

Title: Slow Burn

Author: Biblio

Rating: NC-17

Pairing: Jack and Daniel

Category: First Time. Humour. Romance.

Season/Spoilers: Season 4.

Synopsis: Requisitions. Homicidal jealousy. Surveillance. Interrogation. Intrigue. Nausea. Trees. Alleged waiters with attitude. Alarums, excursions and al fresco molestation. Hissy sibilants. How not to manuals. Your typical first date.

Warnings: None



## Slow Burn

### A slash story by Biblio

JACK

"I'm sorry, Dr Jackson. The requisition hasn't been completed correctly."

"Oh. But I - oh. Can I correct it now? I need those books today, and Beth Anne -"

The notorious Beth Anne of Beth Anne's Books. A holy terror. Got a soft spot a mile wide for Daniel. Like that's new?

" - can deliver them today if we can fax this requisition through."

Who could resist those wide, pleading eyes and tentative little smile? Sergeant Jennifer Jones, that's who. Obviously a supply clerk of the ilk that makes you sweat blood for a goddamn pencil. Had a clerk like that in Germany. Used to hand over a used pencil and keep the new one.

"You can't make an amendment! It's against the rules, Doctor."

"Why?" Daniel asks, radiating puzzlement.

"To prevent fraud."

"I'm not trying to defraud the Air Force. You can call Beth Anne, I have her number right here, she'll confirm the order is ready to be supplied," Daniel suggests hopefully. "It'll be here today. This morning if Frank can manage it for me. Frank is the delivery man and -"

And Sergeant Jennifer couldn't be LESS fucking interested in who Frank is or in helping Danny out. It's not like he's requisitioning a stealth bomber, Sergeant, so cut the kid some slack.

"That's not possible."

"Well, could anyone authorise an amendment to THIS form, because I really don't have time to fill the whole thing out again? I'll miss my delivery slot."

"You'd need the counter-signature of a senior officer," Jones offers ungraciously.

"Sam? Um - Major Carter?" Daniel brightens up.

"No. Senior to the officer signing the order."

"Oh. Geo - General Hammond?"

Jones looks outraged. "You can't trouble the C.O. for something as trivial as THIS."

"Oh, he won't mind," Daniel says sunnily. "It isn't trivial to me, and he'll be happy to help out."

Jones looks horrified, as well she might. The general will happily countersign that requisition for Daniel, and then the general will make sure to have a not so happy word with Jones for making Dr Jackson's life more difficult than it needs to be.

I must be slipping if this airhead thinks I won't find out she's got Supply giving Daniel the run-around. He has a lot of small, complex orders that drive them nuts. I know that. I CHECK and sign those orders. Carefully. Like I clean my weapon careful. He needs specific books and articles, they got editions and shit, and a lot of special equipment. The stuff is expensive too. VERY. Some of those rare first editions cost more than my paycheck. Way more. Daniel doesn't need the hassle if things get fucked up, so I make sure they don't get that way.

I could just put an end to this, but in all the time I've known Daniel, I don't think I've actually seen him interacting with my fellow hard-ass military types. Idle curiosity is granting Jones a temporary stay of execution, at least until they spot me malingering here at the doorway.

I've got a feeling Jones doesn't like this mere civilian cheerfully circumventing the chain of command, that this pettiness is a power game designed to put Daniel in his place. Or

what she perceives to be his place. Daniel can go straight to the general, no questions asked. Always. Sometimes the answer sends Daniel back to me, but he's always listened to and welcomed. It doesn't bother me and it doesn't bother the general. We work hand-in-glove where Daniel's welfare is concerned. In fact, we like that Daniel SHARES his little problems with us, whichever of us it happens to be. And let's be honest, here, it's not like George wears his heart on his sleeve, but if Daniel doesn't go to him, he makes sure to go to Daniel.

The pettiness of my fellow airmen never came up that I recall.

"About THIS requisition, Dr Jackson." Jones hands him an order.

"It's dated a week ago. Is there a problem? The supplier has always been -"

"We've had more important orders to fulfil, Doctor. I'm sure your colouring-in can wait a TAD longer."

Daniel's lips tighten for a moment, and I see the tension in his slender frame as he braces for another pointless explanation-come-justification.

More than enough rope, Jones. Thanks for hanging yourself so efficiently. "Stratigraphy," I snap, making Jones and Daniel jump as I loom up beside them. "Topography. Cartography. Calligraphy." Daniel bites his lip and looks down, so I guess that one was a little out, but I'm on a roll. "Munster soil charts." I ignore a soft whisper of 'Munsell'. Close enough. Tryin' to make a point here. Daniel doesn't colour-in, he makes painstakingly accurate charts of different coloured dirt for reasons he thinks are important. And yeah, there are cheaper artists' pencils, almost all artists' pencils are in fact cheaper, but Daniel likes these because they're the ones his parents used, so these are the ones we get. "And I'll expect these on Dr Jackson's desk by this time tomorrow. Clear?"

"Sir, yes, Sir!"

Good. Haven't completely lost my touch. I turn to Daniel and smile warmly. I'm a little hurt that his smile is so tentative, like he's not quite sure what I mean by mine. "So that's it? Walk you home?" Protocol demands that Jones should bring to my attention any problem with an order that bears my signature. I'm responsible for it.

"There's a mistake on this requisition, Jack," Daniel hands it over to me when Jones doesn't leap for her in-tray.

I keep smiling at him as I take it and hand it to her. "No mistake. I check. Thoroughly. Fax it. Now," I order briskly, without breaking eye contact with Daniel. "Ensure the items are delivered to Dr Jackson's office, ASAP. Daniel." I jerk my head towards the door and Daniel settles companionably at my side as we stroll out, leaving Jones reeling in our wake.

"Thanks, Jack," he says softly.

"They give you a hard time?"

"No moreso than - um - no," Daniel realises a little too late that, God forbid, he should actually be giving voice to a complaint here.

"Than what?" I ask lightly, slipping my hands into my pockets and lounging along by his side towards the elevator. "What, Danny?" The pet name softens him, like I knew it would.

"Death of a thousand paper cuts," Daniel says ruefully.

"Won't happen again," I tell him calmly. "Ever." Going to enjoy making it clear to them. "Gotta go check on Carter. She's playing with reactors again and the general is nervous. Then I got Pentagon paper-pushers to deal with. Later, kid."

"Later, Jack."

He's still smiling a little as the elevator doors close between us. I've done my good deed for the day. Made the SGC safe for artists' pencils.

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Soft laughter. Daniel is - he's blushing. Why?

I look at Carter. She's too busy scarfing down her Jell-o to notice if the Commissary went up in flames around her. Green Jell-o. I barely suppress a shudder, and give her a gentle nudge.

"Ow! Sir?" Carter yelps and glares at me as her Jell-o hits the floor with a wet splat.

That crap even sounds green.

"Daniel." I nod over to where my archaeologist is being royally entertained by one of the damn pen-pushers. Not so damned as the rest of them, but still, a political player when all's said and done. Someone to be amiably tolerated at best. Not blushed at.

"Sir?" Carter looks blank.

I nod significantly toward the floorshow.

Carter smiles. "Major Davis."

And? So? Why is Daniel blushing? Spill, and get your eye off my pie, Carter. Not sharing. I look at Major Make' Em Laugh Davis. No. Not sharing. "The two of 'em friends?" I ask casually.

"Oh, yes. Daniel and Major Davis spend a lot of time together whenever he's on base. They've gotten to know one another very well."

"Really," I take a chunk outta my pie and observe the good major. HOW well? Obviously well enough to make Daniel laugh a little and blush a lot.

"Oh, yes. Major Davis has been VERY supportive of Daniel. They're getting to be quite close."

'Quite' close? If they were any goddamn closer, they'd be holding hands.

"I have to get back to my lab, Sir," Carter says easily. "With your permission?"

Whatever. The woman is not good at subtext. I know that look on Daniel's face, I know that stance. I've been on the receiving end of them often enough. Daniel is confiding. In Major Davis. He'd rather talk to Davis than me? How fucked is that? What could he possibly have to confide in Davis that he couldn't confide in me, his best friend and team leader? Or in Carter, Teal'c, Fraiser or the general?

Something - about me?

So, maybe I need to freshen up this coffee. Over there. Sheer coincidence it's close to where Daniel is sitting and blushing so - so - blushing.

Yeah. I need coffee. 'Cause this pie is choking me. They're comfortably in earshot as I stroll up behind them and make myself part of the scenery.

"The Juniper Valley Ranch is good. It's owned and run by four generations of the same family working and living together," Daniel's awed voice tells me that's a damned fine thing in his eyes. "The chicken is amazing, they've been serving the same menu there for forty-five years."

"Sounds good, Daniel, but it's a little off the beaten track from here," Davis says softly. Smiling. "Kinda late to be driving back on unfamiliar mountain roads in an unfamiliar car."

I pour my coffee slowly and just check out the lay of the land. Just a coupla guys. Food. No biggie.

Daniel blushes and looks down at the tabletop. "You can - um - stay with me," he offers shyly, meeting Davis's eyes. "Stay the night. If you don't want to risk driving. I'll bring you back here tomorrow."

"If you're sure, Daniel," Davis beams.

Coupla guys going on a frigging DATE. Spending the night with Daniel? I DON'T think so. Not if I have to tail you to that fucking restaurant and drive you back myself. Daniel means on the couch, Davis, and I think you hope he's offering you his bed. Himself. Think? I KNOW.

Nice guy, Davis. Helped out. Helpful. Likes to help. Like to help yourself to Daniel. No way. No fucking way. Nice, but a GUY. No way you get to mess with Daniel's mind, get to take advantage just because he's lonely. Because it's been a while. Because he's vulnerable and not thinking clear, and he likes you and he hates to hurt people.

So lose the nice smile and the warm eyes and the interest. They leave me cold, son, and it's me you need to worry about. You want Daniel? You want him enough to come through me? You think you got enough to take me on? You DON'T. No way I stand idly by and let Daniel give it up to a guy. Not to any guy, and most certainly not to you.

No. Not you. Even though he likes you and he ain't beatin' you off with a stick, here. Not when it means Daniel gets hurt and I gotta pick up the pieces when your nice smile and warm eyes are living it up in our nation's capital.

Must be my day to loom. Right by their table. Davis smiles the moment I make eye contact. The fucker is actually pleased to see me.

"Colonel O'Neill, Sir. Good to see you."

"Major," I acknowledge curtly. "You're expected back in the briefing room at thirteen hundred hours, Davis. Better show some hustle."

Davis looks taken aback at my brusque order, but all he can do is obey. "Daniel." He smiles warmly.

"I'll see you at seven," Daniel says gently.

"I'll pack my jamm -" Davis catches my eye and freezes to absolute correctness before marching out the door.

No. No, you won't.

"What was all that about, Jack? Why were you so harsh?" Daniel asks quietly as I slip into the seat opposite and nurse my coffee.

Daniel's lips have that tight look I noticed earlier, which I guess means he's facing another situation that is exhausting even the limits of HIS patience.

I stare into suddenly cool blue eyes and push his limits a little further. "I need your help, Danny," I ask gravely.

Daniel thaws visibly, eyes warming and lips softening back to their normal pout.

"Of course, Jack. Anything I can, you know that." His sweet smile lights his earnest face for a moment.

Daniel's eyes and Daniel's lips feature heavily in the dreams of most of the SGC, me included. Not in any kind of 'Davis' context, obviously, but still, Daniel's obvious desire to help his best bud out, no questions asked, should soften my heart.

Hardens it. Dammit, he needs protection. I'm not gonna let Daniel tumble into bed with Davis just because it's easier for him to lie back and think of the SGC than it is to say no and hurt the guy's feelings. Hell, he'd sleep with ME if I - I - it's for his own good, his own peace of mind. "Personal matter."

Daniel leans forward, anxious now, hands reaching out involuntarily towards mine. "What is it, Jack? What's troubling you?" he asks gently.

The thought of you getting backed into a corner and letting that guy fuck you because you've never yet worked out you have the right to put yourself first.

"Not here, Daniel," I say awkwardly. God, I am such a bastard. A contemptible, cowardly bastard playing on his best friend's affection and support. "My place. Tonight."

"Tonight?" Daniel says blankly.

"If you got plans - " I shrug it off, make a move to stand up, all 'brave little colonel' stoicism.

Daniel fights it for just a moment, then another glance at my faithless face convinces him. "No. No plans, Jack. I'll see you at your place, at seven."

"I'll pick you up here at eighteen hundred, bring you back in the morning," I say flatly, cranking Daniel's anxiety level up towards panic. He'll fret himself to pieces all day over what could possibly be so bad I want us to pull an all-nighter.

Just the thought of Daniel pulling an all-nighter with Davis is bad enough for me.

"Thanks, Daniel. Means a lot." I lay my hand on his shoulder for a moment, totally fail to reassure his searching eyes and suffer the gentle touch of his hand over mine. Gonna have to get Daniel drunk and between the sheets ASAP. God forbid I should actually have to talk. A fate worse than Davis.

What if Daniel really likes Davis? What if this is what Daniel wants? Tough shit. It isn't what I want for Daniel.

I'm a fucking unconscionable bastard.

Like this is news?

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Teal'c is Kel'No'Reem ing, Carter is reactoring, Daniel is flirting and I'm brooding. Last seen, Davis was embroiled in a budget briefing. So I asked a few innocent little questions. So the briefing turned into a bloodbath. So what? So it bought me a few more hours where Davis couldn't be coming on to Daniel.

So I thought.

How the hell did Davis get here before me? Why the hell didn't Daniel tell me this little self-defence programme was a weekly torture session? He can't talk to me now? Can't say to me: Jack, Sergeant Todd is a relentless sadist and it's your goddamn fault he's making my life a living hell? What am I? A fucking unconscionable bastard?

So-o, I gotta find out the hard way this asshole knocks Daniel on his butt every chance he gets. Gotta actually ask Todd what the FUCK he's doing to my archaeologist. Gotta have Todd announce right in front of my archaeologist he's toughening him up on MY orders. Daniel is plenty tough. I never knew he could bounce if you threw him down hard enough. And of course, Major Darling Davis the pencil pusher has a frigging black belt in jujitsu or something and is making Daniel's year by knocking Todd on his ass even harder. Just demonstrating a few moves. We all know WHICH moves. Oh, yeah, they both find that very funny, very cute. Totally hearts and flowers sympatico here, my best friend Danny and his new friend Paul.

Paul already.

Young. Smart. Young. Cute, if you're that way inclined. Young. Sympathetic. Young. Bastard. Fighting every instinct I got here, which is to march over there and knock his perfect young teeth down his perfect young throat and show Daniel how we old guys do it in Special Ops.

So-o. I gotta find out the hard way I got a problem with Daniel showing an interest in a young, smart, cute guy not because he's a guy, but because he's not me?

This is news.

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This is low. Really low. All time Jack O'Neill 'lowest of the low' type low. Spying on my best friend Danny and his new friend Paul. Got the perfect oblique angle. I can see them

all snuggled up and intimate in Daniel's office, but they can't see me unless they look for me. They ain't looking. They SO ain't looking.

Davis is sidling a little closer to where Daniel is leaning, desperately casual, against his workbench. I swear I see the pulse hammering in Daniel's throat from here.

"I'm sorry, Paul. I'll have to take a rain check on tonight," Daniel says regretfully. "Jack needs to talk and I - you know how it is between us." He flushes and looks down.

HOW? How is it between us? How good? How bad? How HOT? How? Gimme something to work with, here!

"It's not your fault, Daniel. Friends. I understand," Davis is all sympathy. "The colonel is - well - you know - " He hesitates, pulling a face, and Daniel chuckles, a little guilty, a lot naughty.

Davis knows. Daniel knows. Speak UP, guys. The colonel DOESN'T know. The colonel NEEDS to know. The roof of the colonel's mouth is dry as dust, and all he's seeing is his best friend Danny, so it must be Danny who's responsible for the raging hard-on currently destruct testing the colonel's resolutely heterosexual libido.

Based on the results in so far, the colonel's libido is caving without a whimper.

"So I guess we don't get to have that talk, huh?" Davis asks softly. "Have you made your decision?"

"Yes. I have. I was hoping to tell you tonight, but I can't, not here," Daniel tells him nervously.

Davis takes that as an invitation and gets a lot closer to Daniel. He's WAY inside that exclusion zone, the zone that only I'M supposed to have access to. My nails are driving into my palms. This is the most blatant fucking pass I've ever seen in my LIFE.

"Daniel," Davis is all soft voice and soft eyes. Daniel is rocking back against the workbench, swallowing hard, transfixed as Davis closes in on him. Daniel, trying out that sweet, tentative little smile.

If Davis was any closer he'd be in Daniel's fatigues WITH him and why the FUCK isn't Daniel telling him to get the fuck away, he's TOO close? WHY is Daniel smiling and standing there letting Davis lean in, lean closer, close enough to - to - Got his HANDS on Daniel. At his waist. Looking to Daniel. Asking permission. Jesus. JESUS. Getting it? Daniel flinching a little as Davis stops a breath away from his lips, and whispering Davis's name, soft, uncertain.

Drowning in there. Cornered. Needs me. Gotta get him outta this mess. Daniel's never done this before. Never kissed a man. Obvious. NOT doing it now. NOT kissing Davis.

Not when Daniel can kiss ME. Solid offer on the table here. Just gimme a chance to work up to it. Ease into it. Get used to it. The whole idea of – y’know – with Daniel. With a guy.

Jesus. Looking at Daniel right now, kinda sweet and expectant - okay, okay, O’Neill. Admit it. Totally drop-dead gorgeous and smokin’ HOT. Forget easing into it. Just colour me fucking unstoppable sex fiend.

“DANIEL? You decent?” I holler cheerfully, barging into the office. Davis coolly steps away and smiles warmly at both of us.

"Good to see you AGAIN, Sir," Davis says humorously.

"And you, Major. Seems like every place I need to be, there YOU are," I say coolly, looking him up and down. Smile not so warm now. Eyes not so soft.

Kissing MY Daniel? NO. You do NOT get to have him. Daniel is no trophy fuck for some pen-pushing pseudo warrior, however good you look together or however much you have in common or however much he likes you, and yes, I see how much he likes you in the way he’s scowling at me for shutting you down. I see it all.

Look your fill, Davis. And kiss him goodbye. Metaphorically speaking. He’s spoken for. Belongs to ME. With me. I’m his family. If he’s lonely, well, he's got me. As often as he wants me. He can have me the whole damn time. And if Daniel wants to be kissed, I'M here for him. If he would just glance down he could see how HERE for him I am. Couldn’t miss it. I can't remember the last time I was this HERE for anyone.

"Dismissed," I order curtly.

Davis looks like he wants to make something of it. Daniel looks like he wants to make something of it. My heart is just bleeding sympathy all over the floor. "It isn't customary for a ranking officer to have to repeat an order before it's obeyed," I say calmly.

"Sir, yes, Sir!" Davis snaps it out, has the barefaced fucking nerve to smile at Daniel right in front of me and removes himself toot nowhere near fucking sweet enough to suit me.

I buy a little time closing the doors. I need it. Got enough on my plate trying to absorb the fact I fully intend to be the only kisser in Daniel's future without rushing to face the lucky kissee. Fortunately for me, the kissee is Daniel, the poster boy for empathy. The kid is crazy about me, thank God. He'll understand, he’ll make this easy for me.

"Are you homophobic, Jack?"

"What? Me?" CRAP. "No!" Yeah. No. Kinda. No. Just – traditional. Except with YOU, obviously. The SOLE exception to an otherwise TOTALLY non-negotiable rule.

"So what, exactly, is your objection to Paul and me?" Daniel asks softly.

Shit. The bigot question was the EASY question?

"Davis and you what?" I say blankly. There IS no 'Paul and you'. Just you and ME. Me and you. Me in you. You in - okay, gettin' WAY too graphic here. Need SOME blood left for thinking with. The couple of corpuscles I got left fightin' a rearguard action in the old noggin are SO not cutting the conversational mustard with Daniel, mostly 'cause they're whining bitterly about being left out of the stampede straight down.

"Kissing," Daniel says crisply. "What's wrong, Jack? Not enough action for you?"

"Whaa?" I wheeze.

"I saw you salivating at the doorway!"

"Whaa?"

"How long have you been getting off on watching men kissing?" Daniel challenges.

"Wha - weren't. Wasn't."

"What?"

Hey, that's MY line! Give it back! It's the only one I got right now.

"So you're not a homophobe and you don't object to me seeing Paul?"

"Yes! No! I mean - " I don't know what the hell I mean. "Yes."

Daniel scowls at me. "What right do you have to judge me, Jack?"

"If your own good sense doesn't tell you - " I snap. He wants Davis. He actually seems to want Davis. Not just making do 'cause he's never had a better offer. Christ. What the hell do I do now? I can't hand Daniel over without a whimper, but what the hell do I know about chasing a guy? Especially a guy like Daniel. If Daniel was a woman he wouldn't LOOK at me. He's a guy and he's right in front of me and he won't look at me anyway.

"What right?" Daniel interjects, voice as stern as I've ever heard it, eyes sparking fire.

None whatsoever. I could mention 'don't ask, don't tell' but I think God would strike me dead for a whopper like that one, given I'm standing here trying to work out the best way to get Daniel naked and into MY sweaty clutches in bed and NOT in Davis's.

“Have dinner with me!” I hear a strangled, insistent voice blurt. Dear God. Daniel’s lips aren’t moving. They’re doing that thinning thing again. Must have been – was me. “If you must – if you want – well – I’m here – do it with me,” I stammer, my ears unable to believe they’re hearing the crap dropping outta my big mouth an incidentally, completely embarrassed to have share a body.

Daniel takes a step back and gapes at me incredulously.

I smile weakly. I CANNOT believe I said that. Dumb fuck. Supposed to be thinking of the best way, not the worst. Whoa, boy. Couldn’t have come up with a worse strategy if I’d sat down for a WEEK and thought about ways to screw this up. Looking at Daniel, I can see I’m in the majority on this one.

“You’re taking PITY on me?” Daniel snaps. “You’re TOO kind. However, I think I can live without your HEROIC sacrifice, AND without your judgemental, dog in the manger, I don’t want him but no one ELSE can have him – “

A good soldier knows when to retreat. I sidle over to the door, away from Daniel’s anger. Disappointment. Hurt feelings.

“POSSESSIVENESS and - “

“I’ll pick you up at eighteen hundred hours, don’t make me come find you!” I cut in ruthlessly, and make a sharp exit before he flings more than harsh words. A good tactician never loses sight of his main objective. Daniel can be as hurt and mad at me all he likes just so long as he is hurt and mad at me at my place, where I can keep an eye and both hands on him.

“WHAT!” Daniel rages helplessly as I put a safe - for me - distance between us with more haste than dignity.

“Dr J?”

“What! Oh! Sergeant! S-sorry. Um -“

Hmm. Daniel has company back there.

“Sorry ‘bout that, Dr J. Looks like the colonel is still on a tear!” a jovial voice teases.

A voice belonging to Sergeant Todd the Sadist. I manage to duck around the corner before Daniel spots me, wait for him to close the door, and sneak cautiously back along.

“Just came to see if you were okay, Dr J? Put you down hard there a coupla times. Favour or no favour, that was going too far.”

“I’m fine, Sergeant, really. I – um – this is – um – just to say thanks.”

"I helped out 'cause YOU asked me to," Todd says coldly.

"I know," Daniel says shyly. "This isn't for you. It's for Peggy and the girls. You'll just have to, well, suffer and go along with them. Moral support for Peggy. The girls are a handful."

I'm 2IC for my sins round here and I don't know Sergeant Todd has a Peggy or girls at home.

"They are at that, Dr J," Todd's voice softens noticeably. "Wow! Family fun night at Gunther Toody's. I can't - "

But he wants to. Wavering.

"It'll be BAD, Sergeant. They've got a clown booked. Apparently, he does tricks with balloons," Daniel announces in a voice of doom. "Face painting. Games. He's even got a monkey. See?"

"You win your bet with Major Carter, Dr J?" Todd asks, teasing again. The monkey was too much for him, I guess.

"Yes," Daniel says sadly. "I think I did."

Bet? Who? What? Why?

"Okay, then. Glad I could help. See you next week, Dr J, and tell Major Davis from me he's telegraphing that reverse kick! My Sophie coulda taken him on that one." Todd chuckles.

"I will, and thanks again."

Yeah. Thanks, Todd. Very enlightening. Ver-ry. I now know Daniel makes friends wherever he goes and he's got some bet with Carter. He thinks he lost the bet and he's miserable as all hell about it. I don't know why. Davis was all over him so far as I could see and put a stop to.

I've already pissed Daniel off more than he's ever been, so what would it hurt to go back in there and find out what the hell is going on? Of course, that would mean actually going back in there, WITH him, after the most agonisingly unsuccessful pass in the history of incoherently bad passes. A man of honour would suck it up. Face the music. Take it on the chin.

I'm gonna lean on Carter.

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DANIEL

"Daniel! At last! We were starting to worry," Sam jumps up from her workbench and rushes to my side, drawing me over to sit down on the stool between her and Paul.

"How'd it go?"

I shudder.

Sam's face tightens.

"Damn," Paul says. "I almost made the supreme sacrifice for nothing?"

"Thanks!" I say crisply. "It was your idea to kiss me!"

"It was Sam's stupid idea!"

Sam scowls at Paul. "Hey! Less of that. I only suggested it because I thought I would be the one who got to do the kissing." She leers at me dreadfully, eyes sparkling.

"So how come I got sucked into this vortex of evil the two of you whipped up?" Paul asks dryly.

"We did a trial run," I supply as Sam scowls at me.

"Not entirely successful?" Paul chuckles at Sam's sour expression.

"No," I say emphatically.

"Charming," Sam sniffs.

"How bad?"

"Bad, Paul. Bad. Sam gave me no warning, she just - SAM!"

"I SEE," Paul marvels after a short, crowded pause. "Sam yanked you across her lap, dropped her head and kissed you. You yelped and Sam dissolved into helpless giggles because you looked absolutely terrified," Paul hoots. "You wanna put him down now, Sam? I don't think his nerves can take it!"

Sam grudgingly releases me and I sit up again, considerably ruffled. "I was so glad when you came, Paul," I confide. "Sam kept insisting all we needed was practice."

Sam nods vigorously. "I'm right too. Lots and lots and lots of practice. Sooner or later, Daniel would have stopped screaming when I jumped him."

She and Paul look at me and snigger meanly.

"You can dream, Sam," Paul grins. "I'M right. You're the wrong gender to make the colonel sit up, take note and start hurting people. I've already accepted I'm not long for this Earth."

"You think Jack will kill you?" I ask, curious.

"Can I have your stereo when - " Sam asks brightly, doing a little throat-cut mime.

"No, Daniel, I think he'll try." Paul ostentatiously ignores Sam. "I'm pretty sure I can outrun him and I'm gating the hell out of here before I gotta find out I can't."

"Wuss," Sam curls her lip. "So? Can I have your stereo?" she insists.

"I'm so glad that news of my imminent demise at the colonel's hands, feet, teeth, ball point pen or whatever the hell else it takes, fills you with such regret and remorse," Paul tells Sam crisply.

Sam smiles apologetically and opens her mouth.

"No. You can't have my stereo," Paul snaps.

Sam closes her mouth. "I could call the colonel right now and tell him you've got your tongue in Daniel's ear," she taunts.

"Threats?" Paul asks softly. "I could call him and tell him I caught YOU with your tongue down - "

"It doesn't matter," I say flatly. "I won the bet."

"Daniel!" Sam turns to me at once, sneaking an arm around my shoulders. "No. I don't believe it. If anyone knows how the colonel really feels it's - it's me. I realised I was a substitute, it just took me a while to figure out who I was substitute for," she says steadily.

I sigh and return her hug. "This was a dumb idea, Sam, and I've only myself to blame it blew up in my face."

Sam gives me a startled look. "That bad, Daniel?" she murmurs sympathetically, tightening her grip as I nod.

"I was harsh with Jack," I confess sadly.

"Harsh?" Sam asks dubiously.

"Harsh?" Paul is bordering on the incredulous.

I look from Sam to Paul. "I can be harsh!" I insist, a little indignant.

"Sure you can," Sam soothes.

"He can?"

"Shut up, Paul! That's not helping!" Sam snaps.

"I asked Jack if he was homophobic!"

"Y-you did?" Sam gulps. "What did he say?"

"He just sputtered."

"I'm not surprised!" Paul yelps, "The whole reason you two turned on the big-blue-eyed charm and suckered me into the sting from hell was to make the colonel's mind boldly go where his mind had never gone before. His outlook on life has always struck me as fairly 'traditional'," he says carefully.

"It went there alright," I say bitterly. "Straight down. Express service. According to Jack, if my own good judgement isn't enough, if I'm SO desperate I have to have sex with Paul, well - "

"Thanks!" Paul snaps ungratefully.

"Shut up," Sam snaps back, scowling at Paul.

"Well given those circumstances, Jack is ready to overlook his moral objections to my lifestyle choices, take pity and 'do it' with me to spare me the degradation of having to do it with Paul," I sigh.

"Big of him," Paul drawls witheringly.

"Oh?" Sam sits up straighter.

"I asked him flat out what right he had to object to me seeing Paul and he couldn't come up with a single reason. He couldn't object, so he settled for being objectionable," I say flatly. "And incoherent."

"Re-ally?"

"Yes, Sam, really. And after all that, he actually had the nerve to insist on taking me home tonight. Threatened to come and GET me if I wasn't waiting by his jeep like a good little Dannyboy at six o'clock sharp."

“Wow!”

“Wow? Where’s the wow factor in that, Sam?” Paul demands. “Sounds like the colonel behaved like an asshole.”

Sam turns to us, eyes glowing. “He’s got it BAD. This is better – so much better than we’d dared to imagine. He was DROWNING in there. When has the colonel EVER been at a loss for words? He made a pass at you, Daniel, you just didn’t see it.”

“You weren’t there, Sam. He was just being possessive. Dog in the manger, in fact. I was – he – “

“You’re in love with him, Daniel, and you aren’t objective where he’s concerned. You’ve been so convinced he’d never feel the same way about you – “

“Or be brought to realise and accept he DOES feel the same way about you,” Paul interrupts Sam.

“You took what the colonel said and did at face value. Talk about a go to guy! He’d already decided what to do, he just got lost in the how, and maybe, in the why,” Sam suggests softly.

I’d love to believe her, really I would. There’s a world of difference between Jack having a stunning revelation, seeing me in a whole new light and – um – getting blatantly horny, and Jack falling in love with me. I must have blinked and missed the latter.

“Are you going over there tonight, Daniel?” Sam asks gently.

“I don’t know, Sam. I need to think about this. Jack may have stuttered out his willingness to sleep with me, he may even be able to sleep with me, though I doubt it, but I’m not willing to sleep with him. Not unless he – he – “

“He does,” Paul says firmly. “Even I can see he does. I wouldn’t be laying my life on the line, otherwise.”

“Perhaps so, but I think it would kill him to admit it,” I sigh.

“Or me,” Paul grumbles, nimbly dodging a punch thrown by Sam.

“Jack’s attitude, what he suggested? He hurt me. He didn’t even say he cared for me as a friend, and I’ve seen little enough of that recently to – Oh, Sam, no, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean – damn. Don’t – “ My unruly tongue!

“I’m not,” Sam says strongly. “I’m getting good and mad. The colonel is hopeless at this stuff. Would it kill him for once to just come out and say what he means?”

"I think he's gonna manage 'Davis! Eat shit and die!' just fine."

"Ah, quit your whining, Paul," Sam snarls.

"Daniel, if I do gotta die, YOU can have my stereo," Paul tells me pointedly, eyeing Sam with dislike.

"Weasel."

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JACK

They say eavesdroppers never hear good of themselves, and it's certainly true in my case. Good news, bad news, worst news. Good news is Daniel has taken leave of his senses and fallen in love with me. Bad news is those three kids tried to play me and, me being me, I fucked up royally by apparently suggesting to Daniel I'd be happy to fuck him at our earliest mutual convenience. Maybe happy is overstating the case. Tolerate, perhaps? Out of pity. Worst news is Daniel isn't even sure I'm his friend any more, I've hurt him, and he won't entertain for a second the preposterous notion I might just possibly love him back.

I'm abso-friggin-lutely positive I love him back or I wouldn't be climbing UP this goddamn tree because HE won't climb down it. Why the hell did I stop the jeep in the first place? Bad enough I had some dumb-ass notion of apologising for anything I'd said which might have misled him about my intentions. He was so stunned to hear the 's' word from me, he almost didn't pick up on the fact the only reason I knew I had something to apologise FOR was 'cause I must have heard him say so. So what? Say I did, maybe? I almost got it past him. Almost. Then he went white, almost fainted and gave the upholstery - and me - a fright.

Cool date so far. I upset him, shocked him so bad he almost threw up, and hit the brakes out here in the middle of nowhere. Then I stupidly tried to explain myself, resulting in some unwelcome revelations about the whole me being a complete bastard thing, which subsequently sent him bolting for safety up a particularly leafy tree. With hindsight, I gotta admit that threatening to carry him back to the jeep if he was going to be so damn childish was not the way to go when he expressed understandable reluctance to share the planet with me, let alone the jeep, and as for a bed, I could damn well whistle for it.

I just had to whistle.

Also, maybe that wasn't the best time to notice for the first time what a great ass he has. Or comment on my pleasure at this very welcome discovery. Daniel just wasn't in a 'perky' place right then.

He's in a leafy place right now. Given our last attempt at reconciliation went along the lines of me hollering up, 'Daniel, don't be stupid! How long ya planning to stay up there?'

and Daniel yelling down, 'How long ya got?', I figured I'd better get my ass up here and fetch him down.

Down.

Long way down.

LONG.

Isn't he supposed to be scared of heights?

I'm not.

Not scared of heights.

Pilot.

Fine with heights.

Just a long way down.

LONG.

"Nice tree," I wheeze brightly, hauling myself painfully onto Daniel's branch and making myself as at home as Daniel's glowering presence and the fear of imminent, plummeting death allows to me to be.

I stare into Daniel's stormy eyes and try to keep my mind off crashing, falling, diving, plummeting, plunging, slipping, toppling, tumbling.

"Jack, I'll be right there, just hang on."

Yeah? That's nice. Kinda redundant, though, advice-wise. SO not letting go.

So-o.

Flying ain't the problem.

It's hitting the ground.

"Jeez!" I yelp as Daniel swings confidently around behind me thanks to an overhanging branch, and then gentle hands and gentler, hypnotic voice urge me along the branch to the point where I can turn and settle my back against the trunk, facing Daniel. "You weren't in the last tree," I say flatly. I'd kinda forgotten I was in the last tree myself. Another joyous incursion into the Eastern Bloc. Daniel's eyes soften even more and he hitches a little closer towards me.

“Want to tell me about it?” he invites.

No. No way, no how. The team, and Daniel in particular are as clean and clear from my crap as I can keep them. He doesn’t need to hear how I waited out a target, waited out my target for three days, waited out my target in a big, inviting tree, just like this one, and when she showed her pretty face I gave her that third eye, right in the middle of her pretty forehead.

“I’m scared of heights,” I say defiantly. So I’m pushing the truth envelope. The more scared I look the closer he gets.

“You’re an Air Force colonel. A pilot,” Daniel points out the obvious.

“Flying is aiming for the ground and missing. This isn’t. This is plummeting to the ground screaming and not missing.”

Daniel hitches a little closer. I think my fearless emotional dishonesty is lulling him into a false sense of security. As soon as he gets close enough to grab, I’m grabbing.

“This is an entire summer in a cast instead of on my bike, or in the sandlot over on York Street, or on my skates buzzing the neighbourhood cats. I’ve still got the scars,” I say fondly. Come nice and close, Danny; be a good boy and come here to the bad man.

“I’ve never been on skates in my life,” Daniel confesses, making a hitch too far.

GOTCHA!

“Jack!”

Glad to see I haven’t lost my touch. In fact, getting in touch with my feelings has gotten me in touch with a pleasantly squirming, protesting armful and – just gimme a sec to work out the logistics, here – lapful of slightly bewildered and blushing Daniel.

“Jack and Daniel sitting in a tree,” I murmur into Daniel’s ear. What was that Carter was threatening to call me about? Oh, yeah. Ears. Daniel has delicate ears. Pink. I lick experimentally. Ni-ice. Daniel gasps as I set to exploring with a will, a lucky swipe of the tongue on a spot just behind his ear revealing an erogenous zone, if the softly whimpered ‘Jack’ is any indicator. “K-I-S-S-I-N-G,” I roll it over my tongue with relish.

“No,” Daniel protests.

“Why not?” I ask reasonably. “We’re not kissing because we want to?”

“No! Yes! I mean – “

"You mean you want to but you won't because I'm an asshole?" I suggest lightly.

"Yes," Daniel says gratefully. "No!"

"You mean you want to but you won't because I made the worst pass in recorded history, and not in the toe curlingly erotic sense, just in the plain old crappy sense, and forgot all the touchy-feely stuff 'cause all I was thinking about was the touching and feeling stuff?" Hard to believe I'm looking at a man and thinking this, but I have to admit Daniel is adorable when he's all confused. "Even I knew I was totally incoherent, there. My IQ was in my pants, and I was slightly annoyed that you were letting Davis drool all over you." Despite my best efforts, my voice tightens up along with my grip. Davis may have been putting on an act to help Daniel out, but I know sparkage when I see it, though it's nothing like what there is between Daniel and me, which is thrumming somewhere in the gigawatt range. Slightly embarrassing I had to have that drawn to my attention, but I still think I adjusted pretty damn impressively given the time frame and the fact my entire concept of sexuality got knocked wheezing on its ass. Carter and Davis will be paying for that, creatively, at my earliest convenience. Daniel is exempt from payback. I love him, and he's pretty much stuck with me. That's more than enough suffering in my book.

"Slightly annoyed?" Daniel enunciates incredulously.

"Cut me some slack, Daniel," I try out the big, pleading puppy eyes. Daniel swallows painfully and moistens his lips nervously. I'd lick his lips for him, but I want to stay in this tree a while longer without exploring the plummeting option. I suppose it's remotely possible that if Daniel is in love with me, he might be attracted to me too. I look at him and I look at me, and I gotta say, I wouldn't be attracted to me if I were him, but he's a really nice boy and there's no accounting for the things he takes a fancy to. He likes old stuff, which should help. "The important thing was me asking you to have dinner with me."

"Ordering," Daniel contradicts. "Just to keep me away from Paul."

"Trying and failing miserably to ask you out on a date. I've never asked a man out on a date in my life, Daniel," I say softly. "Believe it or not, I was nervous." And jealous. And horny, which didn't help. That hasn't changed, but I'm getting more used to feeling it around Daniel.

"Oh. Why?"

"In case you said no! I gotta spell it out for you?"

"Yes. P-particularly the quote 'touchy-feely' stuff, please," Daniel asks earnestly, desperately trying to stay cool, but betrayed by the naked anxiety blazing in his eyes.

"You have amazing eyes. Stunning."

SHIT! Which SAP said that?

"J-Jack," Daniel blushes and drops his head, peeking up at me shyly through his lashes. Then he goes very still. "I - I think your IQ is - um - falling again."

Damn straight. You're sittin' on most of it, kid. Which is the only possible explanation for all the lovey-dovey stuff I'm embarrassing myself with.

"You actually want me to say it?" I grouch.

Daniel nods very gently, his eyes getting wider and wider. I think he's afraid to move, mostly because his IQ is slipping a little, too.

"Okay, if you insist. I love you, you know, and for some bizarre reason beyond my ken, you love me too, even if I am too stupid to live, and can we get to the kissing part before one of us explodes?"

"You love me?" Daniel whispers.

"No kissing?" I ask pathetically.

Daniel takes pity, carefully cupping my face in his hands - beautiful, trembling hands - and leans in as I lean out and only our noses kiss. Crunch. Whatever.

"Ow."

"Ditto. Let's take it from the top." I hold HIS face and lean in to him, managing to land in the general vicinity of some very stiff lips. More around than on. "Nothing fits."

Wow. We're not exactly setting the world alight, here. I feel like I'm twelve years old, and the only thing I'd kissed was the back of my hand. First time I actually kissed a girl - well, truth be told, first time a girl kissed me - I didn't know what to do with my lips. Neither of us seems to know now, and worse, Daniel didn't actually whimper, but I think he came close.

Daniel heroically returns the compliment and this time we do actually manage to connect fully - if briefly - at the lips. Then we both sit back.

"We suck," Daniel sighs.

I wish.

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DANIEL

“We need practice,” Jack says heartily as we pull in to the parking lot. “It was the tree. The whole plummeting to our deaths thing. Cramped our style. We’ll get better.”

We could hardly get worse. I always thought men would be better with men precisely because they are men and they know what works for men. Apparently, I thought wrong when it came to Jack and me, even though we are both indubitably men. And here we are, two men on our first official date, which isn’t so much romantic, as it is defensive. Jack is being very sweet and supportive, offering pancakes at La Crêperie just to take my mind off how bad we are at kissing. Bad. Really, truly bad. Awful. Three attempts just to briefly brush lips. I shudder away from the thought of going to bed with Jack, which, unfortunately, is what he’s hoping and wanting to happen when we get back to his place. The very minute we get back, I suspect.

We’re doing a little better with the feelings, though I’m slightly alarmed by some odd changes I’ve detected in Jack’s behaviour. Already. Put a gun in his hands and he’ll mother-hen us with the best of them. I’ve put up with that for years. This is different, a sweet, quaint, protective courtesy. Like opening the restaurant door for me. I’m beginning to suspect Jack wants to ‘look after’ me, and he’s enjoying himself so much I think he’ll be hurt if I put a stop to it.

“You like it here,” Jack says cheerfully as he strolls in. “You’ve been here with Carter, for her birthday.” He reels back in shock. “Whoa! Pink.”

“Peach.”

“O’Malley’s isn’t pink.”

That’s unanswerable, and also irrelevant. We’re banned from O’Malley’s, until hell freezes over according to the owner.

“Not exactly rushed off their feet here, are they?” Jack says critically as all three waiters close in, smiling widely. There is a brief skirmish over removing our jackets, which Jack wins emphatically, apparently judging the young, blonde-haired, green-eyed ‘student if ever I saw one’ waiter is possibly showing a tad too much interest in my person. I’m thirty-five, for Pete’s sake. This boy is all sculpted pectorals and hormones. Can’t be more than about twenty. He’s not the slightest bit interested in making anything except his rent money, so Jack can just wipe that forbidding look off his face.

“Hi,” the blonde haired Adonis says brightly, making the other two wince. “Oh, yeah,” he says apologetically. “I’m Connor, I’ll be your waiter. Allegedly.”

A nice boy. I cheer up a little and smile at Connor, our alleged waiter.

“I’m studying Anthropology, what the hell do I know about being a waiter?” Connor confides cheerfully as he steers us to a corner table, well away from the kitchen doors, and from the other two couples the waiters are currently waiting on hand and foot.

The other couples? Oh, boy.

"I'm an archaeologist," I supply tentatively.

Connor stops in his tracks. "Hot damn! I'm doing ANTH 220, archaeology and pre-history. Drowning. You a grad student? Haven't seen you on campus?"

"DOCTOR Jackson has doctorates in archaeology and linguistics, and his area of expertise is ancient cultures, languages and literature, specifically writing systems," Colonel O'Neill snaps.

I'm actually quite touched he's so certain about it all he can fire it out at the unsuspecting at a moment's notice. I smile at Jack, and his face softens as he smiles right back.

"Your jammies must've still had feet in 'em when you got your B.A," Connor grins. "So you're on the Faculty, huh? New? Must be. News like you spreads fast. They'd need security on the door if YOU were lecturing. Damn, even I'd be feeling no pain and ANTH 220 runs on a Monday, nine am, and Friday, six pm."

"Dr Jackson isn't associated in any way with the University," the colonel snarls.

"Jack!" I protest at his tone.

"Cool!," Connor gloats. "Those fraternisation rules are a drag. I was gonna ask you to tutor me, but hell, who cares? You're drop-dead gorgeous. Wanna go out with me? Or more accurately, wanna stay in with me?"

I falter to a dead stop, totally at a loss as Connor looks me up and down appreciatively and goes 'Mmm'. The colonel is alarmingly rigid by my side, and I suspect La Crêperie is about to be forcefully deprived of the services of one alleged waiter.

"Daniel!" the colonel snaps, and when I don't move fast enough, he yanks me away, Connor picking up the pace and staying doggedly by my side.

"That shy thing, it's cute, Daniel. Really plays. Take a load off while I grab the menus. You gotta eat dessert, man. Crepe Suisse. Swiss chocolate and whipped cream. You, me, chocolate, whipped cream. Think about it," he beams at me and trots away.

Quite stupefied, I allow the colonel to assist me into the nearest chair. Jack sits opposite me and takes a deep, calming breath.

"Oh, forgot to ask. You want wine? The Cabernet Sauvignon is drinkable, or the Chablis," Connor calls, bobbing up behind Jack. I nod weakly. "You work up at the mountain?" Connor asks Jack as he passes out menus. "Military type?"

"Colonel," Jack says icily.

"I can tell."

Jack bristles, but can't get a word in edgewise as Connor beams down at the old folk and takes pity. "Ah. Forget the menus. I'll pick. At first glance you look to me like a St.Malo, a beef man all the way," he says lightly to Jack, completely impervious to the hostility Jack is projecting. "That's just surface crust, though. Pure mush underneath, especially for the Doc here, am I right? Gonna give you the Douarnenez, Alaskan crab and shrimp in white wine. Daniel gets the Daoulas, poached breast of chicken, mushrooms, hollandaise. Yeah. That'll do it. You can think about the whipped cream while you eat, Daniel." Connor looks from me to Jack. "By the way, you got a great ass, Colonel Jack." Then he trots off towards the kitchen bellowing orders.

Colonel Jack appears to have lost the power of speech. This has NEVER happened at O'Malleys. Not even to Sam.

"When was the last time you dated?" I ask valiantly.

"I was married," Jack says as if that explains everything.

"Has this ever - "

"No. You?"

"I don't get out much," I say weakly, blushing.

"Every damn time, huh?" Jack says, almost sympathetically. "Great ass?" he asks, hopefully.

I smile involuntarily.

"Cool!" Jack enthuses, visibly pleased. I breathe a sigh of relief. There's still a chance Connor might live through this date.

"So, Daniel," Connor grins as he arrives back at our table yanking the cork vigorously out of the Chablis, "You wanna go to a club after this? They got a new band playing at Industrial Nation tonight."

"Industrial Nation?" I'm almost afraid to ask.

"Club over on Platte. I can get off any time after the Daniel Crème Suisse Experience."

"Aren't you working?" Jack demands.

"I got a Ferrari parked out back," Connor winks. "I tell the old man I quit this dive for extra tuition from a bona fide Doctor of Archaeology," Connor leers at me appreciatively, "he'll cough up the cash regardless. Life experience? Get a grip, Dad."

"My glass is dirty," I say desperately as Jack's fist clenches along with his teeth.

"Crap! Goddamn kitchen staff, slacking off again. Think life is just one permanent break. Be right back." Connor grabs my glass and hauls ass with impressive speed. Jack sits in pensive silence for a while. I think Connor could outrun me, and I can run rings around Jack.

"Do I look like I belong in a place called 'Industrial Nation'?" I ask.

"Nope," Connor's voice makes me jump. "You look like you belong at the Met, but even refined types like yourself gotta cut loose every once in a while."

"I'm going to kill him," Jack confides to me, conversationally. "Gonna drag him out back and kill him."

Connor laughs out loud. "You can try, man. Golden Gloves AND black belt, Tai Kwon Do. And if it looks hairy, hell, I can outrun you, swing by the table, grab Daniel and head for that hot tub in the hills."

I start to laugh helplessly at the sheer thwarted outrage on Jack's face.

"Admit it," Connor demands.

"No," Jack snarls.

"He likes me," Connor grins saucily at me. "He REALLY likes me. Back with food, ASAP."

"I don't!"

"Colonel Jack, don't tell me I'm not you, thirty years ago," Connor smirks at Jack, "only smarter and WAY better looking," he chuckles at the look on Jack's face and saunters off towards the kitchen again.

"THIRTY years ago?" Jack rages, "I hate that kid. I really hate that kid!"

"Hmm. Well, there won't ever be a good time to say this, but - I'm wavering, Jack, I have to tell you," I say innocently. "Connor will keep me in a manner to which I could become ENTIRELY accustomed."

"Grr."

"I'm sorry? Didn't quite catch that?"

"Crap. He's coming back. The kid is like a chimp on speed."

"So you coming to that club, Daniel?" Connor asks cheerfully as he places my plate before me with a flourish. "We got green stuff. Sorry 'bout this. The soup is worse, trust me on that."

We have a crisp green salad, homemade vinaigrette, French bread and butter. Plus a huge, steaming crêpe, oozing chicken and hollandaise sauce. I look up, smiling. "It looks wonderful, Connor, thank you."

"Damn," Connor breathes, gazing deep into my eyes. "We're talking actual cerulean blue here."

"For God's sake, Daniel, don't encourage the little shit!" Jack snarls.

The little shit kind of frisbee's Jack's plate across the table at him, apparently unable to tear his eyes from my quote 'actual cerulean blue' ones.

"Hey, give it a little wrist action, there, maybe I could catch it in my teeth!"

"You still got teeth?" Connor marvels, eyeing Jack's greying hair dubiously.

There's a certain tautening suggesting the colonel is very much with us again, and is about to swat the little shit clean into next Tuesday.

The little shit sniggers. "Mr and Mrs Tudberry are celebrating their forty-seventh wedding anniversary. Right over there. Bless. You go apeshit, you ruin their special evening. Suck it up, big guy, suck it up."

I'm betrayed into a laughing fit by Jack's speechless, apoplectic fury as a gloating Connor swaggers away. Jack 'looks' at me. I quite regret letting Jack kiss me, since it means I'm obligated not to be unkind.

I lean in. Jack leans in. We meet up over the lemon daisies in the centrepiece. "I think your hair is - it's - um - well - "

"What?" Jack snaps tersely.

"S-sexy," I say flatly, hideously embarrassed.

Jack snaps bolt upright and shoots me a hard, suspicious look. "Sexy?" he queries, disbelieving.

I feel that more is required of me. "Distinguished?" I suggest tentatively.

"Oh." Jack eyes me uncertainly. "O-oh. Yours too," he relaxes, apparently a little mollified.

I take the chance to slice into my crêpe and tease out some chicken. Wow. This is even better than the last time, with Sam. The golden pancake is light, crisp and melting all at the same time.

"Cute," Jack says obscurely.

"Cute?" I delve into my vinaigrette. Sharp and rich, balsamic vinegar lingering on my tongue. Mmm.

Jack waves a forkful of shrimp at me. "Your hair. Cute." He looks at my hair. "Short, but - "

"Cute'?" I challenge.

Jack's eyes narrow over a heroic mouthful of Alaskan crab and green stuff. "Adorable, even. Much like the rest of you."

"Adorable?" My voice rises.

"Sweet." Jack's goes up a decibel.

"Hot," our friendly alleged waiter calls as he hops up onto the table next to ours, blithely ignoring the scandalised hissing of his compatriots. "Jeez, you're drowning here. You don't tell a guy like Daniel he's sweet."

"Why not?" Jack asks, curiosity overcoming his homicidal impulses for a moment.

"Because he's sweet," Connor says placidly.

"Grr."

"You say something, Daniel?"

"Grr."

"Yep, that's what I thought you said." Jack spears another shrimp and chews thoughtfully.

"Are you gay?" he asks Connor suddenly.

"Wow! What gave me away?" Connor asks, dripping sarcastic pseudo-awe.

"You're - um - out?" I ask gently.

"Never been in." Connor takes a long swig from his coke. "It just so happens that all the people I've been attracted to so far have been guys. I don't dislike women, I've just never met one yet who did anything for me. One look at Daniel, here, and I'm figuring how quick I can get him home, get him naked and get him screaming."

Screaming?

"Screaming?" Jack scowls.

I've never - um - not ever.

"I'm ninety percent hormones," Connor admits, grinning like a fiend. "So I see somebody I like, I just ask. Anybody gives me any crap, well, I've got the Golden Gloves and the black belt to fall back on."

"How often do you fall back on them?" I ask.

Connor glances at Jack, eyes sparkling. "Just about to make a start from the look of things. Colonel Jack, here, isn't what I'd call a people-person."

"Some of my best friends are people," Jack drawls. The penny drops. "Are you seriously trying to tell me not one single guy has ever said no to you?" he asks incredulously, torn between annoyance and out-and-out admiration.

It's a guy thing, even if this guy has a thing for guys. I haven't drunk enough Chablis for that to make sense.

"A couple started out saying no and wound up screaming 'yes, please', does that count?"

"No. You get within five feet of Daniel again, I'm shooting you dead," Jack snarls with total conviction.

"Mad, bad and dangerous to know," Connor quotes softly, grinning impertinently at a darkly brooding and slightly smug Jack, who's sniffed out a possible compliment in there somewhere.

He's easily pleased.

The door chime heralds the arrival of a party of giggling women, probably housewives on a tear. The other two waiters scowl so ferociously even Connor gets the message and gets off his ass, taking a last defiant swig of his coke and a longing look at me.

"For God's sake," he groans, eyeing the gaggle of gigglers cynically. "My butt will be black and blue."

They certainly seem to be taking a prurient interest in our corner of the restaurant, but the objectification of man as sex object seems to be aimed straight at –

“Now THIS, I’m used to,” Jack acknowledges smugly, toasting the women with his glass.

“Connor?”

He turns to me, grinning.

“Hot tub?” I query gently.

“Hot damn!” Connor gloats.

“Hot – “ Jack glowers sullenly and unfortunately for him, silently.

“Dog?” I ask.

“Stuff?” Connor asks.

“Lead,” Jack snarls. “To know you is to want to kill you slowly with a really big gun. BOTH of you.”

“Is this a good time to talk about my tip?” Connor asks brightly.

Jack bares his teeth. “Run.”

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“Romantic assignation for two,” Jack grouches, eyeing our surroundings and me without enthusiasm.

“They have flowers on aisle eleven, we could meet up there,” I snap.

“Did you have to do this NOW?”

“Mrs Lewicki is seventy years old, Jack. I’m not having her wandering the streets in search of cat food at this hour,” I say coldly. “It isn’t safe.”

“Lemme guess. ‘Fluffy’?” Jack sneers.

Nothing about Mrs Lewicki’s cat is fluffy. Nothing. It eats fluffy cats for breakfast. Jack leans against the shelves looking ‘patient’ as I carefully select the most expensive brand and the most exclusive flavours. I sidle around Jack and head for the dairy aisle, Jack right behind me, being offensive without saying a word. “Yoo Hoo,” I mutter defensively. “And Ho-Hos.”

"For the cat?"

"She's old," I excuse. Mrs Lewicki, I mean. Not the cat.

"Sucker," Jack snorts derisively. "If you need me, I'll be over in the produce aisle suggestively cupping kumquats," he leers, "Practice run for later."

Laugh it up, Fly Boy. Those are the ONLY balls you'll be squeezing tonight.

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"Dr Daniel Jackson?"

I'm juggling keys, several phone numbers, only one of which is Connor's and for me, the doggie bottle of Chablis and two straining bags of groceries. Jack had a snack attack of epic proportions which sparked some panic buying on aisle three, and he'll be bringing up the rear with the whipped cream and the Swiss chocolate, just as soon as he's got his precious Explorer parked to his satisfaction. He wants the Daniel Crème Suisse Experience - without the crêpe and Connor - the minute we get through the door. I'm about to become dessert for the first time in my life, and I'm hoping like hell my first reaction isn't to desert. I admit to feeling slightly nervous. The kiss was terrible and Jack's conviction we'll just pick this stuff up as we go along is not one I share. I'm not even touching suck it and see.

"Yessh," I mutter around the keys. A large hand the size and texture of a Virginia ham looms in front of my face and plucks the keys painfully from between my teeth. The large hand belongs to a large man, approximately as broad as he is long, and his face looks not unlike his fist.

"Would you come with us, Doctor?"

I think about this for a moment. Us? Ah. I take a surreptitious peek. As Jack would say, I got movement. From the size of them, it's probably tectonic shift rather than locomotion. "No."

"I'm afraid refusal isn't an option, Doctor."

"Oh." I think about THAT for a moment. Then I drop the groceries and smack the speaker smartly over the head with the doggie bottle, making a break for it before either of the two goons looming up behind me have loomed sufficiently close to hit me back. My feet hightail my willing ass straight around the corner to Jack, the goons lost somewhere in my slipstream.

"JACK!" I holler, fumbling at my jacket pocket for my cell phone.

Jack takes one look behind me, drops his grocery bag and tears up the street towards me, most definitely about to happen to the goons, probably terminally if the look on his face is anything to go by.

I really want to help him, especially when the thuds and the screaming starts, but I've learned the hard way about priorities in combat. It doesn't help either of us if I go back there and we both get our asses kicked and nobody has a clue what happened to us. I have to get help FIRST, or my ass will get kicked and Jack will be the one doing the kicking. Fortunately we have an SGC number on speed dial for dire emergencies like forgotten reference books and - well - kidnapping. I hit the button, turn on my heel and back up behind the Explorer. Jack is briskly kicking one feebly struggling heap on the ground but the other goon is closing in rapidly on me. I can't believe this. He's actually going to chase me around the car. It's bad enough being kidnapped, but do you HAVE to be kidnapped by STUPID people?

"Dr Daniel Jackson," I hiss into the phone. I dodge left as the goon dodges right, and we dance from foot to foot warily.

"Verify your ID, Doctor."

"Budge is a clueless bastard," I sing song rapidly. All the Air Force types have boring numbers for security purposes but where's the fun in that, even if Jack's is the exact longitude and latitude of the place he lost his virginity. Jack's folks really took their eyes off the balls in Key West. Let the boy out of their sight, and he swaggered back a man. I'd rather have visited the Hemingway House myself, but that's just me.

"How can we help, Dr Jackson?"

"I'm reporting a kidnapping outside my home." I fake left again and when the goon follows, dart right a couple of steps, then back. Like dodge ball with - oh dear, with guns. I pick up the pace and hit the deck hard as the goon lunges over the hood of the Explorer toward me.

"Who was the victim?"

"ME!" I yelp and send the phone skittering under Jack's car so the SGC can hear every word of what's happening as the goon slithers all the way over and looms up at me. He's waving the gun. Amateur. He should be pointing it. I lie braced on my hands, seemingly huddled against the car, looking pathetic, until he's standing right on top of me. Really, this guy is stupid. The looming is annoying me too. It is the work of but a moment to kick him the balls so hard he screams and falls down. I jump nimbly to my feet, stamp firmly on his gun hand and kick him neatly under the jaw for good measure. Then I pick up the gun and race back to help Jack.

I can only assume the goon I christened with the Chablis is particularly resistant to chokeholds, because Jack has his thighs locked around the guy's thick neck and is

squeezing hard, grunting with effort as the goon bucks and heaves. It looks like some strange, sadistically combative sexual position which, believe me, he is not going to be trying on me ANY time soon.

“Okay?” Jack gasps. “Gimme.”

I trot around in a wide circle, coming safely up behind Jack to drop the gun into his imperatively outstretched hand. A heartbeat later he has it pressed to the goon’s temple. And a heartbeat after that I have a different gun pressed to mine.

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JACK

“Don’t take it personally, Daniel,” I say gently. “I WAS a Special Ops colonel.” All I get for my trouble is a haughty sniff. “You handled that asshole like a pro,” I praise lavishly, “he’ll have to threaten us standing up for DAYS.” Daniel thaws enough to shoot me a shy little look that makes the roof of my mouth go dry. Not as dry as his, unfortunately. It says a lot about both of us that while I’m trussed up like a chicken, Daniel is the one they gagged. I will be killing the individual who did that the instant my hands are free and the fucker is in my sights, just for the little trickle of blood marring the currently sullen pout. I admit they were driven to gagging Daniel and the goon in question only smacked Daniel AFTER Daniel bit him hard enough to make ME yelp, but still, the asshole laid hands on my Danny, and he IS going to die for it.

Meanwhile, Daniel is loftily ignoring the gag and giving me attitude because while I’ve been tied up in some kind of hawser that looks like it should be mooring something at a dock side, Daniel has merely been handcuffed. I can tell from here he thinks this is insulting and elitist, kind of a professional goon to goon ‘I’m gonna kill you anyway but man you got cojones’ respect kinda deal. As opposed to just being an amateur enthusiast kicking you in them.

We don’t know who these people are, but given Daniel was requested by name, and in his private life he is the kind of man who drags you away from a date to grocery shop for an elderly neighbour and a cat that makes him shudder convulsively every time you mention it, I’m guessing this isn’t personal. Given the IQ around this van, which Daniel probably quadruples all by himself, and is actually making me look pretty good too, I’m guessing these goons are, or maybe were, Marines. If he hadn’t been so ticked off about the handcuffs, I’m sure Daniel wouldn’t have been so hard on them. It’s like shooting fish in a barrel and he really isn’t one to mock the afflicted. Unless he’s ticked off, then the afflicted have to gag him to shut him up.

I’m not sure what to say to Daniel. Torture is NOT, thank Christ, something I’ve had my kids exposed to all that often, and I don’t know how to tell Daniel that the only reason I’m not dead on the sidewalk outside his building is that I’m clearly earmarked for the ‘leverage’ role in the upcoming torture extravaganza. Whatever they have in store for Daniel, he’s going to need all his faculties and probably all of his fingers, which means

there isn't much they can do to him physically, so they'll be doing it to me and making him watch. As for what happens after, well, I'm holding on to the fact Daniel is unique and you don't kill unique. I'm not. Unfortunately, Daniel thinks I am. He thinks my life is worth as much as his. Is worth his. It's not. Not when we're talking market values. I'm only worth what I'm worth to Daniel, what I can be used to make him to do. It is going to hurt him like crap when he realises I am a convenient piece of meat to these people and nothing more. And since the van has just stopped, I'm guessing that's going to be very soon.

The van doors are wrenched open abruptly and someone palpably higher up the food chain peers in. He seems quite taken aback when he sees me, fetchingly attired in my hawser.

"Untie the man so he can walk," he snaps.

There's a certain quality of silence outside the van suggesting the goons aren't in any hurry to do any such fucking stupid and, give me half a chance, fatal thing. I hear some muttering, then the man looks back into the van for a moment, gaping at me incredulously.

"ALL of you?"

There's a little more muttering, even quieter than before.

"He's an ARCHAEOLOGIST."

Way to go, Danny!

The new guy resolves the situation by clambering into the van and pointing his gun at Daniel's head. He stares me down. "You won't make any trouble, will you? Not with my gun at Dr Jackson's head."

Daniel chokes harshly behind the gag and I stiffen. The man immediately stoops to loosen the gag and pull it free. Daniel curls his lip.

"You're not too bright, are you? You people asked for me by NAME. Suddenly, after all this effort, I'm expendable, just so you can get Jack to walk like a good boy? Or maybe you could threaten to shoot JACK if he won't walk like a good boy? I admit I'm new to the torture thing, but how do you escalate from there? If you don't walk, we shoot you. If you don't sit on your chair, we shoot you. If you don't, for example, give us the access code to the top secret underground bunker where the nuclear weapons are stashed, we'll, what, smack you on the nose with a rolled up newspaper and revoke your TV privileges?" Daniel asks witheringly.

The man looks dazed by the eloquent flow of gentle scorn. I almost feel sorry for him. Daniel has a mind like a steel trap, a razor-sharp tongue and more backbone than anyone I

know. These people don't know who they're messing with, and they haven't even gotten to me yet. My name used to mean something in these circles.

Daniel grins at me. "Jack, think you'll make it to the house without killing anyone if they untie you?"

"I'll definitely be killing someone if they don't," I say chattily. "Specifically that dead guy with his gun at your head. That alone gets him bumped straight to the top of my To Kill list." I could KISS Danny. He's grasped rule number one. Control. He's just twisted a situation in which we are basically choiceless into one we're controlling. We aren't, the guy with the gun is, but the guy with the gun has lost sight of that for now. We got the ball and it's up to us not to drop it. "Hey! Dead Guy! You wanna pick up the pace, here? MacGyver starts in fifteen." I scowl at him. "You DO got cable, don't you?"

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I'm cuffed to a chair. Daniel is cuffed more loosely to the chair next to me. We're in a huge, oak panelled office, or maybe library. Daniel is checking out the book titles every time he thinks I'm not looking. Dead Guy is behind the huge oak desk doing his level best to threaten us, but he's a minion and Daniel didn't need a word from me to know the sooner we meet Mr Big the sooner I can threat assess and we can deal, so Daniel is handling the situation in his own inimitable style.

"You don't look ANYTHING like that guy in MacGyver, Jack, so get over it," Daniel snaps.

"Dead ringer," I insist smugly.

"He's got stupid hair."

"So do - oh, yeah, very clever," I snarl. "Smart-ass."

"Bad hair wannabe."

I've probably got seconds to live if the incendiary noises from Dead Guy are anything to go by, but hell, I'm going out in STYLE.

Dead Guy storms out from behind the desk and backhands me, HARD, across the face, snapping my head around. "If there's a beer in it, Dead Guy, I'll turn the other cheek," I say lightly when my ears stop ringing.

"You see, Dr Jackson? If you don't co-operate it won't be you who suffers. It will be Colonel O'Neill." Dead Guy punctuates the threat by belting hell out of my other cheek, so my head snaps towards Daniel. The brief moment I've got to look into Daniel's eyes gives ME pause and he loves ME.

“Aah, I hesitate to point out the flaw in your logic,” Daniel says crisply, “but as I’m not the one you’re hitting, what do I care?”

“You’re breaking your tender heart over my plight,” I point out helpfully, getting another slap for my pains.

“If you say so,” Daniel acknowledges politely.

Dead Guy looks so baffled I almost feel sorry for him. It’s almost impossible to torture someone effectively when you’re relying on psychological torture and the intended victim is merrily debunking every goddamn threat you make. I admit, this is a new one on me, but as the designated punch bag, I’m going with the flow. Every minute Dead Guy is talking to Daniel he isn’t hitting me and that’s pretty much all Daniel can do for me. He’s doing great so – SHIT! Shit! SHIT! That fucking HURT! Seeing STARS, here!

Dead Guy shakes his hand to loosen it up and strolls over to put the TV on. “You wanted cable, O’Neill? I’ll give you cable.” Dead Guy keeps on trucking ‘til he hits one of those godawful evangelical channels. Then he smirks and leaves us.

Ah. The old sleep deprivation ploy. They’ve tuned the TV to something insanely annoying, turned it up and left us. They must have a video camera I can’t see, maybe sound. Every time we nod off, they’ll come back in here and wake us up.

Daniel waits about thirty seconds then sets up a holler that brings Dead Guy back.

“Would you mind turning up the volume? Jack wants to come to Jesus.”

Snarling, Dead Guy tunes the TV to some weird-ass documentary channel.

“Great!” Daniel enthuses, “I missed this when it was on. Would you mind, Dead Guy? You’re blocking my view.” He manages a look of relief quite artistically from what I can see out of an already swelling eye. “I thought you were gonna leave us with Showtime or, God forbid, one of the sports channels running.” Daniel actually manages a shudder.

Sport is what we get when we get Dead Guy gone.

“Sorry, Jack. I tried,” Daniel cringes away from the onscreen - for want of a better word - action.

Fucking CURLING.

“Keep it down, okay?” I hiss. “They’ll have video, could be wired for sound.”

“Are you okay?” Daniel asks tenderly, his face showing the strain suddenly.

"I'm taking comfort from the fact we will never top this as a first date," I say lightly. My face feels like an elephant trod on it and these guys haven't even gotten warmed up yet.

"Are these people military?"

"They were, I don't know what they are now. They want your expertise, that's the only thing we know for sure."

Daniel sags for a moment.

"This is about you, Danny, don't forget that. You can push them a hell of a lot further than I can, they can't hurt you too much if they need you. You're doing great so far, but ease up on the out and out wisecracks. Dead Guy is already lashing out at those, so let's keep him on his toes."

"Keep changing tactics?" Daniel asks intently.

"Exactly. Every minute you keep them talking is a minute they're not beating the ever-living shit out of me." I'm touched by the brisk, emphatic nod. Daniel is most definitely with me. I might wish we were both back at his place making out in a bubble bath, but I actually wouldn't want anybody but Daniel in this with me. Nobody's mind works the way his does.

"And a minute closer to rescue."

"Whadda you care? You're not the one they're hitting," I grin.

"Ja-ack!" Daniel protests. "I was hoping he'd -"

"Hit you instead?" I suggest gently. "They need you, Danny, so they won't do too much damage. They can't replace you if they break you."

"They need you too, for leverage," Daniel whispers fiercely. "That's something I can use against them."

I think it's supposed to work that they use it against him, but he's on a roll here so I let that one pass. "I do not know why it took me so goddamn long to notice -" I mouth 'I love you' at him and he sighs and mouths it back - "I'm a dead ringer for that guy in MacGyver."

"Apart from the hair. And the height. And the lisp."

"LISP?"

"It's sweet."

"Just watch the damn curling."

~~~~~

"Lisp?"

"Jeez, Jack, let it rest, will you?"

"Lisp?"

Daniel shoots me a scorching look. "You have a minor problem pronouncing your sibilants."

"I don't lisp."

"You lisp when you SAY lisp."

"I do not."

"This is not a personal criticism. When we pronounce sibilants, the air passage is narrowed to produce a friction noise. You don't really lisp, Jack, I mean, it's only in the very broadest sense. It's just that you pronounce your sibilants in a narrower, more hissy manner than is the norm," Daniel explains kindly. "And it's really cute, although the rest of you is looking less so by the second."

I match my beloved glare for glare. "I have hissy sibilants?"

Daniel hangs his head abruptly. I think I the little shit just used the word 'adorable' in my hearing. A tad on the trembling side, what with all those suppressed giggles, but recognisable. Like the torture isn't enough? I'm losing all respect here.

The door bangs open abruptly and we have company. A bright new day has broken, and here we have a bright new torturer to greet the dawn with us. They're spoiling us. This one is a tall, cadaver of a man in a Brooks Brothers suit. Going all out for palpable menace, making with the sinister silence, the shark eyes and the slow, deliberate movements. With the knife. He gets in Daniel's face. With the knife.

Daniel sits heroically relaxed, eyeing the guy thoughtfully as the guy leans in and whispers something in his ear. With the knife.

"I spy with my little eye another soon to be very Dead Guy," I singsong.

Daniel grimaces up at New Dead Guy. "No. No, sorry, you pretty much had me until that," he says critically. "You were building up the menace beautifully, shaking in my shoes there, but that last one was a threat too far. If you do that, then I can't do whatever the hell it is you want me to do, and if you back-pedal and say you meant to do that to

Jack, well it's anti-climactic to say the least. Wanna take it from the top, Other Dead Guy?"

Okay, not 'New'. I'll go with the flow. Other Dead Guy opens his mouth -

"What is it with you people, anyway?" Daniel challenges, "Why can't you just ask outright? You're wasting an awful lot of quality kidnap time on amorphous menacing and unspecified threats, and every minute that passes is a minute closer to Jack killing you. I think you should take a time out, re-think your strategy, get back to us when you can offer something a little more creative in the way of persuasion."

Other Dead Guy tries again -

"It's really embarrassing for Jack, you know? Being kidnapped by amateurs. If our positions were reversed, you'd be spilling about the first time you jerked off in junior high right about now."

Crap. Losing it. I'm losing it. Lipping AND giggling. This kidnap has just been one kick in the butt after another for my self-image, although I'm doing better than Other Dead Guy. He looks dazed and helpless. He's not, he's got the knife, but he's not using it and this suggests to me he has ORDERS not to use it. Mr Big must be squeamish, 'cause Other Dead Guy isn't using it on me either.

"I have to say, having seen both of you, I think I prefer Dead Guy. At least his heart was in it. You're actually quite boring. I mean look -" Daniel shrugs at me. "Jack can hardly keep his eyes open, here."

I yawn cavernously, smirking. "Why don't you run along and send in someone with matching shoes?" I drawl. Other Dead Guy doesn't actually look down but I think I have a moral victory there, particularly when the idiot looks helplessly up right at the now no longer hidden camera.

"This is fucking IMPOSSIBLE," he growls at Daniel. "If it was up to ME, I'd be cutting your boyfriend's fingers off right now."

"Boyfriend?" Daniel and I snap indignantly as one.

"BOYFRIEND?" The horrified howl of betrayal draws all eyes to the door.

"Mr Big?" I ask incredulously.

Mr Big stiffens to his full height, which in his case isn't saying much.

"Dr Jackson!" Mr Big hovers protectively at Daniel's side, shooting me hateful looks. If I had a moustache, I'd twirl it.

"Arthur," Daniel acknowledges, wincing.

"You KNOW this guy?" I demand.

"Arthur was a student when I was at the Oriental Institute," Daniel sighs. "He already had a doctorate in complex systems architecture. He audited my courses for fun."

"Fun?" I ask, disbelieving. Arthur has desperate psycho stalker oozing from every sweaty pore. Computer geek. I can TELL. He isn't wearing glasses with one arm taped on, but he SHOULD, and that's WITH the Armani threads. "Don't tell me. You thought the student/faculty fraternisation rules were a bastard too, right?" I ask Arthur wearily.

"Dr Jackson and this - this - lummo?" Arthur sputters, "They're NOT. No - no way!"

Other Dead Guy is perversely starting to enjoy himself. He glances to me. "I get paid regardless," he mouths, shrugging. I shrug back. Fair enough. "They friggin' ARE," he snaps at Arthur. "The good doctor here could get ARRESTED for talking about hockey like that. The colonel here was feeling NO pain, a couple of my guys had to lie down after, and I know I'll never look at my stick in the same way as long as I live."

"Which won't be all that long," I say lightly as Daniel blushes to the roots of his hair. This is what we get for having aural sex in a room with a video view. I merely asked Daniel to explain to me the difference between simile and metaphor, and he chose to give me hockey as a metaphor for doing it. What's the problem? It's not like we weren't up already. And wide awake.

Arthur looks sorrowfully at Daniel. "How could you? I'm WAY smarter than him."

"Yeah? Well? I'm TALLER," I snap. Arthur gasps. I sneer at him. And I'm prettier too. I just hope I'm not about to get deader. "I'm sorry I was short with you. That was really low. I'd like to think I was above stooping to your level."

Daniel scowls into Arthur's apoplectic eyes. "If you hurt him I would NEVER forgive you," he says emphatically. "EVER."

"Never ever ever. With bells on." Other Dead Guy scowls at me. I ignore him. I've got bruises. I'm entitled to the attitude. "Cut to the chase, Arty."

"Doctor Simmons to YOU."

"Sure thing, Arty," I say equably.

"NEVER," Daniel snaps. "Just tell us what you want, Arthur."

"I have an artefact," Arthur nods to Other Dead Guy and he swaggers out of the room. Arthur sits behind the desk, dividing his time between openly drooling over Daniel and eyeing me with murder in mind.

"This geek was a student?" I ask Daniel casually.

"He had no aptitude for the subject at all. I could never understand why he kept on coming to class. I had to spend so much time going over the basics again and again it was affecting my own research. I went to the Dean about it, but Arthur had donated a lot of money to the research programme - "

"No. Don't tell me. Let me guess?" I drawl. "His research topic of choice being the writing systems of the earliest Egyptian dynasties, which by some bizarre coincidence just happened to be the topic of your second doctoral dissertation."

Daniel nods reluctantly. "There was even funding for fieldwork, but given the conditions attached, I raised the money myself."

"Sharing your sleeping bag? Naked translation?" I lick my lips lasciviously. "Pith helmet?"

"Ja-ack," Daniel blushes again. "Robert didn't like Arthur. In fact he - "

"Grasped this idiot was trying to get into your pants, dragged him outside and beat the shit out of him?" I smile sweetly at Arty. I'm glad Daniel is the loving and forgiving type or Rothman's would be one name I'd never dare to mention. Ever. I never liked Rothman. It was petty, I know, but I was jealous and I was not the only one. Carter's nose was thoroughly out of joint too, and Teal's eyebrow went into overdrive whenever Rothman got within ten feet of him. Pathetic, huh? We hated the fact Daniel was two timing us with someone who knew what he was talking about at the time. WITHOUT having to look it up.

Daniel's hot denial falters. "Actually, I do remember him hollering something about the Dean being a pimp with a PhD, but he refused to elaborate when I asked him about it."

He did? Rothman? I was just yanking Arty's chain with that crack. Rothman thought people were 'too recent', he wouldn't have picked up on the subtext any more than Daniel did, even subtext as frigging blatant as Arty's, unless - "What the hell did you do?" I glare at Arty. "ASK Rothman to help you get in Daniel's pants when the bribery didn't get it done?" I demand. He couldn't have. Arty flushes and looks anywhere but at Daniel. Arty - He did! He fucking did just that. I gape at the loser, incredulous. I don't BELIEVE it. "Oh, ya DIDN'T!" I shake my head at Arty. That's - Jeez, that's SAD. "Christ, you must have been desperate," I say pityingly.

Daniel looks at Arty, shocked to his cotton socks. Bless. Arty seems to have difficulty meeting Daniel's eyes.

All in all, I'm taken aback when Other Dead Guy turns up with a box he's carrying as if it's going to go off in his face like a grenade. He slides it onto the desk and makes like a tree.

"Shit. I take it all back, Arty," I say brightly as Arty opens the box and reverently places a velvet-covered something on the desk top. "Here I was thinking you were just some pathetically obsessed psycho stalker wanting Danny to get your rocks off and you had a -" Arty whips off the velvet with a flourish, " - paperweight the whole damn time." SHIT. Where the HELL did he get THAT fucker from? And here's me without my Geiger counter. We left the only one that works back with those giant aliens, right? That skull was a one shot deal, right? This IS a paperweight? RIGHT? All these questions and more I can't ask and Daniel can't answer.

"What's the provenance of this artefact?" Daniel snaps.

Er - what I said.

"It was found on a dig in Belize," Arty says dreamily. "I know Dr Ballard was the expert on this thing, but he's not YOU."

He's not here, either.

Arty's eyes are glowing with admiration and the sort of love you can expect between ten year old girls and the eight by ten glossies of whichever 'one hit wonder' they've got plastered to the bedroom wall that week. I think I'm gonna throw up.

"They can do wonders with cubic zirconia these days," I admire.

"This," Arty fondles his precious find, but he's thinking of Daniel, I can tell from the drooling, "is identical to the Ballard skull in the Smithsonian. It MUST have the same properties as that skull."

Daniel turns to me, flushed and guilty. "Jack? Is this a good time to tell you Arthur believed implicitly in my theory the pyramids were built by aliens?"

We are SO screwed.

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DANIEL

"I got a certifiably crazed comedic kidnapper with a crush, a crystal skull, and an ET fetish," Jack bitches. "I could die from the embarrassment alone."

“At least we’re in more salubrious surroundings,” I suggest brightly. I think I’m alone in that assessment. “You didn’t stop bitching about that chair the whole time you were in it, Jack. The whole night.” When he wasn’t bitching about his hissy sibilants.

“Are you suggesting that by being chained to the wall in a frankly worrying bedroom I have traded up in ANY way?” Jack demands crisply.

“I got a bed out of it.” My little joke falls flat as Jack’s face freezes.

“That is one of the most worrying things about this room. The only thing it’s got going for it is that it doesn’t have a frigging camera.” Jack says flatly. “And that in itself is worrying.”

I sigh and prop my chin on my hands. With only my ankle chained, I can move pretty freely around this large, comfortable bed, the one that has Jack so freaked, but he’s chained flat to the wall by both wrists and he is Not Happy. “Why?” Jack shoots me a look so old-fashioned it’s practically Neolithic.

“If I had a tush like Arty’s I wouldn’t be waving it for the camera either,” Jack growls.

“Oh? OH! You think Arthur wants to – here – but – but YOU’RE here!” Jack looks grim. “While you – while you WATCH?” Jack looks even grimmer. Aah, Jeez. I was freaked enough at the prospect of getting naked and sweaty with Jack and the whipped cream, and I happen to be in love with Jack. I can’t begin to comprehend Arthur in that context.

“Which reminds me. What exactly were you up to all alone with Arty this morning? We talking naked archaeologist in pith helmet fetish here?”

“I merely examined the skull. Arthur was a perfect gentleman throughout.” Jack radiates scepticism from every pore. I sigh. Arthur was too busy angsting over the fact I won’t be wearing white at the wedding to molest me. I didn’t correct his misconception in any way. In fact, I gave him the distinct impression Jack and I were fucking like bunnies every chance we got. “I’ve examined the skull THOROUGHLY, Jack,” I insist, deciding to steer clear of deep conversational waters for a while. Jack has been through enough already, and there’s worse to come. “It may look similar to the skull Nick found, but that’s as far as it goes. It’s almost flawlessly manufactured, but it isn’t carved from a single piece of crystal. It is just a ‘paperweight’. And it almost certainly isn’t from Belize. Maybe Taiwan,” I joke. It falls flat. “Whoever sold Arthur that bill of goods took him for a ride. Some con artist found out about his obsession, cooked up some tale about a lost temple, and sold him that paperweight for more money than he’ll ever admit to paying.”

“While I sincerely hope that Arty got taken for a goddamn FORTUNE, that information is of no material assistance in this situation whatsoever,” Jack snaps. “We’d be better off if the goddamn thing did work, since we don’t have any way out of here and Arty has his little heart set on transporting off to La La Land with the linguist of my dreams. The guy is WHACKO.”

"We can think of a way to escape," I suggest. Even if the skull was like the one Nick discovered, it wouldn't do us any good. The conduit only worked between the temple in Belize and the one on P7X-377. It just seems petty to point this out when Jack is wallowing in being pissed off at life, the universe and me.

Jack glowers at me. "I'm chained to the goddamn wall, here, Daniel, and don't tell me it's coincidence YOU'RE chained to the bed. Neither of us is going anywhere."

He mutters something I don't quite catch. "What was that? Something about coming?"

"It was nothing."

"But - "

"It Was Nothing."

"You're obsessing, Jack. I don't believe Arthur would - not while YOU were - not for a second, but I CAN use his attraction against him. I could - "

"No."

"But - "

"NO."

"If he had the hots for you, you'd do it," I complain.

Jack ignores the real issue, which of course is HIM, and launches into another diatribe about my tactical skills. Or lack thereof. He won't admit that he's freaked because he wanted our first date to end in hot sex, and there's a slight - a minute - possibility it will end in sex, just not with him. I'm not suggesting I actually sleep with Arthur, just make encouraging noises, get him alone and bop him one. Jack has been very insulting about my self-defence skills, mostly because he's totally fixated on the idea that Arthur will boff me before I can bop him. Jack won't admit to that either.

"I just need a few minutes with the phone, Jack," I sigh. "Long enough to reach the SGC and allow George to trace the call and our location."

He can't actually argue with the logic of that, but he can sit there giving me hell. Which he is what he's been doing for the past two hours. Arthur won't allow anybody to lay a finger on me - except him, obviously - and was in fact quite cross with the goon who hit me, and is docking some of his pay in consequence. I won't allow Arthur to allow the goons to hit Jack again, even though they apparently had a schedule drawn up and are quite put out they've been denied their payback privileges. I've examined the skull as best I can without access to Sam's toys and I'm currently making Arthur sweat for the results.

We've been fed and watered, nobody is actively hitting us and Jack has received some cursory first aid at my insistence. Things could be worse. I just have to drag Jack's mind away from all the ways he's obsessing on them being worse. I can TAKE Arthur. I know I can. I'm six inches taller than he is for a start, even though Jack is pretty sure I'm lighter. He made a few snide comments about Teal'c being lighter too, but that's just classic displacement activity, designed to throw me off the scent of Jack's irrational response to the situation.

"You're jealous," I accuse.

"Of ARTY? That's INSULTING," Jack denies, superbly disdainful.

"And true. You've always been this way."

"I have not."

"You have. You wanted to exterminate the Touched with extreme prejudice for - er - touching. You hated Hathor with unreasoning, unwavering passion. You refused to accept the technology was the ONLY thing Omac laid on me. You loathed Shyla from the moment you laid eyes on her. Ke'ra INFURIATED you even when you thought she WAS Ke'ra." I take a deep breath and plunge on. "You gave Zipacna and Anise hell just for having the temerity to be on the same planet as me. I'm not even STARTING on the whole Unas thing; those images kept me awake for a WEEK the first time you sidled up to me and started asking how we passed the time in the cave. 'Did he show you his etchings?' Prick." I glare at Jack. "I still can't believe I was dumb enough to say yes to that one!"

"Sucker." Jack winks at me. "That stinky monster thought you were completely frigging edible and you can't deny it."

"Not the way you mean!" And I think we're wandering off on a tangent, which is one of Jack's specialities. "I had to endure frenzied interrogation over both Sarah AND Steven, and poor Paul knew going in he wasn't likely to survive if he couldn't outrun you," I say haughtily. "Bringing us right up to date we have Connor the alleged waiter, and the Colorado tradition of hot-tubbing, in which, according to you, it is apparently accepted practice to drown the owner of the tub." Another annoying thought occurs. "And while we're on the subject, you OBSESSED over my safety in Hadante AND on Netu!"

Jack glowers sullenly at me. "Crap!"

"Your possessiveness borders on the pathological, Jack, and that's before I'm even sleeping with you." I glower right back at him. "And actually, thinking about the Touched virus, I don't believe for a SECOND you were threatened by my going to see Sam in the Infirmary, not when you'd already had your chance to propagate the species in the gear-up room and you fought her off. Biological imperative, my ass! In fact, the more I think about it, the more certain I am my ass WAS the imperative."

Jack's face is twitching.

I roll peevishly onto my back. "You didn't like Ra either."

"Anything else?" Jack asks unsteadily, snorting with laughter.

"Yes," I murmur silkily, "Don't think for a second I don't know what's going on between you and Thor."

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This wasn't quite what I intended. Terrace. Plaid blanket. Wicker basket. Smoked salmon. Champagne. Strawberries and cream. Warm sunshine. Babbling brook. Carefully cultivated English style cottage garden. Armed goons. Arthur's hand on my thigh. And the cell phone.

I'm tolerating the hand on my thigh and Arthur wheezing over me with the strawberries because it has the goons backed off to a respectful distance and the cell phone is in my sights. I'm aware of one or two sneakily sympathetic looks from the goon who put the gun to my head, even though he's the one I later bit, and I really hope Arthur didn't hear that crack about Beauty and the Beast. He's touchy about me and Jack as it is, without his own thugs dissing him.

Jack is pathologically obsessive about me, and, God help me, I think it's cute.

Arthur is a little scary. I keep shuddering away from the idea that Arthur scoured the globe for some astonishing, irresistible alien-related find and gift-wrapped it in a kidnap because he couldn't stand the thought I might still say no. I've tried to tell him as gently as possible that a gun to the head is no foundation for a lasting relationship, but he's not hearing me. I think it's my thighs. They had a similar effect on Jack when we were in La Crêperie last night, and he couldn't keep his hands off them either. They're helping me now, because the goons are studiously averting their eyes from the sight of Arthur molesting me, and Arthur is so far gone he hasn't even noticed I've edged up to the basket and eased the phone into a convenient fold of the blanket by my hip. I've surreptitiously programmed in the number, one careful digit at a time, the volume is on maximum and I just need to hit send. There's some ambient noise and given the wheezing and my thighs and all, I'm sure Arthur didn't hear the tinny greeting from the phone.

Now I just have to work out how to get 'Dr Daniel Jackson', 'Arthur Simmons', and as much information about our location as possible into the conversation. I think I may need to let Arthur's hand roam into an area Jack ordered me to keep off-limits on pain of, well, words failed him for what the pain would actually be, but I grasped it would be pretty painful indeed.

"I wish I'd given you more credit for accepting my theories about aliens building the pyramids," I begin. My theory wasn't any such thing, but even Sam can't keep track, so I've given up correcting people. "I regret I didn't sufficiently appreciate that Dr Arthur

Simmons believed that I, Dr Daniel Jackson, was correct.” I shamelessly flex my thigh right in Arthur’s face just to get past the awkwardness of that sentence. The ‘doctor’ will help narrow down the computer search. “I was perhaps a little harsh in rejecting the support of someone who had technically been one of my students at the Institute.” Arthur’s name will definitely be on the Institute’s student database.

“I would have FULLY funded your research, Daniel,” Arthur assures me earnestly, copping another feel hard enough to bruise. “I would never have made you give up your work just to be with me. You would never – you WILL never have to worry about funding again. I’ll be with you,” he breathes huskily. “I’m HERE for you. Right here.”

Jack is going to kill me right after he kills Arthur.

“I was fighting the odds, Arthur,” I say sadly. “I should have known no one would believe me. Budge is a clueless bastard, but he’s still the recognised authority on Egyptology.” It doesn’t hurt to verify, even though they’ve probably been scouring the airwaves since my first distress call. “I don’t know why they keep reprinting him.” This is true.

“He’s a fool,” Arthur assures me passionately.

“I’m sorry about the crystal skull, Arthur. It won’t do what my grandfather claimed it would,” I say sympathetically. “You do know he was never able to prove his claims, never able to recreate the ‘teleportation’ in a controlled environment? This skull is beautiful and rare,” and a FAKE, “but it isn’t like the Ballard skull in the Smithsonian. It wasn’t carved from a single crystal. I could have told you that if you’d just asked me. You didn’t need to kidnap me and Colonel O’Neill.”

I slip my hand cautiously over Arthur’s. He’s roaming far and wide here, and I still need more information for the folks back home. George will be beating every bush by now, looking for any property registered to Arthur Simmons, but Arthur is a very rich guy. He came from money if I remember correctly, and he’s made a lot more. “This is a beautiful spot, Arthur. It just seems wrong to be out here looking at all this pastoral splendour when Jack is chained to the wall in the bedroom.” I sigh and look pensive. “The view is nicer from out here on the terrace than it is from the second floor. The terrace is south facing, and the bedroom faces East. The estate is lovely, though, whichever direction you look in. And so peaceful. I can’t hear any traffic noise at all.”

“You like it here, Daniel?” Arthur asks eagerly.

“Oh, yes. I couldn’t make out the architectural detailing of the house last night, what with being handcuffed and gagged in the back of the van and all, but the Gothic architecture, and particularly the delicacy of the stone tracing, is stunning. So few true Gothic stone mansions were built in this country. They were truly the preserve of the rich, since the construction required the services of a stone mason. Was this your parents’ house?” I ask casually. I don’t need to ask him for the address. Five minutes after Sam hears the name

'Arthur Simmons' and with the information I've given her to narrow down the search to the correct Arthur Simmons, she could probably tell what colour underwear he has on. I just need to narrow the search a little further so they come HERE. First. If the SGC have to kick down the door of every property Arthur owns, this could take a while. And it may be cowardly of me, but I don't want to be forced to find out the colour of Arthur's underwear first hand.

Arthur nods. "This house was always my favourite."

"Does it have a name?" I prompt. "It looks like a house with a name to me," I praise.

"Alnwick House," Arthur admits shyly, inquisitive fingers heading purposefully for where the sun don't shine. I pin his hand flat to my thigh and can't decide whether things get better or worse for me when he lifts my hand to his lips and licks it in a manner which reminds me irresistibly of Mrs Lewicki's cat.

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Jack is chained to the wall so he can't pounce on me physically, and the wait until he's sure the guards are out of earshot almost kills him.

"Well? Well? Did the little prick touch you?" Jack snarls.

"No. Just his hands." Best not to mention the lips or the tongue.

Jack growls, a low, menacing rumble deep in his chest.

"Robert was right," I observe dispassionately. "The Dean was a pimp with a PhD. I was able to keep the line open to the SGC long enough to pass on Arthur's name, some specifics about him being a doctor and an ex student of mine, and some stuff about our location, like the name of the house and a description. That should be enough, right?"

"That's enough," Jack agrees curtly. "You did good."

"So now we wait for rescue?"

"I hope."

"Arthur needs psychiatric help," I sigh.

"Ya think?" Jack asks scornfully. "He's completely frigging whacko. You can leave that stuff to the general. How about that place Nick was in? The hospital in Oregon? God knows, they're used to dealing with this particular obsession. Crystal skulls and aliens, and that's not even touching the whole stalker thing."

Jack looks edgy and depressed. "I'm sorry you're having to sit here tamely, waiting to be rescued," I sympathise.

"Not as sorry as you will be," Jack grins suddenly.

"You're right! Dammit, I dropped Connor's phone number. No hot tub!"

"Bummer. I got a bath tub," Jack offers, grinning.

"Duck?"

"Squeaky."

"Ferrari?"

"Better. Four wheel drive for that quality 'making out in trees' experience."

"Great ass?"

"Nine out of ten housewives prefer it," Jack gloats.

"I lost those phone numbers too," I sniff.

"We won't have long to wait," Jack says calmly. "We weren't driven for more than a couple of hours away from the Springs, and Hammond won't hesitate to scramble choppers to get here quicker."

"I remembered to say how many goons there were. The four who jumped us, Dead Guy, Other Dead Guy and Arthur."

"That's good," Jack praises. Then he looks at me seriously. "What's bothering you?"

"It's just - the whole thing is so stupid, Jack. I don't want our friends put at risk for these people. The goons did everything wrong and I don't want - I just don't want anyone to die here. Including them."

"Nobody has to die, Daniel," Jack says soothingly. "These guys were hamstrung by the fact the guy paying them has a crush on you the size of the planet. They know how the game is played, they just weren't allowed to play it. They're not gonna panic and do anything stupid, and our guys certainly aren't. Hell, if I saw Hammond swooping out of the sky screaming 'Yee Haw!' I'd quit on the spot myself. No scarier sight than Hammond in his cammos."

"I thought you were more scared of Janet?"

"I'm not scared of Janet Fraiser. She's a pixie with a stethoscope and a Napoleon Complex."

"She's a 'pixie' with a temper, a gun, and a physical with your name on it, and I'm going to tell her you said that," I say gently. "But that won't bother you because you aren't scared of her, are you?"

"Can we get back to the point, here?" Jack snaps, ignoring deliberate provocation, mostly because he is scared of Janet.

"You think these guys will surrender?" I ask hopefully.

"Actually, I'm pretty sure they'll haul ass the minute they hear the choppers. They're not gonna go to jail for Arty Simmons and they sure as shit won't die for him," Jack says confidently.

"Yeah?"

Jack's smile lights his face. "Yeah."

"What about Arthur?"

"I think - you can take Arty."

"Oh." Jack obviously thinks Arthur thinks I'm worth going to a psychiatric institute for.

"Have I mentioned how well you've handled all of this? If not, I'm doin' it now," Jack praises his boots.

"Do you own any shoes?" I ask curiously, eyeing the boots.

"What? I'm going for the tender moment, here," Jack bridles indignantly, "You gotta pick now to discuss footwear?"

"You only seem to wear boots and sneakers. Do you own any shoes?" I persist.

"You wear plaid shirts, so I wouldn't aspire to any sartorial opinions if I were you."

"What?" I snap. "At least I own shoes!"

"Well, whoop de doo! You also own a Volvo." Jack scowls at me. "A BEIGE Volvo. What is it with that? You not only drive the most boring car on the face of the Earth, you have to go the whole hog and have the most boring colour too?"

"I'm not compensating for anything," I murmur dulcetly.

"Excuse me?" Jack asks crisply.

"I drive a beige Volvo because I do not need my car to do my talking for me."

"What, exactly, is that supposed to mean?"

"You know what it means."

"Maybe, but I want to know what YOU mean. Define 'compensating' as it pertains to my car."

"It's a dick with four wheel drive."

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"Better, kid?"

"Better," I agree, chin once more propped on my hands and Jack's soft eyes fixed on mine.

"Laughing yourself sick is better than crying like a baby, trust me on that. I've done both." Jack freezes suddenly, lifting his head, listening intently.

"They're coming?"

Jack nods sharply. "You. Over the side. Cover. Now."

We've argued back and forth about this, but the 'colonel' is adamant and proving we can't work together as lovers while the lover part is still a technicality isn't at the top of my priority list, so I'm slithering to take cover behind the bed with as much good grace as I can muster while Jack has to just sit there right in the line of fire. I'm trying not to think about sitting ducks or fish in barrels or – he'll be fine. Fine. I'm also not mentioning the thing Jack hasn't been mentioning, which is that I'm the civilian and therefore the hostage of choice, and not just because of Arthur.

The roar of rotor blades fills the air, followed by window after window shattering. Jack nods approvingly. They're not wasting any time landing, just rappelling straight down and in through the windows as the helicopters hover above the house. Moments later desultory shots ring out.

"Sporadic small arms fire," Jack snaps. "I'm guessing we're using CS gas. Drive the goons out where they can be picked off. Er – surrender. You know what I mean."

"I do indeed." He means picked off.

I hear footsteps pounding along the hallway towards us. Jack stiffens.

"That's not Carter unless she's put on weight, and it's not Teal'c unless he's lost a few pounds, so I'm guessing we're about to be in the shit here, Danny. Heads up."

"Down." He says we, but I'm guessing he means me.

The door slams back on its hinges.

"Other Dead Guy," Jack acknowledges coldly.

"Rise and shine, Doc, going for a little drive, just you - " I feel the bed jerk hard and the next moment Other Dead Guy is straddling me, wrenching at the lock on my ankle - "and me. And if you give me any shit, I WILL shoot your boyfriend."

"Just get the fuck out of here," Jack hollers. "Leave Daniel."

"No can do," Other Dead Guy snaps, yanking me to my feet, up on to the bed and over.

Guess they've had enough experience of Jack not to risk getting anywhere near him, chained to the wall or not.

"You're DEAD you FUCKER! You HEAR me!" Jack rages as Other Dead Guy drags me away from him. "DEAD!"

"Got your hands full there, Doc."

So do you, pal. I'm sick to death of everyone assuming that just because I'm an archaeologist I'm totally helpless in these situations. I may not be Jack or - or even Janet, but I can take care of myself, and I plan to. Other Dead Guy is hauling me away from the fighting at the front of the house, towards what I presume are the kitchen stairs. Like George would have left the back door open? Like I said, these people are STUPID. I'm not exactly assisting in my own kidnap here, in fact I'm letting myself flop in Other Dead Guy's arms so he's almost carrying me along. Progress is so slow I can still hear Jack bellowing ever more outrageous death threats and demotion threats if Sam doesn't hurry the fuck up with the keys.

"Keep this up and I may decide you're more trouble than you're worth," Other Dead Guy snarls.

"More trouble than you went to, to fetch me in the first place?" I ask chattily. "You're right. I'm sure the general will just LET you stroll out the back door, no harm no foul. No hostage, no frigging chance," I sneer.

"You're a mouthy little fuck. You and O'Neill were made for each other."

A truer word was never spoken and we're coming to the stairs, which from the looks of things have a blind turn, which means that gun at my temple will have to be pointed

down the stairs and away from me while Other Dead Guy checks it out. Which means that blind turn is the perfect place to slam this bastard against the wall with everything I've got. We stumble down the stairs together, awkwardly, since I'm doing my best to be a dead weight, make him sweat on that turn, so the pistol will be swinging out and away the moment we reach it. Any moment, any moment, any - NOW. As the gun swings out I throw my weight forward, feel his one-armed grip slip a little, instinctively, we're on stairs here, drive my forearm hard into his gun hand, pin it against the wall as I ram my elbow deep into his solar plexus. Hear the whoosh of expelled air with grim satisfaction, breaking the slackened grip to stumble down a few steps, turn and punch him in the balls as hard as I can. He jerks forward, howling, which is the perfect time for my knee to meet 'n' greet his face. Not exactly out, but most definitely down, so I snatch up the gun and bolt up the stairs three at a time to get back to Jack, who looks anything but gratified to see me.

"Jack!"

"What the hell!"

"Thanks," I snap, blatantly eyeing the pistol and tugging speculatively on the chains. I won't, but he doesn't know that. In fact, he thinks I'm going to.

"Daniel! Sir!"

"CARTER!" Jack eyes me and the pistol and my thoughtful tugging on the slack in the chains with visible alarm. "HURRY!"

"DanielJackson! O'Neill!"

"Easy, Danny, easy," Jack soothes, "Just put the gun DOWN."

So I'm not very nice. So sue me.

"Daniel!"

Jack stiffens alarmingly. "DAVIS?" he snarls. "Sonova - "

Jack has to choke the tirade down as we're interrupted by a very welcome and very loud chorus of relieved 'Daniels' and a stampede of booted feet. Sam's bearhug knocks me on my ass so hard she's having to hold me up.

"Daniel! I was so worried!" she murmurs into my shoulder. I don't even flinch from the MP5 propped against my other shoulder, though a distressed bleat from Jack has 'Major Carter' back with us and backing off from strangulation range. Just.

"DanielJackson! Are you injured? I have caught this one. He is insane. He was alternately cajoling and threatening the crystal skull to take him away from this

madhouse," Teal'c has a somewhat battered Arthur dangling from his grip. "The irony did not escape me."

"He needs help, Teal'c, he's sick," I say at once. "Delusional."

"Shoot him."

Everyone glares at Jack.

"What?" he gives a fetching little shrug of his chains.

"Let me help you up, Daniel," Paul says warmly, suiting actions to words, he and Sam taking a hand each. Jack's freezing disapproval suggests he thinks they fuss for an unnecessarily long time once I'm up, but I quite like it. I beam at all my friends. Janet is tsk'ing and sighing over Jack's rakishly battered face, Sam and Paul are hovering solicitously, firing questions they aren't giving me time to answer, Teal'c is tying up Arthur and George is storming in through the door, very definitely in full cammos, 'Yee Haw!' written all over him. He strides over and clasps me warmly on the shoulder.

"Dr Jackson. GOOD to have you back with us, son. Hell of a job, there. Well done."

"Am I in the ROOM here? Is ANYBODY going to ask how I am?" Jack complains bitterly.

"Colonel. I see it takes more than a little kidnapping to sweeten your temper," George greets Jack jovially.

"Ah, you know me. Take a lickin' and keep on tickin'. I can take a lot more than THEY could dish out," Jack brags complacently. "OW! Jeez!" he howls, glaring balefully at Janet.

"Hold still!"

"Daniel," a small voice calls.

"What is it, Arthur?" I ask him gently.

"Dump that arrogant asshole, Daniel, please," Arthur pleads tearfully. "I don't care how big his stick is, or what he thinks he can do with your puck, he's no good for you."

"Janet, it isn't kind to leave the poor man suffering like that," Jack emotes nobly into the paralysed silence, "Sedate the shit out of that whacko, and get back to me."

Janet gives Jack a long, steady look that doesn't bode well for his next physical, but fortunately, her medical assessment concurs with Jack's re the whacko thing, though not the precise terminology, and she duly sedates Arthur.

“Colonel?” George asks coolly.

“Just taking Daniel through one or two of the finer points of hockey, Sir, just to while away a few of those quality sleep deprivation hours,” Jack says plausibly, radiating ‘hail-fellow-well-met, nothing to ask, nothing to tell, just move it right along, Sir’ dishonesty from every pore.

“I’m sure the tape will verify that,” George beams at Jack with gentle malice.

“Tape?”

“The building is secure, we have seven prisoners and no casualties on our side. I suggest we wind this up and take it back to the SGC,” George ushers everybody out, including Teal’c, who’s carrying Arthur, then he follows. We stroll down the hallway companionably, Sam and Paul on either side of me.

“VERY funny!” Jack hollers. “Will SOMEBODY get me OUT of these things?”

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JACK

“I didn’t even know Volvo made a convertible,” I admit chattily. “And ‘beige’ was harsh. More of a grey.” That doesn’t seem to help. I try to think of one single occasion on which I’ve let Daniel drive me anywhere, and the only answer I can come up with is ‘nuts’.

“Nice car.” It is. Surprisingly sporty and turbo charged. Even with the top down the car is amazingly quiet. I think this classy little number cost a shit load more than my Explorer.

Daniel is right. He doesn’t need his car to do his talking for him, mostly because Daniel looks fabulous in his sunglasses and the grey turtleneck ribbed sweater making his huge eyes shine so incredibly blue, and I couldn’t get away with jeans THAT tight when I WAS his age, let alone white jeans.

I look like hell and I know it. Can’t even blame the bruises dotted here and there. Some days I look like I’ve lived every single day of my forty five years, and today is one of them. I look lived IN; every grey hair, line and wrinkle thrown into harsh relief by the bright sunshine that makes Daniel looks sinfully good. Who am I kidding here? The genius is drop-dead gorgeous.

“How are you feeling?” Daniel asks softly, shooting me an anxious look.

“A full twenty-four hours of rest in the Infirmary did me the world of good,” I say sourly. “I swear, Janet slipped me a Mickey somehow.”

"I checked in on you, over and over, but Janet was starting to eye me with that stress counselling look she gets, you know the one. I love you but - " Daniel shrugs, embarrassed.

I pat his knee gently, touched by the love thing, especially on a day when I look how I feel. "I don't blame you for bolting, Daniel. This new guy is into aromatherapy from what I hear."

"Essential oils and massage."

"Massage?" I snap, stiffening.

"Ja-ack," Daniel warns.

"I've no objection to a little oiling, a little massaging, not between two consenting adults, and just so long as we don't come out the other end smelling like flowers," I offer broad-mindedly. It occurred to me that Daniel, being the sensitive, in touch with his feelings type, might actually be into this stuff. He can be into anything he likes, provided he's into it with me. "You may need the massage. First chance I get, I'm teaching you to skate."

"What? Um, why?"

"Back there in the tree. At the start of this date. You said you'd never been on skates." I want to ask why, but suspect the answer may be something like foster parents don't have that much money to waste on the new kid on the block, and the kid probably asked for books with every spare dime he was offered, so he never got around to skates. Had to have a bike though. Every kid has a bike. "You like riding bikes?"

"Meg had a bike. When I was ten or so. She used to sit me on the crossbar and pedal all over the neighbourhood. It was fun. She had no fear. Loved to freewheel down hills. It was one of her life's ambitions to get a speeding ticket on that bike, but she never made it," Daniel grins.

So I can add a bike to the skates I'm getting for him. I want to ask more about 'Meg' but instinct tells me not to push. To be honest, nobody who knows Daniel has a frigging CLUE why he was never adopted. Why only foster parents? Daniel is the original low maintenance guy, and he learned that way back, learned to hit the ground running. Learned to threat assess and get along with anybody and never say anything but 'fine' when you ask him how he is. Being clever and liking books are NOT sins before God, not then and certainly not now. I just have to accept that this amazing guy who loves me comes with his own library. I'll get some shelves built in the spare room and once he's spread out and made himself at home, then we can start poking through the emotional baggage.

"We need to go to the bookstore," Daniel announces.

"We do?"

"We need a book."

"What the hell for?"

"You just want to hold hands and cuddle in bed tonight, that's fine by me. I was hoping for some sex, though," Daniel says crisply.

"I can say with the fullest confidence your hopes will be fulfilled," I assure him firmly. "As often as I can manage."

"Only if we know what we're doing."

"Just put your lips together and blow," I say facetiously. "You've never been with a guy?"

"Neither have you!"

"That was a question, Daniel, not an accusation," I say patiently.

"Oh. Okay. We still need the book."

"A how to manual?"

"Exactly."

I sigh as Daniel hangs a right when he should have taken the left to get us to his place. This route will eventually take us to Pikes Peak Avenue and - "Beth Anne's, right? Is that WISE?" She only supplies the base with most of Daniel's books, the transactions completed with requisitions and invoices I sign. Now I have to stroll in there and buy a book - or knowing Daniel's thorough approach to research, books plural - all with graphic adult content. Even the least suspecting clerk would figure out what we had in mind. Two nervously sweating guys, gay sex manuals - you don't have to be a Jackson or a Carter or even an O'Neill to figure that one out. And given one of the nervous guys is young, sweet, drop-dead gorgeous and probably making with the big blue eyes, while the other one isn't, guess which one will be coming off as the pushy pervert-come-sugar-daddy in the relationship? Oh, joy.

I'm still thinking about the joy as Daniel parks the Volvo and we take the short stroll around the corner to the bookstore. He's walking so close to me I feel the heat of his arm against mine, and occasionally the brush of a thigh. I'm getting a little fixated on the thighs. And the jeans. If I gotta get books to get in those pants, I'll buy every book they got and a goddamn bookcase to put them on.

Daniel's face is brightening up. He LOVES books and he loves bookstores. He loves to read, gets completely lost between the covers. We'll see what we can do about broadening

his repertoire, covers-wise. He gives me an indulgent look when I hold the door for him. I think he thinks I'm being all olde worlde courteous, but Daniel has never seen himself from the rear. I'm feeling no pain watching his ass swaying along in those sprayed-on jeans. I wonder if anyone ever got caught in Beth Anne's committing lewd acts with archaeologists in the relationships section? After meeting Connor, I wouldn't be at all surprised.

I glance around casually. Nice store, if this kind of thing turns you on. Cosy alcove. Stone fire place. Sofa. Antique chairs. Books. Lotsa books. Books everywhere you look, on every surface And tootsie rolls. Mmm. Blood sugar definitely dropping a little, here. Might just mosey on over and -

"Sir?"

Clerk. The clerk is between me and my tootsies. "You're here for the book signing, sir?"

Nice girl, nice eyes. Nice tootsies. Can see 'em. Big bowl. Bigger crowd. "Absolutely."

"Here you go then," she beams, placing a book reverently into my hands.

I casually glance down at the cover. Then I blink and look again. 'Passion's Raging Storm'. This seems unlikely even with THAT cover, sheesh, talk about adult content right there, so I cautiously open it and read the intro. 'Half-Comanche and the son of an English earl, Harvard-educated Brit Hand could break wild horses while talking to them in four languages. He's a man with temperate needs--and the flame-haired temptress that runs his new-found household is anything but temperate. Yet from their first meeting, Brit realizes that she's the woman that has the power to unlock his wild side'. I'll just bet she does. And the name of this flame-haired temptress? Antoinetta? Give good ol' Brit three pages and she'll be - I knew it. Toni. I need my tootsie roll. I need this book. And I need to meet - I check the cover - Jocelyn Flemyng.

I grab my tootsie roll and work my tush - my jeans aren't up to the same standard as Daniel's, but the tush does it for me every time - through the crowds of housewives surrounding - "Jocelyn?" It doesn't seem likely. He's got the most spectacular beard I've seen outside of ZZ Top.

'Jocelyn' grins up at me. "Hey, I'd tell you to pull up a chair, but if you hide that ass the crowd could get ugly."

"Jack," I say, grinning, holding out my book.

"You willing to share? I'd kill you for that tootsie roll. Although, from the looks of things, someone already tried."

"Be my guest, and it's a cliché, but you should see the other guys," I offer graciously. "Er - Jocelyn?"

"Jesse."

"What were you before you became Jocelyn?"

"Roughneck, but my wife hated me being off-shore all that time so I quit the rigs and went for - " Jesse glances behind me to his adoring public, looking a little self-conscious, "- hysterical historical porn. Pays the bills." He shrugs, embarrassed. "Usually my wife Em pretends to be Jocelyn for me at these shindigs, but she's over there, molesting that tall drink of water you breezed in with."

I look over my shoulder and see a tiny, plump woman plastered to Daniel in the 'relationships' section, talking his ass off. Em must be good people like Jesse is good people, because Daniel doesn't seem to mind one bit.

"Lucky bastard," Jesse grins.

"Tell him something he doesn't know," I smirk.

Jesse chuckles and writes something into my book with a flourish, eyeing Daniel with great amusement the whole time.

When I turn the book and check, all it says is 'WOOF!!!'. "Profound," I gush, 'awed' by the innate genius of this undeniably insightful literary gem.

"I'm denying ALL responsibility for chapter seventeen. That one's purely down to Em. She was on a tear. What could a mere husband do? Now get outta here before she lures that boy out to some tacky motel and makes him scream. I'm guessing that's your job."

"You know it," I grin. I'm already turning to chapter seventeen as I make my way back through the crowd. I hear a loud call of 'sucker' from behind me, but let it go. Too busy with - Brit thrust it WHERE? On horseback? I DON'T think so. That's not - NO way! And no, no, I've never heard it called THAT before.

When I get within earshot of Daniel and his adoring acolyte, still snorting derisively and obviously enjoying the hell out of chapter seventeen, I hear Em describe Daniel as a hunka burnin' love, which doesn't surprise me one bit. Em likes a little side-saddle action.

"Ooh! Better and better!" Em enthuses, hazel eyes sparkling up at me.

"I'll never look at horse whispering in quite the same way. That Brit is quite the cunning linguist," I say solemnly. "By the way, Jesse is hitting the tootsie rolls hard back there. Lives could be lost."

"What? He's on a damn diet! He KNOWS he's not supposed to - grr - turn my back for a SECOND!" Em storms off into the crowd.

"This is a cool bookstore. We will definitely call again." I smack Daniel's curious fingers away from my book. "You're too young for this stuff, but if you're good, I'll read the best bits out to you."

"Thanks," Daniel pulls a face.

"You got what we need?" I glance down. "FOUR books?"

"I know." Daniel eyes the shelves pensively. "It may not be enough. Maybe THIS one -" he reaches out.

I get a good grip and yank him away. Only a spineless coward would leave his lover to pay for these all alone at the counter, but unfortunately for me, Daniel treads on my foot and pins me to his side before I can make a break for it. The clerk is the exact same nice girl with the nice eyes. Pulling her face a little.

"What?" Daniel asks mildly.

"I'd recommend 'Come Out, Come Out, Wherever You Are'. These are all good choices for the mechanics, but that one has some excellent stuff about handling emotions and the relationship side of things. You know?" she asks brightly.

We don't know.

"Instead of having one emotionally constipated, distant, uncommunicative lump in a relationship you have two," she says sweetly, grinning. "Words to live by."

Oh.

"I'll be right back."

"Thanks, Jack."

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"Did you remember my toothpaste?" Daniel asks, delving into the bag before I can stop him. He freezes and looks up at me wide-eyed. "Were they having a sale?"

I slip into my seat, looking around edgily. "You didn't read that chapter," I say defensively.

"I know it was called 'Lube, Lube, Lube', Jack, but that didn't mean you had to rush out and buy three of everything!" Daniel folds the bag, hands moving crisply. "And you're assuming a lot." He's blushing again.

"I'm ASSUMING that twelve year old store clerk thought I was either up for a gay orgy or was just a typical guy with a shopping list!" I snap. "I bought three tubes of toothpaste and three Twinkies too, so lighten up."

Daniel starts to chuckle as we pull away. "I don't think that helped, Jack. Really."

"Yeah, well," I shrug. "Dr 'Gay Karma Sutra' Jackson didn't seem to want his toothpaste badly enough to go in there and get it himself, not if he had to get the other stuff too." I pause. "That's a good book, by the way. I skimmed. Maybe a little advanced, but it helps to set goals."

Daniel is still chuckling, which is - well, it's nice. Nice to see Daniel having fun. Fun with me, and all we're doing is driving back to his place, panicking about the mechanics of what 'Come Out, Come Out' refers to coyly as intimate relations.

"So what's the plan?" Daniel asks.

"Take out. Read up. Make out. See if we can't get up to Foreplay Fantasies before we hit the hay," I say cheerfully. "Which reminds me. We need to make a grocery run."

"You're not licking anything off me," Daniel says firmly. "We're going straight home."

I know for a fact he has homemade ice cream at home and licking will indeed be the fantasy in the Foreplay Fantasies segment of make out. Chocolate cherry truffle ice cream licked from Dr Daniel Jackson's navel. Now that's motivation.

I delve into the book bag for 'The Ins and Outs of Gay Sex'. "This is a good one. It's got pictures. Step by step stuff. Er, you're still dead set against that whole chapter nine thing?"

"Yes."

Just my luck. I've never given a blowjob, and it turns out Daniel has never received one and isn't keen to make a start. Definitely a situation calling for show, not tell, but not until I've got his brains puddled out his ears from chapter twenty three of 'Men Loving Men' and he's feeling more amenable to experimentation.

How hard can it be to find washable ink and the right kind of brush?

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"It's GOT to be in there somewhere," I mutter helplessly.

"Want me to read that part out again?" Daniel offers anxiously.

"No, no. I know. Grab that one - no - the other one - " I call as Daniel shuffles the pile of books he has spread out on the pillow.

"'The Joys of Gay Sex'? Pfffft," Daniel snorts. "Promises."

"Turn to page eleven, you know, the anatomy chapter," I instruct. I'm dying of embarrassment here. You could hurl me naked and blindfold at any woman who got her kicks that way and I could find her happy button in a heartbeat. I have Daniel sprawled willingly and wantonly beneath me, desperately leafing through reference books because I can't find his happy button with both hands and a map. I reach down carefully and kiss his sweat-sheened nape apologetically.

"Relax, Jack," Daniel sighs. "'Come out, come out' says not every guy gets the same kind of pleasure from intercourse, and it's just your luck I seem to be one of them."

"We can't do it if we don't both enjoy it," I tell him firmly, kissing his nape again, and kind of nosing into his hair while I'm here. "You smell good. How come it took me five years to figure out you smelled good?"

"You're an idiot," Daniels murmurs distractedly, thumbing briskly through 'Ins and Outs'. "That feels nice, don't stop," he arches his neck to give me better access. "This is my fault, Jack," he admits ruefully. "I insisted we should try things out as we went instead of waiting until we had those foreplay chapters down cold."

"The goddamn things are like cookbooks, Danny. Beat to a peak. What the fuck is a peak? Fold in the eggs. How do you fold an egg?"

"Massage the prostate," Daniel sighs again.

"Want me to - " I start to ease my ludicrously over-lubricated finger free of Daniel, free of this heart-stoppingly arousing silky heat and oh, momma, the TIGHTNESS of him. I didn't even know I wanted this, and now I do, it looks like I gotta want and not have. I can't - I won't have intercourse with him if it's just something he patiently endures for my sake. In fact, I'm hoping right now I'm a natural bottom, because otherwise our sex life is going to stay resolutely soft-focus.

"Leave it," Daniel instructs. "We're dealing with a medical fact here. I've got the damn gland - "

"I just can't find it," I admit ruefully. I'd offer to reverse our positions, but something tells me it would take Daniel about a nanosecond to hit pay dirt and have me screaming from the ceiling. So I just focus on Daniel. He does smell amazingly good. A warm, herbal smell from whatever he uses on his hair, and it's weird how I never noticed how soft his hair is either. Now I'm looking I can see how soft it is, can feel it gliding against my skin and over my lips when I kiss him just there, that little sweet spot at his nape that makes him shiver and - "Danny!" SHIT. What did I DO? "Christ, did I hurt you? You

screamed!" I freeze, he's quivering with shock and whimpering into the pillow. What did I - stroking. I was just stroking him, inside, relaxing him and - "I found it, right?" I ask hopefully.

"Oh, yes. Yes," Daniel's voice is muffled in the pillow and the books. "Yes. I'd say so. Um-hm. NO question." Daniel raises himself up and sweeps the books onto the floor. "I'd like to just kiss for a while, please."

It takes us a few minutes to untangle ourselves and reconvene side by side, Daniel tucked in my arms and my hands on the glorious lush curves of his ass. "Got a little ahead of myself there," I apologise remorsefully.

"No, no. It was GOOD. Really good. Can't wait to get back to it, in fact, but I really want to kiss you right now," Daniel admits, eyes and smile a little shy.

"Kiss away."

Daniel does things his way. Kissing to him means touching my jaw with trembling fingers and tracing the sharp angle all the way across before slipping down to my - regrettably - lined throat. He delicately traces the outline of my Adam's apple and leans in to lick the hollow at the base of my throat.

"Great kiss."

"Just getting warmed up." His palms are resting warm over my cheeks, long, elegant fingers splayed out, dancing lightly over my tingling skin. The brow is also a little lined. The eyes are a little baggy. The eyebrow does have that annoying scar and the two tone do. He goes back to the eyes, which are still baggy.

"I love your eyes," Daniel murmurs, kissing both of them solemnly, sensitive fingertips ghosting against my lashes. "Especially when you look at me like this. It's not just the colour, it's not even when they go puppy on me, pleading and begging for more - "

"Begging?"

"Okay. Whining."

I bare my teeth at him.

"It's that softness. The warmth. Nothing as warm as brown eyes," Daniel murmurs dreamily, gently skimming his lips over every bruise on my face, and finally nipping at my nose in case I think he's gone soft on me or something.

"Brown?" I wait in vain for anything more. "My lover the linguist gazes deeply into my brown eyes and comes up with - brown. Not velvety. Not chocolatey. Not even coffee.

Brown. Inspirational pillow talk by Dr Jackson. The linguist, lest we forget, clearly at a loss for words."

"Too awed by your beauty to articulate," Daniel snaps, tender cheek cupping translating to a painful grip on my ears.

"Try hazelicious."

"Wh-what?" Daniel stammers, gamely choking down some kind of strong emotion, which I suspect from the quivering lips is laughter. "Haz - haz - I can't even SAY that word! What the HELL have you been watching?"

"Like I couldn't come up with that line on my own?" I huff.

"No."

"Shit."

Daniel stares thoughtfully into my eyes, turning my head gently this way and that. "No," he says eventually. "No, I think you're being overly harsh with that one."

I open my mouth to ANNHILATE him so of course he chooses that exact moment to lick my tongue, and the treacherous little bastard rolls over and dies, shamelessly hanging out my mouth and begging for more. I will never win an argument with Daniel if my own hormones keep ambushing me so persistently. Daniel's tongue just curls around mine and he doesn't raise a protest when I lure him into my mouth. Best case, I can work up enough suction to get him to let go of my ears. I don't think 'all the better to steer you with' was the exact ear line from the nursery rhyme, even if my lobes are on the generous side.

THIS, this is kissing. Curled up on Daniel's huge bed, with the late afternoon sunshine warming the room, all the peace and privacy we could want. Slow, deep, delirious kisses. The subtle play of lip shifting over lip as first I lead the kiss, then Daniel, angling for the sweet spot, that perfect spot where we can linger, stroking drowsily. Sweet, drugging kisses, and that warm herbal Danny scent rich in my nose.

Seems like the easiest thing in the world to stroke skin as well as tongues, both of us. Not pushing. Not rushing. Too many ways to describe how soft Daniel's skin is. Sappy ways. Let me count the ways. His skin is soft like my eyes are brown. I tease a nipple, feel an answering touch, thanking 'Ins and Outs' and chapter three, 'cause I never really knew nipples did THIS, not to guys. Not just to him, me too, makes your body thrum and ache for more. Ache low and deep. Heats the blood. Stirs. Yeah. Stirs and swells.

Hands gliding lower, down over taut, flat abdomens. His is flatter, mine more deeply ridged with muscle. Look into his face now, flushed, excited, eyes closed and he's close. Can't get closer to me. I'm not too lived in for Danny. Just about right in Danny's closed eyes, in his willing mouth, in the shaking fingers circling my navel and slipping down to

coarse hair, hesitating, learning that texture as I stroke his thigh, feel the heat of that, trace the long, lean muscles and baby fine hairs. Around and onto his ass, filling my gloating hands. Can't wait. Can't wait to be buried in that ass, deep inside him. Can't wait, but will.

Daniel's back. I never knew how tight and knotted muscles got from reading, muscles he can't reach, but I will. Reaching, rubbing them now, feel him sigh and arch into my hands. I'll be sure to do this for him.

His nape. I keep coming back to his nape, with hands and lips, teeth and tongue. Perfect nape. My favourite part of this gorgeous body clinging hard to mine. Don't even know why with so much to choose from. Just love that nape.

Daniel's hands love my back, fingers working deep into my muscles, testing the differences between us. Broad and heavy, here. Long and lean, admiring hands seem to say. Fit just right.

"Aah, Jack," Daniel sighs, nuzzling into my shoulder.

Hey, if he's talking, he's breathing; if he's breathing, we're kissing. Teasing a little. Tongues flicker and dart, jab against teeth and retreat, licking over and over sensitive tips and gliding in, settling again into that sweet spot, into the slow, sinuous glide of tongue over tongue and palette.

Hands slipping down now, all the way down, onto slick, hot, fervent flesh, twitching and throbbing beneath careful, unaccustomed fingers. Too big, too strong, not my own. Not my touch or my rhythm, awkward. Begin again, each mirroring the other's movements. Single finger tracing a line down the shaft from base to tip, focus on my finger on him, not his on me. I grin. Sounds easy. Too many new sensations here. Calluses rasp over sensitised skin. Holding a pen type calluses, maybe a little roughened from the way he rests his hand on the butt of his pistol. Roughened from using the pistol I guess I put in his hand. If he's feeling what I'm feeling, my skin on him must be like barbed wire.

Slowly sliding tongues, slowly stroking fingers circling testicles, lifting gently, cautiously, holding warmly cupped. Resting. Kissing now, deepening, steady thrusts into his mouth for the moan that comes just there, just that spot. Not a spot in any book, just what I've learned, like Daniel's scent and Daniel's nape.

There's heat, here, growing heat and pleasure, heavy and roiling low in my gut, demanding more. Wants it hard and fast and rough. Trembling in hips that want to rock and thrust. What? Am I a kid, I can't wait? Daniel can. He wants to. He wants to love like this. He wants this slow burn.

We each wrap one hand around a sullen, straining shaft, let the weight rest in one cupping palm. Squeeze gently, pull a little, let go. Good time to grab the oil, which, yeah, big laugh, I bought three of too.

“Nirvana?” Daniel chuckles at the oil.

“We aim to please.”

“You do. Get back here and kiss me.”

I do. I certainly do. We warm the oil between our palms and massage it in to eager, greedy hardness, sliding hands up and down, slow and luxurious, sharing warmth and pleasure, deeper and stronger, spreading with every stroke. Hands learning a new rhythm now, Daniel’s hand on me moving differently to mine on him. Pulling my skin tight, finger tormenting the tip, brushing over and over, making me arch and curse. Laughing into my mouth, and easing back into the stroking. Learning I like that cycle of tension and relaxation. Provoking pleasure.

My hand on him is steady, lulling him in languid, lingering strokes, drawing pleasure from him. He’s letting go, losing himself, flowing into the pleasure I’m giving him, and the sharp pangs of pleasure his gripping and gliding give me.

Every inch of skin is sheened and slick with sweat. Breath is harsh and panting. The kissing deepens, roughens to sharp stabs and lunges of greedy tongues and nipping teeth. I want to let go, want to drive into Daniel’s maddening hand, have him pump me hard and quick, jerk me to climax.

Want to, but won’t.

Forty-five years and a lot of miles on the clock have to be good for something, and they are, they let me do this, let me pleasure him like this, revelling in every moan and arch, drawing this out for both of us, gentle pleasure rippling, so intense it’s almost pain, white behind my eyes, almost unbearable, this slow burn, yes, burning us up as we tense and labour, driving hard into one another, into strong, hard, straining hands, heat exploding out in wave after wave.

Daniel’s scent is rich in my nose. Herbs. Heat. Sweat. Semen. Daniel’s skin is soft and he’s clinging to me, trembling in every limb, face flushed and sated, eyes wide open and slumberous with satiation. I can think of a million ways to describe the blue of his eyes. Sappy ways, all of them. Daniel’s eyes are blue. Daniel loves me. He just showed me how much he loves me.

I lean in close and kiss his lips, sweet lips, sweet kiss. Sweet man.

“Love you, Jack.”

I smooth the damp tendrils from his brow, cup his cheek. “Daniel, I love you too,” I say gravely. “But there’s something you should know.”

“Can’t we just lie here and bask?” Daniel sighs into my shoulder.

“It’s about me and Thor.”

“Prick. Tell me again WHY it is I love you?” Daniel groans. “And Jack? There’s something YOU should know. It’s about you and Hammond. And hockey.”

**FINIS**