Running to Glacier Point

by Julesmonster

Summary

After being injured in the line of duty, RayK heads to Canada to get away from the pity of his friends and family and to find something more with Fraser. Post-CotW. Slash.

Notes

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A/N: I vaguely recall this series when it first aired in the US, but I was not an avid viewer by any means. However, through reading a crossover recently, I became intrigued and have since bought and watched the complete series. I must admit that the relationship between RayK and Fraser intrigues me, so I thought I’d try to write a little story about them post CotW. There are 6 parts. I hope you enjoy!
Ray stared out the hospital window and ignored the discussion taking place around him. It had been almost a month since he'd woken from the coma and in that time, all anyone seemed to be able to do was argue. His parents, Stella and her new husband Ray Vecchio, and even Frannie and Ma Vecchio all seemed to have an opinion about his life and his recovery. And not one of them was willing to listen to a word Ray said. Ray snorted in self-deprecation. Not that they could understand half of what he said these days.

The only person who didn't have an opinion to share was Benton Fraser, and that was because he simply wasn't there. Part of Ray wanted to call his post in Canada find out why he hadn't shown up, but another part of him was afraid. And anytime he'd tried to ask anyone, they had either not understood his question or pretended they didn't understand because they didn't want to tell him anything. He wasn't sure which was worse.

For weeks, Ray had been working with speech therapists and physical therapists and doctors. He'd had more tests and had more blood taken than he'd had in his entire life. The doctors all said the same thing. He was brain damaged. Well, they were a little nicer in how they put it, but it came down to the same thing. Traumatic Brain Injury was just the PC way to say he was brain damaged. And the therapists all told him that he could relearn how to talk and write and do all the things that he used to. But he'd never be as good as he was before. He'd always have to deal with the changes in his body and mind.

Ray hated having to work hard just to get back to what passed for semi-normal, but he was willing to do it if it meant he could get the hell away from the people who loved him. He knew that they were all just concerned about him. He knew that they wanted him to get better, but didn't believe he ever would. They saw him as damaged. And though he saw himself the same way, he hated that they did. He hated the pity and grief he saw in their eyes every time he struggled to find a word only to have it slurred so bad as to be unrecognizable. He hated the way they acted like he was a child who needed them to make his decisions.

After almost a month of therapy, the doctors were finally willing to set a date for his release. He was walking again, though he still needed the help of a cane at times. In fact, other than a bit of trembling when he was really tired, even his fine motor skills were back almost as good as new. Almost.

The one area that he still had the most trouble with was speech. The neurologist said he had aphasia and apraxia. Aphasia meant he sometimes had trouble finding words, slurring when he spoke or understanding what others said to him. The doctor said his was a fairly mild case and he should be grateful that he didn't have trouble reading words or writing them. He admitted that would be worse, but he didn't feel particularly lucky.

The Apraxia meant that even when he knew what he wanted to say, his mouth sometimes couldn't remember how to make the sounds come out. There result was a pretty bad stutter, especially with certain letters. The doctor believed he could retrain his brain to get past both the aphasia and apraxia, but it would take a long time and a lot of work. In the meantime, he'd taken to carrying a notebook with him all the time just in case he couldn't force the words to come out or people couldn't understand him.

Ray had dealt with the pity, the tears and even the arguments since waking, but it was with barely...
concealed resentment. Now that he was being released, however, everyone was getting even worse and his patience was at an all-time low. His parents were insisting that he come live with them. Ma Vecchio and Frannie wanted him to stay with them. Stella didn't want him, and neither did Vecchio, but she felt obligated to insist he come home with them. Guilt was a very powerful motivator. The doctor said he would be okay on his own as long as he continued the exercises proscribed by his various therapists, but no one would consider that.

Ray just wanted to be left alone. And he had a plan to ensure that he got just that. When the doctor finally released him, he would be ready and he would do what he knew was right for him.

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Ray had three days notice before his release, and he used that time judiciously. He worked with Glenda, his speech therapist, and Jerry, his physical therapist, in order to make the arrangements. He also enlisted Lt. Welsh in his plan. That man had not only worked with the union rep to get Ray every benefit he could and ensure his early pension, but he was one of the only people who didn't treat him like he was mentally defective. He was happy to get Ray's bags packed and agreed to pick him up from the hospital. And if the timing was right, he could get away without the huge scene he expected from friends and family.

The day arrived and the doctor, who had agreed with Ray's desire to get away from the smothering group that was constantly crowding Ray's hospital room, signed his release papers a full two hours earlier than he informed the family he would. Lt. Welsh was there, Ray's bags packed in the trunk of his car, and he wheeled Ray out as per hospital regulations. Ray settled into the passenger seat of the car and they pulled away just as he saw his parents drive up.

"They're not going to be happy," Welsh predicted. He had obviously seen them too.

Ray shrugged. "I tr-ried t-to t-tell th-them. Wouldn't li-listen."

Welsh nodded. He had been witness to the way the Kowalski's and Vecchios had pretty much ignored everything Ray said. "I'll call everyone after your plane leaves. You gonna be alright getting there?"

Ray knew Welsh wasn't talking about getting through the airport. The trip to Glacier Point was a long one. It was a relatively large town for the Yukon, but there were definitely no direct flights and no one was expecting him. Ray had left a message with the RCMP post there, but had learned that Fraser was out on a training search and rescue mission and wasn't expected back for a week at the earliest. He was checking in daily by satellite phone, but they couldn't relay personal information unless it was a dire emergency. That mean Ray would beat him there, and Fraser wouldn't know until he arrived home.

Ray would have to take a flight into Vancouver and from there, he'd fly to Whitehorse. He had arranged to take a charter up from there to Glacier Point. He'd spend the night in Whitehorse, though, since he wasn't sure he could take that last leg without his strength giving out first.

To Welsh, he just smiled. "G-got ev-everyth-thing I need. P-paper, p-pen, p-pills…"

They pulled up to the drop-off lane and Welsh put the car in park. "You call me from Whitehorse. And you call me when you get to Glacier Point."

"I w-will," Ray promised.

With a nod, Welsh climbed from the car and set about getting Ray's bags from the trunk while Ray
flagged down one of the skycaps. Soon, his gear was checked and he was in one of those golf carts—Welsh had insisted that he didn't walk through the airport—on his way to the gate. Ray had been more than a little surprised when instead of taking Ray's offered hand, Welsh had pulled him into a bear hug.

Ray had thought that he was prepared for the odd looks he would receive from people when they heard him struggle to speak, but he wasn't really. He did his best to ignore the looks and concentrate on doing what needed to be done. He was glad that the slurring was pretty much gone, but the stutter was still pretty bad. And when all else failed, he pulled out his pad and pen and wrote. When it was said and done, however, he was glad to settle back into his seat on the plane and watch as Chicago disappeared from view.

The flight took about five hours and then he was being escorted from one plane to the next. He suspected that Lt. Welsh had arranged for his cart trip this time too, but was grateful nonetheless. He was already tired from the trip and he still had to get to Whitehorse and to a hotel. Of course, the second plane was much smaller than the first and there was hardly any room to move around, not that Ray's balance was such that he wanted to attempt that. By the time he reached Whitehorse, Ray was ready to fall over from exhaustion. He was once again grateful for the arrangements made by the airline for his transport through the small airport from the gate to the luggage pick up.

Once his bags were loaded onto a cart by the airline employee, Ray used that cart to help him balance as he headed for the taxi stand. Whitehorse wasn't a huge city by any means, but there were a couple taxis waiting for fares, and it was a simple matter to ask for the closest hotel. At the hotel, the cabbie helped him get his luggage into the lobby and Ray was never so grateful for the politeness of Canadians.

Fifteen minutes later, he was in his room and the arrangements for his return to the airport in the morning had been made. Though the hotel didn't offer room service, the man at the front desk had offered to have something delivered over from the diner down the road. When Ray saw his reflection in the bathroom mirror, and saw just how awful he looked, he understood why the guy was being so solicitous. He looked like he could keel over at any minute and the trembling from overexertion was pretty bad.

Ray cleaned up and by the time he was finished and changed into sweat pants and sweat shirt, the food had arrived. He paid for it and sat down at the small table to eat with the television for company. It was only once the food was gone that he recalled his promise to call Lt. Welsh, so he dug his prepaid calling card out of his pack and started dialing.

"I-I m-made it," Ray said once Welsh had answered.

"At least to Whitehorse," Welsh said. "Still have another leg to go."

"Lot shorter," Ray said. He'd learned to keep his sentences short and use the smallest words he could. "T-tired."

"I expect so," Welsh said brusquely. "I know why you didn't hang around to get your strength up more, but it doesn't change the fact that this would have been easier if you were stronger."


Welsh grunted. "Speaking of your mother." Ray groaned. "Yeah. It went about how you'd expect. I had every one of them swearing at me and calling me the devil incarnate. Well, your dad was quiet. I think he might have understood."
"Th-thanks," Ray said quietly.

"Hey, I take care of my men," Welsh said gruffly. "Now, you get some sleep and take care of yourself. I still expect you to call tomorrow after you get in."

"P-promise," Ray said. "Night."

"Goodnight Kowalski," Welsh said.

Ray hung up the phone and lay down. His pills were sitting on the bedside table in one of those pill organizers. He hated the damned thing, but his nurse Freda had insisted that it was the best way to ensure that he didn't miss a dosage. He had to take five pills every morning and three every night and one with lunch every day. He also had pain meds, but those he only took when things got bad. He opened the slot for Sunday night and let the three pills drop into his hand. Then he grabbed the bottle with the pain meds and shook out one. His head and leg were both killing him, and it wouldn't hurt to let the drugs help him sleep.

Soon after, despite the early hour, he shut off the TV and the lights and let sleep claim him.

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This may well be the stupidest thing Ray had ever done in his life. He had run away from home at the ripe old age of forty. Not only had he run away from home, he wasn't even entirely sure of his welcome at his intended destination. As the pilot, Cliff, droned on about the town and the people in it, Ray considered again why Fraser hadn't come or even called while he was in the hospital.

When they had returned from their quest for the Hand of Franklin, Ray and Fraser had talked long and hard about what would happen next. It was obvious that Fraser was a hundred times happier up here than he had ever been in Chicago. It wasn't that he didn't care about all the people he worked with, it was just that the life there was stifling for a man who lived and breathed wilderness.

Ray had loved the harsh life he had discovered on the trail, but knew that he was expected to return to Chicago. Everyone, including Fraser, had made it clear that they thought he would go back. He was city born and bred, and no matter how much he loved their adventure, everyone knew that he would get tired of that before long. Everyone knew that except Ray. But Ray hadn't thought to argue the point. Fraser thought he belonged in the city and Fraser was always right. Besides, Fraser hadn't asked him to stay, so he had returned to Chicago and to the life that was familiar there.

For more than a year, he had worked at the 27th precinct with the people who had become his friends, but it wasn't the same. Nothing was the same. After a while, Ray realized that it wasn't the job or the city or his friends and family that had changed, but him. Almost two years being partners with Fraser, training for their adventure for six months, and being alone out on the ice for more than four months with the same man had irrevocably changed him. He didn't see people the same way. He didn't see life the same way, but he hadn't known then what he could do about it.

And then the shooting and the coma and weeks in the hospital had given him a new perspective on his situation. Ray shook his head. He wasn't running away, he reminded himself. He was running towards a life that he wanted desperately. He no longer had anything to hold him back from taking what he wanted. Hopefully that life would include Fraser, but even if he wanted nothing to do with Ray, Ray knew that he didn't belong in the city anymore. And it had nothing to do with the shooting. Ray had fallen in love with the life he had glimpsed for the few months he'd been in Canada with Fraser. It was a simple life, if harsh at times, and it was a life that he wanted for himself.
"So, you planning on staying for a while?" Cliff asked once he had run out of gossip.

Ray smirked. He'd be the talk of the town for months to come. "Hope s-so."

Cliff didn't ask more. It wasn't the way people from small towns like Glacier Point operated. They would ask a few polite questions and then respectfully observe a person's behavior until they were able to form an opinion. Ray was grateful for that. It meant that most people wouldn't just assume he was retarded or something. And they wouldn't expect him to tell his life story for their entertainment.

Ray had never been to Glacier Point, but it looked much like the other small northern towns he'd seen while on the quest with Fraser. The biggest difference was the fact that this town was far enough south to have trees—and not just pine, fir and spruce trees, there were birch and cottonwoods and poplars. There were also more buildings in the town than most Ray had seen, and he knew that the population fluctuated with the seasons. Glacier Point was on the road to Alaska and there were a number of American tourists who came through every summer. The busiest time, however, were the winter months; the town had a few ski lodges that did a good trade when snow covered the ground. The permanent population was about 1,200, but could explode up to 5,000 at the height of the ski season.

Fraser had taken the position of post commander a few months back when the previous commander had retired. He was now Sergeant Fraser. He'd spent less than a year as Corporal, but considering the length of time he was a mere constable, Ray felt it was a promotion long overdue.

Because of the size of the town during tourist season, there were five Mounties stationed at the post under Fraser and a couple civilian aids. They weren't the largest detachment in the Yukon Territory, but they were up in the top five. Ray was proud of the fact that Fraser was finally being recognized for the skilled Mountie and leader he was.

Since leaving for Chicago, Ray had made a point of making sure he wrote to Fraser at least twice a month. The letters back from Fraser were a little more sporadic but he always wrote long letters telling Ray about the post and the people of the town. Ray had learned a lot about Glacier Point from those letters. He'd learned less about Fraser, but he was getting better about reading between the lines with his friend. He knew that Fraser was often lonely, despite the numerous invitations to dinner he received from the townsfolk. Fraser kept himself at a friendly distance from people and most people were too well-mannered to break through that wall of courtesy, leaving Fraser in his self-inflicted loneliness.

Ray hoped that Fraser would let him do something about that. Well, let wasn't exactly the right word. Fraser had never let Ray in back in Chicago; Ray had simply stormed the fortress around Fraser's heart and forced his way in. Now, he hoped he would be able to do the same again. He hoped that Fraser would let him stay with him, at least. Even if their relationship never became everything that Ray hoped it could be, he wanted to stay. He wanted to be a part of Fraser's life. He wanted to make the man laugh and smile and be happy, the way he had been on their quest.

"Brace yourself," Cliff told him. "Landing can be tricky in the winter like this. But I've been doing this three times a week for more than ten years. Just hang on and I'll get us down safe."

Ray smiled nervously at the guy and watched as the icy runway got closer.
Ray was surprised that there was an RCMP jeep waiting at the airstrip. He could see as he stepped from the plane that the Mountie behind the wheel wasn't his Mountie, but the woman climbed out and approached him right away.

"Detective Kowalski?"

"J-just Ray," Ray said.

She smiled at him. "Corporal Stevens recognized your name from Cliff's flight schedule and thought you might need a lift to Sergeant Fraser's place."

"Th-thanks," Ray said. "Very k-k-kind of you."

"Let's get your bags and we can head out," she said. "I'm Constable Jenny Grant, by the way."

Ray tried to say that he'd heard good things about her, but his mouth chose that moment to stop working, leaving his mouth gaping open, so he settled on a smile and let Cliff and the constable grab his bags while he shouldered his pack and leaned heavily on his cane as they walked to the waiting jeep.

"Sergeant Fraser didn't mention you were coming to visit before he left," Grant said once they were on their way.

Ray's mouth decided to work again. "Didn't know. It was… a last minute th-thing."

The constable was attentive to the road, but she glanced at Ray momentarily. "You've been injured."

"Shot," Ray confirmed. He didn't elaborate. It wasn't something he wanted to get into, even if he could make his mouth work that well.

"Well, this is a great place to recover," Grant said. "The people here are really wonderful. I come from Toronto originally. This was my first post. I thought I'd hate it, but I've been here for three years now and I've turned down two transfers where I could have gone to a larger post with more potential for advancement."

"Fraser likes it," Ray said.

Grant nodded. "He seems to. But he also seems… It's really not my place to say anything, but he seems a little lonely. I hope that changes now that you're here. He deserves to be happy."

"Yeah," Ray agreed. Silently he hoped that he could make Fraser happy, too, but he wasn't sure by any means.

"The Sergeant has a cabin about half a kilometer from the post, on the edge of town," Grant said. Ray knew that. Fraser had bought it and the land around it after getting the promotion. As the supervising officer, he was more likely to stay for a long time than he had been as a mere constable.
Grant continued, "It's a great location, but I'll be honest; it needs some work. I came out earlier and made sure the heat was turned up and a fire laid. There's food in the pantry, too, so you should be all set until the sergeant returns at the end of the week. Of course, if you need anything in the meantime, just call the post. I made sure that the number was listed by the phone."

"Th-thanks," Ray said. He wasn't surprised by the thoughtfulness, but it was still nice to feel so welcomed.

Grant helped Ray get his things inside and a part of him protested at letting a woman carry his cases inside, but the truth was he really couldn't carry more than his backpack. She stayed for a minute to show Ray around, but then had to get back to the post.

Once alone, Ray looked around the front room and sighed. The constable had been right. The cabin was serviceable, but really, that was all that could be said for it. The floors were all bare wood. The furniture was sparse and looked rather dilapidated. There were few personal items out to show that the cabin actually belonged to Fraser. In fact, the only real sign that this wasn't an empty hunting cabin was the small photo of Fraser and Ray, taken in Inuvik just after their return from the quest. They were laughing and happy in the picture, with Ray's arm flung loosely around Fraser's shoulders.

Ray remembered that day distinctly. They had returned to town the day before and had their first real showers in almost a month. It was the first time either of them had been without a beard in weeks and they had spent almost an hour teasing each other about the pale skin revealed. You could clearly see the beard lines in the picture. They had gone to lunch with Maggie, still in high spirits, and she had insisted on capturing the moment for posterity.

Ray touched the picture with reverent fingers before moving his attention back to the Spartan cabin. The basic structure was sound, but repairs were needed. The glazing in the windows needed to be replaced and all of the shutters needed to be repaired or replaced. There were spots on the floor and ceiling indicating where the roof leaked. There was plumbing in place in the kitchen, but Fraser had shut it off because a couple of the pipes had obviously burst at some point and he hadn't had anyone in to fix it.

Ray checked the bathroom and was pleased that the water was still running in there, though the hot water tank was sending rusty water to the shower. The utility closet showed that the hot water heater and the furnace were both about two decades past their prime.

The bedroom was just as bare as the rest of the cabin. The bed was nothing more than an old mattress tossed onto the floor. Ray had to admit that it was a step up from the cot in Fraser's office at the Consulate, but it was still pretty depressing. The drawers all stuck on the dresser and the nightstand was teetering drunkenly to the left, like a good wind would knock it out for good. The electricity didn't work in that room at all, which explained the kerosene lantern on the dresser and the wind up alarm clock.

Ray went back out to the front room and sat on the sofa. There was a lot to be done to make this place comfortable. He'd start with the plumbing tomorrow. Then the wiring. He'd wait for the roof until he felt stronger.

There was a casserole in the refrigerator, so Ray heated up a portion in the microwave, grateful that Fraser had at least splurged for that bit of modern technology. There were also a few beers in the fridge, and Ray knew that whoever had stocked up had done so with Ray in mind, since Fraser still didn't drink. He wasn't supposed to drink with his pain meds, but his headache wasn't too bad today, so he decided to have a beer with dinner and skip the pain pills. It had been almost three months since he'd had a beer.
After dinner, Ray cleaned up and headed out to the large shed out back. It was actually more like a barn, though Ray knew that Fraser didn't keep any animals. He had considered buying the team of dogs they had used on the quest, but in the end decided against it. The post here had three very good teams plus four snowmobiles and three jeeps. There was no need for more dogs.

The shed was largely empty. There were pens for a dog team and a large open area for storing a snowmobile or sled in the summer months. In the winter, it could house a truck. Right now it was empty. The area in which Ray was interested was the workbench. He needed to see what sort of tools Fraser had to hand so that he'd know what he would need to buy from the hardware store tomorrow. He knew the pipes he'd need to get already.

In truth, the workbench was in much better shape than Ray would have guessed considering the state of the cabin. Pretty much every tool Ray could imagine needing was there, lined up along the pegboard or in the large portable toolbox. Ray put the wrenches and other items he'd need for repairing the plumbing and the wiring into the box and carried it back to the house.

When he got there, he reached for the phone. He had a call to make to reassure Welsh.

FRFRFRFRFRFR

Tuesday morning dawned later up there than Ray was used to. He had forgotten how much of a difference there was between Chicago and the northern territories of Canada. They weren't above the Arctic Circle here, as they had been in Inuvik, but the days were still shorter in the winter and longer in the summer. In fact, Fraser had said that in December, they only had about two hours of daylight.

Thankfully, it was February and they had light from about 8 in the morning until 5 at night. By June, they would only have a few hours of darkness. That left Ray with plenty of daylight to walk into town. February was still cold, and there was plenty snow on the ground. In fact, it wasn't unusual to get snow showers as late as May, though it rarely lasted long.

Ray bundled up in deference to the cold and headed out with his cane for support. He hadn't gone more than a couple hundred meters when one of the neighbors rolled up beside him and offered him a ride. Ray nodded and carefully climbed into the pickup truck.

"Name's Greg," the man said with a friendly smile.


"Where ya headed?" Greg asked.

"Ha-hard…ware." Some days it was hard to get the right words out and this seemed to be one of those days.

"You got it," Greg said and pulled the truck away from the side of the road. "You staying at Sergeant Fraser's place?"

"Yeah," Ray was able to force out.

"Corporal Stevens said you're a friend from Chicago," Greg prompted and Ray knew he'd have to respond.

"P-p-partners," Ray stuttered. "Be-before…"

"Well, any friend of the sergeant's must be a good man," Greg said. He didn't press for more and
Ray was grateful.

A few minutes later, they pulled up in front of the hardware store and Ray climbed down carefully. "Th-thanks."

"You're welcome," Greg said with a smile. "Anytime. In fact, if you need a ride back, I'll be headed that way after lunch. Just meet me at the diner down the way."

Ray nodded and waved and then Greg pulled away.

The hardware store was more like a general store. They had a little bit of everything in there, except food. There were even bolts of fabric and sewing supplies. Ray grinned and started hunting for the items he would need. It only took a minute for the proprietor to come out and greet him. Together, they were able to find the piping that Ray needed, along with the putty and soldering wire. While Sid looked in the back for something, Ray wandered over to the carpentry section and found a really nice set of carving tools.

"Those are actually antiques," Sid said when he found Ray a few minutes later. "They belonged to my dad. I can't carve for beans, and never had any kids to give them to, so they've sat in the display case for close to ten years."

"H-how much?" Ray asked.

Sid looked him over. "You ever carve?"


Sid nodded. "Sounds like a worthwhile hobby. I'll tell you what. I'll loan them to you. You think you'll get good use out of 'em and you can buy them from me later for a fair price."

Ray blinked in surprise. "Uh… th-thanks."

Sid nodded and gathered all of Ray's purchases together at the register. While he rang it all up, Ray started packing everything into his backpack. The piping stuck out the top, but it was easier getting around without the weight of a bag in one hand throwing off his balance.

Ray considered the long walk back to the cabin and decided that he had been a bit too ambitious in attempting the journey so soon after getting out of the hospital and after the two days of travel. He had another stop to make, and then he decided he'd definitely meet up with Greg for that ride back to the cabin.

Sid gave him directions to the electronics store and Ray headed that way. He knew that in towns like this one, there usually wasn't much market for electronics, so many stores ended up doing double duty. The electronics store sold pretty much every major appliance and electronic device on the market; if they didn't have it, they could order it. They also serviced the electronics and appliances and handled phone installations and repairs as well as cable and internet service. It was the internet service that had Ray heading that direction, though he wouldn't mind getting a television.

By 11, Ray had arranged for the internet and cable to be hooked up at the cabin through a small satellite dish. He also bought a television, a stereo and a computer. It was one of the conditions that Glenda had insisted upon in order to help him make the move. He had to agree to twice weekly speech therapy sessions over the internet. The service guy would deliver the stuff and install it for him the next day.
From there, Ray walked to the diner and was glad to take a seat at the counter when he arrived. His leg was aching after just the little bit of walking he had done that morning. He knew that a headache wouldn't be far behind if he didn't eat something soon, so he sat and looked over the menu posted on the blackboard behind the register.

"Hey, there," the waitress smiled when she came over. "You new around here, or just passing through?"


"Nice to meet you Ray," she grinned flirtatiously. "I'm Becca. What can I get for you?"


"You got it, honey," Becca said and sashayed off to put his order in.

He was just digging into his lunch when Greg came in and took the seat beside Ray. "Looks like you got the best thing on the menu. Grady's venison stew is the best around."

"S good," Ray agreed.

"Greg!" Becca shouted when she spotted the man beside Ray and then she leaned across the counter to give him a big kiss. "I thought you weren't coming in today."

"Wasn't gonna," Greg said. "But I gave Ray here a lift into town and wanted a place to meet up. Thought it was a good excuse to come see my girl."

"I'm glad you did," Becca smiled and the look she gave Greg was nothing like the flirtatious glances she'd thrown Ray's way. That look was pure love. "I'll have Grady serve you up a bowl of stew, alright?"

"You know me well, love," Greg said. After Becca walked away, Greg turned to find Ray regarding him. "We've been engaged since Christmas. Her folks are pretty old fashioned and insist she live at home until the wedding, which won't be until June. So we meet up when we can."

Ray smiled at him. "Y-you look happy."

"We are," Becca said as she set the bowl down in front of Greg. "And frustrated. You'd think we were living in the last century the way my parents go on."

"Be nice," Greg scolded playfully. "They love you. Plus, they're paying for the wedding."

Becca rolled her eyes. "Big deal. A night at the community center and a potluck dinner."


Becca rolled her eyes again. "Men."

Greg laughed and watched Becca go over to serve other customers. "She's really not as upset by the wedding as she pretends. I think she'd elope right now if I would agree. But in a small town like this, doing things the right way can be important."

Ray nodded. That made sense to him.

The two men ate their lunches, Ray mostly in silence, though he answered the occasional question. Soon enough, Greg was ready to head back and Ray grabbed up his pack and followed him out to
"Looks like you're planning on doing some plumbing," Greg said as he put the pack into the bed of the truck. "Didn't know Sergeant Fraser was having any problems. Then again, he doesn't spend much time at the cabin."

"Work?" Ray asked.

Greg started up the truck and nodded. "Mostly. The people in town like him, though, so he's invited to dinner rather often. And when he has days off, he tends to disappear into the wilderness."

"S-sounds l-lonely," Ray said and watched Greg's face.

"I suspect it is," Greg agreed.
Part Three

Ray spent much of Tuesday afternoon napping. The short trip into town had been more tiring than he had thought it would be. After more microwaved casserole, however, he set to work on the plumbing in the kitchen. It didn't take long to replace the length of busted pipe and then check the rest of the pipes for weaknesses or leaks. Before 9 pm, he had everything in working order and cleaned up.

On Wednesday, Ray flushed out the water heater completely three times before filling it again. It helped get rid of most of the rust, but he knew from experience that the old appliance wouldn't last long before rusting through completely. So he gave Sid a call and put in an order for a new one.

The wiring in the bedroom was fine, Ray discovered. It was simply a blown fuse that had never been replaced. Since there was a supply of new fuses in the fuse box, Ray had no idea why Fraser hadn't replaced the fuse, but it was a simple repair and finished long before the guys from the electronics shop arrived. In fact, as Ray looked over the fuse box and the wiring for the cabin, he was pleased to see that there was more than enough room left on the panel to add in extra circuits. If Fraser let him stick around long enough, Ray could add on a room or two and he could get a washer and dryer installed on the service porch.

Ray stood around watching the two guys work as they set up the television and computer. The most interesting part was watching them put up the dish and tune it for the best reception. Then they went over the basics with Ray and left.

Once alone again, Ray turned on the stereo, put in one of the CDs he brought with him and sat down at the computer. It didn't take long to email Glenda and arrange for their first appointment. She sent him a link to a site that will let them communicate with video and sound. He was suddenly glad he remembered to get the camera attachment for the computer. Glenda insisted that seeing his mouth move would help her to know how to help him.

Ray then spent a couple hours just playing around on the internet. He found sites where he could play games and sites for shopping. He even found a site that gave basic instructions for beginner carvers. Ray read through that site and then shut down the computer. He spent the rest of the afternoon using his new carving tools to practice on an old piece of wood from the wood pile.

On Thursday, Ray was feeling a lot stronger, so he decided to take the walk into town again. This time, he wasn't even winded when he reached the small shops in the center of town. He stopped at the bank first to arrange to have his money transferred from his old bank. He also arranged to have his pension checks deposited directly into that account. It would save time and effort this way.

With his new checkbook in his pack and some cash in his pocket, Ray decided to see what other shops were around. His first trip into town, he had been focused on just getting the things he needed, but this time he was free to just browse a little and get to know the people in town. Of course, getting to know people was tough when he had trouble stringing more than two words together at a time, but they all seemed very friendly and welcoming despite his handicap.

In one store, Ray found some great handmade quilts. The proprietor's grandmother made them and she sold them to tourists mostly. Ray liked them and thought they would look a lot better on
Fraser's bed than the old gray wool blanket that was currently there. He bought two for the bed and a smaller quilt for the front room. It would be nice to snuggle under while watching a game on the sofa.

Another shop sold beautiful wood furniture made by the proprietor. Ray found himself talking to Charlie about his techniques and getting advice on how he could start making some stuff himself. The stutter wasn't as bad when Ray was excited about his topic, so their conversation flowed pretty easily. In the end, Ray bought a table and four chairs. The table at the cabin wasn't much more than plywood with four rough posts tacked on to keep it upright. And there was only one chair.

In a gallery, he found an Inuit woman named Mattie painting landscapes from memory. One picture caught Ray's attention. It reminded him of his time out on the ice with Fraser, so he bought it. He also bought a small sculpture made of some local stone that had been chiseled and carved into the approximate figure of two people intertwined. The stone was smoothed and polished to a shiny finish and the natural colors and striations in the rock made it look like one of the figures had dark hair and one light. There were no faces or details which made it easy for Ray to imagine that it was Ray and Fraser.

After arranging for each of his purchases to be delivered, Ray moved on to the next store. By the time he had reached the end of the road and headed back to the diner, Ray had spent more money than he had originally planned to spend, but he felt good about the items he had bought. Each one would serve to make the cabin a bit more welcoming and cozy. And supporting the local stores was a good way to meet the town people and foster good relations with his new neighbors.

Ray ate a late lunch before heading back up the road towards the cabin. By the time he reached the front porch, his bad leg was shaking with fatigue, but he felt good. It was the best he had felt in a very long time.

FRFRFRFRFRFRFR

Ray felt a little strange sleeping in Fraser's bed without him knowing it, but it was a lot better than sleeping on the sofa, so for as long as Fraser was gone, that's where Ray spent his nights. Waking each morning surrounded by Fraser's scent was definitely a little too nice. It resulted in morning erections that were rather difficult to dispel, even after bringing himself off a couple times. Of course, after weeks in the hospital and no energy or opportunity to do anything about it, getting off at all was still a welcome relief. There had been a time, when he was still heavily medicated, that he couldn't get an erection at all.

Friday morning, Ray woke with the morning erection he had come to expect from sleeping in Fraser's bed. He slipped his hand under the covers and allowed himself to imagine what it would be like waking up with Fraser in this bed, in this room. The images were clear in his mind's eye. Fraser leaning over him, pressing him into the mattress. Their bodies aligned as they thrust against each other. Their mouths clinging as they teetered on the edge of climax. When Ray came, it was with Fraser's name on his lips and a sad smile.

Hope was a damned nuisance. Ray wanted to build a life with Fraser and he would accept anything the Mountie would give him. He was pretty confident that Fraser wouldn't kick him out on his ass. He wasn't nearly so confident that his love for Fraser was returned. But if friendship was all he could expect, Ray would still be content to spend the rest of his life right there by Fraser's side.

With a sigh on his lips, Ray leaned over to the rickety nightstand and took his morning pills before slowly rising and heading to the shower. His leg was getting stronger, and for that he was grateful, but he was still reliant on the cane for balance. Thankfully, he didn't need it to go the short distance between the bedroom and the bathroom. He could use the walls for balance and leave the cane by
the bed.

Ray had speech therapy with Glenda that morning, so he ate a quick breakfast and then logged onto the computer. They went through his exercises and Glenda told him how well she thought he was doing. Being forced to talk to strangers was actually helping him regain some of the confidence he had lost while in the hospital. His friends and family liked to talk over him, correcting him or just plain finishing his sentences for him. It hurt them to see him struggle so they did their best to prevent it. Unfortunately, that kept him from progressing. Now that he'd been on his own for six days, he was making real improvement.

"Jerry wants to set up a video conference with you once a week," Glenda told him. "Preferably when your friend is there."

"Why?" Ray asked. Jerry was his physical therapist, but Ray had been cleared before leaving.

"Normally, you would have been required to continue with PT for a few more weeks," Glenda said. "He let you off because he knew how bad things were for you. But he wants to make sure you're getting better and not hurting yourself. He said something about exercise."

Ray snorted. "Tell him I walked almost two kilometers yesterday. And I really only need my cane for balance most of the time. I'll email J-Jerry in the next day or two."

There was a knock on the door so Ray said, "Gotta go."

"I'll see you Tuesday morning, right?" Glenda asked.

"Right," Ray agreed and closed the connection.

At the door, Ray was surprised to see Constable Jenny Grant standing there with a box in one hand and two at her feet. "I volunteered to bring this stuff up for you. Wanted to check in and make sure you're okay."

"Come in," Ray said and took the box from her hands. It wasn't heavy, but it threw off his balance, so he was happy to put it down on the table.

Jenny had carried in the other two boxes and sat them next to the table. "Looks like you bought a lot of stuff."

"Just things to make the place..."

"Cozier?" Jenny guessed.

"Yeah," Ray grinned.

"Need any help putting this stuff out?" Jenny offered.

So Ray spent a couple hours with Jenny hanging curtains and putting up the picture of the ice fields with Jenny's help. Charlie dropped off the table and chairs Ray had purchased the day before. Once the new quilt was folded over the back of the sofa, the rug was on the floor, the decorative candles were placed around the room, and the sculpture placed on the mantle, the place actually began to look like somebody's home, rather than just a place to get in out of the cold.

"Not bad," Jenny remarked. "I think the sergeant will appreciate your efforts.

"Th-thanks," Ray said. "T-tea?"
"Thank you kindly," Jenny said.

Ray set to work putting together the tea tray and Jenny took a seat on the sofa. "Sid said you've been doing some improvements?"


"Handy guy to have around," Jenny said.

Ray carried the tray over and let her pour tea for both of them. He took one of the shortbread cookies from the plate and took a bite. He had developed a liking for the plain cookies while in Canada the last time and had been pleased to see some among the food left for him upon his arrival.

"My d-dad t-taught me," Ray shrugged. "And cars."

"Useful skills to have, especially up here," Jenny said. "Not many professionals up here. Most people just do it themselves. Larry owns the service station and does some car and snowmobile repairs. And Jake does some building and major home repairs, but most of his work comes from the lodges."

Ray nodded. It had been like that in Inuvik too. "Gonna d-do some c-ca-cabinetry. Need some stuff."

"Sounds like a plan," Jenny said. She finished her tea and smiled. "I should get back to the detachment. Corporal Stevens will be looking for me soon."

"Th-thanks ag-gain," Ray said as he followed her to the door.

"Oh, by the way, the sergeant sent word," Jenny said. "The training exercise has concluded. They found the missing hikers and took them to Petersonville, since it was the closest medical facility. He should return sometime late this evening."

Ray nodded in response and watched her leave. Though he was calm on the surface, inside, Ray's stomach was in knots. There was so much going through his head that he couldn't quite get a grip on anything. Rather than standing in the doorway all afternoon, however, Ray grabbed his coat from the hook, pulled on his boots and headed out to the shed. He'd seen some lumber stacked in the corner the other day and he thought he might try to make a new night stand.

FRFRFRFRFR

Ray looked at the work he'd accomplished with satisfaction. It wasn't as nice as anything he'd seen in Charlie's shop, but it was sturdy. The stand had four square legs for support, a lower shelf and a small drawer. He still needed to sand it down and finish it, but he thought he might just build a matching stand before doing that. It seemed a little presumptuous, but if Fraser didn't invite him to share his bed, eventually Ray would probably build on a second bedroom where he'd need a stand for himself. Either way, it couldn't hurt to build another one.

Dusting off his hands and brushing the sawdust from his hair and clothes, Ray grabbed his cane and headed back inside. It was later than he usually ate dinner, but Ray was starving. He hadn't had anything to eat since Jenny had left. He looked at the clock. It was after ten already. He wondered how late Fraser would get in. Maybe he should cook enough for both of them.

Ray was looking through the remaining casserole dishes in the fridge when the front door opened and he looked up. Fraser stood in the doorway staring at Ray as if his presence were a complete
shock. Maybe they hadn't said anything to him at the detachment? That seemed unlikely, but Ray couldn't be sure. Maybe no one was there when he got in.

"Ray?" Fraser said a little breathlessly. "What…? How long…?"

"B-been here since M-Monday," Ray said.

Fraser looked around the room and noticed the changes. "You've moved in?"

"Yeah," Ray said. He didn't have time to say anything else because suddenly Dief charged through the door and tackled Ray to the ground. Ray laughed and tried to keep the wolf slobber away from his ears. "G-get off fur…face."

Dief whined, but stepped away. Then Fraser was there, offering Ray a hand up. Ray took it and stood, but it took him a moment to regain his equilibrium. Ray grabbed his cane and headed for the sofa. Fraser seemed to take in all of this in before heading to the fireplace to light the fire. Afterwards, he joined Ray on the sofa.

"You were injured?" Fraser asked carefully.

"Yeah," Ray said. There was so much that had happened and it was apparent that Fraser knew none of it. "Guess no one t-told you."

Fraser shook his head. "No, they did not."


"My god, Ray," Fraser gasped.


"What are the long term effects?" Fraser asked.

"St-stut-ter," Ray said. He took a deep breath. "B-bum leg. C-can't think as fast. C-can't move as fast. Balance."

Fraser nodded. "Are you… are you here for long?"

"For g-good, if you'll have me," Ray said and looked hopefully into Fraser's eyes. For just a moment, he let all of the love and hope and fear in his heart shine through.

Fraser looked… Ray had to stop and consider exactly how Fraser looked. Fraser looked just as hopeful, but just as wary as Ray felt. And the love was there as well. "I would like that."

"G-good," Ray said with a slow smile. "In fact, gr-greatness."

"Indeed," Fraser said with an answering smile.

"I've been d-doing some work," Ray said. "On the c-cabin. Th-thought I c-could fix the roof when it's warmer."

"Anything," Fraser said eagerly. "Anything you want. This is your home now." And those words
and the look in Fraser's eyes said that Fraser was giving him more than just a place to sleep, more than just a roof over his head. Fraser was offering to share his life.

"Th-thanks," Ray said. And in his answer, Ray was sure Fraser could see that he had just received everything he could have ever wanted. But being men, they didn't say things like that out loud. "Th-there's st-stew in th-the fridge. Hungry?"

"Famished," Fraser said and followed Ray into the kitchen.
Part Four

Fraser insisted on sleeping on the sofa that night, so Ray lay alone in the bedroom. Well, not entirely alone; Dief insisted on joining him. They hadn't spoken any more about Ray's condition, or his desire to move up to Canada, but Ray was sure that Fraser would want to know more. Ray thought about how devastated Fraser had looked when he'd heard what happened to Ray and how hopeful he had seemed when Ray told him he wanted to stay. He thought about the love in Fraser's eyes and the love he knew had been in his own. Ray's heart kept telling him that Fraser felt the same way about him as Ray felt about Fraser, but Ray's head kept denying the possibility, not wanting to assume. Fraser might just have wanted his best friend around.

Even if he wasn't damaged now, what did he really have to offer Fraser? Fraser was lonely and was certainly glad to have the companionship Ray offered. That in itself made Ray feel good. Fraser didn't open up to many people, didn't feel comfortable letting people into his life, but he welcomed Ray. If that was all it would ever be, then Ray could accept that. There was still no place he would rather be.

With that thought, Ray finally felt sleep claim him.

The next morning, Fraser was up early and had breakfast on the table when Ray limped out of the bedroom. He had left the cane and was using the wall for balance.

"You do not need the cane?" Fraser asked as he watched Ray take a seat at the new table.

Ray shook his head. "Leg's st-stronger now. Just use it for b-balance unless I'm really t-tired."

Fraser nodded. "Understood. I am required to go into the detachment for a couple hours this morning. I need to determine the state of affairs during my absence and possibly sign off on a few items. I should return by early afternoon."

"If I'm not here, I'll b-be in th-the shed," Ray said, and then he thought about the fact that he had no varnish for the nightstands. "Act-tually, c-can I hitch a ride? I'll walk b-back. It's g-good exercise."

"Certainly," Fraser agreed. "I shall leave in half an hour."

Ray nodded and quickly finished his breakfast. He went to the shower and left Fraser to the dishes.

Fraser dropped Ray at Sid's hardware store and Ray quickly found the older man. "That water heater should be in on Monday."

"Th-that's g-great," Ray said with a smile. "I'd love a shower without rust."

"I can appreciate that," Sid said. "How's the carving going?"

Ray grinned. "Not b-bad. Haven't had t-too much t-time, b-but I'm g-getting a b-basic feel for it."

"I found some good blocks for carving," Sid said. "I'll bring them up with the water heater."

"Th-thanks," Ray said with a grin. "B-been d-doing some c-carpentry. Need some varnish."
Sid showed him what he had in stock and Ray bought what he needed. "C-can you b-bring the c-cans when you c-come up Monday?"

"No problem," Sid agreed. "I'd love to see what you've done with the carving."

Ray grinned. "Sure."

Rather than heading back up to the cabin right away, Ray decided to head over to the library. Sid had mentioned that they had a section on carpentry. Ray thought he might just take a look and see if he could find plans for making a dresser. The night stands were fairly simple, but a dresser seemed more daunting. If he found the right plan, he could order the wood from the lumber yard later.

Of course, being unfamiliar with the library, and being new to town, it took a few minutes for Marian the librarian—and hadn't Ray had a good laugh in his head over that one—to give him a card and show him around. He found the section he wanted with little trouble, but had a tough time with the plans. One of the effects of his injury was that reading numbers sometimes confused him. It wasn't that he couldn't count or add, just that seeing the figures on the paper didn't necessarily translate into his head. If Fraser read them for him, Ray would have no problem, so he went by the pictures provided and made his selections based on that.

While he was there, Ray picked up a couple thrillers and checked them out as well. With the books in his backpack, Ray headed back towards the cabin. He was surprised when Fraser pulled up beside him about half way home.

"D-didn't th-think I was th-that long," Ray said as he climbed into the RCMP jeep.

"You weren't," Fraser said. "I was able to complete my tasks more quickly than anticipated."

"J-just in t-time for lunch," Ray grinned.

At the cabin, Fraser began to make lunch while Ray looked through the carpentry books that he had borrowed. "C-can you look at th-these for me?" Ray asked when Fraser sat down with plates of tuna sandwiches for each of them.

"Certainly," Fraser said. He glanced at the two plans that Ray had favored. "Dressers?"

Ray nodded and swallowed the bite he was chewing. "Need one for my st-stuff. And a new one for you."

"And you can make these?" Fraser asked, impressed.

"Maybe," Ray said. "Th-that's why I need you t-to read th-the p-plans for me. C-can't wrap my head around the numbers."

Fraser read through the supplies list for each of the projects and then read the instruction to Ray. It became clear that one was definitely simpler than the other, but Ray liked the harder one better. It would take more time, but he thought the end result would be better. Plus, he thought that dresser would look better with the nightstands he'd already started.

"C-can you d-double the supply list and c-copy it d-down for me?" Ray asked as he picked up both their empty plates and headed for the sink.

Fraser found a pad of paper and quickly wrote out the list of supplies. "I go by the lumber yard on my patrol. I could stop there on Monday and pick this up for you."
"Gr-greatness," Ray said as he finished the dishes.

"You fixed the leak," Fraser said.

"And th-the fuse in the b-bedroom," Ray agreed. "When it's warmer, I'll g-get t-to th-the roof."

"I could take a few days off and assist with that endeavor," Fraser offered.

"Sounds g-good," Ray said.

"Perhaps we could lay the foundation for an extension, as well?" Fraser asked.

"Sure," Ray said, but his voice wasn't quite as enthusiastic. It wasn't that he didn't want to make the cabin bigger, it was just that he didn't want separate bedrooms.

"We could take some measurements this afternoon and I could draw up plans," Fraser said. "Perhaps expand the utility room to make room for laundry facilities. And we could make the kitchen a little larger if we bumped out that wall a few feet." He paused to look at Ray closely. "Perhaps we could even add on a guest bedroom."

Ray paused in drying the dishes. Fraser had said a guest bedroom. Did that mean he meant for them to share? "Yeah, we c-could d-do th-that."

It took a few hours to get a workable plan put together. Because of the placement of the bathroom and utility room, they decided it would be better to only expand the side of the house a few feet and add the extra bedroom off the back of the cabin. That meant that they would have to lay foundations for both additions as well as tear out part of the back porch. The current bedroom would become the guest room and office, and the new bedroom would be theirs, though neither of them had yet to discuss how that would work. Fraser had simply said that they would need room for both of their dressers and nightstands.

"Jake might be willing to come help," Fraser said as he looked over the plans. "At least with the foundation and framing."

"Alright," Ray agreed. "You'll have t-to order the supplies. Not t-too g-good with numbers. We'd either g-get t-too much or not enough."

"Fair enough," Fraser agreed.

FRFRFRFRFRFRFRFRFRFR

That night, Ray headed for the bedroom and paused in the doorway. "You c-coming?"

Fraser looked up from the book he was reading and blushed. But he set aside the book and followed Ray into the small room. Without much fuss or discussion, they were soon both dressed for bed and climbing onto the large mattress together. Ray lay on his back staring up at the ceiling for a long time after the lights went out. Finally, Fraser sighed and pulled Ray close into his arms.

"I would have come if anyone had called me," Fraser whispered into the darkness. "I wish they had."

"I know," Ray said quietly.

"I should have never let you go back there alone," Fraser said. "I should have begged you to stay."

"Th-this isn't your fault," Ray insisted, though he knew he would have stayed in a heartbeat had
Fraser asked. "And we're t-together now."

"Yes we are," Fraser said. He leaned over and kissed Ray lightly on the lips. It was soft and gentle and everything a first kiss should be. And it held all the love that neither man knew quite how to express in words. "I have missed you more than I dreamed possible."

"Me t-too," Ray said. He leaned in for another kiss, and this one took his breath away.

Ray was impressed with the way Fraser simply accepted the changes in him. Though he was initially upset by the story of how Ray had been injured, there was none of the coddling or pity that had been so unwelcome from Ray's other loved ones. Like the people of Glacier Point, Fraser simply accepted that Ray now had limitations that he didn't have before.

Jerry's video conference with the two of them became a weekly event. Fraser was happy to be able to learn ways in which he could help Ray's continuing recovery. And he was excited by every improvement that Ray made both physically and with his speech. Ray still spoke slower than most people, and decidedly slower than his old self, but he stuttered less often as time passed and the apraxia was all but gone.

The only times Ray's condition really became an issue were when Fraser would be called out for an operation. Ray hated watching him leave and Fraser hated leaving Ray alone. They had argued the first couple times it came up over whether Dief should stay with Ray or go with Fraser. Ray won, in the end, and eventually Fraser stopped fighting it. He knew that he needed the backup more than Ray needed the company.

As the weeks passed, they received word from the people back in Chicago. The first letters and emails were rather harsh, chastising Ray for running away. But as time passed, most of the friends and family had come to accept his decision, even if they disagreed. Ray's father seemed the most supportive, but his mother worried about him.

Surprisingly, it was Ray and Stella Vecchio who were most adamant in their disapproval. Neither Ray nor Fraser could understand why they felt so strongly about the move. It wasn't as though they had revealed their newly forming relationship to anyone as yet, so it couldn't be that. They decided to leave it alone and see what happened.

In the meantime, Fraser and Ray got to work on additions to the cabin as soon as the ground was thawed enough to dig. Jake Forman came out to help them lay the foundation and start the framing, but had to get back to his own jobs after a few days. Fraser took two weeks off to help Ray with the basic structure, though he checked in with his detachment daily. After two weeks, they had the walls up, the floors laid and new roof in place. They had even fixed the old roof.

Ray was left to do the finishing work on his own. Considering the fact that his equilibrium was permanently impaired, he was glad that Fraser had been there to help with all of the work that required climbing. Instead, he was left to insulate the walls, put in the wiring, run the new plumbing and heating pipes and put up the bead board walls. He installed the windows and doors. He even tore out the flooring throughout the cabin, much of which was damaged from the leaky roof, and replaced it with new pine under-flooring and hardwood wide-plank floors. He replaced the insulation throughout the cabin.

In the utility room, he finally replaced the water heater and the oil fueled boiler. Then he installed the new washer and dryer he'd ordered. Once the utility room was completed, he got to work on painting. Though he loved the natural wood in the cabin, it made the place really dark. In the
winter, he was sure that would become depressing, so he opted to paint or whitewash each room. He left the baseboards, crown molding and ceiling their natural hues, but the bead-board walls in every room were brightened.

By late June, everything was complete. Ray had even finished making their new dressers and the matching bedside tables were ready to take their place in the new bedroom. Fraser had even insisted upon buying a new bed for them. Considering the old one was simply a mattress on the floor (even if it was better than sleeping on the sofa), Ray was pretty pleased with that idea.

"Hey Ben," Ray said when Fraser came through the front door. "I think I found just the th-thing for th-the guest room."

"What's that?" Fraser asked as he sat down at the table beside his lover. Ray was looking through more carpentry books. He had ordered these over the internet.

"I was looking for p-plans for the bookshelves," Ray said. "When I found th-this."

Fraser looked at the page Ray was showing him. "A murphy bed?"

Ray nodded. "Th-this way we can pull it out when guests come, but use th-the room as an office th-the rest of th-the t-time. P-put th-the computer in th-there. Maybe a couple chairs for reading."

"That sounds quite cozy," Fraser said. He looked at the list of supplies and nodded. "I think we'll have to get Sid to order the spring kit, but the rest of this is readily available. I can pick up the lumber tomorrow if you would like."

"Th-that's great," Ray said. "I'll have to modify th-the built in shelves to fit around th-the bed, but th-that shouldn't be t-too hard."

"I can help with that," Fraser said. He knew that Ray hated to ask, but he still had difficulties with numbers. In fact, it was the one area where they had seen no major improvement in the months since he arrived. "How long do you think it will take to complete?"

Ray shrugged. "A week, maybe a couple extra days. Why?"

Fraser sighed. "I received word from Chicago. Ray and Stella Vecchio are planning to arrive in three weeks."

Ray blinked at his lover. "Th-they're coming here?"

Fraser nodded. "So I was informed by Frannie. She did not believe it was right for them to simply drop in unannounced. They've sworn everyone to secrecy. Apparently they are determined to 'talk sense into us.'"

"Greatness," Ray said sarcastically. "Well, no sense worrying about it. We'll just make do."

"And if they cannot accept us and our decisions, they are welcome to leave," Fraser said stiffly.

Ray didn't reply. He knew that Fraser was upset, but Ray couldn't reassure him, since he felt the same way. They would just have to wait and see.
Ray paced the front room nervously. Fraser had gone to the airstrip to meet Vecchio and Stella and Ray had stayed behind to get dinner ready. Of course, since dinner was meatloaf, it hadn't taken long to do that, and now he was left to worry.

Dief whined at him and Ray stopped. "Yeah, I know. Worrying does no good. Maybe we should check the guest room again?"

Dief sighed and lay down on the rug in front of the fireplace. "Yeah. You're right. I've checked it th-three t-times already." Ray sat down on the sofa. "It's just th-this is our first t-time having guests. And th-they're gonna know p-pretty quick th-that we are sharing a room." Dief barked at him. "I know th-that you already know. Hell, half of t-town probably knows or suspects by now. But th-that's different." Dief huffed and Ray sighed. "Yeah, you're right. Your opinion does matter more t-to me. But Ben…"

Dief barked again and Ray smiled. "Th-thanks Furface."

It was only a few minutes later that Ray heard the jeep pull into the gravel drive. Dief was up and waiting by the door in a flash, so Ray followed him over, using his cane for balance, and let the wolf out. He watched with amusement as Diefenbaker practically mauled Vecchio before he could get more than a step from the jeep. Then he frowned when he saw the look on his partner's face. Fraser looked tense and uncomfortable.

Ray plastered on a fake smile for Stella as she came up the steps to the porch and gave him a fierce hug. "You look a hundred times better than the last time I saw you."

"Fresh air and hard work will do th-that," Ray said. He tried not to notice her flinch when he stuttered, but it was pretty obvious. Damn it. After all the progress he had made, she could still make him feel damaged and inferior. "Come on in."

Vecchio and Fraser brought in the cases and Ray had to wonder just how long they were planning to stay. They had each brought more than he had when he moved there.

"Your mom packed up your apartment," Stella told him as she followed Ray into the kitchen. "She wants to know if you want her to ship everything up here or hang on to it."

Ray shook his head. "She can sell most of it. Just send th-the p-personal stuff."

Stella sighed. "Ray…"

"Don't start, Stella," Ray said. "I'm not moving back. I'll go visit mom and dad but th-that's it. I don't have a life th-there anymore."

"And you do here?" Stella asked skeptically.

"Yeah," Ray said. "I do."

He pulled the meatloaf from the oven and began preparing the green beans. This time of year, they were plentiful in the local gardens, and Ray and Fraser received a lot of fresh vegetables from their neighbors. Ray had even begun canning some of the tomatoes they received. He was planning on
making jam from the wild berries that grew on their property. Sherry, their neighbor, had shown him how to can and Ray was getting pretty good at it. And since Fraser and Jake had insisted on adding a root cellar to their plans for the addition, he now had plenty of room to store the jars.

"You might want to go freshen up," Ray suggested. "Dinner will be ready in a few minutes."

Stella watched him work for another minute but then went to find Vecchio and Fraser.

Ray sighed and thought, *it's going to be a very long week.*

FRFRFRFRFRFRFRFRFR

The tension around the dinner table was palpable. Whatever had been said in the jeep had made Fraser go silent, and Ray was still upset over his conversation with Stella in the kitchen. Vecchio and Stella both looked like they were sulking, but eventually, the silence must have gotten to them.

"This is very good," Vecchio said. "You make this yourself, Kowalski?"

"Yeah," Ray said. "I can cook a few things."

"Actually, Ray is rather accomplished in the kitchen," Fraser said loyally. "He has been canning much of the excess fruits and vegetables that our neighbors have been kind enough to gift us."

"Canning?" Stella asked with confusion.

"It's not that hard," Ray shrugged. "I've got to get to the berries this week, or else the bears will eat them all. And in a few weeks, the apples and pears will be ready to pick."

"We have a small orchard behind the shed," Fraser said. "It will produce more than enough fruit for the two of us for the winter months. The apples should stay fresh in the root cellar for up to a year. And the pears, plums and bush cherries can be canned or dried."

"We planted potatoes and pumpkins in the spring," Ray said. "So we have more spuds than we know what to do with now. I've been trading them with the neighbors. Got these beans that way."

"So, you're a farmer now?" Stella scoffed.

Fraser practically growled and Dief actually did growl. Ray decided to intervene before either of them could bite her head off. "There's nothing wrong with growing your own food or preserving it. In fact, up here, it's just smart. Shipping food in costs a bundle."

"You wouldn't have to worry about that if you were in Chicago," Stella said.

Ray bit back a retort. "You know, I'm gonna excuse your attitude tonight. You're tired from your trip. Maybe we should all call it an early night."

"I think that's probably a good idea," Vecchio said quietly. "We'll help clean up..."

"No, thank you," Fraser said. "Ray and I can do that. If you'd like to bathe, there are towels in the cabinet beside the sink."

"Thank you," Stella said stiffly as she rose from the table.

Vecchio followed her to the guest room and Fraser sighed. "I am not optimistic about this visit."


"What did she say t-to upset you in th-the jeep?" Ray asked as he stood to clear the table.

"It was not Mrs. Vecchio who upset me," Fraser said. He began clearing the table while Ray ran the water for the dish pan. "Ray spent the entire ride denigrating Cliff and complaining about the trip. He insulted our town and the people who reside here simply because it is not a life he can imagine for himself. It is not the first time I have heard him say such things, but I was not prepared for it."

"I'm sorry," Ray said.

They worked together in silence and ignored when the door to guest room opened and closed, followed by the bathroom.

"Mrs. Vecchio was in an abominable mood," Fraser noted as they put the dishes away.

"Yeah, well," Ray said. "Did you expect bet-ter?"

"Yes, frankly, I did," Fraser said. "I did not expect her to come into our home and insult our way of life so blatantly."

"Did you show th-them around?" Ray asked as he hung up the dish towels.

Fraser sighed. "No, I did not. I was not in a mood to hear either of their objections to our sleeping arrangements."

"Th-they're gonna find out," Ray said.

"I know," Fraser said. "And I am not ashamed of our relationship. But I felt it would be better to wait until we had all rested before introducing such a volatile topic."

"Smart," Ray said with a grin and leaned over to kiss Fraser's cheek. "Bed sounds like a good idea."

"Indeed," Fraser agreed with a smile that boded well for Ray's evening. "Though we would do well to try and keep quiet. As much as that is possible."

Ray snorted. "Not p-possible at all with you involved."

FRFRFRFRFRFR

The use of pillows to muffle their cries of passion went a long way towards helping them keep their nighttime activities private. The fact that Ray had thought to use extra insulation between the rooms helped even more. So when Ray rose the next morning, there were no accusing glares from either of the Vecchios. Indeed, they were still sleeping when he began to prepare breakfast.

Fraser had arranged his schedule to spend the first two days with their guests, so, barring any unforeseen criminal activity, he would be there to weather the worst of the storm. When Fraser wasn't working, however, they developed a routine. Ray, who tended to wake at the same time every day, would start breakfast and allow Fraser the chance to sleep in. When Fraser worked, he was up, by necessity, earlier than Ray, and would therefore prepare breakfast on those days.

The pancakes were warming in the oven while Ray started to make the eggs. They didn't often splurge on fresh eggs, since they could be expensive that far north. But Ray figured neither Vecchio nor Stella would appreciate powdered eggs. For meat, Ray had picked up some ham. Luckily, they were far enough below the tundra to actually be able to keep pigs locally. Otherwise, Vecchio and Stella would have gotten their first taste of moose sausage. It was definitely an
acquired taste.

In truth, Ray was getting used to cooking and eating moose, venison, and caribou meat. The prices for those meats were much lower than beef or chicken, and pork might be more readily available, but it was still more expensive than the native fauna. They also ate a lot of fish that had been fished from the many lakes, rivers and streams in the region. In fact, Ray had some salmon in the fridge waiting to be cooked for their dinner.

Ray tried to support the local economy by buying items that were locally produced. He had heard enough from Fraser while on their quest about how important that was for small town economics and for building relationships with the inhabitants of those towns. Every once in a while, however, Ray just had to splurge on real beef—like their meatloaf the night before, though the beef had been augmented with venison—or a frozen pizza. And of course, Fraser made sure he always had smarties to put into his morning coffee.

"Good morning, Ray," Fraser said with a cheerful smile when he emerged from their bedroom. He kissed Ray and then began to set the table for four while Ray finished cooking. "Any signs of life yet?"

"I th-think I heard th-them stirring," Ray said with a grimace. "I'd just as soon let th-them sleep the morning away."

Fraser sighed. "We shall just have to make an attempt to get along as best we can, and not allow them to upset us."

Just then, the door to the guest room opened and Ray Vecchio emerged. "Something smells good. You got coffee?"

"Allow me to pour you a cup," Fraser said.

While he did that, Ray served up the food and placed it on the table. "Stella coming?"

"She'll be out in a minute," Vecchio said. "That bed's pretty comfortable. Where'd you buy it?"

"Ray mad it," Fraser said proudly. "Not the mattress, of course, but the cabinetry and the bookcases in that room."

"Th-the mechanism to get th-the bed up and down came in a kit," Ray explained.

Vecchio's eyes were wide. "You did all that yourself?"

"Ray has done a lot more than that," Fraser said just as Stella entered the room. "He has refurbished the cabin almost entirely, including adding on two additions. He installed the new cabinets in here, did all the wiring and plumbing himself. He redid all the floors in the cabin, and fixed the roof. He has also made other pieces of furniture."

Stella took a seat and began filling her plate. "I suppose that summer job working for Marty Feldman's construction crew paid off."

Ray wasn't sure if she was being sincere or sarcastic, but he decided to give her the benefit of the doubt. "I guess it did. Th-that and working with my fa-ther on the house. But don't let Fraser fool you. He helped out a lot, and we both had help with the framing and foundation."

"I thought the point of you coming up here was to recover, not overexert yourself doing manual labor," Stella said. This time there was no doubt about her intended tone.
"Th-that was p-part of it," Ray said. "But I've been cleared by my doctor and my physical th-therapist for th-the work I've been doing. Fraser wouldn't let me do it otherwise."

"Well, the place looks great," Vecchio said diplomatically. "Lot better than I expected. I mean, I was expecting bare floors and bare windows and not much in the way of home comforts. I mean, the last time I stayed up here with Benny, we had to use an outhouse."

"Well, Glacier Point isn't like Inuvik or even my father's place," Fraser said.

"And you should have seen th-the p-place when I got here," Ray said with a teasing grin for Fraser. "It was p-pretty much like you described. Th-though I have to admit th-that th-there was p-plumbing; it just didn't work."

"Only the sink was broken," Fraser denied.

"Yeah, but th-the hot water in th-the shower was orange with rust," Ray reminded him.

"At least you had a toilet," Vecchio said with a laugh. "So what exactly did you add on?"

"This side of the cabin was expanded by three meters," Fraser said. "That enabled us to reconfigure the kitchen, expand the living room, add a bathtub to the bathroom and enlarge the utility room enough to add laundry facilities." Fraser paused to gauge Ray's feelings and received a nod in response. "The other addition was to the back of the cabin. We added a bedroom and turned the old bedroom into our guest room and office."

It took a minute for the implications of what Fraser had said to truly sink in, but they could see it both of their guests' faces when it did.

"So, there are two bedrooms, but one of them is for guests?" Stella asked slowly as though speaking to a child.

"Yeah," Ray said almost defiantly. "We share."

"Since when?" Vecchio demanded.

"I do not see how that is anyone's concern aside from the two of us," Fraser said, but Ray didn't care if they knew.

"Since a week after I got here," Ray said.

"I guess we know your other reasons for running away, now don't we?" Stella said snidely.

"What th-the hell is your p-problem?" Ray demanded as he stood up from the table. He had never once hit a woman in his life, but he was getting close to wanting to hit Stella. "You have done noth-thing but bitch and snipe since you got here!"

There was silence in the room as Stella glared at Ray and Ray paced the floor.

"Hey, Benny, why don't you, uh, show me that orchard," Vecchio said.

Fraser looked like he wanted to stay, to protect Ray from Stella, but that was a silly idea. Ray nodded to Fraser and the Mountie reluctantly rose and left the cabin with Vecchio following behind.

"Now, are ya gonna t-tell me what's going on?" Ray asked.
Stella stood and walked over to Ray. She had a weird look on her face and placed a hand on Ray's arm. "I'm worried about you."

Ray shook his head in denial. "No. No, th-this ain't about me. If it was about me, you'd have seen how happy I am and been happy for me. You'd have seen how much bet-ter I am. At the very least you'd have asked me if th-this is what I want. You didn't do none of th-that."

"Ray, I am worried about you," Stella tried.

"Maybe you are, but th-that ain't what th-this is about," Ray insisted stubbornly. "Th-this is about you. Now, quit stallin' and t-tell me what's going on!"

Stella sighed and walked away from Ray. She went to the window at the side of the cabin that looked out at the shed and the orchard. Ray could see past her; Fraser and Vecchio were carrying empty pales from the shed towards the orchard. Fraser must plan on harvesting some of the fruit to keep them busy.

"You can't just make major life-changing decisions without considering all of the ramifications, Ray," Stella said quietly.

"I can't or you can't?" Ray asked gently.

Stella turned abruptly to stare at him. "Either of us. It isn't healthy and it isn't right."

Ray looked long and hard at her. "I didn't make th-the decision to move here without th-thinking it over. I was up here for almost a year before. I lived the life. I understood what I was get-ting into. And I didn't just jump into bed with Fraser. We spent years getting where we are now. And I may not have t-told you about my p-plans, but I t-talked them th-through with several p-people I t-trust."

Ray paused to let that sink in. "Th-this isn't about me, th-though. Th-this is about you making the snap decision to marry Vecchio."

Stella got a stubborn look in her eye that Ray remembered well. "I love him. I'm not going to listen to you say bad things about him."

"Wasn't gonna," Ray sighed. "Vecchio's a good man. I may not have spent a t-ton of t-time with him, but I know him. You can't live a guy's life and not know if he's a good guy. And I don't doubt you love him. But I th-think you're doubting your decision t-to get married so soon."

Stella remained silent and that was as good as a confession for Ray. "You're avoiding dealing with your own issues by meddling in my life. You asked me t-to stay with you after the hos-pital. I th-thought it was guilt, but it wasn't. You wanted a buffer."

"You don't know what you're talking about," Stella said quietly, but there was no conviction in her tone.

"Yeah, I do," Ray said. "I was married t-to you a long t-time. I know you." He sat down on the sofa and looked up at his ex-wife who had her arms wrapped around herself in some sort of protective stance. "You want out?"

"No," Stella said quickly. Then she sighed. "I just… I'm scared."

"Of what?" Ray asked.

Stella finally came over and sat beside Ray. "When we got married, he said he was through being a
cop. We went to Florida and bought that stupid bowling alley. It was dumb. That wasn't the life either of us really wanted, just what we thought we wanted. So we came back. I got a job with a private firm and Ray got his place back on the force. And things were okay. He wasn't going undercover all the time like you used to. He came home on time most nights. I could almost pretend that he was…"

"Not a cop," Ray offered.

"Yes," Stella agreed. "But then you were hurt… and it all just…"

"You realized how dangerous the job was," Ray said. "You got scared."

Stella nodded. "And it was easier to worry about you than it was to worry about him." She looked at Ray. "I know that doesn't make any sense, but…"

Ray shook his head with a teasing smile on his lips. "You're unhinged, you know th-that?"

Stella laughed. "I've been told often enough. By you. What am I going to do, Ray?"

"You're gonna t-talk about it with your husband," Ray said as he put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her into a loose hug. "You're going t-to work it out. And maybe in a couple years, he'll get p-promoted and you won't have t-to worry so much."

"You think?" Stella asked with hope in her eyes.

"Vecchio's made some good career moves," Ray shrugged. "Th-that undercover work got him noticed. And Welsh is set t-to re-tire soon, so th-there'll be an opening."

"God, I hope you're right," Stella said and then laughed. "Thank you."

"Anyt-time," Ray said.
Part Six

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Part Six

When Fraser and Vecchio returned, they found Ray and Stella laughing as Ray attempted to teach her how to make sugar cookies. They were both wore flour in their hair and on their clothes, but it looked like they had settled their differences, which made everyone less tense. The two men had filled four pails with berries.

"I guess I'm canning t-today," Ray said easily.

"I recognize the blackberries and raspberries, but what are the others?" Stella asked.

"Lingonberries," Ray said. "And those are bush cherries."

"They're a lot smaller than the cherries we get at home," Vecchio said.

"They will be a little less sweet this time of the year, as well," Fraser said. "But we'll harvest again later and get sweeter berries then. These are good for drying. Their sweetness will increase through the process. The later crop will be better for eating fresh or canning."

"What about the lingonberries?" Stella asked. "I've only ever had them once and they were pretty tart."

"They are similar in flavor to cranberries," Fraser said.

"Little sugar in th-the canning p-process and th-they'll be great," Ray said. "Dried, th-they taste p-pretty good t-too."

The berries were cleaned and sorted. Once the cherries were pitted, Ray began putting trays of the fruit to be dried into the oven once the cookies came out. A few hours on a very low setting would get them dried out. Once that was done, Ray got started boiling the lingonberries, raspberries and blackberries in separate pots, mixing in sugar and pectin. With Fraser's help, he put the hot jams into mason jars and then boiled them to seal them. The cherries, once dried, were cooled and placed into glass jars as well.

It took most of the day, but by four that afternoon, they had a dozen of each jam ready to be stored. Fraser took Vecchio down through the trap door in the floor and Ray and Stella handed them the finished fruit.

"Jeez," Vecchio said when he saw the root cellar. "There's a lot of stuff down here."

"Canned tomatoes, six varieties of jam, an assortment canned vegetables," Fraser said as he placed the new jars onto the shelf. "Would you kindly hand me that marker on the shelf by your shoulder?"

"Sure," Ray said. "What's this for?"

Fraser took the marker and began marking the date on each of the jars. "It is very important to know how old something is before consuming it. Most of these items are good for a couple years,
but after that, it could be detrimental to consume the contents. We mark the contents and the dates so we know which jars to consume first."

"Makes sense," Vecchio said. "You weren't kidding when you said you have a lot of potatoes."

"Mmm," Fraser nodded. "This is less than half of what we harvested. And there will be more before the summer is out. We will use most of the potatoes in the coming year, but some will be set aside for seed potatoes next year."

"You never did this when you were living in Inuvik," Vecchio said. "At least, not that you told me."

"Our summers were too short for most common garden plants," Fraser said. "And as I lived alone, I did not have the time to garden. But my grandmother always had a garden and I spent many afternoons helping her weed or can the fruits of her labor. Now I do the same for Ray."

"So he's like your housewife or something?" Vecchio asked with a frown. Fraser knew he was trying to understand, so he wasn't too upset by the question.

"He is not," Fraser said. "We are partners. It happens that he cannot work his chosen career because of his injuries, which leaves him with more time to do things around the cabin, but that does not emasculate him in any way. Gender roles are not perceived the same up here. People take on tasks and chores based upon necessity, not because of societal expectations. We do the jobs for which we have the skills, and learn new skills based on what we need. Would you believe that I am the wife because I regularly do the laundry?"

"No, I guess not," Vecchio said with a shrug. He picked up one of the apples Fraser had already harvested and took a bite. "Oh… that is..."

"Not meant for eating fresh," Fraser stated. "These are Heyer apples, and they taste much better when cooked. The red apples I pointed out in the orchard earlier are Frostbite apples. They are much better if you want to eat them fresh. They do not ripen until later in the season, however. The Cabot pears will be ready in September."

"You said there are plums, too?" Vecchio asked. "I didn't see them."

"That's because this variety of plum tree is actually more like a bush," Fraser said. "You would not recognize the fruit, either, as it is not the purple or red with which you are familiar. These plums are actually green. They don't ripen until late August and will only keep for a few days, so they must be canned right away. Of course, the pears don't keep long either."

"And you said that there's more berries coming," Vecchio said with a low whistle. "That's a lot of fruit."

"We will trade some of it for other things," Fraser said as he finished labeling the jars and placing them on their proper shelves. "But most we will use throughout the year. It is worth the effort to have the fruits and vegetables available in the dead of winter."

Ray Vecchio took one last look around. "You and him… you like this life? You like… sharing it with him?"

Fraser paused at the bottom of the ladder to look at his friend. "Ray has made my life infinitely better since his arrival, and not only in ways that can be seen in this cellar or in the cabin above. Intangible things."
"He makes you happy," Vecchio translated.

"Indeed he does," Fraser said with a smile.

Vecchio looked at Fraser for a long minute and then shook his head. "I don't get it, but then again, I don't get why you love playin' in the snow up here, either. But if he makes you happy, then I'm happy for the two of you.

"Thank you kindly, Ray," Fraser said sincerely. "As I have been happy for you and Mrs. Vecchio."

Vecchio snorted. "Don't think she's too happy these days."

Fraser pulled up a crate and sat down. "Why do you say that?"

Vecchio played with the apple he'd taken earlier and shrugged. "Just... she's been obsessing over Kowalski for months now. And every time I go to work she gives me this look... like I've betrayed her or something."

"Ah," Fraser said.

"Ah? What ah, Benny?" Vecchio asked impatiently. "She dragged us all the way up here, acts all crazy and now she seems happier than a clam since she talked to Kowalski. What is that?"

Fraser looked intently at Vecchio. "I do not believe that her happiness is based upon anything Ray has offered her, other than a listening ear. I do not believe she is interested in renewing their relationship, if that is what you fear."

"Then what the hell is going on?" Vecchio asked as he slumped down onto the bottom rung of the ladder. "Why are we here?"

"Presumably to visit your friends," Fraser said a little stiffly.

"Ah, Benny, you know I didn't mean it that way," Vecchio sighed.

"I know," Fraser said, and the tension eased from his shoulders. "I can only make a supposition, here, but I believe that Mrs. Vecchio has been experiencing some fear since Ray's injury and your return to police work."

"She's scared?" Vecchio asked... with a little bit of skepticism.

Fraser rubbed his eyebrow absently. "As I said, it is only a supposition. You must discuss your wife's reasoning directly with her if you wish to truly understand her mindset."

"Right, talk," Vecchio said with a nod. "You're right. Stella and me need to talk."

"Come," Fraser said as he took to his feet once again. "I am sure that Ray has begun preparing dinner. It should be almost finished by now. And then we'll go into town for a bit. The teens from the community center have been preparing to present Shakespeare's Midsummer Night's Dream."

FRFRFRFRFR

The two couples ate dinner and then dressed for an evening at the community center. The play was interesting, though the language flew over Ray's head a lot of the time. What was most interesting about the night, at least for the two Vecchios, was the way Ray and Fraser interacted with the parents and friends who had shown up for the event. In point of fact, it seemed like most of the town had shown up for the event. The auditorium, which seated four hundred people, was packed
and there were people standing in the back.

Fraser was polite to everyone who approached him. He knew their names and the names of their children. He asked about how business was going or about their latest project. That wasn't surprising. Fraser was painstakingly polite in all situations. The surprising part was how at ease he was. He smiled and laughed easily with almost everyone who came over to speak with them. It was a far cry from the distant and removed person Vecchio had known in Chicago.

And Ray Kowalski was another surprise. He laughed as easily as Fraser. While he had always been more laidback than Fraser in some ways, he was not given to friendly chatter and was not a cheerful person in general. He was more likely to threaten people than laugh with them. Only his closest friends usually saw that side of him. Yet, there he was, smiling and laughing with each and every group that approached.

Ray still stuttered, but not one person grimaced or sneered when they heard it. In fact, more than one person complimented him on the progress he'd made. And Ray didn't seem to be self-conscious about his impairment. In fact, he didn't look to be self-conscious about anything as he kept a possessive hand on Fraser's shoulder most of the time.

The reason for Ray's ease seemed obvious, now that the two Chicagoans took the time to look. Nobody was judging him. Nobody cared that his mouth didn't work right sometimes. No one cared that he limped or had to use a cane for balance. Everyone seemed well aware of the relationship between Fraser and Kowalski, though no one mentioned it directly. They simply accepted them as a couple, issued invitations to them as a couple. There was no judgment. No one seemed to care if they were boffing behind closed doors. And no one cared that Fraser was odd, even for a Mountie.

"Mattie," Ray was saying to one of the elderly Inuit women gathered around. "You promised t-to t-teach me th-that recipe for ginger p-plum stuffing."

"And I will," Mattie said with a smile. "As soon as you learn how to bake bread properly."

Ray groaned. "We been th-through th-this. I can't do it. Can't quick bread be good enough?"

"You are just impatient," Mattie said. "You must let the yeast do its work and then you'll have bread instead of that lump you had last time."

"The trick is to find something else to do while the dough is rising," another Inuit said. Vecchio was surprised that it was a man this time. "I like to watch hockey. Knead and set it aside before the first period. Knead it again during each period break and finish and put it in the oven after the game's over."

"Listen to Larry," Mattie advised. "He makes the best bread in town."

"Yeah, alright," Ray said and rubbed the back of his head. "I'll give it another shot."

Then Ray was off talking snowmobile engines with Larry and a young girl named Carly who apparently had aspirations to take over the service station when Larry retired. Fraser had stepped aside to talk to one of the other Mounties who had come for the program. That left the two Vecchios alone with Mattie.

"You seem shocked that your friends are so well liked," Mattie said to them.

"Um, well, we weren't expecting..." Vecchio stammered out.

Mattie narrowed her eyes at them. "City people believe the worst about each other without ever
taking the time to know them. Or so I have been told by those who have spent time there. In small towns, you have time to get to know each other beyond appearances. We have prejudice, but it is rare. It is hard to maintain that sort of hatred when the person you hate is your neighbor. We all depend upon each other up here."

"I can see that," Stella said.

"Your friends are happy," Mattie told them. "You should be happy for them. Sergeant Fraser was miserable until Ray came. And when Ray arrived, he was hurt and heartsick. The first week, the sergeant was out doing his duty, but Ray didn't just sit in that cabin. He came out and met the people of this town in spite of his physical limitations. He came into my gallery and saw a painting I had done and his face lit up. He told me that it reminded him of the adventure he and the sergeant had taken. The look on his face as he told that tale spoke to me. I knew then that he was in love with the sergeant. And when I saw how happy Sergeant Fraser was to have Ray here, I knew that they belonged together. There is nothing to object to in that."

"We're happy for them," Vecchio said quietly. "We hadn't expected the change in their relationship, but we are happy for them."

"Absolutely," Stella agreed.

"Good," Mattie said and gave them both a look that said that they had better not be lying.

FRFRFRFRFRFR

As Ray and Fraser lay in bed later that night, Ray thought about the things that he had talked to Stella about that day, but that wasn't what he asked when he finally broke the silence. "Where's Dief been spending his days? He's been disappearing into the woods almost every day for months."

Fraser shrugged. "I do not know. He's been surprisingly tight lipped about his disappearances. Although I have my suspicions."

"And those would be?" Ray prompted.

Fraser sighed. "I have seen evidence of another wolf on the property."

"You think he found a girl?" Ray asked with surprise. "Huh."

"He is getting older," Fraser said. "Perhaps he has begun to feel the need to procreate, to leave a legacy behind."

"I thought you told me he had pups in Chicago," Ray said. "With some dog."

"He did," Fraser said. "But an animal's desire to propagate the species is a strong one. One litter may not have been satisfactory. Especially since those puppies were given away fairly quickly."

"He wants to increase his pack," Ray said.

"Possibly," Fraser said. He hesitated. "I fear that he may wish to return to the life he knew before."

"Ain't gonna happen," Ray said. "We're his pack."

"Yes," Fraser agreed. "I do hope you are correct."
The rest of the week went better than they had anticipated. Fraser went back to work and Vecchio tagged along, leaving Ray and Stella to explore the town. She found the shops quaint and the people very welcoming. Ray showed her around and introduced her to all of the new friends he'd made. They even spent an afternoon baking bread under Larry's watchful eye.

On the last evening before the Vecchios began their trek back to Chicago, the four were sitting down to dinner when Fraser brought up a subject that caught everyone off guard. "Ray, I signed for a packet of papers at work today."

"From the lawyers?" Ray asked.

"Yes," Fraser said.

"What lawyers," Stella asked.

Ray and Fraser shared a glance, but it was Fraser who answered. "Following Ray's injury, the union lawyer that handled his disability pension and settlement suggested that he retain a lawyer regarding the matter of the defective fire escape."

"Mostly I wanted them to be forced to fix their mistakes," Ray shrugged.

"Yes, well, it appears that the owners of the building have settled the suit and agreed with your terms for correcting the structural problems," Fraser said.

"You made that a term for settlement?" Stella asked.

Ray shrugged again. "I agreed to accept a reduced settlement if they fixed it. The lawyers were pretty persuasive. Said a jury'd find a disabled cop pretty compelling."

"We are still waiting to hear back from the manufactures of the fire escape," Fraser said. "Though I do not believe they will settle. If they do, they have to admit to either incompetence or negligence and that leaves the door open to further lawsuits and close examination of their other projects."

"P-probably have to go back to testify," Ray said.

"But that may take some time," Fraser said. "As yet, they have not set a court date."

"So how much'd you get?" Vecchio asked.

"Just under a mil," Ray said.

Vecchio whistled. "That's not bad."

"It would have been significantly more if he'd taken the case to court," Stella predicted. "I've seen similar cases go as high as fifteen million."

"It was worth it to get them to fix it for the people who still live there," Ray said.

"Well, at least we know you'll come down to Chicago to visit," Stella said with a half-smile. Ray could tell that she thought he was crazy not to have taken the full settlement. But their vastly different views on money was one of the reasons they hadn't lasted.
Ray rode with Fraser to drop the Vecchios off at the airstrip the next morning. The two seemed to be working through their problems, which was a relief for Ray. He had no desire for him and Fraser to be dragged into their relationship again.

Fraser drove them back to the cabin and parked the jeep. "Look."

Ray looked over to the edge of the forest and saw Dief, but he wasn't alone. There was another wolf with him, a female, and she had four pups following along behind. They stopped at the edge of the orchard and Dief yipped. The mother wolf yipped back.

As they watched, Dief nudged two of the young pups towards the cabin and the mother nudged the other two towards the forest.

"You th-think…?" Ray asked.

"It appears that Dief has decided to raise two of the pups," Fraser said.

"Jeez, Ben, th-they'll eat us out of house and home," Ray complained.

They climbed from the jeep and met Dief at the porch. He seemed excited and proud to show off his pups. Fraser sat on the step and Ray sat beside him. In moments, they each had a wolf pup clambering into their laps. Dief danced around and yipped happily.

"I do not suppose it occurred to you to discuss the inclusion of two new pack members with us, did it?" Fraser asked Dief sternly. "What if Ray and I didn't want to have two puppies underfoot?"

Dief yipped and Ray laughed. "Guess he doesn't care what we th-think." He scratched the pup's ears and laughed when he licked Ray's face. "Yeah, yeah. I know, I t-taste good. But you gotta limit the licks to below the neck."

Dief yipped at the two pups, almost like he was scolding them, and they yipped back like they were answering him. Fraser and Ray both chuckled. Their humor was stifled a moment later when the howl of the mother wolf was heard from a distance. Dief answered back with a howl and the pups gave weak cries, half yip and half howl. The moment had sobered them all, but Dief seemed to rally and nudged the pups up the steps and into the cabin.

"I guess our p-pack just got bigger," Ray sighed. "Wolves are gonna be a bitch t-to houset-train."

"Dief will set them straight," Fraser said confidently. When he saw the mess the two pups had made in just that short time, however, his confidence wavered. "I hope."

The End

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Well, that's it for this little story. I hope you have enjoyed it. I'm not sure when or iff I'll revisit this fandom, but I do love the characters in Due South, so there's a good possibility that I'll be back again.

Thanks again! Jules
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!