mind, now became a full on terror as he stumbled blindly into the mist calling Phillip's name.

Suddenly, he felt hands pulling him back, restraining him in his attempt to break through the barrier that prevented him reaching Phillip.

"No, no," he screamed as he fought to free himself of the powerful grip. His struggling caused him to turn and face his attacker...An immense hooded figure stood over him, arm raised, ready to strike. With a desperate lunge, he knocked aside the upraised arm and tore at the hood that covered his assailant's face.

A pale snarling visage leered at him, the mouth wide open in a silent howl of rage...

Peter sat up gasping for breath, the sweat pouring from his body. "Not again!"

He flung himself from the soaked bedding. Madly, he rushed into the bathroom, splashing his face and chest with cold water in an effort to erase from his mind the terror that had enfolded him.

Shivering now, he slipped on a robe and padded to the bedroom window. He looked out at the dark sky, and breathed deeply to calm himself. He was momentarily startled as a clap of thunder reverberated close overhead. A sudden lightening storm lit up the sky and the ocean, in a single blinding light. He gasped, and involuntarily stepped back from the window, but then, drawn by some unknown force, he peered out into the night as yet another bolt of lightning illuminated the sky.

There...framed in the window, as if standing next to him, was that pale leering face. He spun round ready to defend himself, but the room was empty—and as one more lightning flash illuminated the room, it lit up Phillip's portrait, the eyes of which were clearly fastened upon him.

"You sent him, didn't you Phillip?" Peter cried. "You let me see him again!"

He almost stumbled to the armoire and with trembling hands, picked up a sketching pad and pencil.

Sitting down on the side of his bed...he began to draw.



 $\mathcal{J}$  eff decided to pay Don Harley an unscheduled visit rather than call for an appointment. An element of surprise never hurt in his line of work.

As luck would have it, Mr. Harley *could* just fit him in for a few minutes, the secretary informed him, after Jeff had totally charmed her with one of his most winning smiles. He had introduced himself as a freelance reporter from LA, doing a short article on successful architects in South Orange County. So mesmerized was she by Jeff's smile, that she forgot to ask for his business card.

Don Harley, seated behind his vast mahogany desk, affected a patronizing air as Jeff was ushered into the large plush office. Not bothering to rise, he waved Jeff to a chair and waited till he had made himself comfortable.

"Well, Mr. uh..."

"Stevens, Jeff Stevens."

"Mr. Stevens, of course. You're working free lance, I understand?"

"I'm actually working for Peter Brandon," Jeff said evenly, his eyes fixed on the man's face. "I believe you know him personally."

"Peter?" Harley looked away. "I don't follow you. What has Peter got to do with an LA newspaper?"

"Nothing, actually." Then not missing a beat, Jeff continued, "I'm investigating Phillip Jennings' death. I understand he was an employee of yours."

"Yes, yes he was..." Harley looked back at Jeff sadly. "Terrible thing, terrible. He was an extremely talented young man. Could have gone far but for what happened." He sighed speculatively, then his eyes narrowed suddenly. "But you are here under false pretenses. Telling my secretary you were a writer."

Jeff ignored the remark. "I have reason to believe that Phillip Jennings uncovered some kind of land scam that was being perpetrated by someone, right here in your firm." As he spoke, Jeff's eyes never left Harley's face, which closed, tight as a fist.

"That's ridiculous!" Harley rasped. "Where would you get such an idea?"

"Not only that..." Jeff continued, "Apparently, Phillip told you about it and was quite concerned over your reaction."

Harley made a big deal of busily shuffling papers on his desk. "This was all so long ago...but...I do remember something about this now. Phillip thought he had overheard something of the kind on the phone, but he was mistaken."

Jeff leaned forward in his chair. "Mistaken? How so?"

"Well, he may have overheard something, but as he told me, he thought it was a crossed line. Obviously, it was coming from some other location entirely." Harley smiled thinly at Jeff. "There was no involvement in anything illegal by anyone in this office, I can assure you. I told Phillip this, but he didn't seem very convinced that he might have been wrong. That's probably why he was concerned—that perhaps I didn't take him seriously enough."

"Did you follow up on his theory?"

Harley could not stop the scowl that appeared on his face. "There was no need. As I told you there was nothing illegal going on...and then of course, poor Phillip was...attacked, a few days later."

"And you didn't think there was any connection?"

"Of course not. Why on earth would I? Are you suggesting that Phillip was deliberately killed because of something he overheard here? Something that had absolutely nothing to do with him or anyone he knew? That's just too ridiculous. You've been reading too many detective stories I fear, Mr. Stevens."

"So, you were absolutely sure that what Phillip overheard, could not possibly have come from this office."

"Absolutely." Harley shuffled some more papers. "I told Phillip that I had called the Telephone Company and they'd had some problem or other that day...a short circuit or something...I don't really recall. Like I said, it was a long time ago. I'm sorry I can't be more helpful."

"On the contrary, Mr. Harley," Jeff said quietly. "You've been very helpful. Well, I won't waste anymore of your time." He stood and held out his hand. "Sorry about the deception, earlier."

"Indeed." Harley shook Jeff's hand limply. "Next time, be sure to make an appointment."

Jeff, resisting the urge to wipe Harley's dampness from the palm of his hand, fixed his most charming smile on him as he nodded and headed for the door. Then, he paused and walked back to Harley's desk. Still smiling amiably, he placed his business card in front him. Harley looked up at him with slack-faced surprise.

"Just in case you do remember anything more about those events, I'd appreciate it if you'd call me. Have a nice day, Mr. Harley."

As Jeff left Don Harley's offices, Peter and Andrew were involved in a strenuous workout together in Peter's garage.

"Where's Eve?" Andrew panted. "Haven't seen her around today."

"She went to visit some friends in San Francisco for a few days," Peter grunted. "She didn't really want to but I insisted she went. They've been on at her to visit for ages, and now she has all this free time since she doesn't have to visit me in hospital. I told her I'd be

fine. I've got you and David, and Rod and 'A' to call, if anything should go wrong—not that it will."

"And not to mention Jeff," Andrew smiled cheekily. "How'd it go in LA?"

"Pretty traumatic. I remembered some of what happened that night."

"Wow. This is great news. What does Jeff make of it?"

"He's following up on some stuff today. He's going to call me later."

"You like him, don't you?" Andrew looked at his friend fondly.

"He's really nice. A very compassionate guy. Yes, I like him."

"And...easy on the eye, from all accounts."

"He is that," Peter agreed. "He reminds me of Phillip, in many ways. Not in looks so much," he added, seeing Andrew's look of surprise. "They're both 'take charge' guys, you know. Used to making decisions and not having much of an argument from anyone."

"You mean, bossy," Andrew laughed.

"Oh, yeah...that too, but Jeff has made me do things I have been trying to ignore since I came out of the coma. Without him I'd still be wallowing in self-pity as he so nicely put it, instead of trying to find out what happened that night."

"How much can you remember?"

"Bits and pieces really, but last night, I had a dream that was so vivid when I woke up I drew the face I saw. I think—in fact I know—it's the face I saw in the alley."

"My God," Andrew whispered. "That's incredible. What does he look like? Have you told Jeff?"

"Not yet. Come upstairs. I'll show you."

Andrew shivered as Peter handed him the sketchpad and for the first time, stared at the face of the man who just might have put his friend in hospital for three years.

"God. He looks meaner than hell." Andrew grimaced as he passed the pad back to Peter. "A face only a mother could love." "He's no oil painting, as my grandmother used to say," Peter agreed. "But don't forget, this is my vision of him; how I saw him at that moment. His face in repose might be very different."

"I sure hope so, for his sake. Better let Jeff see it tonight."

"Did I mention he wants to take me out to dinner?"

Andrew gripped Peter's hand tightly. "That's the best news I've had all day."



Don Harley sat for a long time in silence after Jeff had left his office. Had he convinced that meddling fool that there was nothing to connect Phillip's death to a supposedly overheard telephone conversation? How the hell had that man gotten his information? Did this mean Peter was getting his memory back-or was Stevens just bluffing? Yet, it was so close to the truth.

Damn Frank Meeks for screwing this up—and damn Bowman for getting him involved in this mess in the first place. Now Peter had hired a private investigator. God forbid they should ever find out what had happened. He'd be ruined. Worse still, he'd go to jail as an accessory. He picked up his phone and shakily punched in some numbers.

"Senator Bowman, please." His voice sounded unnaturally high even to himself, as he answered the woman who asked how she could direct his call.

"I'm sorry sir...the Senator is out of the country for a few days on business. May I take a message?"

Harley cursed silently. "Did he leave a forwarding number?"

"Only for extreme emergencies sir. I'm afraid I can't give you that number, but I'll be happy to take a message. He'll be calling me later today."

"Ask him to call Don Harley, soon as he can. He has the number." He slammed the phone down in frustration. What was he going to do? He told himself to calm down. Maybe Stevens *was* bluffing.

No, he couldn't take the chance. He'd better call Meeks, much as he hated ever having to talk to the man. Meeks scared him; he had no problem admitting that to himself.

There was something innately cold about Frank Meeks. The kind of man who could kill in cold blood and never lose a night's sleep over it. He shuddered at the memory of how Frank had recounted the night of the killing to him. The pleasure in his voice had been unmistakable. He knew Frank hated homosexuals. For him, it had made the job all the easier.

Harley had agonized over the whole thing for days before and weeks after. Jennings was a nice kid, and talented. He would have gone far, no doubt of it. Why did he have to overhear that conversation? Incredible, the hand that fate sometimes deals. And worse still, Phillip Jennings had been recommended by his old friend, Fred Olson. If Fred ever had an inkling that he had been responsible in part, for Phillip's death...

He groaned aloud now as he remembered...

Why had he ever got involved with Bowman's plan to ensure that the Hong Kong syndicate he was working for purchased the biggest parcel of land ever put on the market in Laguna Beach's history?

The payoff was to have been in the millions for Bowman, and Harley's firm was to have secured all the designing and construction contracts. What an incredible coup for his company. Everyone would win. All he had to do was make sure the city council voted in favor of the Asian syndicate, and he had been given the funds to do just that. Everything looked like it was falling into place, and for a time it looked like the council would approve the land acquisition—until that idiot woman ruined it all.

Joyce Taylor. Oh, how he hated that bitch.

She, the oldest board member, had actually refused to accept any form of bribe and had threatened to expose him if he didn't immediately resign from the council. Bowman had been furious that he had failed, and had screamed at him like a maniac over the phone. That of course, was what Phillip had overheard when he inadvertently picked up the phone to make a call, and the lines were somehow crossed.

Poor Phillip, never guessing it was he, Harley, the Senator had been yelling at. When Harley informed Bowman their conversation had been overheard, the senator went into a howling rage, ranting that this would ruin all their careers if Phillip ever told the story to the 'wrong' people.

After he had railed at Harley for several minutes, he finally said, "I have someone who can take care of this for us, fortunately."

Harley had almost been afraid to ask. "What do you mean?" he'd quavered.

"A certain man who used to work for me as a security guard. Someone who can be relied on to take care of business for me. Something you have failed to do."

And so it was. Two days later Phillip was dead, and Peter was in hospital not expected to live. Harley had been appalled by this turn of events and had lived on his nerves for the next few days. Having to attend Phillip's funeral and mutter words of condolence to Eve and to Fred, his friends of thirty years, was almost more than even he could stand.

If they had but known the truth.

Meeks had come to him for his money and Harley had never before been so scared of anyone in his life. Frank had sat opposite him in this very office and gloated how the fags had been easy meat. Harley shuddered again at the memory.

Then, seeing Peter again after all these years, at his birthday party...

What had that look on his face meant when they shook hands? Now, it seemed to him that maybe Peter had had a recollection of events. God! His memory might have come back. Who knew how much Phillip might have told him before the night they were attacked?

That's why he had hired this Stevens person. It could be the only explanation.

He picked up the phone again and dialed a Los Angeles number. "Detective Frank Meeks, please."

"Detective Meeks is not available. I can take a message."

"No message. I'll call later!" Harley slammed down the receiver yet again. He had worked himself up into a nervous frenzy and he shivered as cold sweat ran down his sides under his shirt.

What in the world was he going to do now?

\* \* \*

Peter heard the phone ring as he came out of the shower. Wrapping a towel round his hips, he hurried into the bedroom and picked up the phone.

"Hello?"

"Hi, it's Jeff."

"Hi, Jeff." Peter had recognized the deep, warm voice, immediately.

"How are you feeling today?"

"I'm fine...Better now you've called."

"Good. We still on for dinner tonight?"

"I'm looking forward to it," Peter said, smiling to himself.

"Okay, I'll pick you up around six. We have some things to discuss and I'd like to get an early start."

Peter came back to earth quickly. "Did you talk to Don?"

"You bet I did. I think I rattled his cozy cage a little. Look, I have to run. I have a deposition to attend in 15 minutes, but I'll see you in a couple of hours."

"You bet—and I have something to show you."

"What is it?"

"You'll see. Something I drew last night."

"Okay." A pause, then he said, "Listen Peter, do me a favor. Don't go anywhere till I come over—and if someone rings the bell or approaches the house, make sure you know who it is before opening the door."

"This sounds a bit sinister!" Peter started to laugh, then thought better of it.

"I'm just a bit concerned by Harley's reaction. I might be overreacting, but just to be on the safe side, be cautious till I get there."

"You're the boss. I bow to your judgment in this matter." Peter allowed himself to chuckle this time and Jeff responded by laughing lightly.

"I might just be getting too fanciful, but just till we're sure..."

"Don't worry. I'll be careful, Jeff."

"Good. Okay, gotta go. See you soon."

Peter put the phone down slowly and turned to look at Phillip's portrait.

"What do you make of all that?" Peter walked slowly towards the portrait. "Could Don Harley be involved in all of this?"

He closed his eyes, hoping to hear Phillip's voice again—but there was only silence. Sighing, he went back into the bathroom to shave and dry his hair. His thoughts returned to Jeff telling him that Don Harley had been rattled. He wished he could remember what it was that Phillip had told him that night. There it was in the diary—that Phillip had discussed this very thing with him. That he had said he was worried over Don's reaction.

What reaction? Had Don not believed Phillip?

Slipping on a pair of white briefs he crossed to the closet and chose a pale blue silk shirt and cream-colored linen slacks to wear. Despite the seriousness of Jeff's tone he wanted to look his best for this dinner date with him. He allowed himself just a moment's indulgence in a sudden fantasy as he remembered the touch of Jeff's lips on his. Then he shook his head ruefully.

"Quit acting like a dizzy teenager," he muttered to himself.

Promptly at six, the doorbell rang.

Peter's heart skipped a beat as he opened the door and saw Jeff standing there, looking incredibly handsome in a dark tan shirt and black pants.

"You look like you just stepped out of GQ magazine," Jeff said, with a smile.

Peter grinned. "You look pretty sharp yourself, Mister. Come on in. I've got a couple of glasses filled with ice, just waiting for some Scotch."

"Sounds good."

Jeff waited in the living room as Peter darted into the kitchen and returned a moment later, with a glass in each hand.

"Bottoms up."

"So," Jeff said, after the toast, getting down to business right away, "What do you have to show me?"

"Tell me what happened at Don's office first."

"Okay..."

They sat down side by side on the sofa and Jeff's expression was serious as he looked at Peter.

"That guy got kind of nervous when I mentioned the land deal. Then he went off about how nothing illegal had ever happened in his company and what Phillip had overheard, if anything, had come from another location entirely."

Peter looked dubious. "And you think he's covering something up?"

"Well, apparently Phillip admitted that what he had overheard had come in on a crossed line, so Harley was quick to tell him it could have been someone talking from another building, or even another town."

"What do you think?"

"My gut tells me Harley was lying. I think he's hiding something and, if I'm right, then it puts a whole different spin on what happened to you and Phillip. That may not have been just a random gay bashing after all, but a deliberate act to shut Phillip up."

Peter stared at Jeff for a long moment, a shocked expression on his face as he began to realize just what this meant.

"You mean...you really think Don Harley could have been involved in this? That's unbelievable." Then he added thoughtfully, "But it could account for the strange feeling I got when I shook hands with him at my party. Maybe Phillip was trying to warn me. My God Jeff, Don is Fred's best friend."

"Who's Fred?"

"My mother's boyfriend before she married my Dad. He's still in love with her. He was the one who recommended Phillip for the job at Don's company. And Martha, Don's wife, has been a friend of my mother's since they were kids. This is awful."

"Where is Eve by the way?" Jeff asked.

"In San Francisco, for a few days. Why?"

"Because I think I should get you out of here for a while until we sort all this out."

Peter gaped at him. "What on earth for?"

"Supposing that what we've just been guessing at happens to be true? If Harley was involved in anything illegal he probably had partners. They might not be too happy about us getting too close to the truth. You could be in danger." He looked at Peter thoughtfully for a moment. "What if you moved in with Andrew and David for a while? At least until I can work out if we're barking up the wrong tree—or not."

Peter took a long swig from his glass then sank back against the sofa cushions. "If what you're saying is true, that I'm in danger that is, then I don't want to stay with friends. That might put them in danger too." He paused and looked at Jeff. "And what about you? You're the one who stuck his neck out. You could be first on the list."

"Hey, I was a cop remember?" Jeff said, trying to make light of the situation. "I was trained for a life of danger."

"Okay, Rambo...but I think we should stick together on this—there's safety in numbers. Si, compadre?"

Jeff smiled, and then said slowly, "I could stick around here for a couple of days, but I think it'd be better if you came to my place..."

"What are you proposing, sir?"

"Just that you might be safer away from here," Jeff said hastily.

"Of course." Peter realized he had embarrassed Jeff. "Sorry, I'm being flippant...but, what do you say we talk about this over dinner?"

"Good idea. Just throw some things in a bag, so we don't have to come back tonight."

"I'd better call my mother—to let her know I'll be gone for a couple of days."

"Right, and suggest to her she stays in San Francisco for a little while longer. Just till we know what's going on."

"You got it." Peter ran upstairs to make the call to Eve.

There was no reply, so he left a message, keeping it fairly vague, saying just that he was going out of town—and why didn't she stay in San Francisco a few more days. Then, grabbing the bag he had used for his last trip, he threw together enough clothes for a short stay. He paused in front of Phillip's portrait.

"Can you believe what's happening?" he murmured. "If someone did this to you deliberately, we're going to find out and make him pay—big time." He touched the corner of Phillip's mouth with his fingertips. "Wish us luck!"

Then, remembering the drawing he had done the night before, he rolled it up and threw it on top of his clothes, zipping the bag shut and running back downstairs.

Jeff suggested Peter set the alarm he so very rarely used before they left the house, then climbing into Jeff's car, they set off up the coast toward Newport Beach.

"Something else I found out about Mr. Harley," Jeff said, as they drove. "I did some rooting around in public records and found he had been an active member of the city council for a couple of years."

Peter nodded. "Yes, I remember that. Phillip told me Don had ambitions to be the next Mayor."

"Funny thing is, he resigned in the middle of a term without any real explanation given. Just 'personal reasons'."

Peter laughed. "Maybe Martha, his wife, was complaining he wasn't home enough, though I never could really see that as a love match. He always looks like she's getting on his nerves half the time."

Jeff said nothing, obviously thinking things over.

"I don't think I ever asked you where you live." Peter broke the silence as he gazed out at the ocean, its waters reflecting the yellow moon that seemed to sail majestically above them.

"I have an apartment on the island. Kind of small, only one bedroom, but I call it home."

"Nice. Where are we eating?" This was prompted by his stomach rumbling.

"A little place near the bay I discovered about a year ago. Very *un*trendy. The crowds haven't found it yet, so it's still my favorite."

"Do you take all your dinner dates there?"

Jeff grinned at him. "You bet—and there's been droves of 'em. Actually," he chuckled, "You're the first. I usually eat there alone. Gives me time to think."

Peter had a sudden vision of a lonely Jeff, perplexed by a particularly difficult case, sipping a glass of red wine, staring out the restaurant window while mulling over the clues he had uncovered. He stole a sideways glance and smiled as he admired the handsome profile. He began to imagine how Jeff must have looked in his police uniform, and he squirmed in his seat, embarrassed by the sudden arousal that thought had provoked. Get a grip Peter, he thought, hoping Jeff didn't notice his discomfort.

The restaurant was indeed quiet when they arrived. The hostess recognized Jeff immediately and greeted them warmly, showing them to a window table with a view of the bay. They accepted the offer of a glass of Chardonnay each, and then perused the menu.

"Everything's good," Jeff said. "But my favorite is the chicken picatta."

"How did you know that's just what I was going to order?"

They smiled at each other, then Jeff said shyly, "By the way...you are no longer a client of mine."

Peter gaped in surprise, mixed with disappointment. "What do you mean?"

"Well, I can't really invite a paying client out on a date. That wouldn't be kosher. So I here-by resign from the job, and volunteer my services as a friend."

Peter laughed with relief. "Boy, I thought you were giving me the brush off for a moment. Your offer is accepted, and very much appreciated."

Dinner was delicious, the conversation easy, and as they discussed the events of the last few days Peter found himself realizing with some amazement just how short a time they had known each other. So much had happened in the last few days.

"Thank God you didn't give up on me that first day," he said with sincerity, at one point.

Jeff grinned at him. "It was close. I don't usually go back to see if I can be thrown out a second time."

They laughed together, both men feeling the warmth of a newly formed bond—of a fledgling intimacy being created between them as they gazed at each other across the table.

"Can I ask you something?" Jeff said, after a moment. "If it's too difficult to talk about, tell me to mind my own business."

"What is it?"

"What was it like when you were in that coma? Do you remember anything at all?"

Peter looked down at his wineglass, then picked it up, running his finger round the rim as he answered. "All the doctors wanted to know the same thing. Andrew too. I think my mother just wanted to avoid that subject. Unfortunately, disappointing as it may seem, there isn't a whole lot to tell. Most of it seems like a vague dream now. The only part that I really remember is just before I woke up. Phillip was there..."

"Is this upsetting you...talking about it, I mean?"

"No, no. Like I said, it's all very vague, except when Phillip came to me and helped me cross over. That's what it felt like. He made it possible for me to leave that...prison. He opened the door for me and set me free."

"That had to have been an incredible experience."

"I only wish I could remember more about it." Peter paused for a moment, then he said, "Sometimes, I find it really amazing that I can't recall more of it. After all, it was three years! Yet, from the time Phillip and I walked into the alley until I awoke in the hospital room, it's all just a haze. I have no recollection of time passing or anything like that. When they told me I had been out for three years, I just couldn't believe it. It took me a long time to come to terms with that..."

"I'll bet," Jeff murmured. "Did you feel any kind of sensation at all?"

"Once or twice I had a vague sense of floating and falling. The doctors said that must have been as I neared consciousness. I told them about Phillip being there—and they kind of just nodded and smiled. I know they didn't believe that part. Apparently, they hear a lot of strange stories when people come round after being unconscious for an extended period of time. They put it down to hallucination or a dream-like state. But Jeff, for me that part was so vivid; it can't have just been a dream. I have to admit when I awoke, that's what I thought it was. Phillip telling me that I had to go home and that he couldn't come with me—of course, I thought I had to have

dreamed it. Then when I heard his voice at the graveside, I *knew* it had not been a dream He was there with me, just before I woke up..."

He looked away for a moment, then continued, his voice low and filled with emotion. "You know, sometimes I have to consider myself really lucky. The doctors told me that when I was brought in after the assault, they didn't give me a cat in hell's chance of survival—and that even if I did survive the trauma, they figured I'd be a vegetable for the rest of my life. The fact that I didn't die and I'm not a vegetable—that has to mean something, right? There has to be a reason why things worked out the way they did."

He looked intently at Jeff who had been hanging on his every word and who now took Peter's hand in a comforting grip.

"Yes, there's a reason," he said with quiet conviction. "Many reasons—the most important one being that you will have the satisfaction of seeing whoever killed Phillip brought to justice."

"You think we'll find them then?" Peter's eyes glittered in the candlelight. "It's been so long...they could be anywhere by now...and even with Phillip's help, I sometimes wonder..."

Jeff released Peter's hand and leaned back a little in his seat. "Tell me a little about Phillip," he coaxed. "I am kind of curious as to how you two met."

"That I remember very well...we met in that most romantic of places—Pasadena High. His father had been transferred from Seattle to the LA area and Phillip came in late in the semester. He took the seat next to me, winked at me and, that was that."

"That was that?"

"Pretty much. I was in love with him from word one."

"He got you at hello, eh?"

"Sorry?"

"It's a line from a movie. I guess you haven't seen it. Forget it, go on."

"Well, we weren't quite sixteen at the time, and I was pretty naive. I had never even thought of dating a girl. Falling in love with Phillip seemed the most natural thing in the world to me." He smiled at the memory. "All I knew was I wanted to be with him all the time, and fortunately he wanted the same from me. My Mom and Dad liked him instantly, and when his parents were killed in a car crash he moved in with us. He didn't have any other relatives; his parents were 'only' children. There were no grandparents, so my dad took care of the legal stuff and he lived with us from then on."

"Wow," Jeff murmured. "And you'd never had an experience with any guy before him?"

"Never. Oh, I knew what some of the kids did, or at least, I'd heard about it. But no, before Phillip, there was no one."

"And Phillip?"

"One or two, or so he said," Peter laughed. "We were so green, Jeff...but we learned fast enough."

"You don't have to tell me about your love life, I figure it was pretty special."

"Yes it was. *He* was very special..." Peter cleared his throat. "Anyway, after college we moved into the house I'm living in now. My grandmother had left me a trust fund that I inherited when I turned twenty-one. Phillip, of course, had been left a substantial amount when his parents died. When we saw the house, we both fell in love with it. Phillip had a ball redesigning the interior and building my studio." He fell silent, his eyes glistening at the memory.

"Go on," Jeff said quietly, lightly touching the back of Peter's hand.

"We were truly happy there, Jeff. It seemed then that it could never end. Well, now we know better," he added bitterly. He shook his head suddenly. "Listen to me, bringing us down after such a great dinner." He straightened up in his seat. "Let's have a change of subject and you can regale me with tales of *your* love life."

"Not that much to tell really." Jeff looked away uncomfortably.

"I sense a lie there somewhere," Peter kidded him.

"Just the usual list of hits and misses...you know," Jeff muttered.

"Still hurt?"

"Not at all. I've learned I'm better off without the aggravation."

It was obvious Jeff didn't want to elaborate on the subject, so Peter decided not to pursue it at that point. He'd save that for later.

"Do you think I should call Andrew and let him know I won't be at the house for a few days? Should I tell him what you suspect?"

"Not yet," Jeff said, glad to be off the hook. He signaled for the waiter. "Just say you're taking a short trip and you'll call when you get back. No point in alarming anyone till we know for a fact if we're right or not."

After Jeff paid the bill and they exchanged a few pleasantries with the hostess, they walked out into the now chilly night air.

Jeff's apartment was close by so they had opted not to put the top up on the convertible, despite the fact they were both only wearing lightweight shirts. By the time they pulled into his garage they were shivering and laughing through chattering teeth.

"Jeez..." Peter picked up his bag from the back seat. "Who knew the temperature was going to drop like this, tonight?"

"Good excuse to light the fire," Jeff said. "Haven't had that on in ages." He threw his arm around Peter's shoulders as if to protect him from the chill as they hurried up the stairs to his apartment.

He flung the door open, turning on the lights, and Peter looked around the comfortable room, feeling completely at home. The living room was large, decorated in muted colors. A large overstuffed sofa sat in front of the fireplace, a modern affair that Jeff lit with the press of a button.

"All the latest gadgets," he laughed. "Here..." he took Peter's bag. "I'll put this in the bedroom. You'll sleep in there. I'll take the couch."

Peter followed him in, arguing politely that he would be just fine on the couch, at the same time eyeing the king-size bed and thinking they could both fit in there very well. There was plenty of room. Should he suggest it, or would it be construed as something else? Would Jeff think...?

"Warming up?" Jeff asked him, interrupting his thoughts. "How about a nightcap?"

"Love one. What could be better? An after dinner drink in front of a roaring fire."

Jeff grinned at him. "I don't think gas fires actually roar, but it's the best it can do." He took a moment to turn on his CD player.

Peter went over to the couch and sat down, kicking off his shoes and relaxing in the warmth of the fire's glow. He settled contentedly into the softness of the couch's pillows, and closed his eyes as he listened to Ella Fitzgerald's warm voice caressing the words of a Rodgers and Hart melody.

"Wide-awake, I can make my most fantastic dreams come true..." Peter smiled as he listened to the lyrics. "Fantastic dreams, for sure," he murmured to himself.

"My romance doesn't need a thing, but you."

When he opened his eyes again, Jeff was standing over him. He held two crystal glasses containing an amber liquid.

"Here we are," he smiled down at Peter. "Chivas Regal, straight up, no ice. The best way to taste this, so my Scottish friends tell me. Just the thing for a cold night."

He sat next to Peter and they sipped their drinks in silence for a moment, then a sudden thought came to him. "Hey, what happened to that drawing you were going to show me at the house? I forgot all about it till now."

"Don't worry, I brought it with me."

Peter rose and went into the bedroom to retrieve the sketch from his bag. Returning, he gave it to Jeff who unrolled it, his eyes widening as he stared at the vicious expression on the face Peter had drawn. "I dreamed about him last night," Peter told him. "It's the same face I saw in the alley, but this time he was wearing a hood, as you can see."

"That's one ugly mug," Jeff remarked, studying the sketch closely.

There was something vaguely familiar about the face, but he couldn't quite place it. "I'll call a friend of mine with the LAPD first thing in the morning. He'll let us look at some mug shots. See if we can line any of them up with this sweet guy."

"Does that mean you'll be going to LA tomorrow?"

"You'll come with me, of course." Jeff laid the sketch down on the coffee table. "I don't want you wandering around on your own all day. Heaven knows what trouble you might get into."

He smiled at Peter, then leaned over and gently kissed the tip of his nose.

"You're right," Peter murmured, not moving away. "I need you around to keep me in line."

They gazed into each other's eyes for a long moment—and then Jeff's arms encircled him in a gentle embrace, his lips now touching Peter's mouth. With a little sigh Peter returned the kiss, his lips parting, allowing Jeff's tongue to caress his own.

Peter felt his heartbeat quicken and he trembled with anticipation as Jeff's hands stroked and caressed him, then gently unfastened the buttons of his shirt. He shivered with pleasure at the touch of Jeff's soft warm lips as they traced the outline of his chest, his tongue lapping at Peter's small stiff nipples.

Peter's mind whirled in confusion. What was he doing? Why was he letting this happen? He should stop this. He had only known this man for a few days. How could he be feeling all this emotion and passion for someone he hardly knew? Only a short time before he had been telling him of his great love for Phillip and how much their life together had meant to him. Would Jeff think less of him because he was allowing this to happen?

But Jeff was kissing him on the mouth again, holding him tighter now and Peter reveled in the feel of this hard, strong body pressing against his own. It felt so damned good! Their kiss deepened and Peter knew, without a doubt, that this kiss was one he would never forget. It was all encompassing; warm, tender and passionate, filling him with an urge to return these sensations tenfold.

He closed his mind to the whys and the wherefores of the situation and let his need take control. Panting, he pulled away from Jeff's kiss.

"Can we do this on the bed?"

Without hesitation, Jeff leapt to his feet and half-carried Peter into the bedroom. Laughing shakily, they started to undress each other and when they were naked, Jeff stepped back holding Peter's hands in his own.

"You are so beautiful," he said, his voice husky with emotion as his eyes traveled over Peter's face and body, admiring the slim hardness of his torso and the strength in his long straight legs. He paused and looked deeply into Peter's eyes. "You are sure about this, aren't you?"

"Absolutely."

Peter wrapped his arms around Jeff's neck, feeling the heft and hardness of the man's erection pressed against his own. Jeff pushed him gently down on to the bed then lay over him, gazing at him, taking in every feature as if for the first time, intoxicated by the emotion he now felt.

They clung to each other...their bodies moving together rhythmically as they kissed with a rising, almost desperate passion. Peter eased Jeff onto his back, rubbing his face across the light covering of hair on Jeff's chest, then kissing an exploratory trail down the smooth skin that covered the ridges of his abdomen. He buried his face in Jeff's groin, licking up and down the length of his rigid shaft, before taking it in his mouth, relishing the sweet taste. Jeff growled with sensual pleasure, grasping Peter's erection, then shifting position so he could reach it with his mouth.

Both men's lives had been a sexual desert for too long. They needed this even more than they knew. The overpowering passion they now experienced, brought them rapidly to the brink. As much as they might want to prolong this moment, neither man had the power to quell the rising urgency that now gripped their very beings.

Jeff's climax surged through his body and he cried out hoarsely as he came. Peter gasped as he felt the first spurt of semen on his tongue, then sucked hungrily even as his own climax erupted into Jeff's eager mouth. Their bodies writhed and shuddered together in the grip of this total ecstasy, until at last it subsided, and they lay for a while without moving, panting slightly as their bodies recovered from that passionate onslaught. Jeff drew himself up alongside Peter, pulled him into a hard embrace and kissed him. Their mouths tasted of each other as their tongues swirled together.

"If this is a dream, don't ever wake me," Peter whispered against Jeff's lips.

"It's a dream come true for me." Jeff kissed him again and again, until both men felt the beginning of returning passion.

"What's this, Mr. Stevens?" Peter said, taking hold of Jeff's stiffening penis.

"Well, you're not doing so badly yourself. What's this I feel?"

"You're a majorly bad influence," Peter chuckled. "No," he said, as Jeff pretended to pout. "Make that the *best* influence."

Jeff smiled into his eyes. "Thank God, we have all night."

Their second lovemaking was more leisurely, less frenzied than the first as they took time to discover in each other's bodies those secret sensual places that give the most pleasure. They were young, and their bodies instinctively responded to one another, matching each other's intensity, releasing the passions that would take them both to their ultimate ecstasy. \* \* 4

They awoke slowly, still wrapped in each other's arms. Their night of lovemaking had taken them into the wee small hours. In between bouts of passion, they had talked, dozed, drunk some water, even suggested making coffee, but sleep had finally overtaken them.

Peter opened his eyes, blinking at the sunlight stealing in through the blinds. His head rested on Jeff's chest. He lay quietly, listening to the steady rhythm of Jeff's heartbeat and thinking of what had happened between them last night. He could scarcely believe it.

Should he feel guilt? Phillip had been dead for over three years, though in Peter's mind it had been less than six months. He had been the only man in Peter's life. Yet, in some inexplicable way, he was sure that Phillip understood and may even have been responsible for this situation.

Was he being crazy for thinking this?

Was there any credibility at all in thinking that Phillip was somehow helping him through all of this? Why had Jeff decided to come back that day after he'd told him to get the hell out? Had Phillip somehow given Jeff a nudge in the right direction? Did he want Jeff to be the one who...

"What're you thinking about?"

Peter jumped a little, then looked up at the man who held him in his arms. "Wouldn't you like to know?" he teased, kissing Jeff on the cheek.

"Can't you do better than that?"

"You know I can," Peter said, smiling seductively.

"That's for sure," Jeff chuckled, giving him a quick peck on the nose. "But...we have to get moving this morning, if we want to get to LA. I have to call my friend Joe to see if he can get us a look at those mug shots today."

"Oh right." Peter came back to earth with a thump as Jeff got out of bed.

Of course, they still had to take care of business. All the lovemaking in the world couldn't change the fact that Jeff had come into his life to help solve the mystery of what had happened three years ago. Nevertheless, he gazed with admiration as Jeff's naked, powerful body stood over him.

"Come on, lazy bones," Jeff admonished him, yanking down the comforter. "Up and at 'em!" He slapped Peter's bare bottom playfully, and Peter grabbed him, pulling him back on to the bed where they wrestled for a few seconds, giggling like schoolboys.

Jeff pinned Peter's arms down. "Seriously though..." he said, then laughed as Peter wriggled from his grasp, and threw him on his back.

"Serious, shmerious..." Peter grinned, licking his lips lasciviously. "Give me more of that which I crave."

"You're insatiable," Jeff growled, pulling him into his arms. "How can I resist?"

"You can't, you can't. Peter buried his face in Jeff's neck.

LA could wait for an hour or so.

Later, as he listened to Peter singing happily in the shower—they had decided they had better do that separately, or there would be no hope of ever getting to LA that morning, Jeff picked up the sketch Peter had given him the night before. Taking it over to the window, he gazed at it intently. He knew this face, but from where? What was it about this sneering face that stirred a memory of...a confrontation in the police station years ago!

"My God," he said out loud, realization hitting him with an almost sickening blow. "Of course, it's Billy...Billy Bach!"



T rank did not receive the message Don Harley had finally left him at his home, until the following day. The previous night was Susan and his wedding anniversary, and he had planned their evening well. First, a romantic dinner overlooking the ocean at Malibu, followed by a night in the hotel's honeymoon suite complete with hot tub. They had both turned off their cell phones, Frank letting the duty officer know that he could not be reached that night.

It had all gone like a dream, and as they both had the next day off, they could linger in bed until almost check out time. Frank smiled as he recalled those incredible hours they had spent making love.

Susan was a wonderfully warm and giving lover and always made Frank feel something close to being a hero. He had kissed her soft succulent mouth over and over, holding her luscious smooth body against his own, reveling in the passion with which she filled him as no other woman ever had. In her arms he was invincible.

She brought out the best in him and he loved her with all his heart and soul.

She had never been witness to his dark side...that insidious part of him he hid from her—and prayed she would never discover. His euphoria ended when they returned home and they stood listening to the message from Don Harley.

"Who's Don Harley?" Susan asked, seeing the frown on Frank's face.

"Just some character I worked for years ago," Frank said, hoping he sounded as noncommittal as he intended. "Probably wants me to recommend someone for a security job. Something like that, I guess."

Her interest in Harley now over, Susan picked up her purse. "I'll just run down to the store and get us something for dinner."

"Fine." Frank kissed her lightly on the lips. As soon as she left, Frank dialed Harley's number. What the hell could that wimp want now?

"Harley?"

"Frank..." Harley's voice was edgy "Thank God. Listen, we may have a little problem here. I had a visit from some private investigator yesterday. Says he's working on behalf of Peter Brandon."

"So? Didn't you tell him to take a hike?"

"It wasn't that simple. He seemed to know something about the...you know...the land deal." Harley was clearly nervous discussing this with Frank.

"How the hell could he know anything about that?"

"I don't know. Unless Peter is remembering something."

"What would he know about it?"

"Are you forgetting Phillip and Peter were lovers? They probably told each other everything."

Frank was in no mood for this conversation. "Have you talked to Bowman?"

"No, he's out of the country for a couple more days. I left a message but I haven't heard back from him yet."

"Okay. Soon as you do, have him call me. In the meantime give me this PI's name. I'll put a little pressure on him to get off the case." "Won't that look suspicious?" "Not the way I'll do it." Frank smiled thinly to himself. "The guy will know he'd have a problem working without a license, or better still, with a broken leg."

Harley shuddered. God! Why was he mixed up with this kind of subhuman monster?

"Okay," Frank was saying, "What's his name and phone number?"

"Uh, wait...here's his card. Jeff Stevens...714-555-4433."

Frank felt his mouth suddenly go dry, and for a moment he was speechless.

"You got that Frank?" Harley's brittle voice sounded in his ear.

"Yeah...I got it. Talk to you later."

He slammed the phone down.

"Goddamn it!" he screamed at the top of his voice, pounding his fist on the tabletop.

Of all the people to get involved in this situation, he could never have imagined it would be that cocksucker, Stevens. How in the hell could he have gotten into this?

"Christ!" he yelled in fury, pacing about the room, his balled fist rapping against his temples in an effort to clear his mind and think straight.

"Stevens," he said the name aloud. "Jeff Stevens."

He began to laugh, quietly at first then louder as a kind of madness overtook him. "Oh, this is just great..."

If Stevens got lucky in his investigation, or if he visited Harley again...and he most surely would want to...and if Harley panicked...

"Shit," he hissed.

He had to get to Stevens and put him out of the way.

This wasn't going to be easy, he knew that—Stevens wasn't a pushover. The guy had shown he was physically a match for almost anyone in a showdown and even he, Frank, would not find him easy prey. Muttering, he picked up the phone and dialed Jeff's number.

"Stevens' Investigations, this is Monica. How may I help you?"

"Is Jeff in, Monica?" he asked in a feigned friendly tone.

"Sorry sir, he's out on an appointment right now. Can I take a message?"

"No thank you. This is just a personal call...But, could I have the address please?"

"Certainly sir." The receptionist recited the address. He thanked her and hung up.

He felt calmer now, the first shockwave of surprise fading away. He had to think fast and not make any mistakes here.

"Stevens...Brandon..." he muttered.

It must be the fag connection that had brought them together, he thought with a sneer. If he could get them both at the same time...and make it look like an accident. He jumped involuntarily, as the phone, still in his hand, shrilled loudly.

"Yeah, hello," he barked into the mouthpiece.

"Frank." It was Bowman. "You've heard, of course?"

"Yeah, he was just on the line." Frank ran a hand across his brow. *Shit*, he thought. Bowman on top of everything else!

"Take care of this, Frank..." Bowman was saying. "Peter Brandon has suddenly become a danger to me again. I want him out of the way—this private investigator too. We can't leave enquiring minds behind, now can we?"

Frank listened numbly to Bowman's cold voice. He was beginning to get a very bad feeling about all of this.

"And Frank..." Bowman continued. "One more thing...Harley. He can't be trusted any longer. He's running scared. You know what you have to do."

"What...are you *nuts*?" Frank yelled. "How's it going to look—all these guys dying at the same time?"

"That's your forte, isn't it Frank? That's why I keep you around. That's why I pay you, isn't it? Just make sure the police can't make any connection."

"Easier said than done, Senator. It just so happens that the PI is an ex-cop who was on the force, same time as Billy and me."

"That should not present a problem for you Frank. All the more reason to take care of it quickly. I'll expect to hear from you in the next day or so with a report of complete success. Don't let me down, Frank—if you know what's good for you."

The phone went dead and Frank sat down wearily.

This couldn't be happening.

He felt like packing a bag and telling Susan they were leaving town right now. But God, he was in this far too deeply. He knew Bowman wouldn't even flinch about turning him in. Who would take his word against the revered Senator...a man who only a few years ago had been nominated to run for the Presidency?

There was nothing to connect Bowman to the failed land deal.

He'd been too clever for that. If, God forbid, things should turn nasty, Harley was the one who'd have to take the fall.

Bowman was right.

Harley couldn't be trusted to keep his mouth shut. He, Frank, was going to have to do something about making sure Harley didn't squawk...

"Hey baby!"

Susan, returning home laden with grocery bags, interrupted his train of thought.

"Give me a hand here, Sir Galahad."

He jumped to his feet and took the grocery bags from her arms. She kissed him on the cheek as she went into the kitchen ahead of him. Frank shuddered as he thought of all the ways he could lose her now.

It must not happen!

\* \*

Jeff and Peter had arrived at the LA police precinct around two in the afternoon, later than they had intended, but Jeff had called his friend and rescheduled their appointment.

Joe French had been a good friend to Jeff when they joined the police force together. Though straight himself, he had no problems with Jeff being gay and had been ready to defend him whenever he heard some of the other men passing homophobic comments.

He knew Jeff could take care of himself, having the height and the physical prowess to take on anyone who challenged him. Joe had admired Jeff's restraint when confronted by the likes of Billy Bach, but he had particularly enjoyed the time when Jeff put Billy out for the count.

He loved telling that story. "Man, you should have seen that tub'o'lard land on his keester when Jeff popped him one!"

Joe had been a detective now for the last two years and had more than fulfilled his early promise as a thorough investigator. He now welcomed Jeff with a hearty handshake and a manly hug. Just a few years older than Jeff, he was already losing his hair and the desk bound job had caused him to put on a few extra pounds round his waist. Jeff returned his back slapping hug, then introduced him to Peter.

Joe gave him a long look, then smiled. "Peter Brandon. Heard a lot about you, one way or another. Glad you've made such a great recovery."

Peter returned his smile and shook his hand.

"Sit down, sit down," Joe said, waving them to the two chairs in front of his desk. "You look great Jeff," he added, patting his own stomach ruefully.

"You too, Joe." Jeff gestured toward the name on the other desk in the office. "I see my old friend Frank shares this office with you." "Unfortunately...yes," Joe replied. "He made detective a year ago. Caused a few raised eyebrows around here, I can tell you."

They spent a few minutes catching up on the news. Peter was content to sit back, and enjoy watching Jeff talking animatedly to his friend about what had been happening in his life, over the last few months.

"...And then I met Peter through a couple of mutual friends," Jeff said, bringing Joe up to date "They felt the case hadn't been investigated enough by the LAPD at the time. No offense, Joe."

"None taken. As a matter of fact a lot of us felt more could have been done, but you know police politics."

Jeff grimaced. "Right. Anyway, Peter had a dream the other night. We had gone back to the alley where he and Phillip were attacked, and he had a sort of vision..."

"A vision?" Joe asked, skeptically.

"Yes," Peter interjected. "I saw, or think I saw the man who attacked me."

"And that night he dreamed about the same guy." Jeff pulled out the sketch from his briefcase. "At first I thought we might be able to match it to someone on file, but I think I know who it is. See if you recognize this face, Joe."

Joe took the sketch and studied it carefully. He shook his head slowly, then looked up. "Can't say I do Jeff. Not a pretty sight is it?"

"Look again, Joe," Jeff urged. "It took me a few minutes to get it."

Joe looked again at the sketch, holding it up to the light still shaking his head, then his eyes widened a little. "Billy Bach? It could be Billy..."

"That's what I hoped you'd say."

"There is a resemblance, for sure."

Jeff leaned forward expectantly. "Where is Billy these days...do you know?"

Joe looked at the two of them, shaking his head at the irony of what he was about to say. "Well that's the darnedest thing, Jeff. We got a report just yesterday from the San Juan Capistrano police department that a badly decomposed and mutilated body had been found in a house by the railroad there. Seems the guy must have shot himself, cleaning his gun. The front door was open, and a couple of dogs or coyotes had smelled the blood—and come in for supper."

"Jesus," Peter whispered, aghast.

"Took some positive identifying, but the landlord, who'd gone there to collect the rent, which was overdue, told the investigating officers that it was Billy Bach. One of them knew Billy had been a police officer here and called to let us know."

"Holy shit," Jeff exclaimed. "Well, that puts an end to any questions we might have had for him."

"Yeah," Joe agreed. "It'd be hard to figure out where he was the night of the attack after all this time, unless..."

"What unless?" Jeff asked quickly.

"Well, remember he and Frank were buddies for a while. They had a falling out and Billy left soon after. It's a long shot, but Frank might know what Billy got up to when he wasn't on duty."

Jeff looked doubtful. "Were they that close? Seems to me, Frank kinda used Billy."

"You could be right about that, but they did hang around together quite a bit. Then, like I said they had a falling out—don't know why. Don't want to either. Frank's married now. Real happy from what I understand. It's kind of mellowed him out." Joe leaned back in his chair and cast his eyes to the ceiling. "Ah...the power of a woman's love," he added, philosophically.

Peter and Jeff smiled at each other at that remark, unseen by Joe.

"Well, I don't think Frank would be too happy answering any of my questions," Jeff chuckled. "As you may recall we didn't see eye to eye most of the time."

"Oh yes, I remember," Joe laughed. "Not a member of your fan club for sure. Don't worry, I'll quiz him a little and let you know if he comes up with anything. You got anything else on this case?"

"Only some speculating on Phillip Jennings ex-boss, Don Harley. He's a shifty type."

"Don Harley, eh?" Joe wrote the name down on his notepad. "Don't know him. Maybe he's the lead you need. You're going to need a lot of luck to crack this one."

"Thanks anyway Joe." Jeff rose, and shook his friend's hand. "We should get going. Good seeing you again."

"Likewise." Joe pumped his hand vigorously. "And nice meeting you, Peter. Good luck with everything."

"So, are we at a dead end?" Peter asked as he and Jeff walked down the steps outside the precinct.

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, if the guy who attacked Phillip and me is dead, how can we ever prove he did it?"

"By finding out the reason you and Phillip were attacked, and the people who were behind it...and my money's still on Don Harley."

Peter shook his head in disbelief. "That's the hardest part of it all to understand," he said quietly. "That Don Harley could knowingly have put our lives in danger." He fell silent, lost in the depressing thought of a family friend's possible treachery.

"Hey, I'm starving," Jeff said, trying to change Peter's mood. "Why don't we have lunch before we head back? There's a restaurant on Santa Monica I used to enjoy. I haven't been there in ages. Let's go there. I'll call the office and check for messages and tell Monica not to schedule any appointments for the next couple of days."

"You sure? I don't want you losing out on any business because of me."

"Don't worry your pretty head about any of that." Jeff squeezed his arm. "The sooner we get all this straightened out, the better."

They got in Jeff's car, he lowered the top and they set off toward West Hollywood.

"Who's this Frank guy you don't seem too crazy about?" Peter asked, as they turned into the parking lot outside the restaurant.

"Just someone I had some problems with when I joined the police force in LA. He's a total homophobe and hated the idea of gays being inducted into the force. He tried to turn the other guys against me—he and his friend, Billy."

Over lunch, Jeff related the story of the final showdown between himself, Billy and Frank. "The thing is, Peter...initially I ignored a lot of the crap Frank and Billy sent my way, but then it just got to be a matter of honor. Was I going to just stand there and take it like I was afraid of the repercussions if I retaliated? Or was I going to say, Okay—that's enough!"

Peter listened with rapt attention. There was something about Jeff's intensity that, at that precise moment, reminded him of Phillip. He too, had always maintained that bullies were cowards at heart and, if challenged, would most likely back away from confrontation.

"So, that particular night," Jeff continued, "I'd just had enough. Billy came barreling at me like some wild rhino—and," he allowed himself a slight chuckle at the memory, "It was a shame, really. He was just useless in a fight. I put him down so easily—and Frank—well, he just stood on the sidelines and did nothing."

"Wow!" Peter exclaimed, happily imagining Billy landing on his ass after Jeff had punched him out. "I bet that made you feel better."

"As a matter of fact it did," Jeff said, grinning at him. "It kinda slowed Frank down a bit too. I think he thought gays were no good in a fight. I changed his mind for him."

"My hero!" Peter smiled and winked slyly, reaching across the table to take Jeff's hand. They laughed together and their obvious happiness caused many diners to look on smiling, wishing they too could share in the laughter.

\* \*

Around six that night, Frank drove down the 133 toward Laguna Beach. He'd had to make the excuse to Susan that someone had called in sick and he was needed at the duty desk. He hated lying to her but there was no other way. He had to start taking care of business before it all blew up in his face. He'd tried calling Stevens' office several times, but finally, when the receptionist said Jeff was not going to be in the rest of the day, he had given up on getting a shot at him right away.

So it had to be Harley.

In reality, Harley was more of a danger. More inclined to give away the whole story in a fit of panic, just to save his own skin. There was still the chance that Brandon might never fully recover his memory, and that Stevens would find his investigation leading him to a dead end. With Harley out of the way, that line of questioning would result in nothing.

As he traveled between the high hills of the canyon, his cell phone rang. It was Bowman, and he must have been on his cell phone, as the connection was dire.

"Fran...!" He was breaking up badly. "Don...thing...lee..." was all Frank could make out, but he figured Bowman was checking up on his progress already.

"Don't worry," he barked into his phone. "I'm already taking care of it."

There was a concerted babble and squawking noise, followed by silence as the canyon walls cut off their communication.

"Damn him," Frank muttered. The phone rang again, and impatiently he turned it off. He'd call Bowman back when he was good and ready.

He turned off the Canyon road onto Forest and then headed up Gleneyre towards Harley's office. Spotting Harley's Mercedes parked downhill, he passed it then did a U-turn, pulling in behind another parked car. He turned off his lights and kept the engine running. It was already dark...This business part of the street was quiet, most of the offices having closed earlier. In a matter of minutes, he saw Harley leave his office.

Looking nervously left and right, Harley ran down the steps and onto the sidewalk. Pointing his electronic key at his car he stepped out on to the road. Frank gunned his engine, pulling out from his hiding place. Without turning his lights on, he careened down the hill toward where Harley stood, opening his car door.

Too late, the man saw the danger.

If he had flattened himself against the side of his car, he might have stood a chance, but instead, panicked, he darted across the street in an effort to escape the oncoming vehicle. It hit him full on, hurling him several feet into the air. The scream that was torn from his lips was silenced as he hit the ground headfirst; his skull cracked wide open by the impact.

A woman driver, traveling some yards behind Frank's car and unable to stop, sealed Harley's fate by running right over him. Shrieking, she stumbled from her car bringing all traffic to a stand-still, while Frank turned the corner on to Forest Road, switched on his lights—and sped away.

No one arriving at the scene noticed a gray envelope shaken free from Harley's jacket pocket, lying in the gutter. Before long it floated away unseen, in a stream of water created by the run off from nearby sprinklers. It bobbed and weaved its way down the hill, getting caught momentarily at the iron grating that covered the mouth of the drain at the foot of the hill. The force of the water reduced the paper envelope to a soggy mass that gradually slipped through the grating and fell into the spillway below.

Frank gloated as he drove back up the Canyon road. It had gone better than even he had anticipated, and as always, he experienced a sense of elation this kind of danger always brought him. He laughed out loud, thumping his fist on the steering wheel as he headed back up to the freeway.

That's *it*, he thought, wildly...one down, two actually if you counted Billy...and two more to go. He chuckled wickedly as a police car, lights flashing, sirens blaring, passed him going in the opposite direction.

The Senator was going to owe him big time, for this one.

\* \* \*

Peter called Andrew as he and Jeff headed back to Newport.

"Hi!" Andrew greeted him, glad to hear from his friend. "Where are you?"

"On my way back from LA."

"Why don't you come over? Rob and Maggie will be here. They'd love to meet you."

"Uh...well, I'm with Jeff actually."

"You are? Bring him too. He knows everyone here—except me—and I think it's time we got introduced."

"Just a sec..." He quickly told Jeff of Andrew's invitation.

"That's fine," Jeff said. "Tell him we'll be there in about twenty minutes."

"Okay, Andrew. We'll see you in about twenty minutes." He hung up and turned to Jeff. "I hope you don't mind too much."

"No, it'll be good to see Rob and Maggie again—and you've told me so much about Andrew, I feel I know him already."

"He's been dying to meet you, so he can see 'the dreamboat' for himself."

Jeff laughed. "Gee, what if I don't live up to his expectations?"

"Oh, I have a feeling you'll exceed his expectations," Peter said, covering Jeff's hand with his own. "Just as you have definitely exceeded mine."

The traffic ahead of them slowed to a crawl as they entered Laguna Beach.

"Must have been an accident," Jeff remarked.

"Oh yeah, look...up there." Peter craned his neck to see as they passed. "Looks bad. There's an ambulance and loads of police cars."

They eased past the drivers who were stopped to take in the scene, and turned right to take a short cut to David and Andrew's house. Rob and Maggie were just arriving as they pulled up. Rob bounded over, grabbing Jeff in one of his famous bear hugs and practically swinging him off his feet. The two men laughed, their heads close together, delighted to see each other after so long.

"You must be Peter." Rob was looking at him over Jeff's shoulder, then Jeff swung him round for a proper introduction.

"Sorry Peter, this crazy man is a friend of mine," Jeff laughed as the two shook hands.

"Hey," Rob said, indignantly. "If it wasn't for me, you guys might never have met!"

Peter grinned at him. "Then, I'm forever grateful."

Maggie walked over, shaking her head and smiling at her husband's antics. As Jeff introduced Peter to her, they were joined by David and Andrew, who hearing all the commotion, had guessed Rob was outside.

David tried to hush them. "Hey, you guys, the neighbors will be signing a petition to get us evicted as undesirables if you keep up that exhibition in the street."

Peter pulled Andrew over to meet Jeff. They shook hands, then Andrew said to Peter with a wink, "David was right."

"Okay everybody, inside please..." David laughed.

Andrew turned to Peter as they all walked up the steps to the front door. "I'm so happy for you," he whispered.

Peter gave him an innocent look. "What do you mean?"

"I could tell immediately something's going on with you two."

"You could? It's that obvious?"

"Only to me, but that's because I've been praying for this to happen."

"What are you two whispering about?" David admonished them as they entered the living room.

"Oh, just boy talk," Andrew said, archly. "We'll never tell." He dragged Peter into the kitchen, while the others found seats and settled down for a good gossip. "Peter and I will get the drinks," he told David, who waved in agreement.

"So tell me everything." Andrew pulled the ice from the freezer and started throwing the cubes into various glasses.

"I'm not telling you *everything*," Peter laughed. "Some things are sacred you know."

"That good, eh?"

"He is a wonderful guy, Andrew. I never thought this could happen to me, you know...after Phillip, I mean."

"You deserve it my friend, if anyone does."

"You don't think it's too soon?"

"No, I don't. You've been alone a long time." Andrew paused and looked fondly at Peter. "Longer than you know, really."

"I feel as if...as if I've been given something very precious," Peter said, quietly. "A second chance at happiness."

Andrew stopped pouring the drinks and hugged his friend tightly, then he picked up their glasses, handing one to Peter and saluting him with his own. "Here's to whatever you wish for, coming true."

"Thanks, Andrew. You've been such a good friend to me, even when I was being difficult."

"You've never been difficult. Well, not really," Andrew chuckled. "What does Jeff drink, by the way?"

"Scotch, same as me."

David appeared in the doorway. "Hey, where are those drinks? What's this, the return of prohibition?"

Andrew winked at Peter. "He hasn't got a clue. Drinks are on the way." He gave David a peck on the cheek and handed him the tray. "Here, make yourself useful, carry these in."

The evening went quickly, filled as it was with non-stop reminiscing. Andrew and Peter, the only two who had not shared in this past life, sat, nevertheless entertained by it all. Peter was particularly happy to listen as it gave him an insight into the kind of man Jeff was. Every now and then their eyes would meet, and they would share a smile. He watched, as Jeff animatedly related an amusing episode involving one of their teachers.

"Right!" Rob roared at the end. "He never could work it out. Oh man, this had been great. You guys have all got to come up and see what Maggie's done to the house."

"That's a great idea," Maggie enthused. "When can you all come? You can see the nursery we're building."

Dates were discussed, then finally settled on, and Rob and Maggie rose to leave.

"We should get moving too," Jeff said to Peter, who nodded agreement, smiling to himself at the thought of another night he could spend in Jeff's arms.

"Hey, what about your workout tomorrow?" Andrew asked Peter, as they headed for the door.

Peter looked at Jeff who shook his head slightly. "Uh, we'd better skip it tomorrow, Andrew. I'll call you when I can make it. I'll explain it all soon as I can," he added, seeing his friend's puzzled look.

"Now, I'm worried," Andrew said, holding him tightly.

"Don't be. I'm in very good hands."

Jeff smiled at Andrew. "Everything's going to be fine. We're just taking some precautions at the moment."

"Come on, worry wart," David said, stroking Andrew's hair. "Jeff knows what he's doing, I'm sure."

They stood at the doorway watching as Jeff and Peter left, then David put his arm round Andrew's shoulders and led him back into their home. "I *am* worried, David," Andrew said. "Something's going on they don't want us to know about. Something dangerous!"

David answered in what he hoped was a convincingly confident tone. "Jeff's used to this kind of thing. He was a *cop*. He knows the right things to do." He kissed Andrew on the cheek. "Come on, let's clean up and get to bed."

Andrew sighed, wishing he shared David's optimism. He started picking up glasses and plates. "I hope you're right, David. Peter doesn't need any more traumas in his life, that's for sure."

"Andrew's a nice guy," Jeff remarked, as they pulled into the garage outside his apartment. "It's obvious he thinks the world of you. Can't say I blame him for that though."

Peter smiled as they walked up the steps together. "He's been terrific all through this," he said, slipping his hand into Jeff's. "He practically nursed me through those first few weeks when I wasn't really interested in whether I made it or...you know..."

They entered Jeff's apartment and immediately embraced, holding each other tightly, their faces buried against each other's necks.

"I'm so glad you decided to make it," Jeff murmured, running his lips across Peter's throat. Their mouths met in a deep and scorching kiss.

"Me too," Peter gasped, when they came up for air. "Especially now." He slid his hands inside Jeff's shirt and gently caressed the smooth warm skin on his back. "Take me to bed," he murmured.

Jeff smiled at him lovingly—and gave no argument.



T he trip home for Frank was not a good one. He had stopped at a 7-11 in Brea to use their payphone and called Bowman on his 'safe line'. If he expected to hear relief in the Senator's voice when he told him he'd successfully completed the job, he was sadly mistaken.

"You total moron...you...you *cretin*!" Bowman screamed at him. "Do you know what you've done? You've ruined me, you bastard!"

"What the hell are you talking about?" Frank sputtered, angrily.

"I tried to stop you. Didn't you understand what I was saying to you? I told you not to touch Harley."

"What?" Frank gasped, as a cold finger prodded the pit of his stomach.

"I told you not to do it. Harley and I got into it on the phone. He must have guessed I was planning on getting rid of him. He said he'd written a full confession and was giving it to his attorney. It was to be opened *only* if he died through other than normal circumstances. Now it will be opened and read. The police will be notified, Frank. You've bungled this...you've *ruined* me."

"What about me?" Frank yelled back. "Was he naming me?"

"Of course he'll have named you. He hated you Frank...Don was terrified of you."

"Damn you, Bowman," Frank ranted. "This is all your fault. You're the one who wanted Harley out of the way. You've fucked

everything up." He flung the phone down and stormed away from the booth.

Cursing madly, he ran back to his car and burned rubber out of the 7-11 parking lot. What to do first? he thought wildly. If that letter gets into the hands of the police, they'll know just where to find me...

I'll have to get out of town.

Susan...Oh, Christ. What could he tell her? Grimly, he accelerated onto the freeway, and drove like a maniac back to LA.

\* \* \*

Susan was in bed when he arrived home. A note on the table said she'd had an early call at the office. He read, 'Hope you don't mind, babe. Thought I'd get to bed early. Love you, Susan.'

He dashed upstairs, flung the bedroom door open and shook his sleeping wife's shoulder, none too gently. She looked at him groggily, then gasped on seeing his disheveled appearance.

"What on earth's wrong, Frank?"

"Get up." Frank was beside himself with impatience. "We have to pack and leave town, right now!"

"What?" Susan asked incredulously. "But why, for goodness sake?"

"Never mind that now," Frank snapped. "Just do what I goddam tell you. I'll explain later!"

Never having seen this side of her husband before, Susan was slow to recognize the danger signs.

"Frank, I'm not going anywhere till you tell me what's going on." She slipped out of bed, reaching for her robe.

Frank caught her roughly by the arm. She was shocked, and then terrified by the expression on his face.

"You'll do what I tell you to," he snarled, spittle flying from his mouth. "Now start fucking *packing*."

Susan stood aghast, her mind reeling from this sudden violent change in him. Could it be her father was right after all? He had loathed Frank on sight, telling his daughter that Frank was no good for her.

"He'll bring you nothing but grief," her father had warned her.

Nothing had seemed further from the truth, until this moment. Summoning all her courage, she squared her shoulders and faced Frank with a defiant stare.

"Frank..." she began quietly. "If something's wrong, let's talk about it. What can it be that we can't just work out sensibly and..."

"Shut up, you stupid bitch," Frank screamed at her. "You don't know what you're talking about!"

Susan turned pale before his rage, but she was not going to be spoken to like that by anyone. "How dare you, Frank..." She turned to walk away from him, but before she could move a step he grabbed her by the arm, swinging her round to face him.

His face was gray with rage and frustration.

"I killed a guy tonight, down in Laguna...and it's only a matter of time before they come looking for me. The stupid fuck left a note blaming me for everything, and now he's dead, the cops will read it and know it was me!" His voice rose with his panic as he saw the stricken look on Susan's face.

"Frank..." she gasped. "What are you saying? You killed someone?"

Beside himself with rage now, Frank screamed at her. "What are you, deaf? Yes, I killed a guy...I had to. He was going to ruin everything. Now, we have to get out of here."

"I'm not going anywhere with you Frank," Susan snapped. "I don't know who you are anymore."

She turned on her heel and tried to run from the room. Again, he grabbed her, but this time he backhanded her across the face. Her head snapped back, she slumped to the floor and lay very still. Frank

stared down at her, his jaw slack, not believing for the moment what had just happened.

He had struck her...he had struck Susan...

"Oh, my God." He fell to his knees beside her. "Susan, Susan," he moaned.

He lifted her into his arms, burying his face in her hair, that sweet smelling luscious hair he loved so much. He rocked her like a baby, keening gently to himself. Then slowly coming to his senses, he picked her up and carried her downstairs. He must get her to a hospital. She was still breathing, thank God. Gently, he lowered her onto the passenger seat of his car, then ran back inside for the keys. He'd have to think about all the other problems later.

Right now, Susan was more important.

He drove madly up to the hospital's emergency wing. He carried her inside yelling for help. "My wife's been hurt," he gasped, as a paramedic ran over to him. "Please help her. It's her neck, I think."

The paramedic helped Frank lay Susan on a gurney, then he and a nurse wheeled her away to an emergency station where a doctor could examine her. Frank followed them, hovering anxiously while the emergency team got to work, first placing an oxygen mask over her face.

"What caused this bruising and this contusion on the side of her face?" The doctor looked at Frank, who shook his head, appearing to be bewildered by the question. The doctor frowned as he continued examining Susan. Then he looked up at Frank again.

"Well, her neck's not broken, at least," he said. "We'll get some x-rays and see the extent of the damage. Probably a bad sprain. Bad enough to cut off her breathing for a while, though. Let's hope there isn't any brain damage."

"Brain damage...!" Frank ran his hands through his hair in anguish. God...what had he done?

"Looks like she received a heavy blow to the face," the doctor said, throwing Frank a look of suspicion. "Can you explain that?"

"No, no, I can't," Frank said, sensing the danger he was now facing.

"Well, I'll have to report this to the police. Standard procedure."

Frank knew that only too well. "I'm a cop..." He pulled out his badge.

"Nevertheless, uh, Detective Meeks is it? I have to call in a report to the local precinct. You know that, surely?" The doctor's penetrating gaze never left Frank's face. Frank knew the man suspected him of hitting his wife.

His shoulders slumped as he said, "Yeah, right. You go do your thing, Doc."

He watched as Susan was wheeled away, still unconscious. He knew at that moment, he would never see her again. Turning on his heel, he left the hospital, got in his car and slowly drove away.

It would be just a matter of time before the authorities were in possession of Harley's confession, if they weren't already and then, they would come looking for him. His lips twisted in a grimace that was almost a smile as he thought of the consequences this would have for the venerable Senator.

Too bad he was two thousand miles way.

He'd like to ring the bastard's neck himself.

Someone had to pay for all of this though, he thought grimly—and who better than the faggot that should have died three years ago. *He* was the one who'd brought all this mess back into his life. He just had to open up this can of worms again, instead of staying in the twilight zone where he belonged...

"Well, he's going to be a sorry little queer when I got through with him," he muttered. "And if I can get that asshole Stevens at the same time, that'll be just dandy!"

His mood darkened even further as he thought of Susan lying back there in the hospital. If only he could take back those moments when he'd lost control.

"You're the last person I ever wanted to hurt," he cried aloud, tears filling his eyes and dribbling down his cheeks. "Susan, I love you," he cried into the night. "Forgive me..."

But he knew there would be no forgiveness for what he'd done. Their life together was over, he knew that. His own life, as a free man, was probably over too. He was just going to make sure he didn't go alone.



Peter woke with a start; his eyes wide open, taking in his surroundings.

He sighed with relief, remembering where he was. He lay on his side, Jeff's arms wrapped around him protectively. He felt safe all right. Last night's lovemaking had been the most incredible experience of his life. His complete surrender had awakened in him feelings he had never before dreamed possible. He was not about to compare any of this with what he had with Phillip. This was different—he was different now. He could feel the changes the last few weeks had made within him.

Jeff was not merely a replacement for his dead lover. He was much more than that. He had stirred up emotions in him previously unexplored, and had brought him to a greater understanding of himself. Jeff had made him stronger somehow, more determined to face a new life and accept, without hesitation, whatever lay ahead.

There was no doubt in his mind that these feelings were reciprocated by the man who now lay with him in this bed, sheltering him in his arms.

He felt Jeff stir behind him and mischievously, he pressed himself into Jeff's groin, feeling the heat there and the quick hardening of Jeff's penis against him. "Mmm, good morning," Jeff whispered into his ear, nibbling it gently.

The shrilling of Jeff's cell phone however, dashed any thoughts of carnal pleasure they had at that moment. "Better get that," he muttered, as he reached over to retrieve it from the nightstand.

"This is Jeff Stevens."

"Jeff...Joe French. Listen I know it's early, but I thought you'd be interested to hear the latest."

"Yes, Joe. What's up?"

"Well for starters, that guy Don Harley you mentioned yesterday? He was killed in a hit and run last night."

Jeff sat bolt upright. "You're kidding me!"

"Nope. Seems he was getting in his car, right outside his office when someone ran him down. No lights on the car. No one got the license, but we're following up on a reported description of the car the O.C. police gave us."

"That must have been the reason for all the commotion we saw on our way into Laguna last night," Jeff said.

"Uh huh? Oh, and here's another thing. Your old pal, Frank Meeks, put his wife in hospital last night. Seems she took a beating...nearly broke her neck. And he's disappeared."

"You think Frank did this to her?" Jeff frowned. "I thought you said they were happy as lovebirds."

"Thought so too," Joe said. "No one knows what happened yet, but he's AWOL, so it doesn't look too good for him."

"How's his wife doing?"

"She'll be OK, I guess. Turns out it was a bad sprain. Anyway, thought I'd let you know about the Harley guy."

"Right. Thanks Joe, appreciate it. Talk at you later. Bye."

Jeff looked at Peter grimly. "Don Harley was killed last night. A hit and run outside his office."

"My God!" Peter's eyes widened with shock. "An accident?"

"Could be, or again, he might really have been in something he knew too much about."

"Poor Martha," Peter said. "God, she'll have a hard time getting over this. I'd better call my mother and let her know. She'll want to get in touch with her."

"Make sure Eve doesn't come back sooner, because of this," Jeff said. "I have a feeling we need to be even more careful right now. I wouldn't want your mother at the house, just yet."

Peter tried calling Eve immediately, but got the answering machine, so he left a brief message about Don Harley, but added he didn't think she should leave San Francisco just yet and said he'd explain later.

Jeff answered his cell phone as it rang again. It was Monica, his receptionist, explaining she hadn't been able to cancel his 10am appointment, and could he please, please come in just for that one. She didn't want to deal with an angry client.

"Damn," Jeff groaned, as he hung up. "I have to go into the office for a couple of hours this morning. Will you be all right here? Or do you want to come with me?"

"I'll be fine here," Peter replied.

Jeff looked a little dubious, so Peter smiled and said, "Don't worry about me. Who knows I'm here anyway, apart from David and Andrew? I'll be fine, really."

Jeff didn't like it one bit, but he knew by this time how stubborn Peter could be. "Okay...I won't be long anyway." He took Peter in his arms. "Just be careful."

"You be careful," Peter said. "You're the one who deals with all the crazies."

After Jeff left, Peter put on a pair of shorts, a tee shirt and a pair of trainers he'd thrown into his bag. He went for a long jog, using the grounds surrounding Jeff's apartment as a warm up, then heading

out toward the bay. As luck would have it, before a half-hour had passed, it began to cloud over and then a light drizzle fell, quickly turning to steady rain.

"Wouldn't you know it?" Peter chuckled to himself, running for cover. He stood in a bus shelter for a moment or two, but as it didn't look like there was to be any let up any time soon, he set off at a fast pace back to the apartment.

Using the key Jeff had left him, he let himself in, pulling off his soggy clothes as he headed for the bathroom. After a quick hot shower, he threw on a robe he found in the closet. It smelled of Jeff, and for a moment he stood still, inhaling the pleasant, distinctive aroma, and remembering their lovemaking of the previous night.

He sat on the couch, and let his mind drift back to that moment when he had surrendered completely to Jeff's huskily whispered request. He had never imagined he could want someone as much as he did then, and his acquiescence given so willingly, had made their union all the sweeter. Jeff had loved him so gently at first, then, with their passion mounting, they had abandoned themselves to its total pleasure. Every thrust of Jeff's powerful hips had been met with his own...their climax had left them shaken to the core, and as they lay trembling in each other's arms, Jeff still deep inside him, Peter had never felt so complete.

He could feel himself becoming aroused. He stretched out on the couch and was about to give himself up to the sensual memory that now played in his head, when he was brought back to reality by the phone ringing.

It was his mother's friend, Betty, in San Francisco.

"Oh Peter, I'm glad you left a number. Eve decided to fly back today!"

"What?" Peter gasped, jumping to his feet.

"Yes, Martha called her first thing this morning, even before you did. The poor woman was so upset, Eve decided she had to go to her."

Peter cursed himself for not thinking this might happen. Of course, Martha would turn to her best friend...his mother!

"What time did she leave?"

"A couple of hours ago. We just got back from taking her to the airport. The traffic was terrible coming back and..."

"What time does her flight get in?"

"About 12.20 I think, at John Wayne." Peter looked at his watch. It was already after noon. With dismay, he realized he'd never make it to the airport on time, but instinctively he knew he had to get to the house before she did.

"Did she say if she was going straight to Martha's, or going home first?"

"She wanted to go home first," Betty replied. "Fred's meeting her at the airport, taking her home, then they're both going to Martha's."

Peter sighed with relief. At least his mother would not be alone. He'd better get down there too though, he thought. He'd just let Jeff know what was going on.

"Thanks for calling, Betty," he said, starting to hang up. "I'll meet them at the house."

"Bye, Peter..."

Quickly, he dialed Jeff's cell phone.

"Damn!" he exclaimed, when he heard the automatic message telling him the party he was calling was either out of range, or had the phone switched off. He called Jeff's office, and left a message with Monica, saying that he was going home and for Jeff to meet him there if he could.

"Do you know if something's wrong with his cell phone?" he asked her.

"I think his battery must be dead," she replied. "I tried calling him a few minutes ago, and couldn't get through."

"Okay, thanks..." Peter punched the clear button on the phone, and dialed the cab company. While he was waiting for the taxi, he

put a temporary message on the answering machine, in case Jeff, when he realized his cell phone was dead, might call the apartment.

"This is Peter, Jeff. It's 12.20. I'm on my way to the house. Eve's unexpectedly on her way there, so I have to go." He hoped Jeff would appreciate his ingenuity in alerting him to his whereabouts—then he ran down the steps and waited for the cab, outside the apartment.

\* \* \*

Frank had spent a sleepless night in a cheap motel just north of Laguna. He had gone for a walk on the beach late in the evening in an effort to clear his mind. The black mood of despair still hung over him as he tried to come to terms with what had happened between Susan and himself.

He knew he had handled the situation badly. If only he hadn't panicked when Bowman had told him what Harley had done. If he'd just stopped to think things through more clearly...Incredibly, at that moment some guy had approached him on the beach—and propositioned him.

Him...Frank Meeks!

Did that queer think that he looked like the kind of guy who'd be interested in homo filth? Well, he'd shown that stupid skinny fag, with the dyed red hair just what kind of man he'd tangled with. For some perverse reason, Frank hadn't popped the guy right away, but had played with him, leading him on slightly.

"What's your name?" he'd asked the simpering nitwit.

"Bruce. What's yours?"

The guy had had the nerve to reach out and run a hand over Frank's butt as he asked.

"Well, Brucie, as far as you're concerned, my name might as well be Satan!"

"What?" Bruce had squeaked, nervously.

"Yeah, because you're going to hell..."

He had grabbed Bruce by the neck and delivered a punch to the center of his face that had broken his nose and most of his teeth in one go. The man had screamed in agony and staggered away, calling for help.

For a moment, Frank had been tempted to go after him and finish him off, but figured the noise the idiot was making was going to attract attention—attention he did not need at this time. So he had let the fag get away.

Maybe he'd scared him straight...Frank had smiled at the thought. But now, as he lay on the uncomfortably small bed in this seedy motel room, he felt turmoil churning inside of him. The thought of Susan, lying in a hospital bed, haunted his thoughts and because of that, he found it near impossible to concentrate or formulate any kind of plan of action to set his thirst for settling the score in motion.

That, and the need to cover his tracks so the police could not track him down. He knew he had to act quickly...but how? Revenge was uppermost in his mind—the kind of insidious feeling that blocks out any rational thought. He had to get that Brandon guy. He had to finish what he and Billy had started, more than three years ago.

Damned Billy.

If he'd done the job right, none of this would have happened. He knew now he should have taken care of Brandon when he had the chance, when he was still in the LA hospital. Why had he not just gone ahead and put the kid out of his misery then and there? Who would have known?

Well, it was too late now.

Whatever happened, even if he could make it look like an accident, there was still the incident with Susan the cops could get him for. He knew he couldn't explain that away—and he knew she'd never want to see him again.

Moaning, he buried his face in his hands at the thought of life without her.

"No way," he muttered.

There could be no life without her. What did he care now if he was caught? All that mattered was that someone had to pay for the mess he was in.

He'd already gone by Brandon's house and had determined no one was at home. He'd checked out the back of the house, noted the alarm system and the separate apartment. Must be where the fag's Mommy lives, he had thought. Maybe he could get her too...he had smiled viciously at the thought of making Peter watch while he killed his mother. All he had to do was find out where everybody was. He figured that maybe Stevens had suggested they move out of the house for the time being.

"Yeah, I bet that's it," he said to himself, pacing the motel room. "They're probably lying low for the time being. Cowards!"

He'd have to get to Stevens first to find out their whereabouts. He'd make that police officer wannabe scream like the nelly faggot he was! In his demented state, he was forgetting that he had considered Jeff no mere pushover. His rage and lust for revenge were taking control of him, and a reckless urge for this to be finally over now consumed him.

He dialed Jeff's office number.

"Hello?" he said, very pleasantly. "Is Jeff in the office?"

"Sorry sir," Monica replied. "He's out with a client, right now."

"Do you have his home number? I'm an old friend of his just moved back into the area, and I'd like to touch base with him today."

"Sorry sir, that's an unlisted number. I'd give you his cell number, but I've been trying to get him on that and I think his battery must be dead."

Just like he'll be shortly, Frank thought. Aloud, he said, "Well, let me have it anyway if you don't mind."

Monica rattled of the phone number, and Frank hung up.

"Unlisted, my ass," he hissed, grabbing the phone book and hunting for the DMV phone number. Giving his credentials, he asked for

Jeff's home phone number and address, and within minutes was in possession of both.

"Okay," he muttered, dialing the number.

Jeff's answering machine came on, and Frank was just about to hang up, when he heard the words—"Additional message," intoned electronically. He laughed wickedly as he listened to the message Peter had left for Jeff.

"Thank you!" he crowed. "Thank you...you're one dead faggot."

He grabbed his sunglasses and car keys, then paused in front of the mirror. He stood looking at himself for a full minute, his mind a jumble of thoughts and emotions. Then, shaking his head sadly and with a shrug of his shoulders, he left the room.



T he cab ride down to Laguna was slow and tortuous, due to the rain that was now lashing down. The cab driver kept swearing at the other motorists who were unused to these conditions and failing to compensate for the slippery road. Several times, Peter was almost thrown off his seat by the cab's sudden stops and swerves.

He was a nervous wreck by the time they pulled up outside his house. There was no sign of Fred's car, so he ran round the back and knocked on his mother's door.

No reply.

"Strange," he muttered. They should certainly have arrived by this time. Had they decided to go straight to Martha's house after all? Could be the weather had made them change their minds about coming home first? By the time he ran back to the front door and let himself in, he was soaked through. Pulling off his shoes he turned off the alarm, padded to the phone and looked up the Harleys' number. He was relieved to hear Fred's voice answering the phone.

"It's Peter, Fred. How's everything there?"

"Martha's pretty upset right now, as you can imagine," Fred told him. "It's helped having Eve here, of course."

"Let me speak to her and please tell Martha I'll be over to see her as soon as I can."

"Will do, Peter. Here's your mother."

"Peter, darling." Eve sounded worried. "Are you all right?" "Yes, of course I'm all right."

"Then why all the mystery about having me spend more time with Betty, and this, 'I'll explain later,' business?"

"I will explain later Mom, I promise. Right now you've got enough on your plate with Martha."

"Has this something to do with Jeff's investigation?" Eve persisted.

"I'll tell you everything later," Peter said. "Right now, I'm soaking from that rain so I'm going up to go take a shower and put on some dry clothes."

Eve spoke in a rush. "Peter...Please be careful. I couldn't bear it if..."

"Ssh, Mom," Peter said, softly. "Nothing's going to happen. Jeff's got all of this under control."

"All right darling, but please come over here as soon as you can."

"I will. Soon as I hear from Jeff."

He hung up, pulled off his soaking shirt and headed upstairs to his bedroom. He paused in front of Phillip's portrait.

"Phillip," he whispered. "If you can hear me, I have to tell you I'll never stop loving you. Whatever I'm feeling now will never change what you and I had together."

He touched the corner of Phillip's mouth with his forefinger, then shivered slightly, for it seemed he felt the touch returned. He put his fingers to his lips, and continued to gaze at Phillip in wonder.

"You're here, aren't you? I can feel you here."

He shivered again, but this time from feeling the cold wet pants he was still wearing. "Brrr..." He shook himself, the spell now broken. He went into the bathroom and turned on the shower.



Frank's car cruised slowly towards Peter's home. He noticed that there was now a light on in a small window on the second floor. Probably a bathroom, he thought. Well, someone was definitely home. He parked a few houses away.

"Damned rain!" he complained, climbing out of the car and walking quickly toward the house.

He ran up the steps and listened intently outside the door. Faintly, he could hear water running. Perfect...Brandon must be taking a shower. That would mask any sound he might make breaking in. He made his way to the back and stood looking at the kitchen door.

He's probably taken the alarm off now he's home, he thought. The two panes of glass looked easy enough to crack. Taking his gun from his pocket, he swung it against the glass. Sure enough, the left pane cracked enough for him to start removing the shards, enabling him to slip his hand in and unlock the door. In his haste to do so however, he sliced his right hand open between the thumb and the forefinger.

"Shit!" He gave an involuntary cry, pulling his hand back and looking at the blood pouring from the wound.

"Damn it!" There was blood everywhere. Glancing round, he saw the hose bib sticking out of the wall. Crouching down, he turned it on and let the cold water rush over his hand.

In the shower, Peter jumped back as if stung, as the water cascading onto his chest turned scalding hot. "What the...?" Quickly, he twisted the showerhead away from himself, and then the realization of what had just happened hit him like a slap in the face.

Someone was in the house...

The only way the water could have run so hot was if the cold water faucet had been turned on somewhere in the house. Turning off the water, he grabbed a towel, dried himself quickly then pulled on a pair of running shorts hanging on the bathroom door. Cautiously, he stepped out into the bedroom.

No one there.

He went out onto the landing and looked down the staircase toward the front door. He could neither see nor hear anything. Carefully, he walked slowly downstairs. From the bottom step he could see into the kitchen and noticed immediately that the door was open. His scalp tingled as the possibilities of what this might mean began to whirl in his head. He suddenly felt very vulnerable standing there wearing only a pair of skimpy shorts. He'd better find something with which to defend himself—and quickly.

He turned to run back up the stairs, but was startled by a voice behind him.

"Stay right where you are!"

He spun round to face a tall, darkly handsome man, who stood behind him at the foot of the stairs. The man's face was twisted in a vicious sneer.

"Who the hell are you?" Peter gasped, noticing with a sinking feeling in his stomach, the gun in the man's hand.

"Of course, you don't know me, do you?" Frank smirked. "Frank Meeks. I'm the guy who put your little friend away three years ago. Thanks for leaving me the message to let me know where you were!"

Peter cursed himself inwardly now for leaving that message for Jeff. At the same time he did not know what emotion he felt more. Was it fear? Or was this incredible shaking that surged through his body, more from anger at finally facing Phillip's murderer?

"You fucking bastard!" he said, through clenched teeth.

He moved so swiftly, Frank did not see the punch coming.

Peter had never hit anyone in his life before, so it was not a powerful enough blow to knock Frank unconscious, but it startled him sufficiently to allow Peter time to run back upstairs and into the bedroom. Frantically, he looked around for something, *anything* that might help him defend himself against his assailant.

He was breathing rapidly, his anger bubbling over as picked up a heavy bookend from his desk. As he did so, his eyes fell on Phillip's portrait—and suddenly he knew that Phillip had tried to warn him of the danger.

That's why the water had run hot!

"Phillip," he gasped. "I need your help now, baby. He's *here*. The bastard that killed you is here."

\* \*

Jeff, on his way back to his office, swore silently as he realized he had forgotten to turn his cell phone back on after his appointment with his client. It was a habit of his to turn it off when he was talking to someone so they would not be interrupted by unnecessary calls.

Quickly he dialed his apartment number and listened, with some dismay, to Peter's message. He did not like the idea of Peter and Eve being back at the house. His gut told him something was up. He speed dialed the office and asked Monica if Peter had called for him.

"Yes Jeff," she replied. "He's been trying to get a hold of you—I have too—and Joe French. Is something wrong with your phone?"

"Only me. I turned the dumb thing off by mistake."

"Oh. Well, you'd better call Peter right away. It sounded urgent...and don't forget to call Joe French."

"I won't," Jeff muttered, hanging up and dialing Peter's number. He took the next off ramp and headed back south on the freeway. Sighing, he listened to Peter's message machine.

"Damn!" he said aloud. "Where are you, Peter?" His cell phone rang the moment he hung up.

"Jeff Stevens."

"Jeff, it's Joe. Listen, something important has come up. Frank's wife told the investigating officer that Frank had killed a man down in Laguna last night. We're pretty sure it was the Harley guy. We've also had a positive ID on Frank's car from a witness seeing him leave the scene. Didn't get the number, but described the car perfectly."

"My God," Jeff whispered. "Frank Meeks killed Don Harley? Of course, that would explain why Peter drew the sketch of Billy Bach. They must have been in on all this together."

"Is Peter with you?" Joe asked.

"No. His mother took an early flight back from San Francisco, so he went to the house to meet her. I'm heading there right now."

"Well, be careful Jeff. We've got an APB out on Frank He could be in Arizona by now, or anywhere, but you can't be too careful. Don't forget, he'll be armed."

"Would you call the Laguna police and have them send a car by Peter's house, just in case Frank is in the area?"

"Will do. Call me from the house when you get there."

"Right. Talk to you later."

Jeff grimaced as the car in front of him skidded on the wet road. This rain wasn't helping any.

Frank appeared in the bedroom doorway, his gun pointed straight at Peter's chest. With all his strength, Peter flung the bookend he had picked up at Frank. It whizzed through the air, just missing Frank's skull by an inch and crashed out onto the landing skidding down the stairs.

Frank grinned as he entered the room, rubbing his jaw. "Well, well. There's still a little spark in the faggot. Good, it'll be all the more fun for me!"

They eyed each other grimly from opposite sides of the bedroom. Peter knew he didn't stand a chance against that gun. He was trapped, with no way out of the room.

"I'm going to kill you, pretty boy," Frank said, in a matter-of-fact tone. "Sit down over there while I figure out how to do it so it causes you the most pain."

Peter felt his face grow pale. "You're insane," he muttered. "Why are you doing this?"

"Because you've screwed up my life." Frank waved Peter over to the desk chair with his gun. "Because of you and that other faggot, Stevens, I've lost the only woman I ever loved. The only happiness I've known."

"What are you talking about?" Peter asked, sitting down.

"Right, you don't know the damage you've done..."

"The damage *I've* done? You're the murderer, not me."

Frank pulled up another chair and sat astride it, his gun still trained on Peter's heart, his brown eyes turning dark and glittering like a cobra's before it strikes.

"Because you didn't die three years ago like you should have, and because you hired Stevens to start investigating what happened to your little friend that night—because of that, you stirred up a hornet's nest of trouble for me, for Harley and for the S...Well, that's all you need to know."

Peter's eyes widened at the mention of Don Harley's name. So it was Don who'd ordered Phillip killed? He could still hardly believe it.

"Oh, yes." Frank grinned, as he saw the expression of dismay on Peter's face. "Your old family friend was the one who fingered your *lover*." This last word was uttered with all the disgust Frank could muster, and he sneered at Peter as he continued, "I guess you faggots are expendable even to your friends!"

"You despicable bastard!" Peter hissed at him.

"Oh my," Frank laughed derisively. "The faggot's got a temper."

"Put that gun down and I'll show you just how much of a temper," Peter said, with much more bravado than he felt. He looked at the blood that covered Frank's hand and the gun he held.

Frank seemed not to feel any pain as he roared with laughter.

"Kid, I could break you into pieces with one hand, but you don't get any more second chances. This time you won't just go sleepy-byes. This time you will most definitely die. You see, I have nothing to lose. I've already lost everything, thanks to you."

"Thanks to me? Your powers of reasoning are a bit off center," Peter said, trying to buy some time. If he could just keep the guy talking, maybe Jeff would have heard his message and be on his way to the house. It was all he could hope for at this point. "Thanks to you," he continued, "I've spent three years of my life in a coma, after you murdered the most important person in my life. Whatever you think I've done to you, it pales in significance when compared to that. As far as I'm concerned, you're the lowest kind of..."

"Shut up," Frank snarled. "You don't know anything about me. You think your fancy faggot life is so important? Well let me tell you, for the last two years of my life I've been living with the most beautiful woman in the world. Everything I ever wished for came true with her. The world seemed a better place for me. Every moment spent with her was like a dream come true. I'm talking about real love. Man and woman love, not that homo crap you and your so-called lover had!"

He sneered into Peter's face, his disgust boiling over. "And now, I suppose you and *Jeffie* are doing it. How fucking romantic. Well, I hope he was good fuck, because it's all you're going to get. You had to wake up didn't you?" he continued to rant, "You made everyone panic and go out of control. Billy tried to throw you down a cliff, but of course, he had to mess it up like he did the first time."

Peter stared at Frank in silence. So that incident at the beach wasn't an accident after all. God, he thought, if Andrew hadn't been with me...

"Then I get the orders to get rid of you and Harley," Frank was saying. "Harley went into a tailspin after Stevens started questioning him. He just went to pieces." Frank shook his head in disgust. "But the bastard squealed before he went."

"What?" Peter felt the beginning of hope. "You mean the police know all about this now?"

"Yeah, they know, but that's not going to help you any. You'll be dead by the time they come around here." He got up, pushing the

chair away and standing over Peter, the gun now inches from his face.

"But how is this going to help your wife?" Peter asked wildly, flinching despite himself as he looked into the barrel of the gun. "Killing me or anyone else is only going to ensure you'll never see her again."

"I know that already, asshole!" Frank yelled. "It doesn't matter anymore. She's out of my life forever, but at least I have the satisfaction of knowing you and Jeffie will never be able to gloat about it."

He grabbed Peter by the arm, pulling him out of the chair and pushing him backward toward the window. Peter felt the cold hand of fear grip his insides, as he realized that this was the moment this madman intended to kill him.

Desperately, he looked across the room at Phillip's portrait.

"Help me, Phillip," he whispered.

Frank laughed softly as he caught the words. "Help me Phillip," he mimicked. "He can't help you, stupid. He's *dead*. Now, let's see, where shall I begin?"

He pointed the gun at Peter's knee.

"Here? That one really hurts, but not as much as this one..." He raised the gun to Peter's crotch, and his face creased in an evil smile. "Say goodbye to your peter, Peter." He sniggered at his own joke.

"Yes, that's the kind of cowardly act you're good at...right, Frank?" Peter, finding strength and courage from the desperate situation in which he now found himself, stared down the man who threatened him. "That's how you killed Phillip, isn't it? You didn't dare give him a chance to defend himself. You came out of the shadows like the spineless creep you are, and hit him from behind. If he'd had the chance to face you man to man, believe me, it would have been a different story! He would have flattened you—and the other guy with you. He would've put you both away, you pathetic bastards!"

"Shut up!" Frank screamed at him.

"What would your wife think of you now, Frank?" Peter taunted him. "How would you explain all of this to her?"

Frank reached out and grabbed Peter by the hair, forcing him to his knees. "I said, shut up..."

"Drop the gun, Frank!" Jeff's strong voice sounded from the doorway.

Frank spun round firing wildly, and Peter watched with horror as Jeff staggered back, blood staining the front of his shirt.

"No!" Peter groaned. "My God, no..." He stared, grief-stricken at Jeff's inert form, which lay half in and half out of the doorway.

Satisfied Jeff was no longer a threat, Frank turned back and faced Peter, his gun raised to fire. Peter's gaze flicked from Jeff to the man who now threatened his life. Acting totally on instinct, he took a step forward as Frank's finger tightened on the trigger. Frank stepped back, a smile on his lips.

"Want to play, huh?" he sneered. "Want to make it more fun for me? Come on then..."

He took another step back and collided with the heavy easel holding Phillip's portrait. Startled, he made a half turn to see what was behind him and Peter, with an almost animal-like snarl, launched himself at the bigger man, taking him totally by surprise.

Together they crashed to the ground, Peter on top, and as they fell Frank's head smacked against the corner of the armoire with sickening force. He grunted with pain and shock, tried to raise himself, then fell back under the pressure of Peter's weight.

For a long moment he looked up at Peter, his eyes filled with disbelief. His lips moved wordlessly, while over Peter's shoulder, his dimming eyes locked on Phillip's portrait. The last thing he saw before the blackness took him was the smile on Phillip's face. Frank gave out a long defeated sigh, and then his head lolled to the side, hanging at an unnatural angle.

Peter sprang over to Jeff's side and gasped with shock at the sight of so much blood pouring from the wound in Jeff's chest. His eyes were open and he was trying to say something as he looked at Peter, almost with apology.

"Jeff, no!" Peter cried, as he knelt by his side. "You can't die, too!" Frantically, he rushed to the phone and dialed 911, screaming for an ambulance. Then he grabbed a towel and went back to where Jeff lay. He got down beside him, attempting to staunch the wound with the towel, but Jeff's eyes were closed and so Peter lay beside him, cradling him in his arms, whispering soothing words of love and comfort in his ear.

When the police and paramedics arrived, they found him...still holding Jeff that way.



F or the first time in his life, Frank knew real fear. Try as he may, he could see nothing through the darkness that surrounded him.

"I don't belong here..." he cried out. "I shouldn't be here..."

"Where am I?" he moaned.

He felt as though he was floating in a dense, black sea. There was silence everywhere—silence and darkness.

He had to escape from here...

He tried to move his arms and legs, but they would not respond. He could feel himself being overcome by an incredible feeling of tiredness he'd never known before.

Suddenly, he felt himself being tugged by the leg, from somewhere below him. Was someone trying to get him out of here? His heart quickened with hope—a hope that quickly turned to terror as he realized he was being pulled down into the swirling blackness below him.

"No..." he tried to scream. "No, don't take me down there!"

He struggled in vain against the constant downward pull, and then at last he began to see through the darkness that was parting before him. He peered down into the writhing mists below him...there was someone holding him in a vice-like grip and dragging him down! Terrified, he tried to shake himself free of the hideous grasp...but to no avail.

Now, he could make out the shape of the person holding him—now the face! Oh God, it was Billy...That ghastly pale and snarling visage belonged to Billy. Billy was dragging him down—down to somewhere, he knew he did not want to go.

He opened his mouth to scream, and the name torn from his lips was,

"Susan...!"

Susan jumped up from her chair, as she heard Frank moan her name. She had been sitting by his bed ever since they brought him to this room. She had received the news earlier while she was still in the hospital where Frank had left her. The police told her that Frank had been injured and was in a hospital in Orange County. Despite her parents urging her not to go and perhaps because of Frank's frightening behavior two nights ago, she'd felt compelled to go to him. She had to have his explanation of what had happened, why he'd gone berserk like that and struck her in his rage. Susan would never have believed it possible—that the man she loved could have changed so rapidly, right in front of her eyes.

That the man she loved was a *murderer*.

Her mother had finally relented and had driven her down to the hospital. Susan was still wearing a brace to help alleviate the pain of the sprained muscles in her neck, and that would have made driving alone hazardous.

A woman police officer had met them and explained what had happened to Frank. Susan could not believe her ears. This awful story the police woman had told her, about his involvement in beating and murdering a young man some years ago—and now, trying to murder the man's friend.

She knew she should leave. It was all over between them. It had to be. Even if she could have forgiven him and gone on living with him, there was no possibility of that now. The doctors had told her he'd suffered brain damage and a broken neck in the fall, when the murdered man's friend had attacked him in self-defense.

She got up as she heard Frank call her name. Taking his hand, she gazed down at his once handsome face, now contused and contorted with some unknown fear.

"Frank, *Frank*!" Tears poured down her face. "What happened to you?"

He did not open his eyes and look at her. He could not, for even as she held his hand he was slipping away. The forces that were taking him from this life, no matter how hard he struggled against them, pulled even more strongly now. No matter how hard he fought to stay with her, it was not to be.

Screaming silently, he was sucked into oblivion.



Peter had been in the hospital for hours. They had told him it would be touch and go for a while. The one bullet that had struck Jeff had lodged close to his heart. They were going to remove it, they told him. With any luck they would be successful and there would be no hemorrhaging afterward. The police and reporters had been all over the place earlier, including Bob Nichols from the local press.

Now finally, they were gone.

He had sent his mother and Fred home, saying he would be all right here by himself. Monica, Jeff's receptionist, a pretty Asian girl with luminous eyes, had just left after he had promised to call her immediately he knew anything at all.

He sat listlessly in the waiting room, the memory of what had just happened pressing on his mind like a leaden weight. The thought of losing Jeff was unbearable. He had lost his father and Phillip...surely life could not be so cruel as to take this man from him too?

Restlessly, he explored the corridors, unable to sit still in the waiting area any longer.

Now, ahead of him he saw an attractive blonde-haired girl standing outside one of the rooms, sobbing quietly while an older woman tried to console her. Beside them, a young uniformed police officer looked on in sympathy.

"Is there anything I can do?" Peter asked them.

Susan looked at him through her tears and tried unsuccessfully, to smile. "No, thank you, there's nothing." The older woman, obviously her mother, led her away.

Through the open door, Peter glimpsed a man lying in the bed and with a shiver, realized it was Frank Meeks. That would explain the policeman outside the door.

"How is he?" Peter asked.

"He died, just a few minutes ago," the cop replied without much sympathy in his voice. "The nurses are in there now with him. No great loss, if you ask me."

The young policeman, obviously knowing of Peter's involvement in the whole situation, eyed him appraisingly. "How's Jeff doing?" he asked.

"We don't know yet," Peter replied. The doctor's are still operating, trying to get the bullet out."

"He'll make it. The freckle-faced officer gave Peter a smile of reassurance. "He's a fighter..."

"You know him?"

"Only by reputation." He held out his hand. "Bill Meyers, by the way." Peter took the proffered hand and shook it warmly.

"Yeah," Bill said. "Jeff had it rough when he started in the force some years ago, but he showed them he wasn't going to just lie down and take it. Kind of made it easier for us who came after, if you know what I mean..."

Peter caught the implication, and smiled.

"Tell him the guys are rooting for him, will you?" Bill added, sincerely.

Peter nodded. "I will—and thanks."

He walked back to take up his vigil outside the operating theater. Andrew and David were there when he returned, anxiously waiting to know if there had been any news of Jeff's condition. Peter shook his head in answer to their question and for a while the three of them sat quietly, awaiting the doctor's verdict.

"The guy who killed Phillip just died," Peter said suddenly, breaking the silence.

"Good riddance!" Andrew said, vehemently.

"I saw his wife. She looked wrecked."

"Just goes to prove there's someone for everyone," David remarked, staring into a magazine he was not reading.

"He said he loved her. She was everything to him." Peter looked at his friends. "Is it possible for someone to be good and bad at the same time?"

"Like a Jekyll and Hyde you mean?" Andrew suggested.

"Only, in real life. He was so filled with hate for me and for all gay people, it seems; yet consumed with love for his wife."

"An ugly love, if you ask me," David said, putting his magazine down. "The kind of love that eats a person up inside and in the end destroys him, or her."

Peter nodded. "And in this case both of them. I can't help but think though, that if only he'd met her earlier, he might have had a shot at being a good guy, instead of...you know..."

"A psycho," David said.

They were silent again for a moment or two.

"It all sounds so pathetic now," Peter said, standing and stretching. "And academic. He's dead, her life is shattered, and she must be wondering... *Why*?"

At that moment, the doctor appeared and the three friends looked at him expectantly.

"Good news, gentlemen." He gave them just a hint of a smile. "Mr. Stevens is out of the woods. He'll recover, thanks in no small part to his being in such excellent physical condition."

Peter felt relief flood over him and at the same time, tears well up in his eyes.

"It's going to take some time before he's able to get around," the doctor continued. "I understand there are no family members available to look after him."

"Right, his mother said she was too upset to come out here," Peter replied. "But that's no problem," he added quickly. "I'll look after him. Just get him ready. He can come home with me."

The doctor smiled thinly. "I'm afraid it'll be a few days before he can be moved. He'll have to stay in intensive care for at least two more days."

"Oh," Peter said dejectedly. "Of course."

"When can we see him?" David asked.

"Not tonight, I'm afraid. Tomorrow, we'll move him to a private room and he can have a few visitors. Now if you'll excuse me, I must go." He turned on his heel, and disappeared through the doors to the surgery.

Andrew threw him a sour look. "What a dry stick."

David chuckled softly. "He's not into alternate families, that's for sure."

"Never mind," Peter said. "He saved Jeff's life, and I could kiss him for that."

"That'd make his day," Andrew observed, dryly.

Three days later Peter sat on the side of Jeff's bed, feeding him one grape at a time from a bunch he had brought.

"Mmm nice," Jeff said, smiling. "I could get used to this."

"You can," Peter said, feeding him another grape. "I intend to look after you hand and foot, when I get you home."

"Peter, I can't have you burdened with looking after me," Jeff protested.

Peter hushed him with a finger to his lips. "Not one word of objection, please. After what you've been through lately, you deserve every bit of pampering I can give you."

Jeff took his hand. "And what about what you've been through? It's not every day a guy in his under-shorts gets threatened by a psycho with a gun!"

"Running shorts," Peter corrected him.

"Whatever. When I think how close he came to killing you, my blood runs cold."

"How did you manage to show up in the nick of time, as they say?"

"All thanks to Joe. When he heard Frank's wife had told the police Frank had killed a guy in Laguna and they had a fair ID on his car leaving the scene of Harley's 'accident', Joe did the math and came up with Frank as Harley's *and* Phillip's murderer."

"What about the other guy Frank mentioned, when he had the gun on me."

"Nothing on him yet. He must have covered his tracks well, but he was probably the mastermind, with Harley acting as the go-between. You know, when Frank found out from Harley that I was on the case, it must have been like a red flag to a bull. He hated my guts. When I called the apartment and heard your message, I figured if Frank had done the same, he'd be on his way to your house."

"And then you came running into the room, unarmed, and yelling at a maniac with a gun, to drop it...

"Not one of my best moves," Jeff said, ruefully.

They smiled at each other, then Peter leaned forward and kissed Jeff gently on the mouth. "I love you," he whispered against Jeff's lips.

"I love you too."

Their kiss deepened, as their mouths opened and their tongues intertwined.

"Ouch!" Jeff yelped, suddenly aware of the pressure Peter was creating on his chest.

"Sorry," Peter cried, mortified.

"Hey you guys, cut it out..."

They both looked guiltily toward the door, then smiled as they saw Rob and Maggie entering the room.

"You're supposed to be looking after him, not reopening the wound," Rob scolded Peter in jest. He looked at Jeff. "At least you look a lot better today. I thought you were going to croak last time I saw you."

"Thanks buddy," Jeff grinned at him, glad to see his friend again.

Maggie kissed Peter hello, then bent over to buss Jeff's cheek also. "You look great," she said. "I think Peter's ministering angel tactics have really paid off."

"So I guess you got lucky this time," Rob said, ruffling Jeff's hair fondly.

Jeff smiled and took Peter's hand. "You've no idea how lucky."



Senator Jim Bowman looked up with a start as his secretary, Rachel, walked into the room. She deposited a number of papers on his desk, then with a puzzled look at her boss, she left the room. Bowman had noticed the look. He'd have to stop acting so jumpy, or somebody might think there was something wrong with him.

There was, of course.

Ever since his conversation with Harley he had been waiting for the axe to fall. When that letter was discovered the game would be up, his goose cooked...so to speak. All the years he'd put into building a power structure in Washington DC, would be for naught.

Nothing would save him from disgrace when this came out.

He should probably just announce his resignation from the Senate before the scandal broke. Even that wouldn't save him though. His enemies would gather in droves to watch him fall, and gloat over every inch of the descent.

He could deny everything, of course. He could say that Harley was suffering from dementia. With them all out of the way, there was no one to contradict him. Besides, lying was almost a way of life on Capitol Hill.

After reading the reports of Frank's death, it didn't look like the Brandon boy had known anything concerning his, Bowman's, involvement in the scam. He could swear Harley was delusional, and perhaps vengeful over the Senator's more successful career. How would that play out, he wondered? Strange thing—there had been no word yet of a letter indicting him as the brains of the operation. If the police had it in their possession, they would not have wasted any time acting on its contents.

Perhaps there never was a letter.

That must be it. Harley must have been bluffing. That thought made him smile smugly, for a moment. Poor Frank—gone berserk for nothing.

"Ah well," he mused. "Just as well they're out of the way."

Frank had been a definite loose cannon and just may have gone off one day scattering everyone's reputations to the winds. No, better he was gone.

Pity though, he thought. One could always use someone as ruthless as Frank. No doubt about that.



By the end of the week Jeff had been released from hospital and was, with some help from Peter, able to get around comfortably. Peter had set up a bed in his downstairs den, so Jeff wouldn't have to navigate the stairs for the first few days.

Peter reveled in his role as 'Nurse Ratchet' as he called himself. Eve was on hand to cook some nourishing meals for them, and between them, they remembered to set the timer for Jeff's medication and painkillers.

Thanksgiving came and went and this year Jeff could not fly to Arizona to spend it with his mother. When he called, she took the news without much comment. She did not offer to come to him and only barely remembered to ask if he was feeling better.

Peter watched with concern as Jeff replaced the receiver after he had told his mother goodbye. Peter could not imagine a mother who would not fly to her son's side at a time like this. He did his best to comfort his friend, but he knew the hurt went deep, despite Jeff's protests to the contrary.

Peter was just glad to have Jeff there with him. He knew he was being selfish, but every hour spent together was precious to him. Jeff's recovery was swift and soon he was eager to get back to the office and tend to unfinished business.

"You don't need an invalid round the house getting in the way," he told Peter, after a few days of feeling much improved. "This has been wonderful, but I need to get back to work."

Peter knew it was inevitable that Jeff would want to get on with his life as quickly as possible, but nevertheless he did not look forward to seeing him leave. It had been his hope that at some point they would have discussed the possibility of Jeff's moving in with him to stay.

He knew it was early days for that kind of commitment, yet a part of him did not want to play the waiting game. All his life he'd been the spontaneous one, quick to make a decision and now, he knew that Jeff was everything he wanted in a partner.

"Can't you go on living here, even after you go back to work?" he asked Jeff now as they sat on the verandah, feeling the warmth of the winter sun on their faces.

Jeff gently stroked Peter's hand. "Look, I'm fine now thanks to you, but there's no need for me to tie you up any longer. We both need to get our lives together now all this mess has been cleared up. You need to get on with your painting. You haven't done anything since I've been here."

Peter forced himself to ask, "What about us...as *partners*, I mean?" He cringed mentally, preparing himself for the letdown he was sure he could see coming.

"We both need some time to think about that, Peter. My track record in relationships is not something I'm proud of. Maybe it would be better if we put some time and space between us, just for a little while."

"But I love you..."

"And I love you," Jeff said. "But we've known each other such a short time. I know we've been through a lot together..."

"Shouldn't that make it stronger then? All that we've been through together I mean?"

"Yes, and it has," Jeff agreed. "I'm only asking we give it a little more time. My moving in here permanently, into the house you and Phillip shared for so long..."

"That's it? That's the reason? You think you can't live here because of what Phillip and I had together? We can get another house...we'll build one together...we can..."

"Whoa," Jeff broke in. "It's not just that. Look," he said patiently, "for the rest of us Phillip has been dead for almost four years, but for you it's only been a matter of months. After all you've been through in those months, it might be just too...pat...for want of a better word, for you to fall in love with the guy who comes along at the eleventh hour and..."

"Stop it..." Peter exclaimed, in anguish. "That's not the reason I love you..."

Jeff sighed. "All I'm saying is, you should step back and give this some time and thought. You and Phillip had a very successful relationship. It's only natural for you to want another—but we've known each other for only a few weeks. Maybe it's too soon for you to be absolutely sure it's me you want in your life."

Peter looked at him solemnly. "I've never been so sure of anything in my life."

"There are some things about me you don't know." Jeff took Peter's hand gently in his own. "I didn't do well in either of my previous relationships..."

"That's because it wasn't with the right person," Peter interrupted. Jeff smiled ruefully. "You could be right about that. But, at the time, it all seemed terrific. I loved him very much, Peter."

Peter's eyes glistened as he asked, "Who was he?"

"His name was Joey. I met him in Seattle when I was working there. We were together for four years—and I have to tell you, honestly...had it been up to me, we'd still be together."

"He dumped *you*?" Peter looked at him, amazed. "What was he—insane?"

Jeff laughed. "No. I just wasn't enough for him. I think he cheated on me from the very beginning."

"He was insane!" Peter said firmly.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"Do you still love him?"

"God, no. But, there's this part of me that is just really...wary of becoming involved again."

"And the other?"

Jeff sighed. "Lenny...poor Lenny."

"You broke his heart?"

"No, he left me to marry a woman. He just couldn't handle being gay—and a cop. No matter how much I tried to help, he just couldn't put those two parts of his life together. He started seeing one of the secretaries at the precinct and before long, they were engaged. He asked me to be best man—if you can believe that. I didn't go to the wedding. After that, I told myself I was better off on my own. Why set yourself up for yet another hurt?"

"Oh Jeff," Peter murmured. "I would never hurt you..."

"I know you wouldn't." Jeff smiled gently. "What I'm afraid of, Peter...is that I may hurt you."

"Oh." Peter looked at him steadily. "Somehow, I don't believe that."

"Give me a little time, Peter...that's all I ask."

"You know I will give you anything you want."

"Then do this for me, please." Jeff leaned forward to kiss Peter's lips. Peter flung himself into Jeff's arms and started to kiss him passionately.

"Ow-ouch!" Jeff yelled, as the pain from his wound shot through him like a knife.

"Oh my God, I'm so sorry," Peter cried. "Jesus, look what I've done..." Blood was seeping through Jeff's dressing, and Peter flew off to get a fresh one, returning breathless and still apologizing.

"You are adorable," Jeff said stoically, smiling at him. "It's OK, don't worry."

Peter began removing the soiled dressing and attaching the clean one with the almost easy skill he had acquired since tending to Jeff's needs. Fortunately, the bleeding was not serious and on inspection, the wound looked clean and well on the way to healing. When he'd finished, he looked at Jeff with a little smile.

"I bet you can't wait to get out of here now, so I can't kill you with 'kindness."

Carefully, Jeff took him in his arms. "I'll hate to leave you actually," he whispered against Peter's ear.

"Then don't..."

"Peter, just take a little time, that's all."

Peter rested his head on Jeff's shoulder, trying to fight back the tears that threatened to engulf him at any moment.

"Just please don't stop loving me, Jeff. You've become so important to me..." He broke off as the tears slid down his face. "Damn, I'm sorry," he said, pulling back from Jeff's embrace. "I'm not making this any easier for you, am I?"

"I'm the one who should be apologizing," Jeff replied with a sad smile. "For putting you through all this..."

"Will you miss me?"

"Only every day."



The days after Jeff left seemed interminable to Peter. Time after time he wanted to pick up the phone and beg him to come back, or just meet him somewhere. But he'd promised he would not, unless it was an emergency—and Jeff had promised to call him if he got into any post-operative trouble.

Even Andrew's morning visits were not enough to lighten Peter's mood. His friend tried to cheer him up and was generally extremely sympathetic as Peter vented his frustration over the whole situation. In the end, though, he had to agree with Jeff.

"He's being very sensible, Peter. I can understand why he'd be a bit wary of rushing into another relationship after what he's been through. Being let down by someone you love—twice—is bound to give you a jaundiced view of people's intentions."

"Oh, for goodness sake," Peter said irritably, throwing down the dumbbell with which he'd been doing bicep curls. "So can I...understand it. That's what makes it all the harder. He's being 'Mr. Sensible and Nice' and I'm acting like a petulant child. There's maturity for you." He sighed. "I had no idea he'd had such bad luck with those two guys. I mean—why? Were they both nuts? Look at him—kind and good and...and..."

"Drop-dead gorgeous?"

"That too. Oh, Andrew—I want him back!"

Andrew gave him an encouraging smile. "He'll come around. I bet you anything he will."

"You have no idea how much I want that. I miss him so much. All I do is think of what *he* might be doing all day."

He looked so dejected that Andrew knew it was time to get tough. At whatever cost it might have. He hated to see his friend this depressed and aimless, so he took a deep breath and said sternly, "Peter, you need to get a life. Start painting again...just what's stopping you this time?"

Peter looked at his friend in surprise. Andrew had never taken that tone with him before, but Andrew wasn't quite finished. "Seems to me that you have way too much time on your hands!"

He paused and waited for the comeback for which he knew Peter was only too capable. This time however, his friend looked at him quizzically, as if expecting more.

"Are you finished?" he asked, quietly.

"Yes, quite finished," Andrew replied, with a hint of a smile.

"Ordinarily, I'd be pissed with you for what you just said, but I have to agree with you, I'm being a giant pain in the ass, moping around here like some lovesick debutante." He looked thoughtful for a moment. "You're right. I do need to start painting again, and you know something? No one deserves to be my next subject more than you."

"What?" Andrew gasped, more pleased and touched than he ever thought he could be.

"Just like you are now," Peter said, getting up from his workout bench. "All sweaty and toned from working out, hair curling over your brow. Wow, David will love it. It'll be my Christmas gift to you both."

"Peter..." Andrew started to protest, but Peter was already dashing into the house, in search of his sketchpad and pencils. He returned moments later grinning hugely, the gleam of inspiration in his eyes.

"Okay, just start moving around a little—try and be as unselfconscious as you can."

"Oh, easy for you to say," Andrew laughed. "I've suddenly got two left feet."

"Just do it," Peter said impatient as ever, then he laughed at himself. "The master is at work."

With incredible swiftness, he did several full body outlines in various positions as Andrew moved slowly about the garage. "Now, sit down and be still...please."

Andrew did as he was told and Peter sketched steadily for some time, totally absorbed in his work, only glancing up occasionally to look at his subject. "There," he said finally. "Done!"

"Can I see?" Andrew asked, excitedly.

"No chance." Peter snapped shut his sketchpad. "You'll see this when it's good and ready."



Rob and Maggie had always loved the restaurant that sat high above the Dana Point Marina and commanded a breathtaking view of the Pacific coastline. They generally saved it for special occasions involving just the two of them, but tonight they were meeting Jeff for dinner and felt it only right to celebrate his recovery in a special place.

"I thought he'd want to include Peter," Maggie said to her husband, after the waiter had shown them to their table by the window. Rob had ordered some wine while they waited for their guest.

He shrugged his shoulders absently. "Oh, I don't think it's that serious."

"That's funny, I got the distinct impression there was something *real* going on between those two," Maggie said, picking up her menu. "Did Jeff actually tell you he wasn't interested?"

"Uh...no he didn't, as a matter of fact. I just know him, that's all."

"Oh, I see." Maggie looked at him, and was about to annoy him by making him enlarge on this theory and intimate knowledge of Jeff's emotional involvements, when she saw Jeff arrive. He waved to her and Maggie noted with some amusement the admiring looks sent his way by most of the women—and some of the men in the room as he passed through.

There's no doubt he is one beautiful guy, she thought candidly, watching him walk toward them, totally oblivious of the looks cast his way. Not just good-looking—that didn't say enough. When you got past the gorgeous hair and eyes, the strong jaw...there was an aura of *goodness* that set him apart from other handsome men.

And oh, that smile!

Maggie could not quite keep herself from quivering slightly as he now bestowed that smile on her and bent to kiss her cheek. Rob and he punched each other's arms, the way men do in public, then laughing, they hugged warmly.

"So, how's our super sleuth?" Rob asked.

"Not so super, really." Jeff grinned at them. "I'm the one who almost got blown away, remember? Peter was the real hero that day."

"Where is Peter?" Maggie quickly seized the opportunity to ask after his whereabouts. She was determined to find out what was going on between them. She only hoped Rob had got it all wrong.

"Home I guess," Jeff replied, then knowing Maggie expected more he added, "We decided to cool it for a time, if that's what you're wondering."

Rob gave his wife a smug, 'I told you so' look.

"The papers had a field day with the story," he said, deliberately changing the subject. "More police corruption and cover-ups, and a local businessman using cops as paid hit men. Bound to be a TV movie of the week, eventually."

Jeff laughed shortly. "It was a pain getting the reporters out of our faces for a while, but the furor's calmed down now. We're just yesterday's news again."

"So, Harley was the mastermind behind all this?" Maggie asked.

Jeff shook his head. "I don't think so. But he was the one trying to force the council members to vote the Hong Kong syndicate into get-

ting the land sale approval. He got scared off when one of the members refused his bribe and threatened him with exposure. The deal went south after that."

They paused in their conversation as the waiter came over to take their order. After they ordered and the waiter left, Maggie looked at Jeff sadly.

"Why was it necessary to kill Phillip Jennings?" she asked him. "If the deal had fallen through, couldn't Harley just deny involvement?"

"You'd think so," Jeff agreed. "He'd covered his tracks with the city council. The ones who'd actually taken the bribes weren't about to talk and the one who threatened to expose him was apparently satisfied when he resigned. However, there's still this 'mystery man'—the one Phillip overheard talking to Harley."

"Do you have any idea who it could have been?"

"No, but I think Phillip actually recognized the voice and must have told Harley as much."

Maggie shivered at the thought of Phillip giving Harley the information that would eventually lead to his own death. "Poor guy," she whispered. "If he'd only known what a rat he was working for."

"Yeah," Rob agreed. "And a friend of the family to boot."

"That's been really hard for everyone concerned," Jeff said. "Peter's mother and Don Hanley's wife, Martha, have been friends since school days. They were really shaken up by all this."

"I wonder who the 'mystery man' is," Maggie mused.

"That I'd love to know," Jeff said grimly. "As far as I'm concerned he had to be the one with the connections to Frank Meeks. I just can't figure Harley knowing creeps like Frank Meeks and Billy Bach."

"Have you given up trying to work out who it could be?" Maggie asked him.

"There's only one lead—Peter. It seems Phillip spoke to him about all this a couple of days before he was killed. Problem is, Peter can't remember the conversation. He's tried and tried, but that part is just a blank."

"Maybe if you were there to help him..." Maggie said, with a sly smile.

"Listen to her," Rob laughed, shaking his head.

"Okay, I have to say this," she continued, ignoring her husband. "I noticed something very strong and real between the pair of you when I first met Peter, that night at David and Andrew's. I saw the looks you gave each other; those secret looks that you think no one else notices. Well...I noticed and I thought it was wonderful that you had found someone you could feel that much for. I know you've told us you weren't going to get involved again, anytime soon, but it was obvious to me that night, that you and Peter already had a strong emotional bond. Am I right?"

"Maggie..." Rob started to protest.

"That's okay," Jeff murmured. "Yes, you're right of course, Maggie. I haven't been exactly honest with myself about all of this. I think I'm more scared of my own feelings, than I am of Peter's."

"Why?" Rob and Maggie asked, simultaneously.

"Because he's had this terrific relationship with one other person for years—the *only* one. My experience has been very different. Even when I thought I was set for life with Joey. Well, you know what happened there..."

"From what you've told us, Joey sounded like a creep," Rob said.

"And Peter isn't, Maggie added. "He's a different kind of man altogether."

"Oh come on, Maggie," Rob chuckled. "You hardly know the guy."

"I feel it, here." She pointed to her heart. "Women do, you know."

Rob gave a derisive snort. "Right...that's why so many marriages end up on the rocks, I suppose."

Maggie gave he husband a withering look that was meant to shut him up, then smiled at Jeff. "I just have a feeling that this is meant to be for you two. Don't ask me why."

"I know you're right, Maggie." Jeff returned her smile. "I think my own insecurities gave me cold feet when he said he wanted me to stay with him—move in, kind of. I just thought it was too soon you know, after all he's been through."

"Well, I can understand why he'd want that," Maggie said.

"What Jeff is trying to say..." Rob began.

"I know what Jeff's trying to say," Maggie snapped at him. "That's not a reason to not see him, or talk to him. I think you're taking this cooling down thing to the extreme. The poor guy must be wondering what the hell happened, or what he did wrong."

Rob looked daggers at his wife. "Well, what if we let Jeff decide what's best for him and Peter?"

"Believe me," Jeff laughed. "Peter would have a lot to say on that subject."



Driving home, Jeff began to think that perhaps he had been overreacting a bit over the whole situation.

Okay, he didn't have to move in, but Maggie was right, they could still talk. See each other, even. After all, they got along so darned well together. Always so much to talk about, even after all the madness was over with. During his convalescence, he and Peter had talked about everyone and everything imaginable—and somehow he felt they had only just scratched the surface of all the possible topics that interested them both.

If he stopped to compare Peter with either Joey or Lenny—well, that would be a foolish exercise. There really could not be comparisons. He had loved Joey and Lenny for very different reasons.

Joey for his animal allure; for the hint of danger that lurked just beneath the surface. And for the best sex he had ever experienced in his life. But it had been an uneasy love—a love that was never returned in like manner. Joey was too preoccupied with Joey to ever give himself completely to another person.

And Lenny...poor Lenny. So filled with uncertainty and the dread of being 'found out' and ridiculed by his fellow officers. So many times Jeff had tried to help him overcome his fears, but in the end, he'd had to give up. All the therapy and assurances in the world would never help Lenny.

Then Peter...so different from them both. Feisty, funny—adorable...and bringing something to Jeff he had never felt from anyone before. What was it he'd said?

'You've become so important to me...'

No one had ever said that to him before, and he liked how it made him feel. He had to admit he'd missed the little devil more than he could ever have imagined. He wondered how Peter would react to being thought of as 'a little devil'. He smiled to himself then, giving in to a sudden impulse, he pulled off the highway and headed towards Peter's house.

Ringing the doorbell, he felt a rush of apprehension. What if Peter's feelings for him had changed in the week or so they had been apart? Maybe, by giving him time to reflect on the situation he'd come to the conclusion he'd be better off on his own. Had he been foolish after all in suggesting they take time out to consider their futures?

All these thoughts were dispelled however, when Peter swung the door open. The look of delighted surprise that lit up his face was answer enough. For a moment the two men stood looking at each other, silly smiles on their faces, then Jeff stepped forward and pulled Peter into his arms, kissing him passionately.

Peter had just the presence of mind to push the door closed, before they began pulling each other's clothes off. Still joined at the lips, they made their way to the couch and fell on it, then immediately rolled off it falling on the floor in a tangle of arms and legs.

"Oh my God..." Peter's voice was muffled against Jeff's lips. "I've missed you so much."

"I was being a fool," Jeff said, kissing Peter's face all over.

"No, no, don't say that. You were just confused."

"A confused fool, then." Jeff stopped kissing him and looked deeply into his eyes. "I love you, Peter."

Peter's heart felt it might burst with happiness as he tightened his arms around Jeff's strong, naked body.

"And I have a lifetime to tell you, how much I love *you*!" he replied. "Starting now..." Then, remembering Jeff's injury, he looked quickly at the now healed scar. "Oh Lord! I must be killing you, lying on top of you like this."

"Believe me," Jeff chuckled, "That's the last thing on my mind right now."

Peter touched the scar gently with his lips, then proceeded to kiss every inch of Jeff's body. No more words were needed—and soon only the sounds of their ecstasy could be heard filling the stillness of the night.



Senator Bowman was feeling much better these days. As the Christmas season approached and still there had been no devastating discovery of Don Harley's confession, he had happily concluded that it had mysteriously disappeared—or that it had never existed.

Bowman preferred to believe in the latter explanation.

Either Harley had been bluffing or had not sufficient time to carry out his threat before Frank killed him. Either way, it was an enormous relief and he was now able to concentrate more fully on his work. He had to prepare for that TV interview scheduled for later that day. He had to look good for that. Those political interviewers were always so damned quick to pick up on any display of nervousness from their guests.

He had to be on top form!

The subject of the interview was to be abortion. His pro-life stand had caused him to be front and center on many a TV debate over the years and he would not miss the opportunity to expound his philosophies for the benefit of the nation.

After that he could relax. He was looking forward to spending the Holidays with his wife and family at home in Georgetown.

Yes, things were definitely much better all round for Senator Bowman He picked up a copy of the prepared answers he would give on TV later, and with a little sigh of satisfaction settled back in his chair to peruse them. A minute later he was asleep.

He awoke with a tremendous start.

What the devil had happened? He must have been dreaming. He shuddered at the memory. It had been so real. He lurched groggily to his feet and stood supporting himself for a moment against his desk, feeling sick to his stomach.

In the dream, he'd been in an auto accident. A huge truck had skidded into him. A yellow truck with a logo painted on the side in black letters. He hadn't been able to make out what it was, exactly.

He wished he could remember that part.

For some reason, he felt it was very important. Trembling, he sat down again and began picking up the spilled papers he'd been reading. With shaking hands he started putting the papers back in order.

He wiped the sweat from his brow. "Pull yourself together," he muttered. "It was just a damned dream..."

\* \*

"Aren't you putting up a tree this year?" Andrew asked Peter as they jogged along the cliff top in North Laguna. "David's bringing ours home tonight."

"I haven't really had time to think about it yet," Peter replied, smiling at his friend. "Been way too busy with other things, you know."

"I know, I know..." Andrew laughed; pleased his friend was so happy. "But it's only a week to Christmas."

"I'll get round to it eventually. By the way, I have something to show you when we get back to the house."

"You've finished it?" Andrew could not contain his excitement. "Really?"

"Yep, I'm having it framed tomorrow. Let's stop a moment. There's something I need to talk to you about." They slowed to a walk, then found a bench where Peter sat down, toweling himself off.

Andrew sat beside him. "What's up?"

"There's something I've been thinking of doing and I want to run it by you to see if it makes sense to you." Peter paused a moment. "I'm also having Phillip's portrait framed...and I'm giving it to Rod and 'A' as a Christmas present."

"Wow, they'll be thrilled. But, are you sure you want to give it away?"

"I wasn't, till the other day. I was over at their house for lunch and afterwards, I took a stroll on the beach by myself. It was such a beautiful day, clear as a bell out as far as Catalina. I guess I was in some kind of meditative mood, 'cause I stood there for a long time just taking it all in, you know? Then, when I turned and looked up at their house...Andrew, I could swear I saw Phillip..."

"Oh, my God," Andrew whispered in awe.

"He was just standing there on their deck, looking out at the ocean. He loved Rod and 'A's house—always said he felt so much at home there. I think he was telling me somehow, that that's where he wants to be."

Andrew could feel tears spring into his eyes, as he realized the full measure of what his friend was saying. "You mean, like he's saying he's stepping back to let you get on with your life with Jeff."

Peter smiled at him. "I knew you'd understand, Andrew. That's exactly what I felt he was telling me."

Andrew shook his head in wonderment, speechless for the moment.

"Some people might think this is nuts," Peter continued quietly. "But I have always felt that Phillip has been helping me through all of this. I even feel he sent Jeff to me at just the right time. After all, without Jeff, none of this mess would ever have been solved."

Andrew nodded. "That's true. It's amazing how everything just fell into place. It does feel as though some of it was meant to happen, doesn't it? My being your therapist, David getting in touch with Jeff after all those years...having him contact you."

"His coming back after I'd thrown him out, don't forget."

"Yes," Andrew laughed. "That was pretty amazing."

"I guess Phillip just wasn't going to let me screw things up," Peter said, his face registering wonder. He looked sharply at Andrew. "D'you think I'm being a bit too fanciful?"

"Not on your life." Andrew grinned at him. "I, for one, believe every single part of it. It's the most romantic thing I've ever heard of."

"It is, isn't it?" Peter said, standing up. "Come on—let's go back so you can see what I've done to you."

Andrew preened for a moment. "As long as you've caught the special me, I don't care."

"Vanity, thy name is Andrew. Race you back..."

Peter glanced happily at Andrew as he gazed speechless at his finished portrait. He had caught Andrew's likeness in just the way he intended. Seated on a workout bench, a towel draped over his naked shoulders, his skin glistening with the sweat of exertion. His face was tilted upward, his eyes half closed in a dreamy expression that hid from the onlooker, his secret, private thoughts of the moment.

"I just don't know what to say," Andrew whispered, finally.

"Oh, now words fail you," Peter laughed.

"Peter, it's fabulous. How can I ever thank you?"

"By always being the good friend to me you have since my recovery," Peter said, sincerely.

Andrew hugged him. "That goes without saying. Friends forever." He looked again at his portrait. "I can't wait till David sees this."

Peter smiled. "D'you think it'll make him hot?"

Andrew's eyes sparkled. "Oh yes. We better have the first viewing in private."

"Darn, I was hoping to take pictures."

\* \*

Peter glanced at his watch as he straightened the pillows on the living room couch. Another half-hour before Jeff was to pick him up for their dinner date. As ever, he was impatient for the time to come when he would see Jeff again.

"Better find something to kill the time," he muttered to himself.

A thought suddenly sprang into his mind—Phillip's diary. He hadn't picked that up since he and Jeff had read the entries that led them on the trail to Don Harley. Running upstairs, he found the diary and flicked the pages to where Phillip's last entry was written. He sat down and studied the words carefully.

Talked to Peter—told him I was worried about Don's reaction when I told him what I'd overheard.

God, he thought, what was it he told me? If only I could remember.

Inadvertently, he had left the television on when he had gone downstairs before and now as he looked up from Phillip's diary, he saw there was some debate on the news station. He picked up the remote to turn it off, but then paused as he was drawn to the image of the man being interviewed.

That's the guy who wanted to run for President some years ago, he thought idly, his finger about to press the 'off' button. Again he paused, his hand stayed, something rankling in his mind. Under the man's face, in bold letters, his name flashed on the screen...

Senator Jim Bowman.

"Bowman," he muttered, his forehead wrinkled in thought, and then suddenly, he *knew*.

\* \*

When Jeff arrived, he found Peter in a state of excitement.

"I know who the mystery guy is," he crowed, giving Jeff a big kiss.

"What?" Jeff exclaimed. "You do? How?"

"He was just on TV being interviewed. Jeff, he's a Senator! Senator Jim Bowman..."

Jeff looked at him, incredulously. "Senator Bowman, my God! When did you remember this?"

"A few minutes ago. I was reading Phillip's diary and at the same time Bowman appeared on the screen. You do believe me, don't you?"

"Of course I believe you. But a Senator...How the hell are we going to prove that?"

"Probably can't," Peter said sadly. "He's one of the most respected politicians around. Who's going to believe he was mixed up in this kind of sordid cover up?"

"How did this happen, exactly?" Jeff asked.

"Like I said, I was going over the last entry Phillip made, you know, this one..." he pointed at the page. "Where he said he'd talked to me about Don's reaction, and then when I saw Bowman on TV, I remembered that Phillip had said the voice on the phone sounded just like Senator Bowman. Phillip was always interested in Washington's goings on; he'd sit up and watch Larry King and the like. He didn't like Bowman and was glad when he didn't get the nomination for President. He said if you closed your eyes, Bowman sounded like a nice, really genuine guy, but his beliefs—and those beady eyes were a turn off. He does have quite a distinctive voice though. Phillip said he tended to drag out the last syllable of some words—a kind of affectation, he called it."

"So he *could* have recognized the voice all right," Jeff mused. "Wow!"

"Where do we go from here?" Peter asked.

"Good question. This is much bigger than I expected, and we'll have to be careful about how we expose what we know." Peter looked

at him with big eyes and Jeff pulled him into his arms. "Don't worry," he said. "We'll think of something. We can't just go to the press with this, though. I think tomorrow morning I'll try to get through to the Senator, have a little chat first...feel the way, so to speak." He massaged the back of Peter's neck, thoughtfully.

"You think he'll speak to you?"

"Probably not, but I can leave a message that might just galvanize him into returning my call...but that's tomorrow." He kissed Peter lovingly. "Okay. Dinner first? Or..."

"I *am* starving," Peter said, then smiled seductively as he felt Jeff's arousal. "But they do say the best sex can be had on an empty stomach."

Jeff returned his smile with one as equally sensual and murmured against his ear, "I'm sure I read that somewhere, too."

\* \* \*

Next day, Jeff called Bowman's office in Washington and got a snippy temporary secretary on the line. When he asked if he could speak with the Senator he was told the Senator was fully engaged this day and would be unable to take any calls.

"Can I leave a message then?" Jeff asked.

"I suppose so, Mr. uh..."

"Stevens...Jeff Stevens. I'm a private investigator in California."

"Uh huh," the temp sighed, with disinterest.

"I have some questions for the senator, regarding Phillip Jennings."

"Phillip Jen...How do you spell the last name?"

Jeff spelled it for her, then gave his return number. "Do you know when he'll be able to return my call?"

"Not really," came the weary reply. "We're winding down for the Holidays, so he's kind of busy taking care of last minute business. But I'll make sure he gets your message, sir."

She hung up abruptly, then looked at the note she had scribbled, pushing it to one side as the phone rang again. God, she'd be so glad to get out of here tonight. She hated this temporary job she was filling in on, until Bowman's secretary returned from sick leave. To add to everything, the voice mail system had failed, making the job of message taking even harder. Thank heavens; she was on vacation for a week over Christmas. It seemed every loon in the country wanted to bug her today!

Impatiently, she tossed a file folder towards the out tray as she answered the next call. It fell short of its mark, landing on top of Jeff's message. Within moments, an office boy scooped up the file for delivery and the message fluttered to the ground. It lay there, unseen, for the rest of the day.

When Bowman called in, he was given his messages, then as he was about to hang up, the temp said, "Oh wait Senator, there was one more. Now, what did I do with it? Can't seem to find it..."

Annoyed by the woman's mumbling, Bowman said hastily, "Never mind, it can wait till after the Holidays. You have a Merry Christmas...uh..."

"Mary. You too, Senator. Merry Christmas."

Bowman hung up his car phone, and sighed. He'd be glad when Rachel, his real secretary returned. These temps were next to useless. Thank goodness it was his last day at work. He could relax at home for a few days and restore his flagging energy. He'd felt incredibly tired today, probably because he had not slept at all well last night.

The television interview had gone extremely well however, he thought as he steered his car towards the freeway that would take him home. He smiled complacently, no doubt in his mind that he was well out of the woods as far as that mess in California was concerned. Harley had obviously never written any letter. He'd just been bluffing—the fool.

It was the memory of that damned dream that had kept him awake. The one he'd had as he dozed in the office. He couldn't get it

out of his mind. He could still see that yellow truck and it bugged him that he'd not been able to decipher the logo on the side. As he drove up onto the freeway, he was only half listening to the announcer on the radio warning of icy road conditions throughout the area.

He accelerated as he approached the access lane and was immediately aware of a large vehicle traveling far too closely behind him.

"Fool!" he muttered, peering into his rear view mirror at the blinding headlights. He jumped as his car phone rang suddenly. "What is it?" he snapped, impatiently.

"Sorry, Senator..." It was that blasted Mary woman again! "I found that other message I thought I'd lost."

"Well, what is it?" Bowman was trying to maneuver his way into the next lane, as he spoke.

"It's from a Jeff Stevens in California. He was calling with regard to a Phillip Jennings."

Bowman felt a cold shudder course through his body at the mention of Phillip's name.

"Are you there Senator?" Mary was asking.

"Yes, yes!" he cried, hoarsely. He threw the phone down and gripped the steering wheel desperately as he saw the truck looming up behind him again. Filled with a sudden dread, he stomped on the gas pedal to put more distance between him and the truck, then gasped with horror as his car went into an uncontrollable spin.

The driver of the truck, seeing Bowman's car out of control, over-compensated on his brakes and his vehicle too, went into a skid, wheeling round across three lanes. Bowman screamed with terror as he saw the truck skidding sideways towards him. His screaming increased as his bulging eyes made out the last thing he would ever see. The hood of his car buried itself beneath the body of the oncoming truck, bringing his vehicle to a sudden, sickening stop.

Just before his head was torn from his shoulders, he saw imprinted on the side of the yellow truck, the words...

PHILLIP'S MOVING CO.



R od and 'A' had gone all out on this year's Christmas party. Their invitations had read "Formal Attire please"...and they intended their guests' surroundings would live up to the request. The house and grounds were decorated to within one square inch and a magnificent tree stood by the window, its lights reflected a thousand times in the facets of the crystal pieces around the room.

'A' rubbed his hands with glee as he looked at it all with loving eyes. There was so much to celebrate this year. Peter's return to the land of the living and then his subsequent rescue by that divine Jeff fellow. What a happy ending to an awful story. The papers had been full of the lurid details for days. Perhaps he should buy a computer and write it all down as a novel. Now wouldn't that be fun! It might even get published. If not, his friends would all enjoy reading it anyway.

His reverie was cut short by Rod bustling in from the kitchen and glowering at him.

"Where are those dratted caterers?" he complained loudly.

'A' patted his arm consolingly. "They'll be here any second I'm sure, love. Don't get your knickers in a twist."

"Your neck will be in a twist, if you don't mind out," Rod said crossly.

"Oooh no," 'A' laughed, refusing to get in a flap about something he couldn't control. "Not my neck. But you might try my hair."

"What hair?" Rod asked rudely, then burst out laughing, realizing how silly he was being. He hugged his partner of thirty-five years. "Why do you put up with me?" he asked lovingly, holding 'A's stocky body tightly.

"I'm only in it for your money, ducks," 'A' said, his affectionate hug belying the words. "Come on, pull yourself together. Peter and Jeff are coming a little early...remember? Peter says he's got a surprise for us. What do you think it is?"

Rod smiled wistfully. "It's enough for me to see him so happy again. I never thought that it would happen, you know. I could not see him with any man other than Phillip. It's a miracle that Jeff came along, just when he so badly needed someone."

'A' nodded happily. "Indeed it is...Oh look, here's Tom and his workers." He scurried to the foyer to greet Tom the caterer, the man who had managed most of their parties for the last ten years. Tom quickly got his forces organized and threatened both Rod and 'A' with hexes, if they put one foot in the kitchen all night.

"Just leave everything to me," he commanded them with an arched eyebrow, before sweeping off to his domain.

Rod and 'A' both bowed low behind his back, then giggled like errant children. "Oh, let's have a bloody drink," Rod said, relieved that Tom was now there to take care of everything.

"Better make it four," 'A' told him. "Here are Peter and Jeff."

They rushed to the door to greet their favorite guests, then stopped in amazement. Their guests both looked extremely handsome in their tuxedos, but it was the giant flat parcel they were carrying between them that stopped Rod and 'A' in their tracks.

"Whatever have you brought?" 'A' gasped, then giggled. "That's the largest package I've seen in years!"

"Arthur!" Rod snapped. "A little decorum please."

"Merry Christmas to you both," Peter smiled, hugging his friends. "I hope you'll like it."

"May we open it now?" Rod asked, anxiously.

"Of course. That's why we brought it over early."

Peter and Jeff smiled at the delight on the two older men's faces as they tore excitedly at the wrapping. When Phillip's portrait was revealed, set in its magnificent gold frame, they both burst into tears.

"I think *that's* why we brought it over early," Jeff murmured in Peter's ear.

"Oh my, oh my," 'A' kept repeating, staring with unbelieving eyes, while Rod turned to Peter and said, hiccupping slightly. "But you can't give this to us, dear boy. It means so much to you..."

"This is where he wants to be." Peter smiled at them, then told them of his vision. "So you see, I really had no choice. Phillip always felt so at home here, and I know you will love having him with you."

"And we have just the place for him," Rod said, his face now wreathed in smiles. "On this wall, so he can look out at the ocean he loved so much."

"Oh, let's do it now," 'A' cried. "Before the others arrive." He dashed off, returning moments later with a large hammer and some picture hooks. Jeff and Peter took over and in no time the portrait had been hoisted on to the wall opposite the French doors that gave a clear view out across the verandah to the sea beyond.

"Perfect," Rod and 'A' exclaimed, in unison.

Jeff slipped his arm round Peter's waist. "It is quite magnificent."

"A toast, a toast," 'A' yelled, running to the bar. "Tom, champagne please...and pour yourself one. We have a special toast to make."

"Look who's here," Rod exclaimed happily.

Eve and Fred had arrived, Eve looking beautiful and relaxed, now that all the traumas concerning her son were finally over. It had been hard for her and Fred to accept that a close friend had brought them such grief and tragedy. But now, as 'A' and Rod greeted them, she once again, looked her usual poised and elegant self, and Peter's heart swelled with pride at the sight of her.

"You're just in time for the toast." 'A' couldn't contain his excitement. "Look what Peter has brought us."

Of course, Eve had known Phillip's portrait was to be their gift. After Peter had explained his vision and what he intended to do, she had unequivocally agreed with him that it should go to their friends. Now, as she stood gazing at the portrait, she knew Peter's decision had been the right one.

The drinks poured, they stood around the portrait and raised their glasses. As Peter saluted Phillip, he whispered quietly to himself, so no one could hear, a tender "Goodbye."

A little silence fell on the group, as though each one of them was lost in an individual memory—and then, abruptly the moment was shattered by the arrival of more guests.

Peter squeezed Jeff's arm. "Good, it was beginning to feel like a wake," he said, smiling sadly.

"You OK?" Jeff asked him.

"I'm fine, really. Look, there's David and Andrew. Let's go say, hello."

David couldn't wait to thank Peter for painting Andrew's portrait. "It's just so damned sensual Peter," he said, grinning ear to ear. "How did you get that expression on his face?"

Peter winked at Andrew. "That was totally my imagination."

His friend laughed and said, "Yeah, now all I have to do is look at him with those half-closed eyes and he jumps me on the spot."

"Andrew!" David gasped, with feigned horror. "Let's not give out all our personal secrets, please."

At the height of the festivities, Peter wandered over to the tree, and stood gazing at its twinkling lights and garlands of silver. Deep in thought, he turned away and went out onto the verandah, where he stood gazing out across the dark ocean.

His mind mulled over the happenings of the last few days. It had been a shock to read in the newspaper of Senator Bowman's "untimely death" as the media had put it. Now of course it would be impossible to prove he'd had anything to do with Phillip's death. Jeff and he had discussed this and had decided there was no point in pursuing it. The only people that could be hurt by any disclosure now, would be Bowman's wife and family.

"I think they'll have enough to cope with, just getting over the shock of his death," he had said to Jeff, as they read the newspaper account of the accident, and Jeff had agreed, saying quietly, "What a rotten Christmas they will have."

Now, as he stood alone on the verandah watching the few discernable boat lights twinkling far out on the ocean, Peter sighed sadly. He wondered why life had to be so hard and vicious for some people. He was happy now, he knew that, but the events that had led him to this moment had been filled with so much ugliness and hatred. His sympathetic heart went out to the unsuspecting victims of all of this.

To Susan, who must never have had the slightest notion of what her husband was capable. How terrible to find out the man you loved and adored, was a cold-blooded murderer. He only hoped she would find someone worthy of her one day.

To Martha Harley, still in shock over the revelation that Don had been responsible for Phillip's death and all the subsequent tragedies.

His eyes glistened, as the image of Phillip floated before him. He turned and could clearly see the portrait of his late lover through the glass of the French doors. It seemed somehow, that the eyes were no longer looking at him, but gazing out toward the dark horizon of the ocean.

"Phillip," he murmured and turned to follow that gaze, his own eyes straining to see what lay out there in the inky blackness. Instinctively now, he felt Phillip had finally gone from him. Strangely, the feeling of desolation that his death had first brought Peter had been lifted. Of course, he would never forget him, but he knew Phillip would never want to be remembered with sadness.

Phillip would want him to be happy and incredibly, he was happy, for Jeff's presence in his life had brought him all the things he thought he'd lost forever. And now, more than ever, he was convinced that Phillip had brought them together. What the future held, was of course anyone's guess. Life was tenuous at best. There always seemed to be something out there. Something, or someone who could change everything so quickly. He was sure though, that his life with Jeff was meant to be. That feeling alone made him consider himself the luckiest man in the world. Just one more thing remained to be done.

He jumped slightly, then smiled as he felt Jeff's strong arms enfold him from behind. He leaned back into the embrace and shivered with pleasure as warm lips caressed his neck.

"Are you sad?" Jeff murmured.

"No, not sad. I was just thinking how wonderful it would be, if you and I went out tomorrow and bought our very own Christmas tree and took it...home."

Gently, Jeff turned him around, still within the circle of his arms. "Are you proposing, Mr. Brandon?" he asked, nuzzling Peter's nose with his own.

"Yes, I am," Peter replied. Then, with a flash in his eye, he added, "And you'd better damn well accept, Mr. Stevens."

They laughed softly together and Jeff's embrace tightened around him, as he whispered, just before their lips met in a tender but passionate kiss...

"Then, Mr. Brandon, I damn well do."

Inside, Rod and 'A' stood unashamedly watching them through the window. They turned to each other and smiled, eyes brimming with tears of happiness. Rod looked up at Phillip's portrait. Could it just be a trick of the light that now fell on the painting? Rod could *swear* Phillip's smile had deepened.

"Look," he said to 'A'. "He's smiling at them."

"Yes, he's happy for them too," 'A' murmured. "Happy—and at *peace*, at last."

\*\*\*THE END\*\*\*

## Coming soon from J.P. Bowie



When Peter Brandon is commissioned to paint Emily Hastings' portrait, his keen psychic awareness unlocks the dark secret that has haunted her since childhood. Now, on the brink of at last finding happiness in the arms of the man she loves, she is faced with her father's resolute desire to destroy her life.

Her father's murder blows the family secrets wide apart and the extent of her mother's hatred for her is made clear, when she accuses Emily of the murder. Jeff Stevens, now in a committed relationship with Peter, is hired by Emily's fiancé to clear her name. Jeff's investigation turns personal when his ex-lover, Joey Fernandez, is also found murdered and he finds himself tracking two killers—at considerable risk to himself.

His discovery that Emily's father was involved in using the services of a child prostitution ring enrages Jeff, and he agrees to be the bait in a police 'sting' operation. When that goes wrong, Jeff's life is suddenly, once again, in danger.

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