



Yeah. And Frank Zuko could never outdo them, no matter how much money ole Frankie boy spent, no matter how many stylists he leaned on.

Yeah. Ray gave his reflection a smug smile—yeah, still got what it takes.

Someone thumping on the door. One of his nephews, indistinguishable through the door, but something to do with needing to go right *now*. Which meant Frannie had taken over the other bathroom again.

One last moment to look at his reflection, then it was out of the quiet and back into the bedlam.

A small whirlwind tore past him and slammed the door on Ray's heels; Maria ran past with Teresa under one arm and a flouncy, frilly monstrosity under the other, wails of misery following behind mother and recalcitrant child; his own mother was carrying on at least three separate conversations, thankfully all with living people; Tony was wandering around wondering if anyone had seen his coat; and there was an ominous silence from the den where there was the unholy combination of unsupervised children and a Christmas tree.

Years of experience, patience, negotiating skill, and practice paid off, and tree, gifts, and children were all rescued before any real disasters could occur, although one present was a bit...bedraggled. But hey, who would notice once the feeding frenzy hit tomorrow morning?

More yelling, more footsteps running up and down stairs, more Maria chasing Teresa, mother picking up daughter's discarded ribbons and hair clips as quickly as they were tossed aside, Tony looking now for his tie, Ma insisting that spit-wet fingers were the most effective tool for taming a boy's hair, the owner of said hair threatening to lose his dinner on the hall floor, and what sounded like every single cousin on both sides of the family talking all at once. Aunt Sylvia was quizzing Frannie on who was sleeping where—with Aunt Sylvia and husband, Cousin Helena and brood, and dear old Uncle Luigi too, Ray was kind of wondering who was going to be sleeping where himself.

Ray left them all to it. He stuck the tape of "Frosty the Snowman" into the VCR, settled back to relax on the center seat of the couch; waited for the chaos to reduce to manageable levels, the children slowly lured into the den by the sound of the snowman with the magic hat.

Glanced at his watch. Another five minutes, that's all it should take.

Okay, so five more minutes, and with the kids in here, the chaos out there should stop in a minute. He'd just relax, take it easy for five more minutes and wait for the chaos out there to stop.

Frosty turned—he winced at the inevitable pun—to

snow, that stupid VCR acting up again, another bill he'd have to take care of after Christmas. Lost two kids as he tried to fix the tracking, lost the rest of them when the picture came back but the sound stayed out.

From the sounds bellowing from the rest of the house, chaos was still abounding out there. And this was just the dress rehearsal for Christmas Day itself. There was a particularly loud crash and thud, followed by shrieking that took Ray right back to Ma's discovery of Franny's first home perm. Probably for the best, Ray decided as he glanced out the window at a sky promising snow, that Benny'd decided to pass on coming with them tonight. This place was bad enough without Franny vying for the mountie's affections.

The noise outside had barely begun to abate. Five minutes. He'd give them all five more minutes. Five minutes, that was his absolute limit.

Fifteen minutes later, he gave up. Went out into the hall and announced that they were leaving *now* and anyone who was late wouldn't get any presents tomorrow.

Another Christmas miracle. The entire family, cousins included, was assembled, polished, perfect and preened, in less than ten minutes. Yelling at him, asking who had died and made him God—although Ma frowned at Franny for that—and all of them annoyed with him. But they were there, and they were ready, which meant that they could still decide who was going in which car, give directions to the out-of-town aunt and uncle, and *still* get to church early enough for Ma to gossip with her friends.

As always, Ray took as many kids as he could fit into his car—who needed crappy canned Christmas marathons on the radio when you had a carful of excited, happy kids singing carols and festive songs as only kids can?

Although he supposed he should mention that yeah, multi-culturalism was a great thing, but still, you just don't sing The Dreidl Song to Uncle Lorenzo on Christmas Eve.

▼ Midnight Mass over, and kids who were too sleepy to stay awake during Mass were now deafening him with an endless and innovative list of reindeer names, sung to a tune that might, once, have been Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer. Or it could once have been Frosty the Snowman, cos those were the words now, and the tune hadn't changed one bit. A particularly choice variation on the words got Teresa a severe uncle-ly frown and it really was as well the mountie was home safe and sound and protected from the language of kids today.

Out of the cold, into the warmth of the house, the kids tearing upstairs to get out of their church clothes, Ma disappearing immediately into the kitchen and Ray



joy over the Lego Technics Deluxe Set he'd given her.

An hour later, he and his favourite niece were still sitting on his bed, the first engine half-built, when Franny came and dragged them downstairs for breakfast.

▼ At some point, he was going to burst. Midnight feast, a banquet for breakfast, and then there was going to be lunch, and then he was taking dessert over to Fraser's.

Just as well he'd worn his new suit last night—after today, he'd never fit in it again. Still, he looked down his nose at his brother-in-law who wouldn't even notice: no grubby, saggy sweats for Ray, not even on Christmas Day. Loose, comfortable mock-turtleneck sweater, his old favourite butter-yellow pants that had worn soft but still looked good, an old pair of soft, suede shoes. Yeah. He'd do a lot for comfort, but being a twin for Tony wasn't one of them.

He looked at the pot Tony had just washed; handed it back again, handed Tony an Ajax pad just to make sure Tony got the message, and went back to drying the silverware that he couldn't squeeze—no matter how hard he'd tried—into the dishwasher.

Maria was chasing Teresa again—something to do with decapitating Joseph's brand-new GI Joe, by the sounds of it. Ma and Aunt Sylvia were arguing over Gramma's original Christmas cake recipe.

And that sounded woefully like Franny on the phone inviting her friend Stephanie over for Christmas lunch. No way. No way was he going to put up with Stephanie making eyes at him, lifting her skirt right up on her thigh as she sat down—hell, trying to play footsie under the table with him, right in front of his ma and his entire family.

Tony handed him the pot again. Ray looked at it. Handed it back again. Started putting away the plastic glasses reserved for the children.

Beatrice and Joseph this time, running like fiends, Sarah screeching behind them. According to the blood-curdling screams, all of that had something to do with them getting more presents than her.

As if they didn't have enough! There had been mountains of gifts, a fortune spent on the kids, and the adults, and now these kids were screaming about what they *hadn't* got? Shit, when he was a kid—

When he was a kid, he'd thought men in their mid-thirties were old. Ancient.

Okay. Let the kids scream about the Holiday Barbie they hadn't got, or that they only got a Sega Saturn system when they'd had their heart set on a Nintendo 64 system. Let 'em. He wasn't going to say a word, he wasn't going to sound like an old man, telling them 'when I was your age...'

At least the pot was clean this time.

God knew how long it was going to take to get the frittata pan up to Ma's standards.

Ray looked at his watch; it was only 10 AM and he could feel a headache starting already.

▼ At least it was quiet in here. Outside, various nieces, nephews and cousins were playing with the new bike—and right on cue, there came a crash, a thud, a moment of shocked silence and then the scream, nearly drowned out by Ma's condolences and reassurances. Someone had been cruel and given Joseph a sword that made loud noises if you swung it just right, and that, combined with the 'laser' pistol Teresa had liberated from the brats down the block, was making World War II sound like a minor skirmish.

Someone—Aunt Sylvia's latest husband?—was carrying on a conversation with both Frannie and Luigi who were, unfortunately, at opposite ends of the driveway.

And he was stuck in the kitchen with a rattling dishwasher that was making a noise that sounded unhealthy and expensive, and a brother-in-law who couldn't wash dishes and was even worse at dissecting a basketball game.

Where was a piddle-sniffing, mud-tasting, garbage-dump-raking, do-gooder mountie when you needed him?

▼ He'd finally given in and kicked Tony out of the kitchen, sent the poor slob out to deal with the insanity of a houseful of kids on Christmas morning. So now the kitchen was cleaned to Ma's specifications, the dishwasher was reduced to an angry hissing sound, and there seemed to be several platoons of marauding relatives running amok through his house. But if he sneaked into the den, closed all the curtains, and turned up the TV just a bit, he was as good as alone in here. And it was quiet. Comparatively speaking. Feeling just a bit guilty, Ray turned on the local PBS station, the one that always carried that English choir thing, all those kids in long dresses and ruffled collars, every one of them looking like a doofus, every one of them singing like an angel.

Yeah, there it was, the church that was old even by Chicago standards, all that rich old wood, and the candles gleaming, as those voices soared, and the screen filled with the placid, ageless beauty of a stained-glass window and—

Someone at the door. Teresa. Wanting him to do more Technics with her.



and Maria could be heard from the garden, having a spirited discussion on the marital talents of Tony and Franny's ex.

"He's Canadian, Aunt Sylvia, I don't think he's ready for all this."

"And if we don't get on with the baking and the cooking, we will never be ready to feed everyone, Sylvia, leave my boy alone and look at what we still need to do."

Ray stole a cookie from the baking sheet being lifted out of the oven, nearly burning his fingers, taking a second to kiss his ma before making good his escape, completely forgetting the reason he'd come to the kitchen in the first place.

Benny, here, in this zoo? God, the poor man barely coped with a regular family dinner. Benny, in the middle of all this? Definitely cruel and unusual punishment.

The VCR still wasn't working, and it wasn't going to be working, not if Tony didn't stop jamming his meaty fingers into the slot like that. Of course, if there was a short inside, then Tony wouldn't be working too well. Not that Tony worked at all ever—

And it occurred to Ray to wonder why the hell he was spending Christmas morning watching his brother-in-law attack the VCR, Tony looking more and more like a plumber every second as his pants slid lower and his butt crack showed more.

Disgusting. What a disgusting sight any time, but Christmas morning?

Man, this place was really starting to get to him.

And the kids weren't helping.

Just how many were here anyway? He didn't even recognize the one pointing at Tony and laughing—looked kinda like Mario Ciccione, maybe it was one of his. So now he had his nieces, his nephews, his neighbor's kids, his aunt, uncle, cousins and Franny's nightmare friend, Stephanie.

He also had a headache.

He'd actually started to push open the kitchen door when he realized what Ma and Aunt Sylvia were talking about. Looked like Aunt Sylvia's latest husband was heading to be her latest ex-husband.

Ma was keeping her voice quiet, by Vecchio standards anyway. "—believe me when I tell you, being without a man in the house is not a bad thing."

"But you were married to him for so long, it was arranged even before you left home to come to America, you never, *you know* with a man other than him—of course you think it's better to be without a man."

"Sylvia—"

And Ray had to strain to hear his mother's whisper,

didn't know whether to laugh, cry, or run away when he heard what she was saying.

"—he has been gone nearly eight years. I'm a handsome woman, with wonderful children, I do well in the Church—you think I've been without distractions? And still, I tell you, take the distractions when you want them, but you will be happier and better without a man than—"

Teresa coming up the hall, calling his name, forcing Ray to go into the kitchen or be caught eavesdropping.

"—so it was dates Gramma used."

"No, no, no, Mamma always swore it was figs—"

"Dates. Oh, Raimondo, you're here again. Looking for coffee, caro?"

If he hadn't heard otherwise himself, he'd be convinced his ma and Aunt Sylvia had been doing nothing racier than discussing dried fruit.

But Ma, his ma, had said... Had said she...

Distractions.

Fuck, if anyone deserved "distractions", it was his ma.

He grabbed her for a hug, held her close, heard her laughter, felt her love, and couldn't help it: he thought again, as his ma plied him with coffee and his aunt fed him cookies, and Ma's grandchildren filled the warm kitchen with their voices: yeah, Pop, see how much we miss you.

There was an argument going on about who should sit where; which kids could be put together at the coffee table without risking a food fight, where to put the turkey so Tony wouldn't think the entire thing was for him. There was another argument about who had made the mess in the bathroom and who had to mop up the spilled shampoo and the smeared toothpaste. Another one, back on what Gramma had used in whichever recipe it had been that his ma and Aunt Sylvia were using to cover up their real discussions. And from that shriek, it sounded like Joseph had finally got his revenge on Teresa. Who was now wreaking revenge for the revenge, while Beatrice blamed Sarah for the mess and Sarah blamed Tony Jr.

And he'd forgotten to get the Advil when he was in the kitchen earlier.

His ma. And "distractions." He had a sinking feeling that the only reason he was so calm about this was because it hadn't sunk in yet.

Now there was an argument about which side was the fork side, and the kids were back on that damned Polly Pocket, Tony couldn't find the shirt he wanted to wear at lunch, and one of the kids wanted to know why the VCR wouldn't play tapes and what kinda house had



a VCR that didn't play tapes, and Maria was telling Tony what she thought of a man who couldn't find his own shirt and oh God, Stephanie was coming downstairs.

Damn it all to hell and back: it wasn't just the Advil he'd forgotten when he'd gone in the kitchen earlier.

"Hey, Ma!" Ray called, heading for the kitchen again, "I've been thinking..."

▼ He'd stayed long enough to carve the turkey—you see who's missing you now, Pop?—and eat lunch and watch the kids succumb to overtiredness and overstimulation. And then he made good his escape, eluding Stephanie's pout and Teresa's loud laments, leaving the rest of his family to their noise and their arguments, the usual rituals of love that they went through every year.

By the time he'd driven to Benny's place, it was already dark, and the gaudy symbols of Christmas had become few and far between: not enough money for big displays here, although there was a sprig of mistletoe hanging over the chipped-paint door leading to the street.

Nothing hanging over Fraser's door, of course. No noise coming from inside either. Ray knocked on the door, waited a few moments until Benny opened the unlocked door and nearly blinded Ray with the happiness beaming from his smile.

"Ray! Merry Christmas."

Ray allowed himself to wallow, just a bit, in the warmth of that greeting, in the delight of Benny's pleasure at having Ray here. "Yeah, Merry Christmas to you too, Benny. You eaten?"

"Yes."

"Recently?"

Faint shrug. "A couple of hours ago."

Ray offered them both the excuse for his absence from his family and his presence here. "So you're ready for dessert, right?"

Fraser looked at him, blinked. "You brought something?"

Ray gave him an old-fashioned look for that. "Benny, I show up carrying more bags than a porter, we planned this days ago, and you're pretending you've no idea, none at all that I might have brought something?"

"I wouldn't say I'm pretending I have no idea at all—"

"But you like the element of surprise, right?"

More shyness in that small smile, and Ray knew that Benny was thinking about other...stuff.

Distractions.

Yeah, you could say Benton Fraser was a distraction.

"So Benny, you want dessert now, or you wanna leave for the game now, so I have time to do all those turn signals you love so much?"

Benny still hadn't lost that smile, was following Ray around, just watching and smiling, looking like—looking like a kid at Christmas.

"If you don't mind, I'd prefer if we left for the game."

"So get your coat, Benny, and let's get moving."

Benny, disappearing into the closet, Ray grateful that Benny wasn't wearing that damned red suit of his—Benny probably thought it was rude to compete with the other red-suited saint on Christmas—and Ray was half disappointed that Benny wasn't going to be stepping out, resplendent.

But then: who needed that red suit? Man oh man, how did Benny *do* that? He wasn't wearing anything special, layers of blue-toned shirts over basic white undershirt and faded blue jeans, and over it, that old, worn leather jacket that smelled, a bit, of wolf. And the man looked like a vision from on High. If Heaven had been painted by Michelangelo.

"Come on, if we're gonna skip dessert, I wanna be there early enough for a beer."

Hid his grin, neatly, at the faintest, politest frown that appeared between Benny's blue eyes.

"Are you sure that's wise, Ray?"

"Sure I'm sure. Because," timing it just right, tossing his keys backwards over his shoulder, hearing Benny catch them, "you're driving."

And maybe this was Ray's Christmas present to himself. He'd done the family thing, and gotten out of there before they drove him nuts and spoiled the day. He'd bought the gifts, and done the chores, and carved the turkey, and all the million other things the man of the house did at Christmas. But this was for him. Sitting in his own car as a passenger, his turn to watch, to look at the driver, to gaze at strong hands on the steering wheel controlling this huge, powerful testosterone statement.

His turn to be passive, to let someone do the driving, to let someone else be in charge. Someone else making the decisions, being responsible.

His turn to sit here, warmed by the heater, watching Fraser in charge, watching the quiet contentment—and the quiet worry—on Fraser's face, Benny obviously aware of just how much a statement of trust this was.

Ray didn't let just anyone drive his car and Benny was the only one who didn't get the running commentary while he was doing it.

They didn't even have the radio on, didn't need it, comfortably quiet, together, just the two of them.

Ray didn't even demand to know where the hell Benny was taking him when they turned off their



route. Oh, yeah, Dief, needed to be dropped off at Maggie's house to spend the rest of the day with his 'family.'

No two ways about it, Benny was weird. Seriously weird. But for once, Ray wasn't complaining and he was damned near sweet as he gently hastened Benny away from Dief's "children" and on to the game.

There was more noise again, kids here too, but mainly it was guys, guys escaping the family, or families getting rid of the guys for a few hours. Leaning back in his seat, sipping on a rare beer, looking through the crowd, Ray wondered how many of the guys here, though, were like him and Benny.

He turned to the man with him, wasn't surprised that Benny was already looking at him. Ray grinned, punched Benny lightly on the thigh, and they sat back, side by side, to enjoy the Bulls pregame, Ray's gift to both of them.

And Ray didn't stop smiling until Benny shifted in his seat, making himself more comfortable, which meant that one of Benny's widespread legs was pressed closely, warmly, all down Ray's left leg. Right there, in public, heat and muscle and strength.

Ray took another drink of his beer, Dutch courage from a German import, and returned the pressure against Benny's leg.

Oh yeah.

This was good, this was great and this was just a taste of what was coming later. What he hoped was coming later. What he thought they'd been building up to for months. Okay, so they were slow: what they'd been building up to for years.

It was...comforting, to know that they were finally on the right path. A quick glance round, and Ray reached over, squeezed Fraser's thigh, just for a second, and then leaned forward in his seat to enjoy the game on the court and the pleasure of his companion.

Back in the car, the temperature outside heading rapidly below freezing, the threat and promise of snow in the air. Talking now, loud and animated, who played what, who screwed up, who did good.

And Benny driving. Benny relaxing into it, all that easy, competent strength only hinted at, tantalizing, as Benny steered the car through the light traffic.

Benny turning to him at red lights, just to look at him, just to smile at him.

Oh yeah, Ray thought, as Benny turned away to concentrate on driving Ray's other favourite baby and

Benny actually nearly giggled over one of Ray's comments, you just see how much I miss you now, Pop.

Back in Benny's apartment, very little decoration here, no dead trees, no fat jolly old St. Nicks. Just peace, and quiet, and promise, and Benny.

They had dessert, still talking about the game, moving on to the exploits of the kids at Ray's house, Tony getting his hand stuck in the VCR, Ma and his favourite aunt.

Sitting over coffee, Ray feeling the tension seeping from his bones into the serenity of Benny's place, not even surprised that he'd started talking about his ma, starting off slow and easy, knowing that he was going to tell Benny all about Ma.

"So I said, you know Ma, I been thinking, about you and Aunt Sylvia feelin' so sorry for your Benton and all, maybe instead of just taking him over a slice of cake and taking him to the game, maybe I should take over enough food for dinner, and maybe some fritto musto for breakfast and spend the night, you know, keep him company, so you two won't be wasting away worrying about your poor Benton being all alone."

Hadn't expected the reaction: Benny, dropping his fork, grabbing at it, flustered, cheeks reddening, and not from embarrassment, that sudden flush of heat very distinctive.

"You're staying the night?"

Ray's turn to redden, and he was none too sure quite all what made him blush. "If you don't mind."

That killer smile, the shy one, the...loving one. "I'd like that, Ray. I'd like that very much."

"You sure 'bout that?"

"Oh, very sure. I want you to spend the night here. As often as you choose."

Feeling absurdly happy, and even more absurdly a bit shy himself. "Yeah?"

Deep voiced, drawn out, the sound of utter satisfaction, Benny's expression dark and hot. "Oh, yeah."

"That's good, because otherwise you'd be sick of me in a week."

And short of having sex on the table amidst a litter of dessert, what was there to do but back off an inch, catch his breath here, even if Benny didn't seem to have any such hesitations. Probably knew exactly what they could use the cream frosting for, too. "So, uh, when I go into the kitchen to tell my ma this, you know what I hear her and Aunt Sylvia talking about?"

"Sex?" Benny said, bluntly, provocatively, nearly distracting Ray again.

"Yeah. Sex. My ma and what she was calling "distractions," but I knew what she was talking about, right there



in the kitchen with my Aunt Sylvia. It's not that she's old or Catholic or anything, but this is my ma we're talking about, you know, and other women have affairs or boyfriends or whatever, but she's my *mother*."

"And you think you should feel outraged or disgusted that she's had these...distractions?"

Smiling at his friend for that. Trust Benny to notice. "Yeah. I think I *should* feel all this negative crap, and shock and stuff like that, and I keep on waiting for that to hit, but you know something, Benny? All I am is happy for her. After my father... Hey, I wouldn't wish a man like my father on the Dragon Lady, and after him... Ma deserves a bit of happiness, you know? A bit of fun?"

"So the only problem then, is that you're not upset by this."

"Put like that..."

And Benny's eyes laughing at him, and Benny's hand—so warm!—touching his cheek briefly before Benny went off to the kitchen to brew some more of that disgusting herbal crap he drank.

"So, uh, Benny?"

"Yes, Ray?"

"You ever think about... You ever wonder about... With it being Christmas and all..." Ray close behind Benny in the kitchen, following his friend back to the well-scrubbed table with its bowl of tangerines, their fragrance clean and sharp in the air. "D'you ever think about your...mum?"

The unfamiliar word sounded odd to Ray's ears, felt weird in his mouth, but hey, this was Fraser's family he was talking about here, what else did he expect?

Benny was cradling his mug between both hands, and it was one of those rare times when Benny's sheer size was apparent, those broad, broad shoulders, the strong sweep of his back, the muscular forearms, big hands. "She died such a long time ago, most people expect me to have put her behind me."

"Have you?"

Benny leaning back in his seat as Ray walked round into his line of sight. "No. Not even close. I still find myself thinking about her, wondering what she was like, if she was happy, if she was glad she had a son or if she wanted a little girl. If she'd be proud of me."

Ray took a tangerine, mouth watering involuntarily as he broke the peel, even though he wasn't even close to hungry. He focused, fiercely, on peeling the thin veins of pith from the sweet juicy flesh. "How did she die?"

"There was an accident, out on the ice. She went through, by the time they could pull her out... It was too late."

"No Dief for her, huh?"

"No. No Dief for her." A pause, Fraser taking one of the tangerine segments from Ray. "I thought about that, when I was in the water that time, and afterwards, of course. The symmetry, the irony of it—and how little it took to make the difference between one of us living and one of us dying." Fraser's turn to ask the unasked, quietly. "Your father?"

Shrug. "Drunk. Driving. Telephone pole. That about covers it."

"But you don't miss him?"

Anger brightening Ray's smile. "You know Benny, this year—I don't miss him at all and for the first time, God, Benny, it's terrible but it's true and it's wonderful too, but for the first time I don't even feel guilty that I'm happy he's gone. I keep looking round my life and my family, and thinking how damn good it is that the old bastard isn't here to ruin everything again. And you know something else? This is the first Christmas I've had a beer or a wine or something just for the pleasure of it, not drinking the way I learned from him, but just because—I can do it, and he couldn't." A large draught drunk, the line of his throat elegant as he swallowed. "That, and it tastes good."

For that, he got one of Fraser's patented looks.

"Okay, okay, so maybe because a beer loosens me up a little."

Brightness in those blue eyes, and wicked, lovely humor, all housed in perfect, absolute innocence that didn't fool Ray one bit. Not any more, anyway. "And you think you're going to need to be loosened up, Ray?"

"Well, Benny, I think one of us is going to need to be, and you don't drink, so hey, why not me?"

And blushed, at what he'd said, and at the audible sound of him swallowing hard, and at the sudden flare of heat in Benny's eyes.

Too much, too soon, even though they'd been literally years working to this. So even while he was kicking himself for being so damned nervous, he heard himself still talking. "Uh, yeah, so, uh, what did you think of Jordan's game tonight?"

Benny letting it go, Benny banking the heat back down, and Ray was nearly embarrassed all over again that he needed this extra time. Very nearly embarrassed, until he looked at Benny, and saw understanding, and more than a little embarrassment and nervousness of Benny's own.

And so he sat in the sparse apartment, feeling as if he were finally on his way home, and he looked at this man who was his friend, who would always be his friend, and who would soon be his lover too.

Oh, yeah, Pop, he thought as Benny managed to

make a comparison between slam-dunking basketballs and blocking a tackle in ice hockey, you just see how much I miss you, you miserable unloved bastard.

They'd eaten again, a very late supper, even though Ray swore blind he was going to burst, and Benny being Benny, now they were in the kitchen washing dishes. Real dishes, with real silverware, and matching glasses: Benny's Christmas present to Ray.

"Dishes," Ray muttered, more pleased than he was willing to say: no need to be mushy, after all. "He gives me dishes—dishes we're gonna keep in *his* apartment, in *his* kitchen, and then expects me to believe it's all for my sake."

"Well, I must confess," Benny slung him a slow smile and went back to fishing spoons out of the soapy water, "that there was an element of self-gratification involved."

"Oh, so you're kinky for flatware, huh, Benny?"

More of that lovely wickedness shining in those even lovelier blue eyes, Benny deliberately playing the innocent for Ray's delight. "I really don't know what you mean, Ray. I simply meant that perhaps there was an element of self-gratification in stopping your somewhat...repetitive complaints regarding my kitchen equipment."

"Hey, perfect as you are, a man has to find some of your equipment to complain about."

And perhaps it would have happened then, perhaps their relationship would have changed right then and there, but as Fraser turned to Ray, the soapy water splashed, and Ray's hands were full and there was clumsiness and awkwardness and the two of them grinning at each other like loons.

"Back to the dishes," Ray said, supposedly stern but sounding unnervingly indulgent. Benny did as he was told, but not without another one of those wickedness-wrapped-in-innocence looks of his.

"You really got me dishes to stop me complaining about those damned camping utensils of yours?"

Benny, concentrating quite intently on making sure that every single tine of the fork was spotlessly clean. "Things aren't important to me, but you like your creature comforts and I hoped that the more comfortable you were here, the more time you'd spend here, with me and—"

"And?"

"Buying a double bed seemed...presumptuous."

There wasn't a thing Ray could think to say to that that wasn't seriously mushy. Not a thing. So he stepped closer to his friend, put his arm around Fraser's shoulder. Took a deep breath, let his arm slip lower, until his arm

was around Benny's waist, and they were standing there, side by side, Ray leaning on Benny, neither of them looking at each other, just...standing there.

They were quiet for all of a minute and a half, and of course, it was Ray who started talking again, stepping.

"Remember when you had amnesia, Benny?"

"Well, of course I remember, Ray, I had amnesia *then* about the past, and now I have my memory fully intact so I can remember not remembering."

"So d'you remember in the car, when you were askin' what I meant when I said that we'd bonded?"

Soft, low, a remnant of hurt. "I remember that."

"And I said we'd bonded as friends, kinda like blood-brothers?"

"And I wondered why you said that, since it seemed to me—"

"That we spent a hell of a lot of time together for just buddies—"

"And my reactions to you were a long way from brotherly—"

"And I ran away."

"Not literally. And who can blame you, Ray? It must have come as quite a shock to you—"

"Who are you trying to kid, Benny? We've been dancing round this from the second you looked at me in that holding cell, and you know it, we both know it."

"Well..." Clear-eyed, meeting Ray's gaze boldly. "Yes. We have."

"And back then," Ray said, not looking away, having to stop and take a drink because his mouth was so dry, and knowing that Benny would notice that and know what it meant, "and back then, I told you it was because we were friends."

Benny turning to face him now, taking the dishtowel from where it was slung across Ray's shoulder, drying the soap from himself. "And I asked why we were just friends. You told me it was because that's what we were. Friends. Just friends."

"Only, there's no just about it. And... Okay, so the reason we're just friends is because neither one of us has the balls to make the first move, which is really dumb cuz it's not like we think the other guy's gonna say no or run screaming in horror—"

"Or perhaps that's why neither of us had the courage to make that move, Ray." Taking a half-step nearer, so close now Ray could feel Benny's body heat, smell the soap he used. Could feel the power of that gaze like a caress. "Perhaps because we were both so very certain that if we took that step, if we made that move—it would be..."

Deep breath. Look into those eyes. Lean forward just



an inch, into strong hands that came up to hold him, strong body moving forward to support him. "Forever."

"Are you ready for that?" Fraser looked steadily into his eyes.

"No. You?"

Lines crinkling at the corner of Benny's eyes, that silly dimple deepening in his left cheek, those blue eyes twinkling, "Me? Petrified."

And Raymond Vecchio wondered why he'd ever been scared of this.

But Benny was laughing again, face nearly impassive, but those eyes were brimming with laughter and happiness.

I did that, Ray thought, looking at all that vibrancy and unbridled happiness, remembering the Benton Fraser RCMP he'd met all that time ago. Hey, not bad for a screw-up, huh, Pop?

"So Benny, are we gonna... you know."

"No, Ray, I don't know."

Standing there toe to toe, touching at chest and belly, Benny's hands so warm and restless on Ray's waist, and of course, let's not discount the pulse of arousal pressing against Ray's groin. And Benny was still pulling the innocent routine. Worse—was still pulling it off.

"If I didn't know better..." Ray muttered, his own hands coming to rest lightly on Benny's hips.

"If you didn't know better what?"

"Before Victoria—"

And even now, after all this time, after all the depth between them, there was still a flicker of pain in Benny's eyes.

"Before Victoria, I honestly thought you were the world's oldest boy scout. I couldn't imagine you actually, you know, having sex with anyone, and then along comes Victoria—"

"And you could say challenges your conceptions of me."

"Yeah, you could say that. Okay, so I know it's stupid, I kept telling myself it was stupid, but once she was gone again, and you were running away from women again—"

And Benny very nearly changed the subject, by beginning the slow lifting of Ray's sweater, those hands even warmer when they touched bare skin.

But Ray refused to be easily distracted. "The Dragon Lady..."

Sudden sharp glance, Benny looking away. "She... I was trying to find a distraction, a conventional outlet for my feelings. Since it seemed... It seemed that you didn't want my feelings."

And Ray could hear Benny all over again: sometimes it's easier to believe yourself in love than to admit you're alone.

"You got me, Benny."

Full, genuine smile, lighting up Benny's face, the heat from it dazzling. "Yes, I have."

For an innocent, Benny could sure put a lot of meaning into three little words, and Ray heard every single one of those meanings loud and clear. He gulped, and wanted to kick himself for his own nervousness. His erection faded, and he was edgy, uncomfortable in Benny's arms. "Sorry, behaving like a stupid virgin—"

"Not stupid, Ray, but—the other?"

Okay, he could do this. He could say this. "Yeah. Definitely the other. When it comes to guys."

"Then perhaps it should be me...having that beer?"

"So you're not— Ah, you're not, ah, that, when it comes to guys?"

"Nor when it comes to women either."

Only one thing he could say to all of that: "Wow."

And Benny smiled at him, and kissed him, all tenderness and heat, passion and control, not pushing, not at all, but making it clear that he knew what he was doing and all Ray had to do was relax into it, let Benny take the lead...

"Do you want to go to bed now, Ray, or do you want another beer first?"

"You're the one who knows what this is all about, Benny," Ray murmured, letting go of all the weight of carrying his family, of being the stereotype of the Italian Male, letting all of that go without so much as a sigh for its passing, and allowing himself the luxury of trusting another person's strength. "You think I'm going to need that beer?"

Benny's hands darted down, quick, firm, fingertips pressing into the seam of Ray's pants, pressing in right *there*, Benny's instincts perfect as always.

Ray gasped, and tensed, and Benny soothed his palms over the lean muscles of Ray's ass, and then held him close. "I think we can skip the beer, and I think we can also skip the anal intercourse."

"But that's what guys do—"

"That's one of the things men do, Ray. There are plenty of other things we can do, until we're both ready for anal intercourse—"

"But you're ready."

The slightest of pauses. "Yes, I am, and believe me, I will be very happy to give you that tonight."

"That's not what I meant."

A slightly longer pause. "I'm sorry, I'm not following you."

"No, you're not and that's what I want, Benny. I want..."

What did he want, and how to say it?

“Benny, if I’m gonna do this—and I am, God, I *am*, I want to do it...big. I want it to mean something, you know, something I can look back and say, right then, right at that second, it all changed. *I* changed. If I’m gonna do this with a guy, with you—then I want it to be something. Something major. I don’t want to just kinda ease into it, you know, build up over time, but something big, one big moment. I’m changing my whole life here, Benny, I want it to be an *event*. I want it to mean something.”

Then Benny kissed him again, both hands cupping Ray’s cheeks, then sliding down to cup his nether cheeks, those blunt-tipped fingers probing again.

“Beer,” he said, “one more beer, and a bath, and a shave.”

“Then bed. With you, and me, and what we’re going to do.”

And bless him: Benny didn’t ask him if he were sure, if he really wanted this. Benny trusted him, respected him, would let Ray call his own shots. Yeah. This was going to work. The sex and everything, this was gonna work.

“Why don’t you make yourself comfortable, Ray,” Benny said to him, taking him by the hand—and how the hell did Benny make that sexy and not stupid?—and leading him not to the bed, but to the table. “I’m going for my bath, and while I’m doing that, if you want to get ready, you can wear this bathrobe.”

“Uh, about getting ready, Benny...”

Embarrassed beyond belief about this—how did you ask about *that*?

Gentle smile, not in the least mocking, Benny crouching down beside him. “All you need to do is shave so that I don’t have any untoward rashes to explain tomorrow, and wash. You don’t need to do anything else, Ray, I promise.”

Okay, so he’d survived asking that, and he’d survived the answer. Might as well go for broke while he was already dying of embarrassment. “Uh, so, uh, are we gonna use... you know... condoms?”

Christ, when the fuck was he going to stop sounding like a nervous virgin? In ten minutes, judging by the intense desire on Benny’s face.

“I have no communicable or infectious diseases or conditions, but—” and sweet, to see Benny sharing Ray’s discomfiture. “If you want them, I do have a supply.”

“For the Dragon Lady?”

“No! After the Bolt incident and after I regained my memory... Well, I had hopes, Ray.”

“I, uh, I don’t have any diseases or anything either, but if you want to, because you’ll be putting your dick in, uh, there, that’s okay.”

“Thank you kindly, Ray. I’ll just be a few minutes. Okay?”

And Ray was really quite proud of himself that he was recovering his aplomb already, enough to call to Benny’s retreating back, “Hey, I expect you to last better’n a few minutes, mister!”

But then he was alone, in Benny’s little apartment, his irritating nervousness returning because he was getting naked and he was going to be fucked up the ass.

He was going to be a woman for a man, be a fairy, a nancy boy—

“A fucking queer.”

Oh, man he shoulda known Pop would show up.

“No, Pop, I’m gonna be the catcher, so I guess that’s gonna make me a fucked queer. You got a problem with that?”

“Yeah, I got a problem with that. I didn’t raise a faggot—”

“You didn’t raise *nobody*, Pop, you didn’t raise one of us, you just gave a donation and walked away when you’d had what *you* wanted and you never, ever raised one of us.”

“Hey, don’t you speak like that to your father. Your mother would—”

“Yeah, let’s talk about my mother. You know what my mother’s been doin’, Pop, since you finally did something good and died? Ma’s been having other men. Did you know that, Pop? Did you know that she doesn’t miss you at all, not even for sex? Cos she’s got sex, Pop, and it’s better’n anything she ever had with you and—”

And he broke off, stiffening his back to meet the blow from his father’s raised hand. “Yeah, go on, Pop, hit me, just like always. Because that hand is the only thing you ever raised.”

His father—the ghost, the afterimage, the figment of his imagination, his conscience, whatever the hell it was—lowered his hand, stuffed both hands in the ridiculously tight gigolo-wannabe white trousers. “I wouldn’t dirty my hands on a piece of shit like you. A fag, a fucking queer—”

“We already covered that, Pop,” and even as he said it and heard the weariness in his own voice, he started to realize just how much of his fear tonight was the sour aftertaste of his father’s brand of ‘manhood.’

“You’re no son of mine—”

“Oh, you’ve no idea how much I wish that was true.”

“Ray? Should I come in or do you want to finish your phone call first?”

Ray scowled at his father, the last of the ties unraveling. “Come on in, Benny, we’re finished here.” And he



took the greatest satisfaction watching his father fade away to nothing.

It wasn't until he turned round, and saw Benny's face, that he remembered he was naked.

Benny, for his part, seemed to be having some trouble finding words, his hunger visible, in his eyes, in the erection that was firming as Ray watched.

Right now. It could be right now.

But if he'd felt the event deserved a bath before, after that little encounter with his father, Ray wanted to be sandblasted inside and out. Maybe then he'd feel clean. Maybe then he'd feel worthy, again, of this man staring at him with such need. "I won't be too long."

"I'd appreciate haste."

"Yeah, I can see that!"

Then Ray was wrapped in the discreet bathrobe he'd given Benny last birthday, and heading off down to the bath.

Oh, yeah, Pop, he thought, as he scrubbed away the lingering aftereffects of his father and his father's words, his skin now glowingly clean, and thought of Benny's mouth on him, tasting him, Benny's hands touching him, Benny's cock actually inside him—yeah, Pop, you just see how much I'm gonna miss you now.

▼ The electric lights were all out, oil lamps casting soft—dare he say, romantic?—glows over the bed, but Ray barely glanced in that direction, hurrying on past the bed and the man in it to the sink to shave, the toilet door shut firmly behind him. Self-conscious as he felt, he did *not* want Mr. Gorgeous watching him shave and brush his teeth, the sort of things mere mortals—but not Mr. Gorgeous—looked dumb doing.

Stupid, stupid, stupid, but he felt as awkward as his first time. More awkward: that first time, he'd been young, inexperienced and he hadn't even entertained any hopes of Irene coming across—definitely not going all the way. But here he was, a grown man, married and divorced, lover to his fair share of women, but his hand was shaking as he lathered his face. He had to take his time, go slow and easy, because otherwise, he was going to end up one giant shaving cut, and wouldn't Benny find that just incredibly attractive. By the time he was suitably smooth—he did *not* want to be standing there when Benny decided to be good and honest and explain his beard burn to Thatcher—and had emerged from the protective shell of the toilet, Benny was propped up in bed, barechested, his face nakedly showing his worries.

Benny looking at him, nervousness and insecurity personified, Benny unsure enough to be fidgeting with the blankets. "I was afraid you'd changed your mind."

"Even if I did, Benny," and it was easier than he expected, with Benny needing him, Benny being nervous and scared, to breeze in there, drop that robe and climb into that narrow bed with this man, "it'd only be a delay, till I got my nerve back."

Again, Benny didn't ask Ray if he was sure, he didn't double-check, he just lay back and trusted Ray, had faith in Ray, let Ray be the one to initiate this first time.

Ray lay there for a moment, the awkwardness returning, part of him waiting for Benny to take the initiative, part of him appreciating being allowed to make the first move in his own good time. He looked at Benny, looking at Ray: took a deep breath, sloughing off as much of the past as he could, and gave himself the luxury of doing not what Raymond Vecchio, cop, son, brother et al. *ought* to do, but what he, Ray Vecchio, truly *wanted* to do.

And Benny tasted good. Clean skin, soft, smooth, firm muscles underneath, the skin shivering slightly as Ray laved along the side of Benny's neck, from chest to ear, his tongue making all of Benny shiver as he darted it inside Benny's ear. I'm in you, he thought, and moved round to kiss Benny, pushing his tongue into Benny's mouth. I'm in you, I'm right inside you, and you're going to be inside me.

Lips still touching Benny's, Ray's tongue touching Benny's lips occasionally as he spoke: "You like being fucked, Benny?"

Benny's breath catching, Benny's cock pulsing, harder, as Ray said that. "Love it. But if you don't, Ray, that doesn't mean you can't have intercourse with me."

Daring, greatly daring, thrilling to it, his fingers finagling their way under Benny to touch him, intimately, a sound escaping Ray as Benny returned the caress, with interest.

Ray squirmed a little as Benny's fingertip pressed against him, found the sensation was a lot pleasanter than he'd expected; found himself relaxing easily, found himself wanting more than just that gentle skimming touch. "So you don't think we're gonna need score cards to see whose turn it is every night?"

Benny was sounding husky. "I think we're not even going to need that beer tonight."

Ray heard the question under the affection and the relief. Maybe some day, he'd tell Benny, tell Benny the mix-up of emotions, insecurities, needs, whatever the hell it was that had him see-sawing him tonight. Maybe one day, he'd even tell Benny what it was like being visited by your dead father. Nah. Not even Benny would believe something like that. He arched his back, raising his butt a bit higher, inviting Benny's touch in deeper.



“But we will need something—”

“Hey, no pain, no gain.”

“It won’t hurt. Well, not at the time, not if I use enough lubricant and dilate you thoroughly. And as long as I...do ‘it’ right—although afterwards, there can be chafing, and muscle aches just as after any stretching or vigorous exercise to which your body is not accustomed so—”

“So in other words, you’re gonna fuck me till I come, and tomorrow, you’re gonna feel so guilty every time you see me try to sit on my butt, you’ll wait on me hand and foot. Am I right or am I right?”

“You—” and looking at Benny at that moment, Ray knew this was it, point of no return, this was the precise second he would look back and say, that’s when it really, really started. “You are wonderful.”

Christ on a crutch! The way Benny was looking at him. “You gonna say it?”

“Only when you’re too distracted to feel it’s silly. Let me kiss you...”

Ray let him. Let Benny hold him, and kiss him, deeply. Let Benny set the pace, let Benny touch him and hold him, let Benny be the one who shifted position until—there, oh, God, there, his cock touching Benny’s cock, and he had to thrust, had to, couldn’t stop, needed this, needed it so bad, never knew how much he needed this until he had Benny under him, hard and aching, their cocks slick against each other. Benny was still kissing him, Benny making that sexy, needy, little noise in the back of his throat, Benny pushing up to meet Ray’s hungry push downwards. It felt better than he’d expected, and as natural as being with a woman, which should have shocked him, but he was beyond shock, he was too wrapped up in sensation and emotion to think about too much else. Too wrapped up in Benny to spare a thought for anyone or anything else.

It was wonderful, and it was the biggest turn-on in the world to see Benny sweating and flushed, to see Benny’s eyes so dark with passion, to feel Benny thrusting up against him, cock so hard, so demanding—

And incredible, to be turned, put flat on his back as if he weighed no more than a feather, and to feel Benny kissing and licking and nibbling his way down the entire length of Ray’s body, that mouth so hot and wet and so fucking good.

Teasing him, though, probably not meaning to, probably trying to be perfect at this too. “Benny, suck me, come on, Benny, take my cock in your mouth, swallow me down, Benny oh, God, please, yes—”

And then there was a mouth on his cock, tongue pressing the underside, his glans hitting the back of

Benny’s throat, and so he pulled back, wanting to cry because he had to pull back when all he wanted to do was thrust and fuck and find completion in that wet mouth—and sobbing, once, his voice catching on the pleasure of Benny taking him in deeper, throat opening around his cock, Benny’s throat rippling around his cock as Benny swallowed. Benny was fondling him, Benny’s fingers on his balls, stroking, stroking, more fingers, other hand, touching him *there*.

Ray scrambled to stop him, but Benny was abandoning his cock for a second, two, three seconds, an eternity, but then it was almost all right: Benny kissing him on the mouth again, that taste, incredible, knowing that was his cock he was tasting in Benny’s mouth. Wonderful, being kissed like this, but he needed more, reaching down to stroke his own cock, soothing the pre-ejaculate slick and smooth over himself. Another kiss, Benny pulling back long enough to look at him, those blue eyes so bright with emotion, with a passion that matched—outstripped—Ray’s own.

Now Benny was kneeling between his legs, and Benny was sucking him, and Benny was probing him, *there*, with a slick, slippery finger that was just gonna slide right in, oh, God, what a feeling, weird, really weird—and distracting him, Benny sucking him harder, and Benny’s finger in him deeper, touching him inside, and that was the most incredible feeling. Ray decided he loved that, really loved it and wanted more of that, wanted Benny doing that to him. He gloried in that sensation inside, internal caress that made him soar, the firm touch that made his cock pulse. Benny’s tongue was doing incredible things to him, dancing over him, the tongue tip pointing, darting to probe the slit at the head of his cock, and then that mouth opening and swallowing him all the way down, his cock so hot and wet and close to coming, deep inside Benny’s throat.

Every time Benny sank his mouth down on Ray, that finger sank deep inside Ray’s ass too, pressing him, stroking him, driving him to distraction. And pleasure. Two fingers in him, and the mouth sucking him, and Ray couldn’t take any more. His back arched, his flailing hands clutched Benny’s hair, holding him tight in place, as Ray fucked forward once, twice, three times, his semen flooding from him, as he pushed forward into Benny’s face and pushed backwards onto Benny’s stiff fingers.

Collapsing back onto the bed, quivering, muscles going limp, cock going lax, as he lay there, sprawl, sweat beading him, as Benny licked him clean and still, those two fingers inside him, not moving, simply being there: Benny inside him.



And he was, faintly, shocked by just how much he liked that.

"Sorry," Ray managed after a minute or so, "didn't mean to come, couldn't help myself."

A wicked smile for that, and a soft kiss to the sensitive head of his penis. "You weren't supposed to stop yourself. It's easier, you see," and Benny was raising himself up to cover Ray, a bit awkwardly, because those two fingers were still inside Ray, while Benny's legs were urging Ray's farther apart, and Benny's thighs and free hand were urging Ray to lift his legs, lift those knees, expose himself, expose that place where Benny's fingers were inside him.

Ray looked down and his gaze caught, ensnared, on the hungry upward thrust of Benny's erection, that cock so dark compared to the milk-white skin of Benny's belly. The cock that was going to be inside Ray, fucking him, and his heart beat faster, panic tingeing him, as he looked at that huge cock, monstrous, big as a baseball bat—average, he reminded himself, looking at it, thinking about it, calming himself as Benny recommenced the slow, sweet stroke of his fingers inside. Average, maybe a bit bigger, not as big as himself, Ray thought, maybe a tad thicker, okay, a lot thicker, but quite a bit shorter. His own reaction took him by surprise: he wanted that cock, thought it was gorgeous, the veins a tracery on the surface, not like some of those varicose monsters he'd seen in the videos he'd rented. He looked at it: Benny's cock, wet at the tip, so hard, so needy, needing him so much. Ray looked up, met Benny's eyes, recognized the tightly coiled patience and control that was giving Ray time to get used to all this. Then he looked down again, at himself. At himself, and Benny, and Ray swore, fervently, at the sight of Benny's fingers inside him. Swore again, as those fingers moved again, disappearing inside him, and if he didn't know better, he'd swear his cock was going to get hard again.

"I said," Benny told him, getting his attention by nipping Ray's left nipple, "that it's easier to engage in anal intercourse when the recipient is fully relaxed and one of the best ways of ensuring that—"

"Is to give him the best blow job he's had in years. Who taught you that, Benny?"

"Ray, Ray, Ray, Ray..."

"Yeah, I know, you're not going to tell me."

"Of course," Benny said, and Ray was pleased to note that Benny's voice was husky, and trembling, just a fraction, "there is a world of information in your local library."

And as Ray laughed at that, at the thought of Fraser going into the library in his dress reds and formally

asking for information on how best to perform fellatio, Benny slipped a third finger into him, and the laughter died, Ray sighing, squirming a little this time, but liking it too. Liking the way he could accommodate so much, loving the way Fraser was kissing and stroking him, loving hearing Benny's voice damn near break as he whispered Ray's name.

"Come on," Ray told him, reaching down until his fingers were touching Benny's, touching his own skin where his body had stretched and opened for Benny, "you need this, you must be hurtin', Benny, come on, I wanna do this, gonna take you inside..."

Then Benny was fumbling, pressing his cock against Ray, withdrawing his fingers, a sudden hunger filling Ray as he felt their absence, words tumbling from him in his hunger— "Get inside me, get your fucking cock inside me now, Benny, come on, I want it, give it to me" — wincing as Benny tried, failed, tried again, slick cock head sliding past the opening, Ray grabbing Benny's cock, trying to guide it, hold it steady, press it home, there, right there, at his opening, guide it and press it inside—

Oh.

Oh dear God in Heaven.

Too much, too, too much, and Benny wasn't stopping, pushing and pushing and pushing, how fucking long did it take to shove a cock in? Hurting, hurting, and then Benny was kissing him, needing him so much, the kiss breaking off as Benny groaned, and groaned again, and at last, Ray had Benny all the way inside.

Benny's arms were trembling, the muscles on his back knotting under Ray's hands as Benny struggled to hold still. "Okay?"

More or less.

"Yeah," Ray said, only lying a tiny bit, "this is good, Benny, this is fine, real fine."

And then Benny was moving inside him, deeper than his fingers had gone, and Ray could feel the bulk of him inside, and the heat of him, the way the head was wider as it stroked him, inside, God, so far inside, so deep, right up inside him, and he was going to go even deeper inside Benny. Oh, yeah, he was going to do this to Benny because it felt so good, and to fuck Benny, that would be heaven, because this felt good, this felt real good.

Oh, yeah, he was gonna fuck Benny just like Benny was fucking him, so strong, so sure, deep, deep strokes, inside.

Making him hard again. Shit, he hadn't done this in years. Not that he was complaining, no not one bit.

Especially not when Benny giggled, yeah, that giggle,



who could resist the sheer happiness in that? Not Ray Vecchio who knew love when it slapped him upside the head. Ray sighed, as Benny took Ray's cock in his hand, and squeezed him, Benny's hand still slick from putting lubricant on his own cock. Still, the grasp wasn't quite right, the rhythm off, but then, Benny had one or two other things on his mind, so Ray took over, masturbating himself the way he liked it best, as Benny thrust into him—as Benny finally started to let loose, fucking for pleasure, fucking for passion, pushing into Ray, pushing him higher on the bed.

It was a joy to see, an almost greater joy to feel. Benny's mouth was open on Ray, sucking his nipples, biting his shoulder, nipping an earlobe, kissing him open-mouthed, before Ray watched Benny pull away, watched Benny's face as his expression changed, watched as Benny abandoned all restraints and let Ray see *him*, no masks, no barriers, no nothing, just Benny needing this, Benny abandoning himself to this. Benny taking his pleasure, filling his needs, and filling Ray, too.

Strange moment, incredibly strange, incredibly sexy, feeling it, inside, each individual spurt of semen splashing him, as Benny thrust into him, hard, hard, hard, as Benny came, inside him.

Oh, yeah, that was something, Benny coming inside him, Benny's semen inside him, part of him now, seeping into him, and Benny still hard inside him, and Benny kissing him again, whispering Ray's name into Ray's mouth, whispering other things too, things they'd never dare say face to face in passionless daylight. Benny's hand, still shaking after that climax, cupping Ray's balls, rolling them lightly in his fingers, Benny's cock only now beginning to soften, and shift inside Ray.

Nearly there again, Benny inside him, Benny touching him, Benny kissing, Ray stroking himself, faster, harder, until, yes, he was there, nothing much to show for the wave of pleasure that beached him, but it was wonderful nonetheless.

Calming down, heartbeat returning to normal, reality creeping in. Realizing his back hurt, and his asshole felt weird, but only a tiny bit grateful as Benny moved off

him, rolled him over, those wonderful, warm hands stroking his back gently to ease his muscles, touching him softly, intimately.

"Don't think I didn't notice," Ray mumbled into the pillow.

"Didn't notice what?"

How could someone still sound innocent after what they'd just done?

"Don't you go thinking I didn't notice you checking out my ass to see if you'd hurt me."

"Actually, Ray," and there wasn't even a trace of innocence now as Benny slid down him to kiss his tender ass, "I knew I hadn't hurt you, because you would have said so. No, Ray, I was just..."

"Marking your territory?"

"Revisiting a site of much happiness."

He had to laugh at that. "Hey, well whaddaya know? My butt is the happiest place on earth. Don't you go telling Disney that."

The closest he got to a reply to that was another kiss, and then more kisses as Benny slowly came back up level with him. He was turned again, and petted, and pampered, and was ridiculously pleased when Benny settled down to sleep. Benny, flat on his back as always, Ray in his usual half on his stomach, half on his side, and they fit together like hand in glove. Or cock in ass, he thought, wishing he had enough energy left to explore Benny. Hardly touched him, Ray realized, too busy being swept away by his own experiences. Next time, he promised himself. And the time after that, the surety a comfort and a happiness that went beyond words as he hugged Benny close. Tomorrow, maybe, he'd be embarrassed by how sappy he felt right now, might even have a hard time dealing with the way Benny gazed at him. But then again, maybe he'd just enjoy it, the way he was enjoying the feeling of another kiss pressed to his forehead, the way he was enjoying Benny hugging him tightly—the way he loved how it felt when Benny's hand came to rest possessively on his tender butt.

Oh, you were right, Pop, he thought with deepest satisfaction, hoarding his happiness, I'm no son of yours.

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