

Bue cut
m. fae glasgow

bene dictum VI

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a third season
due south slash zine

Due Cut by M. Fae Glasgow

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WARNING:

This anthology contains same-sex adult-oriented material (slash). It is intended for readers of legal age who understand the nature of the contents and wish to read them.

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M. Fae and I originally thought this was going to be an all Fraser/Kowalski zine. Then she sent me **Echoes** and we knew we had a third season zine instead. The stories are arranged chronologically by the episode they connect with, but they do not constitute any single universe or continuity of stories. The opening piece, **Unboxing**, could happen at many points during the Fraser/Kowalski period, but since it's a kind of variation on *Flashback*, we elected to place it after **Echoes**. Some of the pieces are labeled as canon balls. They are stories extrapolated from a specific line or action within an episode. We leave it to the reader to determine which lines of dialogue or events were the inspiration.

—Caroline K. Carbis, Editor

Echoes

a canon ball, set during Burning Down the House

He wasn't given to tossing and turning: it was a waste of energy, a waste of time, and guaranteed to make him foul-tempered. If he couldn't sleep, the best thing to do was simply get up, do something else, wait till he felt sleepy again.

At least, that's what all the experts said. The few times he'd had trouble sleeping, it hadn't mattered what he'd done: there hadn't been any chance of sleep, not till he'd cleared his mind.

And therein lay the problem, he thought, throwing a couple more branches on the fire, the flaring of sparks illuminating the wood like flurries of fireflies. He couldn't clear his mind despite the fact that he was out of the city, out of the crowds—out of the U.S., for that matter. There wasn't another person for miles if he didn't count Dief, although not counting Dief was always a dangerous choice.

But there were no two-legged people here and the only distractions were the sounds of nature. Not some sanitized city person's version of nature, the gentle zephyr dancing through the tree branches rustling the leaves, but the raw sounds he knew so well: some creature finding dinner, some creature becoming dinner; some animal finding a mate; another foraging amongst the roots of trees. The sound of a living forest, still more familiar to him than the noises of cities.

He shifted a little on his bedroll, making more space for Dief, smiling a little as his supposedly Arctic wolf edged in closer to the fire. "You'll burn your tail if you're not careful," he said quietly into Dief's direct line

6 Echoes

of sight. He was ignored, thoroughly and firmly, leaving him no distraction from his thoughts. Like his grandfather's old reel-to-reel, the phone call replayed itself in his mind, from the moment of shock when the constable had told him he had a phone call from Chicago—Ray had tracked him down? How? Why?—to the moment the line had gone dead, leaving him looking at the phone in something akin to stupefaction.

The phone call simply made no sense. Ray, tracking him down to an outpost he hadn't planned on stopping at, and all to tell him that Ray might not be there to pick him up at the train station upon his return? But—why call him now, why go to such extreme effort *now*, when Ray knew perfectly well that Fraser would be within easy reach of a telephone? In fact, he'd given Ray the number of the place he'd be staying at the night before his train left, headed south and east. Yet Ray had gone to enormous effort to track him down, before the end of his holiday, just to say... No, wait, it was more than that. Not just that Ray might be unable to pick him up, not just that specific thing, but...the conversation replayed in his head till he rewound to the right part, Ray's voice forming the words...that Fraser might be on his own for a while.

Which implied a great deal more than simply being busy the afternoon the train came in. Ray, with his oft-bemoaned family responsibilities, couldn't just 'take off' and leave everyone on their own—and while Ray complained about his family and his responsibilities both, he didn't shirk either or begrudge them.

Of course, it was always possible that Ray simply thought he might be very busy for a little while—but no, Ray would say that he wouldn't be around much: it had happened before, on a couple of cases Fraser couldn't be involved in and once when Ray's mother had been ill. Ray had simply told him he wouldn't be around, but Ray had still called when he had time and Fraser certainly hadn't been left on his own.

Semantics, he knew he was arguing semantics, but there was something about that phone call that troubled him—it echoed his last phone

call with his father, when he'd known something was wrong. At least this time, he'd asked. Not that it had done much good, Ray simply reassuring him, while the sadness and regret in Ray's voice had made it clear that Ray wasn't all right.

In fact, Ray hadn't actually answered him when he'd asked if anything was wrong; his question had been answered with another question, which was no answer at all.

Dief whuffed in his sleep, feet and nose twitching, no doubt in pursuit of some dream prey, and since Fraser valued his life, he'd never ever admit to the wolf that Dief looked...cute, like that.

Although he might tell Ray—who might not be there to meet him.
Or might not be there at all.

That was the true echo he was hearing. His father's voice, Ray's voice; he hadn't known it was the last time he would hear his father's living voice, and what was echoing hollowly through him now was his own fear that he might never speak to Ray again.

Which was just silly. Hadn't Ray gone to some lengths to reassure him that Ray would be in touch? For goodness' sake, if he couldn't depend on Ray Vecchio, if he couldn't trust Ray, then whom could he?

Ray might not be there, but Ray would be in touch.

As a friend.

That...niggled. Well, perhaps it irked him, just a little. Possibly even irritated him a fraction.

He stabbed the fire with a twig, and watched the flames flare and boil like anger.

Not that there had been any need for Ray to remind him that Ray would be in touch as a friend: Ray had been quite clear on the subject. More than clear.

That was another conversation that tended to replay itself in his mind, creaking from reel to reel and then back again.

These things happen.

8 Echoes

Natural course of things.

Let's just be friends.

I'll still love you.

And that last one was the real bear, for it was true—for both of them. He still loved Ray, always would, as Ray would always love him, in some fashion. Just not...as before.

As friends.

I will be in touch.

And his own voice, undistorted by the phone line: As a friend.

Even now, surrounded by the wilderness of his homeland, with a ticket to Chicago in his rucksack, he could hear the question in his own voice—the nearly forlorn sound of it.

Perhaps Ray had been right to emphasize that there would be only friendship between them in the future, as there had been in the past. Before Victoria. Before letting go had been an option. Before he had learned how to let go, with Ray's help.

Or perhaps, he thought frowning, it was more that he'd learned to let go using Ray. Even then, even all the way back then, there had been little doubts whispering in the back of his mind like naughty schoolchildren. How much his desire for Ray had been born of need—for Ray, for something, someone good in his life, a need to love as much as a need to be loved.

And now he wondered how much of Ray's passion had been an echo of his own loneliness, his own emptiness, his own need to heal and be healed.

Yet...yet...he could still remember the bone-melting thrill of spilling his seed inside Ray. Could still *feel* Ray inside him, long and thin and hot. Could still warm the loneliness away by remembering how it felt to kiss Ray, to be held by him—to be wanted by him.

Around the hearth stones, the dirt had scuffed away a little leaving gaps where an occasional flame spat out at him. He pushed the dirt back into place, feeling the fire too hot, too close to his face, his eyes dazzled

by the brightness for a moment. So far from the nearest town, farther from the nearest city, the sky was gloriously dark, although there were precious few stars to be seen through the clouds. No rain in them, though, he thought, sniffing the air. Just more heat, and humidity, and fresh, fresh air.

Not something Ray would enjoy, which was why Ray hadn't come along on holiday with him—although that had been simply a convenient excuse and they'd both known it. This was...a breathing space, done very nearly on the spur of the moment, a chance to put some distance between who they'd been to each other, who they were once again, and who they'd always be.

Friends.

For what they'd had—what they'd been, for a little while, not long enough—had been without a future. It'll all end in tears, a family saying passed down through God knew how many generations before it got to him, and it had been true for Ray and himself.

Fraser looked around, at dirt on the ground, tree boles, bare sky, and a rock to sit on, and tried to imagine Ray Vecchio here as a result of anything other than a plane crash.

Ray might come up here, but not for long—it certainly wouldn't be long before resentment on both sides set in. And if he stayed in Ray's milieu, it wouldn't be too much longer before Chicago became nothing more than the millstone that kept him from coming home. Even here, even within Canada, he felt the acid ache of homesickness; even here, he felt the pull of ice fields and the wild freedom of untrammelled lands. Even here in this supposed wilderness with its roads and outposts and hamlets that led to towns that led to cities, he could feel the hunger for the raw beauty that would always be home.

And they'd both known that Ray Vecchio could never be happy up there—very few could. Perhaps that had been when things had begun to shift back towards pure friendship between them again: friends could be

friends no matter how far apart, but lovers? Or perhaps, he thought, watching the flames dying down, slowly, slowly, an echo of the passion between Ray and himself, perhaps what changed was that neither of them despaired when the certainty of eventual parting became clear. They would cope; individually, they would cope. Their friendship would survive, and they, individually, would survive separation. Together or alone, they knew they'd survive, one without the other.

Another difference between them, the sort that pushes people apart instead of making them complementary, the missing part that makes a whole. He himself was quite pleased that he could let Ray go: after all, given his own past history, the less obsessive his feelings, the better. But Ray...Ray still believed in all-consuming love, in passion that couldn't be assuaged unless with that one special person. But for Fraser—what was the American saying? Been there, done that, got the T-shirt? Yes, that was it—and he had been there, done that, had the scar to prove it.

He couldn't imagine loving someone that way, not again, not without immediately going to have his head examined, because he'd been insane—Well no, he hadn't been truly insane. But he couldn't tell a hawk from a handsaw, nor friend from enemy, for he'd been mad with love and lust and need. And fear. So much fear. Of being left, abandoned, lost, of never being able to redress the wrong he'd done her, of not being good enough...of being alone again, not through choice, but because he'd been discarded like an old shoe. Alone could be cold, but lonely...lonely belonged with loss, as something all people suffer, but no one should have to endure.

And towards the end, with the gulf of Ray's citified nature and his own thin veneer of civilized living becoming ever more friable, even together they'd been lonely, each locked away, separate, discrete, their lives partitioned.

But their friendship had remained. A little tense at times, he would concede, but there. Rock solid, immutable, a foundation solid enough to build on.

Yet when he tried to think of them being lovers, he might as well try to catch a will-o'-the-wisp and put it in a jar. There were fleeting, floating images, moments plucked from his memory, already taking on the patina of 'the good old days.' Moments snatched here and there as if grafted onto what they really were, as if the kisses and the lovemaking were a foreign language, never quite mastered, already fading from the memory.

Still, though, he could remember what it was to lie together in the dark, keeping each other warm as the coldness of night fell, the city sounds dying to a grumbling, ill-tempered hum. They'd needed each other, but perhaps...perhaps they'd mistaken what they needed for what they could give. He'd wanted, so very much, to let Ray help him; had wanted, so much, to become himself again, after her. Had wanted, with a gut-clenching rawness, to make up for what he'd done.

Even thinking about it made him want to close his eyes and wish it had never happened, but it had: himself, leaving, with Ray's family home used as his bond because Ray had thought his word was his bond and that had been good enough for Ray. How could he ever make *that* right? How could he ever repay Ray, right the wrongs he'd done, heal the wounds and the damages he'd caused?

With love, of course. But friendship seemed too little, and there had been such need within him, such empty fear, such lonely misery, and so much desire—emotional as much as physical. And the whispering hope that he'd failed her, but here was another chance, someone else he'd hurt and wronged, and perhaps this time—*this* time—he would get it right. This time, maybe he'd be good enough, and decent enough, and man enough.

And his friend had been there, for him, as he'd been there, for Ray. Yin and yang, light and dark, the balanced scales of Justice, the two of them. For a while. A little while.

"I'll be in touch," Ray had said, this last phone call; "You keep in touch now, son," his father had said, that last phone call.

As friends. And if that left him longing for love as well as for home, then so be it. Friends. They would be friends, because that was worth more than sex, more than physical comfort, more than silly notions of finding someone to love the way his father still, to this day, loved his mother.

I'm just calling to let you know that you may be on your own for a while. Perhaps Ray simply meant that he had met someone—that he'd fallen precipitously in love, that Ray and his new someone would be together, and bringing the current friend and ex-lover into the mix wasn't a good idea.

Given the memories and the uneasy prescience Ray's phone call had stirred, someone new seemed like the best of a bad bunch of options. He would hope it was that. It was a hope he'd abandoned for himself: if he couldn't stay with Ray, then what chance did he have of ever finding someone? But to see Ray happy... That would be worth the hurt of seeing Ray with someone else.

So if he thought Ray had found someone else, if he thought that's all that was wrong, why was he still unable to sleep, unable to settle? Because Ray hadn't sounded like a man in love, or a man with a new lover: he knew that sound in Ray's voice, knew it in his smile, in the way Ray moved. And instead of happiness in Ray's voice, he'd heard a thin reediness of sadness, and worry—and fear.

There was no evading it or denying it: something was wrong. And Ray, like his father, didn't want—or need—him to help. Ray was a grown man, an experienced and heavily armed police officer. He should respect Ray's wishes, and Ray's independence.

But still the echo haunted him, and the similarities taunted him. He would be gladder than usual to see Ray, to know his friend was alive and well, that there was no Gerrard in Ray Vecchio's life. There was something going on, no doubt about that, and while he couldn't distrust his friend enough to race back to Chicago, he could give in to his own fears

just a little, and leave early. Tomorrow morning would do, and if all Ray meant was that he'd found someone new, well then—hearty congratulations would be in order, and what was the loss of a few days' holiday in support of a friend?

He could stay here in this delusion of solitude among land and trees and animals instead of hemmed in by tall buildings and cars and impatient, hurried souls—Ray had obviously wanted him to stay, to not curtail his vacation.

But his father's voice echoed in his mind, a mournful cry and a warning. He hadn't listened that time and look at the price paid. It would be different this time, he would make it different this time. This time, he would listen.

Fraser pulled his coat a little tighter around his shoulders, not at all sure if the chill was real or imagined, but completely certain that once again, his life was about to change. And out here, safe in his solitude and his seclusion, he was willing to admit that scared the hell out of him—it filled his head with foolish dreams and silly notions that made his heart beat just a little bit faster, but it scared the hell out of him too.

In the morning, he'd head back to Chicago and face whatever tomorrow would bring.



Unboxing

a reworking of elements of Flashback, set nebulously third season

With the number of times Fraser leapt or fell from upper-story windows, clambered around the exterior of fast-moving vehicles, ran unarmed after heavily armed (and frequently shooting) bad guys, got beaten up, attacked, knocked down and otherwise risked life and limb, the real surprise was that it took this long for him to suffer a real concussion.

It wasn't even in the pursuit of justice: he was in the grocery store with Ray, buying food for Dief, stocking up Ray's kitchen. Ray was insisting that they could live with a shopping cart that squeaked and pulled to the left, while Fraser was adamant that both problems would be solved if Ray would just stop pushing the cart for a second to allow Fraser to cut the string wrapped around one wheel.

And while Ray stood and contemplated which six pack of beer he should get this week, Fraser ducked down to free the wheel—as twin seven-year-olds came careening around the corner, complete with sound effects howled at full blast, playing Daytona 500 with the mini kids' carts so thoughtfully provided by the store.

Fraser was getting out of the way, fast, clambering up from the floor, when the silent little old lady swung sharply out of the way of the manic boys and hit Fraser squarely on his left temple with the corner of her cart.

And Fraser went down like a ton of bricks.

It was all pretty routine: scans, checks, conversations with doctors that convinced them Fraser's brain was undamaged but his mind was scrambled like eggs—in other words, the doctors were convinced Fraser was his usual self.

"Lichen?" the doctor was saying as Ray pushed through the door.

"It's really quite delicious. Although—"

The doctor and Fraser both stopped and looked at Ray. "So how is he, doc?" Ray said to the middle-aged woman.

"As far as we can tell, he seems to be pretty much...I've interviewed him before," she said quietly, taking Ray to the side, "and he doesn't seem to have deteriorated since then."

"I uh—I meant his current injuries from being clunked in the head by a full shopping cart."

"Oh, that. Oh, that's fine, possible minor concussion, take the usual measures," she said, writing one last note in Fraser's file and closing it.

She opened it again immediately when Fraser looked at Ray and said, "Who the hell are you?"

"We already covered that," Ray said, annoyed with Fraser choosing now to let his sense of humor loose. "I'm Ray Vecchio, remember?"

"You most certainly are not Ray Vecchio," Fraser said with a certainty that would do granite proud. "Ray Vecchio—"

"Fraser, are you serious?"

"Of course I'm serious. In fact," and now Fraser was sounding quite heated and the doctor was watching him very carefully indeed, "impersonating a police officer is a very serious crime."

"Only I'm not impersonating a police officer—Uh, doc, could you leave us alone for a minute?"

"No," she said, even more rock-solidly certain than Fraser. "He's obviously suffering some sort of amnesiac episode, and we need to check him out. Now, if you will leave us alone, please? I have a patient to examine."

And while Ray was still protesting, he was shoved out the door and left to wait in the corridor.

Eventually, they made it back to the car, mainly because Ray Kowalski was as willing as Ray Vecchio to lie to authority when necessary.

"So you really don't remember me?"

"I really don't remember you," Fraser confirmed, buckling his seatbelt. "And despite what your police ID claims, you are *not* Raymond Vecchio."

The doctor had been absolutely insistent that Fraser wasn't to be told facts, that Fraser was to be left to remember—or not—on his own.

But beneath the anger, Fraser was looking more than just confused: Fraser was looking scared.

Ray tried to imagine what it would be like to wake up in a hospital to find months and months and months of his life missing: it was bad enough coming up from being deep undercover and finding out how much had changed in his world while he'd been gone. It was bad enough even when he was just doing regular undercover, allowed the occasional discreet call home, or the even more carefully planned brief visit home to make the changes in your old life seem okay.

But Fraser was sitting there looking like he was scared as hell and confused and angry and...

"I'm not supposed to tell you nothing, right? Only no way am I going through the whole putty sandwich thing again."

"Putty sandwich?" Fraser repeated, looking at Ray with even more concern.

"You went on vacation, up to Canada—"

"I remember that! Ray called me, I took the train back, I walked from the station..."

Ray glanced over, and saw Fraser gazing out the window, his mouth slightly open as if the words had simply paused and would restart any second. But Fraser remained silent.

"You don't remember what happened next?"

"No," Fraser said, frowning. "I remember chastising Diefenbaker for being lazy, and then...I woke up in the hospital."

"And you didn't wonder why?"

"I had a head injury, I was confused. In fact—"

"Yeah?"

"No—it's gone. I think I'm actually conflating this memory loss with the last one."

"Only you could say something like that and be telling the truth. So you don't remember anything other than walking home?"

"Oh, great, that's just great. I have a deaf wolf and now I have a deaf impostor," Fraser snapped. "No, whoever-the-hell-you-are, I do not remember anything other than walking home."

Ray swallowed his reaction to the change in Fraser—voice, manner, language, even the familiar body language had taken a sharp turn—because this wasn't the time for him to get into all of that. Facts first, get Fraser settled first, *then* move on to his own shock. "Okay, okay. Listen, Ray Vecchio had to go undercover as a Mob guy."

"In the Mafia? Ray? But—but how could he? When I left, there'd been no mention of him going undercover, how could he—"

"Rush job," Ray said, hiding his own unease at the way the whole thing had happened. "Bad guy's the spitting image of Vecchio, bad guy gets killed in a car crash. Feds *carpe diem* all over the place, Vecchio's shoved under two days later, I'm pulled in six hours after that, a week later you get home. I think you've been filled in, you think the world's gone nuttier than you and you start feeding me putty sandwiches to prove I'm not the real Ray Vecchio."

"That's just silly, Ray. All it takes is one look at you and anyone could tell you're not the real Ray Vecchio. Why the hell did they bring you in to be him? You wouldn't fool anyone. You don't look like him, you don't dress like him, you don't walk or talk or—"

"Yeah, yeah, I get the message, I'm not the real Ray Vecchio and you don't know how much that makes my heart bleed. All I know is what they told me: they brought me in to be him so payroll and all the other paperwork would look the same and nobody would notice he was missing."

"Is he all right?"

Oh and that was a whole can of worms Ray didn't want to open: he'd been keeping quiet tabs on what his alter ego was doing in Vegas, but he had no idea if Fraser—in or out of what passed for Fraser's right mind—had a clue what Vecchio was having to do. "His cover's intact," Ray said.

"That's something, I suppose," Fraser said. "But it still doesn't answer my first question: who the hell are you?"

"Ray Kowalski," he said, shrugging off the doctor's nagging voice. "At least that's what I go by. My badge name is Stanley Raym—" He stopped mid-word, and thank God they were at a stop light, because Ray was staring, dumbfounded, at Fraser who was laughing his head off.

"Stanley Kowalski? My God, what possessed your parents?"

"My dad was a big Brando fan."

"Don't suppose you married a Stella?"

"Yeah," Ray said, hunching his shoulders, making himself small in a way he hadn't for years.

"You did? That's—"

Ray didn't even glance at Fraser.

"Oh, hell. I'm sorry, I shouldn't laugh, it's just..."

"Funny. Yeah, I heard all the jokes before."

"I meant, I'm sorry, I'm very...disconcerted."

Ray looked then, seeing the pallor of Fraser's lips, and the shock lingering behind his eyes.

"S okay," he said. "Old news anyway."

"In what way?"

"Divorced," Ray said, hands clenching on the steering wheel as pain ambushed him unexpectedly.

"I'm sorry," Fraser said, sounding so sincere it made Ray's eyes prickle.

"Me too," he said. "But you know that, you and me've talked about it. With who we were and all that, it couldn't last forever. You were the one who helped me realize me and Stella were finally finito, doneski. Splitsville was the best thing for both of us. Listen," he said, changing the subject deliberately, "we're near the station house, want to stop there, see if that jogs your memory?"

It was late, very late, and the station was almost deserted. Just walking through the swing doors into the somnolent squad room made Ray yawn, his fatigue suddenly made real, brought to the fore from where worry had pushed it.

"Ring any bells?" Ray asked, leaning one hip on his desk as Fraser looked around.

"Many," Fraser said, a small smile warming his face. "I have a lot of memories of this place, but—" The smile clouded into a frown. "But they're all of my time with Ray Vecchio. I don't... I don't remember this—" he pointed to the revealingly personal clutter covering Frannie's desk. "When did Francesca become a civilian aide? What happened to Elaine?"

"She's okay," Ray said immediately, recognizing the incipient fear in Fraser's voice. "She became a cop; she's over at the 14th now."

"Elaine, a police officer?" Fraser's smile was big and warm, infectious, and Ray found himself smiling back. "Oh, that's *wonderful* news! Her mother must be so proud of her, and what a fine example for her to set her younger brother. I bet she's a good cop."

"Yeah," Ray said, basking in the reflected warmth of Fraser's smile. "Yeah, she's a real good cop. You remember anything else?"

"Many things," Fraser said, turning in a slow circle, taking in every detail of the room. "But none of them here with you, and I don't recognize these wanted posters, or the information sheets. Or the names. Dewey?"

"Huey's new partner—shit! I'm not supposed to be telling you things. Okay, c'mon, let's get you home. Uh. No."

"Why the hell not?"

And that had to be the head injury talking, because itsure as hell didn't sound like Fraser. "Because uh..." How was he supposed to explain this without filling Fraser's memory in for him? "Because I'm supposed to wake you every coupla hours, and I'm not driving all the way over to your...place to do that."

They were in the car, halfway back to Ray's place, when Fraser's stomach rumbled.

"You want to wait till we get to my place, or you want to grab drive-thru?"

"Drive-thru," Fraser said, apparently not noticing Ray's double-take. "Look, there's one."

It was a a little mom-and-pop that hadn't been killed by the big chains yet, really just a diner with a drive-up window.

It wasn't as fast as a real drive-thru place, but the food was better, a fact borne home to Ray by the many times he'd stopped here.

"Ray, you can't drive and eat! Pull over."

"No, I'm—Fraser!"

Ray slammed the brakes on just in time as Fraser pulled the steering wheel and lurched them into a parking space in the diner's lot.

"Fraser, are you nuts? Oh, that's great, I'm asking the guy with the head injury and the swiss cheese brain if he's nuts. Of course you're nuts, just try not to be nuts when I'm driving, okay?"

"Geez," Fraser said, sounding aggrieved, "don't get your panties in a bunch. I was—"

But Ray wasn't really paying any more attention to Fraser's safety lecture than he usually did: he was still stuck back on Constable Benton Fraser talking to him about getting his panties in a bunch.

So much for Fraser not knowing every bit of slang ever said in front of him.

Oh, he was going to make the Mountie pay for this. Pay and pay and pay.

"You know, Ray," Fraser said around a mouthful of fries, "we should stop at my place and get me clean clothes and my kit."

"And your wolf?"

Fraser looked stricken. "Diefenbaker, my God, I forgot. Well, I didn't forget forget in the sense of amnesia forgetting—"

"We'd left him at the—there when we did the groceries, he's fine, we'll get him and your clothes."

"Thanks, Ray," Fraser said, patting Ray on the knee. "You're a good buddy."

Ray stared at the way Fraser had just shoved wrappers and left-over ketchup-drenched fries into the brown bag from the restaurant and dumped the whole thing on the floor. Of his GTO. Which he'd spent most of his free weekend detailing. "Oh, believe me, you've no idea just how good a buddy I am to you."

And Fraser gave him an odd look for that, but given how strange the situation was, that just seemed perfectly reasonable.

"I live here? Did I win the lottery?" Fraser said, staring out the car window at the dark edifice that was the Consulate. He jumped out of the car, face lighting up in the biggest smile. "Now this is what I call a solid home, this is somewhere that's not going anywhere any time soon. This," he placed his hand flat on the wrought iron fence that led to the path, "is a place a man can always depend on."

"Uh, Fraser," Ray said, hurrying to lock the car and catch up, "it's not like that..."

But Fraser wasn't listening to him: Fraser was heading towards the door—and then Fraser had come to a halt, at the plaque.

"Consulate?" he said to Ray.

"Uh, yeah. It's a long story—"

Fraser canted his head to the side, his gaze going distant. "Does it take precisely two hours to tell?"

22 *Unboxing*

"Five minutes, max. Short version, maybe a minute."

"But you can't tell me either version because of the doctor's orders and all the worry about corrupted memory and recessive memory failure, blah, blah, blah, right, yeah, gotcha. So, I live at the Canadian Consulate, which appears to have moved while I was on vacation," Fraser said, musingly. "I remember staying in staff residences at a couple of my postings—I guess they have staff quarters in this building."

Ray had no idea whether they did or not, and he was itching to tell Fraser, to warn him what was next. But he couldn't: maybe the shock of seeing the truth would be the thing that would trigger Fraser's memory. And he'd already broken the doctor's orders enough to have her coming after him with scary big catheters.

But he wished he could tell Fraser, because...well, because this Fraser was a hell of a lot more vulnerable than Fraser usually was. No—this Fraser was a lot more visibly vulnerable than Fraser. The old Fraser. So now they had the old Ray Vecchio and the new Ray Vecchio, and for the moment, they had the old Fraser and the new Fraser: who needed the Six Faces of Eve around here?

Ray opened the Consulate door the way he usually did, and got quite a look from Fraser; walking down the hallway, he could hear Fraser's footsteps echoing behind him, and even that sounded different. This new Fraser didn't walk with the old Fraser's nearly military precision. This Fraser...Ray glanced over his shoulder and stepped aside to let Fraser go round him.

"This is...uh..." How the hell could he explain this without filling Fraser's head full of Ray's version of Fraser's memories?

"This is my office? What the hell did I do to piss her off this time?"

Another little detail to be filed away and pondered later when Ray had time to wonder if this was the head injury again or if this was how Fraser thought all the time. "Not just your office."

Fraser looked at him.

"You...uh..." There was no way could he explain the whole performance artist you-lost-everything-in-a-fire thing, not without telling Fraser the whole story, and that wasn't going to help Fraser's memory any, but it was guaranteed to make Ray feel like a heel for being the bearer of bad news. "You live here too."

Fraser stepped into his office, and turned in a slow circle.

He turned around once more, then stopped, and faced Ray. Fraser stood there, just stood there, gape-mouthed, staring first at the office-cum-home and then at Ray. "I sleep in my office? Why? Am I being punished? Do I have some expensive vice that eats up my salary? Am I a raving lunatic?"

"Yes, don't know, no, not that you've mentioned and the jury's still out on that last one, Fraser."

"And why the hell does everyone call me Fraser? I mean—you, of all people, you'd think you could see your way to...well. I do have a first name, such as it is."

"Such as it is? Fraser, you *do* remember everything before you came home, right? I mean, which such is it?"

"Benton," Fraser said, sounding as if he were spitting out something too disgusting for even him to lick. "After my maternal grandfather."

"So it's not a name you'd've chosen for yourself?"

"Hell, no. I'd pick something simple, plain—something that blended in with all the other kids and didn't have adults looking at me and sniggering. Benton's so damned formal, it's only good for keeping people at arm's length, so even though I don't actually *like* 'Ben,' it's what my friends back home call me." Fraser was picking papers up from the neat outbox on his desk, rifling through them, frowning. "Although anything's better than the damned 'Frazier' I get from everyone. Why they call me 'Frazier,' I really don't know—it's not a difficult name, you'd think they could master those two little syllables, but no, it's Frazier, Frazier, Frazier."

Ray realized he was gaping à la Fraser and shut his mouth.

"Benny, Benton, Ben," Fraser said, shaking his head. "Pathetic, but at least it'd be better than Fraser, when it's from my own damned partner."

Amazing the things you learned about someone when their memory was AWOL. "Okay, Ben," Ray said, the name sounding weird and foreign, which meant it pretty much fit this version of Fraser like a glove, "this place isn't triggering any memories," and being here was upsetting Fraser, but Ray wasn't going to mention that, "so why don't you get your stuff and we'll head back to my place."

And it wasn't till Fraser had gone through the closet, the filing cabinets and all his desk drawers that Ray realized Fraser had found his clothes, but had no clue where he kept his toilet kit or his backpack.

"There's a bathroom down the hall," he said. "Beside the back door."

And when Fraser just looked at him in helpless, lost confusion, Ray added, "Follow the exit signs."

At least Fraser fully remembered Dief, who was out in the pocket yard at the back of the Consulate, hunting squirrels.

Ray stood at the top of the half flight of stairs and watched as Fraser knelt down and hugged Dief. There was no other word for it: that was a genuine, heartfelt hug if ever Ray had seen one. Small wonder: at least Dief was unchanged—unmoved by claims of head injuries and bitching about the tardiness of meals—which was pretty much the only thing that probably seemed the same for Fraser. Ray hadn't missed the way Fraser had eyed the black GTO, nor the Bathing Boutique that had replaced the old deli four months ago. And especially not the way Fraser had been eyeing the Ray that had replaced Vecchio.

But Dief was the same now as five months or five years ago, and Ray waited, fairly patiently, while Fraser went through some sort of re-bonding with the wolf that involved Fraser apologizing to the wolf even more than usual.

Eventually, Dief was mollified (thanks to Ray's promise of donuts later), Fraser was packed, and they made it to Ray's place without much more

difficulty than Fraser risking whiplash trying to keep track of the things that had changed.

Ray took Fraser's rucksack and dumped it in the bedroom, while Dief climbed into the red chair that no one else sat in any more. Fraser stood still for a moment, then started walking around, looking at things. "D'you mind if I look around?" Fraser asked, belatedly.

"You're here most—Uhm. I guess that's one of the things I'm not supposed to tell you. Mi casa es su casa, Fra—Ben. Benton. Joe? Mac? Dave?"

Fraser laughed out loud—not something Fraser did often enough—and pulled Ray in for a one-armed hug, which was a bigger shock than all the hells that had been coming out of Fraser's mouth. "Maybe since things come in threes, I should start calling myself 'Ray' too. It's short, easy to remember, doesn't sound like a grandfather..."

"And it's already taken. Go ahead and have a look around—maybe something'll trigger your memory."

Fraser walked around slowly, occasionally leaning forward to peer at a photograph, or pausing to pick up one of Ray's knickknacks, or checking Ray's collection of CDs and videos.

"Anything?"

"Apart from being appalled by your taste in music and impressed by your taste in classic films? No, not yet."

"Nothing at all?"

"It feels...cozy.Very homey."

"Should be, you spend—damn, that's still on the don't ask, don't tell list." Fraser—Ben—gave him a sharp, inquisitive look for that. "So uh...you want to feed Dief or go for a walk? Or how about we drive round a few places you know?"

"Driving around is an excellent idea—Ray. But I should feed Dief first." Fraser headed for the kitchen, and just as Ray was beginning to

hope some memory lingered, Fraser stopped and turned back to Ray. "Where will I find Dief's food?"

"Same place as—" Ray winced. "Ouch. Sorry. Cupboard beside the dishwasher. There should be enough for tonight and tomorrow morning."

Fraser poured food into Dief's bowl—painted with paw prints in the same black and white as Ray's cow dishes—then straightened. "I need to get to a grocery store..."

"Oh no, that is how this whole thing all started. I will go to the grocery store, *you* will stay here. Or sit in the car or take Dief for a walk but you are not, I repeat, *not* coming back in the grocery store till you remember.

"But Ray—"

"But me no buts, please me no pleases, I'll pick up Dief's food and the rest of the stuff on the list."

That triggered something in Fraser and Ray stood, car keys in hand, paused, waiting...but then Fraser blinked, and shook his head and whatever Fraser had been thinking, it hadn't been old memories coming back.

"You stay here—"

"No, Ray, I should come with you, have a look around."

"Okay, but you don't get within ten feet of any little old ladies with shopping carts, okay?"

They'd driven through streets Fraser knew, but not with this particular Ray; Fraser had waited outside the grocery store with Dief, leaning against the wall like Canada's answer to James Dean, nodding politely at people as they passed to and fro. As soon as Ray was safely inside and out of sight, Fraser was, of course, helping little old ladies and little old men and tall young mothers with kids—and even one singularly affectionate young man who had invited Fraser into his home and his car for the ride of his life—load their bags of groceries into their cars.

When Ray came back out of the store, he helped Ray too, the two of them moving together smoothly, both in the parking lot and later, at Ray's apartment.

It was the box of herbal tea that gave Fraser pause. "Ray?"

"Yeah?" Ray said, where he was half-buried putting away ice cream and frozen meals.

"You like green tea?"

"Hell, no."

"But it's my favorite."

"Which is why," Ray took the box from Fraser's hand and put it in the drawer beside the coffee filters and Fraser's imported tea bags, "when you used the last teabag from the last box, we put it on the list."

Fraser had that look on his face again, the familiar expression of a cop trying to put clues together.

"Stop trying so hard," Ray said, gentling his voice. "You don't remember, but don't beat yourself up over it. You'll get your memory back eventually."

"And if I don't?" Fraser asked, sounding unexpectedly small, and unexpectedly scared.

"Then you'll deal," Ray replied, shrugging it off, making it something minor, something manageable—although his eyes were warm with concern. "You'll deal, I'll deal, we'll all deal. We'll get you through it. Anyway, look on the bright side."

"Which is *what*, for God's sake?"

Ray winked at him, patted him on the shoulder. "Less to lose when Alzheimer's hits."

"Now Ray, that's just not funny—"

But Fraser was smiling, and the fear had left his eyes, and that was pretty damned good, considering.

Fraser had spent so long in the shower, Ray was beginning to get worried, thinking dire and dreadful thoughts about concussion and dizziness

and nausea. But the shower finally shut off, and after a while Fraser came out, wrapped in the terry bathrobe Ray usually reserved only for the coldest mornings.

"You okay?"

"I checked my eyes in the mirror, Ray: no signs of concussion."

"I'm still gonna check you every coupla hours," Ray said, pugnacious and determined, making it clear there was no point in Fraser even considering arguing the point.

Not that Benton Fraser—pre- or post-concussion—ever backed down from being muleheaded. "I'm perfectly capable—"

"Of what? Setting the alarm, waking yourself up and checking your eyes and asking yourself questions?"

"Well, yes."

"And how will you know if you're making any sense? It's gonna sound like sense to you, because if you're concussed, you won't be able to tell the difference, right, and on top of that, how will you know if you don't wake up quick enough every time?"

"Ray, I'm fine—"

"You know that, I know that, but tell that to your concussion. You were out, completely out," and Fraser lying there like the dead wasn't something Ray wanted to dwell on. "And when you woke up, you didn't even remember me! I'm checking you, so quit bitching at me and get to bed." Fraser just stood there staring at him, so Ray gave Fraser a push, angling him towards the bedroom. "Go on, get. I'll be through in a minute as soon as I get water."

Ray gave Fraser one last small shove, and headed for the kitchen. He returned, a few moments later, with a glass in one hand, the pills Fraser's doctor had given him in the other, and Dief in tow.

Dief stretched, then jumped up onto the bed, Fraser darting a look at Ray, who wasn't the least bit bothered by the wolf settling down to sleep on the bed—it sure as hell wouldn't be the first time Dief had

sacked out here while Ray and Fraser had read files or watched movies in the living room.

Ray stuck his hand out, two small pills resting on his palm. "I am tired, I am pissed off, and I make a lousy nurse, so don't fight me on this," Ray said, standing over Fraser who was tucked neatly into bed. "Just take the damned pills."

And surprisingly enough, Fraser took the pills without hesitation, swallowing them down dry, with half the glass of water as a chaser—then Fraser was coughing, and staring, as Ray climbed into bed beside him.

"You think I'm going to take advantage of an injured man? Christ, I know I was desperate enough to date the chick who passed bad checks, but I'm not *that* desperate," Ray said, half stung and half intrigued at actually seeing some of what passed through Fraser's head—although being looked at like Frannie on the make was...not high on his list of fun things, he discovered. He turned his back on Fraser's wariness, making a production of setting the alarm. "But waking up every two hours is as far as I'm willing to go—no way am I going to subject myself to that couch and stumbling through here in the cold."

"Am I asking you to wake me up?" Fraser said snippily. "No, I'm not and in fact, I'd prefer—"

Ray's only response was to turn the lamp off, and pull the covers up over his head. And if Fraser wanted to keep yakking at him, then let him: Ray was going to get *some* sleep tonight, he wasn't going to lie awake thinking, and he sure as hell wasn't going to think about the way Fraser had just looked at him.

Two o'clock in the morning, when the world sleeps, and the night is deepest, and darkest, and the cold the bleakest. Ray knew better than to shake someone who's had a concussion, so he repeated what had worked two hours earlier: he leaned over, speaking softly but insistently, voice

gradually getting louder until it was enough to wake Fraser without startling him.

"You awake?"

Fraser groaned.

"What's your name?"

"We've already covered that, Ray. I'm fine—"

"Any blurred vision?"

"It's pitch dark in here, how the hell am I supposed to tell?"

"Damn," Ray said, reaching for the lamp—remembering how that had made Fraser wince and turn away sharply the last time. "Wait a minute, hang on—"

The room was a dim blur around him as he crossed to the door, then Ray was standing, limned in brightness, hand shading his eyes from the glare of the hall light.

"That better?" Ray said, getting back into bed, feet cold, skin prickling as the warmth of the sheets eased his goosebumps.

"Yes," Fraser said, looking oddly at Ray. "You're..."

"Tired and wishing I was asleep," Ray said, resisting the urge to burrow into the expanse of warm body beside him, a sure cure for cold feet and chilled skin. "So let's get through this fast so we can both get some sleep. You got blurred vision? Nausea? Confusion? Headache?"

"I'm fine, Ray."

"Good, that's—" Ray broke off, yawned enormously, blinked slowly. "Uh—alarm, gotta set the alarm..."

And then Ray was once more under the covers, asleep almost immediately, only vaguely aware that Fraser lay awake, bathed dimly in the light from the hallway.

At 4:05, when the checks had been run through and Ray was once more sprawled face-down under the covers, he thought he felt something—maybe Fraser getting settled, or something. There was a noise,

too, familiar, but sleep was tugging at him, pulling him under. An hour and fifty-five minutes before the alarm would go off and he'd have to check Fraser—he'd figure the noise out later. When he woke up. When he wasn't so sleepy...

Around 9:15, there was a distinct thud from the bedroom, followed by a not quite so distinct curse word, and right on cue, Ray stomped into the living room, hands on hips.

"You're a sneaky bastard," he grumbled.

"I admit to the sneaky," Fraser said cheerfully over his shoulder. "Coffee?"

"In a minute," Ray mumbled, and came back shortly, dressed this time in beat-up old jeans and a loose sweatshirt, feeling better equipped to deal with a fully-dressed, completely awake Benton Fraser. "You said coffee?"

"Hmm, yes," Fraser said, pointing the spatula at the coffee maker. "How d'you like your eggs?"

Ray followed the mingled scents of coffee and—bacon?—and leaned over to see what was in the frying pan. Not just bacon, but sausages and, for reasons that probably made sense in Fraserland, sliced mushrooms, all of it sizzling to browned perfection.

"I love you," Ray said reverently, inhaling the scent of frying food. "Fried."

Fraser was standing staring at him. "You love me fried?"

"Eggs, I want my eggs fried."

"And the rest of it?" Fraser asked sharply.

Ray shoved his hands into his pockets, stepped back out of Fraser's personal space. "Forget I said that, okay? It's a joke—only you don't remember and I'm not supposed to tell you. So uh..."

"I'll just...forget that you love me?"

Ray grinned at him, poured himself a cup of coffee. "You shoulda seen Welsh's face the first time I said that to you in front of him."

"Which was..."

But no, despite the hopeful beginning, there was no memory dawning on Fraser's face, just frowning concentration and a sudden jerk as the sausages sputtered and spat in the pan, splashing hot fat on Fraser's hand.

"You know, Ben, this remembering that you don't remember and I'm not supposed to remind you is a lot harder than I thought it'd be."

"The not remembering isn't exactly a cake walk."

"Yeah, I know," Ray said softly, resting his hand on Fraser's shoulder for a moment, squeezing the tensed muscles. "But you'll get your memory back, and if you don't..." Ray shrugged. "You'll have to make new ones, that's all."

Which was reassuring, no doubt, but Fraser still hadn't relaxed by the time they'd finished breakfast and headed out to face the world again—and Ray had run out of things to say..

They'd toured several places, with Fraser remembering most of them—from before. Nothing, not a single place or person or thing, from after the head injury.

Ray had brought them to the Consulate, where Fraser was going to work for a couple of hours, the hope being that routine paperwork would lull his mind into letting the lost memories resurface.

"I'll pick you up around two," Ray said from the doorway.

Fraser held the door open, a cold draft sweeping in from outside. He tugged Ray's coat more firmly shut, muttered something about being dressed for spring not winter.

"It's okay, Mom," Ray said, grinning. "I got my mittens in the car."

"Sorry, Ray, it's just..."

But Fraser trailed off, the frown back, the confusion back, shoulders slumping under the press of worry, his forehead creasing.

There was nothing Ray could say that he hadn't already said, so he sighed, touched Fraser lightly on the arm and repeated, "You, me, here, two P.M., on the dot."

Ray ran down the short flight of stairs, but after he'd unlocked his car he stopped, and for a long, long moment, he stood there, looking up at Fraser who looked so displaced and uncomfortable standing in the doorway of the Consulate.

Then Fraser gave him a half wave, the door was shut, and Ray could do nothing but drive away, and leave Fraser to wrestle with his forgotten past.

When he'd picked Fraser up, Ray hadn't even needed to ask.

"Nothing," Fraser said anyway. "Nothing complete, nothing actually worth a damn. I remembered how to fill in the forms, even the new ones, and how to use the new photocopying machine, although I didn't remember which room it was in."

"But nothing personal?"

"No," Fraser said, then shifted.

Ray caught that out of the corner of his eye. "Spill it."

"There's nothing to—"

"I know you don't know me, but I know you, and I know when you're lying. Spill."

It took a moment before Fraser spoke. "Turnbull brought me in a cup of tea and we were talking about the whole mess. And..."

"C'mon, c'mon, don't make me die of waiting."

Fraser flashed him a sharp look, opened his mouth—then shook his head. "For a moment, I thought...but no, it's gone."

"Like having a word on the tip of your tongue?"

"Well, no, Ray—I never have trouble remembering a word, that's—"

Another of those sharp looks, fading into distant thoughtfulness.

As best he could, Ray waited; he pulled into the parking lot at the precinct, drove around a few times before he finally found an empty space round the back near the trash. He cut the engine, and throttled the urge to nudge Fraser, to ask Fraser, to do anything but sit there silently and wait.

Fraser shook his head, his eyes coming back into focus. "There was something, Ray, I nearly had it, something about you, and waiting. Or dying. But—okay, Turnbull. We were talking, and since he didn't want to risk filling in any of the blanks in my memory, he started discussing curling—"

"No fair, torturing an injured man."

Fraser gave him a glower, and kept right on talking. "At some point, I joined in, and..."

"And?"

"I remembered watching it with him at the Consulate. I was partly out of uniform, Inspector Thatcher was elsewhere—I didn't remember where, just that she wasn't there—Turnbull had brought in tea and sandwiches and I remember watching it with him."

"That's good," Ray said, sounding less than sure of that. "I mean, it's good that you're remembering something but—okay, so why are you telling me this like it's a bad thing?"

"It's not a bad thing per se, Ray, it's simply... I find it disturbing that I remember curling, but not..." Fraser's eyes met Ray's, shards of honesty. "But not you."

"But it makes sense. I happened *after* your memory split—I came after the whole coming home and finding out you don't have a home any more, and that your best friend's gone."

"That's what's bothering me," Fraser said softly, gazing out the window at the cars separating them from the main parking area. "In amnesia caused by a head blow, it's common not to remember the cause of the head injury or the period immediately prior to that. But..."

"But you," Ray said into Fraser's silence, "don't remember from the second things turned bad on you."

"I wouldn't put it like that."

But Ray would, because Ray wasn't trying to protect someone else's feelings; Ray wasn't trying to make Ray feel okay about this whole thing.

He ran his fingers over the steering wheel; didn't dare look at Fraser, cringed when he heard how hurt his own voice sounded. "So you think you're trying to forget all the shit?"

"Or it could simply be that's the period affected, and remembering watching curling with Turnbull is simply the first of my memory returning."

"Call me a masochist, but I'm going to ask again. Why'd you tell me that as if it was bad news?"

Fraser picked lint off his jeans, scratched at a loose thread in the seam. "Because you were there, Ray."

Ray sucked in a sudden, shocked breath, Fraser's words hitting him hard, much harder than he expected. Volpe. Ray's freedom and then his life on the line, and the very first time he'd trusted Fraser to an extreme. But all Fraser could remember was...curling. "You didn't remember me?"

Fraser, still not looking at Ray, shook his head mutely.

"But if you're wiping out all the bad stuff, that's why you don't remember me."

"Ray!"

He didn't like it, didn't like one bit of being part of the bad stuff, but it wasn't his fault, not this time. "C'mon, Fraser, this isn't rocket science, we are not playing Einstein here. I symbolize your best buddy being gone." It didn't make Ray happy, but it made sense. "I was all tied in with Greta Garbo torching your home and destroying all your stuff, so I get erased. Makes sense."

"No, it doesn't. Ray, we're obviously close, I'm *happy* with you, I feel..."

Ray turned then, to look at Fraser, who was lost for words.

"Ray, I can't believe that you're something I want to erase from my past. No, remembering some of that day simply proves that my memory is returning," Fraser said heartily, and his smile was almost convincing. "The doctor said it could return in dribs and drabs, then all at once, or piecemeal over time. We'll just have to wait to see which one it is."

"Wait," Ray said, punching the steering wheel just once, but hard. "I hate fucking waiting."

But wait they did, all through Fraser helping Ray with his paperwork, not a single page of which was the Rosetta Stone of Fraser's memory.

There was still some daylight left when Ray called it quits and admitted defeat: Fraser had spent the last hour more and more distracted, humming and ah-ing and saying not much else of anything. When Ray asked flat out what was going on, Fraser simply blinked and refocused, as if coming back from somewhere far away—and then it was 'hmm' or 'ah' or 'nothing, Ray,' followed by Fraser smiling at him, almost... At the risk of sounding like a reject from Hallmark, Ray was willing to admit that Fraser was smiling at him almost...sweetly. But then Fraser would go back to going through file after file, that same peculiar, distant look on his face.

There were some things a man couldn't be expected to endure, and that was one of them: the other was Frannie giving some spiel about tactile memory and how she would be oh so happy to help Fraser any way she could.

At that point, Ray slammed his hand on the desk, grabbed his coat and keys, and hauled Fraser out of there, 'thank you kindlies' floating in their wake.

It wasn't until the two of them were sitting in the car, engine running, that he finally asked, "Where now?"

Fraser rubbed his eyebrow. "I'm the one suffering from memory loss, Ray, how the hell should I know?"

"Maybe I should just go upstairs and tell Frannie to come on down and lend you a helping hand."

"Hell, no," Fraser said. "Ray—the other Ray—would kill me if I took advantage of his sister, especially while he's gone."

"Take advantage? Who's taking advantage of who here? She practically stripped you up there!"

"Oh, for God's sake, Ray, of course I'd be taking advantage of her."

"I could see that, I really could—if maybe Frannie was a blushing shy maiden, which I don't think she ever was."

"Just because she's sexually experienced doesn't mean I wouldn't be taking advantage of her."

Ray just looked at Fraser, trying to connect this sexually frank Ben with the Fraser who would, after a fashion and after months and months of Ray pushing him on matters personal and sexual, admit that he'd been kissed.

"Think about it, Ray," Ben was steamrolling on, hands gesticulating as if that would make Ray understand. "She's convinced herself she's in love with me, that if she waits long enough, I'll turn into her knight in shining armor and sweep her off to a suburban house with four bedrooms and three kids."

"Yeah? And?"

"And she knows there's not a snowball's chance in hell that'll ever happen. But I'm safe, I'm someone she can put all her energies into, instead of getting hung up on some 'bad boy' bastard like her ex-husband or—or dating that creep Guy Rankin or—"

"Wait a minute," Ray said, turning in his seat, putting his hand on Fraser's chest. "You just said Guy Rankin."

Fraser closed his eyes for a moment. "Ray, please forget I even mentioned that name. Francesca told me something in confidence, I can't believe I just blabbed—"

"When did she tell you?"

"Ray, I'm right beside you, there's no need to shout!"

Which, of course, only made Ray raise his voice even higher. "When! It's important, *when* did she tell you about Guy Rankin?"

Fraser met Ray's intense stare levelly. "We were in the corridor, the one right outside Interview Room 1, it was a Tuesday..."

"And? C'mon, c'mon, think about it. What else d'you remember?"

"I...I..." Fraser was frowning, eyes cloudy with dismay and confusion. "I don't remember! It's—I can see her earrings, she was wearing her hair differently from the way she is now, she told me about Ray and Guy Rankin and...that's it, Ray."

Ray dropped his head forward, nearly touching Fraser. "Damn," he said. "I really thought..."

"I take it Guy Rankin relates, in some way, to you?"

"Yeah," Ray said wearily, straightening back up again. "But if it's not there yet, it's not there. Anyway, it's something you associate with Ray Vecchio." He blew out a breath, tapped his fingers on the steering wheel, glowered out the windshield at the detective parking his car quite innocently opposite them. "So I guess I should start driving you around some more, see if we can find something to jog your—I know! I know exactly where to take you!"

And of course, because he wasn't allowed to fill Fraser's memory in for him, Ray didn't tell Fraser where they were going till they got there, which wasn't until after they'd dropped Dief off with Turnbull because Dief hadn't been with them that night.

Ray should've waited till dark, but it was as cold as that night, with as little wind blowing off the lake, and it was just as quiet.

"You stand there—no, right here, and turn towards me, yeah, like that. And I was here." Satisfied they were exactly the way they'd been the night the dead pirate had dropped on his car hood—and how weird was life around Fraser when Ray could say that?—Ray stood on the edge of the wharf and looked expectantly at Fraser. "This seem familiar?"

"I'm not sure. There's something, but..."

"Something, yeah, something here, right here, on this very spot. No? Okay, so we were here, because of something I did, and then you did something to me, then we started back to my car—no, you were here—and then we got in my car—"

Ray suited action to words, seating himself, waiting while Fraser got into the car slowly, almost meditatively.

"And then...? We got in the car, then what happened?" Ray asked, twisting around in his seat till he was facing Fraser.

Fraser, who had that distant look on his face again, as if there were words dancing on the tip of his tongue, as if he could all but taste the misplaced memories.

And as the first warm brilliance of sunset began to paint the sky outside, joy dawned on Fraser's face, in his eyes.

"Ray—I remember! I remember something, quite clearly, very distinctly. You were splitting us up, you said it was over, finished—My God, Ray, what were you thinking?"

But before Ray could answer, Fraser was rushing on, words spilling from him like rain as if the memories were flooding him. "And another time—we were in a...mausoleum?" Fraser asked, looking to Ray for confirmation of this bizarre fact. "Yes, oh, Ray, I remember! We were in a mausoleum, and there was a stone angel, and a grey-haired woman, and you—" Fraser beamed, then sighed. "I'm so glad I'm remembering," Fraser said softly, "I thought I was going insane."

"You're too unhinged to go insane," Ray said, beaming from ear to ear. "All your memories are coming back?"

"Something about...camping out?"

"Yeah, you dragged me out into the parks a few times—"

"No, not a park," Fraser said, concentrating, eyes narrowed as he tried to catch the memories. "It was...a back yard?"

"A back yard?"

"I'm sure of that—you came up behind me with your comforter and pillow, snuggling up to me."

"The Luanne Russell Sword of Desire case!" Ray said, thumping Fraser lightly on the shoulder. "Yeah, it was cold as—uh—it was cold and you didn't have a fire lit."

"And am I remembering this correctly? In the Consulate, in front of Turnbull...I stripped?"

"Yeah," Ray said happily. "I thought you didn't have anything for me, so you pulled your trousers down to show me what you had."

"That was—" Fraser shook his head, bemused. "Wait—Guy Rankin. Oh my God, Ray, I remember Guy Rankin. We were in the interview room, trying to stop—damn, I can't remember his name. A young black man, arrested on suspicion of stealing a car. We were trying to stop him from revealing the presence of a dead body. Dead body moving—on a ship, we were on a ship, and it was sinking. You nearly drowned and I..."

Fraser stopped then, and for once, Ray was content to wait, because Fraser was remembering, it was working—the end was in sight, and any minute now, Fraser would be back to his old self, because Fraser was remembering all the way up to the Henry Allen.

Unfortunately, Ray didn't think to tell Fraser that. Fraser looked at Ray, and said, softly, tenderly: "Oh, Ray, my poor Ray, this must've been so hard for you."

And then, very unlike his old self, Fraser leaned forward, and kissed Ray. Right on the mouth. In fact, right *in* the mouth, pushing his tongue in with confidence and assurance and a fair bit of demanding passion.

Ray froze, then panicked, then squawked and pushed Fraser off.

"Oh come on, Ray," Ben said, more than a little miffed. "It's not as if we're in the middle of the street or I'm holding your hand in the squad room. It's just a little kiss, nice and discreet—"

"Discreet? You stuck your tongue halfway down my throat! Fraser, we are in a car—my car, the car my dad babied and brought all the way from Arizona—in the middle of a parking lot when it's still daylight and you just *kissed me!*"

"Oh, I take it we're both still in the closet then?" Ben asked, sneering. "Stupid, if you ask me, which you probably didn't, because if I had any say, we wouldn't be skulking around like criminals."

"We are not skulking around like anything," Ray said, looking around to make sure no one had seen them. "I'm telling you, we aren't anything."

Fraser tapped the side of his nose in their old signal, and winked at him. "Got it, Ray. It's all right, I won't do anything else till we get home." Ben stopped and eyed Ray, his mouth slightly open in the most suggestive smile this side of Mata Hari. "We are going straight home, aren't we? After all," Fraser lowered his voice and leaned a little closer to Ray, "the doctor said I *should* go to bed."

"And sleep, and be wakened up every coupla hours and that's what we're going to do," Ray insisted, fending Fraser off again. "Fraser, we are *not* kissing cousins, we're *buddies*."

"Fuck buddies?" Ben said, sounding eager.

If Ray hadn't been sitting down, he'd've fallen over, and there was a childish little voice inside his head still reeling because Fraser had said 'fuck.'

"Because I thought—" Fraser said, and all the certainty of his memories fled as quickly as it had arrived, Fraser's expression sliding back into confusion. "But—don't I distinctly remember holding your hand in an alleyway? Yes—we did, I *do* remember that—you said you'd got the girl. But we were holding hands. In broad daylight."

"Yeah, but it wasn't like that," Ray said, scared of what would happen if Fraser remembered *wrong*—the doctor hadn't said a single what to do if Fraser started remembering things *wrongly*. "You'd hurt your back, I was helping you up..."

"And we just happened to end up holding hands?" Fraser said, dripping sarcasm. "I suppose we just happened to end up kissing?"

"What?" Like that was something he'd forget! "When?"

"Our lives were at risk," Fraser said quietly, gaze focused clear and sharp on Ray. "We were trapped on a sinking ship in lake water cold enough to impair even a strong swimmer, and yet..." Fraser leaned forward, closer, closer, closer, till they were almost forehead to forehead, just a breath apart. "And yet we took the time to share a kiss."

"That wasn't a kiss," Ray said, pulling back a little, just far enough to look at Fraser suspiciously. "You said it was buddy breathing."

"Mouth to *mouth*?" Fraser asked, incredulously. "Without covering your nose? Oh, I hardly think—"

"Fraser, which one of us got whacked on the head and lost his memory? I'd know if you'd kissed me—I'd remember something like *that* and I asked you, I asked you and I asked you about that thing on the Henry Allen, and you explained the whole buddy breathing thing to me. Believe me, you made—you made it real clear that wasn't a kiss."

"I thought I'd kissed you," Fraser said, looking and sounding lost. "But if you say..." Fraser ran a finger round his collar and turned to look out the car window. "My mistake," he said stiffly. "I'd thought...my reaction...well. My apologies, Ray. I won't step over that line again. Shall we?"

Ray started the engine, and started driving, because he didn't know what the hell else to do. Fraser sat there beside him, unmoving, gazing fixedly out of the window, his face averted.

As the sky darkened, Ray could see more of Fraser's reflection in the car window; he didn't need to see all the details, not when the set of Fraser's shoulders and the cast of his mouth spoke so loudly.

"I'm sorry," Ray said, and it was a moot point whether he was apologizing because they hadn't been lovers, or because Fraser's 'reaction' had led Fraser to think they had been. And Ray thought about that revelation all the way back to his apartment.

"I still think I should go back to the Consulate," Fraser said as soon as Ray had locked the deadbolt.

"And I told you, I don't think you should be by yourself—you shocked the hell outta me, Fra—" Ray stopped and looked at this man standing in his living room, as Fraser had so many times. "Ben," he said, starting again, using the name that fit better than 'Fraser' did, "you weren't ex

pecting me to react the way I did, and you thought you were remembering, so you must be..." Well, Ray wasn't entirely sure what Fraser must be, but he knew that he himself was badly shaken. He'd had no idea, not a clue that Fraser thought of him...like that.

"You don't need to wake me to check I'm all right, so I think I should go back to the Consulate."

"You're not okay, okay? You're not remembering right—or maybe you are remembering right, for you, it's just not the same way I remember it."

"You mean—you think I've felt this way for a while and you didn't know?"

"Yeah," Ray said, sagging down onto the couch. "I guess that's what I'm saying."

"Sorry," Fraser—Ben—said. "I just—I don't know. I could be confused, my memories could be scrambled like eggs, I could..."

"Be remembering exactly the way things were, according to you. I had no clue, Ben—no fucking clue at all.

"Well," Ben rubbed a thumb across an eyebrow, an aching familiar sight for Ray. "Perhaps I should've been more forthcoming." There was a bitter little smile then, just for a moment, before real humor sparked in Ben's eyes. "Although given your reaction, perhaps I was doing the right thing!"

And that said things about Ray he didn't exactly like. "You think I'm a homophobe?"

"No," Ben said without hesitation, which tamped Ray's temper. "If you were, you'd punch me or—Ray?"

"Yeah," Ray said, getting to his feet, running his hands through his hair. "I punched you. That's why I took you to that wharf today."

"You took me to where you *punched* me?"

"To where you punched me back," Ray corrected, snagging a beer for himself and a tomato juice for Fraser. "I wanted to make it even-steven because I couldn't undo what I'd done." And it had hurt less to be hit by

Fraser than to remember the look in Fraser's eyes when he'd punched Fraser by the lake.

Ray returned to the couch, and they sat, side by side, drinking silently for a while.

"You want to pick up Dief?"

"Sure—damn, we can't, Turnbull will be asleep by now."

Sleep. That sounded good.

"Perchance to dream," Ben said, making Ray shiver—it was seriously weird to have Fraser with warped memories but still have Fraser able to finish Ray's thoughts. "But at least it'll be a break from all this...remembering."

"And after all that waking up last night, I'm beat." Ray got to his feet, hesitated for just a moment, then said: "You okay sharing with me, even though you've remembered you..."

"Have a severe case of unrequited love for you?"

And that was way more truth than Ray wanted to deal with right now. "I'm going to bed—to sleep," he said. "You can sleep through there with me, or in here."

"And if I come to your bed?"

When did Fraser develop a voice sweet as honey and rough as velvet rubbing against his cock? Or maybe Fraser'd always had that voice, and it was just Ben letting it loose on Ray. "Sleep," he said, heading for his bedroom. "Just sleeping."

And he wasn't entirely sure if he was disappointed or relieved when Fraser didn't follow him, and he was left all alone in his big bed, delivered from temptation.

The middle of the night again, something half-waking Ray, just enough for him to realize something was different, but not enough to register what it was. He grunted, tugged some more covers over himself, and slid right back down into sleep.

Which was why waking up was such a shock.

He didn't remember—maybe Fraser's amnesia was contagious—Fraser getting into bed beside him last night. Didn't remember when he'd shifted over and draped himself all over Fraser. Remembered all too well how good it felt to not be alone, to have someone warm, to—

Be lying here an inch away from getting way too up close and personal with Ben.

And too damned close to giving Fraser—Ben—all kinds of false perceptions and false memories. Too damned close to deceiving Fraser.

They weren't lovers. Hadn't been. Maybe they'd had a bit of electricity between them, but they'd both stayed firmly on the side of friendship. Plus, tempting though it was to just grab on and go along for the ride, he wasn't even sure Ben was remembering Fraser right—the guy's brain was fried in odd ways, in odd places, so who knew if Ben was remembering things properly, or just trying to make a bunch of admittedly weird memories make sense?

And what kind of friend would use that to get his jollies?

Careful not to wake Fraser—who was sleeping like a dead man, and the shock of seeing Fraser like that in the grocery store was too fresh to appreciate this reminder—Ray got up and headed for the shower.

He used the toilet while the shower water ran hot, then stepped in, gasping as the needle-point spray engulfed him in heat.

He'd always done his best thinking in the shower: something about being bare-assed naked kicked him into real honesty with himself. He started lathering up and with time to himself, and before his cock could start getting ideas about a nearly naked man lying in his bed, Ray washed and rinsed and stood there under the hot flowing water, thinking about what was going on.

First off, looking at what Fraser was remembering, and thinking about some of the things he himself had said that had triggered a few odd expressions on Fraser—Ben's—face, Ray could see where Ben got the

idea they were fucking each other. It made sense, too—only they'd never so much as kissed. Not even on the Henry Allen, though it was really telling that Fraser's reaction to 'buddy breathing' had been what it was. Explained Fraser's "I'm not getting excited" back then too.

Okay, so it looked like maybe Ben was right about those memories, if you looked at them through a special Fraser filter.

Which brought him up to the present day, and the man sleeping in his bed. Who—

Ray yelped and jumped back, nearly falling in the slippery tub as the water turned scalding hot. He hauled the shower curtain back, and glared at the man he'd thought was still in his bed, but who was now washing his hands to the background noise of the toilet tank filling up.

"You do *not* flush the toilet while I'm in the shower!"

"Sorry, Ray, I uh... I forgot."

The complex expression on Fraser's face stirred something inside Ray. "Nah, you wouldn't know," he said. "You—the old you—wouldn't come in here when I was in the shower."

"I wouldn't?"

"Nope," Ray said, grabbing a towel and drying off. He stepped out of the tub, and looked up just as Ben swallowed and his eyes glazed.

"I can see why," Ben said, back to sounding sexy. Then Ben's expression changed, suddenly. "Ray? Do I remember... us in a toilet cubicle together?"

Ray's mind was still back a few seconds ago, cataloguing just exactly what he'd seen on Fraser's face when he'd stepped out of the shower. "Yeah, all the time. We used to go there to discuss cases."

"We went into a toilet cubicle, in the men's room, together, to discuss cases?"

Put like that... "Yeah," Ray said, defiantly. "Didn't start out that way, but you always use a stall when you pee, so I started..."

Fraser's eyebrows had climbed. "You started following me in?"

And okay, so that sounded...fruity. Which made Ray shrug, nonchalant, as if guys followed other guys into toilet stalls all the time.

Well, they did. All the time. It just wasn't usually to discuss cases.

Okay, so Ray could *really* see why Ben was confused over just what had and hadn't been going on.

"C'mon," he said, snapping his towel at Fraser. "We'll go get furface and I'll buy us all breakfast."

And with any luck, that would postpone more discussion for a good long while. Or at least till Ray was a bit more prepared to deal with this rewriting of his own personal history—and this rewriting of a man he'd thought he'd known.

This being a Sunday, the Consulate was deserted, leaving them free to take over what passed as the informal sitting room.

"Ray, I think we can safely say that my memories are—" Ben smiled, worldly, and world-weary, "—hopelessly corrupted."

"Maybe, maybe not."

"Ray, I have this—bizarre spin on everything that simply isn't true. So my memories, such as they are, are corrupted—and I haven't remembered one more thing since yesterday."

Which was worrying the hell out of Ray, so God alone knew what it was doing to Ben.

"Yeah? So?"

"So start filling in some of the blanks for me."

"The doctor said—"

"I don't care what the doctor said! I can't *remember*, Ray. I can't remember important things—not just facts, but people, events. Things that shaped me. I can remember some of my time with you, yet I still can't put a face to "Dewey" and—"

Ben broke off there, and did something Ray had never seen Fraser do: Ben looked at him helplessly, lost, begging for...something.

"Ray, I remember that Huey didn't have a partner, but I...I don't remember *why*."

Ray's breath actually caught in his chest, a painful hitch that was only a dim echo of what was in Ben's eyes. "You don't remember..."

"Louis. I remember Louis. I remember him being there, and I remember him gone—but I don't remember *why* he left."

"He didn't," Ray said, even though the doctor would disapprove: she wasn't here, and Fraser—Ben—was, and hurting like hell. "There was...someone was trying to frame Frank Zuko—you remember Zuko?"

"Yes," Ben said, frowning, as if there were things he should be saying. "Something about...his sister? Irene? Oh God, the shooting. Is that it? Was Louis shot like Irene?"

"No," Ray said, wishing there was some way to make this less awful. "There was a bomb, under Vecchio's car..."

"No," Fraser said, but Ray could tell from his eyes that yes, Fraser remembered that—or at least Fraser could figure it out.

"Yeah," was all Ray said.

Ben sat down with a thump. "It's as if I'm reading a report. I know what happened—but I don't...but I don't actually remember it. I don't remember what I felt, or who was there—Ray, when Louis was killed, was I there?"

Hell, yeah. Ray nodded.

Fraser sat there for a long, long moment, staring up at Ray, with his eyes hurt and scared. "What else don't I remember, Ray? What else am I running away from?"

And this wasn't something they could deny or put a good face on: this wasn't a straightforward case of waiting for a temporary amnesia to clear up along with the concussion. When Fraser said it flat out like that, really asking that question, really looking for an answer—it clicked into place, and it was a relief, almost, to have it out there in words. Fraser was running away: his brain had taken a hard knock, and his sneaky little

subconscious had taken advantage of the situation, wiping out all the things that hurt too much to remember.

“Ray?”

“I don’t know what you’re running away from,” although Ray was pretty sure why he was one of them. “But give it time—”

“To what? Stop hurting so I can remember it?”

“To come back on its own, when you’re ready.”

Ben laughed, a familiar sound twisted by pain. “I think I’ve forgotten things I didn’t want to remember, Ray. And—”

Ray stared, willing Ben to look at him, to keep talking.

Ben raised his head, and Ray half-wished Ben hadn’t let him see all this rawness. “And I think perhaps if I needed to forget things this much, I should perhaps...let them stay forgotten.”

“That what you want?” Ray asked, hollowness in the pit of his stomach, a thinness beginning till he felt like a wraith. “You want to forget all it?”

“Yes,” Ben said, lowering his eyes again. “Yes, I think I do.”

“But can you? We all got things we want but can’t have,” and that was a lesson he’d learned only too well from Stella and his dad, “and we all got things we don’t want to remember or wish we could go back and replay so we get it right.” But this was Fraser—Ben—and he couldn’t stand the pain on that face, couldn’t stand the confusion in those eyes. “Okay, look, if you really want to forget, I’ll help. And—” Ray stopped for a second, the hollowness spreading, but the stretched-too-thin feeling receded, his own skin settling over him, displacing what little Vecchio remained. “And if you need to forget me, and you know, what I stand for, then I’ll help you there too.”

“How?”

Ray shrugged. “Nobody thought through the details when they pushed me under as Vecchio, so what the hell, we’ll come up with something so you and him aren’t partners any more.”

That had Ben looking at him, looking at him hard, demanding. “I don’t want you to leave me.”

Yeah, but that took them back to this mis-remembering thing. "We weren't ever like that."

"Not on your side," Ben said softly. "But on mine. And we were friends, Ray—you used to say..."

"Buddies," Ray said, filling in another blank, and he knew then that if Ben wanted the potted history of Benton Fraser, Ray would serve it up on a silver platter—without hesitation. "Yeah, we're buddies."

"Which is something," Ben said. "Half a loaf."

"Half a loaf? Is that like even-steven?"

"Not even close, Ray."

And it was awkward then, more awkward than it'd been with Ben talking and revealing things. At least then, there'd been something to react to, but now—now they'd run out of things to say. Nothing Ray could think of was right: too big, too small, too flip, too somber. "We are not gonna spend the day sitting here brooding, Ben, that's your gig, not mine—me, I do my brooding on the dance floor, or at night. So you, buddy—" Ray stood up, pulled Fraser to his feet, "are going to go do whatever Mounties do and we're gonna go do *something*. Work off that breakfast."

"No brooding, eh?"

"Did you know you get more Canadian when you've been brooding too long? So no more brooding till 8 P.M., or you'll turn into an 'eh' saying curling fan who wears pumpkin pants. Oh, wait, silly me, you already are." Happily, that got Fraser smiling at him, that chased the shadows for a few seconds—that let Ben off the hook for a little while. "Let's go."

"Where, Ray?"

"Out. Somewhere. I don't know. We'll figure it out when we get there."

There was something exhilarating about the open road. The old Easy Rider songs started rattling through Ray's head: those guys had the right idea. Born to be wild—he looked over at Ben.

Okay, so some of them were born to be wild. Some of them were born to be buttoned down on the outside and wild on the inside.

Which gave Ray an idea of where they could go.

He started changing lanes, getting them to where the roads would finally lead somewhere. Not too much later, he started seeing the exit signs he wanted. Ben turned to him, cocked an eyebrow in question.

"Figured we'd let Dief visit some of his relatives."

And that was okay, that was absolutely fine, no protests from either human or wolf partner. Which is why Ray was shocked when he pulled into the parking lot and tension hit Fraser—Ben—so hard and so fast, Ray was surprised his spine didn't snap under the pressure.

"Not here," Ben said, teeth gritted.

Ray didn't wait to get explanations: he just backed out of the parking space and headed back the way they'd just come. "Coulda told me before I paid for parking," Ray said, keeping it mild, keeping it level, wondering what the hell was going on—what the hell Ben was remembering.

"I—this place—there's something about it."

"But you don't remember what?"

"No—something about the polar bears, and...I got shot. Or someone got shot. Or—dammit, I don't remember!"

"But you don't want to remember."

"No," Ben said. "But I don't think I have that luxury, Ray. I've been shot—more than once, I think. Stabbed? Yes—in this leg, stabbed, and shot."

"You're a cop," Ray told him, scant comfort, but all the comfort that could be given.

"And a good one, I know that much. And as a cop..."

"You can't afford to forget," Ray said for him and if he hadn't been driving, broad daylight be damned, he'd've hugged Ben and held him tight.

"Not when things I don't remember are going to ambush me the way going to the zoo just did."

"Where to?" Ray asked quietly.

"I'm open to suggestions," Ben answered, sounding tireder than Ray felt.

"Maybe—" So this wasn't direct memory, but it would all be familiar, and maybe have things that led to more recent personal memories. One last stab at letting things happen the way the doctor wanted them to. "Your dad's diaries."

"Yes," Ben said. "I suppose that's as good a place as any to start."

Ray came back from investigating the deplorable condition of the Consulate kitchen—who the hell had a kitchen that big without anything more substantial than tea and coffee in it?—to find Ben in the hallway, looking confused, an expression Ray was learning to dread.

"Oh," Ben said, sounding disappointed. "He must've left already."

Which made no sense, since Dief had only gone out back to take care of wolfly business outside.

Ray shook his head, shrugged off this minor bout of Fraser freakishness. "Old Mother Hubbard would feel right at home here, Ben," he said. "Get your jacket, we're heading somewhere where the cupboards aren't bare. And where the heating's set higher than freeze-your-butt-off."

"Your place?"

"My place," Ray confirmed.

They brought the diaries with them, and Ben settled on the couch to read while Ray smirked his way through a mystery novel replete with convenient criminals and procedure fumbings that would make Welsh's hair curl.

"Ray?"

"Yeah?"

"Are these all of my father's diaries?"

"S far as I know."

"So some were burned in the fire?"

"Nah—you said you had 'em all safely at the Consulate."

"But they just stop. I've checked—there's nothing here more recent than nearly three years ago."

Ray closed his book very slowly, put it on the coffee table, trying to think how the hell he was supposed to break *this* news to Ben. He was furious with himself, too—he should've seen this coming, should've realized that this would be one more thing erased neatly and precisely.

"Ray, I asked you if it took precisely two hours to tell, and that felt right—but I don't know why. And—I can almost remember something. I first came to Chicago," Fraser began, then he stopped, frowning. "I first came to Chicago," he repeated, voice trailing off, eyes going dark with worry. "Ray?" Fraser said, hoarse and raw. "Why did I come here?"

Ray faced the fear in Ben's eyes and wondered how the hell he was supposed to handle this. "Fraser, you first came to Chicago," Ray said, very gently, "on the trail of your father's killers."

Braced for Fraser's pain, Ray nearly reeled when Ben burst out laughing. "Don't be ridiculous, Ray! You have one seriously warped sense of humor, my friend," Ben said, still making light of it, but Ray could see the tremble of ongoing shock and fear unsteady Fraser's hands.

"Fraser, it's the truth."

"Yeah, right," Fraser snorted. "I spoke to my dad not an hour ago at the Consulate. You could've mentioned he was posted—"

"You spoke to your dad?" Ray said, too shocked to think beyond that. "Fraser, your dad's dead. He was shot and killed."

"Ray, I know I have a hole in my bag of marbles, and if I were relying only on memory, I might take your word for it. But I spoke to my dad, at the Consulate."

"And I'm telling you, your dad's dead. Gerrard killed him."

"Gerrard? Bill Gerrard? Don't be ridiculous, Ray, he was one of my father's closest friends. If you expect me to believe my father's dead and

that I didn't just talk to him, you're going to have to come up with something better than *Gerrard* killing him."

"I don't want to do this," Ray said. "You remember this later, okay, Ben? Don't forget that I do not want to do this."

"Do what? Ray?"

Ray came back from the filing cabinet tucked behind the louvered doors of the utility closet and handed Ben one of the personal files Ray had learned not to keep at the precinct—not even in a hollowed-out art book. He didn't have many files here, but these were the ones he didn't want anyone digging through. Usually. "This was one of the files Vecchio left for me."

There was a moment before Ben took the file, and a longer moment before he opened it. He stopped at the first page, his fingers touching the small black and white photograph there. "Dead?" he whispered.

"Yeah," Ray said, wishing Fraser's version of reality was true.

"So then...in the Consulate...a hallucination."

"Yeah," reluctant, unwilling, but unable to lie. "Time to take you back to the hospital, let the docs check you out again. C'mon, let's go. Hospitals aren't my idea of happening night spots either, Ben, but if you're seeing things—"

"No," Ben said.

"You're seeing things—"

"So? I've seen things before, Ray, and I didn't have to get checked out then."

"But you shoulda."

"Well—no. Sweat lodge visions aren't usually called hallucinations."

"Okay, so you weren't hallucinating back then, but you were today, so we get you checked out."

"I—"

"What is it? You remembering something else?"

"I don't know," Ben said. "The time I had the head injury from the plane crash, when Ray and I were lost in the woods but before my blindness and paralysis—"

That was something not in Vecchio's files, private or otherwise. "You crashed a plane?"

"Not deliberately, Ray. But Ray insisted I had hallucinations while I was recovering from that head injury."

"So you're saying hallucinations are a normal part of head injury recovery for you." Ray stopped suddenly, shook his head. "I don't believe those words came out of my mouth and that I meant 'em. Fraser, just how many head injuries have you had? No—on second thought, don't answer that. Ignorance is bliss and bliss is starting to look pretty good."

"So no hospital?"

There was enough hope in the way Fraser said that to set off all Ray's instincts. "I know why I don't want to go back. You wanna tell me why you don't want to go back?"

"Because the last time I was in a mental institution, they tried to kill me in the Blue Room."

And Ray didn't know where to even begin reacting to that particular statement. "Okay, that's it, you win, you have your hallucinations and I'll just sit over here reading—" his book, which was sitting beside Fraser's dad's diaries. It'd be nice to just pretend that was it, bad news all delivered, but Fraser hadn't remembered about Louis—and according to Vecchio's files, Fraser had been there, had helped Vecchio keep Huey away from the burning wreck—and Fraser hadn't remembered the whole reason he was down here in the first place. "Okay," Ray said, sitting back down, patting the seat beside him. "Uh...so you came to Chicago on the trail of your father's killers, and for reasons that don't need exploring at this juncture, you remained—"

"—attached as liaison with the Canadian Consulate. I remember saying that, Ray, I just don't remember..."

"...the details leading up to it. Yeah. So—what else don't you remember?"

"If I knew that—"

"I wouldn't haveta figure out what I need to tell you."

After a moment, Ben got to his feet. "I'm going to make myself some tea, and think about this."

"Knock yourself—" Ray thought better of finishing that sentence, but Ben just smiled at him, actually looking amused. The man—with or without head injuries—was definitely a freak, Ray thought with an upwelling of affection.

About half an hour later Ray was starting to think about sleeping arrangements and was doing a bit of remembering of his own—plastered all over Fraser? What the hell had he been thinking?—when Ben cleared his throat.

"What about the rest of my family? I'm assuming my grandparents are dead?"

"Yeah, but you've never mentioned when or how, and you never mentioned your mom's side at all." And Ray could've kicked himself in the head for saying that: he knew they were going to have to get there, but he'd been hoping to save some of the really bad crap for tomorrow.

Ben's voice was very small when he spoke. "What about my mother?"

Ben," Ray said as gently as he knew how, "when's the last time you remember talking to your mom?"

"It was...It was..." Fraser swallowed hard, and stared at Ray, a drowning man watching the shore recede. "Oh, God, Ray, why don't I remember?"

Ray shifted, sat closer to Fraser, put his arm around shoulders that flinched in anticipation of news that needed a hug. "You were six," Ray said, almost whispering.

"What happened?" Fraser asked, voice small and scraped raw as a child's knee.

"Don't know, you never said. Just that she died when you were six."

Fraser leaned forward, covered his face with his hands, and went very, very, very still. Ray followed him and held on, kept holding on when Fraser finally turned towards him, and let Ray pull him in close. Then it was Fraser holding on to the one new memory that didn't hurt.

Fraser had gone for another shower, had returned, wordless, and started laying his thin bedroll out on the floor behind the red chairs of Ray's dinette set.

"Don't be stupid," Ray said. "You're the one with the head injury, you take the bed."

Fraser simply shook his head, bruised eyes barely meeting Ray's even for a moment.

"Ben—"

"No."

It was soft, it was quiet, and it was implacable. Ray knew that tone, knew there was no point in arguing—wondered if arguing was even a good idea, or if it'd be the straw on the proverbial camel's back.

Wondered just exactly why Ben was sleeping on the floor. Yeah. As if he didn't know or couldn't guess.

"We can share my bed," Ray said. "It's big enough."

"No."

Okay. So no answers, and a clear 'don't ask any more questions.'

"If you change your mind, come on through."

Fraser merely nodded, and lay down on his bedroll, arms folded across his chest like one of those knight's tombs Ray had seen on PBS.

It gave Ray the creeps, but what the hell could he do?

He stood and watched Ben—unmoving, unspeaking, looking far paler and far deader than he had in that casket—then switched off the lights and headed for bed.

But just in case Ben needed him, and just because the night was too damned dark, he left the light on in the hall, the way his dad had for him when he was a kid feeling scared.

And very, very, very late, or very, very, very early, depending on how you looked at the clock, Ben crept into bed beside him, all goosebumps and tension, all loneliness and loss.

Ben surprised him by not holding on, but by holding Ray, almost rocking him, back and forth, back and forth. It felt wrong, as if Ben were offering comfort instead of receiving it—but if it was what Ben wanted, and if it let Ben feel in control, who was Ray to argue? So Ray lay there, and let Ben hold him, and wished he could pat Ben on the back and tell him it was okay, that everything was going to be fine.

But Ben was too raw for that, the pain too new, and Ray wasn't sure it was the truth anyway, so he patted Ben's back, rubbed endless circles and said not a word.

After a while, and not unexpectedly, Ben kissed him, a small chaste press of lips to Ray's temple

Ray very nearly gave in, very nearly gave Ben what Ben wanted, something so far beyond simple comfort, something that might well be based on desperation and confusion. Instead, he turned away from the next kiss and said, clearly, not hiding, "Remember what you said about Frannie?"

There was a moment, a trembling, delicate moment when Ray thought Ben might push the issue, and Ray scrambled frantically to figure out how to handle that, but all Ben did was whisper, "Understood," and continued to hold him.

And when Ray woke in the morning, Ben was already gone.

At had been two and a half weeks, and things were as normal as they ever got around Fraser. No, scratch that—things were normal around Fraser. Which was so bizarre as to be downright scary. Things were never normal around Fraser: Fraser found honest criminals and was chased by performance arsonists. But for over two weeks, there'd been...

Ray half expected Fraser to start rotting around the edges because being with Fraser was like being with the living dead. They spent no less time together—in fact, they spent more time together—but for the first time in his life Ray understood what all the ‘experts’ were yakking about when they said ‘quality time.’

He had plenty of quantity with Fraser—Ben—but how the hell did you complain to your best friend—your hurting, miserable, lost and lonely best friend—that things just weren’t the same?

It wasn’t even that Ray expected them to be the same: he’d just hoped that it’d be less different between them. There were days when Ray wished he had yielded to Ben’s desires—just gone along, given in, taken what they’d both wanted—that one night, but there were other days he was fiercely glad he hadn’t, because if they were this fucked up without any actual fucking, how messed up would they be with *that* little pressure cooker added to the mix?

And he had no right to do anything: Fraser obviously wasn’t himself, or at least he wasn’t the Fraser Ray had known. So he still thought keeping his dick in his pants had been the right decision. Okay, so he’d admit it: he’d hoped Fraser wouldn’t shut him out. Nothing blatant like a door slammed in his face, but...a lot of things, a lot of little things that mounted up. There were the days when Ben would walk into the squad room with the whites of his eyes showing, skittish and nervous—but saying nothing when Ray asked what was wrong. Or the days when Fraser was this *close* to biting Ray’s head off, days when the Mountie politeness came close to cracking even with complete strangers—and Ben wouldn’t say a thing when Ray asked him what was wrong. The evenings when Ben was content to simply sit in Ray’s living room until it was time for Ray to drive him home, saying nothing, just reading or doing the old puzzles he’d dug out of Ray’s utility closet, or writing letters.

It was the letter-writing that got to Ray the most. What the hell was Fraser saying in those letters that he wouldn’t say to Ray? Who was he saying those things to? Bet he didn’t tell *them* nothing was wrong.

Or worse: maybe that's exactly what Fraser was doing. Maybe nobody knew what was wrong, what was eating Fraser up by bites and chunks and steady erosion.

Maybe nobody knew, but Ray could guess: he was a detective, he was used to unraveling people and putting clues together. So, yes, he probably knew what was wrong: it wasn't hard to guess. Ben'd lost everyone pretty much overnight—didn't matter that it'd happened over a lifetime for Fraser, for Ben... For Ben, it was losing everyone, and having a best friend you wanted but who didn't you want back.

Which wasn't really the case, but how the hell could Ray've said yes that night? And Ben hadn't shown a flicker of interest since, so yeah, probably that night had been a momentary weakness on Ben's part, a cry for help, or just loneliness talking. Maybe the whole mis-remembering thing really had just been the head injury talking, giving Ben hallucinations of the past.

Kind of like the whole dead father thing.

Maybe he really should've taken Ben back to the hospital when he realized Ben was still talking to his dead father, but hell, little kids—Ray included—had invisible friends, why couldn't a man have an invisible dad?

And it made Ben—well, not actually happy, but maybe a bit less miserable. Which was pretty much as good as it got in Benton Fraser's world, no matter how good a face Ben was putting on things. And that was as good an explanation as any why, on the Friday evening of his weekend off this month, instead of going on a date, dancing with a woman who was definitely interested in him, Ray was picking Fraser up from the Consulate and taking Moutie and wolf out into the wilds of Illinois for the weekend.

He was giving up all the comforts of home, a chance to date a lovely woman, just to make Fraser feel a bit better.

Maybe Fraser wasn't the only person who needed to take a fresh look at his emotions.

Ray didn't even bother knocking, just dug out a credit card and snick, he was in the Consulate, Turnbull beaming at him, welcoming him to Canada and all the rest of the usual bullshit.

"Yeah, yeah, thanks, same to you," Ray said on his way past. Then, dropping the sarcasm, meaning it: "And thanks for covering for him tomorrow, Turnbull."

Fraser's office door was shut, a sliver of light seeping out through the gap at the bottom of the door, not even a hint of sound escaping from within. Without standing on ceremony, Ray pushed the door open and caught Fraser.

Without his glasses, Ray couldn't read the name on the file from the doorway, but he was willing to bet he knew exactly what it was. He closed the door quietly behind him, and nodded at the manila folder. "What'd you find out?"

Ben took a deep breath, then simply pushed the file over to the other side of the desk. Another small black and white photograph, and looking at it with the care it deserved, Ray could see the resemblance, in the color of the hair, the gentleness of the eyes, the secretiveness of the smile. Skin tone too, and it looked like there might be some curl in the hair swept back away from the strong face. He didn't have to pay nearly as much attention to the typed information: how many brutally dry incident reports, just like this one, had he read?

He looked up from the bitter words, found Ben looking at him. The days when Ray was glad he'd had the moral fiber to say 'no' to Ben's desire were dwindling down to occasional moments here and there—usually when he couldn't see what Ben was suffering.

"My dad says it was Holloway Muldoon who murdered her."

And Ray was going to let that slide: maybe Fraser'd heard talk when he was a child and suppressed it till this last head injury turned his memory into a Jackson Pollock painting. Or maybe Fraser's dad dropped

in regularly: Ray was willing to bet there were stranger things in Fraser's world than what other people might call ghosts.

"Did they get him?"

"My dad did. Muldoon... My father spent a year and a half pursuing Muldoon and caught up with him far out in the wilderness, at Six Mile Canyon. Muldoon died in an accident trying to evade arrest."

And it looked like Fraser believed that about as much as Ray did. "That'll teach the bad guy to run away," Ray said mildly, although the flicker of Ben's glance at him made it clear he'd been seen through. Yeah, so now they both knew they both thought there was something seriously hinky about Muldoon's death. "Can't blame your dad, though," Ray said. "Not much he could do if Muldoon was running away. But this is tough, about your mom. You okay?"

Fraser pinched the bridge of his nose and let out a sigh. "To be honest, I've been expecting something like this." In response to Ray's questioning look: "I've wracked my brain for some memory of her death, what was said, what was done—who told me, what they told me. I don't even remember a funeral, but I know there had to have been one, and I know my father and grandfather built a cairn for her."

The only cairn Ray had ever heard of was a terrier, but he wasn't going to ask, not right now.

"From what I can piece together from my father's diary, they built it where she was killed—near the barn of our home at the time. But..."

"You don't remember it."

"Not before my latest head injury, not after. I've no memory of my grandparents mentioning her, yet when I think about their home, there were always photographs. No matter where we lived, over the mantle in the kitchen or the living room, they'd hang the framed photo of her."

"Maybe they didn't talk about her."

"Or maybe that's another painful memory I've blotted out. Ray..."

Ray nearly held his breath, waiting, but all Fraser said was, "Finish reading the report."

Ray did, skimming it for details the way any experienced cop cut through the legalese and bureaucratic gobbledygook—and nearly skimmed right over it. Stopped, came back, read it carefully. Read it again.

Incident radioed in by victim's child returning from school.

"Oh fuck," Ray said. "I can see why you don't remember."

"And why perhaps I didn't want to remember?"

Yeah. Faced with that, forgetting sounded like a very sane solution.

"This must be a hell of a shock."

"No—well, yes, it was. But—" A cautious glance up from under lowered lashes. "I found out a week ago."

But it'd taken this long before Fraser could even mention it. Maybe longer, if Ray hadn't just burst in unannounced. "At least the guy who did it is dead."

"Another one," Ben said, expression decidedly peculiar. "I feel as if my path is lined with tombstones."

It was a quote, that much was obvious. "Robert Service, the Yukon poet?"

"Olivia Langdon, wife of Mark Twain. Although that might not be the exact quote. I find my memory... isn't as reliable as it once was."

"Wow, no, really? I'm shocked," Ray said, getting a small smile out of Ben for that. "You still want to get out of town for the weekend?"

"I'm desperate to get out of town for the weekend, Ray—now wouldn't be too soon."

So out of town they got.

"**Y**ou call this camping?"

"Did I say camping? I said we were getting out of town, into the countryside. Look—" Ray spun around, nearly hitting Dief with one of the plastic grocery bags, his spread hands encompassing the very edge

of the nearly deserted RV park and the cultivated stand of trees right beside them. "Do you see any town around you? No. Do you see countryside around you? Yes. So we're here."

Fraser still didn't take another step towards the rather well-appointed trailer. Dief, of course, had already bounded in and found himself a comfy chair.

Ray, realizing he only had the wolf for company, came back outside. "I know you wanted to the joys of camping without benefit of walls, floors, toilets, or showers, but it's winter and I'm not risking frostbite. And look—" he grabbed onto a latch, started pulling it out. "There's an awning, so if you want to sleep under the stars without actually getting snowed on, you can."

"I don't mean to be ungrateful—"

"But you're gonna be."

"—but I had envisioned something altogether more..."

"Primitive? Uncomfortable? Cold, wet, and miserable?"

"Less like a house."

Ray dropped his head, shook it. "Freak. I'm stuck in the middle of the boondocks with a freak. Okay, okay, so I figured this would be too deluxe for you, so—" he went unerringly to the storage bays all mobile homes this size had hidden, "I got the unit that comes with a tent. Knock yourself out."

"Been there, done that, I'll pass this time," Ben said, kneeling beside Ray to peer at the neatly stowed camping gear. "You could sleep a family of six in that thing."

"They didn't have a box to check for occupant, one lunatic Mountie and his wolf."

Dief voiced a protest from within.

"If that wolf gets any softer..."

"He'll turn into a marshmallow and we can use him for s'mores. C'mon, I know you love the cold, but I'm going inside. You want dinner?"

It was cozy inside, spartan enough to make Ray feel like he was camping, luxurious enough to make Dief happy. As for Fraser...Ray couldn't get a bead on Fraser at all. So he gave up trying to decipher the mysterious inner workings of the Mountie mind, and got out the chess board.

Good choice, he decided, when Fraser's face lit up. Better choice, he decided, as Fraser lost himself completely in concentrating on the game. Which Ray won, although he tried not to be too smug about that. "Well, whaddya know? Being the geek president of the chess club in high school was worth it after all."

But having a conversation wasn't easy when there were only two people present and one of them was distracted. It was late, very late, when Fraser stirred and made noises about getting the tent out.

Fraser's reluctance was clear: Ray just wasn't sure if it was because Fraser wanted to stay with Ray, or if Fraser just didn't want to be by himself. "You okay?"

"Me? Oh, yeah, fine, just great—" Fraser met Ray's knowing gaze and deflated like a balloon. "Well, no. I'm—it's...I miss them," Fraser said helplessly. "And—I used to have a perfect memory. Ask me where I sat in grade four, and I could tell you. I remembered every book I ever read, ever musical performance I ever attended. I remembered my grandmother's recipe for bannocks, and my grandfather's hide tanning secrets. But now..."

"You got gaps?"

"Chasms," Fraser said.

Which was hard on anyone. "The memories aren't coming back?"

"Some of the facts are, but the true memories? I could tell you what my grandfather put into his famous summer fruit tarts, but I can't smell them any more. I can't see the color of my mum's sweater, or hear her talking with my father at night long after I'd been put to bed. I can remember certain things happened, but...they're not part of me. They're...diluted. Or gone."

"So it's not just losing them, it's losing them again and again and again."

Fraser nodded, looking shamefaced. "I know that's no different from what everyone else experiences, Ray, but—"

"You've never really forgotten before."

"A few things—some of my father's more useless, pointless advice. But important things? Never."

"I wish I could help."

"I wish I could let you."

Some instinct told him to let it go, do not enter, do not pass go, but— but he'd had time to think over these past three weeks. "Why can't you let me?"

"Oh, Ray," Fraser half-sighed, half-laughed, "you know perfectly well why. And on that rather fraught note, I'm going to turn in," Fraser said, getting to his feet and heading out the door. "Good night, Ray. See you in the morning."

Within the nice, clean, modern enclosure of his rented RV, Ray could hear Fraser outside, taking the tent and walking away from Ray, towards the solitude of trees.

Snow would've been fun, but the morning brought freezing rain and sleet, and a very pissed off, very wet Dief to Ray's door, closely followed by an even wetter, even more pissed off Fraser. "If you'd listened, you wouldn't've become entangled in the guy rope, so don't blame me—"

"And top of the morning to you too, Fraser—Ben. You still want Ben?"

"Please," Ben said, stopping on the threshold, buffeted by wind and sleet.

"Get in here, Ben—so the floor'll get wet, it's vinyl, it'll dry. C'mon—"

Fraser stood on the small patch of vinyl flooring just inside the door and...dripped. Mud. Everywhere.

"Do I even want to ask? Don't answer that. Do I even want to ask what happened to the tent?"

"Suffice it to say that I'll reimburse you for any charges incurred for the loss of the tent."

"This is why people around you take every bit of insurance we can get. We're covered, I think the co-pay's only fifty bucks or something."

"Which I certainly have."

"So you figured out where all your money went?" Ray was handing Fraser towels, while Fraser was looking at the clean towels and rivulets of mud covering his person.

"Into the bank, apparently. I seem to be saving up for something."

"You didn't leave yourself any handy little notes? You know, note to self: Self, I am saving up for a cruise to the Bahamas for Ray?"

"No, I didn't—Ray, if I cover these towels in mud, are there any more?"

No. Which meant... Ray rummaged around in the kitchenette, turned up a box of trash bags. "Here, put your dirty stuff in there. Shower off, keep the towels clean."

"Thank you kindly." Fraser took the bag then stood there, waiting.

Ray finally got the hint and turned his back, preserving Ben's privacy. Or something, because Ben was turning away, sidling into the tiny bathroom as if he didn't want to offend Ray by being naked.

Even though Ray wanted to look.

There. He'd thought it out loud. No fake altruism, no crap about offering comfort to the afflicted. He wanted to look. Wanted to touch. Even though he was pretty sure it would be taking advantage, even though he knew better than to get involved with a co-worker, even though he knew a hell of a lot better than to get involved with someone who was part of an undercover gig, Ray wanted to look, and to touch.

Which he shouldn't do. There were a dozen reasons: Ben was his friend, partner, co-worker, undercover colleague... Ben was vulnerable in a way that made Frannie look armor plated.

He should drop those cozy little lies too. No bullshit about being a buddy, a colleague, a man who followed the rules.

It wasn't that—or maybe it had been that back when he had Fraser and Fraser'd had his own barriers up.

No, there was a real reason he was hesitating for one last moment.

Ben—or Fraser, or both combined—was a deep well of intensity, and Ben Fraser meant starting over. And commitment, with a capital C. Not something Ray'd ever been afraid of before, but then, he'd had no need to be: by the time most people learn what commitment actually entails, Ray was already committed to Stella. Now, though...now he knew exactly what he was getting into. Now he knew exactly what the rewards could be, and how much the penalties could hurt.

But he'd had time, nearly three weeks of time, and he was sure. Pretty sure. Almost sure. Although he wasn't at all sure about the reactions of everybody around them.

Cross that bridge when you come to it—another of Fraser's adages or aphorisms or whatever the hell Fraser called those little sayings of his. Stay the course, even-steven, great scott—but probably nothing that covered setting up home with another man.

Okay, so there really were still reasons—good and bad and fear-based and altruistic, the whole shebang—for thinking twice before doing this, before taking the next step with Ben. But—last night had been the clincher: hearing Ben, seeing the misery, the feelings of rejection on his face... Yes. It was definitely time. They'd tried the whole no-sex thing, and look where that had got Ben. And look how long sex had helped hold Ray's marriage together.

There was one other thing, something he didn't even whisper to himself, dancing around it instead: it didn't look like Fraser was going back to his old self any time soon. It looked a hell of a lot like Ben was here to stay.

No denying it: that changed things. If Ben was just who Fraser really was when the carapace cracked, then...the need to protect, to delay, had passed.

And that was both exhilarating as hell and twice as scary.

By the time Fraser had finished his shower, Ray had Dief toweled off and sulking on a blanket on the floor, ignoring the food Ray had put down for him and eyeing the bagels Ray had toasted. Ray also had Fraser's tea and his own coffee made—and his imagination still firmly under control.

He'd even, in a burst of virtue, left Ben's rucksack just outside the bathroom door, which meant that Fraser appeared at last, fully dressed. But this was a vacation weekend, so the hair wasn't combed into submission—curls, coiling at Fraser's nape, waves rippling in damp layers—and that face wasn't freshly shaven. Not that skipping a day made much difference to Fraser, which was something Ray decided not to mention. Never knew where a man's pride might prickle.

They ate breakfast in something close to a comfortable silence, although there were topics simmering just beneath the surface, Ray thinking about the right time to bring certain things up.

He hadn't actually *planned* to just blurt it out while Fraser was licking stray cream cheese off his top lip.

"If you really want, we can go to the campground office and ask them for a new tent. But you don't have to sleep outside, Ben."

Fraser put his napkin down, and looked silently at Ray.

"I mean—you don't have to sleep alone. Tonight. Or ever."

"Ray? Are you asking me to have sex with you?"

"Uh... Yeah."

"Oh, Ray," Fraser said, patting Ray's cheek then getting to his feet. "Thank you kindly, but no."

"No? Wait a minute. You want me, right?"

Fraser nodded, and took his dishes to the tiny sink.

"And I want you, right?"

Fraser took Ray's dishes, apparently not noticing that Ray hadn't actually finished his breakfast yet. "Do you?"

"Yeah! So what's the problem?"

"Ray, you said I'd no idea just what a good friend you were. You were wrong—I know exactly how good a friend you are, and thank you, but that won't be necessary."

"You think this is a pity fuck?"

"Well, you didn't offer till you found out I wanted you."

"Oh yeah, while you beat a path to my door. It's not about pity."

"Then what is it about?"

"Looking at you. Seeing you."

Fraser wasn't looking at him, and Ray wished he were—he had no clue what Fraser was thinking or feeling, and the back of Fraser's head wasn't exactly giving him any clues.

"In what way?" Fraser finally asked.

"I'm undercover," Ray said, leaning on the small countertop beside Fraser, then following as Fraser moved away. "I'm in a box, I'm in someone else's life, so I haveta put everyone else in a box. If I don't—this isn't my life, Ben. One day, I'll have to give it back. And if I lose sight of that, then when Vecchio comes back...I'll be a mess."

"So why change now?"

"Because you didn't stay in your box."

There was nowhere to hide in the open-plan RV, and Fraser finally sat down on one of the banquettes lined up against the wall.

"When you didn't say anything about wanting me, you were in the box, coloring inside the lines. Then you got hit on the head, and—boom."

"And that changed it for you?"

"Yeah. That, and thinking about it for three weeks."

Fraser met Ray's gaze, looking at him carefully, and Ray knew he was being weighed, judged, the way any good cop learns to take the measure of a man or a suspect.

"Thank you kindly," Fraser said again, and Ray knew the rest of it before Fraser bothered to say the words. "But no. I'd rather have a friend than gratuitous sex."

Which pretty much covered it, and there wasn't a lot of arguing against that, was there? "I uh—that's—" Ray shook his head, rubbed a hand over his hair. "That's blunt and that's honest, and embarrassing as hell, so how about we pretend I didn't just make a complete ass of myself and we play chess instead."

"I'll get the board," Fraser said, and for the next couple of hours, with the wind and the rain howling and rattling outside, they pretended very well indeed.

There is only so long two usually active men can sit still and play chess. There's only so long two sexually aware men can remain confined in an RV before something has to give.

It was, surprisingly enough, Fraser.

"Will you sit down!"

Even over the music in his headphones, Ray heard that. Almost felt it, like thunder rumbling through the sky.

He sat, and picked up a book.

Flicked through the pages. Tapped his foot to the music on his headphones. Whistled along to a few of his favorite songs.

Kept a very close eye on Ben. Watched the tension ratchet up a notch, then another, and another. It was wonderful. And scary, and quite, quite different from his experience with Stella. Ray wondered, briefly, just what would be unleashed when Fraser's dam finally burst.

But so far, the dam wasn't bursting. So far, there was tension in the way Ben was looking at him, tension in the way Ben was edging away

whenever Ray got too close, tension in the way Ben reacted when Ray bent over to pick up a dropped CD.

And tension, in Ray, when he felt Fraser's eyes on him. He'd almost forgotten this dance: the sway of attraction, the pull of desire, the push at boundaries. Boxes. The walls of their boxes were coming undone, gaping at the seams.

They sat down together to have lunch, discussing a case Ray had left on Huey's desk, discussing the damage Turnbull could do to the Consulate in two days without supervision. And every time Ray took a bite of sandwich, Ben would watch—or look away, and that was just as revealing. It had been years since Ray had played this game, years and years and years, and he didn't remember ever playing it when the outcome wasn't completely certain.

But this time he didn't know. They'd end up in bed, he was sure of that, but when, how, what would be the one thing that pushed them over from this push me, pull you, to giving and taking?

He didn't know. And that was part of the thrill.

The weather didn't let up, the wind so severe it rocked the RV a few times. Even someone as experienced as Fraser found it too severe to risk just going out for a few hours.

So they stayed there, in an RV that was shrinking by the second.

Until finally, Fraser's dam burst.

Ray had decided that vacation or not, he needed to shower. Had decided, on the spur of the moment, to come out into the main cabin of the RV wearing only his towel, ostensibly to get clean clothes from his pack.

And so what if it took him a few minutes? So what if it he had to hitch his towel up a couple of times? So what if he had to bend over to root through his pack?

It was all part of the game, all part of the seduction: Ben wanted him. More than that: Ben needed him, and if there was one thing Ray was

sure of, it was that Benton Fraser turned down more sex than most people ever had offered to them, and that Benton Fraser had never made a move on anyone in his life. So it was up to Ray to convince Ben that this was right for them, that this wasn't pity but a mutual desire. Ray had to push, and pull, and get them to the point where Ben could finally allow himself to say yes.

So it came as quite a shock when instead of pinning him up against a wall and kissing the life out of Ray, or standing there waiting for Ray to kiss the life out of Ben, Fraser had shouted, voice torn and ragged, "Why are you doing this to me?"

Now that was a real passion killer.

"Fraser? Ben?"

Fraser was sitting on one of the banquettes, head lowered, looking at the floor, not Ray.

"I'd forgotten so much, Ray. I'd forgotten what it was like to go around looking like this—" a hand sketched a circle around the handsome face, "with everyone wanting a piece of that."

"Fraser, every man you know would kill to have your looks."

"For a day, or a month. But all your life, Ray? Oh, it's fine if all you're looking for is casual, meaningless sex—"

"Like there's something wrong with casual, meaningless sex?"

"For me, yes," Fraser said simply, honestly. "Do you know why I wear my serge most of the time, Ray?"

"Because you're proud of being a Mountie."

"That, and because it restricts the access of strangers."

Which was something Ray'd never thought about, and put his own behavior in a completely different light. Seduction. He thought he'd been seducing Fraser into taking what Fraser wanted. Not— Horrified, he asked, "People just come up and grab you?"

"In restaurants, at the dry cleaner, at the post office—touching my buttocks, rubbing against me as they pretend to squeeze past me..."

And while most guys would love that, this was Fraser. Ben. "Least now I know what to get you for Christmas."

"Really?"

"Kevlar body armor with groin protection."

At least it made Ben laugh, for a moment. "Thank you, I'll look forward to that."

Ray sat down opposite Fraser, their knees almost touching in the enclosed confines of the RV until Ray spread his legs so he wouldn't be touching Ben. Then he realized how it must look, him sprawled there like an extra in a bad '70s porn movie, so he turned sideways, pulled his feet up onto the cushion—got an amusedly knowing smile from Ben for that. "But it's not a joke, is it?"

No smile now, not even a hint of one. "I don't know if it always bothered me this much, Ray, or if this is a side effect of losing so many of my memories—so much of what makes me *me*. But I feel as if they erase me, Ray. When they look at me, I don't exist—they're not interested in me, they just want to fuck what they see."

The rest of it was so huge, Ray didn't even know where to begin to address it. Instead of the sensitive, supportive, nurturing stuff he *wanted* to say, what came out of his mouth was a slightly shocked sounding: "You say fuck now?"

"When there's no other appropriate alternative. And quite frankly, Ray, considering what people say they want, the coarser my word choice, the more accurate it is."

Ouch. And his 'seduction' must've been...double ouch. "That's why you're like a bear with a sore head these days?"

"You've obviously never seen a bear in pain, Ray."

"Okay, so that's why you're like a Mountie with a thorn in your paw these days."

"Imagine," Ben said, leaning forward, the intensity of his gaze drawing Ray in, "what it's like to spend all day, every day, being the object of

desire of all those people. Yes, it's demeaning as hell, but—but it's potent, Ray. They pour sexual hunger all over me, look at me, with intent and knowledge and promise. And as and as for the pheromones, well—let me tell you, Dief's been having a hard time controlling himself. Oh, don't argue, you know you have. I've seen the way you've been eyeing the corgi across the street. But imagine it, Ray."

And Ray could: he'd been on the periphery of it a few times, seen the hunger, seen the desire. Seen Fraser deflect it as if he were Teflon coated. But Ben... Ben didn't have Fraser's life-long practice, or Fraser's life-long protective shell. Ben, oddly enough, was too innocent to pull off Fraser's wide-eyed, clueless innocence.

"All the things people say to me, Ray, the things they say about me when they think I can't hear. The way they look at me, the way the women display their breasts, the way men display the tightness of their trousers. All there for the asking, if I want it. If I'm willing to be nobody for them, a non-person. A stand-in for their dream object."

"But you know you're more than an animated dildo."

Ben didn't look away, didn't pretend, so much more open than Fraser had been, and it still took Ray by surprise. "I'm much more than they want."

So that wasn't all of it. Ben was telling him... "So you're horny?"

"I wouldn't say that."

"You say fuck now but you won't say horny?"

"No, I'll say horny, I just won't say it applies to me."

Not that that was an actual lie—just Ben being typically Fraseran with the truth. "Riiiiight. So, what do you do with all this non-horniness?"

"Onanism is a valid choice."

"Onanism?" Ray said, taking a second to place the euphemism. "The rest of us beat off, but you choose onanism."

"It's better than being with someone and wishing I were alone."

Which made Ray wonder if Ben had tried things to re-learn lessons Fraser had learned a long time ago. "So you've uh...you've had sex with some of them?"

"No," Ben said bluntly. "In this day and age, I'm not going to risk sex with strangers."

"I'm not a stranger."

Another smile, this one slow, and sweet, and vaguely pitying. "But who am I?"

"That's up to you. You don't want people to call you Frazier, then don't let them. You told me you want me to call you Ben—"

"Which you rarely do."

"Because I got to know you as Fraser."

"Because you see me in your image, not mine."

And Ray had opened his mouth to decry that, to tell Fraser just how fucking wrong he was, when he remembered himself strutting around here half-naked because he'd been so sure Fraser needed to be seduced. Maybe Fraser had needed to be seduced, given an excuse, backed all the way to the wall, but Ben hadn't.

Some people might lie or try to shirk the blame, but Ray Kowalski was an honest man, and a brave one. "Okay, so you got a point, you're right, and I wish the ground would open up and swallow me so I don't have to face you, but—" He took a deep breath. "But you haven't let me see what's going on. You knew about your mom for a week, and I'm not saying you shoulda told me. Okay, so I am saying you should've but I get why you didn't. But if you can't let me see stuff like that, if you shut me out the way you have since the first coupla days, I can't see *you*."

Ben was watching him, listening closely, lips pressed firmly closed.

"You gotta meet me halfway, Ben. We already got good at the partnership thing, when we try. So we gotta try at this the same way."

"Trust," Ben said. "It's all about trust again, isn't it?"

"And not just listening, but talking too."

"And sex?"

"Hell, yeah. I'm good to go."

"I didn't mean *now*."

"I know, and you know that. When you trust me enough."

Fraser lowered his head again, scratched his eyebrow. "It's not sex that's the issue, Ray. Because to be quite frank, if I wanted sex, I could spend the rest of my life in bed. It's..."

"Believing the rest of it."

And Fraser simply nodded. "Which will come in time."

Or not. But Ray recognized a 'let me go' gambit when he saw one—he'd used enough in his life—so he got up, careful not to touch Ben, even more careful not to flaunt his crotch in Ben's face and said, as casually as he knew how, "Tea?"

But the relief on Ben's face did nothing to assuage the soiled feeling of guilt clinging to him like mud.

He spent the rest of the day and the entire evening avoiding touching Ben or teasing Ben. He pulled on a sweatshirt over his T-shirt, left it hanging loose outside his jeans. Asked Ben to pass him things instead of stretching round or over Ben to get them himself.

At least Dief found it amusing. Ben just seemed...well, at least he wasn't as skittish as he had been.

They both stayed up too late, delaying the awkward, awful moment, till Ray, lying on one of the benches reading a book, simply fell asleep there. He wriggled a little when he felt something covering him, but it was warm and soft, so he simply pulled it up over his head and went back to sleep.

Daylight sharp as broken glass woke him. All the blinds were up, sunlight streaming in, chill and clear. The sky looked scrubbed clean, the storm clouds and darkness passed on through for now. Fraser was up too, dressed, eating breakfast, Dief lying contentedly at his feet.

"Uh," Ray said, half falling off the bench in his attempt to get up. "Coffee?"

"Almost ready."

That was something. "That's not a couch, that's a bed for dwarves. Or an instrument of torture."

"I should've woken you."

"So we could fall all over each other trying not to make things worse? I'm fine, nothing a gallon of coffee and a handful of Advil won't cure."

"Ray, about yesterday—"

"Not till after my coffee. You can torture me, embarrass me, and make me feel ashamed all you like, but *after* coffee."

"You've nothing to be ashamed of."

"Hey, you're right, prancing around wagging my nearly naked butt in your face was sensitive, mature behavior of which I should be fuckin' proud."

"For God sake, Ray, there's nothing wrong with trying to seduce someone."

"There is when they think nobody wants them for anything but sex."

"That's my problem, not yours."

"Before coffee, and he's started. Partnership, remember that? In a yellow submarine, trusting me? Telling me about the transfer. Not shutting me out."

"It's—it's..."

"Do not say it's hard, Ben, or I will have to kill you."

Ben, smart man, said nothing, and passed Ray his first mug of coffee. And the sugar bowl.

They spent most of the day out in the woods, not saying much but regaining some of the old comfort, although Ray still felt really weird about touching Ben. The more conscientious Ray was about not touching Ben, the more comfortable Ben seemed to feel touching Ray.

Scrambling for footing on a muddy slope, Ray was 'helped' up by a pair of hands planted firmly on his ass. "Tease," he muttered, as soon as he could stand without falling face-first in mud.

"I heard that."

"Eavesdropper."

"I'm the only one here, how can I be eavesdropping? Who were you talking to, if not me?"

"Myself—or Dief."

"Is this where I point out that Dief's deaf?"

And carefully, they maintained their supposedly normal banter all the way back to the RV where they could occupy themselves with packing and falling into the familiar patterns of working together as a team.

They were less than a block from the Consulate when Fraser started to talk.

"It's not the sex I'm afraid of."

Ray narrowly avoided hitting a parked car, swerving back into his own lane in the nick of time. "So what're you afraid of?"

"That once we've had sex a few times, you'll get tired of me as I am."

Ray slanted a quick glance at Ben. "What'd you say?"

"I'm afraid you'll get tired of me—"

"I thought that's what you said," Ray snapped, temper flaring, fanned all the higher because he could see this was just Ben being honest, this wasn't Ben digging for reassurances or compliments. "I am going to pretend I didn't fucking hear that!"

"Because I'm not an easy person to be with—"

"Really?" Ray asked, jerking the car to a halt outside the Consulate, anger unabated as he thought of just how hard he'd tried to make up for what he'd done this weekend, guilt fanning his temper. "Thanks for telling me, because without that newsflash, I wouldn't've noticed."

Fraser was out the car and halfway up the steps before Ray even had the engine turned off, but Ray could move fast when he wanted to. And he wanted to, oh, how he wanted to. He slammed his hand flat on the door as Fraser sunk the key into the lock.

"I already know you, Ben," he snarled. "I know you at your worst and I know you at your best, and God help me, if you think I'm going to get fucking *tired* of you and try to make you over into someone else, I will pop you one."

He grabbed Fraser by the shoulders, hauled him around, yelled right into Fraser's startled face. "I'm not Frannie, I don't want suburbia and I'm my own knight in fucking armor, okay?"

"Ray, I wasn't talking about you, I was talking about—"

"You, yeah, I know, I got that. But what you gotta remember is that there's *two* of us here. Not just you, not just me, but both of us. And don't you dare take your fucking fear out on me, Benton Fraser, because I won't fucking let you."

And then he turned on his heel and left because Ben was looking so lost and needy, if Ray didn't leave right now, he was going to grab on tight and not let go.

And that was no way to treat a man who was too scared to be caught.

Yet.

When he'd calmed down—and his landlady was probably cursing him for dancing half the night—and had some sleep, and started the day with suitable amounts of caffeine, sugar, and other comestibles necessary to the care and well-being of a cop, it hit him, pretty much the way that shopping cart had hit Fraser.

This really, honestly wasn't about him—this wasn't his failure, although he'd made a mess of it. But—a man who couldn't trust his own memories couldn't trust his own judgment either.

And from the sounds of it, Fraser had had a few choice lessons in non-love in his life. Fraser didn't need seduction because Fraser had that every day of his life. What Fraser needed was...courting. Putting the whole sex thing on the back burner. Making it clear sex was the icing on the cake, not the whole enchilada.

Courting. That was something Ray could do. He'd courted Stella for years before she married him, and he'd courted her every day thereafter. And for once in his life, he wasn't the needy one. He could do this, for Ben, for himself. This time, he would get it right.

He started that very day, at lunch.

He felt like a dork, showing up at the Consulate with lunch in a bag and flowers in his hand, but Ben Fraser was nothing if not old fashioned and traditional—albeit with a bright shiny new veneer of the 20th Century.

Ray cleared his throat and tried not to think about how he was going to feel if he bumped into Turnbull or Thatcher on the way to Fraser's office. He cleared his throat again, checked his hair, straightened his coat, and opened the Consulate door. Stalked right past Turnbull, ignored some sort of pale lemon shadow over by the other wall, and headed straight for Ben.

Who gaped when Ray walked in, brandishing lunch and flowers.

"Ray?"

"You don't need seduction, so... Here," he said, handing Ben the flowers. "These are for you."

And Ben, the bastard, started to smile. Those lips started to twitch, those eyes started to twinkle, and Ray stood there feeling a million kinds of dorky geek.

"I'm not quite that fragile, Ray," Ben said.

No, Ben wasn't, and Ray hadn't meant it that way. "It's not that, it's..."

"It's about showing me you want the person, not just the sex."

That was it, in a nutshell, and Ray realized that was why Ben was smiling—Ben got it, got it in one. “But the sex is part of it too, I mean, I’m not planning on becoming a monk.”

“Oh, I don’t know, I think a tonsure would be...fetching, on you.”

“I’m not going bald, not even for you. Ben.”

Who twinkled at him even more, and smiled at him even more, and led him out the back door to the pocket garden and lunch.

Of course, by the next day they were back into their usual routine, grabbing a burger on the go as they chased down leads on a case. But when Ray’s shift was over, when it was time for all good little Mounties to go back to their tiny little offices to fill in the forms that accumulated in their absence, Ray drove them to a restaurant he knew. Nothing fancy, because they weren’t exactly dressed for fancy restaurants, but the food was good, and there was a heated patio where they could eat without having to listen to Dief complain about being left out.

And the next day, and the day after that, and the day after that, they spent time together, almost the way they had before Ben’s accident.

Almost.

But before the accident, Ray would never have expected Fraser to lean over and kiss him goodnight.

And ridiculously, Ray was whistling along with the radio all the way home, happy as a lark, and all because he’d got a peck on the cheek.

He was happier still when he got into bed and indulged in a bout of onanism, sure that Ben was doing exactly the same thing, and thinking about him the way he was thinking about Ben—onanism for two. They were still a duet.

Somewhere along the line he’d stopped asking Ben if he’d recovered any more memories—and somewhere along the line he’d stopped thinking of him as ‘Fraser.’ And somewhere along the line Ray figured Ben had started trusting himself, which meant that Ben could start trusting Ray.

So many more slow increments of change, each better than the one before, each one step closer to where he wanted to end up.

There had been the first time Ben had kissed him, properly, on the mouth. The evening Ben had casually—oh so casually—sat beside him on the couch and draped an arm around him. The afternoon Ben had suddenly stopped, and turned, and simply *looked* at Ray, and Ray had known that something had changed for Ben. And that was the evening, the first evening, that Ben had kissed him open-mouthed, time and again, until Ray had hoped... But nothing more had happened, and he was wryly amused that at his age, he'd taken up necking on the couch like a teenager. On the one hand, it was driving him insane to go so far and no farther; on the other hand, it gave him wonderful sensations to think about when he was alone in bed, knowing that Ben was lying just as alone, just as aroused, doing exactly the same thing as him.

It wasn't enough, he wanted so much more—but it would have to do. For now. Till Ben took them both that final step.

Till then... Well, till then he'd make do and imagine that every touch on him was Ben's hand, not his own.

It was Ray's weekend off again, Friday evening, finishing later than usual because there was a mess of paperwork to be finished before he could take off with a clear conscience. The squad room was its usual noisome Friday night chaos, and he'd taken full advantage of Lt. Welsh being busy elsewhere to borrow the quiet of his office. He was going cross-eyed trying to fill in the last of the forms, but thankfully Ben was checking the final version for him, making sure he hadn't used the wrong word or mis-phrased something so the bad guys could cry foul.

"Ray?"

"Yeah?"

"Have you made plans for this weekend?"

"I thought we could try to get tickets, catch a game."

"Still courting me, I see."

"Yep."

"Aren't you running out of patience?"

Ray lifted his right hand, made an explicit gesture he wouldn't have done in front of this man three months ago. "I got this, I got patience. I wait long enough, I get you."

"Thought you hated waiting?"

"Who's waiting? We're practically living in each other's pockets already, and okay, so we don't have sex with each other, I still got this."

Fraser reached out and snagged Ray's raised hand, and lowered it below the level of the desk. Ray felt Fraser's hand fold over his, a tight, warm grip that gave him all sorts of ideas and all sorts of sensations. He looked at his hand enclosed in Ben's.

Fraser's voice was very quiet, almost painfully diffident.

"Do you *really* mean that?"

And there, in the middle of in the middle of his boss' office, with the blinds blessedly drawn to block prying eyes, Ray let it show, hid nothing, held nothing back. "I'm horny as hell all the time, wanting you. But I gotta wait, so I'll wait. And in the meantime, I make do."

And when Ben didn't say anything, simply let go of Ray's hand, Ray went back to his forms and thought about getting ten minutes by himself before he spent any time alone with Fraser.

The paperwork was done, checked, signed, and filed, or left right there on Welsh's desk where it was supposed to end up, and with Ben right at his side, shoulder to shoulder, Ray made his escape. The night air was brisk but pleasant, smelling faintly and cleanly of approaching snow.

"Ray, do you want to have dinner?"

"Yeah," Ray said, slanting a glance over at Ben. It wasn't as if Ben was a blushing bride, and Ray was doing this whole courting, seduction, let's-do-it thing in nice slow steps. Time to up the ante, say out loud something they both already knew about. "But after that hand

thing, I think I need some quality personal time alone first, okay? I'll drop you at the Consulate, you can get out of the uniform, I'll pick you up later."

"Or," Ben said, taking a deep breath, "we could go back to your place and have some quality personal time together."

Ray was so used to the line Ben had drawn in the sand, it took him a second to realize just exactly what Ben was saying. "That would be good."

"And if it's all right with you, perhaps I could spend the night."

There was a part of Ray that wanted to stop and check that he'd heard Ben right—but that insane part of his brain was drowned out by the rest of him, hurrying to get Ben home. Now. This instant. Before Ben could change his mind.

But he wasn't stupid enough to push too fast or too far: Ben'd said the sex wasn't the problem, but any man who'd deliberately turn down sex just because it wasn't meaningful enough...

...was a lot like Ray himself.

Which was reassuring and exciting as hell: he wasn't a man who indulged unless it mattered, but when it did...there was nothing he and Stella hadn't done. No limits, no hang-ups, just—

And if Fraser was the same?

Ray put his foot down, and Ben didn't even mention speed limits once.

It was both exactly what he'd expected and utterly different. As hesitant as he'd expected, but only for the first few moments, when they learned how to fit together, how to tilt their heads until their mouths met perfectly; cautious, until the first touch of bare skin to bare skin passed in a shiver of shock and pleasure.

Tentative, until he realized that Ben was no more unsure than he was, till he learned that Ben was no less unrestrained than he was. Until he learned what it was like to be kissed and touched by a man who

finally believed himself wanted for his own sake, for his own self, including his faults, not in spite of them.

Careful, until he learned that his strength was matched, surpassed, yearned for. Gentle, until he learned to listen to the sounds Ben made when Ray didn't hold back, didn't protect, didn't rein himself in.

Wild, then, as he learned he was wanted, and welcomed, and equaled. Fierce, as he learned that his hunger was consumed and that Ben's hunger was consuming him. Joyful, as he felt love rush through him, over him, out of him.

Sated, as he lay there, free to look, free to touch, lover and friend.

"About fucking time," Ray muttered as he fell asleep.

This time, when Ray woke up wrapped around Ben like seaweed, he didn't bolt. In fact, he smiled and stretched and started waking Ben up in the best possible way.

Not that he was checking last night hadn't been a fluke, no, he was a hundred percent sure of that. Ninety percent sure of that. Fairly sure of that.

Then Ben woke up and there was no room for doubts—there was no room for anything but Ben, and what he could do to Ben and what Ben was more than willing to do to him.

No limits. No hesitations.

Yeah, this had been worth waiting for. But still, as Ben took a long, loving dalliance down Ray's body, when Ben took Ray's cock in his mouth again, Ray smiled and said again, "About fucking time."



Drawing the Eye

a canon ball, post *Spy Vs. Spy*

Sunday morning early shift at the station wasn't always the best time to come up unannounced on Ray Kowalski, so Fraser strode in with a jaunty wave and a hearty, "Good morning, Ray!", only then realizing that the person leaning over Ray's desk wasn't, in fact, Ray. Nor, indeed, bore anything other than the most superficial of resemblances to Ray.

Oh, not that again, he thought, then felt more relieved than he'd ever admit as one of the night-duty officers—Macintosh, thrice married, twice divorced, four children, two cats, two mortgages and a quite marvelous talent on the accordion—smiled up at him. "He's finishing booking himself a felon, should be back any second now."

Now that was a surprise—and a bit of a disappointment that Ray hadn't called him in for the arrest. "So you had a big break this morning?"

Macintosh organized the files with a few quick flicks of his hands. "On the big case? Not yet, but we're *this* close on it."

"Then the felon..."

"New case—pretty nasty one. He should be back soon, but I got kids waiting for me, so I'm just leaving the last evidence file for him to look through later—and I pulled all the reports together, threw together the charts we need, did a timeline, that kind of stuff."

Ah. "Thank you kindly," Fraser said, taking the thick folder, speed-reading through the contents, grateful as ever for Macintosh's superior graphic and publishing skills: he quite despaired of ever teaching Ray to attain such a level of elegance.

He ran quickly through the other files on Ray's desk and in the top drawer; it was clear enough that Ray had had a busy shift yesterday evening plus a briefly busy morning thus far, so if he was to help with the report...

Ray's notes were as clear and succinct as always, the report finished in short order. In the middle of reviewing the final paragraph, Fraser paused for a moment, debating whether or not Ray would choose to use the subjunctive in a report or would prefer to keep that to private conversation, when another manila folder was dumped on the desk in front of him.

"Move."

Oh dear. He glanced up, caught one look at Ray's face and moved as quickly as he was able—which was, apparently, rather quicker than Ray had anticipated, resulting in an awkward tangling of arms, legs, Stetson, Dief, and coffee. There might have been a danish involved too, but with lupine speed definitely a factor, it was hard to be sure.

Shoulders hunched as he leaned forward to read Fraser's report, Ray said, "Your dog ate my breakfast."

He snapped a glare at the utterly unrepentant Diefenbaker, who merely grinned at him, but at least refrained from saying anything. "I'll be happy to buy you a replacement."

Ray slanted a long glance up at him, then went back to squinting at the report.

Manfully, Fraser managed not to suggest glasses.

"What?"

"Sorry?"

"You're just standing there—what?"

"Oh. I was wondering—" You know, it really was much easier to think on his feet when he was being shot at by Russian spies or even being chased by an enraged bull walrus. "I was wondering if you'd like me to buy you breakfast now."

"You mean now that you already finished my report for me?"

He tried not to frown; tried to keep his face open and pleasant.

"You don't usually mind if I—"

"Yeah, yeah," Ray broke in, waving a hand at him, not looking at him. "Just tired."

"Ah. Sunday morning."

There was, at last, a little glimmer of a smile on Ray's face. "Yeah, Sunday morning. And it's even worse when I start it with stuff like this."

"But at least you were able to find good solid evidence and break his alibi."

"And all in less than two hours, yeah, hand me a merit badge."

He waited a moment, and watched as Ray braced his shoulders, and like any good policeman did just to keep going, shed the guilt for only stopping the guy after the fact, not before.

"At least if he wiggles outta this one, it won't be because of anything I did."

"Yes, Ray. And that means he will finally be stopped."

Another five minutes, while Ray read the report—still without his glasses, although from closer up so that particular ocular problem was solved—signed it without adding the subjunctive, then took it into the lieutenant's office, where the relief officer in charge took it with a smile and effusive congratulations that made Ray don the most viciously insincere smile Fraser had seen in weeks.

Which turned into genuine amusement as he hustled Ray out of there before words could join that smile and land Ray in a dungheap of trouble.

"Saving my ass or his?" Ray asked.

"His, of course," he answered.

"So where are you taking me for breakfast?" Ray asked, with an odd timbre to his voice and a sharp glance at him.

"Wherever you wish, Ray. Although unless you want to walk, you'll actually be the one taking us—unless you'd like me to drive?"

Really, there was no need for Ray to shudder and Dief to laugh like that. He'd like to see how either of them did behind the controls of a snowmobile. Or tractor, or tank, hovercraft or submersible for that matter. And of all...people...Dief really should be more understanding about his ongoing problem with remembering the nuances of driving a private automobile; after all, he'd had to make his driving reactions purely instinctive, and that old right-hand drive Land Rover and those instincts had saved their lives more than once that particular, difficult year.

It went without saying that they hadn't walked, Ray's boots being wildly unsuited for anything other than the riding of motorcycles or looking 'cool'; Ray had driven them and in a concession to Fraser, hadn't actually double parked, but had merely stopped while Fraser ran into the diner to collect their meals to go.

And now they were sitting in Ray's living room, Ray rolling his eyes as Fraser insisted on transferring food from Styrofoam container to ceramic plates. "Oh be grateful," Fraser said. "I didn't insist on warming the plates first—and I let you do takeout. I didn't even," he paused, warmth growing inside as he waited for and got the expected half-smile, "insist on bringing our own reusable containers to the restaurant."

"Yeah, you're a real prince," Ray told him, taking the plate and dousing much of the contents in ketchup. "Remind me to hit you up for a knighthood."

After the past couple of weeks, and this morning—well, really, last yesterday's late shift coupled with this morning's early half-shift—Ray deserved a knighthood. Or at least a knight in shining armor.

Fraser immediately told himself to stop being such a fool and get on with being a good friend—or decide to try for more and actually act on it, or commit to pure friendship and stop this shilly-shallying—It registered that Ray was repeating his name. "Yes?"

"I insult your Queen or something there, Fraser?"

Still wrestling with his more selfish impulses, Fraser had no clue what Ray was talking about, and just looked at him, only habit keeping a doltish "huh?" from escaping.

"Nothing," Ray said, and went back to his food.

Friend, Fraser reminded himself. Or knight in shining armor. Or potential date. Make up your mind, he told himself, borrowing his grandmother's voice: stop dithering, lad.

He took a deep breath, and said, trying to sound casual, "I went to the opera with Mort last night."

Ray's shoulders stiffened, and he shifted until Fraser had most of Ray's back facing him.

"Yeah, I was there when he asked you," Ray said, sounding cool—not cool Steve McQueen cool, which was what Ray was usually aiming at when sounding cool, but cool like water coming down off a mountain in the early days of November.

That wasn't the opening he'd been hoping for. Fraser resisted the urge to fidget: he'd done something wrong, that was obvious, but what—ah. "You don't like opera, Ray?"

"I hate opera, Fraser, loathe and despise it worse than I loathe and despise country & western and boybands. You have a good time with Mort?"

"Oh, we had a marvelous time! The production was superb, and as Mort said when we were having supper afterwards—"

There, he'd said something wrong again. Which meant that— Oh dear. Two tickets for Lucia di Lammermor, and neither he nor Mort had even considered including Ray—and supper at a nice restaurant, while poor Ray worked... "Ray, are you jealous?"

Ray jumped up, banging against the dining table in his hurry. "Over going to an opera? Oh, yeah, missing the opera last night is the low point of my entire life, yeah, I'm real jealous, Fraser."

"My mistake," Fraser said evenly, measuring Ray's reaction, trying to read beneath the surface without tipping his own hand. "As I was saying, last night when we—that is, Mort and I—were having supper, he said it was the finest production he'd seen in thirty years."

"That puts it top of my must-see list," Ray said, sarcasm dripping.

Automatically, Fraser got to his feet to help clear the table, started cleaning the kitchen as always, getting his usual indulgent headshake from Ray. At least that was something: there were times when he irritated Ray to where retreat was the best recourse.

Wiping down the bar surface, Fraser looked over at Ray, who'd stretched out on the couch and was reading the sports page. So he hadn't annoyed Ray beyond redemption, although Ray's reaction was enough to cause him some doubt as to the wisdom of his choice of action.

Fraser took some extra time, tidying Ray's spices, remembering Ray talking about learning to cook while Stella was a full time law student and working as well. He could still see Ray, dappled by sunlight and shadows, Ray talking about taking care of most of the domestic side of things, Ray's discovery that while cleaning bathrooms was hell, cooking was fun. It was a pleasant memory of a good day spent on the lakefront, Ray's distance suddenly giving way to Ray talking—really talking, opening up about so many things until Fraser had felt...included. A lovely day, and for once, he'd regretted night falling, for that meant Ray had had to stop talking, and take him 'home.' Although that night, he'd hoped, for a moment, right as he started to get out of the car, that Ray was going to... He moved the phone to wipe under it, giving himself a little bit more time to think things through.

To dilly-dally, his grandmother would say. But it would be so much easier if Ray—who at least talked to him about sex, who at least realized he wasn't a tin soldier but a flesh and blood man—would make the first move.

Fraser looked over at where Ray had abandoned the sports pages for the local news pages.

He really should face the fact that there didn't seem to be much chance of Ray making a move on him, more's the pity. Admittedly, Ray's reaction to his spending time with Mort had been gratifying, if looked at one way. Looked at another way, and it was just another example of how Fraser simply didn't fit. Or rather, fit with the generation before his own, or before his father's, for that matter. Or an illustration of how Ray could feel left out or even looked down upon because Ray didn't enjoy ballet or opera. Or an illustration of Ray being jealous because Fraser had spent the evening with someone else, had had supper with someone else, had enjoyed himself with someone else instead of being with Ray.

Or, he conceded, wiping under the notepad, it could be all of the above combined, or none of the above.

It would just be so much easier if only Ray would look at him with those wickedly knowing eyes, and invite him to bed, or kiss him, or even just say 'Crystal Ballroom, the band, martinis, me...' to him—unlike all the women at the station, Fraser wouldn't turn him down. In fact, apart from the martinis, the entire proposal was utterly delightful, as far as it went.

To dance with Ray, to move with him, come home with him, to kiss, make love...

"Uh, Fraser, you planning on polishing all the way through to China or are you just mooning over Mort and opera?"

"What? Oh, sorry—I was..." Well, mooning, and over music of a sort, but certainly not what Ray was thinking. Unfortunately, Ray seemed to have taken his pause as an answer and was walking into the kitchen with a face like thunder and a mood twice as dark.

The moment Ray bent over to fetch one of those vile sodas from the fridge, Fraser felt a jolt of response to the luscious sight of Ray's jeans

spread tightly over canted hips positioned perfectly for...well, something a very long way from both pure and friendship. Ray was apparently searching for a particular flavor, bent over in front of Fraser for what was, surely, only a few seconds, and yet the influence this pose, this display was having on him... Fraser stared at Ray's unknowing invitation to debauchery and decided there was no time like the present. Plus, if he didn't say something, he'd do something and that would be dangerously precipitous. Increments. Take it in incremental stages. Dating first, debauchery later. "Ray, would you like to go out with me?"

There was the unmistakable sound of a soda can hitting plastic-coated wire shelving.

Ray stood, slowly, empty-handed. But not, Fraser hoped venally, empty trousered—and he stopped himself from looking, largely because Ray would catch him if he were so blatantly rude.

"What did you just ask me? Because it sounded like you were asking me...on a date?"

Oh, and please let that confusion and reluctance be because Ray didn't expect him to ask *anyone* on a date. "Crystal Ballroom, the band, martinis, me," Fraser quoted the remembered words, nerves rising in a thick ball in his throat so that he had to struggle to swallow.

"Isn't that my line?"

Deep breath, wipe the sweat from the palms of his hands. "Yes. I'm hoping it's more successful for me than it was for you."

"Let me get this straight," Ray said, still standing there, which was something—at least he hadn't laughed or left or given Fraser a look of profound pity. "You're asking me to go dancing with you, on a real date, like going out with each other, romantic interest kind of stuff?"

Fraser shifted, an old nervous tic he'd never been able to shed. "Yes," he said, because he couldn't think of a single other thing—all his quotes had deserted him, leaving him empty and dry.

"You want to date me? Not go out as buddies, but go out, in a purely romantic kind of way?"

"Not really, no." He saw Ray's reaction, couldn't read it, fumbled and stumbled and cursed his lack of language skills. "I mean—yes, I'm asking you for a date, yes, I very much want to date you in a romantic manner, but no, not in an entirely pure way."

There. He'd said it. And realized he'd shut his eyes in anticipation of—rejection? Acceptance? Hope? Coward, he thought at himself, and opened his eyes.

"You're admitting to impure thoughts?"

He still couldn't read Ray's expression: there was delight there, yes—thank God, yes—but he couldn't tell if Ray was delighted at the offer, or simply that finally, after all these months of discretion, Fraser had admitted to having sexual thoughts. Well, might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb. "Yes. In fact, when it comes to you, Ray, there are times when my thoughts are positively venal."

"So behind the polite Mountie face, you think venal thoughts about me, Benton Fraser?"

And thank God, Ray was smiling. "Yes," Fraser said, the fear receding, an entirely different nervousness arising. "I think some extraordinarily venal things about you."

"Things you want to do to me?"

And oh, the way Ray said that made the hairs on the back of Fraser's neck stand up, and made the skin over his spine shiver, and made other parts of him rise to the occasion too. "Things I want to do to you," Fraser confirmed. "Things I want you to do to me."

"Yeah? You want to tell me what some of those things are?"

Not particularly: he'd rather show than tell. But Ray wasn't leaving, Ray was looking at him, Ray was smiling at him—Ray was waiting. "Fellatio," he said, knowing it wasn't the word everyone else used—knowing it was hardly a word of passion, but what other term could he use?

"Buggery," he said, all the longed for dreams spilling forth, his body responding, to the words, to Ray, to the familiar desire so long held in abeyance. "Intracural intercourse."

Ray was laughing at him, but it was fond, rather than mocking—Ray was accustomed to him, comfortable with him, and rarer still, content to let him be himself.

"That's a lot of fancy words," Ray said, stepping closer. "What else you been thinking about? You, me, Crystal Ballroom, dancing—pretty dream, but you know it's not gonna happen."

Hell and damnation, he thought, vicious with disappointment. He started straightening up, schooling his features, falling gratefully into the near-ritual, almost automatic covering up.

"Because I'm a cop," Ray was saying, still looking at him, smile almost gone, a low simmering heat in its place. "And yeah, so you're a Canadian cop, but you're still a cop, and you know something, I just don't have the patience to deal with the questions and the crap and the heavy-handed tolerant PC do-gooders if we came out."

Kick them in the head—he could see Ray wanting to do that if—oh my, that meant Ray wasn't saying no to everything, just to—

"So if we dance, we do it here."

Here? So yes, it was 'yes' that Ray was saying, definitely yes—

"But you want opera and ballet and all that, I'm not your man."

"Ray, I—"

The smile was completely gone now, Ray so much more serious than Fraser expected. "I'm not gonna turn into the kind of guy who goes to the opera and loves culture—okay, so I love art, but that's different, and I'm not gonna go to gallery openings or any of that frou-frou crap with you either—"

"Well, of course you're not," Fraser said quickly as Ray paused to draw breath. "You love action films and boxing, pizza and sports, staying home reading with your music." He understood what Ray was telling

him, understood it deep in his bones, understood it from the dark depths of every single day of his life. "I have no interest in changing you, or 'improving' you. I have no interest whatsoever in you as anyone but you, as you are."

"Warts and all?"

"Of course."

"Why?"

The easiest question of all to answer. "Because I want to be wanted for who I am, not for whom someone thinks I am, or thinks they could make me."

"Yeah," Ray said, drawing the word out, smiling with his eyes again, bright, knowing eyes that could see right through Fraser and left him feeling dangerously naked. "I just wanted to make sure, you know?"

"That I didn't think you'd suddenly start going to the opera with me?"

"And we're never gonna share everything."

Ah. Something else he understood. "You once told me you and Stella were like this—" He held up his right hand, first two fingers tightly entwined as Ray had done that day. "You told me you and she were together in everything."

Ray nodded, and Fraser could see the wariness in him, could see where, even now, there was a lingering expectation of hurt when it came to Stella. "You and she lived in each other's pockets."

Ray nodded again, and Fraser said the last of it, blunt and harsh, going for a clean shot, doing what needed to be done. "And did it work?"

"That's..."

Oh, please don't let him say 'not buddies.'

Ray didn't—Ray just made one of his collection of noises, the one that Fraser thought meant Ray considered something to be harsh but true, or at least fair, but simply didn't have the right words at the moment, Ray more eloquent at times without words than with. "Okay, so

we both got that," Ray said, "we're both clear on that. You won't expect me to go to the opera side of life, I won't expect you to get a tattoo."

Fraser agreed, as somberly as he knew how. "No operas, no tattoos."

"Anything else?"

He could feel the smile pressing at his lips, trying to break through, a silly, giddy grin. "I think that about covers it."

"Okay, that's good, that's greatness because you know what else I've thought about?"

This was a taste of life with Ray: the familiar whiplash changes, but more intense. From serious conversation to sinuous seduction in the blink of an eye. "I haven't dared imagine that."

On anyone else—perhaps even on Ray, at another time—that smile would be downright predatory. But Fraser wasn't running, for he wanted, quite fervently, to be caught. To him, Ray's smile was simply... a promise, a declaration of intent, an indication of real desire.

"So you don't know?" Ray asked him, standing quite delectably, tantalizingly close, a shimmer of seriousness giving strength to desire.

"Can't you guess?" Ray asked him, the experience and intent in that voice going straight to Fraser's groin.

He could guess, he could so easily guess, could so easily say what Ray wanted him to. But then he'd hear it in his own dry words, his own bland tones. But to hear it in Ray's words, in Ray's voice... his pulse leapt, his heart pounded, and his arousal pressed against his jeans. "I could guess, but I wish you'd tell me yourself," he said, hearing the husk of his own voice, and the pleading.

The way Ray smiled at him, it was obvious Ray knew exactly why he wanted Ray to say it all out loud. He stood there waiting, skin prickling in anticipation, eyes nearly closed as the rasp of Ray's voice slid like a tongue across his skin.

"All the things you said, only not so polite. Sweattier. Sexier. Messier," Ray told him, so close now Fraser could smell him, the faintest hint of

hair-care products from this morning, a wispy tang of honest sweat from rushing around so much this morning, the underlying musk of rising arousal. "Every single last one of them. More. Rimming," Ray said, and that was enough, the image exploding in Fraser's mind.

He closed his eyes again, to listen—to feel, to simply be, here, now, with Ray weaving a magical web of words and carnality around him, ensnaring him, bespelling him.

"About a million other things," Ray said, and Fraser remembered the heated moment when Ray had told him, sitting so near but so untouchable in a car not so very long ago: I'll try anything.

A million other things with a man who would try anything: Fraser widened his stance, easing the pressure of his jeans tight and snug against his increasing arousal; got a knowing, nearly smug, smile from Ray as a result.

"But know what I'm thinking about right now?"

Fraser shook his head, then opened his eyes, for he could feel Ray's presence, incredibly close, and yes, he could see the flecks of color in Ray's eyes, the texture of his skin, the light tangled in his stubble.

"I'm thinking about kissing you."

And it wasn't until he heard himself all but moaning, "Oh yes," that Fraser knew he was even going to say it—or that he could sound so embarrassingly close to some of the more illicit videotapes he'd confiscated over the years.

None of which stayed in his head, for Ray did kiss him then, and shock tore through him. This wasn't the sort of kissing he was used to, not as a prelude to carnal activities; this wasn't how he'd imagined the leashed wildness of his partner would touch him. This was...friendship, taken to a new height. This was...buddies, only more. Much more. This was tender. Sweet. Teasing, in a way, just enough touch of tongue to make him want to—oh yes, that's what he wanted, to taste Ray from the inside. To get to know him from the inside out, Ray's mouth a pleasure in

and of itself, and even more, a reconnaissance mission for other ways he could know Ray from within.

Rimming, Ray had said, such a clean word for a such a deliciously coarse activity. And there were so many other places he wanted to taste: the inside of Ray's thighs, under his arms—before Ray rolled on the metal-sharp flavor and rankly chemical smell of deodorant—the hollow of his neck, the dimples at the base of his spine, the dark shadows cast by his testicles, the skin there, rippled like wet sand, the smooth, veined skin of Ray's—

"You want to do it in the kitchen?" Ray said against his mouth and Fraser heard a thread of humor, bright as gold, woven through the red of desire.

He didn't particularly care where they were as long as they got to 'do it.' Apparently, pushing his hands into Ray's jeans and stroking the soft skin of Ray's rear conveyed that message quite clearly.

"Because kitchens have advantages," Ray said, somewhere in the vicinity of Fraser's left ear as Fraser investigated the arc of Ray's neck.

"Hmm?" Fraser murmured, half-dazed by the ease of all this, half-shocked by the intensity of his own response, entirely stunned by how much he wanted this now he didn't have to hide it from Ray—or himself.

"Yeah. Flat surfaces, easy access to oils..."

He straightened up so fast, he nearly made himself dizzy. Or perhaps that was the result of the rest of his blood rushing to points south, making him adjust his stance again, his desire a pulse-warmed heaviness between his thighs.

Oils, he thought, somewhat stupidly, because it was the only word that could squeeze in around the pictures and possibilities in his head. Ray, and oil, and trying anything.

"But you know something," Ray said to him, distracting him terribly by touching him through his jeans, there to the right of his zipper where

his arousal—Fraser shuddered, his hands clenching onto Ray's fore-arms as if that would bring him back from the brink. And it did, in a way: Ray let go of him, as if realizing just how close he was.

"Bed," Ray told him, and began steering him towards Ray's bedroom, a bedroom comfortably cluttered with the many things that made Ray feel at home and drew the eye.

He could hardly wait: amidst all those personal, intimate objects, lying on the hedonistic expanse of Ray's big bed, he would picture Ray, spread out, naked—drawing the eye. As everything Ray did drew his eye: walking along a corridor at the precinct, driving his car as if it were an extension of his masculine prowess, smiling, laughing, the moist tip of his tongue showing as he played with a toothpick... Oh, but now he was spoiled for choice: the anticipated thrill of needing to use oil or rather, a water-based lubricant, or feeling Ray's tongue on him, nimble and strong and wet and—

He was close, he was regrettably close, and they hadn't even got their clothes off yet. Well, he hadn't. Ray had.

Ray had.

Ray was naked, and standing there, looking at him.

While he was still fully clothed, and standing there, and looking at Ray.

He'd never shed clothing so fast in his life, not even during the unfortunate incident with—but that wasn't important at this juncture. What was important was that Ray was naked, he was naked, they had a bed, Dief had made himself sensibly scarce, and Ray was as willing as Fraser himself was. And there was nothing to hide. Hopes, fears, faults; these had become known through friendship, tried and tested and accepted in friendship. This was simply...more. And it was going to be utterly splendid. He hadn't dared dream what Ray might want, or think about, but he had dared fill his head with fanciful notions, of Ray wanting him, of Ray loving him, of Ray with him.

But he had never come close to imagining just how good it felt.

Under him, Ray was laughing breathlessly, delightedly, and Fraser knew that his own unbridled enthusiasm was welcomed, was a joy to Ray, as much as Ray's abandoned sprawl was a joy and a delight to Fraser. Oh, and here was another joy, filling his hand, so smooth and slick at the tip, so astonishingly, lasciviously naked, no foreskin, just—

He had his mouth on it before anything approaching a clear thought had formed in his mind—and wasn't that something of a shock, to not think, to not plan, to not be prepared. To allow his guard down so completely that he could surrender to sensation, and to trusting Ray—not to mention exploring Ray, and tasting Ray. He wasn't sucking on Ray, not yet, for he was too addicted to learning the taste, sliding his tongue up and down Ray's length, over the startlingly bare crown, dipping into the tiny opening, back down, the side of his tongue against Ray, all of his tastebuds tasting all of Ray.

Under his hands, Ray's thighs—soft skin, soft, curling hair, hardness of muscle—were quivering, and he realized that Ray was doing his best not to thrust.

Well.

He would have to do something about *that*. If he got to be unfettered, then so did Ray.

So he opened his mouth, and took Ray inside. And sucked. Deeply, so deeply, too deeply at first, but it didn't take long for him to get the hang of this: it was simply a matter of muscle control, breathing control and co-ordination, far easier than many of the things he'd learned to do over the years. And so much more pleasurable. So much pleasure, so much sensation, such taste, texture, thick warmth heavy in his mouth, the smooth flutter of skin under his hands, the nearly ticklish slide of fair hair against his body—

Ray moved, at last, thrusting, only a little, until Fraser touched him, there, and pressed his finger, there—and then Ray was as wild as Fraser

had hoped he would be, thrusting into his mouth, unrestrained, too much, too fast, but even that was a pleasure, a release, exactly what he wanted.

Because here, doing this, he didn't have to be perfect, he just had to give Ray what Ray wanted, and take his own pleasure—pleasure taken from Ray, given to back to Ray by him, a mobius strip of escalating intensity and stretched-tight desire.

He used his hands as much as his mouth on Ray until his own needs took over and he freed one hand to use on himself. The circuit was complete, at last: his hand moved on Ray, his hand moved on himself, and it was right and good to feel such an intensity of pleasure, because it was Ray's as much as his own.

He could feel his own completion nearing, struggled to postpone it, denying himself that, denying it and wanting it, a delicious conflict within adding to the surfeit of sensations: his hand around Ray, his mouth around Ray, his hand around himself and the slick slide of his own arousal against his palm, vivid, carnal, sensuous, inside and out, it was all the same, united, white water flashflooding together—

He lay there, afterwards, savoring Ray's taste, luxuriating in Ray's touch, long fingers stroking his head, running through his hair, touching his ear, his cheek, his mouth—dipping inside, where he could still taste Ray so sharply, so clearly.

And like a dream drifting through him crept the realization that he felt different. As if by taking Ray's essence into himself, by absorbing Ray's DNA like that, he had changed. For all he should chastise himself for such foolishness, it felt more like truth than fantasy, as it should: it was simply a metaphor for the rest of it.

No tattoos, no operas, they had agreed, but if familiarity can breed contempt, it also breeds similarities: over the years, he would become more like Ray, and Ray more like him. Perhaps the change would take place as slowly as glaciers move, or as suddenly as an iceberg could break free from the unmoving glacier, but it would happen. It had, in fact,

BENE DICTUM VI: Due cut by M. Fae Glasgow

begun with his own greedy slurping of pleasure, with his own uninhibited decision to take Ray in his mouth without asking what Ray wanted: Ray had drawn his eye, and he had drawn Ray's passion from him, and taken it within and blended it with his own.

And Ray, his restless, anarchic Ray, had lain still for him, had been passive for him, this once.

Oh yes, the changes had begun, and there was no telling where it would end.

Ray wasn't being passive now: Ray was tugging at him, talking at him, pulling him up and arranging him like a doll—or given his state of nudity and what they'd been doing, perhaps a blow-up sex doll would be a better analogy.

Now that was something he wouldn't mind trying—not the doll, but other sexual aids which no doubt Ray, who would and probably had tried everything, would know all about.

This growing more alike was going to be...fun.

He raised himself up on one elbow and smiled down at Ray, who smiled back, sleepy, sated, and shifted slightly to accommodate him. His eye was once more drawn to Ray's tattoo. No asking for operas or tattoos—from the other. But there was nothing to stop Ray from getting another tattoo.

And nothing to say that a few years or even a few months from now, he could ask something of himself. "Ray," he said, tracing his finger over the design inked into Ray's upper arm, "are you sure you don't like opera?"



Holding On

after Odds

Fraser politely ignored that Ray was fussing, and Ray pointedly ignored that Fraser needed fussing over. They maneuvered easily around each other: Fraser dealing with getting the container out of the fridge, Ray with putting kibble in Dief's bowl and in a cereal bowl for Ante; Fraser putting the container into the microwave, Ray reaching up and getting down plates; Fraser getting forks and their drinks, Ray bending down to give the four-legged members of this troupe some fresh water.

Ray had already shed his police skin: badge and holster and weapon and ammunition all put in their proper place, and Fraser had finally finished with belt and strap and lanyard. And was standing there, hesitating.

Which was when Ray stepped forward and unfussily undid epaulets while Fraser undid buttons, and it was when Ray slid sleeves off arms and Fraser draped the tunic over the back of a dining chair, the two reds clashing almost painfully.

"Stay," Ray said, getting affronted looks from both Dief and Ante as they trotted past him to make themselves comfortable on his bed, but Fraser, for once, did as he was told.

"Thank you," Fraser said, as Ray hunkered down beside him and started undoing those boot laces.

"Always worse the next day," Ray said, moving to the second boot, fingers quick and certain as they undid the neatly tied laces. "Tomorrow'll be better."

"Is that your vast experience of jumping from second story windows speaking?"

"Nah," Ray said, grunting a little as Fraser braced himself against chairback and Ray's head while Ray tugged awkwardly to get Fraser's boots off. "That's my skinniest-kid-on-the-hockey-team experience speaking."

"You play hockey?"

Ray looked up, past what looked like acres of broad chest and miles of suspenders, to genuine, unguarded excitement on Fraser's face. "Haven't played for a while. Stella—"

"—didn't want you to get your teeth knocked out."

A ghost of a smile for that, sliding over Fraser's umbrage. "Or my nose broken."

"Would you like to?"

"Get my nose broken?" Ray asked, unlacing the jodhpurs while he was down there.

"Ray," equal parts admonishment and, perhaps unleashed by simple fatigue, unalloyed affection.

"Yeah, I'd like to play again. Have to find my skates first."

"I'm sure I could find—"

"Yeah, but if I let you loose," Ray pulled off one white sock, "to find my skates, you'd clean everything," the second sock, Ray standing up straight, as tall as Fraser, meeting him eye to eye, something odd in the moment even as he finished with: "and then I'd never find any of my stuff again."

Fraser didn't look around at the layers of "stuff" in Ray's apartment; he was looking at Ray, head cocked slightly to one side.

"What?" Ray demanded.

"But you'd let me."

"Let you what?"

"Go through your 'stuff'."

Ray slowly eased one suspender down off Fraser's sore shoulders. "But not throw stuff out."

Fraser stood there, very still, while Ray eased the other suspender down. "Not to throw stuff out, no," Fraser said slowly. "But no secrets."

Sharp glance for that, Ray tearing his gaze away from where his hand lingered on the suspenders against Fraser's hip. "Plenty of secrets," Ray said.

Fraser smiled, small and slow and sweet. "But I'd wager," Fraser said very quietly, eyes going to Ray's mouth for a moment, "that your secrets aren't the sort of secrets I—" another sudden flicker of gaze, nervous, Fraser taking a deep breath, "that I fear people close to me will have."

"You'd wager, huh?" Ray said, taking Fraser's trust and turning it into the slide of his hand up Fraser's bare arm. "Thought you weren't a betting man."

Fraser was watching those long fingers stroking him from wrist to short sleeve to wrist again. "Betting is very atypical for me."

"Yeah?" Serious look, trying to read Fraser.

"Yes," Fraser said, letting himself be open, feeling the smile and warmth in his own eyes. "Although I've found that I'm willing to make an exception."

"For me?"

Barely breathed. "For you."

"So what would you wager?"

Fraser smiled again, and stroked his own fingers up Ray's arm to where the short T-shirt sleeve had been rolled even shorter.

"Air," Ray said for him, and leaned in.

Delightful was not a word that could be used for this kiss: there was neither artifice nor artistry, only the strange newness of crossing the line, of finally doing what they'd spent so many months not doing. Fraser's lips were already parted, waiting, when Ray touched him; Fraser's tongue was already sliding between Ray's lips while Ray was still registering that Fraser was meeting him more than halfway; Fraser was already wrap

ping his arms around Ray as Ray was pushing forward, plastering them together.

"Oh yeah," Ray murmured against Fraser's mouth, teasing, tempting, drawing Fraser out a bit more.

No words from Fraser, just a harder kiss, more demanding, a little more strength and hunger unleashed, Ray's message understood. And Ray understood Fraser's message, the dining table a hard edge behind him. "Bed's better," he said, nipping at Fraser's jaw, and Fraser's groan was incendiary, pure raw Fraser, and it was more important to kiss him hard and rub against him than it was to get to the bed.

Good choice, too, for Fraser's hands went to Ray's jeans, the button fly ripping open, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, warm jeans pushed down, growl of frustration as body-heated cotton knit got in the way, Ray laughing under his breath and into Fraser's mouth as he shoved his shorts out of Fraser's way.

And oh yeah.

Fraser was sucking on Ray's tongue like it was his cock, and his hands were stroking Ray's cock like it was his own. Which was good and fine and great, but woolen jodhpurs aren't a pleasant surprise against an erect cock and sensitive balls, so Ray pushed and shoved a bit, got enough room down there to unzip and undress Fraser, nice hot cock in his hands, doing unto Fraser what he wanted done unto himself.

Fraser's breath caught, and he stopped, stood still, forehead against Ray's, as Ray stroked and rubbed him. "Too hard," Fraser said, gasping.

"Never too fucking hard," Ray said, rubbing his palm in a small circle across the head of Fraser's cock.

"For me," Fraser said, gentling his hand on Ray for a second or two until Ray got this message as well.

"Yeah," Ray sighed, as he stroked Fraser's foreskin back, touched more gently than he himself liked while Fraser stroked him hard, doing Ray's very favorite thing, the palm circling across the head, like that—

Oh yeah—

Like that—

And it didn't matter which one of them said what, for they were speaking for each other as much as themselves.

This was so good—

Greatness—

Wonderful—

Fan-fucking-tastic—

Until Ray was being bent backwards, towards the table, and he didn't care that they were going to do it right here, like this, because this was too good to stop and they could do romance later, like when they'd been together ten years and had gotten used to this.

And until Fraser suddenly went stock still, rigid, not in a good way, and moaned, in a bad way.

A very bad way.

"The back?" Ray gasped, cock still held nice and tight in Fraser's clutching fist.

"The back," Fraser confirmed, penis going soft and limp in Ray's hand.

"Fuck," Ray said, heartfelt.

"Unfortunately, not right at the moment, no," Fraser replied.

"Okay, okay, let's get you upright," Ray said, sliding out from underneath as Fraser braced his hands on the table.

"No, wait," Ray said, hands warm on Fraser's back. "Let me get some stuff—"

"Ray!" outraged, and amused, and wryly self-deprecating. "Much though I would like to do this, I'm really in no condition to—"

"Like I couldn't guess?" Ray said, coming back with Ben-Gay, the smell preceding the uncapped tube. "Let me rub some of this in, then we'll try getting you moving again."

"I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"For the coitus interruptus."

"An' I thought it was a bad back."

"Ray—"

"Fraser, I am standing here with my dick waving in the breeze trying not to think wicked thoughts while I rub my hands all over your naked back and keep my cock from getting ideas cos it's getting up close and personal with your bare ass. If I wanna make bad jokes—"

"—you can make any jokes you like. I suppose you really don't want to hear expressions of gratitude from me right now either?"

"You know what I want to hear from you right now—" a fairly gentle slap to muscles tensing instinctively, "and that wasn't me criticizing, it's—it's..."

And then Ray leaned over Fraser, nestling against him, arousal to smooth skin, soft kiss to naked nape. Then it was a brisk pat to Fraser's shoulder and a tug to Fraser's jodhpurs. "Put it away and zip it up, and let's see if we can get you to the couch."

"I thought the bed was better?"

"For what we were going to do. Right now, couch," leaving Fraser standing for a moment while Ray grabbed a blanket from the lower cabinet, "then floor for sleeping, right?"

"Right," although the reference to the couch had elicited a wince.

"Jeez," Ray muttered, slowly pulling Fraser upright again.

Fraser literally put himself in Ray's hands, letting Ray move him, and guide him: another message, understood and rewarded when the pain from lying down on the couch was immediately eased by the firm support of cushions under his back and head, and the relief of stress when Ray lifted his legs up.

Ray slid in under Fraser's legs, putting Fraser's bare feet up on the arm of the couch, his own thighs adding more support under Fraser's, so that Fraser was lying nice and flat on his back, with his legs raised just a little, the weight supported by Ray's thighs: it was enough to make a chiropractor proud. And of course, that was the only reason Ray had

Fraser lying there like that with Fraser's legs a pleasant heat across the tops of his thighs: it was purely for the benefit of Fraser's back. Well, it was mainly for the sake of Fraser's back, but Ray wasn't complaining that it got him Fraser draped over him. "Better?"

"Even better than bed. No, I didn't mean—" Looking at Ray, seeing Ray. "But you knew that," Fraser said comfortably, settling a little deeper into the couch, letting Ray's thighs take the full weight of his legs. "You knew that."

Ray just smiled, and started pressing buttons on the remote.

"Ray?"

"Yeah?"

"Pain is a very sure cure for arousal, but you—"

"I'm fine."

"That's my point exactly. You're fine and you were, well, you were..."

"I can wait."

Fraser lay there, eyeing Ray, who was intensely focused on an infomercial. For hair removal.

Fraser moved his right leg back and forth just a little, and sure enough, Ray's eyes closed, and his head dropped back.

"Ray," Fraser whispered, "don't wait."

Ray sat there, eyes closed, as Fraser rubbed his leg gently across the front of Ray's jeans.

"Unbutton your jeans," Fraser said quietly.

Ray swallowed but didn't move.

"Unbutton your jeans, and free yourself," Fraser said.

Ray looked at him, hard and quick, and then the remote was tossed on Fraser's stomach, and Ray's hands were bumping against the backs of Fraser's leg as Ray pushed his hands underneath Fraser and scabbled at his jeans, pulling them open, squirming around a little to push fabric down and out of the way, and then naked, exposed, he stopped and met Fraser's eyes.

"Touch yourself," Fraser said, and Ray did.

"Show me what you want me to do, teach me, show me what you like, Ray."

Lips parted, Ray did, staring at Fraser, staring into his eyes, hand flying—then stopping.

"Back doing any better?" Ray asked.

"For the moment, yes," Fraser told him, tongue touching lower lip.

Moving Fraser as little as possible, Ray eased and pushed the jodhpurs down, not caring where they went, just getting them off the bits he wanted bare. Undershorts next, and then he stopped and looked. The backs of Fraser's naked thighs were smooth against his own thighs, and he trailed the tips of his fingers over Fraser's skin, upwards, till he had to lean over a bit to reach, taking hold of Fraser's slow erection, gentler than he liked. Fraser's cock in his left hand, nice and easy, his own cock in his right hand, stroking himself as hard and fast as he liked. His left hand was a little awkward on Fraser, but that was okay, that made him go easy on Fraser, and he was managing, managing okay, oh, managing good—

Fraser's hand bumped lightly against his, a confusion of touch, as Fraser stroked himself across and above and under Ray's grip, the two of them sliding up and down the nicely hard length, and then Fraser's naked thigh, soft dappled hair, warm skin, slid against Ray, against his balls, against the base of his cock, meeting Ray's hand, sliding and stroking and rubbing and—

Oh.

Oh yeah.

It was Ray first, hot and slick and nearly silent, and then Fraser's hand was pushing Ray's lax grip aside, Fraser doing himself, not merely letting Ray see, but wanting Ray to watch, wanting Ray to see him like this, unvarnished, revealed, needy—

Fraser second, just as hot and slick, and loudly groaning.

And then the rest of the world existed again and there was the sound of the television, and cars outside. Ray was grinning, Fraser smiling up at him, idly rubbing his semen into his belly.

And with that hand circling, one finger tracing a small circle against the head as his foreskin slowly covered him again, Fraser looked up at Ray and all innocence, asked, "And you say bed's better?"

"If it wouldn't break your back," Ray said, laughing, "I'd kiss you."

"And I'd say I don't care what it does to my back."

Ray grinned at him, rubbed his hand on Fraser's naked thigh. Looked up suddenly, muttered something under his breath. Took great care again in getting out from under Fraser and in pulling the jodhpurs and shorts all the way off to leave Fraser naked and exposed and posed like Josephine in a painting by Rubens. One hand on the back of the couch, he leaned down and kissed Fraser. No passion this time, just tenderness, and promise, and another message. "Okay?" he whispered.

"Yes," Fraser said. "Finally, I think—yes. I'm...we're...good."

"Greatness," Ray laughed, softly, against Fraser's lips, then kissed each closed eyelid.

Ray covered Fraser with the blanket, then slid himself under, taking the weight of Fraser's legs again, taking the pressure off Fraser's back, and easing all the strain.

Fraser handed him the remote, and Ray started flicking through channels, shifting only once, surprised, when Fraser reached out to him and took his hand. Holding on, just holding on, actions speaking louder than any words.



Aftermath

a canon ball, immediately after Ladies' Man

It was quiet as he let himself in, quieter even than it had been earlier, when all the noise in this apartment had been his own and Dief's. Now they were being careful, moving as if hunting, circling around to be downwind, to arrow in without startling.

Fraser put his keys—a bunch as large as Ray's, but needed, all of them, or at least required—on the bar mat Ray kept on his kitchen counter, the thick cloth letting him lay the keys down without so much as a chink of metallic sound. Dief padded softly, scant noise of nails clicking, soft whuff of couch cushions taking his weight. No sigh, no panting, but his eyes were half-wild and watchful as Fraser removed the outdoors—hat, boots, jacket—and padded towards the bedroom.

Some light lingered in here, but not enough to see details immediately; Fraser waited, patient, still, until his eyes adjusted and he could discern images in the dark. There was some city light and street light coming in through blinds that Ray hadn't closed properly; the curtains weren't drawn, and there was no tell-tale small red flash to indicate the alarm clock was set for morning shift.

There was something on the night table, but behind the clock so he couldn't make out what it was, but he suspected it was Ray's glasses; there was a coffee mug dimly lit by the clock's digital display, red numerals reversed onto the white vitrine. On the floor were haphazard lumps, which would be Ray's clothes or remaining detritus from Ray's apartment being "tossed" so callously. Cautiously, Fraser picked his way through

the indeterminate hummocks, the hardwood floor smooth and slippery beneath his socks.

He could see better now; could see the shape of Ray's body under the comforter; could see the defeated droop of recently washed hair; could see the pallor of skin. He couldn't be entirely certain if Ray was asleep, but certainly those eyes were closed. He came closer and listened to Ray breathe.

Not asleep. Not even close to sleep.

In the car, he'd been able to offer next to nothing, too certain that nothing could ease Ray's tumult of emotions to offer anything much at all beyond his presence, and his acceptance, and his hand on the back of Ray's neck. Later still, when the car had pulled up at the Consulate, he'd stepped from the GTO as he always did, said 'good night' as he always did, and was given a smile unlike any Ray had ever given him. And then he'd stood on the Consulate's threshold, as he always did, and watched Ray drive away, as he always did.

And then he'd turned his back to the Consulate and begun walking.

After a while, there had been a cab driver willing to pretend Dief was a seeing-eye dog, which had amused the hearing-impaired wolf no end. Then the taxi had dropped them off, and they were here, using Ray's entry code, climbing Ray's stairs, using Ray's keys given to him in friendship.

That was all he'd come here for tonight: to return that gift of friendship. He couldn't cure what ailed Ray, but he could, he'd realized belatedly, at least be metaphoric aspirin. Or at least the provider of quiet company and the purveyor of comestibles.

"Do not get into my bed wearing stinky socks."

He startled a little, but didn't say anything in reply; he simply moved around to the unoccupied side of the bed, sat on the edge of the mattress, at Ray's back, and stripped his socks off. Hesitated for a moment, then, unsure of what Ray wanted—although Ray wanted him in bed in

some capacity, that was clear enough—and then compromised, between what there had been between them thus far and what Ray might want tonight. Fraser stripped down to undershirt and the soft, unstarved boxer-briefs that he'd converted to after borrowing a pair of Ray's.

What a difference, from that situation to this. They'd thrown punches and nearly drowned that time, but this time, it was only Ray who was drowning, only Ray reeling from the blows. It didn't matter that Ray had saved her life; it only mattered to Ray that he'd cost her eight years of that life and had sentenced her to three trips to the death chamber.

(Snow, falling like the words of a poem recited in a beautiful voice.)

Fraser knew Ray's pain like his own.

Ray had seen his mentor, his father-figure, become base, corrupt. Had endured having his filial affections mocked and used against him.

(Boot to chest, knife thudding into wall instead of flesh.)

Fraser knew that pain like his own, too.

It was warm under the covers, and redolent, not unpleasantly so, familiar scents smelled for the first time like this. He fumbled for a moment, unsure, then settled himself at Ray's back, easing closer to him—

Heard an impatient sigh, and Ray was backing into him, dragging Fraser's arms around him, making Fraser hold him. Ah. He relaxed against Ray, hugged him and then eased his grip; breathed in the scent of hair without styling aids, of skin without aftershave, of a man without armor.

He still wasn't entirely one hundred percent sure what Ray wanted, but he was entirely sure that he would give it, in whatever form, for whatever length of time Ray might need it. With the way Ray had pulled him close and pushed back into him, it seemed relatively clear what Ray wanted from him, at least for this brief time, within these specific confines. And if Fraser himself thought it unfortunate that they should take this next step on the back of Beth Botrelle's suffering, then he would live with that. Would look at it from Ray's point of view: a celebration of life, a moving forward, a way of honoring her by not wasting any of his own

BENEDICTUM VI: Due cut by M. Fae Glasgow

life. He pressed a small kiss to the nape of Ray's neck, and slid his hand up to Ray's nipple—

And heard a sigh, soft, gentle and tired. He felt the calluses of Ray's gun hand against his own, moving his hand up to Ray's mouth, where a kiss was pressed to his fingertips then, gently, back down to Ray's stomach.

Ah.

Not sex then, not the fast-pumping flow of blood and passion, but this...

Quiet. Together. Linked.

Comfort, and peace, and the time to attain both.

He eased in closer, and pressed another soft little kiss to the nape of Ray's neck, and rubbed his hand in small, soothing circles across Ray's belly, unable to make Ray happy right now, but staying the course with him and giving him what he could for as long as Ray needed him.

They lay together, unsleeping in the dark, and waited for the d

Dance Away

during Dead Men Don't Throw Rice

If Francesca's method of announcing her upcoming marriage had been discomfiting, her request—delivered in the blessed privacy of the observation room off Interview I—had just about floored Fraser.

He hadn't even been aware of the 'designated bachelor' tradition, but then, there were so many odd little customs in Chicago, and marriages were full of odd traditions everywhere. From the father leading the bride onto the dance-floor, to breaking glasses, to holding handkerchiefs, to smashing cake into each other's face, marriages were odd events, so it seemed almost reasonable that there be a 'designated bachelor' required to make sure that every woman in the bridal party danced at least once.

Although 17 members of the 'bridal party' did seem rather a lot, especially since Fraser had overheard Francesca telling the desk sergeant she was only having a matron of honor.

Fraser shook himself as if to doff his unworthy suspicions: no doubt most Chicagoans would find some of the wedding customs of Fraser's own native region to be...strange. Certainly the one with the pelts and the walruses.

If Francesca declared that for her wedding she wanted a 'designated bachelor,' then 'designated bachelor' Fraser would be.

And with any luck, all seventeen dances would be waltzes, two steps, or polkas.

Fraser stumbled as Dief crossed in front of him in hopes of causing dinner to descend to the floor; caught himself just before colliding with the kitchen chair, and nearly dropped the frying pan.

And while Dief sat there laughing at him, Fraser conceded to his mocking wolf that yes, perhaps a refresher course would be of some assistance.

“Oh dear,” Fraser said, as the distant chimes of a church drifted towards them.

“Now you notice,” Ray muttered, still sitting on the perp in a Joker costume.

“Well, I was a bit busy to pay attention to the time—”

“The time? I got hit by a little old lady dressed as Poison Ivy—which is not something I ever wanted to see—” Ray said, clicking the handcuffs into place, “and got knocked over by The Penguin who was setting me up for The Joker while Batman and The Boy Wonder robbed the jewelry store, and you’re talking about the time?” Ray stopped suddenly, halfway through dragging The Joker to his feet. “You got a hot date?”

“No! No, nothing like that. It’s a—well, it’s a refresher course.”

“Well, it sure as hell isn’t a ‘how to pick up women and get tons of sex’ refresher course, so let me guess. I know, it’s ‘how to identify the most disgusting things on the street so you can lick them.’”

“No, Ray.”

“How to find the stinkiest sewer to chase perps through? How to find the highest point off which to jump into the filthiest river in Illinois?”

“Only when being shot at, Ray.”

Ray looked at him for a few seconds—a long time, in the lexicon of Ray Kowalski assessing something or someone. “Okay,” Ray said, moving again, hand going to the top of the perp’s head as he folded him neatly into the CPD car, “I’ll give you that. So what’s this refresher course for?”

“You’re aware that Francesca is getting married—”

"Yak farmers in the Himalayas are aware Frannie's tying the knot, Fraser."

"She's honored me by requesting that I be designated bachelor for the reception."

"Designated bachelor?" Ray asked. "You did just say 'designated bachelor,' didn't you?"

So much for giving Francesca the benefit of the doubt. "Regardless," Fraser said, not even bothering to obfuscate or pretend innocence, "I've promised her now, and that's why I was dismayed when I heard the clock chime."

Ray stood aside while the backup uniforms put the rest of the perps into cars. "Fraser, she faked you out, promises don't count when they're made under—"

"Duress?" Fraser said helpfully.

"Ignorance," Ray replied, firmly. "She pretended it was an old American tradition—"

"She didn't actually pretend that per se—"

"So she said it was an old Chicago tradition—"

"That wasn't her claim either."

Ray gave him a look for that as he got into the car. "An old Italian tradition—"

"Nor that," Fraser said as Ray took off at speed, heading for the precinct.

"An old Vecchio family tradition," Ray said, "and don't tell me she didn't. But she got you due to undue ignorance, so the promise doesn't count."

"Ray, she has, it would seem, seventeen friends whom she's promised a 'designated bachelor.' I can hardly embarrass her on her wedding day—"

"You won't be embarrassing her," Ray said, taking the corner just fast enough to get a nice squeal from the tires, "she'll be embarrassing herself for trying to trick you."

"If I don't fulfill my promise," Fraser said calmly, looking meaningfully at Francesca's current, and unmarried, brother, "then she'll have to find a substitute, Ray."

Ray threw him a quick glance. "Maybe we can still make it to your refresher course after all," Ray said.

But Ray's cell phone rang, followed by a pointed and none-too-gentle reminder from Lieutenant Welsh that Ray had just dumped half the geek quota of a comic book convention on Welsh's lap and the consequences thereof if Ray should just take off instead of coming back to sort through the assorted costumed crusaders. By the time they dealt with the self-named Injustice League of America, then fought their way through traffic, found parking, and made it to Fraser's refresher course, the building was locked up and dark.

"We teach all dances from the minuet to rap?" Ray read aloud. "There's no such thing as the rap dance, Fraser, what the hell are you planning on letting them teach you?"

"I really just need a refresher course on some of the basics, Ray, that's all."

"This place is shut, locked up and the key thrown away, so you're not getting any refreshing tonight. C'mon, let's go get Chinese. You can call Le Danse Ecole de Chicago tomorrow morning." Ray turned back towards the car, Fraser right at his shoulder. "And all so you can be designated bachelor to seventeen of Francesca's closest friends."

Fraser didn't quite manage to hide his flinch at that. "Be that as it may—"

"Fraser, you don't need a refresher course, you need your head examined," and quickly, as Fraser opened his mouth to say something, "and not by some yo-yo who thinks you're sane and the Ice Queen's super-sane."

"Inspector Thatcher's mental condition is rock solid, Ray."

“By California the land of the big, bad earthquakes standards, Fraser,” Ray said then added, in response to the look of questioning doubt on Fraser’s face: “The woman thinks she’s going to get into your pants. Ergo, the woman is nuts.”

Fraser stopped dead in his tracks, hurrying the next couple of steps to catch up to Ray. “What—why— how—I’m not entirely certain I understand what you’re saying, Ray.”

“She’s your superior officer. You’re not going to do the horizontal tango with her.”

“Ah.”

“There he goes,” Ray muttered, unlocking his car door. “With the ‘ah’ and the ‘hm’ and telling me nothin’.”

“I’m sorry, Ray? I didn’t hear what you said.”

“I said at least I still think about women.”

The look Fraser cast at Ray didn’t actually call him a liar, but it did doubt the dependability of Ray’s memory.

“I did say that,” Ray said. “In fact, I say that to you maybe once a month, and you never say yes or no to it.”

“Really, Ray?” Fraser asked, all innocence. “I hadn’t noticed.”

The tires squealed as Ray swung the car out of traffic and slammed it into a parking space. “You wanna do that obfucks—that obdu—that smoke and mirrors thing, that’s fine, but do not, I mean it, do not lie to me, Fraser.”

For a moment, Ray sat there and glared at Fraser, who swallowed, hard, and then jerked his head in a way that might be construed as nodding. Or a man hanging onto his temper by main force.

“Okay, good, that’s good, we can dance to that.” Ray took a deep breath and shrugged, deliberately loosening his shoulders. “So, you want Chinese?”

Fraser nodded again. “Chinese is fine. Ray, I don’t make a habit of lying to you.”

"You just did! Accountants are less detail oriented than you—you notice what I had for breakfast—"

"Instant coffee and candy are rather distinctive—"

"But you expect me to believe you don't notice you never answer me when I ask you about that?"

"I wasn't aware you were asking me anything. You were simply stating that at least one of us still thinks about women—and I presume from context that you mean think about them in a sexual way—and that's simply a true statement. I really don't see where the question is in that."

Ray pulled into the alley behind their favorite Chinese place, and dropped his head onto the steering wheel, banging it twice for emphasis. "Okay, okay, you win. You go have your refresher course, you go dance with seventeen of Francesca's friends, and I'll just stop asking."

"Asking *what*?" Fraser demanded, following Ray through the back door into the side corridor where the smells from the kitchen were mouth-watering.

"Nobody is so—so—so—*naive* they don't know what I'm asking about. Frannie's right, you know all about nails and cheese on Pluto, but you don't know what's under your nose. Don't pretend—"

But he didn't get as far as telling Fraser what Fraser should stop pretending about because that was when the owner's grandmother saw them and conversation erupted into multiple voices in English and Cantonese talking about duck and children and health and noodles and school and how they had to have some tea while the food was made specially for them.

And that was pretty much the end of personal conversation for the rest of the evening.

It was considerably later than the next morning before Fraser had a chance to call Le Danse Ecole de Chicago.

"Oh dear," he said.

"Oh dear what?" Ray asked, sliding into the driver's seat and fending off a fond welcome-back-gimme-the-food lick from Dief.

Fraser took the brown bag from Ray, balancing the warmth on his lap as Ray seatbelted himself and started the car.

"Monsieur Gilbert said that since I've missed the first three lessons already, it's too late for me to join the class in progress. He said I should call his partner, a Miss Sullivan, and she'll arrange for a pro rata refund for me."

"Fraser, I don't want to panic you or anything, but you got less than two weeks to get this refresher of yours and you still have to fit in the whole fake-death-by-booger-toad -bring-down-the-mob-guys thing. You sure you really need this whole refresher deal?"

"Well, I've also taken the precaution of borrowing a book from the library, and I'm sure that if I can't get into a class, that'll be sufficient."

Ray winced. "At least get a video or one of the audio courses, Fraser. A book's—"

"—a great source of knowledge."

"Which I bet you already got. You know what steps go with what dance, you got all that memorized, right?"

Fraser nodded, and shoved Dief's investigative nose away from the food.

"You said it's practice you need, and unless that book's got arms and legs and feet, that book of yours is not going to give you any practice other than turning pages."

"I suppose if I can't find a class at this late date, I could contact my friend at the Golden Sunset Retirement Home and attend their Friday night dance."

"Believe me, Fraser, twirling a 90-year-old around the dance floor is no preparation for tripping the light fantastic with seventeen of Frannie's friends. Plus, retirement home, you, them, dancin' cheek to cheek—" Ray's gaze flickered from the shine of Fraser's hair to his bared forearms to his jeans-clad thighs, "equals too many heart attacks."

Fraser flustered for a moment, then settled on, "I suppose it's much like riding a bicycle—you never forget."

"Yeah, right," Ray muttered darkly. "They say that about sex, and look how wrong they were about that."

"Ray?"

"I just mean—it's been so long, I'm not sure I remember what it's like. Yeah, I mean, I *remember*, but I'm not sure I remember remember. It's not like I've forgotten what it's for," Ray flicked his hand towards his own groin, "now *that*, I can remember."

Fraser was now staring firmly out the window.

"But it's like my mother's cooking, you know? I can remember it, I think I can remember how it tastes, but that's not the same as experiencing every little detail, or remembering exactly how it tastes and smells and feels in my mouth—Fraser, you okay?"

"Fine, Ray," Fraser said in a strangely high-pitched, strangled voice.

"You don't sound—"

"Fine, Ray, just fine. I simply—"

Dief made a series of noises.

"Yes, the food is very hot and yes, it is on my..." Fraser cleared his throat. "My lap."

Ray shook his head. "Weird," he said, and went back to driving them home. But every time he slowed for a stop sign or stopped at a red light, he'd take another look at Fraser, who didn't look back, not even once. And who hadn't moved the bag away from his...lap.

Ray was bringing up the rear, in more ways than one: he had Fraser and Dief both in front of him, Fraser still clutching that damned bag like it was a lifesaver and they were back on the Henry Allen.

"So you didn't realize I was asking a question, huh?" Ray asked, unlocking the door, Dief pushing past him, Fraser following behind. Ray took Fraser's leather jacket to hang up as Fraser headed for the dining area.

"Which question would that be, Ray?" Fraser asked, sounding quite impressively clueless.

"About thinking about women."

"What about thinking about women, Ray?"

Ray dumped the plates and stuff on his dinette table as Fraser took the take-out containers out of the bag. "The whole thinking about women question."

"That was a question?" Fraser said, irritation threaded sharply through the cluelessness. He sat down, started to eat, not waiting for Ray.

"Okay, okay, I get it," Ray said, sounding none too pleased about it. "And you can waltz around not-answering better than Turnbull, so I'm going to just give up, right now."

"Speaking of waltzing," Fraser said quickly, "perhaps I could find a private instructor whose rates are within my means."

"Just forget about the instructors and the classes and the money, okay?" Ray said round a mouthful of rice. "After dinner, I'll give you a lesson."

Fraser simply froze, mouth half open, eyes wide open, staring at Ray. Then he blinked and shook his head, back to what passed for normal around here. "You will?"

"Yeah, Mr. I-got-a-book-from-the-library," Ray said. "But you don't tell anyone about this—and anyone includes anyone I work with or have ever worked with. Okay?"

"As long as it's not related to a crime or—" Fraser looked at Ray and stopped. "Understood. I won't tell anyone, Ray."

Ray leaned back in his chair, all gunslinger grace and threat. "I'm a qualified dance instructor."

Fraser's gaze went to where the rug covered the steps painted on the floor, then flew back to Ray's face.

"In college," Ray said. "Needed to come up with some way to pay for me and Stella taking the advanced lessons."

Fraser had gone back to staring at Ray again.

"What am I thinking? You're not gonna think it's weird. Maybe hit me with an amusing igloo dance in the Klondike anecdote, but you won't..." Ray stopped, took a bite of food. "So the truth is, I loved teaching all those women how to dance. They'd come in clumsy as hell and by the time they'd finished my class—hmm. They were so proud of themselves, and they were damn good, because I'd taught them how to move, how to let their bodies merge with the music and blend with their partner."

"Ah," Fraser said, his eyes gone distant.

"Earth to Fraser?"

"Oh. Yes. Lessons. You'll... teach me," Fraser said, staring at Ray's fork as it disappeared into Ray's mouth. "To dance."

"I'll help you practice," Ray corrected, "so you don't dance like a stick. You okay?"

"At dancing? Yes, I'm just lacking a certain panache."

"Not at dancing, not at dancing. I mean right now—you're not eating, you're looking at me queer..."

And while Fraser didn't blush, his eyes did get wide and he did look away, obviously flustered.

Ray took another mouthful of food and chewed, ruminatively, staring at Fraser the whole while.

They'd discussed far safer and far more normal topics—for them. They covered some of the finer points of toad secretions and playing dead and whether or not playing dead was the same as being dead. They'd even covered if what Fraser remembered from when he was under were hallucinations or near-death experiences, but when Ray asked if Fraser had ever encountered any dead people when he was 'under,' Fraser muttered something about fathers who were around at all the wrong times and seemed disinclined to go into any other detail on that particular subject.

So now the table was cleared and the dishes were in the dishwasher, the furniture had been pushed back out of the center of the room. Fraser's overshirt and Ray's shoulder holster had been dumped out of the way, and Fraser was standing there while Ray rolled the area rug up and shoved it into the bedroom.

"So, what you want to brush up on first?"

"You mentioned the waltz," Fraser said, still standing there.

"I said waltzing around—but yeah, okay, the waltz it is," Ray replied, then after taking a good look at Fraser he added, "You sure you're okay?"

"Do you have suitable music? I could go and fetch—"

"There's no escape, Fraser," Ray said, smiling sharply, his arms outstretched, waiting for a partner. "You're gonna have to expose your stick-like rhythm to me no matter what."

Fraser swallowed and went pale. "Ah," he said.

Ray just shook his head. "It's okay, Fraser. You don't tell anyone I used to be a dance instructor who's taken up giving lessons to Canadians, and I don't tell anyone you dance like a rock. C'mere."

Fraser came over, stood stiffly in front of Ray. Moved, when required, to hold Ray for the waltz.

Ray looked down at the huge gap between them. "Fraser, let me tell you, not one of Frannie's seventeen friends is going to let you keep this much distance between you. C'mere—" Ray tugged on Fraser's hand and on his shoulder, pulling Fraser in closer, letting Fraser stop a few inches way.

"Wait for the beat," Ray said, hitting the CD remote then dropping it over the back of his couch. "Wait for it, wait for it..."

And at the precise moment, Fraser started moving, shoulders stiff enough for a formal dance competition, the rest of him moving smoothly enough in the basic box pattern.

"You're doing fine," Ray said, watching the way Fraser's hips and legs moved, the placing of Fraser's feet. "Move closer, because you need to

practice that so you don't step on them. No, *closer*, Fraser, that's farther away. Here—" Ray tugged sharply, deliberately pulling Fraser off-balance, getting in close enough that Fraser would have to move his feet smoothly. "You okay with this?" Ray whispered, turning his head until his mouth was almost brushing Fraser's cheek.

Fraser's answer was a stumble that banged the back of Ray's legs into the supposedly out-of-the-way coffee table.

"Okay, let's try turning again," Ray said patiently, squeezing Fraser's hand. "Go ahead—no, not into the couch. Jeez, Fraser, what's the matter with you? You were doing fine and believe me, Frannie's friends are gonna give octopuses a run for their money, so you better get used to dancing close. C'mon, like this—"

Then Ray was moving them smoothly around the small space, graceful and elegant, made all the more perfect by their matched height and almost equal strides. Ray turned them, and guided them, and turned them again, his hand sliding from Fraser's shoulder to the middle of Fraser's back, as if he were dancing with Stella. Ray sighed, his lashes lowering, his body shifting marginally closer to Fraser. And instead of loosening up and getting into the elegance of the dance, Fraser was stiffening up, pulling away from him.

"This isn't working," Fraser said, hoarsely. "You're leading."

"Oh. Yeah. Uh. I did the women, Stella taught the guys."

They'd stopped, Fraser stepping back from Ray, Ray running a hand over the back of his own neck.

"Turn around," Ray said suddenly.

"What?"

"Just turn around. I'll move behind you—" Ray suited action to words, fitting his hands around Fraser's, moving Fraser's arms as if Fraser were a puppet holding an invisible partner. "And we move together, like this—" He led off, the front of his right thigh briefly touching the back of Fraser's, and he backed off, backed off fast, but did it with all the aplomb he'd

learned teaching women who wanted to get to know him a whole hell of a lot better.

"Okay, you got it? Move like this—no, stop thinking with your head, you know the steps, you got the steps, think with your—" Ray broke off, started again. "Think with the rest of you, let yourself hear the music, go with it, move...yeah, that's it, Fraser."

Fraser moved, holding nothing, his arms filled with emptiness while behind him, warmth danced just out of reach.

"You were right," Ray said, letting go, shoving his hands into his pockets as if they felt empty and cold. He stood there for a few moments, watching Fraser gliding smoothly around the small cleared space. "You know the steps, you just needed a refresher. Okay—" he said, as the track ended, "next up is the rumba—" He stepped up behind Fraser again, slid his arm around Fraser's waist, only to have Fraser stumble and take a step away from him.

"Jesus," Ray snarled, grabbing Fraser. "What d'you think I'm going to do to you?"

"Nothing," Fraser snapped back. "I've got the message loud and clear, and I'm under no delusions. I know you think about *women*."

A lesser dancer would've stumbled, but Ray recovered, and moved in closer, moving Fraser's arms into position, still teaching, and careful now to make sure his groin didn't come too close to Fraser's backside. He was staring now, staring at Fraser's averted face, and he was frowning in concentration. "Yeah, I still think about women—"

"So I understand perfectly," Fraser said, voice tight, shoulders tighter, dance steps textbook correct but completely lacking in grace. "I've received your message of rampant heterosexuality, loud and clear. And unnecessarily frequently, I might add."

Ray actually stopped then, in the middle of the music, in the middle of the dance, Fraser kept within the confines of his arms, the palms of his hands still covering the backs of Fraser's. Ray shook his head, and stood

there for a moment, mouthed 'wow,' then whispered, "Is that why you never answered me?"

"You never asked a damn question, Ray!"

"Oooh, swearing," Ray said, grinning, a definite bounce to his step now. He sounded amused, and kept smiling, gliding forward with his right leg, Fraser forced to move with him, the dance returning, Ray graceful, Fraser still parade-ground perfect. "You wanna know the question, Fraser?" Ray asked, leaning forward just a bit, his movements and his smile confident, hopefilled.

Fraser nodded.

"The first question was which of us is getting less sex, Fraser, which I'd like to take this opportunity to point out you never answered either," Ray said and stepped in a little bit closer, till his chest was against Fraser's back. "The second question was me trying to find out where you stood on the whole Kinsey spectrum. You know—you still think about women? Or've you given that up?" Ray asked, and this time he let his next glide forward slide his thigh against Fraser's. "Or d'you think about guys instead, or as well, or never ever?"

"That's what 'At least I still think about women' means?" Fraser twisted a little, far enough to bestow a look of profound disbelief on Ray. "And you think I need my head examined?"

"When someone says something like that, you're supposed to respond—give 'em something to go on, some clue—"

"A clue," Fraser said, shoulders tensing suddenly. "The detective wants a clue."

There was a pause while the music played, and they stood still, just for a moment.

"A clue," Fraser repeated, standing there within the circle of Ray's arms. "If memory serves, Ray, the stance in the rumba is the gentleman's hand in the small of the woman's back—" Fraser slid his own hand—and with it, Ray's—until it rested just above the button of his jeans. "And the movement is sinuous, like this—"

Fraser wasn't as graceful as Ray, nor his movements as fluid, but he could move, and did, his hips following the rhythm of the music, his head leaning backwards, against Ray's shoulder.

"Now this is my kind of clue," Ray said, softly, letting his lips brush the side of Fraser's neck, abandoning his right arm's pretense at proper rumba stance, wrapping both his arms around Fraser, Fraser's hands still under his own, warm, and strong. "You really had no clue what I was trying to ask you?"

"Do you think it would've taken this long for us to do this had I known you were fishing to see if I was interested only in women?"

"Don't know," Ray said, against the smooth skin at the side of Fraser's neck. "Maybe you'd've wanted to wait, court me a bit."

"Or perhaps I would've waited until I was certain you weren't looking for a substitute for Stella."

And Ray reacted to that immediately, holding Fraser tighter, kissing the side of his neck, nipping his earlobe. "Believe me, Fraser, there's no way I could mistake you for Stella and if I was looking for a stand-in Stella, I'd pick someone—"

Fraser had twisted to look at him again.

"I'd pick someone nothing like you. No substitutions, Fraser."

And that seemed to convince Fraser: he relaxed again, his eyes closed, his mouth open just a fraction, just enough to let him lick his own lower lip. He moved his hand, and with it, Ray's, up to cover his nipple, pressing down slightly, smiling as Ray pressed his hand down a little harder, and circled their hands across Fraser's nipple.

Fraser turned his head towards Ray, until they were a breath away from kissing and said, just as softly as Ray had, "And if memory continues to serve, if I were dancing with a woman, my hand would be in the small of her back, which would, allowing for the typical difference between the height of a man and a woman dancing, place my hand around..."

"Here," Ray whispered, and slid their hands lower until he had Fraser's hand pressed against Fraser's cock—and Fraser's ass pressing back against him.

"Oh yeah," Ray sighed against Fraser's neck, and kissed him.

"Oh yeah," Fraser echoed, and slipped his hand out from under Ray's, freeing his other hand until both hands were rubbing Ray's left hand over Fraser's groin.

The music played on and they moved to it, blending together in a way that could never be done in public. These weren't moves Fraser would use with any one of Francesca's seventeen friends; this was between only the two of them, in Ray's living room, with Ray's music playing, and Fraser turning, turning, turning, until he was facing Ray, and they were kissing.

They stood together, touching, kissing, rubbing against each other, swaying not to the music but to the passion building between them. They did, in the end, make it to the bed, but it was a close call, Fraser's clothes still not all the way off by the time he and Ray were entangled on the bed, bare skin pressed against bare skin. They kissed voraciously, and Ray made sounds he hadn't made in too long a time, when Fraser moved down the bed and slid Ray's erection into his mouth.

It wasn't elegant and it wasn't graceful: it was obvious Fraser needed a refresher course—at the very least—in this, but he'd learned his lessons well. Whether from a book or having it done to him or doing it to others, Ray couldn't know and didn't seem to care: Ray was simply lying there, splayed, exposed, raised up on his elbows to stare down at Fraser.

Fraser, whose eyes were closed and whose mouth was open, who was kissing and licking and nibbling and sucking, whose hands were touching and fondling and stroking every bit of Ray within reach, until Ray curled forward.

Ray's hand fit Fraser's cock like a glove, covering him, sheathing him, warming him.

"Wow," Ray said again, this time as he slid Fraser's foreskin back and exposed the head of Fraser's cock. He gentled his fingers over Fraser, there, right there where pre-ejaculate glistened, and slid so slickly over Fraser's neediness.

Fraser's response was to suck harder, and Ray repeated the move, making Fraser groan and arch into Ray's touch.

"Oh yeah, we all like that," Ray said, stroking the length of Fraser's cock, one hand coming up suddenly to grab convulsively at Fraser's hair. "Do that again," he whispered, and Fraser did the same thing again and it was just as good the second time. Better, because Ray had found Fraser's rhythm now and was moving with him, better than dancing. Much better than dancing: Ray was stroking Fraser's cock hard and fast, and Fraser was sucking him just as hard, just as fast.

"Wait, wait, wait—" Ray panted, letting go of Fraser's cock, trying to pull out of Fraser's mouth.

Fraser pulled back, looked up at him, gaze sharp and clear as diamonds, his mouth and chin glistening with wetness. Fraser licked his bottom lip and smiled, eyes heavy with sex and desire. "I know you've been tested," he said, voice husky, "and I want every last drop."

And then Fraser swooped forward, sucking Ray hard, hand stroking the base of Ray's cock, until Ray was coming, curling over Fraser, holding Fraser's head, grunting his pleasure as Fraser sucked him dry.

Ray collapsed back onto the bed, breathless, gasping, his cock still twitching slightly. He had no time to catch his breath or regain his senses—Fraser clambered over him, knelt over him, covered Ray's mouth in the hungriest, most demanding of kisses. Ray opened to that passion, letting Fraser take his fill, his arms instinctively closing around Fraser again.

There was a tremor in Fraser's right shoulder and a flutter of movement against Ray's arm, then seconds, mere seconds later, there was a splatter of heat and slick wetness across Ray's belly, and a sigh that gusted into his mouth.

And a weight, like a rock, that dropped onto him. He pushed Fraser to the side, not all the way off, just far enough to be comfortable, and close enough that every detail of Fraser's face was clear.

"Some refresher course," Ray said, stroking his thumb back and forth across Fraser's nipple.

"Some lesson," Fraser replied, his hand mirroring Ray's, his expression intent as he watched Ray's reactions.

"Me, too," Ray said, moving closer, sliding one leg over Fraser's hip, no signs of physical response but his heart was in the way he kissed Fraser, soft, delicate, gentle, promising things that remained unspoken.

"We have to get up early in the morning," Fraser said, holding Ray tighter.

"Yeah, we do," Ray said, fingertips tightening around Fraser's nipple.

"I take it you're not going to ask me to leave?"

"Fraser, did I or did I not ask which of us was getting less sex?"

Fraser licked the side of Ray's neck, leaned more deeply into Ray's caresses. "You did, indeed."

"So I'm finally going to get my answer. But—"

"We do still have to get up early in the morning," Fraser said, sounding regretful, fingers lingering in their mapping of the topography of Ray's chest. "Playing dead. Bringing down the bad guys."

"Then Frannie's wedding—better get you a lot of practice before that," Ray said.

"Will you give me more lessons?"

"If we set the alarm early enough," Ray said, sliding his leg between Fraser's thighs. It was too soon for a physical response, but they were moving together again, in perfect step.

Fraser didn't stop moving, rolling over until Ray was atop him and Fraser could grip and stroke Ray's ass. "If we set the alarm early enough?" Fraser prompted.

"Huh? Oh, yeah—if we set the alarm early enough, I could give you another lesson in the morning."

"That would be helpful," Fraser said, the fingers of his right hand making Ray shiver as they ran over Ray's back. "But I think I'm going to have to insist on another lesson tonight, Ray."

"Yeah?"

"Hmm, yes. I think you mentioned an interesting variation on the tango, earlier..."

Of course, in the end, Frannie called off her wedding, much to the disappointment of Dief, who'd been eagerly anticipating devouring all the food at the reception, and of Frannie's seventeen friends, who'd all been looking forward to devouring something entirely different. The cancellation of the wedding saved Fraser from playing designated bachelor, but neither Fraser nor Ray seemed to think that even a second of all that practice had been wasted. In fact, they made a point of practicing as often as they could.



And Eating It, Too

a lead-in to Say Amen

Hands in pockets, Ray slouched his way over to his answering machine, the red blinking light displaying just two messages. His mom, of course, speaking for Dad too, as always, and then his grandpa, querulous these days, but still singing cheerfully and loudly off-key. Nothing from Stella, not even for old times' sake. He tossed his keys on the counter, hit the 'store' button on the machine, then shrugged holster and gun off, unloaded his weapon and locked it away, slower than his usual brisk, automatic habit.

His jacket he slung over a chair on his way into his bedroom, where he pulled off boots and socks and T-shirt. Hallway next, to turn the heat up full blast, although it would take a while to ease the chill in his apartment; then bathroom, where he finished stripping down to bare, goosebumped skin while the water ran good and hot.

He'd forgotten one thing in particular, so he padded, naked and shriveled and shivering, into the kitchen, grabbed a bottle of beer from his nearly empty fridge. Turned back, after a few steps, and grabbed a second bottle—the good stuff, imported—and the bottle opener.

Back to the bathroom then, a haven, a cocoon, a womb, with the light out and the heat finally pouring from the heating vent, and warm moist air drifting up from the bathtub. He set the two bottles of beer on the floor within easy reach and, sighing, carefully slid into the water. He took his time, letting his body adjust to the nearly stinging heat, wincing and lifting up a little as the water touched his ass and balls, settling again,

slower, easier, letting the heat lick his skin and ease his muscles. Slid down all the way, finally, and sighed. Lazily, he lifted one dripping arm from the hot water to snag a cold bottle of beer, the glass chill against his lips compared to the sweat dripping down his temples.

Cold beer sliding down easier than he'd slid into the water, cold beer turning into a nice warm glow in his belly.

Yeah.

This was more like it.

He lay back, head on the rim of the bath, knees bent, his right hand cold from resting the beer on his knee. He drank again, and let the cold drip into him as the heat seeped through him.

He could almost hear his muscles creaking loose.

What a day.

What a hell of a fucking day.

The worst of it was that it hadn't been any different from any other day.

No different at all.

Just paperwork and perpetrators, interviews and form-filling, phone calls and Mirandas and Miranda calling on the phone ten minutes before his shift ended because she didn't understand why her boyfriend was still in bed.

Well, maybe it had something to do with the fucking great big knife she'd planted in the abusive bastard that morning.

So then it had been doctors and social workers and welfare, handing off people and papers and phone numbers and badge numbers, collecting names and job titles and departments so he could put 'em all in his files.

All those pages and forms he'd filled in today. All the documentation that came with the job, paperwork that was the bane of every cop's existence. Page after page after page.

And he was mayor of Loser-ville to feel this sorry for himself because no one had noticed the date. Because no one knew.

He'd wanted a new life, a fresh start; he was the one who'd said yeah, sure, why not, when they'd asked him if he wanted to take on someone else's name and someone else's job and someone else's friends and family. Nice, big, warm, welcoming family.

Only nobody'd stopped to think how to make Ray Kowalski safely pass for Ray Vecchio in front of cousins twice removed and uncles not removed far enough, when those same relatives weren't just family, but Family. Or nearly Family.

So they'd invented a rift to explain why Raimondo had moved out and never came round any more—and man, was Vecchio going to be pissed when he came home and found out what everyone thought of him.

Which was, he thought, smiling as another mouthful of beer slid coolly down this throat, some consolation for today.

Some small consolation, since Vecchio got parties even when he wasn't here—but for him, for the guy shouldering another guy's life? No one had known, and no one had cared, and he was a stupid shit for caring himself.

The water was turning cool and his beer going warm when he finally hauled himself out, stomach grumbling like Dief around doughnuts.

Hadn't even seen Dief today. Or the human half of that team.

Paperwork, Fraser had said on the phone, sounding...

Shit, Fraser'd sounded like a hamstrung cop trapped behind a desk filling out forms for the requisitioning of interior decorating materials and funds for the Consulate. He'd sounded homesick, and not just for the great freezer up north.

Ray dried himself off with brusque, half-hearted scrubs of the towel, dropped it on the floor beside his jeans and underwear, and headed naked for the bedroom, one hand giving his cock a friendly little squeeze on the way. A little dinner, then some quality time on the couch being real nice to himself.

Goddammit. He really was the Mayor of Loser-ville.

Only he could get a date for the night if he wanted, and no, he didn't mean paying one of the working girls for a 'date,' unlike Dewey. A date, yeah—a real date, just not with any of the women he worked with, they were all too clued-in and smart to date cops, or at least had better taste than to date him. But if he put on a suit, gelled his hair up but good, went to a club or a bar...he could have himself a lady for the evening. If he wanted.

But he didn't.

These days, it wasn't worth the risk; it wasn't worth having to think twice or three times before he went down on her, wasn't worth having to worry about the condom breaking while he was inside her.

Jeez, and when had anything like that stopped him from going out and getting laid? Well, when he wasn't married to Stella.

He was getting old.

No two ways about it, he was getting old. Which hadn't bothered him much when he'd thought he was going to be getting old with Stella; hadn't bothered him when he'd been young enough to think of 'getting old' as him and Stella having matching sets of wrinkles.

Now though...now he was on his own and old enough to realize wrinkles weren't what getting old was all about: not being able to run as fast, that was what getting old meant. Not being able to see close up or distance without his glasses was getting old. Being stiff on a cold, damp morning after spending a week literally chasing criminals with Fraser was getting old. Not needing to jerk off twice a day was getting old. Thinking that going out and getting laid was too much effort was getting old. Way old. Too old.

But he could go out and get laid. If he wanted to. It was just that...he didn't. He winced, wished he'd drunk more than just a couple of beers. God, it was bad enough that dating and getting laid wasn't worth the effort, but admitting he just didn't want to...

He was getting as bad as Fraser. Whom he couldn't even call or go hang with because Fraser had more paperwork than Ray did. He'd phone tomorrow, though, first thing, tell Fraser he'd swing by the Consulate as soon as his own Saturday half-day shift was done—they could go see that movie even Fraser thought looked interesting. Try out the new Thai place that smelled so good.

Damned shame they couldn't do that tonight.

Jeez, anyone would think he'd never been undercover before. He'd been there, done that, bought the "Undercover is lonely" T-shirt.

He shook himself, pulled on his comfiest sweat pants, and went to phone Sandor.

"**W**hat d'you mean, no, you're not gonna deliver a pizza to me? Did I come down with the plague and nobody told me? Sandor— No, Sandor, I don't care, you're going to bring me a large pineapple-pepperoni and— Sandor? Sandor!"

Never mind slapping Sandor: next time he saw him, he was going to kick Sandor in the head. And he'd put his boots on first.

Okay, so no pizza. He hit three on his speed dial, and waited for the Jade Palace to answer. "Lee—

"Yeah, it's me and I want my usual—

"No driver? It's Friday night, you have two drivers on Friday—

"Okay, look, so I'll come down there—

"By the health department? So how come you're answering the pho— hello? Hello?"

He slammed the phone down again. Hit number four on his speed dial. "Hey, Luigi—"

He looked at the receiver. Ground his thumb into the disconnect button. Jabbed his finger at speed dial number four again. "We got cut off. Luigi, I want—"

This time he slammed the phone down so hard it bounced. He stilled himself, shoulder muscles knotted harder than before his bath; he braced his hands on the counter, closed his eyes, and breathed deeply. "The world hates me, the world fucking hates—"

The doorbell rang.

And everything just suddenly clicked into place.

He hitched his sweatpants up, undid the locks on his door, and was smiling before he'd even flung it open and seen his non-surprise standing on his doorstep.

"You got to everyone I get food from?" Ray asked, taking one of the brown paper bags from Fraser's arms.

"I believe so," Fraser said cheerfully. "Sandor, the Jade Palace, Italy's Kitchen, Indian Summer, Thai Pagoda, Bob's Bar-B-Q Pit Stop, London Tower—"

"I don't eat there."

"Oh," Fraser said, blankly. "It's on your speed dial."

"Uh, yeah," Ray said from the depths of one of the paper bags. "That's from my old neighborhood, I just never took it off the speed dial thing." He shrugged, aiming for nonchalant. "Stella," he said, as if that explained everything.

And maybe it did.

"Ah," Fraser said, and Ray knew exactly what that meant. Mayor of Loser-Ville, oh yeah, that was him.

Only—when he looked up, Fraser wasn't looking at him with pity.

"It's better to have loved and lost," Fraser said gently, looking at him funny.

"Yeah?" he said, harsher than he'd meant. But what did Mr. No-Sex-Please-We're-Mounties know about it?

"Yes," Fraser said, and that voice was so small and lonely—much more honest than in the crypt, when Fraser had admitted to loss and loneliness as if he were asking for a second helping of apple pie.

"Hey, uhm..." Jeez, he couldn't just go grab the guy in a bear hug—Fraser would get all twitchy again and would probably start bringing out the putty sandwiches. "Listen, you uh, you want a beer;" oh, yeah, like Fraser ever guzzled beer, "or, uh, twig tea or..."

There were crinkles around Fraser's eyes, smiling acceptance of his tacit apology. "I took the liberty of furnishing myself with milk and mineral water. The level of chemical additives in the tap water—"

"—is something I don't want to know about since I just spent half an hour cooking myself in it."

Fraser gave him one of those wall-eyed looks that made Ray wonder just exactly what and just how much seriously weird stuff Fraser had seen. Then comprehension obviously dawned, and Fraser gestured at Ray.

"Your state of dishabille—did you enjoy your bath, Ray? And your beer?"

Kind of, but it was better now that Fraser was here. Fraser, who had his own woes, but had still taken the time to arrange dinner for him.

And—

"Homemade," Fraser said proudly, holding the cake aloft. "Well, Consulate-made, since I thought it wiser not to trust Constable Turnbull to carry it intact from his home to the Consulate."

"Turnbull made this?"

"Oh, he's quite accomplished when it comes to the domestic arts," Fraser told him, slanting him a glance that Ray would've called sly on anyone else. Hell, he knew Fraser well enough: he'd call it sly on Fraser too.

Okay, so he could play along. "Turnbull's gonna make someone a wonderful wife."

"I'm sure he will," Fraser said, impassively, as he laid the chocolate ganache cake out on a doiled plate. "In fact," he said, deftly placing a few candles into the cake, "I wouldn't be at all surprised if he hadn't already."

And Fraser didn't look at him as he said that, but Ray could see the tension in his forearms and the back of his neck.

Testing the water. Constable Benton Fraser, RCMP, Ray Vecchio's official partner and Ray Kowalski's unofficial friend, was testing the water. With him.

Oh shit.

Why the hell would Fraser choose to do that *now*? Couldn't he have waited till Ray knew whether or not he was ready for another relationship—one with a guy at that? No, Fraser had to choose now and—

Oh.Yeah.Well.So he was standing here half-naked, in thin old sweats, bare-chested, no underwear and Fraser was...Fraser. Fraser was Fraser without the uniform, with the sleeves of his flannel shirt rolled up in the bare-skin comfortable heat of the apartment. Ray resisted the urge to look at Fraser's jeans to see if Fraser was noticing just how nearly naked Ray was.

Ray's resistance lasted all of two seconds.

Oh yeah, Fraser was noticing. Dressing-right kind of noticing.

No underwear kind of noticing. Shit, he had no right to be staring—he looked away, mouth twisting in guilt.

"Sorry," Fraser said softly, stepping carefully around him, heading for the dining table as if nothing had happened.

Sorry? "What for this time?" Ray asked, just to make sure.

Fraser was very intently occupied with putting the containers from Luigi's on the dining table. "Perhaps you'd like to put a shirt on, Ray. You wouldn't want to catch a draft from the windows."

He took the hint because that was easier than thinking about all of this, easier than trying to get his head around so much all at once because the ground was shaky under his feet. Or maybe he was just shaky on the inside, old feelings stirring scarily, worse than Bela Lugosi rising out of a coffin. He came back a few moments later in an old T-shirt, and jeans that were worn and loose and a bit threadbare, but a hell of a lot

less revealing than his sweats had been. And he caught a glimpse, just the barest glimpse, of Fraser sitting, head downbent, shoulders slumped and rounded, face—

Face turning towards him, smiling at him, as polite and vacuous and impersonal as Turnbull at his worst.

“I think I remembered your favorites. Although had I not, I’m sure Luigi would’ve been...”

Ray let Fraser chatter on, not listening, looking at the array of food on the table, helping himself, falling on it like a starving man. “Eat,” he said, waving his fork at Fraser, leaning over and starting to pile lasagne and meatballs and antipasto onto Fraser’s plate.

“Thank you,” Fraser said, and began eating, smiling politely and making conversation, telling stories interrupted by polite chewing—mouth closed while chewing, of course.

And Ray let him talk and chew, paying no attention to the sputtering spate of words, mind too busy replaying what he’d seen tonight.

Fraser, looking at him. Fraser, aroused by him. Fraser sitting at the table looking like...

Well, looking even worse than he’d sounded on the phone.

Looking the way Ray had felt the morning he’d signed Stella’s divorce papers.

He’d known, on some half-buried, half-insensible level, that Fraser was...stuck on him. He’d known there was something unusual in the way Fraser was as sarcastic to him and in front of him as he was with Dief and nobody else. He’d known, in that abstract, let’s-not-think-about-it sort of way that Fraser was lonely, and sad, and...

Oh fuck.

Fraser was in love with him.

Benton Fraser, who was going to leave one day as soon as the RCMP forgave him for doing the right thing, was in love with him, Ray Kowalski, who was still bouncing and rebounding from the divorce.

They were the blind leading the visually impaired up the garden path. He wasn't—he didn't—he wasn't even sure what he felt. Other than not ready. In capital letters. In capital letters in a big neon sign.

And Fraser...just look at Fraser. Smiling at him, chatting brightly at him, telling him not the Inuit stories he was infamous for, but as close to a personal story as Fraser ever got. Another one of those stories that showed how clever his friends were and what a rube Fraser was. Another one of those stories that ever so quietly mocked Fraser himself.

Is that what he was doing to Fraser?

Making Fraser mock himself like this because Fraser couldn't mock himself out loud for being stupid enough to fall in love with someone who didn't love him?

Ray bit his tongue just before 'sorry' slipped out.

"Ray? Are you all right?"

"Bit my tongue," he mumbled, reaching for the glass of wine Fraser had poured for him. A good glass of wine, he realized, the same excellent pinot noir he'd come to love over his years with Stella.

He did not want to go there. Never wanted to go there. Never wanted to go back to hurting that much when it ended.

And this would end. Just as soon as Fraser finally got transferred back to the wastelands.

Even now, the thought of Fraser leaving left him empty, nothing inside but an echoing dread. If Fraser left, if Fraser left *him*...

Unless...

No. No, he hadn't even gone that far for Stella, no way was he going to give up his career and his home for Fraser. No way no how.

And he couldn't expect Fraser to do that for him.

All it would take would be new transfer papers, to something less insulting than that other transfer, and Fraser'd be gone and he'd be...he'd be worse off than when Stella had told him she wanted him to move out for a 'trial separation.' As if he hadn't known she always won every trial.

She'd won that one too, and he'd been lost, so adrift for so long that finally he'd jumped at the chance to become someone else.

And look where that had got him.

Fraser was still chatting away merrily, and if you didn't know any better...if you didn't know any better, you wouldn't see that Fraser's heart was bleeding out his eyes.

Oh fuck, he was already hurting Fraser, breaking the poor bastard's heart the way Stella...

Nah, Stella hadn't done anything to him: it had taken both of them to break his heart. But Fraser hadn't even had that much, Fraser hadn't had even a taste of what Ray'd had with Stella before it'd gone wrong. Fraser was sitting there, miserable as sin, and Ray wanted to fix it, make it better, do whatever it took to wipe up the misery in those eyes.

Abruptly, under the mellifluous flow of a no-doubt amusing—after you'd been stuck in a cabin alone for six months without the sound of a human voice—tale involving lichen and padding for a production of Swan Lake, Ray could hear what Fraser wasn't saying.

I love you. I'll pretend not to, just don't send me away.

How many times had Ray himself not-said that to Stella?

And how many times had she not listened?

Or how many times had he made it impossible for her to listen? Orsini wasn't the first time he'd crossed the line, only the last, and the worst.

"Hey," he said, stopping Fraser mid-word. "We're going to be friends, aren't we, Fraser?"

He watched Fraser blink; watched as Fraser deciphered his message—or whatever Fraser thought was his message. Fraser swallowed, and looked at him, all raised chin and bravery.

"I hope we already are."

"Yeah," Ray said, looking at Fraser, seeing him, listening to him. "Yeah, we are friends already, best friends." Ray's heart beat hard and fast, and

there was something in him hiding behind the nerves, but he wasn't ready to look at it, wasn't even ready to look at Fraser's side of things, but he had to look at Fraser. "We're buddies," he said, and saw warmth and hope steal into Fraser's eyes as he said that. "But—you want us to...you think we're gonna be..."

Unblinking gaze, meeting his, Fraser's voice clear and steady. "More? It's certainly something I wish for. But—" Before Ray could speak, Fraser was continuing on, serving up more food, a sleight-of-hand that didn't make an issue of him not meeting Ray's gaze. "—as my grandmother was fond of saying, if wishes were horses, then everyone would ride. Do you want more antipasto or are you saving room for your cake?"

And then those oh-so-honest blue eyes met his with oh-so-clueless innocence and a smile a politician would be proud of.

"It's okay," Ray heard himself say, and saw Fraser's mouth wobble, just for a second, before it—and Fraser's spine—stiffened into a straight line.

"Actually," Fraser said, "I've tasted Constable Turnbull's baking before, so I have every expectation that it'll be excellent."

"It's too soon," Ray said very softly, wishing he could wrap Fraser's heart in cotton and keep it from being bruised. "I'd only hurt you."

And he saw it just for a second: the bitterest of sweet smiles before it was smoothed away, protecting him or hiding Fraser, he didn't know which.

Whichever it had been, Fraser's voice was smooth as a sharp knife. "Don't you think I deserve to make that choice for myself?"

Like Ray had made, time after time even though Stella had tried so hard not to hurt him? "If it was someone else going to hurt you, yeah, I'd stand back and pick up the pieces afterwards. But this is me, and I couldn't live with myself if I did that."

He watched the muscles in Fraser's jaw bunch and jump, perhaps with the effort not to speak in anger. Or perhaps because he was already hurting Fraser. More. Again. And Fraser was retreating even far-

ther behind that damn Mountie mask again, showing Ray the face reserved for strangers and predatory superior officers.

"Well. I suppose I really should thank you."

"Do not do that to me, Fraser, do *not* do that!"

At least Fraser didn't pretend cluelessness this time. He just went very still and closed his eyes for a moment.

The silence stretched between them; Fraser opened his eyes and he was looking not at Ray, but down at the plate in front of him. Ray sat and watched, helpless, remembering all the times he'd been in Fraser's shoes, and all the times he'd... All the times he'd wanted to try, just once more, even though he knew Stella didn't love him as much any more.

And he remembered how much he'd gotten out of even the crumbs that were all that was left of their marriage there, at the end.

Fraser was looking at him again, one of those blandly polite Canadian smiles plastered onto his face. "Buddies," Fraser said, just a shade too brightly. "Friendship is not something to be sneered at," Fraser went on. "And to tell the truth, Ray," Fraser's voice softened, and his gaze turned...fond, "I'm happier and less lonely being your friend than I've been for most of my life. I'll never risk that."

And it was the sincerity of that and the tacit promise—I'll never push for more ever again—that took some of Ray's fear away.

"Well," Fraser placed his knife and fork perfectly parallel to each other, perfectly diagonally across his plate, "unless I had to choose your friendship to me or saving someone's life or—"

Some things never change. Even with the rest of it out in the open, Fraser was still...Fraser. And if Fraser could remain Fraser even after he'd put his heart on a silver platter—or cow-patterned plate—and Ray had rejected him...

"I'm not saying, no, never," Ray said as gently as he could. As gently, God help him, as Stella had asked him to leave that first time. "It's too soon, Fraser. I can't trust myself—"

"Can any of us trust ourselves?"

And what the hell did *that* mean? Oh Christ, they really were the blind leading the blind. "I don't know. But we can trust each other."

"As friends?"

"And partners."

"But nothing more?"

No, he wanted to say with certainty: rip the band-aid off fast, reduce the pain, make it hurt more at first but less in the long run. But...he wasn't sure he meant 'not ever, never' any more. After all, this was Fraser who now was looking at him the way he himself had looked at Stella. And this was Fraser who'd thought of him and made this small celebration for his real birthday.

And this was Fraser, who was still going to leave one day.

He had to say no. Sheer self-preservation demanded that he say 'no.' But...

But the post-Stella numbness was wearing off. And he'd known for months that he loved Fraser. Symbiotically or something, but it was something. Better than nothing. Maybe the foundation for another something, a better something.

Even though it would tear him into tiny little shreds when it all crashed down around his ears: Fraser would leave one day.

But...Fraser hadn't left yet. Hadn't even tried. Had said no when the transfer orders had come through and he could've left. Fraser had been the first one to say he wasn't leaving. Fraser had been the one who'd waited for Ray to say he would stay, too. Fraser was the one who'd looked at him as if his knees had gone weak with relief. And as if the sun had just risen and all was well with Fraser's world just because Ray wasn't leaving.

Fraser had left him to his thoughts. He was making cake-cutting noises in the kitchen, chastising Dief for lusting after a chocolate cake. It was...it felt...like home. Home. Something he'd missed for such a long time, from before Stella had finally called it quits and served him with papers.

By the time the undercover-as-Vecchio offer had come through, he'd pretty much lost himself—but within hours of knowing Fraser, he'd known who he was again, had felt himself sinking back into his own skin again. Fraser grounded him, he knew that—was scared of that, because if he was more himself when he was with Fraser, then who would he be when Fraser left?

But...who said Fraser leaving would mean the two of them splitting up? He knew he was staring again as Fraser came back to the table with plates of cake because Fraser was staring back at him, and Fraser was frowning, unhappily.

Would it be such a bad thing if he switched careers and moved up north with Fraser?

Damned if he knew. Damned if Fraser had given him enough time to even begin to think about this. Which is when it dawned on him that Fraser was doing exactly that: giving him time to think about this, saying nothing, letting him find his own way, accepting his half-hearted 'never say never.'

Fraser would do what it took to keep them as buddies; Fraser wasn't going to push him. Because...because Fraser loved him enough. Fraser loved him. That much.

Maybe as much as Ray was inclined to love. Maybe as obsessively. Maybe as needily. Maybe for as long as Ray wanted to love, and be loved.

Now Fraser was sitting opposite him chewing ganache-covered chocolate cake as if it were cardboard covered in rat poison.

"Friends," Ray repeated, firmly, because he needed to convince himself, needed to give himself time to think about this instead of throwing himself in the deep end, heart and soul and lifestyle. He had to stop and think. Had to. Because this was too important to mess up. "And partners. The rest..."

Fraser wasn't looking at him, had stopped mid-chew.

Ray should say no. He knew he should say no.

But this was Fraser, and his heart had lifted when he'd realized Fraser was at his door, that Fraser had thought about him.

And he thought about that again, let it sink into him, let it seep into him as the heat from his bath had seeped into his bones.

Fraser loved him. Fraser was in love with him. Fraser loved him with the same depth he had loved Stella.

Had loved.

He repeated that in his mind, heard himself using the past tense for the first time.

Fraser would leave, yes, but maybe this time, just maybe, Ray would be wanted enough, maybe Ray would be needed enough, maybe Ray could have enough faith to leave too, to leave with Fraser. To move into his own life instead of into someone else's. If this worked. If this could be what Fraser thought it could be.

"Not yet," he said to Fraser. "I think—yeah, I think we'll be...we could be...but just..."

"Not yet," Fraser said, and smiled at him suddenly. Smiled at him in a way that made him feel ten feet tall and warm all the way through. "Not 'never.' Just...not yet."

And Ray hoped—and feared—that it wasn't a case of 'not yet,' but of 'very, very, soon': ready or not, here I come. But this wasn't a game, this wasn't childhood fun, this was...

Fraser. And him.

Instincts. His instincts never failed him, and that first day, from that first moment, he'd jumped in front of a bullet for Fraser, damn near willing to lay down his life for Fraser, pretty much from the second he'd laid eyes on Fraser.

Partners. Buddies. A duet. From the get-go.

He took a mouthful of cake, the ganache melting rich and sweet on his tongue while Fraser sat there and smiled at him, the picture of happiness.

Not yet, Ray thought, and the panic and fear were beginning to recede because it was 'not yet'...

But soon.

Very soon.

If he could trust himself to love enough, but not too much, this time. If he could trust Fraser would love forever, not just for the first few years. If he could only believe that love could last. If he could just have faith...



Out With the Old

during *Call of the Wild*

It wasn't like he hadn't known what was coming—he wasn't a maroon, he knew the score: he'd been down this road before. You go in, you wear a different name, play a different game, and when the gig's over, you go back to the same-old same-old and count your blessings you're home. You count your blessings that you have a home, that you have a place, that you belong and people know who you are.

So he could appreciate the other guy's position—hell, he'd walked more than a mile in those shoes; he knew the walk, he'd talked the talk. You come home, and you try to shake off that bad guy skin, and hope to hell that the people who love you don't notice that the skin never comes all the way off. Then you pray that the people who love you never ask how come you were able to play that bad guy, how come you were able to convince all those other bad guys that you were just as bad as them.

You pray no one you want to stay in your life asks you what you actually *did* while you were undercover. And if they do ask, you're willing to sell your soul if it would make them accept your facile, funny, non-answers: buttermilk and limousines, oh yeah, enough hints of indulgence, luxury, and vice to make people think they know the dirty truth. But they—both the civilians and the cops who'd never been undercover—hadn't a clue. But Ray Kowalski knew exactly what 'buttermilk and limousines' really was.

He himself had been under as some seriously crappy guys, but even he quailed at the thought of being Armando Langoustini.

Yeah, so he got it, he got the other guy's desperation, he got the other guy pissing all over his territory, marking it, reclaiming it.

He got that, he really got that.

What he didn't get, what just freaked the fuck out of him was why he himself was doing it—this wasn't his life, he knew that, but he'd pranced around like a diva saying this was *his* desk, *his* life, *his* name, *his* place.

His friend.

Geez, two grown men fighting over another grown man like five year olds over GI Joe in a red suit.

But at least the other guy had an excuse.

Him, though? What excuse did he have?

He was a usurper, a pretender, a place-marker.

And he'd known from the start that this was just a temporary gig. Undetermined duration, that's what they'd told him, when he'd asked. Undetermined duration, and he'd known what that meant too: it meant he'd be Ray Vecchio until the other guy came back, or was killed.

Or until one of the other possibilities, the ones no one liked to talk about, the ones no one even whispered about, the ones that you knew about because you'd been there and you'd worked with other people who'd been there and you knew some people who hadn't come back.

Breaking. Going bad. Eating their gun.

At least the other guy hadn't done any of those things—but the other guy had done things Ray knew he could never have done, no matter what. And the bitch of it was, he wasn't sure if that made him a better man than the other guy, or a lesser man.

He should ask Fraser.

Only Fraser was busy, everyone was busy. Ray himself was busy, running IDs and bugging people up in Canada to try to track down the obscure but important Chicago connection and to get some info on what name this guy Muldoon had been living under.

Oh, that was cute: the day he lost his undercover gig, he got to chase an undercover bad guy.

In the meantime, his desk—his old desk—was sitting empty because the other guy was in with Welsh. And so was Fraser.

Stanley Raymond Kowalski got up from the table he was using as a desk, abandoned the phone he'd borrowed, and headed outside where it didn't matter who the hell he was or wasn't—all that mattered was that he was a cop and he could chase down leads no matter what name was on his badge.

By the time he got back to the station, he had no more information than when he'd started: whatever the hell Frobisher had to prove the Chicago connection was completely eluding Ray. His head was pounding, and he felt tender all over, as if he'd taken a beating.

He walked into the bullpen, and saw Fraser, leaning over his desk—the other guy's desk—laughing at something the other guy was saying.

Oh, yeah, that's right, he *had* taken a beating, only the bruises weren't the kind that showed.

Fraser was still laughing at the other guy.

Laughing *with*, Ray reminded himself, not laughing *at*. The other guy was Fraser's friend, the other guy wasn't the enemy, repeat, the other guy was not an invading army, the other guy...

Was just a cop, like him, coming off an undercover assignment, pretty much like him.

Only difference was, Ray had loved his undercover assignment; it had been so much better than real life—and that thought brought him up short. That was dangerous thinking, that was seriously dangerous thinking for a man who went undercover.

A nice little interlude, a vacation, that's what it had been and the sooner he remembered that, the better it would be.

It wasn't as if Fraser wouldn't still be his friend—but it wasn't as if the other guy wouldn't be Fraser's friend either, and the other guy had first dibs as Fraser's friend.

Shit. Well, at least he'd moved on from sounding five years old to being all of ten. What a huge fucking improvement. If he kept this up, by the end of the week he might get all the way back into his twenties.

He stuffed his hands in his pockets, draped himself in attitude, and told himself—more than once—that he didn't care that not one person had noticed him standing there like a loon, thinking.

Not one person.

Not Fraser.

Who noticed everything and everyone, but right now was noticing only his old buddy, his old partner who'd come home, and was taking his old life back.

Ray decided that some 7-Up was probably a good idea—settle his stomach after the headache pills he'd been popping, and the sugar would wake him up some because this...droopiness had to just be the mid-afternoon slump, should've had lunch, yeah, that was it—and it was purest coincidence that going to the break room would delay things for a good five minutes. Ten, if he stretched it out.

He seated himself at one of the tables and sipped his soda; he relaxed his shoulders deliberately, loosening his muscles up before their tension spread up his neck and made his headache worse. He sat, and sipped, and rolled his shoulders, and tried to figure out what the hell happened next—which district he'd be assigned to, or if he'd be sent to Vice, or Narcotics, or Juvenile.

And who the hell he'd be when he got there.

“Ray!”

He flinched, but didn't turn. Yeah, it was his name, but it was the other guy's name too, and even Welsh meant the other guy when he said 'Ray,' so who the hell else would Fraser mean?

"Ray? Are you all right?" Fraser said, and the other guy was nowhere in sight.

"I guess," he said, raising a hand to wave off the concern in Fraser's voice. "Crappy day," he added and that was too whiny, so he had to say something that wouldn't make him sound needy—or make him sound like he was replaying the whole embarrassing 'it's my life' incident in the hotel room. "Think I just need to get back to being Ray Kowalski again. Maybe call a few old friends, go out tonight, have a couple of beers, unwind."

"Oh," Fraser said, and Ray wished he could handle facing Fraser because he'd love to know what expression went with *that* seriously weird tone in his voice.

Ray took another sip of his 7-Up, needing to tip his head back, a long way back, the can nearly empty. He really couldn't avoid at least glimpsing Fraser, and it wasn't all that bad: Fraser was still Fraser; he didn't have 'property of Ray Vecchio' stamped on his forehead or anything.

"I hope you have a good time with your friends," Fraser said, his tone cold enough to cause frostbite.

"Oh, yeah, I'll have a great time with all my old buddies," Ray said, because for all his bravado, who the hell could he call and invite out for a quick beer, when he'd dropped his old life so hard, he hadn't even called anyone in the whole time he'd been under as Ray Vecchio? "I'll celebrate going back to being me."

Fraser's smile was nearly wistful, and definitely deprecating. "Fool that I am," Fraser said, sitting down across from Ray at the small table, "I'd forgotten you spent the entire time...pretending to be someone you're not."

And for reasons Ray couldn't fathom, that last phrase put the weirdest expression on Fraser's face, a commingling of sadness, nostalgia, and self-mockery.

"It's his life, Fraser, I gotta give it back," Ray said, and hoped to hell he sounded a lot more generous than he felt.

"Yes," Fraser said, unsmiling. "Yes," he repeated, more firmly. "Ray does have his own life, and I suppose you have your own life you're anxious to return to."

And the next thing Ray knew, Fraser was standing beside him offering his hand, and saying, "It's been a tremendous pleasure knowing you, I hope you'll keep in touch," while Ray's hand was shaken in a double-handed grip.

"Uh, yeah, sure thing, right," Ray said. He was still congratulating himself—sarcasm dripping—on his witty repartee as Fraser strode off.

So that was it. A handshake and a 'keep in touch,' and that's all she wrote.

Ray's head was pounding again; he rested it on his folded arms, wishing Fraser hadn't seen the other guy in the hotel, or that the world was different, or that he was a problem drinker because at least then he could go get stinking drunk. Maybe he should go get drunk anyway: either people wouldn't notice and he'd be too numbed to care or someone would take him aside and ask him what the hell was wrong.

Of course, then he'd have to figure out what was wrong. Admit what was wrong. Face it.

Or if he was looking for that much pain, he could always just gouge his eyes out with a blunt spoon.

Instead, he hauled himself from the chair, dug more change out of his pocket, and since the 7-Up hadn't done diddly-squat for him, he got himself a Coke. Caffeine to go with the sugar. That's what he needed to improve the day.

That, and Fraser back as his partner. But that wasn't going to happen, so he'd better just develop a deep and abiding appreciation for Coke and tell himself at least his life would be a hell of a lot less surreal from now on.

And that had to be a good thing, right?

Right?

Yeah, right.

Running through tunnels and fountains in a shopping mall being shot at wasn't the time to be noticing dumb things, but Ray couldn't help but take in every detail. Bullets flying his way was a hell of a kick-start: his mind was sharp, clear, focused, everything diamond bright and faceted. He knew where his team was, he was aware of the civilians' positions, was keeping track of how many times he'd fired his own weapon.

But a small part of his mind was still noticing how weird it was that when the shooting had started, they'd divided up along national lines. Which was just plain *stupid*. He had a gun, the other guy had a gun, the two Canucks didn't—but they'd gone haring off together, matching targets in shoot-me red.

While he and the other guy had to work together. Which was easier than he expected: they just synched together, two cops who knew the routine, two cops used to having to think on their feet and adapt to dangerous situations. And at least he knew where the other guy would go, what moves the other guy would make; he didn't have to worry about the other guy suddenly getting to his feet in the middle of a gun battle to *talk* to the bad guys.

"How the hell did we work this with Fraser?" the other guy asked.

"Don't know. Go," he said, body moving forward, automatic instincts and training to the fore. Weird, that the other guy was thinking the exact same thing at the exact same time.

Or maybe not: how many times had the other guy found himself with a stand-up, chatty Fraser in the middle of a gun battle too?

And then things went sour and there was neither time nor attention for anything but surviving.

He was watching the ambulance depart, the other guy carried off, Fraser seriously pissed—in that ultra-polite way of his that, if you knew him well enough to read him, meant big trouble—and even though Thatcher and half the crowd were fawning over Fraser for saving the day, Ray

could see that Fraser cared even less than usual about the praise and the glory.

Ray could see where Fraser's attention was; Ray could see the lay of the land.

This sucked. This was the most suckingly sucky suckfest of his life. He should've listened to his mom, who used to tell him, 'Be careful what you wish for.' He should probably be grateful that losing Stella was no longer the worst time in his life, but grateful didn't even come close to describing his feelings at that moment.

Looked like 'grateful' didn't describe Fraser's feelings all that much better either.

"C'mon," he said to Fraser, who was still being yakked at by Thatcher. Ray turned and headed for his car, calling over his shoulder, "I'll drive you to the hospital."

"Thank you kindly, Ray," Fraser said, blandly polite, "but I wouldn't want to inconvenience you."

Ray stopped, every muscle tensing with the nearly overwhelming impulse to just haul off and punch Fraser. Hard. But he didn't do that, had done it once and that was once too often, he wasn't ever going to do that again. Deliberately, he untensed his muscles and unclenched his fists. "That's not buddies," he said, proud of the way he'd kept his voice low and controlled: no yelling. No quavering. "Just get in the damn car and let me take you to the hospital."

"Ray, I—"

"And if it'll make you feel any better," Ray said, and okay, so maybe the control was wavering a little bit, maybe the anger was showing through now, and maybe the quaver too, "we can pick Frannie up on the way. Unless you think she should just drop me too now that her real brother's back."

For a few blessed moments, the only sound was the roar of his car's engine, and the squeal of the tires as he hauled out of there. Fraser was

too busy trying not to get flung all over the car—man, it felt *good* to drive this fast, light flashing, corners tight, brakes unused—and put his seatbelt on.

And then Ray bought himself a bit more respite by tossing his phone to Fraser, with a terse: “Frannie.”

He listened, of course, as Fraser talked to Frannie: even over a cell phone and on the other side of the car, he heard her shriek.

“Tell her five minutes,” he said, Fraser nodding and repeating the ETA to Frannie.

“Although it could well be less as Ray is driving—” Fraser looked quickly at Ray. “Ray is driving with all due haste, Francesca, so I recommend that you head downstairs—” Fraser looked at the phone, then hit the ‘end’ button. He said to Ray, “I believe we’ll find Francesca waiting for us outside. Ray, I really think we need to talk about—”

“Am I sitting here doing nothing or am I driving like a bat out of hell through the busy streets of Chicago? Do not answer that, Fraser. Now is not the time for anything but the job, just the job, no talking, no ruminating, no nothing, okay? Because I’m busy.”

“Ray, we’ve had conversations when we were being shot at, nearly drowning, running for our lives, and any number of other highly busy situations. I don’t see why we can’t have a conversation now.”

“Because, Fraser,” Ray said, making sure he was smiling so he could claim he wasn’t even a tiny bit upset, “we’re here, and Frannie’s waiting. See? And isn’t having a private conversation excluding the other passenger right there in your big Canadian book of manners under Things Good Little Canadians Don’t Do? Hey, Frannie,” he called out his window, forestalling any polite ‘we’ll stay in touch’ pityfests from Fraser, “over here, c’mon, let’s go see your brother.”

“How is he? What happened? I can’t believe it—” she said, too distracted to even eye Fraser’s backside as he climbed into the back seat to let her sit in the front, “—he’s back five minutes and he’s shot already,

we thought he'd be safe when he came home and instead he gets shot and—is he okay?"

"It didn't look serious to me," Ray said, glad this time when Fraser started talking, because instead of whatever was stewing under Fraser's Stetson, Fraser was concentrating on telling Frannie how her brother had been awake, alert, talking.

The speed he was driving, it didn't take long to get to the hospital, where a judicious use of his badge, a few threats, Fraser's politeness and charm plus Frannie's, 'He's my brother you keep me from him, you'll end up in worse shape than the morgue,' got them an update: finishing the MRI right now, then heading for surgery.

"Nothing serious?" Frannie said as soon as the medical staff had left them alone in the waiting room. "Nothing serious?"

Ray shook his head: this would teach him that a cop's 'nothing serious' was not the same as a loving relative's 'nothing serious.' "When the paramedics got there, he was conscious, he wasn't bleeding out, no broken bones, no perforated organs," he said, and watched as she paled, then rallied as she got things into perspective. "Not serious, Frannie," he said, trying to balance his voice between his sympathy for her and bucking her up. "He'll live, he'll make it, and that's what counts."

Apparently, he'd gone too light on the bucking her up and leaned way too heavily on the sympathy.

"So in other words, you didn't want to upset me, right? You wanted to protect the little woman—"

"Francesca—"

"And you shut up too! You don't even know what you think of me! You—you—oh why don't you guys go and get my mom and I'll stay here with Ray."

"Sure, no problem, we'll do that," Ray said, automatically grabbing Fraser's arm to haul him off—then when Fraser looked at him in surprise, letting Fraser go as if burnt. "Uh—listen, it'll be faster if we send a

police car for her, so I'll get on the phone to Welsh, then I'll talk to Ma and Maria so everything goes nice and calm."

"Why?" Francesca asked, staring at him, narrow-eyed and tight-lipped. "Too much trouble for you now you don't have to pretend she's your ma?"

"Because—" he glanced at Fraser, who was giving him the weirdest of looks, "because uh—we need to get back to investigating," which sounded so much better than 'I don't want to be trapped in the car with Fraser,' "so we can find who did this to your brother. And it's a hell of a lot faster to send a cruiser over instead of me driving all the way out there then driving them all the way back. Ma and Maria'll get here faster in cruiser, okay, Frannie?"

She was still giving him that narrow-eyed stare, but then she nodded. "Don't forget to call Ma," she said. "If a cop car shows up..."

"Perhaps I should go with your mother, Francesca," Fraser was saying, smooth as cream, with a jagged, sour little glance at Ray. "To make sure she doesn't have an untoward reaction to—"

"That's sweet of you, Fraser, but Ray's right, it's faster if we just send a car to bring her here."

"Calling right now," Ray said, saluting them with his cell phone just as Welsh's irascible "Hello? What? Who is this?" came tinnily through the speaker.

A few minutes—and a lot of noise—later, Mrs. Vecchio and Maria were informed and waiting for the police car that was on its way, Francesca had gone up to the waiting room for relatives of surgery patients, and Ray and Fraser were left alone.

"So we know this guy Muldoon is a serious bad guy who's been dead for thirty years, we know he's got Russian nerve gas and a flame-thrower that could be from Russia or anywhere else, and we gotta track this dead guy down ASAP. Any ideas?"

Ray held in the urge to bounce, to fidget, to say 'c'mon, c'mon' to make Fraser hurry up and go along with him: concentrate on the case,

concentrate on getting the guy responsible for the other guy up in surgery right now, deal with the job, the duty—anything other than dealing with Fraser having his real friend back, Fraser having his real partner back.

“Ray—”

Ray knew that tone of voice: it went with Fraser talking about things. And usually that was great, that was golden, because Fraser hardly ever talked about himself. But not today, not right now, because Fraser talking about himself would be Fraser giving him the big brush off. “You got any ideas? Because we need ideas, Fraser, we need all the help we can get tracking this guy down.”

Fraser looked at him for another moment, and Ray thought there was going to be another of those ‘we need to talk’ Rays coming out of Fraser’s mouth any second now, but Fraser finally said, “My father tracked him for a year and a half. We’ll look in his diaries.”

And that was a reprieve, that was a relief, and Ray hurried them to the car so they could get to the Consulate and bury themselves in work.

Only he’d forgotten they had to be locked together in the car to get to the Consulate.

About thirty seconds into the journey—no siren, no lights, no speeding this time, couldn’t justify it and Mr. Stick-Up-His-Ass beside him would probably perform a citizen’s arrest on him or something if he pulled the emergency routine—Ray was beginning to feel an oppressive silence crowding him.

A minute later, his fingers were tapping on the steering wheel. Two minutes later and he was darting looks at Fraser who was just sitting there, saying nothing. Which was a good thing, because it meant Fraser wasn’t bringing up any awkward questions such as, ‘Ray, why did you tell Ray Vecchio that this was *your* life?’ Only...glad as he was that Fraser wasn’t asking any of those questions whose answers Ray didn’t want to

face, most of the time, Fraser being quiet was just Fraser being quiet. But this wasn't a contented Fraser silence. This was a picking words to pieces before asking awkward questions silence. This was Fraser brooding, and this was Fraser building up to things Ray wanted to raze before Fraser even poured the foundation.

Or maybe this wasn't all about him: maybe he was being a selfish bastard—the other guy was Fraser's friend, and the other guy had been shot. Back less than a day, barely time to say hello, and shot. Nothing serious, yeah, but shot.

"He'll be okay, Fraser."

"I'm sure he will be."

"But you're worried anyway, right?"

"Of course. But he's in good hands, and nothing seemed to be life-threatening." Fraser paused for a moment, and Ray slanted a nervous glance at him. "Well, nothing that some routine surgery to remove the bullet won't cure."

Ray slumped a little in relief. "Yeah, he'll be fine. Bet he'll get better faster if he knows we got the guy behind all this."

Fraser's expression darkened and withered, and Ray could easily guess what mentioning Muldoon had done to Fraser. He decided there was just way too much going on today for any of them to cope with: the other guy getting shot, Fraser seeing the other guy getting shot, Fraser finding out about his mom, himself losing his life—oh, not like that. But it was, kind of.

Death lite. Half death. The other guy said it: it feels as though you died and you didn't get everything done.

Hell, he hadn't even got everything figured out in his own mind, and now he was just gonna have to...stop. He was going to have to stop.

No more being the other guy. No more Frannie as his sister. No more hiding behind another name, another identity.

No more Fraser, and didn't that hurt like a son of a bitch? And if he felt this bad, how the hell must Fraser be feeling?

"I'm sorry about your mom—your mum," Ray said into Fraser's wordlessness. "I guess it's a shock."

"You could say that," Fraser said bleakly.

"Because of what happened to her and what your dad didn't tell you?"

Fraser hesitated, just a fraction, before answering, but Ray saw what Fraser wasn't saying: Ray understood that pain, even if he didn't know the details behind it.

"My father seems to have neglected to mention a few things."

"Probably trying to protect you. Dads do that."

Fraser's smile was almost surreal in its tangle of bitterness and love and regret and pride. "Despite his occasional claims to the contrary, not my dad, no. At least, I never thought so. He was a firm believer in the school of hard knocks, the school of life. He certainly didn't believe in what he called mollycoddling."

"Fraser, there's mollycoddling, then there's not telling your little kid that someone he knew killed his mum. That's protecting."

"He should've told me—"

"Yeah, five years ago, ten years ago, but thirty years ago? And when it's been all those years when you were too young, what's he supposed to say later? By the way, son, I know you think I'm all about honesty and decency and maintaining the right, but I lied to you and I kept lying to you about your mum because I was trying to protect you?"

"I would've—" Fraser stopped, and Ray could almost see the wheels turning. "I would've understood, eventually."

"But maybe he didn't see that, Fraser. Maybe he couldn't forgive himself, so he couldn't imagine you forgiving him."

"Am I so unforgiving, Ray?"

And how the hell was he supposed to answer that without opening up a can of worms? This was like Stella asking him if she'd made the right career move, or the right decision about revealing that her best friend's

husband was cheating: she already had her own answer. It wasn't really about the answer, it was about...how he saw her. How he meshed with her. How good their duet was.

"You forgive people all the time," Ray said, choosing his words with care, hoping they came out right, hoping he didn't say the wrong thing. "But I don't think you forgive yourself much, and you kinda hold your dad to the same standards."

"True enough," Fraser said, then quieter: "True enough."

And before Ray could come up with something else to say, they were at the Consulate heading for Fraser's office-cum-bedroom.

They took over one of the fancy, dark-wood conference rooms with a casualness that made Ray feel twitchy, as if his mom were going to come in and yell at him for playing ball in the living room. Fraser obviously wasn't feeling any such constraints: Fraser just dumped a heavy box of his dad's diaries onto the highly polished antique table.

"I believe the diaries we should start with are near the bottom," Fraser said, lifting small stacks of even smaller journals out and putting them onto the table. "If you'll start with those...."

"I'm not even sure what I'm looking for," Ray said. "Oh wow, look at this writing. You got a magnifying glass? Maybe a translator?"

"What? Oh—how did that get in here? Not that one, Ray, that's mine. This one—yes, this is while he was tracking Muldoon."

Then there was only the sound of the two of them turning pages while Ray read Fraser's father's words and wished he could read Fraser's diary instead. He wanted to get another look at that handwriting—it didn't look like Fraser's usual writing, and was that because it was so small, or was it because Fraser had relaxed enough to just scribble, to write fast enough to keep up with his thoughts? Digging through these old diaries could be useful, but what Ray wouldn't give to get hold of Fraser's and find out—

Ray started guiltily when the person whose privacy he was thinking of invading said his name, quietly.

"Ray?"

"Yeah?"

"Have I done something to offend you?"

"Depends. What's the time frame?"

"Recently. Today."

"No," he said, wishing he could lie, hoping he could manage to at least evade some of the truth. "It's all stuff in my own head, okay?"

"But—"

"It's in my head, Fraser, and I want it to stay there."

"But Ray, I really think—"

And it was that guilty, nearly hang-dog expression on Fraser's face that did it: Fraser had enough shit to deal with today without taking on Ray's problems. "Look, you said you forgot I spent the whole time pretending to be someone I'm not," Ray said, almost relieved to be laying this on the table the way Fraser ripped off band-aids, since trying to do it slowly was hurting like hell anyway. "Okay, so you forgot that, and I forgot it too, so when the other guy came back, I got a reminder—kind of like a two-by-four to the back of the head. So anyway, I remembered it was over, that was it, I was yesterday's news, sayonara and don't let the door hit you on the way out...I wasn't prepared, okay?"

Fraser opened his mouth to say something, and Ray barreled on, postponing the moment when he had to hear it from Fraser again, keep in touch, good-bye. "Okay, so I was prepared, but I was prepared for it happening some other time, not today, not now. He's your friend, He's your partner and I'm not, and that's—that's shitty, but I knew it, I just...I just forgot, okay?"

"Ray," Fraser said, and then stopped.

After a moment, Ray looked up and met Fraser's eyes. And was shocked by the anger and the...the...other stuff in there.

"Do you really think that of me?"

"Fraser, I was only make-believe, the what's-it, the understudy."

"So you're saying that any friendship between us was spurious? Fake?"

"I know what spurious means and no, I'm not saying— What I am saying—" He knew what he was saying: he was just trying to think of a way of not saying *all* of it. "I got a bit lost, that's all. I forgot who I was. Forgot I was playing a role."

"So for you, our friendship was real."

Oh shit. Ray saw where this was going—and it wasn't where he'd planned. "And I know you weren't faking being my friend, Fraser, I'm not saying that. I'm just saying..."

"You're just saying I gave you no cause to believe I valued you as a person, as my friend."

"No, I'm not saying that either. I'm saying I was Alice in Wonderland—what's the old title of that book?"

"Alice through the Looking Glass?" Fraser said, eyeing Ray's blond hair with a nearly dazed expression.

"Yeah, that's me. I forgot nothing was real, I forgot it was all made up because you and me, we had to be buddies, because you and the other guy were buddies."

"So you wouldn't consider yourself my friend?"

This would be so much easier if he thought Fraser was pulling some kind of ego trip, or some kind of mind fuck, but this was just Fraser, confused, hit by too many things in one day for even a super-Mountie to cope with. "I'm your friend," Ray said, and it hurt to say most of the truth, and it brought up things he'd hoped to bury so deep he could pretend they'd died a natural death. "I'll always be your friend, because that's buddies. But I understand that it's over now, things gotta go back the way they were."

"I think," Fraser said, picking up one of his father's diaries, "that I'm every inch my father's son."

Which made sense in some sort of weird Fraser way, but Ray'd left his Fraser-to-English dictionary at home. "You mean you—what? Don't mollycoddle?"

"That I don't give the people around me enough of my regard. Or my affections."

And before Ray could figure out how the hell to answer *that* without digging them both into an even deeper hole, Turnbull arrived back from lunch and managed to confuse the entire day even more, until Fraser simply shut Turnbull up by ordering Turnbull to help them search for pertinent entries.

The whole time they were looking through the old diaries, Ray was thinking about what Fraser had said, and what Fraser meant. And how the hell he could explain things to Fraser without adding to Fraser's burdens?

They hadn't found what they were looking for: all they had was the same old idea that Muldoon doubled back on himself, so here they were, back in that cruddy alley, hiding in the dark, waiting for Muldoon to show up.

Ray was back in the same packing-crate-cum-shack, its usual resident slipped thirty bucks a night to go sleep in the homeless shelter and let Ray use his abode. Fraser was... Fraser was over there, somewhere, in the shadows, watching the other direction, the two of them keeping the whole place covered.

And it was good, to be like this: working together, still partners—of a kind—but not attached at the hip where Ray couldn't avoid Fraser talking to him.

The downside was that Ray couldn't talk to Fraser or listen to Fraser about the other stuff that was going on, the other stuff that had to be tearing Fraser to pieces.

Nothing happened all night, unless you count a tomcat catching dinner. Dawn was brightening the sky when Ray signaled to Fraser and they

headed back to the car, Ray stiff and leaden, feeling much older than he was.

He wanted to stare at Fraser; he wanted to gaze at him, hug him, hold him—other stuff, stuff he couldn't put name to, because he had no right, no right at all. He'd run out of time, run out of chances, run out of hope, and now he had to go back to being himself, and he didn't remember how and he didn't know how he was going to face a future with no Fraser in it.

So instead of staring, he didn't look at Fraser at all, because if he looked, if he allowed himself that much, right now, right this very moment when he was tired and at the lowest of ebbs, he wouldn't be able to stop.

And Fraser had enough to deal with. Fraser had more than enough to deal with, and he sure as hell didn't need Ray's problems added to his list. Fraser had his friend back, and as soon as that old friend had recovered, Fraser would have his old partner back too: let him enjoy at least that much without his temporary partner souring it.

He was steering almost by rote, paying scant attention to the nearly deserted roads, most of his mind on how the hell to help Fraser without ending up piling one more thing onto Fraser's plate.

Fraser said, "I know you don't want to talk, Ray."

Which was when, right then, Ray knew that unless he was very careful, he was going to end up talking. All Fraser had to do was bring up why Ray was clinging and Ray would spill his guts—

"You're really sure you don't want to talk?"

"This is me not talking, Fraser."

"Will you at least talk to me about...other issues?"

Warily, Ray nodded.

"Thank you kindly," Fraser said dryly. "Amidst everything else, I had quite a conversation with Francesca. She asked me what I thought of her and when I didn't answer immediately, she said that answered her question."

Well, that explained Frannie's outburst in the hospital, Ray thought.

"Then she referred to the 'sheer hours of female tonnage' she had put into 'this relationship.'"

Ray could hear the quotation marks in Fraser's voice—could hear the confusion and dismay, too.

"She was asking if you liked her like boyfriend-girlfriend, maybe getting-married-one-day liking."

Fraser sighed. "I was hoping I'd misinterpreted her question."

Was there any part of Fraser's life that hadn't just exploded messily all over the poor guy? Oh, Fraser so did not need Ray dumping Ray's little problem on him right now. Friends, for now—always friends, they'd always have some remnant of friendship, it just wouldn't be the way it was now. Remember that, Ray told himself, and put his own feelings and needs as far away as he could. "No such luck, Fraser," he said. "She wanted to know where she stood with you. She always like that with you?"

"Thankfully, no. This is the first time she's actually asked outright."

The urge to hug was getting stronger again, so Ray concentrated fiercely on the nearly empty roads, as if the street-sweeper up ahead was a major hazard. "You have any idea what pushed her over the edge?"

"Presumably it was Inspector Thatcher telling Francesca that we—Inspector Thatcher and myself—were going home."

"That's—" Ray swallowed the shock of bile rising in his throat, and blinked hard and fast. "That's great," he managed on his second try. "With you being so homesick and all. That's, that's...great."

"Yes," Fraser said, sounding hollow. "I'm sure it is."

Dwelling on things never helped, right? But how the hell was he supposed to just let all of this drop and not worry at it like an aching tooth?

Thatcher was taking both of them home. Wasn't that just salt rubbed in the wound—all the wounds, his, Fraser's, the other guy's? This whole

mess, the other guy coming home and Ray having to leave and Frannie and everything else all rolled into one, and Fraser was going home.

Out on a frozen reservoir, Fraser's voice had nearly broken Ray's heart when Fraser had said, "I'm homesick."

Sitting on his frozen ass on that frozen lake, Ray'd heard that 'I'm homesick,' and he'd known the end was nigh. That day he'd thought he still had time, he'd thought there'd be no transfer, no going home, not after Fraser had weaseled out of the other transfer. A single day since Ray'd realized that Fraser was homesick enough to want to leave. A single day since Ray'd learned that he had to get used to the idea that some amorphous day in the future, Fraser might end up going back to Canada. A single day—and then Ray'd been hit with the other guy coming back and kicking Ray out of Fraser's life.

As if that weren't bad enough, before he had time to even begin dealing with that, now Fraser was going home, and both Ray and the other guy were going to be Fraser-less. But at least the other guy had a life to fill in the big empty space Fraser would leave behind.

Ray pulled into a parking space at the hospital, and neither he nor Fraser broke the silence that had fallen so heavily between them.

But at least they were still walking side by side the way they always did, and Ray paid attention to that, noting it and cementing it in his memory. So many things he'd taken for granted, so many things he wasn't going to have any more, and he wasn't going to risk forgetting any of it.

There were chairs and a window in the corridor outside the other guy's room: Frannie was with her real brother right now, and the nurses had warned them, only one visitor at a time.

So there they were, the two of them, the hallway their own personal limbo. Fraser was staring out the window, like an animal in an old zoo staring out through the bars, while Ray sat on one of the chairs, sneaking glances. It wasn't that he wasn't worried Fraser would notice him if he stared; Fraser was way too worried about the other guy and

all the rest of it to notice anything Ray did. But he knew himself too well, and he was no less upset than he'd been in the alley a few hours earlier: if he stared, if he allowed himself that, if he let himself that far off the leash...

But all good intentions aside, he found himself wanting to stare, wanting to do more, wanting to take Fraser and hide him away from the woes of the world...

Okay, so maybe a manly hug wasn't the only thing Ray wanted.

Maybe what he wanted was to kiss it all better.

He was saved from having to think about that little revelation by Frannie was coming out of her brother's room, sniveling, upset, just standing there while Fraser, in his own magnificently clueless way, was trying to talk to her.

Finally, Ray couldn't stand it any more. "Frannie, he likes you," he said, since Fraser seemed incapable of just saying something that simple to—well, to anyone but Ray or Dief.

Which had connotations and meanings, but damned if Ray knew if being on the same footing (pawing?) as a deaf wolf was a good thing in Fraser's world or not.

Only Fraser's world wouldn't be his world for long. Ray got things back into perspective real fast because the other guy still had a bullet in him and Ray was stuck out here in limbo, and Fraser was in there with the other guy.

"He'll be okay," he told Frannie, hugging her the way he couldn't hug Fraser

She thumped his chest, and he felt—really felt—like her brother for a moment. Just a moment. Then she had to go talk to her Ma and her sister, and Ray had to remember he didn't have a sister. Or a partner. And his best friend was in there with his best friend's real best friend.

There wasn't even a machine he could get a Coke or a coffee from, and he was all out of hope.

He slumped into the chair, and let his head fall forward, and felt his head start to ache all over again.

It was just him and Fraser, still at the hospital, standing outside the other guy's door, and Ray didn't know what he wanted, let alone what was going to happen next. Okay, so he wanted Fraser to just come flat out and say 'I like you,' but that wasn't something he should hold his breath for.

But he could be sure of one thing: there was still a case to be investigated, and the other guy wasn't going anywhere anytime soon. Which meant the case—and maybe Fraser—were still his. For the time being.

"So, what," he said, fumbling for words as he went along, "we still partners?"

"If you'll have me," Fraser said and wasn't that a weird thing to say and a weird way to say it?

It was almost enough to give a guy hope.

And that was even more dangerous than forgetting he'd just been pretending to be someone else.

Hell yes, I'll have you, he wanted to say, but that wasn't enough, yet it would be too much—because if he started talking to Fraser about them and having each other and partners, he'd say way too much more than Fraser needed to hear. Which would make him look as pathetic as he felt, and Fraser would be...well, Fraser would be embarrassed, and awkward, and the poor guy was still reeling.

So instead of dealing with the personal, they went to the airfield, and he shocked the hell out of himself by just how far he was willing to go to be Fraser's partner. Or just how far he was willing to go to postpone the inevitable when he wouldn't be with Fraser at all.

Two days away, Fraser had said. Two days, for people who were both snow fit, maybe. Closer to a week, for Ray. A month. Or a year, depend

ing on how bad circumstances got. This wasn't a nice neat little trip up a manicured and trail-blazed resort mountain; this was the real deal, one false move and you're dead.

Even if it only took them two days—which Ray doubted, not that he was going to whine at Fraser about it—they were going to be out here more than just one night: daylight was long gone, and the clouds were beginning to obscure the stars.

When Fraser came to a halt, Ray just let himself fall forward. The snow was lovely and soft, comforting, when he wasn't trying to slog through it. In fact, it was so lovely and soft, he wasn't at all amused when Fraser insisted on hauling him up out of it, and he was seriously unmasked when Fraser started slapping his face.

"You want me to kick you in the head?"

"I want you to stay awake, and stay alive," Fraser said, and the seriousness in his eyes hit Ray.

"I don't think I can," he said. He blinked, felt his eyelids try to cling to each other. "I mean, stay awake. The alive thing, I got, I'm good with that, but I'm not so sure I can swing the awake thing."

"I know," Fraser said, and under the whistle of the wind Ray could hear the tiredness. "There's a copse over there. We'll set up camp for the rest of the night."

And even before Ray realized Fraser had said 'copse' and not 'corpse,' that was second best thing he'd heard all day.

Partners. They were still partners. And whatever the hell had been pissing Fraser off wasn't any more: life was good. For now.

Among the things Fraser had thrown in their crate—and who but Fraser would pack a crate to take with them?—was food, of a sort. Ray made a face at the powdery feeling of the protein bars, but at least they were sweet and filled his stomach. There was even, miracle of miracles, hot chocolate, or at least warm chocolate: mylar bags of emergency water warmed over the fire in what

Fraser called a mess tin, instant hot chocolate packet ripped open and tipped in, the whole mess shaken till it was pretty much mixed. Ray sipped the last of it, feeling warm inside, feeling the lure of the fire outside.

Fraser had already used some of the crate to start the fire, something about dried crate wood burning better and faster than 'sap heavy branches,' but once the fire had really taken, Fraser had started adding little branches, dried-looking twigs, and the smell of pine or fir or whatever was burning smelled surprisingly Christmassy. Cozy.

Out in the middle of nowhere, no roof, no walls, no floor, no toilet, and it felt cozy.

It was the company, not the place. He knew that. Knew that mostly it was himself and the way he was feeling: Fraser wasn't mad at him, Fraser wasn't a walking pillar of pain any more, and Fraser was still there, still his partner. And Fraser was taking care of him even though he knew Fraser should leave him behind because he was slowing Fraser down, because sheer determination was no match for experience. But instead, Fraser was showing him how to lay those sap-heavy branches down to form a crisscrossed space between snow and the sleeping bags Fraser had packed into their crate. Fraser had made him warm chocolate, and Fraser was standing at his feet, looking down at him with an expression almost as warm as the fire.

So when Fraser sat down at the other side of the fire and smiled at him through the flickering oranges and yellows and the flare of sparks, Ray wasn't too surprised to hear himself asking Fraser things he'd thought he should never ask of Fraser.

"Fraser, do you ever get the feeling that you're, you know...lost?"

"No. A quick look to the stars or the sun, you can always find your location."

"No, I don't mean where you are, I mean...who you are."

"Oh," Fraser said, and there was something in his expression that made Ray willing to bet—real money, not air—that Fraser had a clue what Ray was getting at.

"When I first came to Chicago I felt as though I was from another planet."

"Which you are," Ray said, and he didn't even care how revealingly warm his voice was. He was warm, the fire was warm, Fraser was warm...

"Which I have come to accept. Everything was unknown and at times frightening."

Ray could feel sleep—not to mention sheer physical exhaustion—creeping over him, and he fought it: it wasn't often Fraser opened up like this and he wanted to hear it all, especially since Fraser didn't seem inclined to remind Ray he was just a stand-in for the real deal

"And I felt as though I was an explorer," Fraser was saying, "an urban explorer."

Fraser as an SUV, yeah, that was Fraser all right: big, tough, all terrain vehicle, ready for anything, the image making Ray smile. "Urban Explorer."

"I remember one time we were on a stakeout—"

Who with? Ray wanted to ask, but his tongue seemed to have fallen asleep. He forced his eyes open, looking at Fraser over the fire, Fraser's eyes downcast for all there was a hint of a smile around Fraser's mouth.

"—and I was trying to explain the sense of other-worldliness to the detectives—"

Ray wondered if the other guy was one of the detectives, then wondered if Fraser only ever really started talking like this when the people around him were almost out for the count. He felt his eyes close, and he struggled to open them: he wanted to listen, he needed to listen—

"—and I was telling the story of Sir John Franklin who set out to discover the North West Passage. But I realized as I was telling the story that they'd fallen a—"

And when Ray woke up, it wasn't quite daylight, but it wasn't quite night, and Fraser was already moving around the camp.

"Sorry," Ray said, yawning, stretching, coming into contact with the outside world and realizing how cold it was, a hard slap of reality after the sweetness of his dreams. "Didn't mean to fall asleep on you last night."

"It's all right, Ray, I'm quite accustomed to it," Fraser told him, and yep, the warmth was still there from last night. "Warm chocolate?"

There wasn't much by way of food compared to say, a nice city diner breakfast, or...funny, the places memory took a man.

"When I was a kid—right up till I left for college, my dad made breakfast on Sunday mornings. Apart from barbecues, it was the only meal my mom didn't make."

"I'm sorry I can't offer you—"

'Nah, no, didn't mean that. Just—" he looked up, feeling stupidly shy, feeling stupidly nervous, "this feels kind of the same, you know? I wake up, there's warm food—and let me tell you Fraser, cooked protein bars taste truly disgusting—and you know, it's...it's..."

"It's what, Ray?"

Ray stirred the embers of the fire, watching the sparks flare and fade. "I don't think I got words for what it is, Fraser."

"Understood, Ray," Fraser said, "understood."

Then the words Ray didn't even want to think had passed, and the stillness between them ended on a long sigh from Fraser and an even longer look. Then Fraser clapped Ray on the back in something Ray suspected was a kind of Canadian guy-style hug. Ray got to finish his warm chocolate, sitting beside a dying fire, watching Fraser use his boot knife to cut branches into makeshift ski poles—Fraser still looking out for him. Now way he could travel as fast as Fraser, but there were other things he could do: Ray packed their limited supplies, making things as small as possible, cobbling together primitive backpacks from what was left of the crate, and...it was good. It was partners.

Even though it was only temporary. Much though he wanted to, Ray couldn't forget that Thatcher was taking Fraser home, that Fraser probably wouldn't be staying in Chicago. But still, for now it was partners.

There was another campfire, this one far bigger than the last one, or the one Fraser had lit in a city park what seemed like eons ago. Didn't look much like Fraser was telling crazy old Buck Frobisher the tale of Lou Ferigno; in fact, that sounded a lot like a debate starting on what Fraser's dad had done.

And if Ray could hear them, other people—especially these Mounties with their bat ears—could probably hear them. So he left the warmth of his tent, and headed towards Fraser.

"I'm not sure about this rendezvous. I mean we only got half a dozen Mounties. They've got forty armed men, the odds are kinda funky."

Buck Frobisher said, cheerily, "Well, it isn't any good if there's no challenge."

Which left Ray standing there wondering if Fraser was going to grow up to be as loony as this guy.

"Well," Frobisher said when Ray didn't even try to do the polite Canadian thing and leave Frobisher and Fraser to their conversation, "I think I'll go lay down some tallow for the dogs."

Ray took Frobisher's seat, felt the heat of the fire on his face. There were dim memories wriggling around inside him, weird and warped half-dreams of swinging on the side of a mountain, of talking about green ships and partnerships, of being snuggled in beside Fraser, with Fraser's voice singing softly, keeping the dark at bay.

Now they were sitting around a fire, when both of them should be asleep gathering their strength for tomorrow, recouping a little of what their journey here had taken out of them.

It was a perfect opportunity. There were things he wanted to say, questions he wanted to ask, but...but they'd salvaged their friendship

from whatever weird funk Fraser had been in back in Chicago; they'd cemented that, and Fraser...well, Fraser was still dealing with more shit than one man should have to. How the hell did you go from having your dad being this great hero to saying, 'he became a murderer'? And how did you deal with that, when you were Benton Fraser, who put official reprimands in his own permanent record for failing to fill out the right form in a timely manner?

How could Ray toss his own mess onto Fraser's already full plate?

And the things Ray wanted to say... How much was desperation, how much was selfishness, and how much was lingering hypothermia making him as nuts as Frobisher?

At the same time, he couldn't bring himself to say nothing: hard to accept, but it was hardly more than yesterday that Ray had learned that there was no such thing as the certainty of tomorrow, there was no such thing as time enough later. There was the transfer, and there was the other guy, and there was this coil of confusion where Ray himself should be. So he wouldn't ask everything he wanted to know, he wouldn't say everything he wanted to say, but he had to say something, just a little something for himself, something that wouldn't cost Fraser anything.

His empty tent was the nearest, but even so, Ray kept his voice pitched low and quiet. "So if we live through this...we get back to Chicago," he thought, he hoped, but maybe Fraser wouldn't even come back to tie up loose ends, "I guess you'll partner up with Vecchio."

And Fraser didn't leap in to contradict that, even though Ray left him a nice break to do just that. "That's okay, 'cause he's...a good guy, you worked with him for a while..."

Fraser gave him this weirdly uncertain sort-of-smile. "You know Ray, my father and Buck Frobisher were partners for more than 20 years. Their territory was...thousands of miles."

Which didn't tell Ray anything about what the hell was going to happen to him and Fraser next.

"Sometimes they wouldn't see each other for months. No matter how far apart they were they always knew that they were partners."

And was that a reference to how Vecchio had been Fraser's partner even when in Vegas, or was it about Fraser being up here and Ray—or the other Ray—being thousands of miles away? "I'm not sure if you're—"

And then the second last person in the world he wanted to see right then interrupted.

"Fraser."

Fraser looked at him with what Ray thought was regret. "Duty," Fraser said, as if that one word said it all.

"Barks," Ray said, and if Fraser realized he'd just called Fraser's boss a bitch, Fraser didn't let on.

The fire was still as warm, the night sky still as beautiful, and Ray could've been in the worst back alley in the worst city in the world and think it an improvement over where he was right now. He sat there and tried not to look, told himself not to eavesdrop as Fraser and Thatcher walked away. But of course he looked, and of course he listened, because he figured this was Thatcher staking her claim. And maybe that was what Fraser had been trying to tell him with the whole thousands of miles separating partners: Fraser was going home, Fraser was going with Thatcher, transferring, and the other guy wasn't going to have Fraser around either.

Ray heard Thatcher's voice, clean and cool through the night. "I've been thinking about the matter of our transfer."

Shit. Yeah, it was the worst-case scenario he'd feared all the way back in Chicago. Fraser, not just being the other guy's partner, but gone, gone, gone...

"You know, I look out at this cold, barren, empty landscape," Thatcher was saying, which Ray thought was a bit harsh: there were trees and mountains and bunches of things to look at out here.

"Where any mistake could be your last, where you're surrounded by endless miles of silence with only yourself for company."

Which hadn't been bad at all, in Ray's opinion: despite the hypothermia and falling out of an airplane thing, when he'd been with Fraser and pushing himself hard, meeting the challenges, it hadn't been bad. Hadn't been bad at all.

"And I...and I can't think of a life less appealing. But obviously it's where you belong."

And that had Ray looking, and listening, hard.

"Yes, sir, I think it is," Fraser said in a tone of voice Ray didn't recognize.

"So then this could be our..." So maybe this not being able to say things flat out wasn't just a Fraser thing, but a Mountie thing.

"Possibly," Fraser said, and whoa, what the hell was Fraser doing?

Fraser was just standing there as Thatcher leaned in towards him. She said, "Then maybe we should..." and Ray knew she was going to kiss Fraser. Just like Lady Shoes, Thatcher was going to kiss Fraser. Ray couldn't tear his eyes away: he didn't want to see someone else kissing Fraser, but God damn, he wanted to see Fraser kissing someone.

And then Ray blinked and Frobisher howled and...that was it?

That was it?

Hope sparked and spiraled like the fire in front of him, just as hot and twice as dangerous.

Fraser was walking away from Thatcher, towards him. Towards the fire, towards the hope, towards Ray, who sat there, waiting.

Waiting, and wishing, and trying to put words together in a way that would let Fraser know that Fraser could have as much or as little as Fraser wanted, Ray was good to go, all the way, or a tiny baby step towards just being buddies, it didn't matter to Ray. As long as there was something. As long as getting the bad guys tomorrow wasn't the big Technicolor The End. He had to say something—

But Frobisher had finished howling and throwing tallow down for the dogs, one of the baby Mounties was crawling out of his tent, and Ray was painfully aware that for all they were in the middle of nowhere, they sure as hell weren't alone.

"Time to turn in," Frobisher said, clapping Fraser on the shoulder. "I thought you could bunk with me tonight, talk over old times, son."

Fraser's eyes met his, and Ray could read the conflicting loyalties, old ties and new ties tying Fraser in knots.

"You go ahead," Ray said, doing the right thing, giving Fraser time to sort out stuff about his dad, maybe get some questions answered. "I'll see you in the morning."

"Ray—"

"It's okay, buddy," and that was the right thing to say, tension easing from Fraser's face and maybe that meant Ray had been able to say something despite the clustering of Mounties. "We'll talk tomorrow when we've made the bad guys shake."

Doing the right thing, being noble and self-sacrificing and a good friend and all of that kept him warm for a whole five minutes. Then it left him sitting, all alone, wondering if he'd just done the right thing, or squandered his last evening with Fraser.

Nearly mesmerized by the flames, Ray jumped when Fraser's hand grasped his shoulder and another mug of hot chocolate was put in front of his nose.

"Time's it?" Ray asked when he'd drunk half the mug and realized Fraser wasn't bustling off to finish plans or deal with the dogs or get some sleep for tomorrow.

"Long past time to turn in. I want you to stay warm and sleep as much as possible."

"I'm over the hypothermia thing—"

"And you've coped impressively well with snowshoes and mountain climbing—"

"And being tossed out a plane, don't think I'm gonna forget that, Fraser."

"Another disadvantage to continuing as my partner?"

As if Ray had any say in who got to be Fraser's partner. "Ask Vecchio," he said, hearing the sourness in his voice too late to disguise it, bracing himself for Fraser to lecture him or pity him or ask what the hell he meant or something.

"I've never thrown Ray out of a plane, Ray," was all Fraser said, and there was something weird in Fraser's expression...

Dammit. He was back on the roller coaster again: every time he thought he had the whole thing figured out, Fraser threw him another curve. Or maybe he was just fooling himself again and the twinkle in Fraser's eye was a buddy twinkle, not a something-more twinkle. Ray lowered his head, breathed in the scent of real, not instant, hot chocolate. Fraser was still crouched beside him, Fraser was still looking at him.

"Thought you were bunking with Frobisher."

"That was the plan, but between the moose hock and that five minutes ago, one of his recruits came to him with a rather...uhm...uncommon problem, I thought I'd...that is, I prefer to..."

Ray sat and waited to hear what Fraser preferred.

"Ray," Fraser began then stopped, clearing his throat. "Ray—I've been thinking about how you've reacted to...uhm, in regards to..."

This was maybe his last night up here, probably his last chance to clear things up with Fraser. And Fraser was mumbling and stumbling and if the guy had a collar on, he'd be running his finger round it to loosen it. Point to some weird obscure bug and Fraser could tell you its name, but simple, monosyllabic words to clarify a personal situation were beyond the guy. Ray shook his head, smiled at Fraser, hoped he wasn't showing more than just good buddies. "Okay, I had to tell Frannie you liked her, so why'm I waiting for you to tell me what the hell's going on?"

"Well, I...you...we..."

"I don't know where you and me and we stand, Fraser. One minute, I think you're talking about you and Vecchio being partners, the next I think it's you and me, and—"

"You," Fraser said, fast, as if the word bolted free.

"Me?" Ray said, then looked away fast, before his face gave everything away.

"Yes. He's injured and..."

Fraser was looking at him as if hoping Ray would fill in the blanks.

"Until he's recovered? Or until you get transferred back here with the Ice Queen you been kissing?"

"*She kissed me, Ray,*" Fraser said, as he had once before. "And I'm not transferring with her. Even if she weren't focused on a city posting, I wouldn't."

And the big question was why. And the bigger question was: could even Ray get Fraser to just say whatever it was Fraser wanted to say? Could Ray cope with the answer if his hopes were wrong—or if they were right?

"Fraser," Ray said after a moment, "do you like me?"

"Yes," unhesitating, firm, sounding...almost eager.

Which had Ray hoping again. Which had Ray thinking that maybe that twinkle wasn't just cop-type partners-buddies-we're-in-this-together twinkling. He could feel his own poker face start to crack, the emotions spilling out like magma through rock. "Fraser, you like me in a 'we're buddies, partner' kind of way or—"

"Yes," Fraser said. "That is—" Fraser stumbled, then regrouped, his voice not entirely steady. "Do you like me, Ray?"

This was like falling into the fissure: the nervous rush of his heart pounding, the ground suddenly disappearing under his feet, freefall into the unknown then thunk, stuck there, with Fraser. Because oh God, yes, Fraser was interested. The words didn't say it, but Fraser's eyes did, Fraser's voice did. If Ray told Fraser he wanted him, Fraser wasn't going

to think Ray it was another mess landing on him, Fraser wasn't going to feel burdened or guilty or obligated or anything else.

And, Ray was finally able to admit to himself, Fraser wasn't going to reject him. Fraser wanted him. Fraser wanted *him*. Fraser had seen him at his best and worst, and Fraser wanted him.

From a plane, into a fissure, it didn't matter, his whole time with Fraser had been freefall. "Fraser," Ray whispered, leaning closer, closer, his breath pluming out to touch Fraser's face.

Then Fraser apparently gave up on words, and instead of waiting for the woman to kiss him, Fraser leaned forward and kissed Ray.

And it was...delightful. And sexy, and hot—literally, compared to the snowy chill of the night—and tender and a dozen other things that Ray was far too busy to notice or think about. It was unexpected—another freefall—but it was everything he'd expected too. It was a little bit clumsy—clothes too bulky, seating too unstable, angle too awkward, the whole experience too new, but it was...

It was...

"Home," Ray breathed against Fraser's lips.

"Yes," Fraser said, and kissed him again.

And Frobisher howled. Again.

Ray pulled back, and for a second, Fraser followed him, lips clinging. "Fraser—"

"Tent?"

Ray looked down at his pants. "Don't think you can tell in these."

"Ray," Fraser said, and it was the most indulgent sound Ray had heard in years.

"Tent," Ray said, and headed the few feet to his.

It was awkward as hell, fitting two men into that small tent, but not as awkward as picking up where they'd left off. They were crowded in there, but not quite crowded enough—there was just enough space to stay separate, to not touch. Just enough space to feel like a huge divide. Ray

could feel words filling his throat, ready to spill into and then out of his mouth, and he could see Fraser swallow, could see Fraser getting ready to speak.

If they started talking now, Ray was afraid they'd never get back to what they'd been doing—and this could be his last chance to...convince Fraser to come back south? Stay closer than 'keep in touch'? He wasn't sure quite what the hell this was ultimately about, but this time he was the one who leaned forward and kissed Fraser.

It was just as delightful, just as sweet, with the same lick of passion.

"The light," Fraser whispered against Ray's mouth.

"Keep it on, want to see you—" Ray mouthed against Fraser's smooth, smooth jaw.

"So will everyone else, Ray. We'll be silhouetted."

It took a second for that to register: he wasn't stupid, he was distracted. He was distracted again, this time by the way Fraser shivered when Ray dipped the tip of his tongue into Fraser's ear.

"Silhouettes," Fraser gasped, and Ray felt the word more than he heard it.

He fumbled behind himself, trying to find the switch to turn off the...whatever that thing was called. Fraser'd told him, but that was hours ago, and right now it didn't matter what it was called, it just mattered that he could get it shut off, and get Fraser to keep kissing and touching and—

Fraser let go of him, reached around and plunged their small tent into darkness. It took several seconds for Ray's eyes to adjust, but by then, he was kissing Fraser again, and trying to find a way to touch Fraser through all those layers of clothes.

The only problem was, when he took his own glove off, he realized just how cold it was in here, this far from the fire.

"Sleeping bags," Fraser said, barely pausing kissing Ray long enough to get the words out.

And after several minutes' fumbling, groping, and generally getting nowhere, Fraser relit the lamp-heater thing long enough for the two of them to zip two sleeping bags together. The light was left on long enough to undo boots, then darkness enveloped them once again, and after a few more fumbles, Ray was inside the sleeping bag, with Fraser sliding in beside him.

Sliding all the way down him, matching Ray height for height, but that was all Ray could feel. He started pulling at Fraser's clothes; gave up in frustration and started hauling off his own, leaving Fraser to strip.

"No, Ray," Fraser whispered, keeping the volume down so as to preserve some illusion of privacy. "Even in the bags, it's too cold to strip completely."

"We have to do it with our clothes on?"

"Well, not all of them, Ray."

But enough to make it an exercise in frustration as much as passion. Ray slid his hands up inside Fraser's undershirt, palms against the heat of Fraser's skin and the hardness of Fraser's nipples. "Oh God," Fraser groaned, and Ray took that sound into his own mouth, swallowed it down, kissed Fraser hard and strong.

There was so little he could feel, so little he could touch that the small points of contact were electrifying, fireflies in the dark, fleeting touches and bright desire warming him down to his bones.

He jumped a little when Fraser's hands wriggled their way inside his ski pants: it'd been a long time since anyone had cupped his naked ass, and he shivered as Fraser's smooth nails etched delicate patterns across his bare skin. This was good, but it could be better, if he could just—

He filled his hands with the weight and the heat of Fraser's cock, filled his mouth with the broken sound that escaped Fraser. Ray didn't need to ask if Fraser was okay, if Fraser wanted this, if what they were doing was all right—Fraser was bucking against him, making the most arousing noises, Fraser's hands clutching at Ray's ass.

Which wasn't enough: Fraser was taking off like a rocket, and Ray wasn't much behind, but if his cock didn't get some attention soon...

He pushed against Fraser's hip, then grabbed one of Fraser's wrists and pulled Fraser's hand round to the front of the damned ski-pants.

It didn't work. The angle was wrong, the pants were wrong, there was too damned much stuff in the way—

Then Fraser was unbuttoning and unbuckling and unzipping, and Ray had Fraser's tongue in his mouth and Fraser's hand on his cock, and Fraser's cock against his own palm, nice and hot and heavy. Thick, sturdy, with a lovely slippery skin than slid back and forth intriguingly.

"Wish I could see you," Ray whispered.

"Yes," Fraser whispered back, then kissed Ray again and squeezed his cock. Ray shifted, moving Fraser's hand and this was one of those times when they communicated, they actually communicated, because Fraser got what Ray was doing, and Fraser changed his grip, changed the angle and Ray could feel that touch fly through him, a rush of pleasure.

There was a collision of arms and elbows and hands, but then they sorted themselves out, and while it wasn't the best sex in Ray's life, while it wasn't even on his list of damned good sex, it was real, and it was now, and it was Fraser—and that pretty much made up for the clumsy newness and the surfeit of clothes.

In fact, as soon as they were done, he wanted to start all over again. "Practice makes perfect," he said, fingertips held tight against Fraser's back by the weight of pushed-up sweaters and shirts and undershirts. "C'mon, Fraser, let's—"

Ray was rolled onto his back, his tight-strung energy corralled by the limpid warmth of Fraser's heavy body atop his. It was better this time, slower, with enough time to linger, to savor. There was no hurry this time, no mindless race to the finish: they were neither of them quick to recover, although Ray's body—always in a hurry, perennially premature—rose to the occasion long before Fraser's did. Even that didn't matter: it

was simply another of the differences between them that bound them closer, another one of the places where they fit not because they were the same, but because their differences matched. Complementary, as they so often were, and this time Ray was content to let Fraser lead. At least this time.

Ray's eyes had adjusted to the near darkness, the faint glow of light coming through the walls of the tent just enough to give him glimpses of Fraser's face, of the intensity of Fraser's expression. Ray smiled, spread himself out as much as he could in the sleeping bags, making himself an open invitation to whatever Fraser wanted—and Ray could see that Fraser wanted to memorize him, from the skin revealed by a pushed-up sleeve, to Ray's back-arching reaction to his nipples being sucked on, to Ray's finally losing it, spilling his seed into Fraser's clasping hand and pouring his passion into the hunger of Fraser's gaze.

It wasn't until he woke up that Ray even realized he'd fallen asleep—that they'd fallen asleep. Fraser was still beside him, out like a light, a felled log just lying there. Ray's feet were numb and he thought of frost-bite, but the expected nervousness didn't assail him. He felt...grounded. He smiled in the dark, laughing at himself, amused that half-clothed fumbling in the dark had settled him this much. By the time they made it back to civilization and did it in a nice big, comfortable bed, Ray would end up so mellow, he'd be lucky if he could walk upright.

The numbness in his feet was easily explained: Dief, curled up on top of the sleeping bags, half on Fraser, half on Ray, entirely too comfortable to graciously accept being moved.

"Shh," Ray hissed at the first low-voice grumble. "You want me to piss in the bags? You wanna sleep on 'em then?"

Whether it was what he said or the way he said it, Ray didn't want to know: there were times when a deaf, lip-reading wolf still seemed too weird to be real.

Without the tent as windbreak, it was bitterly cold, far colder than it'd been when they'd made it into the tent last night. Ray rubbed his gloved hand over his mouth to hide his smile—although he didn't want to hide. Some insane part of him wanted to wake the entire camp and tell 'em, shout it from the rooftops and announce it to the whole world.

Fraser loves me.

More than the sex, more than the fact that he and Fraser were now an item, it was the simple truth that had sunk into him last night. Fraser loved him. No matter who ended up being Fraser's partner, no matter what name Ray went by, the truth was right there, branded onto his skin in the shape of Fraser's lovebites: Fraser loved him.

And that made even the latrine options up here seem not that bad after all.

By the time he made it back to camp, grateful that he'd managed to take care of business without literally freezing his dick off and a lot more appreciative of leaving most of their clothes on last night, the baby Mounties were up and about, bright eyed and bushy tailed, and quite disgustingly cheerful.

All of Ray's instincts said it was still the middle of the night: the degree of darkness, the amount of moonlight, the number of stars still visible. There wasn't the faintest hint of dawn, and Ray could feel the pull of what he'd always known telling him he should go back to bed, pushing against learning about this new place: it was dark, it looked like night, but it was actually a relatively reasonable hour of the morning. It was definitely a reasonable hour for people who were trying to make it to a rendezvous.

But still, he eyed the dark night sky, had to fight his instincts, which made him wonder how long it had taken Fraser to learn to live by a new rhythm of nature.

Ray crept back into their tent in time to see Fraser crawl, fully clothed, from the clinging heat of the sleeping bags. Fraser looked ruffled and sleepy, hair untamed, curling here and there, sticking up a little in back. It was quite wonderfully intimate, Fraser with all his masks undonned and the truth shining in his eyes.

There were dozens of ways to greet someone in the morning, but Ray wasn't interested in most of them. He shuffled across the small distance separating him from Fraser, and kissed that mouth again, remembering it, knowing it now, body tingling happily because this kiss was familiar, this kiss meant pleasure and love and feeling really, really, really good.

If they didn't have Muldoon to catch, Ray would've tumbled Fraser right back into bed.

"We need to get ready," Fraser said against Ray's lips.

"Muldoon," Ray said, and saw the naked emotions skitter across Fraser's face. "I'm sorry," he added, and the kiss he gave Fraser was nearly chaste, overbrimming with tenderness, and regret.

"As am I," Fraser said, staying within the circle of Ray's arms for a moment. "But much though you—and I—wish we could wave a magic wand and undo the past, all we can do is deal with Muldoon now."

"We'll get him," Ray said.

"If we get lucky."

And that was a golden opportunity to ease the tension returning to Fraser's shoulders and eyes. "We already got lucky," Ray said, cupping Fraser's groin, eyes going wide as he realized Fraser hadn't zipped up his Mountie pants yet. He slipped his hand inside, gave Fraser's cock a friendly squeeze, loving the feel of it in his hand, loving the freedom to do this even more.

Fraser canted his hips, cock still soft in Ray's hand, but perking up and taking notice. "I wish we had some more time this morning—"

"You want more luck?"

"Oh yes," Fraser whispered, and Ray could hear the banked desire, could feel it firming in his hand. Could feel it stirring within himself, his own cock filling, a lovely, sweet precursor to the hungry ache of being hard.

"You don't need luck," Ray said, "I got all the luck you could ever need." He kissed Fraser then, sinking into sensation and the feel of Fraser's mouth open to his, Fraser's need equaling his. Yeah, they had Muldoon to catch, but they could take fifteen minutes first—hell, ten, five minutes if they had to be quick, just let them—

From outside the tent came Dief's barking welcome, then Frobisher's voice, and finally Frobisher sticking his head through the tent flaps.

By which time Ray had his hand back in his own pocket and Fraser looked so innocent, even Ray was nearly convinced they hadn't been doing what they'd been doing.

Until Fraser looked at him, and smiled, and Ray could feel every second of last night all over again.

They'd done what needed to be done—with a little help from insanely polite parachuting Mounties. There were times Ray wondered just what the hell they put in the hot chocolate up here. Parachuting Mounties and nuclear subs, and Fraser on horseback, lassoing Muldoon in some crazed real-life rodeo.

Now night had long since fallen and with it near silence. He hadn't been up here long, but already Ray was learning to discern the small noises that made up sound this far from the city—or even a town or village. There was the creak of tree limbs weighted down by snow, the faint crunch of someone else walking, as Ray was, through the snow, the distant creak of ice. (Thaw, Frobisher had said knowingly to Fraser when they'd heard that noise. Early this year, Fraser had replied, and Ray had stood there, unknowing, unintentionally left out, acutely aware of how much he didn't share with the people from up here.) Ray could hear himself breathe, couldn't help but hear himself think.

And you know something? He didn't want to think. Remembering, now he was all over that. Remembering Fraser touching him, himself touching Fraser; remembering what had been said, what hadn't, the suppositions and expectations that would've kept them apart if they hadn't learned their lesson months ago and actually talked to each other.

He wouldn't mind hoping, either. Dreaming, maybe, of what they would have together, what life would be like as more than just friends with Benton Fraser. Benton Fraser, lasso artist, Canadian cowboy, Mountie, wilderness guy—only a hell of a lot more attractive than that weirdo Dolman.

Ray stopped at the edge of the trees, the line between the unpopulated wilderness and the clustering of people. Here there was another fire, and more Mounties this time: a forest of tents dotted throughout with twinkling little campfires as if an old-fashioned Christmas tree had been tipped over on its side. The real stars wheeled overhead slowly, unhurried, unconcerned with the lives of men, or even the life of Man, which was nothing more than the pause between one breath and the next for the Universe.

Ray stepped away from the trees and angled slightly away from the camp until he was betwixt and between the wild and the settled. He stood there looking up at all that vast timelessness; he spread his arms and turned, slowly, staring up, staring and staring up at the myriad of lights and suns and worlds beyond his imagination, beyond his comprehension.

He spun, and spun, until his eyes found a star that didn't move no matter how much Ray did. It hung there, steady, steadfast and true, even when Ray stood still and the world reeled slowly in a queasy sway of dizziness.

He wanted to look at that one star, that fixed point of brightness, because he was having a hard time not thinking. If he concentrated on that star, he wouldn't have to look at what else he'd seen today. It was

easier to look up at the scintillating coldness of a star, to feel his insignificance to the universe, to feel the shivering coldness of snow, than to look at what he'd seen today.

But it was about Fraser, for Fraser, so Ray had to look. Had to admit the truth. For Fraser's sake. And his mind wouldn't lie fallow for long, too quick, too nimble to let him hide for any length of time.

No point in prevaricating any further; might as well just look at it head on. In these past few days, especially today, taking off on horseback like something out of legend, he'd seen Fraser. Really seen Fraser. Not the citified Fraser, not the Fraser who made odd compromises with and odder rebellions against the tacit rules of city life, of big city civilization. Not the Fraser who squeezed himself in and around the requirements of fitting in, not the Fraser who simply didn't, couldn't, wouldn't conform all the way.

He thought he'd seen Fraser on the streets of Chicago, with the people there, with the criminals there: even in Chicago, Fraser was still Fraser, some core element that refused to be shaped by the city.

But up here...he'd seen Fraser in his element. Elemental Fraser. The real deal.

Chicago Fraser—Ray's Fraser—was a perennial misfit, a stranger in a strange land who'd learned to adapt and make the most of his environment.

But now Fraser was home.

Standing here in the dark, with only the light of the stars and the bitter glow of the snow, Ray could finally see that: Fraser, home at last, where he belonged. Out here.

Fraser could still be partners and buddies no matter how many thousands of miles lay between them. And all the sex in the world wasn't going to make Chicago better than up here, for Fraser.

So it was still going to be good-bye.

Even if Fraser came back to Chicago for a little while, Ray had heard him, on the ice, the way he'd said, 'I'm homesick,' and Ray had seen him up here, on the ice, saying, 'I'm home.'

It would only be a matter of time.

And there was never going to be enough time.

The pain cut through him like a dull knife, slow and hard and burning, a thick agony trenching through his insides.

It didn't matter if the other guy recovered enough to return to active duty or had finally got the golden bullet, Fraser wasn't going to be in Ray's life. Didn't matter what Fraser said about being partners across thousands of miles, Ray was still going to have a huge Fraser-shaped shadow to hold onto and nothing more.

Before it had even really begun, it was over. Yeah, there'd be visits. Letters, phone calls, e-mails. Not enough, not nearly enough.

He stared up at that single bright star twinkling down on him with an icy indifference bordering on malevolence. The star didn't care what happened to Ray: the star would just hang in the sky and guide Fraser through this incredible wilderness.

Fraser would never be lost, not while that star was up there: a quick look at the sky and that star, and Fraser could find his way anywhere.

Ray looked up at that star, and knew himself to be lost.

After a while, he made his way back to the big fire Fraser had laid for him. The biggest fire in the entire camp, supposedly to facilitate heating food, but Fraser had built it—again—right in front of Ray's tent. It was a nice gesture, another of those subtle ways Fraser took care of him, a mirror of some of the things Ray did to take care of Fraser back in Chicago.

The thought behind it should warm him—and it did, it honestly did—but the bigger picture was cold as the ice Fraser had been fishing through.

Ray poked the fire built for him, watched the combustion, felt the heat, and wondered how long things between him and Fraser could last. Fraser wasn't going wherever Thatcher was going, but even if Fraser came back to Chicago, how long would it be before this place claimed him again?

Maybe more to the point: how long could Ray stand to watch Fraser down there, watch that shadow of Fraser when he'd seen the real thing up here? Under the stars, stark, brilliant and bright, where Fraser knew who he was and where he was.

While Ray wasn't sure who he was, nor where he was, nor where his path led. But he knew where Fraser's steps would fall, and where Fraser's steps would lead.

Here.

To the cold and the dark of winter, and to the fecund brevity of spring and summer. A long way away from the streets Ray knew.

It was...it was a lot of things, but maybe ironic was the best word right now: he was finally sure Fraser loved him, that Fraser wanted him. And he was just as sure that it wasn't enough.

He looked up at the stars, at that one fixed star in the center of his heaven, and couldn't help but think of Stella.

Not enough. He was never, quite, enough.

That's what he got for choosing people with big hearts and bigger souls, people who needed so much more than just a single person to share a life with.

But at least he'd had that, not once, but twice, and that was a hell of a lot more than most people had. It was just plain greedy to want more than that, to want something this special to last as long as his parents' marriage had. Greedy to want that kind of certainty in his life.

Through the muted sounds of the night, he heard Fraser's footsteps crunching through the crisp snow, heard the clarion calls of good night as various Mounties marked Fraser's progress through the little tent city.

By the time Ray felt Fraser's presence at his shoulder, he was ready. He could feel himself smiling even before Fraser was right behind him; yeah, it wasn't going to last, but it was still more than he'd expected, and it was better than he'd expected. And it wasn't over, not yet.

"Ray," Fraser said, smiling at him, sitting down right beside Ray, close beside him.

"That's me," he said, and frowned, looking away. So much for being ready: that one small exchange brought things crashing home again, undermining him. Right now, he was Fraser's Ray, but who the hell would he be—who the hell would remain—when Fraser left?

He stirred the fire, and looked over at Fraser, squirreling away the memory of how the white light of snow and stars reflected off Fraser's skin, and how the dancing dapple of the fire warmed the white into orange and yellow the color of the sun.

All around them, there were the sounds of a campful of people settling down for the night: Ray half expected to hear a chorus of 'goodnight, John-Boy' drift through the area. The fire crackled and spat, a tiny ember nipping at Ray's cheek, then dying into cold.

"You asked me if I ever felt lost," Fraser was saying to him in that sort of husky way, Fraser's gaze fixed on Ray, drawing him in. "Ray, do you feel lost?"

Yeah, he wanted to say, but maybe it was the hypothermia or maybe it was the stress and exhaustion catching up to him, or maybe it was just the misery and the loss he'd been repressing since the other guy showed up, or the shock of having everything he wanted only to realize it would one day walk away, but Ray couldn't say even that one word. There was a relic of superstitious dread snaking through him, as if saying the word would give it power, make it real right now, this instant.

Fraser was still looking at him. "Ray, do you ever feel you've lost who you are?"

All the time, he wanted to say. All the time when I'm not with you. But he couldn't say that, he couldn't chain Fraser to him with guilt, so he swallowed the pain and the hope and said simply, "Yes."

And Fraser did what Fraser had done once before: reached out and laid his hand on the nape of Ray's bent neck, anchoring him, comforting him. And

as he had done once before, Ray let that hand draw him in, slowly at first, then faster, till suddenly he was pressed against the sueded skin and fur of Fraser's parka, surrounded by the smell of snow, and fire, and Fraser.

He didn't cry, not this time, because it would've been for himself. He wanted to burrow under Fraser's clothes, to kiss and lick and taste and touch, but there was a horde of Mounties all around. Instead, he let himself be held, felt the power of Fraser's embrace, returned it, holding Fraser just as tightly. Fraser's gloved hand was still on his nape, stroking him there, pressing him close, and with his face hidden, Ray kissed Fraser, just a small kiss, there, where Fraser's scarf was coarse and scratchy, and where Fraser's skin was soft and unexpectedly smooth. After a while, Ray pushed himself away, sat back up again, poked the fire again. Gathered himself, found his voice, and spoke.

"When I was a kid, I was Stanley." He shrugged off the old memories, hunching his shoulders, holding onto the warmth of Fraser hugging him like that out in the open for anyone to see. "Was a lot of other things, too," Four-Eyes, Polak, Butcher Boy. "For a while, I was Stan, made everyone call me Stan. But—" memories, hidden by layers of dust, coming sluggishly into the light, "that wasn't enough. And then I met Stella. C'n you imagine what it was like, being that young and being Stanley Kowalski mooning around after Stella da Silva?"

At his side, he could feel Fraser, solid, stolid presence, a warm, listening silence.

Ray took a deep breath, reliving the past, a grainy, flickering film playing behind his eyelids. "C'n you imagine what it was like being a kid living in a trailer wanting the golden girl he met because he picked up the tennis balls at the country club?"

The listening silence pressed closer, there for him if he needed something to lean on.

"So then I made myself over, you know? It took a while, but I stopped being Stan or Stanley to everyone but my mom. I became Ray, Ray

Kowalski, and I didn't care if I couldn't hardly see the board in class, I didn't wear glasses any more." He was close enough that he could see Fraser perfectly clearly, glasses or no. "I had a look, I had attitude."

"You had camouflage."

"Yeah." And of course, the man who wore a uniform and a mask of Canadianisms would get that. "I was still Stanley to Mom, but the first time Dad called me Raymond..." He could feel the twist to his smile, could feel the distant echo of that day. "He was still calling me the name he'd given me, he was still putting me in his box, but—at least it wasn't Stanley. After that I had a uniform and a badge, and I was Stella's guy and Stella's husband, everything nice and neat."

"Until?"

He wanted to hold Fraser again, wanted to hold him and never let go, make it turn out differently this time. "Until I woke up one day and it was all gone, 'n' I was somebody else. No Stella, my badge had someone else's name on it and even when people called me Ray, they were using some other guy's name. And you know something, Fraser?"

Heart in his throat, he raised his eyes, turned to meet Fraser's steady gaze. "I'm more me as him than I've ever been me."

"Ray—"

"It's okay, you don't gotta say anything," Ray said, although he felt he himself had to say something. Something that would tell Fraser that it was more than just what they'd done last night and this morning, that even when things shattered and broke between them, there would still be some goodness joining them to one another. "You're my friend, Fraser. You're the best friend I ever had, and—just—you know—uh—thanks." And before he could make an even bigger sap of himself, he found a grin, and added, "Thank you kindly."

"You're welcome," Fraser said, and damn, but Fraser's voice had gone all the way husky, and Fraser's eyes had gone all glistening and bright.

And he was staring at Fraser, who was sitting close to him, and Fraser was staring at him... Another second, and horde of Mounties be damned, they'd be kissing here and now for all the world to see.

"Once, when I was just a boy," Fraser said very quietly, as if he were telling secrets. "The first time my grandparents took me to what I thought was a metropolis, I became convinced I was lost. I didn't know street names—to be honest, Ray, I had little experience of streets."

Ray watched as Fraser licked his lower lip, and stifled the flicker of hunger stirring his cock: Fraser needed to talk, so they'd talk first. Then they'd go inside the tent.

"I thought all streets had to lead somewhere, so I followed this street, all the way, long after it had ceased to be anything but a gravel path, long after it had become nothing more but the tracks of vehicles. Believe it or not, I boiled my boots, I was so hungry and so convinced my grandparents wouldn't find me. I told my grandparents I thought I'd lost them, but..."

Ray leaned closer, not daring to hug Fraser because he knew he wouldn't be able to keep it platonic, his heart aching to comfort Fraser, his body aching with the arcing burn of desire. But he had to listen, harvest all these rare truths Fraser was giving him.

"But the truth was, I thought they'd lost me. I thought they'd left me. I was...I wasn't an easy child—"

"Yeah, right. I bet you were perfect!"

Fraser shook his head, his smile slow and sad enough to make Ray itch to hustle him off to the tent and bury these memories in a montage of flesh and pleasure. "I had just lost my mother, my father had been...strange...since her death, and I'd just come to live in the well-ordered home of two people who'd thought their child-rearing days were long past. Believe me, Ray, I was a handful. The first five years or so, I ran away often enough that the local trappers all knew me, and the local Member didn't report me, he'd just scoop me up and bring me home."

"Wow," Ray said, almost shocked. "I always assumed you were a goody two shoes."

"Oh I was, eventually. Unpleasantly so, I suspect. But at first... I remember trying to explain to my grandmother that it wasn't *them*, that they weren't doing anything wrong, that I knew they were doing their best."

There was a fond smile on Fraser's face, fondness mingled with respect, enough to make Ray wish he'd had a chance to meet that grandmother.

"She told me that I wasn't running away from them, I was trying to run towards *me*. And she was right. I was in such a hurry to grow up, I— I was in such a hurry to make people see *me*, not just Bob Fraser's son."

Ray felt a prickle along his spine, cop instincts telling him this was the moment, this was the big confession. "But?"

"But?"

"There was a 'but' at the end there, Fraser."

Fraser gave him one of his sweetest smiles, the dimple in his left cheek even making an appearance. "I never truly felt lost, Ray. Out of place, yes—in fact, odd though this is going to sound—"

"You being a freak again?"

"Very much so. In an odd way, Ray, although there was a distinct other-worldliness to my early experiences in Chicago, occasionally now I feel less...out of place in Chicago than I did at times at home."

Oh yeah, and that was something Ray understood, that was something he could take from Fraser's shoulders. "Because you were supposed to be different, a Canuck in Chicago, you weren't supposed to fit in, so not fitting in was okay," and God forgive him for the surge of hope that put through him. "But when you're home, when you're with your own people... I do undercover Fraser, I know exactly what you mean."

"Yes," Fraser said slowly, measuringly. "Yes, you would."

"Fraser," Ray asked, taking his time, thinking this through instead of just blurting things out, "you feeling lost now?"

Bull's-eye.

Ray watched that hit home, started to apologize—then realized he hadn't hurt Fraser, he'd just cut right through a Gordian knot.

"My parents..." Fraser swallowed, and Ray wanted to hold him, hug him tight, couldn't, not in the middle of the camp. "They're gone now. My grandparents have been dead for years. I have quite a few cousins, and...I have a half-sister I never even knew existed, from a relationship I never even guessed at."

Ray stomped on the urge to kiss it better, throttling his need to take Fraser in his arms and take all of Fraser's hurt into himself: Fraser needed him to listen, not to slobber all over him.

"All those years," and Fraser didn't need to say 'alone' for Ray to hear it, "she was growing up so close to me—and I never knew."

Fraser was looking at him, years of certainty turned into confusion in his eyes.

"I found out that what I'd always been led to believe wasn't true at all—it wasn't simply that my mother had died. I'd always assumed it was from something I was too young to know about, the complications of pregnancy, cancer, something like that. But I spent years terrified no one told me the details because somehow it was my fault that Mum had died." Fraser looked up at the stars that had always guided him, then back at Ray, who had wrapped his arms around himself to stop him from simply grabbing Fraser in front of all the Mounties in their still-lit tents. "Of course, I eventually realized it couldn't've been my fault. But then Muldoon—who had once been the old 'Uncle Holly' of my childhood—told me my mother was murdered. By him."

To hell with anyone seeing them: there were things short of kissing Fraser for a month that Ray could do in public. Ray pulled the glove off his right hand and reached out, startling Fraser. "It's okay," Ray mur

mured, and slid his warm hand down between the soft wool of Fraser's scarf and the softer wool of Fraser's neck. "You'll get through this," Ray said, and he couldn't help it, he rubbed his thumb back and forth, offering comfort, trying not to take anything for himself, knowing he was a liar because being able to touch Fraser like this, being needed by Fraser like this, was balm to his soul. "Give it enough time, and it'll be okay."

Fraser leaned forward, and sideways, so that Ray had Fraser's weight against him and his hand was sliding under Fraser's shirt along the muscles of his shoulder.

"And of course," Fraser said, voice rough, "now I wonder about my grandparents—they must've known about my mother, but they never gave me so much as a hint. Did they know about Maggie too? And what else did no one tell me about? My dad—

"—was only human.

"Oh, no one knows that better than I do, Ray. But—but the failings of the man...I expected those—I lived with many most of my life. But I always thought—"

The muscle under Ray's hand bunched, and he stroked it, felt a slight tremor run through Fraser. This was it, he thought, recognizing the signs: this was big. Out of all the things that had shaken Fraser's world, whatever was coming was, for Fraser, the big one.

"I always believed, I had this rock steady certainty, that my dad was the perfect Mountie. And not just because I'd idolized him as a child, but because he was the legendary Bob Fraser, Sergeant Robert Fraser, RCMP, last of a breed." Fraser remained motionless and Ray kept stroking—lightly—over Fraser's shoulders. "I was told—once—that my dad wasn't the last of a breed, that I was. But that was when I was exiled to diplomatic paperwork, so that shows how wrong he was."

Ray kept stroking, and kept listening.

"I always knew I'd never be as good a Mountie as my father. Always. It was a simple fact of life. And now—now I find out that he tried to kill a

man instead of bringing him to justice. In the same situation, I didn't kill. I wanted to, I've wanted to quite often, but I haven't, and I know I won't."

Ray was nearly holding his breath, had bitten his tongue once already to stop himself from interrupting. Fraser shifted, enough that Ray had to let go, his hand suddenly cold without his glove, without Fraser.

"Ray—does that make me a better Mountie than my *father*?"

"Yeah," Ray said gently, as comfortingly as he knew how to be even if he only half understood Fraser's distress. "Sorry Fraser, but yeah."

Fraser sighed then, a thick, heavy sound, a puff of white air hanging in front of him.

"So what do I do now? How can I be better than my father?"

Ray bumped his shoulder against Fraser, "You just are. You keep doing what you're doing."

"Then what? Then I become a legend like him? Or eclipse his?"

"That's the way it's meant to be, Fraser. Why'd you think my dad wanted me to go to college? So I could be *better* than him, so I could take a step up the ladder.

For a long moment, Fraser sat there in silence, and Ray let him, wishing he could do more—wishing that there was more between them than just however long they had, wishing they weren't sitting in full view. But there were no laws, formal or tacit, stopping one man from throwing a friendly arm around another man's shoulders. And Ray's pulse beat just a little bit faster, and his heart lifted a little, when Fraser not only allowed the touch, but leaned into it, ending up encircled by Ray's arm.

"I've never had to deal with that," Fraser said quietly. "It was always safe before—how could I never fail, how could I be the perfect Mountie, when my dad was right there in front of my face, the perfect Mountie, the infallible Mountie, the ideal made flesh? I could never, ever measure up and that was..."

"Protection," Ray said, thinking about Fraser's confidence, Fraser's quickness to admit to his own failings, real and imagined. "Only now, you

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might be the best there is, and now you might have a chance to measure up.”

Fraser laughed against Ray, a bitter sound, prickly and sharp. “No I haven’t,” Fraser said. “I could never measure up to my own standards, but before...”

“But before it was okay if you didn’t measure up, because you thought your dad had.”

“And now I have to think about that. If even my dad couldn’t measure up, and I know I can’t....”

Ray hugged Fraser tighter, hoping that it still looked like a manly, heterosexual buddy-hug, not particularly caring that it might look like more. The tents were fading into darkness, Fraser needed Ray at least for now, and Ray was mere mortal enough to love that. Hated what Fraser was going through, but being needed....

Being needed pressed buttons he’d had to bury a long time ago.

Raw and battered as he was under the stoic Mountie facade, Ray could almost hear Fraser breaking apart the way that fjord ice had today. He could almost hear the groaning, cracking sound, could almost feel how unsteady the world must be under Fraser’s feet.

“I’m your buddy,” he said, and Fraser went very still against him. “I’ll always be your friend, even if you don’t ever think you measure up. You do, you hear me? You measure up, and even if you make like a bad guy, I’ll still be your friend.”

“As friends,” Fraser said, with more bitterness than any two words deserved.

“Fraser?”

“Nothing,” Fraser said, straightening up, going all brisk and Mountie-like on Ray. “Enough self-indulgent wallowing, I think,” Fraser said. “Time for cocoa and turning in.”

Ten steps away from the fire, the cold night closing around him like a vise, Ray caught Fraser. He grabbed the heavy sleeve covering one arm,

and hauled Fraser around. Fraser stood there, legs slightly spread, feet firmly planted, the stance Ray recognized from a dozen Ice Queen dressing-downs. Fraser was watching Ray, waiting for him to speak, and now that Ray had Fraser ready to listen, he realized he hadn't a clue what he wanted to say.

He just hadn't wanted Fraser to walk away. Not yet.

"Fuck the cocoa," he said, and watched Fraser's pupils dilate when he said 'fuck'—and Ray knew exactly what he wanted to say. "Come back to the tent. Spend the night with me."

Fraser stared at him for a long moment. "I thought you were willing to be my friend."

That rendered Ray speechless. Fraser thought—Fraser took that to mean—Fraser was saying—

"After last night? You thought buddies was *all* I was up for? Fraser, I don't know about you Canadians, but American buddies don't do *that*."

"Tent," Fraser said abruptly, and this time, it was Ray's sleeve that was grabbed, and Ray who was turned around.

He was in the tent, in the sleeping bags, his tongue in Fraser's mouth before he had a chance to think a single coherent sentence. This time it was fast and hurried, desperate and hungry, and when Ray was finished, when he'd tumbled over the edge and was catching his breath and his scattered wits afterwards, Fraser held him, held him close, and stroked his hair until Ray fell asleep.

He awoke to kisses. Tender, soft and true, and compelling him to open, to simply allow Fraser to breach his every defense, his every barrier.

He was loved; he knew that, could feel it in every touch, every caress, every murmur of Fraser's voice against his skin. Ray spread his legs, sure of what was coming next, but Fraser declined, maneuvering them until Ray was atop Fraser, and the slow tendresses ignited, catching fire, desire and hunger and need devouring them.

Ray didn't ask what Fraser had used nor when Fraser had got himself ready for this; he didn't want to know. He didn't even want to know why Fraser had decided to do this, because all that mattered was that Fraser wanted this as much as Ray did, that Fraser was more than willing, that Fraser was consuming Ray with the heat of his body.

And when they were done, there were kisses again, as fragile as sunrise glinting on ice.

Ray understood this body language, spoke it fluently: he was familiar with good-byes.

Even if Fraser didn't realize it yet, that's what every touch was whispering.

If there had been more light, he would have been able to see his breath cloud the air, but he couldn't see that, or Fraser's, could only feel the unexpected warmth of Fraser speaking against his cheek.

"Ray?"

He didn't want to talk: talking meant facts, talking meant arrangements being made, talking meant putting the tactile 'good-bye' into inescapable words.

"Ray?"

He rolled over, wrapped as much of himself around as much of Fraser as he could.

"I can't see the stars," Fraser whispered.

"They're still up there."

"Yes, but..."

Lying this tightly wound around Fraser, Ray could hear him swallow. Don't say it, he wanted to yell; he had a sudden, dreadful impulse to punch Fraser again, just once, because even though it was wrong and he didn't do that any more, the last time...the last time had led to them repairing their partnership.

"Ray, I've been making assumptions, and I'm sure you have too. But we should talk—"

"To say what? You don't want me to leave, I don't want you to leave, you can't stay down there any more, I can't stay up here? That what you want to talk about?"

Ray grunted as Fraser's arms tightened around him, too hard, too tight, and still never quite close enough. The pounding of Fraser's heart nearly drowned out the sound of Fraser's whisper. "I could stay."

"For how long?"

Fraser's hand stroked through Ray's hair, Fraser's lips pressed a kiss to his forehead.

"Inspector Thatcher isn't returning to Chicago—she said she's recommended that I handle the changeover to new staff at the Consulate."

"So you'll be back for a while?" Ray scrambled out of Fraser's grasp, knelt astride him, held Fraser's face in his hands, straining to see in the dark. "You want to do that?"

And even in the dark, Fraser didn't lie to him. "I don't want to leave you."

Not: I want to come back to Chicago. "You want to come home—you need to come home."

Fraser's hair slid silkily through his fingers, Fraser nodding 'yes,' slowly, reluctantly.

Anger began somewhere deep inside, hotter than hell, worse than hell. "It's so fucking unfair," he said, lying down right on top of Fraser, pressing his weight hard into the man under him, sucking at the base of Fraser's neck, marking him.

Even that was temporary.

That would fade, like this, into memory.

He had it all—again. How many people found real love, real passion, twice in their lives? He shouldn't complain, he should be grateful, but—

He wanted to kick the world in the head. Kick God in the head. Kick everybody and everything, because it just wasn't fair.

This time, it was rough, and wild, and raw, leaving bruises and scrapes and bites in its wake—in their wake. Pleasure bordering on pain, pain bordering on pleasure, cross-border, yeah, that was them, Ray thought, lying there afterwards, stunned and scared and aching.

His whole life, he hadn't known who he was—for most of it he'd thought he'd known, been so sure he'd known who he was he'd gone undercover eagerly, but the truth was all he'd been doing was fitting himself into the gaps in other people's lives. His whole entire life, he'd tried on names, and faces, and people, and he'd never been sure who he was.

He could feel the words mustering in his mind, his very own lunatic militia. But they were there, massing, forming ranks, forming lucid thoughts.

But if he didn't even know who he was in even the old familiar places of his life, what the hell would happen if he abandoned all the road signs and guidelines of his old life? His old identity, such as it was?

If he came up here with Fraser, who would he be? The displaced Yank, the fag mooching off the Mountie, Fraser's...hell, he didn't even know what the right term was. Domestic partner? Significant Other? Live-in boyfriend?

He could almost feel himself unraveling, dissolving like mist.

If he came up here, who the hell would he be?

Okay, so there were times when he was burned out, tired of being a cop. But it was who he was, what he did—he'd never done anything else, but he sure as hell couldn't move up here and just pick right up at Detective First Class again. Out in these thinly populated wild places, there weren't many jobs for the people who came with the Mounties posted here—Ray knew, because he'd looked. Told himself it was idle curiosity that had him cruising the RCMP's website, but it had been for a dream he hadn't even told himself.

Yeah, it was a lovely dream: come up here with Fraser, live happily ever after in rugged, rural bliss. But reality set in, reality would always set

in: if he came up here with Fraser, what the hell would he do to make his living? And who the hell would he be?

"Chicago has its advantages," Fraser said unexpectedly, surprising Ray a little.

"Yeah?"

"Well-stocked libraries, theater, opera, take-out Chinese food..."

Fraser's voice kept on listing things, and Ray listened to all the things Fraser could so easily do without. Fraser kept on talking and Ray kept on listening to all the things Fraser wasn't listing—sludge instead of snow, no open spaces, being little more than a desk-bound paper-pusher—and thought of all the things up here that mattered to Fraser.

"So you'll stay in Chicago," he said, interrupting. "For as long as you can?"

There was no hesitation, either in Fraser's promise or his kiss: "For as long as I can."

And Fraser managed to make that sound like forever.

It was tempting, it was the Crown Jewel of temptations—and it kicked the butt of any doubts he might have about how much Fraser wanted this, wanted him, wanted to make it last. But even though Fraser could do it, even though Fraser could force himself to stick it out, stay in Chicago, it didn't alter the truths Ray had seen on two different sheets of ice.

This, this vastness, wildness, thrill, *this* was and always would be home for Fraser. Fraser hadn't so much left the far north to come to Chicago, it had been amputated from him, and it was only now, up here, that Ray could see the bleeding wound, could see the way Fraser limped, always limped, in Chicago.

"I *could* stay," Fraser said, convincingly. "I could stay down in Chicago, come up north once a year. In fact, we could finish fixing up my father's cabin."

Ray went willingly into Fraser's need-filled embrace, savoring it, holding onto the hope as much as to Fraser. "That would be enough for you?"

There was a long silence, too long, and Ray knew the truth Fraser didn't want to say. "You've come back up here every year since you got exiled and it was never enough, was it, Fraser?"

A sigh, like a sob, muffled against Ray's hair. "No, it wasn't. But—I didn't have you—well, I did, but as a friend, buddies, not as..." Fraser's hand smoothed over Ray's shirts, slid down inside his thermal underwear, fingers going between his cheeks. "This time, remaining in Chicago would be different."

But would it be enough? "We could try."

"Yes," Fraser said, and there was a welter of relief in the cascade of kisses Fraser pressed on him then.

There was no chance these kisses could lead to sex, not for a while anyway. But it was as good as sex in a way. "There's another possibility, Fraser," Ray said, mouth against Fraser's slightly stubbled cheek.

"Hmmm?"

The problems hadn't gone away. The big scary change was still sitting there, waiting for him to look at it. But maybe he could ease into this sea change—see if he could get his sea legs, see if he could be the one to make the compromise this time round. "You promised me an adventure."

And in his arms, Fraser went very still. "Ray?"

The big scary change was grinning at him now, drooling, waiting to devour Ray in one big bite. "And if the adventure works out okay, then maybe I could move up here with you."

Fraser's hug was exuberant, intense, the kisses more so. "Being at the Consulate has taught me every in and out of immigration, Ray. There are options, visas—"

Leaving his home behind. Leaving his country behind. Leaving his identity behind.

He'd be taking nothing but himself: there'd be no familiar streets, no familiar people to bolster him. Just himself.

It felt like surrender. And it felt like victory, because this wasn't just change, this wasn't just throwing all his props and crutches and screens away, it was the chance to really see who he was when he stripped away everything but the essence. Yeah, he'd be leaving everything behind. Kind of like death—you can't take it with you. Most of his stuff—gone. Contact with the people who had firm ideas on who he'd always been—gone. People's certainty and expectation that he would do this, or react like that—gone. All he'd bring would be himself: at long last, he'd be himself. Just himself, nothing else, no one else's images of him or disappointments in him, no roles, no predetermined paths to walk. Apart from Fraser, who had learned to let him make his own choices.

"I wanna try it, up here, with you," Ray said, in a rush. Heard the words, felt Fraser's reaction. He hugged Fraser, kissed him again, felt the need in the way Fraser kissed him back. "This is what we want, Fraser, this is what we're gonna do. We go back to Chicago, you do what you have to do, I do what I have to do," end one life, depart for a new one, "and we come back up here, go on my adventure?"

"Yes," Fraser said, fervent and intense, and Ray nearly laughed with joy at the relief in Fraser's voice. Fraser needed, and Ray could give.

As for practical details, how he'd earn his living, how he'd pay bills, pull his weight...well, they'd come up with solutions. They'd come up with something. And even though he didn't like it, the truth was that Mounties got paid enough to support whole families, so Fraser could always...

Oh, he *really* didn't like that idea. He'd been independent since half-way through college; he'd been the one who worked and paid the bills while Stella went through law school; he'd taken his first after-school job when he was 14 so he could buy a bike instead of having his dad help pay for it.

To live off Fraser...

Shit.

He'd think of something—they'd have to.

"You okay?"

"Minor panic attack," Ray mumbled against the side of Fraser's neck.

"About?"

"Money."

"I have suffice—ah. We'll come up with something, Ray," Fraser said, and Ray pressed into him a little harder, loving the feel of Fraser wrapped around him, and him wrapped around Fraser. Ray smiled at the dry humor of the words whispered to him: "Perhaps you could be the Chicago PD's Liaison to the RCMP?"

"Yeah, advising local officers on urban policing methods," Ray laughed, a little. "How to break up riots of walruses. How to prevent bears from mugging little old penguins in the streets."

He could feel Fraser's laughter, shaking under him. "We're not *quite* that unpopulated. In fact—I could..."

"You could what? You don't get to start then stop, Benton Fraser. You could...yeah?"

"There's more than the two extremes, Chicago or wilderness postings, Ray. There's Yellowknife, for starters."

"So we could..."

"Compromise."

That...sounded good. That sounded really good. Fraser, willing to come back to Chicago to stay with Ray, if that's what it took, Ray willing to come up to a vast emptiness if that's what it took, or the two of them meeting in the middle. Or maybe that wouldn't be compromising—maybe that would just be a huge change for both of them, leaving neither one of them with what they wanted. "Adventure first," Ray said firmly. "Then we'll see how I like it up here in the northeast of the Great White North."

"And if you don't like it up here enough for even Yellowknife, then we return to Chicago."

Forever. It really was going to be forever. Ray leaned up again, looked down at Fraser, couldn't really make out the details, but knew Fraser was there, Fraser was looking at him—Fraser was with him, no matter what.

Ray lay back down, got himself settled, and started looking at his dream, thinking about how to make it reality.

There wasn't enough snow or ice left for them to have a full adventure, plus with Thatcher high-tailed out of here on her way to bigger and better things, Fraser had duties in Chicago and Ray had those minor nagging details of job and boss and responsibilities.

So with Fraser looking like he was getting a root canal without benefit of anesthesia, they took one last look at this place Fraser called home, and headed off for the place that was still home to Ray. For now.

Chicago was both a blur of hectic activity and an endless drag of routine drudgery. There was sorting and packing and selling and calling the Salvation Army to come and collect a mountain of things Ray no longer valued. There was putting some stuff in storage so it could be shipped north later or reclaimed if, ultimately, they returned to Chicago. There was the turtle to be moved in with Frannie and Ante, there were his parents, and the GTO, and working his notice at the station. And there was paperwork.

Good God, there was paperwork.

Between ending one life and starting another, there was enough paperwork to deforest half of North America. But when he wasn't using up half the trees on the planet, there was time for other things, other people—time, finally, for all the good-byes that had to be said.

He still hadn't made any decisions on exactly what he was going to do up there, and he had a sneaking suspicion that there was something

seriously hinky about the way Canadian immigration laws managed to accommodate him, but hey, there had to be some advantages to saving the world from Idahoans with a nuclear sub. And it got him up north where Fraser needed to be and where Ray wanted to be.

This time, as they stood in the middle of an ice field just short of Buck Frobisher's outpost, it wasn't just Fraser grinning like a fool. With Fraser watching him, Ray stood there and looked around. Looked all around at this place he hoped to call home. All that snow, all that ice, all that white. A clean slate, life spread out before him, pristine and new, and it was up to Ray what got written, this time. Fraser's gloves were almost rough against his skin as Fraser cradled his face, held him still, and kissed him, there, in the middle of all that newness, that vast expanse that was his adventure, his new beginning and Fraser's homecoming.

They turned farther north after that icefield, using modern transportation—the roar of the snowmobiles almost obscene in this place—until they got to Buck Frobisher's outpost, where a team of dogs was waiting for them.

“Your father's dogs,” Buck Frobisher said, and Ray saw the glisten in Fraser's eyes as he'd looked at the dogs bred from his father's last team. Ray'd watched Fraser examine them, comment on their strengths, their resemblance to this dog he remembered, or that. Watched Fraser reconnecting to old roots, to Fraser's own past—watched Fraser settle into this land where he belonged. Where Ray might one day belong.

Then they'd taken off, Ray and Fraser, and Buck Frobisher saluted. Fraser saluted back and Ray swore he'd seen tears in Fraser's eyes, just for a moment, as Frobisher recognized him as an equal—as someone worthy of respect. And maybe, Ray thought, looking at how old Frobisher looked now, maybe it was as close to a tender good-bye as these Mounties would get.

And Ray realized: this was Fraser saying good-bye to his past as much as Ray had said good-bye to his. A fresh start, for both of them, the two of them defined by themselves and each other and no one else.

Ray looked to where the land became wild and solitary and gave the signal, told Fraser he was ready. So off they went on Ray's adventure and Fraser's adventure, and whatever they found out there, they never told anyone.

But Ray never, ever again wondered who he was.



Reaching Out

a canon ball, after Call of the Wild

It was too cold to sleep outside, even with a fire—always supposing there had been enough trees for firewood. So tonight they were in their small tent, with the BTUs from the arctic heater efficiently beating back frostbite, but failing to warm the atavistic soul in the way a real fire could.

There was little light this late in the year, this late in the day, with fuel so precious. They'd turned the lamp off as soon as they'd finished eating, conserving that energy, conserving their own by retiring to their sleeping bags, the heater between them.

"Isn't Dief coming in tonight?"

There was a snort that sounded suspiciously like satisfied laughter. "Not if he wants to convince the other dogs he's tough enough to be alpha."

"They think he's getting soft?"

"Oh, the mockery he's been enduring..."

Another soft whuff of laughter, echoed from the other side of the tent, then silence.

"So is this more of that hypothermia?"

"Ray?"

"That I'm lying in a tent in the Arctic in winter laughing cos I believe a bunch of dogs are making fun of a wolf for getting soft."

"Well, no, Ray. That's just reality."

"Your reality."

A long pause, the airless sound of regret building. "Yes. My reality?"

A gusting sigh. "Don't say it."

"Don't say what?"

"You know what not to say."

"No, I don't. And if I don't know what not to say, how can I not not

say it?"

"Sorry."

"For what?"

"No, that's what not to say. Don't say it, just don't say you're sorry."

Another pause, then gently: "For what should I be sorry, Ray?"

"You tell me. But I'm telling you, you don't be sorry for it being your

reality."

"Understood."

"Yeah? Then explain it to me."

"You're the one who said it, Ray. I don't see any need for me to—"

"Hah! See? I knew it! You got no clue."

There was no answer from the other side of the tent.

"Admit it, you got no clue."

"Not about this, no."

Silence, the sound of a man not yet ready to think about things hov-

ering, unsaid, between them.

"But I am sorry."

Quickly, sharply, the best form of defense. "Don't be."

"We can head back tomorrow. I can have you back in what passes for

civilization in a week. You could be on a plane back to Chicago in eight

days."

"Back to my reality?"

Pause. Rustle. Nearly a sigh. "Yes, Ray."

There was a long span of quiet, then the sound of restless fidgeting

and finally Ray's voice, a wraith in the dark, cold night: "And what if I tell

you your reality's better'n mine?"

Hitch of breath. Another rustle. "Then we could go on tomorrow and reach the Beaufort Sea in four or five days."

"And maybe we'll find the hand."

"The reaching out one."

"Yeah. The reaching out one."

"Ray?"

"Ray?" There was a quiver in that voice. "Ray?"

"Go to sleep, Fraser."

Pause. Sigh. Rustle. "As you wish, Ray."

The sun wasn't up for long this late in the year, giving them very little time to finish their adventure and get back to safer confines before the day disappeared until well after solstice. But sunlight there was, still, and wind, but no snow bar the thin veils kicked up by the wind, spooling ever closer.

Ray stood for a moment and simply looked. Fraser's grin was back, the self-same grin from that first moment on Canadian soil—Canadian ice—when Fraser had said, simply, "I'm home." Cheeks wind-chapped, red and rough, unshaven long enough to be trembling on the verge of a full-fledged beard, and blue eyes far brighter than the sky could be up here, at this time.

Home. Yeah. Out in the middle of nowhere, a blizzard threatening off to the west, nothing in front of them but wild water, nothing behind them but wild land, and Fraser was home.

Fraser was standing there grinning as the snow began to fall again and landed on his nose and eyelashes and beard.

"Here," Ray said, and reached his hand out, brushing the ice from Fraser's eyelashes, to dust it from his beard, to sweep it from his lips before it could melt there and drip into ice.

And Fraser chose that moment to look at him. To really look at him, and his hand. The reaching out one.

He'd been frozen since they'd landed on that damned ice, but at least he'd been able to move. Not now. He just stood there, like a moose in headlights, with his hand, reaching out.

"Ray?"

He turned away, looked out at the icy sea.

"Ray."

Blinked as the snow fell thicker.

"Ray."

Looked over to where the blizzard was massing.

"Ray!"

Looked down at his feet, snowshoes sinking slowly under his weight.

"RAY!"

Looked then, to his right, at Fraser. At Fraser's hand. The reaching out one.

And knew then, what this adventure had been all about.



