Fraser’s door and stuck his head in.

“Bennie? Got the pizza—Bennie?” The lights were out, and there was no reply from his friend.

“Lousy neighborhood,” he muttered, adrenaline percolating, banishing his exhaustion. He shoved the boxes hastily onto the counter and reached for his gun.

“Over here,” came a whisper from the other half of the apartment.

“That you, Bennie? You okay?” Carefully Ray edged toward the voice, trying to remember where Dief’s water bowl was.

“Yes, Ray.”

Now Ray could see the man standing just to the left of the uncurtained window, staring out.

“What’s up?”

“Take a look,” said Fraser, gesturing. “Up there—no, she’s gone.”

“Someone in trouble?” hazarded Ray, based on experience.

“I don’t know.” Fraser walked into the kitchen area, and flipped on the light. Diefenbaker had his paws up on the counter, and backed off hastily from the pizza boxes at Bennie and Ray’s chorus of “No!”

When the two men were settled at the table with their pizza, and Dief was working on his slice on the floor, Ray said, “So what was all that about?”

“I’m really not certain. Ray, may I ask your advice?”

“Sure, Bennie. Anytime. Hand me some of those napkins, would ya?”

Complying, Fraser went on. “I’d like your advice about women. Well, a specific woman.”

Ray put down his pizza. “A woman? Great! I mean, I may not have
Ray said, “No seconds till I’ve had mine.”

Fraser looked up, a hunted expression crossing his face. “She’s back.”

Ray glanced at the wolf, and sure enough Dief was looking toward the bedroom window, ears perked.

Ray contemplated Bennie, a devious plan presenting itself. “Okay. You want my help?”

“Yes, Ray. I would appreciate any assistance you can give.”

“Fine. I got just the thing to discourage her, but you gotta promise me a couple things. You never tell a soul. And you don’t hit me. Promise?” He kept his face straight.

“On my word of honour, Ray. You won’t arrest her?”

“No arresting.” Ray got up from his chair, staying out of the line of sight, and began giving stage directions.

“Walk over to the window. Casually, you don’t know she’s there. Stop right there and turn facing left.”

Bennie managed a fake casualness that would have done the lead in a high school play proud. Ray sighed and hoped the unknown woman was not an experienced theater-goer.

Biting back a smile, Ray repeated, “Remember, no hitting,” walked over, grabbed Bennie in a flamboyant hug, pressed his body tightly against Fraser’s, pressed his lips to Fraser’s cheek, and, turning so that the watcher couldn’t miss it, ran a hand tenderly downward and grabbed Fraser’s butt. Which was quite nice, Ray noticed.

Ray felt the man tense in his arms, shudder, then go still. Ray released the kiss, turned his head into Fraser’s neck and nuzzled him while he tried to see the woman.

Bennie smelled clean, with a faint scent of shampoo, and a stray bit of hair tickled Ray’s nose. He blew it away. “Thank God you didn’t deck me. Play along with me here, Bennie. Hug me back.”

Body tense, Fraser complied, his arms slowly and awkwardly embracing Ray. “Give her another couple minutes and she’ll be totally convinced you do not ever even think about naked women, much less look at…”

He cuddled Fraser convincingly, keeping one eye on the woman while he ran his hands up and down Bennie’s back. “Umm,” he murmured when Fraser pressed him closer, and muttered, “sorry” when the man twitched violently as Ray stroked Bennie’s butt again. He angled his head for a better view, kissing Fraser’s ear to cover the move. She was still there, all right. “Turn a little this way, wanna make sure she sees I’m a guy.” He tugged at Bennie.

the best track record, but I do know the score. Be glad to help. Who is it?”

“I don’t know her name.”

“A mystery woman? Whoa, Bennie! You want me to help you track her down? How’d you meet?”

“We haven’t exactly met. It’s rather strange.”

“With you around, I’m getting to be an expert on strange.”

Fraser ignored that. “She appears to be following me. And, well, exposing herself to me.”

“What?”

“Well, she opens her coat, and she’s not wearing anything underneath. It’s quite embarrassing.” Fraser ducked his head, thumb rubbing at his eyebrow.

Ray leaned back in his chair. “How come I never had that problem?”

“Well, if you can’t help, Ray, I quite understand…”

“Facetious, Bennie, I was being facetious. So, that was her on the roof across the street?”

“Three nights this week.”

“Bennie, it is a crime, you know.”

“Illinois Criminal Code, title 3, section 11-9.”

“Oh, yeah. So why don’t I arrest her and you can meet her when you file a complaint?”

“I don’t think that’s necessary. She’s not hurting anyone. I’m certain she’s just misguided. I’ve tried to catch up to her to explain that I find this embarrassing and that she should seek professional guidance, but I’ve only been able to track her to her car. She’s driven away in a different direction each time.”

Munching on another bite, Ray asked, “Description?”

“She wears a dark baggy hat that hides her hair. Her overcoat looks like brown tweed. She’s about 165 centimeters…”

“American, Bennie, speak American.”

“Sorry. Five foot seven, one hundred twenty pounds, and, ah, well-endowed.”

“Not just a flasher, but a stacked flasher,” Ray crowed. “Oh, Fraser, what are you doing to the women of Chicago?”

Fraser looked disconcerted. “You think I’m responsible for this poor woman’s actions?”

Smiling, Ray reached around the pizza box and patted Fraser’s arm. Poor guy really couldn’t handle the situation. “No, Bennie, she’s just a nut. I expect if you ignore her she’ll give it up soon enough. She’s just doing it to get a rise outa you.”

“But Ray, it really is quite embarrassing. I just wish I could discourage her somehow without having her arrested.”

Dief gave a small bark.
As he turned, one thing became obvious. Shifting his stance confirmed something he’d not absorbed—that was not Fraser’s bunched up leg muscle he was in contact with, that was Fraser’s dick he was feeling pressed against his leg. The guy was hard as a rock. At the same time, he saw the dark blur of the woman’s figure as she ran away across the roof.

Ray dropped the embrace, stepping back. “What was that?”

“What?”

“That, what was that, Bennie?”

“I’m sorry, Ray,” Fraser said, turning away. In the indirect light he looked more upset than Ray could ever remember seeing him.

Then Ray realized what must have happened, the only thing it could have been, and gave himself a mental shake. “Hey, buddy, I’m sorry. She really got you strung out, and then I hadda go and grab you like that.” Filled with remorse—what a thing to do to the guy—he offered the only expiation he could think of at the moment.

“Hey, come on. I’ll make it up to you, okay? Just like in high school.” He really just wanted to help Bennie. Really.

“What?” Fraser sounded confused and still upset.

“Oh, come on, you can’t tell me Canadians don’t do this. Boys will be boys, right? Even in Canada.” A little bluster to cover any embarrassment.

And determined to apologize for making the problem worse, Ray pushed Fraser two steps back to the bed, sat him down, undid his jeans, and reached for Bennie’s cock. Bennie responded violently to his handling, flailing against him on the bed. Muttering, “Shh, it’s okay,” Ray avoided the fumbling hands attempting to fend him off and leaned his weight against Bennie’s legs to hold him in place. Determinedly concentrating on his justifications he was able to ignore the beginning of his own response as he held Bennie’s aroused penis, stroking and rubbing efficiently, not letting himself get into any inappropriate enjoyment. It didn’t take long, just like in high school. Fraser stopped struggling, lay still, and then came, without a moan or even a whimper. Feeling the spurts of warm fluid filling his palm, Ray shivered.

Bennie lay back, gasping, and stared at Ray, eyes huge in the dim light.

Ray just looked back, hand still on the warm flesh of Bennie’s dick. The room seemed very quiet. Then Ray pulled himself together, reaching left-handed for his handkerchief, and looking away from Bennie while he wiped his hand clean.

When he looked up from his task, Fraser was still staring at him, shock mixed with some expression Ray couldn’t identify.

Ray stood up hurriedly. “Oh cummon. You already promised not to tell, right? And I made it worse for you. Besides,” he added flippantly, “if she came back and saw that she’ll be absolutely convinced she ain’t got a chance with you.”

Bennie nodded, then sat up awkwardly because of the loosened jeans. “Thanks.”

Still trying to regain his usual casual tone, Ray replied, “Sure. No biggie. If I ever need a favor I know I can ask you.” He stepped away to give the guy a chance to pull himself together.

“Oh, of course.” Bennie stood up, standing out of the line of sight to the windows, and quickly fastened his jeans. He seemed to have recovered his composure, only his breathing, still fast, giving a clue to what had transpired. That, and the fact he was carefully not looking at Ray.

“And, Bennie?”

“Yes, Ray?”

“Tomorrow we’ll put up some curtains, just in case.”

When they went into the kitchen, they found Dief finishing the second pizza.

On his way home soon after, Ray quirked an amused grin at the evening. What he had done, jeez, what a laugh. He must have been crazy. It had been a little strange there for a minute and he’d had a qualm or two afterward, but Fraser had seemed to be willing to treat the whole incident and aftermath the way it should be, as if it never happened. No need to worry. No need to think about it at all. Really. It might have been nuts, but, hey, he’d been pretty strung out lately.

Crazy, yeah. “And I didn’t even get to see Bennie’s flasher!” Ray announced to the quiet streets.

Stopped at a light, he stretched, hearing his shoulder pop. God, he was tired. He’d been staying out way too many nights, but he just couldn’t take sitting at home with Franny behaving the way she had been recently. He was just gonna have to do something about his baby sister, either that or move out of his own house. He pulled into the curb. Damn, the lights were still on downstairs.

He walked in and faced the usual chorus. Ma wondering what he’d had for dinner, did he need a little something. Franny glaring, unspoken accusations hovering about brothers who didn’t bring Mounties home for their sisters. He fled to take a shower.

What was he gonna do about his home life? He sure as hell wasn’t gonna end up spending every evening in the pool hall like his old man, but hiding out at Bennie’s
every night wasn’t fair to his friend. Mind churning through the usual paths—why weren’t arranged marriages still allowed?—he stared out the window at the yellow-tinted night sky until he finally fell asleep. He didn’t think about Bennie. Well, not much.

Five weeks later, Ray was having trouble remembering his desperation. He found himself humming as he climbed the steps to the precinct. Damn. Things were going so well, it was scary. The squad-room was cheerful in the wake of the success of their biggest case in years—the capture of the perps that had bombed two university faculty offices. Fraser had given them invaluable help by recognizing the colonial connection.

And things at home were great, just great. Franny was out of his hair for the first time in years. She had met a new guy a month ago, and miracle of miracles, Ray and Mama Vecchio both approved of him. Cam Czerwinski had bought old Mr. Ferraro’s neighborhood plumbing business and the sudden demise of the Vecchio washing machine had instigated the fateful meeting. One look at Cam’s muscles straining the shoulders of his spotless overalls as he man-handled the new washer into position, his blond hair and bright blue eyes—Ma thought he looked like Robert Redford, Franny thought he looked like heaven—and Franny was lost. Ma invited him to dinner that very night and when Ray had come home, late as usual, he found the whole family so entranced that for the first time in weeks no one berated him for not bringing Bennie home with him. Happily, in light of her new interest Franny had finally let her hopeless pursuit of the hapless Mountie drop completely.

Ray was cautious, waiting her out. Would she find some horrible flaw and dump the plumber? After meeting her family would Cam dump Franny? Weeks went by and Cam was still happy. Friday and Saturday nights were quiet because Franny was out dancing with Cam or going to the movies with Cam. Cautiously, Ray started coming home for dinner again. Then she started helping out in Cam’s shop a couple afternoons a week. Ray started getting enough sleep.

Last night Ray had finally taken a chance and invited Bennie over for dinner, telling him Francesca had a new beau and there would be no repeat of the unfortunate incident with the ice cream. Ray would guarantee that Bennie would be perfectly safe because Franny was out with Cam for the evening.

Ma had been thrilled, fluttering around Fraser, glad to see him for the first time in nearly two months and happy to feed him. It was a quiet evening, Maria and Tony and the kids at his parents for the week. After dinner, Bennie and Ray talked about work while Ma watched television. But when Bennie excused himself, Ma motioned Ray over to her chair.

“Raymondo, is he all right? He’s not pining over something?”

“Pining? Ma, what are you talking about?”

“You listen to your mother, I know what I’m talking about. There is something wrong between you?”

“No, Ma, I swear it.”

“Well, then, you find out the problem, Mr. Detective. That’s what friends are for.”

“Okay, Ma.”

Later on he and Bennie took Dief out for a walk, and Ray tried to check out Fraser, but he couldn’t see any difference in the man’s behavior. And within minutes Bennie had asked him what he was looking at. Ma must be imagining things. It had been business as usual lately, as far as he could tell.

When they returned to the house, Franny and Cam were back, and the two men were pounced on and babbled at as soon as they walked in. Ray gave up trying to make sense of the overlapping voices and yelled “Shut up!” Into the brief silence he asked, “Franny, what?”

“Ray, we’re engaged!”

Ray looked from his beaming sister to the smiling plumber. “Cam, you sure you know what you’re doing?” Franny, predictably, hit him. “See what I mean?”

“As long as I have your permission, Mr. Vecchio, sir.” Cam joked back, and then everyone was being hugged and kissed and cried on all over the front hall. When he saw Franny hug Fraser with no more to it than if he was another brother, Ray felt a profound sense of relief. It wasn’t just that he was happy for Franny and glad that she’d be out of his hair, it was a feeling that things were really starting to work out all around. This was how things were supposed to be. He hugged Cam, slapped him on the back. Ma cried harder, and hugged Franny. Ray hugged Fraser, feeling him stiffen in his brief grasp. Gotta work harder to turn this boy into an Italian, he thought, then hugged his sister.

“Why are we standing out here? Cummon. Franny, you go call Maria, tell her and Tony and the kids. Ma, you get the glasses, I’ll get the wine. We gotta have a toast.”

Half an hour later, Ray looked over from where Cam was, totally unnecessarily, telling him all about the plans he had for his business, and how he’d never met anyone as wonderful as Ray’s sister, and that Ray would never have to worry about her comfort or happiness, and checked on Bennie.
Fraser was sitting next to Ma, politely holding the wine glass from which he’d taken only one token sip for the toast, listening quietly to Franny and Ma talk about the wedding. Franny wanted to have it as soon as possible, Ma wanted to plan for at least three months. Bennie looked tired. He met Ray’s glance, but did not return Ray’s grin.

Ray got up, saying, “Ma, you two can do that tomorrow. Let’s let the lovebirds have some privacy. I’ll run Bennie home.” Ma looked at the clock, exclaiming at the hour, and after more hugs all around, she went to bed, and Ray and Bennie left.

They were silent on the drive home. After five minutes, Ray ventured, “You okay, Bennie?”

“Yes, Ray.”

“You looked… tired. Or sad, or something.” He remembered what Ma had said earlier. Maybe she was right after all. “You’d tell me if I could help, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes, Ray.”

“Ah.”

Silence returned.

“So what’s the problem?”

Fraser gave a little twitch of a smile. “I was just envying you your family, Ray.”

“Up until tonight, I woulda said you were nuts, but tonight —yeah, okay.” God, it was great not to be fretting over Franny. He felt as if the whole situation had been gnawing at him, cutting into his life, cutting into what passed for his personal life. “Hey, I know I haven’t had you over much lately, it was just after the last time… You think he’s okay, Fraser?”

“Mr. Czerwinski seems a fine man, Ray. I’m sure they’ll be happy.”

“Just gotta be better than the last one, Franny deserves the best. Neither of us had much luck… Aw, Cam’s a great guy, she’ll be fine.”

“You both deserve the best, Ray,” Fraser replied with unwonted intensity. “Your whole family does.”

A little startled, Ray recovered and said, “Yeah, right.”

So here he was, going to work happy. It felt strange, but he thought he could get used to it. He hummed louder, bouncing a little as he went up the steps to the squad room.

Elaine stopped him in the hall. “Franny called me and told me the news. You like this guy, Ray?”

“Yeah, Elaine, I do.”

She looked at him, then went on, lowering her voice. “You don’t think she just went for him when she couldn’t get Fraser?”

“A rebound thing? Nah, I think she’d given up on Fraser before she met Cam.”

“Hmm.” Elaine looked distant. “Oh, the lieutenant wants you.”

“Thanks, Elaine.” Ray said with all of Bennie’s sincerity, and walked on smiling, so certain of the rightness of the world that he knew it couldn’t be bad news.

Welsh told him to collect Fraser at two tomorrow and show up at the Dean’s office at the University for a special thank-you from the grateful administration. Ray envisioned an honorary degree, but the following afternoon consisted of a short speech, a matched set of calligraphed parchment commendations emblazoned with the University seal and totally unreadable due to the curlicues, then a surprisingly enjoyable tea with four of the surviving professors from the bombed office building. Two of them were philosophy faculty, and Ray soon decided they could just talk to each other; he couldn’t figure out what they were talking about at all. The third wrote mystery novels on the side and Ray decided they could just talk to each other; he couldn’t figure out what they were talking about at all.

Still making promises, Ray and Bennie left, walking through a stream of students toward the parking structure. When they reached the Riviera, Ray made a decision.

“They don’t expect us back any particular time. Let’s play hooky.”

“Hooky?”

“Yeah, not as much work. Let’s blow off work. It’s only another hour.” Oh, this was stupid. Fraser play hooky? “I know, I know, it wouldn’t be right… forget it. I’ll take you back.”

“Actually, I’m signed out for the day.”

“Great!”

They walked slowly back across the quad, enjoying the rare fall sunshine. Winter would be here soon enough.

Ray looked at Fraser, striding along next to him, quiet and a little somber. Ma was right, he decided, something was wrong. Bennie just put so little expression into anything that it was hard to tell what was going on with him. Ray headed for a deserted bench on the sunny side of a clump of trees, branches not yet stripped completely bare.

They sat, side by side, watching the ebb and flow of the campus.

“Bennie, I do want to know what’s wrong.”

“Wrong, Ray?”
“Even Ma noticed. Tell me, Bennie.”

“No.”

Ray turned to stare at his companion. “No? Bennie, you’re telling me ‘no’?”

“Yes.”

“Why, I oughta… okay.”

So Ray spent the next few days making sure that Bennie noticed he was sulking, and being careful that Ma didn’t. It didn’t work. Breakfast-time on Wednesday and Ma was onto him.

She poured more coffee for both of them, then sat across from him, hands wrapped around her mug. “Raymondo, I was right, there is something wrong between you and Bennie, isn’t there? I see you together and there is trouble.”

“Yeah, Ma, I asked him to talk to me and he wouldn’t.”

“That’s how you try to help? Oh, caro.”

“Well, Ma, I can’t exactly get him drunk and hope he talks, can I? He’s a grown man, he can handle his own problems. And if not, he knows where to find me.”

Ma buttered more toast, dropping it onto Ray’s plate with unnecessary force. “I will just have to talk to him myself.”

“No, Ma!” The vision of Bennie embarrassed but polite, trying to deal with God knows what kind of personal questions from a woman whose persistence he had years of experience with came forcefully to his mind. “Let me try some more, okay?”

“All right, you try. He is your friend and he loves you, so he will tell you. You must give him a reason that can not be denied.”

“Yes, Ma. Gotta run.” Kissing her cheek, Ray left, carrying an extra piece of toast for the drive.

All the way into work, he thought about Bennie. The man was the same, yet he wasn’t. He was always quiet, but he was quiet in a different way. He wasn’t behaving any differently, yet he was.

Ray ran over the last week in his mind, reviewing their times together. Nothing. He just couldn’t put his finger on it.

In the squad room, Walters and Bennett were joking around, describing their successful arrest the day before. Bennett slapped Walters on the shoulder, flailed around and clipped the cup of coffee Ray was drinking with his broad gesture. Tepid liquid lurched over the rim onto his lapel. Shoving Bennett aside with a pithy comment, Ray stomped off to the john to mop off the damp stain.

“His hand touched his arm, and he started. “Uh, Elaine…”

“Are you all right? I’ve got the license numbers you wanted.”

“Thanks, Elaine.”

She lingered, despite his show of leafing through the print-out. “Can I get you something? Aspirin?”

Her face was uncharacteristically soft, sympathetic. “No, that’s okay. Uh, I just got somethin’ on my mind.”

“Okay. Let me know if I can help.” She patted his arm again briefly, and he smiled at her, surprised but grateful.

He forced himself to keep his thoughts on the print-out, and spent the rest of the afternoon checking out the most likely numbers with no luck. By the evening he was restless, annoyed, and frustrated. The knowledge that Fraser hadn’t confronted him was tipping him over into anger.

He picked up Bennie and Dief from the Consulate, and drove them home. Bennie was quiet, giving no sign that he noticed Ray’s dubious mood any more than he’d noticed the sulking. He did not point out the traffic violation when Ray made an incomplete stop.

Simmering, Ray followed them up the stairs. Bennie proceeded through his normal routine,
refilling Dief’s water bowl, placing his hat on its stretcher, hanging up his tunic. Ray paced, waiting to be asked what was wrong. Nothing. Ray’s temper frayed further. Damn it! He’d tried talking about it, he’d tried not talking about it. What the hell else was he supposed to do? Why did Fraser have to always be so annoying? He couldn’t stand it. Ray whirled, pushed Fraser one step back against the wall, and demanded, “Bennie, what the hell is wrong?”

Then he heard Dief’s growl, and dropped his hands from Fraser’s chest. He stood very still.

Fraser didn’t move, but he said, past Ray’s shoulder, “It’s all right, Diefenbaker.”

Ray took a shaky breath, then said, “I’m sorry. Think I’d know better than to push a guy with a wolf.” He turned slowly and looked Dief in the face, carefully enunciating “I’m sorry.”

Then he put out a careful, slow hand and touched Bennie’s arm. Backing off from his anger, he said, “I did something, I know. Talk to me.”

He stared at Fraser, who looked bothered. “Ray, I’m sorry. It’s not your fault. It’s me.”

“But I did something.”

“Yes.”

“What?”

“Well, um.”


“Ray…”

Still hoping it wasn’t what he feared, he put forward the only other explanation. Maybe, just maybe, this was all it was. “You think I was cutting you out.” Ray stepped back, paced. “Look, I explained. I wasn’t not inviting you over because of not wanting you. It was because of Franny. When she did that with the ice cream… I just couldn’t have you subjected to that kinda thing in my own house. But it’s okay now, you been over a couple times a week for dinner. You know it’s not me, I wasn’t cutting you out.”

“No, Ray, that’s fine. I understand and I appreciate your motives.”

“Then, what?”

Fraser looked at the floor. Rubbed his eyebrow. Took a deep breath. “What you did, six weeks ago…”

Hell. He had really, really hoped it wasn’t that. “Oh. Oh… God, Bennie, I’m sorry. I did embarrass you, didn’t I? I just wanted to help, but I screwed it up. Big time. God, what an idiot.”

For the first time in weeks, Fraser reached out and touched Ray, a tentative touch on the shoulder. “Ray. No. You didn’t. It’s my problem.”

Now how did the guy figure that? “Talk to me, Bennie,” Ray demanded.

Fraser sighed. Ray went to the bed, sat, thinking again the guy needs to get a couch. He patted the mattress next to him. After a moment Fraser joined him, staring straight ahead.

Fraser took another breath. Ray thought he might try to drop it, but he looked down at his clasped hands, and said, low and quiet, “You said, even in Canada, boys will be boys. Well, not me, Ray. I’d never done that.”

“Oh, jeez, Bennie, I’m sorry.” Ray rubbed his hands over his face. “I just assumed, I mean, all the guys I knew in school, well except for Jimmy Zanelli, and hey, the way he turned out…” Once started Fraser seemed determined to have it all out. He didn’t even acknowledge Ray’s repeated apology, but continued, voice tight, with his confession. “It’s a loss of control, you see, and of course that’s not good. Lack of control is dangerous.”

When the meaning of that filtered through Ray’s guilt, he sat up, staring at his friend. “Are you telling me—you don’t, I mean you never—What about Victoria?”

“That’s my point precisely, Ray. You saw what happened. I did lose control. I stayed off work for four days, I almost deserted my job for her, I almost deserted you, just because… because she touched me, and I couldn’t handle that. I lost control.”

Ray stared at him. Control was certainly Bennie’s middle name. He never really lost it, even when attacked, or wounded, or disappointed by the system Fraser dedicated his life to. Ray, he kicked vending machines, slammed his fist into things, screamed, yelled, broke things—hell, he couldn’t even manage control sometimes when it was the only proper response, witness his time in jail. But that was work. Did Fraser mean…?

“Wait a minute. Are you telling me you don’t, you know…” Ray clasped his fist over a handful of air, and made a pulling gesture.

Fraser looked away. “No.”

“My god.”

Ray contemplated a life like that. How could somebody be so wrong, when he was right about so much else? But it made a horrible kind of sense. Fraser didn’t yell, didn’t scream, didn’t cry—hell, Ray could only think of a few times he heard the man even laugh out loud—and he only hit people when they were wanted criminals, and even then usually only if they hit him first.

No wonder women never got anywhere with him. All they really would have to do is pounce on him, make him lose it, and then they’d get somewhere—three or four days in bed, then the world’s biggest guilt trip.
The man was nuts. How could any guy not… Ray got up, paced the room, his embarrassment forgotten in light of the enormity of this problem.

Fraser watched him, sitting quietly.

“God.” Ray stopped, met Fraser’s gaze. “Bennie, will you accept my apology? I didn’t mean to embarrass you.”

“Of course, Ray.”

“Good. Thank you, Bennie.” Ray resumed his walking. Okay, it really wasn’t his fault—well, what he’d done was, but Bennie had accepted his apology—but Bennie’s problem wasn’t his fault. But maybe it was something he could help with. Sure. Hey, who was it that taught Debbie Cucchio, the shyest girl ever born, how to kiss? Right. Well, he, Raymond Vecchio, was going to fix this if anyone could. He couldn’t let any friend of his go through life with that much of a screwed-up take on such an essentially simple thing.

“Got any food in?” he asked abruptly.

Fraser looked relieved. Thinks he’s off the hook. “Yes.”

“Pasta?”

“Yes.”

“Start some, I’ll be back in a couple minutes.”

Ray thudded down the stairs, pulling out his cell phone. Told Ma not to worry if he didn’t make it home tonight, he was getting Bennie straightened out. Ray didn’t want his evening interrupted by phone calls from home, no matter how things worked out here. Shoulders hunched in the evening chill, planning strategies and organizing his thoughts as he walked across to the little market on the corner, Ray quickly picked up some romano and a couple fresh tomatoes for the pasta and a bottle of wine for himself. He was back by the time Fraser, now in jeans and his RCMP sweatshirt, was tipping a cupful of rigatoni into the pot.

He continued to plan while the food cooked, sipping a small glass of the chianti. Fraser responded best to honesty in Ray’s experience. So, honesty he was going to get. He took off his jacket, hanging it over a chair before sitting down to eat.

After dinner, he took his glass and went back to sit on the bed. “You really need a couch.”

Fraser sat next to him. “I’m comfortable here, Ray.”

“Yeah, right. I need you to have a couch, Bennie.” Placing the glass out of the way on the floor, he turned a little to face Fraser.

Okay. Sorry about this, Bennie, but we’re having this out. You’ll be embarrassed, I’ll be embarrassed, but I gotta do it.” He marshaled the arguments he’d been mentally preparing. “You are so wrong about this, man. Everybody needs to lose control sometimes, preferably in a safe way, ’cause if you don’t you tie yourself all up. Sex is about losing control, that’s what it’s for. It’s, ah, physiology. And it’s right, it’s natural, it’s good—you can’t argue that it ain’t good, Bennie.” He risked a glance, but Fraser was still sitting quietly. “That’s why God gave us hormones. All this stuff we do, sitting in offices, playing games, worrying about stuff, well we didn’t evolve for that. We’re animals, Bennie, when it comes to sex. We should all be rolling around on the grass somewhere doing what we want when we want. But we got civilized, so we spend most of our lives worrying instead.”

Fraser seemed to be coping with this impromptu world-according-to-Vecchio lecture, as best Ray could tell. He hadn’t left, anyway. Or asked Ray to leave.

Ray asked himself once more if he really wanted to do this. Risky. Stupid. He took a steadying breath, and went on. “But when it comes to sex, we are out of control. It’s a good out of control, and that’s how it’s supposed to be. And I’m going convince you of it.”

Ray reached over and dropped a hand onto Bennie’s crotch.

Bennie jumped up, stepped away, his calm fled.

“Ray!”

“Come back, Bennie. You have to. You owe me. You know how bad I been feeling, thinking I had done something wrong? And this time it’s you that’s wrong, and I’m gonna show you.”

“Please don’t.”

“Bennie.” Ray just looked at Fraser, letting him make up his mind, giving him space.

After a minute Bennie returned to the bed and reluctantly sat down. His friend said, “I promise it’ll be okay. Just gimme a chance.”

“I have to disagree, Ray.”

Still arguing, sure, but he’s sitting with me. “I know you disagree, but you are wrong.” Come on, Bennie.

Another moment of silence, then Bennie finally nodded.

Ray started to move, then thought about earlier. “Is Dief gonna cause any trouble?”

“No, Ray. He knew you were angry, before. He’ll know that you aren’t now.”

Ray glanced just a little nervously at Diefenbaker, but he seemed obliviously asleep. Where the wolf was concerned, Fraser was the expert, so Ray pulled off his shirt, gesturing to Fraser to follow suit. He let the man carefully fold the blue sweatshirt and put it on the footlocker, then he pushed gently at Bennie’s chest until the man lay back across the bed.
Ray was surprised at how easy it was—was a little emotional blackmail all it took? Was that how Victoria got him? He had been almost positive this wasn’t going to work, and he wasn’t certain for a second what to do next. Start simple. He looked at Bennie, lying where Ray put him. His eyes were squeezed closed, and he twitched when Ray placed a careful palm on the smooth white skin of his chest.

“Anybody ever touch you, Bennie? Skin to skin?”

“In hospital.” And Victoria, always unspecific, the single exception. To everything in Fraser’s life.

“Oh, great, associate being touched with pain, do you?”

“No. But the pain let me keep control.”

“Yeah, all those beautiful nurses, especially when they give you a bath. I been there.” And the last time you were there, not much sensation below the waist for weeks. My fault, again. The way Bennie looked now, lying passive and unresponsive, reminded Ray of how he’d looked in the hospital after the shooting. He pushed the uncomfortable memory away. “But control is appropriate there, with nurses it’s supposed to be like a business relationship.” Ray began to move his hand, just a tiny circle, soothingly against Fraser’s ribs. The skin was outrageously soft and fine-textured. “Aw, Bennie. Control is wrong, here. I’ll get you to admit it. Everywhere else, but not in bed with someone that wants to be here. Touch me back.” When there was no response, Ray took Bennie’s hand and put it on his own ribs. Skin on skin, the perfect blessing of it. Ray spared another thought for exactly how stupid this might be, what he was doing. Fraser’s hand was cool, calloused, slightly damp, and trembling faintly.

After a minute, while Ray made lazy, undemanding circles on Fraser’s chest, he felt Bennie’s hand twitch, and stroke gently, minutely, once, down and up his side. Ray felt a trail of goosebumps rise, the stroke so light and tentative it was torture. “That’s it,” he breathed softly. Resisting the urge to add ‘That wasn’t so bad now, was it?’ like a trip to the dentist, he kept up his petting, watching Bennie’s closed expression, shadowed and a little ambiguous in the muted light of the kerosene lantern, hoping for something more from the man. The hand moved again, and Bennie scrunched up his face. Ray, checking him over, saw the trouble.

God, the poor guy had no resistance, no wonder he thought out of control was bad. Got to get him used to this, get him to where he can handle it. Good for him. But now…

“Bennie, remember you trust me,” he murmured, and moved his hand with care down to where Fraser was already erect, the trapped dick knotted at the top of his thigh, pushing hard against denim. When Ray gently rested his palm there, Fraser turned his head away, but lay still, clearly a martyr to his promise.

Poor guy. Poor misguided guy. His erection was hot, warming Ray’s palm through the jeans. Ray resisted to urge to press, to caress, right there, shaping Bennie through the fabric, and instead gently moved over to the fly, holding his breath as he tugged buttons free, pulled aside the underwear, and eased Bennie’s penis out. Muttering all the while a quiet repeat of “It’s all right, it’s okay, let it go,” Ray stroked him gently, softly, with no sudden movements, as if Fraser’s erection was some wild animal who might leap out of his hands and run away if not handled with caution. But Bennie’s cock bulged up under his gentle strokes, smooth and straight, hard and soft, and then, just like the other time, Bennie got off fast and sudden and in absolute silence. Ray shivered, wanting to moan for him, give him the reaction Bennie was denying himself. Obscurely, he felt a sense of loss. Why? This wasn’t what he was here for.

Keeping one hand for warmth, or perhaps comfort, on Fraser’s penis, Ray awkwardly tugged the jeans and underwear down, and lay against Fraser’s side, pressing as much skin against him as possible.

He pulled at Fraser’s hands, making him complete the embrace as much as he could. He let him lie quietly for a few minutes, hoping in vain to feel some relaxation in the tense muscles. When Fraser continued to lie without moving, Ray pulled away to shed the rest of his own clothes, and knelt to pull Fraser’s jeans all the way off.

At the first tug, Fraser spoke, low, a tinge of desperation to the words. “Ray. Ray, would you go now?”

Pulling the jeans down Bennie’s legs, Ray replied, “Uh-uh, Bennie. I just figured you couldn’t hear what I had to say until you got that off your mind.” Fraser’s eyes snapped open.

Ray answered the unspoken protest. “Hey. This is not about getting off. Told ya, you’re just all tied up in knots. That’s what I’m talking about. This is about admitting that there are times—and places—where losing control is okay.”

“Ah.”

Well, that was about as non-committal a syllable as Ray had ever heard. “Yes, ‘ah.’ I’m right, you’re wrong, and you’re gonna learn.”

Having disposed of all the clothes, Ray lay down next to Fraser, ignoring the fact Bennie clearly didn’t want Ray anywhere within ten blocks of him, and replaced his palm on Bennie’s chest. Square one. “Skin is great stuff, Bennie. Tell me about skin.”
Fraser began a recitation. Planning on not admitting someone was touching him, was he? Well, that would change. “It’s the largest single organ in the body. There are nerves, pores, blood vessels…”

“Nerves,” Ray interrupted.

“Yes, Ray. Per square centimeter, there are an average…”

“Why?” Ray began the small circling caress again.

“Why?”

“Yeah. If all skin was for is to keep your insides from getting loose and falling out on the floor, we wouldn’t need nerves. But nerves are for feeling, Bennie,” Ray ran his fingers up and down the side of Fraser’s ribs, watching a tiny flock of goosebumps rise. “More to the point, nerves are for feeling good.”

“That’s not entirely accurate, Ray. Nerves are also…”

“Bennie, Bennie, Bennie. That is your problem. You are willing to cope with losing control to pain, if you have to, but not to pleasure. I want you to learn to enjoy losing control to pleasure.”

“Why? It’s better this way.” Fraser’s face was cold and hard and he was lying unresponsive and passive. Martyr. If it wasn’t for the goosebumps and the conversation, Ray would’ve thought he was stroking a dead man. There was no connection to the warm, firm, needy cock he’d been stroking a few minutes ago. Not if Fraser could help it.

“It is not. I know.” Here he was, trying to fix this guy up and all Fraser was doing was fighting him. “Ah, jeez, Bennie! Try for a little open-mindedness here, willya?”

“You don’t consider this, this position you have me in to be open-minded?”

Hah, touched a nerve there. “Nope, I’m talking attitude not position. You are grim, you are suffering, you are so damn intent on not enjoying this. Attitude. Bad attitude.”

An hour later, Ray was ready to either shoot the guy, or give this whole thing up. He had talked, he had argued, he had persuaded. What it came down to was Ray thought touching was good and Bennie thought it was bad, and Ray couldn’t get past that by logic or discussion or threats. The only progress was negative—the man hadn’t actually fled or thrown him out. But Bennie still showed no willingness to consider a change. Ray was pretty well talked out. He was even a little bored with the sensation of stroking Bennie’s body—and considering how soft and sensual Ray found the man’s skin, that was saying quite a lot. Ray sat up.

“Excuse me, I’ll be right back. Do not move.” He tromped off to the toilet, peed, and thought. He needed another strategy.

When he came back, he’d thought of something. “You know muscles, Bennie? Of course you do, you read a book.” He plopped face down on the bed. “Give me a back rub, please. For some reason, God knows what reason I could have here, I’m feeling tense.”

He kept his face turned away, and waited, giving a good imitation of Bennie’s recent posture. Eventually, Fraser put his hands carefully on Ray’s shoulders and started to knead the muscles. Ray could feel the clinical detachment of the touch, no hint of caress allowed, just the press of thumbs into bunched-up spots. After five minutes, Ray directed, “Further down.”

Reluctantly the touch moved down a couple of vertebrae.

“Keep going.”

After a few more minutes of pressure, he turned his head, looking at Fraser where he sat cross-legged, just far enough off to avoid any unnecessary contact. “Bennie.” Bennie promptly removed his hands.

“Nuh-uh. I’m humoring you. More to the point I am no longer touching you, you are safe for a while. But I like being touched and you are going to indulge me. You are going to rub my back, all of my back. Okay?”

He turned away. The hands returned, and restarted at the shoulders. “Done that.” Fraser sighed just a little, and began to move over broader areas. After a few minutes, Ray started to actually enjoy himself. “That’s great, Bennie. I like that. Further down, too.”

He was certain that it wouldn’t happen but eventually Ray felt a cautious touch on his butt. God, a miracle. Or at least some progress. He enjoyed it for a moment, then rolled over, smiling. “Thanks, Bennie.”

Bennie was looking at him with a less than cold expression for the first time in hours. He chewed his lip, hesitating.

“Bennie.”

“Bennie voluntarily began stroking Ray’s chest. It was getting late, and Ray closed his eyes, pleased not to be talking for a while. “Ummm.” Fraser’s hands moved up, onto his arms, back down. He paused. A thumb stroked a nipple. When Ray opened an eye, it was to see Bennie looking at his crotch.
“Nope. I know some guys are, but I’m just not that sexually sensitive there.”

Fraser started.

Ray propped himself up on one elbow, pleased when Fraser didn’t remove his hands. “Bennie, don’t go thinking I’m just better than you at keeping control. I just do something about it regularly and you don’t. If you—Hmm.” Show don’t tell, right? Ray reached for Bennie’s hand and pressed it to his own penis. Fraser went still but didn’t pull away. “If you do what I did to you, I will lose control as fast as the next guy.” He kept his hand on Bennie’s but did nothing else. Not voluntarily anyway. His dick had other ideas, starting to firm up a little at the feel of a warm hand. “Ummm.”

Nothing happened for a few seconds, so Ray took his hand away. He lay back and waited, looking at Fraser, preparing for another round of talking. Bennie seemed almost contemplative, sitting cross-legged, spine very straight, staring blindly at nothing. Then he looked down at his hand. Ray gave a surprised little murmur when Bennie awkwardly stroked at his cock, watching his response. Ray dithered—gotta encourage him, gotta show him this is okay, guys are supposed to be able to let go and enjoy, gotta not scare him off—but after a few moments of Fraser’s tentative explorations he just didn’t give a damn. Despite his claims to Bennie, he hadn’t been getting off much lately—no current girlfriend, and pretty much too tired most nights until recently—and, well, having another hand on him had always been more fun than doing himself. Way more fun.

Lying there on his back, his dick was filling, jutting up now, Fraser carefully gripping him with one warm hand. It was great, it was wonderful, it was frustrating as hell lying still. Finally, he couldn’t stand it, he just couldn’t go further in that position. “Bennie, Bennie, that’s great, but I gotta move, change position. You mind?”

Bennie dutifully lay down, and for the first time in an hour, Ray touched him, stroking up and down his chest lightly. “You mind if I touch you, Bennie? It’s what makes this better than my own hand, the body contact, okay? Can I?” He waited, feeling sweat prickling his skin. “All right.”

Ray wasn’t certain if the calm tone was a continuation of the martyrdom of earlier. He really didn’t care, he just wanted to think about himself for a bit, and forget about Fraser’s stupid hangups. Forget about what Fraser might think about him. Bennie’s body looked inviting, smooth and pale, and his hands remembered the soft feel of his skin with exquisite clarity. He wanted...

No, no, he just needed, right? He just needed to get off. Maybe he was using the guy, but, hey, that’s what guys did. Just a helpful, convenient assist here. Like he’d helped Bennie. He swung a leg over Bennie, kneeling, pressing his legs together around Fraser’s thighs. He reached for Fraser’s hands, wrapping them back around his erection, and began to push into the grasp.

“Ah, that’s good, yeah.” He began pumping, pushing for completion, hands braced on Bennie’s ribs.

Fraser gripped his dick, hands tunneled around it, not doing much but being there. Ray thrust, seeking the inevitability. The feel of Bennie’s body beneath him, between his thighs, under his hands was right, was exciting. He arched up and back, wrapped his hands tight around Fraser’s and shot, groaning aloud. “Whooo.” He kept the grip, riding out the pulsing, all the sensation to the dregs, draining though and out of his body.

“Damn, that’s good,” he muttered, falling back onto the bed at Fraser’s side. When he could think again, he rolled over, shaking sweat out of his eyes, almost afraid to look Bennie in the face.

Shit. So much for his agenda, that had probably scared Bennie off totally. And so much for his point about touch not meaning sex. Idiot. Screw up. He looked, prepared for disgust, dislike, neutrality.

But Fraser smiled at him.

What?

Sticky hands curled, the man was smiling.

“I believe you, Ray.”

“Wha…”

“The way you looked, how you acted, you are right. For you, it clearly is good, as you said. And I’ll try to learn. If you’ll show me?”

Goggling, Ray could do nothing but laugh. “Jeez, Bennie. But my point wasn’t… ah hell, of course I’ll help. That’s why I started this, wasn’t it?”
Bennie rolled onto his side, scrunched closer, and placed himself within touching distance of Ray. “Um,” he said, gesturing with a curled hand, “I should wash.”

“Nah, rub it in, it’s okay. Need a shower anyway.” “Rub it in? Isn’t that… it’s sticky.” “Bennie, Bennie, Bennie. It’s not evil. And I’m already sticky.” Ray grabbed Fraser’s hands and swiped them on his skin. Fraser left them where he placed them for a moment, then rubbed lightly, looking at the white residue.

“Not evil. Ray, given your cultural background, shouldn’t it be evil? Doesn’t your church…” “I don’t go anymore.” Ray sighed, reaching past the effects of afterglow and tiredness for more philosophy. “Bennie, I believe in God. But I just can’t believe God gave us the capacity to enjoy things, not just sex, but touching, or eating, or singing, or whatever, so the Church can say sometimes it’s wrong, or it’s only right certain times. Did I hurt you?” “Of course not, Ray.” “Did you hurt me?” “I don’t think so.” Ray laughed. “Jeez. Know it, Bennie. And did we both wanna be here... bad question. Forget before. Now, are you okay with being here?” “Yes.” Fraser began to run his hands up and down Ray’s chest.

“Then it’s okay. I believe God gave me a brain to make my own judgments. Evil is child abuse, and murder, and hooking people on crack, and blowing up buildings full of innocents, and hating people causa their skin or their name. It sure as hell ain’t this.” He reached over, mirroring Bennie’s gesture, hands stroking gently. “And it isn’t even losing control, if it’s in the right circumstances.” “It’s that simple?” “Yeah, I guess it is. To me, anyway.” Fraser was quiet for a few minutes. Then he sat up, excused himself, and went to the john. Ray sat up and began fishing around for his shirt, figuring they’d had it out, and he should be getting home. He looked at the wind-up alarm on Fraser’s battered footlocker. God, it’d be close to two by the time he got to bed.

“Don’t go.” Ray looked up and saw Bennie watching him from across the room. “Fraser, it’s kinda late…” “But, Ray, I want... You said...” How could the man look so abandoned? “Aw, hell, Bennie. Okay, sure.” He hung the shirt over the chair and sat down again.

Fraser came back to bed, lying down, and tugging at Ray. Ray gave in to the wordless demand, telling himself this was exactly what he had told himself Fraser should be like, and now that he gotten it, who was he to bitch? He began gently stroking Bennie’s body, systematically working the guy from broad shoulders down, studying him in the lamplight, looking as well as touching.

“You’re sure pale. Shouldn’t you be all sunburned, skin like leather, all that snow reflecting?” Bennie looked down to where Ray’s hands were stroking now near his waist. “I tended to keep that bit covered up in the snow, Ray.” “Ah.” He continued, moving to arms for a bit, then legs.

Fraser gave a little hiss of indrawn breath, then said, “Sorry, Ray.” “Hmm?” Ray was definitely feeling sleepy. “Oh.” He realized Fraser was apologizing because he was responding to the touching, becoming aroused again. “It’s okay. Told you it was okay before. Roll over.” Fraser did as he was told, cocking a leg a little for comfort. Ray began a deep kneading massage into his shoulders, hard enough to probably hurt a little. “That better? More distracting?” “Yes. Ow!” Ray gentled down a bit, but kept kneading. After ten minutes he could feel Fraser relaxing, and he moved down the spine, avoiding the scar, staying out to the sides there and being gentle, using palms instead of thumbs. Further down, onto the lower back, working carefully, knowing what felt good to him after a day mostly desk bound. Thumbs into the dimples at the top of the butt, pressing at the sides of the tailbone. Brief token work on the cheeks. His wrists were starting to ache.

“That’s all you get. Roll over.” Fraser lay still, then after a second, rolled. He was fully erect, damp with it. He didn’t say anything, just lay there, not meeting Ray’s eyes. “Jeez, Bennie.” Bennie opened his mouth. Ray slapped a hand across it. “Don’t say a thing, just don’t.” Fraser’s eyes had that lost look again, peering over his hand at him. Ray removed the hand.

“Sorry. You’re perfectly normal—for a frustrated fifteen year old. It’ll wear off.” In response to the look, the incipient apology just waiting to leap off the man’s tongue, Ray reaffirmed, “No, really.” Bennie reached over and stroked Ray’s thigh, calluses catching a little on the hair, but he didn’t say anything.
“And stop being sorry.”

Bennie took Ray’s hand and pulled it lightly toward himself. “Will you—”

“Yeah, yeah.” And once again, Ray found himself doing the friend in need trip, but this time Fraser was trying to enjoy himself, stroking at Ray, watching him, and when his orgasm struck, looking not at all like a martyr. Fraser was still silent, but his hands grabbed at Ray. Watching Bennie’s eyes close, his head fall back, Ray felt the sting of unnamed emotions. Hand covered with come, he rubbed it gently onto Bennie’s stomach, feeling the muscles flutter beneath.

Striving for a little lightness, he said, “Now we both need a shower.”

“Ray…”

“What?”

“There isn’t one.”

“What? Oh, hell. I’m too tired to care. It can wait.”

Ray had let himself be talked into staying over, perfectly happy to take Fraser’s horrible bed rather than drive home. Bennie had insisted on the floor, and when Ray woke at three-thirty with Dief’s cold nose pressed to the back of his knee, he understood why. The damned wolf wouldn’t be moved, and kept taking over more of the bed. Ray gave up, and moved down with Fraser. He woke again soon after dawn, the light filling the room as though the sheet he’d tacked up over the window all those weeks ago wasn’t even there. Groaning, he sat up, rubbing at his back. Nothing like sleeping on the floor to make a guy feel about eighty.

Fraser was bright and cheerful and Ray wanted to kill him, After chamomile tea he still wanted to kill him. After swabbing himself off with a dishtowel at the sink rather than stand in line in the hall for the use of the elderly bathtub he really, really wanted to kill him. He settled for going out for a big breakfast at the diner two blocks over. After lots and lots of coffee he only felt strung out, not actually exhausted.

Walking into the squad room half an hour early, he met Elaine heading for the file room with a stack of manila folders. She stopped, looked him up and down, and opened her mouth.

“Don’t. Say. It.”

“I was only going to ask ‘how many aspirin?’”

“Four.”

She stared at his lapel for a minute, then smiled, a strangely feral smile, before turning away down the hall.

Ray looked down. The faint mark of yesterday’s coffee stain smote his eyes like a neon sign. Oh, god.

“Elaine, hey, Elaine…”

He’d survived the day. Somehow. At home, a long, hot shower, clean clothes, and the prospect of food almost strengthened him enough to face his mother.

“Caro, you look so tired. You should go to bed.”

“I will, Ma. I will. Right after dinner.”

“It’s just for you again, Franny’s with Cam.”

“Oh, good, I can stand for it to be quiet.”

“You don’t take good care of yourself, Raymondo. I worry when you’re so tired.”

He sat down at the kitchen table and let her voice wash over him in chiding waves. When she stopped, he looked up. She was looking at him like he was one of her grandchildren. He could almost see the intended pat on the cheek.

“Ma…”

“I know, caro. You are a grown man and you don’t want to be fussed over.”

“No, Ma, I love it.”

“So. How is Bennie?”

One screwed up sexually deprived lonely guy.

“Better, I think, Ma. I talked to him, I think I got him feeling better.” After getting jacked off twice in one night, he better be feeling better.

“Good. Next time, bring him over here to talk. I worry when you’re out all night.”

Ray couldn’t help a shudder at the thought of last night taking place here. “That’s why I called, so you wouldn’t worry.”

Close to eleven hours of sleep made Ray actually willing to face Friday. Elaine checked him over thoroughly when he came in.

He was wearing a different suit—a different color suit, just to make sure she didn’t miss his virtue. A rash of car-jackings had him out on the streets till two, then he was back, typing up reports. At three-thirty there was a familiar chorus of over-friendly voices, and Ray looked up to see Fraser striding down the room, Dief at his heels. Well, at his heels until the first offer of a doughnut.

Ray felt a moment of total blankness. What the hell had he done? How had he gotten himself into that whole situation? What in God’s name had he been thinking? He had a vivid vision of someone, sometime asking Fraser about their relationship and Fraser telling them honestly and sincerely about Wednesday night. His job, his family, his house, gone, swept away because he stupidly wanted to help a friend with his problems. A
picture of himself, dirty, unshaven, with fleas—or worse—living out of the Riviera until one morning, there he'd be, frozen to death…

“What?”

“I said, did you remember that we have to go talk to the neighborhood watch group. This is the second Friday of the month.”

Fraser looked normal. Completely normal.

“Oh, yeah, right.”

And the afternoon progressed as it had last month, and the month before. They left with Fraser burdened down, as usual, with little plates of baked treats from his cadre of admirers, which they dropped off, as usual, at the mission soup kitchen. Better than Diefenbaker eating the whole collection. Ray figured the wolf would explode if he did, since he’d gotten more than Fraser from his own admirers, also as usual.

They had a usual Friday night at Ray’s, playing with the kids while Ma and Maria and Franny got dinner. After the kids were off to bed, they watched TV and talked, though Ma and Franny were still arguing over the timing for the wedding, so the men tended to stick to sports topics, which were not so likely to lead to domestic violence.

By the time Ray drove Bennie home he had almost forgotten his panic of the afternoon. He was going to have to get used to the idea that there were some things Bennie was willing, it appeared, to keep his mouth shut about. Thank God. He went up to the apartment at Bennie’s invitation.

But once inside he lost his confidence when Bennie said, “Ray? About Wednesday night, would you—”

Oh, no. “You wanna talk some more? Sure, Bennie.”

“No, I want— Would you— Um, could we do that again?”

“But what about what that was all about? I understand we need to talk, but—”

Bennie, Bennie, Bennie, nobody needs a teacher with their own body, just do what feels good, and remember it’s okay to feel good.”

“I’d appreciate it if you would help me, Ray.”

Soon enough and with the same confusion, Ray found himself in a repeat of Wednesday, with variations. Well, part of Wednesday night. Ray’s fears were enough to keep him from finding Bennie’s body, Bennie’s responses, and Bennie’s trust arousing. Without Ray’s invitation Bennie didn’t try to touch Ray again. Bennie still wanted to follow his lead, wanted Ray to show him what was good. Essentially, Ray soon realized, Bennie wanted Ray to touch him rather than to touch himself.

A bit grimly, Ray lectured again about how it was all right to do this for yourself, it was normal, it was healthy, it was good for you. Bennie agreed with everything, but didn’t want to be left alone. There were comments about Ray’s greater experience in these matters that made Ray wince. He stopped what he was doing and sat back.

“Bennie just looked at him, a faint confusion washing his features.” Did I do something wrong, Ray?”

“No, no, no. It’s just… well, Bennie, I told you that this was no big deal, but you make it sound like I do this all the time. And I don’t, I definitely don’t. Not in years and years. It was high school, we were all horny as hell, and none of the girls would let us… you know? It was just a temporary thing, okay?”

“And I appreciate your willingness to help, Ray.”

“Yeah, yeah. Look, the sooner we get you comfortable with taking care of yourself in these matters the better.” And Ray resumed his role as instructor, working to get himself out at a reasonable hour, no matter how much stamina Bennie had.

By Sunday afternoon Ray had long since realized just how big a mistake he’d made. Parked by his house, he sat in the Riviera, head in hands and moaned, “I have created the world’s only Mountie sex addict. Me! Single-handedly. You are such a screw-up, Vecchio. God, what a mess.” If Bennie had had his way, Ray would have been cooped up the whole weekend providing aid and comfort in repeated doses. Though he had come back Sunday at Bennie’s urging, Ray had finally walked out early with an excuse of something he had to do for his mother.

Damn. Be careful what you wish for, right. Bennie was certainly losing some of his repressions, which Ray still thought would be a good thing in the long run, but… jeez, he was like a horny teenager, can’t leave it alone, and Ray was his chosen partner, because he’d made the stupid, idiotic mistake of preaching hedonism to him.

“How the hell am I gonna get out of this? I mean, he’s my friend, but I’m sure as hell not gonna give up all my evenings to go over there and do… that!”

Maybe he could shoot himself in the foot. Taking a bullet would be easier in some ways—it would be over faster. But then he’d heal up and be right back here. And with a cast he wouldn’t be able to run away. Maybe he should sprain his wrist? Bennie’d probably just ask him to use his left hand. He leaned forward and rested his head on the steering wheel. “Ohh. I just can’t handle this. What a mess.”

There was a polite tapping on the driver’s window, and he slowly turned his head. It was Mrs. Ruggerio from next door, with a bag of groceries cradled in her arms.
“Ray? Are you all right, honey? Should I get your mother?” She sounded just like she had when she’d found him crying behind the hedge with a skinned knee when he was seven.

He pulled himself together. “No, thanks, I’m fine, I was just…” Panicking? Wallowing in guilt? Afraid? Contemplating shooting myself in the foot? “…thinking.” He managed a smile. Got out and locked the car. Gave her a hand with the bag, chatting about the weather, hoping she wouldn’t have it all over the neighborhood by suppertime that little Ray was crazy, sitting talking to himself. There were many disadvantages to still living in the old neighborhood.

Inspiration hit in the shower. Balanced on one foot, scrubbing at his left sole, there it was, the obvious answer. Get Fraser a girlfriend. It wasn’t as if there weren’t candidates everywhere. Couple of double dates, then yank off the old training wheels and let nature take her course. Simple. Better make it next Friday, though, give the guy a chance to wear himself out a bit more. He towelled off, flipping through a mental list of candidates. Better not be somebody from work…

“Ciao, Andrea. It’s Ray.”
“Ray Vecchio.”
“Yes, it has been a while.”
“Oh, really? How old is he? Walking already? Hey, that’s great.”
“No, just called to say hello. Look, I gotta go.”
Whew.
“Barbara? Hi there, it’s Ray.”
“Now wait a minute, that wasn’t my fault!”
“Yeah, well, let me tell…”
Hmmm.
“Hello. May I speak to Colette, please?”
“Not since when? Oops.”
“Yeah, I’ll do that.”
Right.
“Shellie? Ray.”
“Would you shut up a minute? I have a deal.”
“I can get you a date with the Mountie.”
“Yeah, Fraser. Yeah, the one that sings. How many Mounties ya think I know, anyway?”
“No catch.”
“Hey, that was years ago!”
“All right, all right, there is one thing. It’s a double date and you have to bring someone for me.”
“Yes, a girl.”
“Ha!”
“You just better make sure she’s nice, or I’ll tell the Mountie about the time you…”

“All right, all right, I won’t unless you do. Deal?”
Okay.

Somehow, Ray survived the week. By Wednesday he could see a hunted look in his eyes when he shaved in the morning. By Thursday, Ma was starting to hover and bake him favorite treats. By Friday he didn’t care who or what he’d be out to dinner with, as long as Shellie took Fraser off his hands. Somehow he’d managed not to scare Fraser off the date, but he thought that Bennie was placing undue emphasis on Ray’s presence for a guy that should be chomping at the bit to get to know a great woman like Shellie.

By Saturday morning he wished he were dead.

What a disaster. He had never, ever, in a life full of bad choices, gotten himself into something as bad as that. Shellie was every bit as wonderful as she always was, dressed to make Ray feel pangs of regret for setting her up with Fraser, and every bit as oblivious to Ray’s admiration as she ever had been. Her friend Marianne was a little short, but pretty, pleasant, polite, and with no obvious defects that would relegate her to blind-date purgatory.

Until she met the Mountie, of course.

Oh, she’d been polite to Ray up through the time they’d ordered dinner. Then Ray became aware, even while himself keeping a worried eye on his protégé, that he did not have her full attention with his stories of exciting true-life crime and personal heroism. Even his best smile didn’t stop her eyes, not worried but more… predatory, from drifting to Fraser.

Fraser gave a nervous start about the time the salads arrived. By the time the main course was served, the whites of his eyes were showing. By dessert, Ray couldn’t take any more. Had these women no shame? Ignoring Fraser’s desperate glances, he left the table to make a quick call. Bennie’s relief when he returned was obvious to Ray, but not to the women, who had passed though vying for attention and were reaching perilously close to the personally vituperative stage.

Ray counted off the moments, worried he’d cut it too close and violence would be done. His cell phone buzzed, and he almost ripped his coat pulling it out of his pocket. Bennie’s grateful expression would have been comical if Ray had been in a mood to appreciate it as he left cab fare and gave the women the story about being called in on an emergency, dragging Bennie away in mid polite farewell before Shellie or Marianne could figure out that Mounties weren’t, as a rule, called in on Chicago PD cases. He didn’t look back, but he could guess what might be happening. He was glad he’d paid
the check while he made his call when he heard the first crash behind them as they fled out the door.

Disaster. Before he met the Mountie he wouldn’t have thought women as a whole so lost to manners, or at least to playing by the rules of the game. Before he met the Mountie he still had a social life. The Riv rocketed away from the curb as he headed, again, to Bennie’s apartment.

“I’m sorry, Ray.”

“Yeah, yeah. Not your fault, I shoulda known better.”

Tonight, he’d be firm. Tonight, he’d tell his friend he just had to handle things on his own.

Disaster.

Plagued by his own sense of guilt, he cooperated with Fraser’s usual evening choice of activities, visions of Shellie in that dress, or almost out of that dress, annoyingly persistent.

Interrupting Bennie in mid-question, Ray exploded.

“We coulda been with two beautiful women. But no. Here we are alone. And it’s your fault.”

“The date was your idea, Ray.”

“Yeah, because I want you to have a girlfriend.”

“But they were fighting.”

Why did the guy have to sound so helpless? “Yeah, yeah. I know.”

“We coulda been with two beautiful women. But no. Here we are alone. And it’s your fault.”

“I never know what I’m supposed to do, Ray.”

With a laugh, Ray gave that the answer it deserved. “Welcome to America, Bennie. Women, they want to keep you off-balance. Keep you guessing.”

“I understand that, Ray. But it wasn’t like that…”

Ray turned, interrupted Bennie with some bitterness.

“With Victoria? She was using you. She had everything figured out ahead of time, she just did what she had to put you where she wanted.”

The guy was just gonna have to get over Victoria, stop thinking of everything in relation to her.

Fraser didn’t wince at the reference. He looked directly into Ray’s eyes with a steady gaze. “No. It wasn’t like that with you, Ray.”

Thrown off balance, Ray could only say, “Huh?”

Still looking at him with that wide, blue gaze, Bennie went on, “I don’t want to be with them, Ray. I’d rather be with you.”

Ray floundered. He must just mean that he wasn’t ready to move on yet, right? “Yeah, I know, but I keep telling you, this is temporary, just to help you out. We’ll get you squared away, find you a girlfriend. They aren’t all like that, really, okay?”

Bennie’s answer to that was to tug at Ray’s hand, urging him back to interrupted attentions. He reached over to his footlocker and picked up a tube of lotion, wordlessly glopping some into Ray’s hand.

“And where the hell did you get this?”

“The corner pharmacy, Ray.”

“Oh, great. Walked in and said, ‘Excuse me, sir, but my friend, Ray, that’s Ray Vecchio, the cop, is teaching me how to jerk off and what would be the best lotion to buy for that?’ in a clear, carrying tone?”

“No, of course not, Ray. I asked him, quietly, about something soothing for chafing.”

Bennie carefully capped the tube, and reached for Ray’s hand again. But Ray was still afraid, and frustrated and ticked off over the failure of his plan, not to mention the vision of spending the rest of the year getting a sex-crazed Mountie rooted out of the ruins of his social life. And what exactly had Bennie meant by what he said? Ray avoided Fraser’s hand, grasped his wrist, and swiped the lotion off his palm onto Bennie’s.

Adamantly, Ray shook his head. “Nuh-uh. You gotta do it yourself.”

“Ray…”

“No.” Get this over, and get out, that’s the plan. He can take care of himself, just gotta prove it to him.

Fraser looked faintly hurt and began reluctantly to work on his own dick. His gaze, still calm, stayed on Ray, quickly losing the hurt expression, gaining warmth as his hand slipped juicily up and down. Looking at Bennie, forgetting for the moment his own continual internal litany of self-abuse, Ray became aware of the difference between Fraser’s usual reserve and this calm but more open expression. And there was something…

“Bennie?” Ray said quietly, hoping he was wrong.

Fraser looked up, met his eyes.

Oh, God, no.

Ray broke eye contact, patted Bennie on the arm, and got up, gathering his clothes and dressing efficiently.

“Bennie, I know the date didn’t work out, but believe me, we’ll get you somebody. I know you’ve got the hang of it, and frankly, I can’t keep dropping everything to help you out with every little thing. I’m glad to have been able to help, but I gotta go, okay?”

And, not stopping for what he was certain would be the wrong answer, Ray Vecchio fled the scene.

That night, lying sleepless in bed, he stared at the familiar view of his bedroom ceiling and counted over his mistakes. And the compounding errors he had made trying to fix the initial mistakes.

And there was no one there to point out to him the fact that not once in this journey did he question why he would have made the mistakes in the first place. His
own motives could be no more complex than the desire to help a friend. Could they?

The weekend seemed quiet and a bit surreal. He did things around the house for his mother. He went to the park with Tony and the kids and played catch.

Above all, he did no thinking about Bennie that he could avoid.

Sunday night, facing the Monday morning drive, he had trouble sleeping. But at least he wasn’t young enough to believe that embarrassment was fatal—at surviving that particular malady he’d had plenty of practice. He bullied through, telling Fraser up front he was busy tonight and wouldn’t be able to take him home. Tuesday he actually looked at Bennie, and was reassured to see nothing untoward showing through the familiar calm demeanor. By Tuesday afternoon, up to his neck in a possible mob related murder, he forgot any personal problems for a while. The case was a bear, taking up all his thoughts as he worked through the weekend before there was a break.

By the next week he could tell himself he had just imagined what he’d seen in Fraser’s face. He took Bennie home for dinner again, afterwards dropping him in front of his building. Fraser did not ask him up.

All through the fall, while Ray was occupied on cases with and without the Mountie’s assistance, he still kept worrying about his friend. Pretending what had happened between them was only the casual, not worth talking about event he had thought he intended it to be was easy for weeks on end, then something would happen and he’d have a glimpse of Bennie’s loneliness intrude on his work-a-day view of the man as a friend, a partner, an annoyingly perfect crime-fighting paragon.

He did not again make the mistake of trying to fix Fraser up with a date, though he was worried about Franny’s upcoming wedding, picturing poor Bennie under siege from hordes of Franny’s girlfriends and all the Vecchio female relatives.

All in all, Ray found the week before the wedding trying beyond belief. For some reason he found himself feeling a sense of dread completely unrelated to Franny and Cam. Waking up from dreaming about Angie, he lay thinking it out. Of course he was worried. Francesca’s first marriage had been a disaster. He and Angela had had troubles of epic proportions. Maria and Tony were hardly a shining example of marital bliss. And his parents… Vecchios were not a good value when it came to marriage.

He found himself able to remember, even after all these years, every word of the hard truths Angie had thrown at him. Truths he had denied to her, but which were the same things he used to beat himself with over his failures. He had loved her, he had wanted to change, but intentions stood no chance against the breadth and depth and height of his failures and his stupidities. There was proof of it everywhere, in the lack of lovers, in the lack of friends.

Franny would be okay. Franny was better than he was. And Cam was certainly better than Ray, miles better—he didn’t need to see Franny as another Angie saddled with someone like him. Hurt by someone like him.

Turning over, kicking at the twisted bedclothes, he told himself to go back to sleep and not worry about her. Fraser—Fraser was another matter. There he was right to worry. Knowing some of Franny’s friends, he might really get pounced on after the reception. Then who knew what might happen. He’d just have to look out for the guy.

He needn’t have worried. The event had gone off well, partly because Franny had stuck to her guns and demanded that it be a small wedding. Well, small by Italian-wedding standards, at least. Ray teared up a bit leading her down the aisle, but Franny was oblivious and didn’t embarrass him. Fraser was in high demand for the dancing, and Ray noticed he seemed to be handling the female attention pretty well, compared to last year. The man stayed for the whole party, not jumping out of windows or hiding in closets. Wandering around after many of the guests had left, Ray was momentarily heartened to see Bennie in an animated conversation with a woman until he realized it was his third cousin Theresa. He couldn’t hope to fix the two of them up, because she lived in Philadelphia and she was already married. So the attraction had to be her profession. Sure enough, when he was close enough to hear snippets of conversation they seemed to be trading stories about urban versus wilderness librarianship.

Ray was glad that the wedding had been a success considering what the next few weeks brought. Louis’ death, Fraser’s behavior about Zuko, and then the loss of Irene left Ray feeling wounded and hurt. He retreated, not noticing Bennie’s quietly supportive presence until a week had passed. Gradually some calluses formed, work was more demanding, and he found himself able to handle the routine of daily life again.

Ray’s social life that fall and winter had its share of ups and downs, mostly downs when he gave it thought. He tried to check on Bennie’s progress with women,
specifically the difficult but lovely Inspector Meg, but Bennie wouldn’t answer direct questions. Ray let it go, telling himself the guy was on his own now where women were concerned. Their working relationship seemed fine, perhaps even better tuned than before. There were just certain categories of things they did not discuss.

In time the calendar said it was spring, but the weather disagreed. The winter of 1995/96 was planning more trouble before it left town. Ray faced the upcoming anniversary of the shooting—of his guilt—with uncertainty. He had no idea whether the Mountie paid any attention to anniversaries, either good or bad. There had never been any sign that Fraser had a birthday, for instance. Faced with the choice of asking or not, Ray chose not. He simply announced he was taking Bennie out to dinner that night. No discussion.

They went to a nice but not expensive place—Ray was not celebrating, here—and as usual talked about work during the meal. Despite the air of normality consistent with the last couple months, Ray found himself having an extra glass of wine.

He’d been able to handle it. He’d been cleared for duty by the psych counselor twice, once after the shooting, once after being shot. Bennie had forgiven him. Ray was fine with it.

Of course, Ray hadn’t entirely forgiven himself. But then he wasn’t expecting to.

After dinner they drove back to Ray’s place. Ma was getting through the end of a tough case of flu and Ray went up to check on her. She was still flushed, sleeping propped up on extra pillows, but her breathing was deep and even under the influence of a dose of Nyquil; out for four or five hours, Ray judged.

He headed quietly back downstairs to join Bennie in the living room, fetching more wine for himself from the kitchen on the way.

“So, Thatcher’s being promoted.” Ray thought this was safe to bring up; it was hardly a personal observation.

“Yes, she is.”

“Well, after that train situation... it’s only right.” Ray still felt some bitterness over the incident. Maybe if he took to wearing a colorful uniform, he’d get some recognition for his work, too. “Will she be going back to Canada?”

“She’s been posted to Toronto.” Fraser sounded unemotional about it, but his voice changed a little when he talked about it.

The sudden thought that struck Ray was terrifying only because of the hollowness in his gut when it occurred, not so much the possibility itself but that he should be so concerned at the answer.

“Will you go with her?” Fraser had been as much if not more responsible for the rescue.

“No, Ray. I need to stay here, I’m afraid.”

“Ah.” Oh, to hell with it. “I’m glad.”

“Thank you.” A slight smile accompanied the response.

Ray sipped his wine, and turned the subject to basketball.

Half an hour later, he re-checked Ma, and coming down, gave in to what he realized must be the maudlin influence of the extra wine, even though he felt perfectly sober and logical. But it must be the wine.

“Bennie, would you do me a favor?” Fraser acquiesced without hesitation, which Ray had known he would, which was why he hadn’t asked before.

“Stand up.” Fraser did. “Hand me your coat.” Fraser did, but there was a quizzical eyebrow cant added.

“Turn around.” Well, whatever expression went with that obedient move was wasted on the lace curtains. Ray stepped close, placed his hands carefully on Fraser’s shoulders, pulled down the braces, and untucked and gently lifted the shirt halfway up Bennie’s back. Fraser tensed momentarily, but stood still and said nothing.

Ray stared at the dark, ugly scar, seen for the first time since fall. His doing, the signifier of his guilt, the mark of his evil intent vested onto Fraser’s innocence. He laid his palm over it to hide it, imagining he could feel the emanations of the metal, his hand detecting the presence under the skin like an x-ray. His bullet. What should have been Victoria’s death, what had almost been Fraser’s.

He stood there, feeling the rise of Bennie’s ribs with each slow even breath, the warmth of the flesh, the knobbiness of the spine, the rough thickness of the scar tissue. He stood there, feeling.

Fraser turned around, and Ray let his hand fall away. He stood quietly, almost toe to toe with Bennie, head down, and knew there was nothing to say that hadn’t been not said between them last summer.

Fraser made a quiet, wordless sound, not even slightly a question.

Ray leaned forward, and answered the non-question with his arms, taking Bennie into a gentle hug. Bennie mirrored his gesture easily, and Ray found himself being held calmly, warmly. His hands were around Fraser’s ribs, one hand slipping back beneath the shirt, feeling the fine-textured softness of his side. He vividly recollected hours stroking that softness.

He cleared his throat. “Hey, Bennie... this is probably
stupid,” Probably? As stupid as any of the many stupid things he’d ever done, “but, you want to come up to bed with me?”

“It won’t help with your guilt.”

Did you learn that from Victoria, too? “No. I know it won’t. Will you come anyway?”

“Yes.” Fraser didn’t hesitate, and there was only the plain simplicity of his affirmation.

As Ray turned and lead the way upstairs, he knew that what he wanted to ask and couldn’t was why. He couldn’t ask Fraser because the man would tell him. He couldn’t ask himself because he wasn’t sure of his own answer. He told himself not to think about it, denial being his second unsatisfactory method of dealing with his mistakes when brooding on them didn’t help. He closed the bedroom door behind them, not hearing the familiar creak as the old door fit into the slightly warped frame. Based on last fall, Ray expected he’d have to take the lead, so he walked over to the bed, sat down, and patted the mattress next to him. Not looking at Fraser, he removed his shoes, and tucked his feet under to sit cross-legged while Fraser followed suit.

He wasn’t sure what he wanted here. Fraser sat, quiet and unreadable. But he had said yes.

“Are you sure you wanna be here?”

Fraser smiled, repeating, “Yes.”

“Okay.” Ray started to reach out a hand, then asked, “Bennie, can I touch you?”

The man just nodded and unbuttoned his shirt. He lay over on the window side of the bed, propping up his head on one hand, waiting. Ray reached over, began to stroke warm hand against cool skin, and Bennie closed his eyes, breathing out. Fraser’s expression was calm, and should have been easier to deal with his eyes shut, but Ray felt suddenly more certain this was a mistake. Before he could decide to stop, Bennie rolled onto his front, face buried in his arms, no expression at all to be seen, just the back of his head and the rucked up crumple of his shirt. The scar still drew him, and Ray traced a finger around it as lightly as he could.

“Ray. Don’t.”

He pulled his hand away.

“It’s over. We both made mistakes.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Ray.”

The tone said more than any fifteen further discussions. Ray replaced his palm on Bennie’s spine, circling it over the site.

“You’ve saved my life as well.”

Ray sighed. “You know, I’m still not sure. Bennie, what if I just convinced myself she had a gun, so I could shoot her, stop her from hurting you? I thought I saw it, but… what if this is the price I have to pay for talking myself into justifying the murder of an unarmed woman? All right, the attempted murder.”

“The price you have to pay?” There was no emphasis on one word over another, the question a deceptively simple repetition.

“Knowing it’s in there—not the ‘I almost killed you’ thing; that didn’t happen—but just knowing it’s in there.”

“Ah.” Bennie rolled onto his side again, sat up, and wrapped his arms around Ray, just as calmly as before. Ray let him, feeling stupid. It was only after Bennie lay back against the pillows, positioning Ray against his side, almost cuddling him, that Ray realized the man was taking the lead after all.

Ray looked over at Bennie, and raised his eyebrows. “You seem okay with this. What gives?”

“What gives?”

“Yeah, what gives?”

“Well, Ray, you were right.”

“Yeah, but my being right made you into a horny kid for weeks! Now you can handle this touching okay? Somebody else give you more lessons?” He poked Bennie lightly in the ribs, then left his hand there.

“Ray, you know full well it wasn’t your being right that did that.”

Ooof. There he goes, being honest again and at the damnedest times. At least five things not to say in this situation rambled through Ray’s brain. No things to say followed them.

“Ray?”

“Yeah, Bennie?”

“We don’t have to stay.” He’s gonna let me run again, oh peachy.

Ray sat up, swung his legs over the side. “Yeah, it is kinda stupid, Ma being three doors down, and all…” He dropped his head, feeling the muscles pull down the back of his neck. He rubbed his hands over his head.

“Bennie, sometimes I really miss my hair, you know?”

“It was your decision to cut it.”

My decision. Why the hell was everything my decision? Whether to shoot Victoria, whether to blow up my car, whether to help Bennie with his problems… whether to stay or run. He sat there, head down in his hands, palms rubbing at his temples, and wished that life could just once in a long, long while, be simple. “Yeah, but it sure as hell wasn’t my decision to have it all start falling out. Sometimes things just happen that you can’t prevent, and you just have to handle them somehow.”

“Yes, Ray, I know.”

Ray took his hands away and looked over his shoul-
der at Bennie. Clearly visible behind the habitual reserve was the truth of that for the man. On multiple levels. None of which had anything to do with hair.

“We don’t have to stay,” Fraser repeated.

Ray dithered. Stay. Run. If you stay, it will get complicated. Okay, more complicated. If you go, he’ll still be waiting.

Fraser did nothing. No arguments, no gestures, no words, no actions. He just was.

Ray reached a hand behind him, touched Bennie. Turned, said “No, I want to.” Looked at Bennie’s face, saw again what he feared, and faced it. Saw Bennie acknowledge the continued glance, Ray’s decision not to hide.

And then Bennie stopped waiting.

Fraser reached forward, carefully and slowly—still giving me an out, will he always do that?—and slid a palm to cradle the side of Ray’s head. A moment of stillness filled not with waiting but with promise, and Fraser leaned forward, and eyes open, tentatively kissed Ray. He dropped his hand, pulling back.

Ray really looked at Bennie, seeing so clearly what he’d avoided since that last autumn evening.

“Yes,” Ray said, and this time he took the lead, reaching for Bennie, initiating a second kiss that started as simply as the inexperienced fumbling that Ray could barely remember from the long gone days of his own innocence. But new as this was between them it was hardly innocent, for their bodies had had that week’s worth of contact last fall, too well remembered. No matter that it had been months ago, had been as intentionally one-sided as Ray could make it, and did not involve kissing. Ray found himself heating up, the familiar scent and texture of Bennie’s skin coming to mean something more than helping a friend. More than he’d allowed it to mean then. He closed his eyes, insinuated a delicate tongue tip into Bennie’s mouth, felt the man’s breath catch, then his own breath held as Fraser followed, his tongue caressing Ray’s in return. After a long moment, Ray broke the contact reluctantly, and stared at Bennie. Bennie’s eyes were wild and warm, and no longer calm at all. He expected his own eyes had much the same heat in them, along with a major quantity of startled discovery.

He got up, walked to the door, locked it, and returned to the bed, taking off his clothes on the way.

“Oh, Bennie, you with me here?”

“What? Oh. Right.” And Fraser got up, the better to do likewise.

Naked, Ray somehow felt committed. This was stupid, right, but he still wanted—Well, what he wanted he wasn’t quite admitting yet. Fraser was smiling, looking at him, and Ray laughed. “What, never seen anything as good as this before? Forget it, Bennie, I know better, remember?”

“Oh, Ray, you’re being silly.”

“I know, but ya gotta admit, it’s kinda ridiculous. Being silly is sometimes the best response.” Whether it was the two of them, naked male bodies, sex itself, or all three, Ray wasn’t certain precisely what he was referring to. Bennie didn’t seem to care about the inexactitude of Ray’s phraseology. He reached forward and tugged Ray back toward his bed. Ray allowed it, figuring another quick couple of mutual hand-jobs and maybe reality would return, so he sat down, rolled to his side and reached toward Bennie. Once again the man surprised him by not leaving the lead up to him. Bennie rolled toward him, making contact all up and down his body, and began to kiss him again, warm, and exploratory, and with a smile in it.

After a minute Ray just let it go, not thinking, not bothering, just enjoying how good it was to have someone working on him with such feeling. Fraser was stroking him, hands moving gently, appreciatively over his sides, down onto his butt. Gone was both the reluctantly distant Fraser of their first time, but also apparently the horny, out of control, needy guy of their subsequent evenings. Ray was getting turned on but he could still feel nothing urgent in Fraser’s body and actions. Ray gave an experimental little hip thrust, and heard Bennie suck in his breath where his lips were now busy at Ray’s throat.

So Ray did it again. Fraser’s hand gripped his butt. By now, Ray would have expected pleas to take care of him, urgency.

Breaking the kiss, Ray asked, “So, who have you been taking patience lessons from? Thatcher?” The thought hurt, just a little.

Bennie’s hand loosened its grip, and he said, “Ray.”

“I know, I know. Enough. Chivalry and all that. Sorry.”

Bennie rolled onto his back, taking Ray with him. Ray pulled up a bit, straddling him, while Bennie continued his stroking. It was all very soft, very gentle, very cuddly. Ray was still afraid of the expression in Bennie’s eyes, and soon lay down on Bennie’s body, beginning to thrust against him, pushing his response away from the softness, away from the confusion, toward the familiar heat, the less complex physical drive. Bennie murmured, pushing up a little to meet the thrusts, reaching again to kiss, his tongue exploring with the beginning of hunger, his penis responding happily to the direct stimulation of Ray’s.
Ray pulled back again, reached down and took the two of them in his hands, stroking and fondling their two erections. Looking down at what his hands were up to he felt a moment of mental dizziness. What was he doing? He shook it off.

Deliberately pragmatic, he said, “Whatta you want, Bennie? Hand job?”

Fraser's eyes regained some focus. “I'd like to, well, if you'll let me…”

“Hey, you wanna do something, do it. Anything you do I don't like, I'll tell ya, okay?” What the hell was he doing?

“Yes, Ray.” Bennie gently rolled Ray over onto his back, crouched over him, and began kissing and exploring and stroking again in the same way Ray found quite scary in its implications. He thought about stopping him, he thought about his own stupidity again, but he let it go on. It felt too good not to. But his mind couldn't help but fight the pleasure. It was too gentle, it gave him too much opportunity to think, and to be afraid. He started losing it, softening up. He opened his eyes, planning on saying something about picking up the pace, but what he saw stopped the words in his throat. Bent over him, flushed and intent, Bennie was looking at him with that warm wildness in his blue eyes, and he was far from being in Ray's diminished state—his penis fully erect, dark red, leaking a little fluid, reaching toward Ray. Ray quickly closed his eyes again, the sight of Bennie's passionate physical response to him blazoned on his brain, shocking through his nerves, re-starting his flagging arousal. His face heated, and he gave a small softy than he'd meant to. How did the guy get away with having dimples, too?

“Sorry, Ray.”

“Jeez, Bennie, what for? I told ya,” Ray said, more softly than he'd meant to. How did the guy get away with having dimples, too?

“I was going to make you feel as good as you did for me,” Bennie said, sounding abashed and still apologetic. Uh-oh. Admit I'm panicking here? Lie. “Nah, probably the extra wine. My fault. I'll take a rain check, okay?” Why the hell did I say that? What the fucking hell was he doing? How did Bennie make him feel so confused, so scared, but still so good? Simple, he wanted simple. Something he could handle. Simple, please. Just a little bit.

“All right.” And Bennie leaned over and moved to kiss him again, then stopped, and asked with charming hesitancy, “Do you mind if I kiss you after…?”

“What, it wasn't in your grandma's etiquette book? It's okay, yeah.” You just had to laugh. Ray leaned forward and kissed him, Bennie's response passionate and full of the oral equivalent of thank-you-kindly-Ray and the taste of Bennie with a light additive of Ray.

Calling himself a coward, Ray let it go with a few more minutes of cuddling, then announced they would
be sensible now. He got up to dress. Just keep running away, that’s right.

Fraser must have burned out his brief flurry of taking the lead in sexual matters, because he went along with Ray’s decision, with no protests. Once dressed, they kept their distance from each other.

That night, the troublesome Mountie safely returned to home and wolf, and Ma settled in for the night, Ray lay in bed. He was getting way too familiar with the geography of his bedroom ceiling. But no matter how much study he gave it, he couldn’t find any easy answers in it. He couldn’t stop thinking about the evening.

He kissed me. Bennie kissed me. Damn, it had been nice. The whole brief thing. Nice. Maybe it was just having a warm and willing body that really wanted to make him feel good. It had been a while. Quite a while, to be honest. But what his mind kept dwelling on was how Bennie’s lips had felt, tentative and sweet, and the feel of the bullet scar against Ray’s palm, the rise and fall of Bennie’s chest, his friend’s response to him, the look in his eyes, those eyes that were so coolly blue, but looked at Ray so warmly—blue wasn’t supposed to be hot, was it? He wasn’t thinking about his own body, not how he himself had felt, but how Bennie felt to him, under his hands, pressed tightly to him, gushing out come against his thigh, his tongue tasting Ray’s mouth. Restlessly, he pushed at the covers. Maybe that was why he couldn’t settle down and sleep. He had been all turned on but didn’t get off. Maybe if he took care of that he could crash. Sure, it was just a physical problem. Sliding his hand inside his pajamas, he rummaged around in his mind for some suitably hot fantasy to fit onto Fraser’s body—perhaps the man on his knees, Ray driving his cock into his mouth… wow, who woulda thought Bennie would suck him like that? Never in a million years. And then the way he hugged me, stroking my body so gentle. His skin’s so soft, he’s so warm… In disgust Ray realized that his hand had relaxed and his intended hot fantasy had simply circled back to sweetness. He grabbed the spare pillow, curled up on his side hugging it, and gave up. Rubbing his face on the pillow, he spent some time remembering the kisses, and finally fell asleep with a small, embarrassed smile on his face.

He was up at dawn, helping Ma through a coughing spell, getting her some lemon tea and a fresh box of kleenex. At seven Franny showed up to sit with Ma, and Ray headed off to work. Daylight and duty banished the sweet indulgent feelings of midnight, and Ray’s doubts returned. He avoided Fraser for a couple days, not exactly running away again, more like avoiding the decision whether to run away for a further while. On the third day, Fraser showed up at the station with a tall blonde woman.

“Ray, could I trouble you for a few moments?” Polite, businesslike, the Mountie on duty. It never happened. He’ll let me keep running. If that’s what I want to do.

“Hiya, Fraser. Sure, you know I never got anything to do around here,” Ray responded sourly, keeping the thick file folder he was studying open in his hands. A week’s work just wouldn’t be a week’s work without Fraser adding an extra day’s worth or so.

“Oh, Constable, now I wouldn’t want to cause your friend any trouble. Let’s just…” The woman positively twittered. She was clearly upset about something, but then most of the people Fraser brought into the police station were upset about something. Because they were in trouble. And Fraser expected Ray to help them, just because he would. Oh, well. He was used to it by now.

Ray stood, leaned across the desk and put out his hand. “Ray Vecchio. How ya doing?”

Fraser beamed at him. Well, it was the slight smile about the eyes that Ray took for the Far North equivalent of a beam.

“Ray, this is Ms. Paula Nevlin. She’s a writer from Toronto.”

Shaking hands distractedly, Ms. Nevlin fussed, “Mr. Vecchio, Constable Fraser insisted you would be able to help, but I really don’t think I need to be bothering you…”

“Come on.” Ray lead them off through the chaos to a quiet interview room.

The woman was in Chicago researching a television script. “It’s going to be on next fall, and I just wanted to get a little more local colour before I did the final rewrite. Of course, I have a backup of the script, but not the notes I took down on the back of the pages.”

“So you lost your script in the park? Ah. Bennie, could I have a word with you?” Ray grasped Bennie’s elbow, and led him outside into the hall.

“Bennie, why me? Just tell me what I did to deserve this? No, don’t,” as Fraser opened his mouth to do so. “I didn’t even know you had television in Canada.”

“Well, of course we do, Ray.”

“Right. Hockey games.”

“Now, Ray, that’s not accurate. And you have hockey games on American television as well. Mr. Mustafi mentioned it.”

Ray backed up against the wall to avoid a passing clerk. Female. Passing closer than necessary to Fraser.

“Yeah, yeah, right. So she got a bag fulla newspaper instead of a bag fulla stirring tales of Canadian life suitable for Toronto…”
With a polite nod to the clerk, Fraser stuck to his agenda. “Ray, I don’t believe you were listening. If she is here getting ‘local colour’ it must be a Chicago story.”

“Suitable for Toronto television. Oh, boy, am I sorry I won’t get to see that!”

“All of this is beside the point, Ray. I was hoping that you could help me look for her script.”

Ray leaned back against the wall. “Bennie, one brown paper bag looks much like any other.”

Smiling in triumph, Fraser played his ace. “But I have a lead, Ray.”

“A lead?”

“A young man in the park saw a Mr. Nelson, apparently a regular, collecting newspaper from the trash cans. He sells it to a recycling plant.”

“Fine, so you can just go, and… Oh, no. You want me to look through garbage again!”

“Well, it’s not garbage, Ray. Newsprint is just paper.” Fraser was being rational.

Hands gesturing, expressing his disgust, Ray protested, “Yeah, paper that’s been fished outta trash cans, paper that pigeons shit on, paper that’s had really disgusting stuff wrapped up in it.”

“Ray, the recycler says that the trucks come at seven. If we don’t find it before then…”

“I can’t believe I’m doing this for you, Bennie. And why can’t she help?”

“She is, Ray.”

“Pointing out likely bags from a safe distance isn’t what I’d call…” Grumbling, Ray continued to systematically unstack, check and restack anything in a brown bag. It seemed that the method of choice to recycle newspapers in Chicago was to collect them in brown paper bags. Bend, open, set aside. At 6:47, Ray was adorned in black smudges—not all of them ink—and his back was protesting. This was worse than calisthenics at the police academy, and he’d hated them with a passion. Bennie, of course, looked pristine and was handling and sorting the stacked bags as efficiently as a robot. How come the guy’s jacket didn’t even ride up? Ray’s shirt had come untucked after the first five minutes and he’d pulled it all the way out, and rolled up his sleeves. The ink probably wouldn’t ever come out, and he’d liked this shirt. Even Dief looked spotless, though he didn’t seem to be able to tell scripts from newspapers as far as Ray could tell, so what use he thought he’d be, Ray had no idea.

Bend, open, set aside. At 6:48 Ray looked into another bag, long past caring what awful thing might be in with the paper. Hmm.

Wincing, he straightened, and hobbled over to the edge of the huge metal bin. “Hey, lady, is this it?”

“Oh! Oh, thank you, Detective! Oh, this is wonderful,” Ms. Nevlin twittered. “I’ve got to get back to my hotel, type up these notes.”

“Glad we could assist, ma’am.”

As soon as the writer was returned to her hotel, Ray told Bennie that he demanded to be fed and fed well, as soon as he was clean. They drove to Ray’s house, and Ray headed straight for the shower, yelling down over the bannister to tell Ma they wouldn’t be staying for dinner. When he finally thought he was ink-free, and had dressed in clean clothes and gone downstairs it was to find little Davie playing catch with Dief in the back, while Fraser and his mother watched from the steps.

“Come on, Fraser, you owe me. Hi, Ma.”

A wail erupted from Davie. The kid must be destined for opera. Ray shielded his ears. “Unca Ray, don’t take wolfie. Deef stay with Davie.”

“Bennie, he can’t come to the restaurant. Might as well leave him.”

Fraser checked with Mrs. Vecchio, and extraordinarily detailed plans for Dief’s comfort were being worked out between all concerned parties when Ray’s patience wore out.

“It’s fine. He’ll be fine. Davie’ll run him ragged, Ma will feed him too much, we’ll get him later. Let’s go, already.”

He hustled Bennie out of the house, took his remonstrations about Ray’s lack of manners in silence, and headed for the restaurant he had in mind. But one more comment…

“That’s it! Enough. I ruined another shirt, I’m tired, I’m hungry, and my back hurts.”

“There’s no excuse for bad manners, Ray, and your mother…”

“Yes there is, and you just heard four. Leave it.”

“Yes, Ray.”

“I gotta buy some coveralls, start keeping ’em in the trunk for the next time you make me dig through dumpsters with you. Actually, the Canadian government oughtta be paying half my dry-cleaning.”

“Well, I could submit a requisition for reimbursement…”

“And how much paperwork does that take?”

“Well, there’s a form 4017D and…”

“Don’t tell me!”

“Understood.”
The dinner was very good, and by halfway through an excellent steak Ray had started to feel less cranky. By dessert he was thinking about an apology for his earlier loss of temper. But when the check arrived, Bennie looked at it and said, “Oh, dear.” Ray rethought the apology.

Reaching for his wallet, Ray growled, “Never mind. Add it to what you owe me.”

“Thank you, Ray.”

“Oh, just don’t mention it, Fraser. Do not mention it.”

Then when he got up from the table, a spasm seized his back as forty-five minutes of sitting on top of the hard labor in the aid of idiot Canadian writers combined to wreak havoc. He could move, at least, but God it hurt. He let Fraser know in no uncertain terms whose fault it was while he gingerly drove him home.

Fraser simply apologized and offered to rub it for him.

Ray gave it some thought. Stupid, maybe. But he figured the guy owed him, owed him big, and he just hurt too much.

“Okay, yeah, you can just do that.”

Climbing the stairs, he regretted the decision by the second step. Each leg lift sent a twinge up his back, sharp and hot.

He stopped, waiting out the pain as it ebbed away slowly. Ignoring Fraser’s offered arm, he leaned on the wall and grimly made it the rest of the way up to the man’s apartment.

It actually was very nice, he thought. He lay face down on the sheet, the scratchy striped blanket shoved aside, and just enjoyed himself. Fraser had some system, all about finding not just the one pulled muscle, but working on all of them, following them in long progressions from shoulders down, thumbs gentling, then pressing, then digging, loosening each section. He had heard the part about the interconnectedness of the muscles of the back, but lost interest when Fraser lapsed into Latin, naming muscles and discussing them like species of exotic wild animals. He was almost asleep when Fraser actually reached his lower back and began to work on the one section of muscle strain and not its neighbors. Thumbs pressing into the injured area woke him with a jolt.

“Ouch!”

“Sorry, Ray.”

“Ow. Ow.”

“Now, Ray, if you tense against the massage I can’t loosen it up. And you are undoing all the work I’ve done so far.”

“Ow, Bennie. That hurts.”

“Ah. Wait a moment. I have just the thing.” Fraser patted him, then went away to the closet.

He returned with a square brown bottle and a ragged towel. “Take off your pants, Ray. You won’t want to get any of this on your clothes.”

One look at the bottle told him this didn’t come from the Sav-Mor Drug Store. “What is that? It’s not some sort of native Eskimo thing made out of dead walruses, is it?”

“Inuit. No. It’s a sovereign remedy for sore muscles. The RCMP have been using it for years.”

“All right.” Ray shed the rest of his clothes and lay down again, staring suspiciously over his shoulder. When Fraser uncorked the bottle, the odor hit his nose like a roundhouse punch. He gasped, sinuses clearing as if they’d been roto-rootered. “My, God, Bennie, what the hell is that stuff?”

The man actually sniffed the bottle with what appeared to be pleasure. “Dr. Dilby’s Patent Embrocation.”

“What the hell is in it?” He was starting to get used to the smell, presumably in self-defense. It was clearly that or die, and the human body was well known for its ability to choose self-preservation.

Fraser tipped the bottle, watching the liquid slosh. “I have no idea, Ray.”

“And you’re gonna put that on me? What if I’m allergic? The way it smells I could swell up, turn purple, explode maybe. I think it’s killed my nose already.”

“Ray, Ray, Ray. I can assure you it will only make you feel better. No one has ever had any trouble with Dr. Dilby’s.”

“Don’t use too much.”

“Ray. I know what I’m doing.”

Muttering darkly Ray subsided onto the sheet. Bennie poured a scant spoonful of the liquid into his hand, carefully corked the bottle, and began to work Ray’s lower back.

It felt wonderful. Tingly, warm, sort of like the Vapo-Rub Ma had rubbed on his chest when he was a kid, but not quite the same. The intensity of the odor eased as it warmed from the contact with Bennie’s hands and Ray’s back. Within minutes Ray forgot his objections. Bennie’s hands worked deep into his back, kneading heavily into his butt and the backs of his thighs. The soreness departed, the muscles feeling loose and sloppy under the attentive inch-by-inch assault. Bennie switched to a brisk circular rubbing that heated his skin, then covered him with the towel and the top sheet.

“Lie quietly. Relax, and let it work in for a while.”

“Mmmph.”

The next that Ray was aware of was waking a couple hours later. He turned his head. Fraser was lying on top of the blanket next to him in bed, head propped against the wall, one of his father’s diaries lying face
He slid down a bit, and his hair was pushed up into a untidy squiff at the back.

Tentatively, Ray moved, waiting for his back to protest. It didn’t. He carefully rolled up into a sitting position, trying not to wake Fraser, and padded away to the john. He checked the time, glad he’d called Ma when he accepted Fraser’s invitation, so she wouldn’t be still up, worrying about him. Coming back he stood, indecisive, one hand on his clothes where Fraser had folded them neatly on the table.

He should go home.

He looked back at the bed. Fraser looked dead to the world, mouth a little open. He looked vulnerable, and silly, and tired. Ray stood there looking him over, thinking about how the man could be so annoying, and yet so much a friend. Thinking about three nights ago. Thinking about handling problems by running away.

Ray sat down heavily on one of Bennie’s horrible kitchen chairs, and dropped his head into his hands. What the hell am I doing? Why the hell did this have to happen? Walk away, man. It’s not too late. He hasn’t said anything. I haven’t said anything. All we’ve done is jacked each other off. I can pretend it didn’t happen. I can leave now.

If I don’t…
Remember how he touched you, so fine…
I should go.
He’ll leave me.
But, I want, I need…
I’m afraid.
“Stupid idiot,” said Ray bitterly, and went back to Fraser’s bed.

He lifted the diary off Fraser’s lap, placing it with a stack of books on the footlocker. “Come on, Bennie.” He shook Fraser sharply. “Come on. Get those off and get under the covers before I freeze out here and you get a stiff neck.” Fraser opened his eyes, smiled a little muzzily at Ray, then did as he was bidden, sleepily peeling out of the long-johns. Ray got into bed, and held up the covers for Bennie to join him. Without waiting for permission, Ray reached for the guy’s cock, wrapping his hand around its softness and squeezing firmly. He ignored Bennie’s gasp, and began a fierce, forced rhythm, fueled by Ray’s anger at himself.

Why would he stay with me?
I’m afraid.
I need him.
He won’t stay.
Why would he want to?
Ray gave a harsh little laugh. “Do you want sweet, Bennie?”

“He’ll leave me.
I’m afraid.
I need him.
He won’t stay.
Why would he want to?
Ray gave a harsh little laugh. “Do you want sweet, Bennie?”

Like the other night? Kisses? Romance, even? It’s not gonna be like that.” He threw his leg over Bennie’s and began brutally humping himself against the long firm thigh muscles. “I don’t think I have sweet any more, Bennie, it’s all gone, burned away by guilt and sin and evil and loss. You don’t want me. You can’t want me.”

“Ray…” Bennie’s voice was rough.

“No, Bennie, you don’t.” He continued pulling, rubbing, hard, insistent hands demanding on Bennie’s burgeoning erection.

“Ray.” Bennie sounded hungry, wild. He reached up, pulled Ray close against him, kissing him hard. “I do want you, Ray, whatever way you are.”

“No, you don’t. You want what I wanted,” cock leaving damp trails on the pale skin of Fraser’s thigh, “years ago, when I thought I could have happiness. You don’t pull, “want” thrust, “me.”

“Ray!” And Fraser pulled away from Ray’s hands, from Ray’s cock. He pushed Ray over bodily and straddled him, holding Ray’s arms away, imprisoned over his head. “I want you. Not sweetness, not romance, you, Ray.”

Ray twisted against the firm grip, anger and fear making him resist what Fraser was telling him. “No, you don’t. You can’t.”

Over him, Bennie was flushed and panting, sweat standing out on his pale skin. His face was transformed, anger mixed with passion, unlike Ray had ever seen him. He released Ray’s hands, moved hurriedly off him, then took his ankles, pushing roughly to position Ray where he wanted. He grabbed the tube of lotion off the footlocker, squeezed a glob onto his fingers, then jabbed his oiled forefinger into Ray’s asshole.

“Fraser!”

Bennie was staring at him, eyes fierce. “Yes.”

Eyes locked on blue eyes, Ray answered, “Yes,” and reached down, grabbed for his own dick, pulling, rubbing hard to the same forced beat he had used on Fraser, feeling fingers probing, hurriedly rushing his muscles toward dilation.

Bennie pulled his fingers out, and without a request for permission or a word of excuse, positioned himself over Ray and began pushing inexorably into his body.
Spreading his legs wider, hips lifting, Ray watched Bennie do it, pulling hard on his cock, slicking up and down as the penetration continued. It was kind of dry, and it felt to Ray as if he could measure every inch of Fraser as he humped down onto Fraser's cock, humped up into his own hand. It hurt some. It hurt as he deserved to be hurt. This Fraser maybe he deserved, for a while, before he left. He knew that he couldn't deserve the Fraser that had kissed him so sweet and wild the other night.

With a needy, impatient whimper, Bennie pulled out, leaving a sore emptiness. He rolled Ray over face down, held his wrists behind his back, and got out of bed. Keeping one hand over Ray's wrists, he fumbled around for something. Ray felt the hot weight return as Fraser straddled him again, and moved his hands down to roughly caress Ray's butt. Fraser's weight pushed Ray down against the bed, and he rubbed his erection against the sheet, impatient. Seconds later the cock returned and Ray felt the slipperiness of its bulk pierce him again, hard, oilier, and then suddenly deep. Bennie moaned, and his hands frantically scrabbled at Ray's body, pulling him up. Then he reached under and slicked up and down, greasing Ray's erection, squeezing a little too hard to be pleasurable.

“Ray, I want you, Ray, Ray…” A flurry of hard fast thrusts and Ray felt Bennie's come gush into his body. A second’s pause then Bennie was pulling out, renewing the pain, the soreness, the loss. “Ray, I want you…” Bennie rolled over, dragging Ray by main force on top of him, raising his own legs, tugging at Ray by his grip on his cock, pushing at Ray to do it to him. And Ray did, finding the muscle and forcing it to open, watching the pain blossom on Bennie's face, watching him welcome it, urging Ray on. “Want you,” Bennie said, low, a statement not a demand, when Ray moved in, the head of his penis slipping, then finding the opening. As Ray forced his dick into Bennie's body, watching it push in deeper and deeper, he could feel where Bennie's cock had been, his ass still stretched from it as he stretched Bennie with his. Bennie was holding his legs up and apart, offering his body wide open for Ray, his cock lying half hard and still wet against his stomach. As Ray pushed in harder, Bennie moaned, pushing up to take it, and Ray could feel Bennie's come oozing out of his butt and down his leg. And Ray let his violence loose, his fear, his hurt, his certainty of loss, and thrust in harder, deeper, more bitterly, watching Bennie's ecstatic welcoming face, until Ray came, hard, deep, and angry, seeing Bennie shiver and twitch as Ray flooded into him.

Fraser kissed him then, letting his legs fall, pulling him down tight against his chest, tongue echoing what cocks had done, saliva as juicy as come in his mouth. Fraser pulled away, rolled over, and put his arm up to cover his eyes. Bennie followed, lying heavy on him, and started talking, breathless. “It’s what you fear, Ray. Pain. Loss. No one to accept your damaged soul as it is. I know. But I will find what you want, to have you, Ray. If you want strength I have it. If you want pain, darkness, I have as much as you. I love you, Ray, and I want to give you my warmth and my joy but if you can’t accept it, I will give you what you are willing to take. Even my darkness, Ray.”

Ray lay still, head turned away from the words. The intense voice went on. “And I want to take your pain as well as your sweetness. What you need to give me I want to take. Anything.”

Ray couldn’t move.

“My life, Ray.”

Ray found words then, dull with pain. “You’ll leave.”

Slippery with sex, Fraser’s hands roughly turned Ray’s face to his. “Maybe. Or you me. Everybody has left me, Ray, why not you too? Or maybe I will leave.”

Ray stared at him, anger resurfacing.

“What, you wanted me to deny it? I can’t, Ray. And neither can you. I faced it. You do it too.” Hot blue eyes did not blink.

Silence.

“I took the risk.”

Ray shrugged Bennie off him, pushed him away to sit up, welcoming the wince of pain in his ass. “It’s not a risk, it’s a sure thing, Bennie. You aren’t going to quit your job to stay with me.”

Fraser sat up as well, cross-legged, the sexual flush on his chest only just starting to fade, cock still long. “Well, no, Ray. But I could say the same thing about you.”

“So?” Ray wrapped his arms around his chest, annoyed to feel himself shaking. “So you gonna give me some seize the day crap? Some pukey platitude about smelling the damned roses?”

“No.”

“No?”

“No, Ray. I don’t think you respond terribly well to pukey platitudes.”

“So?”

“Oh, Ray.” Damn the man, the smile was back in his voice. “The truth is, I can no more guarantee my continued presence in your life than I can fly. But you can do no better. I’ll let you decide, but I would really prefer it if you’d just agree to the whole thing, shut up, and come here and let me hold you.”

“Even if it’s not for ever?”
“Yes, Ray.”

But Ray couldn’t pull himself out of the defensive posture, couldn’t bring himself to reach out to Fraser. Afraid. Run. But…

“Ray?”

Slowly, as if the fingers had to be broken to loosen their grip, Ray unwrapped one hand from his ribs and moved it toward Fraser.

Bennie reached out, wrapped him in a strong-armed hug. Whether it meant ‘don’t leave me’ or ‘I won’t leave’ Ray couldn’t tell. Fraser pulled him down onto the bed, lay half-way across him, skin sticking to him, one hand behind Ray’s neck, the other possessively across him.

Ray lay there in the embrace, feeling half his body cooling in the night air, feeling Bennie relax and weigh more heavily on his leg and chest. Hearing his breathing slowing, matching Ray’s own breath for breath.

His hands reached for Fraser, wrapping over his shoulder and around his waist. He turned his head, resting his cheek against thick, springy hair. Ray’s hand just reached the upper edge of the scar. He moved it away, onto the shoulder. Bennie murmured a little, pressed against him.

It would never work.
It could never work.
Arms tight around Fraser, Fraser’s body plastered to his, Ray fell asleep.

Finishing the last of his ironing, Fraser checked the clock. Early yet, Ray wouldn’t get here for another half-hour at the soonest. He would read until then. He lay on the bed, back propped against the wall and reached for a book. His hand hovered, then settled on one of his father’s journals, the one with a place marked with a slip of paper. Dief came over and settled himself on the rug nearby.

‘I have found that while hunting and trapping are challenging tasks, the most difficult, and also the most rewarding, is taming. You are called on to deal with the animal’s fears, its instinct to run. You will try to handle it, and it will try to fight or escape. Time and again you may think you have won the battle of wills, the fight for trust, but find that you have not. You must use persistence, and guile, and infinite patience. You may have to change your strategy and alter your methods. Eventually you will know in your heart that you have achieved your goal, but there is always a risk that when you put things to the test, and let the animal loose, that you will be wrong, and it will run. Or you are right and it will stay with you but only until some stronger lure than the bond you have forged arises, and it leaves, sometimes after years with you. Then you wait and wait, never knowing if you will see the animal again.

Or you are right and nothing stronger than its attachment to you exists until the end of its days, or yours.’

Diefenbaker rose to his feet, looking toward the door. Fraser replaced the journal on the pile of books by the bed, and got up to meet Ray.