



December 1999

There have been times in the wild when I haven't been able to precisely pinpoint my position. Blizzards, for example, can wreak havoc with a man's sense of direction. Flat landscapes and cloudy skies can also be disorienting. Even a deep forest can mask the typical signs we use to determine location. City streets can create the same confusion — the storefronts tend to blur after awhile, and lights hide the steadfast stars. But I have to admit that, until today, I'd never felt truly *lost*.

When my mother died, I had my father, and my grandparents. When my father died, I had the righteous cause of vengeance to hold me, and then I found Ray. I moved from one safe circle to another, and I never had to wonder where, or who, I was.

The closest I'd come prior to now was waking up in a hospital room, unable to move. Shot in the back. Even then, I can say from the safe perch of hindsight, it was the loss of my good judgment I regretted more than anything.

But even then, I wasn't alone.

Even then, I had Ray.

Now Ray's gone. Gone deep undercover with the Mob, so the correct answer to my repeated query of whether he was all right should have been a resounding "No!" The logical part of me realizes that he told me all he could, that he tried to cushion the blow, but my heart doesn't understand.

He didn't want me to spend my vacation alone up there. He wanted to come, and I told him no. I couldn't do it — be with him every day, but not be with him every night. We made our choices, and now we have to live with them.

Loving me was hard for him. It went against the grain of his life, his history, his hopes. It meant hiding something fundamental from his family, his colleagues. We stole hours together, clandestine and furtive, behind the closed blinds in my apartment, or the anonymous door of a suburban motel.

I didn't intend to love him. But I don't regret it.

I think he did.

And so we (he) chose friendship over love. Over romantic love, anyway. Our platonic love burns as brightly as ever. At least it seems to. I could still hear the love in his voice, across so many miles; hear it so clearly that I felt compelled to remind myself that his call came as a friend, not as...anything more.

Now I wish he *had* come with me. I wish I'd savored the days, even if I couldn't have the nights. I wasted our last opportunity to be together.

I only punished myself.

Now I feel punished by everything else. My home, such as it was, burned to the ground. The few possessions I had are a pile of cinder and ash. The remnants of my father's life, photos of

my mother, my childhood drawings, and diplomas are all gone, like Ray.

“*Buck up*,” my father told me, and I’m doing my best. It’s hard. Harder than I expected. The postcard helped at first — wherever Ray is, he’s obviously all right. But the more I think about it, the more it hurts. The covertness of his message, the one-sided communication, felt all too familiar. He can reach me, but I can’t reach him, and seeing that basic tenet of our relationship made manifest so...concretely...was hard.

But I understand that it doesn’t really matter how I feel about it.

It never did.

I have to respect his decision, and do whatever I can on this end to uphold his identity.

That includes accepting this man in his place. The man who now answers to Ray’s name. The man sitting across from me in an all-night diner, eating things Ray Vecchio would probably have turned his nose up at: alphabet soup and a grilled cheese sandwich.

This man, right here, who stepped in front of a bullet for me on the strength of a few hours’ acquaintance.

Yes, I think he deserves whatever benefit of the doubt I can give him.

I think he’s earned that much.

Somebody did a number on that guy, and I’m betting his name starts with R-A-Y.

Day like we’ve had would be enough to knock the starch out of anybody, even somebody as heavy-starched as Fraser, there, but he looks like his insides are more tired than his outsides.

I meant that little speech in the fireball — not that he paid the least bit of attention to it, but I guess he was distracted. It’s already been a pleasure meeting him. I mean, look at him. What’s not to like about that? Okay, so he’s weird. I’m not exactly Joe Schmoe myself. He grows on you. I’ve only been around him for one day and he’s already growing on me. So it’s been a long, incredibly full day — that’s not the point. The point is, I like him.

The guy gets a ton of stuff thrown at him all at once, and what’s he do? Keeps his hat on, puts his shoulders back and solves the damn crime. And finds time to check me out to boot. At first it was kind of annoying; it’s not like I didn’t know what he was doing — subtle he ain’t — and I still think he’s weird as owl doo-doo, but now that I think about it, I like it that he did all that stuff trying to prove I wasn’t his old buddy Ray. Shows me he’s thorough, and fair. He never pitched a fit, never got real snarky on me (well, yeah, he snarked some, but you know, we were both a little provoked there for awhile), never said anything to make me think it was *me* in particular he had a problem with.

I like that. I get enough of that shit from other people. From one other person.

And at the end of the day, the end of our really long, incredibly full day, he called me by name, asked me if I wanted to get something to eat with him, and so that’s what we’re doing. Doing our best not to fall asleep in the soup, trying to find something to talk about.

He said the postcard wasn’t something I needed to worry about, that everything was fine. Doesn’t take a genius to figure out he’s blowing smoke up my ass. His apartment burned down, with all his stuff in it, and his partner’s gone. Gone, gone, gone. And that was all before we had the nutjob Welcome Wagon to deal with. I think you’d have to agree that, whatever all this is, it’s not *fine*. Makes me wonder just how many ‘fines’ I’m going to have to fight my way through to figure out what he’s really got to say for himself. Partnership’s hard work enough without having to read his mind.

He looks more like just any other guy when he’s out of his Christmas tree outfit. Better-looking than most, yeah, but it’s not like he can help that. I’m not even sure he knows it; he sure doesn’t call attention to it. Or maybe he does the whole polite thing to get people to back off. It’s tough to fight polite.

Think I’m gonna try, though.

We’re about the only people in the place this late. It’s nice and quiet. The food’s good, the waitress isn’t bugging us. So we’re going to sit



here for awhile, have a sandwich, suck down a milk shake, and I'm going to see if I can't figure him out a little. I don't really believe in mincing words, and he looks like a guy who could maybe use someone to talk to.

It's not like I've got anything better to do.

I figure the Vecchio's house thing is a pretty safe bet, so I get the ball rolling with, "Frannie say where they were all staying tonight?"

He puts his soup spoon down and looks at me like I just told him his wolf's got worms. "I never gave it a thought."

Damn. Didn't mean to poke his conscience. "I'm sure they're fine, Fraser. They've...I mean, *we've* got relatives out the wazoo around here. I can hardly move without tripping over one Vecchio or another."

His face clears up when I say that. Whew. One landmine avoided. Okay, now what? We slurp a few more spoonfuls of soup. Well, I slurp. He eats all dainty-like. Doesn't spill a drop. Even pushes the spoon away from him to get each spoonful. Nice manners for a guy who probably just spent a few weeks field-stripping his dinners.

"You got a place to stay?" I ask him. He obviously found a place to wash off and change clothes — the consulate, probably — but I'm not sure whether people can actually *sleep* there. Not sure I'd want to, even if you could. Kind of stuffy, you know? Not the kind of place you could wander around in your boxer shorts scratching yourself.

He nods, looking down at his alphabet soup like the noodles are spelling out 'liaison' or something.

"You gonna stay at the consulate?" I ask, and he nods again.

"You got keys?" I ask, and that makes him look up at me. His mouth drops open a little and he shakes his head.

"Something else I never gave a thought to," he says, "but I'm sure you're right — a new building would require new locks, and new locks mean new keys."

"Yeah, that's pretty much how it goes," I say. "Somebody be there to let you in this late?"

I get another quick shake of his head. "It's unlikely."

I crack my knuckles. "Okay, looks like we've got two choices: I can amaze you with my lock-picking techniques..."

He raises an eyebrow at me. "Or..."

"Or you can stay with me," I tell him. "It's no big deal. You get the couch."

He's looking at me like I'm a stranger. Oh, wait, I guess I am.

"What? You never bunked in with Vecchio?" I say, and I meant to tease him, but that's not how he takes it.

While I'm sitting there, watching him, he just...I don't know...deflates. It's like somebody let the air out of him. One minute he's fine, talking about keys and stuff, and now he's *way* too quiet, and I don't have to be a detective to know I just hit some seriously raw nerve.

Awww, hell. He looks like I just popped him in the mouth. Then he blinks fast a couple of times, coughs once, and turns his attention back to his soup, like nothing's wrong. Right. Oh yeah, we're cool. He's 'fine'. That's why his hand's shaking.

What'd I say?

I have to pull myself together. I've made it this far today, through moments much more trying than a stranger's kindness, without falling apart. I won't start now.

I won't.

I am.

I can feel myself starting to fray at the seams. My throat feels tight and my hands are trembling. That's not how I want this to go. It's not what I meant to have happen.

He...Ray...disarmed me. First with his casual offer of hospitality, which I appreciate more than words can say. I wasn't looking forward to spending the night alone in the consulate, but I couldn't imagine any other option. Then his question — a natural assumption, that partners would occasionally have a need to...oh, how did he phrase it? Bunk in together.

We did, Ray and I. We bunked in. We tangled together under woolen blankets. We

slept naked under ceiling fans in grimy motel rooms. We spent more time awake than asleep, though. Greedy for every minute away from the world, starved for touch, lost in each other.

Lost. There's that word again. That feeling. I'm *lost*, and what hurts most is knowing that even if Ray were sitting across from me — if the real Ray Vecchio were here — I'd be no closer to him than I am now. I would continue to starve for his touch.

Ray and I have certainly bunked in together. But we never will again.

"You all right?" he asks.

I force myself to focus on him, on the differences I see. On the shock of blond hair. On his eyes — blue-gray, not forest-green. On that nose, the one that's seven critical millimeters smaller than the one I became accustomed to feeling tucked in the crook of my neck.

He's not Ray. He's not. But he's kind. And a good detective. And he's looking at me as if he'd like to say the right thing, if only he knew what that was. I try to smile at him. From the look he gives me, I didn't succeed, so next I try my voice.

"Yes, I'm quite—"

No. I didn't get it all out. The words died in my mouth, killed for the lies they are.

I shake my head. "No, I don't seem to be," I say, and am horrified to hear myself sniff. I'm moving before I realize it, trying to get out of the booth, trying to get away before I embarrass myself utterly, but he blocks me with a hand on my arm.

"Fraser, wait, hang on," he sputters. "It's not...It's okay."

I subside a little, take a deep breath. Then another. The strain of holding it all in makes me weary.

"Hey, we had a hard day," he says, pushing aside his soup bowl so he can lean closer to me across the table. "It's not every day you climb all over a car and get blown up and take a ducking in the lake they call Michigan, right?"

"Right," I manage to answer. I'm grateful to him for not mentioning the other things. The important things.

"Eat your sandwich," he says. "Food makes everything look better."

He surprises me into complying, and we sit in more companionable silence, comforted by grilled cheese.

"You know how I know that?" he asks around a mouthful of sandwich.

I shake my head.

"Experience," he says, wiping his mouth. "Had a thing go sour a while back, and I was just like you: if somebody looked at me wrong I dribbled all over them. Finally figured out if I ate something once in a while it didn't happen as often. Not sure why that is."

"Low blood sugar," I tell him, realizing he's quite right. We went through tremendous physical and emotional exertion today, without ever stopping to eat. No wonder my equilibrium is off.

"That what it is? Huh," he says.

I like how matter-of-fact he is in the face of my...display. How rational. It's a nice change. I make myself chew a few more bites, even though it tastes like window putty, or at least how I imagine window putty must taste. I suppose I could ask Ray. I doubt he'd be surprised by anything I say at this point.

"What kind of thing went sour?" I ask before I can stop myself. It's none of my business, but I still want to know.

"A love thing, what else?" he says with a quirk of his mouth.

Indeed. What else reduces grown men to sniffing idiots?

"I know this isn't like that," he says. "I mean, it's not the same kind of thing..."

His voice trails off.

I freeze. I stare at him. He stares at me. I watch as comprehension dawns. I can literally watch him review our conversation and, being the good detective that he is, draw conclusions. I break eye contact first, avert my eyes down to the table top and start counting crumbs. Anything to distract myself, although it becomes patently clear that there's no distracting *him*.

"Is it?" he asks quietly.

I don't say anything, but I feel heat climb into my cheeks.

"You and Vecchio?" It's almost a whisper, but it makes my ears hurt to hear it.

“No.”

I say it as firmly as I can. It’s no less than the truth. All right, it’s a *little* less than the truth, but I know Ray wouldn’t want me to talk about this with anyone, let alone the man filling his shoes. Ray couldn’t even talk about it with *me*.

“No?” he echoes back to me.

I can’t help myself — I raise my eyes to his. I don’t see censure. Or disgust. Or even dismay. I see curiosity, and surprise, and...what looks like sympathy, but perhaps I’m merely projecting what I want to see.

“Look, if you don’t want to talk about it, you don’t want to talk about it, but...”

“It hardly matters now,” I say.

“But it did once?” he asks, and I’m struck by how calm he is in the face of this yet-to-be-uttered revelation. Here I see very clearly the difference between him and Ray Vecchio. This would not be a calm conversation with Ray Vecchio. It’s that very calmness that opens up something inside me, unlocks the gate.

With a silent apology to Ray and an almost staggering feeling of relief, I tell him, “Yes. It mattered once.”

He nods, then turns his attention back to his sandwich. Surely it can’t be that easy. I manage to finish my sandwich as well, and sop up the remaining soup with the crusts before he speaks again.

“What happened?” he asks. Again, I’m surprised at the lack of condemnation in his voice. Ray maintained such a deeply held conviction that we must **not** speak of our relationship — that to do so would threaten our security, our careers, and possibly our lives — that I think part of me expected a lightning strike, or its human equivalent.

I’m as appalled at my lack of restraint as I am by my show of emotion. With a few ill-chosen words, I could jeopardize Ray’s future. Given this Ray’s reaction, that wouldn’t seem to be the case, but that says more about him, and his open-mindedness, than about me and my ability to withstand the temptation to talk about it.

But I’ve held it all in for so *long*.

I brace my hands on the edge of the table, take a breath, open my mouth...

...and start talking.

“It was hard...for Ray,” he tells me, and I’m already wondering why he’s making excuses for the guy.

“He’s a traditional man,” he says.

Not *that* traditional. Not if he was bedding down with the Mountie.

Nothing I read in the file even hints there was something going on between those two. *Nothing*. Fraser looked clean as a whistle, and if it looked like Vecchio cut a corner here and there, I still wouldn’t have guessed they were two-backing it. Vecchio must’ve put the fear of God into Fraser. Not sure it stuck though, because Fraser folded *quick* once he got asked the right question. Must be that integrity thing he’s got going. Ask him a question and he’ll answer it.

“Knocked him for a loop, did you?” I ask, and that earns me another one of those surprised looks I’m starting to like.

That’s right, Mountie man. I’m not him. I’m not even *like* him. The more I hear about him, the happier that makes me. Keep talking. There’s not a thing you can say that’ll shock me. Not one goddamn thing.

“So he said,” he says. Looks bemused, like Vecchio did him some great favor noticing him. Yeah, right. Fraser’s the one did the favor — I’ve heard about the schnoz on Vecchio.

“He too Catholic? Too Italian? Too everything?” I ask, and that almost gets me a smile.

“A combination of all those things, yes,” he says, shredding his napkin into perfect strips. “Eventually, the dichotomy in his life became too much for him, and we...ended it.”

We? Pull the other one, Fraser. This guy’s a lovesick cow if I’ve ever seen one, so I’m not buying that ‘we ended it’ crap. Vecchio dumped him.

“You ended the partnership?” I ask, even though I know the answer. I’m here, aren’t I?

Immediately he shakes his head. “Oh, no. No, we remained partners. And friends. We just stopped...”

“The other stuff,” I finish for him, and he looks at me, shocked. “Sounds like a real prince.”

“You may not be able to appreciate the pressure he felt,” he protests. “You wouldn’t understand –“

“I understand,” I tell him.

“For a Chicago police detective to –“

“I said I understand.”

There’s a weird loud silence while he digests that. I get to watch the light bulb go on. It’s fun, in a life-shattering kind of way.

“Oh,” he finally says, real quiet.

I nod.

I’m not sure why I’m owning up to it this quick. It’s not like he’d already have had a chance to hear the rumors — *hush-hush, don’t say ‘em too loud* — about Queerwalski. Hell, the guy doesn’t even know my name yet. Doesn’t know about that little trap some asshole Viceboy set — never dreamed he’d catch one of his own, I bet. Doesn’t know all the ways I fucked it up with my wife, who I still love, no matter what I say. No matter what I...do.

I get a chance to start over, and what do I do?

First chance I get, I get all...what’s the word? Commiseratory. Over a jilted Mountie and his straight, former, oh-yeah-and-by-the-way-*gone* boyfriend.

Great. Way to go. Just what I needed.

Here’s a stick, Fraser. Beat me with it.

He knows.

More than that, he understands. He said so in words, and I see it in his face, in his clear eyes. He’s remarkably expressive — a rare trait in a policeman. Or perhaps I’m simply recognizing something of myself in him. Something I don’t see very often.

He’s...like me. In that deep, silent, secret place, he’s very much like me. Only he’s allowed himself to bring it to the surface, to a certain extent. I realize that as open as I feel we’ve been, neither of us has said anything yet that could be construed as explicit. It’s as if we

have to speak in half-sentences, in allusions. To do anything else seems dangerous.

Especially here, in a diner where I (if not he) am known. The waitresses here know to bring me hot tea, not coffee. They know Dief will behave himself. It’s not the place to talk about something like this, no matter how much I want to. It’s probably not the time, either, given our level of exhaustion.

It’s been a very long day.

The smartest thing to do would be to curb my wayward tongue, thank him for his company and go...oh. That’s right. Locks, keys, new buildings. It all seems too much on top of everything else. My mind shies away from the thought of spending the night at his apartment. I feel as if he knows too much already. Sees too much. Perhaps I’ll sleep in the park, under what passes for stars here. Yes, that’s as good an idea as any. I’m sure things will look better in the morning. They usually do.

“Are you finished?” I ask him, pointing to his empty bowl and plate.

He draws back, quirks an eyebrow at me.

“You got some place to be?” he asks.

“No, I just...”

After months of locking down my feelings, even my thoughts, it’s hard to open up.

“You just what?” he asks.

He looks a little affronted, and I wonder if perhaps I haven’t given him enough credit for discussing these...difficult topics. Maybe he just makes it **look** easy, but has some of the same trepidation I do about getting it out in the open.

My respect for him is climbing by the minute.

The best part of loving Ray was always the time we spent together, regardless of what we were doing. The worst part was always having to be careful of what I said, how I acted. How I touched him if other people were around. He worked hard to keep a respectable distance between us.

This Ray seems to be trying just as hard to close that gap. The same effort, towards a different goal.

Ray...**this** Ray...wants me to talk to him. I’ll try. I really will. But I don’t think I can say anything more here. It’s just too strange here in

the light to talk about things that have been kept in the dark all this time.

“Would you like to go for a walk?” I ask him.

He looks at me like I’ve got one oar out of the water — another look I’m becoming accustomed to from him — but he just nods, flags down the waitress for the check, and waves away my ‘funny money,’ as he calls it, when I offer to pay my half.

Then we’re out in the bracing air, the city mostly silent at our feet for the moment. Outside, in the cold and dark, which better matches how I feel inside than the comfort of the warm diner. Away from curious ears, just the two of us, two sets of footsteps echoing on the sidewalk. My feet turn automatically for the park, and he falls into step beside me, close enough to brush against the sleeve of my jacket. I realize we’ve spent almost the entire day within reach of each other. I can still feel him, solid against me, his wiry embrace; still see that first smile on his face. I can still feel his long fingers, light on my shoulder, and the heavy weight of his body, propelled into me by Miss Garbo’s perfectly aimed shot.

He touches easily — another rare and wonderful trait.

When we get to the park, we wander toward the small pond in the center, and he drops down onto a bench at its shore. I sit beside him and look out over the water. The night is quiet around us. It’s very late — it must be after midnight now, and we have the park to ourselves. I come here often, but rarely accompanied by anyone else. I’m soothed by the consistencies of nature — moonlight on water looks the same regardless of place. Dead leaves crunch underfoot no matter where they lie. It’s a comfort to me.

We sit in silence for a few minutes, and I’m surprised at how comfortable I already feel with him. Of course, our partnership had a literal baptism of fire. I’m sure our trying circumstances helped lead to a sense of...bonding, to use Ray’s word. More than anything, though, it’s knowing that we share this one unexpected thing that makes being with him now so easy.

It makes me feel less...lost.

I turn to look at him, taking in the clean lines of his profile, the way his narrow shoulders hunch against the cold. Given a choice of ways to spend an evening, I feel certain he wouldn’t have picked sitting on a park bench in the middle of the night with a lonely Mountie.

Yet here he is. Stepping up for me again.

He seems to feel the weight of my gaze, because he turns his head just far enough to meet my eyes.

“We out in the freakin’ cold for any particular reason?” he asks.

I can already tell there may be times when his speak-first-think-later approach to conversation will irk me, but tonight, it’s what I need. Straight talk. As it were.

“I seem to feel most comfortable out of doors,” I tell him with a slight shrug.

He shrugs back. “Probably doesn’t even feel cold to you, does it?” he says.

“No, not particularly. Of course, I have developed an extra layer of subcutaneous fat from all the years of—“

“Whoa there, Fraser. There’s some stuff I do *not* need to know. Got that?” he says, pulling his hands from his coat pockets and holding them, palms up, between us.

It’s interesting that the idea of my having a romantic relationship with my partner didn’t throw him off, but a mention of subcutaneous fat upsets him. What an odd person. What an **intriguing** person.

We came out here because I wanted to talk. Finally. Openly. But I can’t think of what to say.

“What *would* you like to know?” I ask. That seems a safe and reasonable question. It could cover everything from my elementary school years to the periodic table of elements.

He scratches his chin absently, then asks, “Anybody else know?”

I know what he means.

“Not that I’m aware of,” I tell him. “We were extremely careful.”

He nods.

“And you?” I ask.

He snorts under his breath. “No, they pulled their *best* cop for the undercover assignment way across town.”

Oh, dear. Poor Ray.

His name comes into my mind more easily every minute. The name even *sounds* different to me when I hear it in my head. I hear his flat inflection, the emphasized long ‘a’. Instead of only seeing in him who he’s not, I’m starting to see him for who he is.

He shifts on the bench. “It’s not like it’s common knowledge or anything, but yeah, I did something stupid. My lieu knows. He *jumped* at the chance to get me out of his hair for awhile.”

I’m intensely curious to know what stupid thing he did, so I can avoid making the same mistake, but if he wanted me to know, he would have told me, so I don’t press him for more details. Perhaps as time goes by, he’ll begin to feel more comfortable with me.

“You’re performing a critical function,” I tell him. “Whatever brought you here, your presence may mean the difference between life and death for Ray. Don’t sell your contribution short.”

“You always like this?” he asks, ducking his chin into the collar of his coat.

“Like what?” I ask.

“This. All turn-the-tables. Thought we were supposed to be talking about you,” he says.

I like this Ray. I like his forthrightness, his candor. I find myself wanting to tell him everything, but I’m afraid. Afraid that, in the end, it will turn out to be one of those things he doesn’t need to know. Afraid he’ll pull back, when all I want him to do is keep reaching out. It would be better to stop now, before I go any further. Before I get any deeper. Better for him to go home; better for me to stay here.

It isn’t that I don’t want his company.
I want it too much.

He gets me out here and now he wants me to go home? And leave him here?

“You can’t be serious.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time I’ve spent a night out of doors, Ray,” he tells me.

“You don’t even have a sleeping bag,” I point out.

“I can get it from the...”

“The consulate you can’t get into cuz you don’t have the right key?” I’m not sure why I’m pushing him on this. The man’s got a right to freeze his nuts off if he wants, but I just hate the thought of leaving him here by himself. He looks like he might brood if he gets half a chance, and given all the stuff he’s got to brood about, he could be here for days.

“You don’t want to stay at my place? What, you think I got cooties?”

He looks puzzled. “I’m not familiar with that –”

“Never mind, Fraser. Why don’t you want to come home with me?”

We’ve talked around a lot of shit tonight. Let’s go back to that direct-question thing, see where it gets me.

Silence is what it gets me. For like two minutes. Long enough that I’m starting to wonder if he *does* think I have cooties. Maybe Vecchio really did do a number on him. Maybe he got taught guys like us are queerer than queer. Like the queer part just scratches the surface of weird.

“I’m not...myself,” he finally says, so low I have to lean toward him to hear it. “I don’t want to...”

It almost sounds like he doesn’t want to come home with me because he doesn’t trust himself. He might call it something else, but that’s what it boils down to, I think. Coming from a guy like that, it’s a total rush. It’s not like I’ve got men (or women) beating down my door.

“What? What do you think you’ll do?” I hear the challenge in my voice. I wonder if he does.

He looks up at me and I can see right down inside him, like he opened a door and invited me in. It’s all right there in his eyes. All his pain, all his worry, all his fear, and under all that, I can see he needs something. Needs it bad.

Beats me how Vecchio could walk away from him. I’ve only known him a day and I’m already sticking to him like glue.

"It wouldn't be the worst thing that ever happened to me," I tell him, and his eyes widen.

Hey, it's not like it'd be some noble gesture on my part. It's not like he's got to apologize for it or anything. Hell, I could use some cuddling myself, and today was a pretty *good* day for me.

"I've gotta be Ray Vecchio to the rest of the world, right? No reason I can't be him for you, too."

"I don't understand."

I can see that. He looks like I'm talking to him in some weird dialect or something.

"Same name, different game. Only I'm not so...uptight, I guess." Might as well just put the cards right out there on the table. "I mean, if I've gotta take Frannie as part of the deal, I might as well get something good out of it, you know?"

"You think I'm something good?" he asks. He sounds surprised.

I think I'd like to have a little talk with Vecchio. You got a guy like this crawling around in your britches and you make him feel *bad* about it? What is *up* with that?

"Look, I don't know what kind of routine he pulled on you, and I don't want to know, okay? But there's nothing wrong with you, if that's what you think. It's nothing to be ashamed of or anything. Some people are just wired different, that's all," I tell him.

I shouldn't have to be giving that speech to a guy over thirty. He must have had some kind of seriously sheltered upbringing. Or else he just had all the rotten stuff drilled into him. I'm not trying to sugarcoat it — being like this isn't easy for a cop. Any cop. But it's not like he can help it. I sure can't. And I know for damn sure that no cop would *choose* to be this way if he didn't have to be. It's too fucking hard.

"Something good might come from it," he says under his breath.

"Huh?"

"That's something...someone told me today. Not to take it too hard, that something good might come from it," he says, and I can see just how much he wants to believe that.

"Talking about Vecchio?" I ask.

"No, he was speaking specifically of my apartment burning, but I think the concept can

be translated. Loss is loss, whether physical or...personal."

I bob my head at him. I'm not a hundred percent sure I get what he's talking about, but it seems to be helping, so we'll go with it. Loss. Yeah, that's what he's had a boatload of today. All different kinds. Lot of people would have just curled up in a ball and howled, but Fraser's more a take-charge kind of guy, looks like. Not one to really take things lying down, if you know what I mean.

"So come home with me," I say, and I hug him around the shoulders for a minute. "Who's it going to hurt?"

He leans on me briefly, then sits up straight again, and I take my arm back.

"If Ray were—"

"He's not here. He's not coming back. Not any time soon, anyway. And if he did, you wouldn't...he wouldn't...would he?"

"No."

"So, who's it hurt?"

He doesn't have an answer for me. I can tell him who: nobody. Won't hurt. Might help. Can't do much better than that. Maybe he just needs to hear that I'm not looking for some big commitment thing. Sounds like he got burned good on the last one.

"It doesn't have to mean anything. It can just be what it is," I say.

I don't know why I'm trying so hard to convince him, except that I think he needs somebody, and, well, here I am. The shoes fit, I've got I.D. — might as well use 'em.

We'll call it a perk.

It can just be what it is.

That's a novel concept for me. I'm more accustomed to dissecting, analyzing, searching for reasons, for meaning. I don't know whether it's the strain of the day catching up to me, or my own physical exhaustion, but I find myself agreeing, swayed by his hug, persuaded by his meager argument.

I'm going home with Ray. Beyond that, I have no expectations. He seemed to be talking about more than a place to sleep, but I won't hold him to that. I wouldn't ask him for that.

Even if my tired brain and body look at him — at his energy, at his openness — and seem to think it sounds like a fine idea.

I suppose I should feel guilty contemplating doing...that...without Ray. But I felt guilty doing that *with* Ray, too, and the logical voice inside me insists I needn't feel guilty about both. Pick one, it says, and since I can't change the past, I will try not to feel guilty about...this.

I'm very aware of him as we walk, more than I have been before. Aware that his stride matches my own, that his body has a grace to it that makes it hard to look away. I shouldn't let him think he's just a substitute, a less uptight version of Ray Vecchio. I should tell him he has his own appeal, his own attraction. But perhaps that's how he justifies this...I don't even know what to call it.

I feel my heart start to beat heavy in my chest. Doing this, even just walking into his building, makes me feel reckless, unfettered. I feel the ties of the day's pain unravel, feel hunger seep into their place, and there's something wondrous in letting it happen. In not automatically clenching desire into a fist. There's something freeing about simply allowing myself to *feel*.

It feels like I'm teetering on the edge of a cliff. The idea of turning to someone — not out of love, but out of need — is alien, disconcerting. It's a different world now. Everything's changed, starting with the man I'm following up a dim flight of stairs. When we get to his apartment, he doesn't turn on any lights, doesn't offer me something to drink, doesn't invite me to sit down. He just pushes me toward the bedroom. Once inside he closes the door, pushes me back against it, and then stands there in front of me, a tall, lean shape in the dark.

I reach out, put my hands on his waist, and I feel him take a sharp breath. It tells me that I affect him as much as he affects me, and that makes it all seem more...possible.

"It doesn't have to mean anything," he says again in a whisper. "Just do...whatever you want."

My hands clench on his waist, pull him one step closer. Now I can feel the heat of him, the

weight of him. Close. Very close now. I'm very close to opening my arms and diving into the chasm. My stomach turns over, and I think it's fear until I realize my hands are trembling, that I'm starting to sweat. It's not fear. It's excitement.

"I won't hold it against you," he says, his voice low and rough, and...warm. "We can even pretend it didn't happen if you want. Just...do it."

I feel chills race across my skin, feel my groin heat, just at being here, in the dark with him. After the day I've had, it's startling to feel arousal this strong pumping through me. I've spent so many weeks suppressing my baser needs, knowing they weren't welcome, knowing they didn't help me.

The same way I couldn't seem to keep myself from telling Ray my deepest secret, I can't seem to hide this from him either. He has to know. He has to be able to tell by the way I'm pressing him toward me, by the way I'm widening my stance, bringing him in.

He already has the key: Don't make me ask for it. Don't let me feel bad about it. Just...let me.

I pull him to me, pull his legs between mine. For a sharp second, I feel the differences again, the differences between Rays. The tautness of the skin under my hands, the surprise of soft hair against my face, the smell of soap instead of cologne. I'm buffeted for a minute, washed with a sense of sorrow, of relief, and with a surge of longing, all at once. I didn't know I could feel so many different things at the same time. My hands tighten on him, and he hesitates, then presses forward, and I open wide and let him in.

Then his mouth is on my throat, his hands on my chest, and I'm leaning back, raising my chin to let him closer, and I feel his tongue sweep in an arc over my skin. I moan low in my throat, and he presses his mouth harder against me. I let my hands slide around his back, pull him closer to me, until he's leaning hard on me, pressing me into the door. He's built smaller than I am, but he's plenty strong, plenty heavy, and I savor the weight of him on me.

I've *missed* this.

“Good,” I gasp, arching my neck more, pulling him even closer.

“I know, I know,” he mouths against me, rubbing me with his whole body.

My heart skips in my chest. Nothing’s hidden with him. I don’t have to wonder if I’m doing something right, don’t have to wonder if he’s merely suffering the touch of my hands on him. I see him more clearly in the dark than I ever saw Ray, even in the light of day.

Under the cover of his jeans, I feel his erection strong against my hip, feel him start to thrust rhythmically against me, and I answer him with my own thrusts, lining my own erection beside his, moving my hands to his hips to seal us together there. I’m dizzy, as much holding myself up as I am holding him. Even with my eyes open, I can’t see much more than the outline of him, writhing against me. The scent of him fills my nostrils, and when I lean over and press my lips against the side of his neck, his taste explodes in my mouth. Clean, simple, open.

He drops his head back, offering himself to me. Why such a simple thing should hold such significance is a mystery, but it moves me. I let my mouth rest against him, pressing softly into the vein I feel pulsing hard under my lips. He’s open to me in a way I don’t think Ray could ever let himself be. He’s not just accepting my touch; he’s not an unequal partner. He’s doing more than occupying an empty space — he’s filling it to overflowing.

Moving with him, holding him, I feel we are what he already calls us: a duet.

I don’t know how we could get any closer, but he manages it, winding himself around me like a cat. Maybe he knows how off-balance I feel, or maybe he always does this, I don’t know. He seems to know just what I need, though. I need him, wrapped around me. I need the strength of his arousal melded to mine. I need to be held tight, just like this. Tight and hard. Just like that. Yes, just like that.

He groans when I shift my hands to his buttocks and lift him against me. I like that sound so much that I do it again, harder, and now he’s bucking into me, grasping at my back with his hands, moving his legs so they’re

outside mine, so he’s cradling me, holding me with every inch of his body, and he slams into me, as hard as I want, as hard as I need.

I let it happen. I let him give me what I need, what I’ve missed. I don’t think I knew just how deep that need went, how tied together my body and mind and conscience were. Or how integral my heart was to the equation. There’s no sense of confusion here. No possibility that I might be substituting one Ray for another. No, I know who I’m holding. I know him now. I know enough to understand that he talks a good game, but he needs something, too.

I’m shaking in his arms, no longer able to kiss, or slow down, or wait. I’m afraid he’ll have bruises tomorrow from the grip of my hands, but he’s not protesting. If anything, he’s encouraging me, murmuring against me, panting hot gusts of breath into my shoulder.

I feel him go rigid against me, his fingers clawing at my back, then he shudders and I feel his penis pump against me, dampening the sealed space between us. It’s almost enough to push me over the edge, and I let my hands sweep along the back seam of his jeans, slide down between his legs. It’s the surrender I feel, the automatic spread of his thighs, that does me in. Then I’m the one shuddering, coming hard, and I can’t hold up the weight of my head, can’t hold him up anymore. We stagger, but he moves lightning quick, getting his feet solid underneath him, and takes the weight I drop on him, props me up.

I think he can take the weight of me, of my sorrow, my loneliness. Maybe I can give something back to him, in ways Ray would never allow. Maybe I still have a chance to get this right. Under my heavy head, his shoulder twitches, and I feel his hands, steady on my back, urging me toward the bed. We drop down on it together, and before I can even catch my breath, he has me back in his arms, holding on tight, almost rocking me. When I try to talk, he shushes me.

“Not now, Fraser,” he says quietly, brushing his hand through my damp hair. “Just go to sleep.”

Ordinarily, I’d want to wash up. Change clothes. Tell the person I just made love to how

good he makes me feel. Ordinarily, I would do all that. But today hasn't been an ordinary day. This isn't an ordinary man. So I content myself with hugging him back. I think he understands. He understood the rest of it; he should certainly be able to understand this.

I feel him relax against me, heavy now. I glance at him in the low light, looking at the stranger in my arms. He doesn't feel like a stranger. He feels like a friend. Someone I'd be pleased to have as a partner.

It doesn't have to mean anything, he said.

It doesn't have to.

But I find that it *does*.

My father was right. Something good might come from all this.

I think it already has.

*** End ***

