

I Know You're Out There Somewhere

The old saying went, "A fool and his money are soon parted," or something to that effect. The specifics of the phrasing didn't matter so much to Alisha. What mattered was that the words always rang true, if one knew just what fool to apply the right pressure to.

He sat back in a quiet corner of the lavishly decorated manor, observing from there the various people wandering around with their immaculately-groomed fur, their thousand dollar dresses and their pressed-to-perfection suits. He scanned them with a mixture of distaste and idle curiosity as he ran a paw up through long, carefully-cultivated hair. One had to fit in with high society if one was to part the fools in it with their money, after all.

It was a charity benefit, though that was just the pretense. As Alisha sat back in the luxurious couch pressed against the back wall, his own jewelery and carefully tailored, sleek and slinky black dress on display for all to see, he knew what it really was. He could see the truth behind the lie. It was just a very, very expensive penis-measuring contest. It wasn't about helping people. It was about who helped the most. Who had the biggest *heart*.

The fox thought he might vomit, but the thought of ruining one of his finer dresses kept his dinner firmly where it belonged.

Instead, he did what he always did. The forgery on his invitation had been immaculate, and under the guise of wealthy socialite Alisha De Vries the fox had slipped into some congressman's home or other to see just which of the guests might make a fine mark. There had been a wide array of tasty meat on display; more than a few of the males there looked like they could use a good roll in the hay with a slinky, effeminate fox.

Unfortunately, Alisha had been left bitterly frustrated at the fact that nearly each and every one of the most potent marks on display had come with their spouses. It was no trouble for him, of course; any one of these high-rollers wouldn't be the first married male he'd blown in a back room while his wife was gossiping merely ten feet away.

What *was* hard was the fact that so many of these males seemed bound at the fucking hip to their wives. The females kept their arms jealously locked around their husband's middles and eyed each other off like beasts at the edge of one another's territory. They were edgy, even as the males of their lives laughed and drank and smoke and measured their fiscal cocks against one another. It left Alisha no time to put his moves on any of them, even if he felt like any of them looked *half* worth the effort.

Gone, it seemed, were the simple days. Years and years of lying and blackmailing and stealing and grifting and whoring himself out to the wealthy in order to maintain an extravagant lifestyle had been so *easy*. Times, however, were changing. The marks were resisting more. Expenses kept increasing and his take from each male he bedded shrank. It still wasn't hard to keep his looks; fair application of makeup, a good diet and plenty of exercise made sure Alisha hadn't lost his physical touch, and he'd certainly gained enough sexual experience to make any male weak at the knees.

A sigh slipped from between his lips as his ears drooped slightly. It just wasn't any *fun* anymore, either. The fox's ravenous libido, awakened late in his teens and quickly honed to a whirlwind of nymphomaniac grifting, hadn't flagged in the slightest.

Satisfaction, however, was ever in short supply. He spent more time trawling for guys to pound him into submission than he spent looking for marks, it seemed.

“You alright there, miss?”

On instinct, Alisha’s ears perked back up at the sound of the male voice above him. A smile touched his muzzle as he lifted his head slowly, tracing his eyes along the deep navy suit worn by the figure before him. “Lonely, and a little bored,” he replied, his tones soft and light even as he looked up higher.

The figure was a tall raccoon, well-built enough to fill his suit but with the barest hint of a belly bulging his middle. He smiled warmly down at the fox as he waved to the couch. “May I then help you out?” he asked.

Alisha had to keep the frown from his face as he searched the raccoon’s face. Something about him was fiercely familiar. A former mark? “Be my guest,” answered the fox even as he racked his brain. “I could always use a little extra company, if you’re willing to give it.”

As he tried to figure out where he knew this male from, Alisha couldn’t help his brain falling into old patterns. The suit was well-tailored, and he could tell it was crafted by the same brand whose lead designer he’d bedded more than a few years ago at a club. The cufflinks however stood out in the extreme. Anyone could buy a fine suit, but those gold-and-sapphire cufflinks practically dazzled Alisha’s eyes as the raccoon sat beside him. “And might I say,” he added as the other male settled down, “you have exquisite taste.”

“Hmm? Oh, these?” The raccoon held up one arm and twisted it slowly, allowing the sapphires to glitter in the light. “Pretty enough, but the wife made me wear them. They belonged to her father.” He leaned in a little closer as his voice dropped in volume. “Personally, I think he’s something of an overly ostentatious bastard.” The raccoon’s eyes roamed over Alisha’s face as if scanning for something. There was a moment where he seemed surprised, but anyone who didn’t read people for a living might have missed it. Perhaps they *had* met somewhere.

Still, Alisha smirked as he leaned back in the chair and allowed a paw to run through his hair. He could worry about integrating past and present once he knew who he was dealing with. A glance at the raccoon’s left paw showed the familiar gold band of a married male, but that didn’t matter much to Alisha. That was just another hurdle to jump, and he did like a challenge. Certainly the raccoon seemed to be the most viable option he’d seen so far. “Funny, coming from someone wearing Marc Cadin,” he pointed out with a wink.

The raccoon looked actually and properly surprised then, and he perked an eyebrow as he leaned back against the couch and chuckled. “Well, you know your male fashion designers, don’t you?” he laughed. “Aren’t you just an interesting little thing.”

“Oh, you have *no* idea.” Alisha nodded at his paw and tilted his head to the side. “No Mrs. Raccoon along tonight?”

With another chuckle, the other male nodded off toward the dining room. “Margaret’s just meeting up with a couple of her friends for the night. I’m here for *her*, not for myself.” Some of the confidence seemed to bleed out of him as he shook his head. “Of course, you’ve gotta put in an appearance, don’t you? It’s always all about the appearance.”

That was something Alisha understood well. Appearance in his line of work was everything. It was also what made the familiar element of the raccoon so frustrating. He was relatively certain that this guy wasn't a past mark, but there was still that something overwhelmingly familiar that gnawed at his mind.

The raccoon must have caught him staring, and he smiled. "Ah, I know that look. You're trying to figure out where you know me from, aren't you?"

Alisha hoped that the relief he felt wasn't showing on his face as he smiled a little wider. "You know, I'm usually better with faces than this, but I don't think I just bumped into you at the movies earlier this week." He cocked an eyebrow and perked an ear as his smile turned coy. "Unless you and dear Margaret were the two up near the back row with the kid screaming all through my first viewing of the new Star Wars movie."

At that, the raccoon looked positively aghast. "Someone brought a *cub* to... oh, now that's just horrific. I'm so, so sorry! No, we've got no kids of our own just yet, and frankly I'm not sure a cub would really enjoy a movie with such dark tones."

It surprised Alisha how easily the legitimate laugh rolled out of him. "Well, I think that truly depends on the age of the cub. Don't think a newborn would appreciate this kind of story, but..." His eyes narrowed slightly as he cocked his head to the other side. "Are you *sure* I don't know you from somewhere?"

"Well, it's not like most people know their congressman anyway." The raccoon smiled as he held out his paw. "Nice to meet you. I'm Vincent Terrel."

Vince.

Over a decade's worth of time crashed over Alisha in a wave as his eyes widened. He composed himself quickly enough that he was sure Vincent — *Vince!* — wouldn't think anything of it and forced the smile back to his muzzle as he took that offered paw and squeezed it gently. "It's... a pleasure to meet you, Mister Terrel. Sorry. I just don't think I've met a congressman before!"

"Well, I promise that I'm actually a nice guy," he replied with a gleaming smile. "But don't worry, I'll understand if you want to back away slowly."

Alisha smiled, but the expression was hollow. Vince. After all these years. It was no wonder the raccoon didn't recognize him; the fox had done everything he could to break ties with his old life. He was older, and he was dressed to look like anything but himself. He wasn't the mewling little fucking cub he had been when Vince had broken his heart. He was something else now. "And why would I want to do that?" he replied at last.

The raccoon returned Alisha's smile, and a thrill worked through the fox. Vince didn't recognize him at all... and Vince was a congressman now. A whole new slew of opportunities had entered Alisha's mind as he stared into his old friend's eyes. Each of them was carefully considered. Gratification? Perhaps. Money? Potentially. *Humiliation?* Yes. *Oh* yes.

Vince had broken his heart. Only fair that the fox had some revenge.

He sat up a little higher on the couch and began to stretch his arms out. "Sorry, but I've been sitting here for a bit too long. Need to go, get a bit of a stretch. You don't mind?"

That smile remained stuck on Vince's face as he shook his head. "By all means, miss...?"

“De Vries. Alisha De Vries.” Alisha nodded to him, still smiling himself as he stood and took a couple of steps away. A glance over his shoulder showed Vince staring after him, as if waiting for something. The fox perked one ear and tilted his head toward the door. “You coming, Mister Terrel?”

But the raccoon shook his head as he too rose and brushed down the front of his suit with a coy little wink. “Oh, I think that would be a mistake, wouldn’t you?” he asked. “Married congressman follows a slinky vixen off into a dark garden in the middle of the night, his wife just over a stone’s throw away?”

The reminder that Vince had a wife — a fucking *wife* — set Alisha’s blood to boil, but that was easy to conceal. Instead he politely lifted his eyebrows as he placed a paw delicately on his hip. “Really?” he said, and it didn’t take much of an act to allow some irritation to slip into his tone. “*That’s* what you think I’m after?”

“In my experience, attractive females have an eye for me for one good reason, and it’s not my talking points,” he replied with a slow shake of his head.

Not even an apology for the implication. That was something Alisha could work with. His muzzle twisted slightly before he forced his face to composure again. “I suppose it’s a good thing I didn’t think you were simply good company on a dull, lonely night or I might be disappointed. Excuse *me*, congressman.”

Alisha only allowed himself the barest shake of a head before he turned and headed off into the garden at a much faster clip. There was no shout after him, of course; Alisha hadn’t expected Vince to take such an easy piece of bait, even if he felt bad. Guilt was something best left to fester. At least Alisha’s turned back hid his smile.

For the first time in what seemed like years, he felt something old but familiar. Purpose.

He’d run into Vince again before the night was out, on the arm of this bookish — though Alisha had to admit, attractive enough — raccoon girl that he could only assume was Margret Terrel. Vince had barely made eye contact with Alisha, but he could see that the congressman did in fact seem to feel bad about how Alisha had reacted to his insinuation. Alisha in turn simply glided past him with a carefully affected air of dismissiveness.

The groundwork, of course, had been laid. Alisha had ensured that whatever else happened that night, the last thing that Vince had seen and felt when he left had been guilt. That was all he needed to get the ball rolling. People could be so predictable, and he had an advantage over most. For all Vince might have changed, Alisha *knew* him. Right down the the core.

He didn’t sleep that night. Coffee fueled Alisha right through until morning as he dug up every little piece of information he could on Congressman Vincent Terrel. It’d been surprising to see how far he’d come since they’d been teenagers. He looked like he’d built himself into quite the accomplished politician.

Not even a particularly bad one, either. A couple corporations made sizable donations to his campaign funds, but on the whole he seemed to have a sterling record. There were rumors he was gunning for a senate seat, and that Alisha didn’t doubt. Vince’s mother had always pushed him hard to be a politician, and one day take the

highest office in the land. That would just be the right springboard a young, popular candidate to make enough of a mark to start his run for the presidency.

A little money went a long way, and in the days to come Alisha was able to come to an understanding of Vince's daily movements. A hacker was able to provide the raccoon's itinerary for the next couple of months, while an accomplished thief Alisha had once bedded bugged the congressman's home to pay off a debt he'd owed the effeminate fox. It took a little longer than Alisha would have liked, but in the days that followed he was able to gain a complete roadmap to the esteemed congressman's life and integrate himself into a part of it.

Unfortunately, Vince had to travel interstate for business shortly after the charity benefit. That left Alisha all but twiddling his thumbs until he returned. His hacker had prepared a proper cover for his De Vries persona at not insignificant extra cost, and the rest of his week was spent listening to the sounds of the Terrel household and establishing his cover.

The former was not in and of itself particularly noteworthy until a couple of days in, where Alisha had caught a racy rendezvous between Mrs. Terrel and their lavish home's gardener. He'd recorded the whole thing for later use, though if everything went to plan Alisha knew he wouldn't even need to use it. Still, knowing about the good wife's indiscretions gave him an extra card to play. Alisha would never turn that down.

The next time he saw Vincent was the morning after he returned from his trip. Vince, ever the early riser, liked to jog a few blocks to a coffee shop near his home before he started his day properly. Getting up early had never been something Alisha had enjoyed, especially with all the effort it took to put on his little act. Starting his day a whole extra two hours early wasn't exactly the fox's idea of fun, but he'd promised himself it would be worth it in the end.

He'd not seen Alisha that morning, as the fox had sipped at a latte and stared intently at his tablet. The next morning however he'd definitely sight of the fox, and Alisha had had to hide a smirk at the way he'd frozen up for a moment at the sight of him. It wasn't until the third morning that Vince came by that he actually seemed to muster up the courage to approach Alisha. "It was... Mrs. De Vries, wasn't it?"

The tentative words drew Alisha's eyes away from the news report on his tablet to look up at Vince. The raccoon held not one coffee but two, and Alisha eyed them suspiciously before he nodded. "It was 'miss' but... yes," he replied, his tone somewhat terse. "And I remember you, too. To what do I owe the pleasure, congressman?"

Vince looked more than a little uncomfortable as he glanced outside the cafe. "I didn't know you were local," he managed after a moment. "I know most of the locals that come in here."

"I'm in town on business, congressman," Alisha replied with a little roll of his eyes. "Don't worry. I'll only skank up the place for another week, two tops, and then I'll be right out of your way. I promise."

The conversation, or perhaps Alisha's tone and words, began to draw attention. One of the baristas and two other patrons had started to look over, and Vince's reassuring smile to them rang hollow enough to Alisha that he almost started to laugh right there. "For the record, I never considered you a skank, Ms. De Vries."

Alisha snorted as he turned his attention back to his tablet. "No, you merely implied I was trying to seduce you," he growled, and allowed a bit of his masculine tone

to slip into his voice to lower it somewhat. "Heaven forbid I confuse the two." Inwardly, Alisha sighed. Tone it back. He was letting his own anger with Vince dictate his con. He had to tone it back or he'd just drive the raccoon off.

Without invitation, Vince eased himself into the chair opposite Alisha and began to set the coffee down on the table. "But sure, make yourself comfortable," Alisha added, his growl still thick and dark. "Is this normally how you talk to women?"

"Depends on the woman," he replied with a lazy shrug of his shoulders that was every bit the teenager Alisha had known. He slid a cup toward Alisha until it bumped into the fox's empty mug. "Asked Franko what you usually had, so I know it's right. I'm trying to make a peace offering."

"And do you always kiss and make up with people you rub the wrong way?" Alisha lifted a paw and, with a single fingertip, began to slide the full cup back toward Vince. "What makes me so special?"

Vince just shook his head. He glanced aside again, as the other patrons of the cafe turned back to their own business. "I don't know. But when I upset you at that function, you reminded me of someone I used to know." He actually chuckled quietly as he looked down at the table. "He was fiery, too. You'd have liked him."

Alisha's eyes narrowed, though he managed to bite his tongue before he ruined everything. He didn't know Vince was talking about him, after all. "Thing about fire's that sometimes you get burned, congressman," he said at last, though he glanced over at the coffee again.

"Sometimes you do," he agreed as he pushed his chair back from the table. "I come by every morning, same time. Enjoy the coffee as an apology, and maybe I'll see you again before you get out of my way."

Again, Alisha perked his eyebrows. "I always thought an apology included the word sorry."

Vince smirked, and for a second Alisha could see the boy he'd grown up with there, tall and proud and successful. It honestly made the fox want to slink back into his seat. Look what Vince had done. Look what he'd made of himself. "I am very sorry I offended you when last we met, Ms. De Vries," he said as he started toward the door.

The fox waited until Vince was almost to that door before he sighed. "Alisha," he muttered back over his shoulder.

He heard Vince chuckle as he reached out to grasp at the coffee he'd been left. "Have a good day, Alisha," he said, before he turned and left.

Alisha held the coffee cup and stared forward for a few moments before he cast a glance up at the barista. The ringtail behind the counter smiled back at her and nodded once before he got back to work. He must have thought he'd done well.

But Alisha's work too wasn't done yet. Now he had an in. He was in Vince's good graces, and he had a reason to know Vince would be at the cafe now. Everything was falling into place. The first steps had been completed, but now it was time for the fox to work his magic.

With a thin smile, he grabbed his tablet and slipped fully back into character. This was going to be fun.

True to his word, Vince returned the next morning, and the morning after that. Alisha was already present every day, seated in the same spot with his nose buried in the tablet. Every day, Vince brought over a latte, and every day Alisha allowed himself to warm a little more to the persistent raccoon.

It did little to dull the suspicion Alisha felt more and more every day. Vincent had made his apology the first time they'd spoken again after the function where they'd 'first' met. Alisha knew how good he was at making marks fall for him, but Vince hadn't even reached that point. He was being strangely, pointedly decent toward Alisha for no other reason than he could. It set the fox ill at ease. He didn't like 'nice' marks. Too unpredictable.

They'd spoken at length about Alisha's work, or rather his cover story. The first few days Vince had come by, a suited wolf with an earpiece had stood outside, staring hard at the two of them. The bodyguard was not something Alisha hadn't expected; in fact, his bugs in Vince's home had confirmed that the head of the congressman's security was concerned that he'd met some nice vixen at the coffee shop and insisted on observing her for himself. He'd even followed Alisha back to the apartment that he'd rented for the purpose of his con, though Alisha was relatively sure he wasn't going to be able to dig up anything on him. He had been, as ever, careful.

Of course the cover story had held up to all scrutiny, and by the week's end it was just Vince and Alisha. Vince warmed up more and more and discussed more personal, friendly sorts of things with the fox, while the fox dodged the same details of his own fake life. This, too, only made Alisha feel more uneasy.

Vince's friendliness was not what he'd expected. He'd not been ready for the constant reminder of the adult that Vince had become was still in part the boy Alisha had known. He was idealistic without being naive, firm without being unyielding, and he approached the world as something to be improved through cooperation. It was a standard politician sales pitch, but Alisha remembered how passionate Vince had been once upon a time about the prospect of helping people through political work. He bought it.

It bridged the old and the new, however, and that was a complication Alisha wasn't ready for. As the days wore on, his laughs became more genuine. His smiles didn't have to be forced. The pain of seeing Vince faded, and was replaced with an authentic — and *scary* — anticipation for their morning coffee. Mornings were a whirlwind of preparation and almost eagerness. It wasn't until after Vince left that Alisha would remember what he had set out to do.

The guilt surprised him.

That was something Alisha had never had to feel. He didn't have the luxury of guilt. The guys he charmed and bedded and whose fortunes he made off with? That was guiltless. They were the ones stepping out on their spouses, or they'd made their money dubiously, or any of a number of other justifications the fox had used once upon a time. He didn't have to feel bad. Using them felt, if nothing else, *good*. The thrill of the con was almost better than the thrill of the sex. Sometimes, depending on the mark, it was better.

But there he sat, morning after morning across from the raccoon who'd broken his heart as a teenager. The one who he had *reason* to hate and to want to hurt. And yet, every day he sat across from that raccoon and found himself just happy to be there. It was

like Vince was running the same con on Alisha himself, and he was doing it effortlessly. The fox felt, for lack of a better term, smitten.

That was when he knew he had to break it off. Cut his losses and run. The con wasn't going to work, largely because Alisha realized that he no longer *wanted* the con to work. Vince had spent his whole life preparing for a chance to take a position of power and use it to help people, and unlike so many he was actually trying to help those people. He worked hard, and he was genuinely a nice guy. It wouldn't have been the first time Alisha had destroyed a hard-working nice guy for his own ends, but it *would* be the first time Alisha would feel bad about it.

And so he'd told Vince that his business in town had finished up early, during their tenth morning coffee together. Vince had been thoroughly surprised, and Alisha had had to hide his own sadness at the downed expression on the raccoon's face. He'd said that he'd really enjoyed their morning conversations, and that it would be a shame that they couldn't continue.

It had been Alisha's turn to be surprised when he'd handed the fox a small note. The address to Vince's home was scrawled on it, and he'd told Alisha to come by around midday on whatever day was free before she had to leave. It'd taken a second for Alisha to slip back into character and question the raccoon further.

He'd simply brushed it off and said that he had no improper thoughts or intentions behind the invitation, only that he had a gift to offer her as thanks for her company. Alisha had been taken aback, before he'd finally admitted that he was free that afternoon. After all, it was his persona who would be leaving that evening, not himself.

The fox had spent the whole morning worrying, and that alone was an alien sensation for Alisha. Ever since he'd started — traded out his name for another's and his body for control and wealth — he'd never truly been worried before. This was something vestigial; something from before 'Alisha' that had broken back to the surface. It took everything in the fox to try and tamp it back down again, but the feeling wouldn't go away. He felt like his teenage self again.

He couldn't even get a handle on it when he drove up the quiet, high-class street that held Vince's home. When he parked at the curb and stepped out, he was impressed all over. Sure, he'd seen plenty of guys with opulent houses before, but that wasn't what did it for Alisha in that moment. Vince's house was something different.

It was smaller than the others, with a much simpler garden. There was nothing ostentatious about it save for its relative size, and the larger garden that Alisha knew was out the back. The decor was absent the flair and drama that so pervaded the rest of the street and the society that Alisha was always up to his neck in. It was quiet. It was, dare he say it, homey. It was homey in a way every other house on the street was just another status symbol; all pretty and tidy but with no soul to it.

Alisha sighed as he made his way up the clay path that led to the front door. "Better get this over with," he muttered under his breath, even as he tried to summon the strength to keep up his act. The fox felt tired, for the first time, of everything he'd put on. All the slinky dresses and makeup and perfume and jewelery, and the why of what he did... for him, right then, it all felt like just so much wasted effort. It honestly terrified him a bit that he felt tired, almost, of being Alisha. Who was he, if not this glorious, successful succubus he'd made himself into?

He took a deep breath and held it for a few moments before he pressed the doorbell. He had to summon all his practiced control to keep himself in character and not fidgeting until the door swung open at last to reveal Vince, in dress slacks and a nice red polo shirt. Even on his days off, it seemed he still cleaned up nice. "I'm glad you came," he said as he smiled and waved the fox forward. "Please, come in."

"I really shouldn't," Alisha replied as he peered inside. He knew the full floor plan from his investigative efforts earlier, but seeing it in person felt... wrong, somehow. Like this was a part of a life he should never have been able to see. Like he didn't belong. "I have a flight to catch, after all. I wouldn't want to miss it."

"But you'll still come by and take a gift, after all those coffees I bought you?" countered Vince with a smirk. He waggled his arm as he waved Alisha in again. "Please? It will only be for a moment. I'd like to see your face when you open it. Then, of course, you can go. I wouldn't want you to miss your flight."

Again Alisha sighed. There wasn't going to be any way around it. This was only going to become more and more unpleasant for the fox, but this was how it had to be. "You're just trying to make this hard on me, aren't you?" he grumbled, and stomped inside with more frustration than he'd intended. The raccoon's pleased face just... *grated*. It reminded Alisha what he'd started to do, and it made him feel bad. Another alien sensation the fox didn't care for.

"Because free coffee and nice presents are such a burden," Vince said with a chuckle. He closed the door behind Alisha and led her over to the couch in the heart of the living room. "Take a seat. I'll be back with your gift in a moment." He didn't even wait for a reply before he turned and hurried over to the staircase on the other side of the room.

Alisha watched him go as he ground his teeth. That was it, then. Vince would find his present, bring it down, Alisha would open it and be very grateful, and then he'd leave. There might be a hug, maybe a chaste kiss to the cheek, and that would be it. The fox nodded to himself. That would be best. Just stay in character. Cool things down, remember the *present* and not the past, and everything would be just fine.

The couch was comfortable enough, and it made waiting the couple of minutes for Vince's return considerably easier. Alisha closed his eyes as he leaned back and simply took a moment to relax as best he was able. The rest of his day, he was sure, would be hell.

Thumping from upstairs was his first clue that the excitable raccoon was on his way back. Alisha opened his eyes and turned his gaze on the staircase just in time to catch those thumps make their way down it. Vince came back into view a moment later, with a small, rectangular box wrapped in simple red paper in both of his paws. "Sorry; I forgot where I left it," he sheepishly called out as he made his way down.

"Think nothing of it," Alisha replied with a dismissive wave of his paw. "I'm already here and this is pretty comfortable, so I don't mind taking a few minutes to relax before I head off." He fought off a frown as he watched the raccoon approach. He looked worried about something.

"Well, hopefully this will help, too." Vince stopped and sat down beside the fox before he turned the box in his paws over and over. He hesitated for a moment longer before he handed it off to Alisha. "Forget all the coffee and the chats and all that stuff. This... is me saying sorry for everything."

The raccoon's tone turned sombre, and Alisha frowned at him for a moment. He refused to meet the fox's gaze, and so Alisha instead turned to the box. A delicate swipe of a claw shredded the wrapping paper, and the fox hesitated for a second before he peeled it away from the box beneath.

He'd been given gifts of jewelery before, but none of that had shocked him. Dresses and shoes too were just accessories to use to acquire new marks. *Cars* approached impressive, but those were just valuable machines he could use and discard. Behind the wrapping paper though was a memory in physical form.

It was a video game from almost twenty years ago; a tie-in to a movie he'd seen with Vince mere weeks before the raccoon had vanished from his life.

Star Wars Episode 1: Racer.

It was the last game they had played together.

The fox almost recoiled from the box, as if in horror as the implication set in. It couldn't be the exact same one, could it? "I... don't..." Alisha trailed off as he looked up.

Vincent met his gaze and gently reached out to take one of the fox's paws into his own. "I'm sorry, Alan. For everything."

Alisha jerked his paw back and wrenched it out of Vince's grip. The game box tumbled to the floor as the fox stood up rapidly enough that he almost lost his balance and fell back. "I don't know what you're talking about," he managed to grind out as his ears pinned back. "My name-"

"Is Alan Massey," Vince interrupted. The raccoon hadn't gotten up himself, and his eyes were locked on the box rather than Alisha. "We went to class together for twelve years. We were *friends* for twelve years, we were more... and I ruined it all, and..." Vince lifted his head at last, and there were tears in his eyes. "... and I *know* that it's you in there, Alan."

The fox took a hasty step back. All of his composure and planning were gone. This was a completely unknown situation. There were no contingencies for something like *this*. "I don't know what you're talking about," he tried again, and his voice cracked slightly. He couldn't tear his eyes from Vince, even as he backed away.

"You think I wouldn't know you if I saw you again?" Vince slowly seemed to force himself to stand, though he didn't move toward the fox again. "I mean... that dress, those heels, that makeup... I'm guessing there's a pheromone masker you're wearing too, in the perfume?" He shook his head and sniffed once as he swiped the back of his paw over his face. All it did was streak the tears through his fur. "But your face... Alan, those *are* your eyes. Your dad's eyes. That's your muzzle; the same sharp angles as your mom. That little, tiny spot on your nose I'd tease you for... I'd know you anywhere. I just... don't know *why* that's you, or why you lied to me."

Alisha felt like everything he'd built for himself was crumbling in that moment, as he held Vince's tear-filled stare. He didn't know what to say. He didn't know how to respond. It'd been so long since anyone had even been able to catch him out as not even female that hearing his birth name was... almost something he didn't recognize. "You're... awful sure I'm someone else," he tried, though there was a waver in his voice as he spoke.

"I don't know if this is some... trans thing. Maybe you're a female now and you *want* to be called Alisha, but when I knew you it was Alan, and..." His stare became

more fierce as he took a single step forward. "I'm not wrong. I know it. I know *you*. I just don't understand. Help me understand, please."

The shame of what he'd planned to do came back to the fore, and it was enough to break down the fox's last reserves. He sagged as his shoulders and ears drooped low, the act dispelled. A paw lifted to reach back to his long hair to undo the clasp that held it together. He shook it out as he pocketed the clasp and stepped slowly out of the high heels, his footpaws immediately grateful for the lack of extra pressure.

When he looked up at Vince again, it was behind a curtain of hair that just about hid those features that had been so familiar to him. The fox sighed and closed his eyes for a second, and when he opened them again Vince was right in front of him. "Alan's gone," he finally said, his voice restored to its natural — if still somewhat feminine — depth.

Both of the fox's paws found themselves swiftly grabbed and squeezed tight by the raccoon's. "Then who's in front of me?" Vince asked. "Is this who you really are now?"

Muzzle hung open as the fox fought to figure out a reply. That was the question that had been bubbling in the back of his mind ever since the two had begun sharing coffee in the morning. "This is... just the act I show the world," he replied after a moment. "It got me further than Alan ever did."

"Then you're still Alan inside," Vince decided with a nod. He squeezed tighter at the fox's paws. "What happened to you? What started all of this?"

A moment's anger sparked in the fox, but it died before he could even fully fix his glare on Vince. "You did. When you left, I... just... needed to feel in control. This worked, and then... I just kept going." He swallowed hard. No point in bringing up his considerable illegal and semi-legal work. Not yet. But then there was no point in telling Vince all of this, so why did the words keep coming?

Vince nodded slowly as he let go of one vulpine paw and brushed up and through that long hair. "And you knew it was me when we met at that function, didn't you? And then at the cafe..."

"Once you said your name, sure." The fox began to shiver. He wanted to lean forward into the raccoon. Something held him at bay. "I was going to... I don't know. I was angry, and... and now I don't even know what I'm going to do anymore." He closed his eyes again, as if it would give him solace enough to stabilize his chaotic thoughts.

"And what about now?" Vince asked. He squeezed gently at the paw he still held.

Again, the fox had no idea how to reply. "I don't even know," he replied. Since when was he this honest with anyone? Well... since Vincent, he supposed. Fitting. "I was... going. Well, not *going*. I live around here... for the most part. But I was going to make you think I was gone. Just..." He sighed. "Just leave and pretend I'd never seen you again."

The raccoon's thumb gently rubbed in slow circles across his paw as he spoke, and the simple gesture was almost enough to set him more at ease. It took a moment, but the fox was able to gently pry his paw free and take another step back from Vince. "I still think I should."

"I think you belong here more than anyone else," Vince said as he shook his head.

The fox huffed a quiet laugh as he took another step toward the door. Maybe if he could just reach it without any more words, he could turn and run and never come back.

That would be a new trick for Alisha. Old hat for Alan, though. “That’s bullshit and you know it,” he mumbled back as his tail tucked further up between his legs.

But Vince shook his head again as he matched the fox’s backpedaling. He kept pace, but didn’t move in any closer. “Like hell it is. I was a miserable wreck when I left... I almost flunked out of college in my first year, because I just... missed you. But you wouldn’t take a call, your parents wouldn’t put me through to you, you wouldn’t reply to my letters or emails...”

“Letters... Jesus, look at us.” A quiet laugh rattled out of the fox as he hung his head. “I’m getting old. Maybe I should change my look. Not sure it’s going to fool anyone soon.” He opened his muzzle to say something else, but a quiet, “Oof,” is all that came as he found himself backed against the wall beside the front door.

Vince watched as the fox reached out toward the door handle, and he shook his head once again. “Or... you could stop trying to fool anyone,” he suggested as he took another tentative step forward. “You could stop trying to fool anyone and just... be you.”

Fingers lingered on the handle as the fox looked up at Vince again. “Like you do?” he scoffed, and the words came out with far more venom than he’d intended. “You’re married, Vince. To some... some *female*! Way to lead by example.”

“That’s status and appearances and nothing else,” Vince replied immediately, and there was a new note of sadness in his voice. “She gets the status of being married to a congressman, and I get a hotshot lawyer as my wife to keep up appearances. Times might have changed, but you get a lot further in life being the status quo than not.”

“He says to the con artist in a dress,” muttered the fox.

“The what now?”

“Nevermind.” Fingers tightened on the door handle and started to tug it down. “I can’t... be what you want, and you aren’t who you were. Everything I’ve done here was a big, massive mistake. I... need to go.”

He barely started to open the door before he felt the raccoon move in, press close and plant a hard kiss on his muzzle.

It was reflex more than conscious desire that saw the fox shove Vince back with both paws. “What are you-”

“You *don’t* have to go,” interrupted the raccoon. There was a note almost of pleading in his voice as he stared the fox down. “I don’t want you to go.”

“I’ve got to.” Once again the fox reached for the door handle, but he froze as one of Vince’s paws gently lay atop it.

There he stood as Vince gently squeezed that paw. “I won’t make you stay, of course,” the raccoon said, “and I can’t. But... look at all of this. Look at all of it.” He waved his free paw up and around to indicate the house around them. “All this, all my work... and I never stopped missing you. Not even being with you, but... just *you*, Alan. I’ve missed having you as my friend. I lost you, and that was my fault, but... here you are.”

Had it been any other mark, the fox was sure he would have been amused by the raccoon’s desperation. Had it been anyone else. Had it been any other time. Instead, Vince’s earnestness was... touching. Painful, but touching. “Here I am,” he agreed as he shook his head. “But... it’s not me, either. Or it’s not *him*. It’s not Alan.”

“You don’t seem like Alisha right now, either,” Vince pointed out. He moved closer again, and the fox cursed himself as he felt his heart skip a beat. “I’m not seeing her. I’m seeing him. I’m seeing *you*.”

“You’re not seeing either,” countered the fox. His ears twitched as his brow furrowed. Even to his own ears, he sounded desperate. For what?

“The hell I’m not,” Vince insisted. He lifted his paw from the fox’s and instead cupped the vulpine’s cheek as he stared into those green eyes. “Don’t go. Don’t run away from me again.”

Maybe if the fox had been able to take his eyes off Vince’s, he could have still left. Maybe if he’d moved before the raccoon’s other arm wrapped around his middle, he could have still left. Maybe if he’d pushed Vince off when their foreheads had touched, he could have still left. He did none of those things.

Instead, it was all he could do to melt into Vince’s embrace. The arms were stronger than he remembered, their sizes slightly different. But as he closed his eyes and leaned into the raccoon, none of those things mattered. It was almost like he was eighteen again. Not Alisha. Not Alan. Both. Neither.

He stiffened again when he felt Vince’s muzzle tuck in against his neck. A shiver ran through the fox as his legs shook for a moment. He had to summon all his willpower to squeeze his eyes shut and gently push back against the raccoon. This was exactly what he would have wanted, if he was still running game on his old friend. But now... “Wait, wait.”

“I don’t want to,” Vince whispered back, but nevertheless the raccoon immediately backed off. His expression was somewhere between worried and crestfallen as he squeezed the fox tight. “What’s wrong?”

“We can’t.” Inwardly, the fox kicked himself for the waver in his voice. Real convincing. “Not this... not here, or now. Or... or ever.”

Vince set his jaw as he shook his head. The sternness in his eyes was surprising. Powerful. That was new. “Security knows. *Margaret* knows. Like I said... it’s all appearances. I don’t have to pretend in this house... and you don’t have to be scared here.”

The revelation cast Vince’s adulterous wife in a new light. Even as he supposed her affair all of a sudden made sense — and might not have been so much a secret as he thought in the first place — the fox found his muzzle against Vince’s again. The raccoon’s kiss came just as powerfully as his stare had, and it was all the fox could do to stay upright again.

A part of him was certainly upright, strained though it was by the constricting gear that he wore to keep it as unnoticeable as possible. His paws trembled for the first time in years as he wrapped them gently around Vince’s middle. He might not have been sure about this, but it definitely seemed as though Vince was.

As those delicate paws came to rest on the raccoon’s hips however, Vince lost all sign of being that stern, in-control figure. Instead he leaned hungrily into the fox’s kiss, all but pouring himself into that joined muzzle as he squeezed the smaller male tight. No longer apologetic or reserved, he was focused solely on the fox in front of him... whoever that was.

That fox could only moan softly as the kiss was broken. One exploratory raccoon paw had slipped around his waist to squeeze at his rump, and his ears tipped back in an

attempt to hide the burn of his blush in them. He couldn't contain the soft moan however, or the way his hips twitched forward to grind himself against the male before him.

He froze up as he felt Vince's other paw slide up his leg and under his dress. Under normal circumstances, that would be the point where things had gone out of control. That would be the point where the illusion fell apart and he was revealed as something other than the slinky vixen he portrayed. There however, under Vince's grip, there was no such fear. It was a sigh of surrender as much as relief when he felt one of the raccoon's fingers hook into his panties and drag them down. The padding went with them, and suddenly a new outline was made in his dress.

The fox hadn't even had time or inclination to shed that dress. Vince's muzzle hadn't moved off; he'd only leaned deeper into their kiss. It was all the fox could do to wrap one arm around the raccoon's shoulders and pull him all the closer. The fight had left him entirely. Vince had been right. There was nothing to worry about. Not for the moment; not there.

It took next to no effort on the fox's part to dip his other paw down Vince's front. Years of practice saw the raccoon's belt swiftly undone and his pants unbuttoned and unzipped. They pooled down around Vince's ankles, only to be stepped quickly out of. Vulpine paw met barely-clothed sheath, and within moments that sheath was exposed somewhat as fingers carefully dipped through a slit in the raccoon's boxer briefs.

While it wasn't unheard of for someone to go groping around the fox's front, it was a rare enough thing that the feel of Vince's fingers working down the vulpine's sheath was an unfamiliar joy. It caused him to break the kiss with a soft moan, and he gripped Vince's malehood all the tighter as he felt the muzzle formerly at his lips shift instead to the side of his neck.

He leaned down and into those kisses and nips even as Vince began to lift him by the leg. The fox's back slid up and along the wall beside the front door, and he moaned anew as he felt Vince shift his muzzle's efforts from the side of his neck to his throat. The fox squirmed as little tingles of pleasure ran through him, and he leaned back into the wall all the more firmly as the raccoon's body pressed to his.

Unlike the stroke to his sheath, the feel of Vince's firming malehood grinding against the fox's inner thigh was something considerably more familiar. Given the way he was braced against the wall and the pressure with which Vince pressed into him, there was only one way he could see this going. There was no argument as the fox spread his legs a little to give Vince the most room to work with.

Vince moved in immediately, and his hips wriggled as he worked his malehood in under the fox's tail. His breath puffed in short, eager pants against the fox's chest, and the arm around Vince's shoulders shifted so that fingers could be stroked through the raccoon's headfur. Hips twitched and rolled as the fox worked himself down against Vince's length.

The raccoon's eagerness was easy to feel. His shaft ground firmly in against the base of the fox's tail, drooling pre in its wake. His grip on the fox never wavered; he was held securely aloft against the wall as he was ground against, with only the roll of his hips there to help ease Vince up. The soft fur that rubbed along his shaft, it seemed, was driving Vince wild. Or perhaps it was something else; the chance to be who he was again, without censor or reservation.

Their first — and only — time had been an awkward thing, filled with youthful eagerness and inexperience. Almost two decades on though, and the fox at least knew a thing or two about taking a cock. He'd seen and heard of other males broken to be penetrated so abruptly with little more than a bit of pre for lube. For someone who'd spent years taking pride in his ability to take any guy with a minimum of effort, the sudden press upward of Vince's shaft against his tailring was nothing but welcomed.

A moment's focus was all it took to relax against that damp tip, and for the first two thrusts it still wasn't slick enough to find entrance. When it did on the third push amid a short spurt of warm pre, the fox felt himself clamp down on Vince just as Vince's arms squeezed tightly at him. Both muzzles split in a soft groan of realization. Unlike their first time, there was no doubt then. The raccoon was definitely in him. "Is it—" Vince began to ask.

That was as far as he made it before a vulpine muzzle pressed against his, and they were locked in another kiss. The fox felt Vince's moan against his lips as he squirmed lower in the raccoon's grip. Another inch or so was guided up into the heat of his tailhole by gravity as much as anything else, and he wriggled in Vince's grip to help tease the raccoon along. There was nothing Vince could do to hurt him. Experience — which in that moment sent a small shiver of shame through the fox — would assure he could take it. He'd done it plenty of times before.

Though rarely, he had to admit to himself, with as much enthusiasm. Seldom had he any partner that could entice him; sex was just a job. It was just a means to get what he wanted, not something he always wanted in and of itself. Take the dick, pull the con, get out with everything. Sexual need satisfied. Bank account satisfied.

But as he felt Vince ease further and further up inside him, the fox knew it was different. It felt good, even though Vince was nowhere near as good a partner as he'd had in the past. It wasn't a physical niceness that hit him, but an emotional one; a thing he'd denied himself for... well, forever. There was no con. There was no deception. The way Vince stroked along the fox's shaft — when had that gotten hard, anyway? — as he buried himself in deep was going to do nothing for the fox's bottom line.

In spite of that, he felt thrilled in a way that none of his other partners had ever been able to match. He felt his back arch as he pushed off the wall, and he moaned long and loud and unabashedly as he pushed down onto the raccoon's shaft. Every last inch buried itself into him with the motion as Vince lifted his hips to help ease his inward motion. Filled again.

He squeezed tightly at the raccoon and closed his eyes as he clutched Vince's head. He felt Vince's hips pull back from his rump slightly, and then he gasped and moaned again as they slapped against his backside once more. The fox's insides squeezed down along the raccoon's shaft as it pushed back into him, and he relaxed again only so Vince could draw back for another thrust.

Vince wasn't the longest he'd been with, or the thickest. He wasn't the strongest, or the roughest, or even the most gentle. If anything, the fox could only describe the way he was taken against the wall as 'ordinary.' Eager, perhaps; Vince's thrusts came with the urgency of someone who *needed* what he was getting, but otherwise it was ordinary. Plain. Simple. It was just cock buried under the fox's tail.

That did nothing to dull the intensity that the fox felt it with. The simplicity of it simply called into focus Vince's eagerness. The way his fingers curled around the fox's

middle, or the way he gasped and groaned every time his shaft was gripped tight by those clenching muscles around it. His panting for breath even after so short a time, and the throbbing of his shaft as more pre helped smooth out the roughness of his thrusts, and the sharpness with which he kissed at the fox's throat and neck.

The fox yelped in surprise as he felt himself abruptly pulled off the wall. The raccoon yanked him down and hilted himself within that squeezing passage, only to turn and start to carry his partner, still spread around his shaft toward the couch. A giggle slipped out of the fox's muzzle as he pressed his forehead to Vince's, and he caught the raccoon's smile only for a moment before their muzzles touched in another kiss.

It was with probably more force than intended that Vince spilled his captive fox onto the cushions, legs and rump raised up and over one of the couch's arms. The raccoon remained upright and off the couch as he began to lean down and over the fox, and he grit his teeth as he began to move his hips once again. With new force and angle, his hips pounded again and again at that bared rump.

If there were any thoughts of dissent or concern about the position the fox found himself in, they were swiftly silenced. Both of Vince's paws slid up his body, and the fox's dress came with them. He giggled again as he raised his arms and arched his back once again, just long enough to allow the raccoon to strip him completely bare. He felt a spark of pleasure as his shaft was tugged up by the rolled-up dress, and he sighed softly as he was left completely bare. Nakedness during sex was never a luxury he was really afforded. There was always something in the way.

Vince still wore his clothes, but they didn't seem to matter in the slightest. His eyes roamed over the fox's body, and they drank in every detail as his hips worked on their own. They rolled and jerked forward, pushing down deep into that vulpine rump over and over as his fingers followed his gaze. Every inch of the fox he'd once known was explored again.

On some level, it was even better to be rubbed over and viewed in full than being taken. Sure, he felt those sparks of pleasure as Vince's shaft ground against his prostate. Sure, he relished every throb of the raccoon's shaft as it pulsed with his racing heart. Sure, he loved watching Vince gasp whenever he clenched down just before the raccoon thrust down and into him.

But as simple as it was, the *rubbing* was something else. It let Vince do something that so few other guys the fox had been with could do. It let him be just as he was. No show, no deception. Just a fox, full of cock and unabashedly enjoying it. His fur was mussed, his lap a mess from the pre that spilled out of him, his muzzle peeled back in a near-constant moan. His legs spread wider still as he pressed his hips up against the arm of the couch, the better to guide Vince down into him.

Up and down the raccoon's paws roamed over the fox's chest. They ran up to his neck and all the way down his sides to his hips. They squeezed and twitched with the way the fox's body shifted around his malehood, and Vince's face became as much a measurement of pleasure as the fox's was. Each watched the other, and the smallest sign of enjoyment saw a motion repeated. Their bodies found a rhythm, up and down and back and forth, as the fox was finally allowed simply to be who he was.

He might as well have just been a teenager again, back in Vince's house with the raccoon buried inside him for the first time. It almost *felt* like the first time. There was a sense of urgency to Vince's motions of course, but there was a passionate enjoyment in

his eyes that was infectious. He was happy. He was happy just to see the fox he'd lost again.

And the fox was happy to be that person. He lay back as he shivered with delight, his insides squeezing down all the harder on Vince's pumping shaft. Paws gripped at the couch as he shuddered, and a spurt of pre raced up his length to shoot up into the air. It caught Vince in the chest, his shirt marked and streaked. It set the fox to giggling for a reason he couldn't comprehend. That had never been funny to him before.

But it didn't matter. Nothing else mattered. He felt one of Vince's paws reach down to his, and the two entwined their fingers together as the raccoon's thrusts only picked up in pace. A groan rolled out of the fox's muzzle as he leaned his head back and squeezed all the tighter back in response. He felt the resistance his trained muscles put up for Vince, but the raccoon wasn't in a position to be denied. He bucked in harder, and the extra friction only made each thrust feel all the more intense.

The fox didn't know when Vince's other paw migrated to his shaft, but he opened his eyes as he felt his length rapidly worked up and down. He opened his muzzle to warn Vince; to ward him off and make him stop, but the words didn't come. Normally, people didn't want him to get off or didn't care. Normally, he wasn't allowed to have his malehood. It had to be hidden. Ignored. He'd learned to take his pleasure from having pleasure taken from him.

That paw so insistently tugging at the pillar of slick, canine shaft that rose from the fox's lap didn't know anything about that, and nor did the raccoon it was attached to. The fox bit his lower lip as he looked up at Vince, and found that the raccoon was already looking down at him. Both of his paws tightened their grip, one on the fox's paw and the other on his shaft. The latter picked up the pace even as his hips began to pump faster and faster.

And he nodded, just as the fox felt his malehood begin to twitch. There wasn't any warning and there wasn't any helping it or stopping it. It simply came; it happened as if it were always meant to. The fox twitched and writhed underneath Vince, and he felt his insides wringing themselves ragged around the raccoon's shaft as his heart raced. One throb, then another, and then the fox came.

It was thick and powerful, that first spurt. The events of the last few days had given the fox no need to tend to himself, and no real desire with the knowledge of what he'd been doing. But there, with Vince buried under his tail and the raccoon's paw eagerly working his overstimulated malehood, the fox couldn't hold it back. The second spurt was even harder than the first, and it painted another line along Vince's shirt.

Another and another and another came as the fox moaned and squirmed in pleasure. Knees bent as his legs spread wider still, as if his body could simply consume the length of flesh that slammed down again and again into his backside. Each of Vince's thrusts came with a fresh surge in pleasure, and the fox could do little more than lay back and enjoy it. Each buck of the raccoon's hips drained him a little more, and his whole body quaked underneath Vince as his thrusts pushed him down into the couch.

When his high finally wore off and the fox was able to look down at himself, he didn't care about pinning his ears back to hide his blush. Vince was hilted inside him. One cum-sticky paw had shifted to the fox's hip, while the other, cleaner one was still clutched tightly in the fox's grip. Vince's shirt was *ruined*. The volume of cum that

dripped off it and onto the fox — and by extension the couch under them — made him worry somewhat that the couch would suffer the same fate.

And yet he couldn't feel bad about it for even a moment. He beamed up at Vince, shameless as he rolled his shoulders in a little, self-satisfied shrug. "I... wasn't expecting to make such a mess," he admitted, his voice a little breathy.

"I was expecting to make more of one," Vince replied. His own voice was a little unsteady, though considerably more even than the fox's had been. "You really looked like you were enjoying that... I didn't want you to hold back."

The fox chuckled quietly as he nodded and squeezed himself down against Vince's shaft. A soft moan was all he heard, rather than the grunt of sensitivity he might have expected. He looked up and along his sticky body until he saw Vince's hips, still mashed up down against the fox's rump. "You did, though."

Vince shrugged and wriggled his hips slightly, and the shift of his malehood inside the fox only made him moan quietly through a smile. "I'll get off when I'm good and ready," he said with an easy shrug of his own. He winked down at the fox as he gave a chuckle of his own. "Think you've got more than one in you?"

"I'd better get more than one in me," he defiantly replied, and the fox lifted his hips slowly to grind back against the raccoon's buried shaft. "I'm not getting out-fucked here, Vince. You don't get to trap me in your home and have your way. *I'm* in control here."

"Good, because I think we've both earned it." Vince leaned back as he brought both paws up to begin to unbutton his shirt. "Let me get this filthy thing off, and then we'll get to work getting *this* filthy thing," he reached down with a paw to tap the tip of the fox's still firm shaft with a finger, "off again. What do you say?"

The cheesiness of the joke aside, the fox could only laugh quietly in response. He wriggled his hips once again and pushed back up against Vince's inward buck and grind, even as he sighed softly. There, exposed for all that he was — all that he *really* was — with one of the few people in the world who might have known him at his deepest, everything was just... good.

The fox smiled and squeezed down hard around Vince, and he winked back as the raccoon groaned. Perfect. "I say you should get back to thrusting if you want that."

"That I can do." Vince smiled back and leaned down and into a soft kiss as his hips began to stir once again.

Beneath him, with his smile not having flagged in the slightest, Alan leaned up to meet it.

He was gone when Vince woke up.

They'd spent the better part of three hours tangled up together, only for exhaustion to eventually claim them both. Or, at least, to have claimed Vince. When he'd

last been awake, the fox had been in his arms and laying on his chest, the two of them sprawled out on the couch. Now, though? Now he was gone, and Vince was alone.

A glance at his watch showed it was almost five o'clock. Margaret wouldn't be home for another three hours or so, so there was no immediate need to get cleaned up. The couch was another matter, of course, but that was something that Vince could worry about when he got up. He sighed and slumped back against the couch again as he let an arm drape down to the floor.

It brushed through the rug there, but he frowned as it touched something paper. With a grunt, the raccoon rolled over to see what he'd found. It was a sheet of paper, probably from the printer nearby, with a message scrawled in black ink. One of the pens from his desk was also on the floor, right beside the note. Vince lifted the note up and rolled onto his back again as he held it above his head.

Dear Vince,

I'm sorry. I want to believe I could just do what you said and stay. Just be myself. Just be the guy you remember. I can't do that, though. Too much has changed. We've changed too much. I think I want to, but that's just not possible anymore.

Part of it's me. I don't know how to be this person you remember anymore. I left him behind nearly twenty years ago. I made myself someone else, something else, so that I wouldn't have to hurt anymore. And until today, I didn't. It worked. Seeing you here though, and being with you here, was too much. I just can't deal with that. The person I built for myself can handle it, but the person I was when you knew me couldn't. Being that other person is what I need, but it's got problems too.

Because the other part of it's you. You've got a future, Vince. You've built a life for yourself, and you're finally doing the work you always wanted to do. You're helping people. You're making a difference. You were right about your marriage being all about appearances and status. Even if I wanted to stay and be a part of your life, I can't. If you got involved with me and people found out who I was and what I've done? Well, it would be bad for everyone. You don't need to be attached to a criminal, and I don't need to drag your life through the mud.

I'm sorry I ran off back then. I'm sorry I'm running off today. I guess we just have to keep doing what we're good at and hope for the best. I want you to know that no matter what I've done since I knew you, no one was ever as good to me as you. You've always been the best person I've been with, and I'm glad you were first even with how things turned out. Other guys can take me, but you claimed me. I've never forgotten that, no matter how hard I've tried sometimes.

Thank you, Vince. For everything. Sorry, Vince. For everything else.

Love, Alan.

Vince closed his eyes as he lay his head back against the cushions. That answered some of his questions, but it left new ones burning in his mind. He did know for sure though that the fox was gone. Wearing his Alisha personality again perhaps, or maybe someone else.

But as he looked up at the note again as he inhaled deeply of the scent left on the couch from their tryst, he smiled. The signature was his old one, with his old name. His real name. Alan was still in there somewhere. Vince had had to leave, all those years ago. Alan had left now, but maybe not forever. Maybe, somehow, there was a way. Maybe he could find Alan again.

At least he knew the fox was out there, now. That was enough to work from. Whatever Alan had done, mistakes and all, was in the past. Vince knew he could set it right, and he smiled as he sat up. "Alright," he mumbled to himself as he brushed down his fur. "First step's to clean the couch. Second is to get dinner.

"Third step? I've gotta find that fox."