



Already Spring



**a House/Wilson novel
by Melody Clark**





ALREADY SPRING

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My one and only agent (other than for DS and two B7 specifically re-redited novels) is Mysti Frank. If you buy this from anyone else, you just got robbed by a zine pirate. Here is Mysti's site: www.agentwithstyle.com

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Thanks to Annie Booker and Lyn Townsend for being great betas. My appreciation as usual to Mysti Frank (and everyone at Agentwithstyle.com).

The cover graphics are clearly based on Ethan Hawke in his characters from two films in which he co-starred with Robert Sean Leonard. One is Dead Poets Society, of course, and the other is Tape. The movies were appropriately spaced out in time that he made a nice face to give to Wilson's brother David.

Secondary syndrome is based on a real problem facing those who must take "wildcatter" pharmaceuticals. My doctor Fran Lee (hey, Fran!) gave me the basics on it and I've tried, as best a layman can, to fit all the pieces of the puzzle together in such a way that it complements the overall story. I know I've made big mistakes. I'm sure I've screwed up things royally. I'm human.

Most of what is in the novel in terms of Wilson's past, including the names and histories of all his family, is solely my invention. I've also had some fun in the novel with House's birthdate inconsistency. Once it was given as December 21st. Being a Christmas baby, I decided to keep that one as real and play with the others.

Obviously, Walden Woods and the surrounding area actually exist. I must thank my friend Ellen for her childhood experience at Sleepy Hollow Massachusetts Cemetery (not to be confused with the New York Sleepy Hollow of Ichabod Crane legend). I've borrowed it for David's experience. The Concord River experience was my own, excluding the overcoat.

For Kris M.

PLEASE BE ADVISED

ALL CHARACTERS REMOVE THEIR SHOES AND SOCKS PRIOR TO FUCKING. IT MAY NOT BE MENTIONED IN THE TEXT, BUT **IT IS KNOWN BY THE AUTHOR TO HAVE HAPPENED**. I DON'T MENTION WHEN CHARACTERS USE THE TOILET, PASS WIND, BATHE, BRUSH, OR FLOSS EITHER, BUT OBVIOUSLY THEY MUST HAVE DONE SO SOMEWHERE BEYOND THE NARRATIVE OR THEY'D HAVE EXPLODED AND/OR BEEN RUN OF TOWN BY NOW. FURTHERMORE, ALL COCKS AND ANAL CREVICES ARE THOROUGHLY LUBED AND PREPARED PRIOR TO INSERTION. NO ONE HAS AIDS, SO THERE IS NO NEED FOR CONDOMS. THE AUTHOR IS AWARE THAT NOT ALL GAY MEN PARTICIPATE IN ORAL AND/OR ANAL SEX, HOWEVER THESE CHARACTERS DO. WE'RE NOT WRITING GAY PORN, WE'RE WRITING SLASH FICTION. GAY PORN READERS ARE, OF COURSE, WELCOME TO PARTAKE IF THEY LIKE SLASH, BUT THE STORY IS MEANT FOR THE SLASH AUDIENCE. YES, WE KNOW IT CAN TAKE A LONG TIME TO REACH ORGASM DURING ORAL SEX, HOWEVER WE'RE WRITING SEXUAL FANTASY, NOT SEXUAL REALITY. FICTION ISN'T ABOUT THE ORDINARY, IT'S ABOUT THE EXTRAORDINARY.

SO ORDERED BY THE AUTHOR,
THIS 24th Day of March, 2008
LOVE AND PEACE,
MELODY

One: Loitering in Winter

He could hear the wind rattling to free itself from the bony embrace of winter trees. It might have been the Middlesex railroad crossing without the train whistle. The violent wind sounds moaned in chorus, surging up around Stony Brook and over Carnegie Lake to zero in on the Princeton Plainsboro Teaching Hospital, unprotected from the ravages of night. Winter was determined to flow over them. It had surrounded them now like a fog.

As he walked along the parking lot lights, he noticed the ice crystals clinging solemnly to their standards. He'd have gone on wading through the dark night of his soul had it not been for the human bumper car that jolted him as he walked up beside him.

"Yo, Jimmy!" House said, turning to walk in tandem. "Cuddy called you, I see."

"It must be big. She called you, too?"

"No, I was already here. I asked her to call you. She tell you why?"

"She said she'd explain when I got here."

"She lied. The explanation is my job," House said, brandishing a file. "As I've mentioned, all week long I've been presented with nothing but the usual cornucopia of non-nutritive intellectual cheese fries."

"Your lack of satisfying, tragic medical mysteries. There's a good reason to drag me out of bed at 4:13 AM."

"There's more. Our current nursing staff takes a medical history about like a blind podiatrist does a foot exam so I went scratching in the file pile and found this. Clinic ref last night. Admitted this afternoon." As they walked through the hospital doors, House poked at Wilson with the history file.

Wilson took it from him, then skimmed the sheet clipped onto the inside. "Thirty-seven year old white male patient. Night sweats, fever, swollen lymph nodes, HIV positive ... C'mon, House, you don't need me to diagnose this."

"It's not a consult," House said, as he paused them beside the hallway to the rest of the hospital. "It's your brother."

"Jack's fine," Wilson said, squinting in confusion.

"Not Able ... Cain," House said. "The one you sent to the land of Nod, on the east of Eden."

Wilson took a full step back for a moment, looking away as if to survey all that he couldn't quite fathom in his head. "*David?*"

House nodded. "Afraid so."

"AIDS," he said, as if it was small revelation.

House pointed his cane at the folder. "Worse."

Wilson opened the folder again. He read a little slower this time until he finally came to the words. When he read them, he shut his eyes in response. "AIDS related lymphoma."

"On the nosey."

Then he refocused back on the history, seeming to be searching for a little hope. "The CD4 count -- "

"Blows."

Wilson's gaze went dead inside. "Where is he?"

"Post-intake. Follow me."

Wilson was torn by two internal images -- one of the cringing five year old, kicked off his Big Wheel by Charlie Pindermaster. The five-year-old who then ran sobbing to his big brother Jimmy for protection becoming, ten years after that, the rebellious teenager screaming in his face to mind his own fucking business and give him his space.

He decided on some image in-between. Still, David looked paler, thinner and weaker than he could ever remember.

The eyes of the patient, newly settled into a ward bed, focused on the doctors in the doorway. The other dark-haired man at his bedside rose as they entered.

"*Jim?*" David said, as if the very idea was absurd. He shook his head hard, like he had to be seeing things. "I didn't ask anyone to call my family."

"I work here. You must know that. You talk to Mom." He tossed an angry searching stare at the fourth party in the room, but then looked back at his younger brother. "You didn't remember that I'm an oncologist?"

"Yeah, but I didn't know you were one here."

"Well, of all the gin joints in all the towns in the world, you walked into mine. By

providence, fate or sheer dumb luck." He leaned over to lift the patient's chin and gently palpate the swellings along both sides of his neck. He looked over to House. "We have any significant chest film on him?"

"With our current intake staff?" House said.

"Sorry, stupid question," Wilson said, reaching for the chart to read it. "You're on *Abfar*? How in hell did you get hold of that? We're not allowed to prescribe it in the States."

"Yes, we know. Too many patent issues," said the fourth man in the room. "I have ... friends. He's only been on it four months."

"What about before that?"

David averted his eyes, muttering lowly, "Meditation and herbs."

"David!" Wilson said sharply, looking everywhere for a moment but at him.

"Oh, God, he's striking the Superman pose. I know, I know, Jimmy, you think it's medically inadvisable -- "

"No, I think it's stupid. Take the damned cocktail. It works. Anything else is at best misguided delusion and at worst outright medical fraud."

"I'm an artist! So shoot me -- I'm a weird little man! That whole drug thing made me crazy!"

"It might have made you crazy for awhile maybe. But that was then. The cocktail drug therapy is much easier to take now."

"Says someone who's never had to take it."

"It's better than ... this, isn't it? You've developed a nice case of lymphoma for your trouble. As of now, you're off the *Abfar* and back on the tried-and-true. We'll have to send you down for biopsies to see how bad things are."

"Biopsies?" David said, wincing. "Big ick."

"It's a fine needle biopsy. That's no worse than a blood test these days. If the results aren't confirmative and we do a surgical biopsy, well, then ... *big ick*," Wilson said, signing off his chart marks with an angry flourish. "We need to see how aggressive it is. That will tell us what to do next. By the way, this is Dr. House." He turned around to look at House, as if seeking past the boundaries of his own experience. "What's the aggressive ratio with *Abfar*?"

"No charts I've seen," House said, taking a step forward to stand beside Wilson. He focused on his brother. "Lost any baby fat lately?"

"Yeah. Six pounds. How did you know?"

"Montel tells me I'm psychic," he said. "Congratulations. Your idiocy in not following doctors orders probably helped get you here but your ignoring doctors orders again

may help you get out of here alive."

David grimaced. "You're just a big old ray of sunshine, aren't you? What are you, a homophobe or something?"

"Yes," House said incurring a sharp-eyed jab from Wilson. "Oh, you mean phobic about homosexuals? No, I hate all homo sapiens equally. You're here, you're queer, I'm used to it."

The fourth man sneered a little. "So there's no policy against treating AIDS patients?"

"Hey, did you see the episode last night where Mork told Mindy he loved her?" House asked. "That's right, you couldn't have because it's not the 80s anymore. Lucky for you, we specialize in treating sick people here."

"You're a real jackass," the fourth man said. "Why don't you keep the smartass shit to yourself?"

"Why don't you just shut up altogether?" Wilson snapped back. "In fact, why are you still here? I can't believe you have the audacity to stay in the same room with me."

The fourth man rolled his eyes. "That was twenty years ago, Jim. Davey and I have been together a long time. He's a grown man now."

"That's supposed to make it okay?"

The other man took a deeper breath, clearly pacing himself. "That stigma only exists because we're gay men. Your father was 20 and your mother was 17 when -- "

"Leave my parents out of this. You were an adult. He was a 15 year old boy. You're not gay, you're a pedophile. And you're lucky you're not a registered sex offender."

"Jimmy, please," David said, his voice on the edge of caving in. "Not now. Not *now*. Not with all this."

Wilson looked away, muscling up some inner will. He nodded. "I'm ... sorry. I'm ... I mean, you're right. This isn't the place."

The fourth man looked awkwardly across at the doctor least pissed at him. "Do you have a coffee shop or something?"

House pointed. "Straight down the hall, follow the stench."

"Thanks," he said, reaching out to squeeze David's hand. "I'll just be up there. I'll be back when the coast is clear."

When he was gone, David smiled sadly at his brother. "Look, I know you guys have issues. But Shannon's really good to me. He always has been."

Wilson returned to studying the chart. "Are you in any pain?"

David poked multiple fingers at various places over his face. "Pinhead has nothing on me."

He scribbled some more. "I'll start you on something to keep you comfortable. Then we'll go from there. I'm here, I may as well embrace the day. I'll hand carry this over to expedite things." Wilson looked up at him again. "You want me to call Mom and Dad and Jack?"

He shrugged a little. "Mom maybe. Later. Jack hate me as much as you do?"

"None of us hate you, you know that," Wilson said, signing away the chart to the bedside track. "You're the one that parted company, not us."

"Dad kind of made it necessary, don't you think?"

"Yes, well, the rest of us managed to survive his savage autocratic rule for the rest of our years there. But not you, free spirit. You had to be different and run away to join Shannon's nomadic circus."

"Like you didn't want to be different?" David said, gently, looking more deeply into his brother's eyes than before.

"Like I didn't have a choice," Wilson replied. "You get some sleep. After I deliver this, I'm going to stretch out on the sofa in my office for another hour so I only see one of everything. It'll help with my rounds. I'll be in to see you after while."

"Remember, you're still buying me lunch," House added, as Wilson turned toward the door.

Wilson smirked. "I'm always buying you lunch."

"Like I said."

"Hey," the patient said, as House had been about to follow Wilson out the door. "You're Greg, right? Greg House?"

House turned back, looking to make certain Wilson's brother hadn't been talking to some convenient nearby potted plant. "That depends. Do I owe you money?"

David smiled wanly. "Yeah, you're House. Sorry about being bitchy before. I didn't know who you were. I just put two and two together. Mom says you're like family to Jim. She says you're good for him, too. She says you make him be not such a stick."

House supposed he must have looked as surprised as he felt. He almost felt guilty that he'd called Wilson's mother's new dog a "mangy mop of beady-eyed malice" when he had almost tripped over him.

"Well, much as I'd love to stand around and chat about Wilson's stickiness, you know ... leeches to apply, people to bleed -- " House said, devoid of anything more to say that would be even remotely civil. When he ran through *what seems to be the problem* and *why don't we try this* and *I'll want to see you for a follow-up*, he'd pretty much shot his medical courtesy wad. He was just stranded there with nothing

to say.

"Yeah, Mom said you were funny, too." David's gaze drifted to the invisible reaches of that common hallway door. His smile saddened at the edges. "Jimmy was second out of the gate, you know, then me."

Oh, god, here came the invocation of the sacred rites of the primordial confidant. House wanted to crawl the fuck away and hide. If this was anyone else, he'd have snarked back at them about not giving a flying fuck and left. But he was going the extra half-mile because it was a Wilson. A Wilson Wilson.

"Out of the gate?" House said, focusing hard on the nebulous answer.

"Our dad didn't have any big expectations left by the time I made my entrance. I got away with bloody murder. I was an artist. I got to be strange. Poor Jim never had a chance. Even when he and Shannon went around, they couldn't really connect. He just wouldn't own it. You know how it is."

"I do?" House said, his forehead gathering up ambitiously.

The patient shrugged. "That's Jimmy. Say, could you grab my bag off the stand over there? I feel like crap and I'm jonesing for some jelly beans. I've got the Wilson sweet streak. Wait, I can have those, can't I? I mean, I've got lymphoma, right? Which is like cancer? And sugar feeds cancer?"

House's gaze rolled all around the room. "That's right. And behold the healing power of crystals," he said, lifting up with his cane the purple bag that David had indicated. He used the cane hook to deliver it to the bed. "Sugar does not *feed* cancer. And lymphoma isn't like cancer. It *is* cancer. And incidentally, and not incidentally, most people would've pissed their pants in terror right now. You're not even sweating."

David snorted out a laugh then did a one-handed dredge through his overnight bag. "Most people haven't been at death's door with this stuff like five times already. I get something, I knock it down. I get something else, I knock that down, too."

"This one's hard to knock down," House said.

"Yeah, doctors always say that. But my brother is Captain Cancer, right?" David pulled out the bag of jelly beans. "And Mom says you're Doctor Jesus or something. I figure I'm in good hands."

House narrowed his gaze at him knowingly. "You *did* know Wilson was here. You lied. To your own brother. That was sneaky, manipulative and deceptive. I *do* like you after all."

David grinned regretfully. "Uh-oh, busted. Yeah, okay, but I knew if Jimmy knew that, he'd be using it as leverage to guilt me into his clutches."

"If you want to live, that's where you should be."

"If I die, I die. I've done everything anyway. Gone to Europe. Seen the pyramids along the Nile. I've been to the Big Easy for Fat Tuesday so many times, every Lent

I smell like red beans and rice. Hey, want to see a picture of Jimmy and me at Mardi Gras?"

"*Mardi Gras?*" House said, because he clearly couldn't have heard him right. "*James Wilson? James **Evan** Wilson?*"

He nodded, yanking out a wallet and from that an old, bent-up snapshot. "Jimmy's the one with the shitload of beads."

House's eyebrows crowded together, staring at it. "He was ... popular."

"Oh, he was. And this one here is of us with a King Alfred cake -- "

And thus began the hour of the sharing of the photos.

Good for general Wilson reconnaissance, House decided, so he stayed. Especially with the recent "he just wouldn't own it" revelation. Plus the leg hurt. So he looked at pictures and nodded a lot. And hoped for a way to wheedle the rest of the *he just wouldn't own it* info out of him.

Wilson on the rug, playing with his toy doctor kit. Wilson on vacation -- always looking like the most unhappy and ill-at-ease flower in the bunch. Wilson at about age four with a bright perfunctory Hanukkah soiree smile.

David offered him the bag. "Jelly Belly?"

"Your brother is the carbo loader, my fix is in pill form." House still holding a photo in his hand, looked tentatively back at Other Wilson. "Before, you said your brother and your ... main squeeze ... *dated?*"

"He didn't tell you about Shannon?" David said, a little surprised. "My brother still plays everything close to the vest. He's so private about everything." Suddenly, he stopped. Eyes that were as deep as Wilson's though not as dreamless filled with a wider fear. "Wait. I guess I spilled some beans, so to speak, in mentioning the Shannon thing, didn't I? I mean, he told you about the -- "

"Hey," House said, laughing as if the question was absurd even though it wasn't in the slightest. "He's my *best friend!*"

David smiled with growing calm, chewing thoughtfully at a jelly bean. "Hooo! Like Erik Burger said to the art patron, that's a relief. You're just friends though, huh? With as long as you've known each other, I was kind of hoping -- "

The door to the room was suddenly filled with another Wilson ... the primordial Wilson, now sporting his lab coat. His thoughts had clearly been elsewhere, dealing with something else. When he saw them, he was dragged out of his reverie as he looked from one man to the other. "Are those pictures?"

House displayed the Hanukkah shot. "Look! It's a baby Wilson!"

Wilson's face was that of a man who wanted nothing more than to disappear under any available surface. "Oh my ... God ... "

"Oh, stop being a stick. Greg and I were getting acquainted," David snapped, gathering up the pictures like a bad hand at cards. He stuffed them back in his bag. "I thought you were sleeping anyway."

"I was. I received a phone call from Bonnie." Wilson drifted to a chair beside his brother's bed. He looked toward House to deliver the explanation. "Hector has shuffled off this mortal coil."

"Oh, my god!" House said, appearing stunned. "He's doing Shakespeare?"

Wilson gazed back at him with limitless impatience. "He's dead. Bonnie found him this morning. She called me from the vet, crying."

"Alas, poor Hector." House squinted in mock concern. "It wasn't ... suicide, was it?"

Wilson shot him his vaguely patient look for demons. "Just the natural end game of canine old age. Not that the pills you gave him were beneficial, I'm sure, although you did enable his vet to publish an important veterinary paper. Surprisingly, Hector was one of the very few dogs ever medically detoxed. Anyway, Bonnie wants me to give the eulogy."

At that moment in time, David and House said in unison, "For a dog?"

"Dear God, I have House on two channels," Wilson said, rubbing at an ear. "Yes, I know, but apparently they have funerals for dogs, too. She says I've ... *known him* ... longest."

"He's a dog," House went on. "How do you eulogize a dog? Okay, he peed on the carpet every morning, but he didn't drool on his chew toys? He never sniffed peoples' butts?"

"No, I was kind of saving those lines for yours," Wilson said, checking his watch to go on, "It's going to be tomorrow late afternoon or early evening, if you'd like to come, House. I know how close you both were."

"I wouldn't miss it for the ... Oh, wait I forgot, I have absolutely nothing to do. Just can't make it."

"Yes, well, I'll offer your condolences," he said, turning to leave. "See you later, both of you. Unlike House, I have rounds -- "

"*House?*" David said. "It's always *House* with you. I've known him ten minutes and I call him Greg just because he's your primo amigo."

Wilson rubbed at the storm brewing between his eyes. "When your Scout troop met the First Lady at the White House during the Carter Administration, you pinched her cheek and called her Rozzie."

"You're evading my point. You still call your *best friend* by his *last name*."

"It's a doctor's thing. We all do. It's like the ... Army, okay?"

"He calls you that all of the time, doesn't he, Greg? I bet he's *never* called you Greg.

Not even once."

House nodded with a theatrical look of hurt. "True, on all counts."

"He calls me *Wilson!*" the other man said, his voice near the breaking point.

"I bet he *has* called you Jimmy. More than once. Am I right?"

House grinned over at Wilson. "You want to tell him or do I get to?"

"You don't have to tell me, I know it. I know *him*." David put the wrapper back around the neck of his jelly beans bag. "So, Stickboy, what did Mom have to say? I mean, you called her, right?"

Wilson paused a moment. Finally, he nodded. "She's worried. She wants to come to see you."

"Tell her not to. I'm fine. If she comes, Dad will come. And if Dad does, Jack will hitch a ride. You, I can deal with. Lymphoma I can survive. But I've been through Wilsonville and I hate that place."

Wilson once again rubbed at his already tired eyes. "I am going now before my head explodes. Someone will be in in a moment to do the fine needle biopsy. When I know something, I'll be back. You can call Shannon and tell him it's safe to hold your hand."

Wilson walked away, a struggling shuffle and busy click of a cane following after him.

"Hey Jimmy," House said, blocking Wilson's right turn into the post-lab with his cane. "I know something you don't know that I know."

"You know something I don't care that you know ... if that made sense," Wilson said, moving into post-lab. He grabbed up a handful of dry specimen cards with yellow sheets attached, sorting through them, tucking five into his lab coat pocket.

"You will when you hear what it is," House said, keeping up with him.

"I doubt it." He pushed his way out into the hallway that led back up to his office. "But I know you will insist upon telling me."

"Why I should, I don't know," House said, "seeing as how you didn't tell me. About *Shannon*."

Wilson paused only a moment before opening the door to his office. Then he walked in, leaving the door open for House. "There is nothing to tell. And even if there had been, why should I tell you about people I knew when I was nineteen?"

"Because it has that new hot wrinkle of *male/male sex* attached?"

Wilson retrieved the specimen cards from his pocket, dropping them onto the center of his desk. Finally, he breathed in deeply, looked up to the ceiling. "I have never had sex with a man. Okay? Through all the years of Village People jokes and Poconos comments and steam room innuendo, you've never just come out and

asked me, so I'll just come out ... no pun intended ... and tell you. However, even if it were true, you know the statistics, you know the odds. Why should that surprise you?"

"It doesn't. I'm just enjoying your knowing I know. That you willingly dated another guy."

"You know nothing, you just think you know something. And possibly I just think that made sense," Wilson said, dropping into his chair. He reached for the large cumulative file that represented his new patient's medical history. "Brown will, of course, be David's doctor of record. But I'm going to consult."

"Wilson, I just tell you that I *know* that you've enjoyed at least one serving of fruit salad in some form and you're still talking about your brother's medical history?"

"First of all, the ... fruit salad is your supposition." He turned another page, continuing to read. "Secondly, I don't care about anything right now but helping my patient."

House smirked on, plunking himself onto Wilson's sofa. "No, you care. A lot. You just won't admit it."

"That's right because I'm so prone to hiding my opinions from you." He turned another page, squinting in half-belief at the page. "Do you know he's had pneumocystis carinii pneumonia *twice*? And not a word to me. From anyone. My mother *had* to have known."

"Yes, but they didn't want you to know."

Wilson nodded. "Obviously."

"Just like you obviously didn't want *me* to know about your hand-holding with Other Brother's cradle-robbing gay boytoy. All of which tells me it was a whole lot more than nothing."

Wilson tossed him a look, then flipped through another page. "David is a walking textbook of AIDS complications. He's had a vast array of viruses, opportunistic infections, fungal hordeolum, for heavens sakes. And now he has lymphoma. I can see why he's not acting fazed. He's already survived a couple of things that should have killed him outright. And not a word to his own brother."

"In his shape, if the lymphoma is aggressive and stage four," House said carefully, "it *will* kill him."

"House, you rein supreme over the heavens and the earth, but I'm the king of this world. Let me handle oncology, okay? I know death is a strong possibility."

"It's the probability. Even if it's not aggressive, in his shape, he'll go through hell before he gets any better. You're not going to be able to discuss treatment. It won't just be about quality of life."

"I can handle it."

"Bullshit. It'll eat you alive. And I'll have to drag your ass through it. Bring in Brown. At least let him oversee staging, if it's lymphoma."

Wilson exhaled everything out of him, moving all the way back in his desk chair. "I respect Jorge, you know that. While I know my weaknesses, I know my strengths, too. If it was your brother and you had to choose, between Brown and me, who would you choose?"

House paused a long moment, then finally nodded like a gesture of surrender. "You."

"Okay then. I can handle it."

"Let Brown oversee staging."

"Okay, I'll relent on that point. That's probably best anyway," he said, as his phone beeped. He withdrew it from his pocket, checking for the text. "My god, I wrote STAT and they actually paid attention. The assay is in the lab."

"Want some company?"

"Like I could shake you?"

"Not when I get to watch you squirm," House said, standing to manage his way to the door. "While I discuss the naughty topic du jour."

"I'm not squirming," Wilson said dourly, rising up from his chair.

"You're squirming," House said, opening the door for them to walk into the hall.

Once in the work lab, House grabbed up the biopsy tray first. "I'll do the stain. Go. Sit."

"I can handle *this*."

"You know you suck at this anyway. When you're plugged into the case, it's worse. I'll just end up having to do it over when you screw it up, so I'll do the stain. Park your ass."

Wilson abandoned the fight and sunk into the plastic spoon chair. "Yes, Master."

"See, that's the way it's done. Nice edge of kink to the delivery, too." House grabbed up a utensil from the drop tray and started to work. "Want to thank me? Entertain me. Spill some details of your homoerotic tryst so I can commit them to memory for future sneering sessions. Was it oral? Anal? Was there a reach-around involved?"

"It was just a *date*, House -- " he said, before he could catch himself saying it.

"Damn it!"

"Ah, ha!" House said, grinning in victory. "You admit it! You went out with another guy!"

"Okay!" Wilson said, his eyebrows colliding. "I confess. I went out with a guy a couple of times. But there was no sex involved. It was adolescent ... experimentation, okay? End of story."

House's grin went wriggly at the ends as his eyebrows got happy. "Experimentation? Meaning you made out?"

"We kissed. A couple of times."

"Tongues?"

"Are you doing the stain or am I?"

House pointed at the card as he slipped it through the stage clips onto the stage plate. "Already done. And you didn't want to answer my question. Which tells me there *were* tongues involved." He blasted a grin back at Wilson, before putting his eye to the diopter. "You made out with a guy. And you enjoyed it."

"It was adolescent ... experimentation. It was exciting. It was forbidden. And it only happened *maybe* three times. Then Shannon ran off with David."

House's gaze swung sharply back in his best friend's direction. "You soul kissed another guy and you came back for seconds? And then *he* broke it off? Meaning you might have gone back for fourths and who knows, maybe the full-course fruit salad mega-meal. I couldn't have paid for tastier morsels than this."

"If you are finished gnawing upon the heart of my youthful humiliation, can you look at the stain?"

House couldn't stop grinning as he focused back through the diopter. But then Wilson watched as the glee slowly drained out of his face, as House's hands adjusted the objectives, fidgeting with the focus knob. He pulled the clip out and reframed it, and looked through the eyepiece again. He repeated the pattern three distinct times until he finally backed away.

His grimness and silence told Wilson everything.

"How bad?"

House's voice said just above the quiet, "Bad."

Wilson ran a hand through his hair. He grasped the back of his head as if trying to steady his thoughts for a moment of clarity, solace, something. "I'd like Brown to stage it before we tell him but given the time involved, we'd better do both at once."

"Want me to tell him?" came the surprising question.

House was looking back at him, openly, honestly, not a hint of sarcasm.

Wilson smiled softly. "No. It's my problem. I'll handle it. I wouldn't mind some moral support, though."

"How about some *immoral* support?"

Wilson laughed a little. "It's what you're best at anyway."

The words came tumbling out of his mouth like they did with every other patient. It was like a singer's set of different songs for different occasions ... each one a genuinely heartfelt rendition, but the words still came from memory. This time, he had to stumble his way through the number like a bad lounge singer taking requests.

"So, I have a whole megillah of tests and then what happens?" David asked.

"And then we stage your lymphoma," Wilson explained. "There are four stages -- "

"One through ... sorry, Charlie?"

"One through four. The fourth stage is often terminal. But with treatment there are sometimes remissions."

"Sometimes. Not often?"

Wilson shrugged a little. "Sometimes. There doesn't seem to be thoracic involvement. That can be good. We'll know more after the tests."

David winced, tentatively touching the bandage under his chin. "More biopsies?"

"Not now. Perhaps later. Depending upon how the results look when we get them back, we may need them, but probably not. X-rays and a few other tests are in order."

David's whole face caved in. "Spinal tap?"

Wilson waited for a moment. "You *may* need a lumbar puncture, but they aren't nearly as bad as their reputation suggests."

"Have you ever had one?"

Wilson shook his head, then nodded while relenting. "No, I haven't. But it will be a good thing, if you need one. It'll mean we'll need more information for staging which will mean you're not as certainly in stage four."

"So. What do you think I have? You and Greg. Worst case scenario. If it's this bad stage four. Is what I have going to kill me? Tell me the truth. The honest truth. I want to know. If it's stage four, will it be exit stage right?"

"We have no intentions of letting you -- "

"Probably," House said from behind Wilson. He sat forward in a nearby chair. "In your condition, stage four *will* kill you."

David took it all in. He was ashen for a long moment till finally he nodded to himself and smiled. "Thank you, Greg. Okay. If I'm going out, if it's exit stage right, then we'll call my friend Gustave and throw a big party. That's all there is."

"David," Wilson said, "there's also a chance -- "

"A chance. Listen to you. Reality is not Silly Putty, Jimmy. I know the odds. I've heard them all before. I'll keep in mind there's a chance. But there's a good chance I'll die. And it's okay. Better than suffering through weeks of horrible treatment that will end up killing me anyway."

"Where there's life, there's hope," Wilson said.

"Oh, where did you get that?" David said with a sneer. "A fortune cookie?"

"I mean, there's a good possibility that we can find some treatment to extend your life and then something else will come along -- "

David looked toward House. "How good a possibility?"

"We don't even know the staging yet," Wilson said.

"Not good," House added his reply in through Wilson's pause.

Wilson looked around. "I'm trying to help my kid brother make the right choice -- "

House didn't look down or back away a step. He looked deep into Wilson's stare. "No, you're trying to soothe your guilty conscience. This has nothing to do with him."

"Greg is right," David said, reaching out to pat his brother's hand. "You're making up for something that wasn't your fault to begin with, same as usual. I swear you're like one of those sin eaters in that Twilight Zone episode with John-Boy Walton. I know the stakes. Send in the staging clowns. Let them do their worst. We'll worry about what comes after then, okay?"

"Okay," Wilson said, standing up. "I can see I'm outnumbered."

"One last thing, Greg," David said, reaching out to grab House's hand.

House stared down at it like a rude intrusion. But David was shoving a credit card in his hand. "Here's my Platinum card. When you boys get off work or shift or whatever it is you call it, take Stickboy here out, will you? To somewhere with great food and kickass beer? Give him some fun for a change."

"I can buy my own dinner, David," Wilson said.

"Yes, you can. Boneless, skinless chicken in boring wine sauce or crappy vending machine snacks. *Who am I?* You haven't changed. Potato chips and Twizzlers licorice are still not a reasonable substitute for fun, Jimmy."

"House, give him the card back."

House pocketed it, walking toward the door. "You kidding? Free food? Not a chance."

"House, give him the card -- " Wilson said, before realizing he was talking to a departing figure's back.

David slapped in his brother's direction. "Now go. You, too. Go do whatever you're supposed to do. And some of what you're not supposed to do, if you know what I mean."

In that moment, someone else walked into the room. Wilson almost reacted badly until he saw the dark lines etched noticeably through his face. Red-veined eyes. Shannon had been somewhere crying.

Taking one step, Shannon saw Wilson, then stepped back. "Sorry, I didn't think you'd -- "

"It's alright, I'm leaving," Wilson said quickly, leaving the room with haste although he hovered just beyond the door, watching.

Shannon sat slowly down at David's bedside. His hand slid across the bed until it reached David's hand. Their fingers twined together as Shannon's head lowered onto David's shoulder. They were talking, it seemed. After a moment, it seemed like they might be crying.

Feeling like an intruder, Wilson walked away to whatever remained of his already very long and yet not quite begun day.

House's choice of restaurant tended toward steak houses with bad lighting and cold beer on tap. Strippers were an asset. Such was the great mind that loved soap operas and monster trucks and wrestling. And porn. It also loved bad juke box heavy metal -- the louder, the better. The fact House was now deciding upon the "new place" to take him instead of one of their several "already compromised on as generally acceptable to both" restaurants was worrying.

"Let's just go to one of our usual places for dinner," Wilson pleaded, as House continued driving them around.

"I'm looking for this place," House said.

"What place?"

"This place Cuddy goes. She's been yakking about it. It must have good food if she'll squeeze out a quarter from her fleshy coin purse to go there."

"What a lovely pre-dinner image you've loaded me with," Wilson said, squinting around them at the cluster of buildings around Plainsboro Square. "Do you remember the name?"

"Harrison Ford's or something."

"*What?*"

"Or the other guy. From that movie you like. One of them."

Wilson's eyes struck gold. "Do you mean Tommy Li's?"

"That's it! Tommy Lee's!"

"It's *Li* Lee not *Lee* Lee. And it's right there. You can turn around at the -- "

House dive-bombed the car across traffic to a naked piece of curb. He zealously jammed them into the slot. "There we go. That was easy."

Wilson had to cough before he could breathe. "Yes and as soon as I've untied my sphincter from my large intestine, we can get out of the car."

"What a lovely pre-dinner image you've loaded me with," House said grinning big and opening his door.

It was a narrow but deep room with rows of black lacquered tables that were primarily empty except for those by the walls. At the farthest end was a small stage set-up with an overly large karaoke strapped with speakers. The scene already looked hazardous to Wilson's mood. House appeared to be screening it all out as usual.

A smiling Chinese lady showed them to a table midway between the entrance and the stage. She plunked down the menus and scurried away.

House backed into his chair. Wilson was already seated, advancing through the menu with gradually glowering eyes. "Mr. Li's famous barbecued pork tenderloin sandwich? I've never even heard of the sandwich, let alone that Mr. Li is famous for

it. Just because you put something between two slices of bread does that make it a legitimate sandwich?"

House's eyes grew wide with fake alarm. "Are you calling their sandwiches bastards?"

"Essentially. Cream cheese salad on rye? Cream cheese salad's not even a regular food on its own let alone a sandwich. First you make it in the regular menu, then you go onto the sandwich zone. Roast beef, roast beef sandwich ... ham, ham sandwich. Everybody knows that."

"If you can make it there, you'll make it everywhere. Stop whining. They have great cheeseburgers. You like cheeseburgers."

"I thought the idea was to have fun food ... whatever that is. Pizza sandwich? What the hell is a pizza sandwich? There's something inherently wrong with that. It's a calzone ... why don't they call it a calzone?"

"Because it's not one?" House suggested.

"Can I help you?" said a younger Chinese lady with a brighter smile.

"Cheeseburgers. Two. Well-done," House said. "Do you fry your onion rings in lard?"

She smiled apologetically. "Yeah, kinda."

"Perfect. Times two," House replied. "Extra for him. And beer. A pitcher. The good stuff."

"Lowenbrau?" she asked.

House scowled a little. "If that's your idea of *the good stuff*."

Suddenly, the speakers on the stage squealed and someone was taking a seat beside the karaoke machine. House vaguely registered the action in his peripheral vision and the waitress was blocking Wilson's view.

"Great. Now someone's gonna commit karaoke. In public," House said, wincing at another speaker squeal before he asked their waitress, "Excuse me, do you have a *no karaoke zone*?"

"Sorry, no. But that's Lisa. She's a regular. She's not too bad," she said as she left for the kitchen.

When she had cleared the way, they both had a direct view of the stage.

House's stare seemed to expand to the width of the room when he recognized the woman about to commit karaoke. "Oh. My. God."

"What?"

"Look who it is!"

"House ... don't -- "

Wilson watched in his usual House-centered horror as one of the world's greatest medical minds struggled to his feet, thrusting up a hand like a first grader who needed to be excused to the bathroom. "Hey, *Lisa*, do you take requests? How about the Compulsive Control Freak Emasculating Bitch from Ipanema?"

At last, she saw them. She covered her face with her hands. "I'll be back in ten minutes," she said to the shreds of audience, then tossed the microphone aside with a squealing thunk to storm down the stage steps and toward their table.

Wilson was certain he had, sometime in the past, seen her more angry at House. He was hard pressed to remember when it was.

She folded her arms in indignation. "You have stumbled into the middle of my only after-hours recreation, House. You're cocking it up as usual. What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for what may be Wilson's dying brother's final gift to him," House said. "That beats out your *karaoke* any day."

Wilson shut his eyes, shook his head. "I'm sorry, Cuddy. He lured me into one of his fiendish plans again. I didn't know you'd be here. He said you told him about this place."

Cuddy's burning eyes singed House's general direction. "No, I scrupulously avoided any mention of Tommy Li's to House or anyone around House."

"But you kept your personal appointment book open. That was just asking for trouble," House said. Then House's smile widened to fill his face. "Speaking of cocking it up, big news. Wilson likes to kiss boys!"

Wilson's mouth gaped open in a slow-rolling shock amid the first strains of abject humiliation. "House!"

"Oh, you didn't want anyone to know?" House said grinning, covering his mouth with his hand. "I'm sorry! I guess I shouldn't have said anything."

"It's okay, Wilson," Cuddy said, struggling down a smile. "You can't think for a second I believe him."

"It's true. Ask his brother. He stole Wilson's boyfriend -- from the same people who brought you *They Saved Hitler's Brain*."

"House!" Wilson snapped again, using his hands to shield his face from anyone around them.

"Look at him," House said, pointing to his best friend. "Would he be blushing furiously like that if it *wasn't* true?"

She dropped into a chair at their table. She reached for a poppy seed roll from a basket. "I just must accept that there will be less public embarrassment for

everybody if I simply sit down until House gets this out of his system."

Wilson inhaled and exhaled. "Cuddy, I can explain -- "

She held up a hand. "It's okay. It's already forgotten. Standard employee policy when dealing with House."

"Like you're going to forget that Wilson likes kissing boys. Ladies and gentleman of the jury, just put it out of your mind that the defendant is a big closet queer."

"I am not -- " Wilson looked around, lowered his voice. "Just because I enjoyed kissing a man doesn't mean I'm gay."

"Doesn't make you straight either," House said, in as loud a voice as he could muster.

Wilson lowered his face to the table, his forehead against his arms. "Something tells me an emergency call to Dr. Martin is in order."

"You're seeing Martin?" House said. "That tweeby, ninety year old limey head shrinker?"

"Dear god," Wilson said to Cuddy. "Did I actually say the name aloud?"

The waitress appeared with their burgers. She dealt out the plates, then turned to Cuddy with a bright smile. "Anything for you?"

"No, thank you," Lisa said, with a resigned smile. "I'll be eating enough of my words to last a lifetime, thank you. As will my friend here."

"I said the name *aloud*. *Aloud*," Wilson said, in disbelief. He looked over at House. "Except it's not *that* Martin. It's another Martin. It's a female Martin. A black female Dr. Martin."

House smirked in reply. "First name?"

Wilson's frantic gaze skirted over the condiments jar of *Horace's Real Brown Mustard*. "Dr. *Horace* Martin. Pardon me, *Horice* actually. It's the Maurice, Morris thing, only in reverse, only in this case a female version of course -- "

"No dice, Wilson," Cuddy said, smiling sympathetically. "You're a really awful liar. Plus he knows you too well. It's just not happening."

Wilson shook his head hard, pounding his forehead with his hand. "I can't believe I spoke the name in his presence. What is wrong with me?"

"Nearly twenty years of continuous hyper vigilance. You were bound to screw up sometime. Don't beat yourself up. That's House's job." She bit into a roll, a guilty smile stealing across her lips as she did so. "Besides, he might kiss you afterwards."

House's laugh eruption squawked like a shocked bird across the room. He offered her high five. "You da man!"

She high-fived House but smiled an apology over at Wilson who was staring at her in stunned disbelief. "I'm really sorry, Wilson," she said, giggling a little. "I've been working around him too long."

"I guess," Wilson said, reaching into his pocket. He pulled a twenty out and dropped it onto the table. "Don't charge mine on David's card, House. I'll be taking a cab home."

"James!" Cuddy said apologetically, reaching for an arm she didn't catch.

"No, it's not ... it's just ... I just need to ... not be here," he said, turning around to beat a hasty retreat toward the doors and into the darkening street.

"House, say something!" she said urgently.

"Say what? He won't listen to me now. You had to open your big mouth with the boy kissing stuff."

"Me?" she said. "You said it more than I did!"

"I can. I'm an insensitive ass. I've known him for two decades. It's like living next to a cow pasture. Over the years, you don't notice the smell anymore. He expects a little respect from you. He hadn't seen the Mrs. Hyde side of you I have."

"Now I feel bad," she said, staring over at Wilson's now empty chair.

"Relax," House said, chewing into the burger. "He just needs to stew by himself in his well of self-loathing. I'll go check on him later. Why don't you go sing? I've got hellish tinnitus today. Your singing has to be better than the noise inside my head."

"Thank you for that vote of confidence, House," she said, standing. "I'd imagine you're going to make rude sounds and gestures and comments to the stage?"

He stared up at her with a hurt look of surprise. "I'm shocked that you have to ask me that question. Of course I am. And what moral high ground have you to stand on, Dr. Wilson-be-Gone?"

"Sorry. Stupid question. I've sown the seeds of my own public disgrace, haven't I?"

"And you went quietly as a lamb, too," he said, biting into an onion ring with a toothy grin.

He flicked through the channels finding nothing but emotional and intellectual noise. Some bad old domestic trope with Rock Hudson and Paula Prentiss. Dark Victory, but the mediocre Elizabeth Montgomery and Anthony Hopkins version, not the classic original one. The news on all channels was remarkably the same and he'd heard it all anyway in the cab ride from Tommy Li's to his hotel. That had been hours ago.

The clock read 11:11. Another 11:11 thing. He had a lot of those these days.

The knock at the door was surprising, given the hour. And given the fact the lobby hadn't rung up to alert him. He didn't know any of his neighbors. It could only be one person.

Wilson walked to the door, putting his eye to the peephole, looking out.

House was trying to stare back in at him.

Wilson sighed in defeat and opened the door in surrender. "Hi," he said simply, walking away so House could enter the room behind him.

"You missed the sultry song stylings of Lisa Cuddy. My left ear is still bleeding." House looked around the room then plunked down on the suite's one loveseat. "Actually, to be honest, she wasn't all that awful. You, on the other hand, look like your dog died. Oh, whoops, that's right, he did."

"I'm ... fine," Wilson said, with little conviction.

"Still pouting like an offended sniveling six year old or is it safe to be here?"

"It's safe," Wilson said, dropping onto the sofa to sit beside the other man. He reached for the remote and flipped the TV through a couple of more channels. "After today, I just couldn't do the banter."

"I was at the hospital before I came here." House said. "He's stable."

"Thanks."

"He's still going to die, but he's stable."

"I understand that. Thanks for the information."

"Not that you'll notice since he hasn't been a part of your life for as long as I've known you -- "

"Yes, I get that. I understand. Okay? Thank you."

"Hey," House said simply.

Wilson look toward him, mainly out of curiosity about a moment of quiet after such a pointed word and found his eyes aligned with House's. House was staring into his eyes with such a simple, uncomplicated love that left Wilson too stunned to say a word or move or really do anything besides just sit there.

Until House leaned down and pressed his lips gently against Wilson's. They lingered there for seven seconds before Wilson finally bolted to his feet.

"What the hell was that?" Wilson said, protecting his mouth as if he'd punched him and not kissed him.

House was smiling. A lot. Mischief was dancing in his eyes. "An experiment. I like

kissing boys, too. Well, I like the *idea* of kissing boys. I'd never actually kissed one before. As a certain now twelve year old child of our acquaintance said to Chase, I wanted to know what it felt like before I die. So I kissed you. And it was even better than I thought it would be."

"You didn't stop to think that after today that might not be -- Who am I saying this to?" Wilson said.

"Are you saying you *didn't* like it?" House asked, with a look of inquiry that had little actual question behind it.

"I'm not saying anything. It just -- shocked me. My best friend leaned over and kissed me. That wouldn't shock you if I did that to you?"

"Like you'd have *ever* done that to me," House said. "No, I'd have just been happy I didn't have to bankroll getting you drunk enough to do it. So. Did you like it?"

Wilson's battle against a smile was lost. He averted his eyes. Nodded a little like a confession. "It was ... nice."

"Nice like kissing Shannon was nice?"

Wilson's smile wobbled a little. He was blushing again. "Nicer."

House grinned, clearly pleased with himself. "Okay then sit back down and I'll kiss you again. Longer this time."

Wilson covered his face with his hands, as if seeking an inner calm. He walked away from the sofa, folding his arms tightly against him. He stared up into a darkness lurking overhead.

"House, this could change us -- "

"For once in your pathetic life, don't fixate on consequences. It made us both feel good and closer. That's not going to change anything for the worse. Sit back down and let's do it again. I want to. Do you?"

Very slowly, Wilson settled himself down on the sofa again beside House.

House reached behind Wilson's head, slowly tilting him sideways as House leaned in towards him. Their gazes were once more aligned.

Their lips met softer than before. House's hand slipped under Wilson's chin to keep their mouths perfectly together before slipping a gentle intrusion of tongue against Wilson's lips. The lips parted for him but House finally moved away.

He smiled clearly into Wilson's eyes before moving his hand beneath Wilson's jaw to press fingers against his carotid artery. The pulse House felt there made him smile a lot.

Wilson, blushing again, had been about to look away, but House held Wilson's head in place, then reached for the other man's hand to press his fingers against House's neck in a similar place. Wilson could feel the steady pulse like House's own

confession against his fingers -- just as strong, just as fast. Wilson smiled gently in understanding.

"It's almost midnight," House said tightly, clearing his throat of the remnants of the last kiss. He stood up slowly. "Morning comes early."

Wilson followed after him like a lost dog, close but far enough. House finally reached the door and opened it before looking around.

When their eyes met, a smile surfaced softly on House's mouth. Gazing into Wilson's somewhat less frightened eyes, House brushed his lips against Wilson's mouth. The kiss was the gentlest yet.

"Good night, Wilson," he whispered while keeping his smile.

Wilson swallowed hard, breathed deep. "Good night, House," he managed to murmur, watching as House moved away down the hall at a slow and reluctant pace.

Two: Something about Kissing

He'd risen late, stopped for coffee, and checked in to a Gatling gun barrage of messages. His morning was a frenzied hail of patient appointments. Interferon scrips for a recurrence, a new patient who needed hand-holding, an old patient in need of stronger pain meds and sympathy, a handful of incidental matters readily dispensed with.

He was actually grateful for the hectic morning. It had made it harder to remember what he was never going to really forget.

He had kissed House. Three times. And it had been far more than merely nice.

The matters of the morning cleared, he was going over ... or so he thought ... a new list of symptoms of a possible recurrence in another patient. The tests weren't in yet, but he thought he might spot a pattern in the trends. Every once in awhile, his mind would move back to the memory pressing against his lips. But then he'd shove

that memory aside, trying to reestablish the pattern in his head.

He gradually felt the intrusive presence of eyes.

He looked toward the presence. House was standing on the other side of his glass door, looking in from the outside. The other man was smiling knowingly.

Wilson laughed to himself. Shook his head. Beckoned him inside.

"Are you with a patient?" House said.

"Yes, I am, as a matter of fact. Invisible Man meet the Invincible Dr. House. No, as you can clearly see, House, I'm alone. But then since when has my being with a patient ever stopped you?"

"Today it wouldn't have," House said, limping determinedly in Wilson's direction before moving behind his desk and pitching away his cane.

Wilson turned toward him, looked up, smiled in shared mischief. "Yes?"

Instead of replying, House grasped Wilson's arm to haul him out of his chair and into a long, greedy, urgent kiss that lasted as long as House's breath held out. Wilson just melted into it, forgetting where he was and what he'd been doing.

House broke away to breathe. "God, I *needed* that," he said finally while he drank in air. "I *really* needed that."

"Tell me about it." Wilson grasped the edge of his desk to pull himself together. "I've been trying to keep from thinking about kissing you *all day*. It hasn't been easy."

House grasped hold of Wilson's chair to retrieve his cane. He checked his watch. "I have a lap in a half hour. I'll be done by 2:30. We can kiss some more then."

"House!" Wilson said.

The other man had been about to reach for the door when he turned back around to his name. "What?"

"*What?*" Wilson said, looking around the room as if seeking the keys to this mystery. "What is this? What's going on with us here?"

"It's called kissing. I thought we defined that last night."

"I know it's kissing, but what does it mean? It's a very complicated new wrinkle to our relationship, you must admit. And I thought our relationship had more than enough complicated wrinkles to begin with."

"You have to make a big deal out of everything!"

"It *is* a big deal. Two male friends don't usually say, hey, how about those Giants, now how about another hot kiss?"

"Come on, we haven't even slipped each other tongue yet!" House said, incredulous. "It doesn't have to mean *anything* besides kissing people is fun. Why should it be any different than foosball?"

"There's a big difference between the kind of kissing we've been doing and our games of foosball. And there was definitely the presence of tongue in our second kiss last night."

"Okay, okay. Now shut up and kiss me. I have a lap."

"Wait. No. We have to figure this out!" Wilson said a little helplessly.

"Okay. I still have a lap. Maybe we can kiss later -- "

"Wait!" Wilson said, even more helplessly.

He closed the distance between him and House and pulled the other man toward him before craning up high enough to start the kiss and end it after a long, moist moment.

House shined a smile down into Wilson's eyes. "Dinner tonight? My place? We can do take out and watch TV. And kiss a lot more, of course."

Wilson nodded, a vision of surrender. "Oh, yeah."

Jorge Brown's office was a smaller version of House's only except Jorge preferred lots of light compared to House's marked preference for gathering gloom. As Wilson entered, House was already seated in the center chair. He and Jorge were arguing over staging ... as usual.

"It's three," House said.

"If you're going to overrule my opinion, why did you ask it? I don't see enough involvement -- "

"Only because you won't see it. It's artful and elusive which is why, combined with the fact you're an idiot, you can't see it, but it's there. Look at his spleen alone. It's three."

"It's two. The extent of it just doesn't meet the criteria -- "

"Like hell it doesn't. You're just such a sanctimonious, anally obsessive authoritarian -- "

"I'm authoritarian?"

"At last, you admit it."

"Guys, please," Wilson said sharply. "I just came from pediatrics. I don't need a flashback. In fact, the general emotional age around me has dropped dramatically."

"Nice of you to get your ass in here finally," House said with marked relief. He reached for the folder and handed it to his best friend. "I need a second opinion."

"Third opinion," Brown said.

"In *your* opinion."

Brown rolled his gaze around the room. "Your ritual insults aside, Wilson is hardly in a position to stage this."

"It's okay, Jorge. I've got it." He hovered a moment, flipping through the folder filled with the newest test results. He checked numbers, he rechecked film up to the light, he looked over the associations. At last, he plunked the folder down on Jorge's desk with a decisive sound. He shook his head and said, "It's three. House is right."

"Okay," Jorge said, gesturing expansively as if to drive back objections. "It's three. Which means what? In his condition? How much does he want to fight this?"

"He's a kid," Wilson said. "He doesn't know what he wants."

"He's 37," House said. "He's a grown man. His has to suffer the treatments. He has to live through the pain. It's his call."

"It's not just his call," Wilson said. "He's still in shock from the diagnosis. He could exaggerate the amount of suffering involved. He might be distorting reality because he doesn't want to deal with the actual implications."

"It's his reality to distort," Brown said.

"Are we still talking about your brother?" House asked, looking around to him with glowing purpose in his eyes.

Wilson looked away. "I just want to be certain he knows the options. There can't be anything wrong with that."

"The odds *and* the options?" Brown asked.

Wilson nodded. "Both. House can present the negative side of things, I can opt for the positive side."

Brown nodded. "God knows, if anyone is in a position to give the negative side of things, it's House." He shoved the folder back in their direction. "That's my assessment, take it for what it's worth."

House rose out of his chair. "I've always said, Jorge, you put the *ass* in *assessment*."

Brown nodded. "And I consider that high praise from a bastard."

"Why, fuck you very much."

"You're most unwelcome."

Wilson yanked open Brown's door as if it was about to explode from pressure. "House, out. Now."

"Out?" House said, grinning as he walked past him into the hall. "What an odd choice of word."

When they have moved enough distance down the hall, Wilson whispered, "Can we please leave various ... personal things outside the hospital?"

"Oh, sure. Wait, you mean when we're not snogging in your office?"

"Okay, let's say we leave the personal things *between us*."

"Meaning we *shouldn't* make out in the doctor's lounge?"

"We're not *making out*, we're ... kissing, remember? Same as foosball?" Wilson said softly, casting a worried look around for other ears. He checked his watch, remembering all the darker regions of the day. "I have to go talk to David. I forgot I have a eulogy to give in two hours."

"Want me to help?"

Wilson was staggered back in astonishment for yet another time in the last two days. "No, but thanks for the offer. I can cover the usual course of treatment. There'll be time later for your -- "

"Not help with David. You can handle him," House said, with a ludicrously sympathetic smile. "I mean the funeral for poor Hector."

Wilson's eyes filled with suspicion. "But I thought you said you had absolutely nothing to do and would therefore be unable to attend."

"I did, but something came up. I can go now. I could tickle the ivories -- make music -- play a doggie funeral dirge or two -- "

"No."

"Do you need more pallbearers? I could pass out mass cards and milkbones?"

"No. Just ... no."

His brother was sitting up sketching something. David looked up with a sad smile when he saw him.

Wilson took a deep breath. "It's -- "

"Stage three," David said. He set his pen and pad aside. "Yeah, I could see it on your face when you came in. You walked in too quickly for stage four. But you weren't smiling. Not the worst case scenario but close. So what do we do now?"

"Chemotherapy," Wilson said.

"Chemo? That stuff kills healthy tissue along with the cancerous kind, doesn't it?"

"Nevertheless, it's the treatment of choice. We support life so that when the cancer is gone, health can be restored. That's the whole idea."

"Cruel to be kind?"

"Something like that, yes." Wilson sat down on the edge of his bed. "What's this I hear about your coming here on purpose to see me?"

David stretched a smile. "Yeah, I did. I didn't want you to get all big brotherly on me so I acted like it was a surprise."

Wilson smiled and settled back a little. His mind filled up with bright pieces of memory. "Remember when Charlie next door knocked you off your Big Wheel?"

"I still have scars from my ankles to my ears. What do you think?"

"You ran to me then, too. Because I was your big brother."

"Yeah, well, Charlie beat the piss out of you, too. You were never exactly a bruiser."

"I know, but I took the beating for you, let's say. You might also say you ran to me now. Even with all the crap. You and Shannon and your stretches of homelessness. The fights. The visits that exploded into arguments. Even though the last one lasted ten years, I'd ask you to listen to me now. Like it matters."

"It does matter. But I am an odd duck who can't goose step, my brutha. I have my own view of what I should do. As long as I'm not in hideous pain or unable to do anything, I'll fight. But there's a point where it's just not worth it."

"The only alternative to fighting is dying."

"I know that. Dying will be tough, but death's not bad, it's just nothing. It's not like I'll be locked up in a coffin somewhere, scratching at the lid going *I can't get out and see anything*. Or, if there is a life after this one, I'll finally be part of some kind of majority -- the dead. It'll be great. Two Beatles, Joey Ramone, all those movie stars, at the biggest and best club scene ever. No cover charge, no last call -- the party goes all night long. Like the mixologist said to the horse when he walked into the bar, why the long face?" He patted his brother's chin. "Speaking of being locked up somewhere. I lived my life so that when I came to die -- in the words of Henry

David Thoreau -- rhymes with Zorro, doesn't sound French -- I might discover that I had not lived."

"I live quite well," Wilson said.

"Yeah, right. James Wilson, World Class Overachiever."

"We're talking about you now."

He ran a hand back through AIDS-thinned hair a shade lighter than his brother's.

"Yes, you're always talking about somebody else, aren't you?"

Wilson stopped in mid-thought. He rubbed at his forehead, counseling himself internally for a long moment, but finally resolved to go on. "How do you know what I'm talking about? Or who I am? You barely even know me."

"Oh, like you've changed so much."

"I have, but you obviously haven't. You follow your own star regardless of anyone else. I'm an over-achiever? You're the world-class under-achiever. You beat everyone out by failing better than anyone at everything. You can't have life on your terms so you're just going to die."

"That's my choice."

"And my life is my choice."

"Your life is a shambles, Captain Closet Case. I heard your lecture. Now here comes mine." David leaned down to peer up into his eyes. "Don't tell me Greg isn't special. I can see it in your eyes when you look at him."

"He's my best friend," Wilson said, as if he was trying to convince the both of them. "And I'm not in a closet."

"Shorty Saunders in the third grade was your best friend. You never looked at Shorty that way. If you had, he'd have kneed you in the nuts. When you look at Greg ... and when he looks back at you ... it's like no one else is in the room. You both only exist for each other. That's *not* just friendship love."

"We've been friends for twenty years. We're a deep part of each other's lives. Sometimes, we're ... affectionate with each other ... well, I'm affectionate with him. That's all you're seeing. And anyway, you're projecting. You feel guilty about the past and you're trying to envision something that isn't there," Wilson said, taking up his brother's chart to scribble something on it.

"When's the last time you took a vacation?"

"When's the last time you read a book?" Wilson snapped back, finally at the end of his rope.

David smiled. "Funny you should mention that," he said, reaching under the covers to retrieve a small paperback. He displayed the title. "You should read it."

"*Walden Pond*," Wilson said. "By Henry David Thoreau -- rhymes with Zorro, doesn't sound French? I've read it. And *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* and most of his other books."

"Bully for you. Have you ever been there?"

"No."

"Boop. Wrong answer, Dr. Greglove. You *have* been there. Once with me. When I was a Webelo Scout in my year of B.S. hell. My Scout troop leader ... aka our father ... dragged you along to help like some fledgling feudal serf? Then he made us read Emerson till our eyes bled."

Wilson laughed, nodding. "Right. I'd somehow conveniently forgotten."

"I wish I could. I got stomach flu at Sleepy Hollow cemetery and threw up all over Bronson Alcott's grave."

"Ah, yes, this is coming back to me now in startling clarity. Dad blamed me."

"Of course he blamed you. Everything I did up to age twelve was your fault. Everything I did after age twelve, was mine. Nothing was ever his fault or Jack the magic dauphin's." He pushed the book into his brother's hands. "Despite my personal hell during the trip, that's my clearest memory of the two of us just hanging out together. I keep all this to remember that trip. So do me a favor? Along with *Walden*, there's a little article on the transcendentalists I like to read. A couple of Emerson poems ... okay, I confess I like him now. There are also a few pictures from our trip. You read and peruse all that and I'll take your silly chemo. Trade?"

Wilson sighed his relief and nodded, taking the book. "Yes, god forbid you'd simply take the chemo to extend your life. But if that's what it takes, I'll read it."

"I'll give you a test afterwards."

"I don't doubt -- " Wilson stopped, holding the book as if gauging something on its surface. He shoved the book into his lab coat and reached for brother's hand. "This book is warm where you were holding it. Are you having chills?"

"It's a little drafty, I guess."

Wilson stood up from the edge of the bed and reached for a blanket off the other one. Handing the blanket to his brother, Wilson unclipped his pocket thermometer to ease the rubber probe into David's ear.

"What's wrong?"

"Your temperature is 101."

"Is that bad?"

"It's not good. It's not high enough to be particularly bad. How are you feeling?"

"As good as I ever feel these days. Like crap with a side of optimism to it."

Wilson grabbed up his chart again, making a note. "We'll keep an eye on it. It may just be dehydration. On my way out, I'll have them bring in something for that and your fever. Try to get some sleep. I'll check in on you in the morning."

"Running away to your ridiculous doggie funeral? You ought to be going out with Greg or something."

"Actually, I am in a way," Wilson said. "Not how you mean, however. We're getting takeout and watching TV."

"Hey, tall trees from little acorns grow."

Wilson laughed. "Where did you get that? A fortune cookie?"

"Hey, big wisdom comes from fortune cookies. That and they're low in fat. While we're at it, you should also be making plans for Greg's birthday on the 21st."

"Wait ... Practically nobody knows House's real birthday. How did you find out House's birthday?"

"Parlez les mots que je parle. *How did you find out Greg's birthday?*"

Wilson shook his head to himself. "Never mind. We don't celebrate his birthday *on* his birthday. It's a ... Christmastime birthday thing."

"So what? He's an atheist and you're a Jewish agnostic. When do you celebrate it?"

"We celebrate his half-year birthday on June 11th even though technically it would be June 21st. He says he picked June 11th, 1959 as his unofficial birth date because that was when the Postmaster General banned D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*."

David snorted out a loud laugh. "I love it! It's so Greg!"

"Yes, well, you're one of ten people in the world who know that, which makes me wonder how you found out."

"Eric told me, I think. Or Robert."

"Eric or -- Oh, you mean Foreman or Chase?"

David sighed. "You are hopeless. I mean, maybe I get why you put up the wall with Greg, since you're in denial and all, but is it everybody?"

"We're doctors. It's how we do things."

"It's how you always do things." David shook his head with a lengthy sigh. "Run along now. The grieving Julie awaits you."

"The grieving Bonnie."

"Bonnie ... Julie ... who the hell cares about your sad chain of broken beards. *Parlez les mots que je parle.* **Greg.**"

"I had known Hector ... since he was a pup actually," Wilson said, smiling, hoping his flash of wit might stir a smile on some of the tenaciously morose faces. He got nothing. He went on, "Hector was a ... good ... dog. He didn't always behave, but he gave clear signs that he was trying to ... as best he could ... comply with *basic* household rules. He lived a year longer than is the norm for his breed. While Hector and I had not ... seen each other for awhile before he died, I am told he had enjoyed his last year -- "

A loud burst of music arose suddenly from behind a tree. It was Elton John. *Funeral for a Friend*. From the way Bonnie whirled around tensely at the sound, it was clear to Wilson it wasn't a planned part of the ceremony. An unplanned part of the ceremony, to Wilson, could only mean one thing.

Dear god, don't let him make me laugh, Wilson said stoically to himself, chewing a little at the inside of his lip to stay his response. *Not that. Not laugh. Not here.*

Bonnie had turned back in Wilson's direction, looking more determinedly aggrieved than ever.

"He enjoyed his last year," Wilson pressed on, "with regular walks around the dog park, many of whose denizens I'm told we have in attendance. He also played with his stuffed plushie bear named Pinky. He enjoyed sleeping on his favorite satin pillow -- "

"And he liked licking his balls, too!" a voice called out of the tree.

Bonnie had obviously instantly identified the voice of her nightmares. Her eyes shut. The rage was wafting off of her like solar flares from the sun.

Wilson thought he was about to perforate the inside of his lip. And it was beginning not to work anyway. He masked a surprised giggle behind a fake cough. He forcibly cleared his voice. He coughed again to reclaim his voice and then going on, "And he liked to lie in the sun, with the drapes open, particularly in the afternoon. He enjoyed having his hair brushed. And gnawing on his favorite rubber squeeze toy shaped like a steak. Especially in the morning."

"And he liked *licking his balls!*" the tree voice chimed in again. "Especially in the evening."

"Gregory House!" Bonnie yelled out, lunging first to her feet and then in the general

direction of the tree. "Prepare to die!"

"If you'll excuse me, everyone, I have to prevent a murder," Wilson said to the rest of the faces as he ran in the direction of Bonnie. Her bearings were locked onto the tree like a heat-seeking missile.

Wilson caught her arm in time to pull her back before she sunk her porcelain claws into House's smirking face.

She stopped herself, yanked her arm away from Wilson, stumbling back a step. She gasped for air, pointing a long, bony finger at House. "I loved my dog!"

"Please!" House said, sneering. "I loved my dog, too. He died in my arms when I was twelve. We dug a hole for him under the daiku shed near the tomato plants and then my mom baked cookies to make us feel better. This isn't for your dog. It's for you."

"Hector was my dog. If I choose to solemnize his passing -- "

"Solemnize? You put poor Hector's twenty-four ounces of doggie ash and kibble in a moronic-looking \$500 ceramic urn shaped like some shitty artist's idea of what a terrier looks like. He'll be encased for all eternity in a stupid-looking \$1200 memorial doggie crypt. This isn't about him anymore, this is all for you, you and your self-centered one-woman show of public grief with poor Wilson expected to pay the tab *and* serve as master of ceremony."

"James only paid half."

"No, he paid all of it. He loaned you all of it and you're supposed to pay him back the other half whenever you have it which will be a week from never ever. And don't blame Wilson for telling me that. Blame yourself for leaving a detailed message."

"You listened to that very private, personal message that I left him today?" she said, aghast.

"Don't be ridiculous. I always listen to his private, personal messages. Not just yours."

She took a deep breath, pointing at House then looking to Wilson. "I will finish the ceremony. Just. Get. Him. Out. of. Here."

Bonnie turned around and stormed back in the other direction.

Wilson gestured toward the parking lot as House was pulling out an mp3 player from inside the tree. He plucked up his cane from the ground.

"You know," Wilson said, in a conciliatory tone, "she has the perfect right to be angry for that."

House limped along at his side as they began their walk to the car. "Yeah. Right. And everyone has the unalienable right to kiss my ass."

"And," Wilson went on in a formal voice of repudiation, "she has the absolute right to

memorialize Hector in any way she chooses."

"So long as somebody else pays for it."

"That said," Wilson added, lowering his voice into a terse tide of gratitude and relief, "*thank god* you rescued me. I felt like an absolute idiot up there."

"And you looked like an even bigger one."

"Thank you, as always, for allaying my fears. Since when do you have a MP3 player?"

"I don't. I borrowed it from Other Brother. Well, borrowed is too broad a term. Stole with intention to return is more like it. Bitchin' sound, too." He handed it back to Wilson. "You can return it with your compliments."

"Don't cover for him. I'm sure he's in as deeply with this as you are."

"Mr. Gay Nicey-Nicey? Please!"

"Don't let David fool you. My brother may seem deceptively nice, but he's got a mean streak a mile wide. Especially where practical jokes are concerned. Not since The Riddler joined forces with Hush has the idea of two entities combining their talents so concerned me."

"*David Wilson?*"

"See. Even you've been fooled." As they reached the small pet cemetery's parking area, Wilson looked around at the cars. "Where's your accident waiting to happen?"

"I locked it up. Had Cuddy drop me off. She was on her way to an evening Machiavellian management seminar. Required course, I guess. Now for the big event. What's on for tonight?"

Wilson turned around to unlock the doors, his gaze meeting House's over the top of the car. "What do you want?"

"Something hot."

"Mongolian?" Wilson suggested.

"Oh, we're talking about *food*," he said. "I was thinking pizza for dinner."

Wilson blushed a little, unable to suppress the cute smile that struggled with his mouth as he clicked the keychain remote to unlock their doors. "Pizza it is."

"Where the hell is it? We've been driving around for ten minutes."

"Seven," House said.

Wilson frowned a little. "I thought we were going back to your place or my hotel. So we could order pizza."

"Pizza, my ass, you wanted us to suck face."

Wilson tossed a nakedly hurt look over at him. "Didn't you?"

"Of course. Stop whining. It'll be worth the wait. You'll see what I mean when we get there."

"What's the name of the pizzeria?" Wilson said, squinting to scope out the storefront in the old business district at the top side of Pineapple Street.

"*Liza with a Zee.*"

"That's the name of a pizzeria?"

"They sell pizza."

"So does the Blue Marquee theater but that doesn't make it a pizzeria. Wait, *Liza with a Zee*, you said? There it is," Wilson said, sliding his car up to the empty curb beyond the door. His eyebrows crouched together while he examined the entry. "It looks like a bar."

"It's a pub."

"A pub that sells pizza?"

"Why are you so suspicious?"

"Why are you even asking me that question?" He shut off the car. "Okay, we're here. I'm sure there's a whoopee cushion or a squirting flower in there somewhere waiting for me, but we're here."

"We're just having dinner."

"We're *never* just having dinner."

"We're having dinner. Can't you trust me just a little?"

"You have got to be joking with these questions."

It might have been the tight t-shirt on the bartender or the black light Liza Live roof-

to-floor poster. Or it might have been the friendly sign to greet them: ***Liza With a Zee, the Plainsboro Pub for the gay community ... don't like it, leave it.***

"Oh, my God," Wilson said, rubbing all the way from his eyebrows down his face to cover his eyes. "How did I not see this coming? A gay bar? It was the obvious plot complication."

The host approached them smiling. "Where may I seat you gentlemen?"

"Somewhere dark and romantic," House said with a smirk at ready.

The cozy corner with a full view of the little pub was their table. The whole place seemed small from that vantage, facing as they were the visage of Liza Minnelli hanging on the corner shoji screen.

"Oh, Liza with a Zee ... I get it now!" House said, examining the poster from afar. "She doesn't look a thing like her mom."

"She has her eyes. But mainly she looks like her dad, Vincent Minnelli," Wilson replied.

"Pity she was an only child," House said with a theatrical sigh.

"She wasn't. She has a couple of siblings. The singer Lorna Luft is her half-sister ... Besides why are you asking? You don't care."

"Rank curiosity, I guess. You're wrong though. Lorna Luft was Roslyn Kind's sister."

"No, Roslyn Kind is Barbra Streisand's -- " Wilson stopped himself fully, rubbing his forehead again to try to summon any patience quickly forward into his temporal lobe. "Oh, god, I fell straight into that trap, didn't I? The ground opened up before me and I stepped right in. House, for the hundredth time, there is nothing inherently gay about knowing... musical trivia."

House snorted out a laugh. "No, but it's still fun watching you squirm."

"I wasn't squirming, I was -- Oh, my god," Wilson said, stumbling through the words while squinting into the corner at two men necking. He recognized one of them. "That's Tran Dinh Hung from Jersey General."

"No!" House said, swinging around to see him.

"Don't say anything! House, this is going too far. We're intruding on a colleague's private life."

"I didn't know he'd be here. Anyway, he doesn't care if we know."

"Who says?"

"Says the guy with his tongue stuck in his ear. Besides, with a first name like Hung, he should be more careful. He'll just think we're aboard the Good Ship Lollipop like he is. As soon as he surfaces from his expensive homoerotic spit bath, that is."

"Which brings me to the question ... how did you know about this place?"

"Okay, I lied. I have kissed boys before. Just not many. Or recently. Speaking of which." Wilson's head was tilted toward House as the other man's mouth surrounded his lips. The groan that struggled between them was stanchied by House's tongue as it drove downward through Wilson's teeth. Wilson's lips parted greedily to welcome the wet intrusion.

House pulled away for them to breathe. "Now *that's tongue*," he murmured into the ear of the other man who was fighting for breath for a couple of different reasons.

"It certainly was," Wilson gasped out, before he felt House's tongue slide under his ear. And the tender nibbling that quickly made him not give a fuck where they were. "God ... House ... " he groaned, finally forcing himself back into his chair to break contact. He was staring in disbelief at the inside of his eyes. He was drinking drunk deeply at air.

House smiled, his eyes shiny with an unsatisfied hunger. He was clearly happy with himself. "And that's a sneak preview of making out."

Wilson swallowed hard. "It's a good thing it was just a preview. If we had gone on, I'd have had a definite problem in a minute should I stand up."

"Now you know why we didn't go back to my place or your hotel. What would have happened would've freaked you out bigtime. I don't need a freaking out Wilson on my hands. Baby steps, like that anally repressed bald idiot on TV says."

Wilson shook his head at the thought. "You really think -- we would have ... "

"You get hot enough, you'll do any living adult under age 95, and that leaves out the extent of our undying fixation with each other. With what you've got burning a hole in your crotch right now and what I've got going on in mine, yes, we would have."

Wilson shut his eyes. At last, he nodded. "We can't do that. I mean, it would hurt our ... friendship -- "

House had picked up his cane then used it to prod the other man's leg in sheer frustration. "Wilson, you're an idiot."

"I know, you've told me. Why this time?"

"What do you think we've been doing the last couple of days?"

Wilson took in the question and then awkwardly looked away. "Okay, it's been a little more than merely affectionate, I'll grant you that. It's even been, okay, homoerotic at times -- "

A derisive snort from Gregory House was a thing to be remembered. Wilson had heard more than his share. This latest one sounded louder than all the ones before it.

"What?" Wilson said, even louder.

"To paraphrase kindly ol' Doc Wilson, people could build monuments to your self-denial. But we'll get to knocking down your monuments, so to speak, a little later."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Before House could reply, had he been about to reply, a smiling waiter in a ridiculously tight t-shirt was there to take their order. Wilson was able to deduce this fact from the t-shirt the waiter was wearing: *I'm here to take orders*, it read.

"A large Liza Piza, no anchovies," House said grinning. "And a couple of Cokes. No ice in my friend's. He's queer that way. Other ways, too, but that way where soda is concerned."

"House," Wilson said.

"What?" House asked, flashing his most innocent eyes.

The house lights then began to dim even further -- and they had been dark enough to begin with.

"Why are they doing that?" Wilson said.

"What?" House asked again, repeating his innocent eye blink.

"The lights. Why are they dimming?"

"Are you seeing spots before your eyes? Is your hearing affected?"

"Bite me, it's real. The lights are coming down. Why are they?"

The tight t-shirt waiter then pulled the shoji screen with Liza's image out of the way and into a corner, unveiling a ...

"Oh, god no," Wilson muttered.

"Gentlemen and ladies and ladies who used to be gentlemen," said a voice over a crackly PA. "Our own favorite karaoke songstress, Miss Lisa!"

Three people somewhere in the room applauded.

And Wilson watched poor, oblivious Cuddy walk from a backroom over to the corner beside the big, flashing karaoke machine. She picked up the microphone clinging to a peg. She turned in their direction.

Her eyes shut. Slowly.

House leapt to his feet. "Miss Lisa, I'd like to request *When the Lesbos Come Back to Capistrano*."

Lisa looked at him long and hard. She shook her head. She leaned her forehead against the lollipop mike. After a moment, she spoke into it, "House, I could pop you right now and not a jury in the world would convict me."

"I know," he replied, still standing, "but you need me. See, that's the ace up my sleeve."

She dropped the microphone and strode without fear of impunity straight to their table. "I talked to the management," she said. "I told them to watch out for you."

"It was such a freaky coincidence! You know the congenital occlusion I diagnosed last Easter? Our waiter is her big brother. What can I say? In their eyes, I am the risen God."

"But I paid money."

"I paid more. Well, Wilson did."

"That's where the \$40 went," Wilson said quietly, shaking his head at the stark irony shining all around him. "I'm sorry, Cuddy. It's like being a tennis hacker playing against McEnroe. You just can't stand close enough to the net."

"What do you care how *she* feels, Jimmy?" House replied loudly with a smirk to share with the room but which he aimed back at Cuddy. "You shouldn't expect more, you callous bitch. After you publicly made light of my best friend's confused sexuality."

Wilson turned away from them both, hiding his face with the hand propped up on an elbow.

Cuddy looked up at the ceiling for cold comfort. "House, House, House. We're all just pawns in your little world, aren't we?"

"Don't be ridiculous. You're a pawn. Wilson's my queen."

Wilson then surrendered his head fully against his arms folded atop the table. "At least we're outside the PPTH neighborhood," he consoled himself aloud. "Word surely can't spread *that* far on its own."

House elbowed him rudely. "Don't look now but Hung is paying close attention. I think he got the message though from my sucking on your tongue."

"You mean you two -- " Cuddy stopped short of the question, looking from one man to the other but then said, "Never mind, I genuinely *do not* want to know."

The waiter came around from the side with the pizza that he plunked at the center of their table.

"Anything for you, Lisa?" the waiter asked with a smile before leaving.

She surrendered to a chair, her head leaning into her hand. "Tequila. Salt. Limes. Now. On a separate check from *his*."

"You'll need to bring a roll of paper towels," House added. "I've seen her do shooters before. She leaves a debris field a mile wide."

Cuddy laughed with an aching sense of irony as the waiter walked away. She seemed to be rubbing at her own quickly gathering House-triggered headache. "Is

there anything else you'd like to say, House?"

House gestured to their dinner. "Pizza?"

She looked hopefully at the big serving tray. "Is there a knife involved?"

"Nope, just one of these rolling things. Hard to get any vascular traction with that." House cut out a slice and handed it along to Wilson's plate. He cut out a wedge for himself. He extended a hand to Lisa for her to pass along the plate from the setting beside her. "C'mon, Cuddy, unclench. You need food."

"I need a knife."

"Maybe later."

She surrendered her plate with a thoroughgoing sigh. "Alright. Why not? There goes my dream of thin thighs along with my pride and my only recreational activity. Tell me, House, do you have so little in your life that you devote this much time to screwing with me?"

"No. I usually have a full slate just screwing with Wilson, but he's going through a tough time right now." He faked a whisper across the table. "The g - a - y thing and all."

Wilson shook his head, chewing thoughtfully at his own pizza. "You know, the sickest part of all of this is that, while I'm humiliated, I'm not the least bit surprised. And by the way, I'm *not* gay, House."

"Did I spell gay? I meant g - o - y. Yeesh, your people are *so sensitive*." House chewed off a big part of his own pizza. "And by the way, yes you are. That time I meant gay."

"No. I'm not."

"Yes. You are."

The waiter plunked the implements of tequila destruction on the middle of the table. He hovered beside the table a moment more as if awaiting further instruction. "Stop arguing, you two," Cuddy said to the two men at her table, "if House is sucking on your tongue, Wilson, you're not exactly straight, right?"

She stopped herself, covering her mouth, as though unable to believe the sound of her own voice. Her gaze flickered up to the waiter who was already retreating with an amused smile.

Wilson looked at her with slightly less stunned but still overtly disappointed eyes. "Gee ... thanks."

"Oh, God, James, I'm so sorry. Honestly. What's the matter with me? It's like I'm turning into House. Is the moon full?"

Wilson sighed softly. "It's alright."

"Don't let her off so easy, Jimmy," House said, swinging a playful glare at her. "You cold-hearted bitch."

"Shut up, House," Wilson said, as methodically as a clock chimed. "Well, that takes care of the pesky matter of outing me to the hospital board and I didn't even need outing."

"Yes," House said, "You -- "

"Don't start that again," Wilson said. "Okay, maybe I'm bisexual. I *might* own that."

"No," House said, finishing his pizza, then thoughtfully swatting together his hands to rid them of crumbs. "I'm bisexual. You're *gay*. Gay as an Ungaro spring frock. A lover of men. You only have sex with women when they jump you. Or when you're imagining they're me. You went out with the sexually unquenchable queen of all funbags over here and you didn't even try to get fresh."

"Oh and God knows what a slut I am." Cuddy looked over at Wilson. "I'll do what I can to stop the rumors about you, James."

"Oh, yes, that will help," Wilson said dryly. "House and I were seen publicly soul kissing at a gay bar named *Liza with a Zee*. And while we're at it, hello, Hung, hope you did well at the Golf Jersey statewides again this year. You, Cuddy, have the extenuating circumstance of the karaoke matter to explain your presence. No, I'd say I'm certifiably screwed in the outing department, one way or the other."

Cuddy dumped the salt, plucked up a lime wedge and poured the tequila, but offered the glass to Wilson.

"Mazel tov," Wilson said, taking the shot of tequila and drinking it down without salt or lime required. He slapped the glass back on the table, rasping out, "And thank you."

She smiled regretfully. "Make you feel better?"

"Made me a little numb. Right now, that is mercy itself."

"Well," House said, reaching for his cane and the paper towels. "Cuddy, driven to drink. My best friend -- nudge, nudge, wink, wink -- outed in embarrassing public detail. I can see my work here is finished. Wilson, I suggest we depart these precincts and go back to Galilee where we belong."

"Wait," Cuddy said, folding her arms. "Why are you taking the paper towels? I thought you said I leave a debris field a mile wide."

"You do, but with us gone, they can just hose you down. You know how much these suckers cost now days?"

"Speaking of rising costs," Wilson said, bunching up his own napkin and pulling out his wallet. "I assume I'm paying, of course."

"Of course."

When Wilson had finished buckling his seatbelt and House was done ignoring the seatbelt warning noise, Wilson drove the car forward away from Liza with a Zee's now-fabled curb.

"When you get up to the street here, hang a right then go behind it into the ally."

"Why?"

"Have I ever steered you wrong?"

"Consistently."

"Your fault for not paying attention. Really, now, you'll be glad you did. Head up here and down the ally."

"What the hell," Wilson said. "Maybe I'll luck out and be abducted by aliens."

"Figures you'd be into anal probes."

Wilson sighed loudly for what had to have been the hundredth time that night alone. He turned right on the directed street and then drove on until he saw a brick fence fronting an old alleyway.

"We're looking for a really dark section."

"Somewhere to bury a body?" Wilson asked.

"Don't be silly. The ground's way too hard over here. Just up there on the right hand side, where you turn onto the old flat cement pad but there's nothing around it except a few dark cars."

"Okay," Wilson said, with the voice of surrender. He slowed the car into a dark spot next to an old Aqua Velva sign splashed across the side of a garage. "This dark enough for you?"

"We need darker," House said. "Up there, under the broken streetlight."

"Why, yes, that's the perfect place for a carjacking. Silly me for not wearing a more expensive watch," Wilson said, compliantly pulling the car forward until they were in the very place House had directed them to. "Now what?"

House smiled a little evilly. "Know where you are?"

"Somewhere dark and terrifying?"

"Relax. You're safe. The cops scrupulously avoid this place while peeping at it every hour on the hour." House leaned near Wilson's ear. "Hey. Look at me."

Wilson turned around slowly, almost fearfully.

House smiled. His eyes appeared weighted with just the right measure of wild mischief, as if his words and their meaning had been pre-calibrated to have the desired effect and he was, in turn, enjoying that desired reaction. "It's the local gay make-out place."

Wilson had still been clinging to the steering wheel, so he gripped it harder. He leaned his head forward -- fear, desire, wonder, a weird kind of relief and even more fear cascading in his gut so hard it was thrusting up around his heart.

"I thought you said I wasn't ready -- "

"Relax, what we're going to do you can't do in a public bar. But if you're still pigheaded about staying in denial, you'll be able to hold onto your semi-straight credentials in the morning." He leaned nearer to him, turning to pivot Wilson's head toward him. "Kiss me, Jimmy. Start it this time. Start it hard. You know you want to."

Wilson grabbed out for handfuls of House to pull him toward him, anchoring their mouths together by driving the other man back against the seat and using gravity to mesh their mouths together. Wilson's tongue thrust feverishly down into the hot moisture of House's mouth.

House's tongue swirled tenderly up into his mouth while his teeth nibbled at the sides of it, as if trying to suck Wilson's lips more deeply into his. He raked his fingers through Wilson's hair, taking control of the kiss.

But Wilson moved upward to break the grasp, once more pistoning his tongue deeply. Moving up to claim the kiss had cost him leverage.

He found himself swung down into the seat and up against the door.

It was such a raw and urgent groan, Wilson almost didn't own it until he realized House was smiling at the sound. His shining eyes were burning into his.

"Take out your cock and jerk off," the other man demanded, pouncing his lips around the soft, sensitive area behind Wilson's ear that had driven him crazy earlier.

Wilson writhed upward to somehow both escape from House's maddeningly sweet interest in his neck and to give him clearer access.

"I can't do that ... in front of you," Wilson choked out.

"Yes, you can. And judging from what you have crawling in your crotch, you want to. A lot. Go on. I want to be kissing you when you come."

"I'm not," Wilson gasped, "... not ready for ... this."

"Ready for what? You jack off twice a week if you're the average male your age. I'll just watch and kiss you, of course. We've been doing that all day. C'mon, whip it out before I decide to take a giant leap and just let you freak out. Two choices, Jimmy -- my hand or yours."

Wilson leaned up enough to see outside, straightening himself against the seat. He eased in a breath as he unbuckled his belt enough to unzip his slacks.

House's smile widened the farther down the zipper moved. His eyes were glittering with a mad and long-suffered kind of need. "Go on."

Whatever was left between flaccidness and hardness was now pulsing hot and rigid with blood as House's gaze slid over Wilson's cock.

"Do it," he murmured, not looking away.

Wilson slowly wrapped his fingers around his penis, beginning the slow, rhythmic slide of his hand. Everything that had been loading into his nerves for the last two days expanded to surge forward in a sharp rush of pleasure. That only made him move his hand harder.

"Take the precum and slide it down over your dick so it'll make your hand move faster," House said, in what was almost a groan. He did as directed, eliciting an even harder-edged moan out of House who murmured, "God ... Jimmy ... *Faster.*"

Wilson's hazy awareness flashed downward toward House's tight blue jeans. "It looks like you're packing," he gasped out, his eyes widening at the idea. "Why don't you let me watch you, too?"

House kept his gaze locked on Wilson's. Grinning with a hazy heat, House's hand jerked open his fly and reached inside to pull out his rock-rigid dick. "This won't take long," he said.

Wilson coughed out a broken laugh, fighting against the tension building quickly and completely through his muscles. "Tell me about it."

With the slick sound of flesh over flesh growing louder and wetter, House leaned toward Wilson so they were gazing into each other's eyes. He slipped his lips gently over Wilson's half-open mouth that immediately responded. Sucking at each other's mouths while Wilson's tongue jammed upward into House's mouth again. The groan wrung out of Wilson was hard, raw, and loud enough to force their lock on each other's mouth.

House buried his face in the comfort of Wilson's shoulder to moan through his own release.

Leaning against each other, a moment or two ticked away before either man opened his eyes. When they did, they were looking into each other again. Wilson wondered if all the terror and beauty and first overwhelming sense of peace he felt could be even half-visible in his gaze. He could easily see that at least some of all he'd experienced was mirrored in House's searching eyes.

Wilson for some reason heard himself whisper, "Greg ... Thank you."

House nodded, gulped for air, a smile spilling slowly over his lips. "You're more than welcome, Jimmy," he said, his hand reaching into the backseat for the paper towels earlier deposited there. He unwrapped his own and passed the role onto Wilson.

"This should help with the spill."

Wilson laughed when he saw them, took the roll, followed suit. "I should have known you had an ulterior motive." When he was cleaned off and his pants rebuckled, rezipped, he returned the paper towels to the back seat.

When he turned back around, House gripped hold of his hand. Wilson looked up into the eyes of the man beside him. House was smiling. Really smiling.

Wilson shook his head in silent agreement. House nodded in reply.

Wilson's cell phone beeped loudly. He reached for it, ready to tell whomever it was to fuck off but the text displayed there stopped him.

He slammed the phone down, and turned back around toward the wheel. "Get us back to the hospital."

"Why?"

Wilson took a breath before he could muster enough air to say it. "My brother's temperature just hit 105. Suddenly, he has pneumonia."

Three: A Conspiracy of Others

She was hopping on one leg, yanking off her other high heel as she entered the front doors of the hospital.

"You were inches from slamming into us," House said, walking quickly through the doors to get in front of her. "You're a public menace."

"Oh-oh, don't even. Don't even. Just ... get out of my face, House," she barked back, vanishing around the corner to her office.

"How did she know --" Wilson asked, looking at him uncertainly, as they pressed on toward David's ward.

House shrugged. "The flying monkeys must have told her."

David was sitting up looking cranky, holding the oxygen mask to his face. He looked noticeably more ill.

Daniels, the attending, was standing there looking worse for the wear. He handed them both the charted file but Wilson took hold of it. "We started him on antibiotics

for the pneumonia.”

Wilson nodded, reading the chart. “Why didn’t it show up yesterday? Nosocomial Pneumonia?”

“Or PCP again,” House said. “Third time’s the charm.”

“With a false negative chest film? It would make sense. He has PCP *and* stage 3 lymphoma?” Wilson asked himself then looked to the attending. “Sputum samples?”

“Already labbed.”

An explosion of coughing threw David forward. It transpired for another ten seconds until it seemed to subside. Quieted again, he sat backward.

“What is this, Jimmy?” he barked out. “I thought you guys were supposed to make me better.”

Wilson smiled in sympathy. “Looks like you’ve got pneumocystis carinii pneumonia again.”

“Crap, I was afraid of that,” David said, sucking at oxygen again. “Am I gonna die now or something?”

“No. Remember our discussion?” Wilson said, reaching up to move the IV tube for better delivery. “It was an agreement. You wouldn’t die. I’d read Thoreau.”

“You have everything under control here?” Cuddy said, dipping her head in the door.

House turned around to simper back at her. “Believe it or not, both Wilson and I have actual medical degrees. We didn’t buy ours off the internet.”

Cuddy pursed her lips, smiled at the wall, and then restored to a semblance of sanity, looked back. “When they couldn’t raise you at home, House, they paged me, okay? I came here because yours and Wilson’s little impromptu appearance at Liza with a Zee effectively crossed off my favorite karaoke place number two from my list.”

“Why? I didn’t embarrass you any more than I usually do.”

“Liza with a Zee?” a voice choked out in between coughing spasms. His eyes were big as night. “You two were at *Liza with a Zee*?”

Wilson exhaled, looking from Cuddy to House then over at his brother. “It’s a long story.”

“I’ll bet. And I want to hear it as soon as they’ve flushed this herd of live tap-dancing elk from my chest.”

“We’d better have an up-close and personal with your lungs,” Wilson said, adding something to the chart. “That can wait till morning. You seem to be breathing more easily.”

Wilson's brother nodded. "Thank heavens."

Wilson picked up the pocket thermometer off the ready tray and popped the rubber nodule into David's ear. "That's looking better. Oddly better. Any chills?"

"No, just a cough. And Commander Medico here won't give me anything for it."

"Sorry, better for the productive cough to produce. Think you can sleep?"

"I think I want to try," he said.

"Something?" Wilson asked, from the doctors lounge's resilient Mr. Coffee.

"No."

Wilson carried his coffee over to the sofa that now set even with the wall. Relaxing into the sofa, he drank heavily at the coffee to stave off the growing edges of numbness. House was hovering near the door as he stared in his general direction though, of course, not directly at him.

"I'm going home," House said, his pause seeming long and wide. "Coming with me?"

Wilson looked up, considered it a second. He gave a half-hearted shake of his head. "I can't. My brother is in critical condition."

"The brother you didn't know was still alive before yesterday? Why? Because you'll be of such invaluable assistance while he's clocking Z's?"

"Go home and sleep. I can't just ... go."

"You can't ... but that's not why."

Wilson laughed harshly to himself. He shut his eyes for a long moment before he finally turned back to ask the obvious question. "Okay, I surrender ... why?"

"Because you'd be with me. Behind a locked door. In a private place. With no windows."

"And this is?" Wilson said, looking around the room where they were clearly alone.

"This is a doctors lounge with forty-seven doctors with keys outside this door, to say nothing of Cuddy and the janitorial crew. My place would be alone alone. And the nearby temptation of a bed. But if you have to, be a coward. Sacrifice your life to pointless gestures. I'm not bound by them, too."

Wilson sat back in the sofa, shook his head at the floor. He sighed, loud and long,

like he was waiting for the inner turmoil to at last be at an end. "Business as usual, nothing has changed," Wilson said to the conspiracy of silence all around him. "Why did I think that ... maybe ..." His voice slipped over the edge of sound.

House moved to the door, holding it aside like a threat. He was glaring back at him, wordlessly. Finally, he walked out and let the door swing closed quietly behind him.

Wilson got up and turned away from the couch, toward the small personals area as if considering somewhere to hide. It would take his mind off the night. It would lure his mind away from the array of gentler promises he had just perhaps permanently passed by.

Wilson found the book where he'd placed it earlier when he'd been on his way to the funeral and points beyond. *Walden ... Walden Pond* as it was typically called. He'd read it once in high school, once in college, too. He was now bound by his word to read it again.

He sat down at the table.

From the book's center, tumbled out a trio of Polaroids. He laughed at the sight of the first one -- a very young, dour-looking David in a two-sizes too big Webelo ensemble that made the boy look like a Cub Scout had swallowed him whole. Next to him, the perpetually uncomfortable and incurably skinny Jimmy Wilson, swimming in a Boston Red Sox t-shirt. They were standing, grudgingly posing for the picture. Atop the North Bridge in Concord. The rude bridge. Many times rebuilt, but always atop the original. They looked a lot more than merely bored.

Wilson laughed again -- it was all coming back to him now.

The next pictures were of the two of them at Walden Pond, standing in Thoreau's cove beside the chained plot where Henry's cabin once stood. Another photo of them showed them standing beside its nearby reproduction.

It was the kind of vacation some adults loved. For two young boys, it was fourteen days of boredom that their father assured them "you'll remember with great fondness". Wilson had barely remembered it at all.

He set aside the pictures.

He opened *Walden* to a random page. The first line highlighted read:

On tops of mountains, as everywhere to hopeful souls, it is always morning.

Suddenly, the door to the lounge pushed back open. House had commandeered to the doorway a linen cart. He pulled a blanket off the linen cart and tucked the blanket under an arm. Plucking out a pillow, he gripped the edge piping between his teeth. He managed his way across to the couch, tossed the pillow into one end, and yanked the pills out of his pocket. To swallow his pills down, he reached for the coffee Wilson had just abandoned by the couch. Then House laid his body across the sofa's length and yanked angrily on the blanket to spread it out across him.

"Shut up," House said, before anything else could be said.

Wilson watched discreetly, over the top of *Walden*, until it was obvious the other man was sleeping. Only then did he let himself smile. An infinitesimal concession from House was worth a hundred from other people. Maybe even a thousand.

It is always morning, indeed.

There was nothing but the usual low-grade hospital noise during the night. House had, of course, been right. Nothing had happened.

Sometime around 2:30 AM, Wilson had dragged himself onto the floor, his head on one of the armchair cushions. Sometime afterward, someone had covered him up with another blanket. House had been gone by the time there was enough light sliding through the room to wake up Wilson. The source of Wilson's blanket would remain a mystery, although Wilson had half an idea.

He found his feet and opted for yet more coffee.

The next order of business was, of course, finding House.

He found him in the light lab, brooding over an array of objects. He looked no more sour-faced than usual but somewhat more intent. Wilson pushed open the door a little. "The new stuff?"

"Yeah," he said with an empty sound to his voice. "Other Brother has suddenly become interesting."

"Judging by your criteria for interesting, that doesn't sound good." Wilson walked across to the table to survey what was there. He leaned down for a closer look at a scan then scrutinized an earlier one again. "Where did it all go?"

"Look at his spleen. It's almost normal. But his white count and proteins are higher."

"The spleen is normal and now the white count is elevated? Spontaneous regression in lymphoma? It happens. But when it's done, it's gone. How could he -- "

"He couldn't," House said simply, shaking his head. "Something is missing ... besides the bulk, I mean."

"Pseudolymphoma, too, maybe?"

"PCP, pseudolymphoma *and* lymphoma?" House said. "Yesterday you were skeptical about a double-header."

"The pseudolymphoma might have led to the lymphoma. He's definitely staged too high, though. Brown was right. Maybe there's a hidden variable that connects them. Maybe Abfar?"

"Then a quarter of Europe's AIDS patients would have these symptoms, too." House nodded to the results. "I asked Brown to bring in an AIDS specialist."

"Why Brown?"

"Because," House said slowly, as if tempering his words. "He called it right. You didn't."

"You didn't either."

"I'm not an oncologist. You are. You screwed up. Bigtime."

There were so many moments in their embrangled history that consisted of stunned stretches of time of Wilson gaping at House. In all the surprise, such moments were still somehow entirely mundane. This time, Wilson was stunned long enough to fall silent. Inside, Wilson's objectivity played its usual game of leapfrog with his natural indignation. "In the first place," Wilson said at last, "he's not even your patient. It's not your call."

"I'm only talking to you now because it's you. I don't want to bring in Cuddy. I was hoping you'd not be an idiot and bring in Brown yourself."

Wilson shut his eyes, taking another breath of calm. "You mind telling me what I did that was so wrong?"

"First, you automatically agreed with me. You never automatically agree with me about anything, even the time of day. Maybe due to what you call our new relationship wrinkle, I don't know. On its own, it wouldn't have made you screw up this badly. It comes down to the fact you saw what you wanted to see. You didn't want to see plaques so you didn't. You misread results. Because you were afraid to see them any other way."

"I *wanted* to see the worst case scenario with David?"

"Yes. You were *afraid* to see a good outcome. That's pretty much the rule with you on any day, but in this case, because of idiotic loyalty to me plus your trying to act like Dr. Kildare, you made a really boneheaded, intern-level mistake."

Wilson looked away, unable to look back. He centered himself for another moment, fumbling through his glass menagerie of contrary reactions to deal with them one by one. "Interpretation is an art not a science," he said. "You know that. Pass the same results past ten doctors, get ten different analyses."

"But Brown called it. You didn't. You could have, you should have and you would have, but you didn't. If you'd listened to me, we'd have a couple of days back. Do you really want your brother to die because you're a pigheaded moron?"

Wilson turned sharply away to walk across the floor in a slow and gradual laying down of arms.

From a distance, a tangle of voices seemed to float toward them. Voices that were, to Wilson, immediately familiar. The familiarity bred a slow-rolling contempt.

As the familiar voices neared their end of the hall and grew louder, one of them said in a low and sardonic voice, "I named my sons after Kings. Who knew one of them

would turn out to be a queen?" And then another familiar voice snickered sharply in reply.

"This is all I need," Wilson said, pushing his way into the switchback hall.

His father and brother were standing there, looking like the vestigial original and a slightly exaggerated copy. Wilson was never particularly happy to see them on the best of days. This was not the best of days.

"Why are you here, Dad?" Wilson snapped out at him.

His father made a full turn in his direction. Even though his father had to have known Wilson was there, he acted surprised. "Well, hello, son. We're here to see David, of course."

"Here to see him," Wilson asked, "or here to scream at him?"

His father stoically checked the time on his watch. "Probably a bit of both, judging from his usual behavior. Unless he's changed remarkably. I was told at the switchboard he could have visitors."

"Well, for the moment anyway, I'm his doctor. That's my call. I *can* cut-off all visitors."

"Advisory heard and accepted," the older man said. "We promise to not overtax him."

"There's a promise he's never heard before," House shot back, bringing up the rear.

Wilson looked over at House with begging eyes, then began to lead the way down the hall. He said back to his father, "Where is Mom?"

"Your mother shared your concerns about my speaking with David. She has elected to come over later and separately. She sends her love."

"No one is going to cause a scene, Jim," Jack said, as always from behind.

"Most of our family and friends know how to behave ourselves in polite society." The older Wilson's gaze moved upward to the man walking behind Wilson. "And speaking of one of the minority faction, House, always a pleasure."

"John Senior," House said. "Always a pain in the ass."

The older Wilson laughed shortly. "Well, at least my wife sends her love to you."

Wilson slung a second pleading look to House who smiled sardonically in response but also kept silent.

Wilson turned back to his father where they had all come to stand, by the door to David's room. "I have your word you won't upset him?"

His father lifted a hand to swear to the fact. "My solemn oath."

"Alright." He pointed for his father to continue on into David's room. "I'll be listening."

The Wilson procession went on and James Wilson stared after it, not certain what to do or say from there. He watched them move into the room like items on a sequenced conveyor belt.

"Inside all that cottony Wilson-brand caring and compassion, your mother's a fairly righteous babe." He pointed after the throng. "How did she end up on his tuna hook?"

Wilson flinched, shaking his head hard in a kind of percussive trauma. "I don't even want to think about that question let alone answer it."

"Okay. Answer this. Do I call Brown ... or Cuddy?"

Wilson sighed, tapping a hand against the images beyond the door glass. "Call Brown," he said, following in the even more infinitely worrying direction of his father and brother.

David was sleeping. Watching the two other Wilsons seated at his bedside reminded James Wilson of some mob boss and his mafia leg-breaker. Jack was in back, watching like a protective attack dog. Their father was at the fore, trying to seem cordial and reasonably tame. Wilson always feared his father most when he looked like this.

Wilson took a deep breath of calm as he watched David's eyes open. His younger brother turned his head weakly in their father's direction.

"I'm dead," David groaned in a voice fresh out of sleep as he stared at the two new Wilsons. "I'm dead and the rabbi was wrong. There is a hell and it's filled with Wilsons."

The oldest Wilson laughed humorlessly, shaking his head with what might have been an edge of anger. "After all this time, is that all you have to say for yourself?"

"*Have to say for myself?* I'm not in jail, Dad, I'm in the hospital. See, no bars."

The older man leaned forward in his chair. "It has been how many years since we've seen you? You take off, without a word, chiefly because you wanted to live your life as you saw fit without concern for the consequences. Well, good for you. And here is what it's got you. You can't even lay this all on your sexual ... preference."

David's eyes grew wide. "I can't *even* lay this on my *what?*"

"Simple behavior," the older Wilson cut in. "Reasonable restraint, that's all that's called for. Now, I've been forced to come out to the hospital on a lovely morning. Your brother had to trade shifts just to see you -- "

"Just to say *I told you so*," David snapped back. "You don't care about seeing me. I heard you bellowing down the hall about naming your sons after Kings. Well, deal with it, Pops, you named your queer kid after the Jew. Given your self-loathing about your secret identity, that speaks loads. You want to gloat? Fine. Blame it all on me and my bad. I don't care. Just get your face out of my face."

"I thought we had an agreement," James said, fully entering the room he'd been hovering just beyond, to stand between his patient and his father.

"I didn't know I was breaking it. Can't a father counsel his son?"

"Were your son capable of leaving the room, I'd let him make his own decision," James said. "Since he's not, the decision is mine. General topics only or I'll be forced to ask that you leave."

"Very well," the oldest Wilson said, clearly fumbling for something to say. "Alright. Let's do mindless chit-chat then." John Wilson Sr. sat back into chair. "How is ... Seamus?"

"Who the hell is *Seamus*?" David asked.

"Your ... boyfriend," their father replied.

"*Shannon Pillsbury is fine*. And yes, we're still together. After all these years. Not one break-up. Hey, Jackie Paper, how many times now have you and Joan separated? How about you and Mom, Pops? I'll leave Jimmy the heartbreak kid out of it, since he's not climbing my ass and he's showing recent signs of positive adjustments, to quote our father."

"That's beside the point," the older Wilson replied.

"Oh, bulldozing my psychosocial ramparts is okay, but kicking at yours is off -limits. Oh, sure, *that's* fair."

"My lifestyle doesn't make me sick," his father said. "Unprotected sex. Multiple partners ... partners that are strangers ... that's not an unsafe lifestyle? You both have AIDS."

"I have AIDS. Shan is HIV positive. He's never even carsick."

"Anyway," James added to intervene, "David just told you he's in a longtime relationship."

"What about the drugs they did?" John Wilson shot back at James. "And he and his ... friend were vagabonds and vagrants for how long?"

"*Vagabonds*?" David snapped out, coughing out more laughter. "Next you'll be calling us dandies and ne'er-do-wells, Daddy-oh. Please flip your calendar forward a decade. We own a condo, for christsakes! And the only recent non-doctory substances I've done are herbs and Shan's disgusting shitkaka mushrooms. Trust me, them 'shrooms give a boy no buzz."

"We're all victims of our lifestyles to one extent or another, Dad," Wilson added.

"You take drugs for your blood pressure, diabetes, and cholesterol. If David had been taking his medication, he would have been healthy. His lifestyle has no more to do with his condition than anyone else's has with theirs. Including yours."

His father sneered his way through a laugh. "Would you be defending him if he was straight?"

"Yes, I would," Wilson said. "Would you be *attacking* him if he was straight?"

"Listen here, young man. Don't make me out to be a bigot," his father barked back. "I stand up for the gays with my friends. The religious ones spout off about special rights and that sort of thing. I say the gays have every right to be free and alive like everybody else -- "

"John Wilson Senior, not for jailing and killing *the* gays," David said weakly, accented with a cloudy cough. "Why, Dad, you're a regular bleeding heart!"

His father folded his arms in defiance that was still broadcast toward James. "I can't believe you're taking his side. Don't you remember what we all went through with him?"

"Of course I remember. I also remember better times. And I can't believe you're talking like this to your very ill son in any event. If we're going to bring up past misdeeds, what about mine? Like David said, how many new secretaries has Jack had to hire when Joan found out? Heaven only knows what she doesn't know about. Or that Mom doesn't know about you, *Dad*. Everyone is human. David. Jack. You. And me."

His father was no longer listening, but was now staring straight at David. A wash of new concern was now outweighing the older man's anger. "What's wrong with him?"

Wilson's full attention had gone toward his younger brother also. The younger man was simply staring at a wall. "David."

No response.

Wilson leaned forward, waving a hand near him. "David." Still nothing.

The oldest Wilson shook his head, as if to dismiss his own and everyone else's concern. "He's probably just sulking and ignoring you."

"I don't think so," James replied.

Suddenly, David blinked a little, looked back at the others. "Why's everyone staring at me?"

"You weren't responding," Wilson said.

"Not responding? What am I, a laptop?"

"We were talking, you didn't say anything. You feel okay?"

"As okay as I felt before."

"What's the last thing you remember?"

"You bitching out Dad."

"Well, that covers the last forty-some years," the older Wilson added from the sidelines.

Wilson focused on his brother. "Your head hurt?"

"Yes, of course," David said. "Dad's here. Why are you asking?"

"I'm wondering if you had a seizure," James said, reaching to the ready tray for a penlight.

Their father looked at James as if he'd taken leave of his senses. "He barely moved!"

"There are all kinds of seizures," James said, coming around to David's side. He flashed the light into one pupil then the other, both of them reacting. "Not all of them involve involuntary movement. Some result in the opposite."

"I'm fine," David said. "Aside from feeling like crap."

"Any problems with your vision?"

"Since you flashed that thing in my eyes? Hell yes."

From the periphery, Wilson saw House enter the doorway with his usual easy sense of entitlement. "Every well person named Wilson, leave. Now. Get. Vamoose. Move your ass out the door."

From the other side, James saw his father coast toward the bed a moment, as if reluctant to leave. The older man looked with eyes filled with what Wilson thought was a grudging fear. And he'd never seen his father afraid. Not once.

John Senior said before leaving, "James, talk to you later?"

Finally, James relented with a nod. "I'll call you."

Wilson replaced the light in the tray. He looked toward House. "I think he may have had a seizure."

"I didn't have a seizure," David coughed out, reaching for a weak grip on House's hand. "Greg, you should have seen Jimmy! He went all Harper Valley PTA on their asses. It was great!"

"That's one of Wilson's default modes," House said. "Ode to Billie Joe, Harper Valley PTA, Scarlet Ribbons ..."

David giggled weakly, leaning fully back into his pillow. He reached over and pinched a little at Wilson's face. "You defended me before Satan and you won."

House looked to Wilson pointedly then nodded toward the door. "Brown is off the bench."

"Then I'll be in the showers," Wilson said softly, sadly, leaning nearer his brother, with just the space of confidence between. "Dr. Brown will be coming in here in a moment. He is a cancer specialist, too. A very good one. He will ... takeover for me from here."

"Takeover?" David coughed out, grabbing weakly at his brother's arm. His eyes conveyed more than a hint of betrayal. "You're *abandoning me*?"

"Of course not. It's just ... it's just better now if Dr. Brown has your case. I'll be around, too."

"But why? You're Captain Cancer! I want *you* to be my doctor."

"Change of hospital policy," House said, shrugging from the sidelines. "We are ruled by a heartless iron maiden."

David shook his head. "No way. No how. Tell your iron maiden to ram it up her constricting stove pipe. I'll raise a stink. I'll have Jersey Action Gays down here picketing with huge ass protest signs -- PPTH IS MEAN TO GAYS. The JAG boys respect no authority but their own, trust me. Bottom line -- I want Jimmy on my case, which is where he'd be anyway."

Wilson took a deep breath of contrition. "I made ... a serious error in judgment."

"Oh, no!" David said, clutching at his chest. "You mean you're not perfect? My heart! My dreams! My illusions! Forever shattered!"

"Spare me, David," Wilson said, rolling his gaze across the room.

"Spare *me*, Jimbo. You may walk in with your hands on your hips, but I know you're not Superman."

"This was a big mistake, David."

"So was Mom breeding with our father, *James*, but I don't hold that against her." David Wilson directed his attention to House. "That all straightened out, Greg?"

House grimaced a little. "Except I'm the one who has to spackle Doctor Dumpty here back together again if something happens to you."

"I take full responsibility," David said. "That going to be enough for Lisa?"

"There is no god but Caesar," House said sternly. "Except you. You pay the bill."

"Excellent. Speaking of bill-paying, I have a small surprise. I drew something for you. Consider it an early Hanukkah gift."

"That's right, you said you still drew," Wilson said, his head moving back in surprise as his brother brandished the gift -- an almost perfect cartoon of a smirking Dr. House. "Except that now you're incredibly good. David, I'm serious, you should do

this professionally.”

“Ya think? Hey, maybe I could. I could open an art studio. Maybe I could call my place, oh I don’t know ... Atlantic Sunrise Art Studio. Maybe I could put it on the Boardwalk for the tourist trade, too! No, wait, I forget, I can’t do that.”

“Why not?” Wilson said.

He reached over and affectionately tapped his brother’s face. “Because, I already did it, stickboy. That’s how I make the big bongo bucks.”

Wilson shrugged. “Okay, you made your point. And thanks. House can hang this up in his personal portrait gallery.”

House was considering it over Wilson’s shoulder. “My head isn’t that big. My *head* isn’t. My ego is. And other things.”

David coughed out a helpless squeal of laughter, slapping weakly at the bed. “It’s a caricature, dummy. Anyway, what can I say? Human hands wield humble tools by the artist’s mortal eye.” He swatted over at his brother again. “Anyway, it’s for stickboy’s gallery. I’m sure he’s seen your big thing.”

“David!” Wilson said, shocked suddenly into full humiliation mode.

“Oh, stop blushing. I swear your face will freeze that way.”

House grabbed up the drawing. “I’ve decided I like it. Besides, it’s too good for your brother’s place. Bad impressionist landscapes and crappy seaside watercolors only -- strict hotel policy.”

David’s mouth twisted up. “He doesn’t *really* live in a hotel, does he? You’re joking, right?”

House grinned over at Wilson. “Are you going to tell him or do I get to?”

David’s mouth dropped open wide. He looked from one man to the other, then finally back at his brother. “You live in a *hotel*?”

Wilson’s eyebrows tilted together. “So?”

“A hotel hotel? A sanitized for your protection and turn-down service is extra hotel hotel?”

“What’s wrong with that?” Wilson said defensively. “There’s maid service. Room service. Dry cleaning pick-up at the door.”

“What wrong with it? Oh, let me think ... maybe it’s that it’s as warm and comfortable as a one-size-fits-all hospital gown? They’re okay if the only other choice is naked. Most people aren’t going to choose them for everyday attire.”

Before Wilson could sum up a reply, somebody, somewhere, to the south of them, yelled something. Something loud.

"What was -- " one of them said, though Wilson wasn't sure which had said it, as the wheel of sound wobbled with its rapid expansion. As the sounds grew louder, fragmented sentences could at last be discerned.

The basso voice at the center was definitely John Wilson, Sr.

The only words Wilson was certain of were "fag" and "queer" and "hypocrite".

It could only mean two people had collided.

"Uh-oh, Shannon Versus Dadzilla," David said, wincing. "Watch out, Tokyo."

Wilson founded them in the hallway, inches apart, looking like a pair of Rottweilers bent on mutually assured destruction.

Wilson had torn these two apart a couple of times in the distant past, though not since he'd hit middle age. He picked off Shannon, dragged him into the patients lounge and sat him down, then dragged his father over to another corner for his timeout.

Wilson stood between them. "In case it's somehow escaped all of your notice, I work here. It's my job."

Shannon shoved aside the glaring silence by saying, "It was his fault -- "

"You know how he is," Wilson cut him off mid-sentence. "You should have stayed away from him. Go and talk to David. Let me deal with my father."

After a moment, Shannon dragged a hand through his own dark blond hair and wandered to the door before straggling through it reluctantly in the direction of David's room.

Wilson came to stand before his father.

"Dad," James said slowly. "If you ever say that kind of thing around me or anyone I know again -- "

The older man stood up, tossing him a hard glare laced with regret. "I spoke in anger, James."

"A lot of people speak the truth in anger."

"I have nothing against ... gay people per se," his father went on. "I have three sons. I ... love them all equally ... of course."

"Of course," Wilson said with a dark, crippled laugh. He shook his head to himself and the wall.

"*Of course*," his father snapped with greater certainty. "But it's painful to find out ... things. It simply is. He has the right to his feelings, well, these are mine. You'll

understand one day when you have sons of your own.”

“What if I don’t?”

“You will. Understanding is something that comes with parenthood, believe me. ”

“Oh, I might understand, that’s not what I meant.” He lifted his eyes to engage his father’s more wary stare. Honestly, openly. “But what if I don’t have sons -- or daughters? I’m over forty, Dad. I’m not married, I have no children -- ”

“You’re divorced,” his father shot back, as if making an important correction.

“My marriages sucked.” Wilson looked backward toward the door, toward the intense shadow he had somehow known was lurking there. “The one significant, lasting, meaningful relationship I have in my life is with another man. Had you considered that?”

His father’s gaze seemed lost again as it strayed in the direction Wilson’s attention had momentarily gone. Moving back to his son, his father’s stare seemed to be awakening to fear. “What are you trying to tell me? That suddenly you’re gay too now?”

Wilson stood silent at the crux of a moment that he allowed to move onward into an evasive silence.

He looked away. “Tell my mother I’ll see her later at lunch,” he said, turning around to head in the distant and comforting direction of the doctors lounge showers.

He had stored his gym bag in his office with a spare running suit he had never gotten around to using. That would become his change of clothing for the day. Not the most professional appearance but a healthy one, he decided, even if he presented it on five hours of sleep in two days and a sore, stiff back.

The doctors lounge private shower was little used. It was too small, for one reason, and too cold most of the time for another. He totes his gym bag with him into the tiny locker area. Changing out of old clothes, he donned one of the hospital logo terry robes no one ever used because they were too short for almost everyone. “PPTH,” House had sniped at Cuddy, “does not stand for Petite Physicians Teaching Hospital”. The thought of it made Wilson smile, but then the thought of most things House said made Wilson smile.

Dragging a hand through his hair, a vestigial guilt forming around his heart for having backed down before his father, Wilson then pushed his way into the narrow room with a shower stall.

“You’re a coward!” House said, standing against the shower room door.

Wilson cast him a weary glance. “I know. You’ve told me.”

"Why didn't you tell him?" House said, leaning forward on his cane to interrupt Wilson's path to the shower.

"Tell him what?" Wilson asked, not looking back. "I thought you said I'm in denial."

"Last night you weren't. Not completely."

"Well, maybe I was wrong. Perhaps you are wrong, as impossible as that may seem. Given recent events, I don't see how you think I can trust my own perceptions right now at all."

"Because of one dumb mistake?"

"One mistake?" Wilson laughed at the silent irony of it, his glare scouring the shower wall. "House, you have mentally catalogued every last one of your tiniest errors in judgment over the last twenty-five years ... "

"That's me. You're you. You screw-up. You can't help it. Mrs. Wilson 1, Mrs. Wilson 2, Mrs. Wilson 3, Amber -- "

"I prefer to call her Cut Throat Bitch," Wilson corrected him.

"Yeah, and all the other disastrous near-misses ... or near mrs's. What's one more?"

"Is this supposed to be making me feel better?"

"It's supposed to be pulling your head out of your ass. No one died. Other Brother is holding his own. He's a Chinese puzzle box of a medical mystery, but he's stable. Emotion makes you stupid. What happened for damned sure wasn't because you had sex with another man -- "

"I didn't say it was!" Wilson shot back.

"No, but you thought it."

"And I thought your working theory was we didn't have sex."

House groaned loudly. "I only said that to keep you from freaking out. You came, I came. Of course it was sex. Or damned close to it."

"Maybe. But the problem wasn't the -- sex. It's the emotional entanglements. With you. With my family. Isn't that what you were just saying earlier? That I became stupid partly because of ... what has been happening with us."

"What's happened has been good. It's your reaction that's the problem. It's your usual bullshit emotional -- "

"Okay! I'm evil. I have emotions. I confess. And I'm sure I fail you terribly as a best friend because of them. And maybe you're right, maybe I'm a coward, too. If all that's true, it makes me wonder why you bother with me at all."

"Please! Shove the self-pity."

"I should shove the self-pity? From you that sounds like van Gogh telling someone not to cutoff his nose to spite his face." Wilson leaned his head against the shower door. He touched a hand against the cold, slick glass, as though feeling for a heading on where he was, who he was. "Three days ago, I had a life of appallingly simple complacency. Then my long-lost brother shows up out of nowhere and spills my past all over the place. My best friend starts kissing me. And I like it. A *lot*. Hell, more than a lot. I can't stop thinking about kissing you, all day long, no matter where I am. I'm feeling your arms around me and your lips against mine and your tongue and -- *God* -- Now you keep telling me I'm gay ... my father just asked me if I am and, frankly, I'm seriously beginning to wonder ... "

"*Seriously beginning to?*"

"Look, I'm not you!" Wilson yelled back, covering his face with his hands. "I don't sink my teeth into my flesh every ten seconds just to make sure I'm alive. I have to live with some degree of denial to survive. I just do."

"Your whole life is denial."

"What if it is?" He held onto the shower stall handle for a long moment then shook his head. "It's my life. If I choose to live it in denial, then I do. You'll just have to respect that."

Wilson then slammed open the stall door to step inside the one person shower, still wearing his robe. He closed the stall behind him.

He switched on the water that screamed down in heady steam clouds over his head then expanded over his shoulders like a cloaking, concealing embrace.

He pumped out the industrial "soap" that served them as body wash, non-sterile hand soap and shampoo, and that always smelled like cheap fruit cocktail. He soaped himself over once completely and then let the water blast over him. It was a healing experience -- one he reveled in -- until he heard the screech of the shower stall opening again.

Rinsing clear his eyes, he looked around, squinting through the steam though he really didn't need to see who it was.

A very naked House was grinning at him with ambitious defiance. The steam was glistening the edges of his hair. House's gaze wandered hungrily and without any apologies over Wilson's naked body.

"Speaking of not respecting my living in denial," Wilson said, turning fully away to shake his head at the wall and to himself. "I guess it's a lot to ask you to respect basic personal boundaries, too."

"You're an idiot. What personal boundaries? You've seen me naked. I've seen you naked."

Wilson thought harder a moment, his mind searching pockets of memory. "When have you seen *me* naked?"

"I've seen your dick every day in the john. I saw a *lot* of it last night. All look, don't touch, but I saw it."

"That's my penis, that's not my whole body. You said you'd seen me naked. When?"

House grinned. "That's for me to know and you to endlessly obsess about. Just toss me a washcloth."

Wilson exhaled in surrender, plucking the remaining washcloth from the wrap-over plexirack and pitching the cloth backwards at House. "There *are* other showers in here, you know."

"Believe it or not, I already showered." House pumped soap into the washcloth, bunching it up to distribute the suds. "I'm only here to help a friend."

"I've been bathing myself since I was --" Wilson's words choked in his chest as House pressed his lips against his throat. House's left hand brushed over one of Wilson's nipples to awaken it then his fingers tugged at it gently.

"I'm just like Bert and Ernie's rubber-ducky," House murmured, grinning, his eyes glowing with fresh arousal. "I make bath time *lots* of fun."

House rubbed the soapy washcloth down the left cheek of Wilson's ass. His fingers inquired through the cloth, the lather spreading out in uncertain circles, as he tenderly pressed the washcloth up between Wilson's legs.

"House, don't --"

"Why?"

"Because," Wilson said, gulping at air. "This is getting --"

"Relax. It's just another small step. Nothing *too* scary." House's hand moved over to the other nipple, continuing the gentle harassment. "Now, that feels a lot better, doesn't it?"

House moved the washcloth around to Wilson's chest, rubbing it down over his ribs and belly until the cloth brushed the first tufts of pubic hair.

"Oh my god," Wilson gasped hard against a gulp of air. "What are you doing?"

"Helping you shower," House murmured, plunging the washcloth down to grasp Wilson's already stirring cock, sliding it all the way up its length and down again, as it began to rapidly fill with more blood. "That's alright, isn't it?"

He nodded eagerly, helplessly, gasping, "Hell, yes."

He turned his smoky gaze down into Wilson's eyes. His hand continued its rhythmic slide up and down Wilson's quickly hardening cock. It was already nearly engorged. "Wow, this is really getting you hot, isn't it? I guess washing you like this sort of feels like I'm jerking you off. I'm not *really* doing that, though. Just helping my friend, right?"

"House," Wilson said, in the laughing groan of a man in the grip of something that felt so good he didn't really believe it.

House's arms reached around him and braced Wilson back against him, leaning them both against the back wall so his hand could move more quickly and hungrily around Wilson's throbbing cock. While he worked his friend's cock, he thrust his own dick against the curve of Wilson's ass.

"Guess you can tell from what's poking against your ass, I'm liking it too. Not only are you going to come in my hand, I'm going to come against your ass. Of course, it'll only *really* drag you out of denial if I do something like, oh, drop the washrag completely."

A gut-born whimper burst out of Wilson through his tightly gnashed teeth. House's tongue licking hungrily at Wilson's ear, his hand slid the washcloth firmly over the rock hard, blood-pulsing proof of the other man's rapidly escalating heat.

"Please ... " Wilson groaned out.

"Please what? Should I? Shouldn't I? I will if you want me to. Or maybe I will even if you don't want me to. Maybe."

Wilson arched back against him fully as House's mouth captured his in a hard kiss. He was driven further down into House's arms by the manic thrust of the other man's tongue.

"God, I don't know," Wilson gasped out, as the kiss ended. As he drank in air and tried to think and stared up into House's eyes out of a lust so large it terrified him.

"I do," House murmured, grinning down into his eyes.

He nodded the other man's attention downward to where his bright red and pulsing dick was gripped in a soapy washcloth inside of House's hand.

House for a moment slid back his hand enough to slam the washcloth against the floor. He grasped Wilson's cock with his bare hand.

Wilson's whole body convulsed at the touch.

"Oooh, that did it, didn't it?" House whispered, his voice melting around the words.

House's cock, slamming upward while trapped between the two of them, suddenly erupted its own stream of cum.

House gulped up enough air to restore his voice, as if seeing the edge of everything surface in Wilson's eyes.

Wilson choked on the sound of a blissful agony, strangled by the need to vent it. The arms around him cinched him up hard to keep him standing while his hands grasped feebly at liquid wall to accept the sweet onslaught through his nerve endings.

"That's what I want," House murmured in response as he greedily hand-pumped cum from the other man's dick.

Reaching for a piece of wall to help him stand, Wilson covered his eyes with a hand. He shook his head, still swept up by the final strains of what had just been blasting through him.

Grinning in victory, House reached for the detachable shower wand, flipping it on to unleash a torrent of water. He washed Wilson off and then himself.

"That was close enough to sex to be really hot," House said, "but far enough that you can deny it is, if idiotically, inanely, absolutely have to."

"Don't be ridiculous. That wasn't just sex, that was great sex. There's no denying that."

"We weren't in a bed. I used a washcloth up to a point."

"I may be in denial, but I'm not a complete idiot, House. Even I can admit that was sex."

Done with the shower wand, House returned it to its holder. He smacked a kiss on Wilson's forehead. "On that note, I have to get dressed. I have a late lunch appointment."

Wilson frowned a little. "Since when?"

"Since I was in my office and you were having the meeting with La Familia. She called earlier and I phoned her back."

"Okay," Wilson said shortly, immediately serious as if trying to shake off a negative reaction. "Just as well. I have an appointment, too."

"Don't be jealous, you idiot -- the *she* I'm meeting is my mom. She's in town overnight on some veteran military wives junket."

"I'm not being jealous," Wilson said, matter-of-factly. "I genuinely do have an appointment. A late lunch appointment with my mom, too, actually. I'm supposed to meet her at some restaurant on Pineapple Street. I assume we're meeting about --"

"Which restaurant on Pineapple Street?" House cut in.

"Some place called the Bat Cave. Why?"

House nodded, squinting hard at the other man. "I'm meeting *my* mom at the Bat Cave."

"You're not serious. What time?"

"Three. You?"

Wilson shook his head in amazement. "Three."

"Are we being set-up?"

Wilson considered a moment then shrugged. "Might be a coincidence."

"No, it *mightn't*."

"Who would be setting us up?"

"Cuddy?"

Wilson shrugged. "Who could blame her? I guess we can ask. And then we can swing past my hotel so I can get some clean clothes. I'd rather not walk around in my gym sweats, if it's all the same to you."

Wilson's check-in with his brother found him playing mahjong with a candy striper. He looked better. His vitals were normal and holding. The candy striper was losing.

"Can I get anything for you while I'm out?" Wilson called in to his brother.

"Yeah! A real home for you to live in, Ramada Man!" he called back.

They had stopped Cuddy in the middle of the hallway on her own way out somewhere. House had focused on her with a suspicious, searching stare.

"We're going to the Bat Cave," House had said cryptically.

She waited a moment, as if expecting the joke. Then she grinned as if they're not making one was an even better one, "Say hi to Alfred," she said, obviously trying not to laugh.

Wilson and House looked at each other as she walked away. "She's not in on it," House said.

"Guess not."

The Bat Cave was actually on South Mill Road all the way on the other end of Pineapple Street from where it curved onto Cranberry Road. They found a parking spot in the adjacent lot, Wilson having already noticed his mother's well-driven Volvo with the *College of New Jersey Film School and Cinematic Arts Department* parking insignia on the window.

"Jimmy!" a voice popped up over the din of smaller voices spread around.

They turned toward it and found their mothers seated next to each other on the little

patio bench outside the restaurant. They were chirping at each other with the occasional punctuated laugh traveling between them.

Wilson suddenly felt very nervous.

"You know, Mom," Wilson said, smiling diplomatically from one woman to the other, "the odd thing is ... House and I didn't even realize you and Mrs. House knew each other."

"Oh, we didn't," Blythe House answered from her end of the bench. "But we thought we really should. I mean, you two are so important to each other, we thought it was silly for us not to be acquainted. So we've been catching up like old friends."

House squinted with concern toward Wilson; Wilson shrugged.

Adie Wilson stood up to plant one on her son's face, then flicked the lipstick away with her thumb. "Hello, my darling. And don't frown so, Gregory. I called Blythe. We got to talking. Here we are. We knew Gregory would be paranoid if we asked you both outright, so we engaged in a little subterfuge."

House looked around with growing suspicion and asked his mother, "Dad isn't here, is he?"

"Are you joking?" Blythe said, laughing. "Your father? Go to one of my hen parties, as he calls it? I doubt it. No, it's just the four of us. You can stop sweating, Greg."

"Thank Batman for that," House said.

The door to the darkly-glassed grotto restaurant swung open -- to an inner patio walled with falling water over faux bronze rock. The host, wearing a penguin outfit, was unaccountably smiling. Wilson supposed the man had been wearing it so long, he no longer felt strange. "Professor Adinam Feldshu Wilson, party of four?" the host said. "Follow me."

"Mom, do you have to use your entire name every time we go out to dinner?" Wilson asked, shaking his head.

She grinned and pinched at his nose. "Do you have to ask the same question every time I do?"

"He's so adorable," Blythe said to Adie.

"I know. And so is Gregory," Adie replied.

"Thank you, I know."

House looked over at Wilson. "Are you having a flashback to being in a baby carriage or is it just me?"

"Not just you," Wilson said, leading the way to follow after the head penguin to their little grotto table near a well-lit waterfall wall.

And the two women continued to talk between themselves. House and Wilson sat

across from each other, continuing to share concerned and quizzical glances. The drinks penguin came. Their mothers ordered Mister Freeze's frozen margaritas. House opted for a bat beer. Wilson just kept sipping at water, glancing over at the conspiracy of mothers.

House picked up the placard in the center of the table, reading, "*When you are ready to order, please switch on your bat signal attached to your signal phone. See diagram.*"

"You're joking," Wilson said.

"Fraid not." He handed Wilson a menu, seeing the mothers had already discovered theirs. "Not only that but Commissioner Gordon then calls us on the bat phone and we give him our orders."

"Again ... you're joking."

House tapped the little black and yellow signal phone. "Again, 'fraid not."

Wilson shook his head, continuing to consider the menu. "Well, why not carry a stupid theme all the way to its inane, torturous end?"

"Jimmy!" Adie said, sounding a bit hurt. "You *loved* Batman!"

"When I was nine! I'm not now. I'm taller. I have a job."

"He's so cute!" Blythe said, smiling while considering the menu.

Adie smiled over her menu, too. "I know, and so is Gregory."

Wilson covered his eyes. "House, please. Shoot me. Shoot me now."

"Not a chance. If I have to live through this, so do you," House said, switching on the bat signal -- the beam of which bounced up to the ceiling, highlighting their table number with a bat signal around it.

"I don't think we're all ready to order yet, Greg," Blythe said from her end of the table, visually surveying the others, all staring at menus.

"No, but I have a question," House replied, "on which my very sanity depends."

The little signal phone warbled. House answered it.

"This is Commissioner Gordon," a barely post-adolescent voice said from the opposite end. "Is this a question or an order?"

"A question, Commissioner Gordon," House answered. "Are Catwoman and Batgirl available for a live girl-on-girl sex show? That might help alleviate the aching idiocy of your lame-ass theme restaurant. Otherwise I'll be forced to euthanize the entire restaurant out of simple human decency."

"I'm sorry, sir," the Commissioner of the Hour replied, "You're only to use the bat signal to request the Commissioner's attention for important questions and orders

from the kitchen. Please do not abuse the bat signal."

"I'll abuse my bat signal whenever I want to. And I'd think the survival of your customers would be an important question."

"House!" Wilson said, fighting not to laugh while holding out a hand for the phone. "Give it to me now."

"Greg, give Wilson the phone," Blythe added firmly.

House shut down the phone and placed it again in the center of the table. "Happy?"

"Thrilled," Wilson said, still fighting not to laugh. "Now, do we all know what we want?"

"Blythe and I both want the Riddler Specials," Adie said, still giggling and trying to hide it behind the menu.

Wilson grimaced at his menu. "I guess I want -- "

"I know what you want," House said, grinning in what appeared to be a confidential communication. "I also know what you want to eat."

The explosion of laughter from the mother end of the table made both men turn sharply in their direction. Wilson turned terrified eyes back at House; House shrugged.

Wilson swallowed hard, turning his attention back to the phone. "I should make the order -- "

"No, I will. The Commissioner and I have developed a rapport," House said, grabbing the signal phone up again and switching on the beam.

A second later, the warble was heard. "This is Commissioner Gordon, is this an order or a question?"

"It's a questionable order. The ladies at our table would both like the Riddler Special. My companion would like the Mad Hatter turkey salad with whatever tasteless, no-fat house dressing you have. And I'll have a batburger with cheese. And please get our drinks over here before I really do decide to euthanize the restaurant."

House hung up the line.

The mothers started giggling again.

"Mom," Wilson said, looking at them when suddenly gripped by a revelation. "Did you two meet up in the bar before we got here?"

Adie stifled a half-snorted laugh. "Yes, we did. Well, we had to show off baby pictures without you guys around. You two would sneer and groan."

"Baby pictures?" Wilson said, looking to Blythe. "You have baby pictures of House?"

"Why, yes, haven't I shown them to you before?"

"No," Wilson said, smiling too widely. "I'm almost astonishingly certain you haven't, oddly enough."

House exhaled slowly while closing his eyes. He shook his head. "My hell is complete."

Blythe smirked in her son's direction. "Well, here," she said, handing over the table to Wilson a baby book reading BABY BOY HOUSE. "Enjoy yourself."

"Oh, I will," Wilson said, smiling more widely at House as he opened to the first picture. He continued flipping through the contents, making the occasional comment punctuated by a derisive snort until finally arriving at the next to last picture -- the coup de grace. The piece de resistance. He lifted up the book to tap at the photo in question. "Oh, I just must have copies of this one."

"Of course I'll make you some."

"No, Mom," House said. "You won't."

Wilson looked over at him, his eyes shining with yet-to-escape hysterical glee. "But I could sell these for enough money for us to both retire on."

"Which is why you're not getting copies."

"But it's you wearing Wally Gator footie pajamas. You're kissing a five foot lavender bunny rabbit. To deny this to me would be cruel."

House extended a hand toward Adie. "Wilson pictures," House said, motioning for them to be surrendered. "Hand them over."

"You've already seen my worst ones," Wilson said.

"Bull. Moms *always* have the worst ones and you know it."

Adie giggled again and surrendered her own photo album hand-lettered JAMES EVAN WILSON. "Amuse yourself, Gregory."

Wilson did not know which was worse, the interminable wait for House to hit the worst of them, or the punctuated guffaws arising out of him while he worked his way through the *almost-as-bad* ones. "Copies!" he would occasionally call out, brandishing a photo of Wilson in some silly outfit or merely sitting naked in a sink or on a rug or, in the last case, hanging monkey-like from a high chair having stuck Cheetos in his ears. House grinned eagerly, announcing, "This one I'll want poster-sized."

Wilson sighed. "Even trade?"

"Even trade," House said, scowling back.

"No copies, Blythe," Wilson said in the posture of defeat.

"No copies, Adie," House added.

At that point, a 5 foot 7 inch unhappy looking penguin stormed up to their table. He was carrying a platter with drinks and food that he got busy about distributing.

Finally, he angrily crossed his flippers before House. "I am the senior Gordon in charge. Is it really too much to ask that you act like an adult during your visit with us here?"

"That depends," House said. "Is it really too much to ask that I not get a lecture on adult behavior from a grown man wearing a penguin costume?"

"I am the manager!" the penguin replied.

"There *are* worthwhile jobs that entail a lot less silly costumes, you know. Firefighter. Cowboy. Policeman."

"He will behave," Wilson said, fighting once more not to laugh. "I promise."

The manager turned so curtly in Wilson's direction that his flippers flapped. "See that he does," he said, then turned around and waddled away.

Wilson shut his eyes, shook his head, and turned his attention to his salad. His mother was merely listening to Blythe say something and then there was a pause.

Wilson decided to venture his primary question of the moment. "Excuse me, Mom. I sort of assumed that we were getting together to talk about Davey."

"Oh, we were. But I talked to him a little while ago. He sounds much better. I told him his big brother would take good care of him and you did."

Wilson looked over to House who was laying waste to his cheeseburger. He looked back toward the women. "He say anything ... unusual?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact. He told me something I had no idea of. I wish you'd have told me."

Wilson's far more worried stare went back toward House. "And that is?" he asked Adie, while still looking fearfully at House.

"You know what it is," Adie said. "Gregory's birthday is really December 21st!"

"Oh, that!" Blythe said. "He just insists we celebrate it a different date. That's his silly business."

"I feel so badly. I always send him cards in June."

"Don't feel badly, Mom," Wilson cut in. "Even Cuddy got that wrong on his chart once. I throw him a half-year birthday party in June. The half-year party keeps him from pouting too much around his actual birthday."

Wilson's mother said, "I still don't understand."

"That's because you weren't born near Christmas. Pardon me, Hanukkah." House scooped out something from his cheeseburger. "Why do these people insist upon ruining a cheeseburger with shitty mushrooms?"

Wilson listened then suddenly recalled something else. "Shitkaka mushrooms," he said, remembering his brothers' words. He looked up at House again. "Are there any known side effects from shitake mushrooms? Something that might explain my brother's problems?"

"Do I look like an edible fungus expert to you? Call Thirteen. Have them tested."

"I'll call Cuddy."

"No, call Thirteen. Cuddy won't be there."

"Okay," he said before punching through the number and handing along the instructions. When the phone call was finished, Wilson sat back in his chair, on the brink of realization. "Speaking of Cuddy ... before you said *why do these people insist upon putting shitty mushrooms on a cheese burger?* These people insist upon, you said. As if it's a repeated experience."

"It is. You know how many haughty cuisine chefs try to trick out the simple dignity of a cheeseburger with inappropriate vegetables?"

"House, your middle name is inappropriate."

"Only on my baptismal certificate."

"You're sure Cuddy isn't going to pop out of somewhere with a karaoke mike in hand?"

"Don't be ridiculous."

"What's wrong, Jimmy?" Adie said, both women now carefully listening.

"Our Jimmy has developed this weird paranoia about Cuddy," House said, shrugging. "He keeps imagining she's going to leap out at him, singing along with out-of-time instrumental versions of pop classics."

"Never mind, Mom," Wilson replied. "I'm just trying to keep House's wilder antics in check."

"Oh, I love House's antics!" Adie replied. "Greg, why don't you call the silly penguin man again? That was divine?"

"Mom!" Wilson said, grabbing up the signal phone protectively when House reached for it. "This restaurant was your idea! Do you ever want to come back here again?"

"This dumb place? It was Davey's suggestion. He thought *you'd* like it!"

House flashed his eyes innocently. "It *is* very gay."

"House!" Wilson said sharply, holding the signal phone away again as House once more tried to grab it. "David didn't think I'd like it. He knew it would give House a platform on which to publicly embarrass me."

"Yeah, because he knew you'd enjoy it," House said.

Suddenly, the dreaded penguin man had appeared at their table. His flippers were once again crossed. "Is there a problem?" he asked furiously, clearly at the end of his penguin rope.

"Thank heavens you're here! I have a question for the Commissioner," House said, pointing at Wilson. "And this man won't let me ask it!"

"Sir," the penguin man said to Wilson, "please return the signal phone to the center of the table so it may be used by your dining partner."

"The penguin has spoken," Wilson said, gesturing in surrender while he plunked the object down and sat back waiting for House's final act.

House lifted the signal phone in the air, flashing it once to gain the Commissioner's attention. The signal phone warbled and House hit the answer button.

"Commissioner Gordon? Is the penguin guy here as constipated as he seems? Because, in my medical opinion, it's caused by his head being stuck up his ass."

Penguin Guy drew a deep, even breath. "I'm afraid," he said, "I'm going to have to ask your party to leave immediately."

"No problem," House said, smiling. "We just need our check."

"Your meal is on the house. Just ... please ... leave ... "

"Okay," House said brightly, picking up the signal phone again. He turned toward Wilson to make sure his gaze lined up perfectly with the other man's eyes. "In parting, for old time's sake, I just want to abuse the bat signal one more time for my friend here." At that point, House deftly deep-throated the signal phone.

Strangely enough, Wilson had never thought of a telephone as at all erotic before. He had not, even when holding the signal phone in his hand, perceived it as provocative in any way, shape or form. But suddenly, Wilson was very fond of this vision of House, particularly the sucking on it part.

He was almost relieved when they were distracted by the personal escort to the manager's office.

On their final way out the door, House grabbed Wilson's arm and dragged him with him into what was stupidly if not surprisingly called the men's bat-room. Wilson suspected it was less call to nature than House's final act of defiance.

In the men's room, Wilson waited for House to finish at the urinal and proceeded with his own sermon across the tiled divide. "This is a first for me, believe it or not. I'd never been banned for life from a restaurant before. I didn't even know one could be."

"*Amateur,*" House called back, shaking off and zipping up.

"You do know that poor man probably doesn't make ten dollars an hour. With tips, *maybe* fifteen."

"He's a jackass."

"So are you."

"Yes, but I'm an educated jackass. I earned the right. For him, there's college. And trade school."

"You don't know his circumstances. He may be a jackass who never had the opportunities other ... jackasses have had. He may be ill-tempered because he's the sole support of his dying mother and three younger siblings. You may have just made his miserable life that much more miserable."

"I prefer to think that he's a pathetic jerk living off his dying mother while pimping out his three younger siblings so he can work at his pathetic Batman dream job. Furthermore, at night he probably hustles home the Tennessee Tuxedo get-up to bang his equally obnoxious fuckbuddy."

Wilson's angry mouth finally buckled with the weight of a grin. "You're infuriating!"

"Thank you!" House said, going to the sink beside Wilson. He flipped on the faucet to wash, then splashed some water at Wilson.

"And you're humiliating!" Wilson said, avoiding the splash while his words tripped over a spate of helpless giggles.

"Am I blushing?"

Wilson exhaled in surrender and grabbed hold of House to flatten his back against the men's room wall. When their mouths collided, an instantaneous close quarters combat of greedy tongues was joined. Wilson felt like making damned sure it never was going to end, but there was that little breathing problem.

Wilson gulped at air, adding at last, "And you make me fucking crazy."

House grinned hotly into his eyes. "The whole thing or the phone suck?"

Wilson shook his head. "The whole thing, but the phone suck was an excellent finish. Even if you did put it in your mouth when you didn't know where it had been."

"You going to say the same thing when we go home and I suck your cock?" House asked, pecking quickly at the other man's lips.

The groan once more burst like a surprised, twisted sound out of Wilson. He shook his head helplessly. "Not if you don't say it when I suck yours."

House held Wilson's face still between his hands. House's eyes stared with a nervous hope deeply into his friend's. "Going to freak on me?"

"Probably. A little." Wilson inhaled and exhaled completely. "But I still want it all. I want it. Completely. Like I want you. And I love you."

House laid into him with a kiss that seared through a hopeful minute. When it stopped, he leaned their foreheads together.

It wasn't just the primary silence that bothered Wilson, but all the successive silent moments that stretched in between the first one and the ring of House's cell phone. In the time after, Wilson tried to reassure himself that the distance between his confession and the phone call was shorter than it was. In reality it had been long. Long enough to leave an echoing place around Wilson's heart.

What the hell did you expect? he said to himself. This is *House*.

But something. *Something*.

"This better be an emergency," House said, catching the call on the second ring. He listened. He exhaled a sigh. His eyes grew dim again. "Gotcha. No, he's with me. We'll be right there."

Wilson was able to focus for a moment through the hollow, echo sounds. "What was that?"

"It was Foreman. Our evening plans have to change. Other Brother's Chinese puzzle medical mystery just got even more interesting. Interesting in the same sense as the old Chinese curse."

Wilson swallowed hard. "How?"

House looked over at him, as though uncertain of the reception to his next words. "He just lost the vision in his right eye."

Four:

The Absence of Evidence

"The vision has returned now. Could have been caused by a lot of things," Foreman suggested, when he met Wilson at the top of the corridor. He handed him the new scans he'd just picked up. "Given his current status, possibly transient ischemia."

"In *one* eye?" Wilson said.

"It happens. Vasoconstriction can lead to temporary blindness. Might be the reason for his seizure, too. Looking at the scans, it's pretty clear there's cerebral involvement. Here's the catch, though. He's Sjögren's negative."

Wilson scrunched up his eyes to examine the fine detail by the latent corridor light. At the last revelation, he looked back around sharply. "He's what? Stage 2 cerebral lymphoma, stage 2 AIDS related lymphoma plus pseudo lymphoma was our best guess. But now pseudo-lymphoma without Sjögren's syndrome? We're back to square one." Wilson shook his head, almost at the edge of despair. "Anything come of the mushrooms?"

Foreman considered the labwork record. "Polysaccharide lentinan, shown to be anti-neoplasm in lab mice. Lenthionine, a platelet aggregation antagonist, the vitamin B complex, etc. But basically, lentinula edodes, Chinese black mushrooms. The good-for-you kind."

Wilson nodded, sighing. "It wasn't a strong candidate for the problem anyway. So we just advance on the general metaphor of what it's acting like and deal with it's qualification tomorrow. The stop-up the leaks school of medicine that House so enjoys." He considered the scans again. "He certainly isn't showing signs of vascular involvement."

Foreman laughed. "That's for damned sure."

"Hey, Howard Johnson's Favorite Son, I hear your voice!" David called out from within the patient room. "Why don't you talk to your patient for a change?"

"If you'll excuse me," Wilson said, "I believe I'm being summoned."

"Hey, if you don't mind my asking, " Foreman said in parting. "What's with Davey's friend the pirate guy?"

"Davey's friend?" Wilson said squinting. "Pirate guy?"

Foreman grinned and shook his head. "Go ahead in. You'll see."

There was in fact, seated at his brother's bedside, a black man in a full-blown pirate costume. He was smiling merrily. Setting between him and David, a dessert sample platter was laying on the end of the bed. Such were the things to make a man wonder.

Wilson decided to focus on his brother. "Well, I've just come from the Batman experience. I understand you've had a worse evening. How's your eye?"

"It was scary as hell when it happened. I'm glad Eric was here if you and Greg couldn't be. It works fine now. That's not going to happen again, is it?"

"It's our job to make sure it doesn't. It might have just been a seizure, like your other one. The eye is part of the brain. The transient blindness happened once which gives it a moderately fair chance of happening again, but I see no reason to expect that it will. And if it does, no reason to think it won't be just as transient."

"Which means you don't know?"

Wilson nodded like a confession. "Which means I don't know."

"I'm an artist, Jimmy. I can't be blind. I *can't* be."

"I see no reason to think you will be."

David nodded. "Yeah, that's what Eric said. Okay, cheer me up. Tell me about the Bat Cave. I was hoping your wild man at large would get your mojo working and you'd have a more fulfilling evening than this. I knew all that pretentious silliness would be like red meat to your Big Dog. Greg had a high, old time, I'm sure, knocking the piss out of them. And I knew you and Mom would be laughing hysterically ... however you were concurrently properly mortified of course."

"She had a good time, I think. God knows House did." Wilson smiled a little sadly. "I guess in that way, I take after Dad and you take after Mom."

"Not even. Hey, where did this come from?"

"Where did what come from?"

"This," David said, motioning to his face. "The Frowny Face. It's not a good look for you. What happened?"

"Nothing ... nothing," Wilson said, with little resolve behind it. "Why did you say not even? Before?"

"Why, because *I'm* like Dad and you're like Mom."

"That's not true -- "

"Yes, it is. I'm uncompromising. Determined to have my way or the highway. He left home at 17. I did it two years earlier. You all told me I was too young, the drugs were bad, I shouldn't be homeless. Somehow, by some miracle, it all worked out for the best, but it doesn't take away from the fact that you were right. Dad didn't listen to Grandpa any more than I listened to anyone. No, you're like Mom. You're both loving and nurturing, and you both have big ole borderline personality disorders with no room for yourselves. You know the old saying? Dream as if you'll live forever ... live as if you'll die today. Bonus points if you can name who said that."

"Gosh, I don't know. Frost, Shelley, Yeats ... James Dean." Wilson tossed him a look. "You had that quote emblazoned on a t-shirt that you wore till the sleeves fell off, remember?"

"Okay, okay. But the point is you do the exact opposite. Every day is any day. every dream is hopeless and soon going to end. Yet you have shown hopeful signs of abandoning your stickboy side. Speaking of which -- where is Greg?"

Wilson looked up, glanced around. "He said something about going to the gift store. Probably looking for the National Enquirer. Actually, he probably wants to think on his feet."

"Going to score, huh?"

Wilson laughed sadly. "Do you know everything going on around here?"

"Almost. He's haunted, he's brilliant, he's entirely your Mr. Thang. And we all have our addictions. For instance, I'm addicted to parties. Which is why Goosy is here. We were planning my big going away party, although word hath it I may not need one. I'm guessing I'm not as sick as you thought. And I do so love a good party. But for a great party, you need a grand reason and we don't have one now."

"After I finally found vegan rugala!" spoke the chair-sitting pirate.

"Oh, my pet, I know, I'm sorry," David said. "Which reminds me, where are my manners? Gustave, this is PPTH superhero Captain Cancer, whose secret identity is my brother the mild-mannered Jimmy Wilson. I told you about him and Greg, remember ... wink, wink? Jimmy, this is Gustave the Gay Black Green Green Grocer. He's gay, he's black, he's environmentally friendly and he sells organic fruits and veggies. What's not to love?"

Wilson considered his second biggest quandary of the moment and then decided to address it. "May I ask ... why he's dressed ... like a pirate?"

David lowered his voice to his brother. "Gustave loves him some Johnny Depp. Don't mention it, though, he's very sensitive about it. Goosy owns the Little Easy green grocer and vegan restaurant next to my studio. Now that you're on the up side of forty, you ought to start thinking about going veggie, Jim. Personally, I can't do vegan. Cheddar and I go way back. Speaking of way back, Goos, go and guess -- who's the older one?"

The pirate considered them both for a moment. He said to David, "You are."

David pouted for a moment. "See? That's what's tragic. I'm the little brother, not that you can tell with my sickly bad self. He's also cuter, but I'm smarter by two whole IQ points. I'm officially a genius. He's merely intellectually gifted. But the smart girls don't have to be pretty, do they, Goos?"

"Two IQ points doesn't make you smarter," Gustave said.

David grinned. "Yes it does. Isn't one point like a thousand times smarter?"

"No," Wilson said, smiling knowingly, picking up his brother's chart to study for a moment. "You're thinking of the Richter scale for measuring earthquakes."

"Oh, that's right! I got it wrong. But one is still worth seven."

"No," Wilson added. "Those are dog years. One IQ point is worth one. Two are worth two."

"Okay, Doctor Wilson," David said, "if you're just as smart, stop pouting and go make up with your husband, no matter what happened."

"He's not -- " Wilson said, stealing a look over at Gustave, then despairing of any hope of privacy. "House is not my husband. Or boyfriend, for that matter."

"The best friend crap again? Once again, I will point out that you never kissed Shorty."

Wilson's eyes lit up like flash fire. "I can't believe House told you he kissed me!"

David's eyes opened wide and he snorted out a huge laugh. "He didn't, but you just did! Who's smarter now? Gustave, we're havin' a great party after all!"

"Not so fast," Wilson said softly.

"Why? You're gonna tell me you run around kissing doctors you make goo-goo eyes at all the time?"

"No, I -- " Wilson turned to look at Gustave who was clearly all ears.

"Oh, okay," David said. "Goos, stick your fingers in your ears and hum the William Tell Overture real loud or something, will you?"

"No," Wilson said, waving Goos off sticking his fingers in his ears. "That's not necessary. I've told you that much, I may as well tell you the rest. Okay, over the last few days, House and I have gone beyond ... friendship. "

David beamed proudly toward Gustave. "See? Am I ever wrong?"

"You are never wrong," Gustave agreed. "About this stuff anyway."

"So what happened!" David said, whacking his brother's arm. "Out with it, man. Details!"

Wilson inhaled again. "It's a long story. Over a couple of days. But it ended up that I said ... something. Something I shouldn't have. To House. Before we left the restaurant."

"Something?"

Wilson nodded. "The big something. I was overcome by the moment and I just blurted it out."

"So? I say that to Shannon ten times a day."

"So all I received ... was a lot of silence in reply."

"This is Greg we're discussing here. What were you expecting him to do? Get all hopelessly devoted to you?"

"No, of course not. But he says the big three words to me when he's joking around. How hard can it be to say? I was out there with it. I was taking a huge risk."

"So you feel vulnerable. That's normal. Trust me, Greg's falling down drunk in love with you. It's obvious. He even edges you out in the truly, madly, deeply department and you act like you're about to throw down a prayer rug when he's around. I'm never wrong about this stuff. Goos, am I ever wrong?"

"He's never wrong," Gustave agreed with a nod. "Except about Herbert Jepson."

"Give me a break, Goosy," David replied. "I was right about him loving you. It's not

my fault he was a horndog. Next time, don't just think with your mighty broadsword." David looked back to his brother. "How long has it taken for you to admit this to me, my brutha? And I've known you my whole life. And you cry at Rosalind Russell movies."

Wilson tried to smile. He nodded. "I just think I was ... hasty."

"Like the turtle told the rabbit when the snails mugged him, I don't know what happened, it all went by so fast," David said.

"I'm sure there is a moral to that story but I'm too tired to try to glean it," Wilson said. "You're stable now. I'll check back with you in the morning. I'm going to go home and sleep."

"What happened to your hot night with Greg?"

"Greg knows where to find me ... if he wants to."

"You're just going to use this as an excuse to take refuge in your one-size-fit-all home-sweet-homeless?"

Wilson looked pointedly back at his brother. "I have never, in my life, demeaned you for being who you are, as you are. Why do you do that to me now?"

"Because this hurts you, goddamn it. I love you like the French Quarter blues, my brutha, but you are miserable. Greg sees it, too. And I think he's as miserable without you in his life, the way you're supposed to be, as you are without him. You've built this wall around you while you've built a wall between you, too."

"Is that the end of tonight's sermon?" Wilson asked wearily.

"Just one more question -- you know the saying *we loiter in winter while it is already spring*?"

Wilson nodded a little and smiled a little sadly. "Trust me, it's still winter outside. But yes, I know, it's from Walden. Can't I take the Thoreau test tomorrow?"

David shook his head. "That wasn't a test question, mon frere, it was a reminder. It's already spring, stickboy. So go find Greg and kiss him till he tells you what you already know."

Wilson took in the words for the moment, staring quietly at his reflection in the door glass and the extension of the long, dark hospital hallway meandering away into night.

Wilson turned and followed on the long, lit path toward that night without saying another word.

When his brother had gone, David looked over at his friend the pirate. "So, Goosy, you bring *la grosse dame* after all?"

"I brought it. Without the party, I was thinking you wouldn't need it now."

"Maybe I don't. But ya never know... you know?" He smiled a little sadly. "I was a way shitty Boy Scout, but I still remember that stuff about *being prepared*."

As he walked into his cold suite, it was 11:11 again. Again. *The mind recognizes patterns and discards the data that doesn't correspond to the pattern*, House would say. Actually, Spock would have said that -- House would have called him a moron, but that was the general idea. The mind didn't notice the times when it was 1:34 and 2:17, but it sees the 11:11 and then subconsciously conforms it to fit the pattern. Still, the little bit of whimsy still in him made him wonder.

He had barely shut the door and drawn the drapes and started walking around the shadows cluttering up the lay of his rooms, when there was a knock at the door.

He seriously considered merely standing there and doing nothing but he knew that would only lead to House going down to the front desk and coming up with some emergency bullshit story to force his hand.

Instead, he walked over, opened the door, saw it was whom he knew it would be and walked back into his front room.

The tired step led up to the click of a cane. Finally, there was the sound of him settling into a chair.

Wilson perched himself on the edge of his front room chair. He didn't look toward the eyes he could feel radiating at him.

"Did you talk to David?"

"He said I should talk to you. Told me something was wrong." House shifted forward on the sofa. His voice was soft and a little sad. "What happened to us going over to my place?"

"It's just ..." Wilson glanced once up at the other man, then had to look away to go on. I need to ask ... I need to know, okay? What have we been doing here? What are we trading our friendship for? Have I been thinking this was something more than it was?"

"That's an inane question."

"Maybe. But I need it answered."

The darkness surrounding the blue in House's eyes blackened into anger. "I won't be emotionally blackmailed into reciting Valentines Day bilge. If anyone should have doubts, it's *me*. You're the one who marries every 1000th satisfied customer."

"You're the one who broke into Dr. Martin's office," Wilson said.

House looked away again, stealing a discomfited moment of quiet. "When did you find that out?"

"I didn't. You just told me." Wilson laughed up a pained, humorless sound. "Sorry, I stole that *you just told me* idea from David. For what it's worth, I knew you would the minute I blabbed Martin's name at dinner. But I don't have some folder to go to and divine your deepest feelings. All I know is what you say. And to be honest, the evidential record isn't very strong with you."

"First, I bribed the cleaning woman, I didn't really break in. And secondly, what the hell do you want from me?"

He sighed with a wordless kind of helplessness. "I want you to tell me how you feel. I already told you how I feel. And I don't want some flip comment because I give you pain meds. No matter how badly it hurts me. If you don't care as much as I do ... I want to hear it. And then I want out."

"Why don't I tell you what you *really* want to hear? So you can go back to being a coward?"

"And what's that supposed to be?"

House's eyes grew dark with certainty while he managed to move across the room fast enough to lean into Wilson and force him backward where he sat. "That I got the only thing I wanted out of all this *almost fucking* in the first place. My big mystery -- James Wilson -- completely defenseless, while he came right in front of me."

The words hurt like hell the moment they impacted, even with the shimmer of pain in the other man's voice.

Wilson stayed back in the chair. He looked away toward a darkened window. His words were soft and low and quiet even to the edges. "I won't deny that the last couple of days have been ... amazing. Beautiful. Perfect even. But what it was, is over. We go back to our stupid, screwed-up friendship. Whatever's left of it."

"We can't do that."

"Then I guess we're left with nothing." He pressed at the moisture pooling warmly in his eyes. "I guess we'll just work together."

House took hold of a fistful of Wilson, towing him forward. He stared deeply through Wilson's tears. "I am not letting go of ... this."

"If it's just sex -- "

"It's *not* just sex! What do I have to do to prove it to you? Drive a car over my worldly possessions or something?"

"All I need is three words, that's all."

House exhaled loud and long "Even if I say that to you, it still won't be enough. It'll be something else next week."

"It'll be something. If you didn't need to be certain, why did you break into Martin's office? You know now. What you put me through. What it took to get me through it. I even found a female proxy for you. How sick is that? But it didn't work. Because she wasn't you. Because it's always you. It's only ever going to be you. I don't know how I can be more honest. So you tell me what I need to hear or there is nothing more to be said between us -- "

House's cell phone rang again. He groaned and grabbed it up and opened it with a sharp jerk. "What?" he barked into it, his face tightened with anger that gradually ebbed as he was listening to something on the other side. "Okay. Damn it. No, he's with me. We're heading in." House shut down his phone and said gently, "This time the vision loss is in the other eye and it's not going away."

"Shit," Wilson muttered darkly. "So much for transient ischemic blindness."

After a moment, Wilson felt a hand hesitate above his shoulder. Finally, one finger touched his throat a moment before moving away. "C'mon," House said. "I'll drive."

Wilson fought against the drag of weariness and sadness and a hundred other things as he stood up and grabbed for his jacket. "I've got to get coffee on the way. On top of everything, I'm dead on my feet."

House's glare was even more darkly reproachful than usual. "If you didn't take SSRIs -- "

"It's not anti-depressants!" Wilson returned sharply, bristling. "It was the tryptophan in the Bat Cave turkey salad, I think."

"Tryptophan," House said suddenly, now standing beside him. Something else was dawning in his eyes. Something distant while drawing nearer. "The over-the-counter stuff became toxic in processing."

"A few years ago. The Feds pulled it off the market. Why?"

House focused his eyes on something invisible between them both. "A toxic substance was accidentally added during manufacture. FDA pulled it as a safeguard. Just like the Colorado naturopath with the pharma-still source."

"Wait, I remember this. The counterfeit AIDS medication? From a few years ago. His patients couldn't afford pharmaceuticals, so the naturopath got them counterfeit ones off the black market. Except something toxic was accidentally added."

"It wasn't the medication, it was the source. If AbFar didn't come from a standard manufacturer but came from a dirty pharma-still -- "

"David may have Secondary syndrome," Wilson said. "Christ, it all fits."

"Call Other Brother's main squeeze," House said. "Tell him to bring all of the AbFar crap they still have and meet me at the lab."

Wilson nodded, reaching for the door as he pulled his cell phone from his pocket. "I'll take my car and go deal with David."

It was the Big Wheel all over again. As Wilson entered the room to find his little brother clinging with frightened fingers to Shannon, David looked almost as scared as the day he reached out for his big brother when Charlie Pindermaster had come calling.

Foreman was attempting to give him an injection. He saw Wilson and looked toward him with the usual doctor's visual plea for backup.

One of David's hands lunged out to grab his brother and pull him close. "I can't be blind, Jim."

"There's no reason to think you will be. This may be just as transient -- "

"Then why isn't it going away?"

Wilson grabbed the arm Foreman was shooting for and held it down. "It may. But we have to help the process. We can't help you if you won't let us."

"You shouldn't force him that way!" Shannon said, trying to crowd his way to David's side again.

Wilson pushed Shannon back again, hard enough to propel him into a chair. "Are you helping him or are we?"

The other man waved Wilson off, nodding his compliance while he sat back in the chair. "Sorry."

Foreman found the vein for the injection. "I injected him with this already. It's what worked last time."

"Then it should work this time," Wilson said to David, who was finally relaxing back into a more controlled huddle of fear.

"What if it doesn't?" David asked.

Wilson grabbed up a retinal light to flash David's left eye. "Then we'll find something that does. Do you see anything? Is it obscured? Is it the presence of something in your field of vision or does it seem like somebody shut something off?"

"It's nothing. I already told Eric that!"

Foreman shook his head. "It still sounds like constriction to me."

"We have anything back yet?"

"In your office."

"Wait," David said, his voice flooded with relief as he grabbed at his brother's arm. "I have light coming at me from the left here. It's milky but it's real. And I have one Captain Cancer coming in clearer right in front of me."

"That's a lot better news," Wilson said, trying the light again. "Anything?"

"Just a big white splotch, but it's nice to see anything."

"See, I told you to be -- "

"Wilson," House said firmly, softly, succinctly through the open door.

Wilson looked up to find House staring at him in an uncertain way that vacillated somewhere between sadness and something enough like love that he could interpret it that way if he wanted to. House tilted his head toward the hallway as if he wanted Wilson to follow him.

"Oooh, looks like Gregory wants some up-close and personal time," David said, relieved good humor lighting up his voice. "Greg, remember what I told you about the sale at Dirty Houdini!"

Wilson's glare circled quickly around at his brother then moved for a meaningful moment toward Foreman who was grinning guiltily into David's chart while making focused notations.

"Oh, stop. Eric wasn't born yesterday. Now, go. Bad enough I interrupted your hot date once. Oh, and quit blushing so brightly, too, your capillaries will burst."

It seemed to Wilson the space between the bed and the sliding door was about fifty miles. He finally reached it and walked through without looking back, going in the direction House was pointing.

"I gathered ye test results and put them on my desk," House said, chucking his cane to the side while he plunked down in his office chair. He had pulled up beside him a steno chair and when Wilson tried to sit in his usual place, House made a loud clucking sound for his attention then gestured to the chair just beside him. "I put this here for a reason."

Wilson considered the chair a moment then nodded his tacit agreement. He moved across and lowered himself into the chair.

House was silent for too long a moment. Then he tossed a lab report on the desk before him.

"Their counterfeit AbFar is positive for methylcholanthrene," House said softly.

Wilson's whole body tensed up with the words. He kicked at something invisible and shook his head. "It's Secondary syndrome."

House nodded. "At least that's my best assessment based upon what we got back from the lab. The counterfeit Abfar was manufactured somewhere that cooks organic compounds at very high temperatures. Good intentions in this case were laced with methylcholanthrene before they paved the road to hell. And that, as you know, gives us a nasty carcinogen which can spawn a very nasty, bizarre form of motor neuron disease in some AIDS patients."

"Good intentions of the pharma-still coupled with naked greed by pharmaceutical companies. Wonderful." Wilson breathed out everything in him. "Do we have any notion of the prognosis?"

"In a very small sample of cases. It seems to be an AIDS related motor neuron disease but it mocks lymphoma and, thus, pseudo lymphoma. It's a whole new disease, thanks to the big boys at the FDA. So far, the prognosis is ... grim. And ... bad."

"Blindness?"

"That's what distinguishes it from Gehrig's. Generally thirty to forty-five days from diagnosis. A gradually worse degree over time. That's followed by years of muscular atrophy, the usual problems swallowing, breathing, all the fun stuff --"

"I get the picture. ALS on crank."

"Pretty much."

"And no idea in the world of how to treat the thing."

Foreman's shadow passed over House's door before he stood for a moment inside it. "The relaxant took effect. He's sleeping a little. His boyfriend is in the diner."

Wilson nodded. "Good. Telling my brother can wait till morning. Let him get one more decent night of sleep anyway."

"Secondary syndrome," House informed the man inside the door.

Foreman squinted in sharp surprise then gradually shook his head. "But there've only been --"

"They bought counterfeit Abfar from a dirty lab," House replied.

"Do we know where?"

"No," House said. "And the cone of silence will descend over it so quickly that we'll never find out. But word will get around. They'll clean up shop. No one will pay but hopefully they'll learn life's little lesson about not mixing medication with deadly mutagens."

"Nice little money-making operation they have there," Foreman said. "Front room pharmaceuticals for the rest of the human race. Backroom pharma-still counterfeits for us Yanks."

"No national health insurance," House said. "Wildly overpriced medication. Next to no real FDA anymore. And our tax money goes to supposedly protect people in other countries with all those things? Who is it over here that calls us the greatest country on earth? And who is it over there that call us spoiled children?"

Foreman shook his head. "No one who knows what the hell they're talking about, that's for sure. Sorry about Davey, Wilson. See you both tomorrow."

"Goodnight," Wilson called out hollowly to Foreman's retreating shadow.

"You okay?"

Wilson looked away in a manner that was becoming a tic to him. "I'm fine."

House looked at him with deeply scrutinizing eyes. "Modern euphemism for *I feel like shit, but I don't want to admit my human frailty to anyone?*"

Wilson gave an interrupted nod. "Thank god you're here to translate these vagaries for me. Go on home. I'm going to stay here and think of a way to tell my parents."

"Tell them what?" a voice at House's office door snapped toward them -- less like a voice than a collision of sound.

It was a face that it still took Wilson several seconds to recognize, with all the age collected in his features and all the time over which they had become strangers. He recognized Shannon.

Wilson sighed, fighting to think and then to speak. "We think David has -- "

"Secondary Syndrome. Right?"

Wilson hesitated but then finally nodded. "Do you know what that is?"

Shannon turned a little toward the light. He rubbed a hand into the small of his back, as if stretching to take in the wave of information. "I know enough. The minute you wanted the Abfar, we knew. What do we do?"

"We can adapt existing treatment modalities to fit this. The etiology seems somewhat similar to amyotrophic lateral sclerosis ... Lou Gehrig's disease. If it is Secondary, in a way it's good. It doesn't terminate as rapidly in death. We'll have time. There are breakthroughs."

"He'll be blind," Shannon said.

"There are worse things than being blind," Wilson said.

"Not to an artist. His whole life is lived through his eyes."

"There are other forms of art than visual art. Anyway, it's not what he is, it's what he does. We're intelligent creatures. We adapt."

"Like your mother adapted? She studied film for eight years just so she'd sit in a classroom and teach new filmmakers to do what she doesn't have the guts to do

herself. She never even tried. Davey did -- Davey does. You want him to teach now?"

"David wanted to be Degas. Correct me if I'm wrong but I'm thinking being a sidewalk caricature artist is a bit of an adaptation, too. And about my mother -- she is right now teaching more students how to make films they won't be able to make either and so they'll go on and become future film school teachers themselves. That's not a career path, it's a Ponzi scheme. She was scammed. And she made the best of it."

"Now you sound like your father."

Wilson bolted up off the sofa in anger, then caught himself, calmed himself. He took a deep, careful breath and went on. "No, my father is a miserable jerk who'd do something like kill himself if he couldn't get his way. Just like David is thinking of doing. And yes, I'm sure that's his backup plan. When I was a kid, I didn't even know anyone wants to become something. I thought you're presented with options and you choose one. I wanted to help people. Curing cancer would help people. Doctors cure cancer so here I am. I want to be a good person so I became a good doctor. I made a choice. So did David. If I had to make another choice, I'd make another one. So will David."

"You're not the one who has to help him choose."

"So you're going to do what? Rollover spinelessly like my mother does for my father? Go along to get along?"

"You don't know anything about me!" Shannon snapped in reply.

Wilson didn't comment for a minute. "You're right, I don't. And you're going to do whatever Shannon wants to do. And whatever Shannon wants to do, he will do, no matter what I or anyone says. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to go call my parents from the lounge." Wilson looked for a moment over his shoulder. "Go on home, House. Someone should sleep comfortably."

"I'll be here," House said shortly.

Wilson shot him a mutedly sad and anguished look. "Then I'll be there," he said.

House aimed his stare into his office's darker reaches until Wilson had finally turned distinctly sideways and walked out the door without even moving close to Shannon Pillsbury. Wilson walked slowly past House's office window without once looking back.

When House looked up, he saw that The Man Who Once Kissed James Wilson was still staring at him from the door -- staring like a man on the verge of asking a question.

"Sorry, visiting hours at the medical ape habitat are over," House said to the staring man. "Please don't disturb the primates while they're planning on getting hammered."

"Davey wants to talk to you," Shannon said simply. "He's waiting."

"Oh, he's waiting, why didn't you say so?" House asked, slowly reaching aside to grab for his cane. "I thought he was getting his beauty sleep."

"He faked it. He wanted to talk to you alone. Or at least without Jim."

David looked enough like Wilson to force an invisible fist up through House's throat he wouldn't have admitted, on pain of death, was stuck there. House supposed there was no way around their current relationship impasse. To make for Wilson the mouth sounds he thought would magically heal him would have only been a temporary palliative for his symptoms. Due to ludicrous and inane social customs, Wilson wouldn't now let House close enough to drag him into bed and give him the only sure cure -- forcing joy through his body the source of which could only have come from whatever it was people called love.

He made himself set aside his usual unending well of pain regarding Wilson for the moment.

David was turned away toward the wall. His face was tensed up like an infant in silent tears. He had balled up a fist and was pressing his face against it.

When he looked up and saw House, he looked a little relieved. He almost smiled a little.

"So you know we know?" David asked softly, trying to hike his tone of voice over his own throat full of tears.

House nodded. "And vice versa."

David nodded. He coughed to clear his voice and then went on. "I can't be blind, Greg."

"Yes, so I've been told."

David laughed darkly and shrugged. "I have been an artist since I splashed two Styrofoam cups filled with purple and pink Tempura paint across a kiddie canvas when I was in kindergarten. You of all people know we have to choose what we can and can't live with. I can't live with this, Greg."

"You can live with it," House said sharply. "You're choosing to not live with it."

"Look, Mr. Doctor Jesus, could you live without your fabled brilliance? Could you survive ... would you want to survive ... without my brother? No bullshit here ... where I'm going, your secret is safe with me. Tell me the truth."

After a long moment, House shook his head. "No," he admitted.

"Then don't judge me, Greg. We all have our limits. These are mine." David shook

his head sadly. "Okay, obviously Jimmy is somewhere safe and incommunicado or you wouldn't be here. I only asked Shannon to drag you in if he was. Allison is sneaking up a wheelchair from discharge ... That's where Shannon is, going up to grab it. We knew Secondary was a possibility. We hoped it was a remote one. And we knew there was nothing you could do even if we did bring up the possibility and therefore place our friends at risk from the Feds."

"And let a whole hospital work for hours to diagnose it?"

He smiled guiltily. "We figured you'd have had to do the footwork anyway."

"Why, David," House said, "you're almost as callously manipulative as I am."

David winced a little. "I like to think I'm personable and persuasive. Anyway, lucky you, you're the only one who's going to know. I have all my medications for my pneumonia and the eighty other things. So I'm just going to take off."

"That's medically ill-advised."

"I know, I know. Shannon has the statement of liability release from our attorney, all signed and everything."

House shook his head. "Your brother would tell you that life is worth living. He would say there are treatments that will extend your life. Your mind won't be affected, just your body."

"I know, but what would you say to that?"

"He would say what I would say would be immaterial since we're talking about your life. And he would avoid the fact that his opinion is just his opinion about your life by living on in his happy home land of denial."

David laughed, reaching out and slapping House's good knee. "I love you, Greg. But you'll be a champ? You'll keep my secret till I'm gone?"

It took House a slow, maddening march of minutes. "So far as I know, your brother has just fallen asleep in the doctor's lounge. Waking your brother would involve several loud rings of his cell phone. A minimum of five. It would take me that long to walk down there to alert him. I would say, if your boy squeeze has the getaway car backed up and waiting, you'd be able to leave before I could reach Wilson in time for him to stumble to his feet and get down here."

He smiled with a faraway sadness. "Thank you. And I know Jimmy's already pissed at you. This will make him pissed at you some more, but you know he won't be mad at you for long. My friends and other family will think I'm going to some alternative treatment center. When I die, they'll find out the truth. And you know how bad it would freak out my mom and Jimmy if they had to watch me die slowly."

"You may have six to eight weeks of sight ahead of you. You're just throwing that away for an eternity of nothing?"

"No, I'm going to take off and spend one good month somewhere I love. I'm going to look at everything I can for as long as I can." His gaze lifted a little and turned for

a moment toward the hallway beyond which Shannon was standing. "Loving Shannon as much as I can. Drawing as much as I can. And then, when the time is right, I'm going to take my final medicine and lay me down to sleep. El permanente style."

"And if you don't go blind? If we were wrong?"

"You wrong? Well, if that miracle occurs, I'll be back and we'll all go out for great Chinese. I do however have a gift for you first. A little thank you. I'd rather give it to you as a gift and get to see your face light up than leave it to you in my will or something."

House nodded. "I like presents."

"You'll love this one. It's a *very* rare 12" special vinyl recording. It's a ten minute version of Lake Pontchartrain Juju Queen by somebody named Hiffy Blues Lick Meacham. I should tell you there is no blues musician by that name but there was once a blues club called that run by my old friend named ... well, Hiffy Blues Lick Meacham. One day back in the early 80s, a fine fellow named Rye Cooder set down his ole gig bag beside the one and only Muddy Waters and they started to butterfly jam. Hiffy taped it. There is one and only one pressing of it which Hiffy himself gave to me before he passed. There's no one else in the world who would appreciate it like you would."

House actually let himself look shocked and impressed beyond words. "Rye Cooder *and* Muddy Waters? Together? At the same time?"

"Yup. Interested?"

"In a word, yeah. That's better than lesbian porn."

David hooted out a laugh. "If you say so. Shannon will make certain you receive it. However it comes with two conditions."

House stared over at him with new and sharp concern. "Which are?"

"One, love my brother with all your heart and anything else you two want to involve in the process until you both collapse together in a dead heap from exhaustion at a minimum age of ninety-five years."

House nodded. "And?"

"And, well, someday, and that day may never come, I'll call upon you to do a service for me. But, until that day, accept this as a gift for being my beloved brother-in-law."

"That's from the Godfather, except for the brother-in-law part. The scene between Don Corleone and Bonasera," House said, with deeper suspicion. "Your brother warned me about your tricky mean streak."

"Mean streak? Me? So shoot me, my mother teaches film school. Anyway, do I look like La Cosa Nostra to you?"

House crooked an eyebrow skyward. "What does La Costra Nosta look like?"

"Alright, alright. Deny a dying man a final favor."

House shook his head. "That never works when I use it either."

"Let's try this then. If you love my brother half as much as I think you do, you'll agree. And I'll make sure he knows that was part of the pact. I hear you can use a little back-up in that department."

House narrowed his focus. "You'll put that to Wilson in writing?"

"Absolutely. By the way, the favor I'm asking will involve nothing illegal, or physically tasking, and it won't cost you a cent."

House further considered. "These were the *real* Rye Cooder and Muddy Waters? Not the Fake Elvises kinds? Not Rye Crisp and Ethel Waters?"

"The real deal."

Finally and slowly, House nodded. "Okay, I'll probably live to regret this but okay, I agree."

The squeak of wheels signaled the chair at the door. "Everything is stowed. We're ready," Shannon said. "Your chariot awaits."

"Thank god. I'm dying for unhealthy pizza with all kinds of bad booglies on it." Shannon helped David from the bed to the wheelchair then covered him over with a thick blanket. David buttoned his robe then reached for his sketch pad and removed from within it two envelopes. He handed the envelopes to House. "One is for Jimmy obviously. The other is for my mom. My dad and Jack can kiss my ass if they can reach it."

House slipped the envelopes into a pocket. "Okay, I'll see they get them."

David looked down the hall, in the busy direction of the hospital switchback, beyond which lay the doctor's lounge. His eyes filled with tears. Finally one spilled over onto his face. "I think this would have been easier if I hadn't come here. I'd forgotten how much I love him. Now I remember. But I'm still glad I did."

House nodded. "Wherever you arrive, I hope it's the place you're looking for."

"That's probably the most sentimental thing you've ever said to anyone," David said, grinning through tears. He managed to stand up from the chair. "But just a sec, you got a big scary bug on your face."

"No, I don't," House said suspiciously, backing up a little.

"Yes, you do -- right there," David said, swooping in to clamp a kiss on House's face. Cackling merrily, David surrendered back into the chair. "Hah! Gotcha! Okay, Shan, time to hit the high road. Mush, Miss Tessmacher."

"What?" Shannon said.

David pitched his gaze to heaven, smirked back at Shannon, and slapped a hand at the door. "Just go."

Shannon pushed David in the chair until they moved through a the intermediate door and then around the switchback toward what was certainly the outside entrance. As they passed the edge of the glass, David smiled back sadly and waved goodbye.

For House, there was only one thing left to do.

"People like who, Dad?" Wilson was barking at his father, seated near where Wilson was standing -- his back to the door -- in the doctors lounge. "Happy people? People living authentic lives and not the ones laid out for them by their parents? People who are alive?"

"Gay people. Homosexual people. Bisexual people. It may not be fair, it may not be just, but these kinds of things happen -- "

"No, they happen because of money, Dad. Bigotry. All of that. Not people. Not innocent ones anyway."

"Maybe so. But their lives will never be as easy as yours and mine."

House was standing near the door; a moment after, Cuddy walked in also. She was looking decidedly stressed and was carrying the release forms she had obviously just been faxed. House gave her a warning look as if to strongly suggest they stay in the background out of the range of fire.

Wilson, hands on hips, was in full ecclesiastic mode. "Their lives? God, I look at David and see all the people who love him -- even people who've only known him for days. If something would happen to House ... he infuriates the world, but if he died, people would care a lot. It would kill me. He would leave a big hole in peoples' lives."

"What does House have to do with this? "

"Just this, Dad. I asked myself, what size hole would I leave in the world if I died? I mean, other than House ... *maybe* ... how many people would care? People I've known for years. And I realized with a terrible clarity -- not many. *Oh, James Wilson, that's too bad, he was a nice guy ... a pretty good doctor, they'd say.* A couple might miss me. But even then not for long. I mean, they don't even know me. How can they know me? I'm a stranger in my own skin."

At that point, Cuddy walked up and slapped the papers across the back of Wilson's head.

He whirled around, in more than a little shock. "What was that for?"

"Your friends would miss you!" Cuddy barked back at him, whacking his head again with the handful of papers. "How can you say that?"

Wilson grabbed for the weapon, yanked it away to make a point. But then he noticed the title. "Contingency release form? Who was released?"

"Davey," Cuddy said. "Didn't he talk to you about it?"

"Of course not. We just diagnosed him with Secondary syndrome. Where in the hell could he be going?"

"Somewhere he loves. Until his vision holds out," House said quietly, "looking at everything he can for as long as he can."

Wilson's gaze swung toward House. "You knew he was leaving?" Wilson said harshly.

"Not until just before. I didn't have time to call you or come down here before he left."

"Is that the truth?" Wilson asked, his voice caving. "Or is that just what you came up with so you can live with it?"

House accepted the onslaught of words. Absorbing them, he removed from his pocket the two letters to hand them over. "He left these."

Wilson took his, absently handing the other one over to his mother who had crept up beside them, a vision of worry.

Wilson read over the note. He slowly shut his eyes as the realization sunk in.

Adie Wilson had read over her own note. Sobbing a disjointed sound mixed with fear and sadness, she turned in her husband's direction. "We have to go find him."

"To hell with him then," John Wilson murmured, his eyes dark with misted-over rage. "If he just wants to leave again, let him leave. Good riddance."

"That's it," Wilson said finally. "That's it. Dad, this moment will be our rude bridge. Consider me your embattled farmer."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means, Dad, you aren't just losing one gay son. You just lost two." Wilson turned toward his mother, meeting her gaze with a gentle smile. "I think I know where he is, Mom," he said. "I'll call you."

Walking past House, he finally looked up at him.

"Wilson," House said quickly, quietly, almost at the edge of fear, "where in hell are you going? It's the middle of the night. You're just going to drive around looking for him?"

"I said I think I know where he is." Wilson looked at him once, then looked away. "I'll call you, too."

House looked across the sweep of Wilson's office. As individual as the man himself and just as obtrusive, meaning not at all. "He's been reading something," he said to Cuddy as she was busy looking around the room. "A book."

"What kind of book?"

"Some inane piece of crap. Something like you'd read. Look in the top drawer, where he keeps the pictures of the two of us together he thinks that I don't know he has."

Her hand jerked away from the handle as if it had just burst into flame. "Together?" she said, grimacing with a spasm of terror. "Or *together* together?"

"Rated G for general audiences," House sniped back.

"Okay," she said, continuing to open the drawer carefully as if a snake might be coiled up inside.

"Except for the one with my cock up his ass, of course."

She slammed the drawer back, holding up both hands. "That did it. You look for it. You're his flaming love buddy, not me."

"No sense of adventure at all, Lisa Cuddy. Living inside your comfort zone is probably what led you to a life of karaoke."

"Wait. Is this the book?" Cuddy asked, picking up one from the edge of Wilson's desk and showing it to House. "Walden?"

"Looks like it. What's it about?"

"What's it about? You *are* joking?"

"Duh ... no."

"Henry David Thoreau. *I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately?*"

He shrugged. "I got nothing."

"You can say that again." Pictures and papers fell out of the book into her hands. She looked at a picture. "Wait -- isn't this Wilson when he was a kid?"

House commanded his cane again and crossed quickly, looking at the item in question. "Yeah. And that boy might be his brother. They look like they're on some kind of bridge."

She tapped at the image in the picture. "I think that's the old north bridge near Lexington-Concord. That's not too far from Walden Pond which, Dr. Supergenius, is what the book is about. My Aunt Ann lives in Waltham so I'm familiar with the place. Yeah, I'm almost positive it's the Old North Bridge."

"What north bridge?"

"The one in the Emerson poem."

"What poem?"

"The *poem*, House. Ralph Waldo Emerson? Did you read anything but porn and comic books in school?"

House scowled reproachfully as he looked back at her. "Give me *some* credit, Cuddy. Of course I didn't."

She sighed, shook her head. "It's about the bridge where the first war of the American Revolution began. I think that's this bridge in the picture. Did you read about the American Revolution or did you sleep through grade school?"

"Of course I read about it. I noticed there's no Queen on our money. Excluding Andrew Jackson, of course."

While he had spoken, Cuddy had sorted through the other items in the book -- more vacation-type photos of the same two boys. She finally unfolded a copy of a poem from some book. "And here's the poem it's from. *By the rude bridge that arched the flood, their flag to April's breeze unfurled, here once the embattled farmers stood, and fired the shot heard 'round the world.* Wait. Where did I just hear that? Rude bridge. Embattled farmer."

"From Wilson. It's the last thing he said to his father before he left. *This moment will be our rude bridge. Consider me your embattled farmer.*"

Cuddy nodded, an equal recognition dawning in her eyes. "And then he said I know where is."

House grabbed up the book and collection of pictures and papers. "Then I know where Wilson is. How far is it from here to this stupid bridge place?"

"Five hours for mere mortals," she said. "Half an hour the way you drive."

"Which reminds me, I'll need your car," he said, holding out his hand.

"Why *my* car?"

"Obviously because Wilson has his. I can't do this weather on my ride"

She sighed resoundingly, then pulled the keys from her labcoat pocket and surrendered them to his hand. "Just be sure to watch the brakes. And put unleaded in it. And remember it's not a sportscar."

"As if that last part's gonna be hard," he shot back.

"Hey, wait," Cuddy said, remembering. "Are you forgetting something? What about your new patient?"

"It's her fault for being boring. My team can figure her out. Good lord, woman, I have a rebellion to putdown!"

"General Cornwallis," she said, "it's midnight. Do you even know where you're going?"

He considered the question. "Does the Automobile Club still have free road maps?"

"I guess."

"Last question, do you have Automobile Club?"

She groaned. "God, I miss Wilson already. House, I'm afraid you're just going to have to buy a map when you get there. Till then just follow the road signs."

"*Follow signs?* How quaint!" he said, yanking open the door from Wilson' office to the outside door.

"Wait, House," she said quickly to grab his attention.

He looked back around. "What?"

She smiled. "Just ... bring him home ... okay?"

He nodded. "That's the idea."

Five: Already Spring

Gregory House hated driving. Well, to be most accurate, Greg House hated driving lame, old grandma cars. He loved driving cool, hot, flashy cars, but Cuddy's car was about as lame as they made 'em. It even had one of those mega-lame pine tree smelly things dangling from the rearview mirror. It was even too sensible for James Wilson and that was really, truly saying something.

The long, lame, boring ass drive had almost been worth it just to see -- when he'd asked to borrow her car -- Cuddy's eyes inflate with more terror than the day he offered to explain to a couple of inquiring nuns that the Virgin of Guadalupe had not, in fact, put in a guest appearance in a hospital bedpan.

He breathed in a face full of night air and grinned to himself. *Ah, good memories.*

Ape-Changers' volatile bass line oscillation was going fizzy and fuzzy within the walls of Cuddy's pig shit stereo speakers. It was like watching Adam Sandler play King Lear. He wasn't sure why, but it was.

By that hour, House concluded, Wilson had word that his brother wasn't there. He would know he'd never see David again.

Wilson being Wilson, he would stick his tongue in the sore tooth of history and go to the most depressing place he could find to immerse himself in his oh-so-miserable fate. "Dealing with it" would be what Wilson would call it. House would then commence his usual salvage operation of hunting him down then taking him somewhere to get him really drunk. This time, there was likely to even be a reward for him in doing so. That idea made Gregory happy.

He started driving up around that Lexington-Concord thing to find the stupid bridge place.

The object of his twenty years of love, obsession, lust, frequent no-interest loans and grants, more lust, occasional feeding frenzies, even more lust and ongoing screwed-up friendship was barely visible in a thin morning light. The clinging ice and mist made his coat and hair look lighter, but there was no mistaking the tragic pose ... the mythic posturing of James Wilson, singular victim of fate. Wilson was near the Minute Man Park place at the Lexington-Concord thing. He was leaning against the main post of some crappy little wooden footbridge.

When he saw him, Wilson shook his head and slowly if sadly smiled.

"You're not supposed to park there," was the first thing Wilson said. It was, in a way, the driving motto of James Wilson's life.

"Do I care? We're in New England. There's not a cop awake for thirty-five miles. Besides I'm a poor cripple, remember? They wouldn't dare ticket me."

Wilson nodded, laughed a little, shrugged. "I guess you know David's not here."

"Yup. Left me a note. Said he wouldn't be here, but you would be. Before you ask, he didn't tell me where he was going."

"He left me a message on my voicemail. Told me he wouldn't be here. I was on the 25 near Worcester when I thought to check with my service. I'd already paid the toll so I decided to just come here."

"You checked your service then you got my messages," House said, moving up beside Wilson to lean against the first edge of the footbridge. "I've been trying to call you."

"I know. So has Mom. And Cuddy because you wouldn't answer her calls. Of course, seeing her car behind you, I now understand the frantic tone in her voice." He looked around with a quiet finality, standing up from the post of the bridge he'd been leaning against. "Listen, you want to get breakfast somewhere? Then I guess we can just turn around and go home. Nothing to see here now."

"Yeah, there is. I want to see this thing Cuddy was foaming at the mouth about. This miraculous dumbshit bridge place?"

"What miraculous dumbshit bridge place?"

"Where all the 4th of July crap began."

"The Old North Bridge? What do you think you're leaning against?"

House looked around, drawing back a little in amazement -- staring at a basic, run-of-the-mill wooden footbridge arching over the Concord River just below them. House squinted in confusion. "This is it?"

"This is it. Concord Green is right there. That's where the shots were supposedly fired."

"But it's a crappy old wooden bridge."

"A crappy old wooden national monument bridge that has been meticulously rebuilt about a hundred times at taxpayer expense. One million a year just in termite abatement alone. But yeah, this is it. What did you think? It would be paved with gold or something?"

"Or hover or glow-in-the-dark. Fish are fucking right there alongside the national monument pilings."

"Not this time of year. But it's a bridge. Crossing over water where fish may or may not be fucking is one of its more important functions."

"Speaking of fucking, that reminds me ... "

"Everything reminds you of fucking ... so it seems that fucking reminds you of

everything."

"It reminded me that Other Brother reserved a suite for us at Inn on the Green right over there. Where you conveniently parked your car. We can get breakfast as room service. Right now eight hours curled up with you sounds like a lot more fun than five hours driving Cuddy's pathetic idea of cool wheels."

"House, with everything that has happened, I don't know if I'm ready for that."

"Wilson, with everything that has happened, you're completely ready for that. You really want to talk about what we have to talk about here in Mighty Tightly Whitey Land?"

"Talking can wait till we get home." Wilson squinted down at his watch. "I have a 4 pm appointment I want to be at. If we leave now --- "

"Ooops," said House. Then came the crinkling sound of something thumping into the slush below. "It looks like I have dropped my cane."

Wilson stared in the direction House was looking. "And I guess it's just impossible for you to retrieve it."

"With all this ice ... and my disability?" House gave a hopeless gesture. "I'm up you-know-what-creek."

"It figures. Okay," Wilson said, beginning to walk in the direction of the frozen grass berth that passed under the first piling's slush pool where the cane had come to a stop. "I can see it from here."

"You'd better give me your overcoat. In case you fall in. Awfully cold to be walking around with a wet overcoat."

"Good idea," Wilson said, peeling it off and handing it over to House who had just come up to stand behind him on the last piece of solid ground. Wilson walked to the bank. "Wait," he said, turning around, his eyes filled with the first clear glimmer of suspicion, "why would I fall in? It's a fairly straight shot over to the piling."

House shrugged with an air of absolute innocence. "Like the bumpersticker says, shit happens."

"More likely *House happens*," Wilson said, scrutinizing him carefully. "You're not going to pull anything, are you?"

"No. And don't give me your skeptical scientist squint! You'd think after all these years you'd believe me. I swear to you, I'm *not* going to pull anything!"

Wilson gestured in surrender. "Alright, it seems I have no choice but to take you at your word," he said, turning around toward the wash-up.

At which point, House pushed Wilson into the half-frozen lip of the river.

The booming howl that shook the river and green and bounced farther across the Walden woods might have been heard by a passing stroller and thought to be the cry

of some poor frustrated animal.

It was, in fact, James Wilson crying out first at the shock of the freezing cold, then in anger and frustration and, once picking himself up to finally grab House's cane, from flinging it back in House's general direction.

"Thanks," House said merrily, picking up the cane.

"You!" was all Wilson could manage, between the rage and the cold.

"Hey, you asked about me pulling something. You never said a word about not *pushing* something!"

"You! I could -- I could just -- "

House grabbed for an arm to help him up to solid ground. But as soon as Wilson arrived there, he jerked the arm away from him.

House smiled, offering the overcoat. "Bet you're glad I warned you to take the overcoat off now, huh? See and you say I don't have your back."

Wilson grabbed the overcoat away from him, flapping it open and throwing it around him as quickly as possible. "You! I could absolutely -- I could just -- "

"Stop dallying around here in the cold with those wet clothes on," House said, as he coordinated his way back twenty-five steps or so up the bank and finally to where Cuddy's car was standing at ready. "Come on, into the warm with you, young man."

Wilson shambled his way up from the embankment and around to the road in the path of House's embossed footsteps across the frozen grass. He jammed himself into the passenger side of Cuddy's car. He immediately began to shiver.

House grinned over at him ambitiously then started up the car. "Bet you think it's a good thing Other Brother got us a reservation now, huh? Truly, life finds a way."

Wilson hovered near the small car heater like a tiny fire on a big, windy night. "House, the second I get warm, I'm going to find a way to kick your ever-loving ass."

"No, no, first we get you out of those wet clothes, and then we get to the foreplay."

The lit fireplace in the little cabin suite had warmed the room and lent it a radiant golden cast upon their arrival. Standing beside it, Wilson was divesting himself of all of his frosty clothing. He draped each of his nearly frozen garments over the secondary fireplace screen.

House had been watching the show and smiling widely when Wilson turned around.

"What's wrong, House?" Wilson said, visibly annoyed. "We've seen each other naked

before, remember?"

"You got no complaints from me. You're the big dumb prude," House said. He grabbed up Wilson's tie from the fireplace screen. "You shouldn't put fake silk near open flame. It can combust."

"No, it won't! Anyway, it's not fake and it won't burn anyway."

"Not that it matters. You could torch your entire butt-ugly Dad Brady wardrobe for all I care." House tossed the long tie around his neck to let it hang there then walked over to the king sized bed consuming the better part of the front room. House reached down and pulled up the tag on the bed's big black furry duvet to read it aloud. "100% genuine acrylic. Wilson, think of all the fine young acrylics that gave their lives so you could be warm. Come on, park your pretty naked ass."

"My naked ass is fine just standing up, thanks," Wilson said.

House smiled a little in genuine sadness. He turned fully back around. "You still mad at me? About before, I mean. Not the ... bridge thing."

Wilson glared back at him. "I'm too cold to say right now, I think my brain is frozen along with my ... other anatomical features. House, there's only one thing I want to know. If you don't feel enough to say the words, then why all this? Okay, I'm probably fun to annoy and harass, I grant you, but there are others. I'm not the only mouse in your tom cat kingdom. And I'm your best friend -- okay, I understood your risking our friendship with the addiction. But was it worth it just to get your rocks off?"

House tossed his cane toward a chair. "It *isn't* just sex, damn it, I *told* you that!"

"You're really big on telling me what it's not. Well, tell me what it is for a change. That's what I really want to know."

"Alright," House said. "I rehearsed this warm and fuzzy shit all the way down here. I may as well say it now." He lowered himself to sit at the end of the bed. He looked away, staring hard at one far corner of the room. "Did it ever occur to you that it's as hard for me to say ... this kind of crap ... as it is for me to walk across the floor?"

Wilson glanced at him with a little surprise. "Yes, it has."

"Good. Because beneath this admittedly sexy veneer of brilliance, I'm a big, inept, awkward, hopeless, emotionally crippled ... jackass. Satisfied?"

Wilson now looked around with the expression of a man who'd just seen a leprechaun ride in on a unicorn pulled by a Yeti. "Are you okay? That came just terrifyingly close to a sincere admission of personal failings."

"Don't stop me now. I'm on a roll." House took a deep breath again, resolving himself physically to go on. "About everything with your brother I'm ... sorry. Even if you had rendered the wrong diagnosis that was all as much my fault for distracting you as it was yours. Anyway, it wasn't your fault at all, since the disease was playing keep-away, not your brain."

And now the leprechaun, unicorn and Yeti had just invited a centaur in for a bridge foursome. Wilson's jaw hung open wider. "Wait. I'm serious now. Are you having hallucinations? Any delusions ... other than the usual ones, I mean?"

"Let me finish," House said, his gaze floating upward toward where the cabin room's open beam ceiling received all light. Wilson looked up in the same direction as if thinking the answers to this latest House weirdness might be up there, too. House was quiet a moment more. "Finally, if you were pathetic about Cutthroat Bitch, and you were ... *really* pathetic ... then so was I with Cameron."

"Can you see the future ... have you shown superhuman strength?" Wilson said, walking over toward him. "Can you speak in a language you've neither known nor studied? Do you ever respond to the name Captain Howdy?"

"I'm serious! Compare you two. Physically, mentally. Same pointless dedication to abstract bullshit. Same idiotic moral center. You both have nice asses ... " He snuck a look in Wilson's direction. "I think yours is better though. You'd have seen the similarities, too, if you weren't such a big, fat coward."

Wilson was smiling a little. "The feelings were *yours* and I'm the coward?"

"Well, I only realized the Cameron connection coming up here. I'm just a five hour coward. But ... my point is ... " House squirmed a little on his feet, before finally admitting softly though certainly, "it's always been you, too."

At that point, a gryphon danced in with pretzels and beer.

Wilson turned away to the wall, gathering up the fragments of his shattered reserve. He quickly whisked away a wet trace of something that had fled down his face.

"Alright, who are you?" Wilson asked, his voice tightened with a combination of laughter and tears. "And what have you done with the man I love?"

House grinned softly, standing up from his place on the bed. He sunk his fingers deeply into Wilson's hair. "Guess I'll just have to prove it the direct way."

"What way?" Wilson said, laughing as he pushed off another tear.

House captured Wilson's mouth under his then dragged him backward into the bed.

House rolled Wilson onto his back to lay on top of him. House smiled down into his eyes. "Oh, now *this* is *better*."

Wilson laughed sharply, struggling to rise up again only to be pushed back down again. Another attempt was equally as futile. For the moment, he went limp against the bed. He stared up expectantly, uncertainly, as though almost unsure of his own reaction. "I don't have a choice?"

House smiled knowingly. "From the hot thing growing against my leg right now, I'd say you don't want a choice." House leaned in to kiss Wilson's throat and then whisper to his ear, "If you want one, I'll give you one. Do you want one?"

Wilson gulped audibly at air. Something wild was awakening for the first time in his eyes. As if almost amazed at the fact, he slowly, certainly shook his head.

House laughed hotly. "I didn't think so," he said, forcing down Wilson's wrists again and capturing his mouth beneath his. The groan muted inside House's mouth, Wilson writhed up hungrily toward him to escalate their kiss but he was gently pushed down again.

Staring deeply into Wilson's eyes, moist and bright with arousal, House dragged the other man's wrists upward and held them above Wilson's head with one hand. Then he dragged Wilson's tie from around his own neck.

"These stupid things have some real purpose after all," House murmured.

House wound the tie around both of Wilson's wrists, adding a firm flourish for the benefit of Wilson's glistening, half-believing stare. House looped both ends around the decorative post out of the headboard and then bound both ends of the tie together again.

"Jimmy," House whispered teasingly, to draw Wilson's attention away from his own bound hands and toward him.

House bit the end of the tie in his teeth and yanked it hard to lock the knot.

The guttural burst of sound out of Wilson in reply was sharp enough to jolt the bed beneath them.

House leaned down and licked liberally at Wilson's nipple. "Looks like that question about who controls our relationship has a new answer. Wouldn't you say?"

Wilson tensed harshly against something that seemed to burn through him from within. He nodded hungrily.

"And you really, really, really like this, don't you?"

Wilson was struggling with every taut muscle in his body to speak. "Fuck, yes."

"Thought so," House whispered, his hand tenderly stroking upward over the other man's scrotum. He looked back into Wilson's eyes to make certain he knew what was about to happen. "You going to freak on me? Oh, wait, that's right, I forgot, it doesn't matter if you do, does it? This is all, well, out of your hands, so to speak."

"House," Wilson gasped out, a haggard, dry whisper spoken as his eyes shut like he was in the grip of full realization.

House moved downward, finally licking softly at the point above Wilson's navel as he grabbed firmly at Wilson's wine red and rigid boner, already beading moisture from the head. "Just think, just a few days ago, I leaned over and kissed you by surprise. It was so sweet and almost innocent. Now, here we are, all warm and cozy ... even if you're, well, a little constrained ... and I'm about to ... well, you know. Which reminds me, open your eyes and look at me, damn it. You didn't really think you'd get to coast through my kissing your dick for the first time with your eyes closed, did you?"

Wilson's eyes opened, staring down at the other man -- as though wanting desperately to see what he was going to see while being terrified to see it at all.

House smiled up mischief. "There you are. Ready?"

It seemed like a fight for Wilson to nod once.

"Darn, almost forgot," House said, reaching into his pocket and pulling a container out. "You wouldn't believe the stuff they have at convenience stores these days. Cuddy doesn't have Auto Club so I had to buy a map. And they had lube, too. Lucky that, since I was basically on my way down here to drag you into bed and really, actually have ... you know ... gay sex with you -- "

"House!" Wilson sobbed, the desperate sound of begging to it.

"Patience," House whispered, opening the container's corner with his teeth. He squirted it half-empty over his hand. "Modern merchandising is weird that way. You might even say it's ... well, queer."

"*House!*"

House snickered a little, lifting the other man's ass enough to slide slick and knowing fingers up against Wilson's prostate. He looked up to watch Wilson's fast and obvious very positive reaction to his fingers' tender manipulations. Wilson's eyes reactively shut.

House grasped his lover's cock, gripping the shaft firmly enough for it to quiver and the head to moisten again.

"Open your eyes, Jimmy," House murmured.

Wilson's eyes opened -- and immediately seemed to open wider.

House smiled and licked his lips, his mouth poised for imminent conquering of Wilson's penis.

Then he shoved Wilson's cock to the back of his throat and contracted every mouth and throat muscle he owned around it.

The only reason Wilson's cry wasn't a scream was because it sounded like he'd choked it down. His body writhed up to force his dick more deeply into House's busy mouth.

House answered the demand vigorously, sliding his tongue sloppily over the head that was thoroughly moist with saliva and precum.

This isn't going to take long, House mused to himself, warmed by the helpless gasping of the other man as House lapped his tongue in sync with the mad twitches of the cock's base as he fisted it. He was equaling the rhythm in his careful sliding of two fingers up Wilson's ass.

All of a sudden, he felt Wilson's instinctive recoil from the brink of pleasure. It was a

natural reaction to extreme sensation -- the overwhelming sweetness tantalizing every inch of his nerve endings now.

Then House's fingers restored the bridge between the sensory nerves. And made Wilson cum just as hard as he'd been about to.

There was no choking back the cry dragged out of Wilson as he came in House's mouth, the other man's tongue savoring every last remnant of his reward.

Then he climbed back up Wilson to slip one end of the knotted necktie into his teeth again then forced open the knot with a yank.

He leaned down and gently pressed his lips to Wilson's.

Wilson surged upward to take over the kiss. He sunk his fingers into House's lost cataclysm of hair. Wilson was staring into his eyes with the depth of emotion that always left House feeling physically weak, no matter the circumstances, but especially now.

Wilson laughed softly, shaking his head. "You're more gifted than even I knew."

"Yeah. And you'd have found that out a long time ago if you weren't such a -- "

"Big, fat coward, I know, I know," he said, laughing again. He reached out for House's hand, closing his own fingers around it. "All I care is that it's real now. It's finally real now."

Rising up with his good knee, House yanked open his belt and toyed with the zipper until he'd slid it down. As House reached for the half-full lube container, he smiled a seductive warning. "Turn over, face down, and I'll make it more real."

Wilson's smile became a nervous laugh as he obeyed. "That would certainly do it."

"Relax," House said, standing up to strip away his clothes. "I just want what I got out of you in the shower."

"No, you don't."

"I don't?"

"No. You just think that's all you can have. And you're afraid to ask for more. But ... if you ask, you might be pleasantly surprised. House ... you know that if you want it, I want it, too."

"Why do I have the feeling you're quoting someone?" House said, smiling tenderly in the way he only did when he couldn't be seen. He finished pouring the slick stuff over his cock and hand while his fingers moved up and down for coverage. He dumped some of the rest down the crack of Wilson's ass. "And why don't you just admit you really got off on the little sneak preview with my finger banging your butt hole like I thought you would. And it was the kind of gut-wrenching *feel good* that makes you crave it again with every fiber of your being. So stop acting like you're some vestal anal virgin sacrificing your admittedly gorgeous ass to be reamed for the glory of love and spread your fucking legs."

"Yes, master," Wilson said wryly, his face in a pillow. "By the way, I think somebody has an anal fetish."

"Yeah, somebody does. And I think somebody else is developing one so it's a damned good thing, huh?"

House's dick slid up into the crack of Wilson's ass, plunging slowly and slickly into his asshole until a gasp jerked out of Wilson.

House gulped for a breath. "You okay?"

Wilson grasping for handfuls of duvet, nodded sharply. "For fucksakes don't stop now."

"Not on your life," House said, laughing out a jagged, breathless sound of pleasure, "not for a second. Now shut up and move up on your knees a little."

Wilson flexed backward to reach him and House's cock pulled back once and moved farther and deeper again. And again.

"God ... I had no idea -- "

"You said that yesterday," House groaned through a laugh, his pace now mounting and moving faster.

"Then I'm fucking saying it again."

A groan burst more sharply from House as he moved forward a little faster. He breathed in short, hungry gasps while he moaned with every one. "Fuck ... this is so beautiful ... " he coughed out, grabbing out for Wilson's waist to bind them closer together. He held back a moment, breathless, wanting, lacking the energy to power past the wall of pleasure to complete it.

Wilson forced himself back again, remounting the effort from his end.

House was just kneeling there as Wilson forced his asshole back around his lover's cock.

It only took two or three of those ministrations for all hell to break loose in all the pleasure points in House's groin. "Jimmy!" he cried out, coming with his dick deep inside Wilson's ass.

Several quiet moments rolled on after that one.

Wilson moved aside for House to slide toward him. He opened up the duvet to cover them both in a sea of black fur.

Lines of light across the cabin suite sketched deeper patterns to the day. It was really daylight now.

"Wonder what time it is," Wilson said hazily, smiling as he kissed at Greg's face.

"Why do we give a fuck?" House asked, his eyes still closed. "Oh, by the way,

there's been something I've been meaning to tell you."

Wilson leaned back a little, his eyes concerned. "What?"

"I love you." House looked around, to catch the moisture growing in the other man's eyes. "See, aren't you glad I waited?"

"Yes," Wilson said, smiling as he leaned his head against House's insanely happy shoulder. "I'm still going to kick your ass, though."

"Promises, promises."

End:

Requiem for a Hepplewhite

Three Months Later

The Little Easy green grocer and vegan restaurant had a sign taped to its door. The sign had initially read, CLOSED FOR PRIVATE MEMORIAL SERVICE, then someone had crossed out MEMORIAL SERVICE and written in GREAT PARTY.

It made Wilson smile just as much as the hand-lettered sign in the doorway of the little art studio next door had made his heart ache: *Closed due to death in the family.*

There had to have been a hundred people packed in there, as Wilson and House entered the room. At the far wall, as they entered, was what looked to have once been some kind of mahogany furniture -- a sideboard perhaps -- that had been converted into something of a Viking funeral ship.

"That was Davey's favorite English sideboard," Shannon explained, emerging from the crowd. "He insisted we turn it into something we could use to put his ashes out to sea."

Wilson laughed softly, peering inside to see the distinct pink and purple urn seated inside. "Yeah, that's David." He looked over at the other man directly. "You okay?"

"No, not really, but I have to be." Shannon clapped his hands together twice. "Everyone, this is Davey's big brother Jimmy. I'm his old boyfriend and now brother-in-law. And this tall, handsome-esque specimen here is Greg House, Jimmy's old best friend and new boyfriend."

"Captain Cancer!" a few people called out from among the bobbing heads and raised glasses.

House shook his head to the throng and pointed the tip of the cane in Wilson's direction. "No, let's get this straight, if you'll pardon the expression. I'm the dark, conflicted superhero. Wilson is my amiable sidekick. David's main squeeze was Jimmy's brief never-went-past-first-base summer flirtation. I'm Jimmy's virile, thoroughly consummated bed monkey and eternal love of his life."

"Greg," Wilson said, flicking him a warning glance.

"Sorry," House said, as if regretfully. "I've embarrassed you again, haven't I?"

"And only the fifth time today," Wilson said, grabbing for House's sleeve to tow him along to the table marked "Family" where their names were emblazoned on joker-faced place settings. In the center of every table, set tacky gold tureens filled with red beans and rice.

"So, Jimmy," called a black man from across the table, "you move out of the hotel

yet?"

Wilson peered over at him curiously. "I'm sorry. Do I know you?"

He looked at Wilson as if the answer should have been obvious. "Yeah, I'm Gustave. This is my place."

"Sorry. Strangely, I didn't recognize you without your metal beads and horsehair braids. Yes, as a matter of fact, I have moved in with Greg. Or we've moved in together. We're looking for a mutually acceptable place which will be large enough to contain us both ... and Greg's ego."

"My ego?" House said. "What about your ego? To say nothing of your hair products."

"Let's just say all of it," Wilson said smiling.

"Well, now that you're both here," Gustave said, lifting a crystal cup and a spoon. He clanged one against the other. "It is time for the entertainment!"

Out of a backroom, somebody was carrying a large box – something about the size of a washing machine box. The stranger set it squarely on the two chairs between Shannon and Gustave.

Shannon arose. "Goosy, if you'll assist me please. We have one last bequest to hand out. All the other friends already have received their bequests directly from David. Greg, this is yours, as was promised. It does, however, come with this letter which I have been directed to read aloud, as you and David discussed." Shannon removed from his pocket a stationery envelope which he unfolded. "*Dearest Brother-in-Law Gregory, you will find herein the vinyl 12" record as promised, along with a bonus which I will get to in a moment. This does all come with a proviso, as I've already mentioned to you. I'm afraid that day has come when I must call upon you to do a service for me.*"

"I warned you," Wilson said.

"What service?" House said, immediately worried.

Shannon cleared his voice and removed from the box a satin sleeved 12" record which he passed along to House's hand. "*Shan will have just given you the item in question. Examine it to your satisfaction. You will find it is, in fact, what I have said it would be. To sweeten the pot, I am adding to it an even rarer and more valuable item.*" Shannon reached far into the box to drag out the next thing -- a big silvery guitar – which he set on the table before House. "*This is the rare, valuable resonator guitar used by Rye Cooder on this recording.*"

"Wait," Wilson said. "Rye Cooder is actually somebody's name?"

"He's only one of the top guitarists in the world," House said.

"With that name, he'd better be," Wilson said, then noticing Shannon's withering stare. "I'm sorry. Go on."

Shannon cleared his throat. "As I was saying ... it comes with full documentation signed by Cooder. The second item, Shannon will play for you now. I have promised you I would attest to my brother the veracity of your feelings, Greg. However, I doubt anyone can say it like you can, brother-in-law-man."

Shannon reached in and pulled out a small voice recorder. He clicked it to play. David's voice hummed out of it, **'Could you survive ... would you want to survive ... without my brother? No bullshit here ... where I'm going, your secret is safe with me. Tell me the truth.'** It was followed by House's simple, unadorned. **'No.'**

It would have been humiliating enough without the chorus of awwwws that followed its playing. But Wilson reached discreetly for his hand and clung to it a little more firmly than before. That was nice. And it distracted House from the awwwing sea of queens.

"My secret was safe with him, huh? Your brother was an evil genius," House said.

Wilson was smiling a lot now, still holding his hand. "I tried to warn you."

"Alright, what am I in hock for here?" House asked shortly.

"All you must do is one of two things," Shannon read on from David's letter. "Someone will be out in a moment to select a song for you from the World of Tammy Wynette Fortieth Anniversary Karaoke Songbook and you must go forth to the karaoke machine secreted behind the former Hepplewhite which is now a Viking funeral pyre. If you choose the first option, you must sing that song which will last a little over three minutes, if I know my Tammy Wynette. If you choose to not sing that song, then you will sit quietly, without saying a word, for the half hour while the lady who will be out shortly entertains my guests. You must face the far wall, not making any sound or gesture, until her set is finished."

"And I have the perfect selection," a gleeful female voice said as she approached the table from behind her two doctors. Lisa's grin was as big as Texas and twice as gleefully malicious. "Want to guess what it is?"

"Stand by your Man, of course," Wilson said.

She smiled and nodded. "Of course. Her signature piece."

"Your brother was a *sadistic*, evil genius, Jimmy."

"I did warn you." Wilson tried not to laugh. "You don't have to affirm what you said on the tape. I believe you. Don't do it for that reason."

"I'm not. I know you know that. Especially after the last three months of sweaty nights together. And stop blushing." House shook his head hard. "There are goods on the line. A Cooder slide guitar. A rare 12" vinyl. There are no small stakes involved."

"What'll it be, House?" Lisa said, smiling grandly. "Three minutes of public humiliation or a half hour of private torment?"

House inhaled and exhaled. He made himself say it, "Private torment."

"Excellent!" Cuddy said. "You will now turn your chair toward the far wall and shut the fuck up."

House did so slowly and deliberately, slumping into it in a defeated posture, as if painfully resigned to his dark fate. "Alright, have your fun at my expense."

"Oh, I will," Cuddy said. "Wilson, follow me."

"Wait," he said, looking up. "Where am I going?"

"I need a pip," she said. "Don't worry, House, I'll return him to you safely."

Wilson looked around indignantly. "You'll have to live without a pip. I didn't make any deals."

"No, but you did open your big yap."

"What did I say?"

She grabbed for his ear, towing him along toward her stage. "Do the words *My friends won't miss me* ring any bells?"