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Faster than the Speed of Light

TOP SHELF

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I

"Goddamned faggot. Drop de--"

Sure, Frank had nailed the bastard right below his dirty mouth, but it was still a surprise when he collapsed. The guy must have had a glass jaw. Frank paused, flexing his hand, not wanting to look away from the men on the other side of the drunk tank to check if that was blood Frank felt on his knuckles. His bad shoulder was also complaining, but there was no time for that, either.

"Anyone else?" He was pleased the question came out mean instead of panicked. Behind him, the kid from the bar was breathing hard but otherwise had the sense to keep quiet.

"Fuck you." It was the bigger and stupider of the remaining construction workers who spoke. He sounded a lot more tentative than he had a minute ago, now that his friend was sprawled out unconscious on the concrete of the cell floor at Frank's feet.

Frank made sure he had stepped clear of the first guy before he said, "Hell of a mouth you have on you." He narrowed his eyes. "Someone should tell your mother."

The last bit did it, all right. Even though no insult had been involved, just mentioning the word mother in here was enough to get the moron moving. He came in high, and Frank met him low with a tight fist to the groin. It was a dirty trick, and a difficult one, but it worked. This chump went down, too, and Frank pivoted, only to find the kid was attempting to deal with the last guy.

Attempting, hell: the kid was doing the job. Not that he had much in the way of style. Frank could tell there had been training -- in this civilized year of 1948, almost everyone had a little, what with the recent world war and all -- but it was mostly the wild wolverine routine that was carrying the day. Any second now the kid was going to bite--

The laborer yelled, and the remaining pair of temporary jailbirds looked up from one of the cell's two cots before resuming their card game. Frank stepped forward to intervene.

"Come on, Champ, play fair." He managed to bear-hug the last guy, whose nose was now bleeding freely. The kid let loose and backed up to stand pressed against the bars, staring at Frank with wide eyes, breathing hard.

Frank heaved his burden toward an unoccupied corner of the cell, earning him another twinge from his shoulder. Of course he couldn't make the toss that far, but the fellow got the hint and managed to crawl away toward the corner where he'd been directed. Frank looked down and then deliberately kicked his second opponent a couple of times, just in case this guy was feeling sassy after he'd finished retching. He was not.

Dirty fighting was nothing but trouble postponed, but Frank did not know what the hell else he could have done. He had been stuck in a bad round of stare-downs even before the cops had dealt a joker from the latest deck of new arrestees into this cell. Then the laborers, still drunk from a hard evening's work disposing of their paychecks, had decided to have fun molesting the fresh-faced arrival. And their guards wouldn't have

intervened. No big surprise, given where the raid had scooped up Frank and the kid.

After the evening's raid, all the cells in this tank-town jail were overloaded with the clientele of the only lavender bar in four hundred square miles. Frank and the kid had just been unlucky enough to draw cellmates with the energy to care and the stupidity to act only three minutes after the guard locked up the kid and walked away.

Still, life could have been worse. If a couple of cops had been in the mood to play beat up the Nellie -- or for a blow job, or a tight ass -- the kid would have been up the creek with no Frank to help paddle.

"Is additional persuasion truly necessary?" The kid's voice: pleasant, steady tenor, fancy phrasing, vaguely familiar. Although it was not really fair to call him a kid. Frank had been too busy for a full inspection, but, now that he was paying attention, the guy had to be a year or three past twenty. In fact-- Frank risked another long look.

Oh, shit, now Frank knew him. What a snafu. Murphy's Law at its finest.

In Frank's defense, his cellmate was hard to recognize without the tweeds and glasses. And what had the kid done to his hair? Was it that British crap, Brylcreem? Never mind.

"Nope. I think our roommates now get that it's bad to assume a guy's an easy target just because he wandered into the wrong kind of bar. By mistake."

The kid -- no, Courtland -- opened his mouth, met Frank's steady gaze, and closed it again. "Er, yes. Of course. I'm sure they'll leave us be in the future, Mr., um, Jones." Wow, what an original alias.

Courtland must have caught Frank's reaction, since he gave Frank a snotty stare down his slightly snubbed and freckled nose. Nice to see he had guts, because he would need them. Then he said, "I've telephoned the younger Mr. Charny of Petersen, Charny, and Brin about this idiocy. I'm sure he'll be here soon."

"You had a nickel for the pay phone?"

"A few of them. One of the officers was kind enough to make change for a ten-dollar bill before I was moved into the cellblock." The tone had been innocent, but the hazel eyes were dryly amused. Frank knew without asking there hadn't been any swap for that sawbuck aside from the handful of nickels.

Frank let his lips stretch out into a smile with no illusions about how it would look on his war-battered features. "Okay. We might as well have a seat." Squatting, he grabbed and dragged their first opponent away from the one empty cot and over toward the other side of the cell, made sure the second guy shifted as well, glared at the still bleeding third, and then straightened up to sweep out a hand. "After you."

"Oh, no. After you, Mr. Jones." Courtland's bow was a thing of sarcastic beauty and a joy to Frank alone. Frank doubted anyone else in this cell could appreciate the nuances.

Frank sat down and elaborately crossed one ankle over his denim-clad knee, leaning back against the concrete wall. His bad shoulder still hurt some from all the exertion, but Frank decided to ignore the pain. Courtland joined him on the cot and absent-mindedly patted a jacket pocket before removing the hand with a frown. That was right, he smoked a pipe. He probably thought the pipe made him look older. If Frank remembered right, it didn't.

Swallowing another smile, a real one this time, Frank asked, "So, what do you want to do now? Try and get in on the card game?"

"No, Mr. Jones, I don't think so. My mind was running more along the lines of some intelligent conversation. This penal atmosphere is a peril to reason."

Frank snorted.

Courtland kept going, sounding serene. He seemed to have recovered his balance somehow. "I understand from Docto--" He paused to clear his throat. "You're reputed to be quite intelligent, Mr. Jones. So, what do you think of this notion of a steady-state universe?"

Right. That was what Frank called concealing your identity. Hopeless to expect anything else, he guessed, since once a boy-genius physicist, always a boy-genius physicist. Astronomy was probably Doctor Courtland's idea of suitable chatter among the masses, something he thought wouldn't give away the fact that Frank was both a senior and a soon-to-be master's candidate in Courtland's brand-new department. Resignedly, Frank

located the astronomical edge of his recent education in general relativity, opened his mouth, and plunged into the deep end.

About the time their guard showed up, Frank was wondering if he would have been better off joining the unhappy heap of humanity nursing wounds in the far reaches of the cell. He felt as if his brain had been stripped and reassembled as determinedly and thoroughly as Frank had oiled the Garand rifle he had lugged along from North Africa to the Bulge. Young Doctor Courtland, on the other hand, was smiling up at the unpainted concrete ceiling, long arms wrapped around the knees tucked up under his chin, happy as a kid with a new cap pistol.

When the guard rattled the keys in the cell lock, Courtland frowned. Frank stood in a hurry. After Courtland did not follow suit, Frank grabbed his upper arm, hauled him upright, and towed him out the opening door past their bored jailer. It was not until they were both in the corridor that Frank paused to turn and salute his former cell mates. They repaid his courtesy with verbal interest until the guard hauled out a hardwood baton and smacked it once against the cell bars.

"What did that gesticulation with your little finger mean?" Courtland sounded interested.

Frank kept moving. "Don't ask me. I learned the gesture in France. Maybe it's something to do with frogs or poodles."

Courtland considered this and then said, "I don't believe that, as a rule, you indulge in such stereotyping, Mr. Mackenzie. You're pulling my leg."

"Nope, I'm just ignorant." Keep the words coming, Frank. Talk over him before he uses more real names. No, wait: all the cops and bulls already knew about Courtland because of the phone call, and the two of them were out of earshot of any cellmates who might turn up later to try a little blackmail. Masquerade time was over. Come to think of it, this was about the only chance Courtland and he would have to piece together a good story. "I picked that bar, didn't I?"

"Bearing in mind that the only other place we'd seen in San Agustin that offered drinks and a public phone at such an hour was called the Dew Drop Inn..." Courtland retorted. He shook his head before he added, "No wonder we made the mistake of going into the Frisco. An excellent example of why one shouldn't make choices based on names."

There was something to be said for being locked up with a genius. Okay. Their story was that they had gone into the raided bar together and by mistake, presumably while traveling on college business. Traveling at night together, way east of Sierra Alta. Right. The university telescope. Frank had even worked up at the observatory his junior summer, so he would make a plausible guide. "I'm just sorry this screwed up your first good shot at seeing the sixty-inch in action."

"My first real chance of any kind," Courtland corrected. But his face contradicted his tone. As they waited for the main door to the cell block to be opened, Doctor

Courtland wore an expression Frank had learned to recognize in the three years since he'd been honorably discharged and decided to go Joe College on the GI bill. Professorial approval for student ingenuity was descending like manna from the heavens. Oh, brother. It looked ridiculous when paternal benevolence beamed from a freckle-faced twenty-three-year old toward Frank's battered and thirty-two-year-old self.

The elderly gent who sat scowling in the interview room was clean-shaven and wearing a full suit and vest, even though the time was now two thirty in the a.m. If Frank wasn't mistaken, the suit was an expensive one. Courtland paused in the doorway right ahead of Frank, started to look sheepish, and then visibly pulled himself together before he entered and spoke. "Hello, Uncle William."

"Collis." All the repression Frank could have wanted directed toward his peppy cellmate was in that word, but the first name was probably what served to subdue Courtland. Frank couldn't blame his professor-to-be. That name would defeat anyone. Uncle William's attention swiveled to Frank. "Who is this--" To give credit where it was due, the pause was short. "--gentleman?"

"Frank Mackenzie, one of the senior undergraduates in my new department. I recruited him for an informal chauffeur and guide. We were en route to visit the university observatory, and had stopped at the Frisco Bar and Grill to make a phone call and use the facilities, before we got separated in the ruckus when the police, for reasons now apparent, raided the establishment." Courtland hoisted eyebrows at his senior relative. "I

called Jim to come and disentangle us from this ridiculous mess."

"Young James had the sense to telephone me, being well aware that Joe Sanders, San Agustin's mayor, is my fraternity brother." Uncle William's voice was blunt and pitched to carry. The news would be all over the police-station-cum-jail in under an hour, if Frank was any judge. "Good grief, boy, don't you know a den of vice when you walk into one?"

Frank kept his expression as blank as if he'd been watching a colonel chew out a second louie. He had to struggle, though. Courtland's reaction to Uncle William's question was masterful. He was Tom Sawyer, outraged, as he said, "Wherever would I learn something like that?" Then the expression switched to professorial, and Courtland added with precision, "I believe it's immediately apparent that Mr. Mackenzie couldn't be expected to possess such specialized information, either."

Well, the statements weren't exactly lies. And Uncle William seemed to take Courtland's words at face value. Shaking his head, Uncle William said, "Only you, Collis. I'm sure I don't know what I'll tell your mother." Standing heavily, he added, "Wait here." Like they were going anywhere with the jailer still in the room.

Frank had underestimated the old guy. All three of them were out the door of the police station in twenty minutes flat.

Uncle William asked, "May I give you a lift?" It was pretty obvious there'd be room. The Rolls double-parked in front of the police station stuck out like a sore thumb.

Courtland looked worried and said, "Yes, please. We parked back at the bar. I hope our vehicle hasn't been towed."

Frank kept his mouth shut during the ride through the gritty, late-night streets of San Agustin. He'd learned young that silence made the rich forget you were around. Although quiet didn't work on Courtland, who kept shooting him quizzical looks, it worked fine with the old gent.

Uncle William spent the trip lecturing Courtland with the air of a man who wasn't so much mad as put out, and who was determined not to be annoyed in the same way again. Courtland got a fast briefing on the Murky World of Perverted Creatures of the Night, although more than half of the info was wrong. Frank would have bet good money Courtland also knew this, but the doc kept his scholarly instincts under control and the ride ended without incident.

Frank was interested to learn from veers in the lecture that Doctor Courtland was one of *those* Courtlands: railway money that had mated with older banking money to breed one of the ten most prominent families in Southern California. Active in the Valley Hunt Club. On the board of the Huntington Library. Big, fancy house in Pasadena. No wonder the doc got stuck with a name like Collis.

When the old gent let them out in front of the Frisco, the bar's façade now thoroughly smashed up by the cops, he leaned out the rear window of the Rolls and said, "For heaven's sake, go over to the Desert Inn and get cleaned up. You reek of disinfectant. Then catch a few hours of sleep before Mr. Mackenzie drives you back to Altamonte. If I couldn't explain this to your mother, I certainly couldn't explain why you'd been killed in a driving accident afterward."

"Yes, Uncle William."

"In any case, I promised those policemen that you wouldn't leave town until Judge Dienbecker and Mayor Sanders call them tomorrow morning to attest to your character."

"Thank you, Uncle William."

"Really, Collis. Do try and be more careful in the future. You have the reputation of your new university to consider, after all."

"I shall, Uncle William. Goodbye, Uncle William."

They stood in silence until the tail-lights of the Rolls rounded a corner. Then Courtland turned to Frank. "Do you actually have a car with you? I don't. I can't drive without my glasses."

"How the hell did you get here, then?" Frank paused and frowned. "No, scratch that. What happened to your ride?"

"He's not in jail. He'd left for a while with an old acquaintance he'd met at the bar, promising to return for me later. I'm sure he had the sense to keep driving when he spotted the fuss." Courtland frowned. "I wanted to dance. Tonight was a rare opportunity, and I'd been looking forward to the opportunity. It seems I wasn't the only one anticipating a crowd."

Yeah, seems the cops had heard about the stag sock-hop, too. Frank sighed. "What I have is a motorcycle. You'll have to ride up behind."

The brilliant smile he got in return was not reassuring.

Courtland really didn't have to hold on so tight during the trip. He also didn't have to eye Frank with such interest in the hotel elevator. And he sure didn't have to look so disappointed when he examined the elegant room's twin beds. If Frank hadn't distracted the bellboy with a healthy tip, there might have been trouble. They had already come close, trying to check in to a fancy pile like the Desert Inn without luggage. The rucksack Frank carried for his overnight kit had been a poor substitute.

Having finished his inspection of the furnishings, Courtland turned and inspected Frank some more. Frank inspected the professor right back. Red-brown hair, pleasantly forgettable features, a strong chin, easy on the freckles. Tall and skinny but in shape. Only the off-green eyes, somehow both dreamy and sharp, gave away that you were dealing with anyone more interesting than the boy next door. Although the boy next door had never

given Frank a once-over like Courtland's or there might have been even more excitement in Frank's youth than he remembered.

Frank felt like shaking his head. He didn't know how many shave-tails fresh from O.C.S. he had needed to teach their jobs over his years in the service, but he had never learned to like the process. Still, he had better say something before Courtland said something else that might get them both into trouble.

"Look, Doctor Courtland. I can tell where this is going. And you seem to be a nice character for a rich guy. You're even okay-looking, if a fellow would make a play for Penrod all grown up, which I wouldn't." That was a lie, but a necessary one. "However, you're also the newest of the five, count 'em, five physics professors at Clarence Tenn Polytechnic, and I'm the department's pet ape-man. That means, even if I wanted to, I couldn't jump your bones without ugly complications ensuing."

Courtland went very still. His lips tightened and his jaw set. For a moment, Frank thought he would blow. Then his gaze drifted to a point somewhere behind Frank's forehead. After a few seconds, he said, tone wondering, "I was flirting, wasn't I?"

"Uh." Courtland's words weren't any reaction Frank had expected. "Well, yeah."

"Crap." The word sounded weird coming from those lips. "Runaway subconscious. I need to work on that." Then the eyes refocused and narrowed. "Pet ape-man?"

Now Frank knew what to say. "Sure. Tarzan of the Inland Empire. As seems to be widely admitted, I'm not dumb. But I am coarse. The department's accepting me, one of their own undergraduates, as a master's candidate so that they can finish polishing me up. Once I've learned to drink my tea with my little finger crooked out, they'll try to ship me off to some place like Cornell or Columbia for my doctorate." Frank shook his head. "If I'd turned out to be an experimentalist, I'd be on my way already. But, as it stands, I'm too much of a roughneck for theoretical circles."

"Actually, from what I've already heard, you still need a bit of supplementary tutoring in advanced statistical theory. And it won't hurt you to start your graduate work under the stewardship of those who comprehend what you can do. Your senior thesis was, by all accounts, brilliant." Courtland screwed up his brow in thought. "You are also right about my older colleagues wanting to smooth a few rough edges off of you. However, the slight but constant air of belligerence is what worries them, not your working-class manners or badly scarred features."

Fu-- Damn him, anyhow. Every once in a while, a green officer had been smart enough to snap off a shot that hit home. Those guys usually turned out to be the biggest pains with which to deal of all the brass. But Courtland didn't seem to know he had scored. He just got glum and kept talking. "I'm afraid that you're also right when you say we can't dally together."

Frank told himself to be firm. "A night in the sack wouldn't have worked anyhow. I'm not your boyhood fantasies about the gardener come to life."

"No, you're a very bright physicist-in-training with a gardener's particularly appealing, outdoorsy kind of body. And I already favor brunets with blue eyes even before factoring in the mind and muscles. Greed: but that's my problem, not yours."

Oh, for-- Sometimes too much honesty and self-awareness was as bad as too little. "Doctor Courtland. Sir. Knock it off." Frank delivered the last three words with a top sergeant's snap.

For a moment, Courtland's eyes lit up with mischief. The expression made him seem even younger than his twenty-three years and as tasty as a hot-fudge sundae after a week of stringing line in the Mojave. "All right, Mr. Mackenzie, I am knocking. Nonetheless, I reserve the right to admire whomever I will, even if I must learn to hide my reactions better."

Frank sighed. "Yeah, keep your eyes -- and your taste in 'em -- to yourself, okay? Otherwise, someone's sleeping in the bathtub tonight, and it's not going to be me."

"Aye aye, Mr. Mackenzie."

Great. Now Frank was a squid, and an officer, to boot. Things just couldn't get any better.

Of course, that was before the F.B.I. showed up the next morning.

II

At least Frank and the doc had been cleared by the cops, checked out of the Desert Inn, and gotten back to Altamonte before they had visitors. In retrospect, Frank wasn't sure how he would have dealt with G-men while Courtland shaved in the background, stripped to his undershirt, humming baroque opera and intimidating his three or four chin hairs with Frank's safety razor.

As it was, Frank had a moment to think when he opened the door to his dorm room and found a pair of blue suits, topped by cold eyes and crew-cuts, waiting inside for him. He narrowed his own eyes and kept quiet. His reward was the slight look of disappointment that flashed across the younger G-man's face when the guy got a good look at Frank's ugly mug. That momentary expression gave away their agenda right then and there.

The older agent did the talking. "Mr. Franklin Mackenzie?"

"Yeah, that's me."

"I am Special Agent O'Rourke. This is Special Agent Eldridge. We'd like to ask you a few questions about your arrest last night."

Frank snorted. "Sure, if I get to see some I.D. first." His personal step one for dealing with cops, M.P.s, and their predatory kin was not to let them see you sweat. After tossing his rucksack into a corner, Frank took and examined the two identity cards with care, handed them back, pulled out the wooden chair at his desk, and sat

straddling its back, his arms folded across the top.
"Okay, shoot."

"Why were you in the Frisco Bar and Grill last night?"

"First I've heard about the Feds being interested in fairy bars, so this must be about Doctor Courtland." Using a word like "fairy" around guys like these was rubbing salt into open blisters, but this was not the time to try some stupid last stand at Truthville. Instead, Frank asked, "What's up? You guys worried about his security clearance?"

"At the present time, Doctor Courtland doesn't have federal security clearance." Oh boy, Junior G-Man was green. Senior almost looked pissed at that little giveaway.

Frank shrugged. "Okay, okay. I was in the bar to take a leak, have a drink, and use the phone, but you must know that from the locals. You must have the whole story from the locals by now. Is there any particular part I can confirm for you? I've got a test in quantum mechanics to study for, and it's a bear."

Senior took over. "Just answer our questions, Mr. Mackenzie, and we'll leave you alone as soon as we can."

"Fine." Frank stayed quiet and looked inquisitive. Step two, let the cops do the talking as often as possible.

"Did you observe Doctor Courtland speak with any of the bar's patrons in particular?"

"Nope."

There was a short pause. Senior kept going with a slightly dogged note in his voice, "Did Doctor Courtland show any special interest in his surroundings?"

"Yeah." Junior's eyes shifted. Hah. *Too bad, kid. I'm not dumb enough to give you what you're expecting.* "He liked what the jukebox was playing. Doctor C's a big dancer, I guess." Frank snorted. "Boy, was he in the wrong joint to think about cutting a rug."

"Did he seem to recognize the nature of the establishment?"

"Well, the twenty or thirty policemen busting in through the front door kind of gave the secret away." Frank let himself sound dour and patient. He actually felt dour, if not patient.

Senior was feeling less patient. "You may wish to be a bit more cooperative, Mr. Mackenzie."

"Sure, if you'll let me know what cooperation you want. I can't tell you the doc's running around in silk scanties because I haven't seen his shorts. He doesn't lisp. He wears his watch on the back of his wrist, not the front, and he totes his books slung down low. He fights okay, even if he does bite. I'm not sure what all that proves, but you're welcome to my observations, for what they're worth."

"So you have no personal reasons to suspect Doctor Courtland of being a homosexual?"

There it was at last. Took him long enough to try the implication. Frank scowled and was distantly pleased to see Junior tense a little. "Y'know, I sure hope you're not hinting at what I think you're hinting at." And here was the moment to shift gears on them.

Frank offered up a quick mental apology, even though she would only have laughed at him, before he turned to pick up the photograph on his desk. Its sterling silver frame was the most expensive object in his dorm room, even counting his senior textbooks and his slide rule. He cradled the photo. "If you think you have something to say on the subject, why don't you tell it to her?"

Junior blinked, confused. Senior seemed wary when he said, "You're not making any real sense."

Jackpot. They hadn't done their homework. Holding out the photograph, Frank said, "My late wife. She died in a car crash just after our tenth anniversary." He didn't have to fake his feelings about that. "I was somewhere around the town of St. Lô at the time with the 15th Combat Engineers." Indulging in a little sarcasm, he added, "That was after the North African, Sicily, and Normandy campaigns, but before the Bulge, in case you've forgotten. I saw 'em all." He put Sally back where she belonged. *Thanks for one last round of covering fire, Cutie, although I would sure rather have you around than useful.*

It looked like Senior thought this might be a bluff, but he could not be certain, and Frank's tactics had probably stung. G-men had played their role in the recent war, but it had not been on the front lines.

Time for Frank to show his cards and rake in his winnings. "Look. The doc and I went out, we got arrested in a homo bar, we beat the crap out of some sleaze balls in jail who got the story wrong, and we came back here on my motorcycle. If you want some alarming information about Doctor Courtland, pay attention to that last part. He got his test ride, and now I think he's in love with my '47 Indian Chief. Probably he wants one for himself. They attract a lot of attention from the ladies, y'see. I'm not sure how much attention the doc's had until now, what with being in college, studying physics, since he was thirteen or fourteen."

Step three for dealing with the cops: when you do talk, make your words honest and make your topic junk that everyone knows. But, step four, let the cops think that talking to you is giving away their secrets. "That is, he was studying physics except for the years he spent at Los Alamos, or so I've heard. Funny he doesn't have security clearance." Frank narrowed his eyes in consideration, making sure the gesture showed.

Senior did the best he could. He sighed with heavy sarcasm and said, "Very well. We won't keep you from your studies any longer, Mr. Mackenzie." Reaching into a pocket, he pulled out a piece of pasteboard. "Here's my card. If you remember any information that you think may be of use to us, please give me a call." Now his face was cold again, dangerous. "This is, as you seem to have figured out, a question of national security."

Frank took the card and put it away in his desk. Then he got up to open the door for them. "Hey, no hard feelings. It's been a long twenty-four hours, is all." After they

were out in the corridor, he added, "Good luck and all that, but I think you're barking up the wrong tree."

"Maybe, Mr. Mackenzie. We'll have to wait and see." Senior delivered the line pretty well. Frank paused briefly in appreciation before he shut the door. Step five, give cops the last word whenever possible.

Shaking his head, he went to pull down his quantum physics notebook from the shelf above his desk. Step six and done, try not to look back. And Frank really did have a test coming up.

He knew that he had to find a chance to see Courtland alone and warn him. Classes were no help. Frank had already taken all the undergraduate courses that the doc had been stuck teaching when Doctor Loomis abruptly dropped dead four months short of retirement and Courtland was brought in early from his post-graduate fellowship.

It was just as well that, as an incoming graduate student, Frank was expected to cultivate the company of the senior members of his department. As he had anticipated, he was able to find a quiet corner at Doctor Greerson's monthly faculty-student tea and back Courtland into it. After advancing on his objective, Frank made sure the living room only had a view of their profiles before he spoke. "I had a visit from some federal boys the day after our field trip. They wanted to know all about your social life."

Courtland looked startled and then rolled his eyes. "Not again. I thought they'd lose interest when I shifted my research interests from sub-atomic physics to general relativity, even if they ignored my dropping some hints that I might favor international control of atomics."

What was it with this guy? He was like a duckling let loose on the Arroyo Seco Parkway right before they cut the ribbon to open it to traffic. "You tried to make them think you were politically unreliable, when you're-- You couldn't just rob a bank? Both the Feds and academic departments are a lot more forgiving of larceny than you-know-what these days. Either kind of you-know-what. They hate 'em enough separately that you didn't need to mix the two."

"To be honest, mine wasn't so much a choice as a necessity. A matter of employing the sparse materials available, as it were. I spent too many of my peak troublemaking years penned up behind barbed wire on the Mesa to have cultivated any serious vices. Any others, I mean."

Frank eyed Courtland, considering. Seems the professor had been doing more than earning his physics merit badge at Los Alamos. Huh. He did not ask with who. He knew Courtland wouldn't tell. Instead, Frank said, "You should get a girlfriend, Doc. And soon."

"Ah, Mr. Mackenzie." That had been Greerson's plummy voice. Great: Frank would have to be the one who twitched at the familiar sound. Courtland only shifted around to face Doctor Greerson, their department chairman, with an expression of mild inquiry on his face.

Beaming at them both, Greerson puffed out his cheeks once or twice before continuing. "I'm glad to see you're making Doctor Courtland's acquaintance. Given your mutual interests, and that fascinating little question you raised about gravitation and magnetic field lines in your senior thesis, we've decided he'll be your graduate advisor."

What the hell? This was news to Frank, and, seemingly, not just to Frank. Courtland was still looking sandbagged when Greerson took Frank's arm and detached him from his future advisor with a skill honed in dozens of college senate meetings.

Greerson commanded as he towed, "Now, come along with me and speak to Doctor Throop, who wants your opinion on what the department will need to request from the university in the way of electrical rewiring when we install the new cyclotron."

He steered Frank out through an open pair of sliding glass doors and about fifteen feet across the Greerson backyard, into the shade of some bottle-brush trees, before he lowered his voice slightly and said, "We're giving you a mixed teaching and research fellowship. To be frank--" Greerson produced a cute little smirk to underline the pun, "--it will do young Courtland good to have a mature candidate to help with his undergraduate courses and settling him into the Polytechnic. His own two picks from the pool of applicants this year are rather challenging. Your future colleague, Mr. Figueroa, is only twenty. And as for his other candidate--" He trailed off for a moment, shaking his head. "Doctor Courtland's second graduate student will be a young woman, if you

can believe that. You would think this was the biology department. Passionate youth and its blue-sky ideals." Greerson snorted benevolently.

"I'm sure she'll be safe with Doctor Courtland, sir." Now, there was an understatement.

"Humph. I'm not entirely certain Doctor Courtland will be safe with her." From his expression, Greerson had some vague vision of a femme fatale vamping the physics majors and faculty of Clarence Tenn.

The idea of a fellow graduate student vamping Doctor van Staarling, who resembled a dandelion gone to seed and sometimes seemed to forget his own wife, or Doctor Throop, who only flirted with buxom females who had the I.Q.s of flatworms, struck Frank as fairly hilarious. Even a week ago, he might have made some wisecrack about the situation. Now, with the caution of the newly hunted, he settled for saying, "She might be one of those systematic ladies like Doctor Meyer over at U.S.C. You know, the kind who are really neat and observant. Good experimentalists."

"Well, perhaps. If such should turn out to be the case, we'll have to see what she and Doctor Throop make of each other. Speaking of whom--" Greerson took Frank in tow again.

This was not the first time Frank had been asked to deploy what he had learned as a linesman at Southern California Edison, and moonlighting as an electrician, for the benefit of his department. At least he finished this particular strategy session with an offer of a summer job helping to set up the new cyclotron. Between the

G.I. bill and the life insurance policy on Sally, Frank had a little money for school. But those funds had to cover expenses all the way through his Ph.D., a possible post-doc, and a job hunt that would have to exclude a lot of positions for a touchy security reason that Frank could not explain. Extra money was always welcome.

The unexpected job offer did make it impossible to get back to his other business, leaning on Courtland to be a little more careful, before the party was over. Then, for the next few weeks, he and the doc seemed to just miss each other several times. As matters turned out, he really didn't see Courtland again until graduation.

Instead, Frank spent the end of his last undergraduate semester in the overworked near-isolation that he had grown used to during the past three years, ever since he returned from the war wounded, a green widower, and back to screwing guys. Those weeks in May and June were the last break his nerves would have for a long, long time, but there was no way he could have known that then Too bad. Frank could have spent his time sweating over something hotter than his finals. Although, as matters turned out, the extra one-night stands would not have done his nerves much good in the long run.

As usual, several science departments joined forces to host a reception for the new graduates and their families right after commencement, out on the lawn behind the Physical Sciences Building. Meeting relatives of the kids he had older-brothered the past couple of years and comparing their kin to the less-than-kind descriptions

his fellow students had given him was sort of fun. The distraction of his private party game helped him miss Sally a little less on a day when he badly wanted her by his side. Instead, he was enjoying matching up Mrs. Birnbaum, a lady who looked a lot like a chipmunk, with her son's tales of a fire-breathing dragon, when Doc Courtland practically backed into Frank.

"I'm sor-- Oh, hello, Frank. Congratulations." Courtland cleared his throat. "And Mr. Birnbaum. Congratulations, Mr. Birnbaum. Is this your mother?"

Chuck Birnbaum looked nervous as Chuck's ma opened up wide the verbal throttle. The woman could talk the way a Jeep could cover ground. Courtland charmed her, and she did not mind telling him so. The university thrilled her, and she wanted to share that with Frank. Charles' graduation had been the peak, the pinnacle, the absolute Mt. Whitney of her life; she did not care who knew it. Frank watched with amusement as Chuck, with an ease that hinted at long practice, avoided his ma's punctuating embraces. Undismayed, Mrs. Birnbaum carried on. She would never, ever forget this day. But just in case, she wanted photographs.

"Mom, the university doesn't allow cameras at graduation ceremonies. Only afterward. I told you that."

"Don't be silly, Chuck. I clearly saw a man next to me taking pictures of your professors during the faculty parade with one of those teensy-tiny modern cameras. The man was very tall and wore a nicely tailored navy suit with a fedora," Mrs. Birnbaum said. Then, with the triumphant air of a player who had caught the argumentative ball and slung it fast toward home plate,

she finished up with, "His handkerchief matched his tie."

"Sheesh, Mom, what does tailoring have to do with anything?"

"Darling, a decent suit has to do with *everything*. And don't say 'sheesh.' It's vulgar."

As Chuck and his ma launched into what was pretty obviously a well-worn argument, Frank did his damndest to catch Courtland's eye. The doc was slowly edging away. He could be trying to ditch the Birmbaums, but somehow Frank doubted it. Frank narrowed his eyes and moved to intercept. "'Scuse me, folks. Doctor Courtland, I have to talk to you about, um, a physics problem. Same-polarity particle fusion."

Courtland flinched. That was odd: Frank's dig at the doc had been too vague for even Chuck to catch. "I'm rather busy right now, Frank."

Frank gave him a look, one that he'd found in the past worked well on rogue superiors. The expression still worked. Courtland sighed, squared his shoulders, and let himself be led away. They paused briefly so that Frank could accept Doctor Tompkins's hearty congratulations for Frank's highest honors, and then ducked behind the refreshment tent.

Frank wasted no time. "Come on, Doc, get a grip. We can't work together for the next two or three years if you turn tail and retreat every time you see me coming."

"The problem's not you." Courtland shook his head and then smiled wryly. Frank told himself to ignore the smile. "Rather, it's not entirely you. I merely need to work on my self-possession before I try to cope with this odd situation and the F.B.I. at the same time."

"So, you think it was a G-man that Ma Birmbaum saw?"

"Don't you?"

Wonderful, Socratic dialogue. There had been a time when that stuff impressed Frank, back before he realized the technique often covered for the fact that his teacher of the moment didn't know what the hell was going on. "Yeah, I do."

"So, I still have a problem. Excuse me, we still have a problem."

Frank considered the doc, who seemed both amused and harried. The guy was handling the situation pretty okay, all things considered. "Look, you don't need to worry about my end. I'm dating again, and that'll keep me busy."

Courtland craned his neck a little, probably checking for eavesdroppers. "I broke it off with my friend who gave rides. This situation is too problematical to figure in the effects of random day-to-day encounters with a 'close friend.'"

"Another professor? English department, I bet."

"Don't fish. It's merely a species of flirting, as I'm sure you're well aware."

Even better: now the doc was back to advancing, not taking cover. "Sorry, sir." Frank felt himself grin and straightened his face in a hurry. He did not like what a big grin did to the scar across his lip.

"Stop that!" Courtland's words were a whip crack, a tone Frank hadn't heard from him before. Startled, Frank scowled. So did Courtland, who added, "You're not Victor Frankenstein's monster. If you want to smile, Mr. Mackenzie, smile."

Frank gave Courtland a long, slow look of consideration, slow enough to make the assessment obvious. The doc would be a pain-in-the-ass superior, all right. Then, deliberately, Frank grinned. Usually, the only bosses worth working for were pains in the ass, in Frank's opinion.

Courtland promptly proceeded to prove Frank's theory by marching him back to Doctor Tompkins, where the two of them ganged up on Frank to hash out a summer reading list.

"You can come by my office once a week and ask me questions," Courtland said. "I'll be on campus all summer, finishing a paper and preparing my lecture notes for the fall." Typical. Once the academic mind grabbed hold of an idea, a clamp-wrench was nothing to it. Courtland had seemingly decided, once and for all, that Frank was his very own graduate student.

"Oh, and don't forget to have Frank read Fermi on the neutron," Doctor Tompkins added with relish. The big, bluff professor was the department's third theoretician,

counting Courtland and van Staarling, the fluid mechanics specialist. Before Courtland's arrival, Frank had assumed Tompkins would be his graduate advisor. Nope. Now Doctor Tompkins was taking the second seat beside young Doctor Courtland here, probably because Tompkins was a micro-scale man, interested in exploring the quantum jungle, and Frank liked general relativity and theoretical astronomy best. But being demoted to co-pilot would not restrain Tompkins from joining in on the fun of bombing runs across Frank's brain.

"I thought Frank might enjoy Feynman's quantum mechanics formulation in the *Review*," Courtland said.

"Already read, Doc C."

Both professors beamed at him, and two mouths opened at once. Uh-oh. Here it came again. Time for show and tell, physics variety.

An hour and a half later, Frank realized that he'd glared at one of the campus foodservice workers only after the guy flinched. The waiter had jostled Frank while trying to remove a pan of Swedish meatballs from the now-vacated buffet table, but the guy still did not deserve seeing what served Frank for an evil look these days, even if the accidental interruption of Frank's complex explanation had been kind of annoying.

After Doctor Tompkins had been dragged off by his wife, Frank had finally made some headway explaining his point of view about quantum field theory and the infinities resolution problem to Courtland, although it had been rough going. They really needed some slide

rules and a chalkboard... Looking around, Frank spotted the blond in a seer-sucker suit wandering away from them while jotting in a notebook. Cripes.

"Eavesdropper, Doc."

"Oh, *damn*." Courtland started to turn and then obviously thought better of the motion. "I'd better go." His expression shifted into a sunny smile straight out of *Tom Sawyer*. "Although I hope whomever it was enjoyed trying to puzzle out your rather distinctive notions about particle diagrams."

"Yeah. Good luck, G-man." Frank smiled himself.

"I really have to read that senior thesis of yours." Courtland's own smile widened as he considered Frank. Something subtle shifted behind the hazel eyes, and he wasn't Tom Sawyer fresh from a whitewashed fence any more. He started to speak, but then caught himself and shook his head. "Which is my cue to retreat. I'll call you later. No, perhaps I'll send you a letter via the intra-campus mail."

"Doc--"

"Penelope Hamilton, nineteen years old, sound of mind and wind, enjoys horses, dogs, dancing, and musicals, not yet ready to settle down. Stop worrying. I comprehend the problem, and I am taking measures." He tried to look severe. "Although that's my business, not yours. You're my student, not my nanny."

"Okay." The doc was right; now that he'd gotten the idea he was in danger, his love life was none of Frank's business. "I'm gone, then."

"Considering my luck to date? Give me leave to doubt that," Courtland said. He shook his head, turned on his heel, and vamoosed.

III

Courtland was right; Frank was not gone. In fact, every seven days for the next two months, he spent his Tuesday mornings in Courtland's office, covering both the chalkboards and the pages of his notebooks with equations. Every seven days, as the smog rolled east through the L.A. basin, the Santa Ana winds pushed heat back toward the Pacific, inflation raced across the country, and the Reds tried to strangle West Berlin, Frank saw Courtland. Once a week, just like clockwork, they met for hours. Once a week: too much time with Courtland for Frank's peace of mind but still not enough time spent to appease Frank's hunger for... physics. Not for Courtland, for physics.

Frank looked up from his notes and felt himself sigh. He really should not be wasting time sulking when he was supposed to be preparing problem sets for the fall's General Physics labs. Years back, Frank had discovered with all his buck privates that the questions you asked a guy while he was first learning something mattered as much as the answers you got back from him. So Frank had blocked out several sessions to spend with the textbook, picking the problems that might force the kids to learn the basics they needed.

He leaned back in his chair, chewed on the end of his pencil, and reminded himself again of why he was here in his tiny Physical Sciences Building office at eight in the evening on a nice Saturday in early August and not out coaxing some cute co-ed to cut a rug.

His job would be to help push his students past arithmetic until they figured out that numbers were

merely strange words in a second language, just silent messengers like the little muscles that move on the face of a close friend and tell you what he's feeling. If Frank did his job right and the kids bothered to do their homework, they would stop interrupting their thinking to remember the numerical value of the gravitational constant or how to set up an acceleration equation and start getting mental pictures of notions like how much scale and units mattered. Eventually, they would quit counting the arithmetical beats and be able to concentrate on the mathematical moves of the cosmic dance.

At least, that was the way Frank thought physics classes should go, the same way most learning did. During the war, he had made it past remembering *hande hoch* meant hands up and moved on to wondering whether or not the Jerries were really going to drop their guns. Before that, he had stopped reminding himself not to touch hot lines while he was grounded and reached the point of focusing on grid design. More recently, he had figured out the tiny twitch at the left corner of the lips showed Courtland was intrigued, and learned to ignore the gesture while paying attention to what--

Frank put down his pencil. Courtland again. The doc was visiting the inside of his head too much these days. No way to avoid such thoughts, what with studying under Courtland and all, but Frank's brain should at least stick to translating the gestures and overlook the mouth making them. But Courtland's lush and mobile mouth was pretty tough to miss.

Sitting up straight, Frank stretched out an arm and picked up his own latest problem set, paper-clipped

together with several pages of comments and questions in the doc's clean, wide handwriting. Nothing unique to Frank there.

Courtland was also trading mail with his other two incoming graduate students, sending them both fat letters full of suggestions and instructions he had composed with the same care he had lavished on Frank's Tuesday sessions this summer. The fact that Courtland took trouble with his teaching shouldn't make his lips, his hands, his dick, and his ass harder to ignore, but it did.

Frank needed to yank his attention away from that particular vision. He got up and stretched. Then he went out into the corridor, meaning to use the can. But on the way, he was distracted by noise from the elevator. Frank had learned to tell what floor the ancient machine was stopping at, and it had halted on the next floor up. What the hell? It was all faculty offices upstairs, and the hour was too late for the professors and too early for the watchman. Something itched in Frank's brain, and he had not survived this long by ignoring his intuition. He kept going past the restroom to the stairwell door.

After taking the flight as quietly as he could, Frank eased open the door to the fifth floor. Nothing visible but a vacant corridor. But somehow the place did not feel empty. Frank pushed the door back until it was barely cracked open, peeled off the old uniform shirt he was wearing, wrapped it around his hand, and stretched up to twist the hot light bulb above the door counter-clockwise until it went out. Then he put his shirt back on and waited.

As waits went, this one wasn't bad. Maybe twenty minutes passed before two men walked past the door toward the elevator. Frank got only a glimpse, but that was sufficient enough. Guys could change their suits for working clothes easily enough, but upper-end crew-cuts took time to grow out. The powers that be had paid someone on the faculty an after-hours visit, and Frank would be willing to bet that someone was not Doctor Throop.

When he heard the sound of the elevator, Frank waited a minute or two longer, listening for more noises, before screwing the light bulb back in tight. Again he waited, a good five minutes this time, before he went out into the dark corridor. He soft-footed quieter than he had ever moved while hunting desert sheep, walking as quietly as he'd slunk through the ruins of St. Lô.

He saw no scratches on the lock-plate on Courtland's door. Why should there be? He would bet they had a key. So did Frank, but when he reached for the doorknob, his hand hesitated before falling back to his side. What if they had wired the place for sound? He was not a linesman anymore, but he still kept up with his *Popular Electronics*. Some of the new mikes were barely bigger than a guy's two fingers, and those were just the ones they told civilians about. If Frank went busting into Courtland's office, making noise, right after the visitors had left-- No.

Calmly using the can and then going back to his own office and finishing off his problem set was one of the tougher jobs Frank had tackled recently, but he managed. Making himself stroll casually out to where he'd parked his motorcycle, mount up, and take off

without checking for followers was tougher still, but Frank managed that, too. He would not have known what to look for anyhow, Frank told himself. By telling himself that a lot, he got off campus and onto Foothill Boulevard without trying any of the maneuvers his amateur brain insisted would have lost pursuers, maneuvers that would likely have given him away instead.

At the first red stoplight on Foothill, Frank revved the accelerator. If he'd had any sense, he would headed for a pool hall then, or a movie theater, or just gone home to his new apartment to wait for Tuesday morning. But every man ran through his ration of good sense sooner or later, and Frank knew that his moment had come. He turned right and headed for Old Pasadena, out toward the fancy district where the Courtlands had their pile.

Even the rich were not exempt from the post-war housing shortage as L.A. bloated like a python that had swallowed a hippo. Thanks to a graduating biology student he had tutored through statistics, and her landlord dad who had needed some rewiring done, Frank had been very lucky in finding an apartment off campus. However, Frank knew the doc was still living at his folks' house, probably while he searched in vain for lodgings fancy enough for a bachelor Courtland. Any suitable vacancies were being filled by families of four. So it was almost nine p.m. by the time Frank pulled his Indian Chief up in front of the tall stone pillars and ironwork.

At least he had used the trip to come up with an explanation for his presence so straightforwardly stupid that it just might work. Frank leaned forward and mashed the button next to the gate.

He had expected a long wait and then an unfamiliar face, but a speaker he had not spotted underneath all the English ivy said, "Yes?" One bland word in an unknown, masculine voice: it could be anyone.

Frank swallowed an urge to clear his throat. "Sorry the hour's so late. I've come to see Doctor Courtland. I'm Frank Mackenzie, one of his grad students, and the doc told me to drop by if I got stuck bad in the middle of reviewing the Forier transform in Rheingold's latest paper."

Either the invisible guy was a servant, polite enough to be superhuman, used to dealing with Doctor Courtland, or all three. The voice did not bother to ask Frank why the hell he had not put off his visit until tomorrow morning. Instead, the voice said, "Please wait, Mr. Mackenzie." Okay, probably a servant. In any case, it only took a few minutes for the doc to show up on the other side of the gate.

"Frank." Courtland was in evening dress, his looks falling neatly into the interval boundaried by sweet and striking. Great.

"Doc. I was working at the campus and had my cycle, so when I got stuck, I thought I'd swing by."

"Good. I'm pleased you took my hints seriously." The doc pulled out a key. "Do you think you can get your

motorcycle through the walkway gate without scratching your paint?"

Courtland plus the Indian Chief still equaled true love. Frank grinned at the doc, no longer really caring if his scar showed in the light of the two carriage lamps on the gateposts. "Sure. Wouldn't want to damage this sweetheart."

He'd expected to be lugged off to some outbuilding for a fast conference, but he should have known better. Frank ended up their walk by kicking down his stand at the end of a curving drive, dead in front of the broad stone stairs sweeping up to twin main doors. "Okay, I'm parked."

"Then follow me." Courtland headed up the stairs, so obviously sure he would be briskly attended that Frank could not bear to miss the opportunity to mooch after him. That attitude got him through the imposing front doors with their leaded glass and into the receiving hall, all dark wood beams and oriental knick-knacks. Repeated self-reminders that he had been inside homes of the rich and famous before kept Frank tagging along all the way to the sitting room. By that time it was too late to turn tail, which was just as well. He had had no idea he was about to be introduced to the doc's ma.

When they came in, a slim and gray-haired lady was sitting in a fancy armchair, placidly embroidering just as if she could not afford to hire someone else to do it for her. In Frank's amateur opinion, the evening dress she wore would pay for a few months of stitching all by itself. But the pale blue eyes that rose to assess them both when Courtland stopped on the arty carpet in front

of her were keen, and something about the way she tilted her head was familiar.

"Mother. This is Mr. Mackenzie, of whom I have spoken."

A dry little smile stretched her lips. "Mr. Mackenzie." She offered Frank one thin hand. Her grip was firm and helped Frank pin down his first impression. Mrs. Courtland reminded him of both Ma and Sally. She was a smart one, then. He made his shake definite but not aggressive, and her eyes narrowed a little in what might have been approval.

"Mrs. Courtland. I'm sorry to bust in at this time of night." Frank didn't bother cleaning up his grammar and diction. The rich never believed you, anyhow.

"No apologies are needed. I'm quite used to Collis' professional enthusiasms disrupting dinner parties and other such inconsequential social affairs." The words were ironic, but the smile she turned on the doc held a hint of warmth. "An informal evening visit is unexceptional. Please feel free to excuse yourselves to indulge in your mutual preoccupation."

"Thank you, Mother." Courtland leaned forward and kissed her cheek.

Her hand came up to cradle his face for a brief moment, quite a display for their kind. "You're welcome. Good evening, Mr. Mackenzie. I'm pleased to finally have a face to match up with your name."

Hard to know how to take that, so Frank settled for nodding. Then he followed Courtland out of the parlor on another hiking expedition, this one down long corridors and up some prettily carved stairs to a chamber that was obviously a former library converted into a study. Frank saw that the doc had added chalkboards to go along with the built-in, ceiling-high bookcases. But the field equations on the closest board brought his mind back to business.

Frank asked, "Could you show me to the retiring room first, Doc? I want to be able to concentrate."

Nice talking to someone smart, very nice. Courtland visibly registered the phrasing and its hidden instruction, blinked, and said, "Certainly. Follow me."

Back out into all the wood paneling and oriental décor they went. Frank said, keeping his tone casual, "You might be wired for sound."

"Really?" Courtland did not break step. "Frank, have you ever thought about getting a job as the messenger who comes in after the various murders in Shakespeare to horrify any survivors with the latest news? No, never mind. Your evidence?"

"Two men wearing high-grade crew-cuts visiting what was probably your office, although it might have been one of the adjoining rooms, now that I think about it. Likely with keys. About an hour and a half ago."

"Crap. They just don't give up." Courtland held open the door to a washroom about the size of a normal guy's bedroom, and stepped in after Frank, closing the door.

Frank looked at him, looked at the closed door between them and the corridor, and chuckled. "Nope. They don't give up. Which is why I shouldn't be shut inside a can with you."

For a moment Courtland seemed startled before the expression went sheepish. Then he laughed, too. As Frank had often noticed, the doc had a good laugh: open, fresh, and catching.

Before he could stop himself, Frank heard his own voice say, "Ah, get out of here." But the delivery didn't match the words. In fact, his tone was probably the reverse of what it should have been for that phrase.

The moment stretched. While it did, the hazel eyes behind Courtland's glasses were as wide open as the Eastside Bowling Alley, and with the same big, neon-glowing welcome signs visible in the windows. But Frank was not going inside. No.

Courtland knew better than to let him in, anyhow. He looked down at the hand-painted floor tiles and said, "I'll wait out in the passage." He exited, and Frank employed the room for the purpose for which it had been intended, not the one he wanted to use it for, the one he was not going to think about right now.

After washing his hands twice and making sure to use the fancy hand towels, Frank trailed Courtland back to the study. It was a positive relief after all the drama to talk about gravitational physics, and talk physics, and talk. When the maid came in with coffee and sandwiches, she did not really register, even if the ham

on rye did. Not until he was waiting for Courtland to finish resolving a complex partial differential in his head -- Frank wished *he* was a natural-born mathematics prodigy -- did the chiming of the carriage clock on the mantle finally get through.

"Doc?"

"Mm-hmm." Courtland drew a capital delta and then the line over it.

"It's one in the morning."

"Yes, yes-- Oh, shoot. Mother's undoubtedly gone upstairs, and I wanted to thank her for sending along the sandwiches."

"Yeah, well, you can tell her tomorrow. Right now, we should both get to bed."

Stupid. Sure enough, there was one of those moments again. The doc's head came up, the long lashes dipped a little over eyes somehow darker, and his lips parted. But then the mouth closed firmly, before opening again.

"You're right. I'll escort you back down to the front gate. I sincerely hope that, for once, Higgins has abandoned duty for sleep."

Walking a Chief all the way along that drive, in either direction, was no joke, but even with his bum shoulder, Frank could manage the task well enough. And working up a little sweat served as a viable alternative to fleeing from Young Doctor Temptation, who was strolling alongside him in the dark. "Y'know, this is getting ridiculous."

"In my case, painfully so." Courtland took a deep breath, and his tone when he continued was more abstract. "Our government, in an unfortunately typical fit of paranoia, is seriously obstructing the path between me and the proper recipients of my social overtures. So instead I veer toward the nearest interesting target."

Time to pretend to misunderstand. "How is Miss Hamilton, then?"

"She flourishes, as do all her horses and hounds. If she knew you were available to receive them, she would send you her companionable thanks for the inquiry and her best regards. Before she returned to visiting with her own dear school chums, that is."

Hell. Frank could decode that response. Miss Hamilton liked the ladies. The doc was not even getting his at-bats with the rival farm team, let alone scoring with his preferred ball club. No wonder he was cruising Frank, in spite of his declared best intentions. Frank stopped, and Courtland stopped, too.

"Look, Doc. I won't ask for details, but isn't there something you can do to get the snoops off your ass?"

Courtland made an unhappy noise. "Although I'd love to think of myself as some Horatio defending my ethical bridge unto death, I've already considered what would be needed to lose the surveillance. Unfortunately, the F.B.I. is reputed to have the institutional memory of the proverbial elephant, and Teller--" He shut down tight.

Frank felt his eyes widen as he chased down the memory of where he had heard that name before. Courtesy of Doctor Tompkins' fondness for spinning tales about his former colleagues in the Manhattan Project, if not about their duties, Frank had learned some stuff about Doctor Edward Teller. Frank even knew Teller was still a big fan of nuclear weapons development, whatever else he was doing out at the University of Chicago these days.

Frank had never wanted specifics about the bomb and its future. For understanding this situation he did not need them. By all accounts, Teller was a prima donna who did not forgive slights and did not forget them, either. If Courtland had crossed Teller and somehow managed to attract the attention of the F.B.I. while doing so, the doc was well and truly fucked.

Or, to be more accurate, not fucked. Poor, suffering bastard. For a moment, Frank wanted to let go of the Chief, step forward, grab Courtland, and-- No, he did not. The motorcycle would land on Frank's feet, just wait and see. "So you crossed Doc Teller."

"Oh, I did something much stupider than merely crossing him. Two years ago, at a weapons conference, I let him know I'd spotted a mistake he'd made. But then I changed my mind, swallowed the detailed explanation, and claimed I must have been in error."

"What?" Frank's brain caught up with his mouth. "Wait, I get you. When you said that, you lied. He really was wrong about... whatever it was."

"Probably. Four, perhaps five, to one odds against my being in error, to use gambling terminology. They were heading in the wrong direction, and I didn't point out the right one." Even in the dark, Frank heard the heavy sigh. "I'm not used to lying except about the one thing you already know. Doctor Teller is observant, and I'm sure he could assess me accurately. I'm fairly certain he understands I tried to stonewall him."

"So how'd he get the F.B.I. after you? Did he claim you're a Commie agent?"

"Perhaps. Not at all a plausible claim, in spite of my pacifistic hints up on the Mesa after that conference. The Russophiles at Cal could be unbelievably, stubbornly naive, enough to put off anyone. However, given this rotten international situation--"

Now the dam was well and truly busted. As if the words had been waiting to pour out of him, Courtland burst forth with, "If the only possible result of Teller's research was the defeat of communism, I wouldn't hesitate to tell him what I spotted for a second. I'm a New-Deal Democrat with a streak of the socialist about me, not a fellow-traveler. I'm not that much of a hypocrite. Sinking to the most selfish level of political analysis, I like my gratuitous class benefits. They shield me. And it's not as if the Stalinists would hesitate for a second before shooting a man of my background and nature."

Courtland paused for a moment, looking unhappy, and then rushed on. "No, my problem may have started with Teller's physics. Although my first instinct is to advance research, I didn't want to be the one proving that his

proposals were askew, off-track. Given the validity of his central concept, and the likelihood of further weapons development, my responsibility for the results would be-- And I'm sure the Soviets are--" After his second time he cut off, Courtland gave up. When he spoke again, his voice was quiet, bleak. "I often find myself thinking we humans were all born to be hanged. Still, who wants to be the one knotting the noose?"

Motorcycle. A heavy motorcycle between them that would fall on his feet if Frank let go of it. He gripped the handlebars so hard his shoulder ached, until he found his usual voice. "Okay, Los Alamos, weapons development, you used to do sub-atomic physics. I'm getting the drift here."

"Good. I really don't want to say more."

"That's okay. I really don't want to know more."

"I'm sorry I dragged you into all this."

"What, you frog-marched me into the you-know-what bar and then called the cops? Don't lose your logic now, Doc."

A long pause was followed by a soft snort. "Thank you, Mr. Mackenzie."

"You're welcome, but I'm sure not letting go of my Chief to shake your hand."

"This time it's my turn to get your drift. Thank you again, Mr. Mackenzie, both for your implied compliment and for your support of my one other good

resolution. Just let me unlock the gate for you and get out of your way."

Neat delivery of the extra message in that last sentence. Sometimes this guy was twenty-three years old going on sixty-five.

"Yeah, okay. I'm leaving."

Suiting his actions to his words, Frank pushed his cycle out through the gate, swung over the seat, and kicked the starter. He didn't look back to see if Courtland was watching him ride off. He already had enough things to think about on his way home and enough work to do keeping all those thoughts above the waist.

IV

In fact, Frank had plenty of thoughts to take him through the rest of the summer, including through the time he spent working on the new cyclotron. Although he had always enjoyed pulling out his toolbelt and renewing his former relationship with Ol' Boss Electricity, he kept finding his attention drifting away from the tools in his hands and back toward the math in his head. Pondering journal articles about stellar masses and their tensors, not to mention probabilities and field theory, was nothing to be doing while double-checking wiring. If Frank had needed any more support for his undergraduate drift away from electronics, through experimental and into theoretical physics, he got it.

The guy handling the cyclotron rewiring for Southern California Edison turned out to be one of Frank's former line bosses; not surprising, given where the university was located and how few men could sort out the details of this kind of complex installation. They had once worked together stringing high-tension wire on the Mojave lines that now brought power into L.A. from the Hoover Dam generators.

These days, Sam was a senior supervisor known for his caninness, so he'd been sent to deal with the eccentric demands of Clarence Tenn Polytechnic. His memories of Frank were good enough that Sam loaned out a set of spikes, a hard hat, and a climbing belt, and then lured Frank up-pole to double-check that the SCE work orders matched what the mad professors had in mind.

At the top of the first pole, Sam adjusted a buckle without looking, leaned back against his belt, and said,

"Christ, you're climbing like a girl." He selected a cylinder key from his ring.

Frank paused a few feet below him, shoulder hurting, the familiar summer creosote smell of the pole hauling up strong memories. Yeah, he was climbing like shit. "What do you expect? It's been years since I've been up, three since I was even in the Corp of Engineers. Not to mention the grenade I shacked up with at the Bulge."

"I heard about that. Good thing you're only eyeballing today. Bet your hands are rusty, too."

"For this kind of job, uh-huh. That's why I'm in school on the G.I. Bill. All I need for physics is a brain that works."

Sam grunted approval. "Just as well. Never saw anyone for worrying about the numbers behind the diagrams like you. You always had your head stuck either in a book or someplace else away from the job. Glad it wasn't up your ass, or you'd have kept working wire too long and fried yourself." As he spoke, he was levering open the switch box. "Come take a look here and make sure the eggheads aren't going to fire up their sweetie and black out half the foothill communities."

They spotted a small problem on their third climb, one just serious enough to put Sam in a good mood at having his suspicions justified and to make Frank feel like he had not wasted the whole afternoon. That would have been a shame because it was beautiful weather, and Frank could have been out riding the Rim of the World Highway on one of the few days left of the summer break. While Sam made adjustments, humming the same

Sinatra chorus the whole time, Frank took his now-rare chance to crane around three-sixty and enjoy some scenery.

There was a lot of clear blue sky on view. The Santa Anas that had held the smog back this week had finally died down -- no chance Sam would have let Frank go aloft in high wind, of course -- but the air was still clean. From the cross-trees, Frank could see the far-off smudge of a brush fire above the near slopes of the chaparral-covered San Berdoos. A red-tail hawk was hovering, searching for either careless sparrows or field mice with a death wish. Traffic was moving well on Foothill. Over on the campus side, he had a clear line of sight across the walls of the administration quad and into the courtyard of the faculty club.

Well, look at that, officer country. From the unmistakable white puff of hair, Doctor van Staarling was having lunch with someone out on the adobe-tiled patio beneath the old fig trees. The someone moved. A roan head: Courtland, of course.

A guy who can see can often be seen. When they came down, Frank wasn't surprised to spot Courtland parked on a well-worn sandstone wall by the walkway to the Physical Sciences Building, oblivious to the beautifully tailored pair of trousers he was risking on rough stone.

"Uh-oh, here's the boss." Frank checked his watch. Yup, they'd been scheduled to meet at fourteen thirty to put together some quizzes for fall, and Frank was running late.

"He's young," Sam noted.

"Huge, bulging brain. A good guy, but I owe him some time on the clock starting now. Can I dump this stuff on you?" Frank handed over the hat, spikes, and climbing belt with only a small pang.

"You bet. Give me a call some time, will you? We'll elbow back some beers."

Frank felt bad, knowing how lightly Sam had meant the invitation and how unlikely it was that Frank would ever take him up on the offer. His past life kept receding like a former apartment house briefly glimpsed in a rearview mirror, falling farther behind with each second. "Sure. See you then, Sam."

"Have fun with the geniuses, Frank."

Frank walked over to Courtland while untying the work shirt from around his waist and using it to wipe his face. The sun had been hot. "Hey, Doc."

"Frank." Courtland shot the cuff of his fancy shirt to check his wristwatch. Amazing how cool he managed to look, dressed in a three-piece suit in this heat. "You're only just late. We can stop off en route if you need to clean up. Not that I'm going to ding you for being delayed by what's essentially department business. Doctor Throop would never forgive me."

"Leave around a copy of *Esquire* with a Vargas girl he hasn't seen before. He'd forgive you."

Courtland grinned. "And such forgetfulness would do wonders for my reputation, to boot. All right, then, let's go."

Frank put his shirt back on and buttoned it up over his T-shirt; mustn't offend the eyes of any of Clarence Tenn's small cadre of co-eds who might be on campus early for fall semester, not to mention the all-powerful secretarial staff. Then he followed the doc up to Courtland's office.

The doc had installed a room air conditioner that he'd paid for out of his own pocket. He turned it on. The unit was noisy, with an odd, irregular rattle that Frank had carefully encouraged. Courtland raised his eyebrows at Frank, who nodded approval. While the doc was hanging up his suit coat, Frank took off his shirt again, folded it, and draped it over the phone. Breaking out his tools and brushing up his wiring skills this summer had also given Frank an excuse to covertly research the sort of electronics he had never needed to know the details of before.

As it had turned out, the doc's office had been bugged. Too bad about those wires that had gotten ripped out when Frank had supervised the rewiring of Throop's private lab next door, not to mention that unfortunate back-surge incident with the oscilloscope. After Frank had fried and left the second microphone where it was, it had not been replaced. But there was still no sense in taking chances, since both he and Courtland could run to sloppy tongues after long sessions at the chalkboard.

Courtland sat down, leaned back in his chair, and sighed. "Problems are in the manila envelope by your

elbow. Do you have those short definition questions done?"

"Yup. Should be on your desk."

"Here they are. Let's each review our questions, then cross-check each other's work and see how we're going along."

A couple of quiet minutes of pencil-and-paper work followed. Frank's attention drifted a little -- he had already re-read these questions a lot -- and he wondered what dopey definitions the undergrads would produce this semester. Frank was sort of looking forward to Courtland's commentary. He had learned the doc could be snotty-clever on the subject of stupidity, and that was fun when someone else was the target.

"Does this friction problem seem simple enough to you?" Courtland took off his glasses and polished them neatly with a white cotton handkerchief from his trouser pocket. "My odd knack for computation makes it hard to apply the usual rule of thumb of ten-times-as-long-for-student-as-professor."

"Let me see." Frank reached over without looking and got the doc's hand along with the papers. Nice long fingers, good and strong-- Courtland's hand tensed. Cripes, not again. "Hey, calm down, Doc. You want to bust a vein?"

Courtland, who had yanked his hand away, frowned. "You really don't need to be so over-protective. Deprived or not, mine is a natural enough reaction, if not one socially appropriate to your sex."

"Not with me, yours isn't a natural reaction. It's been months now, and I'm no pin-up girl. I'm not even some physique guy."

The frown deepened into a scowl. "Why do you persist in underestimating yourself? Or is it that you don't believe that I, in particular, will continue to be attracted?" A hand waved. "No, forget I said that. I'm being intrusive."

Frank shrugged. "When it comes to me, attraction's not general issue anymore. I know because I used to be good-looking before my grenade, so I've seen the usual reaction from your sort before and after." Shit, bad phrasing. The second Frank's mouth spoke the last sentence, he wanted to swallow the words back down again.

Too late. Courtland's expression coagulated. His tone when he spoke was stiff. "I'm sorry. I wouldn't want you to think I'm being forward because of some self-assumed privilege due to my social status."

"No, my problem's not that. Not where you come from, I mean." Shit again. From Courtland's stony face, Frank wasn't getting through, but his mouth kept trying. "Really. I'd met okay upper-crust guys before you."

Frank hesitated, but, for some reason, the story needed to be told. Maybe the sad and sorry tale would rub off the glamour of slumming and slacken the tension between them.

"Y'see, my pa took off during the Depression when I was just a kid, so Ma got work as chief housekeeper at the Cedar Knot Lodge up by Big Bear. Once I was old enough, she got me a job there, too. I met some pretty plush characters, and they liked my... style. I spent some weekends in your kind of neighborhood during my last couple of years in high school. I got over into Hollywood, too, before I ran into this guy who had a long talk with me about what I was doing, what it might mean."

Courtland's gaze was intent. After clearing his throat, Frank kept talking. "You know how kids are. I decided to prove he was wrong about me. The facts caught up with me after a while, but that was later."

"Empirical evidence can be brutal to theories." The words were almost abstract. Almost.

"Yeah. Anyhow, back then I was ready to graduate, and things at my pal Sally's house kept getting worse." Frank smacked the back of his hand against his other palm, imitating the sound of someone being suddenly struck, and Courtland nodded without speaking. "For years, we'd been running races for head of the class, so we were best friends. Aside from Ma, she was the only one up-slope I could talk to and not watch that glazed look come into her eyes. I think she even suspected part of what was going on with me about Hollywood and all. I don't know, marrying Sally seemed to make sense, solve a lot of problems."

Frank shrugged. "It was one of the rich guys I'd met who got me my first job at Southern California Edison for a wedding present, a really nice gift with business so bad

during the slump. He was okay. Some of the others were, too."

During all the true confessions, Courtland had reached for and loaded his pipe. Now his eyes were lowered, seemingly intent on the lighter's flame, as he said around the stem, "You're not being very discouraging if that's your purpose in telling me this."

Frank snorted. "Doc, a guy like you looks at me and sees a real he-man. To my own sort, I was just a head-in-the-clouds fella who never shut up about the weirdest crud, not exactly the toughest line-stringer to ever wander down the slopes. And they didn't even know about that other stuff. After Sally died, I needed this physics degree, needed it bad to become someone I could make sense of." Frank looked away. "Especially after so much fooling around in the Army."

"Believe it or not, I do understand. I have my own tales of woe. Physics savants don't fit in well within so-called high society. My prep--" He broke off and smoked for a few seconds before saying, "No, not at all the same."

"Maybe, but we Nances don't fit in well anywhere, including physics. Shit." Frank realized he was looking around as if he could see the possible electronic audience for his stupidly blunt comment. In fact, this whole conversation had been stupid. "Anyhow, it's easier to play keep-away if I remind myself of the ways we're different. Nothing wrong with you. I'm just making my job simpler."

"It's simpler to stay away from a cliché than another human being, you mean." The look that went along with

Courtland's words was ironic. He took the pipe from his mouth, deliberately blew a smoke ring, and then set the pipe down in its stand on his desk.

"Yeah." The doc's comment hit home. "Right. So I'm not making your job any easier with the agony-aunt version of my life."

"No." Courtland abruptly stood up from his chair, pivoted, and threw a punch at the nearest file case. Frank was barely in time to get between him and the wood.

"Take it easy, now," Frank said. Courtland pulled against Frank's grip, and then relaxed. Frank nodded. "Too much tension. You sleeping enough?" He realized he was still holding the doc's fist and let go.

"I sleep enough but not well, although most of my strain is not due to you." Courtland grimaced. "Even now, after your well-crafted monologue. Sorry."

Frank grinned. "Hey, my ego can take the blow."

"But don't start thinking it's that scar again. I'm now to the point where it merely makes me want to lick you. Decadent, but true."

Oh, to hell with trying to pretend he was not as interested as Courtland was. It was not slowing down the doc anyhow. Frank turned his grin into a leer. "Tell you what. After I get my master's and move on, you can lure me off someplace safe and pay back our patience by telling me all about the interesting stuff you're thinking." Frank's dick wanted details now, but it would just have to wait.

"Well, well. Won't that make the January APS convention fascinating the year after next." Now Courtland looked like Toby Tyler contemplating ditching school for the circus. Ready for the tigers, and Frank had two tickets to the big top, yeah. But then Courtland let out a sigh, sat back down in his chair, and reached for the pipe again. "However, if I dwell on future possibilities, we'll never get these tests put together."

Frank felt some emotion roil in his chest and told it to simmer down. Wanting to give the doc's ass a nice, warm rub as a reward for keeping himself under control was just plain stupid, not to mention counterproductive.

Instead, he said, "Great. But, before we start up again, did you get a load of this deeply concerned procedural memo from Doctor Greerson, the one about those three kids in Joey Meyer's lab section last semester who all managed to shock themselves at the same time on one of the new spark-tracks?"

"I certainly did." Courtland reached over and grabbed the memo from Frank's hand, wadded it into a ball, and tossed the ball into the wastepaper basket. "Two points for me, and that's about what it's worth. Unlike this." He turned back to his desk and picked up a now-ragged, cardboard-bound report.

Frank had no problem recognizing what the doc was holding. Frank's senior thesis.

Courtland opened the cover. "Better than I was told, and I was told your work was very good, indeed." Absently, he set his pipe back into its stand.

"Doc Tompkins thought I was nuts." Tompkins had not used those exact words, but Frank had to say something to cover his reaction to Courtland's praise.

"Not at all. There are two places where you tangled up your equations, and you completely missed one set of implications that could be drawn from your ideas about magnetic field lines, but your basic work is sound. Drum tight, in fact." The doc's gaze had drifted from Frank off toward some distant point visible only to himself, and he smiled dreamily, lips slightly parted, like one of those extra-old Greek statues they'd discussed in Appreciation of Art. "The questions your idea raises are provocative. Brilliant." His words were softer this time.

"Thanks."

"You may be starting your best work in your early thirties, so late in life, because you spent your prime years as an autodidact outside the formal physics community. Less inhibiting to your talent for freeform spatial visualization." Courtland focused. "Have you thought about working this up for submission to one of the journals?"

Frank blinked. Then he found his tongue. "Yeah. Sure." And elephants airlifting chocolate to Berlin would fly out of Frank's ass. "But you said the math's screwed up."

The doc looked... shy? "Ah. Not significantly. Easy enough to fix." His words sped up. "If you're not yet

fully confident about your abilities in that respect, I could co-author if you like. You'd be lead author, of course."

There was no "of course" about such an arrangement. Without Courtland, there was not a chance in hell of a grad student getting a paper like Frank's published any place prestigious. The doc's own list of publications was already way down its third page. Just this year, he had contributed to both the *Reviews of Modern Physics* and *The Physical Review*. "We could take a look and chew it over, I guess."

"Certainly. I already wanted to discuss in some detail where you think you're going with your notions. You may have your master's thesis, or possibly the backbone of your dissertation, here. We'll have to see, but there's certainly enough of interest to justify a special-topic tutorial in the fall semester. That's another reason I'm afraid we'll have to continue meeting regularly despite, ah, other circumstances."

Frank wanted to start chalking up equations now or grab Courtland and treat him the way he was treating Frank's ideas. One or the other. Instead, Frank cleared his throat before asking, "Okay, how about Monday? If we polish off the test questions this evening, I'll be clear on Monday."

"It seems so long to wait," Courtland said wistfully. Then he brightened. "If you're free, you could come over to the house on Saturday."

"Your ma going to be there?"

"Oh, yes." For a moment, the doc seemed older, his expression mixing cynicism and amusement. "Quite safe. Nothing but physics to worry about."

"That's the good stuff, physics, not the worry."

"Yes," Courtland said, voice soft. "Yes, indeed." He looked at Frank gravely, and his fingers ran lightly across the worn cardboard cover in what could only be called a caress before he put the thesis down and shoved it away from him across his desk. "Just as well. Otherwise, these next two years will seem to last a very long time, indeed." He took a deep breath. "Show up around ten, please. But in the meantime, shall we tackle the kinematics problems for our freshmen?"

"Yeah."

They both returned to work, careful not to look at each other.

That night, Frank stood staring out the bedroom window of his apartment at a eucalyptus tree and the trash cans beneath it for maybe ten minutes, unseeing, before he went to get the keys to his motorcycle. Then he emptied his wallet of all its contents except for the driver's license, a couple of bucks, and a worn twenty he always kept tucked away for random cops.

No matter how hungry he was feeling, he sure as hell was not going to run the risk of public sex, especially with a faint chance that the F.B.I. was still watching. If he had ever had that kind of reckless streak, working

high-tension power lines and then wearing sergeant's stripes during combat had sanded it off. Such caution meant that the parks were out. And all the lavender baths he knew about were clear across the L.A. Basin. So he would have to visit a bar again. Once he got off the bike and parked it someplace safe, he could stash his license, cutting down the possibility of being identified if he got scooped up again.

In the end, Frank went to a joint on the east side he had visited before, the sort of middle-of-the-road tavern where the barkeep could pretend the tavern's oddly mixed clientele all lived in the neighborhood and were going home to their wives. Once inside, Frank looked around until he spotted a thirtyish blond, still trim in a well-cut, three-piece business suit, dressed wrong for wanting anything too rough or too public. When their eyes met, the other man's narrowed a little, and he caught and held Frank's gaze. He must be another of the ones who found the weather-worn face appealing, all working-class and tough guy. A load of hooey, but Frank would have been careful about talking too much and giving away his real, Joe-College status anyhow.

He leaned back against the bar and tried to look dangerous. The effort must have succeeded because a lit cigarette, a bourbon and water, and a short walk later, he and Blondie were in a cheap hotel room together.

Although it was not as good as math, male flesh was still distracting. The smell, the taste: Frank could pretend for a few minutes that all his yearning was for sex, and what he wanted was nothing more than a guy's mouth hot and wet around his dick. He squeezed the wool-clad shoulders tight and concentrated on a hunger easier to

feed than the one that had been bugging him for the past couple of months. His distraction did not last long, though. Frank had been on short rations, and he came hard and fast.

His pick-up gazed up at him, licked his lips slowly, and then asked politely, "All done?"

"Yeah. Your turn?"

He got a surprised look, and then, "That'd be nice."

Blondie had been good enough that Frank was wrung out, making it easy to keep his mind on what he was doing, on using the skills he had learned back in high school without being distracted by fancy emotions. Sure, good-natured distance was duller for Frank, leaving him disinterested enough to notice that his jaw was sore, his tongue was getting weary, and he was developing a cramp in one calf. But cool concentration was better for Blondie than flourishes would have been. The guy spent quickly and with enthusiastic, obscene commentary.

While Frank was walking the four blocks down dark streets toward the lot where he had stowed his motorcycle, he realized he was frowning. The sex had been pretty good, and he had needed the release. Too bad that the time was long past when scratching that kind of itch was the greatest feeling in the world. These days, all the fancy maneuvers and the danger that went along with being laid by another, unknown guy only made him tired.

He wanted to do what most men his age could do, go home to someone as nice as Sally had been, someone

who would say more than "How do you want it?" before and "You can have the bathroom first" afterward. But this time around, he wanted to want his nice someone at home as more than just a friend. Nowadays, his idea of a great screw would be one where he was comfortable, one where the aftermath would be a warm bed and not a long, windy motorcycle ride back toward Clarence Tenn Polytechnic.

Shit. Frank did not even have his master's yet, and he was already acting old. At this rate, by the time he got his Ph.D., he'd be ready to retire, prop up his feet on the porch railings, and take up whittling bubble-chambers.

V

Frank barely noticed when the fall semester's surge of work swept away his brooding the way a push broom cleaned up a barracks, not so much disposing of his problems as shoving them into corners where he could ignore them. As he might have bet would be the case, he was still spending a lot of the time left over from physics working with the cyclotron, not to mention tending to his own laboratory sections, and also not to mention keeping an eye on Courtland's other graduate students. Even though they were all technically equals, Frank's age and time on campus had moved him into the vacant slot as senior teaching assistant with no debate. Too bad that neither of the other two had argued; having back the hours he had to spend as straw boss would have been nice.

Not that his new comrades were big on arguing anyhow, except in graduate seminars, where they were a pretty pair of piranha. Jerry Figueroa, fresh from Manhattan, was a slim, good-looking, Latin kid who was more absent-minded than the entire physics faculty of Clarence Tenn put together, even including Doctor van Staarling. Phoebe Hannaford, who came from Virginia, was a small, striking blonde who seemed to inspire in most males a frantic need to pamper her. Jerry ignored most external stimuli, Phoebe ignored all the little gallantries, and Frank -- who in a kinder universe would have been buying flowers for one or the other of them -- did his best to ignore any possibility that either of them could be anything other than a work colleague. He failed.

When Frank was feeling honest, he would admit to himself that the department's graduate students had bugged him as an undergraduate. Most of them came from the big cities, from the right side of the tracks, and straight from sixteen years of expensive education. Nothing to share outside of the classroom, or so he had thought. He had meant to duck out on all the beer busts and trips to restaurants for cheap foreign food that were a normal part of grad school social life.

As it turned out, he could not avoid Courtland's choices any more than he could avoid Courtland. In fact, he had no more luck with his new comrades than he'd had with the doc. This time, Frank only ended up with intimates he had to trust with a nerve-racking secret rather than someone he desperately wanted to jump and couldn't.

What sealed his fate was the day Courtland looked up from hashing out grades on the first midterm, cleared his throat, and said, "You've heard about Doctor Condon, of course."

Condon, who was a sub-atomic and spectroscopy man, was also director of the Bureau of Standards. Recently, the House Un-American Activities Committee had decided that Condon was some kind of Soviet agent. No physics graduate student could have missed the excitement, given that everyone from Albert Einstein through the American Association for the Advancement of Science and down to the American Physical Society had been having very public kittens about the slander.

Frank put down his red pencil. "Sure, I heard about him. During the interdepartmental baseball game with the Astronomy guys two weeks back, one of Doc

Tompkins's boys even coughed up the juicier details about Condon's testimony."

"Oh? What did he say?"

"According to Barry -- his undergraduate advisor was a former Ph.D. candidate of Condon's -- a member of the House committee told Condon he'd been, um, 'at the forefront of a revolutionary movement in physics called quantum mechanics.' Given that he'd headed one revolutionary movement, they thought he might be heading another."

"Really." Courtland's voice, when he said the single word, was flatter than the San Joaquin Valley. "So now Edward Condon, that pillar of Princeton and Westinghouse Electric, is America's answer to Mao. A less probable candidate..." He closed his grade book and tossed it onto his desk. "The man might enjoy preaching world peace and civilian control of atomics to the public, but HUAC has still lost their collective minds."

"If so, they're crazy like a bunch of rabid foxes. They sure know all the little details of turning the screws. One of the committee members kept referring to Condon as 'Doctor Condom.'"

"Please tell me you're joking."

"Nope." Frank yanked a thumb over his shoulder, indicating Courtland's periodically bugged office. "You're surprised?"

"Not as much surprised as poorly informed. Of course I signed the petition of support, but I've been being

careful not to discuss political topics with my peers, which has walled me off from the gossip as an unanticipated side effect. It seems as if this present storm of paranoia shows no signs of weakening."

"Yeah."

"Which means I'm afraid that I have to ask you for a favor."

"Yeah?"

"Phoebe and Jerry. You'd better warn them."

Frank didn't need an explanation. "Okay, Doc. Sure."

He should have tackled his fellows one at a time, but his nerve failed him. Instead, Frank lured the pair out with vague promises about Chinese at the Canton Palace and vaguer hints about settling the logistics for returning midterms.

Over glossy red menus, Frank said, "Professor Courtland wanted me to talk with you. He has a little personal difficulty and is worried that you might get caught up in it. He thinks..."

Frank trailed off. Phoebe put down her cup of tea and was attending as gravely as Margaret O'Brien hearing out a movie father, but Jerry was staring up at the painted panels of the lamp in the center of the room. What now? Oh, the red silk tassels were oscillating a little oddly from some sort of micro-turbulence. Frank broke away from his own train of thought and waved a

hand in front of Jerry's face. "Base to Jerry. Come in, Jerry."

Jerry blinked, once. "Is it about the government wanting to keep an eye on the professor because they think he might be a Commie? I already told them no. I mean, jeez, I'm a City College man, and we know from red-baiting."

Phoebe turned to raise eyebrows at Jerry, turned back to Frank, and sweetly announced, "That was silly. I said yes."

Both men stared at her. Her chin rose a little. "I am perfectly capable of making up my own mind. I could already tell Doctor Courtland was entirely harmless by the time they asked me, and the first three reports I filed told them so. I haven't heard a word back since then."

"Smart, very smart," Jerry said thoughtfully. "I should have thought of that."

Phoebe shrugged gracefully, turned to the approaching waiter, and asked, "Are the squid balls fresh today?" Frank had already seen the stunned look the Chinese guy gave her on the face of every physics professor at Clarence Tenn Polytechnic but Courtland. Jerry had gone back to contemplating the lamp and had to be prodded at some length into narrowing his choice down from, "Umm...beef." Frank reminded himself that if he strangled them both, he and Courtland would be stuck grading every single problem set for the rest of the semester. He took a deep breath and ordered egg fu yung instead.

He had to admit that he was glad to be able to report back to Courtland that the doc's other grad students were not interested in the theoretics of supposed Commie plots. Even with all the added activity, life had finally settled into a rhythm Frank liked. For the first time in three years, he felt as if he was raising his head and looking around, not just hiding his face from the world in textbook after textbook, taking cover from his life behind a stupidly large class load and the jobs he needed to pay for it all.

Yeah, sure, he still spent most of his free time with paper, pencil, and slipstick, or over in the library digging through the journals, or at a chalkboard in Courtland's office or study, trying to sort out his ideas. That was fun. But he was also talking sports with Jerry and movies with Phoebe. Frank even stood in the long line to invite Phoebe out for an evening's dancing, and it was a real change of pace to cut a rug with a gal when he was not trying to pull the wool over her eyes about what a loverboy he was. The monthly departmental teas had shifted from tough to kind of entertaining. Frank finally admitted to himself that he liked most of the other physics professors, and their grad students were wearing him down toward amused tolerance.

Best of all, Courtland's small gang went exploring Southern California a couple of times on weekends with the doc as host and Frank as native guide. Seems the doc had spent a lot of time wandering the forests and canyons around the Los Alamos Mesa with other physicists back during the war, and he believed the experience had encouraged his creativity. So they all got to have fun admiring the scenery in the mountains or around the beaches while they talked over whatever

topic in physics had caught someone's interest. And the four of them finally got over to the University Observatory to see the sixty-inch reflector, too. Watching the director's reaction to Phoebe's educated questions about theoretical astronomy was pure, evil joy.

Too bad the rest of the U.S. was still having a rotten time. The country seemed to be frothing in panic about everything from the Red Menace to the Kinsey report. Even Frank had the frequent urge to look over his shoulder, although he was watching out for the guys that most of his fellow citizens would regard as protectors: military types, cops, intelligence specialists.

Frank stayed careful. He removed the few physique magazines and "problem" paperbacks that he had painfully assembled from the lock-box beneath his bed and, after checking that he was alone, trashed them. He strung out the intervals between his trips to the bars and baths as long as he possibly could. He watched his mouth. The only touchy conversation he slipped into that fall semester with the doc would not have sounded like much to an eavesdropper.

He had come by for his twice-weekly tutorial. For once, Frank had been early, arriving while Courtland was holding the tail end of office hours. Courtland did not hear him enter. Instead the doc was reading, face intent.

Frank only got one, quick glance at a tattered white book jacket with red borders that looked awfully familiar. Courtland, hearing Frank's indrawn breath, clapped the book closed, his hands cupped over the cover like he had been caught reading *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in a French

paperback edition. But the maneuver did him no good. This was one book just about every physicist and student of physics had read when it came out two years ago, including Frank. The doc was reading Hersey's *Hiroshima*. Cripes. Why didn't Courtland settle for driving a fork into his crotch? It would probably hurt less.

To break the silence, Frank asked, "How many times does this make?"

Courtland did not pretend he misunderstood. "I don't keep count. But I read it first when it came out in *The New Yorker*." He put the book down. "Twenty-one years old, and I suddenly realized I was an adult. When you've helped vaporize tens of thousands of people, you're certainly an adult."

Frank pulled out the chair Courtland kept for the students and sat down next to his desk. "Nope. You're only an adult when you realize that killing's something to worry about, justified or not."

"You're... too kind to me."

"I'm a vet. My unit was slated to be shipped to the Pacific theater. If I hadn't necked with a grenade, I might have been one of the guys the bomb kept from dying. Hell, that the bomb kept from killing, for that matter. So I'm not an unbiased observer." Frank reached out a hand and picked up the book. "Did you ever read anything about the fire-bombing of Tokyo?"

Tilting his head, Courtland said, "No."

"Maybe you should. From what I heard, they planned to do a lot more of that incendiary stuff during the invasion of the home islands." Frank used the dust-flap to mark Courtland's place. "Here you go. Any way you look at it, these folks will wait, and you won't forget them. In the meantime, what did Doc Tompkins say about our gravitational paper?"

For a few seconds, Courtland sat studying Frank, who was still holding the book out, as if Frank were a tough field equation. Then, slowly, the doc smiled. "He certainly doesn't think we're nuts. In fact, he offered to lend me some stamps for postage."

"Did you take him up on it?" The book was lowered, forgotten.

"The package went out in the departmental mail this morning to *The Physical Review*."

"Right." Frank swallowed. "So today, I am a physicist."

"At least you got the order right. Adult first, physicist second." Courtland snorted. "Unlike me."

That was no way to talk. Frank swiped at him with the book. Courtland laughed, his face lighting up enough to show that he was still only twenty-four. It was just as well that a student showed up to clear up some confusion about centripetal versus centrifugal before anything else had time to happen.

In late November, Courtland's gang met up at Vito's Fine Pizza Pies for yet another session of planning over food. Frank felt he had plenty of justification for asking, "When are you two shipping out for Christmas?"

Jerry stopped studying the bowl of grated cheese in the middle of the red and white checked tablecloth. "I'm staying."

"Yeah? You'll have to come over to dinner during the break. We could take in a movie afterward, or go bowling, or maybe shoot some pool."

"You can cook? Neat." Jerry turned to ask Phoebe, "How about you? When are you leaving?"

"Oh, I'll be staying out here as well."

At that point, Frank would have left her alone, but Jerry frowned. "How come? I know you're not broke like I am."

"It's better that I remain in Southern California." Phoebe started to pick up her menu again, but seeing that Jerry was still waiting, she added, "Daddy will be a touch melancholy, but at least his holidays will be peaceful this way. Mother's still awfully perturbed about how I chose to employ Aunt Orra's legacy."

Jerry looked dubious. "I thought you said your aunt was some kind of reformer who believed in women's education."

"She was a suffragette, and she did. But there is a proper education and then there is carrying matters more than a

trifle too far." Her last sentence had the air of a quotation. "After all, the most important job any women could have is managing her family and household." Those words sounded well-worn, too.

"Oh, yeah? Even if that's true, your husband might fall down the cellar stairs and break his neck. You're supposed to lounge around and let the kiddies starve, when you could be doing some high-grade physics instead?"

"I have tried using a variant of that argument. Seemingly, if one's relatives don't have the good grace to retrieve one's affairs, starving would be the ladylike thing to do."

"Sounds dumb to me. Maybe you are better off staying out here."

"My thinking exactly." She picked up her menu so decisively that even Jerry realized the topic was closed. However, Frank did notice that Phoebe didn't object the way she did most times when Jerry nominated pepperoni for the communal pizza topping.

The next day, in Courtland's office, Frank told the doc, "We're not facing any scheduling problems. Everyone's in town over the break."

"Oh?" The doc paused with a piece of chalk clutched between his long fingers. White dust speckled his fancy blue dress shirt. "Then I hope you'll all be joining me for dinner on Christmas Eve. Unless someone already has other plans. Is Jerry Roman Catholic?"

"Not enough to notice. Your ma won't mind?"

"She asked me to ask you. The three of you, that is."

"I can only answer for me. You'll have to ask the others yourself."

"I'll do that."

Frank realized he was squaring his shoulders and made himself relax. "Okay, sure."

Although his expression was sober, Courtland's eyes were laughing. "This is a perfectly legitimate invitation. The department encourages us to take a benign interest in the social development of our graduate students, you know."

"I know." Frank grimaced. "Believe me, I know."

"Your presence would also be pleasant for me. It means there would be at least three other people at the table who aren't completely obsessed by the details of the impending Rose Parade."

"Really? From what I hear, Omar Bradley is the grand marshal this year. Not sure how that squares with Our Golden West being the theme, since I don't think the general was ever stationed at any of the army bases out west. I guess someone could do a float depicting the Battle of the Bulge in tea roses and birds of paradise, but--"

"Might I remind you that your grade in Statistical Thermodynamics hasn't been submitted yet?" Courtland stared coolly over his glasses, his eyebrows hoisted.

"Hey, that reminds me. I've been meaning to ask. How did you end up running Doctor van Staarling's course this semester instead of him?"

"For my sins, Frank. For my many, many sins." Courtland turned back to the field equations. "Even if those sins are more indeterminate than observed."

Frank puffed out a breath and made himself concentrate on proofreading Courtland's arithmetic. Tough work, given how much Frank liked the way the doc's shoulders pulled against his shirt as he wrote.

Hopeless: when Courtland's ma had them all over for Christmas Eve, Frank realized his social life had now hit the dirt directly on top of the big X marking officially hopeless. Instead of going back up-slope to his aunts or his former in-laws for his holiday meal, Frank ended up spending the evening in a Pasadena mansion dining with colleagues he couldn't tune out and strangers he couldn't ignore.

They had all accepted the doc's invitation, of course. Before the dinner that Friday evening, Frank had helped Phoebe hold Jerry still for a haircut, Jerry had snapped back to full consciousness long enough to veto Phoebe on what they should purchase for a hostess gift, and Jerry and Phoebe had ganged up on Frank to stuff him into his only three-piece suit.

When Doc Courtland showed up to chauffeur them over to Pasadena in his beat-up, pre-war Buick, he looked as nervous as a mine removal expert in a thunderstorm. He pulled over to the curb in front of West Hall, and Phoebe got into the shotgun seat without waiting to have the car door opened for her. Frank and Jerry, who had both moved forward, glanced at each other and shrugged. Then they both grabbed for the handle of the passenger door behind her. In the end, Frank let Jerry have the seat and walked around the car to sit behind Courtland.

Frank was relieved to discover once again that the doc was a decent driver with good reflexes, able to keep his mind on the road even while making polite off-duty conversation -- something about dogs -- with Phoebe. Reaching over, Frank took the bouquet of daffodils away from Jerry, who was visibly drifting since the topic of the conversation was not science. Good thing the doc's ma was smart. Frank would not have wanted the job of guiding this pack through a formal social situation, especially if they were mixing with any family that had been invited.

Jerry was impressed enough by the Courtlands' spread to blink a whole lot before he started paying the kind of attention he did while running lab sections. Phoebe gave the English-manor-disguised-as-an-oriental-bungalow one cool, assessing look and then dialed up the southern belle. When she and Ma Courtland shook hands and said hello in the foyer, it was as if they were taking their positions on the same team before a game of ice hockey or lacrosse, some sport where Frank only knew half the rules.

If the room in which the guests assembled was a real picture, the balsam fir that brushed the high ceiling was even more so. Everything hanging from the branches was made of crystal or glass, and the tree gleamed and glowed instead of flashing and sparkling in the way Frank was used to. Someone had put on a record of old-fashioned carols -- the sort sung with four-part harmonies in other people's languages -- with the volume turned down low. Throughout the room, expensively dressed guests stood around chatting as if it would be rude to admit they were here to eat. At least Frank got a cocktail before his dinner, even if he did want to sneak out of the room on the trail of Higgins, the butler, to see if they hid anything stronger than this snazzy eggnog back in the kitchen.

When the dinner guests made it to the table at last, the meal was good if complicated: clam and chicken broth, choice steaks in fancy sauce, string beans that had been mixed with celery, and tasty goop that turned out to be made from chestnuts. The cutlery surrounding Frank's plate could be counted on only two hands with a few fingers left over, which helped a lot.

On one side, he was seated next to a nice, older lady who decided he needed to know about the Pasadena Playhouse; fine by Frank. He let her fill him in about all the important differences between how Hollywood stars behaved on stage as opposed to on screen. On his other side, his neighbor was a cute redhead with strong teeth and a smoky alto voice who spent her first courses chatting with Courtland, seated at the foot of the table.

When his good-natured theater fan cut him loose at last, Frank turned to the redhead and said, "Sorry. Somehow I missed our introduction."

She laughed; excellent sound quality there, too. And her gaze did not linger on either his face or his suit, both scruffy for this company. Instead, she said, "I'm not surprised. You were much too busy clinging to that Brandy Flip before dinner to worry about names. Bet I can guess who you are, though. Mr. Mackenzie, right?"

"Right." Frank studied her for a moment. What he could tell about her dress was that green was a good color on her, it must have cost a bundle, and she could probably outrun a brushfire in it without being incinerated. It was enough data for a guess of his own. "You're Penelope Hamilton." The doc's girlfriend, he was thinking.

"Oh, you scientific types. You never leave a girl her mysteries." For all that the words were flirtatious, her tone and her eyes were friendly. Frank relaxed, wondering how much Courtland had told her. "Since I've heard enough about you that we might as well have been introduced months ago, feel free to call me Pen, Mr. Mackenzie."

"Sure. But Mr. Mackenzie is what they called my uncle in the local paper when they reported he led another meeting of the Ancient Order of Foresters. Me, I'm Frank."

"So you are." Past her, Frank saw Courtland swallow a grin before he turned to answer a comment from the society matron on his right. Okay, she really was playing the old, familiar game. Must be keeping her

hand in. That was fine, since Frank actually knew these rules.

He leaned back a little in his chair and turned on a slow, warm smile. "You're the bright young lady who likes horses and hounds."

"Pedigree boxers, actually, and western-style riding. And you're the late-blooming genius."

"Hey, slander. I'm nothing but a sad example of what military service can do to a guy. There'll be lots more of my kind storming up the beach at Clarence Tenn over the next few years."

"Really? I'd been given to understand that you're one in a million."

The smile she offered as she delivered the line would usually be Frank's cue that he should check if she also liked dancing. He was spared that since she was already dating the doc, although she did not strike him as a bad evening out. "I'm one in ten, maybe. And don't ask which ten." If she had read her Kinsey Report, she would know what he was talking about. He tilted his head a little and increased the wattage of his smile. "Too bad I don't know enough about boxers."

"Do you know anything at all about riding?" Frank liked her all the better for the tiny, amused lip twitch that had kept her from getting all the oomph out of her parry that she could have.

Still, enough was enough. "Not much. I did grow up in the San Bernardinos around Big Bear, so I have done some high-country riding."

She lost the velvety amusement, brightened, and that was that. Discussing the kinds of horses you could safely take off the usual trails got Frank through the chocolate soufflé.

Afterward, Courtland's ma led out the ladies. The older, silver-haired guy who had sat next to her at dinner made sure the men who had stayed behind got drinks. He turned out to be the doc's Uncle Leland, who seemed to be in charge of the conversation when Ma Courtland was missing.

Once Frank had made sure Jerry was doing okay -- to Frank's surprise, Jerry was holding forth to the husband of Frank's nice theater fan about some musical composer named Copland -- Frank grabbed his chance to get out onto the veranda and breathe some fresh air. Courtland had bailed out a few minutes earlier, likely to have a fast session with his pipe. Fancy tobaccos could smell odd to the uninitiated, and the doc was a considerate kind of guy.

Frank was a little surprised to find they were the only ones outside. Maybe it was too cold for fancy Pasadena types; the temperature was dropping into the fifties. He still strolled over to lean on the brick railing next to Courtland, looking out over the lawn toward the dark pines beyond. Given the cold evening, the crickets were chirping a slow march rather than a double-time. Whatever Courtland was burning in his pipe smelt a

little like incense. Quiet was a nice change from all the party talk.

Courtland was the first to break the comfortable silence. "How are you doing?"

"Not bad. Our side may even be winning on points, although I'm not sure. Don't know the details of how this game is scored."

The snort was appreciative. "Let's just say that Mother is looking pleased with the results of her social recipe and leave it at that."

"Okay as far as I'm concerned. Phoebe was a sure thing." Frank considered. "She's like you, I guess. She kind of has to do this stuff well. But Jerry's doing better than I would have predicted."

"Both of his parents are teachers in the Manhattan public school system. His mother teaches music, I believe."

"That explains all the chatter about New York City orchestras over dinner. His pa teaches physics?"

"Mathematics." They glanced at each other in the dim, both smiling at the obvious guesses, before looking away again. Courtland continued with, "Not too much longer, now. My Uncle Leland and Aunt Susan are flying overseas tomorrow morning, so they'll need to depart early."

"Off to see some more Europe now that the worst is over?"

"No, Uncle Leland has a new assignment. He's with the State Department." Removing his pipe, Courtland said, "I notice you were getting on well with Pen."

"Nice girl. Bet she's a hell of a dancer."

"She is. Nice, that is, as well as a good dancer. Thank God, given the circumstances." Courtland tapped out his dottle on the bricks.

Frank quickly changed the subject. Almost at random, he said, "I was kind of surprised your Uncle William wasn't here. I got the impression he hung around your ma a lot."

"Unlike Uncle Leland, Uncle William's not really my uncle. He's an old friend of my late father's. I think Mother is auditioning him for a possible second husband."

"Yeah?"

"Yes. But I don't know. He's a political animal; you may have noticed. In any case, she decided she wanted my young academic guests to be comfortable. Thus, she didn't invite him this evening."

"Good decision." Frank hesitated. "So this became her house after your father died?"

"No. She's being kind enough to serve as my hostess. I'm an only child. No siblings to help out."

"What-- You mean this is your place?"

"Yes."

The monosyllable was an awfully bleak acknowledgement of a very nice shack. Frank opened his mouth to say so and then stopped. Instead, he said, "Kind of an inconvenient location for someone working over at the Polytechnic."

Courtland turned his gaze toward Frank, ironic even in the dim. "It is. But I am told there are standards to be maintained. Mother is quite eager for me to find her an ally in running the household and sustaining our position in the community. I feel rather badly that I haven't been able to oblige her thus far, given how supportive of my interests in mathematics and science she was when I was younger."

Hell. Courtland may have had a point back during the summer when he compared Frank to the messengers in Shakespeare. Frank did seem to get stuck breaking bad news to the doc. "Although it's risky, you might want to make it a little clearer what exactly your problem is. Otherwise, sooner or later, the Feds might threaten you with her."

Courtland winced. "Sensible, I suppose. Did you ever tell your mother?"

"Nope. Although she may have suspected. She sure was eager to see me marry Sally."

"I see. My mother is the same. Eager, I mean. Not that there would be anything wrong with her desire for grandchildren in other circumstances. She has no way of

knowing why the alternatives are so much more attractive to me."

Too bad Courtland smoked a pipe. The tone of that last comment -- kind of like his girlfriend's at dinner -- was Frank's cue to offer him a light. Instead, he said, "Okay, I'll take those words as a compliment. Time to go back in?"

"And there I go again." Now it was Courtland's turn to fold his arms on the railing and stare out over the garden. He asked the darkness, "Why am I always the one pushing?" The words sounded like he genuinely wanted to know.

"Younger, hungrier." Frank had turned around to lean back and park his own elbows on the railing, looking at the glowing windows of the house so his and Courtland's gazes wouldn't meet by mistake. Indistinct conversation and the deep sounds of male laughter were making it out past the engraved glass panels in the oak doors between the dining room and the veranda. "You're driven. I noticed it really fast, all the way back in that jail cell when you were fighting. And driven doesn't stop after brawls. Think about it. You've already published three papers this year and have a fourth one out for peer review."

"That last one was mostly yours. But I take your meaning." Courtland paused. "I don't know. Perhaps I should have a serious talk with Pen about the future." Frank didn't have to see Courtland to sense more hesitation before the doc said, "You were married."

Frank stared up at the cedar shingle siding on the upper floors, the fancy woodwork of the roof, and the few stars already visible in a Pasadena evening sky. At last, he said, "Yeah. I was. It was the best choice I had at the time. And I did love Sally, a lot." The words felt as if he were yanking a tangled clump of fishhooks and line out of a too-tight dungarees pocket when he said, "It was still a mistake." He had to take a deep breath before he could add, "Maybe it would be different for you two because-- You know."

This pause was even longer than the last. When Courtland spoke, his words were quiet and formal. "Thank you for the warning."

"You're welcome, I guess. Time to go back in?"

"Yes. Not the same reason, but just as valid as the previous one."

In comparison to Frank's little trip out for some air, the conversation for the rest of the evening was a cakewalk. He even managed to get the high-society types laughing with him, rather than at him, when he spun a couple of yarns about the mountain resort where he had worked and stringing high-tension lines in from Hoover. As she shook his hand goodnight, the little lines around Ma Courtland's lips were relaxed and her eyes were friendly. She seemed to be telling the truth when she told him he would have to come back for another inning of the social game sometime really soon.

On the trip back to Clarence Tenn, as Phoebe and Courtland compared notes and Jerry softly hummed something Frank didn't recognize, Frank had plenty of

time to try and convince himself that earnest thanks and easy socializing were good enough rewards for his virtue and restraint.

Himself was not convinced.

VI

After Frank had spent some time overseas, he had learned at last why the Southern California winters struck folks from other parts of the country as odd. December and January in the Los Angeles Basin were more about rain than cold. Not that it rained every day down on the coastal plains, although when it did decide to let loose, it could rain buckets. But the main sign that winter had arrived was the foothills turning lush and green.

When Jerry knocked, without warning, on Frank's door the Thursday after Christmas, the first words out of his mouth were, "Wow. The grass isn't always dead."

Frank took his time studying Jerry, still holding the door open. Jerry didn't react to the stink-eye. Maybe he was used to it. Relenting, Frank said, "One of the botany gals told me Southern California has a Mediterranean climate regime. This is the big growing season for the local plants."

"Pretty. But I'd bet the trees imported from back east are confused."

"You're confusing. Get in here before the neighbor's cat decides to come visit again, will you?"

"Okay." Jerry wandered through the door, drifted over to the couch, and sat. "Are you cooking dinner?"

"Good thing you didn't arrive an hour from now, after I'd gotten everything started, or you could go whistle. What's up, Junior Genius?"

"That's not me you're thinking of, that's Doctor Courtland. You want to come see *Force of Evil* at the Rialto?"

"Sure. Pork chops okay for dinner?"

"Great. I still can't believe you can cook."

"Easy to tell you haven't eaten often at the undergraduate dining commons."

"There's a problem?"

"If you're used to decent home cooking there is, and I was. Sally could make straw taste like fresh corn on the cob. Not to mention, my ma was on her own while I was growing up. She worked. If I wanted dinner early, I had to improvise."

Jerry nodded wisely. "Cooking's useful."

"If you know that, I'm surprised you didn't learn how." Frank walked into the kitchen, opened his refrigerator, and started pulling out ingredients. Here went all the extra pork chops he had meant to save for tomorrow. Oh, well. At least he had soaked them in orange juice and Worcester sauce overnight, the way that recipe in the women's magazine had suggested, so they were ready to go without a lot of fuss.

Jerry called after him, "When I asked if I could learn how to cook something, Mom told me to stick to doing the dishes."

"Maybe she thought you'd chop up your fingers or set yourself on fire while you weren't paying attention."

"Hey." Jerry didn't sound very offended. "Bet I could follow a recipe. I got great grades in my laboratory classes."

"Uh-huh. Chemistry labs. Physics labs."

"I pay attention to lots of other stuff besides science." The voice was closer. Frank looked up to see Jerry leaning against the archway between the small living room and smaller kitchen. "Sometimes I don't think you get exactly how hard Doctor Courtland works us."

"You complaining?" Frank struck a match to light the gas burner before he picked up Sally's old cast-iron skillet.

"No, merely observing. It'll all pay off later. But it takes a lot of concentration to keep up with you guys right now. Can I help?"

Frank studied him and then said, "Wash your hands first."

He had known Jerry long enough by now to suspect that something else besides the second showing of *Force of Evil* had brought him to Frank's apartment this evening, but Frank had also learned to wait for an explanation. You had to meet Jerry at whatever random rendezvous Jerry had chosen for any particular conversation.

Sure enough, they made it through dinner, the movie, a couple of sundaes, and the trip back to Frank's apartment before Jerry said, "You know girls."

"A few. Why? You don't?"

"I mean, you have a reputation."

Jerry was perched on the sofa again, close enough to the overstuffed armchair where Frank sat to punch the guy in the shoulder. Frank restrained himself in favor of saying, "I'm thrilled."

"Not a bad reputation. A reputation reputation. The other grad students told me." At Frank's pained look, Jerry visibly decided to explain. He counted off his points on his fingers as he said, "One, you don't tell tales out of school. But, two, the older co-eds all think you're heaven-sent. So, three, you have no problem getting pretty girls to go out with you."

"It isn't hard. You say, 'Hey, insert-name-of-appropriate-interesting-gal. Would you like to go dancing with me some evening really soon?'"

The scorn was mild but evident. "Even I know that."

"Then exactly what is your problem, Comrade Jerry?"

"Well, I haven't been out dancing for a year and a half now. No, fourteen months, three weeks, and a couple of days ago, since my last steady broke it off with me. She said she needed someone either less busy or more ambitious." From his mild tone, Jerry wasn't holding a grudge. "Anyhow, I'm rusty, and it's finally my turn to

take out Phoebe." Wow, so that was what determination looked like on Jerry. It suited him. "With a reputation like yours, you have to be up on the latest, so I hoped you would show me."

"Show you what?"

"The local steps out here. You know, the west coast way of jitterbugging." Jerry's voice lowered a little. "In my old neighborhood, our Lindy Hop had a lot of Latin to it. I don't want that to come across as grabby or something if she's used to a different style. Could you show me?"

"Uh... okay." Now, here was an innocent request that could lead to a traffic accident, at least for Frank. "I wonder when my life became one long Andy Hardy movie?"

Jerry frowned. "Did it?"

"Not really. You think Phoebe will care all that much about your style?"

"Maybe not. I will."

Of course he would. "Great." Not that the idea of dance practice was great, but there was no way for Frank to explain why. "You'll have to help me move the chairs and coffee table back against the walls. Be glad that this is my downstairs neighbor's night to go bowling."

"Think we'll be loud?"

"I know we'll be loud. We'll also need about three meters of space to work with."

Frank had learned which local radio station spun a lot of dance music, which was good because he hadn't spent any money on 78 records in years. After they had shifted all the furniture and rolled back the rug, Frank found the right frequency, waited through the announcer's advertisement for the Sav-On drug store until some Tommy Dorsey tune came on the air, and then took Jerry's right hand. "I'm the boy, right?"

"Kay."

"I bet you already know we're doing an eight-step rather than a six-step. So, go ahead and step back right--"

Jerry was a good dancer even if he was not used to being led. But he picked up the basics he was after fast and moved on to learning the simpler local flourishes in another hour or so. He was also intent, focused, consumed by his desire to do what he was learning well, and altogether the kind of student any teacher wanted.

He was attractive, too, something Frank already knew. Most times, Jerry's good looks did not matter. Even now, the fact that Frank could see himself taking a try if Jerry had shown signs of interest was nothing to do with anything. Jerry had never dropped any hints that he was the sort of guy looking for a tourist's trip down to the scary part of town for cheap, exotic thrills among the low-life natives, and this dancing lesson sure would have been his chance. But no soap. Frank was dancing like someone doing a good job of playing the older brother. Jerry could have been the younger brother.

Frank did not mind, or, at least, did not mind much. This kind of imbalanced interest was something most men ran into sooner or later with their dance partners, with one exception. Your average male who tried something with an oblivious girl was not courting the kind of disaster Frank would have risked. Even so, the informal tutorial in Savoy Style Lindy was more fun than Frank might have predicted, complete with small, illicit thrills to keep his attention focused.

When they were done and cooling off with a couple of Acme beers, Jerry said, "I was right."

Frank grinned. Even though they all liked each other, no member of his new academic family ever missed the chance to say those three words. "Yeah?"

"You are a hell of a dancer."

"You're not bad yourself."

"Fresh," Jerry said, but he was only being New York, Frank could tell. "I guess I should be grateful you're not really interested in Phoebe."

"I guess you should." Frank took a swig. "Are you?"

Jerry considered this the way he might have pondered a tough problem in thermodynamics. "Does it matter?"

"Maybe, maybe not." Frank contemplated Jerry's date for dancing, thought about Courtland and the stag sock-hop that had almost ended with both of them in jail, and tilted his bottle in salute. "Still, it's nice to even have a chance."

"Yeah, it is," Jerry said, sounding contented.

Frank tried not to be envious. Mostly he succeeded. And he worked off the rest by saying, "Come on, Gene Kelly. Let's get my coffee table back where it belongs."

He let Jerry handle moving the big easy chair. That thing was heavy.

Turned out that Jerry was also a guy who did not kiss -- or not not kiss -- and tell. Frank heard nothing more about the big date for dancing. Except for Jerry's evident attractions, he had almost forgotten the entire affair until he was reminded one overcast Sunday afternoon in February from an unexpected quarter with unpredictable results.

Frank was midway through a serious bout of calculation, so he was slow answering after someone knocked. But the knocking, although not loud, was determined enough to make him give up any thoughts of pretending he was out. After several seconds and a truly juicy word, he put down his slide rule, got up, and mooched across the living room of his apartment.

Phoebe advanced the second Frank opened the door. As she marched toward him, he instinctively got out of her way, leaving the doorway clear for her to enter even as she started talking. Her southern accent, usually muted, was thick as blackstrap molasses.

"Well, now. Obviously I need to settle on sparking with a single beau because these recent developments are just too hideous to endure any longer than I must. Doctor Throop has noticed I'm a female. He said I should try tight sweaters more often. Doctor van Staarling asked me if I was wearing perfume when he returned my latest annotated bibliography, Doctor Tompkins keeps smiling at me, and Mrs. Courtland has invited me over to tea three times."

Frank, who'd opened his mouth to try and say something, shut it again.

"Three times in a month," Phoebe repeated, as if the frequency should be really significant. "So I've picked my man. What I require is someone interested in physics who doesn't secretly think mathematical equations are unladylike. Someone like you."

Shit, she couldn't mean--

"And I truly don't care if he's a Yankee from New York or if his people formerly hailed from the Caribbean. The War between the States has been over for almost a century, no matter what Mother says, and I do believe his ancestors included more bluebloods than mine."

No, she didn't mean Frank. Jerry, of course.

"I have everything planned. All the details. This should work out just fine." Arms folded across her breasts, she nodded determinedly.

Frank had not spent all the hours of his married years out to lunch. He knew his cue. "Okay, okay. What do you need from me, Phoebe?"

Only the tiniest slump of her shoulders gave any hint that she might be relieved. "First, could you explain the reasons for what I'm doing to Professor Courtland?"

"Sure. Although I don't know why you don't either talk to him yourself or wait for him to find out."

Looking around, she spotted the overstuffed armchair and sat in it. Now that she had settled down, Frank felt free to perch on the nearby arm of the couch. She told him, "Any approach relying upon gossip does not work with the professor. He is the merest trifle oblivious. No offense intended."

"Should I be offended?"

"You might be, given that you're his favorite. Although, Lord knows, the man has his reasons. After all, you're both the boss of the rest of us and his co-author."

"Not published yet. Only recently accepted."

Her look was tolerant. "Both those reasons show that you're the one to help me persuade him this is a tactical response and does not mean I am running off to get married and have babies the second he turns his back, thus wasting his time. I've learned how professors think."

"Tactical response?" Frank raised his eyebrows at her. "Kind of rough on Jerry."

Her baby-blues were steady, but there might have been a little more color than usual in her cheeks. "Mostly tactical. I had a great many alternatives, but Jerry is someone who understands that I am not at my best in a tasteless, repeating series of tight sweaters. And he has other virtues, too."

"Okay, mostly tactical. As long as you both know what you're getting into." He considered her for a few seconds. "So, that's the first thing you need from me. What's the second?"

"If any of the other boys ask -- and they will -- could you also let it be understood that this decision has been brewing for a while, and I am not being impulsive? I truly do not need anyone getting the idea that I am some sort of indecisive flirt, which would generate more problems than having a steady will solve."

Frank was not going to grin. She also didn't need that. Truly. "You're sure the news will get around?"

"How long did you say you've been at Clarence Tenn?" She relented. "That's all right. Most men don't notice how much they like to gossip. They don't notice a good many things they associate with women."

"Oh, yeah? Name one."

He should have known better. In fact, he felt like a dope even before Phoebe dimpled and said, "I wager you never noticed that there are no public washrooms for female students in the Physical Sciences building."

He opened his mouth. He shut it and blinked. He opened it again to say, "Okay, you got me. I didn't."

"I knew it. Mind you, it is useful having the kind of acquaintanceship with the departmental secretaries that sharing their single washroom encourages, but the logistics are still terrible."

"I bet they are." He thought of all the monthlies and shuddered.

His reward was an amused look. "Sometimes I can tell you're a widower. Which is another reason why you're the man to testify for me."

"Fine. I'll spread the news."

"It won't take long. Jerry and I will be going out dancing again this evening, and, I swear, gossip travels faster than the speed of light around here."

"Which would imply that rumors about dancing are a violation of classical laws," Frank retorted in the sort of physics bicker that was becoming a knee-jerk reaction. "Unlike all other information above the quantum scale." Then he frowned. Something about those last two sentences was trying to trigger a thought.

Phoebe mistook his expression. Her tone was almost apologetic when she said, "I do appreciate this. I know my social difficulties are not your problem."

"Are you kidding? Doctor Throop opening wide the throttle on the subject of tight sweaters is everybody's problem. I still work on the cyclotron, you know."

"Yes. I know." She gave him the dimples full force. "I'm prepared to show my gratitude."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Jerry is waiting downstairs. We hoped you would be our guest at the Canton Palace this evening before the two of us go on to the Havana."

"At least the pair of you knows how to bribe a guy. Let me get my jacket."

All through dinner, Phoebe's comment about gossip kept bugging Frank. Of course rumors about dancing didn't travel faster than the speed of light. General relativity implied that no information on the scale at which humans socialized could spread-- Frank felt his eyes widen.

"You get something spicy in that last forkful?" Jerry asked.

"Nope, another sort of burning realization. Don't ask."

Being Jerry, he didn't. In any case, he was too busy glancing at Phoebe as if she were an unexpected experimental result that had all sorts of interesting theoretical implications. She had the sleek, satisfied air of the mistress manipulator at work, a good look on her as far as Frank could tell.

Frank was happy to be mostly ignored. He needed some extra minutes to deal with the realization that, one more

time, he was going to be the bearer of bad tidings to Doctor Courtland.

This time, Frank lingered outside Courtland's doorway instead of busting right in. He read the notices on the departmental bulletin board down the hall while the undergraduate in Courtland's office moaned about vectors. Even after the kid had gone, Frank still delayed. Not until he realized he had started to shine one of his shoes on the back of his opposite trouser leg did he break down and go knock.

"Come in, please."

Frank stuck his head around the door. "Hi."

Courtland looked over his glasses with a quizzical expression. "You're out of season."

"Uh-huh. Listen, can we talk?"

"Of course. The extra chair is even empty of journals for a change."

Frank craned to look up and down the hall, making sure no more undergraduates were lurking in ambush, before he closed the door. Then he turned on the air conditioner, muffled the phone, sat, and said, "I checked the office again last week, but I don't know. Maybe we should go for a walk."

"Uh-oh," Courtland said. He put down his pen

"Yeah. I had a sudden revelation last night." He hesitated, and the doc gestured for him to continue. "We made a big mistake. A huge one. Massive."

Courtland almost blanched. "In the magnetic fields paper?"

"No, no, not that."

"Thank heavens. If it's somewhere in the infinites resolution equations we're working on together, don't worry. There's still plenty of time to revise them before--"

"The sock-hop. We made a mistake about the sock-hop out in San Agustin."

That caught Courtland with his mouth open. He shut it, frowned for a moment, and then said, "Explain."

"We're used to thinking of--" Frank pointed at the wall where the bug had been "--certain guys as if they were, I don't know, everywhere all the time, like some kind of old-fashioned aetheric medium. But when Phoebe mentioned that stupid joke about gossip traveling faster than the speed of light yesterday, I realized--"

--it doesn't. Gossip is merely one more variety of Newtonian-scale information." Mute now, Frank stared at the doc. Courtland's eyes narrowed in thought. "Let's take a stroll."

They were halfway across campus before they were far enough away from any passing students for Courtland to

say, "All right, keep going. I want to see if we've reached the same conclusions independently."

"Okay. We were arrested late in the evening, and the G-men showed up at my door fairly early the next day. But they aren't psychics. They only have so many resources. Out of all the crud happening in police stations across forty-eight states, they can't automatically know what events feature guys they're interested in. There's no way they should have arrived so fast unless somebody had told them exactly what had happened."

"I see." Courtland fell silent to return the waves of a trio of co-eds. The smile that went along with his wave was strained, but the gals weren't close enough to tell. The trio kept going, looking over their shoulders as they talked animatedly, probably about the doc. In contrast, it took Courtland several seconds to find some words and start speaking again.

They had strolled through the first shadows of the twin row of elms stretching along the walkway between the Administration Building and Talbot Hall before the doc said, "You're right, and that should have occurred to me. You would think I hadn't learned a thing about security back at Los Alamos." He shook his head. "In any case, those constraints leave us with a limited number of possible informants. Two, in fact, since my phone call from the jail was made after normal office hours."

"That lawyer pal you called, what's-his-name, he's one."

"Jim Charney. And the other is Uncle William."

Courtland had sounded steady enough that Frank kept going with, "Neither of them would seem to have had any reason to spontaneously rat you out to the G-men."

"Unless they had already been asked to report anything of interest."

"Yeah."

"Crap. Oh, crap, crap. Why didn't I realize? Did I not want to know?"

He should not have kept poking at what was technically another man's tangle, but Frank heard himself asking, "Have you figured out what you're going to do?"

Courtland stopped dead. "Talk to them both."

Frank stopped, too. "You sure?"

"No, of course I'm not sure!" Catching himself snapping, Courtland shook his head. "Sorry. But what else can I do? I have to know. Not knowing is worse."

"I guess I can see how you'd feel that way, even if asking is courting risk." Before he had finished thinking, he found he had reached out and squeezed Courtland's shoulder gently, the way you did with a buddy in trouble. He let go hastily. "Good luck."

Slowly, Courtland closed his eyes. Then he opened them again and gave Frank a wry smile before saying, "I'll need it." Without another word, he turned and walked away toward Talbot, likely heading for the faculty club to get a stiff drink.

At least, the faculty club was where Frank would have been heading if this had been his talk to have. He stood for a moment, staring after Courtland, feeling a little queasy. The doc's latest problem wasn't about school and wasn't truly about sex, either, which made it nothing they had in common. Now that the doc had gotten his information, whatever Frank could do would not make things better. His wanting to try was kind of bad.

Graduate Advisor. Cute number. A nice guy to go hiking with. Otherwise, none of his business. Frank checked his watch. It was time to get to Special Topics in Advanced Linear Algebra. In fact, if he didn't hurry, he would be late. Turning around, Frank broke into a trot, trying not to think about how he was retreating in disarray.

VII

For the next two weeks, Courtland wandered around acting worried. Most of the undergrads seemed to see his preoccupation as distraction and dreaminess, their notion of normal, egghead-professor behavior. Frank could tell Jerry and Phoebe knew something was wrong, but they kept their questions to themselves. Once or twice, he thought he intercepted looks between the doc's colleagues, but that could have been his imagination. Frank ended up feeling like the only supply sergeant in the know about an iffy commando raid still in planning.

During his private hours with Courtland -- last semester's tutorial had somehow merged into this semester's tutorial without much discussion -- the doc clutched at physics the way the troops riding the landing craft in toward Utah Beach had clutched their rifles. Frank did his best to help out, wracking his brain to scrape up every wild notion or screwy question that had ever struck him as he poked through the physics books and science magazines that had once been just a weird hobby.

Early on, he caught a fleeting glimpse of something in the doc's eyes that might have been gratitude, but all Courtland did was pull a blank exercise book from the clutter on his desk and say, "Write them down. All of them, no matter how silly they might sound now. These are what you would have been sifting through while you were young, seeds of the work you should have been doing."

"The folks who can turn on lamps and radios in Altamonte might argue," Frank said, but he took the exercise book anyhow.

All in all, Frank had never been so relieved to see an Easter break in his entire academic life. Being on his own for a while was a reprieve. After a mandatory day of visits to his remaining relatives in Big Bear, he settled into his apartment, determined to take advantage of everyone forgetting that he could have worked full-time over the break by making serious progress on his thesis.

A few weeks back, Doctor Tompkins had confirmed that Frank's academic career was moving very quickly. However, since a few students did advance at this pace on the theoretical side of the hard sciences, Tompkins had suggested he make more hay while the sun was still shining. Frank had agreed. Given how badly he was tangled up with Courtland, he was A-okay with the idea of finishing his master's degree fast and getting the hell out of Dodge City.

For several days, he wrestled with equations and text. Barely rinsed dishes stacked up in the sink. The neatly sorted piles of dirty clothes that should have gone to the Laundromat got raided. By Thursday, Frank was skipping shaving. On Friday, he was reduced to wearing an old pair of Levi waist-overalls and the most battered of his surviving army T-shirts. He really needed to go shopping for groceries; instead he had paid the kid who lived two doors down to bring him back food from the Big Boy burger joint on the corner.

When eleven rolled around that evening, the downstairs neighbor's cat had somehow snuck in again and was

snoozing in the overstuffed armchair. Frank was too busy to chase him out. He stuck to sorting through the papers scattered all across the coffee table as he tried to pull together his last section of mathematical exposition before starting work on his conclusions.

The tenants next door were having some kind of party, and their record player was going strong, loud music seeping through the wall along with a lot of social noise. When somebody knocked, Frank thought it must be one of the neighbors with a late invitation to the bash, the kind you offered to keep the cops from being called. He went to the door meaning to tell whoever it was to calm down, that the racket was nothing much after years of barracks followed by more years of dormitories.

He opened the door, still clutching a couple of pages covered with equations. Courtland stood on the other side, holding a leather suitcase by its handle.

Frank would always wonder what his face had looked like. The doc blinked at him uncertainly and asked, "May I come in?"

"Hell, no," would have been the smart answer. Instead, Frank backed up a little, waving the papers in his hand toward the living room as if he were directing traffic around road construction.

Courtland walked in, put down the suitcase, and shut the door. Then he turned, saw all the papers spread out on the coffee table, and said, "Oh. Rough draft of new article, paper for one of your seminars, or thesis?" Then he wandered over toward the table while Frank was still trying to choose what to say, and almost sat on the cat in

the armchair. Something about that, and something about the way Courtland too carefully soothed Felix while disarranging all of Frank's work with his free hand, confirmed what Frank had already suspected. The doc was pixilated.

Frank ground the heels of his hands into his eyes for a few seconds, trying to come all the way back from the work that had tied him into mental knots for the last ten hours. Then he dropped his hands and asked, "What's with the suitcase?"

Courtland peered over his glasses. The words of his reply were pronounced with too much precision. "Did you know that there is a regional-level dog show in Arcadia tomorrow, not to mention a Toastmaster's convention in Pasadena? Between the two events and those who can't find more permanent residences during this housing shortage, all the local hotels and motorists' lodgings are full."

"You need some place to stay? How come?"

Courtland put down the pages he was sorting through, frowned at them, and switched them around. "I'm now in the bad books of one of my two remaining friends in Pasadena, and the other knows my relatives excessively well. Pen and her roommate are riding the high country in Colorado, Tompkins and his wife are visiting Avalon this week, and Doctor and Mrs. van Staarling go to sleep promptly at ten every night. They hate being awakened. Mrs. van Staarling also tends toward curiosity." All at once, he looked defeated. He told the coffee table, "I couldn't think of anyplace else to go."

"Doctor Greerson-- Nah, you're drunk."

"Which ruled out several other possibilities, yes. And I didn't want to answer questions."

"So there go even more of your options." Not, Frank suspected, that Courtland had tried as hard as he could have to think of other places to park after having the bright idea of wandering into Frank's apartment. But at least he had tried. "Coffee?"

"Please. That fifth highball was a mistake."

Shaking his head, Frank went into the kitchen to get the pot brewing. He had to raise his voice to cut through the noise from next door with, "There's a party, in case you somehow didn't notice."

"Ah. I wondered where 'Hey! Ba-Ba-Re-Bop' was coming from. I was sure those drinks weren't bad enough for me to be hearing things."

Back in the living room, Frank sat on the couch well away from the armchair. "Okay, the suitcase. You're hoping to stay the night?"

"Yes. May I borrow your sofa?" Now Courtland would not look up from petting the cat. "I discovered the identity of my F.B.I. informant. Once I had eliminated Jim and worked up the nerve to speak with Uncle William, he freely admitted all. A simple and valuable political favor, he said, and harmless enough since no Courtland would ever do anything truly damaging either to his country or to himself."

"Except you did. To yourself, at least."

"Oh, Uncle William knew the Frisco arrest was some sort of silly misunderstanding even before he heard my story at the police station. Nonetheless, he has his image of himself to tend, so he still left a message with his federal contact. He is a paragon of civil rectitude, not a man to be swayed by trivial matters such as personal loyalties and commitments. That's what I told Mother."

Frank winced. Hadn't the doc said his ma was thinking about marrying the guy? Bad timing on the sarcasm, then. "Y'know, Phoebe sent the Feds those letters--"

"Phoebe hasn't known me since before I was born. Phoebe has no political interests to protect or other ways to profit from her efforts. As near as I can tell, Phoebe genuinely intended to help me."

"Okay, okay. So you talked to your ma."

"At first, she was disinclined to believe me. I'm afraid she wanted further details. Specifics of the situation. Once I began providing them, the conversation rapidly spun out of my control. In the end, it was deemed better that I leave."

"She booted you out of your own house."

Courtland ignored him. "After my failure at the first three hotels, I stopped for a drink, meaning to recoup my nerves. In the end, I abandoned my car at the bar and took a taxi."

"Do you remember the name of the joint?"

"The Dew Drop Inn."

"The one over by East Central, I bet, not the one in San Agustin. Sheesh. Is there only one funny-funny bar name issued to the entire Southland? Don't answer that. Just wait here. I'll get your coffee."

When Frank brought in the mug, filled to the brim with the blackest of linesman java, the doc took a sip and winced. One more sip, and he leafed through Frank's notes until he found a page he deemed unimportant enough to play coaster. Then, after putting the mug down on it, he said, voice distant, "I ended by telling her the exact nature of my difficulty. The news was not well received."

"Fuck." It was Frank's turn to almost sit on the cat as his knees folded and he ended up back on the couch. "My advice stinks like garbage."

Courtland made an impatient, give-him-here gesture. Frank scooped up Felix and passed the critter over. "Don't be ridiculous," the doc said, resuming his cat soothing. "There was no way for you to predict how strongly negative her reaction would be. I had heard people's responses to such news was sometimes--"

"Most times. Almost always. Especially if someone's surprised or wants to think they're surprised."

"In any case, so much for the F.B.I. blackmailing me via her, not to mention so much for Uncle William. No matter how upset she is with me, my mother still hates sneaks and tattle-tales. He's done for, which is good. I

never liked him anyhow. He's not merely more pompous and condescending than Greerson at his worst, but also a pompous, condescending asshole. Unlike Greerson, thank God."

"I kind of got that impression."

"If you permit me to stay, I'll be better in the morning. More able to think clearly."

"That's if you're not too hung over in the morning to think anything."

"I'm already not feeling well. Oh, not nauseous." he added quickly, probably at an alarmed look from Frank. "Only--" He waved the cat, trying to express something.

"Beat up. Run over and left in the road like a dead jackrabbit."

"You've approximated my feelings, yes."

The music next door had switched to "I've Got a Crush on You," but Frank still didn't reach over to pound on the wall in hopes that the neighbors would pipe down. He really did not want a visitor with an invitation to the festivities right now. Instead, he said, "Okay. You can park here tonight, maybe tomorrow. That'll give you the weekend to figure something out."

"I'm sorry. I'll be good, I promise."

"Hey. After an evening like yours, you could try for bad again, and I'd give you a break on the razzing. What do you take me for?"

"My student -- honestly, my best and brightest student ever -- with whom, in spite of all my efforts, I'm hopelessly entangled." He scratched around Felix's ears, looking bleak. "I tried to keep my distance. I truly did."

"Yeah, yeah." Frank's voice was rough. "Drink your coffee, okay?" He got up and went over to the old wardrobe that served as his linen closet. Only when he had an armful of sheets, blankets, and pillows did he turn and say, "It was an okay try. A good try, even."

Courtland's gaze came up from the papers he had been sorting through again. The smile that followed his moment of bemusement was-- Frank dropped the sheets onto the foot of the couch. "The cat goes out before bedtime. He lives downstairs. If you have to throw up, the plunger's underneath the sink next to the can." He ran the fingers of one hand through his crew-cut. "For cripe's sake, don't stay up working through that stuff. It's not even a rough draft yet, not ready for review. Get some sleep instead." He grimaced at the wall between them and the party which was now singing along to Frank Sinatra. "If you can."

Voice entirely sincere, still with that too-careful way of sounding out his words, Courtland told Frank, "I do wish I could make a pass at you. You certainly deserve the tribute, and it somehow seems insulting not to try." He pointed. "Your T-shirt has three holes in it. I believe your Levis are developing one as well, right about there." The way he illustrated the problem with his hands should have been outlawed.

Caught off-guard, Frank stared at him. Then, slowly, he smiled. "No screwing around while you're plastered, Champ. Even if you are hotter than the solar corona when you're all earnest like this. Good night."

The next morning, Courtland sat staring with a polite and patrician woe at his breakfast. It was cute, in a not-meaning-to-be-snotty-but-being-snotty-anyhow kind of way.

Frank said, "Sorry about the bread. The result of having things delivered rather than shopping myself. I'm never sure what I'll get."

"It's just that I have a headache."

"Drink lots of water."

"I'm also bilious."

"Drink lots of water and eat your toast. Skip the orange juice."

With the sigh of a B-movie juvenile, Courtland started taking small, reluctant bites of dry toast. Frank went back to his Rice Krispies. They were only a little stale, and the milk was still good.

Courtland said, "I think I killed three papers' and a textbook's worth of brain cells last night."

"You don't drink much, do you?"

"No, not much. All things considered, it would have been a bad idea back on the Mesa, and I haven't bothered since. Although I shouldn't be telling you that. Personal information."

Frank settled for raising his eyebrows while munching.

"Much too late?"

"Yup," Frank said, mushily.

"Ugh," Courtland said, staring at Frank's mouth.

"So don't ask me questions before I've swallowed. You need to share any gory details of the big fight?"

"No." There was a pause. "Maybe." Courtland got down one more bite of toast -- keeping his mouth closed -- before he let loose with another one of his speeches. "Does anyone really think Freudian analysis will fix this sort of difficulty? Anyone educated? I mean, anyone with any scientific and statistical training? Have they actually looked over Freud's so-called data, his case reports?"

Frank shrugged, chewing again. As far as he was concerned, psychoanalysis was a fancy hobby for the rich, but this was not his moment on the soapbox.

"I'd rather be exorcised. At least that's admitted to be a straightforward appeal to faith." Courtland's eyes narrowed. "Do you feel that you had issues with your father?"

After swallowing, Frank said, "Sure. But that doesn't matter unless bighorn sheep had them, too."

Courtland looked startled and then inquiring.

"I was out on a hunting trip once, scanning the hills with my old binoculars, and saw a couple of rams going at it with the accelerator down to the floorboards. Both front and rear." Frank made a couple of illustrative gestures. "Couldn't believe my eyes. Do you think they had weak fathers and overbearing mothers?"

"I really don't know. How would you go about verifying that?" Their gazes met, and Frank knew they were both contemplating a research team chasing a bunch of wild sheep around the desert mountains with test forms and clipboards. When they stopped laughing, Courtland was clutching his stomach. "Ow. No, don't say it." He reached for his half-eaten piece of toast, picked it back up, and stared at it in renewed, tragic dismay.

This second go-around was enough to make Frank give in to temptation. "Y'know, some nice, soft-boiled eggs would taste good right around now. They're especially tasty stirred up with mayo. Yum, yum, slides down smooth. I should get a carton when I shop today."

"Don't even bother," Courtland retorted. "If the thought of checking myself into some Southern California version of the Happy Dale Sanatorium for emergency de-perversion therapy isn't enough to nauseate me, mere eggs won't turn the trick."

"You're a tough nut, Doc."

Courtland rolled his eyes and ate more toast, slowly and reluctantly.

Frank finished his Rice Krispies and sipped his remaining coffee, cut with a little milk out of respect for the morning, while he studied his guest.

The doc's hair was ruffled from his shower, and his hazel eyes were kind of bloodshot, but he looked pretty good for a guy who had just tied one on last night. He was bouncing back fast from the first shock of being booted out by his beloved ma for lavender leanings. There was some backbone to this Boy Scout, but Frank had known that much already.

Maybe Frank was making too much out of this attraction between the two of them. Maybe they should just screw and get it over with, kill all the tension by reminding themselves that sex was not some mysterious, life-changing event that only ever happened after the last scenes of a Hollywood romance. Or was that notion only Frank's dick offering a really clever excuse to run over the doc's good intentions?

Before Frank could ask Courtland what he thought, someone knocked. No, not someone. The brisk pace of the knocking was familiar.

"Should I--" Courtland waved toast in the direction of the apartment's bedroom.

"Nah. I think I know who this is." He went to get the front door, and, sure enough, there she stood. "Morning, Phoebe."

"Professor Courtland's mother called me," she told him in a clear, carrying voice. She had the air of someone being very patient, indeed.

"Oh, for--" came back from the direction of the kitchen before Courtland's words cut off abruptly.

Phoebe said, "I thought so. Are you going to let me in?"

Frank leaned toward her, looming a little, but she only tilted her head to look up inquiringly at him. "Be nice," Frank settled for saying, the volume low. "His ma found out about his trouble with the G-men. She didn't like it."

Her words were also quiet. "Of course she didn't. Nice people don't get involved with the F.B.I."

Frank grimaced.

"Don't worry. I usually hew to a different definition of nice."

It was true. She usually did. Even so, Frank stepped back and gave her a sergeant's stare.

She sailed right past him, calling out, "Good morning, Professor. I'm sorry to meddle in what is really your affair, but your mother telephoned me this morning, asking me if I knew where you were."

"Because what my students need is to be bothered about the vagaries of my private life."

Frank trailed Phoebe into the kitchen, where she had picked up the coffee pot and was refilling Frank's mug.

"That did seem to be her view of the matter, yes, sir. For some reason I couldn't quite make out, I don't believe she's happy with your steady, Miss Hamilton, just now. She assigned the job of finding you to me, instead."

Through gritted teeth, the doc managed to say, "Believe it or not, Miss Hannaford, once upon a time our graduate students at Clarence Tenn made their way through their scholarly careers concentrating on, oh, I don't know, physics. Rather than the non-academic follies of their instructors."

"Well. You don't say. I fear that must have been long before my time, given how Doctor Throop has Alan Bloomfield wash his car every other weekend."

Courtland looked revolted enough to be considering another soapbox tirade. Frank rushed in with, "You want something to drink, Phoebe? I have coffee, orange juice, some milk that's not too old--"

"No, thank you." She pulled out the last remaining chair at the kitchen table before Frank could pull it out for her.

Courtland half-rose until she was seated, sat back down, and said, "I apologize for my mother's phone call."

"Calls. That's all right, Professor. My own mother is a woman of somewhat dramatic disposition."

"Mine isn't. I thought. Here's hoping I haven't been reported missing to the police."

"Oh, I doubt it. She seemed to have herself in hand, being merely unsure as to where you had fetched up. My

first guess was Doctor Tompkins's house, but then I remembered that this weekend is his twenty-second wedding anniversary. He's on Catalina Island with Mrs. Tompkins, or so I am told."

"Yeah," Frank said. "That's what I heard, too." He didn't let himself look at the doc.

"Just in case, I sent over Jerry to make certain they're not back yet--" Courtland closed his eyes in seeming pain at Jerry's name and then opened them again as she kept going. "--but Frank's apartment struck me as the most likely of the other possibilities."

Frank nodded. "Good guess." If you can't beat 'em, join 'em whenever possible was one of his personal rules for coping with wives, mothers, and such-like distaff powerhouses.

"Thank you," Phoebe said, almost primly. "On second thought, I would like some orange juice. I can get it, though."

"Okay."

There was a brief pause in the conversation as she rifled through Frank's kitchen cupboards and refrigerator. A quick glance told him that Courtland seemed to be holding up okay, even if his expression was stuck somewhere between horror and amusement. "Things like this never happened to me at Cal," he muttered through the fingers that his chin was now propped on.

"Weren't you fifteen or something at Cal? Not even Throop would try to get away with making a fifteen-year-old wash his Cadillac."

"Frank, don't be mean." Phoebe sat back down with her juice. "The professor did his graduate work while at Cal. Even at his youngest there, he was sixteen. I hope you don't mind that I looked that up, sir," she said, directing this part to Courtland. "It seemed judicious to learn all I could about my future advisor."

"Research is good," he told her, rather absently. "I should call Mother."

Phoebe looked pensive. "If I may be permitted to offer an acquaintance's opinion, I'm not sure she's quite ready to speak with you yet."

"I see."

"I promise I'll call her back as soon as may be."

Courtland shook his head mutely and took a bite of dry and slightly squashed toast. Frank wasn't sure when the squashing had happened. Phoebe drank her orange juice. Frank tried a sip of his coffee. Not really warm anymore, but this mugfull was black, which was turning out to be what the morning required. Before Frank could decide whether or not to add more sugar, he heard rapping on the apartment door. The raps started strong but seemed to trail off oddly.

"I would imagine that's Jerry. May I?" Phoebe asked Frank.

"Knock yourself out."

She got up to go answer the door, and it was Courtland's turn to speak quickly in a low voice. "Somehow, this is not the suicidal dawn after a nighttime confession of degeneracy that one reads about in serious novels on the topic."

"You'd prefer that to this?"

"I'd prefer to pretend my students weren't being shanghaied away from their proper preoccupations. Good morning, Mr. Figueroa."

"Morning, Doc. Hey, is the dancing at the Avalon Ballroom as good as the Tompkins' housekeeper was telling me?"

"Yeah," Frank told him, and "So I've heard," Courtland chimed in at the same time, now sounding resigned.

Jerry wandered over to the refrigerator and opened it. He stood staring at the mostly empty shelves while leaning on the open door, as he said, "There sure isn't much in here. You need to go shopping more often."

"I was trying to get some work done on my thesis this week--" Frank started.

"Jerry--" Phoebe had also begun, in a tone mixing two parts mild exasperation to one part indulgence.

"Right!" With the whip-crack of that one word, Jerry straightened up and closed the refrigerator door, Phoebe turned her patented Margaret O'Brien expression toward

the doc, and Frank straightened up over his coffee. Seeing he had all their attention, Courtland continued, "Since nobody has anything more educational to do this weekend than be catapulted into my affairs, how about our having a pleasant, perambulatory discussion about neutron capture?"

Phoebe and Jerry looked at each other, and then at Frank, who shrugged and nodded.

"We can see what progress has been made over at the site of the future arboretum in Rancho Santa Anita. I believe the roses are said to be coming along nicely. Can you give us a ride over to where I left my car, Jerry?"

"Yes," Jerry said. He paused thoughtfully before he added, "But I think Frank should change his Levis first. Those ones he's wearing are getting a really interesting hole in 'em."

VIII

After the four of them spent an afternoon looking at plants and talking about particles, Courtland took his suitcase and disappeared off somewhere. Frank was not fooled into believing that this meant everything was back to what passed for normal these days. He was getting to know the warning signs of trouble delayed but still in transit.

He'd settle for a postponement, he told himself. Classes had started again, and he once more needed to be everything to everyone all at the same time. A few days of constantly trying to be in three places at once, and Frank was feeling wild-eyed.

Frank must have looked a little crazy, too. "You seem unduly harried," Courtland said with a frown, as he closed the door to his office and locked it. His expression still concerned, he parked at his desk and reached for his pipe. They were meeting for their first tutorial after Courtland's big sleep-over.

"I am harried. Also, hassled. Kind of rattled, too. Not your fault."

Courtland put the pipe back down. His gaze level, he asked, "Truly?"

"Not unless you're all of a sudden a touchy cyclotron electrode that needs inspecting. Or a dopy freshman let loose on an oscilloscope for the first time. Or my latest proof in advanced linear algebra."

As he often did when given the chance, Courtland demonstrated that he was all grown up in spite of the fresh-faced looks. Instead of snatching at Frank's conversational get-out-of-jail-free card, he held his gaze steady. After a few seconds, he added raised eyebrows.

"All right, all right." Frank sat in the guest chair, got up and removed a pile of paper-clipped graph paper from the seat, and sat again. "Maybe, excluding our classes together, some of this is your fault. Some. A little. Only a little."

"A little is still too much." Courtland shook his head. "I screwed up. I shouldn't have come to you last Friday."

"Not as bad as you could have. Screwed up, that is. And, hey, I helped. But we both know it could have been worse."

"Nonetheless, the problem remains. Matters are still, hmm, sliding downhill." Courtland flashed a brief smile mixing mischief and ruefulness, and Frank found he was smiling back. "Let me see what I can come up with in the way of slope remediation. An academic retaining wall, as it were."

"Yeah," Frank said. Courtland was right; they had to try something. They couldn't keep tying themselves into knots every time one of them got careless. Frank would give the doc a month to attempt sorting out the mess. Then, if Courtland couldn't come up with a solution, Frank would have to try. But Courtland was the boss here, the professor, which meant he should have the first crack at a fix.

In the meantime, Frank meant to take advantage of all this improper trespassing, if only to satisfy his own curiosity. "So, I heard you boarded with the Tompkins for a few days after the break."

Courtland's lips moved in silent words that Frank was pretty sure were "--faster than the speed of light." Then, voice back at its usual volume, he said, "I'm at the house now." He sighed. "Mother decided to join Uncle Leland and Aunt Susan in Rome for a while."

Suppressing a wince, Frank instead offered, "Italy's supposed to be nice. What's left of it."

"Yes. So I've heard. And Switzerland is right next door, with its additional attraction of being virtually intact."

"Uh-huh."

"I believe she's also considering traveling through France. What's left of it. Or England, in its current, somewhat battered state. Perhaps both countries. Whatever will give her an excuse to stay away from Southern California for a while. Away from me."

This time Frank didn't bother hiding his wince.

"And I shouldn't have added that last sentence."

Frank shrugged.

"Never mind. It's useless." He worked both hands into his russet hair. The doc really needed a haircut before people thought he was doing a bad job of trying to imitate Einstein with fewer curls. "Can we not be too

close for a while? Just for a while? No, my appeal to the fates comes much too late."

"Huh." Frank studied him. "There must be some way to shove me away. I guess you could start by stealing Felix the cat and dropping him off at the pound."

That earned Frank another stern stare.

"Explain to the freshmen how special relativity makes a good case for astrology. Grade the outbound seniors by throwing their papers down the stairs and seeing where they land. Tell the Dean that Doctor Greerson is full of beans and we need less funding for the grad students this coming year, not more."

The doc was trying to stay severe, but his lips were twitching.

"Force me to wax the Buick with my one good shirt. Send Jerry down to skid row to sell matches to fund the cyclotron, and meanwhile invite Phoebe up to see your etchings while he's gone."

"Oh, wouldn't that be boring all the way--" Courtland stopped dead. "Wait a minute. Are you implying that Jerry and Phoebe are an item?"

With a smack to his forehead, Frank said, "Shoot! I was supposed to tell you about them." He shook his head. "Although I can't believe you didn't notice already. Even if she said you wouldn't."

"But-- Aren't they-- He's three years younger than she is!"

Frank threw back his head and roared.

After a few seconds of increasing exasperation, Courtland said, "Oh, shut up. I merely tend to think of normal people as being, well, normal. You know, as following the typical social conventions in these matters."

Frank got it down to a grin before he said, "I think they've been kind of surprised by how ordinary they are this way. Even so, Phoebe still wants you to understand that there's no chance of anyone running off to Las Vegas to get married and have babies before dissertations are done. Especially her."

"Is my having a say about virtual-state babies part of yet another *in loco parentis* professorial duty that no one warned me about?" Courtland asked plaintively.

"She's worried you'll drop her as a waste of time if you think she might end up a housewife. It's been known to happen."

"God. Please tell me I don't look that much like Harry Throop."

"Nah. And be fair. Doc Throop and Phoebe have been getting along better now that she's figured out how his buttons get punched and is avoiding them. What with Jerry, she's out of circulation. And she dumped her one tight sweater. Also, I think she's taken to baking him cookies sometimes."

"I see. Like a sister. Like a mother. Not a target."
Courtland shook his head. "Even if Harry is so easily appeased, I hope you won't think baked goods are the prescription for all such inappropriate fevers. I don't believe cupcakes would bring my temperature down."

Frank tilted his head. "I wouldn't have pegged you for a cupcake man. Pie, maybe."

"Cake, as a matter of fact." Courtland's expression coagulated. "Please don't tell me that, on top of everything else, you can bake."

"My frosting is hit or miss, but-- Chocolate? Pound?"

"Oh, fu--" Courtland diverted just in time. "--dge."

"My fudge isn't bad. It would sure make for a better offering than waxing the Buick. Smells good, and sampling the results is fun. Do you have a birthday anytime soon?" Frank shook his head, suddenly aware he had stopped teasing at some point. "Okay, when the hell did that become a question I wanted answered?"

Courtland took off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose. Then he put them back on, looked at Frank, and asked, "It's not just the problem we started with anymore, is it? I'll think of something, I promise."

Frank shrugged and then nodded. "Physics?"

"Emphatically. And unlock and open that damned door. I don't want to know what I was thinking when I closed it."

Without another word, Frank did.

A couple of weeks later, Frank almost cracked his head on a conduit when a familiar baritone suddenly asked him, "Frank. Do you have some time free?"

Doctor Tompkins. Frank slid back out through the access panel he had unbolted to double-check rewiring on one of the big electromagnets so fast that his shoulder twinged. "Sure, Doc. I'm free until four." Oh, well. There went eight hours of sleep tonight.

"Then how about lunch at the faculty club?"

To Frank's surprise, Doctor Throop, who was sitting about fifteen feet away with his feet propped up on his lab desk while he read *True: The Men's Magazine* and ate his ham sandwiches, suddenly dropped his feet to the nonconductive flooring with a thud. Those big, blue eyes of his narrowed belligerently -- the guy was good-looking in a corn-fed-beef kind of way -- and he told Frank, "You can take a rain check if you don't feel up to a social occasion."

Huh. That was an attempted tackle on Tompkins by the defense team if Frank had ever heard one. If Tompkins had ever heard one, too: the doc's expression was an interesting mix of irritation, amusement, and approval. Just when you thought you had a guy like Throop neatly labeled and stored in the skunk drawer, he had to go and surprise you.

Too bad Throop's sudden lunge toward decency made it even less likely Frank would grab the chance to duck out on whatever new trouble this was. "That's okay, Doc. I have to eat sometime."

He turned to Tompkins. "Lunch sounds great." Frank would have worn something other than a work shirt and trousers to a fancy meal if he had known it was coming, but life was like that.

"Excellent." Tompkins turned to Throop and asked, the words delicate, "If you're quite certain he's done for the day? You don't have any other little chores you need him to take care of? More inspection, freshman papers graded, your laundry folded?"

Ouch, Frank thought. Tompkins still hit as hard as he had back when he had been Frank's undergraduate advisor.

For his part, Throop ducked his head and glowered before he said, "No. Frank does all his duties well and quickly. He's done." Then he pointedly put his feet back up on his desk and flipped to a new page in *True* before taking a defiant bite out of a Tollhouse cookie.

Frank hastily packed up his tools and stowed the toolbox in the locker he had assigned himself, wondering what the heck was going on. Tompkins waited patiently, saying nothing, smiling faintly while studying this end of the cyclotron facilities. Experience had taught Frank that this kind of bluff, fatherly behavior from Tompkins often rang as false as a busted nickel tossed onto a coin grid at a carnival by a deputy sheriff in plainclothes. Okay, lunch might be tricky.

At least they chatted on the way to the faculty club. Any talk was better than ominous silence, even if their conversation was not really idle, no matter what it might have sounded like to an eavesdropper. In fact, Doctor Tompkins was making sure that nothing interesting had happened to Frank's brain since the last time they had sat down and talked together, about two weeks back.

The faculty club -- named after some dead guy with cash whose name Frank refused to remember -- was based in one of the two buildings left over from the old rancho where Clarence Tenn had been built. It was a long, two-story building with whitewashed adobe walls, red-tiled roofs, dark wooden beams, and a Spanish-style interior. Somehow, Frank doubted that the original household had included all the fancy but fake Mexican furnishings, let alone servants like the student waiters hustling around to take orders from the faculty and alumni having lunch on the courtyard patio beneath the old fig trees.

They got a shady table by the brightly tiled fountain. Doctor Tompkins ordered a Cobb salad and a martini; Frank asked for the chili and stuck to drinking Coke. While they waited for their food to arrive, Frank told Tompkins all about the laboratory section he was teaching this semester and wondered what was coming.

He had managed to get down a few spoonfuls of chili sprinkled with busted-up saltines before Tompkins slid the conversation sideways into, "Well. We'll certainly need to free up some of your time if you're going to help out with our meeting this summer."

Frank did not ask what meeting. Instead, he settled for looking inquiring.

Tompkins forked up some avocado, ate it, and then told him, "It was quite the coup, Doctor Greerson securing us this year's western summer meeting of the American Physical Society. It will be our first time playing host. Of course, our worthy chairman has had a well-deserved run of good fortune over these past few years. I must say, he does know when to seize an opportunity. I was surprised by how quickly he settled on Doctor Courtland from among the possible candidates to succeed Doctor Loomis, for example."

Frank grunted noncommittally. A hard-working young genius with a big local name and buckets of money? It seemed like an easy choice to him.

"Of course, Col is another one who has a good eye, and he also isn't afraid to fish outside of the usual waters. He's taken to noticing what we overlook. Doctor van Staarling told me he'd somehow missed Jerry Figueroa's application in the pool last year; a pity, considering Jerry's statement of interests. I'm ashamed to admit I'd ignored Phoebe Hannaford." The bland, good-natured smile gave way to something faintly wistful. "I understand she and Jerry are dating now?"

"Uh-huh," Frank said. "Pretty seriously, as far as I can tell."

The smile bounced back. "Good. That should guard her from other distractions. She has interesting ideas about parity laws. However, I'm content for her to remain with Col for the moment.

"And then there's you. Not his choice in the first place, but he's brought you along quickly, very quickly. All in all, he's done extremely well with his initial graduate students."

Sometimes, Frank still felt like a horse being handicapped over at the Santa Anita racetrack. Maybe the irritation was what made him say, "Glad you trust Doc Courtland's eye for a candidate. He told me he's scouting for the year after next with some guys he knows who can spot promising undergrads at this group of colleges back east. You know, Wilberforce, Howard, Morehouse, those places?"

For a second, Tompkins went blank. Then, along with an extra glint of appreciation in his gaze, he found the smile again. "That should be interesting. Col does enjoy expanding our horizons."

"I guess. Like you said, the doc goes after the overlooked ones." Since Frank would not be around the academic year after next, he had not bothered much with Courtland's latest shenanigans, but it was not as if partial differential equations cared about skin color. Look at Chandrasekhar and Tomonaga. So maybe Frank should not care, either. After all, he had learned not to worry about the drivers who supplied his platoon via the Red Ball Highway. There were also those field artillery guys at St. Lô. That was a pretty math-dependent military operations specialty, so likely some--

Tompkins interrupted his musings. "Would you anticipate any problems?"

"Well, yeah, but not from whoever we get. He'll be hand-picked and ready to go. The faculty-- I don't get an opinion even if there was something I could do. A few of the skulls belonging to other grad students might need to be cracked together until a little light leaks in, but that'll be someone else's problem. I'll be gone by then."

"As to your leaving..." Tompkins leaned back and took a sip from his martini. "You know, you've exceeded all our hopes for you. That second paper you and Col are putting together is interesting. Exceedingly interesting."

"I suppose."

"And you'll be presenting as well at the section meeting this summer, following up on your *Review* work?" Without waiting for an answer, he said, "You're developing nicely on the social front, too. I know you're now viewed as quite the force of nature among the other graduate students, and Doctor Greerson was pleased by how well you handled our visitors from the Pentagon. You left behind a good impression of us all."

For a moment, Frank was puzzled. Then he realized Tompkins must mean that pair of Army Air Corps majors Frank had been handed to babysit after some meeting or other of theirs with van Staarling about atmospheric dynamics and flow. He and the fly-boys had ended up going drinking together and trading a bunch of half-veiled corps-versus-corps and noncom-versus-officers insults, the way you did. They had then swapped some war stories, the way you also did, but the evening had been nothing special. He didn't know why these majors had supposedly turned thumbs up on the

whole department over something so minor. It seemed safest not to react. Frank kept his mouth shut.

"You're going to be asked to stay on to finish your Ph.D. here."

Now it was Frank's turn to go blank for a moment. Then he said, "Doc--"

Tompkins raised a hand to interrupt him. "Personally, I think you should say yes, especially considering the revised funding you'll be offered. We're neither Northwestern nor Chicago, but we've been rising fast. As a result, with resources so abundant since the end of the war, I imagine we'll grow a great deal more in the next few years. But that's neither here nor there. I'm more interested in what Doctor Courtland had to say. Doctor Greerson had asked me to approach him about your future, but Col came to me first."

Okay, this was where they had been going. "Uh-huh?"

"Good. It's getting harder to tell what you're feeling. I do need to know, though. What do you actually think of Doctor Courtland?"

Frank did not hesitate for long. Doc Tompkins was a lot more dangerous than he looked, but he also seemed to care more about physics than anything else. As near as Frank could tell, politics and power were just two more tools for him, one big reason Greerson was still solidly in place as the chairman of the department. So honesty was likely the least dangerous tactic here.

He still had to find a way to frame his emotions so they seemed safer, more ordinary. For a second or two, he mentally flailed. Then he said, "You have to know what kind of physicist he is. You were at Los Alamos together."

"Where he was one of the junior theoreticians. Mostly working on computational problems because of that inborn talent of his. But, yes, the ideas he was pondering were already impressive."

"He's also one hell of a teacher."

"So I understand."

Nothing helpful there. Frank let himself sigh. "Well, we both like hiking. And motorcycles. And physics for fun, not just physics for work. I keep having this itch to find out if he bowls or if he shoots pool. He introduced me to his ma. And he loaned me his copy of *Gentlemen's Agreement* when I mentioned I wanted to read it, and I loaned him back some old issues of *Weird Tales* and *Astounding Stories* so he'd have something simple lying around for when he wanted to relax."

Frank looked up from studying his chili. "Also, the doc should get a better haircut before his girlfriend notices that mess growing on his head and is annoyed, which would be a pity because she's one cute number." He felt himself look away even as he added, "Once, I almost asked him out drinking. On my wife's birthday. What would have been my wife's birthday. He'd have probably said yes." Frank swallowed. "We keep starting to be friends. Except he's my advisor. I think it worries him."

The noise Tompkins made was noncommittal. His words were not. "For once, Doctor Greerson seems to have been a little too successful with one of his schemes. Col does worry. It's why he came to me."

"Yeah. He would care about that kind of stuff."

"Legitimate 'stuff,' as you put it. He wants to avoid unduly preferential treatment. There are also the problems that arise from emotional bias. Friends fight; they make excuses for each other. As well, he's rightly afraid of putting unintentional intellectual pressure on you. The two of you work very productively together, but he doesn't want to lure you off into areas that won't sustain your interest in years to come or that won't exploit your abilities to their utmost while they're at their peak."

Frank snorted. "Like he's all that big on stellar structure with a side of gravitational theory. I'm more worried about distracting him." Even as the words got out, he knew they should have stayed in.

Tompkins' lips stretched. It didn't look much like his usual smile. "I begin to see why he's concerned. Your relations are shaping to be a great deal more fraternal than I would have predicted, having known both of you before you met."

Fraternal. Not even close. Frank shrugged. "We study physics. We share some likes. We're both doing something different than what we were bred to do. There's more overlap than shows. It happens."

"It also matters that you two collaborate effectively. Effectively enough that we don't want anything peripheral interrupting you until you've done whatever you can do together." Tompkins ate a few more bites of salad.

Tired of all this elaborate wind-up, ready for the pitch, Frank said, "So I'm sure you figured out something."

After wiping his lips with his napkin, Tompkins said, "We did." He leaned back in his chair. "Although the position will be rather more informal than usual, Col will still be your primary academic mentor. However, I," every hint of his usual smile disappeared, "as the other departmental member of your committee, will now take over his official duties as your advisor."

"You'll be the one tearing me a new one whenever it's needed."

"I'll decide when discipline is required, yes. There's still enough social distance between us for that to remain an effective deterrent." His smile crept back. Under the circumstances, it was kind of terrifying. "Someday, you and I will also be friends." The smile went away again. "Just not right now."

Eying him warily, Frank said, "Okay."

"Good." The doc picked up his fork, obviously considering the best way to bring on the discipline. Then he stabbed some lettuce and said, "You'll be taking a tutorial with me this summer, along with the one you'll be having with Doctor Courtland to wrap up your thesis."

Great. Tutorials were twice as much work as normal seminars. "Sure."

"I know Col has been encouraging you to cast your topical net wide, to both your benefits. It's good that he's working on sub-atomic issues again. But I expect you to be doing more with those ideas you have about stellar evolution than you have thus far." Tompkins' gaze over his plate was both level and deadly as a rifle muzzle. "The ones you say don't especially interest him."

Frank started to open his mouth to defend Courtland, who had chewed over astrophysics with him at length, realized just in time that such knee-jerk partisanship was part of the problem that needed solving here, and shut his mouth again.

Tompkins beamed at him. "Col certainly is a good influence on you. I'm glad we can salvage most of your academic relationship." The beam grew brighter. "Which is why I'll be watching to make sure neither of you puts a foot over the line. When it pertains to your education, that is." His eyes finally joined in on all the beaming. "None of this means you can't speak to him about that haircut. In fact, I do wish you would."

Feeling a little stunned, Frank stuck to nodding. Otherwise, he was busy hoping that he was nuts to be suddenly thinking that Tompkins could have been that other guy at Los Alamos who helped Courtland figure out-- No. Really not likely. In any case, there were some lower-order probabilities in day-to-day life that it was better to ignore. This wasn't quantum field theory.

"You should finish your chili," Tompkins said. "It's a specialty of the house."

"Yeah, it's pretty good."

"The cake is good here, too. Try the velvet spice."

When ignorance was a good idea, only a dope probed too deep. Instead, Frank spent a few minutes eating and thinking hard about his own future. Then he pushed his bowl away, waited for a gap in Tompkins' latest flow of chatter about the arrangements for the summer physics conference, and asked, "So. Exactly what was the department thinking about nudging in my direction to help fund my dissertation?"

Frank went over to Courtland's office afterward and waited until the doc came back from his Introduction to Physics (II) lecture. For once, Courtland was alone rather than having a string of freshmen following along after him like so many science ducklings.

Seeing Frank propping up a wall in the corridor, Courtland looked quizzical. Frank allowed himself a reassuring smile, but he waited to talk until they were alone in the office together. He sure hoped his continuing inspections for electronic eavesdroppers were working.

Courtland had left the door open, but that was okay for this conversation. Frank opened with, "I had lunch with Doctor Tompkins."

"And how did it go?" Neutral, very neutral.

Gazing up at the ceiling, Frank said, "Y'know, none of this will solve our biggest problem."

"I know. But it was the best I could come up with under pressure. Please tell me if and when you think of something better."

"I've got nothing." Frank snorted. "Or maybe that's only my skinny wallet drowning out my busy brain. Who funded the Alvin P. Farley Fellowships for the Physical Sciences, anyhow?"

"I'm sure I don't know. Is it a good fellowship?"

"Plump. Really plump. What would you think of helping supervise my dissertation if I stay?"

The doc didn't miss a beat. "As if I were tied between two horses, one galloping off toward satisfaction and one toward frustration. Not that my feelings should matter."

"Fine. I get that. Not true about their not mattering, but I get that. Just as well you talked to Tompkins when you did."

"If I'm understanding what you're saying, I certainly hope switching back to him as your official advisor will be enough."

"Believe me, I hope so, too." Frank shook his head, trying to weigh the probabilities one last time. After a

few seconds, he gave up. "Anyhow, there's one more thing I have to tell you."

"Yes?"

"You should get a better haircut, Doc. And soon."

IX

From what seemed like an immense distance, Frank noticed that he was talking a lot. Not that noticing stopped him.

"--and so we graduated in the middle of June and had a party and got married two days later and then had another party that afternoon. And all this was really easy, y'see, because Sally was boarding with my ma by then, what with the promise of the job at the library she had. Been promised. So they -- she and Ma -- could do a lot of logistics work together. For parties. And for the graduation and the wedding and all that."

"Very wise," Courtland said, starting to nod. Then he stopped. Frank could have told him that moving his head would be a bad idea after the last round of Scotch and sodas.

"Yeah. And Sally was head of the class and got to give the speech at graduation because my last English teacher hated me. An A-, the bastard, just because I wanted to talk more like the other fellas up-slope and not a Joe College when I wasn't getting to go anyhow. Fuck him. Rubbing it in. So I told Sally the way I talked made me even more glad she was head of the class and would give the speech at graduation, besides her being so smart and all, which I think is one more reason she said yes. She would marry me. And that's why today is my wedding anniversary. Was."

The doc considered. "Is."

"And was. No, is. Unless it's past midnight, in which case was, not is."

"Well reasoned. Another drink?" Courtland asked, pointing toward the mostly-empty crystal decanter with a forefinger that only wavered a little.

"Uh-uh. No more for me. I get sick. Also, I talk kind of a lot if I get sloshed."

"Not on my grandmother's carpet, I hope. It's a Mir Seraband." The last word came out very slowly.

"So no more drinks, even classy ones. But thank you for all the good Scotch. Also, the matrix theory brainstorming before the drinks. Except now I can't go home."

With a brief wave of his hand, the doc said magnanimously, "Stay over. I have... guest rooms here. And toast for tomorrow morning. There's one." He pointed across the hall. "I'll show you." After starting to get up, he sat back down quickly. "Or maybe not."

"That's okay. I'll find it. Past the bathroom?"

"Past the bathroom, yes."

It only took opening the doors to the linen closet and the bathroom to find the spare bedroom, and finding the bathroom first was kind of convenient. It was the same bathroom where he had wanted to get into Courtland's trousers all those months ago. He still wanted to get into Courtland's trousers, but the doc was missing right now. And if Frank did not start paying attention, he was going

to miss something else, even if there was not some fancy, oriental rug in here to take damage. Only fancy tiles.

Frank remembered to wash his hands and use the guest towels when he was done, and he resisted the urge to detour toward the study or maybe sing as he wandered back into the bedroom. He even managed to get most of his clothes off before he climbed between the sheets of the guest bed. What he did not remember to do was shut the curtains. Light from the rising sun hit him like a sledgehammer the next morning.

He made it back into the bathroom just in time. After a rest on the nice, cool tiles, he stuck his head under the cold faucet. Then he decided he could not handle a shave yet no matter what he looked like in the big mirror over the marble sink, even though there was a fresh safety razor in the cabinet. Instead, he went across the hall to check on Courtland.

Sure enough, the doc had never made it off the couch in his study. Sleeping, he'd twisted himself face-first into the leather where the back met the seat as if he intended to burrow for spare change beneath the cushions.

Frank hated to disturb him, but there were servants running around this place. At least Frank knew to be extra gentle when he woke up Courtland.

"Crap," was the doc's first word, drawn out most of the way into a moan.

"Bathroom?"

"I'm not moving. Not ever again." Courtland stayed very still.

Frank was okay with that. He could sit down carefully and quietly on the table in front of the couch, some blocky, Japanese-style item that would take his weight. There was not much light in this room right now, which was good, even if all the writing in chalk on the blackboards in front of the bookshelves hurt his eyes.

A couple of minutes passed. It was peaceful. At last, Courtland asked, "Did we drink a great deal of scotch last night?"

"Yeah."

"Did we do anything else?"

"Nah. Bathroom?"

"I'll move in a minute or two more. I promise."

"Should have undone your belt buckle and taken your shoes off."

"Shut up."

"Right."

Frank decided he could sit here all morning. Now the room was hardly spinning at all. Maybe his stomach would finish settling soon.

"Oh, God," Courtland said, with a sort of sluggish, all-body writhe that looked as if he was going to start

digging for treasure again. In other circumstances, the move might have been really interesting. He still did not turn over, though. Instead he paused in the slow-motion squirm or whatever it was. "We've taken turns getting drunk at each other's houses."

After considering, Frank said, "Uh-huh. You know what that means."

"I refuse to think about it. Or about anything else. Except, possibly, death."

"We are now officially pals. Buddies, even."

"I believe I hate you just now, Mr. Franklin Nathan Mackenzie."

Smiling would hurt too much. "You'll hate me more at breakfast. Does your cook serve eggs?"

Courtland's moan was truly pitiful.

It was not like the doc and Frank were suddenly running around together all of the time, the way you did when you were little kids. They did not go fishing at their special pond, or build a secret clubhouse, or take to swapping baseball cards in the bushes behind Talbot Hall. In fact, they had yet to spend much time together that did not involve either physics or alcohol. The only real change was their no longer having to pretend not to care. However, given how much time Frank spent having to lie, this chance to be honest about something was still a relief.

There was one collection of facts belonging to a secret club that he and the doc swapped pretty quickly, but that was only to be expected. In fact, their very next Sunday brainstorming session after the Great Anniversary Drunk ended with Courtland turning away from the chalkboards in his study and saying, "I think we've both had enough for today. Let's go outside and enjoy all the Southern California sun and incinerator fumes, along with a couple of drinks."

Frank hoisted eyebrows at him.

"Lemonade," Courtland said repressively. "Or limeade. Unless you'd prefer a Coke?"

"No, limeade is good."

They headed out to where a couple of redwood chairs were parked on the lawn by one of those tables with a sunshade attached to it. There was a nice view of the lily pond. Mr. Higgins followed them with a tray that held linen napkins, an engraved silver pitcher full of limeade, and a couple of glasses heavy enough to do some good in a bar brawl. No straws, though.

After waiting until the butler had glided off, Frank said, "I can't tell if he disapproves of me or what."

"I believe it's 'what.' He feels my having to care for dependents forces me to behave."

"Maybe you should get a dog."

"The only one in a doghouse around here is me. Higgins is a great admirer of my mother."

"Ouch."

"Yes. The air of reproach still lingers painfully."

"Does he know what you two fought about?"

"No, thank heavens, or my domestic life wouldn't be worth living. None of the staff know. We Courtlands try to be discreet around our people, for all the good that does in the end." Courtland grimaced. "More to the point, Mother hires and fires partially in accordance with her hatred of tattle-tales and sneaks. At least it helps to reduce the threat of extortion, even if I think it may also be one of the reasons I'm so deeply in her black books at the moment."

Frank nodded, taking a swallow. These Pasadena types possessed enough moolah for the doc to have a big bull's-eye painted across the shoulders of every pricy tweed jacket he owned. If he wanted to do anything else with himself besides be homosexual, he kind of had to lie, although his ma would not know that, not having lived the life and learned its hard lessons.

"At least I also get the protection that goes along with all this." He waved his glass toward the house "Not like the other men who were at the Frisco that night."

"Try not to think about it, okay? You'll just make yourself nuts without being able to fix anything." Frank promptly ignored his own advice. "Me, I'm still amazed

all our names weren't printed in the local paper the next day, like usual."

"That may have been Uncle William's fine hand at work. Or perhaps some other patron had enough influence. I don't know. That was the only time I've ever been swept up in a raid."

"Lucky. My one other time, I made it out the window and over a wall before they caught me."

Courtland shuddered.

"It wasn't too bad. That was in Europe, and I'm still not sure the M.P.s knew what they'd wandered into. I didn't stick around to find out. I've been more fortunate, or maybe more careful, back here."

"Alas, the siren call of sock-hops," Courtland said with a rueful grin.

"Yup," Frank said. They clinked glasses in a toast.

"Just how familiar are you with the local joints?" Frank asked the doc after another good swallow of limeade.

"What with most of my education having been elsewhere, not as familiar as I wish I was, especially given that the FBI may be tripping lightly and fantastically in my footsteps. Right now, I'm afraid to accept any invitations to parties from the people I know."

"I get you. So how about we talk some names?"

This time he ignored Courtland's smile -- a little too affectionate, a little too knowing -- in favor of closing his eyes and mustering a different kind of knowledge than he usually displayed at the doc's command. Then he started speaking.

--so, all in all, you might want to stick to the baths when you can. The Crystal Baths or maybe the Palace would probably be good for you if you don't mind that kind of hit and run."

"If I wasn't interested before, I certainly would be by now."

"Hey, if the pressure has built up to the point where this is an emergency--"

"Don't. Don't even offer as a joke," Courtland said, rolling his eyes behind his glasses. They were a nice greeny-brown, a color something like a forest pond in this bright sunshine. "Even without that kind of kidding around, I have been informed, at length, that we already have a burgeoning reputation as the Martin and Lewis of Clarence Tenn Polytechnic. Or perhaps I should say the Laurel and Hardy."

"Is this another fine mess you've gotten me into?"

"Not yet. We are very, very lucky that it's the beginning of my career, that Doctor Loomis thought he was retiring and had cleared his roster of graduate students, and that I thus have enough time available to indulge myself the way I do around you without arousing much criticism or envy. And we'd still be courting disaster if you weren't as academically gifted as you are, even if

that's part of my ongoing difficulty." His gaze was serious.

"You only like me for my brains? I thought it was the resemblance to your gardeners." Frank smirked. The doc tossed a wadded-up napkin at him, which missed. They drank some more limeade.

After the pause, Frank said, "The joints closer to Pasadena would be easier, but you also might run into someone you know there."

"Doesn't that happen to everyone, sooner or later? Even I, with all the time I've spent away at school, have noticed a few of the usual suspects in my family's social circles. Before I learned I was deemed an active security risk, I thought the occasional random encounter with an acquaintance might help enrich my private life. Nothing's working out the way I expected." Courtland shook his head. "But at least I'm not in jail. And I still have a shot at tenure. And my papers get read."

"So you won't be heading for Paris any time soon."

"Even if a certain act is legal there, no. I want to do physics. And it's terrifying how many scholars don't care how accurate your work is if they don't like what you are." He turned to look back across the lawn toward the terrace. "I wonder if Uncle Leland would take the house off my hands?"

"Huh?"

"I don't think Mother is all that fond of Italy. But I don't think she'll come back as long as I'm still here. If Leland

gives me a reasonable price, she can tend to the household while he and Susan are overseas, they can all share the familial duties when everyone is in residence, and I can find something less overwhelming and rather closer to Clarence Tenn. Besides, Leland has two offspring to snatch up the banner when he falls, unlike me. Skip is even a decent sort who knows an architectural masterpiece when he sees one. When he was down from Stanford last time, he managed to make sense while praising the foyer."

"Didn't you grow up in this place? It's a very nice shack."

"Do you still live in Big Bear? It's beautiful in the San Bernardino Mountains. Besides, I'm twenty-four. Perhaps it's time for something new."

"Okay, okay. I hear you. But I thought you were thinking about getting married. Maybe."

Courtland shook his head. "Even with the sort of marriage I could have, I don't think I would want someone more interested in all this than in me."

"Good point."

"Thank you."

"You should still hold on to that Chinese-type lamp with the sailing ships on its shade."

"I'll keep that in mind."

Having finally been freed from service to the cyclotron, Frank had taken to dropping in on the nickel-ante poker night first started by one of Tompkins' students who had recently finished up his Ph.D. and left for Bell Laboratories. Barry Green had inherited the game, and he invited Jerry to tag along, too. To Frank's surprise, they also ended up with Phoebe sometimes joining in. Maybe she was welcome because a lot of the graduate students were out of town for the summer, or maybe the others were fascinated by the sight of a woman playing poker, or maybe they were hoping for cookies; sometimes, Frank could not tell what ordinary guys were thinking. Maybe they were not thinking.

That evening in late June, it was just the four of them and Quentin Purvis sitting around the table. Quentin liked to talk a lot, hoping to distract his fellow players. Like usual, he was starting a diversion even as he finished up the deal. "So, you folks going to the big Fourth of July barbecue at the van Staarlings'?"

"We have a choice?" Barry said. "I'm in." He shoved three white chips forward.

"Fold," Frank said in turn. He got up to get a drink. "You can always plead relatives. Or a girlfriend."

Barry blew a raspberry. "My kin are up in Oregon. And girlfriends, if they matter, are expected to attend, as you'd know if you'd stop trying to sequentially evaluate the charms of every single available co-ed." He paused. "Jerry."

Jerry looked up. "Hmm?"

"Play the game."

"Oh. Call." Jerry shifted some chips into the pot.

"I'm folding," Phoebe said, and asked Quentin, "Will you be attending?"

"Heck, yeah. Last year van Staarling and that guy from the astronomy department, Stabe, almost started a brushfire when they lit the grill. Whoosh! Those ribs were good, too. I think all the leaping flames helped. And free food is never to be spurned."

There was a murmur of agreement around the table.

Quentin nodded sagely at this acknowledgement of his profundity. "If Courtland's coming this first year, that means the entire department will be there."

Everyone looked over at Frank, who shrugged. "Does he ever not do social stuff he's supposed to?"

"I yield your point, sir. I'm calling. Who wants what?"

"Two cards," Barry told him. "The grub this time should be extra good since I figure they'll be fattening us up because we'll be staffing the Sectional meeting this month. Hooray."

Quentin snorted. "Like it'll kill you to show your face around your future professional association."

"I hate pretending I volunteered when I was drafted."

"This isn't being drafted. Blockaded into Berlin was being drafted. Occupying Japan is being drafted."

"Careful with that word," Barry said, tone now serious. "We're physicists. We may all end up by being drafted someday soon and set to slaving over steaming hot cauldrons of radioisotopes. Even including our departmental veteran, here. Hey, Jerry. You figured out the odds yet?"

"One card, please."

"And that's two dealt to me," Quentin said, suiting his actions with the deck to his words. "Anyhow, the cackle is that there will be some interesting attendees at Sectional this year."

"Aren't there usually?" Phoebe asked. "Seems as if the gentlemen from Cal have a certain reputation all on their own, and they might come."

"Not merely the usual attendees. There's also some fellows traveling from back east. One name in particular was a big, big surprise."

Barry waved a hand holding a red chip in the air. "Are we playing here or what? I'm raising five." After tossing his chip in the direction of the center of the table, he added, "Go on, Quentin. It's obvious you want us to ask, so I'm asking. What's the big, big news?"

"Teller's coming. Doctor Edward Teller from Chicago."

Frank, who had been at the sideboard, about to open a bottle of beer, put down the church key and turned

around. He felt a little like moaning but settled for saying, "Oh, great. Courtland is going to be pi...leased."

"Doctor Tompkins won't be jumping with joy, either." Barry frowned. "You sure, Quentin?"

Quentin merely nodded. He was Doctor Greerson's current bright-eyed boy, and the chairman may not have used his graduate students to wash cars, but he did have them do clerical chores when he felt it necessary.

"I'll see and raise you ten," Jerry said. "I've never heard anything about this Doctor Teller. Is he as bad as all that?"

"Betting's getting too rich for me," Quentin told him. "Fold. Maybe. Who knows? But there's also a thing going on, a regional thing. Teller's bunch didn't get along with Oppenheimer's at Los Alamos, which means the Cal guys mostly can't stand him, which kind of spread out from there. And neither Tompkins nor Courtland like him, as Barry and Frank have so kindly attested to for us, so dear old Clarence Tenn is also poisoned ground."

"Be truuuue to your APS seection," Barry sang atonally. "Fight, fight, fight for the quantum white and Pacifiic blue. I'll see you, Jerry-boy. What do you have?"

"Flush. In spades."

"Dang," Barry said. "My three kings are now really sad."

Jerry frowned down at his hand, spread face-up on the table. "So, if this Doctor Teller isn't well liked at Clarence Tenn, and we're the hosts of our summer Sectional this year, why is he attending a conference in a section he doesn't even belong to?"

"That's the sixty-four dollar question, isn't it?" Quentin asked. "I can hardly wait to learn the answer. Mind you, we're all physicists around here, which means we're far, far above petty little personal feuds and inappropriate, scurrilous gossip, so totally inconsequential in comparison to the impersonal and inexorable advance of human knowledge inherent in scientific research."

It took Barry picking up the deck and shuffling to stop the mocking hoots of laughter.

X

The Fourth of July had dawned warm with a slight breeze tumbling along the mountain slopes to dilute the city vapors. By mid-afternoon, the sun blazed down on a celebrating Southland. The sky was lacquer blue overhead, free for a change from anything much in the way of the usual exhaust. Instead, Frank could smell cooking as his own neighborhood enjoyed their Fourth of July picnics and parties. There was a slow crackle of exploding firecrackers outside, and the yips and howls of unhappy dogs. After putting down some litter for Felix, who had mysteriously decided to hide under Frank's bed, he headed for his motorcycle. At least he didn't see any smoke from accidental fires yet on his way over to the van Staaings'.

The van Staaing spread was located in the faculty neighborhood to the north of Clarence Tenn, out where the floodplain rose up to meet the foothills and the mountains behind them. Their river-rock house had a big backyard without anything beyond it but empty hillsides covered by sun-browned bunch grass, patchy chaparral, and scattered oak trees.

This shortage of neighbors was just as well, given that Quentin had not been kidding about that barbecue. It was a huge, old-fashioned structure, built out of the same cemented cobbles as the house was, with two broad iron grills set into its top. Most of the physics and astronomy faculties seemed determined to use the massive object to verify the thermal capacities of meat during various conditions of extremely rapid incineration.

Frank had brought along a couple of chilled tins packed with layers of deviled eggs between waxed paper. The eggs were greeted by Mrs. van Staarling and the other faculty wives with a lot more surprise and pleasure than seemed needed. When Mrs. Greerson told him he was a dear man for the second time, Frank retreated into the backyard before somebody kissed him or something.

One good look at the barbecue, and Frank kept moving. Anything involving explosives or incendiaries was not on his list of fun times these days, not since France. He figured he would be okay with whatever these maniacs who were usually his colleagues could come up with in the way of fireworks if he paced himself, but what they were doing to that charcoal was not pacing.

Courtland had been part of the grill convention, and it was not Frank's job to dance attendance on him during social get-togethers like this anyhow. Everyone else who was neither a firebug nor back in the kitchen dealing with baking potatoes and crusty French bread, corn on the cob, leafy green salads, and strawberry pie was scattered in clusters across the rest of the backyard. Frank traded a couple of waves but walked on.

There were galvanized tubs sitting near the stairs to the back porch with soda and beer on ice in them. The inevitable plump bottles of red wine in straw cradles were already sitting atop the long, wooden tables set up beneath the shade of the cedars by the detached garage. He snagged himself a Shasta ginger ale from a tub and sat down on a bench at one of the still-empty tables.

The growing crowd was mostly stag and pretty lively; even while having to be careful, Frank could settle back

and enjoy the scenery. A couple of graduate students who had invited themselves along from engineering had somehow hauled the van Staarlings' big radio/phonograph outside onto the scraggly lawn and run an extension cord back indoors; out of respect for the mixed ages of the crowd, they were playing the new Doris Day record rather than the latest jazz. Two fellows he didn't recognize were pacing off the backyard and debating how they would design an in-ground pool for these surroundings. Several girlfriends were gossiping over by the record player, also pleasing to the eye in an abstract, flower garden kind of way. Over in a corner, some of the guys he knew from the observatory were playing horseshoes and making stupid bets involving Cepheid variables. He was thinking about getting up to go join them when someone sat down next to him and said, "Hello, Frank."

He turned. It was Penelope -- no, Pen -- the doc's girlfriend. She looked nice and cool in a billowing dress of green linen cinched in at the waist with a wide belt; the outfit flattered her without being anything that might make Doc Throop wander over toward their table. Frank wondered why he had not anticipated her arrival. Even knowing what he knew about her, she would still count as mattering in the eyes of the other faculty members, which meant she would be expected to attend.

With a nod of greeting, he said, "Surprised you're not indoors with the other officers' wives."

"I'll go inside in a bit." She was using those flirtatious tones of hers. "Right now, I'm fulfilling another part of my social duties by making sure Col's students are

settling in comfortably. Especially you," she added, lowering her long eyelashes demurely.

"I haven't seen Phoebe and Jerry around yet," he said, ignoring the teasing.

"They're hiding behind the garage. Phoebe is sneaking a fast cigarette while Jerry stands guard."

"Huh. I didn't even know Phoebe smoked."

"She doesn't. As a proper southern lady, she only soothes her nerves with smoldering tobacco. And never in public."

"Nothing's wrong, is it?"

"Aside from a young woman of her beauty and brains having to spend an entire afternoon between the rock of her professors and the hard place of their spouses? Not a thing."

After considering her, Frank said, "Sounds like you know her pretty well."

"Oh, we've met before. We had tea together twice beneath the eagle-like gaze of Catherine Courtland. Phoebe also thought to leave me a message warning me about Col's quarrel with his mother, a favor that I much appreciated, especially given that she hadn't heard all the gruesome details and didn't know the true scale of the conflict."

Frank winced as the penny finally dropped. "Ma Courtland meant for Phoebe to be your relief pitcher."

"That would be my guess." She was using a trick Frank also sometimes employed, one involving looking around without moving her head much, to double-check who might be within earshot of their table. Right now, between the rival delights of the chemical warfare platoon at the barbecue, the horseshoes, and the folks fooling around with the record player, that would be no one.

Relaxing a little, she told him, "A relief catcher might be the better comparison. Just in case Col wasn't getting the right signals about his pitching from me."

"The doc must have been thrilled. He's not big on having us distracted."

"He did seem to think Mrs. Courtland was presuming. I pointed out that we were lucky my supposed substitute was uninterested in the marital game, given that he and I aren't exactly hurrying to close out our inning."

"Should I be hearing this?"

"Why not?" Her smile was playful. "Even with Col being the soul of discretion, I find I'm not worried about you, considering our conversation on Christmas Eve. It's fairly obvious, at least to me, why you would be his favorite student. Any scholarly reasons aside."

Yeah, Frank had not exactly hid his hairpins from her, had he? He wondered if he looked as sheepish as he felt. "Don't get the wrong idea, okay? The doc's been good. Close to the perfect professor."

"Why am I not surprised?" The sigh was as long-suffering as her expression was friendly, but the way she reached over to rest her hand on his forearm made him glad he was not likely to misunderstand her intentions. Voice low and a touch husky, she said, "I'm sure you could help him cope with all that perfection."

"Not sure he wants helping." He corrected himself. "Not sure it would be such a great idea."

He could tell by the laughter in her eyes that she was teasing again when she said, "Oh, Frank. Given what even I have heard about your reputation, I did expect better of you." Ever so gently, she reached out to stroke the neckline of the shirt he was wearing with one short, carmine-tinted fingernail.

"Hey, Frank."

Frank suppressed a start at the interruption. "Yeah, Jerry?"

Jerry was standing right next to the table, holding half a dozen bottles of ketchup. "I have to distribute these. Where we'll be eating. Could you give Phoebe a hand with the mustard?" His attention shifted to Pen. "Hi, Miss Hamilton. I think Doctor Courtland was asking after you."

For some reason, she seemed even more amused by the summons. "Thank you, Jerry." Getting up, she sauntered off gracefully in the direction of the barbecue.

Jerry shifted slightly to watch her walk away, looking a little vague. He was good at that.

"Ketchup?" Frank prompted him. "Mustard? Phoebe?"

"I'm right here," Phoebe said from Frank's other side. Okay, when dinner rolled around, he was sitting at a table farther away from the garage. All this sneaking up was getting on his nerves.

"Why don't you come help me?" Phoebe asked him, the words as sweet as sugar.

Uh-huh. Abandoning his ginger ale, Frank got up and followed her toward the house. Sure enough, she stopped well short of the back porch.

"Okay, Phoebe. What is it really?"

"I know it's mostly automatic on your part, but do you truly think the professor's steady is the person with whom you want to be seen flirting by the entire physics faculty, not to mention most of the astronomers, a couple of the chemists, one of the geologists, and many of their wives?"

Frank opened his mouth to muster a defense and then closed it again. Nope, he had set himself up for this one. He settled for saying, "It wasn't anything serious, and the doc won't mind."

"That's because he trusts y'all. Even I trust y'all. Well, Pen. And you, I think. But you know what they say about gossip around Clarence Tenn."

"Cripes. Not that again."

"Always," she said, managing to get two distinct syllables out of it. "And I'm not the only one who's watching. Here comes Doctor Courtland. Be friendly."

"I am friendly. Me and Doc Courtland, buddies and pals."

"No, be visibly friendly." Her look was exasperated. "Joke around with him or something. Don't have any sort of serious discussion that could possibly be read as an argument. You could try smiling for once."

"I thought this was a barbecue, not the school dance."

She did not bother with a retort. Instead she said, raising her voice. "Well, I think I can just about manage the mustard now. Thank you for your help." With an angelic smile of her own, she departed for where Jerry was carefully placing ketchup bottles atop the invisible intersection points of the axis of symmetry of the wooden tables.

"What help?" Frank asked her departing back. "For that matter, what mustard?"

Turning to Courtland, he said, "Y'know, not too long ago I was the hermit of Clarence Tenn. There are times when I miss that."

"Frighteningly, I comprehend what you just said."

"You want to get farther away from 'Love Somebody'?"

"I admit, I prefer Peggy Lee as a singer."

They strolled over to a corner of the yard where someone had parked an old-fashioned, slat-backed bench by a rock garden, and sat. Frank said, "I'm supposed to be joking around with you in order to fend off gossip. Want to hear the one about the House Un-American Activities Committee and the three monkeys?"

"Is that why Pen was sent over in response to a nonexistent message, and now is going into a huddle with Phoebe?"

"Yeah. Seems she was flirting with me a little too much for the tastes of your bodyguards, sometimes also known as your graduate students."

Courtland's huff mixed annoyance and amusement. "This is why I don't like my students to be involved--"

"Just give it up. It's not going to work in this department. We're all hand-raised like a bunch of orphaned lambs."

After a moment, Courtland laughed before relaxing back against the bench. "True. This is worse than Oppie's cabal back at Cal."

"Physics." Frank shrugged. "It's what happens when you can fit, oh, every cosmologist in the country into the same Pullman berth."

"Not for much longer. But, yes." His gaze shifted toward Frank. "Did you mind Pen flirting?"

"Nope. Sauce for the gander, sauce for the goose. I'm the Dean Martin in this Martin and Lewis routine, right?"

Courtland smiled. "Right. And flirting is good camouflage."

"You bet. Smart lady."

"She is."

"Speaking of being smart, you get any use out of our man-to-man chat about places to see in the Southland?"

For a few, too short, very tasty seconds, Courtland looked sultry. "Cleanliness is next to godliness. Or perhaps not."

"Glad to hear it." Frank's eyes narrowed, and he half-twisted to gaze back across the lawn. "Hey. What the hell--"

The fireball rising up from the barbecue was impressive. Frank felt himself flinch back, and then felt the doc's hand strong on his shoulder, squeezing hard. Courtland said, "I told them the breeze from the northeast meant that they should take into account..." He trailed off, shaking his head as he let go.

"Wow. Is that a fire extinguisher Mrs. van Staarling has there?"

"Hmm. Looks like it is. She's rather deft with it, isn't she?"

"Sure is. But bye-bye to all those ribs that were waiting for the grills."

"There are more. And at least Doctor Stabe might get to keep his eyebrows this year. Not to mention postponing the brushfire until after the fireworks." Courtland got up. "Shall we go help out?"

"Yeah. Although I wasn't counting on dealing with explosives until later." Frank stood, still feeling a little tense. "I don't like burning stuff near my face."

"No wonder you don't smoke." Courtland slapped him on the shoulder, the good one. "Maybe we can pass around some of those deviled eggs I heard you brought along, to appease the ravenous pangs of graduate student hunger until the charcoal burns down properly."

"That's not going to take long at this rate," Frank said, voice a little awed in his own ears.

Courtland's lips twisted sardonically. "American physicists. Your reliable source for the biggest and best incinerations."

Now it was Frank's turn to knuckle the doc gently in the upper arm. "Come help me hand out eggs."

Later that evening, Frank was back at the same table by the garage, nursing a beer and watching as much as he could see in the dark of the gleeful bedlam at the other end of the yard as the grad students set off fireworks and then chased down any fugitive sparks with the other fire extinguishers Mrs. van Staarling had been smart enough to pass around. From this distance, all the color, flame, and movement made for a good show.

Two tables over, some guys and gals were talking and smoking, the red dots of their burning cigarettes brightening and dimming, their voices and laughter low and warm in the dark. But Frank was left to his own thoughts until Courtland walked up to him.

"You okay?" the doc asked.

"Sure. I know my limits. All of 'em."

"No surprise there." Courtland hesitated. It seemed as if he had meant to say something else instead of, "I'm leaving now. Pen needs to get home. Good night, Frank."

Even with only the dim lamps over by the garage and the sputtering fireworks to provide illumination, Frank could still tell when Courtland started to turn away.

"Hey, Doc?"

"Yes?"

"You heard about Teller, right?"

"I did."

"Hope it doesn't mean more trouble."

"I don't know. I hope not, too." He heard Courtland sigh. "I'm making telephone calls. So much for no more gossip or politics."

Frank felt like he had no words left, so he was surprised to hear himself say, "At least, this time around, you have some folks to watch your back."

Streamers from a skyrocket arched down toward the earth, and the emergency fire extinguisher brigade went thundering off into the shadowed landscape accompanied by whoops, crashing noises, and curses. Courtland waited for the noise to die down before he said, "Oddly, even after today's barbecue, I still find that notion reassuring."

Frank snorted in amusement. "Good luck with the drive, Doc. Watch out for the drunks."

"I will."

After the doc had headed off toward the street and the Pontiac, Frank poured out the remainder of his beer on the grass and got up to go find his hostess and say his goodnights.

He rode the rural roads for a long time that night before he finally turned the Indian Chief back toward Altamonte.

Frank had always liked spending the summer months on campus. He enjoyed the quiet between academic sessions, the intensity of courses crammed into a few, short weeks, and the contrasting atmosphere of languid dawdling and determined study in the library. It was fun choosing between late, leisurely hours of calculation in

his office and night rides when he could let his thoughts take their time forming as the wind rushed past him.

Even when he worked full speed, the summer months still brought a sense of freedom with them. But, for some reason, this summer seemed to be riffling by like the pages of a wind-blown calendar in an old movie.

He had studied with Courtland. He had studied with Tompkins. He had studied with Jerry, and Phoebe, and most of the handful of graduate students who had not scattered across the country to homes, jobs, and other schools. He studied on his own, calculated, considered, and calculated some more. Even as he worked his hardest, a clock seemed to tick loudly somewhere just out of earshot.

"Why all the hurry? Why not slow down?" Jerry asked him over pizza at Vito's right after the Fourth. "You'll be done with your last coursework by the end of fall semester. Maybe even with your thesis, since you got such a big head start. Keep this up, and you'll be out of here with your doctorate in four years, tops."

"Yeah, probably," Frank said. He used a spoon to scoop up grated cheese from the little glass bowl on their table and scatter it across his first slice. "For some reason, I keep feeling like time is running out."

"That doesn't make much sense."

"Maybe it's the conference coming up. My first try at giving a paper."

Jerry picked off an olive and swallowed it. "You'll be fine. You're following up on work you already published. Anyhow, the doc isn't letting you say a word in public without you triple-checking it beforehand."

"Wish that would catch all the mistakes automatically." Frank scowled. "Wait until you get your first letter from some guy up on you by ten years' experience, two degrees, and tenure at Fancy Pants U., asking what the hell you thought you were thinking."

"So, this critic we're not naming was right?"

"Nah. The nit he picked was sort of stupid. But I'm still not looking forward to dealing with that kind of stuff face to face."

"I would think that would make you backpedal, slowing you down, not speeding you up." After considering this, Jerry shrugged. "Either way, you'll be fine as long as you don't bite anyone at your session."

"Hah." Frank barely stopped himself from adding, "You're thinking of Courtland, not me." It was lucky Phoebe's entrance was so well-timed.

Jerry and Frank got up, and Jerry kissed her cheek, before she slid past them into her chair. They both sat back down.

"Oh, good, olives," she said, taking the remaining plate and a fork.

"We've been talking about Frank. He's overworking again," Jerry told her.

She paused in her dealings with the melted cheese stringing from her chosen slice to say, "Well, imagine my surprise."

"Hey," Frank protested, not really meaning to stop her. He took a bite of pizza and chewed.

"Do try and leave behind some physics for the rest of us," Phoebe said.

"You can have all the fluid dynamics you want. I'll throw in molecular physics, too."

"How generous."

"He's in a big hurry," Jerry told her. "He feels like time is running out."

"I can certainly understand that. Right now, physicists are widely in demand. There are two or three jobs for every one of us taking a doctorate. Even I'll have my pick." She arched her eyebrows. "This surely won't last forever."

"No, it's not that," Frank said. "I don't know what it is, but it's not practical stuff like that."

"Then perhaps you're listening to the news too often. Europe, China, all those hearings about Red infiltrators in Washington. Those would make anyone nervous."

"I'm not nervous."

"Rushed."

"Okay, maybe I'm rushed. A little."

"You need to relax." She eyed him critically. "I wonder if you need fall and all your dancing partners back."

Jerry, who had obviously been pondering the matter, said, "Maybe you need to find a steady. The way I have. The way Doctor Courtland has. Like the man says, you're not getting any younger, right?"

Frank blinked over his slice of pizza, his chewing slowing to a halt. For a few moments, he thought of his co-ed partners, so cute, so cheerful, and so ultimately deceived. He thought of Pen sauntering toward Courtland and the other faculty members at the barbecue. He thought of Sally. He thought of the doc, of engagement rings and marriage.

At least he remembered to swallow before he opened his mouth to say, "Maybe you're right."

The next few days, as the conference grew near, Frank tried to ignore the feeling of time rushing by. After all, by any empirical standards, he was making swift progress. Less than a week after the latest pizza conference, he and Courtland unknotted the last of the tangles in what had become their field theory paper, and about time.

True, the work had been tough, but that was only what they deserved for converging on the same problem from two different mathematical directions at once. He was

glad their intuitions had been on track when they had realized, all those months ago, that they were each repeating what the other was saying in a different mathematical dialect. All they had needed to do was reconcile these two ways of doing the same job. Of course, compromise in Congress would have been easier.

He and the doc sat staring at the latest chalkboard full of figures in Courtland's office for what must have been an entire minute before Courtland suddenly stood up from his desk.

"I think that's it," he said. "That's all we needed to demonstrate that the operator-based and spatial approaches are equivalent. Oh, we should get fifth and sixth opinions, but the paper is otherwise done."

"As long as none of those extra opinions jabs a hole through the whole paper by spotting a step we skipped."

"Always a risk." Courtland turned to Frank. "Do you think we forgot anything significant? Honestly?" He was trying to look grave, but a smile was threatening to break through.

"You know I would've said something if I did."

"I rest my case."

Since today's topics of conversation were not touchy, the air conditioner was off for once, saving some strain on the fuses given that Throop was working in his lab next door. With the midday July heat, the door and windows of Courtland's office were wide open. This public

exposure made it pretty easy to squash a familiar urge to reply to all the doc's barely leashed glee with hands and lips. Instead, Frank let himself smile. "Okay, okay, you win."

"Excelsior." Throwing his arms wide, voice almost tentative, Courtland said a little louder, "Excelsior."

"Yay," Frank agreed, his smile widening into a grin.

Courtland walked out into the corridor. "Excelsior!" This time he got some volume into it.

The next door down opened. Throop leaned out and asked, "What the hell?"

"Well may you ask. We've licked it. The integral and path formulations are, indeed, equivalent."

"What? All that bickering about quantum field approaches was for nothing? Huh!" Frank, leaning on the office doorjamb, could tell Throop was trying to be belligerent but not really succeeding. Although he scowled, his voice was almost friendly when he said, "Now turn it into something I can test in here, and maybe, just maybe, I'll be impressed." He went back into his lab, slamming shut the door behind him.

"You just wait," Courtland told the closed door.

"Get back in here, you nut. Excuse me, Doctor Nut," Frank said.

With a little more coaxing, Courtland came back into the office, threw himself down into his chair, and spun around once in a circle. "Done. And done."

Frank parked himself on the edge of the doc's desk, a careful few feet away. "We can finish writing--"

The sudden frown was formidable. "I can finish writing. I can. You've done more than your share of the work. Let me take over the secretarial duties this next week so you can concentrate on your thesis." He swiveled to look at the chalkboard again. "You should have been working on it all summer, not letting me steal so much of your time to finish up this side project of ours. Tompkins will murder me."

"Bullshit."

The doc's head turned back so fast it was a wonder he did not get whiplash. His expression was slightly shocked.

"Come on, we both know this one's going to be big news. Not a chance I'll be gigged on any delay. That is, if they think I was helping out in the first place. Good thing we've been showing off bits and pieces of this the entire time we've been working on it together; otherwise, no one would ever believe I contributed enough to matter."

"Oh, please." The tone of those two words was native enough to certain bars they both enjoyed that Frank's lips quirked amusement. Undeterred, Courtland continued, "You truly think I would have handled the path integral formulations the way you did? I'm too

fluent in pure mathematics; that's too spatial an approach. You were the one able to comprehend the full implications of what fragments Feynman has published so far, not me. It was purely serendipitous that we got to talking at the reception last year and spotted the approaching convergence. I'll never again be able to eat a Swedish meatball without a tiny twinge of gratitude."

"Hey, I'm not arguing against another co-authorship, even if I am second author this time. I'm only glad there are people around to testify I'm not freeloading, is all."

"Someday -- someday very, very soon -- you will lose that inferiority complex of yours. And I want to be there."

"I thought you didn't believe in Freud."

"A man can diagnose a problem brilliantly without having any true idea of how to fix it. *Exempli gratia*, Karl Marx."

"Hey, politics."

"That isn't politics. Merely cracker-barrel philosophy. In fact--"

What might have been the start of one of Courtland's more entertaining speeches was interrupted by a knock on the open door. They looked up to see Doctor Tompkins standing in the doorway, a smile on his face. The smile seemed truer than usual.

"Harry called you." There was no question in Courtland's voice.

"I was down the hall in my office, yes. He said you'd sorted out and strengthened that weak computational bridge."

Without another word, Courtland waved at the two boards in the room, both covered in equations. Tompkins walked into the office and started reading, chin in hand.

They both watched like a pair of hovering hawks while Tompkins studied their work. Frank had enough experience by now to sort out the first read-through for arithmetic from the second for understanding and evaluation. Tompkins never paused in the way he would have if he had caught what he believed to be a mistake.

"Yes," was all he said at last. "That's it."

"Great," Frank said. "So would you tell Doc C. you're not going to chop off his head if I spend some more time away from my thesis helping to finish the dam... the dang paper?"

"No. No head-chopping. Finish the paper." He turned to Courtland. "Get it done."

Courtland raised both hands. "As you say."

Was Tompkins' smile a touch sheepish? "I mean, I think you should get this resolved and submitted before turning your attentions to other matters."

Frank looked at the doc. The doc looked back. "Aye, aye, sir," they chorused.

"Very funny, gentlemen. In fact, you might as well come over to the faculty club for lunch and amuse me a little more." He took one more long, considering look at the chalkboards. "I believe Doctor Padajawarski will be annoyed. He was sure Tomonaga's method excluded any alternate approaches."

Frank snorted as he got up. "There's the fruits of my hard labor. This Doctor Padajawhoozits being really annoyed."

"Frank, shut up," Courtland said from the doorway, his words tolerant. "I'm hungry, and I want something to eat."

"Such a good influence," Tompkins murmured, in a way that was obviously meant to be overheard, as he closed the office door behind the three of them.

XI

About two minutes into his conference presentation, Frank was suddenly grateful for all the times he had practiced the talk, given that he had spotted Doctor Teller. Teller turned out to be one of those small guys whose builds had not decided between solid and squat. He was not a great looker, and was a little rumpled in the fancy suit he wore, but he had the eyes Frank had noticed before in big thinkers, eyes behind which something spun fast every second of the day.

There was no chance Teller was attending this session to hear about stellar structure. Even as Frank spoke, trying to make his points, Teller's attention kept darting from Frank to the chalkboard and then off to one side of the speaker's podium. Courtland was sitting over there, in the short row of chairs against the wall, slouched down in an attempt to evade Frank's peripheral vision. The doc was doing an okay job of playing inconspicuous, but he was obviously what Teller was studying.

Weirdly, the distraction ended up making Frank's talk easier. He did not have enough attention to speak, write on the chalkboard, wonder what the hell was going on, and worry about the rest of the audience, all at the same time. At least he had been able to tell he was holding the group's attention -- there was not much coughing, and their gazes stayed with him -- but he had not been able to decide at first if they were interested in what he was saying or wondering who had let this moron have a slot. After spotting Teller, detailed fretting had to go to make room for everything else Frank was doing.

Even so, he was irritated. These men he was lecturing would be his peers for the rest of his career. He had wanted to learn their faces, see how they reacted, watch how they behaved as they thought. Instead, he was being distracted during the question period by Teller's sharp gaze moving from the questioners to Frank, back and forth as they spoke. At least Frank had lured Teller's attention away from Courtland at last.

Frank's was the final presentation before lunch; not a bad slot for a beginner, although it did mean some of his audience had snuck out early. The three guys who came up to the podium afterward really seemed to want to discuss magnetic field lines for a few minutes. He had to refer one of them to Courtland for fine details about math techniques that were way outside of the boundaries of both their joint paper and Frank's presentation. When Frank turned to indicate the doc, he was not surprised to see Teller already talking to Courtland, hands sketching gestures.

After that, Frank pleaded a previous appointment to the astronomer from Palomar who had asked him out to lunch: the invitation was a good sign, he told himself, right? Once he had gotten a rain check for the next day, he went over to Courtland, who was talking to Frank's recent inquirer after the metaphysics of mathematics with a distant, if polite, air. The doc's manner was nothing like what Frank was used to seeing on him, much closer to the style he remembered from some of the upper-crust visitors to the Cedar Knot Lodge back in Big Bear. Teller stood off to one side, his arms crossed, waiting for his conversational turn to come around again while radiating impatience.

Frank joined in on the waiting. After a while, he realized that he had shoved his hands deep into the pockets of his new suit's trousers. He was likely scowling belligerently, too. He thought about losing the attitude before deciding to give himself a break for special circumstances. The next time his gaze met Doc Teller's, he got a brusque nod of acknowledgment. He nodded in response and then turned toward Courtland, who was shaking hands as he sent Doctor Tell-Me-About-Your-Philosophy-Of-Eigenvectors-Or-Whatever on his way.

Courtland asked Frank, still in that remote, carefully measured voice, "Have you met Doctor Teller of the University of Chicago?"

"Nope."

"Doctor Teller, Frank Mackenzie. Frank, Doctor Edward Teller."

Frank shoved out a hand. At least Teller took it without hesitation, and his grip was good.

"It was a interesting presentation, Mr. Mackenzie. Perhaps even challenging." Teller proved to have the accent, complete with rolled 'r's, that Frank had heard from other physicists born in eastern Europe.

"Thanks."

"Doctor Courtland says that he has a luncheon appointment with you that he cannot postpone. However, I must leave here soon to attend another conference. Would you mind if I invite myself to come along?"

"Nope." Over Teller's shoulder, Courtland gave Frank a look that was much more opaque than usual. "Hope you'll be okay with the cooking at our faculty club." Teller had better be okay with it; food did not get much finer in their neck of the Southern California woods. This was not Manhattan.

"I'm sure I will be." Teller made a cutting gesture with one hand. "Business must take precedence."

Although Frank hoped he meant precedence over the food, and not over Courtland's desire to offer congratulations to a promising graduate student on the occasion of a first conference presentation, he would bet money, at bad odds, that it was the latter.

Just outside of the conference room, Phoebe, Jerry, and a couple of the other grads were waiting to give Frank their postmortems and reassurances. But when she spotted him in unfamiliar company, Phoebe managed to stop the others before they swarmed. Teller ignored them in favor of talking to Courtland about some guys they had known at Los Alamos, but Frank hoped Phoebe could tell that Frank's gestures, as he followed the pair outside, were meant to convey apologies and gratitude.

In any case, the three of them walked over to the faculty club from Talbot Hall without interruptions. In fact, Frank might as well have been invisible. He was being overlooked by their self-invited guest in a way he was pretty sure was deliberate, but that was fine. Frank was content to play ignored, but not unseen, party-poop for as long as Courtland needed him to.

He had underestimated Doctor Teller. The guy had the determination of a bulldozer operator under fire in the hedgerows of Normandy. No sooner did they have their food in front of them than he opened up on Courtland as if Frank was not even at the table. "What is this about you giving up your security clearance?"

"There were problems during an interview after the conference in '46. I believe you know which conference I refer to without more specifics." Pointedly, Courtland glanced over at the occupied table next to theirs. "I have not viewed myself as having clearance since then. Seemingly, the F.B.I. agrees."

Teller frowned. "They do?"

Frank stopped shoveling up chili, and Courtland raised both his eyebrows. "You hadn't heard?"

"No."

"Odd. I thought you might've found out about my decision in Washington. I've heard rumors that you've been spending a fair amount of time there, talking to the locals. Not the Atomic Energy Commission locals. Politicians, rather. Security officials. About your usual primary research interest, along with other subjects that have less to do with physics."

"Not everyone who is important is a physicist. Not everything that matters is a subfield of physics. I remember you making those mistakes when you first arrived in Los Alamos."

"Not exactly those mistakes. I forgot that not everyone to whom physics might matter is a physicist. When I tried to fix that error by joining the project, I then forgot that not everyone who matters is important.

Miscellaneous enemy civilians who live in industrial towns can matter quite a lot. But never mind." It was Courtland's turn to cut a conversational thread with a slashing gesture of his hand. "So you weren't the one who submitted my name to the security team as a risk, triggering the extra interview?"

Teller's look was incredulous. Frank could not tell if he was faking or not. "Why would I?"

"Any number of reasons. One being, I went to Cal."

"So? You were not one of those undependable characters who clustered around Oppenheimer."

"Not undependable, only-- Never mind."

"Be rational. I know your political views, and they do not favor Russia. If I did not think you reliable, would I be here to say you should return to the Mesa?"

Courtland stared at Doctor Teller. At last he asked, "Why?"

With a grunt of satisfaction, Teller shifted back his seat, away from his meal. "General--" For the first time at the table, his gaze shifted to Frank and then away "--a certain respected general in Washington claims the Russians will not replicate our work for a generation."

The snort Courtland produced was a masterpiece of disdain. "Two to three years at the outside."

"There is only one difficulty in the world: wishful thinking. At least you are not prone to that." Teller made a complicated gesture with both hands. "We both know you have significant insights into a certain problem that you have not shared."

"Perhaps, perhaps not. In either case, developments must have moved past me. For reasons that are now, I hope, obvious, I haven't kept up with the specific research since 1947. My recent work in general relativity--"

"Yes, that is why you have a paper on field theory about to be published. The weapons projects are important to the country. I believe this. At the end of this summer, after your meeting and the one on reactor safety in England, I will be returning to work in Los Alamos full time. You should also visit. You would be welcomed."

"I don't think so. Even if I didn't have this little security problem of mine, I've promised myself. No more weapons development work."

"Do you think the Russians share your qualms, your sentiments? As I said, wishful thinking." He looked over at Frank. "Perhaps you would prefer that more promising future physicists fight their battles with nothing better than rifles to pit against the new technologies?"

Before Courtland could say a word, Frank said, "Scuse me, Doctor Teller." He dumped his fork into his chili and left it there. "When I got back to California, I sold

both my hunting rifles to buy my first good slide rules. Haven't shot any kind of gun since the Army." Making sure to hold Teller's gaze, he said, "I'd sell the slide rules, buy back the rifles, and set sail for Russia with big, red bulls-eyes painted on all my uniform shirts before I'd do your kind of work. Likely that's just me, but you still might not want to use my past service to try selling whatever project this is to Doc C."

His words were received like the gift of a three-days-dead jackrabbit. The rest of the lunch was frosty, very frosty.

Courtland walked Frank back over to Talbot Hall after Doc Teller brusquely excused himself from their company.

"I'm afraid you've made yourself an enemy," Courtland told him.

"Okay, maybe I should have stayed out of it. Whatever it was."

"Maybe. Although I appreciate the fact that you didn't."

"Sure." Frank cleared his throat. "You think he was telling the truth? About not reporting you?"

"I don't know. I really don't know. I also don't know who else might have dropped the words that piqued their interest. All I know is--"

"Yeah?"

"My life would be easier if Doctor Teller's arguments were entirely without merit."

"Instead of having some merit mixed with much bull dickey, sure. But c'mon. You know it's a stochastic society these days. Hard to figure out any answer to better than a rough estimate of probability even if that still doesn't keep you from having to make decisions."

"I do know one thing to a high degree of certainty."

"And you're going to tell me all about whatever it might be."

At least those words coaxed a smile out of Courtland before he sobered and said, "I'm almost entirely certain this mess will get worse before it gets better."

"Wish I could argue with you."

Doctor van Staarling was the first professor to get edgy, sometime around the start of September, not too long after fall classes began. In van Staarling, edginess showed up as suddenly focusing on everything around him, including all the little details he usually ignored. When van Staarling actually snapped at an undergraduate for eating an Oh Henry bar during a lecture session, everyone sat up and took notice. Later, Frank decided that day was when he should have added the two of van Staarling's atmospheric dynamics research with the two of those Air Force officers coming back across country to consult with him again, and reached some approximation of the four he had been

reminded of during lunch with Doctor Teller. But Frank had not done his homework.

Doctor Tompkins was the professor who caught on next. Frank never asked how he found out, but Doc T. was a guy who talked from time to time with folks like Bethe, Fermi, Oppenheimer, and the other big wheels in the former Manhattan Project, including the ones still in Washington. Maybe somebody leaked information, or maybe there was just enough worry in other physicists' voices that Tompkins got worried, too. In either case, Tompkins lost his perpetual smile during the second week in September.

By the time the twenty-third of September rolled around, all of the professors were nervous and a lot of the students were, too. Most of the students could not have given a reason for their tension without resorting to some pretty wild rumors, but everyone knew that something was on the wind. They just did not know yet that the something on the wind was radioactive.

Frank had his feet up on his desk, jotting a few notes about formatting to the typist in the margins of the final draft for his thesis, when someone knocked on his open door.

"Come on in," he said without looking up. "Make yourself at home."

Not that making yourself at home would amount to much in Frank's office. He paid for the privilege of not sharing by working in a room he suspected of once having been a broom closet. Frank had a window, a small desk, and a chair. Technically he had an extra

chair and a file cabinet, too, but it was hard to sit in the extra chair with the door opened inward, and impossible to dig deep into the file drawers with the door closed.

"Frank," someone said.

He looked up. The someone was Barry, sounding much more worried than usual, which is why Frank hadn't recognized his voice. "Hey. What's up?"

"It just came over the radio. Truman announced that the Soviets have the bomb."

"What?" Frank asked. Then he sat up straight, dropping his feet to the floor with a thud. "Fuck!"

Barry barely flinched at the last word before he nodded swift agreement. "Yeah."

"Any details?"

"Not yet. Nothing official, at least."

But Frank's brain had gotten up to speed at last. "Those Air Force guys who were consulting with van Staarling. They must have detected traces of radioactivity from an atmospheric test." He drummed his fingers on the desk, once, twice. "Better forget I said that."

"Forgotten. I have to go, anyhow. Doctor Tompkins sent me around to tell a couple of folks who might not have heard, including you. I missed Doctor Courtland."

"Oh, yeah?" Frank felt his eyebrows pull together. He looked at his watch. "I guess he left for the day."

Courtland only had the one class at eight on Fridays this semester, so if the doc was not on campus, he was already back at the house.

Frank took a deep breath. "Okay, I'm informed. Will you make sure Jerry and Phoebe have the news? And ask 'em to talk to Bill, just in case." Bill was Courtland's newest graduate student, a smart kid from Indiana with big ears, thick glasses, and an ongoing case of nervous competition.

"They'll all be around for Thermodynamics later. If they haven't heard by then, I'll tell them. Oh, and the Friday night meet-up is at El Indio tonight if you get the chance to drop by."

Given the day, not a surprising choice. The drinks at El Indio were both cheap and strong. "I might. Thanks for the invitation, anyhow."

Barry waved and went out, shutting the door behind him.

Frank was up and packing papers into his Army surplus messenger bag about two seconds after the door closed. He managed to make it out of the building and across campus to the east parking lot without being intercepted, mainly by dodging any serious-seeming student or clump of students who so much as glanced in his direction. By the time he had kicked the Indian Chief into starting, he was happy to concentrate on nothing more than his driving.

This time of day, the iron front gates at Courtland's place were open. Although he had long ago learned

where the garages were, Frank left the motorcycle out on the circle drive and went straight up to the front door.

He was a little surprised when Mr. Higgins himself opened the door, but not for long.

Frank said, "You heard the news."

"Yes, sir." Higgins insisted on using that 'sir.' Usually, there was a challenge buried somewhere beneath the word, but today he sounded relieved enough that it rang true. "Mrs. Dominguez was listening to her radio in the kitchen and informed the staff. I told Doctor Courtland. He seemed perturbed."

"Perturbed. Got you. Pen anywhere around here?"

"I believe Miss Hamilton is presently attending her classes at U.S.C."

Frank was not sure why he was surprised to learn that Pen was a college student. She was only twenty, after all, rich, and smart to boot. In any case, that revelation was beside the point right now. "Guess that leaves me pinch-hitting. Where's Doc. C.?"

"When I saw him last, he was on the rear terrace."

"Mind if I find my own way?"

Without a word, Higgins stepped aside to clear the path.

"Thanks," Frank said, and got going.

When Frank went out through the French doors from the rear sitting room and emerged into sunshine, Courtland was sitting on a bench, smoking his pipe and staring at nothing in particular.

"At least you're not drinking," Frank told him.

"I don't drink, remember? Well, not much. Certainly not this early."

Frank let the messenger bag fall at his feet -- was there some reason he had brought it along? -- and sat on the other end of the bench, keeping open space between them. His shoulder hurt; he must have been tensing it during the ride here. This sure was turning into a shitty afternoon.

Even after a good look, Frank could not tell how badly Courtland had taken the news. The doc's expression was grim, and he was puffing too fast, but whatever his first reaction on hearing the news had been, by now he had himself under some kind of control.

Okay, there were times to talk and times to shut up. Staring at the early fall flowers around the pergola in the garden below seemed like a smart thing to do. Frank let Courtland smoke.

His patience was rewarded in a few minutes by the doc asking, "Do you remember what I said, oh, perhaps a year ago now, about not wanting to tie the noose to hang mankind?"

"Yup."

"My resolve may have come too late."

"One, don't give up so damn easy. 'May' is a term of uncertainty. Two, don't try to gobble down a bigger slice of responsibility pie than you've been served. Three, ease up on the brooding, okay? Doubt it's helping anyone, including you. Four, let's go to a movie."

Courtland turned slowly. His stare was disbelieving. "The Soviets have the bomb, and you're asking me out to a movie?"

"Uh-huh. Movie." Frank shrugged. "Sometimes you seem to forget you're not just the guy who was once a single wire in the enormous cyclotron named the Manhattan Project. You're also Professor Courtland of Clarence Tenn Polytechnic. He's a nice guy who tries to be a good Joe and a decent teacher. Well respected, even liked, by both his students and colleagues. So why don't you forget about that minor Mesa functionary for a while and do something for the prof right now? I think he can go out to a movie with a friend."

Time to sweeten the offer. Frank let his gaze drift down some from the doc's face, smiled with unhurried enjoyment at what he saw, and then spoke again. He pitched his words to be both husky and deep, the way he would have if he were coaxing one of the sweeter, shyer girls out dancing. "Just a movie, Doc. That's all. If we leave now, we'll have time to get dinner after the early show. You can go back to feeling guilty tomorrow."

Courtland seemed a little dazzled for a second. Those lush lips of his parted slightly and he almost lost the

pipe. Then his eyes widened even as his jaw firmed.
"You're playing dirty."

This time, Frank flat-out smiled at him, for once letting the smile be whatever it wanted to be. "Not as dirty as I'd like to, Champ. But, once again, the timing stinks. You need distracting, not another challenge to one of your big resolutions."

The expression in Courtland's eyes swiftly shifted from surprise to amusement. "Too bad," he said. "I really have to work some more on my timing. I should know better than to rush. Slow and relentlessly steady wins the... race." His words found an intersection between double meaning and mischief.

"Now who's playing dirty?"

"Alas, not me. Not really. At least, as you note, not at this juncture." Taking his pipe from his lips, he turned away to empty it into the ashtray on the small table next to his end of the bench. Without looking back from his clean-up, he said, "Frank, you're one hell of a good friend."

"Thanks." Stupid to feel so ridiculously flattered. Courtland was only stating the obvious. Sure, they were friends. They had been friends for a while now, no matter what Frank had told Doc Tompkins.

Done cleaning up, Courtland zipped his pipe into his tobacco pouch and asked, "So, what's playing?"

For a moment, Frank's mind went blank. He had not thought that far ahead. Then he offered, "*My Friend*

Irma? They were handing out tickets on campus yesterday for a sneak preview. Lots of laughs, many of 'em due to Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis, or so they claimed. Maybe we can take notes."

Courtland tried glaring over his glasses at Frank, but the expression slipped into a crooked smile. "No."

"Okay, fine. You have a better idea?"

"*White Heat*? I noticed it being advertised on a marquee I pass on my way to Clarence Tenn."

"Saw it. Gangster film about a homicidal maniac. Huge, intentional explosion at the end."

"In other words, not the plot for today."

"Yeah, no. Wait, I've got it. *I Was a Male War Bride*. Cary Grant as the ugliest W.A.C. ever. Phoebe says it's really funny."

"Never mind the humor or the drag. I believe you had me somewhere between the words 'Cary' and 'Grant.'"

"Great." Frank slapped both thighs and stood up. "We're heading for the Rialto. You know the way?"

"I'm not that out of touch with popular culture."

"Let's meet up in front of the theater, then." Frank checked his wristwatch. "We'll be right on time for the matinee."

They went to watch the movie, which was really funny, and continued on to dinner at El Indio afterward. Courtland seemed to handle all the speculation and comments about the Soviet A-bomb test among the gathered grads just fine, even taking part in an argument about why everyone had underestimated the physicists over in Russia. Frank did notice that the doc nursed one drink for most of the evening, which was more encouraging than not. And Courtland had managed to get down all of his beef enchilada. Looked like he still bounced back fast during a crisis.

However, just to be sure, when Courtland got up to leave, Frank also left the table long enough to follow him out into the parking lot.

"You gonna be okay?" Frank could not linger long without someone noticing, but he still wanted to ask.

"For the moment. I might not sleep well tonight, but at least I can now blame that on indigestion. You were right. This was much better than sitting around and brooding."

"Swell." Frank shoved his hands into the pockets of his leather motorcycle jacket. "Well, good night."

Courtland quickly looked around the parking lot. Then, his expression serious but his eyes amused, he offered one hand for shaking and said, "Thank you for a simply lovely evening out, Mr. Mackenzie. Gosh, I had a wonderful time."

Gravely, Frank took the hand and shook. "Gee. Does this mean it's okay if I call you again?"

"Oh, I'll be waiting by the telephone. However, do keep in mind, until your grades are submitted this one last time, I'm not that kind of a boy. Certainly not on a second date." Courtland made up for the snide words with a warm smile.

It was an amusing way to describe the first occasion when the two of them had gone somewhere alone together to enjoy something that was not physics. Only hours later, when Frank was home and in bed, did he abruptly sit up amidst the sheets and swear, realizing that he really had been out on a date.

Guys like him did not get to date. Sex, sure; pair up, maybe; date, no. The evening had been one of those weird occasions when one kind of social behavior had mimicked another. Ignoring the dull pang of resentment aroused by this conclusion, Frank lay back down, rolled over, and went back to trying to sleep. Combat nightmares aside, the rest of the night was fine.

That resentment came and went for a few days, long enough for Frank to get annoyed and decide to do something about it. If he could not date, at least he could damn well pal around. After thinking matters over, Frank waited a careful two weeks and then asked the doc if Courtland wanted to try bowling. The answer turned out to be yes, and the results hilarious, although that highbrow stage show at the Pasadena Playhouse was a pretty wicked revenge.

The buddy-buddy routine turned out to be fun. It was lots more fun than dating all those Clarence Tenn co-eds had been, if Frank wanted to be honest. Given the

circumstances, he was trying not to be too honest. But he was also keeping a close eye on the passing time. At last, that imaginary clock ticking somewhere in the back of his brain had turned into an ally, not an enemy. The end of this final semester of classes could not come too soon.

XII

Interestingly, it was Jerry who shoved Bill into Frank's office that third Friday in November. If asked, Frank would not have predicted Jerry had enough ginger in him for the job, but maybe Clarence Tenn had been good for him.

"So ask him," Jerry said, voice stern. "Go on, ask."

"All right, all right, stop pushing."

Frank put down his slipstick. "What is this, another conference? And do we have to have it in my office?" It was really crowded with three guys in the room.

Jerry ignored the questions. "Ask him or, I'm telling you, I will."

"Okay. Jeez, stop being such a creep."

Frank steepled his fingers, staring out the window. "Still waiting for news. Here, inside my ex-broom closet. In case anyone's interested."

There were a few seconds of intermingled, "You'd better--" and, "Hey, I will. Only--" until Frank managed to get turned around to face them. Bill had jammed himself into the extra chair. Meanwhile, Jerry was putting on a pretty good show of hulking in the open doorway, blocking the sole line of retreat.

Examining them both, keeping his expression chilly, Frank raised eyebrows in inquiry.

That did it at last. Bill blurted out, "You swear the professor's not a Commie?"

After taking a deep breath and releasing it, Frank trusted himself to answer. "He's not. His full name is Collis Amasa Courtland, remember?"

"Huh? What does that even mean?"

"The names all come from Big Four railroad families. They were old-time California millionaires: Stanford like the university, Huntington like the museum, Crocker like the banks, Courtland like the town. One step down from Vanderbilts or Rockefellers, something like the Chicago tycoons. Maybe the Armours. Anyhow, the doc's a direct descendent, and he's not much interested in a brand of government that might want to stand him up against a wall and shoot him because he got stuck with some really ugly names."

"So? Congressman Nixon says--"

"Richard Nixon thinks Doc C. is a Communist? Who's next, Mickey Mouse because he wears red pants?"

"No, not that. It's just, everyone who knows about these things says rich guys can still be pinkos. They go all..." Bill's words trailed off in the face of Jerry's glare.

Raising a hand, Frank said, "Hold it. I get that gossip moves faster than the speed of light around here -- keep quiet, Jerry, you know what I mean -- but who told you the doc might be a Red and why the hell would you even care?"

"I was only asking around," Bill said, all truculence. Jerry snorted, making it sound a lot like the doc would have. At that, Bill flushed before he continued weakly, "The F.B.I. wanted--"

Frank slapped his forehead.

"The F.B.I. wanted. Oh, the F.B.I.," Jerry caroled, the fey tone of his words really mean. "Could I give you some news about your dearest, darling F.B.I? You bet I could."

"Mr. J. Edgar Hoover is a hardworking patriot and a great American!"

"Both of you. Shut. Up." Frank said. He was not sure what his voice sounded like, but they both did. "Look. If you want to know whether or not Courtland is a Red, and you don't believe me, you can try asking him. Or you can ask Doc Tompkins, who's known him for years. You can even ask Doctor Teller from Chicago, who doesn't like the doc one bit.

"But I'll give you my best approximation of the truth right now. Courtland's not a Communist. He didn't even vote for Wallace in the last election, he voted for Truman like I did. If that's not good enough for you, Richard Nixon, J. Edgar Hoover, or anyone else, I've got nothing, and you can get the hell out of my broom closet."

"I was only asking," Bill said. Now he sounded sulky as a ten year old.

"I get that. I do. But you should remember that Doctor Courtland helped melt a lot of civilians during the war. So, these days, he just wants to sit around and do beautiful stuff with numbers. There are other guys who disagree with his choices, and maybe one of them talked to the F.B.I., who are paid to be paranoid anyhow. At least, that's what some of us around the department are guessing."

Slowly and deliberately, Frank reached up to rub the scar slashing across his lip. "Me, I've seen enough to understand why the doc got squeamish. Maybe some guys haven't. Setting that aside, ask yourself this. If Courtland really was a Red agent, wouldn't he be cozying up to the weapons guys as close as he could, rather than running off to Clarence Tenn Polytechnic and playing around with stuff like general relativity?"

Was that the faintest, momentary shadow of doubt on Bill's face? Good enough.

"Go talk to him. Then go back and talk to the G-men. Or not. Either way, for cripe's sake, act like a physicist and get some empirical data before you adopt theories from a bunch of secondary sources who never got any closer to the doc than Washington D.C."

"I only meant to help."

"Yeah. So did we all." Frank sighed, feeling about a million years old. "I hereby swear the professor's not a Commie. Now, could you please help meaningfully someplace other than my teensy, tiny office?"

After a pause, Bill said, "Okay." His expression seemed suspended between relief and disappointment, likely at the premature end of a job he had likely viewed as working as a secret agent rather than as a fink. Meanwhile, Jerry had crossed his arms over his chest and was looking a little self-righteous.

"Everyone done now? Then everybody out."

As soon as Jerry stepped back from the doorway, Bill marched through it, even though he may not have had anyplace to be marching to. Frank caught Jerry's eye and said, "You."

Jerry tried looking vague.

"Don't bother. First, thanks. Second, don't break the new guys even when they're being annoying, okay? At least he confessed to what he'd been told to do. Someone, maybe a lot of someones, around here probably hasn't."

"Yeah, I know. It's kind of creepy, when you think about it."

"You're telling me? Tell Courtland." Frank shook his head. "No, I'll tell Courtland."

"All right."

"Go bother Phoebe."

"We do need to work on our final thermodynamics presentations," Jerry agreed, back to his normal, distracted tones. At least he shut the door behind him on the way out.

Left behind, Frank put his head down on his desk for a few seconds. They really didn't quit, these federal boys. Given the Russian A-bomb and all, he wasn't surprised, but he also wasn't looking forward to a fresh round of playing hide-and-seek the homosexual with G-men on the opposing team.

And wasn't that just too bad. Frank got up to go visit Courtland.

When he exited the elevator, he was just in time to see Bill entering the doc's office. Thanking his lucky stars that, for once, he was not going to be the bearer of bad news, Frank changed directions and opened the door into the stairwell, happy to return to his office even if he might not stay there for long. His train of thought had been completely derailed. Maybe he should head for the library and double-check some bibliographic citations.

Was boredom worse than excitement these days, or the other way around? Frank sure wished he would stop having all these chances to research the question empirically.

Seated at his usual table in the periodicals section, with several open volumes of bound journals scattered around him, Frank looked up from taking notes at the touch of a hand on his good shoulder. "Hi," he said, keeping it quiet.

"Dinner?" Courtland asked, leaning in close so he could also keep his voice down.

"Dutch treat?"

Frank was rewarded with the doc's usual reproving stare over his glasses. "Not unless something has suddenly changed your financial situation. If you didn't win the Irish Sweepstakes in the last month, I would prefer to pay."

"Okay, how about I cook? Then you can shell out for some movie tickets afterward."

"Very well. That sounds like a reasonable compromise."

"Hope you like hamburgers and spinach. Or maybe squash. I had a couple of lamb chops left, but--"

"Shhhhh," the undergraduate sitting down at the end of the table interrupted. "Some people have to study in this library." Clearly trying for wit, he added, "Why don't you guys take love's young dream outside?"

Courtland did not get mistaken for a student very often, but when he did, the results were usually entertaining. This time was not an exception; the doc stood bolt upright, his face a picture of injured dignity.

Frank told the would-be comic, "Thanks for the advice, Emily Post. We're leaving." Getting up, Frank stowed away his notebook and pencils. Meanwhile, Courtland marched over to the shelves and spent the wait apparently studying the spines of the bound volumes of the *Journal of Paleontology*. As Frank walked off, he snagged the sleeve of the doc's suit coat and towed him along.

Once outside, Frank opened movie negotiations with, "*Adam's Rib*."

"*The Heiress*," Courtland counter-offered.

"*All the King's Men*."

"That sounds good."

Frank nodded satisfaction at the compromise before asking, "So, did Bill confess?"

"Yes, and we had our little chat about the subtle-to-him differences between patriotism, politics, and security. He seemed dubious but open to persuasion, especially after I told him he could continue reporting to the F.B.I. if he wished, but I expected him to take accurate notes of my lectures if he did. These days, I find I'd be more offended by being misrepresented as a bad instructor than as a poor security risk. Do you think that means I'm getting used to this madness?"

"Probably. And just as well. Between the Reds taking China and the Russians having the bomb, nobody's calming down any time soon."

"This is not the way I pictured the post-war world. Or how I thought I'd live my life. Still, I suppose things could be worse." Courtland looked sideways. "Uncle Leland's taking the house."

"So your ma kept quiet."

"It seems so. There's a distinct air of exasperation when he refers to her in letters or during overseas phone calls that makes me assume her explanation for her actions has been either sparse or nonexistent. I gather he thinks she is upset over my refusal to take my social position seriously, which seems to be nothing more than what he had predicted. Seemingly, an unworldly scientist such as myself cannot be expected to head the Courtland family, and I am thus behaving responsibly by stepping aside to live the hermetic life of a gentlemen scholar, leaving behind our familial influence to those who know best how to employ it."

That had been some pretty dripping sarcasm, there. Frank grinned, and asked, "You going to buy a house?"

"I believe I've found a house. It proved to be an easier task than trying to locate a good apartment. Besides, I find that, as a gentleman scholar, I yearn for more privacy these days."

The doc's face was a portrait of serene innocence as he delivered that last line. Not choir-boy innocence; this last year had aged him some, not a bad thing in Frank's estimation. You still would not expect Courtland to be a guy who could unload a neat double entendre, but at least he was past Frank making comparisons with Penrod or Toby Tyler. He was even past his likeness to *Tom Sawyer, Detective*. Somehow, it did not seem fair that the added patina of maturity was only making him a hotter number. Good thing the teaching part of their relationship was almost done. Restraint was getting tougher.

When they got over to Frank's apartment, Courtland parked on the couch while Frank headed toward the kitchen to get dinner started. Felix promptly charged out of the bedroom to refurbish the doc's suit for him with some high-quality fur.

After some time spent on greetings -- returned -- and admonishments -- useless -- the doc called into the kitchen, "I thought you said he lived downstairs."

"Yeah, he does. Did. But apparently the gal who owned him is moving in the direction of her fiancée, one suitcase full of clothing at a time, and he got marooned at some point during her migration. How do you want your burger?"

"Two steps away from charcoal, please. So you've rescued another stray?"

"Another?"

Instead of answering, Courtland came into the kitchen and sat down at the table, where he lowered his voice as he asked, "You've checked your own place for eavesdroppers, right?"

"Uh-huh. The artificial kind. Although these walls are thin."

Looking down at Felix, who had followed them into the kitchen and was now making it clear he could do with some hamburger, Courtland said, "You're still helping those in need."

"What need? No need here." Frank also looked down. "You don't need raw hamburger. You have cat food. Enough meowing, okay?"

"His working hypothesis seems to be that there is no such thing as enough meowing."

"Anyhow, it's not like he lives here. He's just staying over for a while."

"And it's not like you helped me, either. You just saved me from a tiny piece of hell in a small-town jail, and you've kept on going since. No wonder I can't hold out much longer. Never mind." Courtland scooped up Felix. "Meow meow; meow meow, meow. In conclusion, meow," he told the cat at close range in his best professorial tones.

Damned if that didn't make Felix simmer down. Frank dumped the hamburger patties into the fry pan, where they could wait until he got everything else going, and asked, "Spinach or squash?"

"Spinach." Courtland placed Felix on the floor next to the bowl with cat food in it. The cat took his cue.

"There, and enough of these distractions and follies. Now, if your cooking doesn't demand too much of your attention, what did you think of the letter from Doctor Schwinger about our infinities paper that I left in your box this morning? He raised an interesting point, but I still don't know why he's resisting our conclusions so passionately."

"Huh," Frank said, putting down the bunch of spinach he was washing to tug at his lip. "I get the impression he's

hung up on those continuum limits for some reason.
D'ya think--"

They never did make it out to their movie that evening.
Physics was just too much fun.

By passing around the word that he was ready to buy and willing to pay well, Courtland had found a house in the old faculty neighborhood that had been built around the time Clarence Tenn first got up onto its academic feet. His new house was a simple and straightforward two-story, twenties-style bungalow, not some mansion in disguise. But at least the doc's mish-mash of artsy, turn of the century furniture -- probably pulled out of Courtland family attics -- looked at home in the place, and he had a couple of extra bedrooms upstairs to fill with books, chalkboards, and scientific journals.

Frank thought the house had been a good buy. He had a decent chance to form an opinion while he came in to check the place for bugs right after Courtland bought it and again after the movers had come and gone. The house seemed secure, and Frank could report to Courtland that the wiring was first-rate.

Courtland stuck to his guns about refusing to use free graduate student labor and had professionals do all the packing and moving. He also showed some common sense by bringing in temporary cooking staff and then asking Pen to play hostess at the housewarming party he threw in December, right after finals but before everyone scattered. That avoided any hints of a

suspicious liking for stag affairs while he was being watched.

When the afternoon of the party came around, the Dean, the other professors, their wives, and assorted graduate students had nothing to do but tour the house and enjoy the buffet laid out in the dining room, with one diplomatic exception. In some obscure act of tribute to his position, the Dean was let loose to make the salad dressing right there at the dining room table.

"What's with the rubbing garlic into a wooden bowl business, and why can't we have something in our salad besides greens, oil, and vinegar for a change?" Frank asked Phoebe as he watched from the back of the room. "I like cheese. And avocados. And--"

She stepped on his foot, which was not fair, given that Frank had kept his voice down.

Even so, the buffet was a nice spread. Frank got a plate full of food, heavy on the sliced ham and the carrot casserole. Then he went to sit on one of the window seats built right into the living room wall.

He gazed through the picture window, out toward the street beyond. Doctor Stabe was chatting with Mrs. van Staarling and one of the observatory guys out on the long, pillared porch that stretched across the front of the house. The huge palm tree growing in the middle of the front yard was the kind of specimen that made Frank feel Southern Californians were a little too fond of the *Arabian Nights*, and the doc had finally gotten rid of that plaster burro and cart the former owner had plopped down to ruin the flowerbeds. Some kid was racing down

the nearest sidewalk behind a big setter on a leash, and across the street, a guy in a nice blue suit-- Oh, cripes.

Turning back to the living room, Frank spotted Phoebe and Jerry. Jerry's arm was firmly draped across Phoebe's shoulders as they talked to Doctor Throop. It took Frank a while to catch Phoebe's eye and jerk his chin toward the window.

She was good; she was very good. It took barely any time at all for her and Jerry to excuse themselves and get across the floor to Frank.

After Phoebe had taken the seat next to him, she softly asked, "What?"

"That guy across the street."

She peered out the window while eating a smoked oyster off a toothpick. Then she asked, "Yes?"

"You see him, Jerry?"

Jerry, being Jerry, did not bother trying to hide his shuffling around to get a good look. "Sure. He's reading a newspaper."

"While standing in the middle of the sidewalk," Phoebe said, sounding thoughtful.

"Wish he wasn't wearing that snap-brim," Jerry said. "Wonder if he has a crew-cut."

Frank snorted. "C'mon. He's standing around reading a newspaper while wearing a hat and suit. On a

neighborhood sidewalk at four o'clock on a Friday. In Altamonte. You really have any doubts?"

"He sure seems to want us to see him. I wonder if there's someone more subtle lurking elsewhere, or the obviousness is the point?" Jerry asked.

Phoebe's eyes narrowed. "I certainly do see him, lurking outside a housewarming, likely for no better reason than to cause trouble. How an innocuous academic gathering like this could be a peril to national security, I cannot fathom." Abruptly, she stood up. "Obvious. Well, all right then." Without another word, she stalked off toward the dining room and the buffet.

"Does she mean to do what I think she--" Frank said, turning to Jerry. Then he stopped. He had long thought Jerry was a pretty good-looking kid. With that appreciative gleam in his eyes, pretty good-looking fell short as a description. "Maybe you'd better go help out."

"Yeah," Jerry said. "Maybe I'd better. Wouldn't want to miss the fun." Off he went.

Two or three minutes later, back came Phoebe with a plate full of food, a dazzlingly gracious smile on her face, and a scary look in her eyes. Jerry followed her, holding two glasses, a bottle of Coke, a bottle of grape Nehi, and a church-key. Out the front door they went, somehow without attracting much attention from the group chatting on the porch. Through the yard they marched, across the street, and over to the loitering newspaper reader. As Frank looked on, incredulous, not trying to hide his grin, Phoebe walked up to the guy and opened wide the spigot on the Southern belle.

"What in the world are you watching with that expression on your face?"

Courtland's voice. Frank was too fascinated by what he was seeing to turn toward the doc. "Phoebe's trying to feed the F.B.I."

"What?" Courtland sat down quickly on the window seat next to Frank and leaned over to get a good view.

Now Phoebe was motioning back across the street and toward the house as she talked, her gestures graceful and lively enough to be straight out of *Gone With the Wind*. The loiterer was fumbling around with his newspaper and seemed a little stunned. No, a lot stunned, given that she had somehow gotten the plate of food into his hands. Jerry wasn't even trying to top that one. He had put down the bottles and the glasses on the sidewalk next to the guy, weighing down the newly fallen newspaper.

"Good Lord," Courtland said, his voice torn between foreboding and amusement.

"Seems she decided he was being vulgar by lurking so obviously outside your party. I think she's still kind of mad about the F.B.I. not responding to her last letter."

"Remind me never to be vulgar in her presence. Never."

Now Phoebe was sweeping back across the street, Jerry marching in her wake like a faithful knight errant. Good thing no inattentive cars tried to drive by just then. Cars would have bounced off the pair of them like something in a *Superman* serial.

The watcher was looking after her with the plate of buffet food still clutched in his hands. Courtland, seeing the face turned in his general direction, shifted forward to make sure he was nicely framed in the picture window and waved politely. He sure did believe in backing up his students.

You had to give the G-man some credit. After a few seconds, the guy waved back at the doc, picked up the fork Phoebe had parked on the plate, and dug in.

Final score as far as Frank was concerned? Seven to three in favor of Clarence Tenn; when you added up all that killer graciousness, Phoebe had made the kick for the extra point.

After the watcher got fed, the rest of the party seemed kind of anticlimactic. Frank received some more congratulations on the stir caused by his and the doc's quantum fields paper. There were a lot of arguments about current politics and even more arguments about the sound quality of the new 45 rpm records. Mrs. Tompkins flirted with Barry more obviously than Frank had ever flirted with Pen. Then they all played several rounds of some highbrow version of charades. Phoebe and Jerry acted out *Witness for the Prosecution*, which made Courtland mutter to himself.

By nine, everyone had pretty much drifted off except for Frank and Pen, who had re-emerged from the kitchen after making sure everything was okay with the cooking crew back there.

"I need a cigarette," she told Frank, who had been rearranging chairs in the dining room. "Do stop being secretly helpful and come outside with me."

Out on the porch, Courtland was seated on a bench that Frank thought he recognized from its former place on the Courtland mansion's terrace. The doc sat with one ankle resting on the opposite knee, placidly smoking as he gazed across the street at the still loitering guy with a newspaper.

"He sure is being obvious. Surprised no one has called the cops on him," Frank said, sitting down on the far side of Pen after she sat down next to the doc.

"I suppose he has official identification," Courtland said. "Or it might be this neighborhood. No one may have called. Eccentrics are not unknown around here."

"Then you should fit right in." Pen sounded cheerful about the prospect.

"I hope so. Did anyone get that dinner plate back from him?"

"Jerry did," Frank told him.

"Good. I'd hate for the kitchen staff to be put to any extra trouble."

Pen laughed. "Don't worry about that. Morale is high. They're still amazed by how little liquor your colleagues consumed and how small a mess they made. Not to mention, they'll be gone in about," she checked her wristwatch in the light from the hanging electric lantern

overhead, "fifteen minutes, leaving behind nothing but a refrigerator full of leftovers and a fairly sizable bill."

You could hear the contentment in his voice when the doc said, "Victory."

Pulling out a cigarette from her silver case, Pen let Courtland light it for her. Frank propped up his feet on the porch railing and waved away a disoriented moth. They all quieted down for a few minutes, enjoying the evening and watching the G-man watch them.

Courtland broke the silence by saying, "I'll be glad for the leftovers. A Mrs. Cleary, recommended to me by Mrs. Greerson, will be coming in on weekdays to cook and clean, but I am determined to forage for myself on weekends. I was appalled to realize I don't even know how to boil an egg."

"I'll help you out," Pen told him, after exhaling a luxuriant stream of smoke. "Frank can help as well. Jerry tells me Frank is already teaching him how to cook."

"Why am I not surprised? At least Frank and I spend enough time together that no one should draw any unfortunate conclusions that they haven't already drawn."

"Oh, really?" Pen asked, in a voice too full of silken amusement to be anywhere near innocent.

Frank grinned to himself in the dark. "Sure. Y'see, we're thinking about writing another paper together. If you consider the current problems with Einsteinian--"

She held up a hand. "Hold it, Bub. First, you have to be warned. I study early manuscripts, not mathematics, and I already have a deal with Col about no equations. If you're the other half of his song and dance team, then that deal applies to you, too."

Seemed as if she still did not believe Frank about Courtland's good behavior. Oh, well. As long as the doc understood he had kept most of his promise to himself about keeping his mitts off his grad student, he would be fine. "So, you're studying manuscripts at U.S.C.?"

"Yes and no. The manuscripts in question belong to the Huntington Library. My first job there owed a lot to familial influence, but at least now I'm trying to get the education to catch up with the occupation."

They had a pleasant, easy chat about her work for a few minutes while the darkness thickened, the night cooled, the doc smoked his pipe, and the guy across the street courted the sniffles.

After a particularly sharp-edged observation of hers about one of her curator-bosses and that guy's distinctive tastes in *incunabula*, Frank couldn't resist telling her, "I always liked the smart girls. Too bad your dance card is full." He was only two-thirds teasing her.

"Girls?" Pen retorted, obviously amused, and "Smart girls?" Courtland asked him before snorting.

"Hey," Frank said, loading up the word with wounded innocence. "Our Clarence Tenn co-eds are really bright."

But I will change my phrase to 'the smart ladies.' Didn't mean to insult you, Pen."

Pen laughed before Courtland said, "I'm not sure the senior undergraduates you favor want to be addressed as 'lady.' At least, not on the dance floor."

"Maybe not. I guess the wrong address would make my social life feel formal and fake. More so than usual, I mean." Before he could catch himself, Frank sighed.

There was a moment of wry silence haunted by the ghost of the candid conversation the three of them could not have, the one that did not need careful details and hidden meanings.

Pen cut the quiet with, "Perhaps you need to meet more girls -- ladies -- like me. Now, let me see. Who do I know..."

"She's setting me up," Frank told Courtland in mock panic.

"Just surrender. It's much easier that way."

Frank looked across the street at the silhouette of the G-man. Hidden meaning or no, he lowered his voice a little before he said, "I may remind you of that crack some day."

He was almost entirely grateful it was Pen who broke the sudden, hot tension with a kind snort and, "I hope so. Col needs to get out more." But it still stung, having to be the one who left the doc's house first that evening.

Petty or not, Frank hoped that F.B.I. guy caught one hell of a cold.

XIII

Frank already had a study session scheduled with the doc on the day he received his grades for fall semester. They were pretty much what he had expected; not a bad way to wrap up this part of his academic career. He walked into his bedroom, whistling, and propped up what would be his last report card against the silver-framed photograph of Sally. He always left the records of his academic achievements sitting there for a few days as tribute.

After arranging everything to his satisfaction, Frank realized that his whistling had slowed and now sounded kind of thoughtful. He stopped, considering. Then he winked at Sally before he went back out of the bedroom, heading toward the bathroom and a shower.

Courtland started talking physics even as he shut his front door behind Frank. From the gleeful tone of his words as he led Frank across the living room and up the stairs, he had just come up with something really nifty. But Courtland might as well have been saying, "blah, blah, relativistic blah," as anything coherent.

Frank's mind was way too busy elsewhere to follow the mathematical logic, although he did wonder briefly if the tone of his grunts and one-word replies gave any hints about what he was truly thinking. Probably not, since the doc kept right on going with the sounds of genius at work. Frank settled for trailing after Courtland while feeling as if he were once more stalking desert bighorns out in the Mojave. No, stalking one single, solitary fellow ram.

They entered what should have been the master bedroom, now converted into the doc's newer and smaller study. It was furnished with the same chalkboards the old study had contained, as well as the same couch and a lot of the same books. Courtland walked up to the chalkboard positioned against the far wall, picked up a slide rule he had parked on its chalk rest, and poked the slipstick at an equation, still rattling away.

"Doc," Frank said, when Courtland paused at last to catch his breath and fish around for some chalk.

Courtland didn't turn. "Hmm?"

"Got my last set of grades today." Frank began closing the range.

"Good, good. I'm sure you did very well. You always do. Now, if I'm not mistaken, the integration over the interval between--" His words broke off abruptly with a tenor squawk even as he whirled, almost clobbering Frank with the slide rule.

This was not the effect Frank had been aiming for. He stepped back, holding up both hands in a gesture of surrender while attempting to bottle up the laughter. He failed.

"Oh, very funny. Let's see how well you do the next time someone puts a hand on your butt without warning." Seeming to hear his own words, the doc's mouth shut so quickly his teeth clicked together. He swallowed. Then he tilted his head, contemplating Frank.

There was nothing boyish about Courtland's grin when he said, "You're not wasting any time."

"Should I?"

"No. No, you shouldn't." He stepped forward, removing his glasses and pocketing them. "After all, you've long made your opinions about the possibility clear. And I've done as much as I can. Except this." Wrapping the fingers of both hands into the lapels of Frank's motorcycle jacket, Courtland hauled Frank in for a kiss.

Nothing boyish about the kiss, either. A moment's diffidence, a quick caress from mobile, soft lips, and they both accelerated to enjoying wet warmth and the fierceness of tongue touching tongue. Courtland tasted like salt and strong coffee with maybe a hint of spice. He smelled of the familiar tobacco, chalk dust, and tweed. The grip of his lean arms was strong and determined. He was as intent on having his way as Frank had ever hoped, had ever dreamed.

After some untimed, urgent exploration, it took Courtland maybe sixty seconds to walk Frank backward and shove him into sitting down on the leather couch. He said, "I hope you don't mind if we rush."

"Nope," Frank said, heating his smile with all the lust he could gather. He spread his legs a little wider since Courtland seemed determined to kneel down between them.

"I'm sure we can manage something more sustained later. Would you mind taking off that jacket of yours?"

Not to mention, compelling as it might be, your T-shirt?"

"Glad you like the T-shirt." Rushing or not, Frank still made a production out of sliding off the jacket and tossing it to one side, followed by stripping out of the T-shirt. He enjoyed the feel of heat seeping along his skin beneath the denim of his Levis, spreading out from where Courtland had a hand pressing against the inside of each of Frank's thighs.

Judging by his expression, Courtland had gotten too distracted by the striptease to keep dealing with difficulties like a belt buckle and a zippered fly. When confronted at last by battered, naked chest, Courtland slowly rubbed his lips together before saying, "Yes, I do like the T-shirt. However, it seems I like the T-shirt even better when it's off you and on the rug. And I very much like what was beneath the T-shirt." Courtland's gaze drifted down to the bulge in Frank's Levis. "I wager I'll like that better out in the open, too."

The rasp of his zipper being lowered made Frank want to whimper with relief. At this close a range, the hot intensity of Courtland's familiar hazel eyes, their pupils dilated with want, also fried his normal control. But it was the sight of Courtland's lush mouth that was speeding Frank's pulse until his blood pounded in his ears.

Then Courtland got him free. Here, at last, was the firm, searching touch that Frank had pictured beneath his blankets after lights out for way too long. He spread his legs a little more and tried to look encouraging instead of ready to leap.

"I was right," Courtland almost breathed. "This, I like very much, indeed. In fact, please permit me to demonstrate my appreciation." He shifted his fist down some and tightened his grip on what he had wrapped in his hand. Then he ducked his head, opened that beautifully clever mouth of his, and got to work.

It turned out that Col Courtland was a natural-born prodigy at more than just resolving differential equations in his head. Working both hands into Courtland's already tangled hair, Frank let himself growl. He decided what was going on was almost worth the wait. Then he thrust forward a little and shuddered when Courtland growled right back, the sound muffled by his mouthful. Oh, fuck, it felt good.

"Still gotta be the champ, you," Frank said, his voice low and ragged.

Courtland's hand tightened even more around some really intimate real estate. Frank felt, rather than saw, the smile before Courtland went ahead and started the knock-out round in his title bout.

Frank knew the way his fingers were stroking Courtland's hair afterward, touching Courtland's face and his shoulders, could not be called anything but caressing. It was kind of a relief to look down and watch the dreamy look give way to hot inquiry, for Frank to grin and tell Courtland, "I saw that. Ready for a rematch?"

Maybe three hours passed before Frank managed to drag himself out from between the fancy sheets of the equally ritzy bed in Courtland's bedroom and head for the shower. If Frank had not been so used to spending at least that much time yakking away about physics with the doc, he might have worried about nosy neighbors and nosier investigators. As it was, he paused long enough to make sure they had left the lamps on in the study, nodded satisfaction at seeing light streaming out from behind the half-closed door, and staggered on.

When he had made it into the bathroom, Frank turned on the light and blearily checked his reflection in the mirror, turning around and craning his neck to examine what he could see of his shoulders and back. Nope, no bite marks above the collar line, and no hickeys on the arms or hands. Good. As wild as things had gotten for a time, he had wondered if they had been careful enough. But the only really visible sign of what had occurred was the stubble burn on Frank's thighs, and nobody else except for the doc would ever see that. Oh, and he had spotted the redness of a couple of bruises to come, but those could have been caused by anything.

A little trial and error with the shower handles, and Frank got some hot water flowing. Once he was in the shower and scrubbing, his bad shoulder let him know it was not happy and would be repeating that refrain for a while. He just smirked up at the showerhead. Sometimes, having your fun was well worth paying the price.

Even over the water, he heard Courtland enter the bathroom. "Hey," Frank called out.

"Hello to you, too." From the sounds that followed, Courtland was using the sink and a washcloth to take care of basic hygiene before it was his turn in the shower. Then Frank heard a cupboard open, something rustle, and Courtland saying, "Fresh towel on the rack to the right of the shower."

"Thanks." Frank gave his thighs one last, good scrub, slapped his wet chest, and turned off the taps.

When he slid open the shower curtain, Courtland was sitting, naked, on the closed lid of the can, looking like he had recently been in the world's happiest hurricane. Frank looked him up and down and was amazed to feel the low, twisting want in his gut that would have gotten things going again at any other time. Seemed the flesh might be weak, but it was still willing, if unable. That was amazing, if he took into account both their first encounter and the fastest sequel Frank had managed in years.

Courtland was peering up through his lashes, which was also inspiring if wasted. He said, "Very good, I thought."

"Good enough that you probably don't need your ego fed any more, although I'll give it a try if you want. You earned the extra effort."

"Maybe some other time, when I can express my 'you're welcome' more directly." Giving up flirting for a direct gaze, Courtland asked, "Will there be another time?"

Frank shrugged, reaching for the towel. "Why not? We seem to see eye to eye about the proper grade for that first lab session." Courtland's lips twitched amusement

as he nodded agreement, so Frank kept talking. "Not to mention, we're already in too deep to avoid complications by stopping now. I mean, we can quit this later if something bad starts happening, but we were knotted up six ways from Sunday before we mussed up your sheets."

"You're saying we might as well enjoy ourselves."

"I guess that's what I'm saying, all right. As long as we don't get caught."

Courtland sighed. "For all that homosexual encounters are supposed to be simpler and cruder than those had by normal types, sometimes this all seems too complicated. I hate having to worry about everything from my posture in your presence to who will be cleaning my sheets. Good thing I'm teaching myself how to do laundry."

"Don't start up with the brooding again. Fun times, remember?"

That earned him another lip twitch and, "I certainly do remember."

"Good." Frank finished off his drying job by using the end of the towel to rub the remaining water out of his crew-cut. "How about you change places with me and hit the shower? Then you could repeat what you said earlier about your latest notion. I have to admit, I got distracted and missed the entire spiel."

"I'm not sure if I should feel insulted or properly appreciated."

"Tell me what you said again, and you can feel properly appreciated on both ends. Uh. So to speak."

Courtland snorted with laughter and stood up. Frank gave him a sheepish grin while hanging up the towel. Then Courtland eased past Frank into the shower, pausing along the way for a fast but surprisingly tasty kiss. As Courtland pulled the shower curtain closed, there was a smile on his face.

After working the shower taps, Courtland announced loudly over the sound of the water, "Now, then. As I was saying before being so thoroughly interrupted--"

Taking his seat for the lecture, Frank realized that he was smiling, too.

Frank was perfectly happy to give up the baths and bars for a while in favor of dallying with someone now less a professor than a pal, even if that pal lived beneath the all-too-watchful gaze of the G-men. After all, the F.B.I. already had Frank's name in a file back in Washington, so it was not like he was risking anything new. Also, the logistics of their meetings were simple. And they got along really well in the sack, even better than Frank had hoped.

For all that Courtland was young, he was properly cautious. No furtive, just-for-the-thrill-of-it hand jobs in dark alleys or park bushes for him. Their single encounter in the doc's office was a mistake that they did not repeat, even though, as a onetime event, it was great.

On the few occasions when they were committing enjoyably illegal acts in Frank's apartment, they kept the noise way down, remembering the thin walls. Frank never slept over at Courtland's house, either, which was kind of a pity. He would not have minded one bit.

This caution had its rewards. Even after careful study, including checking the reactions of external observers such as the other graduate students and professors, Frank spotted no signs that he and Courtland were acting any differently than they had been before they started screwing. This seemed fair since nothing felt very different, aside from the enjoyment of folding a few extra hours of fornication into all the physics. Although the two types of pleasure were not much alike, they still seemed to go together at least as well as peanut butter and bananas did on toast. The holidays that year turned out to be a lot of fun.

Before the Christmas break, the doc had made it clear to everyone that Phoebe was about to inherit Frank's old job as straw boss of Courtland's teaching assistants. When she and Jerry got back into town, Frank took them out to the Canton Palace. He figured Phoebe would like a chance to ask any questions she might have, and Jerry automatically accompanied Phoebe these days.

Social life during graduate school still sometimes struck Frank as weird. This was one of many occasions when the three of them talked business first, discussing the lab sections while they were getting seated, pouring tea, and munching on crispy noodles. Only after ordering did their catching up begin.

"Steamed scallops with ginger and garlic, please," Phoebe said. The waitress nodded without looking up from her order pad.

"Beef chow fun," Jerry announced. Having managed to order without prompting, he went back to contemplating his menu. There was a pause in the proceedings while the waitress got it away from him.

When the waitress finally turned her attention to Frank, he started to say, "Egg foo--" before stopping. Both Phoebe and Jerry were gazing at him more in sorrow than in anger. Even the waitress radiated the kind of patience you needed with friends who thought sequential burping was a varsity sport. "Okay, fine. How about the egg and beef layered on rice?" Then Frank handed over his menu before he could get his chops busted about that, too.

"You're looking well," Phoebe told him after the waitress departed for the kitchen with their order.

"Yeah, so are you. Since neither of you is a ghost, you must have survived Jerry's first visit to Virginia."

"Phoebe's cousin Robert was impressed I could play boogie-woogie," Jerry said.

"Is that where you stayed? With this Cousin Robert?"

Jerry nodded. "He's a pharmacist. We did a lot of shad fishing while Mrs. Hannaford had conniption fits."

Frank glanced at Phoebe, who shrugged. "Although Jerry's phrasing might be a trifle blunt, that was indeed

what she was doing. Daddy and Jerry got along quite well, though."

"He was impressed I could play Liszt, and we talked a lot of baseball while Mrs. Hannaford was busy. But I still prefer Manhattan. All those extra bathrooms and things down south are strange, and people kept looking at me funny whenever I got a drink at a water fountain." His words were vague, but the sardonic expression in his eyes made it clear Jerry knew what had been going on.

"Never mind. We're back in Southern California and staying here." Phoebe smiled at him with doting fondness before turning back to Frank. "What about you? Any more trouble while we were gone?"

"Nothing yet. I had to check Bill's spelling on the latest report he mailed to the you-know-who. He was getting all the names wrong. You wouldn't believe how he spelled von Neumann."

"Oh, yes I would." Darkly, she added, "Even so, I imagine *he* will receive an answer."

"Who knows? I can't tell what these guys are thinking, and I haven't seen one since the party to ask. Been too busy. The doc and I are working on another paper."

Phoebe looked at Jerry; Jerry, at Phoebe. They both rolled their eyes. At this rate, Frank gave them no more than a year before Phoebe was hiding a ring on a long necklace below her collar so that none of the other professors would find out too early about her altered future marital status.

Done with her share of the eye rolling, Phoebe asked, "Did anything else happen while we were gone? Anything interesting that has nothing to do with physics, I mean?"

"Huh. Let's see." Frank started ticking off points on his fingers. "Pen wants to set me up with one of her sorority sisters. Doctor Throop is dating a car hop. I guess I'm stuck with Felix the Cat because I haven't seen his owner in a month. After some big New Year's banquet or other, the Dean of Science called the Dean of Engineering something with lots of syllables that translates into 'you big lug, you.' Oh, and Bertie Wilson almost got arrested for helping to smuggle Clarence Cougar-" Clarence was the stuffed mountain lion who served as the Polytechnic's mascot. "--into the Kitty Cat Club and onto the stage right before Lili St. Cyr's show. They got caught on the way out, and the cops were called. Which is all the gossip I can remember right now. It's been quiet."

Jerry blinked sagely. "I'm surprised Bertie didn't get bounced from the program. Maybe Doctor Greerson thought it wouldn't be fair, given the bar brawl you and the doc were in that one time."

Regular sex must have been good for Frank's nerves. Instead of panicking, he raised his eyebrows and asked, keeping it mild, "Bar brawl?"

"Sure, the one where you got arrested a few years back? I heard about it from Ellery, who was working up at the observatory when some cop telephoned to see if anyone had ever heard of you."

That was worth a forehead smack. "If it was a cop who called. It might have been the you-know-who again."

"Could be. Given that, you should be pleased to hear Professor Stabe started telling whoever it was all about your senior thesis. The whole thing, including each and every page and equation, in detail."

Doc Stabe was a good guy, but he did like his details. Frank sighed. "Great. So all of Clarence Tech has heard."

"A lot of guys have heard something, I guess. Gossip travels--"

"Yeah. Got that one. Surprised no one has ever ragged me about it."

Phoebe sniffed demurely. "Brawling is such a terribly masculine occupation. I'd imagine none of those boys wants to risk revealing such a reassuring story about the beau ideal of manly science as a fairy tale." She did not seem to mean anything special by her last words. Oddly, it was Jerry who blinked a few times even as he grinned.

Frank still thought it was time to change the subject. "Anyhow. It's been a lot more peaceful around here than out in the big, wide world of physics."

"You're telling me," Jerry said. "My mother kept asking me to explain nuclear fallout to her. Aunt Irene had told her pasting up aluminum foil on top of the wallpaper would help. And my Uncle Raul wants to know what kind of money atom scientists need to take on a job like that."

"It's not the job, it's the working conditions," Frank said, hearing the dryness in his own voice.

"Sure, and the politics. What naturally produces more gamma rays, radioisotopes or HUAC?"

"I'm not standing really close to either."

"Good answer. There are reasons I prefer fluid dynamics," Jerry said. "I'll leave the sub-atomic physics to fellas who like being tangled up with those high-powered military types and their minions."

"Hey, don't get cocky. Look at what happened to van Staarling. Also, if you think about it, I'd bet there's a branch of fluid mechanics that will play a big role in the development of any super-bomb relying on--" Frank stopped talking. Phoebe was staring at him, her eyes narrowed in an expression a lot like the one Frank had once dubbed "Sally's overdue book look." "What?"

"I swear." She gave Jerry a good dose of the stare, too. "Are you two really going to drift into one-upping each other with specific details about weapons development right here in the Canton Palace?"

"Come on, Phoebe. You're just as fond as we are of proving you're at the top of the class," Jerry said mildly. "And honestly? It's not as if we know that much. Not to mention, these days even the newspapers are chewing over details."

"In this case, I wasn't playing, so I can umpire. And compared to the general population, even including the

newspapers, you both know a great deal. Which makes you quite capable of giving anyone who accidentally overhears something out of context in this very public place unneeded conniption fits. Do you truly want people going home and pasting up aluminum foil? Not to mention, our dinner is about to arrive."

"The food's coming? Why didn't you just say that in the first place?" Frank asked her, cheating to duck out on the argument.

Apparently, that having been an offense against logic, he earned an even more severe response from her than the overdue book look. She stuck out her tongue at him. Jerry hid his grin.

Afterward, while Frank was telling Courtland about the evening, he said, "Jerry had a point. I even saw an article mentioning the Super in our local rag."

"I noticed that one. No wonder the security types are on high alert." Courtland sighed. "So much for a quiet life. There are times when this is like trying to, hmm, have some fun in Pompeii."

"As long as the big volcano in the background doesn't decide to blow." *Instead of me or you*, Frank did not add, but Courtland laughed anyhow.

XIV

Courtland planted one hand on each hip. "God damn Klaus Fuchs. The possibly non-existent deity can also damn Edward Teller for being so busy with his crusade back on the Mesa that Fuchs ended up doing most of Teller's assigned work, all of which was likely passed along to Russia. Oh, and while he's at it, the deity might as well damn everyone who helped fire the starter's pistol on this new race for a hydrogen bomb. I'm sure Fuchs' espionage will help it end well."

Frank had seen Courtland launch into a fair number of speeches over the past couple of years, but this one was a lulu. On the other hand, this one was also justified by the last couple of weeks. Yesterday's arrest of Doctor Fuchs in London as a Soviet spy had been another big shock for the former Manhattan Project scientists.

Still, Frank was not sure some of these details were okay to share. "Hey, should you be telling me this?"

Courtland glanced at the windows of his study, closed and curtained on a sunny Saturday in February. Then he stared over his glasses at Frank and snorted. "I was awakened this morning by the long-distance operator. Uncle Leland called from Manhattan in order to read me several articles from the front page of the *New York Times*. They included one wherein it is reported that J. Edgar Hoover says Klaus Fuchs, yesterday jailed as a Soviet spy, had certain basic information about the hydrogen bomb. When he was done reading, Uncle Leland requested my opinion of the reporting."

"Was that his way of asking if you're going to be arrested?"

"No, that was his way of asking me who else will be arrested. You see, no Courtland would ever condescend to be a spy in the same ring as some Communistic German, even if he was a brilliant scientist."

"Too bad the F.B.I. doesn't agree with your uncle."

"I wish I could tell if they know something or are merely flailing. The arrest of Fuchs suggests they know something. My case suggests they're flailing, unless we count that other factor."

"They seem to count it. Don't know why red is supposed to always accompany lavender, but everyone else sure thinks it does."

"Has it always been like this? The Life?"

"Nah. Of course, we're physicists now, and back then I was nothing but a kid hanging around a bunch of guys with more of everything than I had except for looks. Even so, I remember Hollywood being a lot calmer. Not safe, but--" Frank broke off, shaking his head. "And yet those studio guys were still dragged in front of HUAC last year. These days, reading about politics is like watching someone both hysterical and genuinely in pain. Good luck figuring out what has him screaming at any particular moment."

"I never did like Fuchs," Courtland muttered. "Self-righteous, socially immature, overly intense, drank like a

fish, smoked like a chimney--" He shook his head. "Or is this a matter of takes one to know one?"

"Do you feel any urges toward espionage?"

"Oh, please. If I did, I actually would check myself into a local loony bin and resort to psychoanalysis."

"Then you're only being a snob again. Don't worry about it." The doc's gaze was baleful, but that was better than beating himself up. Frank stood. "C'mon downstairs, would you?"

"Why?"

"If you're going to rehash this, you should move around or something. Also, you're not the only one involved here. Let's head into your kitchen so I can double-check what you have in the way of pots and pans."

Courtland's expression had shifted from anger toward curiosity. "I'm not sure how those three sentences fit together."

"It's almost Doctor Tompkins' birthday, and I'd bet he's not having a nice Saturday, either. I'll teach you how to bake something, and we can haul it over there."

Three hours, one pan full of somewhat tasty near-pancakes, and one pan full of chocolate cupcakes later, they crossed the front porch toward Courtland's old Pontiac, parked under the carport. Frank glanced across the street and, as he had expected, saw a guy in a nice suit and a snap-brimmed hat standing on the sidewalk over there. It looked like the same G-man as at the party,

too. At least he was not pretending to read a newspaper this time.

"Hold it," he told the doc.

"Hmm?" Courtland looked up and followed the direction of his gaze. "Oh, of course. I'll get the car started and wait for you."

Frank crossed the street, watching the watcher watch him. Walking up to the guy, he said, "Don't know how you can tolerate all this standing around. You want one? They're chocolate, still warm."

"Sure," the guy said, fishing a cupcake out of the open tin Frank was offering him with care. He was likely worried about getting crumbs on his shirtsleeve cuffs. "You do a lot of baking?"

"Both my ma and my wife thought a man should be able to feed himself when he's hungry and she's away. We're heading over to Doctor Tompkins' place, if anyone's interested."

The shrug as the guy took a bite was noncommittal. "Pretty good cupcake."

"I'll let Doc C. know you said so. His first effort, but he learns fast. Watch out for the setter down the block. He'll try and get anything left over away from you."

"You're telling me?" Special Agent Watcher asked, tone wry.

Without another word, Frank went back across the street and got into the car. It seemed as if he could feel a considering gaze on the back of his neck the entire trip. The feeling gave him the creeps.

"Well?" Courtland asked, backing out the car into the street.

"Guess he knows his job. Nothing much. Didn't think there would be. He does say your cupcakes are pretty good."

"At least I'm learning to do something of which they approve." Shifting the car into first, Courtland got them going.

Maybe the timing was coincidental, or maybe it was not. The very next Thursday, Frank was paging through the notes Doctor Tompkins had handed him about his dissertation proposal when someone knocked on the door to his office.

"Come on in, but on your head be it."

Quentin peered around the half-opened door. "Frank."

"What?"

"Doctor Greerson wants to see you. He and the other faculty members are down in the departmental conference room."

This could not be good. "Okay. Anything else?"

"Nope."

"Fine. Don't ask me what's going on, because I don't know, either."

Looking a little offended, Quentin said, "I don't have to ask. If, for some reason, I decide to be interested, someone will eventually tell me."

"So much for privacy. Out, I have to lock up."

Frank thought about diverting to the men's room to comb his hair and clean up. Then he shrugged. If his professors were not used to his looks by now, they never would be. Instead, he punched the button that would summon the elevator, listening as it creaked and rattled its way up the shaft. Rumor was they would be getting it fixed as part of the big departmental expansion beginning this year, the one that was supposed to include better office space designed for more graduate students. Frank would believe it when he saw it happening.

The conference room was located next to the chairman's office, which meant Frank had to get past the senior departmental secretary. Waiting until she was off the telephone with the registrar, he said, "Good morning, Miss Swan."

She condescended to unfold her cheeks into an approximation of a smile. At some point, he had done something to make her approve of him, although he still was not sure what that had been. But he would take his luck wherever he could find it. "Good morning, Mr.

Mackenzie. You're to go right in. However, they are a wee bit upset, so you still might wish to knock first."

That was more good luck. He knew a hint when he heard one. Going to the door, Frank paused to listen. Its wood was good, thick oak, but he could still make out the kind of rise and fall in the muted, deep voices beyond it that meant the professors were annoyed. Great. He knocked, hard and brisk, before entering.

Courtland sat at the foot of the polished mahogany table, looking aggrieved. Glancing at Frank, he moved his shoulders in something that resembled a twitch as much as a shrug. Not absolute disaster, not yet, but danger ahead.

Doctor Greerson was sitting at the head of the table, alternately pulling in and puffing out his cheeks like a grampus spitting water, not a promising sign. The other professors were seated along the sides of the table. Tompkins was cryptic and unsmiling, Throop belligerently exasperated, and van Staarling vaguely upset.

Whatever this was, it sure was not fun. There was an empty chair to Courtland's right, between him and Doctor van Staarling. Frank pulled it out, sat, and turned toward Doctor Greerson. "You sent for me, sir?"

"Yes." Greerson grampused a little more before bursting out with, "Really, it's too bad. There are other matters we could be dealing with right now. Our search to fill our newly funded position, for example, is--"

"Henry," Tompkins interrupted, with a smile faker than usual. "The time."

"Of course. My apologies." He donned his Firm But Fair expression. "I've come from an early meeting with the Vice Chancellor and the Dean. It seems the Federal Bureau of Investigation passed on some information to them about Doctor Courtland, as well as about you, Mr. Mackenzie."

Courtland propped his chin on his hand, giving away nothing. For his part, Frank felt as if he had been gut shot, but he had a lot of practice keeping his feelings off his face.

However, since Greerson had spoken to him and not the doc, he asked, "Yes, sir?"

"Information about that incident in San Agustin. The... tavern dispute."

Might as well start as he meant to go on. "You mean that time when we got arrested?"

"Yes, yes. In the, err, the--"

"Buttercup bar?" Frank asked, making sure his words sounded helpful.

Courtland snorted very softly, Throop coughed loudly, Tompkins shot Frank a thoughtful look that promised retribution later, and van Staarling seemed a little confused.

Greerson only winced and continued. "An establishment of that nature, yes. I am told Special Agent O'Rourke implied that you might have been engaged in activities while in this place that were not merely illegal but also detrimental to the good name of Clarence Tenn Polytechnic while constituting a security risk."

Frank could not do Tom Sawyer, outraged, and carry the act off, but he could roll his eyes, and he did. "Look, I'm sorry about beating up those guys in jail, but they were grabbing at Doctor Courtland's--"

"Yes, yes. Thank you, Frank," Greerson interrupted, sounding harried. "Col recounted the details of the latter part of your evening for us before you arrived. While I cannot approve of your methods, you were inarguably provoked. However, later events aside, you picked a very unfortunate evening to visit an even more unfortunate establishment." Even though no one had interrupted him, he held up one hand. "I do understand that Doctor Stabe had invited you to visit the observatory--" Frank managed not to react to this rewrite of the facts. Had Stabe edited events in his head? It did happen sometimes. "--and that nature has its needs. Err, for sanitary facilities, I mean."

"Yeah, we needed a toilet."

"However. This could have worked out very poorly for you. Very poorly, indeed." Greerson gave Frank a sorrowful look charged with very poorly. "You are lucky that the Dean understands those responsible for our security needs are a trifle overworked and overwrought at the moment, and advised the Vice Chancellor on that basis. The Dean consulted at

Westinghouse while Doctor Condon was there. He's also been quite impressed with Miss Hamilton. I believe he knows her father."

"He wasn't thrilled to learn about the obvious surveillance at Col's housewarming party, either," Doctor Tompkins said dryly. "A man and his wife should be able to mime *The Naked and the Dead* without contemplating the possibility of having been observed by loitering federal agents."

Greerson nodded. "Yes, that was unduly intrusive. In any case, the Dean and the Vice Chancellor informed Special Agent O'Rourke that appropriate steps would be taken. Given that, I have been instructed to review the events of that evening with you and reprove you as seems appropriate." Drawing himself up, he glowered fiercely at Courtland. It was even kind of impressive. "Professor Courtland, in the future, be more careful when entering public establishments that serve liquor."

"Yes, Doctor Greerson," Courtland said mildly.

"And, as for you, Mr. Mackenzie, continue your recent abjuration of boxing. Fighting sets a poor example for your peers, many of whom do not have your years of experience and familiarity with the wider world." For a moment he looked honestly unhappy. "I'm sure you heard about the incident involving Clarence Cougar and Miss St. Cyr, the um, well, I suppose she could be termed a--"

"Burlesque star," Frank offered, making his words helpful again. "Or maybe stripper." Then he winced as

Courtland, still wearing that mild expression, reached out and flicked his ear, hard.

After clearing his throat, Greerson said, "Thank you, Col. We must consider ourselves fortunate that this ridiculous matter did not get into the newspapers. Unlike our more recent student escapade."

Throop barked out a laugh. "Ridiculous. That's an understatement, not just abstractly but also empirically. How many pansies know about Lili St. Cyr?"

This was a mistake that should not be corrected and an opening that should not be missed. "I caught her bubble bath act when I was still on recuperative leave before I was discharged." He had been dragged to the show by a really fey Signal Corps corporal named Artie.

"Oh, yes?" Throop brightened.

Frank nodded. "It's one heck of a show, Doc. You should see it. Impressive, and yet classy. Also extremely pneumatic."

Throop opened his mouth, obviously about to request specific observations even as Greerson said, rather plaintively, "Gentlemen, please. We still need to discuss the new faculty position, which we cannot do with Frank -- Mr. Mackenzie -- in the room."

Grumbling, Throop subsided while Greerson stared at him sternly. Meanwhile, the doc had taken out his tobacco pouch and was turning it over and over in his hands as if he desperately wanted a smoke. Tompkins was now smiling faintly, and van Staarling was still

musings about the meaning of life or whatever it was he thought about while staring at the ceiling. Frank and the doc might be through the worst of this storm.

Having subdued Throop to his satisfaction, Greerson sighed, getting the full measure of pompous martyrdom out of it. "It was a pity that you two had this ill luck during your trip. However, I suppose the least said about such politically motivated slander as resulted, the soonest mended."

Too bad that this was the moment when Doctor van Staarling reached enlightenment. He turned toward Courtland with a polite little cough and then said, "Extremely developed intelligence is often associated with incongruous psychological weaknesses. It may be the price paid for a refined nervous system. I have long had my suspicions about Isaac Newton."

The mood around the table coagulated like a sour-cream Jell-O salad. Tompkins winced, and Throop shot Frank a wary, interested look, as if he thought Frank was going to reach over and punch van Staarling in the face.

"My dear Professor--" Doc Greerson started before he ran down, this time completely stymied.

"Nonetheless, you should try to resist your inclinations toward unfortunate indulgences." Doctor Greerson kept making panicked little gestures with both hands as van Staarling rambled on gently. "In the end, I have noticed that sexual eccentricities tend to distract one, reducing one's productivity, perhaps because of the physiological strain accountable to overindulgence, or conceivably--"

Incredulous, Frank watched what should have been sudden disaster collapse back into farce. Greerson kept trying to wedge too many words into brief pauses during van Staarling's rambling monologue. Tompkins had his arms folded and his gaze directed toward the nearest window, obviously waiting it out. Throop was barely trying to hide disbelief.

Without intending to, Frank looked over at Courtland. Courtland looked back at him and then away. Frank knew they were sharing the same thoughts.

Unlike Courtland's ma, the other physics professors did not want the truth about an upper-crust genius they had chosen themselves, one who could bring so much to their department. They were refusing to know. Given this initial, willed ignorance and the human dislike of admitting error, the doc would get nothing from them but support during any further struggles with the F.B.I., as long as he stayed discreet. This determined disbelief was about the best thing that could have happened both to Courtland and to Frank.

Frank felt his lips twitch. Courtland turned laughter into coughing. Briefly, their gazes met again, sharing their understanding, before they looked away once more.

At this half-hidden evidence of amusement, relief seemed to flow around the table before Doc Greerson turned his attention back to cutting off Doctor van Staarling's speech, this time with greater success. Then Doc Tompkins took over, launching them into a debate about what the current, mistrustful atmosphere might spawn next, accompanied by a discussion of how the department could best go about ignoring the F.B.I.

without imperiling any precious federal funding. Frank was relieved to be booted out so the senior faculty could get down to some serious griping and moaning about paranoid military and security types without any juniors present.

Only Frank and Courtland knew their reactions had been something other than politely bridled amusement at van Staarling's seemingly mistaken monologue. They had really been responding to this entire, crazy, incongruous, hypocritical rescue. Sometimes you just had to laugh these days, or you would end up crumpling like aluminum foil.

Courtland lay sprawled out across Frank's couch, a purring Felix parked on his chest. They had indulged in a hike out at the Mormon Rocks, accompanied by a meaty discussion of the Monte Carlo method, with Jerry, Phoebe, and Bill. The weather had been sunny and not too windy, the Cajon pass interesting to examine, and even Bill's complaints that the F.B.I. had stopped writing him back had been more amusing than annoying. Happiness had ruled the day.

When Courtland had come upstairs to Frank's apartment to pick up a few more back issues of *Weird Tales*, he had suddenly run out of juice. Frank had let the doc alone for a hour or two while he either thought or halfway dozed; sometimes you could not tell the difference until he shared what he was thinking or started snoring. In the meantime, Frank had reread one of the pulp magazines intended for the loan. The quiet had been kind of nice, but now it was close to nine.

"Hey," Frank said, leaning forward and shaking the doc's shoulder. "You have to get up and go home. Your nanny may be watching."

"Have you checked your wiring and telephone recently?" Courtland asked without opening his eyes.

"Yeah, this place is okay. I think. Like usual, no guarantees. Someone could have taken advantage of our nature trip."

"In other words, good enough for a rough approximation of safety. I got a note from my mother yesterday."

"Yeah?" Frank asked, feeling wary. This subject was kind of a mine field.

"Given the difficulties Uncle Leland and his colleagues have had recently after Senator McCarthy claimed they were largely Communists, not to mention the slanderous connections being made between State Department officials and a certain personal taste of mine, she feels she better understands why I needed to lie." He sighed. "Of course, she also feels it is more important than ever that I try to deal with my difficulty."

Frank considered this. "Better than nothing, I suppose."

"Not really, given her hatred of lying and my intrinsic nature. I've always wondered why ordinary sorts seem to believe we had never thought of trying to change before they suggested the idea to us."

"Because they radiate mystic ordinary rays that will somehow make change easy? Because they know so much more about us than we do? Because this way of living is always a whole lot of fun?"

"Well, it is with you around."

Since Courtland still had his eyes closed, Frank did not worry about what his smile said. "Thanks. Likewise."

"At least her letter will keep me from building up false hopes. And she continues to refrain from threats, which is good."

"Sure."

Opening his eyes, Courtland picked up Felix with both hands, holding him dangling overhead. "You, my friend, need your dinner. Cat food."

Reminded of the existence of chow, Felix wriggled until he was placed on the floor and could trot off into the kitchen. Sitting up, Courtland asked, "Are my shoes around here somewhere?"

"Try about fourteen inches away from your feet to the right."

Courtland picked up a shoe. "Well, your dissertation proposal is done. Next stop, your written exams. And then your orals. Knowing you, you'll have your dissertation mostly done by then."

Frank shrugged.

"In some ways, I'm still too close to being your teacher to feel comfortable. I'm trying to view this whole affair as including the Attic cultivation of the beloved's mind, although our ages are both reversed and more acceptable."

"Is that your way of telling me you're not stopping the sex even though you still feel a little guilty?"

"He gets it in one." Looking up from his shoelace, Courtland gazed over his glasses, expression serious. "My morals will have to settle for the full loaf of being *persona non grata* in the weapons development community to console them for the half loaf of my having waited before we had sex. And it was tough to wait. Between that brain of yours and our shared tastes, I think I would have had problems even if you combined Barry's buck teeth and Bill's elephant ears."

"As long as I didn't have Phoebe's--" Frank made a scooping gesture over his chest.

"If she catches you doing that, you're a dead man."

"Yeah, but a dead man with a safe reputation. Better hope you don't ever have any more brilliant students who share your musical inclinations."

"I forgot to factor in your age. I like older men. Brilliant, older, musical, male students. Although even combining all those variables a second time probably wouldn't have the same result." Falling silent, Courtland examined his remaining shoe. He put it on. Then he took a deep breath, let it out, and said, "I'm in love with you."

Frank stared at him for what felt like a really long time. "Okay, Champ, now you're revenged for the unexpected hand on your ass."

Busy knotting his other shoe lace, Courtland said, "Good. I think."

"You've tied a knot."

"Crap." Looking up, Courtland grinned. "Obviously, I'm not very suave in these situations."

"That's okay, neither am I." Frank swallowed. "Which is kind of too bad, because it seems as if I might love you, too." He shook his head. "What the fuck is this, a Hollywood romance?"

"No, because after I do what I mean to do to you once I finally get this shoe back off my foot, I still have to go home. And we'll be double-dating this weekend. You're escorting Pen's good friend to the Pasadena Playhouse with a late dinner to follow. Italian, most likely. I hope the F.B.I. gets photographs."

"Yeah, and I have a meeting at nine tomorrow with Doc T. about scheduling my written exams. Whatever you'll be doing probably shouldn't keep me up too late."

"The way I'm feeling right now? I don't think it will take long. No, not long at all." Courtland, whose expression had been languid and voice had been downright dirty, paused and brightened. "We might even have time for seconds."

"Fine. Then just give me the goddamned shoe."

XV

Quentin looked judicious. "Three years, seven months, thirteen days. Not a record, but not bad. Still, you could have waited another two weeks to defend your dissertation."

Forced to stand still, Frank had to settle for glaring at Quentin over Phoebe's head as she finished readjusting Frank's hood so the gold silk lining would show the way it was supposed to in the photos. "You entered that stupid betting pool and lost, didn't you?"

"Well, yeah."

"Who won?"

"Barry. He cleaned up." Quentin shook his head in disgust.

"Serves you right."

"Maybe. Phoebe, would you help me when you're done with Frank? Everything's slipping."

"That's what you get for sending off your fiancée to escort your parents to the refreshments tent." Phoebe gave Quentin a look. "And what's the magic word?"

"Jerry. Okay, only kidding. Please."

"Oh, fine, but you'll have to hold your horses for one more minute." Done using whatever mysterious clothing magic she had at her command, Phoebe held Frank at arm's length and critically studied his gown. "Good. You

may go talk to Professor Courtland and Pen. Do not get lost before the departmental photograph. Do not ruin my work."

Gravely, Frank saluted.

"Do not salute." Suddenly, fiercely, she hugged him. "That was some truly fine work. Your wife would be proud."

"Thanks." He hugged her back, even as she adjusted something that had shifted. Frank grinned and added, "I'll let you touch my Nobel prize."

"Do not make me smack you, or I will not let you admire *my* Nobel prize. Go."

Frank headed across the lawn behind the Physical Sciences building, accepting congratulations, offering a few of his own, and dodging other people's photography sessions. On his way to the cluster of faculty, he passed a guy in a nicely tailored navy suit who was wearing a fedora.

Pausing, Frank asked him, "Did you get a picture from the right side? It's my good profile."

"I noticed that while examining your mug shots, Doctor Mackenzie," Special Agent Watcher said before taking a neat bite from a deviled egg.

Frank would have to count this tussle as a tie. He got going again.

He was stopped by Doctor Throop. "Frank. Excellent job, although I still can't believe you accepted the offer from Tarzana. A liberal arts school, when you could have joined one of the bigger departments back east?"

Frank shrugged. "It'll keep me in Southern California. If I moved anyplace cold, my shoulder would give me trouble. Besides, I like teaching, and this will make the logistics easier since Col and I are considering writing another paper together."

"What a radical idea. You want one of these ham sandwiches without the crusts? Puny but tasty."

"I get any crumbs on this gown and Phoebe will disembowel me." Involuntarily, Throop glanced down, checking his own academic regalia. Before he could grin, Frank told him, "Hey, I have to go. I'm being summoned for photographs."

As Frank had already learned, Pen was ruthless with a camera. After a good session of fiddling around with first positioning and then her light meter, she looked up from the reflection finder of her Kodak and asked, "Can you two please stand in the same postal code? Col, put your arm around Frank. Thank you. Frank, you might try reciprocating. Col doesn't have cooties, I promise."

Col was warm and familiar against Frank's side. "I'm glad you decided to stay," he muttered, very low.

"You knew I would. Just because I can't have the whole damn cake, you think I'm spurning my large and tasty slice?"

Pen made an exasperated noise. "Please stop talking. I can summon reinforcements, you know." After more fiddling of the kind that only camera bugs understood, she told them, "Say Laurel and Hardy."

"Laurel and Hardy," they chorused.

Pen took her pictures. Then she looked up and said, "Amazing. I think I have all that I want from you two." She could not resist dimpling at her own words, and Frank grinned right back at her.

Col stepped away and rested a hand on Frank's good shoulder, careful not to rearrange any of the regalia. He gave Frank a quick squeeze before letting go. "Come on. I want to see if we can get to the refreshments tent before they round us up for the big departmental photo session. I could do with some Swedish meatballs."

"Just stay away from the edible centerpiece. All that fancy cheese was supposed to be sculpted into Clarence Cougar for the Chancellor's bash, but someone dropped it, so they salvaged the cores of the head and body and turned them into a hydrogen atom, instead."

"I won't ask how you learned that."

"Give you a clue. The info didn't arrive faster than the speed of light."

With a quirk of his lips that mixed sweetness and wryness, Col said, his words soft, "So few things worth having on a human scale do."

End

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