

*This story is set in the same universe as **Strange Loops**, about three years before the events of **Strange Loops** take place. This is a standalone but it's actually the second story of an emerging three (or four) story AU Mark/F arc. The first story, **Down When I'm Loaded**, is still being written. Yeah. I don't write sequentially. After all this time, I don't think this news really comes as a shock to anyone. I guess I ought to say that the existence of this story is in some wise a spoiler for all of **Strange Loops** but I'm guessing if you're here you know that already.*

Thanks to Otsoko, Beth, and Kellie for read-through and beta; to Otsoko for enabling the language slut within (obviously the French influences here can be attributed entirely to Otsoko); to realitycek for the impetus for the story; to Kellie, Journey, Denise, and realitycek for being willing to endure AU backstory TalkStory to the nth power; and to Rowan, for lots o' hockey fodder. Oh, and Susan – thanks for post-minute proofing!

*Soundtrack: Talk of the Town, the Pretenders; Missing Pieces, of a revolution; The Enemy Within, Rush; So Hard, Voice of the Beehive; You Wanted More, Tonic; Murder or a Heart Attack, Old 97's; Scar Tissue, Red Hot Chili Peppers; Half a World Away and I'll Take the Rain, REM (oh come **on**, like you're surprised or something).*

No hot tubs were harmed in the writing of this story. Hockey players, however, were damaged, although they are fictional, as are, sadly, most of the teams mentioned (now).

Benton Fraser/Mark Smithbauer; NC-17.

To realitycek and Otsoko, for reasons too numerous to explore at this juncture

Missing Pieces

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“Fucking refs!”

I can hear him, halfway down the hall.

“Where the fuck did they find those blind fucking assholes? Seoul?”

“Well, fuck you too!”

A door slams; an assistant coach stalks past me, thin-lipped with anger. His eyes barely flicker at me in acknowledgment.

I push the door open in time to see pads hit the wall next to me and rebound to land near a team sweater, obviously discarded first.

“I said fuck you!” he shouts and then stops short.

He hasn’t bothered to wipe the blood off his face, the blood that occasioned his subsequent slashing penalty and, further to that, his ejection from the game when he took exception to the lack of a penalty on the player who’d left him bleeding.

“Clearly elbowing,” I say.

“Unless you’re fucking blind, deaf, and dumb,” he says harshly.

Only fourteen minutes into the game, the fifth game of the series, currently tied two and two. The Jets played hard and took the first two; the Nordiques fought back, coming out on top the next two games; and Mark, in particular, took and continues to take two back-to-back defeats personally.

He rubs a hand across the back of his neck and winces.

“You’d better go,” he says. “I’m in no mood for—”

“Is anyone coming to look at that?” I pick up his sweater and pads and cross to the bench to put them down there.

“Fuck them,” he snarls. “Fuck you too.” He shoves the pile off the bench, then shoves me. “Go, I said. The hell’s wrong with you?”

“I thought you might want...” I hesitate; I’ve never seen him like this. “I thought you might want to, ah... vent.”

“Oh, yeah, good call, Ben. You think? You think?” He shoves me again, backwards this time.

“So I thought,” I say, beginning to get angry. “He was an idiot, Mark, unquestionably. But—”

“Oh, you know what? Don’t even go there, you fucking do-gooder.” He shoves me yet again, hard this time, against the lockers. “Fucking I told you so, fucking good sport, fucking don’t let the fucking team down. Fuck you, Benton Fraser, you fucking wannabe Mountie.”

My fists clench; I see him set his jaw, see, too anticipation in his face. I smell the sweat and the blood, both fresh; his face is bruising already. Disconcertingly, Mark angry is very similar to Mark aroused; my confused body begins to respond to the flush

in his face, the determined and challenging look in his eyes, the tension evident in his muscles, and, undoubtedly, the pheromones contained in his fresh sweat and the adrenaline and testosterone...

I shake myself mentally: this is entirely inappropriate, as is my half-formed erection. "I only wanted to help," I say then, tightly, and begin to turn away.

"You want to help?" He snags his stick, leaning against the locker, and quicker than I can blink, throws it behind my shoulders and snaps me back around and towards him. "You want to help? Take off my skates." He throws the words at me, a challenge.

"Take off your own damn skates," I retort, well and truly angry now. "I'll see you tomorrow. I'm going back to the hotel."

"Take off my skates," he repeats, setting his jaw: more than a challenge now, is this a test? Proof of something, perhaps? That startling thought pushes my erection to full-blown in a few short seconds. He growls and pushes down on the stick. It bites into my shoulders, forcing my knees to give a little.

"Fuck you," I say harshly, defiance as always my first, and second, and third reaction to commands. I grab the stick and jerk it sideways, trying to pull it out of his hands. He jerks back: an unsteady tug of war for a few moments.

"Fuck you, go, then," he says, and wrenches the stick, hard, out of my grasp, in a practiced motion. He sends it sailing across the room to hit the door. "Go, damn it! Get the fuck out of here. I already fucking told you!"

I look at him, too long; without saying anything else, I sink to my knees and begin to unlace his skates. I feel my face flush; I begin to sweat too, perhaps a sympathetic reaction to his physical state; and I resolutely ignore my own physical state as I work at the first knots. I don't have occasion to frequent locker rooms any more but they tested my resolve in the past, embarrassed me, in fact, more than once; and those fantasies are certainly not helping the situation now. It doesn't help, either, that Mark played a prominent part in many of them, the living embodiment of many dreams made reality.

I tug hard at the knot, trying to concentrate on Mark as simply a friend, a confused and angry friend, keyed up almost past bearing and certainly beyond my own comprehension. Hockey is the only thing, until recently, I've ever known him to be passionate about; in a very real sense, he lives for it; and his disappointment and humiliation are probably crushing him under several tons of guilt.

"Fuck," he says, less harshly. "Fuck, Ben." Out of the corner of my eye I see his head drop, and feel, somehow, through the muscles in his body, his shoulders slumping too.

"Yeah," I say, finally untangling the first knot. I can feel the warmth from his body, so close to mine; I can smell his sweat in the air; and I can't restrain a tiny, involuntary thrust into the air, towards him, towards the skate I am unlacing.

"Fuck," he says again, an entirely different note in it this time; and I feel, suddenly, his hand in my hair. It startles me; I look up at him in surprise; and he stares back at me, too many emotions warring on his face, confusing me.

“Screw that,” he says hoarsely, and then his hands are at his pants, in another of his easy, practiced motions. “Suck me off.”

By the time I understand what he said, his jockstrap’s been efficiently dealt with and his fully erect penis is mere inches from my lips.

“Good God, Mark!”

“Hurry,” he says through clenched teeth, and he strokes himself once, twice. “Come on!” It sounds like a command but I hear the plea threaded through it and my resolve collapses as I give in: to temptation, to pity, to pure lust? All of the above? And is this one of his fantasies as well? No matter: I lean forward and take him in my mouth quickly, completely, without finesse. I haven’t done this much but I’ve done it enough to know that he likes it fast and slightly rough: teeth scraping here and there, a firm hand at the base.

“Christ!” he says, and he sounds exultant. “Harder. C’mon, harder!”

I comply: harder, deeper, faster, still not quite believing any of this. Anyone could come in, at any moment, the scandal would be appalling; and my penis is so hard it aches. I am afraid to touch myself; I grab his calf with my free hand and pull it towards me, between my legs, the skate guard catching on the rubber mat; but he jerks impatiently, freeing it.

I suck hard, resisting the temptation to rub myself against his leg, his skate, just as hard: not enough sense to stop, but, thank God, a dull roar from the arena cedes my arousal to a brief moment of panic, enough to recall me to some sense, to keep me from almost overwhelming temptation.

“Oh, *fuck*,” he chokes out moments later as he slams forward, both his hands hitting the lockers behind us with a dull metallic thud as he all but shoves me into them too, his hips jerking hard. I grab at him for balance, feeling the gluteal muscles start to flex under my fingers; a low pitched grunt accompanies the first bitter spurt across my tongue, and I hear myself making sounds to match his as I swallow hungrily, as hard and as fast as he’s shooting.

His hands come down to my head as I swallow again and then suck, gentler; and then he shifts backwards, awkwardly, and sits, landing heavily on the bench. I move with him and he cradles my head for a few brief seconds. I press up against his crotch, pulling myself in closer with one arm around his waist, luxuriating in the smell and taste and feel of him, musk heavier than usual, elemental and somehow primal; and despite myself, I almost come when I feel his lips brush my hair.

He pulls at my chin then, drops a brief kiss on my lips, then pushes at my shoulder. “Get up,” he whispers as he stuffs himself back into his pants. “Christ, I can’t believe you did that.”

I grin at the grudging admiration in his voice, flick my tongue out to taste remaining traces of him, and go to work on his right skate laces.

“Get up,” he says again, and he sounds, amazingly, hungry again. “Get up before I drag you into the showers and fuck the ever-loving shit out of you.”

I raise a sardonic eyebrow at him and lean back to pull off his skate.

“All right, Ben, you made your goddamn point.” Another roar from the arena recalls us both to our surroundings. “Get up. You’re pushing our luck.”

I get to my feet, somewhat painfully. “I’m going to have a cigarette. I’ll see you back at the bench.”

“Fuck that,” he says gruffly, nodding at my crotch, where the heaviness of my erection is still apparent. “Wait for me. And that’s mine, don’t you fucking touch it.”

“Fuck you.”

“You wish.” He stands and strips off the rest of his clothes. “Wait for me. You don’t need a goddamn cigarette, fucking cancer sticks. You only smoke to annoy me.”

“Your ego is in rare form tonight.”

He glowers at me, tightlipped again. “Wait for me.”

I glower back, well aware that I want nothing more than to be dragged into that shower and fucked to within an inch of my life; and for a few seconds I almost forget the game. He eyes me for a few seconds, one corner of his mouth pulling up into a not-quite smile. He reaches forward and I brace in anticipation, hardly knowing what I wait for; he punches me lightly on the shoulder and then turns and heads for the shower. A small sigh escapes me. The crowd, chanting unintelligibly, recalls my attention, and I listen hard for some indication of the score as I prop open an emergency exit to smoke a quick cigarette.

When he comes out of the shower, towel-wrapped, four minutes later, I am waiting. He grins, a hint of triumph on his face, then sniffs, then shoves me against the lockers. I shove him back. “Come on, Mark, get dressed.”

“Goddamn cigarettes.”

Another roar from the arena distracts both of us. He cocks his head and then shakes it; suddenly he looks older.

“Hey, Mark.”

“What?” he says brusquely, pulling on his jeans.

“What I was going to say was that if you’re going to slash like that, you might want to try combining it with a dive. If the ref’s in the wrong place it’ll look like you tripped.”

“Yeah, well... whatever.” He pulls on one boot, then the other, then stands and grabs his jacket. “Not the angle I was at, eh.”

I shrug. “You never know.”

“Fuck it. Fuck them. Fucking asshole nearly took my fucking head off but the ref can’t see that, fucking fuckhead.”

“I can show you tomorrow. We had a left wing at Cornell who was very good at it.”

“Yeah, I fucking need hockey tips from a fucking biologist.”

“Biochemist.”

“Fucking college hockey.” He hesitates and then asks, seemingly in spite of himself, “Where is he now?”

“Used car salesman in Minneapolis,” I say with an entirely straight face.

“Fuck that.”

I relent. “Greg Burry.”

“Detroit? Figures.” He looks at me, then the door, and then squares his shoulders.

I nod at the door. “I thought there’d be a reporter or two down here.”

“They’ll keep them away from me, eh,” he says, a self-deprecating grin following.

“Ah. Reputations are useful things.”

“Yeah, like you don’t know it.”

And sure enough, there are a few people about, a discreet distance from the door, as we head back up to the bench.

“I didn’t break any fucking sticks,” Mark yells over his shoulder at them. One of them shouts a good-natured response. “We must still be tied,” Mark says to me, “or they’d have told me to fuck off.”

He’s mistaken, as we see moments later: his team is one goal ahead. His coach, however, pulls him aside and rips into him with a few quiet but well chosen words. I watch the game with unseeing eyes. I’m not close enough to hear them but I am close enough to see the dull red flush climbing Mark’s neck. The period ends very shortly after that and Mark heads down to the locker room with the rest of them. When he comes back out, sporting butterfly bandages on his forehead, he’s looking considerably angrier and not quite as chastened as I’m sure they think he ought to; he restrains his temper, barely, in a few short words with a reporter, and spends the rest of the game on the bench hurling creative and colourful invective at any referee foolish enough to skate within earshot.

This has a deleterious effect on their tempers, of course, but it seems to have an energising effect on his teammates, who are at times openly laughing by the middle of the third period and whose game has suddenly become energetic and almost insolent. By the time the countdown ends the third period, the Jets have won the game, five-two, and are leading the series again.

I wait in the hallway for Mark: I don’t trust myself in the locker room, or, rather, I don’t trust my body. I concentrate on the outlines of the concrete blocks in the wall opposite. I have finished the vertical count and begun to calculate the number of blocks in the corridor and the arena by the time he comes out with, as I expected, ten or twelve others. They herd me with them to the parking lot as they argue about the relative merits of bars on the Grande Allée versus the Château Frontenac. Two or three taxi drivers are consulted, with the help of the Montréal-born goaltender, and it’s decided that the hotel bar is more convenient.

Mark takes his informal role as life of the party almost as seriously as he takes his self-appointed task of leading the league in penalties year after year. Thus it is that I find myself sharing a table with the afore-mentioned goaltender, Pierre. He knows me, slightly, as do some of Mark’s other teammates, as a friend from Mark’s junior days. On occasion, I’m even tolerated on the ice at practice, though I’m not up to professional

standards in checking runs; but I skate well enough that Mark doesn't have to blush for me.

Pierre is worn out: this series has been played, until tonight's game, in the nets. I practice my careful French and offer commiseration; he, in turn, offers his own brand of sympathy, though unfortunately between his Joulal patois and my lack of facility, I miss the full meaning of some of his broader expressions.

"*Colis en hostie!*" He grins, nodding at Mark. "*Jouer avec cette espèce de marde, c'est ben d'ficil. I'se croit le meilleur jouer dans la ligue. Je m'imagine que au junior i' était encore pire.*"¹

"*Il était un peu, disons, égoïste.*"²

"*Égoïste! S'il te fucking plait! I'se croit le don du bon Dieu! Vous autres etiez compains, n'est pas?*"³

"*Oui. Compains.*"

Pierre gives me the look and a bit of a leer. "*Très bons compains. Il était ton chum, hein?*"⁴

"*Non.*" I shake my head. "And he wasn't, back then."

"Ah. Okay. *Je m'excuse.*" He looks at me to see if I'm offended. Naturally I'm not: that would be dangerous. "*C'est juste que de temps en temps, il me donne l'impression qu'il est au point de me draguer. Pis, i'a jamais dit rien. Donc, j'ai pensé qu'il doit avoir un chum, la.*"⁵

I hide my surprise, mustering a quick retort: "*Ou plus qu'un.*"⁶

He grins at that. "*Et toié, t'es beau pas mal, tu sais-tu? Ben cute.*"⁷

"*Est-ce que tu me dragues?*"⁸ I ask, somewhat recklessly.

"*Tu m'drages-tu?*" He corrects my French into Québécois, laughing. Then he mimics my too-correct Parisian accent, but good-naturedly: "*Oui, si vous voudrez: je suis en train de vous draguer.*"⁹

"*Merci bien, pis...*"

"*Compris. Tant pis. Bon! C'est tarde et ch'us fatigué. Je me sauve. Bonne soirée, toié.*"¹⁰

"*Bon soir, Pierre,*" I say, dragging out the second syllable of his name into a gentle mockery of his Montreal accent, *Pi-aire*.

¹ Fucking A! - playing with that piece of shit must have been hard. He thinks he's the best player in the league. I gotta imagine that in junior it was even worse.

² He was a bit, let's say, egotistical.

³ Egotist. Fucking please! He thinks he's God's gift. You all were buds, right?

⁴ Real good buds, he was your 'friend,' eh?

⁵ Ah, okay, sorry ... It's just that sometimes he seems like he's about to cruise me/come on to me. But he's never said anything. So, I thought he must have a 'friend.'

⁶ Or more than one.

⁷ And you, well, you're pretty handsome, y'know? Really cute.

⁸ Are you cruising me?

⁹ Why, yes, if you'd like, sir: I am about to cruise you.

¹⁰ Got it. Too bad. OK! It's late, and I'm tired. I'm outta here. Good night, you.

He grins at that, waves aside an offer of a third beer from a table over, and gets to his feet, stumbling a little. I reach out to steady him and he grins and says something that is, for the most part, beyond my limited comprehension: "*Colis en 'stie, Ben, j'ai mon coton de faire toujours l'meme marde avec cette equipe d'idiots. Hein, tsu veux-tsu monter en haut? Y'a une bouteille de bon whiskey dans m'chambre. Calice d'la vierge, Ben, parce-que j'aimerais t'enculer ben fort.*"¹¹ Mark, coming up behind him, claps him hard on the back and tells him not to skip the Jacuzzi in the morning.

When he turns to me, however, his eyes are steely. "You heading up too?" he asks, a trifle overloud.

I blink at him, mildly surprised. "After I finish my beer."

"You're heading up," he hisses then, fast and quiet. "Now."

"Fuck you," I whisper back, suddenly furious.

"That's the idea. And you'd better be ready. I'm not in the mood to fuck around tonight."

I scarcely know where to begin protesting; but, as usual, he's chosen his terrain wisely. I have two options: one, to leave with a semblance of dignity; the other, to stay and cause him to make a scene, which he would accomplish as outrageously as possible, and then blame it on the beer or the adrenaline. I sometimes think he manages to keep it hidden through sheer brashness.

I glare at him, and take my time finishing my beer. Unfortunately there wasn't much left so my retreat is less than dignified; but when I catch his eye as I wait for the elevator, he's not looking triumphant so much as simply angry.

Jealous, I conclude on the ride up to the seventh floor. Odd, because despite his teasing, I know that Pierre is in fact married and has a young daughter. Yes, very odd and, of course, completely unacceptable. I stew for a few moments, then take a quick shower, change into clean boxers and a t-shirt, and crawl into bed. I didn't give him a key; chances are good that he'll admit defeat and go to his own room. Or he'll bang on the door until he wakes everyone in the hotel, also a possibility but, I decide at last, a remote one.

I turn off the light and roll onto my back, reaching into my shorts; but I'm tired, in truth, and a little shaken by Mark's reaction in the bar. Jerking off would, of course, show him, but then, of course, he wouldn't know about it so it's rather childish to pursue that line of thinking; therefore I turn over and will myself to sleep.

I am not sure how much later it is when I am rudely shaken awake to blink sleepily in the sudden glare of light. He is well and truly angry, although he keeps his voice down.

"I fucking told you—"

"How did you get in?"

¹¹ Fucking shit, Ben, I am real tired of always doing the same shit with this team of morons. Hey, wanna go upstairs? There's a bottle of good whiskey in my room. Christ, Ben, cause I wanna buttfuck you real hard.

“Key card, front desk gave me one when I checked you in, asshole. What the fuck—”

“Go back to your own room and sleep it off,” I hiss angrily, and reach up to turn off the light.

He bats my hand away and then strips the covers off me. He stops short at the sight of my underwear. “You jerk off already?” he growls, and grabs for my boxers. “The hell were you thinking?”

“Perhaps that I needed to sleep, and so did you?” I twist away from him; he lunges for me and misses. He falls heavily onto the bed, his uncoordinated movements silent witness to his alcohol consumption.

“For someone who wouldn’t know an ass bandit if one hit him over the head with a fucking *bouteille* of whiskey, you wear the tightest fucking jeans in Canada, Fraser, and it’d better stop.” He lunges again and this time makes contact.

“Ass bandits like married-with-children Pierre Chaudfrette?” I push back, trying to get a knee between us, a foot, something for leverage.

“Doesn’t fucking matter how married he is, only blind men couldn’t appreciate your ass in those goddamn jeans.” He finally manages to pin me down through the simple expedient of straddling me; despite myself, I feel a heaviness begin in my groin. “What the fuck is *wrong* with you?” he says, his voice thick, as he fumbles with his jeans. “You pissed that I left you high and dry in the locker room? You have to get off with fucking Pierre the fucking—”

“What the fuck is wrong with *you*?” I shove him, thrusting upwards at the same moment, catching him off balance long enough to heave him off me. We stare at each other for a long few seconds, I in honest amazement and he in anger shading into something undefinable; and then I push him away as I get off the bed. “He’s married, Mark. He has a three year old daughter, for God’s sake; and he was extremely tired and sore. If he were after my ass, which I sincerely doubt—”

“He’s the biggest fucking AC/DC in the league. Fucking asshole, I can’t let you out alone. How the fuck do you manage by yourself in Toronto? Didn’t you hear what he said to you? He asked you back to his room, damn it!”

“Even if he wasn’t joking, which he was, d’you think perhaps I’m not interested in him?” I snap, perilously close to losing my temper. “D’you think it could be that fucking simple, Mark?”

Suddenly he reaches out a hand to me, palm up, then turns it over to pat the bed. “Shit, Ben,” he says, and suddenly he sounds one part past tired and three parts into weary. “Fuck it. Come on. Come to bed.”

“I’m not tired.”

“Oh, God, now he’s going to sulk.” Mark rolls onto his back, covering his eyes with a forearm.

“I’m not sulking.”

“Fucking sulky bastard, you know how sexy that is when you stick your lip out like that, just a little, not enough to really...” He lifts his arm slightly to look sideways at me.

Despite myself, I feel my lips tremble. He grins, the first real grin I’ve seen all night, not the bared-teeth feral grin he showed the reporters and the refs, not the hail-fellows-well-met grin he reserves for his teammates, but the grin of the boy who skated on a frozen pond with me when we were thirteen.

“Sulky bastard,” he says again, and arches up to push his jeans down over his hips, exhaling quickly, involuntarily: sore back, bruised ribs, God knows what else: he was checking hard in the first ten minutes. I capitulate, kneeling beside him and helping him to pull them the rest of the way off. He grins again, wry this time.

“Old man.”

“Young idiot, more like.”

He sits up to pull off his shirt and tosses it to the floor. I retrieve it along with his jeans and put both on the other bed.

“C’mon,” he says impatiently. “C’mon. I want you to suck me again. Christ, Ben, do you know how fucking *hot* that was? You were *hard* for me.”

Despite my self-consciousness, more than just my colour rises in response. “Do you know how fucking stupid that was?” I retort as I pull off my t-shirt and toss it on the other bed.

“Fuck, yeah,” he says, and his voice has dropped three notes. “You’re living a little, Ben. Learn to live a lot. This is it, this is all we get.”

“While I’m fairly certain I agree with your underlying philosophy, I’m equally certain that there’s no sense in looking for trouble.”

“Yeah? Didn’t think you could see much on your knees,” he says, his tone so amiable that it takes me a few extra seconds to process his actual words; and I flush when their full import hits me, embarrassed and on the edge of anger again. In the meantime, he’s taken advantage of my distraction to grab me and pull me down.

“I—”

“So goddamn fucking hot,” he breathes against my ear as he reaches between my legs. “Not the blowjob, just you. Hard for me. On your knees for me.”

“I’m well aware you find my, ah, technique lacking...”

“The only fucking thing you’re lacking, Ben, is a goddamn ounce of common sense.” He leans down to kiss me, long and dizzyingly hard, and I taste whiskey in his mouth; and finally I give in, and, in fact moan, far too loudly, as he strokes me through the thin cotton, his grip practiced and unerring.

It’s the first time we’ve kissed in weeks; this is the first time, of course, that I’ve seen him in weeks, not to say months: as he is fond of reminding me, the end of the regular season was a less than propitious time for such revelations as ours; and though he made time to meet me at the airport, he had to leave directly from the hotel lobby for the stadium. I thought arranging my time off would be problematic but my supervisor, upon hearing that my old junior hockey friend had arranged for me to see

the final three games of the Cup, practically shoved me out the door in a jumble of envy and autograph requests, thus proving, as Mark said when I called to confirm, that even 'those geeks at Gairdner' have their priorities straight.

"The *hell* were you thinking," he says again, a statement more than a question, pulling the elastic of my waistband down; I roll to one side and push too. "There we go," he breathes, and the satisfaction evident in his voice makes me throb in his hand. His sudden inhalation tells me he felt it too.

"Hard for *me*," he says aggressively, matching the motions of his hand to his voice.

I nod, then groan, my eyes closing, as he twists his hand a little. Then he rubs his palm up and over the head of my penis, through pre-ejaculate, nearly bringing me off the bed.

"Not yet, Ben," he says, and when I open my eyes he's grinning at me, his bruise making his grin more cockeyed than ever.

"Did I *ask*—"

"You wanna beg?" he cuts in. "Don't even go there, I'll make you beg."

"In your fucking *dreams*," I growl, thrusting hard and fast into his hand.

"Every damn one of 'em," he says hoarsely. "The ones where you're not fucking sucking me off with my goddamn skates still on."

"Oh *fuck*..." I sound amazingly resigned; but he is quick to react, quicker than I am, certainly, and he squeezes my penis hard, eliciting a very undignified, not to say indignant, protest from me as he chokes off my impending orgasm: "Christ, Mark, that hurt!"

"Guess you didn't jerk off after all," he says, and he sounds extremely smug. "Waiting for this, eh?"

"In your dreams," I say again, with unfortunately less emphasis; his hand has moved down to cup my scrotal sac, two of his fingertips pressing beneath it, behind it, distracting me utterly. And he knows it.

"Waiting for this?" he says, and he sounds hoarse again as he rubs his fingers down even further, slipping one slightly inside for a bare delightful second. "Or this?" He leans down and licks the top of my penis, far too gently, and reflexively I grab his head with both hands.

He laughs, and it's a triumphant sound: for an unfettered moment I hear echoes of an ancient Greek warrior, riding into battle, bruised, battered, undefeated, his lover at his side; and I gentle my hands on his head, breathing his name. He looks up at me and smiles, and then rewards me, finally, surrounding me with the wet, tight heat of his mouth. His tongue is agile and he knows... oh God... exactly where to rub his tongue, exactly how to suck... "Mark," I whisper, hardly recognising my voice.

"Mmmhmm," he murmurs around me, sending me writhing up against him; and now he lets me direct our movements, sucking harder, cupping his palm lower now and rubbing it gently against my scrotum, tugging gently, then a little harder, never enough to hurt, never enough, never enough...

“Jesus, what’s with you tonight?” Mark pulls off and away completely, leaving me hanging, almost literally, my penis throbbing but my arousal backing down in the coolness wafting from the air conditioner. “Christ... you’d think you never...”

His voice trails off; I flush, a hot haze followed by a mindless bedewing of sweat.

“Maybe you should’ve jerked off.” His grin is even more impudent than his tone.

“Maybe,” I snap.

His smile grows broader. “You’re not going to come ‘til I fuck you, Ben, just so we’re clear on that.”

“Fuck you.” I reach for my erection, aching, stiff; he grabs both my wrists and hauls them up fast, above my head, and moves up to straddle my chest, his penis trailing moisture all the way up my chest to my throat, and then he releases me to brace his hands on the headboard.

“C’mon,” he says, a very engaging grin on his face. “C’mon, Ben, suck me off.” I hear a noise escape my lips that is very embarrassing, or will be in retrospect, but he grins bigger and puts one hand down to my head, guiding me, as my lips part, and my tongue flicks out, seemingly of its own accord, to taste him. Another few seconds and we shift in concert, his penis sliding warmly into my willing mouth.

“That’s good, yeah. That’s it. Oh, God, yeah... oh, Christ, that’s perfect.” He thrusts shallowly at first, quickly; then he slows to harder, deeper movements, as if he’s opening my mouth the way he opens my...

“Ohhhhh, yeah, yeah, just like that, harder now...Christ...”

I try to keep up with him, but the pillow impedes me; I can’t push my head back far enough. I lose the rhythm and then he does too, stuttering in response and going in too deeply, and I gag around him. He shudders and jerks forward for a second, then, mercifully, backwards, and pulls out almost completely. I suck in air and saliva, cooling my mouth, and he shudders and jerks, again going in almost too far.

“Christ, that felt good,” he says breathlessly. “God, that’s amazing.”

With my mouth still full of him, all I can do is murmur breathless agreement around his taut, straining flesh, silky, salty, hot.

“Another way,” he says, breathing hard. He pulls out of my mouth and then, as if he can’t help himself, thrusts back in, once, twice, shallowly. “Fuck. Another way.” He shifts off me, panting a little, and then leans over me to kiss me, very thoroughly: tasting himself in me and moaning approbation of same into my mouth.

“I... missed you,” I murmur, moving my lips from the bruise on his cheek to the wound on his temple.

“Yeah,” he says simply, but it sounds heartfelt, and my adrenaline surges in response. “Fucking Gairdner can’t relocate to fucking Winnipeg, eh?”

I choke off a laugh: so typical of him. He pulls me more towards the centre of the bed, and then slides down on top of me to rub against me as he kisses me again, harder than before: my lips are always bruised afterwards, another novelty, and a reminder, treasured by me despite the adolescence of my self-consciousness, for days sometimes.

“You could get a job at the University of Manitoba,” he mutters against the skin of my throat, setting off sparks behind my eyes, closed now.

“Well, I—” The rest of my sentence is lost in a gasp as he shifts his weight again and then reaches down and strokes, gently but firmly, across my anus.

“Shit,” he says hoarsely. “Turn over, c’mon. Where’s the lube?”

We shift, together and separately: I pull the lube out of the drawer, and roll over and he pulls his jeans off the other bed, retrieves his wallet and drops the jeans on the floor. He pulls condoms out of his wallet as he gets back on the bed with me, then shoves the phone out of the way to make room for it all as he dumps everything on the nightstand. He tears open one packet and I shudder involuntarily at the sounds of foil ripping and then latex snapping: entirely Pavlovian of me but he doesn’t care, and neither do I.

“C’mon,” he says, a little roughly, and pushes my legs apart to kneel between them. “God damn, your ass ought to have a warning label. I’m burning those fucking jeans tomorrow. I hope you brought another pair.”

“Yes, but they’re even tighter,” I murmur, eyes half closed, feeling unaccountably languid. I love this moment, this prelude: every part of my body is keyed to a fever pitch and yet I’m rushing headlong down a slope and the inevitability is euphoric.

“Fuck you,” he says, but this time he laughs, and though it sounds reluctant, at least it is genuine. He kneads my gluteal muscles, squeezing gently and then harder, jolting a moan from me and I spread my legs wider, soundlessly encouraging him.

He laughs again. “God, Ben, I love that you’re so into this.”

“Into is good,” I say breathlessly. “Into is *very* good.” The languorous feeling is gone, replaced by exhilaration, hurtling towards the event horizon.

The speed increases in the next few moments, when he licks the skin covering my hip and then bites, gently, the flesh that curves into muscle at the base of my spine. I shudder again, hard, my hands curling into the sheets to hold myself down. He licks, then bites again; then he spreads me wide.

I push up against him, anticipating the feel of slick fingers. I feel, instead, to my utter surprise and even consternation, a warm wet roughness tinged with bare scrapes of beard stubble. Realisation slams me back down into the mattress and I freeze, stunned. He makes a hungry sounding noise and spreads me wider, nudging at me to push back up, licking, sucking, fluttering his tongue around around around and, oh God, oh Christ, in in in, and then in and out, over and over.

“God!” I choke, finally, regaining a semblance of sense. “Mark!”

Another lick, a swirl of tongue, and I nearly come then and there, moaning in sheer frustration.

“Into, you said,” he growls against me, his lips vibrating against my anus, superbly sensitive now. He moves again, and then I feel his lips and tongue on my lower back, moving upward, licking and nibbling the muscle alongside my spine as he shifts in position and, finally, thrusts his well-slicked erection hard against me.

“More,” I say, growling too, insistent, and I push backwards, spreading my legs further, trying to encourage him and wanting to melt like warm butter into the sheets at the same time.

“You’ll get it,” he growls back, raising himself up on his arms and thrusting into the crevice, his penis sliding easily but, to my very real frustration, not penetrating. I shove myself up at him and, arrested on a forward thrust, the head of his penis catches for a bare glorious moment right where I want it, need it...

“Need...” I moan, shameless now, beyond wanton.

He says nothing, perhaps beyond words as well; he grunts and thrusts harder, faster, exquisite torture, sliding back and forth and never in, as I wriggle and thrust beneath him, angling for penetration, craved.

I feel his weight on my back, suddenly, and his breath in my ear: “You fucking sucked me *off* in the locker room,” he pants. I arch my back, feeling the muscles down low tensing, straining, and take him by surprise: the head of his penis slips in. We moan together now, low hard sounds.

“...fuck...” he gasps, and pushes in, hard, for a few seconds before pulling out completely. I have no time to protest before he is back, going deeper this time. He pulls out again, but I’ve caught his rhythm now and the next time we come together I push and he drives halfway down before he manages to stop himself and pull back.

“Ben,” he chokes, and he sounds well past frustration. “Slow down...”

I twist to try to look at him: is he insane? I can’t see him well enough; I drop my head back to the pillow and match his next thrust so he is buried completely inside me. He shudders; I echo it. When he pulls back and thrusts again, I let it happen, finally, feeling it start deep inside me, behind me somewhere very close to him; and on his next thrust I let go, my eyes shut tight as I surge into the sheets beneath us, feeling the spasms in me contracting around him, long and hard inside me, stretching me, filling me...

“Hottest damn ass in Canada,” he pants, rocking slowly, triggering one last contraction inside me; and then he lets go too, pulling out and slamming back in, hard, harder. I lose count, lost count a few seconds, an eternity, ago; but I am there with him when he tenses and then begins to jerk, strong and rhythmic, crowding into me, impossibly deeper, impossibly thicker, as he groans muffled words into my shoulder, words followed by teeth at the last and then the rhythmic cycle of warm and cool air across my sweaty skin as he breathes hard through his nose and mouth, trying to regain his breath.

“Oh, man, Ben,” he says finally, rolling off me. “Man.” He disposes of the condom in a tissue and turns out the light. I shove at him, trying to untangle our legs, as he pulls at me.

“What?” he says, too lazily to be convincingly irritable, then laughs, a real laugh, albeit a tired one, and rolls out of bed, clearing everything off the other bed with one swipe. “C’mon, pansy ass.” He grabs my hand and tumbles us down together, claiming the entire centre of the bed as he casually wraps an arm around me and pulls me in next

to him. "So what do you wanna do while we're here in this fucking frog Disneyland, besides get the shit fucked outta you?" he says sleepily, his breath warming my cheek.

"That sounds like a plan."

"Hit the ice with us in the morning, eh."

"If you like."

"You can watch me nail Pierre's ass."

"*Merci bien*, but I'll pass."

He laughs again, a deep, full sound. "You bet you will."

I yearn to ask him if he's nervous but that would be inane: this is his third Cup series and, potentially, his first Cup victory.

"I changed your ticket so you're on my flight," he says a little later, as if he's reviewing a To Do list in his head. "Tomorrow afternoon instead."

"As you wish."

"We doing the hotel or my place?" he asks. "Hotel's closer, but my place has the Jacuzzi."

"Ah—"

"Good. I need the Jacuzzi."

Later still, after he has relaxed into a near-boneless sprawl, he mutters, "Shouldn't be here," into the space between the back of my head and the pillow. Unexpectedly he hugs me, hard; I hear a rib creak ominously.

"Mark."

"Yeah."

"You're getting maudlin."

"Hey," he whispers. "Nailed the hottest ass in Canada. Not stupid, eh."

"You present a deceptive appearance," I say, reaching up to touch his forehead.

He snorts appreciatively and murmurs something uncomplimentary. He's asleep a few moments later and I'm not far behind.

Pre-dawn, the sound of the toilet flushing wakes me. He stumbles back to bed, mumbles something, and plasters himself on top of me.

The next time I wake, he's still on top of me, this time moving his groin against mine in a leisurely fashion that belies his sturdy erection.

"You're so fucking hard—"

"Thank you."

"— to wake up," he finishes, then laughs, then kisses me. Less than seven minutes later, both of us thoroughly and messily smeared with semen, he kisses me again, smugly this time, and rumbles, "Morning."

"Mmm."

He rolls off me and scrubs at his stomach and then mine with a corner of the sheet. "I thought you'd bring the dog."

"Wolf."

"What the fuck ever, Ben. I told the front desk—"

“So I heard.” I pinch together the skin over my eyes, rubbing the sleep out of them, wanting nothing so much as coffee: sex in the morning is an unaccustomed luxury. “He’s... ah... conceived a violent affection for some of the staff at the convenience store on the corner. He comes home with stories about foiling feline plans for world domination. What it is is that he’s found people to feed his delusions of grandeur, in my opinion; or a reliable source of expired bakery goods. But they were willing – in fact, eager – to put him up.”

“You are so fucking weird.”

“Well, I hardly think it’s fair to hold me responsible for Diefenbaker’s flights of fantasy.”

“Ben?”

“Yeah?”

“Hit the showers.”

“Coffee,” I say, reluctantly swinging my feet to the floor. “Civilised people have showers after coffee.”

“Hey, this is hockey. Ain’t no civilised here.” He stretches and winces again. I look at him, sidelong. His eyes are closed and he looks, as he did last night for a brief moment, old and worn; he has a bruise, purpling nicely, stretching from the bottom of his left rib cage almost to the center of his chest, oddly enough the same shape as the bruise on his face.

He opens his eyes suddenly and catches me looking. He looks away and then rolls off the bed on the other side. “Shut up.”

“I think I have some ibuprofen,” I say quietly.

“All I need’s to get that asshole alone on the ice Thursday,” he says grimly.

“Mark...”

“Shit,” he says. “I gotta shower. I gotta meet Morgante at nine at the Bistro. Get reamed some more. Make sure you get some breakfast.”

I say nothing, only nod.

He’s shaving, complaining vociferously about my preferred brand of razor and the inadequate brand of coffee supplied with the room, when my phone rings.

“Have I seen you?” I ask, pulling on a shirt as I cross to the desk.

“Yeah, I knocked you up at eight and told you to get your ass to the stadium for some ice time,” he says without missing a beat.

I repeat his message, not quite word for word, to the team captain, who is evidently trying to organise his more recalcitrant players. He laughs and says he’ll look for him in the lobby. Mark comes up behind me as I hang up the phone, grabs me around the waist with one hand and scrubs his knuckles through my hair with the other, then releases me to pull his clothes on.

“Same thing you wore last night,” I say quickly, alarmed, crossing to my bag.

“Fuck them,” he says. “I got lucky, eh.” But he backhands the shirt I toss him out of the air and admits the fit is tolerable. “All right. Eat. I’ll meet you in the lobby after my ass-chewing and we’ll head over together. Oh, fuck. Get my shit out of my

room and bring it down with yours, will you? Not much there, most of my gear's at the stadium." He palms his wallet off the nightstand, tosses me his keycard, winks at me, and leaves without even bothering to see if anyone's in the corridor.

I check the bathroom, stow the lubricant and remaining condoms in my bag, deep in an inside pocket, ensure my tickets are still in my jacket, and head up to Mark's room.

Fortunately he wasn't exaggerating: one bag, and barely touched, at that. I make a check of the bathroom anyway, realise as I zip his bag that he must have taken a pair of my underwear, and tell myself sternly to calm down as I disarrange the bedclothes and thump a pillow with my fist. My newfound facility at deception is somewhat troubling but not so much so that I forget to wet a washcloth and throw two towels to the floor before I leave.

I eat a quick breakfast and then head to the lobby. I don't have long to wait: one quick glance through a newspaper someone left behind on a small table, and then I hear his voice, off to my left, rumbling low, and the coach's voice, steady and slightly louder.

"All right," Mark says as they approach me, "I got it. See you there. Ben! Got my stuff?" He doesn't wait for my answer, just slings his bag up and nods at the doorman as he strides through the entrance. "Taxi," he shouts, to no one in particular.

The ride is fairly silent: his cheeks are flushed. He and his coach have had it out before this: once in the pages of the Winnipeg Sun and, subsequently, of course, in the Sporting News.

"Threatened to bench me," he mutters to me as we mount the steps to the stadium. There are, mercifully, no reporters and only a small knot of fans, content with a wave and a cheerful shout. "Fucking bench me. No place for vigilantes on his team, he says."

"Vigilantism has a long and noble tradition in hockey," I say as lightly as possible. One side of his mouth twists up for a few seconds.

"I told him if he fucking benched me I'd cause a riot," he continues, almost under his breath, pausing with me inside the doorway. "He said they can win the Cup without me. Like I don't fucking know it."

"Ouch," I say as sympathetically as I dare. I recognise the coach's tactics but am not altogether sure it's the best approach for someone as volatile as Mark. The coach has been with the team for two years; Mark, almost ten. "Of course, you know I'm of the opinion they won last night because the refs were intimidated into fair behaviour."

He grins at that, albeit reluctantly. "They were pissed, eh," he says, sounding rather more cheerful.

"Completely."

"Fuckers."

"I don't think they can win it without you," I say quietly and with perfect truth.

"Fucking prima donna," he growls, not meeting my eyes; but he doesn't turn away from me.

“Mark, if your ego is news to him then perhaps he needs to take a job in Anaheim.”

Mark stares at me for a few seconds and then throws his head back and roars with laughter.

“It wasn’t that funny,” I say acidly.

“What I wouldn’t give to hear you tell him that,” he says wistfully, still chuckling. “Asshole. He can’t fucking wait until I go free agent, you know?”

“Neither can the rest of the NHL.”

His grin splits his face wide: two of his close friends were traded three and two years ago and he’s done nothing but butt heads with the new coach, an arrogant and loud American who lacks both humour and good nature, this past season especially. I’m not sure Mark will leave Winnipeg; he’s deeply devoted to his team; but he will certainly enjoy the sense of autonomy free agent status will give him.

“Smithbauer!” A roar sounds from the end of the hall. “Get your ass on the ice!”

“Fucker,” Mark growls again. “C’mon.”

Practise is surprisingly disciplined: various drills run, two and three times; two reporters are escorted from the premises at one point – “Illegal picture taking! Two minutes!” Mark shouts, garnering a laugh. The head coach leaves shortly after that for an interview and the moment he’s gone, Mark, the team captain, and two assistant coaches organise a game of pick up and Mark shouts to me to get some gear on.

It’s a friendly game, quite different from the hockey that has characterised this series thus far; but I see the effect it has on relaxing the players, Mark included, reminding them why they’re here or, perhaps, how they got here.

After Mark smacks his third puck past Pierre, with Pierre hooting something that sounds quite rude at him, they call a halt: most of the team and the staff is on one of two flights this afternoon, and if I know Mark, we’re on the earlier one. He would rather arrive at the airport during final boarding calls than waste time waiting.

I shower quickly but he’s still finished before me, even with his cut freshly bandaged. “Fucking slowpoke,” he says. “C’mon, taxi’s waiting.” He tosses my bag at me and grabs his own. “Flight leaves in less than an hour. Half the fucking team’s going to miss it if they don’t get their asses in gear.” He raises his voice slightly; a few of the players tell him, good-naturedly, to fuck off as they head in for their own showers. One is limping heavily; Mark frowns, looks at the captain, who looks back at him and shakes his head.

“Fuck,” Mark says as we head up to the plaza.

“Not good.”

“Yeah, I heard ‘em telling Dan that one of ‘em was hurting. Probably why they threw the reporters out. Extra day’ll come in handy. I had to play through playoffs few years back with a taped ankle and it sucked big time.”

“I remember,” I say quietly; he was lucky it wasn’t smashed.

“Getting maudlin, Fraser,” he says, and thumps me heartily on the back. “Haven’t blown a knee yet. You didn’t show me that move your used car salesman used to do. Do it tomorrow at practise, eh.”

“Ah, the personal ice rink in your barn still evades your grasp?”

“Behind the barn,” he says, his voice dropping into low, intimate registers for a few brief seconds, sending my heart pounding into my throat; I grin, somewhat foolishly, before a shout from behind us reminds me of where we are.

“Putting a pond in this summer,” he says in the same voice, and then, without missing a beat, turns to see who’s hailing us.

As luck would have it, it’s Pierre, lugging two bags and his mask: Mark says he doesn’t let the mask out of his sight during the playoffs.

“I hear you say taxi,” he says, his English still heavily accented despite more than five years in Winnipeg. “Room for me?”

“Hell yeah,” Mark says. “More the merrier, eh. You on the 1:30 flight?”

“*Oui*, and they must feed us.” He hands me one bag and the driver the other and we load them into the trunk.

“They will,” Mark says briefly as we pile into the taxi. He takes the front seat and I applaud his judgment: should Pierre have felt inclined to start any rumours, it is things like that that will discourage him. “More fucking pasta.”

They make almost identical sounds of disdain and spend the drive to the airport comparing the worst playoff food they’ve experienced, a discussion verging at times on the hilarious.

We hit a snarl of traffic close to the airport and Pierre begins to get nervous. “They’ll hold the plane,” Mark says at last, taking pity on him. “They always do.”

Pierre nods but says something under his breath about a *coup de foudre*.

“Shut up,” Mark says irritably. “You’re going to fucking jinx us.”

Pierre mutters darkly in French and Mark snaps at him, a crude phrase that I recognise the import of even if I don’t comprehend its finer nuances. Much to my surprise, Pierre laughs out loud, says, in English, that Mark’s accent remains execrable, and pronounces the phrase again, carefully, and waits, expectantly, for both of us to repeat it: “*Mange la merde*.”¹² We do so, accompanied by his laughter; meanwhile, our driver decides that the snarl is temporary enough to risk taking the shoulder, and he does so, all the way to the airport exit.

He is rewarded, shortly thereafter, by a tip from Mark that makes his eyes widen incredulously and he says something that sounds a great deal like a rebuke to Pierre. Pierre counters with a coarse comment regarding the probable ancestry of the driver’s favourite players and we part on that cheerful note.

No checked baggage: I have learned that much in my association with hockey players. We make the gate before the first boarding call and, unsurprisingly, are ushered onto the plane almost immediately. I think, at first, it’s because they recognise Mark and/or Pierre; then realise that it’s because we are flying first class.

¹² Eat shit.

“Shut up,” he hisses in the bustle. “Just don’t, Ben, I’m not in the mood. You can pay me back if you want but I’m not folding myself into one of those fucking coach seats.”

I glare at him, tight-lipped, for a moment: money isn’t an issue, or wouldn’t be, if he wouldn’t make it so, with televisions and couches and...

“It’s the fucking couch again, isn’t it,” he whispers as he fumbles for his seat belt. “Get the fuck over it, already, Ben. You’ll have it for twenty years, knowing you, until it’s depreciated into nothing.”

“It’s the principle,” I whisper back, as sternly as I can, grateful that Pierre is on the other side of the aisle and two rows back.

“Fuck you,” he says, and asks the flight attendant for two bottles of water, and then settles in with a magazine and his water, pointedly ignoring me.

I wave away offers of preflight refreshment, and, once we are off the ground, pretend to nap. I succeed so well that the smell of food comes as a shock. True to prediction, Mark is given a plate of pasta with meatballs, and when he finishes it the attendant brings a second one. Somewhat alarmed – I too was given pasta, presumably because I’m traveling with Mark – I begin to eat more slowly, which doesn’t go unnoticed by Mark. He chances a grin at me; I murmur, “Ostentation,” and swipe one of his breadsticks.

“Don’t fill up,” Mark says. “They’ll feed us again on the flight from Toronto.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No. No shit. More pasta, too, bet you. When we get to Winnipeg we’ll stop for steak on the way back to my place.”

“No offence, Mark, but I think I’ll simply have a beer and watch. In amazement.”

True to his prediction, more food is served on the flight from Toronto (changing planes is accomplished with a minimum of fuss, I discover, when one is flying first class). I manage finally to convince the attendant that I really am not hungry; her solicitousness, however, doesn’t go unremarked by Mark and he shoots a less than friendly glance at her back when she walks away, and lapses into monosyllaby for the remainder of the flight. Thus I am surprised when he offers, in fact, presses a ride home on Pierre: Mark drove himself, but Pierre, who lives a scant ten minutes southeast of the downtown area, apparently prefers taxis.

“No, really,” Mark says. “It’s practically on my way.”

Pierre gives in gracefully but I can tell he’s slightly puzzled too. Mark makes a joke about the upcoming game, however, and Pierre relaxes somewhat, evidently ascribing Mark’s behaviour to nerves, as it may well be.

After dropping Pierre off and with the thanks of his wife ringing in our ears, Mark swings back onto the wide boulevard heading west. Pierre’s neighbourhood was in fact slightly out of Mark’s way: he lives almost due south of the airport in Old River Heights, in an older house, set well back from the road, with a long winding driveway

and a carriage house instead of a garage, almost too small for his Land Rover, which seems to be the largest model available.

“No steak?” I ask, trying to lighten the atmosphere: he has said less than half a dozen words since we left Pierre on the lawn with his ecstatic daughter hanging from his neck.

“Not hungry,” he says briefly, pulling his bag and mine out of the back seat.

I shrug and follow him to the side door, which opens into the kitchen. He lets me go in first, then sends the bags sliding across the floor as he grabs me, pushes me up against the door with one hand on my chest and starts to unfasten my jeans with the other.

“Were you always this jealous?” I say, trying to sound reproving and succeeding only in sounding rather husky.

“Yes,” he growls. “Were you always this fucking clueless? Oh, wait. I know the answer to this one, fucking head in the clouds Benton fucking Fraser.”

“I have... no interest in... flight attendants,” I point out, but as the words are emitted between involuntary gasps, I sound ridiculous rather than reasonable.

“She was interested in you,” he says harshly. “All I could think was you bending her over or her pulling up that ridiculous fucking skirt and wrapping her goddamn legs around you.”

“Well, your video rental habits would seem to be manifest,” I say, somewhat testily: he’s well aware I haven’t dated any women at all since Columbia.

“Well, I can’t exactly rent gay fucking porn in fucking Winnipeg,” he snaps, almost tearing my shirt as he pulls it over my head. “Look at you, goddammit! Look at you. Jesus Christ.”

“Look at you,” I say, steadily; his face is flushed, his hair awry, his jaw set in seeming anger, the same combination that so confused me in the locker room... yesterday? Tomorrow? Seventeen years ago?

“Look at *you*,” he says with considerable emphasis, his eyes sweeping me from top to bottom and then back again: my shirt off, my pants unfastened and my erection poking out of my boxers: I look down and then look at him, and I feel the flush rise from my navel to my forehead in a hot, reckless wave.

“Your own gay porn?” I’m proud that my voice, at least, sounds composed.

Astonishingly he laughs, a deep, rich guffaw, apparently deaf to the edge in my tone. “Oh-fucking-yeah. You’re not kidding. Jerk yourself, Ben. Do it right here, right now.”

“Mark –”

“Come on,” he says impatiently. “Let me see.”

My hand trembles slightly as I push at my waistband. Then I pause and look at him, ambivalent; he looks at my groin and then at me; then takes two swift steps forward and pulls me into a warm, hard embrace, murmuring something unintelligible against my lips before he plunges his tongue in, seeking mine.

“Come on,” he whispers then, pulling at my waistband, coaxing me to move with him. “Come on. Christ, all this and you don’t even know what to do with it.” He halts us in our awkward progress across the kitchen by suddenly dipping his head down to lick my chest; and then he suckles one nipple for a few ecstatic seconds. “I want to fuck you in every room in this house,” he says against the skin covering my collarbone, and then he pulls it taut with his teeth, very gently, as he slides both hands around and under my waistband to grab my rear and pull me against him, shuddering appreciatively as he rubs us together. “I want you to jerk off for me,” he murmurs in my ear, licking the convolutions there. “C’mon. Come with me. Will you?”

“Will you?” I say breathlessly.

He pulls back, frankly startled; and then a huge grin slowly spreads across his face. “Will *you*?” he repeats. “Hell, yeah, I will...”

“It’s a deal,” I say against his lips and I push him backwards a little as I lean in to kiss him again, tasting his lips, his tongue, licking the faint shadow of stubble.

“Deal,” he agrees, and tugs me with him. “C’mon. C’mon.”

I’ve been here before this, once soon after he bought it and once a couple of years ago on my way through to Inuvik; but rational thought has temporarily deserted me, along with memory, and it’s not until the faint smell of chlorine assails my nostrils outside a room by the back patio that I remember the oft-mentioned Jacuzzi; one look at his face and I nearly come then and there.

“Oh, Christ.”

“Fuck yeah,” he says hungrily, toeing off his hiking boots, untied and half laced, as usual, then peeling his pants, briefs, and socks off quickly. “C’mon.”

“Is this why you put it in?” I say, slowly pulling off my own boots.

He reaches over to turn it on, gloriously naked and aroused, and completely unselfconscious; and I feel a stab of envy.

“Yeah, I put it in on the off chance you were gay and would show up on my doorstep one day to jerk off with me in it, eh,” he says with a grin, skidding his palm across the surface of the water, splashing me. “Fucking egotist.”

“The profligacy of that accusation leaves me breathless,” I retort, gathering the courage from somewhere to step out of the rest of my clothes, leaving them in an untidy heap, next to his, on the floor.

“C’mere,” he says, holding out a hand. “Fucking wicked mouth, Ben, you know it.” He pulls me in close; he’s perched on the edge and he wraps his legs around me, rubbing our erections together wantonly as he kisses me again, harder this time, even more demanding. “Ready?” he says against my lips, one hand moving down to hold both of us, stroke us together. “C’mon, get in.”

With that, he releases us and slides over and into the water the same way he goes over the side off the bench in a game; I am less practiced and struggle, unbalanced, on the edge, for a moment before sliding in with him.

“All right,” I say at the same time he says it; and we both laugh.

“All right,” he says again. “Stand up, come on. Let me see. Do it.”

His gaze is steady; I flush again, grateful that it can be ascribed, this time, to the effects of the water bubbling around us. He slides against me, and the feel of his body, warm, wet, and slick, stretching along one side of me, is comforting. Thus encouraged, I grasp myself and begin to stroke.

“Too slow,” he says after a few moments and then he grabs himself and pumps a few times, biting his lower lip. “Like this.”

At the limits of my patience, I reach for him and mimic his movements. His eyes open in surprise and then he laughs.

“Like this?” I say, stroking faster.

“Oh, Ben, no... no, fucking... stop...” he says, trying to twist away, still laughing; and his penis jumps in my grip. “Oh, fuck, c’mon, stop.”

I relent; he leans back, trying to get his breath, trying to regain his grin; but all he seems able to manage, with my hand still on his hard, warm penis, water surging around us, is a smile, small but warm; and I stroke him again, very slowly this time.

He braces both hands on the edge, in his eyes a plea; slowly, wordlessly, I kiss him, gently, then harder, teasing him open, tasting him, and astonishingly he lets me, opening his mouth to me but not moving his arms; and when I drop my lips down, a long, shuddering sigh escapes him as he throws his head back, arching his neck against my lips. Gaining confidence, I lick slowly down his chest, capturing stray droplets of water here and there with my tongue; and then I begin to trace the outline of the bruise, purple and red now, shading into yellow, a livid smudge against his skin in this odd half-light, laving it with my tongue. He moans; I see the muscles bunch in his forearms and then more muscles ripple, down his stomach to his thighs, as he thrusts into the space between us. I moan, myself, in response, and close my eyes as I lose myself in the taste and the texture of the skin under my tongue, exploring the contours of his ribs, his stomach, his abdomen...

His outburst shocks me: I feel my eyes go wide as he jerks my head back and says, roughly, “Come *on*, Ben!” In my head I hear an echo of a lonely sound, died a-borning, my grandmother always said: her description for words that waited on the tip of a tongue to stay there forever, forgotten, stillborn. His mouth trembles at one corner, then pulls into the twisted, self-knowing smile so familiar to me. “Fucking prick tease,” he growls, mock-angry, playful, thrusting himself into the air.

The water boils up around me, the air thick and heady, almost choking me, as I sink to my knees; but it feels warm and safe, after the initial shock, lapping about me in a steady rhythm that I echo, consciously, as I lean in to take him in my mouth, bracing one hand at the base of his penis, moving the other down to weigh his balls, heavy and low, stretched from the heat of the water, rolling and stroking them with my fingers.

It’s over very quickly: his limits, generally robust, have been stretched thin over the past few weeks and tonight is no exception. A muttered word, my name, and then the now-familiar bitter spurts over my tongue, down my throat; and I wonder, in a haze, what that would look like, then what it would look like to come under water, slow motion, perhaps, spurts of fluid slowed and thickened, twisting and uncoiling.

He gasps again, pulling away from me so he can slide down into the water with me, where he kisses me, almost desperately, as if he's trying to lick my mouth clean of him. "What are you thinking?" he growls, reaching between my legs. "Jesus, if you could see your face..."

"Thinking of... coming..." I manage hoarsely. "Coming..."

"Here? Now?" he says, and his eyes squeeze shut for a brief instant as he seems to vibrate with excitement.

"Here, now, under water, in your mouth, in your hand..." My voice breaks; his hand, practiced, strips me hard and fast and as I start to convulse he hauls me upwards, his shoulder under my arm, so that my penis breaks the surface of the water. I gasp at the sensation of cool air and look down; and we both groan together then as I shudder into his hand and the air, a thick spatter of creamy liquid arcing over and into the water, followed by another, then another, finishing with one, two abbreviated bursts.

We stumble upstairs, barely dry, and tumble into his big, soft bed, where neither of us loses any time falling asleep. Around eleven he wakes me, his eyes sleep-heavy still, with a pair of sandwiches, and we picnic on the bed, washing the sandwiches down with milk, making us both laugh at the incongruity; and after that we sleep again.

I wake him, this time, later in the night, for a frenzied coupling, fumbling in the dark with necessities and desire; and afterwards he sleeps again but I don't. I rest with him, our arms and legs still entwined, and watch the window to the east lighten, slowly, a reluctant dawn.

oOo

*Such a drag to want something sometime
One thing leads to another I know
Was a time wanted you for mine
Nobody knew
You arrived like a day
And passed like a cloud
I made a wish, I said it out loud
Out loud in a crowd
Everybody heard
It was the talk of the town*

*It's not my place to know what you feel
I'd like to know but why should I?
Who were you then, who are you now?
Common labourer by night, by day highbrow
Back in my room I wonder, then I
Sit on the bed, look at the sky
Up in the sky
Clouds rearrange
Like the talk of the town*

*Maybe tomorrow, maybe someday
Maybe tomorrow, maybe someday
You've changed your place in this world
You've changed your place in this world
Oh but it's hard to live by the rules
I never could and still never do
The rules and such never bothered you
You call the shots and they follow
I watch you still from a distance then go
Back to my room, you never know
I want you, I want you but now
Who's the talk of the town?*

Pretenders, **Talk of the Town**

Words I taught my spellchecker:

Pavlovian

gluteal

fuckhead

unremarked

monosyllaby

goddammit (it suggested "goldsmith")