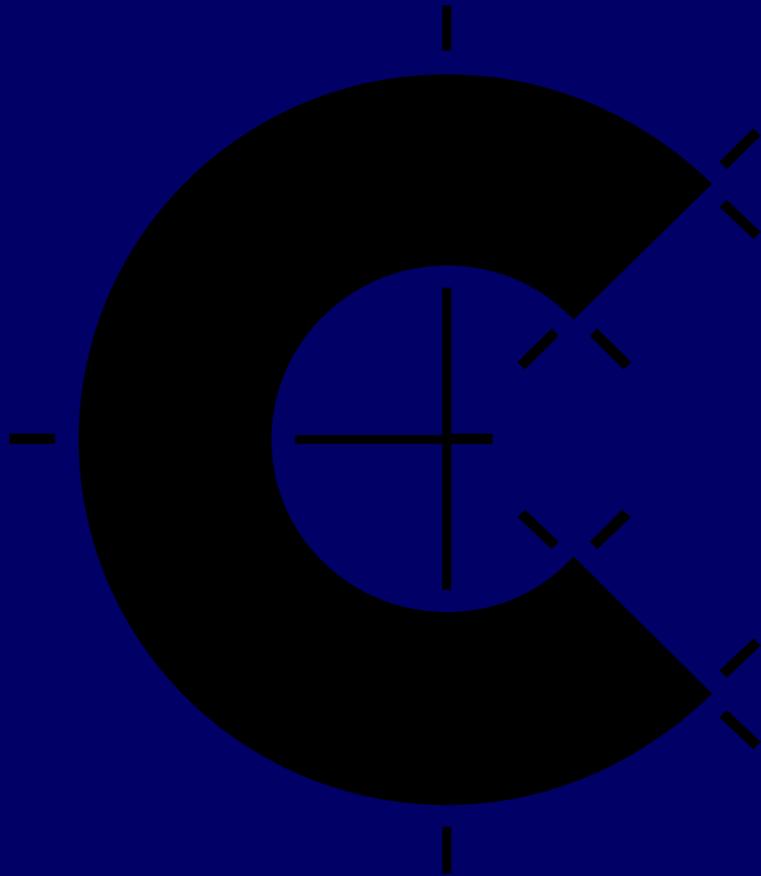


Pæan to Priapus VII a multi-media slash anthology



ircumference
by M. Fae Glasgow

OUTAGE

This was supposed to be a nice quick little romp, an indulgence in my guilty pleasure of 'going undercover as gay' stories. Well, I should've known better, from two men who, even trapped on a sinking ship, still take the time to discuss their relationship. And I should really have known better from two men who seem to have an inordinately difficult time of letting go.

And I really, really, really ought to have known better, when it's canon that not only are these men not having sex (with anyone), but that they choose to turn down opportunities after a single kiss. Just try getting them in bed!



“...SUPPOSED TO

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know the malfeasant was the monsignor, Ray?”

And it was a measure of just how weird life around the Mountie could be that not a single person raised so much as an eyebrow as Ray Vecchio, né Kowalski, came into the station, voice raised in debate with his inherited Mountie.

“It doesn’t matter he was the monsignor, you don’t tackle someone for littering!”

“Well, it was right on the steps of the cathedral, there was a considerable amount of litter and it did rather appear as if the malf—”

A quelling look from Kowalski resulting in a verbal U-turn.

“—the monsignor was doing something rather more illegal than littering.”

“Oh so you admit there’s worse things in life than littering?”

That earned a patented ‘you are so weird’ look, which was more than a bit rich, considering the source.

“Well, of course, Ray, there are many things worse than littering, as is reflected in the criminal code. In fact—”

Story Beginning

“In fact, the truth is, no matter what you thought you saw, you tackled some innocent guy for littering which means you tackled the monsignor himself, which means we got about ten minutes before I get called into Welsh’s office—”

There was a definite snip sharpening the smooth surface of Fraser’s polite words. “The monsignor seemed quite pleased by our protection of his cathedral—”

“—at which point I’ll lose my badge and you’ll lose...something, that—” a vague, harried gesture around throat and chest, “white string thing and—”

“It’s a lanyard,” and the snip was rapidly becoming a snipe, “as I have mentioned once or twice.”

“Once or twice? A day, maybe. And lanyard or string, it’s still my badge and I’m going to be raked over the coals as soon as—”

“Don’t you two ever stop?”

They both turned together, looking up at Francesca, who kept right on talking before either of those open mouths could start that backchat thing at her. “You’re both wanted—and don’t get your hopes up, bro’, it’s only the lieutenant.”

“See? What did I tell you?”

Story Beginning

“We don’t know that yet, Ray, and the monsignor did say he wanted to call your lieutenant to thank him—”

“And you believed a guy you pinned to the ground?”

“You said it yourself, he’s a monsignor.”

“My point exactly! He—”

They both came to an abrupt halt just inside Lieutenant Welsh’s office, and looked at the unnaturally tidy desk, devoid of both clutter and lieutenant.

“That’s it, my badge is history.”

“You don’t know that.”

“My lieutenant calls me into his office after my partner beats up a monsignor—” a sharp gangbanger gesture with both hands, four fingers and two thumbs pointing at Fraser, “—and don’t even start with the hairsplitting—and my boss isn’t even there to ream me out. This is bad, this is—”

“A situation for which there could be any number of explanations,” Fraser said, coming to parade rest, until he caught sight of Ray’s very speaking look at him. “Sorry,” he murmured, sitting down on the couch beside Ray, closing his eyes for a moment and muttering a singularly unconvincing ‘well, pardon me’ under

Story Beginning

his breath before spreading his legs and resting his hands on his thighs in a suitably mollifying posture of relaxation. Politely—or perhaps simply sensibly—he ignored Ray’s half hidden smile.

“The lieutenant,” he continued, as Ray leant back and closed his eyes, one hand doing a ‘yak yak yak’ motion, “could simply have answered a call of nature—”

“No, that’s what you do, us Americans go to the can.”

“—or indeed, his presence could have been unexpectedly required in one of the interview rooms—”

“Yeah, maybe Dief shouted for him. That count as a call of nature?”

“—or he could have been called suddenly to a meeting or—”

“Or he could be talking to the monsignor right now, sucking up to keep this outta the papers and offering my badge as sacrifice.”

“Well Ray, given the nature of the monsignor’s religious beliefs, I doubt he’d want a sacrifice—”

“Or maybe he’s talking to the monsignor’s boss—”

Fraser gave him another of those ‘just what planet are you from?’ looks. “You think *God* is going to bother with—”

“Uh, guys?”

Story Beginning

“Yes, Francesca?” blended with “Don’t you ever leave him alone, Frannie?” as she stood perfectly framed—with rather studied casualness—in the doorway.

She waved a file at them in general query. “What are you guys doing here? I told you, he wants to see you both.”

“And I’m sure he shall, Francesca, as soon as he returns.”

“Yeah, only by then he is going to be even more pissed than he was a half hour ago when he started screaming for you two. I told you, he’s waiting for you.” She made little shooing gestures at them. “At the Consulate.”

Fraser and Kowalski both sat up very slowly, and very straight. They looked at Francesca, who finally got that thing about deer and headlights.

“Oh dear,” Fraser said.

The car was parked—legally, without a single remonstrance required from Fraser—and they were standing outside the door of the Consulate.

“So what’s it like?” Ray asked, standing with his back to the door.

Story Beginning

“What’s what like?”

“Being reamed by the Ice Queen?”

“I’d hardly call it being reamed—”

Ray turned towards Fraser for that, smiling sharply. “But you’re not going to argue with the ‘Ice Queen’ bit?”

“It’s a wise man who picks his battles, Ray.”

“And two sacrificial lambs standing here staring at a door.”

Fraser refrained from making any remarks about the monsignor, sacrifice, and lambs, and contented himself instead with simply pushing the door open. He stood aside politely to let Ray precede him into Canada, his hand in the small of Ray’s back there purely as a courtesy, and certainly not to...ah...encourage Ray to face Lieutenant Welsh. And most assuredly not because his hand on Ray was reassuring, rather like the heat from an open fire on a cold night.

“So what’s it like?” Ray whispered, a naughty child in church.

“I wouldn’t call it ‘being reamed,’ Ray. However, I will say that Inspector Thatcher can be most...thorough and detailed in her chastisements.”

Ray winced.

Story Beginning

“In fact,” Fraser said, gently urging his friend and partner towards the inner sanctum, “I believe the correct vernacular would be ‘cut you a new one.’”

“Rip,” Ray corrected absently. His lashes shadowed his eyes as he glanced sidelong at Fraser. “And I know you weren’t beating the monsignor up. It was just, you know, hyper.”

“Hyperbole,” Fraser supplied, his eyes more openly fond than usual. “Yes, I know.”

Then Ray looked at Fraser, and Fraser looked at Ray.
And looked.

Until Ray shrugged and shifted edgily from foot to foot. “So.”

They both stood outside another door, paneled, polished, and bearing a small brass plaque.

“So,” Fraser echoed.

“Yeah. So.”

A clearing of throats, a meshing of glances, and Ray saying, “She’s your boss, you get to go in first.”

And of course, it was purely Ray’s imagination that it was sarcasm dripping from Fraser’s “Thank you kindly.”

Story Beginning

“Where have you bee—” clashed with “Good of you to grace us with—”, Inspector Thatcher lobbing a glare at Lieutenant Welsh who volleyed it right back.

“Constable Fraser—”

“I assure you, sir, it was purely accidental. Well, not accidental per se, more...intentional but mistaken and—”

The inspector’s face bore one of those expressions people reserved exclusively for Fraser’s explanations. “I don’t think I want to know what you’re talking about.”

“You don’t,” Ray said easily, sprawling comfortably in one of the supposedly formal wing chairs. “So if we’re not here to be—” Fraser gave the tiniest shake of his head and this time, the U-turn was Ray’s, “—chastised for what Fraser did that you don’t want to know about, to what do we owe this pleasure?”

“Orders,” Thatcher said briskly, as Welsh said “Inter-departmental cross-border co-operation” long-sufferingly.

More shared glances, which seemed to decide that it was Fraser’s turn to speak for them. “Ah,” he said.

“Exactly,” Thatcher replied, and “What?” Welsh said.

Story Beginning

Ray, impatient with the usual circling around and around, cut to the chase. "So is this Canadian or U.S. bad guys?"

Inspector Thatcher fidgeted uneasily, and came perilously close to blushing. "Canadian, I'm afraid," she said, manfully. "A rather clever criminal who uses unorthodox methods to gain access to security issues, government officials, finances..."

Welsh, leaning forward, and smiled. "She means he blackmails the snot out of people and then gets away with murder."

"Literally?"

Inspector Thatcher flashed a very quelling look at her esteemed colleague while she answered: "Yes, Constable. Literally and figuratively, considering what he did to the Fisheries' Minister in Halifax."

"Ah," Fraser said again.

"Exactly," Inspector Thatcher repeated.

Ray hung his head and groaned. "I hate when they do that. So leaving aside fishes and ministers and hoping there aren't any loaves or monsignors involved, where do we come in?"

"Good question, detective," Welsh said, sitting back in his borrowed chair. "I'm looking forward to hearing the good inspector explain it."

Story Beginning

“Well, he— Our orders say— The explanation is—” she began, and sputtered and then finally admitted defeat. “All right, so the reasons given to me sound more like the convoluted plot of a bad soap opera than grounds for police work, but orders are orders.”

“Ours is not to—”

“Don’t go there, Fraser,” Ray said sharply. “We are not doing the do or die thing for fish.”

“It’s not for fish, Ray, it’s—” Fraser trailed off and looked at his commanding officer. “What is it for, sir?”

“To catch a thief, and a murderer, blackmailer, terrorist—you name it, he’s done it.”

“Littering?” Ray asked sweetly.

That got him a hissed “Shh!” and the unified glares of the two superior officers behind the desk.

“So what are we doing and why...sir?” Ray asked Thatcher.

“This malfasant has escaped every trap set for him—”

“Wonder why,” Welsh said. “You guys scared he’d think you were rude if you didn’t put out enough ‘this is a trap’ signs?”

“Oh, so we should just send in the tanks and surround him with enough firepower to conquer a small nation?”

Story Beginning

“That was the feds, that wasn’t—”

“Gentleme—ah. Uhm, sirs,” Fraser interrupted as politely as was possible when one’s superior officers were all but shouting at each other, “perhaps we could come up with a unified response to this situation, utilizing the best of both our nations?”

Welsh looked at Ray, who shrugged and they chorused, in unison, “Canadians!”

“Well, yes, we are,” Fraser said, not meeting Inspector Thatcher’s eyes. “And you are both currently our guests, here in Canada, so...ah...”

“That’s Canadian for ‘shut up and behave yourselves,’” Ray said in a conspiratorial stage whisper.

“Ah,” said Lt. Welsh.

“Americans,” muttered Inspector Thatcher.

“Gentlemen?” Fraser asked again, scratching his thumbnail across his left eyebrow. “Our orders?”

“Yes. Well. Hmmm,” Inspector Thatcher said.

“Oh for God’s sake!” Welsh growled. “Look, it doesn’t make any sense to me either, but we got orders, from both sides of the border, from—” Welsh pointed a finger towards the ceiling.

Story Beginning

“Told you he’d talk to the monsignor’s boss,” Ray said *sotto voce*. Welsh had obviously learned better than to ask, when the Mountie, the monsignor and the flatfoot were involved.

“So apparently,” Welsh continued, “this guy blackmails cops, security execs, fund-raisers, politicians, caterers, you name it, to get information he sells or uses, or to get into various events and functions. And he’s got at least eight dead bodies to his name.”

“How does he kill ‘em?”

“Suicide,” Thatcher said crisply.

“He suicides them? That’s a neat trick.”

“Ray, I believe the Inspector means that he’s been clever about who he chooses, so when he blackmails them and they opt for suicide rather than doing what he wants them to do, or sticking around long enough to come to us.”

“Exactly,” she said, and flicked through the pages in front of her, frowning at whatever she saw there. “Anyway, the plan is to entice this malfeasant into an attempt to blackmail two law enforcement officers who will both, rather conveniently I admit, be in a position to give him both inside information about and access to the upcoming international security conference.”

Story Beginning

“Oh yeah, right, this guy’s escaped you for—how long?”

“Seven years,” Welsh said, not without some satisfaction.

“Seven long, long years.”

“And at least eight deaths,” Fraser put in mildly, putting them all in their places.

“So how’re we supposed to convince this guy to put the squeeze on us when he hasn’t taken the bait before? You said it yourself—it’s too convenient.”

“But it’ll work this time,” Welsh said.

“So you keep telling me,” Thatcher said. She raised her hand to stop Welsh from launching into speech. “Yes, yes, I know, and you’ve convinced me. But I still have my doubts.”

“No one else will.”

“True enough,” she said. “If I, of all people, can see it immediately when the facts are elucidated—”

“Exactly. It’s a real no-brainer so—”

“You two wanna fill us flatfoots in on this?”

“Well,” Inspector Thatcher said, glancing at Fraser, then looking away so quickly every police instinct in the room just screamed. “It’s really very convenient in that we happen to

Story Beginning

have two perfectly placed law enforcement officers who already have a well-established, completely convincing cover.”

“I told ya,” Welsh started in, “it’s not a cover!”

“Yes, yes, so you say and I believe you, but it was rather...sudden.”

“Only because you hadn’t noticed what was under your nose—”

“Okay, so if you two could remember you’re not the only people in this room, it would reallllllly help.”

“Ray—”

“You shut up. You c’n lecture me about Miss Post’s Big Book Of Manners Canadian Style when we get outside. So either these two convenient law enforcement officers of yours have a long cover, or it’s sudden, choose.”

“Both,” Welsh said, which made even Fraser frown in puzzlement. “Look, it’s like this,” he said, and rather unnervingly, looked to Inspector Thatcher for encouragement—and got it. “We all know about it and we don’t talk about it, but we know. Which makes it perfect to set this guy up, then reel him in, nice and easy.”

“Sirs, I believe I can safely say that I speak for both us—that is, Ray and myself—when I say that we really have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Story Beginning

Inspector Thatcher took a deep breath and just hit them with the explanation. Machine-gun rapid-fire, right between the eyes. “About four weeks before specific events he targets closeted gay males preferably police officers then blackmails them for access to targets and/or information and/or governmental secrets and/or plans, but he’s always seen through everyone we’ve tried to plant and therefore failed to take the bait, but since you two are already...already...well, already *in situ* as it were, he’ll fall for you—” she winced, Welsh winced, Fraser and Ray just gaped, “not fall for you fall for you in the falling for someone sense—oh, just—he’ll completely believe your cover because it’s not a cover which is what will convince him and let us trap him into blackmailing you.”

Ray’s somewhat strident, “What?” was bulldozed out of the way by Fraser’s downright heated: “Sir, you’re suggesting we *entrap* someone?”

“Never mind the malfeasant what’s-his-name,” Ray jumped in and interestingly enough, he was looking at everyone but Fraser. “Fraser, you hear what they just said about us?”

“Well, yes, Ray, but that’s not important right now—”

Story Beginning

“Oh, and when will it be important?” Ray jumped up out of his chair, his hands gesticulating wildly—and he still wasn’t actually looking at Fraser. “Will it be important when word spreads around the station and greater Chicago and all the way up to those Northwest Territories? What the hell would your father say?”

“Hopefully nothing at all, for once,” Fraser said, rather fervently and he was certainly looking at Ray: rather intently, at that. “But that would just be gossip, Ray, and sticks and stones—”

“Will break your bones if I have anything to say about it. They’re saying you and me are—that we’re...”

“Involved?” Fraser said helpfully. “Dating? Intimate?”

“Partners,” Welsh said dryly.

“Which we surely are,” Fraser added, even more helpfully.

“I am not arguing that, Fraser,” Ray snapped, “I’m talking what people are gonna mean when they say partners. They’re gonna mean partners partners.”

Fraser scratched his left ear. “Would this be related to the Inspector’s ‘falling for you falling for you’? Or are we simply repeating ourselves today?”

Story Beginning

Thatcher broke in. “No one’s talking about entrapment—”
“Actually, sir, and with all due respect for both you and our superiors, I was, in fact—”

“No one,” Inspector Thatcher repeated firmly. “But an opportunity will be obvious to this criminal and should he decide to take it...”

“Then that’s his own lookout,” Welsh finished for her. “And when he approaches you two, we’ll haul him in and—”

“Hand him over to the Canadian authorities,” Thatcher said, finishing his sentence very firmly indeed.

“Okay, so fine, dandy, just great, no entrapment and me and Fraser are going to just take down this master criminal guy who’s been suiciding people as well as murdering a few here and there.”

“That’s essentially it, Detective,” Thatcher said pleasantly enough.

“And the way we’re gonna do this, is by convincing him that we’re partners partners, as in *doing it* partners, and then we just nab the bad guy and all go home for tea, is that it?”

“That does cover all the salient points, Detective Vecchio,” Thatcher said, considerably less pleasantly now.

Story Beginning

“But you know, this is where I got a problem with this grand plan,” Ray said, faking calm with absolutely no success, throwing himself back into that same chair. Again. “Fraser and me aren’t that kind of partners partners.”

“Well, Ray, we are partners—”

“But we’re not partners partners,” Ray’s gaze speaking volumes, all of it illegible to Fraser. “Trust me on this, Fraser. So how,” Ray turned his glare back to his boss and Fraser’s, “are we supposed to convince this guy?”

The looks passing between Thatcher and Welsh could have been comical—under other circumstances, that is. As it was, Ray sat there and fidgeted for a second then looked up at Fraser, who looked at him, and then both of them looked back at both their bosses. Some people did synchronized diving for fun; they were all going for a Gold in Synchronized Speaking Looks.

Or maybe the bosses were just tossing an invisible coin to see who lost and had to up the ante from Looking to Talking.

“Listen,” Welsh began, “this is off the record, won’t go anywhere beyond these four walls. You don’t have to lie in here, to us.”

Story Beginning

“Although I would have preferred it had you trusted me enough to tell me yourself, Fraser, especially...” Thatcher flustered a little, “...considering certain shared histories we...shared.”

Shared histories? Ray’s look said to Fraser.

Can I run away now? Fraser’s face said to the entire assembly.

“Sir,” he said, shifting a little from foot to foot, “I really don’t understand what you think I should’ve told you.”

Yeah, right, every expression in the room said.

“She’s talking about her and him thinking you and me are more than just buddies, that’s what she’s telling you you shoulda told her.”

“But we’re not, Ray.”

“See?” Ray told the bosses triumphantly—just as Fraser, ever helpful, said:

“Although, I suppose we really are much more than just ‘buddies,’ outside of your own parlance, Ray. The most common usages of the term ‘buddies’—”

“You are not helping here,” Ray said without looking at him, speakingly or otherwise. “We’re buddies, we’re not fu—”

Two throats cleared in Canadian politeness, while two shared looks spoke some very blunt American.

Story Beginning

“Uh—we’re not...uh...”

“Sexually active?” Fraser supplied helpfully.

“Speak for yourself,” Ray muttered, tossing a quick look at Thatcher. “I mean we’re not doing each other—” pointed look at Fraser, “irregardless of who we are or aren’t doing elsewhere.”

“Regardless, Ray.”

“Of what?”

“The word, Ray. It’s ‘regardless’, not ‘irre-’”

“Fraser.”

“Understood.”

“You two finished your dog and pony show?” Welsh asked, leaning back in his chair.

“Regardless,” Thatcher said, ploughing on, “the fact is that you two, with your ah...established relationship, have perfect credentials and will completely convince the malfeasant that he can safely attempt to blackmail you.”

“And what I’m saying,” Ray jolting to his feet, leaning across the desk, “is that me and Fraser don’t got this established relationship credential. We were out busting bad guys when they handed that special Scout badge out on rainbow day.”

Story Beginning

There was a pause. There were looks. There was even more throat clearing.

And then Fraser started to say something about the Scouts organization, and their official reaction to putative 'rainbow days' and gay rights, which is when Inspector Thatcher silenced him with a single glare.

Now that he was quiet, she looked Fraser straight in the eye and asked, "Strictly off the record and as your commanding officer," her baleful glare continuing unabated, throttling Fraser's nit-picking before it could be reborn, "are you and Detective Vecchio engaged in a sexual or romantic relationship?"

Everyone turned to look at Fraser, who stood there, and pulled the lobe of his right ear. "Ah. Yes. Well—there is some debate over the term 'romantic' which—"

"Just answer the question, Constable."

"Between whom would this putative relationship—romantic, and/or sexual, should it, in fact, exist—be?"

"Between you," she said through a clenched smile that was fooling no one, "and Detective Vecchio."

Another tug of his ear lobe, and he most definitely wasn't

Story Beginning

looking at anyone. “In that case, sir—would that be the former Detective Vecchio or the present Detective Vecchio?”

And that had Ray looking at him.

One of them asked the question they were all thinking: “It makes a difference?”

Fraser tugged at the collar of his uniform. “I really can’t betray a confidence, sir. Detective Vecchio—that is, the underworld figure formerly known as Detective Vecchio—isn’t present to ask in regards to his desire for privacy regarding how other people would regard my regard for him and—”

“Who’m I, Fraser?”

As far as the world was concerned, Detective Stanley Raymond Kowalski was Detective Raymond Vecchio.

Fraser swallowed.

There was a pause.

“Oh all right,” Fraser very nearly snapped. “I’d rather not say for the former and no for the present. Sir. Sirs.”

“So you and—” Welsh waved his hand towards the current Vecchio, “aren’t...” punctuated with a judicious headshake.

“What have I been saying?” Ray demanded, slapping the desk

Story Beginning

and then throwing himself back down in a chair. “You’re setting us up to get this guy who suicides and murders people, and you’re setting us up with *nothing*.”

“But everyone thinks—”

“—that I’m Ray Vecchio, only we all know that ain’t true. We all pretend we think it, but we all know better—and that’s another thing! You want me to go undercover when I’m already undercover? Who’m I goin’ undercover as this time? This won’t be Ace Leary snowing some two bit town. So who’m I going under as? Me? Him? Me being him and everybody knowing I’m not him?”

“The orders were rather vague on that detail, detective.”

Welsh nodded. “Our brass didn’t see fit to address that either. So you go under as...whatever. Just—”

It was rare indeed to see Lieutenant Harding Welsh reduced to fluttery hand gestures. “Just—do what you always do as whoever you do it as and wait for this guy to take the bait.”

“What we do won’t convince him!” Ray said loudly. “This guy’s sharp, right?”

“As a tack,” Thatcher said.

Story Beginning

“So he’s not going to fall for us pretending we turned gay overnight.”

“Ray—”

“And I do not want to hear a word out of you on that subject right now, Fraser.”

“But Ray—”

“What did I just say?”

“Eight deaths, Ray,” Fraser reminded him again, with nearly palpable sincerity. “At least eight deaths, and who knows how many ruined lives? And a great deal depends on this upcoming conference.”

And if the bad guy could get in there, only the monsignor’s boss knew what he could do. Or what other people he could get his hooks into.

Ray hung his head, and sighed. “I am not wearing any rainbow badges,” he said.

Welsh snorted.

“Ah—” Fraser forestalled whatever words Ray was about to launch, “to whom should we report if this malfeasant should make contact?”

Story Beginning

For several minutes, it was very nearly pleasant: a routine covering of familiar ground, establishing procedures, passing over documents with background information, photographs, an incredibly long list of things this man was suspected of doing. But then they got back to that one thorny little detail.

Other people—namely Fraser—might have danced around the issue for a minute or two (or hour or two, in Fraser’s case), but Ray, being Ray, just asked flat out. “So how’re we gonna convince him we’re good blackmail candidates?”

Thatcher shrugged slightly, not enough to rumple her lemon suit jacket. “The reports indicate that he does a great deal of background work and chooses the likeliest candidates from those assigned to the event,” and no one needed to point out that with Fraser’s reputation for rectitude, he’d be a prime—and safe candidate, “and then moves in. The expectation is that he will approach Constable Fraser here with threats to himself and perhaps more likely to his...his...uhm...you.”

Ray looked at Fraser, and looked away quickly as Fraser turned to him.

“His usual *modus operandi*,” Thatcher was still saying, “is, or so

Story Beginning

we believe, to scare them with threats to ‘out’ them, and of course, once they’ve succumbed to the first very minor blackmail request, he has them.”

“Yeah, I got that,” Ray sniped, his ‘I’m not stupid’ unsaid but loud enough, “but how are we—me and Fraser—gonna convince him we’re his best victims? How’re we even gonna get him to notice us?”

Thatcher’s smile was as sweet as a vampire with a virgin and twice as predatory. “You explained that to me very well earlier, Lieutenant. I believe this is your area of expertise.”

If looks could kill, Fraser and Ray would have to argue over jurisdiction.

But Welsh satisfied himself with just a dirty look and another clearing of his throat. “You just do what you guys always do,” he said, no doubt thinking he was being both pellucid and helpful. “And I don’t want any details, okay?”

“Do what we always do, sir?” Fraser asked, looking as puzzled as Turnbull filling in forms.

“Yeah. You know—what you guys do.”

“Well, actually, sir, I have no idea what you think we do.”

Story Beginning

“You know—the—the things you do.”

“Such as?” Ray demanded.

Inspector Thatcher gave Lieutenant Welsh a smile of surpassing sweetness, which soured his expression and apparently was the inspiration needed to make him convince Fraser and Ray the way he’d convinced Thatcher.

“Such as spending all your free time together.”

“I’m supposed to be Vecchio!”

“Yeah, and I notice you moved in with Vecchio’s family, detective.”

Okay, so maybe the lieutenant had a point, shooting that argument down, and yeah, Fraser did spend a lot of time at Ray’s own apartment. But lots of guys hung out together. “So because we spend time together, Fraser and the other Vecchio—”

Thatcher butting in with all the suddenness of comprehension dawning. “That time, when you were wearing perfume—”

“No, sir,” Fraser said, perhaps just a trifle hoarsely. “Not on that occasion.”

“Oh,” she said.

At least it was better than ‘ah.’

Story Beginning

“Perfume?” Ray asked.

“And a dress,” Fraser told him helpfully; opened his mouth and apparently decided not to mention the pantyhose and wig. And certainly not the dancing with Ray part.

“But that wasn’t you and me, so that proves my point that this guy is not gonna fall for—”

“How many buddies, or even partners,” Welsh said softly, “would risk their lives for each other the way you two do?”

“That doesn’t mean we’re fu—”

Fraser’s “Ray!” cut him off just in time.

“Okay, so we’re not doing the horizontal tango,” Ray said, shooting a look at Fraser. “We’re...”

He looked at Fraser.

Fraser looked at him.

“Motorbike through a window,” Welsh said quietly.

“Always leaving together,” Thatcher added, entering into the spirit of things.

“Always arriving together.”

“Grocery shopping together—”

“—for dog kibble.”

Story Beginning

“Finishing each other’s sentences,” Thatcher added with no apparent irony.

“Hugging.”

“Touching.”

“Smiling.”

“Oh, excuse me, I guess I didn’t get the memo telling us smiling was the same as fu—”

Thatcher stepped in, dripping innuendo. “In that special way.”

No way was Ray going to look at Fraser right now. “C’mon, this is all just submiss—sub—”

“Subjective,” Fraser supplied.

“Yeah, subjective. You guys look at us doing normal guy things and you’re building a mountain.”

“There’s the whole closet thing,” Thatcher said, almost musingly.

“Yeah,” Welsh said, warming to the subject. “Hanging out in closets, subverting the heterosexual paradigm expectations of closeted police officers—”

“The closet thing, as you call it, was simply... a convenience,” Fraser added, in the interests of clarification and backing the current Ray up. “And it was primarily the former Ray.”

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“See?” said the current Ray. “Wrong Vecchio.”

“Oh, my mistake,” Welsh said. “So why don’t you remind us where you and Red here *do* hang out?”

Ray mumbled something.

“Sorry?” Thatcher said. “I didn’t hear you.”

“He said that he and I hang out in the stalls at the men’s room, sir. Well, actually, he said—”

“The can,” Ray supplied. “But it’s not the way it sounds—”

“And I don’t think we need to repeat the way it sounds in front of a lady Mountie and your...Mountie,” Welsh said repressively.

“I told you, this isn’t a problem, you don’t need to hide it.”

“And I’m telling you, this is all circumstantial!” Ray’s voice was rising like steam, thick and hot. “If I brought this to you, you’d laugh my ass all the way outta your office.”

“You still need convincing?” Welsh demanded. “Okay, the hat.”

“The hat?” Ray asked, bewildered.

“The hat?” Thatcher asked, shocked.

“Yes, the hat,” Fraser said, too pale to qualify as actually blushing, for all he looked mortified. “But I assure you—”

“The hat,” Thatcher repeated, to Welsh. “I know he allowed

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him to wear it once, but I assumed that was simply a surfeit of holiday spirit.”

“Let him wear it that time,” Welsh confirmed lugubriously. “Let’s let him hold it, play with it... He even just walks away and leaves it for Ray to bring with him.”

Thatcher blanched. “Constable Fraser, while I understand that you have a...a special relationship with Detective Vecchio—”

“A special relationship?” Ray muttered. “Is that like the ‘special relationship’ between our countries? So that means America’s fu—”

“Ray!”

“—the hat is an integral part of the uniform.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And leaving aside the hat,” Welsh went on, “I got a report from a Ms. Luanne Burwell that you two were sleeping together in her back yard.”

“Yeah, we were *sleeping*,” Ray said sharply. “And we looked at her getting undressed—” Pause. Look at Fraser. Continuing before Fraser could be way too honest: “At least I tried.”

“Which brings us to some of the conversations you’ve had in

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the hallways of my station house,” Welsh went on, almost kindly. “Such as you telling the constable here that at least you still think about women.”

“Yeah and that proves my point—I was wondering which one of us was getting less sex.”

Which wasn’t maybe the best way to convince the bosses he was doing the dirty with women.

“Asking the good constable here,” Welsh pointed at Fraser just to make sure Ray had no doubts on at least one thing, “in front of two suspects and a witness, if he found you attractive. That ring any bells? Does his answer ring any bells? Like, oh, I don’t know—Big Ben?”

Even Fraser couldn’t pretend not to get that, although it was Inspector Thatcher who flashed a look at his...tunic hem... and blushed.

“You were seen holding hands in an alley,” Welsh went on, nails in their coffin. “And a certain suspect who helped you...delay reporting a dead body to me, not that we’re going to go into that at the moment, mentioned a certain amount of handholding in the interview room.”

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“We weren’t actually holding hands,” Fraser put in in lieu of correcting the whole bell thing. “I simply put my hand over Ray’s.”

“To keep the kid quiet,” Ray put in. He adopted a peculiar, wide-eyed expression. “See? Completely innocent.”

Thatcher and Welsh were looking at them with identical expressions.

“And I simply failed to remove my hand in a timely manner,” Fraser finally said, and he didn’t need Ray’s headshake to tell him just how...unconvincing that sounded.

Thatcher was still looking at him. “Not dating,” she said, to Fraser.

“Or looking like you’re dating each other,” Welsh added.

“I was getting over a divorce!” Ray said, diverting everyone back to him, managing to protect Fraser from Thatcher’s more pointedly personal remarks. “What was I supposed to do?”

“Something a hell of a lot more convincing than hitting on every woman you saw in front of every other woman you saw and asking ‘em out like you were Casanova on speed!”

“I told you, lieutenant, I was getting over a divorce, I was desperate—”

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“So that’s why you were supposedly watching Luanne Burwell and then went on a couple’s vacation with a bad check writer? A vacation, I hasten to add, you dropped like a hot potato when Fraser,” Welsh nodded at Fraser who was nodding in rather unfortunate agreement, “called you and asked you to come home? That’s not what you’re supposed to do. You were getting over a divorce, you took a woman on holiday, that’s what you *are* supposed to do—only you didn’t stay long enough to...” Welsh flashed a quick look at the stony-faced Thatcher and another at the nearly blushing Fraser. “Uhm, yes, well—you’re supposed to take advantage of the opportunities you had.”

“Take advantage? Is that how you see it?” Thatcher asked, and she and Welsh were off and running again, hurling comments fast enough to overlap, giving Fraser and Ray a chance to catch their breath, and regroup.

Ray stood close to Fraser, leaned in to whisper, “You got anyone you can, you know, use as evidence?”

Fraser scratched his eyebrow. “Do you remember you remarked that at least you were still thinking about women?”

When he’d said he didn’t know which of them was getting less

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sex. When even that little comment got back to Welsh. Which meant the gossip about the two of them was...something best not thought about right now. “Yeah?”

“The answer is me.”

Ray mouthed the word he wasn’t allowed to say. “Which means we got nothing to convince them with. Unless—” he looked at Fraser hopefully. “What about Janet what’s-her-name with the brats?”

“She was married, Ray.”

“Yeah, yeah, and? C’mon, this is no time to play gentleman. How far did you get?”

Fraser swallowed, looked around to make sure there was no one within hearing distance; their respective bosses were still lobbing comments like grenades, so Fraser leant even closer, and whispered, “One kiss.”

“Oh that is just—” Ray broke off, Fraser’s expression showing Fraser knew just exactly how pathetic Ray thought him to be. “Uh...yeah, but hey—” Ray lowered his voice at Fraser’s shushing gesture, “I know one—you and Ladyshoes.”

“I told you, Ray. We kissed once.”

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“C’mon,” Ray cajoled, “you heard ’em, won’t go outside these four walls. You and Ladyshoes...” Ray trailed off, looking at Fraser invitingly.

A tiny shake of Fraser’s head. “One kiss, and she was the initiator—and we were in the cells, so—”

“Even if you’d lie, you couldn’t because everyone would know.” Ray mouthed that word again.

“Maggie?” Fraser asked diffidently.

“Not even close.”

Softer, quieter: “But you were married.”

“And there’s been nobody since.”

Fraser did nothing more than raise an eyebrow, but Ray could read that surprise like a neon sign.

“No one?” Fraser asked, very quietly.

Ray shrugged, leaned in closer to make sure Welsh and Ice Queen couldn’t hear. “No more than you.”

“Ah,” Fraser whispered.

“Yeah,” Ray whispered back, sympathetically.

And together, they both realized the wrangling on the other side of the desk had stopped. Shoulder to shoulder, they raised

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their heads, and looked. And discovered they were being looked at.

As they stood there, pretty much cheek to cheek. After whispering into each others' ears.

"You were saying?" Thatcher asked, archly.

"Okay," Ray said. "We'll do it."

There was at least one advantage to this case: time off. Thatcher, looking somewhere between annoyed and mortified, had cut Fraser loose from red tape and forms for the rest of the week, and Welsh had reminded Ray about budget constraints and how many hours a detective could put in without screwing said budget up with excessive overtime pay, and given him two days 'off' to get a handle on this case.

So they had free time, by their usual rather frenetic standards. Lots and lots and lots of free time.

And not a thing to say.

Fraser had taken the time to change into civvies and they'd collected Dief and a stack of files while they were at the Consulate; the loudest sounds in the car were the soft whush of well-washed

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jeans as Fraser shifted his legs, and the nearly sibilant whuf of the wolf panting.

Panting? It sounded more like laughing.

Or perhaps that was just self-consciousness talking.

“At least there were no repercussions from my meeting with the monsignor,” Fraser said at last.

“Yeah.”

Fraser shifted, plied his hands around the brim of his hat.

Ray turned the radio on.

Dief panted.

Fraser looked at Ray. Ray looked at Fraser. And Fraser half-smiled, shook his head once, just a tiny movement, and all the wry humor in the world brightened his eyes.

“Who’d a thunk?” Ray said, relaxing back against his seat, dropping back to a mere ten mph over the speed limit.

“Well, everyone but us, apparently,” Fraser replied, tossing his hat onto the dashboard.

“Always the last to know,” Ray said, grinning now. “You hungry?”

“Famished.”

“Fighting litter does take it out of a person.”

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“Just ask the monsignor.”

“So you want Chinese?”

“Indian.”

Ray slowed for the stop sign, pretty much coming to a halt before rolling on through the empty intersection. “Indian, huh. Never tried that before.”

Absolutely blandly, Fraser said, “Expand your horizons, Ray.”

“Indian,” Ray repeated, thoughtfully. “That’s curry and Kama Sutra, right?”

Fraser blinked. “Although preferably not at the same time.”

“Expand your horizons, Fraser, expand your horizons.”

Laden with a large brown paper bag each and multiple files, it took trying to exchange the files and food, ended with them bundling the files onto Ray and Fraser getting the keys out of Ray’s right jacket pocket, then Ray finding the right one, and Dief leading the way—or getting underfoot, depending on whether one were to listen to Ray or Fraser—to get them into Ray’s apartment.

Dief, of course, paid them no mind, and took over the couch as usual.

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“I really think we should discuss this case,” Fraser said as he got the plates out and passed them to Ray.

“The case,” Ray snorted, pouring Fraser’s milk. “More like an excuse. The case doesn’t make sense to me.”

Fraser grabbed a few sheets of paper towels and stuffed them into the back pocket of his jeans, stepped neatly out of the way as Ray grabbed flatware from the drawer.

“So what d’you think?” Ray asked, Fraser just a step behind him on the way to the couch and coffee table.

Ray got Dief pushed back to an acceptable portion of the couch while Fraser laid out the array of food and Ray’s version of napkins, then sighed, long-suffering, as Dief was permitted, yet again, not only up on the furniture but essentially to join them for dinner. “You’re spoiling him,” he said as he seated himself in the space left for him, not even bothering to wait for the usual reply. “As for this case, I have to accept that my...” he peeled tops off containers and took the spoon Ray handed him, “...superiors are of the opinion that this scheme will be of some assistance in catching a very dangerous criminal.”

“Have to accept?” Ray flashed a grin at him and spooned Fraser’s favorite onto two plates.

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Fraser didn't actually grin back, but there was a distinct smile lurking as he tipped lamb *biryani* onto the plates.

"It's bogus," Ray said flatly, accepting the remote control from Fraser and turning ESPN on, muting it automatically in their dinner-without-television compromise. "No way is this guy gonna come after us."

"But if he should, it would be the best chance of putting a stop to him."

"You think this is going to amount to anything? Two guys out of how many people involved in this conference? And this bad guy's supposed to just pick us out of all those people—how's he supposed to find us?"

"Ah. Yes. Well, that's the question, isn't it?"

"The question," Ray said unexpectedly quietly, "is why we got pegged for this job in the first place."

Fraser took his time adding some *matar paneer* to his plate, arranging it neatly on the other side of the *biryani* so the sauce wouldn't mix with the chicken *tikka masala*.

"So if you're not willing to talk about how we got pegged," Ray said into Fraser's not answering, "then I can safely assume you're

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not willing to talk about why you needed to know which Vecchio she was asking about.”

“That’s perfectly safe assumption, Ray.”

“Any point in pushing?”

“Not tonight, no.”

Silence.

On the screen, a touch down was scored, and on the couch, Ray discovered there was, as Fraser had insisted, a green food thing that he would, actually, like.

“So everyone thinks we’re fucking,” Ray said—casually, of course, since he was, after all, not pushing tonight.

“Ray—”

“They’re not here, Frase, just you and me, you don’t have to pretend you’re gonna faint if you hear a four letter word. Everyone thinks we’re fu—”

“Not everyone,” Fraser interrupted quickly.

“Even Thatcher—and don’t think I haven’t forgotten her ‘shared histories’—thinks it. Name one person you can prove doesn’t.”

Not missing a beat: “Francesca.” Then, quickly: “You. Me.”

“Yeah?”

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“Of course, Ray.”

“See, I’m not so sure.”

“You think Francesca thinks I’m engaged in a homosexual relationship with her so-called brother?”

“Not her. You. Me.”

So much for not pushing. Fraser gave Ray a long look, then conceded with a sigh. “I think we established that neither of us is particularly...active, at present, Ray.”

Ray took a bite of something an interesting shade of burnt umber, and discovered just how hot *vindaloo* can be.

“In addition,” Fraser offered Ray his milk, “I believe we would have noticed engaging in carnal activities with each other, Ray,” he said, with a hearty clap on the back as Ray choked.

“Yeah, I think I’d noticed if I sucked you off—but that’s not what I’m talking about here, Frase. We’re not talking about you trying to prove I wasn’t the real Ray Vecchio—”

“I’ve tried to explain that, Ray,” Fraser gave him a piece of *parantha* to help cure the sting left by *vindaloo*, “and I was terribly sorr—”

“Yeah, yeah, I know, I got that,” Ray said round a mouthful of

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the buttery bread. “What I’m talking about why people think that about you and me.”

Fraser scooped up some *matar paneer*, chewed thoughtfully—and thoroughly—and made Ray wait. “The natural human inclination towards a certain degree of venality and/or simple miscomprehension?”

“So you’re saying they got dirty minds,” Ray replied, licking the butter off his fingers, Fraser staring at him, “and don’t know what they’re seeing.”

“I wouldn’t put it like that—”

“But that’s what you said when you strip the frills and pretty bows off it. Okay, so let’s say they just all got hairy palms and’ve gone blind,” a smile when Fraser didn’t even bother pretending he didn’t understand, “but what about it? Lookit us—lookit the way we were in the Consulate. We *look* like a couple, Fraser.”

“But...we’re not?”

“See? That’s what I mean—you made that sound like a question. Even you and me, we know we know what we’re not doing, but do we got a clue what we’re really doing? We got questions, we got doubts—we got *something* here, Fraser.”

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Very, very quietly indeed: "Have we, Ray?"

Coverage had shifted from football to golf, and Ray didn't even flip the channel, just sat there, staring. He lowered his head, looked down at the table, and muttered: "We can, maybe. If you want to."

Fraser cracked his neck, and thought, rather wistfully, of the days when sitting with Ray Vecchio didn't involve actually discussing relationships.

Not as quiet before, hard edge honing the words cutting Fraser's silence to shreds. "So you don't want to."

"I didn't say that, Ray."

"So what do we got?"

"I don't know."

Ray heaved a theatrical sigh. "Okay, so I asked for this, cos I know better'n to push you farther than I can when you got your heels dug in. Which movie you wanna watch?"

One of those times when expressing gratitude wasn't the best move, no matter how intensely thankful he might feel, so Fraser stowed his gratitude away for later, to be repaid when Ray needed him most. "What did you rent?"

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“Oh, I got you a good one,” Ray said, all normality and pretense, going over to the shelving and picking up the small stack of rental boxes. “You’re going to love this.”

And because it was expected of him, and because Fraser had been here before, Fraser said, “Oh dear.”

In the end, neither one of them had watched the movie. Good intentions and all of that, but the action sequences held very little appeal for men who’d used fire extinguishers to rocket from a sinking ship, or driven burning cars through the streets of Chicago, and the plot, well, the plot had about as many holes as their current excuse of an assignment. Given a choice between watching a cheesy, plot-impaired action movie that forgot the minor detail that all these heroics tended to hurt and going over the case files that could help them catch a murderer before he ‘suicides some more’ as Ray put it, work won. So food containers had been crammed into the fridge, dishes rinsed and shoved into the dishwasher, paperwork sorted out into neat piles on the coffee table.

It was soothingly familiar: work, and sitting together, passing

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each other pages, communicating with little more than the occasional gesture and polite grunt.

“So,” Ray finally said, putting down the report on the suspicious suicide of a Saudi OPEC representative, “what d’you think?”

“Much though it pains me to say this, Ray, I believe your initial assessment applies.”

“My initial assessment which would be...”

“Bogus,” Fraser supplied smartly. “Spurious, in fact. While it’s obvious his *modus operandi* is what was put to us, it’s extremely unlikely that with over three thousand people involved in this conference, one man would have the time and resources to find us, and even if he did, there’s no guarantee he would select us.”

“But we got pegged for it, Fraser.”

Back to that. They were back to that, and Fraser was back to scratching his eyebrow.

“I know you don’t wanna talk about, but Fraser—”

“Yes, I know. We have to. If we’re to accomplish our objectives—”

“Fraser! Stop that.”

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“Stop what?”

“That deferring—uh, deflecting—that deflecting deferral thing you do. This case is bogus, we’ve agreed on that. But why us? What are we doing that everybody—except you, me and Frannie—thinks we’re doing it? And how come you and me aren’t so sure that we’re not?”

“We know we’re not—”

Ray twisted sideways suddenly, all sharp angles and knees, and intense eyes, focused entirely on Fraser. “I know we know we’re not, but we got something here, we got some chemistry or submarine thing going here.”

Another eyebrow scratch, and an oh-so-casual sideways twist from Fraser too, but this moved him farther away from Ray. As far away as could be both polite, and put down to someone getting comfortable. “I think you mean subliminal.”

“Or suppressed.”

A sharp exhalation of breath, and Fraser wasn’t looking at Ray any more. “Yes,” he said, blood out of stone, “that, too.”

“Or maybe,” an odd cross between sharp and soft, “I did mean submarine. You and me, in that yellow submarine.”

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And everything, every last thing around that.

“I trusted you,” Fraser said simply.

“Trust me still?”

“Unstintingly.”

A moment, while they both simply breathed, and looked at each other. Then Ray broke the moment, gestured around at his apartment. “Look at the way we are, when we come home—jeez, I even call it coming home. We’re more domestic than me and Stella were, and not just because she wouldn’t eat in front of the TV.”

“We’re partners, Ray,” Fraser said resolutely. “We have to communicate clearly and well for our work, we have to be able to read each other, work as a team, in tandem—”

“You ever been like this with a partner before, Fraser?” Ray demanded. Stopped. Narrowed his eyes. “With Vecchio, maybe?”

“He’s not here and while I know, technically, you’re him, I still can’t— he’s a very private man, Ray, and he wouldn’t want me discussing my...my...”

“Desires? Feelings? Relationship?”

“Yes,” Fraser said, agreeing to the whole list or some of it, relief

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driving some of the stiffness out of both his spine and his voice. “My...responses to him would reflect on him no matter his response—or lack thereof—to me.”

Ray leant forward, an almost kind expression on his face, a gentle smile, counterpoint to the stab of his words sliding home. “That, my friend, isn’t buddies.”

A sharp look for that, just as cutting. “I thought you were saying we’re not buddies.”

“Whatever else we are or aren’t, we’re buddies, and partners.”

A chaos of questions in Fraser’s eyes, doubt darkening his voice. “Are we, Ray? Will we be?”

No sharp edges now, the attitude dropped, gone. “Is that why you didn’t know he’d gone?”

Sharp intake of breath for that, like a man kicked in the belly.

“Is that it, Frase? Did you and him—you know, what people think we’re doing—did you and him do that and it went bad, the way it did for me and Stella?”

With staccato, jerky movements, Fraser started stacking papers, lining the edges up perfectly straight, order amidst chaos. “I don’t know how things went wrong between you and your ex-wife.”

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A shrug, unconvincing in its attempt at nonchalance. “No communication,” Ray said. “She was telling me things I wasn’t hearing, didn’t hear until the day she told me to move out.”

“Is that why you were so concerned that we weren’t communicating?”

And Ray found it very interesting that Fraser would sooner talk about their possible, putative, rumored relationship than even mention the other guy. “Don’t know. Looking back...maybe, but—I wasn’t looking at any of this stuff then. I was—it was trust and partnership, you listening to me, me standing up to you. It wasn’t about any of this—you know—stuff.” A hesitation, brief, but distinct. “Or maybe it was and I was too chickenshit to look at it.”

Fraser wasn’t looking at Ray, but his hands, where they attempted to straighten already neatened paper, weren’t entirely steady. “And when did you start looking at the rest of it?”

Quick laughter, quicker smile, chagrined and bashful. “Today.”
“Today?”

Ray leant back, body language loudly declaring—supposedly—how completely comfortable he was with all of this. “Yeah.”

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“And you’re not...freaked?”

“You’re the freak,” said affectionately, greeted with a pale smile, “and I was with Stella forever, but that didn’t stop me from knowing what I was.”

Fraser didn’t need to ask; with ostentatious *sang froid*, Ray answered the unspoken question. “Bisexual.”

And then spoiled the entire Mr. Cool effect by blushing.

Which made Fraser smile, a real smile, the rare one that twinkled his eyes and crinkled his cheeks. The dimple even made an appearance.

And Ray’s breath caught in his throat.

“I suppose,” Fraser sounding rather hoarse, “that this is one of those moments that convinces people that we’re...”

“Partners partners.”

“Ray—”

Nothing more, just Fraser not knowing quite where to look, searching for words.

“That a problem for you?”

“No—well, yes.”

“Good answer, Fraser, good answer. Now you wanna pick one?”

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“No, I don’t have a problem with bisexuality.” A pause, then fast, almost as fast as Ray’s usual speech: “It’s been part of me for a long time.”

Ray was up and off the couch, pacing, move or die. “So if you’re that and I’m that, and everybody else can see it between us, how come we’re...”

“Not? My fault,” rusty voice, bleeding with apology and regret.

“If you say you’re sorry, Benton Fraser,” Ray said, leaning over the coffee table, one hand planted on a file, the other digging a finger into Fraser’s chest, “I will pop you one. I swear I will and I don’t ever want to do that to you ever again so do not even *think* the word sorry.”

“As you wish.”

“I wish.” Straightening up, running a hand through spiked hair, rubbing his palm on the back of his neck, and then, as if to himself: “Oh, God, I wish.”

Fraser didn’t ask. Probably didn’t need to.

“Okay, okay, so the bi thing isn’t the problem,” Ray was saying, shaking his head in shock over what he’d just said out loud.

“It seemed to be, for you,” Fraser retorted, “when we were in the Inspector’s office.”

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“Image,” Ray dismissed it all with a shrug. “Can’t keep a cover if you don’t have the image. But this bi thing isn’t the problem,” he muttered, doing a remarkably intense job of pacing for such a small, enclosed space. “What was that ‘no’ you were talking about?”

“If people think you and I are...”

“Partners partners—”

“...then it’s not you they’re saying I’m...with.”

“Vecchio.”

Bare. Raw as winter. “Yes.”

“He have a problem with this?”

“Which this? You and me this, people’s perceptions this, his reputation this?”

“You and him this.”

Not even an ‘ah’ for that, just silence, while Fraser looked down at his hands, and Diefenbaker crept over, licking at his fingers and face.

“Thank you,” Fraser whispered into the thick fur, “but I’m all right.”

Which was just about enough to break even the Ice Queen’s

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heart, so it was hardly surprising that Ray Kowalski stopped with all the grace of a car hitting a brick wall.

“Fraser?”

“I’m okay, Ray. Just this—it stirs up things perhaps best forgotten.”

“Maybe this is none of my business—”

A wry look on Fraser’s face, an almost visual ‘bit late for that’ overlaid by something else.

“—but forgetting and burying are two different things. C’mon, Fraser, I know about this—I tried burying and it ends up stinking worse than Mort’s morgue.”

“I’m not burying things,” Fraser said. “I can’t. They’re still alive.”

There were times Ray Kowalski would kill for the right words. Or to know what to do. Leave it, push it: would it be giving Fraser a break or missing the only opportunity to—whatever it was they were doing here.

Communicating.

Really communicating. Or trying to.

“Letting go,” Ray said with his own stark rawness.

And Fraser looked up, met his eyes, and pain matched pain, scales perfectly balanced. “Yes.”

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“Can’t.”

“No.”

“I got that,” Ray whispered.

A long moment, while Fraser stared at him, seeking something, Ray clenching his teeth to stay open, fighting the compulsion to look away and hide.

“Yes,” Fraser said at last. “Yes, you do.”

Ray blew out a breath, and a second later Fraser did the same so that the tension cracked, fell away.

“You really okay, Fraser?”

Small smile, twisted, certainly, but a smile nonetheless. “About as okay as I get, Ray. You?”

“Getting there. Taking a while, but I’m getting there.”

Fraser didn’t need to mouth the platitudes: the honest gladness lit his eyes, a simple relief that his friend could see the light at the end of the tunnel.

“So what would Frannie do now?” Ray asked.

“Francesca?” Fraser nearly squeaked.

“Yeah. You know, how do women handle all this? You spill your guts—then what?”

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“You’re the one who was married.”

“Yeah, but to the Stella, who didn’t do the girlie stuff.”

“You’re suggesting we do girlie stuff?” And that easily, that quickly—perhaps that desperately—they were sliding back into the smoothly-worn grooves of their friendship. “Ray, are you trying to tell me you have a secret desire to paint my fingernails?”

“Oh no, I saw that photograph of you when you were playing Ms. Fraser,” Ray said, blithely ignoring Fraser’s reaction to either the mention of a photograph or to Ray letting on that he had known all about that little incident. “You want tea?”

“Thank you kindly,” Fraser said, getting up to make it, as he always did.

“Hey, I’ll get it,” Ray replied, as he always did in his turn, grinning as he followed Fraser into the kitchen and reached for his own coffee supplies. “I know how to make tea.”

“Tap water and—” a not entirely fake shudder, “Lipton’s,” Fraser remembered. “I’ll make the tea, Ray.”

Then it was the way it always was, tea and coffee on the couch with sports on the television, and if either of them noticed that

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they weren't quite sitting as close as usual, and if either of them noticed they were looking at the other as often as the screen, neither of them was willing to comment on it.

And for the first time since even the very first time Ray Kowalski had become Ray Vecchio to Fraser, it was awkward when the car pulled up to the Consulate late that night, and neither of them quite knew how to say good-bye now, teetering uncertainly on the cusp of change.

It was still pretty early by Ray's standards when he pulled up to the Consulate, although Fraser had been up long enough to primp two uniforms for the upcoming conference, fill his full quota of forms—even seconded to a case, there were forms; there were always forms—walk Dief, breakfast, bathe and take advantage of the time difference to place that call to the Halifax office regarding that rather obscure piece of information requested by a fifth grader doing her “My Heritage” homework assignment.

“You ready? What am I saying, of course you're ready, it's in the rule books, always ready, be prepared—”

“Actually Ray,” Fraser said, pushing the seat back after letting

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Dief in, taking the time to settle himself quite comfortably, “I believe ‘be prepared’ is the motto of the Boy Scouts,” Fraser said, continuing right over Ray’s muttered ‘yeah, I remember—dib dib dib, dob dob dob.’ “Founded by Sir Robert Stephenson Smyth Baden-Powell, later Lord Baden-Powell of Gilwell, in 1908, the Boy’s Scouts—or Boys’ Brigade as it was known in certain regions for a considerable amount of time—adopted the motto—”

“To put me to sleep years later.”

“Oh, I don’t know, Ray,” Fraser said lightly, “you’re not that old, if we don’t count you in dog years.”

“Thank you kindly,” Ray said after Dief had finally stopped barking. “What he said, Fraser.”

“In that case, I’ll have to wash your mouth out with soap too, Ray.”

“Wash my mouth? No, no—when you go around licking dead men’s stuff, do you go wash your mouth out? No, you just come and talk to me with the same mouth you just licked a dead man’s boot with.”

Ray caught a glimpse of Fraser’s rather pole-axed expression. “What?” he asked.

Story Beginning

“That’s what bothers you?”

Ray gave him a look for that. “You mean apart from what you’re doing to yourself—you any idea where these things’ve been before you lick them? No, you have to lick them and then you find out they been places you shouldn’t be licking—yeah, I’m bothered by you licking those things then being right there in my face.”

“Oh. I’m sorry, Ray, it just never occurred to me.”

A hopeful smile topped by wary, laughing eyes. “So you’ll stop licking dead guys’ stuff?”

“No, Ray.” Pause, perfect timing. “I’ll buy mints.”

And there was nothing Ray could say to that, so he just passed Fraser his packet of wintergreen gum.

After nearly ten minutes of silence, Ray had to ask: “That’s what it takes to offend you into not talking to me?”

Fraser looked at him, big eyed.

“The whole—licking things thing.”

An emphatic shake of the head.

“You were yakking up a storm when I picked you up so it’s not what I asked or said last night—is it?”

Story Beginning

Fraser raised a finger in a 'please wait' pose, took the neatly folded gum wrapper from his jeans' pocket, discreetly mouthed the chewed gum into the wrapper, folded it up tidily, and replaced it in his pocket. "Actually, no, Ray, it was just that my mouth was full."

"Gum" Ray said pretty much like Saul on the road to becoming Paul, "that's all I need. A box of gum. A case of gum. A store full of gum."

"Or," Fraser said, eyes twinkling, "you could just tell me to shut up."

"Yeah," sidelong glance, "that works too."

"And you might well, shortly. The case—"

"Yeah. We gotta do something," Ray shifted, looking sidelong at Fraser, who was looking sidelong at him, "to make this guy think we're his 'in' to the conference."

"Exactly. And despite what the Inspector and the Lieutenant said, I really don't think our actions to date would—"

"Convinced everybody else, why not our bad guy?"

"Because convincing him is moot, unless we can attract his attention in the first place."

Story Beginning

“I was hoping you hadn’t come up with that. Cos then I could pretend I hadn’t either and we could just...not.”

“But we have to, Ray,” Fraser said, getting out of the car as they pulled up to Ray’s apartment building.

“I know, I know that, I just—”

Fraser standing very still, by the front door of the building. “You don’t want to be thought of that way, or you don’t want to be thought of with me, that way?”

Ray unlocked the door, pushed it open so Dief could run ahead. Exchanged a wry, awkward look with Fraser as Fraser squeezed past him, and they both realized how this sort of thing must look to others—and how often Ray had done it for Fraser, and vice versa. A private joke about politeness, looking like... well, something else entirely.

Then they were in the apartment, electric kettle brought down from the shelf and plugged in for Fraser’s tea and, though Ray swore it wasn’t necessary, Ray’s coffee, before Ray started answering Fraser’s question.

“It’s a whole bunch of things. But the main thing—after Stella, I—it’s kind of like I—I’m kinda—”

Story Beginning

“Scared,” Fraser whispered, pouring M&Ms into Ray’s cup.

“Yeah,” a sigh of relief at having it said for him. “You?”

“Yes.”

“So that’s why we’ve never...”

“Partly, at least.”

“And the other guy’s reputation?”

“Amongst other things.”

“Okay,” Ray said, taking his coffee, heading for the files. “I can deal. So, uh, how we’re gonna protect his rep and still do this case?”

“I’ve pondered that at length,” Fraser said, scooting over to make room for Dief on the couch, because there was no point arguing that particular point any more, not when both Dief and Ray conspired against him on it. “And I can’t think of any way, bar revealing you to be Ray Kowalski.”

“So he’s either dead or he comes home to people thinking he’s gay.”

“Bisexual.”

“You think people are gonna make the difference?”

“The distinction?” Pause. Sip tea. “No.”

Story Beginning

“At least he’ll get to come home.”

A definite smile, small, sharp, but truly Fraser. “So it’s not a fate worse than death, then.”

And who knew what devil provoked Ray, but he leant forward, close, far too close, and whispered, “You tell me, you’re the expert.”

For a moment, it looked like the old, too familiar innocent naive mask was going to drop over Fraser’s face, but then he simply looked away and said quietly, “To a degree.”

“You mean things you didn’t do?”

“Things I don’t know I was necessarily good at.”

Wow, Ray’s face said. Ouch, his eyes said. Buddies, his hand on Fraser’s shoulder said.

And Fraser’s hand slid up, and touched Ray’s hand. A mere touch, but how could anything be casual between them, now? A mere touch, but hot, electric, shocking them apart.

“Files,” Fraser said, entirely too briskly, eyes haunted. “And we need to plan how we’re to draw this man’s attention.”

“Files,” Ray repeated as he stroked a finger across the back of his hand where Fraser had touched. “Uh—yeah. Files.”

Story Beginning

And they buried themselves in paper, easing into it, passing each other pages, gradually moving closer to each other on the couch.

After a while, Ray spoke. “So d’you think he’s gay himself, that’s why he notices?”

“Perhaps. Or he might simply be aware that it’s one of the most common bigotries still enforced by various cultures, organizations, employers, religions—”

“I got it, I got it,” Ray muttered all too knowingly. “Look at this one—” he passed Fraser a file. “I think this guy was noticed somewhere else, cos he was married, right? But look at who the cops interviewed when they were checking out why he suicided. They talked to his accountant and business guys about money and embezzlement—”

“No evidence thereof was found.”

“Exactly. But look who else they talked to.”

“A bar owner.”

“Yeah,” Ray dragged the word out, waiting semi-patiently for Fraser to get to the point.

“One here in Chicago.”

Story Beginning

“Yeah. And you know him,” patience a lost battle, “because it’s where you took me to pump me about why I nearly killed that guy in the alley.”

“Beth Botrelle,” Fraser said softly. “Is she well?”

Ray shrugged, his expression dark. “Seems to be. What’s that phrase you used about the last guy you put in the hospital? As well as can be expected?”

Fraser leant in that bit closer, until their shoulders brushed. Buddies, the gesture said. Maybe something more the *frisson* whispered.

“Anyway,” Ray took a deep breath, and beside him Fraser did the same, “she says she loves her new job, and she’s involved in a law school project trying to get some other poor innocent schlub off Death Row.”

Fraser took another deep breath, like a man girding his loins.

“And don’t change the subject,” Ray said, pointing back to the files and away from whatever Fraser was going to say. “You know this guy, and you took me there.”

“It’s...nice.”

“Nice? A gay bar’s *nice*?”

Story Beginning

“It’s not a gay bar per se. It’s just a bar where people can be themselves. There’s no smoking and almost no alcohol served.”

“Only you,” Ray said, shaking his head. “A booze-free gay bar that’s ‘nice.’”

Buddies, Ray’s hand on Fraser’s shoulder had said. “When I’m there,” Fraser offered, not looking at Ray, “no one ‘hits’ on me.”

And that had to be like Christmas and birthdays rolled into one for Fraser, and for Ray...well, having Fraser tell him that, and all the other admissions that came along for the ride with that one, that was a few Christmases and birthdays right there. But hang on— “You go to a gay bar and no one hits on you? *You?*”

“Well...”

“Fraser.”

There wasn’t much point in refusing Ray when he used that ‘tell me or I’ll kick you in the head’ tone. “It’s just around the corner from the Consulate.”

“Being a trained observer, I noticed that.”

“And it’s not what I believe is called a ‘pick-up joint.’”

“So it’s a family-oriented gay bar. You’re doing the teflon thing again. Just tell me.”

Story Beginning

“The bartender knows me and...well...”

Ray just shook his head. “He thinks you’re with someone so he put the word out and now, nobody hits on you.”

“In a nutshell, yes.”

“You *lied* about that?”

“Not specifically lied, not a lie in so many words. I merely...didn’t correct him.”

“So who did you not lie about to him?”

“No one specifically. Actually—” and that was a genuinely worried frown marring Fraser’s forehead, “—given that Turnbull also goes there... Oh dear.”

For a second, Ray just stared at him. And then reaction set in.

“Ray.”

“Ray.”

“Ray, Ray, Ray!”

The familiar fifth “Ray” got an answer. “Yeah?”

“It’s not funny.”

“It’s gotta be funny, or we’re both sunk. You, and Turnbull?”

Snippy, now: “While we’re technically the same rank, I’m very much Turnbull’s superior. He reports to me—”

Story Beginning

“Get off your high horse, Mountie, I wasn’t laughing cause I thought you and him were an item.”

“Oh, there was something else amusing you?” Fraser asked stiffly, back once more ramrod straight, even whilst seated on a sofa.

“I didn’t think you’d take advantage of him—I was just laughing at Turnbull trying to explain to the bartender that you and him were just good friends.”

“Oh.”

“C’mon, you gotta see the funny side—”

“Of mocking the afflicted? I think not.”

“Fraser, think about the bartender trying to make sense of what Turnbull’s trying to say even though Turnbull’s prissier than you.”

“I am not prissy!”

Ray leant back, looked at him from under lowered lashes.

“Fuck,” he said, very deliberately.

“Really, Ray, there’s no need for—”

Ray smiled. “I win.”

“An aversion to bad language doesn’t mean a person’s prissy.”

“Then what does it mean? Too much soap when you were a kid?”

“Too much respect for the language,” Fraser retorted, prissily, it

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could be said. “And anyway, if a person has to resort to that sort of word, why then they’re lacking in imagination, vocabulary and creativeness.”

“Your gramma say that to you a lot?”

Half smile, quick look. “Only as she was washing my mouth out for me.”

A matching half smile, Fraser’s tongue tipping out to moisten his lips, and Ray watching that. Watching him.

Until one of them cleared his throat and the other looked back at the files, and the moment was, once again, abandoned.

Ray reached out, fingers rat-tap-tapping on the papers nearest him. “So how’re we gonna get this guy to notice us?”

“You brought up the bar.”

“Yeah,” Ray replied, all reluctance and fidgeting. “And we know there’s been at least a peripheral connection with your friend the bartender before. So this bar—is it just a nice family-friendly non-alcoholic gay bar, or is it the kind of place where someone might go, you know, discreet.”

“If they were...closeted? Yes,” Fraser replied, certain. “There are several men who have a tell-tale pale band of skin—”

Story Beginning

“—on the third finger, left hand,” Ray said too quickly, shoving his own left hand—with the finger that no longer had that band, pale or gold or otherwise—into his pocket. “So that’s a place for us to start. They do lunch?”

Raised eyebrows, a slight squeak to the voice. “You mean right now?”

“We got three weeks max, Fraser. Maybe a lot less, because we don’t know how long he’s been in Chicago looking or who he’s already found.”

There was no denying that. Duty must, and all that. Fraser took another deep breath. “True. Yes. Well. Now it is, then.”

And there was something in that tone that had Ray looking at him all the way to the car.

They’d found parking, not all that far from the bar—although they were rather closer to the Consulate. Fraser’s hand was on the car door handle when Ray stopped him, a light tap on his shoulder.

“We ought to—you know, decide in advance what we’re...”

“How far we’re willing to...”

“Yeah, exactly.”

Story Beginning

They stared at each other for a moment.

“If we’re gonna snag him, I hate to say it,” Ray said carefully, “but the bosses were right.”

Fraser swallowed.

“We’re supposed to be an established couple.”

Faintly: “So...like an old married couple?”

“Yeah.”

Almost hoarse, almost frightened: “Then I’ll follow your lead, Ray.”

“Oh, great, thanks—”

“You were married for a good number of years, Ray.”

“Compared to my parents, it was nothing, just—passing through.”

“But you were together for a long time, you said since you were thirteen.”

“That’s when I fell in love with her.”

“Ah,” Fraser said, and for once, Ray just left it at that, because that ‘ah’ said it all, and said nothing at all.

“So old married couple,” Ray muttered.

“Yes, Ray.”

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“Okay,” he said, shifting in his seat, twin strands of chain around his wrist catching the noon light. “Okay, so I can do this.”

And Fraser could be forgiven for wondering just whom Ray was trying to convince.

Then—

The briefest touch of lips to Fraser’s cheek, and a flurry of tan coat and Ray, burst of cool breeze before the car door was slammed shut.

The passenger door opened, more cool breeze filling the car.

“Uh, you gettin’ out any time soon?” Ray said, no doubt aiming for casual but still sounding worried as he leant down to look at Fraser.

“What? Oh, yes, yes, of course.”

Then Fraser was standing on the sidewalk, wondering why Ray wasn’t with him.

“Dief,” Ray said. “Remember him? Dog with wolfly delusions?”

“Dief,” Fraser said. Then: “Dief! Of course, I’ll—”

Ray let Dief out of the car, and stood there, quirking a bitter little smile, as Dief made Fraser pay, and pay, and pay, and Fraser gave Dief every ounce of his attention.

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Dief safely deposited into Turnbull's care—or vice versa, as Ray put it—they headed for the bar, Ray's shoulders slumped, hands deep in pockets, frown directed at the cracked sidewalk.

"It was only a friggin' kiss," he muttered.

"I know that."

"Not like it was rape and pillage or anything."

"I know that."

"So what the hell was that all about?"

No attempt at pretense, just a concerned look sent Ray's way.

"It wasn't what I expected."

Ray's expression lightened not one whit.

"I was prepared for... for sexual intimations."

"But not a kiss on the cheek?"

Meeting Ray's eyes, actually coming to a halt in the middle of the sidewalk. "Not that, no."

"Ah," Ray said, and started walking again.

"'Ah'?" Fraser said.

"Yeah. Ah."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You tell me, you're the one who's always ah-ing."

Story Beginning

Three long strides and Fraser was at Ray's side, shoulder to shoulder. "You mean you understand my reaction?"

"It could mean that."

Muttered, almost as if Fraser were doing that talking-to-thin-air thing again: "Well, that's certainly helpful."

They were nearly at the bar, Fraser's nice, family-oriented gay bar that had had nearly as many women as men in it the time Ray had been there; nearly showtime, and if there was one thing Ray had learnt this time around, it wasn't good to go undercover with issues unresolved. "You're used to people pulling the sex thing on you," he finally said quietly. "You're used to people trying to get you in bed, get what they want from you."

"Ah," said Fraser.

"Not 'hmm'?"

"No, I believe this warrants an 'ah.'" And a flicker of a glance at Ray, who'd said so much without dragging it all out into the open, then Fraser whispered, "Thank you."

"For what? Not spelling out that it was the affection in the gesture that did you in or for treating you like a person and not just a pretty face on top of a great body?"

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“Well, it had been for both, Ray,” Fraser said, opening the bar door and ushering Ray in. “I do believe I shall have to rescind one.”

“Rescind one? Oh, please, no.”

“Well, there is still time to avert that.”

“You mean, if I don’t say anything till you’re ready to hear it? C’mon, Fraser,” sitting down with his back to the wall and tipping his chair back on two legs, grinning, a little sharply, up at Fraser, pushing just a little, “even Methuselah won’t live that long.”

“What would you like to drink?” Fraser asked smartly, leaving Ray in no doubt that the subject was being changed right this very instant, damned close to officious as he sat down at the small table Ray had chosen. “The same thing you had last time we came here?”

“That stuff tasted like something you’d lick off the floor. I’ll have beer.”

“Then I’ll drive you home.”

“One beer will not impair my driving abilities. Not spread out over lunch, so don’t start in on me with the body weight and the alcohol content and the metabolism thing.”

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“Studies show—”

“You know and I know one beer’s not going to put me even near the limit. And if you go on about it, I’m gonna start wondering what you’re trying to distract me from.” Pause. Wait for the Mountie to meet his eyes. “As if I didn’t already know.”

“If you already know,” Fraser said in that perfectly reasonable tone of voice that could drive saints to drink in ten seconds flat and Ray Kowalski to distraction in two seconds or less, “then why would you ask me?”

“Because, Mr. Smugster, maybe you need someone to make you say it.”

And Fraser sat down suddenly, heavily, into the chair opposite.

No way could Ray have expected his mild pushing to get the reaction it did, no way could he risk hazarding the wrong guess. “You okay?” he asked, chair legs scraping on the floor as he leant forward, meeting Fraser more than half-way. “What did I say?”

“Someone...”

Perhaps it was undercover, or perhaps it was simple friendship, or perhaps it was whatever the hell they didn’t know was going on between them, but Ray covered Fraser’s clenched hands with

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his own, warming them, just for a few moments, before withdrawing, discreetly. “Her or him?” was all he asked, gently.

Wild look, filled with falling snow and the impact of a bullet in the back. “Her. She made me—” Breaking the words off, staring off at the wall, only slowly coming back to Ray. “No, that’s neither fair nor true. There were certain things I...chose...to do for her.”

“The way we’re gonna make this guy choose to come after us?”

Shoulders slumping, eyes closing briefly, opening again as if there was nowhere to hide inside, or perhaps simply too many still-living ghosts. “I made my choices, Ray, she didn’t control me, she didn’t do my thinking for me.” Wry smile, twisted at one edge. “Unfortunately, I wasn’t doing my thinking for me either.”

“Mr. Instinct,” Ray said, repeating an old conversation.

“Just Mr. Stupid,” Fraser said simply.

“You?”

“Oh, yes, me.”

“At least you—”

“Well, hello there, nice to see you both back, can I get you your usual?”

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Oh, great, just when things were getting interesting on a personal level, the bartender had to butt in on a professional level. “I haven’t been here often enough to have a usual,” Ray snapped. “I’ll have a beer.”

“Another bad case?” the bartender asked, all soulful eyes and sympathy.

“You could say that,” Ray said, “but then you’d be talking about it and I don’t want to talk about it. So a beer, if it’s not too much trouble.”

“Tap or bottled? Domestic? Imported? Microbrewery? Local microbrewery or—”

“Heineken,” Fraser broke in. “And I would like a carrot-beet juice, please.”

“Excellent choice,” the bartender said, beaming. “Coming right up.”

“Carrot-beet?” Ray repeated. “Carrot-beet? I don’t even want to think what color that’s gonna be never mind what it’s gonna taste like.”

“It’s actually rather sweet,” Fraser said. “Not only from the carrots, of course, but beets, specifically sugar beets—”

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And that dissertation—and Ray’s derailing thereof, and the bartender’s frequent attempts at conversation—kept them going all the way through their drinks arriving, and well into lunch, into a comfortable dissection of whether intentions ameliorated actions and whether or not that meant Ray could or could not kill Francesca for her ‘help’ the previous week. It kept them going, nice and easy, segueing them back into cases and work, kept them going right up until it was nearly time for them to leave.

Ray leant over and whispered, “We’re undercover, Fraser. You gotta walk the walk and talk the talk.”

“Ah,” Fraser said and dabbed his mouth with a napkin. “You mean...get down with my bad self?”

“No I do not mean that—I mean you’ve got to behave like you and me are a couple.”

“Well, I am, Ray.”

“Not with the conversational chit-chat and how was your day stuff, I mean—” And he touched Fraser’s mouth, right there at the corner of his lip, where there was one last trace of mayonnaise.

And Fraser’s eyes darkened, deepened, and changed everything.

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For all of two seconds. And then snap, crash, the shutters came down and Fraser was back to being Constable Benton Fraser RCMP who came to Chicago on the trail of his father's killers, polite and discreet and pretending a complete lack of comprehension. "But Ray, if you look around us—"

Which Ray did, of course, since that was easier than thinking about whatever Fraser had just hidden behind that mask—or, for that matter, why Fraser thought he had to hide—and he took his time.

Couples, mainly, some male, some female, no mixed couples at all that he could see; waitresses and waiters, no public displays of affection, no rainbow signs being waved. Discreet, that's what this place was, discreet, and subtle. And they fitted right in.

Which was either way too comfortable, or way too uncomfortable, but either way, didn't bear thinking about. Apart from the case. At least they had the case.

"How long've we got before the conference?"

"Three weeks," Fraser supplied dutifully.

"And how're we supposed to get this guy to come after *us*

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instead of some other closeted couple or guy or whatever if we don't do anything to get noticed?"

"But we're not supposed to still be in the honeymoon phase," Fraser argued back rather routinely. "Surely by now, most daily routine would be, well, unremarkable and routine."

"But we have to make a difference between what we always do and what a couple would do."

"Not according to Inspector Thatcher and Lieutenant Welsh."

"Yeah, except Her Majesty Meg didn't see it till Welsh pointed it out to her. Which means we—"

"—have to point it out to the malfeasant," Fraser finished for him, a thoughtful look in his eyes. "Not to entrap, but to—"

"—entice. Give'm an opportunity. So we need to—"

"Actually, Ray," Fraser leant in another inch or so, forehead nearly touching Ray's over the small table, "I'm not so sure we need to do anything else. I believe we get enough notice as is—"

Fierce surge of denial, battering words past his clenched teeth and a shudder of shock at the unexpectedness of his own reactions. "No, we do not, we do not get enough attention as is just by being the way we always are, it's not that obvious, we need to

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get this guy, we need to do something to get this guy, gotta do more, push the envelope, dangle a worm in front of fishy-fishy and reel him in.”

“Ray?”

“Stop looking at me like that—people’ll think we’re talking divorce.”

This time, Fraser didn’t actually say ‘ah,’ but it was there all the same. His shoulders cast a shadow across the remnants of Ray’s meal, his fingertips dappled the back of Ray’s hand. “At least this isn’t real,” he said, gently.

“No?” Ray asked. “Is that for real ‘not real’ or is this more of your existentialism, nothing is real, and nothing to get hung about?”

Genuine incomprehension in Fraser’s eyes this time.

Ray talking as much to himself as anyone else: “Living is easy with eyes closed, misunderstanding all you see—”

“I’m not Stella, Ray. You’re hearing everything I have to say.”

Ray leant back, away from Fraser, one hand fiddling with the dirty knife beside his plate, ting, ting, ting, as he tapped metal to ceramics, rhythm to the rest of the song singing in his head, words about it getting hard to be someone; memories of her

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voice, singing along to the radio then the vinyl and eight track then the CD, relationships measured by shifting technology. “She used to love the Beatles,” Ray said. “Me, I was Stones, Kinks, Iggy when he started. Only place we really met was the stuff we danced to and...I started dancing for her.”

“You gave up boxing for her and took up dancing for her,” said mildly enough, the first taste of criticism creeping in with: “What did you do for yourself?”

Sudden grin, unexpected and sharp. “That’s where she came in. She gave up stuff for me, she started things for me. Give and take, blend and balance, that’s what we had. And it was good. Only I didn’t see when it stopped being good for her, and I don’t know what I’m seeing with you.”

Fraser folded his napkin neatly, dropped it onto his plate, straightened knife and fork so they were side by side, not crossing each other, perfectly parallel. “I’m...” Glance up, across their personal round table, to someone watching, to someone wanting to know, to someone who wanted to see him. “I’m not sure either.”

“Okay,” Ray said, looking at Fraser pretty much the way Fraser had looked at him once or twice. “Okay. So you don’t know

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about you and me—” back to tingling the knife, until Fraser’s warm hand reached over and stopped him. “And me,” he said, into Fraser’s patient waiting, “I don’t know about me either. But—we can deal with this, can’t we? We can learn—”

“Bloom, close?”

“Just don’t go kicking me in the head. So you don’t know what’s going on, and I don’t know what’s going on—”

Too quick, a man still looking for a bolthole. “So perhaps we should concentrate on the case.”

“Which is what got us sitting here talking about not knowing what we’re doing.”

“Then perhaps...” Flicker of tongue over lower lip, flicker of glance, then steady, unwavering, not certain, no, not certain at all, but seeking. Searching. Sextant to the sun. Not a bolthole, but a haven, perhaps, if he had the courage to try. “Perhaps this case could be...”

Breathless. Ray was suddenly breathless, eyes narrowed, his words a mere hint of sound. “A trial run?”

Fraser taking a deep breath, buddy breathing of a different sort, breathing deep and even until Ray was breathing along with him,

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calm, calming, or at least good enough to cope for now. “A trial run,” Fraser repeated softly. “Of a sort.”

“So...I’m undercover as someone else who’s supposed to be undercover with you for this but is really undercover as someone else completely, but you and me, we’d be undercover as ourselves seeing what it’d be like if we weren’t undercover but we’re using being undercover to be what we can’t be because day to day, guys like us have to be undercover all the time on the job because we’re cops, so we can’t be out. So we’re not undercover, we’re going undercover.”

Fraser blinked. Twice. “Well, Ray, since the opposite of under is over, perhaps it would be more accurate to say we’re going overcover.”

“Or maybe,” and there was the knife back in his hand, ting, ting, ting again, “it would be even more accurate to say we both been burned, and you’re still waiting for the other shoe to drop and you’re still running scared of being burnt again.”

Disbelief, bright shiny and new. “And you’re not?”

Shifting in his seat, made uncomfortable by memories and tomorrows. “Your sister—”

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A frown over that, smoothed away to a carefully non-judgmental politeness.

“I liked her, I liked her a lot. I even maybe had some feelings for her. Because by then, Stella...” Shrug, fix the bracelet, the old chain twisted twice around his wrist. “I was trying to let her go. And Maggie was...”

Fraser tried to fill in the blanks, to fill the hollow ache in Ray’s eyes. “Beautiful? Blonde? Bright? Willing?”

Eyes honest as the sky is wide, and just as stormy. “Maggie was you.”

Live far enough north, and you learn not to look directly into the summer sky, for the way the light burns. Shoulders hunching forward, Fraser finally looked back into Ray’s eyes. “What do you do,” he whispered, “when you try to let go but are twice as bound?”

“Go on,” the voice of experience grated out of Ray’s mouth. “And hope you can run far enough the chains break.”

“I can’t become someone else, Ray.”

“You think I did? I took his name and I filled his spot, but—when you leave everything behind, you have to look at what you take with you. You get to figure out what’s you.”

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Curiosity pushing the hurt and the fear aside, for now, Fraser focused, intent on Ray and Ray's words. "But you didn't leave Stella behind."

"Yeah, I did," Ray said heavily. "Just took me a while to figure that part out."

Fraser was staring at Ray still, searching again, seeking, finding who knew what. Glancing around, to make sure no one could overhear, pitching his voice just so, low, discreet, but far from level. "Once I thought I was over someone. I thought I could be certain, that I could plan my life. I told myself I could make promises once more. I believed that, right up until the moment she came back, and I was willing to throw away my own life, and others. Ray—I can't promise you anything."

"Better than lying to me. And I'm not promising you nothing either," delivered with all the belligerence Ray lacked in the boxing ring. "I still—look, I know this is gonna end. Even if you let him and her go, he's still coming back, you're still going to get back to Canada one of these days, and I'm still—I'll still be Ray Kowalski, no more Vecchio."

Story Beginning

Substitutes and undercover lives, men pretending to be what they are not. “And you don’t think that would be enough for me?”

“I don’t know if that’s gonna be enough for *me*.”

Partners. Partners don’t always need words; partners don’t always need to be told the truth. No certainties for Ray, and Ray was willing to risk it anyway. Was willing to face the danger of finding out that being alone, being himself, wasn’t enough without Fraser. Was willing to give hostages to fortune without back-up. Was willing to try, even though defeat was guaranteed.

“Was being with Stella so good that you’d try again,” Fraser asked diffidently, “with someone else, even though you believe it’s all going to end badly?”

“Yes,” Ray said simply. “And anyway, this way, I’ll know it’s not me that went wrong.”

Failure as a guarantee of...not failing. But willing to try anyway. Three citations, Ray Kowalski had to his name, his own name: nothing, compared to the courage this took.

And could Fraser do anything but honor that bravery with his own?

The moment hung, suspended between them, another in a long line of moments they’d only so recently started noticing. Another

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one of those moments they abandoned, and had abandoned so many times.

But this time, there, right there in a public restaurant, albeit in a discreet corner out of the bright lights, Fraser leant forward again, was met more than halfway, again, and it was Fraser who kissed, this time. Chaste, discreet, old married couple, barely more than a brushing of lips against lips, but it was hope and fear meeting, and gentling both. Two men, sitting there in silence, looking at each other, at lips each had kissed, and aware of the eyes of strangers looking over at them.

“Okay,” Ray whispered, then stronger, “okay. We can do this, I can do this, we’re good to go. For the duration,” he said, pinning Fraser with his stare and a strong hand clenched around Fraser’s wrist. “We do this, for the duration, and then—”

“I don’t know.”

“Nobody does. At least you’re honest.”

“This time,” Fraser said, raw and rough. “When I’m not lying to myself.”

“So we tell the truth to ourselves and we lie to everybody else, sounds good to me,” Ray replied, bright and breezy and trying

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too hard, looking away from Fraser and seeing a few people suddenly look away in turn. "And that kiss helps the case."

The case. The metaphor. Their overcover undercover. Their excuse. "I'm sure it did."

Ray let go of Fraser's wrist, letting the intensity slide away like a caress on soft skin where the veins pulsed blue with a heart beating fast. "We should follow through on some more of those names."

"The precinct?"

And continuing this, not in front of strangers, but colleagues, and near friends, hurrying along even though Ray, technically, still had time off. Acting before this moment, too, lay abandoned between them.

"At least they all know I'm not the real Ray Vecchio," Ray said, Fraser leaving the tip this time, Ray's turn to pay for the meal. "So his rep's safe for a while."

At least something was still safe.

Even if neither of them was sure anything but sex was truly safe any more.

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“Where’s Frannie?” Ray asked, half-way through the door.

“Not feeling well,” Huey said, passing him.

“Female troubles,” Dewey sneered.

“Hey—” Huey started, the rest drowned out by the doors swinging shut behind them.

“Small mercies,” Fraser muttered, Ray nodding a heartfelt agreement.

“I’m not looking forward to the shit hitting that fan,” he said.

“Ray.”

“It’s okay, she’s not here to hear me say it. Anyway, she’s supposed to be my kid sister, I gotta say things like that.”

“I should be saying things like that about Maggie?”

“Nah, you’re Canadian.”

“More small mercies,” Fraser said sharply, switching on Frannie’s computer. “All right, the list of names we wish to check begins with... ”

Routine police work, but they were good at it, chasing down connections and leads, each of them skewed enough in their approach that they took very different paths from the norm.

Ray watched as Fraser went from Point A to Point... seven, or

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something. "You're a freak," he said fondly, squeezing Fraser's shoulder. Caught sight of one of the uniforms watching; squeezed the back of Fraser's neck, ended with a gentle little pat.

Found himself fingering the hair at Fraser's nape, noticing that the perfect Mountie hair was cut unevenly, then realizing that it was cut perfectly straight, but that Fraser's hair curled and waved unpredictably, a little bit of perfect imperfection over muscles that were corded.

Followed Fraser's gaze, looking up in time to see both Huey and Dewey coming through the door again.

"Showtime," Ray whispered.

"Indeed," Fraser replied, twisting around a little to smile up at Ray.

A quick glance over to check the reaction and...nothing.

"They didn't see us," Ray said quietly into Fraser's ear, supposedly looking over his shoulder at the computer screen.

"Yes, they did."

"They didn't."

"They saw us, Ray, they just didn't react."

"They're not shocked?"

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“It appears not.”

“Welsh—”

“—won’t be shocked either and was, it seems, quite right.”

“Shit, people really do think we’re...”

And this time, when Fraser turned around to look at Ray, there was no bright smile on display, just a blend of hope and fear in eyes gone dark with worry.

“Attitude,” Ray reminded him, shadow boxing a little, giving Fraser that sly grin. “Gotta keep the attitude.”

“Otherwise Huey and Dewey would surely realize you’re not the real Ray Vecchio,” dry as dust.

Ray snorted at that particular lame-duck theory. “But if this guy has access to the precinct—”

“He’d know this was a set-up.”

“Might as well put up some polite signs in Canadian, get your entrapment here.”

“Ray—”

“Enticement,” Ray said, long and slow and low. “Enticement.”

“Jeez, guys,” Huey came right up to Ray’s desk, kept the volume down, “get a room before people notice, okay?”

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“Uh, right—ah, sure—”

And Fraser, playing Constable Fraser RCMP to the absolute hilt, piped up brightly with: “Why would we need a room when we have plenty of space right here?”

“Remind him Dief’s no Toto and that he’s not in Canada any more,” Huey said, and left Ray to explain all about Dorothy and her friends.

Returning files they had no real cause—save for this case they weren’t officially working on—to look at, they cleared Ray’s desk, Ray standing there, shrugging into his jacket. “C’mon, c’mon, get the lead out, let’s get going before the lieutenant can find something urgent we gotta do right now.”

Fraser was sorting through another stack of papers listing to one side of Ray’s desk. “It only takes a moment, Ray—”

—to drive your partner batshit. C’mon, Fraser, we’ll go get Dief, walk him over to that Italian place with the patio.”

Fraser’s face lit up for a moment, making the mask all the more obvious as it fell into place.

“What?”

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"I—ah, I simply forgot."

Stepping in close, very close, even by their standards. "Just because it's the case don't mean we're not trying this on for size, too, okay?"

"Sorry," Fraser told him, straightening his shirt collar and accepting his hat from Ray. "I'm just nervous."

"Nervous, huh? Me, I'm scared spitless."

"You are?"

Big grin, delighted, and an arm slung around Fraser's shoulders. "Couldn't tell, huh? I fooled you?"

"Yes, Ray. Completely."

"I'm good."

"Yes," Fraser said, abruptly thoughtful. "Yes, you are."

They'd missed one minor detail: Friday night was not a good time to expect a trattoria to cater to a wolf, even one in dog's clothing. So they ended up with food to go, and headed back to Ray's, them on the couch and Dief grumbling over kibble in the kitchen, tonight apparently being Ray's turn to bow to Fraser's wishes. On this, at least.

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Just the same as any other evening after any other long day's work. Only tonight, they were undercover, as themselves. Trying on new skin, as themselves. Or at least Fraser was.

Fraser, who was looking at Ray, and Ray who was half expecting Fraser to bring out the nose caliper and putty again.

"What, I spill an identity crisis down my shirt or something?"

"No, it's alfredo."

"I've got some guy who's not you on me?"

"The sauce, Ray," although the by-play was strained.

They ate for a while, in silence, commentators mercifully made mute, the hockey play-by-plays speaking for themselves.

The dishes were scraped and dumped in the dishwasher, Fraser finally satisfied that the machine was full enough to be turned on, water whooshing and splashing.

Fraser was—for reasons that made no sense whatsoever to Ray—wiping down the sink and countertops, his shoulders broad and blank, the perfect place for Ray to face.

"Fraser—" putting a hand on one of those shoulders, stopping Fraser from turning around, failing, Fraser turning around slowly, with care.

"Look, I see the way you're looking at me. And—" focusing on

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the way the flannel shirt was pulled askew by Fraser's twisting around, "this is me, doing this. This thing. With you."

"Which you, Ray?"

"Me me. Not Vecchio, not the undercover cop guy, just...me."

Ray held himself very still, and very tall, matching Fraser inch for centimeter, eyes held level and steady. "You remember what you said when I didn't even know if I'd killed Volpe."

Time, while Fraser thought, measuring the weight of a heart against a feather.

Rephrasing, repeating, pushing—needing, and brave enough to show it. "You know me, Fraser."

Still looking, still weighing. Then: "Yes. I do know you. You're my partner. And you're my friend."

"Was that hard to say this time?"

"Not in the least."

Ray gave him a look.

"Well, perhaps it was a trifle less easy."

Ray kept on giving him that look.

"Oh, all right, so it was difficult this time. But not because I didn't mean it."

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“It’s always harder when it’s the truth,” Ray told him, patting him on the upper arm, touching him on the shoulder.

“And when it’s the great leap forth.”

“Into the unknown?” Ray asked, ever a cop, ever curious—ever a man needing to know.

“Even if it’s not the great unknown,” Fraser replied, unyielding but gentle, “even if it’s simply the mildly unfamiliar, that still doesn’t say anything about the former Ray, Ray.”

“Who said I was asking about him?”

“You were fishing.”

“Nah,” Ray said, taking his can of soda and heading for the living room, “I was just angling for information.”

“Fishing, in other words.”

“Covering all the angles.”

“Angling.”

“Yeah.”

“Which is another word for fishing.”

“C’mon, you already know all about Stella, you can’t spill a simple yes or no about the other guy?”

“That would hardly be gentlemanly.”

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“Gentlemanly?” Ray snorted, nearly choking on his soda. “That Canadian for secretive?”

“It’s me for discretion, and friendship. Tell me, Ray, would you want me to tell—say, Inspector Thatcher or Turnbull about anything we might yet do this evening?”

“But you’re not sleeping with either of them—” nearly joking look of horror, “—you aren’t, are you?”

Prissily again, playing along with Ray, although Fraser knew all too well this was no game, and lacked the reassurance of rules or ordered plays. “Well, I’m not sleeping with you either.”

“I thought you were.”

“No, we decided that we would...”

Ray, waiting for Fraser to actually sully those lips with naughty words.

Fraser looking at Ray.

Ray waiting for Fraser to admit Fraser knew those naughty words.

Fraser looking at Ray.

Ray dropping his head, and sighing. “Okay,” he said, saying it for Fraser: “We’re gonna try it on for size.”

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“Something like that,” Fraser said, not quite smiling. Not exactly leaning forward and leaping into Ray’s arms either.

But soon. Tonight. No point in postponing it for Valentine’s Day sentiment trotted out by Hallmark. For all it wasn’t just sex, it wasn’t exactly head over heels in love, either.

“We got the perfect excuse, Fraser. We’re living a lie to catch a thief.”

“So gather ye rosebuds while ye may?”

“Something like that. So uh—” thumbs hooked into the belt loops of his jeans, shoulders slouching, smile guttering like a candle, “you uh ready to hit the hay?”

“Not exactly rosebuds.”

“We’re not exactly Romeo and Juliet either. And don’t go quoting anything about poison, I got enough bad dreams from you licking things.”

“I don’t lick everything, Ray— Ah. I walked right into that, didn’t I?”

“With both eyes open and both feet in your mouth, Fraser.”

“Are you going to keep calling me that?”

“What? Fraser?”

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A nod.

“I—uh—I—that’s how I think of you. What did he call you?”

A long pause, while Fraser looked away, and pinched the bridge of his nose. Then he raised his gaze again, and met Ray more than halfway. “Benny.”

“All the time?”

“No, Ray,” said with just an edge of warning, “sometimes he called me Frazier. Or Frase.”

“Sorry, I was just...”

“Angling?”

“Fishing. And I’m not calling you Benny like you’re my pet dog. No offense, Dief. Dief? Where’s surface?”

“In your bedroom, probably.”

“If he’s in my bed—”

Fraser followed at a far more moderate pace, stopping in the doorway as Ray negotiated a large, sleepy and exceedingly comfortable wolf from his bed.

“You can have the couch,” Ray was saying, hauling at Dief’s determinedly uncooperative warmth. “I promise,” Ray repeated, making sure Dief could see him, “you can have the couch and a box of Twinkies.”

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That worked.

“The things I do for sex,” Ray muttered. “Wolf hair on the bed, wolf hair on the couch, Twinkies in the wolf...” Still kneeling on the bed, Ray looked over his shoulder at Fraser. “No lecture on how bad Twinkies are for him?”

“You promised him.”

Promises, promises, and whatever they had going between them.

“I know you’ve been burnt, but I’m not going to burn you again,” Ray told him, darkly intense. “Won’t even singe you a little. Promise, scout’s honor.”

“I thought you were never a scout.”

“They sell scout’s honor now, didn’t anyone tell you? Yeah, they sell it in all the big stores now, you know, the good ones, the classy ones, scout’s honor, nun’s virtue, presidential pardons—”

“Ray, you’re blithering.”

“Yeah, well, I’m trying to figure out how to ask my best friend to come to bed and fuck me which isn’t exactly something I’ve had a lot of practice at so I’m entitled to blither or blabber or whatever.”

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“Do you mean you’ve had no practice in the asking,” Fraser asked, coming into the bedroom, undoing buttons and belt and buckle, “or in the doing?”

Ray concentrated on getting his own boots off, watching out of the corner of his eye as Fraser unlaced boots and pulled off socks and started on flannel overshirts and cotton undershirts. “Both,” he muttered, muffling it with his T-shirt coming off over his head. “You?”

“The asking.”

“So...you’ve done the doing?”

“No need to fish, Ray—I have had more friends than Ray Vecchio.”

“So you could’ve done this with him or someone else or...”

“There’s a wealth of information in your local library. And I could have...by myself, using... aids.”

Ray nearly tripped on his jeans. Gulped. Swallowed. And betrayed just how much desire lay behind all the calm discussion. And just how truly skilled he was at keeping himself undercover, hidden behind a persona.

“You?” he breathed.

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“Possibly,” Fraser whispered, letting his own leash slip, just a little. Letting his own self show, desire rising to meet Ray’s, shock slithering slowly behind on the heels of self-knowledge.

“Oh fuck,” Ray said, and reached out, jeans half on, half off, hands all the way on Fraser, grabbing at broad shoulders and smooth back, tongue diving into wet, warm mouth, hunger pouring from him, pouring out of him into Fraser.

“Ray—”

“Don’t talk, we’ve done the talking thing,” between kisses and nibbles and licks, “we do more talking now, take us a week to get back here, and who’s been getting less sex, huh, Fraser, who? Me is who, you got kisses, I got—oh yeah, so c’mon, c’mon, let it happen—” Hand cupping Fraser’s ass, fingers going tight on firm flesh, eyes closing in pleasure. “Please,” Ray said on a groan. “Please.”

No doubt that this was what Ray wanted—and no doubt that this was Ray wanting it. Outer layers shed like clothes, this was raw Ray in Fraser’s arms, in Fraser’s mouth, pushing against his front, pulling him close by the rear. Surrounding him, and inviting him in.

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Inviting? Demanding. Insisting. Begging.

“Did you know?” Fraser whispered, on the bed now, fumbling with two pairs of jeans and underwear.

“Know what?” Ray said round a mouthful of earlobe.

Shiver, hand clenching in Ray’s hair, dark rumbling moan, before Fraser could speak again. “Know how you feel about m—”

A flurry of movement, implacable, and Fraser was on his back, Ray astride him, kneeling there pressing him into the bed. “Told you,” Ray snarled, “this is just a try-out, just a thing until he comes back or you go back to Canada. That’s it. You can deal with that, or we don’t do it.”

An incitement to violence spread over him, a tempest in a naked body, and Fraser’s response was to reach up with one hand, gentle, slow, and stroke the stubbled side of Ray’s face. “I don’t plan on hurting you.”

A push, a shove, a twist of lips that looked like another snarl, and then Ray was subsiding, sucking on a nipple, stroking the flat of his tongue across the expanse of bare skin and muscle beneath him.

“Won’t be able to help it,” he murmured. “m just doing damage

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control." A sharp bite to soft skin, followed by the sibilant whisper of tongue. "Attitude," breathed against Fraser's desire, "gotta keep the attitude."

Attitude. Just another word for mask. Something Fraser could understand then: not a lie, not self-deception, but bastions and buttresses, and a safe place to hide, afterwards. Just in case.

Fraser said nothing, allowed his body to speak for him, circling his hands on the lithe stretch of Ray's back, fingertips following the ebb and flow of muscles, fingernails scratching lightly, up and down or round and around, whichever made Ray shiver and murmur most.

Open mouths and closed eyes, and skin rubbing against skin, heat building and burning, and Fraser, holding on, gentle, sweet, caring.

And Ray exploding in harsh motion, kneeling again, muscles pushing hard as he shoved Fraser's arms widespread, and held them there against the bed. "Do not do this to me," he yelled. "I'm not a ghost, I'm not some cold piece of crystal. Do not—" leaning right in, so close, dangerously close, nostrils flaring, "treat me like a guest. Do not," same fury as the much regretted day he

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had punched Fraser, “leave me naked and lie there being polite and not you.”

“Ray—”

“I get you. I get *you* or we stop.”

Eyes narrowing, tip of tongue darting out over lower lip.

“I’m here,” Ray said, dark as molasses, words and promises dropping from his lips sweet and rich, “I won’t let you get—” words failing him, but Fraser understanding, partners, communication, on the same page, Fraser’s spoken and unspoken history laid bare between them, “I’ll stop you. I will.” A sharp movement, forearm across Fraser’s throat, other hand on Fraser’s heart, “I can. I trust you. Now you trust me.”

“I do.”

“Prove it.”

Bob of Adam’s apple against Ray’s forearm, and Fraser’s eyes going dark again, as they had in the restaurant, the leash slipping a little more. Being allowed to slip a little. “All right,” Fraser said. “As you wish.”

“I wish,” Ray said again, as he had before, and slipped his own leash just a handspan. Enough to let some of the feelings show again.

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Old married couple, indeed—an old married couple on their honeymoon. Fraser wrapped arms and legs around Ray, cocooning him, trapping him, ensnaring him in heat and muscle and want. Devouring him with hungry mouth and greedy hands, taking and taking, giving and giving, touch and need and want and pleasure, and Ray was doing the same, scales balanced again, partners. More than buddies, but never losing sight of what they were, no matter what, always buddies, and always partners.

“I could love you so much,” Fraser whispered into Ray’s mouth.

“I could take it,” Ray told him, licking the corner of Fraser’s lips.

“I get—”

“Yeah,” Ray said, sighing it into Fraser’s ear, getting a shiver and a jolt from Fraser’s hips, “I know, I know how you get, I know you. Told you,” tongue dipping in, more of those shivers and a rhythmic thrusting from those hips, “I can take it.” Stopping, for a moment, leaning up with hand against Fraser’s chest, heartbeat fast and frantic against his palm. “If you can give it, I can take it.”

Fraser pulled him down close again, and kissed him, chest to chest, hips off center from each other, hard cocks against hard

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hips, rubbing, slick sliding back and forth, up and down, sliding, sliding, pushing—

“Wait!”

“You get cold feet now,” Ray growled into Fraser’s collarbone, “I swear, I will hunt you down and fucking kill you.”

Ray pressed his hand against Fraser’s chest again, above his heart, iron to lodestone. Fraser took hold of Ray’s wrist, letting his strength loose, the double twist of metal warm and ridged against his palm, Ray unflinching under the power of his grip. Fraser’s gaze wavered a little, then steadied in the certainty in Ray’s eyes and he met that trust, and held it, bringing Ray’s fingers up to his mouth, using his own hand to fold Ray’s thumb and little finger towards his palm, three fingers, blunt, long, knobby-knuckled fingers sliding into his mouth. And a gasp over him, and a thrust against him, as he sucked those fingers knowingly, oh dear God, so very knowingly, into his mouth.

“He teach you this?”

His eyes had closed either from pleasure or from the weight of memories, and he opened them again. Let some of the wildness show, watched as Ray didn’t flinch. Watched, as Ray actually

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smiled, and thrust harder against him. Met him, matched him, trusted him, and gave him a limit, safe border, safe haven, a firepit in which to burn.

“She did,” he said, and flicked his tongue against the tips of Ray’s fingers, “she did. This—” sucking fingers all the way in, against the back of his throat and the flat muscle of his tongue, “I did to her, for her—”

In the snow, in the bitter cold where she was his only warmth, and his only color. And in his sere apartment, where she had shown him the bitterness of his cold life and the colorlessness of his heart.

“And what did she do for you?” Ray whispered over him, words dropping on Fraser like snow, melting against exposed skin.

Fraser sucked on Ray’s fingers, tongue thrusting against them, between them, flaring and flickering like fire around the tips.

“Oh yeah,” Ray groaned, “oh yeah—”

“That’s what she did for me,” Fraser said, dark as night, coldness creeping in like death, “and this is what she did to me.”

He tugged Ray’s hand down, down, down, past the softening heat of his flagging erection, to where his legs parted, where he spread, like a woman, as he had, for that one woman.

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Fear, between them, an echo of the past and a foreshadowing of the future.

Until Ray smiled. Sunlight chasing night, and winning; heat burning cold, and winning, snow melting into a sheen of sweat, and Fraser was hard again, hard and up and thrusting. He stared up, needing to see it, Ray's smile, and honest eyes—and still some fear, yes, but Ray wasn't running scared, Ray was meeting this future of theirs head on.

Wet fingertips—fingers wet from him, from her—pressing against him, and he opened, more than just muscle and flesh. Felt himself open, within and without, and Ray was grinning at him, wild and strong, and pushing into him. Too narrow, too slim, for what Fraser really wanted, and he muttered, moaned, hooked his hands behind his knees and lifted them, spread himself wide open—his gaze flew to Ray's, and the expected humiliation just curled up and died under the heat and the pride and the flaring need in Ray's eyes.

"I can take it," Ray said, the bump of his knuckled pressing home, "I told you. I can take whatever you give."

And so Fraser gave. He let the sounds out, as he had found he

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could do in the safety of the Consulate hallway with all his clothes on, but this was more than a manipulative criminal manipulating his neck, this was Ray, who was pushing another finger inside him. This was Ray, whom he could let see if it hurt; Ray, who struggled, clumsy and awkward, to stay inside him as he scrabbled one handed in the nightstand drawer.

Ray dropped a sticky bottle onto Fraser's chest, and grinned at Fraser's taken aback expression: only Fraser could lie there, naked and exposed with Ray's fingers up him—oh God, Ray shivered, looking at where Fraser's body stretched tight around his fingers—and looked shocked that Ray had a bottle of slippery stuff beside his bed. "Never used it with anyone before," Ray mumbled around Fraser's nipple where it was so small in Ray's mouth, nipples unused to touch, still flat and small and so unlike a woman's—so unlike his Stella's. A quick nip and suck and then Ray was looking down at Fraser, at the honesty there, at the fear he was allowed to see, at the raw need and base lust. And maybe, just maybe, more. A lot more. "Make my fingers wet again," Ray told him, and Fraser obeyed, curling up, stomach muscles clenching in a way that had Ray's hand stroking over them,

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admiring noises coming from Ray's mouth, matching the sounds of deep hunger coming from Fraser's.

Fraser dribbled the clear slickness onto Ray's fingers, dear God, there, where two of them disappeared into him, and mouthed Ray's collarbone, licking along the elegant sweep of bone, the fine definition of lean muscle and smooth skin. "Beautiful," Fraser murmured, to either muscle or fingers, or just Ray.

Ray's hand on Fraser's chest again, on that spot, pushing Fraser back down. "Lift up," Ray said, so Fraser lifted his knees again, until Ray's grin matched Fraser's, hungry and open and feral. A thrust, hard, unyielding, bony fingers pushing inside, demanding.

"You ready?"

"Yes," Fraser said, and felt the truth unfurl inside, opened by Ray's fingers. "God, yes."

Not fingers now, no, not fingers, but Ray, long and hard, hot and aching heavy inside, adding so much to him.

And Ray, groaning as if his heart would break, voice breaking instead on a sob, for it had been a lifetime since he'd been accepted like this, and because Fraser was tighter than Stella had

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been, and because Fraser—Fraser wanted him. Still wanted him. Wanted him and took him, inside, letting him inside, letting him see all the truths and faults that Stella had protected him from.

“Yes,” Fraser groaned, and shifted, so that Ray was in deeper, and Fraser was even more open.

Hard cock, deep inside, Ray staring down at where his body met Fraser, at where he breached Fraser, at where he became Fraser. “Not her,” he gasped, thrusting hard, pulling out, seeing himself reappear and disappear, seeing Fraser taking everything he could give. “She never—like this—”

“No,” torn and ragged, and then Fraser had trapped Ray within the clasp of his strong legs, Ray’s hips rubbing against inner thighs and calves with every deep thrust, and Fraser’s arms clutched and held at a back strong enough to carry him. If he needed it. If he wanted it.

“Ray—” Fraser gasped, wanting Ray to know, wanting to tell Ray that it was all right for Ray to let go now, for Ray to unleash his own hungers, and he grabbed Ray, held him as tightly as he could, and opened to him even more.

High and keening, a cry of pleasure, a cry of loss, and Ray was

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there, within Fraser's arms and inside Fraser's body, and Fraser was there, under Ray and surrounded by Ray.

Ray's hand was on Fraser's cock, feeling a different pulse leap and race against his palm, and he was driving into Fraser, and driving Fraser on. Taking, and taking, and giving more and more.

Until Fraser yielded to the mindlessness of pleasure and Ray's cock and Ray's hand, white banners of surrender, and satiation.

Ray watched, and hungered, and took Fraser's pleasure for his own. Smiled, unaware of how much of his heart was in his eyes as a flushed and rumpled Fraser grinned at him, lax and happy, body relaxed and hot around Ray's cock.

"More," Fraser said, half-dazed in the afterglow. "Give me more. Harder."

Hesitant at first, Ray pushed in gently, to be greeted with a growl and a snarl, and Fraser pushing up hard, harder, to meet him. Safe now, certain, Ray let go, and thrust, hard, again, and again and again.

"Take, Ray," Fraser said, intent now, fingernails scraping over Ray's back the way Ray had liked so much—the way Stella had

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taught him to like?—sliding round over ribs and flexing muscle to rub and then twist at nipples.

“Oh fuck—”

“Yes,” Fraser said, voice pitched low and red as sun at midnight, “take. I can give it, Ray, take it, Ray, Ray, take me—”

And Ray came, hard, shoving and shuddering into Fraser, who took it, and took Ray, and held him tight when Ray collapsed atop him.

Breathing. Breathing slowing, and calming, skin sticking to skin, ejaculate cooling between them, and inside Fraser. No move to get up and wash, just breathing, and skin to skin, arms around each other, legs entwined and entrapped, and the softest brush of lips against lips.

No more talking, just sleep, and the quiet of their breathing.

It was still dark when Ray awoke, lying flat on his belly in the bed, face over the edge of the bed, one foot hanging out; the sudden jolt of awakening, the sudden shock of awareness, and the more shocking realization: not alone, not alone, not alone. It wasn't Stella: she'd never made the bed dip the way this person

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did, slender Stella'd never carried that sense of bulk; Stella'd never breathed in quite that rhythm, quite that depth, quite that sound; Stella just hadn't ever felt like this large warmth behind him. And Stella'd never come complete with the sound of wolf claws clicking on their way to kibble in the kitchen. And Stella, his Stella, the Stella, had never been Fraser. And he'd never ever fucked her quite like that. Adventurous she'd been, and inventive, but she'd never wanted that.

Ray didn't have his glasses on and couldn't see the clock; wasn't about to move to check the time, because if he moved, then Fraser might wake, then this would be real, and then it would be time to face the music. And last night might've been the last dance.

So much for just trying it on for size.

Size didn't count, at least that's what women were always saying, but this was fucking huge. Too huge.

"Ray?"

So much for not waking Fraser and for it not being real yet.

"Yeah?"

"Are you all right?"

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“No, see, that’s not the way it’s supposed to go. That’s my question and your answer because I’m not the one who—I’m the one who—”

“You didn’t hurt me.”

“Yeah,” Ray said, voice on a far more even keel than Ray himself was, “I kinda noticed you not complaining. Good?”

“Fishing, Ray?”

“You bet.”

“Then very good.”

“Better than—oh man, I do not believe I was gonna ask that. I—uh, Stella was right when she said I was needy.”

That was a definite snort of laughter. “And I’m not?”

There was no answer to that, not for a few moments. Still in the dark, Ray finally rolling over onto his back, two men lying side by side.

“You always sleep like that?” Ray asked before he could censor himself.

“Like this?” Fraser asked, looking down at himself, lying there like a stone knight carved neat and tidy atop a tomb. “Yes.”

“Cool,” Ray said—then quickly, as if outracing fear or

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nerves: “I never liked having someone spooned around me or anything.”

“Too hot?”

“Yeah. And too distracting. Never slept too good when Stella’d get all—don’t get me wrong, cuddling’s good, cuddling’s real good, but it’s too—”

“Stifling? Constricting? Restraining?”

“—when I’m trying to sleep. Can’t get into a comfortable position.”

“Which seems to be hanging half out the bed.”

“Yeah. So uh—what I’m trying to ask you—”

No practice in asking this either, not after so many years with the one person.

“I thought—” and it was Fraser sounding unsure, Fraser sounding uncertain of his welcome, “we were trying this on for size? For the duration?”

“Yeah,” Ray said, and there was the sound of real happiness in his voice. “All right. So we’re...”

And Fraser lying there in bed, smiling in the dark, repeating a conversation that had changed so much for them. “We’re still uh...”

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Ray nearly laughing, obviously remembering the same conversation on a wooden ship, with the crack of sails overhead and the cracking of the ice between them. "I think."

"Good."

"Nah, I think you said 'okay', I said 'good.'"

"Not greatness?"

"Greatness," Ray said, softly. "For the duration."

Fraser lay still for a moment, then said, softly, "Ray—"

"Don't," Ray said steadily. "I don't need promises, I know you can't make 'em."

"I have...loyalties."

"I know."

"I need—"

"I know that too, and it's okay. You need, I need, we both get what we need."

Whispered in the dark: "And what do we need?"

Impossible things, for Ray. Slates wiped clean, pasts erased, baggage lost by some celestial airline, leaving them to travel light. Fat chance.

No different, then, from Fraser's own needs. And no less impossible.

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“We need to get up and at ‘em,” Ray said, briskly, sitting up, scratching at his chest. “We still got this case, and I still got regular cases.”

And they both needed a break, too, time to regroup and see just how much damage had been done to battlements—and just how much either of them wanted to repair the breaches in their defenses.

Fraser sat up, on the other side of the bed, and didn’t even chide when Dief came back into the bedroom and leapt up onto the bed, still warm from where they’d slept.

“Right you are, Ray,” Fraser said easily, scratching behind Dief’s right ear. “Up and at ‘em it is.”

And they spent the rest of the morning doing a very fine impersonation of an old married couple indeed.

There should be a small brass plaque: Lunch, In the Break Room, by Salvador Dali.

What there was instead were two FBI agents making disparaging remarks about coffee and decor, a woman dressed as a demonic clown complete with red nose and red horns, and Frannie talking to the desk sergeant.

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“No!”

Fraser and Ray turned at the same moment, Ray flickering a warning glance at Fraser, who aborted his move to stand.

Frannie was staring at them, hand to her mouth, other hand to her throat, and her eyes...

“Ray—”

No words, just another warning look, from a man who'd spent far more time with women in general and Frannie in particular.

If you're sure, Fraser's uncertain look at Ray said. Caught Ray's warning glance, and looked around just in time to meet Frannie full on.

“You could've told me,” Frannie hissed. “Instead you let me—oh how *could* you? And how long? Since just—just—” keeping the words in, keeping her voice low, keeping this a remarkably small scene, given her provocation. But there were other people in the break room, feds, and she had her brother to protect. “Since just, you know, or always? Oh my God! Did you and Ray—”

Fraser didn't blush, as he hadn't, when it had been another Vecchio questioning him about his activities—sexual or otherwise—with a sibling.

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“Francesca—”

“I don’t want to know!” she said, hands coming up, looking away.

I do, Ray’s look said.

So do we, everyone else’s looks said.

“Understood,” Fraser said, very gently. “It was never my intention—”

“Yeah, well you could’ve told me you didn’t have any intentions. I’ve put so much into—oh, forget it!”

She stormed off, clicking heels and taut back, leaving silence behind. Until Ray looked around. “What’re you all looking at? You never seen my sister get mad before?”

No, no, no, of course not, they all murmured, but their expressions all said something else.

“C’mon,” Ray said, grabbing Fraser by the upper arm, “if I get one more speaking look, I’m gonna go deaf. Let’s go chase down our friend the fence and see what we can get from him.”

So they made their escape, knowing that the ripples were spreading out behind them, in an ever increasing, hopefully enticing, circle.

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“You okay?”

“Hmmm?”

“I said, you okay, Fraser?”

“Oh.” Eyebrow scritch, look out of the car window as the fence’s seedy neighborhood disappeared behind them. “I was thinking about Francesca.”

Ray shifted in his seat, flexed his hand on the steering wheel. “Yeah. Sucks.”

“I wouldn’t know. Ah—sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

Ray was still staring at him in near shock. “Fraser, is there something there I should know about?”

“No.”

Bucket of cold water, Ray shrinking under the impact. “I didn’t mean—I know you and me are just for the duration, I just...she’s my sister while he’s gone, I need to look out for her.”

“Ah—I didn’t mean—” Fraser sighed. “Sorry.”

“S okay. Didn’t come out right.”

For either of them. Fraser began again, trying harder. “Francesca... Ray Vecchio once had some cause for concern that my relationship with his sister wasn’t entirely familial.”

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“He thought you were dipping Frannie? What, the guy’s blind or something?”

“Well, she did rather give the impression...”

“And now she’s getting ripped because we’re giving the same impression.”

Well, yes. They were giving the same impression. Or maybe they were doing a hell of a lot more.

Fraser looked at Ray, cautious, careful. “And we’re...”

No labels. Just the reassurance of Ray’s conviction. “For the duration.”

“Yes.”

“So you and she never...”

“That would be telling, Ray.”

“And since Frannie’s been decent and good, you’ll be too gentlemanly to tell.”

A pause, Fraser swallowing, running his fingers along the brim of his hat. “I didn’t intend to say those things about Victoria. In the heat of the moment, I’m afraid I forgot myself.”

“Good,” Ray said, smiling at him suddenly, the leash let slip, “that’s the way it’s supposed to be.”

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“But—”

“But nothing. God didn’t smite you with lightning or a plague of boils or crocuses—”

“Locusts—”

“Roaches or nasty, personal itches, right? So you can stop being the Marquis of Queensberry.”

“Ray, he wasn’t involved in manners, he was involved in establishing the accepted rules for boxing.”

“Is he the guy who set up the *gentlemanly* conduct for boxing?”

“Well, yes, Ray—”

“And is the saying ‘all’s fair in love and war’?”

“Well, of course, Ray—”

“And is boxing not a form of small war?”

“Ray?”

“So if boxing is war and all’s fair in love and war, isn’t the Marquis of Queensberry the right expert for gentlemanly conduct in matters of love?”

“Uh—”

“Shut up and just say, ‘Yes, Ray, my friend.’”

“If I shut up, how can I say anything?”

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“Just say it.”

“Yes, Ray, my friend.” Heartbeat. Two, three. “My very dearest friend.”

Ray nearly hit the truck in front of them. “I thought—”

Very sincere look from the Mountie, very speaking. “Can we love only one person? Can we have but a single friend?”

No, and that was the problem. “For the duration,” Ray said again, prayer or curse or promise. “For the duration.”

And there was nothing much either of them had to say after that.

Ray double-parked outside of the Consulate, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel. “I thought you had time off to deal with the case?”

“I do indeed. However, time and tide and forms wait for no man, and if I don’t fill in the appropriate forms, payroll will be affected as will the bookkeeping.”

“How long?”

“Two hours at most.”

“Okay. I’ll go follow-up on the robbery, come get you at six.”

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“Thank you kindly, Ray.”

“Hey! Fraser!”

Fraser stopped, hand on open door, one foot already outside.

“Aren’t you forgetting something?”

“Ah,” Fraser said. “The case.”

And the kiss.

Fraser pulled the door closed, and twisted round to Ray. A chaste peck, to Ray’s cheek, then another, just as brief, just as chaste, to Ray’s lips. Old married couple, yes, but with a lick of honeymoon lurking barely beneath the surface.

“For the duration, Ray,” Fraser whispered against Ray’s cheek.

And then Fraser was gone, and Ray was back to being Ray Vecchio Mark II, and being the Kowalski/Vecchio undercover invitation to blackmail, and on his way to solving another burglary, hoping he and Fraser had been seen.

Because if they’d been seen, then that made this real, not the way his wedding had, but it was as much as he was going to get this time around. For the duration.

It probably looked perfectly natural—or at least, it probably

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looked as if they were used to doing this—when Fraser waited till Dief's tail was out of the way and got into the car himself, leaning over less than half-way to meet Ray with another of those chaste kisses.

"Good evening, Ray, and how was your day?"

"Honey, I'm ho-ome," Ray mimicked.

"Wrong accent," Fraser said readily. "Although..." added musingly, with just a flick of a glance at Ray, "I have been told I have reddish highlights in my hair at the end of summer."

"Yeah? Well I go blond."

And was that a 'from a bottle' muttered by Fraser?

"You complaining?"

"Would it make any difference?"

"From Mr. GQ Meets Details? Not a chance."

"So it doesn't matter then, for instance," Fraser said, staring rather intensely at the streets passing by outside the car window, "that my favorite shade thus far was the one you wore from September 18th to November 3rd?"

Of course, Ray had to give him a look for that. "I don't know what's freakier, that you notice or that you remember the dates."

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Fraser's shoulders relaxed suddenly, and he darted a smile at Ray. "I'd say the dates, myself."

"And you're the expert on freaks, Frase."

The look Fraser gave Ray was very speaking indeed; in fact, it even had a tone of voice, drolly affectionate and teasing.

"I walked into that."

"With both eyes open," Fraser agreed cheerfully, "and both feet in your mouth."

"You're in a good mood. The Ice Queen on vacation?"

"The opposite, in fact. She received a communiqué this morning that the Consul have an audit impending, and she's rather...detail oriented at this point."

"So the good mood is..."

Bright grin, dimple and all. "For the duration, Ray," Fraser said, happily. "I have—this—for the duration. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof."

Ray gave him another look for that. "So an afternoon of form filling with the Ice Queen barking at you makes you decide to just—cut loose and...what? I don't get it, Fraser."

"I've already been granted time to work this case with you in

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addition to my usual liaising duties and in place of my regular Consular duties. So even with the additional work for the audit, I will still be spending most of my time on real police work. And the Inspector has gone through phases like this before, and they've passed. And—"

"And?"

"And I realized I had, well, that last night we'd..."

A crowd of laughter shocked from Ray. "You mean, you got some, you're gonna get some more, your dick's happy, so you're happy."

"Well, I have tried to tell you, I'm just a man, much like any other man."

"No, you're not, but that's okay. Part of your charm."

"You think I'm charming?"

"Fishing?"

"Angling."

"Fishing."

"Digging."

"Fishing."

"Hoping."

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“Yeah,” Ray said after a moment. “Whatever it is you’re hoping you got, you got. In spades.”

“Really?”

“You don’t need to fish on this one, Fraser. You got it. Truckloads of it.”

“Ray...”

“Yeah?”

We are going to...tonight, aren’t we?”

Long look, long, lean, hungry. “You want to?”

Voice slightly hoarse, and very needy. “Very much so.”

“Good,” Ray said, staring at Fraser’s mouth. “Good.”

“Then might I suggest that the faster you start driving, the faster we’ll be home and able to do...what we want to do?”

And it took all of three blocks, with two stop signs and one set of traffic lights, for Fraser to realize that he had, perhaps, chosen the wrong word in ‘faster.’

Parking in Ray’s spot at his apartment building; passing each other files, moving around each other, as they had done any number of times in the past, but it was different tonight, of

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course. Different because this time, the small touches and looks really did mean what people thought they meant; different because tonight, the sexual tension others saw was there, unsublimated, barely held in check. Postponed, for the moment, not denied.

“Dinner,” Fraser said as they closed the door to the outside world.

“Sex,” Ray replied, sliding his hand round the back of Fraser’s neck, Fraser’s mouth opening, tongue-tip darting, Ray licking Fraser’s bottom lip, murmuring into Fraser’s mouth: “You. Oh yeah,” Ray sighed. “I’m gonna eat you all up.”

But:

“Dinner,” with an edge to it, Fraser walking away, all starched shorts and epaulets.

“Uh—” Ray stood for a moment, watching his personal lead soldier march stiffly into his kitchen. There were several ways he could take this, ranging from panic to fury to getting the wounding comment in before he could be hurt to swearing blind that Fraser didn’t like or want him at all ever for anything. But he’d done that, years ago, outgrown it through the cycle of his marriage, so instead he propped himself up against the wall, thumbs

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hooked into the back pockets of his jeans, body language deliberately open. “So you want to tell me what’s going on or do I get to guess or do I get to react badly, fuck this up and sit around wondering where the hell I went wrong?”

“I—uh...”

“Fraser,” whispered soft and easy, Ray moving now, coming close enough to touch, but not touching, not quite yet. Just being close. “We got three weeks of this case, and if you want it, until he comes back or you leave. Or do we got to find another sinking ship so you’ll communicate with me?”

“Ray, I...”

Touching now, but just a hand on Fraser’s shoulder. “Buddies,” Ray told him, squeezing that tense shoulder lightly. “No matter what else, we’re buddies.”

“Control,” Fraser said at last.

A huff of laughter, breath dancing across Fraser’s nape. “Yeah, you got control issues. So I’ll back off, let you call the shots—”

Fraser stood stock still in front of the cold fridge, with Ray warm all down his back. “No, it’s not that. Well, yes it is, in that it is, in fact, control issues, or rather, an issue of control.”

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A pause, while Ray translated that. “You mean, you lose control of yourself?”

Relief, and a sigh. “Yes.”

“Talked about that,” Ray said in a tone that brooked no more discussion. “Covered that.”

Softly uncertain, glistening with faith, words repeated on a breath of hope. “You have me.”

No hesitation, Ray’s voice unlowered, strong and sure. “And I’ll stop you.”

“From what?”

“From doing what you did when she came back. If it helps any,” small kiss dropped to the right side of Fraser’s nape, where the hair looked shorter, the curl soft against Ray’s lips, “I don’t have a house I can mortgage. You could put my brother up for bond, though, if you’d like.”

“Ray—”

“Buddies,” Ray repeated. “Buddies, and partners. I watch your back, you watch mine.”

“Safe?” Fraser asked, hands not entirely steady as they traced around the green paper shamrock still stuck to the door of Ray’s fridge.

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“Safe. Me and you, keeping each other safe.”

Deep breath, Fraser’s back pressing against Ray’s chest, a gusting sigh as Fraser let the breath go. “Okay,” he said. “Safe. But dinner first.”

“Oh no, you first—”

“Dinner,” determinedly, as Fraser ambushed Ray’s hands before they could reach their target. “Because you, buddy,” turning quickly, one hand palming Ray’s ass, “are going to need your stamina.”

“Buddies,” Ray smiled, leaning in, forehead to forehead, giving Fraser the control Fraser needed. “Yeah. I like that.”

And so they had dinner first, fast, microwaved leftovers strewn together on plates, eaten in haste on the couch.

Undressing, in the near dark, Ray the one to switch off the living room light, Dief the one to whine about being told to stay on the couch.

Ray wasn’t whining, nor was he staying on the couch: he was moving fast and frenetic, loose-limbed in a way that most men his age could only envy. Or admire.

Fraser stopped half-way through skinning off his trousers and underwear to simply stare unabashedly at Ray.

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“What?” Ray fumbled to a halt. “I got more sauce on me?”

“No, nothing like that,” Fraser told him, getting rid of the last of his own clothing, advancing, with intent, on Ray. “I was simply admiring the view.”

“I could get behind that,” Ray replied, moving backwards, sprawling onto the bed, arms and legs akimbo.

But Fraser wasn’t talking, was only looking, and moving, one hand, four fingertips, drawing the lines of Ray’s body.

Ray watched, bemused, as Fraser took his time, an unhurried contour mapping of territory. “You like that, huh?”

A half smile greeted that, Fraser nodding downward to indicate his own body rising to the occasion. “You need to ask?”

“Well, now that you mention it,” Ray said, cocky grin meeting Fraser’s cocky reaction. “You like it,” Ray said sing-song, “you really, really like it!”

And incipient laughter caught in his throat as Fraser bent down, and started licking. And sucking. Nibbling, too.

Ray’s body was busy speaking for him, an endless rhythmic chant of ‘I like it, I like it, I like it’, and Fraser was hanging on every word of that. Where the fingertips had been, the mouth

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followed, Fraser paying attention, responding in turn to Ray's responses; learning what pleased, what didn't, what was barely noticed—and what had Ray pushing for more.

"Let me—" Ray said.

"Hush, don't worry," Fraser whispered, lips light and ticklish as butterflies against Ray's ribs. "Let me, Ray. Let me."

"But—"

"You want me?"

Lying there, revealed, to perceptive eyes and the knowledge of his own neediness. "Yes."

"You need me?"

Eyes shutting fast, all the better to hide behind. "Yes."

"Do you have any idea how much I need someone to need me?"

Eyes opening slowly, reluctant to read Fraser's face.

"Do you know how often people run from that? Or use it against me?"

He was a detective; he could make an educated guess, but he kept quiet, letting Fraser speak, letting Fraser do and say what he needed to.

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“Do you know,” and Fraser went back to touching, went back to using his mouth, making Ray’s body come tinglingly awake wherever he caressed, “just how much I want to promise you the sun and the moon and the stars?”

“I trust you,” Ray said, simple answer containing so complex a truth. Fraser was measuring Ray’s reactions intently, fingers pinching Ray’s left nipple lightly. “You shouldn’t.”

Now it wasn’t fingers holding sensitive flesh, but a hand covering Ray’s mouth, silencing the protests unspoken, and a mouth covering Ray’s nipple, silencing him that way, with lips that moistened, and then opened as Ray’s hand pressed the back of Fraser’s neck, pulling Fraser in closer. Ray’s hand finally clutched, holding Fraser tight as the lips gave way to teeth, the kiss giving way to a stinging bite.

“Maybe—” but that was all Ray had time to say, the word fading to a hiss of breath sucked in past the hand against Ray’s mouth. And another hiss, because the fingers were no longer against Ray’s mouth, but Fraser’s fingers were inside Ray now, against his tongue, flooding Ray with the taste of Fraser’s fingers, the touch of them, the symbolism of them.

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And so Ray gave up trying to speak, luxuriated instead in giving what was needed, in being, for once—for now—exactly what someone else in this world wanted. Floated, happy and content, in being enough.

“Do you like this?” Fraser whispered against Ray’s skin.

Yes, Ray’s body said, with an arch of back pushing nipple into Fraser’s mouth and a suck of mouth pulling Fraser’s fingers in deeper.

“Do you like this?” And a fractured moment without contact, as fingers were tugged free and Fraser’s mouth stopped working its magic on Ray.

Then, what Ray had expected, what Ray had been waiting for, what Ray had been holding his breath in anticipation of. Mouth, hot, wet, sucking mouth, taking his cock inside.

“Oh yeah,” Ray moaned, thrusting up, pushing hard, groaning as Fraser took him, and sucked him harder. “You know what I want, give it to me.”

“Not yet,” mumbled against the head of Ray’s cock. “You said I could take what I needed.”

“Yeah,” Ray said happily, running his finger around Fraser’s wet lips. “Which is what I want.”

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“Really?” was the reply, Fraser nipping Ray’s finger, then opening his mouth wide, so wide, lips stretching into a perfect oval, Ray’s cock sucked inside, sucked deep and fast and hard.

Ray’s hands clenched in short hair, and Ray groaned, tried to do the decent thing and pull back, tried not to choke Fraser, but strong hands grabbed his ass, and tugged, hard, unyielding, until Ray was all the way down Fraser’s throat, his own mouth opening in shocked pleasure as he stared at the sight of Fraser sucking him off. He was in deep, as far as he could go, as far as he could be taken, Fraser’s nose buried in his pubic hair and himself buried in Fraser. “Please,” he muttered, but was ignored, or perhaps misunderstood, for Fraser just used that tongue all the more, and sucked all the harder, until Ray’s cock was as much Fraser’s as it was his own.

Ray touched the wet circle of lips where Fraser was taking him inside, an echo of the night before, and the need. And the pleasure. “Love you,” he whispered.

And Fraser’s all-too-knowing eyes flashed brightly as Fraser looked at him.

“Symbolically or something,” Ray repeated, an edge of

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desperation to it this time, unable to quite manage a smile.

“Gotta love a guy who gives you great head, right?”

Fraser pulled away for a moment, mouth closed, lips still wet, chin glistening from sucking Ray. “Yes,” he finally said, with a terrible gentleness and a caress to Ray’s cheek. “Yes,” and then he opened his mouth wide again, and took Ray in.

“You like this?” Ray asked, softly, wonderingly.

No words in response, just more flickering caresses from Fraser’s tongue, and Fraser’s hand coming up to cradle and stroke Ray’s balls.

“Oh yeah,” Ray sighed again. There was a sudden coolness on his cock, and a sudden wet warmth lower, Fraser taking his balls into his mouth one at a time, sucking on them, licking them, pressing his tongue hard and flat between them, making them feel tight and full and hot.

“Fuck!” Ray said, hips pushing up to meet Fraser’s tongue. “Do that again—”

“Yes,” Fraser said, licking, thumbs rubbing just hard enough on Ray’s inner thighs.

And then nothing.

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Ray stared at him, cock trembling, belly quivering, heart hammering in his chest. “What do you want from me?” he asked.

Everything, Fraser’s look said, devouring, wild, hungry, dark with all the things Fraser had learned at the hands of others. Your heart, that stare said, still beating, on a silver platter.

As Fraser’s heart had been ripped out of him. At least once. Maybe twice.

“No,” Ray whispered, braced for Fraser’s rejection or Fraser’s hurt—or even another of Fraser’s roundhouse punches. “I can take whatever you can give.”

But he wasn’t going to surrender. He wasn’t going to let Fraser take what he couldn’t afford to give. He could love, could even, perhaps, dare to say it aloud again, but that wasn’t what Fraser was asking for.

Ray found himself wondering just exactly what Fraser had learned, and what it had cost him.

For a long moment, Fraser stared at Ray, broodingly dark, imminently dangerous, his hand wrapped tightly around Ray’s vulnerable cock.

Ray simply met that gaze, and lay there, vulnerable, but his was the hand on the leash.

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And then the dark was gone, banished like a memory, and Fraser smiled. Bright, beautiful, warm as a summer's day. "Thank you," was whispered, the words soft and wet where they dropped gently onto Ray's cock.

"I could love you," Fraser said, so sweetly, tongue tip darting into the slit at the head of Ray's cock, fingers stroking his balls, fondling Ray, giving pleasure in return for not being allowed to take too much.

"Would it make any difference if you did?" Ray asked, wishing the words back as soon as they left his mouth. Too real, too much—too true. "Shh—don't say anything, just shut up, don't say anything, just suck me—" Ray's hand on the back of Fraser's neck pushing Fraser down and Ray's cock pushing up, hard cock and soft lips, pushing into Fraser, past a delectable, deliberate ring of resistance, perfect echo of the night before, fucking Fraser again, fucking Fraser's perfect mouth, fucking hard a mouth that never said 'fuck,' that never swore, but look at it now, filled with cock, glistening with cock, listen to Fraser now, filthy sounds, sex sounds, venal and raw and honest, the sounds of one man sucking another man's cock.

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Ray thrust hard, and Fraser took him, moaned around him. Testing the waters, Ray said: “Cocksucker.”

And Fraser’s hips bucked, involuntary, mindless rut.

“Fuck,” Ray said, and Fraser thrust again, and swallowed and sucked harder.

“Shoulda known,” Ray whispered, hand on Fraser’s nape, holding him in place while Ray fucked into his mouth. Issues of control. Yes, God, yes, Ray thought, fucking Fraser again, watching Fraser take everything, watching Fraser pretend that this was Fraser letting go of control. That this was Fraser trusting.

“Fuck me,” Ray said, astonished by the way his voice shivered.

Fraser sucked him again, and did something marvelous with his tongue.

“I mean it,” Ray said, trying not to thrust into that wet welcome.

“Fuck me.”

But Fraser was stroking his balls again, rolling them between fingers, bringing Ray closer.

Ray was no fool: he could argue with Fraser, or he could find a little bit of heaven in Fraser’s mouth, so Ray let go, and thrust into

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Fraser, thrust and pushed and flooded Fraser with his come, and then lay there, panting.

Recovered his breath just as Fraser reached down for his own cock, and said, again, “Fuck me.”

And even in the midst of passion, even with his breath coming in frantic gasps, Fraser fought that. Wordlessly, with wet lips pressed tightly closed, a thin, pallid pink line, a barrier that could not be breached.

But Ray had been inside there. He’d seen that mouth stretched wide to take him, he’d seen Fraser with his chin glistening from making Ray’s own cock wet and slippery, he’d seen... That’s what he’d seen: Fraser, needing control. He could do that; he could give Fraser that.

“Told you,” Ray said, lying down on his back, an action replay of Fraser’s own movements the night before, “I gotcha. And I won’t let you go too far.”

That mouth, that font of generosity and prissiness and a joyously oral fixation, was still pressed shut, and now Fraser’s eyes were narrowing, his back going stiff.

Like a cat, which Ray figured would be funny—tomorrow, or

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next week, when laughing wouldn't end in carnage or at least one seriously pissed Fraser stomping all the way back to Canada.

"Fuck me," he repeated, insisting, pushing and pulling at various bits of Fraser, getting no co-operation, no real resistance, just slippery seal immovability.

Okay. So try something else.

Words.

Fuck, he was going to have to do the talking thing again.

"Do you want me?"

A considering pause, then a nod.

"And you know how needy I am?"

"Don't—" snapped at him, real anger flaring, unhidden, for a moment.

"Don't what?" Ray snapped right back, shoving at Fraser a little, the flat of his hand on smooth chest. "Don't lie here and tell you to fuck me?"

Hard and flat as a knife. "Don't lie to me."

Ray looked at him, and hoped Fraser could read the expression on his face, because the only thing he could think to say was something along the lines of 'just how stupid are you' and 'you

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insane fuck, you got me demanding you fuck me and you want to *talk*' and overriding it all, an incredulous, outraged, 'look who's calling the kettle black, Mr. Liar.'

"Lie?" Ray finally said, when it was painfully clear that Fraser wasn't planning on helping them along here.

"This isn't about you."

"No?" Ray said, silken soft and dangerous. "You sure about that?"

The first glimmer of doubt in Fraser's eyes, the first softening of those lips.

"You think I don't need to take? You think I don't need to know I can give you what you need, that you'll keep coming back to me because—"

Ray slammed his own mouth shut, a serious case of closing the stable after the horses got out. He waited, breathing harshly, for Fraser's reaction.

For the duration, he'd said, to Fraser.

And now he really was well and truly caught. Only not in the way he'd wanted Fraser to catch him. And hold him. No trap and release, not this time, not with him, nope, no how no way—only Fraser wasn't supposed to know. Not yet. Not quite yet.

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Fraser wasn't erect any more—looked, indeed, as if he never would again, and was even willing to entertain the ungrateful thought that that just might be a good thing.

“For the duration,” Fraser said, flat and cold, getting up from the bed, turning his back to Ray. “Wasn't that *your* idea?”

Panic, pointed and hot, stabbing into Ray. Who'd known this feeling before. With Stella. And he hadn't known how to make her come back either.

Fraser was in the living room, reaching for his boots, when Ray came through, naked and rumped, shivering from the cold, arms wrapped around himself.

He didn't look stunningly beautiful; he wasn't a work of art, he wasn't so incredibly sexy that one look at him had Fraser on his knees at Ray's feet.

Ray looked like a man, just a man, who was cold, and hurting, but not giving up, standing there naked and shriveled, shivering.

“It's not like you didn't know,” Ray said, almost conversationally.

Fraser raised an eyebrow at him, cocked his head like Dief hearing particularly unwelcome ‘no pizza for you’ orders.

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“You heard me,” Ray said, trying to hold his head high. “You saw me. You knew.”

“Knew what? That you were lying to me?”

Perhaps it would look graceful, if Ray were clothed, or if Ray weren't holding himself as if afraid he was on the verge of falling apart, but standing there, under Fraser's shuttered gaze, Ray's fidgeting just looked ungainly and nervous. “It wasn't an out and out lie. I was only telling you what you wanted me to tell you.”

“I'm not in the habit of wanting people to lie to me.”

Oh, that was rich. Good intentions began to slip, unnoticed, through Ray's fingers. “No? Only because you've got this big habit of ignoring the things that don't suit you—or only letting yourself hear something if it's exactly what you want it to be.”

“Like you,” Fraser said, all cyanide bitterness underlying the almond sweetness, “and Stella?”

Low blow, enough to make Ray flinch.

Enough to make Fraser come to his senses. “Sorry—” he began. Stopped. Began again. “I'm...”

And his look said it all: he didn't quite know what he was.

Story Beginning

Which brought every one of Ray's good intentions right back, and added a few more.

"Come back to bed," Ray said, immediately raising a hand to silence Fraser. "Not for sex. Just—just so you're not leaving."

"For the duration," Fraser accused.

"And you knew better," Ray answered right back.

Fraser twisted his head that certain way, the tension in his neck cracking loudly. "Perhaps I did," he said at last. "But still..."

"Leave it," Ray said, reaching a hand out towards Fraser. "Come back to bed, get some sleep, we'll fix this in the morning."

Will we? Fraser's look said. And after a moment: "I'm sorry, but I can't," Fraser said out loud, his words landing like slaps on Ray's naked skin, Ray's eyes flinching, again. And Fraser's 'no' turned into: "Not right now—not tonight."

"Tomorrow?" Pushing, giving not an inch, taking a yard. "We still gotta do this case."

Oh yes, the case. As if either of them truly believed in it.

But it served as enough excuse for other things, so perhaps...

"Yes," Fraser heard himself say, even though self-preservation was screaming at him to run from another lover who would tell

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him lies and hide behind a smiling face, as she had. “We’ll discuss the case tomorrow.”

And that was enough, for now. It had to be.

Half past fucking dawn, and Ray was going to kill his fucking neighbor—

Until it registered: that was his own door closing, and that was a very familiar voice muttering imprecations and hissing “shh!” And that, very definitely, was the sound of a wolf’s claws on his floor.

The relief went straight to his head, dizzying him.

“Ray?” quietly, from the doorway.

Ray lifted his head from his pillow, looked over his shoulder.

Fraser, in civvies and frown, arms folded, gazing at him.

“Is it morning yet?” Ray asked, tongue and brain fuzzy.

“Yes. You said—” Fraser cleared his throat, and went on, “that we could ah fix last night this morning. As it’s morning...”

“Barely,” Ray snapped, never at his best this early in the day, and before the benefits of caffeine and sugar. “No, wait, I didn’t mean it—I meant, good, Fraser, great, fine, terrific, we’ll fix this.”

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And that was the most peculiar smile on Fraser's face.

"But coffee first, I would think," Fraser told him, "and perhaps a shower?"

Ray took a deep breath, sniffed at himself. Considered, for all of half a second, how much better Fraser's sense of smell was than his own. "Shower," he agreed readily. "Then—"

"Coffee," Fraser said, doing that deflecting thing again.

"Then Fraser," Ray said firmly, "we're fixing this...this... whatever."

And wonder of wonders, all he got was a "Yes, Ray," a watered down smile, and the sight of Fraser retreating to the kitchen, a promise of coffee drifting in his wake.

Showered, not shaved, and with hair unspiked, Ray looked at himself in the mirror.

He'd learned many things with Stella; knew some of the things not to do, knew some of the things that could paper over the cracks, at least for a while.

And deliberately, very deliberately, reached for his razor.

Coffee was waiting on the countertop, sweetened just right, with

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brown sugar instead of candy, since he'd remembered to pick some up last Thursday.

No. He hadn't remembered: Fraser had remembered, and reminded him.

That had to count for something, just like all the little things he'd done for Stella should've counted for more than she let them, at the end.

He knew what he'd meant—the unspoken message from him to her—when he remembered to pick her up pantyhose and tampons, and he'd known what it meant when he finally realized she wasn't remembering to pick him up toothpicks and ice cream.

Ray drank his first mug of coffee in—well, not quite cozy silence, but at least they weren't hostile. More...still thinking about it.

"Okay," Ray said, hands wrapped around his second mug of coffee, "let's get this fixed."

"Ah, yes, well," Fraser said, sounding brisk and alert and completely at a loss, all at the same time. "I uhm... I ah..."

"I think the word you're looking for," Ray informed him, "is sorry."

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“Actually Ray, I believe it was ‘apologize.’”

And Ray had his head raised, eyes narrowed, hackles up before he realized Fraser was trying to joke to make it easier.

“Yeah?” he asked, eyes still narrowed, trying hard to smile, trying not to repeat his own old patterns. “Sure it wasn’t ‘grovel?’”

Deep breath, Fraser straightening his spine, coming to full, perfect attention. In jeans and well-worn flannel. With the sleeves of his henley peeking out from under his shirt sleeves.

Ray very nearly didn’t hide his smile in time. “Grovel?” he nudged Fraser.

“You missed out ‘abjectly,’ Ray,” Fraser replied. “I ah...I over-reacted last night.”

And it was going to be that easy? Where was the soul searching, the agonizing, the prying blood out of a stone in the form of a Fraser-confession?

“Yeah?” Ray said, for want of anything else.

“Yes. I am sorry,” Fraser told him, in that sincerely sincere way of his that made his usual sincerity look almost frivolous. “I was reacting from...past lessons and false expectations.”

Ray winced in empathy. “They taught you well.”

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"I chose to learn certain things," Fraser corrected.

"Fraser—"

"Please, Ray. I can't—"

No, Fraser wouldn't be able to stand there and vilify even a villain, let alone someone—someones—he'd loved. Loved. Still. Would love, maybe.

And that thought was depressing enough to ruin even brown sugar coffee.

"Ray—"

"What?"

There was a long pause, silence until Dief made a rumbling, grumbling noise, not quite a growl. "Ray, you said I can trust you, and you me."

Uh oh. "Yeah?"

"Then—" a thumb to eyebrow, and Fraser looking away for a moment, actually reaching up to tug at a collar that wasn't there. "Please don't push me where I can't go."

"I was just getting you past your limits—"

"Past my limits? Ray, maybe that was your intention, but you were pushing me, to—" Fraser struggling, visibly, for control, "to

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take what I didn't want to take, to give what I didn't want to give—”

And that just did it. “You still don't want to see yourself, do you?” Ray yelled, the anger rising up and ambushing him. “You blame me for you believing it was just ‘for the duration,’ and now it's me pushing you, well, let me tell you, Mr. Perfect—”

“I'm not—”

“Yeah, *I* know you're not perfect,” stalking closer to Fraser, “and I don't need you to be perfect because I'm not perfect and you know what? I tried living with perfection before, I married perfection before, and it hurts like fuck because the rest of us can never measure up. So you don't have to be perfect for me, but you still gotta be perfect for *you*. Only,” stalking ever closer, close enough to see the whites of Fraser's eyes and the angry flare of his nostrils, “I'm not taking the blame so you can be perfect. You say I lied to you about the duration? Only because you went along with it. And I pushed you last night to where you didn't want to go? Only because you're afraid, too fucking afraid to face yourself and the fact that you got needs like the rest of us. It's okay for me to get sweaty and messy and fall apart fucking you, but oh no, Mr. Perfect can't get his hair mussed—”

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“I had you in my mouth,” growled at him, from inches away, Fraser’s voice a tightly coiled whip of anger. “I didn’t care how I looked or whether or not you—or anyone else would call me...” the near mockery in Ray’s eyes the final, goading spur, the word spat out like snake venom, “—cocksucker.”

Ray heard that, saw that word coming out of pristine Fraser’s mouth, and knew this was out of line, way beyond safe Fraser-space. Grabbed his own temper with both hands—experience and practice—and stepped backwards, as Fraser, unleashed, advanced on him.

“I came here this morning to apologize, to fix this whatever we have between us, and instead— do you think this is *easy* for me? To lay myself bare, to let myself go—to let *them* go? And you’re rubbing my nose in it—”

Still advancing, dark, the anger fed by raw, bleeding pain.

And it was that that truly stopped Ray.

A promise. He’d made a vow to this man, more binding than his own wedding vows.

You can trust me.

And: I won’t let you.

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“Fraser,” he said, very softly, bringing the tone down, his police training coming to the fore, and he expected the flare of anger he got when Fraser recognized that. “I didn’t want to hurt you—” and God, wasn’t that what Fraser had been saying to *him*? “—I didn’t mean to push you too far. But—”

“But what?”

And all his platitudes and ‘right’ answers dried up and blew away like leaves in autumn. “I need you,” Ray heard himself whisper, and saw as Fraser’s anger dimmed to embers, then to ash. “I don’t need the polite guy who won’t take, I need...”

And Fraser understood. “You need me to take you. So that you’ll belong to me.”

Ray fought the temptation to hang his head in shame. “The way I don’t belong to Stella any more.”

“Dear God, Ray—”

“Sorry,” Ray said, “I know, I know, it’s not all my fault, but...some of it is.”

“And a great deal of it’s mine. Ray, I can’t—just—the way you wanted me to last night.”

Here was the answer Ray wanted—the answer he needed. “Why not?”

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“Because...” another of those nervous gestures. “Because then I’ll be treating you as I was.”

“Oh fuck,” Ray said, so heartfelt that even prissiest Fraser wouldn’t find fault, and this morning’s Fraser could only muster a faded smile for. “I didn’t think—”

“Unfortunately, neither did I,” Fraser told him. “I’m...” head lowered, canted to the side, so he could whisper it to Ray, “not very good at relationships.”

“Oh yeah, and I’m a real master of them, just ask the Stella.”

“I don’t think that would actually be wise,” Fraser said, shaky smile and faint attempt at humor, the anger and pain slowly being pressed back down into whatever wells Fraser kept hidden inside.

“Yeah, I don’t think she’d appreciate my—” and Ray stumbled over another of those little mines in their own personal field. What the hell were they? He looked at Fraser, found Fraser looking at him. Gave up even trying to look like he had a clue what they were doing. “So what the hell are we?” he asked.

“Partners,” Fraser replied without hesitation. “Buddies.”

“Yeah,” Ray said, feeling the warmth of that seep into his bones, soothing the raw places last night and this morning had

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left. “We’re still that.” Smile faltering, reality intruding. “For the duration.”

“It doesn’t matter what else happens, Ray,” Fraser said, backing away a little, looking unsure and ruffled and a bit lost. “We’ll always be partners.”

Yeah, right, Ray’s expression said. “No,” he added, sharply. “I don’t want to hear it, okay? We got—this thing we got, for however long we got it. You know I want more, I know I want more, I don’t want to hear you spinning me any tales just to make me feel better.”

“All right,” Fraser replied, very quietly. “But—”

“No,” Ray told him, gentling it with a pat to Fraser’s shoulder. “I don’t want fairy tales.”

Fraser stood there, and moistened his lips, and looked at Ray for a long moment. “I spent much of last night and this morning thinking.”

“Yeah?”

“About why I over-reacted—”

“Yeah, well, seeing it from your side, that wasn’t over-reacting, Fraser. I shouldn’ta—”

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“No, you shouldn’t have. But you did, and I did, and...” This time Fraser didn’t give into any of his usual nervous tics, just stared at Ray until it was Ray fidgeting with nervousness, and Fraser who’d found whatever he needed to keep talking. “Will you let me go?”

And Ray’s “fuck, no!” blurted from him before he could censor it. “Uh, yeah, sure, I mean, yeah,” he added on, all casualness and deceit, “sure, if you wanna go, I’ll let you go.”

“Lying to me again, Ray?”

“No—okay, okay, yeah. I don’t let go real good,” Ray said, a master of understatement. “I won’t crowd you if you decide to go, but—”

“You won’t make it easy on me.”

And another of Fraser’s needs was there, in his eyes, waiting to be read.

“No,” Ray whispered, “I won’t make it easy. I’ll fight you, I’ll fight you so fucking hard it’ll be easier to stay.”

“Yes,” Fraser whispered back, eyes alight. “God, yes.”

And then they stood there just looking at each other.

“Uh... This isn’t the healthiest relationship, is it?” Ray finally muttered.

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“No, it would certainly seem not,” Fraser answered, with rather unnerving—and not entirely unconvincing—cheerfulness.

“And you think this is a good thing?”

“I’m a freak,” Fraser said, and perhaps it was meant as a joke, but the truth laid him bare, “as are you. And perhaps this is the healthiest relationship in the world for us—balance, Ray.”

Balance, between what each of them needed, what each could give and each could take.

“That’s, uh, you know, that’s really where things went wrong for Stella and me,” Ray confessed.

“And you know my history.”

Oh yeah. Ray knew.

“So maybe,” Ray mused, “maybe a fu—messed-up from-the-start thing is good for us.”

“You said it yourself, Ray,” Fraser replied, muffled a little because he was, rather to Ray’s surprise, now engaged in the mortally mundane routine of getting eggs from the fridge to make breakfast, “you were willing to try this because you knew from the start that when it went wrong, it wouldn’t be your fault.” And then Fraser straightened suddenly, and looked at Ray with surprise. “Nor would it be mine.”

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“Just realized that?”

“Yes,” Fraser told him, and shook his head. “Remarkable,” he murmured and went back to scrambling eggs.

“Freak,” Ray said, trying the new meaning on for size.

And got a bright smile for that, even if Fraser’s eyes were still a little shadowed.

The dishes were in the sink, Fraser standing there sink-cleaning again, Ray the one happy to leave dishes where they landed until he ran out of clean stuff.

“Ray?”

“Uh-oh, you’re not looking at me—this is gonna be another one of those conversations, isn’t it?”

“No,” said quickly, Fraser turning just as fast, a flush rising to heat his face. “I just wanted to mention that it’s still early, really quite very early and morning and...”

“You’re blithering,” Ray told him, but indulgently, his stomach happily fed and his brain ready to listen to other parts of his body. “You wanna try and fix last night?”

Rapid nodding for that.

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“We can fix it,” Ray said, taking Fraser’s hand, the way they’d been seen before, but different now, of course, very different.

“Told you last night, we can fix it.”

“And if you tell me often enough, you’ll believe it too?”

“But at least if I’m wrong, it’s not my fault. Or yours.”

“Doomed to failure,” Fraser said, following Ray into the bedroom, fingers flying deftly over shirt buttons.

“Don’t stand a chance,” Ray replied with a sharply wicked smile, and the sound of button-fly jeans being ripped open.

“Might as well just relax, then,” Fraser said, pulling his shoes and socks off.

“Since the whole thing’s not gonna work anyway,” Ray agreed, kicking his jeans off, tugging his boxer briefs down and tossing them aside. Naked, Ray climbed up onto the bed, knelt behind Fraser. “Never gonna work.”

And then: hesitant, quiet, ending the joking: “Do you think we stand a chance, Ray?”

“You’re the most stubborn man in the world,” Ray murmured against the bullet scar nestled against Fraser’s spine. “I just gotta convince you to dig your heels in, and—we’ll be good.”

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“I did know, you know,” Fraser said softly.

“Be hard not to.” A breath of laughter and pain against Fraser’s back. “What gave me away? Me being all over you like a rash or telling you I loved you?”

“When I finally calmed down,” Fraser said, reaching back, bringing Ray’s arms around to hug him, “it was realizing you were in this for you, yes, but for me, too—you were trying to give me what you thought I needed.”

“You never had that before?”

“Yes, I have—once, at least. But he—”

Ray licked his back, the scar glistening under his tongue.

“I need, Ray, I always need more than anyone can give me.”

“I can give,” Ray whispered, “you just gotta let me.”

“I don’t know how.”

And Ray tugged him backwards, onto the bed, and started showing Fraser how.

This time, it was all kisses and caresses, and Fraser lying there, bound safe and sound by Ray’s limits, free to let go, and simply take, and take, and take, for Ray was there to give. With kisses and hands and fingers, Ray gave, until Fraser could take what he

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needed, what he wanted; until Fraser was lying there with Ray on top of him, measure for measure, inch for inch, no polite raising up on elbows, just Ray, bone and sinew and hot, heavy weight pinning Fraser down.

Until Fraser clamped his hands around Ray's head, held him tight, immobile, and kissed him hard. More than kissed: a reversal of buddy breathing, Fraser holding Ray in place, sucking the breath from him, hips thrusting up hard and hungry, cock pushing into the softness of Ray's balls, between his thighs, and against the hardness of Ray's own cock.

Until Fraser's mouth left Ray's, until Ray was heaving in great rasping breaths, until those turned to moans, as Fraser sucked on Ray's throat, hard enough to hurt, marking Ray, the pain counterpoint to the pleasure.

Familiar pain, for Ray, the remembered pain of his tattoo, of being marked there, claimed and tagged by Stella the night she agreed to marry him: her champion, she'd said, her spark plug, she'd whispered just before she took his cock— But that was long since past. This was another mark now, less permanent, but perhaps, perhaps...perhaps there would be another night, and

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another mark, one as permanent as the mark Fraser was leaving on him where it couldn't be seen, only felt, only ever felt, by Ray himself.

"Maple leaf," Ray muttered, and got a taken-aback "What?" from Fraser.

"Nothin'," Ray said, and bent to dip his tongue into Fraser's ear.

"I want," Fraser demanded, flexing this newness between them. "Explain."

And held tight again, held so that he couldn't look down or away or anywhere but at Fraser's eyes, Ray whispered, "Maple leaf. Tattoo."

For an eternity, Fraser simply stared at him, one hand leaving Ray's face to trace, unerringly, over the indelible tag on Ray's right arm. And then Fraser was holding Ray hard again, coming in close again, kissing Ray hard, sucking the breath from his lungs again until Ray needed Fraser even for breath. And Fraser breathed for him, breathed into him, giving Ray Fraser's own breath. "Perhaps," Fraser said over Ray's gasping, fingers going back to the sharp lines of Stella's tattoo. "Perhaps."

And then Ray was between Fraser's legs again, his cock slicked

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and hard, and being devoured. Fraser taking, Ray giving, and it worked, for them, until they were tangled together, sated, sticky, and sliding into sleep.

For all they had this ‘case,’ Ray still had the rest of his work. They’d dealt with a burglary and an assault already—enough real police work for Fraser to be one happy non-bureaucrat for the week—and were just starting on a bookmaking racket.

Ray slammed the file shut.

“Ray?”

“I do not believe this.”

“Ray?”

“I do *not* believe this.”

“Well, Ray, perhaps if you were to tell me what it is you don’t believe, I could decide if you’re right in your disbelief or—”

Ray opened the file again, and slid it across his desk to Fraser. Who looked at the photograph of the suspected bookie.

“The monsignor,” Fraser said.

“Do not—I repeat, do not—say I told you so or any variation thereof,” Ray said sharply. Then groaned, dropped his head and

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banged his forehead on the desk, once, twice, three times, just for good measure.

“It’s all right,” Fraser whispered conspiratorially, “I won’t tell anyone you used ‘thereof.’”

“Thank you, Fraser,” Ray muttered from his desk.

Fraser patted him on the back, and went back to reading the file. Chastised himself a second later for forgetting to use the opportunity to further ‘out’ them for the other case, shared a rueful smile with Ray—who was still lying with his head on the desk, face sideways against more of the eternal paperwork—when the hair on the back of his neck raised, and beside him, Dief growled.

He looked around, and caught two uniforms and one detective (third class) staring at him. And at Ray. Who raised himself slowly, furrow between his eyebrows, watching Fraser’s face. “What is it?” Ray said.

“Nothing,” Fraser replied breezily.

Ray reached for his glasses, and Fraser put a hand on his arm, stopping him. “It’s just part of the job, Ray,” Fraser said quietly. “It’s not worth you looking at them.”

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“So someone’s giving us shit looks—”

“I wouldn’t put it like that, but yes, and it won’t help if you react in your usual predictable manner.”

“You mean kicking them in the head.”

“Precisely. If we were truly a couple who were simply becoming careless due to complacency—”

“—we would have let all the shit slide.”

“Don’t look, Ray.”

Ray dropped his head back onto the desk, and thumped it again. “This kills me, Fraser.”

“I know patience isn’t one of your virtues—”

“No, I said I hate waiting,” Ray interrupted sharply. “What I hate right now is letting them get away with this crap just so we can give some bad guy enough time to pick us out of an invisible line-up. Waiting kills me, Fraser,” Ray said, level and true, “but that don’t mean I can’t be patient when I’m hanging in there till we figure out what it is you and me’ve got here. I can be patient for as long as you need to let them go and want me instead.”

Fraser looked at him long and hard for that then nodded, once,

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sharply. “Then a virtue it is,” Fraser said briskly. “Shall we go and chat to the...monsignor?”

By the time they got there, it turned out the ‘monsignor’ (aka Peter “The Pope” Pyus) was going on a retreat of sorts: racing away at full tilt, Fraser and wolf and Ray pounding along behind him.

By the time they got their man, got him back to the precinct, booked him—for quite a few things worse than bookmaking, or so the happy feds and state police were saying—got him in a cell and the paperwork from the broken window and the car in the mall fountain taken care of, there wasn’t much point in starting on a new case. Especially not when Welsh was out of his office for ten minutes, which gave them enough time to drop off the paperwork and make a clean getaway before the lieutenant got to read about their handiwork. And the price tag it came with.

“My place?” Ray said as they were taking the stairs two-at-a-time, beating a hasty retreat as Welsh’s voice approached.

“Mine, I think,” Fraser replied, stepping aside to open the door for a uniformed officer and an apparently pregnant man

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complaining that he hadn't been shoplifting. "I'll uhm... I'll need a change of clothes for tomorrow."

"Yeah," Ray said, blinking. Reacting more than was required—or convincing—for the case. "Uh, yeah, we'll swing by the Consulate, get your stuff—"

"Ray? Ray. Ray. Ray!"

Another blink, and a headshake. "Yeah?"

Fraser edged him into one of the emergency door indents—the very one, in fact, where Fraser had lost Guy Rankin some months before, although he refrained from mentioning that to Ray. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, sure, fine, great, goodness—" Stopping. Rubbing his forehead. "Good. Greatness," he repeated, getting it right.

"It's just that you seem," Fraser leaned in a bit closer, "well, pole-axed."

"Nah, not me, no poles, no axes—uh, okay, so I'm Polish, but you know what I mean."

"No, Ray, frankly, I don't. I simply said I needed to pick up some clean clothes and—there, you're doing it again!"

"Doing what?"

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“That.”

“What that?”

“That that. The—going all...”

“All what? Fraser—” grabbing Fraser by the arm as Fraser took a half-step backwards, “what that? I am not going out there looking weird—”

“Panicked. Panicked, and then dreamy,” Fraser said reluctantly. “You look all...dreamy.”

“Yeah, okay, so I can deal with that. C’mon, you need to get your stuff, we need to get outta here before Welsh gets us—”

This time it was Fraser who grabbed Ray by the arm, and hauled him back into their nook. “What were you dreamy about?”

“Fishing, Fraser?”

No doubt his father would have something to say about having the grace to be shamefaced, but his father—thank heaven and earth and everything in between—wasn’t around at present.

“Well, should I be, Ray?”

Communication. Listening, and talking, and making things work. “It just kinda hit me that you’re not fighting this and we could maybe—just maybe—you know—not fu—not screw it up.”

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Fraser's turn to panic, to feel the sudden rush of possibility threaten to choke him. "We could," he said, sagging back against the wall.

"Yeah," Ray told him. "You and me, we could both end up with someone again."

Not in limbo, not on the shelf, not on the dump, discarded. Fraser swallowed, knew he'd gone pale.

"You okay?"

"I think so. It's just—it's been so long since I even considered..."

"Considered what?" Ray asked, leaning in again, curving around even more protectively as someone walked past and muttered a particularly foul three letter word. "C'mon Frase, don't make me fish."

"Happiness," Fraser said, the word alien and nearly forgotten. "Not just content, not just satisfied with things as they are, but...happy."

"I had that," Ray confided. "You'll like it."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

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“Right.”

“Okay.”

“Well then.”

“Your place?” Ray whispered, mouth a scant handwidth from Fraser’s cheek.

Another long moment, while Fraser weighed something, brow furrowed in thought, then clearing. “Yours first, I think,” he said, making it sound like a promise and a liberty. “If you don’t mind.”

“Mind? Are you nuts—no, don’t answer that, I already know the answer. So c’mon, let’s go, let’s get moving—”

And they did, hurrying out of the station house, completely unaware of the looks and the talk that rippled and roiled in their wake.

It was easier this time: sandwiches and potato salad and fresh milk for Fraser all picked up at a deli on the road home, Dief walked, sandwich wrappers tossed in the trash, and then no pretense of anything else but heading for the bedroom, and each other.

Different this time, surer, each learning the other’s limits, each

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leaning on the other for limits, and a circumference of safety, here, in bed, just the two of them.

Well, just the two of them, and a few lingering ghosts, some of whom were finally beginning to fade away into mist.

“You like that?” whispered in the dark, answered by a groan.

“Please,” begged shamelessly, and answered.

“Yes,” gasped, the need taken inside, and returned as kisses and touches and pleasure.

No pushing tonight, neither of them thinking they knew better, just meeting, as they did best, in the middle.

And perhaps that was why Fraser felt safe enough to loosen the leash just a bit more, and why Ray lay there, torn between the glorious, newly-familiar pleasure wet around his cock, and the uneasy unfamiliarity of Fraser’s fingers, probing him, there.

“Too much—oh please—” he gasped, bucking forward away from that finger, driving his cock deeper into Fraser’s hungry maw of a throat.

Fraser moaned around the thickness in him, tried to take Ray deeper inside, pressed his finger in farther.

“No—”

Story Beginning

And Fraser lay there suddenly flat on his back, dazed, bereft, Ray leaning over him, pushing him down.

“Wait,” Ray said, breathless, shaking a little. “Too much, don’t know if—”

And Fraser ‘got’ it. Got what he’d been doing, got what he’d misread in Ray’s reaction: trying too hard to please, trying too hard to break the old fears that bound him, he’d succeeded only in transgressing against Ray. His erection flagged, pathetic and limp against his thigh, and he started to scramble away.

“Get back here!”

Strong hands using police tactics for completely non-police reasons, pulling Fraser back, settling him.

“Told you,” hand firm on Fraser’s chest, right over the desperate thudding of Fraser’s heart, “I wouldn’t let you. I gotcha, it’s fine, we’re fine—”

Fraser stared up at him in the half-light, the muscle in his jaw jumping, his hands clenched, his heart still racing. “I’m sorry—”

“You always get this carried away?”

Days of duty unfulfilled, uniform draped across her naked

Story Beginning

shoulders; days of forgetting to eat, or call—or repay money, or remember friends at all. “Yes,” the simple truth.

“Figures, the way you been reacting to all of this,” Ray said easily, not that either of them believed his insouciance. “I just didn’t like it that much—feels weird.”

“Sorry,” Fraser repeated.

“Don’t know if I’m ready to—you know, do that, even though—”

Just a single night before, demanding it. Pushing for it.

“We all have things we thought we were ready for, but weren’t,” Fraser told him, rough and hoarse and still not breathing right.

“I thought I’d like it—the books an’ all make it sound like a guy’s G-spot. But—” a slight grimace, an expressive shudder. “You okay with that?”

An inelegant shrug, and fingertips tracing circles on the back of Ray’s hand. “I like it—and I don’t need you to reciprocate.”

Sultry smile, and the touch of Ray’s hand on Fraser’s belly. “So back to where we were?”

“Ray, are you sure—”

Story Beginning

“No, I’m not sure,” Ray said back, sing-song with sarcasm. “In fact, I’m seriously traumatized, I don’t think I’ll ever want sex again in my life. Of course I’m sure! Fraser—” Not pushing this time, but taking the point, letting Fraser follow if he chose. “I’ll show you how sure I am,” Ray said, “here, put your hand on me—” taking Fraser’s hand, putting it on his half-hard cock, pushing up into it, nice and slow and steady, watching Fraser all the while. “Oh yeah, like that...”

Fraser, trusting—himself, as much as Ray—let go of so many things, and reached up instead to hold onto Ray. He touched Ray, the way he was learning that Ray liked best, grip firm and in constant motion. He went willingly when Ray pulled him up into a kiss, mouth open and ready for him, desire abated, but still there.

Still there.

Just another bump in the road, and easier to smooth than the last one and twice as sweet to cross. So they twined together in the near dark, balancing each other, complementing each other, until they gave enough, and took enough, and could lie there, breathing together, until they slept.

Story Beginning

The phone rang early, but Ray was already up, showered, dressed, had even had breakfast: the perils of having his very own resident Mountie who had used up the spare clothes kept at Ray's and was unwilling to wear the same things again.

"Vecchio," Ray answered brightly.

"Yeah, I'm sure it's me," he griped into the phone.

"No, I didn't take any funny pills this morning, sir, Fraser—"

And Fraser sat on one of the breakfast bar stools and watched Ray look at him, then the phone, and actually blush.

"No, no details," Ray said quietly, watching the toes of his socks scuff through dust and fluff on the floor. "Uh, yes, sir. Right away, sir." And as soon as the phone was hung up: "Three bags full, sir."

Fraser looked a question at Ray.

"Consulate," Ray answered him. "ASAP."

"Ah."

"Don't 'ah' me. And uh Frase?"

"Yes, Ray?" said as the 'sacred' hat was being placed on his head, Ray settling it in place with just a bit more flourish than was strictly decorous.

Story Beginning

“They uhm, the Ice Queen noticed you weren’t in your bed—cot. Office.”

Fraser just looked at him for a moment, until Ray wished he could read whatever was in Fraser’s eyes.

“Ah.”

And this time, Ray felt like agreeing with him.

They were standing at the door of the Consulate again, Fraser stepping aside to let Ray precede him as always, Ray jostling him, making a swipe at the Stetson.

“Gentlemen? If you’re quite finished frolicking in the hallway?”

Ray made a face at Inspector Thatcher’s retreating back, and took Fraser’s hat, twirling it between his hands as they followed those clicking heels and that straight back—and that firm, curvaceous ass, Ray’s expression and elbow nudge said to Fraser.

No such thing, Fraser’s blank facade and stiff back said.

Come on, Ray jostled into Fraser again, nearly dancing along at his side.

Well, all right, Fraser’s half-smile conceded.

And then she was looking at them, and the hat, until

Story Beginning

Ray slouched again and handed the hat over to its rightful owner.

“My office,” she said, leaving the door open behind her.

She was wearing mint green today, and Welsh was wearing a rumpled white shirt and a frown.

“There’s been a development,” she told her desk.

“Major development,” Lieutenant Welsh agreed, addressing the pattern on the rug.

“And this would be...” Fraser prompted helpfully.

“Yes, well,” Inspector Thatcher said to the rug.

“Ah,” Lieutenant Welsh said to the desk.

Fraser and Ray just looked at each other. “Sirs?” Fraser prompted again.

“You’re the Mountie, you tell ‘em,” Welsh whispered.

“One of them’s yours,” she hissed back.

“Oh for fu—”

“Ray!” came the chorus of three.

“Great, so you can talk to us directly and look at us at the same time,” Ray told the bosses. “So you wanna try that again with whatever you dragged us over here to tell us?”

Story Beginning

“The development?” Fraser prompted yet again, sounding just a tad impatient himself.

“The malfasant,” Thatcher began, then stopped, and gestured at Welsh.

“He’s uhm...he’s made his move.”

“Oh good,” Fraser said cheerfully. “Are the plans in place?”

“Fraser,” Ray said with no cheer at all, “they’re telling us the bad guy made his move, and since we didn’t get no call, that means said bad guy made said move on someone else, which means you and me came out for nothing.”

“Well, not for nothing, Ray,” Fraser said, and perhaps both bosses thought he truly was referring only to the case. “After all, it could just as easily have been us he chose.”

But Ray, unlike the bosses, was looking at Fraser. Not the case. At least, nowhere near all just the case.

“May I ask,” Fraser asked, “whom the malfasant approached?”

“Ah,” said Thatcher.

“Hmmm,” said Welsh.

And from somewhere near the back kitchen, there came a wail.

Fraser looked at Ray. Ray looked at Fraser.

Story Beginning

“No,” Ray said.

“Surely not,” Fraser said.

Thatcher nodded.

“Turnbull?”

“What did this guy catch him doin’?” Ray asked in sheer disbelief.

“Not using the right oil for oiling his Sam Browne every second Wednesday?”

“Apparently,” Thatcher took a deep breath, “he was certainly oiling...something.”

“Leather,” Welsh added.

“Hmmm,” Thatcher said.

“Turnbull?” Fraser repeated.

“There’s a club,” Welsh started.

“Of a very specialized type,” Thatcher continued, actually looking at them by now. “With an emphasis on, or so Turnbull tells us, discipline. It seems Constable Turnbull is quite a regular there.”

“A well known regular,” Welsh added, looking at Thatcher, sharing speaking glances.

“And it would appear that our wanted criminal knew of this club—”

Story Beginning

“And its regular...ah...clientele,” Welsh supplied.

“—and this morning, when Constable Turnbull unlocked the Consulate—” and everyone could read the look she gave Fraser, “there was a note in his desk drawer.”

“Told you the locks in here suck,” Ray said.

“Be that as it may,” Thatcher said, teeth clenched again, “Turnbull is now...liaising...with the international crime team—” she spared a second to glare at Ray then continued right over his staccato burst of laughter, “which means that you two gentlemen—”

Ray wasn’t laughing now. “Were set up with nothing, for nothing, only now we got more than nothing to deal with because everyone thinks there’s something going on between us.”

“They thought that anyway, Ray,” Fraser said calmly.

“Except for the ones who were shocked—do not ask me to name names, Fraser—and the ones who didn’t know and the ones who got pissed at us for flaunting it.”

“I’d hardly say we flaunted it—”

“Doesn’t matter,” Welsh broke in firmly. “You’re both off the case as of now.”

Story Beginning

“So do we get to tell everyone what we were doing?”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” Thatcher snapped. “We’ve spent seven years trying to catch this miscreant, we’re not going to throw it all away so you can...”

“Start chasing women?” Ray smiled, winking at her.

“So you can,” she said quellingly, “go back to pretending you and Constable Fraser are just buddies.”

“Well, we are, in fact, buddies, sir—”

“Fraser,” she said tiredly, “please do not lie to me on this matter any further.”

“I’m not—”

She looked him straight in the eye. “Can you honestly tell me that you and Detective Vecchio—Detective Kowalski—are not engaging in carnal relations with each other?”

And right there, right then, Fraser blushed. Bright red.

And Ray just slunk down deeper in his chair.

“Told you,” Welsh said, “doesn’t matter. Won’t go beyond these four walls.”

Ray sat up straight again, looked over at Fraser, who was looking at the floor. “We done here?” he snarled. “Yeah, we’re done.”

Story Beginning

Whirlwind of tan coat and black boots, and Ray was out of the room and half way down the corridor before Fraser could unglue his feet and follow.

“Ray?”

Ray sped up.

“Ray. Ray. Ray. Ray!”

“What?”

“This isn’t the way to the station house—and I really should get back to the Consulate—”

“I am not going back to work today,” Ray said, fierce and low. “I am not going in to face them looking and whispering behind our backs—”

“Well, if it’s behind our backs you could hardly face—I’ll shut up now.”

“You do that.”

“But Ray—”

“I though you were going to shut up?”

“We are still officers of the law. You still have cases.”

“And?”

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“And there are still people depending on you to right wrongs, come to their aid—”

“So they can tuck their babies up at night and sleep tight.”

“Essentially.”

Silence, while Ray drove.

“You remember what else you said to me that day, Fraser?”

There were many things Fraser had said, but there was one or two more obvious things. “About finding you attractive?”

“About not being qualified.”

“I’m not a woman, Ray.”

“Yeah, I’d kinda noticed that when you shoved your cock down my throat.”

Fraser stopped breathing, didn’t even blink for a moment. “Ray? Are you all right? Are—are we all right?”

“Don’t know,” Ray told him. “Right now, I don’t know.”

“Will you at least tell me why you’re so angry?”

“Wish I knew, Fraser,” Ray said, tires screaming as he pulled into the parking lot at the precinct, “wish to fuck I knew.”

They had spent the entire drive home not looking at each other—

Story Beginning

or rather, Fraser had spent the time not looking at Ray. Ray had simply stared at where he was steering.

There had been no discussion of where they were going; what other possibility was there, apart from separation, and silence?

And if they stopped talking now—if they stopped this whatever they had now—there was no guarantee they'd ever start again.

It had taken a sinking ship, pirates' treasure and a matching set of punches to get them communicating again last time, and that was to repair pure friendship. It didn't bear thinking about, what it would take to repair...this.

They had dinner, on the couch, pizza ordered from the car, waiting for them when they got home; Dief had been let loose in the overgrown weeds masquerading as the "community garden" out back; and now the three of them were back upstairs, Dief sensibly retired to the bedroom, the two humans sitting, side by side, on Ray's couch.

Ray scratched his nose, and Fraser scratched his eyebrow. Fraser tugged on his right earlobe, and Ray picked at a thread on his jeans. Fraser looked at Ray, as Ray was looking, sidelong, at Fraser.

Story Beginning

“The gossip won’t stop,” Ray said finally.

“I know.”

“Even when all of this case stuff comes out, it won’t stop.”

“I know.” Then, in answer to Ray’s questioning look: “It hadn’t stopped before we began this charade, why would it stop now?” Especially since now, the gossip was true.

Or at least, it had been.

“So uh,” Ray started.

“Yes?”

“Are we—still...us?”

Deep breath, from one, from the other, both staring straight ahead.

“I think so,” Fraser said.

“Yeah?”

“I hope so.”

Ray moved around some of the papers on his coffee table. “Me too,” he said, quietly.

“Well, yes, I’d gathered that, Ray.”

“No one ever accused me of being subtle.”

“Although perhaps they ought.”

Story Beginning

“Yeah? Well, don’t think I haven’t forgotten your shared histories with the Ice Queen.”

And while there were several grammatical issues Fraser could take with that sentence, he stuck with: “Jealous, Ray?”

Chin lifting, defiant, challenging. “Yeah.”

“Why?”

“Because.”

“But I’ve never shared more than a kiss with her—” and oh, wasn’t that a recurring theme in his life with women, and he should’ve noticed, should’ve thought about it before now, long before now, when he was sitting discussing this—and them—here with Ray, “certainly far less than I’ve...we’ve...us,” he finished, lamely.

Ray wrapped his arms around himself, hands cupping his own elbows, holding hard. After a little while, Ray muttered, nearly a non-sequitur now: “She can give you stuff.”

“Stuff? Such as!”

A sudden flare of the day’s anger, glittering bright shards in Ray’s eyes. “Kids,” Ray said.

Gentleness covering sharp steel. “You’re the one with the

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fixation on having children. I never wanted to inflict my absence on them.”

“Okay, so not kids, but the rest—” voice raised suddenly, arms aching from being folded so tight, from not grabbing or hitting or holding Fraser, “how about public acceptance? How about having a nice place in the suburbs where the neighbors don’t look at you funny and your fellow Mountie cops still come when you yell for backup? What about not having uniforms mutter ‘fag’ when they walk past? What about those things, Fraser? What about being able to introduce someone to your family and friends and not have them kick you out and stop talking to you for the rest of your life?”

“My family’s all but gone,” said so mildly, the sting all the sharper for the gentleness of the voice. “Of my traditional family, all I have left are cousins, and they’re on my Uncle Tiberius’ side, so bringing home a boyfriend would be quite a relief for them. I very much doubt Maggie would turn me away, when we’re all either of us has—and I’m hardly likely to choose to live in the suburbs. Those are your concerns, Ray” Fraser said softly, “not mine.”

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And there was no eluding the truth, not now. Attitude, Ray had said. Yeah, right, his conscience kicked him—hard. “I don’t know how my mom and dad’ll react,” Ray admitted, still hugging himself, still holding on. “I still don’t know why my dad went off the deep end when I became a cop. I know he said it was because he wanted better for me, but jeez—I don’t get it. Stella was ‘better’ for me, Gold Coast girl, but he hated her more than the cop thing. My brother though—” a shake of his head. “Million miles from Maggie. Real card-carrying homophobe. Won’t let my nephews join the Scouts cos he says it’s ‘unnatural’ for boys to be sharing tents with each other.”

And his brother had said a lot more things. “It was different, you know,” Ray went on, voice pale as snow, “before I met you, and when this was all make-believe for the case.”

Fraser simply nodded, not risking derailing Ray now.

“When people made cracks about my hair or my clothes or the bracelet—or the music, my earring, the ballroom dancing, whatever, I had Stella, you know?”

“Yes,” Fraser said, simply. “So it didn’t bother you then, but it bothered you this morning, and all day.”

Story Beginning

“When that lameass made that joke and everyone smiled and I hadda keep my mouth shut—” Temper rising again, Ray grabbing a pillow, thumping it, twice, three times, then throwing it, hard, across the room. “And this whole thing was pointless! I mean, we coulda—you know—what we did, us, without anybody knowing, but now...”

“Now what?”

“Now they look at me, and you, and know what we do. What I am.”

“You’re still you, Ray. That hasn’t changed, no matter the perceptions of others.”

“And that’s supposed to make me feel better? That’s supposed to make it easier? Fraser—I went in there today and everybody looked at me like they knew what we’d been doin’! You didn’t notice, no, you’re above these things, but me, I noticed, I saw the looks and the innuendoes and all the whispers. You got no idea—”

“You think I don’t know?” a whisper of Fraser’s own temper, leashed far longer than his passion. “I had to face them, every single last one of them, and they knew.”

Story Beginning

“You didn’t notice today—”

“Because today, I had nothing to be ashamed of.”

“When’ve you ever—” breaking off mid-sentence, looking at Fraser, at the old pain, the old misery marring his eyes like the scar on his back. “Her.”

“Yes. And worse: what *I* did. They knew, Ray. They all knew, about Ray, and his family, and everything I did for her. With her.”
So yeah, Fraser knew.

“Does it get easier?”

No sugar coating this bitter little pill. “Eventually.”

“Great, something to look forward to.”

“It does get better. And you get used to it.”

“Oh, now that just makes my day.” But Fraser had said it wasn’t the same for him, today. No shame. Not ashamed. Not of this. Them, together. “Uh, Fraser?”

“Yes, Ray?”

“This morning, when I got mad.”

Dryly: “I had noticed that, yes.”

“Some of it...some of it was because I was going to miss it.”

Fraser just looked at him.

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“The little kisses, people thinking a couple. Kinda made it real.” Both Fraser’s eyebrows climbed up at that. “I thought you—” “That’s them thinking about what we do in bed, that’s them sticking their labels on me—I had a lifetime of labels and I’m sick of it.”

“Right you are,” Fraser said, as if he’d have to go back over that and think about it later. “So—it doesn’t feel real to you otherwise?”

“Nah, it does, but I mean—when other people see it, it’s a declaration. Kind of...a promise.”

“Ah.”

“Do not do that to me, Fraser.”

“Ray—”

“But then I got my brain in gear,” Ray said over whatever ‘ah’ related substitute Fraser had come up with, “and reminded myself if it doesn’t matter when they whack their dumb labels on me, then it doesn’t matter if they don’t stick on the ones I want.” Ray looked at Fraser, very nearly nervous, treading carefully. “And I reminded myself all that mattered was you weren’t fighting this anymore.”

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“I believe,” Fraser said slowly, looking at Ray as if his next words were written on Ray’s face, “that I could, in fact, be getting...stubborn about this.”

Ray trying so hard to play it cool, but the energy was pouring off him, and he was jittering, nearly bouncing, in his seat. “Yeah? So at least we’re still...whatever. For the duration. Or maybe—you really think we can make it longer?”

“Probably.”

Keeping a lid on it, not bouncing, just tapping his feet against the floor. “Possibly. A bit longer.”

“Probably. And a lot longer.”

“Possibly.”

“No fairy tales, Ray,” said in Fraser’s most profoundly stubborn tone. “It’s definitely a probably. And for longer than either of us expect.”

Which was enough to make Ray’s smile burst forth, and the energy with it, Ray on his feet and hauling Fraser up too, dancing backwards towards the bedroom. “And if people talk nasty,” Ray was saying, doing that Fraser ‘unto each day’ thing, “I’ll just kick ‘em in the head.”

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“But then I’d have to arrest you.”

“You, me, handcuffs,” Ray said thoughtfully. “Yeah, I can go there.”

“I didn’t mean—” Not that Fraser thought Ray had either, but they had a routine to keep up, although Ray didn’t seem too concerned with it right now, Ray’s hands far too busy unbuttoning and unzipping and stroking and touching.

Nearly manic enthusiasm, burning so bright—too bright, bright enough to drive any shadows into hiding. But there were enough problems lurking around the edges, no way was Ray going to give them any purchase, not here, not now.

Later, maybe, they couldn’t be avoided. But right this second, Fraser was getting stubborn about this whatever was between them, and Ray was simply, after too long a time, happy.

You’ll like it, he had told Fraser. Hadn’t told Fraser how much he missed being happy. Hadn’t told Fraser just how good it felt to feel on top of the world, Ma, just because the right person smiled at him in the right way.

And Fraser was smiling in the right way. A little befuddled, a little bemused, but it was a good look on Fraser, blunted some of the matinee idol, movie poster too-good-to-be-true looks.

Story Beginning

There was laughter in that bed, this time. Laughter, and fun, a playfulness that led to sweaty, slippery sex, all mouths and hands and hard cocks, rubbing. Quick and messy, over fast and easy, ending in breathlessness, and affection, and a few more barriers down.

And a few more ghosts laid, at least temporarily, to rest.

Later, in the dark, when Ray came back to bed from the bathroom and his movements had woken Fraser, they lay together, curious caresses, too new yet to be comfortable or idle, still 'getting to know you': the way Ray's stomach quivered if Fraser stroked his nails along his ribs; the way Fraser's skin was so smooth until the sudden coarseness of hair there, and there. The way Ray's nipples responded so quickly, years of Stella's devotions, and the way touching Fraser's didn't make Fraser shiver in delighted response—yet, Ray whispered in the dark. Yet.

Lying there, sharing kisses, kisses that had nothing to do with sex, and were all the more nervous because of that.

Ray's fingers were dappling dance steps over Fraser's body, waltzing across broad chest, dipping into armpit, gliding up over

Story Beginning

clavicle, tap-dancing back down to circle around and around a nipple.

Ray's voice breathing words into Fraser's ear, whispering in the dark. "You ever feel like you don't know who you are?" Fraser's arm sliding around Ray's back, Ray's warm voice sliding the words into Fraser. "Like if you weren't around somebody. Or that someone wasn't around you," Fraser's arm tightening, Fraser's hand stroking Ray's arm where it lay across Fraser's chest, "then you wouldn't be you or at least not the you that you think you are. You ever think like that? "

A kiss pressed to Ray's temple, and Fraser's voice, not whispering, but strong, sure, nearly bold in the darkness. "No, Ray. But I have..." A near convulsive tightening of his arms, hugging Ray too hard, too tight, and Ray not protesting, just grabbing on and holding just as tight.

"I have known," Fraser said, and now his voice was a whisper in the dark, too, "what it is to lose who I am when I'm with someone. I have known," and this time it was a comforting kiss pressed to the corner of Fraser's mouth, "myself not to be who I'd thought myself to be, because of the company I chose to keep. In the past,

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I've let myself be a man," Ray slithering up and over, covering Fraser, keeping him safe, and contained, "I don't ever want to be again."

"Won't happen with me," Ray said, clear and bright, stubborn as Fraser himself.

There was a long moment, a very long moment, then Fraser went still.

Ray just lay there, and kept on touching, letting Fraser think as much Fraser wanted to—and could manage, when his body was being quietly worshipped.

And then Fraser burst out with: "Great Scott."

"Pole," Ray murmured against Fraser's throat.

"No, not that—well, yes, that, you are..."

Ray blinking in the sudden light, Fraser's hand still on the lamp switch. "You are..." Fraser's smile making the lamplight dim. "You are great, Ray, just... greatness."

"Fraser," Ray said, with just a soupçon of very understandable concern, "are you unhinged or—"

A bolt of laughter from Fraser, and then he was wrapping Ray up, snuggling him in, keeping him close, touching him and petting

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him, and generally licking or kissing every inch within reach. “Not unhinged, just woefully blind.”

“Blind,” Ray said. “Blind about what?”

“Me,” Fraser said, gleefully. “I was stupid and blind and oh, Ray, Ray, Ray, Ray, Ray, I am such a fool.”

Ray eased back, lay there in his rumpled bed and looked at his even more rumpled Fraser. Whose hair was sticking up more than Ray’s did, and should, if truth be told, have looked, well, silly.

But Ray was generous, and was slowly realizing that maybe, just maybe, it was okay to be besotted again. That maybe, just maybe, Fraser’s version of ‘a lot longer’ was close to Ray’s version of ‘forever.’

“I’ve been so busy trying not to repeat my past mistakes,” Fraser was saying, speaking as fast as Ray usually did—very nearly blithering. “I didn’t even see what else I was doing.”

“Which was?” Ray said, running his arm up the pleasant swells and dips of Fraser’s arm.

“I said it, Ray. I could love you so much.”

Ray looked at him.

“Love isn’t something a person can *plan*, Ray. It’s not something

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you could do or could not do—well,” rueful smile, thumb to eyebrow, “it’s something over which I’ve never had any control.”

“Fraser, do not tease me—if you mean what I think you mean—”

“I was comparing,” Fraser said, apologizing. “Her, him, what I felt for them, what I felt for you. And it was so different—”

Ray spread his hand across Fraser’s chest, heartbeat strong against his palm. “How was it different?”

“Fishing?”

“Better than popping you one.”

Another bright smile for that, and Fraser brushing the backs of his fingers across Ray’s lips. “I have no idea,” Fraser said. “It just...is.”

“Yeah?”

“It’s as if,” Fraser whispered, moving in closer, wrapping himself around Ray again, nudging his hips against Ray, letting go the leash of passion a little bit more, “I’m more the me I think I am. The me I could’ve been, if I hadn’t...lost sight of myself.”

“So now you know how I feel?”

“Yes,” Fraser said, open mouth barely separated from Ray’s open mouth. “Yes.”

Story Beginning

With one thing and another, it was just as well it was Saturday and Ray the only one of them with a work shift. Between needing to get Fraser something resembling clean clothes, and needing to repeat what they'd figured out the night before—complete with demonstrations, physical re-enactments and tactile reassurances—it was well past Ray's usual "ish" for getting to work.

They'd barely made it in from the parking lot before Dief headed off on the trail of the doughnuts of the entire 27th Precinct.

Fraser was in too good a mood to muster even a token protest. He simply smiled beatifically at Ray, who tossed a very satisfied grin back at him.

"Another day, another dollar," Ray said, shoving open the swing door into the bullpen, light on his feet and bristling with energy.

"Actually, Ray, given the salary scales of the Chicago PD and those of the RCMP, it's considerably more than a dollar. Although," that odd shifting of head from side to side, Ray stifling a smile at the gesture, "given the current rate of exchange between Canadian and United States currency—"

"Fraser."

A glint of a smile, only in the eyes. "Understood."

Story Beginning

“Thank you,” Ray replied, bowing elegantly. He straightened up, and just...stopped. Stood there looking at Fraser, who was looking at him, last night and a whole lot of tomorrows stretched bright and shining between them. “Uhm,” Ray cleared his throat, voice gone husky, “you want tea?”

“After my last experience with the tea in the breakroom—”

“Nah,” Ray said, stretching over his desk to reach the middle drawer, “I got you some herbal crap the nutso Earth Mother in the store said you’d like since you like bark tea. And even she,” shoulder to shoulder with Fraser, heading for the breakroom, “shuddered when I mentioned bark tea, so it’s not just me—”

They were being looked at again.

By the entire compliment of officers, civilian aides and pseudo sisters cramming the breakroom.

“What?” Ray demanded. “We’re undercover, we’re supposed to be pretending we’re gay!”

“Ray!” was completely drowned out by snorts of laughter, ribald comments and one vehement “oh yeah right” from Frannie.

“And I suppose you have a bridge,” she said, stretching up to get right into Ray’s face, “to sell me in Florida?”

Story Beginning

She swept out on a cloud of perfume and bristling back. Then: turning round, looking at them. Looking at Fraser. Looking at Ray. Looking at Fraser with Ray. She came back, close enough to speak without being overheard. “Of course, you’re not really my brother, are you, Ray?”

Ray took one look at the gleam in her eye, looked at Fraser, and said, “Oh dear.”

One last, very sharp smile, and then Francesca was gone, and they just had the rest of the denizens of the breakroom to deal with.

Fraser came right up behind Ray, and it was, of course, purely so he could speak without being overheard. Just as it always had been—blind, definitely, he had been oh so blind. But at least now he had the blinkers off, so he leaned in close so he couldn’t be overheard, and luxuriated in the feel and smell of Ray. As he always had. “You really shouldn’t have said that.”

“What? I didn’t say a word to her—Huey, did I say a word to Frannie?” Huey just filled his coffee mug, shook his head, and left. “I thought ‘em, I thought a lot of ‘em, but I didn’t actually say a single one, Fraser.”

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“No, not to Francesca,” Fraser hissed in that stage whisper of his and he still hadn’t stepped back and Ray sure as hell hadn’t stepped forward. “I meant about...”

“About?” Big, innocent eyes.

“You know perfectly well what I’m talking about.”

“If I knew what you’re talking about, would I be asking what you’re talking about?”

“Ray.”

Ray took his coffee from Fraser, handed Fraser the milk, familiar routine made new by the way they brushed against each other, by the way Fraser allowed himself to enjoy it, by the way Ray didn’t have to pretend any more. “Why would I ask you—”

“Ray—”

Ray sat down in his chair, tipped back on two legs, looked up and smiled at Fraser. “Might as well sit down, you got three more ‘Ray’s to get through.”

“You counted?”

“Up to five? Yeah, I only get confused when I run out of fingers.”

“What about,” Fraser sat down opposite, glanced at the last few people still lingering in the breakroom, over by the door,

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whispering as quietly as he was whispering to Ray, “when people talk? And know?”

Ray’s mouth tightened, and his hand started beating a tattoo on the formica tabletop. “Doesn’t count,” he mumbled. “It doesn’t count, they don’t count, you and me’s all that counts.”

Not quite convincing yet, but at least the hand wasn’t a fist, and Ray was looking at Fraser, not at the three people (two uniforms, one detective third class) still standing in the doorway.

“For the duration,” Ray said quietly.

Fraser took a deep breath, and reached into his jodhpur pockets. “Or longer,” he said just as quietly, laying the brightly colored brochures on the table.

Ray looked at them. Looked at Fraser. Looked back at the ‘Welcome to Canada’ brochures, and didn’t seem to care that there was a veritable explosion of whispers and pointing over in the doorway. And then Ray smiled like the sun coming out, picked the brochures up, and tucked them—carefully—into his inside jacket pocket.

“What, there’s no work to be done around here?” Welsh boomed, scattering the threesome in the doorway like rabbits.

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“Nice of you to grace us with your presence, detective,” said to Ray as Welsh headed for the coffee.

Welsh poured a mug of coffee, turned round and looked at his detective and his...liaison. “No excuses, detective?”

Ray rocked his seat back again, and for a moment he and Fraser simply looked at each other. Then Ray was smiling up at Lieutenant Welsh, his face utterly innocent as he said, sweetly, “It was the Mountie’s fault, sir. He was licking things again.”

“Undercover,” Welsh muttered over Fraser’s shocked ‘Ray!’
“undercover my ass.”

