



Love is the Law

A Fin/Munch LEO:SVU Novel

by
Melody Clark



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Age Statement Required
Not Intended for Readers Under 18

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Love is the Law

Book One

A

Fin/Munch

"Law and Order: SVU" Slash Fan Novel

By Melody Clark

Cover by Melody Clark

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Special thanks also to my publisher Mysti Frank for her patience while I got this thing together, and for understanding when the initial (***not*** Hydra’s) beta read from hell (and yours truly’s idiocy) made a reprint advisable. I feel like, when I write fan fic, I ought to bring to it the same level of focus I bring to other stuff. I wish I had as much time to devote to it. This time, it made the compilation phase somewhat harried for my poor publisher.

Yes, this is Book One. All apparent inconsistencies will be resolved in Book Two sometime this spring. If anyone wants to read it, drop me an email at melodyclark@fanfictiononthenet.com or a SASE to Mysti. You know the routine.

For people who’ve read my earlier stuff, please note **all guns have been accounted for**, the guys have sex (well, sort of) **in the first 30 pages**, they do not have sex with their shoes or socks on, there are no vanishing glasses, no weird words thanks to young “inventive” authoring or the erstwhile spellchecker from Hell. Also, sometimes what seems an extraneous word is there for the timbre of the sentence. I like to do that to help me establish pace. Mea culpa.

Thanks lastly to the Belz and Ice for my borrowing their virtual, life-sized action figures for my story. Anyone who happens on L&O: SVU on location in New York can verify what sweet guys they both are. Belzer, for a living legend of TV, is incredibly modest and shy. Ice looks like he’d bite your head off, but then up you walk with a rabbit on your sweatshirt and he says, “Hey, I love bunny rabbits!” He also drapes around his buddy Belz enough to get a slash woman’s mojo working serious overtime, but it really is only a “cultural thing”. Also, Belzer and Hargitay are quick to defend the comments attributed to Ice that he “took credit for the show’s success”. Anyone who read the full interview will know that Ice didn’t say any such thing, but I’ll make the point here for the record, your honors.

General Content Warning

This novel, aside from being an explicit slash novel, deals with some very grim realities of life. The SVU consorts daily with the worst kinds of devils, in order to protect angels unaware. Unfortunately, some angels slip through the cracks. We’re all adults here, but I just wanted to warn those overly bothered by “off-stage” violence. None of this happens to children (something about which I can’t write), but the aftereffects of the violence against adults are described with enough detail to advance the plot and are inherent to the story. I don’t dwell on them, however.

Assorted Munchkin Notes: Consistency vis-à-vis John Munch

I know my fellow Munchkins know this, but just for the record: the character of John Munch did not originate on *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*. In fact, John Munch (as always, played by the great and wonderful Richard Belzer) holds the world's record for an original character with the most appearances on different TV series and films (all produced by entirely different production companies, with the exception of the two "Law and Order" series). Munch has often proven more popular than the shows he's on, as is clear from the character having originated on "*Homicide: Life on the Streets*" and then being appropriated by "*Homicide: the Movie*", "*Law and Order*", "*The Beat*" and as any fannish soul knows, in the *X-Files* episode "Unusual Suspects". Now he is the wise, lyrical and very funny owl of "*Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*".

Update: Just as I put this puppy to bed, a first-run episode of SVU has aired in which the dreaded "Munchkin" nickname has been used in full earshot of Fin. As such, its use in this story as a ghost of Baltimore returned to haunt John is now inconsistent, but lets just say Fin somehow didn't **hear** it the first time. Now watch an episode air where he *calls* him that (which, of course, Fin will, he's just waiting for the perfect time).

Stuff I Invented (i.e. has not been established on the series)

Fin's family, except for his son. Also, his son's military service.
The Stablers' divorce.

Fin's sexuality and lifestyle - about which we know little – and anything which contradicts it on the series from here on out is clearly AU. ☺ However, he does know an awful lot about some pretty far-out sex topics, including B&D.

Almost all the facts about Munch are character canon, including the past drug habit and his murky participation in a conspiracy with his fellow officers to off someone who, quite honestly, deserved just what he got (and I don't even believe in the death penalty). Flannery and Butterfly are fictitious, but the three Munch wives (including Gwen who liked to cheat on John with his partners and friends), the Munch-enamored young Felicia, the Waterfront bar, Munch's obsession with **not** being Montel Williams, and most of the other stuff are Munch Canon fodder, mostly HLOTS vintage. Two of the wives, Felicia and the Waterfront have been seen "on camera".

Other Writers' Fan Conventions I've Shamelessly Lifted

Benson's romance with Alex Cabot (that's a nod to the B/C femslash writers who often acknowledge a Fin/Munch pairing)

Real World Stuff I Made Up

The area of the Village around Sheridan Square, especially regarding Stewart to Nightchurch. I also shortened the block and played with the terrain a little...I hope it wasn't enough so that Big Applers will find it jarring.

"We have the city of Angels, Los Angeles... Philadelphia, the city of Brotherly Love, and now, Baltimore, City of the Broken-Hearted..."

John Munch

("Homicide: Life on the Streets", A Many Splendored Thing)

"Do you have a girlfriend?" – Dr Audrey Jackson

"Do you?" – John Munch

"Do you always deflect personal questions with jokes?"-Dr. Audrey Jackson

"Do you always deflect jokes with personal questions?"-John Munch

*(from SVU: the scene fans like to call
"How John Munch Passed the Psych Exam")*

"Love is the Law...Love under will."

The Book of Thelema

Chapter One

We wish to welcome you to Munchkinland

*"I have enough trouble
remembering birthdays
and I have to figure out **Kwanzaa**?"*

After some days, there will never be another. Oh, the calendar continued, but only by virtue of the marking off of abstract entities: days, weeks, months: an amalgam of years. Some moments stopped time completely.

For two men at the SVU, it was the morning they found the second death angel... hanging in the fluorescing glow of senior high school sports field lights. A male victim, raped, sodomized, hammered Jesus-style to a wooden cross that had been used as the framework for wings. Satin wings, carefully *kitsched* in sequins, fine glitter, anything to pick up the light. Ice had frozen them, enrobed him, in a blizzard night. The death angel was hanging from the hoop strut on a basketball pole.

The unie seemed queasy with his reaction. "It's almost...pretty."

"Mixed metaphors," Munch replied, deadpan. He shook his head. "And too much Tony Kushner."

"Who?"

"Angels in America," Munch said, his pattern-seeking mind kicked into high gear. "A Reagan-era set cultural vector of the early days of the AIDS crisis, with Roy Cohn as the symbolic Satan of Kushner's *Inferno*. Even Ethel Rosenberg puts in a cameo appearance."

"You think this has somethin' to do with that play?" the uniform asked.

Munch smirked. "This is a Tribeca schoolyard. It's not the Bethesda fountain. Is it?" He lifted an eyebrow as if his words had answered the question and the truth should now, therefore, be obvious.

The uniform flipped an inquiring, baffled look at Munch's partner. "What?"

Fin shook his head, rubbing his neck. "Don't bother your mind with it. Just don't

mention AIDS and the green monkeys to him or we'll be here all night." He was looking at the notes on the crime scene. "This perp wants us to think he's an artist."

Munch looked over at his partner. "You see 'Angels in America'?"

Fin winced at him. "That shit's eight hours."

Munch nodded, shrugging. "Only the second half took the Tony." He looked back to the officer. "Okay, once forensics lights, fogs and dusts, bring him down. Lets see if we can ID him so we can shatter the tenuous hopes of his loved ones in time for eggnog."

"We've got a possible. A missing person, fits the description," Stabler said, coming up from behind them. "Michael Flannery, aged 24, blond, five plus six, a music journalist for *Revolution*, whatever that is..." He looked up at the figure above them. He clicked on his flashlight, directing the beam at the silent face. Stabler compared it to the picture. "I'd say that's him."

Fin referred to the face in the beam of light. "I'd say so, too."

"The ultimate, angels' law, indulging every instinct of the soul. There where law, life, joy, impulse are one thing," Munch muttered softly. "Robert Browning."

Fin grabbed his nearby shoulder. "You kopacetic?"

John shook his head quite simply. "No." He turned around and walked away.

Fin checked out Munch's direction, then looked with questions to Elliot. Stabler shrugged. Fin peeled off of the line of detectives to follow his walking partner.

"Yo, Munch, wait up."

"I'm not a good place to be right now."

"Lemme judge that. Where you goin'?"

"I don't know," he said, finally realizing. He slowed to a ramble, and then stopped completely. "I was kinda hoping I'd know it when I got there." He looked toward the hanging angel again. "I...*hate...this...*"

"We *all* hate this. You know that."

"I know that. But suddenly, I *really, really, really* hate this. It feels like my head's breaking up. You won't want to be there. All this stuff will fall out."

"Like I said, that's my call. Panic attack?"

Munch nodded weakly. "I think so."

"Where's your pills?"

"In the car. Don't get them. They take my edge off. I need my edge."

"That's messed up. I got your edge. You need to not go crazy."

"Fin," John said, reaching for something. He grabbed an offered arm for strength. Munch was putting himself back together, piece by piece. "I'm fine. Thanks."

"Yeah, sure. You're about as fine as the dude up there."

Munch fought for a smile, his breathing having evened out, regulated. "By that, I assume you don't mean the dude *way* up there."

Stabler's steps slowed as he approached. He seemed to survey the Munch-centered moment at hand, from a few steps off.

Tutuola flagged him over. Munch and Fin both saw for the first time that Elliot was wearing the red felt vest of some silly Christmas outfit. A leather jacket had been pulled over it. A scrubby little knit cap was pulled over his head. It was the uniform of their lives: one real life spent at SVU with a personal life cobbled onto the broken edges and around the gaps. And there weren't a lot of edges or gaps.

Elliot was pointing his fog-scattering flashlight at a paper scrap. He squinted to read it. "I just called it into Cragen. We're going up past Christopher Street from the piers. That's the deceased's address. The perp generously left behind the vic's wallet. We're going to notify and the usual."

"No, you're not." Munch grabbed the paper from Stabler's hand. "Go home, Elliot...."

"What?"

"You heard me, Mustafa. Beat it. Spend Christmas Eve with your kids."

"I can't leave now. "

"You can and you will. I'm a lapsed Jew. I have no family. It's just another crappy night to me and I'm used to the detail."

Fin nodded. "He's right, Elliot. We're not at crisis staging, Cragen won't mind. We got it from here."

"You, too, Olivia," Munch called to the woman who had joined them at the edges of the circle. She had come in from a party in Queens. She was wearing one of those hand-

painted Christmas sweaters. "You'll have to prop him up."

Benson nodded raggedly in the background, moving up to tug at Stabler's coat sleeve. "They're right. Let's go," she muttered gratefully.

Stabler was clearly examining the unseen contents of his conscience. Trying to get right with it. At last, he exhaled, and nodded.

"Merry Christmas, peace on earth, koombayah," Stabler mumbled, waving tiredly, walking away. Benson saluted them just as wearily, and followed after her partner.

"FYI," Fin said, to break the uneasy quiet. "Mustafa don't mean Father, that's all that Lion King, Mulan, Disneyhistory crap. Mustafa just means the Chosen."

"Oh, and I remember the breath-taking historical accuracy of the Sword in the Stone."

Fin laughed, finally nodding. "Okay, you got a point."

Munch pounded a gloved finger at his longest-enduring partner. "Which brings me to the point that what I said to them goes for you, too, Fin. It's Christmas Eve, which in the great devouring maw of Christendom means something to almost everyone. I don't have anywhere to go. I know your son's in the gulf, but you must have plans with Big Momma and your aunt."

"Big Momma and Auntie are in Cancun. I got 'em cruise tickets for Christmas."

Munch smiled fondly at his partner. "Okay, but you must have some celebration to go to. A party. A religious gathering? Kwanzaa?"

"*Koowannnzaa?* Yo, get real, earth to Munch."

"What about..."

John's thoughts stumbled blindly. He had long realized he didn't know squat about Fin's dating life. Vague mentions of sending flowers, but never a name attached. No women. No men. No inner boneyard of emotional wreckage similar to Munch Eternal Meadows.

"I got nothin' to do," Fin said finally. "Except keepin' your skinny ass outta trouble. " He looked over Munch's shoulder. "That address is the old Cinema on the Square."

Munch nodded. "Ever since nine-eleven, every building counts. The whole friggin' city is going co-op."

The theatre had not gone co-op; it had been sold at county auction as "surplus property" to a private buyer. It had been clearly renovated from a hulking, shuttered zombie of yesteryear to a restored personal palace and private home.

All part of the latest industrial residential renaissance which John Munch considered one part free enterprise-driven urban renewal and one part arrogant, pretentious crap.

A young black man answered, grabbing back the door as if it was an emergency hatch. At the sight of the two detectives, the young man's eyes opened wide, and every hint of hope in them withdrew behind a dull fog: the first survival mechanism: refusal to think, only letting reality in one thought at a time. The detectives had seen that stare hundreds of times, from the other side of very different doors.

"Where is Michael?" the young man asked.

Munch showed him the badge. "I'm Detective Munch, this is Detective Tutuola. May we come in?"

"Is this about Michael?"

"I'm afraid so."

What had once been a lobby was now a great room: the inlaid marble of gold cinema reels remaining. Their steps echoed in the vast space, as they walked across to an assemblage of sofas by a far standing wall.

On the way from the front door to the far wall, John Munch did the informing. He always switched on autopilot to mutter through the grim routine. Where the young man's stride from the front door was bold if nervous, as the truth sunk into them, his legs weakened to a slow trot. His whole posture sagged against a table, then abandoned its stance to the first available chair.

Munch steeled himself internally. ***For on this night, I bring you tidings of great sorrow... The light of your life, on this Christmas Eve, having been permanently expunged. One of the werewolves of the city – one we couldn't bring to heel -- aimed his feral hunger at your beloved, the heart of your fragile world. What remains of him now awaits cataloging at the morgue... And a very Merry Christmas, Love, the City of New York.***

"We're so very sorry," he always added, like it might somehow fucking make a difference.

Munch wished he still had been the sort of person who hugged and comforted and whispered gentle words. He wasn't anymore. That had been beaten out of him by his mother. He was the sort of person who watched awkwardly from afar as Fin gathered the other man's raging grief into his arms. His partner whispered to it softly.

Detective John Munch just stood there, staring up at their inverted popcorn-strung bluegreen Christmas tree hanging artfully from the ceiling. On the ground, amid standing candles, were pyramids of presents, immaculately wrapped.

"Did Michael have..." Munch said, when the questions could be asked, "any enemies? Anyone he'd had conflicts with? Business associates? Ex-partners? Former boyfriends? Family?"

The other man, whose name had been given as Kelvin, shook his head. "None I can think of. Some I guess. Everybody pisses off somebody."

Munch gave his Joe Friday nod. "Just ask my exes."

"Nobody who'd..." Kelvin's face crumpled again. Voiceless tears rising. They jerked through him in slow spasms of realization and grief. *It wasn't going to get better from here.*

Fin squeezed the man's wrist, as if to infuse him with some of his own inner strength. "Kelvin, we gotta take a look around. Eventually, we gotta search Michael's stuff, but right now we just need to see his room. See if we can find anything that could tell us somethin'."

Kelvin nodded. "Of course. Whatever...anything... Can I get you... can I help with..."

"No, no," Fin replied. "Can we call anybody for *you*?"

Kelvin shook his head. He summoned a deep, uneasy breath. "No. I will have to make the calls myself."

Their room...Kelvin and Michael's room...had once been the theatre business offices. It was easily 50' x 50', the walls redressed in a paisley weave, sofas clad in dark green and cantaloupe-colored plaid that hinted at the twisting colors in the walls.

A formal portrait hung over the bedroom suite's fireplace: two young men leaning against each other, utterly in love.

The K on one pillow informed Munch and Tutuola as to which had been M's half of the bed. On the small cherrywood bed stand at his side, Munch spotted a sales receipt and some crumpled shrink-wrap plastic.

"Manos à Manos Books."

"Male-male porn place up on Sheridan and Third," Fin said. "Used to be a drop spot for X-running rave baiters."

"Yeah, I know," Munch said, before he could stop to think...or think to stop. Okay, it

was the drop spot he knew about: *the drop spot*. He swallowed his composure, pressing on. "Somewhere to start."

Fin reached for a standing photo at the table's corner, picked it up. "Wonder if this was an old boyfriend?"

Munch turned his detective eyes upon it, only to have them intercepted by his own more human ones. A swerving memory bolting in from another lane.

"Steve Flannery," John said, waiting only a moment to reach for the name.

Fin's brow furrowed. "Know him?"

"Once upon a time in Baltimore. He owned a string of...*drinking establishments*. I know him from when I co-owned that money pit we called a bar. Steve had most of the local patronage locked up."

"Flannery? Did he have a son?"

Munch shrugged. "He might have. I didn't make attachments, back then. Not like here, I mean."

"Steve is Mikey's father," Kelvin said from the door. His eyes were swollen, his hair mussed; he was on the shallow end of the first full wave of shock. "The tightass motherfucker."

Munch nodded slowly. "Not a warm and fuzzy father-in-law, I take it?"

"Hated that we're men in love. Hate that I'm black. Hated Mike was a journalist. Hated we bought a theatre to live in."

Munch shook his head, shot a commiserating glance at Fin. "That's him, a real ambitious jackass on so many levels. You know where he's living now?"

"1015 Fifth Avenue. The penthouse, of course."

Munch smirked. "Charming. We'll go pay his Odiousness a call."

"I just rang him. His service informs me he's in Telluride until Thursday."

"Did you tell them what happened?"

"Yes, they told me they would ring me if there had been a change in plans."

"Heartwarming. Here's my card. Call us there if you hear from them. Inform His Worship we'd like to have a private audience with him. We'll let you know what

happens from here." Munch showed him the receipt from the room. "We found this on Michael's bedside table. It's a receipt for a bookstore called Manos-à-Manos. It's dated yesterday. Is this something you purchased?"

"Lord, no, I hate that dive. Michael has a bunch of lifestyle friends around there. Men who belong to the Neighborhood, if you know what that means. He goes to see them. I never took to the scene that way."

"Did he have any connections, any friends in Tribeca?" Munch asked.

"No. None that I've heard. Why?"

"That's where his... he was found. So no connections?"

"*Tribeca*?" Kelvin hiked his shoulders in a kind of crippled gesture of blankness. "I doubt it. I mean, we've been there. No friends there though."

Fin asked the first of the last stream of questions: the harder ones. "Kelvin, there ain't no easy way to ask this question, but just ask it right out. Was Michael into wild side stuff at all? Rough stuff? S&M maybe?"

"Just bondage. He always says pain is for pervs. We draw the line there."

"I hear ya." Fin nodded again, gently moving further along the road. "Was he into group scenes at all? Anything kinkier than bondage?"

"These days? Not at all. We're monogamous. They were just old friends"

"We can talk to them. You never know. Any names in particular?"

"I'll have to think about that. I can call you."

Fin nodded. "Do that. You got the card. My partner's name is the one you can pronounce. Mine's the one you can't."

Kelvin's smile surfaced through sadness. "Tutuola. I can say that. Michael encouraged me to find my roots. We even lived in Nigeria for six months. Worst six months of my life...before now. I started trying to learn Yoruba and Swahili when Michael made us celebrate Kwanzaa."

Fin grinned, flipping a look at his partner. "They cute that way, ain't they?"

Much gave him a two-eyebrow arch in reply.

"I know," Kelvin said. "I have enough trouble remembering birthdays and I have to figure out Kwanzaa?"

Munch softly cleared his throat for the usual reasons. "Excuse my barging into Cultural Diversity Week, but your topic raises a question. Michael didn't have a special affinity for religious iconography, did he? Angels in particular? Angels with a small a, not the sports franchise. Or did he know someone who did?"

"You mean those nasty baroque Christmas card creatures or the little kewpie doll kind?"

"Angels in general. Or maybe an artist who worked with those themes?"

"No. Michael hates conventional symbolism. And kitsch might as well be liquid sin. At Revolution, he got into all kinds of trouble with major labels because he hated modern music even more, except what he calls honest roots music...bluegrass, some folk, jazz, blues, rap. He does...I mean, *did*...like the Beatles, but that was as mainstream as he got. You can imagine how that went over with the heavy metal trade."

Munch nodded from the cinema reel marble to the pendulant upside-down Christmas tree. "I can see he wasn't much for orthodox anything. If you think about the angel connection, or anything else, give us a call."

"I will. May I ask...why?"

Munch considered the path ahead... how solid the ice was... decided not to take the step without a psychological flotation device.

"A victims advocate will be here in a couple of hours. They'll go over the details with you. Help you make...arrangements. Finally, do you have a picture of Michael we can use? We'd like to show it around, in case there might have been witnesses."

"Of course," Kelvin nodded. He pulled out a drawer to retrieve a stack of 5 x 7 color shots of a blond young man sporting glasses and a big smile. He gave them a top copy. "Revolution just had these publicity shots made...for Christmas..."

Kelvin's attention settled finally on the topmost photo. His eyes slowly closed. He was at last evincing the next step in this earliest stage-within-a-stage of grief: comprehension.

Munch figured there was a fifty-fifty chance that the twenty-four hour "book" dive Manos-á-Manos would be closed for Christmas Eve.

But the leather-bound, anatomically correct window mannequin had Willy and the Walnuts wrapped up in red and green flashing fetish feathers.

"It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas," Munch said, as they climbed from the car.

The usual tired old guy behind all porn store cash registers was, this time, a tired young woman... albeit a young woman with black and wool-white hair and a henna tattoo of Rhesus Pizzas on her face. She had been reading some thick paper scenezine: **Skunkslut**.

When the woman met Munch's inquiring stare, he saw she was wearing costume contacts. Bright yellow-green cat's eyes. This was, after all, New York.

"We're looking for information on a victim of a homicide," Munch said. "We have reason to believe he was a customer here recently. Yesterday. The receipt says 11:30 AM."

Fin produced the 5x7. "He familiar to you?"

She looked with dead eyes at the picture. She shrugged. "Could be. These contacts are cool but they don't see detail well. He may have been here. He seems a little familiar. I don't think I waited on him, though, because I'd remember a customer in front of me. Maybe Ruck did. He's the dungeon master. He handles the fetish end. I just sell the books and zines and smut."

"Is Ruck around?" Fin asked.

"Yeah, he's down in the stock room. Just through the door, you can wait in the playroom. I'll ring him to the floor."

"Thanks."

The bed in the playroom's center was outfitted with handcuffs on one of the ends and leather ankle restraints on the other. A studded dog collar dangled from the nearby frame-welded poster. *Delivery by Christmas*, the sign above promised.

"To think we got the Captain a Mister Coffee," Munch said.

Fin couldn't stifle the laugh. "Yeah, Cragen really looks the leather type."

"Fin!" a voice sailed up from behind them. "Look who dropped in out of nowhere. I haven't seen you in years."

"Cliff!" Fin said, thrusting out a hand to greet the man in blue jeans and *the Eat This, Bitch* t-shirt. "I'm with SVU now. Where you been hidin', man? Are you Ruck?"

"Yeah, that's my RPG name. The scene stuff. Mainly it's just a green trade gimmick these days. So look at you..." The one called Ruck looked over at Munch approvingly. "All grown up and respectable now, huh?"

Fin grinned sheepishly and brandished his badge. "This is my *partner* Detective Munch. We're here investigating the murder of a customer of yours. Man named Michael Flannery." He displayed the photo. "You remember him at all? Came in here yesterday, late morning."

Ruck's eyes saddened as they considered the image. "Oh, Christ, yeah. That's Misha. He came in and bought some playwear for his lover's Christmas stocking. He's dead?"

Fin nodded. "How'd he seem?"

"Nice. Friendly. A little shy, a little rushed, like usual. That's life in the bitch city. He didn't seem weirded out or anything, if that's what you mean."

"Wha'd he buy?"

"A scroting. A stocking for testicles. He had his lover's initials embroidered."

"You run security tape on the floor?"

Ruck nodded. "Hell, yeah. I'm on the pier. You know how many little sailor pricks hop off international shipping and try to rob me blind? To say nothing of the drug trade you helped us drive out of here. I can run back yesterday's footage for you."

"We'll need a copy."

"Follow me."

There were exactly eleven minutes of tape. Ruck played the length of it for them on the video screen, in fast forward until the time stamp reached 11:24 AM. In the door, walked the living image of Michael Flannery.

"There he is," Fin said, tapping at the screen.

"Who's the guy behind him?" Munch asked the entity called "Ruck".

"He's a regular. Billy something. Laurie, what's the name of that furry fetish dude? The one who buys all the skank video?"

"Billy Somber," the bored girl behind the cash register said. "I think it's a stage name. He's in a heavy metal band. Rough House."

"Violently original," Munch asked. "Any chance they came in together?"

"Didn't seem to," Ruck said.

Fin pointed at the monitor. "Watch this. Flannery's not seeing him, but Somber's

definitely checking him out."

Munch noticed, nodded. "Is Somber part of the harder-edged lifestyle, as it were, or is that just the band's name?"

The recently identified Laurie hiked her shoulders. "He's into a lot of stuff. Furies are usually pretty normal, conventional, just with the anthropomorphic animal component. But Billy's a wild card. I know him from the furry circles, but he crosses lines."

Munch wrote something down. "You have an address for Mister Somber?"

"No. He floats. He doesn't have an apartment. Says they tie him down."

Fin smirked. "Couldn't pass the credit check, huh? Tell you what, he comes in here, you call us, okay? You open tomorrow?"

"Of course not," Laurie said, taken aback. "It's Christmas."

There was a bar beside the bookstore. *Pan*, with a graphic store sign of the mythological creature playing his pipes. Munch and Fin both looked at each other, making the furry connection.

"Might be worth a look," Fin said.

"Okay. I'm hungry anyway."

"Bars around here aren't known for their pub grub, but I expect they can scrape up something."

"Gives a whole new risk factor to the phrase Chef's Surprise," Munch said, walking in the door that Fin had opened.

The entry was strewn – and it's the only time Munch had ever used that word, *strewn*, internally or not – with *tchotchke*: pink, purple, blue beads and a feather boa around a green plastic Christmas tree. The traditional look.

Mood music in *Pan* amounted to the title song from the Brady Bunch's Greatest Hits album; *It's a Sunshine Day*. Munch felt as though he was having needles driven into his brain.

"That's musical pornography," John said, face withering fully at the sound.

Fin, of course, started snapping his fingers. "I think it's kinda catchy."

"So is scabies." Munch tracked down the evil's source. The prime suspect was a big Wurlitzer jukebox, circa 1975. He reached behind as if to brace it, then thumped a fist once on the Lucite hood. Silence ensued.

Fin shook his head. "You Fonzie now?"

"No. I owned the Waterfront, remember? I know where the switch is in back."

Suddenly, the waiter doors swung open, and a surly looking black shemale burst into the room. "Hey, who – "

Her eyes struck gold. "*Munchkin!*"

To Tutuola, Munch looked as if a dart had hit him from behind. Fin nodded in appreciation of the three-diamond ammo jackpot he'd just landed.

"Munchkin?" Fin echoed to his partner.

"Forget you heard that," Munch said, turning next to the shemale. "I do *not* know you."

"Of course we know each other, sugar. Baltimore."

"Thought you worked Homicide," Fin said, unable to stifle a smirk.

"I did. *Ma'am*, you have clearly mistaken me for someone else."

"No, I'm not! Did you ever figure out who killed Kennedy?"

"No, she's not," Fin said, grinning to advance Munch's discomfiture.

"Oh, Munchkin's just shy," she said, looking over at Tutuola for the first time. She obviously liked what she saw. "Oooh, ooooh, whose little boy are you? You're *much* cuter than his last boyfriend."

"I do *not* know you. And he is my *partner*."

"Whatever you call it these days." She traced the path from Fin's brow to his braid. "My name's Butterfly. Pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Fin grinned, flashed the badge. "I'm Detective Tutuola. We're with Sex Crimes, investigating two special circumstance homicides in Tribeca." Once more, he showed the photo. "You recognize this man?"

"Yeah, he's around. He's one of the regulars in the Neighborhood. I think his friends

call him Misha. Did he die?"

"Yeah, he died," Fin said. "What about a dude named Billy Somber?"

"That cheesy little meanass pudsucker. I hate his ass. I hope *he* got the pointy end of somebody's pipe."

"Not a friend o' yours?" Fin asked, smirking.

"Not at all. He ran with a bunch of little Fagscists types. You know, like ol' Tommy Lee in JFK...the sweet Tommy Lee, not Pam's bad boy with the monster wanger."

Fin nodded, jotting stuff down. He motioned to Munch and smirked at him, too. "I hope my partner never hurt you that way."

"Munchkin? Shoot, he's always a gentleman. Little too much of one, if you get my drift."

John Munch rolled his gaze to the spectral distant depths of Heaven. "From *where* do I *know you*?"

Butterfly snickered, pinching Munch's chin. "You're such a joker. Now, what can I get you and your delectable gentleman friend this Christmas Evening?"

"Just take a card," Munch said, giving her theirs. "We'll show ourselves out."

Fin gently punched his arm. "But I thought you was hungry."

"Funny, suddenly I'm not," he said, moving for the door.

"You shouldn't be ashamed, Munch," Fin said, unable to resist this prime chance for teasing. "All God's children got a right to shine."

"I...don't...know...her."

"Yeah, that's what Eddie Murphy said, too."

"Wait up!" Butterfly called out, appearing carrying a Polaroid camera. "You two are standing under the lucky mistletoe. That means you get a kissing Christmas picture."

Munch looked up. "Oh my god."

Suddenly, Fin seized the moment and smacked a big wet kiss on Munch's many-furrowed brow. The Polaroid flashed.

Munch tented an eyebrow in Fin's direction. "Please... Not in front of the Klingons."

Butterfly presented their picture, with a small cellophane bag of butterfly-shaped sugar cookies.

"This is in case you two get the Munchies." Butterfly winked. "If you know what I mean."

"Well that was Episode One of Old Home Week in Dante's Inferno," Munch said, checking his spare notes. "It's nearly 1 AM. I'm calling it into Cragen's system and clocking us out. As if this new hell wasn't fresh enough, It's starting to frickin' snow."

Fin squinted up at the gentle fall of it. "Sounds like a plan to me. I got my party tomorrow. You're still coming." The last sounded less a question than a decree.

"Of course I'll be there. Who else would have me?"

At 1 AM on Christmas Eve, traffic was only a slow-moving gridlock, not the usual madhouse crazy quilt of near misses and screams of pedigree repudiation. Fin made the distance from Sheridan Square to Middleton Manor in half the usual time. His partner reviewed his notes, suddenly in a reverie. Probably trying to avoid the topic of the prior encounter.

Fin grinned to himself, shook his head.

"What was that about?" asked his partner, prince of peripheral vision.

"Nothin'. Just thinkin'."

"I'm dead serious, I do not know that...individual."

"You probably forgot."

"Butterfly is not someone easily forgotten. I'm already having flashbacks."

"You dropped acid and shit in the sixties, right?"

"There weren't enough tabs on the East Coast to blot her out."

"You'll remember her."

"No, I won't, because I do not know her. And you'll notice I haven't mentioned *Ruck*."

"Now you know what that was about. Stop dodgin' the question."

Fin slowed the FiNch Mobile, as the unies had zealously dubbed it, alongside the sheltered door to Munch's hole in the floor termed a daylight *basement apartment*.

"Four o'clock firm, no later."

"I am Mister Punctuality."

"You are Mister Full of Shit."

"True, but I'm also Mister Punctuality. Why the stickler for this party?"

"Coz I know, the way you been playin', you might curl up on that grassy knoll you got in your head and not come out till New Year's Day."

"I'll be there... Anyway, the Man lives on the Grassy Knoll, Odafin. We peasantry inhabit Dealey Plaza."

"Tell me something I don't know. But Christmas Day is the time to be with the living, Johnny. To be with the ones who love you."

Munch looked at him deadpan. "Are you saying you love me?"

"Of course I love you, don't you love me?"

"Yeah. Except when you call me 'Johnny'."

"What's wrong with that?"

"What if I called you 'Odie'?"

"I'd say *Woof*."

"Just say good night, Munch," he told himself. "See you tomorrow, Odafin. At *four*." Munch then turned to walk the length of sidewalk as it twisted down the steps and to his door.

"Merry Christmas, Munchkin," Fin added last, waiting to see Munch stop a moment, as if he'd been hit from behind by a second dart. John shook his head without looking, and went inside.

Fin smiled alone, wondering what in the world it would take to make John Munch listen to his heart.

Tutuola drove on toward home, that one thought haunting the whole of his mind and, beyond it, his struggle with sleep.

Chapter Two

How the Munch *Didn't* Steal Christmas

*"I haven't moaned since
Johnson was in office."*

Odafin Tutuola had moved from his Brooklyn pit to a two-room gorge not far from the SVU. This place was friendlier, warmer. Munch had only been here a handful of times. The Munch hole was nearer work, so when they stumbled blindly to a purplish near-morning, the partners crashed at John's place. But this home was Odafin Personified. Munch always had a fond feeling when he walked inside, as if it was a warm hug from his friend.

Munch also wondered if Fin knew that colors existed beyond brown, blue and black in the happy kingdom of furnitureland.

On the entry wall, an impressionist oil painting in red, green and black: *Alexander and Hephaestion in Africa*. That was balanced by what might seem a schmaltzy little wall plaque: *it's never too late to have a happy childhood*. It only seemed schmaltzy to those who had experienced a happy childhood. To Munch, it was the very soul of cool.

"Your coat," Fin said, from beside him.

He slipped it off, presented it to his friend. "It's Tucker Warren."

"I noticed. You know your urbane threads, my man. What I wanna know is how you afford 'em with all the purported former Mrs. Munches."

"An encyclopedic knowledge of Connecticut garage sales," Munch said, as Fin carried the overcoat elsewhere.

Benson and Stabler were, as usual, attached at the hip. An obligatory paper cup seemed lost in Elliot's hand. He seemed more lost than the cup, but smiling, gentle, at peace. Olivia was seated next to him on the big, long, snuggly couch, as Fin called it. The surface sagged toward Elliot, so Olivia was nearly leaning against him. Neither of them seemed to mind.

Once Alex had gone and Kathy was history, the very thin wall between BensonStabler had begun to fall away.

Cragen was lying on the ground, staring hazily at the ceiling. There was an

incriminating paper cup in his hand as well.

"Merry Christmas, Boss," Munch said, looking down.

"Hey, John," he said, smiling up even more hazily. "You really are unnaturally tall."

"I know. And the tragic part is it's only partly an alcohol-induced visual distortion."

Cragen gave him a sloppy smile. "Have I told you lately what a good friend you are to me?"

"Yes, you have, you tell me every year about this time. Go back to sleep, Donnie," Munch said, removing his jacket and blanketing it over his Captain. "Sleepytime for you, Mister."

A soft little voice, "O...kaaaay."

Fin was back, and Munch saw he was wearing all black, which Munch didn't want to admit he had noticed, but he had noticed it...and then some.

"Get you anything?" he asked his partner.

Munch considered the fairly euphoric Benson and Stabler, and the benignly comatose Donald Cragen.

"Whatever they've been having. A double, if you will."

Fin smirked big time, displaying his dimpled wealth. "John Munch on Crème Cormier. That'd be kickin' to watch."

Elliot brandished his cup, smiling in his wild man meets ironic gentleman way. Somewhere added to the mix, the gaze of the hurt young boy he once had been. "More please."

Olivia considered his eyes. "You've probably already had enough."

"My kids are out of town at my in-laws for my first ever Christmas night without them. Define *enough*."

Olivia nodded, conceding, lifting her cup as well. "Okay, I'll have more, too, then."

Fin nodded to all. "I'll bring in the reinforcements."

Munch sunk into the opposing sofa, the one Fin dubbed the short, pudgy, huggy love seat. Fin was the only person Munch knew who named his furniture. It was, of course, obscenely comfortable.

Munch wallowed in it a moment, until his partner reappeared with arms filled by private label liquor. As always, Fin first served his guests (Munch, *explained Fin long ago*, was no longer a “guest” but an “intermittent resident”, which John always thought sounded like he was about to rain). Fin handed across the other detective team’s personal economy-sized bottle of Crème Cormier.

Benson filled Elliot’s cup first. Stabler smiled like a Keebler Elf on a sugar high.

"Happier?" she asked.

He nodded eagerly.

To his partner, Fin presented a generous highball filled with a brown, frothy liquid. It resembled some hybrid of chocolate milk and root beer. It smelled to Munch as if the liquid, and a match, could blow up most of New Jersey.

Munch moved his long legs back for Fin to pass. Tutuola plunked down beside him on the obscenely comfortable couch.

John motioned to the sizeable glass. "We sharing?"

"No, that's all for you. I'm the designated party driver."

"They all have little paper cups," John said.

"Yeah, but you need more. A lot more. It's gonna take that much, believe me. Hey, wait. You still not takin' your pills, right?"

"No, I'm not. I can get fried even *with* doctor's orders."

"Okay then, drink hardy. Then I can give y'all your other Christmas presents."

Munch waited to drink. "We said no extra presents this year."

"*You* said no extra presents," Fin answered. "I shrugged. I didn't agree to nothin'."

Munch leaned his head back, groaning at the guilt of it all. "Now I feel badly. I only got you two. Usually I overcompensate and get three for every one I receive."

"Thanks for the fruit basket, John and Fin," Olivia said from her own gentle fog.

"And thank you for mine," Elliot added. "Although my kids ate it."

"And thank you for..." rose the voice of Donald Cragen, from his own distant reverie, "whatever the heck you got me..."

"You don't like fruit, so Fin and I got you the coffeemaker. You're welcome, Donnie. I'm glad it made such a lasting impression. And thank you *all* for the Greatest Top 100 Government Cover-ups, volumes one through four. Books which for a change I actually did not already have, thanks largely to Fin crawling through my bookcase when he thought I wasn't looking." He saluted them all with his humongous glass. "You're all good co-conspirators."

Elliot took up the appreciation chain from there. "And thanks to the Captain for my silk tie collection and for Olivia's silk scarf collection, even though she regifted them to her cousin Delilah." Elliot winced as the female fist connected with his arm. "I'm way, way too tanked to be tactful."

"My digital camera's special," Fin volunteered. "All the cool dealies on it. Thanks, you guys. And thanks for the IPOD, Donnie."

Cragen waved toward the air, still lying flat on the ground. "I never know what to get my under-forty friends. I asked my niece."

Fin and Munch shared a bemused look. "Fin is 44, Donnie."

"He is? Oh, sorry, yeah, he *is* older now than when he joined us. I keep forgetting that everybody ages, it's not just me."

"Thanks anyway, Captain. I still think it's cool. I shipped it with tunes over to my boy in the gulf, so it was perfect." Fin leaned forward, clearly about to speak. "Elliot, Olivia, I got a special extra gift for both of you."

"For them?" Munch said, pouting a little.

"I told you, yours comes later."

Stabler had reached for the economy-sized bottle, pouring more into his glass. "I think this calls for another drink."

"Know what I think, Elliot?" Fin said. "I think you should move away from the Cormier and get closer to the special lady next to you."

Elliot Stabler actually blushed. Really and sincerely. After a moment, he snapped a look toward Olivia, as if in faint hope she hadn't heard. But she had.

Elliot leaned over to plunk down the paper cup in his hand. "And that's your business how?"

"It's my business 'cause you're my friend and I love ya. You came in here feelin' no pain. And you've gone even further under since you've been here. I know you're

hurting right now, but how we negotiate our pain is another thing altogether."

Elliot's eyes were clouding up again. Waterworks were imminent. His smile was liquid, gentle, tinged with annoyance. "Suddenly this is turning into a 12 Step meeting. I *hate* 12 Step meetings. You have another suggestion?"

"Yeah. You love Olivia, Olivia loves you. You're not exactly married now. Her lady's gone away. There has been mistletoe dangling over your head for the better part of an hour. So why don't you honor the ritual and kiss the young lady?"

"If you can't be with the one you love, love the one you're with?" Elliot asked, with an expression that, on a less kind face, might have been a sneer.

"No, more like, if you love the one you're with, then love the one you're with."

Elliot's grin widened. "What if we don't want to kiss each other?"

Fin's gaze rolled upward and around to Munch. "You believe these two? Everybody knows you want to. At least. Everybody. Even Huang and he don't catch onto anything 'cept maybe the last episode of Survivor."

Olivia blushed a little but Elliot, as usual, blushed a lot. "That may or may not be true, but right here? In front of everyone?"

"Your Honor," Munch said, "the witness is evading the question."

"So I noticed," Fin replied. "Maybe they're afraid the kiss will unlock seething passions trapped just below the surface."

"That's my theory, also."

Olivia blushed more; Elliot covered his face with his hands a long moment, till he clearly had an idea. A brilliant idea, it would seem. He smiled his victory. "Okay, okay," he said, "tell you what, I'll make you a deal. You two also have mistletoe hanging over *your* heads. I'll kiss Olivia right after you kiss Munch."

Olivia smiled at the idea, turning her eyes to join Elliot's challenging stare.

Fin and Munch looked at each other. Munch lifted an inquiring eyebrow.

Fin's smile gleamed back at them. "Don't mind if I do."

If Munch had expected the forehead smack of the previous evening, he soon found his mouth conquered by the lip translation of a bearhug. It was warm and loving, a few moist moments of soft surprise, Fin's fingers working back through his hair. Their lips parted, their gazes merged together. Munch's eyes were as wide as Fin had ever seen

them. And Fin was grinning big enough to light the room.

Sky rockets...a serious, full-scale firework display...4th of July meets the 5th of November, set off in his head -- John Munch would have sworn to God it did. Okay, probably it was only the blood pulsing through his closed eyes. He supposed it was his own heightened respiration that had summoned Fin's zealously hidden dimple brigade. Munch cleared his throat, removing his glasses to defog them. That also defused the moment and sent the challenge back across the room.

Fin gestured toward them, as if to say *you're it*.

Elliot laughed, red for all manner of reasons. "Man, I must really be hammered. I swear to Christ I just saw -- "

"You did," Liv said. She nodded, flicked an awkward smile. "*They* did."

"*They did?*"

She nodded. "*They did*. Really. And so we have to... I mean, if you want to..."

"Of course I want to, don't you...want to?"

Fin Tutuola had only to stand, shaking his head at the vision before him. "You know, it's a real sad situation when a man and a woman have a harder time kissing at a modern American party than two men do. C'mon, John, lets give 'em their privacy." Fin pitched Olivia the remote. "That's the lights and the music, Liv. I don't have the RC for Ellie. I'm afraid yous have to work that out alone."

John Munch was smiling to himself, at the wit and wisdom of his partner. So how was John Munch to cover for his rapid breathing from his partner's kiss? What? A sudden allergy to leather?

Tutuola led him away from the people who were negotiating lip landings. "Stay put. I'll be right back," Fin said, heading quickly into the kitchen again. From it, he emerged with a pretty middle-aged lady in what detectives euphemistically called a *peignoir*. She was carrying her own beverage. Fin led her by the hand to Cragen, where he was still spilled across the rug.

"Ronita, this is Donald Cragen, my captain and good friend. Donnie, this is a friend of mine, Ronita. I thought you might like each other. She's gonna keep you company awhile."

Cragen smiled, like a blissful recipient of a special benediction. "Hi, Ronita."

"Hi, Donnie," Ronita replied, lowering to sit beside Cragen. Before Munch's eyebrows could scrape the rafters, Tutuola had hooked his arm and

was towing him out of the living room to the only other room in the house that didn't have a sink in it.

"You booked a pro for the Captain..." Munch said, his jaw dropped in downright disbelief.

"Ronita's not a ho! She's an old friend, like I told ya. She's a retired Narc. She likes older gentlemen. I thought they might get somethin' goin'. Cragen never even goes out. Maybe that's why he started drinkin' again."

"Cragen does this every few years. Once he told me he only drank during Hanukkah. It was two years before I found out he wasn't Jewish."

"*Cragen?* That mighta clued you in."

"Stop evading the question, Fin... you arrange for Cragen to get laid? You throw gasoline and a match around Olivia and Elliot? Most people just have bands or strolling balladeers at parties. Odafin Tutuola arranges real, live orgiastic rituals in his front room."

"That's rude and crude. I don't play it that way. I just set somethin' up. If it happens, it happens." He nudged Munch further into his bedroom door. "We gonna hang out in here even, with the door closed. For privacy reasons."

"You're a regular Miss Manners."

"Mister Manners to you."

"And while you're plotting all this lewd and lascivious entertainment, you didn't think to get something going for your partner?"

Fin smiled with secret mischief. "We gettin' to yours," he said.

Munch wondered faintly about the increased brightness in his partner's demeanor, as they entered Fin's bedroom and closed the door.

Fin removed his wristwatch, tossed it on his bureau. He hiked his black sweater sleeves to reveal his arms. He sat down to the edge of the bed and started to yank free the shoestrings on his Addidas sneaks.

Munch did as much looking around the small room as he could, without knocking anything over. Small photos of a young bright-eyed 10-year-old boy he knew could only be young Odafin. Gold eyes, brandy brown skin, even a handful of incongruous freckles. Mostly Nigerian and even a little Irish, but 100% African-American. "My Odafin," Munch remembered his partner's grandmother saying, "he's a lot of things. All of them good as gold, thank the good lord."

In the photograph, was another young boy, a little older than Fin. That had to be ...Ajayi, Munch's white brain fought for the name. *The one that hadn't been so good.* But he remembered Fin shaking his head when Munch had suggested Ajayi had been born under a different star. 'Naw, A.J.'s just lost his way. He'll get it back again.' Fin had lost track of his little brother when the latter was 15 and slipped the confines of that nauseating joke the putative "educational" system called a "reform school".

Munch wondered if he should give the present now, or save it for later. Or just stand here and figure out what the hell his partner was doing.

Tutuola slid a box from under the bed, lifted the lid. Inside lay a row of bottles containing what looked like rich-colored lotions. Then he opened some matches and struck a light to one of the sticks of incense hidden inside. He reached over and slipped the burn stick into a soft wax candle.

"We going to chant Om and contemplate our navels?"

"No," Fin said, grinning. "I was wonderin' when you were gonna ask. This is one of your Christmas presents. Something I been studying for awhile. *Ifa lfe*, a form of Yoruban Tantric massage. Supposed to help you relax. I started learning it to help me sleep when I was undercover back at the Narc. Well, actually, I first read it when I was eleven 'coz it had dirty pictures. And coz I thought it might help me with the ladies."

"All commendable goals at the onset of puberty."

"It's real relaxing. I figure it might help you out."

"*Tantric* massage, you say?"

"Yeah, and a little bit of Pranayama, basic Karezza, bodywork, orgone therapy, too."

"Sounds...festive," Munch said. "All which leads inexorably to what Freud puritanically termed polymorphous perversity."

Fin smiled, his eyes sparkling. "If you're lucky."

"Quoth the Cragen, o...kaaaay," Munch said. "I suppose I have to remove my sweater."

"I suppose you have to remove more than that. You can leave your briefs on if you're shy."

Munch shrugged. "What the hell. If it helps me get past the panic attacks, I'm with the program." Munch pulled off his dark brown sweater. "While I'm doing this, you can look in the inside pocket of the sweater. There's something for you in there."

"Somethin' cheap, of course." He reached for his partner's sweater, then checked out

Munch's progress. "Man, Munch, nobody wears white thermals any more."

"I refuse to be compelled by the conventions of the madding crowd's ignoble strife."

"Whatever."

"And I've got extremely sensitive nipples." He doffed the thermal top and unbuckled his belt, suddenly feeling a wave of shyness. He was going to look up and make some flippant witticism, but then he noticed the sudden quiet from his partner's location in the room.

Fin was looking at the folded sheet of paper he had pulled from Munch's sweater pocket. Fin's eyes were swimming, as he stared at the information in his hand. He was shaking his head in a loving disbelief.

"Ajayi's in a nursing program in Pittsburgh," Munch explained. "He's about three months from getting his RN. Told me he wanted to get his life together before he called his family. He sounds like a nice young guy. He's been through a lot, but I think you were right. I think he just misplaced his morals, but he has them. Just like his big brother who happens to be his hero."

One tear seeped through Fin's fingers and ran down his hand. He tried to wipe away the residue.

Munch cleared his throat to try and go on. "I also took the liberty of faxing Big Momma and your aunt in Cancun. I called a couple of cruise lines and found them. They had the news on Christmas - "

Munch found himself engulfed by eager arms. Arms that surrounded him completely, Fin's face sunk firmly into John's shoulder. It was the kind of hug Munch hadn't had in a long, long, long...hell, ever. Fin was leaping radically and quickly into African-American Healthy Emotional Male mode, and it scared Eastern-European-American Emotionally Repressed Male Munch more than a little.

"What'm I gonna do with you?" Fin asked, fighting the next jag of tears. He held Munch back to inspect his face. "You the best, man. The best. Nobody has ever given me a gift this good. And you just added ten years to my grandmama's life."

Munch shrugged, a vision of awkwardness. "I thought it would be something that might make a difference."

"Make a difference. Get your slacks off, John, and hit the bed." Fin stripped off his black sweater. "And don't turn your back on me too long 'coz right now there ain't telling what good things you might get. *Lay down.*"

Going with the evening's apparent theme, Munch actually felt himself blush a little,

which is something he didn't know was possible anymore. He had decided the finer capillaries in his face had grown bored from lack of use and moved onto Florida to retire.

John laid face down, looking toward the window. Fin drew open the drapes, so the winter sky could be clearly seen: it's gentle snowfall into the arms of early evening. The room was darkened, and the hush of something misting the room could be heard. Munch gratefully inhaled the misty dark and quiet. Somewhere, some billow of music was playing faintly. It was just enough to buoy his thoughts, like a pillow beneath his unquiet mind.

"In the beginning," Odafin spoke softly, "human language burst forth out of feelings. Sounds, of pain, and sorrow and grief, and joy. Sounds of pleasure and passion. Sounds we stuffed down, in our quest to quiet others and control the tribe. We crushed our feelings beneath our silence."

"Is this the director's cut version? Y...O...W! That hurt!"

Munch had been smacked on the butt in reply.

"Yeah, and there'll be more of that if you don't quiet up and listen."

"Yes, Sensei," Munch replied.

"Good," Fin said, going on. "Now as I was sayin'...Pain was allowed, for it gave the vanquisher his victory. Sorrow and grief were allowed, for the same mean reasons. *Ifa* is the good of life. *Ife* is the love. We have forgotten their combined expression. If we forget one, we condemn the other to silence and regret. Sela."

Down the middle of John's back, Fin drew a line of warm Oil of Rose Otto, then spread it across his skin, along the path of his nerves. Fin's palms gliding over John's back had a deeply sensual effect on the recipient, to a degree to which John Munch wasn't about to confess even to himself as he nestled his head on the small, fragrant pillow that had been seemingly set there just for him.

"In English," Fin continued. "There are lots of words for pain and sorrow. There are many words for rage and death. There's only one word for love. Only a few words for pleasure. Only a handful of good words in a sea of pain and sorrow and rage and death. Our sounds will find new words and build a language. Sela."

"That's interesting," Munch said, muttering faintly into the pillow.

Fin leaned close to his ear. "Yo, let's try this again. For a couple minutes of our lives, John, I talk, you listen."

"Sorry, forgot."

"But if you feel like moaning or groaning or somethin', go for it."

"I haven't moaned since Johnson was in office."

"I talk, *you listen*."

There was no point to speaking, one moment on. As Fin's fingers delved at a ladder point along his spine, John sensed his nerves recoiling. Everything in him, pent-up energy, pulling tight. It wasn't pleasant or unpleasant, it was just wild, unambiguous and profound. Suddenly, he heard a groan of someone hurting badly, and then one gut-wrenching sob. It took a full minute to realize the groan and sobs were his.

The tears had come out of nowhere: out of some black hole in his head. There wasn't any detailed pain with them that he would admit: only John's standard free-floating agony.

Fin quickly moved down on the bed, pulling Munch toward him. Fin's fingers through John's hair whispered apologies his words couldn't yet.

"That was it, John, that was the bad stuff."

The other man's strong arms encircled him without hesitation, held him tightly against his own strong, broad, brown chest, breaths pumping harder through lungs. Munch was accustomed to playing Protector, but Fin's warm body was a custom fit. It welcomed him. *An image of the Tao slipped quietly through* his mind. Fuck it all: John had never been held like this in another man's arms. *Ever*.

"Shit, I'm sorry," Munch whispered, rolling away from the all-encompassing comfort, to the very edge of the bed. To the cold room, sitting on the bed's end, listening to the faint tympanis of hell back feed through his head. "I'm sorry... I don't know what that was... Where it came from, I don't..."

"John, that's what's supposed to happen."

A knock at the door shocked the tension down. Fin rubbed a hand over John's nearest shoulder. "I got it covered."

Elliot, smiling in his own big-eyed crazed puppy way, was standing at the door, looking uncertain and half-afraid. He was naked to his toes except for his skivvies. "Everything okay in there? We heard...noises."

"Yeah, it's all good," Fin said, rubbing his oily hands over a dry cloth. "I was just giving John a deep tissue massage. Kinda like Rolfing, if you know what that is."

Elliot gnashed his teeth in sympathy. "Okay. Sorry. Just thought I'd... check."

"Everything okay in there?"

"Yeah." Elliot giggled, which was not a common sound from him. He laced his fingers over his head. "Everything is great. I think Cragen just fell asleep, though. Ronita left for another party."

"Nobody bats a hundred," Fin said.

"Yeah, well," Elliot added, taking a short step away. "I'll leave you two to... I mean, have... fun, I guess..."

Fin shut the door, lighting the room a little with his laugh.

Munch turned around, his tears having stopped in favor of profound disbelief. "Am I having auditory hallucinations now or did Elliot Stabler sound giddy?"

"As close as I bet he's ever come to it." Fin walked up to the man at the end of his bed and pointed back at its surface. "Lie down, John. We got unfinished business."

"I'm fine," Munch said, reaching for his sweater. "I'm all loose and flexible and amazingly calm."

Fin grabbed back the sweater. "No, you're not. You're wound up like a porch spring. You look like you're gonna pop any second. Besides, this is the good parts. You went through the sour, now comes the sweet. So lie down. On your back this time. Now."

"Aye, sir," Munch said. "What comes next? Christmas in Ruckville?"

"If that's what it takes, my man."

John Munch later would think that, at some level, he had to know how hard Fin's words had punched his happy buttons. At the moment, still half-sleepwalking through his life, he had only sensed a kind of amorphous warm and fuzzy feeling as he lay back down.

"All right, Doctor Frankenstein, do your bidding."

"Yeah, right, like I could get the bolts outta your tightass neck."

Fin lowered the lights again. He moved the music onto a warmer pulsation, a rhythm out of air. He filled his hands with lavender oils. He spilled some over John's chest.

Fin spoke softly. "Have I ever told you about the first time I saw you?"

"I don't think so. Care to enlighten me?"

Fin's hand worked the oils down the other man's abdomen, Fin's fingers feeling the soft reflex response of muscles. "The day I first walked into the SVU, the first person I saw was you. There you stood in your fine suit, all tall and commanding, all around you other people...good people...but you know it's like they say about the whole world in science class. Most things are just reflectors, most people, too. But not you, you shone with your own light. You had your own sense of honor, your own kind of beauty. You were the coolest man I ever saw. Hell, you still are."

"Thanks," he said softly, because it was about all he could say, through the hard invisible knot cinching his throat. "I think that's the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me. Other than *you're served*."

"John, not everything's a joke. I need you serious now. As serious as I can get you."

"Sorry," he said, nodding. He looked up at Fin. "I get nervous, I make jokes. I don't do serious well."

"Like I didn't notice."

Fin's fingers probed firmly at John's solar plexus, above his navel but below his ribs. There was little resistance. He was open in this instance, wherever Fin's touch moved, though Munch's muscles were tight with blocked energy until Fin touched them. John's upper muscles were relaxing. His lower abdominals, however, were on high alert.

Fin leveled his voice to a smooth purr, pausing the massage to await a reply. "John, you ever been with another guy?"

Munch glanced over at him, then back toward the ceiling. "Serious?" he asked.

Fin nodded. "Serious."

Munch was stone silent a couple of moments, until he simply stated the fact. "Yeah."

"You like it?"

That took another moment. "Yeah. Why?"

"You like it as much as being with a woman?"

"Yeah. You thinking about experimenting? Because, always remember, the only way to have safe sex is with the suitable application of a condom..."

Fin snorted a laugh in spite of himself. "Thank you, Doctor Koop. I guess I'll let that joke slide. Three straight answers with one joke outta you is the best I can hope for. I already *experimented*. Lots o'times. Nobody talks about it, where I come from, but it's not unusual, going both ways. Always seemed stupid to me to limit yourself to loving

half the world."

Munch waited a moment before adding, "Yeah, to me, too."

"That doesn't surprise me."

"I still *do not know* Butterfly."

"Get the case outta your head. You're not supposed to be thinkin' about that stuff. Just pay attention to what I'm sayin' to you."

"We're back in Iffy Iffy mode."

"*Iffa Iffe*. This is the Iffe part now, which is where it gets fresh."

John closed his eyes, settled back. "All right, I'm behaving."

"First, gimme your glasses. You won't be needin' 'em. And they might get mashed."

Munch removed his eyewear, closing the earslides. He handed them over. "We're going to be doing something that might *mash* my *glasses*? Didn't you just say this was the *good* part."

"All kinds of good stuff can bust up your glasses." Fin reached across to gently place the glasses on his bureau, beside his Mosher shades. The two sets of eyewear were so different and yet fit so perfectly together. Now why did that just seem so right for the moment, he smiled to himself, retrieving the small sachets bundles he had set out there earlier.

"What are you grinning about?" his partner said, smiling lazily himself.

"Your bigass glasses," Fin said. "Now be quiet. Time to behave yourself."

"Laissez les bons temps rouler," Munch said.

"Whatever."

Munch shut his eyes. He realized his blissful grin probably made him look, well, dopey. Still, dulcet relaxation was an unfamiliar indulgence in Munchkinland. He'd rarely been so...serene, there was simply no other word. And the skill of his partner's hands was gentle but effective. John's '60s trip had been an "E" ticket to ride. He'd been through everything from Primal Scream Therapy (where he nearly transformed his therapist into a work of *Edvard* Munch himself) to Transcendental Meditation, which didn't for him and wasn't very.

This was going to get very pleasant and, potentially, painfully embarrassing. He could

handle the first; he thought he could stave off the latter.

Fin's hand moved around to the back of his neck, placing the Benzoin sachet behind John's neck. Munch felt his shoulders relax in reply. John sensed a warm, sweet aroma passing over his eyes. Fingers combed through his hair. He felt a warm, wet smack planted there. A kiss. John smiled hazily. It was Munch's day for Odafin noggins' smooches.

"Here's where you trust me," Fin whispered to his ear, moving around him. "I use my body to complete the circuit. Don't fight your reaction. Trust me. It's all part of the process."

"I trust you, I trust you," John replied, his voice only taking shape enough to be heard.

One of Fin's hands Munch could feel behind his neck, the other hand sliding beneath the band of his slacks. Fin's fingers continuing on below the solar plexus to John's navel, to the top of his groin. The ministrations there were tender, gentle, respecting the distance to the business district of the Munch family jewels. But the Munch jewels weren't much returning the favor.

John considered using one of his mental methods of tamping down the coal fires, but then he remembered Fin's appeal for trust. Right now, respecting that was more important to Munch than personal dignity. Beyond which fact, the hot pulsing sensations in his crotch were becoming so frickin' good, he very nearly didn't give a damn. No, *strike that*, he *didn't* give a damn.

Eroticising the landscape, Munch's forebrain fought back. *The orgasm response can create a bridge between ...*

"Jesus," he whispered, at a sudden rush.

Fin answered. "Give it what it wants, baby. Give it what it needs."

The human mind wasn't supposed to remember this much pleasure, because if it remembered it, the body would relive it all the time. Each moment moved along like an hour, each one within him thinking the sensations could *not* get any better, and then he would be stunned at his profound inaccuracy, but then also certain the pleasure pulsing through his crotch could *not get better than...*

If the light of all his immoderate past pleasures had condensed into one coherent light, that is what blasted through him now. It can't feel like this... It doesn't feel like this... / *don't feel ...*

"C'mon, John, " Fin's now the voice of seduction around him, becoming his world and everything in it. "It's what's real."

Panorama of mind. Orgasmic life review. The new SVU detective (OdaWHAT?...*is that a name?*) -- *He was turning, he could hear his steps, he could see him walking toward him...*

You knew it then. You *goddamned, fucking knew it then*, Munch yelled at his heart.

The first pleasure blast hit hardest, but it was the slow and sexy pulsing edge that rippled through him smoothly and finally, that turned a hot meditative thrill into a waking wet dream.

John reached out for the real thing, the *true* thing: the man beside him. John wove forefinger to thumb through the thick-bodied naps beneath his hands. His mouth moved onward up the man, tasting blindly at his jaw line, kissing hungrily up his throat, till his lips slipped over a warm, open mouth that accepted his completely. No resistance. John's mouth asked a silent, critical question, to which the other gave a long, loving reply of lips and tongue. To answer completely: *So there could be no mistake...*

Fin ended the kiss so they could breathe. "You with me, Johnny?" he whispered at last, gathering the other man against him again.

"What the fuck just – " Munch said, his words ragged with confusion, terror, pleasure, tears.

"Shhhhhh, don't think. Just feel. We'll have time for talkin' later. If you need to hide for awhile, I'll understand. I love you, man."

"I love you," John whispered, before he realized what he had said.

Fin kissed his forehead. "Thank God for that. Now get some rest," were the last words John heard his partner say, before exhaustion paved the way to the deepest sleep in John Munch's middle age.

Chapter Three

Half-Remembered Things

"Now this man knows how to throw a party."

A bear crawling from hibernation on the Ides of March couldn't have had more fog in his brain than had John Munch struggling from a braid of alien duvets and unidentified flying eiderdown. He had a lifetime of stuff in his eyes. His brain was socked in solid. He awoke laying the wrong way on somebody else's bed and he was staring at a ceiling not his own.

Fin's place, he remembered. Last night. He exhaled. *That's right*.

He didn't recall a lot else, but he did *not* remember being naked. That was the plot point that *really* threw him.

He was alone in the room but on the bureau was posted a big fuzzy note with a blinking belt flashlight, to get his attention. To the flashlight was appended his eyeglasses.

*Shower, shave. Your clothes are washing.
I've gone for breakfast. Borrow my sweats,
if you don't want to run around naked. I'll
be right back. Oh, I borrowed my car.*

He complied with his partner's directives. Munch climbed into the shower stall as if he was entering a crime scene. It held all the amenities: Bath gel. Shampoo. Conditioner. Some other stuff in black and gold bottles, but with African symbol motifs on the containers. Munch supposed that if he relaxed his lifeless hair anymore it would disintegrate completely.

The shower finished, his internal fog lifting, he had to admit he felt stunningly good, particularly for John Munch.

The thing called sweats might have been any one of four odd folded knit couplets. He held up each and chose the one that was longest limbed. It was orange and gray with diagonal zigzags crossed in black. Sort of South African Tribal Impressionism meets Charlie Brown.

He donned it quickly, as he heard the sound of his partner's return from the road.

"Good morning," Munch said, as he tried to seem casual and failing completely. The living room was peopleless. Not a soul left behind.

"We the only ones here," Fin said from the kitchen. "Elliot and Olivia took off. They weren't lookin' much at each other."

"Sounds like a success," Munch said.

"That's what I'm thinkin'. Cragen was out of here before I woke up. I've got your – "

Fin had walked from the kitchen to move toward Munch. And he stopped dead at the full-length vision before him. He was clearly trying not to laugh...honestly, *really* trying **not** to laugh. Tutuola backed hard against the bar to perch foam cups on the counter, before the first giggle jag seized him. And then another. And then another. He pounded the counter, regaining composure, only to look over and begin all over again.

He pounded the counter with both fists, commanding air and composure and calm, then he turned around. He had to make himself be serious, riding the wild edge of another laughing fit.

"I'm guessing," John said dryly, "this is not a good look for me."

Fin's dawning composure crumbled a little to let out a laugh. He wiped tears from his eyes. "It's just you look like Masai Lurch or somethin'."

"Masai *Lurch*? Lurch on the *Adam's Family*?"

Fin nodded, finishing up with a final chuckle eruption before he dried his eyes again and straightened his ass up. "They too big and short on me. They *way* too big and short on you."

Munch regarded the ceiling, folding his arms across his chest. "I remind you that I can't help being tall and long-limbed. Many of the great men of history were. Many of the great men of sports and entertainment. Thomas Jefferson. Magic Johnson. Ichabod Crane. Geoffrey the giraffe of Toys R Us fame."

"I know, I know." Fin sniffed, rubbing at the stitch in his side from laughing. "Anyway, those aren't my sweats. That's the fleece set my auntie bought me for Christmas. I didn't suggest it 'cause it's already started to pill."

"That's why they call it fleece," Munch said. "You pay \$50 for it and it falls apart the next day." He looked down at it. "I guess it'll work until my clothes are dry. Which brings me to the question, why are my clothes washing?"

Fin smiled, a little sadly. "You don't remember much. About last night, do ya?"

"I have vague memories of enjoying the hell out of myself, but the details are hazy. I probably will remember at some point later and be sick with humiliation over something I did or said. Just don't tell me you have a tuba."

Fin snorted another laugh. "Man, don't get me started. My gut's achin' as it is. You did fine last night. No lie."

Munch smiled at the overt affection in Fin's voice. He was a good man: a good friend. He reached over, to free a trapped lock of lint from his partner's Fu Manchu, until Munch's gaze fell upon Fin's soft lips and John remembered something.

Just a flash of something. A fleeting memory past a mental mirror. Total warmth and tender things John knew he wanted to go on forever encompassed in a flash.

"You okay, John?" Fin asked, his smooth lips bending to a smile. His eyes, glowing with a certainty of purpose.

"Yeah, fine," Munch said. "Just..."

Fin nodded, his smile reviving fully, softly. "It'll come back in time. Don't fight it. It'll get there. I promise."

SVU December 26th

John Munch had insisted upon going to his apartment, and changing into different clothes. The very fact he insisted upon doing so, despite the fact his own had been laundered, made Tutuola grin all the way to the precinct. Something remained in that formidable Munch memory, lurking under the primeval fog.

Odafin walked to his desk, seeing Benson with her eyes shut, leaning into her chair. Facial tissue was draped over her face. And Fin decided Stabler looked akin to a feline with a sublingual canary, as Munch would have put it. Fin wondered if he had the same feather-pattern on his own chin. Elliot nodded toward Tutuola. Fin grinned back at him, knowing they were both wondering the same thing about the other, in reference to their respective partners.

From behind, Cragen hooked an arm around Fin's neck. "Everyone," he called to the command floor. "Now *this man* knows how to throw a party."

"Thanks, Cap," Fin said, grinning. "You don't remember any of it, do you?"

"Not a damn thing," Cragen confessed, "except I had a great time. My favorite kind of party." With that, he moved on.

Stabler looked around to Fin, as the black man made his way around the room to Olivia, who was flagging him down with hand gestures toward a report sheet.

There were four yellow Post-Its on Olivia's computer screen: **NEVER DRINK AGAIN.... NEVER, EVER DRINK AGAIN ... NEVER, EVER, EVER, EVER DRINK AGAIN.** There was the bargain-sized bottle of Ibuprofen on her desk. On the bottle was a Post-it note: **NEVER, EVER, EVER, EVER...** and she'd run out of room at the edge.

"Sorry, Olivia," he whispered gently, returning to his desk with the sheet.

"So," Elliot said, smirking ear to ear. "How was John?"

"He was and is fine, Elliot," Fin said, grinning back as widely. "He went back to his place to change his duds. I won't ask about Olivia, she doesn't look happy."

"Too much Crème Cormier."

"I did warn you. It goes over real easy but it comes down hard."

Elliot nodded. "I know you did. We were willing participants. I'm going to write the company, though, and suggest a warning label."

"Good idea." Fin looked over the report sheet. It had been typed up by a unie. Somebody had walked in a report.

"So," Elliot said again.

"A needle pulling thread, I hear," Fin replied. "You might as well go ahead and ask, but be prepared for the same question. And I ain't likely to tell you the truth either way."

"Okay." Elliot folded his arms. "Was that really Sort of Roling I almost walked in on in there?"

"Yes and no. Does that answer your question, 'coz that's all I got to say."

"Gives me an idea. And you didn't punch me in the nose, so I'd say that's an affirmative. Gives me teasing material, too."

"Elliot, tease me about it all you like, but don't go kickin' at John about it, 'cause he doesn't remember much yet and you know he's sensitive behind all that razor-sharp wit. You hear me?"

Stabler nodded his agreement. "Yeah, I'll watch the smart remarks."

"Thank you." Fin grinned, looking around. "Hey, Olivia, you get Elliot's RC workin' last night?"

Olivia was now cradling her head inside her arms, against her desk. She struck up two thumbs.

"Attaboy, Elliot. Looks like you're a certified hit."

Through the doors walked tall John Munch, looking like a tranked and tagged gazelle just re-released upon the Serengeti. He centered himself carefully and entered the room slowly, looking around as if the environs were strangely familiar but still somehow unreal.

Elliot put coffee in his old friend's hand. Stabler looked back toward Tutuola, pointing from Munch back to Fin, giving him the okay sign, as if to say *you didn't do so badly yourself*.

Munch sipped blindly by instinct at caffeine. "Pardon me, has anybody seen my brain? I believe I left it here yesterday."

Fin pointed down at his partner's desk. "In there, filed under B for Bunny Rabbit."

"Where did you learn to alphabetize, the Internet?" Munch considered his desk before him. "I know you from somewhere, don't I?" John surrendered to his chair. "Has the Commissioner called, Batman? Or is Gotham still sleeping?"

"Gotham never sleeps," Tutuola answered.

"Neither does rust. Or us. Anything on the Flannery case overnight?"

"Kind of. We got this." He tossed the report sheet across to Munch. "Our friend Laurie Walters from Manos-a-Manos was booked at the 1-4 last night on a DUI."

"She and eight hundred other citizens of Gotham City."

"Yeah, but what caught my eye was her wheels. How's a woman at a bookstore drivin' that sweet a ride? And the car's registered to her, not to her daddy. Or to her sugardaddy."

Munch skimmed the report. "Viper?" He whistled in response. "Oooh, the wages of

sin are *impressive*. Not even moonlighting in Mister Rucker's Neighborhood is going to brace you for that stickershock."

"Nothin' else on docket. Christmas lull. She lives at a Village Sheridan Inn. I'm thinkin' we oughta go and have a few words with her."

Munch nodded, reaching for Fin's keys. "And one of them will be *emissions*."

There was no room at the Inn, but they made some at the diner across the street.

The patron of ***Skunkslut*** was wearing her two-tone hair under a cap that read ***What Would Jesus Do for a Klondike Bar?*** Munch had to concur with the message, if not the medium.

She was about as toasty warm and friendly as she had seemed on Christmas Eve.

"What the fuck do you assholes want? I'm fuckin' busy."

Fin gave her his bulldog glare. "A few minutes of your time, Miss, no need to get nasty."

Munch continued on, "We thought perhaps, in the clear light of day and beyond the earshot of your employer, you might have remembered some important detail about Billy Somber and his Sombreros. Also, we were wondering how the hell a counterculture bookstore employee bitchette like your badself affords your wet dream of a car."

"Is that any of your fucking storm trooper Nazi business?" she barked.

"I'm afraid so," Munch shook his head in false regrets. "You already are benching for the DUI. You stand on the periphery of a murder-rape investigation, too. This little element draws the hard light of suspicion in your direction. We can do this here, or we can do it at the station."

"I won it, *okay?*"

"That was some box of Crackerjacks."

Fin pouted. "I always used to get the little whistle."

"Or the miniature book," Munch added, as they tried to pare a little bit under Laurie's quick. "I mean, what in hell are you gonna do with that?"

"Shut up!" Laurie said. "Shut up! Okay, okay, I get canned if my boss finds out, because he thinks its competition. I get serious industry connections there, I need the job. I run a porn site, okay? A furries porn site. Graphic drawings of anthropomorphic animals and people fucking. Fantasy, okay? I pull in twelve G's a month. Can you blame me?"

Fin's eyebrows gathered at the edges. "You run a furries site and rake in that kinda cash? Man, Munch, we in the wrong line of work."

"You ain't lyin'," Munch said, grinning at the sound of those words in his voice, instead of his partner's. "Got some proof to back up the brag, little sister?" Fin swung a *dontchueversaythatagain* look in his direction.

"I can get some. I just cashed a check." Laurie dragged a stub from her blue jeans pocket. She tossed it over to Munch. "That's just my main processor. That's not even upsells or exits or banner receipts."

Munch looked at the bottom line and damn near dropped his jaw. "Twenty two hundred dollars. You get this amount of check from them every month?"

"No, of course not. Every week. And that's a pretty small one."

Munch lifted the brim of her cap. "Let me guess. Thou art Skunkslut."

"It's a nickname, okay, not a religion. And I can tell you more about Billy now, since you two know this much. He's my friend, but he's a weirdo. He's into real dark S&M and fake death garbage. These impulsive snails around here get sexually obsessed with some fetish and they'll do whatever it takes to get sprung."

"Like what? Kill music journalists and turn them into Christmas decorations?"

"I read the thing in the papers. I'm thinking he wasn't an angel. I think they made him a butterfly. If it's Billy, I mean. *If* it's Billy. He's into that whole metamorphosis crap. Maybe that's why he used to go bug Butterfly at Pan. She hates his ass."

"We've noticed."

"And he has another buddy at the Stretcher. It's a wet-leather sado club over on Christopher, but you can't tell it from the outside. Look for a men's clothier called the Stylers, it's right next-door. The Stretcher is where you ought to start looking. Those fetal pigs over there. Flannery used to be part of the scene, too, until he fell in love with a real nice guy and got the fuck out of there."

"Suddenly you know him?" Fin asked.

"Yeah, yeah, I know him. Everyone around here knew Misha, but nobody much will say

so. Ruckey can, 'coz he's not part of the scene, he just owns a sex store. The real 'stylers were all pretty pissed when Michael went black."

"You talkin' about Flannery's special gentleman?" Fin asked, unable to stop the grin curling at his lips.

"No, no. Go black means get out. Leave the lifestyle. Get mundane. Something most people call sane. They don't like it because they leave with too many skeletons in their closets and some of them have way familiar names. I don't know shit, so I've got a safety on."

"Sounds like the Mob," Munch said. "Or the fabled Priory of Sion. To say nothing of the Illuminati."

"Munch," Fin said.

"Just commenting," John replied.

Laurie scowled. "Can I go now? I got htpasswords to update."

"Just one question," Munch said, "since you've become a sudden font of useful information, maybe you can divulge the general location of Mr. Billy Somber?"

"Easy. He went that away," she said, pointing toward Christopher Street.

The Stylers was a prim little man's shop: *outfitters of fine European styles*.

Munch squinted at the numbers, jotting them down with his notes. "Why is it that London is filled with Real American Food restaurants and in the States we've got Authentic English Fish and Chips, and Fine European Styles?"

"Nobody wants to be where they are," Fin said.

"You said a mouthful, as usual."

The Stretcher was one painted-over door aimed at the sidewalk. Munch knew they could knock all day and it would never open. So he turned the doorknob so both men

could step inside as if they were meant to be there. That was three-quarters of a cop's job, getting the bluff in early and controlling the scene while he still could.

"Who's the master and who's the slave?" barked a big human gargoyle in leather vest and pants, his eyes glittering in Fin's direction. "Slaves go that way. They don't come in here."

"We are *detectives*, moron," Munch said, shoving the gargoyle back a full foot then shining the badge in his eyes. "And you'll want to take that back before I bust you for impersonating a Homo Sapien."

"Shit, I'm sorry. I thought you were out-of-towners. I don't want trouble."

"Then, you'll tell us where we can find Mister Billy Somber. We understand he's one of the Stretcherettes."

"Yeah, he's here. He's up in the Tombs. Through that hall and up the stairs behind the manacle tree."

"Thanks," Munch said, as dry as his voice could manage, starting down the hall.

"And by the way, *I'm* the master," Fin added.

Munch whirled around, continuing to walk, only backwards. Both eyebrows arched in unison.

"Don't get sassy with me, Mister Man," Fin said, grinning.

Munch's eyes opened wide for emphasis, then distracted by some obvious half-formed memory, he turned around to continue their entry into the Wall-Identified Billet of Discipline.

"Sounds positively Freudian," Munch said, heading their ascent through the Billet and up the steps beyond the much-fabled tree of manacles.

"This doesn't look too twisted," Fin said, glancing around the space.

"I'm sure they keep the weapons of marginal-destruction for the paying clientele."

"Help you with something?" asked a mountain of manmeat before them, face obscured by a leather snood with holes for his eyes and mouth.

Munch and Fin did the badges. "I'm Detective Munch, this is Detective Tutuola. Special Victims Unit. We need to speak with Billy Somber. Any idea where we might find him?"

"Yeah. He should be in the showers now."

"Lucky us. Should we sniff for his scent or would you point the way?"

"Right through there, hang a left at the big metal dildo, you can't miss it. There's a big sign on the door. It says SHOWER."

Fin nodded. "Yeah, we sorta thought it would."

What in the whole, wide world coulda happened to somebody that they wound up needing this kinda pain to have some sort of pleasure, Fin wondered, as they cleared the corner to come upon Billy Somber's bleeding badass self. He was wrapped in a hip towel. He was shorter than Fin, thinner than Munch, blonder than little Cindy Brady. He was also toking on serious Chronic like there was no tomorrow, till he saw them and he stopped.

Then Billy put the flame out in his hand. And didn't flinch. Not even a little. Which wasn't surprising, given the ritualized wound patterns across his back, trunk and down both of his legs.

"Okay, Lawrence, we're impressed," Munch said. "Drop the doobie. We're not with Narcotics." He badged him. "We're with Sex Crimes. We're investigating two homicides with special victims. We understand you knew one of them. Michael Flannery."

Billy let it drop. "Yeah. I heard. I knew him. But I didn't kill him. I didn't kill nobody."

"Well, that's a start. We understand you're into some rough action, Billy. A rough house, too. That doesn't exactly paint a Muppet-like picture of your internal life. What was your relationship to Mr. Flannery?"

"Nothin'. I mean, I knew him. I mean, we had friends in common, you know. We hung out sometimes. He was around more when I first got started. Then he married some tightass citizen queer and went society."

"Sounds like you didn't like him," Fin said.

"That's right. I didn't. He knocked my band in a write-up for Revolution. But a lot of Neighborhoodlums hated his ass. He put on airs. He acted all posh and stuff. He didn't want to mix with our shit."

"Doesn't somebody have the right to shift gears?" Fin asked.

"Sure. But everybody knows when you get in, you don't get out completely. You keep

the oaths, you hold to the honor system. You don't go talking to people."

Munch looked up from his notes and over his glasses. "Flannery was talking to someone? About what?"

"Stuff I can't tell cops. Stuff we don't tell anyone."

Munch made a quiet sound, like a plea to the warehouse within for more patience to be sent up and fast. "The stuff we need to know *is* the stuff no one can tell the cops. That's what this little pilgrimage of ours is for. If we got all the information we need from idle conversation, we'd be at home in our flannels like the rest of New York. And we can do it here, or in the little room with the magic mirror."

"You'd better pop me, because I'm not talking. I'd be dead in 48 hours, if I talked, whether I'm in or out." He slammed open his locker doors, grabbed a shirt out, and slammed the locker closed. "I've got a gig in a half hour with my band. Is the Inquisition still on or am I free to go?"

"Just a couple more. Your public can wait." From his overcoat pocket, Munch withdrew a second photograph. This was one he'd been faxed that morning. It was a necrotograph of the first victim. The one they hadn't ID'd yet.

"You ever see this handsome sailor before?"

"No," Somber said blankly. "Should I have?"

"Not at all?"

"No. Don't think I ever saw him even. He doesn't look even a little familiar. Can I go?"

Munch raised one finger. "What is it with you and butterflies?"

"Nothing," he said. "You mean the herniated cunt up the road?"

"No, I mean the symbol. The real thing. You know. Flutter, flutter."

"Nothing," he said again. He yanked his sweatpants from the locker. "Why?"

"We hear you've got a thing about them. About them as a symbol of metamorphosis."

"Fuck no! That stupid bitch Laurie told you that. She always gets it wrong. It's the Phoenix, the firebird rising from the ashes. It's the symbol of my band."

"Striking," Munch said. "So no butterfly fetish?"

"No! That crazy he-bitch over there got it in her fucking crazy head the design was

about her. But it wasn't. I may be a weirdo, I may be a Goth pain queen, I may like it rough, but I don't kill people. I keep my tongue tight, but I'm not your bad man. Can I go now?"

Munch scowled. "Torquemada has left the building. For the moment anyway. You usually around here, musicman?"

"Here or the Lash," he said.

"Which is?"

"Restricted. Nobody goes there. It's part of the code. If I told you, they'd kill me."

"And these guys are your friends?" Fin asked.

"No, they aren't. But they're part of the order of things. They're in the deal. And I understand the rules and have pledged my oath to the disciplines."

"And they buy your soul with Chronic for your buzz," Fin said, stealing a glance at the dope that Billy had dropped on the ground.

"No. Nobody owns me. They love me, but they don't own me."

"Yeah, sure," Fin snapped back. "You know how many punk ass kids told me the same thing when I worked Narcotics? And they always, always, always wound up with a pin in their arm and no life in their bodies. Tell me something I don't know. It's the same thing here. You get addicted to it. It's not about love, even a little. It's about overloading your system with noise so loud you can't receive the signals about the stuff that really hurts you."

Billy looked from one detective to the other. "Either one of you have a fetish? I mean, you do, but one you practice?"

"We ask the questions, *Billy*," Munch replied.

"Okay, I'll bite," Fin said. "Yeah, I do."

"Then you know," Billy said. "It's a spiritual quest. It's a deep connection to something larger than all of us."

"Yeah, it is," Fin said. "But it's only like that when it's opening you up. Making you real. Otherwise, it's just fakin' it. You start hurtin' people badly, you start killin' people, it's not a fetish anymore, and it's a crime. And those people you're protecting may be murderers and criminals. Keep that in mind."

John Munch was very pleased when they reached the outside air. The sidewalk was

even better. Anything beyond *that* place was better.

"I should have thought to burn *my* last Firebird," Munch said. "I didn't know a new one arose from the ashes."

Fin turned around in his direction, smiling. "Hey, John, did I say you could talk? You can now, but I didn't tell you that you could."

"You're skating on opaque ice, Odie," he said.

"Woof." Fin smirked, looking around to see something else behind him. Fin pointed the other direction. "Hey, that's an old stray cat I ran outta here a long time ago. Looks like he needs a reminder."

Munch watched the process, amending the account in his head to reflect the later police report. *Detective Tutuola persuaded the Informant to wait to be questioned.* By the time Munch reached his side, Fin was growling into the face of the jerk he'd just nailed against a retaining wall.

"John," Fin said, as Munch reached him. "Meet Amal. A little slug drug runner from the bad, old days around here. Amal, I thought I ran your sorry ass out."

"I gotta make a living," Amal said. "I keep my nose clean. I don't do the sugar shit anymore."

"I got you the job fair pullout. I gave you the civil service exam phone numbers and the contacts."

"Man, those are chump jobs. Twenty thou in the door at ninety days. I got a kid to raise."

"Twenty thou in the door and the added benefit of holding your head up like a man around your boy. To say nothing about sleepin' at night and livin' to a ripe, old age."

"I hear ya, Finsky," Amal said. "My girl's on sugar. She still shacks. But I'm just carrying paper for a couple of peckerwoods that blow through in the middle of the night, is all. Just some prohib dirty movie shit. The stuff they can't sell at the porno candy place over there."

"What?" Fin asked, scowling harder, "Kiddie porn?"

"Fuck no! I got morals. Just animal shit. Not even beastie stuff, just some high bitch in ho heels steppin' on rodents and the like. Shit, I do that bit in my apartment all the time, except I never thought of workin' the weasel to it."

"Oh. Nice. Crushing," Munch said grimly.

"That is messed up," Fin said, flinching visibly. "Steppin' on bunny rabbits? I'd sooner step on you, Amal."

"One more procession of the constant, compulsive expression of externalized repression."

"You been studyin' Malcolm again," Fin said proudly to his partner.

Munch nodded. "So what are they trampling, Amal? What kind of poor, helpless creature being crushed under sexy footwear gives them wood?"

"All kinds. They got pictures on the labels. Mainly mice, rats. Hamsters."

"All the little helpless, cute and furry things, in other words," Fin said darkly.

Munch inhaled his righteous anger. "Amal, these night visitors of yours, are they in Mister Flannery's Neighborhood? Are they locals? People that you meet as you're walking down the street?"

"I don't know. That's not my scene over there. All that crapping and peeing on each other. Beatin' each other up till it bleeds. That's *nasty*."

"You did sprout morals, Amal," Fin said. "I'm almost kinda slightly proud of you. Do you know the names of these so-called peckerwoods with the sick flicks?"

"They ain't got names around here. They got screen names. Nicknames. That shit. Anyway, you'll have to roll me in to get that out. That'd be slittin' my own professional throat."

"We're not investigating sick flicks, Amal," Fin said. "Not yet anyway. We're looking into two sexualized homicides. And I promise I'll make it up to you."

"Yeah, that's a relief. Okay, there's one called Heathcliff. I never seen him. He never talks to nobody, nobody knows him. Damn unfriendly, if you ask me."

Munch shook his head. "No one has manners anymore."

"I'll give you him. He connects with the other dudes. Heathcliff owns the Neighborhood. I hear he's around the Lash sometimes, too. But I don't know where that is. I just hear people saying he's there. You know, *oh, I saw Heath, he's over at the Lash*. That kinda thing."

"What about this guy?" Fin said, showing a happier image of Death Angel Number 2.

"Yeah, that's Misha. An old face, from my more lucrative days before Finsky here

kicked my ass."

"I'm crying for you," Munch said. "Was Misha into any of this garbage?"

"No, not so far as I know. Didn't know him much, just saw him around. Why you showin' his snapshot? He buy the farm?"

"And a hundred head of grazing cattle," Munch said. He showed him the other picture. "What about this guy?"

Amal looked at the picture and showed no reaction at all. "No. Nobody I know."

"You sure?" Fin asked. "Doesn't even seem a little familiar? Remind you of anybody, say?"

"No, no, not at all." There was something more like paralytic fear behind his eyes, rather than lack of knowledge.

"Tell you what," Munch said. "Lets play, *give the dead guy a name*. You go first. Norman. John. Paul. George. Felix. Oscar."

"Baltimore," Amal said, almost like he didn't mean to say it aloud. When it was said, he made eye contact with Fin. He lowered his voice to a shadow. "I'd call him Baltimore. Can I get goin' now? I got deliveries to do."

"Oh, sure," Munch said, distractedly. "Nothing should stay you from your appointed rounds."

Amal looked back to Fin. "The white guy always talk like that?"

"The white guy's name is Detective Munch," Fin said, pointing away. "Get the lead out. And stay clean or I'll bust your sorry ass."

"How come you real cops don't give money out like the TV ones do?" Amal asked, cranky.

"Because real cops gotta make real money," Fin said. "Your reward should be a clear conscience."

"Yeah, a lot of good that'll do me. I did think of somethin', though. Somethin' along these lines. Might help. If you got some extra pocket change I –"

"Tell us," Fin said sharply. "And if it's of value, we'll take some compensation into consideration."

Amal shrugged. "It's just, you know, steppin' on rats and shit. And that dead guy's

name was Misha. You know what Misha means in Russian or German or some shit?"

Munch's head drew back in surprise, a mental link clicking into place. "It means mouse."

Amal nodded. "I was thinkin' maybe he was another one of them mice. There's more than one way to dispose of a pest."

Fin pulled greenery from his pocket - \$5 – and handed it over. "Now beat it."

Amal frowned at the five, but then with a look of dark inspiration from Fin, speedily took off.

Munch was tangled up in his own thoughts. "Mouse. Yeah. And Baltimore again," he said. "That's...*unsettling*."

"Maybe we should talk to Butterfly. She said that's where she knew you from."

Munch's ironic gaze drifted to the ground. "Yes, I'm afraid we should."

Fin smiled pointedly and aimed it at Munch. "You know, I'm gonna start thinkin' you're sweet on her and I'm bound to be jealous."

"I only have eyes for – " Munch stopped, as if something vivid slammed against his memory. He swallowed hard, but through practice grabbed up the bits of his composure, packed it all back together. He had to turn around to make the fix complete.

"You okay?" Fin asked, hoping his eyes conveyed his words.

"Yeah," Munch said. "Let's go catch a butterfly."

There was a sign on the door of Pan: *Sorry, closed due to Butterfly Medina's appearance at the Miss Oswego Shemale Beauty Pageant. She regrets missing your presence. She will return on 12/27.*

"Butterfly fled," Fin said.

"Yes, but we've picked up local interest." Munch nodded sideways, to the street. "Those two natty dressers over by the bookstore."

"Wonder if ol' Amal ratted us out."

"I think they've been with us since the Stretcher. We must be getting close to the honey if we're drawing gadflies." Munch's hand crabwalked up to his service piece, unsnapped its strop. "Made 'em?"

"Got 'em clean," Fin replied, dropping back about a foot, to cover the upside of the first guy so Munch could handle the second.

"Nice and easy," Munch said. "Forgiving them their trespasses, we're just going to our car."

They were within feet of the midpoint between the strangers and Munch's car when there was a sudden surge in the other men's volume of voices. They were looking anywhere but at the detectives. The nearer Munch and Fin drew to the car, the louder the voices grew, but not solely due to distance. The grislier one of the Two laughed hard, and it wasn't a friendly sound.

"...Niggah Narco..."

It was the first time Munch could remember doing something before he knew what he was doing. He had grabbed the big mouth and slammed him into the bookstore parking lot wall behind them. John would have pile-driven the bastard's head into the brick if stronger hands hadn't grabbed him from behind.

"John!" Fin's voice said, breaking the spell on Munch. "They ain't worth it."

"What's your name?" barked the bad one. "What's your badge number?"

Munch barked back. "First name Fuck. Last name You. Look up my number. Who the hell are you two and why are you bloodhounding us?"

"That's your imagination. You must be fuckin' paranoid. It's a fuckin' public street."

Fin's phone rang. He flicked it open, stepped away.

Munch pulled off a glove to point a bare finger in his conversant's face. "I'll remember you."

"Yeah, I'll remember you, too, fuckhead."

Fin grabbed his arm. "C'mon, we gotta leave now. Captain wants us back in the squad room."

Munch used the finger once more. "Lucky you."

"Lucky you, too, fuckhead."

Munch was dragged halfway into the car. "Gotta run. Thank you for the sparkling repartee," he shot back. Munch slammed the door behind him for emphasis.

Fin peeled off and up the street to put immediate distance between the morons and his partner. He claimed a corner and turned onto an alley. "Jesus, what was that shit about? I'm a big boy and I been fighting my own battles for a long damn time."

"I'm sorry, I know. I know." Munch removed his glasses, rubbed at his eyes. "I don't know what the hell got into me. This crap is all just getting personal as hell for me. What did the boss want?"

"Nothin'. I lied. I got your phone in my other pocket; I hit the one dial for my number. I had to do somethin' to get you out of there before you fed that jackass the Upper East Side. I love ya and I appreciate what you tried to do for me there, but you don't have to prove anything to me. I know where your soul is. And you know if those jerks call this in that the translation is gonna be different."

Munch slapped a palm against his head, then punched the dashboard. "Fuck. They'll blame it on you."

"Exactly."

"Cragen won't listen."

"It's not the Captain I'm worried about. It's those morons in the upper office. You know they love to hang black cops out to show they're tough on police brutality. Look at L.A. Rampart, perfect example. One bad cop, my ass. Keeps Al Sharpton happy *and* the Pointy Pillowcase Gang."

"I know. I *know* this. What the hell is wrong with me?"

"You're a good man. You lead with your heart and you don't know any better. It would never occur to you to think that way, so you don't know it exists till they stick it in your face. Lighten up on your bony ass for a change."

Munch pushed his eyeglasses in place. "That would be a first. All right, where are we with this thing?"

"We got Butterfly at her beauty pageant. Elliot and Olivia were going to run Billy Somber's name and some of the other stray names around. We got foot canvas details out, working the regions. They said they'd buzz us if anything came up. I've got the office pullin' 61s for patterns in the M.O. It's covered. We'll get there."

"This guy is a serial killer without a series," Munch said. "He's got two crimes with exacting attention to detail. Obsessive compulsivity is written all over it. But that doesn't just come out of nowhere. There's no journeyman unaccounted for that approximates this perp's patterns. So where did this guy come from? If we don't know where he's from, we can't know where he's going. Once he gets a taste for this, once he gets his rocks off, he's going to be a menace to the whole fucking country."

"Yeah, it almost seems...I don't know...mocking. Like it's trying to look like one thing, but it's not."

Munch nodded, considering quietly a moment. "Maybe the perp doesn't really have a murder fetish?"

Fin shrugged. "What do you think?"

"I think he does," Munch concluded. "But what he's doing is more conscious choice than just blind compulsion. This guy isn't driven to exposition; he's compelled by something else. He's displaying to get our attention."

"Maybe he's dressin' it up to disguise his real M.O.?"

"It's worth exploring with Doctor George."

FBI Agent George Huang was the second neatest person in the western world, John Munch had concluded. The first neatest person entered the room before Munch, dropping into the closest, most appropriate chair. John decided to loom over all from the corner.

George was entering his office from the rear. "I received your text message while I was at dinner. I had to stop by 1 Plaza. I'm glad I wasn't too delayed."

"Dinner? What time is it?" Munch said staring at his watchless wrist.

"Thirteen minutes of four in the afternoon," George said. "I gather you had a late night. You came in later than usual. I wouldn't know. I wasn't invited."

"George, it's not like that," Fin said. "I asked over the quad squad and the Captain. We all work together. I didn't invite Casey either. Besides, I heard you had other plans."

"Nothing that couldn't have been altered with enough advance notice," he added. "But I'll be an adult about it."

"We're doin' the same *soiree* on New Year's Eve. You are hereby invited."

"I'll check my calendar and get back to you. Captain Cragen is telling everyone it was the greatest party he's ever attended."

Fin laughed, shaking his head at the irony of it all. "He don't even remember why he had a good time. But then there's a lot of that goin' around," he said, tossing a glance

back to the corner where his partner was standing.

Munch cleared his throat. "I suppose I should be concerned by that, but I'll press on. What do you think of our perp theory in the dead angel homicides?"

Huang nodded. "Perhaps you're correct. Perhaps the killings serve one need and the postmortem displays another. For instance, tribal communities would slaughter buffalo for food and for the hides they used for clothing and other things for other reasons. He may be following a psychopathology as well as an artistic vision. Art and ritual often intermix, even in abnormal psychology."

"So he may be killin' for one reason, entirely separate from why he's dressing up the display," Fin said.

"It's possible."

Munch folded his arms. "Could he be trying to convince us he's Clarice Starling material when he's just your run-of-the-mill wacko?"

George shook his head, smiling too serenely. "I don't think so. It's not an elaborate cement overcoat, if that's what you're saying. I think the displays *do* serve *some* expressive purpose. The symbol of the crucifixion is there; it's not just a frame for the wings. And the angel iconography itself, being redemption of a kind, if not the person himself, then all humanity. The transcendence, the ascension. Sounds like he's trying to deliver us from what he perceives as evil. If he merely wanted to hide his murder signature, why not simply weigh the body down and throw it into the Hudson River?"

"Because all the other bodies down there might just bounce it to the surface?" Munch waved a hand to show he'd been joking. "Okay, so it's not just eliminating some annoyances and then making them look pretty? You think it serves a need."

"To him it does," George said. "And the need is somehow linked to the murder. There is a connection..."

"What else aren't we seeing here?"

"I think the Baltimore links are significant. Including your own."

"Therefore, I am *not* paranoid," Munch said, looking to his partner to make certain he'd received the message, too.

"Not at all. And you knew the father of at least one of the victims. You have the Baltimore reference to the second victim. Certainly it's an item that should be circled. You might reflect on previous cases, to see if anything comes to mind. It may not be you specifically. It may just be a common connection to something else."

"I've tried," Munch said. "I can't think of anything."

"The brain is an imperfect computer. I decided to check the silicon kind for its own pattern seeking utilities. I was finally able to access Baltimore PsychArch. I typed in the manifest of names you gave me, and a case came up."

"What case?"

"Case File 2123-A. The State of Maryland vs. Mister Sagretti Magretti. They used a forensic psychiatrist extensively in the prosecution."

"Spaghetti Magretti," Munch said with more than a hint of *Eureka* in his voice. He surrendered finally to a chair. "He was tried for Murder One special circumstance premeditation. But the case was circumstantial. The bullets that took out the vic were reloads. They couldn't be tracked or traced. Turns out, Magretti was framed. The one and only framed case I have ever had. Flannery's Bar was the dumping ground for the vic."

"How did it come out?" Fin asked.

"The perp stumbled into the 2-1, produced the murder weapon, handed over a duped video of the killing, then held the gun to his head and squeezed one off. Killed himself right there."

"Saved the people of Baltimore a whole lotta change," Fin said.

"It was almost annoyingly neat. I suggested a psych ops connection, but my insight was met with the usual scorn. Even when I tried to pursue a forensics evaluation, the gun disappeared. Remember this, evidence matrons get *very* upset when guns disappear."

"Why would they video tape the killing?" Fin asked.

"No one knew. They decided it was surveillance tape, and that's where it ended."

Fin shook his head. "That's just hinky."

"Thank you, my partner. Now you know why I wish I could drag you back in time. But it wrapped up neatly and the DA in his interminable wisdom put a bow on it."

"And missed links to a lot of other cases."

Munch nodded. "Which is why I'm a nattering nabob of negativism."

Fin gave him a smile of solidarity. "Don't feel bad, John, I got cases we could compare one for one back with Narcotics. It's lazy cops or dirty cops, one way or the other."

"Well, we're going to sweat the details on this one," Cragen said, from the door. Cragen was looking at Munch. "You know a Pasqual MacDuncan?"

"How could I forget a name like that? Yeah, he was my next-door neighbor in Baltimore for a while. Never saw him, but I remember his name from the mailbox."

"Here's more reason to remember it," Cragen said. "He just put an identity to death angel number one."

"Damn," Fin said, for both of them.

Munch shook his head hard. "I feel the cold brush of the Fickle Finger of Fate."

"I don't blame you," Cragen said. "John, we're taking no chances here. You'll never let me forget I said this, but you're more than a cop, you're an archive and resource and an old friend. Fin, I'm gonna ask that you not take your eyes off Munch until this perp is in custody."

"You don't have to ask, Captain," Fin said. "I'm already on that page."

Munch shook his head harder. "And I am not placing Fin in jeopardy because of my history. This is my problem, I'll solve it."

Fin grabbed for an epaulet to drive home his point. "John, I survived the Mexican Mafia, Golden Triangle death squads, even a couple of Guatemalan jobbers with links to the Shining Path. You already know about my Colombian drug cartel experiences. One of my specialties was guarding informants. I think I can handle a lone nut. This ain't even a whack squad."

"The question is whether I'm placing you in the line of fire. And I am not. We don't know it's not *a whack squad*."

"I'm there already, John. I'm stayin'. *End of discussion*."

George cleared his throat gently, to redirect attention. "Probably a good idea. If this is a stalker of sorts, one friend nearby will be better than a security detail."

"It's settled then," Cragen said. "Also, I'm shorthanded because of the holidays. We can't work a security detail out of the workforce on duty. John, when you're not in office, I want you to go home with Fin. And don't give me that *I'm a cop* fake bravado crap. Pound your brain, make some phone calls, do what you have to do to remember who this guy is and what his beef is with you. He very well may know where you live, but he probably won't have placed Fin yet."

"So I make certain that he does?"

Fin stood up, pointing straight at the door. "We decided. Debate over. Your chariot awaits."

Munch tossed up his hands in surrender. He walked silently out the door, before his partner.

Elliot appeared next to the captain at the door. He was carrying the older man's requested coffee lite.

Fresh mystery lit up Stabler's face. "Captain, did I just see John Munch leave the room without a smartass remark?"

"You sure did," Cragen said, his browline riddled with surprise.

"Jesus. Truly, love *is* a miraculous thing," Elliot muttered, shaking his head.

Cragen nodded as if this was clearly true, but George looked between the two of them with smiling circumspection.

"So," Huang said, "anyone remember the party yet?"

Chapter Four

Fin Gets the Munchies

[well, somebody had to say it]

"I may seem like a psychosexual Hercules, but I'm really made out of fine china and marked Fragile."

Munch stared darkly at the hot, strong coffee. It was setting to his side, somewhere near his hand. He could feel the heat flow around his fingers.

Around him, his partner's apartment, which summoned in him, veiled though deep-seated fear and joy and tenseness...a kind of slowly unfolding restless yearning.

"I hate riding a desk," Munch muttered.

"You see a desk in here?" Fin asked.

Munch threw a smirk at him. "You *know* what I *mean*." He leaned forward, moving over to give his partner a place to land beside him. It also allowed him a moment to shift around, to regain his mental sea legs. "I don't even know who the enemy is. With my years in the ranks, it could be anyone of a thousand social miscreants, all with motive and opportunity. Hundreds of people hate my guts. It's like combing the sands of Roswell for one piece of a fifty year old spacecraft."

"But it's not. It's one cat. *On Earth*. We just gotta narrow the field down to him. We done this for other people, we'll do it for you."

"Draw a circle," Munch said, yanking off brown loafers, feeling oddly at home enough to do so. He leaned back into Fin's celebrated living room sofa, "Draw a circle, starting anywhere."

"Then lets start sketching. What about that frame-up? The spaghetti guy?"

"Spaghetti Magretti. A stage name," Munch added. "By night he had a dinner theatre he ran with Bony Maroni. They had an act."

"No kiddin'."

"By day, he tended bar at Flannery's beer dive."

"Was he just a random dupe or did he serve another purpose?"

"He was convenient. At least that was the ubiquitous working theory of the time."

"One you didn't subscribe to?"

Munch shrugged. "You know me well, Batman. Not really, but it has been said by the renowned Dr. Jackson that I can smell a conspiracy at a lemonade stand."

Tutuola chuckled. "That may be true, but lots of times, you're right. And you know what Carl Oglesby said...that guy who wrote the book you gave me."

"Conspiracy is the normal continuation of normal politics by normal means," Munch replied, his gaze softening. "You *read* it?"

"Of course I read it. You gave it to me, with pages clipped and passages highlighted in yellow marker. Like I said, a lot of the time you're right about this shit. You see connections they don't. So lay it out for me. What did you think was behind it at the time? You remember?"

"I've tried to forget. That's been an eternity. I remember a lot of links to the so-called alternative community in Maryland. It's the same there as it is here, because of the amount of anti-gay crime, the police tend to know the gay community better than most. Statistically, gay people aren't violent, so we thought maybe somebody else, someone linked."

"A closet case?"

"Maybe. I remember a lot of the players linked primarily to the bisexual community, whatever that is. Maybe someone batting for both teams, as Benson so coyly puts it."

"Can I ask you somethin'? I mean, you my best friend and we're just talkin', so I don't mean to sound all Militant Momboso on you. What is it with white folks, sex and baseball metaphors? Scorin', first base, second base, third base... home run..."

"Early sexual imprints taken during Little League games. Do I know, Odafin? Shall we consider the finer impact of Jelly Roll Blues on mainstream America? Or can we stick to the topic at hand?"

"Okay, no harm, no foul. Just thought I'd ask. You're right, we should be focusing on Mister Spaghetteman."

"Might be a good idea to have the Bank run his name through the database, see where he is, if he is, and what he's doing."

Fin reached across to score his *cell phone* 'less, then punched for his coded connection to Cragen's system. "You wanna text it or should I?"

"You do it," Munch said. "You spell better."

"Yeah, well you smell better."

"Two words – Aqua Velva." Munch leaned toward his partner and sniffed. "Actually, you're rather pleasantly fragrant this evening. It's sort of power peppermint meets Rose of – "

When the words didn't follow, Fin looked around. Munch was silent. Staring straight ahead of him, the tinted lenses hiding the depth of John's reaction. The expression was obvious. Munch had remembered something, but not about Magretti or Maryland: about last night. Munch leaned up a little, as if consciously shifting his thoughts around. He behaved as if he were watching Fin send the message through the system.

He hid the aftermath well. "There was this guy connected somehow to the porn industry, too. Maybe he has priors. Maybe that could be cross-referenced with Magretti. Hell, it could be cross-referenced with my whole dismal fucking life. There are so many directions we can go in."

"First we get Mister Spaghetti, then we get moose and squirrel."

"Wise words, oh Child of the '60s," Munch said, smiled.

"I loved Bullwinkle. Me and my friends got together every day to watch it. That and Fractured Flickers. Tom Slick. SuperChicken."

"And George of the Jungle. Yeah, I remember. I was in college, but I remember. I didn't have any friends, so I watched it alone in my rickety old hill house with Mother." He grinned at Fin as if to show he wasn't serious. He pushed the conversation back in his partner's direction. "You keep up with your friends?"

"Not hardly," Fin said. "Ramon is dead. Antoine is dead. Perry is dead. Elijah, last I heard, might as well be. He got a gold arm. Miguel is in the system somewhere. Straight life for a double murder, no chance of parole. I was the only one of my friends that got out, thanks to my family. My parents. My sisters and brothers. Big Mama. My aunt."

Munch smiled sadly. "Thank God for them."

Fin nodded. "So you did have friends, right? Homeys? Pals? Outside your wiseass

Psycho shit? What's up with them?"

Munch laughed. "My pals? My pals are a bunch of middle-aged guys who get together and can't remember any of the good times we had together. Which is why I no longer attend high school reunions."

"I bet you never did."

Munch's mouth crinkled in a smile. "You know me too well, Alfred."

"Thought I was Batman."

"You are both in our little virtual Bat Cave," Munch said.

"Long as I'm not the Boy Wonder."

"Never. And now that we've discussed the full range of the animated entertainment medium from the last thirty years," Munch said. "When are we going to discuss what almost happened last night?"

Fin turned around, the grin rising fully on his face. "You remember?"

"Bits and pieces. Words and phrases. Enough to make it hard to concentrate. Not enough to make me too uncomfortable around you and anyone else. For instance, I remember soul-kissing you, which would be difficult to misinterpret."

Fin's smile resolved into a gentle good humor, along the lines of sadness. "There's no obligation involved, John. That was a present. We can forget it ever happened, if you want to. It doesn't have to go anywhere from here. I give my love without strings attached."

John Munch gave him a look of irony, softened by a host of free-floating gentler emotions. "Did you hear anyone say *whoa*?"

Fin's eyes slipped closed, as if he had just heard something beautiful.

"The only problem is," Munch added, his calmly ironic voice sinking a little as he spoke, "I may seem like a psychosexual Hercules, but I'm really made out of fine china and marked Fragile." Munch averted his eyes toward the window. "With what I feel, if we start this, it's not ever going to end. At least for me. You know my history. You know my *batting average*, if you'll excuse the metaphor. I sometimes...wreck things because I hold on too hard. I play to win. Just so you know, if you want to stop this now, I'll understand..."

Fin swiveled Munch's head back around to face him. He slipped the other man's glasses from his eyes. "Did you hear anyone say *whoa*?"

Fin pressed his lips to melt John's sardonic smirk, the kiss like a whisper, a memory of skin. Fin tilted his head for a clearer path, insinuating his lips again over John's more circumspect mouth: moister this time, more explicitly conveying *I'mgoingtofuckyouthistime*. A dance of skin and tongue. Dominating with gentle precision. As Fin sought to deepen the kiss, a nervous gasp jerked through John, ending it.

"Damn," John snapped at himself, gasping for air.

"You okay?" Fin whispered to John's ear.

"Just nerves," he answered. "I'm fine."

"Naw, now you just okay. You won't be *fine* for a few more minutes," Fin said, shining a naughty smile into the eyes of the man he loved.

John Munch inhaled as deeply as physically possible. "And if I don't fucking kiss you, I'm going to explode on contact. Messy clean up job."

"Shut up, John," he whispered.

"Yes, Sensei."

Fin's mouth claimed John's completely. A trapped craving unleashed, down from four years of wanting John Munch, loving John Munch, being bound by Anglo Saxon conventions to keep his hands to himself, all distilled into a single moment of contact. Their mouths fought for the upside. Fin rubbed demure promises over the nipple struggling through John's shirt, while John's fingers wove through Fin's tight black skeins of hair. They were breathing in only each other until the need for air tore the kiss apart.

There was no transition. One moment it was kissing, the next John kicked the fucking coffee table to somewhere in the Bronx, the full range for action now revealed. He slung the pillows off the sofa to strategic places in the room. Then reached for Fin.

"You think you gonna be on top, huh? That's sweet," Fin said, his eyes now cloudy from the wild thunder through his blood. "I been writin' this song in my head for four years, John. And we ain't playin' it that way."

John found himself slammed back as if he weighed nothing at all, his back pressed against the pillow mountain he had just built for Fin. Against his own native Alphaness, his own Type A male quest to claim dominance, to master the fucking, he nearly goddamned melted as Fin had supped him to the pillows, then loomed over him. Something like molten deliverance spread through John Munch halfway through his soul.

"You *my* baby now," Fin whispered, in victory and in love.

Okay, all the way through John's soul.

Fin plucked blindly at buttons until he had freed them all by feel or force. His grin warming up as John's shirt came off, Fin reached for the thermal. He tugged it off John's body and over his head.

"Yesterday, somebody said somethin' about extremely sensitive nipples. Who could that have been?" Fin murmured, blowing a wet kiss over the nipple he'd earlier been pestering through John's shirt. He passed a whisper of a finger over the other nipple, tightening immediately at the almost-touch. "Never give somebody *that* much information, John, unless you want 'em to use it."

John's body arched against the pillows. He thought he was going to fucking pass out. Grabbing for handfuls of floor. Throttled breath showing clear evidence he was feeling *too much too* perfectly to speak.

Fin tugged mercilessly at the nipple. His tongue drew a wet line across to the virgin nub, blowing across it till it tightened as hard as the other. Then he tenderly nibbled the soft crest of it, while he mopped his tongue across its hardness, promising love along with this unyielding pleasure.

"Fin," John begged, gulping air, frantic for this to ease, never wanting it to end.
"I –"

"Hmmm?" Fin murmured, stopping his nipple attentions for a moment. His gaze delved deeply into John's open eyes.

John could only reach for him again. Avid fingers. Pulling down. Wanting Fin's mouth to continue marginally more than his nerves pleaded for Munch to push the sensations away. He arched up toward the lips and hands that played him keenly like a blues baseline out of time. Then when John thought he would pass out, Fin's lips began to move down. John's wet nipples tightening in the cold air, longing for their lost, John's body easing into a merely ball-aching lust. He wasn't so horny now, he wanted to fuck the wall, in other words.

Lips speaking to his flat belly, to the ridges of his ribs, to the big, hot clothed bulge that strained desperately at the zipper that trapped it. Swelling demandingly to Fin's tender assault of tongue and mouth.

"What do you want?" Fin whispered to the hardness, thickening even more as he touched it, tasted it, nibbled at it. "Not gonna be trapped alone like last night, huh? Not gonna do it half-ass. Tonight, we're doin' it right." Moving up a little, the black man's tongue teased John Munch's styling straight man's belt loop from its buckle. He bit

down on the leather and pulled the hitch open.

"You'll be takin' these off now, John," Fin said, matter-of-factly.

Fin moved back a little, so John could strip. Fin himself ripped off his black sweater and slung it away.

Munch moved up onto his knees, complying with a kind of heated precision. He fought to inhale, stripping easily out of the slacks that had been too much to remove the night before.

John combed the hair out of his eyes; fighting to collect himself, even a little. "I suppose this – "

"I said get *naked*," Fin hissed, without room for hesitation. "No cute remarks to ease off the edge. This ain't no massage tonight, John. I know you're scared. But we love each other and we trust each other, so I'm tellin' you to deal with it. Get naked. And get ready."

Tutuola arose and ripped off the rest of his clothing. He rushed his counter, opened a slide door in the cabinet, yanking out something annular and silver, and something that glowed like brandy-colored gel in low evening light.

When he saw a now perfectly naked Munch watching the process and his partner's muscular body with hungry, devoted eyes, Fin dimmed the light. Just enough so they could see each other, but nothing else.

Fin's eyes seemed to glow in the dark. "Lay back, John."

In the long life of John Munch, this seemed like the longest minute. Lying back in the dark, the only illumination from city lights and the stars framed inside the window. *Snow*, Munch remembered last night. But tonight's sky was puzzled with gray clouds wafting between the city and the stars. The effect was electric, magical; befitting the night his partner became his lover. *December 26th*, he remembered, when he'd glanced through their Unit calendar last week. Then he'd had no idea... no hope...

"Fin," Munch whispered.

"Right here, John," the other man said softly, drawing near as the light spilled over his shoulders and chest, highlighting the bend of shadows with fine Kentucky bourbon-colored sculpted muscle.

Fin smiled, licking his lips. "Close your eyes."

The last thing he saw was the moistened mouth before his lids slipped closed. Through his mind flickered their introduction, the first trade of words, the first time he reached

over and shook Fin's hand. The touch sparked visceral intuition he'd have laughed away in anyone else. A kind of electric, palpable sensation; the bridge between his old life and his new.

Suddenly, fingers touched. They caressed the bend of John's erection, increasing its stiffness, summoning a slowly building upsurge of blood through flesh. Fin's was a gentle hand that could be hard when it had to be, as John had seen himself. The combined effect sunk Munch's hands backward into the carpet again.

The unseen hand wrapped around Munch's cock, stroking harder this time. "You ever been done, John?"

"You mean – "

Fin's tongue teased the glans, slipping through the crevice. "Yeah," he whispered against it.

"No," John said, fingers grabbing harder at the floor. "Never."

"Ooooooh, a virgin," Fin said, chuckling huskily, a sweet, smooth sound that sent a shiver up every good nerve in Munch's body. "Good. 'Cause its not true lovemaking till two men do each other, and I'd be totally fucked-up jealous had some other man done that to you. You trust me?"

Munch swallowed, the moment too good to go on, he thought, but then it did. *Like the night before.* "You know I do."

"Just checking," Fin said, with a smile in his voice. He kissed John's open thigh. "We'll take it easy. I'll do you when you're ready, when you need it. You don't need it tonight. But I got something to help the transition, if you get what I'm sayin'."

Something vibrant pulsed around his balls, one moment warm and sweetly resonant, the next bound by rougher and sharper pleasure. The onslaught was gnawingly nice, Munch's prostate throbbing with the strict pleasure of one satisfying wave after another. And the thing wasn't even in him yet.

Munch felt a nice, wild wetness pour over his balls, across his leg. Something was being slicked up for entry.

"Fin," John whispered again, because there weren't any other words to say. Only the one.

Munch felt himself lifted just enough, and then his ass explored by something cool, slick, hard... *nice*. It shook through his body with one wave of bliss after another, and John lost all track of reality for what might have fucking been forever. Fin's mouth demanded his cock, jamming it through to the back of his throat. Claimed it

with a sound of joy...a sound so profound Munch thought the noise itself would make him cum. Fin's every mouth muscle sucked, his masculine jaw wrapping around the root while his tongue teased and taunted each pleasure nerve to its fullness. Fin's sucking mouth was demanding, but bent solely on John's extreme pleasure, loving Munch more than Munch thought he deserved to be loved.

And John knew what permutation occurred when real love was poured hot into the gold forge of sex... love became visceral, obsessive, a blood creed... Even more than his love for Fin already was...

Between the muttering pleasure from the thing jammed hard inside him and the uncompromising, demanding suck of Fin's mouth, Munch's reserve relented. It all blasted through him, until he flooded cum through his lover's mouth, the sound of Fin's ambitious, lip-smacking swallowing taking the slack out of what was left of John's orgasm, then tenderly loosening the rope.

The pulsing object withdrawn, the ecstasy calmed into a widespread, shapeless joy with only one source.

The source of Munch's joy kissed his cock, until Fin found himself flipped over atop Pillow Mountain.

John's sweat-slicked face broadcast a Munchean wild-edged smile. His lips slipped over and around the object of his adoration, this thick, muscular black cock twitched wildly as John clutched at it. "Where's the magic trick?" Munch whispered.

Fin grinned around a pleasure cramp that was conquering and controlling every impulse in his body. He shook his head.

"Ain't no time for that," he groaned, grasping John's head, blindly compelling him down with the hot power of something looming large along every nerve in his body. "Just suck me...I need that more..."

At the word, Munch pounced, his lips capturing Fin's cock as fiercely as his own mouth was jacked into. Fin's cock was already hammer-hard. Nearly the moment Fin struck depth in Munch's throat, John's mouth became a sluiceway for the black man's cum. He swallowed some, bathed his face in some, then moved up to nuzzle some into Fin's grinning face. John pecked at his mouth. Reached for his own glasses.

Munch pulled Fin into his arms and Fin went gladly.

Fin crawled into the shelter of the carefully-guarded kingdom of Saint John of Munch. Fin thought about their shared morning gym routine, the days he had to drag Munch through the reps, through the hard build machines. *This is my ass on the line, if you can't keep up, partner*, he used as his excuse, sometimes reminding him of the eight-year age difference. As he rolled into John's arms, Fin's face against the sculpted

muscle of his chest, the younger man grinned with a dash of guilt that his efforts had paid off in then-unimagined ways.

They both lay there in the arms of understanding. What had just happened. What it all meant.

"I love you as much as I ever loved anyone in all my life," Fin moaned, the rock-tough man shaking, an early warning sign of his tears.

Munch's tears streamed silently into the other man's hair. "I love you more," he whispered.

Chapter Four

*In the Matter of the State
of Maryland vs. the "Former"
Mr. "Spaghetti" Magretti*

"I am open to the existence of UFOs, ghosts, poltergeists, Yeti, even Mothman in all its incarnations sans Richard Gere. The one theory I do not subscribe to in any form is that of mere coincidence," Munch replied.

Fin's eyes blinked open. Morning was washing far across the high ceiling and over the other wall. There was no carnage of the previous night – no ransacked sofa and upended table. There was no debris from the clothing warfare of the night before either. Everything had been cleaned up. He had been gathered to one place in the floor, surrounded by every pillow in his house. A comforter had been spread over him. What had been itching his chin and woke him, was a little stuffed Marvin the Martian doll Fin kept on his at-home desk. Munch had won it for him with his much-vaunted stuffed toy snaring skill at one of those glass booth games, when they pulled a stakeout at a Barney's World-Famous Old-Fashioned Pancake House.

Fin grinned at the sight before him – the whole of it.

Fin then saw the Bat Signal shining on the ceiling.

He tracked the source to his belt loop flashlight: a little piece of paper cut into the shape of a bat and slipped across the beam. The paper bat had his name written on it.

Fin fell even further in love, were that possible. He opened the note.

Gotham needs us, Batman. I am in the kitchen covering case files. I have edible things and enough coffee to keep Toledo awake for a year. Get dressed. Do not come in here naked. If you do, we'll never

leave the apartment.

*Yours Truly,
Masai Lurch*

Toweling his shower-wet hair, one dressed Tutuola stood in the doorway to his drab little kitchen. A tiny table crammed into a slightly larger corner. Fin was a tall guy, but the even taller man before him was occupying most of the space.

Fin came up from behind him, nesting a kiss on his head, then pressing another one to the side of his face. "Good morning," he whispered.

John's dead earnest stare elevated to the level of Fin's eyes. He leaned into capture Fin's mouth in a deeper kiss. Fin used leverage to win the contest of tongues, but then truly took unfair advantage and blasted John Munch with a blinding smile.

"Now it's good morning," Munch said.

Fin chuckled softly. "Man, here I thought you didn't want us to stay around the apartment all day."

"There is a marked difference, Fin, in what I want to do and what I have to do. I *want* to tackle you to the floor and replay last night. I *have* to go out and catch a killer, and so have you."

"I know," Fin admitted, moving sluggishly to the opposing chair. He considered the plateful of round things. "This that wiggly deli, tasteless donut stuff?"

"No. They're bagels of the non-fat variety."

Fin pulled a face, returning the inspected item. "Forget this shit, I want Pop Tarts."

"Bagels protect you from the natural ravages of aging. Pop Tarts *is* one of the natural ravages of aging."

Tutuola tossed him a street imp grin, then blitzed through the kitchen to fetch a box from a cupboard. He displayed his plunder: *Non-Fat Pop Tarts*.

Munch rolled his eyes northward and gestured in surrender.

"Oy," John said.

Fin pulled the small table two-slice toward him, tucking two toaster pastries into the slots. "Yo, John. You really think you could tackle me to the floor?"

“Stop.”

“What?”

“You know what. You’re trying to distract me, you’re causing really, really pleasant images to develop in my head.”

“You responsible for your own images, Munchkin, don’t blame me,” Fin said, grinning. The Pop Tarts ejected. He plucked up each hot and smoking thing, letting them fall to the table. He licked copiously at his thumb for the burn and sucked jam from another finger, grinning all the while. Fin stroked his thumb down the length of his tongue.

Munch shut his folder, grabbing for the slightly larger folder than in turn was consumed by another, larger folder. He was certain that, somewhere, there existed a larger folder for *it*.

John grabbed up his overcoat. “We are going to the precinct so we can work.”

Fin smiled, roguish, plucking the folder from his hand down to the table again. “We workin’ now. And you think I can’t smoke you up down there?”

“I’m sure you can *smoke me up* down there, but the point is I won’t be able to return fire,” Munch said.

Tutuola laughed. “Hey, we always got the crib. I used to play lookout for Olivia. Liv would play lookout for you and me. Now that big Munch mind is thinking, whoa, we *could* get busy in the crib. And he knows we might as well hang out here.”

“I’ll bribe Olivia with Krispy Kremes. Large ones.”

“Olivia’s on my side in this. She wants us together, too. I’d win out. And you know it.”

“I’m surrounded.”

Fin nodded. “And you might as well surrender.” Odafin’s point having been made, he flipped open the folder, scanning down the material at hand. Lists of names: names cross-indexed with other names. At the top, County Information Offices, Baltimore. Cross-checks, is what they were. Strictly speaking, unconstitutional, but damned handy for cops when the chips were down.

“You ever see *Gone with the Wind*?” Fin asked him, out of the blue. “You know, Scarlett O’Hara, Rhett Butler, Butterfly McQueen...”

Munch looked up, waiting to see if that could even possibly be a serious question. It was.

“Once,” he said. “The memory was surgically removed from my brain.”

Fin grinned, nodded. “Well, speaking of surgical removal, your Spaghetti Man used to have a supper club called Tara.”

“It’s also the Irish – “

“Yeah, yeah, I know. But then Mr. Spaghetti, after being cleared of the murder charges, moved to Trinidad, Colorado.”

“Trinidad, Colorado,” spoke the walking encyclopedia before Tutuola. Munch tossed down the paperwork he’d been scanning. “Sex change capital of the United States.”

Tutuola twisted the folder around for Munch to see. “Could be we just found where you crossed paths with Butterfly.”

A cell phone rang, both men reaching for their own. “It’s mine,” John said, opening the connection. “Munch.” The more he listened, the higher his eyebrows arched. “Okay, boss. Fin, your fax machine on?” Fin nodded and John said to the cell phone, “Send it over, Donnie.”

“What is it?” Fin asked, moving to the kitchen counter and the multi-function faxcopierscannercanopenerphone thing he’d gotten from the squad room his first Christmas on the unit.

“The captain is relaying a fax over we need to see. It came in marked to our attention, to the squad room.”

“Got it.”

“What is it?”

“From the size and shape, a VHS cover? The Biggest Game...that’s the title. Looks gray market porn.”

Munch snapped up the page, squinting at it, as if trying to read something in it that linked somewhere to his mind.

“Your contact Amal. He said his source sold trampling films. With the law of diminishing sexual returns, the further stimuli must be deeper, stronger, for the sexual compulsive to get high. What would be the next step up from animal trampling?”

“Snuff films,” Fin said, his eyes going wide.

“Exactly.” He pointed to the faxed page. “And what do you think the odds are that people are the Biggest Game?”

"Including one named Misha," Fin said for them both.

Flannery had flown in from the Telluride trip, in time for Michael's funeral. Benson and Stabler were elected to grill Flannery, given the situation with Munch. Then they were to follow him discretely to the cemetery, to see if any unknown faces put in an appearance at the funeral. The usual perp funeral watch.

Butterfly Medina was still in Oswego.

Munch partook of the juice of Our Lady of Columbian Dry Roast, as if imbibing patience from its dark supply. He exhaled long and slowly, and then turned to drop onto his desk pile the morning's influx of paperwork.

"We got a hit with Michael Flannery's mitochondria DNA," Fin said, walking into the square of desks to thrust the read-out into his partner's hands. "But it's not the kind we thought we'd get. It red-flagged the identical twin of a missing child, a suspected abduction victim. He's been missing since 1992."

Munch was truly stunned. He glared over the printed matter before him. "Are they sure?"

"Ran it twice. Looks like Michael Flannery wasn't Stephen's son at all. I acted on a hunch and ran a search for juvenile male abductions in Baltimore. I got fourteen hits, all about the same age, and all about the same profile."

"Someone abducted them. And now someone is killing them."

"Sounds like the target of Project Pedarrest," Olivia said, from the coffee pot. "It tried to breakdown a group of pedophiles. Very powerful people. Doctors, lawyers, judges, politicians, ministers. They were abducting adolescent males for the sort of things you can imagine. When that became too dangerous, they would adopt teenagers through international agencies...male and female pedophiles working together. They lied, paid extra, and successfully adopted dozens of children. We could never track down all of them. Some of them showed up in the system, years later. Others, we hope, escaped."

"Or became the stars of snuff films," Fin said, shaking his head, covering his face with the full measure of his hands. "God, sometimes this job..."

Munch rubbed some small comfort into the back of Fin's arm, and then, feeling Olivia's eyes on his effort, moved his hand away.

"Still nothing on Flannery?" Munch asked Benson.

"I can't even turn up a library card for him. This guy is clean as a pork chop. And don't say it... Not everything is the CIA."

"You naive child," Munch said. "Beyond which fact, you have a better suggestion for someone without a past who turns up with money enough to run a successful drinking establishment in Baltimore...no mean feat, may I point out...and has no credit history, no Social Security number, no bar tab even? The new Federal no domestic friendlies policy seems to have looked the other way with this guy."

Benson nodded. "Okay, he's CIA."

"Or one of the other alphabet soup agencies. It would also explain his hand in this many cookie jars. The CIA overlooks a lot when it comes to friends in high places."

"All of which helps us track down the killer how?" spoke Donald Cragen, from the edge of the quad squad. The Captain displayed the dispatch in his hand. "Which is becoming an even greater mandate, since we just had a call. We've got another angel and this one has a name. Amal."

CSU was working the crime scene, and this time it wasn't Tribeca. Someone had somehow scaled security and the natural protective impulses of locals, to invade and desecrate the one canyon in the whole of Manhattan. The unnatural canyon that was made all at once, three years earlier.

"Now this guy is really starting to piss me off," Fin said, as they first walked up to the body.

"Typical escalation pattern of a criminal sociopath," said George Huang from behind. "Becomes even more anti-social. Ethical violation, desecration. And this one was meant for us. For SVU. A kind of warning, if you will." Nearly consumed by a winter coat, George still hugged his arms for warmth. "My heavens, it's horrifically cold out here. I'm going back into the squad."

"Welcome to our world, Agent Huang." Munch sent him a well-aimed smirk, as he walked away. "It's cold, it's raining, and it smells bad."

Fin tapped his partner on the back of the head. "We better get the eyeballing over with, so CSU can finish." He leaned down and peeled back the dignity cover. "God, Amal. If you'd only called the damned civil service numbers. He's got a kid, John."

"I know... He was just a kid himself."

"Aggressively sodomized," the CSU guy Henry said flatly, just a recitation of facts. "Emphasis on aggressively. Lower body fluids, too. The guys who did this are real, Class A nutjobs. At least with fluids, maybe we can raise some solid DNA. Has to be at least two guys."

"Wouldn't take much..." Fin said. He took a moment behind his hand, gathered himself up. "He was just a flyweight."

Henry nodded, jotting something down on one of the grid-marked green and white papers the CSU seemed to never exhaust the supply of. "But it would take one to sit on him while the others sodomized. You don't get those kinds of throat striations from a single penis."

"Then it wasn't done here," Fin said.

Munch was stooping down fully, surveying the crude cross' framework, the ligatures, the palm intrusions. The sick splay of netting that turned the framework into angel wings. "Who wants to bet it'll turn out to be the same base grade wood sold at ten thousand dealers in the Tri-state area. And the same brand of netting available at a hundred thousand yardage stores. Somebody second-guessed our every step. Who is this guy?"

Tutuola examined the scuffmarks on the heel of a shoe. "Somebody with tech behind him. Database mapping tools. Big time Benjamins."

"I don't know. It's like he has backup. Somebody is protecting this monster. And good kids go down for the count. At least we know now who faxed us the video box image now."

"The other informants weren't lyin' about the hazards of talking."

"Or being talked to." Munch stepped back to consider the post on which the death angel had been hung. "When William Wallace was killed back in old Britain, the English put his head on display. And having been forced to sit through Braveheart, who could blame them? It was a warning to Wallace's followers and the armies of Robert the Bruce."

"Yeah, John, I saw the movie. But who are these guys trying to warn?" Fin asked.

"Maybe it started out as a way to cover the tracks to evade Pedarrest, like Olivia said."

Then the trampling guys wanted to hit the big time and do snuff films. So somewhere A inserts with B and they gave these lambs over to the snuff film monsters to sacrifice. No questions asked. Two Mishas with one stone, lets say. Then they add Amal in for the mop-up. So who is targeting me? Is it a coincidence of my being with Baltimore Homicide because that connects to so many disparate places and people? Is it because I know something I don't know that I know? Or that I think I don't know that I know?"

"I'm gettin dizzy."

Munch finished his visual survey of the earthly remains of Amal Reynolds, now with his eyes wide open, staring like a lifeless doll at an unseen world.

"Henry, you blow and glow him?" Fin called out to the CSU tech. He got a hurried nod in reply.

Fin crouched down, to press his fingers over the dead man's eyelids and gently slipped them down.

"An ja je pei kaloma," Tutuola said.

Munch inquired with a glance.

"It means he will rise higher than the one who brought him down."

John nodded. "He won't have to reach far."

Suddenly, it was 8 o'clock again. PM. Quittin' time, in that funny, archaic way that normal people meant it. Not that 8PM was ever really quitting time for the men and women of the elite detective squads, which was a butt-kissing way of telling them their lives were no longer their own.

They had been beeped before they ever left the Manhattan crime scene. Sheridan Square: *see the lady*.

"Wonderful," Munch said. "Someone living in the land of 1-Adam-12."

"Somebody conspiring against our private time," Fin said drolly, from the driver's side of the car. "They better have a damn good reason. Me and you got big plans for tonight."

"We do?"

"Heck, yeah."

“Were you going to share them with me?”

“Eventually,” Fin said, his eyes lighting up without need for external illumination. “For the meantime, I think I’ll just let you wonder.”

“Will I like these plans?”

Fin grinned to himself, nodding. He even let a couple of dimples slip through. “You liked last night, right? That doesn’t hold a candle to what we’re doin’ later.”

Munch smiled, wishing he didn’t feel so incredibly good at this particular point in time. He wondered if there would be sufficient light standards between the car and the Sheridan Square to safeguard his decorum.

“You really want me to have an erection in broad daylight, don’t you?”

Fin chuckled, his eyes having misted over a little, from the effect of his words on his partner. “Naw, as long as you remember, I can smoke you up wherever I want to.”

“And you don’t think I can smoke you up whenever I want to?”

Tutuola shook his head, laughed to himself. “Baby, fact of the matter is, around you I never cool down. I been dealing with that for a year now. You just got started. And anyway, you’re the one who wore all black today, lookin’ all fine and tall.”

Munch could only laugh to himself with more than a little wonder at the fact. “How in the hell did this happen, Fin?”

“How’s it ever happen? I’m just thankful every day that it did.”

How many partners had there been? Too many to number. Friendly acquaintances, rarely even friends. And how many loves? Enough to have done significant damage to the metaphorical portions of John Munch’s heart. And most of them had cheated on him with his partners. The only partner Munch had ever let in...that he ever trusted...was the other man across the car from him now.

And funny how they all seemed insignificant in comparison to him now.

He could only smile. A little. He was, after all, John Munch.

“Me, too, Fin. Me, too.”

Skunkslut, definable from all the other snow-feathered sidewalk features by the two-

tone color of her hair, was waiting for them on the corner of Apathy and Impersonal Suffering. She seemed to be listing toward the right.

She flagged them down; Fin slowed the car. Munch leaned back and unlocked the rear passenger door.

She hopped inside. "Warm," she said, coughing out clouds. She banged together her mittened hands. "I thought you'd never fucking get here."

"We didn't know exactly where we were going," Munch said. "You didn't give a lot of details."

"Well, look who the furry dragged in," Fin said, guiding the car back into a tight rotary around the square. "Laurie, you look like you seen a whole herd of ghosts at least."

"Stuff the sardonic turn of phrase," Laurie barked out. "Billy is missing. And I lied about him before."

Fin shot a look of mock disbelief to Munch, who responded in operatic kind. Both men continued the can-you-top-this game of faux-surprise, until it broke off into mutual chuckles.

"Okay, okay, so I'm transparent!" she yelped. "He's my neighbor. Okay, friend. And occasionally more. We only fucked every once in awhile, and not for a long time. Like a year." Laurie tossed to the front seat a jewel case holding a CD. "This is a picture. Just the one. I got it in the mail. I should have given you this last time, because then maybe you would have caught the ratbastards. And Billy wouldn't be gone. They sent it to me as a warning not to talk to you. It's the last thing that happened to Misha."

Fin took the CD in hand. "Did you fax us a video cover this morning?"

"No," Laurie said, rubbing her icy red nose to warm red. "Should I of?"

"Naw. You sure this is it? This is all of it? Nothin' else?" Fin said. "We don't want to be findin' out you're holding out on us again. Because we know where to find you. My partner gets badass nasty when he's mad, and he's not real fond of you to begin with."

"You think I'm in danger?"

You got friends in town? Somewhere you can go? Family?"

Laurie shrugged. "I've got a sister in Rockaway who doesn't hate me."

"Then go see your sister. Get out of Dodge. Just leave now if you can. We can drop you at the station. Don't tell anyone where you're going."

She nodded. "I've got enough travelers cheques to cover my ass awhile."

"We'll need a phone number."

She nodded, grabbing up a wad of cash register receipt to scribble it down. She tossed it across. "You can try it, it's real."

"Oh, I will," Fin said, yanking out his phone. He stumbled through the numbers; the phone rang twice. "What's your sister's name?"

"Evelyn Gentry," she said.

"Evelyn please," Fin said to the voice at the end of the phone, then back to Laurie, "Thought your name was Walters."

"Duh. She got married."

Fin smirked back at her. The he said to the voice at the other end, "My name is Detective Tutuola. I'm with NYPD Special Victims. I'm sitting here with your sister... No, no, she's fine. We just need you to verify her name for us if you can. Whichever one has two-toned hair, Ma'am."

After a second, Fin's brow scrunched up. "Laura June Walters. That you?"

"Gosh. I wonder."

Fin sneered at her again, then said to the voice at the end of his phone. "Laurie will explain all this to you later today, ma'am. Good evening to you, too."

"Now if you're done with the bright lights and the rubber hoses, I guess I should give this to you." Laurie took out a photo from her pocket, handing it over to Munch. "Here's a picture of Billy. I guess you'll need that. In case you find him..." Her voice shriveled into that of a little girl, hopeless, some child who had never really had a strong sense of self and who now hung on by sheer force of will. Her tears dissolved into her open hands.

Munch could only reach back, pat a corner of her jacket, offer her a handkerchief.

"Thanks," she muttered, pinching the hanky around her nose. "You got kids?"

Munch shook his head. "No."

"I have a son," Fin said.

Her face rumbled at the edges. She looked like a very old person with a very young heart. "I wished I 'd had a dad like you guys. Instead of the fuckhead I got."

There had been no words left for them to say at that point.

Munch walked her up to the station. He saw her safely onto the train to the beach. And he marched through city ice to the waiting car. The sight of that good and decent soul named Odafin scowling merrily back at him from behind the wheel, switched on the floodlights in his soul.

What was it he had told Fin, when Tutuola was still new on the Unit? *It's the living victims that rip out your heart.*

Munch crawled into the warm. He displayed the CD in his hand. "You know we have to take this in to look at it," John said. "Chain of evidence established, paper trail delivered, all that Constitutional crap."

"I know. I already logged us into the green machine." Fin shoved the car into drive. "We're on our way to the squad room."

It was one thing to see people dead, and another thing entirely to watch them die. Munch had seen someone die, back in Baltimore, back when his old ex-partner said they had had to "take out the trash". He had been little more than a kid then, when that happened. He had vomited for days afterwards.

He had seen a snuff film before, back in Baltimore, in Homicide, too. Just the one, but it had been enough to prevent more than fitful sleep for six months and caused him to wake up screaming a couple of times in the first few weeks. He wasn't about to do that to Fin, so while he dispatched his partner on some makework assignment, Munch slipped up to the lounge where the multimedia PC was kept.

It was just one image – one still – but it was enough.

"What the hell are you doin'?" a voice blasted at him from behind.

Munch turned the swivel chair around. "Looking at a picture of a young naked man being crucified. Granted, I'm a Jew, but I think the Easter story had it differently."

"I'm from the Hood, John. I'm not bound to be shocked by what's on there."

"Help yourself," Munch said, respecting the professional request.

"Man," Fin said, wincing, looking away. "What's that symbol on the backdrop?"

Munch clicked on the icon to increase the area to full screen.

"A rampant lion?" Munch suggested.

"More like a dragon? See the wings? Or a bird?" Tutuola said, shaking his head.

"Actually, it's a Phoenix," Benson said, from behind them.

Both men looked around to Olivia, but their eyes moved ultimately to each other.

"Could be a coincidence?" Fin said.

Munch made a face. "I am open to the existence of UFOs, ghosts, poltergeists, Yeti, even Mothman in all its many incarnations sans Richard Gere. The one theory I do not subscribe to in any form is that of mere coincidence," Munch replied.

Benson presented to them a print-out. "Yeah, well, here's another one. You guys aren't going to like this either. You entered Sweet Little Laurie's contact number into the database? Well I used it to track down some information. It seems Laurie Walters is her married name, too, the ex-husband being a man named Tim who seems to have vanished before her less-than-legendary junior college years. But guess what Laurie's maiden name is."

"Just tell us it ain't Munch or Tutuola," Fin said.

Benson pointed at her hand. "Try MacDuncan," she said.

Had there been a wall beside them, Munch might well have put his fist through it. "We were played!" he yelled, more at himself than at his partner. "Madam Skunkslut played us like a frickin' jukebox."

"Man," Fin said, shaking his head. "I can't believe this. I'm worried about my poor friend Billy, she said. Her poor friend Billy. I wish'd I'd had a daddy like you guys. Shit. I wonder if she Photoshopped the phoenix into the background or if she put it there in the first place."

Benson couldn't help the smile that escaped her lips. "The two most hard-nosed cynics in the entire New York LoD and you guys got *played*?"

"Smirking can backfire on you, Olivia," Fin said. "It gives me and Munch future smirking rights which might be even more humiliating."

"Sorry. I know this is probably unfair and unkind, but I just gotta tell Elliot. It'll make his year."

Munch glowered at the fair Olivia and made sure his look was seen, though all she did

was smirk somewhat apologetically back at him. Then John deposited himself back at the computer, boosting up the background so he could look for obvious signs of digital manipulation, when he saw something else. "Well, what do we have here?"

"What?" Fin asked, happy for a chance to escape Benson's smirk.

"There." John pointed to an odd shadow on the backdrop. "Looks like a bright light on the backdrop, behind his body. There's a shadow on it. Like something a distance from the camera."

"Oh, yeah. Like triangles."

"The bottom row looks like triangles," Olivia said. "The top one looks like...an inverted triangle. Or pyramid. Like a stalactite...or stalagmite, whichever one hangs down."

"No," Munch said, sliding his glasses up to his eyes. He used them to look with import up at Fin. "It's an upside down Christmas tree."

"Damn," Fin said, as his phone rang. "Just a minute." He stepped away to talk to the caller.

Benson shrugged. "Am I missing something?"

"Besides human compassion?" John asked, smirking again. "It's Michael Flannery's house. We went there to inform his boyfriend. Apparently there's more here than meets the eye, if you'll pardon the expression."

"And if you'll pardon me," Olivia said, "I'll go issue a points on her."

"Good idea. Be sure to tell Elliot on your way over."

She flipped him off behind her head.

Fin rejoined Munch. "That was an old *El Barrio* contact of mine. He's got information for us, on the crushing shit and snuff stuff. I'm gonna go meet him."

"We left Laurie Partridge out in the cold this long," Munch said, reaching for his overcoat. "I guess a couple of more hours won't hurt."

"You can't go on this one, John," Fin said, checking his watch. "It's Old Kelly Street. Way past ol' Spanish Harlem. You walk in there with your peachy mug, you'll leave in a body bag. It's warring tribes down there, that's all they know. The Corleones and the Raviolis or some shit. They livin' the Godfather."

"I'm a cop, Fin. I've been hip deep in Harlem before."

"You ain't been this deep. Not where I'm goin'. I wouldn't even take a black unie with me coz that uniform tends to bleach the skin. I'm established, they know me, they not givin' me any shit. I go down there with some white man, they gonna think I've gone all Tom on 'em. You can't go with me, John. You gotta stay here."

Munch stepped back a little, unsure what to say. Uncertain what it was exactly that had been hurt...that had hurt him. He reached for the yellow button on the keyboard, printing out the image. He *wasn't* sure why. It just gave him something to do. "You go to Harlem. I'll check out the theatre of blood again."

"I won't be but naptime. This can wait an hour. What's the matter? D'I say somethin'?"

"You said a lot of things. And if you can fly solo in Harlem, I can cover this rookie-level crap."

"They've killed people, Munch. They been making circles around you. You heard what the captain said. An hour ain't no big deal. You're just sayin' this because I guess I hurt your feelings sayin' you can't go down there - "

"Detective Tutuola, I am the senior shield," Munch snapped back at him, hoping to heel him with rank, so he could move around him.

His way was still blocked. "You're one helluva lot more than that."

John Munch surveyed their little corner of the squadroom. Hardly anyone here but the usual skeleton staff. And no one was paying attention to them.

Still and all, he moved the volume down on his voice.

"Go to Connecticut, look around, what do you see?"

"What? Why am I in - "

"Just answer the question, Tutuola."

"All right," Fin said, face souring at the sound of his last name on John's lips. "Depends on what part. I'm in the far parts, I'm lookin' at a whole lotta white people."

"Exactly. And the ultimate irony is I don't see that at all. I see Italian people, the less than occasional Romanian Jew, Irish people, a whole lot of English people, the occasional blended Latino, and a lot of other varieties. Some of their ancestors were conquerors, others are descended from chattel, some from peasants bought and sold. But not *one people*. I see alienated individuals defying pattern. But we're **not one people**. The mirror was fractured a long time ago."

Tutuola took it in, torn between the words and his watch; what it marked time for.

"Guess I see your point, but that white skin buys a whole lot of glue for the mirror..."

"Without a doubt." Munch said, stealing another silence or two. "But you asked what was wrong and I'm telling you."

"Yeah, you right, I'm sorry. Go on."

"Except for our friends, scraps of family, we're surrounded by a lot of empty space. We're alone. That wall that keeps me from being alone is this place. Primarily you. And when you said what you said, it felt like you just stuck the whole damned 'Hood between us."

"*John...*" Fin lowered his voice to a shadow resting between them. He looked around to make certain they weren't seen, and then covertly stroked a hand down the length of his partner's shirt buttons. "You forgetting what we were just talkin' about? In the car? What we gonna do, when we get home? That bad nasty stuff we shared with each other last night? That's all that matters. That's all, John. You don't understand this because you're not black. That's all this means."

"I love you," Munch said, finally looking at him again, clearly, truly. "Isn't that enough?"

"In this situation, no, it's not. You're white, John. It don't matter to me a bit. It doesn't make a difference with you and me. But we can't pretend there *is no* difference. It makes a difference with you and them. C'mon, you gonna be walking in with me on your arm to some VFW NRA Ford trucker joint in Middle-o-Nowhere, Montana?"

"I wouldn't go there voluntarily in the first place," Munch said, quickly. "And if I had to go for work reasons, I wouldn't be afraid to be seen with you. I'd do what I had to do to defend you. I wouldn't be worried about what happened to my street rep because I was hanging out with *some black man*."

Fin received the words, absorbing them. Finally, he shook his head, looking at his watch for the tenth time. "I've got to meet this cat. This isn't over. One way or another, we gonna make you understand this later."

"As my partner would say, whatever. "

"We gonna *make you* understand, John," Fin whispered again, his gaze burning into him until Munch was forced to return his attention. There had been no room for error in Fin's words, or in his hot and loving eyes. "You hear me?"

John tried to look away, but there was nowhere else to look... nowhere else that mattered as much.

He nodded.

“Then stop doubting me. And stay here until I get back from where I’m goin’. I’ll have a backup handy at Resolve Street, so long as you agree to stay put until I come back.”

Finally, Munch nodded reluctant agreement.

Fin left as quickly as he could, knowing that the sooner he was finished, the more quickly he’d return.

Munch begrudged his time at the desk, every *tortoise strolling in slowmo* hellish second of it. He sharpened every pencil in the office, and a couple of the pens. He resorted to Fin’s file drawer. He tried not to think of where he was going, what he was doing. And he definitely didn’t look at the clock.

All right, finally he did look, but only twelve minutes had passed. Twelve goddamned minutes.

Elliot ambled in, flipping through a file from the archives. “John, you got a call on the house phone.”

“Fin?” he asked too quickly – and stupidly, Munch chided himself, since his partner would have buzzed the smart ring on his cell.

“Naw. Sorry, some guy named Steve? Doesn’t sound official, sounds personal,” Elliot asked, trying to remember. “He’s on line four.”

“Wonderful. Probably one of my ex-wives’ attorneys.” Munch said, reaching for the line. He punched it with a sharpened pen. “Special Victims. How may I serve and protect you?”

“Always with the smartass rejoinder.” Munch decided *oozing* was the best adverb for the sound flowing into his ear. *The voice oozed over the line*: the stranger’s tone as cold and slimy as the blob that nearly chowed down on Steve McQueen. Since McQueen had been dead one helluva long time, he was pretty sure it wasn’t that *that* Steve to whom he was speaking.

“Who is this?” he asked.

“Been a lotta years. You quit Homicide, huh?”

"I'm asking once more, then I'm freeing the line for other calls. Who are you?"

"You the one trying to reach me and now you ask me who I am."

"Flannery?" he asked, giving Elliot the hand sign for a trace.

"Yes. We need a meeting. I can explain a lot of things. You know the pie shop on Stewart?"

"The one by the deli?"

"Yeah, the one with the bad corned beef. Used to be an automat back in the day. I'll be there in an hour. In the backroom. And by yourself please. If you're not, I won't show up. Just ask your two paisani at the airport."

The line clicked back to dial tone.

"That was Flannery?" Elliot said, big waiting eyes. He gave one of the teletechs in the upstairs a kill sign for the trace, as there hadn't been enough time.

"Yeah. I'm going to go meet him. Tell Fin where I'm at, when he comes back."

"Shouldn't you take backup?"

Munch shrugged. "The guy has seen too many cop shows. He says come and come alone. So that's how I'm going. I'll be at the old Stewart Automat, by the deli. It's a pie dive now. Apparently, Our Man Flannery has a sweet tooth."

"Keep your head up," Elliot said.

"I will."

"If you're not back in an hour –?" Elliot asked it like a question.

"Send in the clowns," Munch replied as he walked out of the squad room.

The pie shop was off Stewart, but pointed toward Nightchurch. Munch subbed it to

Christopher, then walked up two blocks. He scoped the layout, tried to remember where the front was, where the blind spots were, where someone might hide away and hook him from behind.

Munch pushed open the door a little. The yellow-haired Swiss lady he vaguely remembered smiled from within. Twelve customers, four wait staff, one cashier. And a straight shot through the traffic breezeway clearly showed Steve Flannery sitting in an alcove, scaling a Dutch Apple Crème slice.

A little pie with your blood justice, Munch thought to himself.

"Munchkin," Flannery said, he pointed at the opposite chair. "Take a load off. Try the pie here, it's exceptional."

"I'm not a pie kinda guy," he said. "I heartily encourage you to explain why I'm here, what's happening and why I shouldn't just slam the cuffs on you and drag you into booking on the next ferry to the tombs?"

Flannery laughed, a hard sound, almost a cough, except that it lifted at the end. "Because I didn't do what you're investigating. And you got a notion I'm a spook, right? So I am. I'm deep cover in this case. You and the little rotary club from hell are ruining a ten year investigation."

"What in hell are you talking about?"

"Operation Pedarrest. You heard about it. I'm deep tissue in it. I've made a lot of busts, from the inside, but those take time to document, so it doesn't blow my cover."

Munch appeared unpersuaded. "And how do I know you're not just a child-molesting bastard with a novel defense?"

"You coulda asked Michael. He was an operative, too. Looked a few years younger than he was. He infiltrated with me. Took a lot of pie dollars to get his DNA in the system. And he paid the ultimate price, I might add."

"All gave some, some gave all," Munch said dryly.

"You're such a cynic. Honest, try the pie. It's amazing. Bella, a slice of the pecan surprise for my old friend Munchkin."

"I don't want pie, I want facts. And I want you to stop calling me your friend, to say nothing of Munchkin. Now tell me what you know about the murders of the three men so I can either arrest you or go find the ones I should."

"I know I didn't kill 'em, but I know who probably did."

“Care to share that information?”

Flannery once more forked through his pie. “The rotary, like I said. That little ship of fools. They’re trying to frame Somber.”

“I noticed. How come?”

“It started out so casual, the way it always does. The animal rights whackos trying to bring him down, because he makes deep green with the stepping on hamster shit. Everybody’s got a cause.”

“Yeah, it’s hard to see how anyone could object to that,” Munch said stiffly.

“Listen, it happens. All the time, all over the world. Little fuzzy things...cute little bunny rabbits... you ever see one of those cosmetic company scare pamphlets? Things die. A guy’s gotta make a living.”

“There are these things called jobs. Laurie even makes good cash without hurting a fly.”

“Laurie! What a piece of work she is. Laurie thinks I’m involved with Somber’s enterprise. She sees all the connections and assumes. Pederasty, child porn, I’m the devil incarnate to her Skunkhighness. So she thinks I killed her brother. One of my theories is she killed Michael to get back at me. She staged it to look like what she thought was my handiwork. And the same with Amal to shut his big mouth.

Munch’s eyes reflected nothing at all. “Well, you’re the master of framing, after all.”

“That was a long story. Linked back to Operation Pedarrest.”

“Care to hear my theory?”

“I got nothin’ but time.”

“I think you’re lying. I think Operation Pedarrest was nothing more than an international Intelligence conjob to cover your ass. I think you’re one sick motherfucker, and this whole bullshit story is just part of the act.”

“I figured you’d think that, so I brought some proof I know what I’m talking about.” He pulled out his billfold, presenting a folded sheet. He pushed it across. “Take a look at that. It’s a health department form signed by the legal owner of the Stretcher.”

“Heath Clifton. That first name is familiar,” Munch allowed.

“What you don’t know is his nickname,” he said. “It’s Mister Clean. I think you know him as Ruck.”

Munch leaned back in his chair, amazed. "Ruck? The guy who owns the bookstore?"

"Yeah. And Laurie is pointing away from him, and toward old Billy, so you know where my money's at for the real killer?"

Munch nodded, seeing his theory. "I'll look into it."

"You're welcome," Flannery said, standing to button his suit coat for the road ahead

"Happy to help. You know I can bring IAB down on your ass faster than nasty on Martha Stewart. So don't dog my steps, we're doin' God's work. Keep your nose in joint. There's always that little matter of the unfortunate perp who didn't go the way you Homociders wanted it to. Granted, he more than had it coming, but I always have that on you. To say nothing of your gray market pill habit back in old Baltie. You'll need to remember that. I do."

Munch turned to watch his steps away. "And you need to remember I'm gonna keep my eye on you. One speck of proof you're running kids, and I'll be the first one to transport your ass to the island and crown you Bitch for a Day. Regardless of the personal consequences."

"You wouldn't be a great cop if you didn't. And you're a great cop." He pointed toward the dessert case as he was leaving. "Really, I'm serious, try the pie. It's amazing."

Before Munch could move, the smiling lady from the shop conveyed to his table a slice of pecan surprise. "Compliments of Mister Flannery," she said.

"No, I really – " he started to refuse, but when he looked down he saw the color Polaroid photograph balanced on top of the pie.

The photo bore the day's date of about twenty minutes prior. The image was of a bright red Viper, jammed into a space at what was obviously the corner of Christopher and Stewart.

"Son of a – " Munch said, and then stormed the door, to turn right at the corner and onward to Christopher Street.

First he checked her address. A bleary-eyed young man in J.R. Bob Dobbs boxers answered the door. He explained that Laurie wasn't there. And he didn't know where she was, but she hadn't been there in awhile. He even offered to let Munch search the apartment, but whenever they asked, that was a sign you could decline.

Munch returned to the Viper. He laid down on the horn, long and loud. Nothing. No one even opened a window to scream at him. *Where in hell is this, Seattle?*

He slammed the horn again, keeping it down another minute until finally somebody opened a door.

It was a side building that had been converted to apartments. Munch knew from drawings he had seen, during forensic due diligence that now seemed a lifetime ago, that these apartments had once been the offices and projection booth of a theatre. The theatre that had become Michael Flannery's home.

"You!" Munch yelled at the woman framed in the doorway.

Laurie didn't even try to run.

"Okay," she said. "Okay, I can explain everything!"

"Nobody makes me look like an idiot," Munch said. "I do too good a job of that by myself."

"I had to shake you fucking storm troopers somehow!" Laurie said, worried glances working the street behind Munch. "Look, come in. We can't talk out here. Somebody will see I'm here."

"Good luck going incognito in the bright red Viper."

"I'm serious." She grabbed his arm, dragging Munch into the door to the entry. She shut them both in, tripping a line of deadbolts. "You were going to do Flannery's work for him. He was feeding you bullshit."

"Bullshit like the fake still of the ascension of Michael Flannery? Combined with your helpful seeding of information to frame our friend, and sometimes yours, Billy Somber?"

"That image wasn't fake, snotrag, it was real."

"Until Digital Forensics works the image, I only have your word for that and, frankly, your word doesn't mean bupkus to me right now."

"Maybe my word will help," a voice said from atop the flight of stairs, to the second level loft.

Munch stared upwards, to the person of Billy Somber, standing at the top.

"Come on, Detective," Billy said, motioning them upward, "we owe you an explanation."

Chapter Five

Hard Love

"Love is the Law," Fin whispered.

"I feel like I'm in a bad Nancy Drew mystery," Munch said, looking around the room of faces: Kelvin, Laurie, Billy Somber, Butterfly. "Except this time the suspects are working over the detective. What happened to Billy hating all of you and all of you hating Billy, except for Kelvin, who supposedly didn't know *any* of you?"

"We double-teamed you," Laurie explained. "We had to. You were getting in the way of our investigation."

"*We were* getting in the way of *your* investigation? Let me clue you in, Nancy, in this little place we like to call Reality, your ass would have been grass out on Deception Island. Detective work is dangerous enough to the professionals. Now tell me what the hell is going on."

"Flannery killed my brother," Laurie said. "And he murdered Michael. They were working with the Feds to bring Flannery down. Flannery's people molested them both. They were both victims of the pedophile ring. So was Billy. We had to hide him while you were looking the other way. If Flannery knew how close we were getting, we were afraid he'd kill us all."

Munch regarded the bad replaster job on the ceiling. "Funny about that, because he just pointed the finger at you."

"He would, wouldn't he?"

"Wouldn't you? And to further build the case against Laurie the Liar of Sheridan Square, Steve Flannery is what we major leaguers call a blank. He's not traceable, which works with his version of events, and not yours. He says Michael was an op also. He says you killed Michael to get back at him."

“Michael hated him!” Kelvin snapped, his eyes filled with genuine tears. “He had used and degraded him for years. How dare you say we killed him!”

“I’ll admit you’re the wild card in the theory,” Munch replied. “How does the crushing video garbage work into this?”

Laurie’s face shriveled up in distaste. “I hated it. I protested it. But I was the best front for it, with my animal rights thing. It was the only way we could make money. Lots of it. The real money has dried up in legal porn sites. We had to keep our operation against the pedo ring going. You big guys weren’t doing fucking shit, okay? We were making inroads.”

“At best, you were being used,” Munch said. “Crime at this level has so many permutations, you need a top-flight detective squad to even begin to cover the bases. You guys were out of your depth, *if* what you’re saying is true.”

“It is!” Laurie said. “I swear on my dog Dopey’s life.”

“Oh, well, game over. Laurie, get with the plot – your word is highly suspect to anyone with an IQ above freezing. If you told me ice cream was cold, I’d stick my finger in it.”

“I know, okay? But Flannery is the one who killed them, and then he turned the murders into snuff films. He tried to frame us for it.”

“And I know all about Flannery’s framing abilities,” Butterfly said, uncrossing her long legs as she sat in the velveteen chair.

Munch ducked his face behind his hands a moment, to straighten his ducks once more into relatively even rows. “All right, suppose I buy this for the moment. Laurie, you’re the sister of the first unfortunate. Kelvin, you’re the husband of the second.” He looked over at Butterfly. “What, was Amal your little brother?”

“I didn’t even know the man, Munchkin,” she replied.

“Then why Amal?”

“Because Flannery knew Amal could tie him to Ruck. Ruck has left town because he’s in so much danger. He was the one helping us get the crushing stuff produced and distributed. Flannery also used Ruck to funnel through the snuff videos to Amal. The minute Ruckey saw what it was, he brought it to us, to warn us.”

“Amal’s death also covered your asses,” Munch pointed out.

“Look,” Laurie said, her face screwing up in a sad, agonized expression. “You’ve seen me at work. I can’t even change a tire. You know I’m a lamer. You really think I could help mastermind a triple murder? And the victims were all raped and sodomized.

Kelvin's weaker than I am, and don't get me started on Billy -- "

Somber frowned. "Gee, thanks."

Munch held out a hand to stop the onslaught. "Yeah, well, I don't know how in hell Flannery could miss the fact you're all in this together. You're about as subtle as a Catskills comic. So he definitely is higher on the suspect food chain than you guys right now. Probably using you from within your so-called operation."

"We -- "

"Save it," Munch said as his phone rang. He pointed back to the wall of faces. "Nobody moves."

He opened the phone line. "Munch."

"Tutuola," said the very familiar voice on the other end.

"Thank God," Munch said, his heart untying itself so it could open up and let the blood flow once more to her fingers. "Did you find out anything?"

"I found out plenty. You've got the perp in the room. Wait till I get there before you spring it, okay? I guess I know where you are."

"It is not like that. I'm in Butterfly's *pad*. It's in the apartments that were made from parts of the theatre, on the other side. I'm texting over the address."

"We gonna deal with that later." The phone went out.

Fin's words sent a shiver through parts of Munch's body he didn't use in detective work. With every mental muscle he could muster, he forced those thoughts away.

Munch dragged a wooden chair over, unpegging and pulling his service piece. "As Laurie would say, okay, okay. We're all going to wait until my partner gets here. He has information to enlighten us all."

"Ooooh," Butterfly intoned. "The hottie?"

"Yes," Munch said. "And he's taken."

"Not gonna play with your boyfriends, John, I got friends of my own."

"I'm sure you do."

Laurie's jaw dropped to her knees. "He's your *boyfriend*? I didn't know cops could be queer together! I thought it was, like, against the official cop law of the world or

something.”

Munch shook his head yet again. “That’s only on TV shows, Laurie. Plenty of cops are queer...and gay... and bisexual and straight...and *Presbyterian* together. Didn’t you watch *Starsky and Hutch*? And don’t say ‘I didn’t know they were Presbyterian.’ Besides, I am not Montel Williams. This is a police interrogation. I ask the questions.”

“Don’t get so defensive, Detective,” chimed in Kelvin. “You wouldn’t deny it if your lover was some woman on the force.”

“I’m denying nothing,” Munch said. “I’m saying my private life is not a topic for conversation. You people do not know me.”

“As if,” Laurie said. “I’ve seen more of you than your friends have, Buttmunch.”

“Congratulations, Laurie,” Munch replied. “You are now officially the five millionth moron to call me that since I was six years old in Mrs. Pennowitz’s Kindergarten class.”

“It’s a name thing that made him a closet case,” Kelvin said as an aside to Laurie. “It always is with the bottoms.”

“I am not a – “

“Munch!” a voice called out from behind and below them.

“Sanctuary, sanctuary. Everyone remains seated,” Munch told them. He reached across to open the entry door to the small apartment. “Up here in the bell tower. And hurry.”

In a moment, the small apartment door was filled with Tutuola. He did not look happy, but then if Fin ever looked happy, it was strictly after office hours. But the glare he was giving seemed reserved for the only other detective in the room. He only broke their contest of eyes to move to Butterfly and point her toward a piece of wall.

“Stand up, hands behind you. You’re under arrest for the murders of Pasquale MacDuncan, Michael Flannery, and Amal Reynolds. I gotta give ya the Carmen Mirandas so keep your mouth shut so I don’t gotta do it twice.”

The Mirandas read, Munch felt a Laurie hand clutch at his arm.

“Butterfly couldn’t have done this!” Laurie said. “She’s nice!”

Munch shared a smirk with Fin. “She was a plant. She infiltrated your group. Which is a good thing, because at least it gives you guys a better *reasonable defense*. Anyway, apparently nice people kill all the time, Laurie. Remember that.”

“Not nice people who were in Oswego,” Butterfly piped up, pouting at the handcuffs on her wrists.

“But you weren’t in Oswego,” Fin said, dragging her to the door. “You weren’t in Trinidad, Colorado, either. Oh, your paper trail was there, but you never did the hospital stay, and no one can remember having seen you. I called and checked. You are widely known around HoTell Harlem for being a fake shemale who infiltrated the ranks. A former female impersonator, so you made the grade without many questions. And you had access through your apartment here, into the old theatre, which Kelvin didn’t know about. That’s where you killed his man, there in the rafters.”

Kelvin nodded. “Jesus. That is how it happened. That makes sense.” He sunk back into his chair, too stunned to be angry... He looked up at Billy, who was looking away.

Fin continued, “For the record, Butterfly’s real name is not Spaghetti Magretti or Butterfly Medina. It’s Tyrone Charles. Tyrone has no reflection, either, which means he’s probably in Big Daddy Flannery’s camp, for whatever reason.”

“I’ll be out in three hours,” Butterfly said, smiling at Munch. “Or maybe we’ll find some new detective and screw with his head.”

Fin looked to his partner. “I reviewed the tape from the Baltimore killing. I saw the perp tape, too, from the squad watch. He shot himself with his left hand. So apparently did the shooter on the tape, but then I got to looking at the screen. I noticed the clock on the wall was numbered backwards.”

Munch looked to the ceiling again. At last, he nodded his understanding. “They flipped the film. I’m dyslexic, so I didn’t catch it.” He looked over at Butterfly. “You weren’t framed. You really did it. And I helped get you off.”

“So to speak,” Butterfly said.

Munch kicked at an invisible chair, muttering murky things to himself.

“No hard feelings, Munchkin,” Butterfly said. “It wasn’t personal. It was all strictly business. But you got this conspiracy thing, and so it was easy to work you, so long as you weren’t clued in on my connections with Steve. For what it’s worth, I always liked you.”

“That really is what matters, isn’t it?” Munch said.

Fin towed Butterfly out the door and down the stairs. “Yo, get over here?” he yelled back at Munch.

“Right behind you,” John said. He nodded to the others remaining, all staring at each other in shock and surprise. “Stay low, below Flannery’s radar, until this blows over.

And leave the detective work to us. You'll be out of the crushing trade now, too, right?"

Laurie nodded sadly. "Sorry, Munchkin," she said.

He winced only a little at the name. "Save that for Animal Cruelty. You'll be hearing from them shortly, to say nothing of Vice. Keep your noses clean and it'll probably stay in the misdemeanor category. Leave the crime fighting to the guys with the capes, okay? And I'll see what I can do about busting Flannery. Happy New Year, Nancy Drew," he said, and followed in the wake of his partner.

Elliot and Olivia returned the favor of Christmas Eve and walked Butterfly through his bookings. Munch and Fin were admonished to *go the hell home*.

They rode along in silence, John Munch wondering if all paths into the future were this bleak, or if was only the night and the winter and the shadows growing long in his life. Hours ago, things had been so different. But then his life had been rosy as the merry month of May the day he walked into his Baltimore address to find his then-bride Gwen, well, *Inflagrante Delicto* Klaatu Barada with Munch's then-partner. Two soul-crunching betrayals with one stone. *And the crowd goes wild*.

While Munch mourned uncertain futures, Fin pounded some exacting rhythm on his steering wheel. Suddenly, he coasted right to a loading zone and hit the brakes.

"What?" Fin asked, looking only at him.

"I suppose that my security detail is no longer necessary," Munch said, staring out at a world gone wrong and gray and mad. "Just drop me at my place."

Fin looked over at him hard. Fin, in pain, angry, all those things glinting in the gold-brown depths of his eyes. And they were misting up, too. Munch looked away. *Christ, that was all he needed, tears from a walking, talking, vertical Fin*.

"Thought you was comin' home with me," Fin said.

"I thought I was. But shit happens. Shit happened. It's okay. You looked angry. Upset. I thought we were off."

"We are never off. We never gonna be off. What is it with you?"

"Call Dr. Audrey Jackson, she has the full report, which she'll only be too happy to make

known to you. She's a sistah, too, maybe you can set something up."

"Shut up!" Fin said, slamming the heel of his hand against the wheel. And he meant it. "I read all that. Your mommy was a hellbitch. Your daddy shot himself in front of you. Lookit here, I'm cryin' for ya. That help?"

"Go to hell," Munch said, reaching for the handle on Fin's car. Only to hear it lock from the inside.

"Wrong answer," Fin went on. "Man, everybody like us starts out with nothin'. End of your sob story. It's you in your nightmare, it was me in mine. But we're here, we're alive, we're not tweakin', we're not dyin', we got jobs with pensions and people who love us whole. We bring somethin' to the team and we take somethin' away. We got all the props we can handle. We weren't born in Biafra, we didn't die under concrete pillars like a lotta cops on nine-eleven. We survived. Everything after that is bonus miles."

"What in hell do you want from me?" Munch said, his own voice tightening up now. He hadn't cried so much in twenty years as he had in the last two days.

"I don't want anything from you, I want to give somethin' to you. And that's your whole problem." Fin released the door locks. He turned his eyes away to the street. "Go on now, if you want to. If you really have to suffer by yourself."

His hand was on the handle, but John Munch knew there was no way in hell he would use it of his own volition. It just pressed like ice against a gloved palm. He waited for what passed through the eye of every moment like a year.

"You want me to leave?" Munch asked, his voice caving.

"No," Fin snapped. "You open that door, it's gonna bust me up bad...like I never been busted up before. But it's your choice. I'll probably end up comin' after you and we'll have a big, ol' street scene and end up still goin' home together. We're gonna end up together, you know that. I know you do, that's why you're pullin' so damn hard. I suggest you just swallow your bigass pride and settle it here, so we can go home now, instead of like usual puttin' us both through a whole lotta hurt and doin' it later. But if you come home with me, we go there on my terms. On *my* terms."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means, we gonna make you understand. We gonna close the deal between us. You figure it out from there."

John was pretty damned sure he understood. The very thought of it sent his mercury rising. He supposed this was what the religious mystics meant by *wholeness*. He felt like he'd been waiting for this all his life.

Finally, John reached over and locked the door, from the inside. "I'm sorry," he said. "I don't know why... what... I'm not... I just want to go home. To your home..."

Fin leaned across the car. "You love me?"

Munch looked over at him. His gaze stumbled over Fin's stare. His pain at the pain he saw there triggered a flood of regret, relief. His feelings must have been damned obvious, because he got a Tutuola smile for his trouble. And Fin was getting all misty-eyed...looking adorable...

Fin was clearly thinking similar things. "You don't gotta answer that, I can see it on your face. And it's beautiful." He grinned, almost looking flirtatious. "Is it true that little beauty queen Felicia back in Baltimore asked you to marry her twice?"

"Who told you about her?" Munch said, squirming in place, and not only from awkwardness at the story.

"Well, she's a fellow SVU detective, but she swore me to secrecy as to her true identity."

"Gosh, with four of us, three being men, that'll be difficult to determine, but with my cunning prowess in detection, I'll try. Yes, what Olivia said is true. And I turned Felicia down. Twice. She was a kid... 20-something. The sound of gum snapping was deafening."

"I ain't no twentysomething beauty queen, but what if I asked you to marry me?"

Munch's eyebrows once more lifted in unison. "That would be bigamy. We're already married, Fin." He flashed his blue badge shield, the same one that Fin carried, with a one-digit difference. "And you didn't even have to ask me once."

Fin moved in and captured John's mouth, kissing him deep and long until they had to come up for air.

He reached over to detain his chin and keep his face toward him. "We still gonna make you understand, John. We still gonna close the deal. We still on my terms."

"I don't know what any of that means, but it sounds like one helluva lot of fun. Just get us to your place, before I drag you into the backseat," Munch said.

Fin put the car in drive. "I'd like to see you try."

Morning bled through the curtains, flooding Fin's front room in a blanket of gentle gray. The men shed their warm gear on the mud porch, and then continued on into a room as comfortable as an old cotton sweater. Fin drew the litany of door locks.

Then he walked over and yanked free John's belt from its buckle. "You get naked."

"Right now?"

"Yeah. I'm setting the alarm and clocking us out of the system. Get ya clothes off."

"Right here?"

"Yeah. Naked. Now."

Munch watched his partner deal with cell phones and pagers. John complied partially by unbuttoning his shirt and sliding it off. He pitched it aside to a chair. He removed his belt, as if that might qualify him for partial credit. It seemed weird as hell to be even half-naked in the broad, open daylight of Fin's front room.

Fin grabbed around from behind, an uncompromising hand sliding down his fly. He worked his hand beneath the waist, and under the elastic of John's briefs, yanking it all down.

"Off," Fin said, no room to argue. "Shoes and glasses, too."

Munch at last complied, feeling truly weird now...nude, nearly blind, and barefoot. He looked his fully dressed partner up and down. All Fin had shed on the mud porch was his leather jacket. "Plan on sharing the wealth yourself?"

"Never mind what I do." Fin grinned, moving around behind him. "We dealin' with you now."

Fin's hands scaled John's chest from behind, holding the naked body against his wool and denim one.

The effect on John was electric, damned near obscene, like being *felt up*, he fought for a word from his youth. But he liked it...he liked it a lot...and so did Fin, whose obvious enjoyment now prodded the bare cheeks of John's ass. It was vaguely threatening, in a way that punched Munch's happy buttons so hard, his pulse was climbing faster than an Iron Man competitor in the final event.

Fin tenderly tasted John's neck, tongue kissing down to the slope of John's ear, then really moving in. Munch moaned even harder, against the relentless nibbles, moving his head back so the onslaught would continue and then only making the grip of pleasure more intense.

"Do you know I love you?" the black man's desire-tight voice slipped into his ear.

"Yes," John Munch whispered, a confession from every corner of his body and mind.

"Don't you *ever* doubt my love again. My love is limitless, but my love can also be hard when it has to be. From you, it doesn't take no for an answer. You hear me?"

Fin's erection demanding more, as the tight crotch of his jeans humped John's bare ass with tender menace. All John could do was nod.

"When I came to SVU, I knew all about you. Heard you were a genius. When I came around that desk that day and saw you, I think that very moment I fell in love. I fell in fuckin' lust, too. I knew I was going to be with you, in every way, in all ways, and it was only going to get better. But all you saw when you looked at me was your new partner. You'd had dozens of them. None of them as good as you. None of them as smart as you. I was just the next. But how were you to know any better? You couldn't know that it was me."

Munch arched back as Fin's fingers claimed his nipples, pulling them till they were tight and hard between Fin's forefinger and thumb.

"Poor Felicia struck out. No more Munch wives, no more partners, it's always only gonna be you and me, but I think you know that now."

"I know," John managed to whisper, a desperate confession struggling out of a happily condemned man's gut.

Fin pulled something metal from his pocket. John felt the silvery coldness kiss at his hip. The metal was pressed against his belly, gently moving up his chest until the metal licked at a nipple.

John thought he'd fucking melt at any moment, but then when the cuff clicked down around his wrist, he knew...*knew*... that Fin's acquisition of John's soul was a done deal.

"Love is the law," Fin whispered. "You have no rights but the ones I give you, just as I'm no longer a free man in your world. You have the right, this moment, to say no and I'll take the handcuffs off you. We'll just make nasty love like the other night, but if we go into the bedroom, that's the point of no return. No goin' back. You hear me? I promise you that I'll never, *ever* hurt you. And that if you say yes, you'll never regret it a day in all your life. What's the word, John?"

John gulped for air. His tears streamed. He managed to nod. "God, yes," he said.

"Good man," Fin murmured to his hair, as if unable to hold back emotions, or the words that freed them. "My John." He used his end of the handcuffs to lead the naked man

along behind him. "Come on. Let's go to bed."

The doorway to Fin's bedroom was the place of decision, but Munch knew there had never been a choice. He would follow Fin wherever and whenever he wanted him. No other option. Never had been.

But still, as he was dragged over the threshold, it felt like every nerve in John's body surged back to life.

"John," Fin whispered, as if to sanctify that second in time.

With one free arm, Fin positioned John around and pushed him gently across the bed. With John's free hand, he pulled himself toward the headboard.

The other wrist was surrounded with metal and locked down as well. This cuff ended on the headboard. Fin grabbed the first cuffed wrist, locking it up there also.

John was completely restrained now. Unable to move, unable to change position, open and vulnerable to the whim of the hot, hard man behind him.

Munch had never felt so fucking happy in his whole fucking life.

He could hear the struggle of cloth over skin, the ripping sound of an eager zipper, the shedding of clothing that seemed like a Munclean hour of life that really was only a moment.

Fin leaned into him fully, a blanket for John's body. Fin smeared his nakedness over him like a balm for John Munch's soul.

Munch felt a cylinder of something hot and sweaty enter the cleft of his ass. Something pumped moist warmth up into him. It tingled through everything in him.

"Remember I said one night, you'd need it. I say you need it tonight," Fin purred into his ear. He was draped over him now. "I'm gonna do something no other man has ever done for you. You my baby? You my man? Trust me?"

"Always," John moaned.

"You ever gonna doubt my love again?"

"No," John whispered, a thought to which he might have normally made a smart remark, but his cynical systems had blown completely when the first handcuff locked onto his arm. He'd never admit anywhere else how good it had been to shut them down when he was with Fin. Or what it had meant to him to be with Fin here, now.

"You know how this plays, John. Gonna hurt some at first, but then it feels so damned

fucking....” Fin stopped to catch his breath, gently chewing at John’s ear.

“Just fuck me,” John said, a gasp, a sob, a cry, all at once.

“Patience,” Fin murmured, laughing a rich, soft sound that made John’s whole body shiver in its wake.

Fin didn’t stop when it started. The pain fed the pleasure, John’s whole being infused with hot, pulsing hardness that filled him completely, even gaps he hadn’t known to exist. The pleasure enticed nerve endings he’d never imagined. John had never, ever dreamed that this much pleasure could be summoned from him, given to him, all at one time. Fin just kept stretching all of his boundaries, all of them, everywhere, all at once.

“Fin,” he called out, because it was all there was to say...it was the name now for every good thing in his life.

“This is what you bring from me, baby,” Fin whispered, sliding a hand around to grab and pump the fuck out of John’s cock. “And I’ll always give it back to you again.”

John’s hiss made his lover peel his fingers from his dick. “I need that for later. I’m going to give it to you. And if you touch it one fucking time, it’s gonna go off. Just...fuck me.”

Fin moaned, like that was all he wanted to hear.

It had been a long time since Fin had ass-fucked someone he loved this much. A long time like forever. He had almost forgotten the goodness of love beading up like sweat out of hard, honest muscle...feeling where it slammed into pleasure. The way it made landfall in one hot rush, clearing everything...everything...in its way.

He groaned John’s name over and over again, like wild and wicked poetry melting words into his hair, into his shoulder, Fin blindly following the path of the sensations. All at once, in the warm gray light, wrapped around John, fucking the man who had surrendered to his will, because he’d asked him. Because *he* had *asked* him.

He took the top, he took it all. The blindly clenching muscles of John’s ass like a hard, sweet hand grabbing Fin’s balls, his cock, his breath in a joyful cramp that refused for long moments to fade away.

“Fin,” John groaned, the warm proof of what they had begun, moving through him, inside him, around him.

Fin bit gently down into the soft flesh of his lover’s back. His arms closed around him.

“John,” he whispered, easing his sweaty head back for a tongue-swabbing, messy kiss over John’s mouth.

Munch felt something metal drop into his mouth from Fin's teeth. Fin's grin filled his eyes.

Straining, John pulled the key from his tongue. He rammed the object into the cuffs, unlocked it, and the key freed the second set as well. He pulled his arms free, pulled his lover toward him, under him.

"On your belly," Munch said.

"Fuck, yeah," Fin murmured, collapsing over the bed, hugging it, ready for his own reward.

John ripped the lid off the joy jam, wedging it up Fin's ass. Munch slipped his fingers up, slicking the passage, moistening everywhere he could reach. He found the small, solid spot he'd been seeking. He toyed with it, teasingly. Gently caressing it, firmly, rhythmically.

Fin chewed at his pillow, slamming his crotch against the sheets. He opened his ass for invasion.

"You know what, I think I'm going to fuck Odafin."

Deep breath throttled in Fin's chest from the almost sinful pleasure building in his butt.

"John," Fin whimpered softly. "Please. Just *do* me."

The frenzied need in Fin's voice had hardened John's cock to a bulging, moist moment. The head found the slip of Fin's ass without guidance, the promise alone almost pushing him over the edge. Tonight had been for Fin. Munch could wait a few moments longer.

But the fact was, he was about to fuck another man. More important, he was about to fuck *Fin*, in fact, and the ass he'd been coveting through denim and more over four long years was there for the fucking.

He pushed once, only to feel the other man's ass muscles taking control, almost forbidding his attempt at control. John found himself ramming harder, faster, Fin's ass muscles driving his rhythm. He was near the grip of something beautiful.

"Fin," John said, a broken sentence left hanging because of the action going on around his cock. "This is for you."

"Not tonight." He strained for a breath, moistening his mouth. "This for the doubts inside your head. We got a lifetime to make love. There's only one thing I want right now. Make it real. Close the deal, John. Cum inside me."

"It was always real," John cried, once again feeling paradise encroaching on all his deepest places. He tried to talk to distract himself, to make it last...for Fin.

"John..."

John curled around him, his face to Fin's cheek, sharing tears. Fin was jacking back against him again, this time harder, as if knowing John was trying to make it last. This was it: John surrendered. There was nothing... nothing more but this...

The raw power too primal to let him moan or make a noise or do anything but pound into Fin's ass and squirt him full of everything he was.

The pleasure subsided slowly, in aftershocks of smaller, sweeter power. They were both too much of one thing, as the poet man had said, to move at first. Finally, John rolled to his side, gathering Fin into his arms. The man he held murmured a soft reverie in return.

Then when John thought Fin might be falling asleep, his partner turned around to face him.

His eyes were smoked up with all the nice things, Munch thought to himself, wishing he had Fin's penchant for poetry.

"John," he whispered, kissing his face, his forehead, brushing his lips across his mouth. "Stay."

"Of course," he promised, because he knew. He knew for sure, just as he had known the negative future before, he was certain of the positive now.

Fin sniffed back a few tears of his own. "So who we gonna tell about this?" he asked.

"Duh, as Laurie would say. *We gonna tell everybody.*"

John wondered if anyone else in the world hugged as hard and warm and wonderfully as Fin Tutuola. Munch concluded no one could. With his man Odafin, perfection was just part of the package.

[END]

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