With Six You Get Eggroll

by Speranza

Summary

Ray burst out laughing. "Benny! You've developed a sense of humor!"

"Yes, Ray." Fraser lowered the gun and showed him an amused look. "Six immaculate conceptions will do that to you."

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Prologue: Florida

Down in Lane 24 somebody was really rolling 'em--that was maybe the third strike in a row down there, and there weren't any league players on the roster tonight. Dewey stretched his neck and tried to get a glimpse of whoever it was. Yeah. There. Guy in a pink striped shirt, striding, rolling--and boom! Steeeee-rike!

"Dewey! Hurry up, man--you've gotta see this!" Huey was leaning against the back of the bar, looking up at the TV screen, hands frozen in the act of polishing a glass.

Dewey walked to the bar, neck craned. "Yeah, what?" It was just The Tonight Show, big fucking deal--all that meant to him was that they could close in another hour. Who needed to look at Jay Leno's fat, ugly, grinning face? The show was just a worthless piece of crap television, except for some of the comics. Some of the comics were pretty okay.

Huey shot him and glance and then let out a long, slow whistle. "Dewey, my man, you are never going to believe who's..."

"Chicago's Own Mambo Italiano..." Leno was saying, really gearing up for it, drumroll please!
"...Francesca Vecchio!"

Dewey leaned forward, jaw dropping, as horns blew and the music started up: ba-bah-ba-ba-baaa.....

The velvet curtain swept aside and Frannie walked out, looking really pretty jaw-droppingly terrific. She was wearing a tight black top with sweeping black bell-bottom pants and stiletto heels, and her hair and makeup looked to be done by experts.

She looked like a star.

She waved wildly at Jay and showed him a warm smile before settling herself down on the red leather stool, crossing her legs, and adjusting the microphone. "Good evening, Los Angeles!" she called, and the crowd roared back its approval. "It is just so nice to be out here in the City of Angles!" The crowd tittered. "Not that anything seems to me to be particularly angular around here, if you know what I mean. In fact, things seem definitely to be on the global side--you guys really have a start on that whole global economy thing that I was reading about in Mademoiselle. Me, I'm old-fashioned--and right now I'm pretty convinced that I've got the only real boobs west of the Mississippi. At least I think so..." Frannie glanced dubiously down at her substantive chest. "I mean, we are west of the Mississippi, here, right?"

"Jeez," Dewey said admiringly as the crowd burst out clapping and laughing. "Who'd ever have thought. Frannie, of all freakin' people..."

"Well, she always did have the gift of comic timing," Huey conceded.

Dewey snorted. "Is that what you call it?" he asked, and behind him, Mr. Lucky rolled another strike.

Epilogue: Canada

Chapter One

The snowmobile sliced left, sending up a spray of snow, nearly bucking its two riders off. But then it steadied and started making its way forward again. It was maybe only another two miles to the cabin, if they were headed in the right direction, which--well, who could tell in all this white nothing?

But the dark spot ahead of them grew larger, became defined--not another goddamned copse of trees, thank God, but something man-made. Fraser's cabin, had to be. Finally, the building--no, buildings, because there was more than one--began to take shape against the horizon. The cabin itself, large and square and bigger than they'd both expected it to be. Two smaller shacks on the side. One for dogs, certainly. And a bright red shape outlined against the snow...Fraser? Was that Fraser?

No way--not unless Fraser'd lost about a hundred pounds and half his height. It was a girl, maybe twelve, watching them curiously as they slowly puttered to a stop.

Stella Kowalski slid off the back of the snowmobile, then reached up and pulled the helmet off her head. She shook out her long blond hair and smiled. "Hello, there!"

The girl tilted her head and stared narrowly at her. "Yeah, whatever."

Stella kept smiling, though she now felt a bit awkward; maybe this wasn't the right cabin after all? She looked over to Ray Vecchio for reassurance; he'd now pulled his own helmet off and had
tucked it under his arm. He shrugged and shot her a rueful "who knows?" sort of smile.

"Hey, hi there," Ray said, trudging across the snow toward the little girl with his free arm extended. "How're you doin'? I'm looking for Constable Fraser's place, which maybe this is and maybe this isn't." He stopped short in front of the girl, who hadn't raised her arm in any sort of reciprocal greeting, and let his own gloved hand fall back to his side. "So, uh...how lost are we, huh?" Ray asked, wincing.

The girl just stared at him for another moment, like he'd just landed from another planet, which really maybe he had. "You're not lost," she said finally. "This is the place."

"Hey, well, that's just cool," Ray said and tried on another smile. The girl seemed utterly unmoved. "I'm Ray and this is Stella." He reached backward for Stella with his gloved hand, and Stella took lurching, awkward steps across the snow to join him. "We're old friends of Constable Fraser's."

The girl looked him up and down, and then she turned her attention to Stella--and made a wry face. "Oh boy," she muttered. "This is gonna be fun."

Suddenly two small boys and three huge dogs came bolting around the side of the cabin, whooping and screaming, one chasing the other. The girl let out a long-suffering sigh, as if this were more than one human being could possibly take. The boys didn't even break stride, just kept running and screaming until they'd disappeared around the other side of the house.

"What's your name?" Stella asked, leaning forward a bit.

"Sarah," Sarah said. "I suppose you wanna see Ben, now, huh?"

Yeah, he wanted to see Ben--that was the point of the enterprise, and he was pretty damn sure Benny would want to see him. "Yeah. Is he home?"

"Yeah, he's home." Sarah turned and headed for the front porch. Ray and Stella exchanged nervous glances, pulled their sidebags off the snowmobile, and followed her. Sarah didn't hesitate; she just pushed the door open and walked in, tugging her coat off. "Ben, you've got company! Couple of yuppies here to see you!"

It took Ray's eyes a moment to adjust as he entered the front room of the cabin, which was dark and quiet and empty except for Sarah, who was rummaging around in the small kitchen off to one side. A fire was blazing in the grate, and the place was a disaster area--cups and plates and trucks and dolls and blankets and crayons and paper were everywhere, covering every available surface--floor, tables, counters, you name it. "Ben!" Sarah yelled again, without looking up from what she was doing; looking for cookies, Ray realized suddenly, and apparently finding some. "Company!"

Suddenly there was a low, whining sound--an alarm, maybe--no, someone in pain--an animal--no, a child. One of the room's four doors opened and there was Constable Benton Fraser, Royal Canadian Mounted Police, holding a small boy who was wailing like a fucking ambulance siren.

Fraser just stopped and stared at them. "Ray? Stella?"

Ray grinned helplessly; okay, yeah, this was weird, but it was just so good to see the guy. "Benny! I don't know what the hell's goin' on here, but you look great!" Which wasn't exactly the truth--what Fraser looked was exhausted, nearly as exhausted as the small blond boy who was weeping hysterically onto his flannel-covered shoulder.

"God, he's not still at it, is he?" Sarah muttered, slumping down in one of the kitchen chairs with a glass of milk.
Fraser ignored her; he was still boggling at Ray and Stella. "Ray..." he repeated, as if he just couldn't believe it. "Stella. How did you--why are you--?" He came forward, adjusting the boy's weight so that he could extend his other hand to meet Ray's--finally, a welcome, Ray thought with relief. Ray ripped his glove off and pumped Fraser's hand furiously.

"Benny, really, you are a sight for sore eyes. It's so great to see you." Ray had to yell this last bit, because the boy's wails were rising in pitch and intensity, and Stella's smile, at least, now looked definitely plastic.

Fraser didn't even seem to notice the racket. "It's wonderful to see you, too--and you, Stella; what a marvelous surprise. Please--take off your coats, drop your bags, sit down by the fire. Sarah, please, put the kettle on, will you?"

Sarah looked deeply aggrieved, but slid out of her chair to obey.

"So who's this?" Stella asked brightly, leaning forward to look at the weeping, red-eyed child. The child's tear-streaked face, upon seeing her, crumpled even further: a portrait of abject misery.

Now it was Fraser's turn to let out a long-suffering sigh, and Ray instantly knew where Sarah'd picked up that particular mannerism. "This is Robbie," Fraser said, looking down at the child and shaking his head wearily. "He suffers from Weltschmerz, I'm sorry to say. Apparently he feels that it is his destiny to channel the entire world's pain and suffering."

"Isn't there something you can do for him?" Stella blurted, just as Ray asked, "Is he yours?"

Fraser chose to answer Stella's question first. "I'm afraid not--not when he gets like this. I can't seem to do anything with him, and if Ray doesn't get here soon, I'm--"

"Can't we just bury him in the snow?" Sarah asked darkly.

"No," Fraser replied pointedly; but Ray thought that Fraser looked seriously tempted.


"Man, oh, man, this is gonna suck the big one," Sarah muttered.

"Yes," Fraser told Stella; his voice was firm, but his face was flushing a little, too. "Ray and I--we--"

Ray Vecchio thought it was about time he repeated his question. "Fraser, is this kid yours?"

Fraser licked his lips and then nodded. "In a manner of speaking. To the extent to which anybody can be anybody's. Or rather, he's ours," Fraser added awkwardly, glancing back at Stella. "Ray's and mine. One of ours. There are...well, six of them. Somewhere. Somewhere." Fraser lifted his free hand and waved it about hopelessly. "Sarah, you've met; she's our oldest." Sarah quickly lowered her head; she was pouring hot water into the teapot now, and looked like she wanted to die. "Eddie and Andrew and Sam are outside somewhere. Holly's with Ray. Girls hockey practice," he added in explanation.


"It's something of a long story," Fraser said, sitting down in the chair that Sarah had vacated with the weeping Robbie still in his arms. "Perhaps over--" He stopped suddenly, lifted his head, and
listened intently, then glanced over at Sarah. "Sarah, is that--?"

"Yeah," Sarah agreed, bringing the tea tray over. "Snowmobile at three-o-clock."

"Oh, thank God," Fraser said, sounding vastly relieved.

Now Ray could hear it too, the whirring rumble of a snowmobile's engine, though Kowalski sounded a hell of a lot more in control over the machine than he'd ever been.

"Sarah, this looks lovely," Fraser said; and yeah, the kid had put together a nice spread--tea and cookies and what looked like some leftover coffee cake. "Thank you." Fraser reached out for her with his free arm, but she pulled out of his reach, and then looked sickly guilty that she'd done it.

"Sarah, don't--" Fraser murmured, but she turned, snagged her red coat from the hook, and ran out of the house. The door banged shut behind her.

Fraser stared after her for a second, and then turned back to Ray and Stella. "Please. Help yourself...have something hot, you must still be cold from your--"

The door burst open again, and Sarah ran back into the room, followed by Ray Kowalski, who was carrying another girl in his arms. One of her legs was sticking out stiffly, and Fraser leapt out of his chair, still carrying Robbie, who now began to shriek in earnest. Ray and Stella instantly got up as well, backing away from the table as Sarah shoved the tea-tray to the far end. Kowalski, wearing a thick parka and a wool hat, sat the bundled girl down on the table and turned to Fraser.

"Okay, so I'm gonna kill that little bitch Chrissie McVey," Kowalski said angrily, "and bury her body in the--"

"What happened?" Fraser interrupted, leaning worriedly over the little girl, who looked to be about nine. "Holly, what happened?"

"Holly was playing great is what happened," Kowalski yelled at him, "and so that little skank Chrissie McVey deliberately knocks her down and skates over her ankle and--"

"Does it hurt?" Fraser was asking urgently. "Holly? How bad does it--"

"It's okay, I'm okay, just my foot's all cut up!" Holly stuck out her left foot and made a face, "Plus Ray's totally right, the little skank just--"

"Ray." Fraser's voice was a warning, now.

"Well, she was!" Kowalski said defensively, and then he seemed to notice Robbie, who had started sobbing rhythmically the moment he'd walked in the door and was now reaching out desperately for him. "Jeez, what's up with him?"

"Weltschmerz," Fraser said grimly.

"Can't be that, can't be just that--here, switch off," Kowalski said; he swiped off his hat and dropped it on the table, then pulled Robbie out of Fraser's arms. Fraser quickly bent to strip the bloody sock and leggings from Holly's ankle.

"It's not bad--really, it's not bad," Fraser reported after a second. "Sarah--please--get me some antiseptic, some gauze from the bathroom--"

Sarah disappeared through one of the doors. Kowalski rubbed Robbie's back and hissed, "You can't put everything on to Weltschmerz, Fraser--something's happened to him, what's happened?"
Fraser gently prodded Holly's ankle and she sort of squeaked, wincing. "Sorry," Fraser apologized, "but you'll be happy to hear it's not broken. Just cut, as you say--"

"Fraser, seriously," Kowalski insisted, and Fraser lifted his head, looking angry.

"Nothing happened, I told you. He was fine all morning, and then suddenly--"

Kowalski shook his head in disbelief and headed toward the sofa, passing Sarah, who rushed back to the table carrying a brown plastic bottle, a bag of cotton, and a roll of bandages. Kowalski sat down, pulled the sobbing Robbie off his parka, and peered into his face. "What's up with you? You hurt?"

Robbie shook his crumpled face wildly.

"You sick?" Kowalski asked.

"Holly, this is going to sting a little, but be brave, all right?" Fraser said.

"No?" Kowalski pressed. "So what--you just havin' a bad day?" To Ray Vecchio's surprise, the kid suddenly nodded, still weeping. "Okay, well, that happens," Kowalski said, sounding really calm about it. "What happened--you spill something?" The kid nodded again, now looking totally distraught, and Kowalski leaned forward and sniffed at his shirt. "What is that--apple juice?" The kid's face went into total collapse. "Yeah, okay, that sucks--what else?"

"You said stings! You said it would sting," Holly screamed, "not that--"

"Just one more second, Holly, I swear," Fraser muttered.

"You make any pictures today? Huh?" Again, Robbie nodded distractedly; his mouth was open to shriek but there was no sound coming out, which was at least something. "What kind, crayons or paints?"

"That's not a second!" Holly wailed, and Fraser instantly said, "Done, done, that's it, it's over--"

Kowalski pressed his ear nearly against the kid's mouth, then pulled back. "Crayons, huh? They come out good?" Robbie shook his head in a violent, hysterical negative. "Couldn't get it going, huh? Okay, so that sucks too--what else?"

"Here, see, we're wrapping it up," Fraser said, winding a thick bandage around Holly's ankle. "Literally and figuratively. You'll be right as rain in a moment."

"You gotta speak up, kid," Kowalski was telling Robbie. "I can't hear you." He leaned forward again, and Robbie moaned something incoherent. "Your what?" Robbie whimpered something, and Ray frowned. "Your zebra? You lost your zebra, is that it? Huh." Ray leaned back against the sofa and regarded the boy in his lap. "Well, there you go. Mystery solved." He reached out and stroked the sweaty blond hair away from the boy's flushed face. "You spilled your juice, your pictures suck, and you lost your zebra. That is a very hard day. That is such a hard day when you are three."

"Hey, who're they?" Holly asked, turning to point at Ray and Stella.

"They're Ben's friends, come to visit," Sarah told her. "And don't point, it's rude."

Fraser suddenly looked up at Ray and Stella, face apologetic, as if he'd just remembered they were there. "I'm sorry. I'm really very sorry--please, have some tea."

Ray raised his hands. "Hey. Benny. No rush! Took us three days to get here, what's another half-
an-hour?" Stella glared at him.

Holly giggled and made a face at Fraser. "Benny? Hey, can I call you Benny?"

"No," Fraser said firmly.

"That is such a hard day," Kowalski said, pulling Robbie into the crook of one arm and getting up. "I've had days like that," he added, and then said, almost as an afterthought: "I've had years like that. You lose your zebra and your pictures suck, and all you wanna do is cross that day out." Kowalski raised his free hand and made an X in the air. "Just cross it off and start again. Redo. Start over. Is that what you want?"

Robbie stared up at him for a moment and then nodded; then he, too, raised his arm and made an X in the air.

"Don't blame you a bit," Kowalski agreed. "Okay, so let's call Saturday a wash. My feeling is you go down, take a nap, wake up and we call it Sunday. Okay? Cause you are looking a little worn out here. I think you got yourself pretty tired with this whole Weltschmerz thing. Yes? Yes. Okay." He turned for one of the doors, Robbie in his arms, but then Robbie let out a squeal of protest and Kowalski stopped. "What?" he asked, then looked where Robbie was looking--across the room at Fraser. "You're right, there's procedures, I stand corrected." Kowalski took Robbie back across the room toward Fraser, who turned to him with a look that was half admiration, half irritation.

"I don't know how you do that," Fraser murmured.

"Oh, you're gonna," Kowalski said in a neutral tone that still managed to be totally threatening. "You're gonna get an earful from me when I come back out here. Meanwhile, say goodnight--Robbie's goin' down for a nap."

Fraser leaned in and stroked the boy's face with his thumb. "Goodnight, Robbie. Sleep well."

"I'm going to wring your neck," Kowalski said evenly, like he was saying, Make me a cup of tea, willya? and then he glanced over at Ray and Stella--the first time he'd acknowledged them being there. "I'll see you guys in a minute," he added, and then took Robbie into one of the back rooms and shut the door.

Fraser blew out a breath, lifted Holly off the table and onto a chair, and then slid the tea-tray back to the center of the table. "I'm in for it, I see." He poured cups of tea for Holly and Sarah, put cookies on their saucers, and then waved Ray and Stella back toward the table. "Any idea what I did?" he asked Sarah.

"I don't know," Sarah told him. "I wasn't here to see what you did wrong."

"Too bad. Forewarned might be forearmed." Fraser showed a bleak smile to Ray and Stella, who had nervously pulled up chairs. "The tea's still hot. And this cake is really very--"

Ray shook his head. "Man, Fraser--is it always like this?"

"Frequently, yes," Fraser admitted.

"Robbie's a weeper," Holly explained; she was holding her tea mug tightly in her hands. "He just cries all the time."

"Holly, this is my friend Ray Vecchio, and this is Stella Kowalski," Fraser said. "Stella is...was...um..."
Ray took Stella's hand in his. "Stella's my wife," he said, thinking that it had only taken an hour to get this information across, and maybe now he could be the center of attention for a goddamned minute.

Fraser's reaction didn't disappoint him; he looked momentarily surprised and then increasingly delighted as the news sank in. "She--well! Congratulations!" Fraser reached across the table and warmly shook Ray's hand once again. "That, at least--that does, I confess, begin to answer some of my questions--"

"You haven't even begun to answer mine, Benny," Ray replied.

"You used to be Ray's wife, though, right?" Sarah interrupted. Fraser shot her a sharp look, which she ignored. "Our Ray."

Holly had gone suddenly wide-eyed, looking from Sarah to Stella to Fraser. "Really? Is that true? Ben, is that true?"

Stella looked deeply uncomfortable; so, for that matter, did Fraser. Ray found himself feeling vaguely resentful--way to steal his thunder, there, kids, thanks a lot.

Sarah quirked a smile of smug satisfaction and sat back in her chair, holding her mug of tea.

"Yes, Holly, that's so," Fraser said quietly. "You can ask Ray about it later; I'm sure he'll tell you all about it."

"How was your game, Holly?" Stella asked--and way to go, Stella! Change that topic! "Before your accident, I mean. Ray said you were playing really well."

Holly shrugged, but she looked pleased. "It wasn't a game, it was just practice," she explained. "We only get a couple of real games a year, playing the town girls--"

The door opened and Kowalski came back, now without his parka. Sarah leaned forward and poured another mug of tea. "One more second," Kowalski said to Stella, and then he sat down at the end of the table and glared at Fraser. Sarah sent the mug of tea sailing down the table, right into Kowalski's cupped hand.

"All right, Ray," Fraser sighed. "Hit me."

"The juice thing," Kowalski said instantly. "You can not ignore the juice thing--"

"He was fine about it," Fraser insisted. "It wasn't a big deal, he didn't cry, he was just fine--"

"Doesn't matter," Kowalski interrupted, shaking his head. "All that means is that he's learned to repress it. Look, he sees the other kids using glasses, he wants to use a glass too--be like them, a big kid. When he can't, that is like a trauma, Fraser. Doesn't matter if he shows it right there or not, that is a big freakin' trauma for him. You've got to get on board with that, show a little empathy, okay? He's a sensitive kid, and he finds it massively humiliating. It ruins his whole day. It's like--spilling something is total life failure when you're three. Plus what's with the zebra?"

"I haven't the faintest," Fraser said.

"Kid says he lost his zebra. What's he talking about--that wood thing he carries around?"

"It's from the zoo set," Holly interrupted. "It's like a--a--" She raised her hand and cupped the air. "Like a puzzle piece. It's a little flat thing--you know, a zebra."
"So what happened to it?" Kowalski demanded.

"Like I know. I was with you," Holly retorted.

"Yeah, okay, right," Kowalski agreed, and looked again at Fraser. "You didn't see him drop this thing?"

"No," Fraser admitted. "But where could it be? It's somewhere in the house, or maybe outside in the snow. Diefenbaker'll find it."

"Okay, fine," Kowalski said, and then he sat back in his chair and looked at Ray and Stella. "So. What brings you guys here? Is this tag-team torture, or what?"

"Ray," Fraser warned.

Kowalski glanced over at Fraser, then shrugged reluctantly. "Okay, okay."

Ray felt his lips pulling into a tight smile; he'd dreaded this conversation, but now he was sort of looking forward to letting Kowalski have it--right between the eyes. "Stella and me got married two weeks ago."

Kowalski's eyebrows shot up; he looked from Ray to Stella and back to Ray again, but he didn't seem hurt or pissed off, just surprised and really curious. "Oh yeah? You're kidding."

"Nope," Ray said, reaching out for Stella's hand again--she seemed to want to pull away, but he tightened his grip. "God's honest truth."

Kowalski stared at them for another moment, hand clenching and unclenching around his mug of hot tea. The table had gone very still and silent. "That's...good," Kowalski said finally, and beside him, Fraser seemed to relax a little. "That's really good. Congratulations, Vecchio. And Stella--I hope you know what you're doing."

Stella cracked a small smile. "I think I do, Ray, yes."

"So what--honeymoon in the Arctic Circle?" Kowalski asked, and Stella nodded quickly and reached into the pocket of her brightly colored ski jacket. "Why not Bermuda or Europe?"

Stella's hand withdrew clutching a folded color brochure, which she slid across the table toward Kowalski. "We wanted to do something really exciting," she explained. "After Ray got out of the hospital. Have an adventure, be bold--" ""Primitive," Fraser supplied quietly.

"--primitive form. See the Northern Lights, God's own fireworks display, and sleep under a sky full of stars. Book Your Northern Adventure Now. Call Arctic Travel, a sub--sub--"
"Subsidiary."
"--of EcoTourism Inc." Holly finished reading and looked up. "What's eco-tourism?"

"People who wanna see caribou," Kowalski said.

Holly looked surprised. "Do people want to see caribou?"

"Apparently, yeah," Kowalski replied.

The door burst open again and two boys burst in, soaking wet and laughing and heading noisily for one of the back rooms. Instantly, Fraser was on his feet and intercepting them.

"Wait, wait, whoa," Fraser called out, grabbing one boy in each arm--and unlike Sarah, the boys didn't seem to shy away from physical contact. Instead, they just laughed harder, half hugging Fraser and half fighting him off, wriggling wildly. Fraser pulled them back toward the table, nearly lifting them off their feet. "We have company," Fraser noted, somewhat breathlessly. "You might be polite and say hello."

"We saw already," the older boy protested; he looked to be maybe eight or so. "We saw them before."

"You saw them," Fraser repeated. "Were you properly introduced?"

The boy made a face and then shrugged. "Not exactly."

"Not exactly." Fraser let go of the boys and then held them in place by pressing a palm down on each of their heads. "So introduce yourselves please. At least try to act like civilized human beings. I'd appreciate the charade as a personal favor."

"Hello," the boy on the left said; the other boy said nothing but showed them a nervous, awkward smile.

"That's not an introduction," Fraser chided. "That's a greeting."

"He means names." Kowalski was slouched back in his chair and grinning wryly at them. "Rank. Serial number."

The older boy winced and glanced up at Fraser. "Do we really have to?"

"Yes," Fraser said firmly. "We get so few guests, it behooves you to practice. Go on."

"Okay," the older boy sighed. "My name is Eddie, this is my brother Andy--"

"Let Andrew introduce himself, please," Fraser interrupted.

"My name is Andy," Andy said instantly, then glanced up at Fraser for approval.

"Well done," Fraser told them. "This is my very good friend Ray Vecchio. And this is his wife Stella."

"Hey Eddie, hey Andy," Ray said quickly, hoping that this was the right answer in Fraser's whole weird etiquette system. "Nice to meet you."

Fraser nodded approvingly and let go of the boys heads. "All right. First things first--boots, please, by the door." The boys nodded quickly and started tugging off their boots. Then wipe up that
water; you've gotten water everywhere, if you haven't noticed. Then get yourselves washed up. You look a mess. And where's Sam?"

The boys' heads jerked up and they exchanged a quick look. "Dunno," Eddie said.

"What do you mean, you don't know?" Fraser asked, frowning.

"He didn't want to play with us," Eddie told him. "He went off by himself somewhere."

"Is he in the shed?" Fraser pressed, and again, the boys exchanged a questioning glance.

"Don't think so," Eddie said finally.

Fraser sighed his long-suffering sigh. "Which way did he go?"

"North, I think," Eddie answered.

"North. Fine. Very well." The boys put their boots by the door and then scrambled in the kitchen for a mop. Fraser stepped carefully past them and opened the front door again. "Diefenbaker!"

"Fraser." Fraser turned back to look at Kowalski, who shook his head and pointed toward the back bedroom. "In with Robbie. Asleep on the rug."

Fraser nodded, closed the door, and then crossed the living room toward the boys' bedroom. "Diefenbaker," he whispered, opening the door—and a moment later the wolf dragged itself out, looking sleepy-eyed and vaguely irritable. "Dief, I need you to--"

The wolf lifted his head, surveyed the room, and then, to Ray's delight, instantly bounded across the room toward him, leaping up on his hind paws and barking delightedly into his face. "Hey!" Ray shouted happily, rubbing the wolf's ears with his hands. "You remember me!" Some small, mean part of himself noticed that Kowalski looked more pissed off over the dog's greeting then he had over the loss of his former wife. "It's great to see you, you stupid mutt!"

Fraser crossed back across the room; he, at least, looked pleased at their reunion. "There'll be plenty of time to catch up with Ray later," he told Dief, and Dief leapt back onto the floor and stared up at him inquiringly. "Right now I need you to go find Sam."

Diefenbaker barked.

"North, apparently," Fraser replied. He moved toward the front door, Diefenbaker following. "Oh," Fraser added, turning with his hand on the door latch, "and by the way. If you should happen to find a puzzle piece shaped like a zebra..."

Diefenbaker stopped and let out a confused-sounding bark.

"Never mind," Fraser amended, shaking his head. "Just go get Sam."

Diefenbaker looked back over his shoulder, shot Ray a "catch you later" look, and then bounded out the front door when Fraser opened it.

Ray put his elbows on the table and grinned up at Fraser. "So you lost one, huh?"

"Hey," Kowalski shot back, "a day where we lose only one is basically a pretty good day."

Fraser smiled and returned to his chair. "Sam's a bit of a dreamer," he explained. "We lose him more than the others; he has a tendency to wander off. We're not quite sure where he goes, and--"
"Maybe," Sarah muttered, staring down at the tabletop, "he just doesn't want to be here."

"--Diefenbaker never tells." Fraser didn't look at her, didn't acknowledge the comment, but his smile suddenly seemed forced. "As you know Diefenbaker's a wolf of great discretion."

"Sarah." Kowalski wasn't looking at her either, but his voice was back to that threatening, menacing neutrality. "Quit it."

"You might go straighten up your room," Fraser said evenly. "You and Holly will have to sleep with the boys tonight so that our guests can--"

"Oh, come on!" and that was a full-fledged whine, now, and they'd maybe even taken a swerve toward Tantrum City. Sarah scraped back her chair and stumbled to her feet, suddenly looking on the verge of tears. "Dad! Sleep with the boys?"

"Ray," and that was Stella's voice, quietly nervous; she was looking at Kowalski. "I don't want to--we don't have to--" Kowalski shook his head sharply and she shut up.

"You and Holly can have Eddie and Andy's beds," Fraser told her, "and the boys can camp out on the--"

Sarah suddenly kicked out at her chair, which skittered a few inches, shrieking against the hardwood.

"I mean it, Sarah!" Kowalski growled. "Quit it now."

Sarah ignored him and looked pleadingly at Fraser; she seemed like she was barely holding it together. "Can't I at least sleep out here on the sofa?"

Fraser gazed fixedly at her for a few seconds, and then nodded slowly. "Yes, all right--"

"Maybe," Kowalski interrupted softly, and Sarah shot him a look of pure hate. "If she gets her act together."

Fraser glanced at Kowalski, licking his lip, and then nodded in agreement. Sarah, actually beginning to cry now, turned and rushed from the room, slamming the door behind her.

"Want me to go help her clean up?" Holly ventured, glancing from Fraser to Kowalski and back again.

"Nah, let her be, Hol," Kowalski said. The boys returned from their bedroom, their clothes changed, looking cleaner. Robbie danced into the room behind them, smiling, his small face clear from sleep. Kowalski stood up and pointed at each of them. "You--carrots," he said to Eddie. "You--potatoes," he said to Andy. "You--benched due to injury," he said, pointing at Holly. "Hit the sofa, read a book." Kowalski glanced over at Fraser and added, "You want roast duty or Robbie duty?"

Fraser smiled down at the table for a second before lifting his head. "Would you think less of me if I said roast?"

Kowalski groaned. "Flip you for it? No, no, forget it," he amended, when Fraser actually made to pull out a coin. "I got him. C'mon, champ," he added, crossing the room and picking Robbie up off the floor.

Holly followed him toward the sofa, limping and hobbling theatrically. "Can you pick out a book for me?"
"Sure, gimpy," Kowalski replied, and paused by the bookshelf. "Here," he said, pulling out a volume and tossing it to her. "Read Gulliver's Travels. It's got dirty bits."

"Oh, cool," Holly said and settled in.

The door opened for what—if Ray was counting correctly—was the final time, and yet another boy rushed in. The mysterious Sam, Ray presumed, followed by a triumphant-looking Diefenbaker.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Sam moaned, and it was weird—he was only maybe ten or eleven, but he had the odd, distracted look of a mathematics professor late for a lecture. "I forgot the time," he explained, wrenching off his parka and hanging it on the line of hooks. His glasses had begun to fog up. "I forgot my stupid watch--"


"Yeah, okay." Sam roughly wiped his glasses on his flannel shirt and then seemed to notice Ray and Stella sitting there. He glanced over at Fraser, who beckoned him over to the table with his hand.

"This is Sam," Fraser told them as Sam drifted over. "Sam, this is my friend Ray Vecchio and his wife Stella."

"Hi," Sam said politely. "Nice to meet you." He extended a hand toward Ray, who reached out and shook it, and smiled at Stella.

"Likewise," Ray said, grinning at him. "I think you're the last one."

Sam smiled, nodded, gave an offhand shrug. "Yeah, there's kind of a lot of us." He turned to Fraser and asked, "Should I clear up the tea stuff?"

"If you would please, yes," Fraser said, standing. "Or do you want to come hunting?"

Sam gave a small shudder and began to pile the mugs and plates back onto the tray. "I'll pass, thanks. Take Sarah, she's a better shot than me anyway."

"That's true, but..." Fraser turned and looked at the closed bedroom door, then exchanged a loaded look with Kowalski.

"No, he's right, that's a good idea," Kowalski said, coming over with Robbie in his arms. "Take her, she's a good shot."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Fraser murmured, shaking his head. "I'm not entirely sure I want to be putting a loaded rifle into Sarah's hands at the moment."

Kowalski showed him a small grin. "She called you 'Dad', though—did you catch that?"

Fraser nodded grimly. "Yes. Make sure you put that on my tombstone after she shoots me."

Kowalski stepped closer and lowered his voice. "Let it alone. There's nothing you can do with her, except maybe shoot her first. It's just the age."

Fraser rubbed his temples and shook his head. "Perhaps. I don't know." He dropped his hand and smiled wryly at Ray. "Nice try, by the way, at making her hate you more. What are we playing now—good parent, bad parent?"

Kowalski shrugged. "Worth a try, I thought."
"It didn't work, though."

"Yeah, I know."

"Our children appear to be smarter than the average felon."

"Lucky us," Kowalski said and blew out a breath. "Give me a minute, all right? Let me have a crack at her." He shifted Robbie in his arms as if he were about to hand him over to Fraser, then stopped and shot a sharp grin at Stella. "Here, Stell," Kowalski said, holding the boy out and heading toward her.

Stella looked momentarily surprised, then laughed and held her arms out to take him.

"You want an adventure?" Kowalski thrust the boy at her. "I'll give you an adventure--here, knock yourself out."

Still laughing, Stella took the small boy and settled him onto her lap. "Hi there!" she said brightly, lifting a pale hand to stroke Robbie's hair. "Do you want to sit with me for a while?"

Ray watched them narrowly, taking in the picture that they made--Stella holding Robbie, Kowalski bent protectively over them--the three blonds, who might have been a nuclear family in some other, saner world. But now Stella was his wife, and Kowalski was--well, God only knows what Kowalski was doing, living up here with the Mountie--and who the hell was Robbie, anyway? Where had all these freakin' kids come from?"

Ray looked over at Fraser, and saw that he was quietly studying the same picture: Stella, Kowalski and the kid. And then Fraser's blue eyes shifted and met his, and for a moment they were on the same page, sharing minds. This is the way things should have been. And aren't we lucky they aren't? Ray found himself grinning stupidly at Fraser, because yeah, he guessed that was true. He supposed he ought to count himself pretty lucky that Stanley was bent, because now Stella Kowalski was his.

Then the picture broke apart, and Kowalski was heading toward the bedroom door and knocking softly. "Give me five," he whispered to Fraser, "and then call the police."

"I am the police," Fraser replied with a smile.

"Better yet," Kowalski said, and opened the door.

Fraser disappeared through another door and returned with two rifles. "Ray. Why don't you join us?"

Ray nodded and got up. "Sure. We gonna go kill dinner?"

"No," Fraser said, checking his rifle. "I thought we might hold up a supermarket."

Ray burst out laughing. "Benny! You've developed a sense of humor!"

"Yes, Ray." Fraser lowered the gun and showed him an amused look. "Six immaculate conceptions will do that to you."

Chapter Two
Five minutes later, Kowalski walked out of Sarah’s room—and a moment later Sarah herself followed, looking awkward and sort of embarrassed. "Sarah," Fraser said, holding out a rifle, "we could really use your expertise."

She nodded and took the gun from him. "Sure."

They put on coats, hats, gloves, scarves and headed out into the cold, leaving the room busy behind them: Eddie and Andy were peeling potatoes and carrots at the table, Sam was washing dishes in the sink, Ray and Stella were sitting on the sofa and having a silly conversation with Robbie.

"We'll need to be quick," Fraser told Sarah and Ray. "Before the sun goes down."

Sarah nodded, checked her gun, and started walking; Ray put a hand on Fraser's arm, holding him back a little, indicating that they should let her get ahead of them.

"While we got a minute, Benny," Ray said quietly. "You gotta tell me the story."

Fraser looked at him, smiled, and nodded. "All right."

Stella held Robbie in her lap, but Robbie couldn't seem to keep his hands or his eyes off Ray. Ray, for his part, seemed genuinely amused by this. "So," Stella said, smiling ruefully at him, "you finally got your kids, huh?"

Ray half-groaned, half-laughed. "Oh yeah. In spades. You know that thing they say--be careful what you wish for?"

"I admit, you didn't do it halfway," Stella said.

"Yeah, that's me--Mr. Extreme." Ray leaned his head back and contemplated the ceiling for a second. "I dunno, it all just sort of happened," he said, meeting her eyes again. "It was one thing after another--boom, boom, boom. I came up here to be with Fraser," Ray said with an offhand jerk of his shoulder, and Stella knew that move from old--it meant Ray didn't really want to talk much about that. "And we were just basically hanging out, except that one day this guy shows up at the door..."

"I had a friend called Mary McGinty," Fraser said; he was talking to Ray but his eyes were fixed on Sarah, who was up ahead, moving stealthily and scanning the woods. "She and I trained together; she graduated second out of our entire class." Fraser didn't say it, but Ray knew perfectly well who'd graduated first. "She probably should have been first," Fraser added, as if reading his mind, "but at the time...well, there weren't very many female recruits. Still aren't--not out here." Fraser waved his hand at the darkening, snowy landscape. "Anyway we were very close at the time..."

"--and the long and the short of it was, she got knocked up at some point. Don't know who--Fraser didn't seem to know either. Anyway, she kept the baby, and that's Sarah." Ray stopped and suddenly scrubbed wearily at his face. "Man, Sarah, Sarah, Sarah..."

"We were stationed together from time to time, otherwise we kept in touch by correspondence," Fraser explained quietly. "She sent me pictures of Sarah, I wrote back respectful notes, 'What a lovely child you have,' that sort of thing. But last year, quite unexpectedly, a man came to our door. He was a legal representative, sent by the RCMP, and he told us that Mary had been shot by a poacher during a routine patrol. She was only thirty."
Fraser stopped and stared at Sarah, who had stopped short and lifted her gun.

"Hence her interest in guns," Fraser whispered, going utterly still himself. "I think she feels that turnabout is fair play."

Sarah fired.

"Fraser and Sarah's mom were like, RCMP buddies," Ray told Stella. "Class nerds or something. Anyway, this lawyer guy tells us that McGinty named Fraser as executor of her will--plus she put in a special provision asking Fraser to take care of her kid if anything ever happened to her, which then it did."

"Ray," Stella ventured. "You don't think...you know. That maybe Sarah is..."

"Fraser's?" Ray shook his head. "Nah, no way. Nothing that simple. Easier if it were."

Robbie again reached out for Ray, and this time Ray absently pulled him back into his lap.

"To be honest with you, my first thought was--no way is this going to happen," Ray told her. "I mean, I just didn't see how it was possible for us. But Fraser..."

Ray trailed off, his attention captured by Robbie, who was clumsily groping his stubbled cheek. "What do you want, you wanna go play?"

Robbie seemed to consider this, and then nodded. "Yeah. Wanna go play."

Ray set him down on his feet. "Go to your room, get a toy, bring it back here," he said, and Robbie set off running. "I think it's because she was shot," Ray said almost casually, settling back in his seat.

It took a second for Stella to process the sudden return to the subject.

"He just--Fraser wouldn't let it go," Ray said. "He was determined that we should do this, and Fraser determined is, like, a very scary thing. I think he wants to make it right for her--for Sarah, I mean. Except he can't, and that's what he hasn't figured out yet."

Fraser broke out into a run, and Ray stumbled behind, trying to keep his feet under him.

"Well done, Sarah!" Fraser called out.

Sarah held up the dead rabbit triumphantly; she was flushed and beaming. "Didja see that? Did you see that shot?"

"Yes," Fraser said, stopping short in the snow behind her. "It was wonderfully done."

"Bang!" Sarah shouted, grinning. "I'm gonna get another one, too--here, hold this!" Fraser took the dead rabbit from her and she ran away across the snow, totally surefooted. "And stay behind me, okay?" she called back over her shoulder. "Okay? Cause otherwise you'll scare them off!"

"So once it was a given that we were gonna take Sarah, other things started seeming possible. Plus, I'd always wanted kids--you know that. We started thinking that maybe she ought to have a sibling. Because, face it--her, living with us, here in the middle of nowhere--it's just weird. So we started lookin' to adopt a kid that was about Sarah's age."
Ray stopped and looked across the room at Sam, who was wiping down the kitchen counters.

"What we wanted was Sam," Ray continued, lowering his voice, and Stella nodded. "Sarah's twelve, Sam's eleven—we thought, perfect, great, they'll get on. Except see—"

Robbie came back from the bedroom, carrying something that looked like a small farm. "The zoo set, right, shoulda figured," Ray said with a grin. "Okay, so sit down and commence with the playing."

Robbie plopped down on the rug in front of them and started dragging the two-dimensional wooden animals across the floor, making appropriate accompanying noises.

"God, please, that he doesn't remember the zebra," Ray muttered.

They walked together through the twilight, and Fraser told him how he'd come to get the boys.

"So we found, when we looked into adopting Sam, that we'd walked right into the middle of an adoption intrigue." Fraser stopped and looked at Ray; his breath was a puff of white in front of his face. "Sam, Eddie, Andy, and Robbie are all actually brothers," Fraser explained, and now that he'd mentioned it, yeah, Ray could see the resemblance between them. "As it turned out, Social Services had been deeply divided because there had been a number of people who'd wanted to adopt Robbie—and only Robbie. Robbie was maybe a year old at the time, and apparently people prefer to adopt younger children." Fraser shook his head, as if that were inexplicable to him. "Ray and I, of course, had precisely the opposite desire—in fact, frankly speaking, Robbie's a bit too young for us to handle. Even Eddie and Andy require a level of care that..." Fraser blew out a frustrated breath. "...well, it frankly boggles the mind. But the agency was exceedingly interested in us, because no one'd ever been interested in adopting Sam at all."

"He seems like a lovely kid," Ray ventured.

"He's a wonderful kid," Fraser said with surprising vehemence. And then he seemed to catch himself, and looked away. "Wonderful," he repeated, more quietly. "But they wanted us to take all four boys, and Robbie..." Fraser shook his head and then looked pleadingly at Ray. "I hope you understand why it was such an issue for us. We weren't—hell, we aren't—equipped to have a child that young, either of us. But we were their only chance to stay together. And so we discussed it...and we discussed it...and we discussed it." Fraser was suddenly almost laughing. "And finally we decided that we'd just have to make it work somehow."

"So suddenly we've got five," Ray said, sinking back into the sofa cushions in mock-exhaustion. "Which has got to be some sort of land-speed record. And then came Holly." He reached behind his head, pulled out a throw pillow, and hurled it at Holly—it hit her book squarely, and then bounced up into her face.

"Hey!" Holly yelled, glaring at him. "What'ja do that for?"

"What do I call you, Holly?" Ray asked her, smirking. Holly flung the pillow furiously back at him, but he just caught it easily and stuck out his tongue at her. "Come on, answer the question."

Holly rolled her eyes. "The Eggroll. Because with six you get eggroll." She sighed, and then looked to Stella for sympathy. "He's really kind of pathetic."

Ray looked at Stella, threw his lanky arms out, and put on a gigantic smile.
"Yeah," Stella told Holly after a moment. "He really is."

"Believe it or not, adopting Holly meant that there were enough children in the area to open a local school. They had to send out a teacher from Yellowknife, and build us a schoolhouse--"

"Wait a second," Ray interrupted, raising his gloved hand. "You've got a school just for your kids?"

"Well, no," Fraser amended. "There are a few others, but they'd all been home-schooled up until that point, just as I was when I was young. But our six put this area over the limit, which is fifteen."

Ahead of them, another shot rang out, and Sarah yelled, "I got another one!"

"Well done, Sarah!" Fraser called back, and then he added, "Ray and I do, of course, exercise considerable influence at PTA meetings."

Ray shook his head and followed Fraser across the snow toward Sarah. "Well, yeah, Benny, sure--you're parents to one third of the school!"

"Yes." Fraser seemed distracted; he stared up at the vanishing sun, then glanced down at his watch. "Sarah, we've got to hurry now. Fire a shot south-southeast, if you please."

Sarah nodded, hefted her rifle, and fired toward a clump of bushes. Instantly there was a blur of rabbits. Fraser raised his rifle and fired--then quickly reloaded and fired!--then quickly reloaded and fired for a final time. "All right!" Fraser called to Sarah, letting the rifle drop to his side. "That ought to do it."

"So you see, for one more kid, we got cash and prizes. New school, new teacher, more doctors at the clinic--a wave of social services crashing down on upon our heads, every one of which we need. And it's all thanks to Holly." Ray grinned at Holly and made to throw the pillow at her again, but he put it down when Holly ducked. "Plus, she's got a slap shot like you wouldn't believe."

"Ray, we're done!" Eddie yelled.

Ray sat up. "Holly, keep an eye on Robbie, willya?" He heaved himself up off the sofa and wandered over to the kitchen table. "Carrots, check." Ray said, examining the pile of neatly peeled carrots. "Potatoes, check. Okay--now go get your shit out of the living room, and then you're dismissed for a while."

The boys nodded, scrambled into the living room to collect their stuff, and then disappeared into their bedroom. Ray took the platters of potatoes and carrots into the kitchen, slid them onto the counter, and then took Sam by the shoulders. "How're you doin', sport?"

"I'm fine," Sam replied; he was looking around distractedly. "How does it look?"

"Great. It's gonna be dirty again in ten minutes." Ray pulled the sponge out of Sam's hand and tossed it into the sink. "You're dismissed until set up," he said, and reached out to ruffle Sam's hair.

Sam smiled, stepped away from the counter, and then stopped. "Hey, can I go read in your bedroom? Just for a while?"

"Yeah, sure," Ray said. Sam grinned at him and went through the farthest door.

The room had gotten suddenly quiet--Holly was reading, Robbie playing and talking softly to
himself--and Stella slipped off the sofa and went into the kitchen. "What about me?" she asked Ray. "Can I do something to help?"

Ray leaned back against the counter, smirking. "You want orders from me? That's a first."

"Don't get used to it," Stella replied with a smile.

"I won't," Ray said, and it was funny, but even now, even here, having him close like this was enough to give her something of the old tingle. "You look great, you know. You look really happy."

"You too," Stella replied, and meant it. "You look happy, too. Maybe a little *crazy*...."

"Hey, that's not news," Ray shook his head, grinning. "I was crazy before, but I was crazy for nothing. At least now I'm crazy for *something*.

"The kids," Stella said softly.

Ray instantly looked over in Holly and Robbie's direction. "The kids, yeah... And Fraser," he added wistfully, and then he blinked rapidly and looked back at her, seeming almost embarrassed by what he'd just said. "Fraser could drive Freud round the bend," Ray said, suddenly pushing himself away from the counter; he obviously still didn't want to talk about it. "But mainly, you know, things are pretty good and--"

Stella stopped his retreat, taking his arm. "I'm glad things are good," she said, tightening her fingers. "I'm really, really glad things are good, Ray."

"I--yeah. They're good." Ray stared down at her fingers for a moment, and then he lifted his head and met her eyes. "I miss dancing with you," he said softly. "That's what I miss most. Fraser...the man's got two left feet."

Stella felt a smile slowly spreading across her face. "Bet he does everything else good, though," she whispered.

Ray ducked his head closer to hers. "Oh yeah," he whispered back. "He does everything else just fine."

"Oh, God," Ray moaned, turning away and covering his eyes with his hands for good measure. "This was *disgusting*--he was gonna be sick, he was gonna throw up all over everything. Fraser and Sarah were slicing the rabbits open, chopping their heads off, ripping their skins off their poor little rabbity bodies. "This is not something you do with kids, Fraser! This is something kids should never even know about!"

"What's he talking about?" Sarah whispered to Fraser.

"I don't know," Fraser replied. "Don't worry about it--just be careful with that knife. Make sure you don't nick a bowel or--"

"Christ," Ray wailed, instantly moving his hands to cover his ears. "That is so disgusting, that is *so* disgusting--"

"It's really not so bad," Sarah said; she sounded like she was trying to reassure him. "Here, come on--have a go."

Ray glanced nervously at her--she was holding a half-eviscerated rabbit in one hand and a deadly
looking knife in the other. "Forget it!" Ray said quickly, and looked away again.

"Yes, do," Fraser instantly agreed. "We've got no time for amateurs if we're going to eat at a civilized hour."

Chapter Three

"I didn't do anything!" Holly whined. "I swear..."

Ray was rapidly wiping his hands on a towel. "No, I know you didn't, I know you didn't--"

"I've got it," Stella told him, grabbing the wooden spoon off the counter. "I'm totally in control here."

"Don't I know it," Ray said wryly, and then he was striding across the room to pick up the wailing Robbie. "You didn't see anything happen?" he asked Holly, heaving Robbie up into his arms.

"No, nothing," Holly insisted. "He was just sitting there and..."

"Zebra..." Robbie sobbed, drooling spit all over Ray's shoulder. "I wan' my zebra..."

"You want your zebra," Ray repeated, stepping back and looking around for it idly. "Right, okay--reasonable request. Where's Diefenbaker? Dief!"

Diefenbaker appeared, apparently from out of nowhere, and looked up at Ray. Ray squatted, picked up another piece of the zoo set, and held it out toward Dief. "Find this for me, willya?"

Diefenbaker sat back on his haunches and looked at Ray as if he were stupid.

Ray sighed. "No, not this," he said, clenching the piece in his fist and shaking it. "This but shaped like a goddamned zebra!" Robbie let out another despondent wail, and Ray looked pleadingly at Diefenbaker, who seemed unmoved. "Look, please. I'll owe you, okay?"

Diefenbaker let out a sharp, interrogatory bark.

"My life," Ray said wearily. "My first-born child--or here, how about my last-born?" Ray shoved the weeping boy toward the wolf, who jittered backwards, apparently horrified, and then turned and ran off. Ray made a face and stood up. "Even wolves fear this child..."

Robbie let out another soul-rending cry and buried his face in Ray's shoulder. Ray blew out a breath and began to rub his back reassuringly. "S'okay, kid, hang on," he muttered. "Life gets better, I promise..." He wandered back into the kitchen and settled himself back against the counter next to Stella, still rubbing circles on Robbie's quivering back. "Geez, Stell, I dunno. Maybe Fraser's right. Maybe this is Weltenschmerz." He leaned back a bit, got a glimpse of Robbie's contorted, crying face, and then shook his head. "Fraser says that he's crying for the millions of souls murdered in Tibet..."

The front door opened and Fraser himself appeared, carrying bloody carcasses in both hands. He stopped short and looked at Robbie and Ray. "Oh, no, not again..."

"Yes, again," Ray shot back, and then looked past him toward Vecchio. "Hey, you got free arms--get over here."

Ray Vecchio looked suspicious, but Ray just pushed past Fraser and shoved the crying boy into his
"You figure it out, you tell us," Ray said, and then he rushed back to the large double sink and started filling one half with water. Instantly Fraser was next to him and dropping the rabbit carcasses into the sink.

"Where's the salt?" Fraser asked him.

"Go wash your goddamned hands," Ray snapped. "Sam just cleaned."

"Right, yes," Fraser said, and disappeared into the bathroom.

Robbie kept wailing, and Ray Vecchio began to look panicked. "Stella--what do I do?"

"Talk to him," Stella suggested. "Sing to him or something."

"I'm putting the guns away!" Sarah called out, moving toward the bedroom.

Ray was shaking salt into the water. "Shoot me first," he muttered, and then he looked down around his ankles. "What?" He banged the salt down on the counter. "What?" He squatted down, pulled something out of Diefenbaker's mouth, and let out a triumphant yell. "I love you! I freakin' love you!--and then he was bearing down on Vecchio, holding out the missing zebra.

"Shouldn't you wash that first?" Stella asked.

Ray looked at her, then wiped the piece of wood roughly across his shirt. "Dief's cleaner than the kids, believe me," he said, and then offered the piece to Robbie. "Here you go, champ--instant zebra!"

Robbie took it, looked at it, and then beamed through his tears. "Zebra!" He began to squirm in Vecchio's arms, and Ray said, "It's okay, put him down." Vecchio seemed happy to comply, and Robbie ran toward the rest of the zoo set. "Dief, watch him!" Ray called to the wolf, and Diefenbaker trotted across the room and sprawled next to Robbie on the rug in front of the fire.

Fraser came out of the bathroom, sleeves rolled up. "All right, what needs to be done?"

"Stella's got the vegetables and potatoes under control," Ray told him. "You just need to make those rabbits look like dinner."

Fraser nodded. "Okay--roasting's simplest, roasting's fastest."

"Roast away, then."

Fraser glanced across at Robbie and then said, sounding relieved, "He stopped crying."

"Dief found the zebra," Ray told him.

"God bless Diefenbaker," Fraser replied instantly. "And you," and if Stella hadn't been watching, she would have missed it--the sudden, shared smile, the way Fraser's hand briefly skimmed Ray's shoulder as he slid into place next to him at the sink and contemplated the soaking rabbits. The momentary jolt of electricity between them--and Stella felt suddenly, sinkingly sure that if she and Ray Vecchio hadn't been there, Fraser would have kissed Ray just then.

And that was sort of upsetting, because she'd thought she was okay with that. They'd even managed to talk about it, however obliquely, *He does everything else just fine,*--but that was when Benton Fraser wasn't actually *there*, right in front of her, six feet of denim and flannel and muscle and--
goddamn it!--generating heat with her husband. Her ex-husband. With Ray Kowalski. With Stanley, she thought meanly.

She turned; her husband was touching her arm and looking at her with concern. "You okay?"

"Yeah, fine," she snapped, and then she bit her lip and said, more softly, "Yeah, I'm okay, thanks."

Ray drew her aside and she let herself be drawn. "This must be freaky for you," he murmured.

She looked into his beautiful green eyes and then showed him a smile. "No, it's okay, it's really okay," she said, and then she stretched up and kissed him, sliding one hand against his waist. And Ray was warm and solid and his aftershave still smelled nice—though some small part of her was aware that maybe she was kissing him right now just to rub it in Stanley's face. Because she could kiss her new husband in public. So there.

They broke apart, and then Ray leaned in and kissed her once more, softly. His green eyes were clear and sharp and sizing her up. "You think the kids know?" Ray murmured, lip curling into a faint smile. Shit, he was reading her mind—why the fuck did she have to keep marrying detectives? "You think they understand what's going on here?"

"I don't know," she replied, feeling embarrassed at herself. "I imagine so." What was it her business, anyway? What was it either of their business what these men did in their own house? She glanced back into the kitchen; they were still standing together at the sink, talking in low voices. Standing damned close together, not that it was any of her—

"Makes you wonder," Ray said quietly. "It can't be good for them. This isn't exactly a normal homelife."

Stella heard Stanley laugh and say, "Like I know, Fraser," and Stella knew that tone—that was his coy voice. That made her stomach clench, and she found herself taking her irritation out on Ray. "What do we know about normal?" she demanded in a harsh whisper. "What do we know about anything? They seem to be doing a pretty good job as parents—better than what I could do."

"Me thinks the lady doth protest too much," Ray murmured, and she felt like smacking him. He didn't give her the chance, though; he was heading into the living room, hands jammed in his pants pockets, and plopping himself down on the sofa. "So how're you guys doing?"

Holly folded a corner down, closed her book, and let it drop to the floor. "Okay. How did the hunt go?"

"It was disgusting," Ray said, grinning at her. "Totally and completely disgusting."

"That's what Sam thinks," Holly told him, and as if he had heard, Sam suddenly appeared from the bedroom and knelt down on the rug next to Robbie and Dief. "Sammy," Holly said, "Mr. Vecchio doesn't like hunting, either."

"Yeah, it's pretty gross," Sam agreed with a shrug. "Sarah's the only one who really doesn't mind it, but then again she was brought up around here."

"Oh?" Stella asked, drifting over to stand by the back of the sofa. "Where are you from?"

Sam glanced up at her and absently straightened his glasses with the back of his hand. "Yellowknife," he said. "It's a pretty big city."

Stella clamped down on a smile. "So this is a big change for you, huh?"
"You could say that, yeah," Sam said.

She saw Ray edge forward on the sofa and knew what he was going to say before he said it. Part of her wanted to stop him, but she didn't stop him—because maybe she was as curious as he was. "So how is it really, living here?"

Sam seemed to consider this. "It's okay. A little weird. It's okay, though."

Ray lowered his voice. "What about them?" he asked, nudging his head toward the kitchen. "Is it weird living with them?"

Enough. That was enough. "Ray," Stella said sharply.

Ray ignored her and just stared at Sam. "You know. Having two daddies."

"Oh, they're great," Holly said brightly from her position on the sofa. "They're just great to us—"

But Sam was staring narrowly back at Ray through his glasses. "What are you asking me?"

"—they take us skating and hiking and sometimes to the movies on Sunday after church," Holly continued, addressing herself to Stella now that she saw that Ray wasn't paying attention to her. "It used to be just me and my mom before, so having all the other kids around is a blast—"

Sam suddenly jerked his head toward his sister. "Holly," he interrupted. "Go clean up your room. These people have to sleep there tonight."

"These people," Stella thought, wincing. She could hear more than a little Benton Fraser in that phrase.

Holly looked surprised. "Yeah, I know, but Sarah was supposed to--"

"Just do it, okay?" Sam said angrily, and now he was grabbing Robbie's hand and pulling him up off the carpet. Holly gaped at him for a moment, and then she scrambled off the sofa—Stella had a pretty good idea that Sam didn't normally talk to her in that tone of voice.

Ray was squirming uncomfortably. "Sam, hey, sorry if I--"

Sam ignored him. "Take Robbie with you, Hol." Robbie was hanging from the end Sam's arm, looking sort of lost and flailing around on the floor for his beloved zebra.

"Really, kids," Ray said, forcing a smile, "you don't have to--"

"We've got work to do, Mr. Vecchio," Sam mumbled, not meeting his eyes. Holly, looking upset and confused, limped over and took Robbie's hand. Sam fell back to his knees and began doggedly gathering together the pieces of the zoo set.

Holly pulled Robbie into what Stella assumed was the girls' bedroom, and a moment later an annoyed-looking Sarah came out. "Why'd you send them in to me?" she demanded, staring at Sam.

Sam didn't look up at her; he just continued searching after missing pieces. "Because."

"Because?" Sarah repeated, crossing her arms. "Because you wanted the living room all to yourself, maybe?"

Sam stood up, clutching the zoo set to his chest, and glared at her; his fair skin was flushed pink. "Why don't you quit being such a pain?" he whispered angrily. "Maybe for just one second
something could be not about you, all right?"

Sarah's eyes widened. "I--"

"Just give me a hand, here, willya?" Sam said softly, mouth tightening. "Please?"

Sarah stared at her brother for a long moment, and then nodded slowly. Sam headed grimly off for the bedroom, and Sarah followed. Sam slammed the bedroom door behind them, and instantly Stella shot Ray a sharp look. "Nice work, there, Vecchio."

Ray Vecchio lowered his head, his hands dangling between his knees. "Okay, I know--that was really bad."

"That's a freaking understatement," Stella retorted--and then they both lifted their heads and stared at the closed bedroom door, because now they could hear snatches of furiously whispered argument. Sam's voice, strained and strangely high-pitched in his intensity. "...who these people even are!..."

"...do so!" Sarah. Protesting. "...Ben's friends!..."

"...says them, that's what they say!..."

"...married to Ray..."

"...believe everything...we don't know anything...could report us..."

Stella looked at Ray, horrified, as the sounds behind the door died away. "Jesus, Ray," she whispered.

Ray had closed his eyes and was rubbing a nervous hand over the back of his head. "I know. Shit."

Stella glanced anxiously toward the kitchen; Fraser was carefully fitting the skewered rabbits into the rotisserie, and Ray was standing over him, giving directions, arms crossed. And then she turned, stifling a gasp of surprise, as the door opened again. Sam came out, showed them an obviously forced smile, and then hurried into the kitchen, head down. He opened a cabinet door and began pulling down dishes.

Ray Kowalski glanced at him and said, "You got time yet. We're not ready."

"It's okay," Sam said quickly, and then added, awkwardly, "--Dad."

Ray did a slow double-take. "Sam?"

"Yeah?"

"Everything okay?"

"Yep." Sam grabbed the sponge out of the sink and moved to wipe down the kitchen table. "Everything's great."

Ray wandered away from the oven, following him. "Because, like I said, we got maybe another half an hour before we..."

"No time like the present!" Sam said brightly, and then he brushed past him back into the kitchen. He pulled a large, white tablecloth out of a drawer and then returned to the table to spread it out.
The door behind them snicked open, and Sarah slipped out of one bedroom and into the other. "Just shut up a minute!" they heard her yell, and then all went eerily silent behind Door Number Two.

"I'm hoping you're having a bright idea about how to fix this," Stella muttered to Ray.

Ray shook his head helplessly. "No clue."

Fraser closed the stove door and stood up, brushing his hands together. "All right," he told Ray, "half an hour should..." He stopped, because Ray clearly wasn't listening to him. Ray was watching Sam, who was carefully setting out plates, glasses, napkins, silverware. Fraser touched Ray's shoulder, Ray turned to look at him, and they had a quick, intense conversation with their eyes.

"That...looks lovely, Sam," Fraser ventured finally.

Sam's head jerked up and he smiled broadly. "Thanks, Dad! Glad to help."

"2-1," Ray muttered. "Your point."

Fraser was staring at Sam thoughtfully. "Yes, I can see that, Sam. You look veritably delighted." He took a step closer to the boy. "You're sure everything's all right?"

Sam stared up at him earnestly. "Everything's great, Dad--honest."

"3-1." Ray rubbed a hand over the spikes of his blond hair. "Man, this is a rout."

"I don't think that's the truth," Fraser said quietly. He reached out to stroke Sam's hair, and to Fraser's obvious surprise Sam leaned into it and raised his arms to give Fraser a hug.

Fraser instantly wrapped his arms around the boy and turned to Ray, looking baffled.

Ray pointed an accusing finger at Sam. "You killed Robbie!"

Sam looked at him, startled. "No, of course not! Dad," he added quickly.

"3-2," Ray retorted, "and what the fuck?"

"Ray," Fraser said sharply.

"Nothing the fuck!" Sam protested. "I swear!"

"Sam," Fraser said sharply.

Sam looked up at him apologetically. "Sorry, Dad."

"Okay, stop, stop," Ray said, striding over. "Right now. Right this freakin' second."

"Stop what?" Sam asked, now sounding distraught. "What do you want me to stop?"

Ray looked at Fraser again. Fraser just looked back at him, totally flummoxed.

Ray reached out and took Sam's face in his hands, gently feeling the glands under his ears. "You're not getting sick, are you?"

Sam shook his head vehemently—and then suddenly his face was crumpling, and he buried his face against Fraser's chest. Fraser held him tightly, cupping the back of Sam's head with his palm. "Sam..."
Ray's mouth had fallen open, and he slowly sat down in the nearest chair. "What the..."

Fraser looked at him over Sam's head. "Weltschmerz?" he mouthed.

"No!" Ray nearly yelled, and then he was tugging at Sam's arm, pulling him out of Fraser's arms and into his own. "Sam, I swear to God, you are scaring me, here," Ray said, shaking him a little. "This isn't like you."

"I'm sorry." Sam's arms crept around Ray's neck. "I'm sorry, Ray..."

"S'okay," Ray murmured, clutching him tightly. "Whatever it is, it's okay--okay?"

Fraser rested his hands on Sam's shoulders and bent to murmur something against the top of his head.

"That's true," Ray said softly. "That's the truth, Sammy--you know it is."

Sam lifted his head and swiped at his nose with his sleeve, knocking his glasses askew. "Okay..."

Ray reached up to straighten them. "Okay?"

"Okay," Sam repeated. He stumbled backwards, out of Ray's lap, and against Fraser, who steadied him.

"I think you should lie down for a few minutes." Fraser's voice was quiet but firm. "Until dinner at least. All right?"

Sam wiped his arm across his forehead. "All right, Dad, yeah."

"Come on," Fraser said, tugging him by the shoulder. "You can use our room." He nudged Sam ahead of him, toward their bedroom door.

"Sam?" Ray called, and Sam stopped and looked over his shoulder. "Later I'm gonna beat some answers out of you, so just prepare yourself."

Sam grinned helplessly and shoved his glasses up with the back of his hand. "Okay, Ray."

"He won't really," Fraser told him.

"I know," Sam replied.

Chapter Four

So dinner with the Children Of The Damned turned out to be a really freaky thing.

Ray Vecchio had never heard so much politeness coming off one table in his life--it was all, "Please pass the--," and "May I have the--," and "Thank you kindly," until he thought he was going to be sick. He was used to large family dinners, but in his experience they mainly involved lots of yelling and grabbing stuff, not this Stepford crap. He didn't think it had anything to do with the fact that the kids all now thought that he and Stella were out to report them to Social Services, get them taken away from their parents, and leave them to die, alone, in the snow. No, these kinds of table manners took a minute to learn, but a lifetime to master--this wasn't anything the kids had whipped up just for effect.

Besides, Fraser and Kowalski didn't seem to think there was anything weird about it at all, and they'd
sniffed out Sam's Happy Homemaker routine fast enough. Sarah, he'd noticed, had given Sam hell about that, drawing him aside and muttering, "I knew you'd crack under pressure. You're so damn weak." Sam, for his part, had promptly told her to drop dead--so hey, you could really see the Kowalski influence in there sometimes.

The rabbits, by the time they'd hit the table, had looked a lot less like dead animals and a lot more like dinner--plus, they tasted like chicken, just more gamy. Fraser, he noticed, had taken care to serve him and Stella first. He'd thought that was just more politeness but soon realized it was practical--once the kids hit the food, the food just vanished. Sarah, Sam, Holly, Eddie and Andy fell upon the meal like crazed wolverines, while Kowalski tried to force-feed Robbie tiny bits of cut up meat and carrots, which he refused with increasingly vehement shakes of his head.

Finally Kowalski threw the fork down in frustration. "Right, okay," he said, grabbing Robbie under the armpits and swinging him off the chair, "you are done, sir. Time for bed."

Fraser quickly got to his feet, dropping his napkin onto the table. "I'll do it."

Kowalski waved him away. "You don't have to, don't bother--"

"No, really, I'll do it," Fraser said, coming over. "Go back and eat, Ray--you've barely eaten a thing."

Kowalski grinned wryly and shook his head. "I don't seem to need food or sleep anymore. I have evolved into a superior being."

"Ray, if you die," Fraser said seriously, "then the children will all die horrible, neglectful deaths. Then they'll put me into prison. Then they'll make a TV movie about it--'Death In The Snow: One Family's Tragedy' and--"

"All right, yeah, okay," Kowalski said and thrust the kid into Fraser's arms. There was a moment during the hand-off where they were standing close, arms entangled, and suddenly it hit Vecchio that they were really doing each other. It was something about how they stood together, how they touched--and up till that second, he'd known it but he hadn't really known it.

Holy fuck, man. Kowalski and Fraser were doing it.

Ray Vecchio looked over at Stella, but she wasn't looking in the right place; she was frowning at Sam, who was staring down at his plate, cheeks blazing. It took him a second to figure out what was going on, and then he got it--Sam had seen what he'd seen, Sam knew his two daddies were doing it, and he was embarrassed because--

He was ashamed because--

No, he wasn't ashamed, he was worried--worried that he and Stella were seeing what he was seeing, which was what, exactly? Two forty-year-old guys fussing over a small boy. Sam's brother. Two forty-year-old guys fussing over their son.

Ray looked over at Fraser again, and then lowered his head to hide his smile. Fraser was making the puffin face, and Robbie was laughing at him and slap-patting his swollen cheeks. Man, Fraser always looked so damn comfortable out here, like he never, ever did back in Chicago. It was like something deep in him eased up--even his posture relaxed, although maybe that slouch was mostly about holding the kid steady. Still, Fraser looked pretty damn happy, standing there with Robby in the crook of his arm, and Kowalski looked--okay, yeah, still edgy, still basically an asshole--but the kids brought out some gentle streak in him that Ray hadn't ever seen before.
Ray glanced at Sam again—and then suddenly he was scraping his chair back and walking around the table to stand behind him. Sam stiffened, fingers tightening on his fork—and man, that was bad, he’d really freaked the kid out. Ray looked up and saw that Stella was watching him curiously. He showed her a faint smile, and then put his hands on Sam's shoulders and bent down to whisper into his ear. "I love your dad, kid. You've got to trust me on that."

Sam went still for a second, and then turned his head to squint at Ray. "Which one?"

Smart ass. "Benny's my best friend. I want him to be happy, okay?"

"I'm sure he'll be delighted to hear it," Sam replied, and man, if the kid hadn't already mastered that passive-aggressive way Benny had of making a guy feel like shit.

"Say goodnight, kids," Kowalski said, dropping back into his chair at the table, and the other kids all looked up and said, "Goodnight, Robbie," "Night, Robbie," "Sleep well." Kowalski picked up his knife and fork and shot a warm smile over at Stella, which sort of pissed Ray off. "One down, five to go."

Ray slipped back around the table to his seat, just as Andy raised his head and asked, "Ray, can we watch TV tonight?"

"Ask Ben," Kowalski replied.

"You got a TV?" Ray asked him, surprised.

"Yep," Kowalski said, shoving in a forkful of potatoes. "All mod cons. Indoor plumbing, television, satellite dish--"

"And a computer," Eddie piped up, "not that you let us use it or anything."

"That's right," Kowalski said. "Because I am mean, mean, mean."

"You've really got a computer up here?" Stella asked.

"Yeah, a laptop--but it's not a toy," Kowalski replied, looking pointedly at Eddie. "You want to kill aliens, do it the hard way--get yourself abducted."

"Har-de-ha-ha," Eddie said, rolling his eyes. "You kill me."

"Not yet I haven't," Kowalski replied, and then he looked back at Stella. "It's mainly for work, Stella. Some days I can telecommute in."

"You work?" Stella asked, looking surprised.

"No, I sit home and watch Oprah on the dish all day," Kowalski retorted. "Eat bon-bons and take valium and wait for Fraser to bring me flowers."

Stella raised her palms in surrender. "All right, I'm sorry."

"I work for an environmental research group," Kowalski told her, reaching out for the bowl of mashed potatoes. "Sometimes I go in, other days I'm out in the field. We've got a woman who helps us out, looks after Robbie when we're not home. Two more years, he'll go to school, and life will get a hell of a lot easier."

"Do you think Ben will let us watch TV tonight?" Andy asked worriedly.
Kowalski looked at him. "Not if you ask like that. Use your brain, Andy."

Holly nudged Andy's arm and said, "You gotta ask for something specific. Ben always wants you to ask for something specific."

"Whattya mean, specific?" Andy asked, looking lost.

Sarah let out one of her long suffering sighs. "I'll do it," she said. She scraped her chair back and then stopped. "May I be excused for a minute?"

"Uh-huh," Kowalski said.

Sarah got up, went into the living room, and returned a moment later, thumbing through the newspaper. "Here," she said, folding the newspaper back and thrusting the page at Andy. "The listings. Ask for something specific."

Andy stared down at the page, looking hopelessly confused.

"Here, gimme that," Holly said, grabbing it.

Kowalski cleared his throat.

"May I have the newspaper please?" Holly instantly amended, and then she snatched the paper out of Andy's hand and looked it over. Sam leaned over and looked over her shoulder. "Dumb and Dumber," Holly read.

"In your dreams," Sarah retorted.

Holly looked up. "Terminator II?"

Sarah shook her head. "Not a chance. He'll say it's too violent."

"There's a game," Sam said, frowning over the paper. "Oilers vs. the New York Rangers."

"Talk about violence," Sarah muttered.

"Where?" Holly asked eagerly.

"There." Sam pointed. "See? He'll go for that."

"Isn't there anything else?" Sarah asked impatiently.

"Uh...not a lot," Sam said, scanning. "A lot of R-rated movies and a bunch of dumb sitcoms."

"Indiana Jones and The Temple of Doom," Holly said, pointing. "That's PG-13."

"Are you thirteen?" Sarah asked, rolling her eyes at Holly.

Holly sighed. "No..."

Stella looked over at Ray as the kids poured over the paper. "You've got them pretty well trained."

"Not me. Him." Kowalski shrugged. "Personally I think Dumb and Dumber is funny."

"The Princess Bride is on the Kids Channel," Holly said.

"The Princess Bride is girly," Eddie protested.
"No, it isn't," Sam disagreed. "It's pretty funny, actually."

Eddie whined, "But it's about a bride."

Sam shook his head. "It's not about a bride. It's got giants and fighting and stuff."

"And what's wrong with girly, anyway?" Holly asked Eddie, raising her chin belligerently. "You know, I could punch you really hard."

"Could not."

"Could so. You'd be in major pain," Holly said confidently.

"Dad..." Eddie looked pleadingly at Kowalski.

"She could, actually," Kowalski told him. "But we wouldn't let her. Not unless she gave us money," he added after a moment.

Fraser came back from the bedroom, pulling the door softly shut behind him. Kowalski looked up at him, and Fraser nodded, slicing a line in the air with his hand. "Out like a light."

"Fantastic," Kowalski sighed.

"Ben, can we watch The Princess Bride on TV tonight?" Holly asked.

"It's on the Kids Channel," Sam assured him.


Fraser looked at each of their faces, and then glanced over at Kowalski, who nodded, barely perceptibly. "All right," he said, and the kids seemed to exhale all at once.

"Cool," Andy said.

"Great," Holly said.

"Wait," Sam said softly, and the other kids all turned to look at him. "First things first, right?"

The table went utterly silent, and Ray could feel the children trying not to look over at him or Stella. And then suddenly, almost as one, they were out of their chairs and working together to clear the table.

Fraser sat down next to Kowalski, looking sort of dazed, like a man in a dream. "I didn't hear you assign duties," he murmured.

"I didn't yet," Kowalski replied, frowning. "That's what's so weird."

Fraser nodded slowly and licked his lips. "All right. Where are our actual children?"

"Beats me," Kowalski said, and then turned to look at him and Stella. "Did you guys put them up to this?"


Fraser just looked at him curiously, but Kowalski's eyes were narrowing suspiciously. "What did you do, Vecchio?"
"Ray," Fraser murmured. "If he got them to clean up voluntarily, I wouldn't complain."

"Depends why they're doing it," Kowalski said. He bent forward over the table, his long, lean arms sprawling outwards. "What did you do to my kids?"

"They probably just want to make a good impression," Fraser suggested.

"On Vecchio?" Kowalski asked, shooting a look at him. "Why bother?"

"Ray," Fraser chided, shaking his head.

"No, really--I'm serious," Kowalski insisted. "Why bother?"

"Because it's nice?" Fraser suggested.

Kowalski shook his head slowly, and then suddenly he was up, out of his chair, and striding into the kitchen. "You. Me. Now," he said, grabbing Sam's arm and hustling him into the bedroom. "Right now," he said, and slammed the bedroom door.

Fraser looked apologetic. "Ray's parenting style runs toward...well, the paranoid and suspicious. Whereas my own is more along the lines of forgetful abstraction. What this means in practice is that I forget to feed the children, and he worries that we're going to poison them by mistake. Luckily, they're complementary neuroses. Would you like tea or coffee?"

Five minutes later the bedroom door opened and Kowalski said, "Fraser." Ray wasn't sure exactly what Fraser heard in his tone of voice, but he was instantly out of his chair and heading into the bedroom. The door closed again, and Ray turned to Stella nervously.

"Are we in for it?"

"I think we deserve to be in for it, Ray," Stella replied, staring down at the tabletop.

The kids finished washing the dishes, and then they stood there and looked at each other. "You ask them," Holly told Sarah. "You're the oldest."

"All right." Sarah went over to the bedroom door and knocked. "Ray? Ben? Can we put on the TV now?"

"Yeah." Kowalski's voice, calling back. "Go ahead."

The kids went into the living room, and Sarah pulled a cloth off what Ray now saw was a medium-sized television. She pressed the button, found the right channel, and they raptly watched commercials for dog food and room deodorizers as they waited for the movie to come on.

The bedroom door opened again, and Kowalski said, "Sarah." She looked up at him, and he beckoned her into the room with a wave of his hand. Groaning, she got up and went through the door, which closed again behind her.

Stella and Ray exchanged another nervous look.

The movie started, and Peter Falk came in to visit his sick grandson, bearing a book.

Suddenly there was screaming from the bedroom, and the door burst open and Sarah ran out, shouting, "Maybe he thinks that's great--but I don't! I hate living here! I hate both of you!" She grabbed her parka off the hook, flung the front door open, and raced out into the cold night.
"Don't!" Kowalski's voice, rising sharply, and then a moment later Fraser strode out of the bedroom and grabbed his coat off the hook as well. "Fraser, don't," Kowalski repeated, following him across the room. "I'm serious. Let her go. She'll come back."

Fraser was shoving his arms into the sleeves of his parka. "Ray, I can't."

"She'll cool off," Kowalski said, half-angry, half-pleading. "It's cold out there."

"I'm sorry. I just can't," and then Fraser was out the front door, too, and pulling it shut behind him.

Kowalski stared at the closed door and muttered, "Goddammit."

Sam nervously came out of the bedroom and touched Kowalski's arm awkwardly. "You okay, Ray?"

Kowalski glanced at him distractedly. "Yeah. Fine. Go watch your movie."

"She doesn't mean it, you know," Sam told him, and this time Kowalski turned and ruffled his hair.

"It's okay, Sam. Go watch the movie."

Sam nodded and reluctantly drifted into the living room. Kowalski sat down at the table, put his head into his hands, and blew out a breath.

"You want some tea?" Stella asked quietly.

"I want a drink," Kowalski replied, rubbing his forehead, and then he looked up and showed Stella a wry grin. "Don't worry, though. We haven't got any."

Stella poured him some tea and pushed the mug toward him. "That didn't sound like it went very well."

"No, it went fine," Kowalski said, cupping the mug and staring into it. "And I'm sorry, Vecchio--I guess I owe you an apology."

Stella stole a glance at Ray. Ray just shrugged at her.

"Kids got the wrong idea somehow. Convinced themselves you were Social Services in disguise." Kowalski made a face into his tea. "Sam, I guess, was the bright light who came up with that idea--not his fault, though, he's been around that block so many times..."

Kowalski blew out a breath and lifted his head. "You guys wanna hear something funny? Let me tell you something funny. Sam's folks died in a car accident. Left the kids with a neighbor, they're driving back, 1:30 in the morning on a rainy road and bye-bye. The boys go to three different foster homes and spend the whole time worried that they're gonna be split up permanently, since Robbie's so young and disgustingly cute. Fraser and me bite the bullet, take all four of them, and adopt them legally which is just what I had to remind Sam of just now. I had to show him the papers, black and white, nice and legal, and explain to him that I could start dancing around here in a grass skirt playing the ukulele and they would still be my boys, now and forever, amen. And Sam?" Kowalski smiled faintly and scratched at the back of his head. "Sam's really happy about that, okay?"

Kowalski took a sip of his tea, leaned back in his chair, and continued his story in a low voice. "Then there's Holly. Holly's mom was a drunk, fuckin' blotto most of the time, and god only knows what her home life was like, cause Holly doesn't ever wanna talk about it. Anytime I ever think about havin' a drink, taking the edge off, I just look over at Holly and pour myself another cup of
fuckin' tea, which tastes like shit to me but I don't care. Story is that Holly's mom goes out to a bar—sounds like the beginning of a joke, right? Holly's mom goes out to a bar, gets smashed, comes back, and unlike Sam's parents makes it home through the ice and the snow, which we call Drunk's Luck—except get this. She turns off the engine, falls asleep in the car, and freezes to death overnight. Holly wakes up the next morning, no mom, sees the car—goes outside and finds her mom frozen like a popsicle. Social Services, two foster homes, a year of that merry-go-round—and then we get her, bring her up here. Now Holly is really clear—she doesn't want to talk about her mom, she doesn't want to talk about her old life—but she is really fuckin' clear that she is happy to be here, one hundred percent, no question. Background like that, you'd think she'd be all fucked up about it but she isn't—she's totally resilient, that kid, and has done herself a cost-benefit analysis that says 'this rocks, that sucked.' Okay? No nostalgia there, I think she's just glad to be out of it."

Kowalski leaned back in his chair, looked up at the ceiling, and then got up, went into the kitchen, and returned, banging an heavy glass ashtray down onto the table. "My last vice, and even then only outside or after dinner," Kowalski said, sticking a cigarette into his mouth. He lit up, inhaled deeply, and blew out a cloud of smoke. "Okay, you ready for the punchline?"

"This isn't funny, Ray," Stella said softly.

"Oh yeah it is, it's hilarious, just wait. The punchline is that all of this—adopting five kids, putting an extension on the house, becoming the fucking gay Canadian Brady Bunch—is for Sarah. It's all for Sarah. All Fraser wants on God's fucking green earth is to make Sarah McGinty happy. And. Sarah. Is. Miserable."

Kowalski raised the hand holding the cigarette and gestured toward the front door.

"Fucking. Miserable. She hates living here, and she hates both of us. You just heard it yourself."

"She didn't mean it," Ray said quietly. "Sam's right, Stanley—she didn't--"

"She means it," Kowalski interrupted. "She means it as much as any twelve year old ever means anything."

"But Ray--" Stella began.

Kowalski raised his hand, lit cigarette still between his fingers. "I'm not saying it's our fault. It's not our fault. It sure is not our fucking fault—we've done everything two people could possibly do. But Sarah loved her mother, and her mother was shot, and there's just no way to make that feel better. I mean, think about it from her point of view—what, she's supposed to be grateful to us? For what? She wants what she had, she wants her mom back. This is all gonna be second best for ever and ever and ever."

Ray nodded at Kowalski grimly. "Okay. I can see that. So all right; you did your best, you can't worry about her--"

"I'm not worried about her," Kowalski retorted, looking frustrated. "I'm worried about him!"

Ray frowned. "Who--Benny?"

"Yeah, Benny," Kowalski replied sarcastically. "Because your pal Benny is a little over-identified, here. Because Benny can't see the five grateful kids under his nose because he is out there chasing the sixth—who he ain't ever, ever gonna make happy—through the fucking snow in the middle of the night. Because this isn't really even about her—and that's the real joke, here. This is about Benny trying to make Benny happy—like if he can help Sarah get over her mom, then maybe he can get over
his mom, except in neither case is it gonna happen. And then, when she runs away from home--"

"What?" Ray said.

"--which I figure is comin' in about a year, I'm gonna have to scrape him off the floor with a spatula, which believe me, I do not need."

Stella's voice was a hushed, horrified whisper. "Run away?"

"Absolutely. It's comin', I can see it--she's already making googly eyes with a kid from the village--"

"Ray, she's just a little girl!" Stella protested.

"She's twelve," Kowalski said flatly.

Stella stared at him for a moment and then closed her eyes, seeming pained. "Oh my God..."

"Yeah." Kowalski stubbed out his cigarette. "It's younger than it used to be, isn't it."

"But, I mean--" Stella now seemed totally distressed. "What makes you so sure she'll run away? We didn't."

"No," Kowalski said, shoving his chair back. "We didn't. But he did. Twice."

Chapter Five

"You kill my father. Prepare to die."

Ray Vecchio looked around the dark room and noticed that all the kids were totally engrossed in the movie, mouths actually hanging open as they stared at the glowing screen. Even Stella, sitting on the floor with Andy in her lap, seemed pretty damn interested in whether Mandy Patinkin would finally revenge himself on Christopher Guest or what. Ray shook his head, grinning, and then turned to have a word with Kowalski--who, despite his flaws, would no doubt share his total disinterest in this movie.

Kowalski did. Kowalski had fallen asleep on the other end of the sofa and sort of collapsed into himself, hands folded over his chest.

There was a muted thump, and then a squeak as the front door opened and closed. Ray silently turned around to look--and there was Fraser, and carrying the sleeping Sarah, whose arms were wrapped around his neck, legs around his waist. His boots creaked against the floorboards as he crossed the room, carrying her into his bedroom.

A minute or so later, Fraser slipped out again, and quietly sat next to him on the sofa.

"Everything okay?" Ray mouthed.

Fraser nodded quickly, reassuringly. Then Fraser glanced over at Kowalski, sprawled out on the other side of him--and touched the spikes of his hair, leaned over him, kissed him. By that time Ray had processed what had happened, it was over, and it was like he'd almost imagined it. Benton Fraser kissing Ray Kowalski while Mandy Patinkin muttered, "You kill my father. Prepare to die," over and over again. Totally surreal, especially since Kowalski hadn't so much as stirred.

"He's really worried about you, Benny," Ray murmured.
Fraser had turned his eyes to the screen, and Ray watched the reflected light from the television play across his face. "Yes. I know."

"And now he's got me worried about you."

Fraser's lips quirked in a faint smile. "Thank you. That's very kind."

"Which is kind of a pain in the ass."

Fraser was frowning at the television set. "Why can't this man move his limbs?"

"Because he's dead," Eddie replied.

Fraser crossed his arms and tilted his head to the side. "Ah."

There was a groan from the corner of the sofa. "...m'up...."

Fraser shot only the barest glance at Kowalski. "Untrue."

"...no, I..."

"You're dead on your feet. Go back to sleep."

"...m'not on my..." There was no further sound, and Ray leaned forward and looked over. Kowalski was out cold again, which didn't seem to surprise Fraser one bit.

They watched the end of the movie, watched Andre The Giant turn up with four horses, watched the heroes jump out the window and ride off into the sunset. Watched Peter Falk pause at the door of his grandson's bedroom, smile, and murmur, "As you wish." And then the credits started to roll, and the kids stretched and squirmed.

"Shh," Fraser said. They glanced back over their shoulders at him, and he slowly inclined his head toward Kowalski. They nodded and began to collect themselves more quietly. "Bed," Fraser said softly, standing up. He moved to each of the children in turn, touched their shoulders, kissed the tops of their heads.

"Goodnight," they each whispered to Fraser, and then they turned to Ray and Stella and vaguely waved their hands.

Fraser held Holly back for a moment. "Is your room clean?"

Holly smiled. "Yeah, it's clean, we made it really nice."

"Good girl," Fraser said, and kissed the top of her head again. She followed the boys into their bedroom and shut the door.

Stella was standing over her sleeping ex, contemplating him with an amused look. "We're going to bed now, too," she told Vecchio. "These men are very tired."

"No, no," Fraser protested. "He's just napping. He usually does this time of--"

"Ray is napping," Stella repeated, giving each word its own definite emphasis. "Ray. Kowalski. Is napping."

For a moment, Fraser looked like he didn't understand, and then he smiled at her. "Yes, that's right."
"Ray is napping," Stella said, shaking her head. "That means he's--"

"--very tired indeed, yes," Fraser finished.

"--dead," Stella said, and then she frowned. "He's not actually dead, is he?"

"No," Fraser assured her. "He's just resting."

"He's pining for the fjords," Ray muttered.

Fraser frowned. "But we have fjords. Just about forty miles due--"

Ray took Stella's arm and steered her toward the girls' bedroom. "Goodnight, Fraser--"

"Wait, Ray, your bags--" Fraser went to the front door. Ray stopped, turned, and then went to take the two satchels from Fraser's hands. "Surely this can't be everything?"

"No, it is," Stella assured him. "We wanted to travel light. Have an adventure, remember?"

"Ah. Just so," Fraser said, and then he shook his head as Ray gestured for him to hand over the bags. "No, please. Allow me."

He led them into the girls' bedroom, which was in fact immaculate. The girls had cleared all their stuff out of sight, dusted the top of the single bureau, and pushed their two twin beds together.

"This is lovely, Ben, thank you," Stella said.

"Yeah, thanks, Fraser," Ray agreed.

"Not at all," Fraser said, setting the bags down. "I'm sorry we don't have regular guest quarters. Let me fetch you some towels..."

"We've got 'em," Ray interrupted. "Figured we'd basically be camping, you know?"

"Ah, yes. Well." Fraser nodded and drifted to stand by the door. "No doubt you've already figured out the lay of the land. The bathroom is the first door on the left, then the boys room, this room, and our room. I should warn you," Fraser added, awkwardly, "that with eight of us, there's sometimes a bit of a morning crunch. There will be tomorrow, I assure you, since we're all going to be scrambling to get ready for church--"

"Church?" Ray repeated, wincing.

"Yes. We attend eleven o'clock mass at Our Lady Of Snows. I hope you'll join us--we'll have breakfast in town afterwards..."

"I, uh--" Ray said, but Stella interrupted him and said, "Yes, of course we will."

Fraser beamed at her. "Wonderful. If there's anything else you need, please don't hesitate to knock--and certainly, do make yourself at home. Beverages in the fridge, snacks in the pantry, extra towels and linens in the closet, there should be an adequate supply of soap and shampoo and--"

"Goodnight, Fraser," Ray said with a grin, and shut the door.

Ray shoved the latch into place and turned to look at her. "You know how you never want kids ever? We're never gonna argue about that again."
"Oh?" Stella sat down on the pale pink floral bedspread and smiled. "That's funny. I was just thinking that maybe I'd changed my mind."

"God, don't even joke about it," Ray moaned, holding his head.

"Hey, if they can do it, we can," Stella said. "Ray couldn't keep his plants alive. And Fraser doesn't strike me as the naturally paternal--"

"Ray?" Fraser called from outside.

Ray turned back to the door and reached for the knob.

"Not you!" Stella whispered. "Him!"

Ray pulled his hand back and shot her a grateful look.

"...on, Ray." Fraser's voice, sounding gentle. "Time for bed."

Ray stared at the closed door, and then suddenly he was frowning at the long vertical wooden planks. He raised himself up on his toes, then ducked down a little and raised his fingers to trace the wood.

"What the hell are you doing?" Stella whispered.

"Shh," Ray hissed. Again he raised himself up on his toes, palms pressed against the boards--and then he turned around, went to the bedside table, and turned the small lamp off. The room was instantly thrust into darkness, but Stella could see what Ray'd been looking at--there were two of three clear slices of light coming in through the cracks between the boards of the door. A dark shape moved past her in the darkness, and then part of the light was blocked out.

"That's spying," Stella accused.

"I know that," Ray said.

"What do you see? Ray! What do you--"

"Shh!" Ray repeated, and she shushed and listened.

"...m'up...."

"Untrue, but you really do have to get up now. We've promised Sarah the sofa, remember?"

A muted groan. "Sarah...where's Sarah...?"

"She's asleep on our bed."

"You found her?"

"Yes, of course. C'mon, Ray, it's time to..."

"What happened, what'd she say?" Ray, seeming more awake now.

"Nothing that bears repeating." Stella heard the soft creak as Fraser sat down on the sofa and sighed longsufferingly. "She yelled and cried until she wore herself out, and then I carried her home."

"Perfect," Kowalski muttered. "You wanna review the day's stats?"
"I don't see why. I'm depressed already, thank you."

"Three out of six kids in tears today--no, wait, make that four. Holly at the pond when that skank knocked her over."

"Wonderful. You realize that's a 67% disapproval rating."

"Or to look at it the other way, we're batting .333. Which isn't bad, Fraser."

"It's bad, Ray."

"Okay, yeah, but you totally won 5-3 on the Dad thing."

"I counted 5-2."

"I got a 'Dad' outta Eddie when you weren't looking."

"Oh."

"It's only that you got home court advantage."

"That's probably right."

"Maybe we should just sleep out here. Give Sarah our room."

"No, I don't think so." Stella could hear the smile in Fraser's voice. "We'll scandalize the Vecchios."

"Oh, hey, that would almost be fun. Though Stella's not scandalized," Ray added. "She asked me if you were good in bed."

"Oh? What did you tell her?"

"I said fair to middling."

"Wonderful."

"I'm only yankin' your chain, Fraser."

"I know. I feel the persistent tug of it."

Stella waited, listening intently in the darkness, but there was nothing, and nothing, and nothing. And then the Vecchio-shadow rolled against the door, turning till his back was against it, and leaned there, going still.

"What?" Stella whispered. "What?" She got up, one hand out protectively in front of her face, and made her way toward the cracks of light.

Ray and Fraser were kissing hungrily on the sofa, which was just--it was just so--unimaginable. She'd expected this kind of ferocity from Ray--she'd been married to the man for fifteen years--but not from Benton Fraser of all people. She'd always privately thought of Fraser as oddly asexual, a pleasant, dim sort of man, something of a goof. And she'd never understood what other women saw in him, because he reminded her of all the guys she hadn't wanted to date--the bland jocks, the class presidents, the student-leadership types. All the guys who'd paled next to Ray Kowalski with his black leather jacket and his heavy silver bracelets, Ray who'd smoked and danced and played pool.

Here, though, in this wilderness, Fraser was different, because he was taking Ray on--her Ray--and
he seemed to be winning, knotting his hands in Ray's hair and forcing his head back and back and back--

Stella leaned back and crossed her hands over the boards in front of her to block out the light. "I want to kill him," she heard herself say.

Her husband's voice came to her in the darkness. "Who? Fraser?"

"Yeah."

"Share my pain," Ray Vecchio said.

Chapter Six

The next morning was, as Fraser had predicted, utter chaos--kids cramming themselves into the bathroom, running between rooms to find clothes, hairbrushes, ties, shoes. Now, on Day Two, he'd gotten a sense of the kids' personalities and saw that they each responded to stress in their own way: Sarah moped, Sam got worried, and Robbie greeted every small setback with wailing despair. The one funny thing about all this was Kowalski, who sat at the kitchen table reading the paper like he was stone cold deaf--which maybe, after a year or two of this racket, he now was.

Ray Vecchio drifted over to the table and slid into the chair beside him. "So tell me--church?"

Kowalski lifted his eyes. "Yeah. Church. What about it?"

"You don't look like a churchgoer."

For a second Kowalski looked like he was going to make something of it, but then he just shrugged and looked down at his paper again. "Fraser's idea. Thinks it's important for the kids. I don't mind." He glanced up, his blue eyes narrowed. "Do you mind?"

"Me?" Ray said, trying to look innocent. "Hell, no. I was an altar boy."

Kowalski tried to suppress a smile, failed. "The hell you were."

"The hell I wasn't," Ray insisted. "Six years hard time at St. Mary's. There was this one nun, Sister Joseph, hit me so hard my ears still ring."

Kowalski put down the paper and leaned back in his chair, looking nostalgic. "Yeah, my mom wanted me to do the altar boy thing, but I said no way, forget it."

Ray put on his most saintly look. "Guess I was just a better boy than you."

Kowalski rubbed his cheek meditatively, his beard rasping against his hand. "Yeah, maybe you were at that."

Stella wandered over and said, "How far is the church?"

"Forty-fifty minutes if we can get up decent speed," Kowalski replied.

Ray frowned. "On a dog sled or what?"

Kowalski shook his head and got up, grinning. "Not a dog sled. C'mon. You'll love this."
It was weird, Stella thought, to watch Ray tromp through the snow towards the shed—he moved with such assurance now, while she and Ray Vecchio stumbled behind, always one flail away from losing their balance. Ray reached the shed ahead of them, and then he was shoving at the iron latch, pulling it up, pushing the huge wooden door inward and...

"My God," Ray Vecchio said, pushing past her, "you've got a fucking Humvee."

It was indeed a fucking Humvee--huge and looking like a tank with its giant olive-green body and huge black treads.

"Yeah, it's the accessory of choice for the modern Canadian family," Ray said, walking around the side of it. "We bought it used from Fort Sierchen, just south of the border. I wanted to get a cruise missile too, but Fraser wouldn't let me."

"Okay, Kowalski, you got me," Ray Vecchio said, looking at him. "This is the coolest thing I've ever seen."

"Well, less so when it's full of kids and you realize it's just a glorified SUV," Ray replied, "but yeah." He stared admiringly at the Humvee for a moment, then shot a look at Vecchio. "It's really pretty cool, huh?"

"Totally. You wouldn't give me a crack driving, would you?" Vecchio cracked his gloved fingers.

Ray shook his head. "Not to church, not with the kids--it's just not that fuckin' easy to drive. But if you want, we can take 'er out for a spin when we get back..."

Stella watched, vaguely amused, as her current husband and her ex-husband got into the cab of the Hummer and started discussing gizmos and gadgets and technical specifications--two boys playing with the biggest Tonka Truck ever. Bored, she wandered around the rest of the shed: machines on the one side, dogs on the other. Next to the two snowmobiles was the huge kennel--four or five of the sled dogs were sleeping, the others glanced up at her and then barked lazily. The reason for their sloth was pretty clear--the remains of breakfast were still in the steel bowls scattered around the perimeter. She kept walking, studying the leather harnesses hanging from their hooks, the neatly arrayed sleds, their runners carefully waxed and oiled, the huge wooden tool bench alongside one wall. Ray's tool bench, she realized after a second--it was arranged just the way his garage had been arranged at the house, back when they'd had the house. She even recognized some of the tools, had watched him wind the aging friction tape around some of the handles. The GTO was gone, she supposed, but maybe Ray was still Ray, still fascinated with engines--

The Humvee's engine blared into life, echoing loudly in the shed. She turned, and saw that Ray Vecchio was pulling the shed doors open wide. "Stella!" he called. "Go on, get in!"

She nodded and went to the Humvee. The metal door swung open and she climbed inside--it was huge in here: two big seats in the front, maybe eight more in the back, one with a child's safety seat strapped to it. Bent over, she moved into the back--and nearly fell over as they lurched forward, crawling out of the shed. Behind them, Ray Vecchio pulled the shed doors closed again, and a moment later he was in Humvee and staring lustfully at the controls. "Okay--we're ready. Move her out!"

Ray shoved the huge stick forward, and, with the rumble of an approaching army, they lurched into motion. Stella clutched tightly at the green vinyl seat, feeling really quite excited as they clumsily wheeled to the left and trundled over the snow toward the house.

"Man, you gotta let me try this. You gotta let me try it."
Ray shot Vecchio a glance, grinning wildly.

"It's like--man, I had one of these as a kid!" Vecchio said, nearly shouting over the roar of the engine. "Did you have one?--they were like, programmable and--"

"Big Trak!" Ray whooped, clutching tightly at the wheel as they steamrolled over the snow. "I had a Big Trak--a Trak 4--they were programmable, yeah, with--"

"--a keypad on top--"

"--yeah, numbers and arrows--"

"--8 DD batteries--"

"--and they did bugfuck except crash into the fucking wall!"

Stella stared at them, looking from one of them to the other, and wondered if prolonged exposure to the Arctic Circle did something to addle the brain. Or maybe it was just the Y-chromosome. She was thrown forward as Ray ground the Humvee to a stop, and when she looked to her left, she saw Fraser standing on the wooden steps of the porch in his fur-trimmed parka, watching them pull up. Neither Ray seemed to notice Fraser until he walked down the steps and opened the passenger door of the Humvee. Behind him, Andy and Eddie barreled down the steps and clambered up into the cab, taking what looked to Stella to be assigned seats and belting themselves in.

"Ray," Fraser said, and both Rays turned around. Fraser grinned wryly. "Yes, well, this will be confusing if it persists. Mr. Kowalski," he clarified, reaching into his pocket, "you left your wallet on the dresser, and being that it contains your driver's license--"

"Right, yeah, sorry," Ray said, reaching past Vecchio and taking the brown leather wallet from his hand. Fraser stepped back and offered Holly a leg up, then extended his hand more gallantly to Sarah. Sam came last, holding Robbie's hand.

"Get him buckled up back there," Ray called, turning in his seat, just as Fraser said, "I'll be out in a moment, let me just do a last minute check of the house. Everyone have everything? Speak now, or--"

"Anyone gotta pee?" Ray asked suspiciously, and when nobody answered, he looked hard at each of their faces in turn. "No? No? Because it's your ass in the snow. Okay," he said, turning back to Fraser, "do a final systems check and lets blow this popcorn stand."

Fraser relinquished what was obviously his seat in the front and went to sit in the back of the Hummer with Stella, which was nice of the guy, because whoo, boy, he hadn't had this much fun since--well, must have been the Trak 4.

Once they were pointed in the right direction Kowalski shifted that gear lever with gusto and they began to pick up speed. Oh yeah. Oh yeah, and they were just fuckin' flying over the snow now, through all this totally gorgeous nothingness, and how good was this? Really freakin' good. He looked back over his shoulder and saw that Stella was also staring out the window, glued to the scenery--oh yeah, this was an adventure all right, and a hell of a lot better than the Bahamas or Hawaii or any cliched honeymoon like that. She glanced at him and smiled; clearly she thought so too. The kids, meanwhile, seemed totally oblivious to it all--the boys were squabbling over some sort of hand-held video game, Sam was looking at some sort of pocket comic book, Holly had nestled herself against Fraser's side and closed her eyes, and Sarah...Sarah was sitting there stoically, looking like--
--okay, Joan of Arc. Maybe it was because they were going to church, a place Ray Vecchio hadn't been to in a while, but the look on Sarah's face suddenly made him flash back to, oh, maybe 8th grade or so, when he'd sat at a wood table in a corner of Saint Mary's School's library and flipped through a dusty old book on The Lives Of The Saints. They each had to pick a name for Confirmation, and do a book report on the guy's life, except a lot of the saints had been chicks. He remembered staring at the pictures with a weird sort of fascination, cause all the girl-saints seemed to have one of two expressions on their face. Either it was a contorted sort of ecstasy, hands lifted as they burned to death or got stabbed or ripped to pieces or whatever, or else it was this calm, stoic look which was totally tough: *I-can-take-this-suffering-you-fuckers, just-you-watch-me.* Joan of Arc had looked like that, standing there in her suit of armor, and Sarah looked like that now. *This will end soon, and you assholes will not beat me down.*

Come to think of it, Fraser had sometimes worn that look on particularly trying days back in Chicago.

He wasn't wearing it now, though. Fraser was surreptitiously watching Stella, who didn't seem to realize she was under scrutiny. Ray found himself wondering what Fraser was looking at, why he seemed so damn fascinated with her--and then he caught a glimpse of Kowalski's hand, shifting them up into fourth, and suddenly understood.

His wife. And Kowalski's wife. Stella was two Rays for two.

Fraser's eyes abruptly flicked toward him, catching him watching him watching her. But Fraser didn't act like a man caught; instead he just smiled warmly, familiarly, and for a second it was just like the old days, before his undercover gig, before either of them had gotten involved with the Kowalskis. He grinned back at Fraser, and it was funny, but it seemed they could still get their psychic thing going every now and then. Because he could read Fraser's mind perfectly: *Congratulations. She's lovely. I'm happy for you.* Ray's grin widened and then he decided to take a chance, tilting his head at Kowalski.

"You too"--and Fraser looked first surprised and then embarrassed and then away.

"All right," Kowalski barked, and Ray looked at him. "ETA ten minutes and counting," and now, ahead, he could make out the first blur of the town, if you could call it a town. It got larger and larger as they approached, a small collection of one-story buildings, many of them up on stilts and connected by a sprawl of pipes and ducts, like the whole town was on an IV drip in an intensive care unit. Kowalski carefully moved them onto the road, if you could call it a road, and past the first of the buildings. Slowly they rumbled up the main street, passing a grocery store, a hardware store, a luncheonette, a laundromat, the local post office--and yeah, that had to be the church up ahead, though it didn't look like any church Ray'd ever seen. Just a plain square box with a cross on top, totally different from St. Mary's or St. Andrew's or any of the big, fancy cathedrals in Chicago.

Kowalski slowly pulled the Hummer into a line of parked Jeeps, trucks, snowmobiles, and the occasional car. "Right, okay," he said, switching off, and the kids stirred into motion and began to get out on both sides. Robbie, Ray saw, had fallen asleep in his car seat, and Fraser was crouched over him, carefully undoing the straps holding him in.

Ray stepped down onto the street, put an arm around Stella, and looked around. Kowalski came around the Hummer and gestured for their attention. "My office is down that way," he said, pointing up the street. The kids' school is there, the sports center is there, Fraser reports in to the station over there, there where the flag's flying--"

"Ray," Fraser said from inside the Hummer, and Kowalski wordlessly took Robbie from his arms.

"--and over there," Kowalski continued, turning with Robbie limp and asleep on his shoulder, "is
where we'll have breakfast. They do a fantastic breakfast--they got everything: eggs, waffles, bacon--"

"Strawberry pancakes," Holly added helpfully.

"--strawberry pancakes, yeah," Ray agreed, "or any other kind that floats your boat, French toast--"

"I want strawberry pancakes," Holly told him.

"Yeah, I figured," Ray replied.

"I'm going to have bacon and eggs and oatmeal," Eddie volunteered.

Ray squinted narrowly at him. "Do I look like your waiter?"

Fraser stepped down from the Humvee and slammed its metal door shut. "Come now. We don't want to be late." Andy reached up, and Fraser took his hand and started walking toward the church door. The other children followed--Eddie, Sam, Holly still limping a little, Sarah trailing behind them glumly. Ray and Stella and Kowalski brought up the rear, Kowalski carrying Robbie.

"God, this is gonna be fun," Ray murmured to Stella.

Kowalski's head whipped around. "Hey. Count some blessings, cause you got plenty you could be grateful for."

Ray was gonna say something back, but then he realized that Kowalski was talking about Stella and shut up. Because, yeah, maybe Kowalski had a point there. He put his arm around Stella's shoulders, pulling her close, and she turned her face up to his and smiled.

Three paces later, Ray realized that maybe Kowalski hadn't really been talking to him at all.

Inside, the place was small, but fairly typical-looking--pews, altar, more chapel than church, really. Fraser stopped at the head of a row and gestured the children in, but Sarah remained hovering in the aisle, shooting the occasional glance over her shoulder.

"Ben," Sarah said finally, fidgeting, "can I go sit with Charlie?"

Fraser stared at her.

"Yeah, okay," Kowalski said, quickly stepping forward, and Fraser shot a look at him that could have melted steel. Sarah exhaled happily and smiled, then she rushed up the aisle to sit with a tall, awkward-looking boy in a back pew.

Fraser was angrier than Ray'd ever seen him. "Why?" Fraser whispered to Kowalski. "Why on earth did you--?"

Kowalski stepped close to Fraser and said in a low, even voice: "He's a dope, Fraser. Worst thing you could do is to turn him into an international man of mystery. Trust me on this." Fraser didn't say anything and Kowalski repeated, softly, "Trust me, okay?"

Fraser nodded once, tersely, and slipped into the pew, not looking at him.

"Great," Kowalski muttered. "Perfect." He sighed and looked over at Ray and Stella, then jerked his head, offering them the next seats.
"After you," Ray responded with exaggerated politeness, and Kowalski nodded grimly and moved into the pew beside Fraser. Ray put his hand on Stella's waist and guided her in, and then took the last seat in the row for himself.

Ray Vecchio sat there, remembering why it was he didn't go to church anymore; in fact, he spent most of the hour mentally counting off the reasons.

One--face it, church was for girls. The chick-guy ratio in here was maybe two to one, which at one point might have been a plus, but he was married now. Plus the old-lady quotient was very very high, and old ladies freaked him out. Second--it was incredibly boring. Chant, drone, stand, sit, sing, chant, drone, sit. Plus, hey--and call this number three--the themes were really pretty depressing, and being that this place was some sort of Protestant denomination rather than Catholic like he was used to, there wasn't even any good art to take your mind off things.

The general air of misery wasn't helped by the company. Fraser just stared down at the floor, head bowed--upset over Sarah's defection, Ray supposed. Kowalski, the lucky bastard, got his out when Robbie woke up and started weeping almost automatically, like it was his default setting. People in the neighboring pews turned to glare at them, but Kowalski just glared right back. A moment later, though, Fraser shot him a despondent look--and Kowalski got up and carried the kid out, muttering something about good thing there was a graveyard convenient, and did anybody have a shovel? Sam and Holly were bent over their prayer books, reading them page by page from the beginning like they were novels or something, and the two younger boys were surreptitiously thumb wrestling.

Ray wished somebody would thumb-wrestle with him. He looked hopefully at Stella, but she was sitting there respectfully with her hands folded and her head down.

It seemed like it would last forever, but finally it ended. The reverend told them to go in peace to love and serve the Lord, and instantly he, Eddie and Andy were on their feet, chomping at the bit. Some dreary music started, and people started making their way to the doors. Ray looked at Stella and Fraser expectantly, and Stella got up, but Fraser just continued to sit there, seemingly lost in his own thoughts.

"Ben, come on, it's over," Eddie said, worming his way past Fraser's knees.

Finally Fraser looked up. "Go on. Ray's already outside, I'll be with you in a moment."

The kids nodded and practically ran up the aisle to the door. Stella, looking worried, followed them out, but Ray hesitated; he'd been dying to get out of here, but it felt wrong to leave Fraser sitting alone like this.

"It's all right, Ray," Fraser said quietly, not meeting his eyes. "I'll be right there."

"No rush, Benny," Ray murmured. "Take your time." Sighing, he moved up the aisle to the door, and saw that Fraser wasn't the only one who was lingering. Charlie was gone, but Sarah was still in her pew, arms braced on the seat in front of her and her head buried between them. Praying, Ray thought, and then the uncharitable thought: Good. You do that. And then a moment later, a step past her, his detective's brain kicking in--not praying. Crying.

Ray stopped, turned, but saw that Fraser was already getting up, out of his seat, and so he hurried up the aisle toward the door. He stopped there and glanced back, busying himself by dipping his middle finger into the font of holy water and crossing himself. Fraser slid into the pew next to Sarah, dropped a palm on her back, and leaned forward to murmur something--
--and in a blur of motion, Sarah lifted her head, raised her arm, and struck him, a flailing, glancing, girlish blow that nonetheless connected with the side of Fraser's face and made him recoil in surprise. Before he'd had a second to think about it, before he'd even been conscious of thinking anything, Ray was moving back down the aisle and hearing the loud echo of his own voice in the empty church. "Hey! You! What the hell are you--"

They both instantly turned to look at him; Sarah's face enraged and tear-streaked, Fraser's blankly horrified. Sarah suddenly jerked backwards, away from Fraser, trying to run for it, but Fraser moved quickly, grabbing her arms and holding her in place. Ray took another step forward, and Fraser shot him an agonized glance. "Ray. Please. Please --" and he didn't even need their psychic thing to know what Fraser was saying. Please go away. Please don't try to help. And for God's sake, please don't tell Ray Kowalski.

Outside, Kowalski was sitting on a low concrete wall, smoking a cigarette and talking to Stella. Beyond him, Eddie and Andy were running around and laughing, and Robbie was doing some sort of frenzied snow-stomp, waving his arms wildly. "What the hell is he doing?" Ray asked, joining them.

"Dance of the demented," Kowalski said, shrugging. "Like I know. Where's Fraser?"

"He's...he said he'd be out in a minute," Ray replied. "Where's everyone else?"

"Holly and Sam went down the block," Kowalski told him. "There's a store down there that's got records and books and stuff. Sarah hasn't come out yet--is Sarah still in there?"

"Yeah." Ray replied. "She's there."

Kowalski's eyes narrowed. "With that guy?"

"No," Ray said, glad to be able to reply honestly. "He split."

Kowalski glanced at his watch and said, "Maybe I oughta go get 'em..."

"Nah, don't," Ray said, and Kowalski shot him a sharp look. "They're havin' a moment," Ray told him, trying to sound as casual about it as possible.

"Fraser and Sarah?" Kowalski asked.

"Yeah."

"A good moment or a bad moment?"

"Hard to tell," Ray hedged, and that made Kowalski smile.

"Yeah, okay, we'll let 'em be. But I'm getting pretty hungry, which must mean that the kids are starv--hey!" Kowalski yelled suddenly at Eddie and Andy, who were now actually in the snow and rolling around furiously, punching and pulling hair. "Quit it before you get soaked!" The boys didn't quit it, though, and suddenly Kowalski was up off the wall and standing over them, yanking them up by the collars of their parkas, pulling them out of the snow and away from each other. "I'm serious! Quit it right now!"

Andy was gasping raggedly. "He took my GI Joe!"

"Give him his GI Joe," Kowalski said instantly, whirling on Eddie. "You got your own."
"Yeah, but I need two," Eddie explained breathlessly, "so that they can fight and--"

Kowalski shook him hard. "Yeah, well, maybe your GI Joe needs to take a walk with himself and think about his penchant for mindless violence. Maybe he should read a book or learn to play the piano."

Eddie looked horrified. "But that's not--"

"Give him his doll," Kowalski growled. "Now --before I show you some real violence."

Reluctantly, Eddie pulled the GI Joe out of his pocket and handed it to Kowalski, who snatched it out of his hand and thrust it at Andy. Andy grabbed it and instantly ran away, toward the door, toward Fraser and Sarah, who were just coming out and--okay, so there'd really been some sort of moment in there, Ray thought with some surprise, because Fraser had his arm tightly around Sarah's shoulders and she had her arm around him and her face half-buried in his chest as she walked.

"Took you long enough," Kowalski said, turning to them. "C'mon, let's go eat. Sarah," he added, and she lifted her head and looked at him. "Holly and Sam are down at Harmon's--I've promised them they could each get something. If you get down there and hustle you can get something too."

Sarah momentarily brightened at this, and then shot a nervous look up at Fraser. Fraser just smiled at her and patted her cheek--and then she was pulling away quickly and running up the block. Eddie instantly followed after her, but Andy hung around Fraser's side, presumably assuming that Fraser would offer both him and his GI Joe extra protection.

"What was that all about?" Kowalski asked Fraser, coming over.

Fraser shook his head. "Nothing. I'll tell you later."

"Later ain't gonna be a whole lot more private than it is right now," Kowalski objected, and Fraser thought about this for a moment and then nodded.

"Andy," Fraser said, looking down at him. "Why don't you run ahead with the others?"

"Cause Eddie's gonna take my GI Joe," Andy explained, frowning worriedly.

"I'll stage a rescue," Fraser assured him. "I promise."

"Okay," Andy said, and headed up the street.

That just left Robbie and the four adults. Stella suddenly took Ray's arm and said, tactfully, "C'mon, Ray, we'll go ahead, too."

"No, it's all right," Fraser said quietly. "Ray, I want you to understand. What you saw--Sarah wasn't really upset at me --"

Ray raised his hands quickly. "Benny, you ain't got to explain nothing to me."

"--she was upset with Charlie. As you surmised she would be," Fraser added, ruefully turning to Kowalski. "I'm sorry I doubted you."

"That kid's a dope," Kowalski repeated. "I told you."

"Oh, I'm afraid it's beyond that," Fraser said with grim irony. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a tiny ziplock bag full of drab green leaves.
"Oh fuck!" Kowalski said, half spinning around in fury.

Fraser nodded and stared down at the little plastic bag. "Apparently it's the de rigeur gift for contemporary courtship," he murmured, shaking it between his fingertips.

"And she freaked," Kowalski muttered. He was now doing his own angry version of Robbie's demented snow-dance.

"She freaked, yes," Fraser agreed. "I think she suddenly found herself rebelling a bit more than she'd bargained for. But that's only because she's twelve," he added quietly. "Right?

Kowalski's head jerked up. "Yeah. Yeah, that's right."

"It was too much, too fast," Fraser said; he was looking intensely at Kowalski, like he was trying to tell him something beyond what he was actually telling him. "This time."

Kowalski sounded almost relieved. "This time, yeah. You've got it."

"Because she's still torn," Fraser murmured. "But next time it happens--"

"Yeah," Kowalski nodded slowly, holding his eyes. He looked pained.

"--because there's going be a next time, isn't there?--"

"Yeah." Kowalski's voice was oddly gravelly. "Yeah, there is. I'm sorry."

"--she won't be as surprised." Fraser looked away. "Next time she'll be ready for it, and it won't be this easy."

"Don't buy trouble, Fraser," Kowalski murmured. "Just don't be shocked either, okay?"

Fraser's voice was barely audible. "Right. Yes. I understand."

Kowalski pulled the baggie from his fingers, slipped it into his pocket, and then squeezed Fraser's arm. "C'mon, I'll buy you a pancake."

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**Chapter Seven**

They walked up the street and into Harmon's, a store that seemed to sell pretty much everything—clothes, toys, records, books, magazines, assorted hardware, canned goods, you name it. The kids were all ready with their purchases, and seemed to know exactly how much they could get away with. Sam was carrying three Hardy Boys novels and a small toy that looked like a rocket launcher. Sarah was carrying a CD, which she held out to Kowalski with a hopeful look.


"Ray, please?" Sarah begged.

"Yeah, all right," Kowalski said, and then suddenly he slung an arm around her. "You did good today," he murmured, ducking his head a little. "And hey--it wouldn't be contemporary music if your parents didn't hate it." He lifted the CD again, and squinted hard at the cover picture. "Though you know, if you wanna go this way--how about David Bowie or Elton John?"
Holly, meanwhile, had crept up to Fraser with a box in her hands. "Okay," she said quickly, "I know it's more money than usual--except really, you know, it's educational and I could maybe have this for, like, the next few times."

Ray shot an amused look at Stella; amazing how all kids became lawyers in certain situations.

"What precisely are we talking about?" Fraser asked. Holly held the box out to him, and Ray saw instantly that whatever it was, she was gonna get it, because Fraser looked totally goddamned delighted.

"A microscope," Fraser said, turning the box over in his hands.

"Yeah," Holly said enthusiastically, grabbing it back from him. "See, it says here that you can--"

"I know what you can do with it," Fraser said with a smile. "But that doesn't strike me as a very high quality instrument."

"Well, it was the one for kids," Holly explained, squinting at the box. "Six to nine, it says."

"Well, you're already nine," Fraser said, moving toward the back of the shop. "Let's see what else they have."

"No. Way," Kowalski said to Eddie, who was holding up another hand-held video game. "In. Your. Dreams."

"But Sarah got--and Sam got--"

"And how much work do those guys do?" Kowalski demanded, crossing his arms.

Eddie groaned. "All right. Lots."

"And what do you do except eat a lot and be a pain?"

Eddie seemed to have to think about this. "I dunno. I'm good looking. I'm funny."

"Yeah, well, I'm good looking, and I'm funny, and what do I get? Bupkis."

"Not true!" Eddie squinted up at him. "Somebody here just got a box of CDs from HMV."

"Somebody works for a living," Kowalski retorted. "Somebody who's a lot bigger than you are, so shut up! Here," he added, grabbing the video game out of his hand and snatching another GI Joe from a hook on the wall. "You can have this so that your lonely-ass GI Joe can learn some social skills."

"Ray," Fraser chided, coming up behind him, "you're arguing with an eight year old."

"Yeah, well, he started it," Kowalski retorted.

"I'm sure," Fraser said. "Here, have a look at this. Holly wants a microscope."

Kowalski barely glanced at the box. "It's nice. It's a microscope."

"It's a real microscope," Holly said excitedly, "made of metal and with real glass slides!"

Kowalski blew out an irritated breath. "Great, I can see it now--broken glass and bleeding and violence. Fan -tastic."
Fraser was frowning down at the box. "Ray, do you really think--"

"No," Kowalski said, sighing, "no, I don't, just I'm hungry and I want to get out of here."

"He hasn't had any coffee yet," Holly said to Fraser. "You know what he's like before coffee."

"You," Kowalski told her, stabbing a finger at her, "are no longer my favorite child."

"See?" Holly said, and Fraser smiled and nodded.

Stella, always thinking, nudged Ray with her arm until he got it--she wanted him to pick up the gifts.

"Ray, no," Fraser said, seeming shocked. "We couldn't possibly accept--"

"Shut up, Fraser," Ray said, shoving him out of the way and handing the man at the counter his credit card.

"Ray." Fraser was pleading now. "It's too much. I simply can't allow you to--"

"Hey, c'mon!" Ray said, throwing up his arms. "Couple of presents from Uncle Ray and Aunt Stella, this way they remember us when we come back."

Behind him, Kowalski seemed to be having some sort of seizure. "Uncle Ray and Aunt Stella?"

"You shut up," Ray snapped at him.

"Thank you for that," Kowalski said, shuddering violently. "Because now I need therapy." He turned, only to be shot several times by Andy, who'd found some sort of--well, Ray-gun. Not breaking stride, he clutched a hand to his heart and stumbled hard into a pile of stuffed toys. "Or death. That works," Kowalski said, and died.

"Ray, honestly," Fraser repeated doggedly, "you don't have to--"

"Let a guy give a gift, willya?" Ray complained.

Andy nervously tugged at Kowalski's sleeve. "C'mon, Ray--get up."

"Shut up," Kowalski said, not opening his eyes. "I have gone to a better place,"

"Hey, cool, you killed him," Eddie said. "Take his wallet."

Stella burst out laughing, and then bit her lip when Kowalski opened his eyes and glared at her. "Hey, you want a souvenir of your trip to Canada?"

Stella backed away, hands raised. "Thanks but no thanks."

"No, seriously," Kowalski said, grabbing Eddie by the collar. "I'll throw in a year's food and all the GI Joes you could stand."

"Kids!" Fraser said, turning around. "Say thank you to, uh--Uncle Ray and Aunt Stella."

"God!" Kowalski sank back into the pile of stuffed toys, hands clutching his ears. "Stop with that!"

"Hey," Stella protested. "I like the idea of being Aunt Stella to your kids."

Kowalski dropped his hands and looked at her. "Really?"
"Really, yeah," Stella said. "I think it's neat. I mean, the way things worked out, we're practically in-laws."

"Which reminds me," Holly piped up suddenly. "Is it true you and Aunt Stella used to be married?"

"Holly!" Fraser said, looking scandalized.

Kowalski threw a stuffed bear at her. "Way to bring up my private life in the middle of a public place. Muchos gracias."

Holly's pale skin flushed a deep red. "Ray, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to--"

"Yeah, it's true," Kowalski said, hauling himself to his feet. "Totally true."

"I think we'd better go get breakfast," Fraser said, looking worried.

There wasn't any question as to where they would sit, as the restaurant only had one table big enough to accommodate them. Thankfully, at least, all the kids seemed to know exactly what they wanted, because even with that ordering took a year: "strawberry pancakes, please, thank you kindly," "two scrambled eggs with hash browns and white toast and bacon--Dad, can I have bacon?--bacon, please, thank you kindly," The waitress scribbled and scribbled on her pad. ten juices, three coffees, two teas, three hot-chocolates, two chocolate milks...

"It's like organizing Normandy," Stella said, shaking her head.

"Yeah, everything's like this," Kowalski agreed, nodding. "Everything is just massively chaotic."

"So is this the routine?" Stella asked. "First church and then breakfast?"

"Yeah," Kowalski replied, but now he was distracted; across the table, Fraser was holding Robbie in his arms and trying to soothe him, without much success. "Give him a crayon," he told Fraser.

Fraser looked frustrated. "I haven't got a crayon."

Kowalski shook his head, tsking softly, and reached back to fumble in the pocket of his parka, hung up on the chair behind him. He came out with a green Crayola, and held it up in front of Fraser's face like Exhibit A.

"You're brilliant," Fraser said fervently, taking it from him and flipping his paper placemat over. Robbie started happily drawing giant green swoops.

"I know," Kowalski said, and then he turned back to Stella with a grin. "Sorry, you were saying?"

"That this is your routine," Stella repeated. "Church, breakfast..."

"On Sundays, yeah, and sometimes a movie afterwards or something," Kowalski said, nodding agreement. "Sports if there's anything going, town fairs or festivals when applicable--"

"Inuit festivals are the best," Sam suddenly volunteered.

"--Inuit festivals, yeah," Kowalski agreed, instantly amending his list, "which are mostly during the summers--"

"They're better than town fairs," Sam explained. "Ben says I can be apprenticed to a shaman when I get older. If I still want to."
"--but sometimes in the winter too, light-festivals especially," Kowalski finished.

"I want to be a shaman when I grow up--or maybe an environmental biologist. I'm not sure," Sam told Stella.

"Sam's really into nature," Kowalski added with a bemused shrug, and Sam quickly nodded his agreement. "Thing is, you need routine up here--well, you need it with kids, I guess--but especially up here. It's not like there's all that much to do--"

Fraser looked at him sharply. "There's plenty to do. You've just explained so."

"There's plenty to do," Kowalski instantly repeated, smiling. "Like I was just explaining to you."

"Kiss ass," Holly murmured.

Kowalski shot a glance at her. "You are now officially my least favorite child."

"I don't see where this environment is any less stimulating than your own Chicago childhood. At least not the way you've described it." Fraser said defensively.

"You lie, white man." Holly showed Kowalski a grin full of new, widely-spaced adult teeth. "You worship the ground I walk on."

Kowalski grinned back at her. "Shh." He looked back toward Fraser. "No, you're right, you're totally right. There were maybe more kids around, but half of them wanted to break my head, so--"


"The children have books," Fraser insisted, "toys and games and sports and a whole world of things to explore--"

"Am I arguing with you?" Kowalski asked, somewhat testily. "No. I am not arguing with you--hey, we do more with the kids than my parents ever did with me, that's for sure. It's not like we spent every afternoon at the Chicago symphony or anything--so yeah, I'm agreeing with you, you win." Fraser nodded, finally ceding the point, and Kowalski turned back to Stella. "He's right, it's true. In an odd way, cause there's less to do, you do more of it--you basically gotta do everything. Even me, in my spare time, what I've got of it--I do stuff that I never did in Chicago. I ski, I play hockey. I read at lot. I work on the snowmobiles and the Humvee. I make stuff--carpentry, woodworking, a little ironwork now and then. I can use a blowtorch now, which is pretty exciting. I even thought about maybe tryin' to learn another language, except the books I took out were totally useless. Phrases you'll never need: 'Your hair looks like Hitler's'--"

Fraser stifled a smile. "Tuo capelli e comme i capelli di Hitler," he murmured.

Kowalski glared at him. "Yeah, like I said, just totally useless, even for ordering in restaurants." He looked back at Stella. "I'd maybe try to pick up an instrument, but the one thing we got enough of is noise."

Ray Vecchio looked down suddenly--Robbie, in Fraser's lap, was tugging at his sweater.

"Hi," Robbie said.

Ray found himself smiling back helplessly; man, the kid was cute when he wasn't being a drag. "Hey there, little guy."
"You like my picture?" Robbie asked; the picture in question was so much green scribble-bibble to Ray's eyes.

Fraser leaned toward Ray, voice lowered. "I've found it best to say yes. Art criticism is apparently wasted on the young."

Breakfast started to arrive, and then kept on arriving--tray after tray of it, steaming hot and fantastic looking. The table was soon covered with thick, slightly-chipped plates bearing eggs, pancakes, waffles, hash browns, bacon, ham, toast--you name it. The kids dived in, and Ray suddenly realized that his stomach was growling.

The only person who seemed oblivious to the food was Robbie, who still seemed intent on him. "S'a sky," Robbie told him, stabbing his crayon on a green swirl. "S'a night sky."

"It's great," Ray replied, patting his head awkwardly. "It looks just like the night sky, all right?"

Robbie beamed at him and leaned forward to grab another fistful of his sweater, nearly flinging himself off Fraser's lap and onto the floor. Fraser, who was trying to get some milk into his tea, quickly steadied him with one hand while clutching the milk jug with the other. "He seems to want you," Fraser said, looking from Robbie to Ray. "Do you mind?"

The words struck fear into Ray's heart--but as he looked at Fraser's face, he found he couldn't say no. Because this was still Fraser's kid. Whatever weird way it had happened, this was Benton Fraser's kid.

"Sure, lay him on me." Ray reached out with both hands and picked the boy off Fraser's lap. "Come on--come sit with your Uncle Ray."

Across the table, Kowalski groaned, and Ray grinned.

Robbie sat happily on his lap for the entire meal: talking to him, talking to himself, talking to the new picture he was making on the back of Ray's placemat. Fraser seemed pleased, and Kowalski looked surprised. Both reactions made Ray happy--hey, he could do the kid thing if he really wanted to: he was Italian, it was in the genes. And then, at the end of the meal, Robbie's face suddenly crumpled for no freakin' reason and Ray's confidence vanished. The boy looked wildly around the table, eyes briefly stopping on Fraser, and then he turned and flailed one arm out toward Kowalski, who sighed and got up out of his chair.

"Don't feel too badly about it," Fraser murmured. Ray glanced at him, trying to hold the wriggling boy still until Kowalski could get to them. "As you can see, I'm also the distinct second choice where Robbie is concerned."

Kowalski made it round the table and Ray stood up for the handover. For a second, though, it was weird--really weird. Standing there looking at Kowalski with his blond hair and his lined face and his drunk's stubble--Kowalski who had been him for two years, who had answered his phone and gone to his family dinners and driven his partner around so that Fraser could do his superhero routine. And who had then run off with said partner to live in a frontier town in the Arctic Circle.

Ray himself had returned to find his own life oddly Kowalskified, with everyone treating them like they were just one person, like Kowalski had actually been him for those two years. Kowalski'd changed his social scene radically, making peace with some of his enemies, pissing off other people he'd thought of as friends. So now he was responsible for what Kowalski'd done as "Ray Vecchio"--which in a way was fair, he supposed, since Kowalski'd inherited all the baggage of his fucked-up
life, but still. The whole thing was a fuckin' mess--and nothing had gotten easier when he'd started seeing Stella, because that only cemented the idea that he and Kowalski maybe were the same person, which was a pretty insulting idea all in all.

And now here they were, him and Kowalski, eye to eye in a luncheonette with a baby between them, and he could see that Kowalski was as weirded out as he was. Kowalski shuffled on his feet and raised his arms, looking like he was trying to figure out a way to get Robbie away without touching him. Like they were matter and anti-matter, and if they so much brushed fingers they'd both suddenly vanish into thin air. Dopplegangers, in some weird way--and how could you be so intimately connected to a guy you barely knew?

Robbie let out a particularly piercing wail and Kowalski moved forward decisively, like he was gonna pull the boy out of a shark tank or something. He reached out, and Ray sort of adjusted the boy in his arms, and for a second they were close, heads inches apart, arms brushing, as Robbie flung his arms around Kowalski's neck and almost kicked off Ray's chest like he was a diver--and then it was over, and Kowalski was pulling away, and hey, nothing had exploded and they were both still here. He felt incredibly, stupidly relieved, and then he looked at Kowalski and saw relief on his face--and then Kowalski was shaking his head and laughing, and Ray grinned at him.  

"Fuck."

"Yeah. I know."

"What?" Fraser said, standing up. The kids followed suit, standing and worming their way back into coats and hats and gloves.

"Nothing," Kowalski told him. "I got the kid, you get the check and the laundry--"

Fraser groaned softly. "The laundry. I almost forgot."

"Plus you might want to pick up some steaks or something, make dinner easy," Kowalski said, shifting Robbie in his arms.

"Yes. All right," Fraser said. "Should we just pull the Humvee up in front of the market and--"

Kowalski shook his head. "No--I'll tell ya. You go now, get some food, meet us out at the Hummer, and then we'll stop and pick up the laundry on our way out. I think there's, like, four bags or something. I think that's what I dropped, I don't even remember."

"All right." Fraser turned, looked at the children, and then seemed to focus on Sarah. "Sarah," he said quietly, "do you want to come to the market with me?"

She looked at him steadily for a moment, and then shot a quick look at Kowalski, like she was asking his permission or advice or something. And Ray thought that was strange, because he hadn't thought that Kowalski and Sarah were close or even friendly. But there she was, looking to Kowalski for something, and then she suddenly said to Fraser, "Yeah. Okay."

They finally got out of the luncheonette, something else that was a lot more complicated than it should have been. "Yo! Eggroll!" Kowalski yelled. "Gloves! You--" this to Andy, "--left your hat, and whose Gameboy is that? Get it or lose it!" They made their way back to the Hummer, and got everyone strapped in and settled. Fraser and Sarah arrived a few minutes later, each bearing a cardboard box of groceries, which they loaded into the back. Kowalski handed Fraser the Hummer's keys, and Fraser took the wheel. They trundled up the street and turned right, pulling up in front of the laundromat where Fraser popped out and returned carrying a sack big enough to be a bodybag.
"That's one," Fraser said, and man, there were three more, just as big, that had to be fetched and loaded before they could finally hit the road.

Ray sat in the passenger seat and watched with envy as Fraser nudged the tank up to speed. "You gotta let me drive his thing," Ray said, looking back over the seat at Kowalski--and suddenly he realized that he was getting into the same habit that the kids were in, running everything by Kowalski, which was stupid, because this was Fraser's machine as much as Kowalski's, right? Ray quickly turned to look at Fraser, and repeated, "You gotta let me drive this thing,"--like that would somehow make it less obvious that he'd been asking Kowalski the first time. Still, though, he now got why the kids did it--because it was Kowalski who probably had a goddamned opinion on everything.

And it was Kowalski who answered him, calling over the roar of the engine. "I said yeah--when we get back, we'll take her out, play around."

Give him this much, Kowalski was as good as his word. No sooner had they pulled the Hummer in front of the cabin, unloaded the kids and the groceries and the laundry, then Kowalski jangled the keys in front of his face. Ray snatched them out of his hand and shot him a grin.

"Fraser!" Kowalski called; Fraser and Sam were in the kitchen unpacking the groceries. "You okay for a few?--I'm gonna take Vecchio out in the Hummer."

Fraser looked up, nodded briskly, and waved them away. "Go ahead. Enjoy yourselves."

Kowalski paused for another moment, scanning the room--Sarah was sitting in a chair, earphones of a CD Walkman clapsed to her ear, listening to her new album and staring dreamily at the cover; Holly was practically ripping open the box of her new microscope; Eddie and Andy were sitting on the floor playing some sort of card game that seemed to involve a lot of hand slapping; and Robbie was sprawled on the floor next to them, watching the game with fascination.

Kowalski nodded to himself, apparently satisfied, and then jerked his head at Ray. "Come on. Let's hit it."

Chapter Eight

Stella helped Holly put her microscope together, squinting to read the instruction manual and pointing out the parts--base, lenses, slide-clips, view-finder. After a while, Sam drifted over, looking intensely interested in the project, and Stella handed the manual to him with a smile.

Fraser had put the kettle on the stove and was sitting at the kitchen reading the newspaper Ray had abandoned there this morning. Stella drifted over, feeling oddly nervous, and slid into the chair beside him. Fraser glanced up, and Stella suddenly realized that he was as scared of her as she was of him.

"I'm making tea," Fraser said quickly. "Or perhaps you'd like something else? I can offer you--"

"Tea is fine," she interrupted.

Fraser looked relieved. "Very good."

Stella steeled her nerve. "I just thought that...maybe we could talk for a while, you and me,"

Fraser's relieved expression disappeared with such speed that Stella almost laughed. "Talk?" Fraser
asked blankly, as if the idea was completely foreign to him.

"Yeah. I mean—that's part of why we're here," Stella explained. "If you haven't figured that out. I didn't know that Ray would be here—I mean my Ray, your Ray—oh, you know who I mean. *Stanley."

Fraser smiled wryly and nodded.

"That was an additional...surprise," Stella said carefully. "But Ray—my—Ray Vecchio—" God, she was stumbling over words, and that wasn't like her at all. "Ray wanted to see you," she said firmly. "Wanted me to see you. You're important to him, and I think he wanted me to get to know you—"

Fraser stared down at the tabletop. "I'm very flattered," he said quietly.

"--since I really don't know you at all."

Fraser's head jerked up, and for a second there, Stella thought she saw something dangerous in his eyes, something potentially combative, and she reminded herself not to underestimate him. In Chicago, in his Mountie reds, he had always looked lost. Here, though, the man was in his element, and what had looked country-simple now looked a whole lot more rugged and wild. Maybe she had her J.D., but this was Fraser's turf and she'd better not forget it.

"In that case," Fraser said carefully, "I suppose we should talk. If that's what Ray wants."

"Yes." Stella showed him a smile. "I think it is. So tell me," she added, abruptly changing tacks, "do you think we all want what we didn't have when we were young?"

Fraser looked momentarily surprised at the question—score one for her. "I don't know. Perhaps. Do you think so?"

"Yes. I do." She glanced down her hands, which were loosely clasped in front of her, and studied the new wedding ring on her left hand. "I grew up in a nice middle-class family. Maybe even upper-middle," she admitted, after a moment. "My father was a doctor. He met my mother at Yale. Three kids, four bedroom house, two cars." She twisted the gold band around her finger and then looked up at Fraser. "I've married two police officers. Do you think that's strange?"

"Not at all," Fraser said.

"Well, it is strange," Stella told him. "It's strange where I come from. The women I grew up with—they married rich men, they have children, boats, summer cottages—"

"That's very interesting," Fraser said politely, but his eyes said something different.

Stella felt her cheeks start to burn. "I don't, of course. I don't *want* those things. That's what I'm trying to tell you. I want something else."

Fraser was watching her closely, and now he was nodding again, more sympathetically. She found herself getting angry at his calm, at his stillness. Ray'd wanted her to talk to Fraser, but how on earth did you *talk* to a guy like this? He didn't give you anything to work with, not even a foothold.

She considered her next statement carefully. "I've been lying to Ray," she said.

Fraser just tilted his head a little, considering her. "Oh? Which one?" he asked evenly.

"Yours," she replied; and it was easier to say that now. Yours—your Ray, not mine. She waited for
Fraser to ask her what she'd been lying about, but Fraser didn't ask. He just waited, watching her closely with his dark blue eyes, deep and cold as the bottom of the ocean. Hell, guys like Fraser were the worst kind of witness—they just sat there, all calm and polite, which forced you do all the work and ultimately made you look hysterical in front of the jury.

"I've been telling him that I'm okay with this," Stella said—and bang, that got him—she could see the tiny flinch, the first minuscule crack in the facade. Good. She could work with that. "He's been worried—but he's been worrying about the wrong thing. He thinks this is about sex."

A more pronounced flinch, a deeper crack. She went on, pressing her advantage.

"But it isn't," Stella said. "I don't care what he's doing or who he's doing it with," and this was true. Men, it seemed to her, had one thing in common—they all needed someplace to stick it and move it around. Left to themselves, they'd come up with some pretty inventive solutions—blow-up dolls, vacuum cleaner attachments, socks, the insides of peanut butter sandwiches. Put them together, and they'd use each other's mouths and assholes—and Stella supposed that despite his clean-cut exterior, Fraser was no different. If Ray was willing to offer his ass for the purpose—well, it wasn't like she was using it for anything. "I don't care if you're having sex," she reiterated. "It's—your marriage I'm jealous of."

Fraser's pale skin was flushing now; his neck and cheeks were obviously reddening, even though he was staring again at the tabletop, not meeting her eyes. Still, though, she was having trouble gauging his emotions—was that embarrassment? irritation? rage? If he'd only just say something, give her a clue.

"He wants all this," Stella told him, leaning forward and lowering her voice. "He always wanted all this—I know, because we fought about it." Fraser wasn't meeting her eyes, but he was listening at least. "And I didn't—I wanted something else. I wanted him, because I thought he was different, wilder, freer than the guys I knew. Which was my mistake, because what I never thought to question was what on earth Ray saw in me. Why on earth did Ray want me? You ever meet his parents?" she asked. "Barbara? Damien?"

Fraser looked up at this, nodded. "Once or twice."

"They're lovely people," Stella said, and again Fraser nodded his agreement. "Polish immigrants, slaving for the American Dream—and now they have it: the Winnebego, the West, a warm climate to retire in. They were really hard workers, both of them—Ray's dad worked at a meat-packing plant, Barbara worked in a garment factory on the south side. Ray was supposed to be the beneficiary of all that—they'd save money, send him to college, he'd be a doctor or something. That was how it was supposed to work, anyway. Except Ray was all alone, and he did whatever he wanted—and I was so jealous of that," she added suddenly. The memory was so clear it was astounding. "Ray could just go where he wanted, do whatever he wanted—do whatever he wanted—but my mother was home all the time, I had to get permission to breathe." Stella reminded herself to breathe, and took a deep breath. "Are you understanding me?" Say something, she thought desperately. Please say something.

Fraser's mouth tightened. "I'm—not sure."

She sighed and rubbed at her forehead with the back of her hand. "I'm trying to tell you something, for god's sake."

"I--yes," Fraser said, looking away. "Please go on."

"When we were kids, Ray could do whatever he wanted after school, because his parents weren't home—they were out, working hard, working overtime. So Ray came to my house," Stella
explained, "and sat with me in my kitchen and ate my mother's cookies. He was like an emissary from another planet," Stella said fervently, and now Fraser looked up and met her eyes, and nodded rapidly; okay, so at least there was one think they could agree on. Ray Kowalski's unworldliness. "I felt like--take me with you! Get me out of here! Take me to your people!"

"Yes," Fraser said quietly. "Yes, I see."

"And he did," Stella continued with soft urgency, "finally he did. We got married, and everybody was thrilled about it--his parents, my parents, and really, that should have been my big clue right there. Barbara and Damien just loved me--I was a doctor's daughter, and a lawyer myself, and if Ray hadn't become a doctor or lawyer, well, hey, this was the next best thing, right? They thought they were getting in, do you see? Me? I thought I was getting out."

She stopped, took another deep breath, and then tried to tell Fraser the rest of it. "When things started going wrong, his parents sided with me, and my parents sided with him. Barbara and Damien said, 'Ray, she's a professional, you can't expect her to waste all that wonderful education!' My parents said, 'Ray's a good man, a solid provider, and men have needs, Stella--you can't expect everything to be about you and your career.' Do you see?" she asked Fraser, almost begging. "Can you see it?"

"Yes," Fraser said.

"Because I was stupid," Stella said flatly. "It never occurred to me to ask why Ray wanted me. By the time I figured it out, it was already too late. I thought I was marrying James Dean. And I guess I did, in a way. Except that was who he was, not what he wanted. He wanted this," Stella said, jabbing her index finger against the kitchen table. "He wanted order, routine, family. He wanted all that so badly that he--well." She stopped, exhaled in frustration, and then blurted, "Well, all right, call a spade a spade. He ignored his attraction to men. Because that's what he did. He didn't think he could get that with a guy, and he needed that more than he needed--well, whatever else he needed. Not that he got it," she added softly. "Not that he got any of it. Instead he got me, and I was his parents all over again, calling up from the office and saying, 'Sorry, honey, I have to work late--there's food in the fridge, help yourself.' Everything at cross-purposes. The whole thing was a mess."

"I'm sorry."

Stella looked hard at him; he looked sincere, he looked like he meant it.

"For both of you."

"You shouldn't be," Stella said. "You of all people shouldn't be. If we hadn't divorced, he wouldn't be here with you. If we hadn't divorced, I wouldn't be married to Ray. The other Ray. My Ray. Ray's different," she explained. "Ray's from a big family--and for him, family's all about duty, obligations, especially since his father died. Ray's spent his entire life having to be the big man, trying to fend off women who were trying to feed him." Stella smiled ruefully. "Consequently, I've never met a man happier to just come home, be quiet for a while, have a salad and a glass of wine. I don't bother him. I don't make demands. He doesn't have to take care of me--so you see? We all want what we didn't have as children, I think."

"I wanted noise," Fraser said quietly, so quietly that Stella thought she could actually hear the sound of ice cracking. "It was always so quiet. My grandparents were librarians," Fraser added with a wry twist of his lips, "so of course a certain amount of silence simply came with the territory. And the Territories. What you see here today--this is thirty years' worth of development. Sprawl," Fraser added, drawing the word out for maximum irony, and Stella bit down on a smile. "Thirty years ago
there was almost nothing here. And that was beautiful in a way, but..." Fraser trailed off, staring intently at his hands. He was, Stella suddenly noticed, also wearing a ring.

"Lonely," Stella said softly.

Fraser didn't answer.

"Well," she said, sitting back in her chair. "Now you have noise."

Fraser smiled ruefully, but didn't look at her. "Indeed."

"You have your noise, Ray has his children, my husband's got peace and quiet and I have a life. But it's hard for me to see you and him together," Stella confessed, and she couldn't keep the edge of resentment out of her voice. Fraser looked up at her tone. "Seeing your marriage work. You gave him what I couldn't." she said, almost bitterly. "I was afraid I would drown, be absorbed, lose myself completely--no more Stella. It must be easier for men--because here you both are, with six children, and you're both still yourselves, you still get to be yourselves, you're still exactly the same--"

"That isn't true," Fraser said, and his vehemence surprised her. "That's not true at all. You do lose yourself, you do drown, can't you see what's--" Fraser stopped, tried to gather himself, but he was upset, and the ice had cracked into huge, jagged pieces. "I'm not who I was," Fraser told her. "I can't imagine Ray is either. You become a split self, you live as both yourself and them, however much you try not to."

Almost helplessly, Fraser's eyes drifted toward Sarah, who was leaning back in the armchair with her eyes closed, bobbing her head to the music on her Walkman.

"Ray thinks I don't understand her," Fraser murmured. "But he's wrong; I understand only too well. Anger. Resentment. Fear. The feeling that nothing will ever be right again. Not knowing whom to blame for that. Blaming everyone for that. Blaming yourself most of all."

Stella watched Fraser stare at Sarah, and realized suddenly that Fraser really was a split self, that he was living both sides of this conflict. He was the angry child, blaming himself for the loss of his mother--but he was the adult, too, taking Sarah's blame to heart.

"I know it's not us," Fraser said sharply, turning to look at her. "Whatever Ray thinks, I do know that. It's not me, it's not Ray, it's not the other kids or the house or living here. It's not about Charlie or drugs--it's just pain, general, specific, and irrational. But I thought if I..." Fraser looked back at Sarah again. "...that if I just...if I could only..."

Fraser stopped, and then he started shaking his head slowly, like he was seeing something horrible, something he couldn't quite believe.

"She's not me. I can't help her." He looked again at Stella and said, "You're quite right to be afraid."

Behind her, the door banged open and the two Rays came in, laughing and shoving each other. "No," Ray Kowalski said, grabbing Vecchio's jacket, "you are such a lame-ass piece of--"

Ray Vecchio grinned and made as if to clock him. "Hey, you said turn left!"

"I meant the other left! Your other left!"

"The left on the right? Riiight."
"I wasn't wearing my fuckin' glasses!"

"Blind and stupid," Ray Vecchio said, grinning, "what a total treat you are!"

Ray Kowalski shoved him away, collapsed into one of the kitchen chairs, and stared up at him. "Hey," he said, "doesn't matter, that bush was only, like an endangered species --"

"Oh, yeah--great --I killed the Great Arctic Mountain Shrub--"

"Yes, you did, I think you did, and now I'm gonna have to report you to the correct authorities. Fraser," Ray Kowalski said, turning, "arrest this--what's the matter with you?"

Fraser stood up and rubbed idly at his temples. "Nothing. I'm fine. I see you had a good time."

"I ran over a shrub," Ray Vecchio confessed, "but it was small shrub, a shrubino--"

"It was a pretty big shrub," Ray Kowalski murmured.

"You can't see left from right, Stanley--how could you see the shrub? You've only got my word for it that there was a shrub."

"I felt the thump," Ray Kowalski said with a smirk. "As we ran over it--hey, what did you do to him?" he asked, suddenly turning to Stella.

"Nothing," Fraser insisted.

"Nothing," Stella said, almost at the same time. "We just talked."

"You talked?" Ray Vecchio asked, looking from Stella to Fraser and back again. "You guys finally talked?"

"Talked about what?" Ray Kowalski asked, eyes narrowing suspiciously.

"Just talked," Stella told him. "We're just getting to know each other."

"I wanted them to know each other," Ray Vecchio told Ray Kowalski.

"Who cares what you want?" Kowalski retorted.

"I do," Stella said, standing up. "I care what he wants."

"She cares what I want," Vecchio told Kowalski.

"We just talked," Fraser told Kowalski.

Kowalski wheeled on Stella. "Did you talk about me?"

"Yes," Stella said.

"No," Fraser said. "Yes," he instantly amended. "Of course. It's only natural."

Now Ray Vecchio was wearing a suspicious look too. "What about me, did you talk about me?"

"We don't have that much in common, Ray," Stella snapped at him. "What do you expect?"

"You worked in the same building for five years," Ray Vecchio nearly whined. "You know people! You have common friends!"
"We know you, Ray," Stella said sharply.

"And you don't have any friends," Kowalski muttered.

"I used to," Vecchio told Kowalski. "Before you became me and--"

"Please," Fraser begged. "Stop."

Stella turned to Fraser. "Hey, you wanted noise, you got noise."

Fraser sank back into his seat, laughing helplessly.

Chapter Nine

"What do you think they're doing in there?" Ray Vecchio murmured.

"I don't know," Stella replied offhandedly, thinking: Fucking. They're fucking. What do you think? Ray Kowalski had grabbed Benton Fraser by the arm after dinner and told him that they had to talk. If they were still talking, she was Marie Antoinette.

Robbie was marching around the sofa they were sitting on; he had been marching steadily for nearly 45 minutes now, and showed no signs of stopping. Stella thought that if scientists could somehow harness the energy of small children, get them to run on treadmills or something, there wouldn't ever be any shortage of electricity.

Holly and Sam had both returned to the microscope, except now they were fighting for it. "Let me see!" Holly begged.

"Wait, just let me focus it," Sam replied.

"You let me focus it--it's my microscope!"

"One more second!"

"You said that five minutes ago!"

From the direction of the bedroom, a single soft moan, heartbreaking in its intensity. Ray. She knew that moan; that was the sound he made just before he--

"ACTION MAN!" Eddie yelled, swooping out of the boys' bedroom with a blanket flying from his outstretched arms. "I AM ACTION MAN!"

Sam looked up at his brother, annoyed. "Quit it, you're being a pain."

Eddie stopped, posed, one hand on hip. "ALL OF CANADA IS WITHIN MY DOMAIN."

"There are no Canadian superheroes, stupid," Holly snorted.

"Sure there are," Sam corrected. "There's Iron Man, Nelvana of the Northern Lights, Captain Canuck, Northguard and his partner Fleur de Lys--"

"Okay, I stand corrected," Holly said, rolling her eyes. "There are no Canadian superheroes who aren't pathetic. So go on, Eddie! You fit right in!"
"Up yours," Eddie said, and swooped away again.

Robbie made a final lap around the sofa and then hurled himself at Ray and Fraser's bedroom door and started banging on it wildly. "Ray! Dad! Ben! Dad!"

"I think the four of them are a little busy right now, kid," Ray Vecchio muttered.

Robbie kept banging noisily, and suddenly the door opened. Fraser was standing there, dressed exactly as he had been when they last saw him—except, Stella thought, perhaps his hair was just a little messed up? and perhaps his shirt-tails weren't quite as tucked in as they ought to be? Fraser reached down for Robbie, swung him up, and then, suddenly, lifted him high up above his head. Robbie shrieked with joy.

"Dad, tell Holly that Canadian superheroes aren't pathetic," Sam said.

Fraser lowered Robbie down to the floor again and turned to Sam, seeming shocked. "Pathetic? Of course not. Superman's certainly not pathetic."

"Superman's Canadian?" Holly said.

"Well, in a manner of speaking," Fraser explained. "Half-Canadian in any case; Joe Shuster was a native of Toronto, I believe."

Ray Kowalski appeared behind him in the doorway, hair going every which way and looking flushed. He put a hand on Fraser's shoulder, and Fraser turned to him. "The thing you have got to remember," Ray said softly, intently, obviously continuing a prior conversation, "is that kids who suffer like that can still turn out mighty fucking fine, Fraser. Like you. Just like you," and Fraser stared at him for a long moment before reaching out, twining a hand in his disordered hair, and pulling him close for a kiss.

Stella instantly looked away, focusing on Robbie—Sam—Holly—anywhere but the doorway—but none of the kids so much as blinked at the show of affection. Sam was saying, "See? See?" to his sister, and Holly was in fact staring at Fraser and Ray with some impatience. "What about Nirvana, who's Nirvana?"

"Nelvana," Sam corrected.

Fraser slowly pulled his mouth away from Ray's, and then turned to answer Holly's question without missing a beat. "Nelvana was actually the first Canadian superhero. Nelvana of the Northern Lights. She was a woman and she carried...well, I believe it was metal-melting light ray."

"Cooooool," Holly said, nodding appreciatively, and Stella noticed that beyond her, Sarah had shoved her headphones back and was following the conversation with some interest.

"She was, yes. I think she could make herself invisible, too." Fraser smiled slowly as he struggled to remember. "What's really interesting, though, is that she was based on an Inuit legend. Nelvana was the daughter of—"

Fraser stopped suddenly, having caught Sarah's eye. Sarah slid back in her armchair and smiled at him, headphones dangling around her neck.

"—the daughter of Kolieak, the King of the Northern Lights," Fraser finished, and smiled back at her.

"All right," Ray Kowalski said, clapping his hands sharply, "National Canadian History Hour is over. You," he said, pointing at Sam, "dogs. You," this to Holly, "put that microphone—"
"Microscope," Holly corrected.

"--whatever, away, and get to bed. And tell your brothers," Kowalski added. "Tomorrow's a school day, tomorrow these people are leaving, tomorrow things around here are getting back to normal."

"Isn't this normal?" Holly asked.

"You just shut up," Ray Kowalski said.

Epilogue to the Epilogue: Chicago

Dear Ray (and dear Stella, of course),

We were delighted, Ray and I, to receive your letter, and to learn that your trip was all that you wished it to be. Indeed, Victoria Island is beautiful, though I confess myself somewhat distressed to hear that they've built hotels there whose services include cable television, though no doubt you enjoyed the amenities.

We are all fine here, and life proceeds apace. Robbie is now four, and seems intent on proving to us that he's reached a new plateau of personal maturity. Ray claims to be counting down the days until we can enroll Robbie in kindergarten, but personally I suspect that he actually rather misses having a baby about the house. * Certainly, I do. It feels like an irrecoverable loss.

Andy has expressed a desire to study the clarinet. This, rather unfortunately, has polarized the house; there is a camp that believes that the study of music enriches the soul, there is a camp that believes that Andrew plus clarinet equals unbearable noise pollution, and there is a camp that believes that the clarinet is, and I quote, "the single uncoolest instrument in the history of sound." ** I leave you to decide which of us is in what camp. I will keep you abreast of further developments.

Eddie is, at the moment, being very, very good, as he's decided that he wishes to be Captain Canuck for Halloween, which apparently requires a staggering array of accouterments from Harmon's, mostly in the line of plastic weaponry. Ray has also promised him the use of an old bomber jacket to complete the costume. I have my reservations about buying instruments of death and destruction for an eight-year-old, plastic replicas though they may be, but Eddie has indeed framed the matter very cleverly. Being, he says, that Captain Canuck was in fact a hero of the Second World War, the performance of violence in the telling of his story technically qualifies as a species of historical re-enactment. ***I'm still trying to formulate a response to that, but in the meantime, Eddie now finds himself in possession of two gray plastic hand grenades and a rather sinister-looking bayonet.

Holly recently led her team to victory in the girls' hockey final, scoring two of the team's four goals. She has, much to my delight, been wearing her triumph with modesty and grace. I wish I could say as much for Ray, who has, I'm * Unfucking true! HUSKIES
sorry to say, grown nearly unbearable on the subject. * While I can not
convince him that women's ice hockey is unlikely to be an Olympic sport by
2010, I have, at least, managed to convince him to remove the pink victory
banner from the side of the Humvee.

Sam has also had a triumph recently, having attained very high marks on his
eleventh-year national examinations. I must confess my own particular
pleasure in this fact, as I've always had an anxiety that I know Sam shares:
that of merely being a big fish in the very smallest of ponds. Living here, it is
sometimes difficult to gauge the quality of one's performance in any given
area. As a child, I often found myself wondering how I compared to other
children, as there were so very few around to give me a sense of perspective.
Of course, Sam has a fairly large data sample living in the same house with
him, and shares his bedroom with more people than comprised my entire
scouting troop. Still, he is gratified--as am I, through him--to find that he is
statistically in the very highest percentage of Canadian youth. ++

Sarah has taken to wearing nothing but black rags and listening to a band
called Amniotic Rage. Ray won't tell me what that means, probably for my
own benefit, as I admit that I find their lyrical content prima facie disturbing
enough without the terrifying possibility of subtext. More unfortunately still,
she seems to have conquered her reservations about both her friend Charlie
and his preferred courtship gift. As a result, there have been a number of
unpleasant scenes. I won't bore you with the details. Quite
uncharacteristically, Ray is much calmer on this subject than I, and has
privately assured me that one can inhale a considerable amount of marijuana
before experiencing permanent brain damage. +++ I find this less than
comforting, but am at something of a loss as to what to do about it. Am I to
arrest her? Threaten her? Eject her from the house? These possibilities
horrify me. Thanks to Dief's keen nose, and, dare I say, my own, Sarah is
finding concealment increasingly difficult; however, I am wary of constructing
a situation which would drive her away from the house and from us. Ray says
that we have to wait and see whether she's doing it simply as an act of
rebellion, knowing that we hate it, or whether, God forbid, she actually has the
weakness of the addict within her, whereupon more drastic measures might be
necessary. $

In other news, we have as of yesterday received a letter from Inspector
Thatcher, who is, as you know, still behind her desk at the Consulate, where
she no doubt belongs. She tells of us Lieutenant Welsh's retirement from the
Chicago Police Department and of his current bid for public office. Ray
swears that he will have to make a trip back to Chicago to cast his vote; he's
deeply skeptical at the prospect of casting an absentee ballot, the mail service
here being what it is. $$ He believes that the Lieutenant will make a wonderful
mayor, as do I; in fact, I cannot think of a man more suited for public service.
We've therefore discussed the possibility of making a visit to Chicago in
November, in time for Election Day, and of taking the children with us so that
they can see the city that we both love so well. The children are, as you might
imagine, deeply excited at the very idea. If the plan is finalized, we do hope
that you and Stella will have time to see us--we would not, of course, dream of
foisting ourselves and our inevitable chaos upon your home, but perhaps we

++ Fraser's also
pretty
pleased because
Sam has
just recently begun
to
show an interest in
the
RCMP. If the kid
becomes
a Mountie, Fraser
will
probably die of
joy.
Then we'll see who's
unbearable around
here.

+++ P.S. Hope you
enjoyed
theyou-know-what.


Happy
honeymoon, Stella.
Light
up and think of me
here
in snowy Grown-
up
responsible-person
land.

$ She doesn't. She's
doing
it to piss us off, but I
can't
believe she'll keep it
up
long. Because you
should
see the look on F.'s
face.
It's godawful, and
even
S. can see that.
I think she needs to
see him suffer, but I
got
my fingers crossed
might choose a hotel conveniently located to you.

Finally, Inspector Thatcher's note contained a rather disquieting postscript, which implies that Constable Turnbull has taken a position of some importance within the Canadian Security Intelligence Service. Ray says that, in that case, we should be very glad of living within the Arctic Circle and should, in fact, take the additional step of constructing a bomb shelter just in case. I myself am inclined to treat this news with greater skepticism. Surely, no reasonable person could put "Turnbull" and "intelligence' in the same sentence? So the news can't possibly be true. Can it?

Crossing my fingers, and sending you both love,

Benton Fraser

The End

End Notes

This story is Livia's fault. Almost entirely. She was telling me that she had an idea for a story where Fraser and Ray had adopted a lot of kids, and something in my head went boing, because I'd had a floating scene (the one between RayK and Robbie about the zebra) that I'd already decided would be condemned to oblivion because I couldn't think of a larger story in which to use it. When Livia said she was abandoning this particular plot bunny, I asked if I could have it. She said "yes, BUT"--there were certain things she wanted to see in the story. One of which was that she wanted them to have a troubled teenaged daughter. No problem--I can do that. She also wanted a scene with a baby and a barefooted Ray in front of a fire, but this I regretfully turned down--I can't see them either with babies or barefoot in the Arctic Circle. So if you want to see that, and I think I do, go pester Livia about it.

Of course (waving wearily to Laura JV pre-emptively) I had to go and make it a scrambled AU that went to the end of the series. (Okay, Laura? Okay? You gonna give me grief about this?) But it seemed to me entirely logical that if the brief was to give Fraser and Ray a mass of kids--then why not SIX kids, and then why not scramble the entire ending? So it becomes this switcheroo, where everyone gets someone else's ending. Sort of like the lottery switch in Good For The Soul.

Enough dispensing of blame; time for credit. As always, Mia, for fantastic beta and support. Resonant also helped a lot, offering not only encouragements but a lot of fantastic voice-nitpicks for which I'm very grateful. Linda is the typo queen this time around (all typos left are my own damn fault) and, as always, Cin is my rabbit consultant. (Key, since they're turning out to be a feature.) Thanks, ladies.
Works inspired by this one:

Treats by danceswchopstck, Bivouac by danceswchopstck, On Call by mrs_d, With Six You Get Eggroll by Cesperanza [Podfic] by Rhea314 (Rhea)

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