



It hadn't really been a surprise to find Fraser on his doorstep. Neither of them had anyone around this Christmas, and while Ray was pretty sure that sort of thing worked out just fine for his partner...

He knew he hadn't been able to keep the disappointment out of his voice when he'd told the other man about his parents' surprise cruise.

The Bahamas at Christmastime. There was something deeply wrong there...

And he'd probably looked a lot like a scrawny little kicked puppy when he'd shared the news, and now it was Christmas Eve and there was a Mountie at his door.

Bearing gifts.

Well, one gift. Dief bore his own.

Ray hadn't been able to work up even a token protest to their presence, and so one thing had led to another had led to actual cocoa and then also to decorating the tree.

Well, the bush.

Three feet of chubby little evergreen, because even though he'd collected plenty of ornaments over the years, there was no way he could have bought himself an actual tree.

Not for one.

With Fraser there, though...He chanced a look at the other man, watched him patiently untangling a length of garland with singular focus. They could go get a bigger tree...

Instantly, Fraser spoke up in his head:

"Why would we do that, Ray?"

"Well, because this one is too small."

"It has a neatness of proportion that reminds me of my days among the Muchbetterthanyou tribe in the Western territories. It really is an interesting story..."

Fraser was still droning on when Fraser really did speak —

"Ray?"

— which was strange, but not really excessively so, considering.

"What's up, Fraser?"

"Is there something wrong?"

"Hmmm...? Nah, was just thinking about the tree."

"You don't think this garland fits within your decorating scheme?"

"What?"

"Your scheme."

"I don't have a scheme."

"Ah. Well, then. What about the tree?"

"It doesn't have one, either —" Ray blinked to himself a few times. "I was just thinking...it's not important."

A little line formed on Fraser's forehead. Not quite the coveted Annoyance Line, but close. Ray brushed a hand over his smile.

"More cocoa?"

Later, with the garland tucked neatly between the branches, the small glass ornaments scattered in a carefully random —

"It's not really random when you plan it out quite this strictly, Ray."

"Ah, but it *looks* random."

— pattern, Ray shut off the lights and settled himself on the floor beneath the tree.

As a child, there'd been more than one Christmas where they couldn't really afford all the trappings and accessories, but Ray had developed his own way of dealing with that.

Just like now he'd get down on the floor as he was, scoot just under the tree's widest point, and then look up through the branches and see...not much at all, really. Green, and tinsel, and bright flashing lights. Same then as now.

Out of the corner of his eye: Fraser and Dief's presents, as well as his own self-wrapped set of rims. Pure, unadulterated chrome of the type that requires *hours* of attention every few weeks just to keep it looking classy...but anyway.

Looking up this way the tree could just as easily be seven, eight feet high — the angel's head brushing the ceiling and the scent of good old Douglas fir turning his whole place into something right out of Santa's workshop.

There could be dozens of presents around him from all sorts of people, cards overflowing his non-existent mantelpiece —

"Ray?"

Ray scooted out from under again and found Fraser and Dief exactly as he'd left them — standing a few feet away and just barely not at attention.

"Whoops, sorry, forgot about you there."

"Oh, I didn't mean to interrupt...."

He looked like a man about to decide his wolf needed a long, long walk or something. No way. "Come on down here, Frase."

"On the floor?"

He grinned. "Yeah, it's like ground, only cleaner."

The line was back. "Really, Ray, I'm not sure if I would agree with that comparison..." And then he was down on the floor, cross-legged and looking down at him.

"Hey, I'll have you know I swept just the other-"

"Year?"

"Oh, yer a riot, Frase, really. Come down here, I want to show you something."

"The inch-thick layer of —"

Ray grabbed him by the flannel and yanked, missing the tree by bare millimeters. Fraser landed with a small 'oof' beside him, eyes twinkling. Ray abruptly had the distinct sense he was twinkling right back and turned fully on his back again, pleased to see the branches cleared his nose by a solid two inches.

"OK, now you scoot —"

"I'm not very good at scooting, Ray."

And God, but he didn't need to look at Fraser to see the cheerful tease in his eyes. It was possible that he'd have to try flannel-yanking more often, but that wasn't the important thing at the moment. "Look, you just pretend you have wheels on your butt."

Low chuckle, quickly stifled. "What sort of wheels?"

"What do you *mean* 'what sort of wheels?'"

"Big wheels, little wheels, cartwheels —"

"You could go on all day with that, couldn't ya, Frase?"

"I believe so, Ray."

I love you. "OK, OK. *Training wheels.* Little, invisible training wheels."

"For a regular bicycle?"

Ray slammed his fist to the floor and laughed. "Yes, dammit, a regular bicycle."

"And you want me to scoot?"

The laugh turned into a giggle. "I think I might die here, Frase."

Well, *that* wouldn't be a very happy Christmas, now would it?"

"We Kowalskis believe in putting *everything* under the tree. I'd think you'd be



interested in recreating my culture to the fullest extent possible."

"I see. And did you murder a Kowalski for every Christmas?"

"There's a reason my family's so small, Frase."

And Fraser just chuckled then, low and sweet. Ray caught himself quieting his own laughter just to listen, waiting for the other man's breathing to even out before speaking. "Are ya done?"

"For the moment, yes."

"Good. Now I'm going to tell you why we're under the tree —"

"I just never realized your mother was so...so *bloodthirsty*, Ray..."

Ray snorted. "Direct descendent of Attila the Hun, Frase, I kid you not."

"I wasn't aware he was Polish."

"Ski. Hunski. Gotta be careful with those history books — they lie to you something awful."

"I'll try to remember that, Ray."

"You do that."

"I will."

Pause.

"*Fraser*. You've got me thinking about my mother cutting a bloody swath through the family reunions now."

"Is she wearing leather?"

"*What?!*"

"Well, the Huns wore a lot of leather. Their 'armor' was actually made of heavily tanned horsehide—"

"I never realized you could be so evil, Frase."

"It's my dirty little secret, Ray."

He grinned. "I never realized you could be dirty, either."

"Much longer on this floor and I'll be positively disreputable."

Ray used a tree branch to thwap him gently, dislodging an ornament in the process.

"You're never going to remember where that ornament went, you know."

"Will too."

"You won't. And everyone will know the placement wasn't random."

"That's low, Frase. Real low."

"Disreputable?" He sounded hopeful.

I *love* you. "Anyway, Fraser, evil Mountie guy — isn't there some sort of law against that? Anyway, I'm telling you why we're under the tree."

"All right."

"We're under the tree because...you aren't going to start talking about my mother again, are you?"

"Is there anything else I should know about her?"

"I'm gonna tell her about the bloodthirsty thing, ya know. As soon as she gets back. Then you're gonna get it."

"Get what?"

Ray sighed. "Probably an entirely *platter* of pierogi."

"Oh, I do love your mother's pierogi, Ray."

"I'll probably get a smack to the head, but you'll, *you'll* get the pierogi."

"Does she like being thought of as a murderous nomadic dictator, then?"

"Well, she does have the RV..."

"And a taste for leather?"

"I'm gonna drop this tree on your head, you know it?"

"Well, I'm in the right position, at least..."

"Are you prompting me now?"

"Yes, Ray. We could talk about whether or not your mother has a taste for young virgins instead, if you'd like."

"Bad Mountie! Bad! Do you kiss the Queen with that mouth?"

"Well, no, actually I've never kissed the Queen."

"Betcha want to. All that talk about re-GI-na. I know what ya really mean."

"Now that's just disrespectful, Ray."



"Yeah, but you're laughing."
"True, but we've already established how disreputable I am."

"Fraser?"

"Yes?"

"I'm glad you're here."

"I'm glad as well, Ray."

Silence then, and Ray looked up into the winking lights, wondered if it would be too much to just...reach out. Curl his fingers around Fraser's.

And for a heartbeat he knew exactly how it would feel, the warmth and slight roughness of it. Ray closed his eyes and started talking instead. "What do you see right now, Fraser?"

"Red, blue, green, orange, and white lights, the tree, parts of the silver garland, several ornaments. You..."

"That's all?"

"Essentially."

"Can you see the top of the tree?"

"No."

"Then if you didn't know better it could be touching the ceiling."

"Well, the dimensions of the base —"

"Can you see the whole base of the tree?"

"Well, no, but I can make an educated guess about its diameter by —"

"Don't guess."

"But —"

"Remember what we said about logic?"

Ray could almost feel the line coming back, but Fraser relented. "All right, I'm not guessing. Theoretically, the tree could be as tall as the ceiling."

"Good Mountie." Ray smiled at the soft snort from beside him.

"What else, Ray?"

"Um...this floor. You're right, it's dirty. Lots of dirt. Might as well be the ground, really."

"All right."

"And the only reason it's warm is because we're under the tree. Roots and stuff."

"And...beyond that?"

"Snow, Frase. Nothing but snow. Miles and miles of it. And forest. The tree is this huge old monster, thirty feet high —"

"We decorated it with a cherry-picker?"
There was a smile in the voice, slightly dreamy.

"Exactly. We're underneath this big old tree in the middle of a forest in the Territories. And the reason there's no snow under us is because there was a...a big storm. Shook a whole bunch of pine needles loose."

"Oh, Ray, that's —"

"Look, I know it's silly but could you just —"

And Fraser's hand found his and there was a brief awkward moment of thumbs but then it was just...warm. "Ray, it's beautiful."

"Oh. Um. Well, I..."

"Thank you."

Ray took a deep breath, squeezed the other man's hand. "You're welcome."

Long, comfortable silence.

"Have you ever been out of the city during a snowstorm, Ray?"

"Spent my whole life in cities..."

"When the snow falls you can't really hear it, but...it feels as though you can. The silence isn't the same as other silences."

"It's...heavier."

"Yes, that's it exactly."

"You get that in the cities, too, sometimes, Frase."

"You're right, of course, but..."

"It's never really quiet for you, is it?"

"It is now." Another squeeze and Ray suddenly knew, *knew* that the first person to honk their car horn would die very, very painfully.

But no one did, and they just laid there quietly, breathing in evergreen. Ray closed his eyes, letting the colors diffuse themselves through his eyelids, not letting go.

"Ray."

Don't let go. "Shh, I'm listening to the snowfall."

"I want to know where you go when you're under the tree."

"Aw, that's just...I mean, it's not really important."

Low, sure voice. "Yes it is."
"Jeez, don't *do* that."
"Don't do what?"
Don't let go. "Look, it's silly. Kid stuff."
"Oh...I'm making you uncomfortable, aren't I?"
Ray squeezed the other man's hand before he could think of letting go. "No, it's not that, it's just...well, OK, I started this under-the-tree thing when I was little. Real little. I don't even really remember much besides crawling under to poke at my presents and then just laying there.
"Looking up into all these blinking lights..."
Ray smiled to himself. "They weren't so blurry then."
Thumb moving over his own in a sort of absently comforting way.
Ray was sure Fraser didn't think anything about little gestures like that. "Anyway, it would be like the tree just went on forever, and just outside of my vision there would be this big cartoon orchestra — don't ask — and they would be playing whatever carol was on our old record player and...there would be someone there.
"When I was little it'd be my imaginary baby brother Mike. Or maybe Harry..."
"And then Stella?"
Grinned to himself. "Yeah. She'd be horrified to know how many Christmas songs she's sung in my head."
Another light squeeze from Fraser.
"Ah, so anyway that's it. Nowhere special. Just someplace with a big tree, cartoon guys with violins and stuff, and someone to share it all with. This...you being here today...ah hell."
"Me, too."
"You really don't mind just laying here holding my hand and babbling about Christmas fantasies, do you?" And Ray nearly smacked himself for not being able to keep his mouth shut.
"No, Ray, I don't mind. Are you sure it isn't bothering you?"
"I'm sure. I mean, we don't have to hold hands, but it's OK since I don't mind

touching you and can't you say some other horrible thing about my mother right now?"
"She makes *terrible* pierogi."
"No, she doesn't."
"You're absolutely right."
"Maybe we should get out from under this tree. Tinsel fumes rot the brain, you know."
"I don't think that's —"
"Trust me."
"I do trust you, Ray, I just don't want to leave your Christmas place."
"Yeah, but yours was prettier."
"It didn't have any cartoons."
"It's too cold for cartoons up there. Drawings get all stiff, can't move around and do crazy stuff..."
"That...makes sense."
"Welcome to my world, Fraser. Try not to be afraid."
"Of a cartoon orchestra? I think I can manage that."
"You've never seen what a cartoon can do with a violin, have ya?"
"It can't be any worse than what your mother can do with a broadsword."
"Shhh, you're disturbing the orchestra. Close your eyes." And then Ray slid out from under the tree carefully, a little surprised by the fact that he didn't have to slide very far. Tugged them both to a stand and then closed his own eyes.
Felt the floor beneath his feet morph into something smooth and marble.
He still had Fraser's hand. "Can you hear that? It sounds like they're doing terrible things with the instruments but they're really just tuning up."
"Oh, dear, that bass is very flat."
"You just can't get good 'toons these days, Frase. It's a real tragedy."
"Indeed."
"The conductor's tapping that little stick-thingy on his podium —"
"His tuxedo is quite nice."
"Better than Huey's?"
"I wouldn't go that far."
"And a one and a two and a three and a —" Ray started humming a deliberately

lounge-y version of "The Christmas Song," pulled a chuckling Fraser into a slow, easy dance.

"I was expecting something a little more...traditional."

"Hah, shows what you know about my fantasies. Besides, you don't get any more traditional than this at Christmas." He spun them around with lazy finesse.

"You can't talk and hum at the same time."

"You *noticed*...you could always sing, you know."

"Where are we?"

"Christmas carols..."

"...being sung by a choir...and folks dressed up like Eskimos...' Which is just patently untrue. Hardly anyone outside of the Inuit culture wears sealskin. 'Everybody knows...a turkey and some mistletoe...' Are they suggesting they be served together? Because that's —"

Ray laughed and banged his head against Fraser's shoulder a few times. "You're not doing it right!"

"Ah, well, I blame the conductor. He's doing simply horrific things with his baton."

"Oh, God, the images —"

"You should probably fire him, Ray."

He whirled them around, laughing, and immediately tripped them both onto the couch — banging his shin on the coffee table in the process. "OK, I surrender. Next time we don't hire any 'toons."

"Don't you think that's discriminatory?"

And then he couldn't keep his eyes closed any longer. Fraser looked almost as flushed as Ray felt: lips parted in a laugh, eyes shining...Beautiful. "Fraser —"

"Ray, I need to let go of your hand for a moment..."

Ray jerked away immediately, but before he could start apologizing Fraser had pulled

something green and slightly crushed from his pocket. "Wha...?"

"I don't have any turkey with me, but..." And he held it between them, tugged it gently into something like its original shape.

"I can't believe you brought *mistletoe* with you!"

Fraser blushed to the roots of his hair. "I know it was presumptuous —"

Ray jerked the other man's hand up until the mistletoe was vaguely above them and pounced.

Warm, soft mouth. Open for him, sweet with the chocolate from earlier. Fraser moaned and sort of *pushed* himself into the kiss, hot clever tongue slipping into Ray's mouth and taking up residence. His free arm moved around Ray's waist and pulled them closer and suddenly Ray was the one moaning.

Fraser's hand was busy on his back, sliding and kneading, tugging restlessly at Ray's shirt, not stopping even when they broke for air.

"OK, Frase, you can put the mistletoe down now."

"But I want to kiss you again..." Words spoken almost against his mouth.

"There's mistletoe all over the ceiling. All over this apartment as a matter of fact."

"No there —"

Ray kissed him again, sucked briefly on his lower lip. "There is mistletoe all. Over. This. Apartment."

"My God, it's almost a health hazard..."

The scrap of green went flying and then Ray was being pulled in for another kiss.

There was, perhaps, something to be said for going away for the holidays.

End

