



It was like watching ice forming around a tree during an ice-storm. Ray could literally see the change happening. The closer the plane got to Chicago, the thicker the layer of distance got around Fraser. He hated it. Hated it. He wanted the other Fraser back, the Fraser who had stood in an endless field of snow, looked around, and smiled, a brilliant, delighted smile. The one who had breathed deeply the air that made Ray's throat ache with its purity, who had seemed so perfectly, comfortably at home in those miles on miles of nothing. Watching what happened as they neared 'civilization' was like watching a wild animal who had been caged for years, allowed to run free for a few short days, and then returned to the cage once more. It made him hurt. This wasn't right. Not at all.

Unconsciously he reached out, put his hand against Fraser's, having the bizarre notion that it would be cold, and slick, and hard. Ice. It wasn't of course, and Fraser turned to look at him, eyebrows lifted. Embarrassed, Ray snatched his hand back.

"Sorry," he muttered. "Didn't notice where I was putting it."

Fraser nodded, apparently accepting the lie at face value, though there was a hint of puzzlement in his eyes. Ray stuck his nose in a magazine hastily snatched from the seat pocket in front of him, pretending to be deeply involved in the latest Hollywood rumors. Fraser kept his head turned toward Ray, and after a few

moments of increasing discomfort, Ray flicked a glance at him, only to realize he was staring out the tiny window, not at Ray. His partner's expression was wistful, even sad. The ice hadn't covered him completely yet.

"Fraser?" The name slipped out before Ray could think to call it back.

The Mountie blinked, dark lashes coming down over those smoke-blue eyes, and as they lifted the Mask was firmly back in place. "Yes, Ray?"

"You okay?"

There was a moment, the space of an indrawn breath, then Fraser nodded. "Yes, Ray. I'm perfectly fine."

He didn't go on to say what most people would have said. 'Why?' Probably figured if he didn't ask, then Ray couldn't pry, right? Wrong. Ray scowled. He wanted in. The damned Mountie was shutting him out and he didn't like it. Not after he'd finally gotten him to start unbending a little, letting him in a little.

"Fraser, you've been pretty quiet lately," he said, pointing out the unusual event. Fraser always had something to say, some dumb-but-smart Inuit story, or an appropriate and informational anecdote of some other kind. *Christ. I just thought 'anecdote'* Ray thought to himself disgustedly. How the hell was he supposed to keep up his image if he accidentally let a word like that slip out?

"I'm sorry, Ray. I didn't know it was bothering you. I thought you generally preferred me silent."

"No I don't!" Ray exclaimed, annoyed. "You know I just say that to say that. You being quiet, it's weird, Fraser. It's not...you."

"I'm merely a little fatigued, Ray. It's been an eventful few days."

Ray snorted. "You're telling me!" He frowned, trying to remember when Fraser had started being quiet. It wasn't difficult. The quiet had started after they'd caught Muldoon. He looked at Fraser's impassive face, and thought maybe he knew why. After all, it wasn't every day you found out your mom was murdered, and that your dad had lied to you about it for years.

"Is it...I mean, well...." Damn it. How to say this?

Before he could figure it out, Fraser straightened in his seat, a pleasant, but slightly blank expression on his face.

"I believe we're beginning our descent," he said, tugging at the end of his seat-belt, though it was already securely fastened.

Ray started to try again, only to have the airplane intercom crackle to life as the captain came on to agree with Fraser's statement. They were on their final descent into Chicago and would be landing in just a few minutes. Crap. The moment was gone now. Well, he'd just have to try to find another one. He wasn't going to let Fraser get away with keeping it all inside, not this time. He was damned well gonna talk about it, spill his guts like Ray did to him, about everything, all the time. That was what friends did.

And they were friends. He knew that now, with a bone-deep certainty. Fraser had been given a choice, and had chosen him. More than once. He'd just been too short-sighted and insecure to realize it the first time. Almost even the second time. But having someone risk his own life for you tended to whap you over the head with some things that you maybe might've missed the first time. Yeah, so part of that was duty, the Mountie was nothing if not

dutiful, but there were plenty of men who would have seen their duty as getting Holloway Muldoon first and saving Ray Kowalski's skinny ass somewhere back in fiftieth place. All Ray had been was deadweight, yet Fraser had risked losing Muldoon to make sure Ray was safe.

Ray felt a flush on his face as he remembered that damned ice crevasse. God, could he have been any stupider? Talk about too dumb to live. Maybe it was a good thing he'd never had kids, since anyone that dumb probably ought to be culled from the gene pool. Fraser told him flat out that the ice field was dangerous, so what did he do? Went running off like a moron, and got them both trapped crotch-to-crotch down a two-hundred-foot hole in the ice.

That thought made him blush harder. Oh yeah, smart thing to remember there, Kowalski, he thought, not sure which embarrassed him more, the stupidity or the attraction. Thank God it had been really, really cold in that crevasse, and that he'd been bundled in about eighty-seven layers of clothing. He hadn't gotten hard over another guy in a hundred years, and his idiot body had to pick that moment to do so. Well, that was a flat-out lie. He'd gotten hard over Fraser lots of times before, just never while they were stuck together like glue. What a mess. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Fraser yawn, and he turned to stare, stunned.

"Fraser, you just yawned!" he exclaimed in amazement.

Fraser looked at him, frowning a little. "I was merely attempting to equalize the pressure in my ears, Ray. The change in air pressure as we descend is somewhat painful."

"Oh," Ray said, a little disappointed. For a minute there he thought he'd caught the Mountie in a moment of human weakness. He dug in a pocket and pulled out a stick of gum, proffering it to Fraser. "Here, try this."

"No, thank you," Fraser began. "I don...."

Ray rolled his eyes, flicked the wrapper free and stuck it in Fraser's mouth before he could finish the 't' on 'don't.' "Shut up and chew. It helps with the ears thing."

Looking startled, Fraser did as instructed, swallowed a couple of times, then lifted his eyebrows. Ray grinned.

"Worked, hunh?"

Fraser nodded. "It did indeed. Thank you."

Ray chuckled. "Don't say I never did anything for you."

Fraser looked at him oddly. "I would never say such a thing, Ray."

Even though Ray knew it was just a Fraserish misinterpretation of a common saying, that solemn, serious response sent a little surge of pleasure through him and he couldn't help but smile.

"Me either, Fraser. Me either."

Thank goodness the Mountie didn't have a clue exactly how many and what sort of things he did for Ray. Fortunately for Ray's peace of mind, the stewardess came down the aisle then, taking trash and checking seat-backs, tray-tables, and seat-belts, and he distracted himself with thoughts of getting home and changing his clothes for the first time in days.

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As the cab pulled away from the consulate, Fraser turned to the dark, quiet building and sighed, then walked up the stairs, unlocked the door, and stepped inside. There was a sense of desertion in the air. He knew he was the only living being inside those walls, but it felt momentarily as if that aloneness extended to the entire world. Perhaps he should have taken Ray up on his offer, almost insistence, that Fraser stay at his apartment. But that was not an option he felt comfortable with, so here he was, alone. After carefully re-locking the door, he steeled himself to make the short walk to his office. Stepping inside,

he looked around the cramped space he called home. It had never felt less like home than it did right now. Placing his hat on the hook, he divested himself of coat, then outer clothing, stripping down mechanically to his combinations.

As he opened the closet to hang up his clothes, he stopped suddenly. His throat constricted, and tears welled in his eyes as he realized he would never again open that door and find anything other than a closet behind it. He blinked back the tears, and hung up his things, hurting, but resolute. *Dad. I've lost you, again.* At least, this time, there had been joy as well as sorrow in that loss. His mother's face, that open, loving look...he'd almost forgotten what she'd looked like— and it was so good to have that in his heart again. Part of him wished, just for a moment, that he could have gone with them as they walked into the air, as they became one with...whatever came after. At least then he wouldn't feel so alone.

In the palpable quiet of the deserted consulate, Fraser wished he'd been able to bring Diefenbaker home tonight, but as usual, Customs balked at clearing a wolf-hybrid without special dispensation, and as he'd left the country in a bit of a hurry, he didn't have the necessary documentation with him. Perhaps Ray was right, and it would have been better to lie, but lying was not really in his nature, unless he counted lying to himself. He did a lot of that. Tomorrow it would be better, though. Tomorrow he would have work to occupy his time, his mind, to distract him from his thoughts. The Inspector would expect him to keep things running smoothly until she returned from Ottawa.

Of course, she too, would soon be gone. He knew she had already put in for a transfer. That was part of what she was doing in Ottawa. Where did that leave him? She had promised to support a request for transfer on his part, back to his beloved North, but suddenly he found he had no desire to do so. No, that was one of those lies he told himself. He did want to go

home. But equally, he wanted to stay, here in this noisy, dirty, crime-racked city by the lake. Because if he went 'home' now, he would lose the only person in the world who gave a good God-damn about him. Apparently he could have home, without Ray, or Ray, without home. Not both. Never both. A choice loomed on the horizon, and he'd never felt more miserable in his life.

Flicking away the moisture which had gathered at the corners of his eyes, Fraser realized he was still absently chewing on the piece of gum Ray had given him on the plane. Not given him. Forced on him. The action had shocked him momentarily, the intimacy of it, the faint brush of fingertips against lips, almost against tongue. He'd had to fight the urge to taste those fingers. Instead he had found the hot, potent sting of cinnamon flooding his taste-buds, his nose, too. It had come to him then, why Ray sometimes smelled faintly of spice. And also, that now he knew what the inside of Ray's mouth would taste like....

He clenched his hands against the feelings that thought engendered, helpless against it. He flattened the now much-chewed gum against his palate, searching for any lingering taste of sweet and spice, lost in the brief fantasy that it was not his own mouth but Ray's he caressed with his tongue. The sound of a siren from somewhere beyond the confines of the building brought him sharply out of his delusion. He scowled, disgusted with himself, and spat the gum into the wastebasket. Pathetic. Truly pathetic. But it did make him realize one thing. He could no longer pretend he didn't have these feelings. They were becoming strong enough that he was afraid he was going to let them slip. Right now, with his emotional state so friable from the events of the past few days, he was doubly worried.

Once more he thought of the choice that awaited him, and he closed his eyes, swallowing hard, mouth suddenly dry. Perhaps it was not so difficult a choice after all. It would be better to be alone than to

risk losing that friendship. At least, at a distance, the friendship would still be there. If he stayed...he could ruin it forever. This time, though, he was aware of the potential for disaster. Last time...well, now with twenty/twenty hindsight he suspected he knew what had happened. He was fairly certain that Ray Vecchio had become uncomfortable with the closeness of their relationship, perhaps had heard the same rumors that Fraser had heard, and ignored, knowing them to be untrue. But his old friend might have believed them, deciding Fraser felt more for him than simple partnership, or even friendship. Why else would he have chosen to disappear from his life with hardly a word? And what other explanation could there be for that last, odd conversation, where Ray had emphasized over and over again that they were friends.

He wondered if that had been his first partner's way of telling him that there could never be more than that between them, not that he had even considered it, not with Ray Vecchio. Whatever it was that attracted him to Ray Kowalski had not been there with his previous partner. Still, he suspected that was exactly what Ray had meant. He would never know for sure, as it was not something he could ever bring himself to ask Ray— Ray Vecchio— about; he could ask Ray, his Ray, about almost anything. He was distracted for a moment, wondering how Ray Vecchio was doing, and made a mental note to call him in the morning and find out. He stood for a moment, indecisive, then he opened the 'blank forms' file drawer and took out an application for transfer, rolling it into the typewriter. There were some things a computer simply wasn't very good for, and filling out forms was one of them. Seating himself, he hesitated for a moment, then began to type, a strangely empty feeling suffusing him as he did.

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The apartment seemed small, cluttered, and overly hot all of a sudden, though it

had never felt that way before. Ray got up for the fourth time since lying down, and went and turned the thermostat way down, not that it would help, since all his neighbors undoubtedly had theirs all cranked up to 'summer swelter.' He went into the bathroom and ran cool water over his hands, smoothed them over his face, felt marginally better. Roaming aimlessly around the apartment, he scowled at the clutter, having a sudden urge to throw away at least half of what he owned. Why did he keep all this shit anyway? He didn't use most of it, and a lot of it was from his Stella days anyway. It seemed stupid to keep it now, when it no longer had any significance.

He was still too hot. Maybe opening a window would help. Pulling up the blinds, Ray opened one, standing naked in the cold air that flowed in from outside, and relaxed a little. Better. As he stood there, the photo of himself and Stella caught his eye, the one that had sat by the fan ever since he'd moved in. He picked it up and looked at it, wondering why he still had it out. He should have put it away ages ago. That was a closed chapter. With a slightly wistful feeling he placed it face-down next to the fan. Suddenly unable to stand the claustrophobic feelings the apartment gave him for a moment longer, he went into the kitchen and got out the box of garbage bags from underneath the sink, snapped one open, and set to work.

By two-forty a.m. he had made six trips to the dumpster in the parking lot, and he finally felt as if he could breathe again. He wasn't a neat person, and the apartment would never look pristine, but at least now he didn't get the feeling that everything was about to tumble over and smother him. And most of the things that had brought that Stella-ache to his heart were gone now, or at least put away where they weren't a constant reminder of what a fuck-up he was. Time to get on with life, stop pretending that somehow the clock would

turn back and everything would be back like it was before he and Stella split.

He didn't even want that any more. He wanted to go forward, not back. Time to...what? He didn't really know. He just knew there was a change trembling in the air, in himself. A change that would begin with giving up a name that had belonged to another man. He was actually looking forward to it. To being Stanley Raymond Kowalski again, instead of Ray Vecchio. Well, he still wasn't wild about the Stanley part, but the Kowalski felt right. It was his name, and it no longer hurt to use it, no longer made him think of Stella, instead of himself. Yawning, he stretched, and wandered into the bedroom, turning out lights as he went. He could still catch a few hours of sleep before he had to get up and go to work. He kicked off the sweats he'd put on to make all those trips to the dumpster, pulled off his tee-shirt, and crawled into bed. And lay there, wide awake, despite his fatigue. Something wasn't right. Something was missing.

The bedroom felt as close and stuffy as the living room had earlier. He flung out of bed again, and opened his bedroom window a crack, then, as he turned back toward the bed, it suddenly hit him. He was too hot because he'd just spent days in the snowfields of Fraser's native realm. He couldn't stand the clutter because there was no clutter in Fraser-land. Just clean, cold, emptiness. The thing that was missing was Fraser. For the first time in days, he wasn't with Fraser. He couldn't sleep because Fraser wasn't so close he could hear him breathing, or smell him, or reach out with a hand or a toe and touch him. No. Oh, crap. No. This wasn't, as he'd told himself on quite a few previous occasions when his fantasies started to wander in a Fraserly direction, just a momentary interest in a very attractive man. This was more. He wasn't that stupid, was he? He hadn't really gone and fallen for the damned Mountie, had he?

He sat down abruptly on the edge of the bed, and buried his face in his hands with a groan. Partner. Part-ner. Mountie. Constable Benton Fraser. Not boyfriend. Not in a million years. But oh, God, how he wished it were otherwise. No wonder Stella no longer moved him. He had a new obsession. One with skin like milk, he thought, waxing poetic. Sable hair, and sky-colored eyes, and red lips...shit, he looked like fucking Snow White gone butch. All those Disney movies he'd watched as a kid must have invaded his psyche further than he'd realized. He had a short guffaw at the idea of himself as Prince Charming, and lay back, staring at the ceiling with sandy eyes. *Oh man, Kowalski, you are one stupid son of a bitch. Get a serious jones for your partner. Dumbest-ass thing he could possibly have done. Well, at least he'd figured it out now. Wasn't there some sort of saying about knowing being half the battle?*

As he stared up at the ceiling he saw the shadowy spiderweb of the dream-catcher Fraser had made for him swaying in the breeze from the open window. He still remembered that bizarre story Fraser had told him that day in the cemetery, crouching behind tombstones as those whacked-out romantic cigar smugglers had taken potshots at them. Eagle feathers. All the way from Commerce City, Colorado. He wondered what that place was like. Weird-ass name for a town in Colorado. Sounded like a shopping mall. Weren't places out West supposed to sound all macho and natural, like Moose Antler or something? Frontierish sorts of names, like they had in Canada. He reached up and touched a fingertip to one of the dream-catcher's dangling feathers. It felt cool and silky against his skin. *Catch this dream, he thought. Catch it, and take it away. It's not a nightmare, but it's a dream I can't afford.*

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The morning had dripped by in a slow, stringy runnel of time, like molasses in

January. Though Turnbull had returned, the Inspector had been delayed for several more days in Ottawa, leaving Fraser to run the consulate in her place. He could do that, easily; he knew all the ins and outs and nuances of the job as well as she did. By mid-morning he had completed his report on the Muldoon incident and placed it on her desk, along with his request for transfer. Then he'd dealt with the stack of requests for information on immigration and travel policies, and set Turnbull to filing a backlog of Form 43-oblique-stroke-12-dash-B's which the Inspector had allowed to accumulate in her 'to be filed' basket. He had to deal with a young woman who had lost her passport, and had just finished up with that when the phone rang, startling him, since Turnbull had been doing receptionist duty. He must have been too busy to catch this one.

"Canadian consulate, Acting Liaison Officer Fraser speaking, how may I assist you?"

There was a brief pause, and then a husky, slightly nasal male voice said. "So, like, does a bear shop in the woods, Liaison Officer Fraser?"

A spontaneous grin shaped his mouth. "I don't believe I've ever seen a bear shop, either in or out of the woods, Detective Kowalski."

They both chuckled at that, and then Ray spoke again.

"They springing Dief from solitary today? Do you need a ride out to the airport?"

Fraser closed his eyes for a moment, touched that Ray would think of that. "Yes, I've arranged for him to be released, and I would certainly appreciate a ride."

"Thought you might, since you won't lie about ol' fuzz-face and tell 'em he's just a dog, so you couldn't get a taxi back and I don't figure you'd wanna walk all that way."

"Well, we have walked that far on many occasions, Ray."

"Yeah, I know. We walked over half of fu...er, the dang Northwest Territory. But

that don't mean you should do it in Chicago. I get off at five, I'll be there as soon as I can, okay?"

"That will be fine, Ray," Fraser said gratefully. "I'll attempt to be ready when you arrive, but the Inspector was delayed getting back and left me in charge."

"No problem, Fraser, I can wait. Lucky you, no boss to ream you out."

There was a faint edge to his friend's voice that concerned him, and Fraser frowned. "Was the lieutenant upset?"

Ray laughed faintly. "Uh, yeah, you could say that. Said if I ever pulled a stunt like that again he'd have my badge. Then he told me I was up for another effin' citation." Ray sighed. "I asked him not to, but he said it was a done deal."

"You were extremely helpful in apprehending Muldoon, Ray, and you deserve recognition for it."

There was a short silence, then Ray snorted. "Yeah, like I wasn't a hundred-sixty pounds of drag the whole trip. But thanks for making nice."

Fraser frowned. "Ray, I was not just being 'nice.'"

"Oh, no, you would never do that," Ray said, sounding amused.

Suddenly Fraser could hear loud voices and noises in the background which were muffled momentarily by the sound of a hand over the mouthpiece, then Ray returned to the phone.

"Sorry, Fraser, gotta go. See you at five. We'll go to my place after we spring Dief and get pizza, or something special for the fuzzy guy."

Fraser smiled. "That would be very pleasant, Ray."

"Great, see you!"

Fraser hung up the phone, still smiling at the prospect of being able to spend time in Ray's company, until it hit him that spending time with him was something which would soon be impossible. He'd swallowed heavily at that thought, fighting back the tears that seemed to lurk far too close to the surface in the past few days. He

had to get a grip on his emotions. He couldn't go on like this. He leaned his elbows on the desk and put his head in his hands, the heels of his hands pressed against his eyes, and took a deep breath, trying to regain some control.

"Sir? Are you all right?" Turnbull's voice was gentle, and concerned. "Is anything wrong?"

Fraser looked up, startled, not having heard his subordinate come into the room. He blinked and cleared his throat. "Ah, no, Turnbull. Nothing is wrong, I'm fine."

Turnbull looked at him closely for a moment. "You're sure?"

"I'm sure, Constable," he said, invoking the formality of the title. "Just a slight headache."

It wasn't a lie, he told himself. His head did hurt. But his heart hurt more.

"Ah. I see. Would you like an aspirin? Some tea?"

Fraser shook his head. "No, thank you, Turnbull. I'm sure it will go away on its own."

"As you say, sir. If you'll just hand me the rest of the 43-oblique-stroke-12-dash-B forms, I'll get them taken care of."

Fraser handed him the stack of paper and held his breath until the other man had left the room, only then expelling it in a deep sigh. Yes, it would go away on its own. Or rather, he would.

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Ray got to the consulate at a quarter of five. He'd finished the case he was working on at four-thirty-two, and after convincing himself there wasn't really time to start anything new, he'd just slipped out early and headed for his car. He knew he shouldn't do it, but he wanted to see Fraser. Needed to see Fraser. With the weight of the previous night's epiphany behind him, he understood why, and that was exactly why he shouldn't be doing this, but he felt like a junkie deprived of his drug of choice. He parked in a spot that wouldn't be legal for

another two hours, and put his 'official police vehicle' card in the window to avoid getting a ticket. He knew that drove Fraser crazy, but everyone did it and Ray wasn't about to change his stripes at this late date.

He whistled tunelessly as he loped up the steps to the consulate door, nodded to the unfamiliar guy in red who stood next to it, and knocked. Turnbull answered it, smiling as he saw who was there.

"Detective Vecchio, good to see you again, sir!"

"It's Kowalski, Turnbull. Vecchio's the other guy again now, remember?"

Turnbull looked momentarily confused, then he remembered, and nodded. "Yes, of course, Detective Kowalski. You're here to pick up Constable Fraser?"

"Yep, we gotta go spring his alter ego from inhumane bondage."

"Ah, you're going to retrieve Diefenbaker from quarantine."

"I just said that."

"So you did. I'm afraid that Constable Fraser is currently assisting someone with their immigration forms in his office, but if you'd like, you can wait for him in the Inspector's office. He'll be finished in just a few moments, I'm sure."

"Thanks, Turnbull. That'd be fine."

Turnbull let him into the office and closed the door behind him. Ray stood for a moment, indecisively. He always felt a little uncomfortable in here. Usually because Thatcher was glaring at him. But she wasn't here this time, so he took his time, wandering around, inspecting the room as he hadn't been able to in ages, not since the time he'd spent here after the Volpe shooting. He shuddered a little, memories playing out, and not just bad ones. Fraser bending over him, dabbing that stinky stuff onto his cut forehead, so close it was like he was going to kiss him. Fraser slipping those cuffs on, looking so earnest and caring and apologetic as he did...

Shaking off that line of thought, Ray eyed Thatcher's big desk chair with envy.

Must be nice to rate such a great chair. Bet her back never hurt. With an evil little grin, he plopped down in it and spun it around, testing it out. Nice. He put his feet on the desk, and got out his phone to call and schedule a pizza delivery for after wolf-retrieval, then knocked some papers off onto the floor. Oops. Quickly he leaned down and gathered up the scattered forms, straightening them neatly. A glance at the top page told him he was holding Fraser's report on the Muldoon case. Curious, he started reading. Maybe he could crib from Fraser when he wrote up his version for Welsh. Except that no one would ever believe he could write this well. It was like reading a novel.

He got to the last page of the report, flipped to the next document, hoping there was more to read, and stopped, staring at the heading on the form. "Request for Transfer." It had Fraser's name on it. It had Fraser's signature on it. It listed several potential posting alternatives, all of them in Canada, and the date next to the signature was today's. For what felt like forever he simply sat there, staring at it, feeling as if someone had just kicked him in the stomach. Fraser was leaving. He was leaving. Voluntarily. He wanted to leave. Oh, God. He tried to look at the form again to be sure he hadn't misunderstood, but couldn't see it clearly, between the shaking of his hands as he held it, and the blur in his eyes from the tears. He couldn't get his mind past that first stunned realization that Fraser was going to leave. Nothing had hurt this much since Stella had served him with divorce papers.

Sometime later, he had no idea how long, he heard Fraser's voice, and Turnbull's, as they spoke outside the door. Quickly he put the papers back on the desk, then leaned back in the chair, trying desperately to act as if everything were normal. He wanted to give Fraser a chance to bring it up, didn't want to jump all over



him and demand answers. Surely there was some reasonable explanation. A moment later Fraser stepped into the room, smiling, as if there were nothing wrong in the world.

"Ray! I'm sorry to keep you waiting. I've asked Turnbull to close up here so we can leave."

Ray shoved himself out of the chair with an approximation of his usual energy. His cell-phone fell off his lap and onto the floor as he did, and he had to lean down to pick it up and put it back into his pocket. "Great, let's get at 'er. Dief's probably going stir crazy by now."

"I'm sure he will be grateful to be released," Fraser said, falling into step beside him.

As they exited the building Ray kept his gaze straight ahead, wishing it were still light so he would have an excuse to put on his sunglasses. He was sure his eyes were red. As if reading his thoughts, Fraser looked at him, frowning.

"Are you feeling all right, Ray?"

"I'm fine, Fraser," he snapped.

"You look a bit pale," Fraser said dubiously.

"Didn't sleep good." That was safe. No need to say why.

"Ah. Yes, well, the city is a noisy place. After spending time in the quiet of the open spaces once more, I confess I had some trouble sleeping last night as well."

I'll bet you did, Ray thought bitterly.

"Yeah, that's probably it," he said aloud, unlocking the GTO. "Here you go, get in, let's go rescue the wolf."

Fraser got in, and as he was buckling up Ray started the engine, then picked up the 'official business' placard and reached across to put it in the glove-box. Doing so made him lean close to Fraser, and he could smell him suddenly, which sent little prickles of awareness along his skin. He shivered, and reached to turn on the heater so Fraser wouldn't wonder why. He pulled into traffic smoothly, and drove, waiting for Fraser to say something. He didn't. Neither of them spoke, and it was getting

uncomfortable. Waiting at a stoplight, he shot a glance at Fraser, found him staring down in the general direction of the floorboards, his face expressionless. As if sensing Ray's glance, he looked up suddenly and their eyes met. Ray cleared his throat, and Fraser looked away.

"How was your day?" Fraser asked politely, meaninglessly.

"Fine." Ray returned, equally meaninglessly.

"That's good," Fraser said.

"Yeah," Ray answered.

Silence returned. After a moment or two, Ray reached down and snapped on the radio. Acidic hard-rock filled the car. Fraser winced, and Ray turned it down a little, but didn't change the station. Anything but silence, or speech. That last conversation was way too close to the ones he'd had with Stella, just before they'd split for good. He didn't want to think about that. The remainder of the trip to the airport was accomplished without conversation. Ray waited in the car while Fraser went in and got Diefenbaker, ostensibly so he wouldn't have to pay for parking, but really because he needed a few minutes alone. It was beginning to dawn on him that Fraser had no intention of saying a word about his request for transfer. Apparently he was just going to hit him with it as a *fait accompli*. An accomplished fact. He knew what that meant, you couldn't be married to a lawyer and not learn some of that stuff.

He wondered if he could make it through the evening without cracking. Why the hell had he invited Fraser over for dinner? Oh yeah. Because he'd thought they were friends, then, and had wanted to spend time with him, just talking and shit. Maybe put a friendly arm around him, innocent, but an excuse to touch...he stiffened suddenly, wondering. What if eighty-seven layers hadn't been enough clothes? What if the cold hadn't been enough? What if Ben had noticed? Was that why he wanted a transfer? Was that why the sudden quiet, the layers of ice? Oh,

Christ. Of course it was. He put his face in his hands, then snapped back upright as the passenger door opened and the seat was put forward.

"There you are, Dief, in you go," Fraser said heartily.

A white-furred blur launched itself into the car and dove straight for Ray as if he were dinner.

"What's his problem?" Ray asked, trying to fend off the licking-machine that Dief had become. "Geez, Dief!"

Fraser settled into the car, looking at the wolf with a frown. "It would appear he's pleased to see you, Ray."

Ray wiped his wolf-slobbered face with one hand and shoved at Diefenbaker with the other. "Nice somebody is," he muttered under his breath. "Enough! Lay off!" he said directly into the wolf's face. Dief refused to comply, continuing to try to crowd in close, to lick and nuzzle. "Fraser, would you get him off me? I'm not his freaking girlfriend!" Ray exploded suddenly, irrationally angry.

Fraser grabbed Dief's muzzle and physically hauled him away from Ray. "Diefenbaker, stop," he ordered sternly. "That's enough."

The wolf whined, but reluctantly settled into the back seat. Ray started the car.

"So, anyplace you wanna eat?" he asked, hoping that Fraser would suggest a restaurant so he wouldn't have to take them back to his place.

"You had suggested pizza at your apartment," Fraser reminded him.

He remembered. Oh, he did. That memory was razor-sharp now, cutting him so deeply he was surprised he wasn't bleeding. "Yeah, just thought maybe you'd want something else," he muttered.

"No, that's fine, Ray. Dief likes pizza, especially Tony's pizza."

"Pizza it is, then," Ray said bleakly.

Fraser looked at him, apparently catching his tone. "Did you want something else?" he asked, a little apologetically.

"Nah. I'm not all that hungry, anything's good."

Ben stared at him, frowning a little. "Ray, are you sure you're feeling all right?"

Ray glared at him. "I said I was fine, didn't I? I'm fan-fuckin'-tastic. Okay? Got it?"

Ben's eyes widened, but he nodded. "Yes, Ray. I didn't mean to upset you."

"I'm not upset!" he snarled.

"No, no of course not," Fraser said soothingly, looking distressed.

Ray clenched his hands on the wheel. This was not going to work. He couldn't do this. Couldn't pretend. "Look, Fraser, I'm sorry, I guess maybe I don't feel so good after all. Guess everything's catching up to me. Just didn't wanna let you down."

"It's all right, Ray. Why don't you just take Diefenbaker and me back to the consulate? We'll manage on our own tonight."

Ray closed his eyes. Yes. They would. They'd manage fine without him. Just fine. Too bad he couldn't say the same. "Yeah. That's probably a good idea, Fraser. I'll do that."

He put the car in gear, and headed for the consulate.

* * *

Something was wrong. Ray hadn't called him in two days. The first day of silence hadn't disturbed him unduly, but after part of a second, Fraser had worried that Ray had fallen ill. Unfortunately he didn't answer his phone at home, and a discreet call to Francesca told him Ray had been at work both days, though spending most of his time in the field. Alone. Fraser fretted at that, knowing Ray's tendency to impulsive actions, but couldn't get away from the consulate to accompany him, nor had he been asked to. That bothered him. Ray had always asked him along on his cases. Why hadn't he this time? Of course, Fraser *had* told him that he would be

occupied with his consular duties, so perhaps that was all it was.

Fraser let himself think that for a little while, until Dief's pacing and worried grumbles made him take note. "Do you think so?" he asked. At the affirmative whine, he sighed. "I think so too. He's not acting normally at all, and I have no idea why."

Dief trotted to the door and looked back at him expectantly.

"No, Diefenbaker, we can't leave, you know that. Not until after hours."

Dief groaned. Fraser stood up, and went to the door. "Turnbull?"

The other man looked up from what he was doing at the reception desk. "Yes, Constable Fraser?"

"The other day, when Detective Kowalski arrived, how did he seem?"

"Seem, sir?"

"Yes. His, well, his emotional state. Did he appear...normal?"

Turnbull frowned thoughtfully, then nodded. "Yes, sir, he did. I would even venture to say he seemed happy. Why?"

Fraser shook his head. "No reason, Turnbull. Just curious." He returned to his desk, still puzzled. What had caused the abrupt change in Ray's mood, then, between his arrival at the consulate, and his departure a short time later? When Fraser had opened the door to Inspector Thatcher's office and seen him sitting in her chair, he'd looked...stricken. White-faced, and stunned, as if he'd just had some bad news. He'd not said a word, though, and had gotten up immediately. Fraser frowned, remembering that Ray's cellular phone had fallen to the floor as he'd stood. Had he gotten a call? Some sort of distressing news? If so, why hadn't he said something? As he was mulling that over, his own phone rang, and he answered it automatically. The voice that returned his greeting was a bit of a surprise, though.

"Hiya, Benny! How're you doing?"

For a moment Fraser was frozen in place, transported back in time, then he

snapped out of it. "Ray! Good to hear from you! How are you feeling? I'm sorry I've not been by to see you, but since Inspector Thatcher is still away, I've had very little time to myself." He felt guilty, suddenly shamefully aware that he hadn't contacted Ray Vecchio since he'd gotten back from the Territories. Granted, he hadn't been back long, but he'd known Ray was out of the hospital and physically doing well, and should certainly have at least phoned. Disgraceful behavior.

"Actually, I'm doing great, Benny. Been pretty busy, myself. I'm, uh, I've been seeing someone. Someone I met at the station."

Fraser's eyebrows went up. "Someone you met at the station?" he prompted, trying to think of who might have attracted Ray's interest.

"Yeah. A gorgeous blonde, great legs. She's with the State's Attorney's office. You know her, or so she says, though she knows your partner a lot better."

An odd feeling began to spread through Fraser's chest. No. Oh, no. "Stella Kowalski?" he asked, almost in a whisper.

"Got it in one," Ray said, sounding amused. "Nice lady. I really like her, a lot, Benny." His voice lowered, and became more emotional. "I think, well, I think it might be serious. Haven't felt this way about anyone in a long time, not since Angie."

Fraser closed his eyes, shaking his head as if that would change what Ray had just told him. That explained a great deal. A very great deal.

"Anyway," Ray continued. "I wondered if you wanted to get together sometime, touch base some."

"Yes, Ray, I'd like that," Fraser said sincerely, though his mind was not on lunch with his former partner. It was on the emotional state of his current one. He remembered all too well how Ray had reacted the last time he'd found out that Stella was seeing someone seriously. This must be killing him. He had to find him. Talk to him.

"I know Thatcher's got you tied up at work all week, so, how's lunch Saturday work for you? I would have suggested dinner but my doc won't let me stay out late yet so lunch works better for me. Say, around one?"

"That would be fine, Ray," Fraser replied. "Lunch on Saturday, that's tomorrow, at one."

"Great! Frannie says you're living at the consulate now? That true?" Ray sounded disbelieving.

"It is," Fraser assured him. "I have been for some time. As you probably heard, my old apartment burned down, and this was convenient."

Ray chuckled. "You always were weird, Benny. Well, I'll come by for you, since I assume you still don't have your own car."

"That would also be correct," Fraser said, smiling a little. It would be good to see Ray, to talk to him again. It was reassuring, to think that after all this time, they could still be friends.

"Good. We'll go to that diner we always used to like over by your old place. It'll be like old times. See ya then!"

Ray hung up, and Fraser immediately got up, going to the door. "Turnbull?"

"Sir?" Turnbull called from down the hall.

"I have to go out. I'm leaving you in charge here."

Turnbull came around the corner, looking surprised. "You're leaving? Now? Is it an emergency?" he asked.

"It may well be. I'm not yet certain."

Turnbull nodded as if that made sense, and straightened to attention. "You may rely on me, sir. I'll maintain the post."

"I have every faith in you, Turnbull."

Turnbull glowed proudly, and saluted.

Fraser worried all the way to the station, and more so when he arrived there to find Ray was not on the premises. He was about to go looking for Francesca to ask her if she'd seen him, when Lieutenant Welsh opened his door and motioned him in.

"Constable, a word, please?"

Fraser nodded and stepped into his office. The older man closed the door, and also closed the blinds, giving them privacy from the noisy activity in the bullpen, and motioned him to a seat, resuming his own. He sat for a moment, frowning at his desk, and then looked up, his expression grave and concerned.

"I'm surprised to see you here, Constable. Kowalski gave me the impression you wouldn't be around much any more."

Fraser frowned, wondering why Ray would have said that. Then he realized Welsh must have misunderstood. "My absence is only temporary, sir, until Inspector Thatcher returns from Ottawa." At least, for the time being, he thought. Eventually, of course, it would be of longer duration, but no one here needed to know that yet.

"I see. Well, I'm glad to hear that, because frankly, I'm a little concerned about Kowalski."

Fraser sighed. "In fact, sir, so am I. I came here to find him. I spoke to Ray Vecchio earlier, and, well, I learned some news that I thought might have...ah...distressed him."

"Vecchio told you about himself, and Assistant State's Attorney Kowalski, right?" Welsh interrupted.

Fraser nodded. "Yes sir."

Welsh shook his head. "I sure didn't see that one coming, I tell you, though that's neither here nor there. But I'm not sure that the Vecchio and Stella thing is the problem. See, as soon as Kowalski came in on his first day back, I hauled him in here to talk to him about it, one-on-one, didn't want him to hear it from Dewey. But when I told him, he was just kind of neutral, like he didn't really care much, though he made a couple of derogatory comments about Vecchio. He seemed fine for the rest of the day. It wasn't until the *next* day that he showed up looking like his best friend just died."

"The next day?" Fraser queried, puzzled. That would have been the day

after he'd driven Fraser out to the airport. That meant he'd already known about Stella and Ray Vecchio when he arrived at the consulate that evening, apparently in a good mood. That seemed to invalidate his theory as to the cause of Ray's upset.

"Yep, the next day." Welsh confirmed. "He didn't say a word to anyone, just took off and started working like a damned street-cleaner. He's back here five times that first day, books three drug dealers, a domestic violence, and a DUI. All by his lonesome. Now you know and I know if someone makes an arrest a day that's doing well, and here he's got five. And one of them's a DUI? He's not a patrol officer, he's a detective. It's not his job to bring in drunk drivers. Today he comes in and I ask him what the hell he thinks he's doing, and he just shrugs and says 'my job.' I tell him to stick to the cases he's already got and he says sure, and the next thing I know, he's gone again, without filling out the board, and without his damned phone. It's still on his desk. I think you'll agree with me that this is not normal behavior, even for Kowalski."

The knot of fear in Fraser's throat that had been getting larger as he listened prevented him from speaking for a moment, but finally he managed to shake his head. "No sir, it's not."

"I didn't think so either. So. Have you talked to him today?"

"No sir, we haven't spoken since the evening after we arrived back. He took me out to the airport to pick up Diefenbaker from quarantine, and we were supposed to have dinner, but he wasn't feeling well so he dropped me off at the consulate. I haven't seen him since then."

That seemed to surprise Welsh. He regarded Fraser thoughtfully for a moment, then folded his hands together, and looked uncomfortable.

"So, you two haven't, ah, been together since you got back to the States?"

Fraser shook his head. "Not other than sharing a cab from the airport, and picking up Diefenbaker."

Welsh thought about that for a bit, then spoke again. "That's a little unusual, isn't it?" he asked, giving Fraser an odd look. "I mean, you two usually...hang around together, don't you?"

Fraser had a feeling he was missing an important implication, but couldn't think of what it might be. "I suppose it is a little unusual, since we generally see one another daily, either on a work-related or a personal basis."

Welsh cleared his throat. "Did you guys have a fight or something while you were up North? Or maybe when you got the wolf?"

"A fight?" Fraser asked blankly.

"Yeah, you know, a tiff, a quarrel, a spat."

Fraser frowned, and shook his head. "No sir. Ray did seem a little temperamental on the drive to the airport and after we picked up Diefenbaker, but as I said earlier, he intimated that he was not feeling quite the thing and I put it down to that."

Welsh sighed. "Constable, don't be dense. You know what I'm asking."

Fraser eyed him dubiously. "No, sir, I'm afraid I don't."

"You're going to make me say it, aren't you?"

"Say what, sir?"

Welsh looked exasperated. "Listen, I'm not stupid, Fraser. You two get back from Canada and you don't see each other for three days? That's not normal. Not for you two. And then Kowalski starts acting like Supercop, which from what I read in his file is exactly how he handled his divorce. So, since you're being coy, I'll be frank, did you and Kowalski split up?"

Fraser stared at the other man, openmouthed, as he finally realized what he was being asked. He felt blood rush into his face, and he tugged at his collar, trying to breathe in a room that suddenly seemed devoid of air. Welsh eyed him, handing him

a Styrofoam cup. He gulped desperately at the liquid in the cup, barely registering that it was cold, bitter coffee. Finally he cleared his throat, and spoke.

"I'm afraid you're laboring under a misapprehension, sir. Ray and I are not...we're not...I mean, not like...we don't" Unable to think of a way to finish his sentence, he let it trail off and hoped the lieutenant understood.

Apparently he did. Welsh's eyes widened. "You're not?" he asked, sounding incredulous.

"No sir."

That earned a frown. "You expect me to believe that?"

"Sir, you know I don't lie."

"You swear to me you and Kowalski aren't sleeping together?"

Fraser thought back over their time together, and knew he could not say that, it was not, literally, true. "While we have slept in close proximity on several occasions, we are not...." he took a deep breath, and made himself say it. "We're not lovers, if I take your meaning correctly. We never have been."

Not that he didn't long to be. Not that he didn't dream of touching that pale golden skin, of learning the texture of three-day stubble against his mouth, of sliding his tongue between those sullen lips to discover the taste of him, of feeling the thrill of hard, hot flesh against his own. Closing his eyes he shook off those thoughts.

Welsh sat back in his chair and looked at him through narrowed eyes. "Then what the hell is wrong with him? I was sure that had to be it, especially after he told me you wouldn't be around any more, and no, I didn't misunderstand that, Fraser, my hearing is fine. He meant what he said, and he said you were transferring back to Canada."

Fraser suddenly felt very cold. "Ray said that?"

"His very words."

"May I ask under what circumstances?"

"Yeah. I called him on the carpet this morning for going out without backup, and he said he didn't have a partner. I pointed out that although you're not officially a member of this department, you've always served as his backup. He said you wouldn't be doing that any more. I asked why, and first he got real quiet, then he got defensive, the way he does, and said you were going home soon and wouldn't be available, and I should just drop it. Then he said it wasn't public knowledge yet, and I wasn't to spread it around because he didn't want Frannie to get upset. So, is it true?"

Fraser opened his mouth to lie, and couldn't do it. Avoiding Welsh's gaze, he nodded. "I am planning to request a transfer back home, yes. But I don't see how he could possibly know that. I barely know it myself, and I certainly have not mentioned it to him."

Welsh shook his head, sighing. "Kowalski's funny that way. Sometimes he just knows things. Instinct, he calls it. Hunches. If he's like most of us, he knows when someone he's close to is holding out on him. And not only is he close to you, he's damned good at putting two and two together."

"Sir, I told you, we're not...that close," Fraser protested feebly.

"Constable, I like you. And against my better judgement I like Kowalski too, you're both good guys. You don't have to lie to me. It's not my cup of coffee, but I know it happens. Even to cops," Welsh said, looking weary. "You know, it happens to partners, more often than you'd think. Something about that bond...." The older man shook his head and paced for a moment, then came to stand beside him, a hand on his shoulder in an almost paternal touch. "Look, however things are or aren't between the two of you, you're friends, right? Go find him, Fraser. Right now I think he doesn't care very much about anything, and that's a very dangerous place for a cop to be. If you have any idea where he is, find him."

Fraser straightened. "I shall, sir. You may rely on me."

Welsh nodded, formality reestablished. "I know that, Constable. Good luck."

"Thank you, sir," Fraser said, meaning it. He turned to leave, then stopped at the door. "Sir, is there any way you could, discreetly of course, ask the mobile units to keep an eye out for Ray's vehicle? It is fairly distinctive, and it would help narrow down the search."

Welsh nodded. "Already done, Constable, although I thought I'd be the one out talking to him once they spotted it. I think it will be better coming from you. But you're going to have a lot of work to do once you find him, you know that, don't you?"

He did. He still wasn't sure how Ray knew about the transfer, but it was clear he did, and that he was deeply hurt by it. He was almost one-hundred percent certain that the lieutenant was inaccurate in his perception of Ray's feelings toward him, but even if he felt nothing more than friendship, the hurt was still there. That would have to be dealt with, and it would be neither easy, nor pleasant.

"Oh, and, Constable, take Kowalski's cell-phone so I can reach you if they find his car."

Fraser nodded, and left the office. He stopped at Ray's desk to pick up the cellular phone, and looked over the topmost files on the off chance that he could garner a clue from them. They were all familiar, cases he and Ray had been working on together in the week or two before the Muldoon affair. He frowned suddenly, realizing that there were three files missing from that group. The three ugliest files, of course. He closed his eyes and fought back panic. Exactly the sort of cases Ray should not be working on



by himself. Unfortunately that still left him too many options. Which of the three would Ray be most likely to pursue on his own? Since he'd found a clue in Ray's personal space at the district, perhaps his other personal space would yield clues as well.

Setting his hat firmly in place, he headed for Ray's apartment.

* * *

Ray opened his closet and dragged his spare duffel bag out of the back, unzipping it to make sure it held everything he would need. It should, since he'd never unpacked it after his encounter with Marcus Ellery, but he wanted to make sure he

hadn't forgotten anything in that crypt, which now felt like aeons ago. He thought back on that, and closed his eyes. That had been the first time Fraser had called him his friend. That had felt so damned good, to have someone who cared, even if it was some freak of a Canadian. It had been so long. Then there had been that whole, weird, Fraserish un-birthday party. And the dream-catcher. It had hung over his bed since that night.

It came to him then, that Fraser hadn't made the dream-catcher for him. He must have made it for Vecchio. With all the trouble it took to get the eagle feather, he had to have requested it long before he'd ever met Ray Kowalski. Somehow that robbed it of some of its meaning. Maybe that was why it hadn't caught the dream he'd needed it to catch. Why it wasn't catching the nightmare he was having right now. No, that wasn't fair. Maybe he shouldn't expect it to be able to catch a nightmare that was real, or a dream that came with open eyes. Not even magic was that strong.

He shook his head, disgusted with himself. For God's sake, Kowalski, get a grip. Go do your job. Welsh told you to do your job, so do it. He finished his inventory of the duffel's contents, and zipped the bag shut again. He sat for a moment on the couch and looked at the three files, trying to decide which one to start with. The Clegg case was hot, but the guy didn't have a real base of operation, and it would be hard to find him on short notice. Chilton was a good bet, with a stationary operation, but was also pretty cautious. He'd probably be noticed before he could get anything on the guy. So that left Roven, who was slick, and thought he was smarter than everyone else, which made him careless. When they'd been working the case before, Ray had noticed Roven had a bad habit of taking the merchandise for a trial run, whether it was drugs or the girls he ran. That was an exploitable weakness.

Dropping the other two files on the coffee table, Ray smiled a little viciously as he picked up Roven's folder and leafed through it, looking for the address he needed. Yeah, he could get behind taking Roven down. It would give some meaning to a suddenly hollow existence. Being a cop was all he'd ever been good at. Clearly he was an abject failure at everything else. So he'd be the best damned cop he could be, and that would have to be enough.

* * *

As she had done once before, Ray's landlady let Fraser into Ray's home without a fuss. She'd gotten used to seeing him around, knew he and Ray were friends. But when she opened the door, Fraser thought for a moment that she had opened the wrong apartment until he saw the familiar string of chili-pepper lights around the kitchen pass-through, and the cactus on the counter next to the telephone. He stepped inside and looked around, feeling slightly stunned.

The claustrophobic feeling Ray's apartment normally evoked in him was gone. The etageres and shelves which had formerly held a myriad of assorted knick-knacks and clutter were nearly empty, now displaying only a few select items. The walls were bare of posters and photographs save two of Ray's family. Most telling of all, the photographs of Ray with Stella were gone. Fraser scowled, puzzled. What did that mean? Was that a reflection of Ray's upset over Stella dating Ray Vecchio? No, that didn't make sense. Ray hadn't taken down her photographs when she'd been seeing Alderman Orsini.

Fraser suddenly realized he had absolutely no idea what was going on in Ray's mind right now, and that shocked him. Normally they were so in-tune that they barely had to speak. How could he not know what was behind this? The only thing he was certain of was that this change was deeply significant. Ray had an intense need for emotional connection. All that clutter had represented a safe place in his life, had given him those needed attachments. For him to have voluntarily relinquished them was disturbing.

"Wow, he really cleaned up in here, didn't he?" the landlady commented, looking around. "Guess now I know what all the trips in an' out, an' all the draggin' an' movin' stuff around was the other night."

Fraser rounded on her instantly. "What night? When did he do this?"

She frowned thoughtfully. "Hadda be Tuesday night. Or should I say mornin', it was pretty late. I hadn't heard him up here in about a week, then when he does come back, he starts making all this noise. Well, it wasn't that bad, I was up watchin' a movie or I prob'ly wouldn'ta heard it, but it was more noise than ya expect t'hear at that hour. It was around three when he got quiet again."

"I see. Thank you kindly," Ben said absently, and the landlady left him alone then, closing the door, closing him in with the disturbing changes. He stood there for a

long moment, thinking, trying to make the puzzle pieces fit. At his side, Diefenbaker whined a little, uneasily, clearly he too felt the change in atmosphere. Normally Dief was perfectly at home in Ray's apartment. Perhaps too much so. When Fraser didn't respond to the sound, the wolf got up and trotted out of the living room. Preoccupied, Fraser didn't pay any attention to him.

Tuesday night. Ray had done all this the same night they had returned from the Territories. Fraser wasn't sure what to make of that. He couldn't figure out the timeline. Ray had seemed fine that night when he'd gotten out of the cab and sent Fraser on, albeit reluctantly. He'd also seemed fine the next day on the phone, as well as to Lieutenant Welsh. It wasn't until Wednesday evening in Inspector Thatcher's office that things had seemed to go wrong. Ray had been sitting at her desk, in a typically disrespectful fashion, which said he'd probably been in a decent mood when he'd seated himself. Fraser shook his head, frustrated by his inability to work through the clues. The timeline was all wrong. If he'd cleaned the apartment Wednesday night, everything would make so much more sense.

Giving up on that line of thought for the moment, Fraser brought his attention back to the task at hand, and quartered the apartment, looking for anything that would help him determine where Ray was. His gaze sharpened as he saw the edge of a manila folder on the coffee-table under a discarded shirt. Quickly he picked up the shirt, and beneath it found two of the three missing files from Ray's desk. The one that was still missing involved drugs, prostitution, witness disappearances, and probable organized crime connections. Add to that the fact that Nicholas Roven was the kind of man Ray loathed at first sight, a suave and sophisticated wheeler-dealer, and instinctively Fraser knew he'd found what Ray was working on; the case that was most likely to get him killed.

The cleaned apartment suddenly took on a new and ominous significance. He felt a shiver course through him as he remembered Lieutenant Welsh's words; 'Right now I think he doesn't care very much about anything, and that's a very dangerous place for a cop to be.' Had Ray cleaned out his apartment to make it easier for his family to dispose of his things once he was gone? No. Fraser refused, utterly refused, to believe that. No, Ray was simply being his usual, impulsive self, without Fraser to ground him, to steer him away from actions that might endanger his life, even as they assisted others.

He closed his eyes, a shiver going through him, and suddenly realized that no matter how difficult it was for him personally, there was no way he could consider a transfer back home. Not if that meant leaving Ray vulnerable here in Chicago. He made a mental note to remove the transfer request from Inspector Thatcher's desk before she got back from Ottawa, and destroy it. He simply could not leave. Transfer. Inspector Thatcher's desk. Ray. Dear God. That was it. That had to be it. He'd left it on her desk, along with his reports. Ray must have seen it.

Remembering how he'd felt when Ray Vecchio had left his life without saying a word, Fraser suddenly understood why Ray Kowalski was acting the way he was. If Stanley Raymond Kowalski hadn't been waiting at the station when he returned, to literally pull him into his life with open arms, he might well have reacted quite similarly. Even with that welcome, the sudden change had rocked his world on its axis, and nothing had been more painful than the realization that someone for whom he felt deeply had been able to simply leave him without a backward glance, without a word of warning. To see the transfer, to know Fraser was planning to leave, when he had not spoken of it at all, that had to have evoked a similar pain. And if Lieutenant Welsh was right....

No, that was wishful thinking. Certainly the lieutenant was mistaken. He had simply seen through Fraser's pitiful attempts to conceal his own emotions, and jumped to an unsupported conclusion regarding the mutuality of those feelings. A man who'd been married to his childhood sweetheart, who still loved her in fact, was not going to be having any sort of romantic leanings toward another man. But they were, or had been, friends, good ones. To Ray it must seem as if Fraser had betrayed that friendship.

He had to make that up somehow. Even if it meant explaining why he had taken that step. To reveal himself in that way would be difficult, perhaps the most difficult thing he'd ever done. It would risk further damage, possibly even the destruction of whatever might have been salvageable of their friendship, but he had to make it clear to Ray that it was not his fault, that he had done nothing wrong. It was Fraser who was at fault. Drawing in a deep breath, Fraser looked around for Diefenbaker, and didn't see him.

"Dief?"

There was no answer, not that he really expected one. His companion was deaf, after all, as Ray so frequently pointed out. Well, it was a small apartment, there were relatively few places to look. He wasn't on the couch, his usual favorite location. Perhaps he was in the bathroom. Dief had a regrettable tendency to use Ray's toilet as a water dish. Passing the bedroom on his way to check that possibility, he glanced inside and stopped, shaking his head. The wolf was ensconced on Ray's bed, head and paws on the pillows, as if he belonged there.

"Diefenbaker!" he snapped, scandalized.

There was no response, though the slight squinting of the wolf's closed eyes told him that he'd been noticed. "Dief!" he said, more severely. "Get off of there!"

Again, no response. Annoyed, Fraser stepped into the room and squatted next to the bed, putting a hand on Dief's flank so he

couldn't pretend he was asleep. "Down, Dief!"

Dief opened one eye, and moaned. Fraser sighed. "I know you do, but I'm sure he will not appreciate having his bed full of wolf-hair. Now get down."

Giving him a reproachful look, Dief stood, stretched leisurely, and finally jumped down. Insolent animal. Sometimes he was simply impossible. A quick glance at the sheets revealed a few white hairs, and Fraser leaned to sweep them away. As he did, he caught Ray's scent where it clung, deeply imprinted here, probably deeper than any other place. His hand lingered on the sheets, his fingers stroking, instead of brushing, as if the close-woven cotton were skin. In his mind he could see Ray lying here asleep, naked, no doubt. He was somehow certain that Ray did not wear anything to bed. His imagination supplied a slow, sensual stretch, a yawn, tongue flickering across sleep-dry lips, the gradually dawning recognition of the heavy fullness of a morning erection. One hand moving down over the hard plane of chest, perhaps pausing a moment at the nipple there, before moving on...

Diefenbaker made a soft whuf and butted his elbow, bringing him out of his fantasy. Flustered, he stood up, and cleared his throat, tugging at his collar and blushing even though there was no one there to notice. As he turned to leave, his gaze fell on the dream-catcher he'd made for Ray, and smiled to see it there above his bed. He had sometimes wondered what had happened to it. He'd never been in Ray's bedroom before, and hadn't realized that it had been given a place there. Although, judging from his reaction it was probably a good thing he hadn't been in Ray's bedroom before. He put that thought out of his mind and left the room. No time for dawdling, he had work to do.

* * *

Slouched in the driver's seat of the GTO, Ray angled the directional microphone for better reception, and frowned as the static cleared. Mostly he'd gotten a lot of nothing so far, but this didn't sound good. A girl. Sounded pretty young, and very scared. He listened to Roven talk about how her brother had got himself in deep, and how someone had to pay up, or work it off. Ray's frown turned to a scowl. He was pretty sure he knew what was coming next, and...yep, there it was. Roven was suggesting she go to work for him, to save her brother's sorry ass 'cause nobody would want his, but hers was pretty nice, and people would pay good money for it. She started to cry. Ray felt his temper flaring. No way was he gonna sit here and let this go down. He could nail Roven on extortion right here and now, if nothing else. It might be minor league stuff, but it was better than nothing.

But he couldn't do it alone. Roven had goons. He had nobody. Ray felt a brief flare of pain at the realization that there was no longer anyone at his side to back him up, and quickly crushed it. Like an unarmed Mountie was much backup anyhow. Get used to it. Do your job, Kowalski. He reached for his cell-phone to call in a blue and white for backup, and



it wasn't in the pocket where he usually kept it. Startled, he searched the other pocket, then the other seat, even under the seat. Then he remembered. He'd taken it out back at the station when he was switching to his heavier jacket. He must have left it there, on his desk. He sighed, banging his forehead against the steering wheel. Way to go. Can't call for backup. Maybe a pay-phone? No, not in this neighborhood. Phones didn't last long here.

He listened again, heard the girl crying some more, heard Roven's smarmy voice, laying it on thick, telling her what his goons would do to her brother if she didn't go along with this. Heard her starting to cave.

He knew Roven, and he'd want to personally approve the merchandise before he sent it on. Oh no, no-no-way. Can't let that happen. Had to go now, or it would be too late. That was not gonna happen on his watch. Maybe if he did his '*Lethal Weapon*' wacko-cop routine they'd get freaked out and not notice he was all by his lonesome. Ripping the earphones out of his ears, he flung himself out of the car and headed for the alley, knowing that they'd left that door unguarded and it was the only way he was getting in.

Ray was all the way up to the door and just about to go in when something hit him, and he found himself sprawled on the concrete with something big and heavy on top of him. His gun went spinning away, and for a moment he lay still, stunned, seeing stars from the impact, and struggling to breathe with lungs from which all the air had been expelled by the force of the tackle. Then panic kicked in and he fought hard against the entangling arms, shoving against the body that held his down, trying to reach his ankle holster. His arms were caught at the wrists, and pressed flat to the ground above his head by one strong, broad hand as the other covered his mouth, and the body on his bore down, hard, making it difficult for him to breathe or struggle.

Suddenly he realized someone was saying his name, over and over, in a tight, harsh whisper, and Ray actually looked at his attacker. Saw that damned red serge, that perfect hair, the blue eyes, clouded right now with a shockingly unfamiliar emotion; and it suddenly dawned on him that he hadn't been tackled by some anonymous bad guy. He was pinned to the ground by about a hundred and eighty pounds of very pissed-off Mountie. He'd never seen Fraser look so mad before, not even about Muldoon. He'd seen Fraser in a lot of different states, from irritated to determined, from sad to amused, but never flat-out, full-bore pissed-off. Shocked, he stopped struggling.

Fraser didn't let up, but some of the anger began to fade from his gaze. Ray started to feel a little strange, pinned, panting, beneath his partner's bulk, bodies touching, torso-to-torso, Fraser's thighs between his own. He had one knee still drawn up from his last attempt to reach his backup piece, and he was excruciatingly aware of the intimacy of their position, feeling Fraser's hip against the inside of that thigh. His body reacted to that as he'd always feared it might, with a rush of arousal. But just as he was about to close his eyes in embarrassed misery, he realized something. Either the Mountie had taken to carrying a nightstick, or he was turned on too.

The universe skidded to a halt. They stared at each other, unspeaking. Somewhere in the sludge that suddenly constituted his brain, Ray realized Fraser wasn't freaking out. In fact, the anger in his gaze was rapidly being replaced by something...else. A question. An answer. No words. Time began to inch forward again, incrementally. The hand covering his mouth shifted, a thumb stroked along his jaw, rasping on stubble, then it was moving across his lower lip, back and forth, very lightly, almost hypnotically.

A shudder went through him, pure and delicious, and he turned his head just a little, enough to bring that inquisitive digit between his lips, and his eyes closed as he tasted Fraser for the first time. His tongue stroked the pad of that thumb, circled it, drew it deeper. He held it between his teeth, lightly, unwilling to let go. He sucked on it, sucked hard. A soft, wordless exclamation made him open his eyes and he looked into Fraser's face, saw the question in his eyes deepen into heat. Yes. An answer. God. This couldn't be real...could it? But it felt real, so real, and so damned good.

Slowly Fraser tugged his thumb free of Ray's mouth, ran it damply across his lips again. Ray stared, breathless, as Fraser's tongue flicked out across his own lower lip in an echoing movement, then he was

leaning down, eyes drifting closed, and those firm lips were on his. Warm, soft, a gentle brush, completely at odds with the violence of mere moments earlier. He tipped his head to one side, so their mouths could fuse more closely, let his lips part, felt the hot, slick slide of tongue against his own. Oh God. Oh God. So real, so unreal, so good. Tasted like cool rain on a hot summer day, like a fire on a cold winter night. Everything he needed, condensed into a single being, who was drinking him, desperately, as if he'd been crawling across the desert for days without water and Ray were a spring.

Ray wanted to put his arms around Fraser, to hold him, to tangle his fingers in that thick burnt-chestnut hair, to stroke that broad back, to feel the smooth curves of the ass he'd eyed with lust in his heart. Unfortunately he couldn't, since his arms were still pinned over his head by Fraser's hand. He squirmed a little, pushing against that restraint, and Fraser's head lifted suddenly, his eyes wide, shocked. He jerked his hand away from Ray's wrists, and started to push himself away as well.

Oh no. No. He wasn't going anywhere. Not now. Ray tangled his legs with Fraser's, grabbed him with both newly-freed hands, and refused to let him budge. Cupping a hand over the back of Fraser's head, he pulled him down until their lips met again, and everything went up in flames once more. Even better than before. Hotter. Harder. Harsher. Yeah, this was what he needed. The slow grind of hips against his own, matching hard-to-hard, the blatant thrust of tongues, mingling breath and spit and need.

Then, right in the middle of that wonderful discovery, damn it, a coherent thought managed to swim up into his brain from somewhere. Roven. The girl. Oh, geeze. Crap. He was lying in an alley, getting frenched by an extremely eager Mountie, when he was supposed to be doing his job. With a heartfelt groan he turned his face, separating their lips.

Fraser's tongue left his mouth reluctantly, with a little sound of protest. Ray knew just how he felt. Christ, to have to stop now was painful! But he didn't have a choice.

"Uh, Fraser, there's a girl, in there. Don't think she wants to be. Roven's threatening her brother. We gotta get her out."

His words acted like a bucket of ice water. Fraser was off him instantly, picking up his hat which had fallen when he'd tackled Ray, then extending a hand to pull him to his feet. "On three, Ray?"

Ray nodded. Yeah. On three. This was right. Partners. Yeah.

* * *

Fraser had used Ray's phone to request back-up as soon as he'd realized his friend was planning to enter the building alone. Then he'd sprinted across the alley and caught him before he managed to do so, although, granted, his method had been somewhat less than gentle. The sight of Ray recklessly risking his life had made him furious. All he could think of for a moment was that empty apartment, and a red haze had filled his mind. That was his only excuse for what had followed. He'd been so afraid that rational thought had all but ceased.

Then within seconds of pinning him to the ground, he'd felt the response of Ray's body to the proximity of his own, seen the answer to his unspoken question in those startled blue eyes, and the last vestige of whatever good sense he had ever possessed had simply fled. With criminals and a victim mere steps away, with fellow officers on the way, he had touched Ray in ways that could not possibly be misunderstood, had kissed him within an inch of his life. And miraculously, inconceivably, Ray had responded.

Thankfully Ray had regained his senses mere moments before their backup had arrived, and they'd managed to make the arrests without further incident. After the

third time they'd found themselves staring at each other and blushing, they had been forced to avoid looking at each other for extended periods of time in order to complete the time-consuming and tedious tasks of booking the suspects, talking to the witnesses, and filling out reports. Because they were both pretending nothing had happened, Fraser was feeling as uncertain as a newly commissioned constable on his first day out of the Depot.

Welsh kept looking questions at him, questions he couldn't answer, though it seemed as if Ray was acting almost normally again. Unfortunately Fraser had no idea why he was acting that way. Especially not after...well, what had happened. Finally they were finished, and that business of not looking at each other was proving quite difficult as Ray leaned against his desk, and looked vaguely in Fraser's direction without meeting his eyes.

"Um, interesting day, Fraser," he said, carefully.

Fraser felt a little shiver of nervous tension go through him. "As you say, Ray," he managed.

"I, uh, I think we gotta talk," Ray said, sounding very serious.

Fraser's mouth went dry. That sounded so...ominous. But he nodded. "I believe that might be advisable."

Ray snorted. "'Advisable.' Geez. Come on, let's go hunt down some privacy."

He led Fraser out to the parking lot and unlocked the GTO. Fraser let Diefenbaker into the back, then climbed in. As if by agreement they did not speak until Ray pulled into the parking lot outside his apartment, killed the engine and set the brake. Oddly, it was not an uncomfortable silence, not as heavy as it had been a few nights earlier. After a moment, Ray got out, and Fraser did the same. They walked in silence up the stairs to his apartment, Dief trotting at their heels, as quiet as they were. Once inside, Ray finally turned to look at him. They eyed each other warily.

"So, uh...." Ray said.

"So, ah..." Fraser began.

That triggered a spate of 'after you's' and 'you first's.' Finally, Fraser cleared his throat and took the initiative.

"I hope you can forgive me, Ray. I can't imagine what possessed me to..."

"Fraser," Ray said, trying to interrupt.

"...attack you like that, save for a certain amount of..." Fraser went on, knowing if he didn't get it out now, he might never be able to.

"Fraser," Ray tried again.

"...fear on my part. You see, I had just been to your apartment and seen..."

"Fraser!" Ray yelled. "Yo! Fraser! Benton Fraser, RCMP! Attention!"

Fraser stopped. "Yes, Ray?"

Ray looked pleased. "Shut up, Fraser."

"I thought you said we needed to..."

Ray cut off the rest of the sentence by applying his mouth to Fraser's mouth. Very passionately. Fraser wrapped his arms around Ray's wiry body and pulled him closer, until their bodies were molded together from knees to chest, their mouths slanting hotly together, tongues tangling, breath mingling. Finally Ray pulled his mouth away, a quick, mischievous grin flashing across his face.

"Well, I couldn't exactly say 'I wanna suck on your tongue some more' in the middle of the bullpen, now could I, Fraser?"

All the blood that had been heading rapidly southward did an abrupt U-turn and ended up in Fraser's face as he registered what Ray had just said. "Raaaay!" he blurted, voice caught somewhere between a gasp and a groan, embarrassed, aroused, and stunned by the honesty of that statement.

Ray laughed. "You sound like a sheep, Fraser! A sexy sheep, but a sheep. And I didn't even say anything really racy. Like what else I'd like to suck on..." He ground his hips suggestively against Fraser's, letting him feel the growing firmness there, so like his own. "Damn it, Fraser, why didn't you tell me?" he complained, nuzzling his neck. "God, I thought I was losing my mind!"

The transfer. He'd known this would come up. He took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, Ray. I didn't know, I didn't...realize, so I was doing what I thought would be best," Fraser said in a whisper, trying to keep his brain functioning when all he could think of was the way Ray felt against him.

"Best?" Ray pulled back a little, sounded puzzled. "What're you talking about?"

Fraser turned his head to look into Ray's face. "The transfer request."

Ray went still, his heightened color fading. Slowly he pulled away. "Oh. Oh, that." He turned away, braced a hand against the wall, and raked the fingers of his other hand through his hair.

Suddenly everything was tense and awkward again, and Fraser realized they apparently hadn't been discussing the same thing at all. That tended to happen with them, whenever emotions ran high. He frowned, trying to put things together. "I'm sorry, what did you think I was talking about?"

"I, uh...the...well, the uh, thing."

"The thing?"

"Y'know the *thing*." He made a circling gesture with his hands. "The thing between us."

Fraser's brain searched for a translation for that cryptic Rayism, and assayed one. "You mean the...attraction? Between us?"

Ray nodded. "Yeah. That."

"Oh. Well, the one has much to do with the other," he admitted finally.

Ray looked at him, a quick flash of wary blue eyes, quickly lowered again. "How?"

Fraser sighed. "Perhaps we should sit?"

Ray nodded, and they went to the couch, taking seats, not touching, but not at opposite corners, either. Of course, the fact that Diefenbaker was curled up on a good third of the couch already made that less voluntary than it might have been. Still, it was a start. Fraser stared at his hands for a moment, then finally sighed.

"I didn't want to ruin our friendship, Ray. I was afraid that if you came to realize what I felt, you would...not wish to remain my friend."

Ray looked startled. "Oh, geez. You too?"

Fraser felt his eyebrows lift. "Too?"

Ray laughed, though it sounded suspiciously tight-throated. "Yeah. Too. When I saw that transfer request I figured you must've figured it out. I mean, I tried not to let it show, but God, you turn me on, and I can't always pretend you don't. So I thought I hadn't been careful enough, and you were running screaming the other way as hard and fast as you could go."

They stared at each other, Fraser remembering that moment in the alley when he'd felt Ray's body respond to his, when their eyes had met. Hard, and fast. But not running. Slowly a lopsided grin curved Ray's mouth, as if he were remembering the same thing. Fraser found himself echoing it. Ray's grin turned into a laugh that Fraser found completely infectious. After a moment he sobered, though.

"Ray, I'm going to throw away my transfer application."

Ray looked up, eyes narrowed. "'Cause of me?" he asked, frowning.

Fraser shook his head, slowly. "No, Ray. Because of me. When I was afraid for your life it made me realize that I would not be happy without you."

The expression on Ray's face was painful. So shocked, so disbelieving. Was it so hard for him to believe that anyone could feel that way about him? That hurt, too. In an attempt to convince him, Fraser leaned forward, bringing their mouths together again. Ray responded instantly, without even a momentary hesitation, his lips soft, and parted. Their kiss was gentler this time, but no less involving. After a few moments Ray suddenly pulled away, frowning in apparent confusion.

"Afraid for my life? Why?"

Fraser gestured to the apartment. "This. I saw this, and all I could think was that you were trying to make it easy for your parents and your friends should they have to...dispose of your effects."

He watched that sink in, saw Ray's eyes widen. "Oh Lord. I never thought...." he shook his head, tensely. "You thought I might...?"

"Perhaps not deliberately," Fraser said, remembering how devastated he'd felt at thinking that, how angry he had been with Ray when he'd seen him approach that building without partner, without backup. "But frankly, your behavior over the past day or two has been reckless in the extreme."

Ray's eyes slid away from his and he stared at the carpet between his feet. "Who told?"

"Lieutenant Welsh."

"Busybody," Ray complained, not looking up.

"He was concerned for you, Ray."

"Oh, right, like he wouldn't like to kill me himself sometimes."

"Perhaps he would, but he truly was concerned. To the point that he asked me if we...well, if we had broken up. As a couple."

That brought Ray's head up again. "He *what?* Welsh?"

Fraser nodded. "I admit to being astonished as well. He was very kind about it, but he seemed quite shocked to find that we were not."

Ray blushed. It was an interesting phenomenon. Fraser didn't think he'd ever seen Ray blush before. He put a hand over his face, hiding behind it.

"Oh geez," he said, almost a moan. "I am never going to go to work again." Suddenly he lifted his head, and looked straight into Fraser's eyes, a smile shaping his mouth. "What the hell am I saying? Why should I be weirded out that Welsh thinks we're a couple, since we are?"

"We are?" Fraser asked, startled.

Ray suddenly looked less sure of himself. "Um...well, yeah. Aren't we? Now?" Suddenly he drew himself up, looking offended. "I mean, you think I roll around in alleys with just *anybody*, Fraser? You think I drag just *anybody* home with me and offer to suck on 'em? I have standards, y'know!"

Fraser had gotten good at recognizing that glint in Ray's eyes, and the deliberate thickening of his regional accent. He was being teased. He bit the inside of his lip to control his smile. "Well, considering some of the women you've been interested in over the course of our partnership, I had begun to wonder...." he teased back.

"Oh, like you got such a great track record? I mean, come on! A married woman? You slut, you!"

"Well, I didn't know Janet was married until later," Fraser pointed out reasonably, enjoying the banter, hoping to provoke more.

"Uh-hunh, and what's your excuse for Lady Shoes? I could hear you through that door, making like the deli scene in 'When Harry Met Sally.'"

Fraser stared at him blankly. "Excuse me?"

Ray laughed, shaking his head. "Never mind, I should've guessed you wouldn't have a clue. But the next time I hear you making noises like that I'd better be the one making you do it."

"Noises like what?"

Ray looked at him through half-lowered eyelids, and licked his lips. "Uhhhhnnnn," he moaned throatily. "Ahhhh, mmmmm-uhhhh. Ohhhhhh."

Fraser swallowed heavily. The sounds really were remarkably provocative. He could almost feel their vibrations on his skin, sending hot shivers through him. He stared at Ray. "Did I really sound like...that?"

"Yes, you did," Ray breathed. "Just like that. You did. And I'm dying to hear you do it again. But it better be me in your underwear next time," he said threateningly.

"It was just a back-rub, Ray," he said placatingly.

Ray grinned. "If a back-rub makes you sound like that, I can't wait to hear what a blow-job does."

Before Fraser could even blush, Ray was on him, mouth on his, pushing him backward until he was practically lying on Diefenbaker, who objected with a whine and jumped off the couch. Deprived of his support, Fraser dropped flat on his back on the wolf-warmed cushions. Ray put a hand under one of Fraser's thighs and urged his leg up onto the couch as they continued to devour each others mouths. Unable to think clearly, Fraser followed that urging, which left him with one foot on the couch and the other still on the floor. He didn't understand why Ray had wanted that until the other man slid his hips into the wide space the position created between his thighs, but by then it was too late to object.

Not that he wanted to object. He wanted to just lie there and let Ray kiss him, and touch him, and oh, dear, that was, perhaps a little too fast...He reached down and caught Ray's hand to keep it away from the zipper of his uniform trousers, pulling his mouth away to gasp an embarrassed "Ray!"

Ray laughed and tangled their fingers together, effectively holding that hand down while moving his free hand into place, using his body to block Fraser's other hand from interfering while he managed to get the trouser button undone and the zipper down. He'd worked the pants partway open when Fraser managed to get a hand free and caught Ray's wrist.

"Ray, no!" Fraser protested again, a little panicky at the speed at which things were suddenly moving. Some latent prudishness on his part, no doubt. He was having a bit of a struggle reconciling his innate shyness with his need and Ray's somewhat gung-ho nature. Ray's hand stilled, his eyes lifted to Ben's, and he nodded slowly.

"Okay." He took a deep breath, let it out. "Okay, slower, right?"

Ben nodded. "Please."

* * *

Ray felt a little guilty for rushing Fraser, he knew that wasn't Fraser's thing, but the drive, the need to claim him had been so strong. He felt guilty for thinking that, too. He couldn't claim Ben. It was like Fraser said about Dief, he belonged only to himself. But if Ben chose to be with him, of his own free will, then that was the closest thing to perfect Ray could imagine. He could die happy, right now. Well, almost happy. It would be nice not to die horny. But that was okay, happy was the important part.

He sighed, and settled in against Ben, his head resting against his chest, listening to the steady, if slightly accelerated beat of his heart. He smiled, and Fraser's hand came up to stroke through his hair.

"What are you smiling about?" Ben asked, his voice sounding husky and rough.

"How'd you know I was smiling?" Ray asked.

"I could feel your mouth move," Ben said, fingers playing with the hair at the back of his neck, making him shiver.

"Oh." That made sense. He chuckled. "I was listening to your heart. I think some people think you don't have one, the way they act. Always pisses me off."

He heard Ben's breath catch on a sigh, felt the fingers tighten in his hair. "Thank you for that. But it's not entirely their fault if they think that. I am, generally, quite careful not to show it."

Ray lifted his head, looked into Ben's solemn blue gaze, and nodded. "I know. I know that. But you can't hide it from me."

Fraser looked at him, and smiled. "Nor would I wish to."

Caught for a moment between joy and self-consciousness, Ray blushed and smiled, ducking his head. "Thanks." He cleared his throat, and met Ben's eyes again. "I, uh,

sorry I rushed you. I know you like to take things slow. Guess I got a little carried away, you know. Like 'woohoo, I won the prize!'"

Fraser shook his head, his face a little flushed. "No, Ray, don't be sorry." He laughed, a little ruefully. "I suspect if left to me, it might have taken months to get to this point. I'm not...well, I'm not very experienced at this sort of thing."

"No shit, Mountie," Ray said, laughing softly as Ben blushed, then taking pity on him, "but then, I'm not whatcha call an expert, either. I just know what I like, and I figured you'd probably like it too. I mean, we got the same basic equipment, after all."

He grinned and winked, and Ben grinned back the sweetest, most spontaneous grin Ray had ever seen him give. He couldn't resist leaning in to kiss him again, and it was slow, and hot, and man, Ben might not have much experience but he was damned good with that tongue. Not surprising, given his tendency to slurp everything in sight. After a moment, Ben sighed into his mouth and turned his face slightly, breaking the kiss.

"Ray, could we...." he stopped, biting his lip, looking uncomfortable.

"Could we what?"

"Move, ah, somewhere else? There's not very much room here."

For a moment Ray couldn't think what he meant, then it dawned on him that Ben was suggesting they go to bed, although he couldn't quite come right out and say it. A slow grin spread over his face and he nodded.

"Oh yeah. That'd be good. Real good."

He rolled off the couch, stood up and stretched, then looked down at Ben splayed out on the couch, totally rumped, kissable, hell, fuckable, with his uniform mostly on but pants unzipped, and he couldn't resist teasing him.

"Man, you look like something out of one of those magazines they sell at porno places. You know, 'Hot Men in Uniform' or

something. Wanna play Mountie and Perp sometime?"

As he'd fully expected, Fraser's face went bright red, rivaling his tunic. But then, much to Ray's surprise, a slow, almost sly grin spread across his face.

"Only if we can first replace that black leather jacket of yours that was lost aboard the *Henry Allen*."

Ray's mouth went Sahara dry, eyes widening. "Izzat a joke?" he managed.

Fraser shook his head, slowly, sensually. *How the hell did he manage that*, Ray wondered.

"No, Ray."

"I am all over that!" Ray managed to gasp, wondering if he had enough in savings to go buy a new coat.

Ben's grin widened, the blue eyes brimming with amusement. "I was rather hoping you would be all over me."

Ray gaped. Wow. Who knew Fraser had a playful side? He reached, caught Ben's fingers in his own. "Come on. Couch is cool, bed is better." He tugged at Ben's hand, and his partner – friend – no, lover, sat up, or tried to, but was hampered by his disordered clothing. With a frustrated sigh Ray bent and caught the pumpkin pants in his hands, pulling them back into place, trying not to think about what lay just a few threads-width away from his fingers.

"There. Now up."

Ray held out his hands again and pulled Fraser to his feet, staggering a little. Fraser was so damned solid. They were pretty much the same height, so sometimes he forgot what a difference there was in weight. He thought about how that weight would feel against him, unconsciously pulling Ben closer, then they were in each other's arms once more, mouths fused, bodies angling for closeness. Reaching around to secure his hold, Ray found himself with a handful of perfectly curved ass, and moaned into Ben's mouth, hips rocking against his partner's. He forced himself to pull back, shuddering. If he

didn't watch it he was going to come before they even got started.

Without a word Ray headed for the bedroom, half-dragging Fraser with him, needing to get in there before he lost his nerve, or his mind, or something. Finally reaching their destination after what felt like a three-mile hike, he was just about to start ripping clothes off the Mountie when the phone rang. It startled him, and he listened as the answering machine picked up out in the kitchen. He heard Welsh's distinctive voice, but couldn't quite make out the words. With a sigh he gave Fraser an apologetic look and scrambled to pick up the extension next to the bed, just in case it was an emergency.

"Yeah, sir, I'm here. Is there a problem?"

"Yeah, you do have problems, Kowalski, and I don't like to see my people making stupid rookie mistakes. So I don't want to see you in here again until you figure out what they are and fix them, do you understand?"

"Uh..." Ray began, completely confused, then suddenly he remembered what Fraser had told him about Welsh. His face got hot. "Uh, yeah. I think I do."

"Good. Consider yourself out sick until you get your head out, okay?"

"Okay. Um, sir? You know those problems?"

"Yeah, Kowalski?"

"I'm, uh, working on 'em."

"I'm pleased to hear that, Detective. Feel free not to share any details."

Ray chuckled. "Yes, sir."

Welsh hung up, and Ray did as well, then he turned the ringer on the phone all the way down. No more interruptions. Turning to tell Fraser what Welsh had said, he stopped suddenly, a shiver of apprehension going through him. Fraser was still just standing there, right where he'd been, hadn't moved an inch. His eyes were closed, he was frowning slightly.

"Fraser?" He ventured tentatively.

Fraser shook himself visibly, and opened his eyes. "Yes, Ray?"

"Something wrong?"

The eyes that lifted to his were oddly blank. "No."

Flat. Unemotional. Uh oh. This was not good. He didn't know what was up, but clearly something was. Ray swallowed, hard. He shouldn't have rushed him. Damn it. He'd known he shouldn't have, but he'd done it anyhow, and now Fraser was wiggled. Great, Kowalski. Way to ruin things before they even get started. Feeling a little shaky, he put his hand on Fraser's shoulder in what he hoped was a reassuring fashion.

"Ben, I..."

His voice trailed off as he felt tremors under his hand. Fraser was shaking. Now that Ray felt it, he could see it too, a fine, constant shiver. And there was a faint sheen of sweat on his skin, as if he were feverish, or shocky. Oh, boy. Not good at all. Was he sick? He started to steer him toward the bed, only to have Fraser grab him, arms going around him, holding him so tightly he could scarcely breathe.

"Ben! Fraser? Frase! Hey, what's"

Fraser silenced him with a kiss so hard it hurt as his lips were abraded against his own teeth. He flinched a little, and instantly Fraser let go, and sank down to sit on the edge of the bed, his head in his hands.

"I'm sorry, Ray, I'm sorry," he whispered, pointedly not looking at Ray.

Ray stood for a moment, staring at him, then shook his head and sat down next to his partner. "Okay, this is no good, Ben. You gotta talk to me. What's wrong?"

Fraser did his eyebrow-rubbing thing, still avoiding his gaze. "Forgive me, Ray, I didn't mean to be so rough."

Ray ran his hands through his spiky hair, disordering it further than it no doubt already was. "Look, I don't care if you were rough! Jesus, Fraser! I've brushed my teeth harder than that! I care about what you're thinking, what you're feeling. Let me in your head, damn it! We're partners, friends!" Maybe even lovers, if we can get through this, he thought, frustratedly.

Fraser's eyes closed tightly, and he shook his head. "I was...I heard the lieutenant's voice, and I remembered something he said, and...it seemed that I was walking in here, seeing, everything was so...different. And knowing I did that, knowing it was my fault, that I hurt you, just as I've been hurt...."

"You're not making sense, Mountie. What are you talking about? You didn't hurt me!" He froze suddenly, Ben's words finally sinking in. 'I hurt you, just as I've been hurt.' Oh holy...had somebody forced Ben? Was that what he meant? Oh Christ, and he'd just jumped all over him like a kid with a new toy. Had ignored, at least at first, Ben's attempts to slow him down. Fuck. Fuck-fuck-fuck. No wonder Ben was so damned shy, so oblivious to his own attractiveness. Those were classic responses to rape. He reached out to pull his partner into his arms, and stopped, suddenly uncertain. He knew from his training that rape victims often didn't like to be touched. Ask first. He remembered that.

"Ben, can I...is it okay if I touch you?"

Blue eyes lifted to his, a little puzzled, a little worried. "Of course, Ray."

"I, uh, just didn't want to assume. I do that too much. Look, um, it's all right if we don't do anything else. Totally, okay?"

Fraser was still looking puzzled. "Excuse me?"

"I mean, like, I'm okay, you know."

Fraser nodded, seeming to understand, at last. "Yes, and I can't begin to express my relief at that."

Ray suppressed his dismay. That was disappointing, but he could deal. Making sure Fraser was okay was a lot more important than his own admittedly selfish desire for pleasure. "Well. Okay, good, that's, uh, good. So. You want to— talk about it?"

"About what, Ray?"

"About, well, about...what happened."

The puzzled look came back. "Which particular thing were you referring to, Ray?"

Oh wonderful. Fine time for Fraser to get all oblivious. Sometimes Ray thought he did it on purpose just to avoid having to talk about things that made him uncomfortable. So, how the hell to bring it up? "What happened— whatever happened that hurt you."

Blank look. Then Fraser sighed and shook his head. "No, I don't think that's necessary. It was a long time ago. I rarely even think of it any more."

"But you do think of it, sometimes, right?"

"Yes, Ray."

"Like, a few minutes ago, right?" Christ, it was like pulling teeth to get him to talk!

"Well, yes, briefly. But only in relation to the pain I caused you."

Ray surged to his feet, pacing, hands balled into fists of frustration. "I told you, you didn't hurt me! How many times do I have to say it?"

"Ray, I know I did, so it's pointless to tell me otherwise."

"I can handle it, okay? I been hurt lots worse!" He started to mention the time Stella got over-enthusiastic with her teeth and then decided now was not a good time. In fact, there probably would never be a good time to do that. Oooohkay. Try again. Maybe try to be subtle.

"So, it was a long time ago?"

Fraser nodded.

"Did you, uh, did you know the person?"

Fraser looked at him oddly. "Well, of course I did, Ray. How could I not?"

"And what'd you do about it?"

"Well, there was, at that point, little which could be done. It was just a matter of soldiering on. Your friendship has helped me through that, immeasurably."

Aw, man. Fraser's last sentence made Ray feel both great, and horrible. Damn, if only he'd known, maybe he could have been even more help. Then he processed the first part of the statement and felt a slow rise of fury, not exactly at his partner, but sort of

He couldn't believe it. Someone had hurt Fraser and he'd just *let* them?

"Fraser! I don't believe this! You did nothing? You just let 'em get away with it?"

"Well, as I said, there was little I could do. And I'm sure he meant no harm."

'He.' Well, that sure as hell confirmed that Fraser wasn't talking about Psychobitch Metcalf, about whom Ray had read, though Fraser had never spoken of the incident. But what he'd said after that made Ray's blood boil.

"*He meant no harm?*" Ray demanded incredulously. "Jesus H. Fu..." he clamped his mouth shut on the expletive he knew would upset Ben, shaking his head. "This is not happening. I swear it's not. Fraser— Ben, I know you know better than this. You know who did it, and you did nothing? What if he does it to someone else?"

"Well, I find that a highly unlikely scenario, Ray. It was simply a matter of circumstances. I doubt that the same precise combination of events would occur again, it would be rather like lightning striking twice, although I realize that the probability of that happening is rather higher than most people think."

"Exactly. Which means that he might do it again."

Fraser sighed. "Ray, I think perhaps we should change the subject. This conversation is clearly not particularly constructive."

Since Fraser was starting to look a little annoyed, which was rare enough to be worrisome, Ray sighed. If he didn't want to talk about it, there was no way to force it, and it might even be traumatic. Better let it go for now. "Yeah, okay. Whatever." He caught Fraser's eye. "But you know we'll have to talk about it sometime."

"Perhaps," Fraser allowed. "Although I fail to see how it would be useful."

Unable to think of a reply to that, Ray slouched unhappily, staring at his hands, wondering what the hell he should do now. He had rarely felt so completely at a loss in

his life. Suddenly he felt a hand against his shoulder, stroking lightly.

"Ray?"

"What?" he snapped, then regretted it. "Sorry."

"No, it's quite all right. I do understand I can be somewhat vexatious...."

Ray laughed softly. "Vexatious. Cute. You know I only love you for your vocabulary, don't you, Fraser?"

"Well, yes, Ray, I had suspected that," Fraser said, sounding amused. "Though it's not very chivalrous of you to admit it."

Ray looked up, startled. Sure enough, Fraser was smiling. Smiling? And looking, well, kind of sultry, to boot. The fingers on his shoulder slipped upward to the back of his neck, tracing gentle patterns against his skin with just fingertips. He shivered, closed his eyes and swallowed hard, trying not to react. Surely Fraser had no idea what he was doing.

"Ben, please. You can't look at me like that, and touch me like that if you want me to keep my hands to myself."

Ben's hand went still for a moment, then resumed its motion. He felt warmth against his ear, just a fraction of a second before he heard Ben's voice.

"Why would I want you to do that?" The query was barely a whisper, and the fingers kept almost-tickling his neck, and Ben's breath was warm against his skinDamn it! He scooted away, staring at Fraser with confusion.

"Ben!" he gasped, confused, aroused, and wondering if Fraser really did have a screw loose. "Cut it out, that's not nice!"

Fraser smiled and reached out to run his fingers along the line of Ray's jaw, fingers catching lightly on Ray's perpetual stubble. "I thought it was very nice."

Bewilderment settled over Ray like a fog. "But...but you said you didn't want to do anything!" he said, his voice sounding distressingly like Luke Skywalker's had when he was going on about Toschi Station and power converters.

Ben frowned, looking puzzled. "I did?"

Ray nodded. "Yeah. You did."

"When did I say that?"

"Right after you, um, freaked out."

"Ray, I did not, as you put it, 'freak out,'" Ben said firmly.

"Well, whatever you want to call it, then. Right after that."

"And my exact words were?"

"Like I remember? It was something about being relieved we weren't gonna do anything else."

Fraser thought for a moment. "As I recall, I said I was relieved that you were all right."

"Yeah. Exactly."

"What has that got to do with not wanting to...." he paused, reddened marginally, and went on, "with not wanting to continue our earlier activities?"

"Fraser! Are you having blackouts or something? Geez! You freak out, you tell me someone hurt you and then you think I could put the moves on you? I mean, I may not be the most sensitive guy on the planet but I went to all the training sessions on how to handle this kinda thing, and I know that the last thing I should've done was what I did, and I'm not about to do it again!"

Fraser stared at him, quiet, thoughtful, with that tiny frown between his eyebrows that told Ray he was doing his Logic Boy routine. His eyes narrowed. "Ray, what exactly did you think we were talking about?"

Ray stared at him. How could he not know what they'd been talking about? Maybe he really had just had a blackout. He swallowed hard and tried again. "About you. Getting...um," Ray looked down. God, he did not want to say this. If Fraser was bad enough off that he was having memory lapses about it, would actually saying it send him into some weird zone-out state or something? "Getting hurt," he finished, lamely.

"Ah. I thought that must be it. Ray, I believe we've been talking at cross-purposes. When I said I was hurt, I meant emotionally, not physically," Fraser said

gently. "When I said I hurt you, I was referring to the way you must have felt when you saw that transfer and I had not spoken to you about it. I realize that for you it must have been much like it was for me when I returned to Chicago and found that Ray Vecchio was gone. You must have felt very hurt, very abandoned, just as I did. When I said I was relieved you were all right, I meant that I was glad that you had not been harmed in any way due to my actions. That's all."

Ray lifted his head, staring at Fraser, trying to see the truth of his words. He wasn't just saying that, was he? Wasn't making it up to cover his own pain? Now that he thought about it, things did make a lot more sense when he put that spin on them. Of course, he was going to have to go find the Style Pig and beat the crap outta him for hurting Fraser, but that was for later. Now he had a misunderstanding to clear up.

"You weren't...uh, nobody, did anything to you?"

Ben shook his head, slowly. "No, Ray."

Ray put his hands over his face and collapsed back onto the bed in a boneless heap of relief and chagrin. "Thank God. You have no idea how awful I felt when I thought...."

He felt the bed give as Ben stretched out next to him. "Ray, I'm fine. I'm really perfectly fine."

Ray laughed a little. "Oh yeah, you are definitely *fine*. Extremely fine. So, then if that wasn't what you freaked about, what did you freak about?"

"I told you, I didn't freak."

"Fine. Whatever you want to call it, why'd you do it?"

"Because I was reminded momentarily of how afraid I was that you had gone and done something irrevocably stupid."

Ray turned his head, scowling. "Hey!"

Fraser's jaw tightened stubbornly. "Well, it would have been, wouldn't it? If you had gotten yourself killed, because you thought I was...no longer your partner."

Ray thought about it. Closed his eyes. Imagined himself without Fraser. Couldn't. If Ben left him, he would simply cease to exist. He might be someone else wearing his face, his name, but like he'd once tried to tell Thatcher, and Fraser too, without Ben the him he was now wouldn't exist. But he couldn't say that to Fraser. Couldn't burden him with that. "Yeah," he lied, because he knew it was what Ben wanted to hear.

"There, you see?" Fraser said, sounding pleased. "I'm glad that you agree."

Ray forced a smile. "Well, when you're right, you're right."

Fraser looked at him narrowly. "Ray?" he said softly, questioningly.

Ray shook his head. "S'okay, Fraser. Just a little emotional, you know." Don't go there, he thought. You don't want to know. He looked at Ben, and it dawned on him that they were both on his bed. He grinned, and this time his smile was real. "God, doesn't it just figure that I finally get you in my bed, and you're fully clothed?"

The suspicious look on Fraser's face was instantly replaced by a startlingly warm, almost seductive smile. "Well, I'm not actually fully clothed, Ray. My trousers are unzipped."

"The fact remains that your clothes are definitely on your body."

"As are yours," Ben pointed out, looking...disappointed? Did he really? Yes. He did.

"I can fix that," Ray said, temperature and pulse suddenly skyrocketing, "I mean, well, if you want...."

The look in Ben's eyes gave him the answer to his question, as did his words, and his voice, lowered, and slightly rough.

"I want," Fraser said softly. Just two words.

Whoa. Well, that was blunt.

"Okay. Well, ah, guess we better do something about it, then, right?"

Fraser nodded. "Right you are, Ray."

After a moment's awkward hesitation, Ray rolled to his knees, and then reached down and caught the bottom edge of his

tee-shirt and drew it up and off, tossing it aside. He was about to undo his jeans when suddenly Ben's hands were there instead, arms coming around his hips, fingers sliding along his waistband before starting to work. He stared down at those hands, watching them slide the first button from its buttonhole, then the second. The arousal that had lazily begun to build over the past few minutes surged exponentially. It was a good thing his jeans were a little loose, because it gave room for his rapidly expanding erection.

He heard a soft, affirmative-sounding 'mmmm' from behind him, and shivered. Third button. Fourth. He held his breath. Fifth. Then Ben's hands were sliding gently inside the soft, old denim, spreading the sides apart, slipping beneath his thin cotton knit shorts to push both them and his jeans down his thighs. He felt lips touch his back, just above his left shoulder-blade, heard a soft intake of breath, then Ben cupped a broad hand over the firm thrust of his cock. Such a simple, ordinary touch. Not even stroking, just resting there.

Another kiss was pressed against his back, this time higher, on his neck. He felt the hot, wet flicker of a tongue, and almost laughed. Fraser was tasting him. God. Ben's habit of tasting everything in sight was paying off bigtime. In fact, he was kind of hoping Ben would get around to tasting a lot more of him before the night was through. He pushed his hips forward, searching for resistance, sure that if Ben left his hand there much longer, he would come, without a single stroke on bare flesh.

"Ray."

It was not a question, not really a statement, just his name. But Fraser's voice sounded husky and strained. Before Ray could even try to respond, he was being turned and pushed down onto his back on the bed, Ben's larger form covering his, Ben's mouth on his, tongue greedily searching out his own, slicking along it. With a bit of a shock he realized he could feel the long, firm ridge of Ben's cock

pressed against his own, though fabric still separated their skin. Suddenly he felt constricted. He needed to be naked, now. He wanted both of them to be naked. He kicked off his boots, heard them thunk to the floor off the edge of the bed. His jeans and boxer-briefs were already partway off so he twisted and bucked beneath Ben's weight until he managed to shimmy them down past his knees, then toed them off, along with his socks, managing somehow not to break the kiss once. His breath sounded harsh and desperate through his nose.

Finally there was the rough wool of Ben's uniform against his bare skin, almost everywhere, chest, arms, thighs, but his feet curled on smooth leather as they brushed against Ben's. With a frustrated moan he turned his head, breaking the kiss, gathered himself, and pushed, twisting as he did. Ben ended up on the bottom then, looking up at him with wide, startled eyes. Ray got to his knees and grinned down at him.

"Your turn, Mountie."

* * *

For almost the first time in his life, Benton Fraser felt utterly at a loss. This was unexplored territory, and he didn't really have the slightest idea of where he was going. He did, however, have a guide, and would have to trust that Ray knew his way here. He seemed to. He seemed so sure, as sure as Fraser normally was. It felt strangely freeing to admit that he didn't know what to do. He looked up at Ray who knelt above him, his long, lean, golden-pale body almost crackling with energy, with passion, and thought he'd never seen anything so beautiful in his life. He envied that intensity, that willingness to fling himself headlong into the unknown, not, as Fraser had always done, for duty's sake, but simply for the pure joy of discovery.

"Well?" Ray said softly, smiling. "You gonna get undressed or do I have to do it for you?"

Ben closed his eyes, smiling. "You do it."

Ray chuckled. "Lazy, ain'tcha? Fine. But no bitching about where stuff ends up."

Oh dear. That wasn't...Ben tried to sit up, to tell Ray he would, after all, take care of it himself. Ray shook his head, planting a hand firmly on his chest, pushing him back down.

"Oh no you don't. You said I could do it and I'm gonna. You have no idea how long I've wanted to peel you outta that damned uniform, so hands off."

After that confession he could hardly object. Frankly, he could hardly think. The idea that Ray had wanted to do this for a long time had just crawled into his brain and taken possession of it. He lay passively as Ray sat back on his heels, apparently trying to decide what to tackle first, then he turned, stretched out on his stomach, and went to work on the laces of Ben's boots. Inadvertently, or perhaps quite 'advertently' the position allowed Ben to study the elegant lines of his back. Surprisingly broad shoulders tapered to a narrow waist and hips, compactly curved buttocks, and long, long thighs and calves. It wasn't the first time he'd noticed the length of those legs. Sometimes, especially in black jeans, they looked impossibly, almost inhumanly long. They were strongly muscled, too, surprisingly so for a man who seemed to have no regular exercise regimen.

He felt his left boot being tugged off, heard it hit the floor, followed a moment later by his sock. Then Ray was working on the right boot. Fraser watched the play of muscles in that rangy back. So thin. He understood Ray's mother's continual desire to feed her son. An amused thought surfaced that semen was primarily composed of proteins, but he still didn't think Ray's mother would approve. That thought probably ought to distress him, but somehow it didn't. He let his gaze follow the beautiful convex of shoulder muscle down into biceps, then deltoid, and on until he got to long wrist, and elegant fingers

working with single-minded efficiency at the unfamiliar laces. Finished, Ray pulled the right boot and sock off and dropped them beside their mates. Mate. Lovely word.

Ray looked back over his shoulder at him. Ben gazed back, awash with anticipation, but oddly content to wait for Ray to continue. It just felt right to him, to let Ray take the lead here, in this. He was, after all, far more experienced in matters of the flesh. Watching him, the corners of his partner's mouth turned faintly upward, and his eyes gleamed with some private amusement. Ben lifted his eyebrows.

"What?"

Ray chuckled. "Ah, nothing."

"Nothing rarely means nothing, Ray."

Ray's smile widened. "I'll tell you sometime. Not yet. Too soon."

"Now, that's really not very fair, Ray."

"Just a little mystery, Ben. Relax."

Ben. His name seemed to shiver through him, and Fraser absorbed that new intimacy with a moan. Ben. That was as erotic to him as the touch of fingers against his needy flesh. He had existed so long as simply 'Fraser' that 'Ben' was a mystery to him, one that Ray was bringing to light. Then Ray moved, a lithe, feline roll, and was back on his knees, then suddenly, with a mischievous smile, he reached out to ruffle Ben's hair wildly.

"Hey, you're right! It can be disorderly!"

Ben smiled, remembering when he'd protested that his hair wasn't always neat. He also remembered walking along the street, in pain, feeling hopeless and truly beaten for the first time in his life, then having Ray pull alongside him, telling him he was proud of him, offering him not just moral, but very real support. That had been balm to his wounded, weary soul. Then, the final shock in a week full of them, he'd turned around during the Christmas party to find Ray wearing his Stetson. For long, long moments he'd only been able to stare, praying his heart wasn't in his gaze,

knowing Ray couldn't possibly know the significance of that gesture in Western lore. Or had he? Perhaps he had known, had been trying to tell him...

"Ray? The Christmas party?"

There was no way Ray should have been able to understand his question from those four words. But he did. Another example of on how deep a level they communicated. A slow flush spread up Ray's torso into his face, and he ducked his head a little, with a shy, sweet smile.

"Yeah. The hat. Didn't think you noticed."

"And I didn't think you understood."

Ray shook his head, laughing. "God, we're dumb."

Ben chuckled. "Apparently so."

Their eyes met. Fraser moistened suddenly dry lips, as Ray moved forward, hands on his shoulders, pushing him down onto his back, then sliding those lovely, long hands down his torso to the waistband of his still-unzipped trousers, which he took in both hands and very slowly peeled open. Extremely, extremely self-conscious, aware of a heated flush in his face, and an equally heated erection, Ben sighed as Ray slid between his legs, slipped a hand behind Ben's knee and lifted his foot onto the bed as his mouth sought out the hollow of Ben's collar-bone, then moved up the taut line of the his throat until he could sighed against his ear.

"Scoot back, on the bed, all the way."

Ben obeyed without thinking, without hesitation, moving back so he was lying diagonally across the bed, tense with anticipation, and perhaps a little fear of the unknown. Ray started to move with him, then stopped with a little shiver. Anticipation, Ben wondered. Fear? Or perhaps, like him, both?

"Jesus, Ben. Even with half your clothes still on you're the sexiest thing I've ever seen."

He sounded awestruck. There was no doubt as to the sincerity of the compliment. Ben could read it in Ray's voice, in his face,

his eyes, and his body. He was fiercely aroused, trembling even, eyes hot and dark with need. Blushing, Fraser's gaze slid lower, over the hard, muscular chest, the rib-rippled torso, followed the faint line of ash-blond downward and finally stopped at Ray's groin. Hard length of flesh rising from a nest of dark-blond curls, taut skin, a sheen of moisture at the tip. He shivered, wondering why he'd been so hesitant to look. Different. Very different. But also the same. Ben lifted a hand, hesitated, and let it shift destination and come to rest on Ray's hand instead.

"Ray, I...I..."

"Yeah, me too, Frase, me too," Ray said huskily.

The nickname comforted him somewhat, grounded him. He was still Frase. Not just this new and slightly frightening 'Ben' person. Ray moved then, coming over him, settling down close, their bodies aligned, touching. Instinctively Fraser brought up his knees, tightened his thighs around Ray's narrow hips. Ray sighed and arched against him, and suddenly everything was very, very real, and achingly arousing.

Ray paused a moment, his eyes smoky as they met Fraser's. "Trust me?" he asked softly.

Ah, that. It was so hard for him, to do that, to trust someone besides himself. But they had done this before, they had gone through this before, and Ray had been right. That time, and other times since then. He trusted Ray on so many levels, he might as well include this one too. Trust him. Trust him. He nodded.

"I trust you, Ray."

Ray's face lit up like someone had a spotlight on him, then Ray's mouth covered his, almost a bite, then a lick, then softening into a slow, sweet kiss. Sweeter than any he'd had in his life. He abandoned himself to it, absorbing it like sunlight. Finally Ray pulled back, just a little.

"You trust me, right? You really do?" he whispered, against Fraser's mouth.

"I do."

"Then let me do this for you, please, Fraser."

Fraser nodded, then Ray's hand was sliding between them, those long, lean fingers were sliding beneath his loosened clothing, finding him, wrapping around him. He tried to say Ray's name again, but it came out sounding far more like those moans Ray had demonstrated a little earlier. It had been so long since anyone had touched him like this. No, that wasn't right. No one had ever touched him like this. Victoria's touch had been greedily demanding. Ray's was not. It was gentle, tentative, curious, and knowing.

"Oh yeah," Ray said softly, lips against his ear. "Oh yeah. That's it, just like that."

Fraser arched a little, control failing him. Ray's hand moved on him, his stroke slow, sensual, unhurried.

"Wow," Ray breathed, almost reverently. "Damn, you feel — I mean, hard, but so soft too, like silk, or velvet or something." He chuckled. "Geez, I can't believe I just said that. Sounds like something out of Frannie's dumb romance novel. Then again, never thought I'd be doing this either. But it's cool. It's great. How's this?" Ray's hand was slightly rough, warm, the narrow palm cupping him, clever fingers stroking.

"Nooooo," Fraser moaned, shivering, aching, then wondered why he'd said that when the last thing he really wanted was for Ray to stop. It was a habit he'd have to break.

"Yessssss," Ray hissed in his ear. "You know you need it. When's the last time anyone touched you like this? When's the last time you touched you like this?"

Oh God, could he confess that? The last person to touch him intimately had been Victoria, so long ago. The last time he'd touched himself? Far more recently, alone in the consulate, late at night, dreaming of Ray's hands on him just as they were now.

"Too long, am I right, Ben?" Ray asked softly.

Fraser choked on the words trying to spill out, and managed only to nod instead.

"Oh, waaay too long," Ray said sorrowfully. "Ben, undo these."

Ray's hand led Ben's to the lowest brass button of his tunic and he was shocked to realize he was still almost fully dressed, yet Ray was stroking him lovingly, kissing his jaw, licking his ear. Shivering all over, Fraser's fingers fumbled numbly to obey that request. *Anything, anything, just keep touching me.*

"I will, I will," Ray said in answer to the words Fraser hadn't known he'd spoken aloud. "Go on. Open the tunic, good," Ray said, coaxing, as Fraser finished with the topmost button, loosened the lanyard, and ripped open the Velcro tabs at the collar. Ray's free hand slid beneath the serge to push the lapels apart and back, then moved down to his waist, easing beneath the bottom of his undershirt to rest on the bare skin of Fraser's stomach, a finger dipping lightly beneath the elasticized edge of his boxers, still in place, because Ray's other hand was slipped through the fly.

"Ray," Ben moaned. "Ray, please." He didn't know quite what he was begging for, other than for this mind-altering delight to continue.

"Anything, Ben. Anything. I want to taste you, can I taste you? Is that too much?"

The eagerness in Ray's voice was unbearably arousing, the thought of Ray's mouth on him even more so.

"No, yes, please, Ray!" Ben said incoherently.

Then it wasn't a thought, it was a reality. Ray's weight shifted off him, and hands were stripping his boxers down to his thighs, baring his erect sex completely. Lips touched him, softly, almost reverently, an unexpectedly gentle kiss. Startled, he opened his eyes, mesmerized as Ray's hand surrounded him again, lifting him a little, watching as Ray bent toward him, lashes feathered down to hide his eyes, sullen, sulky lips parting around him, drawing him into wet, slick heat, tongue moving against

him, cheeks hollowing as he began to suck. This was a surrender he'd never dreamed of, and in submitting to Ray's desire to do this, he found his own need perfectly, completely fulfilled. His eyes closed and his head fell back as he arched into that welcoming fire and gave over his life-long control to Ray.

Pleasure exploded through him, almost ripping itself out of him in slow, shuddering spasms. Ray made a little sound, almost a purr, and he felt the suction increase marginally, decrease, increase, tongue moving firmly each time, drawing the pleasure out until it was nearly agony, but he wanted to feel every second of it again, over and over. So sweet, that release, the touch of his lover's skin on his, the closeness of it so beautiful, so needed, for someone who had been alone his whole life. He felt wet heat on his face, and when Ray finally released him and lifted his head to smile at him, he saw tears there as well, but wasn't frightened by that. He understood it. Completion.

* * *

Ray wished he'd been able to watch Ben's face as he came, but he couldn't exactly do that with his face buried in Ben's crotch. However, his face right after he came was so beautiful that maybe it was a good thing he hadn't seen it before. He might have been blinded, like staring at the sun. That complete and utter surrender had rocked him to his core. Getting Fraser to trust him on the submersible had been sweet, but this...this was amazing. He should have known that Fraser would be like this. The guy spent his whole life all strapped in and bottled up, so when he let loose, he did it with his whole entire being, not a single thing held back. Beautiful.

Then he saw the tears on that gorgeous face, and felt them on his own, and suddenly he knew with a soul-deep certainty that this wasn't just about sex for either of them. He'd known for sure it wasn't for him, but now he knew for both of

them. This was what he'd wanted all his life, thought he'd had with Stella and hadn't. He'd never cried for her, she'd never cried for him. There was depth here, fathoms of it. This was it. The Big One. Forever. Probably a stupid thing to think at this point, but he couldn't help it. It was how he felt. He was a person who fell hard, and he'd just gone crashing off a mountainside.

Ben opened his eyes, looked down at him. Ray felt his mouth curve in the biggest, shit-eating grin he'd ever grinned. He was so happy he could howl, but he didn't want to piss off the guy upstairs or the landlady. Ben looked hazy, and a little confused, then he seemed to focus on Ray, and a slow, sweet smile answered his own. A minute tension released inside him, one he'd been hiding even from himself, the worry that Ben might not like his lovemaking. That didn't seem to be a problem, judging from his reactions.

He would have just lain there watching Ben's face forever, but unfortunately he was starting to itch where the rough wool of Fraser's uniform was pressed intimately against his own sweaty skin. Time to get Big Red out of the rest of his clothes.

"Hey, Fraser? Ben? You in there?"

He saw real comprehension come over Ben's face like a sunrise. He blinked, licked his lips, and spoke. "Uh, what?"

Ray laughed, knowing it wasn't nice to laugh at Ben for being incoherent after coming like a train wreck, but loving the idea that he'd just totally fried the Mountie's brain.

"I'm gonna finish my job here, okay?"

"Your job?" Ben managed, puzzled.

"I'm undressing you," Ray reminded him.

Fraser nodded and lay there passively as Ray opened his Sam Browne, tugged it off and tossed it negligently over the side of the bed. A moment later he did the same with the lanyard. Next he tugged at first one sleeve, then the other, freeing Ben's arms from his sleeves, then he had to stop for a moment to slide his hands up Ben's bare

arms to his shoulders, then back down, then up again, running his fingers beneath the straps of his tank-style undershirt. His skin was so fair and soft, yet the muscles beneath it were strong. The contrast was oddly arousing.

"Mmm, nice," he breathed. "You oughta wear this with jeans sometime." Suddenly he had a mental image of Frannie's face if she saw Fraser like that and backpedaled. "Heck, what'm I saying? Never, ever wear this out in public. Got it?"

Ben nodded, looking amused. "Yes Ray. No undershirts in public."

"But when we're here, just us, yeah. Definitely. Okay, sit up now."

Ben obeyed, and Ray divested him of the tank, then he reached down and picked up Ben's uniform tunic from where it lay on the bed. He looked at it for a moment, then stood up, going to his closet where he carefully hung it up. He knew the uniform meant a lot to Ben, so he wouldn't treat it like an old pair of jeans.

"Ray?"

"Yeah, Ben?" he said, turning to find Fraser watching him with suspiciously bright eyes.

"Thank you, for that," the Mountie said softly.

"Yeah, no problem," he said, embarrassed all of a sudden. He eyed his partner, and grinned. "But Fraser, the pants go on the floor. And I mean that," he said severely.

"Understood," Ben said, trying very hard not to grin. Ray could see the little twitches around his mouth as he controlled it.

"Good." Ray crossed to the bed, grabbed the pants and boxers just below the knees, and pulled, hard. Halfway off already, it took only two tugs to finish the job. Just as promised, Ray dropped them negligently to the floor, then straightened. Their eyes met. Fraser moistened his lips with that little tongue-flicker Ray had come to find unbearably erotic. Ray drew in a ragged breath, controlled the urge to fling

himself on Ben and just go for it. No. He wouldn't do that. He could handle this. He could.

Moving forward, Ray put hands on those broad, pale shoulders, pushing Ben down onto his back. He let his gaze sweep Ben's bared body, and Ben shivered, a little, as if a cool breeze had passed over him. He'd never looked at a man this way before. Not that he'd never seen another guy in the altogether, but this was a long way from either a disinterested glance, or a quick, furtive survey. This was overtly sexual, intimate in a way he had never imagined he might ever be with another man.

To see the planes of firm pectorals, strong waist and thighs, the light scattering of body hair which thickened at the groin to frame a penis, all as desirable and erotic. It was strange, yet somehow...right. Years ago, the summer between eighth and ninth grade, he and a friend had eased their adolescent need with each other a few times. But they had done it hurriedly, guiltily, in the darkness, never taking time to really see each other, too embarrassed to do so. Now he wanted to look, slowly, blatantly, to drink in the solidly masculine beauty that lay before him.

Fascinated by Ben's nakedness, Ray reached down, following the path his gaze had taken with one hand, fingers trailing from cheek, to throat, past shoulder, over chest, into navel, then on to the now-quiescent shaft which lay against the dark thatch at the apex of his thighs. Ben sucked in air through his clenched teeth in a soft hiss, and under his hand Ray seemed to feel a slight stirring. He stroked a single finger over the soft skin, nudging the foreskin back so he could touch the glans, and Ben arched involuntarily into that touch with a gasp. Ray's gaze flickered up to his face, back to his groin, and he smiled, shifting his hand away on to lie warmly on Ben's thigh.

"You are unbelievably beautiful," he said, surprising himself. It wasn't something you said to another guy. But it was true. A blush washed upward from somewhere

around Ben's navel, and Ray felt a rush of emotion so strong he could barely breathe, and had to close his eyes against the welling tears. And he knew he had to tell him. He couldn't not tell him a moment longer. He hadn't dared let himself think in these terms until today, but even though it was so new it was scary, he had no doubt that was what he felt.

"Fraser, I mean— Ben, I, uh, I gotta tell you something. Before we go any further. So you don't think I just mean it in a physical kinda way."

Fraser looked at him warily and Ray almost laughed, yeah, he had kind of messed up that intro there. He gathered his courage, met Ben's apprehensive gaze and said it.

"I love you."

He held his breath, hoping it wasn't too much. It was easy to speak of want, or need, and of course, desire, but love was something else entirely. He watched Ben's eyes widen, saw the glimmer of moisture fill them, but not spill, saw shock change into amazement, then denial, then, finally, acceptance.

"And I you, Ray," Fraser breathed in a whisper. "I have for a very long time."

And then Ben was pulling him down into his arms, and their mouths met, open and warm. Ray felt Ben's tongue steal inside, licking tentatively at his own. He moaned and shivered. Felt like he'd been on the edge of coming for hours now, aching with it. Fraser finally showing some initiative was wonderful, he'd started to wonder if he was ever going to get with the program. But now he was, oh yeah. A hand slid down his back to curve over his ass and push his hips forward, pushing his rock-hard erection right into the slowly expanding bulge of Fraser's cock. He moaned again, louder.

"Shhh, Ray, it's late, you don't want to disturb your neighbors," Fraser said softly.

"I don't?" Ray gasped, panting, taking his cue from the hand still kneading his

buttock, humping languidly against the smooth belly beneath him. "Since when?"

"Ray!" Fraser gasped, scandalized.

Ray grinned. "Hey, hearing the neighbors get lucky is what makes apartment life fun!"

Ben's eyes widened, and he colored, and Ray laughed out loud.

"Doesn't all that blushing make you dizzy?"

"It's not something I can control," Ben said, clearly embarrassed.

Ray felt badly for having teased him, and he leaned down, putting his lips against his ear. "Don't even try. I wouldn't know who you were if you didn't do that. And I wouldn't want that. I want to know you. All of you."

He felt a shiver go through the body beneath his, felt Fraser's arms tighten around him.

"Ray?"

"Yeah?" he breathed, still against that ear. Fraser shivered again. Liked that. Sensitive ears, in more ways than one. Ray let his tongue steal out to slide along the convolutions there, and the shiver became a full-fledged arch beneath him.

"Ahhhhh," the sound was half sigh and half moan. "I can't...I can't talk when you...."

Ray took pity on him and stopped licking. "Talk fast."

"I want you."

Ray grinned against the side of Ben's neck. "Yeah, I could kinda tell."

"No, I...I mean, I want you to...to, ah, make love with me."

Ray started to ask what the heck Ben thought they'd *been* doing, then it hit him. Ohhh. So, he wanted to do that, their very first time? Ambitious. He was amused again. Damn if he hadn't been right earlier, when he'd wondered about Ben's unusual passivity. To use the lingo he'd picked up working Vice, apparently Ben was a 'bottom.' At least for now. Maybe it wasn't too surprising, considering his mind-boggling inexperience with the physical side of things. Ray suspected that might change

after he got a few more miles on him. He couldn't imagine Fraser staying submissive for long. He liked to pretend he was, but in reality he was just good at letting other people think they were in charge when he was really the one holding the reins. Or was he just making unwarranted assumptions about Ben's previous experience? He shot a look at Fraser, found him staring back anxiously.

"Ben, have you...well, have you ever actually done that?"

Blushing, Ben shook his head, avoiding his gaze. "No. I...no, not in...reality."

That sank in, and Ray's eyes widened. Not in reality. Did that mean he'd fantasized about this? Now there was a thought to send him reeling. He reached out and traced patterns on Ben's ear with a fingertip until he shivered again. Nice.

"You know what's involved?"

Fraser nodded. "Yes, Ray."

"And you still want to?"

Ben's eyes closed, and he nodded, lower lip caught in his teeth, his expression openly, unmistakably yearning. Ray drew in a long, shaky breath. God, could he do this? Of course he could. It wasn't like he'd never done it before, even if his partner hadn't been male. It was just that this was...Ben, and that made all the difference in the world. That made him ache with need, and scared him witless at the same time. What if he didn't like it? He pushed himself up on his forearms, looking down into Ben's face.

"Ben, it might not be a good idea, this soon. I mean, we ought to take it easy, work up to things."

Ben nodded. "Oh. I see. Yes, well, you're probably right."

Lush, dark lashes feathered down to hide his eyes, but not before Ray saw the disappointment in them. Oh, damn it, not that. He'd never been able to stand up to that look, even when he suspected it was deliberate manipulation. He swallowed hard.

"But, if you really want to...." he began uncertainly.

Those lashes lifted again, revealing eager, anxious blue eyes. "Yes, please."

Please. Uh oh. The fatal one-two punch. The eyes, and please. Ray dropped his head to Ben's shoulder with a low groan. "Okay. Okay, but we take it slow, okay? Easy. You tell me if you want to stop, right?"

"Of course, Ray," Ben said, in a voice that clearly said 'What, are you nuts?'

He found himself laughing, maybe it was just hysteria, but he managed to control it after a moment, and lifted his head, "I mean it. You don't like it, you tell me, right away. No macho Mountie 'I can take it' crap, got it?"

"I believe so, Ray."

Ray stared at him for a moment longer, and finally decided he wasn't doing his 'fibbing' thing, and leaned down for a kiss which was deep, and hot, and verging on wild. He broke it, gasping, and had to taste more. Fraser wasn't the only one who liked to taste things. He'd always had a bit of an oral fixation himself, though he was too culturally conditioned to do it in inappropriate places. He licked along Fraser's jawline, enjoying the rasp of faint stubble against his tongue, startling a little sound out of his partner. He grinned, and licked down his throat to the hollow of his collarbone. Ben squirmed, breathing raggedly. Ray felt a surge of echoing arousal; getting Ben excited did the same for him.

"You taste good," he whispered against the broad chest, between licks. He found a nipple and sucked until Ben moaned. "And smell good," Ray went on, sniffing, as he deliberately rolled his hips against Ben's and sighed. "And you feel good, too." Reaching down, Ray slid a hand up one pale, muscular, lightly-furred flank, feeling the power in it, knowing that power was leashed and tamed, for him.

Ben shifted his thighs apart, brought his knees up, as he had earlier. Running on pure instinct, Ray found himself thrusting

into the gap between those powerful thighs, discovering that he wanted it this way as badly as Ben did. But he was pretty sure it wasn't going to work like this. Not easily, anyway. He forced himself to think, really think, instead of just feeling.

First off, did he have...yeah, memory kicked in. Okay. Supplies in the night-stand. A little old, but probably still okay. Secondly, how to make this easier? Working a couple of years in Vice had supplied enough detail for him to know it would probably work better back-to-front. Nothing to get mushed by accident, no knees and legs to get in the way. It was less personal that way, but easier logistically. With a sigh he reluctantly pushed himself away from Ben's body, moving to lie beside him.

"Ray?" Ben queried, looking at him with a puzzled expression.

"S'okay, Ben," Ray reassured him. "Just trying to figure this out." He grinned a little sheepishly. "I never did this before either." Well, not with a guy, he thought, but didn't say.

The confusion vanished from Ben's face, replaced by a look of eagerness that made Ray a little dizzy from the rush of blood to his groin. He turned to fumble at the night-stand drawer with shaky fingers, only managing to get it open after three tries. Where...where...he pawed through the jumbled contents searching.

He managed to dump half the jumbo package of M&M's out in the drawer as he rummaged, and that didn't help matters. Flashlight. String. String? Why was there string in there? A book he'd forgotten about. About six months worth of ATM receipts and spare change regularly dumped out of his pockets, a half-empty box of tissues. Ick— what was that slithery thing? Oh. He relaxed a little. It was just the chain on those dumb dog tags from the Army Surplus store.

It said something about his sex life that this stuff was so hard to find. And that made him wonder what the hell Ben was doing here with him, when he could have

anyone, male or female, that he wanted. Shaking off that thought he scrounged again, damn it, he knew they were somewhere in— there, in the far back, underneath a half-used bag of cough-drops. Packets. Tube. Yeah. Anticipation shivered through him. He wrapped his fingers around his prizes, turned, and nearly dropped them.

Ben had turned onto his stomach, and lay with forehead against his crossed arms, thighs slightly spread. Ooohkay, so Ben knew it worked better that way, too. He wasn't going to ask how. Ben knew a lot of stuff you wouldn't think he would. Ray found himself staring at the oddly vulnerable-looking back of Ben's neck, and bizarrely wondering how often he had to get his hair cut to keep the skin there so smooth, so...bare. He shook his head, trying to get past that strange 'stuckness'. He knew he was being silly, but he wasn't sure he could look at that strong, sleek back, or the firm curves of that ass without losing it.

His confidence was trying hard to unravel, but Ray desperately snatched a few threads of it back. Somebody had to take the lead here, and Ben was clueless. It had to be him. Ben was counting on him. Grounding himself in that thought, he closed his eyes. Don't look. Just touch. Touch is okay. Touch is good. Feels good for both of you. Not like looking, which is only good for you. Putting the condoms and lubricant down where he could reach them, he reached out and placed his palm against Ben's back. Felt a tiny tensing of muscles, then they released. He slid his hand down, feeling the silky skin give slightly beneath his palm.

As he reached hip level, he felt the slow, forward arch of pelvis into the sheets, heard a soft almost-grunt. His hand tightened on the upper curve of one buttock. Felt hard, and yet soft. The curve was nice in his hand. Solid. His fingers stroked, felt the response in another push of those hips into the bed. Finally, he opened his eyes, focused on his hand, the way it

looked against Ben's pale skin. Good. It looked good. He flexed his fingers. Ben sighed and shifted his thighs wider. No doubt about it, none at all. He wanted it. It suddenly occurred to Ray that he didn't know why, and he really, really needed to know that now, before things went any further.

"Ben? Why do you want this?"

Ben was silent for a moment, and when he replied it was without lifting his face from where it was hidden against his forearms, so the words were faintly muffled, though he could see the flush climbing his neck, painting his ears. "Because I want you to be a part of me. Because it is the most intimate act possible between two people."

Holy shit. That it was, it surely was. The trust...God, no trust issues here. Except maybe, one. If Ben thought he had to do this, that somehow Ray needed for him to do it..."Ben, look at me."

Slowly Ben turned over so he could look at Ray, his eyes shadowed, apprehensive. Ray slid down beside his partner and kissed him reassuringly before drawing back. "Ben, you don't have to do this. You know that, right? I mean, I'm good, just like this. There's lots of other things we can do."

Ben cocked his head and studied him intently, forehead creased in that tiny frown he always got when analyzing. After a moment his expression relaxed. "Ah. No, Ray. I know that, but I want to. I want to very, very much. I want to know you this way. I want you to be part of me. Nothing more than that. No obligation or coercion. I simply want you, I have for a long time. I have, in fact, spent entire days thinking of little else than your hands on me, your mouth on mine, your body in mine." Sudden uncertainty clouded his face. "Unless, of course, you would rather not?"

Ray, who had gotten stuck somewhere around the words 'in mine' suddenly heard what Ben was saying and came back to himself in a rush. He took Ben's face

between his hands, looking him directly in those storm-cloud eyes. "Don't even think it. I want it. I want you. Any way you want me, any way you'll have me, up to and including at noon on the observation deck of the John Hancock building if that turns your crank."

Ben's eyes got very wide then, and his tongue flickered out to moisten his lips. Ray had a feeling his thumb would be worrying his eyebrow if Ray's hands hadn't been in the way. He grinned slowly. "You got an exhibitionist streak I don't know about?" he teased. "Guess I should've figured, with you wearing that damned red coat all the time. Stand out like a sore thumb."

Color surged hot and bright across that creamy skin. "Ray!"

Ray chuckled. "Relax, I'm joking."

"Ah," Fraser said, swallowing heavily. "I'm sorry, I'm not very used to being teased, not...not like this."

Ray shook his head. "I know, and I intend to do something about that, too." He grinned suddenly, and winked. "But not right now. Right now there are other things I intend to do to you." He stopped, frowned, and then got serious. He didn't know what it was, suddenly he was talking as much as Fraser did, and being as cautious as the Mountie, too. This was just too important to mess up. "I mean, with you. Not to you. There's a difference. This has to be with, Ben. You understand? It has to be right for both of us. So if it's not right, you tell me. Understand?"

Ben's eyes met his, open and steady. "Yes, Ray. You don't have to say it again. And I promise you, I will be honest. I'll never lie to you, Ray. Never."

"Not even for my own good?" Ray prompted.

"Well...."

Ray gave him a look.

After a moment's consideration, Ben sighed, nodding. "Not even then, Ray."

Finally. Finally. Ray leaned down and claimed Ben's mouth again, sealing that promise with his lips, taking it from his

tongue. Ben's arms slid around him, holding him, hands roaming down his back, up again, back down, holding his hips as Ben lifted against him, rubbing the firming length of his cock against Ray's pulsing, aching erection. God, that was so good. So good. Then Ben shifted his thighs wide, and drew up his knees, curling his pelvis upward so that Ray's thighs slipped between his thighs and his hips slid down into that space there, hot and damp with sweat. Almost without even trying, he was practically where he needed to be. Whoa. Maybe it *would* work frontways—and that would mean he could see Ben's face. He lifted his mouth, looked into Ben's eyes, asking his question. Ben nodded.

"I want to see you, I need to see you when you...when you..."

Oh God. "Ben, if you want me to last long enough to do this, you gotta quit saying stuff like that," Ray said shakily. "But, I'll try. If that's what you want, what you really want."

Fraser looked faintly annoyed, as if Ray's persistent attempts to ascertain his mental state were becoming irritating. "I really want it, Ray. And if you would kindly..." his voice trailed off suddenly, and he couldn't complete his sentence, but Ray had a feeling he knew what it was Ben couldn't say.

Ray grinned. "I kindly would," he growled, and leaned in to kiss him again, only to have Ben put a hand on his chest, holding him just out of reach.

"Ray. Now." His voice was firm, almost demanding.

Now. Christ. Okay. Impatient Fraser was new, and incredibly arousing. Ray swallowed hard and nodded. He found the lube again, and managed to get the top off, covering his fingers with the slick, cool gel. He rubbed it between his fingers, warming it, hoping like hell it worked for guys as well as chicks. It should, there was no reason it shouldn't was there? He almost asked Ben, then realized who he'd be asking and didn't. He shifted back onto his

haunches, trying really hard not to notice how utterly erotic it was to see Ben all splayed out like that. Knees raised, thighs spread wide, waiting for him, waiting to be...oh geez. Don't look, don't think, just do. He eased his fingers down into the shadowed warmth beneath the soft, loose flesh and the wiry curls. Stroked gently. Ben's thighs flexed, his hips lifting, giving Ray easier access. He eased a finger into the opening there, and Ben tensed, his cock twitching. Ray froze. Ben's eyes were closed so he couldn't really read his reaction, though it didn't look negative.

"That okay?" he asked anxiously.

"Mmmm...." Ben said, not very coherently. "Oh, please, yes. That's ...yes."

Well, that was definitely positive. Ray let his finger slip deeper, stroking, searching...he knew it was there somewhere, sort of knew where it was...after all, every adult male who'd ever had a physical knew that much. Suddenly Ben gasped, and shuddered, hands clenching in the sheets.

"Ray! Oh, Lord...oh"

Ray grinned. There. Oh yeah, there. He repeated the caress over and over again, until Ben was panting and writhing under his touch, and then he very carefully slid a second finger into him. It went in easy, and Ben groaned, a deep, throaty sound that Ray was beginning to understand meant pleasure. One of Ben's hands lifted, slid behind his neck and drew him down into a frantic, heated kiss, tongues slicking over tongues, mouths melding, breath mingling, the burn of stubble against his own lips, harsh, yet unbearably erotic. He kept up his caresses while they kissed, fingers sliding in and out, curling them to find and stroke that small spot that seemed to bring so much pleasure. Finally Ben pulled away, gasping.

"Please, Ray...I need...."

So did Ray. So much. He reached for a condom, and Ben's hand stopped him.

"It's safe for you," he whispered.

Ray shivered. "And you. I promise. I wouldn't lie."

"I know. Let me feel you?"

Jesus. Yes. "Yes," he breathed, and stroked himself with slippery fingers, then knelt between Ben's thighs. And somehow it was easy. It shouldn't have been easy, it should have been awkward and difficult and possibly even inept, but it wasn't. Somehow his body and Ben's knew what to do. Maybe it was just instinct, the urge for connection, for pleasure, for fulfillment. Maybe it was Ben, because he could do anything right, the first time. Or maybe it was just meant to be like this. Just like this. Easy. Right. So right. Ben shifted his legs high, hooked his knees over Ray's biceps, and then Ray was easing in, which seemed as if it shouldn't have worked but it did, so sweet. Ben moaned and shuddered, his head thrown back, throat arched in a taut line, his mouth open, panting. A little afraid, Ray hesitated, and Ben opened his eyes, the heat in them reassuring, and contagious.

"Don't stop," Ben said huskily. "Please."

Oh God, there it was again. Please. Ray closed his eyes, the only way he could maintain even a hint of sanity, and complied. He knew, in every inch of skin, in every pore, in every nerve, that this was Ben beneath him, around him, that the pleasure he felt wouldn't be this good with anyone else, never had been, never would be. It was a shocking, stunning discovery. He leaned down, his lips against Ben's as his body took over, driving slow and deep, over and over.

Ben turned his head, breaking the kiss, sucking in air through parted lips, and Ray could feel him breathing, inside, and out. The dark and wordless sounds Ben made seemed to caress him, to wrap around him and squeeze, and he couldn't help himself, he moved harder, faster. Feeling the slick length of Ben's cock pushing against his belly, he reached between them to wrap his fingers around the thick hard shaft, stroking him in time with his thrusts, over and over, until he drank the soft cry that broke from his partner's...his lover's throat, felt Ben shudder, felt the splash of wet heat against his skin.

Only then did he finally let himself go, hearing the sob that broke from his own lips, feeling the delight explode through him like lightning, and fireworks, maybe even thermonuclear devices. Never so good. Never so sweet, so right. When the pleasure ebbed enough for him to think again, he eased free and gathered Ben close in his arms.

"Love you," he whispered.

"Love you," Ben whispered back.

* * *

Something was thumping. And it wasn't his heart, though at the moment that was nearly as loud. Ray lifted his head from the pillow to look toward the direction of the sound. Yeah. It was definitely someone at the door. Crap. He shifted his hands from Ben's hair to cup his ears, hoping Ben wouldn't hear the sound through Ray's moaning and his shielding fingers. No such luck. He felt his partner's attention shift focus, weird how he could tell that, even with Ben's mouth wrapped around him, hot and wet, and incredible. Then he was doing what Ray had been afraid he'd do, lifting his head and letting Ray's cock slip from his mouth.

"Ray? Aren't you going to get that?"

Ray let his head fall to the pillow with a groan. "No, I am not gonna get that. I'm not expecting anybody. Somebody probably let some damned salesman in the building. Or they're tryin' to convert me or something."

"Well, it's not very nice to allow them to just stand there and knock, Ray. What if it were a neighbor with an emergency?"

Ray listened to the knock as it came again. "It's not an emergency."

"How can you tell?"

"I can just tell, okay?"

"I don't see how you could possibly make that determination with the information at hand, Ray."

Whoever was outside the door knocked again, harder. Ben looked at him. Ray sighed. "Okay, okay, I'm going." He got up,

grabbed a pair of sweats from the floor and pulled them on, cursing door-to-door anythings under his breath as he stomped out to see who had the unmitigated gall to be interrupting the best damned blow-job of his life. He flipped open the deadbolt, unlocked the primary lock, and flung open the door. "Yeah?" he growled, about as pissed off as he ever got. Then he realized who was standing there, and got even madder. Vecchio. Ben's words about how the man had hurt him all came back to him in a flood. "What the hell do *you* want?"

Vecchio's gaze traveled down his bare torso, lingered on the unmistakable bulge under the laundry-worn fleece, then came back up, amused, and apologetic. "Hey, man, sorry. Didn't know you had company. I'll get out of your..." his gaze lifted to Ray's hair, and his amusement deepened, "...hair in a second here. I'm just looking for Fraser. We were supposed to have lunch today. I went to the consulate to pick him up and he wasn't there. I went to the station and they said he was there yesterday, but nobody'd seen him today. I tried to call you, but your machine picked up, so I thought I'd come over and see if you were home, and if you knew where he was."

Oh. Fuck. "Uh, you mean right now, this instant?"

"Yeah, right now this instant." Vecchio said, looking a little confused.

"Nope, don't know," Ray said, since it was literally true. Fraser could be anywhere in the bedroom, but he didn't know exactly where.

Vecchio frowned. "Weird. It's just not like him, to forget."

"Yeah, uh, well, he's had a kinda tough couple of weeks, you know, all that Muldoon stuff," Ray misdirected wildly. "Got a lot on his mind."

Ray nodded. "Yeah. But it's really not like him to be gone all night, to just disappear like that."

"Sometimes he goes off in a park somewhere, camping. Maybe you should check that out. And, uh, I gotta get back

to...." He jerked his head toward the bedroom suggestively, hoping Vecchio would take the hint before Fraser recognized Vecchio's voice.

Vecchio nodded. "Yeah, good idea, thanks, Kowalski." He glanced in the direction Ray had nodded, and grinned. "Have fun."

Ray couldn't help grinning back as he thought about what was waiting for him. "Oh yeah."

Vecchio chuckled and turned to go, and Ray started to swing the door closed, and disaster struck.

"Ray? Who was at the door?" Fraser asked from the bedroom doorway.

Vecchio spun back around with a gasp, eyes going wide. Ray closed his eyes. *Shit, meet fan* he thought faintly. There was a moment of extremely loud silence.

"Benny?" Vecchio's voice was incredulous. "That you?"

"Ray?" Fraser's voice sounded uncertain.

"Benny?" Vecchio repeated stupidly.

"Oh, Lord! Lunch!" Fraser exclaimed. "Ray, I'm sorry, I...I...time seems to have gotten away from me. I know that's no excuse, but, well" his voice trailed off uncomfortably.

It was clear there was no way to go back in time about four minutes so Ray sighed, and opened the door the rest of the way, stepping back to let Vecchio in. Except he didn't come in. He just stood there, his gaze swinging from Ben, to Ray, again and again, slowly dawning comprehension lighting his face. His jaw dropped.

"Fuck," Vecchio said succinctly.

Ray thought that about summed things up. He shot a glance at Fraser, saw he was wearing nothing but boxers, and winced. That cinched it. There was just no way out, no way to explain it as anything other than what it was. Talk about unfair. Less than twenty-four hours and already somebody had found them out. They really had to get better at this. That had to be some kind of record.

"This is not...this is just *not* happening." Vecchio said, shaking his head. "This is *so* not happening. Benny, tell me this is not happening."

"Tell you what isn't happening, Ray?" Ben asked

"Tell me you two aren't...you weren't...uh, *doing* each other."

"Doing what to each other?" Ben inquired, puzzled.

Vecchio rolled his eyes. "You know what I mean."

"I'm afraid I.."

"He means were we having sex, Ben," Ray translated quietly, knowing Ben really didn't understand the question.

"Ah. That." Fraser got quiet. He rubbed his eyebrow, gaze fixed on the floor. He cleared his throat, and finally looked up, clearly embarrassed and uncomfortable, but relentlessly honest. "Well...I'm, ah, I'm afraid I can't tell you that wasn't happening, Ray."

Vecchio stood there for another few seconds, then his eyebrows drew down. "Jesus, I leave you alone for two minutes and you go and...Jesus H. Christ! I can't believe this. I really can't believe this. I mean, *him*..." he shot a disgusted glance at Ray, who bristled at him, sensing what was coming.. "Well, I could believe anything about him. But not you, Benny. Not you. You're too...too...damn it, Ben, you're... *The Mountie*."

Ben paled, but drew himself up, as dignified as if he were wearing the uniform. "No, Ray. I'm not 'The Mountie.' I'm Benton Fraser," he said quietly. "And that is an altogether different thing. Something that, perhaps, you didn't realize. And it wasn't two minutes, it was over a year. A lot can change in that time."

Vecchio stared at him for a long, silent moment, then he shook his head. "Yeah. I guess it can, hunh?"

"Ray, why don't you come in so we can talk about this?"

Vecchio took a step forward, looked at Ray, and stopped. "Fuck. I gotta...Look, no

offense, but I just can't deal with this. I'm out of here."

The other man turned and strode quickly away. Ben started to follow, but Ray caught his arm, shaking his head. "No, Ben. Let him go. Give him some time. Hell, it's a shock for us, and we're in the middle of it. I'm sure he'll come around," he lied. He wasn't at all sure about that. But he couldn't say that. Not to Ben, not now. He might not like Vecchio, but he was important to Ben. "Besides, nobody gets to see you in your boxers but me," he said in an attempt to lighten the mood.

Ben let himself be drawn back inside the apartment and Ray closed the door, locking it, leaning back against it with a sigh. "Well, wasn't that fun?" he asked.

Ben sank down on the sofa, staring at his hands disconsolately. "I'm sorry, Ray. This is all my fault. I should have remembered our lunch...appointment, but I'm afraid it just went right out of my head."

Ray smiled ruefully. "Well, guess that's kind of a compliment."

Ben looked confused for a moment and then to Ray's surprise, he nodded. "Yes, actually. It is. You make me forget...everything."

Ray felt heat rise in his face, and wondered if blushing was contagious. "Yeah, uh, well, anyway, look, it wasn't anyone's fault, not really. It's just one of those things. I mean, like it was fate or something. Vecchio didn't have to come looking for you. You're a grown man, for God's sake, if you want to stay out all night or blow off a lunch date, that's your choice. I swear the guy acts like you're about six years old and raised by monks or something."

"No, Ray, he doesn..." Ben started to protest that, but stopped mid-word and frowned thoughtfully. He sat quietly for a few moments and then looked up at Ray with surprised eyes. "Actually, you're quite right. He has always been overly protective of me. I suppose I never really thought about it before, as prior to his departure I

didn't have much experience with a partner, or a friend, who did not." His gaze warmed as it held Ray's. "Now, I do."

Ray smiled. "Yeah. You do. And just so you know, I get protective too. But I control myself. Like I didn't punch his lights out when I opened the door."

Ben frowned. "Now, Ray, why would you want to do that?"

"Cause I don't like people who hurt you. Hell, I didn't even like myself when I hurt you. Thought I was going to have to punch myself out."

That brought a faint hint of amusement to Ben's gaze. "You know, I don't believe that's actually possible."

"Yeah. I figured that out. Had to get you to do it instead," Ray said, grinning, hoping to break Fraser out of his mood.

It didn't work. Ben sighed. "Yes. I shouldn't have. And this...this is my fault, despite your assurances to the contrary. It was inexcusably rude to just forget an...appointment like that."

Ray caught the hesitation, the second time Ben had done that, and realized what was going on. "Date. You can say it, Ben. Date. You had a lunch date. I'm not going to get all weird about that. Okay?"

Fraser nodded, looking contrite. "I'm sorry, I..."

Ray rolled his eyes. "You want to leave a little guilt for the rest of us here, Benton-buddy? You're hogging it all."

"Forgive me...."

"Argh!" Ray snarled, slumping down onto the wing chair, staring at his hands, wishing he knew what to do. This wasn't his Ben, the annoying, pushy, never-wrong Benton Fraser who had a sense of humor, and teased him subtly, who was quiet but strong, with an innate dignity and surety. This person was uptight, apologetic, self-conscious. The whole...dynamic...that made him who he was, was just...off. And there was only one reason for the change that Ray could see, and that reason was named Vecchio. When Vecchio was around, Ben was like a different person. Or maybe that

was it. He wasn't a person. He was The Mountie. Like Vecchio had said. Another reason he should've belted the guy. Shit. He wanted his Ben back. He just didn't know how to get him.

* * *

Fraser watched Ray slouch in the chair, his body curved forward, almost hunched, his hands dangling loosely between his knees, desolately. It wasn't a pose. Ray's body could not lie to him, even if sometimes his mouth could. And he was the cause of this mood, he knew that. Yet another apology formed in his throat and he choked it back, realizing finally that his apologies were part of the problem. He thought back over the last few minutes carefully, analyzing. And he realized what else was wrong. He moved to crouch in front of Ray, almost between his thighs, and reached to take those slack hands in his.

"Ray."

He spoke quietly, asking for attention. Ray looked up, curious, but without expectation, his gaze level, and strangely...unemotional. Ben suppressed a shiver and started to speak, then realized that what he needed to say was nothing that could be spoken with words. He leaned forward, slid his arms around Ray's waist, and brought his bare torso up against Ray's equally bare chest, tucking his face into the hard, bony curve of his shoulder, feeling the ridge of collarbone beneath his cheek. He could feel Ray's pulse, slow, but picking up speed. He breathed in, deeply, filling his nose with the scent of his partner— a little sweat, a little sex, a faint hint of something a little sweet, almost herbal. Shampoo, perhaps, or styling gel? Not strong enough or harsh enough for cologne.

Head still down, eyes still closed, Ben lifted a hand and stroked his fingers through Ray's hair, traced the curve of one ear, followed it down to that sharp jaw, catching on stubble as he followed that line to his chin. There he shifted his fingers

higher, and traced the sullen curve of lower lip, the slight bow of upper lip, pressing faintly, until he felt moisture—the touch of tongue against his fingertips. Yes. He lifted his head then, and replaced his fingers with his mouth, trying to communicate through that touch. *I love you. I need you. I want you. I won't let this hurt us.*

Ray's lips parted under his, opening to let his tongue in, accepting. The kiss was gentle, unhurried, and sweet. Too soon Ray pulled back a little, eyes open, gazing into Ben's eyes with piercing clarity.

"You back now?"

Ben nodded. "Yes. I think so."

Ray stared at him a moment longer, judging, assessing; finally he nodded.

"Good. Don't do that again. Don't like that."

"I didn't like it either," Ben confessed, embarrassed and strangely ashamed.

Ray frowned. "Then why'd you do it?"

"I don't know. Habit, I suppose."

"Bad habit."

"Yes," Ben admitted. "Clearly."

Ray smiled a little at that, and leaned forward to kiss him again. Again a long, slow, sweet meshing of lips, tongues, the rasp of stubble against sensitive flesh, breath mingling. Arousal slid through his veins like warm honey, slow and thick. He had to shift his knees apart a little to accommodate his growing erection, felt a matching hardness against his belly, where it was pressed against Ray's groin. He remembered that long, beautiful shaft, the way it felt in his mouth, the way it tasted. He kissed harder, pressed himself closer. Ray suddenly drew back again, his expression serious.

"You know we're going to get that a lot. If we tell people."

Ben dragged his brain back up from the general vicinity of his groin and tried to understand. "Wha...what? Tell people what?"

Ray sat back a little, increasing the distance between them. He didn't meet Ben's eyes.

"Vecchio's reaction. If we tell people about us, if they find out. They'll be shocked. They'll be mad. Some of them will even be disgusted. Guess we should have thought of that before we...."

Ben understood, finally, and interrupted, shaking his head vehemently. "No, Ray. No. What other people think doesn't matter. What matters is you, and me."

"Me and you, hunh?" Ray chuckled to himself. As was often the case, his next words left Ben wondering what on earth he was talking about. "And a dog named Blue...nah, Dief doesn't rhyme and it's a dog, not a wolf."

"Excuse me?" Ben said blankly.

Ray grinned. "Sorry, 1970's pop-culture allusion. Sometimes I forget you've got no frame of reference. But me and you, I get that. Me and you is awesome, the best, greatness." Ray closed his eyes and smiled, then just as suddenly sighed, raking a hand through his hair, opening his eyes again, their sea-change depths solemn once more. "Unfortunately me and you gotta live in the here and now. That means we gotta deal with the crap too."

Ben was beginning to get an inkling of why Ray sometimes got annoyed with him for going off on practical tangents in the midst of other, more urgent matters. And urgent was a very good word for what he felt.

"Ray?"

"Yeah, Benton?"

"While I appreciate the gravity of the subject at hand, and agree that we must come to some agreement regarding such issues, do you suppose it would be possible to...that is to say could we...well, could we do it later?"

Ray stared at him in surprise, and then slowly, slowly, his mouth curved in a sensual smile. "Got something else you want to talk about first?" he asked, lifting a hand to rub at his angular jaw for a moment, then letting that hand slide down his throat to his chest, long, curved thumb

brushing over a russet nipple before continuing on down to rest, relaxed, on his thigh, just centimeters from where the mound in his sweatpants made it clear he was still aroused.

Ben's eyes followed the movement as if he were tracking a criminal, intently focused. Without lifting his gaze, he reached out, put his hand over Ray's. "Ah, not exactly, no. Not talk."

"Not talk?" Ray's voice seemed deeper, huskier. Seductive. "Got something you wanna do?"

Ben licked suddenly dry lips. "Yes. Very much so."

One corner of Ray's mouth twitched and Ben knew he was fiercely controlling a smile. He lounged back against the chair's brocade upholstery, shifting his thighs a bit further apart, and lifting an eyebrow. "What?"

Ben knew he was being teased. He enjoyed it. It was strange, before Ray, he might not have realized that, and he certainly wouldn't have liked it. Now he could not only understand and appreciate, he could give it, as well. He shifted back a little, casually, letting his hand slid off Ray's to rest against his own thigh instead.

"Actually, I'm sure you're right," he dissembled. "We do need to have a serious discussion."

Ray grinned wickedly. "Yes, we do. We need to have a serious discussion about my dick and your sweet, sweet ass."

The heat of a deep blush flashed over his skin like wildfire and Ben swallowed heavily. Oh, Lord. He should know better, he really should know better. He was a mere apprentice and Ray was a virtuoso. For Ray the tease was a long-ago mastered art form, and despite their mutual inexperience in this particular arena, his instincts were sure and true. Ray's smile widened, and he slid his hand back up his own thigh, cupping those long, long fingers over the equally lengthy prominence between his thighs, stroking it a little. Ben

licked his lips, swallowed again, feeling himself start to sweat.

"Or maybe, your dick, and my ass?" Ray suggested in a bare whisper. "'Cause, y'know, we're partners, and partners...share."

That little pause seemed so significant. Was significant. A wordless sound escaped Ben's throat, a ragged almost-growl. Only sheer willpower kept him from lunging then, from taking what he wanted. Ray's smile grew equally feral.

"Yeah. Oh yeah. Come on, come on!" Ray urged him, like he was watching a boxing match, and goading his fighter. "You want it. You know you want it. And you know something?" He didn't wait for a reply. "I want it too."

The raw, blatant need in his voice was irresistible. Willpower retreated, its forces in complete disarray, and Ben was moving, a shoulder in Ray's midriff a hand on his shoulder as he pushed, pulled, lifted. Ray's laughter ended with a breathless 'oof' as Ben gained his feet with Ray over his shoulder in a fireman's carry. A second abrupt exhalation was forced from him a few seconds later as Ben dropped him unceremoniously onto his back on his bed and divested him of his sweatpants. Ben skinned out of his boxers, and straightened to find Ray giving him a sultry look from beneath long, honey-brown lashes.

As soon as he had Ben's full attention, Ray rolled onto his stomach. As if that weren't bad enough, he shifted his thighs apart, and pushed up onto his elbows to look back over his shoulder at Ben, eyes sparkling, sparking, daring him, full of amusement and defiance and desire. The pose brought the long lines of his back into relief, made a cupped hollow of his spine, drew the eye right where Ben suspected Ray meant it to...how could he know that? Breath deserted him again. For very different reasons this time.

His knees hit the bed before he was even aware of movement, and he was leaning over Ray's shoulder to capture that

rakish grin and taste it. Ray made a soft sound against his lips, a hum. It tickled, made him pull back and scrub his mouth against Ray's shoulder to take the tingle away. Ray laughed, a soft, pleased sound.

"Do me. Do. Me. I want to feel it, feel you. Do me."

The command simultaneously aroused and annoyed. So very Ray. Demanding. Yet demanding nothing Ben didn't already want to give, need to give. With Ray he was never quite sure who was in charge. It seemed as if he was, yet at the same time, it didn't. Perhaps that too was partnership, passing the lead between them effortlessly, without conscious thought. Perhaps it was no control at all, because neither of them had to have that with each other. And it didn't matter. Not now. He reached for the tube on the night-table, held the cap in his teeth as he turned the tube to unscrew it, layered a thick mound onto his fingers, then dropped the open tube back on the table. Realizing he'd forgotten something, he spit the cap in that general direction, heard it hit the floor and roll under the bed.

Ray chuckled evilly. "In a hurry, are we?" he asked in a throaty, provocative whisper.

Ben didn't answer, verbally. He let his fingers do it for him. Ray gasped, then moaned a little as Ben's fingers began to stroke and tease, around, around, up, down, back around, then finally, inside. Still propped on his elbows, Ray dropped his forehead down against his interlaced hands, his breathing quick and loud, as Ben slid his finger deeper, deeper. Had it felt like this to him, for him? The amazing heat, the smooth, sleekness, the incredible tightness...he curled his finger a little, found, stroked, and Ray whimpered, his hips arching into the bed in an involuntary thrust. He repeated the caress, slowly, with the same response. He liked that. Liked causing that. Wanted more. He pressed a second slick finger against that small orifice, felt it yield. Yes. Two fingers in, slippery,

moving in, marginally out, in deeper. Ray shuddered and moaned.

"God, Fraser. Ben. Oh my Lord...that...I had no idea!"

Ben stopped in mid-motion, worried. "Is that...good?" he asked cautiously, really not certain.

An explosive laugh greeted that. "Christ, you have to ask? And I was afraid I'd hurt you!"

Ben clamped down on the impulse to tell him the truth, not wanting to make him feel badly. Then he realized perhaps he ought to warn him. "Well, actually, Ray, it was a little...uncomfortable."

Ray's head lifted, looked over his shoulder, frowning. "I hurt you?"

"No!" Ben said firmly. "Not hurt, not...precisely. Just...well, it's hard to describe. But in the end it was well worth any momentary discomfort."

"Oh. Good." Ray looked relieved, then startled. "Was that...did you just make a pun?"

Ben blinked. "Excuse me?"

Ray grinned and wiggled his hips, eyes closing a little in pleasure as the motion caused Ben's fingers to slip deeper. "You, uh, you said 'in the end' it was worth it."

Ben realized what he meant, and blushed, then suddenly realized just how ridiculous it was to blush over a double entendre considering that they were both naked, and exactly where his fingers were at the moment. Speaking of which...he started moving them again, slowly, carefully, hoping that he could minimize any potential discomfort with a little judicious stretching. Of course, since Ray was rather more generously endowed by Nature than he was himself, it should be easier to begin with. He tried very hard not to think of what he was going to be doing in a few moments, knowing he was altogether too close to the brink as it was. He concentrated on pleasuring Ray, stroking his back, his buttocks, easing his fingers in deep and pressing into his prostate, making him

hump the bed and pant. It was almost hypnotic, and painfully arousing.

"Fraser?" Ray sounded hoarse.

He looked up, met those hot blue-gold eyes, and nearly lost control at what he saw in them. Somewhere he found his voice.

"Yes, Ray?" He sounded just as hoarse as Ray did.

"Gonna make me beg?"

No. Oh, no. Definitely not. Galvanized into motion, Ben grabbed for the tube on the night-table and squeezed some onto himself, gasping at the chill, but grateful for the way it backed his arousal down a little. Dropping the tube over the side of the bed to join its cap, he gritted his teeth and used his hand to spread the slick stuff over his erection, then he moved between Ray's thighs and slid into place alongside his fingers. Carefully he eased his fingers free, and pressed the head of his penis against that too-small aperture. He meant to go slowly, he had planned to be careful, to be gentle. Ray had other plans. He was barely inside when he felt Ray shift a little, then push himself up, and back, hard. The movement was so unexpected and he was so slicked up that he went in fast, and deep.

Ray's back bowed, head back, breath hissing over clenched teeth. A fine tremor shook him. Ben wasn't sure if he should pull out, which would probably hurt just as much, or just stay where he was and let Ray adjust. He started to ease back, only to have Ray reach back and grab his hip.

"Don't," he hissed. "Do. Not. Move."

Ben went as still as he could. Not an easy task, as he had just started to realize just how good it felt to be lying here like this, inside Ray, joined as deeply and intimately as it was possible to be joined. His body was demanding movement. He resisted that demand. He could do this. He could. He leaned down and nuzzled the back of Ray's neck, his ear, trying to distract him from what he knew had to be pain. Trying to distract himself, as well. It was the only way he could keep himself still. Finally he felt the tension easing, felt the heat and

constriction around his cock soften and yield. Oh Lord, he wanted to move, he needed to move. No. No. He licked one of Ray's ears. Felt him shiver.

"God. Fraser. You're...inside me," Ray's voice was full of wonder.

Ben closed his eyes, wishing Ray hadn't reminded him. "Yes. I'm..." he bit back the apology that had tried to surface. "I am."

"That's...incredible."

"Am I hurting you?" He had to know. He had to. He couldn't continue if he was. There were other ways to find pleasure, ways that didn't involve pain.

Ray was quiet for a moment, and then he slowly shook his head. "No. No, not any more. That was my fault, anyhow. Just got impatient. But it just feels...you feel...God. It's...you. It's..." He shivered, all over. "You can move now."

Finally. Finally. No more torture. Yes. Ben moved. Slowly, gently, hesitant but delicious, movement. Felt that heat clasp him, reluctant to release. A shiver of his own echoed Ray's. When no tension or apparent distress resulted, he moved again, a little less tentatively. And again. And again. Each time a little easier, a little deeper. Ray moaned, a throaty sound of need, not pain, and met Ben's movements with his own, little bucks and faint twists, until Ben caught his hips in both hands and held him still, because he was driving him mad. Ray laughed, at that, panting.

"Yeah. Do it. Go for it. Love it. Love you inside me. Love you."

And that did him in. Utterly. He put his forehead against Ray's shoulder, and gave in to his need, to their need. He drove into that clasp, yielding heat in long, deep, strokes. Ray's hips thrust against the bed echoing his penetrations, augmenting them. The wet, soft sounds of flesh on flesh, moans and sighs of pleasure, his own, Ray's, intertwined in air that was heavy with the scents of sex, and sweat, powerfully erotic. Ben bucked into Ray's tight heat one last time, and then he was coming, hard, and long, and sweet. Somewhere in that bliss, he

was faintly aware of Ray shuddering, moaning, felt the pulse of orgasm sweep him, too. Yes. That was it. That was right. Perfect.

* * *

Something was definitely weird around the 27th. First off, there was a note on his desk from Stella, asking him to call her. Since she hadn't left him a note in over a year, it freaked him a little. He'd tried to call, only to find she was in court on a case and wouldn't be out for at least a couple of hours.

Then there was the other thing. Ray had sensed it the minute he walked in. People were...watching him. Covertly. But definitely. If he caught them at it, they would just look away and pretend to be doing something else. Since he wasn't usually a paranoid sort of guy, he didn't think it was all in his head. No, it was definitely for real. And it was really getting on his nerves.

He got that prickly feeling between his shoulder-blades again, and turned to find Dewey staring at him. That was it. That was just it. He pushed away from his desk and stomped across to Dewey's, leaning over it, hands planted firmly on its surface.

"Okay, what?" he demanded belligerently.

Dewey held up his hands, leaning back. "Nothing, man! I didn't say anything!"

"No, but you looked at me."

Dewey made an innocent face. "Can't a guy look around the office? Don't want to get eye strain."

Ray glared at him a moment longer, but knew he wasn't going to get anything out of the other cop. He straightened. "Look somewhere else," he growled.

"No problem," Dewey muttered, picking up a folder off his desk.

Ray headed back to his desk, then stopped. He had to know what was going on, and if there was one person at the station guaranteed to know what was going

on with everyone at all times, it was Sergeant D'Aragon. He headed out to the booking desk to catch up on the latest gossip. There appeared to be a biker convention in the lobby. There were half a dozen leather-clad men and women in Harley Davidson tee-shirts milling around. He gathered after a moment that one of their compatriots had been arrested and they were unhappy about it.

He worked his way through the crowd until he got close enough to the desk to hear that, as usual, D'Aragon was on the phone. He couldn't see her through the big biker guy who was right in his way, but he could hear her, with a little effort.

"...no, not the blond one, the *bald* one. Yeah. That's right. Mmmhmm. Okay, well, anyway, so he comes in all steamed up, grabs the assistant state's attorney by the arm and hustles her down the hall to the closet. You know, the storage closet? Down by the interview rooms? Yeah. That's it. Well, I needed some fax paper so I was headed that way myself, that's how come I saw them go in, and that's how come I heard what I heard."

She paused a moment, obviously listening to whoever was on the other end of the line. Ray processed what he had so far. Something about Stella. And somebody bald. Had to be Vecchio. Vecchio and Stella. In the closet? He was having trouble wrapping his brain around that scenario, even though he knew they were dating. It just wasn't very...Stella. She was way too classy for closets. D'Aragon started up again and Ray strained to hear her over the background noise.

"No, that wasn't it at all! They were arguing! At first I couldn't hear much, then all the sudden Vecchio gets real loud, like he's really ticked off, and he says 'So it doesn't bother you that your ex-husband is fooling around with my ex-partner?' Only he didn't say 'fooling around with,' if you know what I mean." D'Aragon giggled, then went on. "Oh yeah. That's exactly what he said. Word for word, no lie. And you know

there's only one person he can mean, because Vecchio never had a real partner. Just that nice Canadian fellow. Guess he's not quite as nice as we thought, hunh?"

Ray tapped the biker in front of him. "You. Move." He snapped.

The guy started to argue, looked down at him, shut his mouth, and moved. Ray stepped up to the desk, and very deliberately pressed the switch-hook on the phone, disconnecting the call.

"Hey!" D'Aragon protested, then realized who she was looking at and paled. She smiled sickly. "Uh, Detective Kowalski. Something I can do for you?"

He reached across the desk and wrapped his fingers into the front of her uniform blouse and yanked her forward over the desk so she was mere inches from his face. "You can shut your talking hole, you heartless bitch. You can say anything you want about me, but so help me God if I find out you've ever said anything about Fraser I will kill you. Understand?"

She swallowed, nodded, her eyes huge and fearful. He liked that. He smiled. "Good. Very good. And now you're going to tell every person you told that story to that you were wrong. Right? Every person. And you're going to ask them who they told, and you're going to tell them too. And I don't care how long it takes you. I don't care if you have to tell the whole fucking city of Chicago. Got it?"

She nodded again. Ray held onto her for a moment longer, then let go. She slid limply across her desk and into her chair with a plop. He turned around and walked away from the desk, the bikers parting before him like he was Moses and they were the Red Sea. It was dead silent in the room.

The odd parting of the waters kept up in the hallway and all the way to the bullpen. He wondered vaguely what he looked like, what was making people step out of his way like he was a leper. He walked up to Welsh's office and stood in the doorway until the lieutenant looked up from his phone call. He studied Ray for a

moment, his eyes widening, then narrowing, and he turned back to his call.

"Look, I'll call you back. I got a situation here," he said abruptly, and hung up, returning his attention to Ray. "You need to see me, Kowalski?"

Ray nodded, not trusting his voice.

"Come in and have a seat."

As Ray stepped into the office and headed for his usual chair, Welsh got up and closed the door, then the blinds. Finally he returned to his desk and sat down again. They were silent for a moment, then Welsh cleared his throat.

"So. You got something to say to me, Detective?"

Ray had been trying to think what to say, what to do, ever since he'd let go of D'Aragon. He had just done something that no cop should ever do, and he knew it. He nodded, slowly, and removed his shoulder holster, his badge still clipped to it, and laid the whole thing on Welsh's desk.

"You're gonna want those," he said quietly.

"Why?"

"Because I just threatened Sergeant D'Aragon. So I...I figured I'd resign, and save you the trouble of suspending me and having to go through the whole Internal Affairs thing. So there it is. Official. I quit. I'll put it in writing if you give me something to write on."

Welsh was quiet, staring at the pile of leather, nylon, steel and plastic on his desk. After a moment he looked up, frowning. "Would you care to tell me why you felt it necessary to threaten Sergeant D'Aragon?"

Ray felt his jaw tighten so hard he thought it might cramp as he tried to force down his anger. "It's personal, sir."

"Not any more it's not. Now spill it, Kowalski."

Ray shook his head. He'd resigned. Welsh couldn't make him say anything.

Welsh was silent, watching him for some time, waiting. When he finally realized Ray wasn't going to speak, he leaned forward, lacing his fingers together



on his desk. "Kowalski. I know you. You have a temper, but you never go over the edge. I also know Shirley D'Aragon, all too well. If you threatened her, there had to be a reason. A good one. And my gut tells me this has something to do with that little problem we spoke about on the phone last Friday. Am I right?"

Ray stared at his hands, willing himself not to break down. He nodded.

"Something about Constable Fraser?"

Ray nodded again, still not looking up. Welsh sighed.

"How did I know? You never get this bent out of shape on your own behalf. Look, you know the rules, I have to suspend you..."

"No you don't. I already told you. I quit. I'm gone. History. Outta here." Ray stood up suddenly, heading for the door. He couldn't do it any longer. Couldn't keep himself together.

"I don't accept your resignation," Welsh barked.

"You've got no choice," Ray said flatly, and left the office. He swung by his desk, grabbed his book on Canadian Impressionism out of the bottom drawer and removed his private files, dropping them back in the drawer. As he picked up the few personal items he kept there, shoving them in his pockets he heard Welsh's voice.

"Kowalski! Get your butt back in here!"

Ray shook his head, and took off, book under his arm, carefully not looking at anyone as he walked rapidly through the station. He could only pray that D'Aragon's story didn't get back to anyone who might mention it to Thatcher. Fraser had had enough problems with his career without adding this to it. He was finally back on track, the bigwigs in Ottawa were finally seeing him as a valuable asset, and now this had to happen. Christ. Good work, Vecchio. As tempting as it was to go find the Style Pig and whale on him, he knew he wouldn't do it, if for no

other reason than because Ben wouldn't like it.

He got to the GTO and stood by it for a moment, trying to organize his thoughts. He couldn't go to the consulate because Ben would instantly know something was wrong, and he didn't want to go home because he knew Welsh would call him there and bug him. After a moment he opted to just go for a drive. Sometimes that was the best thing to do. Just get away, get out. He got into the car, shoved a *Nine Inch Nails* tape in the cassette player, and headed for the highway.

* * *

Fraser checked his watch. Again. Six-fifty, and Ray still hadn't arrived to pick him up. That was quite unusual. He was trying not to let his imagination run amok, but there was a voice in the back of his mind, telling him that there was only one logical reason for his lateness. That after a day spent alone, without Fraser's influence, Ray was having second thoughts about their relationship.

Every time he thought that, he would shake his head, and tell himself that Ray wasn't like that. He would never simply not show up, even if he were having second thoughts. So he must have gotten tied up at work. Cases often developed unexpectedly, and there was no telling when he might have to put in extra hours. Although it was unusual that he had not called. It must be something quite important, to have kept him away from both regular phones, and his cellular phone.

He picked up another immigration file and began a document check. He didn't allow himself to check the time until he had completed it, but as soon as he put down the file he looked at his watch again. Twenty minutes had passed. It was after seven. He reached for the phone to call the station. Surely someone there would tell him if Ray were busy on a case.

Just as he started to dial, he heard a knock at the front door and a surge of relief went through him, so strong he actually felt tears start. Blinking them back, flicking the excess moisture from the corners of his eyes, he hurried to the door, wondering why Ray hadn't simply come in. He opened the door and took a step back, startled. "Lieutenant?" he said, feeling confused.

"Constable." Welsh acknowledged. He looked oddly solemn. His hands were thrust deep into the pockets of his overcoat, his shoulders slumped a little from their usual solid squareness.

"Can I help you, sir?" Fraser asked, wondering why he had come, and after work hours. He hadn't stopped by like this since the Damon Cahill case.

"Actually, I came to see you," Welsh said, looking around, spotting the chair at the reception desk, nodding toward it. "You, ah...you might want to sit down."

Sit down? Why would he...Oh. Oh, God. No. The import of Welsh's presence hit Ben like a hammer. He knew this, this face, this demeanor, these actions, those words. All too well. He had been so worried about potential relationship problems that the most obvious reason for Ray to be delayed simply had not occurred to him. No. Please, no. He felt a hand on his arm, guiding him, pushing him down onto the chair.

"Breathe, Constable," Welsh said. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to...ah, hell. I should have known you'd know the drill. He's alive. But he's hurt."

Ben dragged a shuddering breath into oxygen-starved lungs so he could speak. "How badly?"

Welsh hesitated, which told him the answer before he even spoke. "Pretty badly."

"Where?"

"Cook County General. I thought you'd want to know, to be there. I'll drive you."

Fraser nodded blindly, getting to his feet.

"Get your coat, Fraser. It's cold outside."

He almost said he didn't care, but he did. He had to. He needed to be strong, to be rational, for Ray. He would need that. He nodded, and went to his office, put on his coat, and quietly explained to Diefenbaker why he was leaving. Dief silently licked his face, and though Fraser normally didn't really appreciate that, this time he welcomed it, because it saved him wiping away the tears. Drawing a deep breath, he squared his shoulders, set his hat firmly in place, and went out to join the lieutenant.

They were both silent for several blocks, then finally Ben settled on which question he had to ask first. "What happened?"

Welsh sighed. "We're not entirely sure at this point. There was a high speed chase, which he shouldn't have even been involved in. Hell, he wasn't even on duty, he'd left the station earlier in the day. Anyway, this chase was coming up on an elementary school, and school had just let out for the day. Kids everywhere. The blue and whites were trying hard to get in front of the guy to cut him off when out of nowhere Kowalski shows up in that damned GTO, blasts past the suspect's car and swings around broadside in front of it. You can probably imagine what happened."

All too well. Too graphically. Ben's stomach lurched. "But...why? Why would he..."

"Because he's a good cop, and a good man. Because he'd put his life on the line to make sure those kids didn't get hurt. That's why."

And that was the simple truth. Ben knew it. Ray might protest that he was cynical and hardened, but inwardly his belief in right, in justice, was nearly as strong as Ben's own. And it had led him to do this brave and foolish thing.

"His injuries?" Fraser asked, bracing for the worst.

Welsh shook his head. "I don't know much. I came over to get you as soon as I was notified. We'll find out when we get there."

"What about his parents? Have they been notified?"

"I sent a blue and white out for them. Didn't want them driving."

Fraser nodded. Silence descended again, until Fraser found more words that needed saying. "Thank you, sir, for thinking of me."

Welsh looked at him oddly. "I would have anyway, but you're listed with his parents, you know, as next of kin."

Ben stared at him, startled. "I am?"

Welsh nodded. "Yeah. He took off Stella and added you about seven months ago. You didn't know?"

Speechless, Fraser shook his head, feeling tears sting his eyes as he tried to fit that piece into the puzzle that was Ray. Next of kin? For months? Had he felt...the way he felt for that long? And then had never said a word, not wanting to make Ben feel uncomfortable? How had he missed that? He was usually such a keen observer of human nature, especially of Ray's very human nature, yet he had somehow not seen something so important. But as he thought about it, suddenly he knew he hadn't missed it at all. He had simply thought he was imagining it, that it was wishful thinking on his part. It hadn't been. Not at all. With that realization, the last of his fears about what Ray really felt toward him disappeared and left him even more devastated than before. He bent his head to hide the tears he knew would show in the light of each streetlight they passed, grateful that the lieutenant was too busy paying attention to Chicago traffic to take notice.

Welsh pulled into the hospital parking lot and drove up to the Emergency Room entrance. "Go on in, Constable. I'll park the car."

"I can wait, sir, and walk with...."

"Fraser."

"Sir?"

"Get out of the car."

"Yes, sir." Fraser did as ordered, and practically ran to the nurses' station. He waited a moment for the young man there

to put down the phone, and turn to him, eyebrows raised questioningly.

"I'm looking for my partner, Ray, that is, Detective Kowalski, of the Chicago Police Department. I understand he has been admitted. Could you tell me where I can find him?"

The man nodded, looking at the computer screen. "Spell that for me?"

Fraser spelled, the man typed, and a moment later he was looking up at Fraser, eyes wide. "Oh. Him. Didn't know his name. They just moved him upstairs to intensive care a little while ago. You a cop, too?"

Fraser nodded. He wasn't going to quibble about titles at this point. The young man smiled a little. "That's cool. He's your partner?"

He nodded again. Words seemed to be trapped in his throat.

"Very cool. He's really a hero."

Memories flashed. Sitting in the sun, deliciously warm after a day spent in a chilly crypt, looking at the diffident, self-conscious man beside him, achingly aware how important he had become, after so short a time. *'In December 1988 a young boy was being held in a warehouse. You went in even though you knew your cover had been blown. You drew fire, you were wounded, yet you managed to rescue the boy. Your first citation. In December 1990, in a jewelry store you single-handedly held off three gunmen, saving four innocent lives. Your second citation. In September 1993 you faced down three escaped murderers and you brought them to justice. Your third citation ...'*

"Yes. Yes, he is," a gruff voice said from behind them.

Welsh's words snapped Fraser back to the present. He swallowed, hard, and turned. "They've moved him from emergency to intensive care, sir."

To his surprise, Welsh smiled at that. "Good, that's good. He's a fighter. He'll be okay. Come on, Constable, let's see if we can find out some details."

They took the elevator to the third floor. The doors opened onto a hallway, a

sign directed them to the nurses station and a lounge. It was strangely dim, and hushed. The rhythmic hissing of respirators and the faint, incessant beeps of various monitors filled his ears. The air smelled of antiseptic, and blood, and numerous other things he didn't care to dwell on, laid over by the more homey, familiar scent of coffee, and distantly, oddly, popcorn.

Watching room numbers, he rounded the corner, Welsh not far behind him. There, that was the one. Just as he approached the door, Stella stepped out, followed by a petite, dark-haired woman in lavender scrubs. Stella saw Ben, and an odd expression flashed across her face. Sympathy, and something else. Some deeper understanding that startled him.

"Ms. Kowalski," he said, feeling uncomfortable, without quite knowing why.

"Constable Fraser," she acknowledged quietly, then her gaze shifted past him. "Lieutenant Welsh."

"This is Ray's room?" Fraser asked, although he knew that to be the case. It seemed better to ask an obvious question than to have an awkward silence.

"Yes. His parents are with him, they called me."

Fraser nodded. "I...I would like to see him. Do you think I could go in?" He didn't know why he was asking Stella that. After all, she and Ray had been divorced for some time. Still, it seemed appropriate somehow.

"Are you a relative?" the woman in the scrubs asked, moving to block the door.

Ah. That. He should have guessed that would be an issue. Resigned to exclusion, Ben sighed, and shook his head. "No, I'm afraid..."

"Constable Fraser has as much right to be in that room as Ray's parents or I do," Stella interrupted briskly. "More so than I do, actually. And while I realize it's hospital policy to allow family members only until the patient is conscious and can state their wishes, as an attorney I know that it's not a legally enforceable policy. I also know that Ray would want him there."

Faced with that, the nurse gave a slight shrug and stepped away from the door. Stella smiled, a little smugly, then looked at Ben., her gaze softening noticeably.

"I think it would be completely appropriate for you to go in, Constable."

"Thank you," he said sincerely, though puzzled as to what had caused this sudden aberration in her behavior. She was normally quite curt with him. Probably, he suspected, because he didn't approve of the way she treated Ray and that showed more than he liked to think. He looked at Welsh, who nodded.

"Go on, Constable. I'll wait for you in the lounge, get a cup of coffee. Let me know what you find out."

Fraser nodded, and steeling himself, he stepped into the room.

Ray's father looked up and their eyes met. Fraser wondered if his own fear and anguish was as visible as Damian Kowalski's. To regain his son after years of separation, only to fear losing him now. To gain love after so long alone, only to fear losing him now. Damian touched his wife's arm, nodded toward Fraser. Barbara turned, and moved to him, enfolding him in her arms much as she usually did her son.

"Benton. Oh, Ben. It's so awful."

Awkwardly he hugged her back. He didn't quite know how it was supposed to be done. His family had not been very demonstrative. Not after his mother died, anyway. She patted his back, and pulled away, wiping her eyes.

"What you must think of me, falling apart like that," she said, looking embarrassed.

Ben straightened and looked at her gravely. "I think you're a mother, Mrs. Kowalski. A good one."

She smiled at that, if a little weakly, and returned to Damian's side. Ben nodded to Ray's father, and finally turned toward the bed. Ah, God. Ray looked...awful. Where his skin wasn't livid with bruising, it was nearly the same color as the sheets, all the gold leached out of him, leaving

powdered lead in its place. Both eyes and the left side of his face were mottled in red, purple and greenish-blue, the whole adorned with a sprinkling of small cuts. A butterfly bandage spanned his nose. His left arm was in a Velcro-wrapped brace, and above that it was nearly one solid bruise all the way up to where the sleeve of the hospital smock hid his upper arm and shoulder. From the way the smock sat across his chest, it was clear that he was heavily bandaged beneath it. An oxygen cannula snaked across his face, held in place with paper tape. His right arm, less heavily bruised, though sporting a couple of bandages, held an IV line, attached to a slowly dripping bag suspended from hook above the bed.

He looked...frail. Strangely so. Yes, Ray was thin, but strong. Frail was not something he had ever expected to associate with Ray. Even half-frozen on the face of a cliff he hadn't seemed frail. Vulnerable, but not frail. He wanted so badly to touch him, to put his fingers against his throat and feel the warmth of his skin, the beat of his heart, to reassure himself physically, to taste his lips, and feel his breath. But he couldn't. Ray's parents would surely not understand. He had to swallow several times before he could turn to face the Kowalskis and ask his question.

"Have you spoken to the doctor?"

Damian shook his head. "No. The nurse said he was in stable condition, and that the doctor would be in to see us in a few minutes to give us the details." He looked at Ray, and shook his head. "I saw the picture of the GTO on the news out in the lounge while we were waiting. He's lucky to be alive."

"Actually, he's even luckier than that," a man's voice said from behind them.

"Because if it weren't for the concussion, he probably could have walked away from that accident. And that is nothing short of a miracle."

Fraser turned, saw a stocky, curly-haired figure in a white lab coat. "Dr. Clooney?"

The man looked at him, and his eyes narrowed. "Don't I know you?"

Fraser nodded. "Constable Benton Fraser, RCMP. Detective Kowalski and I were here a few weeks ago, with Davie Abelard."

Recognition lit the doctor's gaze. "Oh yeah! With the wolf. And the faith healer. I remember. The kid who got hit..." His eyes suddenly widened as he looked at Ray, then back at Fraser. "So, do you warn people around you about this proclivity you have for attracting automobile accidents?" He grinned, then sobered abruptly. "Sorry. I shouldn't be joking. Forgive me." At Ben's nod, he turned to the older couple and put out his hand.

"You must be Mr. Kowalski's parents. I'm Dr. Clooney, I've been handling his case. First, let me reassure you that he's doing very well, despite the fact that he looks like he's lost a few rounds with a bus. And as I said to his partner, he's one very lucky man."

Barbara Kowalski started to cry again, and Damian put his arm around her, soothing her gently. The doctor waited quietly, obviously used to this. After a few moments she controlled herself again, and turned back, shoulders straight, a firm, determined look on her face.

"Please, go on. We need to know what all...all his injuries are. Of course he looks dreadful, that's to be expected, but what exactly is wrong with him? He's so...still."

The doctor nodded sympathetically. "Of course. He's sedated, quite heavily. We want him to stay very quiet for now. He has a pretty severe concussion, which is the main reason I've got him in intensive care, so we can keep a close watch for complications. I've put him into a drug-induced coma to reduce the chance of swelling in the brain. We'll reevaluate that every few hours until we feel it's safe to let him come out of it. The head injury is the

worst of it. Aside from that he's got a few lacerations, a broken nose, a sprained wrist, broken ribs, and some internal — and external, bruising. There's a possibility of a ruptured spleen, the x-rays weren't very clear, but we're watching that too, and if we have to take it out we will."

Damian cleared his throat. "What'd you mean he was lucky?"

"Well, basically everything that could go right did. First off, his car was hit on the passenger side, which bore the brunt of the impact and confined the worst of the structural damage there. Secondly, he was driving an older model car, with more steel and better overall construction, so it provided more protection than a late model vehicle. Third, he was wearing a shoulder-belt, which that make of car doesn't even normally have, and that probably kept him from fracturing his skull. Considering the severity of the crash, the relative mildness of his injuries is just short of miraculous."

Fraser had been listening to the doctor with a growing sense of relief and hope. The worst-case scenarios that had sprung to mind when he'd first heard about the accident, and first seen Ray, began to fade a little. Still, looking at Ray, he worried.

"What sort of long-term repercussions will this have?"

The doctor looked at him, serious again. "At this point it's hard to say. The cuts, bruises and breaks will heal, we're probably looking at a couple of months to full recovery on those broken ribs, but he'll be up and active within a week or so, I'd guess. The head injury is our primary concern. Standard neurological tests and a CT scan showed nothing out of the ordinary, but problems don't always show up right away. He'll have headaches, disorientation, possibly some short-term amnesia."

"Amnesia?" Barbara asked. "So, he might forget things?"

Clooney nodded. "In head trauma cases such as his, the victim often forgets the accident, and sometimes several hours to a

couple of days preceding it. Those memories may or may not return. Anyway, don't be surprised if he wakes up and has no idea why he's here."

Fraser's stomach gave a sickening lurch as he considered the ramifications of that. Amnesia. Possibly even a couple of day's worth. Oh, Lord. What if Ray didn't remember...them? He forced that thought aside. As his grandmother would have said, don't borrow trouble. He realized with a start that the doctor was talking again, and he hadn't been listening.

"...back to my office for a few minutes to give me some medical history? And I don't suppose any of you know who his regular doctor is, so I can get current files?"

The Kowalskis shook their heads, but that was one place Fraser could help.

"When absolutely forced to, Ray usually sees Dr. Carson Pettis," he said, remembering that from the times he'd accompanied Ray there when he'd felt it important that Ray receive medical attention for an injury received on the job, or for an illness.

Damian smiled a little. "That sounds like our Raymond. He never was much for doctors."

Dr. Clooney nodded his thanks at Fraser, then turned his attention back to Ray's parents. "Shall we go? It will only take a few minutes and then you can come back and sit with him."

A moment later, Fraser was alone in the room with Ray. Finally he could touch, could reassure himself. He put his fingers against Ray's face, stroking gently over the less bruised side, careful of the cuts, even through Ray could not possibly feel it. His skin was warm and pliant, he felt very much alive, despite his pallor and the lividity of the bruising. Tears stung his eyes, and he leaned down, his lips against Ray's ear.

"I love you, Ray. Remember us. Please remember."

He started to straighten, then couldn't resist brushing his lips against Ray's dry,

motionless mouth. He thought he felt a slight response and waited, breathless, lips barely touching, for it to come again. It didn't. He straightened and sighed, disappointed, though logically he knew that Ray was heavily sedated and it was highly unlikely that he would wake to a kiss like some character in a fairy-tale. It was a silly expectation. He heard a sound, and turned to see the nurse in the lavender scrubs standing in the doorway.

"I need to check the patient," she said, nodding toward Ray.

Fraser stepped aside to let her work, and suddenly realized that the lieutenant was awaiting word on Ray's condition. Since Ray was clearly in competent hands, he reluctantly left the room to make his report. As he neared the lounge he stopped in surprise upon hearing two familiar voices raised in anger. They weren't shouting, although he suspected they would be if they were not in an hospital. Both men sounded upset, Welsh more so than Ray Vecchio.

"...don't care if you have been undercover for a year. You should have known better. Frankly that should have made you more careful, not less careful. That man in there, no, *those* men in there, saved your life, saved your career, and you repay them by telling the biggest gossip in the entire Chicago P.D. things about their personal lives that could cost them their careers?"

"I didn't tell D'Aragon anything!" Vecchio protested. "I never even saw her!"

"It doesn't matter if you saw her, you were yelling it at Kowalski's ex-wife at the top of your lungs in a Goddamned closet! Anyone walking down the hallway could have heard you, and probably did. So if it wasn't D'Aragon, it would have been someone else. It was wrong, Vecchio, and you know it. Kowalski is a good cop, a damned good cop, or he was until your little stunt. Because of you he put his badge and his gun on my desk today. I don't have to tell you what that means. But even having resigned, he still didn't hesitate to

put his life on the line to protect and serve. That's what a good cop does."

Ben was frozen in place, almost literally, stunned. Ray had resigned from the police force? And Ray Vecchio, a man he had considered a friend, a man he had, in his own way, loved, had precipitated it? He had spoken to Stella Kowalski about things that were properly her ex-husband's place to tell her, if he wanted it known. Had exposed something private, and personal, and loving to people who would only see it as ugly and shameful.

The chain of events was suddenly clear. Ray Vecchio had, for whatever reason, gone to the 27th. He'd seen Stella Kowalski there, and told her about his discovery. Someone had overheard it, and predictably, had spread it about. Ray had arrived at work and heard the rumor, which must already have been widespread. And his experience with American law enforcement told Fraser how that rumor would have been received by the majority of the people there. Acceptance was out of the question.

Ray had faced that, alone. Fraser knew how Ray would have reacted, could almost feel it, inside. The pain, the anger, the hurt that would hide behind the 'fuck you' mask. Something, he was unclear as to what, had occurred that pushed Ray into resigning. He'd left the station, and somehow gotten involved in that car chase, and now he was here. And it all led back to Ray Vecchio. He felt utterly betrayed. His fists clenched as rage exploded through him, as hot and dark as what he'd felt for Gerrard after realizing he was responsible for his father's death.

He wanted to run back to Ray's room, to somehow let him know how sorry he was that he had not been there to stand with him, to confront that prejudice together, but he still had to tell the lieutenant about Ray's condition. Taking a deep breath, he closed his eyes, forcing chains of control around his desire to actually do physical harm to Ray Vecchio. Finally he felt able to continue, and began to walk with slow, deliberate

steps into the lounge. Welsh looked up as he came around the corner, and frowned.

"Bad news, Constable?"

Fraser kept his gaze fixed on the older man, not certain he could retain his control if he were to actually look at Ray. "No, sir. Actually, the news is quite promising. Considering the severity of the accident, his injuries are relatively minor. He is concussed, which is the most worrisome injury, but the doctor seems confident that he will make a full recovery."

The expression of relief on Welsh's face was touching. Fraser had always known the man thought of Ray as a good policeman, if a trifle unorthodox, but it was clear he actually liked him, as well.

"I'm very glad to hear that, Constable."

"As am I, sir."

To his left, Ray Vecchio cleared his throat uncomfortably. "Me too, Benny. I, uh...Stella told me what happened. I thought you might, ah, might want some company."

Fraser turned to face him, finally, keeping his face impassive. "The lieutenant is here, as are Ray's parents. I see no need for you to be here," he said coolly.

The other man looked a little startled, but he pressed it. "Well, yeah, but that's not the same as having a friend here."

That was too much, and Fraser couldn't maintain his hard-held control. Not with Ray lying in a hospital bed because of what this man had done. His fists flexed, and he pinned Ray Vecchio with his gaze. "A friend? Are you my friend, Ray? Would my friend have done what you did? Would my friend have said the things you said to me, to Ray; would my friend have spread rumors, attempted to widen the rift already extant between Ray and his ex-wife? Would my friend have jeopardized another man's career over issues of sexuality? I don't believe so. And I think you should leave. Now."

The other man stared at him in open disbelief. "You don't mean that!"

"I do mean it. Please leave."

"You don't want me to stay?"

"I do not want you to stay," he enunciated carefully.

The disbelief in Ray's green eyes shaded into hurt, and Fraser felt an unsettling pleasure at that realization. He was glad it had hurt. He had wanted it to hurt. He would do it again, if he could. It was not a pleasant revelation about himself. Ray dropped his gaze, shifting uncomfortably on his feet.

"I, uh, well. Okay. Guess I'll go home."

Fraser ignored the forlorn sound in his voice. Ray took a few steps and stopped, looking back at him. "Look, Benny, I'm...I'm sorry. I didn't mean...I didn't think..."

Fraser held up a hand. "Don't, Ray. It's not me you need to apologize to. Just go."

Ray looked at him for a long moment, then he turned and walked away. It was very quiet in the lounge. Fraser could hear the faint click as the thermostat in the coffee-maker kicked on to warm the pot. He realized he had his eyes closed and his fists were still clenched. A hand settled on his shoulder.

"Why don't you sit down, Constable Fraser?"

He opened his eyes to see the sympathy in Welsh's steady hazel gaze, and shook his head "No. I need to get back to Ray. I just wanted to tell you...I didn't expect to..." He swallowed back a sob, suddenly feeling very bewildered. He grabbed for his control, found it, shakily. "Forgive me. I shouldn't have subjected you to such a scene. I just...I didn't know, and when I heard..." He lost his voice again, lost his control. He put a hand over his face to hide his tears.

"Look, Fraser, I understand. I wanted to smack him one, too. I couldn't believe it when I hauled D'Aragon in to find out what in hell was going on, and she told me what happened. You didn't know? Ray didn't tell you?"

He shook his head. "No. I hadn't seen or talked to Ray since he dropped me off at the consulate this morning. I expect he was

reluctant to tell me what had happened. He's rather protective of me at times, doesn't like to tell me things he thinks will upset me. I can't imagine what would have prompted him to resign, though."

Welsh looked uncomfortable. "Yeah, well, that was a bit of a misunderstanding, I think. Ray thought he got out of line with D'Aragon. She, after some conversation, doesn't agree. She won't push it."

It suddenly hit Fraser that if Ray had resigned, he had no benefits. He looked at Welsh, stricken. "Sir, I realize it's quite inappropriate for me to ask this, and I wouldn't ordinarily, but I don't think Ray, his parents or I would be able to cope with the financial burden of his hospitalization. Would it be at all possible for you to postpone accepting Ray's resignation until...."

"Relax, Constable. I wasn't planning on accepting his resignation anyway. It's always been my policy to give a twenty four hour cooling-off period, at least, before taking a resignation. In this case, it'll be longer. He's fully covered."

That was a weight off. Fraser sighed. "Thank you, sir."

"It's the least I can do. Go on back now. I'll let people at the station know. They do care, you know, despite what happened this morning. They just needed a little time to adjust. They're not bad people."

Fraser nodded. "I know that. I do. It's just...I wasn't there, to help. I should have been there."

Welsh smiled gently. "You know how many times I've heard that in my life? And I'll tell you what I told them. It happened, get over it, go on."

Well, that was certainly plain speaking. Fraser couldn't fault that. "It's good advice. Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Fraser turned and headed back to Ray's room to continue his vigil.

* * *

God, he felt really weird. Kind of like he was drunk—a little...floaty. He also had a splitting headache. Maybe he was hung over. But he didn't remember getting drunk. Must have been a real binge. He squinted open one eye and winced at the light. He should have remembered to close the blinds. He wondered where Stella was. At work, probably. She hated it when he got plowed, and had no sympathy for him at all.

He managed to get the other eye open, and frowned, realizing from the rails on the bed and the plastic bag suspended over his head that he must be in a hospital. Oh, Lord. What the hell had he done now? Last time he'd woken up in a hospital he'd gotten himself shot. Stella was gonna be so pissed. She'd made him promise last time that he'd be more careful, not put himself in harm's way. His job was one of her main arguments against them starting a family, though not the only one, not by a long shot.

He took inventory. Aside from the headache, and face-ache, he didn't feel too awful, but that floaty feeling told him there might be a reason for that other than wholeness. His left arm felt stiff, and he glanced down to discover that it was strapped into a disgustingly cheery blue cast and above it his arm was a rainbow assortment of colors. He tried to sit up a little, and dropped back into bed with a groan as pain lanced through his midsection. Okay. Broken ribs. Broken arm. Bruises. The funny feeling in his dick was familiar from his last hospital stay, too. A catheter. That meant he'd been here awhile, unconscious. Damn it, why the hell couldn't he remember what had happened to him?

Wait. Hospitals. They were supposed to have...he groped around with his un-cast arm and managed to find the nurse remote-control thingy hooked over the bedrail. He pushed the button. There. Maybe they could tell him what had happened. Think, just think. What's the last thing you can remember? He closed his eyes, casting back.

Warm. Comfortable. Naked. Naked was good. Okay, he could go with that.

Oh, not just warm and comfortable. A little excited. More than a little. The feel of hands on his bare torso, sliding toward his hips, fingers skimming his nipples for an instant, followed by the touch of lips against one. Oh yeah. Nice memory. Good memory. Something a little different about that mouth, though, something he couldn't quite put his finger on...a little odd...what? Oh, oh yeah, do that. Mouth moving on down his sternum. Wonderful. Lower. Yes, lower. A big, warm hand curling around the base of his cock, holding him for...yes! God, yes. Lips closing around him, tongue like wet, nubby silk as it caressed him...

"Well, awake at last, are you?"

A woman's voice. Not Stella's. His memory dissipated like smoke leaving him in the hospital room again, alone and embarrassed, hoping the nurse wouldn't see the partial erection he'd developed, which felt really odd and uncomfortable now with that catheter in place. He shifted one knee up to make a concealing tent of the covers, and carefully turned his head to focus on her. Unfamiliar. A big, pleasant-looking woman with graying blonde hair, cut short. He nodded.

"Yeah. I'm awake. What happened to me? How'd I get here?"

She moved closer, checking his IV, looking into his eyes, then nodding as if satisfied by something. "Well, you were in a car accident. You don't remember?"

He shook his head, and winced, wishing he hadn't. "Nope. Nada."

"Do you remember your name?" she asked, seriously.

He looked at her and rolled his eyes. "Of course I remember my..." his voice trailed off. Oh, shit. No, he didn't remember his name. What the hell was his name? "Oh my God! No. I don't! What's my name? Where's my wife? Where's Stella?"

Movement at the door caught his eye and he glanced over to see a man standing there, a stricken look on his face. A really,

really good-looking man. Tall. Built. Wearing a red buffalo-plaid jacket over a blue sweater the same shade as his eyes. Fair skinned, dark-haired, with a really beautiful mouth. He had a sudden flash of that mouth, lower lip obscured by the quick flicker of tongue in a habitual gesture, and then it hit him. He knew that mouth. Oh man did he know that mouth. That was the mouth that had been wrapped around his cock in that memory. The 'oddness' he recalled had been stubble. And with that memory, others came tumbling into place in an almost painful rush.

"Ben!" he exclaimed.

The smile that lit the other man's face was incandescent. He came forward, tentatively, stopping next to the bed. "You...you remember?" he asked cautiously, flicking a quick glance at the nurse.

Ray smiled. Oh yeah. He remembered. "Yeah, Ben, I remember now. Well, mostly," he said, as it dawned on him he still didn't remember some things. "I remember I'm Ray Kowalski, I remember I'm not married to Stella any more. I remember you're my...partner. But what the hell happened? How did I get here? Last thing I remember is waking up...er, well, waking up. Sometime. Um, Sunday, I think? What the hell day is it?" He knew he was blushing, knew he was on the verge of getting hard again under that concealing slope of sheet and blanket. The look on Ben's face helped with that. He was so serious.

"It's Wednesday morning, Ray. As for what happened, apparently you took it upon yourself to prevent a high-speed chase from going through a school zone."

Ray stared at him. "Uh...the GTO?"

Fraser flicked his fingertips across his eyebrow. "Ah..."

Ray groaned. "Totaled?"

Fraser nodded. "I'm afraid so."

"No wonder I don't remember. Dad's gonna kill me."

"He's been here every day, Ray. He and your mother just went down to the cafeteria

to get some breakfast. I passed them on my way up."

A warm feeling spread through him. "Every day?"

"Every day, all day," Fraser confirmed.

"Wow. That's just...wow," Ray said weakly, not quite believing it. He and his dad had been doing better, of course, but that was still a surprise, somehow. "Mom taking it okay?"

Ben nodded. "She's a strong woman, Ray."

Ray grinned. "Yeah. Steel under all those feathers— kinda like RoboMother-hen."

The nurse cleared her throat. "Since you seem to be doing so well, if you'll excuse me, I'll go let Dr. Clooney know that you've come around."

Ray looked at Fraser. "Clooney? The short guy? Medical humor?"

Ben nodded. "Yes. He's been taking care of you."

Ray chuckled. "Small world."

"So it seems, at times." The nurse gone, they looked at each other for a long moment, then suddenly Fraser was bending over him, lips brushing his once, then coming down harder, kissing him fiercely. Ray kissed him back, lifting a hand to his neck, getting his IV tube tangled with the call-button cord on the way up. Fraser broke away then, embarrassed, blushing, and helped him untangle things before he spoke.

"I'm sorry, Ray. I was just...God!" his voice caught. "I have never been so afraid." He looked away, his eyes shining suspiciously.

Ray stared at his profile, stunned. "You? But you're not afraid of anything."

Ben turned back to him. "Oh yes, I am. Constantly. I am afraid of letting people in, of letting them close. But you refused to let me back away, refused to let me keep you out. And when I heard what had happened, when I saw you here, in this place, I realized for the first time just how much I need you."

Stunned didn't begin to cover it. Poleaxed maybe. "You? Need me?"

"Yes. I need you. You are...essential to my well-being. As I've sat here, watching you, waiting, and praying you would recover fully, I realized that I have, mostly, been ignoring that part of the equation. I had not admitted, to myself, or to you, that I need you. I had admitted want, and love, but not need, and it is there, and undeniable. Had I lost you, I would surely have lost myself."

Ray felt tears welling up in his eyes, and his nose hurt like a son of a bitch, but he held out his hand. "Ben, please. C'mere." Ben reached out, let Ray lace their fingers together and pull him down. "Need you, too, Ben. Always have. Just didn't know it." This time the fierceness was gone from their kiss, replaced by an aching tenderness.

"Ahem, gentlemen?"

The voice pushed them apart in a startled rush, and Ray was intensely glad that the man at the door was the doctor, not his father. Yeah, he'd have to explain eventually, but he really wasn't up for it at the moment. Damn, they seemed to have a real knack for getting caught at this. Blushing, Ray scowled as the doctor approached the bed, grinning. "You ever hear of knocking?" he demanded.

"In a hospital?" Clooney asked, incredulously.

"Yeah, well, okay, you got a point."

Clooney nodded. "Yeah. I do. So I'd say you're feeling better. A lot better."

"Good drugs," Ray said with a wink. Ow. *That hurt. Don't do that again.*

Clooney shot a glance at Ben, who was still blushing, and chuckled. "Among other things."

"You didn't see that," Ray said severely.

"These aren't the 'droids you're looking for,' right?"

Ray laughed out loud, then moaned, clutching his ribs. "Shit. That hurt."

Clooney nodded. "I'm not surprised. You're a mess."

"A mess? Is that, like, a technical term?"

The doctor looked at Fraser, who had finally managed to stop blushing. "Is he always like this?"

Fraser nodded solemnly. "Yes, pretty much."

"Okay, then I guess I'll stop worrying about brain damage. I think it's safe to say he's going to make a complete recovery."

Fraser smiled. "So it would appear."

"Speaking of damage, what all did I do to myself, besides kill the best damned car ever made?"

Clooney explained, did a brief examination and quizzed him about his symptoms, seeming pleased with the results of both. Ray began to realize just how lucky he was as the doctor dropped comments about how much worse it could have been. While the doctor was working, Ben disappeared for a little bit, only to reappear a few minutes later with Ray's parents in tow, and that was a huge production, complete with tears and hugs. His dad showed him the classifieds out of three different newspapers and was already deep in planning how to replace the 'Goat.' Then his mom had handed him the stack of get well cards and presents, and he started to feel like crying again as he saw that the detective division at the 27th had sent him a gift-wrapped five pound bag of M&M's and some flowers.

Then things started to get weird. First he opened a card signed by Sergeant D'Aragon, and inside she had written. "I'm very sorry. I've done as you asked. I won't press charges." He stared at it blankly, wondering what joke he was missing. After a moment he shrugged and went on to the small manila envelope from Welsh, which, once opened, proved to hold his badge. Ben got a strange look on his face when he saw that. And something that had been nagging at Ray since he'd woken up started to nag harder.

"Mom, can you and Dad take a walk for a bit? I just remembered I need to talk to Fraser for a few minutes here, alone, about a...a case we're working on."

She eyed him askance. "Stanley, you really shouldn't even be thinking about work yet," she said gently.

"I know, but it's important. I have to. Please?"

She sighed and nodded. "Damian, let's go get some air."

His dad looked a little puzzled, but he complied. Ray had to grin. His mom always had been the one in charge. Then they were gone, and it was very, very quiet. Ray picked up his badge, looked at it, then looked at Ben.

"Okay. What's going on? There's pieces missing, aren't there? What was I doing on a high-speed chase? Why did Welsh have my badge? What the hell did Sergeant D'Aragon mean by she's not gonna file charges?"

Ben sighed, and pulled a chair over close to the bed. "It's a little...complicated, Ray. I don't want to stress you."

"I already got a headache, it can't get any worse. Spill."

"Do you remember anything at all about Monday?"

Ray started to shake his head, remembered that it hurt, and switched to verbal. "No. Not really. Last thing I really remember was you going down on me Sunday morning."

A faint flare of pink shaded Ben's face at that, and he cleared his throat. "Yes, well then, you recall that on Saturday, Ray Vecchio came looking for me when I missed a scheduled lunch with him?"

Oh yeah. He remembered that. He still wanted to flatten Vecchio. "Yeah. What's that got to do with anything? Wait...did I hit him?"

"No, Ray, you didn't."

"Damn. Okay, so what the hell did I do?"

"Please, Ray, let me do this in sequence, so it flows logically."

"Okay, okay. In sequence. Go." Ray waited, and after a moment Ben went on.

"From what I have been able to determine, Ray Vecchio went to the 27th on

Sunday, I'm not precisely clear on why, and Stella was there because one of her cases had just been arrested again. Upon finding her there, Ray— Ray Vecchio, that is, apparently took her aside and spoke to her, rather...ah...forcefully, regarding our...relationship."

Ray closed his eyes tiredly. "He told The Stella about us."

"I'm afraid so, yes."

"Christ. That should have come from me. She shouldn't have heard that from someone else."

"You're absolutely right, Ray. It was unforgivable. But unfortunately, in his upset, he failed to make certain that their conversation was not overheard."

Ray's eyes flew open again. "What?"

"I'm afraid Sergeant D'Aragnon overheard at least a portion of their conversation, and...."

"And she told the entire fucking universe, because she can't keep a sock in it for three minutes," Ray said, feeling oddly calm. He had a sense of déjà vu about this whole thing: not quite remembering, faintly familiar nonetheless.

"Well, perhaps not the entire universe. However, she did let several people know, yes."

"Did I hit her?"

"No, not...exactly. However, you did threaten her with lethal force should she continue to make comments about...."

"About us," Ray said, finishing his sentence for him even though he knew it annoyed Ben.

"Actually, from what I gather, you were not so concerned for yourself as for me."

"You've got more to lose," Ray said softly.

"Ray, that's not true."

"It is. You've got a career."

"As do you," Ben said.

Ray ignored that. He'd never thought of his job as a career, ever. "Back to it, Mountie. The badge? I assume Welsh yanked it, so why's he giving it back? Just

because I went out and did something stupid?"

"He didn't suspend you, Ray, you resigned. He refused your resignation. Which, I might add, is a good thing, otherwise you would have been uninsured at the time of the accident."

Ray smiled. "You would think of that."

"Someone has to be practical, Ray."

"Yeah," Ray picked at a loose thread on the blanket, and sighed. "So, we've been...what do they call it, oh yeah. Outed. We been outed. Did it get back to Thatcher?"

"Not that I'm aware of, no."

"That's something then. You're still okay. Good." His headache was suddenly much worse, and he closed his eyes and rubbed at his forehead distractedly. God. What a mess. He opened his eyes again, and startled a strange, desolate expression on Ben's face. It flashed quickly out of existence as soon as Ben realized he was being watched, but it was too late. Ray watched him for a moment, waiting for him to speak. He didn't.

"What else, Ben. What aren't you telling me?"

Ben sighed. "It's nothing, really. I'm sure I'll be able to get it straightened out shortly."

Ray let him stay with that lie for a little while, hoping he wouldn't have to ask. It didn't work. He sighed. "You trust me, Benton Fraser?"

Ben looked startled. "Of course, Ray."

"Then tell me the truth."

Ben closed his eyes, looking like a man in pain. "I've been reassigned," he said after a moment.

Whatever Ray had been expecting, that wasn't it. "You've been what?"

"I've been promoted and reassigned, back to Canada, to Sergeant Frobisher's unit, with an eye toward taking it over when he retires, as there aren't many officers willing to handle such a remote detachment."

Fraser hadn't looked at him once. Not once. He looked miserable, as miserable as Ray felt. The man who had looked like he'd

just had an orgasm when they landed in that snowfield looked miserable at the prospect of going home. He'd just gotten a promotion, so he should look happy, not devastated. That wasn't right.

But...reassigned. God. Why now?

"I, uh, I thought you were gonna throw away your reassignment request," he said, wincing the moment it was out of his mouth, it sounded so...needy.

Ben looked at him, finally, his eyes haunted. "I did. This was not done at my request. Apparently Muldoon's case drew attention at higher levels and had far-reaching consequences, and it was decided that I have atoned enough for solving my father's murder and exposing corruption within our own ranks."

Ray thought about that, and grasped at the straw Ben had offered. "So, you said you should be able to get it straightened out? You really think you can get...un-reassigned?"

"I don't know, Ray. Unfortunately the order came from high up, and I'm not a person with strings to pull. I don't know how much hope there is."

"I see," Ray said, and he did. This was it. The end. Ben would go back to the Northwest Areas, and he'd be here, and they would both be alone. Only at least nobody up north would be gunning for Ben because he was a queer cop. Kowalski wasn't going to be a safe name to wear around here any more. Hell, maybe he could find some other undercover cop to take the place of. Or better yet, just get the hell outta Dodge. He looked at his badge, and smiled wryly. Welsh should have kept it. He wasn't going to have much use for it now.

"Ray?"

"Yeah?" He kept staring at the badge.

"I'm sorry."

"Not your fault."

A light tap at the door startled them, and they both looked over as it opened to reveal a slim, attractive blonde woman. Ray sighed. It needed only this.

"Hi Stella."

Her face lit up. "Ray! You're awake!"

"Yeah," Ray said warily, surprised by the open pleasure that seemed to cause her.

"May I come in?"

"Sure."

She stepped into the room, and he noticed she held a bag of M&M's in her hand. Then she spotted the one on his tray and smiled. "Looks like someone beat me to it."

Ray smiled wanly. "You'd think I was a chick, the way everybody's throwing chocolate at me." Suddenly realizing what that might sound like, all things considered, he winced. Oh, good one. Subtle. But to his surprise, she just smiled gently.

"Everyone knows about your M&M fixation, Ray. I don't think it's meant to be a comment of any kind." She turned to Ben, and smiled. "Constable Fraser, I'm glad you're here. I think we all need to talk."

Ray tensed, which made his ribs hurt. He winced, and Ben saw it, and looked at Stella.

"Perhaps this might be better left to another time? We don't want to overstress him."

"No, let's do it now," Ray said quietly. "Get all the bad stuff over with in one swell foop. If your news didn't put me back under, this isn't gonna do it either."

Stella looked from him to Ben and back, frowning a little. "Is this a bad time? I can come back."

"No," Ray said again, more strongly. "Just get to it, okay?"

Stella looked a little startled, but she nodded and pulled a chair up next to Ben and sat down. She fidgeted for a moment, then finally took a deep breath and plunged in.

"I need to ask you something personal. Very personal. And while I'll understand if you don't want to tell me, I have a good reason for asking so I hope that you will."

Ray eyed her warily. "Shoot."

She glanced at Ben and then back at Ray. "How long have you been lovers?"

Ray felt heat burn his face, felt blood throb in the bruises there. He knew Ben would be blushing too, even without looking at him. His first instinct was to say it was none of her business, but they had been married for a long time, and he did still care about her. He always would. And he'd always been honest with her, there was no reason to stop now. "Since Friday."

"Friday, the wha..." she stopped, looking startled. "You mean last Friday? Five days ago?"

"Yes."

Stella groaned, and dropped her head to her hand for a moment, then lifted it to look at him, sadly. "Then I'm afraid I owe you even more of an apology than I thought."

"What for?"

She looked uncomfortable, which was strange. Stella was always so self-assured, so strong. A fidgety, embarrassed Stella was just weird. She cleared her throat, and spoke, finally.

"I thought it had been longer. I suppose it doesn't reflect well on me, but after we were divorced, I...sometimes enjoyed the fact that you still loved me. I could see that, feel it, every time we met. It was reassuring to me. Having someone love you, even after you've hurt them, well, it's heady. Good for the ego. Then, after Constable Fraser came I started seeing a distance, and I didn't like it. I could feel your...devotion fading, and I didn't know why, and I hated it. I didn't have that ego boost any more, not the way I had. You were still nice, you still cared, but the fire was gone, and I wondered why. Then I started noticing how you two were together all the time. Working, or not working, you were always together, and there was an...intimacy there. You were always in each other's space, you touched constantly, and Ray, you looked at him like you used to look at me, and I knew. I just knew. Or thought I did, anyway. You weren't in love with me any more because you were in love with him. I resented that. And, even more, I resented the fact that you

kept trying to make nice to me. I thought you were..." She took a deep breath, her face flushed and unhappy. "I thought you were using me, as cover. Trying to hide your relationship with Fraser by pretending you still wanted me."

Ray was shocked. "Stella! I wouldn't do that!"

She looked at him sadly. "I know that now. I should have known it before. After all, I've known you since we were both kids. I don't know why I let myself think that. I guess I was jealous." She laughed, shakily. "I suppose it's only fair that I find out what that feels like, isn't it? But I was wrong, and I was angry, and I let those things influence me when Ray Vecchio took me aside to talk to me on Sunday. I should have stopped him, I knew we might be overheard. Then I saw Sergeant D'Aragon nearby when we'd finished, and I had a feeling she might have been listening, but I didn't confront her with it. I was too upset, with him, and with you two, to think clearly. I was going to tell you, I left a note for you to call me, but it was already too late then, wasn't it?"

He nodded, winced, and sighed. "God, I never realized how much I talk with my head. Look, Stella, it was all a big mess. Not your fault, not really. Just a...a whadayacallit. A comedy of errors."

"I concur," Ben said. "If anyone is at fault here, it's Ray Vecchio. Had he been more circumspect, none of this would have happened."

Ray stared at Ben in shock. Fraser, blaming Vecchio for something, instead of himself? Would wonders never cease?

Stella looked at Ben solemnly. "And he knows that. He feels terrible. He came to see me Monday night after he saw you, wanting to know if there was anything he could do, at this point, to make it right. I told him he would have to ask you."

"Frankly, I can't think of anything he could do to repair the damage he's done," Ben said, in a voice so cool and distant that Ray wouldn't have been sure it was him talking if he hadn't seen his lips move. "He

chose to put personal prejudices above the welfare of two men. I'm not sure I can forgive him that."

Stella sighed. "I believe he knows that, too. But he would still ask it, if he could. Despite everything, he's not a bad man. He was raised to believe certain things and the shock of finding that perhaps that was wrong affected his judgement, just as anger and jealousy affected mine. We're only human."

Only human. Well, that was true. Ray felt all too human, right now. Very tired, both physically and emotionally, and hurting in more ways than just the physical. The thought of Ben leaving was still the foremost thing in his mind, the most painful of all his injuries. He closed his eyes to hide from two pairs of all-too-observant eyes. He heard whispering, didn't try to make out words. A moment later he heard Ben speak his name, softly.

"Ray? Would you like to rest?"

He managed an affirmative sound. Rest would be good. If he was asleep, then nothing would hurt. At least for a while. Then suddenly a little something from their conversation nagged him into opening his eyes again. Ben was already by the door, hand on the knob. Ray cleared his throat.

"Hey, Frase?"

Ben turned back immediately. "Yes, Ray?" He returned to the bedside, almost eagerly.

Ray almost hated to ask, but he needed to know. "What happened with you and Vecchio on Monday night? Stella made it sound like you guys had a fight or something."

Ben's face went expressionless. It was kind of creepy, actually. "No, Ray. We didn't fight. I simply told him some home truths. It's nothing you need concern yourself with."

Ray knew Ben well enough to know a lot more must have happened than he was letting on. He put his hand on Ben's arm, looking up at him "You okay with that? I mean, he was your best friend way before I

came along. I know that, always have. I mean, you even made him that dream-catcher, even if you ended up having to give it to me."

Ben stared at him, frowning. "What on earth makes you think I made that for Ray Vecchio?"

Ray stared back. "Well, um...'cause it takes so long to get an eagle feather and all that. We hadn't been partners very long then, and it was his birthday, so I just figured...."

He stopped, because Fraser was shaking his head. "No, oh no, Ray. I didn't make it for him. Dream catchers are no more interchangeable than people." He moved his free hand to cover Ray's reassuringly. "I made it for you. Yes, the process could have taken a long time, but in actuality I was quite lucky and was able to obtain the feather immediately upon my first request. Yes, it was Ray Vecchio's birthday, but it was an opportunity for me to...express to you how much you had already come to mean to me without you or anyone else thinking anything untoward."

Ray laughed a little, even though it hurt his ribs. "Untoward. That like 'germane?'"

Ben smiled back. "Yes, quite."

"You made it for me? Really?"

"Yes. I swear on my"

"You don't have to swear, Ben. I believe you. I just thought...well, that doesn't matter, does it?"

"No. It doesn't," Ben said, still smiling.

Ray shook his head slowly. "You know, for a couple of detectives, we sure as hell took a long time to figure us out, didn't we, Ben?"

The smile faded from his friend's face. "Yes. We did. I wish"

He stopped abruptly, but Ray knew what he'd been planning to say. Something like Ray was thinking, something like maybe if they'd figured it out sooner, they wouldn't be facing everything they now faced. Too late for that though. He sighed.

"Yeah. I wish, too, Ben. But if wishes were horses, you know?"

Ben nodded. "Yes. All too well."

Abruptly everything seemed to weigh Ray down again; and he felt like he couldn't face another second of that dark future right now. He closed his eyes to hide his feelings from Ben and faked a yawn.

"You need to rest, I shouldn't keep you up," Ben said, taking his cue.

Ray nodded. "Yeah, I'm gonna try to sleep now. I'll see you later."

"Ray, I...love you." Ben said quietly, almost a whisper.

"Love you, Ben." Ray whispered back. A few moments later he heard the door to the room close quietly. He sighed. Love and a buck might get you a cup of coffee, but it wasn't going to do a lot to resolve their problems. Nothing was. Just play with the hand you've got, Kowalski, all the other cards are on the table.

* * *

Fraser trudged slowly up the stairs toward the fourth floor of the hospital, aware that he was deliberately dawdling. It had been a week since the accident. Four days since he'd told Ray about the reassignment. They'd been avoiding the topic ever since. He'd finally heard back today on his final avenue of appeal, negatively, and he didn't want to have to tell Ray he had failed in his quest to have his reassignment reversed. Inspector Thatcher had clearly thought he had a hole in his bag of marbles when he'd made his request, especially when all he could say about his motivations was that he had found certain compelling reasons why he should stay, and, no, he could not tell her what those reasons were. Still, she had tried, but apparently he was now 'persona grata' and Ottawa wanted him 'back where he belonged,' no arguments brooked.

Except he belonged here. With Ray. He couldn't imagine how he could possibly fill the hole in his life, in his heart, that being

separated from Ray would cause. Several times he had nearly asked Ray to accompany him, but each time he had choked back the request. He could not ask Ray to give up everything, to move to another country, to put up with the climate, the isolation, and the absences that long patrols would necessitate. He supposed they could still see each other during vacations. At least his unwittingly accumulated hoard of vacation days would come in handy. It would be a long trek down from the Territories, but it would be well worth it. And he would take part of it now, so he could stay here, and help Ray until he was recovered from his injuries.

He pushed open the fourth-floor stairwell door and stepped into the corridor on autopilot, his feet moving him toward Ray's room without conscious direction. He nodded to the nurses at the station, and stopped as he saw Dr. Clooney coming out of Ray's room with a thoughtful frown on his face. He looked up, saw Ben, and the frown deepened.

"Can I talk to you for a minute?" the doctor asked quietly, sparing a quick glance toward the room he'd just left.

Feeling a little twinge of fear, Ben nodded, and followed the doctor to the solarium, empty on this gloomy, overcast winter day. The doctor took a seat, and motioned Ben to an empty chair across from him.

"Is something wrong?" Ben asked quietly, dreading the answer.

"I don't know. You tell me. His body's healing well enough, I'm about ready to let him out of here. But there's something else wrong. Everyone tells me he's a very high energy individual, yet I see no sign of that in his behavior. He ought to be champing at the bit to get out of here, but he's not. I don't like how much he's sleeping. From what you, his ex-wife, and his parents have told me, that's not normal. There's nothing organic wrong. I mean, yes, he's recovering from a serious accident, but as well as his physical recovery is progressing, he

probably doesn't need that sort of rest at this point. I'm concerned that I'm seeing the start of a depressive slide, not uncommon in patients who've had head injuries. There's something bothering him, something he won't talk about. I asked him if he wanted to see a therapist; he refused. I pushed him on it, and he got mad, told me there was nothing anybody could do and he just had to deal with it himself. So, I need your help. What's going on?"

Ben had seen those things too, and had hoped desperately that they were simply part of the normal recovery process. He slumped in the chair, rubbing his forehead as he tried to think how to explain his fears. "I think it's a combination of things," he finally managed. "I believe he's concerned about resuming his duties. You see, the day of the accident, there was an incident where he works. A former friend of mine was...indiscreet, regarding our relationship, and as gossip will, it spread quickly."

Clooney whistled softly. "You were outed. And he's a cop. You're both cops. Shit."

For once Ben didn't even flinch from the profanity. It was all too apt. He nodded. "As you say. And then, on the heels of the accident, I learned that I've been reassigned. I will be returning to Canada in a few weeks."

The doctor looked at him narrowly. "Is that because of the same incident? They're pulling you out of here because you're gay?"

Ben looked at him, startled. Odd, he'd never thought of himself in those terms before. But he supposed it was generally accurate. He shook his head. "No, it's not that. Actually the RCMP is quite liberal in that regard. There are quite a few openly gay officers in the service. In point of fact I suppose my superiors see the reassignment as a promotion. And had it occurred two years ago I probably would have welcomed it. But now...it's going to be very difficult."

Clooney nodded. "Yeah. Difficult all around, I can see that. And I can see why he'd be depressed, even just situationally,

without the added problem of recuperating from a head injury. I really wish he'd talk to someone about it. He's going to need a lot of help coping with going back to work. If it's even half as bad as what you read about in the papers, having his fellow cops know he's gay is going to make his life sheer hell. Is he really thinking about going back? Maybe he ought to be considering other options at this point. At least take a leave of absence until feelings die down a bit. That might help, if he can afford it."

Ben stared at him. It had never occurred to him that Ray might not go back to police work, that it might not even be advisable for him to do so. He thought about the number of times in the past few days that he'd caught Ray staring at his badge with that odd, wry sadness on his face, and suddenly realized that was probably what he'd been thinking about. Ray was bearing the brunt of a situation that involved both of them, without complaining, without protesting.

Ben would go back to Canada, to his home, to a job, to people he knew, to his sister; and Ray would stay here with...nothing. The time he'd spent being someone else had taken its toll on his 'real' life. He had no real friendships, or contacts, apart from those forged at the 27th, which were now in shambles. He was divorced, and the person who professed to love him was leaving. Granted, Ray's parents were here, and their relationship better than it had been in years, but could that compensate for the magnitude of what he'd lost? Ben got to his feet abruptly.

"Thank you, Dr. Clooney, this has been a very enlightening discussion. I'll see what I can do to remedy the situation."

Clooney stood as well, and put out his hand. "Good luck."

Ben shook his hand, firmly. "I don't believe luck is what is needed now. It's going to take work."

Clooney smiled. "Why do I have a feeling that's not going to be a problem?"

"I sincerely hope you're correct. Can you tell me where I can find a telephone?"

Clooney pointed over toward a small table. "Right there, if you're making local calls. I've got to get back to work."

Fraser nodded, already moving toward the phone. Twenty minutes later, he opened the door to Ray's room, quietly, and stepped inside. Ray was, as so often lately, asleep. Or at least lying there with his eyes closed, pretending to be asleep. Ben closed the door behind himself and moved to stand beside the bed, studying Ray's face.

He no longer had an IV, and the cuts and scrapes on his face had paled to faint pink against his golden skin. The bruises were beginning to fade, having a wider variety of colors now, but less intensity. The swelling in his nose had gone down considerably as well, leaving his face more familiar. It was also leaner, the lines around his eyes and across his forehead more pronounced. As usual, he was stubbled. It was a constant source of amazement to Ben that Ray somehow managed to keep an almost consistent length of stubble. By all rights it should be shorter or even nonexistent on some days, and longer on others, but it always seemed to be the same. It was a puzzling phenomenon.

As he stood there, he saw a faint movement in the muscles around Ray's eyes and knew he'd been right. Ray was faking it. He was awake. Well, two could play at this. He leaned down, his mouth poised just inches above Ray's, waiting. It took a while. He was about to give up, as the position was making his back hurt, when the corner of Ray's mouth twitched a little, and then a full-fledged smile curved it for half a second before being suppressed.

"I saw that," he said softly.

"You did, hunh?" Ray replied, just as softly, without opening his eyes.

"Mmmhmm."

"So, you just gonna hang there all day?"

"If necessary."

"If necessary for what?"

"I want you to tell me."

"Tell you what?"

"If you still want me. If you still love me. If you still need me."

Ray's eyes opened, shocked, worried. As usual Ben was mesmerized by the way the golden flecks in their blue-gray depths caught and held the light, like sparks, or embers.

"Of course I do!" Ray gasped. "Why would you ask that?"

"You want me?"

Ray nodded. "Yes."

"You love me?"

The worry softened, and something very different took its place. "God, yes."

"You need me?"

"Like air."

"Thank God," Ben said, and closed the distance between them. The kiss, their first since the doctor had caught them at it that first day, was hot, and sweet, and strangely tender. When Ben finally drew back, Ray looked up at him in puzzled wonder. "What was that all about?"

"I need you too, Ray. And I love you, and I want you. We need each other. And needing each other means being together. Everything after that is just logistics. Will you come with me, when you're well enough to go?"

Ray frowned, maneuvering himself up on his elbows, wincing as it hurt his ribs. Ben found the control for the bed and elevated it so he could sit up without effort, and Ray finally spoke.

"Go with you where?"

"On an adventure, Ray. To find the Hand of Franklin, and perhaps, something else besides."

Ray studied him for a long, long moment, head slightly cocked to one side, like Diefenbaker analyzing an unusual action or scent. He started to smile. "Fraser?"

"Yes, Ray?"

"You are unhinged."

Ben ducked his head slightly, trying not to smile back, not yet. "Understood."

"But so am I. Of course I'll go."



"I know it's not your favorite climate, Ray," Ben began apologetically.

Ray held up a hand, interrupting him. "No, Frase. Climate don't matter. It all starts with us, and goes from there. We have to be, like, explorers, not just looking for Franklin. It's like we're starting out again, from the same place we started before, but...everything's changed."

Ben felt an ache in his chest, and nodded. "*You shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring, will be to arrive where we started, and know the place for the first time,*" he quoted. Eliot's words were so very appropriate.

Ray looked at him, and smiled. "Yeah. Exactly."

End

Author's note: There is a great deal of diversity of opinion as to the correct treatment for closed-head trauma such as concussion. I did do some research into the differing methods, but I am not a doctor (nor do I play one on TV) so in the end I chose the method that made the best dramatic sense for the story as opposed to the one that might have been the most likely. Please don't take my choice as gospel.

—KM

Soundtrack: Alanis Morissette: "Uninvited," Goo Goo Dolls: "Iris," Sarah Brightman: "Deliver Me" and "Eden," Pierce Pettis: "Words Said in the Dark" and "Hole in my Heart." Peter Gabriel: "In your Eyes" and "Secret Worlds."

