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**Like a House on Fire**

by [Beth H (bethbethbeth)](http://archiveofourown.org/users/bethbethbeth)

**Summary**

"In the immortal words of Yogi Berra, 'It's deja vu all over again.'"

**Notes**

Written with the wonderful Kellie Matthews.

Thanks to Sihaya Black and Betty Burch for patient beta, and to AuKestrel for helping us see the story through new eyes.
Like a House on Fire - 1

Everyone at the 27th District who'd had even a peripheral involvement in the LeBeau case was aware of the newly revised extradition treaty between Canada and the U.S. The recent amendments to the international accords meant that Henri LeBeau, a career criminal who was Canadian in name only, was going to be bound over to face trial in Saskatoon, instead of in Illinois where his latest run of 'alleged' crimes had actually been committed.

Even if it hadn't been for the inexplicable lack of any real cooperation from the Canadian authorities during the course of the CPD's six-month investigation, losing LeBeau to the Canadian justice system would have grated. But to have spent half a year calling in favors and rooting around local landfill sites for illegally dumped toxic waste, only to have the perp sent up north and out of their jurisdiction for what would probably amount to nothing more than a slap on the wrist was wrong. Wronger than wrong.

And yet there Ray sat in the uncomfortable chair that faced Welsh's desk offering to escort the prisoner up to Saskatoon so he could be turned over to the Canadians.

"I said I'll go, Lieutenant."

Welsh narrowed his eyes and leaned forward. "Overcome by a sudden overwhelming urge to find closure, Detective?"

"Yeah, something like that," Ray muttered.

"Curious, because I seem to recall someone who looked a lot like you in here yesterday stomping around and yelling that there was 'no fucking way' the Canadians were going to get their mitts on LeBeau."

"Come on! This is my case, or at least it was my case before it was yanked out of my hands." He leaned over, flattening his palms on the case reports stacked at the edge of the lieutenant's desk. "I just want to make sure LeBeau's taken care of before I sign off on this thing. Give me that, at least."

Welsh sat for a long minute, just looking at Ray, his deadpan expression giving no indication what he was thinking.

"Lieutenant . . ."

"It's that important to you, Kowalski?"

He nodded, feeling an odd tension in his jaw.

"All right, you've got the delivery duty. And, Detective," Welsh continued, before Ray even had a chance to release the breath he'd been holding, "let's make sure all the i's are dotted and t's are crossed on this one. I don't want to see you back here until you've given our Canadian friends depositions, case notes, and anything else they think they might need to make these charges stick. Word is they're making every effort to assign an early court date. I'm sure you can find something to occupy your energies up north between now and the start of the trial."

"Yeah," he said, a little surprised by how quickly Welsh had agreed. "I can . . . um. . . I'll think of something."

"I'm certain you will."
"Thanks, Lieutenant."

"Forget about it. Just do good up there."

Ray picked up his files and started to leave the office. Before he reached the door, he heard Welsh add, "Kowalski? Say hello to Consta . . . Corporal Fraser for me when you see him."

The office door closed behind him, and Ray returned to his desk. Sure, he could pass a message on from Welsh. Easiest thing in the world. Except for the fact that he and Fraser hadn't actually seen each other in almost two years and probably wouldn't see each other this time, either.

Fraser. His former partner. His . . . friend.

They still talked on the phone every once in awhile. Wrote letters less frequently. Sent stupid presents for birthdays and for Christmas. Well, he sent stupid presents; Fraser usually sent something useful.

But still . . . it had been almost two years.

A week after the conclusion of their arctic adventure, Ray had finally checked in with his lieutenant. He hadn't really been sure if Welsh still was his lieutenant, considering how long he'd been incommunicado, but after a long pause, Welsh just said he'd been holding a detective spot open for him at the 27th and that Ray needed to get his butt back to Chicago sometime this millennium if he was still interested in being a cop.

At first, he had debated with himself whether he'd take Welsh up on the offer or not. It felt good to be asked. It felt better than good, and he couldn't imagine working under a more stand-up guy than Harding Welsh. But there was something about being in Canada that felt right to him, more right to him than the thought of returning to Chicago, anyway.

He'd figured maybe he would bring the subject up that night at dinner, see if Fraser had any thoughts about stuff he could do up there - maybe something the two of them could do together - if he gave up on the whole being a cop thing. But before he could even mention Welsh's offer, Fraser had announced that he'd received notification of his new assignment and that he had to start making arrangements to relocate to a small town in north-central Saskatchewan.

"Exile over, huh?" Ray had asked with a forced smile.

"So it would appear," Fraser had replied, answering Ray's smile with one of his own, although no less forced if Ray was any judge. "I had thought that perhaps they might actually have been thinking in terms of sending me back to the Territories, as I had once requested, or back to . . . well, I'm sure that despite its location and relative isolation, there will be ample opportunity at Lac la Rouille to make a difference, so I really have no cause for complaint."

"Yeah, sounds like your kind of place, Fraser," Ray had said, a bit absently. "So, um . . . I guess I've got to get back to reality, too. I talked to Welsh today. He wants me back at the 2-7, but . . ."

"Oh? That's . . . that's wonderful, Ray," Fraser cut in, sounding something less than enthusiastic.

Ray cocked his head to one side and frowned at Fraser for a second, then shrugged. "Yeah, I guess." He fiddled with his fork, then looked up again. "You think you'll ever be heading south again? I mean, for a visit or whatever. Or are you just going to forget about Chicago like it was some kind of bad dream?"

"No," Fraser had said, shaking his head emphatically. "I'll certainly miss . . . well, that is to say, there
are a number of things I'll miss from my time in the States."

"Yeah?" Ray asked.

Fraser nodded, but didn't elaborate, and Ray hadn't pushed. He knew better than to try to get Fraser
to talk when he clearly didn't want to. And that had been that. They'd gone back to Chicago, Fraser
staying just long enough to get his things and attend the big farewell party Frannie had thrown for
him, her brother, and Stella. Frannie had ended up sniffing her way through most of the evening.
Ray had felt like that too; knowing that two of the most important people in his life would be out of it
the next day hadn't exactly put him in a party mood, so he'd ducked out early and spent most of the
night staring at the ceiling over his bed.

He hadn't given Fraser a going-away present. He couldn't think of anything he'd want, or need.
Fraser hadn't given him anything either, except that as they stood, oddly awkward, at the Air Canada
boarding gate the next day, Ray had put out his hand for a farewell shake, and Fraser had taken it,
and then pulled him into a hug, which had surprised the hell out of Ray. From the embarrassed look
on Fraser's face when he let go a moment later, it had surprised him too. Then they'd called the flight
and Fraser had to go - and again, that had been that.

And now was now. He thought about the logistics of this trip to Canada. The tickets were already
arranged, Welsh had already cleared him, and he didn't have a partner he'd be leaving in the lurch,
though he'd been working with Elaine a lot after she'd transferred back to the division six months
ago. When you were going for detective it helped to have someone to show you the ropes, and
Welsh thought Ray was a good mentor. Whatever. At least he and Elaine got along, which never
hurt. Most of his cases had been cleared so he could work on the toxic waste case anyway, so there
was nothing standing in the way except maybe finding someone to watch Spot for a few days, and
Frannie was an expert turtle-sitter.

Saskatoon. He looked up at the map of North America on his bulletin board, located Saskatoon, and
mentally estimated the distance between it, and the little red map-tack at Lac la Rouille that he'd put
there two years ago after Fraser pointed out his new posting. It looked like around five-hundred
miles, give or take a bit. Barely in the same province. He sighed. Nope. Not this time.

* * *

Fraser lay on the couch, watching the Blackhawks kick the collective asses of the Toronto Maple
Leafs. Diefenbaker whined in sympathy from across the room, but Fraser had long since stopped
caring about the state of Toronto hockey. He leaned over slightly, reaching for the open bag of Old
Dutch Ketchup Flavoured Potato Chips, but it was just beyond the reach of his fingertips.

"Come here, Dief . . . bring me the bag."

Diefenbaker whined and looked pointedly at Fraser.

"I'll give you one if you bring me the bag," he said after a moment.

When Dief didn't move, Fraser finally managed to stretch enough to grab the bag himself. "Fine. I
just thought you might want a little exercise. You're getting soft, you know."

Diefenbaker barked.

"I do not have pot/kettle issues," Fraser snapped.

Dief trotted over to the door and barked sharply. Fraser sighed. "Would you stop that? Believe me,
after two years it's really gotten old. No, Ray is not going to be here any moment."
Dief barked again. Fraser threw the remote at him. Dief easily sidestepped the missile and Fraser sighed as he realized he would have to get up and get it so he could use the mute. He was sick to death of Canadian Tire commercials. As he sat up, someone knocked at the door. He frowned, puzzled. It was Saturday. The Episcopalian Ladies' Assembly delivered on Mondays. The Catholic Ladies' Assembly came by on Wednesdays. In general, he never saw anyone at all on weekends. Maybe one of the groups had held a bake sale today and were bringing leftovers? He looked down at his sweats, which were reasonably clean. The hole in his sock wouldn't show if he was standing. He went to the door as he was, picking up the remote on his way.

Opening the door, he took one look at the person on his stoop and dropped the remote again. It bounced off the mat and out the door. Dief tried to shove past him, barking insanely, but Fraser was frozen in place.

Ray grinned at him. "Fraser! Buddy!" he exclaimed, wrapping him in a hug.

The contact was a shock. Literally. It had been a very long time since anyone had touched him, let alone so intimately. In fact, he realized with an odd sense of deja vu, that time had been Ray, too. Almost on auto-pilot he returned the hug, and then Ray stepped back to look at him. He felt his face go hot, wishing he'd put on something more presentable. But how could he have known?

"Ray, what are you doing here?"

Ray shrugged. "Well, I was in the neighborhood, so I thought I'd stop by."

"Ray, there is nothing in the neighborhood," Fraser said, still trying to wrap his brain around the idea that Ray, Ray Kowalski, was standing on his front stoop.

Ray grinned. "Canada's a neighborhood."

Fraser frowned. "Please don't say that anywhere near a representative of the tourism board or the next thing you know we'll be seeing it on t-shirts."

Ray studied him for a moment and his smile faltered a bit. "So... is this a bad time?"

"God, of course not, Ray. Please, come in." He looked behind Ray and saw six bags of varying sizes stacked up on the steps. "Can I help you bring your packages in?"

"Might as well, seeing as how most of them are for you. Soon as I said I was heading up this way, everyone started handing stuff over to me 'just in case' I saw you."

"For me?" Fraser asked, still feeling rather as if he were in an episode of The Twilight Zone.

Ray nodded. "None other. Everyone said to say 'hi.' And I mean everyone. The only reason I'm not bringing you a pizza is because I managed to convince Sandor it wouldn't be any good by the time I got it here." He picked up a bag and looked at Fraser pointedly.

Suddenly realizing he was still keeping Ray outside, Fraser stepped out to pick up one of the bags. Diefenbaker, seeing his chance, darted out and leaped up, his paws on Ray's shoulders. Ray yelped, teetered, and then went down on his backside, hitting the sidewalk with a solid 'oof.' Diefenbaker started licking his face, whining and vocalizing. Ray tried to fend him off, and finally put his hands on Dief's muzzle and held him still.

"Enough with the licking, mutt!" he said clearly into Dief's face. "I'm glad to see you too!"

Dief apparently felt he'd done his duty in welcoming Ray, because he let Fraser reach a hand down
to brace Ray to his feet. Ray picked up several bags and followed him into the house. Setting down his parcels, he glanced around the room, and then back at Fraser.

"So . . . um . . . you're feeling okay, right?"

Fraser realized Ray must be interpreting his shock as illness. "Yes, of course, just surprised to see you, that's all. Why didn't you let me know you were coming?"

"I . . . kind of wanted it to be a surprise. Plus I wasn't sure it would work out and I didn't want to make plans I couldn't keep, you know? I figure you're not exactly company-ready, so if there's a motel around, maybe I could use your phone to call and get a room?"

Fraser shook his head. "Nonsense, Ray. Of course you'll stay here with me."

Ray glanced around again. "You have a guest room?"

"I have a spare room," Fraser equivocated. He did. It was full of the arctic travel gear from their adventure together, and the heat wasn't on, but he had one. He would, however, put Ray in his room, since the bed was comfortable, and he'd sleep on the couch.

Ray smiled. "That'd be great. How about dinner? I drove straight through today and I'm starving."

"Straight through from where?"

"Saskatoon. Had to escort a prisoner."

"Ah, Mr. LeBeau?"

Ray looked surprised. "You've heard about him?"

"I keep up," Fraser said. There wasn't a lot else to do. "A member of one of our more infamous biker gangs, I believe."

Ray nodded, grinning a little. "Yeah. Hard to wrap my mind around that one. Canadian biker gangs. Go figure. At first when they told me that, I was thinking bikes you know? Like Schwinns. The whole case was kind of a deja vu, what with the toxic waste and Canadians and all. Could've used you on the job. It wouldn't have taken near as long to wind things up."

Fraser turned away, making a show of turning off the television. "I'm sure you handled it competently on your own."

"Competently yeah, but without our old . . . pizzazz, you know?"

He sounded a little wistful, and Fraser turned in time to catch a flash of that same expression on his face. Perhaps he wasn't the only one who missed their old partnership. Which he did. Desperately. Having Ray here was almost painful, but it was a pleasurable kind of pain. "I'll just go change, and we'll go get something for dinner. There's an excellent little café just down the road."

"Mathilde's?" Ray asked.

Fraser stopped, halfway to his bedroom. "Yes, actually. How did you know?"

"I stopped there to see if anyone could point me at your place. I tried the RCMP post but the guy there wouldn't tell me where you lived even after I got out my ID. Said it was a violation of your privacy. I think maybe he thought I was a hit man or something. But there was a group of old ladies at the café who were happy to tell me how to find you. They were kind of funny, all excited that I
was coming to see you. I barely got out of there with my cheeks unpinched. You'd think you never had a visitor before."

Fraser felt his face getting warm again. "That was probably Maude Johannsen and her bridge club friends. They often commandeered a table on Saturday afternoons." He didn't tell Ray that the reason Maude was acting like that was because it was true. He hadn't had a visitor the entire time he'd lived here. Maggie had planned to come once, but ended up having to cancel due to a search and rescue operation up near Peace River, and their schedules hadn't coincided since. "Anyway, if you'll excuse me I'll be right out."

Ray nodded, and turned his attention to Diefenbaker, who had been sitting at his feet gazing up at him adoringly. Fraser rolled his eyes and headed for his bedroom. Opening his closet, he found himself reaching toward the back, pulling out his dress uniform. The plastic shielding rustled as he peeled it off. He hadn't worn it in ages, there was never any reason to do so, here, but somehow with Ray here it just seemed right. Placing it on the bed, he got out clean underclothes, pulled them on, and then stepped into the jodhpurs.

He pulled them up, settled them, and went to fasten the fly, only to find that the edges wouldn't meet. He frowned, staring down at the gap between the edges, and reflexively tried again. They still wouldn't meet. He tightened his stomach muscles and the gap narrowed slightly, but didn't vanish. Could the cleaner have shrunk them? He hadn't worn them since they had been cleaned, so he wouldn't have noticed.

Irritably he got out his other dress uniform. He knew it fit. It had last been cleaned in Chicago and he'd worn it since then, though it had been quite a while. He knew he'd gained a few pounds but it ought to fit. Taking the pants from their hanger, he pulled them on, only to find that, like the first pair, he could not fasten them. Determined, he sucked in his stomach, yanked on the wool, and managed to wrestle them closed. They cut into his waist painfully, bringing the truth home with a shock. It wasn't the uniform. It was him.

He looked up into the mirror, seeing himself as Ray must have seen him. He needed a haircut. He needed a shave. Worse, he was badly out of shape, thanks to regular meal deliveries by the local church ladies' groups and no regular regimen of exercise. He'd never had to worry about that before, so he hadn't here either. Apparently he should have. Good God. How the hell had he let this happen?

Once he thought about it, it was perfectly obvious. His position at La Rouille required much less physical activity and more vehicle time, and when combined with the fact that Dief ran free during the day in the woods behind the detachment, it meant he was getting out very little. It had happened so gradually he hadn't realized it, even though he should have. It shocked him to realize just how oblivious he'd been to what he was... and wasn't... doing. It was as if he'd turned off part of his brain when he'd left Chicago and not turned it back on until he'd seen Ray again.

Obviously it wasn't just that Canadian clothing sizes were different from US ones, as he'd thought last time he bought jeans. And when he'd asked Sally to order him two of the newer style uniforms she must have... adjusted the measurements for him without mentioning it. Face burning, he unfastened the jodhpurs and stripped them off, changing into a comfortable pair of jeans, a henley, and a baggy sweater, and headed back to the living room.

Ray was standing by the end table holding the beer-bottle Fraser had emptied earlier, staring at it with a slightly perplexed expression. When he saw Fraser, he put it down hastily. "That a good brand?" he asked.

"It's decent," Fraser said. "Shall we go?"
Ray nodded. "Yeah. I think we've got a lot of catching up to do."

Once outside, Fraser started to head in the direction of the blue Ford rental parked at the curb, but he stopped short when Ray put a hand on his shoulder.

"Mind if we walk? After driving all day I'd like to stretch my legs."

Fraser turned around slowly, unwilling, for some reason, to lose the touch of Ray's hand against his arm. "Of course we'll walk, Ray. I don't know what I was thinking." What had he been thinking? Perhaps this unexpected visit still had him a bit off balance.

Ray grinned. "Maybe seeing me, you just automatically think about riding shotgun, like I'm a Rorschach test. See Ray, think car. Don't know what that says about your psyche, but . . . ."

Fraser smiled back at his former partner. "While I'd hardly characterize you as having any real similarity to an ink blot, there may be something to your hypothesis."

They headed up the street, settling immediately - instinctively - into the rhythm they'd grown accustomed to in Chicago. Fraser launched into a running commentary about the prevailing theories of the function of free association and its relationship to literary metonymy, but he was barely conscious of the words coming out of his own mouth. Ray's presence had nothing whatsoever to do with his inclination to drive instead of walk. Try as he might, he couldn't remember the last time he'd actually chosen to leave his pool car behind to reach any destination, even somewhere so ridiculously close as Mathilde's.

For God's sake; what must Ray be thinking of him? He took a quick glance in his direction, hoping to ascertain, without being too obvious, just how disappointed his old friend was with the state he'd let himself get into. However, while Ray was looking directly at him - a fact which, in itself, made him feel inexplicably awkward - the expression on his face was neither chastening nor pitying. It was just - happy?

Fraser's monologue tapered off as he tried to determine what might have brought the broad smile to Ray's face. However, this just seemed to increase the size of Ray's smile. His grin grew even wider, then he shook his head and threw his arm around Fraser's shoulders.

"Running out of steam? Don't stop now - not while you're on a roll; I've missed this too much."

He'd missed rambling discourses on language and psychology? Surely that couldn't be what had made Ray look so joyful. He furrowed his brow and inclined his head questioningly.

"Missed you," Ray said. "It's been too long, you know?"

"I do, indeed," he replied, although it surprised him a little to find that just being with him could still make Ray this happy after a two-year hiatus, but he wasn't about to look that particular gift horse in the mouth. He had missed Ray. Just how much he'd missed him was only now beginning to become clear to him. Being with him even for something so mundane as an early evening walk to a café, was bringing him more pleasure than he could remember feeling in . . . well . . . years.

Then Ray's arm eased off his shoulder and moved down around his waist. The gesture was casual, nothing that Ray hadn't done many times in the past. However, the memory of the spare tire that had been reflected back in the mirror when he'd had finally stopped to take a long, hard look at himself made him stiffen and pull back slightly from Ray's touch.

Ray dropped his arm immediately and shoved his hands in his pockets. "Kind of chilly," he commented.
"Yes, well, it is November, Ray," Fraser said. "How were the roads? Had they been cleared after Wednesday's snow?"

Ray nodded. "Yeah, mostly. There were a few scary spots, but I made it in one piece. Anyway, who cared if there were a couple of bad patches on the drive, right? I was on a mission."

"You were?" Fraser asked, interested. "What mission would that be?"

Ray reached out as if he were going to ruffle Fraser's hair, then let his hand fall, sighed and shook his head. "Coming here, Fraser. Seeing you."

Fortunately the chill air gave him an excuse for pink cheeks, because his face felt remarkably warm. That warmth seemed to spread inside a little, as well, easing coldness he hadn't been aware was there until now. They reached Mathilde's and went inside. He was uncomfortably aware of the eyes on them, Maude Johannsen's coterie in particular, but Ray didn't seem at all put off by the curious glances he garnered. He just sat down in the booth across from Fraser and grinned. "I take it you guys don't get a lot of out-of-towners?"

"Not at this time of year, no," Fraser admitted. "Very few people come here after the first snow unless they have no choice. I'm sure they're curious to see who would voluntarily make such a trek."

Ray grinned at him. "Well, I've always played by my own rules." He fished his glasses out of his pocket and put them on, then picked up the menu and studied it.

Fraser blinked. "New glasses, Ray?"

Ray looked up at him and smiled ruefully. "Yeah. Even blinder than I used to be. I made the mistake of taking Frannie with me to pick out frames and she talked me into these."

Fraser studied the effect of the wire-framed lenses on him, and smiled. "They're very fetching, Ray."

Ray snorted. "Fetching. Yeah. So what's good here?"

"Everything, actually," Fraser said, oddly reluctant to recommend any of his usual favorites. Just then Tilda came up to the table, standing next to Ray, looking at him curiously for a moment before she turned her gaze to Fraser.

"Well Corporal, what'll it be tonight? The usual?"

Fraser thought about his uniform pants and shook his head. "No, thank you Tilda, I believe I'll just have a green salad tonight. No dressing."

She frowned, studying him closely. "You taking sick there, Benton Fraser?"

He flushed. "Not at all! I . . . ah . . . I ate earlier," he lied. "But my friend had a long drive today and is in need of sustenance."

"Is that right? Where'd you come in from, young man?"

Ray looked up from his menu, his eyes widening a little as he took in the resplendence that was Mathilde. She was in pink tonight. Pink angora sweater. Pink circle skirt. Pink artificial nails. Pink ankle strap platform sandals. Pink cat's-eye glasses with rhinestones sparkling at each corner. Her pink wig had been tormented into a four-inch beehive. Her vast, motherly bosom and ample hips were swathed, as usual, in a pristine white apron which really did not complement the outfit at all but no doubt saved a great deal on dry-cleaning costs.
Ray smiled, but it wasn't a mocking smile. "Drove up from Saskatoon, ma'am. Today that is. Flew in from Chicago yesterday. Escorting a prisoner."

Tilda pressed a hand to her chest. "A prisoner? How exciting!"

Ray laughed and shook his head. "Hardly. Not without Fraser there, anyway. Things just haven't been the same since he's been gone."

"So you knew our Corporal Fraser in Chicago?" Tilda asked with a pointed look at Fraser.

Fraser realized he'd been remiss and hastened to correct it. "May I introduce my former partner, Ray Kowalski? Ray, this is Mathilde Johannsen, the proprietor of this establishment."

"Please, call me Tilda," she said, putting out a hand, making it clear that Ray was not to shake it. "Everyone around here does."

"It's a pleasure, Tilda," Ray said, gamely kissing the air above her hand, then sitting back. "So, what do you recommend?"

"Well, everything's good, honey, but Benton here is particularly partial to the chicken fried steak, with mashed potatoes and gravy."

"Yeah, huh? You in the mood for that tonight, Fraser?"

He was. Just the thought of Tilda's chicken fried steak was making his mouth water, but he couldn't bring himself to order it. It might taste wonderful but he was suddenly all too aware that not only had every serving he'd eaten over the past two years contributed to his waistline, it had probably lined his arteries as well. This was getting ridiculous. Everywhere he turned this evening, there was another reminder of just how oblivious he'd become to everything but his job.

Suddenly, Fraser wanted to look anywhere but at Ray. He dropped his gaze until his eyes lit on the menu. Just the thing. He reached across the table and slid it toward him. He was fairly certain he had the selections memorized at this point, but he felt a sudden need to raise some barrier between himself and Ray's gaze - and the menu fulfilled that purpose admirably.

"Tilda serves rather generous portions, Ray, but please order what you want. The steak is excellent. For my part, perhaps I might try something new tonight." He scanned the items quickly, almost desperately, for something he hadn't had. Cottage cheese? Apparently he'd spoken those last words out loud, or so the looks of surprise on Ray's and Tilda's faces would seem to indicate.

"You sure you're feeling well, Corporal?" Tilda asked.

"Frase, I thought you hated cottage cheese."

"Ah. Well, no... that is to say..." Not for the first time this evening, Fraser found himself fumbling for words, but Ray's timely interruption brought his struggle to a halt.

"Okay, that means you still hate it." Ray grinned. "How about if we share the steak. We can do that, right, Tilda?"

"Of course, honey." But then she frowned. "You sure that's going to do you? You look like you could use a little more meat on your bones, if you don't mind my saying so."

Ray laughed. "My mom didn't call and tell you to say that, did she?"
"Your mother sounds like a very sensible woman, Ray," Tilda sniffed. "You tell her I said so next time you talk to her."

"I'll do that," Ray agreed, then turned back to Fraser. "So we'll share the steak, yeah? What veggies come with that, Tilda?"

Fraser looked up in surprise; Raymond Kowalski was actually asking for vegetables?

"We have corn, peas, carrots, or courgettes."

"Um . . . Fraser?"

"Zucchini, Ray."

"Oh. Okay. Yeah, that sounds good. The steak and two orders of . . . uh . . . courgettes. That ought to do it."

"If you're both sure that's it." Tilda didn't look convinced, but both men nodded. She finally shrugged and smiled at them. "I'll just get your order started."

She patted Fraser's shoulder, then started to walk toward the kitchen, pink skirt swaying from side to side with each step. Halfway to the kitchen she stopped, looked over her shoulder, and called out "Remember to save room for dessert, boys," before winking at them, then disappearing behind the swinging saloon-style doors.

Ray settled back in his seat. "Nice lady."

"She is, as is her sister." Fraser nodded in the direction of Maude.

"You're kidding. They're sisters?" He turned his head slightly to get a better look at the foursome who were still playing bridge. "You're talking about the one by the window? Wow! Maude's all kind of Chanel and pearls. And Tilda's so . . . what's the word I'm looking for?"

"Colorful?" Fraser offered.

"Heh." Ray laughed. "Sort of an understatement there, Fraser, but it'll do."

"They are very different on the surface, Ray, but they both have good hearts. The Johannsen sisters were the first to welcome me when I began this posting. I really don't know what I would have . . . well, that's not important."

Oh, just wonderful. A few seconds more and he'd have been complaining to Ray about how few people had shown any interest in getting acquainted with him when he first arrived. Or three months later. Or at all.

The arrival of dinner brought a halt to his self-indulgent train of thought. Tilda had clearly decided that one already over-abundant meal wouldn't suffice for two grown men, since the platter she placed in the middle of the table contained twice the normal serving of food. She set a clean dinner plate in front of each of them, and chuckled as Ray's eyes widened.

"Now, are you sure I can't get you boys anything more here?"

Ray glanced in Fraser's direction, silently mouthing the word "More?"

"I'm sure this will be more than adequate, Tilda," Fraser said. "Thank you kindly."
"You're very welcome, Corporal. And if you want anything else, all you have to do is ask."

After Tilda left the table, Ray couldn't contain his laughter. "This is food for one? One what? One Scout troop?"

"I did warn you the servings were rather on the large side," Fraser said, feeling somewhat defensive.

"That you did." Ray laughed again and shook his head. "Okay, let's give this a try."

He reached for one of the steak knives Tilda had placed next to the platter and cut a substantial piece of meat and lifted it slightly. "This okay for you?"

"You don't have to serve me, Ray. I'm perfectly capable of getting my own food."

Before he'd even finished the sentence, Fraser could feel himself start to blush for what must have been the tenth time that day; it was all too apparent just how capable he was of feeding himself. However, Ray didn't react to his words at all except to place the food on his plate and start to cut a piece for himself

"Not exactly a burden, you know, Fraser?" he said.

They began to eat. After a few minutes, Tilda waved to them from across the room and raised her eyebrows in a questioning manner, in answer to which Ray gave her a 'thumbs up.' Satisfied, she returned her attention to another customer, which left Fraser and Ray free to return to their conversation.

"So... what have you been up to lately?" Fraser asked, trying to find an innocuous subject. "Are you seeing anyone?"

Ray smiled a little, his gaze focused on something over Fraser's left shoulder. "I'm kind of... between innings. You know how that goes." He shrugged. "Sometimes the Crystal Palace or Red Dog doesn't turn your crank any more and you want a little down time."

Fraser took a sip of his tea to ease the tightness in his throat. It certainly sounded as if Ray had quite a busy social life, if he was needing 'down time' from it. He nodded, pretending he knew what it would be like to need that, and forged on, trying again for a less painful subject. "Who's your partner these days? Anyone I know?"

Ray looked at him blankly for a moment. "Partner? Oh, um, well, I've kind of been working with Elaine lately."

"Elaine?" Fraser asked, surprised. He must somehow have missed some important news. "I didn't realize she'd been promoted to detective."

"Well, she hasn't been, yet. Welsh figured I could... show her the ropes, so to speak." Ray offered the boxing metaphor with a little smile.

"An excellent choice," Fraser said smiling back. "And I'm sure your partner doesn't mind sharing the caseload."

Ray coughed and concentrated on cutting a piece of meat. "Yeah. Well, something like that. What about you? You got a faithful sidekick up here?"

Fraser looked away. "As officer in charge I don't do much fieldwork any more, and I don't really have a partner as such."
"Yeah, you're the boss, but you've got somebody you work with a lot, right?"

"I've worked with a variety of good officers in the past two years," Fraser said.

Ray looked at him for a moment, then glanced around the café, and then looked at Fraser again. Fraser could almost see him analyzing the situation, his mind making connections, readying itself for one of its illogical leaps. Sure enough, a moment later, Ray nodded.

"Hard to get people to stay here?" he asked.

Illogical, but stunningly accurate. "As you say. Because of the location of the detachment, our turnover rate is rather higher than we'd like."

Ray nodded. "Yeah. I figured that. But you stay." There was a question implicit in his statement.

"I do. The people here deserve to have their needs seen to."

Ray frowned a little. Opened his mouth. Closed it. "Yeah. Yeah, that's true. So you like it here?"

"It's a very pleasant place," Fraser said equivocally. He certainly wasn't going to complain about the incredible monotony while sitting within earshot of some of the biggest gossips in town. "What about you? How are things in Chicago these days?" he asked, in a somewhat desperate bid to focus Ray's attention elsewhere.

"You know how it goes. It's a job, and you do what you gotta do. Work, work, work. Catch bad guys. Fill out more paperwork than should be humanly possible. Like you said, people deserve to have their needs seen to. It's a dirty job, but somebody's got to do it." He grinned disarmingly with a slight shrug.

Fraser was pleased to hear that. He'd been concerned that Ray was still feeling ambivalent about his career when he'd turned down a promotion the previous year, but although he still tended to downplay his own role, it seemed he was aware just how much of a difference he was making to the city of Chicago and its inhabitants. He was, however, more interested in Ray's life outside of work.

"Is there anyone new in your life?" he asked carefully.

Ray picked up his glass and took several swallows of his water, then set it back down and wiped his mouth neatly with his napkin. "Well, there's the two new guys who took over for Huey and Dewey. Danny Gamble and Mark Proctor. They're pretty good guys. Neither of them smell like bacon bits and fish, anyway, which is a big plus in my book. Elaine's back, but I already mentioned that. We got this new aide - a guy. It's weird to have a guy getting the files and stuff. I keep expecting Frannie and her half-shirts, you know? Speaking of Frannie, she sent you this . . . ."

Ray dug in his wallet for a minute and handed Fraser a small photo of Francesca with two babies. Fraser studied the photo, trying to see if he could find a resemblance between the children and any of the adults he knew. He couldn't. "They're very . . . ." He stopped, not quite sure what he ought to say.

"Generic?" Ray asked with a grin. "Yeah. Babies are, I've noticed. All that stuff about 'oh, he looks just like his mommy' is kind of a load of bullshit if you ask me. At least until they're old enough to not look like Mr. Potato Head any more. But she's happy and that's all that matters, right?"

"Indeed," Fraser said fervently, relieved that he didn't have to find something vaguely complimentary to say.
"Excellent, dude!" Ray said, drawling the word out.

Fraser snickered. "Would you be Bill, or Ted?"

"I'm blond, that makes me Ted. You're stuck being Bill. Hey, that's actually appropriate, since the actor's Canadian and all. Wait . . . ." Ray stared at him, eyebrows lifting in exaggerated surprise. "You just recognized a cultural reference more recent than 1950-something. What's going on here?"

"Satellite television," Fraser said ruefully. "I'm afraid I've been corrupted."

Ray looked at him for a moment, and then pushed his not-quite-empty plate to the side. "So, talk."

"I thought that's what we've been doing."

"No, I've been running off at the mouth, and you've been sitting there going 'ah' every so often to keep me yapping. What about you? What have you been getting up to, work-wise or whatever?"

Fraser leaned forward and speared a third piece of the leftover steak. "Nothing so exciting as you've been engaged in, I promise you. This is a rather small community, as I'm sure you've noticed, and very little of a criminal nature occurs on a regular basis." He didn't want to admit that most of his workload these days consisted of writing speeding tickets and making drunk-driving arrests.

"Yeah, I get that," said Ray. "But there's got to be something juicy. Come on, Fraser, give!"

"Honestly, there's nothing to tell," he said firmly, willing Ray to just let the subject rest.

"Nah, I'm not buying it," Ray said, laughing. "You trying to tell me crimes don't just come hopping into your lap, like they used to in Chicago? Come on, come on, c'mon already. Start talking."

"Damn it, Ray, there is nothing to tell. Nothing! Don't you understand that, for God's sake?"

The vehemence with which Fraser spoke surprised even him. Ray looked away for a moment, but then turned back toward Fraser with a neutral expression on his face, apparently willing to pretend that he hadn't just been snapped at by his friend for asking a perfectly reasonable question.

Maude's group wasn't quite so adept at pretense. All four women had turned toward the unlikely sound of his raised voice, and they were still gazing with some interest in his direction.

Fraser closed his eyes and dropped his head slightly. "God, Ray. I'm sorry."

Ray frowned, then gave a quick little nod. "What-say we pay the bill and head back to your place? We'll make some tea, you can open your presents, then maybe we can get some sleep. That sound good?"

Fraser just nodded, not trusting himself to say more. Mortified didn't even begin to cover the way he was feeling at the moment.

Ray glanced quickly around the room. With a quick glance of his own, Fraser noticed with relief that only Old Man Fitzhugh, a fixture at the luncheon counter since Mathilde's first opened for business, was still staring at them with rapt interest, but the smack Tilda applied to the back of his head as she walked past was enough encouragement for him to return his attention to the slice of apple pie cooling in front of him.

Tilda approached, a large white paper bag in her hand, as they slid out from the booth. Fraser looked down, then rubbed a finger across his eyebrow before hesitantly starting to speak.
"Tilda, I'm . . . I'm really terribly sorry if I caused a scene, and if . . . ."

"There's no scene here, Benton Fraser," she interrupted, removing her glasses and letting them dangle from the pink mother-of-pearl chain she wore around her neck. "Just another quiet Saturday night as far as I can tell."

Fraser might have argued the point, but Tilda raised her eyebrows at him in a quelling manner strangely reminiscent of his grandmother, and the rest of his apology died on his lips.

Ray looked back and forth between the two of them, then reached into his pocket for his wallet, but Tilda laid her hand on his forearm. "Don't you worry any about the bill, Ray. Benton here has an account."

She took the bag she'd brought out from the kitchen and placed it in Ray's hands. "I'm not letting you boys rush out of here and miss the best part of the meal, so I've wrapped up what's left of tonight's special dessert in case either of you get peckish later on. It's your favorite, Benton, the flan tart with mixed berries."

Fraser began to protest, but Tilda waved off his objections. "You'd be doing me a favor. There's not much call for adventurous cooking around these parts, and you know how I hate to see good food go to waste."

"Yes, ma'am," Fraser acquiesced with a wry smile at Ray.

Ray was chuckling as they walked out of the restaurant. After they were about halfway down the walk, he said, "Man, I'd put on those pounds my mom is always after me about if I lived here."

Fraser felt his face go hot and looked down, clearing his throat. "Yes, well, she's an excellent cook."

Ray was quiet for a moment. "Frase . . . I didn't mean . . . ."

"It's quite all right, Ray."

Ray looked at him assessingly. "Kind of snuck up on you, huh?"

Fraser shrugged, still not looking directly at his friend, as they turned up the path to his house. "More like ambushed in a dark alley and taken prisoner," he muttered.

Whatever Ray might have replied was lost as he unlocked the door, and Diefenbaker ran outside and jumped up on Ray, barking enthusiastically.

"Jeez, what's up with you!" Ray said, wiping wolf spit off his face with his free hand. "Didn't we get the slobber part of the reunion out of the way a couple hours ago?"

Fraser took the bag in one hand, simultaneously pushing Diefenbaker down with the other. "Diefenbaker! Get off Ray! It's not a wolf bag, after all."

Leading the way inside, Fraser took some paper napkins from a stack sitting on the coffee table in the living room, and brought them over to Ray. "I'm afraid this display has rather less to do with Diefenbaker's admitted fondness for you than for the bag Tilda pressed on us as we were leaving."

Diefenbaker barked again, this time at Fraser.

"Well, you should have thought of that before the incident that got you banned from Mathilde's. If you're still hungry, why don't you take yourself outside and hunt for something, or have you
somehow forgotten you're a wolf?"

Diefenbaker took one last wistful look at the tantalizing bag, then trotted to the open door, deliberately stepping on Fraser's foot as he passed.

Ray snickered. "Dief's the same as ever."

"Perhaps," said Fraser, carrying the bag into the kitchen. "Or perhaps he's just taken a cue from me and has foregone all efforts at self control," he muttered to himself.

Setting the bag on the kitchen counter, he had only managed to turn halfway around before a sudden odd feeling came over him. He wasn't sure whether what he was feeling was anxiety or exhaustion or some other wholly unidentifiable sensation, but whatever it was, it seemed to have robbed him for the moment of the ability to move.

He leaned on the counter, hands pressed heavily against the beige-tiled surface, and stared blankly into the stainless steel sink. He could hear a faint inner voice - a particularly irritating inner voice - telling him that he had company and that Ray must surely be wondering why he was taking so long, but for once, politeness gave way in the face of this sudden and inexplicable paralysis.

It was tempting to stay in the kitchen rather than return to the living room and face whatever probably unanswerable questions Ray was sure to have for him. Though of course, staying would be only a temporary shelter at best, since Ray would soon come looking for him. He rejected, outright, the third option - that of slipping out the kitchen door and into the night - as too melodramatic by far. He snorted, briefly amused at himself. As if he wasn't already being incredibly melodramatic. Self-indulgent. Ridiculous. Unfortunately even that realization didn't bring him any closer to stepping away from the counter.

The decision of what to do next was taken out of his hands in the next moment when Ray walked into the kitchen, boot heels making a hollow sound on the scuffed linoleum floor.

"You making tea, Fraser? Because I wouldn't mind a cup if you are."

Automatically, Fraser reached for the kettle on the back burner and started to fill it from a blue jug of filtered water.

"Hey, where can I dump this stuff?"

He turned around to find Ray standing in the middle of the room, holding up two empty beer bottles in his right hand and with an old pizza delivery box tucked under his left arm.

"There's a recycling bin," Fraser said, indicating the hutch to the right of the back door. "And the container beside it is for the . . . um . . . cardboard box."

Ray placed the bottles carefully on top of the pile of glass and metal, then turned back to Fraser. "What about garbage? There's something kind of curly and green here that might have actually been food at one point, although I wouldn't bet on it."

He lifted the lid of the box, and Fraser peered inside. "Ah. Yes, that once was something much like food. Anchovy and pineapple pizza, to be precise. The garbage can is under the counter there. Dief has a regrettable tendency to get into it if I leave it out."

"I guess Dief has more sense than to eat anchovy and pineapple pizza, huh?" Ray said, making a face as he tipped the greenish slice into the garbage can and slammed the lid shut, then stuffed the box in the bin. "What made you order something that disgusting?"
He paused for a moment, and then as happened all too frequently when he was around Ray, his id took control of his vocal cords. "I was homesick, Ray."

"Yeah?" Ray said, cocking his head to one side. "You got a lot of anchovies and pineapples up in the Yukon?"

"In point of fact, no. As I'm sure you're aware, pineapples are found primarily in tropical regions, and although the north has been experiencing a particularly mild . . . ."

"Fraser."

"Sorry." He leaned back against the edge of the sink and crossed his arms over his chest. "I was homesick for . . . Chicago."

Ray didn't say anything right away, and Fraser began to get a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. He could remember quite vividly standing on a frozen reservoir in Chicago and sharing his feeling of homesickness with Ray. That uncharacteristic admission had been followed almost immediately by a chain of events that had all but ripped his world apart. Ordinarily, he wasn't a superstitious man, but he worried for a moment that the simple act of putting a name to part of what was churning away inside would draw unwanted attention from the universe.

However, this time there was no dead body being pulled up from a hole in the ice. There was only Ray, nodding slowly, then reaching over to touch Fraser's arm briefly.

"Yeah, I get that. I think I get that. Me, I've been drinking enough tea over the past couple years to float a caribou."

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"Where do you want to start? Biggest to smallest, or smallest to biggest, or just random, or maybe alphabetical order?" Ray asked after they had settled onto the couch with mugs of tea.

"Excuse me?"

"Your presents," Ray said, nodding at the assortment of parcels leaned against the far wall. "What do you want to open first?"

He looked at the packages, and felt an odd warmth in his chest, and a tightness in the back of his throat. "I . . . why don't you choose for me, Ray?" he said quietly.

Ray looked at him, then at the packages, and nodded. "Sure. Sure, I can do that." He went over and started dragging things over to the coffee table, handing Fraser a light-weight box wrapped in what appeared to be the Chicago Sun-Times Sunday comics from the previous week. "This one's from Welsh."

Fraser ripped open the wrapping, and opening the box, lifted out a dark blue baseball cap with the words 'Chicago Police Department' blazoned across it.

"He said that was to remind you of auld lang syne," Ray said. "And that I was supposed to tell you that any time you want to come back and liaise, you'd be more than welcome."

"That's very kind of him," Fraser said, pretending to study the cap closely so Ray wouldn't notice he was blinking rapidly.

"Kind, hell! More like self interest. Our solve rate's gone way down since you left. This is from
Mort.

This time the wrapping was a large, blue, felt-like disposable towel of the type often used in the morgue, taped down with surgical tape. Inside were three books. "Criminal Poisoning: An Investigational Guide for Law Enforcement, Toxicologists, Forensic Scientists, and Attorneys; The Poisons and Antidotes Sourcebook; and Dead Reckoning The Art of Forensic Detection," he read out. "I'm sure these will be extraordinarily useful should we ever have a murder to investigate," he said drily.

Ray cocked his head. "You almost sound like you'd like that."

"Of course not!" Fraser exclaimed, horrified. "It's just . . . well, the closest anything's come to requiring actual police work in months was when a fire broke out at Stevensen's Art Supply three days ago. However, Constable Zhertak's preliminary report indicates that all available evidence points to this being nothing more than an unfortunate accident."

Ray leaned back against the couch and studied him with narrowed eyes. "But you don't think so, do you?"

Fraser shrugged. "No. However, I'm not sure I can justify reallocating human resources based on what's really nothing more than a hunch on my part."

"You've got a hunch about this?"

"So it would appear."

"Jeez, go for it then! What the hell else has anybody got going on? Your Mounties too busy judging quilting competitions?"

"No, not this month. The quilting competition isn't until January." Fraser said, deadpan. For a moment he saw outrage start to spread over Ray's face, and then he suddenly looked at Fraser keenly. Fraser couldn't keep a corner of his mouth from twitching upward, and Ray shook his head, laughing.

"You almost had me there! Good one. Okay, seriously. Would it hurt to do some checking? It's not like you to just let it go. What triggered your hunch?"

"I'm . . . not sure," he said, closing his eyes for a moment, trying to identify what it was that had made him suspicious. He remembered Constable Zhertak standing in his office, having come straight from the scene, discussing the probable cause. There had been something . . . something . . . . He found himself inhaling deeply, searching for a long-gone scent. "A smell. There was an odd scent lingering on Constable Zhertak's clothing."

"Accelerant?" Ray asked quickly.

Fraser frowned. "Possibly. In all honesty I can't remember exactly what it was, just that it seemed both familiar and out of place."

"Then you've got to check it out."

"I suppose it wouldn't hurt."

Ray nodded. "Yeah. Never hurts to check. Okay, so, next up, Elaine sent you this." He handed Fraser a small, flat parcel.
Fraser tore open the handsome gold gift-wrap to find . . . "A first-aid kit?"

"There's a card, I think," Ray said, nodding.

"So there is." Opening the card tucked into the small case he started to smile. "If you get beaten up in Canada anywhere near as often as you did in Chicago, this will come in handy. Love, Elaine." His throat wanted to close up, and he had to clear it. "How thoughtful of her."

"Elaine's a nice girl. Woman, I mean," Ray amended sheepishly. "Anyway. Want the big one now?"

At Fraser's nod, Ray handed over a large, soft, parcel wrapped in a white plastic garbage bag that smelled faintly of baby powder.

"From Francesca?" Ray nodded, and Fraser undid the twist-tie that held the bag closed and pulled out a large afghan blanket. It was knitted in a sort of mottled shade of green, not very expertly, and was distinctly lop-sided. He noticed that there was some sort of pattern on it in brown yarn, and shook it out to try and determine what it was. After a moment he looked back at Ray, somewhat perplexed. "A . . . dog? With horns?"

Ray laughed. "That's what I thought, too. She poked me with her knitting needles and informed me that it was a moose."

Fraser looked at it again, trying gamely to see the correct animal. Dief whined. Fraser choked back a laugh. "No, Diefenbaker, I promise I won't tie antlers to your head."

Dief made a satisfied-sounding noise. Ray handed Fraser a small, cylindrical package.

"This one's from Huey and Dewey. Along with free passes to the comedy club if you're ever in town."

Fraser opened the package and looked at the can in his hand somewhat perplexed. "Mixed nuts?"

Ray chuckled. "It's probably their way of describing themselves." He looked at the can. "Any cashews in there?"

Fraser automatically began unscrewing the lid to check, and then as he removed it, he gasped in surprise as three long, narrow snakes leapt out of the can and writhed on the floor. It took him only a moment to realize he'd been taken in by the gag-gift, but Diefenbaker leapt up, snarling and barking and pounced on one of the 'threatening creatures' and shook it madly in his jaws, only to stop suddenly with a perplexed look on his face and let the mouthful of fabric and spring-steel fall to the ground.

By that point Ray was laughing hysterically, and Fraser couldn't help but do so as well. After several moments they finally managed to control themselves, aided by gulps of cooling tea, though Fraser found himself giggling again as Dief gave an offended whuff and turned his back to them.

"Think he'll ever forgive us?" Ray whispered.

"Us? Probably. Huey and Dewey, never," Fraser whispered back. "I'll have to get him a treat tomorrow to make it up to him."

Ray clapped his hand to his forehead. "Treats! Duh! Frannie sent a care package of treats and toys for him, but I forgot it out in the car, sorry. I'll go get it."

He returned moments later with two boxes. One he put down on the floor with a grin. "Go for it, guy," he said as Dief started to rip and tear at the wrapping, then he turned to Fraser, holding out the
second box. "This is from me," he said, quickly, shoving the box toward Fraser with a slight flush on his face.

Fraser took the box. The paper was scarlet. The color of his dress uniform tunic. He tried not to think about that as he opened it, carefully. And stared at what the paper had hidden. "Ray!"

Ray looked at him with an odd smile. "It's a GPS. I, um, saw it in the Hammacher-Schlemmer catalog and thought of you. This way you always know where you are, even if there's no sun or stars to look at to find your way."

Looking down at the GPS in his hands, he knew Ray was waiting for a response, would surely believe his present had been unwelcome if he remained silent, but he was unable to speak. He couldn't find the words to express just how apt this gift was, how greatly he was in need of . . . something just like this.

The uncomfortable silence continued. He knew that if he were to turn and look at Ray's face right now, he'd see nothing but concern there, but that was the last thing he wanted to see. For God's sake. Five hours since Ray had shown up on his doorstep, and he'd done little but act like he was brain-damaged, making the possibility of them having the kind of reunion he'd sometimes allowed himself to fantasize about over the years even less likely to occur, assuming 'less likely than no chance at all' was even a valid category.

He rubbed his thumbs along the edge of the unit, noting its similarity in size and weight to the television remote control which was buried somewhere amidst the stack of old newspapers. Beside him, Ray began to tap his fingers impatiently along the edge of his mug, but he didn't speak, giving Fraser more time to say something. His continued silence was ridiculous. Surely a simple acknowledgment, some indication of how much he truly appreciated these gifts - Ray's in particular - wasn't beyond his capabilities.

"Thank you," he finally said, still looking down, appalled at the difficulty he'd had with even such a punctilious expression of gratitude. "It's all . . . it's wonderful, Ray. This especially."

"Yeah?" Ray said, sounding for all the world like he did right before he started to lay into someone in an interrogation. "Cause if you're just saying that to be polite, I could take this back where I got it and maybe get you a miniature inukshuk from the airport instead."

Fraser glanced up at Ray and saw the grin on his friend's face. He tried to respond in kind, to make something about the day seem normal, but the small laugh he attempted sounded harsh even to his own ears. Choked. Almost a . . . sob. He swallowed once, hard, driving the unnervingly intense emotion back down inside.

Then, unexpectedly, he felt the touch of Ray's hand against the back of his neck, and he was almost undone. He squeezed his eyes tightly and dropped his head again, hoping as he had when he was just a small child that if he closed his eyes, he would become invisible.

More silence, then Ray spoke. Softly. Almost tenderly. "Things aren't going so great here, are they, buddy?"

Another half-laugh, half-sob. "What makes you think that?"

"Call it a hunch," Ray said, even more gently, his hand rubbing the back of Fraser's neck in a soothing motion.

"You, ah . . . ." Fraser cleared his throat, still unable to look at Ray. "You've always had amazingly
"accurate hunches."

"Yeah," Ray said simply. "You want to talk about it?"

He shook his head, fast, and firmly. "No."

"No?" Ray asked, not sounding shocked, or angry, but only as if he wanted to be sure.

"No, not . . . yet."

Fraser felt rather than saw Ray nod.

"Yeah. Okay. Not a problem." He sat quietly for a moment, and then yawned, stretching ostentatiously. "What say maybe we turn in early? I'm pretty tired from the drive. Funny how just sitting in one place all day can wear you out."

Fraser snorted. "Yes. Yes, it is. Let me show you where the bathroom is, and you can wash up."

"Sold!" Ray said, standing up and lifting the smaller of his travel bags. "Think I could take a shower? It'd be nice to get some of the road-dirt off."

"Certainly," Fraser said, trying with a vague frisson of panic to remember when the last time he'd cleaned the bathroom was. Last week, after bathing Dief. Right. Okay. It should be livable. He had the uncomfortable sensation that his grandmother's ghost was standing at his shoulder glowering at him. Fortunately, unlike her, Ray wasn't known for excessive fussiness. It suddenly dawned on him that he also needed to change the bed linens, and he was so rattled that he suddenly had absolutely no idea if he even had any clean sheets, or if his extra set was wadded up in the laundry basket. With some trepidation he opened the linen closet to get Ray a towel, and was relieved to see his spare sheets folded and on the shelf, thank God.

As soon as Ray was safely ensconced in the bathroom, he dashed back to the linen closet to get the fresh sheets and quickly made the bed. He wasn't able to find any clean pillowcases, but after a careful inspection of his pillows, he concluded that the lower one was spotless and perfectly acceptable for a guest's use. Once the bed was made, he straightened up the rest of his room a little. Fortunately it was already neater than the living room, where he spent most of his time, and ate most of his meals. He then retrieved Ray's second bag and placed it at the foot of the bed. With a quick look around, he decided that the room would do, and headed out to get their mugs and take them to the kitchen to clean up. He put them in the sink, with the other dishes that had accumulated since the night before.

Shaking his head, he grabbed the dishwashing soap and turned on the hot water. A moment later, a startled yelp from the direction of the bathroom made him shut the water off just as quickly and dash across the house to the bathroom door.

"Ray?" he called out.

There was no answer, though he could hear the sound of the shower. For a moment he hesitated, but the lack of response overruled his natural reserve. With a perfunctory knock he opened the door. The bathroom was full of steam, the shower was still running. There was no answer from behind the navy blue shower curtain.

"Ray?" He said, a little louder, a little more concerned. "Ray?"

To his relief, at the third repetition the curtain opened and Ray looked out, wet, soapy, and puzzled. "What's up, Fraser?"
"You . . . ah, yelped. I was concerned."

Ray smiled. "Yeah, I did. Sorry, I didn't know you could hear me. The water went cold for a minute there and I just about froze my nuts off before it decided to be hot again. I forgot that the plumbing in old houses sometimes does that. Don't worry, I'm fine."

"I'm terribly sorry," Fraser said, feeling his face heat as he realized he'd been responsible for the sudden change in water temperature. Living alone, he was no longer used to having to think of such things. "I thoughtlessly ran water in the kitchen."

Ray shrugged, and smiled. "No problem. Wasn't the first time I've had a cold shower, probably won't be the last," he said with a wink, pulling the curtain back into place.

Fraser stood for a moment longer, staring at the space where Ray had just been, seeing not the embossed stripes of the blue vinyl curtain, but instead Ray's wet, naked body. He certainly seemed very fine. Fit. He meant fit. Very. Fit. He shook his head, frowning, as he pulled the door closed and went back to the kitchen to see if there was enough water in the sink to at least wash the dishes. He could rinse them after Ray finished. And doing dishes should keep his mind from straying to inappropriate paths.

Fraser had finished the dishes and was wiping crumbs and old cooking-spills from the counters when Ray emerged fifteen minutes later, clad in a pair of gray sweatpants and a t-shirt, his hair towel-dried into a wild tangle.

"So, uh, where am I sleeping?" he asked, rubbing the back of his neck with one hand and yawning widely.

"I have the room all ready for you," Fraser said, rinsing the sponge under the tap and drying his hands. "I took the liberty of putting your bag in there already."

"You didn't have to do that," Ray said. "But thanks. Lead on, Macbeth."

Fraser somehow resisted correcting him, and led him past the still-steamy bathroom to his own room. "Here you are."

Ray looked around, then looked at Fraser. "Never thought I'd see you with an actual guest room. Guess you figured Maggie'd need a place to stay when she comes to visit, huh?"

Fraser nodded. He knew Ray well enough to know he'd have a fight on his hands if he told him whose room it was. And in any case, he would have put Maggie in his room had her visit actually occurred, so it wasn't a lie. Not really. "Sleep well, Ray. I'll see you in the morning."

Ray nodded and headed for the bed, then stopped and looked back at him. "You turning in?"

"Not just yet," Fraser said. "It's a bit early for me, though I understand that between the drive, and the time difference you're quite worn-out."

"You sure you don't want me to stay up?" Ray offered, a faint frown creasing his forehead. "Because I could. Just give me some coffee."

"I'm sure, Ray. We'll have plenty of time to talk once you're rested. And in any case, there's a hockey game on."

Ray grinned. "Oh, well, why didn't you say so? I mean, hockey being the national religion and all, I wouldn't want to keep you from attending services. Night, then. See you in the morning."
Fraser nodded and left, closing the door quietly behind himself. He could hear the faint creak of the bed as Ray got into it. He stood there in the hall for a moment, eyes closed, then sighed soundlessly and headed back to the living room. He turned on the television, found the game, and turned the sound down most of the way, but not so far that Ray couldn’t hear it a little. He remembered that when he’d first moved to town, the intense quiet of the nights after years in Chicago had made it somewhat difficult to get to sleep. Hopefully the sound of the television would act as white noise for Ray.

Half an hour later he found himself yawning, despite the excitement of the play. The game was on tape delay, and he had inadvertently learned the final outcome when he switched channels during the first intermission. Not even Jarome Iginla's sparkling play this evening could make up for his knowledge that Calgary's defeat was already assured. He got up and went into the bathroom, brushed his teeth, and relieved himself. As he started to step out of his jeans so he could change, he belatedly realized that he had failed to get a blanket, or anything else to wear from his room before putting Ray to bed in it.

"Proper preparation my ass," he muttered under his breath. It looked as if he was going to spend the night on the couch in his clothes. Without a blanket. With a sigh he turned off the television, took off his shoes and stretched out on the couch, using one of the arm-cushions for a pillow. He had to tuck his knees up a bit, since it wasn’t a particularly long couch. It was also rather too narrow for a grown man. An all too grown man.

God. How could he have let this happen? He thought about Ray, who seemed to be happy, healthy, and enjoying his life, and it was obvious that he’d somehow let his own life slip out of his control. It shocked him to realize that. How had he let himself get so. . . isolated? Why hadn't he noticed, for God's sake? He rubbed his thumb across the bridge of his nose and shivered a little. The house seemed strangely chilly, but he could hear the furnace running so he knew it was on. He hoped Ray was warm enough.

It was strange how alone he could feel with someone else in the house. Unbidden, he remembered sleeping with Ray night after night under the white dome of a tent as they meandered across the arctic in search of a myth. Remembered sleeping with Ray in a hammock on a frozen cliff, in bedrolls in a female suspect's back yard, in twin berths on a ship in the Great Lakes, and in an unfurnished apartment in Chicago as they guarded a gentle, exploited savant. Never before had there been a closed door between them. That seemed, somehow, to symbolize everything that had gone wrong in his life since he’d left Chicago behind. Since he'd closed that door.

Heat burned in his eyes, stung his nose, tightened his throat, and he spread his hand across his face, as if that could contain his pain. After a few moments he felt something nudge his hand, heard a soft whine, and smelled slightly-stale breath. He lowered his hand to find Dief staring at him, for once not looking superior, or disdainful, but with real concern and affection in his eyes. He had something trailing from his mouth, and after a moment Fraser couldn't help but give a choked-off laugh as he realized that Dief had brought over the hideous afghan that Francesca had made for him.

"Thank you," he said softly as he pulled the afghan over himself.

Dief whuffed, and lay down next to the couch, his head just within reach of Fraser's hand. Taking the hint, Fraser reached down and ruffled his fingers through Dief's thick fur, and scratched his ears.

* * *

The first time Ray awoke, it was to the kind of darkness and silence that he hadn't encountered since his travels in the far north. Way warmer though, he thought contentedly, nestling beneath the down comforter and slipped back off to sleep. The second time he woke, the house was still quiet, but the
weak morning sunlight had finally started to push its way in through the bedroom windows.

He reached over to the bedside table for his glasses, and took a look at the alarm clock. Eight-thirty? That would be . . . ten-thirty, his time. Man, he hadn't slept this late in months. Knowing Fraser, he'd already been up for hours, keeping quiet for his sake. Well, no reason that he had to tiptoe around in his own house. Now that Ray was really awake, there was no reason to stay in bed . . . except that he was really kind of liking the whole idea of being in Fraser's bed.

That was something they were going to need to talk about if he could ever force himself to leave the warmth of the bed and get up and dressed for the day. No way was this a guest room, not unless all Fraser's houseguests smelled exactly like him. It was probably weird to be able to pick your ex-partner out of a line-up by smell alone, but he'd had an intensive training period. First there had been the Quest. Spending that much time in close-quarters with someone who didn't have regular bathing opportunities tended to make you pretty familiar with the way he smelled.

Then, as soon as they'd returned from their adventure, Ray had helped Fraser get himself sorted out for his move to Saskatchewan. It all happened pretty fast. Too fast for Ray to get around to unpacking his own things from the trip. Or maybe not too fast, exactly. Ray just hadn't wanted to unpack, hadn't wanted to put that particular experience in one of those boxes marked 'done' he seemed to have been collecting over the years.

After Fraser had left town for good, though, there really wasn't any good reason to keep a set of duffle bags packed and ready by the front door. He started to unpack and then about halfway through the first bag, he came across one of Fraser's henleys crammed in with his own things. He was about to throw it into the laundry pile with the rest of his clothes, but as he took it out of the bag, the lingering scent of Fraser on the shirt triggered such a feeling of loneliness in him - an almost physical hunger for his friend - that he couldn't bring himself to wash the damned thing and remove what seemed to be the last link between the two of them.

The henley sat draped over a chair in the bedroom for a few days, but one night after an absolutely crap day when he was really missing Fraser, he took the shirt to bed with him and wrapped it around his pillow before going to sleep. Totally adolescent move, but it helped a little. Made him feel not quite so alone. A few days later, jerking off with his face buried in that shirt-wrapped pillow, he realized that his behavior was a little obsessive even for him, so he'd tossed the shirt in the hamper, but he was never going to forget that Fraser scent. No way did he want to, either.

Ray wallowed for another minute. Turned his face into the pillow and inhaled deeply. Yeah, that was Fraser all right. He felt like he'd come home or something. Yeah. That was it. That was the thing that had been off, been missing, for two years. He was supposed to be with Fraser. Or Fraser was supposed to be with him. Either way, same thing. They weren't supposed to be in different places, damn it.

He took another sniff, pulling the pillow into his arms, nuzzling it a little, feeling that early-morning wanna-get-off kind of glow starting, and . . . oohkay. No. That was kind of a wrong thing to be feeling while sniffing Fraser's pillow. A little too enthusiastic. Fraser would probably not appreciate having to do that kind of laundry. He guessed that was his body's way of saying 'hey, been too long!' Maybe he should do something about that later in the shower.

Speaking of Fraser, what kind of nitwit put the guest in his own bed? Freak. He'd probably figured that Ray wouldn't have taken the bed if he'd known it was his, and he was right about that. Or at least he wouldn't have taken it all by himself. But no matter how long Fraser droned on about politeness and etiquette and whatever the hell else, he wasn't putting Fraser out of his bed tonight. How bad could the other room be?
He threw the covers off and sat up, planted his feet firmly on the floor, then took off his glasses for a second and scrubbed his face with the flat of his palm. He put his glasses back on and then took a pair of sweat pants from his bag and tugged them up over his hips, pulled on a sweatshirt, and opened the bedroom door.

He stood in the narrow hallway for a few seconds, listening for a sign that Fraser was up and about. Apart from the soft hum of the furnace, the house was still quiet. Not even a sound from the wolf, which maybe meant that Fraser'd taken Dief out for a walk or something.

Ray glanced at the closed door on the other side of the hallway. The real guest room. He shook his head and sighed. Maybe he should just move his stuff over there now. Make it harder for Fraser to raise any dumb objections later on. He walked the few steps separating the two rooms and turned the door knob.

Okay. He knew Fraser was used to roughing it, but this was nutty.

The room was cold from being closed up, and there wasn't a stick of furniture in it. The only things in the room, in fact, were a few cardboard boxes and the arctic camping gear they'd used on their trip. Nothing else, not even a bedroll on the floor, so he was pretty sure Fraser hadn't slept in here last night.

Ray walked out into the living room. The first thing he saw was Dief, sprawled out on the rug, with a single open eye fixed on him.

"Hey, boy," he said quietly. "Where's our Mountie?"

Apparently not willing to move any more than necessary, Dief glanced to one side and made a sound that was almost a moan, and Ray followed the direction of his gaze.

Fraser. Still fast asleep on a couch that looked to be at least a half foot too short for him. He had his face half buried under his right arm, probably to block the light. Ray noticed yet again that his hair was longer than he'd ever worn it in Chicago. At the moment it was a tousled mess - covering his forehead, curling around his ears and the back of his neck. He nearly reached out to smooth it back to a more familiar configuration, then realized what he was doing and stopped.

As he watched, Fraser shifted a little uncomfortably in his sleep. Looked like he was shivering a little, too, except the thought of any conditions being too cold for Fraser short of a full-scale blizzard or a dunk in the Beaufort Sea was almost too weird for him to contemplate. But . . . people change. Or maybe he never really had been that impervious to cold, just damned good at ignoring it.

The slight trembling continued. Ray could see that Fraser's sweatshirt had hiked halfway up his chest sometime during the night, exposing pale, smooth skin all the way around. His left arm was curled protectively around his stomach, as if he were trying to warm himself. He took a step closer and saw that the goofy-looking moose afghan Frannie had made for him lay crumpled on the floor next to the couch. Okay, the least he could do was cover him up a little.

He knelt down and lifted the afghan off the floor, rested it on his knee, and sighed. He hadn't disregarded anything Fraser had said - or half-said - the night before. Fraser was unhappy. Really unhappy. And he felt rotten that Fraser was feeling so bad about his life and hadn't been able to say anything to Ray about it before this. But none of that altered the fact that all he wanted to freaking do was just stand here and look. Just like he'd been wanting to do for the past two years.

And changes or no changes, looking at Fraser made him feel . . . good. He was feeling that same spreading warmth he'd felt a few minutes earlier while snuggling Fraser's pillow, that groin-
tightening, skin-flushing tingle. Suddenly it hit him. He dropped the afghan again and found himself staring at Fraser open-mouthed. This wasn't just a generic, horndog urge to get his rocks off first thing in the morning. This was directly related to his feelings for Fraser.

How could he not have known . . . this? He knew he'd missed Fraser. Missed him every damned day. He honestly couldn't remember a day going by in the past two years that he hadn't thought of Fraser at least once. Kind of like the way he used to think about Stella. Or maybe exactly like that.

Holy shit. Considering all of the frickin' clues he'd had staring him in the face, how could it have taken him this long to put all the pieces together? Some detective he was. For God's sake, he'd slept with Fraser's shirt wrapped around his pillow, and he'd gotten turned on! What was that? Just some giant coincidence? How could he have not figured out that something more than missing his partner was going on? What kind of a moron was he?

He guessed he was just so used to thinking of Fraser as his friend and partner that the other stuff had kind of slipped in under his radar. Thinking that took a little of the 'hey stupid!' sting away, in any case. He shook his head, then stood up. Okay. Afghan. Feed the wolf. Make coffee. Worry about the rest of this later.

Easier said than done. He laid the afghan over Fraser and automatically started to tuck it around him a little, but when his fingertips brushed against Fraser's side . . . God, that was enough to put all thoughts of fixing breakfast for the wolf on the back burner, at least for the time being.

Connection. Warmth. Fraser's skin against his own. Whatever it was that was feeling so good here, he wanted more of it. He spread his fingers on Fraser's side, slowly. Told himself it would only be for a second or two, no longer than it would take to feel the rise and fall of Fraser's breath just once. But the second or two became a minute, and that minute showed no sign of ending, and Ray was still kneeling on the rug watching him sleep when Fraser blinked his eyes once and was suddenly - immediately - awake.

"Ray?" A small frown creased his brow. "Is something wrong?"

Ray yanked his hand away, wondering what Fraser would say if he replied, 'yeah, your ex-partner's gone completely insane.' "No, no problem. I was just . . . um . . . the afghan. It'd fallen on the floor, so . . . ."

"Ah, I see. Thank you then." Fraser looked around, and his eyes widened suddenly. "Good lord, Ray! I had no idea it was so late!" he said, sitting up, the afghan falling off again as he scrubbed his hands over his face and through his hair, leaving it looking kind of surprised.

Ray shook his head. "I just got up myself, Fraser, don't worry about it. I was just going to go see if you had any coffee, and maybe feed Dief."

"You certainly don't have to take care of Diefenbaker for me, and I do have coffee on hand, if you don't mind instant."

"Have I ever minded instant?" Ray asked. "So long as you've got sugar, I'm good."

"Not a problem." Fraser stood up and headed for the kitchen. Ray, following, couldn't help but notice the rear view, which he'd once overheard Frannie raving about as 'one of the greatest tushes on earth.' Yeah. Soft. Round. Grab-able. He shook his head, smiling.

"Something amusing, Ray?" Fraser asked, glancing back at him.

"Huh? Uh, no. Just . . . happy to be here."
That drew a smile, a slightly embarrassed one, but a smile. It was nice to see. Fraser got out the jar of coffee, and then picked up the teakettle and emptied it, refilling it with fresh water before putting it on the stove.

"Hot water coming up," he said as he reached to turn the burner on, he paused for a moment and looked at his sink, and then back at Ray with a tiny smile. "Unless you'd rather just use the tap?"

Ray laughed. "Nah, not today. I'll wait for the real stuff." He glanced around. "What have you got around here for breakfast?"

Fraser hesitated for a moment. "Well, I'm afraid that you've caught me slightly understocked. I had planned to do some grocery shopping today."

"No problem," Ray said. "I know I surprised you so beggars can't be choosers." He suddenly remembered the tart they'd brought home from Mathilde's last night, and looked around for it. It wasn't on the counter. Of course it wasn't. It was in the fridge. He swung open the refrigerator door and surveyed the fairly pitiful contents of Fraser's refrigerator.

He wasn't kidding he needed to go grocery shopping. He had a third of a quart of milk, three sticks of butter, the tail-end of a block of cheese, several plastic containers of what might be leftovers but judging from the interesting colors of the contents opening them might be best left to a HazMat team. Half a loaf of bread, an industrial sized jar of peanut butter, and several bottles of beer. That appeared to be it. No tart, though. Definitely.

It suddenly dawned on Ray that he'd gone to bed quite a while before Fraser had. And Fraser had probably gotten hungry and eaten it while he was watching that hockey game Ray had heard faintly through the door. "Well, no problem," he said quickly, not wanting to make Fraser feel guilty for not sharing by mentioning it. Besides, they shouldn't eat dessert for breakfast anyway. "We can take my car and head to the store, pick up some stuff. Bagels. Fruit. Yogurt. Okay?"

Fraser nodded. "Certainly. I'll just feed Dief, and then we can go."

Yawning, he got a can of dog-food out of a cupboard and opened it, spooned its contents into a large metal dish, added a scoop of kibble from a covered twenty-gallon plastic bucket by the door, then mixed it all together before putting it down on a plastic mat.

To Ray's surprise, Dief hadn't appeared as soon as the can was opened. Fraser seemed a little surprised, too.

"Dief?" he called. "Diefenbaker?"

In answer, they both heard a low groaning sound. Fraser went to the kitchen door and looked out. Ray followed. Dief hadn't budged from his place on the rug near the couch. Fraser frowned.

"What's wrong, Dief?"

Dief groaned again. Ray had never seen Dief look green before, but he definitely did now. Fraser crossed the room quickly to kneel beside the wolf. "Dief? Are you sick?" He put a hand on Dief's side, and incurred a yelp. He looked up at Ray, fear in his gaze. "Large dogs can sometimes get intestinal torsion. I've got to get him to the vet as soon as possible. Would you go in the kitchen and get a large trash bag from under the sink, and then spread it out in the back of the Suburban? The keys are on the hook by the kitchen door."

Ray nodded and headed into the kitchen. As he leaned down to get a garbage bag out of the cabinet, something under the kitchen table caught his eye. A piece of brown paper bag. Shredded. He looked
closer, and saw crust crumbs, smears of purple and red, a dollop of some creamy substance. Oops. Unless Fraser had taken to eating dessert under the table without a fork, he'd just mentally convicted his best friend of gluttony based on circumstantial evidence.

"Um, Fraser?" he called out.

"What?" Fraser called back, still sounding a bit panicked.

"I think I figured out Dief's problem. C'mere."

A moment later Fraser was in the doorway. "Ray, we really don't have time for . . . ." His voice trailed off as Ray pointed under the table. He ducked down, studied the evidence, sighed, and shook his head. "Oh for God's sake!" He went to stand in the doorway, staring at Dief with a scowl. "Diefenbaker!"

Ray, standing next to him, had to put his hand over his mouth to keep from laughing out loud. Fraser sounded exactly, exactly like his dad always had every time he'd called Ray on the carpet for some transgression or other, that perfect parental combination of disgust, dismay, disbelief, and disappointment, all mixed with a healthy dose of annoyance.

"You are a disgrace to your species," Fraser said severely. "Ray was looking forward to that! What have you got to say for yourself?"

Dief whined apologetically, eyeing Ray. Fraser nudged Ray with his elbow. "Say something!" he hissed.

"What? Uh. . . Dief, that was pretty uncool. Don't do it again," Ray managed to say with a mostly-straight face.

Fraser shook his head. "All right. You are going out in the dog run, because we both know the effect that rich desserts have on your digestive system, and I am not cleaning up after you. Come on. Up. I know you can walk."

Dief reluctantly got to his feet and waddled toward the kitchen. Fraser went to the back door and unlocked it, letting Dief out and then walking barefoot across the snow-spotted yard to let him into an area partitioned off with chain-link fencing. When he came back he brushed the soles of his feet off on the mat with a little shiver. "I suppose I should have put my shoes on."

"Yeah, you'll probably catch your death of cold," Ray said with a grin. "Like anybody ever died from a cold. We need to get something warm down you. You know what I was thinking? Do you have any oatmeal? Like we had on the adventure?"

Fraser looked thoughtful, and then nodded. "Yes, I believe I do."

"Perfect! We've got breakfast."

"I could make bannock.1" Fraser offered tentatively.

Ray grinned, remembering all the times on the trail that he'd made the oatmeal while Fraser put together bannocks, and cooked them in a little shortening in the cast-iron skillet. "Oh, man, that would be so cool. The kind with raisins?"

"If you like," Fraser said.

Fraser opened a cabinet and got down a familiar-looking tin of oats. Ray grinned and gave him a
thum's up as he got out a church-key to pry up the lid. Ray opened cabinets until he found the pots and pans, getting a pan out for the oatmeal and the cast-iron skillet for the bannocks. Using a mug to measure, he put water in the pot, took off the teakettle, which had just started to whistle, and put the pan on the same burner. Fraser used the same mug to measure the oats into the water, and Ray got the salt off the back of the stove and shook a little in.

Handing Ray a wooden spoon to stir with, Fraser got out a bowl and the flour and soda and raisins and started on the bannock. Remembering that Fraser would need some melted butter, Ray cut a piece of butter into their all-purpose mug, and stuck it in the microwave to melt while Fraser put everything else together. Periodically stirring the oats, he watched, and when he had everything ready, handed Fraser the teakettle to pour hot water into the dry stuff to make the dough.

"You got shortening?" Ray asked, suddenly realizing the bannocks were nearly ready to cook and he hadn't prepped the pan.

"In the cabinet next to the stove," Fraser said, kneading the raisins into the dough.

Ray found the can, dug out a spoonful and dropped it into the skillet, putting it on a medium flame. Three minutes later, Fraser dropped several irregularly-shaped pieces of dough into the melted shortening and they both watched as it puffed and browned, with Fraser turning the pieces with a spatula now and then to brown both sides evenly. Removing those three to a paper towel to drain, he put in the second batch. Ray tasted the oatmeal.

"Needs about five more minutes," he announced.

"Good timing. Why don't you make your coffee? I'll watch the stove."

Ray nodded and went to get another mug. "You want some? Or tea?"

"Tea please," Fraser said.

Ray nodded and found the tea in the cabinet he remembered from the night before. He put Fraser's tea to steep, made coffee for himself, and then got down bowls and plates for their meal. Fraser scooped oatmeal into the bowls, put three bannocks on each plate, and they took everything to the table and sat down to eat.

The first bite of oatmeal brought a flood of memories. He chewed, swallowed, and grinned. "I haven't had this in two years. Never thought I'd miss it, but I guess I did." He picked up a bannock and bit into it, feeling the crisp surface yield to his teeth, enjoying the tough, chewy inside with its sweet bursts of raisin. "These too," he said around his bite. "By the time we got back to civilization I thought I'd never want to see either again, but you know, they kind of grow on you."

"They do. I'd almost forgotten how good they are, myself," Fraser said, tearing off a chunk of bannock with his fingers and putting it in his mouth, clearly savoring it.

As he watched Fraser chew, Ray remembered how shocked he'd been at first, watching Fraser eat on the trail. He used his fingers, even for things like oatmeal, scooping with two fingers, licking them clean after each bite. When they had meat, he often ate it Inuit fashion, putting the whole piece to his mouth and slicing off the bite with his knife closer to his lips than Ray liked to think about. Until then, he'd never realized before what a sensualist Fraser was, and it wasn't just food, either. Sometimes he'd catch Fraser absently stroking the fur of his parka, or working oil into the dog's harnesses with slick fingers moving like he was giving a massage. In Chicago he'd really kept that part of himself under strict control. Now Ray thought he had an inkling as to why. Given half a chance, and no reason to control himself, Fraser . . . didn't.
Some bad part of him wondered if Fraser didn't just need some other outlet for that side of his personality. It was beyond him why Fraser hadn't been snapped up by now by some sturdy Canadian woods-babe. He was sure they had those here, he'd seen a whole bunch since he got to Canada, strong-looking, attractive women in jeans and flannel who reminded him annoyingly of Janet Morse. When Fraser had first landed here he must have been the primest catch on the market, but here he was two years later, clearly without any names on his dance card. Ray just didn't get that.

Now that he thought about it, it wasn't like Fraser had ever had much - well, any - action in Chicago, but Ray had always put that down to there not being anyone his 'type' there. It had been pretty clear that Chicago women had definitely not been Fraser's cup of bark tea. Of course, they hadn't gotten around to having that heart-to-heart talk yet, either. Could be that there had been somebody recently, and it hadn't gone well, and that was part of why Fraser was so miserable. On the other hand, Ray kind of thought that Fraser would have mentioned a girlfriend if he'd had one.

Fraser looked up suddenly. "Is something wrong with your food?" he asked, concerned.

Ray shook his head. "Nah, just spacing out."

It took them only a few minutes to finish eating, and then Fraser collected the dishes and took them to the sink.

"Can I help?" Ray asked.

Fraser shook his head. "Nonsense, Ray, you're a guest. Sit and enjoy your coffee."

Ray shrugged, and picked up his mug as Fraser ran a sink full of soapy water and started washing up. "So what's there to do for fun?"

"There's a great variety of recreational activity hereabouts: hunting, fishing, hiking, pleasure-boating, cross-country skiing, skating, even dogsledding," Fraser said, looking over his shoulder with a grin. "Though I suspect you probably wouldn't consider that last recreational."

"Not on a bet," Ray agreed. He thought about Fraser's list, and realized every one of those activities could be done alone. "But I meant of the more social variety," he said. "Music? Clubs? Theater? Movies?"

"Well, there is an amateur theatrical group in town, and there are frequent performances by local musicians, and if you want more diverse offerings, the drive to Prince Albert isn't bad most of the time."

"Prince Albert?" Ray thought for a moment, remembering the map in his office. "That's what, two and a half, three hours from here?"

Fraser nodded. "About that, yes, in good weather." He dropped his dishtowel, squatted to pick it up, then stood again.

Ray found himself watching Fraser's butt through the whole sequence. He'd never thought he'd say it about anything Frannie-related, but she was so right about that. He was still trying to figure out how to weasel some information out of Fraser about his social life when the doorbell sounded.

"Would you mind seeing who's at the door, Ray?"

"Sure. No problem."

He took one last look at Fraser's backside, biting his lip to keep from laughing at what a freak he'd
become as he went out into the living room to answer the bell.

He was still grinning as he opened the door, but the grin changed to a slight frown as he recognized the caller. Ramrod straight in his blue uniform, clean-shaven, dark blond hair buzzed almost to the scalp, the guy looked like a recruiting poster for the RCMP, if the RCMP had started recruiting from the Aryan Nations to beef up the ranks.

"Constable Zhertak," Ray said, leaning against the door frame.

Zhertak's eyes flickered down, then back up, a slight sneer forming as he took in Ray's casual attire and bare feet, but he gave a single nod of acknowledgment. "I see you managed to find your . . . friend," he said, an odd tone coloring his words.

"Yeah, I did. Thanks for all your 'help' yesterday."

Zhertak's eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly, but his expression remained otherwise neutral. "I'm sure you can understand . . . ."

"Yeah, whatever. So I guess now you're looking for Fraser?"

"Indeed. I need to have a word with Corporal Fraser, if it wouldn't put you out too much to tell him I'm here."

His words were perfectly polite, but Ray found himself bristling a little anyway. If this snot was who Fraser had to work with everyday, no wonder his job was pissing him off. Or at least it would piss Ray off. Hard to tell with Fraser. He used to have a pretty endless capacity for putting up with shit - or at least more than Ray did. Whatever. For all he knew, Zhertak was the nicest guy in the world and he just hadn't noticed yet.

He stepped back and opened the door a little wider. "Come on in. We're letting the heat out."

Zhertak took two steps inside, then looked around the living room and came to a stop. "Perhaps I should just wait here."

Ray glanced around the room. It looked a hell of a lot better than it had the night before, but if Zhertak didn't want to go any further into the house, that was fine with him. Anyway, he was pretty sure he didn't really want to share the sight of Fraser's backside in jeans with anyone, and for sure not with Zhertak.

"Perhaps you should. I'll get Fraser."

He shut the door behind Zhertak, then returned to the kitchen where Fraser was just hanging the hand towel to dry over the edge of the sink.

"Let me guess," he said, smiling broadly. "Ray Vecchio is in the neighborhood and has dropped by for a cup of coffee?"

Ray grinned. "Close, but no cigar. Nah, it's your buddy Zhertak, all dressed up in Mountie blue and looking like he needs a hell of a lot more fiber in his diet."

Almost instantly, Fraser's expression grew serious. He went out to the living room, with Ray following closely behind, and extended his hand in greeting to the man waiting by the entryway.

"Constable, good morning."

Even before Fraser had finished his greeting, a startling transformation began to take place. Apart from the sweater, which was folded up on the couch, he was still wearing the clothes he’d slept in the night before and his hair was barely pushed off his face, but the guy who stood before Ray was the self-assured and exceptionally focused Benton Fraser that he’d been back in Chicago. For a second, Ray wondered if he was just seeing what he wanted to see, but no, Zhertak was standing a little straighter, his fingers twitching at his side like he thought he ought to be saluting or something. All trace of that annoying smugness had disappeared, at least for the moment, and nothing remained but a serious Mountie making a report.

"Good morning, sir. I'm sorry to disturb you and your guest so early on a Sunday morning, but we've just had a report of a fire at Dixon's Masonry, and as I passed the turnoff to your house, I recalled that you'd expressed an interest in the earlier incident, and I thought I should stop and inform you."

"Yorkton relay phoned the detachment?"

"Yes, right after they'd received the initial report. I passed by on my way here, and Dave seems to have everything well in hand. Fire Control's just waiting for Helen to arrive from Hull Lake with an additional unit."

Fraser, still nodding, pushed some magazines aside on the coffee table and Ray watched in shock as he picked up a cell phone. He started to punch in some numbers, then held the phone under his chin, waiting for his party to answer, while he slipped his jacket on and started zipping it up.

'Ray? Perhaps you'd see if . . . ."

"Diefenbaker?" Ray asked, guessing Fraser's next move.

"Yes, if you don't mind. We'll meet you out front."

"No problem. Be back in a second," Ray said, heading into Fraser's room where he shucked his sweatpants and yanked on socks, jeans, and boots, then swung back through the living room to lift his own jacket off the hook by the door and shrug into the sleeves as Fraser suggested to Zhertak that the fires might be related. He headed out back to parole Dief from the dog run, letting Zhertak's claim that the two fires were just 'a freak coincidence' fade into silence as he closed the back door behind him. The wolf whined gratefully, a properly chastened look on his face.

"It's not me you've got to convince," Ray told him. "You just worry about apologizing to Fraser. He wanted some of that tart, you know?"

Dief barked twice, tossing his head back.

"Don't give me that. You were not just trying to help. Besides, you know how much he worries about you. He thought you were really sick."

Ray looked sternly at the wolf, but when Dief put his head down on his foot and whined, he gave up. Being a parent was a lot harder than it looked. "Come on. We've got work to do."

By the time they got around to the front of the house, Fraser had already locked the front door and was waiting for them with the engine running. Zhertak was nowhere to be seen. Ray assumed he'd headed to the scene under his own steam. He let Dief into the cargo compartment in the back of the SUV where he flopped down on top of a coil of rope and some other emergency equipment. Out of habit Ray almost offered to drive before realizing that since he had no idea where they were going, it probably wasn't a great idea.

Three minutes later, watching Fraser handle the Suburban like he'd been born in the driver's seat, he
realized it was also completely unnecessary. "You drive a lot up here?" Ray asked.

Fraser spared him a glance as he turned a corner and Ray could see smoke rising some distance down the road. "Yes. The detachment mandate encompasses both community and what you would probably think of as state patrol functions. We work quite a few accident scenes." His expression tightened a little.

Ray nodded. "Saw my share of those when I was a uniform. They're always tough. What else do you get a lot of up here?"

Fraser's shoulders slumped a little. "Numbers are relative, of course, but statistically domestic violence, property crime and assault are our most common offenses. A good percentage of which also involve alcohol or drugs. It's strange, but I actually had less contact with those aspects of policing in Chicago than I do here, even though you would think it would be just the opposite."

"Well, you said yourself it's not real exciting up here, and you know when some people get bored, they start drinking, drugging, and beating on each other for fun."

Dief suddenly yipped, startling Ray.

Fraser shot a glare back over his shoulder. "You can hold it for three more minutes, we're almost there. And next time you're tempted to make a pig of yourself, remember how you feel at this moment."

Ray stifled a snicker. Then he hoped Dief actually could hold it. He didn't relish being in the car if he couldn't. The plume of smoke got thicker and heavier as they drove, and Ray started to smell it even with all the windows up. Finally they pulled up in front of a graffiti-marked warehouse, one section of which was badly charred, flames still licked feebly here and there. Two small fire trucks were on the scene, pumping water onto the smouldering mess. Zhertak was there, standing well back, like he was afraid he'd get his uniform dirty.

Fraser set the brake, got out, and went around to let Dief out. Dief immediately ran for the nearest patch of grass. Fraser shook his head and started towards the fire trucks. Ray got out, staying on the sidelines so he didn't get in anyone's way. A small crowd had gathered to watch, and Ray instinctively scanned the faces, knowing if Fraser was right and it was arson, that the arsonist might well be in the crowd. No one looked particularly guilty, though a lot of people looked excited. He guessed that was normal. This was probably more excitement than they got all year.

Too many years as a cop had Ray itching to do something, even if it was just helping out with crowd control. But this was Canada, and the crowd was too polite to need much in the way of policing. Everyone stayed at least fifty feet back from the fire - the only exception being one gawky teenage boy in an oversized grey sweatshirt who'd started inching forward to get a better look the minute the firemen turned their heads. Ray grinned. Apparently being a teenager trumped being a Canadian, although he could see the kid move back into the crowd as soon as he noticed Zhertak looking in his direction.

The death glare of that guy was enough to scare just about anyone into hiding. What was up with him? It was a relief when Fraser waved him over. He picked his way through the tangle of hoses, to find Fraser still talking to one of the fire crew.

"Ray, this is Dave Byrnes, head of our fire control unit. Dave, Ray Kowalski, my former partner from Chicago."

Byrnes removed one of his kevlar gloves and tucked it under his arm, then extended his hand to Ray.
"Good meeting you . . . Kowalski, was it? You got any family around here? Name's kind of familiar."

Ray smiled. "Could be. I saw a street with my name on it this morning. Maybe I'm Canadian after all. So . . . you guys find out anything about the fire?"

Fraser shook his head. "Not yet, although the prevailing opinion of the fire unit seems to be the same as Constable Zhertak's - that this is nothing more than a coincidental occurrence."

"You know how it is with some of these older buildings," Dave said to Ray. "Wiring troubles, building materials not up to code. Must be the same in the big city."

Ray was tempted to say that down in the 'big city' the arson guys sort of liked to check things out before they decided a fire was just an accident, but he swallowed the words back down and just nodded.

Dave turned back to Fraser. "Anyway, like I was saying, Corporal - you can dig around in there if you want, but there's no way I'm letting anyone except my own people in there until tomorrow, not even you. Fires are tricky buggers. You never know when they're gonna jump back up and bite you on the ass. Really ought to be left to the experts, if you ask me."

Ray glanced over at Fraser, sure he'd offer some kind of argument that would get Dave to change his mind, but he just nodded once and said "Of course. I understand completely."

Okay, he really didn't get this at all. Fraser'd seemed pretty driven when Zhertak brought the news of this latest fire, and now he was just going to let it go? Ray was wondering if maybe he should say something when he happened to look down and see Fraser's index finger curl in slightly and his thumb extend in the direction of the building.

If this had been anyone else, Ray wouldn't have thought anything of it, but Fraser was just about the least twitchy guy he'd ever known in his life, apart from that eyebrow thing, and nothing he'd seen in the past day pointed to a change in that behavior, at least. Something was up. Oh yeah, something was definitely up. Just because he didn't have a freaking clue about what was going to happen didn't mean a damned thing. Partnering Fraser had always been like this . . . this not quite knowing and knowing completely, all at the same time. God, this was cool - just like old times. It felt almost like waiting for a kiss, a nearly sexual tingle of anticipation.

Then Dave started saying something about a cousin who used to live in Milwaukee in the seventies, and wasn't that pretty close to Chicago?, and maybe Ray knew him . . . but Ray was barely listening, all his attention focused on Fraser. And Fraser looked as if he was listening with great interest to Dave's ramble, except Ray knew - he knew - that Fraser wasn't really paying attention to Dave either. No, Fraser was with him, focused on him, and Ray could almost hear Fraser saying, 'Wait for it. Wait for it, Ray.'

Sure enough, a second later, Diefenbaker - apparently recovered from his ordeal of greed - appeared from out of the blue and made a mad dash past the tape, past the fire engines, and through Dixon's open front door.

Dave whirled around and stared after him. "Jesus! What the hell was that? Don't tell me that was that animal of yours, Corporal."

Ray bit down on his tongue to keep from laughing. He should have known better than to think Fraser would just let it rest. Hell, he never let anything just rest. Then Fraser, who was already on his third apology to Dave for Dief's behavior, met Ray's gaze and . . . oh man, all of a sudden Ray didn't
know whether he wanted to laugh at the knowledge that Fraser'd sent the wolf out on a recon mission or because of the sheer freaking joy of knowing he was in total synch with Fraser again for the first time in way, way too long. It buzzed him, made him want to grab Fraser and kiss him senseless . . . which meant it was probably good that there was a shitload of people standing around watching.

He was dimly aware that there was some kind of Keystone Cops routine going on nearby, with three of Dave's guys all trying to get into the building at the same time and succeeding only in getting themselves wedged in the narrow doorway, but he just couldn't take his eyes off Fraser. And he wanted to say something, maybe 'See? I can wait for it.' or 'Oh yeah, I got it.' or maybe even 'Are you feeling this? Are you feeling what I'm feeling?' and what he was feeling was a kind of warmth that had nothing, and everything, to do with fire - but just then, Dief leaped out through an open window and immediately slunk over to hide behind Ray's legs, and the moment passed. But it had been there . . . and it had felt great.

Fraser knelt down on the ground next to Ray and took Diefenbaker's face in his hands, forcing the wolf to look at him. "You are not to enter buildings without my permission. Is that clear?"

Dief gave an indignant moan in response and wriggled back out of his grasp, tucking himself even more tightly behind Ray's legs. Fraser shook his head and stood up, wiping the mud off the knees of his jeans as he did so. "Once again, Dave, I must apologize on Diefenbaker's behalf. Honestly, I don't know what gets into him sometimes. Ever since he saw a news report in Chicago about a police dog rescuing a litter of kittens from a burning building, he's been impossible in settings like this." He looked down at Dief. "Delusions of grandeur."

Dave frowned. "The wolf watches the news?"

"Generally speaking, no, he doesn't. He finds it disheartening. However, stories about animals hold a special fascination for him."

"Yeah, I get that." Dave nodded. "When I was a kid, we had a dachshund named Sparky who'd come running into the family room every time Alberta Game Farm came on the television. What the hell . . . no-harm, no-foul, right?" he said as he reached down to pat Dief on the head.

With as much dignity as he could muster after being compared to a dachshund - and sparing not a glance for Dave - Diefenbaker got up from the ground and loped off in the direction of the Suburban.

Fraser sighed. "Perhaps this would be a good time to take our leave, as well. Ray?"

"Right behind you," Ray said, instinctively knowing Fraser wanted to go check out the other crime scene.

Fraser turned to look at Byrnes for a moment. "Dave, If you find you require any assistance from the RCMP this afternoon, feel free to call on the services of Bose Zhertak . . . ." Dave glanced doubtfully in the Constable's direction. " . . . or contact me, of course. Let me give you my cell phone number."

After the number was recorded, they took their leave and began to walk to the car, where Dief was waiting impatiently. As soon as Fraser started the engine, Ray started to chuckle. "So what did he find out?"

"Dave Byrnes? You were there, Ray. As yet, there's no . . . ."

Ray shook his head. "You know I'm not talking about Dave. I'm talking about the Pie Pig back
"Diefenbaker?"

"Do you see anyone else in the back of the car?"

Okay, he'd forgotten that along with the coolness of being with Fraser, there was usually a big serving of weird on the side. Of course, that weirdness could be kind of cool in itself, at least when the two of them weren't under fire or sinking in a ghost ship or something.


As they turned the next corner, Stevensen's came into view. Fraser pulled into the empty parking lot and shut off the engine.

"Well, Ray," he began a bit hesitantly. "You must understand that while Diefenbaker's olfactory receptors are far more numerous than our own, he hasn't yet mastered the ability to catalogue accurately all the odors he detects, particularly odors of a chemical nature. However, it would appear that the same unusual smell that I encountered earlier in the week is also present at Dixon's."

The look on Fraser's face as he finished speaking was glum, almost as if he was resigned to the likelihood that his former partner's response to this information would be one of complete disbelief, but Ray just nodded and unbuckled his seat belt.

"Okay, let's get at it, Fraser. Let's see if a second sniff around here turns up anything."

As they approached the yellow tape which still cordoned off the art supply store from the general public, Ray started to chuckle. "Hey, Frase. Tell me in advance so I can prepare for this. Am I about to be arrested for trespassing or operating out of my jurisdiction or something?"

Fraser paused for a moment, almost as if he were considering these exact options, then he smiled and very deliberately raised the tape so Ray could pass underneath.

After forty-five minutes of digging around in the still-sodden mess left by the fire crew, Ray had to get outside and get some clean air in his lungs. Fraser swore he could detect 'that scent' he'd noticed on Zhertak in several places in the building. The only thing Ray's 'olfactory receptors' could detect was the acrid smell of smoke that still blanketed everything inside the ruined store.

He moved over to the sidewalk and leaned up against a telephone pole, taking in the sight of the store in front of him. A few minutes later, the view got a lot whole lot better looking when Fraser walked through the front door. Pretty as a picture - too bad he didn't have a camera on him to capture the image. Ray shook his head. This was his idea of art? He was getting to be as big a freak as Fraser.

He started to smile at the thought, but in the next instant his smile turned into a frown.

"Ray?" Fraser called, a slightly worried note in his voice. "Is something wrong?"

"Nah, just . . . I don't know. You got a tagging epidemic going on up here in La Rouille?"
"Not that I'm aware of." Fraser started to turn back toward Stevensen's, following the direction of Ray's gaze. "You're referring to the graffiti low on the south corner of the building? Unwelcome, of course, but I wouldn't characterize a single instance of graffiti as an epidemic."

"Neither would I, but I'm pretty sure I saw the same tag back at Dixon's and in the same place, lower right in front of the building."

Fraser's eyes narrowed. "Hmm. Perhaps we should . . . ."

"Yeah."

The two men walked over to the right side of the store, joined by Dief a moment later. Fraser knelt down on the ground and started to lean in to the stucco wall, but was stopped short by Ray's hand on his shoulder.

"You going to lick that?"

Fraser's face started to flush, but he met Ray's gaze with a determined look. "I was hoping to ascertain the source of . . . ."

"No, I figured that, but you're not the only one with a tongue here, you know."

Fraser's eyes widened, and Ray could feel the blush rise on his own face, when Fraser swallowed hard and said, "Are you trying to tell me that you were about to volunteer to lick the wall?"


Ray pointed toward the mark, and without a single whine of complaint, Diefenbaker ran his tongue gingerly over the rough stucco. Ray was about to congratulate himself on finding the perfect solution to the problem when the wolf turned his head toward Fraser and started to lick his face more enthusiastically than a mere expression of affection would warrant.

"Diefenbaker!"

Fraser's automatic protest almost went unheard under the sound of Ray's gasps of laughter. "God! There is just no way to keep gross things away from you, is there? So . . . what does . . . what does it taste like?" he asked, still laughing too hard to take a proper breath.

"Spray paint."

"That's it?" Ray looked up at Fraser, still giggling. "Spray paint? Not some colorful extract of a South American bug that's been smuggled into the country?" he asked, pulling a typically Fraserish explanation out of thin air.

"Ah. You'd be referring to the cochineal, no doubt."

"The whatsit?"

"A tiny reddish-brown insect which lives on prickly pear cacti and which has been used as a coloring agent since the time of the ancient Aztecs. But no, I don't believe cochineal is one of the ingredients in this particular brand of spray paint."

Ray wiped at his eyes with the back of his hand, and laughed again. "Heh. Welcome back to the Discovery Channel."

Fraser grinned, then sat back on his heels and stared at the graffiti for a few seconds. "I find myself at
something of a loss here. Is this a word?"

"Sort of. A tag. You know, like . . . like a trademark or a company logo or something. It's like the
tagger's signature."

"Ah. Can you make any sense out of the . . . tag?"

Ray tilted his head to one side and squinted. "Yeah. Yeah, I think so. See this here at the end? The
two vertical lines? I think this is supposed to be one of those Roman numeral twos. And before that?
A couple of letters. An 'M' in the middle."

"I see. And the first letter would be a 'Zed'?"

Ray grinned. "On my planet it would be a 'Zee,' but yeah. That's what it looks like to me: ZMII."

Fraser pushed himself up off the ground and stood back a bit, eyes slightly narrowed and focused on
the wall, as if by force of will alone he could make himself see what Ray had seen in the graffiti
marks. After a moment, he nodded his head in satisfaction. "How likely is it that the 'Z' and the 'M'
are the initials of the tagger? Off hand, I can't think of anyone in the vicinity with those particular
initials, but it would provide something to go on, at least, if the first name begins with a 'Z'."

Ray nodded. "Yeah, the trouble is it's usually a street name or gang name we're talking about, not
someone's real name. Whoever's doing the decorating, though, probably wants to be known by this
tag. The thing is, it's a little weird seeing it attached to a crime scene. Tagging's vandalism, and yeah,
it's a low level crime all on its own, but you don't really see it used as the signature for other crimes."

"The what?"

"Huh?"

"You said 'the signature' - that these tags look like signatures."

Ray frowned. "What? Yeah, I guess so. It's just that . . . well . . . when you came outside just now I
was zoning a little, just taking in the scene, and the tag kind of jumped out at me like it was an artist's
signature on a painting or something. Probably doesn't mean anything, though."

"No, you might be onto something," Fraser said emphatically, a peculiar brightness coming into his
eyes. "Let's go back over what we know. Two fire scenes, possibly connected and the results of
arson, with similar graffiti marks placed where artists have traditionally signed their works. Add to
that the fact that both businesses - Stevensen's Art Supply and Dixon's Masonry - are enterprises
related to arts media."

Ray nodded his head. "Okay. So we've got arson, art, some kind of stinky accelerant, and a tag with
ZM in it."

He looked at Fraser. At the same instant, they both spoke. "Zoltan Motherwell."

"In the immortal words of Yogi Berra, 'It's deja vu all over again,'" Ray muttered. "Nah, that would
be too weird. What would Motherwell be doing up here?"

"Even if he still bore a grudge for the part I played in his arrest and incarceration in a facility for the
criminally insane, the term of his sentence won't be up for . . . ." Fraser paused to calculate.
"Seventeen years, three months, and fourteen days."

"Yeah? Well that's something I can check on. You got your cell phone with you, right? I left mine at
"Of course." He took the phone out of his jacket and handed it to Ray.

"Thanks. I'm going to call Chicago, if that's okay. See if Elaine can get us some news about Motherwell." He started to punch in Elaine's home number, then stopped. "Call's going to be expensive. I'll pay for it."

"Don't be foolish, Ray. Even if the call wasn't related to a case in my jurisdiction, you're welcome to anything I have."

"I am, huh?" He grinned as he finished entering the number, and dragged his brain out of the gutter. "Good to know."

"Elaine? Ray. Could you..."

"Ray? Where are you? I thought you were visiting Fraser!"

"Yeah, I am."

"Oh, okay. Good. I guess I just didn't expect to hear from you. Did you give him the presents?"

"Yeah, I did, don't worry."

"Is he there right now?"

"Yeah, he is."

Elaine sighed, and he could visualize her shaking her head. "Well, put him on! I talk to you everyday; you can wait. Come on!"

"Okay, hold your horses. Jeez." He turned back to Fraser with a grin, holding out the phone. "She wants to say hi."

Fraser took the phone, and Ray tapped his foot a bit impatiently as they exchanged greetings.

"I'd like to thank you for your gift," Fraser said. "That was a very thoughtful gesture." He paused, then started to chuckle. "Ah. Oddly enough, no. Neither Ray nor I have been in any physical peril in the past 24 hours." He paused again and met Ray's gaze. "Yes, he is, isn't he?"

Okay, whatever he was or wasn't, what he wanted to do right at this moment was yank the phone back out of Fraser's hand and put an end to this conversation. In fact, the urge to do so was so strong, he had to jam both his hands into the pockets of his jeans to keep from doing it. What the hell was wrong with him? Yeah, they had business to take care of, but this was Fraser's turf, not his, and if he wanted to take a couple minutes to talk to an old friend on his own damn phone, there was nothing wrong with that.

The trouble was, it felt wrong. In fact, it felt just like when he'd been given this really cool Erector set for his eighth birthday and his dad made him give his cousin Billy a turn before he even got to play with it. He could still remember yelling "It's not fair!" over and over again until his folks couldn't take it any more and sent him up to his room for the rest of the day. Crappy birthday. He never even got to eat any of his cake.

"Ray?"

He looked up and saw Fraser holding the phone out to him. "Oh. Thanks. Okay, Elaine? Can you
"Check something out for me?"

"Ray Kowalski, cast your mind back a whole two days to Friday morning. Did I or did I not say I'd be over at Daniel's this weekend?"

"Oh. Oh, shit. Sorry, babe."

"I am not your babe, Kowalski," she said in exaggerated annoyance. "Anyway, lay your questions on me; me and Daniel are in weekend date limbo at the moment, so it's cool."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. We're coming down the home stretch in Trivial Pursuit."

"You're what?" Ray put two fingers over the mouthpiece and whispered, "Did she tell you she's on a date? They're playing Trivial Pursuit." He grinned.

"Ray?" Elaine asked. "You still with me? I didn't catch that last."

"Yeah, sorry. Okay, can you check and see if either Zoltan Motherwell or Greta Garbo have been released recently. You need a case number?"

"Believe me, I remember them. Are you sure that's really her name?"

"I'm sure."

"No problem, then. Right after I finish squashing Daniel like the Trivial Pursuit bug he is, I'll see if their names flag anything, make a few phone calls."

"Great. I'll give you a call back later this afternoon, okay?"

"Anytime, Ray."

"Yeah? Sure I won't be interrupting any . . . um . . . trivial pursuits?"

"In the words of a friend and colleague - hardy ha ha ha. Nah, call anytime. We'll try to keep our unbridled passion bridled for a few hours."


He shut off the phone and handed it back to Fraser. "She says she'll check their status and see if either of their names have come up on any recent reports. We can call her back in an hour or so; she should have something for us then."

"I thought she was on a date."

"She is, but she's a cop, just like you and me. Case comes first."

Fraser shot him an odd look, and then began to smile. "A cop. Yeah," he said.

Ray looked at him just as oddly, he was sure. "Yeah, what? You're not making any sense."

"Yes, I am. For the first time in a while."

Ray shook his head, watching Fraser fondly. "For those of us not living in your head, what sense are you making?"
Fraser's smile got bigger. "I'm a cop."

Ray got it. He grinned back. "Yeah, Fraser. You're a cop." He reached out and slung an arm around Fraser's shoulders, hugging him. "A damned good one. So listen to your hunches, okay?"

Fraser had tensed a little as Ray put his arm around him, but he relaxed some as he nodded. "I'll endeavor to do so,"

"Good." Ray said.

Man, touching Fraser felt good. Felt right. He didn't want to stop. Which meant he probably needed to. With a last squeeze he started to let go, but as he did, Fraser brought up his own arm a little tentatively and put it around him. Ray looked at him, startled, but trying not to show it, not wanting to spook him. Fraser looked back, still smiling, though his smile was slowly fading, turning into an intense, curious expression.

Dief butted their knees with a whine, and they both looked down, startled. Dief pushed his way between them, forcing Fraser to step back, shaking his head. "Oh for heaven's sake, Diefenbaker. Learn to share."

Covering his disappointment, Ray leaned down to ruffle Dief's fur. "It's okay, we like you too." He straightened up and looked at his watch. "So, we done here?" he asked, feeling a little breathless and hoping he didn't sound like he was having an asthma attack.

"Done?" For a moment Fraser's gaze was almost like a caress, and then he looked down at Dief and frowned. When he looked back at Ray, his expression was normal again. "I believe so. For now, at any rate"

"We got time to do a little grocery run?" Ray asked, his stomach reminding him how bare the cupboards were at Fraser's house.

"Of course. We'll run by Robinson's Trading and stock up."

"Perfect. Pemmican ho!"

Fraser grinned and motioned him toward the Suburban, Dief bringing up the rear.

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God, it felt good to be using his mind again, Fraser thought. To feel like he was not just existing from day to day, drifting. Even more than that, to be working with Ray, their duet in harmony again. It was amazing. It wasn't just policework he'd missed - his time in La Rouille had not been completely without professional satisfaction, though it was by no means what he was used to in Chicago. No, it was partnership he'd missed.

Not just any partner, either. If that was all he wanted, there was Constable Zhertak, or his predecessor Constable McKay, or her predecessor Constable Minogue, or any of his former colleagues. He could spend all day naming off former personnel. The list seemed well-nigh endless. No. In just a matter of hours, it had become crystal-clear that it was Ray he had missed. Pure and simple.

He'd known, of course, that he missed Ray. Terribly. He'd been accustomed to spending a good portion of every day with Ray, both working, and socially. To go from that, to nothing at all had been... well, he strongly suspected that it was akin to what divorce must feel like. That comparison had seemed all the more apt, considering the fact that since the day they'd met he had been plagued...
by certain highly inappropriate, or, at any rate, inexpressible feelings toward his partner. Fortunately he'd managed to keep them under strict control, at least externally. Internally . . . they had definitely not helped ease the separation.

When he'd left Chicago he had assumed that time and distance would lessen the attraction. He'd been wrong. He thought about Ray all the time. Missed him. And the attraction had never lessened. That had been made even clearer earlier in the day after he'd sent Dief in to investigate the scene of the fire. He'd turned to find Ray watching him, eyes bright with amused comprehension, the corners of his eyes wrinkled, and his lips curving in a faint smile he was trying valiantly to suppress. He'd looked - incredible. Beautiful. Their gazes had caught, and held. Fraser had known he should look away, but couldn't bring himself to as those long-suppressed feelings had reasserted themselves with a vengeance.

Ray's eyes had widened, his lips had parted as if he were about to speak, and then Dief had bounded out, whining excitedly, and the spell was broken. He'd looked away, only to find Constable Zhertak staring at him with a frown that let him know that the fact he'd just been staring at Ray like some sort of lovesick bovine had not gone unremarked. His face had instantly gone hot and he'd knelt, ostensibly to check and make sure Dief was all right, but in reality to regain his composure and draw the somewhat battered shell of his dignity back into place.

Only now, home once more, without prying eyes to worry about, could he relax a little, and watch Ray for a moment as he found places for the groceries he'd insisted on paying for. It struck him suddenly that Ray had not seemed uncomfortable with that extended eye-contact, and had not looked away. He usually became prickly and defensive when someone stared at him, but this time he hadn't. Even when he'd appeared about to speak, his gaze had held steady, not wavered. And it had seemed to Fraser that there had been an oddly familiar expression in Ray's eyes. Almost . . . longing?

No. No, it was ridiculous to think that. Pure projection. Wishful thinking. But, still . . . Ray had not looked away. And then, at Stevensen's, Ray had put his arm around him. He could still almost feel the weight and warmth of that, and the surprising, full-body response he'd had to that simple touch. He couldn't believe he'd actually been daring enough to return the gesture. And Ray had not seemed perturbed by that, either. He wondered, with some irritation, what might have happened had not Diefenbaker interrupted.

"Man," Ray said, straightening up, a stack of plastic containers in his hands. "I don't know what these used to be but I think they're beyond hope. I vote we not even try a salvage operation but just pitch them as is."

Fraser looked at the stack and felt a momentary pang of conscience, which he ruthlessly suppressed. Ray was right. Some things were beyond salvage and he'd be better off just starting over, fresh. "An excellent plan, Ray," he said, going over to open the cupboard which hid the trash bin. "A clean sweep, as it were."

"Yeah." Ray said, dropping the containers into the bin. They thunked satisfyingly, and Ray dusted his hands together. "There. You know, between the price of fresh produce, and Zhertak's nonstop frowny-face of doom, I'm beginning to understand why you might not be too happy up here."

The casual comment, offered with a half-smile, carried far more weight than it should have. Fraser turned away abruptly. "I'm afraid neither Constable Zhertak, nor the cost of living is to blame for my poor attitude. I've achieved that entirely on my own."

"Somehow I doubt that," Ray said sharply. "That's not the Fraser I know and love. What's going on? Is it the job? Or is it . . . personal?" His voice gentled on the last question.
Fraser picked up the teakettle and filled it, just to have something to do. "It's nothing, Ray, I'm afraid that I'm simply feeling a little envious."

"Envious? Of who?"

"You," Fraser admitted, placing the kettle precisely on the center of the burner and turning on the heat. "Everything seems to be going so well for you."

There was a moment of silence, then Ray spoke. "Me?"

He turned around to find Ray staring at him.

"Things are going well for me?" Ray asked incredulously. "On what planet, Fraser? Welsh can't find anyone who'll partner me for more than ten minutes, and my social life consists of yakking with Sandor when he brings my Friday pizza."

Now it was Fraser's turn to be incredulous. "But . . . you said . . . you were busy at work, and that you needed 'down time' from your social life."

Ray flushed, clearly embarrassed. "Yeah, well, I am busy at work, but that's because I have to do twice as much work as a guy with a partner. And as for the other . . . I didn't want to sound like a complete loser, okay? And I did need a break from doing the whole 'go out to the bar and think about picking someone up and taking them home and not doing it because they aren't who you want to begin with and God knows where they've been, anyway,' routine."

Fraser sorted through that, finally figuring out what Ray had said, and found himself oddly . . . glad. "Oh," he said. "Why can't Welsh find you a partner?"

Ray laughed softly. "Because you spoiled me for anybody else, Benton Fraser. Anyway, don't envy my great life, okay, because it's not so great."

"No, I'm sorry . . . I didn't realize . . . ."

"No apologizing," Ray said firmly. "How could you realize anything when I wasn't really being honest? I should know better than that. Friends don't lie."

"No. No, they don't," Fraser said, making a decision, frightening as it was. But if Ray was going to be honest with him, how could he not be honest in return? "And you're right. Things aren't going well here either. I find I'm in a rather similar position, actually, well, save for the being busy part. This job has been a nightmare, I'm little more than a glorified traffic-cop. Whatever skill I may once have had at my job is atrophying from disuse, and though I realize it's hard to believe, I have even less of a social life here than I did in Chicago. I don't fit in."

Ray reached out and put his hands on Fraser's shoulder, squeezing lightly. "Fraser. Benton. Ben. You fit in one place, just right."

The progression of his name, first familiar, and warm, then less familiar, but warmer, brought his head up rapidly, eyes open, to look into Ray's eyes, just inches away. They stared at each other for a moment. For several moments. He was acutely aware of how close Ray was. Of the fact that he could actually feel the faint movement of air as he breathed. Of how close his lips were. Of what he had just said. What Fraser knew he meant. In Ray's eyes, he could see a similar awareness. And then suddenly Ray blinked, and turned red, and stepped back, his hands falling, then lifting again in a sort of helpless shrug.
"I... uh... sorry about the invasion of personal space there. Don't know what I was thinking. Um, I'll just go... call Elaine back. Yeah. See if she has any information for us yet. Use my phone, it'll be a local call. It's in my suitcase."

He dashed for the other room as if there was someone with a flame-thrower on his trail, leaving Fraser to stare after him a little bewildered, more than a little aroused, and wondering what, exactly, Ray had meant. In retrospect, his reaction seemed to make the simple statement more meaningful than it might otherwise have been, but after a moment's consideration he shook his head. More wishful thinking. He was too old for that sort of nonsense. He had to stop letting his imagination run away with him like that. He needed a clear head, needed to follow Ray's example and concentrate on the case. The teakettle's whistle shocked him out of his daze and he took it off the burner, turning off the flame, as he heard Ray approaching, already talking on his phone.

"You did? Yeah? And he's still in the nuthouse? Damn it. I was sure we had... wait! What about her? Garbo? Yeah, I'll wait."

Fraser opened a cabinet and took out two mugs, holding one up and looking at Ray with lifted eyebrows. Ray nodded, and Fraser kept listening as he made two cups of strong instant coffee, adding sugar to Ray's. Finally Ray spoke again.

"Her too? Well, hell. Nah, it's good information even if it wasn't what I thought. What? He does? Huh, go figure. You wouldn't think they'd let 'em have Net access, would you? Anyway, thanks. And Elaine, have a good time with Daniel, okay, and tell him I'm sorry for cutting into your date. Yeah. Bye." He flipped the phone closed and tucked it into his jacket pocket, then looked at Fraser with a rueful half-smile. "Both Motherwell and Garbo are still in the nuthouse, so no go on that idea. I was so sure... damn. I guess my hunch-maker needs a tune up."

"Not necessarily, Ray. You're forgetting the two."

Ray's brow crinkled. "The two what? Elaine already checked both of them out."

"The numeral two," Fraser clarified. "You said the tag read ZMII. That might imply a copycat, rather than the original, might it not?"

Ray stared at him. "You know those skills you were worried were disintegrating?"

Fraser nodded.

Ray grinned at him. "They're not. Trust me. Hey, you got a computer to go with that cell phone?"

"Actually, I do, but my laptop had a drive failure last week and I had to send it in for repairs, however I do have a working computer at my office," Fraser offered, feeling a sudden need to get out of the house and into a location where they weren't... alone... together.

"Great!" Ray said, brightening. "Elaine says Motherwell has a website. Maybe we might find something useful there."

"An excellent thought," Fraser said, relieved.

"Pitter-patter then, Fraser, let's get at it," Ray said, taking a step toward the kitchen door before stopping, staring at the mugs of coffee on the counter. "Think we've got time for the coffee?" he asked longingly.

"Not to worry, Ray," Fraser said, opening the cabinet again and getting out two travel mugs. He carefully transferred the coffee from the ceramic mugs to the stainless ones, put on their caps, and
then handed them to Ray. "There."

Ray looked from Fraser to the mugs and then back again, shaking his head. "We really corrupted you in Chicago, didn't we? TV, cell phone, laptop, travel mugs. Next you'll be telling me you have a cappuccino machine in the cupboard."

"Don't be silly, Ray. That's at the office," Fraser said blandly as he opened the door and motioned for Ray and Dief to precede him out to the Suburban.

Ray started to laugh, and then looked at him narrowly as he settled into the passenger seat and put the cups on the dash so he could buckle up. "You're kidding, right?"

"Not at all," Fraser said, letting Dief into the back and then taking his place behind the wheel. "Constable McKay was originally from Vancouver. She'd gotten homesick for what she called 'proper coffee' and in an effort to help our retention rate, I got one for the detachment office."

"Huh," Ray said, thoughtfully. "Did it work?"

Fraser sighed, pulling out of the driveway and onto the street. "Unfortunately it didn't prove to be sufficient incentive."

"She left?"

"She requested and was granted a transfer to a more urban detachment on grounds of hardship."

"Hardship!" Ray said indignantly. "Working with you isn't a hardship! What was she, a lesbian or something?"

"Excuse me?" Fraser said incredulously, staring at Ray in astonishment as he stopped at the stop-sign.

Ray blushed and looked chastened. "Sorry. Not P.C. there. Its just, most women would kill to work with you, you know? So I thought maybe . . . ." he let his sentence trail off and shrugged.

Fraser turned onto the main road and shook his head. "I'm sure Constable McKay's sexual preferences didn't enter into the matter. She simply wasn't comfortable in such a rural setting."


Fraser nodded. "I wrote her a letter of support."

Ray shook his head. "Why am I not surprised? Hey, I just had a thought. If we're going to your work, can I be the acting liaison?"

"I'm afraid we haven't time to file the paperwork," Fraser said, suppressing a smile as he "It'll have to be unofficial this time."

Ray sighed. "No fair. You get all the cool titles."

"Liaison is a cool title?"

"Better than detective."

"I disagree. Liaison always sounds faintly . . . sordid."

Ray chuckled. "Yeah, that's what makes it cool."
Fraser shot him a look, and Ray's smile widened. "Li-ai-son," he murmured throatily, giving the word a faux-French inflection. "I mean, you just know when you say it that people are thinking: 'Yeah, I'd like to liaise with him all right.'"

"Ray!"

Ray grinned back, unrepentant. "You know I'm right."

"What you are is incorrigible."

"That's my middle name."

"I thought. . . ."

"My other middle name," Ray said with a look. "God, I've missed this," he said with a soft sigh.

"As have I," Fraser admitted.

Ray reached over and patted his shoulder, leaving his hand in place. It felt heavy and warm even through his coat. They exchanged a look, and then they both fell silent, sipping coffee from their mugs as Fraser drove. The quiet lasted several miles, and he thought about what it might mean that Ray had left his hand there. About his words, and deeds. Perhaps he wasn't deluding himself. Finally, in the back, Dief whined. Fraser glanced in the rear-view mirror to see him looking worriedly from himself to Ray and back. "It's all right," he said softly.

Ray turned and looked too. "Yeah. Sometimes quiet's okay, you know? Just means you don't have to always be shooting off your mouth to be comfortable with someone."

Dief made a sound suspiciously like a snort.

"That will be quite enough out of you," Fraser said severely. "You haven't exactly taken a vow of silence yourself."

Ray laughed, and then shaded his eyes. "That's it up there, isn't it?"

Fraser nodded, seeing the national and provincial flags waving in the wind up ahead. "Yes. You were here before, as I recall."

"Yeah. I think Zhertak thought I was a stalker or something. Hey, you know, if he's always that suspicious, he'd know if there were any new faces in town, right?"

"He would," Fraser allowed. "But then, so would I, and there aren't. Well, aside from you," he said, pulling in to his assigned space in the small parking lot. "So, should I arrest you for arson?"

Ray held out his wrists as if ready for cuffing. "Well, if you really want to, sure, but I warn you, I've got an iron-clad alibi. I spent the night with a Mountie."

A feeling of deja vu shook him. Ray in his office at the Consulate, in trouble, coming to him for help. Trusting him to help. That feeling was quickly followed by an odd surge of embarrassed arousal. Was Ray . . . flirting with him? He looked into Ray's eyes, and what he saw there made him bold. "Yes, well, be that as it may, since you weren't actually sleeping with said Mountie, he would be hard pressed to verify your alibi."

Ray sighed and snapped his fingers. "Damn. Blew that one," he said with a wink and a grin. "Guess tonight I better make sure my alibi is solid," he said, and then he opened the door and got out.
Fraser stared at him for a few seconds, completely stunned, but as Ray walked around to let Dief out he scrambled to unfasten his seat belt and follow. He had no idea what to say. Had no idea what to do. Had no idea... about anything at all. But he had what felt like a foolish smile on his face as he escorted Ray into the detachment.

* * *

Ray had a hunch. A completely non-case-related hunch. One that had been getting stronger ever since he'd looked up to find Fraser staring at him back there outside of Dixon's. One that had set off more flashing lights and sirens in his head than a Vegas slot machine when Fraser put his arm around him outside Stevensen's. But he knew better than to try and make a case without any solid evidence, so that was what he was after now. Real evidence. Something he could touch. And there was really only one way he knew of to get the kind of evidence he needed, so he did it. And his first foray had just gotten a pretty strong positive response - if Fraser's big goofy grin was any indication.

Once inside the bunker-like detachment building, Fraser introduced him to their dispatcher, Sally Cardinal, a Cree woman in her early fifties who bore a startling resemblance to Sophia Loren. She was a lot friendlier without Constable Jerklike hanging around looking at him suspiciously and offered him a home-made oatmeal cookie. He almost took one, but then Fraser declined and he decided it wouldn't be very nice to eat in front of him when he was actually making an effort, so he thanked her, kindly, and followed Fraser back to his office.

"Hey, no storage boxes?" he said, looking around in mock amazement. "What's the world coming to?"

"Well, I did try, Ray, but Sally said they were a fire hazard, and since her significant other is the La Rouille fire control supervisor I'm afraid I had to do as she said," Fraser said with utter nonchalance, leaning down to turn on his computer. "Why don't you have a seat, I'll go get a second chair."

Ray sat, and was still chuckling softly when Fraser wheeled a second office chair into the room and maneuvered it around the rest of the furniture to park it next to Ray. From his vantage point behind the desk, it suddenly dawned on him that the setup of the office looked awfully familiar. "Hey! This is Welsh's office!"

Fraser looked at him blankly. "Excuse me?"

"You've got it set up just like Welsh's office. Couch in the same place, chairs in the same place. Blinds."

Fraser looked around the room as if seeing it for the first time, his expression thoughtful. "Now that you mention it, I can see the similarity. How odd."

"Hey, it makes sense to me. Welsh is a good guy, and you and I spent a lot of time in that office. Probably reminds you of..." Ray barely managed not to say 'home' and scrambled for a replacement ending. "Well, reminds you of then."

"Indeed," Fraser said, looking around again with a faint smile. "So, did Elaine give you the website address or do we need to search?"

"Nah, I got it," Ray said, typing, as Fraser sat down, scooting up next to him so they could both see the screen. It was kind of distracting having Fraser so close that Ray could actually feel the warmth of his body there. He ended up mistyping the address twice. Fraser cleared his throat, and Ray blushed a little and typed more carefully and got it, finally.
"Burnitdown-dot-org?" Fraser asked. "How... original."

"Yeah, well, the guy's got a fixation. That's why he's in the looney bin."

"Mental health facility."

"Looney bin," Ray repeated.

"Ray."

Fraser's voice had that faintly annoyed tone that Ray loved to provoke. He turned his head to grin at him and found they were practically nose-to-nose. And Fraser was looking amused, not annoyed. His eyes were bright with it, and his mouth curved upward, and they were so... close... and then Fraser's gaze dropped a little, just a little, and Ray knew he had to be looking at his mouth and he found his own gaze moving lower, to that slightly lopsided smile, and he knew if he leaned forward even just a little he could...

A deeply offensive crappy-tinkly version of an old Doors tune began to play through the computer speakers, and he snapped his gaze back to the screen, feeling heat in his face, and elsewhere as he scrabbled for the mouse to see if he could figure out how to turn it off. Fraser reached past him and turned the sound off on the speakers. Ray sighed in relief. "Thanks. Couldn't handle that."

"So I see," Fraser said.

Damn him, he still sounded cool and calm and not at all rattled. Ray snuck a sideways glance at him, though, and his face was a little pink. Okay. Okay, good. Not just him, then. He returned his gaze to the screen and looked at the options. Home. Duh. Links. Maybe. History. Nah. Wait... there. That was what they wanted."He's got a message board! Perfect!" he said as he hit the button. The next screen asked him if he was registered. He clicked 'no' and it directed him to a registration area. "Crap."

"It's all right, Ray. I believe it's an automated script generated by the software. Give it a screen name."

"Like what? Harry Callaghan? Paul Kersey?"

Fraser smiled. "Those might tip our hand. Hmm, how about FH451?"

Ray had typed it in before it dawned on him what he was typing, and he grinned and nudged Fraser with an elbow. "Bradbury. Smart. I like it."

"Thank you, Ray."

"What do I put for location?"

"I suggest any place other than Canada or Chicago."

"Good idea." He typed in Arizona. "Occupation?"

"I suppose 'arsonist' might be a tad obvious," Fraser mused.

"Just a little. Librarian."

"Excellent choice."

"Age?"
Twenty four.

"Why twenty four?"

"Old enough to have a job but young enough to still be reckless."

"Works," Ray said, putting it in. "Pretty nosey for a piece of software," he commented as he clicked on the button to complete the registration.

"Marketing research, probably."

Ray stared at him. "Marketing? For an arsonist?"

"For the company that makes the software. There you are. The registration was accepted, you can now continue to the message board."

Ray nodded and watched as the page loaded. "Bingo. Archives."

Fraser nodded and leaned closer. Really close. Ray could hear the soft sound of an indrawn breath, could feel his hair stir a little in the faint current of air. Then Fraser . . . sniffed. Not as in sniffled. Sniffed. Breathed in smell. And then he did it again. "Are you smelling me?" Ray asked, not daring to look away from the computer screen.

"I was, yes. You smell very nice."

He smelled nice? He. Smelled. Nice. Fraser thought he smelled nice. He was still staring at the computer but his eyes wouldn't focus. And he had to know, once and for all. "Fraser, are you flirting with me?"

There was a fraction of a second's hesitation before Fraser replied. "Yes."

Ray had to suppress the urge to leap to his feet and pump a fist in the air while whooping loudly.

"Is that going to be a problem?" Fraser asked softly.

Ray shook his head, grinning. "Nope, no problem at all." He leaned back in his chair, his shoulder brushing Fraser's chest.

"Good," Fraser said, without any hesitation at all this time, his hand coming up to rest on Ray's shoulder.

Ray couldn't stand it any more. He turned his head. Fraser looked. . . looked like somebody had turned a light on inside him. He smiled. Fraser smiled back. Ray licked his lips. Fraser closed his eyes for a moment, and drew in a long, slow breath. Oh, yeah. Yeah. On the same page. Finally.

"Excuse me, sir, but could I see you for a moment?"

Startled, they both jumped a little. Zhertak was standing in the open doorway, regarding them with a sour expression. Fraser moved his chair back a small amount, and ran a thumb across his eyebrow. "Of course, Constable, what can I do for you?"

Zhertak's gaze slid to Ray, and back to Fraser. "In private, sir?"

Fraser nodded and stood up. "Ray, see what you can find in that archive, and I'll be right back."

Ray watched him go, wanting to go after him, instinctively sure Zhertak was going to bitch about
something - probably him. The guy seemed to have had it in for him ever since he'd rolled into town. Ray didn't know if he didn't like Americans, strangers, him personally, or was just an asshole on general principles. Of course, considering his build, it could just be the steroids.

He turned his attention back to the screen, clicking through the archive to get a feel for the tone of the board. Most of the messages seemed to be from a bunch of people who were way too in love with the sound of their own keyboards, all going on for page after page about how the world had to go through a new baptism of fire. The rest of the posters didn't have a philosophical agenda, as far as he could tell. They just thought that fire was pretty or something.

Most everything came back to fire, though, one way or another. Every so often, someone posted an 'exciting offer' for a long distance calling card, but they were chased off pretty damned fast by the regulars. Matter of fact, the only off-topic poster who didn't get this treatment was someone named 'Omega.' He didn't seem to post anything except random quotes from poems and songs, but people seemed to like his stuff, given all the "Yes!" and "Okay!" responses that always followed his posts.

The responses to his posts all came from the same eleven people, too. No, twelve, including 'Little Nero,' who'd just started posting last Tuesday. Right before . . . right before the fire at Stevensen's.

Ray looked around on top of the desk for something to write with. Nah, nothing there. He pulled open the center drawer and started fishing around for a pen or pencil. Empty Kit Kat wrapper. Packet of Fig Newtons. Half a dog biscuit. Rubber duck.

Rubber duck? Aw Jeez. He'd wondered where the duck he used to keep on his desk at the 2-7 had got to. Looked like Fraser took it with him when he left.

Okay, there, a pen. As he pulled it out of the drawer, he started to get a creepy feeling, like he was under surveillance or something. He looked over toward the office door, and yeah, there was his buddy Zhertak staring at him with his hands in the desk, then looking pointedly at Fraser. What did he think was going on? A daring theft of the state secrets that Fraser had stuffed into a cookie for safe keeping?

Ray really wanted to pop him one, but Fraser moved into the doorway of his office and stood between him and Zhertak, then looked at his watch. "Ah. Just look at the time. Thank you for sharing your thoughts, Constable."

"Are you certain you wouldn't like some assistance?" Zhertak asked, peering around Fraser and looking at Ray.

"No need," Fraser said, ushering him out toward the front door. "It wouldn't be fair to keep you any later than I already have on your day off. Have a pleasant afternoon, and I'll see you bright and early tomorrow."

Sally looked up from her budget report as Fraser shut the front door behind Zhertak, and grinned, but said nothing before returning to her work.

When Fraser returned to his office, Ray leaned back in the chair and smiled. "The Iceman Goeth."

Fraser looked blankly for a moment, then nodded in recognition. He leaned back in his own chair and shook his head. "Do you know, Ray, until you arrived, I had managed to fool myself as to how disagreeable that man is."

'Yeah," said Ray. "But me being around isn't improving his personality, is it? No one can be that big a pain in the ass all the time."
Fraser sighed. "I have to admit, he's not generally so... well, he's not generally quite this annoying. But the truth is, all too often I find myself wishing I could put some of Meg Thatcher's practices to good effect, perhaps see my way clear to sending him out to pick up my dry cleaning occasionally."

Ray chuckled, but Fraser leaned forward in his chair and frowned. "Ray, I... I wasn't quite that insufferable, was I?"

How could he think that? "You mean because Thatcher... hell no, Fraser. Never." He reached over and placed his hand on Fraser's arm. "Never, you hear me? Anyway," he said, after a pause. "She was way more insufferable than you."

Fraser glanced up at Ray and started to laugh. "Thank you kindly, Ray. I think."

Ray squeezed his arm again. "Freak," he said affectionately. Okay, sitting next to Fraser, hand on his arm, laughing together. Yeah, this was good. Maybe even better than in Chicago because Ray really couldn't remember a whole lot of sitting around laughing and touching each other back then. Why not? Why the hell not? He glanced back at the computer screen and shook his head. Yeah, okay, maybe he remembered why not. It was because they were usually too busy with their cases to pay attention to anything else when they were together. And because, well, maybe even back then some part of him had known if he got started touching Fraser he might not... stop?

Fraser looked out the door of his office, and under his hand Ray felt him sag a little. "Actually, though, I suppose I should have let him stay. After all, this has now become an official investigation."

Ray looked at him and frowned. "We don't need him. We're partners. A duet. We always solved stuff just the two of us, why change now? It might jinx us."

Fraser looked back at him intently, and Ray felt himself turning red. "And, uh, maybe I don't want to share you, okay?"

A long look passed between them, unbroken until the front door to the detachment opened and a trio of giggling young girls dashed in, all talking excitedly to Sally about their victory against Prince Albert's girl's hockey team and grabbing at the oatmeal cookies Ray and Fraser had turned down earlier. None of the girls showed the slightest interest in wandering back to Fraser's office, but both men quickly turned their attention back to the website archive.

"Okay, Fraser," said Ray, clicking back through the screens he'd been looking at while Zhertak had Fraser out of the room. "Take a look at this. Most of the threads are political rants, art appreciation, that sort of thing. But these here - the ones started by this Omega guy - are just, like, poetry and songs and stuff. Now, on this message board, off-topic posts usually get people flamed... ."

"Flamed?"

"Yeah. You know, you get an inbox full of people cursing you out, insulting your dog's family tree, that sort of thing."

Fraser smiled. "I'm familiar with the definition of 'flame,' Ray. I was just struck by the appropriateness of the term in this particular situation."

Ray rolled his eyes. "Okay, so like I was saying before you were struck - Omega's getting the 'net equivalent of a bunch of bobble head dolls nodding at everything he says, and everyone who responds has been a regular on the board for a long time, except for this Little Nero, who just started replying to Omega's messages last Tuesday."
"The day before the first fire took place."

"Yeah."

"Interesting." Fraser leaned forward and held his hand over the mouse. "May I?"

"Sure," said Ray, but he held his hand there a moment or two longer than was absolutely necessary so that Fraser's fingers brushed against his as he was moving his own hand away.

He laughed to himself. This was as bad as being thirteen again and taking Stella to horror movies just so he'd have an excuse to put his arm around her. Actually, back then, the idea of daring to touch any girl, much less The Stella, seemed a hell of a lot more scary than Linda Blair's 360 and pea-soup projectile vomiting, so maybe this wasn't quite as bad. When he was a kid, it used to take just about the whole film before he could get himself to 'accidentally' brush his hand against her elbow or her shoulder, and half the time he couldn't even tell whether she noticed or not. No way was Fraser not noticing, not if the grin on his face was anything to go by.

"Hmm."

"You find something?"

"Not precisely. I'm just considering the use of the pseudonym 'Omega.'"

"Yeah," Ray said, drawing up closer to Fraser. "It's got to be Zoltan Motherwell. Last letter of the Greek alphabet like Zee's the last letter of our alphabet. And 'omega' - makes sense that a guy who's all about bringing an end to things would pick a name that usually means 'the end.'"

Fraser turned toward Ray. "I wasn't aware you were familiar with Greek, Ray."

"I'm not. I'm familiar with sitting on my butt in church during sixteen years of Easter services. Huh."

"What is it?"

"Alpha and Omega. The beginning and the end. I'd forgotten until now, but there was this Obrzed Swiatla - this service of light - every year on Holy Saturday. Used to scare the crap out of me when I was little 'cause they'd turn off all the lights in the church and we had to sit there in the dark, thinking about the darkness of a world without God. I, um . . . I really didn't like the dark much back then. Anyway, as soon as everyone started to freak out in the church, they'd light this really huge bonfire."

"And?"

"So, then they'd light this candle off the bonfire, and the candle was decorated - Alpha and Omega, the cross, that kind of thing. I used to draw pictures of it in Sunday school."

"This seems to have made quite an impression on you."

"Yeah, well like I said, I really didn't like sitting around in the dark."

Ray wondered for a minute whether he should be feeling more embarrassed about telling this story than he was, but Fraser just nodded. "Anyway, it's got that fire connection again."

"Indeed it does, as do the poems Omega is posting. Take a look at the Tuesday night poem, Ray."

To show the lab'ring bosom's deep intent,  
And thought in living characters to paint,  
When first thy pencil did those beauties give,
And breathing figures learn from thee to live,
How did those prospects give my soul delight,
A new creation rushing on my sight?
Still, wond'rous youth! each noble path pursue,
On deathless glories fix thine ardent view:
Still may the paint's and the poet's fire
To aid thy pencil, and thy verse conspire!
And may the charms of each seraphic theme
Conduct thy footsteps to immortal fame!

"Who's that? Shakespeare?"

"No, actually it's a poem by Phyllis Wheatley, who was . . . well, that's not important at the moment. What is important is that not only does the poem refer to fire - in this case, the 'poet's fire' - but it also alludes to paint and pencil. Looking at Omega's choice of poems, it appears that each work contains both a reference to fire and some form of art media. Although . . . ."

"What?"

"I seem to have come to an impasse with the next poem. I can't place the author or the art medium to which the poet refers."

"Let's see."

Fraser clicked on the post in question and shifted slightly to the right so that Ray could get a better view of the screen.

He read the first few lines - You shake my nerves and you rattle my brain / Too much love drives a man insane / You broke my will, oh what a thrill - and started to laugh.

"What's so amusing, Ray?"

"Nothing really, except we finally hit some poetry I do recognize. Jerry Lee Lewis, Fraser - 'Great Balls of Fire.'"

"Ah. And its connection to an art medium?"

"I don't know, unless . . . okay, Dixon's Masonry. That's what got set on fire the night this was posted, right?"

Fraser nodded.

"Okay, simple. It's rock and roll. Stone, rock . . . you know?"

Fraser looked pained. "I believe I 'get it.'" He frowned thoughtfully. "You know, Ray, if Omega's messages really are some sort of arsonist's primer, then judging by the interpretations we've seen, it seems to me that we're dealing with someone with a rather literal mindset. Juvenile, one might even say."

Something about that nagged at Ray, but he couldn't quite tease it out of his subconscious. He knew better than to try too hard, though, because then he'd never get it. "Okay, so let's take a look at the most recent stuff from Omega," he said to distract himself. "See what his next suggestion is."

Fraser scrolled down and found a post dated earlier in the day. He brought up the window and read aloud.
"Outcast, a horror to his kind,  
At night he to the forest fled.  
There, the birch-bark made fire for him,  
The brown fern made a bed.  
The river murmured lullaby,  
The moisty mosses breathed of balm,  
The clean stars carried light to him,  
Unterrified and calm.  
Aye, as they would have served a saint  
Freely all served the guilty guest'. . ."

Fraser paused, his forehead furrowing.

Ray sensed weakness and went for the kill. "Okay, who's that by?"

Fraser's frown deepened. "I feel I ought to... it's very familiar, yet I can't seem... ah!" His face brightened. "Yes, of course. Grandmother's correspondent from New Zealand. Blanche Edith Baughan. I believe the work is called 'On the Just and the Unjust.' As I recall, she was quite a proponent of penal reform."

Ray snorted. Fraser rolled his eyes. "Penal, Ray. As in prisons."

"Spoilsport," Ray said with a grin. "So, he's talking about guilt."

"Indeed. And fire, yet again."

"But we still have no idea how the copycat decides what fires to set."

"Yes and no. We do know that, as I said, he or she is very literal-minded. So, what's in the poem that we can work with in a literal fashion?"

Ray read the poem again, and felt his stomach clench. "Oh, shit. He's gonna set a forest fire?"

Fraser frowned. "Hm. I don't think he's quite ready for something that large yet, although I suppose we can't discount the possibility. I think I'd best make a call to the park officials and let them know to be on the alert. However, I do think he's still working up to something on that scale. So far his targets have all been local, and relatively small."

Ray read again. "I don't know, Benton. Not much there. Birch-bark, brown fern, and moss? Pretty basic stuff. I don't think a campfire is going to get this perp off. Not after two buildings. What are you looking at me like that for?" he asked, looking up to see Fraser staring at him in surprise.

"Benton," he said.

"Um... yeah." Ray felt his face getting hot. "That okay?"

"Very much so," Fraser said, then he cleared his throat. "Birch-bark, brown fern, and moss. You're right about that not being much to work with."

"Anything you can make from that stuff get made around here? Anybody use it for anything? Maybe a florist?"

Fraser frowned again, and his gaze lifted, looking over the computer, at the... wall? Ray looked. Didn't see anything but a weird-looking picture of dragonflies. It was pale brown, with darker brown patterns in it, repeating, almost geometric, kind of like those snowflakes that kids make by folding
paper and cutting with scissors, only it didn't have holes in it.

"Birch-bark bitings!" Fraser said suddenly.

"Huh?" Ray asked, feeling lost.

"It's an artistic endeavor indigenous to this region, Ray. First Nations women once used them as beading patterns but in the last decade or two the bitings themselves have become prized as an artform. That's one there on the wall."

That explained that. "So it's made from birch-bark?"

"Yes, it is, and quite flammable. In addition, we have one of the region's foremost practitioners and teachers of the art living right here in town. Her English name is Hannah Moss."

They stared at each other for a moment.

"Moss." Ray said.

Fraser nodded.

"Hot damn."

"Exactly."

"You think he'll hit tonight?"

"Quite possibly, since he's had time not only to select a target but also to do at least some rudimentary planning. He seems to act within twenty-four hours of the time that the poem is posted, and the poem did say 'at night.' You realize, though, it may not be a 'he' at all."

"Yeah, true. Maybe we've got ourselves another Greta. In which case... you got a vest around here? And a spare?"

For a moment Fraser looked like he was going to protest that, but then seemed to think better of it and he stood up and went to the door of the office. "Sally?"

Sally turned around. "Yeah, Corporal?"

"When you have a moment, would you get two Kevlar vests out of inventory and bring them in?"

She frowned. "We got a problem? There's nothing on the wire about any A&D's in our area."

"No, not that I'm aware of. It's simply a precautionary measure. Speaking of which, please alert the Forest Service to double their firewatch until further notice. We have reason to believe we have an arsonist operating in the area and there is a chance he might move to a larger target."

She nodded thoughtfully. "I'll get right on it."

Fraser came back to the desk. "I'll call Hannah and let her know we're on our way over to check for anything suspicious."

Ray nodded, and scooted his chair a little so Fraser could get to the phone that was on his side of the desk. Which put his crotch about eight inches from Ray's nose. He manfully resisted getting closer. It was Fraser's office, after all, and the door was open and there was all that glass. Plus he figured that soon as he did, Zhertak would pop up again. So, save it for later. Save it for sometime private, when
they had time. Lots of it. He decided to make himself useful and print out the messages to start an evidence file. Turning back to the computer, he sent the first two files to the printer, and then got a popup telling him there was a problem. He sighed.

"These things hate me," he complained. "Make it print."

"I see some things never change," Fraser said, pausing with the phone handset in one hand as he leaned over to turn on the printer, his groin brushing Ray's shoulder.

He shouldn't. But it was pretty much irresistible. Ray tilted his head, looking up, and Fraser froze, looking down, as the back of Ray's head came into contact with his fly. Fraser's tongue flickered across his lips as faint color rose in his face. Ray gave him his best wicked smile, and then slowly rolled his head a little, as if he was easing out a stiff neck. The faint blush went bright pink, and Fraser coughed, reaching for Ray's hair, then quickly snatching his hand away before he could make contact and stepping back to put several inches of air between them.

"Ray!" he hissed.

"What?" Ray said innocently. "I've got a sore neck."

"I see," Fraser said. "Perhaps I should get you an aspirin. Or some liniment."

"Nah, that's okay. It's better now."

"That's too bad."

Ray stared at him. "Huh?"

Fraser smiled almost as wickedly as Ray had done earlier. "I simply thought you might enjoy a . . . massage later." Suddenly, as if taken aback by his own comment, he flushed darkly again, one hand splaying out across his stomach in a nervous gesture. "I . . . ah . . . that is . . . I mean . . . ."

Ray held up a hand, cutting off his babbling. "Hey, you never know, Benton, it might get sore again. So just keep that idea for later, okay?"

Fraser looked a little surprised, and then still blushing, he nodded and turned away, dialing the phone with singular concentration. Ray shifted his attention back to the computer and started printing again, listening to Fraser's half of the conversation. It was kind of funny only hearing half, and pauses, because he could sort of fill in the other half from his imagination.

"Yes, good afternoon, this is Corporal Benton. . . ah, yes. Yes, ma'am. Indeed. Yes it is. I did, actually, I was wondering if my partner and I might stop by and speak to you for a few minutes. No, not about the tickets, you know you have to deal with the Crown on that score. What? Oh, no, certainly not. No, I meant, well, frankly I misspoke, he's not precisely my partner, although he used to be when I lived in . . . Yes, he is an American. I see. Certainly. Yes, we'll be right over. Can I . . . oh. I'm sorry to hear that. Yes, I could do that. Anything else I can bring you? Well, then, good bye." He hung up the phone and turned to look at Ray. "She said . . . ."

Ray interrupted. "She said you should come over and bring that weird American guy so she can get a look at him, and she asked you to pick up something at the store for her on the way, right?"

Fraser looked a little startled. "Actually, yes. How did you know that?"

"I'm psychic. What'd she get a ticket for?"
"Speeding. She drives like the proverbial bat out of hell," Fraser said with a grimace. "And it's not just a ticket. It's eleven, in the past eight months. She's had her license revoked, which is why she's asked me to stop by the store. Her daughter, Mary, was supposed to come yesterday morning and drive her out to the Reserve for her regular weekend visit but she's ill and unable to come, so Hannah's stuck at home and bored and is dying to meet you, and she's nearly out of coffee."

Ray stood up. "Well, we can't let that happen to the nice lady. Caffeine deprivation is not a pretty thing. What are we waiting for?"

"One last thing. I need to send an email, it will only take a moment. If I may?" He nodded at the chair Ray occupied.

"Oh, sure, no problem." Ray exited the chair and Fraser took his place.

"I thought it might be prudent to alert the RCMP Technical Security branch about the existence of this website so they can begin a threat and risk assessment," Fraser said as he typed at his usual super-speed. "We may not be the only community affected by Mr. Motherwell's literary efforts."

Ray nodded. "Yeah, good call. From the looks of it, there's a dozen other wackos who may or may not be playing this game."

Fraser finished his email, and shut down the computer. "As you say. Now, we can go see Ms. Moss."

Ray nodded, and headed out with Fraser at his heels, and nearly ran into Sally who was carrying two Kevlar vests.

"You want these now, Benton?" she asked, holding them up.

"Yes, thank you Sally." He reached past Ray and took them, then extended one to Ray. "Here you are. We can just duck into the men's room for a moment and suit up."

Ray nodded and let Fraser lead the way. The men's was a single-seater, but large enough to accommodate both a prisoner and a guard. Ray locked the door out of habit and then peeled off his sweater and settled the familiar weight of the vest around himself, over his t-shirt, tightening the Velcro straps until it fit. That done, he looked up to find Fraser standing there, still holding his vest, with an anxious look on his face.

"What? What's up?" Ray asked.

Fraser shook himself a little and seemed to snap out of whatever he was in. "Sorry. I'll just wait for you."

"Wait for me, why?" Ray asked, frowning. "Just put the vest on so we can go play Mr. Coffee for the nice lady."

Fraser looked at him, then looked down, two little spots of red burning on his cheeks. "Yes. Yes, of course. Would you mind holding this for a moment?" he asked, holding out the vest to Ray.

"Sure." Ray took it, and Fraser turned around, facing away from him, and slowly lifted his own shirt, pulling his arms free but leaving it bunched around his neck. Then he reached back a hand somewhat awkwardly.

"The vest?"
Ray didn't understand why Fraser was acting so shy all of a sudden, but he knew he was going to have a hard time getting it on like that, so he ripped the straps open and slid it around Fraser's torso for him like he was a little kid.

Fraser stiffened and pulled away, holding the vest in place as he quickly did up the straps and then awkwardly yanked his henley down over it. Clearing his throat, he turned back to face Ray and gestured at the door. "Shall we go?"

Ray followed him, wondering what stick he'd got up his . . . okay. He wasn't going to think about that right now. He stopped at the drinking fountain for a minute to gulp down a few swallows and take a minute to recover from his wayward thoughts. Fraser went on to the door and stood there waiting. Straightening, Ray headed for the door and on the way past Sally's empty desk he saw Dief with his paws up on the desk-top, straining to reach something . . . a cookie. After this morning, he was stealing sweets? Stupid wolf. He shot a glance over at Fraser, who was digging in his pocket, probably for his keys. At least somebody in the family had some sense. He slapped his hands against the counter hard so it would vibrate. "Dief!"

Dief's paws hit the ground and he shot a guilty look at Ray.

From the doorway, Fraser frowned. "What's he done?"

"Nothing," Ray fibbed, realizing Fraser couldn't see Dief from where he stood because the counter was too high. "I just wanted to get his attention so he'd come with." He reached over and opened the little half-door to let Dief out from behind the counter, even though he could probably jump it.

"Good thought," Fraser said, nodding.

Dief nosed Ray's hand as he fell into step beside him. Ray looked down with what he hoped was a severe expression. "Behave or I'm telling dad," he whispered. Dief thumped his tail against Ray's leg and looked chastened. Ray had seen that look on him often enough to know better. "I mean it," he growled.

"You mean what?" Fraser asked, puzzled.

"Huh? Oh, um, just reminding Dief who's boss, you know?"

Fraser frowned faintly, still looking puzzled. "Ah. All right then." He glanced at Diefenbaker, but the wolf avoided his eyes. "Shall we go?"

* * *

Listening to Ray charm Hannah Moss, Fraser's thoughts kept returning to that moment in his office when Ray had . . . well, flirted was far too mild a word. Though it was nearly impossible to wrap his mind around the thought, that had been an out-and-out proposition. He was simultaneously eager and terrified. No one had touched him with honest desire in so long he'd nearly forgotten such a thing existed. And he'd been . . . Lord . . . thirteen, the last time he'd touched another man with sexual intent. Though he could hardly call himself, Steve, Mark, and Innusiq men at that age.

The contest had been Mark's idea. . . he was competitive about everything. He'd even brought a tape measure to see who could get the most distance. Innusiq had seemed rather bemused by the whole idea. Both Mark and Innusiq had drawn the line at kissing, though. Mark had wrinkled his nose and declared that 'girly stuff.' Innusiq just thought it was disgusting. Only later, after Mark and Innusiq had gone home, had Steve suggested they try that, too. Ben could still, after twenty six years, recall that first kiss. Or perhaps not the first one, which had nearly resulted in mutual nosebleeds, but the
ones after that. He had a feeling that Ray would be far, far better at it.

"Hey, Benton, what's the goofy smile about?" Ray asked.

Suddenly wrenched out of dreamy speculation and firmly back into Hannah Moss' living room, Fraser looked around a bit wildly. The woman was nowhere to be seen. "I . . . ah . . . where's Ms. Moss?"

"She went to go get the coffee," Ray said, looking at him oddly. "You power napping there?"

Fraser stared at him, unable to keep his eyes from focusing on Ray's mouth. "Ah, not . . . exactly."

Ray's eyes narrowed, and then widened, and he started to grin. "Not exactly?"

Fraser nodded. Ray's grin broadened. "You know, I'm really starting to look forward to getting home tonight."

His mouth went bone dry, and his heart-rate skyrocketed. He wasn't quite certain whether the sensation was anticipation or fear. Perhaps both. Probably both. He took a deep breath. Definitely both.

"Here you go, Mr. Kowalski, your coffee," Hannah said, coming out of the kitchen with two mugs. "You sure you don't want a cup, Corporal Fraser?"

Fraser cleared his throat. "Yes, ma'am. But maybe some water?"

"Sure thing." She handed Ray one mug, set the other down on the coffee table, and padded back into the kitchen in her shearling slippers. She was a small, stocky woman, but graceful. He knew she was a prize-winning dancer, so that wasn't too surprising. He heard water running, and watched Ray as he sipped his coffee with an expression of abstracted pleasure. He wondered if Ray looked like that when . . . for God's sake, he admonished himself. Show some self control.

Hannah returned with a glass of water, which he took and gratefully sipped. "Thank you, ma'am."

"You wanted to talk to me about something?" she prompted, taking a seat on the couch next to Ray, too close to Ray, and picking up her coffee before turning to him with an attentive expression on her broad face. "Is something wrong?"

Fraser's hands curled into fists and he shook off the urge to tell her to move. "I'm sure you've heard about the two fires the community has experienced in the last couple of weeks."

"Hard to miss that, eh?" Hannah asked wryly. "Most excitement we've had around here in years. Strange to have two so close together that weren't just house fires from somebody's candles or stove."

"Frankly we suspect the timing may not be coincidental."

Her dark eyes narrowed shrewdly, drawing parallel lines between her brows. "You think they was set?"

"We have no irrefutable evidence of arson at this point, however the fact that both fires affected establishments connected to artistic endeavors is somewhat concerning."

"Uh-huh," she said, looking around the room, at the stacks of bitings carefully pressed under heavy books here and there. "Am I next?"
"Not necessarily, although the possibility can't be ruled out. We were wondering if you've noticed any suspicious activity of late. Particularly any unusual odors."

"Odors? You mean like gasoline or paraffin?"

"More like perfume," Ray put in. "This perp starts fires with perfume."

Something clicked suddenly in Fraser's mind. He spoke without thinking. "Aftershave," he corrected. "I'm quite certain it was Calvin Klein's CK."

Ray looked at him sharply. "You didn't tell me that before." Ray looked annoyed. "What, working up here by yourself all this time make you forget that partners is sharing?" he asked pointedly.

Fraser flushed. "Honestly, I only placed the scent just now."

Ray thought about that for a moment, and then nodded. "Okay. You're off the hook this time."

Hannah cackled and slapped Ray on the thigh. "I like you. You don't let him pull crap."

Taken aback, Fraser was about to protest when Ray shook his head.

"It goes both ways. He doesn't let me pull any crap either. That's how come we're good together." He looked at Fraser and winked. Fortunately Hannah couldn't see that because of the way they were seated. Fraser felt a smile curve his mouth, and he nodded.

"Indeed, we are."

Hannah nodded. "Yeah, that's a good way to be." She looked at Ray. "I bet you miss working together."

Ray sighed. "Yeah, I could really use Fraser back home. So, Hannah, about those smells," he said in a deliberate change of subject. "You notice anything?"

"Nope, I haven't smelled anything funny lately. Haven't noticed a thing out of the ordinary. Of course I keep pretty busy, even if I do have to get folks to take me places when I need to go," she said with a pointed look at Fraser.

Fraser tried not to smile, and shook his head. "Hannah, you know the local speed limits as well or better than I do."

"Yeah, but nobody ever enforced 'em around here until you came," she complained.

Fraser was trying to come up with a reply that didn't damn his predecessors when Ray spoke in a faux-confidential tone.

"Hey, y'know, you got off easy, you just got tickets. Fraser arrested me once. Handcuffs and all."

Hannah's eyes widened. "He did?"

"Yep. In between almost singlehandedly bringing down two different international terrorists."

"Ray, don't exaggerate," Fraser said repressingly, trying to shut him up.

"I'm not. There was the guy on the train with the impromptu thermonuclear device and then the guy in the nuclear sub with the nerve gas."
Hannah looked up at Fraser, then at Ray. "A nuclear submarine? You don't mean that one they caught up north, 'bout two years back, do you?"

"That's the one," Ray assured her.

"I read about that in the papers! It was even on The National! I had no idea that was our Corporal Fraser!"

"Yeah," Ray said. "I'd give my right arm to have him back in Chicago."

"My goodness! I can certainly understand how you'd want him back. He's really wasted here, isn't he?" She looked over at Fraser. "I, ah, I'm sorry about the speeding. I promise I'll try to do better if I get my license back."

"I'm very happy to hear that. As for the matter at hand, we're going to have someone make regular checks on you until we have this situation resolved, and I want you to call us immediately if you notice anything even slightly suspicious."

She nodded. "I'll sure do that. I hope you find this guy. I know Nancy and Todd Stevensen were just devastated. They've got insurance, thank God, but it's going to take a lot for them to get back on their feet. And I'm sure Ralph Dixon's pretty upset, too."

"We'll do our best." He looked at Ray. "I think we need to go to the trading post and see if we can find out if anyone has recently started buying unusually large quantities of aftershave."

Ray nodded, standing up. "Thanks for the coffee."

Hannah laughed. "No, thank you for the coffee. Before you go, come over here. I want you to have a souvenir."

She lifted a book off of a stack of bitings, and began laying them out across the table. Ray followed, after a questioning glance at Fraser, who nodded encouragement.

"Pick one."

Ray shook his head. "No, these are your work, I can't just take one."

"Don't insult me, Yankee," Hannah said firmly. "Take one."

Fraser watched as Ray carefully perused all the offerings, and then hesitantly pointed at one of the smaller ones, an oval which held shadowy images of spiders. "I like that one."

Hannah's face lit up. "That's my favorite! Nobody ever wants my spiders."

"Spiders are cool," Ray said with a grin. "They eat mosquitoes."

"Smart boy. I knew I liked you!" Hannah said, picking up the biting and slipping it into a protective envelope before extending it to Ray. "There you go. Enjoy it."

Ray took it gravely. "I will. I promise."

As they headed out to the Suburban, Ray looked at him curiously. "How'd you know it was CK? No offense, but you're not exactly the cologne type."

"Generally true. However, the explanation is really quite simple. I was once beset in Marshall Fields by a cologne-wielding sales clerk. Some of the fragrance got on my uniform and it lingered for
Ray chuckled, shaking his head. "I think I've had run-ins with that clerk myself. Okay, so that explains part of the mystery, but how come you didn't just figure Zhertak was using it himself when he came in smelling like aftershave? And how did you know it was aftershave not cologne?"

"Well, the process was entirely subconscious, however, I suppose if I were to break it down, I would say there were two main factors. The first being the strength of the scent, which was clearly quite concentrated since I could detect it over the other fire-related smells. The second being that Constable Zhertak strongly favors something called Drakkar Noir, and while he has on occasion come into work smelling faintly of Charlie, which is a favorite of Amelia Maslow, or Halston, which I believe is Darlene Adler's preferred scent, he has never, in the entire time he's worked here, smelled of CK. And I suspect that our culprit is using aftershave rather than cologne because there's more alcohol in an aftershave, thus making it a better accelerant."

"Huh. Yeah, I guess that makes sense. And you did all that without knowing you were doing it? Wild."

"It's not at all unusual. You do the same thing all the time," Fraser said, unlocking his door and then tossing the keys to Ray so he could do the same.

Ray caught them, and looked at him dubiously as he did so. "I do?"

"Certainly." Fraser opened the door and slid into the driver's seat as Ray got in on the other side. "Your subconscious receives data, interprets it, formulates a plan, then delivers the result to you as a 'hunch' which your conscious mind can then choose to act on."

"Hey, I like that. Next time somebody asks me if I'm acting on a hunch I'm going to remember that. Wait, hang on a second here. I can buy that you know what CK smells like because of a perfume-wielding clerk, and that you know what Drakkar Noir smells like because Constable Workout likes to drown himself in it, but how come you know what Halston and Charlie smell like?"

"I was forced to share my apartment with Francesca Vecchio for several days," Fraser said, starting the engine and reversing out of the driveway, then heading back toward town.

"That'd do it," Ray said, then he frowned. "Hey! You bunked with my sister? How come I never knew this?"

"You knew all about it, Ray. Or should have, after reading the files."

Ray frowned. "Oh, a Vecchio case." He frowned thoughtfully, tapping his fingers on the dashboard. "Carver?" he asked after a moment.

"Indeed."

"Oh. Okay. So it was all innocent-like?" Ray asked.

"Rather more innocent than Francesca would have liked, I'm afraid," Fraser said with smile, feeling only a slight pang of outraged chivalry.

Ray snorted. "I bet." He glanced out the window at a passing car, and his frown came back as he swivelled around to look back the way they'd just come. After a moment he turned back to face forward. Fraser glanced at him, trying to keep an eye on him and the road.

"Is something wrong?"
"Hmm? No, nothing." He was still frowning. After a moment he cleared his throat. "Um. . . you know that thing where your subconscious receives data, interprets it, formulates a plan, then delivers the result as a 'hunch'?

"Yes."

"I'm having one of those now. Turn around."

"What?"

"Turn the car around. That kid in the beat-up Gremlin we just passed. I saw him at Dixon's. He was mighty eager to get a look at that fire."

"That's hardly a damning. . . ." Fraser began, then he cut himself short, checked the mirrors, and cranked the wheel around, making a U-turn. He knew better than to doubt Ray's hunches.

Although the roads were practically deserted, which was of course quite common for a Sunday afternoon in the region, the young man driving the orange Gremlin appeared to take no notice that he was being followed. The Suburban was, in fact, the only other vehicle on the road, but the steady 50 kph speed Fraser maintained was certainly nothing that was likely to draw the driver's attention.

Fraser glanced over at Ray, certain that he'd be frustrated that it wasn't him behind the wheel of the car, but Ray just looked back at him and smiled.

"Nice maneuver back there, Fraser. You have been getting some driving practice in lately, haven't you?"

That much was true, Fraser thought, sighing inwardly. All due to far too much time in the car and far too little time on his feet. However, he was aware that Ray's comment hadn't been intended as a criticism of how soft he'd become of late, but instead had been meant as nothing more than a compliment about his driving skills. He found himself feeling inordinately pleased by Ray's words - more so, perhaps, than was warranted by such a relatively small thing - and the pleasure he felt showed in the smile he returned to Ray before returning his attention to the road.

"I thought, perhaps, you were missing being behind the wheel."

"Thought I was just itching to go after a suspect at 31 miles an hour? No way, Fraser. Believe me, it's better for my rep to just be a passenger here."

"Ah, so would this be an example of 'anti-style' in driving?" he asked drily.

Ray glanced over, looking a bit worried as if what he'd said might have caused some offense, but Fraser just grinned to let him know that he understood no insult had been intended.

After a second, Ray nodded and leaned back. "Anyway, if driving at a crawl was anti-style - and I'm not saying it is, okay? - it would be just right for going after a guy driving a Gremlin. Jeez, talk about the ultimate anti-style car."

Fully aware that Ray's comment was meant to get a rise out of him, Fraser tried to recall everything he had ever read about Gremlins to see if he could retrieve an odd story, perhaps involving another pursuit, in which the car had played a pivotal role. Unlikely that he would come up with anything, since he was forced to agree with Ray's negative assessment of the Gremlin, but he'd missed this old and familiar game of finding an unlikely story to suit every occasion. From Ray's expression - a perfect mixture of challenge and amusement - it appeared that he, too, had missed it, and was just waiting for Fraser to 'take his turn.' He thought perhaps something would come to mind in a moment,
but before it did, Ray shifted quickly in his seat.

"Okay, heads up. He's got his turn signal on. Just like you figured, he skipped the first turn off. But if he heads up, um, Sawmill Road there, he can circle back around to Hannah's place, right?"

"It certainly appears that's what he's intending to do."

"So, what's the game plan, this being your turf and all?"

For a moment, Fraser felt unaccountably dispirited at the thought that so much time had passed since they'd last worked together that Ray had to ask what he was planning to do instead of knowing instinctively. But that disappointment passed in the next moment when he realized he didn't actually have any plan of action. He laughed to himself: how silly was it to resent Ray's inability to read his mind when apparently nothing was there for him to read in the first place?

"Perhaps we might . . . talk to him?"

Ray laughed. "That talking thing work up here? I used to have a Canadian partner who did a lot of talking at suspects down in Chicago, but I figured it was the shock value of somebody in the big bad city offering polite conversation that got everyone to cough up the goods."

"Oddly enough, I used to be just like this Canadian partner you describe. Recently, however, I've found it more efficacious to just threaten to kick people in the head."

"More efficacious, huh?" Ray grinned. "Heh. I'll bet it's just a posture."

Fraser smiled back. As he eased his foot off the accelerator to keep his speed consistent with the decreasing speed of the Gremlin, he glanced automatically in the rear view mirror.

"Oh for God's sake."

Over the rise, he could see the RCMP vehicle assigned to Constable Zhertak accelerating towards them, its lightbar flashing garishly. He looked back at the Gremlin, which had almost begun its turn onto Sawmill, and could see the young man turn to look over his shoulder, then cut the turn signal, take a sharp left turn, and speed off in the opposite direction.

"Son of a bitch!" Ray yelled as he watched the Gremlin drive out of sight. He turned around to see the car behind them and slammed his hand on the dashboard. "What the hell is he doing here?"

"I have no idea, but I'm certainly going to find out."

Fraser pulled off the road onto the shoulder by the turn off. He unfastened his seatbelt, got out of the car, and started to walk back to Constable Zhertak's car, which had now come to a stop thirty feet behind his own. He could hear the passenger door of his Suburban open and knew that Ray was getting out of the car, but he didn't hear Ray's footsteps following him, only the low growl of Diefenbaker from the back seat.

By the time he reached the car, Constable Zhertak had put the vehicle into park and was standing beside the driver's side door at parade rest.

"Corporal Fraser."

"Constable. I'm rather surprised to encounter you here. I thought you'd gone home for the day."

Zhertak shifted uneasily in place. "Yes, sir. I had planned to do so. But I happened to run into Dave
Byrnes, who told me that one of his people, Angela Smith I believe, had found evidence of breaking and entering through the back entrance at Dixon's, and I thought you'd wish to be informed."

"And was it just a happy coincidence that brought you to this particular stretch of road?"

"Well, sir . . . not precisely."

Fraser raised his eyebrows questioningly, but remained silent as Zhertak flushed before his gaze.

"I returned to the office and asked Sally for your whereabouts, but she only knew that you had requested kevlar vests and then departed. I . . .I grew concerned and . . . well, I went into your office to see if you had left any indication as to your plans for the afternoon. There, I discovered computer printouts with references to fires highlighted and your Rolodex opened to Hannah Moss's address and, well . . . ."

"Didn't it occur to you to simply call me?"

Again, Zhertak flushed. "I'm afraid that in the heat of the moment, my concern overcame my common sense, Sir. I was quite worried that you were heading into a potentially volatile situation without backup."

Fraser instinctively glanced back over his shoulder at Ray, who was still waiting patiently by the car with Diefenbaker. There was his backup. Ray. However, he was forced to admit that as an RCMP officer and his second-in-command, Constable Zhertak deserved to be kept informed about all cases affecting the La Rouille region, particularly one as potentially life-threatening as the current arson investigation. It had been unprofessional not to share information pertaining to developments in the case - or even that there was a case at all - with anyone but the man he considered his true partner.

It was understandable that Constable Zhertak was uncomfortable with the involvement of someone he thought of as an outsider in something he believed to be of official interest only to the RCMP, even if his attitude toward Ray - and by extension, toward Fraser himself - was rather offensive. And regardless of his own desire to work exclusively with Ray as he had in the past, he couldn't deny the fact that it was that very desire which was responsible for Zhertak's untimely arrival on the scene - and the subsequent loss of their suspect.

"I appreciate your concern, Bose, and I apologize for not bringing you up to speed sooner in the investigation. However, perhaps in future, you'll endeavor to contact me before taking any action?"

"Yes, sir," he said stiffly. "It won't happen again."

"No, I'm sure it won't." Fraser sighed, and looked in the direction the Gremlin had gone. It occurred to him that he should at least try to make Zhertak feel as if he were part of things. "If you insist on giving up your day off, as it appears you do, perhaps you wouldn't mind doing me a favor."

Zhertak leaned forward, his expression unusually eager. "I'd be pleased to, sir."

"Would you radio Sally and ask her to log in to the database and pull the registration records of a 1973 Orange Gremlin, last year's style license plate number RBY 414, PV type, which expires in October of next year."

"Um . . . I may have to go back to the office to find that information."

"Is there a problem with your radio?" Fraser asked, glancing at the car.

"No, sir. It's just that Sally was threatening to take a baseball bat to her monitor when I stopped by
the office."

Fraser shook his head, smiling a little. He was quite familiar with Sally's opinion of the antiquated computer she had to use. "Ah. Then perhaps you'd be so good as to go through the paper records with Sally, assuming you don't have to charge her with felonious assault upon the computer first."

Zhertak giggled, then evidently recalled the precarious footing he was on with his superior officer and wiped the smile from his face. "Will do, sir. I'll call you as soon as we get the registration information."

"I appreciate it, Constable. I'll speak with you shortly."

"Indeed. And again, Corporal, I want to apologize. To you and to your . . . to the detective."

Fraser nodded shortly, and Zhertak headed back toward his car. Fraser thought of something else. "Constable?"

Zhertak turned quickly, hurrying back. "Sir?"

"I'd like you to stop by Mrs. Moss' home before you return to the detachment. I was going to ask you and Constable Traynor to alternate with us doing drive-bys to check on her throughout the night, however the more I think about it, the more I think that may not be enough. I'm concerned about her safety, and I think the detachment budget can cover putting her up at Marie Richard's bed and breakfast for the night, so I'd like to ask you to take her back with you and get that set up."

"Certainly, sir. I'd be happy to."

Zhertak hurried off to his car, got in, and drove off toward Hannah's, as Fraser walked across the gravely shoulder to join Ray.

"Everything okay?" Ray asked. "It didn't look like you had to read him the riot act or anything."

"Actually, he was quite contrite - and he offered a very gracious apology to both of us."

"Yeah? He say why he'd been dogging our heels?"

"As a matter of fact, he . . . ." Fraser stopped speaking and looked away.

"What? He what?"

"It appears he was . . . worried about me."

Ray started to chuckle, and Fraser could feel his face turning red. "Ray, I hope you don't find it amusing that my own subordinate evidently believes me to be incapable of doing my job without a minder."

Ray shook his head, then placed a hand on Fraser's shoulder. "I don't know . . . it doesn't feel like that to me. It's more like . . . he doesn't want to leave you alone with me for some other reason." His eyes widened suddenly. "You know what? I'll bet he's got the hots for you!"

Fraser frowned, shaking his head. "I'm sure you're mistaken, Ray."

"Bet I'm not!" Ray said, a little too emphatically, but a moment later he shrugged. "I don't know, maybe. Hard to say. Just . . . why wouldn't he?"

"Even if that were true, why in the world has he been acting in such an insulting manner toward a
friend of mine? Surely he'd . . . ."

"He's jealous," Ray interrupted.

"He's . . . ah, I see."

He frowned some more. The whole idea seemed highly unlikely. After all, since he'd arrived, Bose Zhertak had dated virtually every eligible woman in town before settling into a somewhat precarious equilibrium between Amelia Maslow and Darlene Adler. All things considered, he certainly didn't seem to be of the appropriate persuasion.

On the other hand, Ray, who was now professing a far more than platonic interest in him, had once been married. On the other other hand Ray could well be projecting. Although even that thought was a little disconcerting. He'd grown so accustomed to being solitary that the idea that someone - possibly two someones - had . . . feelings for him, was all but inconceivable.

His tongue darted out to wet his suddenly dry lips, and Ray's fingers followed the path of his tongue along his lips. He swallowed hard, and Ray pulled his hand back, but then he touched his wet fingertips to Fraser's cheek.

"Don't flip out on me here, Benton, okay? It shouldn't be that surprising. Back in Chicago you practically had to beat people off with a stick."

Fraser closed his eyes. "Yes, well, I should think it's apparent that things have . . . changed since I was in Chicago."

He felt Ray's hand slide around the back of his neck. "They haven't changed as much as you think. There was always more to you than just a pretty face."

Ray's fingers curled in to the too-long hair at the back of his head. "Later, okay? We'll talk about this later. Anyway, what did you tell your boyfriend that we were going to do next?"

"Ray! He's not . . . ."

"I know. " Ray grinned and bumped Fraser's arm with his own. "Just yanking your chain. What's next?"

Fraser shook off the dazed feeling that Ray's touch had left in its wake and nodded. "I think we should go check out Sawmill Road and see if there's any evidence that our arsonist may have been there before."

He opened the door of the Suburban and got in, and a moment later Ray was back in 'shotgun' position. Just as he started the engine, his cellular phone began to ring. He got it out and thumbed it on.

"Corporal Benton Fraser speaking."

"Ah. . . hello, sir," came Bose Zhertak's voice, sounding unusually hesitant.

"Is there a problem, Constable?"

"She says she won't go."

"Mrs. Moss?"

"Yes, sir. She won't leave."
Fraser shook his head, well aware of Hannah's stubborn streak. "We'll be right there."

"Thank you, sir."

The drive to Hannah's was blissfully short, although Fraser could feel Diefenbaker's mocking stare on the back of his head the entire way. Ray got out of the car and after he closed the door, Fraser looked back at Dief with a scowl. "I'll thank you to mind your manners," he hissed. "Or have you forgotten that I still control the can-opener and kibble scoop?"

Dief looked worried. Fraser felt rather reprehensibly smug. He got out, and they walked up to the front porch where Zhertak was standing next to an angry-looking Hannah Moss. Under other circumstances it might have been amusing to see the six-foot-two-inch constable completely intimidated by the five-foot-if-that Hannah Moss, but these weren't other circumstances.

"Is there a problem?" he asked politely, looking from one to the other.

Hands fisted on her hips, Hannah shot a glare at Zhertak and nodded. "You bet there is. This idiot just come strolling up to my door, telling me I've got to go with him for my own good!"

Ray suddenly seemed to have developed an itchy nose. Fraser strongly suspected he was grinning behind his hand. Fraser was having a hard time not doing so himself. "Perhaps Constable Zhertak didn't make my suggestion clear," he said smoothly. "We simply thought it would be prudent if you stayed away from the premises until our suspect is caught. We wouldn't want you to be come to any harm through our negligence."

Her glare was suddenly aimed his way, and he felt a moment of empathy with Zhertak.

"Your suggestion? This was your idea, Benton Fraser? I guess you're the fool, then. If you think I'm in danger, then so's my house, and I'll have you know that I've lived in this house for thirty years, and I'm not going to run off and leave it for some lunatic to burn down! My kids were born here, my husband died here, and this house has kept me safe for all that time. I'm not leaving it unprotected, you got that?"

He cleared his throat. "Ah, yes, ma'am. I think the point is clear. However, it wouldn't be unprotected. We would have someone coming by to keep an eye on it at regular intervals."

"Yeah, and what about when they're not coming by? It's an old house, Corporal, well-aged pine, with paper insulation. It'll go up like a torch if it's lit and by the time Dave Byrnes rousted his crew and got down here it'd be all over but the crying. Nope. No way am I leaving. I'm here. I've got four fire extinguishers and a garden hose. I'm staying."

She glared from him to Zhertak and back, apparently leaving Ray out, since he hadn't said anything. Zhertak shot him a look that said plainly 'See? She's nuts!' and Fraser resisted the urge to sigh. "I understand, Mrs. Moss. We'll work around it. Would you be willing to have someone from the detachment stay with you tonight?"

Hannah thought about it, and nodded, grudgingly. "Yeah, I suppose. It's not like I don't have the room. And it'd be nice to have some company."

"Excellent. Constable Zhertak, if you'd be so good as to go on back to the detachment and see to that other matter we discussed I'd be grateful. Once that's done I'd like you to bring Constable Traynor by, she can stay here with Mrs. Moss overnight. Ray and I will stay here until she arrives."

"Why don't you just have her drive over?" Zhertak asked, looking puzzled.
"'Cause we want things to look normal around here," Ray cut in. "You put an RCMP cruiser in the driveway and there's no way the perp will show his nose again. Any unfamiliar vehicle, really, doesn't even have to have gumballs on top, and he'll spook."

"Gum..." Zhertak looked confused for a moment, but then he nodded. "Ah, yes, I understand. All right. I'll go look up that information for you, and then I'll get Arden... er, Constable Traynor, and bring her back... in my personal car, not the cruiser."

Fraser nodded. "Excellent idea, just in case he's watching the traffic in the area."

Zhertak excused himself, looking suspiciously relieved as he hightailed it for his cruiser. Fraser turned back to find Ray with his hand on Hannah's shoulder.

"You okay?" he was asking softly. "You look a little upset."

"Well, of course I am!" she snapped, then she softened. "Sorry. I shouldn't snap at you. I know you're just doing your job. It's just..." Her face crumpled a little. "I hate to think that someone around here hates me so much."

"Now, see, it's not really you," Ray said. "It's just that this guy thinks he's got instructions to torch some kind of art that had to do with wood, and your stuff fits the bill. So, it's not personal. It's not that somebody doesn't like you. It's just this weird game he's playing with this other guy, and this other guy is in a mental ward so that tells you he's not playing with a full deck to start with."

Hannah looked slightly confused. "Who's not? The guy in the mental ward or the guy who wants to burn down my house?"

"Well, if you ask me, both," Ray said. "But for sure the guy in the mental ward. Hey, aren't you a little chilly, standing out here with no coat?"

Hannah rubbed her arms. "Now that you mention it, yeah. Come on inside." She opened the door and ushered them inside. "You boys hungry? I made a big pot of beef-barley soup that I was going to take up to Mary's but since I'm not going now, it'll last me forever. I'll get it out and warm it up, make some biscuits, and we can have an early supper." She turned and headed for the kitchen.

Fraser opened his mouth to refuse, only to have Ray catch his eye and shake his head, scowling, before he called out.

"Yeah, that'd be great! We never got lunch today."

Fraser waited, eyebrows lifted, and as soon as Hannah had disappeared into the kitchen Ray put a hand on his arm and pulled him close, lips nearly against his ear.

"Fraser, moms deal with stress by cooking," he whispered, "and she's a mom. Just go with it. She needs to do this."

A surge of warmth went through him at the feel of Ray's breath and his face lightly touching his hair, which, oddly, evoked a shiver. He tried to convey his understanding of Ray's words, but nothing came out of his mouth except a strange choked-off little sound. Ray pulled back a little, looked at him, and then smiled wickedly and leaned back in.

"You like that?" he whispered, his lips brushing Fraser's ear.

Fraser closed his eyes and nodded. He couldn't possibly form words. The warmth spread through him like wildfire, pooling in his groin.
"I'll remember that," he said, still in a whisper. "Later." His tongue flicked out in a rapid tease before Ray drew back, cleared his throat, and not-very-surreptitiously adjusted his trousers.

Fraser swallowed thickly, and echoed Ray's tug. It was several seconds before his voice returned. "Ray. . . ."

"Yeah?"

"I'm . . . looking forward to later."

Ray's smile was like sunlight breaking through clouds. "Me too, Benton. Me too."

***

The last time Ray could remember feeling this way - this worried he was going to do something to mess things up and this sure everything was going to be great and this stupidly happy all at the same time - he'd been seventeen years old. 1977. He'd grown fast over the past year, but he was gawky and shy and didn't have a clue about what he was going to do with his life. Every time he thought about his last report card, he wasn't even sure he was going to make it through to graduation.

Then one Saturday morning in late May he woke up and everything had changed. His dad told him to get in the car, but instead of taking him to get the haircut he'd been threatening him with for the past month, he drove him over to Bill Adamczyk's garage - lecturing him all the way about responsibility and maturity - only to stand back while Mr. Adamczyk handed him the keys to the GTO he'd been admiring for months. He was going to have to work every day that coming summer to help his dad pay it off, but it was his. His car.

Then they returned home, and when he walked in the door, there was his mom, beaming at him from the front porch. He didn't even have time to wonder when she'd started to get so excited about cars before she handed him an envelope and squeezed him so tightly he almost couldn't breathe. He read the letter and couldn't believe it. A college - a real college - had written to him to say they wanted to offer him a place in the fall. Him - with his 62 percent average.

An hour later, he got a phone call that made him forget the letter from the college. Hell, it almost made him forget the Goat for a second. It was Stella. Stella who'd broken up with him two weeks earlier saying that they were too young to be going steady and that now that they were graduating and moving on with their lives, they should start seeing other people. Stella. And she was crying and saying she loved him and she didn't want to break up with him and it didn't matter to her if he didn't go to college as long as they were together. And then she asked him to go with her to the senior prom. He just sat on the kitchen floor, wrapping the phone cord around his arm and wondering when lightning was going to strike, but thinking it was pretty much worth it even if it did, until Stella had to ask if he was still there.

Now, twenty years later, he felt like he was seventeen all over again. He wasn't sure what the hell was happening between him and Fraser, and it was almost scaring him to death, but it just felt so damned great.

Maybe too great - at least at the moment. Jeez. Another few minutes of standing here staring at Fraser, and he was going to end up jumping the guy in the middle of a stranger's living room.

"Fraser? Let's go see if Hannah needs any help."

For a minute, Fraser just looked confused, then gave him a slight smile, nodded, and started to walk toward the kitchen, but Ray held his hand out. "Lose the jacket, Benton. In fact, we might as well get
rid of the vests, too; I think we're going to be here for a while."

Fraser took off his jacket, hanging it on the coat rack by the door, then he turned his back and wrestled and wriggled until he got the kevlar vest off, without ever unbuttoning his shirt. The whole thing was as big a production number as he'd gone through to put it on earlier. Finally he turned back toward Ray looking uncomfortable and slightly flushed as he tugged the bottom of his henley out of his jeans even though he'd worn it tucked in that morning, before he'd had to put the vest on.

Ray frowned. He couldn't remember more than two or three times before when Fraser had worn a shirt untucked, so why . . . okay, that's why. God. He was worrying about the way he looked. No, that wasn't quite right, this wasn't vanity. Ray knew that. This was Fraser worrying about not being the same guy Ray remembered, about being out of shape and . . . human, and maybe being a little unsure of his own appeal - the kind of worries Ray used to think Benton Fraser didn't share with the rest of the world. Maybe he could do something to help with that.

"Hey." He closed the few steps separating them and slid his hands around Fraser's waist, tucking the shirt back into place. Fraser sucked in a startled breath, going as still as a proverbial deer in the headlights. Ray didn't remove his hands from where they'd stopped, an inch below the waistband at the back of Fraser's jeans, just tugged him a little closer. "It's okay."

It was then that Ray figured out the main difference between being seventeen and being thirty-nine; he'd learned how to be patient, at least a little. No, it wouldn't have taken much to just slide his hands down a little lower, another inch at the most, until they were touching Fraser's ass - and God, wasn't just the thought of that enough to make him wish he had a paper bag to breathe into - but he didn't do it. There was a really nice lady warming up beef-barley soup no more than twenty feet from them and it wasn't like this was going to be his only chance.

Later.

Reluctantly, he slid his hands out and was perversely glad to see a disappointed expression on Fraser's face. "Come on. Let's go in."

The kitchen was like Hannah herself; it was small but practical, and with an underlying warmth that had little to do with the heat emanating from the open stove.

As soon as they walked in the room, Hannah glanced up from the table with a satisfied look on her face and nodded. "Good timing, boys. Now get yourselves washed up and let's get some food into you."

Fraser turned to look back at Dief, who'd followed them into the kitchen. "Shall I ask him to wait outside?"

"No need," Hannah said, setting the biscuit tray down. "The more, the merrier. Even got a beef bone here for him that I used to make the stock. He like bones?"

Fraser sighed. "I think you'd be hard pressed to find anything he doesn't like."

Once Diefenbaker had settled down happily under the table with his snack, they took turns at the old-fashioned enamel basin, washing their hands, then drying them on a faded pink dishtowel hanging nearby. Ray wondered for a moment if it had once belonged to Tilda Johannsen and chuckled. Fraser looked questioningly at him, but Ray just shook his head and smiled, drawing a confused answering smile in response.

Ray hung the dishtowel over the handle of the oven door to dry, which earned him a nod from
Hannah. Fraser cleared his throat. "Could I be of assistance with anything?"

Hannah snorted in response. "The day I need help serving up soup to company's the day somebody'd better haul me off and plant me in one of them old folk's homes down in Regina. You just sit yourself down, Benton Fraser. And you too, Ray Kowalski. We don't want these biscuits cooling off now, do we?"

They both did as she asked, although Ray smiled to see Fraser's noticeable hesitation over sitting down before his hostess. If Hannah was anything like his mom, she'd be up and down like a jack-in-the-box until everything was just right. Sure enough, it wasn't until the soup had been served, the basket of fresh biscuits had been set down in the middle of the oak table, and tall glasses of apple cider had been placed in front of each of them, that Hannah finally sat down.

She pulled a napkin out from the brass holder and placed it on her lap, then pursed her lips. "Well, come on. Dig in, boys. You know, when my kids all still lived at home, anyone who waited around this long to start eating would've found themselves going to bed hungry. My brood used to go through meals like a swarm of locust." She fixed a glare that took in both of them at once - no easy trick considering they were sitting on opposite sides of the table - and they immediately reached for their spoons.

To be honest, Ray didn't need much encouragement to eat. It had been a long time since they'd shared breakfast that morning, and the rich aroma of the soup reminded him how hungry he was. Still, he'd only finished half of his soup when Hannah got up and reached for Fraser's bowl to refill it. Fraser began to protest, but Hannah would hear none of it.

"You don't want to insult the cook, do you? You know, there's nothing so satisfying as seeing someone appreciate their cooking, Benton. I like a man with a good appetite. You take another couple of those biscuits, too."

With a rueful smile, Fraser nodded and took the bowl from Hannah. "Thank you."

They were just starting to clear up after lunch when the doorbell rang. Hannah sighed. "He's back, and he's got my babysitter with him."

"Constable Traynor isn't a babysitter, Hannah. You know that."

"That's as may well be, Benton," she said disconsolately. "But it's what it feels like."

Fraser put his arm around her shoulders. "I'm more sorry about this than you can imagine, but we'd be derelict in our duties if we didn't make every effort to ensure your well-being."

Hannah pulled back and stared at Fraser for a second, then turned to face Ray. "Don't you just love the way he talks?"

Ray choked back a laugh. "Yeah, I do. Listen, you want me to get the door?"

"No," she sighed. "I may as well face it now as later."

The bell rang a second time. "All right, all right already," she called, walking into the living room. "Hold your horses."

Fraser and Ray placed the last of the dishes in the sink, then left the kitchen to find Hannah sitting on the couch and engaged in an animated discussion with Arden Traynor about termites. Zhertak was still standing there with a wary expression on his face, looking for all the world like he was worried the wrath of Hannah might turn back on him at any second.
"Ah, Corporal Fraser," he said, visibly relieved. He walked over to join the two men and nodded a greeting to Ray. "Sally and I were able to come up with the information you requested. The registration for the vehicle in question belongs to Crawford Jones."

"Crawford Jones? That's Lana Jones' oldest son, isn't it? I didn't know he was old enough to drive."

"He is indeed of legal driving age and has been since this past summer. The vehicle formerly belonged to his Uncle Turner, who apparently signed over the ownership to him as a birthday gift."

"I see. And his address?"

"12A Pine, Lot#3, Duck Lake."

Ray nodded. "A trailer park."

Zhertak glanced at Ray. "Yes, it is a trailer park, Mr. Kowalski, but how did you know that?"

"Well, first of all, that's Detective Kowalski, so there's a clue right there. Second, it sounded familiar. I spent the first eight years of my life in a trailer park." He paused to see if he was going to get any smart ass comments from Zhertak, but when none were forthcoming, he grinned. "Plus, I passed the sign for Duck Lake on my way into town yesterday."

Fraser had that expression on his face that probably looked all serious and business-like to almost everyone else, but looked to Ray like a guy trying real hard not to laugh.

"So, Fraser? You want to take a ride?"

"I think that would be a good idea. Constable Zhertak, would you mind keeping an eye on the detachment? I suppose I could ask Constable Traynor if you'd prefer to stay here and . . . ."

"No, quite all right, sir. Happy to watch over things. Call if you require any more assistance. Really. No trouble." He was still offering his assistance as he backed out of the door and bolted for his car.

Hannah looked up from the couch and cackled. "Scared him off, did I? Looks like you don't scare as easy, eh, Constable?"

Arden Traynor smiled. "I don't scare at all."

Ray went to fetch a sleepy wolf from the warm kitchen, and when he returned, Fraser had put his jacket on and was giving last minute instructions to Traynor.

". . . leaving Dief here to do outside reconnaissance, and we'll let you know within the hour."

"No problem, Corporal. Hannah and I will be just fine."

Hannah nodded. "Run along, boys. We'll entertain ourselves somehow. I think I'll show Arden the nest of wolf spiders up in the attic."

Ray didn't think that sounded particularly entertaining, but Traynor looked pretty eager at the prospect of crawling around in the attic looking at spiders, so who was he to judge?

Before leaving, Fraser and Ray took a quick walk around the sparse woods that surrounded the house, seeing if there was any evidence of anyone having been in the area recently. Of course, Ray knew that only Fraser'd be able to notice anything hinky; the extent of his woodlore consisted only in knowing that thing about moss only growing on the north side of trees - except that he remembered Fraser once telling him that wasn't actually true, particularly the further north you went, so he
guessed his woodlore was really pretty much nonexistent.

But he wasn't about to pass up a chance to spend a few minutes actually alone with Fraser, even if they were supposed to be working. Didn't take much in the way of self-awareness to realize it was getting harder and harder to keep his hands off him, and when Fraser - his eyes still trained on the underbrush - reached over and took hold of his hand before clearing his throat almost immediately and releasing it again, it looked like he wasn't the only one having trouble keeping his head on straight.

Patience. He could be patient. Even if it was a damned over-rated quality.

Duck Lake turned out to have neither a lake, nor any ducks that Ray could see. What it did have, though, were lots and lots of electrical cables and mini satellite dishes attached to the sides of almost all the trailers in the park. The Jones home was no exception. As they approached the door, Ray could hear an all-too-familiar sound. Fraser paused before knocking on the door and frowned.

Ray laughed. "Just a 'toon losing a fight with a train, Fraser. I thought you said you'd been corrupted."

"I thought I had." Fraser smiled. "Evidently my television-watching has been missing a vital component."

He knocked, and the door was opened by a young boy wearing a wrinkled Digimon t-shirt and Nike sweatpants. Before Fraser could say anything, the boy started yelling. "Mom! Some guys are here!"

He wandered away to join another slightly older boy down on the floor in front of the television, but in a few seconds, they were greeted by the sight of a harassed-looking woman waving bright red fingernails in the air in front of her. "Colin! Bennett! I told you to turn that down or turn it off!"

Fraser tapped on the metal edging. "Lana Jones?"

She turned toward the door. "Hey! Corporal Fraser. Haven't seen you in ages. Come on in."

"Thank you kindly. I'd like you to meet my good friend, Ray Kowalski. Ray, Ms. Jones runs Lana's Hair Salon on Chesterton."

Ray looked at Fraser's hair curling over his collar and raised his eyebrows. "Yeah, I can tell you haven't seen him for a while," he laughed. "Good to meet you, Ms. Jones."

"Please, call me Lana. Everyone does," she said, looking pointedly in Fraser's direction. "Now what can I do for you gentlemen today?"

"Actually," Fraser said, "I was hoping to have a word with your son, Crawford."

"You and me both," she muttered. "What's he done, now?"

"We're not certain he's done anything . . . Lana, but we'd like to ask him some questions, if that's all right with you."

"If you can find him, you can ask him whatever you want," Lana said with a smile, pushing a lock of straight, dark hair back from her face. "That boy's getting harder and harder to keep track of these days. He took off early this morning and hasn't been back since."

"Ah. Perhaps you might let me know where he might be. Some friends, perhaps?"
Lana shook her head slowly. "I honestly can't think of anyone he might be visiting. Crawford . . . well, Crawford doesn't have many friends here in La Rouille, not like those two," she said indicating the boys still parked in front of the muted t.v. set.

Though black-haired like their mother and brother, they were round-faced and smiling. Not much like their brother, who Ray remembered as an angular, sullen young man from his brief glimpse outside Dixon's Masonry.

"He used to play with some of the neighbor kids when he was younger," Lana continued. "But these days he's either planted in front of his computer or he's pulling a disappearing act. Teenagers, huh?"

One of the boys started to giggle, and all three adults turned to look at them, which just set both of them to laughing harder.

"What's so funny, you little hyenas?"

The older of the two started to chant, "Crawford's got a girlfriend . . . Crawford's got a girlfriend," and the younger one hummed along, until Lana waved them into silence with her still-drying fingernails.

"Since when? Bennett? What's this about a girlfriend?"

The older boy giggled again. "Crawford's got a girlfriend."

"Yes, so you said," Lana sighed. "What makes you think he's seeing someone?"

Bennett rolled over on his back on the carpet. "Because he's always doing that online chat thing and whenever me or Colin get near, he threatens to beat us up, and he's started buying that stinky stuff like girls like to wear."

Fraser and Ray exchanged glances. "What kind of 'stinky stuff,' Bennett?"

"You know, like perfume stuff. Me and Colin opened one last week and, man does that stuff reek! We kept the windows in the bedroom open for three whole hours, but as soon as Crawford came home he knew we'd done it. Said he'd beat us up for that, too. Didn't do it, though."

"Would you mind showing us where he keeps this stinky stuff . . . if that's all right with you, Lana? I must warn you that the case we're investigating is actually quite serious and you'd be well within your rights to ask us to leave until a search warrant is issued by the local justice of the peace."

"No, Corporal, it's all right with me. Come take a look. I swear, that boy used to tell me everything, and now everything's a big secret."

Ray nodded. "Yeah, my mom used to say the same thing about me."

"Yeah?"

"Sure," he said as reassuringly as he could. "Happens to all of us. Well," he turned to look at Fraser and smiled, "it happens to most of us."

Lana led the way to the boys' bedroom, with the two younger ones trailing after them. She opened the door and they saw a bunk bed by the window and a twin bed along the opposite wall, plus three small dressers all jammed into the room. Colin started to open the top dresser drawer by the twin bed, but Bennett bumped him out of the way.
"Move it, pipsqueak."

"Hey! Cut it out!"

They started poking at each other, and finally Lana had to separate them. "Oh, for heaven's sake! Can't you two get along for a minute?"

She opened the drawer and took a long look. "Nothing but socks and underwear, boys. Are you sure you saw something?"

"Well, duh!" Bennett said indignantly. "There were ten whole bottles of that gross stuff in here yesterday."

Fraser looked around the room. "Do either of you boys remember if there was anything written on the label of the bottles?"

Bennett frowned, but Colin nodded, "Uh huh. CK, like my initials. Right mom? Colin Kenneth is CK."

"Right you are, sweetie," Lana said, ruffling her son's hair.

The two boys left the room and went back to the living room, presumably to go back to watching t.v., if the sudden increase in volume was any clue.

"Sorry we couldn't be more help, Corporal."

"Unfortunately, this may have been more helpful than we all might have liked. May I ask one more question?"

"Sure, shoot."

Fraser winced a little, and as he spoke, Ray realized why.

"I know most of the young men in this area hunt. Does Crawford have a rifle?"

Lana paled, her eyes searching Fraser's face. "Why would you ask that?"

"It's always good to be fully prepared," Fraser said quietly.

She swallowed heavily. "He has one, but it's locked in the gun-case in my room, under my bed. And it's staying there," she said, her voice going hard, along with the line of her jaw.

Fraser nodded. "Lana, if your son does turn up before we encounter him, I'd encourage you to retain counsel before speaking with us again."

Lana was visibly shaken, but her voice was calm. "And if you find him first?"

"I promise you we'll contact you before taking any action, if it's at all possible."

"I'm trusting you with my boy, Corporal."

Fraser nodded. "I'll endeavor to be worthy of that trust, Ms. Jones."

Still looking pale and concerned, she ushered them to the door. "You be careful on the step there, let me get the lights for you," she said, flipping a switch that lit both the light beside the door, and one at the end of the walk that was supposed to look like an old-fashioned street lantern on a short post.
Fraser thanked her, and after she closed the door behind them, Ray turned and looked at Fraser. "You didn't mention the computer."

Fraser shook his head. "No. I don't have a warrant, so confiscation would be suspect. She might have given it to me willingly, however I didn't want to chance tipping our hand."

Ray nodded. "Yeah, true. We'll just hope he doesn't get spooked and wipe it."

"Even if he does, it could likely be reconstructed by the RCMP's Computer Investigative Support Unit. Shall we go?"

Ray nodded, took three steps toward the car, and then stopped, glancing at the nearly over-flowing trash can that was set out in the street for pick-up.

"Fraser... we need a search warrant for that?" he asked, nodding at the can.

"No, it's on public property."

"You got any gloves?"

Fraser paused for a moment, looking at him oddly, and then nodded and went to the Suburban, opening the back. A moment later he returned, carrying two pair of latex gloves, and a couple of ziploc bags, one medium, one large. Ray accepted one pair of gloves, pulled them on, and went over, lifting out the bag of what was obviously kitchen garbage and then picking carefully through the less messy items left in the bin. After a moment he found a box and some bubble wrap. Pulling it out he checked the return address label.

"eScents-dot-com," he read aloud. "And lookee here, a packing slip and receipt to one Mr. Crawford Jones, for one dozen bottles of CK. Huh, not as expensive as you'd think. These online places have good prices."

Fraser opened the larger bag and held it out. "If you please?"

Ray dropped the box into the bag, "Thank you kindly," he said with a cheesy grin. "Let me see if I can find anything else. He turned back to dig in the trash some more, and when he glanced up, Fraser had that funny look on his face again. "What? What?"

"I... it's trash, Ray."

Ray looked down. "Wow, really? No kidding?"

"It's just that no one... I mean usually it was... oh, never mind."

"What, nobody ever dug in the trash for you before?" Ray asked, grinning.

Fraser shook his head. "No. Well, not without complaining."

"Well, that's why we're a duet," Ray said. "We share. Even the icky stuff." Spotting a gleam that looked like glass he reached for it, the tips of his fingers grazing... there. He had it. Pulled out a bottle. "Exhibit number two," he said, brandishing the empty CK bottle. "Kid's not real bright, is he? Not a hardened criminal, at any rate. He's probably just bored."

"Arson is a serious crime, Ray," Fraser said severely, opening the second bag for him. "I can't believe you're excusing his actions."

Ray dropped the bottle into the bag and held up his hands. "Not excusing him, Fraser. Just saying..."
I get it, you know? I've worked with a lot of kids, and the thing is, they're dumb about stuff. Not because they have low IQ's mostly, but because they just don't . . . think. They don't get cause and effect. That's the thing most grownups forget. You have to remember that YOU were just as stupid at one point or you can't deal with kids at all. Didn't you ever do anything stupid when you were a kid?"

To his surprise, Fraser coughed, and colored enough that Ray could see it even in the artificial glow of the nearby street and porch lights. "I . . . ah. . . ."

Sensing a story, Ray jumped. "No ah-ing allowed here, Fraser. Yes or no?"

"Yes," Fraser admitted, blushing darker.

"Hah! I knew it. Spill! What was it?"

"Well, ah. . . It involved a goldmine, a boomerang and a tank full of gasoline. But this isn't the time or place, we've a case to solve."

Ray eyed him narrowly. "Yeah. Okay. You're right. But don't think you're off the hook, Benton."

"Understood."

"So, what's our game plan? We've got some evidence, but we don't know where our suspect is. Seems like maybe our best bet would be to go back to Hannah's, find a place where we stake it out without being screamingly obvious."

"My thoughts exactly," Fraser said. "Since Hannah's daughter has custody of her van until her license is reinstated, we can probably put the Suburban in her detached garage. And as I recall, there's a small workshop above it, which Hannah's husband Mike used to use for woodworking before he passed away a year ago."

Ray nodded. "It have windows?"

"On all four sides."

"Perfecto. Let's go. Dief's probably tired of walking a beat around Hannah's."

"It's good for him. He's gotten soft," Fraser said. A moment later he sighed. "Like Mountie, like wolf."

Ray reached over and squeezed his shoulder. "Not soft, Benton. Just a little neglected." He moved his hand slightly, trailed his fingers up Fraser's neck, raising gooseflesh and a shiver. "You just need some. . . attention."

Fraser was staring at him, eyes slightly glazed, lips parted. He leaned forward slightly, and Ray found himself leaning too, and just in time remembered that there were probably at least three pair of eyes glued on them at that moment, and he pulled back, looking around guiltily. "Let's go."

* * *

It was fortunate that there was no traffic, since Fraser drove the few miles back to Hannah's with less than the requisite amount of attention on the road. He couldn't believe he'd almost kissed Ray right there in the middle of the street. What had he been thinking? A moment's thought forced him to admit that he really hadn't been thinking at all. Simply feeling. Feeling Ray's acceptance, his desire, his. . . love. Feeling all those things himself. To have Ray acknowledge and echo his own feelings,
on top of the satisfaction he'd already gained by finally feeling useful, needed, and effective was nearly incompreheensible.

"You're pretty quiet there. Penny for your thoughts?"

He glanced briefly at Ray, felt, more than saw his quizzical gaze in the darkness inside the vehicle. "I was just contemplating how it might feel to win the lottery."

There was a short pause, and then Ray chuckled. "Oh yeah. I get that. This is just... the best, you know?"

"I do indeed," Fraser said warmly.

"God, I wish..." Ray began, only to break off abruptly.

Fraser knew without a doubt what he'd been about to say. He sighed. "As do I, Ray."

The realization that Ray would be leaving the next day kept them both quiet for the remainder of the drive. Once they reached their destination, a few moments conversation netted them the use of the garage to conceal the Suburban, and the workroom as an observation post. Hannah furnished them with a large thermos of coffee and a five-pound coffee can festively decorated with maple-leaf patterned contact-paper, which was filled with sugar cookies. In addition, she gave them two Hudson's Bay blankets and the information that there were some old lawn-furniture cushions stored in the garage that they could sit on, though the furniture itself had long since fallen apart.

"All the comforts of home," Ray said, beating Fraser to it. "Thanks. This is the best-equipped stakeout I've ever been on."

Hannah beamed at him. "Well, it's the least I could do." She looked hopefully over at Fraser. "So, should Constable Traynor go home now?"

Fraser shook his head. "No, I'd like her to stay, if you don't mind. Just in case we miss anything."

Hannah sighed, and Fraser heard Ray snort under his breath.

"Shyeah. Like you'd miss anything."

He sent a quelling glance at Ray and set the coffee and cookies on top of the folded blankets he already held. "Why don't you take these, and I'll just go move the truck."

Ray grinned at him irrepressibly, and nodded, heading out the kitchen door and over to the garage. Putting down his burden, he opened the garage door and waited for Fraser to drive the Suburban inside. Once he'd parked, Fraser got flashlights and a packet of disposable double-cuff restraints out of the back of the unit. Ray, blankets draped over his shoulders and still maintaining his grip on the thermos and cookies, somehow managed to grab a couple of the green vinyl cushions off the shelf where Hannah had indicated they could be found and disappeared out the door with them. Fraser followed him a moment later, closing the garage door before ascending the staircase that led up to the workshop. Dief appeared out of the small copse to the south of the house and followed him, grumbling about the working conditions.

Ray had put the coffee and cookies down on the workbench and was in the process of rearranging several gallon paint cans, a sawhorse, and two sheets of heavy plywood into a makeshift seat facing the window which fronted on the house. That done, he put the chaise-style cushions down on the plywood and sat down for a moment, testing his construction. When it held up, he nodded looking pleased. "There. Not quite as good as the GTO's bucket seats, but hey, at least we won't have to
stand up or kneel the whole time, and our butts won't get numb."

"It certainly should help, thank you," Fraser said, taking a moment to orient himself, identifying the path to the door and making sure it was clear, as well as noting the positions of the workbench, a second saw-horse, and a table-saw before reaching up to grasp the chain that would turn out the overhead light. "All set?" he asked Ray.

Ray took a look around. "Hang on," he folded one of the two blankets and put it down on the wooden floor under the workbench. "There you go, Dief. Why should we get all the perks?" he asked, and then nodded at Fraser as Dief curled up on the cushion. "All set. Go for it."

Fraser tugged on the chain, plunging the room into darkness. He stood for a moment, allowing his eyes to adjust, and then moved forward toward the window. The vantage point was quite good, showing the rear and both sides of the house, away from the porch light that flooded the front yard with light.

"Nice view," Ray said.

"It is an excellent vantage point," Fraser said before glancing back to find that even though they were on the dark side of the house, there was enough light coming in the window to faintly illumine the room they occupied, and that Ray was not looking out the window, but rather at his backside. He was torn between feeling foolishly pleased, and feeling slightly exasperated. "Ray," he said, trying to sound severe but succeeding only in sounding rather fond. "We're working."

Ray grinned. "Yeah, but that doesn't mean I'm blind, Benton. From this distance, I don't even need my glasses. And that is one world-class view you got there, I'm telling you. And as a connoisseur, I should know."

Fraser's face went hot. "Nonsense, Ray. If you're not blind, you can't have failed to notice that I'm... not in optimum condition."

Ray sighed, shaking his head, scratching at his stubble with a raspy sound before patting the cushion beside him. "C'mere, okay? Sit."

Fraser sat, somewhat gingerly at first until he realized that Ray's makeshift couch was sturdy enough to support him. Ray reached out and put a hand on his thigh, squeezing lightly. Fraser's entire focus seemed suddenly to be concentrated on that spot. He could feel the warmth of Ray's hand through the denim of his jeans, could make out each individual finger where it lay. He swallowed hard.

"Look, we're pushing forty here, Benton. Optimum condition left us both in the dust a few years back. Don't sweat it, okay? I'm into the whole package, not just bits and pieces. All of you. If putting up with your passive-aggressive crap back in Chicago didn't put me off my feed do you really think anything else will?"

"Passive-ag... I am not!" Fraser said hotly, affronted.

"Tell me another one," Ray said, his voice dripping sarcasm. "Your picture's in the dictionary right next to the definition, Benton. But that's okay, because that's you and I got to kind of like that about you. And besides, my picture's in there next to just plain old ordinary aggressive so it's not like I got room to talk. Just cop to it."

Fraser thought about protesting, but then Ray's fingers shifted slightly up and down his thigh in what could only be termed a caress, and he found himself barely able to think. "I... ah... what were you saying?"
"You're passive-aggressive," Ray prompted.

Right. Yes. That was the topic. Fraser tried to marshal his thoughts, a task rapidly becoming nearly Herculean. "I suppose. . . some people might. . . view it . . . in that light."

Ray's chuckled, fingers straying slightly higher, moving toward his inner thigh, toward the crease where thigh and hip joined. "You're breathing kind of heavy there," he teased.

Fraser lifted his gaze from the hypnotic stroke of fingers on his thigh and looked into Ray's face, shadowed, mysterious. His mouth was curved in a faint smile, his eyes shone with reflected light. He hesitated for a moment, and then remembered that Ray was leaving in the morning and he might never have the chance to do this again. That thought was. . . unbearable. He had to know. Had to. He had no choice at all. Lifting a hand, he slid it behind Ray's head, feeling the plush prickle of short-cropped hair against his palm as he leaned over, tilted his head a little, and brought their lips together.

Ray leaned into him, lips parting, breath sighing into his mouth, the hand on his thigh tightening a little, his other hand coming up, fingers threading into Fraser's hair, tugging a little to reposition him, and then Ray's tongue flicked his lower lip, slick and warm, and Fraser shivered and opened wider to let him in, shifting closer, up against Ray. He felt solid, warm, and strong. As Fraser moved, Ray let his hand slide along Fraser's leg until his thumb was resting in the crease where thigh met groin, and. . . squeezed.

Fraser let out a startled gasp which made Ray start laughing, and determined to even the score, Fraser slid a hand down Ray's back until it was resting on as much of his backside as he could reach, and he squeezed back. Surprised, Ray twitched. Okay, it was more of a jump. The movement unbalanced Fraser, causing him to shift most of his weight to one side. Suddenly the cushions, plywood, Ray. . . everything, was sliding, accompanied by the incredibly loud sounds of paint cans falling and rolling, the hollow, ringing thud of a sawhorse hitting the floor, and Diefenbaker's startled barking. Too stunned to react, they rode the avalanche down to the floor and lay there for a few seconds, trying to catch their breath, adrenalin mingling strangely with arousal. Ray lay sprawled mostly beneath him, but as he pushed up onto his hands to look around, Fraser rolled off him and sat back on his haunches.

"Sorry, sorry! God, that was stupid!" Ray gasped in apology, looking rather stunned. "What the fuck just happened?" He rubbed the back of his head.

"I have no fucking idea," Fraser echoed, rubbing his elbow where it had come down hard on the floor and still smarted.

Ray stared at him, shocked, and then started giggling. "You. . . you. . . Holy shit, Fraser!"

Fraser found himself laughing too, it was irresistible. "That sums it up nicely."

"I think. . . Dief, shut up, okay? You're going to give it away if we haven't already!" Ray snapped. "I think one of the paint cans fell over and it kind of. . . snowballed from there."

Fraser surveyed the devastation. "I believe you're right."

Introducing the subject of sexual orientation really did seem something of a moot point at this stage of the proceedings, but Fraser couldn't quite keep his need to question entirely at bay. "So. . . you're. . . what I mean to say is. . . have you always. . . ?" He struggled to find the right words, but Ray just looked as if he was finding the whole situation more and more hysterically funny every second. "Ray, if you'd just stop laughing for a moment, I could. . . ."
"You could what? Finish a sentence?" Ray lay back down on the floor, wheezing with laughter. "You really think you need to ask what you're trying to ask? Now?"

It did sound a bit stupid, after all, but he was nothing if not persistent. "Perhaps not, but if I were to ask, would you say you were . . . ."

He laughed. "Well, if I'm not, I'm going to have to have a serious discussion with my dick because it seems to think I am."

Fraser blushed, but smiled back at his friend, then paused for a moment before saying, "Ray?"

"Yeah?" Ray grinned.

"Aren't you going to ask me if . . . ."

"Believe me, I've got nothing to ask you, Octopus Boy." And then Ray, still lying on the floor, started to laugh again until Fraser couldn't help but join him.

After they got their laughter almost under control, they picked themselves off the floor and put the makeshift bench and their supplies back to rights in fairly short order. Diefenbaker, however, was not so quickly settled. He pranced around the small workroom over and over again, stopping occasionally to vocalize in a manner that sounded suspiciously like laughter - and not even Fraser's quelling glare had any discernable effect on his behavior.

As he began his fifth circuit of the room, Ray reached over and stopped him in his tracks. He placed a hand on either side of the wolf's head and turned him around to face him. "Yeah, so me and Fraser are both idiots. I think you've made your point already, don't you? Or do you have more to add to this discussion?"

Dief shook his head free of Ray's hands, looked over at Fraser, and barked sharply before lying down on the blanket and curling up into a ball.

Fraser sighed. "I don't know where he acquired this unfortunate need to always get the last word in."

Ray glanced at him. "Well, it's not from my side of the family."

Fraser frowned, unable to understand for a moment why Ray had said that - and with such a serious tone of voice. Then he saw the corners of Ray's mouth start to curl up into a grin, and he relaxed into the almost forgotten rhythms of the easy banter that had once been as familiar and welcome as the purple saxifrage that carpeted the Northwest Territory each spring in his youth.

He turned to Ray and raised his eyebrows. "I certainly hope you're not suggesting this trait comes from my side of the family."

Ray's grin grew wider. "Hey, if the shoe fits."

"It doesn't."

"Does too."

"Does not."

"See?" Ray laughed. "You're doing it right now. Can't let it go, can you?"

Unexpectedly, Fraser found himself unable to respond. Ray's words, spoken without rancor and clearly joking, were suddenly far too reminiscent of an earlier - and not at all funny - exchange three
years ago on the shores of Lake Michigan. The sudden memory of angry words and punches traded on that day spawned an unwelcome sense of foreboding. They'd come so close to ending their partnership that day. And how close they were now to the time that Ray would have to depart for Saskatoon and leave him once again without a partner. Alone.

He could feel rather than see Ray's worried gaze on him, and he knew he should say something to lighten the mood, but he couldn't find the right words. Ray began to fidget on his end of the bench, but he remained silent, giving Fraser time to pull himself together. It wasn't until he heard a soft whine from Diefenbaker that he was able to shake himself out of his own silence and face Ray again.

He offered what he hoped was a reassuring smile, and Ray returned it with a small smile of his own.

"You okay?"

"Yes. I was . . . I'm sorry, Ray. Perhaps I'm a bit . . . shaken."

"Yeah, falling on your ass in a pile of paint cans and cookies can do that to a guy."

As he forced himself back to normal, he considered how ironic it was that when it looked as if he was finally reclaiming a passion for the work he'd always loved, now he also had to contend with his passion for one Raymond Kowalski as well.

It wasn't as if he had never encountered this state of affairs where Ray was concerned, but back in Chicago he had believed that the hope of anything coming of his desire for his partner was firmly in the realm of fantasy, and so it was fairly simple to find a balance between thoughts of Ray and attention on his work.

But now, the discovery that Ray returned his interest - and apparently in no less intense a way - tipped the scales so far that maintaining any kind of a balance was all but impossible.

Ray picked that moment to reach over and take Fraser's hand in his own. He squeezed Ray's hand automatically, but followed that almost immediately by pulling his hand away, leaving Ray looking visibly unhappy.

Fraser sighed. "Ray."

"Nah, it's okay. If you're not in the mood, you're not in the mood. Been there, done that, got the tattoo."

"Ray."

"I said I get it, Fraser."

"Ray!"

"What?"

"It isn't that I'm 'not in the mood,' as you put it."

Ray remained silent, but turned to face him.

"The truth is, I think the exact opposite is the case. I'm too much in the mood, and every time . . . every time you touch me I lose all sense of where I am and what I'm supposed to be doing. We're supposed to be working, Ray," he said, pleadingly. "I can't . . . you're too much of a distraction."

"Oh." Ray frowned for a moment, but then he started to smile. "Oh. Okay. Okay, I get that." He
laughed explosively. "Boy, do I get that. Yeah. We're on our best behavior, both of us. Hope that kid shows up soon," he said a little plaintively.

"As do I."

They both stared out the window for some time, watching intently.

"You really think he's going to show?" Ray asked, out of the blue.

"It's the logical assumption. Ms. Moss' property fits all the requirements."

Ray looked out the window, thoughtfully, then turned back to Fraser. "You know, he's not going to show if those lights stay on. They'll scare him off."

Fraser looked over at the house, nodding. "You're probably right."

"You got her phone number?" Ray asked, pulling out his cellphone.

Fraser nodded, and got his own phone out. "I do, but put that away. There's no point in you making a long-distance call from ten yards away," he said, dialing.

Ray laughed, closing his phone and sliding it back into his pocket. "Yeah. For a second there I kind of forgot we weren't back in Chicago - it feels like old times."

Ray's words brought home, yet again, the fact that tomorrow he would be going back to Saskatoon, and the day after, back to Chicago, and Fraser would remain behind and his life would go back to what passed for normal. Before he could think of anything to say, Hannah picked up her phone, and Fraser pushed away his personal pain to deal with the matter at hand. After asking her to turn out the lights in the house, he closed his phone and put it away. A few moments later the porch light winked out, followed a moment later by the lights that shone in the windows, one by one. The last one to go out was on the upper floor, Fraser assumed it was Hannah's bedroom.

"That'll help," Ray said softly, as if the darkness also required quiet.

Fraser nodded, then realized that in the lessened light, he probably couldn't be seen. "Yes, it should. Good idea." He fell silent then. Ray didn't speak either. After a few moments, Fraser realized that while they could see the house, he couldn't hear a thing. He reached over and found the catch that locked the window and opened it, then slid the window open a few inches.

"You figure freezing our butts off will keep us from jumping each other's bones?" Ray asked, sounding amused. "Kinda like a cold shower?"

"I'm afraid we'll have to rely on will and good sense for that," Fraser returned. "I just thought it would be helpful to be able to hear the approach of a vehicle, or a person on foot."

"Smart. You get the east window, I'll do the south and west ones."

A few moments later they had all the windows open a small amount, and the ambient temperature in the room had dropped precipitously. Ray shivered and opened the coffee, pouring some into the cup-lid, taking a couple of gulps, then handing the cup to Fraser who did the same, wanting to share that with Ray, though the contrast of heat in his mouth and the cold air against his face actually seemed to make him feel colder. He shivered a little too, as he handed Ray the empty cup, which he put back on the thermos. After a few minutes, Ray picked up the blanket, Fraser could see the pale wool plainly as he shook it out, and then wrapped it around himself, holding one side out like a wing.
"Come here, we can share. I promise not to get fresh."

Fraser nodded, and moved into Ray's space, taking that side of the blanket from him to hold it around them.

"Better," Ray said after a moment. "We didn't exactly dress for a stake-out this morning."

"No," Fraser allowed. "In retrospect it might have been prudent to go home and change."

"Yeah, but it wouldn't have been us," Ray said. "What time is it?"

Fraser shifted his arm until he could see the luminescent hash-marks on his watch. "It's about nine-twenty."

Ray sighed. "Bet he doesn't show until after midnight."

"I don't bet."

Ray chuckled. "Yeah right. Sure you don't."

His laugh was warm, intimate. His voice more so. The right side of his body warmed the left side of Fraser's. When he breathed in he could faintly smell the warm, spicy scent of him . . . and warmth began to build inside him. Heat. Fire.

"Damn it!" He stepped away, out of the warmth, trying to stop thinking about how Ray's skin had felt under his hands, about what he had tasted like, the complete uninhibited response he had shown to Fraser's touch.

"What?" Ray asked, sounding startled, reaching to grab the trailing side of the blanket.

"I. . ." he paused, casting around for an excuse, and found one. "I'm an idiot. I need to call Dave Byrnes." He pulled his phone out of his pocket and opened it.

"Why?"

"If our suspect actually does manage to set a blaze before we get to him, the fire suppression unit will need to be here as quickly as possible." He dialed, waited as it rang, and then explained the situation to Dave, who agreed to put a skeleton crew on standby, just in case. Ending the call, he glanced at his watch. A whole six minutes had passed. Lord. He was never going to make it through this. It was torture.

"You done?" Ray asked impatiently.

"Yes."

"Good, then get back over here, I'm cold."

Fraser hesitated.

Ray sighed. "That's too much, too, huh?"

Fraser scowled, annoyed with himself. He wasn't that big a 'wuss,' as Ray would say. "Certainly not," he said moving back to Ray's side, and sliding an arm around his waist.

"Better." Ray relaxed against him, and they stood looking out at the house. After a few minutes, Ray fidgeted a little. "You know, this was easier in Chicago. At least there we could play the license plate
game to keep sharp. And there were convenience stores handy, most of the time. And I wasn't having such a hard time keeping my hands to myself."

Fraser told himself he absolutely would not whimper. It was beneath him. "There are cookies and coffee," he pointed out, steadfastly ignoring Ray's suggestive comment. "Though I'll admit that even if we were out where we could see the road, the odds that we would encounter any license plates other than Saskatchewan ones are slim to none."

"'S what I thought. Guess we could sing songs or something."

Fraser looked at him, wishing he could see his face. Surely he was joking. "Sing?" he asked cautiously. "Wouldn't that 'give it away' as you put it earlier?"

"Well, I don't mean sing sing, not like belting out Broadway show tunes. Just sort of. . . I dunno. Hum? Whisper the lyrics?" He thought for a moment, and made a face. "Okay, forget it. Dumb idea. Guess we'll just have to . . . sit here."

Fraser nodded, sighing. "As you say."

"Well, look at the up side here. You won't have to hear me sing Kum-Ba-Yah."

Fraser shuddered eloquently. "Thank God. I believe that could be considered grounds for justifiable homicide."

"Oh, yeah, you're a funny guy, Fraser. And yeah, for once I do mean 'funny ha-ha.'" Then Ray nudged his knee into Fraser's leg, pulled the edge of the blanket more tightly, pulling Fraser in closer to him in the process. "Of course, 'funny weird' hasn't been taken off the list yet, so don't get too excited."

"Don't worry, I'm not excited," Fraser said, laughing a little, only to find himself gasping slightly as Ray's hand slipped beneath the blanket and rested on his knee, fingers curled on his inner thigh.

"What was that you were saying about not being excited?" Ray asked, running his fingers lightly up the inseam of Fraser's jeans.

"Ray!" He said, trying to sound stern, but succeeding only in moaning his name in an embarrassingly loud manner. "I thought we'd agreed to . . . oh, God. Ray, could you . . . oh, you're. Oh, yeah. Just another millimeter and . . . mmmm."

Ray's fingers lingered for a moment, but then he pulled his hand away and Fraser wanted nothing more than to have that hand back where it had just been. Amazing. He had no control where Ray was concerned. None whatsoever. He leaned over, elbows on his knees and buried his face in his hands, but no more than two seconds later, Ray reached over, took Fraser's face in his hands, turned him slightly, and gave him a quick, hard kiss on the mouth before returning his hands to hold the blanket.

"Sorry. I'm . . . okay, I'm not sorry I touched you, and I'm sure as hell not sorry I kissed you, but . . . I know, I know. Not yet. We got a job to do and we're professionals, damn it."

Ray sighed, then wrapped his arm around Fraser's own arm and leaned his head on Fraser's shoulder. For a moment, Fraser continued to sit upright, but the temptation to lean slightly against Ray's head finally proved to be too much.

He couldn't have said how long they sat there, holding each other - leaning against each other - but this time, almost miraculously, he didn't find the close proximity to Ray a distraction. Yes, he
remained aware of Ray - of everything about the man beside him, in fact. The tickle of spiky hair against his temple. The familiar, and probably unconscious, tapping of Ray's foot on the softwood floor. The puffs of breath that could be seen in the bright gleam of moonlight spilling into the small, chilly room.

However, this once familiar hyper-awareness of his surroundings which had been all but dormant for far too long and which was now waking up with a vengeance, didn't stop with his awareness of Ray. The whisper of wind - barely audible on this still night - rustling through the branches of the birch trees outside. The faint smell of pine needles coming from somewhere beyond the stand of birches. The faint sound of leaves, half buried in the light dusting of snow, crackling underfoot . . .

"Ray," he whispered. "I think we have a visitor."

Ray sat up, instantly alert. "Where?" he whispered squinting out the window.

"Not sure yet, I heard. . . just a moment. . ." Fraser strained his eyes, saw a vague movement near the back porch of the house. He waited tensely, knowing it was as likely to be a deer or elk as a person, but a moment later the shape resolved into a human figure as the visitor stepped onto the porch and was silhouetted against the side of the house. "Back porch."

Ray nodded, watching intently. The shadowy figure squatted down, and began to make splashing and pouring motions around the area where the wooden porch joined the house.

"Got him," Ray whispered, rolling gracefully to his feet, the blanket falling unnoticed to the floor as he picked up one of the flashlights.

Fraser surged to his feet as well, grabbing the other light, and followed him to the door. Dief leaped up as well, dancing excitedly, though for once quietly, at their feet. They stood for a moment, still watching, as a sudden flare of light on the porch illuminated the figure. Fraser realized that he had flicked a cigarette-lighter into life. "Go!" Fraser growled, and put his hand against Ray's back, urging him forward.

Ray was already in motion. He pushed the door open, and headed down the stairs. The sudden creak and squeal of the door's hinges sounded as loud as a scream in the quiet night. The figure on the porch whirled, still holding the lighter. Its fitful flicker illuminated Crawford Jones' pale, scared-looking face as he stared at them, mouth agape.

"Shit!" Crawford yelped. The lighter went out, and the sound of breaking glass told Fraser he'd dropped the bottle of after-shave.

"RCMP, remain where you are!" Fraser called out, not particularly hopeful that Crawford would obey him, but he had to try.

As he'd suspected would happen, his words triggered movement, not stillness. He saw a dark blur and squeal of the door's hinges sounded as loud as a scream in the quiet night. The figure on the porch whirled, still holding the lighter. Its fitful flicker illuminated Crawford Jones' pale, scared-looking face as he stared at them, mouth agape.

"Shit!" Crawford yelped. The lighter went out, and the sound of breaking glass told Fraser he'd dropped the bottle of after-shave.

"RCMP, remain where you are!" Fraser called out, not particularly hopeful that Crawford would obey him, but he had to try.

As he'd suspected would happen, his words triggered movement, not stillness. He saw a dark blur and could hear running steps, moving away in fast, hard thuds against the hard ground, the sound interrupted by a periodic crunching sound as Crawford hit patches of snow instead of winter-dry grasses and earth.

Already halfway down the stairs, Ray yelled, "Oh no you don't! Freeze, you little dickweed! Chicago PD!"

There was a brief interruption in the sound of running feet, like as not while the boy tried to process both Ray's colorful phrasing and the command he'd probably never expected to hear outside of an
American television show. Ray took advantage of the moment to vault over the railing to the ground. Instantly Crawford took off again. Ray landed, rolled, and was up and running after their suspect before Fraser even made it down the rest of the stairs. Realizing that their suspect was heading for the trees behind the house, and guessing that he had parked his vehicle on the old logging road on the other side of the copse, he calculated the best way to cut him off.

"Dief, stay with Ray!" he ordered, as he swung to the south to take a diagonal track through the woods and cut Crawford off. A light flared on some distance away, swinging wildly, and he realized it was Ray's flashlight, tracking Crawford and also illuminating his own path through the stand of trees. Smart. Ray was far less likely to injure himself if he could see roughly where he was going. It also showed Fraser that they were quite a bit further ahead than he had realized.

He had to get ahead of them or Crawford might be able to get to his car before Ray caught him, and too many people, both guilty and innocent, had been killed in car chases for him to let that happen here. He didn't want Crawford hurt. Or Ray. Or Zhertak. Or some family heading home late from a gathering up on the Reserve. He could do it. It wasn't that far. Three-quarters of a mile, perhaps. An easy run, really. He ignored the breath catching in his chest, tearing at his throat, making him feel like he was fighting for air. Ignored the burn building in his thighs, the ache in his knees. Kept pushing himself. Faster. Faster. Just one thought in his head. I have to get there first. He stumbled, caught himself with both hands, wincing as they scraped on twigs, rocks, and crusted snow.

Pushing himself upright he saw the flicker of Ray's flashlight, closer now. Heard Dief barking. Heard the sound bounce a little. Echo. He had to be close to the road, to hear that, because the trees would deaden and mute the sound if he were still deep in the forest. Almost there. Almost there. He sucked air into his laboring lungs and put every once of determination he owned into his run. He broke out of the trees, the moon-silvered gravel of the road stretching ahead of him. Seconds later a lanky figure burst into view a hundred yards down the road, heading for the beat-up old Gremlin parked beside the road. Not quite tall enough and too skinny to be Ray. Crawford.

One last time. One last time. His heart was trying to pound itself out of his chest. His lungs burned. His legs ached. Every muscle he owned felt like jelly. The gravel slid beneath his feet, trying to make him fall, but he dug the cleats of his boots into the scree and managed not to, running low and flat-out, arms pumping, and the distance closed, vanished, as he flung himself forward and tackled Crawford like an American football player would, taking him down just seconds before he reached the car.

The gravel tore through his jeans and bit into his knees, scraped the backs of his hands raw. He ignored the pain and hung onto his prize doggedly as it kicked and flailed.

"R... C... MP... " he panted. "You're... under arrest."

"Fraser?" He heard Ray call from behind him.

"Here!" he gasped.

Fraser heard running steps on the gravel and Ray was there beside them, the flashlight illuminating the scene. "Restraints... pocket!" he managed.

He felt Ray's fingers trail over his backside as he hunted for them, and thanked his lucky stars that he was in too much distress to respond to that touch. "Jacket!" he snapped.

Ray's hands moved, locating the packet of interlocking plastic loops. Pulling out a set, he grabbed one of Crawford's hands and snugged the band securely, but not painfully, around that wrist. Crawford kept kicking, and flailing around with the other hand.
"Give it up dickhead!" Ray growled, threading his fingers into Crawford's long dark hair, holding him by it, not quite pulling. Yet. "Or do you want to add resisting arrest to the arson charge?"

One last flail caught Fraser in the ribs and stole what little breath he had recovered, but then Ray did yank, and Crawford subsided sullenly.

"Ow man!" he whined. "That hurts! Police brutality!"

Ray snorted. "You think that hurts, you ought to try my patented head-kick." he said, taking his hand out of Crawford's hair to loop the restraint snugly around the boy's other wrist as neatly as a cowboy roping a calf.

"He threatened me!" Crawford bleated.

Fraser levered himself off his legs and sat up, sucking in deep lungfuls of cold air, desperately trying to re-oxygenate his system, shivering a little as his sweat cooled him down too much, now that he was stationary.

Crawford looked at him scornfully. "What's the matter, Corporal? Too many hash brown casseroles and cream pies from the Ladies' Auxiliary?"

Fraser felt heat flare across his face that had nothing to do with exertion. He didn't reply, because the only reply he could give would be 'yes.'

Ray reached down and smacked Crawford lightly on the back of his head. "Yeah, well he caught your skinny ass, didn't he?"

"Ow!! He can't do that! Can he do that?" He asked, looking at Fraser, then back at Ray. "Who are you anyway?"

"Detective Ray Kowalski," Ray said.

"Kow... wait! You're one of the guys from Chicago! I remember you. You were on the ghost ship!"

"Yeah. That's me. Corporal Fraser's partner... and friend." He shot a look at Fraser that was full of warmth, then looked back at Crawford, his gaze narrowed and glacial. "And you're in a world of hurt here, Mr. Jones. Arson. Attempted murder. You might think about that next time you're tempted to sass the Mountie."

Crawford's mouth dropped open. "Murder?" he squeaked. "No way! I never hurt anybody!"

"Sheer luck," Ray said ominously.

"Indeed," Fraser said, finally having enough wind to speak coherently. "I'm afraid Detective Kowalski is right. Had you succeeded in lighting that fire tonight, you could have killed Mrs. Moss."

"She's not even home!" Crawford scoffed. "Everybody knows she goes up to the Reserve to visit Mary on the weekends."

"If that's so, then you'd think that 'everybody' would also know that she didn't go up this weekend," Fraser said without trying to soften it as he usually would, anger at the sheer thoughtlessness of the boy's actions pushing him to make Crawford aware of just how big a mistake he'd nearly made. "Mary is ill and Hannah stayed home."

"Really?" Crawford stared at him, looked at Ray as if to request confirmation. Ray nodded. And
suddenly all of Crawford's flippancy and attitude vanished, melting away as tears welled in his eyes.

"I didn't know!" he wailed. "I swear I didn't know! I thought she was gone! I wouldn't have... I didn't want to hurt anybody!"

Tears washed streaks through the dirt on his face, acquired, no doubt, in his wild run through the woods. Maybe he'd fallen, wiped his sweaty face with his dirty hands. He no longer looked like a young man, but like a little boy. Fraser heard Ray's voice, not aloud, but a memory: 'You have to remember that you were just as stupid at one point or you can't deal with kids at all.' His anger seemed to evaporate. He'd done plenty of stupid things in his life, hadn't stopped doing them once he hit adulthood, either, as his current physical state eloquently reminded him. He reached out and gently put his hand on Crawford's shoulder.

"I know you didn't. Come on. Let's go back to Hannah's. I suspect you have something you'd like to say to her. And then we're going to call your mother, go to the detachment, and have a serious discussion about what you've been doing and what we're going to do about it."

Crawford nodded, sniffling, unable to even wipe his face because his hands were restrained. Fraser pulled a clean handkerchief out of his pocket and did it for him, even holding it so he could blow his nose, like the child he suddenly seemed. Small and scared, never mind that he was nearly as tall as Ray. He glanced at Ray, who nodded at him approvingly, and he felt a warm glow in his chest as he helped the boy to his feet.

A sudden flare of light and the crunch of tires on gravel brought them all around to watch as Constable Traynor pulled up in the Suburban and set the brake, leaving the engine running and the lights on as she got out and headed their way. Ray switched off his flashlight and Fraser frowned, fingering the keys in his pocket.

"Constable," he said.

"Sir," she responded formally. "We heard... I mean, I thought you might need assistance in rounding up the suspect."

He almost winced at the further proof that his subordinates felt he was incapable of doing his job, but somehow managed not to show his dismay. "Thank you, but Detective Kowalski and I have matters well in hand. Er, how did you...?" he nodded at the vehicle.

She looked a little sheepish. "I, ah, hotwired it, sir."

He gave her a long look, and she cleared her throat. "I'll put everything back to normal when we get back to the detachment."

"Yes, you will," he said, refraining from further comment. "Well, as long as you're here, you can drive us back to Mrs. Moss', and then we'll head back to the detachment from there. And since you're carrying a radio, would you also call in the arrest and have Constable Zhertak request that Mrs. Jones and her attorney meet us at the detachment?"

"Yes sir!" She pulled out her radio and made the call as Fraser escorted Crawford to the Suburban and put him in the back seat, getting in beside him. Ray let Dief into the cargo area and then took the passenger side front seat himself. A moment later Traynor joined them, getting in and putting the vehicle in gear as she released the parking brake. None of them spoke, though Crawford still sniffled periodically.

* * *
Ray paced restlessly outside the detachment, feeling unfairly excluded, halfway wishing he smoked so he'd have something to do besides bite his nails. He'd killed some time helping Traynor put the Suburban to rights in the big, heated garage that took up most of the back side of the detachment building. She hadn't really needed any help, but had let him kibitz, probably just to be nice. Once that was done she'd taken him inside and offered him some coffee. Cop coffee was the same no matter where you went: Thick, black, bitter, and super-caffeinated. Which probably explained why he'd started pacing in front of the main desk for a while, until he got tired of Traynor and Zhertak looking at him like they half expected him to pull out a rubber hose and push his way into the interrogation room where Fraser, Crawford, Crawford's mom, Crawford's lawyer, and even Diefenbaker were all sitting around yakking in that calm, polite Canadian way.

It didn't quite seem fair that he had to stay out when he'd been in on everything else, but the lawyer had insisted and Fraser had asked him to wait outside. What was taking so long in there anyway? How hard could it be to book the kid and come out so Ray could take Fraser home and show him some real appreciation. Which apparently no one around La Rouille ever bothered to do, or at least hadn't until now. Zhertak had been almost annoyingly respectful and admiring when they brought Crawford in. Ray was still sure that the too-buff constable had designs on Fraser. And Fraser wasn't open for designing. He was Ray's.

He paced some more. Shivered a little. It was pretty damned cold outside when you weren't being kept warm by the adrenalin pumping through you as you chased a suspect through the woods in the dark. He finally decided he was being stupid standing around outside freezing his nuts off, since he had plans to use them later. He headed back toward the doors just as they opened, Fraser holding them open so Lana Jones and Crawford's lawyer could walk out. Judging by the looks on their faces they weren't happy, but they also weren't completely torn up. Must've come to some sort of arrangement about the charges, though it looked like Crawford was definitely spending the night. No surprise there. He was, after all, an arsonist.

Ray lifted his eyebrows at Fraser who put a finger to his lips and then pointed at the Suburban. Ray nodded and headed for it, getting in and starting it as Fraser and Dief escorted the two over to their car, waited until they had started it and pulled out, then they came across the parking lot to join Ray. Fraser let Dief in the back seat and then opened the front door, pausing for a moment before he got in, eyeing Ray in the driver's seat.

"You think you can find your way back to the house?"

Ray rolled his eyes. "Benton, this town's the size of my old neighborhood in Chicago. I think I can manage, especially since I've done it once already. Besides, you know I can't stand to go more than twenty-four hours without getting behind the wheel of a car. Get in."

Fraser chuckled and nodded, getting in. "True. I wouldn't want you to go through withdrawal."

Ray waited for him to buckle up, and then headed for the house. "So what happened?"

"Crawford confessed to setting both previous fires, and to the attempt tonight. He's in a great deal of trouble, but we're hopeful that the Stevensens and Mr. Dixon will see their way clear to letting Crawford attend a sentencing circle instead of going through the court system. He is genuinely remorseful; discovering that Mrs. Moss was home tonight came as a great shock to him and made him realize how dangerous what he was doing is. He's offered to lay information against Zoltan Motherwell as well, which should help us shut down his access to the Internet and possibly prevent repetitions of what happened here."

Ray nodded, chancing a glance at Fraser. "What's a sentencing circle?"
"It's an aboriginal justice program in which the perpetrator is required to face his tribal elders and receive a sentence at their hands, in lieu of going through the regular court system. It's been shown to be quite effective, especially with youthful offenders like Crawford."

"Sounds like a good idea." He tapped his fingers on his thigh, and looked back at Fraser. "You know, what I can't figure out though, is how the heck Crawford got hooked up with Motherwell of all people to begin with. It's one hell of a weird coincidence."

Fraser sighed. "Actually, it's not a coincidence at all. I'm afraid it's my own fault. I was invited to give a talk on careers in law enforcement to local high-schoolers, and in an effort to enliven the proceedings, I used several anecdotes from my time in Chicago."

The light dawned. "One of them being our first case together?"

"Indeed. And as the assembly was mandatory attendance, Crawford was there. Later he grew curious about Mr. Motherwell and looked him up on the Internet, and the rest, as they say, is history."

Ray snorted. "Dumb kid. I can't believe he was stupid enough to think he'd get away with it, considering he was following the m.o. from a case he knew you'd already solved."

"That we solved," said Fraser quietly. Ray glanced over at him, but Fraser's eyes were closed and he was leaning against the passenger side window. "As you said yourself, Ray, young people often seem even less likely than adults to consider the possible consequences of their actions. Crawford's finally been forced to take a hard look at himself and his behavior, and hopefully he'll be able to make better choices from here on out and live a life he's proud of." Fraser paused, and laughed softly. "And, Ray, if I start sounding like a bad religious pamphlet again would you kindly shoot me?"

Ray laughed. "Yeah. You got it."

As Ray turned the Suburban onto the main road, he thought about what Fraser had just said. Yeah, if everything worked out right, this would probably jolt the kid into making some changes, but whether they were going to be long-term changes or not was another story. Down at the detachment, it sure seemed that Crawford's mom loved her son, but if that was the case, where the heck had she been when her kid was getting into this mess to begin with? How could anyone pay so little attention to someone they cared so much about?

He sighed. Two other kids, a full-time job, and a loner son who'd hit the age where everything had to be a big secret: that's how Lana had missed the signs. No big mystery there. Maybe the real mystery was how he had managed to miss seeing so much about his own best friend for so long.

Ray turned into the drive, put the car into park, and shut off the ignition, but Fraser didn't move. His eyes were still closed, and he'd slumped down a little in his seat, clearly asleep. He looked so completely exhausted that Ray almost felt guilty waking him up, but he sure as hell wasn't going to leave him out in the car all night. He unbuckled his seatbelt, then turned in toward Fraser.

"Hey," he said, laying his hand on Fraser's shoulder and shaking him gently. "We're home."

Fraser smiled in his sleep and turned his head slightly toward the sound of Ray's voice, rubbing his cheek against the knuckles of Ray's hand in the process. "Mmm . . . nice."

"Yeah, it's nice," Ray said, sliding his thumb along Fraser's cheek. "But it'll be nicer inside."

He walked around to the passenger side and opened both doors. Dief, who'd been curled up on the
backseat, stretched himself awake and slipped out of the car. Fraser wasn't quite so fast. Eyes still
closed, he unbuckled his own seatbelt, but he sat for a moment before finally answering Ray's smile
with a bleary-eyed grin of his own. He groaned a little as he began to straighten his legs, and stopped
to test his weight on each knee before releasing his hold on the roof. He took a deep breath, then shut
the car door behind him, and headed slowly for the house, Ray walking close beside him.

They entered the warm kitchen. Ray held his hand out for Fraser's jacket, and took it into the living
room to hang up on the coat rack along with his own. When he returned to the kitchen, Dief was
lapping at a bowl of fresh water, and Fraser was still standing in front of the sink, holding his hands
under the running water and wincing slightly.

Ray reached over and turned Fraser's hands over, palms up. No gravel imbedded in them, but it
looked like he'd done a number on both his hands sometime during the chase in the woods. "Kind of
messy. You got any of that pregnant mucus stuff here?"

Fraser smiled. "I'm afraid not, Ray. There should be some antibiotic ointment, however."

"In the bathroom? I'll get it for you."

"You don't need to do that, Ray."

"It's not a problem. Trust me when I tell you I was heading that direction anyway." Ray grinned. "I'll
bring the ointment and some band-aids or something out with me when I'm done, okay?" Fraser
nodded, and Ray left him fixing a bowl of food for Dief.

Fraser was sitting on the couch, his boots and socks removed and placed next to him on the floor,
when Ray joined him in the living room a few minutes later. He was leaning against the back
cushion, eyes closed, and breathing in the steam from a mug he held in his hand.

"Hey," Ray said, laying the tube of ointment down on the coffee table. "I found a bottle of aspirin in
the medicine cabinet. Looked like you were walking a little stiffly when you got out of the car. You
might want to take a couple of these before you go to sleep; it'll help if there's any swelling."

"Thanks, Ray." He took the aspirin, and swallowed the tablets dry, as if he'd forgotten he was
holding a drink in his other hand. "I heated up some chicken soup in the microwave," he said,
indicating the second mug sitting atop a magazine on the table, "but if you'd prefer a more substantial
meal, I'll see what I can come up with."

"Nah, this is good." Ray reached for the cup and took a careful sip. "I think I'm too tired for anything
more ambitious than instant soup."

Fraser opened his mouth to reply, but it was swallowed up in a yawn. "As am I, apparently."

"Yeah. Looks like it's time for Doctor Ray to do his thing. Give me your hands."

"Ray, I'm perfectly capable of putting antibiotic ointment on my own hands."

He sat up, but Ray pushed him backwards again. "Just go with it, Fraser. I'm in the mood. You don't
want to come between a man and his mood, do you?"

"Good lord, no," Fraser said with a grin, relaxing back against the pillows as Ray applied cream to
his hands and covered the worst of the scrapes with band-aids.

"Okay," Ray said, taking the empty mugs from the table. "Be back in a second."

When he returned from the kitchen, Fraser had fallen asleep again, his head tilted to one side. He laughed to himself. Whatever fantasies he'd been having about a night of hot monkey sex were obviously going to have to be put aside for the time being. He was pretty tired himself, but Fraser looked like he was just this side of lapsing into a coma.

He knelt down on the couch and put his arm around Fraser's shoulders and squeezed gently until he finally stirred.

"Come on, let's get you to bed."

Fraser looked away. "The couch is fine, Ray."

"For Dief, maybe. Unless . . . ." Huh. It hit Ray that maybe he'd been making a few too many assumptions. A little groping in a cold garage didn't necessarily mean that Fraser wanted to be sharing a bed with him. "You know, I'm not going to boot you out of your bed again. I can take the couch if you don't want to . . . ."

"No!" Fraser's said instantly, with a stricken expression. "That's not what I meant at all!"

"Ookay." Then Ray waited, hoping Fraser would add something that would help him figure out what was going on, but after about twenty seconds passed - which had to be the longest damn twenty seconds Ray had ever sat through - he gave up. "So . . . um, you want to tell me what you did mean?"

Fraser opened his mouth to reply, then lifted his hands helplessly before letting them fall again and said wryly. "You know, I don't have the faintest idea what I meant. I'm so tired I'm babbling."

Ray grinned. "Okay, that's progress - sort of."

Fraser smiled back at him through tired eyes, then pushed himself up off the couch and held his arm out in the direction of the bedroom hallway. "Ray, my very good friend - would you do me the honor of sharing my bed with me tonight?"

"Yeah, see . . . that's better! You've got the 'formal invitation to give a guy a sleeping-with-a-Mountie alibi' thing down pat."

Fraser smiled, and Ray stood up, and almost instantly his spot on the couch was taken over by sixty pounds of wolf, who curled up in the warmth left by the two men.

"Well, he's looking comfy. How about you and me go follow his lead?"

"If you insist, Ray," Fraser said, eyes bright with humor. "But I hardly think there's enough room on the couch for all three of us."

Ray rolled his eyes. "Did you get any sleep last night?"

Fraser sighed. "It doesn't appear that I did, does it?"


"Yes, well . . . he isn't often allowed to sleep on the couch. I think he's availing himself of this rare opportunity while he can."

"Smart wolf. So . . . bed?"

"Bed."
Within minutes, the living room and kitchen lights were shut off, and the two men were finally heading in the direction of the bedroom, but Ray halted Fraser's progress with a quick tug on his sleeve as they passed the bathroom.

"What is it, Ray?"

"Hang on a second. You got anything like Ben-Gay or Aspercreme in here somewhere? Coming out from the car, you looked a little stiff . . . ."

Fraser snickered, and Ray shook his head.

"You been watching Beavis and Butthead? I didn't mean that kind of stiff."

He didn't even make an attempt to look confused by the reference, just smiled and said, "Top shelf of the medicine cabinet, I believe."

Ray walked into the bathroom and found an unopened tube of Aspercreme where Fraser had said it might be. "Got it. You want to go on in to the bedroom?"

"Actually, if I could have a moment to myself here . . . ."

"Huh?" Ray looked around the room. "Oh. Oh, yeah. Let me get out of your way. Just let me know when you're done, okay?"

Fraser nodded, and Ray walked back out into the hall, shutting the door behind him. He supposed he could give the man some privacy, even if just having a bathroom door closed between them felt like too much of a separation at the moment.

He went into the bedroom and put the Aspercreme down next to the lamp on the window side of the bed. Not exactly the kind of stuff in a tube he'd been hoping they'd need to have handy on the bedside table, but, yeah, it had been a long day, and it wasn't just Fraser who was wiped. He probably wouldn't be good for much except sleep right now, either.

Ray sat down on the edge of the bed and removed his boots and socks. By the time he'd taken off his sweatshirt, undershirt, and jeans, Fraser had appeared in the doorway.

"The bathroom's free, Ray."

"Thanks. Just going to go wash up and brush my teeth. Be back in a second."

Ray's words were spoken easily - casually - like it was no big deal for the two of them to be getting ready to sleep together, but inside . . . well, inside was a different matter entirely.

The thing of it was that this should have been no big deal. Even before their Arctic trek, they'd shared sleeping quarters - even the same bed - more times than he could count. And on the quest, well . . . there usually wasn't more than an inch or two separating them most nights after they'd set up camp. But this was different. This was sleeping together with intent, even if they were collectively too beat to really get down to business. Kind of scary, even if it maybe shouldn't have been. But scary in a good way, like when you're at the top of the first hill on a roller coaster and you know there's no way to stop the damn thing and you're really, really looking forward to the heart pounding rush that's going to come any second.

Ray broke some kind of land-speed record getting in and out of the bathroom, but by the time he returned to the bedroom, Fraser was already under the covers and looking a little freaked out. Okay, he was damned if he was going to get into the bed while Fraser was looking this nervous.
"Hey."

"Hi, Ray."

Okay, he was still capable of talking. That was a good sign.

"You put any of that gunk on yet?"

Fraser glanced over at the bedside table. "No, however, I don't believe I really need to use any tonight. I'm sure by morning, I'll . . . ."

"Let's take a look."

"Excuse me?"

"Let's take a look. Slide your legs out of the bed and we'll see."

"It really isn't necessary, Ray." Fraser gave him a small smile, but at the same time he clutched the blanket even closer to his chest than he'd been holding it a minute before. Frightened virgin routine? No way. Not after that scene up in Hannah's workroom. So what was this all about?

"It's necessary for me, Fraser. Don't you get that by now? Don't you get how much I care about you?"

"I . . . ." Fraser closed his eyes for a moment, then slowly slid his legs over to the side and out from under the covers.

Even with the awkward way Fraser was sitting, he kept the blanket held against him as much as he was able to do while still showing his legs, and it probably wasn't about being cold or anything since the house was nice and warm. Besides, if anyone was going to be cold on a late fall night in Canada, it was more likely to be him, but he was standing there in nothing but briefs and felt perfectly comfortable while Fraser was still wearing his long-sleeved henley and looked - well, Ray wouldn't exactly say it looked comfortable.

What was with him? Wasn't this the same guy who'd practically broken the public decency laws of two countries the day he'd smuggled files into the consulate for Ray? He could still remember how weird it had been watching Fraser peeling down in front of him and Turnbull a little more enthusiastically than he'd ever seen anyone get half-naked. When he'd started flinging clothes right and left to get to the folders he'd hidden down his pants, Ray'd thought if Fraser ever wanted to change professions, the Lucky Horseshoe over on Halsted would probably be happy to hire him for Ladies Night.

Ask him? Don't ask him? Maybe it'd be better to stick with not asking him. After spending over a year pretending he didn't notice Fraser talking to thin air; pretending not to notice this particular weirdness would be a piece of cake in comparison. Maybe it was just that now with everything out in the open, he was a little nervous about getting . . . out in the open. That was probably it.

Smiling a little at that thought, he crawled across the bed and grabbed the tube of ointment off the table, then sat down beside Fraser on the edge of the bed. Turning the bedside lamp up to its highest setting, he took a look at Fraser's knees. No broken skin, which was a good thing, but they were swollen and bruised. Fraser was probably going to be one hurting puppy come morning, maybe even with the Aspercreme.

It struck him as funny, all of a sudden, that this was the first time he'd ever gotten a really good long look at even this much of Fraser's bare skin, and he was wasting time thinking about some over-the-
counter medicine. Tired or not, this was pretty ridiculous. He should at least be doing something about getting his hands on those legs.

"Doesn't look too bad, but this stuff's going to help. Lay back against the pillows, okay? I'll put some on for you."

"Ray, I can . . . ."

"Fraser, what did I say about wanting to do this?"

Fraser sighed resignedly, then edged back on the bed until his back was touching the pillow and both legs were stretched out in front of him. Ray crawled over his legs, sat down cross-legged in the middle of the bed, and flipped open the cap.

He sniffed. Not bad. Smelled sort of sweetish. Not like a doctor's office, at least, or the rotting-stuff smell of whatever that crap was Fraser had used on him once upon a time. A little aloe or something, maybe, but that was all he could smell.

He squeezed some of the cream on his palm and put the tube down by his side on the bed. Then he dabbed a little on each of Fraser's knees.

Okay, he'd been right to think this was going to be a little weird.

It felt nice, actually. Nice to be touching Fraser's warm, smooth skin finally. But . . . knees? He had to start with knees? Wasn't exactly on the top ten list of seduction fantasies that'd been running through his head for the past twenty-four hours.

He started to move his hands up a little on Fraser's bare thighs, but he could feel a slight tensing in his muscles, so he decided to head the other way for the time being. He rubbed some of the cream into Fraser's calves, relieved when the tension that had surfaced began to dissipate. As Ray worked the cream in, Fraser let out a small groan, and relaxed more fully against the pillow.

"Thank you, Ray." Fraser said quietly. His eyes were closed, but a contented smile was playing on his lips. "This is nice."

"Yeah? Good." Ray slid his hands slowly up the calves and then past Fraser's knees to the outsides of his thighs. He rubbed gently now, slow strokes up and down, feeling the slight crisp-rough texture of hair shift beneath his hands. "So . . . roll over, okay?"

Fraser's eyes went wide, and he stared at Ray.

"What? You got a problem with my seduction technique? Damn. It's always worked before," Ray cackled. "No, you goof. I was just thinking I'd give you a back rub before we go to sleep, if you want, I mean."

Fraser hesitated for a moment, and then nodded. "That would be nice, Ray."

"Good. So roll over, and give me credit for a little finesse," he muttered as Fraser, somewhat reluctantly, complied, lowering the blanket about midway down his back.

Ray shook his head. He knew there was no way that was going to be enough. Ever since he'd met him - but more frequently after the Scarpa case - Fraser'd had intermittent back spasms, and they were almost always in his lower back. If Ray knew him, the pain he felt there every so often would probably be enough to send anyone else screaming for a chiropractor or a surgeon or something, but Ray had learned to look for more subtle clues than screaming when it came to Fraser. A wince.
Leaning on the edge of a desk when he could have been standing. That sort of thing.

He couldn't get over how much he'd noticed about Fraser even before he'd figured out what it was he was feeling for him - or how much he liked the fact that there was finally something he could do to make him feel better. Who didn't like getting back rubs? He tugged the covers down some more, and got started.

A minute later, he wasn't sure that Fraser actually fell into the 'liking back rubs' category. First off, it was kind of hard to give a good back rub through a shirt. Second, every time Ray's hands strayed lower than the bottom of his ribs, Fraser tensed up again. And it wasn't just when he touched his lower back. The same thing happened when his hands traveled over to Fraser's sides, no matter how high up on his back they were, and he knew Fraser was not ticklish. It was like trying to give a back rub to a squirming plank of wood.

He was just about to give up when he inadvertently slid his hands down along Fraser's sides to his waist and Fraser stiffened up like he'd gotten an electric shock or something. No, it was more than that. This was someone who used to stick his tongue into electrical outlets. Willingly. Electricity and him had to be old friends by now. Ray paused - his hands stilled on Fraser's waist, with Fraser trying his damnedest not to breathe, near as he could tell - when his instinct finally kicked into gear and he figured out what the hell was wrong.

It was the same thing that had been going on for the past two days. Fraser turning away to put on the Kevlar. Leaving his shirt hanging outside his jeans. Well, fuck that, Ray thought, though he had the sense not to say it. He left his hands where they were and leaned down, kissing the back of Fraser's neck, the little knob at the top of Fraser's spine, and then started working his way lower, at the same time letting his hands slide up and down Fraser's sides in a rough caress.

"Ray!" Fraser choked.

"Shut up, Benton," he said against the small of his back. "I'm gonna get offended here if you keep thinking I'm a shallow dickwad."

"Ray!" This time Fraser sounded shocked in an 'I can't believe you just said that' way, instead of in an 'I'm freaking out' way.

Ray laughed, and moved up to nuzzle the back of Fraser's neck, kissing him behind his ear. "What's the matter, that word not in your approved vocabulary?" he whispered into Fraser's ear. "I've got a ton of 'em. I could make a sailor blush, but I'll settle for a Mountie. Now would you just relax and let me do this for you?"

Fraser nodded. Ray started over again, this time putting a little cream on his hands and pushing them up underneath Fraser's shirt. After one initial flinch that Ray thought was more surprise than self-consciousness, Fraser began to relax into his hands as he rubbed the cream into the skin he couldn't see, but he could feel. The thing that got to him was that Fraser didn't feel all that flabby or out of shape. Just... solid. The weight he'd put on was distributed so evenly over his frame that he didn't have much in the way of a gut or anything, just some love-handles that even Ray had fought off and on himself. They ran in his family. He figured he'd lose the battle one of these days.

Fraser made a sort of contented almost-purr as Ray worked his fingers around his shoulder blades, and he turned his head, settling onto his pillow a little more with a sigh. That was followed a few moments later by a jaw-cracking yawn. Ray suppressed a chuckle and kept working, until Fraser reached back, awkwardly, and caught his hand, tugging a little to pull Ray down closer.

"What?" Ray asked quietly.
"C'mere," Fraser muttered.

Ray leaned closer, his nose nearly touching Fraser's, so he could hear whatever it was Fraser had to say. To his surprise, Fraser didn't say a word, just turned his face up, searching blindly until their lips met. Ray smiled against Fraser's mouth and returned the awkward kiss. When their lips parted again, he eased himself down alongside Fraser, one arm across his waist, their heads on the same pillow. It felt good. Felt good. Everything finally felt right again, after being all wrong for two damned years. He had no idea what they were going to do about it, he just knew that he didn't want to give it up again.

* * *

Warm. Comfortable. Horny. Pretty typical way to wake up, Ray thought, except that he hadn't woken up to the unmistakable presence of another person in bed with him in so long that when he got conscious enough to realize it, he kind of jerked a little, startled. The deep breath he took as he did was full of a familiar scent, though, and he remembered where he was and who he was with, and settled back again. Fraser was spooned up behind him, actually wrapped half around him, one thigh across his, an arm around his waist, nose buried in the crook of his shoulder. And if the hard-on poking him in the ass was any sign, Fraser was feeling warm, comfortable and horny too. He grinned. Bonus.

"Benton?"

"Mmmm?" Fraser responded, sounding both sleepy and cautious. An odd combination.

"Just checking," Ray said.

Fraser's head lifted and his arm tightened around Ray's midriff. "You have to check to see who you're in bed with?" he demanded, sounding outraged.

Ray patted the hand on his stomach. "Nah. I was just checking to see if you were awake yet, so settle down," Ray said with a chuckle. He shifted his hips, just a little, and was rewarded with a swift intake of breath and a similar shift of hips against his.

"Ray?" Fraser's breath was warm against his ear.

"Yeah?" Ray said, encouragingly.

"I'm in. . . I want . . . I . . ."

His hand closed around Ray's shoulder and he shifted backward, pulling Ray back too, until he was lying flat on his back looking up at Fraser. Sleep-wrinkled, hair sticking up every-which-way, patchy stubble, but eyes brilliant with everything he couldn't say. He was beautiful.

"Yeah, me too," Ray said, his voice thick. It was hard to swallow for a moment.

Fraser's mouth came down on his, gently at first, in a sort of 'hi, nice to meet you' kiss. But after they both figured out they already knew each other, it warmed up fast. Pretty soon they were back to where they'd had to leave off the night before when they were interrupted by a minor avalanche.

And just as quickly past that point. Fraser was apparently just as perceptive in bed as he was out of it, because when his fingers brushed Ray's nipple and it tightened and Ray gasped, Fraser went for the little nubs like there was a neon sign on them or something. Stella had always thought it was weird that Ray liked to have his nipples played with more than she did. Clearly Fraser didn't find it weird at all.
With his few functioning brain cells, Ray realized that he could finally do what he'd wanted to do last night, and got both hands on Fraser's ass and squeezed. Fraser, in the middle of raking his teeth across one of Ray's nipples, bit down almost too hard, and Ray barely managed not to yelp. Once he was sure Fraser's teeth were clear, he petted again and Fraser moaned breathily against his chest, clutching his shoulder as he rocked his hips, pressing the hard length of his cock against Ray's thigh.

Ray pushed up, finding Fraser's hip, rubbing against it the same way Fraser was rubbing on him. "Yeah," he muttered. "Good."

Fraser nodded, clutching at his hip, and lifted his head to bring their lips together again, tongues stroking. When the beeping sounded, for a minute Ray thought it was the smoke detector and he had a muzzy thought about that being appropriate, considering the heat they were generating. But then it dawned on him that Fraser had gone still. Was pushing away from him, turning toward the nightstand. . . oh. Whew.

"Shut that thing off, okay?" he growled, reaching for Fraser. "We're up already."

Fraser silenced the alarm clock, then he sat back, flushed, breathing heavily, and with the most. . . lost. . . expression on his face.

"We have to stop," he said quietly.

Ray stared at him, jaw dropped. "What? Why?"

"It's Monday."

Ray still didn't get it. "There some law here against sex on Mondays?" he asked, baffled.

Fraser sighed deeply. "You should leave here in an hour if you're going to make it back to Saskatoon in time for your court appearance this afternoon."

Saskatoon. Court. LeBeau. "Shit," he moaned, covering his face with his hands. "But. . . we could. . . we've got time. . . I can speed!" he offered, incoherently.

"Please, Ray. I. . . let's just leave it here, all right?"

Something about Fraser's voice made him uncover his face and look, really look, at Fraser. He looked. . . about as miserable as Ray felt.

"This isn't about. . ." Ray stopped. How the hell could he ask if it was because Fraser didn't feel attractive without making it sound like Ray thought he was acting like a fifteen-year-old girl? He couldn't. And he didn't want to push. Pushing was bad. He swallowed down his disappointment, and nodded. "Okay. Okay, no problem," he lied. "I. . . um, don't suppose you want to go to Saskatoon with me?"

Fraser sighed again. "I'd love to, but I'm afraid I can't. Duty. . . ."

"Yeah. Arf." Ray sighed too. "Okay. You, um, mind if I get a shower and shave?"

"Of course not!" Fraser actually looked appalled. "Be my guest."

Ray managed not to comment that 'guest' status wasn't exactly what he'd been hoping for, as he sat up and swung his feet over the side of the bed. Standing up, he was glad now that he'd worn his briefs to bed, because they made it at least a little less obvious that he had a woody he could pound nails with.
He walked out of the bedroom, but Fraser calling his name brought him up short. He turned, hoping maybe Fraser had changed his mind about not having enough time before he had to leave, that maybe he'd figured out that what happened next between the two of them was more important than any damn clock or court. But all he saw was Fraser - somber and silent - holding out a fresh towel for him, and that fantasy bit the dust.

Who was he kidding? This was Fraser. Nothing was more important than justice. And that was right, really. He knew that. Plus, it gave them a reason to stop, and something in him thought maybe Fraser wanted that. Maybe this was all just a little more than Fraser had bargained for. Fraser had been lonely, hungry for human contact. And Ray had been there and he was . . . safe, in a way no one else was. Especially last night when Fraser was tired and hurting and his brain wasn't firing on all cylinders.

But now in the cold light of morning things looked different. Yeah, he knew the name of that tune. There'd been a couple of mornings right after he and Stella'd called it quits where Ray couldn't figure out what the hell he'd been thinking the night before. Mornings when he looked across the kitchen counter and the near-stranger he was sharing coffee and toast with was so obviously not what he'd imagined her to be the night before - not what he'd wanted her to be - that he'd just sit there wishing that grown-up life had do-overs the way kids' games did.

It didn't look like there was going to be any do-over this morning, either. This wasn't a game - and he and Fraser weren't kids. They were adults and they were friends, and he had to let this go, had to be what Fraser needed him to be, even if that meant letting whatever he thought they'd been building up to over the past two days just fade away.

Fuck! He grabbed the towel from Fraser's hand and stalked out of the room, feeling stupid and angry with himself. He could almost feel Fraser's eyes boring into the back of his head as he walked away. He knew if he were to turn around he'd be met with one of those "Why are you so angry with me, Ray?" looks that Fraser used to give him a lot back in the early days of their partnership - before he'd figured out that an angry Ray didn't necessarily translate to angry at anyone but himself.

He shut the bathroom door behind him, managing not to slam it by sheer force of will. He leaned heavily against the sink, fingers curled tightly around the edge of the basin. He was going to have to get himself under control or he'd never be able to leave the bathroom and face Fraser. It wasn't his fault. There was no reason to take out his frustration on the one person in the world he least wanted to make unhappy. This wasn't all about him.

He stepped into the tub and pulled the curtain all the way around so that the floor wouldn't get soaked, then took the quickest shower he could remember taking in his life. A little colder than he usually liked it, too, not that he really needed much in the way of cold water dick-wilting. Frustration and anger had done a good enough job of taking the starch out of him that he wasn't going to have to worry about being in pain all the way back to Saskatoon. Not in physical pain, anyway, unless he counted the lingering embarrassment over yanking the towel away from Fraser and stomping out of the room like a little kid. After drying off and putting on his briefs, he stared at himself in the mirror for a moment, blew out a long sigh, and set his jaw. Okay. Time to face the music.

Returning to the bedroom to get dressed, Ray found Fraser was nowhere to be seen. He got that. No reason for him to just sit there waiting for a second go-round at being treated like shit. It looked like Ray was going to have to do a little fence mending, make sure Fraser knew he still wanted to be his friend. No matter how much he wanted more than friendship from Fraser, the thought of not even having that much was way too crummy to think about.

He tossed his suitcase up on the bed and started pulling out the last of his clean clothes. He gave the
trousers an assessing look. Not bad. A little wrinkled, but he'd be sitting in the car for five hours in any case. He could probably get away with wearing them down in Saskatoon since they'd told him he wasn't going to be asked to appear in open court. Of course, if they changed their minds about that, he was out of luck. Welsh would have him on traffic duty for a month if he embarrassed the department by looking like he didn't have the proper respect for the Canadian judicial system.

As Ray started to zip up his bag, his eye was caught by the sight of Fraser's henley lying on top of the dresser. What were the odds that he'd be able to get away with 'accidentally' slipping the shirt into his bag and taking it with him when he left? He could always send Fraser a new shirt to replace the one he'd taken, and besides, Fraser had plenty more where this came from, and. . . okay, if he was really going to swipe the shirt, he should just do it and not try to justify it. Because there was no real way to justify it, nothing that would make sense to anyone but him. He just. . . wanted it.

Furtively he slipped the shirt in with his own, then zipped the bag shut. Leaving the bag in the bedroom for the moment, he went out to the living room. Neither Dief nor Fraser was out there either, but he could smell something cooking, so he followed the scent into the kitchen where he found Fraser standing in front of the stove.

"Ah, Ray," Fraser began a bit hesitantly. "Breakfast is nearly ready. You've a long drive ahead and I didn't want you to have to set out on an empty stomach."

"Wow," he said, glancing over at the table. It was set with green place-mats under the two plates. A pot of freshly brewed coffee and a bowl of mixed fruit with yogurt spooned over the top occupied the center of the table. A short stack of french toast sat on a plate beside the stove, while Fraser finished cooking the last two pieces. "You didn't have to go to all this trouble," he said, feeling even more guilty. "A cup of coffee and a leftover bannock from yesterday would have been fine."

"Yes, I'm still familiar with your eating habits," said Fraser wryly. "But, well, you're. . . I wanted. . ." He shrugged helplessly, a very un-Fraser thing to do, then turned back to the pan on the stove in front of him and removed it from the flames. "Sit down," he asked, his back turned. "Please?"

"Yeah. Yeah, sure." Ray pulled the chair out and sat down at the table. Place-mats? Cloth napkins, even? Jesus, how the hell was he going to get through this meal? He was having enough trouble just swallowing the coffee. He gave himself a good mental shake. For god's sake, take it like a man, Kowalski. Grab that bottle of real maple syrup and choke down the damned french toast and stop being such a wimp.

"Is the coffee all right?"

"Huh? The coffee?" He took another sip and actually tasted it this time, looked up, surprised. "Yeah, it's great. What did you put in it?"

"It's Dutch Mocha. I thought you might like it, though I'm sure it'll never transcend the experience of M&M's in your coffee," said Fraser with a crooked grin.

Ray smiled back weakly. It wasn't fair. Why couldn't the man just act like a shit? Or better yet, go back to the distant act he'd been so good at back when they'd first met? Why did he have to be so nice and so thoughtful and so fucking gorgeous - even in an old t-shirt and sweatpants - that Ray wanted to jump him right here on his kitchen table?

God. He had to get the hell out of there before he did just that.

Fraser sat down and forked a piece of french toast onto his plate, then looked pointedly at Ray, who hastily stabbed a couple of pieces, slathering them liberally with syrup. Fraser nodded and turned his
Ray shoveled in some food, not really even tasting it. It sat in his stomach like a lump of lead, and once he'd eaten enough that he didn't think Fraser would be offended, he took his dishes to the sink and rinsed them. Finally, with a deep breath, he turned slowly to face Fraser, taking a long moment to look at him. His friend. His partner.

"I. . . uh, thanks for the breakfast, Fraser," he said finally. "It was great."

"I'm . . . I'm glad you enjoyed it, Ray."

Almost a minute passed where neither of them said a word. Ray looked down at his watch.

"Well, guess I'd better be hitting the road if I want to get to Saskatoon on time. I figure Canadian judges don't like to be kept waiting any more than American ones do."

"No, no, they don't. Can I help you take your things to the car?"

Ray shook his head. "Nah, just have the one bag." He smiled a little. "Lot less of a load going back."

Fraser nodded. "Please give my thanks and best wishes to everyone. I'll send notes, of course, but considering the respective postal services involved, I suspect that you'll arrive long before they do."

"Yeah. Unless they decide they need me to stick around in Saskatoon for a few." Ray winced a little at the eager note in his voice. "Anyway, I'll go get my stuff. Where's Dief? Can't leave without saying goodbye."

"Outside. I'll get him."

Ray went to the bedroom to get his bag while Fraser opened the kitchen door and called Dief. He picked up his bag, stood there for a moment with it, staring at the bed a little blankly, and then shook his head in exasperation and headed for the front door. Fraser was standing there next to Dief, waiting. His expression was carefully pleasant, so Ray put on what he hoped was a similar face as he knelt to ruffle Dief's fur. "Hey, you take care of Fraser, okay? Don't let Zhertak hit on him. Well, unless he wants him to, I mean," he amended, suddenly realizing he might be sort of out of line there. It was none of his business who Fraser went out with.

"Ray! I don't. . . ." Fraser began, sounding dismayed.

Ray waved a hand, cutting off the protest. "I know, I know. You don't think Zhertak has a thing for you. I got that." He scratched Dief's ears, staring at him because he knew better than to look at Fraser right then. Dief whined, and did a worried looking eyebrow-thing at him. Ray made a face. "Don't worry, I'm good. No more fruit tarts, okay?"

Dief grumbled, but shoved his nose under Ray's hand and Ray figured that was an agreement. He stood up, his bag in his left hand, and put out his right hand, sort of staring past Fraser's shoulder, trying to make it look like he was looking at him. "Well, thanks for everything. It's been real, Benton."

Fraser hesitated for a moment, then clasped his hand. His hand felt cold. Ray couldn't ever remember that happening before. Fraser's hands had always been warm, even on the coldest days. Before he could really process that, Fraser was pulling him in close, wrapping his arms around him, tight, so tight he could barely breathe. Against his ear he could feel Fraser's warm breath as he spoke.

"No, Ray, it hasn't been real at all."

He thought he felt the brush of lips against his cheek, and then Fraser was pulling back. The shock of
it made him forget he wasn't going to look at Fraser. Their eyes met. Fraser's were shadowed and full of regret. Ray flinched, looking away. God, and he thought it had been bad the last time. He lifted a hand, reaching out, then let it fall again before he could touch Fraser.

"Sorry," he whispered.

"Me too," Fraser echoed hoarsely.

For a moment they stood there, unspeaking, then Ray cleared his throat. "Well. Guess I'd better . . . get at 'er."

"Indeed," Fraser acknowledged, opening the door.

Ray extracted the rental's keys from his pocket, and stepped out into the cold morning air. He didn't stop until he got to the car. He unlocked the door, opened it, tossed his bag into the passenger seat, and started to get in. Before he did, though, something made him turn back and look. Fraser was gone. The door was closed. He swallowed hard.

"Well, that's that, then," he whispered, and got in.

* * *

As Ray lifted his bag and turned away toward the car, Fraser could feel his deliberately neutral expression begin to crumble. However, for Ray's sake - and for his own, if he were to be entirely honest - he couldn't allow himself to show how difficult this was for him.

From the very start of their partnership in Chicago, Ray - outwardly brash and aggressive though he was - had permitted Fraser to see far deeper inside him than he allowed the rest of the world. In particular, the still-raw wounds of his broken marriage and the pain caused by his long estrangement from his father over his career were so close to the surface that he'd sometimes imagined Ray's pain was actually being spoken aloud, even when his partner said nothing at all about it. In many ways, Ray's quip about being a poet on the inside had been true.

Gradually the dynamic of their relationship had changed, though, and Fraser started to allow himself moments of vulnerability with Ray. It didn't take long for him to learn that Ray's sensitivity went both ways - or at least it did where he was concerned. Over time, Ray's rough care and understanding had dragged more honesty of emotion out of him than he had felt comfortable showing to anyone since his youth. Unfamiliar as revealing his feelings was at times, Fraser had come to believe that as long as there was some sort of balance in the relationship, as long as he was still able to provide something in the way of support to his partner, it might not be a sign of weakness to accept the concern that Ray offered him.

This weekend, however, there had been no balance. Even while working the case, it was clear Ray's primary concern had been for him, and while that wonderful on one level, on another level it was almost as humiliating as realizing his subordinates clearly had severe misgivings about his ability to do his job. How could he have spent the past two days doing little but bare that unhappiness to Ray, over and over again, when he could have spent the time more enjoyably? It seemed incomprehensible now that he could have been oblivious to his own unhappiness for so long, but the last thing he wanted, after everything Ray had given him this weekend, was to fall apart and make Ray feel guilty for leaving.

That was why he'd let the ring of the alarm that morning put a stop to their lovemaking, even though he'd desperately wanted it to continue. As Ray had touched him in ways he hadn't been touched in years, his feelings were so intense that he knew if they'd gone any further - if they'd moved even an
inch closer to completion - it would be impossible to keep his need, his desire, his love for Ray in control. And despite his apparently immense capacity for denial and self-delusion, he was still well enough grounded in reality to know that was simply not an option.

He shook his head, trying to clear it. Surely he could keep his emotions in check long enough for Ray to walk from the house to the car. He had a lifetime's experience with repression - how was this different? When Ray reached the car, he could wave goodbye and Ray would wave goodbye in return - and the two of them would be able to carry on as if some aspects of this weekend had never happened.

His hands clenched into fists at his sides as he fought down the urge to go after him. The problem was, he didn't want this weekend to be forgotten. He didn't want his time with Ray to come to an end at all. But it had to; he knew that. Ray had responsibilities in Saskatoon and back in Chicago, and he had responsibilities at the detachment. They couldn't be together. That was the simple truth, painful as it might be.

When Diefenbaker moaned softly beside him - the sound an uncomfortable echo of the ache growing inside him - he broke. Turning, he blindly opened the door, and both he and Diefenbaker slipped inside the house. He shut the door, closing himself off the only way he could, because he was just far too open in every other way right now. He closed his eyes and leaned against the door, chest pressed to its cool surface, his head against his crossed arms, and stood there for a long time - barely breathing, eyes still shut, simply existing, trying not to think - but when he was finally able to force his eyes open and move to the side window for one last look at Ray, he was gone.

Four minutes. The clock on the mantle showed that only four minutes had passed from the moment Ray said he'd had to go until now. How could only four minutes have gone by? He took a deep breath, then headed for the bathroom. He was being ridiculous. Maudlin. His father would be appalled. There was no point in spending any more time thinking about this. He just had to accept that Ray was gone and get on with his life.

Of course, telling himself he wasn't going to think about Ray being gone was far easier said than done. He remembered all those times in childhood when his grandfather would tell him to think about anything he wanted except a caribou sitting at the kitchen table - and how for the rest of the day, he was able to think of nothing but the imaginary caribou he'd been trying so hard to ignore. And thoughts of Ray were far less easy to ignore than thoughts of the caribou had been, particularly now that Ray had actually been in his home, and everywhere he turned, there was yet another reminder of his partner.

Even showering brought its own set of problems. The soap in the holder at the side of the bathtub was still wet and slightly lathery from Ray's shower earlier that morning. As Fraser rubbed it over his torso, he imagined Ray's hands on his body instead, sliding over his wet skin, down over his hips, rubbing lightly across his thighs. The fantasy continued until he could feel Ray's long fingers teasing at the base of his penis, at its head, fingertips stroking down along its hard length, wrapping themselves firmly around his shaft, sliding up and down. He started to breathe harder, could feel his penis stiffen and thicken in Ray's hand.

No. Not Ray's hand. His own. Ray was gone. He squeezed more tightly, holding onto himself as he'd wanted Ray to hold him. Stroking. Up and down, his hand firm and tight along his foreskin, up and down and missing Ray and desperately wanting this to be Ray's hand on him. He kept stroking over and over until his body finally yielded, catching the come in his free hand, sliding it over his stomach as Ray might have done, gasping out Ray's name as the final pulses of orgasm drove through him. As the sensations faded he slid down along the tiles and knelt, hunched over slightly in the tub, warm water raining down on his head, streaming down his face, letting him pretend that was
He couldn't stay in the shower forever, no matter how much he wanted to. He got out, dried himself off with the same towel Ray had used earlier that day, shaved - carefully enough to avoid more than a single, rather painful nick on his jaw - and then picked up his used t-shirt, sweatpants, and boxers.

Once in his bedroom, Fraser opened the hamper in his closet and threw in the clothing he'd picked up from the bathroom floor, then turned to get the henley he'd been wearing the previous day to add it to the hamper. He thought he'd put it on top of the dresser, but as distracted as he'd been last night, it could be anywhere. He searched the living room, checked the bathroom again, and finally took a quick look in the kitchen just in case he'd left the shirt hanging on the back of a chair, but it was nowhere to be found. He frowned, wondering where on earth he'd left it. Was it possible Ray had mistakenly packed it? It seemed unlikely after having seen Fraser wearing it all day, but perhaps Ray had been distracted too.

Fraser shook his head. Why was he obsessing about a shirt? It would turn up eventually. He got his blue uniform out of the closet, looking a bit wistfully at the red serge tunic as he did so, and dressed for the day, then he and Diefenbaker got into the car and drove down to the detachment.

Although it was still early when he arrived at the office, Sally was already at her desk and talking to somebody on the phone. She nodded as he walked in, though, and handed him a stack of telephone messages before returning to her own conversation.

Fraser paused at the door to his office. Ray was right; it was laid out nearly identically to Lieutenant Welsh's office in Chicago. He wondered, for a moment, if he'd had an unconscious wish to make things as familiar as possible, or if the similarity had been purely coincidental. He sat down and sighed; either way, now that his attention had been drawn to the resemblance, it was going to be impossible not to think of the 27th District every time he came to work - as if he could ever forget. He was going to have to rearrange the furniture.

As he was saying goodbye to Henry Cooper, the elder who'd called to set up a preliminary meeting regarding the sentencing circle - he heard a soft knock on his office door and looked up to find Bose Zhertak standing in the doorway, holding a mug in his hand. "Good morning, sir. I . . . uh, Sally just made a pot of coffee. I thought you might want a cup."

"Thank you kindly, Constable. That's very thoughtful of you."

Zhertak flushed, but brought the mug over and placed it on his desk. "Sir? Um . . . do you have a moment?"

Fraser nodded. "Of course. Take a seat." He waited until Zhertak had sat down. "What can I do for you?"

"On behalf of all . . . well, me, really. I'd like to apologize for my behavior over the past few days. I realize that my actions yesterday almost succeeded in scaring Crawford Jones away before you were able to come up with any proof of his involvement in the fires, and for that, in particular, I'm truly sorry. I've taken the liberty of drafting a reprimand for my personnel file, and . . . ."

A sudden feeling of deja vu swept over Fraser; God, had he ever been so young? "Bose, that won't be necessary," he said gently. "However, we don't want to see anything like that happening again, do we?"
"No, of course not."

"No, and since we don't, would you mind telling me why in the world you came out after me without hearing from me first?"

Even as he asked the question, it struck him that perhaps Zhertak's answer wouldn't be anything he wished to hear. He was almost ready to tell him to forget it, when he heard a slightly mumbled response.

"Could you repeat that, please? I don't think I heard what you said."

"I . . . um . . . I was jealous, sir."

"Jealous?" His jaw nearly dropped. Had Ray been right when he suggested that Zhertak had a more than fraternal regard for him?

"Not . . . not jealous in the sense of being jealous. I mean, in the sense of . . . um . . . I mean, well, do you know what I mean, sir?" Zhertak asked, turning a spectacular shade of red.

"Not precisely. Perhaps you'd care to elaborate," he said, rather hesitantly.

Zhertak took a deep breath, then said, "I wanted to be working with you. I'd read so many things about you before I came here this year, and . . . sir, did you know I requested this posting just so I could work with you?"

Fraser was sure there was a dumbfounded expression on his face, but he couldn't do anything about it. "No, I don't suppose I knew that."

"Oh yes. We'd all heard so many extraordinary things about you through the Depot grapevine. You're . . . you've become rather a legend, sir, if you don't mind my saying so."

It was Fraser's turn to flush. He rubbed his thumb across his eyebrow and dropped his gaze to his desktop, trying to find something to look at besides Zhertak's uncharacteristically earnest expression, but apart from the phone messages, there was nothing to see except . . . except the rubber duck, which he immediately slipped off the desktop and held in his hand, down below the edge of the desk.

"But then I arrived and . . . well, permission to speak freely, sir?"

"Of course."

"It's just . . . well, you didn't seem exactly as I'd imagined you'd be." Zhertak bit his lip and took a deep breath before continuing. "I'm sure it's my own fault for being taken in by tales that never sounded entirely plausible. I mean, tracking a litterbug over 1700 kilometers of wilderness? Honestly, sometimes I can't imagine how somebody as naive as I must have been ever allowed to become a member of the RCMP. But the stories were always so fascinating, and then the part about having a deaf half-wolf turned out to be true, so . . . ."

Fraser nodded. "It was just that the rest seemed a bit disappointing, didn't it?" He glanced down at the rubber duck he still held in his hand, thumb rubbing across the smooth yellow surface with careful pressure, not wanting to make it squeak. Not attraction, Ray. Hero worship. And sadly misplaced hero worship, at that.

"Not disappointing," Zhertak exclaimed, beginning to sound a little worried that he'd gone too far. "And La Rouille isn't exactly a hotbed of criminal activity, so I can see why you weren't . . . anyway,
then the fires took place, and . . . I have to admit that none of us believed it when you suggested that
the first one might have been set deliberately."

"I understand your reluctance to believe that, Constable. At that stage there was neither any hard
evidence, nor a pattern, and . . . ."

"No! That's just the point. You didn't have any hard evidence at all, and yet somehow you still knew
it was arson! And you wouldn't let it drop . . . wouldn't let it go."

This is what engendered the sudden burst of hero worship? A combination of intuition and
obsession? "You know, Constable, much of the . . . credit for solving this case has to go to Detective
Kowalski. Without his appearance in La Rouille, I'm not at all certain I'd have pursued the case with
the same . . . fervor."

"I have no doubt you would have, sir," Zhertak said emphatically, an intense look in his eyes.
"Although . . . ."

"What is it, Constable?"

Zhertak's gaze fell. "Detective Kowalski. There was finally something to investigate here and, well,
you seemed so happy to be working with your former partner again. I'm not certain 'jealous' is the
right word, but I certainly envied his position. We all did, sir."

Fraser shook his head. How disconcerting to discover that his subordinates weren't concerned he
couldn't handle the investigation, but that they had simply wanted to be a part of it - to learn from
him. God. How could he have read them so inaccurately? He suddenly felt guilty. He'd failed them
as O.C. It was his job to include them on investigations, to teach them, not to let an outsider usurp
their duties.

And to find out that he was actually being admired for being obsessive? He'd have to set them
straight about that, at least. Obsessions rarely worked out the way one might wish, all evidence from
this case to the contrary. He looked back down at the rubber duck in his hand, still finding it difficult
to believe that he'd actually stolen the toy from Ray's desk, just so he'd have something tangible to
remember him by. If being obsessed and unrelenting was all it took to get what you wanted, he and
Ray would be together. No, it also took . . .

For God's sake.

It also took saying something!

Ray wasn't a suspect in a criminal investigation. The point wasn't to pursue him without his knowing
anything about it.

He thought back over the past two days. Had he ever, at any point, said anything to Ray that would
have let him know that he wanted to be with him on an ongoing basis? Had he indicated in any way
the depth of his feeling? That he. . . loved him? How in the name of God had he expected to know
whether Ray reciprocated those feelings if he never actually said anything? No. He was doing it
again. Not communicating. When he knew better.

What sort of evidence had he been looking for from Ray before he'd be willing to risk saying
something? God knows he had more hard evidence of Ray's feelings for him than he'd had for the
possibility of the fires being set intentionally - and yet he pursued the arson investigation despite an
almost complete disbelief from his colleagues that the two fires were anything more than a
coincidence.
Ray had kept in contact with him for years when all his other friends and acquaintances from his time in Chicago had apparently lost interest. He 'stopped by' La Rouille because he was 'in the neighborhood,' when that was patently untrue. He was . . . he had to admit it, Ray was clearly attracted to him despite his less than splendid condition. And Ray cared about him. So much so that he'd been clearly desolate when he'd had to leave . . .

. . . so much so that when he had left this morning, he'd taken Fraser's henley. That hadn't been an accident; Fraser was suddenly dead certain that it hadn't. Ray had taken the henley for the same reason that he, himself, had taken the rubber duck - to have at least something to hold onto if he couldn't have the whole person.

Call it intuition. A hunch. Extrapolation based on personal knowledge of the suspect. Call it whatever you want. But he was damned if he was going to let the most important person in his life just disappear without finally telling him that this wasn't just about being bored and lonely, or thinking Ray attractive, or caring for him as a friend, but that he loved him and that he wanted to be with him. Forever, if possible. Why had he been trying to keep his feelings from Ray? Was he an idiot?

"Sir?"

God. How long had Constable Zhertak been trying to get his attention?

"I'm sorry, Constable," he said, pushing his chair back from his desk and standing up. "I don't mean to be rude and I'm sorry to leave in the middle of our conversation, but you've just reminded me of something vitally important I have to do immediately."

"Um... quite all right, sir," Zhertak said, standing as well, looking completely confused.

"Thank you for being so understanding. Sally?" he called as he grabbed his jacket off the coat rack and went out into the reception area, indicating to Dief that he should follow. "I have to leave, and I'm not sure when I'll be returning. Take my calls, please, and I'll have my cell phone on if you have any emergencies." He turned back toward Zhertak. "Constable?"

Zhertak popped his head out of Fraser's office. "You have an appointment, sir?"

"Of a kind. I'm leaving you in charge until I return."

"You are?" Zhertak sounded positively astonished.

"I am."

Fraser was halfway out the door when he heard Zhertak ask, "Can I use your computer?"

He turned back and smiled. "Use my computer. Sit in my chair. Draw with my colored pens. Whatever you like, Constable."

Zhertak gave a surprised-sounding laugh, then managed to assume a serious expression and nodded. "You can rely on me, sir."

"I'm sure I can, Constable." Fraser said, still smiling. "Dief?"

Dief trotted out the door Fraser held open for him. Fraser followed and stood for a moment, taking a deep breath of the crisp air, and then headed for the Suburban. Realizing he was still holding that damned duck, he laughed a little and shook his head, putting it up on the dashboard. Settling in, he buckled his seatbelt, glanced at his watch and winced. God. He was never going to catch up with
Ray, who had an hour and a half head start. He pulled out of the parking lot and headed east, trying to plan out his route, trying to anticipate Ray's movements. Ray wouldn't be speeding, he was too smart to risk that with marginal road conditions and an unfamiliar route. Even so, he must be a third of the way to Saskatoon by now. However, if he knew Ray, which he did, he would likely stop in Weyakwin to get gas, use the restroom, and get more coffee. That would delay him for somewhere between ten and twenty minutes. Not nearly enough time, but a start.

He knew a shortcut that would take a good twenty minutes off the drive, and then once he hit the highway, well, the Suburban was better equipped for the road than Ray's Taurus, and he was more than familiar with the route, so speeding wasn't an issue. And it wasn't exactly proper use of RCMP equipment but he did have a lightbar and this was an emergency . . . of sorts. But no matter what, he'd still be behind. He might well have to chase Ray all the way to Saskatoon. The thought was daunting, but he wasn't going to let it stop him.

Stop him. Hmm. He glanced at the radio and thought for a moment about calling in a stop and hold order on Ray's rental car, but just thinking about Ray's reaction to that put a halt to that line of thought instantly. Even if he didn't get suspended for pulling such a stunt, Ray would probably kick him in the head. Turning, he glanced at Dief. "Hang on, this is going to be a rough ride."

Dief just grinned at him, tongue lolling.
Fraser's teeth were still rattling in his head a good ten minutes after he'd left the graded dirt road across Sam Steele's back forty and gotten onto the CanAm. His brain was definitely rattled as well, although some of that rattle had less to do with being shaken like dice and more to do with the speech he kept trying to put together for whenever he actually did find Ray. Between that, and concentrating on the road in front of him, he nearly missed the lone blue Ford Taurus that passed him going the opposite direction. If Dief hadn't suddenly barked, it might not have registered at all. He slammed on the brakes, his eyes going to the rear-view mirror. Blue Ford Taurus? What on earth? He looked at Dief.

"Are you sure?"

Dief snorted, his expression was disdainful.

"No, I'm not questioning your eyesight. It's just... well, he's going the wrong direction! How could anyone manage to get completely turned around on a straight road with virtually no exits?"

Dief made a sound suspiciously like a laugh, and Fraser felt his face warm. "That's a fallacious comparison. I'm talking about driving," he growled, cranking the wheel around as he hit the brake, doing a 180 and leaving a season's worth of tread on the road. Reaching down he flicked on the lightbar and siren, and floored it. Ahead of him he saw brake lights flare, and a sudden wash of near-panic flooded him. God, what if it wasn't Ray?

The Taurus pulled to the side of the road ahead, and Fraser pulled in behind it. The rental sticker on the back of the car reassured him, but panic returned a moment later as every potential sentence he'd composed for the moment deserted him. What the hell was he going to say? Mouth dry, he opened his door with a quiet admonition to Dief to stay put. Walking toward the car where Ray waited, he could see that Ray had the window down, fingers tapping impatiently on the door. He almost laughed at that, and he suddenly realized that Ray hadn't really looked at the person approaching his car. He didn't know. He certainly wouldn't expect it to be anyone he knew.

Some perverse impulse made him fumble his ticket book out of his pocket, and take out a pen, actions Ray would expect from anyone who pulled him over, and he took up a stance next to the car that would prevent Ray from easily seeing his face unless he leaned down and craned his head back to look past the roof-line.

"Hey, sorry about the speeding," Ray said before he could speak. "I can't seem to get that KPH to
MPH conversion thing down. How bad was it?"

"I'm afraid it's worse than that, sir," Fraser said. "Grand theft is an extremely serious offense."

There was a moment of silence, then Ray swore, opening his door, forcing Fraser to step hastily aside to avoid getting what Ray once called the 'Orsini treatment,' and then Ray was out and pushing Fraser up against the car with his hands fisted in his coat lapels.

"Benton Frickin' Fraser," Ray growled.

"Assaulting a peace officer is a serious offense as well," Fraser said a little breathlessly as Ray braced himself there, just inches away.

Ray snorted. "Assault, yeah," he said, bringing up one hand to cup Fraser's jaw, fingers caressing it. "What the fuck are you doing out here?"

"I might ask the same," Fraser said, grinning foolishly. "Especially seeing as how you're headed in entirely the wrong direction. Were you lost?"

Ray's eyes met his, grave and intent, almost gray, reflecting the cloudy sky. "Yeah. Lost, and getting loster every minute farther away I got."

A shiver raced through him as the meaning of Ray's words sank in. So familiar. "God, yes. Exactly."

Ray's gaze sharpened, curious. "Exactly what, Benton?"

"Lost, and getting loster," he said. "Ray... I..." he had to swallow down the lump in his throat before he could go on, could say the words he'd never said to another living soul. "I need you."

Ray leaned in, his weight coming full against Fraser, touching from knees to groin to chest, solid, warm, unbearably... near. "That hard to say?" he asked, his tone strangely conversational, in contrast to the intensity of his gaze.

"You have no idea," Fraser grated, his voice barely functioning, unable to look away, mesmerized.

"Yeah, I do," Ray said, his eyes drifting closed as his lips brushed Fraser's. "I know exactly how hard it is. I. Need. You," he whispered, punctuating each word with another brush of lips, the last one prolonged as his hands came up to cup Fraser's face, his long, oddly-jointed thumbs lying along his jaw, stroking slightly, holding him still for a kiss that was deep, and sweet, and no less hot for all that sweetness. When he pulled away, he smiled. "Not just for that, either," he said meaningfully. "You know that right?"

Fraser nodded. "Yes. But that's part of it."

Ray nodded back. "Yeah. It is. Kinda scary, huh?"

"A little," Fraser admitted, since Ray had.

"Too scary?"

"No." Fraser let his hands slide around Ray's waist, pulling him closer, feeling the hard length of his cock pressed against him, knowing Ray could feel his own arousal nudging at his hip.

Ray sighed, and rocked against him a bit, then a little harder, before dropping his forehead down against Fraser's shoulder with a soft groan. "Jesus, Benton, I can't do this again. I'm gonna have the bluest balls in Canada." He laughed a little. "Well, except for you."
A wave of heat swept into Fraser's face and he cleared his throat guiltily.

Ray looked up, shrewd eyes assessing his face, and then he gave a strangled-sounding laugh and thumped his head against Fraser's shoulder several times, hard. "Oh, that's just not fair, it's really not."

Fraser got a hand under his chin and tipped his face up. "It was awful," he confessed.

Understanding filled Ray's eyes, and he nodded. Fraser pulled Ray in again, and this time he initiated the kiss. Ray responded instantly, eagerly, holding nothing back, nipping and licking and sucking until Fraser grabbed him by the hips and twisted, pushing Ray back against the car as he had just been, using his weight to pin him there, thrusting against him. Ray spread his thighs, bracing himself, his hands coming down to rest on Fraser's backside, kneading. Fraser choked a little, moaning, one hand sliding between them, reaching for Ray's zipper, tugging at it, needing to feel skin, needing to touch, to taste, to smell, prove to himself this was real. An annoying repetitive sound finally penetrated his consciousness.

"...ser! FRASER!"

He jerked back. "What?"

"Is that an engine?" Ray asked, breathing hard.

Fraser listened. "Mmmhmm," he agreed, leaning back in, not really understanding why Ray wanted to know. Ray pulled back slightly, lifting his eyebrows, so he clarified. "Yes. Eighteen wheeler by the sound of it. Probably the weekly resupply for Robinson's Trading. About two miles off, I'd say. Sound carries well here."

"I . . . um. . . don't guess it would be really good for them to drive by with us making out here. You being in uniform and all."

"Probably not," Fraser agreed, reluctant to push away.

"If he's two miles away and going sixty he'll be here in two minutes," Ray said, annoyingly practical.

"Right you are." Fraser let go of Ray's waistband, stepping back with a sigh, reaching down to adjust himself to a slightly less uncomfortable position.

Ray watched him, then looked up, slowly, his gaze smoky. "Do you have any idea how close you are to getting molested in the back of your damned Suburban?"

"I don't believe it's considered molestation when both parties are of age and consenting," Fraser said huskily.

"Fraser," Ray said warningly.

"Right, right," Fraser said, closing his eyes, trying to think. Where were they? He'd passed the turn off to Weyakwin not five minutes before he'd seen Ray. He opened his eyes. "I think we could safely take a short side-trip without negatively impacting your arrival in Saskatoon. Follow me."

"Got a plan?"

"I do indeed."

"It involve a pirate ship?" Ray asked, trying not to smile.
Fraser shook his head. "No pirate ship," he assured Ray solemnly.

"Count me in."

Fifteen minutes later he pulled into the parking lot of the Kisseynew Cabins & Campground and got out. Dief jumped out, looking at him knowingly. Fraser looked past the lodge to the woods beyond, and then back down at Dief. "I don't suppose you'd like to take a long exploratory walk in the woods? Perhaps see if you can scare up a rabbit or a squirrel?"

Dief whined.

Fraser shook his head. "I certainly will not. That's bribery."

Dief turned his back and looked at Ray's car, pulling into the lot.

Fraser sighed. "Please, Dief? I'd very much appreciate it."

Dief looked back at him and pushed his nose under his hand for a moment, and then bounded off toward the woods. Fraser stared after him, somewhat stupefied by his own success, as Ray parked next to him, stared up at the sign above the lodge office, and shook his head.

"No. Just... no. I'm not doing this in a motel called 'Kisseynew,' Fraser! I'm just not."

"It's a lodge, not a motel."

"Motel, lodge whatever, it's still Kisseynew. It's... cute." He shuddered eloquently.

"It's not cute, Ray, it's Cree."

"Cree?"

Fraser nodded. "Yes. It means 'it flows swiftly.' Well, actually, it could also mean 'they salted it down' or 'it is old' or 'old number four;' no one really seems to know for sure any more."

"Uh-huh." Ray looked dubious.

"No, really, Ray. It's named after Lake Kisseynew in Manitoba. When Rollie Thompson decided to open a second facility here, he didn't want to pay to have new matchbooks and pens printed so he used the same name as his other location in Manitoba."

Ray chuckled at that. "You know, that I can believe. Cheap is the same all over. That's all right then. I thought it was one of those cutesy things like 'Dew Drop Inn,' you know?"

"I would never subject you to such a thing," Fraser said, trying not to smile. "Shall we?"

Ray nodded and got out. "Wait. We're just going to walk up there and get a room, straight out, with you in uniform and all?"

"Yes, Ray."

"Huh. This place rent by the hour?" he asked dubiously.

"Not normally, no." Fraser walked up the three steps to the office porch. "Coming?"

Ray nodded. "You bet. This I got to see."
Fraser opened the door and motioned Ray in, then followed him. The desk was empty, so he rang the bell. A moment later Clydene Waters came out of the back room. Fraser heard a brief moment of television dialogue and determined she had been watching a soap opera.

"Hi there, what can I do for you gen..." she began, then she realized who she was addressing and looked surprised. "Corporal Fraser! What's this about then? There a problem?"

"No reason to be alarmed, Clydene, my colleague and I just need a quiet place to have a conference for an hour or so."

"Conference?" She frowned thoughtfully. "Well, we don't exactly have a conference room but there's the poker room in the back of the bar if you want."

"Actually, one of your standard cabins would be do nicely," Fraser said evenly, hoping that he was feeling warm because of the ambient temperature in the lodge, not because of a blush. This was harder than he'd thought.

Clydene looked from him to Ray and back, narrowing her eyes. Fraser wondered if he had beard-burn. Ray had shaved that morning, but he did stubble up awfully quickly. "Yeah?"

"Yes," Fraser said firmly. "Quite sufficient."

"Okay, if you say so," Clydene said with a shrug, reaching for a key.

Ray leaned closer. "You got anything kind of in the back? I'm undercover," he said confidentially. "Can't have anyone see me or listen in."

"Ohhh," Clydene said knowingly, eyes wide. She put back the first key she'd picked up and got a different one, waving it at Fraser, though her eyes were still on Ray. "Here you go. And don't worry about a thing, I understand entirely."

"I sure as hell hope not," Ray muttered, sotto voce, as they walked out of the office.

Fraser choked on a laugh, wanting badly to kiss him. It was nearly impossible to wait until they had picked up Ray's bag and were safely inside the cabin, drapes drawn, before he could pull him into his arms and give in to the urge.

Ray kissed him back, laughing, peeling off his coat and dropping it next to the door, then walking Fraser backward toward the bedroom with its queen-sized bed. "Conference?" he asked between kisses, grinning. "Conference? Is that what they call it up here? Gotta remember that. That mean phone-sex lines are conference calls?" He wrestled Fraser's jacket off, dropping it beside his own, and then started unbuttoning Fraser's shirt with one hand, pulling the tails out of his trousers with the other. "You know I love a man in uniform, but the clothes have to go, because I really need to have a serious conference with your dick."

Ray steered Fraser backward until the bed caught him behind the knees. He grabbed Ray's shoulders as he lost his balance, pulling Ray along with him as he fell. They hit the bed and bounced a little, and Fraser took advantage of the moment to flip Ray onto his back and push himself up a bit so he could look down at him. "Honestly, Ray, I don't see that undercover is much of an improvement," he teased.

Ray grinned, shaking his head. "No, not much. But hey, between the two of us, it worked. One-two punch, just like old times."

Fraser looked down at Ray and felt his smile fade, suddenly serious. "Not quite like old times," he
said, moving a hand to the second button on Ray's shirt, the first already lying open. His fingers shook as he eased it from its buttonhole, then moved to the next one, opening it as well, baring Ray's prominent collarbones, and the almost triangular indentation of his sternum.

"No, not quite," Ray agreed, just as serious. He lifted one hand to slide it beneath the fall of Fraser's open shirt, fingers trailing the curve of his chest, down to one nipple, barely brushing it through his henley.

Fraser gasped, startled by a shock of pleasure out of proportion to the lightness of the touch. Ray touched him there again, more firmly, framing it between two fingers, then pushing his shirt aside with his free hand so he could bend his head and touch his tongue to it. Fraser arched, fingers fumbling on the next button of Ray's shirt, tugging impatiently until the button popped free and spun away, falling silently on the carpet. It was all he could do not to grab Ray's shirt in both hands and rip. He wanted him naked. Now. Sooner than now.

He managed, somehow, to get the other buttons open, to undo belt and button and zipper and plunge his hand below all those maddening layers of fabric to find a familiar, yet strangely unfamiliar length of flesh, gripping it in his palm with a growl of triumph.

"Benton, God!" Ray gasped, his whole body tensed, shaking, as Fraser stroked and squeezed with calculated roughness.

It wasn't enough. He wanted it all. Letting go, he sat back on the bed and manhandled Ray out of his shirt. Ray squirmed a little and he heard the telltale thumps of boots hitting the floor, then he was squirming more. Fraser helped Ray shimmy out of his pants, leaving only his boxer-briefs. He slipped his fingers under the waistband and hesitated a moment, nervous, until Ray reached down and pushed with one hand, helping. Fraser took over from there as Ray lifted his hips to make it easier.

"Oh yeah," he sighed, sliding a hand down Ray's chest, down his abdomen, spreading his fingers to comb through the thick, sand-colored curls that surrounded his cock, which arched hard and strong, the head damp and shining already. He licked his lips, and watched Ray's whole body respond to that with a jerk like he'd been shocked. He looked up, meeting Ray's eyes.

Ray pushed himself up onto his elbows, and as Fraser gave ground he sat up all the way and looked at him evenly. "Your turn," he said, his fingers not much surer as he helped Fraser peel off his shirt. He looked a little startled when Fraser tugged the shirt out of his hands and tossed it on the floor. He started to grin as Fraser discarded each successive piece of clothing on the floor beside the bed, and when he pitched his boxers halfway across the room, Ray started to laugh.

Rolling over on top of Ray, Fraser kissed him, tasting the curve of his mouth and the tang of his amusement. As he settled in against Ray's long, bare body the laughter faded, and the brilliance in Ray's eyes shaded to smoke. One of Ray's hands swept down his back, came to rest on his hip, and tightened a little, pulling Fraser closer against him. Fraser was shaking, felt it echoed in Ray, though it wasn't cold in the room.

It was so different from what he remembered, only the feel of warm, satiny skin against his own gave him a point of reference. He was glad of that. Nothing to remind him. Just Ray, known, and dear. Long legs rough with hair, big feet, big hands, strong hands, wide chest and shoulders. He was all planes and angles, or mostly. Even Ray with his boundless energy and racing metabolism had softened some over the years. Somehow he hadn't noticed that last night. It made him smile. Ray reached up and touched the corner of his mouth with a finger.

"What's that for?" he asked.
"I'm . . . happy," he confessed in a whisper, feeling as if saying it might somehow make the gods jealous and they'd take it away from him.

Ray's mouth curved upward too. "Me too." He put his other arm around Fraser and squeezed, hugging him close. The action brought their groins fully together, and they both shivered. Ray nuzzled his throat, making a sound not far different from a purr. "'S nice, Benton. Do it again."

Fraser obliged, though he thought 'nice' was a feeble way to describe the kiss of flesh on flesh. He rocked slowly, dragging his cock along Ray's. Ray groaned and clutched at his hip, proving that 'nice' was an understatement for him as well. His free hand moved up from Fraser's shoulders to his hair, fingers tangling in it, pulling Fraser's mouth roughly down to his at the same time he thrust upward against Fraser's hip. Fraser growled into Ray's gasp, and ground against him, needing the pressure, the friction, the closeness.

Ray arched under him sliding one leg to the side and then hooking his calf over the back of Fraser's thigh and knee. The intimacy of the act astonished him, and he bit hungrily at Ray's mouth, thrusting faster, feeling Ray echo his pace, and oh, God too soon, too soon, he felt the rhythmic clutch of orgasm seize him, shake him, each spurt almost painfully wonderful.

"Christ, oh, Christ, Benton. Yeah. . . ." Ray pumped against him, his cock gliding now in the slick, hot mess between them, once, twice, and then the mess wasn't just his own and Ray was shuddering silently in his arms, his teeth caught in his lower lip, his hands clenched bruisingly tight on Fraser's hip and pulling at his hair hard enough to bring tears to his eyes. At least he told himself that's what it was.

The scent of sex was strong in the air, his own familiar smell, and a new one layered with it, rich and strange. He wanted to imprint the moment on his senses, to call up on future lonely nights when he needed comfort. The sound of Ray's breathing, the feel of his sweaty, spunky skin, the taste of his mouth. The taste of his throat, and his collarbone, and . . . Fraser turned his head to pull free of Ray's slackened grip and slid down his body, licking a swath through the thick, pale fluid coating Ray's belly where they'd been pressed together, savoring the salt-bitter-sweetness of their mingled flavors, feeling the swirl of wet hair against his tongue as he cleaned Ray off.

"I should've known you'd want to lick something," Ray said, gently amused.

Fraser smiled at that, then leaned in to tongue his cock. God, the skin was so smooth, soft, silky. Emboldened by Ray's easy acceptance, he slid his fingers under the softened length of Ray's cock and lifted it, taking it into his mouth.

Ray gasped, and gave a whole-body twitch. "Jesus!" His hand found Fraser's hair again, lightly this time, stroking. "God, that feels. . . wow. . . but, I . . . uh, don't think I'm going to be good for much at this point," he said apologetically.

Fraser soothed a hand up and down his thigh, and shook his head a little, not wanting to let go long enough to use words explain that it didn't matter, he just needed to do this. Fortunately, he didn't have to.

"Yeah, okay. Got it. Knock yourself out," Ray said, chuckling a little. "Long as you're not expecting anything." After a moment he sighed and relaxed, still stroking Fraser's hair. "You know how long I've wanted to get my hands in your hair?" he asked, fingers sliding through the disheveled waves. "I like it longer like this. Course I like it short, too." He laughed softly. "I pretty much just like you any old way."

Fraser felt a flush rise in his face. Ridiculous, really, considering the fact that they were naked and
he, at least, was sticky with semen, and he had Ray's penis in his mouth, but he couldn't help the embarrassed delight Ray's words gave him, every bit as amazing as the physical pleasure he'd just supplied. With one last lick, Fraser let Ray go, and pillowed his face on Ray's thigh, one arm across his belly. Ray kept stroking his hair, his caresses slowing gradually, and under his arm he felt Ray's breathing even out. He found his own breathing slowing to match Ray's, the petting almost hypnotic. He closed his eyes with a sigh, completely relaxed for the first time he could remember.

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Ray scowled, trying to stay asleep despite the annoying scratching noise. What was that? A branch brushing against the house? Must be a storm or something. Except... storms didn't... whine. And that was definitely a whine. Dief? Yeah, sounded like him. Wondering what the heavy thing making a numb and slightly damp place on his thigh was, Ray opened his eyes, and...

"Fuck!" He sat bolt upright, dislodging Fraser who was using his thigh for a pillow. "What time is it?"

Fraser blinked at him, disheveled and confused, one side of his face red from where it had been pressed against Ray's leg, and a little shiny with moisture. "Wha...?"

"Time! What time..." Ray remembered suddenly that he was still wearing his watch, and he looked, and groaned. "Oh God, I am so screwed. I'm due in Saskatoon in less than two hours and there's just no way, short of alien intervention, that I'm going to get there in time."

He could almost see Fraser's brain start working. The vacant expression sharpened, his eyes narrowed, and then he reached over the side of the bed and grabbed his pants, detaching his phone from the belt before pushing himself up to a sitting position. "Let me see if I can do anything. Who have you been working with in Saskatoon?"

It took him a minute. He always messed up the name. Wait, he had it. "Guy named Thobhani."

"Aki Thobhani?" Fraser asked. Of course he pronounced it exactly the way the guy himself did.

Ray nodded. "Yeah, that's him."

"All right, good." He opened his phone and dialed. A moment later he started to speak. "Aki? Hello, it's Benton Fraser. Yes. Mmm? Fine, yes, relatively quiet, though we've had a bit of excitement lately, which is why I'm calling. You're expecting my former partner from Chicago, Ray Kowalski, this afternoon, to give a deposition on the LeBeau case? What? Yes, actually, he is. Yes, that's the one. The submarine and the nerve gas, yes." Fraser rolled his eyes at Ray with an exasperated expression on his face. "Yes, in any case, he's been assisting me with an arson investigation in La Rouille and to be quite frank time's gotten away from us and there's simply no way that he can be back in Saskatoon in time for his one o'clock appointment this afternoon. Is there any way he could... yes. Yes. Four o'clock? That should do just fine. Thank you very much."

Fraser closed his phone and looked at Ray smugly.

Ray gaped. "Fraser! You just lied!"

"Yes, I did," Fraser said, somewhat defiantly, only to correct himself a moment later. "Well, after a fashion,"

Ray grinned. "Okay, now I know you love me." He paused for a moment and looked at him seriously. "You know I do, right? Love you, I mean."
Fraser set the phone down on the floor next to his pants, then rolled back over onto his side, facing Ray. He reached out and touched Ray's face, fingers gently brushing back the hair from his forehead, thumb trailing gently over his eyebrows. "I . . . hoped. And now I do," he said, an almost imperceptible quaver in his voice.

"Good!" Ray said fiercely, wrapping an arm around Fraser's waist and holding him tightly. "Don't ever stop knowing it, okay?"

Fraser buried his face for a moment in the warmth of Ray's neck, then pulled back just long enough that Ray could see his suspiciously bright eyes before he leaned back in and kissed Ray, hard, on the mouth. "I won't, Ray. I won't stop knowing it. Just . . . keep reminding me, all right?"

"Yeah. I think I can do that."

Fraser started to smile, but it was an odd smile like Ray had never seen before on his friend's face - and one he wasn't sure he ever wanted to see again. Happiness was there like you'd expect to see - like you'd hope to see - in a smile, but, God, something else was there, too. Something that pressed hard at the corners of Fraser's mouth and eyes. Not pain, precisely. Not really fear. Neither of those - or maybe a little of both. Something almost . . . desperate.

Ray reached up, his palms against Fraser's temples, thumbs brushing lightly over the soft skin below his eyes, trying to erase that look of desperation with his hands. He felt the warmth of Fraser's breath against his cheeks, his mouth, each rapid exhalation an unspoken plea. He leaned in, closing the gap between them until there was just a whisper of space between his lips and Fraser's own slightly parted lips. He held himself still, felt his own shallow breaths find entry into Fraser's open mouth, then sealed their mouths with a kiss.

He felt Fraser's fingers stroking the short hairs at the back of his head, tasted his tongue as it begged access to his mouth, heard the soft sounds he made in his throat as they kissed. Then Fraser broke the kiss and spoke, slowly and deliberately, but so softly and hoarsely that if they hadn't been so close, Ray would never have been able to hear him at all.

"I love you."

Ray squeezed his eyes shut tightly, just for a moment, a feeble barrier erected against the sudden sting of tears. He hadn't known how much he'd needed to hear Fraser say those words until they were finally spoken.

He opened his eyes and looked at Fraser. God. He looked as relieved as Ray felt, but he looked . . . surprised - like he couldn't believe he'd actually been able to say it. Ray shook his head and smiled reassuringly. He knew that was a damned scary thing to say when it was for real. His smile drew an answering one from Fraser, unclouded now by the fear and pain that had been there moments before.

Ray wrapped his arms tightly around Fraser and smiled. "I don't need to ask you if that was hard to say."

Fraser grinned, blushing slightly, then his expression turned serious. "Not as hard as saying goodbye's going to be. Ray, I . . . God, I don't want you to leave, but you have to get to Saskatoon. Aki's already done us a great favor in agreeing to have the time changed. Our judicial system is far less . . . flexible, I suppose you'd say, about scheduling matters than the Chicago court system appeared to be, and we shouldn't impose upon him a second time, particularly not when, well . . . ."

Ray nodded. "No, you're right. And you know, I do understand how much being dishonest grates on you, even when it's a matter of life or death."
Fraser frowned. "A matter of . . . ."

"I was dying of waiting, Benton," said Ray gravely.

"Ah," Fraser said with a smile. "Of course."

Ray dropped a kiss on Fraser's too-welcoming mouth, then slid out of the bed reluctantly and began to retrieve his scattered clothing from the floor. He could feel Fraser's eyes on him as he slipped his briefs on and turned, about to make a joke about charging admission, but he stopped when he saw the expression on Fraser's face.

He couldn't remember ever being looked at with such a combination of longing and love in his entire life. It was a little weird to be the focus of such intensity, but he wasn't about to say anything that might make Fraser think that any part of what he was feeling was wrong. He reached out again, but Fraser shook his head this time.

"No, we really have to get dressed."

"Right, right."

Ray put on his socks and trousers, but the shirt was another matter. Not only was one of the buttons missing, but there was a tear in the buttonhole too. Okay, so maybe there was a slight drawback to Fraser's intensity. He threw the shirt on the bed and pulled another one from his bag.

"Good thing I still had a spare. I don't know if showing up looking like a caveman just had his way with me would go over real big in Saskatoon."

"I'm so sorry," Fraser said, looking at the damage he'd done earlier. "I'll replace it, of course, and . . . ."

"Nah, don't worry. It died in a good cause," Ray grinned. "Besides, I . . . um . . . I kind of owe you a shirt, anyway."

"I know."

"You do?" Ray asked, looking surprised.

"Yeah." Fraser nodded, then pushed himself off the bed and up onto his bare feet. He walked behind Ray and brought his arms around him, his body warm against Ray's back. "You're welcome to anything I have, Ray. When you . . . ."

Ray waited for him to go on, but the sentence remained incomplete. "Fraser? What were you going to say?"

"It was nothing, Ray."

"Come on, Benton," he said, turning around in Fraser's arms to face him. "It didn't sound like nothing."

"Actually, it was. I was going to say . . . well, I was going to say that when you wore the shirt you could think of it as if I had my arms around you, keeping you . . . oh God, would you stop me, please?" He buried his flushed face in Ray's shoulder.

Ray patted his back and chuckled. "Keeping me warm? You're really sweet, you know that?"

"Shut up, Ray."
Ray was still laughing when they heard the scratching sound coming from the cabin door again.

"Oh, Lord. I completely forgot about Diefenbaker. He's been outside all this time."

"Man," Ray said, shaking his head. "I don't envy you. That's going to be one pissed off wolf."

"Ray, could you . . . ." Fraser said, one foot in his boxers.

"Yeah, I'll let the guy in. Go, um, look busy or something."

Ray opened the door. Diefenbaker, after giving Ray a perfunctory lick on the hand, jumped up on the bed and started to bark at Fraser.

Fraser paused, pants in his hands. "You couldn't possibly have heard me since, as you have told me repeatedly, you're deaf. In any case, I have not been watching too much daytime television."

Ray knelt down on the bed and put his hands on the side of Diefenbaker's muzzle, turning him slightly to face him.

"Enough with the yapping, okay? First off, you're a wolf and wolves aren't supposed to bark, right? B, you're in now, so stop complaining. Besides, if you behave, Benton's going to get you an order of chicken fried steak and mashed potatoes with gravy from Tilda's when you get back home . . . aren't you, Benton?"

"Ray," Fraser said severely, trousers on now, but unfastened as he reached for his shirt.

"Aren't you?"

Fraser sighed. "Of course I am, Ray.

Ray grinned. "Good. See, Dief? Life's good."

Diefenbaker woofed in agreement and curled up contentedly on top of Ray's discarded shirt.

"Hey! That's mine!" Ray protested, reaching to tug it out from under him.

Fraser reached out and caught his wrist. "Wait, Ray. If it's not too presumptuous of me, perhaps you might let Dief keep it? I mean. . . I'd love to wear it myself, but I'm afraid that's not an option, and in any case it's ruined, so someone might as well get some use from it," he said ruefully.

Ray looked from Fraser, where he stood holding his own shirt, to Dief, happily snoozing on his shirt, and he smiled. "Dief, huh? Well, if you can wrestle it away from him, lemme tell you that a shirt makes a pretty good pillowcase."

Fraser's eyebrows drew down slightly. "I'm not sure I take your meaning."

Ray felt himself flush a little. "See. . . I, um, actually owe you two shirts. You left one in Chicago back when you moved, and I just sort of. . . forgot to send it back to you."

"In Chicago?" Fraser sounded, and looked, like he'd been poleaxed. "That long ago?"

Ray nodded, feeling his blush deepen. "Yeah. Okay, so I admit it. I'm a moron. But at least I finally got a clue, eh?"

Fraser did a bit of a double-take, and smiled. "You said 'eh.'"
"Yeah." Ray chuckled. "'Eh.' People back home keep asking me if I'm Canadian. I also drink tea and read books and I'm even polite. Well, mostly. Except when I'm not."

"And I drink coffee and swear and watch television. Good lord. I didn't realize national characteristics were infectious."

Ray snorted and pulled on his shirt, buttoning it. "So what happens now?"

"Now, you go to Saskatoon and take care of your responsibilities with the Le Beau case, and I return to La Rouille to finalize the arrangements for Crawford's sentencing circle." Fraser said evenly, not looking at Ray as he put on his own shirt and tucked it in, then zipped up.

"Yeah, and then what?" Ray asked, as he shoved his feet into his boots and stamped them on. "Because I've got to tell you, Benton, my days of being somebody's pen pal ended back when I was in sixth grade."

Fraser paused in fastening his belt and sighed. "What happens next, then, is that we try to determine what employment opportunities are available for me in Chicago, although honestly, I can't imagine being able to leave my posting before . . . ."

Ray stopped in the middle of picking up his jacket off the floor. "Wait a minute. You're thinking about moving to Chicago?"

"Well, yes." Fraser frowned, his expression going very . . . expressionless. "Unless I misunderstood? I may have been jumping the gun a bit, but I assumed we . . . " He stopped. Swallowed. "But if you're not ready to make that kind of decision yet, I understand completely. I'm certain we can . . . ."

"No!" Ray almost shouted, then he toned himself down. But he could see that Fraser was trampolining to a wrong conclusion and he was determined to head him off at the pass. Or something like that. Talk about mixing metaphors. "No, of course I'm ready. Decision's been signed, sealed, and delivered at my end. Fraser, I want to be with you - you know that. But . . . Chicago. Wow. I guess I didn't think you'd be willing to move back there."

Fraser sat down on the bed, holding his hiking boot but not putting it on as he looked at Ray with something like consternation. "Where else could we be, Ray? That's where your job is. Your career. Your family and friends. I wouldn't dream of asking you to give up all the things that are important to you."

Ray poked two fingers at him, scowling. "Hey, get it straight. It's you that's most important to me. Do you hear that?"

"Well, yes, but . . . ."

"No. I mean, do you really hear it? Because I'm telling you right now, Benton Fraser, I would give up anything . . . anything, to be with you. I'm not going to be without you in my life. Not again. And if that means moving up here to Canada, then that's the way it's going to be." He stood in front of Fraser with his fists clenched, ready to . . . he wasn't sure what. . . but whatever it took to convince Fraser he meant it.

Fraser's expression softened, and he reached to take one of Ray's clenched fists in his hand, prying at it, opening his fingers. "I feel the same way, Ray, but you have to understand that it's no sacrifice for me to leave Canada. Not now. You've seen what my life's been like up here. Even this weekend, when I actually had an investigation to pursue, the pace has been, well . . . Ray, to be honest, after Chicago, it's driving me out of my mind."
Yeah. Ray had seen that. But he'd thought it was something else. "You sure it's not just because you've... um... been lonely?"

Fraser nodded, his gaze never leaving Ray's. "I'm sure. That's been a part of it, of course, but it isn't the whole answer."

"Okay," said Ray slowly, thinking. "What if we moved up north? Don't you still miss the Territories?"

"I don't know about down in the United States, but here in Canada we have a little thing called 'a vacation,'" Fraser deadpanned.

Ray smiled, but shook his head. "Come on, I'm serious, here. I did okay on our trip, and that was a lot tougher than living up there would be. I could hack Inuvik or Yellowknife or wherever if it would make you happy."

"I appreciate that more than you could possibly know, Ray, but it's not necessary," Fraser said. "At one time, being allowed to return north would have come as a godsend, but quite frankly, I'm no longer certain I'd be comfortable with that degree of isolation, or the pace."

Ray turned that over in his head, and thought he understood. "People change, huh?" he asked after a moment.

"People change," Fraser agreed, sounding relieved.

"Okay, so it's Chicago for the both of us. That's good," Ray said definitively. "I like that. Okay, so how about I talk to Welsh when I get back? See if he has any suggestions."

Fraser nodded, then sat back down on the bed to put on his boots. "Good idea. For my part, I think I'll get in touch with Assistant Commissioner Underhill. He's the one who instituted the RCMP liaison program, and..."

"The liaison thing was his idea?" Ray interrupted. "I think I want to kiss him."

"Perhaps you'd find a hearty handshake sufficient," Fraser said, as Ray chuckled. "In any case, he's currently serving on the commission developing a pilot program involving the cooperation of a number of governmental agencies from both our countries. I'm afraid I don't know as much about this as I might, but now's as good a time as any to learn."

"Sounds good," Ray said, nodding. "Hey, you know what? I take back what I said. Forget that Underhill guy; I think I want to kiss you, instead."

He tugged Fraser up off the bed and pulled him into his arms, kissing his mouth, then leaned against him, just holding him. The thought of having to lose this closeness when they'd only just found it, was more than he wanted to think about.

"Don't want to go," he muttered.

"I don't want you to go," Fraser said softly. "Perhaps..."

"What?"

"I was thinking that perhaps I could come down to Saskatoon tomorrow evening after work. Between Constables Traynor and Zhertak, I'm sure the detachment will survive without my presence for a bit longer."
"Yeah? You really think you could get away?" Ray asked eagerly. "Or maybe I could go back up to La Rouille. I don't think I'm going to have anything much to do after tomorrow afternoon, and my flight back to Chicago isn't until 3:00 p.m. on Wednesday."

Diefenbaker jumped off the bed and yipped happily at Ray's heels.

Fraser shook his head. "Well, that's one vote for you coming back up to La Rouille. You know, he's only taking this much of an interest because he believes you to be a softer touch when it comes to contraband snack food than I am."

"I'm hurt," Ray laughed, bending down to let Diefenbaker lick him. "I thought he liked me for my conversational abilities."

"Perhaps he does," Fraser said. "Actually, if he's anything like me, he likes having you with him for every possible reason."

Ray looked at him with a mock frown. "Not that I don't appreciate the sentiment, Benton, but I'm not sure I want the wolf liking me for all the same reasons you like me."

Dief growled, and Fraser's eyes widened.

"Ray!"

Ray laughed. "Jeez! Settle down, both of you! I was joking." He looked down at Fraser's feet. "Finish tying your shoes, Benton, we need to get out of here pronto." He glanced past Fraser, and winced. "Oh God. . . the bed. They're never going to buy the conference story once they get a look at that."

Fraser, kneeling to tie his second boot, craned around, and eyed the rumpled bed critically. "Actually, Ray, I think all we need do is straighten the covers."

"You don't think the come stains kind of give it away there?" Ray asked drily.

Fraser looked at the bed for a moment longer, and started to smile. "I suppose they do at that." He stood up, and pulling out his wallet, removed several bills and placed them on the rumpled bed.

"What are you doing?"

"Paying for the use of the room and leaving a cleaning fee."

Ray blinked. "Don't you . . . uh. . . ." He stopped, thought for a moment, and looked at Fraser again, perplexed. "What, people don't gossip in Canada?"

Fraser's smile grew broader. "Of course they do."

"So then. . . ." Ray got it, like the clouds opened up and trumpets sounded. He felt his own eyes widen. "Oh."

Fraser suddenly looked a little concerned. "Is that all right?"

Ray swallowed hard, and nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, it's fine. Except. . . what if . . . won't you get. . . ." He couldn't say it. Pussy. He took a breath. "I'm not going to be here to watch your back, and damn it, Benton, I do not want to get a phone call telling me that somebody didn't back you up because of this gossip."

Dief whined. Fraser looked down at Dief. "Certainly not. I think it's Ray who's been watching too
much daytime television." His gaze shifted to Ray's face. "Do you know of any actual incidents where that happened?"

Ray thought about it. Hell, they had a bunch of gay cops on the force in Chicago. They even had a gay community liaison. Nobody batted an eyelash. "Um, no," he muttered.

"I thought not."

"Stupid, huh?" he asked, knowing he was beet red.

Fraser smiled and shook his head. "No. Sweet."

Ray put a hand over his eyes. "Shit. It's just... it's you, Benton. It's not just some 'gay cop.' It's you. I worry, you know?"

"I do know. And that's all right. I know I've worried about you ever since I came up here, for all the everyday, mundane reasons one worries about a cop. I know what can happen, with or without backup. But you can't... we can't... let fear rule us."

Fear? Try sheer terror, Ray thought, but he straightened up and reached to pull Fraser close and hug him. "I'm happy to be gossiped about, 'long as you're part of it. And if anybody says anything mean to you I'll be on the next plane up here to kick 'em in the head, got that?"

Fraser chuckled against his neck. "It's probably fortunate that there are no direct flights, then."

Ray laughed. "Yeah, probably." Pulling back, he brushed one more kiss across Fraser's lips and then let him go and stepped back, running a hand through his hair. "I look okay?" he asked.

"You look marvelous," Fraser said huskily.

Ray put out a hand. "Down boy! I meant do I look respectable enough to talk to a judge?"

Fraser eyed him more critically. "Yes."

He nodded. "Good. He took a step toward the door and hesitated as another thought occurred to him. He inhaled deeply, but damn, he really couldn't tell. He looked back at Fraser. "Um... do I smell like I just got laid?"

Fraser laughed. "Only to me, Ray. I don't expect anyone would detect it at a normal distance."

"Guess I better not let anyone get too close then," he joked.

Fraser's eyes darkened. "That's right."

Ray's eyebrows shot up. Note to self: Fraser had a jealous side. Good to know. It was okay, though. Ray knew all about those. "Count on it," he said.

He glanced around the room to be sure he hadn't forgotten anything, and saw the money on the bed. That was wrong. He walked back over, got his own wallet and took out a crisp US twenty dollar bill. Replacing one of Fraser's bills with the twenty, he handed Fraser back the bill he'd taken off the bed. Fraser didn't protest, and the look in his eyes told Ray the gesture was understood, and appreciated.

"All set then?" Fraser asked, pocketing the money.

Ray nodded. "Ready as I'll ever be." He opened the door and stepped outside into chilly gray day,
waiting.

Fraser zipped up his jacket, picked up Ray's discarded shirt, and followed, Dief at their heels. They walked in silence back to where they'd parked. Ray noticed that Clydene was watching them from the office window, and he waved at her. They got to their cars and Fraser opened the door of his Suburban and tossed Ray's shirt inside, then came over as Ray unlocked the Taurus. As soon as he opened the door, Diefenbaker jumped in and squeezed through between the seats to the back where he sat down next to Ray's duffel bag and looked at them expectantly.

"Come on guy!" Ray protested. "Don't make this harder than it already is. You know we gotta go different directions here." He opened the back door and made shooing motions. "Out. You can't come to Saskatoon with me. The hotel doesn't take wolves, okay?"

Dief just whined and lay down, his chin on Ray's bag. Fraser sighed.

"I know, Dief, but really, we can't, either of us. Not at this moment."

That got a moan, and Dief put a paw on top of Ray's bag possessively.

"Honestly, it's all right. Ray will be back. We'll see him again soon." Fraser looked at Ray and nudged him with an elbow.

"Yeah," Ray added hastily. "Promise. Soon as I can get back here, okay? I'll, uh, bring you something."

Dief growled and eyed him disdainfully. Ray spread his hands. "Okay, sorry. I won't bring you anything." He looked at Fraser ruefully. "Guess bribes only go so far."

"Nothing could possibly replace your presence," Fraser said a little wistfully.

Ray blinked hard and shook his head. "Okay, enough of that. Dief, out now. I mean it. Do not make me come in there and get you. One... two..."

Diefenbaker reluctantly heaved himself to his feet and exited the car. Ray closed the door and turned to Fraser, who avoided his gaze.

"I suppose this is goodbye," Fraser said, holding out a hand as if to shake.

Ray stared at his hand, took it, and pulled him in for a long, tight hug instead. "Just see you later, okay? Not goodbye," he said into Fraser's ear. "Hey, you want to really give ol' Clydene something to gossip about?"

"Excuse mmmph!"

Ray cut off Fraser's question by kissing him. There was a moment of startled stillness, and then he responded, returning Ray's kiss with as much passion as he had earlier. Fortified by his nap, Ray's body reacted predictably and he was half hard by the time they finally stopped. "Shit," he muttered, trying to settle himself into a less uncomfortable position without being too obvious about it. Kissing in front of Clydene was one thing. Grabbing himself was another.

Fraser nodded, licking his lips. "Indeed."

"Not up there on my list of 'greatest ideas ever,' eh?"

"Possibly not, but appreciated nonetheless." Fraser looked at the car. "Ray, you really should..." he
gestured out to the south.

Ray nodded. "Yeah, I know. I have to go. I know that. I'm going. Really. Now. Right now."

"Wouldn't it help if you were actually in the car?" Fraser asked, the lines around his eyes and mouth deepening a little as he fought to keep from smiling.

"Yeah, yeah," Ray got in and fastened the seat belt. Fraser closed the door for him, and then leaned down as Ray rolled down the window.

"One for the road?" Ray asked, feeling stupid and needy.

Fraser kissed him again. Softly this time. Exactly what he needed. When their lips parted, Fraser cleared his throat.

"You'd best get going, Ray. I'll talk to you tonight and we'll make plans."

Ray nodded, put the key in the ignition, and started the car. "Yeah, we will."

He pulled out, turned around and headed down the drive. Looking in the mirror, he nearly hit the brakes as he saw both Fraser and Dief standing beside the Suburban, watching him. Shit. How could he leave? How could he not leave? He had to leave. This. Sucked. He dragged his eyes from the rear view mirror and stared straight ahead. Drive, Kowalski. Just drive.

Twenty six minutes later, back on the CanAm and determinedly headed south, he pulled over onto the shoulder and got out his cell phone, turning it on, hitting the first autodial. A moment later his call was answered.

"Corporal Benton Fraser speaking."

"Benton."

There was a moment of silence. "Ray? Is something wrong?" Fraser sounded anxious.

"Other than the fact that you're headed north and I'm headed south, nope. Nothing."

"Ah. Then... why are you calling?"

"Love you."

He could hear Fraser swallow. "Ray..." his voice cracked a little. "Ray, it's unsafe to use a cellular telephone while driving."

"I pulled over."

"I love you too."

Ray grinned. "Would you still love me if I hadn't pulled over?"

"I think that goes without saying."

"Okay, good. Bye."

"Good bye."

He got back on the road. Thirty two minutes later his phone rang. "Kowalski," he answered.
"Ray."

He laughed, glad the road was deserted so if he wandered a little as he laughed and drove and held the phone it wasn't a problem. "Cripes. We're a pair aren't we?"

"I think that's an excellent description."

"What's up?"

"I just . . . miss you."

"Likewise."

"Did you pull over?"

"No."

"Ray."

"What if I don't talk? I'll just hold the phone to my ear and you can . . . um . . . breathe at me or something."

Fraser groaned. "Now you're making me drive unsafely."

"You didn't pull over?" Ray asked, mock-appalled. "Tsk, tsk. Hey, this line secure?"

"I seriously doubt it."

"That means anybody could, like, overhear this call?"

"Yes."

"Guess I won't tell you what I'd really like to be doing to you right now then."

"Ray!"

Ray chuckled. "How many people you think Clydene's called so far?"

"A dozen, at least. Starting with Sally."

"Good. That way Zhertak will know to keep his hands to himself because you're taken."

"Ray, I've told you before, Constable Zhertak doesn't like me in that way."

"You just keep on thinking that."

"Ray, he has a girlfriend. Two girlfriends."

"Compensating," Ray said with a grin, constitutionally unable to refrain from chain-yanking, then he had to slow as a drift of snow pulled at his tires. "Hey, the road's kind of messy up ahead, I need both hands. I'll talk to you later."

"Yes, you will," Fraser said huskily.

He made it to Saskatoon without incident, with twenty minutes to spare, and was really glad he'd been to the Courthouse once already so he knew where he was going. Nobody looked at him weird and nobody sniffed at him so Fraser must have been right about him looking and smelling okay.
After he gave his deposition, Aki Thobhani invited him to dinner along with a couple of the other RCMP guys working the Le Beau case for a hob-nob, though it turned out they mostly wanted to talk about the submarine thing, which was okay by Ray because it gave him a good reason to talk about Fraser.

When he stopped outside the restaurant to call and let Fraser know his plans, Sally answered Fraser's line and told Ray he was busy with Lana and Crawford Jones, but that she'd tell him about the dinner thing and that he'd call him after they got done. Then, to Ray's surprise, she told him that his visit had clearly been good for Fraser and she hoped that he'd visit again. He'd been blushing when he'd gone back to the table, and he wondered just how much ribbing Fraser was going to get over that stop in Weyakwin. It looked like everything was pretty much out in the open, which was good, but Fraser wasn't used to it and it might be a bit much for him.

Eventually Ray made it back to the motel. Once inside his room, he went to call Fraser but couldn't get decent cell coverage so he stripped to his shorts, pulled back the covers on the bed, and pulled the hotel phone closer to the bed. Finally he settled on the bed, read the instructions for how to place a call, and dialed.

Fraser answered on the first ring. "Ray?"

"Almost in the flesh."

"It's really not kind of you to say things like that when you're two hundred and thirty five miles away."

"Sorry. How'd it go today?"

"My day was fine, yours?"

Ray sighed and settled himself more comfortably against the pillows. "Benton, don't you think we're past 'fine' as an answer to that question? How much shit did you get today?"

"Well, I wouldn't precisely call it 'shit,' although I did get a lecture from Sally for not filing a leave notification before I left the detachment this morning, since she's responsible for maintaining our time records."

"Are you going to beat around the bush all night? How. Did. It. Go?"

Fraser's voice softened. "Very well, actually. I was pleasantly surprised by the number of congratulatory remarks made and the variety of people who made them."

Ray started to smile, a feeling of relief spreading through him, easing his tension. "Yeah? Like what?"

"Er... well, the Episcopalian Ladies Auxiliary brought me a cake." He cleared his throat. "I gave Dief a piece and put the rest in the freezer."

"One piece won't kill you, Benton," Ray said, rolling his eyes.

"No, of course not. I just wanted to wait for you."

Ray realized he was grinning like an idiot and would have made himself stop, but there was no one to see so he didn't. "Oh. Uh, okay. Cool. So nobody got nasty?"

"Not precisely nasty, no. There were a few less than polite comments but nothing serious."
Ray sat up. "What did they say? Who said it?"

Fraser sighed. "Ray, will you please relax? It was nothing, and even if it were something, I'm a trained peace officer and perfectly capable of handling things myself."

He sounded more than a little irritated. Ray swallowed his protest. "Sorry. I just . . . ."

"I know. How did the deposition go?"

"Smooth as silk. LeBeau's going away, no doubt. Everything was by the book. I might have to go back in sometime in the morning and answer a few more questions, but Aki thinks they should be finished with me by noon, latest."

"And dinner?"

"Dinner was good. They all wanted to talk about you. Everybody wants to know about the sub thing. And the litterbug thing. And the fishing over the limit thing, but that was before my time. You'll have to get me up to speed so I know the story for next time."

Fraser groaned. "Oh God, I'm never going to live that down, am I?"

Ray chuckled. "Probably not. Hey, there's another plus for Chicago. Nobody's going to be asking you about that one there!"

"Thankfully true."

Ray lay back and cradled the phone between his ear and the pillow. He could almost see Fraser's blandly studied expression as he said those words, his eyebrows arching just a little, the tilt of his head. All those were old things - comfortable things; he'd spent close to twenty months with that blandness, those arched eyebrows, that tilt. Longer than that without them, but that was going to change.

He closed his eyes, then, and thought about the new things. Hair curling at the base of Fraser's neck, the slight softness beneath his chin, the patchy stubble on his jaw in the morning that could hardly be seen, but that Ray had touched with his fingertips, his cheek, his lips.

He shifted in the bed, stretched his arm out just a little, then a little more, almost as if he thought that if he just kept reaching out, he'd be able to touch Fraser somehow. But he felt nothing under his hand except the too-slick bedspread, and, God, that wasn't what he wanted to touch. He pulled his hand back, his fingers curled into a fist at his chest, but no matter how tightly he curled his hand, his arm - his body - he still felt empty. Cold.

"Ray?"

He sighed. "Yeah. Yeah, I'm here. Sorry. I was . . . ."

"Are you all right?"

He almost said he was, but he hadn't let Fraser get away with 'fine' before, and he wasn't going to let himself get away with it now.

"No, not really."

"What's . . . ."

"Nothing, except you're not here."
"I miss you, too."

Fraser's voice was soft and too gentle, and Ray knew he was worrying him, but he didn't want to not say what he was feeling. And with his mouth, the words were going to come whether he wanted to say them or not.

"It's just . . . ." He put his hand over the mouthpiece. What was the matter with him? He'd gotten through the day okay. Through dinner with Aki and his friends. Hell, he'd gotten through the last two years just fine. Why was it so hard now? "It's just . . . I don't know what the hell's going on, Benton. I'm flipping out here or something. I really need to touch you."

God, he had to stop this before he started hyperventilating or some other dumbass thing that would probably freak Fraser out so much that he'd rethink this whole being-together deal. Stop it, Ray. Just stop it, for Christ's sake.

"Ray. Stop it," Fraser said, the words a weird echo of his own thoughts.

"Sorry. I'm . . . I didn't mean to . . . ."

"Do something for me. Go get your bag."

"Okay," he said, shivering a little as he crawled out from under the covers. Why were hotel rooms always either too damned hot or too damned cold?

He put the phone down on his pillow and did as Fraser'd asked. He took the bag off the chair, dropped it down on the middle of the bed, then picked up the receiver again. "I'm back."

"Good." Fraser paused - long enough for Ray to start worrying if he was okay. "You . . . um . . . you said something earlier about . . . maybe this is a foolish suggestion, but . . . Ray, take my shirt out of your bag and put it on."

Automatically, Ray put the phone down and followed his instructions. He rummaged though his clothes, found the henley, and slid it over his head.

"Okay, I've got my security blanket," he said. "Now what?"

"Ray, I . . . I don't want you to think I'm treating you like a child. I just thought . . . ."

Great. Now he had Fraser worried about him and worried about trying to help. "Nah, it's good. Don't know why I didn't think of this myself. This is great."

"Really?" Fraser asked, disbelief plain in his voice.

"Yeah. I feel like Linus, but I also feel better." No lie there. He did feel better suddenly. Just being able to breathe in the scent that still clung to the shirt made it better, at least a little. "It's not as good as having you here with me, but . . . better, yeah. Thanks, Benton. What, are you psychic all of a sudden or something?"

"Not . . . exactly," he replied hesitantly. Ray could almost see that thumb rubbing at his eyebrow. "I'm afraid I had a similar need for your presence, and . . . ."

"Benton? Did you just have to fight the wolf for my shirt?"

"Certainly not!"

"Fraser."
"There was no need to fight," Fraser sighed. "I've recently discovered that where Diefenbaker's concerned, if you just look miserable for long enough, eventually he'll demonstrate some compassion."

Ray got back under the covers, then lay his head down on the pillow and smiled. "Man. Playing for sympathy from a deaf half-wolf. That's kind of . . . well, it's kind of pathetic."

"You know, Ray," Fraser said in a blandly superior voice, "I think I'll refrain from sharing just how useful I find your assessment of 'pathetic' - and do you know why?"

Ray heard the undercurrent of amusement in his partner's voice and laughed. "Yeah, because you love me, right?"

"Precisely," Fraser said matter-of-factly. "Now, I think it's time we got some sleep, don't you?"

"I suppose. Still don't like being here without you though," Ray groused. "Being alone in Chicago until you can get things tied up here is going to be a bitch, you know?"

"I know," Fraser sighed. "I'm not looking forward to it any more than you are. However, there's no reason to borrow trouble. We'll be together tomorrow night, and after that . . . well, you know I'll do my best to speed things along at this end."

"You'd better," Ray said, stifling a yawn. "Okay, I'm just about wiped out. 'Night, Fraser." He reached over to switch off the lamp and, on impulse, pulled the spare pillow under the covers next to his body.

"Ray? Are you sleeping with a strange pillow? Is this something I should worry about?"

"You heard that? How the hell did you hear that?"

Fraser chuckled. "Good night, Ray."

"'Night."

He could hear Fraser hang up the phone. A minute later, the phone started making a really, really annoying sound, but Ray just put his hand over the earpiece and held the receiver tight against his chest as he drifted off to sleep.

* * *

The only thing that had made that first night alone bearable for Ray was the certainty that he and Fraser would be together again the next night. If Ray had known how long it was really going to be until he could see him, he might have taken a cue from Dief and just crawled into the back of Fraser's SUV and refused to get out.

In court Tuesday morning, Aki had passed Ray a message from Fraser saying that things were pretty slow in La Rouille and that he thought he'd be able to come down to Saskatoon that evening, but in the end, that proved impossible. Sometime in the early afternoon, a fight broke out between the parents of the visiting Prince Albert girl's hockey team and some of the local parents over a disputed call. What began with angry words soon escalated to screaming, punches being thrown, and finally a car being driven through the rink wall onto the ice, scattering players and officials alike and causing serious property damage. By three in the afternoon, the small La Rouille jail was packed to capacity, and Fraser had to give up on any chance of leaving town that night.

Travel advisories for the night aside, Ray really didn't mind the thought of driving all the way back to
La Rouille, not when he knew he had Fraser waiting for him at the other end, but as the day went on, Ray grew more and more sure there was a plot to keep him in Saskatoon. Despite Aki's assurance that he'd be scheduled early in the day's proceedings, he was still waiting around to be called at four in the afternoon. First, the judge had been caught in traffic, delaying the start until almost noon. Then, when things did get going, one of the Canadian officials who'd been called to testify had to have his time moved up so that he could make a flight to Ottawa later that day. And finally, no more than five minutes after Ray took the stand, the courthouse's antiquated sprinkler system malfunctioned and flooded the courtroom, soaking all the participants and postponing Ray's testimony until 9:00 a.m. the following morning.

Aki was all apologies, but Ray knew it wasn't his fault. Sure, he was overseeing the case for the RCMP in Saskatoon, but he wasn't to blame for screwing up Ray's plans. There wasn't anyone to blame. Knowing that didn't make Ray feel any better about not getting another chance to be with Fraser before he had to head back to Chicago.

In the end, they were lucky to even get a chance to talk to each other. The early winter storm that had been threatening the northern end of the province finally hit with a vengeance at six in the evening, knocking out telephone service in the La Rouille region. Ray left his cell switched on when he went to sleep, hoping that Fraser would be able to get through, but the room was still apparently cell-proof. By the time Ray woke up the next morning the battery in his cell phone was dead from being left on all night.

It wasn't until Ray was already checked in at John G. Diefenbaker International Airport in Saskatoon and waiting for his flight when he got an opportunity to talk to Fraser, and even then it was just a too-short call with him huddled over a payphone next to the boarding gate. There were a million things he wanted to say to Fraser, but the blue-haired lady in the next booth was getting way too interested in his end of the conversation. She leaned closer and closer with each passing minute until he was about to ask her if she wanted him to send her a written transcript when he was finished.

Then the flight - the first one, the one to Minneapolis - was called, and Ray had to hang up without having said any of the things he'd wanted to say, although it probably wouldn't have made a lot of difference to the way he felt because talking was really pretty low down on the list of "Ways to Say Goodbye to the Person You Love."

* * *

"So he didn't make it after all?"

Fraser looked up from the report he was working on, pretending he didn't know what Sally meant. "'He?'"

Her expression told him he wasn't fooling her. "Detective Kowalski."

"I'm sure he'll be here sometime today, but not for the initial ceremonies. There were some flight delays which impacted his arrival time."

"But he's coming?" Sally prodded, frowning a little.

"Yes. He had to stay in Prince Albert last night when they closed down the airport there and he was unable to complete his flight or find a rental vehicle."

Her frown cleared. "Okay. Good. That's good. Isn't it about time for you to change?"

Fraser smothered a smile. "As soon as I finish up this report, yes. Thank you for the reminder,
"No problem." She headed back out to the communications desk.

Fraser sighed, rolling his shoulders and glancing at his watch. It had been three weeks, two days, 10 hours, and 23 minutes since they'd parted in that parking lot in Weyakwin. As soon as he thought it, he smiled a little, shaking his head. Ray would no doubt ask why he hadn't counted the seconds, too. At some point in their lives, either he or Ray or both must have offended the gods of travel, as they seemed to be actively impeding their reunion. The peculiar mixture of anticipation and frustration he'd been feeling since Ray's last call the night before left his stomach vaguely unsettled and gave him a ache that seemed to center right between his eyes. He rubbed absently at the spot but it didn't help.

The first call from Ray the day before had come from Minneapolis, where snow had delayed his connecting flight for almost three hours. The second call had come from Saskatoon, where the shuttle flight he was supposed to take to La Rouille via Prince Albert had also been delayed, supposedly by half an hour. Three calls later that half hour had stretched out to two and a half. Finally Ray had called to tell him the flight was boarding and he'd see him in around an hour.

Forty-five minutes after that, he'd gotten yet another call, this time Ray sounding ready to kick someone in the head as he explained that he was stuck in Prince Albert because all flights in and out had been grounded due to high winds and low visibility and wouldn't resume until sometime late the following morning. He'd then launched into a rant about car-rental places that closed at six in the evening and how he was going to find out the name of the manager so he could go roust them out of bed to rent him a car to drive the rest of the way.

Fraser had reassured Ray that the elders would understand about the delay, and told him to get a room in Prince Albert for the night and just come up the next day whenever he could. Ray had grudgingly agreed, and they had commiserated for a few moments on the universal unfairness of the delay, until Ray's phone had run out of charge. Fraser had gone to bed to get some sleep, trying unsuccessfully to not think about what he might have been doing instead. Sleep had mostly evaded him, but he had drifted off sometime around three, and then been up at seven to take Dief out for a run, then shower, shave, dress, and polish his boots before going in to work.

He shook his head and focused on finishing his report, ignoring the soft knock on the molding next to his door for a moment as he concentrated. "Just a moment, I'll be right with you."

"'S'okay Benton. I'll just go steal some coffee."

Fraser stood up so fast he caught his knees on the underside of the pencil drawer because he'd forgotten to push his chair away from the desk. "Ouch, damn it!" he swore softly. "Ray!" he called after the figure retreating down the hall.

Ray turned, a broad smile lighting his face. "Done already?"

"You're here!" Fraser gasped, completely stunned.

Ray laughed softly. "Surprise."

"Indeed," Fraser managed, pulling Ray into a fierce hug. "God, it's good to see you!"

Ray hugged him back, and after a moment turned his head and planted a kiss right on Fraser's mouth. His lips were a little chapped, but the kiss was open and welcoming, a little slide of tongue sending a shiver through him. Fraser returned the kiss without hesitation, his fingers cupping the back of Ray's
head, stroking his hair. The knot that had been sitting in his stomach for over three weeks finally loosened up. After a moment Fraser let him go and stepped back. "How on earth did you get here? Did they have an early flight?"

"Nah. Word was they wouldn't let anyone fly until at least noon, so Scotty Hughes drove me up from Prince Albert."

Fraser frowned. "Scott... you mean Prescott Hughes? The pilot?"

"Yeah, he was the one in the cockpit from Saskatoon to Prince Albert where we got grounded. He was going to swap out there with some other guy but we got to talking when we were stuck. I told him about my problem, the circle and all, and he said he had a hankering for Tilda's special caribou and turnip stew and said I could tag along if I wanted."

Fraser frowned, trying to make the timeline make sense. "But, Ray, that's at least a four hour drive under conditions like last night's!"

"Try six. Good thing Scotty knows the road. I'd never have made it on my own," Ray said rubbing his stubble, his fingers making a faint 'scritching' sound as he yawned.

"Six... but that means..." his voice trailed off as he realized that Ray must have left Prince Albert not long after they had last spoken. Good God. They couldn't have done more than about twenty miles an hour the entire way.

"Yeah," Ray said, stretching. "Drove all night. White knuckled it most of the way. Well, I did anyway. Scotty was cool. Don't mind telling you I'm pretty fried though. I seriously need coffee." He started walking toward the coffee-station in the break room, and Fraser followed him. "So while I'm fueling up, tell me again about this sentencing circle thing, what exactly is it I'm supposed to say? Because I think I'm going to need cue cards or something to make sure I get it right. In my condition I shouldn't be left to ad-lib."

"Well, you won't have to say a lot actually. It's mostly up to Crawford and the elders, but he has to speak to everyone affected by his actions, ask forgiveness, and find out what he can do to make restitution."

"Hmm," Ray said, reaching for one of the clean mugs by the coffee pot and tipping the carafe over it. "That might be a bit of a problem, then, because really we ought to be thanking him. If it wasn't for him, we probably wouldn't have figured out what was up with us."

Fraser shot a glance at him, feeling a surge of warmth go through him as he nodded. "True enough, however I think that stating that might run counter to the intent of the circle so perhaps we can just make a statement about law and community that will suffice."

"Sounds good to me," Ray said, nodding. "How long does it last, this circle?"

"It's entirely up to the elders involved, but I'm guessing three or four hours at least."

Ray sighed. "Oh. Damn."

Fraser sighed too. "I know."

"But after that you've got until Tuesday morning off, right?"

"Right."
"Good. I hope you're provisioned up because after we're done here today, we are not leaving the house unless we have to," Ray said with a significant look.

The surge of warmth moved lower and intensified. "I believe you'll find the cupboards fully stocked," Fraser said huskily.

"Good." Ray graced him with a smile that did nothing to extinguish that warmth. "That's what I like to hear." He headed back toward Fraser's office, sipping his coffee. "Speaking of cupboards being stocked, you still got those Fig Newtons in your..." Ray pulled open Fraser's desk drawer and stopped, staring.

Fraser's face went hot. Good God. He completely forgotten to take the latest arrivals home on Friday. He started to push the drawer closed, but Ray beat him to it, reaching in to pull out the top three books, and lifted his eyes to Fraser's, his brow furrowed in confusion.

"Um... should I even ask why you have three copies? I mean, one I get, hell, I have one myself. Picked it up in Boystown last week, but... three?"

Fraser thumbed his eyebrow. "It's a... an ongoing practical joke of sorts. They started appearing soon after you left."

Ray looked from the books in his hand, to Fraser, and his lips twitched. "Oh yeah?"

Fraser nodded. "Yeah."

Ray snickered.

"It's really not funny," Fraser said sternly, obviously trying not to smile either. "It's very unprofessional to get them at work. At home was bad enough."

"At home?" Ray asked, eyebrows climbing.

"At home," he confirmed with a sigh. "Amazon and UPS have apparently been doing a booming business in La Rouille of late, since this sort of book is not generally found at Chapters."

Fraser hadn't thought Ray's eyebrows could get any higher, but he was wrong.

"Booming? Just how many books are we talking about here, Benton?" Ray asked, clearly struggling with hilarity.

"Er..." Fraser lowered his voice. "So far, four copies of 'The Joy of Gay Sex.' Six of 'The Gay Kama Sutra.' Five 'An..." Unable to bring himself to finish that particular title while standing in his office, he coughed. "Well, in any case, five copies of a book written by a physician and published by a company with the quaint name of 'Good Vibrations,' and an assortment of other... instruction manuals."

"Instruc..." Ray's control failed completely and he started giggling. Putting down his coffee to keep from spilling it as he groped for a chair and sat, putting his head down on Fraser's desk, laughing so hard he had his hands pressed against his stomach as if it hurt.

Fraser's own lips twitched, despite his resolve not to give in. A knock on the door frame brought his attention away from Ray and he saw Sally standing there watching them, a duffle bag in one hand and a garment bag in the other.

"You two better get moving if you're going to be on time," she said. "You've only got half an hour
and he looks like something the cat dragged in. Here's your things, Mr. Kowalski."

Ray looked up at her, waving a hand weakly, trying to hide the titles of the books with the other one. Sally shot him a knowing look and Ray blushed, coughing a little as he fought to control his laughter. Fraser relieved her of Ray’s luggage.

"Thank you, Sally. We'll manage from here. Ray, do you want to use the men's room to freshen up?"

Ray nodded, reaching for his coffee and taking a gulp. "God," he said after swallowing. "Sorry about losing it there. I'm punchy. I've got my good suit in the bag, but do I have time to shave and work on the hair?"

"I think so, if we're quick, though you'll have to share the lavatory with me as I need to change as well."

Ray chortled. "We go in there together and everyone in the building is gonna be outside with a glass against the door."

"Nonsense," Fraser said, though he wasn't entirely sure Ray was wrong. "They're professionals. And so are we."


Fraser reached behind the door to get his own garment bag off the hook there, and Ray took back his duffel, opening it to get out his shaving kit, and then left the larger bag on the chair next to Fraser's desk as he followed him to the men's lavatory. Hanging both their suit carriers from a pipe, Fraser started unbuttoning his tunic as Ray stationed himself in front of the sink and got out a razor and shaving cream and started to lather up. Fraser shrugged out of the blue tunic and then unbuttoned his shirt and stripped it off as well, leaving on just the a-shirt beneath it. As he started to unfasten his belt and unzip his pants, something made him look up to meet Ray's gaze in the mirror. Ray smiled, and he felt himself warm at the appreciation clearly reflected in his expression.

"Wow, Fraser. You look good. I can't believe I didn't notice. You get a haircut or something?"

Automatically Fraser's fingers went to his considerably shortened locks. "Yes, actually. Lana did it for me. She said she was tired of bringing Crawford in to see me and having to look at my hair."

Ray lifted an eyebrow. "Isn't that bribery or something?"

"That works. Looks really good. She's got talent. Of course, it's pretty much impossible for you to look bad so it's kind of like cheating but still." Ray gave one last appreciative look, then turned his attention back to his shaving.

If it had been anyone else saying those words, Fraser might have doubted their sincerity. He'd never been particularly vain, but over the past few weeks he'd had reason to think about his appearance, and despite having taken some necessary steps toward countering the bad habits he'd adopted since leaving Chicago, he was still out of shape. However, he knew Ray meant what he said, and that never failed to warm him

It should have been difficult to reconcile both his own highly critical self-assessment of, and Ray's open admiration for his looks, but oddly, it no longer was, perhaps because he now understood that Ray's appreciation of his appearance was a result of his love for him, and not the reverse. As the
proverb went, 'beauty is in the eye of the beholder.' More than one person had expressed a negative opinion of Ray's appearance during the course of their partnership, while he had never found Ray anything but attractive. Disturbingly so, at times.

After a moment Fraser realized he was just standing there watching Ray shave, so he finished undressing, got out his dress uniform, and pulled on the jodhpurs, tucking his undershirt in neatly. He hesitated for a moment and resisted the urge to suck in his stomach as he grasped the waistband and went to do up the button, then he set his jaw and pulled the edges in. The fabric strained a bit, but the button went into its buttonhole and held, and the waistband didn't cut into his waist too badly. He zipped up and reached for the tunic, shrugging into it. It was still a little tight across the shoulders and upper arms, but the buttons fastened without gapping between each one, and the tunic lay mostly smoothly across his chest and stomach.

A tiny sigh of relief escaped him, and he got out his lanyard and the dress belt. Ray finished shaving and rinsed his face, dried off with a paper towel, then straightened and looked at Fraser.

"Hey! Haven't seen that in a long time! Thought you said you couldn't wear it?"

Fraser felt his face go hot. "I couldn't, when we spoke about it on the phone three weeks ago. But I felt I should wear it today to honor the solemnity of the occasion and so I asked Constable Zhertak to assist me in a developing a training regimen. Since he's unmarried but living in quarters designed for a family, he's converted the spare bedroom into a gym of sorts with a bow-flex, treadmill, and free weights."

"And you did it. Like there was any doubt. Still, congratulations!"

"I must admit that I found it necessary to reposition the buttons slightly."

"Whatever works," Ray said with a wink, then his grin suddenly faded to a frown. "Hey, wait. You been working out with Zhertak? At his place?"

"Yes," Fraser answered, puzzled by Ray's reaction. "He's been very helpful."

"Oh yeah. I bet he has. I've seen those infomercials too, you know. Guy working out on that flex thing with nothing on but skimpy shorts so everyone can ogle."

The light dawned. Fraser smiled gently. "Ray, there's nothing to worry about. If anything I've put a crimp in Bose's social life, as he's been spending a good deal of time with me when he would otherwise have been out with Darlene or Amelia."

"Sure he would. I'm telling you, he's after your ass," Ray said darkly.

"He's not, Ray, I assure you. And in any case I was fully clothed during all of our workouts and he never once touched me inappropriately. And whether or not he was, you can trust me," he said earnestly, trying to assuage Ray's discomfort.

Ray opened his mouth, closed it, and shook his head with a sheepish smile. "Yeah, I know. I know I can trust you. Have since the day we met. I just have a little trouble understanding how anyone can keep their hands off you." He reached out and let his hands rest on Fraser's hips.

Fraser closed his eyes, feeling the warmth of Ray's hands even through layers of heavy wool. He lifted a hand to touch Ray's lips with his fingers for a moment before dropping his hand to Ray's shoulder, sighing. "The feeling is mutual, however, we've got seventeen minutes before we need to be at City Hall."
Ray groaned and stepped back. "Right. Right, I knew that." He turned away ostentatiously and looked at the mirror. "Man, six hours under a toque gives a guy seriously depressed hair. Think I can salvage this?" he asked, fingering his very flat hair.

"I have every confidence in you," Fraser assured him.

***

"What are the chances we could get something like this going in Chicago?" Ray asked, watching Crawford where he sat, his face still blotchy from crying, talking with Nancy and Todd Stevensen after the circle had concluded.

"I'm not sure," Fraser answered. "I know it's been attempted in the States before, in Minnesota I believe. But I didn't know there were a lot of aboriginal youth in Chicago."

"There's a few. But I was kind of wondering if there's any way to adapt it for inner-city kids. The whole victim-impact thing is really good, so is the fact that the offender has to take responsibility for his actions, and work in the community to make restitution. Plus I liked that part where nobody else gets to say anything until you're done. No stupid 'objections' and 'overruleds' you know?"

Fraser smiled. "The Crown Prosecutor did seem to be having a bit of a hard time with that. She's new to the area and this was her first sentencing circle, but all things considered she didn't handle it too badly. In any case, I really don't know if there's any potential for attempting a similar community justice partnership program in Chicago, but we can see for ourselves once we're settled."

Ray nodded, his gaze still resting thoughtfully on Crawford. "Yeah. Maybe Louise St. Laurent would be willing to help out. She's been working with the juvenile program lately."

"It's worth talking about," Fraser said, taking the opportunity to really study Ray without risking another elbow in the side from Hannah Moss.

Clean-shaven, with his hair acceptably un-depressed, wearing an unfamiliar navy suit, crisp ivory shirt and navy tie, Ray looked marvelous, even if the circles under his eyes and the slightly pinched look of his face betrayed the fact that he was tired. Though as far as Fraser was concerned Ray had looked equally marvelous prior to grooming and changing, but still, since Ray had been placed almost directly across from him in the seating arrangements, it had been hard not to just stare at him through the entire four hours and forty-six minutes of the proceedings. Hannah had elbowed him three different times in order to get his attention focused on the person speaking instead of Ray. Of course, every time he got elbowed, Ray had been looking back at him, so it hadn't been entirely his fault.

He'd suspected they might have a little trouble along those lines when Ray returned. It was why they had planned for Ray to come in a half-day early, so they could get some of that out of their systems before the circle. Unfortunately, November weather in Saskatchewan rarely cooperated with plans of any sort, and theirs had been no exception. His gaze rested on the line of Ray's jaw, remembering what it felt like against his lips... An elbow caught him in the ribs and he coughed and turned to find Hannah standing next to him, her dark eyes alight with amusement.

"Put your tongue back in your mouth young man. Don't you know this is a solemn occasion?"

Face burning, Fraser nodded. "Yes, it is. I'm terribly sor..."

Hannah smacked him on the arm. "I'm teasing you, Benton, you look all you want now that the serious part's over. But that's not what I wanted to talk about. So you're really leaving us?"
"Yes, I am," Fraser admitted. "I'm returning to Chicago to work in the new permanent RCMP liaison office under development there."

"Got both your old job and your old partner back, then? That's good. We'll miss you, but I think you'll be happier there." She looked at Ray, then back at Fraser, and winked. "No, I know you will."

Fraser couldn't help but smile. "Thank you. I suspect you're right. I'm afraid I got acclimated to the pace there."

"That happens," Hannah said sagely. "I was talking to Arden Traynor earlier, she said your replacement is coming in on Monday, and that she doesn't figure the new guy'll be half as good as you."

"I'm sure that's not true. Sergeant Carol is an excellent officer, I had occasion to work briefly with her when I first arrived in Chicago and took her place there." Fraser almost smiled, remembering how then-Constable Carol had berated him for doing precisely that, though her meaning had been vastly different.

"Her?"

Fraser nodded. "Yes. Sergeant LeeAnne Carol. She's transferring in from Red Deer."

Ray turned at that, putting a hand on Fraser's shoulder. "The detachment's going from a CO with two last names to one with two first names?" he asked with a grin. "What are the odds, I wonder? And speaking of odds, what are the odds of getting something to eat anytime soon? I haven't had anything but coffee since lunch in Saskatoon yesterday."

Fraser was surprised. He wished Ray had said something earlier, he'd have given him something out of the break-room refrigerator in the detachment if he'd known. No wonder he looked tired and a bit out of sorts.

"Yesterday?" Hannah said, sounding appalled. "Benton, take him home and feed him, right now. You hear me?" She made shooing motions with her hands.

Fraser bit the inside of his lip, trying not to smile. "Yes, ma'am." He turned to Ray. "Shall we go?"

Ray smiled gratefully. "I'm all over that."

They left the City Hall together, and Ray headed across the street to the detachment to get his bags out of Fraser's office while Fraser went to the trading post and rounded up Diefenbaker from Don Robinson who'd kept an eye on him during the sentencing circle. Fraser let Dief into the Suburban, got in and started the engine, expecting Ray to be right out, so when Ray hadn't reappeared several minutes later, he turned off the engine again and got out, walking toward the detachment. Just before he got there, Ray finally came out, looking decidedly embarrassed. Fraser fell into step beside him.

"Is anything wrong? What took so long?"

"I, um... had to assure Sally that my intentions were honorable. Are you sure she's a civilian? The way she grilled me she'd make a hell of an interrogator."

"I'm sure, though lately she's been making noises about possibly applying to become a member. Give me your bag and I'll put it in the back."

Ray surrendered his duffel without protest, and shook his head. "Well, if she goes for it I'd write her a recommendation. She'd make a good cop,"
"I'm sure she'd appreciate it."

They reached the Suburban, where Dief was inside going noisily crazy as he watched them approach.

"Hey! Dief! Long time, no see!" Ray said as he stuck his fingers through the two inch gap at the top of the window. Dief licked them happily as Fraser went around and put Ray's bags in the back, then got in on the driver's side and leaned across to unlock Ray's door. Ray paused a moment before opening the door, giving Diefenbaker a stern look. "You got your licking quota in already, so my ears are off limits, okay?"

Dief grumbled but curled up in the back seat with a little sigh, his chin on his paws. Ray opened the door and got in. Moments later they were on the road, heading toward Fraser's house. Ray leaned back in his seat with a yawn. "God. Long two days. Sorry about all the screwups, Benton. Wish things had worked out better."

"Me too. In fact, I was beginning to understand that whole 'dying of waiting' concept," Fraser confessed ruefully.

Ray laughed. "Sucks, doesn't it?"

"It does indeed." Fraser decided it was time to change the subject. "How was your trip? Well, aside from the last part, which I know about already."

Ray made a disgusted face. "Oh man, you do not want to know. First I slept like crap night before last, up every hour to look at the clock 'cause I was afraid I'd oversleep. Then I finally did fall asleep about ten minutes before I had to get up to make the flight. Then there was this kid behind me, maybe a year old, did not want to be there at all. Howled the entire time. Gave me a splitting headache, which still hasn't completely let up."

"I suspect that's partially dehydration. There's a first-aid kit under the passenger seat, aspirin included, and you'll find several unopened bottles of water behind my seat."

"Fraser, you are a god. Don't ever let anyone tell you different."

"Surely only a demi-god," Fraser demurred as Ray dug out the first-aid kit and found the aspirin, then reached behind the seat to get a bottle of water. After downing several of the white tablets, he finished off the bottle of water in several long swallows, and then rolled his neck.

"Thanks. That should help."

"I hope so." Fraser reached forward and slipped a tape into the cassette deck. A moment later the haunting sound of aboriginal flute music drifted from the speakers.

Ray's lips quirked upward. "You into that New Age stuff?"

"I find this particular tape soothing. Hannah gave it to me."

Ray listened for a few moments, and then yawned widely. "Yeah. Soothing."

Fraser reached over with one hand and gripped the back of Ray's neck, massaging firmly. Ray groaned, dropping his head forward, offering more of his neck to Fraser's fingers. Fraser continued his massage for a few moments. Ray yawned again. When Fraser let him go and put his hand back on the steering wheel, Ray sighed and settled into his seat, leaning back against the headrest, eyes closed. Fraser concentrated on driving, letting Ray rest his eyes. He remembered Ray saying he'd
slept badly, and suspected that by 'badly' he meant 'not at all.'

School was letting out just as they reached it, and Fraser stopped for several minutes to let a large group of children cross the road. He was fairly certain that they were taking an inordinate amount of time doing so simply because of his presence. They were gawking at the vehicle, no doubt wishing he would turn on the lightbar and siren. Glancing over at Ray, he saw he was clearly asleep, leaning a little toward Fraser, lips slightly parted. Fraser moistened his own lips, then shook his head and rolled his eyes at that near-Pavlovian response. A moment later he heard a snuffling sound and he turned to see Dief straining forward to nuzzle at Ray's hair. Ray twitched a little and waved a hand as if he were shooing away a fly. Fraser frowned at Dief and shook his head. Dief slunk back with a grumble and lay back down.

Once the children were clear of the crosswalk he accelerated, slowly, so as not to startle Ray awake. Within seconds, though, he again found himself looking at Ray instead of the roadway. Annoyed, he forced himself to stop. As if that were his cue, Dief was up and nuzzling again. Ray stirred slightly, and Fraser reached back awkwardly with one hand to push Dief away. Dief growled. Fraser growled back, albeit softly, baring his teeth. Dief, after a moment of comically brow-furrowed surprise, gave ground and resumed his place on the back seat with a little huff, pointedly not looking at Fraser. Fraser grinned, even though he knew it was silly to feel smug over getting the last word with Dief for once.

He managed to resist the temptation to look at Ray again until he'd pulled into his own driveway and parked. "We're home, Ray."

Ray opened his eyes instantly, blinking a little, confused, until he saw Fraser and smiled. "Oh. Okay. Home. Cool. Food?"

"Food," Fraser confirmed. "And then bed."

Ray chuckled. "A little anxious?"

"To see you get some rest, yes."

"I'm good. Don't worry about me."

"I'm not worried. I just prefer you fed and rested. I know from experience you're much less cranky that way."

Ray cackled and stretched. "True enough." He opened the door and got out, then let Dief out of the back. "Someone's on their best behavior today," he said with a nod at Dief.

"Only because I threatened him." Fraser said, getting out as well, and walking around to retrieve Ray's bags from the back.

"Whatever works," Ray said. "So what have you got food-wise that's fast?"

"We could have soup, or sandwiches, or both."

"A sandwich would be good. Got any window putty?" Ray asked with a wink, following Fraser up to the door.

"I'm terribly sorry, I completely neglected to get any at the store the other day," Fraser said, opening the door. "I do have roast beef, turkey breast, and tuna salad, though."

Ray sighed exaggeratedly. "I suppose I'll have to make do. But your rep for proper preparation just
"I'll just have to make up for it in other arenas. Help yourself to whatever you like in the refrigerator, I'll put your bags in the bedroom.

"Other arenas, huh?" Ray asked suggestively. "Been reading those instruction manuals have you?"

Fraser paused in the doorway to the living room, turning to look back at Ray. "As a matter of fact, yes."

The sound of Ray's laughter followed Fraser through the living room and down the hallway, and when he reached the bedroom, his own laughter, slightly manic, bubbled up suddenly, leaving him almost lightheaded by the time he could finally draw a breath.

"Hey, Fraser!" Ray called from the other room. "Everything okay in there?"

"Everything's fine, Ray!" he called back automatically, although he was still having a surprisingly hard time getting his breathing back under control. "I'll be out in a moment!"

Still laughing, he placed Ray's duffle bag on top of the shorter of the two maple dressers, then carried the garment bag over to the closet and began to slide his own clothing to the side to make room for Ray's things. He wondered which side of the closet Ray would prefer, whether the right or the left would be more convenient. Or perhaps Ray might like his bag unpacked? He really should have asked Ray for his suit jacket while he was in the other room. The jacket would surely do better placed on a wooden coat hanger and hung up neatly in the closet than it would do tossed over the back of an old kitchen chair. Should he go back in the other room and get it? Perhaps Diefenbaker would bring it in if he asked poli... Fraser's laughter, which had come to a halt only a moment ago, returned in full force. He wanted Diefenbaker to fetch Ray's jacket? Was he unhinged?

"Hey."

He turned around to find Ray standing in the doorway to the bedroom, jacket slung over his shoulder.

"Good boy!" Fraser said encouragingly. "Bring me the jacket."

"Um, Fraser?" Ray said worriedly. "Are you okay?"

Was he? It was difficult to know for certain, and the look of confusion on Ray's face wasn't helping any; all it was doing, in fact, was making him laugh harder. Without knowing quite how he was able to accomplish the feat, he hooked the garment bag over the closet door and then collapsed in a fit of helpless giggles on the bed.

The next thing he knew, Ray was on the bed beside him with one arm wrapped around his waist and his other hand stroking his hair.

"Hey, Benton," Ray asked quietly. "Any particular reason you're flipping out here?"

"I'm not..." He looked up and saw the clear disbelief in Ray's eyes. "Well, maybe I am, just a little. I was... I was hanging your bag in the closet and..." He took a deep breath, bringing a halt to his now teary-eyed laughter by sheer force of will.

Ray glanced over in the direction of the open closet door and sighed. "Started to feel a little claustrophobic, huh? Yeah, I get that. Like... Stella moving out was the same thing in reverse. I took a look at all the empty space in the closet and started feeling all... what is it? Arachnophobic?"
Fraser turned his head and stifled a laugh against Ray's sleeve. "Are you thinking of agoraphobia?"

"Yeah, that's it. Anyway, it was just a whole lot of emptiness in the closet - sort of like a symbol for my whole life back then, you know? So I get it if you're feeling a little crowded." Ray looked toward the hallway, then back at Fraser. "I can put my stuff in the other room if you want."

"No, don't!" Fraser shook his head. "That's not what . . . I'm not feeling claustrophobic."

Ray propped himself up on his elbow. "You got any clue what's up, then?"

"I think I'm just . . . nervous, Ray."

"About being with me?"

"Not about being with you, precisely, but . . . about being with anyone. I've . . . I've never really lived with anyone, apart from my family, of course, but that was when I was a child, and in any case, this is . . ."

"This is different."

"Yeah. And I don't want to . . . " He rolled over on the bed and faced Ray. "I really don't want to screw this up."

Ray shook his head, then leaned over and kissed Fraser once, gently, before sitting up on the bed. "We don't want to screw this up."

We. Of course. Fraser was trying to think of a way to tell Ray he understood, and appreciated that inclusion, when an odd rustling noise made him lift his head and look toward the door, and instantly he started to laugh again as he saw Dief.

Puzzled, Ray craned around to look too. "What the . . . " he began as Diefenbaker came up to the bed, a bag full of french rolls held in his teeth. Dief nudged Fraser's arm and placed the bag on the bed beside them. Ray looked from the bag to Dief to Fraser, perplexed. "What's this all about?"

"Diefenbaker is not-so-subtly reminding me that I'm remiss in my duties. I believe he feels I'm supposed to feed you before we end up in bed."

"Like one of those St. Bernard's with the brandy?" Ray asked, chuckling. "Well, you're definitely a lifesaver, Dief. My stomach thanks you."

He started to open the bag and extract a roll, but Fraser sat up and reached to stop him. "No, you need more than just a roll. Come on, it won't take but a minute or two to prepare sandwiches, and probably less than that to eat them if I know you."

Ray grinned. "Okay, up and at 'em." He slid off the bed and stood up, holding the bag of rolls in one hand and reaching the other out toward Fraser. "Let's go fuel up." Ray lifted his eyebrows suggestively

Fraser took Ray's outstretched hand and let himself be pulled up off the bed.

As he'd guessed, it took them barely two minutes to fix their meal, although rather more time than he'd estimated for Ray to eat the sandwiches he'd made for himself. He'd finished a turkey sandwich and had started to make serious inroads on the roast beef when he looked over at Fraser's plate with its serving of tuna salad.
"Is that all you're having? You didn't even have a roll."

Fraser glanced over at the open bag, then shook his head. "Yes. This is plenty. You look like you could still do with more, though." He got up from the table and opened the refrigerator door. "I took the liberty of paying a visit to Tilda's last night and picking up one of her tarts."

"This the same kind that Diefenbaker scarfed down the last time I was here?"

Fraser nodded, unaccountably embarrassed by the memory of that morning. He put the tart and a bowl of whipped cream on the table, then cut a slice of the dessert and placed it on a plate in front of Ray before sitting back down.

"Looks great!" Ray said, putting a dollop of cream on his serving. Then he looked over at Fraser and frowned. "Aren't you having any? Tilda said this was your favorite."

Fraser shifted uncomfortably. "It is, but I don't need any at the moment."

Ray snorted. "Having dessert every once in awhile isn't a need kind of thing. Nobody needs dessert." He slapped the palms of his hands on the table, pushed himself up from his chair, and started to walk out of the kitchen. "I've got an idea. Follow me."

"Ray?"

"Come on, Benton," Ray called in a slightly muffled voice from the living room. "And bring the plate with you."

Fraser glanced over at Diefenbaker, but the wolf looked just as perplexed as he felt.

"Should I just play along?"

Diefenbaker yipped once, encouragingly, before curling up on the rug by the sink and closing his eyes. Fraser stood up, quickly put the remainder of the tart back in the refrigerator, then picked up Ray's plate from the table.

He walked into the living room. No Ray, but there was a trail of discarded clothing - tie, shirt, trousers, socks, briefs - leading through the room and down the hallway to his bedroom. His pulse began to pick up in anticipation. Stopping in the doorway, plate still in hand, he looked over to find his blankets draped over a chair, and a grinning and quite naked Ray sprawled across the bed.

"Found me, eh?"

Fraser smiled. "Taunt a Mountie, and he'll track you to the ends of the earth."

Ray laughed, then rolled over onto his side and propped himself up on one elbow. "Or at least the bedroom. Okay, so here's the game plan . . ."

"You have a plan?"

"I do. A man with a plan, that's me."

"And my part in this plan would be . . . ?"

"Your part involves getting naked, while I'm . . . here, hand me the plate. You'll see my part of the plan as it unfolds. All will be revealed," Ray said mysteriously.

Fraser handed the plate over and began to remove his clothes as Ray had asked. He knelt to remove
his boots and socks, slid his braces off his shoulders, then unbuttoned his jodhpurs and stood to step out of them along with his boxers, face going a little hot. Finally he unbuttoned his henley, but hesitated a moment before pulling his shirt over his head.

He told himself that his unaccustomed self-consciousness was irrational, but it was difficult to ignore his embarrassing lack of condition entirely, despite believing that Ray's appreciation for both his mind and body was quite real. Feeling foolish, he took a deep breath and took the shirt off, resisting the urge to suck in his stomach before turning around. What he saw when he looked at Ray would have made any attempt to hold his breath useless in any case.

Ray was laying on his back again, but now his torso was covered with the ingredients of Tilda's tart. Custard coated his chest and mid-section while berries ringed his nipples and navel.

Swamped by both arousal and hilarity, Fraser began to laugh. "Ray? You're . . . um . . ."

"Just think of me as a big serving tray. I thought this might give you an incentive to indulge a little." He dragged a finger through some of the custard and then licked it off before shooting a flirtatious look at Fraser. "Did it work?"

He cleared his throat. "I think I can safely say it would be hard to resist anything served so appealingly."

"Yeah?" Ray grinned. "Then what are you doing all the way over there? Come and get it, Benton."

Fraser took a step, then paused, feigning confusion. "I'm not at all certain this is the same dessert I brought in. Something's missing."

"Oh yeah. Almost forgot. . ." Ray reached over to the plate and scooped the whipped cream up in his hand, then slathered it on his penis. "Whoa! This stuff's kind of cold. Want to give me a hand warming it up a little?"

Fraser smiled. "I think I can offer more than a hand, Ray," he said, crawling across the bed.

Ray stretched his arms out and grinned. "Have at it."

Still on his hands and knees, Fraser lowered his head to Ray's chest and started to suck gently on one of Ray's nipples.

"I. . . uh, think you're missing the good stuff, Benton."

"I'll get to it, Ray," he murmured, raising his head slightly. "This is . . . this is the good stuff."

"Mmm. Yeah. That's good stuff, all right," Ray moaned, writhing a little as Fraser's tongue teased each nipple in turn. "Oh man, do that again."

Fraser licked a path up Ray's chest, then tilted his head up until their eyes met. "You know, I don't recall any dessert ever telling me what to do before."

Ray grinned. "Yeah, well . . . you just never met the right one before."

With the small corner of his brain he'd set aside for thinking about anything other than the way Ray's skin tasted beneath the sweetness of the custard and the tart bite of the berries, Fraser acknowledged how apt those words were. He never had met the right one before.

He'd spent so many years alone, but each time he'd come close to allowing another person to get
close - rare though those times had been - he'd always felt an undercurrent of sheer wrongness, to use Ray's expression. Even if he were to take Victoria out of the picture - although forgetting her wasn't something he'd ever be likely to accomplish entirely - he still couldn't come up with a single instance of a relationship in which he had anything resembling the connection he'd found with Ray. Either he held too much of himself back, which ensured that forging a true partnership would be all but impossible, or - as he'd done with Victoria - he allowed so much of who he really was to be submerged in the other person's needs and desires that in short order, he was no longer able to recognize himself.

But with Ray, he always knew exactly who he was. In fact, he'd come to recognize that he was more himself - more the man he had always believed himself to be and had always wanted to be - when he was with Ray than when he was without him. And being that man made it possible for him to be the kind of person who had something to give back to a lover. Not just something, but everything. In fact, some of his best traits were focus and perseverance, and he could apply both now.

As Fraser worked his way down Ray's body, he suspected he was getting more of the tart on his skin than in his mouth, but the way Ray was arching beneath him was a clear indication that what he was doing was more than acceptable. He lifted his head a moment and looked at the mess he was making of himself, Ray, and the bed, but he couldn't really bring himself to care. All he was really interested in was seeing if he could use his tongue to remove the single Saskatoonberry that had rolled into Ray's navel.

"Hey!" Ray giggled, curling in slightly, sending most of the remaining berries sliding off onto the sheets.

"Ticklish?" Fraser asked.

"Of course not," he said with a wink, still laughing. "Just wondering if you were planning on getting around to the whipped cream sometime this century."

Fraser looked down at Ray's groin and bit back a smile. "You know, it'd be a shame for you to miss out on this fresh whipped cream when you've already foregone your share of the tart."

"So you got a solution to that little dilemma? 'Cause I'm telling you, Benton, there's no way I'm limber enough to do that taste test."

Fraser closed his eyes for a moment, trying to shake the mental image of Ray making the attempt, and what should have looked silly instead looked... erotic. "A pity," he said huskily. "But I think I may have a solution." Fraser reached out and took half the cream from Ray's body, then, flushing slightly, spread it on himself. Ray was right, it was cold, and along with the slight physical discomfort came the certainty that he'd never looked so foolish in all his life. But maybe letting yourself look foolish was part of what relationships were all about. "As someone once said, 'partners is sharing.""

Ray chuckled at that. For a moment Fraser sat, indecisive, then he turned around and stretched out next to him with his head near Ray's knees. The action was executed a little more awkwardly than he'd imagined he'd do when he'd played out this scenario in his imagination over the past weeks. He looked up to see Ray's eyes widen in surprise, and he swallowed hard, hoping he was correct in assuming Ray knew what he had in mind because he was suddenly feeling less than articulate.

"You really have been paying attention to those books, haven't you?" Ray asked, rubbing his hand lightly across his own stomach, his voice a husky whisper.

Fraser frowned, wondering if Ray thought he was completely untried. "I didn't need a book for this.
I'm not entirely without experience, and . . ."

"Really?" Ray looked surprised.

"Really, what? Are you referring to my experience with mutual . . . with this? Well, it wasn't precisely the same since she . . ." He was starting to feel something close to exasperation. "Do I need to furnish a resume?"

"No, I didn't mean that. . . I meant . . . oh, man. . . ." Ray started to laugh, shaking his head.

"What's so funny?" Fraser asked, a little lost.


Fraser eyed him, puzzled. Was it possible that Ray was even less familiar with this than he was? It hardly seemed likely. "Well," he said hesitantly, "if you'd like to wait until you've read up on this particular configuration, we could certainly . . ."

"No, no!" Ray shook his head vigorously. "I'm good. It's just that we never . . . I mean, it never really worked very well with Stella, she was too short. . . and um, I'm just going to shut up now," Ray said, turning red.

Oh. Fraser had finally got the picture. More of a picture than he actually wanted. He tried to think of a way to distract Ray from those thoughts. . . yes. He had it. "Right. Well, then," he said, starting to grin, "a quick lesson is probably what's called for right now. I want you to think of your mouth as a flower that opens by day and then closes down at night. All right?"

Ray laughed. "You're a freak, you know that? But I like that in a guy." He scooted down on the bed, positioning himself so that he could slide his arm beneath Fraser's waist and pull them closer together. "Huh," he said after a moment. "This is a little weird. I sort of miss being able to get to your mouth. Guess I'll have to find something else to kiss," he said with a chuckle.

Fraser shivered as he felt the first brush of Ray's tongue licking at some of the whipped cream smeared between his hip and his belly. He took a quick indrawn breath, tensing automatically when Ray moved his head and his hair brushed against the tip of his penis.

"Come on, Benton," Ray murmured against the soft skin of his belly, his hands firm on Fraser's hips, fingers stroking the small of his back. "Relax, okay? I've got you."

Fraser took a deep breath, then slid his arm beneath Ray's leg and rested his cheek on the lightly-furred thigh. As the tension eased slowly out of his body, he turned to taste the smoother skin of Ray's inner thigh.

"Mmm, nice," Ray said softly, rubbing a thumb along the base of Fraser's spine. "Like that. I like us . . . like this. God, I've wanted you. Wanted this."

"So have I, Ray." He tightened his hold on Ray's thigh, then turned his face toward the soft dark blond curls at Ray's groin, catching the musky scent beneath the lingering aroma of whipped cream.

He leaned in closer, breathed deeply, wishing he could surround himself completely in the scent and taste and touch of Ray. He rubbed the side of his face against Ray's groin, mindless of the whipped cream smearing his face, then raised his head slightly, closed his eyes, and brushed his chin along the hard length of Ray's erection.
Ray shuddered and groaned, and then shifted a hand to push Fraser's thighs apart. He felt a sudden shock as Ray started to nibble gently at the base of his own penis. God! There was something frighteningly erotic about that gentle skim of teeth in such a vulnerable place, knowing he should be afraid but trusting Ray too much to muster any fear, and aching for more. He'd never wanted anything as much as he wanted to feel Ray's mouth around him right then - except perhaps for the desire to take Ray's penis in his own mouth. He angled his head slightly, almost panting, needing to know the taste and texture and weight of Ray's cock, but he held back another moment, letting the tease of anticipation intensify his own arousal.

Finally he let his lips brush against Ray's erection, sliding his mouth sideways along the hard length of it. The sweetness of melting whipped cream overwhelmed his senses first, but was fast overcome by the clean, slightly salty flavor of Ray's skin. Just as his tongue reached the tip of Ray's cock, his own penis was engulfed in the warm, wet heat of Ray's mouth. He gasped, losing contact as sensation swamped him, fighting the urge to thrust. He breathed through it, and after a moment the insistence faded a little, the warm pull of Ray's mouth on his aching cock becoming a sensual background of pleasure as he took the head of Ray's cock in his mouth.

Ray moaned around him, and the vibration sent shivers through him. Wanting to duplicate the experience for Ray, he tongued the sensitive spot below his glans and hummed. Ray clutched at his back, and the suction around him intensified as Ray swallowed convulsively, breathing hard through his nose. Taking that as a positive response, he kept licking and sucking and occasionally humming until his jaw started to ache and he was getting a little lightheaded. Reluctantly he let Ray slide from his mouth and lifted his head to take a deep breath.

Taking advantage of the moment, Ray let go of him and rolled over onto his back, tugging until Fraser was all but blanketing him. Instinctively Fraser tried to balance on his knees and elbows, not wanting to let all his weight settle on Ray, but Ray wasn't having any of that. He wound his arms around Fraser's hips and pulled him down. Once Ray began to brush his lips along the length of his shaft again, he couldn't for the life of him remember why he had ever wanted to be anywhere but right where he was.

They were so closely matched in height that all he had to do was lower his head to kiss the soft skin below Ray's left hipbone, tasting a faint trace of whipped cream there. He wanted more. More of Ray. He pressed gently against one of Ray's knees with one hand until Ray took the hint and let his legs fall open, drawing his knees up, giving Fraser complete access. Eagerly he licked a path down the crease of Ray's right thigh, nuzzling crisp curls and soft skin, chasing hints of vanilla and honey and Ray. He sucked and nibbled at the soft weight of his testicles, until Ray moaned, his sucking and licking at Fraser's erection faltering.

He still wanted more. Frustrated, he slid his hands under Ray and urged his hips upward, his knees outward, and curled around until . . . yes. . . there, he could chase the slick sweetness of liquified whipped cream down to the root of his cock, lick there, suck there. Ray's moans seemed to turn a little desperate, his cock tracing wet trails against Fraser's throat and shoulder as he thrust erratically. Fraser braced an elbow on the bed and cupped one of Ray's buttocks, his thumb pressing firmly into the smooth span below his cock as he worked his other hand up under his chin so he could wrap his fingers around Ray's cock.

It was awkward as hell but worth the effort, as Ray jerked and shuddered, the movement making Fraser's hand slide against skin smeared with residual whipping cream. His thumb brushed across the small aperture between Ray's cheeks. Ray gasped, hips moving in a fluid surge, first pushing his cock hard into Fraser's hand, then pushing down against his probing thumb. A surge of heat exploded through Fraser as weeks worth of late-night reading and desperation brought fevered images to his brain. "Oh God," he gasped, his whole body tense with the effort of not coming.
"So good," Ray rasped, breathless.

"Can I?" Fraser asked, unable to summon words for anything more complex.

"Anything," Ray said, pushing down against his hand again. "Anything you want."

He wanted everything. But he couldn't have it... at least not all at once. He had time, he reminded himself. They had time. Days of time, uninterrupted, to learn each other, to enjoy each other, to love each other. And time after that, maybe not so uninterrupted, but time with no foreseeable cut off. Forever - as much of forever there ever was for a finite being. No reason to rush. But oh, he wanted. He wanted. Everything. Shifting over to one side, he turned once more, sliding down to the foot of the bed, his shoulders between Ray's thighs. Once in place he returned his hands to their former positions, one cupping his ass, his thumb right... there, so close, the other curled around Ray's erection, stroking gently, slowly.

He wished Ray would give him more room. A moment after he wished it, Ray shifted, spreading his thighs wider, raising his hips, a little. Fraser shivered. Not a word spoken, but the desired results achieved. Communication on a nearly telepathic level. Ray wanted him. Wanted this. Wanted everything. He squeezed the spare curve of Ray's ass, stroked his thumb across the opening again, and then, daring, he licked down low, right where perineum became buttocks, close, so close, but not quite there. Even there he found hints of sweetness along with the bright tang of sweat.

"Christ!" Ray gasped, sounding a little panicky, shaking a little, thighs and belly taut. Slick wetness welled hotly from Ray's cock to coat his stroking fingers. Fraser squeezed again, licked again, same place, not moving closer, sensing Ray wasn't ready for that yet. Sensing perhaps he wasn't ready for that yet, either. He licked once more, and tightened his grip on Ray's cock, moving his thumb to rest directly over Ray's anus, pressing lightly. Ray shifted, and shimmied, and pushed back, and it slipped in with surprising ease. Ray hissed in a breath, tensing, and Fraser froze.

"Ray?" His voice shook as much as his hands suddenly did.

"'s good, Benton," Ray said breathlessly. "Just... give me a sec."

Fraser nodded, and rubbed his suddenly itchy nose against Ray's thigh. Ray started to relax, he could feel it. Experimentally he tightened his hand around Ray's cock and gave a long, slow stroke. Ray's hips followed the movement, and the tension just seemed to flow out of him. He stroked again, and pushed in a little with his thumb, searching... he knew the general vicinity to search, just not where exactly...

"Holy... fuck!" Ray's hips bucked and he shuddered, then he was reaching down, fingers tangling in Fraser's hair, tugging nearly hard enough to bring tears to his eyes. "Up. Here. Now." Ray said, panting between each word.

Fraser nodded, wincing a little, and started to slip his hand free so he could move.

"Leave it!" Ray growled. "The rest of you."

The rest... oh. He thought he knew what Ray wanted. Clumsily managed to crawl up Ray's body, but with his arm in that position it just wasn't going to work. "Ray... I'm sorry, I have to..."

"Yeah, yeah," Ray sighed, and twisted his hips up and away. "There."

Better. He rolled over so Ray was on top and then slid his hand down Ray's back and stroked his thumb against the small opening again. Ray spread his thighs, letting them drop to either side of Fraser's, and bit his ear.
"Tease," he accused.

Not wanting to be unfairly labeled, he pushed. It went in. Even more easily this time. Ray moaned, rolling his hips, his cock sliding against Fraser's with mind-bending results. Fraser gripped Ray's hip with his free hand and thrust up against him. "Oh. . . Ray."

"Mmm," Ray said, licking his way around Fraser's ear, an erotic tickle, then across his cheek, then finally tracing his lower lip with just a tongue-tip, all the while rocking in a way that made Fraser dizzy with need.

He turned his head, and opened his mouth, catching Ray's lips with his own, sucking at his maddening tongue, pulling Ray against him with one hand, and using the other in a way that made Ray lose his rhythm and whimper into his mouth. Instinct took over, his body driving hard against Ray's, again and again, absorbed in the feel of Ray's cock riding along his own, the tight, silky heat of him around his thumb, and his imagination melded the two sensations into a single one and with a moan he shuddered and came, pulsing out his pleasure over Ray's belly and cock, hands clenching. Ray arched against him with a gasp, his cock sliding easily in the spreading mess between them, and then he was coming too. Fraser could feel each pulse both against his stomach, and inside Ray as well. They lay there, panting, for a few moments, and then Ray leaned to kiss him again, tenderly this time, stroking Fraser's jaw with his fingers, then he sighed and relaxed fully, his head tucked into the crook of Fraser's neck. Fraser carefully eased his thumb out, unwrapped his fingers from Ray's hip, and slid his hands up Ray's back and just held him.

Ray brought a hand up and curled his fingers loosely around Fraser's left biceps, and yawned. The movement made the light from the bedside lamp glitter oddly in his hair, and looking closer, Fraser realized for the first time that there was silver in Ray's blond, along his temples primarily, but a few gleaming strands scattered across the crown as well. For some reason that made a lump rise in his throat. He lifted a hand and stroked Ray's hair with the backs of his fingers.

Ray lifted his head, looked into his eyes, and frowned a little. "Hey. What's up?"

Fraser shook his head. "Just. . . wishing we hadn't wasted so much time," he managed after a swallow.

Ray looked puzzled. "What brought that on?"

Fraser felt himself redden a little. "Ah. . . you've got. . . " his sentence trailed off. He wasn't sure how Ray would take it.

"I've got what? A flat ass? Crabs? What?" Ray demanded, a little irritably. He was sleepy, and not up to deciphering Fraserspeak at the moment.

Laughing, Fraser figured his discovery was certainly better than either of those options. "No, Ray. There's just a little grey in your hair."

"Oh. That." He traced a finger along Fraser's temple, then up higher, along his hairline, where Fraser was all too aware he was starting a streak. "You too." He smiled wryly. "Some detectives, huh? We can figure out anything except how much a pound of cheese weighs on Pluto."

Fraser chuckled, remembering the rest of that conversation. 'But do you know what's right in front of your nose?' "Indeed."

Ray yawned again. "Now can I go to sleep?" he asked a little plaintively.
Remembering that Ray had been up for nearly forty-eight hours straight at this point, Fraser decided he could postpone his need for intense conversation for a while. "Go to sleep," he said softly, hugging him with one arm.

Ray nodded and relaxed, dropping his head back down with a sigh. He was quiet for a few moments, his breathing deepening, evening, then suddenly, out of nowhere, he kissed Fraser's shoulder a little sloppily and muttered. "Love you."

"And I you," Fraser whispered.

Ray made a satisfied little sound and went limp.

Fraser lay there for some time with a smile on his face that he suspected was fairly fatuous, but he couldn't really help it. After a while he started feeling sleepy himself. Like Ray, he hadn't rested very well in the past few days. Anticipation was not a considerate bedmate. He yawned shallowly, noticing it was a little hard to take a deep breath with Ray relaxed and heavy against him. He should probably have suggested that Ray sleep somewhere other than right on top of him. Although there was something kind of nice about it, despite the discomfort. He yawned again, more widely, eyes tearing up a little from the stretch, and when he lifted a hand to wipe his eyes he noticed that his fingers were... purple. And red. And sticky.

It dawned on him that some of the stickiness he'd been trying not to notice was tart residue, not semen. The sheets were covered with the stuff, as were both he and Ray. He really ought to get Ray up so they could shower. And the sheets needed changing desperately. He shifted a little, put a hand on Ray's shoulder to shake him, and . . . he stopped. The hell with it. If Ray didn't care, neither did he. He could wash everything just as well in an hour or two.

* * *

Still half asleep, Fraser could sense that someone was watching him. Smiling, he began to open his eyes, certain he'd discover Ray had woken for some reason, but no . . . Ray was still fast asleep, curled up next to him. However, the feeling of being under observation only grew stronger. Taking care not to disturb Ray, he slid his arm out from under him and slowly turned to . . .

"Oh, for God's sake."

There, looming over them on the bed, was Diefenbaker, berry-coated tongue lolling out of his mouth, looking as fidgety as a wolf could look. It dawned on him that he could see far too clearly for it being night-time in the middle of winter. They'd left the bedside light on the entire time they'd been asleep.

Fraser scrubbed the sleep out of his eyes and felt Ray stir beside him.

"What's up, Frase?" His voice was raspy. "We got visitors?"

"One lupine visitor, to be precise. Diefenbaker's reminding me that he doesn't have opposable thumbs and so hasn't been able to let himself out of the house."

Ray chuckled, then rolled over and reached across Fraser to let Dief lick at his hand. "Doorknobs are a dumb invention, huh, boy?"

Diefenbaker moaned in agreement, then jumped off the bed and went to sit impatiently by the bedroom door.

Fraser leaned over and kissed Ray. "Good morning."
"Morning? I think your internal clock's busted, buddy. You trying to tell me we slept through the night?"

Fraser grinned sheepishly. "Well . . . no. I've just been looking forward to being able to say 'good morning' to you when I woke up, and now seemed as good a time as any to start."

Ray put his arm around Fraser and squeezed tightly. "Yeah, I get that. 'Morning to you, too.' He raised his head, craning it slightly to see if he could get a look at the alarm clock on the other side of the bed. "What time is it anyway? The sun's down."

"10:30 p.m."

"You're kidding! We slept for almost six hours?"

"It would appear so. You . . . we clearly needed the rest." He lay his hand down on Ray's forehead and brushed his thumb across one eyebrow. "In fact, why don't you go back to sleep? I'll just see to Diefenbaker, and I'll be back to join you in a moment."

"Nah, I'm good." He stretched and slid one hand up Fraser's arm, using his shoulder for balance to sit up. "Why don't you let Dief outside and . . . you want me to boil water for tea or something?"

Such a simple thing, but sitting in the kitchen late at night and sharing a pot of tea with Ray sounded wonderful. He knew it was the kind of thing most people took for granted, but he wasn't sure he would ever become altogether accustomed to having Ray to share things with. In truth, though, he never wanted to become complacent about this gift he'd been lucky enough to be given.

He nodded, not trusting himself to speak for a moment, then cleared his throat and smiled at Ray. "That sounds good. Perhaps we could make some toast as well?"

"Sure. I'm going to go to the john first and . . . Fraser?" he said, stopping before he'd gotten one foot out of the bed.

"What is it, Ray?"

"I'm . . . um . . . I think I'm kinda stuck."

Fraser took his first serious look since waking at the wreckage that had once been recognizable as his bed. The pillows had been knocked to the floor and were laying on top of the crumpled blanket. The badly stained sheets were stuck to both Ray's skin and his own by a combination of dried custard, berry juice, and semen. It was even worse than he'd remembered. How could either of them have fallen asleep in this disaster area?

He started to peel the sheet off one of Ray's legs, then started laughing. "You know, I'm not sure this is the romantic scene I envisioned when I dreamed about your return."


"Is that . . . in . . . American . . . or Canadian dollars?" Fraser asked between laughing fits.

"Canadian. This is definitely a Canadian thing, Benton."

Having freed Ray from the sheet, Fraser leaned forward to kiss his smiling mouth, then started pulling the bed linens together into a pile in the center of the bed. "Ray? Do me a favor and open the window."
"Why?" Ray asked, even as he crawled out of the bed. "We just going to chuck the evidence outside and hope it's dragged away by a wild animal?"

He chuckled. "It probably wouldn't be a bad idea, but no, I'm just providing Diefenbaker with a means to get outside while we - and the bedding - pay a visit to the shower."

Ray pushed the storm window up two feet, letting a blast of cold air into the room "Come on, Dief. You need some help getting out?"

The wolf gave him a disdainful glare before jumping on top of the dresser and out through the open window.

"Should I shut the window? It's going to get pretty damned cold in here in a minute."

"Leave it open for the time-being. It probably wouldn't be a bad idea to air out the room, and in any case, Diefenbaker . . . ."

"You scared of what Dief's going to say to you if he gets locked outside on top of not being let out when he needed to go?" Ray said with a grin.

"Of course not," Fraser said, unwilling to admit that he really didn't want to have to listen to any longer a list of complaints from the wolf than he already heard on a regular basis. "He's a rational creature, and there's no reason for him to . . . ."

"This is Dief you're talking about, right? The wolf with a doctoral degree in irrational grudge holding?"

After taking a moment to consider Ray's words, Fraser made a mental note to purchase a supply of rawhide treats when the shops opened in the morning. "Good point." He smiled at Ray, then looked toward the bed. "Let's see what we can do to get some of this mess rinsed off the sheets."

"And ourselves." Ray rubbed his hand down his chest, grimacing at the whipped cream congealed in his chest hairs. "We need to be hosed down. My thighs are trying to stick together."

"Which would be a great pity," Fraser said with a grin.

"It would," Ray said, returning his grin.

"I'm surprised we weren't stuck to each other," Fraser said, scratching at an itchy spot on his stomach. "I guess we both must have moved around enough to prevent that."

"So, after we get cleaned off, you want to do some more of that 'moving?'" Ray was . . . leering at him. There really wasn't any other way to describe it.

He smiled. "I think a little more 'moving' could be squeezed into the weekend schedule." He picked up the heap of bedding and headed for the door. "Could you bring the mattress pad along with you?"

"From an army cot to a queen-sized bed complete with a mattress pad. You really were corrupted, weren't you?"

Fraser turned around halfway through the doorway and raised his eyebrows. "It came with the house, and I didn't hear you complaining about the bed six hours ago."

"Believe me, Benton, I'm not complaining. Viva la corruption!"

Fraser walked into the bathroom, then dropped the pile of bed clothes into the tub. He turned the taps
on, then looked up to see Ray standing in the hall, the mattress pad draped across his shoulders like a king's robe.

"Ah. Your Majesty! Would you be so kind as to bring your mostly naked self over here?"

Ray grinned, then threw the mattress pad across the room and into the rapidly filling tub. "Always knew you had a kink for royalty. That picture of the Queen was a dead giveaway." He walked over to the edge of the bathtub and looked at the purple-tinted water. "You really want to put your sheets and us in there? Wouldn't it be less disgusting to just take everything down to the river and beat the sheets against a rock or something?"

Fraser looked down and sighed. "It is rather unappealing, isn't it? I considered just putting everything into the washing machine, but . . ."

"You have a washing machine?"

"Well, yes. Didn't I mention that?"

"Nope. Come on. Let's toss everything in the machine and then we can wash off in a tub that doesn't look like Barney the Dinosaur took a leak in it."

"Barney who?"

"He's a . . . never mind. Just be grateful you haven't had to experience the joys of babysitting Frannie's rugrats yet. Nice kids, but after a couple of hours, you end up singing kiddy t.v. show theme songs the whole next day, and, trust me, that's not something you want to be doing down at the station." He scooped up an armful of wet sheets. "After you."

Fraser led the way to the small washing machine installed in one of the hall closets. "Do you think we should do an online search for stain removal suggestions? I really should have taken care of this sooner, but . . . ."

"We had other priorities," Ray said, with a grin. "Nah, we don't have to go online. You got some peroxide in the bathroom?" Fraser nodded. "Okay, go get that and I'll get some dishwashing stuff from the kitchen."

Fraser looked up from the machine. "Peroxide and dishwashing liquid?"

"Yeah. It's a secret Kowalski family stain removal formula."

"Really?"

"Nah." Ray smiled. "My mom got it from Good Housekeeping. It works, though."

Once the 'secret ingredients' had been poured on top of the stained bedding, Fraser turned the machine on and they returned to the bathroom. Ray looked into the tub, which was filling with fresh, hot water. "That looks better."

Fraser nodded. "I thought it would defeat the purpose to get into a tub full of dirty water. Perhaps this time we won't risk looking like Violet Beauregarde when we're finished."

"You know Willy Wonka, but you don't know Barney?"

"It was a book long before it was a movie. Though clearly I have yet to catch up with my cultural literacy in the area of children's television programming." He tested the temperature of the water,
then stepped into the tub and held his hand out.

Ray paused before he got into the bathtub and grinned. "This going to be one of those 'oh dear, I dropped the soap' kind of deals?"

Fraser laughed. "I was actually thinking of bathing this time, but maybe we can try that scenario tomorrow."

When Ray stepped into the tub, they rinsed the worst of the sticky mess off their skin under the shower, then Fraser closed the drain and as the tub filled they eased themselves down until they were both sitting, Ray leaning back against Fraser's chest. Fraser reached around and handed him a bar of Ivory Soap, but Ray made no immediate attempt to use it. Instead, he put the soap back on the edge of the bathtub, then took both of Fraser's arms and wrapped them tightly around him before letting his head drop back on Fraser's shoulder.

"Mmm. This is nice," he murmured contentedly.

Fraser slid one arm out from under Ray's, then started to card his fingers through Ray's hair. "It is. I wish . . . ." He sighed.

"What do you wish?"

"I just wish . . . that it could be like this all the time."

"Hey, I'm up for it," Ray said, stroking his forearm lightly. "You and me figure out how to grow gills, we can stay in the bathtub permanently if you want."

Fraser snorted. "That's not exactly what I meant."

"I know."

He could almost see the smile blooming on Ray's face. They lay quietly in the tub for a while, cocooned in hot water. Fraser closed his eyes. The next time he opened them, with a little start as he realized he'd been asleep, the water was lukewarm and the trickle of cold air from the gap beneath the bathroom door reminded him that the bedroom window was still open. He sat up a little from where he'd slid down in the water. "We should finish up," he said decisively. "And go make that tea."

Ray jumped. "Wha? Huh?" Apparently he'd been asleep too. "Oh. . . yeah, sounds good," Ray agreed. "Soap?"

Fraser lathered up his own hands, and then handed the soap to Ray. He figured it was best not to offer to scrub him, since he actually wanted them out of the tub reasonably quickly. Once they'd soaped, they stood up, opened the drain, and rinsed off with the shower. They dried off, and Fraser gave Ray his robe that was hanging on the back of the door, since they'd forgotten to bring clothing in with them. The navy terrycloth looked wonderful against his skin, and with his hair flat, Ray seemed years younger than his actual age.

"I'll go fill the kettle while you put something on," Ray said, then with a grin he nodded at the door and asked, "You ready?"

Fraser nodded.

"On three," Ray said. They counted to three, then Fraser opened the door and dashed, shivering, for the bedroom, grabbing his sweats out of his dresser and yanking them on quickly as Diefenbaker
stood in the doorway and snickered. He glared at his companion as he closed the bedroom window.

"It's hardly my fault that I don't have a pelt," he said haughtily, going to join Ray in the kitchen where he stood filling the teakettle and frowning thoughtfully.

"Listen, Benton," he said as Fraser came in, "What you were saying before - I get that. I know what you're feeling 'cause I feel it too. It's just so easy like this. Being together. Just hanging out. No stress. But you know it's not going to be like this all the time when we get back to Chicago. In fact, it's not even going to be like this often."

Fraser nodded as he got the bread out of the refrigerator. "I know."

"I can be kind of hard to live with," Ray continued as if he hadn't spoken. "In case you've forgotten, I'm loud and I can be kind of manic and I have a temper and . . ."

"I know, Ray. It's all right," Fraser interrupted. "I can be stuffy and stubborn and I, ah, I have a temper too." Ray snorted at that, nodding. Fraser ignored him and went on. "But we'll be all right. We were before."

"Yeah, well, we weren't living together before," he said, setting the kettle on the stove and turning on the burner under it.

Fraser smiled. "Weren't we?"

Ray thought about it for a moment. "Hell. I guess we kind of were. We were together more than most married couples are, and we fought a lot less."

Fraser nodded soberly. "I know we probably can't avoid an occasional disagreement." He smiled a little in response to Ray's cackle. "We can both be pigheaded, but I think we learned how to keep it to the occasional carping rather than a full-fledged fight."

"Yeah," Ray agreed. He reached over to take Fraser's hand and curl the fingers into a loose fist, then wrapped his own hand around it. "We gotta talk. And listen. Because I don't ever want to punch you again, and I sure as hell never want to get punched by you again. So we have to communicate."

Fraser nodded, then lifted their hands and brushed his lips against the back of Ray's knuckles before slipping his hand free. Putting two slices of bread in the toaster he depressed the lever to start the bread toasting. "I have orange marmalade or peanut butter for the toast, if you'd like."

"Both sound good," Ray said. "Did I remember to tell you that UPS delivered the camping gear and your trunk the day before I came up?"

"No, you hadn't. I'm relieved to hear they arrived safely."

"Yeah, though we'll need to look for a new place pretty soon, because I can already tell my place ain't big enough for the both of us, pardner."

"That's not a problem. Once we find a place acceptable to both of us . . . excuse me, all three of us," he corrected himself as Diefenbaker gave him a dirty look, "I'll be happy to either buy or rent. My savings should be more than adequate to cover my share, no matter what we decide to do."

"Be nice to have a real place," Ray said, looking around the kitchen with a slightly wistful expression. "Speaking of which, what all are we packing out when we leave next week?"

"Just my remaining clothes, and Diefenbaker. Since this house is a furnished rental I don't have to
worry about the furnishings, other than the television which I've arranged to donate to the Band Council."

"The band? You think they should be watching TV instead of rehearsing?" Ray asked, eyes wide.

Fraser rolled his eyes. "You, sir, are a smartass."

Ray grinned. "Yeah. And it's your duty to keep feeding me straight lines."

"And toast?" Fraser asked, catching the slices in mid-air as the slightly over-exuberant toaster expelled them.

"And toast," Ray confirmed.

* * *

It was really kind of weird, Ray thought, kissing his way down Fraser's naked back, running his tongue across the cratered scar next to his spine before moving lower, but so far nothing they had done had turned him off at all. And in the last two days they'd done damned near everything he'd ever heard of that two guys could do. Okay, well, just short of everything. There was one thing Ray had been avoiding because he was afraid Fraser wouldn't like it. Fraser seemed to want it. Acted like he wanted it. Bad. Bad enough to lay there spread out on the bed like an invitation to a wet dream. Not that Ray minded, since it let him return a favor from the night before, but he wasn't sure that Fraser really knew what he was asking for. Stella hadn't liked it. He remembered that very clearly.

Shaking off that thought, he ventured lower, reached the little indentation right at the top of the cleft between Fraser's buttocks, and flicked it with his tongue. Fraser whimpered, his hips curling forward, rubbing himself against the mattress. Oh yeah. Ray put a hand on each of Fraser's cheeks and pressed outward, just a little, then followed the cleft south a little further. Man. He couldn't believe he was doing this, even more he couldn't believe how much it was turning him on to do it. He was harder than he'd been since he was sixteen years old, his breathing ragged, his whole body flushed with heat and damp with sweat. He was so hard he almost hurt, but it was such a good hurt.

He pulled his tongue back in to moisten it, licked out again, closer. Fraser gasped. He tasted like clean skin and sweat. Ray's fingers dug into the soft-firm curves under them a little, pulling him open more, and he pointed the tip of his tongue and . . .

Fraser's whole body jerked, nearly bucking Ray off. "Raaaaay!" he gasped.

Ray held on with both hands and did it again, probing.

"Oh. . . God. . . Ray!"

He squeezed, he licked, he flicked, he kissed. He felt Fraser open up for him, relaxing, and he went for it, he delved, going deep, as deep as he could. Kept at it until Fraser was shuddering and babbling, a mindless stream of half-sentences and words, all variations on 'fuck me now,' spreading his thighs wider, pushing his gorgeous ass back at Ray, asking for more. Damn, if he'd had any clue that Fraser would be like this in bed, he'd have jumped him the day they met.

"Ray. . . please!" Fraser pleaded. "I need . . ."

Jesus. He sounded. . . broken. Needy. Ray's fingers twitched, He gave one last lick, shifted one hand, sucked on his finger for a minute, and then slid it inside Fraser in a slow, smooth push. Fraser's body tightened up around his finger, sucking at it. His neglected cock jerked a little at that, drooling a little puddle of pre-come onto sheets that still held faint ghosts of blue, red and purple stains, and
several more recent, less colorful ones, still damp. They were going to have to do laundry again soon, he thought distantly, with amusement. Thank God Fraser had three sets of sheets.

Fraser... undulated, using Ray's finger as a pivot. "So goood..." he breathed. "Please Ray. More."

He'd been asking that for the last day and a half. There was only so much a man could take. Especially feeling that smooth, tight heat gripping his finger like that, imagining what it would feel like around his cock. And he'd already had two fingers in there at some point... he'd lost track of exactly when but he knew he'd done it, helped along by the lube, thankfully not home-made. Fraser had bought it from the same internet site that had shipped Crawford Jones the CK. And Fraser had come like a fountain and kept asking for more. So it was okay, right? Had to be. He dropped his forehead down to rest it on the warm, flushed curve of Fraser's ass. Licked it, the skin peach-soft against his tongue.

"Ray!" Fraser growled.

There was only so much 'no' in him, and apparently he'd just hit bottom. So to speak. "Okay. Okay, you win. I give. Where's the..."

"Night table drawer," Fraser said, stretching to fumble at the drawer, finally getting it open, pulling out the little bottle, opening it. "Here."

Ray eased his finger out of Fraser's heat and held out his hand. Fraser upended the bottle, pouring so much slick across his fingers that Ray had to catch the drips with his other hand. He stroked himself with the extra, clenching his teeth a little against the urge to just finish himself off right then. The other hand returned to the cleft between Fraser's cheeks, letting the lube drip off his fingers, rubbing it up and down the crevice, into the little furl, pushing it inside with first one finger, then when Fraser seemed nice and relaxed, another one. God. Tight.

He curled his fingers forward, and Fraser jerked, hissing "Yesss!" through his teeth. He stroked in and out a couple of times, feeling how nice and easy it was. Tired slipping another finger in. It went in easy, too, even though it felt like he had his fingers in a smooth, hot vise. Ray leaned around and found Fraser's mouth with his own, kissing him as he kept stroking. Fraser kissed him frantically, his hips moving with Ray's caresses, licking and sucking at Ray's mouth between gasps of "Now, now!"

Ray slipped his fingers free, and settled between Fraser's thighs, rubbing his cock between Fraser's cheeks in all that slickness there, feeling the head of his cock catch against the little hole and dip inside just a tiny bit, once, twice. Feeling Fraser push back each time, trying to get him in deeper.

"Tell me," he whispered fiercely into Fraser's ear. "You better fucking tell me if you need me to stop."

Fraser nodded jerkily. Ray braced one slick hand against the sheets beside Fraser's hip, wrapped his other hand around himself, aimed, shifted his hips forward, and...

"Oh, fuck," he breathed, feeling himself sliding in. Just as tight and hot as he'd felt around his fingers. Almost like being sucked, but different, better.

Fraser made a kind of a grunt. Didn't quite sound... comfortable. Against his lips he could feel the flex of muscle in Fraser's jaw. Wait. Wait. He thought about pulling back, but Fraser hadn't asked him to stop. He stopped, just the head of his cock inside Fraser. Benton. Waiting. Felt Fraser relax. Okay. Slow, he told himself. Slow. He pushed a little harder. Felt that snug channel yielding to him, opening up, but just barely enough to let him in. Felt so damned good. Fuck. Fuck. He was losing it. fuckfuckfuckfuck... He held onto the word, chanting it like a litany, meaningless, in his head, for
distraction.

"Yes!" Fraser panted, making Ray suddenly aware that he'd also been saying it aloud. "Fuck me." He made a sound in his throat, somewhere between a growl and a purr, and pushed back against Ray, hard.

"Jesus Christ!" He was in, all the way in, wrapped tight in silky heat. He pushed, trying to get deeper, impossible, wanting. Pulled back, almost all the way out.

Fraser reached back a hand, scrabbling at his hip, trying to tug him back. Ray obliged, sliding home again. Fraser moaned, pushing up onto his hands, torso arched, head back. The new angle shifted most of Ray's weight onto Fraser's ass, grinding Fraser's groin against the bed. Ray rolled his hips, again, again, a fluid glide, in and out, just enough for friction. Fraser panted, shifting his thighs wider apart. Ray kept up the rhythm, feeling Fraser tighten up around him on every in-stroke, feeling the flex of his glutes, the slick slide of his sweaty thighs against Fraser's.

Fraser shifted up onto his hands and knees, startling Ray for a moment, but it took him only seconds to realize what he wanted. He braced his own knees against the mattress and pulled Fraser back against him with one hand tight on his hip, then reached to curl his other hand around the heavy length of Fraser's cock, so that with each thrust of Ray's body, Fraser echoed the movement into his hand.

"Yes!" The word was an explosive gasp. Fraser let his head drop forward, bent, and Ray knew he was staring down the length of his own body to watch as Ray jacked him. Each of his thrusts forward was met by one of equal strength back against him, and he felt Fraser start to shudder under him. He tightened his grip, moved harder, faster, and then Fraser was coming, hot slickness spurting against his fingers, against Fraser's belly, his whole body taut and shaking. Ray managed a few more ragged thrusts but the close, hot channel that gripped Ray's cock seemed to pulse, squeezing him, dragging him over the edge. He started to come just as Fraser's knees gave out. Ray pancaked down on top of him, one arm trapped beneath him, laughing and gasping, and coming, his whole body nearly shorted-out with pleasure.

"What's funny?" Fraser asked a few moments later, his breath caught.

Ray kissed the side of his neck, tasting the salt of his sweat. "Not a thing. Just. . . I'm so freakin' happy."

Fraser turned his head, trying to see Ray, without much success. "Really?"

Ray carefully shifted his hips, disengaging. Fraser hissed a little and Ray soothed him, rubbing softly. "You okay?"

"I'm. . . good," Fraser said, making good sound like so much more than it ever had before, rolling over to look at him, a lopsided grin on his face that made Ray want to kiss it off him.

So he did. A moment later he pulled back. "Really," he said, finally answering Fraser's question.

Fraser pulled him close and they lay quietly for a little while. For some reason Ray found himself thinking about Stella. She'd always said they had a great sex life, and all the time they'd been together, Ray had thought so too. Mostly. But at some point he'd started to realize that there was something missing. After the divorce he'd kept trying to tell himself he was wrong, that it really had been great, perfect, the best. But no, he hadn't been wrong; something had been missing. Now he knew what that something had been. Equality.
Not to mention he was . . . gay. Apparently. He felt a little dumb to be just figuring that out at his age. He guessed being 'in love' with Stella all those years had kept him from thinking about what he really liked, what he really wanted. And those post-Stella mornings sharing coffee and toast with strange women - they could never have been what he really needed. Because what he needed was . . . Fraser.

Maybe he should send Stella a thank-you card, though, for dumping him on his ass and making him figure things out for himself. Might be hard to find one like that at Hallmark, though.

* * *

As they got out of the Suburban, Diefenbaker took off like a shot toward the empty lot next to the detachment.

"Where's he off to?" Ray asked, puzzled.

"He wanted one last chance to play in the snow," Fraser said, gazing after him. "He is an arctic wolf, after all."

Ray rolled his eyes. "We get snow in Chicago, Fraser." After a moment he frowned, suddenly realizing that maybe 'snow' was just a metaphor here. "You sure about this, Benton?" he asked as they headed up the walkway toward the main doors of the detachment. "You seem to be doing better here now. If you don't want to leave, there's probably still time to get things put back the way they were. I mean - for you anyway. I'd have to come up with a new Canadian career, but at least you could stay up here." He didn't quite know why he was asking. Okay, maybe he did. He didn't want there to come a time when Fraser told him he hadn't really wanted to leave and he'd only done it because Ray wanted him to.

Fraser stopped and looked at Ray, the brim of his Stetson shielding his face from the falling snow. "I'm sure. I've never been more sure. And, for your information, the reason I'm doing better is because there's finally a light at the end of the damned tunnel."

Ray looked at Fraser with wide eyes, then had to blink as a snowflake hit him in the eye. "The what tunnel?"

Fraser gave him a look.

Ray grinned. "So you're cool with going?"

"I am ecstatic about going. I can't wait to leave. I've never been so happy to leave anyplace in my life. Well, except for that time I was assigned to a two-man post in . . . ."

"Benton," Ray interrupted him. "It's freakin' snowing out here. Tell the story inside if you have to."

Fraser smiled. "Just yanking your chain."

"Coolness." Ray smiled. It felt good to have Fraser teasing him again. He looked at the building. "She here yet?"

"There's an unfamiliar vehicle in the lot, so I assume so."

"You nervous?" Ray asked as they stopped again, just under the overhang at the front door.

Fraser narrowed his eyes at Ray, and then sighed. "I . . . a little."
"Well, just remember, you're ten times the man she'll ever be."

Fraser looked puzzled. "I expect that's true. Though I suppose she could have a surgical gender alteration and . . ."

"Mountie. I meant Mountie. So don't let her cow you."

"Ray, make up your mind, am I a man, a Mountie, or a cow?"

"Um. . . is this a trick question? Give me a minute here. . ."

"Ray!"

Ray laughed. "You're Benton Fraser. That's the important part." He opened the door, motioning Fraser through, then as he walked in behind him, he mooed. Loudly.

Fraser gave a single, startled snicker. Sally looked up from her desk, saw who it was, shook her head and looked down again.

"Has Sergeant Carol arrived, Sally?"

Sally looked up again. "Yep. She's in your office. I gave her some coffee."

"Thank you kindly. Is everyone here?"

Sally nodded. "In the break room, nervous as cats in a room full of rocking chairs. I told them they had to wait for you, just like you said."

"Excellent." Fraser took off his hat and peacoat and shook snow off them over the mat in front of the door. Ray followed suit with his parka, and brushed his hands through his hair briefly to get the snow out, and make it stand up right. Fraser eyed him, and shook his head. "I don't know how you do that."

"Do what?"

"Get your hair to look right without a mirror."

"Talent, Benton. Sheer talent. Let's do this thing."

Fraser nodded, hung his coat and hat on one of the hooks next to the door, and headed for his office. Ray quickly put his coat next to Fraser's and followed him. As Fraser paused for a moment in the doorway, Ray took moment to study the woman sitting in one of the two 'visitor' chairs. She was about his age, and looked like she'd be tall, standing up. Built. Pretty. Well, no, not pretty. Beautiful, even without any makeup. She wore her long, dark-brown hair loose and wavy, and made the boring blue uniform look good. Ray suddenly realized she was holding his . . . Fraser's rubber duck, rubbing it with her thumb, smiling a little. He stifled the urge to go yank it out of her hands.

"Sergeant Carol," Fraser said evenly.

Corporal Fraser! It's good to see you," she said, putting the duck down on the desk and standing up, reaching out to shake Fraser's hand firmly, sparing Ray a curious glance.
"Indeed," Fraser said. "It's been quite some time." He moved around to the back of his desk and opened a drawer. "In fact, I've been hoping we might someday meet again."

He had? Ray was a little puzzled. Fraser hadn't said anything about that before.

Sergeant Carol turned red. "Oh, God," she said, putting a hand over her eyes. "I'm so sorry about... what happened. To this day I can't believe I was such a bitch about it. I was really hoping you'd forgotten. Since that's out, I guess I'll have to hope you've forgiven me instead."

"Of course," Fraser said blandly. "Had our positions been reversed, I imagine I might have been similarly perturbed."

Sergeant Carol shook her head. "That's bullshit, Corporal, and we both know it, but it's kind of you to say so. I hear you're going back to Chicago."

"I am. They've instituted a full-time official liaison program there now. I'll be working out of the 27th division with my old partner, Detective Kowalski." Fraser nodded at Ray.

Sergeant Carol turned, holding out her hand. "I'm very pleased to meet you Detective Kowalski! I've heard so much about you."

"Likewise." Ray shook her hand, braced a little as he waited to find out what she'd heard. The sub probably. It was almost always the sub. Though sometimes it was the Henry Allen. Ghosts and gold got people's attention almost as fast as nukes and nerve gas.

"Ali Thobhani was very impressed by the thoroughness and tenacity of your work on the LeBeau case. It's good to know we'll have such a capable officer working with our liaison in Chicago."

Ray blinked, startled. He hadn't expected that one at all. "Thanks. It was good to get the guy off the streets, no matter where he ends up."

She nodded vigorously.

"Please, seat yourselves." Fraser said. "Before I introduce the rest of the members, I'd like to take the opportunity to do something that I've wanted to ever since I saw you last."

Sergeant Carol resumed her seat. "And that would be?" she asked, looking a little anxious.

Ray sat down in the other chair, watching. Fraser was up to something, Ray could tell. He had that gleam in his eye, even though his expression was placid. He leaned forward a little, waiting to see what would come next.

Fraser reached into his desk drawer and brought out a black metal full-strip stapler. "I'd like to return this. You left in rather a hurry and..."

Sergeant Carol started to laugh. "Oh my God! I don't believe it! You've had that all this time... just waiting?"

Fraser smiled. "Well, honestly, I'm not entirely sure how I ended up with it when I left Chicago, but when I found out who was going to replace me here, I couldn't resist."

She shook her head. "And to think I thought you had no sense of humor! Though I really ought to report you for appropriating RCMP property!" she said with mock severity.

"Yeah, you really can't trust him with office supplies," Ray put in with a grin. "He's got a real
problem that way."

"Now, Ray, you know the incident with the CPD hole punch has been greatly exaggerated," Fraser said with great dignity. "And as for the stapler, you can both see that it's right here on RCMP property, being used for its intended purpose, so it's hardly anything I could be held accountable for."

The sergeant laughed again. "Corporal, you're something else. I'm beginning to think I was an idiot. Maybe I should have stayed in Chicago," she said speculatively.

The hair on the back of Ray's neck prickled a little. He reached out and picked up Fraser's duck. "Nope. He managed just fine there on his own."

She looked over at him searchingly, glanced down at the duck, back up at his face, and then she nodded. "So I see." She turned back at Fraser. "Well, thank you for taking such good care of my stapler all these years. I'll try to do as well with your detachment here."

"I'm sure you'll do an excellent job. I've heard nothing but good things about your work, and I recall that the liaison office was in excellent shape when you handed it over to me."

Sergeant Carol snorted inelegantly. "You mean when I stomped off in a huff, don't you? In any case, thanks for the compliment." She glanced at Ray again, then back at Fraser. "And, Corporal, congratulations on your... new posting."

Fraser nodded. "Thank you kindly, Sergeant Carol. Let me just check to see if everyone is here now so I can introduce you. Ray, perhaps you'd like some coffee?"

Ray recognized a cue when he heard one. "Sounds good, Benton." He stood up, pocketing the duck. "You want a refill?" he asked, nodding at Sergeant Carol's mug.

"No, thank you, I'm fine," she responded.

Ray followed Fraser out of the office and down the hall. Fraser stopped between his office and the break room, and looked at Ray.

"Is there a problem?" he asked softly, his voice pitched for Ray's ears only.

"She was flirting with you!" Ray hissed, scowling.

Fraser smiled. "Yes, she was. However, I wasn't flirting with her."

Ray thought about that. Nodded. "No. You weren't."

"You don't have to defend my honor, you know."


Benton smiled. "For what it's worth, I suspect the first time I'm confronted with a similar situation I may have a comparable reaction."

"Really?" Ray thought about that for a moment, raised his eyebrows, and grinned. "Cool. So, you want me to cover the com-center while you rally the troops for the official hand-off?"

"I'd appreciate it, if you don't mind. It will just be a few minutes."

"Not a problem. But I still want that coffee."
"I thought you would. Let's just hope they've left you some."

Fraser opened the break-room door and Ray stepped through it, heading for the coffee pot. Six pair of eyes locked on him for a moment, then shifted away as the four constables and two community policing representatives realized he wasn't their new C.O. He nodded at them, filled a mug and sugared it, then went out to the front counter. Sally looked up at him questioningly.

"Fraser wants you in the break room. I'll watch the com-center, okay?"

She eyed him narrowly. "You ever work a com-center before?"

"Not as such, no." Jesus. Could he sound any more like Fraser? He shivered a little. That was kind of scary. "But I'm a quick study." He gave her his best grin.

She shook her head, smiling a little. "I assume you can use a phone and know what a hold button is?"

"I'm a phone ace, Sally, trust me on that score."

"All right, how about a radio mic?"

"You hold down the little button on the side to talk, right? And let it go if you don't want them to hear?"

"Right. Okay. Well, I guess you'll do. But you come and get me right off if you have any questions. Oh, and if anybody calls you have to remember to say 'Good morning, La Rouille detachment and then..."

"And then 'Bonjour, c'est le détachement de La Rouille.'" Ray finished for her. "I got it," he assured her. "Now go on before you miss the show."

She looked a little startled, but she got up and went. He watched her, wondering if it was scarier that he'd just sounded like Fraser, or that he knew how to answer the detachment's phone in French. He sat down in her chair and went to scoot it in, then had to adjust the height setting so he didn't feel like he was riding a tricycle. He sipped his coffee, and leaned back. Not a bad chair. The computer screen was set on a map of the area showing weather conditions. He figured Sally wouldn't appreciate it if he started surfing the Chicago real estate ads on her computer so he left it where it was.

A flash of red caught his eye and he glanced over to see Fraser escorting Sergeant Carol toward the break room. He discovered that if he leaned just a little to the left, he could see in. Almost a straight shot to Bose Zhertak and the other guy Mounties... Will Goodrunning, plus a little of Patrice Bourque - sideburns and beard mostly.

He pushed the chair back another inch, then one more. Okay, that was better. At least he could see Fraser now even if he couldn't hear what he was saying.

Ray smiled. Just about everyone was doing that 'I'm nodding so you'll know I'm listening' thing. The only one who wasn't doing the bobble-head doll routine was Zhertak, and he was... Christ, he looked shell shocked. Transfixed. Then his tongue darted out and swiped his bottom lip, and Ray just about fell off his chair. What the hell?

He glanced back at the switchboard to make sure he wasn't missing anything, then slid the chair back another few inches. He knew Fraser didn't think Zhertak had a thing for him, but Ray knew infatuation when he saw it and Zhertak was showing all the signs. Then Ray looked harder and...
weird. Yeah, he had that stunned look on his face, but . . . he wasn't looking at Fraser at all. In fact, it looked like he had those adoring puppy dog eyes trained right on Sergeant Carol.

Ray chuckled to himself as he rolled the chair back to Sally's desk. Too bad they weren't going to be sticking around long enough to watch this story play out. It might be pretty amusing now that it wasn't Fraser being stared at. Heh. Looked like Zhertak had a thing for authority figures in general.

The official introductions were finished before Ray'd even gotten a chance to check out the weather conditions in Saskatoon and Minneapolis, and everybody started filing out of the break room. He watched as Carol shook Fraser's hand, then went into his . . . her office. Fraser leaned in the doorway for a moment, then joined Ray.

"Seems like that went well."

"Yeah, from what I could see, the handover went pretty smooth."

"I noted your keen interest in the proceedings." Fraser smiled. "I'm sure she'll do fine here. Better than I did, to be honest. She's actually eager to begin her duties here, and it looks like everyone is responding positively to her obvious enthusiasm."

"Zhertak sure is," Ray said with a grin.

"Indeed," Fraser said, dropping his voice. "It appeared that way to me as well. I believe there might be a bit more response than is ordinarily acceptable under the RCMP fraternization guidelines."

Ray looked past Fraser and saw Zhertak knock on Carol's door, then enter. "You going to say anything to her about it?"

Fraser shook his head. "No, I don't think it's necessary. In the first place, I have a suspicion that you and I are prone, at the moment, to seeing rather more of a personal interest between people than may really exist."

"You saying we've got love on the brain?"

Fraser flushed slightly, then cleared his throat. "Yes, that's exactly what I'm saying." Ray grinned. "In any case, Sergeant Carol is more than capable of speaking up for herself."

"I'll say," Sally interjected from behind Fraser's shoulder.

Both men started guiltily.

"This one seems like a pretty tough cookie. I'll watch out for her though."

She looked at her desk, then at Ray, and he jumped up. "Sorry. Guess I'd better let you have your chair back, Sally."

"Thanks for looking after things, Detective." She glanced over at Fraser, then stared hard at Ray. "Make sure you keep doing that."

Man. How many moms did he and Fraser have between them? "Um . . . yeah. I will. Um . . . Fraser? You got anything left to do here?"

"Just packing up the last of my things here, and then I think we'd best head for the airport."

"Okay. So . . . bye, Sally," Ray said. "It's been good knowing you."
"Same here. You're okay, Kowalski. And as for you, Benton Fraser," she said, hugging him tightly. "We'll miss you. You go and have a good life down there in Chicago. Just remember you've got friends here if you ever need them."

She hugged him again, and Ray could see Fraser squeeze his eyes shut briefly as he returned her embrace. He shook his head. Couldn't help think how much easier it would've been for Fraser these past two years if he'd been able to recognize that he really had been accepted and appreciated by the people in La Rouille. Looked like there were a whole lot of things in this life that you just couldn't see until you were ready. On the other hand, if Fraser had felt included from the start he might not be coming home with Ray, so he was just as glad it hadn't happened.

Sally released Fraser and sat down at her desk. "Okay, run along, boys. Constable Traynor's gone outside to round up your wolf and take the three of you out to the airport. Then maybe things will get back to normal around here." She grinned.

"Yes, yes . . .true." Fraser's voice was a little unsteady. "I'll just . . ." He turned and started to head back to his old office, but when Ray caught up with him and put a hand on his shoulder, he stopped.

"You okay?" Ray whispered.

Fraser turned to Ray, took a deep breath and nodded. "I'm okay." Then he smiled. "Let's say our goodbyes, shall we?"

They said their farewells to Carol and Zhertak as they collected the last of Fraser's personal papers and supplies in a small cardboard box. Just before sealing the box with duct tape, Ray slipped the rubber duck out of his pocket and in with the rest of things Fraser was taking to Chicago.

"Okay," Ray said, turning to Fraser and smiling. "I think we've got everything. Let's get started."

* * *

"I have to admit, Ray," said Fraser as he plugged his new computer into a surge protector, "in all the time I liaised with the 27th, I never noticed an empty office on this side of the squad room."

"Yeah, kind of weird, isn't it?" Ray said, ripping the duct tape off the last of the boxes. "Not a bad office, though. I thought for a while they were going to make you work out of the supply closet. There was some talk of letting you have the break room but that kind of caused a small-scale riot so they had to rethink that one fast. This one's a little small, but I think it's better than your old office at the Consulate, especially since you don't have to share it with all the file boxes." He opened up the box on the desk, and there on top was the rubber duck. "Don't think I didn't notice that you're not just light-fingered with office supplies," Ray said with a grin as he flourished the toy.

"You're a fine one to talk, Mr. 'He won't miss a shirt or four,'" Fraser said, repositioning the duck more to the center.

Ray held out a sheaf of papers. "Guilty. Here. Put these in your in basket. You'll look industrious."

Fraser took them, frowning. "I need to sort them out first."

"Just do it." Ray said. "Sort them out later."

Fraser hesitated for a moment, and then put them in the in-basket. Ray nodded approvingly. A tap at the door made them both look around to see Harding Welsh standing in the doorway, his broad, solid presence familiar and welcome.
"You've returned, Corporal," he said with exaggerated care. "Upon reflection, I imagine that pleases me."

Fraser smiled. "It pleases me too, sir."

Welsh looked sharply at Ray. "What are you doing here on your day off, Kowalski? Just can't stay away?"

Ray glanced over at Fraser, then back at his lieutenant. "Just helping Fraser settle in. Um . . . sir? There's something I think we gotta talk about."

"If it's about you and the Mountie, I figured that out years ago. Took you guys long enough." He watched as Ray set the duck on top of Fraser's computer monitor, and shook his head. "You know, Detective, just because the wolf's a florist doesn't mean you have to go into interior decorating."

Ray did a double take. "How do you know about the wolf?"

"I read reports, Kowalski."

"You do? Jeez. All this time I figured they went straight upstairs and were never seen again."

Welsh glared at Ray. "You know, it's not too late to arrange for a long-term undercover assignment at The One Liner."

"Sir?" Fraser said quietly.

Welsh looked over at him, eyebrows lifted.

"Is it going to be a problem?"

"Not unless you make it one."

"Understood," Fraser said.

Ray nodded. A sudden commotion outside the office had Welsh turning, opening the door. The bullpen was filled with milling figures. Welsh scowled.

"Who are all these people in my squad room?"

Fraser stepped out from behind his desk and looked through the open door. "Well, sir, there would appear to be a construction worker, a fireman, a policeman, albeit one from another jurisdiction by the look of the uniform. A butler, a butterfly collector, an . . . elf?"

"What? We got a Village People reunion here?" Welsh asked, bemused.

"Look, a transvestite bride!" Ray said. "Wait. There was never a transvestite bride in the Village People."

Welsh looked at him. "And you know this how, Kowalski?"

"Hey, I was young!" Ray said defensively "And the construction worker was . . ." He glanced at Fraser and felt his face get warm. "Um, never mind."

Fraser lifted an eyebrow at him. Ray had a feeling they were going to have a Discussion later.

A uniformed officer, dragging what looked like Elvis during the Fat Years, stopped for a moment,
looking harassed. "Sorry, sir. There was one of those 'murder mystery weekend' things going on at
the Millennium Knickerbocker and a fight broke out when the murderer was revealed to be Mr.
Mustard in the library with the poison rather than Mrs. Teal in the kitchen with the duct tape. We had
them all down in booking and they said they wanted to appeal to a higher authority."

"Send 'em up to records, then," Welsh snapped. "But I want them out of my squad room."

"Yes, sir!" the uniform said, and continued his Elvis herding.

"Duct tape?" Fraser murmured, eyebrows lifted.

"We get the Red Green Show down here, too, you know," Ray said.

From outside the office, someone yelled. "It was not Mrs. Teal!"

"I don't care who killed who with what!" Welsh bellowed. "Just get 'em out. Now!" He started out
the door, and then stopped suddenly and turned to Fraser, shaking his head. "You know, Corporal,
in the two years since you left, the strangest thing anyone brought into my squad room was a
chocolate chip bagel. You've been back for less than a day, and it's already a madhouse in here."
Welsh paused, then looked surprised. "What, you break your face or something Fraser?"

Ray turned to find Fraser smiling. . . the kind of smile he hadn't seen since they'd dug themselves out
of the snow after falling out of a plane. He felt a smile tug at his own mouth as Fraser shook his
head.

"No, sir. I'm home."

* * * Finis * *

1. For those of you looking at us in confusion, Canadian bannocks are not like Scottish bannocks,
which are flat oatcakes. The Canadian version is more like what is commonly known in the U.S. as
'frybread', and is often made with the addition of raisins or other dried berries. For a site with a
history of bannock and recipes, go to: http://www.for.gov.bc.ca/kamloops/fnb/FNB.htm

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