



The Mountie was off limits.

Oh, yeah. Way off limits. So far off limits the warning sign was a mile high and flashing neon: do not trespass, do not touch, and definitely do not fantasize. C'mon, the guy was pure as the driven snow, the northern stuff, not this gray Chicago slush. He didn't act like he had lustful thoughts about *women*, much less guys, much less anything remotely resembling his partner.

'Course, that was the other big problem, that they were partners. Getting the hots for someone you worked with was not a good idea. You ended up spending time together, time when you really should be thinking about work, about the case you were on or the butt-plate who was likely to jump you if you didn't pay attention...but half the time you *didn't* pay attention, 'cause you were too busy thinking about your partner and what he would look like out of that damn red uniform, and what you would do to him once you got him that way.

Right.

Ray parked the GTO on the street in front of the consulate and took the stairs two at a time. They had a dinner date—okay, not a date, just an agreement, two buddies, going out to eat, but, hey, he took what he could get. He tried the front door—

open, still, which was kind of weird because it was after hours—and slipped inside the foyer.

"Fraser, c'mon!" At this hour, the only person around should have been his partner. But too late he noticed that the door to his left was ajar, the door belonging to the office of the Ice Queen herself.

He heard the click of high heels before he saw her. "Detective, I can only assume you're not aware of the fact, but this is a consulate, and a certain amount of decorum is...Eeeah!" The last word turned into a shriek.

"Hey, what's the big—"

"Kill it, Detective. Step on it!"

"Aaaggh!" He saw it, there on the patterned tile floor. An enormous, no make that gigantic, cockroach. Dirty brown, and the thing had to be three inches long. "Oh, geez. That thing's right outta Kafka."

"Your feet are bigger than mine," Thatcher said, apparently missing the literary reference, which was a good thing for Ray's reputation. "You're less likely to miss."

"There's no point in killing it," a third voice said. Fraser's voice. Fraser stooped and in one easy motion caught the monstrous roach between his thumb and forefinger, then held it up to the light. "Ah,

Periplaneta americana, I believe." He turned it over, all those ugly legs waving. "No, no, I'm mistaken. It's a species of *Blattella*. It just happens to be of unusual size."

"Fraser, just kill it," Ray said.

"It's pointless to kill an individual, Ray. Where there's one, there are thousands."

"Thousands of cockroaches?" Thatcher's voice sounded faint.

"I'm afraid so, sir."

"As big as that?" Thatcher sounded fainter.

"Oh, no, not all of them. The life cycle of the cockroach is actually quite interesting. The nymphs, or young roaches, undergo a series of moltings in which they—"

"Fraser!" Thatcher stopped him.

"Sorry, sir."

"Get rid of it."

"As you wish."

Of course Fraser, being Fraser, couldn't just step on the thing like anyone else. He had to disappear back into the back hallway, taking it with him. Ray was left standing there next to the Ice Queen...and sympathizing with her, for something like the first time ever.

"We'll have to fumigate," Thatcher said, still a little weakly.

"Oh, yeah," Ray agreed.

"The sooner the better," she said more decisively. "Fraser!"

Fraser reappeared from wherever he'd gone off to. "Sir?"

"Call an exterminator. Right away. I want this taken care of immediately. I don't care what they have to hose this place down with; I want every last one of those things dead."

Fraser tugged on his ear. "Perhaps you might consider a program of IPM, or Integrated Pest Management, which uses less toxic means to reduce and manage the population."

"You wanna live with them?" Ray asked.

"You might be surprised how effective simple policies such as eliminating sources of food and water can be. Combined with

traps baited with hormonal lures, such measures can actually—"

"Constable!" Thatcher interrupted. "Oh, never mind. I'll make the call myself." And she turned and stalked into her office.

"Oh, dear," Fraser said under his breath.

Ray shifted on his feet. "You really wanna live with those things?"

"No, not particularly. I just don't believe it's a good idea to introduce poisonous chemicals into an environment where people work and live."

"Fraser, this is Chicago. We do it all the time. If it weren't for exterminators, we'd all be living on rubber rafts out on the lake, 'cause the bugs would've taken over by now."

Fraser didn't even crack a smile. "I see."

"So you coming to dinner or what?"

Fraser glanced toward the Ice Queen's door, but apparently decided he'd been dismissed. "Yes, of course, Ray."

"Okay, good," Ray said, and led the way out to the car. It was good, even if it wasn't really a date.

Hey, at least he ranked above the cockroaches.

Having dinner with Ray was always a pleasurable experience. For its own sake, not for any...ulterior motive. Fraser didn't have ulterior motives. It would be inappropriate. And if his dreams regularly failed to meet his own standards of propriety—well, at least they belonged to the sleeping world, set apart from the land of wakefulness.

It was Thai food tonight, which Ray had resisted the first time they'd tried it, but now consumed quite eagerly. The conversation was running their usual gamut, from the case they'd just wrapped up, to cockroaches, to....

"Look, you could always stay with me for a couple of days. You know, while they're spraying that poison stuff around."

Fraser felt his heart skip a beat in his chest. That didn't mean...no, it most certainly did not. He cleared his throat. "That's kind of you to offer, Ray, but I'm not sure it's entirely—"

"Aw, c'mon, Fraser. I got a couch. I got a bed. I'll even give you the bed if you want."

Oh, dear. Sleeping in Ray's bed would be...no. It was bad enough at the consulate. With the sorts of dreams he'd been having, sleeping anywhere near Ray would be dangerous. Yes, quite dangerous.

"Fraser?" Ray was looking at him with an odd expression.

"That won't be necessary," Fraser managed. "I'm sure the inspector will understand the importance of using nontoxic pest management techniques."

Ray made a face and swallowed a mouthful of green curry. "Uh, I don't think so. The way she was looking, she'd drop an H-bomb on the things if she thought nobody would notice the fallout."

"Ray, I'm sure she would never actually—" Fraser began, but Ray wasn't listening.

"Fraser, come on. Don't be an idiot. You don't want to stick around and be poisoned, and I don't mind sleeping on the couch, so what's the big deal?"

He couldn't answer that question. What could he say? *Ray, I've been having the most peculiar dreams?* No, it was impossible. He could not confess the substance of those dreams to anyone, much less to the object of them. They were his secret shame...and his secret indulgence, hard though he tried not to think about them.

"Fraser, you okay?"

Fraser forced his eyes up to meet Ray's genuinely confused ones. "I'm perfectly all right."

"You sure? 'Cause you're acting kinda strange tonight."

It was true enough. He was preoccupied and uncomfortable, and he was taking it out on Ray, whose motivations were entirely innocent. "I'm sorry, Ray."

"So you're gonna stay with me when they do the fumigation thing, right?"

He couldn't possibly say yes, and he couldn't explain himself, either. "I appreciate your concern, but that won't be necessary."

Ray set his fork down with a clatter. "Okay, yeah, I get that. You don't have to send out smoke signals or anything." He shoved his plate away from him, leaving half his helping of noodles untouched. "You ready to go?"

Oh, dear. He'd hurt Ray's feelings. It was perfectly understandable; he'd refused Ray's hospitality. "Of course," he said, and signaled for the check. "Ray, I'm sorry if I seem ungrateful. I can assure you that I—"

"Fraser!"

"Yes?"

"Shut up?"

That meant Ray was well and truly annoyed with him. Fraser swallowed the hurt that was bubbling up in response, and merely said, "As you wish," as he fumbled in his hat for enough bills to cover his half of the meal.

They maintained the silence out to the car and most of the way home to the consulate, but Fraser could feel Ray radiating annoyance and hurt. When Ray finally pulled up to the curb, it was more than he could take. He had to say *something*, so he settled for "Thank you kindly for the ride, Ray."

But somehow, that was wrong, too. Ray jerked around to face him, his left arm braced on the steering wheel. "Okay, that's it. That just does it. You *never* thank me, Fraser. Not for stuff like giving you a ride."

"Well, I'm terribly sorry, Ray. I certainly appreciate all of the times you've—"

Ray brought his right hand up to his temple, like his head hurt. "No, you don't get it. You don't thank me 'cause you don't have to thank me. We're a duet, right? We're partners. You jump out windows; I drive the car. That's how it works, okay?"

"I see," Fraser said, although he didn't. "So you're saying you don't want to be thanked."

Ray closed his eyes. "Yeah, that's what I'm saying."

"All right, then," Fraser said, though he wasn't at all certain he understood. He reached for the door handle. "Good-night, Ray."

Ray glanced over. "You gonna stop by the station tomorrow?"

Fraser felt something unclench inside. Ray couldn't be too angry, if he were thinking of such things. "I have duties in the morning, but I should be there in the early afternoon."

"Okay," Ray said, facing forward again. "Good."

"Til tomorrow, then."

"Yeah, see ya."

Fraser got out of the car and made his way up the steps. It would be all right. He'd try apologizing again tomorrow and see if that helped. And if Ray really wanted him to stay over when the exterminators came—whenever that might be—well, perhaps he could do that. He would have to be careful, but for Ray's sake, yes, he could manage.

The smell hit him as soon as he opened the consulate's front door: sharply chemical, somehow acrid and cloyingly sweet at the same time. He didn't need to taste anything to know what it was. Somehow, Inspector Thatcher must have arranged for the exterminators to come tonight.

Fraser spun back to face the street, but the GTO was already disappearing around a distant corner. Ah, well. Ray was probably right. Chicagoans were exposed to such chemicals all the time. Surely they could not be truly dangerous.

A series of woofs announced Diefenbaker's presence. Outside the building, not in, which was odd in and of itself. But no doubt Dief had been locked out accidentally when the exterminators left.

"No, I didn't bring you anything. You had your dinner before I left."

Dief whined.

"We have to abide by the local health regulations. They frown on the notion of wolves in restaurants."

Dief whimpered.

"Well, I certainly had no idea she would arrange to have them do it tonight."

Fraser pushed the consulate front door open again and stepped aside for Dief to enter, but instead of trotting forward, Dief sat down on the concrete walkway.

"Do you mind?" Fraser asked, but Dief still didn't move. "Yes, of course I realize the odor is unpleasant, but I assure you, it's perfectly safe."

Dief hunkered down and rested his muzzle on his paws.

"All right," Fraser said. "Be that way." There was no point in forcing the issue. Dief was half arctic wolf. He was perfectly capable of surviving a February evening in Chicago.

The smell was considerably stronger once he got inside. No wonder Dief preferred to remain out in the cold. The stench burned his throat and made his eyes water, and he could taste bitterness just from breathing it.

He made his way back to his office, suppressing the urge to cough. It was astonishing that ordinary Chicagoans put up with such things. His head was spinning already, after just a few breaths.

Once inside his office, he unlatched the window and threw it open, letting the cold outside air in. Yes, that was better. He breathed in great gulps of fresh air and felt his head slowly start to clear.

It was a sorry state of affairs when Chicago air smelled good. He was almost tempted to join Dief outside, but no, he could simply sleep with the window open. The odor would clear soon enough, and it would be better than listening to Dief say "I told you so" all night. There was nothing worse than a smug wolf.

Fraser went about setting up his cot and getting into his long johns. If the scent was still annoying in the morning, he would

air out the consulate before anyone else arrived for work.

With that comforting thought, he willed himself to ignore the stench and go to sleep.

Fraser was the most annoying human being on the planet.

Ray shut his apartment door, tossed his coat across the nearest chair, and slumped on the couch. Fraser was completely clueless, and, yeah, okay, it was nuts to be ticked off about that when it was the only thing keeping Fraser from running panicked back to the Yukon Territories, but he couldn't help himself. He wanted Fraser here, in his apartment, even if it was only for one night. Even if he didn't so much as look at Fraser in those red long johns. He wanted to help. He wanted to be trusted. He wanted...

Damn it. He wanted too much. And he wasn't that dumb, wasn't going to be that dumb, geez, no. He just wished Fraser might admit to needing him, even a little. Wished Fraser could take a chill pill and do what he said, just this once.

Was it so much to ask for?

He wouldn't've jumped him. Wouldn't've even thought about it. But...no, that couldn't be it. Fraser couldn't have figured him out. If he had, he would have said something or done something or....

Except Fraser wasn't always so up front and honest as you'd think. Fraser had played Lady Shoes for everything she was worth, that time. Had fooled him, too. Not by lying, exactly, but by holding back and letting people believe stuff and then not correcting them when they did.

So maybe Fraser did know, and just wasn't saying anything. Maybe Fraser felt funny about the whole thing, and that was why he didn't want to stay over.



Ray closed his eyes and slumped down into the couch cushions. If he screwed his eyelids tight enough, he could almost picture Fraser in the next room. In his bedroom. Sprawled out across the sheets—were Mounties allowed to sprawl?—with his head thrown back, snoring.

He wouldn't touch. He'd just listen to those snores, and maybe go to the door and peek in. He'd never actually seen Fraser asleep. The few times they'd slept anywhere near each other, he'd always been the one to drop off first and wake up last. Which was actually kind of funny, if you thought about it, because sometimes he didn't sleep so good, and you wouldn't think Fraser would be the kind of guy to toss and turn.

Well, he wasn't going to find out, now. He was never going to find out, and it was his own damn fault, for not heeding the warning signs, for letting his head—and his dick—get this far out of line, that all he had to do was think about Fraser *sleeping* and he started to get hot and bothered.

He was a sicko. Certifiably unhinged. But damnitall, he couldn't stop himself. Even now, when he was pissed off at himself and lonely, all he had to do was picture Fraser rolling over in his bed, mouth half-open, big chest bare, with his hair all mussed on the pillow, not tame and combed like it usually was.

Oh, geez, yeah. Ray shifted sideways on the couch, trying to ease the sudden pressure in his crotch. He should stop this, should stop right now, but it was too late. Fraser-in-his-head opened those eyes and looked at him, hair still all messy, body radiating warmth, and then he reached out and...

Ray braced his feet hard against the arm of the couch and yanked open his fly.

He was standing on a snowfield, surrounded by crisp, cold air, but it didn't smell right. It was some sort of chemical

spill—yes, that was it—only it didn't smell like chicken parts. It smelled sickly sweet and sharp, like some sort of neurotoxin.

A blur of motion, color in the vast white landscape, and he recognized the presence before he ever saw the face. "Ray?"

Ray was right there, standing knee-deep in snow, blue eyes and spiky hair, close enough to touch. "C'mon, Fraser."

"Ray, do you recognize that smell?"

"You're imagining things, Fraser. C'mon." And then Ray was kissing him, mouth hard on his, only he couldn't taste anything.

"Ray," he said, "Ray, Ray, Ray," and Ray was touching him, Ray had his fingers *right there*, only it was wrong this time, because he wanted so desperately to taste Ray's kiss, but all he could taste was bitterness. And then without warning the touch on his mouth and his groin vanished and Ray was gone, leaving him aching with the loss.

He was on his cot, in his office at the consulate. It was morning, and he was awake and alone. But his mouth still tasted bitter, and his body still felt...oh, dear.

Fraser sat up, willing himself not to think about it. Usually these dreams were slightly more...well, satisfying. They didn't always start out the same, but somewhere along the way they invariably turned to images of snow, and Ray. Ray kissing him. Ray touching him. Ray wanting him.

But he had to stop thinking about such things, because the dreams were a peculiarity of his subconscious mind, and if he wasn't careful, they might bleed over into his waking state, which could only lead to trouble. Yes, quite serious trouble.

Well, he was awake, now. Fraser swung his legs over the edge of the cot and looked around for Dief, but there was no sign of white fur in his office, and his door was shut.

Oh, right. Dief was outside, because of the insecticide. Insecticide which he could taste in the back of his mouth, undoubtedly from breathing fumes all night.

He pushed himself to his feet and had to grab the desk when the world spun. He felt very odd. But perhaps what he needed was something in his stomach.

He found his balance and made his way out into the hallway and across to the consulate's kitchen. He had some pemmican somewhere, still, saved from his last trip north. Yes, there it was, in the upper cabinet, still wrapped in a bit of wax paper. He popped it in his mouth, chewed...and gagged as the bitter taste exploded in his mouth. He turned and spat the mouthful out in the sink.

His head reeled for a moment, and he had to brace himself against the counter. He wasn't thinking clearly. He should have guessed that the exterminators would have sprayed here in the kitchen, even if they really shouldn't have sprayed the interiors of cabinets containing food.

Well, it was too late to do anything about it, now. Fraser pushed himself upright, feeling strangely lethargic. The room was spinning again, worse than before, but he refused to give in to it. He rinsed his mouth at the sink, then slowly, very carefully, made his way out of the kitchen and back to his office. He had paperwork to do this morning. He might as well get started.

An hour later, he straightened in his chair and rubbed his eyes. His head hurt, and the paper in front of him had gone strangely blurry. It was odd. When he looked straight ahead, he couldn't see properly, but when he glanced slightly to the side, the page seemed clearer. There was a blank spot in the center of his vision, as if he'd looked at a bright light or a flashbulb, only it didn't appear to be fading as an afterimage ordinarily would.

It was a blind spot, a foveal blind spot, and it was clearly affecting both eyes. Fraser closed his right and mapped the spot on his left by moving his finger and noting where he could see it and where he could not. The blind spot took up something close to three degrees of vision. He mapped the right eye,

and estimated it at four degrees. On impulse, he mapped the left again, and found it had grown to five degrees of his visual field.

His head was splitting, and he was suddenly nauseated. Fraser stumbled to his feet and out into the corridor. He didn't need to see to know his way. He made it to the bathroom just in time to heave up the meager contents of his stomach.

His heart was racing and his mouth tasted bitter twice over, now, but he couldn't panic. Panic was the enemy of rational thought. And rationally speaking, this was a clear case of neurotoxin poisoning.

Fraser leaned over the sink, still retching. The effect on his vision was unusual, but it was possible the toxins were interfering with the proper function of his retinal receptors—his cones, primarily, but he seemed to be losing sensitivity in his rods now, as well. It didn't look like dimness. Rather than fading to darkness, his vision had gone bright, almost white, and that whiteness was threatening to encompass even the farthest reaches of his periphery.

It was serious, then. Serious enough to require medical attention. Fraser splashed cold water on his face, then straightened and found a towel by feel. He would call Ray. Ray would take him to the hospital. Ray would take care of him.

He stumbled out of the bathroom and into the conference room. He could make it to the telephone. It was only just out at the desk in the foyer. But his foot hit something hard, and pain shot through him. There wasn't supposed to be a chair there. He was certain there wasn't. But the next thing he felt was the rough pile of the carpet against his cheek.

He had to get up. He had to call Ray. But then he heard the snick of a key turning the lock in the front door, heard the sharp staccato of high heels on tile floor.

"Constable?"

It was Inspector Thatcher, not Ray. Not Ray. But she would do.

The squad room phones had been ringing off the hook all morning, some weird confluence of the stars, or maybe it was just the full moon last night. Whatever it was, it was a pain in the neck, and Ray hadn't managed to get out the door and over to Wrigleyville, where he was supposed to be investigating a case involving an assault with a snowblower.

Hey, he knew Chicago winters did weird stuff to people, but he wanted to be there and back already just in case (yeah, okay, it wasn't all that likely, but a guy could hope) Fraser got off early and showed up at the squad room in time for lunch or something.

He just hoped Fraser wasn't peeved at him for being so pushy last night, pushy to the point of practically begging Fraser to stay with him. He didn't have an excuse for it. *Sorry, Frase, I was kinda horny.* Oh, yeah, that'd go over real well. But Fraser had forgiven him some pretty ugly stuff in the past. And at least this time he hadn't hit him or anything.

The phone on his desk rang, and he was tempted just to let it go—sneak out the back way and let somebody else deal with it. But there was a tiny (okay, miniscule) chance it could be Fraser.

"Vecchio."

"Oh, Detective, you're there. This is Inspector Thatcher." There was something funny about her normally cool, clipped voice. Something not quite right. "I'm afraid there's been a bit of an incident at the consulate, and I was wondering—" Oh, no. It was something to do with Fraser. Something bad. "—if you could come down to Northwestern Hospital."

"Hospital?" Shit, it really was bad.

"Yes, I'm afraid Constable Fraser had a rather severe reaction to some insecticide. I wouldn't bother you, except he's been asking for you quite specifically."

Wouldn't bother him? What was that? "Look, he's my partner," Ray said, because

that said everything. "I'll be there as soon as I can." He dropped the receiver into the cradle without waiting for Thatcher's good-bye, grabbed his coat, and pelted out to the parking lot.

Rather severe reaction. What the hell did that mean? Ray slid behind the wheel of the GTO and thanked his dad's mechanical wizardry and the gods of muscle cars when the engine cranked to life on the first try. Thatcher hadn't sounded happy. In fact, she'd sounded downright freaked. But that was nuts. Everybody had their apartment sprayed sometime; it was a fact of city life. If you had a reaction, maybe you coughed or sneezed or something. It didn't put you in the hospital.

He burned rubber all the way up Lake Shore, cursing every traffic light and every car in front of him. Fraser in the hospital seemed...impossible. Fraser didn't do hospitals. He hadn't even agreed to see a doctor that time Warfield's goons beat him up.

Ray squealed tires getting into a space in the hospital parking garage and bolted for the stairwell. Maybe Fraser was allergic and he'd had some kind of asthmatic attack or something. It couldn't be worse than that. Not Fraser. Not from some stupid bug spray.

He should have made Fraser accept his offer. He should have threatened to kick him in the head or something. Fraser would've listened to that, and if he hadn't, well, Ray could've gone through with the kicking. Anything so Fraser wouldn't have ended up here.

Damn it, he hated hospitals. They were almost as bad as the morgue. People checked out here, checked out permanently, and he didn't want to picture that and Fraser in the same thought. Oh, God, no.

He tried the emergency room first, only to find Fraser had been moved to acute care, whatever the difference was. He charged up the stairs, rounded the corner, and ran smack into a wide, red chest.

For a moment he thought it was a miracle, or Thatcher had blown things out of proportion. And then he realized: it was Turnbull, not Fraser.

"Detective Vecchio! How nice to see you."

Turnbull's niceties were the last thing he needed right now. "Where is he and what's wrong with him?"

"Constable Fraser had a wee little reaction to the chemicals, but the doctors think he'll be right as rain in just a few days."

"Turnbull, *where?*"

"Well, I'm not sure how many visitors he's allowed to have at one time," Turnbull said, his usually blank face gone puzzled. "Perhaps if we asked a nurse..."

Ray fainted left and then ducked around Turnbull to the right. There were patient rooms opposite the nurse's station, and no nurses in sight. Ray checked each room as he went, and found Thatcher in the third. He dodged around the curtain, ignoring her disapproving look. He didn't give a damn what she thought.

Fraser was there, half-propped up in the bed, his face pale, but otherwise looking pretty much like himself, even in the thin hospital gown. He lifted his head as Ray entered, and Dief barked a greeting from the visitor's chair beside the bed.

Ray skidded to a stop. "Next time I tell you to do something, you're gonna do it. You're not gonna argue or be polite. You're gonna say 'Sure thing, buddy, whatever you say.'"

Fraser turned toward him and smiled, but his eyes didn't quite meet Ray's.

"Thanks for coming, Ray."

"What the hell is wrong with you?"

Thatcher cleared her throat, like she thought he'd forgotten she was there, which in fact he had. "Constable Fraser is experiencing some difficulties with his vision."

Difficulties? What was that supposed to mean? Ray held up his hand. "How many fingers?"

"I have no idea."

It hit like a knife in the gut. Fraser was blind. Completely, totally blind. "Oh, geez."

"It's all right, Ray," Fraser said, like Ray was the one who needed comfort. "The doctor believes it's probably temporary, an acute symptom of the neurotoxin."

"So you're gonna get your sight back." Oh, God, he had to. He just had to.

"Well, we don't know that, yet. We'll have to wait and see."

Damn it, he wanted to hit something. Or someone. Ray rounded on the Ice Queen, who wasn't looking particularly icy today, but he didn't care. "What'd you do, hose the place down with benzene?"

Thatcher stiffened. "I hired a licensed exterminator. He assured me it would be perfectly safe."

"Safe?" Damn it, he sounded panicked, but he couldn't stop himself. "Does this look safe to you? No? I didn't think so."

"Ray," Fraser said quietly.

"I can assure you there will be a full investigation," Thatcher said, and for a moment Ray actually thought he saw her lower lip tremble. "I've already contacted our lawyers in Ottawa."

"Oh, great," Ray said, and it felt like his lower lip was trembling, too. "Lawyers. Yeah, that'll do him a lot of good."

"Ray," Fraser said again.

"You can't see, Fraser," Ray said, turning back to face him. "Somebody poisoned you. You need cop work, not lawyers."

Fraser raised his eyebrows, his expression infuriatingly mild. "It's quite possible I'm having an idiosyncratic reaction to the toxin. My body is not accustomed to the variety of chemicals found in this environment."

"Fraser, you been in Chicago three years."

"True enough."

Thatcher cleared her throat behind him. "Detective, if you would like to assist in the investigation, the consulate will be happy to cooperate with you."

Ray spun to face her, but for once she didn't sound the least bit sarcastic. "Oh, yeah? So I'd be the one doing the lesioning?"

"Liaising,' Ray," Fraser said.

"I know what he meant," Thatcher said tartly. And to Ray: "Yes, we can pool our resources."

"Okay, good," Ray said. It wasn't good, not good enough, but he needed to do something, anything, even if it wasn't going to fix Fraser's eyes. "You're on."

He didn't get a chance to say any more than that, because the doctor came in, a small, brisk woman in a white coat. She shooed Ray and Thatcher to the foot of the bed, patted Dief's head, and peered into Fraser's eyes and mouth. "How's the headache?" she asked.

Damn. Fraser was in pain, and he hadn't even thought to ask.

"Somewhat better," Fraser said.

The doc wiggled her fingers to the left of Fraser's face, then moved them across to wiggle over on the right. Fraser didn't so much as blink. "Not even a flicker?" she asked.

"I'm afraid not."

The doctor looked down at her chart. "Well, your lab reports all look good. You're responding well to the antidote, and apart from your vision, the neural tests all look relatively normal. I see no reason not to discharge you, provided you have someone to look after you and someplace to go where you won't be exposed to any more pesticide. Is that feasible?"

"Well, it's rather difficult," Thatcher said, at the same time Ray said, "Yes."

Two pairs of female eyes turned toward him. "He can come home with me," Ray said.

The doctor looked him up and down. "And you would be...."

"His partner."

"Ah," the doctor said, and there was something in her look that made him think...oh, geez. He glanced over at Fraser's face, but he looked perfectly composed. Yeah, well, leave it to Fraser to let

something like that go over his head. "You must make sure he drinks lots of fluids and gets plenty of rest. Bring him in if you notice any change in his condition. I'll want to see him the day after tomorrow in any case."

"Got it," Ray said.

"I expect you to take good care of him, Detective," Thatcher said sharply. Ray looked over at her. She had her chin up, defiant. Like she'd read the doctor's little innuendo the same way he had. Like she was...wow, *jealous* of him, just a bit.

It was almost enough to make him like her. "Yeah," he said. "I will." He turned back to the bed. "Fraser, you wanna get ready to go?"

Fraser sat up and swung his bare feet, bare calves, bare knees over the edge of the bed. Ah, geez. The man had no right to look hot in a hospital gown. And blind. Damn it. Stone blind.

"Well, there's one small problem, Ray," Fraser said, calm as if they were discussing what to eat for lunch. "I'm afraid that all of my clothing has been contaminated with pesticide."

In the end they made do with a thin robe borrowed from hospital stores, and some slipper-socks that felt rather odd underfoot but did provide some traction. Fraser followed Ray down the hospital corridor, one hand on Ray's shoulder. After several hours like this, he was becoming accustomed to being without his vision. He had four other senses—well, three and a half, as his sense of smell was recovering only slowly. But he could hear the click of Dief's nails, padding along beside him, and he could feel the warmth of Ray's body through the smooth leather of his jacket. Yes, he could make do. And if this turned out to be a permanent condition...

No, he wouldn't think that way. It was unproductive, when the doctor had said he might very well recover with time. Panic

would only breed more panic, and worry Ray.

"Okay, careful, we got some steps here. Six steps."

Ray seemed...quite concerned, as it was. Overly solicitous, even. But at the moment, it was a help. Once he was back in familiar territory it would be all right, but here where he didn't know the terrain, he was grateful for the shoulder and the warning about the steps.

"Okay, you stay here," Ray said, once they'd maneuvered down the steps. "I'll bring the car around."

"That won't be necessary," Fraser said.

"Not necessary? Oh, that's a good one. Fraser, 'not necessary' is what got you here in the first place." Ray's voice rose as it changed from overly solicitous to deeply annoyed. "Every time I got to listen to you. When do you ever listen to me? Well, today you're gonna start. You're staying here; I'm getting the car. End of story."

There was nothing to say to that. The words echoed their last true argument—the one that had culminated in the tiny submersible in the depths of Lake Superior—all too clearly. Fraser eased his back against the wall behind him, so that he would be out of the way of any passers-by. "Understood."

He could feel Ray's presence in front of him, unmoving for a long moment. "Okay, good." Ray said. "I'll be quick." Ray's hand brushed his arm lightly, as if to reassure him, and then disappeared. Fraser heard the sound of a door open and felt the cold draft, then heard it close once again. At his feet, Dief whined.

"I'm perfectly all right," he said.

Dief made a wuffling noise.

"As a matter of fact, you were, and I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't rub it in."

A woof.

"Ah, well, thank you for that, then."

Dief went quiet, and Fraser settled in to wait. He was standing just to the side of what seemed to be a fairly busy entryway. He could hear people passing him, some

briskly, hospital staff in a hurry, some more leisurely, as if on break, and some quite hesitantly, patients being discharged. Every time the door opened, he told himself it could not possibly be Ray yet. And then, sooner than he'd expected, the door opened with a particularly hard yank, and he recognized the step as it crossed the threshold.

"Hi, Ray."

Ray's gait faltered. "I didn't say anything, Fraser. How'd you know it was me?"

"You have a very individual walk."

Ray made a rustling sound. "That a bad thing?"

"No, not at all." It was, in point of fact, quite endearing. Ray had a unique grace: part dancer, part fighter, and the rest all untamed energy.

"Here," Ray said, and Fraser felt something warm and leather-scented settle around his shoulders. Ray's jacket.

"Won't you be cold?"

"Car's warm, and it's just outside."

Fraser reached to touch the smooth leather, the softness of the shearling collar, and memory supplied the color: black. "Well, in that case, I'm sure I won't need this, either."

"Fraser, I'm double parked. Can we just go?"

"Of course, Ray."

It was cold outside, and the thin robe was no defense against the wind. Fraser was grateful for the jacket, even if it was only twenty steps to the car. Ray settled him in the passenger side and came around the car to slide in behind the wheel. A warm panting breath at Fraser's shoulder told him Dief was in the back seat.

"I'm grateful for your offer to take me home."

"Oh, that's great." Ray put the car in gear and it lurched into motion. "Now you're grateful. What about last night, huh? You couldn't've been grateful then?"

Oh, dear. Ray was clearly still annoyed. "Well, I was grateful, then, too."

"Not grateful enough," Ray muttered. "Look, can we not talk about this?"

"Ray, it's all right. In all likelihood I will regain my vision in a matter of hours or days. And until then, I'm sure I'll be able to manage perfectly adequately."

"Mnngh," Ray grunted, and there was a tapping noise, like he was drumming his fingers against the steering wheel. "You are just so...so...so *reasonable*."

Sometimes Ray's comments managed to be both obvious and confusing at the same time. But this time...no, he understood. "Ray, it wasn't your fault," Fraser said. "It was my own error of judgment."

Ray drew a sharp breath, audible over the smooth purr of the engine. "You admit it? You admit you make mistakes?"

"Everyone makes mistakes, Ray."

"Not you. You're supposed to be perfect or something."

It reminded him, suddenly, of something Ray Vecchio had once said in very different circumstances. "Ray," he said softly, "I'm not perfect, and I'm not a saint, either."

There was a silence, and then the car abruptly swerved, as if Ray had strayed into the wrong lane and only just noticed. "Not a saint, huh?"

"I'm afraid not."

"You know, some people wouldn't say that was such a bad thing."

Ah. He understood that. Not that Ray meant...well, of course he didn't mean it in a personal sense. "I'm aware of that."

"That's good," Ray said, but his fingers went back to drumming. "That's, uh, that's good."

Fraser felt his face start to go warm. He wasn't even sure why, just that something in the tone of Ray's voice was making him think very odd thoughts. Thoughts which had absolutely no basis in reality. They belonged to the dream world, and he really ought to keep them there.

"Fraser?"

"Yes?"

"You're not ticked at me? You don't mind staying at my place?"

"No, Ray. I told you, I'm grateful."

"Oh. Right." Ray said, but the drumming sound of his fingers didn't stop.

It didn't entirely make sense. Well, of course Ray was concerned for him, and Ray was also upset that he'd refused his hospitality, last night. But he seemed almost nervous, now, if that drumming was anything to go by. As if some part of him didn't want to be taking Fraser home, after all.

Well, if it were something serious, he would just have to trust Ray to tell him. It was perfectly possible that it had nothing whatsoever to do with him. Perhaps Ray had some case he needed to be working on, and this current distraction was keeping him from it.

Yes, that was probably it. That would, in fact, explain quite a bit. And if there were something else, too...well, he could only trust that they would work it out, whatever it was. He had faith in their friendship. He had faith in Ray. It would be enough, he was sure of it.

For a blind guy, a newly blind guy, Fraser didn't do so bad getting around. He made it up the stairs in Ray's apartment building with just a hand on Ray's elbow, and he dropped it entirely as they neared Ray's apartment door.

Ray fumbled with the key in the lock. "Uh, word of warning, Fraser. The place is kind of a mess."

Fraser was probably the only guy on the planet who could look together in a hospital robe and dorky socks with a leather jacket slung across his shoulders. "More so than usual?" he asked, but the even tone made it a question of fact, not a criticism.

"Yeah, I got a little wild the other night, and I wasn't in the mood to clean up." In point of fact, he'd had a fit of dancing, and it had kind of gotten out of hand. When he

used to dance to an image of Stella, he'd always done a waltz or a fox-trot—something sedate and elegant and controlled. For some reason thinking about Fraser made him want to bang his head.

He got the door open, and Dief trotted inside. "C'mon in," he said, but Fraser was already striding confidently ahead of him, just on Dief's heels. Ray followed him in and shut the door behind him, so he was two steps away when Fraser tripped over the pile of dirty socks and shoes he'd left beside the couch.

"Whoa," Ray said, and leaped to grab Fraser's elbow, flailing wildly to hold them both upright. "Sorry. See what I mean?" He was still holding Fraser's elbow, and the leather jacket had slipped off Fraser's shoulders and onto the floor, leaving Fraser in nothing but the thin hospital things. Fraser's arm was warm beneath his hand, so warm he wanted to just...oh, shit. He yanked his hand away. "Here, why don't you sit down for a sec and let me pick up a little, okay?"

"Certainly," Fraser said, and found the couch with his hand. He sank into the cushions, knees up above his hips, and Ray was suddenly painfully aware of just how short that gown was.

Oops. He tore his eyes away from Fraser's thighs, grabbed the stray socks and shoes and the jacket off the floor, and went to shove them in his bedroom closet. He had to have something Fraser could wear. Jeans were out. No way Fraser would be able to squeeze into even his baggiest pair. But sweats, yeah, he had several pairs of old sweats, and some of them were even clean. Ray dragged down the oldest, loosest pair, found a sweatshirt to go with it, and carried them back out to the living room. Fraser was on the couch still, with Dief sitting happily beside him.

"Here," Ray said, dropping the sweats in Fraser's lap. "Put these on. You gotta be freezing."

Fraser's face tipped up, like he could see, only it was obvious he couldn't. "Actually, it's quite warm in here."

"Fraser, just do it."

"Understood." Fraser fumbled with the sweats for a moment, sorting them out by feel, and then got to his feet and—oh, shit—bent to pull the pants on right there in the middle of the living room.

Ray knew he should look away. He had to look away. But Fraser couldn't see him watching, and he was mesmerized. Fraser got the left leg on, up to his knee, then struggled for a moment before getting his right foot in the second leg properly. But then, oh God, he was pulling them up, pushing the hospital gown out of his way, and Ray got a glimpse of just enough skin to see that Fraser wasn't wearing any underwear.

No way. No way was he loaning Fraser jockey shorts. And no way was he 'fessing up how he knew they were needed. The sweats were old and soft. Fraser would just have to deal.

Fraser was shedding the robe, now, and working on the knots that held the gown together in back. His hands were at an awkward angle, fumbling with the strings.

"You want help with that?" It was out of his mouth before he had the chance to think.

"No, I believe I've got it," Fraser said, and the knot fell free from his fingers. It took him just a moment to undo the second tie, lower down, and then he was pulling the gown off, and Ray was standing there staring at that smooth expanse of chest.

Fraser was gorgeous. Not cut like a body builder, but shaped just right, broad at the shoulders, narrowing to the waist, and all of that bulk covered with smooth, creamy skin. He had a few noticeable scars—flaws that made Ray want to touch him even more, to memorize their position and shape, to map out the cartography of skin. Scartography. Mmm, yeah. He could get into that.

Fraser picked up the sweatshirt and juggled it, finding the shape of it and then pulling it over his head. But then he had it on and it wasn't all that much better. On Ray that sweatshirt was nice and baggy. On Fraser it stretched taut across his shoulders, and the pants were just as bad, hugging his hips and ass and...oh, yeah, his crotch, too.

Brilliant idea, Kowalski. But what else was he supposed to do? And it was better than the hospital gown, *especially* since he now knew Fraser hadn't been wearing anything underneath.

For a hot, painful second he was actually *glad* Fraser was blind. Glad Fraser couldn't see him like this, staring and blushing and making a fool of himself. Of course, then he felt rotten for even having that thought. Rotten twice over. Greatness.

"Ray?" Fraser had his head cocked to the side like he was listening for something, which, knowing Fraser, meant he'd figured out his partner was just standing there like an idiot.

"Yeah?" he managed.

"Is the floor clear?"

Oh, *damn*. He'd forgotten what he was supposed to be doing entirely. "I'm, uh, working on it." And to make that something resembling the truth, he bent to pick up a stack of videotapes and a Sharper Image catalogue. He stuck the tapes on the nearest shelf and dumped the catalogue along with a handful of candy wrappers, two of those "Have you seen this kid?" fliers, and a menu for Papa Joe's pizza in the nearest trash can. Then he took care of the CDs, the stray pieces of clothing, the newspapers, the empty beer bottles, and the lampshade.

"Okay, it's clear," he said.

"Thank you kindly," Fraser said. "Now I expect you'll be going to work."

To work. He hadn't even thought of it. If anything, he figured he'd call Welsh and take the rest of the day off. Welsh would understand. "Fraser, the doc said you need someone to take care of you."

"I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself." And then, as if to prove it, he got

up, made his way around the couch (barely missing barking his shin on the corner of the coffee table), and ran full-tilt into Ray's bicycle where it was hanging on its stand by the wall.

"Jesus, Fraser." Ray was at his side in a moment, but Fraser wasn't acting hurt.

"I'm all right, Ray."

"Look, this place isn't exactly idiot-proof, okay?"

"I understand that." Fraser pulled away from him, found the turtle tank with one groping hand, and navigated his way past the table and into the kitchen. "There's no better way to learn my way around than trial and error," Fraser went on. And his hand went up unerringly and took a mug down off one of the cup hooks.

Ray went to lean against the doorframe at the entry to the kitchen. "You really want me to go?"

"I understand that you have things to do, Ray. Diefenbaker and I will be fine here." Fraser turned on the tap and filled his mug with water, then brought it up to his lips. "As you can see, I am following the doctor's instructions."

Oh, right. He was supposed to be drinking fluids and all that. "You gonna take a nap, then?" The doc had said something about rest, too.

"I'll try," Fraser said.

It wasn't like he wanted to leave Fraser. He didn't. If he left he knew he was gonna spend the whole afternoon worrying. But there were also things he wanted to do. Thatcher had said he could liaise, and he was itching to get on it, to find out who she'd hired and why the stuff was poison. It couldn't just be Fraser being oversensitive. Nobody went blind from that. "Okay, but you gotta promise to pick up the phone when I call. Let the answering machine take it, and if it's me, pick up the phone."

"Of course, Ray."

"Okay." He took a deep breath. He could do this. He could. "Okay, good. I'll see you later." For a moment he had an almost overwhelming desire to touch Fraser, as

some kind of weird way of assuring himself that he'd be all right. But that was probably just a substi—sublimation, *whatever*, for wanting to kiss him. Great. "Don't do anything dumb, okay?"

"I'll do my best."

And with that dubious promise, he was out of there.

It was more difficult than usual to clear his mind for the meditation exercise. Fraser wasn't certain why, except that being in Ray's apartment surrounded by Ray's things was rather distracting, and being blind didn't seem to help at all. It felt like Ray, here. It even smelled like Ray.

From over in the kitchen, Dief whined.

"We'll eat when Ray gets home," Fraser told him. "It will only be another ten minutes." Ray had in fact just called to say he was on his way. Fortunately, Fraser had gotten back to the apartment in time to answer. He was certain Ray would have been worried if he'd called while they were out. Ray was concerned enough already. The last call had been the fourth of the afternoon.

It was surprisingly gratifying. Oh, he already knew Ray cared for him. They were friends, and they'd been through enough tests of their friendship to know it was real. But this felt different, somehow.

It wasn't that he was being taken care of. He didn't need to be taken care of. It was more Ray's automatic assumption of the role, and the fact that Ray knew without asking that he was the most important person in Fraser's life.

He wasn't used to having someone who was so important to him. Not like this. And it felt...good, in a way he hadn't expected. It was oddly pleasant to be expecting Ray to walk through that door. Pleasant to anticipate sleeping here tonight, where it felt and smelled like Ray.

But he really had to stop thinking that way. Ray's concern certainly didn't mean

anything like *that*. And if he were going to sleep here tonight, he would have to do his best to keep his dreams in check.

Right. But the trouble was, he wasn't certain he could actually do that, because over the past few months, the harder he'd tried to suppress those dreams, the more vivid they had become. And the one time he'd managed to achieve a lucid dreaming state, he'd...well, he'd prolonged the dream, instead of altering it.

Where Ray was concerned, his willpower was shockingly weak.

There were footsteps just outside the door, then—Ray's footsteps—and a moment later the sound of the key turning in the lock. In the kitchen, Dief scrambled to his feet with a clatter of toenails on linoleum. Fraser waited where he was, on the couch.

"Fraser? Oof. Hey, c'mon! Crazy wolf."
"I'm in here."

There was a shuffling noise, and a happy woof from Dief, and then Ray was in the living room and he could smell food. Pizza.

"How many fingers?"

It was no use; his vision was still blank. "I'm sorry."

"Damn."

"The doctor said it would take time."

"I know that. I know that. Look, you wanna have dinner? I'm starved."

"The pizza smells delicious. Ham and pineapple?"

"Yeah, I guess Tony's off the anti-Hawaiian kick." There was a sound of corrugated cardboard being set down, and the couch shifted beside him. "Here, I brought you a bottle of water."

"Thank you," Fraser said as the cool plastic touched his hand. Bottled water always tasted faintly of polymer resins, but it was better than Chicago tap water, which was an overpowering mixture of chlorine and dead algae. He heard Ray open the box and take a piece of pizza, so he reached for one himself. He was getting quite used to managing without his sight. He found a piece on the first grope.

"So," he said, settling back into the couch cushions, "was your investigation fruitful?" He'd been surprised—and gratified once again—to find that Ray had spent the day looking into the business about the insecticide. But Ray's report over the phone had been rather sketchy.

"Fruitful," Ray repeated around a mouthful of pizza. "Yeah, well, not fruitful enough. The guys down in the lab say the hospital report's queer."

Fraser swallowed the bite in his mouth. "'Queer' as in inaccurate?"

"Nah, it says the pesticide stuff was something called Dursonate—ethyl di-something or other. But the lab guys say it was banned five years ago, and it was never supposed to be used indoors, or on roaches."

"Hmmm," Fraser said, to give himself time to think.

"The guy the Ice Queen hired seems straight-up, far as I can figure. Licensed, insured, been in business twenty years. Didn't even have a registered complaint at the Better Business Bureau. He says he signed an order to use something called Pyrethrin. Low toxicity."

"Yes, it's made from chrysanthemum flowers," Fraser said absently, and took another bite of pizza. "Did you speak with the person who performed the actual application of the pesticide?"

"Oh, that's another story. The guy who actually did it was not the guy who signed off on it. Took me half the afternoon to catch on to that one, and when I tried to track the real guy down at his work site, they said he'd already left. I called back to the office, but they said he wasn't there. Figured I wasn't gonna get anywhere with the run-around, so I came home."

He'd been too worried to stay away longer. It was unspoken, but Fraser understood. "It's possible that was just a coincidence and he wasn't actually avoiding you."

"Yeah, and it's also possible he meant to poison you. Where does he get a banned chemical? That's what I want to know."

"A very good question," Fraser said, still musing. "Perhaps one we will be able to answer tomorrow."

"Yeah," Ray said, apparently not noticing the plural pronoun. "Tomorrow. You want another piece?"

"Yes, thank you," Fraser said at the same moment Dief whined.

"Here you go." He felt a piece of pizza materialize by his hand, then heard a second rustle of the pizza box, followed by the snap of wolf jaws closing around something soft and cheesy.

"Ray, you really shouldn't feed him pizza. It isn't good for him."

The couch next to him creaked. "You don't miss much, do you?"

"I have four senses intact," Fraser said. "It's quite sufficient for most tasks. As a matter of fact, when Dief and I went to the park this afternoon, I—"

"Wait, you took Dief to the park?"

"It's only a few blocks away."

"Fraser, this is Chicago. Drivers don't stop for normal pedestrians, and you weren't even carrying one of those white canes."

"We managed perfectly adequately, Ray. With Dief to tell me when the lights changed, I had no trouble whatsoever with traffic. Although I must say I noticed quite a few honking horns."

"Oh, I bet."

"We made it back perfectly safely, Ray."

"I can see that." But Ray didn't sound particularly mollified. "Look, Fraser..."

"Yes?"

Ray sighed. "You want any more pizza?"

"Oh." He was almost certain that wasn't what Ray had started to say. "Well, perhaps one slice." And he leaned forward to get it.

He wasn't trying to annoy Ray, truly. It was just that the oddest things seemed to set him off. It couldn't be that Ray was really upset at him for taking Dief to the park. No,

it was the undercurrent again, whatever it was—the thing that had had Ray on edge since yesterday. Since *before* he'd gone blind, so it wasn't that.

He wished he understood it. He really did. But somehow, he had the feeling that being able to see wouldn't have helped this particular situation. No, it was insight he was lacking, not vision.

Fraser took another bite of pizza and puzzled it over, but inspiration didn't come.

* * * *

In the end, they watched TV. Okay, Ray watched TV, and Fraser listened. Except the truth of the fact of the matter was, Fraser didn't really seem to be listening all that carefully. He looked kind of zoned out.

Well, it was better than talking, anyway. It was better than picturing Fraser out on the streets in those too-tight sweats, earning honks and catcalls, and probably not all of them for jaywalking, either. Better than sitting right next to Fraser on the couch and having to sit on his hands to keep them to himself.

So he'd gotten up, on the pretense of finding the remote, and escaped to a chair. Not as comfy as the couch, but comfy and tempting didn't mix. Not with Fraser. Never with Fraser.

It was almost ten, now, early for bed, but Fraser was supposed to be getting his rest, and he couldn't see to tell the time, anyway. Ray clicked the television off. "You wanna get ready for bed?"

Fraser's eyebrows lifted. "I assumed you would be staying up later than this."

So much for fooling him. "Uh, I could. I mean, if it bugs you, I'll try not to make too much noise, but if you close the bedroom door, it's pretty quiet in there."

"Oh, I couldn't possibly turn you out of your bed, Ray."

Damn, that was Fraser being difficult again, and it had been way too long a day for him to cope. "Look, you think I want you out here on the couch, getting in the way? I

didn't think so. Just take the bed, Fraser. I sleep on the couch all the time."

Fraser hesitated, as if he really wanted to protest. But all he said was, "All right," and got to his feet.

Ray found Fraser a clean towel and a spare toothbrush, then went to change the sheets while he was in the bathroom. He was just tucking in the blankets when Fraser appeared at the door. "There's a couple more blankets in the closet if you get cold," Ray said. "You want me to get them out?"

"I'm sure I'll be more than warm enough."

"All I got for you to wear is sweats."

"I'll be quite comfortable, Ray. Really."

"Okay, then. Good. You need anything else?"

Fraser came over to the bed, found it by feel, and sat down. "No, I'm fine."

"Okay." He was hesitating, and damn it, he knew why. He was fighting all these stupid impulses, the ones that made him want to touch Fraser, or offer to tuck him in. "G'Night."

Fraser found the corner of the covers and turned them back. "Good-night, Ray."

He couldn't stand here gaping. Fraser would know. Ray slipped out and closed the door gently behind him.

He didn't want to watch TV. He didn't want to watch anything but Fraser, and he couldn't stop thinking of him there in the bedroom. But it was something to pretend to be occupied with. He flipped channels for awhile and finally stopped on a strange movie about this guy who was a dead ringer for a terrorist and got roped into pretending to be him so the CIA could do their thing. Yeah, it was pretty dumb. Like anyone would believe he was really the other guy. Anyway, they were cheating, 'cause both guys were played by the same actor.

He was almost getting into it when the bedroom door opened: Fraser, still dressed—thank God—in the sweats.

"What's the matter? Can't sleep?"

Fraser blinked blankly. "Well, I thought perhaps some warm milk...."

"Don't have any milk. The last stuff got lumpy."

"Ah." Fraser looked...lost somehow. More vulnerable than Ray was used to seeing him. He turned back toward the bedroom. "Well, perhaps I'll just...."

"Your head hurt or something?"

Fraser turned back. "Not too badly."

Shit. He was in pain again, and he hadn't said anything. In pain, and unable to sleep, when he was supposed to be getting his rest. "You want an aspirin?"

"I don't think that will be necessary."

Oh great, they were back to 'not necessary.' Ray got up and went into the bathroom. Aspirin, Tylenol, he had to have something in the medicine cabinet. But as he was rooting, he came across another bottle, a bottle of sleeping pills he had left over from a year and a half ago, after the divorce, when the doc had prescribed them for his jumpiness.

On impulse he shook one out into his hand. Fraser wouldn't have to know what it was. If it helped him get a good night's sleep, it would do them both good.

Ray found the Tylenol and added one of those, filled a cup with water, and went back out to where Fraser was still waiting for him. "Here, take these," he said, grabbing Fraser's hand and depositing the pills in it. "Fix you right up."

"Ray, I really don't think—"

"Just do it. Do it for me, okay?"

And Fraser, surprisingly meek, said, "As you wish," and took the pills with a big gulp of water.

"You want anything else?" Ray asked.

"No, thank you."

"Good, then. Sweet dreams."

And Fraser turned and disappeared back into the bedroom.

There was snow underfoot, clean, powdery mountain snow, and he had to get down to

the valley floor. There were no tracks, no sign of any other creature, human or otherwise, but he could see the way down easily. To the right were a series of rocky outcroppings, windswept. There would be less risk of avalanche that way.

"Fraser?"

Ray was over to his left, standing knee-deep in the snow in the deep pack, just at the point where the slope fell away, concave and dangerous.

"Ray, you have to move very carefully. The slightest motion could trigger...."

But Ray wasn't listening to him. Ray came toward him with great heaving steps, plowing through the deep snow. And then, without warning, the slope slid away underneath him, and in a thunder of rushing ice he was gone.

"Ray!" Fraser shouted, horrified, but it was too late. Ray was gone, gone down the mountainside. Gone forever.

"S'okay, Fraser, I'm here."

The world jumped, and he felt a touch on his forearm. Ray. Alive after all, and right here with him. Relief coursed through him. Ray was all right. And then he knew: he was dreaming. It was the old, familiar dream, the one he'd had too many times to count.

He shifted and caught hold of the hand on his arm. It was dark, so dark he couldn't see anything, but he knew this dream. This was the good part.

He slid his hand up Ray's arm and tugged him close.

Fraser was asleep, now, but shifting restlessly on the bed. Ray paused in the doorway. Even with the television set on, he thought he'd heard Fraser say something.

"Fraser?"

Fraser muttered something incoherent against the pillow. And it was crazy...yeah, okay, it was worse than that, it was eavesdropping, but Ray couldn't stop himself. He went to lean over the bed,

straining to hear Fraser's words. And then, in a clear, anguished voice, Fraser said, "*Ray!*"

Shit. That sounded like a nightmare—a nightmare involving him. Ray bent and touched Fraser's arm to wake him. "S'okay, Fraser. I'm here."

Fraser grunted and rolled toward him, and then, somehow, Fraser was clutching his hand. Holding on for dear life. And clearly not awake yet.

This was not exactly one of his fantasies, but damn it, Fraser was touching him. Fraser almost never touched him. Okay, maybe accidentally, or maybe for some crazy Mountie-like purpose, like that buddy-breathing thing. But not a deliberate touch, a touch for the sake of touching. Not like this.

Ray eased himself down on the mattress, careful to keep a good foot of distance between himself and Fraser's body. If Fraser woke, he'd say...hell, he'd figure something to say. Right now, he was just...oh, God. Fraser's grip changed on his hand, moved up to his arm, then his shoulder. Fraser's hand closed firmly around him and tugged.

He was up against Fraser's body now, only the thin sheet and their clothing separating them. He could feel Fraser's breath against his neck, and then, oh *geez*, Fraser nuzzled him.

Fraser was still dreaming. He *had* to be. He couldn't possibly know who he had in his arms, and he was under the influence of that damn sleeping pill, which meant it was time for one Stanley Ray Kowalski to hop right out of bed. But, oh God, it felt so good. He couldn't go. He knew he had to. And he couldn't.

Fraser's lips touched his skin, a damp, soft shock. Fraser's hand came up to the nape of his neck, fingers digging into his hair, turning his head, pulling him down, and *shit*—lips touched lips.

Oh God, he was in trouble now. Fraser's lips moved against his, and he was a goner. Yeah, okay, any second now Fraser

was going to wake up and kill him, but he didn't care. He needed this, needed it now. Ray plastered himself to Fraser's body and opened his mouth, reveling in astonishment as Fraser's mouth opened, too—sweet and hot against his. With his free hand, Ray tugged at the sheet between them, pushing it down, so it was just his jeans and tee-shirt against Fraser's too-tight sweats. Damn. Too tight for a different reason, now. Ray rubbed against him, feeling the hard ridge of Fraser's cock against his own.

"Fraser," Ray whispered. He didn't care if Fraser woke up, now. He'd go the temporary insanity route. Or the "you started it" defense. Or...

Fraser shifted against him, pulling him close, and then Fraser heaved, rolled, and ended up on top, pressing Ray against the mattress, grinding groin against groin so hard it almost hurt. Fraser grunted against his mouth, wordless, now, and attacked him with lips and tongue and...teeth. Yeah, teeth, closing around his lower lip, pulling at it, teasing it—wanton and impossibly erotic.

This was *Fraser*. Oh, God, not a saint. Not hardly. There was nothing saintlike about *this*.

Ray was drowning. He'd lost any good sense he ever had, and he didn't give a damn. All he wanted was to feel Fraser's body against his. Skin to skin, damn it. They were wearing way too many clothes.

He slid his hands under Fraser's sweatshirt, trying to push it up, but Fraser wasn't exactly cooperating. He was panting against Ray's mouth now, moaning with every thrust of his hips.

"Fraser," Ray said again. "*Fraser*." But it was too late. Fraser heaved against him, heaved hard, and held still, his whole body taut. In the next moment, Ray felt it through the layers of jeans and sweats: a warm, steady pulse against his groin.

Fraser groaned and collapsed back down, half on the mattress and half on Ray, and Ray could feel the thump of Fraser's heart against his chest. Damn it, he was

close. He was so close. But Fraser's breath was slowing against his neck.

"Hell of a dream, buddy." But Fraser didn't so much as twitch. He was well and truly asleep. Asleep *now*, when Ray desperately needed...Oh, it was typical. It was so typical. Fraser got his way once again, shot *his* wad, and left his buddy hanging.

It was totally unfair. And the worst of it was, Fraser had been asleep the whole damn time, asleep and dreaming about God-only-knew-who. Okay, yeah, it was a revelation to think Fraser actually had dreams like that, but, damn it, the least he could've done was have a *considerate* dream.

Fraser muttered something and shifted, moving his weight off Ray and turning to snuggle up against his side. And even now—sound asleep, drugged, what *ever*—that big body was intoxicatingly warm.

Yeah, he had it bad. Like that was news. But sometimes a guy had to take what he could get. Ray reached down to undo his fly. Hey, if Fraser hadn't woken during all the humping, he wasn't likely to wake up now. And if he did, it would be his own damn fault, for taking his jollies without taking care of his partner.

The head of his dick felt slick in his hand; he'd leaked that much already. Shit, if Fraser had lasted just fifteen seconds longer...Ray tugged on the shaft, slid his hand up, rubbed a slippery thumb right against the sweet spot under the head. He'd had Fraser on top of him, never mind the circumstances. He'd had Fraser kissing him, teasing him.

Dreaming about him.

Well, okay, maybe not for the later part, maybe not for the good stuff, but Fraser had said his name. *His* name, not anybody else's. And when he'd said, "It's okay," Fraser had grabbed him and pulled him close....

Oh God. What if Fraser had been dreaming about him? What if the kisses, and the hard on, and the humping had been for him? Ray's whole body went hot. Yeah, it was a fantasy, but it was sweet, so sweet.

His hand was moving hot and fast now, and he pressed hard against Fraser's body, arching toward him, so close, so damn close. He was never, ever going to feel this way again. Fraser wouldn't even remember the dream. Or maybe he would, when he woke up and found himself stuck to his sweats.

He felt it again, the hot, hard pulse against his crotch, heard Fraser gasping in his ear, heard his name, *Ray*—in his mind now breathy, rather than anguished—and he was over the edge, jerking hard, shooting warm and sticky fluid across his stomach and over onto Fraser's.

Oops. He should've watched his aim. Ray sank back down into his pillow, panting for breath. It felt good. Not perfect. Not damn well even close. But more than he could have hoped for, even if he ought to feel rotten about it.

The thing was, he couldn't figure it. Who was taking advantage of who, here? After all, Fraser was the one who'd got off first, even if he had been asleep.

Ray wriggled out of his tee-shirt and used it to mop his stomach, and then Fraser's, where the overshot had hit him right between the waistband of his pants and the yanked-up hem of his sweatshirt. It was tempting to try mopping under that waistband and lower down, but that probably *would* wake Fraser, and then he'd have to shoot himself. Oh, well. If Fraser was gonna wake up with spunk all over him, at least it would be his own.

Ray tossed the tee-shirt on the floor, pulled the covers up over both of them, and snuggled back into that warm embrace. He'd get up and go sleep on the couch later. Right now he was going to enjoy every minute he could.

The bed felt empty. Fraser had no idea why it should feel that way, unless it was simply the fact that he was used to sleeping on a cot, and this bed was twice as wide. Yes, that had to be it. The impression he'd woken

with, that he was missing the warmth of another body, must be left over from a dream.

A dream. Yes. It had been quite vivid last night, almost aching real, and unlike the last time, quite satisfying. His body went warm at the memory—Ray's body, hard beneath his; Ray's skin, warm and tangy—and he felt a familiar, sticky discomfort inside the sweat pants. Oh, dear.

Fraser pushed himself upright in bed. He felt strangely groggy, like he hadn't had enough sleep, although his internal time sense seemed to think it wasn't particularly early.

His vision...he tried opening his eyes, and found they were already open. But he couldn't expect it yet. He shouldn't. It was foolish to worry. The doctor had said it would take time.

He got out of bed and turned to make it, smoothing the sheets and pulling up the blankets, which were all bunched at the foot. Then he made his way to the door.

A wheezing sigh and a scrabble of wolf claws announced Dief's location, but Ray was still asleep on the couch if the soft, steady breathing was anything to go by. Well, there was no need to wake him. Fraser set one foot quietly in front of the other, and promptly ran into the trunk he'd forgotten was there against the wall.

Something heaved among the couch cushions. "Wh—What?"

"I'm sorry, Ray. I didn't mean to disturb you."

"Fraser, it's...oh, it's seven-thirty."

Later than he'd thought. "I'm afraid I slept in."

"Right," Ray said, and the couch cushions rustled like he was shifting on them. "Anybody ever tell you Dief snores like a chain saw?"

"Quite a few people, actually."

"Yeah, well you coulda warned me."

Oh, dear. They were on the wrong foot already this morning. "I'm sorry, Ray."

There were more shifting noises, and a groan or two.

"Was the couch uncomfortable?"

For a long moment there was silence, so quiet Fraser could hear his own heartbeat. But when Ray spoke, he sounded perfectly casual. "Nah, it was fine. I told you, I sleep out here a lot." And then, in that same casual voice: "How's the eyes?"

"No change, I'm afraid."

Ray sighed. "Thought not. Guess I better get ready for work. You want some coffee or tea or something?"

"Oh, yes. Tea would be nice."

"Okay, just gimme a sec." More rustling noises, and the sound of joints popping. Then Ray was up and moving toward the kitchen.

Fraser followed him as far as the breakfast bar and sat on one of the stools. "Ray, I was wondering...."

The water turned on and made splashing noises. "Yeah?"

"Do you happen to know anything about the state of my clothing? I'm afraid the doctors were convinced it would all be contaminated."

"Yeah, that's what the Ice Queen said. She'd doing a detox on the whole consulate. Hired a specialist and everything. I think she said they'd have your clothes back in a couple of days."

"I see." It was no more than he should have expected. He ought to be grateful that they weren't being burned. But he had hoped... "So I imagine you will be attempting to track down the exterminator today."

"Yeah, for starters. I had Frannie get me his home address last night. Figured I'd check there, first."

"That would be logical," Fraser approved. "Even if he is not at home, we may find some useful piece of information there."

There was a clanking noise, like Ray had set down a full tea-kettle a bit too abruptly. "Whattaya mean, 'we'?"

"Well, I realize I don't have a proper uniform, Ray, but I had hoped you could overlook that."

"Fraser, you're *blind*."

"Well, I don't see how that's relevant to...."

"Not *relevant*? How could it be not relevant?"

"Ray—"

"You can't even walk around the apartment without tripping over my stuff. How do you expect me to—"

"Ray, Ray, *Ray*."

"What?"

"I believe I might be of use to the investigation. If nothing else, I imagine I will be able to recognize the odor of even a very faint trace of Dursonate."

"Look, we don't know anything about this Wallace guy. If he did this to you on purpose, he's gotta be a pretty hard guy. You don't know what we're walking into."

"Wallace?" For some reason, that name rang a bell.

"Yeah. Stuart Wallace."

"I don't suppose he's any relation to...." No, it was a coincidence. It had to be. But he heard Ray's sharp intake of breath.

"Illinois Lake Freight."

"Well, it can't actually be the company proper. They were forced out of business when we arrested Gilbert Wallace and his accomplices."

"Yeah, but they had all those poisons. Suppose they didn't put them all on that boat they were gonna sink? Suppose they got rid of some of them by *using* them and getting paid twice over?"

It made a certain amount of sense. "Of course, we don't know that Stuart Wallace is a relation. Or even if he's aware that the chemical he's using has been banned."

"Yeah, well, that's the fun part of being cops. We get to go find out."

Fraser heard the plural pronoun, but he had to know for sure that it was intentional. "'We'?"

Ray shifted on his feet. "Yeah, okay, you win. But you have to promise, if it gets hairy, you do exactly what I say. You don't start niggling or going off and doing your thing. Okay?"

"I promise to be careful."

"Mnngh," Ray said, which meant he caught the evasiveness of that answer.

"Ray, I can't make specific promises about future actions when we can't predict the circumstances in which those actions will be carried out."

"Do you have to be logical about everything?"

"Well, not everything, Ray. I'm sure there are some domains where I'm not logical at all."

"Name one."

Fraser felt his face go warm. He could think of an example all too easily. "I can assure you that my dreams show no trace of logic whatsoever."

Dead silence, broken only by the sound of the tea kettle whistling.

"Ray?"

There were sudden industrious sounds of coffee and tea-making: cups rattling, water pouring. "Dreams aren't supposed to be logical, Fraser."

He felt his face go, if anything, warmer, but Ray couldn't possibly know. He'd been out here, asleep on the couch. "I suppose not."

"Right." A scraping sound: crockery sliding across counter. "Here's your tea. It hasn't soaked enough yet."

"Steeped."

"Whatever. Look, you want a shower? I think I got another set of sweats you could wear. And you might even fit into a pair of my shoes."

A shower sounded heavenly, and the prospect of clean clothes even better. He didn't need to mention to Ray precisely why he felt that way. "Thank you, Ray," Fraser said.

"Yeah, just don't make me regret it."

Fraser didn't have a clue about last night. Ray knew it shouldn't bug him, but it did. It bugged him all the way to Stuart Wallace's apartment. It meant Fraser had been well

and truly asleep, the whole damn time. It meant Fraser just thought he'd had a funny dream—an *illogical* dream—and that was that.

Of course the worst part was, now that he was thinking about it in the cold light of day, he didn't even know if Fraser had been dreaming of him. Fraser had said "Ray," but he could just as easily have meant Vecchio.

It hurt to think that, like it had hurt, way back when, to think Fraser was hanging around with him just because he was the replacement Ray. He didn't think that anymore. He trusted Fraser, trusted that they were well and truly friends. But who Fraser dreamed about, who he called "Ray" in that anguished tone of voice...no, he didn't know that. Wished he did, but he didn't.

Wallace lived in one of those tall buildings by the lake, far enough north that it wasn't all that fashionable, but a lot nicer than the skanky walk-ups a few blocks west. He flashed his badge to the doorman and herded Dief and Fraser through the lobby and into the elevator.

Fraser looked better today, although Ray couldn't quite finger what was different. A little less pale, maybe, or a little more confident on his feet. He hadn't tripped over anything despite the fact that he was no longer using Ray's elbow or shoulder for guidance. He almost looked normal. Well, okay, except for the sweats. He was wearing Ray's navy blue ones today, and if anything they were tighter than the grays. Together with the jacket and the battered gym shoes he'd borrowed, they made him look like a down-on-his-luck fighter in training...except that his face was too perfect to have ever been pounded on in the ring.

The elevator stopped at the forty-eighth floor, and the apartment was just around the corner. Ray touched Fraser's shoulder to steer him clear of the door, drew his gun, and rapped sharply. "Mr. Wallace? Open up."

They waited a suitable time, and then Ray knocked again. "Chicago PD. Open up in there."

"I don't hear any movement," Fraser said. "I believe the apartment is empty."

"Well, he didn't escape out the window. Not on this floor." Ray stepped back.

"Do we have a warrant?" Fraser asked.

Oh, right. Trust Fraser to be worried about that at a time like this. "We got my foot," he said, and kicked the door in.

The apartment was a mess, but it looked like an empty mess. Ray edged inside, his gun ready, and checked the kitchen, the bathroom, the bedroom. All empty. He came back to the living room to find Fraser navigating the piles of newspaper and empty McDonald's wrappers with shuffling but confident feet.

"Smell anything?"

"I'm not sure." And then Dief whined from underneath the dining table. "Ah," Fraser said, and went to join him.

"Fraser, do not lick anything," Ray said—no jest this time. The thought of Fraser getting any more poison in his system was terrifying.

"There's no need, Ray."

"You found something?"

Fraser lifted his head and somehow managed to avoid hitting the underside of the table. "There are definite traces of the chemical. I believe it must have been stored here, and since removed. I can feel the imprint of a container here in the carpet, which would suggest that the removal was recent."

Ray squatted beside Dief. Fraser was right—there was a circular mark in the carpet, like a heavy canister had been sitting there. "Okay, so where did he move it to?"

"Perhaps he disposed of it after using it at the consulate."

"You want to check dumpsters?"

"That might prove efficacious."

Ray glanced over at a pile of boxes stacked against the wall, and something caught his eye. "Yeah, or we might just go to 3247 West Pershing."

Fraser straightened beside him. "You found an address book?"

"Nope. Delivery slip." It was attached to one of the boxes. "It's a warehouse district. Could be effic—useful."

Fraser's face turned toward him, his expression open and almost amused. "That it could."

Tires crunched on gravel as Ray pulled the GTO to a stop.

"It's a warehouse, all right," Ray said, no doubt for Fraser's benefit. "Let's go see who's home."

They got out of the car, and it was easy enough to follow the sound of Ray's footsteps across the graveled parking lot to the warehouse. The air currents changed as they got closer, which meant it was a large building. Ray's footsteps stopped in front of him, so Fraser stopped, too. Ray's hand squeezed his arm briefly, a clear signal to stay put. And then he heard a buzzing noise that meant Ray had rung the doorbell.

Fraser concentrated on the sounds from within. Footsteps, and a familiar clicking noise. "There are two men inside. I believe at least one is armed."

There was a scrape and a dull metallic sound as the door opened, and a nasal, sullen voice said, "Yeah? Whattaya want?"

"Chicago PD," Ray said. "We just want to ask you some questions."

"What kinda questions?"

"Are you Stuart Wallace?"

"Yeah, what's it to ya?"

It was an interesting question, and one which depended on several pieces of information. "Are you any relation to Gilbert Wallace?" Fraser asked.

Stuart Wallace grunted. "That some kind of crime?"

"Not that I'm aware of," Fraser said. "As a matter of fact, if it were, it would constitute a case of guilt by association, which is not an accepted legal doctrine in the state of Illinois."

"Say, what?"

"He's saying we can't arrest you just because Gilbert Wallace is your dad," Ray translated.

"Uncle," Wallace corrected.

"Whatever," Ray said. His voice was deadpan, but Fraser thought he could hear an underlying satisfaction. It had, in fact, been a nice piece of work to coax that admission, although it was certainly less than an admission of guilt. "You wanna come down to the station on your own, or do I have to arrest you?"

"I thought he just said there's no guilt by association."

"I'm not talking about your relatives."

Wallace made shifting noises. "Then what?"

Fraser cleared his throat. "Possession and use of banned chemicals in violation of the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act, and reckless endangerment."

"Attempted murder," Ray corrected.

"Ray, I don't think we can consider the misapplication of pesticide to be grounds for inferring homicidal intent."

"Look, he's got motive," Ray said, clearly annoyed.

"Motive alone is not proof of intent."

"No, but it's *uhngh*." The last word became a grunt, and Fraser heard the thwack of a blow landing.

"Ray!" He threw himself toward the sound of the attack and managed to land a solid punch, but there were footsteps behind him, and he couldn't turn fast enough. A blow hit his stomach, and another landed on his jaw, and he lost his balance. The ground hit with a crack, and there was a rushing noise in his ears, a rushing that quickly faded into nothingness.

"Mnff." Damn, his head hurt. Ray tried to speak again, and figured out why he couldn't—there was something over his mouth, something that felt like duct tape.

His hands and feet were also taped together, and his ass was cold where it was pressed hard against a concrete floor.

Oh, right. Stuart Wallace. And Fraser arguing with him over picky legal stuff and distracting him to the point where neither of them noticed they were about to be jumped.

Ray heaved himself up into a sitting position and looked around. They were inside a warehouse, probably the same one they'd come to investigate. Fraser...was right there beside him, likewise bound with silver tape. Fraser twitched and opened his blind eyes, then twitched again.

It's okay, Ray wanted to say, but he couldn't get it out around the tape. So instead he inched and heaved his way over until he could touch Fraser's leg with his knee. Fraser jerked, then steadied, as if he recognized the touch.

Okay, time to think. How did you get out of duct tape with no hands and nothing to cut with? Ray tried flexing his fingers. Yeah, he had a little control there. He might be able to...he inched up, positioning himself so he could get his hands, bound behind him, on the tape over Fraser's mouth.

Fraser didn't flinch at the touch this time, even though it was his face. He held perfectly still as Ray tried to get numb fingers to grasp the corner of the tape. There? No. Damn. Yes. Ray twisted and yanked, and with a ripping sound, the tape came free.

"Thanks, Ray."

"Mngh nhg," Ray said, which was supposed to be "do me" but didn't quite come out that way.

"Hold still," Fraser said, like he understood perfectly. Ray lowered his upper body to the floor and turned to make it easier as Fraser scooted closer. Fraser was going to sit up and use his hands. Of course he was. But he didn't. His shoulder touched Ray's, and he rolled up onto his side, his face close...closer...right against Ray's. "Ah," Fraser said, warm breath against his cheek. And then...oh, geez. Fraser's lips

touched his skin, traveled down, found the edge of the tape.

"Brace yourself," Fraser said softly, and right then, Ray would have done anything—absolutely anything—he asked. Fraser's lips moved against him, and, oh God, those were his teeth. Teeth on the corner of the tape. Teeth pulling.

Pain ripped across his face. "Aaagh!" But damn, it felt good to be able to talk. "Uh, thanks, Fraser."

"You're welcome. Where are we?"

"In Wallace's warehouse, I think." He looked around again. "We're between two rows of packing crates, so I can't see much."

"Are your hands bound?"

"Yeah. Duct tape city."

"All right." Fraser twisted and jack-knifed himself so that his face was against Ray's arm, then worked his way down, cheek against Ray's skin, to get closer to Ray's bound hands. Ray did what he could to help out by turning and shifting so that Fraser's teeth could get access. Those soft lips touched his wrist, and he couldn't help himself. He shivered.

Fraser stopped what he was doing. "Is there something wrong?"

"No. Just, uh, just hurry up."

"Understood," Fraser said, and his mouth touched Ray's wrist again. There was a tug, then teeth again, then a tearing. More tugs, more ripping. It felt like it took forever, and it yanked and hurt, but he almost didn't care. Fraser's mouth kept touching his wrist, or his fingers, or his palm, and he wanted...shit. They were in a warehouse, tied up, being held prisoner, and he was thinking about where he wanted Fraser's mouth?

In another moment, his hands were free. Ray shook them out and winced as returning blood made them tingle. But he could move his fingers, at least. He yanked off the remaining tape and sat up.

Fraser had his cheek against his knee, now, and was moving downward. "Fraser!" Ray hissed. "You don't have to do that."

"Teeth are easier than hands, Ray. Unless you have something to cut with?"

Ray glanced at his holster, but of course his gun was gone, and he hadn't been carrying a knife. He wasn't sure Fraser was right—now that his hands were free, his fingers ought to work just fine—but he didn't want to waste time arguing, either. "I guess not."

Fraser set to work on his ankles, which was fortunately less distracting than his hands or face. Ray twisted around and tried to see what he could do about freeing Fraser's hands. But Fraser's hands weren't bound with tape. They were handcuffed. With his cuffs.

Ray fumbled in his pocket and finally—thank God—found his keys. He'd made sure to put a handcuff key on the ring after that last fiasco, the one on the Henry Allen. Hey, he could learn from his mistakes. He wasn't stupid.

He sorted through the keys—yeah, okay, so he hadn't taken the old apartment keys off—and found the right one, then undid the cuffs from Fraser's wrists. He got them tucked in his waistband in time to help take the tape off Fraser's ankles.

"What do you think we—" Ray started to say, but Fraser's hand clapped over his mouth.

"They're here," Fraser whispered. "I just heard them enter the building."

Damn. Ray lifted himself to a crouch and peered over the crates. There was too much stuff—oil drums, canisters, boxes—piled up for him to see anything. But he thought he heard voices. He ducked back down. "Stay low," he whispered, and put a hand on Fraser's arm to steer him down the row of crates. They ended up at the far wall, and Ray checked both ways furtively, but it appeared clear. Still holding onto Fraser, he sidled along the wall.

"We don't have to do it here," one of the voices said, quite clear now. Ray froze up against a pile of boxes, pulling Fraser to the cover next to him. "We can cart them over to

that place on twenty-third street and torch it."

"Are you stupid or something?" That was Wallace. "We start a fire and Johnny'll rat on us for sure. No, I say we do it here and dump them in the river. Less mess."

They were close now, but at the other end of the row of crates. "Yeah, that's what your uncle said, and look where it got him."

"Would you shut up about—oh, *shit*. They got away."

"Door was locked, Stu."

"Then they're still in here."

Ray grabbed Fraser's arm again and pulled him along, down the free space along the wall, away from Wallace and his accomplice. He ducked around a stack of crates and found the far end of the building, but no door.

A whine made him spin, and made Fraser pull away from his hand. It was Dief, in a cage with duct tape around his muzzle. There was a catch holding the door shut, but fortunately no lock. It was the work of a minute to get the door open, and Dief bounded out, whining and wagging his tail.

"He's got tape on his mouth," Ray whispered.

"We'll have to try to get it off." Fraser bent to use his hands and teeth, and Ray crouched down to help. He was not going to be jealous of a wolf. He wasn't. Between them, he and Fraser got the tape loose, and then Fraser, being Fraser, yanked on it hard. Of course Dief—like any sane creature having tape ripped off his facial fur—yelped loudly.

"They're over there!" Wallace shouted from the other end of the warehouse, and footsteps pelted across the concrete floor. Ray grabbed Fraser and yanked him back the way they'd come, hoping Dief would have the good sense to follow. As he ran, he grabbed a small can and tossed it behind him. It made a satisfying crash, and a moment later a shot rang out from the same direction. Ray jerked Fraser to a halt behind a stack of steel barrels, and another shot sounded.

"Damn, they got us pinned," he whispered.

"Are there any windows?" Fraser whispered back.

Ray craned his neck, but there weren't even skylights. "Nothing."

"Describe the lighting system for me."

"Nothing special, Fraser, just fluorescents. The one above us is burned out."

"Can you find anything to throw at them?"

"Fraser, they got guns. We start throwing rocks, they'll come straight at us."

"Not the suspects," Fraser said. "The lights."

"You want me to throw something at the lights?"

"Yes, unless you see a light switch."

Ray glanced around. They were right up against the wall, but he didn't see anything resembling...wait. "Looks like a fuse box."

"Good," Fraser said. "Go remove all of the fuses."

Ray squinted up at the fixtures. "Fraser, that'll make it pitch dark in here."

"I realize that. It will level the playing field for Dief and myself."

"What about me?"

"Well, you know, Ray, two out of three isn't bad."

There was another shot, and the ping of a bullet hitting the wall overhead. Damn, they were closing in, and it wasn't like he had a better plan. Ray ducked low and ran for the fuse box, followed by a hail of shots. He jerked it open to find old-fashioned fuses, not circuit breakers, but there was no time for finesse. Ray lifted his fist and bashed it against the row of fuses. He felt the prickle of glass shards against his hand, and everything went black.

Damn, it hurt. He brushed at his fist with his other hand and felt dampness, probably blood, but the worst of the pain eased as he brushed the bits of glass away. Whatever. He heard curses and another shot, then a wolf snarl, and a loud thump.

"Ray?" Fraser called. Thank *God*. Ray picked his way down the row of barrels and found Fraser by the growling sounds.

"There's another one still out there," Ray whispered. He found the prone body of their assailant by stumbling over it and crouched down to apply his handcuffs. As he was clicking the second cuff closed, he heard another thumping sound, a growl, and the sound of a brief tussle.

"Fraser?"

"Right here, Ray," Fraser said, sounding only the tiniest bit winded. "If you would be so kind as to read these gentlemen their Miranda rights, I'll go see if I can find the door."

Right. Business as usual. They got the bad guys, never mind the methods.

"Thanks, Fraser," Ray said, and turned to the two men on the floor. "You are under arrest for, uh, pesticide violation and attempted murder." Hey, it really was attempted murder, now. "You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say could be used against you...."

It should have felt like victory. They'd figured it out and caught the bad guy. But it felt completely hollow. Fraser was still blind. Ray had been checking him all evening, waving fingers in front of his face, and Fraser never even flinched.

It was killing him. It was almost two days, now, and there was no change. And maybe he was being impatient. He knew the doc had said it would take awhile. But he couldn't help thinking there should have been some sign, some hint that Fraser was getting better. He hated waiting, and weird as it might seem, it had been easier when he'd had something to do, a puzzle to figure out and bad guys to chase. Now he just felt helpless.

"You wanna go to bed?" he asked. It was ten already, and he was sick of pretending to watch TV.

"Well, I, ah...." Fraser started.

"What?"

Fraser's face had gone pink. "I was wondering if I might sleep here on the couch tonight."

Oh, God. That couldn't mean Fraser knew about last night. He'd been asleep. Dead asleep on that damn sleeping pill. "Something wrong with the bed?"

"No, of course not. It was quite comfortable."

"So what's the problem?"

Fraser shifted in his seat. "Well, I...I don't feel I...I can't put you out of your bed for two nights running, Ray. It wouldn't be right."

"Hey, I'm offering. Wouldn't offer if I didn't mean it."

"I realize that. But the fact that you're willing to make such a sacrifice doesn't make it right."

Fraser was quibbling again, going into full Mountie-mode. It was typical Fraser, and under other circumstances it wouldn't have meant anything. But it wasn't other circumstances, and it was ticking him off. "Do not do this to me, Fraser. Do not go all polite and stupid. You got a problem with the bed, you tell me, okay?"

Fraser's face went bright red. "Well, I'm afraid I...that is, I had a rather odd dream last night, and I think it might be prudent to sleep somewhere where I didn't have certain...associations."

A dream. Oh, yeah. An *illogical* dream. Ray felt a deep burn in his gut. Fraser wanted to be *prudent*. Fraser didn't want to have a dream like that again. And Fraser still didn't have a clue, didn't know *he'd* been there, didn't know it had been the most amazing, astonishing, frustrating night of his entire life—even when you factored in the Stella years, which was saying a lot.

Prudent be damned. He was sick of feeling like this, sick of keeping secrets and pretending nothing had happened. Sick of being *polite*. "Fraser, it wasn't a dream."

Fraser's whole body stiffened. "I'm sorry?"

"It wasn't a dream. I mean, you were asleep and everything, but it was real. I was there."

Fraser's face went white, like all the blood had drained out of it. "What did, ah...what did I...?"

"You said my name. Sounded like you were having a nightmare so I went to see if I could wake you. And you, uh, you grabbed me. Pulled me down on the bed and went to town. You were all over me, Fraser, so don't tell me it was just a damn dream."

Fraser's mouth worked, but nothing came out. His face went, if anything, whiter, and his blind eyes stared straight ahead.

Damn it, he was acting like some kind of offended virgin. Like he thought *Ray* had done something wrong. "Look, it wasn't me. You were the one got your rocks off."

Fraser swallowed, his adam's apple bobbing in his neck, and finally found his voice. "I...I'm terribly sorry, Ray. I had no idea that I...that it was...." He pushed himself to his feet. "Perhaps it would be best if I left now."

"Fraser—" Shit, this was not what he wanted. Not what he wanted at all.

"Dief?" Fraser said, and brushed past Ray on the way to the door.

"Fraser!" Ray caught up to him a single stride. "C'mon, you gotta talk to me."

"Ray, I...I don't know what to say."

"You can tell me one thing." He caught Fraser's shoulder. "Look, you owe me this much. Who were you dreaming about?"

Fraser twitched under his hand. "I'd rather not say."

"You'd rather not say. Uhn-uh. Not this time. You're not getting away with that."

"Ray, I'm afraid this is rather personal."

Personal. Oh, geez. Was Fraser actually involved with someone? The Ice Queen? Ray Vecchio? "Okay, okay, I get that." He couldn't picture Fraser with anyone...well, anyone but him, and that part was pure fantasy. "Just...well, if it was me, I think I got a right to know. Anyone else, you can say none of your business. But if it was me, you gotta tell me."

"Ray...."

Ray pushed Fraser's shoulder back until his back was flat against the wall, his head right next to the dartboard hanging there. "C'mon, Fraser. Was it me? Was it?"

Fraser hung his head. If he'd been able to see, he would have been staring at the floor. "Yes," he whispered.

Oh, God. Ray felt his hands drop to his sides, and never knew he'd moved them. Fraser had been dreaming about him. Really and truly about him. And Fraser had called it an odd dream, one he didn't want to have associations to.

Ray closed his eyes. He wanted to kiss Fraser, wanted to kiss him so bad he could taste it. But Fraser was acting all weird, like he was wishing last night had never happened. And if Fraser shoved him away, he'd never forgive himself. Even now, when things were already a complete mess.

There was a clicking-creaking sound—the sound of his door opening. He opened his eyes, turned...and saw the door swinging closed.

It was a good thing he was already blind, because his eyes were prickling and filling and he wouldn't have been able to see in any case. Fraser ran a hand along the wall and found the stairway by feel, ignoring Dief's whines beside him. He had taken advantage of Ray's trust, used Ray's body without his consent, and Ray hadn't said a thing all day. Ray had taken him along on the investigation knowing, knowing....

The fact that he would never have done such a thing awake was irrelevant. The dream was still vividly real. Ray's skin against his. Ray's breath covering his mouth. Ray under him, writhing. Oh, dear God. He couldn't have...no. He'd woken with ejaculate on the *inside* of his sweatpants, which meant he'd never taken them off. At least he'd spared Ray that much.

"Fraser!"

Ray. Fraser felt a peculiar twinge in his heart. There was no call for Ray to be chasing after him. Ray was the injured party, here.

"Fraser, c'mon!" Footsteps clattered down the stairs, faster than he dared move himself, and Ray's hand closed around his elbow. "Look, you can't just take off."

Dief barked in agreement, but Fraser stiffened. "I think it would be better for all involved if I did not sleep in your apartment tonight."

"Better for all. Oh, that's rich. You walk out on me, and it's supposed to make me feel better?"

That...made no sense. After what he'd done, Ray could not possibly want him around. Of course, it was possible Ray simply didn't want to be responsible for turning a blind man out on the street. "I'll be perfectly all right."

"Fraser, you got nowhere to go. They won't be finished doing the scrub job on the consulate for days."

Oh. He hadn't thought of that. But surely there was somewhere he could go, some person who would take pity on him. Someone about whom he would not have wanton, dangerous dreams. "I'll make sure your clothing is returned to you."

Ray gave an annoyed grunt. "You think I care about that?"

He didn't know what to think. "Ray, I..."

"Look, it was my fault."

His head was starting to hurt as badly as it had last night. "I don't see how that's possible."

"It was, okay? It just was."

"Ray—"

"You know those pills, those things I gave you for your headache?"

"Yes, of course."

"One of them was a sleeping pill."

Fraser froze. Ray's hand was still on his elbow, and it suddenly felt like it was burning him through the fabric of the sweatshirt. A sleeping pill. Suddenly the whole incident—the dream, the vividness,

the fact that he hadn't woken, even through *that*—made sense. But Ray had lied to him, if only in a small way. Ray had played a part in bringing about this...situation.

"Fraser, I'm sorry." Ray was still close, still linked by that touch. "I didn't realize it would...I mean, that you would..." His voice went bleak. "I thought it would help you sleep. Doc said you needed your rest, and I thought if I told you, you would've refused."

Fraser suddenly felt very, very tired. "Yes, Ray. I would have."

"So it's my fault, and I'm sorry, and I, uh, I want you to come back."

After everything, Ray still wanted to have him around. Fraser felt his pulse pick up again. He wanted...he had no idea what he wanted.

"Please, Fraser? I promise not to give you another sleeping pill."

He should leave. He knew he should. It was the only proper thing to do. But Fraser felt himself turn to face back up the stairs. "I think that would be wise."

There was no way he was letting Fraser get away now. Ray took tighter hold of his elbow—screw independence and that free will crap—and steered Fraser back up the stairs.

Dief let out a series of woofs as they got close to the apartment, but they didn't sound threatening. In fact, he almost sounded happy.

"You're being naive," Fraser said as Ray pushed the door open.

"What?" Shit, he couldn't read minds, could he?

"I'm sorry. I was speaking to Diefenbaker."

"Oh. Right." Ray shut the door behind them, not letting go of Fraser's elbow. He steered him over to the couch and gave him a little push to sit down. Fraser sank into the cushions obediently.

"You wanna sleep on the couch, you can sleep on the couch," Ray said, even if it wasn't what he wanted.

"Thank you."

Ray pulled up a chair, sat, and fidgeted. He wanted...oh, God, he wanted too much. "Fraser—"

"Ray—"

They both stopped, mid-breath.

"You first," Ray said.

"No, after you."

"I was just gonna ask if you wanted tea or something," Ray lied.

"Oh. No, thank you."

"What were you gonna say?"

Fraser's face turned toward him, eyes still painfully blank, and Ray wanted to hit somebody or cry or something. He hated this. Hated every minute of it, but he didn't know how to fix things.

"I realize this isn't something one can apologize for," Fraser said softly. "But I am terribly sorry. I believe it would be best if we would simply put the incident out of our minds."

"You saying you can do that? Say, 'Okay, it never happened' and forget about it?"

"It would be for the best, Ray."

"I'm not talking about what's best, Fraser. I'm talking about reality. And I'm asking: can you do that? Say you'll forget and then really go and do it?"

Fraser's face was pale and set. "No, I...I don't believe I can."

"Good."

"'Good'?"

"Yeah, 'cause I can't do that, either."

Fraser brought a hand up to smooth his eyebrow. "What do you propose we do?"

He didn't know, didn't have a clue. Except...damn it, he knew what he *wanted* to do. "It's like falling off a bicycle," he heard himself say. "You gotta get back on. You know, out with the bad, in with the good."

Fraser's face went, if anything, paler. "You don't mean ...?"

"Look, you owe me one." The words tumbled out, now that it was too late to stop

them. "You're the one who got off and left me hanging. And if you can dream about it, you can do it. Isn't that what they say?"

"Ray, I don't think—"

"It's like the time when I hit you. Had to make you hit me. Had to make it even, Fraser, and that worked, didn't it?"

"I'm not sure."

That was Fraser being impossible. "Look, I'm not asking you to marry me. I'm talking about one time. One night and that's it."

"You really think it would help?"

Damn it, no. He knew what was going to happen. One night with Fraser and he'd be sunk; he'd be aching for more. But truth was, he was already aching—aching bad enough that he'd do anything, say anything, for one night. One real night, with Fraser awake and everything.

"Yeah," Ray said. And Fraser just sat there. Sat there while a hundred different emotions flitted across his face, too fast to read, only most of them looked upset and worried.

"All right," Fraser said.

He couldn't have heard that right.

"You'll do it?"

"Yes."

Ray gulped, feeling suddenly overwhelmingly shy. Fraser had just agreed to have sex with him, and all he felt was...panic.

"How should we start?" Fraser asked.

They were really going to do this. For all the wrong reasons, maybe, but, oh God, it was real. "Maybe we should, um, start the way we started last night."

"I was asleep."

"Yeah, you were laying in my bed. C'mon."

Without further prompting, Fraser got to his feet and followed Ray into the bedroom.

It was terribly confusing. Ray had proposed this, had argued for it as if he

actually wanted it, but now he didn't seem particularly enthusiastic. It wasn't like the dreams. In the dreams there had never been this awkwardness, this need and hope and fear, all rolled up together.

"I was on the bed, like this?" Fraser asked, stretching out.

"Nah, you had the sheet over you," Ray said, and Fraser felt the cool cotton settle around him.

He reached out to catch hold of Ray's hand, and found his wrist instead. "Ray."

"Yeah?"

"Are you certain you want to do this?"

"Look, you're the one who got your jollies last night. This is you doing it for me, not the other way around. And you were holding my arm a little higher up."

"I see." Ray did seem sincere. He would have to trust that, as he trusted Ray in everything else. "Like this?" he asked, sliding his hand up until he was gripping Ray's forearm.

"Yeah. And then you, uh, you put your hand on my shoulder."

Fraser moved his hand up, feeling the firm contours of Ray's biceps under his fingers, sliding higher to the curve of shoulder. He had an overwhelming desire to tug Ray closer.

"Uh, yeah, like that," Ray said, and suddenly he was right up against Fraser's body, only the thin sheet between them.

"Then what did I...?"

"You nuzzled my neck."

Ray's neck was right there in front of him. Fraser eased forward to smell that warm skin, to breathe in the essence of Ray. So good. So very good.

"You kissed me."

He couldn't. He didn't dare. Ray would know immediately how he felt, the true meaning of the dreams he'd been hiding from the waking world. But Ray was asking, and he couldn't refuse. He lifted his head and found Ray's jaw line, brushed lips against the rough stubble, explored his way to Ray's chin, then at last found his mouth.

Ray's lips moved against his, molding their contours to fit his, opening to him, breathing sweet air into his lungs. Ray was kissing him back. It wasn't a dream; it was real.

"Ray," he whispered against those lips. "Ray."

"Don't stop."

Oh, dear Lord. "Did I do this?"

"Yeah." Ray shifted against him, pulling the sheet down out of their way. "You, um, you rolled on top of me."

He flashed to the dream, then: Ray's body beneath him, wonderfully nude. Ray's body moving against his, opening for him the way Ray's mouth was doing right now. "Would you like me to do that?"

"Yeah."

"All right." He found Ray's shoulder with his hand, pressing him back against the pillows as he rolled off his hip and down onto that warm body. It felt...astounding, even through two layers of clothing. He could feel the hardness of Ray's chest, the sharp bones of his hips, the...oh, dear. That was not a hip bone.

It was impossible. Utterly, completely impossible. He'd kept the dream world and the real world separate for so long, he'd never imagined they could cross over into each other. But he was awake, now. Four senses told him he was well and truly awake.

"Is this okay?" he whispered, rocking against Ray's body, feeling the hardness of Ray's arousal against his.

"Yeah," Ray said back. Then: "No."

"No?" Fraser wrenched himself away from Ray's addictive warmth, rolled over and sat up.

"Fraser!"

"What?"

"I just...I thought it might feel better if we weren't wearing all these clothes."

Oh. Fraser felt his whole body go hot. Ray wanted...that. Or did he? "Did I, ah, did we do this last night, too?"

"No. You mind?"

"No."

"Okay. Okay, good." Warm hands came to touch Fraser's waist, tugging up on the sweatshirt, and he reached down to help them. And then those hands were tugging at his waistband. Fraser swallowed hard and helped Ray push off the sweatpants, feeling the cool air wash over him. It felt good on his heated skin, but he wanted more. He wanted Ray.

The movement next to him had ceased. He couldn't even hear Ray's breathing.

"Ray?"

"Yeah?" Ray was right there. Still close.

"Is something wrong?"

"No." That almost sounded like a laugh.

"No, Fraser. You're just...you're something else."

"Something else than what?"

"Uh, nevermind. Hang on a sec." There were rustling and unzipping noises, and Fraser wished he could help, but he didn't want to grope. "Okay," Ray said, and his hand touched Fraser's chest. "Okay, we're good to go."

Fraser turned toward him, wishing with a sudden, hopeless ache that he could have his vision back, just for a moment, to see the expression on Ray's face and the long lines of his body. "What do we do now?" he asked softly.

"Whatever the hell we want."

"And you do...want?"

Ray's other hand closed around his shoulder, dragging him up onto his side. "Oh, yeah. I want."

They were skin to skin, now, and it was hard to think anymore. Chest touched chest, warm and smooth. Bellies touched, and hips and...yes, erections, too. He could feel the rough brush of Ray's pubic hair against his glans, the firm heat of Ray's shaft pressing against his own.

And then Ray kissed him, and he forgot what was touching where, or which body parts belonged to him and which to Ray. His entire body was a single erotic instrument, encompassing, encompassed, merged with Ray's. It was like nothing he'd ever dreamed. It was perfect.

"Yeah," Ray whispered, and he realized he'd said that aloud. "Yeah, perfect." Ray's hand came around him, squeezed his buttocks, adding sensation to sensation. And then Ray's hand moved up to his hip, slid between them, and wrapped around them both.

"Oh." Fraser moaned against Ray's mouth, seeking, then finding, tongue-against-tongue. Oh, yes. Ray's hand moved around them both, pumping them in tandem, and it was exactly what he needed. Flesh fused to flesh, and it felt like being Ray and touching himself, two bodies in one skin.

Sensation built between them, within them. Ray's mouth panted against his as Ray's body heaved in perfect synchronicity. Sweat covered them both, dampening the path of his hand as he trailed it down Ray's back to cup Ray's buttocks. Yes, that was good. He squeezed as Ray thrust against him and felt the muscles bunch against his palm.

In all of his dreams, he'd never pictured this. Never this sweet unity, this melding of purpose and soul. Fraser felt a hum start in his groin, felt it spread out into his gut and up to his heart. The physicality of it was overwhelming...and was only a tiny fraction of what he was feeling.

"Fraser," Ray panted against his mouth. "Oh, yeah. Oh, God." And Ray bucked against him, squeezing them both tight. For a moment time stood still, and then hot stickiness was shooting between them. Ray pumped him harder, his hand now slick and warm. Oh. Oh, my. And then Fraser was lost, too, lost in sensation as Ray held him and kissed him and the rhythm of pure ecstasy took over.

As the last pulse of sensation ebbed, Ray pushed him back down against the bed, pressing against him, a warm length and sharp stubble against his neck. "Was that okay?" Ray whispered.

Okay? Surely Ray had some other definition for that word if he could consider it a descriptor of what had just happened

between them. "Yes, Ray. Was it what you needed? Will it help?"

"I think so. Ask me in the morning."

"All right," Fraser said, and made a mental note to do so. Not that he would really be capable of forgetting. Oh, no. He didn't imagine he would ever forget this night. "Will you stay?"

"It's my bed, Fraser. I think I should be the one asking that."

"Do you want me to?"

"Sure, if you want." Elaborately casual.

"Thank you."

Ray shifted against him, twisting away and then coming back, and a moment later something soft and cottony swabbed across his stomach. "There. So you don't wake up with my spunk on you again."

"Again?" That didn't make sense. Not from what Ray had revealed of their activities last night. "I thought that I, ah, 'left you hanging.'"

"Wasn't you that got me off. Took care of that myself."

"I see." Fraser felt his face go warm. Regret...for having left Ray so desperate, and foolish longing, that he'd been so dead to the world he'd missed out.

"Wasn't your fault. You were asleep."

"Right. I was asleep."

"Which we should both be, now."

"All right."

Another twist, and the click of a lamp being turned off, and then Ray was back beside him, snuggling close.

It felt unreal, now, like something out of the dream world, but Fraser had no desire to question or quibble with it. If he was dreaming again, so be it. He would savor this dream; he would fold it and wrap it up and store it in a corner of his heart, to take out for comfort's sake, whenever he was at his lowest ebb.

Comforted by that thought and by Ray's presence, he slipped down past the dreamworld and into the sweet realm of oblivion.

Fraser's body went quiet against him, and Fraser's breathing settled in slow and deep. Asleep, just like that. No need for sleeping pills tonight.

Hell, no. Ray gave in and allowed himself the luxury of tracing one finger in lazy circles across the skin of Fraser's hip. Fraser had been into it. More than into it. Fraser had been right there with him every inch of the way, mouth to mouth and cock to cock.

Shit, it beat buddy-breathing with a stick. It beat half the things he'd imagined, and God knew he'd imagined a lot. Not that he didn't want to try all those things with Fraser, now. But he wasn't gonna think about that. He wasn't gonna think about anything but the big body pressed against him, relaxed and quiet in sleep.

He'd seen it all, now, and it was more beautiful than he'd imagined. Perfectly proportioned, like something out of a Renaissance painting, only without the strategic drapery. Yeah, and Fraser's cock had been as gorgeous as the rest of him, full and hard and touchable.

And Fraser had let him touch. Fraser had *wanted* him to. He couldn't get over that. But Fraser had called it perfect.

Perfect.

Oh, yeah.

Ray wrapped himself around that solid body, pillowing his head on Fraser's shoulder. If it had been perfect, maybe, just maybe Fraser might want to do it again.

It was morning. Fraser was certain, this time, when he hadn't been quite as sure yesterday. But he was warm and comfortable and well-rested, and he could feel a long, lean body pressed tight against him.

It wasn't a dream.

He could scarcely believe that, but the body against him smelled like Ray. Was

Ray, still asleep. And they had made love last night. He could smell that, too.

I'm not asking ya to marry me, Ray had said. *I'm talking about just one time*. But Ray had stayed—or had let him stay. Ray had cuddled close all night long.

Just one night, and now it was morning. So perhaps that meant he should get up and leave Ray to wake up alone. Yes, he ought to, but he didn't want to move. Ray's body felt too good against his. If Ray wanted to kick him out of bed, he would have to do it explicitly.

Fraser rolled onto his back, his hip and arm still brushing Ray's side, and rubbed his eyes. They itched this morning, itched abominably. It was probably just another phase of the toxin's effect. It would subside eventually. Fraser forced his hands back down to his sides. Scratching an itch never helped; it only made things worse.

Something flickered, off to the right, and he jerked his head around instinctively to look at it. Nothing. No, of course not. His vision was still entirely blank; what was he thinking? But when he rolled his head back, he thought he saw the flicker again.

It was too much to hope for, after his desperate wish last night. It was probably just ghost images, a trick of the mind, like an amputee's impression of a phantom limb. Fraser forced his eyes shut. If his eyes truly were recovering, he would know soon enough. There was no point in straining now and misleading himself with false hope.

But once his eyes were closed, something was different. The world was darker. He opened them, and had a definite impression of light. Morning light. And off to the right again, a flicker of white.

"Dief?" he said softly. And the flicker happened again, just as Dief whined a morning greeting from precisely the same direction.

Fraser sat up and turned his head slowly. He had no foveal vision, but the periphery was now picking up variable impressions of light and dark. Yes, there

was the window, bright edges around what had to be a shade. There was Dief, tail wagging. The motion was easier to see than stillness.

Fraser blinked, his eyes watering. Trying to look at things wasn't helping. He still couldn't see anything straight ahead. But now he could tell where the door was, and the closet. And Ray, lying asleep still beside him.

At first all he could make out was a shape, and the motion of Ray's rising and falling chest. But as he blinked and strained and looked away, then back again, he could see more and more detail. The covers were pulled up to Ray's middle, but he could make out the expanse of bare chest above them, the slightly darker blur that was Ray's hair against the white pillow. Yes, that haze was Ray's stubble, the shadow was his nose. The curve was his mouth. The pale shape against his hair was his ear.

Fraser forced his eyes shut and counted. Ten. Fifty. One hundred. Two hundred. Three hundred and fifty. He opened them again, and saw Ray.

Golden hair, flattened by sweat and sleep. Rough stubble across his chin. Long grooves around his mouth, grooves that meant Ray knew how to smile. Soft brown lashes brushing the edges of his cheeks.

Ray's skin was infused with a honey-warm hue, like it was somehow lit from within. His frame was both bony and muscular, whipcord strength wrapped tight to his skeleton. One hand lay across the edge of the covers at his stomach. A beautiful hand—Fraser had always thought that, but looking at it with new eyes, it seemed the most exquisite form he had ever seen. Ray's nails were short—possibly even chewed—but his fingers were long and lean, tapered close to the bone between the prominent knuckles. And...oh, dear. He was injured. There was a Band-Aid stretched across the outer edge of his palm. But it was a small Band-Aid. However he'd been hurt, it couldn't be bothering him too much. After

all, this was his right hand, the one he'd used to touch them both last night.

Fraser brought one hand up to trace the edge of Ray's beaded bracelet, clasped around his wrist as always. It suited Ray well, silver for his gold. Fraser slid his hand down to the edge of the covers and, very gently, tried to tug them down.

Ray twitched, blinked, and looked up at him, eyes a soft blue in the early morning light. "Fraser, what are you doing?"

"I just wanted to look at you."

"Hey, look, couldn't you wait until I was...Oh, geez." Ray's eyes widened, and his hand lifted. "How many fingers?"

"Three."

"Oh, God." Ray reached for him, hooked one hand around his neck, and pulled him down hard. Ray's mouth quested and found his, hot and wet and frantic. "You're okay," he whispered. "You got your sight back. You're okay."

"I'm okay," Fraser agreed. Ray's body pressed against his through the fold of covers between them, and he thought he could feel a burgeoning tumescence.

Ray let go of his mouth to kiss each eyelid, then his nose, then his lips again. "I thought...oh, God, I thought it was permanent. Thought you were gonna have to quit your job and go back to Canada, and I was gonna lose you."

"The doctor did say it was likely to improve," Fraser said mildly.

"Doctors lie, Fraser. You can't trust them."

"Well, in this case, it appears she was telling the truth."

"Thank God," Ray said, and kissed him again.

Ray cared about him. He could feel it in every flick of Ray's tongue, in the tightness of Ray's grip around his neck. It wasn't just sex, or just friendship. It was both, and deeper than either. Fraser reached between them to find the edge of the blanket between them. "Ray, could I...?"

Ray let go his lips and looked up at him, bemused. "Whattaya wanna do?"

"I'd like to look at you."

Ray closed his eyes. "You know, I'm not really, uh, all that."

"You are to me."

Ray's eyes shot open, and he swallowed visibly. "Fraser—"

"Please, Ray?"

"Uh, yeah. You could...you could do that."

Fraser pushed the covers back and drank in the sight. Ray's skin had the same honey tone everywhere, and the hair under his arms and on his lower belly was only just darker than the hair of his head. His penis lay against that puff of dark gold, so turgid that Fraser could see Ray's pulse as a gentle bobbing motion. There was a line just below the head where golden skin changed to dark pink: his circumcision scar.

Without pausing to think, Fraser bent down and kissed that scar, and Ray gasped. Fraser glanced up, but Ray's face did not look distressed. No, certainly not. He lowered his gaze and concentrated on the organ before him.

It was beautiful, like the rest of Ray, and uniquely him. Fraser dipped and ran his tongue up the underseam. Ah, yes. Ray seemed to like that. Fraser pursed his lips and sucked hard, pulling the head into his mouth with a pop, and Ray groaned.

His dreams usually involved picturing Ray's whole body, feeling Ray's body against his. But this...this was its own sort of pleasure. Fraser sucked again, pulling the whole of Ray's shaft into his mouth until he was close to gagging, then slid back up and off and sucked it in again. Ray tasted musky and salty and just a little bit sweet, and Fraser wanted more.

He set up a rhythm, sucking, licking, releasing, and sucking again, timing his strokes to Ray's moans. It was heady, and it only got better as Ray tensed and then began to shake. "Fraser," he whispered. "Oh, God." And moments later Fraser's mouth was filled with hot, salty, bitter-sweet liquid, and he rode it out, sucking and swallowing, until Ray collapsed back down

against the pillows, his whole body gone soft and twitching.

"Fraser," Ray said again.

"Mmm?"

"C'mere."

Fraser slid up to lie next to him and was rewarded with a kiss.

"You didn't hafta do that."

"I'm well aware of that. I wanted to."

"You wanted to." Ray buried his face against Fraser's neck, so his next words were muffled. "You're a freak, y'know."

"So you have said."

"But you're my freak."

That was a declaration, and it was far more than he'd been expecting. "Yes," he said softly. "I'm your freak."

"You know that thing I said last night, about this only being for one time?"

Oh, dear. "Yes."

"Didn't mean it. Didn't mean a word of it. Thought it was the only way to get you into bed."

"Well, in that case you were mistaken. Although I must say...."

"Yeah?"

"Well, it was rather beyond the scope of my imagination that you might, ah, reciprocate my feelings. I'm afraid I assumed that was a possibility that existed only in my dreams."

"I could reciprocate," Ray said, lifting his head. "I'm good for that."

"Ray, I didn't mean—"

"Fraser?"

"Yes?"

"Shut up?"

"As you wish." And suddenly he had no desire to protest, none at all.

Fraser's body was warm against his lips. Fraser quivered at every touch. And Fraser had actually admitted it, admitted belonging to him. Like they were really and truly together, now. Friends. Partners. Lovers.

It was too much to comprehend, too much right with the world all at once. But, damn, he'd ached so long it felt almost like he deserved it.

What did they call it? Justice. No, karma. Yeah, that was it. Karma. You suffered enough, you did your good deeds, and one day you got your heart's desire.

They should advertise it that way; people would line up in droves. Do good, get a Mountie. Except he wasn't giving up his. Uhn-uh. Not for anybody.

Ray kissed the soft skin on the inside of Fraser's hip and heard Fraser's quick gasp. He lifted his head to see Fraser looking at him. Watching him. Seeing him.

That was the best part by far. He would have traded the rest—every kiss, every caress—for the simple sight of Fraser's eyes meeting his. But the crazy thing was, he didn't have to. And Fraser, unhinged freak that he was, seemed to think he was a sight for sore eyes.

He could get used to that. Hell, yes. Might take him a bit, but it wouldn't be a hardship. And if Fraser wanted to watch him....

Ray bent closer, hovering lips and tongue right over the tip of Fraser's cock.

Mmm, yeah. He could give Fraser a show.

Fraser propped his head on a pillow and settled back to watch as Ray's golden head trailed kisses down his torso. Ray lifted his head and smiled, and Fraser felt the brightness of it light sparks in his chest.

Ray bent closer and he could feel warm breath against his skin, could feel—and see—Ray's mouth *right there*, like he'd never even dared to hope for.

Ray's mouth opened to take him, wet and hard, and the raw power of it shocked him to the core. It was almost too much—too much need, too much trust, too much sensation. It overloaded his nerves, shooting bolts of electricity up the length of his spine

and sending tingles all the way out to his fingertips.

It was the connection again—the one from last night—only magnified almost to the point of pain. Fraser gasped as Ray's mouth worked its magic, as the golden head bobbed up and down, as his feet curled with the surfeit of pleasure.

He had to shut his eyes; it was that intense. He wanted to watch; he did, but it was pure heat now, fire all through him, and the fire's name was Ray.

Vision was irrelevant. Highly overrated. The sense of touch was everything, was anything, was Ray.

Fire built to a frenzy, and past. Fire consumed, and left a wasteland. A bolt of pure nothingness shot through him, and when it was gone he was left gasping and sated and drenched in sweat.

Ray coughed against him and took a shuddering breath, and it was only then that Fraser realized he had his fingers twisted tight in Ray's matted gold hair.

"Ray...." He untangled his fingers one by one.

"S'okay. I'm good."

"I'm sorry."

Ray's head jerked up, and blue eyes snapped as he reached up to wipe his mouth with the back of his hand. "You better not be."

"I didn't intend to do that to you."

Ray straightened, stretched, and popped his jaw, then slid forward to mold himself against the length of Fraser's body. "Hope to hell you don't mean that, Fraser, 'cause if you ask me, that was better than perfect."

Better than perfect. Oh, my. Fraser turned his head and kissed Ray's sweaty forehead, trying to say all the things that he had no words for with the touch. "Well, in that case...."

Ray shifted against him. "Yeah?"

"I believe I'm not sorry after all."

Ray's face broke into a sunrise smile. "Good," Ray said, and snuggled closer, his body cool with sweat, now, and turning sticky.

Good. Yes, it was good. Fraser eased his arm around Ray's shoulders, feeling the sharp prickle of Ray's stubble against his neck and the clammy itch of his own cooling skin. There was a damp spot in the sheets right beneath his buttocks that was uncomfortable already. It would start to chafe, soon, and they would have to move, but for the moment all he wanted to do was press himself against Ray, reveling in the delightful planes and angles of that lean body and ignoring all the rest.

He wasn't complaining. Oh, no.

He wouldn't have dreamed of it.

End



crystalhemis