



*Thud-thump. Thud-thump. Thud-thump.*

Ray squeezed his eyes closed against the bright, fluorescent light of the squad room, and thought (as he frequently did) that he should have known better. He had Saturday shift this week — something that normally would have been a routine pain in the ass, if it hadn't been for the fact that last night's retirement party for Detective First Class George Stavropoulous had left him with a First Class hangover.

As a result, pain in the ass didn't even begin to describe it.

*Thud-thump. Thud-thump.*

Beat of heart, beat of head. Both feeling like they were struggling against overwhelming odds, and were thinking seriously about giving it up as a bad job. His head hurt. His stomach hurt. His mouth tasted like maybe he'd licked the floor of a holding cell when he wasn't paying attention.

And of course, this had to be the day when Welsh decided that Saturday duty wasn't bad enough, but that somebody had to show the new guy the ropes and hey, Vecchio — try to explain the paperwork without mentioning that you never do any yourself, okay? Ray had agreed out of desperation, a gut-churning need to get away from the smell of long-ago roast beef and mustard that haunted Welsh's office.

On top of *that* it was also Frannie's turn for Saturday shift, which meant she had to miss her niece's piano recital or some such crap, which meant she was even more pissy than usual, which meant that she took it out on everybody by making coffee so bad that even Welsh wouldn't drink it.

*Thud-thump.*

So — the new guy; a transfer from somewhere back east. With the way his luck was going today he would probably be some New York smartass, or some rube with a Maine twang that would cut through his head like—

"Detective Vecchio?"

Ray pried one eye open, wincing. Given the glaring light and no glasses and his head, pretty much all he caught was an outline. A really, really *big* outline.

He cleared his throat. "You're not, like, a bad guy or anything, are you? Because I gotta tell you — I'm not in the mood, pal."

The outline came closer and sat down at the chair next to his desk, clarifying into a broad-shouldered guy with light brown, buzz-cut hair and chiseled features that didn't quite match the hard gleam in his eyes. Pale blue eyes. Bright. Ray squinted.

"Charlie Darnell. From Boston PD. I was told to ask for you—"

"Right, right, right, Stavropoulos' replacement." He offered a hand, and received one of those 'I'm a goddamn cop' handshakes. "Look, Darnell—"

The man smiled, proving that the brightness of his eyes had nothing on his teeth. "Call me Charlie."

That was definitely a Boston twang. Slightly better than Maine, anyway. Ray nodded, then wished he hadn't. "Ray. Just let me get some stuff together here—"

He would have continued, except that as he spoke Francesca swooped down out of thin air, making him jump. Her hands fluttered restlessly, tucking her hair firmly behind one ear, playing with her necklace. The whisk and rustle of leather over nylon seemed suddenly very loud. "You're him? You're the new guy?" Ray caught that 'what-shall-we-name-the-children' look on her face, and smiled even though it hurt to do it.

"Uh...yeah..." Those blue eyes had gone wide and uncertain. Apparently ol' Charlie wasn't quite the hardcase he seemed to be. Ray sighed and leaned on his fist.

"Charlie Darnell, my sister Francesca. Civilian Aide. Hey, I happen to know that she made the coffee, if you'd—"

He had to whip his foot out of the way quick to keep it from being pierced by a spiked pump. "Actually, I was just about to make some cappuccino, Detective Darnell." Ray wondered absently if he could be absorbing some kind of weird female hormone just from listening to her voice. "And then I'd be happy to take you around the station, show you the ropes—"

"Ropes if you're *lucky*," he murmured, and pulled the other foot away fast. "Hey, Frannie, correct me if I'm wrong, here, but didn't you say something to Welsh about how you were way too busy with case research to put in any time on...what did you call it? 'Potty training', or something like that—"

She turned on him fiercely, and for a split second it *was* like having a sister — if he'd ever had one, he would have bet good money that she would have looked at him like that. Obviously he hadn't missed much. Frannie smoothed out quick, however, since apparently it was more important not to scare off the new hunk than it was to tear

Ray a new asshole. "But Ray, you know I'm *never* too busy to stand by our boys in blue —" a smooth shift, and she switched over to Darnell with another prizewinning smile. "I just love cops. They're like...knights or something. All that...nobility."

Darnell smiled back at her, and while she melted he caught Ray's eye with a glance of commiseration. Ray winked, and waved them both off so he could put his head back down on his files as soon as possible.

He watched Darnell stand, registered Frannie's soft breath of surprise — the guy had to be at least six foot six — and tuned out the sound of Frannie's voice as she led him away, asking some stupid question about his gun.

Head down. Finally. Ray sighed. Darnell would do—

"...no, actually," he heard Darnell's voice, cautiously polite, from far, far away, "I'm not married..."

A bonus all around. Looked like Fraser might actually get a break, Frannie-wise. Ray closed his eyes.

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Okay, so he should have known better. Again. Should have known pulling that Saturday shift wouldn't get him any favors four days later. When Welsh offered to let him off the hook on the Bennetti case (lots of footwork and an evidence search that would start at the city dump — not exactly a plum assignment), he should have seen the bait-and-switch before he jumped.

But he hadn't.

"Since you're not going to be digging up the Bennetti evidence, Detective, I think it would be best if you got that paperwork backlog off your desk, don't you agree?"

Suddenly the dump didn't seem like such a bad deal. "Well, you know, Lieutenant, about that Bennetti thing—"

"And furthermore," Welsh interrupted smoothly, "since we've had a quiet week around here I think it would be abundantly

possible for you to have said paperwork completed and on my desk by lunchtime tomorrow — that's twenty-four hours from now."

"Uh...Lieutenant—"

"Go in peace, Detective. May the force be with you. In triplicate."

Damn.

And so now, when he'd been looking forward to an afternoon of scheming up interesting things he could leave in Huey and Dewey's desks while they were out dump-fishing, and looking forward to lunch with Fraser and Dief to try to figure out which of the three of them could handle the hottest chili, now he had nothing to look forward to except...

Fucking paperwork. In triplicate. Ray sighed, bit his pen vengefully, and got down to it.

There was a noise, a nagging, incessant distraction — something like Chinese water torture only it was too far away to care about. And anyway, he wasn't going to look up until he figured out how to spell 'interrogation' — which was just *stupid* because it wasn't like he didn't write it enough—

"Ray!"

He whipped his head up. "Fraser. Oh jeez...I forgot to call. Look, I was gonna call you but then I got into this thing here that I have to do since I'm not at the dump and I just...hey, I can't make lunch today, okay? See, the Lieutenant's got this strange idea that somehow I can get caught up on a six month backlog in less than twenty four hours, and I don't know what evidence locker he's been sniffing but—"

"Ray!"

He blinked. Sometimes facing Fraser's uniform was like getting smacked in the head with something...well, something really red. "Yeah, Fraser?"

"You can't go to lunch with me?"

"Boy, nothing gets past you, does it?" He twisted his head abruptly, and the tension in his neck eased with a satisfying crack.

"And you were too busy to let me know of the change in plans?"

"Not too busy, Fraser; I just forgot. I think it's probably all the Wite Out I've been breathing."

"I see." Ah. Fraser's disapproval. Life just wouldn't be life without it. The sad thing was that Dief looked pretty bummed out too. He shouldn't have bragged up that chili so much.

"Look, Fraser, I'll make it up to you — day after tomorrow, and we can—"

"Excuse me." Darnell. Apparently out of nowhere, appearing somehow right next to his desk. That such a big guy could move that quietly seemed...weird. Just weird. Ray shook his head. Darnell was smiling. "You must be the Constable I've heard all the stories about."

Ray watched Fraser slide from irritation to that apple-polisher look in the blink of an eye. "Indeed. Constable Benton Fraser, Royal Canadian Mounted Police. I first came to Chicago on the trail—"

Ray cleared his throat, and craned way back to get a look all the way up to Darnell's face. "His dad is dead but he caught the bad guy, and now he's an attached lesion to—"

"*Liaison*, Ray."

"What I said. Fraser, this is Charlie, George's replacement from Boston. As far as I know he came here on the trail of a job—"

"I'm sure he did, Ray—"

And then, from Darnell, cutting smoothly across both their voices: "Would you like to go to lunch with me?"

That was so unexpected that silence descended for a moment. Ray blinked and looked at Fraser, who was looking at Darnell.

Who was smiling at Fraser.

"I beg your pardon?" Fraser asked softly. Ray's mouth twitched. Apparently, Fraser hadn't seen that one coming either.

Darnell seemed to take it in stride, however. He took a step forward, pretty much the only one left between him and Fraser, and just kept on smiling. "I heard Ray here tell you that he's busy, and I was

just about to go try a new Greek restaurant I heard about — would you like to join me?"

All on their own, Ray's hands found his glasses and fumbled them onto his face. He caught the look, the intensity, the *intent* in Darnell's blue eyes, and his stomach seemed to fold in on itself. Oh *God*.

Ray knew that look. He'd seen it at least once on the face of every female in the station, and at least once a day on the face of Francesca Vecchio. And here it was...on a guy. A big, strapping *cop* guy. What the fuck?

"Well, that's very kind of you, Detective," Fraser was practically lit up, apparently thinking he'd discovered the only polite American in existence. Ray swallowed, and almost choked on dry air. "I'd be delighted. Greek, did you say?"

He should say something. He *knew* he should say something, that to not say something was going to hook him right back to one of those 'should have known better' moments, but for the life of him he couldn't figure out what the hell he *could* say. Not until he got Fraser alone.

Which looked like it might be a while, if Darnell's grin was anything to go by. "Yep. Greek. You like Greek?"

Ray's face burned, something that usually only happened when he did something incredibly stupid in front of Stella.

Fraser, however, was blush-free. Of *course* he was. "Very much so. Do you like wolves?"

It was the first time Ray had ever heard Darnell laugh, and he found that he didn't like it. Not at all. The muscles in his shoulders tensed to the point of pain.

"Hell, yeah," Darnell agreed enthusiastically, and Ray could only watch while the guy steered Fraser towards the door with one huge hand on his shoulder. "Everybody loves wolves. You gotta howl at the moon, don't you, Constable?"

Fraser looked...even more stupidly trusting than usual, strolling away like that as if all was right with the world. "I take it that you're referring to 'wolf music', and

indeed, I must say that it's gratifying to find another aficionado of that particular song." A familiar, dry Fraser chuckle. "In fact, there was this one time, when I was bivouacked on the edge of a forest in the Yukon underneath a full moon near the end of November; when it came to my attention that my camp had been surrounded by..."

And then they were gone. Ray realized slowly that his mouth was hanging open, and he shut it with a snap. All the blood in his veins seemed to be percolating, and there was a terribly confused sense of not knowing whether to laugh his ass off, or grab his gun and go rescue Fraser.

Neither option seemed quite like what he wanted. There were probably a few other options he should consider, but right now his brain was so full of Greek/wolf/Fraser combinations that he couldn't even begin to figure out what they were.

In the end, he just closed his eyes for a few moments, then shook himself all over. He shrugged, and started going through his desk drawers in search of a fresh bottle of Wite Out. He found some eventually, and it was a damn good thing he did because it turned out that he needed it — suddenly his typing fingers had turned stupid on him. Probably shouldn't have skipped lunch.

Darnell. Jesus. You could just never tell about some people.

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"Ray! I wasn't expecting you."

Ray shifted from foot to foot in the consulate doorway, hating the restless, thundery feeling in his limbs but unable to keep himself still. "Yeah, well, that's me — expect the unexpected. It's just..." Abruptly his ear itched, so he scratched it. "I didn't hear from you today, so..."

That familiar, faint frown-line of confusion bunched up on Fraser's forehead. "Today? Were you supposed to hear from me? Did I forget something—"

Ray twisted his shoulders inside his leather jacket. "No, Fraser, you didn't forget

anything, like you would, but I thought that after what happened yesterday—"

Fraser nodded, and his forehead smoothed out. "Ah. About lunch yesterday? Consider it forgotten — water under the culvert—"

"*Bridge*. Under the *bridge*, Fraser. And this isn't about that. This is about...that other thing."

Fraser's head tilted, and for a moment he looked so much like Dief that Ray wanted to laugh. "Other thing? And what thing would that be, Ray?"

Naturally. Naturally Fraser couldn't pull his head out long enough to make this, like, *easy* on him or anything. Ray shifted to the other foot before he could stop himself. "The other thing, the other lunch, the other...look, are you gonna keep me standing out here all night?"

The door swung wide. "Oh, of course not, Ray. Please come in."

The consulate always gave him the creeps at night. He followed Fraser down the hallway, knowing that he was working hard to keep his steps silent. How in the hell could the guy *sleep* here?

It was better, at least a little, in Fraser's little hole of an office. It smelled better, or something. He took a chair, the least uncomfortable of a really uncomfortable bunch. The desk lamp was still on, and there were two neat piles of forms centered on the otherwise uncluttered surface. "Hey — am I interrupting something, here? I mean —"

"Not at all. I was just preparing a few materials in advance of...you see, Inspector Thatcher is...well, the Argentine Ambassador has been paying us — I mean her — a visit, and—"

Ray waved it off. "It's Canadian stuff, I get it. I don't need to know. Okay."

Fraser stared at him curiously. "Ray, are you all right? You seem rather agitated—"

"Agitated, agitated, right — that's good. That's real good, Fraser; real top-notch observing, there." He rubbed his eyes, and

almost had to pry them open afterwards. He should be home and crashed out right now, catching up on sleep after yesterday's nineteen-hour shift and today's sixteen-hour shift, instead of...where he was.

But no. He was here, and he wasn't about to walk out without saying what needed to be said. He'd put it off long enough. If Fraser didn't know...well, Fraser couldn't know. And if he did, he didn't know enough. Which was a problem, or could be. How that had come to be *his* problem, he wasn't sure, except that when he'd picked up Vecchio's baggage, the Mountie'd come as part of the package, and he guessed that made him responsible, in a strange sort of way.

Whyever, it needed to be done, and so there he was. Doing it.

"The other thing, that other thing I mentioned." It really was hard to get the words past the tightness in his throat. Surprisingly hard. "It's about Darnell."

Fraser's head tilted again. "Detective Darnell?"

Ray nodded, and forced himself to meet Fraser's inquiring eyes. "Yeah. Detective Darnell. The guy who asked you to lunch."

Fraser frowned slightly. "And Detective Darnell is the...other thing? Forgive me if I seem to be confused by that statement, Ray, but I—"

Deep breath. Just fucking say it, already. "He's queer, Fraser."

Fraser blinked. "He didn't seem all that unusual to me, Ray—"

Oh *man*. Why him? Why did crap like this always come down to him? "Not queer like *that*, Fraser — he's *queer*, okay? He's...he's *gay*, he's a *fag*, he's an *ass bandit*, he bats for the home team, he—"

"Ray!"

"What?" His face was so hot, so burning hot...

Fraser squinted at him. "You're telling me that Detective Darnell is a homosexual."

Another deep breath, and something that had been wound razorwire-tight in his

stomach slowly began to unravel. "Yeah. Whatever. That's what I'm telling you."

Fraser nodded, looking scarily calm. "And that was the...other thing?"

A suspicion dawned on him, prickling the back of his neck. "Let me guess — you knew that already, right? Something about his smell or the way he holds his fork or something—"

At least that got him a smile. "No, Ray, I wasn't aware of that fact about Detective Darnell. As far as I can determine he handles a fork in a perfectly ordinary way, and he smells just fine—"

"Fraser, I did *not* need to know that —"

"But what puzzles me is why you felt moved to inform me of this...aspect of Detective Darnell's lifestyle."

Ray shifted in the chair before his butt went totally numb. "You don't know why."

"No, I must say that I don't."

Just when he thought the hard part was over. Jesus. "Well, isn't it obvious? I mean, the guy asked you to *lunch*, Fraser—"

"Yes he did, Ray; and it was very kind of him to do so, since you were otherwise occupied. I think, in fact, that you'd enjoy that restaurant very much—"

"Fraser!"

For a guy who told the truth so damn much, there was nobody to hold a candle to him when it came to evasion, that was for sure. Ray's hands twisted in his lap. Hands on hold, temper on hold, check.

"Yes, Ray?"

"You don't get it, do you? I mean, the guy wasn't just asking you to lunch, he was asking you to *lunch*, okay?"

Fraser was back to squinting. "Are you saying that Detective Darnell had motives...*other* than simply sharing a meal with me?"

"If you mean am I saying Darnell wants to play hide the Canadian bacon, then yeah, I am."

Fraser looked lost. "Hide the...could you elucidate, Ray?"

It occurred to him in one wild and desperate moment that he could just pick

up the nearest huge hardback book and whack Fraser over the head with it. It might not help get his point across, but it would certainly make him feel a hell of a lot better.

"Let's leave the bacon out of it for now, okay, Fraser? What I mean is that it wasn't lunch like two-guys-at-lunch, it was lunch like one-step-closer-to-getting-into-your-longjohns-lunch."

"Ah. I see." Fraser nodded and smiled, and then abruptly frowned. "No I don't. Why on earth would Detective Darnell want to get into my longjohns, Ray? For one thing, he's six inches taller than myself, and furthermore—"

He slammed up to his feet before he even knew he was going to do it. "For God's sake, Fraser, *nobody* can be this frigging clueless — Darnell asked you to lunch because he's hot for you, because he wants you, wants to screw you, have sex with you, do impure things with you or however the hell you Canadians put it — he wants your ass, Fraser. Is that clear enough for you?"

And wouldn't you know it — the guy was *still* calm. "Yes, Ray, perfectly clear. That's what I thought you were suggesting — well, without the profanity, of course. However, when you then raised the topic of bacon and longjohns I became confused, and thought perhaps I'd been mistaken."

He sat back down before his knees went out from under him. "I hate you sometimes, Fraser."

Fraser nodded, still looking calm. "I'm beginning to realize that, Ray."



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And later, sipping a cup of some godawful tea that Fraser had insisted he take to 'calm his nerves'.

"So. You get it, then."

Fraser's eyes met his own over the edge of a ceramic mug with (surprise!) the Canadian flag emblazoned on it. "I do, Ray. I get it."

*Finally.* He felt the call of his bed, of his own dark apartment — something that

seemed almost to be pulling at his tired bones. "Good. So watch your step, and I'll do what I can on my end to keep Darnell away from you. You'll be fine."

Fraser's forehead was bunching up again. "Keep him away from me? Is that really necessary, Ray? I mean, if Detective Darnell were ever to make any sort of...overture, I'm perfectly capable of telling him—"

No bed. No rest. Not yet. God. "See? You *don't* get it, Fraser. It's not like...no, it's not that I think I have to defend your *honor* or anything like that, it's just...well, people talk. You know."  
"Hmm."

"Don't start 'hmm'ing me, Fraser. Look, the guy is obviously out of the closet—"

Fraser's eyes cut over to the closed door at the side of his room. "Closet?"

"Like, you know, he's open about it, he doesn't care who knows about his...queerness, or whatever. So, if you hang around with him, buddy up to him, then people are going to talk. *Now* do you get it?"

"I believe so, Ray, but I'm curious — did Detective Darnell *tell* you that he was no longer inside his 'closet'?"

Ray made himself take another sip of tea. It tasted like...roots, or something. Probably was, but he shouldn't think about that right now. "He didn't have to, Fraser. He propositioned you right in front of me. That is *not* the act of a guy in the closet."

Fraser had that distant, private look that he got whenever he'd figured something out, but didn't feel like sharing it with the rest of the world. Ray *hated* that look. "Right you are. Well, I believe I understand everything now, Ray."

Those words were so welcome that all the lingering irritation seemed to wash away on a wave of exhaustion. "Thank you, God." He yawned, and felt a pop that went all the way down his spine. "I gotta go. I'm out on my feet, here—"

"Would you like me to call you a cab?"

"No, no, I just need to get my car pointed in the right direction and I'll get home fine. I just need sleep."

"Very well. I'll see you off, then."

He caught Fraser's formal wave in his rear-view mirror, and returned it without thought. Still calm — the big idiot still looked calm. Go figure.

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For a case with this much leg-work already done, it just didn't add up. He had one dead guy, four people with opportunity, three *different* people with motive, and two others who didn't seem to relate to the case at all except that they had means and they were nearby and the whole thing smelled like one of those old tuna fish sandwiches out of the lunchroom. Not good.

It was an itch, a tease — something he should be seeing but wasn't, something he should be doing but hadn't. He was too close to it. Too close to see. And of course, having Welsh breathe down his neck about how the dead guy was an influential businessman and there were people out there who wanted answers, dammit, didn't help things much.

Help. He needed help.

And so after working late he went to Fraser, because if there was one thing he could count on Fraser for it was to see things differently, to get snagged by some detail that everybody else had passed right over. Too bad he didn't have any lickable evidence to bring with him.

He went to Fraser, but Fraser wasn't there. Of course.

Fraser was AWOL. Had been for a couple of weeks now. There, but somehow...not there. It wasn't all him. Ray'd been burning the midnight oil some himself, off doing stuff when Fraser came to the station, missing him by a few minutes, as he'd find out when he asked Frannie if she'd seen him. They'd pass sometimes, in the hall, and talk about the cases in shorthand

over their shoulders as they brushed by each other.

That wasn't so strange. Not really. But usually they'd find themselves in the car going somewhere, or getting something to eat, or something. Some concentrated time they could talk about stuff, get on the same page. He didn't know how much he'd counted on that until *wham* he didn't have it anymore.

Benton Fraser, Missing in Action.

It didn't help that Welsh was riding his ass hard, like whatever grace period he'd gotten in the Vecchio transition had expired and now he was just another cop to harass. Days were passing under his feet without him noticing much more than the fact that the take-out cartons in his trashcan were piling up, and he always seemed to be out of clean shirts.

It was fucking depressing.

The consulate was locked up tight and shadowed in darkness, and even after he let himself in with his credit card and made his slow way down the black and silent hall to Fraser's room there was nothing, nobody there, nobody at all which seemed just too weird all of a sudden — the Twilight Zone, Canadian style. He made sure to lock up when he left.

He meant to go home after that, to sit down and spread out all the files and go over everything again and really *look* because he was sure the answer was there, somewhere. He meant to go home but somehow it didn't work out that way — somehow, after he locked the consulate door and turned towards his car he just kept walking, letting the case and Fraser and all of the details fill his mind.

He knew the facts. He knew Fraser. It seemed like those two things should be easy to combine — as if the space that Fraser occupied in his mind could be slipped on like another pair of glasses, tinting the world with Frasersvision.

And yeah, okay, that was kind a scary, but there was no point in *dwelling* on it.

He considered one possibility after another — about the case, about Fraser, about his current inability to really get a grip on either one. When he came back to himself and looked up he found that he'd walked about ten blocks from the consulate, and was currently standing in the middle of a bunch of freaks and hookers and dust-heads; everybody everywhere looking to score, with one thing or another. The street was alive. The people around him seemed somehow to be more real than he was himself. He was one of them. He wasn't. He was.

And all that strangeness was too much for one tired and underpaid detective to face, so he slipped into the nearest bar and blinked until the outside neon had faded from his eyes. He bellied up. He ordered a beer. He felt eyes on the back of his neck and turned, and then he jerked upright almost fast enough to knock him off his stool because those were *known* eyes, Fraser's eyes — Fraser was here, as if he'd collected himself from the stock of Ray's thoughts and just taken shape, somehow.

Fraser at a table in the corner. Fraser in this...dive.

Ray blinked again and his vision widened, and when it registered that Fraser was seated at one of the crappy, tilting tables across from *Darnell*, he drew in a deep and involuntary breath, sawdust and beer and a faint hint of piss sucked right down deep and all the way to the bottom of his lungs. Fraser and Darnell.

Fraser and Darnell.

He had no time to deal with it before Fraser was coming right for him, looking surprised and pleased and a little too flushed to be comfortable in that flannel shirt and leather jacket — radiating color and heat, and Ray drew in on himself without noticing, not wanting to be touched. Thought Fraser might just burn him, if he touched him now.

"Ray!" Fraser seemed to read him (as he usually did), and didn't touch him. There was that, at least.



"Fraser."

"I can't even begin to imagine how you found me. Perhaps your tracking skills are—"

"I wasn't looking for you, Fraser. I just wanted a beer."

Fraser nodded. "Serendipity, then. Would you like to join us? The corner is relatively quiet, more conducive to conversation—"

Too much. Too much. His face was hot, again, but it wasn't embarrassment. Not at all. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Ray?"

His lips were numb. His hands were numb. "I thought you were going to stay away from Darnell."

Fraser seemed to be considering that.



"Well, you see, Ray, it was my understanding that your objection to Detective Darnell was in relation to people talking about my interactions with him. In light of that, he suggested this place, which he said was an unlikely locale for either off-duty police officers or consulate employees — although, given the fact that you're here, perhaps it might be necessary to reconsider—"

"You're here with Darnell."

Fraser blinked, glanced at the corner table, and then turned back to him. "And Diefenbaker. But surely that's a rather simple deduction, Ray, given that—"

"Darnell is gay." Was he going to lose it, here? Was he? The uncertainty in and of itself was maybe the scariest thing about it.

"You mentioned that before, Ray. I'm aware of that."

Ray took a deep breath. Cracked his knuckles. Two ways to go here: Reasonable or whup-ass. In this neighborhood, whup-ass would probably charge up every freakazoid in a nine block radius, and there

was the Darnell thing to consider; he'd probably just *love* to bring his six-foot-six down and squash some Kowalski...

"Thought we talked about this. It's not *smart*, Fraser, it's not a smart thing to do, hanging out with him."

Fraser shifted from one foot to the other, which usually made him look like he'd settled down, but not this time. This time he just looked off balance.

"I...enjoy his company," he finally said.

Christ. What did *that* mean? And did he really want to know? No. No, he really didn't want to know. What would a guy like Fraser see in a guy like...unless he...Oh, man, talk about things he did *not* want to know.

Maybe that wasn't it. Maybe Fraser was just...hanging out. 'Cuz Ray was busy all the time. Maybe he just wanted somebody who'd go at the drop of a Stetson, somebody who wouldn't blow off his stories.

Maybe Fraser was just...lonely.

Ray shook himself. Okay, okay. That was the one he'd go with. Made sense, he could wrap his brain around that. Wasn't like Fraser had a ton of people in his life, and most of them were even weirder than he was. He for sure knew how that felt, being lonely. He missed Stella. A lot. Like getting his right arm chopped off, was how that felt sometimes.

He sniffed. "Look, Fraser," he said, leaning over so he didn't have to say it too loud. "I've been out of it, snowed under. Sorry I haven't been around as much."

Fraser just blinked at him.

Okay, if at first you don't succeed, repeat yourself.

"I been just plowed with work, Welsh is like...he's turned into this slavedriver, all of a sudden. I'm...sorry."

Damn if Fraser didn't take that exact moment to look over his shoulder, smile at Darnell.

*Smiled* at the fucker. There he sat, in that crappy place, *apologizing* to him, when Fraser was the one...he was the one...

"Ray, your duty comes first, I understand that," Fraser said.

No, he didn't understand. He didn't get it at *all*.

"What're you doing, Fraser?"

"I told you, Charlie thought this might be a good—"

"There is *nothing* good about this, Fraser."

Stalemate. Two guys at a bar, not looking, not talking. Close enough that Ray could feel the heat coming off him, could hear his leather jacket squeak when he shifted again, shifting farther away.

"Perhaps if you got to know him a little better," Fraser said.

Ray smiled. It felt like a smile, but usually Fraser didn't back up a step when he smiled at him.

"Uh, no, that's okay," he said.

"Ray," Fraser said, then stopped. Then started again. "I'm not...there's nothing...improper about my friendship with Charlie."

Friendship.

Friendship?

Didn't look like friendship from here.

Not in a place like this, off in a corner, quiet, the kind of place people went to....

"Doesn't matter what it is, Fraser. Matters what it looks like."

"What does it look like?"

Nobody was that dense. Fraser had to be *trying* to piss him off. Trying to push him away. In his own evasive, round-the-corner way, Fraser was telling him to mind his own business. Which probably meant Fraser had some business of his own he was minding.

Which maybe, just possibly, awww Christ, probably meant...

The beer he'd drunk soured in his stomach. He pushed himself up, closer to, then away from Fraser, clenching his teeth against what he wanted to say, but wouldn't, couldn't. Not without risking...what? What was he risking?

He pictured day after day of paperwork, Huey and Dewey, Welsh over

his shoulder, with no Fraser to break up the day, no wolf mooching out of his snack drawer. Yeah, that was worth keeping his mouth shut for. What else could he say? He'd said it all already. Dumb lug didn't want to hear it. Or heard it and didn't care.

That much was pretty damn clear. Fraser didn't care.

His legs were numb when he stood, his fingers numb when he fished in his pockets for a few bills to throw on the bar, and when he walked he felt like he was stumbling, but he knew he wasn't.

But inside, everything *inside* — that wasn't numb.

That wasn't numb at all.

Just how lonely would a guy have to be to do...that?

\*\*\*

That jaw-dropping night in the piss place turned out to be an example of a *good* day between them. They turned sour, like the milk in his fridge when he didn't pay attention. They still partnered up, still talked about cases, clues, hunches and evidence, but everything felt tilted, off. Felt like they were speaking two different languages, more than it usually did; like they could talk police work fine, but the minute it turned even halfway personal, Fraser clammed right up.

Didn't seem to matter what Ray tried; nothing helped. Even solving the Bennetti case hadn't done the trick. A whole month they'd spent on that damn case, once it got past the climbing in dumpsters stage, and they'd done it. Nailed the sucker.

He'd spent the past two hours crawling through the paperwork, hyped up enough from the bust to not even mind doing it, almost hyped enough not to notice that it wasn't *his* desk Fraser was hanging around while he did it.

A flash of red caught his eye as he finished the last line of the last page. He closed the folder with a thump of satisfaction and squinted up at Fraser.

"Pizza or Chinese?" Taking it for granted, assuming that things would go the way he needed them to — a trick to keep the desperation out of his voice. Learned, but maybe too late to do him any good.

At least he'd managed to make Fraser look uncomfortable. "Well, you see, Ray, I'm afraid...that is, as much as I appreciate the invitation, I've already made plans for the evening—"

He felt a frown tugging at the corners of his mouth, and he let it stay there. "We just wrapped a case, Fraser."

"I'm aware of that, Ray."

"And after we wrap a case, we go out for dinner — it's...tradition. If we don't do it we might be messing with our streak, right?" Everything in him was cool and calm. Fraser would hear this, would respond to it. He'd have to. But no. Fraser was shaking his head, his face tight with that puckered-up-lemon look that he got when he was about to disappoint somebody. So either he didn't know Fraser as well as he thought he did, or Fraser just...really didn't want to be around him. Or just really wanted to be around someone else *more*.

If he'd been hungry before, he wasn't anymore, not when he heard that tone in Fraser's voice, that one that wasn't as apologetic as Ray wanted it to be, that one that was pretty damn determined.

"I'm sorry, Ray. Perhaps another time."

There was more to be said, he knew that. Maybe he *didn't* know Fraser as well as he thought he did, but he knew enough to keep the pressure on, to take away one option at a time until Fraser *had* to talk to him. Tell him the truth.

Problem was, he thought he already knew what Fraser had to say, and he didn't want to hear it. He couldn't hang himself out to dry like that, couldn't put the both of them through it.

So, when Fraser nodded at him and gave him that fake smile, and walked away from his desk calling for Dief, he said nothing. He just swallowed.

Tasting something bitter.

\*\*\*

He *hated* kidnappings.

Especially *kid* kidnappings.

Give him a good old murder, bad blood, drug deal gone wrong — at least everything was known, and the worst had already happened, and all he had to make sure of was that the right person went away for it. There wasn't this minute-to-minute *pressure*, there weren't any panicked, question-question-crying-question relatives to deal with, there wasn't this dark, terrible, relentless kind of hope that kept everybody jittering and jiving on the edge until the deal went down and you got (more often than not) a point-blank failure on your hands, shunting you right back to good old murder territory.

And some sad, broken little body that he couldn't, just *couldn't* look at.

So there he was at his desk, the third day in a row of twenty-two hour shifts, still waiting for something to break while his vision went grainy and unreal, a picture squeezed tight in his left hand of a smiling little girl with brown braids holding a brown mutt, pulling his eyes back to it every few seconds even though he really, really didn't want to look at it anymore.

Ray closed his eyes — just for a moment, just to let the case roll through him one more time, fact after fact that *should* piece together if he could only fit it all in, track down that one thread, any one thing that he might have missed...

"Ray!"

He jerked up in his chair, ready in a split second to say no, he wasn't sleeping, no way was he sleeping—

But it wasn't just Fraser. Fraser had gone to get him a sandwich and had been gone a long time, but here he was again with no sandwich in sight, nothing but his hat in his hands and Darnell smiling from over his shoulder.

Both of them smiling. Ray's jaw ached.

"Charlie and I were talking about the case on the way to the lunchroom. When he interviewed Mr. Collins, there was a receipt for a harbor berth on his desk, and when he mentioned that, I remembered the traces of diesel fuel that were found at the abduction site—"

This was...awfully tough to follow in his current state; Fraser going ninety miles a minute with his eyes lit up like a pinball game. Ray blinked and waved one hand, the one with the picture in it, and that bright, smiling face caught his eye, and then he understood.

"She's on a boat." Certainty there, something he felt all the way down to the pit of his stomach.

"She's on a boat." Echoing him, confirming him. In stereo. From both Fraser and Darnell.

"Let's go." Extra ammo, spare handcuffs, one arm in his jacket, and then he headed as fast as he could for the door, totally wide-awake now, totally focused on the job.

At least for now.

\*\*\*

And for once, for *once* there was a happy ending all around — a terrified but unhurt little girl returned to her parents, a clean bust that was pretty much locked down tight for any jury that wasn't completely blind, and no shots fired on either side. Less paperwork.

A happy ending for everybody. Except the kidnapers. Right.

"Ray?"

"What?" Oh, he *had* to get some sleep soon — the sun was going down behind him in a wash of pinkish light, and between that and the red suit Fraser looked like he was *glowing*, like someone had built themselves a neon Mountie and installed it down in the middle of the funky wood shacks of the harbor. Crazy.

"I know you haven't eaten." Fraser sounded slightly apologetic, which was stupid — like he was going to blame Fraser for forgetting his sandwich when he'd solved the damn case? The reminder, however, made his stomach growl as the case started to slip away and his life started to slip back; he hadn't eaten, no, not since...well, not for a long time.

"No." The word felt heavy with exhaustion as it dropped from his lips, and everything seemed suddenly very clear, what he had to do — thank Fraser, and go with him to find at least five pounds of food and eat it, and then sleep for a week. Simple. He could do that. That would be good.

"Charlie says there's a good Italian restaurant nearby. Would you like to join us?"

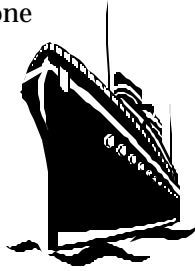
And he was so far, far out of it that nothing was happening right, like it was time for him to blow up now and fill Fraser in on *exactly* who his partner was, make it really clear and spell it all out so that there wouldn't be any question about it, so that there wouldn't be any mistakes. His hands twitched, curling up, grabbing for something but he didn't know what. His stomach growled again, so empty, so very empty...

"I'm not hungry," was what he said. Just that. Fraser looked at him, studied him, concerned and serious. When Fraser took a step towards him something tightened in all of his muscles, and he was *so* tired, but not tired enough to do something stupid, so he turned around and headed for his car.

Where his traitor hands could wrap around nothing more threatening than a steering wheel, which he clung to all the way home, holding on, holding on, holding on *tight*.

\*\*\*

It occurred to him as he was driving home that he should have learned by now that desperation was about the worst enemy



he could have. After all, he'd had lots of chances to pick up on that. To figure it out. To take it on, somehow, to take it inside him and make it a learned thing, right up there with keep your head low when the heat's on and don't back down when the other guy is running scared. A survival skill. Something automatic that he did when there was a threat to be dealt with.

He should have known better, is what it came down to.

He should have known better, after all these weeks of Fraser being there and not there, with him but withdrawn. And there was really nothing to say so he'd just kept waiting for Fraser to get over it, knowing that he was too quiet himself, knowing, and not having a single frigging clue what to do about it.

Well, he could've talked about it, he supposed, or maybe screamed or something; punched something — but every time he'd thought he was working up to it he backed down, backed into himself, into more silence.

So much silence.

He *knew* that he was getting desperate, that somewhere inside things were breaking down and wearing out — damage, we got damage here, with too much quiet outside and too much noise inside. Too much.

Which now called for too much beer, since the numbing he'd gotten that other night had worked so good — if a little was good, a lot had to be better....

So instead of subjecting himself to Fraser, and Darnell, and food that he'd probably puke up later anyway, he had an endless evening of slow poison alone inside his apartment, since he didn't know what kind of hell he might trip himself into if he went out.

Way too much beer. He sat and scratched his neck in an unsuccessful attempt to ease his dry throat, and drank, and craved cigarettes. About a thousand of them, one right after the other. Something hard and harsh — and that's what led him to the bottle of hard stuff he kept in the back

of the cupboard for extreme emergencies, and that's when everything started slipping down and away in some out-of-control funhouse mirror ripple. He couldn't, couldn't open his eyes. He couldn't look. He could get the glass to his mouth without looking. That was enough.

A black, lost place, then, and then the next thing was a door — familiar, and there was something about it that was awful and exciting at the same time. The moment that the door opened and he caught a glimpse of Stella's face it crashed into him, everything terrible and threatening and the true distance between how he lived and what he needed, and horribly, horribly he *said* some of that, bleated it out while he sagged against Stella's doorjamb. Said some, he didn't know how much. The word 'please' was in there somewhere, he was dead sure of that— more than once, even. For a moment he thought about punching himself, just to see if it would stop his mouth.

But he didn't, and whatever it was that he said, it was either too much or not enough. Or just too late. Probably too late. Stella was late — getting ready to go out, smooth and lotioned and made up in a pretty peach camisole and robe that he remembered, remembered how the silk of it was nothing compared to her skin, remembered how it slid -slithered off her, when the time was right. And yes, he understood that she didn't have time for this, that she was running late. She always was. But...she was always worth waiting for. He remembered that, too.

He could only hope that the prick of an attorney that she was gearing up for felt that way. That he knew what he was getting a shot at.

And now, on the other end of another one of those weird, kaleidoscope blacknesses, there was a card in his shaking hand and the sound of his own breath much too loud in his ears — did he run? Was he running, now — to or from? No way to tell.

He must have been clumsy with the card. Either that, or he'd been out here a lot longer than he thought, because all of a sudden the consulate door gave way and he was falling forward, pitching forward for one dizzy second before Fraser caught him, scooped him neatly inside.

For lack of any better idea, he held on. "Fraserrr..." Fraser must have been sleeping — even through his clogged-up sinuses he could *smell* that, something warm and concentrated and subtle that told him that Fraser had just dragged himself out of bed to come prop up his drunk, sorry ass. That made his eyes sting, a last bit of awfulness just to make the experience complete.

"Oh, dear." Ray could feel the vibration of the words through the chest pressed against his own. It tingled. "Ray, you're *cold*."

He couldn't argue with that, because the lingering warmth of the alcohol had been iced out of him long ago, and now his teeth were chattering and he was shivering and he realized that he'd left his apartment without a jacket and *oh God* what the fuck had he said to Stella?

"Stella," he croaked, and winced at the alcoholic longing in his own voice.

"Um...no. It's me, Ray." Fraser seemed to be trying to push him away by the shoulders, and Ray had a sneaking suspicion that Fraser wanted to look at his face so he held tighter, buried his face against a red thermal cotton-covered arm.

"I *know* it's you — I know you're Fraser, Fraser. I mean I went to Stella, I talked to Stella, I told her..." Oh, and he was going to be saying it all over again, if he wasn't careful. The room was spinning, but Fraser was still holding him up and it was very dark, or maybe he just had his eyes closed, but at least it was dark for *him*, so that seemed to make it okay.

And Fraser seemed to be dealing with all of this pretty well, considering, so Ray took a deep breath and continued.

"Where've you been? You're never *there* anymore."

Fraser shifted him slightly, steadying him against his shoulder. "Ray, I've been at the station every day —"

"Not the work, *me*."

The muscles under his hands might have stiffened up a bit at that, but he couldn't be completely sure he'd felt it. "I'm...sorry, Ray."

Just the fact that there was no argument, no pissing around about the literal meaning of each and every word seemed like a miracle, like some huge obstacle had just evaporated out of his way like magic. "Yeah. Me too, I guess."

Saying the words lifted some unsuspected weight off him, and he was light now but not so dizzy, not much of anything really except closed-eyed and comfortable in Fraser's arms. He heard himself make some kind of weird rumbling noise, but at least he wasn't blurting out a bunch of nonsense about how much he sucked, so that was okay.

His stomach growled. Should probably have eaten something, he thought distantly. Maybe gone to sleep instead of wandering around the city looking for lost people. Lost. Like the little girl. Well, they'd found her. Who was lost? He didn't even know anymore. He'd thought Stella, and Fraser for sure, but they weren't the ones sweating out whisky, or saying crazy stuff that shouldn't ever come off the tip of a tongue. Maybe he was the only one lost. Maybe it was just him.

"Am I lost?" Well, fuck. If he wasn't before, he seemed to be doing his level best to *get* himself there. Lost and stupid and crazy fucking drunk, fastened onto a Mountie in the foyer of the Canadian consulate — This Is Your Life, Ray Kowalski...

Vecchio.

This Is *Not* Your Life.

"Ray," Fraser began— but he didn't get to hear about whether or not Fraser thought he was lost because all of a sudden everything closed down around him at once, like some kind of disaster that he'd

been fending off only now he couldn't fight anymore, because it was too heavy to carry. His hands curled into fists, clenched tight into soft cotton, feeling the solid heft of Fraser's chest underneath; strength and stability that he needed and needed so *fucking* badly, and it had been *denied* to him—

"Fraser—" Fraser. Fraser was at the end of it, at the beginning, and at every single point along the way. Even when he wasn't there.

Not there. Unbelievable, the pain of that, the coldness. Cold to his bones, but Fraser was hot, and suddenly he had to know if Fraser would give him that heat when he needed it, he *had* to know, and the only way to find out was to just reach out and take it.

Fraser's cheeks were warm enough to burn his icy hands. He hissed and moved in closer, willing to burn, burning already from a spark of his own deep inside — the fury of knowing what he'd driven himself to; that he couldn't bear the thought of Fraser keeping himself to himself anymore, of Fraser keeping his mouth to himself...

...Or even worse, the thought that he might be keeping himself for someone else...

*His partner. Fraser was his partner. His.*

Hot, soft lips. Open to him. Open, with a miraculous jolt that shut out everything except the terrible, pounding sweetness of his heart in his mouth, everything except the unspoken mournful noise that flamed from his throat and then was burnt out, doused by the tip of Fraser's tongue. Tears sprang to his eyes, escaped, like everything else he desperately needed to keep, now slipping away from him. He shivered, disconnected and trembling. Wondered how a kiss — was it a kiss? this groping of his mouth to Fraser's? — could make him feel like he'd pierced a vital organ, like he was bleeding.

And he expected, somehow, that Fraser would put a stop to this. Fraser would have to. Fraser wouldn't let him, any more than Fraser would let him die gut-shot in some

dirty back alley — a soothing thought, that Fraser would stop this, that Fraser wouldn't let him die alone—

Except Fraser *didn't* stop it. Fraser let him do this, held him up, opened to him in a way that reached right down inside and made a mess of everything. Fraser let him, kissed him, tasted him, and slid their tongues together with a deep sigh that knew *nothing* about the fact that this was killing him, that he was killing them, that he had done something to bring them to the end of things, to the truth of things, here.

"Ray," Fraser said against his newly wet, newly warm lips. Such a dark and unexpected word, spoken like that. Like pain. Fraser, saying 'pain' in a language he wasn't supposed to understand.

He pulled back without conscious thought. He almost just kept going, right over backwards and onto the glaringly clean floor of the foyer — would have, if Fraser hadn't caught him by one arm.

In the wordless, harsh-breathing dimness that followed, Fraser's eyes looked unusually deep — dangerously vulnerable hollows that he would have liked to trace just lightly with the tip of one finger, if he could have trusted his own hands not to betray him.

"It's all right." Strange, to hear Fraser's calm voice telling such a stupendous lie.

"It's *not*." His own voice didn't sound strong enough, nowhere near as strong as he needed it to be, but maybe he sounded upset enough to make up for it. He hoped.

And he thought that Fraser would probably argue with him about it, but Fraser didn't. Warm, gentle hands propelled him, and before he knew it he was sitting on one of the padded chairs at the front desk, and Fraser was staring at him, an intense, *serious* look that he could only take for a second or two before he had to look somewhere else. Anywhere else. He swallowed.

Fraser cleared his throat. "I'll call you a cab."

He looked up in time to see Fraser fade into the shadows and dimness of the

hallway, and maybe he could have said something, maybe he *should* have said something, but really it was pretty clear that he'd be better off if he just kept his mouth shut.

That seemed like the first good idea he'd had in a long, long time, so he decided to go with it.

And he did. He kept his mouth shut when Fraser returned, when Fraser told him that the cab would be there soon, while Fraser waited with him. He even managed to keep it shut when Fraser walked him to the cab and said good-night to him—calmly, as if everything was okay, as if Fraser really *believed* that. He could have said...but he didn't.

Ray sat, twisted queasily in the back seat of the cab, and stared at Fraser until darkness and distance left him nothing more to look at.

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Remember the Alamo? All those hearts buried at Wounded Knee? Pickett's Charge? None of them got to be household names by winning. In every war, somebody lost. Somebody won, too, and that made it into the history books more often, but every once in a while, the losers got a page for themselves.

Ray had raised the white flag after...well, what the hell had happened? Fortunately, the exact details were a little hazy, blurred by too much booze, too little sleep, too little food. He didn't suppose they were blurry for Fraser, but every time his mind wandered down that road, he yanked it back, hard. Couldn't think about Fraser, what he might say if Ray ever managed to have a minute alone with him ever again in his whole life.

Hadn't happened yet. They were going on four days now, would be four days exactly sometime around midnight, near as he could tell. Four days ago, he'd found out just how lonely a guy'd have to be to do...*that*. Well, something *like* that anyway.

He'd probably have done *that*, too, if Fraser hadn't stopped him, propped him up, called him a cab.

Fucking hell.

Nothing like finding out what your limits were. Or that you didn't have any.

*"Hi, I'm Ray. No last names, please, it's too fucking confusing. I just flushed my partnership down the john. It's been four days since my last..."*

He'd blown it. Blown it big time. Blown it to Kingdom Come and beyond, probably. And Fraser, what was up with him? Fraser hadn't exactly helped snuff out the fuse. Ray vaguely understood his own crappy reasons, but what was Fraser's excuse? Rigor mortis? Cat got his tongue?

The whole thing — half-remembered, half-suppressed — felt like something that had happened to somebody else. Some other desperate, unhappy person with no sense whatsoever. No survival skills.

Some other loser.

So he did the only sensible thing. The only thing he could do when something was that badly blown, when the stakes were high and the walls were down and really, the option of moving to someplace like Madison and starting over — without the Mountie, without the crap — was starting to sound like a damn good idea, well, the only thing left to do was follow one of those old adages, one of those history book things:

If you can't beat 'em, join 'em.

Which was how he found himself on day five at an Italian restaurant, sitting across the booth from Fraser. And Darnell. Because the only thing worse than remembering what he'd done to Fraser was wondering what Darnell was doing to him.

Wondering. Picturing. Imagining. The whole thing was driving him nuts. He was there, his insides still scabbed over from the shock of Fraser's mouth on his own — was it really as hot as he remembered? as wet? — and it was all he could do not to lean across the table, see if Darnell had his hand on Fraser's thigh.



It took most of the meal for him to get himself to eat more than a bite of this, a taste of that. Across from him, Fraser and Darnell ate like the big meaty guys they were, tossing back lasagna and garlic bread like they had hollow legs to fill.

Maybe it was the food, the first real solid meal he'd had in a long, long time. Maybe it was the relief of spending more than five minutes in Fraser's company. Whatever, some things started to come into focus. Like the fact that Darnell and Fraser were two peas in a pod. They talked about the same weird things, laughed at the same stupid stuff. Ray had never seen Fraser laugh so much, and he hated that Darnell could make him do that, make him laugh so hard he turned red and wiped tears out of his eyes with the corner of his napkin. Oh yeah, it was all pretty clear from here.

That wasn't the worst of it, though. No, the worst of it was the fact that, damn his East Coast ass, Darnell seemed like an okay guy. Funny, smart, and if you didn't *know* he was queer as a three-dollar bill, well, you'd never know it to look at him, hear him.

Except...

He did know. And so he could see. Little things, mostly. The way Darnell licked at his own lip to tell Fraser he'd missed some sauce, staring at Fraser's mouth the same way he'd stared at his plate when it was brought to the table. The way he'd slid in the booth beside Fraser automatically, when everybody knew the guys who were partners should have been seat-sharing, and the other guy should've been across the way.

Darnell he could read like a book.

So maybe Fraser was right. Maybe there wasn't anything...hell, what Victorian word had he used? Improper, right. Maybe there wasn't anything improper going on. Yet. Wasn't because Darnell was funny and smart and not interested. Oh, no. Darnell was interested; he was just biding his time, that was all. Darnell was *plenty* interested. Every time Fraser laughed or even smiled at

one of his damn jokes, Darnell's eyes went wide with appreciation, sucking it up — something Ray saw only through the narrowest squint he could manage.

They split the bill, like always, and Ray and Darnell hit the can while Fraser paid.

Okay, it was weird to whip it out in front of the guy. Ray hadn't ever really been bladder shy, but he found himself sheltering his dick with his hand while he used the urinal, found himself staring steadfastly ahead, so Darnell wouldn't think...wouldn't wonder...Well, he just wasn't going there.

But since it was the first chance they'd had to talk alone, ever, he figured he'd better use it. Use it or lose it, wasn't that the way it went?

So he shook himself off, tucked himself back in his jeans, and went to the row of sinks. He waited for Darnell to join him, then caught his eye in the mirror.

"I know what you're doing," he said. Something deep inside his stomach turned over, and he didn't think it was the half a piece of lasagna.

Darnell raised an eyebrow. "Yeah?"

"You think I was born yesterday? I know what you're doing," he repeated.

He watched as Darnell deliberately soaped his hands, rinsed, then wiped them dry on a paper towel. Ray shook his own hands twice, then rubbed them on his pants.

Darnell didn't say anything, just walked around Ray to the door and opened it, gesturing Ray to go ahead of him. As Ray passed him, he said, "Wish I knew what *you* were doing."

Heat crawled up Ray's neck, spread to his face. He allowed himself half a glimpse at the grin on Darnell's face and muttered, "Yeah, me, too."

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The problem was, there was no way in hell to prepare for this kind of thing. No amount of gearing up, setting his jaw, or daydreaming about worst-case scenarios was really worth a fart in a high wind when

it came to dealing with...this kind of stuff. The kind of stuff he hated. The kind of stuff that made him feel like maybe it might be a good idea to whap his head against a wall for an hour or two so that he'd have something else to think about besides...this kind of stuff.

This *Fraser* kind of stuff. This haven't-talked-about-dick, but-here-we-are-stuck-in-the-car-together-on-stakeout, so-what-the-fuck-do-I-do-*now* kind of stuff. There was no way around it — Darnell had pulled the first shift, and he himself had second shift, and it seemed a fact that it was a better idea to suffer through eight uncomfortable, Fraser-filled hours in the unmarked than it would have been to have spent the previous eight hours wondering what kind of shenanigans Darnell could wheedle Fraser into.

If he hadn't called dibs on Fraser, Darnell would have. And Darnell, of course, drove a van. A big, black, 'ain't-I-macho' van. So there was no way around it, no choice at all, really, when he thought about it. Like he'd been thinking about it. All day.

Ray shifted in the driver's seat for the third time in ten minutes. "Fraser, can you maybe stop that before I have to beat your head against the dashboard?"

He felt Fraser's eyes on him, but never looked away from the closed warehouse door at the end of the alley where they were parked. At least he had something he was supposed to be staring at. "Stop what, Ray?"

"Stop that whatever the hell it is you're doing that's making that clicking noise."

There was a pause, and for the first time he wondered if there really could be an end to Fraser's patience. "I was simply examining my cuticles, Ray."

Probably not. "That's great, Fraser — God knows I don't want you to have to bust up a smuggling ring with your cuticles looking less than prime — but since Welsh said something to me about a stakeout and didn't mention anything about setting up a friggin' manicure shop—"

"Enough, Ray." Oooh, that was almost *testy*. "I understand your objections. I'll stop."

"Way to be a crime-fightin' machine, Fraser."

From the corner of his eye he saw Fraser's lips press together, wondered if maybe he should angle for one more jab. But then it occurred to him that they were still working through the second hour of an eight-hour shift, and maybe he should save something back for when he really needed it, like in case Fraser decided to try to talk to him about...any of that stuff he didn't want to talk about.

An hour later, he was almost ready to hope that Fraser *would* try to talk to him — after he'd snapped at Fraser for drumming his fingers on his hat, pulling at stray threads on his uniform, and breathing too loudly, now it was a lot like sitting in the car with a corpse — somebody's stuffed and mounted Mountie, which was kinda funny unless you had to be there, listening to the silence and checking out of the corner of your eye to make sure that Fraser's chest was still moving.

For his own part, he couldn't seem to keep still — it seemed like every few minutes he developed another weird itch somewhere, or one of his legs would go numb and then he'd shift and have to sit through the pins-and-needles without saying anything — and for some weird reason he remembered his fifth-grade teacher, Mrs. Crater, calling him 'ants-in-his-pants Kowalski' in front of the whole class and how much he'd hated that, and how much he just couldn't help it, just like he couldn't help it now.

"Fraser." He didn't know he meant to say anything, but there was pressure inside him that just seemed to want to let itself out in all kinds of bizarre ways.

"Yes, Ray."

Spur-of-the-moment quick, and he had to say *something* or else look like a total idiot—

"Your wolf is licking his balls in my back seat again."

Lame, Kowalski, very lame. Way to go. Way to avoid looking like an idiot—

"Ray." That was testy. That was *beyond* testy. All of a sudden his heart sped up — apparently there were limits to Fraser's patience, and it looked like he'd just found them. "What is *wrong* with you?"

"Me?" He faced Fraser squarely, and let the warehouse door fend for itself for now. "What's wrong with *me*? That's...that's really rich, Fraser; that's a real prizewinner—"

"Yes, *you*, Ray; I'm asking what's wrong with *you*. If you didn't want me to accompany you, it would have been very simple to—"

"To *what*?" Their voices in the closed car seemed painfully loud after the long silence, but he couldn't help it. "To hand you over to Darnell so he could paw all over you in that 'if-the-van's-a-rockin'-don't-come-knockin' ride he's got?"

Oh, that was much more than he'd meant to say, that hadn't been what he'd meant to say at *all*, but it felt like there was steam coming out of his ears, here, and there must have been a part of him that wanted to do this, that wanted to send everything to hell...

The sun had gone down about an hour before, but there was still enough light to see the traces of red in Fraser's cheeks. Every other sign of anger had vanished, however, and now Fraser just looked...curious. Like he was trying to figure something out. It made Ray's stomach flutter like crazy, and it took all his willpower not to press his hands there to make it stop.

"Ray, you sound...jealous." Fraser didn't sound testy anymore.

That was okay — he himself was plenty testy enough for both of them.

"Are you out of your mind?" He shifted sideways, facing Fraser, with his shoulders hard against the car door, something firm at his back, something solid that he could count on, and crooked one leg up on the

seat. The move twisted him all up, but even that just seemed like how things should be, everything twisted, nothing comfortable. "I'm trying to help you out, trying to keep you from eight hours of having some musclebound guy practice his body cavity search techniques on you, and you think I'm *jealous*? That's *nuts*, Fraser."

Fraser blinked at him slowly, then nodded. "You *are* jealous."

He blinked back. "I am *not*."

Fraser, the bastard, actually smiled a little. "Oh, I believe you are, Ray."

He felt filled, brimming right up to the top with the kind of anger that could get out of hand if he wasn't careful, if he didn't watch his mouth. He should stop. Just stop now, and shut up, and shut Fraser up double-quick if he said another goddamn word. Pop him one, that'd shut him up, or he could...no, no, he couldn't even think it. He should just stop. Now. A friendly piece of advice there from whoever was running the internal pressure-cooker...but the dark, tight feeling deep in his gut told him that it was already too late, much too late.

"Yeah? Well, you got your beliefs and I got mine, but here's some late-breaking news for you: there's no Santa Claus, Elvis is really dead, and I am *not* jealous of friggin' Charlie *Darnell*."

Fraser was still staring at him like he was the most fascinating thing since the wrong kind of mud at a crime scene. Ray dug his fingers in hard — one hand into the leather back of the seat, the other hand into his denim-covered knee, braced and sure and certain that he could deal with this, that he wasn't about to do anything stupid. *More* stupid.

"Perhaps not," Fraser said abruptly, and then it was almost like freefall, like pushing against something harder and harder and harder that suddenly *gave*, spinning out weightless and wondering what to do with all that excess energy until Fraser continued. "Perhaps you're simply afraid."

Ray's stomach clenched painfully with one final, jarring cramp, and his throat

slammed shut so quickly that he had to swallow to avoid choking. He slouched low against the door, tense and trapped in his body again — freefall over, kiddies, everybody out. He wondered for a moment how he managed to get himself into messes like this — how he could start out knowing *exactly* where he didn't want to go, and then go there anyway like someone had given him a frigging *map*. Like he had some kind of homing instinct for disaster.

"Like hell," he managed, but it was hard to talk past the tightness in his throat, hard to find words that didn't have to stay locked in the grim, pounding space between his temples.

And the only thing that could be worse than Fraser looking curious was Fraser looking understanding, like he had a grip on the whole picture and wasn't assigning blame anywhere. The way he was looking now. "There's no need to be ashamed of feeling fear, Ray; it's a perfectly natural response to—"

"I'm really hating you right now, Fraser," he felt himself moving and panicked but he just couldn't stop it — he was uncoiling, coming out of his crouch like a snake who just caught sight of a tasty leg. "This is one of those times when I just really, really hate you."

Words weren't enough; it wasn't enough to spit it out and get it over with. Saying it wasn't enough, so he reached out and got a handful of Fraser's short, thick hair, sinking his fingers in and pulling while he leaned forward himself so he could meet Fraser halfway and *show* him what was what, prove that he wasn't afraid, prove that he *must* hate Fraser because he certainly didn't have Fraser's best interests at heart, or else he wouldn't be doing...this.

He licked his way into Fraser's mouth like he owned the place, and Fraser's hair tugged at his fingers — he thought maybe Fraser was trying to pull away, and he was about to go for a better grip, but no. Fraser was just tilting, Fraser was going for a deeper, closer angle; Fraser was letting him,

just like he let him before, and *God* that burned his ass so bad because Fraser shouldn't, shouldn't be doing this, neither of them should, they should *not* be sitting here on stakeout with their tongues tangled together like a couple of kids fucked up on beer and hormones.

No beer, not this time. He didn't even have that pathetic excuse. No beer, but plenty of hormones because the deeper he got into Fraser's wet mouth the more he wanted to just stay there, the more he lost control of his body until he was practically squirming on the seat, his hips and his hard-on pushing up into nothing but air.

From far away, he heard Fraser pull in a deep, deep breath through his nose. Some instinct told him that it wasn't because Fraser was half-stifled with his tongue but because Fraser was *smelling* it on him, smelling the truth coming out of his pores like sweat. And he thought that might be enough, that maybe he'd proved his point, so finally he let go, let Fraser have his hair back and his air back and his smooth, warm mouth back and then he crammed himself against the door again and tried to pretend that he wasn't shaking.

*Fraser* was shaking. Ray really couldn't blame him — must be scary as hell, almost getting eaten alive by your partner. Fraser was shaking and wide-eyed and looked a hell of a lot less certain about the world, which was just fine and dandy. Which was, in fact, just about—

"It's all right, it's okay," Fraser said softly, and right away the bottom dropped out of his stomach, because he'd practically excavated Fraser's tonsils and here Fraser was telling him that it was *okay*, like what he'd just done was...okay. Telling him? Or himself? Did it matter?

"It's *not*." God, hadn't they been through this before? Different chorus, same song, but none of it was *okay*. He *knew* that, knew it in an all-the-way down, rock-bottom sure kind of way, but apparently Fraser didn't. And that meant that they weren't done yet. His breath caught and he

held himself still, because if he let himself move he was going to curl up around the hot throb of want that was his dick under the influence of thinking about not being done with Fraser yet.

Ray took a breath, and forced himself to stretch out instead, reach out. His hand moved all on its own and got involved with Fraser's hair again, but this time he stayed where he was and brought Fraser to him, pulling back until he was caught between the cold weight of the door and the hot weight of Fraser.

"Not okay," he whispered against Fraser's still-moist lips, and he didn't think Fraser heard him at all until the sound of soft breathing was cut across with the loud, purring sound his zipper made as he yanked it down, and then he gasped in relief and Fraser gasped in something else and Fraser *still* didn't pull away, *still* didn't get it.

Fierce fumbling through his briefs and then he had himself in hand and *had* to moan, and he couldn't give up Fraser's lips so that's where he moaned into and Fraser shivered, sighing back at him, just a sound, nothing that sounded like 'stop', so he just licked a wet trail along Fraser's bottom lip, and whispered. "Suck me. Slow."

Movement, something silent but it seemed to have some weird kind of harmony anyway — the way Fraser's head went down while his own tilted back, point and counterpoint, and he felt everything, throat, chest, and hard, aching cock, stretch out and reach up and get deep into it, deep into Fraser, and it turned out that he didn't need that hand on the back of Fraser's head for anything at all, because Fraser had it covered.

He kept his other hand fisted tight around the base of his dick, and when he felt Fraser's soft lips slide over his fingers there he jerked and grunted and stiffened up so he wouldn't just shove himself deeper and make it happen — not yet, not quite yet, he had to stop, *Fraser* had to stop, Fraser should stop this, Fraser...Fraser...

"Fraser..." He meant to say 'stop'. He did. He'd had enough. Enough of this wet, deep, tight; enough of the soft curve of Fraser's neck sweet under his hand; enough of moaning like his heart was breaking while Fraser moved on him, teaching him a new meaning for the word 'slow'.

"God —" he was talking to the roof, felt like he could talk to the roof all night. Maybe even get past this one-word crap and really open up about it, tell the roof about how it wasn't supposed to be this way, and how he never knew what the hell he was doing anymore, how he was trying not to scream right now with how good it was and about how he was so...*fucking*...sorry...

"Sorry —" One too many times; one too many strokes where Fraser went *way* down and did that weird swallowing thing that pulled somewhere deep in him every time it happened, and he wanted to tell the roof there was no *way* this was Fraser's first time, no way you could learn to do that on the job. On the job. Awww, fuck, roof, yeah, he was getting a job all right. Didn't know a job like this was out there with his name on it. Didn't know, didn't know, Christ, he'd had no idea.

One last hot-sweet-wet glide into Fraser's mouth and then he *did* scream — strangled and choked off and stifled against the back of his own hand, yes, but still — it was a yell, a racket. Bad enough. Bad enough to let him know that he'd never had a more shameful moment in his life than right now; thrashing all over the place and hanging onto Fraser's head and bucking up and in and coming like nobody'd ever touched him in his whole miserable life. Until now. Until...

"Fraser." At least it wasn't a scream. All he could see was black and all he could feel was a hot pulse of pleasure through his whole body, but the screaming part seemed to be over and the good after hey-maybe-it-is-okay crazy euphoria part took over. Thank God.

He heard Fraser sigh, felt Fraser shaking. When he could stand it he tugged

Fraser's head up from his lap, up from something unimaginable that his mind seemed to be trying to both memorize and erase. Part of him knew that it was time for the guilt and regret to set in now, time to let this terrible thing that he'd done slide into the past, and start paying for it—

But he wasn't *done*. He pulled Fraser straight from his lap to his mouth, straight into another kiss — a whole different thing than what had gone on before, because he still couldn't stop himself but now he wasn't angry anymore, now he was just burning with deep, grateful pleasure. And that wasn't right, that wasn't what this was supposed to be about, not at all. But the wrongness of it didn't matter, he already had their mouths sealed together and was going for it, gentle and blissed out and fiercely glad in a way he knew he'd cringe over later.

And for the first time Fraser did more than just let him — Fraser answered his gladness with gladness, and spoke that to him just as surely as if he'd used words to do it. He felt Fraser *wanting*, and he didn't, couldn't understand it, but right now it just was what it was — it was Fraser needing something that he could give. Before he knew it his hand was tight on a hard, hot length under scratchy fabric, and he told Fraser to come, he said it out loud but muffled around Fraser's tongue in his mouth, and Fraser stiffened and groaned just like *that*, like that was all he'd been waiting for, like that was all he'd needed. Which was a fucking *mindblower*.

"Fuck." Straight into the stratosphere. There was no way to follow where he'd come from to where he was, no way on heaven or earth to explain how he'd managed to get here. He'd been angry, he knew that much. Angry at himself and angry at Fraser — Fraser, who alternated between normal, predictable Fraser and *this* Fraser, this melting-into-him, panting-and-flushed Fraser...Who turned from one to the other faster than he could keep up.

"Yeah," Fraser breathed in his ear, enough of a shock to send him bolt upright in his seat. That was just too much. He pulled back. Pulled away. Fastened his clothes just as quick as he could, fighting off a sudden wave of panic until he was all zipped up again.

Ray faced forward, wincing when he realized that he'd have to turn on the defroster because they'd steamed the car up good. That was no way to spot...what? Who were they out here for again?

He heard Fraser shifting around, and out of the corner of his eye he caught that clean, white handkerchief that Fraser always had on him, prepared for anything, and part of him wondered how Fraser could have possibly been prepared for *this*..

—Smuggling. Smugglers. They were on the lookout for evidence of suspicious activities. At that warehouse. Where he was looking now. Ray ignored the foggy view and found the defroster by feel, staring at the warehouse door for all he was worth while Fraser poked that clean white handkerchief down his uniform pants, swabbed around a little, then folded it up and put it in his pocket, like he always did that, came in his pants on a stakeout.

Fraser didn't say much. Okay, he didn't say anything. Which was kind of amazing, considering they had to sit there for another five hours in a car that smelled like come, in a car with windows that never did completely defrost, like they figured why bother when who knew when one of the occupants would pounce on the other one again.

Six hours in a car with steamed-up windows, ping-ponging between disbelief and giddiness and the occasional flare of gut-clenching temper. At least *he* was. He had no idea how *Fraser* felt. Fraser'd managed to pull himself together pretty good, surprise surprise — which told him more about Fraser than he'd ever wanted to know — but Ray still felt like he'd had most of his common sense and his entire self-image sucked out through his dick.

And he wasn't at all sure he'd proved his point.

Hell, he couldn't even remember what the point was.

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Desk duty had its advantages. If he bent far enough over a folder, and kept a pen in his hand, nobody bugged him. Pretty neat trick, huh. Even Frannie left him alone.

Two weeks since the stakeout. The makeout. The blow...out. Two weeks of doing his level best to pretend nothing had happened, that he hadn't done as bad (or worse) by Fraser as Darnell would've done, if Ray'd let him have his way. At least Darnell probably wouldn't have...in the front seat...on duty...

Jesus, what had he done?

The fact of it, the *hugeness* of it came over him for a moment, and he shivered. Unreal. It had felt unreal right afterwards and it still felt that way now, and when it didn't he found himself wishing it did — because it was *too* real, too reach-right-down-in-there real for him to deal with. All it ever did was make him cringe; all it ever did was put him on edge and make him feel turned on and sick to his stomach and hungry all at once.

Made him want to hide somewhere.

Made him want to find Fraser, pronto, and...what? What the hell could he do, anyway, except make things worse?

He'd had his chance to set things right, and instead he'd steered them wrong. Even worse, worse than doing it, worse than making Fraser do it, was the certainty, down in a dark, empty place he didn't want to see, that he'd do it again. That he'd do more than that, if Fraser'd let him. That he wanted *more*, when less would have been the smart move.

Somehow, in trying to kill the loneliness, Ray had just managed to feed it, until it grew and spread and threatened to choke him. Threatened him. Now, any cop can tell you what happens to a guy who

feels threatened. He either pushes or he folds. Ray'd never been much of one for folding.

So maybe the sad truth was that it wasn't *Darnell* Fraser needed to worry about.

Kind of amazing, really, that afterwards life continued as always, as if his world hadn't been turned on its side, tucked up against a car door and blown into a new dimension.

Pretending wasn't perfect, but it was better than dwelling on stuff he couldn't talk about, or even think about in whole sentences most of the time.

Nothing constructive had come of the stakeout — not outside the car, and for sure not inside the car. And so life, well, life just went on. The bad guys didn't care much whether Ray Kowalski had his head up his ass, or whether Charlie Darnell was sniffing around the Mountie, so getting things back to even, if not back to normal, seemed like a good thing to go for.

So Ray tried. He really tried, and, for the most part, thought he succeeded pretty well.

If their duet ended up being a trio more often than not, well, that didn't seem to be the hurdle it once was. Nobody's gonna think anything nasty about *three* cops heading out for something to eat, or catching a movie, or going midnight bowling. No, it was the *couple* thing he'd worried about. This was just some guys going out, right?

Right.

One good thing about it was that he got to keep an eye on Darnell. No harm in that, was there? He'd seen the way Darnell watched Fraser when he thought nobody was looking —like the way Dief looked at a Twinkie. Fraser needed a keeper and there he was, a good Ray-sized one, fully charged and ready to serve. And Fraser seemed okay with him coming along. Seemed kind of happy about it, like he liked things being more like the way they had been.

Yeah, it was good. Long as he managed to pretend he hadn't...long as he didn't *think* about...as long as he kept it all on the surface — work, food, fun — it was all right.

He tried to forget that Fraser had said it was all right the other way, too. Both times they'd...the first thing Fraser'd said afterward was that it was all right. Gave the go-ahead, but after the fact. Permission granted, retroactive.

Backwards, just like every other freaking thing in his life at the moment.

Permission. For what? To screw up the last good thing he had going? God, he could hear himself now, telling Fraser in that rathole that there was nothing good about this. Nothing good. Nothing good about Fraser and Darnell, and for sure nothing good about Fraser and *him*.

Ray dropped his head the last few inches down onto his desk, feeling the cool paper of some report or other against his hot forehead.

There was no him and Fraser. Not like that. Cuz even if *Fraser* was...and it was starting to look like yeah, maybe he was...*Ray* certainly wasn't. No way. Nuh-uh. Didn't know where the thoughts kept coming from. He'd *used* Fraser. Used his mouth like it was his own hand, in the dark, under the covers, doing it like he liked. He'd been mad, crazy mad, jumping out of his skin crazy and he'd finally pushed Fraser over *his* edge, too, and God, it had *felt* good, but it *wasn't* good.

Couldn't be.

Even if, way down deep, something in him whispered that he *wanted* it to be.

He'd looked in the rearview mirror, once, afterward, and been so shocked by what he'd seen he'd barely looked since. He'd taken up an electric razor to avoid watching himself shave. He tilted the car mirrors so all he got was open road, no shock of blue gray eyes, nobody there to mock him, tell him he sucked, what kind of friend was that, what kind of partner, to do *that*?

Fraser made it easy on him. Talked cool to him, didn't provoke him, didn't bug him. Or maybe he just didn't let himself be bugged. Could be that. Took two to tango — always had. If Ray could keep a lid on it, Fraser could, too. Fraser took his cues from him, he knew that. Always had. Fraser...responded...to him.

And off his brain went again, would probably have played the whole damn thing over again in his mind if his ears hadn't caught something, if his Fraser radar hadn't gone off, poking him, telling him to pay attention. He raised his head.

There, by Darnell's desk. Fraser, bent at the waist, leaning with his hands on the desk, Darnell looking up at him, not smiling. Ray squinted, reached for his glasses. Whoa. Somebody's dog die?

He saw Fraser glance around the squad room, his gaze sliding over Ray, then returning briefly before he dipped his head toward Darnell again.

" —talk about this someplace more private?" Ray heard Fraser say, then a phone rang somewhere and Darnell's reply was drowned out. Then they were up, headed out, Darnell walking ahead of Fraser a little bit, so tall he made Fraser look small.

He should probably let them have their talk in private. A man had a right to a private conversation, didn't he? Sure he did.

Wasn't gonna happen. Not on his watch. And since his watch seemed to be pretty much all the time, it didn't take him a minute to re-file the folder, grab a jacket and do that tracking thing, down the hall, outside, following an instinct that said Fraser'd never talk about anything even remotely personal in the building.

Bingo.

He spotted them at the edge of the park, sitting on the low wall near the pond. Something about it made his heart pound high and fast in his chest — maybe it was seeing them sitting like that, or maybe the fact that he was following along, thinking there was no way he was really gonna do this, but yeah, doing it anyway. He



swallowed, and tried to remind his jumping nerves that he wasn't sneaking up on a couple of bad guys here, but just two guys, two other cops, trying to have a little talk.

He saw that they both had hot dogs in their hands, but he would have bet his next paycheck Fraser wouldn't eat his. Cover, that's what it was. Two guys eating lunch. That was all. Abruptly he wondered if that had been Fraser's idea. If it had been, then maybe Fraser really *had* learned something about keeping up appearances. Ray shrugged it off, trying not to think about whether that was a good thing or a bad thing.

Had to love the urban planners and their thing for shrubbery. Those little bushy beauties let him get close enough to hear, without being close enough to be seen. He moved easily, quietly, so quietly that he didn't think even Fraser would hear anything. He was so into it, into finding a good spot and a comfortable position and a casual stance, that it wasn't until he tuned in and started actually listening that it occurred to him that maybe, or even make that *probably*, he might not want to hear what they had to say.

"—been as patient as I can, Ben," Darnell said.

"And I appreciate that, Charlie, more than I can say," Fraser said.

Hearing that, having it out in the open like that — Darnell, copping to the fact that he'd been angling for Fraser's Twinkie, and Fraser, implying that it hadn't happened yet — it was a relief and a shock at the same time. Ray took a deep, quiet breath that seemed to uncurl a thread of tension that had been twisting in his stomach, a tension he hadn't really noticed until it wasn't there anymore.

He squinted up at the sky like he was checking out the weather, careful to keep his head tilted at the best listening angle. It was weird not to be able to see them, but he had to keep an eye out. Didn't want anybody thinking *he* was some weirdo, creeping around in the bushes. Made him

wish he'd thought ahead enough to get his own hot dog.

"I mean, it's like I'm in high school, dating the Homecoming King. You let me this close and no closer," Darnell said.

Ray could hear the frustration in Darnell's voice. More than hear it, he recognized it, had heard it in his own voice more times than he could count. Yeah, Fraser could tie you up in a knot faster than you could say "Mounties always get their man."

Silence for a minute. Damn, he wished he could see Fraser's face. He was pretty good at getting stuff from his expression; had to be since Fraser didn't always spit up everything when he should.

"Charlie, I enjoy your company..."

God, that line again. C'mon, Fraser, get some new material. But he found himself smiling anyway — an uncomfortably smug-feeling, but irresistible smile — already knowing, already buzzing in his hard-to-keep-still body because that was Fraser's 'I'm-gonna-be-real-polite-while-I-ruin-your-life' tone, Fraser's regretful tone. Too bad, Charlie, no Twinkie for you—

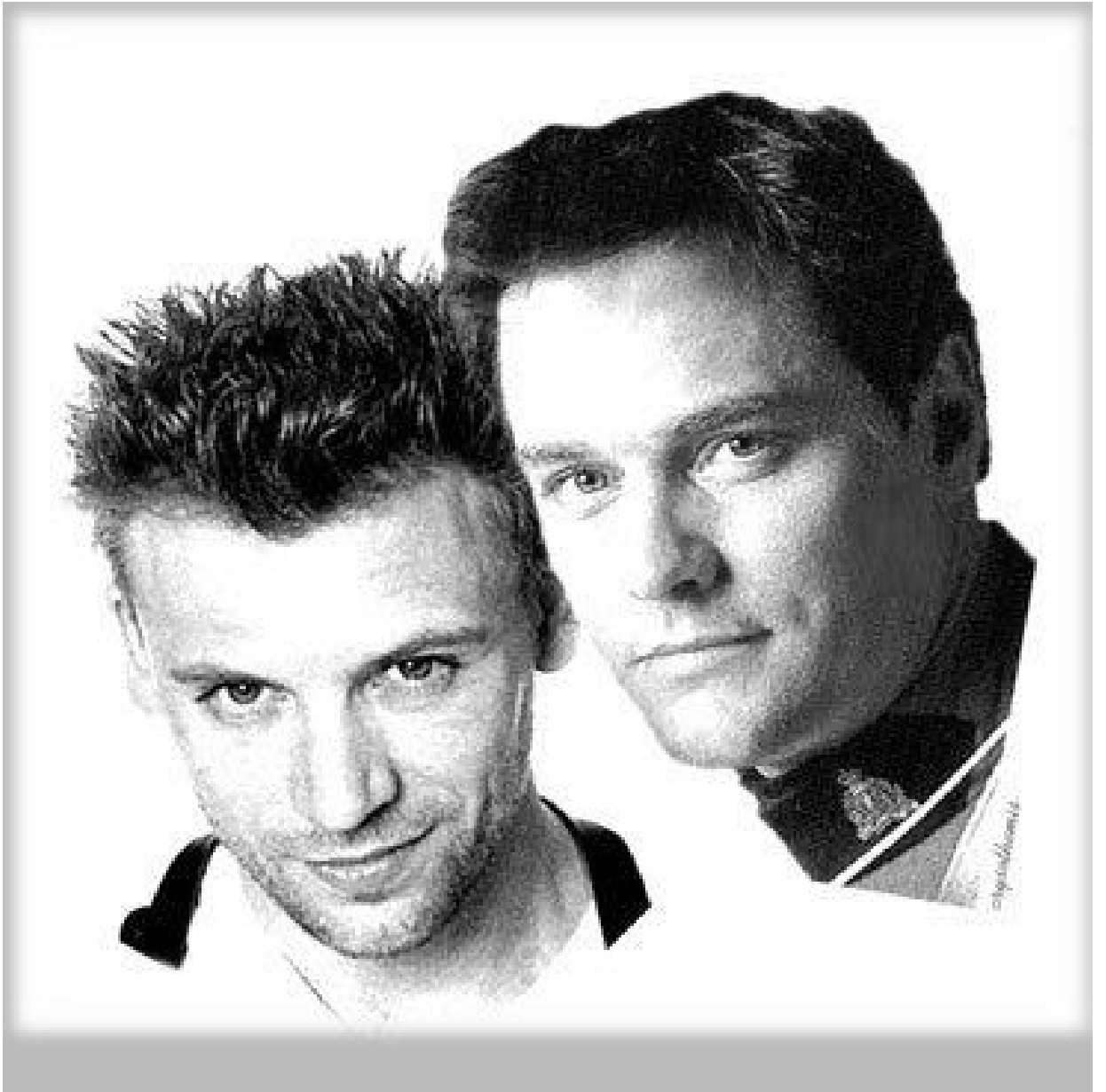
"...but I'm not interested in pursuing a deeper relationship," he continued.

Ray's smile widened, and his face felt hot. Got it in one.

"It doesn't have to be a *relationship*, Ben. Why can't we just...you know, have a good time? Why's it got to be complicated?" Darnell pressed. Ray's smile slipped away as if it had never been there, and his muscles twitched — an automatic urge to push his way past the screen of shrubbery, and maybe get in Darnell's smooth-talking face and ask him just who in the hell he thought he was *pushing*, here, because Fraser said *no* already, he said *no*—

Fraser's voice tightened. "I don't seem to have the constitution for casual relationships. I'm sorry."

More silence. Ray didn't blame Darnell for not responding to that — just those few quiet words had stopped him cold, too. He shifted to a more comfortable crouch,



hoping they weren't going to turn this thing into a soap opera — his knees couldn't take it. He supposed he should go — he'd heard what he needed to hear, after all.

"That's it? You won't even think about it?" Darnell said, and Ray almost felt sorry for him. Almost. He knew how hard it was for Francesca to work with Fraser, feeling like she did, and there had to be others who felt like that — Fraser seemed to collect them, whether he wanted to or not. And now Charlie would feel that way, too.

This close but no closer.

Funny, that wasn't how *he* felt. Too close was more like it. Too damn close.

"I *am* sorry," Fraser said, and damn if he didn't sound like he was.

Yeah, sorry, Charlie.

Something seemed to sink in — past the relief part, now, this was more like certainty, and Ray clamped down on the sudden shot of adrenaline that streaked through him, that made him want to jump out of the bushes and say, "HA! How 'bout *them* apples?"

A crazy thing to do, sure, but he couldn't help feeling it — automatic, and powerful enough to feel like a kick to the chest, busting-out-full of something and *needing* to share the high. He kept himself still. It was a backlash, that was all. It was just because he'd been freaked for so long about what might happen if Darnell ever got it in gear and went for it.

The silence went on long enough this time that he had to peek. They were gone. Ray gave it another minute, then unraveled his crouch and went to sit on a bench, resting his knees and giving his brain a second to get with the program.

Fraser'd turned Darnell down. Got the offer, thought about it, and turned the fucker down. Turned him down *flat*, none of that hemming and hawing stuff he usually did when the conversation turned personal.

And there'd been none of that "it's all right" stuff for Charlie Darnell. Nope, he hadn't heard a word about that.

Fraser'd said no. Fraser wasn't screwing around with him. Hadn't yet, and apparently wasn't going to.

Ray pulled in a deep breath and let the last of the adrenaline ease out of him, leaving him jumpy and a little stiff. Fraser...had done what he'd done.

Now all Ray had to do was decide whether or not he wanted to think about *why*.

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Kind of a cake decision, as it turned out. Yeah, he wanted to think about why, and it was a damn good thing, because he didn't manage to think about much of anything else for the next three days. Thought about it all the time, actually, mostly in the back of his mind unless he was home and in bed with all the lights out, which was when the whole situation *wasn't* in the back of his mind at all. It was inside him, settled low in his gut, riding him.

That was when the highs and lows, the tension and fear and want and rush and *heat* of it was right in him, filling him up, tearing him apart little by little and leading him in circles of thoughts, cycles of feeling, that made him wonder if he might not be going a little bit nuts. A little *more* nuts.

After all, Fraser hadn't said a single thing about why. Hadn't told Darnell that sorry, Mr. America-types just didn't turn his crank, hadn't said anything about maybe saving his Twinkie for somebody else. All he'd said was 'sorry'. And that he didn't do casual sex—

Which, when he thought about it, made him wonder about the whole conversation, whether he'd heard what he thought he'd heard, whether he'd really been there to hear it, because that was an out-and-out *lie*. Fraser *did* do casual sex. Fraser had blown him in the front seat of his car, on a stakeout — and sex didn't get much more casual than that.

...Or much hotter than that. At least, not in *his* experience. But...as for Fraser's

experience, he didn't have a clue — not very long ago, he wouldn't have put down a penny on Fraser having much of *any* experience. Of course, he wouldn't have figured Fraser for queer, either, and look where that got him. Maybe Fraser did that kind of thing all the time. But wait, he'd said he *didn't* do that kind of thing. But he *did*. Or he *had*. Ray'd been there for it, Ray remembered it well, could give a play-by-play if Fraser needed his memory jogged. Maybe if Ray went ahead and asked Fraser about it, it would be one of those over-and-done-with, water under the culvert things. For Fraser at least.

But it didn't seem very likely, didn't seem very much like the Fraser he knew — but hey, none of this did, so what the hell?

Which brought him right back to a counting-up of the known facts: Fraser'd said no to Darnell. Fraser *hadn't* said no to *him*.

And that *still* seemed wrong — that Fraser would let him pull that shit, and just keep not saying no. Like somehow his no-sayer was broken when it came to Ray.

Hard on the heels of *that* thought there was always a question — always the same question — and every time Ray's mind wandered down that particular path it was like his thoughts floated up and out and beyond any hope of his control. His face got hot and his body tingled, and it didn't seem to matter what he happened to be doing at the time — making coffee, getting bawled out by Welsh, watching the Cubs get their asses kicked — whatever he was doing would go dim and faraway, and by the time he pulled himself back in line he'd have a great, big, embarrassing boner to deal with.

What *else* wouldn't Fraser say no to?

Of course, it wasn't the question that was fucking with him so much as it was the answer — maybe nothing. There probably wasn't a single, goddamn thing that Ray could think of (and he *did* think of it, he thought of a *lot* of things; didn't really want to and didn't think it was a good idea but he

did it anyway) that would actually make Fraser say no.

That was really the worst of it — the idea that maybe Fraser wouldn't say no. It chewed at him, rubbed against him, got him all messed up and excited and terrified all at the same time: Fraser wouldn't say no, Ray knew he wouldn't, he *knew* it, and *God* it would be so much easier, so much simpler if he would. Just 'no', and Ray could back off, back away, no problems and with his conscience clear.

Then he could still be him, or the him he was pretending to be anyway, the one who'd been pretty happy just having Fraser for a partner, having somebody to eat with, somebody to bounce ideas off of. Now that the Darnell thing was back-burnered, they could, maybe, if they wanted to, go back to the way things had been before.

Before.

Yeah, before a whole bunch of fences got jumped.

So he wished, often, sometimes he *dreamed*, that Fraser said no to him.

Just as much as he wished and dreamed that Fraser said yes.

And he thought, late at night, in the safety and solitude of his bed, about what he could do, if he dared, with Fraser's yes.

What he could do...

So he put into practice what he'd learned from Fraser, and did that 'there, but not there' thing. Worked the cases, went to dinner in that cozy little threesome they'd built, and did his level best not to stand within five feet of Fraser.

How to chill, Fraser-style. Hey, he'd learned from a master. How to make it look good, so Welsh didn't notice, or Frannie, so it looked like business as usual.

Wasn't, though.

Not even close.

Hadn't been for a long, long time. And if he let the bizarre fuck inside his head go the way it wanted to, he'd be throwing it all away. Was pretty close to thrown as it was and one more move, one more wrong step, one more time getting his hands on Fraser's

curiously receptive body would be the limit, the end, the wall.

Once more, just once, and the partnership would go splat, bye-bye, th-th-that's all folks. Ruptured. Severed.

Nothing could withstand that kind of torture and survive. Nothing.

And as much as he seemed to...*want*...he didn't want *that*.

So he stayed close but steered clear of anything that might put them together in the same place for more than fifteen minutes at a time. He found himself using Darnell as a buffer, inviting him along on trips that really didn't need *two* CPD detectives.

Ironic, huh. After all the trials and tribulations about Fraser and Darnell, and what it looked like versus what it was, now he was the one making the overtures about the Greek restaurants, keeping Darnell in the middle, keeping it all on the level, on the up and up, giving himself some critical distance.

Because he didn't trust Fraser not to give him what he wanted.

And he didn't trust himself not to ask for it.

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As it turned out, all of that was just a head-trip, all of it was...whosiewhatsie...*academic*. An academic thing. Right. Too bad he hadn't taken time to get out of his head long enough to wonder what *Fraser* thought about it all. Might have been a good question to ask at some point along the way. One more thing to add to the list of "Ways Ray Fucked Up."

Because right about the time he'd decided he might just explode out of his skin from chilling out and holding back and trying to do The Right Thing, and he'd scoured his own brain about it so much that he felt like he'd scrubbed off some stuff he might need later, opportunity knocked on his door.

Actually, it was Fraser who knocked on his door. The opportunity part of it was because, for once, it was Fraser all by himself, without the usual additions of Dief-and-Darnell. Just Fraser, asking him if he had plans, if he wanted to get some dinner.

Like he used to. Like they hadn't just spent some crazy months avoiding each other, then colliding at regular intervals, ruining everything, trying to ruin it.

And yeah, he knew it was just stupid but he couldn't help it — right away he got nervous about that. It made his mouth dry up and his palms go moist and itchy, and even though he felt nervous about it he was kinda...*glad* about it too — even *more* stupid — but he couldn't help it. Couldn't help any of it.

"Just you and me, huh?" He had a horrible suspicion that he might be blushing, because his face felt awfully hot. But at least there was the relief of knowing that, if he was, Fraser didn't appear to have noticed.

"If that's all right." In the mellow light of the hallway Fraser looked impossibly...precise, clean and calm and orderly, and immediately Ray was swamped with the desire to get in his face, to tell Fraser point-blank 'you *sucked my dick*', just to see what would happen.

And there was something else, too, something less of defiance and more of compulsion; the urge to reach out and mess up what he could, the urge to make Fraser sweat, to get him dirty, to sticky him up and slick him over and move him so far past clean and calm and orderly that a fucking *truckload* of handkerchiefs wouldn't be enough to undo the damage.

In the end, though, he didn't go with either impulse. In the end he just held the door open to let Fraser in, and mumbled something about needing to change his shirt.

So he waved Fraser in and then went to pull something off the still-pretty-clean pile, and it wasn't until he stepped back into the living room that another piece of the puzzle

snicked into place in his mind, and he found himself leaning against the doorway staring at Fraser — at Fraser's profile, actually, since Fraser was standing at parade rest in front of his window, looking out; tall and correct and silent. And he knew he should say something, but right now he didn't seem to be capable of saying anything, not while his head was buzzing with all this, with *everything*.

The queer thing, that was it.

When he looked at Fraser now, he saw 'Fraser — queer', and that little thought totally spun his wheels, because Fraser was just so...*pure*.

Queerboy. Choirboy. Imagine that.

It twisted him somehow. It made him feel like there was too much, just too much he didn't know, too much that he never would have guessed. Too many surprises, and a whole bunch of almost-panic at the thought of what the next surprise might be...

...So what did that make *him*? And why couldn't he just pick something and *stick* with it? Because it seemed like, no matter what, even if he took a good long look at himself and he turned out to be a full-bore flaming homo, it had to be easier than what he'd been going through; easier than wondering and fearing and wanting and struggling and not knowing, not ever-ever knowing.

Turned out it wasn't an explosion he was waiting for. It was an implosion, everything caving in on itself, all of it, and just like the first time, just like the last time, when he got this close, got this far, nothing else seemed to matter except...

His feet moved, long strides that felt funny but felt *right*, too, like he had a purpose here, dammit, and he didn't care what it looked like. And then he was in front of the window, and eye-to-eye with Fraser, who turned right to him, turned right around to face him, and Fraser looked *nothing* like the kind of guy who gave blow-jobs in the front seats of cars and came in his pants with just one touch, nothing at all like

the kind of horndog who didn't know how to say 'no'—

He couldn't do it. Somehow couldn't stand there and *not* touch him. Couldn't go to dinner and pretend, couldn't hold himself back. Not for another minute of his life, not even for a second. So Fraser would have to do it for him. Any holding back that had to be done, Fraser would have to do it.

"Tell me." His own voice sounded much too rough, much too angry in his ears. He didn't remember reaching out but apparently he'd just gone ahead and done it, because now he had one hand hooked behind Fraser's neck, and the other burrowed under the tunic and curled tight into the waistband of Fraser's pants, pulling their bodies together.

Fraser's eyes were wide and dark, full of that strange openness, that complete lack of fear, that *heat* that he just didn't get, he didn't *get* it — "Tell you what, Ray?"

He slid his hand up the back of Fraser's neck and into that soft hair, one quick second to appreciate how the curve of skull fit just right in his palm before he tugged Fraser close, close enough to almost touch, almost kiss. "Tell me *no*, Fraser. Tell me that."

A spark, a curl, a glint of something burning down far away, far deep in there in Fraser's eyes, far past the point where he could see. "No, Ray."

He heard it and his heart *slammed* in his chest, and for a split second he was *so* hot, white-hot, because he'd asked for it and now by God he'd got it and it was-wasn't-was what he wanted. He could let go now. He could let go.

His whole body shuddered hard. Once. He couldn't let go.

Not now.

He shifted his feet, braced himself. "Tell me again, Fraser." One more time, one more time and he'd be able to let go, be able to take the answer inside him, where it could fight for space with all the rest of the stuff he didn't want to think about right now, all

the stuff he didn't want to know about himself.

And Fraser looked so *strange*, staring into his eyes that way — hungry and satisfied all at the same time, like he was into something, getting something out of just looking. "I won't. I won't say no, Ray."

Everything stood still for just a second — the room, Fraser, himself — everything frozen, everything locked. Then he felt his face go red-hot, and just like that everything *unfroze*, and he was free. Free to...what?

What was he free to do, exactly?

He swallowed. "What if I say it?"

Fraser's hands came up close, traced a soft, slow line over — of all the weird places — his throat. "Are you saying no?"

*Thud-thump. Thud-thump.*

Beat of head. Beat of heart. Familiar, but no hangover this time, no excuse. Just the realization that he'd hit a wall, a wall with a door in it, and he could either continue to hurl himself at it until he was bruised and beaten, or he could turn the knob and walk right through.

"No." He couldn't hear it, just felt the vibration in his throat under Fraser's fingers when he said it. "I mean, I'm not saying no either."

And then it kind of caught up with him; what he'd just not said no to, what he'd basically said *yes* to, what he'd just put at risk, but Fraser's tongue was already slipping over his own and Fraser's body was pressed hard against him, and then there wasn't a lot of time to think about it.

There was time to *feel* it, though, along with the muscle-loosening, dick-hardening, pulse-pounding reality of Fraser getting into it, making out, taking over — a low, distant, thundery sort of sadness, a brief wish that somehow he could have kept this *one* thing safe from the kind of disaster he constantly brought down on himself. Fraser was...a good partner. And a good friend...

...And a really, *really* good kisser. Hot, and hungry, and deep — kind of an 'out of this world' kisser, because Ray was having a hell of a time remembering that there was a

world outside of these kisses, outside of having Fraser's arms around him and Fraser's hands *all over* him, outside of what Fraser felt like when he let himself go like this.

Then there was a moment, sharp and immediate, when he could feel Fraser's shoulders pulling away from his hands, when Fraser's hands held his face away while Fraser stared into his eyes, and Ray had to blink to focus, to see more than a soft, blurred haze of want.

"Are you saying yes, Ray?"

He felt his head bob up and down. Yeah, yeah, hadn't they covered that?

"What are you saying yes to, Ray?"

It was funny, but he'd never been in this kind of position before, never been the one who could just relax and let things happen to him. And oh, Jesus, it scared the crap out of him but he *liked* it — he liked it a *lot*. He licked his lips, tasted Fraser there, and his stomach knotted up for a second with the desire to have Fraser's taste, his smell, everywhere, everywhere he could reach and some places he couldn't.

Slut — he was a fucking slut. For this. For Fraser. He took a deep breath, a Fraserless breath that felt cold inside him, and shivered.

"Anything? Everything?" Didn't seem to be much point in bothering with anything less, not at this stage in the game. Not considering what it was probably going to cost him.

And maybe Fraser knew that, or sensed it somehow, because Fraser didn't push for anything more but just started stripping him out of his clothes, kissing all the bare places as they were exposed. Ray just let it happen, let everything — fear, and regret, and tense, maddening lust — just roll over and through him, let it shake him, take him, pull him wide open.

Some of it was weird — deeply, terribly weird. Like being down on the floor all of a sudden, naked as a jaybird and straddling Fraser's lap — Fraser's *fully clothed* lap — and being held in a way that seemed

*completely* wrong for two guys who were supposed to be rolling around and getting their jollies (not that he'd know, not that he had the faintest clue about this whole thing).

Like being held in a way that made him press his face down into Fraser's scratchy, uniformed shoulder — because Fraser's strong arms and solid body felt so fucking *good* that it made his eyes sting, and he had no idea how Fraser could have known that he needed to be held like that when *he* hadn't known himself, but Fraser knew, and so Fraser held him and didn't make a big deal out of it, but it *was* a big deal, it *was*.

Made him wonder what else Fraser'd known all along.

And yeah, it was weird when Fraser finally pulled back from him, left him a weak and horny puddle on the floor and *finally* started getting out of that damned itchy wool, when Fraser tugged something out of his pocket — a small bottle, a few packets — and shrugged at him, when he finally managed to tear his eyes away from that and look at Fraser's flushed, rueful face...

"The curse of the optimist, Ray."

And maybe he should've been pissed about that but instead it just jerked this short, surprised laugh out of him, so he didn't bother to get pissed. Instead he paid attention to the way his heartbeat was shaking him, even like this, laid out flat on the floor, watched Fraser strip, and murmured, "Pretty sure I'd be easy, huh?"

Fraser shook his head. "You are many things, Ray, but 'easy' is not among them."

Before he could decide whether to feel flattered or insulted, Fraser was on him and *doing things* to him again, both of them naked this time so there was a lot more Fraser to feel, now, a whole lot of it, all smooth and warm, like his mouth; he was like his mouth all over his body, and the world went away again, flamed away on tongues and rough fingers and the fire of hard, desperate cocks until later, much later, when he was kneeling up with Fraser right behind him, shaking in Fraser's arms like

something was wrong, *really* wrong with him...

But there couldn't be anything wrong, because Fraser had him tight and solid, and Fraser had fingers pressing *inside* him now (*inside! God!*), and he couldn't stop rocking back, shocking himself with it, and he could hear his own voice, low and rough, saying over and over that this was good, this was good, this was just so fucking *good*.

"Easy, Ray. It's all right." He heard that from far away, and then Fraser tilted him, shifted him forward so he went, went down, went forward and put his hot face down on the scratchy, but significantly cooler carpet, because he trusted Fraser. And he stayed where Fraser put him and then he waited, thinking to himself that he was being very patient, for someone who was about ten strokes past crazy.

Even though he was shaking he felt calm until one big hand gripped his hip and he felt a snub, slick touch right where he was hungriest — not fingers, no *way* was that fingers — and the truth of what this was and who was with him sank home all in one hot, spasming second and then, before he could blink, or protest, or take a second even to figure out what that incredible rush meant, he was coming, squirting all over his own chest and rocking and *groaning* loud enough to make his own ears hurt.

And of course he expected Fraser to stop, then, to back off a little and let him pull himself together, but instead Fraser nudged at him, pushed, and he felt himself *flex* and then Fraser just stroked right into him, right in deep, and his entire body went rigid and there was pain and he was still coming, shaking, gasping — God! — taking it, taking everything Fraser had to give, utterly unable — finally, *finally* — to hold anything back.

He came down slowly, relaxing one muscle at a time into a body that was already full beyond bearing. Full of pleasure, full of embarrassment, full of *Fraser* — and that still seemed unbelievable,



absolutely unreal, but all he had to do was tighten down to know that, yes, that was Fraser back there, that was Fraser in him, around him, everywhere.

"Perfect," Fraser breathed in his ear, stroking him — such a strong, sure touch — stroking down his wet chest, his belly, stroking up his thighs, holding him, touching him, in every way he could be touched. "You're perfect, so perfect —" and he was so entranced by that, by the fact that Fraser could actually *say* that, that he barely noticed when Fraser started to move again until they were already there, in rhythm, back and forth and in and out and deep and slow and...

...And this was a lot more than he'd bargained for. This went so far past what he'd bargained for that he couldn't even see there from here. After all this time of not getting it, of not understanding what Fraser wanted, now he was starting to get it — and it wasn't just his ass. Not that simple. A truth communicated to him through touch, through patience, through steady, smooth, stroke after stroke of slow pleasure — Fraser wasn't into his ass. Fraser was into *him*.

Fraser was into *him*.

And that changed *everything*. He let himself go under, gave himself up to sound and smell and the lapping ripples of sweet, unbearable sensation that spread, wider and deeper, softening him, tenderizing him from the inside out, straight from Fraser's center to his own. A mainline.

He felt Fraser push deep inside him, felt each stroke connect directly to his dick, pumping it up, tingling sensation, so soon, so fast, until he pushed back, thrust forward, learning the motion, absorbing it, absorbing Fraser, dizzy from trying to sort out one sensation from another.

Sweat. His chest, wet with it, with come, smeared by Fraser's fingers. He heard his name, lost among moans. Heard himself fight for breath.

He pushed hard into air until he felt Fraser's hand there, as smooth and warm as

the rest of him, a strong hold, perfect, and he had to open his eyes, had to see. Looked down and saw an old scar on Fraser's knuckle, barely visible in the dim light. Something wild and lionhearted thundered against him when he pushed back, teeth rasped on the nape of his neck, and he felt obedient blood rising to the surface. Blood rising, slowly but surely; a ripening and heavy-wet smell of desire. An upside-down world, the long reach of view down his own body, Fraser's pale, strong hand on his hard wet cock, raw and shocking.

When the deliberate rhythm stuttered apart he gasped, caught on a spike of excitement, skittering along like a kicked pebble across the surface of his own lust. Catching up. Reaching back for a handful of hot, smooth-skinned muscle, the flex and rock and ragged, shallow pounding of need.

Low hunger in his belly, a thigh-clenching, cock-throbbing, tight and urgent *greed* for this, fucking Fraser's hand and taking everything he wanted, pulling Fraser to him and demanding — do it, let it go, let me have it — and then he was *slammed* forward so hard he almost went down flat. Fraser's arm curled up under his shoulder and pulled him back, pulled him into it, and Fraser made some desperate sound like an animal and shoved one last time and then Fraser was *coming* inside him, rigid and groaning and bucking and stroking until Ray was *there*, right where Fraser was, twisted with pleasure and pulsing out, out, out; the wild, mingled sound of their voices something bright and strange and wonderful.

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It hadn't seemed possible that Fraser might...that Fraser would...that Fraser could possibly want him back. Not want him back as a partner, but want him *also*.

Fraser *wanted* him.

Not Darnell. Didn't matter whether Darnell wanted him; Fraser was used to people wanting him. It only mattered who

Fraser wanted. And that, weirdly, oddly, emphatically, seemed to be *him*.

Ray sighed, burrowed closer to Fraser's drowsing body beside his. Felt like himself for the first time in a long time, which was strange, too, since he wasn't sure he'd ever really known who he was before. He'd missed something pretty important, missed it completely. Thank God for Fraser, who hadn't given up on him, hadn't let him throw it all away, even when he thought that was *exactly* what he was doing.

"You could've said something, you know," Ray mumbled into the arm under his head.

"I thought I had," Fraser said against Ray's shoulder.

Using every ounce of energy left in his sore, sated body, Ray rolled over to face Fraser.

"Not so much with words," Fraser continued, aligning his body to Ray's, holding him snugly against his chest. "I'm afraid words tend to desert me just when they might prove the most useful, but —"

"With what you did," Ray finished the sentence for him, and saw a grateful little smile flicker across Fraser's face.

"That's right," Fraser said quietly.

"Cuz you don't do casual relationships," Ray said.

Fraser moved against him. "That's very perceptive, Ray."

Ray snorted. "Not as much as you'd think."

Fraser raised an eyebrow at him, and Ray gave in to the temptation to trace it with his index finger.

"I sort of accidentally heard you tell Darnell that," he said.

"Accidentally?"

"Okay, on purpose," Ray said, then decided maybe it was time to distract Fraser before he got a lecture about eavesdropping. "Told you he was on the make."

"So you did," Fraser said, "And I told you I wasn't interested in him."

"You did *not*," Ray said, indignant, because he would have remembered *that*. *That* might have saved him a world of hurt.

"Yes, I did." Firm, confident, that voice. That voice hadn't just spent the last couple of months tied up in knots.

"No, you didn—"

Mouth on his, familiar, warm, like the night in the foyer of the consulate — a slick, heated blur.

"I told you there wasn't anything improper about our friendship," Fraser said against his mouth, licking in between the words.

Ray struggled not to fall back under. Some stuff left to be said, important stuff, and Fraser was still talking:

"I wasn't interested in him. I didn't want *him*."

Oh God. So sure of himself, Fraser was so *sure* of himself. For a minute, Ray felt envy rise up in him, sharp and bitter. What he wouldn't have given to be that certain of who he was, what he needed, instead of stumbling along as he had, shredded up inside, unsure about everything except the fact that *nothing* had been the way he wanted it.

He pulled himself back, forced himself to concentrate on Fraser's words. God knew they'd had enough silence.

"But I didn't think you...I didn't know if..." And for once, Fraser didn't sound perfectly sure.

Right. Well, how could *Fraser* know when Ray hadn't had a fucking clue? Fraser was sure of himself, no problem there — it was *Ray* he didn't get. Yeah, well, join the club.

Ray rubbed his face on Fraser's damp chest. "I didn't know either, Fraser, so it's not like you missed anything."

Quiet descended, spread over them like a blanket. Not the cold distance of the silences they'd kept before, but the warm closeness of finally being understood.

"I missed you," Fraser murmured into his hair.

"Yeah, me, too," Ray whispered back. "Thought I'd fucked it all up, ruined it."

"And now?" Fraser asked.

Ray raised his head, looked Fraser in the eye. "This is the part where you usually say, 'It's all right, Ray.'"

Fraser smiled. "It's all right, Ray."

"It is?" Man, that felt a lot better than his usual 'it's *not*'. Hell of a lot better.

"Yes."

"Okay."

So he put his head back down and closed his eyes, and let it be all right. Even as sore and tired as he was, there was something in him that said Fraser still wasn't close enough, so he reached out and got a big armful and hung on tight, and Fraser squeezed him back, and that made it even all right.

He felt muscles loosen up that he hadn't even realized were tense, felt himself relax for the first time since he'd seen Charlie Darnell look at Fraser like it was suppertime and he was the blue plate special.

He'd wanted to spare Fraser some grief, and he'd ended up the one doing the grieving. Had wanted to protect him, and ended up the one caught off-guard.

He wondered why he could figure out little things on a case without any trouble, but big things, like the fact that his wife didn't love him anymore, or that maybe, just possibly, his partner did, went right over his head.

Maybe it was time to stop thinking so much, maybe thinking too much was what got him tangled up in that coil in the first place, and he ought to just quit it, just *feel* for awhile. Open his eyes and ears and see what Fraser had to say for himself. He could spread a little blame here, if he played it right. The whole debacle couldn't be *all* his fault.

He moved a little, ready to tell Fraser this was all *his* fault, looking forward to it, almost, the fuss and bother that would follow, the indignant huffs Fraser would puff; yeah, he might have to get physical with him — but Fraser wouldn't let him pull back, not even an inch. Fraser kept him sealed right up against his body, skin to skin.

Ray subsided. Okay, yeah, that worked, too.

Close. Protected. Guarded.

God, it was sweet. So sweet, to be like this, heartbeats blended, mingled breath, inching towards sleep. He wondered if Fraser felt it, too. Then Fraser's hand moved slowly, slid from tight on his back to light on his chest, settling right over his heart, pressing there, and it felt like a kiss.

Yeah, Fraser felt it.

Maybe he hadn't figured it all out yet, had a long way to go, but that much Ray knew.

Whatever he felt, Fraser felt it, too.

\*\*end\*\*