



Soundtrack: 'Pacing the Cage' and 'The Whole Night Sky,' *The Charity of Night*, Bruce Cockburn; 'Fire Escape,' *All the Pain Money Can Buy*, Fastball; 'Texarkana' and 'Low,' *Out of Time*, R.E.M.; 'World Leader Pretend,' *Green*, R.E.M.; 'I Know What Kind of Love This Is,' *Cry Cry Cry*, from the album of the same name.

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"You ever take no for an answer, Frase? Alone means alone. I wanna be alone."
"Ah. But I don't think you really do, Ray."
He stares at me a moment, bleary eyed but with an edge, despite his blood alcohol level, of insight. Sighs.
"I already know it's no use arguing with you. Come in. Grab a beer."
"I don't generally imbibe."
"I'm so surprised to hear that." He doesn't quite stumble on his way back to the couch, where he drops and sprawls, almost bonelessly, staring moodily at his bare feet perched on the edge of the coffee table. I sit next to him, after turning on the lamp.
"I like the dark, Frase."
"My night vision isn't very good, Ray."
He reaches up and turns the light out again. "Sounds like a personal problem to me."
"I'll be the first to admit to the existence of those."
"Not me. I got no problems. My life is fuckin' perfect, Fraser. Well, except for the florist wolf, but I ain't losin' sleep over that."
"Ah."
The bottle clinks against his teeth, faintly, as he swallows.
"Do wolves who are florists generally inspire you to solitary drinking?"

"Subtle, Frase. Real subtle."
"I try."
"I bet you do. What's with the wolf?"
"He's sulking. He wanted to watch curling with Constable Turnbull."
"Curling? Like hair? No. No, Frase, please. I just don't want to know. Wolf's a florist and a hairdresser. You get weirder by the second, you know that?"
"Curling is a sport."
"Fraser."
"I thought I ought to clear –"
"Fraser."
"Understood."
"You really don't drink? Ever?"
"Very rarely."
"Yer kinda ... kinda Spartacus there, Frase."
"Spartan."
"Yeah."
"I suppose so."
"Why?"
"Why what?"
"Why don't you drink? You ever had a beer? It's Canadian."
"I noticed that."
"Stella didn't like beer."
The temptation to comment upon Stella's preferences and my reaction to said preferences is a strong one but I am also strong.
"You don't care what Stella liked."

"It's hardly my place – "
"S okay. I don't care either. 'S why I bought beer tonight. Well, that and they were outta Wyborowa vodka."
"I can see that I have something to be thankful for."
Finally he grins. "Yeah. Did a little too much of that after we broke up. Came to my senses though. Came to my senses a while ago, really."
"Forgive me for pointing out – "
"People always say that when they're gonna state the obvious ... "
" – that you seem to be taking a similar tack tonight."
"So?"
So ... indeed. There is only one possible response. "Hmmm."
"What's that mean?"
"What do you think it means?"
"I think it means you're a freak."
"Hmmm."
"And ... that Stella and me are over and I oughtta know that already. And shit, I do. And I don't want her. Not any more. But ... wantin' her ... seein' her ... I want what I can't have. Always. With Stella and ... well ..."
"Ah."
"Is that a Mountie way, a polite way, of asking what happened?"
"If you think so, yes."
He sighs. "Thought we were forever, that's all. And we would've been, 'f I hadn't screwed up. But I screwed up for a reason, right? Because it wasn't meant. Because we really weren't forever, and it's better to know that now than later, right? Can't go back. Can't go back."
"I believe that's circular reasoning, Ray."
"So?"
"Hmmm."
"Gonna pop you, Frase."
"What I meant to say, Ray, is that you are indubitably right."
"I never been indubly anything, Fraser, except an idiot." Cocks an eyebrow. "You got nothing to say to that?"

"I'm not really qualified to judge."
"Fraser. You are not funny. You felt qualified to judge that me an' the Stella dance great together."
"You do."
"We fucked great together too."
"Ray!"
"Hey. You came here, you invited yourself in, now you don't wanna hear it?"
"I admit I would prefer to be spared the intimate details."
"Innimate details? Who the hell talks like that, Fraser? Innimate details. Jesus."
"I'm sorry – "
"Oh, don't get all starched and buttoned on me. Wasn't planning to ... but it was some kinda iminate details ... that's all. And sometimes it's just trying to figure out if it's Stella or the inn – im – fucking."
"Probably quite a bit of both, Ray."
"Wasn't enough."
"Sometimes it's not."
"Wasn't enough because of me, Frase."
"I doubt that, Ray."
"No, Fraser. Shit. So, like, we're at this wedding. Guy was one of my buds in college – we were roommates for a while. We get way toasted at the reception – hey, he's Polish too – and he spills to Stella. To the Stella, of all people."
"Spills what?"
"Shit. Fraser ..."
Uncertainty. Defiance.
"Fraser ..."
"Yes?"
"You like me, huh? Friends and partners?"
"Absolutely, Ray."
"Anything change that?"
"Absolutely not, Ray."
"Okay." Deep breath. Eyes flicker nervously. "So he spills that ... that we ... him and me, I mean ... in college And Stel freaked. Not at first. And at first, you know, I thought it was that she thought I cheated on her. Which I didn't." He sounds dangerously positive.
"You don't need to tell me that, Ray."
"Because she was ... you know ... is it

for real, let's see other people. Except I didn't wanna see anyone else”

He takes a deep breath and another swig of beer. “But my friend good friend. Best friend. Used to jerk off together. Then me and Stella split up and the jerkin' off got a whole lot more ... well, everything.”

Unaccountably my heart rate has increased noticeably.

“But she was freaked more that I could be with a guy and with a chick. So when we started getting serious about the baby thing ... well, when I started getting serious ... she thought maybe I wanted kids because of me, to prove something, like that I was really a man and not ... not because I just like kids. I dunno, maybe I did. But I didn't think so; I mean, I didn't feel all guilty and shit about doin' it with a guy. It was fun, it was good, it wasn't what me and Stella had, but it was cool. Anyway. So the more she thought, the less she liked the kids idea. And, eventually, the me idea.” Uncertain glance, cornered eyes.

“So now ... now I freaked you out too, I guess. Straight arrow Mountie, huh. Freaks you out to hear that I had a thing with a guy? No friends and partners for us now, huh?”

“No.”

“No?”

“No.”

“Why's that?”

“Many reasons, Ray, not the least of which is that one's sexual orientation doesn't determine whether one is a good or bad person.”

“Many reasons, huh?”

Another long silence, an almost palpable increase in discomfort, on both our parts.

“Mountie reasons or Benton Fraser reasons?”

“Both, of course.”

“Okay, but which one doesn't care more?”

“In all honesty?”

“Yeah. Of course.”

“Well, Ray, I don't want you to think

that I question your abilities as a policeman, because – “

“Benton Fraser reasons.”

Another long silence, narrowed eyes, piercing my soul. A dawning realisation, insight ... no, certainly, one could never doubt his ability to hear and see unspoken, hidden realities.

“You and Vecchio had a thing, didn't you.”

Not quite a question, not quite a statement.

“Yes.”

He sighs, closing his eyes, leaning his head back, a quiet kind of resignation on his features.

“So what? What do 'I' do? Am I a cock sucker? An ass fucker?”

“Ray, are you a mean drunk?”

His eyes fly open and he snorts despite the tension. “Not usually, no.”

Silence for a time and then he says, unsteadily, “I just ... wondered. If you thought I was attractive in a generic sense or in a 'I wanna put my tongue down your throat' sense.”

“Both, I'm afraid.”

“Afraid why?”

“Because I know what Ray Vecchio wasn't and was. I don't know ... about you ... and uncertainty disorients me.”

“What was he?”

“What he was doesn't matter, now, because it's over.”

He leans forward, his eyes narrowing slightly. “Over. Aw, Frase. And you didn't know?”

“I ... guessed.”

“At least Stella told me. Not that I wanted to hear it.”

“It's very hard to admit to an end when one has trouble admitting to a beginning or a middle.”

“Oh.”

Another long silence, less uncomfortable, and then he drains his bottle and sets it, carefully, on his coffee table, next to the others. Too carefully.

“Yeah. I mean, I wondered. Just from

the way you looked sometimes. The postcard. But it surprises the hell out of me too, you know, because, Catholic Italian guy cops don't usually ... well, yeah, that's a stereotype. I mean, I'm a Catholic Polish guy cop. So sue me."

"Ray, for someone who has consumed as much alcohol as you appear to have done, you're making a surprising amount of sense."

"Macho guilt? I gotta work on that, I guess. Can't be Vecchio without it. Can't be Vecchio without you, either, though."

"I don't want you to be Ray Vecchio, Ray Kowalski. Please. What I want is a partner ... and a friend."

"Just ... friends?"

"Ray ... we've only known each other a short time. Yes, I find you attractive, in every sense. But I don't want to drive you away; I don't want to enter into a relationship that you may be less than comfortable with; I would rather subsume my desires and retain your friendship."

"Benton. Benton buddy."

"Yes, Ray."

"You won't tell me what Vecchio was. You wanna hear what I am?"

"Yes. No. Ray - "

"You want me to show you what I am?"

"No. Yes. No. It would be much easier to have this conversation if you were sober, Ray."

"If I were sober, Benton buddy, we would not be having said conversation."

"Precisely."

He blinks at that, and then a long, slow grin curves his lips.

"You're funny, Benton Fraser. Shit. I like you. I wanna be friends. Partners. And I wanna kiss you."

"Why?"

He blinks again. "You ever look in the mirror?"

"Frequently. I meant, why me?"

"Oh. Well, Jesus, Fraser. I like you. Like you a lot. You'n me, we're on the same page. A lot. Wanna kick Vecchio's ass except I'm

Vecchio now."

He reaches down beside him and snags another bottle, opening it with his belt buckle. I open my mouth to protest and he grins at me.

"I don't suppose I could convince you to switch to coffee," I say instead.

"Shouldn't drink alone. I know. I don't do it too often. Just ... everything. Been wantin' ... Couldn't have Stella. I always . . always want something I can't have."

"I understand that."

"Do you? I was good at pretending. Too good. Bet you're good at that too. You wanna pretend I'm Vecchio? Because I still wanna kiss you."

"Definitely a mean drunk."

"Well, you could shut me up."

"I prefer to reserve violence as a method of last resort."

"So shut me up another way." He eyes me, challenging, a small lopsided grin lifting one side of his face.

"Ray - "

"You want to, don't you?"

The atmosphere changes like lightning changes the dark. The word feels dragged from my throat. "Yes."

"Yeah ..."

"But I can't. I won't. You're drunk, Ray."

"Hey, Frase, you said yourself I was making a lotta - a surprising amount, you said - sense. And if you're not weirded out over kissing a guy, and I'm not weirded out over kissing a guy, and we're partners and friends, I say we got the best of all possible worlds."

"I can't quite make out the donkey ears, Dr. Pangloss."

"What?"

"What about tomorrow?"

"You know what, Fraser? I don't live in tomorrow. I live in today. If you spend all your time in tomorrow you never see today."

"You are drunk, Ray. That made no sense."

"You just don't want it to make sense."

"Perhaps I don't."

"I got some words that'll make sense, Benton Fraser. Kiss. Suck. F - "

"I think it's time we called it a night, Ray."

"Now you're talking."

"Perhaps we might meet for lunch tomorrow if you've recovered sufficiently from the hangover I feel sure is incipient."

"How about a breakfast date? Better yet, how 'bout you stay and we won't even have to leave the apartment?"

He looks hopeful, appealing ... strangely innocent, vulnerable, stripped of a good deal of his 'attitude,' as he calls it. "You find me attractive?"

"Yes, Ray."

"Then what's the problem?"

It's like kicking a puppy. It can't be done. "The problem is not you, Ray."

"Oh." He leans back again, reflects on that, drains the bottle. This one doesn't make it to the coffee table: he drops it to the floor.

"Think I'll kick you in the teeth, huh? You said you didn't want me to be him. I'm not him, you know? Tell me. Talk, Benton Fraser. Talk to me in that voice of yours. You want I should tell you what your voice does to me?"

"Don't you think that perhaps your unwonted attraction to me might stem from your confusion over Stella?"

"We're not talkin' 'bout the Stella, Fraser, we're talking about you, and how come you don't want me."

"I didn't - "

"Can I touch you, Fraser? Not sex, just ... touch?"

"I don't think that would be the best course of action under the circumstances."

"You're safe, Fraser, I had so much to drink I'm not sure I could get it up right now even for that tight Mountie ass. C'mere."

The sudden intake of breath, the rush of cool air between my lips, startles even me. Ray frowns, worried, and then, apparently taking my inability to move for consent,

pulls me against him and pushes my head down to his shoulder, his hand remaining in my hair. He smells of beer and of spice and of golden air and motes of dust in a crypt.

"So Vecchio was an ass fucker." Long, still silence, broken only by the whisper of his fingers moving mechanically in my hair. It has a relaxing, almost hypnotic effect.

"So ... no beginning ... no middle ... and no end. How'd you do it, then?"

"I thought you knew - "

"You're so funny, Fraser."

Another silence, but the words want to come out. And the comfort helps. "Day by day. I ... needed ..."

"Oh, yeah. Yeah. I ... need ... yeah, Frase. I get that." And although his lips brush my hair there is no tension or worry, simply more comfort. "I didn't need Stella ... I just needed Stella."

"Is it possible to get drunk by osmosis, Ray? That almost made sense."

"So did you need Vecchio? Or did you just ... need?"

Almost blindly my head turns into his neck, and the inhalation brings even more of the scent of Ray, heady, almost overpowering. "How do you know?"

"You know."

"No, I don't."

"Yeah, you do. Did you need him like you needed the nutcase chick?"

He's prepared for my reaction and his arms are tight around me, refusing escape.

"Or was it the same?" Kind. Inexorable.

"It was more. Of ... of the same. But ... more."

"Friends? Partners?"

"Friends. I ..."

"Friends like that, Frase ..."

"It was me, Ray. Not him."

Fingers. Long, strong fingers, moving down my jaw, under my chin, pulling my face up. Soft, warm lips whispering against mine. "Bullshit, Benton Fraser." Gentle, wet tongue parting my lips, meeting no resistance. Soft, sweet, beer flavoured kiss. The second man I've ever ... the only man I've ever ... Dear God ... "If I ever get you in

my bed I'll never let you out. That's not buddies, Fraser. You know that."

"I made the situation ... untenable." Hating myself, ashamed, my lips seeking his of their own volition.

He nibbles at my lower lip, whispers again. "He couldn't deal?"

"Obviously."

"I can. You kiss even better than I thought." Still-wet, warm tongue, less gentle, demanding both access and response. Receiving both despite my resolve. "Like that. You like that?"

No words, only a movement of my head.

Soft laugh-cackle. "Liar."

Again no words, a different movement of my head. And, again, warmth, wetness, tongue, mouth, teeth, and above all, feel. The touch of lips, too long since, the rasp of stubble, real stubble, soft and scratchy, the contradiction of sensation anchoring this event in reality. Soft moan-sigh, echoed in his throat, caught in my mouth. Another long exploration, languid, mutual feeding of desire. Desire ...

Bodies shift, adjust, arms move, pull, hands tug. "Wanted to kiss you, feel you, for so long, Benton Fraser." Cool air on my torso, wicked lips licking, sucking. Pebbling first one nipple, then the other. "You like that. You are so good for my ego, Benton Fraser."

"You keep saying my name ..."

"I like how it sounds. Not much about you I don't like." Mouth returns to nipple, summoning an arch, a moan, a raw sound.

"Not ... much?"

"You got me there. Not anything, Benton Fraser. Least not anything I can think of off the top of my head."

Startled chuckle. Compare, and contrast, and shouldn't. No furtive touch, no reluctance, no feeling of guilt for existence, for evoking a need that was mutual and much despised despite its allure.

"Hey, Benton, you still there?" Pulls back, faint frown, blue eyes worried, a trifle bloodshot, incredibly beautiful. Lean in to

kiss first one eyelid, then another, and his worry recedes, replaced by a soft sigh. Follow his jaw with my tongue, licking stubble, savouring taste, learning Ray. Head arcs back, encouraging more. Taut neck, warm skin, sweet golden skin, covering strong tendons. Tendons that seem to want teeth. A loud moan, hands clutch at my back. Ego feeding is, apparently, mutual.

"Jesus God, I knew that mouth was more than just show." Passion and laughter, inextricably mixed, unconscious of the fact that this cannot be guilt free, cannot be fun, cannot be warm, open, unconfined. Couldn't. Can. Can?

Shifting under me, sliding further down the couch, encouraging me to cover him. I brace one foot on the floor, pushing his shirt up, frightened but less so, possibility of rejection receding. Tongue sliding over, mouth suckling one hard nipple, unprepared for the buck, the fingers clutching my hair, the gasp. "Don't stop. I like that."

"Really?"

"Smart ass." Fingers still in my hair pull me down again. "Yeah, Ben. Just like ... that ..."

Moans and movement are satisfying, yes, but his mouth is a drug. Even the warm, fast exhalation from his nostrils on my face is arousing.

Break the kiss, rest against his head, breathing hard.

"Ben ..."

"Ray ..."

"I got a perfectly good bed in the other room ..."

Sense returns in a blinding flash. Struggling is fruitless, held close by strong arms.

"Don't panic, Fraser."

"I've already taken far more advantage of your condition than is acceptable, Ray."

"Me too."

Warm flicker of tongue against my ear sends common sense fleeing in a dark outward spiral.

"Clothes can stay on, Ben." Persuasive

whisper followed by tongue again. "We don't have to do anything else if you don't want to. But I wanna stretch out with you, feel you, okay? Kiss you, lick you some more. Because you taste damn good, you know that? I wanna taste your fucking collarbone, okay?"

Incoherent moan, involuntary nod. Force one more word out. "Stella."

"Stella. Shit. Frase, I'm not – I know this is you, okay? I mean, you're pretty hard to confuse with Stella, even when I've had a few. Wrong height, wrong hair colour, wrong mouth ... I was walkin' behind her and Orsini and it was like walking behind a stranger, Fraser. We got nothing in common. A dream, that's what I was walking behind. And you ... you 'n that voice. You and me, we got some basic things in common. I think we do. Would I go to bed with her? Well, not now. Would I have? Yeah. I hope not. Hope I have more sense'n that.

"And you ... Frase, you treat me like a person. Like a guy. In the crypt. You didn't nag me, you didn't lecture me ... much, you didn't guilt me. You just ... fuck, why did I have that last beer? You didn't ... I mean, you just told me what was what. Even with Stella, Fraser. You told me what was what. Dammit all to hell, you even stuck up for me – you know she's got you in her sights now, she's never gonna forget that. I like you. I like you, partner. Friend.

"Anyway. Took a long time. A long time. Maybe what we had was real and maybe it wasn't or maybe part of it was. But what I thought it was, and what I wanted it to be, what I wanted to get back, that part was a dream. A dream I couldn't have. A dream that just reminded me that I can't have stuff. And now I got a chance to have what I want. You. So. Benton Fraser. When I ask you to kiss me, to let me kiss you, to come to bed ... I'm asking you. And I'd've asked you last week, if I'd known ... if I'd known ... I'd've asked you a while ago. Especially if I'd known – " ... lascivious grin ... "- that I was an ass fu-

Only one possible response now, and my mouth closes on his, my eyes catching his look of intense pleasure coupled with a slight and understandable hint of smugness before closing to better enjoy the sensations wrought by his tongue and lips.

Lost in desire, sensation, again, tongues together again and again, bodies moving with each other again and again and again. "I thought you were ... incapacitated ... " Somehow force words into his mouth.

"Guess I was wrong."

"So you ... prevaricated ... "

"Hey, Fraser, any excuse to get past those scared Bambi eyes."

"Not scared."

"Oh, yes, scared." Pulls me into a tight warm hug. "Kay. Bed. C'mon." He reaches down my leg and tugs at the boot. "How come you never tie these? Izzat a cool Canadian thing? Like high school kids in America don't tie their hightops?"

"Inverse snobbery." I pull the other one off as well, place them side by side under his coffee table. He pulls himself up out of his sprawl, his entirely sensual sprawl, grins at me, and kicks them under the table.

"Loosen up, Benton Fraser." His grin widens as my instinctive reaction to straighten is checked, too tardily to hope he wouldn't notice. He moves his hand up my thigh and then onto my buttocks.

"Tightness in moderation, moderation, you got that?"

"I didn't think you understood that concept."

"You got me there. Not that moderate is a word that could be applied to yer ass anyhow. Come on. Night, Dief."

Ahead of me, pulling me by one hand. Afraid now, at the eleventh hour, of balking. And bed is, true, reality. Unfamiliar concept, reality nonetheless. My eyes slide away from the rumpled sheets, composure warring with panic. On the wall is the dream catcher. His dream catcher, made for a man increasingly dear to my heart, necessary to my soul, made in the hopes he would understand that offers of friendship,

partnership, were seriously meant; made too for healing, healing he needed, healing he is accomplishing. Made from friendship and worry, worry over a man who would voluntarily give up himself ... a man who thought that his self was not important enough to keep, to matter. And selfish gratitude that in no other way could we have met.

He's watching me, serious, not pushing.

"Yeah, I put it up. Did you think I wouldn't? You made it for me."

"I hoped ..."

"National Eagle Repository. You're a piece of work, Benton Fraser. You made that up."

"Actually, Ray -"

"I should have known. Anyhow. It caught my dream. Been catching lots of dreams for me. If you'd get in that bed, it'll have caught the best one of all."

Impossible to resist. Strength sorely lacking, will to resist even more so. Weakness in matters of passion is evidently a large part of my infrastructure. Choices of my heart ... best not to think about that, not when, perhaps, my heart is learning sense. Goodness. Warmth. Generosity of spirit and of body, of Ray.

I smile, simply, at him. He smiles back, steps back. The choice is mine, has to be mine, has to be made, generous even here, even now, when he knows he could unduly influence me with that mouth, that body, those hands. Trust. Comfort. More warmth.

"I see you need lessons in hospital corners." Move to the bed, stretch, tuck, straighten.

He grins, slow, wicked. Moves to the other side of the bed, pulls the covers down, deliberate, messy.

"Gonna starch my sheets?"

"That sounds positively ... indecent."

"Good. Which side do you like?"

My puzzlement is evident.

"Oh, yeah. Cots." But a swift frown, another thought rising to his lips, checked with a bite, teeth in lip, want to lick leftover indentation ... "At least we don't gotta

worry about that." He flops down on the bed, bunches a pillow under his neck, pats the bed.

Smiles, again, simply. Wants - me.

Almost involuntarily my hand goes to his face. He moves into my touch, unselfconsciously, pulls me down, helping me over that barrier. We lay, for a moment, in a tangle of limbs and awareness of two hearts beating more rapidly than recently expended effort would indicate.

"God ..." he whispers. "This dream come true stuff ... I am all over it."

"Dream catchers are supposed to catch nightmares. Bad dreams."

"Hey, I got a Canadian dream catcher. Special. And I sure don't know what universe you could be a nightmare in, Benton Fraser."

Warm hug, warm voice, dream, not nightmare, to this man, please let dream stay not-nightmare, wordless heartfelt plea to that selfsame universe. Warm hand on my back, circling, patting, inspiring my hands to similar motion.

"Hey, Frase." Hand under my shirt, stroking, touching, encouraging.

"Yes, Ray."

"That was cool." He pulls my shirt up and off, my protest quelled at the sight of him shrugging out of his own. It takes me a moment to respond.

"What was?"

"Orsini. I meant that, when I said thanks. That was ... that was cool."

"That was extremely rude, not to mention ill-mannered, and I will undoubtedly burn in hell for it."

"I'll be right there with you, Benton buddy. In fact ... if we're gonna ... let's go all out." Quick motion, twist of his wrist, unbuttons his jeans and then my own, slides his hand inside, nudging the zipper down.

"Clothes on, you said."

"And you believed me?"

"Not as such, no."

"Hey, Fraser." Fingers stroking, pulling, pushing; encouraging me wordlessly to reciprocate with gentle thrusts



of his hips.

“Ray?” Syllables, thoughts, becoming more and more difficult to form.

“How 'bout a breakfast date?” Ear to ear grin, hands moving up to pull me closer to him, mouth centimetres from mine.

“That would seem rather pointless, Ray.”

“Why's that?”

“We're already in bed.”

Earns another grin, another kiss, his hands back at work in his pants, mine.

“Fraser ... lift up.”

“Ray ...”

“Aw, come on, you're not gonna sleep in jeans. Me either.”

“I suspect sleeping isn't exactly on your agenda at this point.”

He's finished tugging off my pants, pulls off his own as well and casually drops both over the side of the bed to fall in a tangled heap on the floor. He crawls back up the bed, pulling the covers with him as he comes, and settles in half on top of me again. “I am tired, just not tired enough to keep my hands off you.”

This casual approach, matter of factness mixed with passion, is very disconcerting. He ... talks ... and he thinks ... and he does ... and all without guilt, no dark clouds in sight.

“Where'd you go, Benton Fraser? Still thinking? I'm not doing somethin' right.”

“You've done admirably ... it's me.”

He sighs exaggeratedly. “Time for the big guns. Time for that collarbone.” Head descends, lick nibble kiss down my throat. Lips fasten themselves to the base of my throat, sucking, tongue moving, hands moving down my body and can't help arching up into those hands, into that mouth.

“God, yeah,” he whispers. Moves his mouth to the hollow between shoulder and neck, licks, sucks, bites, unexpectedly, bringing me up off the bed. “Oh, yeah.” Feel him grin against my skin as he returns to the aforementioned collarbone, hands slipping inside the waistband of my boxers,

my hands reciprocating, drawing forth a moan and a thrust, warm hard flesh, soft wiry hair ... Twists against my hands, an almost-wriggle, and his underwear is down at mid thigh, one of his hands pushing it the rest of the way off. Hardness against my hip, against my hand, gluteal muscle in my other hand.

“Like that, Fraser? 'S okay?” He hesitates, his fingers at my waistband, beginning to push mine off.

The kindness unnerves me almost more than the prospect of falling, again, into a trap from which there is no escape, a scenario which can have no satisfactory ending. He mistakes my stillness for indecision and moves his fingers back up my torso, stroking gently.

“S okay, Frase. Sorry.”

“No, Ray. Not ... that.” Releasing him is not an option ... the feel of him so good, so good. “Please.” Lift my hips slightly off the bed, in an invitation impossible to miss. “Please.”

“Thank you, Benton Fraser,” he whispers against my mouth. “Thank you.” And together, his hands, my body, we make short work of the remainder. He drops my underwear over the side of the bed with the same careless abandon as before, as if we, in the bed, are of paramount importance and the rest just so much dross.

Finally skin to skin, naked, full sensory awareness, the sensation of touch much neglected. Difficult to tear my eyes away from him, his chest, his abdomen, his groin, his thighs, even his feet. He doesn't seem to mind, just smiles at me, lets his eyes move up and down my body in the same manner, followed quickly by his hands, moving gently but unerringly to my swollen hardness.

“Gorgeous cock, Benton Fraser,” he whispers. The blush is, at this point, a given, although hearing him talk, hearing him tell me how much he wants me, how much he wants this, is almost a greater gift than even his touch. “Thick, hot, smooth. Can I taste you?”

Again unprepared for my reaction, a swift instinctive thrust into his hands as my mouth gasps, “No!”

“Why not?” He pushes his tongue between his teeth briefly, cocks his head at me. “You don't like it?”

“I don't ... know.”

“Fuck, Benton Fraser. You're gonna know. Then you can decide.”

“Ray, please. You ... you don't have to ...” Agony of embarrassment, never dreamt of asking, of wanting something so far beyond possibility. Push myself onto my elbows to watch in almost horrified fascination, fear, anticipation.

“Don't have to? No shit, Ben.” Long tongue comes out again to flicker up the underside, lick the top.

“God, Ray ...”

“Nobody's ever gone down on you? What, were they both blind?” His tongue comes out again, swirls around his lips. Beyond words, watch him lower his head, his mouth, oh God, his mouth ... hot, yes, wet, yes, licking, sucking, moving in concert with my helpless thrusts. Have been there, have tasted, have never been tasted ... never thought of being tasted, never wanted to be tasted out of a sense of reciprocity; wanted this, this way, now now now ... suddenly bereft, cool air chilling my skin.

“Fraser, next time I buy a twelve pack, don't let me. Jesus. I'm sorry. You taste so good and I am so buzzed...” He flops back on the bed, grinning, one hand still caressing me. “Oh, you like that. I can do that.”

“You don't have to do anything, Ray.”

“Oh, you do it yourself?”

“Ray!”

“Jeez, Frase, chill already. We all do it. Wow. That's some, ah, coverage on the blush there.” He grins, tired lines around his eyes merging with smile lines. Pull him towards me, hug him hard, feel his lips move to, yes, my collarbone. My hands, everywhere, my mouth licking, tonguing whatever it can reach. Moving against each other, bodies, lips, tongues, again and again.

Moan, soft, and a breath of sound.

“Want you, Frase.”

Gather strength, drop my head to my arm for a moment. Begin to roll over – strong arms catch, pull me back.

“Where you going, Ben?”

“I – you want me. And I – I do ...”

“I want you. In me.”

Neither he nor I is prepared for my reaction, involuntary withdrawal, reflex in full startle.

“What the hell?”

“No, Ray.”

“Fraser. Ben. It's been a while but I liked it then. Like it now, with you. What are you worried about?”

“I don't ... I don't know what ... Ray, I cannot talk about these things.”

“Frase, I am all over the fucking thing but we gotta talk about the ... the basics. I like this, I don't like that, I wanna try this, don't wanna do that.”

He eyes me up and down, shakes his head. Grins. “Nonverbally? Tell me in sign language, Inuktitut? I want you to fuck me. Got that? Nod.”

Nod. Blush uncontrollably. “Ray ... I ... can't. I don't know ... and ...”

“And?”

“And I would ... I would cut off my right arm before I would hurt you.”

“Fuck.”

Long silence, tension implicit in every stretching second.

“Why, Ben?”

“He ... needed. I ... wanted ...”

“So somehow he managed to keep his mouth off that gorgeous cock and now you're telling me he couldn't even fuck ass right?”

“Ray –”

“Your loyalty thing kills me, Benton Fraser, but I get it, I'll shut up about him now. Shit.” Flings back against the pillow, mattress bouncing under us both. “You into pain?”

“No, Ray.”

“He into pain?”

“Not that kind, no.”

"I ain't into pain. Not that kind, and not the other kind either. But if you don't want to, I'm not gonna push it."

Instinctive contradiction rising to my lips, checked on my tongue. But he hears it anyway. Dilated pupils, another flash of teeth, the weight of his body, warm, hard, on mine, settling us into the sheets, hungry oh God hungry tongue.

"Fraser ..."

"Mmm."

"I don't get you. Even though you don't like it that way, you were gonna ... for me? How come?"

"I ... sometimes, at first, it was ... and you wanted ..."

"I want a lotta things, Fraser, you gonna give 'em all to me even if it hurts you?"

"If I can."

"You give me this then? You fuck me? Because I want that." As tension increases so does thrusting, hard lengths between us and against each other. "God ... I want that ... want it all, Benton Fraser ... want to suck you and fuck you and lick you and feel you come in my mouth, in my ass ..."

Sparks of sensation flickering, catching, burning from my groin up into my chest and then my head, convulsions shaking me ...

"... and all over my belly ..." Grins again, sweetly. "Gorgeous man." Stroking the back of my cheek with the knuckles of one hand, while the other finds its way to my hip and then further down, holding me tight, thrusting into the now-slippery warmth between us, strong, hard, stronger, harder ... jerks his head back, eyes closing tight, my name on his lips. His face ... his face everything I imagined.

Tired grin, rueful. "Sorry, Frase."

"Well, you did warn me."

"Will you stay?"

"I'm too comfortable to move, Ray."

"You feel so ... so damn solid, Benton Fraser. 'Night."

Happiness is growing, expanding, tightening my chest. Even drunk, asleep, he

holds me ... unaccustomed but good. So good. So warm, so hard. So there. With me. With. Me.

oOo

A tickling at the edge of awareness. Unfamiliar softness beneath my cheek, unfamiliar scents in the sheets, in the air. Coffee. Semen. Sweat. Ray. The mattress gives with a faint creak as Ray sits, mug between his hands.

"Morning, Frase."

"Good morning."

"You blush over that? You kill me, Benton Fraser. How you doin'? Want some coffee? I made a real pot."

"How are you doing?"

"Never better, Frase. Aspirin, coffee, and you in my bed. I'm good to go."

Expel an anticipatory breath, shaky, cautiously allow the world to settle into a new configuration.

"You havin' second thoughts?" Holds his mug, almost absently, to my lips, and just as absently, I inhale a sip. Frown, swallow bitterness laced with chocolate.

"Anticipating same, yes."

"I admit this wasn't the best idea I ever had."

Sheer panic, fought down with terror and rising despair.

"I'd have to say the best idea I ever had was taking this assignment." Sips coffee, smiles over the rim of the mug, mischief, delight. Full awareness, no regret ... no greater gift. In the back of my mind, my heart, my stomach, an unrecognised tension releases, leaving me drained, shy, ecstatic.

"So." Conversationally. "Shower first or fuck first?"

Gulp, inhale, swallow, choke.

Ray chuckles. "Back to the, uh, nonverbal communication?"

"I don't think you were quite as ... inebriated as you wanted me to think you were."

"I'm a Polack, Frase, I was weaned on

vodka. But frankly I'd rather be sober for the fucking." One more sip of coffee, for me, for him, and then he leans over to kiss me as he puts the mug on the night stand.

"Ray, I – shower, teeth ... oh, God, Diefenbaker!"

"Relax, Frase. I already took him out. You been sacked. Been a while since you had sex?"

"Ah ..."

"So things were kinda downhill even before he left?"

"You might say that."

"I do say that."

"Why do you want to talk about him?"

He shrugs. "I don't know. I ... trying to get my head around it, I guess. That anyone could ... leave you ... I'll tell you right now, I couldn't." Solemn, sober. Almost scared. "I ... want more. Want more than just last night and today."

"Yes, so you said."

"Said what?"

"If you got me in your bed you'd never let me out. I hope that that was largely figurative."

"For the weekend, Fraser, that's entirely literal. For the rest of the time ... yeah, guess I'll have to let you go to work, liaise with me, toss bombs around, that kind of stuff. But come the night ..."

My eyes close in relief, anticipation, fear, a delight of my own. Want. Need. Gifts, from him, to me; to him, from me.

He's watching me, gravely, waiting.

"I would be ... satisfied ... with more than last night and today as well."

"Satisfied. We'll have to work on that. My fault for tryin' to seduce you when I'm drunk."

"You were trying to seduce me?"

"Yeah."

"I thought seduction followed a somewhat subtler policy."

"For me, that was subtle, Benton Fraser. I'm a lot like you in that respect." He grins, finally, and reaches down to kiss me, a seal, a benediction, a confirmation. "C'mon. Let's shower."

"Oh."

"Jesus, Fraser, what the hell is that look? Hit me over the head with an axe handle ... shit, no wonder Vecchio couldn't help himself." Husky voice, getting huskier, muffled in my neck. "God knows I can't ..." Warm lips, strong tongue, coffee/spice/Ray flowing over my taste buds. Even better than last night, could lose myself in just this forever.

"Fraser. Ben. Jesus. Let's shower."

Shaky voiced, unobtrusively eases his jeans as he sits back, takes another sip of coffee. "Come on. We got all day. And I got a couple of shower fantasies."

"Ray." Unsure. Full of longing.

"Yeah. I know. It's okay. Told you, I want you. I know what I want. Don't care what people tell me I'm supposed to want. You and me, okay?" Stands, abruptly, looks away and then drags his gaze back to me as if he can't help himself. "Shower. Jesus. You're pretty damn fuckable. Bet you get hit on all the time."

"No."

"Must be the, uh, intimidating Mountie uniform. Me, I like the way you fill out a pair of jeans."

Turns, quickly, discarding clothes as he removes himself from temptation, and the sound of water follows after a moment or two of silence. Roll out of bed, myself, body still languorous from sleep and the aftermath of love. Sex.

He's already in the shower, steam filling the air. Pushes aside the door to watch me rinse my mouth, use the toilet – blushing, ridiculously. He grins again. "Like I said ... nice package."

"You find me attractive?" Unconscious echo. Real need.

"Get your ass in here. God damn, Ben." Hot wet water, hot wet kiss, wet skin, wet hands. "You bet I do. Don't mean to embarrass you, Fraser, but you gotta know you're gorgeous. Didn't anyone ever tell you that?"

"Men don't ... say that."

"This one does. I take beauty where I

find it.”

“Ray, I don't know how to respond to that. I ... don't.”

He looks surprised. “You don't have to. Turn around. You have incredible hair too, you know that? Soft, thick.”

“Ray, can I say those things to you?”

Turns me back around, pins me with two blue eyes. “If you want to. If you want you can say anything you want to me.”

“We're the same height.”

“Yeah.” Nonplussed.

“I have wanted to touch your hair for weeks now.”

Closes his eyes, passion, triumph, his mouth opening slightly. “God, Ben. Did I tell you what your voice does to me?”

“You alluded to it last night, I believe. I have also wanted to touch your face. Your jaw.”

“You like stubble?”

“On you? Yes.”

He rinses his hair, nudges me under the spray to rinse my own as he finishes soaping me, his fingers covering every inch of my body, long fingers, nimble fingers, everywhere but my groin ...

Then, at last, gentle touch, soap everywhere, even ...

“Do me too, Frase.” Face buried in my neck, full body contact in a face to face hug, his fingers parting, circling, rubbing ...

The soap falls unheeded to the shower floor, unfamiliar sensations, patterns of arousal. He moans as a fingertip follows. Moans and jerks back, down, against my finger. “This is gonna be ... so good ...” Expects the reaction, this time, holds me through it. “Good, Ben. I promise. Do not stop.”

Hungry mouth, greedy fingers, around in front of me now, and then soft sigh as he sinks to his knees, holding me in both hands, both our mouths opening in anticipation. Grins up at me, unexpectedly, head tilted. “It was fun with a buzz, but it's even more fun now.” Hot wet slickness, that tongue again, up, down, under, behind. Moaning around me, adding to the sensory

stimulation. He wants this ... me ...

Brace one hand on the shower door, the other against the tiled wall, my knees threatening to buckle. He throws one arm around my hips to help support us, his suckling growing more abandoned, harder, faster, stroking in time.

“Ray ... Raaaaayyy ...”

The mouth disappears momentarily although the hand continues. “You gonna come in my mouth, Benton Fraser?”

Never realised the effect words could have, prior experience having been silent, hurried couplings. Words meant realisation, meant truth, meant inability to pretend it wasn't what it was. Nod, choke, and thrust into his mouth, there again, the concept of his desire and mine meshing, clearly, enough to trigger my orgasm almost without stimulation. He moans around me again, sucking, swallowing, eagerly, both hands cradling my buttocks, letting me have all of him, all of his mouth ... and then supports me, lowering me gently with him to the floor of the tub. Smiles at me, opens his mouth slightly so I can see the slickness inside.

“Wanna taste yourself?”

Dear God ... yes ...

Air, water, fire ... grounded finally by the coolness falling on us. Release his mouth, finally, whisper, “I want to taste you too.”

“I am so glad to hear that.”

Pushes me up, takes my hand to pull himself up as he turns off the shower, steps out, pulls out towels. “Not much point in dressing ... Jesus, Ben, you gonna blush like that when you go down on me?”

“Does it matter?”

“No.” Hand in the middle of his chest, pushing him down to sit on the closed lid of the toilet, legs spread for balance as he descends. His eyes widen. He grins again. “Bed?”

“I don't want to wait.”

Half erect penis, growing under my eyes, under my tongue, against my lips. Despite the shower, he still smells of Ray, of

man, of sex, of need, of wanting. Bury my nose between his penis and his scrotum, inhaling deeply, damp soap-musk-semen, scent brings out my tongue to taste, to learn again, a new part.

“Goddamn, Fraser ...”

Fully erect now, straining against my cheek as my tongue continues tasting his scrotum, the muscle below it, the crease at his hip, one hand tangling in my damp hair, one hand roughly caressing my shoulder.

“You’re a fucking tease, Benton Fraser.”

Give in, finally, to the allure of that straining muscle, the even greater allure of that man who wants this, unashamedly, openly, joyfully. The taste is different, saltier, richer; for a moment he simply rests in my mouth, allowing my tongue and my palate to grow accustomed to the new diameter, the different taste of him, the sparking feel of his pulse pounding against my tongue. Slow movement forward results in a moan and a controlled thrust.

Uncontrolled is better. Unleash my tongue, elicit wild thrusts, groans, and, all too soon, a climax, not soon enough, so long, and rare even then, since the taste of sex has filled my mouth. Greedy, yes, continuing until he moans and pulls up on my hair.

“Too ... good, way too much, leggo now. Oh, man.” He pulls me up to kiss him, to share the taste of him in my mouth as he shared the taste of me in his. “Sorry, again, Ben. What you do to me. Feel like I’m sixteen, just lookin’ at you going down on me is enough to make me come.”

Puzzled, my head cocks as it draws back and we regard each other. “I don’t understand why you feel it necessary to apologise, Ray.”

He looks equally puzzled for a moment, and then grins. “You are so damn good for my ego, Benton Fraser. You really get off on that, don’t you.”

Traitorous blush, again, but his hand won’t let my head drop. Forces me to look at him.

“Fraser, I get off on it too. Kinda thought that was why we were both here, huh?”

He slides down to kneel with me on the small rug, hugs me hard. As if he knows the words can’t form, oddly, considering my usual facility.

“Hey,” he whispers. “I meant that.”

“I know.”

“C’mon. Back to bed.” He opens a small drawer as we stand, scrabbling at the back, pulling out a small bottle and a plastic square. “Gotta move this stuff to the night stand, I guess, if we’re gonna be using it.”

No sound, no movement even, but something charges the atmosphere, makes him look at me swiftly, standing mute.

“Shit, Ben. What?”

Shake my head. Ray is right. Ray was right. Ray is too important to risk.

“What, Ben? Damn it all to hell, I am gonna go hunt Vecchio down and get the full story out of him. I’m getting it outta you, kinda, but it’s hard on my nerves. Condoms are bad? What? What’s up with that?”

“Condoms are fine, Ray. I’m ... sorry.”

“Bad memories? C’mon, Benton Fraser, spill.”

“I can’t, Ray!” Sharply. Almost angrily but relief of tension, of some kind of emotion necessary, even the wrong kind. “I cannot stand here naked in your bathroom in broad daylight and tell you things that I don’t have words for, that I don’t have emotions for!”

He pulls me around, one hand clenched on my arm. “You just went down on me in broad daylight in my bathroom. I just sucked your cock in my shower in broad daylight. It felt damn good. No reason to feel ashamed. We both wanted it, both enjoyed it. If you can’t tell me, fine. I can wait. I’m not a patient guy but I can wait, for you. Because, damn it, Benton Fraser, you are enough. You are enough for me, here, now, today, tomorrow.” He reaches down and pulls a few sheets of toilet paper off the roll, blots my eyes with a rough kindness, pulls me, stiff, unyielding, into a warm hug, wrapping his arms around me, one leg even, pushing his face into my neck,

mine into his.

"I'm sorry," he mutters after a few moments. "I'm not ... not thinking straight. I know. I know what the problem is. I think. So it's okay. No condoms, okay?" His lips caress my neck. "You're Mr. Clean. Vecchio and me, we get tested. I ... God, Frase, I haven't had sex since Stella and me split up. Don't laugh."

"Why would I – "

"You are sweet, Benton Fraser. This condom's probably expired anyhow. Why do condoms have expiration dates? I don't get that."

Choke against his neck, as he intended. He expands upon the theme, still holding me tightly. "I mean, what? Airtight package, latex that won't disintegrate for a thousand years? Can you imagine the archaeologists? I mean, dating the find'll be a breeze but I'd lay money they could open the damn thing and use it in a thousand years. But they won't. They'll put it all holy holy on a pedestal in a museum – by that time no one'll know what it is – with one of those scholarly kinda plaques with all the theories as to what it was, how it was used, and its probable cultural significance."

"Which was huge." Equilibrium almost restored, arms relaxing around me now.

"Pretty much, yeah. And unless they find more than one, they won't even open the package. So they'll X-ray or ultrasound it or whatever and try to figure out what the hell our culture was doing with so many circles wrapped in plastic, because they'll see the magazine ads and stuff. And then someone'll write a book linking the circles in the plastic to the crop circles that also plagued the late twentieth century. And someone else'll write a book debunking all the scholarly explanations for the cultural significance and that book will conclude that it was all about sex. Just to be a shit, you know? But ... that book'll be right. One last fuck you from the twentieth century."

"It all comes back to sex."

"There ya go. We're on the same page again. Bed, Benton Fraser." He tugs at me,

and then turns back, serious again, soft rapid voice. "I'm not gonna let you go. Not gonna let you hide. You gotta tell me. Not today, not tomorrow. But you gotta tell me. Trust me. Partners and friends."

"Then ... you need to listen for stories without words."

"I fucking love the way you talk, Fraser." Pulls me in close for a deep, hard, almost bruising kiss. "I'll listen. To all your stories. All the different ways you tell 'em."

"Ray ..." Sound of need. My need.

He takes my hand and pulls me after him, back to the bedroom.

"I wasn't kidding, Benton Fraser. Back in bed." He pulls the covers down, rearranges the pillows, actually tucks me in as he pulls the covers back up. "Stay there. I'm coming right back. Okay? Think of some stories." Grins, a little tremulously, and touches a finger to my lips.

"Will Inuit stories be acceptable?"

"Whatever, Frase."

Ray leaves as Diefenbaker enters.

"Wolf'll have to get off the bed when I come back," he says over his shoulder. A grumble as Diefenbaker jumps up on the bed, sniffs me, and flops, not entirely disapprovingly, next to me, warm comfort. Small happiness – he likes Ray. Ray likes him.

Stare at the ceiling, one hand in Dief's fur. Thinking about everything. Nothing. Ray. Ray. Acceptance. Liking ... Pleasure. Apparently mutual, a heretofore unthinkable concept. Friendship. More ...

"Oh-kay." Ray returns with a tray and an enamel bowl. Dief lifts his head, ears cocked. "C'mon. Dief. Look at me. Fraser, tell him his breakfast is down here." Absentmindedly drops the small bottle and, afterthought, picked up as a unit, the condom packet on the near night stand.

"Dief ..." Diefenbaker jumps down, whines, sniffs the bowl and sets to.

"Eukanuba, right? Not the sled dog stuff, though. He doesn't need that. Like they'd have it in Chicago. Ha."

"How early were you up, Ray?"

“There's a vet clinic a few blocks over, Fraser. Open on Saturdays, no problemo. I got it when I walked him. I told you, you're not listening. In bed, my bed, never let you out. Got that? Maybe for a Dief run this afternoon but that's it. Got it? Got it?” He pushes everything off the other night stand and puts the tray down. “Orange juice. Cereal okay? Frosted Mini Wheats, kinda healthy. No Corn Pops.” Another laugh as he hands me a bowl, spoon already inserted. Unfamiliar taste and texture but not unpleasantly crunchy, not overly sweet. Orange juice freshly squeezed. A man of surprises. Too many to count, especially after the last few hours.

“Thank you.”

“Ulterior motives, Frase. Not gonna give you a chance to back out until I've shown you what we can have.”

“I have no intention of backing out, Ray.” Firm glance, equally firm return. Warm grin, echoed in my face.

“Good. You like this? You ever had this? I was gonna make oatmeal but figured you had lots of that growing up. Time to stretch your wings, huh?”

“Yes, I like it. And yes, oatmeal was a favourite. I am a Fraser, after all.”

“Hmmm. Good thing I didn't go for that. You're probably an oatmeal connoisseur. Steel cut oats, right?”

“Generally. And no sugar, of course.”

“Of course. That'd be, like, weakness. Or taste good. Or something weird and unCanadian like that. What'd you put on it, anything?”

He pours himself and me more cereal from the box on the tray, adds milk from a small pitcher.

“Butter, milk, salt.”

“No wonder you lick electrical sockets and mud, Benton Fraser.”

“It's not bad when ... “

“When that's all you've ever known, huh.”

“Precisely. In fact, the concept of sugar is unsettling and I'm not sure I would like it.”

“You should try it. Brown sugar, milk, a little butter. That's how my mom made it. And plain old Quaker oats. Make you some tomorrow morning, okay?”

“Okay, Ray.”

“You'll try it?”

“Of course.”

“Good.” He stares at me a moment, as if something else were promised. Perhaps it was. Shakes his head, tops off the orange juice and then drains his glass. His energy was unsettling at first. Now it is craved. He puts his glass and bowl on the tray and then climbs under the covers with me, settling his head on my thigh, one arm across my lap, one wound around my back. Sighs.

Finish, quickly, dispense with my own dishes to slide down with him, to hold him. Decadent to be in bed in full daylight without illness as a reason. Hedonistic. Long suspected streak, now confirmed.

Leisurely touching, slow thorough exploration. No urgency, no worry.

“I'm tall but you're so solid, Frase,” he says softly, rolling, pulling me on top of him, prefacing his remark with a kiss to my shoulder. “I like the feel of you under me, on me.”

Smile, bend to kiss him, flash of red in the corner of my eye. The packet. The condom. Close my eyes, resolutely. No fear here, no guilt, not yet, perhaps not ever. Different man, different place, different time, different me. Kiss him, feel his warm mouth, lick his teeth, ignoring.

“You like to feel me too?”

Encourages me to talk, also different, must remember – this Ray wants words, needs words, wants ... participation. Open my eyes to reassure him and catch red again in my peripheral vision. “Yes yes, Ray. You feel ... wonderful.”

“You're not here, Frase. What are you doin'? What are you worrying about? Dirty night stand? Oh. The lube?” He cranes his neck, unable to clearly see the red packet behind the small bottle. Pushes up on his elbow, eyes narrowing. “Shit. Sorry. I didn't even notice. The condom?” Softer voice.

"You gonna tell me? What was it?"

Close my eyes, can feel the texture, smell the distinctive odor of latex as if it was yesterday.

"No, Ray, nothing ... we just had to use them. All the time, after a while. For almost everything. Even when he was in – when we were – I had to wear one."

"What? Just to stroke you off?"

Long silence, tension in the lithe body under mine. Move off him, partially, unable to look in his eyes.

"I ... " Apologetic. "I don't understand. I'm not tryin' to make it harder. I really don't understand."

"It wasn't ... me ... that way."

"I'll say. Why the hell did you do it that way, Ben? It's not your fault ... you didn't know any better ... but didn't you ask yourself, at least?"

"Yes, of course."

"Rational Mountie."

"But he needed it. I needed him. Those were the terms."

"Fraser, your choice. I guess. But that's so ... well, I won't say that. But why? If he hated it so much, why?"

Voice breaks, sinks to a whisper, shakes. "Because he wanted me. It was me. He couldn't say no. And it was so wrong. Even when it felt good he felt wrong."

"Probably felt worse. Catholics're good at that." Matter of fact, anchoring me to reality, warm hand on my back reminding me to breathe. "He could've said no, Frase. Don't know why he didn't."

"You weren't there."

"Lucky for him. What, did he feed you a line about helpless in your spell crap? You pulled his dick out and stuck it up your ass?"

Angry, getting angrier, too familiar, tension in the body so familiar, in the voice, frightening similarity, and when he raises his other hand my flinch is entirely involuntary, trapped between memories, trapped in the past.

He sits in a flash, eyes wide, startled, furious. "Jesus fucking Christ, Ben! God!

Fuck!" He shifts backwards across the bed slowly, giving me space, hands out. "Tell me he didn't hurt you, Ben."

"No."

"You lyin' to me?"

"No."

"Did he hurt you? Hit you?"

"No."

"Did he yell at you?"

"N ... no."

"Fraser, damn it, spill!"

"He ... said things."

"Hurting things?"

"Yes."

"You didn't believe it. You did believe it. Jesus Christ, Fraser. You know, love's not like that. Hell, most sex isn't like that. Why ... how ... damn it, I'm sorry, Fraser, I'm making things worse. But you – I like you a lot. Can't believe you wanna go to bed with me. And it blows my mind that anyone lucky enough to go to bed with you would waste any time thinking about anything but you."

"At least he didn't try to kill me."

My attempt at humour fails miserably. Black frown follows.

"What? The Metcalf bitch? You tellin' me she blamed you for wanting you?"

"She didn't want me at all. There were ... there were no fingerprints in my apartment, Ray. She spent two nights there and there were no fingerprints."

"So Vecchio comes along with every available surface covered in latex and you figure that as long as he's leaving fingerprints somewhere that's okay."

"It was all ... too much." Too many expectations, too much anger, even more guilt. "It's all right, Ray. I understand why."

"I don't think it's all right. I don't think the bare idea is all right, and I don't think your rationalisations are all right. Did he ... did he kiss you?"

"Not very often, no."

"Well, you know, I thought he was a fucking asshole before but now I'm pretty damn sure he's just massively brain-damaged." Rolls off the bed. "Hang on." Is

back in seconds with a matchbook. "We'll burn the fucking thing."

Torn between laughter and chagrin. "You'll set off the smoke alarm, Ray."

"Shit. Hang on." Rattling in the kitchen, back again, flourishing scissors triumphantly. "Cut it up." He hands me the scissors, like a child, handle first. "Go on."

Can't hold back a laugh. Scissors are poised when he grabs the packet away. "Not that way. The whole damn thing, Ben." Tears it open, holding my eyes. Hands me the now empty packet. "Cut. Go on. Cut." Shoves a wastebasket towards me with his foot. "Little pieces."

I obey, wordlessly.

Still holding my eyes, he unrolls the condom. "Here you go. Have at it. Cut it right up the middle. Cut it in half. Tiny pieces, Fraser."

Involuntary shiver as my fingers pull the bottom down, feel the familiar texture, insert the bottom half of the scissors into the tube. A chill up my spine, unexpected, as the scissors close sharply.

"Again." Ray holds it so the other side is available. Hands me both pieces, steady gaze. "Cut. Tiny pieces. Go on."

A certain satisfaction; a greater feeling of relief as the pieces grow smaller and smaller and disappear bit by bit into the trash. He takes the scissors back as my feet find the floor.

"Where you goin', Frase?"

"To wash. The odor ... lingers."

"Okay. You okay? Feel better?"

"Very much so."

He grabs my hand as we reach the door. Presses it against the door frame. Presses his own slightly above it. Grins at me. "Fingerprints, Frase."

No option left but to kiss him, try to return his gift with one of my own. He responds wholeheartedly, a murmur in his throat, cold steel pressing against my back.

"Mmmm. Go wash up, Benton Fraser." He grins, runs a finger down my jaw. "Then back to bed, no more distractions. Just wanna leave my fingerprints all over you."

Heads to the kitchen. Still moving soap around my fingers when he joins me in the bathroom, an arm coming around either side of my body to wash his hands too, warm lips on my neck, spikes of stubble. The contact ... the amount of touching he provides, I need, he needs, is incredible. So too is the feel of his tongue on my neck, circling, licking, as he entwines his hands with mine, soaping together, rinsing together, soaping again, final rinse. He reaches for a towel, tongue still moving on my neck, and dries our hands together.

"You got nice hands, Benton Fraser," he whispers, breath cool against the heated, wet skin of my neck.

"As do you, Ray."

"You like that?" He licks again, sucks.

"Yes."

"You got a nice neck too. Mmmm. You taste so good. You taste like you smell."

"How do I smell?"

"Mmm. Vanilla. Snow. My grandma's linen closet. Wolf. Benton Fraser."

"You smell of sunwarmed apples, motes of air in the sunlight, oranges stuck with cloves."

He turns me around to look at me, wide eyed, grinning again. "Jesus, Ben. Is that – is that good? You sound like you like me. Like to smell me."

"I didn't say I liked those things."

"You didn't say if you liked to kiss me, either."

"It's growing on me."

"You are so funny."

"I believe you mentioned ... bed? Earlier?"

"Keep getting distracted in the bathroom. What's up with that? I never thought the bathroom was a particularly sexy room before."

"I'd imagine your presence has a lot to do with it."

"I'd imagine it's kinda mutual, unless you're makin' a sly dig at my solitary activities. Which generally take place in bed, anyhow."

Success in repressing the flush until

that moment. He grins triumphantly. "That's quite a handicap, there, Benton Fraser."

"Believe me, Ray, I am well-acquainted with my shortcomings."

"Don't know how you get shortcoming outta incredibly sexy blush, Frase."

He holds my hand as we walk back to the bedroom together. The casual openness, admission of closeness, of affection, is without precedent. Wonder, briefly, if he would hold my hand in an alley. In his car.

In bed, he props himself on his elbows and looks at me. "Okay, Frase. Need you to do some math for me. What's the surface area of your skin?"

"In inches or centimetres?"

"Real measurements, Canadian freak."

"I believe the average is something like two square metres, Ray."

"Freak. What's the surface area of my fingertips?" He holds one hand out, palm up.

"Ah, approximately ten square centimeters, at a guess."

"So how long would it take, if the train left Chicago at eleven a.m. going 60 miles – kilometres – an hour for me to cover every inch of you with my fingerprints?"

"Is the train moving at a steady rate of speed with no stops?"

"Uh, no. No. It's gonna go fast and slow and sometimes it's gonna stop altogether." His face less than inches from my own, one side of his mouth curving into the groove I find difficult to keep my eyes from. One hand hovering over me, so close the warmth is apparent, but not touching, not yet. "I bet you were good at word problems."

"In which direction is the train travelling?"

"Oh, I think you could guess that. South. Definitely southbound."

"It's difficult to give a precise answer, given the fact that the train's variable rate of speed makes a certain amount of estimation necessary ..."

"Oooh, watch the Mountie squirm."

"Forty-four hours, Ray." A glance at the

clock. "Forty-three hours and fifty-two minutes."

"Wow. That's about what I guessed. Something to be said for inductive reasoning, huh." Grins, again, and touches, finally, finally, and the only possible response is to touch in return. "Let's get started. Top down or bottom up?"

"It's a quandary."

"Quandary. You kill me, Benton Fraser. Top just because I can't believe how soft your hair is." He rolls on top of me, suits actions to words, pressing his fingertips gently all over my head, my temples, my ears, my forehead, my eyes ... Attempt to reciprocate but he shakes his head. "My turn for now, Ben. Close your eyes. Feel me. Feel me." Content myself with resting my hands on his hips, then, concentrating on his touch. Every inch of my face, ending with my lips, starting down my jaw, pressing lightly at my artery, pausing for a moment to put his mouth there instead, his tongue pressing, steady, feeling my pulse. Draw in a shaky breath.

"You're so alive, Benton Fraser. I love that."

"I love how you enjoy life, Ray."

"Gonna learn from me, Fraser? Gonna learn that? You're trying, aren't you."

"I think you're right. Do that again."

This time he runs his tongue all the way up the artery, bites gently at my jawbone, riding out my startled gasp and tightening of my grip. "Train's getting sidetracked," he whispers. "You're too much. So damn responsive."

"I think rather that it's your skill, Ray."

He pulls back, frowns, shakes his head. His face clears after a moment. "You believe that? You believe that."

"Of course." Puzzled. Responses evoked unlike anything in my experience, spontaneous combustion, unquestionably Ray as accelerant.

"Wow, Fraser. Okay, remember how I said I was gonna have to let you outta my bed during the week? I changed my mind. Gonna keep you here twenty-four, seven."

“That sounds eminently desirable, Ray.”

He gives his head a little shake. “Okay. Okay. Back to fingerprinting. Jesus, Ben. You make my gut flop.”

Incredible sentiment, inelegantly expressed, apter than apt: physical, emotional, mental upheaval.

Fingers continue down my neck to my shoulders, my collarbone, pressing, rolling – the professional touch, faintly amusing. Easy to imagine the whorls and swirls imprinted on my skin, more permanent than any tattoo. He occupies himself with one arm, out to the hand, pressing our hands together, fingers to fingers, before starting on the other arm, where he does the same. Then, back to my chest, down, down to one nipple. Again, the mouth, the tongue, as if unable to resist. Again, my response, primitive, unrestrained, unashamed: acceptable desire, acceptable need, acceptable reaction to entirely new sensation.

“No one ever touched you there, huh, Ben? Last night was the first time for that too?”

“How – how can you tell?”

“You get – you get this kinda amazed look on your face.” Voice soft, getting softer. “Beautiful, heartbreaking. You’re some kinda awesome cop, strong guy, together guy, but I feel so damned protective. What’s that? What’s that about? I just wanna ... just wanna kiss it all away.”

“You are. Protective. Very.”

“Christ, Ben.” Abandons my nipple to pull me into a fierce, hard hug. “It might just take forty-some hours to finish this.”

“All right.”

Pulls back, grins. “I like that you’re into this. You into me talking? I talk too much?”

“If you were to stop, I would become seriously alarmed and undoubtedly begin artificial respiration.”

“Oh.” He fingerprints in silent earnestness for a few moments more, resolutely avoiding eye contact, serious mouth. Play. Provocation. My gut flips, then

flops. Grab his wrists, roll us both so he is underneath, find his mouth, breathe softly into it before sealing our lips, finding his tongue.

“That’s not quite how they taught us to do it here in America, Frase.” Nibbles gently along my top lip.

“I have often noticed that America isn’t quite as cutting edge as it likes to think it is.”

“Face it, Frase. You need to polish that technique.”

“As you wish, Ray.”

Kiss, frivolous, deepens rapidly into desire and thence into passion. Wanting ... not quite sure what, yes, knowing what, not wanting to admit ... comfort, desire, ease restored, dislike distressing Ray. Still some reeling, in my own life, from the past. Cold darkness to taint the warmth and light that is Ray. Somehow he burns ... burns away corruption, cauterises wounds, cleansing swift and painful and final. Endings and beginnings, so similar, each beginning more painful than the last.

Eyes dark with desire open to mine, curiously intense. “Where you keep going, Benton Fraser?”

“I ... have a certain amount of disbelief inherent in my system.”

“Get back in your head and back in my bed and kiss me again. Jesus, your tongue ought to be outlawed.”

“Yours should be imprisoned.”

“In your mouth ... okay.”

Back, yes, completely in the moment, on Ray, tongue in Ray’s mouth, perfect ... Ray’s hands ... his warm, hard body ... thrusting, short thrusts at first ... longer, slower, luxuriating in the feel.

“You like this. Like ... feeling? Like seeing me? Like – “

“Kissing, Ray.” And follow word with mouth. Kissing. Ray. Feeling. Ray. Wanting. Ray.

“Yeah ...”

More, more sensation, more intense, am vaguely aware of Ray reaching out to the night stand, opening the bottle. Opening.

Bottle. React ... negatively.

"Ssshh, Frase, wait. Trust me. Help me out here. Put some in my hand."

No choice but to comply, no ability, already, to say no to him.

He pulls me down to his mouth again, other hand moving behind me to push us together.

"Okay ... gonna be cool for a sec ..." He dives – no other word for it – for my neck and his hand moves down between us, around us both. "Roll a little, Frase," he mutters against my neck, arching his back, thrusting us together into his hand. Losing my mind at the sensation, side by side now, as he continues wicked lips against my neck, chin, jaw, wicked hand on our ...

"Ray ..."

"I ... know ..."

Strained voice, panting a little, stroking speeding stroking, fast smooth ... trust indeed.

"Like it ... like this ... God, Fraser, your mouth ... let me have your tongue again ... feel it in my mouth when I ... oh, Christ ..."

His hand makes a lithe twist across both the tops, grasps us again and then his mouth pushes mine open wide, sucking at my tongue hungrily, hard, then releases it to moan as convulsions begin. Watch his face, temporarily distracted from my own sensations by the joy on his face. Honest joy.

His hand stopped moving a moment ago, long fingers holding both of us together as he pulses against me. He breathes, hard, for a few moments, gasps a smile as he collects his semen and begins again, just me now, so close, so close already, lose myself in his eyes, his mouth, his hand ...

"Right now, Ben ... right now ..."

Pulls me close, kisses me hard at just the right moment, the moment when all thought ceases and there is only sensation and, afterwards, briefly, Paradise.

"So good." Rubs his face against mine, gently, drops his head into my shoulder, eyes closing, arms tight around me.

"Mmmm ..."

"Y'know what's so great about bein'

with a guy? Y'don't care 'f we sleep. You wanna sleep too."

"Mmmhmmm." Hypnotic rhythm of pulse slowing, steady, Ray's breath against my shoulder warm, in its own syncopated rhythm with my heartbeat. Listen/feel. Eyes drift shut. Pulse slows ... breathing slows ... arms relax infinitesimally ...

oOo

Abrupt awakening – cold nose in my back, Diefenbaker definitely displeased. Ease out of Ray's embrace; he murmurs and rolls onto his front, one hand stretching out uncertainly before deeper sleep reclaims him.

Diefenbaker whines, softly. Turn, fix him with a glare, a finger to my lips. Quietly, quickly, find clothes, still scattered on the floor, choose the bathroom to get dressed in. Clothes are wrinkled. A smile curves my own lips; I like being rumped, with Ray. Boots. Socks. Ah, yes. Kicked under the coffee table. Last night. Last night. Another smile, and I catch a startled glimpse of a stranger in the mirror: same shirt, same jeans, uncombed hair, unshaven face, genuine smile, happy eyes. He looks friendly; natural; open; happy; the sort of person Ray might possibly want in his life after all, in every way, every miraculous way.

Couch ... another entirely uncontrollable smile at the memory of the first touch of his mouth on mine. Socks, boots, unlaced to be cool Canadian for Ray. We'll go to the Consulate, fetch a change of clothes, wonder if Ray would find me bringing my razor and a change of clothing presumptuous. That would never have been a possibility ... before. And now ... there are many possibilities. That concept is both frightening and exciting.

Dief, from the small foyer, whines again.

Paper and pencil by the telephone; Ray is more organised than he pretends. Brief

note: cannot bear the thought that he might believe for one second that I left without a goodbye.

'Diefenbaker needs a walk. I need clothes. Back as soon as possible.' Signed, foolishly, 'Benton Fraser.' If Diefenbaker could roll his eyes, he would.

"Kindly keep your comments to yourself," I whisper. "You like Ray. Whether he's blond or not has nothing to say to anything." It strikes me, not for the first time, that Diefenbaker and my father have very similar personalities, at least insofar as their perception of my character and judgment in matters of the heart are concerned.

In the bedroom, indecision. Pillow is a bit clichéd. Settle for picking up his jeans and shirt, folding them, and putting the note atop them at the foot of the bed. One lingering look, hastily recalled to myself by the clicking of Dief's nails behind me, his ominous stare drilling into my back.

The walk is helpful, reassuring in a way. In the light of day, no doubts assail my mind. Problems, yes, undoubtedly; but the core of it, the friendship, the trust are ... rock solid. The joy ... unknowable. The commitment ... unbelievable. Slowly sinking in, what Ray said last night: he hasn't had sex with anyone since Stella. Start to imagine that perhaps he entertains deeper feelings for me than ... Shake my head. Cautiously optimistic, as I haven't been in so many years, since a cold candlelit night in an apartment now reduced to blackened rubble in an empty lot, much like my heart, my soul. Broken brick used to rebuild a shaky friendship with Ray Vecchio, a friendship that couldn't survive, as so many can't, twin threats. And I know so little of matters of the heart; foolish choices and, seeing, now, how I feel, wonder how much, then, my heart was involved at all. Fooled by wanting, yes, possibly. Quite possibly.

This time ... Ray chose. Chose me. My choice made within hours of meeting him, but knowing my heart is foolish and blind, I ignored it. No second chances, after all, and

my second chance crashed and burned more thoroughly than the first. Must remember to ask my father, or perhaps Diefenbaker, about the possibilities of third chances occurring and if so, the likelihood of success. In, of course, a non gloating fashion.

Twenty or so blocks pass in a fast, happy reverie, Diefenbaker bounding ahead, running back, a long time to be cooped up, especially on a week-end. A car pulls up beside us; a familiar, dearly familiar voice drawls, "Hey, Mountie, tell a sailor where to find a good time?"

Can't stop the grin, the laugh, the surprise.

"I'm afraid I'm Canadian, sir, I'm not familiar with Chicago's, er, night life."

"Well, damn. C'mere. Tell me about yourself. What's a Mountie doin' in Chicago?"

He leans out the window, one arm hanging down, winks.

Lean myself, one hand on either side of his arm; it takes every ounce of restraint to refrain from kissing him.

"In point of fact, I first came to Chicago on the trail of the killers of my father ..."

"Really? You catch 'em?"

"As a matter of fact, yes."

"I heard that about you guys. You Mounties always get -"

"That's actually a misconception."

"Well, you got this one. Climb in. I'll buy you a drink. We can explore Chicago's night life together."

"All right."

He looks over, grinning even bigger as I slide in after Dief. "You're a fucking easy pick up, Benton Fraser. One drink? Next time hold out for dinner."

"I'll make dinner."

"Keep that up and you'll be kidnapped."

"I have been."

Laughs, shakes his head.

"Permanently."

"You didn't sleep very long."

"I was lonely."

He moves his hand across the seat, easy, natural, encloses mine in it. My gut flops, followed almost immediately by my heart as my fingers convulsively intertwine with his.

“And I got this ... this crazy Mountie alarm. Went off. I was, like, sure, he's gonna walk Dief, like, a hundred and thirty-seven blocks to the Consulate to get some socks. I got socks, airhead Mountie. Underwear. Clean, even.”

“Your underwear lacks starch.”

“That ... what's that, some kinda subtle Canadian put down?” His thumb, rubbing the back of my hand, is both distracting and hypnotic. “I hope you're kinda not implying that I lack, uh, starch in other areas ...”

“Not to my certain knowledge, no, Ray.”

He pulls my hand up, briefly, to his mouth, tongue and lips closing for a moment on one knuckle, casual, affectionate. “That's good. Because, you know, if you're just not sure, I'd be happy to demonstrate.”

“Ah. Well, then, a demonstration is most certainly indicated. Where are we going?”

“Lake. For Dief. Then we'll stop and get your damned starched boxers, get a uniform too. And, yes, Fraser, I got an iron and even an ironing board. Stop and get a video. I got a movie I want you to see. And dinner. Sound like a plan?”

Speak simply, clearly, from the heart. “It sounds close to Paradise.”

Startled look, covered quickly by a warm grin. “Yeah.” Glances around quickly, pulls my head over to meet in the middle of the car, fast kiss, faster flicker of tongue.

“Ray!”

“I know, I know. You're fucking irresistible. Cops and queers don't mix but I've never been sensible. And we mix, huh?”

“We are walking dichotomies, you might say.”

“You might say. Dichotomies. I love the way you talk, Benton Fraser. Did I tell you that?”

“I believe it's been mentioned once or twice, Ray.”

“Hey, listen. You're not dressed for running. I'll drop you at the Consulate, you pack a bag, okay? I'll take Dief on, give him a run, you catch up. How's that?”

“A ... bag?”

Panicked breaths, wanted this, want him, but he just said he has never been sensible.

“Yeah. Why not? Told you I'd let you out weekdays; rest, you're mine. Frase, this part of it is greatness. We gotta eat, breathe, sleep each other, screw until we can't see straight. It wears off eventually, then we get the great sex, friends and partners part, and that's good too, that's a different place to be, comfortable, wonderful, but not the carnival ride this part is. You gotta go with it. Enjoy. Let it flow.”

Flow. Oh, God. The rapture inside me is almost too much to be contained, but experience born of long practice lends a hand and I manage somehow not to force him to pull over to the side of the street and ravage his mouth with my tongue.

“Okay?” Puzzled, a little worried.

I turn my head, let him see my eyes, unguarded for a moment, my mouth, open for a moment.

“Uh, wow,” he says, somewhat strained. “Fuck. We're here. Don't suppose you'd let me suck you off on your desk?”

“Ray.”

“All right, all right. Thatcher's desk?”

“Ray!”

“Turnbull's?”

Red, hot under the collar, oh yes he's good at inducing that, pull the handle and open the door.

“Meet you at the lake. Frase.”

“Yes, Ray?”

“I'm just teasing. I – “

“It's quite all right, Ray. It's actually quite flattering. I am simply not used to being the object of ...”

His face darkens, grin disappearing.

“Frase, shit, I almost called you hon. Look. Fraser. We gotta talk.” He switches

off the engine. Dief whines. He turns his head. "Just a minute, Dief." Back to me. "Look, Fraser. Get your head around this. We're going to play Twenty Questions tonight; you're gonna talk to me about Vecchio. Okay? Understand? Do that 'understood' thing."

"Understood, Ray."

"Know it's hard for you. Make it easy as I can. But I want more, you want more, and I hate turning every fucking corner and getting a rake in the face. Okay? I know you can talk. I'm listening hard as I can. But I need a crib sheet. You help me put together one tonight, okay? Just who, what, when, where. Then I can deal, you can deal, we can just avoid some of this crap altogether. Okay? Say okay."

"Okay, Ray."

He looks around again, pedestrians too far down the street to determine their gender, and vice versa, and kisses me hard, full on the lips, tongues writhing together, instant electricity, much better than the real thing.

"Okay, I know, sorry. It's so fucking stupid that I can't kiss you. Okay. Meet you at the park. You mull, got that? Mull and make me some stories." He starts the engine again, squeezes my hand hard and then relinquishes it with a little push towards me.

"Thank you, Ray."

"One more word, one more look like that, and there isn't a desk in the Consulate that's gonna be safe. Get your ass movin', Mountie, and damn I did not need that image in my head."

He all but peels out, leaving me with a foolish and somewhat incredulous smile on my face.

At the park, Ray is throwing a stick for Diefenbaker on the beach.

"I didn't know he fetched," Ray calls to me.

"Neither did I. He tends to be secretive."

"It's good exercise, right?"

"Undoubtedly."

"I think we ran about a mile. I caved pretty fast. Not in the shape I used to be. How many miles you run with him? There's a lot I don't know about you, isn't there?"

"On a weekly basis, approximately twenty-five miles. He needs more. It's a question of time."

"God damn."

"He is half wolf, Ray, in an urban environment."

"You get up at oh dark thirty every morning?"

"Normally, yes." I pick up the stick and throw it as hard as I can. Diefenbaker ignores me. Utterly. Looks at Ray, barks.

"Well, I can't get it now, rocks for brains. Go get it and I'll throw it again. Wolves ain't too good at logic chains, huh?"

"His nose is out of joint."

"I can see that. Snubbed by a wolf."

"Not a new experience for me, I'm afraid."

"Moody wolf, huh?" He throws the retrieved stick across the breakwater.

"Absolutely."

"How about you? You moody?"

"Of course not."

"I bet."

We have fallen into step, heading up the beach.

"I've been mulling, Ray."

"I'm damn glad to hear that."

"Ask away."

He shoots me a startled glance; but it is easier to face things in the light of day, in impersonal situations. This realisation got me through the last months with Ray Vecchio.

"Here?"

"Yes."

"You ... you sure?"

"Yes."

"You ... you floor me, Benton Fraser."

"Ask away."

"Well, shit, I don't have twenty questions yet."

"Do you always swear so much?"

"Yeah. You mind? "

"On you? No."

We walk in silence. He says, abruptly, "Okay. Look. I didn't – it – you didn't sleep together? Last night, when I asked you which side of the bed. He lived at home, but you – you had your own place."

Hard questions. Unsurprisingly. He has an unerring instinct.

"No, we didn't."

"Damn, Fraser. What the hell did you do? I mean, you had to have – and where?"

"I'm not sure what you want to know or, perhaps, why you want to know it."

He frowns for a moment and then his brow clears. "No, no, Frase. Not smutty stories. I don't even wanna think about you and anyone – anyone – else." His voice drops to a low growl, fierce, almost possessive. "Just wanna know where it's okay to put the moves on you. And what kind."

"Ah. I see."

"That would kinda be a non-answer, there, Frase. Couch? Couch's okay. Car? Front seat, back seat?"

Perhaps this wasn't the appropriate place. My walk speeds up.

"Back seat?"

"I'd ... rather not."

"Okay. Okay." He swallows hard: more words sure to distress me. "My place. My place is good."

"Yes."

"All of it?"

"Yes."

"Okay. How 'bout the consulate? It's a new consulate, huh?" Trying to keep a straight face. Deadpan, yes, I do that too.

"I believe that would be satisfactory as well."

Startled look. Slow grin. "I'll take you up on that someday. I will. See if I don't."

More silence, relatively speaking: Dief is tracking a squirrel.

"So ... I'm guessing cheap motels are right out?"

Shudder, cramp hits my leg. Stumble, break my stride, Ray reacts swiftly. "Frase?" Steadies me with a hand on my arm.

"Old ... old knife wound."

"No fucking benches ..." Supports me as we sink to the ground. Impatiently he moves my hands aside, digging into my thigh with his own strong fingers.

"Frase, I'm sorry. Jesus. That's why ... that's why we gotta have this out."

"Ray, please stop apologising. It's a cramp. It has nothing to do with the conversation."

Déjà vu, fingers at my jaw again, pulling my face around to meet his eyes. "Bullshit, Benton Fraser." Feel his breath warm on my lips. Dief barks. We both jerk back, quickly, no one around, good God, this is insane.

Off balance, emotional and now physical upheaval. His fingers, still massaging automatically, it would seem, until one hand lightens its touch, slides up my thigh. "Ray ..."

"You sound pretty fucking sexy when you're turned on and exasperated."

"And you're quite good at inducing said condition. Help me up." Deep breath. "Motels ... once or twice. In the beginning. It need not worry you; it's not a situation likely to come up between us."

He sounds shamed. "I was bein' a smart ass, Fraser. I'm sorry. Wouldn't hurt you."

"I know that." Smile, warmly, at him. "You didn't."

He paces back and forth for a moment, then turns, flinging his arms out, explodes.

"All right, fuck, Fraser. I don't want to know. I don't. But, Jesus, what the hell did you do? And where the hell did you do it?"

Close my eyes, head spinning, memories, unwanted, untamed, ashamed, dark deserted warehouses, cramped cars not meant for two grown men, hurried impersonal fumbblings, strokings, stifled groans, words rarely spoken except for direction. Never spoken in affection, though affection was felt: he wouldn't, I couldn't, can't force reciprocity. Omnipresent omnipotent guilt, frequent pain, physical, emotional tearing, gut wrenching words, tears sternly suppressed: what little respect

for me he had left could have been destroyed utterly by such a display. Only agreement could deflect, terse monosyllables, calm-sounding, all the ice my soul could summon to hide behind, refracting pain, melting into regret and bitterness.

“He okay?” The querent, a nodding acquaintance with two Weimaraners, often seen: they too need a great deal of exercise.

Ray, distracted, shakes his head. “No. He got a bad cramp. Didn't stretch.”

“Man. Hey, Mountie, get home, put some ice on it. You look bad.”

“Yeah. Yeah, c'mon, Frase. Dief!” He takes my rucksack, slings it over one shoulder, and pushes me a little in the direction of the car.

I retain sense enough to limp overtly, somewhat blindly, in Ray's wake.

“I'm so fucking sorry – “

“Ray, not another word. Please.”

Shoots one horrified glance over his shoulder, pain lancing unexpectedly through my heart. Struggle with words, reassurance. “Ray. I can't talk now. My ... inability to control myself ... is in no way your fault. Please.” His car, silence, long walk, darkness fogging my brain, my heart. Activity in the parking lot but still we sit for a few moments, each gathering words.

“You were right, Ray, this needs to be finished. It's not fair to you.”

“What? What the hell are you talking about? Finished, hell! I haven't even gotten started. I got three quarters of you left to fingerprint.”

Unexpected smile, albeit small, delighting in indignant Ray. “I'm not making myself clear. I'm sorry. Ray Vecchio needs to be finished. I believe you have nine questions left.”

“Inability to control yourself? How about no one cares about you, Fraser? How about you got fucked over by your 'partner' – “ he spits the word, “your 'partner' who left you without a word and all you got was a fucking postcard taunt for a goodbye?”

“I believe that was in the nature of an apology.”

“I believe you inhabit that state called the Nile all too frequently, Benton Fraser.”

“Ray, ask. Let's finish this. I would rather, much rather, think about you right now than Raymond Vecchio, if that makes any sense.”

His eyes, blazing, soften now. “Yeah. Yeah. Okay. Okay.”

He thinks a moment. “Where'd he fuck you? Why'd he fuck you? How'd he fuck you? Why'd he keep on fucking you? Why'd you keep on fucking him – because, Benton Fraser, my friend, you don't seem to lack self esteem; did you love him? Did anyone know? Why the hell wouldn't he sleep with you? And who came on to whom?”

“Oh, my.”

“Do I get a bonus question?”

“I'm not sure it's safe.”

“It's important.”

“Ask away.”

“How much of us is a substitute for him, trying to put together the past?”

Swift, sure, I know the answer to that one. I don't know the answers to all of them, but this answer is elementary, instinctive. “None. Not one bit. You are so ... different ... it's two universes, Ray.” Two different universes, connected by a black hole. “A new universe, new, unbelievable.”

“No one ever called me a universe before.” Exaggeratedly impressed, but the grin was swift and real. “How you doin' on the rest of 'em? Need time to mull?”

“A bit.”

“Okay. Dinner? Dinner to go.”

“I'll fix dinner. Let's stop at a grocery.”

“What d'you need? I have some stuff ...”

“I doubt you have caribou.”

“I doubt Dominick's does either.”

We drive a few minutes in silence.

“Where, I think we've covered.”

“Not all of it.”

“Why? I still don't know. His ... attraction to me outweighed his ... common sense. The attraction continued, despite the guilt. As for me ... I told you. I needed him.”

That's all."

"That's all? That's pretty simple. Pretty damn loyal. Pretty damn ... stupid. You could have any chick in Chicago. A lot of the guys, too. So why?"

"He needed me as well. I ... need that. Needed that."

"I think the first tense was the right one."

Forces honesty, soul-baring. "You are correct."

"You need me?"

Shaken, suddenly, by panic again, swift rush, croak in my throat. "Y-yes."

"Good. Me too." He glances at me, smiling. "Me too, buddy, it's okay. So, I'm guessing you, uh, loved him?"

Yes, no, yes. At that time, yes, I did, and now, no, I did not, since learning that reality and perception can be, as they are in so many other ways, completely different.

He looks again, sympathetic, misinterpreting my silence. "Yeah."

"Yes." Feel compelled to qualify. "I thought I did. In the past year or so, however, I have learned things about myself. To be needed, wanted, evoked a response in me, to want, to need, although I may perhaps not even have liked the person in ... that way. Now, at least, I am able to want, need people whom I ... like."

"Yeah." He sounds thoughtful. "Yeah. I get that. Did he love you?"

"Of course."

"That was a little too pat, there, Frase. Once more, with feeling."

"I think so, yes."

"Well, you would."

"I fail to see why else he would go against his conscience, his religion, his Weltanschauung, for sex."

"You really don't know too many guys, do you. My Weltanschauung is more or less geared towards sex. It's the Y chromosome. The urge to reproduce. Generally speaking."

"I fail to see -"

"Did he like it? When you did it, I mean?"

Yes. Oh, yes. Raw, unrestrained, hard,

wild, fast - repressing noise, mine and his, repressing tenderness, probably mine, rarely his. "Yes."

"Well, that explains that. And no one knew. That sucks."

Startled almost out of my wits, I look at him long and hard.

"Hell, no, I don't mean that. Don't mean you should publicise your preferences. Just meant that it's good for you to talk about it, now, with me, at least, long's I can keep that green eyed monster at bay."

"That's very unselfish -"

"I know. You can make it up to me in bed." His hand reaches for mine again.

"And he wouldn't sleep with you because?"

"My apartment was too cold. My bed was too small. In honesty, it was too much ... reality."

"Sounds like you're dealing with some part of it."

"I'm not stupid, Ray."

"Never said you were, Benton Fraser. Just fucking adorable and naïve as all hell."

"I am a Mountie. I am not adorable."

"Oh, yes, you are. Last question, think I know the answer. Who came on to who?"

"Whom."

"Fuck that."

"What do you think the answer is?"

Squeezes my fingers, smile in his voice as he says, "I figured you did some subtle Mountie type come on thing. That look you get."

Curiously flattering. "No."

The car screeches to a stop after a fast wild turn into a parking lot as he stares at me, unblinking. He looks out the windshield, looks at me, and is suddenly out of the car and pacing, wildly, on the blacktop. Leans into my window. "Warn a guy before you explode his stereotypes?" He's angry, calming, trying to thread humour into this.

"I'm sorry, Ray -"

Back in the car, grabs both my hands in his own. "I wanna fucking hunt him down and kill him. Yeah, you don't like that. I don't give a fuck. Take someone like you

and ... Jesus, ruin you. All but ruin you. For anyone. But almost for me, and if you weren't as smart as you are you'd be ruined."

"In all fairness, Ray, Victoria had a great deal to do with my perceptions ..."

"Yeah, well, it's not the first time and it won't be the last time a chick uses a guy to get something. Guys do it too, hell yeah. But for a friend ... a partner ... partners don't do each other that way, Frase. They don't. They don't come on to you and then get all 'I'm so het' so that you get confused and ashamed. He into control? He into mind games? Yeah, you won't answer. I know the answer. He belongs in the Mob. I read his files. I gotta fucking be him. The only good part is I get you and I'm not too fucked up to enjoy that part. Hey, look at me, Benton Fraser. I'm bi. You're bi. I want you. You want me. Got that?"

"Oh, yes."

"In fact, after havin' you, I'm pretty damn sure I'm queer. And, havin' you - I don't care about it."

He starts the car, still moving jerkily, anger/adrenaline wearing off slowly.

"Okay. Store. What's for dinner?"

"Pizza."

"Frozen pizza? Oh, come on, Fraser, I can do better than that. I got a pizza place -"

"Trust me."

"Twist the knife. Okay, Mountie. Okay."

Grocery visit uneventful, amusing as Ray shows me Pop-Tarts and other essential components of the American diet. Brief argument at checkout over who pays, Ray winning; I had only twenty in American money. Clerk regards us speculatively. Discretion probably necessary; today, I don't care.

On the drive back to his apartment, he asks, almost shyly, "You mind if we don't get a movie?"

"Of course not."

"I mean, I don't want you to just think that I want you for sex. That I want you for

just sex. But, God, Benton Fraser, I want you. For everything. Especially sex."

One arm over the arm of the couch, Diefenbaker standing next to me, his nose resting along my ribs, pointing up under my arm. Tableau broken by Ray, coming in with a mug of tea and another mug that smells of coffee.

"Hey, what's he doing? I've seen him do that before."

"It's a ... reconnection."

Quick as the thoughts flashing, Ray has lifted my other arm and laid his head against me, nose pointing up. "Yeah. I can see that. Feels good. You smell good."

"Of course, he doesn't usually talk."

"Funny Mountie. I never stop."

"I know. Please continue."

His mouth was open, another thought emerging, but at that he snaps it shut, grins instead, slightly shy. Cogitates. "Get on your nerves?"

"Every last one. Please continue."

"Wow. That's ... that's sexy, Benton Fraser. I turn you on. Yeah."

"You do."

In one swift movement he straddles me, hands busy at my waistband, then his own. Almost instantly aroused at his touch, erection straining, drawing forth a satisfied smile. Leans close to me, whispering against my mouth, as if he knows, instinctively, how much I want that closeness, how much I need his breath on my face.

"Been thinkin' about this, Ben. Want you, in me. Shhh. Listen." Warm kiss, soft lips, rasp of stubble again. "If you trust me ... want me, in you. So you can see. So you can see. So you can do me, know why I want it."

Terrifying, yes, not simply physical pain; I have an extremely high tolerance for that; but terror that our trust, our ... friendship, carefully building, might fall victim to my memories, insecurities, longings, fears. Ridiculous reaction; I would lie down in front of a train for him. Step in front of a bullet for him. Pull him close, warm strong hug. He hugs back, sighing

against my neck.

“Good. I liked your pizza.”

“So you said.” As an attempt to regain equilibrium, his instincts are unerring.

“Buffalo milk mozzarella is, for some reason, a key ingredient.”

“I thought, 'Yuck!' but it was good.”

Hands under my shirt, roaming, smoothing, lifting, pulling. “Different from Chicago pizza.”

“If we got some terra cotta tiles for the oven one could approximate a brick oven taste and effect.”

“I know a guy who's a roofer. Ask him next time I see him. Hey, Ben.”

“Yes?”

“I like the 'we.' That's ... that's what I want.”

Shaky breath, no words, no words. I too, Ray. I too.

“Good,” he says again, apparently satisfied by the hug, by my face. “And speaking of we ... if you're gonna take off on hikes with no warning, you need a key.” He nods at the counter. “Put one by the phone for you.”

And, fast again, off my lap, at the stereo. “You know what you need? You need a little romance. Dance with me? Can you waltz?”

Mind whirling, arousal, laughter, lump in my throat. He wants ... me. “Not as well as you, no.”

“I'll lead. I can make anyone look good. Why d'you think Stella stayed with me as long as she did?”

Challenging, assessing stare, slight quirk to his mouth. Defiant: bringing her up before I can, making comparisons that are inevitable.

“If we're going to reopen the subject of extremely foolish former partners ...”

Frown replaced by grin, momentary relaxation. “Come here. No, don't you dare button those jeans up again. Look, I'm leaving mine open. Give our bodies something to think about besides tripping over each other's feet.”

Long kiss, surprisingly unpassionate.

“Ready? Sinatra, okay?”

“Anything is okay.”

And indeed it is. A waking dream; to be wanted, needed, by this man is gift enough; to be enjoyed so thoroughly is reassuring, unbelievable, ecstasy-inducing. To be held, close, moving, slower than he did with Stella, something my soul needs. Something his soul needs as well.

“You're not too bad, Mountie. A little stiff ... but I like that in a man.”

“You were Mae West in a former life, weren't you.”

Snort, followed by chuckle. “Yeah, maybe. She couldn't have kept her hands off your ass either.” Hands follow thought, down to my hips and then behind, cupping, pulling me against him as we sway in place. “Feels so good ...”

“Mmmm ...”

Two, possibly three songs later, still standing in one place, still buried faces in necks, breathing shakier, arousal growing ... no attempts, however, to begin, or continue, undressing. Just sways, face in my neck, breath hot against my skin, tongue flicker every now and then and a shudder when I do the same.

“Could hold you forever, Benton Fraser.” Breath of sound, cool on the hotness of my neck as he pulls his head slightly back.

“You feel wonderful.”

“Mmmyeah. So ... you gonna kiss me? Or do I have to come up with all of it?”

Brief shock, involuntary withdrawal. “I'm sorry ... Selfish ...”

“No, airhead Mountie, I'm not mad. I just want you to kiss me. You. Kiss me. Okay?”

Unused to demands, expectations of reciprocity, of participation, of activity. Hesitantly pull his face to mine, join our mouths.

“Benton Fraser.”

“Mmmm.”

“You want me?”

“Yes.”

“Let me hear it. Talk to me.”

“Ray ... I want you.”

“Where?”

“Everywhere.”

Chokes back a laugh. “My fault. Sorry. Killed the mood.”

“No.” Another kiss, warm, lingering, sweet, deepening to passion. “Bed. Couch. Floor. Shower. Park.”

“Oh, that everywhere. You forgot consulate.”

“Consulate.”

He pushes against me, gentle rhythm. “Thatcher's desk.”

Hesitantly my hand moves to the still-fastened buttons of his jeans.

“There you go.” Unabashedly pushes his erection against my hand. “Fast learner, Benton Fraser. You like it when I undress you? I like it when you undress me.” His hand moves between us too, beginning to ease my zipper down. “I like feeling your hands down there ... like the way they brush against my cock. I like that you don't quite know how to unbutton those buttons. Oh God. And I really really like the way you're pulling my cock outta my jeans right now.”

Can't stifle a moan, don't need to, hard length fills my hand, thrusting into it. Head moves to my neck again and his lips and teeth combine while there, eliciting a jerk, a moan. Hands busy, faster now, freeing me from constraint as well, pump instinctively into his fingers.

“Can't decide what to do next. Do you wanna suck me? Do I wanna suck you? Or just stand here a while and feel you, feel us together?”

Shudder, tremble, and an orgasm wracks me, coming out of nowhere, train wreck into oblivion. Shaky sobbed breath, embarrassed beyond words.

“You are so ... fucking ... sexy,” he breathes, apparently unworried. “Hey, look. Look.”

Look down at his hand, his long fingers, my penis still mostly erect in his palm, beginning to recede into its foreskin, semen covering the tip of it and his hand.

“Jesus God. How the hell did I get you?”

Is that a picture or what?”

He's not angry; not distressed; not unhappy. Cautiously reality penetrates. Another shaky breath, no sob this time.

“I think I decided what I want to do next,” he whispers, and sinks to his knees unexpectedly, licks me clean, long tongue, beatific smile. “I love how you taste.” He licks his palm next, fingers one by one, still kneeling, looking up at me through unexpectedly long eyelashes.

No conscious thought, hands, feet move of their own volition as I tug him to his feet and almost drag him, unable to take my eyes off his, into his bedroom.

He grins, brilliant. “Is this the part where you remind me to be careful what I wish for?” Pulls his shirt off with practised ease, dropping it behind him on the bed. Mine follows, on the floor.

Wordless answer, wishes and dreams one with reality, skin his jeans off, fingers lingering all the way down long long legs, golden skin, golden hair, hands in my hair grabbing to stay on balance as my tongue licks the back of his knee.

His other knee comes up to kick off his jeans, my hands helping with the second leg, kneeling between him, worship too small a word for what I feel now, looking up at him, wanting him, wanting him.

He draws a shaky breath, looking back at me, grin fading. “Benton Fraser.” Whisper of sound. “Do you have any idea what you look like?”

Open my mouth, let my tongue emerge. He closes his eyes briefly, in pained ecstasy. “Oh, God, please.” His penis, hard, wet, twitches. “Please.”

Touch tip of tongue to moist tip, letting his taste flow over my tastebuds front to back, eyes closing to analyse, discern, catalogue let tongue emerge further, encircle the entire head, ending beneath at the small vertical ridge where the shaft joins it. He jerks, gasps. I pull back, look up at him again. His eyes open slowly, expression clearing. Words tremble. “I ... like to taste you.”

“No complaints here, Ben.” He thrusts forward a little, grinning again.

Swallow, then, almost whole, in one swift motion, easy rhythm, hand working in concert, hungry, so hungry for him, his taste, his body, this connection.

He moans, sways again. I push, gently, and he topples backwards on the bed, his elbows catching him, my arm around his hips controlling the descent. Even better, crouching now, his feet on the floor on either side of me, his ability to thrust into my mouth greatly increased, both of us making unknowing unknown sounds in our throats. His scrotal sac tightens, hardens, and he pulls me off. Unexpected; bereft again, I look at him.

“Took away your bone, Dief?” he gasps, one hand moving to grasp his penis, squeezing hard beneath the head. “C'mere. C'mere, Frase. Kiss me. Hold me. You trying to distract me?” Pulls me up with him, on top of him, both of us pushing, pulling, my jeans and boxers together, down and off.

“I'm ... sorry.”

“No, c'mere. It's okay, I was teasing. You don't play those games. You just want me. God. Wow. But ditto, Ben, okay? Ditto.”

We shift together, higher up on the bed, losing no opportunity to rub against each other.

“Yeah, that's it. Okay. Let's ... let's do this before I can't.” He sits up to fumble at the night stand.

Tense again, curse autonomous memory.

He frowns, pulls my face around to his.

“It doesn't have to hurt.” Soft, persuasive. “Always does a little, at first, but after that ...”

“It's difficult for me to believe that, especially ...”

“Especially what?”

“Well. Ah. In light of my previous experience. Especially when your, ah, endowments are, shall we say, more substantial than – “

“Too much information, Benton Fraser! Too much fucking glorious information!”

He collapses backward onto the bed, howling with laughter.

“Well, I'm sorry, Ray, but I thought it was relevant to the discussion at hand.”

“It's irfuckingrelevant but I love it. Jesus.” Sobers abruptly. “Just relax.” Pops open the lid of the lubricant. “It's ... it's easier ... looser ... if you lie on your stomach, okay? I won't do anything you don't want. Trust me?”

Nod, breathe, roll. To my surprise, he touches my shoulders instead. Unfamiliar motion. Realisation dawns: fingerprinting again.

“Do your back now, while I got you here,” he whispers, moving to straddle me, his hardness merging naturally into the cleft of my buttocks. Oddly good. His fingertips, more so.

Concentration, breathing, rolling fingers, occasional small thrusts against me, gentle... pauses midway to trace a circle, then presses longer, harder there, rubbing with the pads of his thumbs before resuming, thrusts increasing in frequency as he sits upright, his hands moving into the small of my back. Relaxation and arousal increasing, strangely complementary. Reaches my buttocks, he moves backwards, I strain towards the hardness as it recedes: it felt good.

“It's okay, it's okay,” he whispers, smoothing both hands over me. “Patient, be patient, Ben.” Quickly, still gently, fingerprints my buttocks, one hand missing for a moment, then back, slick, fingerprinting my tailbone and then down, down ... “Hand me the other pillow, Frase.” Tugs at me. “Lift.” Carefully pushes the pillow beneath me, arranges me in it, other finger still moving at the base of my spine, inducing movement in return.

He rests then, head on my back, one hand on my neck, in my hair, hardness now against my thigh, one foot rubbing idly along my calf, finger moving again. Slow, sensuous, teasing, avoiding. From time to time his tongue flicks out to join his breath on my back. Tension slowly ebbs; he feels it,

feel him smile, finger no longer avoiding, circling, gently, puckered rim. Strangely quiet, serious, concentrating. Need words.

As naturally as thought progresses, from one mind to another, he hears unspoken longing, more than need.

“I think I love you, Benton Fraser.”

Words, unprecedented, unexpected, followed by warm kiss to spine, mutual tension in bodies touching. Sudden certainty that he hadn't meant to say that, couldn't help himself, any more than I can help loving him, any more than I can say it.

“Ray ...”

“I'm ... sorry.” Bare whisper, tremble. “It's ... okay. Just ... you know?”

Tension increasing, trying desperately to contain fireworks inside, belly flopping inelegantly, like a trout on a riverbank. Can he feel the flops? Can he feel the heartbeat pounding, pounding in my ears, rush of blood, prone position, thank God, or yes fainting would be a distinct possibility. Words never said, never expected, barely remembered.

“Fraser?” Voice tense, body tenser, both hands pulling me close, wetness on my back not tongue, mirroring wetness on his pillow. “Sorry. Breathe, Fraser.”

Gentle squeeze, red darkness recedes with influx of oxygen, small gasp, followed by another.

“Want you, need you, love you.”

Words tumble, rocks in a stream, ice cold glacier stream, sparkles of light dancing from warm sun. Arms grip me harder. “Love you.” Whisper now, susurrations of sound.

Falling falling falling unsure of landing breathe leaves dry and crunching smell of wood smoke breathe and bonfires in the air, old grass, fresh sawdust falling falling again.

“Catch me.”

Words unbidden, miraculously he understands, moves up to hold me, pull me close, tight, hard, anchoring reality. Gentle mouth, lips as salty as mine, breathing ragged still, with mine. “I got you. Got you

now. Safe here, in my bed. I love you.” Deep inhalation, mine, his, both catching, at the bottom, unspent sobs lying in wait. “No one ever ... ?”

Short, sharp, quick shake of my head. “I don't ... remember.”

Sighs. Hugs. “I'm so sorry, Ben.” Sorry, not for me now, but for me then. Too much too much too much falling again and this time no leaves, no sawdust, no wood smoke, Ray's arms, Ray's bed, Ray's sheets, Ray's mouth, my tears, hot, scalding embarrassment.

“I bet you even cry sexy.” Feather kisses on my eyelids, prompting breathless sob and instinctive turn into his neck. Holds me. Chants words in my ear. Pain in my heart, in my soul, too much now to suppress, no more strength, only weakness, welling out of me, unstoppable flood through clenched teeth, choking, gasping.

“You're tied into knots,” he whispers after a few moments, after sobs slow, replaced by silent flow of tears. “Knots.” His voice breaks; his mouth seeks mine. “Let me untie you. Please. Please, Benton Fraser.” Guilt and shame increase exponentially: now he cries, for me, because of me, and I struggle for control.

“No,” he whispers again. “Knots won't come undone if you keep making them tighter.”

Cry, then, together, anything for him, even this opening, even this untying, painful, fear worse than physical pain, opening leads only to anguish but this time, perhaps, safety beckons: trust; friendship; love.

Hold each other in silence broken only by convulsive breath from time to time. His foot moves, his hand goes down, and he is wiping my face with the shirt he discarded on the bed. Gently. “Blow.”

“Ray ...”

“I don't have a handkerchief and neither do you. It's cotton. Think outside the box, Benton Fraser. I'm not gonna make love to you all stuffed up.”

Laugh, stray sob, blow, another knot

untied. He turns the shirt over, mops his own face, suddenly sneezes into the fabric, tosses the shirt over his shoulder.

“Gesundheit.” Automatically.

“Thought you were Scottish.”

“I’m Canadian.”

Small grin, eyes still serious. “I’m glad, Ben. Glad I can say that. Mad no one else did, but glad for me and you, here, now.”

“I ... too.”

“Is that Canadian for ‘I love you?’”

Panic rises, sternly quelled. Quick nod, eyes sliding away in embarrassment.

“Good,” he says firmly. “I got it. Got you. Sealed with a kiss, huh?” Pulls me into a hug again, lips warm, gentle, undemanding, a benison.

“Love is too small a word,” I whisper against his mouth.

Feel him smile; he pulls back to look at me. “Just when you think it’s safe to get back in the water ...” Back of his hand across his eyes, and then quickly, hard hungry kiss, demanding this time, passion restored, building, flowing freely from him, to me, from me, to him, ebb of fear consonant with rise of desire.

Dusk has fallen, room darkened. He reaches to turn on the light, one long arm, not releasing me. “It’s okay. But I gotta see you. Make broad daylight, huh? No hiding in the dark.”

“Ray, I really would prefer ... Kiss me.”

Indrawn breath, amazement, glorious smile, dawn breaking. “God, yes.” Devours me, I devour him, suddenly hungry, smell feel taste, every inch of his mouth, chin, neck, anywhere I can reach, he can reach. Hands kneading, exploring, caressing; breathless, I find the discarded bottle, hold it out to him. Existence, very thought of lubricant reassuring; for some reason, not a solution that crossed my mind.

“Okay. Okay. I am thirty five years old, there is no fucking way I am going to come just from being handed a bottle of lube.” Deep breath, holds his hand out as I upend the bottle, squeeze. Pulls me close again with his other hand, mostly on top of him,

lubricated hand moving unerringly down, coolness incites a gasp, a moan. He moans back, fingers moving, one pressing inside, small shock, no pain. Slips in and out, fast, again, maddening, creating desperate, sudden need, synapses travelling familiar routes, fight with reality. Concentrate on feel: same, different, better, more, kisses rained on my face, my nose, my chin, my shoulders, stubble scratchy, reassuringly Ray.

“Here, God – “ another thrust against me, “ – move, Frase, let me . . . “ Shifts us onto our sides, somehow keeping the finger in place, rearranges the pillow at my hips again. “Come on.” Moves half onto my back, pushing me onto my stomach, his mouth on my cheekbone, on my ear, finger twisting deeper, smoothing, sliding, probing ... touching, something, sheer pleasure is almost pain, my heart pounds harder.

“You like that?”

“Good God, Ray!” Memories. Brief, all too brief moments buried in unceasing, relentless pain – from time to time, felt ... something ... akin to this.

“Wait until you feel my cock on it,” he whispers, voice raspier than before. A second finger eases in as I try to make sense of the words and the sensations. “Wait until you feel that, Benton Fraser. Filled with me, hitting that ... it’s so fucking incredible”

Beginning despite fears to believe him as two fingers twist, writhe, stroke, causing mindless whimpers, voiceless moans, his words having an equally arousing effect.

“Tight Mountie ass,” he breathes against the skin of my neck. “Jesus God, I can’t believe my luck. Breathe, Ben, relax now, one more finger ...”

React to warning with obedience, small blessings of well learned, hard earned lessons, third finger slides in easily, long fingers move, find, stroke again, stretching, stroking ... moan, whimper, move against fingers torturing me, teasing me.

“Oh, yeah. That’s it ... that’s it ...” Breath on my ear, tongue lick nibble lick again.

“Want me?”

Fight back memories panic tension, successfully, moan, “Yes....”

One leg moves across mine, straddling me, close my eyes as his warmth dissipates from my back, my neck.

“Okay. Gonna hurt a little, it's okay. Just breathe. Just open. You okay?”

Nod, eyes still closed. Fingers withdrawn, slick hard thickness resting there instead. Steadying breaths, mine and his. “Christ, you are gorgeous. Ready? Want this?”

Can't repress a tear, fortunately rolls unseen into pillow. Nod again.

“Say it, Benton Fraser. Please.”

Broken voiced, hoarse with effort of restraining panic. “Yes.”

Push forward, stretching burning, panic rising in long stemmed tide overtaking me as he stills ... “Breathe, Benton Fraser.” Confident, aware. Leans forward and over, kisses me softly on the mouth, then tongue flicks out to trace tear path. “Love you. Want you.”

“Yes ...” Let relaxation accompany sibilance.

“There. That's it.” Moves forward again, millimetres, stretching still, burning still, less so; as he continues, burning lessens, disappears altogether, stretching continues, not unpleasant. No sharpness, no tearing pain, no soreness ...

“... Ray ...” Voice of wonder, he understands. Kisses me again, straightens.

“Yeah. Yeah. I know. Almost there. God, Fraser, almost there and fuck ... tight Mountie ass doesn't ... doesn't come close” Voice trembles.

Last increment, pause, full stop. “Relax.” He rocks infinitesimally, somehow encouraging loosening from inside. Rocks a trifle harder. Slides an inch or so out, then back in. On the return, stiffen, jerk.

“There. Yeah. Toldja. Christ.” Strained voice, shaking with effort to control. “Easier now?”

In answer I push backwards against him, encouraging thrust. Sliding together

and apart, much easier than I thought possible, strokes increasing in length, never missing the spot, encouraging my flagging erection.

“Just ... fucking ... perfect,” he moans, pushing, pulling, harder, faster, no pain, no pain? No pain. Only comfort, closeness, and at the apex of each thrust ecstasy, a minor supernova. “Oh ... God ... Ben ...” So hard, inside me, so thick, can feel the tremors begin, visualise with sensory accuracy spurts inside me, hot wetness, thick, filling me filling me filling me ... I thrust in turn into the pillow and the friction and the thought and the feel of him, still inside me, still, incredibly, spasming, triggers my own, disbelief patent.

“All over your pillow,” I gasp, the first words that form.

He has collapsed across my back, still shuddering. “I'll never wash it again, God, Ben, I have never come like that.”

Stray twitches from him still inside me induce similar ones in myself, in the pillow, in the dampness quickly soaking in. My thoughts are formless. Disbelieving. Ecstatic. Sad. Angry ...

“Okay?” Still breathing hard, face resting on my shoulder.

“Yes. No.”

“Good clear signals, there, Frase.” Chuckles, slips himself out, rolls next to me, finger on my lips stifling my protest at the loss of him. “Sssh. It's okay. We'll do it again. If you want.”

Close my eyes, tightly, squeezing back tears, ashamed. “Yes.” Whispered.

“Great. Greatness. Thank God. You liked it?”

“I always ... did ...” Shaky breath. “But I enjoyed this.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, Ben. Whoa. I thought – thought you'd see how good it could feel. That's kinda the point. And it did. Where's the – where's the guilt trip coming from? Of course you enjoyed it. Well, I mean, thank God you enjoyed it, we did it right.”

“Shouldn't ...”

“What's the point? What's the point of doing it if you don't enjoy it?” Anger beginning, again, my inability to form words having a different but no less deleterious effect on the current situation. He sighs. Shifts away. Sighs again. “Okay. Okay, wait. I'm thinking. I'm thinking, not reacting.”

He reaches back for me, hand over my head to grasp my other hand and I flinch, again, hating, cursing myself.

“Oh, God, Ben. Please. I won't hurt you.”

“I know.”

“Please tell me. Please just ... tell me.”

Memories flow, too fast to grasp, too fast for words, cold eyes, cold words, face to face in my lost apartment.

“I want ... more. More of us. Touch me. Talk to me. Kiss me. When ... when we started ...” Words so hard to push out, so frightened, but Robert Fraser's son is capable of some courage. Capable of taking a stand, even for himself, even in this. *“I want it ... here. In my bed.”*

“I can't give you that. This is it. This is all I can do. Take it or leave it.”

“Then ... I will leave it.”

“No, you won't. You need it. You need it as much as I do.”

“Not in the same way.”

“You need it however you can get it, Benny.”

“I ... did. I ... don't.”

“Yes, you do! You need me! And you want me!”

Shake my head, words unable to form now, watching anger rise direct proportion to fear of loss. Fear gives me brief pleasure: anger means something, at least; some small proof that this is more than he will admit.

A brief hard kiss, so rare, so unexpected that I respond.

“See?” Triumph, anger still. “See? You want me, you goddamn slut. You'll take anything on two legs, won't you?”

“As will you.”

Brief sharp crack of hand on flesh, hard, brief hard pain fading to sting on my cheek.

“I'm not the one who takes it up the ass,

Benny.” Gentle, almost affectionate voice at odds with the physical reaction. Open my eyes to see his, fathomless, remote, anger and hurt inextricably mixed. Still absorbing that as he pulls me close for a second kiss, unprecedented. “You want it here? Fine. Get undressed.”

And so help me God, I do.

“God, Ray. Ray. Please.” Plea for I don't know what: cessation of pain, need for touch, even my own.

Three resultant actions, almost simultaneous. Hand buried in my hair pulls it and my head back sharply. Penis buried inside me pulls back and thrusts in, hard. Other hand, startingly, descends with force and sharpness to connect with my right buttock, stinging echo reverberating in my mind and the room.

“You got what you wanted.” Hissed, quiet. “The rest is on my terms. Don't make me do this.”

“I ... didn't.” The unfairness is manifest.

The hand in my hair tightens. Another slap descends. An idle thought chases across my mind: he finds that arousing, unsurprising given the nature of his interactions with his father. Misjudged the situation, again. Don't know why I thought my room, my bed, would make a difference. It is not the place; it is the people. My mind, curiously divorced from reality, notes a third blow and Ray's resulting orgasm with detachment. Tears, difficult to suppress for a few seconds: aided, finally, in resolve by thoughts of his added scorn.

Abrupt withdrawal, not unusual. Quick to dress, also normal. Pause beside me: unusual. Rough voice. “You're bleeding. Christ.” Hand, tentative, touches me, gently, entirely confusing. “Get dressed, Benny.”

I nod, silent, unmoving.

Sighs. “You know what happens to people like us, Benny. We burn in hell for eternity.”

Some of us create hells. All of us do. “Then end it.”

“I ... can't. You're just ... so ...” Frustrated, none of the fitting words can be applied to me, a man, the Mountie. “Sometimes I hate you. Get dressed, God damn it!”

The demarcation is, it's true, very thin.

Unexpectedly he sits, heavily.

“It shouldn't be this way.” Almost an apology. “You and me ... we're friends. Should

have stayed friends. We shouldn't hurt."

"I'm ... sorry." Careful control. "Inspector Thatcher has asked me to take some leave."

"You're going away?" Anger, hurt, relief in his voice relief stabbing, sharp lance pain in a frozen heart.

"I think ... distance ... might help."

"I ... need ... you ..." Words grated out. Words thaw my heart.

"And I you."

He gets suddenly to his feet, paces. "No. No, you should go. Go." He stares at me for a long moment, then harshly: "Get dressed, Fraser. Now."

Obedience, far too ingrained. He stands at the door, watching. Keys move from hand to hand.

"Come on. I'll drop you at the urgent care."

"... Fraser. Benton Fraser ... Benton Fraser ... come back to me. Fraser. Fraser."

Fetal curl, knuckles in my mouth, sharp tang of blood on my tongue, Ray wrapped around me, talking, talking, whispering my name.

"Fraser. You there?"

Wild eyed, can see them reflected in his own. "It didn't ... have to ... be that way."

"What way?"

"Pain, hurt, words, bodies. It didn't have to be that way. And I didn't know, didn't know, didn't know ..." My God. Out of control. Pain, anger, all I can feel now. I pull away, fumbling for clothes. He wraps himself around my back.

"Where the hell are you going?"

"Out. Please. I need ... oh God I need air."

"Christ, Ben. I'm ... I'm sorry."

"It's not you."

"It's me, it is me. You can't ... you can't tell me what happened?"

"As you see, I have taken far too much advantage of you." Jeans on, he won't release me to stand.

"Fraser, please. I want you – wanted you – please don't let him do this."

"He gave me –"

"He didn't give you shit, Benton Fraser. He took. He took."

"He gave me what he could. It's not his fault it wasn't enough."

"Whose fault is it then? That's all you had: it wasn't your fault. He should've just not done anything at all or else gone for it."

"That's not for you or me or anyone else to judge, Ray."

"Says you. I can judge whoever I damn well please."

"Please let me go."

"Please don't run away. Please. You run away now, what happens? What happens to us? Where's that go? Alone, I understand; but together is better."

"Alone is all I know."

"Not now. Not now. Let me show you. Let me be here."

Anger, trying so hard to suppress, Ray is the innocent – the only innocent – and the one who gets hurt, in the end, as do all innocents.

"Ray, I can't. None of this – none of this is right. I am not the man you think I am. I was not the man he thought I was. And I compound my error, time after time, by lying to myself about my needs, desires, and motivations. I will hurt you. I have hurt you. I need to be alone, now, so I won't hurt you again."

A long, long silence. His grip does not slacken. His tears are hot, his sobs silent and wracking. Between them he whispers, from time to time, words like "sorry" and "chance" and, worst of all, "love." He is warm against my back, his heart pounds against my ribs as if it was my own. Gradually his sobs grow farther apart, then stop, shuddering remnants only.

"Please stay," he whispers, lips against my shoulderblade. "Please tell."

The anger bursts. I turn rapidly, suddenly. "Stop pushing! You don't want to know! I don't want to tell you! I want to forget and I can't! You won't let me! Sharing will not help; it will simply give you a burden that you don't deserve and it will not lighten my burden. Nothing will. Nothing could. Nothing should."

Startlingly he pushes his face into mine,

unblinking, nose literally to nose. "I'm not a shrink, Fraser. But I won't stop. Even I know that if you push it down, it festers. It ties knots, Benton Fraser. You are one fucking gigantic knot. And the less you tell the more worried I get. You lied to me. He hit you. He ... he hurt you, damn it all to hell, and you lied to me and you won't tell me and you loved him and why the hell am I even trying? Why the hell do I feel this way about you if you want Vecchio?"

"I don't!"

"You lied for him!"

"For you!"

He blinks. Pulls back an inch. Blinks again. "Right."

I nod. "And ... " Selfishly ... "For me.

"Fraser ..." Uncertainty replaces anger. "No. No, that's ... I don't believe that."

"If you knew ... if you knew ... you could not want me. Would not want me to ..."

"Fraser, you could tell me he pimped you on a street corner and I would still want you."

"You would?"

"No. But you wouldn't so I figured I'm safe." He allows a tiny grin; a grin I feel compels response. "Right?"

"Right."

"You still gonna take a walk?"

"I ... yes."

"Can I come?"

"Perhaps alone means something different in America."

"Yeah. It's in the dictionary right next to stupid ideas. Fraser. I'm really really stubborn. When I want to be."

"So am I."

"I knew that. I figured maybe you didn't know I was." Swiftly, leaving no chance for protest, he kisses me. "Take the pants back off. Get your ass in this bed. And talk."

"No."

"To which part?"

"Ah ..."

"All right. I'm coming with. You leave without me, I'll follow you and shout

suggestive remarks about your ass every time we pass someone."

"Ray ... " Shake my head, laugh, sigh. "What?"

"I want to strangle you. I want to kiss you."

"Ditto with hot fudge sauce on top, Benton Fraser." He's already pulling his jeans on, rummaging in a drawer for another shirt. Tosses me my shirt from the floor by the foot of the bed. After I pull it on, he is in my face again, unblinking, solemn.

"Did he hit you?"

Rage pulses, swiftly controlled, leaving me shaken. It does not shake him.

"Did. He. Hit. You."

Nod. Swallow. Can't look away from those lucent eyes. From the contempt, from the pity sure to follow. That I, a man, a Mountie ...

Satisfied, he steps back. "I knew that. I knew it the first time. But you needed to say it. Fucked up guy, huh? Mrs. Vecchio – she never talks about Dad. Talks about everything else. Not about Dad."

I am still having trouble comprehending his reaction and my nod, while interpreted as agreement, is purely automatic. "I ... you ... I ..."

"Need some socks?" He's rummaging again.

"Ray, I – "

He holds out a pair of socks. "You're gonna tell me. You liked us. Like us. Want more. I want more. You're gonna tell me. And we're gonna sleep. And tomorrow we're gonna talk some more. And then you're going to make love to me. Maybe let me make love to you again."

I stare so hard, so intently, that he frowns. "What part of that do I need to repeat?"

"All of it. The last part."

"All of it. The tell part, the fuck part. No less than all of it."

"Ray ... I can't." Softly. Breathing out, softly.

"Come on. Walk, then. You wanna walk, walk. Don't look at me like that."

But even in the dark night, lit fitfully by street lamps, cutting through alleys Ray seems to know well, gathering composure and peace, I cannot ... talk. Embarrassed; words fail, but Ray does not push. He holds my hand, simple reassurance, safe in the anonymity of night.

oOo

Gently, carefully, he settles us under the covers, stretches out next to me, sighs deeply, echoed by mine.

“You okay? Walk made it better?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

“Benton fucking Fraser, screw your head on straight. Thank you. For letting me touch you. For trusting me ... with that, at least.”

Instinctive protest, memory and anticipation. “I craved your touch, Ray.”

“Tense?”

“Crave.”

“Good.”

“I crave all of you; and now that I am here, in your bed, I will never leave.”

He smiles at the ceiling. “I wasn't planning to let you. Tell me ... at least tell me how it started. We can start there, tonight.”

Deep breath. Easier, really, than the rest; this has been replayed many times, from many angles, in my own head.

“I had – no, I chose – to go undercover as a teacher in a girl's school. A female teacher.”

“Really?” He frowns. “I didn't see – I didn't read that case file, I guess. I mean, you mentioned it in the crypt, but I didn't know it was a case with Vecchio.”

“Saint Fortunata's? Sister Anne?”

“Oh. Al Capone. Yeah, I did read that. You're not – he didn't mention that. You broke that case? Why didn't he say?”

“He was ... unsettled by the required deception.”

“It was a case, Fraser.”

“That was certainly my attitude. However, my acting abilities came as a

surprise to him.”

“I don't know why. Nothing you do surprises me and I haven't known you nearly as long as he did.”

“You have a somewhat different outlook on life, Ray.”

“Unsettled how?”

Uncanny ability to pinpoint.

“He attracted to you in a dress?”

Hectic, scarlet flush. “Yes.”

“And you?”

“No.”

“Good. I like fucking guys and chicks, not guys dressed like chicks.” Restless thumb strokes my knuckles, only point of contact although I can feel his body heat radiating alongside me. “Is that – is that when? Why?”

“So he said. Yes.”

He reaches abruptly up and turns out the light, then pulls me against him.

“You okay? You still okay?”

“Of course.”

“So ... was that part of it? Part of what you did? Had to do?”

“At first.”

“Why, Ben? Why – I mean, I know you said need. But you have a mirror.”

“Because. Because I thought ... I thought it was love. At first. It was ...”

“I hope you've gotten over the doormat part, Benton Fraser. I want partners, friends, equals.”

“I don't think you need a doormat, Ray.”

“And what if I did?”

“That's a moot point, Ray, you don't.”

“What if I did, would you be that doormat?”

Deep breath. Time for truth, for ultimate trust, for honesty ... for myself, risking rejection, safe gamble, now. “No. I ... can't.” Nor can I look at him; safe gamble perhaps but frightening nonetheless.

“Good.” Complete satisfaction, acceptance, trust not misplaced. Sighs into my neck; I sigh into his.

“I got you, Frase.”

“Good night, Ray Kowalski.”

“Good night, Benton Fraser.”

In the morning, cramped right arm, unable to feel left. Never felt so good; grey light of dawn turns rosy as I pull back, watch him sleep. Diefenbaker's claws click, preceding an almost soundless whine.

Kiss Ray, gently, and slide from under him, shaking left arm to restore circulation. Tell Dief soundlessly to be quiet. Embarrassing emotional displays are bad enough; being woken at dawn, unforgiveably rude.

Clothes, on floor again, a habit now. How many days to establish a habit? Twenty-one? Establishing a habit of Ray: three weeks far too long, my need for him stronger than any drug.

Rucksack is still in the living room by the couch, extricate my running shoes to Dief's obvious delight. I find the key Ray gave me and add it to my keychain. Somewhat ... permanent.

Jerk my head at the door. Early enough for four or five miles.

Return to still silent apartment. Showering will wake Ray; it's not quite seven. I feed Diefenbaker, quietly, put the kettle on, begin to rummage in Ray's refrigerator. Bacon, eggs, expected; oatmeal, purchased yesterday, for me, unexpected. Coffee maker; coffee in the freezer. Whole bean. Damnation. The coffee grinder will indeed wake him. Rummage in freezer, find another bag, coffee already ground in this one.

Too early still but after seven now, coffee, frying bacon, and Ray stumbles sleepily from the bedroom, stretching, yawning, grinning.

“Oatmeal. Said you were gonna try oatmeal, Benton Fraser.”

Unselfconsciously naked, backs me against the refrigerator for an intimate kiss.

“I have water on the boil but I left the oatmeal for you.”

“Mmm. Good. Hey, Benton Fraser. I got laid last night. How 'bout you? You get lucky?” Another hug. Another wicked grin.

“Unbelievably lucky, Ray.”

“You're nuts, grinning like that after I kiss you with morning mouth. Go brush my teeth, piss. Coffee. God love you, Benton Fraser.”

And he's off again, amazing vibrant man even half awake.

Foolish grin on my face, recalled to reality by Dief's pointed whine in reference to overdone bacon.

“Okay, okay.” From somewhere, a robe unearthed, plaid flannel, well worn. “Oatmeal.” He snags a piece of bacon from the paper towel, crunching as he reads the label on the package. Hand him coffee; he smiles, reaching in a container on the counter for M&Ms, still reading the label.

“How do you like your eggs?”

“Mmm. Over easy. Didn't I get muffins? Or you want toast?”

“I'm not particular.”

“No, I've seen what you'll put in your mouth. And I'm not talking about that, so quit blushin' already.”

We move easily together in concert in the small kitchen. The oatmeal is done at the same time as the eggs; we eat the eggs while the oatmeal cools, butter melting, brown sugar turning from light brown to dark honey, milk puddled around the edge. He sees me eyeing it with uncertainty and grins.

“Just try it, okay?”

“I said I would.”

He pulls my face up. I crave his fingers on my chin. I know exactly what they mean, now. “Lotsa new things, Benton Fraser. Lotsa knots untied. Thanks for breakfast.” Gentle lips, flicker of tongue, banked passion flares, day of exploration, calm, unhurried, sweet, beckons. “Try some. Try some oatmeal.”

He stirs his own, holds a spoonful up to my mouth. Oats softer than steel cut, butter the same, sweetness entirely unfamiliar but not unwelcome. My tongue comes out to lick the spoon.

He laughs the cackle laugh, also craved. “Ha. A ha. Like it, don't you. I knew it.”

“You were right.” Finish mine, quickly,

knowing my grandmother is turning in her grave.

"I should've made you two bowls. Want mine?"

"No, of course not, Ray."

"It's okay, Frase, I usually don't eat oatmeal in the summer." He pushes the bowl towards me.

"That's odd. Oatmeal is a seasonal food?"

"Nah, it's just that Canada's so cold all the time you guys need stick to your ribs carbs every morning. Chicago in the summer ... popsicles for breakfast, sometimes, you know?"

"I ... see." Cataloguing freezer contents in my brain. He knows. He laughs again. "I haven't bought any yet. Not hot enough." Finishes his coffee, pours more, watches me eat oatmeal, crunching the last slice of bacon.

"Coffee popsicles."

"There's a thought. Shower?"

"Yes, please. I reek."

Swift movement, close to me, sniffs. "You reek great, Fraser. Man, Mountie, wolf, bacon. I'll take it. Any day. Any way. And, Frase. You gonna be staying here, don't tiptoe around, okay? You want a shower, take a shower. I'll survive. We'll probably be hittin' the sack pretty early anyhow. Mmm."

Blink, dumbfounded.

"You never lived with anyone, I know, I figured that out, I can do the math. One crazy bitch plus one fucked up macho cop equals one lonely Mountie. This ain't gonna work if you tiptoe, that's all. We fight, we fight. I yell at you for wakin' me up, you yell at me for being a sleepyhead. We'll work it out. What we got, it's important, we'll work the rest out."

"Live ... with you?"

"Well, I know you can't put your name on my mailbox and all, but what the Ice Queen doesn't know won't hurt her, huh? Long's you're at work before she is, right? We'll go look at apartments every once in a while, keep up the story."

"Live ... with you?"

"Maybe you ought to take up coffee, Frase, suddenly you're hearing in tongues or something. Live. With. Me. If you want. I hope you want."

"Diefenbaker."

"Landlady likes him. Lease allows pets. I'll double check, but it's not a problem. I always meant to get a dog, don't have to now."

"I wasn't ... I didn't expect ..."

"I didn't expect any of this either but I know what I want. I want you. Gave you a key. I'd ..." Suddenly, blushing, turns to the coffee pot, voice drops to a soft rapid mutter.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said ... I'd give you a ring if I could. One knee. Whole nine yards. But guys ... how the hell they do that? Chicks are easier."

"Odd American custom. An engagement key. I'll have to research it further."

He grins, lighting the room. "Yeah. Yeah. Wear it around your neck, whatever."

I hold my keychain up, solemnly. "It's already in place."

"Wow. You ... you're doin' okay with the commitment, there."

"I'll be doing better after a shower and ... bed ... and a financial commitment."

"Half the rent, groceries together, argue later about the heat bill when we argue about the thermostat setting and the open window in December. Okay? Now. Screw the paper. Important stuff: that shower."

Husky voice, sudden movement. "More important: touching you."

His turn to be backed against the refrigerator, the keys dropped unheeded on the counter.

"Love you too," he breathes, grin reaching his eyes and surpassing them.

Inhale coffee, Ray, the two forever inextricably linked in my sense-memory, and succumb to the warmth of his mouth, softness of his lips, writhe of his tongue. Internal ecstatic sensation having nothing to

do with arousal and everything to do with the fact that I am here, in his kitchen, kissing him, being kissed, welcomed, warmly, eagerly, strong hands cupping my buttocks, one moving up my back into my hair to hold my head there, at the angle he wants, I want.

“Oatmeal,” he says softly. “I don't know why I didn't think of it before. It's the ... the perfect taste for you. Perfect, Fraser. Oatmeal. God, oatmeal is turning me on. I'm a freak. Can I pour oatmeal over your cock and lick it off? I think I'd come just from the taste of the two of those together.”

Eyes widen involuntarily, gasp deep in my chest, off balance literally and emotionally. He laughs, warm, happy. “Boil some more water? Here, kiss me again, and let me suck you. That'll be enough oatmeal taste for now.”

Mouths wide, his tongue eagerly searching mine for remnants of oatmeal flavour, and swiftly sinks to his knees, fumbling to release me, not quite hard yet, heavy, filling, wanting, waiting ... He closes his eyes and sucks me in gently, teasing the still loose foreskin, not yet stretched, running his tongue around it and then flicking in and out, softness disappearing pulse by pulse under his tongue and the look of him on his knees, mouth moving gently.

He lets me slip out for a moment and opens his eyes to look at me, then up at my face. “Oatmeal is perfect,” he whispers. “Love to make you hard.” His hands tug at my pants, pulling them down, freeing all of me. He nuzzles my scrotum, tongue circling echoing contents and takes me in his mouth again. He looks up at me, mouth open wide, my penis resting inside on his tongue, trying to repress a grin. Rush of blood, confused as to desired destination, gravity making the choice simpler. “Like that?” he says, releasing me again.

“Do you?”

Oddly he frowns. Then surges to his feet for another long kiss, backing me against the counter. “You crazy? Yes, I like.

God, do I like.” Kisses me again, then pulls back and looks. Hard. Unexpectedly raises a hand to my face, touches my lips, my nose, smooths my eyebrows. I push into his touch. “Oh, yeah. Yeah. Don't worry. Fuck. I almost called you hon again. Mounties never let you hear the end of that, huh? Yeah. I like you. Like you a lot. You're sexy, gorgeous, hot, sweet, and you got the smartest ass I ever saw.”

“Actually I think you provide serious competition in that respect.” Reassured, I can tease. “And I'm not sweet.”

“Personality wise, nope, you're not. But your cock ... sweetest damn thing I ever tasted, except your mouth. His eye catches something on the counter; he leans over, pulling the empty bowl towards us. “You left me a little.” He scrapes the spoon around and then, holding my eye, holds my penis in one hand and slowly, lightly, drags a trail of oatmeal, slightly cold, very sticky, along the top of it with the spoon in the other.

“Ray.” Shocked. Aroused. Surprised.

“D'I ever tell you I love the way you say my name? You say it different from his, huh? I can tell.”

Rocketed from arousal to memory of despair and back again as he sinks to his knees again, takes me in with a sigh and a soft sound: not quite a moan. Can promise, oh, not with words, with body, with signs, with sounds, with each heartbeat, that I never said, felt, or thought, wanted, needed, loved the syllable of his name, the sum of his parts, like this before. Watch, simply, detached in a way, as he concentrates, licking, pulling, tugging, long slow sucks, long slow thrusts, a plateau of desire, passion banked slowly glowing embers licking flame like long tongue. Time slows and stops. Endless pageant, ebb and flow of love, need, want on his so dear face.

“Oh, man ...” Slowly, reluctantly, he releases me, hand still stroking as he gets to his feet. “God, that's so good.” He works his jaw. “I need practice.” Winks. “Exercise those muscles. And if you're gonna move in,

maybe ... knee pads.”

Wonder, irrelevantly, if I will still be blushing in five weeks. Five months. Five ... years. Raise a hand, wondering, still hesitant, to his face, to echo his movements, touch a finger to his lips, his nose, his eyebrows, scrape fingernails lightly through stubble, massaging the line of his jaw then with fingertips. Eyes half closed, he says, “Need you ...” Throaty murmur, leans in again as if drawn by a magnet to my lips, hand reaching between us for me, my own hand finding him inside the robe.

He makes a small impatient sound against my lips and suddenly sinks to his knees again, my protest ignored. “Can’t ... gotta taste it ... You want it?”

“Now!”

He grins at that, sucks me in hard, fast, his robe open, his own erection glimpsed in half images between his mouth and his hand and irrelevant plaid flannel. Time, far from stopping again, has begun now to speed up, his mouth and hand encouraging me, his other hand moving down to stroke moisture from himself, moving back up to me, moving back, pushing apart, pushing into me, friction eased slightly by small slickness echoing hot wetness inside his mouth, all around me.

“All around me,” I say, barely aware, moving legs farther apart, leaning back for support on the counter.

“All around you,” he says around me, hand pumping now, hard, encouraging, look down to see him looking up, wonder on his face, love in his eyes.

“That is ... it, Ben,” he whispers, and moans, and opens his mouth wide to catch the first jets, as I shake, tremble, jerk over and over, gasping his name.

“Oh, fuck,” he says softly, tongue coming out to lick his lips, one hand dropping to his groin, and then he moans, his head jerking backwards, his eyes shut tight, his mouth half open, face more beautiful than the sun, as irregular patterns form on the vinyl tile between my feet.

Pull him to his feet, residual shudders,

enfold him in my arms, hold him. Hold him. Chest to chest, heartbeats slowing. He sighs, as do I.

“Ray.”

“Yeah, Fraser.”

“Where’s the mop?”

His snort turns into a gurgling cough. “I guess ... oh, fuck, Fraser. My brain’s not firing on all cylinders right now and you bushwhack me with that one. I made the mess, I’ll clean it. Tomorrow. Or some time next week.”

“So you have a mop.”

“Maybe. Stop with the cleaning and kiss me again. Gotta feel you, gotta smell you, gotta taste you to know this is real. Dreams come true.”

“So do nightmares.”

“Sweet mouth, nasty brain.”

“I spoke without thinking – “

“Nah. Nah. You’re right. You got a whole lot of nightmares in there. Everyone’s got some. But this – this doesn’t have to be.”

“It could be.”

“It won’t.”

“I ... have believed that. Twice.”

“Third time’s the charm, Benton Fraser.”

“Third time under.”

“Drown with me. Drown in me.”

“I am.”

“How’s it feel?”

His lips, seconds from mine, breathy voice, half closed eyes, warmth warmth warmth golden sunlight piercing heart.

“Terrifying.”

“Did it feel like that before?”

“Not quite so – “

“You don’t know how glad I am to hear that. Drown in me.” Nothing more, nothing less, than a command.

“I am trying to let go.”

“I’ll catch you.”

As I fall his mouth closes on mine, warmer than tears, wetter than tears, softer than tears, and in tears I can float, buoyant, lost.

End

*I would give my life to find it
I would give it all
Catch me if I fall...
All alone
Waiting to fall*
'Texarkana,' *Out of Time*, R.E.M.

