"Benton Fraser says no body, no death, and nothing we say seems to convince him otherwise. He's just not sane on the subject, Ray, and so we were hoping that maybe you could talk some sense into him."

**ADDITONAL NEW NOTE FOR AO3: Story has formatting that will be lost if not viewed in Author's Style.**

Author's Notes: Like so much of my work, this is team-betaed by some of the most amazing betas anywhere. Resonant—I stole so much from resonant, so thank her if you like the sex scenes and blame me if you don't. Res, I officially dedicate Ray's thighs to you. I thank Mia, again, for going endlessly beyond the call of duty; Te for pulling me down off the ceiling and offering medical help both to me and my story; Alanna and Cin for going over things with wonderfully close eyes and sensitive ears; Laura Shapiro for voice tics; Gear for timely warnings; and Livia and Julad for just giving a shit.

**Part One**

I. *Las Vegas, Nevada*
Man, but if I got into it fast, I got out of it faster. Ba-da-bing, ba-da-boom—four-thirty on a random afternoon, me and the guys sitting around the conference table trying to fix the Wallace fight when the phone call came.

"He ain't gonna throw it," Frankie was muttering; he was staring down at the inlaid wood tabletop, looking stupid and murderous, Frankie's particular gift of a combination. "Wallace ain't gonna throw it, he's gonna take a lot of persuading."

"So make him persuaded," Sonny replied calmly. "Help the poor guy see reason."

Johnny G. looked like he could smell good steak grilling somewhere close. "Yeah," he said, dropping a fist on the table. "Bash his fuckin' face in—right, boss?"

I sat there, slouched in my chair, watching all of them. It took me a second to be sure that I had their attention; you never said nothin' till you had everyone's full attention. "Wrong," I said quietly. "Frankie's right," and Frankie's head shot up as if he was shocked to be right about anything, ever. "Wallace won't go easy, and it ain't worth the effort to make him see the light on this one. So think outside the box for a second, you morons."

The table went silent as everyone struggled to kick their brains into gear. Sonny was quickest on the uptake, which was only what I expected. "So you want us to work on Leroy instead?"

Give that boy a gold star. "Yeah," I said, showing him a smile. "Work on Leroy instead."

Johnny's broad, stupid face creased into a frown. "But the betting is all—"

I shot him a glance and he shut up. One mean look always gets you further in a room full of thugs than any sort of yelling and screaming act. Violence they expect and know how to deal with. But a look means somebody's thinking, and being none too good at thinking themselves, it's like you're doing a magic trick: Look Ma, no hands.

In fact, I'd learned this particular mean look right from my mother.

"You gonna tell me about betting?" I asked, except it wasn't really a question. "You wanna advise me on this point?"

Johnny looked real nervous now. "No, boss. No."

"You think I don't know how the betting's going, Johnny?" You had to say everything three times to drum the point into Johnny's fat head. "You tellin' me my fuckin' job, here?"

Johnny's mouth worked as his brain struggled to find some other, clever synonym for "no, boss," but I couldn't wait that long. I sat up straight and everyone at the table tensed.

"We can get the bets reversed faster than we can break Wallace," I explained, and everybody nodded quickly: nod, nod, nod. "We reverse the bets, work on Leroy, have him throw the fuckin' fight. Same difference," I told them, except it wasn't quite the same difference, because it meant that Reggie Wallace, that proud kid from Queens, wouldn't have his fucking spine broken by these goombahs. Whereas Leroy would happily throw it in for the right number of zeros, but I wasn't trying save the world or nothing. Just a couple of spines, maybe—a couple of arms, a couple of legs, a couple less faces broken here or there when I could manage it without blowing my cover.

I settled back into my familiar slouch and looked at Sonny, who was the only one I trusted to handle this right. "Go talk to him," I said quietly, and that was when the phone rang. I let it ring once or twice while Sonny nodded at me slowly, his eyes telling me without words that yeah, he
got my drift: play nice with Leroy, slip him drinks and cash and quiet threats until he understood what was in his best interest.

Then I picked up the phone.

"Yeah," I said softly, not needing to say "Hello," or "Languistini," or anything like that, because in the realm of unlisted numbers this was pretty high up there on the un-list.

The voice said, "Mr. Archer wants to meet you at the orchard."

Suddenly I had ice water in my veins, and it was all I could do not to shiver, not to squeeze the phone right out of my sweaty hands. "Oh yeah? When?"

"Now. There's a limo downstairs."

Keep cool, keep cool, I thought, taking a long hard look at the numbers on my gold watch, like I was wondering whether or not I could fit this meeting into my hectic schedule of blackmail and bookmaking. Like there was any choice about it.

"Right, gotcha," I said, and racked the phone into the cradle. "Meeting over," I announced, and everyone's heads jerked toward me, surprised. I shrugged as coolly as I knew how. "I gotta see a guy about a thing," I said, shoosing them with my hands. "So get outta here, we'll talk about this later."

With a shuffle of chairs, the boys got up and headed for the door. A moment later Baby Tommy materialized out of nowhere in that uncanny way he had, holding my suit jacket. "Yer all brushed and polished, sir."

I turned my back to him and slipped my arms into the sleeves. Tommy slid the jacket onto my shoulders and then adjusted it so that it hung right. "Lookin' good," he commented as I turned around. "You want yer alligator shoes? They're just back from downstairs."

I patted his cheeks affectionately and felt a sudden stab of nostalgia; geez, the kid was only twenty-two, and now I'd never get see him grow up to be a real gangster. "Nah," I told him. "I'm in something of a rush, kid, thanks."

I crossed the suite to the wall safe. The leather briefcase was there, all packed and ready for me, and I pulled it out and slammed the steel door shut. For a second I was tempted to go into my bedroom and pack a few things, because god, the stuff I had!—a closet full of tailored suits, thirty pairs of custom-made shoes—except I'd have to be out of my freakin' mind.

Anyone guessed about me not coming back and I'd never feel the bullet.

So bye-bye suits and bye-bye shoes. I clutched the thick handle of my briefcase and breezed for the door. "Later, kid," I told Baby Tommy, who shot me a jaunty two-fingered salute. And then I was walking down the hallway toward the elevator, my shoes making no noise on the thick, elaborately-patterned carpet. I pressed the button and the doors instantly opened, cause nobody makes anyone in the penthouse wait for anything. I stepped in, pressed "G" for Ground, and watched myself from twenty-five different angles in the mirrored elevator car. So long, Armando, you handsome devil, you. I'm gonna miss you. I'm gonna miss all of this.

I felt, more than heard, the familiar noise of the casino as the elevator doors opened. It was like being hit by a wall of sound—bells, whistles, sirens, the call of the dealers: Blackjack! Craps! Poker! Whoop—whoop—whoop! and somewhere there was a waterfall of quarters splattering into somebody's plastic bucket. We have a winner, folks; we have a winner! Ah, the symphonic sound of suckers being sucked; it was totally seductive to me, and I guess I wasn't the only one, cause
Vegas is a town with a hard-on, twenty-four/seven.

I moved fast through the casino toward the main exit, which itself marked me as a player, because these places are Roach Motels: suckers get in, but they don't come out.

But I was getting out, and fast. Bye-bye, now, I thought as I passed my favorite craps table, the lucky one where I'd won two-fifty last week.

Bye and seeya, because I was going back to a world where two-fifty got you a newspaper and maybe a bagel, cause it was two dollars and fifty cents, not two-hundred and fifty thousand dollars.

But staying was out of the question, because Mr. Archer wanted to meet me at the orchard. Now if it were Mr. Bates or Mr. Carlucci or Mr. Darby on the line I'd've had a little wiggle room. Could've maybe packed my bags and planned a weekend trip to L.A., or had a final drunken blowout at the Grande or the Bellagio. But Mr. Archer was not a guy you kept waiting. Mr. Archer meant that there was a first-class, A-list, balls-to-the-wall screwup somewhere down the line, and I was running for my life.

I raised my palm and pushed my way through the revolving door into the bright sunlight and baking heat of a typical Vegas afternoon. ("But it's drrrry heat," the tourists bleated to each other; yeah, right—dry like an oven, dry like the goddamned Gobi desert.) Instantly, a limo pulled up in front of me, long and white and glittering in the sun. A doorman in a red uniform and gold epaulets stepped out of the shade to open the car's door for me, and I smiled at him, like I always did, because he reminded me of the Mountie. I wondered, as I slid into the limo's plush, air-conditioned exterior, if I'd be seeing Benton Fraser any time soon.

The limo pulled away down the curving drive of the hotel and into the crazy traffic of the Strip. I knew better than to ask the driver where we were going, I knew better than to ask anything at all. I noticed, idly, that the car wasn't heading either toward the airport or toward L.A., the two most obvious places you went when you drove outta town. Instead, we turned onto one of those roads-to-nowhere which criss-cross all over the state of Nevada.

I sighed, poured myself a scotch from the wet bar, and turned on the television. Neither the local Vegas news nor CNN gave any indication as to what the A-list disaster might be, but it had been worth a try, anyway.

Half an hour into the steaming desert, the smoked glass window between my luxurious compartment and the driver's seat slowly whirred down. The driver was in full uniform, cap and everything, and he shot me a quick glance over his right shoulder. "Mr. Languistini? I've been directed by Mr. Archer to take you to a safe place."

"We goin' to the orchard?" I asked, returning code for code.

He relaxed almost imperceptibly and then nodded. "Yeah."

I took another sip of my scotch and then asked, "It's bad, huh?"

The driver didn't answer. I turned my head and looked out the window at the pink and blue desert sky. The colors out here always floored me.

"It's bad," the driver finally said.

I turned back and caught his eyes in the rear view mirror. "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah." The driver's eyes were dark below his visor. "Ray Vecchio's been murdered."
II. Happy Jack, Arizona

Nobody would tell me anything more, even once we reached the safehouse: an adobe hut in Buttfuck, Arizona. I handed over my briefcase, which held all the hard evidence I'd accumulated during my two year stint as Languistini, and sat through endless debriefings which turned out to be totally one-way streets, with information flowing from me to them.

Nobody would tell me a goddamned thing about my own goddamned murder—or rather about the murder of whatever poor slob they'd gotten to be me while I was out here being someone else. And apparently part of the safety out here was freedom from any information that would bother my pretty little head, so I existed in a total news blackout—no newspapers, radio, television, nothing, nada, niente. I had a TV but no goddamned reception, and so my armed FBI bodyguards brought me videos along with my food: Godfather I, II, and III; Goodfellas; The Family; My Cousin Vinny—I guess it was their idea of a joke. It wasn't funny.

They let me make just one telephone call, right at the start—to my mother of all people. Now don't get me wrong, I love my Ma and all, but what I really wanted was to talk to someone who knew something, who knew anything—Welsh if he would talk to me, or Fraser if he was still in Chicago, which I doubted. But if wishes were horses there'd be shit on the streets.

So I tried pumping Ma.

Her: "Oh Dio, Dio, Raimondo..."

Me: "Yeah, Ma, I'm fine, great, healthy as a—"

Her: "Madre di Dio, grazie per tutto!" <sounds of sobbing>

Me: "Ma, I'm fine! Listen to me—"

Her: "...nome di Padre e di figlio e di Spirito Santo, Amen."

Me: "—for just a second, okay?! This guy—the guy who got killed—"

Her: <sobbing louder> "His poor mother..."

Me: "Forget his mother for a minute, willya, Ma? Just tell me what—"

Her: "Not everybody's like you! Not everybody can forget their mother so easy!"

Me: "—the hell happened to him?"

Her: "Two years and what? Nothing, that's what! Not a letter, not a card..."

Me: "I've been undercover with the freakin' mafia!!"

Her: "He brought me flowers every Mother's Day and on my birthday which is more than you ever did! Mio povero figlio biondo—Madre di Dio, what did I do to make such a bum?"

I hung up, took a couple of deep breaths, and reminded myself that yesterday I could have put a hit out on her, no problem.

And I'd learned one thing anyway. Poor bastard was blond.

It was a pretty rough six weeks all in all, with nothing to do but watch gangster movies and feel
sick every time anybody blond got it in the head. I even dreamed about him, Ma's _povero biondo_, and tried to convince myself that he hadn't gotten it because he'd been me. After all, the guy was a cop—maybe some perp had got him in a shoot-out, or he'd caught a stray bullet. Or maybe not even that: maybe he'd been porking his best friend's wife and the guy had shot him. It didn't even have to be a deliberate murder, I told myself; he could have been hit by a drunk driver, say, which was at least manslaughter, right? And that would've been a problem just the same, cause they'd still have to bury the guy and what name do you put on the tombstone, mine or his?

Except I knew, just _knew_, that this was wishful thinking, that this guy hadn't spun out on the ice or anything. They said murdered, they _meant_ murdered: they meant somebody'd gone and done the poor fucker _in_. All I could hope was that he'd gotten killed for himself and not for me—a sick, selfish thought, I knew, cause it didn't make any difference to _him_, now, did it? Dead was dead, after all. But I couldn't help hoping. It was bad enough for a cop to get killed. But if this guy'd been killed on my account, I wasn't sure I could handle that.

Finally we got the word that it was okay for me to come out of hiding. My bodyguards, acting almost human for a change, tried to make small talk with me on the way to the airport—which was a shame, really, because now I didn't want to talk. My stomach was like a fist: whatever way this had gone down, I was about to find out.

And I was pretty sure I didn't want to know.

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**III. Chicago, Illinois**

We flew into O'Hare, and I felt like king of the underworld as I walked through the airport with armed guys to either side of me. A black car was waiting for us outside, but not a limo this time, so I figured I was on my way to coming down in the world. And no uniformed chauffeur opened the door for me—but all 300 pounds of Danny Quinzio was in the back seat, thank the Lord God.

"Danny." My stomach unclenched a little at the sight of him.

"Hiya, Ray." Danny showed me a tired smile as he shook my hand. His palms were sweaty, but I squeezed tight—so great to see him after two years of him being only a voice on the phone, my only outside contact. Right now I felt closer to Danny Quinzio than to anyone in the world, cause he was the only voice from outside Vegas I was allowed to hear, the only voice for two years who knew I was _me_.

The car pulled away from the curb and I said, "What's going on, man?"

Danny blew out a breath, and right there any hopes I had of not being responsible for this just upped and died. I sank back against the leather seat, feeling sick. "Hell. How'd it happen?"

"Short version?" Danny asked, and the familiarity of his voice was almost soothing. "It was a fuck-up. This guy Kowalski—"

I closed my eyes. "Kowalski," I repeated, and my throat felt like I'd just swallowed glass. Cause suddenly it was real, _he_ was real—not just some guy but a _particular_ guy: a guy with a name as well as a haircolor and a mother. I took a deliberate breath, trying to clear my spinning head. "Not a paisan, I take it?" I asked, and smiled thinly.

Danny looked surprised at the question. "Kowalski? No, he was a Polack."

I nodded and rubbed my aching forehead with the heel of my hand. "Yeah, I figured that, Danny. So what happened?"
"He picked up a homicide, a guy found shot in the park. Standard kind of thing, looked like a drug deal—nothing that rang bells. So it went onto Kowalski's docket." I nodded for him to go on and he did. "Case didn't go anywhere for weeks," Danny continued. "In fact, Welsh blacklisted it twice." I nodded again, knowing that Welsh kept a list of cases that looked like they were gonna mess with the bullpen's solve rate. "Except Kowalski must have still been working it," Danny said quietly. "Morning of April 9th, he leaves a message saying that this thing might connect back to Charlie Fish—

Everything went suddenly sharp and clear: Charlie Fish, aka Carleggio Pesce. "Oh shit..."

"—and that he's gonna go check it out, ask some questions, shake things up." Danny's face tightened; he could see I was already way ahead of him.

"Why the hell didn't Welsh stop him?" I exploded, suddenly furious. "What the fuck was he—"

"Welsh didn't know anything about it," Danny said grimly. "No way would Welsh have let Kowalski go after Charlie Fish, what with Charlie being such a huge fan of yours." Danny shifted uncomfortably on his side of the car, rocking the whole back seat. "Look, it was a fuck up, like I said—we tried to keep Kowalski off the mob cases, except nobody knew this was a mob case. I mean, we only figured it out afterwards, once he was dead."

I frowned across the car at him. "What do you mean?"

"I mean it was a fuck-up!" Danny almost shouted; I'd never heard him sound so upset. "Kowalski goes to shake up Charlie's people, and I guess he did a pretty good job of it because next day he's gone, missing, vamoosed, and his apartment's been trashed and everything he owns torn to pieces —"

"Christ," I muttered.

"—and there's a message spraypainted on his living-room wall in foot-high letters," Danny finished in a voice full of quiet savagery. "Where is Ray Vecchio? We pulled you out of Vegas that afternoon."

I sat there in silence for a few minutes as the car cruised along the highway, processing this, picturing it. Danny seemed to understand that I needed a sec before I could handle much more of this story. "So okay," I said, finally. "Then what?"

"Then we had to figure out what the fuck happened," Danny replied; he seemed to have calmed down himself. "Turns out his partner knew all about it—"

I sat up straight in my seat. "What partner?"

Danny just blinked at me. "His partner," he repeated, like I was just being stupid. "Your partner—you know, the Mountie," and suddenly my stomach clenched so tightly that I would have thrown up if there'd been anything in me to throw.

"Fraser's still here?" I managed; I'd convinced myself that no way was that possible, not after two years, not still. In fact, I'd had it in the back of my mind that I might go up north to see him as a way of maybe delaying my re-entry into the mess of what remained of my life, but that was impossible now, because Benton Fraser was apparently still in the middle of the mess. Life as usual.

"Yeah, he's here," Danny confirmed, "and he was working with Kowalski. He—"

"He told Fraser," I said, squeezing my eyes shut. I had the whole picture now. "Kowalski told
Fraser about Charlie Fish, is that it?"

"That's it, yeah. He left a message at the Canadian Consulate—"

"And Fraser didn't know about Charlie and me, so he didn't know to stop it. And they didn't tell Welsh, because me and Fraser always worked on our own. Act first, report later..."

"That's about the size of it." I opened my eyes and saw Danny looking at me somberly. "And by time we put all the pieces together..." Danny shook his head and I felt a chill steal up my spine. "We were already doomed to playing catch-up. But the good news," Danny added, and hell, I couldn't wait for some good news, "is that Charlie's dead too."

I stared at him, meanly delighted. "He is?"

"He is," Danny said in a firm, satisfied voice. "I only wish it was our people who shot him. But one of his guys spared us the trouble, a guy called Joey Carbone. He was pissed at Charlie for bringing the heat down by killing Kowalski."

This was all too much to take in. I ground the heels of my hands into my eyes, trying to soothe my pounding head. "Enough already," I muttered. "Enough for now."

"Two more things you got to know, Ray," Danny said quietly. The car had pulled up in front of a suburban house, another goddamned safehouse, I assumed.

"Enough," I repeated, and reached for the door handle.

Danny ignored me. "One. The D.A. cut Carbone a deal for killing Charlie Fish, because we were all so glad to see the bastard dead." I gritted my teeth and nodded, betting that Carbone was real popular around the 2-7 right now. Hell, I might send flowers myself. "So it's from Carbone that we have the details on Kowalski's murder. Carbone was one of the kidnappers, so he told us how the grab was done."

I went for the door handle again—I didn't want to fuckin' hear this!—but Danny pressed a button and the locks shot down with an audible click.

"They broke in and beat him up in his apartment," Danny went on, sounding like the goddamned voice of doom. "Evidence at the scene confirms this. Then Carbone says they dragged him down the stairs and put him in the trunk of Charlie's car. We impounded the car, got matching blood, hair and fibers—"

"All right, already!" I banged my fist against the car door. "I got the picture!"

"Carbone then testified that Fish told them to get out of there, that he'd finish it himself. Fish then drove Kowalski to the docks, shot him, and dumped his body in the lake." Madre di Dio, I thought. Povero biondo... "We used sniffer dogs to find the dock, then sent in a team—"

"Christ, stop."

"—which found more blood and hair, DNA confirmed as Kowalski's. Plus we recovered a bloodstained shirt from the water—"

"I believe you!" I shouted. "I fucking believe you, all right!"

"Well, that's good," Danny said flatly, "because your Mountie doesn't," and I shut my mouth so fast my jaw snapped. "Benton Fraser says no body, no death, and nothing we say seems to convince him otherwise. He's just not sane on the subject, Ray, and so we were hoping that
maybe you could talk some sense into him."

"Where—" I had to stop and swallow before I could get the words out. "—is he?"

"Inside," Danny said calmly, nodding toward the safehouse. "That's the second thing I wanted to tell you," he added, and unlocked the car door.

**Part Two**

**I. Near West**

I climbed the porch steps, crossed to the door, and turned the knob. The house wasn't locked, which didn't surprise me much being that it was Fraser who was living here, and he never really got the concept. I guess the house was 'safe' just by having Fraser there, sort of by definition.

I stepped into a living room that reminded me of my grandmother's, God rest her soul, only more disgusting. Plastic-covered furniture from the forties—not retro but ugly—and a coffee table covered with cigarette burns. I dropped my bag on the table, slung my overcoat onto the sofa, and went to explore the rest of the house.

"Please, Fraser." Stella's face was hard, but I'd seen that sort of hardness before and knew it was primarily a sign of suffering. I suspected my own face was etched in similarly harsh lines. "You're not making this easier on anyone, you know. For God's sake, think about Barbara if you can't bring yourself to give a shit about anyone else—"

Fraser was sitting at the kitchen table, his head braced on one hand. He looked up when I pushed through the door, and Christ, he looked older. There were fine lines around his eyes and mouth that I didn't remember being there. And maybe it was just the light, but I could swear he had flecks of gray in his hair.

I wondered if I looked that much older to him. "Hey, Benny."

"Ray." The hard lines in his face softened, and he stood up, his chair scraping the linoleum. "Ray..."

A blur of steps and then I had Fraser in the tightest bear hug I could manage. I grabbed so much flannel that I thought I'd split the back of my fancy suit jacket, and moreover I didn't give a shit. Fraser hugged me back with equal force, and I figured he was pretty damn pleased to see me, too.

Finally I pulled back and punched his arm lightly. "You're a sight for sore eyes, Fraser—God, I'm glad to see you. Though I'm sorry it's like this. I didn't want it to be like this."

"Message for you, sir." I found myself wondering if Turnbull would have had a brilliant career in some alternative universe as head butler of an English estate; the man was like something out of Evelyn Waugh.

"Oh?" I asked, and Turnbull handed me the memo slip.

"Detective Vecchio called," Turnbull explained, "and said something about..." His face creased into a frown and he put a finger to his cheek. "Now let me see..."

I glanced down at the message, which was in Turnbull's very own handwriting. *Tell Fraser that Simpson used to work for Charlie Fish.* "That Mr. Simpson used to work for Charlie Fish?"

Turnbull brightened. "That's it," he said. "You're very clever, aren't you, sir?"
Fraser's faint smile didn't reach his eyes. "I take it they told you."

"They told me, yeah." We sat down and looked at each other across the table. "I'm sorry, Fraser—really, I am. I can't help thinking this is all my fault."

Fraser shook his head in a quick negative. "It's not your fault, Ray. In fact I'd rather not think in terms of fault at all right now." His lips twitched again, but no way I could call that tight, ugly look a smile. "It just doesn't help," he added quietly.

"Well, it's not your fault," I protested. "You had no way of knowing about me and Charlie Fish—Fraser avoided my eyes. "As I say, perhaps we'd best leave any question of fault aside."

I pounded the table once in frustration, then fell back in my chair. "Christ, what a mess." I blew out a breath and looked around the ancient kitchen. "They been keeping you here?"

"They were," Fraser explained with an oddly un-Fraserish shrug. "They lifted security this morning, after Mr. Carbone was sentenced. But they're letting me stay on a few days."

"Stay on? Why?" I asked, frowning. "What's wrong with your place?"

"Look, you wanna keep your keys in your hat, keep your keys in your hat. Just don't keep my keys in your hat, cause that's what pockets are for. Figure how stupid I look as a cop when my place gets robbed because I gave my keys to a Mountie who keeps his keys in his hat. We on the same page here?"

"Certainly, Ray."

"It burned down."

"Burned down!?"

Fraser waved his hand dismissively, as if it were no big deal. "Not recently. Quite some time ago. A performance arsonist—it's a long story. I've been living at the Consulate," he said, and then added, "primarily," and gave a polite little cough. "But since I resigned, it's no longer appropriate for me to—"

"Resigned," I repeated; what with so many shocks to the system these past weeks, I was losing the ability to muster surprise.

Fraser braced his hands on this thighs and stared down at them. "Well, I had to. They wouldn't let me work on this case anymore."

Right, okay, here we were at the nub of the thing. "You don't think he's dead?"

Fraser winced so sharply, and with such obvious pain, that I could have kicked my ass up and down Main Street for framing the question like that. I was trying to think how to apologize when Fraser said, quietly, "I don't know. It's certainly possible. Maybe even probable. I don't know."

He fell silent then, still staring down, and I waited, not trusting myself or my big mouth.

Finally Fraser lifted his head and looked at me. "It's more that I'm skeptical of the case as it stands. It just doesn't make sense to me."

I put my elbows on the table and leaned forward. "How so?"

"Well, motive for one thing." Fraser raised an absent hand and stroked his thumb across his
"Well, motive for one thing." Fraser raised an absent hand and stroked his thumb across his mouth, lost in thought. "Why kill Ray?"

"Ray?" I asked, wondering if this was his name or mine. I didn't even know the povero biondo's first name. "Was his name Ray, or—?"

Fraser twitched again, and I didn't realize what I'd done until he'd corrected me. "Yes, he's a Ray too. Which is convenient," present tense.

I felt like an idiot, like somebody should just gag me and lock me in the basement. "I bet. But Fraser," I added quickly, wanting to get past the present tense thing, "I gotta tell you—Charlie Fish don't need no motive to kill me. The guy hates me for that whole mess in '86—I mean, he really really hates me, Fraser. If Kowalski got in his face—"

Fraser shook his head again. "Let's be logical about this," he said, and that was more like the Fraser I remembered. "Nobody has suggested that Ray was murdered for his investigation of Charlie Fish per se. Rather, the explanation is that Ray, as 'Ray Vecchio,' asked some very inconvenient questions about Mr. Fish's involvement in a murder. Mr. Fish, furious that you would dare to interfere with him—"

"—which I wouldn't've," I interrupted, thinking that the point was worth making. "If it were me, I wouldn't've, Fraser, because it woulda been like waving a flag in front of a bull—"

Fraser raised his hand. "Please, Ray, let me finish. Mr. Fish is thrown into a fury that you—you, in particular—would dare to investigate him or his people. So he and his men decide to teach you a lesson. They go to what they think is your apartment. They confront the man whom they believe to be you. Except he isn't you. Now according to Mr. Carbone's testimony, Mr. Fish was surprised and startled to encounter Ray Kowalski. According to Mr. Carbone, that's how the beating began—with Mr. Fish wanting to know what the game was and where you really were. And to seal matters, Mr. Fish left the question writ large upon the wall—Where is Ray Vecchio? All of which goes to show that it was you, and not Ray Kowalski, who was the target of Charlie Fish's murderous rage that night."

Now it was my turn to shake my head. "Yeah, but Benny—all well and good there, except your Ray got his ass caught in the middle. You can't kill the Ray you want, kill the Ray you're with, you know?"

"Yes, I know," Fraser said quietly, "and that might very well be what happened." Now he was rubbing his eyebrow nervously, his face tense. "I have no doubt that the beating happened. I have no doubt that Ray was taken down to the car. And it's certainly possible that Ray was subsequently murdered just for being there, or because his impersonation of you made Mr. Fish feel like a fool. However," Fraser added suddenly, dropping his hand to the table with a thump, "consider this. If Charlie Fish wanted to kill you—you, Ray Vecchio—what would have been his best chance of getting you?"

I stared across the table at him for a long moment while my brain worked it out. "A trade," I admitted.

It was like Fraser's whole body had suddenly turned to water. He sank back in his chair, wearing an expression of the very purest relief. "Yes, Ray. Exactly."

"I'm with you," I said, and I was; Fraser was no dummy. "You think that Charlie Fish stuck Kowalski somewhere, figuring to trade him for me later, when I resurfaced."

Fraser suddenly looked five years younger. "Yes."
"Except then he got himself shot, which he wasn't expecting."

"Yes," Fraser agreed.

I frowned. "So where is he? I mean, it's been weeks now..."

"I don't know." The tension lines had returned to Fraser's face with a vengeance. "I've been wracking my brain for alternatives; in fact, I have a list of possibilities. But it's like finding a needle in haystack..."

"Fraser," I said, feeling a sudden stab of panic, "if he had Kowalski holed up in the wrong place—somebody's basement, a warehouse, or a dungeon somewhere—"

"I know." Fraser seemed barely able to get the words out. "He could already be dead—starved, suffocated, what have you. As you say, it's been weeks. But if there's even a chance that he's still alive somewhere..."

"I got it," I said, nodding grimly. "All right. I'm with you."

To my surprise, Fraser reached across the table and clutched my hand tightly between both of his, and for the first time since I'd seen him there was hope in his eyes. "I knew you'd come. I knew you'd help me. You're the best friend I have," and damned if I wasn't, and damned if I wouldn't do anything he ever asked of me.

We sat up late into the night, drinking tea and making plans. It was Fraser's idea that we ought to go through all the evidence again, follow the trail, just like old times, just like this was a regular case. That way I'd get up to speed on the details, and he'd get to go over it again and see it all fresh.

It turned out that Fraser had worked the case at first—in fact, he was the one who found Fish's car, and it was Dief of all wolves who'd found the dock where Kowalski was dumped—sniffer dogs, my ass. And they'd both of them been there at the dock when Kowalski's shirt was pulled from the water—but when the CPD declared Kowalski dead, Fraser'd jumped ship on the investigation.

"They stopped looking," Fraser said doggedly. "They stopped looking, they decided that we'd found everything there was to be found." Except to Fraser's mind they hadn't found the most important thing, the key thing: Ray Kowalski himself, or in the worst case, his body.

They'd retaliated by putting Fraser into protective custody, "for his own good," they said, but really, Fraser thought, because they didn't want him messing up the evidence chain. "But I'm a civilian now," Fraser told me, and under that polite exterior was a determination that I knew better than to cross. "I'm a civilian and as of this morning I'm no longer under police protection," and as far as Fraser was concerned, that was license to do whatever he damn well pleased.

"Besides," Fraser added, and I could see that his determination was only a half-step away from real fury, "they're on the verge of closing the case for good. And with Joey Carbone now in prison, all evidence is now fair game, don't you think?"

Yep. Fair game. Totally—and to be honest I was finding this whole thing goddamned therapeutic. Because it was all so familiar, him and me, talking cop talk and bucking the system. Finally, after two long years, I was Ray Vecchio again—and I was beginning to feel like Ray Vecchio, to work like Ray Vecchio. I was sitting here in this shitty kitchen with Ray Vecchio's best friend, and I could almost forget—almost—what it was we were working on.

Except every so often I'd get a real look at Fraser's face and it would crash down on me that this
was his partner we were talking about—his partner and the guy who had replaced me at the 2-7. Because Fraser—all right, Fraser was always personally involved in his work, but not personally personally, not like this. The only time I could remember seeing Fraser like this was the first time, back when he’d stood in front of my desk and told me that the dead Mountie was his father. And now the dead cop was his partner, and the dead cop was me, and it was pretty damn weird and oddly familiar at the same time.

"Tomorrow, we’ll start again," Fraser said, putting down the pencil he’d been writing with. "Revisit the whole case, start to finish. We’ll begin at Ray's apartment, then I'll show you the evidence from the car, and the dock." He rubbed his forehead and looked down at the notes he’d made. "Hopefully we can figure out some line of attack, some method of search..."

"I'll do my best, Fraser," I said, meaning it most sincerely, and Fraser smiled at me.

"I'm sure you'll bring me luck, Ray. You always did."

We gathered our things and headed up the stairs. Fraser showed me the bedroom I would occupy until I could figure out what was up with my life. It reminded me a lot of my bedroom at home. I sighed; this was no suite at the Bellagio, that was for sure.

"Sleep well, Ray," Fraser said, and moved down the hallway toward his own room.

"You too," I replied absently, and then I heard myself calling after him. "Hey! Fraser!"

He stopped and looked back at me curiously.

"This Kowalski." I leaned against the doorframe and chose my words carefully, being sure as hell to use the present tense. "Is he a good guy? Will I like him?"

"Yes," Fraser said, sounding serious, "and I certainly hope so," and then he stepped into his room and disappeared.

II. South Side

Kowalski's place was nice enough from the outside; one of those old buildings that got advertised as having 'character', which in my experience meant 'no elevator.' Sure enough, we had to whuff our way up three flights of stairs to the apartment door, which was criss-crossed with yellow crime scene tape.

Fraser pulled out his knife and slit the tape without hesitation, and I reached for the knob. The door was locked, just like I figured. "You want me to go talk to the landlord?" I asked, but Fraser already had the keys out. That made me smile, because I had forgotten how Fraser was always prepared for everything. I guess I wasn't entirely back to being Ray Vecchio yet.

Fraser unlocked the door and the smile fell off my face. When Danny said the place had been trashed—well, he wasn't kidding: it was like a fucking hurricane had blown through here, and a mean one at that. What really got me was the obvious maliciousness of it all—upholstery ripped to shreds, stuffing flung everywhere, chairs hacked to pieces. Drawers were emptied, papers shredded, glass broken—there wasn't a thing in the place that looked intact or recoverable.

And there, across the wall in red spraypaint, was Charlie Fish's final postcard: WHERE IS RAY VECCHIO? It gave me the serious creeps to see my name up there in what looked almost like blood, and to know that I'd been responsible for wrecking this guy's life.

...la división de alto rendimiento de General Motors y en 1964 dió en el clavo con el GTO, así como Ford con el Mustang. Porque si hay un auto que refleja todo el fenómeno muscle car...
Ray stared at me across the kitchen table. "You know, I never figured you for an addiction to Spanish radio."

"It helps me keep up with my Spanish," I explained, feeling vaguely embarrassed. "It's educational, and of course it's free—"

"My two favorite things," Ray muttered into his coffee cup. "Look, could we maybe hear the news, maybe?"

I gestured toward the radio. "I thought you'd be interested in—"

"I would be if I was a genius and spoke Spanish, which I don't."

"I thought you studied Spanish," I said with a frown.

"Flunked ain't studied, Fraser. In fact it's the opposite."

"But you like things Spanish, don't you?"

Ray seemed to slump further in his chair, then shrugged his shoulder. "Tacos count?"

"You like the tango," I pointed out, but this was apparently the wrong thing to say, because suddenly Ray was sitting up in his chair and bristling all over. Even his hair seemed to have gotten somehow spikier.

"It was my wife who liked the tango," Ray said, stabbing a finger at me. "She liked the tango, I just liked her. Her records, and she dumped them just about the time she dumped me. Okay? Comprende?"

"Entiendo," I murmured, lowering my eyes. Behind me, I could still hear the radio announcer burbling. *Pontiac, haciendo caso omiso de la orden, ofreció la opción GTO con un motor 389 en el modelo Lemans del 64...* I felt like perhaps I ought to apologize, but what precisely would I be apologising for? He was the one with the attitude problem, after all.

After a moment I could hear Ray shifting nervously in his seat, and then he muttered something I couldn't make out.

"Pardon me?" I asked, lifting my head.

"Ex-wife," Ray muttered, and now he was avoiding *my* eyes.

"Indeed," I said, as breezily as I could manage, and got up to pour myself another cup of tea. "Accuracy is, of course, important—"

"I'm sorry, okay?" He glanced up, and then away, looking rather like a hunted dog. "Just—I'm sorry, Fraser—"

Fraser was crouched beside some smashed stereo equipment—nice stuff, or used to be, from the look of it. The floor around there was scattered with old records, and it looked like Charlie and his pals had taken the time to stomp on every one. Fraser picked up an album, slid it out of its sleeve, and contemplated the jagged half-moon of black vinyl for a moment before letting it fall to the floor. *Soul Of The Tango*, the cover said, and I wished I hadn't seen that, because right now a sense of the guy's personality was all I needed.

Still, though, once I'd started noticing I couldn't stop noticing—a broken strand of chili pepper lights hung over the pass-through to the kitchen, and there were painted footprints on the floor.
under the rucked up rug. Dancing feet, I realized a moment later, like you saw in old movies.

"He likes to dance, huh?" I asked Fraser.

Fraser turned his face away. "Yeah."

I sighed and tried to look at the room more like a detective. One corner was a little less cluttered than the rest, so I figured this was where they'd laid into Kowalski. I bent down to confirm this and saw a smear of blood on the white wall, and another on the edge of the battered roll top desk. Maybe Kowalski's blood, but maybe he'd managed to land a few punches himself.

"He any good at fighting?" I asked absently.

"Yeah." There was a strange undercurrent to Fraser's voice—like maybe he thought the question was funny. "You could say that."

"Aggressive?" I pressed, turning to look at him.

"Very."

"In other words, he's an asshole," I said, and to my surprise Fraser laughed.

"Completely and utterly, yes," Fraser admitted, grinning at the thought. "In fact, Ray's rather a colossal asshole, which is much of his charm."

I burst out laughing myself, half of out shock. "Wow, a colossal asshole—even better," I suggested. "Sounds like the Vecchio name's been in good hands."

"Excellent hands, yes." Fraser stood and gave Kowalski's living room a long, searching look, and I stood there and watched the good humor die on his face. He looked suddenly lost in the rubble—like maybe he was barely resisting the urge to clean up the place.

But after all, Fraser knew this place as a place. He probably spent a lot of time here, hanging with Kowalski and talking whatever shit they talked together. Fraser had to know what this place looked like when it was normal, so it had to be a bigger shock to him seeing it look like this, like a wreck. all beat to shit. For me, this was pretty much just another crime scene, but for Fraser, this was a place he was connected to—his partner's place, his friend's place. He had memories here, and maybe he recognized some of Kowalski's stuff, made associations back to the guy.

"You spend a lot of time here?" I asked him.

"You could say that," Fraser murmured, and then suddenly he snapped back into himself; suddenly he was all business again. "There," he said, pointing at the corner where I'd been looking before. "Notice the scuffle pattern—"

"Yeah, I noticed," I said, and I did. "You got blood on the wall, blood on that desk over there—"

"Right," Fraser agreed, and stepped carefully through the rubble toward the corner. "Now, they must have caught Ray by surprise, because he never got to his gun—"

"Wait, wait, whoa," I said, raising my hands. "How do you know that?"

"It's in evidence lockup," Fraser explained. "It was found in the bedroom, in the lockbox where Ray normally keeps it." Fraser looked the roll-top over with a critical eye. It was smashed up pretty badly, and covered in glass; I figured this was where Kowalski had kept his tchotchkes. Fraser started struggling to pry open the battered roll top. "However," he added, gritting his teeth
as he pulled, "Ray did of course—"

The accordion top splintered suddenly, leaving a gaping hole big enough to worm a hand into. With a sigh, Fraser started to bash at the opening with his elbow. A moment later he reached in and pulled out a second lockbox, only this one wasn't locked. Fraser popped the latch and pulled out another gun.

"His ankle piece?" I asked, and Fraser nodded grimly. "Nice. Okay, so both guns accounted for, which means for sure Kowalski never saw this coming." It also meant that Fraser _had_ spent a lot of time here, because he'd put his hands on Kowalski's spare piece pretty damn fast. "The knock at the door takes him off guard," I mused, pointing toward it, "takes him off guard, and then there's guys in here and he's overpowered. How many guys—do we know?"

"Four," Fraser said softly. "And Charlie Fish, at least according to Mr. Carbone."

"Right, okay. Five to one, not great odds." I bit my lip and stared around at the room. "They jump him and get him beaten down, tied up and restrained—"

Fraser shot me a sharp look. "I assumed they knocked him unconscious."

"No." I shook my head. "You don't know Charlie, Fraser. He'd want Kowalski to _see_ this—to _know_ what they were doing to his place, his life, all of it."

Fraser nodded slowly, his face now blank. "Yes, I see. An intimidation tactic. Though knowing Ray as I do, I can't imagine he'd be easily intimidated. Such a display would be much more likely to infuriate him."

"Then that tells you how badly they beat him," I said flatly.

"Yes, of course," Fraser said and turned away.

"So they restrain him, trash the place, and then drag him down to the car." I paced slowly across the battered room, and then stopped and kicked at a pile of rubbish. "So far, so bad—but what I'm seeing here confirms Joey Carbone's story, Fraser."

"Yes," Fraser said quietly. "Unfortunately. The blood here was confirmed as Ray's, and the trail led out of the apartment, down the corridor, down to the street."

"And right to Charlie's car."

"Yes."

"The cops pick up any weapons?" I asked, looking around.

"Yes," Fraser replied. "Two bloodstained coshes, no fingerprints. They're at the 27th precinct, along with the other evidence that was collected. We'll go there now; you should see it. You should see all of it."

I nodded at this. "Should I go downstairs and call up another taxi?"

To my surprise, Fraser shook his head. "No. Now that we're here, we have other options."

I followed Fraser out of Kowalski's building and down the block. Near the corner was an alleyway and we turned up it; it ran along the back of the row houses which lined the next street. Fraser stopped at the third garage door, took his keys out of his pocket, and inserted one into the
"Ray rents this garage from Mrs. Kraschek," he explained as he turned the key and then twisted the latch open. "She's eighty-three, and consequently prohibited from driving." Fraser reached down, grabbed the steel handle, and sent the door clattering up.

"Here you are," I said, spying Ray bent nearly double under the GTO's hood. "I've been wondering where you—"

Ray lifted his head; he hadn't shaved that day, and his chin was rough with pale stubble. There was a streak of grease under his left ear, and two clear prints where he'd wiped his hands on the front of his T-shirt. "About time you got here. I needed you like hell a couple of hours ago."

"Oh?" I stood next to him and peered at the engine; he smelled like clean sweat and motor oil, and I forced myself to focus on the machinery before me. "What's the problem?"

Ray wiped his hands hard on his thighs, and then pointed. "Windshield wiper motor got detached from the harness, and I either needed two guys or nine-foot-long arms to get it back into place, of which I had neither. Look, see," Ray said, bending down to reach deep and back into the engine; he was fiddling with what looked like a piece of hose, "one piece connects from this side, but the other's in the car on the back side of the firewall—"

His shirt rose up at the small of his pale, smooth back. "Well, it seems to be connected now," I said. "You managed it somehow—"

"Only by spending two hours making like MacGyver," Ray snorted, pulling himself out. "I tried bracing the other side with the snowbrush and my toolbox but that didn't work, and then I was trying to build, like, some kind of architectural structure to hold that side down but that didn't work, because the only things I got in here are a plank of wood and a toaster—"

My breath caught in my chest as I beheld a vision of pure loveliness. A perfectly restored 1967 Pontiac Grand Turismo Omologato, the most beautiful—no, I corrected myself, feeling a sudden pang of guilt—the second most beautiful car ever made. And okay, this one was a particular beauty: ported heads, AC, PS, PB, Hooker Super Comp headers with Flowmaster custom exhaust system, automatic TH400, Hughes 2500 stall converter, custom drive shaft, drive shaft loop, disk brakes all around, 15 inch Rally II wheels with Firestone radials, engine compartment painted and detailed, hideaway headlights, black interior, bucket seats...I was in love, I was in love, I was in love.

Fraser practically had to pull me out from under the hood. "Ray. We need to—"

"You got the key to this thing?" I asked.

Fraser looked taken aback. "Yes, but—"

But me no buts. "Gimme the key."

Fraser brought out his keys and then hesitated, clutching them tightly in his fist. "I'm not sure I ought to—"

I crossed my arms and glared at him. "Did he drive my car?"

A spasm of guilt crossed Fraser's face. "Er—hm. Well. About your car, Ray—"

"Did he or did he not drive my car?" I demanded.

"He did, yes," Fraser admitted.
"Gimme the keys, Fraser," and Fraser sighed and handed over the keys.

The thing ran like a dream—gorgeous, totally gorgeous, just purring like a kitten, mrrrow! I found myself speeding down the street, testing her, just seeing what she'd do and how well she'd do it.

One thing for sure about Mr. Kowalski: the guy knew his cars, yessiree.

I came to myself somewhere up on Wacker, when I realized that I'd completely forgotten where we were going. I glanced over at Fraser, and felt instantly terrible: he looked really far away and sort of desolate.

"Hey, I'm sorry," I mumbled, "I got caught up with the car. It's a beautiful car."

"Yes," Fraser agreed quietly. "It is. Ray's very fond of it."

I coughed and flicked the turn signal on—even the click, click, click sound was gorgeous. "Where are we going? The station?"

"If you would, yes," Fraser replied. "There's some evidence there that I'd like you to see. However, you'll have to be the one to request it." Fraser looked up at me finally, and it was weird, but I couldn't read his eyes at all. "I'm afraid that I'm persona non grata at the moment—certainly, I have no authority there, official or otherwise. But if you were to ask—"

"Okay, yeah. I got it."

Fraser licked his lower lip thoughtfully and looked away again, out the passenger window. "You might even suggest to Lieutenant Welsh that you want to see the evidence in order to convince me of Ray's death."

I nearly blew through a red light; instead, I downshifted and stared at the back of Fraser's head. You leave a Mountie alone in Chicago for two years and look what happens: the bastard gets downright cagey. Or was this the influence of Mr. Ray Vecchio aka Kowalski, he of the beautiful cars and the dancing feet? I had a serious moment of what the fuck has been going on here in my absence?

Fraser just stared out the window and didn't say a thing.

III. Downtown

I switched the engine off, turned to Fraser, and said, "Okay, look—I'll get Welsh to give us the evidence, but you've got to run interference for me up there. This is a work run—I'm not ready to give my 'what-I-did-in-the-Mob-last-summer' speech yet, okay?" Fraser nodded, seeming to understand. "I wanna lay low, keep the hi and byes to a minimum. Gimme your scarf." Fraser instantly pulled his scarf from around the collar of his leather jacket and handed it to me. I wrapped it around my own neck, high above my overcoat collar, so that I could duck my face into its folds if I needed to.

We got out of the car and headed across the courtyard to the door. Fraser put his hand out for Kowalski's keys, and reluctantly I tossed them back to him. And only then did it occur to me that it was pretty weird that Fraser had those keys in the first place. Cause I myself loved Fraser like a brother, but I'd never given him the keys to my car. And even with the undercover thing, when my whole life was being given away, the one thing I'd balked at was the Riv. But they'd insisted—said that the Riv was an essential part of the undercover guy's cover—so I'd given in, finally. But I hadn't been happy about it.
"Hey Fraser?" I asked, holding the door open for him—cause it only takes a second to be courteous. "Where is my car anyway?"

"I'll tell you later," Fraser said, and walked into the station.

We split up at the staircase—he went up first while I lounged around for a bit, studied the wanted boards on the first floor. New guys, same brand of ugly. I glanced down at my watch and figured I'd left him enough time.

The bullpen was achingly familiar, all the bustle, people running around, strange shit happening in every corner. I pulled my scarf up around my face a little and tried to blend in, like I was here to get my crack-whore-wife out on bail or something. Welsh's door was shut, but from the shadows I could see that he had people in there right now. Meanwhile, Fraser was talking to Huey and Dewey over near my desk, and none of them were looking my way, which was good.

I knew the best way not to be noticed was to stay in motion, so I walked around—down the hall past the interrogation rooms, bought myself a soda at the machine, drank it as I turned up the second leg of the corridor.

And then, bang, coming down the hallway straight for me was my sister Frannie, carrying a clipboard and looking hell bent for leather. I skittered back and turned my face to the wall, waiting for her to pass—and then just as she came close I whirled and grabbed her, slapping my hand over her mouth and dragging her into one of the interrogation rooms. She kicked me hard in the shins just as I got the door shut behind us—so hard I felt it in my teeth, like eating cold ice cream—and then a second later she had me smashed up against the door, one arm so high up behind my back that I thought it would break.

Okay, so nice move.

"It's me, it's me, it's me!" I yelled, my nose smushed up against the door and getting splinters. "Me! Ray! Your brother!"

Strangely, this only made her yank my arm harder and shove her knee into the small of my back. I howled in pain. "That's not funny, buster! You don't even look like my brother!"

Even for Frannie, this made no sense. "What are you talking about? C'mon—lemme go, already! Zio, zio, zio!"

The knee at my back eased up. "Ray?" Frannie asked, sounding uncertain.

"Yes!" She let go of me, and my aching arm slipped back to my side. Wearily, I rolled around so that I had the door to my back, so that she could see my face. "Christ, when did you become such a bruiser?"

She leapt toward me, and for a long, terrifying moment I thought she was gonna beat me senseless. But then I had two armfuls of sister, and she was hugging me hard and kissing my face with big smacks. I held her so hard that I took her right up off the ground.

"You're back. Ray, you're safe," and I just kept holding her tight, because I felt really choked up and I didn't want her to see me all mushy-faced. "Ma said you were coming back, but I didn't know—hey, put me down."

I let her down, and she stared hard at my face for a couple of seconds before pulling back her arm and whacking me one.
"Why the hell did you grab me like that?" Frannie yelled, jamming her fists on her hips and glaring at me. "I could have broken your stupid head! This is a police station—somebody might've shot you before they even realized—"

God, I had maybe even missed this. "Shut up already, willya?" I said and kissed her forehead. "I didn't know you were such a killer."

"Hey, I'm a police aide." Frannie proudly tapped the badge sewed onto her bicep: Civilian Aid Worker, it said. "You should see what I do around here, Ray—I do most of the computer stuff, fingerprints and mugs shots and everything. I do filing, and make coffee, and I've been taking self-defense classes so that I can self-defend myself."

"That's great, Frannie," I said, and I meant it. "I'm real proud of you."

Frannie shrugged a little, her petite little shoulder rising and falling. "I was thinking,—you know, before—about maybe becoming a cop." She showed me a tentative smile that faded quick. "Now I'm not so sure. You know...what with what happened to Ray...." She let out a long sigh and looked upset. "I mean, that coulda been you. And even so it was him. And he was great—I mean, I loved the guy, Ray, he was my fake brother for two whole years..."

"Yeah, Fraser seems real attached to him, too," I said.

To my surprise, Frannie blew out a little, frustrated snort. "Yeah, well, Fraser's totally on Mars where Ray's concerned. He told you, right?"

I parked my hip on the interrogation table. "He told me, yeah."

"Poor Fraser," Frannie said, shaking her head. "I feel bad for him, don't get me wrong—but he's been giving Stella the most awful time."

"Stella who?" I asked.

"Stella Kowalski," Frannie answered. "Who is also ASA Kowalski—she's Ray's ex-wife."

I winced at this; yet another piece of the shattered Kowalski life. Just put it on my tab. "I didn't know he was married."

"He was—divorced a couple years ago, I think. Before he started being you." Frannie let out another long sigh. "Anyway, she wants to close it up, hold a service, like. A memorial thing, flag and the whole business. For his parents and stuff. Ma wants to go, too, and Maria—cause, I mean, Ray's been sort of adopted by us out of necessity. Christmas, Easter, all that. Ma's really broken up about it; she's got her black on for him, which is too tight but—"

"And Fraser's blocking the service?" I interrupted.

"Fraser's blocking the service big time," Frannie said. "He's like a brick wall about it—and you know I love Fraser, you know that—" She was almost pleading with me, and I nodded reassuringly, because yeah, I knew she loved Fraser. Bane of my existence, in fact. "—but he's really gotta stand aside on this. Do you know that normally it takes three years for someone who's missing to be declared dead?" Frannie demanded.

I nodded again; yeah, I knew that, too.

"Except Stella Kowalski's a lawyer," Frannie explained, "and so she filed some kind of motion based on the fact that there's testimony as to what happened to him. And she wins, right?—the judge signs the paper that says that Ray's dead, which means that everything can move to closing.
Except get this,” Frannie said, eyes widening the way they did whenever she was sharing really good gossip. “They go in to read the will? and guess who’s executioner?”


"Bingo," Frannie said. "Benton Fraser is right. And so what do you think his first thing he does as executioner is?"

"He stops the service," I muttered, shaking my head; boy, this was a mess and a half.

"He stops the service is right," Frannie said, "because it turns out that one of the executioner's jobs —"

"Executor," I muttered.

"—whatever," Frannie said, irritably, "is to arrange for the funeral and stuff, except that if Fraser says no then it's no go. Boy, you should see Stella Kowalski, she's just furious about it, cause after all her hard work—"

"Has anybody considered that Fraser might be right?" I shot back. "Huh?"

"Right?" Frannie looked sort of shocked. "Whatya mean right?"

"That maybe Kowalski's not dead. That maybe he's holed up somewhere and—"

"Rayyyyy." Frannie's voice had hit that whining place that only dogs could hear. "Okay, look, I get it, you've been talking to Fraser, but clearly nobody's told you the other side of it. Nobody wants it to be true, believe me, but we got evidence, mountains of evidence, buckets of—"

"Okay, yeah—that's what I'm here to see," I told her, suddenly seeing exactly why Fraser'd suggested the strategy that he did. Man, things had really changed around here if he didn't even have Frannie on his side. "I figured if I could see the evidence, I could maybe sit down with him, convince him, you know?"

Frannie smiled at me, sorta warmly, sorta sadly. "Okay, yeah—that would be a really good thing, there. He'll listen to you. Maybe only to you."

"Can you get me the stuff?" I asked her. "You got keys?"

"Sure I got keys," Frannie said and pulled a huge ring of keys from her belt.

"Let me see what you've got in evidence lockup," I told her, "and then I'll do my best to convince Fraser of the truth. Okay?"

"Okay," my sister said, nodding. "You just wait here."

I waited, and fifteen minutes later the door slammed open and Frannie reappeared, wheeling a dolly stacked with battered-looking boxes. "Man, you weren't kidding," I muttered, running to help her.

"I look like a comedian to you?" Frannie snapped. She pushed the dolly to a stop and passed the back of her hand across her forehead. "I'm not kidding here, Ray. Fraser's wrong on this one."

It felt like some sort of heresy for her to say it—Fraser's wrong—and I suddenly realized that I didn't want Fraser to be wrong, that I really needed Fraser not to be wrong about this. Because I
needed Kowalski not to be dead. But now, confronted with those three big boxes, I felt my first sickening wave of doubt.

"Fraser's usually not so off base," I said quietly, trying to calm myself down inside.

"I know," Frannie said. "It's really weird. It's just how he was with Ray—they were really weird together, the two of them."

"Thick as thieves, huh?" I asked.

"Sure," Frannie said with a shrug, "or at each other's throats."

I felt my mouth fall open. "You're kidding me."

"Again with the comedian thing," Frannie made a face at me. "I'm dead serious here. They were like very—very—" she seemed to fumble for the word. "Tempesting. Up and down like a yo-yo, feast or famine, come hell or high water—"

I was trying to get this into my head. "You're saying they fought or—?"

"Like cats and dogs," Frannie confirmed.

I tried to picture Fraser being the cat to anyone's dog or vice versa, and found I couldn't. "I just can't picture Fraser fighting—"

"Yeah, well, Kowalski could fight with a rock," Frannie retorted. "It was like a gift of his, God rest his soul. Don't get me wrong," she added, raising her hand. "It wasn't always like that. Just it wasn't like before, when it was you and him. You and Frase always got on pretty easy-like, where with Ray it was always like...I dunno. Either they were glued together or they were all prickly and yelling." She shrugged again. "Really weird, like I said—so I mean, I'm not stunned that Fraser's being weird now that Ray's dead. They probably had, you know—unresolved issues."

She nodded at me sagely, and I narrowed my eyes at her. "You've been taking psychology, haven't you?"

"Yeah," Frannie said, beaming at me, "at the community college last semester—can you tell?"

I sighed and hauled the first box onto the table. "Gimme a while with this stuff, Frannie, okay? And if you see Fraser, tell him to come in here, pronto—but don't tell anyone else I'm around."

"Right, Ray. Okay," she said and disappeared.

Not only was there a lot of stuff, but it was organized—everything properly bagged, tagged, and indexed, if maybe getting dusty. A cop killing, I thought grimly; nothing like it to boost efficiency and organization around a station.

One gray flannel shirt in a plastic bag. Large pale pink stain on the front, diluted from the water. I felt the hairs on my arms stand on end—this felt like the closest I had gotten to Kowalski so far. Even being in his apartment and his car hadn't given me this sort of eerie feeling.

I stared at that shirt for a long time, and then made myself put it aside. Pages and pages of DNA reports, bagged hairs, bagged fibers—I held one tiny ziplocked bag to the light. Golden blond, darker at the root. Dyed, maybe—who the hell was I dealing with, here?

The coshes were in the box, not bagged, the blood dry on them and crusting off. Also a chair leg from one of Kowalski's chairs, and this had blood on it, too—Kowalski's again. Another bag
brought up a large jagged shard of glass, from a broken picture frame maybe, and this had blood on it that was not Kowalski's. Kowalski's fingerprints were on the wider edge, though, and I found myself cheering him on, even though this fight was way long over. You grab that glass, Kowalski. Slit their fucking throats. I made a note to myself to ask Fraser if they'd ever found out who it was that Kowalski'd managed to cut.

I was putting the glass shard down on the table when I heard the door open. "Bout time you got here," I said, and looked up.

It wasn't Fraser.

For the second time that day my heart stopped. The car had been good—the car had been really, really good—but this was on a whole other level of good. The woman standing before me was the most drop-dead gorgeous creature I had ever seen: pale blond hair, good cut; an excellent suit, powder blue silk—Spring collection Armani, it looked like; a fantastic figure: great breasts, slim waist, and long legs to boot. Even her shoes were good—alligator, my favorite, maybe 2 1/2 or 2 3/4 inch heels, plus with pointy toes, Italian style. Plus she smelled nice: I was in love, I was in love.

Gah.

"Hi," I said stupidly, then showed her a gigantic smile, like I was an idiot child.

She showed me a smile in return, but hers was quick and tight and nervous—like maybe she was scared my inner idiot child was gonna bite her or something. "Hi—do you have a minute? I wanted to talk to you."

"Sure!" I said. "Yeah!" Talk? I could talk. I could talk all day and all night if she wanted—music, art, you name it. I could talk till I was blue. "Come on in."

She shut the door behind her softly, then took a step into the room on her high heels. "You're Ray Vecchio, aren't you? The real Ray Vecchio?"

"Real, one-hundred percent Ray Vecchio," I said, resisting the urge to thump my chest. "Completely authentic. You can check with my Ma."

Her pale pink lips twitched at this, and I felt like I'd just won an Olympic gold medal. "It's nice to meet you," she said, extending out her pale, gorgeously manicured hand. It was soft and warm and I wanted to rub it all over my face. "I'm Stella Kowalski."

The world stopped, tilted, flipped over entirely, then went totally black. An opera started playing in my head, some wild dark thing full of shrieking sopranos, because it was the part where the hero slits his throat with a piece of broken glass after finding out that the woman of his dreams was married to his heroic dead warrior rival. Or maybe it was Tosca, I dunno.

I held on to her soft hand as the world gradually settled back into place around me. "Oh," I said, and hey, that wasn't a bad first remark considering I'd just lost my fucking mind.

She looked at me with her huge, beautiful blue eyes. Hell, this was destiny. This was kismet. This was—oh, wait, the lady was saying something. "I know that you told your sister not to say you were here. And I don't want to get her into trouble—but she said you were here to help, that you were going to help me."

"I'll do everything I can," I told her, squeezing her hand reassuringly, and then I steeled myself for what I had to say. "I'm so sorry for your loss, Mrs. Kowalski—"
"Stella," she interrupted. "Please call me Stella. Or Ms. Kowalski if you must," Stella added briskly, "but I haven't been Mrs. Kowalski for years now. In fact," she said, and gave my hand a reassuring little squeeze this time, which sent sparks straight up my arm, "I'm mainly trying to arrange things for Ray's parents. I'm still very close to his mother Barbara, and they've been—well, devastated by this, as you might imagine."

"Yeah, I'm sure," I murmured.

She took a deep breath and blew it out; even her breath was sweet. "I know you're Constable Fraser's friend," she said, sounding really nervous now, and I got why: like Frannie, she was about to commit heresy, and was waiting for the lightning bolt. "And he was a good friend to Ray when he was alive, but—" She bit her lip, and I stared at her mouth, totally entranced. "Well, he's just not helping," she burst out, finally. "He thinks he is, but he isn't—he's just holding everything up, making everyone suffer. How are Ray's parents supposed to go on with their lives? We need closure. We need to move on."

I felt my throat close up, felt ripped up inside by warring impulses. On the one hand, I wanted Fraser to be right, for Kowalski not to be dead. On the other hand, suddenly the thing I wanted most on this earth was for Stella Kowalski to be able to go on with her life, and for that life to somehow include me.

"I'll do everything I can," I repeated, at a total loss for what else to say. "I mean, I'll do my best to try to...move things on, one way or the other."

That was pretty vague, but Stella smiled at me and seemed to take it in the right spirit. "Thanks. I really appreciate it," she said. "And I'm happy to meet you, I'm just sorry it has to be like—"

She blinked suddenly, furiously, and then seemed to wobble a little—and I shifted my hands quickly, grabbing hold of her at wrist and waist. "Hey, you all right?" I asked quickly. "You okay?"

She nodded quickly, her face flushed. "Yes, I'm fine; I'm sorry; I'm stupid," she said tersely, almost angrily. "I didn't notice you were working on—" She raised her hand and pointed at the table, and I glanced over my shoulder and saw Kowalski's bloodstained shirt wrapped in plastic.

"No, I'm sorry," I said, stifling a groan. "I should have been more—"

"No, I'm sorry!" Stella insisted. "You're just doing your job, Detective—"

"Ray," I blurted, and felt my face get hot. I wished my name was something else, anything else. Phil or something. Shithead, even.

"Ray," Stella acknowledged, averting her eyes. God, this was so fucking unfortunate. She pulled away from me, showed me another nervous smile, and then turned for the door. I watched her as she stopped, hand already gripping the knob, and looked over her shoulder at me. "You know," she said, and there was something in her tone that I couldn't quite get—a forced casualness or something. "Ray's real first name was Stanley, except he hated it." Her nervous smile had gone sort of wry. "Ray was his middle name, actually," she said as her parting shot, and there was a message for me there, I knew it.

When Fraser finally came in, I was sitting hyperventilating at the table, even sweating a little—wet and stinky at the pits. I blew out a sigh of relief toward the brown back of his leather jacket as Fraser turned to shut the door behind him. I was glad it was just him—any more visions of loveliness today and my goddamned heart was gonna give out.
"Where the hell have you been?" I demanded, wiping another layer of sweat off my forehead. "I thought you were gonna help me with this."

Fraser's smile was as tense and forced as Stella Kowalski's. "I'm sorry," he said, pulling a chair up and sitting next to me, "but I've been forced to endure a number of rather earnest, well-meaning speeches—"

Yeah, well, now I knew what that was all about. "You didn't tell me you were executor," I accused. "You didn't tell me you were holding up Kowalski's services—"

"I'm executor," Fraser said with an ironic tip of his head. "I'm holding up the services."

My heart filled with a vision of Stella Kowalski. "Why?"

"Because. There's. No. Body," Fraser said slowly and distinctly, like I really was an idiot child—and maybe now I could see Fraser arguing with Mr. Stanley Kowalski, he of the beautiful taste in cars and women. Cause Fraser'd sure gotten snippier since I'd been away, or was I just remembering him wrong?

I waved my hand at the boxes. "There's a lot of evidence here, Fraser."

"Yes, I know, Ray." Fraser had that total evenness to his tone that meant he was very highly pissed. "Let me remind you that I found most of it." He slipped his jacket off his shoulders and backwards onto the chair back before leaning forward and heaving another brown Kowalski box onto the table. "There are a couple of things that I wanted to show you—"

The question I filed away from before sprang back to mind. "Did you ever find out who Kowalski cut?"

Fraser shot me a satisfied look. "Charlie Fish. The scar was on his body when we recovered it—well over six inches, I'm afraid."

*Good for Stanley.* Fraser had reached into one of the boxes, produced a small ziplock baggie, and flickered it back and forth. "Fibers," he said. "From the trunk of Charlie Fish's car." I nodded and rolled my hand at him, encouraging him to continue. "Rope," he told me, dropping it onto the table, "matching a coil that was found in Ray's utility closet at home. Rope that Joey Carbone says was used to bind Ray's arms and legs as they took him down to the car."

I shrugged. "So?"

"So Ray was tied up when they took him to the car," Fraser said, using his brand-new 'I'm-talking-to-an-idiot' voice.

"Again—so?" I asked. "You gotta figure that they'd tie him up, Fraser, especially if he was still conscious, which he probably was—"

Apparently I was still disappointing him; he reached out and grabbed Kowalski's plastic-bagged shirt, dropped it in front of me with a thwack, and then sat back in his chair and stared at me.

"Well?"

You know, I could see why maybe Stanley would have wanted to smack him around now and then. "Well?" I repeated, annoyed that my brain wasn't clicking right, except then suddenly it did click right and I got it. "Wait, whoa," I said, sitting up straight. "What is he, Houdini?"

Fraser nodded approvingly at my deduction. "Exactly," he said, frowning down at the shirt. "How does Ray's shirt come off in the water if his hands are tied together?"
I put my elbows onto the table and stared down at the bagged shirt myself. "All right, well there's gotta be some explanation..."

"I'd love to hear it," Fraser said.

"Charlie untied him before he threw him in the lake," I suggested.

"And just why would he do that? Surely he'd sink faster if he were trussed up."

I had a sudden brainstorm. "Maybe he wanted it to look like suicide! In case the body was found—"

"Suicide." Fraser seemed to think about this. "Interesting theory. So Ray, presumably suffering from some sort of extreme identity crisis, destroys his own apartment in a frenzy of self-loathing and writes 'Where Is Ray Vecchio?' upon the wall as a parting gesture." I groaned and put my head down on the table, but Fraser didn't let up on me. "Perhaps that was by way of a suicide note. Or no—I have it!—no doubt it was the proverbial cry for help—"

"All right, stop. I didn't think it through," I muttered.

"I should say not. In fact, I'm finding this whole experience very frustrating," Fraser said, crossing his arms. "This case of all cases, everyone's thinking seems to have taken on the razor sharpness of suet pudding."

I sighed. "Maybe the ropes disintegrated in the water—"

This earned me a dismissive head shake. "Rope swells in water—if anything, Ray's bonds would have gotten tighter. No."

I sat up and glared at him. "So you explain it."

Sonofabitch did, too. "Ray never went into the water. His shirt went into the water without him."

Fine. I decided to go on the offensive. "I'm assuming you pointed this out to the correct authorities."

"Yes. Of course."

"And what was their explanation of the Case of the Incredible Sinking Shirt?" I demanded.

"Ah, yes—well, it's a masterpiece of its kind," Fraser said bitterly. "They simply concluded that Ray wasn't actually wearing the shirt that day."

Now I was really confused. "So what's it doing in the lake?"

"I asked the same question. The reigning theory," and I don't think I'd ever heard Fraser drawl a word out with such sarcasm before, "is that the shirt was brought along as a bandage, to staunch blood somewhere on Ray's body. Thereby accounting both for its free-floating nature and the presence of Ray's blood on the fabric." Suddenly Fraser slammed his hand down on the table so hard that I jumped, and part of me was on the verge of running for it, cause I'd never seen Fraser so angry before. "Except that's ridiculous. Preposterous. Either you're trying to kill a man or you're not—you can't have it both ways! I don't understand this business of staunching the wounds of a man you're determined to kill. It doesn't make sense psychologically—you're either murderous or solicitous, you can't be both."

I raised my palms. "All right. What do you think happened?"
Fraser blew out a breath. "I think Ray was wearing the shirt, and it got bloody when they beat him. I think he was still wearing it when they tied him up, dragged him downstairs, and put him into the trunk of Charlie's car—a fiber match proves the shirt was in the trunk. And then later..."

Fraser looked into the mid-distance thoughtfully, like he was picturing the scenario in his mind. "Later the ropes are cut, and the shirt is stripped off Ray and thrown into the lake precisely to create the effect that it did create—that Ray was dead. That's what Charlie Fish told his men, remember. That he'd killed Ray and thrown his body into Lake Michigan—"

"But why would he do that?" I exploded. "I thought the whole idea of his maybe keeping Kowalski alive was to trade him back for me, to have a card to play back with the cops—"

"Yes," Fraser interrupted. "That's what I believe. That's exactly what I think he did. But consider what actually happened, Ray—Charlie Fish was subsequently shot by one of his own men." Fraser gnawed at his lip and considered for a moment. "I think this whole situation is motivated by fear—Charlie's fear. I think that Charlie Fish was getting very nervous about his own status and power within his little corner of the mafia. I think that's why he took your investigation—Ray Vecchio's investigation—so much to heart: it was a sign of his own weakness that you were daring to investigate him so openly, you who by all accounts should have been terrified of him.

I think he brought his men to Ray's apartment intending to make a grand display of power—he was going to kill you, and show his men that he was capable of killing you, thereby cowing them back into submission and proving that he was still on top, the big man in the organization. Except you weren't you—the door opens and it's not Ray Vecchio on the other side, but Ray Kowalski. So what does Charlie do? Does he kill Ray Kowalski openly, in front of his men? No. Does he order them to kill him? No, we know he doesn't. So why not?"

I wasn't gonna take any chances on a stupid answer. I just waited.

"If Ray is dead," Fraser said carefully, "then the story makes no sense. Why send the men away and murder Ray by himself? Much better to either kill Ray in front of them as an intimidation tactic, or order them to do it, thereby binding the group together in the shared murder. But if Ray isn't dead, the story clarifies itself," Fraser mused. "Why send the men away? Because he isn't going to kill Ray, and he doesn't want them to know that. Why throw Ray's shirt, and whatever else we haven't found, into the water? To support the story he told his men. Why haven't we found Ray in any of the obvious places? Because Charlie Fish didn't put him in any of the obvious places, or use any of the obvious resources he had at his disposal. And that gives Charlie every card to play: his men think Ray's dead, but Charlie can pull him out of hiding at any time and trade him, return him, barter his life in some way if the going gets rough. Except it backfires," Fraser concluded quietly. "Because Ray's not just a cop, he's an undercover cop, and he's an undercover cop covering for a man who's in his own sensitive undercover operation with the mafia. The heat comes down, the men play their cards, and they shoot Charlie Fish in an attempt to placate the police. Charlie's removed, Joey Carbone tells the story, and everyone's happy, police and thieves alike, case closed."

I let out a long, slow whistle. "That's a hell of a story, Fraser."

"Yes, I know."

"I mean, it's nuts," I explained.

Fraser acknowledged this with a slight nod of his head. "Yes, I know," he repeated. "It's completely nuts. Still," he added, "you wouldn't expect any less from me, would you?" and I had to admit that he had a point.
We spent a little more time looking over evidence, then planned an exit that was the reverse of our entrance. Fraser would go out first, drawing everyone's attention, and then wait for me in the car.

Fraser pulled on his leather jacket and surveyed the interrogation room briskly; everything was neatly packed and stacked, the boxes all loaded up again on the dolly. "All right," he said. "I'll meet you downstairs."

Ray sighed softly against my ear and his muscles relaxed; he was easing up, trying to pull away from me. I felt my back come away from the door—but this was intolerable. I wasn't ready, I couldn't be seen like this, I couldn't possibly let him see me like—

I clutched hard at his arms, keeping him close, refusing to let him back away. He resisted, trying to put distance between us, but I steeled myself and kept us rooted together. I wouldn't let him gain the distance. I would not let him see my face until I'd composed it.

He tried to twist his head to the side, but I leaned forward and moved with him, keeping our faces in strict and perfect parallel. Ray's movements became tighter and more frantic—we swayed like dancers—and then he shoved at me with a sticky hand and crammed a foot's worth of space between us. But that was enough. Too much, in fact.

"You're an asshole," I blurted.

Even in the darkness, I could see a spasm of shock cross his face. "You weren't supposed to let me." He was wide-eyed, and seemed almost scared. "You weren't supposed to—"

He turned and made for the door, and then stopped short in front of it, like maybe he'd forgotten something and couldn't remember what it was. "You've got everything," I assured him. "And I've got your scarf, so—"

I shut up, because Fraser wasn't responding; in fact it was like he hadn't registered the sound of my voice. Instead, he just stood there, staring at the door, and after a moment he lifted his hand and pressed his palm against it, like he was trying to push it open, except it wasn't a swing door and it didn't open that way anyway. The damn door opened in.

Slowly I got to my feet, wondering what was up. "Fraser?" I said, louder, but again he didn't answer. It occurred to me that maybe he needed a moment to collect himself before venturing out into the bullpen and withstanding another round of speeches about how he really ought to let Stella bury Stanley, or at least whatever it was that was left of him. Bury his shirt or whatever.

It was weird to see Fraser so beat, because most of my memories were of him being damn near invincible—the guy who could surf for half an hour on the tailgate of a truck in the mud and fall off with nary a hair out of place. Fraser was supposed to be perfect, goddammit—even tracking down his father's killers he was almost like some sort of justice machine. But now he seemed sort of bent, like there was a weight on his back.

The case was freakin' getting to him—and I felt an irrational stab of jealousy against Mr. Stanley Kowalski, both on my own behalf and that of the rest of the free world. Cause who the hell was he, anyway, this Mr. Kowalski, to get Benton Fraser all twisted up like this? Or was it just that Fraser hadn't managed to solve this particular case to his satisfaction—that Kowalski was the one man that the Mountie'd failed to get?

"Fraser!" I shouted, and this time Fraser's head jerked over his shoulder.

"Sorry, Ray, did you say something?"

Now that I had his attention I didn't know what the hell to say. "Better get a move on."
"Indeed, yes," Fraser said quietly. He straightened up, dropped his hand to the knob, and passed through the door into the hallway.

I found myself pacing the room back and forth while I waited, trying to process. Rope and bits of fiber. Dyed blond hair. Live blond hair—golden and gorgeous and brushing Ms. Kowalski's shoulders. Bloody shirts and jags of glass and Fraser with his head bowed and his hand pressed to the door, deaf to the world. My sister doing jujitsu, Fraser stopping the funeral, Kowalski tied up with rope and maybe drowning, maybe not—

I glanced down at my watch and turned for the door; I'd waited long enough, and now I needed some goddamned air. Head down and scarf up around my mouth, I strode down the hallway for the exit and—kismet, destiny—ran smack into Stella Kowalski again, nearly knocking her off her gorgeous alligator heels. She opened her mouth to yell at me, stopped when she saw who I was, and then I grabbed her arms and blurted, before I lost my nerve, "You wanna have dinner with me?"

Her blue eyes widened with something that looked a lot like shock, and for a second I felt like the scum of the earth—just leap on the poor widow, why don't you? And then she blinked twice and whispered, "Yes, all right," and the whole grimy bullpen disappeared around me. "What time?"

"Eight?" I asked.

She glanced furtively around to make sure no one was listening and then said, "All right. Eight."

"Where should I pick you up?"

"Here," she replied. "I'll be working late," and suddenly the bullpen crashed back in around us. "Eight o'clock, then," Stella repeated, and then she was past me and moving down the hallway. I had to stop myself from dancing down the stairs.

Maybe it was whatever he saw on my face, but Fraser didn't let me drive this time; at my approach, he himself slid into the driver's side of that bad-boy GTO. I guess that was fair, because where my head was I'd probably have crashed it. In fact, I was so lost in replaying the scene upstairs, which in my head was playing in wide-screen Dolby with surround sound ("You wanna have dinner with me?" I asked, against the setting sun, the wind dramatically whipping at the folds of my flowing overcoat. She raised her long, white gloved hand to me and I kissed it. "Yes, all right," she said, and the wind blew her hair back. "What time?") that I didn't even notice we'd pulled up.

I jerked my head to stare out the window; I had absolutely no idea where I was. "Where are we?"

Fraser'd switched the engine off, and as an afterthought, had pocketed the keys. "The Consulate. I need to stop in and—"

"It is not," I protested, ducking my head and taking a second look at the building.

Fraser sighed and opened the door. "You're right, it's not. My idea of a joke, I'm afraid." He stepped out of the car and then bent down to pop his head in. "Wait here, I'll be right back."

I watched him as he passed through the wrought iron gate, jogged up the few steps and disappeared into the building. The sign outside said, "Canadian Consulate."

Okay, so I guessed they moved it.
Two minutes later the reason for the pit stop became evident. Diefenbaker bounded down the steps ahead of Fraser, then ran to my door, leapt up on his hind legs, and began licking the window. I hooted with laughter and pressed my hands and face to the glass. A moment later, Fraser opened the driver's side door, pulled down the seat, and called for him. Dief dashed round the car and hopped into the back seat to lick my face in person.

"You stupid mutt!" I yelled by way of greeting. "It's so good to see you!" I grabbed him by the muzzle and shook his face from side to side. "Look, he remembers me."

"Of course he does," Fraser said. He started the car, pulled us back onto the street, and turned the car south.

IV. South Side

Dief fussled over me for a few minutes and then went to sprawl out on Kowalski's back seat. I turned my attention back to Fraser. "They don't let you keep him at the safehouse?"

"They didn't, no," Fraser replied distractedly; he was focused on driving. "Not while I was an official visitor. Now that I'm no longer under police protection, I don't see the problem."

"No police protection for Dief, huh?" I asked, and Dief barked in support of my outrage. And then I realized where Fraser was taking us—the south lakeshore—and that knocked all the joke right out of me.

Ten minutes later, Fraser had us parked at a beat-up old harbor. When he turned in his seat I thought he was gonna talk to me, but instead he turned all the way around and addressed himself to Dief.

"Diefenbaker," he said, and Dief barked to show he was paying attention. "Show us where Ray is."

Diefenbaker stared at him for a moment, and suddenly I realized where Fraser'd gotten his "I'm-talking-to-an-idiot" look from. Then the dog looked at me and let out a bark.

"No, not him," Fraser said testily. "The other one."

Dief paced in a nervous little circle around Kowalski's back seat and then let out another sharp woof.

"Glad to hear it," Fraser said and opened the car door. He held the seat down for Dief, who bolted out and took off at a run. We got out of the car and watched him blur away for a second before following him down one of the smaller side piers. "I want you to see this," Fraser murmured to me, his eyes locked on Diefenbaker as we walked. "I want to see what you make of this."

Diefenbaker had run straight down to the very end of the dock, and now he crouched there, staring out over the expanse of Lake Michigan, barking his head off. Jesus Christ. I looked at Dief, then looked out onto the endless expanse of choppy gray waves—there was a wind today, a bad one, the kind that cuts right through you.

This was not a good place to die, I thought, shivering violently in my overcoat.

Fraser didn't even look cold; he was just looking down at Dief sadly. Dief, for his part, looked like he wanted to leap out into the water—and for a second I let myself picture it. Dief diving and resurfacing, then swimming furiously for shore dragging the bloated body of—
"So what do you make of it?" Fraser's voice was quiet.

"God, Fraser," I said, feeling agonized. "Not good, this is so not good, here—"

Fraser narrowed his eyes at me. "So you think what they thought. That he's down there, in the water."

I wheeled on him, flinging my arms in the air. "Fraser, even the wolf thinks he's down there in the water—where do you think he is?"

Fraser turned toward the lake—and then slowly, slowly, he raised his arm and pointed out, over the water. "Lake Michigan is sixteen hundred and sixty miles in circumference," he said softly, still staring out toward the horizon. "Most of that is beachland, of course, but obviously there's been a lot of development. Still, I have to think that Charlie Fish would want Ray close to hand, somewhere nearby where he could get to him quickly if the need arose—"

"Fraser," I said. "I don't follow."

Fraser didn't answer me directly; instead, he crouched down by the very edge of the dock and rubbed his hand along the wooden planks facing the water's edge. A moment later he raised his hand to his nose, sniffed it, and then licked it. I winced, but Fraser was already nodding to himself as he heaved himself up.

"I think they went in a boat," Fraser said. "Wherever they went, they got there by boat," and then he turned on his heel and began walking away from me, up the pier, toward the car.

I gave him a couple of minutes to himself, and then followed him back to the car. Fraser was in the driver's seat, staring straight out the windshield. I tapped my knuckles on the window; he didn't look at me, but a moment later the glass whirred down.

"You okay?" I asked, and Fraser jerked a tight nod and tightened his hands on the wheel. "Okay," I said, and lifted my head to stare out at the lake.

"That's all I know," Fraser said finally, and his voice was dead in a way that sort of frightened me. "That's as far as I've gotten."

"We'll need maps," I said, looking down at him.

"Yes."

"Computers, too—computers would help. Maybe look at harbor records, shipping records, boat licenses—"

"I don't have any of those things."

"We'll get 'em. I'll get 'em for you."

"Yes. Okay. Thank you, Ray," Fraser said.

V. Downtown

There wasn't much of anything we could do after that. Only place still open by this time was the station, so we pulled over at a pay phone and I called over there. I got my sister on the line, who herself was on her way out. I asked her about maps of the lake, and she said there were some
around that she could probably "borrow" for me; she'd look, anyway. I asked her about the computers but hit more of a wall there—I didn't have a password anymore, and while Frannie did have one, she didn't have enough clearance to do what we wanted.

I put my hand over the receiver and had a brief conference about it with Fraser—who at the station might help us? Huey? Dewey? Welsh? Fraser shook his head at each one and I sighed: I thought we'd been outsiders before, but we were real outside now. Act first, report later suddenly wasn't looking so good as a philosophy. I didn't have any status at the moment, no badge, no gun, nothing, and what with Fraser's link to the RCMP cut off, we were finding out real fast why civilians didn't do so well at investigations.

I lifted the receiver to my mouth again. "Okay, Frannie. Grab what you can, okay? Meet you outside in twenty minutes?" She agreed and I hung up the phone.

"Hey, some of this will be public domain anyway," I told Fraser, trying to be encouraging—which was weird, me encouraging Fraser. He nodded, still looking sort of glum. Personally, I thought he was being overly cynical about the situation, because I'd seen Fraser in operation, and on charm alone he could usually get anyone to give him practically everything, particularly if the person in charge was a chick. "Tomorrow we can go to the public offices and do it the old fashioned way—by hand. People have to register property, Fraser. They pay taxes, collect rents—"

Fraser seemed to shake off his mood by a sheer act of will. "You're right, of course. There will be records—it's just a matter of putting our backs into it. And now there are two of us to do the work."

We went back to the car with a sense of shared determination, though somewhere in the back of my head I kept hearing Fraser's voice saying: sixteen hundred and sixty miles in circumference. Though yeah, okay, most of that was just rocks. But still, face it, there wasn't a whole lot of hope here unless we had some sort of brainstorm.

Frannie, bless her, was waiting for us at the corner with a bunch of rolls of paper under her arm. "This is what I could get," she said, passing them to me through the window of the car. "Even this I had to explain by saying I was interested in studying geography, which nobody even wanted to hear about, the bastards." She leaned down into the window and grinned at me, then looked past me at Fraser. "Heya, Frase. How're you holdin' up?"

"I'm all right, Francesca," Fraser replied. "Thank you kindly for asking."

"You gotta let it go, you know," Frannie told him, the evening wind whipping her hair around as she stood in the cross-draft of the intersection. "You gotta let Stella move ahead with—"

Fraser actually interrupted her. "I appreciate your input," he said, just as I asked, "Can we drop you home, Frannie?"

"Nah, I got a date," she said, then grinned teasingly at me. "Don't tell Ma."

"I ain't talking to Ma, yet," I said in all honesty. "I'm layin' low for a while."

"Well, enjoy your lowness," Frannie said, and stepped away from the car. "Don't lose those maps or I'll get fired."

We turned toward home, me clutching the rolls of paper in my lap. I figured this was as good a time as any to mention my evening plans to Fraser. "Hey," I said, nervously. "Speaking of dates, and speaking of Stella—"
That was enough to make even Fraser take his eyes from the road, though his face was carefully blank as he looked at me. "You have a date?" he asked, sounding as near to incredulous as Fraser ever sounded. "With ASA Kowalski?"

"Yeah," I said, and shrugged, trying to make it seem as casual as I can make it. "Just dinner. I just wanna talk to her a little."

"Hm," Fraser said, and returned his eyes to the road.

"What—hm?" I asked, defensive maybe because of my guilty conscience.

"Nothing."

"What nothing?" I pressed.

"Nothing," Fraser repeated, still staring forward.

VI. Near West

Surprising me not at all, Fraser instantly took charge of the maps when we got back to the house, spreading them out on the kitchen table as he put up the water for tea. I sighed and took myself upstairs; I wanted a shower and a shave and a change of clothes. I found some extra towels in the closet and settled in for the longest, hottest shower I could stand. I felt like I wanted to wash the day off me, maybe wash away some of the guilt and the creepy-bad visions of dead Kowalski before I saw Stella again. I felt a lot better when I got out. I went back into my room and put on the best suit I had—the suit I had on my back when they pulled me out of Vegas. A clean shirt, good cufflinks, my gold watch and a silk tie—and I had some of the old spark back—just a little Languistini in my Vecchio, which felt really fine. I still had one pair of good shoes left, too, so I brushed these up and put them on. Picture complete, and I stared at myself in the mirror with some satisfaction.

She'd love me. How could she possibly resist me? How could anyone?

I slung my jacket over my shoulder, feeling like a hero in one of those great old movies of the forties. I could even feel the strut in my step.

When I pushed through the swing door into the gloomy kitchen, Fraser was sitting staring down at the kitchen table, just like when I first saw him—had that only been yesterday? For a second I thought he was studying the maps, but then my eyes focused better and I saw that he was looking over something else, some object he was turning over in his hands. He didn't look up, and I took another step closer to the table, squinting, trying to see what he had there.

And then it came clear: he was holding a pair of glasses. Round tan plastic frames, really thick, with the left lens spiderwebbed and cracked. And I didn't have to ask whose glasses those were, and a second later, I realized that there were other things I didn't have to ask now, either. Because the way he was holding those glasses told me a lot—told me damn near everything, in fact. Or maybe there'd been bits and pieces of it coming to me all day and it took this to force me to put them together.

"Where'd you get 'em?" I asked, though I thought I pretty much knew the answer to this.

Fraser didn't look up. "I stole them," he said, staring down at them. "From evidence lock-up. Not today," he added, almost gently, glancing up at me. "I wouldn't have jeopardized your sister's trust in you."
I was really lost for what to say, here; I felt like I’d seen something I shouldn’t, which I now couldn’t unsee. I didn’t know what he wanted to tell me. I didn’t know if I wanted to know anything.

But I couldn’t just walk out and go on my date with Stella; walking out was just—cold. "You and Kowalski?"

Fraser turned the broken glasses over yet again. "Yeah."

"Long time?"

"Long enough."

"I'm sorry, Fraser," I said.

"Me too. I'm sorry, too."

And I went off, feeling really helpless, to go and phone for a taxi.

**Part Three**

I have no vision, only hindsight—which is a damned inferior thing, maybe even a curse. But hindsight is my only connection to Ray, and so I indulge in it constantly. Rethinking, revisiting, looking back...

To the beginning—but when *was* the beginning, really? I’ve thought about this for hours. Tempting, I think, to mark it from the first day he touched me, that warm October day when we found the man who’d murdered Ms. O'Reilly's sister-in-law. Except that wasn’t a beginning by *intention*, and in any case it wasn’t a beginning either of us could be proud of.

Much better, I think, to date it from that evening in late December when I tried to slip out of bed to return to the Consulate. Ray muttered something in his sleep and tightened his arm around me. "Don't," he said—and I didn’t, and I never did again after that. That's a nicer beginning to remember— a much nicer one, I think.

But it's a lie—it makes everything too nice, and too easy, when it was neither. *He* was neither. To remember it that way is to compress the time before that into nothingness, and in hindsight, I think it started that very first day in the bullpen, when Ray turned to face me, greeting me with open arms as if I were the stranger. In hindsight, *damned hindsight*, I can see the odd, strong fascination between us, working on us even then.

Of course, I couldn’t see that at the time. Certainly, I knew that I liked him, was intrigued by him, but even through that horrible October week when he punched me, when he touched me, I kept thinking that this must somehow be about Stella. Of course, I had *reason* to think that—Ray’d been confiding, with increasing urgency, that he intended to win her back, and for good this time. There was some talk about romantic destiny, and I distinctly remember the word *kismet* being used. I told him I thought his efforts were ill-advised, but that only made him angry, so I dropped the subject. Still, I saw him planning for his date—he bought a new suit, ordered flowers, made reservations.

I knew at a glance the next morning that it hadn't gone as he'd wanted, but he didn't volunteer any information and so I didn't ask.

She was waiting for me outside the station—not just lovely, this lady, but smart. And the smile she gave me; man, I just *had* to believe that smile was genuine, despite my name and her ex and all the
mess of it between us. I told the taxi to wait and hopped out onto the sidewalk.

She came toward me, hand extended. "Where should we go?"

"You'll have to pick it," I told her. "I've been out of town for too long; I don't even know where to go anymore."

However, I wasn't surprised when he asked me to go to the gym with him later that afternoon; Ray often felt like sparring when he was under a great deal of stress. I was happy to provide him with a partner—that much, at least, I could do to help him—but I wasn't prepared for what actually happened. Ray'd changed quickly, and was standing there, jittering nervously in warm-up as I got my gloves on. I wasn't yet wearing my helmet, and neither was he; I assumed we'd each do a bit of work with the bag before turning our attentions to each other, but in this I proved to be wrong.

I turned toward him, and suddenly, in a flash of movement, he hauled off and hit me, socking me so hard that I reeled backwards, surprised, into the padded wall of the gym. It hurt like hell, and I stared at him, baffled, my hands flying up to protect my face. But Ray just smacked his gloves together and kept moving, his sneakered feet squeaking on the mat.

"Thought you were ready," he said—and even then I knew it was a lie, knew it viscerally. But I couldn't imagine what on earth the lie meant.

"I wasn't," I replied, carefully straightening up.

"Yeah. I see that now," Ray said with a shrug. "C'mon, let's get at 'er—say, two out of three?"

I found myself wondering, as we sparred, whether perhaps he had wanted to punish me for being right about Stella. It occurred to me that he might have experienced my words as a jinx, or perhaps he'd just needed to take his frustration out on somebody, and I had been near to hand and just too tempting a target. I resolved not to say another word on the matter, come hell or high water. If Ray wanted to pursue Stella, he could pursue Stella; it was none of my business, I thought.

She suggested a restaurant in the penthouse of the Sterne building, a place that hadn't been here two years ago or I would've been a regular patron. The view from here was fantastic—there was lake on the one side, city sky on the other.

We got a table in the corner, and I appreciated the set-up; white linens, good crystal, silverware so heavy it was hard to lift. I did a weird little dance as we sat down so that I could face city-side, which maybe was selfish of me but no way could I stare at that water all night.

Stupid, of course, but at the time it seemed to make some kind of sense. Especially as Ray's renewed obsession with Stella showed no signs of abating. Two days later I kept my lips firmly pressed together as Ray told me that he was going to have another go at it—a more impromptu undertaking this time, he informed me, just showing up at her door late at night. It was the formality of the date which had done them in, he said. He was no good at this fancy dress stuff. He hated eating at stuffy restaurants. They needed to remember that they were good together, and so he felt he should play to his strengths, which he defined to me as "dancing and fucking."

"Well, good luck," I said, and went home to the Consulate.

The next morning was busy; Ray rang my office quite early to say that he'd gotten a lead on the O'Reilly murder, a horrible crime which had left the pregnant Mrs. Catherine O'Reilly stabbed to death behind the counter of the jewelry store where she worked. Her husband, Paul O'Reilly, had been utterly devastated by his loss, and so communication with the police had been maintained by
his sister, Susan.

I should, I suppose, mention that, among my many reasons for doubting the success of Ray's recent re-courtship of Stella was his very obvious attraction to Ms. Susan O'Reilly. This hadn't been the first time Ray'd been attracted to someone we'd met on a case, though there seemed to be a new desperation to his flirtation. Ms. O'Reilly was an attractive woman in her way, though I myself didn't see much there to lose one's head over. Furthermore, our continued dealings with her did little to cause me to revise my opinion: a nice lady, sincere certainly, but none too quick on the uptake. In fact, I found myself having to explain the most basic things to her two or perhaps even three times as she stared at me with her huge, cow-like eyes.

However, chacun son gout as the French say; Ray was obviously attracted. He was forever drawing her away into the most secluded corners he could find, or, when that was impossible, interposing himself between Ms. O'Reilly and myself as if he could create said secluded corner by sheer will. I found this all rather embarrassing, but resolved to maintain an attitude of patience and tolerance; we each have our foibles, after all.

Quite luckily, our morning's lead produced a genuine break in the case, and by early afternoon Ray and I had our suspect in custody—an unrepentant criminal named Andrew Parker. The case having been successfully concluded, I left it to Ray to break the good news to Ms. O'Reilly, who would then convey it to her brother, the bereaved husband.

Ms. O'Reilly's reception of the news was less than tactful on several fronts. For one thing, the enthusiasm with which she greeted the idea that we'd actually managed to capture her sister-in-law's murderer showed that she'd expected no such thing.

"You got him?" she asked, looking from one of us to the other. "You actually got the bastard?" and then, to my very great embarrassment, she threw her arms around me and kissed me quite heatedly before whirling around and hugging Ray, though sparing him the indignity of a kiss. "My God, you got him," she repeated, apparently in utter disbelief. "Thank you so much, Detectives—Detective," she amended, looking at Ray, "Constable," she added. "I can't wait to tell Paul," she said, and off she went, bouncing in a most unseemly way.

Thus was the stage set, and in hindsight, I could actually calculate the number of elements to which Ray was particularly vulnerable: the death of the young, pregnant wife; the obvious grief of the husband; the rebuff of his advances by the attractive sister-in-law. Ray seemed as upset over Susan's lack of regard as I was by her attentions, which left me hot-faced and flustered.

Into this volatile atmosphere walked Stella Kowalski. She was carrying a clipboard, and her face was set in lines of grim determination. She strode straight over to Ray and thrust her clipboard at him.

"Here," she said.

"What?" he protested.

"Sign," she said, handing him a silver pen, and he signed. "And here," she added, flipping a page, and again he signed. "Thanks," she said, "though you know, my life would be a hell of a lot easier if you'd bother to do your paperwork right the first time—"

She was still talking as Ray lifted his head and moved his eyes to my warm, still-flustered face. His own eyes had gone suddenly unreadable. They showed no trace of any of his most recent emotions: elation, lust, disappointment, anger.

"Come here, Fraser," he said. "I want to show you something."
Perhaps if I'd had a more social upbringing, a wider childhood peer group, I would have recognized the words for what they were: an ambush. I suppose it only takes one time for a child to learn that "I want to show you something" might well result in a head shoved into a toilet, or a painful twist to the nose. I, however, had had no such childhood training, and therefore followed Ray into the interrogation room quite naively, expecting to be shown something of interest.

But Ray switched off the lights with a flick of his hand as he passed through the doorway. The room was plunged into gloom as the fluorescent lights cut out, and I'd only just formulated the question, What are you doing? when he was upon me, slamming me back against the door I'd closed behind us, one rough hand covering my mouth. "Shhh," he whispered, anchoring me against the door with the weight of his body. "Don't say I never did nothing for you."

I must confess that my first reaction upon feeling Ray's hand skim the front of my trousers was pure, unadulterated shock. For a moment, I didn't know what to think; no, more accurately, for a moment I couldn't think at all. And then, as his hand tightened into a caress, I found myself quickly evaluating the different options I had for extricating myself. Violence, of course, would be the quickest way: a punch to the nose, jab to the kidney, twist of the wrist—even a knee to the groin if Ray's attentions persisted. Still, though, there was our partnership to think about—and our friendship—both of which might easily be shattered right along with Ray's nose. And there was, of course, more at stake here than friendship: I would do well, I lectured myself sternly, to remind myself that Ray Vecchio's life might well depend on my continuing to get along with this man, which would be made infinitely more difficult if I were to clobber him.

No, I concluded, perhaps violence was not the answer here. Certainly not as a first move, right out of the gate. What was called for was a somewhat less drastic form of communication, and so I started rehearsing phrases in my mind: "Ray, stop." "Ray, you mustn't." "Ray, I'm sorry, but this is utterly inappropriate."

It was right about that time that I realized, with something of a start, that whatever my mind had been thinking, my body wasn't the slightest bit interested in being extricated from this situation. In fact, my traitorous body was clearly having another conversation entirely, apparently saying, "Go, Ray!" and "Ray, don't stop," and "Ray, this is really most uncommonly delightful." I became suddenly, fully, aware that Ray's hand had actually worked its way into my trousers, had closed around me and was stroking me languorously. To my own astonishment, my body was responding fully, entirely—my heart, which seemed on the verge of exploding right out of my chest, was apparently pumping great quantities of blood due south, which was to say, Rayward. I was barely managing to get air in through my nose, as my mouth was still clamped shut under Ray's hand.

I made a desperate sounding noise, and Ray instantly removed his hand from my mouth and grabbed my tunic instead. I sucked in a lungful of air, and found that I could actually taste the scent of him—the clean sweat on his neck, the stale smoke on his clothes, the strong, sweet smell of the coffee he drank—and to my own humiliation I grew harder still. Ray noticed—well, considering what he was doing it would have been difficult for him not to notice—and sped his hand on me, grunting a little at the effort. And even as my body responded to him, practically begging for the touch of his callused fingers, I knew—viscerally—that this was as much of a punishment as that punch at the gym; that this, perhaps even more than the punch, was an attempt to knock me off my game, send me sprawling down onto the mat. Twice rebuffed by Stella, I thought dimly, as my body raced toward orgasm despite me—rebuffed by Stella, rebuffed by Susan, and somehow that was my fault, he'd made it my fault, as if I were to blame for—as if I'd wanted Susan to—as if I could possibly have controlled—never asked, never wanted—
I tried to stifle a groan as my body let go, releasing itself in Ray's hand. *Unfair,* I thought bitterly. *Unfair.* But fighting wasn't ever about fairness to Ray—he fought to win, always, and he'd gone instinctively for my weakest point. Natural enough, I knew, for my body to respond in this way, as I tended to treat sexual release as a cursory matter, rather like evacuating one's bowels or brushing one's teeth. Unsurprising, then, that my body should react so joyfully to any hand not my own, especially when the hand in question was so—and was still—

Damn it, I knew perfectly well what he was trying to do—make me lose confidence; knew perfectly well how he expected me to feel—ashamed and humiliated. This was an attempt at dominance, pure and simple, and *damn him for it,* he wasn't going to gain the edge on me that easily. His hand was slowing to a stop, each stroke teasing me with aftershocks, and my eyelids fluttered with pleasure. *Damn him.* I needed to collect myself, show him that I couldn't be cowed so—

Ray sighed softly against my ear and his muscles relaxed; he was easing up, trying to pull away from me. I felt my back come away from the door—but this was *intolerable.* I wasn't ready, I couldn't be seen like this, I couldn't possibly let him see me like—

I clutched hard at his arms, keeping him close, refusing to let him back away. He resisted, trying to put distance between us, but I steeled myself and kept us rooted together. I wouldn't let him gain the distance. I would not let him see my face until I'd composed it.

He tried to twist his head to the side, but I leaned forward and moved with him, keeping our faces in strict and perfect parallel. Ray's movements became tighter and more frantic—we swayed like dancers—and then he shoved at me with a sticky hand and crammed a foot's worth of space between us. But that was enough. Too much, in fact.

"You're an asshole," I blurted.

Even in the darkness, I could see a spasm of shock cross his face. "You weren't supposed to let me." He was wide-eyed, and seemed almost scared. "You weren't supposed to—"

"What?" I demanded.

Ray looked as if he were going to say something, and then he pressed his lips together tightly and shook his head. *Nothing.*

Well, damn if I would let it *be* nothing. I grabbed his arms—he had strong arms; fighter's arms—and shoved him back toward the table. I could see the familiar calculations in his eyes: *punch to the nose? jab to the kidney? knee to the groin?* But I wouldn't give him the chance; I was moving swiftly now, motivated by something very near rage, or at least *outrage.*

Ray's thighs hit the back of the table and he stumbled, one booted foot momentarily skidding off the ground. I confess I took advantage of that moment to seize hold of him and drag my hand across his denim-covered crotch. *He was hard,* and if my face didn't register any emotion it was because I was too surprised to react; I hadn't expected that, not in the least. To the extent to which I'd been thinking, I'd had some idea of violating his person as he'd violated mine—turnabout, at least, was fair play. But as to finding *him* in a state of sexual arousal? That was unthinkable, and lucky, and *obvious*—obvious, of course. Ray was the one who'd been feeling sexually frustrated; that was the *cause* of this whole mess after all.

Stupid. How stupid I was, in hindsight; how blind both to his motivations and my own. I had everything precisely backwards, and I would continue to have it backwards for some time to come. Even now, with the evidence literally in hand, I could do nothing but extract my own, mindless vengeance. He wanted to play boy-games; well, I could play boy-games. There was
such a thing as forgiveness, but we were far past that and into some foggier moral realm of "do unto Ray as Ray has done unto you."

So I did; I trapped him there against the table and stroked him to orgasm with quick efficiency, shocked at myself even as I was doing it. Ray screwed his eyes shut and let me, gasping and grimacing until it was over. Suddenly my hand was wet with him and I drew it away and reached for my handkerchief.

"Are we quits now?" I asked as I wiped off my hand.

Ray sagged back against the table, seemingly exhausted. "Yeah," he said, gasping. "We're done."

We weren't done, of course; not even a little. In fact, that's what marks this as the beginning, however unintentional, however badly we both behaved. At the time, as I turned the doorknob and stepped back into the brightly lit station hallway, I was sure that this was a one-time occurrence—some odd game of chicken that Ray and I had had to play at this point in our friendship. In hindsight, of course, this was simply the first time, the first go-around, the first permutation of a much longer and complex game.

"...in public service," Stella said, her long fingers twining around her wine glass. She shrugged, very prettily. "I like the rush of it, really playing hardball with criminals, cops, other lawyers. I think I also liked defying everyone's expectations of me: my parents', Ray's..."

"They thought you'd be Stella, Dainty Girl Lawyer? " I asked, and she smiled.

"Something like that. Though who ever knew what was going on in Ray's head," she added with a soft snort. "God bless him," she added, almost deferentially, "but he had all the self-access of a brick wall."

What I didn't realize at the time was that, having done it, the possibility suddenly existed of us doing it again. Ray and I had, however inadvertently, put something new into the world—we'd created a space, an option, an opportunity—and having done so, we would almost inevitably avail ourselves of it. Sex between us was no longer potential; it was actual; and that turned out to be a very different thing.

What was even stranger was that this bizarre incident didn't seem to alter our friendship one bit—which in hindsight, of course, shows exactly how bizarre our friendship was. After the first rush of anger and emotion had passed, we were even able to discuss what had happened with equanimity, as if were something only slightly out of the ordinary for us, which in a way it was. Ray apologized to me in due course, confessing that he had, in fact, been irrationally furious that day, and that he had been trying to provoke me, just as I had suspected.

"But I never figured for getting that far," he admitted, lighting a cigarette in the car. "I figured you'd punch me or something; maybe I even wanted you to punch me. But then you didn't say anything, and so..." He shrugged.

And so, indeed. "I still don't understand what on earth I had to do with it," I said, turning my head to stare out the passenger side window.

"Yeah, well—what I don't understand is you," Ray retorted. I glanced at him and his mouth was pursed into something very like a sneer. "I mean, picture—you got women nearly falling over themselves to get to you. You could have two for lunch and three on Sundays for a year and still not run out of—"
"Ray," I chided, but this was just a nod to our formal, unspoken rules of communication. He said something shocking, I scolded him for it, and then we could continue the conversation sotto voce, man-to-man. "Don't be stupid," I told him, lowering my voice appropriately. "Two for lunch and three on Sundays....a man could get himself into real trouble acting like that."

Ray tilted his head to the side, apparently considering this, and then nodded. "Yeah, I guess he could at that."

"Besides," I confided, still feeling the freedom of post-chiding frankness, "for most of them it's just the uniform. I've been tempted more than once to just put it in a bag and hand it over. I'm not sure just what it is with women and uniforms—"

Ray grinned wickedly. "Hey, I got a uniform—"

I stifled a smile and ignored him. "—but they certainly form some key element of sexual attraction for a substantial subset of women."

"—which is blue and has shiny gold buttons." Ray slouched back in his seat and took a thoughtful drag from his cigarette. "You think I should pull that puppy out of the closet and wear it around?"

"No," I said firmly, and then continued with my train of thought. "I suppose the explanation might be almost anthropological; perhaps even an evolutionary response to the extent to which a uniform explicitly represents—"

"What's wrong with my uniform? I got a hat, too! It's an okay hat—"

"—the protective power of some authority or other. It won't work," I added, addressing his question.

"—though I hate hats, I look terrible in hats, why won't it work?"

"It's blue," I explained.

"Oh, yeah. Right," Ray replied and threw his cigarette out the window.

I suppose that, even then, we were both of us looking for a pretext to repeat the experiment. We were not yet at the point where the thing could be done casually, though that point would come sooner than I would have imagined. Even so, we didn't have long to wait, our lives being what they were: a mere week and a half found us sprawled on Ray's sofa at nearly four in the morning after thirty-three straight hours of police work. We'd needed to find the chairman's daughter before the crucial stockholder's meeting, and so we'd just put our backs to it and done it. However, we'd both consumed rather too much in the way of stimulants in the process; we'd both drunk endless cups of coffee, and Ray'd smoked far too many cigarettes. As a result, despite the story's happy ending—the daughter's recovery, the kidnapper's arrest—we were both of us bone tired and yet strangely on edge, brains wired and spinning.

Sitting there, staring off into space, I realized that I was probably going to fall asleep in full uniform, without removing so much as my lanyard. And I would have fallen asleep right then, except Ray hadn't yet hauled himself off to bed, and he was taking up the rest of my sofa. I did, I confess, almost think I owned Ray's sofa, as I often slept there when we worked late. And while I knew I was only a guest, exhaustion had made me irritable, and I found myself wishing he would just go already so that I could fall over sidewise and pass out.

I managed the energy to turn my head toward Ray, who looked as though he'd forgotten where he was. He'd gotten his overcoat off, but he was still sitting there in his leather blazer, blinking slowly
at the room.

"Ray," I said, and he rolled his head my way.

"Oh, hey," Ray said, looking surprised to see me. "God, I gotta go to bed..."

I tried to nod, but it came out as a rather pathetic little twitch. "Yes. Very tired."

"Very tired," Ray repeated.

Neither of us moved.

"I'm trying to get my legs to work," Ray explained after a moment. "Somebody soaked 'em in concrete."

I gave another pathetic twitch and let my head fall back against the sofa. "I know just what you mean."

We stared at each other for another long minute, and I swear I could see the exact moment where the idea entered his head. "Come here," he said.

I admit that my cock twitched, but I simply didn't see where the thing was possible. "Can't," I said. "Too tired..."

"Come here," Ray repeated. Neither of us moved for another few moments, and then, with palpable effort on both our parts, we each moved a few inches and closed the gap between us. I was so relieved at having accomplished this task that I let my head droop. My chin brushed his shoulder, and then my cheek brushed the leather collar of his jacket—

— and suddenly I was rock hard; something about the smell of the leather, it's stiffness, it's—

Ray's hand slipped underneath my tunic, brushed the front of my trousers, then slid down the zipper. Unlike last time, I wasn't content to wait. I buried my face against his shoulder and reached for him, briefly caressing his erection before working my hand into his jeans and grabbing hold of it. Ray moaned, I thrust helplessly into his fist, and we were at it again—gasping and fondling each other in earnest. I remember the scent of the leather jacket filling my nose as Ray jacked my pleasure ever-higher; I remember mouthing the soft leather, licking it, adding taste to scent. I actually don't remember my orgasm, as I must have fallen asleep right in the middle of it.

But we finally woke up, nearly fourteen hours later, I'd find teeth marks on the collar's pointed tip.

We went on like this for another couple of weeks, groping each other occasionally, intensely, almost offhandedly. I remember another episode of this kind in Ray's apartment, one in my office at the Consulate, still another in Ray's car. About this time, in late November, Ray had a number of dates with a woman called Marika Charles, who I liked rather a lot. Marika worked for a charity called Christmas Wishes, which collected money to buy presents for impoverished children. She had come to the 27th precinct just before Thanksgiving, in order to forge a link with the station's own seasonal charity efforts. Ray had happened to be passing the public relations office down on the first floor, had seen Marika come out, and had lingered to engage her with a lazy smile and a none-too-fresh cup of station coffee.

Incredible as it now sounds, I hadn't the slightest idea why my mood sank. Certainly, I recognized the signs, even then, of a vague sort of depression, which I combated in my usual way—by focusing intently on a series of tasks: low-priority, high energy things for which I normally I didn't have much patience. I reorganized the Consulate's filing system, answered backlogged
correspondence, and called the printer we dealt with in Ottawa to restock our supply of official forms (39-Bs, 1088s, and 280-Cs having been particularly popular that year, I found). I assumed, wrongly, that my usual Christmas blues had arrived a month early, and that was all.

It honestly never occurred to me that I was in love with him; such a thought was somehow impossible, unmappable, outside the boundaries of reasonable logic. I know now that the thought hadn't crossed Ray's mind yet either; to the extent to which he was aware of an emotion, it was anger, or frustration, or irritation. My depression, his irritation—both were, of course, well-documented responses to the Christmas season, and familiar enough elements of our emotional repertoire. So nothing seemed particularly wrong; nothing that would flag as unusual in any case.

What was unusual was that Ray stopped seeing Marika Charles after their fifth date—well, no, even that wasn't particularly unusual per se, as Ray's relationships often seemed to come to speedy and unexpected conclusions. No, to be more precise, what struck me as unusual was that Ray was the one who appeared to have ended it, because Marika Charles continued to telephone, and each time she did Ray merely glanced down at the message before crumpling it into his fist and tossing it into the wastepaper basket. This, I should say, annoyed me each and every time he did it, and as proof of my absolute and rather spectacular cluelessness, I somehow managed to convince myself that I was annoyed on her behalf. She had been sincere, I thought, and Ray, for all his whining about women, was tossing her away with nary a thought. He obviously couldn't tell the proverbial silk purse from a sow's ear if he could pine for Susan O'Reilly and disregard the infinitely superior Marika Charles. I should call her myself, I thought bitterly. Ask her to lunch, or offer to volunteer for Christmas Wishes, which would not only, I hoped, earn me her attention but also allow me to do something worthwhile and perhaps combat my own seasonal depression.

"...so young." She sighed, and pushed her fingers through her blonde locks. "We didn't know anything about anything, least of all ourselves—"

"But it was what you did then," I said quietly, thinking of my own youth, thinking of Angie. "I mean, me—nobody expected anything of me, not my own folks, not nobody. Whereas Angie, when she looked at me, I felt like maybe I could actually do something."

Stella leaned forward. "Yes, exactly. Ray helped—"

"She thought I could be a cop—"

"—put me through law school. He believed in me."

"—or at least she didn't laugh. Everyone else laughed," I admitted.

The only thing that stopped me from actually acting on what would have, in hindsight, been an incredibly stupid plan was the fact that Marika Charles seemed so obviously fond of Ray. It wouldn't be fair, I told myself, to take advantage of her vulnerability, catching her on the rebound, so to speak. And how could I possibly explain my partner's oafish behavior? "I'm sorry," I would explain earnestly, "but Ray just doesn't have any taste."

So I did nothing, thank God, and soon enough there was a case to rescue me from Consular drudgery. Another murder, unfortunately, this time of a man called Pete Schneider. And perhaps it was due to the nature of our relationship at the time, but Ray and I were almost instantly at each other's throats over it. After only a single day of investigation, I found myself suspecting Mr. Schneider's business partner, Frank Mulroney. Ray, it turned out, was equally certain that murderer was Schneider's younger brother, Phillip.

We argued about it. We argued about most everything, come to think of it.
"What, you're psychic, now?" Ray accused. "You got some direct link to the ether which tells you —"

"I examined the evidence," I said in my calmest, most rational voice—which also happened to be the one most likely to infuriate Ray. "Listened to the testimony of witnesses. Both of which clearly indicate—"

"What about motive?" Ray interrupted. "Motive is key here and the brother's got motive, personal motive—"

"So does Mr. Mulroney," I pointed out. "Financial motive—you heard about the problems at the company—"

"Company problems don't have the same kind of frenzy as family stuff—that's blood stuff; that's blood there. You got two brothers who are big-time rivals, it's like Cain and Abel, like from the Bible, maybe you've heard of it?"

"I'm familiar with the text, yes," I replied smoothly. "I believe it says something about money being the root of all evil—"

"I am gonna hit you so hard," Ray threatened, "which, by the way, will only be proof of my theory that most murder is personal—"

"Take a pill, will you, Ray?" Francesca said in passing, rolling her eyes. "Take a valium or something—"

Ray wheeled on her. "Hey, maybe you could give me one—"

"Ray," I chided.

"—something out of your supply; one of those happy pills which make you so fuckin' useless around here—"

Francesca looked suddenly on the verge of tears; there were few better ways to hurt Francesca than to imply that she was useless. Francesca wanted, more than anything, to be of use to us, and Ray's remark cut her to the quick.

She raised her chin, though her lower lip wobbled slightly. "You're such an asshole," she said, and then she turned on her heel and stalked off with some dignity.

I lowered my voice. "Now look what you've done..."

"I want to be District Attorney." Stella raised her head and glared at me over her creme brulee, just daring me to say something.

"Hey, that's great," I said, meaning it. "I think that's just great."

She looked like maybe she didn't believe me. I took her hand and decided to tell her my deepest secret. "I wanna run the mob unit," I said, hoping she wouldn't burst out in hysterical laughter or something. "My whole life I been running from those guys, letting them make me feel like a loser. Now I want my name back. I want my neighborhood back."

She stared at me for a long time, maybe sizing me up; well, she was taking me serious, at least. "Well, good for you," she said finally. "Fuck those guys," and that was it, game over, I would die for her.
Ray tightened his mouth. "You could maybe listen once, you could maybe give me the benefit of the fucking doubt—"

"There is no doubt," I said firmly, angrily. "It's the partner."

"It's the brother!" Ray shouted.

I gritted my teeth. "It isn't."

Ray's face was turning purple. "It fuckin' is!"

"Oh, for God's sake," I exclaimed, feeling like my collar was going to strangle me. "I'm going to go apologize to your sister—"

"You think you're so fucking superior!" Ray shouted at me, as I strode off, across the bullpen, trying very hard to ignore him. "Why don't you come down to the planet, Fraser? You might actually like it down here with us cretins—I hear it's very cold in space!"

Somehow we managed, despite everything, to solve the case, carefully avoiding each other's eyes when new evidence suggested that Schneider's brother and partner had been co-conspirators. I don't think either of us was ready to say we were sorry; Ray, I was fairly sure, still wanted to hit me in the head, and I for my part had been stung by his crack about it being "cold in space," which I took as a vaguely anti-Canadian slur.

However, clearly this was something we were going to have to get past, and if I were a better man, I suppose I would have conceded first, conceded gracefully. How hard would it have been, after all? "Ray, I'm sorry. I was wrong. I should have listened." It seemed impossible to say.

Ray didn't say anything, either; rather, I noticed, with a start, coming out of my daze, that he'd pulled his car into the alleyway a few doors down from his building. He'd somehow neglected to take me home to the Consulate, and brought me back to his apartment instead.

Ray shifted the GTO into neutral and fumbled in his coat pocket for the keys to Mrs. Kraschek's garage. Despite my desire to make peace, I felt my eyes narrowing as I watched him: what on earth was he trying to pull now? Was this apology or revenge?

"I should go home," I said firmly.

Ray pulled the ring of keys out of his pocket. "Nah, come on up."

"No, really, I shouldn't."

I was debating the idea of a good-night kiss when Stella leaned across the back seat of the taxi and whispered, "Why don't you come up for a drink?"

"You sure?" I asked. She nodded.

"No, really, you should." Ray got out of the car and slammed the door shut behind him, then bent down to sneer at me through the partially open window. "Come on up," he said, his lips turning wry at the corner. "I'll let you chew on my jacket."

Ah. So it was revenge, then. I watched Ray walk into the beam of the GTO's headlights and unlock the garage door.

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I decided to tread carefully up in the apartment, keeping my distance from him as I took off my
lanyard and tunic. I accepted the beer he offered me more out of reluctance to refuse it than from any genuine desire to drink. I held back, and took a cautious sip, as I watched him pace around his apartment—there was something of the caged animal about him, something that seemed vaguely dangerous to me.

He seemed to be winding himself up for something, screwing up his courage in some physical way.

Finally he stopped right in front of me and stared into my eyes. I felt suddenly sure that he wanted me to apologize: Ray, I'm sorry. I was wrong. I should have listened — My chest tightened, trapping the words there. I just stared back at him, unable to say anything, furious at myself for that inability. Ray, I'm sorry. I was—well, dammit, he was at least as wrong as I was, wasn't he? He hadn't listened to me either, right?

"Right," Ray said, as if he were reading my mind. He took the bottle of beer out of my hand and set it down on the dinette table beside us. "Come here."

I shook my head slowly, although truth be told, I was already aroused, and growing more so by the second. "No," I murmured. "I don't think—"

Ray's eyes dropped to my mouth; his voice dropped too, to a low whisper. "Come on..."

For a long slow minute things were utterly frozen between us, and then I nodded, once, and Ray switched off the lights. He then knotted his hands in my henley and tugged me forward, toward the sofa. It took us only a moment to find a comfortable position, as we were now old hands at this, so to speak. We'd even had the foresight to unzip before settling down. Ray slung an arm around my neck, I braced my chin on his shoulder, and we were off. His hand squeezed me tightly, roughly, his fist sliding up toward the head of my erection, his thumb brushing over it. I twisted my head to stifle a groan; there was simply no way anymore to deny that I loved this.

I loved her apartment. I loved her wine rack. I loved standing at the glass doors over her terrace, staring out over the water. The view—suddenly I had a view of more than Chicago, I had a view of myself, my life, her life, and maybe our lives together. So when she came up behind me and put her arms around me, some part of me just snapped; I wanted her, I wanted all of her: the woman, the beauty, the future District Attorney. She put her hands on my face and kissed me so damn sweetly, and I felt like I was home, really home.

However, the twist of my head brought my mouth into contact with—not the leather collar of his jacket, or the soft flannel of the overshirts he wore, but the smooth skin just above the neck of his t-shirt. I moaned; his skin was soft, and warm, and slightly salty.

Vaguely, through my haze of pleasure, I heard Ray gasp. "Don't bite!"

I smiled against his neck and then, just to be perverse, nipped hard at his earlobe. He shuddered violently, and for a moment I was certain he was on the brink of orgasm. But he seemed to take hold of himself, and then he grabbed a tight fistful of my hair. I grunted in pain and felt his mouth touch my ear. "Suck me," he whispered.

I closed my eyes; my heart was pounding in my chest. So there it was, round two, Ray's move—and it was a brilliant one. In the back of my mind I could hear Ray's voice: I never figured for getting that far. I figured you'd punch me or something; maybe I even wanted you to punch me. He was presenting me with two doors: did he want me to suck him or punch him?

Either way, I thought dimly, you really had to respect Ray as a strategist. Either way, the deadlock between us would be broken. Either I'd be punished for my arrogance, or he would be. Either
way, we'd now be able to move on.

But in which direction? Surely I had every right to punch him: he'd been as wrong as I was about Schneider's murder, and certainly demanding that one's partner suck one's dick was well outside the the boundaries of convention. Rather than admit he was wrong, Ray might be giving me a good, clear shot at him and an iron-clad justification. So knowing Ray as I did, this was very possibly his way of apologizing—for the argument, for hurting Francesca, for just being an asshole in general.

One good hit and we'd be quits; I'd help him bandage his bloody nose and then we'd have another beer and maybe watch some hockey.

On the other hand, what if I bent my head down and did as he asked? Ray would win in the short run, having established real dominance over me this time. You think you're so fucking superior! Ray had yelled, and if Ray really thought I had an edge over him—well, this would put me in my place and no mistake. Round two in our game of chicken, and somewhere deep down I felt certain that Ray would continue to hammer away at what he saw as my weak point—my masculinity—until it cracked. That way, if I lording it over him—well, he'd have it over me, and he'd know it.

The Mountie sucked me off.

That was the short run. But in the long run...well, I'd learned something over the last month or so. Actually, I'd learned rather a lot.

First of all, I'd learned was that there was no such thing as "one-time only" between us: whatever we did now would set a pattern for future interactions. Punching him would simply lead to more punching, whereas sucking him off...well, having done it once, we'd end up doing it again and again. And god only knows what would happen after that.

The other, more important, thing that I'd learned—well, had learned, was still learning, and would continue to learn—was that I didn't mind that thought at all; in fact, I found it profoundly exciting. And maybe that meant Ray had already won, that my weak spot was even weaker than he'd suspected—but it seemed to me that in my weakness was a potential source of strength.

Because I was all right with this—the thought hit me like a blow, sitting there on the sofa with Ray pulling my hair and still stroking my erection. I was all right with this—my God, I was fine with this!—and anyway, I put sixteen stranger things in my mouth before breakfast—hell, as breakfast—so why not, after all? I was fine with this, which maybe meant that losing was winning, that maybe going down would bring me out on top, so to speak.

"All right," I whispered back to him—and Ray stiffened so violently that I was suddenly sure that he'd wanted me to punch him. But it was too late to go back now; too late for either of us.

I pulled away and started lowering my head. Ray suddenly seemed to remember that he'd actually asked for this, and cupped the back of my neck, shoving my head down. If that was meant as an intimidation tactic it didn't work; I just went at him with redoubled eagerness. His erection was beautiful and smooth, and after a couple of tentative licks, I pulled him into my mouth. Above me, Ray gasped, his hand tightening on my neck. This excited me even more, and I began to move my mouth on him faster, more rhythmically. I found that the rhythm of sucking excited me just as much as it did him—the slow up and down, in and out of it, the feeling of his hard, erect flesh in my mouth, dragging over my tongue.

I lay between her legs and made love to her, twining my fingers into her hair, unable to stop kissing her mouth. Her arms were tight around me, our bodies were pressed together, and she was so warm, and so soft. Her hands were gently stroking my back, her nipples brushing my chest,
and I slid my hands down her sides to her thighs so that I could tilt her up and drive more deeply into her. "Ray," she moaned, and panic-sweat broke out on my neck. What if—had she—? But she was right there with me. "No. You," she said, and pulled my mouth down to hers again.

"God," Ray gasped above me. "Christ. Fraser..." and I increased suction on the tip of his cock, wanting to send him over the edge. Ray grabbed my head and thrust himself hard into my mouth once, twice, before suddenly jerking in orgasm—and I felt dizzy with it, triumphant with it, not humiliated or ashamed at all. I swallowed, listening to him sob for breath above me; I had achieved my own orgasm at the first rough thrust of Ray's cock into my mouth.

Finally, I lifted my head, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand. Ray was in a state of collapse on the sofa, eyes closed and mouth open as he panted at the ceiling. "How was that?" I asked him, as evenly as I could manage.

He didn't answer for a moment, which I understood: he didn't look like he could breathe. "That was good," he managed finally, though I noticed that he still couldn't meet my eyes as he said it.

However, next day at the station, Ray had a noticeable swagger in his step—and perhaps that was just tiniest gleam of arrogance in his eye? To my surprise, I found that I didn't mind; in fact, I liked the way arrogance looked on him.

I watched, smiling faintly behind my hand, as Ray sought out Frannie and apologized to her at length, even to the point of listening with great apparent interest to a very long and boring story about a course in psychology she was taking at the local community college. "Psychology, huh?" Ray asked, scratching idly at the back of his head. "I dunno—is that useful at all?"

Everyone noticed Ray's good mood that day, even Stella, who turned to me after Ray breezed by her with a "Hey, great to see you, looking well, catch you later," and asked, with eyebrows raised, "Well, who the hell is he fucking?"

I didn't think she really wanted to know.

And as I suspected, that wasn't to be the only instance of oral sex between us. In the following days, I went back to his apartment almost every evening after work, and once we didn't even make it to the apartment—we just did it right in Mrs. Kraschek's garage. With one thing and another, we were developing a nice little sexual repertoire—buttons were being unbuttoned, sleeves being pushed up, little bits of skin exposed here and there, though it still wasn't anything I could call intimate. We'd still never been naked together, we'd still never kissed, and I was always still back at the Consulate by twelve o'clock, like some sort of cocksucking Mountie Cinderella.

Worse yet, Ray's ebullient mood didn't last. He seemed to ride the triumph of it for a few days (The Mountie sucked me off!) and then he grew sober, tense, and familiarly twitchy. At the time, this baffled me utterly: how could he bring me to such staggeringly sweet orgasms one minute, and then be sul.len and unkind to me the next? And he'd won, after all: I was now sucking him off with some regularity—hell, I'd do anything he asked—so what on earth did he have to complain about?

It was in that confused mood that I went to his apartment one evening in mid-December. It was a cold, gray day made only more depressing by omnipresent Christmas lights and canned Christmas music. I'd been running errands all day for Inspector Thatcher, whose anxiety about the upcoming Consular Christmas party had reached a fever pitch. I was therefore glad to make my escape and spend a few hours with Ray before returning to the world of canapes and cocktail napkins.

But Ray, I noticed as soon as he opened the door, was even more tense than usual, his face
"Come in," Ray said brusquely, before stopping himself and asking, with a noticeable effort, "Hey, how're you doing? You okay?"

"I'm fine," I replied.

"You want something?" Ray drifted kitchenwards, and then back, moving the way he did when he was screwing up his courage for something. "I got—I dunno what I got. Coffee. Beer for certain. I got maybe a couple cans of Coke—you want a Coke?"

"No, thank you," I said, shaking my head.

"C'mon—Coke is life, Coke teaches the world to sing, that's what I hear, anyway. Rots your teeth but who cares—food of the gods. You sure? Yeah? Okay, fine," he said, and took a cigarette from the pack on the counter and lit it.

"What about you, how are you?" I asked, sitting down on one of his kitchen chairs, my leather jacket balled in my lap.

"Me, I'm okay," Ray replied, blowing out a cloud of smoke with a shrug and a wave of his hand. "Boring today, but that's nothing new. All you get in December are suicides and thefts." He took another drag from his cigarette and looked like he was trying to think what to say. "So you know, there's a game on," he said, finally, "Hawks-Devils, ESPN. I thought we could—well, you know, we could do whatever, whatever you wanted, and then maybe kick back, relax, watch the game. Hang out."

That sounded like fun, exactly the evening I'd wanted, and Ray certainly looked like he needed to "kick back and relax"; I was afraid he might suddenly snap like a piano wire. "That sounds wonderful," I said, honestly.

Ray seemed to relax a bit at that, now that the evening was set and we had a plan. A quarter of an hour later found us both sprawled on the sofa—television on, potato chips in a bowl, two ice-cold beers sweating on their coasters, and Ray's hand in my lap. I was in something very near to paradise, but Ray's face still hadn't lost its pinched expression—and then suddenly he leaned forward, bringing our faces close together.

"I'll do you," he said, but his voice was tight; he had just barely gotten the words out. And then suddenly I understood: this was what he'd been working himself up for. Ray was offering to suck me.

But even my confusion, stupidity, and ongoing blindness did not stop me from recognizing that Ray's offer was—joyless. Admittedly, I'd been anxious when Ray'd grabbed my hair, but I'd eventually done the act with eagerness, even exultation. But I could see no trace of that exultation on Ray's face, only a grim determination, like a boy determined to eat a plate of much-detested vegetables.

I nodded slowly, and then said, as gently as I could manage, "You don't have to, you know. Not if you don't want to."

I was shocked by the sudden fury in his face, sure from his expression that he was going to hit me, and keep hitting me—my God, this was going to get ugly. I tried to prepare myself for anything, any move he might make, while desperately trying to figure out what I'd said wrong, when I'd meant only to—

His fists were tightening on my shirt, his eyes flashing ice, and then he blinked and some of that
sparkling ice rolled out of his eyes and onto his cheek. My God, he was crying, and—

He shoved me away, got his knee under him, and hauled himself shakily to his feet. I just stared at him, utterly dumbfounded, more completely at a loss than I'd been since this whole thing started, and that was saying something. He wandered around the apartment for a moment, chest heaving, struggling visibly to control himself, and then he went into his bedroom and didn't come out.

I sat there for a few moments, staring stupidly at my hands, then switched Ray's television off and went home.

**Part Four**

I stroked my thumb over the shattered left lens of Ray's glasses; it was the only way I could still touch him, the *real* him, rough-edged and half-damaged. I would *not* let myself lose touch with him as he was; it was the only way I had of keeping him alive.

Have you every noticed the way people speak of the dead? Their voices become hushed and reverential: "Such a fine man / wonderful father / exemplary employee / good friend to me." I've been tempted to say on many a murder investigation, "Well, clearly *somebody* wanted to kill him; he can't have been *perfect*." For instance, Robert Fraser was a terrible husband and a lousy father in my exceedingly biased opinion, though he did have a real knack for tracking caribou. That would have been a more honest eulogy than the one I sat through; *beloved husband and father*, they intoned, *and an exemplary officer*. I crossed my arms, tried to keep my face neutral, and thought, "Well, one out of three, anyway..."

One tries to let bygones be bygones after death, I suppose. The dead are all saints; it's only the living who piss people off.

So I need to remember how difficult Ray was, how prickly, how imperfect. An asshole, as Ray Vecchio said.

Still, in hindsight, I should have understood more about Ray's push me-pull you attitude. I should have seen how deeply conflicted he was, how furiously he was fighting himself. I'd thought he was trying to humiliate me, but I realized as I watched him crying, actually *crying*, that he was the one who felt humiliated, and that he was still reaching out for me anyway.

Because that was *undeniable*—despite his anger, and his sullenness, and his occasional rages, it was Ray who'd started everything, Ray who'd continued to push things, Ray who'd had the courage to reach out to me in my cold outer-space orbit. And I'd done nothing to help him; I hadn't even realized that he *needed* my—

Diefenbaker jumped up, putting his paws onto the kitchen table, scaring me half to death and making me fumble and nearly break Ray's glasses. "Dief!" I yelled. "You stupid—" but then I suddenly came back to himself, and realized that Dief was whimpering softly. I glanced down at my watch; it was nearly one-thirty in the morning.

"Oh, for God's sake," I murmured, rubbing my forehead wearily; I'd done it again, I'd lost hours again, and poor Diefenbaker was probably starving, thirsty, and dying for a walk, not necessarily in that order. "Dief, I'm sorry," I told him, dropping my hand to the table. "I got lost. I'm sorry."

I tucked Ray's glasses into my left breast pocket, where I always kept them, and heaved myself up out of my chair to fulfill my responsibilities to Dief. We took a walk through the cold night air, then returned to the kitchen where I set out a huge plate of food and a bowl of water and watched him literally wolf it all down. Finally, he sprawled out on the kitchen floor, and I crouched down beside him to stroke his fur. "I missed you," I said, and he licked my face; apparently he wasn't
going to hold my neglect of him against me.

I straightened up and turned off the kitchen lights. I didn't suppose I'd be seeing Ray any time soon—if he hadn't come home by two in the morning, I doubted he was coming home at all—but I left the hallway light on for him, just in case. Interesting, I mused, climbing the stairs toward my bedroom. Ray and Stella. Ray Vecchio and Stella. Maybe that was something I could be happy about, some good that could come out of all of this.

I washed, changed into my sleepwear, and put myself to bed. Overhead, Ray's dreamcatcher spun in some otherwise undetectable breeze, and I stared up through the darkness as it, watching the eagle feather on the end flit, turn, and flicker.

"Catch my dreams," I whispered to it. "Make this all be a bad dream..." and then I closed my eyes and tried to lose myself in thoughts of Ray.

I spent the morning after our failed hockey date quietly seething: not only was I instantly reimmersed in the business of planning our apparently internationally-significant Consular Christmas party, but I kept seeing those icy tears rolling out of Ray's eyes, which made my work seem even more obviously irrelevant than usual. I kept trying to leave the Consulate and go to the station, but Inspector Thatcher insisted that the cocktail napkins we'd bought simply didn't match the tablecloths, and she'd done scientific research on the subject, looking up serial numbers and color codes. So it was well past noon before I managed to make good my escape.

Ray wasn't there. This didn't strike me as immediately unusual—I assumed he must have been sent out on a case—but then Francesca told me that no, he hadn't been in at all, and in fact he wasn't coming in today. Ray had called in sick.

Worried now, I grabbed my hat and set off for Ray's apartment. I knocked hard, but he didn't answer, and when I pressed my ear to the door, I could hear no sound or movement inside other than the steady tick-tick-tick of the kitchen wall clock.

I swiped my hat off my head and leaned back against his apartment door, thinking. If Ray were physically sick, it was possible that he'd taken himself off to the doctor's office, though I'd never known Ray to see a doctor that quickly. On the other hand, if Ray were simply stressed-out, heartsick, in need of a day away from suicide and theft, well then—

I walked down the block and up the alley toward Mrs. Kraschek's garage.

"Here you are," I said, spying Ray bent nearly double under the GTO's hood. "I've been wondering where you—"

Ray lifted his head; he hadn't shaved that day, and his chin was rough with pale stubble. There was a streak of grease under his left ear, and two clear prints where he'd wiped his hands on the front of his T-shirt. "About time you got here. I needed you like hell a couple of hours ago."

"Oh?" I stood next to him and peered at the engine; he smelled like clean sweat and motor oil, and I forced myself to focus on the machinery before me. "What's the problem?"

Ray wiped his hands hard on his thighs, and then pointed. "Windshield wiper motor got detached from the harness, and I either needed two guys or nine-foot-long arms to get it back into place, of which I had neither. Look, see," Ray said, bending down to reach deep and back into the engine; he was fiddling with what looked like a piece of hose, "one piece connects from this side, but the other's in the car on the back side of the firewall—"
His shirt rose up at the small of his pale, smooth back. "Well, it seems to be connected now," I said. "You managed it somehow—"

"Only by spending two hours making like MacGyver," Ray snorted, pulling himself out. "I tried bracing the other side with the snowbrush and my toolbox but that didn't work, and then I was trying to build, like, some kind of architectural structure to hold that side down but that didn't work, because the only things I got in here are a plank of wood and a toaster, and finally I had to do one bolt this side, one bolt that side—a mess, I'm telling you."

"Well, but you got it," I said, ducking my head to study the mechanism. "That motor looks very well and truly reconnected."

"Yeah." His hands were freshly dirty again from making his adjustment, the nails black-edged and caked under, and he started sorting through a box of rags, looking for a clean one. "Thanks. You wanna come up, have a sandwich, cause I need—"

I leaned forward, clutched his bare arm, and kissed him, hard as I could manage. The touch of his mouth to mine was like an electric shock; god, how I loved his mouth, the taste, the texture, everything about it. I felt him jerk sharply, and helplessly I raised one hand and cupped the back of his head, holding his mouth against mine. Just one more second, one more, one—

Ray twisted his head away, panting and wild-eyed, a trapped animal trying to escape. He yanked his arms back, preparing to shove me away—and then stopped suddenly and looked down at his filthy hands.

My God. Our entire lives on the line and he was worried about my uniform?

I grabbed his hands roughly and wiped them hard against my chest. Ray's eyes went huge as he looked from his hands to my face and then down again at the streaks of black grease on my tunic-front. "I don't care," I said heatedly. "I don't care, Ray—"

It could have gone either way: a punch or a kiss. And I was ready for either. But when he hauled me forward and kissed me—his kiss was hard, fierce, sloppy—my surprised thought was: he's been holding out on me. Ray'd been holding out, holding back, and why hadn't I realized that till this moment? We fell back against the passenger side door, just kissing and kissing, his tongue deep in my mouth. It was like the universe had just expanded, doors flying open to reveal larger, airier rooms beyond this cramped space. It was like falling through the floor.

I grabbed his head between my hands and just hung on, feeling like I couldn't bear to break away from him. Our mouths fit together so easily, so perfectly; I felt that he was about to eat me alive, and that I wouldn't mind at all if he did. So much there in his kiss, such a vast array of emotions I hadn't recognized: passion, desperation, terror, desire. I held on and tried to make my own kisses equally revelatory, wanting to show him all the things I kept buttoned down beneath my grease-streaked tunic. I sucked his tongue. I stroked the roof of his mouth. I clutched his hair, rubbed his back, cupped his warm, firm ass in my hands. Ray's hands moved over me, too—rough hands, strong fingers—burning everywhere they touched—and it was then that my brain shouted out its first clear articulation of a terrifying thought: fuck me, my brain shouted, shocking me to the core, for god's sake, go ahead and fuck me.

We broke apart, then—me leaning back against the car for support, Ray nearly doubled over in front of me, struggling for breath. His face, I saw, was flushed and distressed, and I stared at him as if I'd never seen him before. Who was he? who was I? and what the hell had I just been thinking?!!

When Ray finally straightened up, I saw that his mind was working rapidly; he was processing
something, too. Then Ray took another deep breath, fixed me with a hard look, and said: "I won’t be your bitch, Fraser."

I think my mouth may have actually fallen open. I do remember, with some clarity, the brief but very intense fantasy I had of grabbing him by the hair and slamming his stupid head into the side of the GTO.

But fortunately for Ray's head and my conscience, I realized that Ray was feeling precisely the same panic I'd felt only a moment ago, only expressing it more characteristically, as overt hostility. All right, I remember thinking. Calm down, just calm down. Ray was still staring at me with some defiance, and I took several deep breaths to clear my head.

I think he was surprised when I leaned forward to kiss him again, this time gently. "Come upstairs," I murmured into his mouth, and I found myself rubbing his leg rhythmically, obsessively. "Come to bed with me. Please, I need you to." Ray turned his head, his face becoming anxious and confused, and I repeated, quietly: "Please."

Because I hadn't once indicated that I was doing anything more than following his lead, going along with his plans, being a good sport about everything. My own earlier, vindictive thoughts came back to me—He wanted to play boy-games; well, I could play boy-games—and I hadn't done anything to show him that this was more than a game to me.

"Please," I repeated.

Ray gave me a long, searching look and then said, "Yeah, okay."

We went back up to his apartment and I held my ground, quietly but firmly, when he tried to tug me toward the sofa. I had said bed and I meant bed; it was high time, in my opinion, that we got both naked and horizontal. Ray looked for a moment like he was about to argue with me about it, but I think the idea of me actually articulating, in actual words, aloud, that I needed something from him was ultimately just too seductive. I think, in some other universe, Ray would have pulled out a tape recorder and had me speak into the microphone.

"What's that, Fraser?" he'd say, shoving the microphone at me. "Did you just admit to something less than total self-sufficiency? Like maybe I'm not the only clod here?"

Unfortunately for Ray, no tape recorder was to hand.

We spent that entire afternoon in his bed—naked finally, finally naked—and it says something about the entirely backwards nature of our relationship at the time that, with all that bare flesh to feast on, mostly what we did was kiss. Kissing as his weight came down on me, arousing me wildly and stealing my breath; kissing faint traces of sweet-smelling grease from his ear, face and neck; kissing, clumsy and eager, until my chin was wet with him, until Ray no longer tasted like Ray but like some amalgam of himself and me, strange and strangely familiar.

It felt like we had years of lost kissing time to make up for. We kissed for a long time, for hours—until at last Ray's hand brushed my erection and I went off like a shot.

I heard him laughing distantly as I slowly came back to myself, and when I opened my eyes it was with some irritation.

"What?" I demanded.

"Nothing." Ray was propped on one elbow and grinning down at me. "Yer fun."
"Oh?" I asked in the absolute haughtiest voice I could manage, which wasn't much, considering I could barely breathe. "Fun, did you say?"

Ray raised his chin, still grinning. "I said that, yeah."

"You want fun?" I asked him. "I'll show you how fun I can be," and then I flipped him over and sucked his cock until he screamed.

I wish I could say that it was all sweetness and light between us from that point forward, but unfortunately, it wasn't; that sort of thing only happens in stories. Oh, things got better—more settled, at least. A week later, two days before Christmas, Ray stopped me from getting out of bed to return to the Consulate; from then on, we were living together in all but name. And on Christmas morning, I found a set of keys sitting next to my coffee cup at breakfast, which would seem to indicate that we'd made a smooth transition.

But that wasn't the case. The problem, as I saw it, was that Ray was comfortable with what we were doing only to the extent to which he could deny to himself what we were doing—which was to say, apparently setting up shop in a long term, mutually satisfying and exclusive sexual relationship. Whenever Ray seemed to fully realize this, he went—well, I really don't think that bezerk is too strong a word. All of a sudden, he would talk incessantly about Stella, or his wife, as he'd call her, as if reminding himself, and me of course, that he'd had a wife, that he'd once had a wife, as if that were some internationally accepted proof of heterosexuality.

Furthermore, I thought that if I never heard the word "bitch" again it would be too soon. "I'm not your bitch, Fraser,"—apparently, granting even the simplest of requests—washing the kitchen floor, turning the television down, hanging his clothes up in the closet—was enough to qualify Ray as "my bitch." Finally, having really had it up to here, I had to point out to him that I wasn't going to be his bitch, either, and that he'd have to get off his ass and do something if he was interested in sharing living space with another human being. I confess, I took this well, even with some amusement ("Say it again—c'mon—'I'm not your bitch either,'—say it!") and he did actually begin to do his share of the household work.

I told myself to be patient. Wait it out and he'll adjust, I thought, because there's no point in protesting a fait accompli. We breathe oxygen, and that's just the end of it; there's no point in deciding that you'd really rather be breathing hydrogen instead. It would be the same here, I assumed; little by little, Ray would adjust himself to reality, and all would be well.

And that's what happened really, though it was a longer and rockier road than I'd expected, with each of us getting one of those long-threatened bloody noses in the interim. I got mine at the conclusion of an argument which began, memorably, with Ray yelling, "I am not a faggot, Fraser!"—although I have to admit that my response was, in fact, designed to provoke him.

"Well, that's very interesting, Ray," I'd said, putting down my newspaper, "because of course philosophers have been debating the nature of being for some time. The reigning theory, I believe, is based on the concept of the performative—which is to say that a thing is what it does, I'm afraid."

I was ready for him when he came at me; I'd never bought Ray's stupid act, and knew perfectly well that he could translate what I was saying into, "Faggot is as faggot does." However, in the struggle, we knocked our coffee mugs and cake plates off the table and, as we turned toward the crash, Ray's elbow smashed into my face and there was even more mess to deal with, blood spraying everywhere.

Ray looked so abashed at finally having made good his threat that there was only one thing I
could think of to make him feel better.

"You clean it up," I said thickly, blood clogging my nasal passages as I craned my neck back and pressed the towel Ray'd given me to my face. "I'm not your bitch, Ray."

Ray smiled faintly, kissed my forehead at the hairline, and then made an excellent job of it, cleaning not only the blood and the coffee and the plates but the whole rest of the apartment in his fit of remorse.

Ray, I'm embarrassed to say, got his bloody nose due to a misunderstanding on my part. It was after a long day at the station, and we were both exhausted and on edge. Ray had his hands braced on the kitchen counter and his nose practically pressed to the microwave as he waited for what was passing for dinner to be ready; I was pulling bowls out of the cabinets and silverware out of the drawers.

Suddenly Ray straightened up, turned to me with a determined look on his face and said, "I want out, Fraser."

And maybe it was just all the stress of being patient, so damned patient, but before I could even think I'd drawn my arm back and just socked him one. Ray fell back against the counter, hands flying to his nose, just as the microwave dinged off behind him: dinner was ready, even if we weren't. I still had my fist pulled back—I was really out of my head, and I think I was actually going to punch him again—when Ray flailed at me with his right hand, still holding his bloody nose with his left, and yelled, "Not you, you idiot! Not you! Crap, gimme a towel or something—"

We went through a lot of dish towels in those days.

It was only after I had Ray settled in one of the kitchen chairs, head tilted back and towel of ice pressed to his face, that he was able to explain that he hadn't been talking about me, or our relationship. "I meant the job, stupid," Ray said, glaring at me with one angry blue eye. "I am sick of the fucking job, all the perps and the twerps and the schitzoids. I am sick of having Stella in my face every other day, I'm tired of the paperwork and the weird hours, and I am particularly tired of the bad coffee. You I'm pretty much okay with," he finished, narrowing that one blue eye at me, "or I was."

It was after this that things finally became—well, what I came to call normal. Ray's most berserk attacks of homosexual panic subsided, and we were even able to do the occasional joint load of laundry. I, for my part, discovered that it was all right not to pretend to total self-sufficiency, and just as I had learned how valuable it was to have a partner in my policework, so I was now learning the pleasures of having one in my life. It was quite nice, I discovered, to share your life with someone—to know someone was waiting up for you, would care for and about you. To have someone who would compensate for your deficiencies, allowing you to drop the ball every now and then—and that was an unimaginable luxury to me, one I enjoyed almost as much as sharing a bed with him.

In short, for the first time in my life, I felt like I could relax every now and then; and as Ray grew more comfortable with himself and our relationship, he calmed down a little, too. We developed an ease with each other—first in bed, as Ray grew increasingly confident in his reciprocations, and then eventually in conversation.

"I love you," I said one day, turning to him during a halftime break which saw Leafs 3, Rangers 1.

I didn't get the response I'd been expecting. Ray seemed to considered this for a moment, and then he said, sounding very sincere: "Thanks. That's nice, I guess."
"That's nice?" I demanded. "That's nice, you guess?"

Ray looked hurt, and a little bit defensive. "Well, you know—yeah. I mean, that's nice—that's good—nice!"

"Nice for whom?" I asked, crossing my arms and glaring at him.

"For me!" Ray was definitely defensive now. "It's nice for me! I'm the recipient of the niceness, okay?"

"I just think that's a very odd response," I said, turning my eyes back to the screen, now heartily annoyed.

"Well, I'm a very odd guy," Ray retorted.

"Well, apparently," I muttered.

"You betcha," he replied, and we went back to watching the game.

Ray chose the middle of a power play to mutter his next comment, which I only realized I'd heard a few seconds after I'd heard it.

"It won't last," Ray said.

I dragged my eyes away from the screen where the Leafs were playing five on four. "What?"

Ray's eyes were still following the players. "It won't last," he repeated, almost offhandedly, "not that there's a problem with that, not like it has to. It's nice now."

The noise of the game dropped away, as if Ray'd muted the sound. "Why shouldn't it last?" I demanded.

Ray shrugged and still didn't look at me. "Because it doesn't."

This was so flat, and so final, that for a moment I was truly at a loss for words. "Ray, just because you and Stella—"

That got his attention; his head jerked toward me and his eyes flashed fire, just like in the old days. "She's ambitious. You're ambitious. People step over me, Fraser, believe me, I got footprints on my head." He jabbed two fingers at his head as illustration.

"I am not ambitious—" I protested.

"Ha!" Ray crossed his arms.

"I am not," I said, heatedly. "You can't know me very well if you think that."

"Tell me about it in a year," Ray said, turning resolutely back to the screen. "Or six months. Whenever it is you get tired of playing house with me."

There was no answer to that; Ray was using the same reasoning I'd used earlier. Wait it out, just be patient. There's no point to protesting facts, and the fact is that love doesn't last, Fraser. You're naive, too stupid to know that—but give it time and you'll see; you'll adjust to reality.

I sat there, feeling sick to my stomach, and tried to distract myself from these thoughts with the game. It didn't work, and a few minutes later, I got up and said, quietly, "I'm going to bed."
"Yeah, you do that," Ray said tightly.

I lay there for hours, unable to sleep, listening to the faint sound of the game on the other side of the bedroom door. But I guess I did sleep, because when I woke up Ray was bed with me, and his arms were around me, and he was whispering into my hair. *I love you*, he said, *believe me, I love you. I just can't be optimistic*, and I held him close and fell back into sleep.

I opened my eyes the next morning and saw the dreamcatcher spinning in the early morning light. Six, or half past, judging from the angle of the light. The house was still, or nearly so: I could hear Dief's paws clattering in the kitchen, but no snuffling or snoring from Ray's room next door. Not home yet.

I sighed and stared up at Ray's dreamcatcher. "I love you," I said to it, to him. "Believe me, I love you...and I will be optimistic."

**Part Five**

I woke up to the most annoying buzzer sound in the entire world. "Oh, god," I muttered, and then there was a voice, a muzzy female voice, saying, "Don't worry about it, it's just the alarm—"

I sat up in a panic and looked around, looked down: Stella. She smiled up at me from her mound of pillows. "It's just me," she said.

"Just you? What're you *kidding*?" I leaned down and kissed her as passionately as I could manage, which was quite a bit, me being a Vecchio and all. "You are like—a vision," I told her honestly. "You are like—like I need to pinch myself, like I might be hallucinating. It's just that—" I looked around and found the alarm clock: man, 7:30 in the morning, and Fraser was probably up with the pigeons. "I just gotta get going. I gotta be somewhere."

"That's all right," Stella said, sitting up, the white sheet falling down to her waist: my god, she was lovely. "I've got to get to work anyway."

I kissed her again, and again, before scrambling out of bed and looking for my clothes, which were crumpled up on the floor by the side of the bed. So much for my best suit.

"Will I see you again?" Stella asked quietly, as I zipped up my pants.

"Stella," I said, "with God as my witness, you are going to see me every *day* from now on till the end of your natural life."

I ran out through her living room, pausing to snag an apple out of the bowl on her glass dining room table, and took the elevator down to the lobby, where her doorman hailed me a cab. Sitting slumped in the back seat, I sat and watched the city whiz by me. There were people heading to work, cars clogging the streets, stores opening up—it was a great morning, a beginning, the first day of my life. My new life with Stella.

I saw a sign blur by, and it took a few seconds to register—and then I was leaning forward, tapping on the glass, and yelling at the cabbie, "Wait! Wait! Go back!"

Cause I had an idea.

Fraser was sitting at the kitchen table, writing furiously in a notebook, Frannie's lake maps spread
out all around him. He glanced up as I pushed through the kitchen door, then stood quickly to give me space to put the box down.

"Okay, sorry, sorry," I said, setting the box onto to the table with a thump. "I'm late, but hey—I come bearing gifts."

Fraser looked down at the brown box, then up at me again. "So I see. Did you have a good evening?"

"Fraser," I said, sinking down in a chair and shaking my head, "you don't even know the half of it."

Fraser managed a smile, which I really appreciated knowing how stressed out he was and everything. "It went well, then?"

"It went amazing," I answered honestly.

Fraser sat down in the chair across from me and looked at me curiously. "You like her, then?"

"I—" I was about to tell him exactly how much I liked her, except for a second I just wasn't sure of the etiquette here. Was it okay to fall crazy stupid in love with the ex-wife of the murdered guy who was your best friend's partner and lover? I didn't think there was any sort of greeting card out there for this one. "Yeah. I like her, Fraser—I really really like her. She's just so smart and pretty and ambitious—" Fraser flinched a little at the description; okay, maybe too much information there. "Look," I said quickly, "I know you've got problems with her. I mean, over Kowalski—it's gotta be weird for you and everything. Just I can't help that I—"

"No, no," Fraser interrupted, "I understand perfectly. Of course you shouldn't help it—there's no reason for you to help it, in any case. She's a lovely woman," Fraser said, and I felt his approval like a blessing, like a benediction, "and under other circumstances..." He trailed off, looking thoughtful, and then added quietly: "I don't blame her for what she's doing; she's got the difficult task of trying to make things right for Ray's parents. I haven't even been able to talk to Mr. or Mrs. Kowalski. I wouldn't know what to say." Fraser sighed and massaged the bridge of his nose with his fingertips. "Awkward all around. But if I were her, in her position, I'd be doing exactly the same thing. Clever of her to approach a judge; imagine having to wait three years before getting a death certificate. It would be horrible for them—it's horrible enough already."

"So you don't mind?" I asked, needing to have this all clear.

"Of course I don't mind. I think it's wonderful." He stood up then, and considered the box in front of him. "So what have we here?"

"This is for two years' worth of missed Christmases and birthdays," I told him. "Go on, open it."

He did, prying the thick staples out of the cardboard with the flat of his knife. He seemed to sigh in relief as he pulled out the laptop, set it down on the table, and then cleared away the styrofoam packing and the box. "Thank you," Fraser said. "I'm sure it'll help—save us some footwork, in any case."

I leaned forward over the table, grinning excitedly. "Okay, yeah—except I had this idea. You don't have codes, I don't have codes—for CPD access I mean." Fraser nodded grimly, pursing his lips. "Right, but figure institutions, Fraser—like marmalade, slow as molasses." Fraser just stared at me, waiting, and it was nice to see confusion on his face for a change. I sat back in my chair and showed him my cockiest grin. "You know who'll have codes? Kowalski. I'll bet you money that they haven't deleted Kowalski from the system yet."
Fraser's eyebrows flew up; clearly this idea hadn't occurred to him. "Well, yes, that's certainly possible," he admitted. "But I don't have Ray's passwords."

"No," I granted, pulling the laptop toward him and flipping the top up. "Figured you didn't. But look—his login name's gotta be my login name, because he was there being me, right?" Fraser was nodding slowly, watching as I found the power button and began to boost up the machine. "It's a standard thing anyway—first initial, four letters of the last name. RVECC."

"Right...all right..." Fraser'd pulled his chair closer and was staring at the glowing blue screen.

"We need a phone line," I said, turning to him. "Please god that this place has a phone."

Instantly Fraser was out of his chair and pushing through the door to the front hallway—that's right, I remembered seeing the phone out there on the hall table. "It's here, dammit," Fraser called back, surprising me with his language, "but the cord's not long enough. We need a longer—"

"Forget it," I called back. "Take the mountain to Mohammed, Fraser." He came back and we pulled the table and two of the kitchen chairs out into the hallway, shoving it up against the wall under the stairs where the telephone was. "All right," I said, unplugging the phone and sticking the cord into the back of the computer. "We're almost in business—"

"But the password," Fraser reminded me. "We don't have—"

"We do have, it's in your brain somewhere." I tested the modem—okay, shitty, but sending a signal; it would do. "I know cops, Fraser, and so do you—they keep sending us those damn memos telling us to change our passwords to something stupid, seven characters with two numbers that no one on earth could remember, but we just don't give a shit and we never do. My password used to be CANNOLI—a word, seven letters, easy on the head. Think about it, Fraser—you know Kowalski, you know how he thinks. He's gonna have something like that," I said, "because only anal people follow the rules on this stuff—"

"People like me, I suppose," Fraser admitted. "My password was DIDTEAP." I rolled my eyes at him and Fraser said, sort of defensively, "It's an abbreviated quotation. From Eliot—"

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," I said impatiently; I'd gotten us to the opening screen now. USER, it prompted, and I typed in: RVECC and hit tab to the box saying PASSWORD. "Get cracking, Fraser—start thinking."

Fraser blew out a breath and sat down beside me in the chair. "Okay. Seven characters."

"Seven characters, " I repeated, fingers poised over the keyboard.

"That would seem to exclude dates, which are only six—so no birthdays, anniversaries, anything like that."

"It's gonna be a word," I insisted. "He's a cop, it's a word."

"A seven letter word," Fraser said and closed his eyes.

"Or a shorter word with a number," I admitted reluctantly. "You could do that too."

"God, this is hell," Fraser muttered, and then he opened his eyes. "All right. First things first: try STELLAK."

I did, hitting return with a sudden, irrational wave of hope. PASSWORD DENIED. "No," I sighed, quickly trying STELLA1, STELLA2, STELLA 3, all the way up to 9. Nothing. "That
ain't it. What about STANLEY, that's seven letters—"

"Don't even bother," Fraser said, shaking his head firmly. "Not to sound hubristic, but try me. BFRASER."

I nodded and tried BFRASER, FRASER1 through FRASER9, and then, feeling really clever, MOUNTIE.

"No," I said finally. "Try again. Wait—could be so dumb as to use VECCHIO?" I tried it; he wasn't; and then I tried RAYMOND just in case. "Okay, no."

"Let's stay with people," Fraser suggested, hunching forward over the computer. "His mother's BARBARA, that's seven letters." That wasn't it. "Try MCQUEEN." I shot him a sideways glance, but did it. No go. "MBRANDO?" No.

"All right, let's take a different tack," Fraser muttered. "Places—start with CHICAGO." No. "He lives on South Pagani," S. PAGANI; no, "and he grew up on Clark Street, but that's not seven letters. God."

"Keep goin'," I said softly. "You got it in there, I know you got it in there..."

"Ray, it could be anything."

"No, it couldn't. People are dopes, Fraser—it's gonna be something obvious, trust me."

"Obvious after the fact," Fraser griped. "All right, the car. What about the car—GTO?"

"How do I make that into seven letters?" I asked.

"I don't know. GTO AUTO?" No. "1967 GTO? GTO 1967?"

"Nope, neither," I reported. "Gran Turismo Omologato—TURISMO is seven letters," but they were the wrong fucking letters, just my luck. "All right, what's the plate?"

"WE 761," Fraser said. "Not enough."

"It is if you add IL in front of it," but ILWE761 got us nothing.

"All right," Fraser sighed. "Try DANCING." No. "FUCKING." No. "CHAMPION—no, wait, that's eight letters." Fraser closed his eyes again. "TURTLES?"

"You're overthinking this, Fraser," I growled. "What kind of gun does he carry?"

"A Glock 9 mm."

"Okay, that doesn't help." I stared down at my fingers, thinking, trying to think. "What kind of food does he like?"

Fraser was starting to sound a little desperate. "I don't know. He never struck me as particularly picky. He likes...I don't know. Pizza. Tacos. Chocolate—chocolate ice cream, sweet things. He takes a lot of sugar in his coffee..."

This wasn't helping. "He smokes, right? What brand?"

"Marlboro—eight letters."

"Shit. What about music, what kind of music does he—"
Fraser was already shaking his head. "It's too wide a field; his record collection was simply enormous."

I leaned back in my chair and looked at him; Fraser's whole body was wracked with tension. "Why don't you make us some coffee or something," I suggested gently. "We'll take a break, clear our heads..."

Fraser squeezed his eyes shut for a second and then nodded and got up, heading for the kitchen door. "You know, I did think I knew him..." he said quietly, pushing through the swing door—and then he pushed right out again, like a cartoon or something, a Keystone Cop. "No, wait, I'm an idiot," Fraser exclaimed, looking like he was about to smack himself in the forehead. I sat up in my chair. "I know what it is—and you're right, it's obvious, it's stupid, we skipped right over it—"

"Gimme! Let's try it," I said.

Fraser sat back down in the chair, looking sort of stunned and disbelieving. "Try nothing—I'm sure of it, Ray. It's the car. It's PONTIAC."

He was right; I knew he was right even before I typed the letters into the field, my fingers nervously jittering over the keys.

PASSWORD ACCEPTED.

~~WELCOME TO THE CENTRAL COMPUTER SYSTEM OF THE CHICAGO POLICE DEPARTMENT....

"We're in, Fraser," I said with relief.

We spent the next few hours narrowing the radius down, or at least trying to. No way we could consider the whole of Lake Michigan, and from the way Fraser was thinking, Charlie Fish would've wanted to keep Kowalski close by, so he could trade him—exchange him for a new model Vecchio if he got the opportunity.

We worked from the computer to the maps and back again, isolating the stretch of coastline around Chicago, and then going to the detail map for a better look. "There's fuckin' miles and miles of coastal property, Fraser," I muttered. "Apartment complexes, warehouses, golf courses, parks..."

Fraser was rubbing his jaw as he studied the maps. "It's got to be something specific," he muttered to himself. "Charlie Fish had a car, so it was someplace better reached by boat than by car..."

"All right," I said, trying to get my strength back up. "So let's eliminate everywhere that hasn't got a dock."

We started doing this, crossing out properties in the detail map with Xs in red pen—but geez, it went slow. I made him stop to have lunch, and then we called out for Chinese food around dinnertime.

I had a brainstorm in the middle of my beef lo mein, and put the carton down. "All right, look, wait a minute," I said, still chewing, and Fraser dropped the red pen and leaned back in his chair, stretching his back out. "This is going well, this is going good—but let's stop for a second, okay?" Fraser reached out for his tea, took a sip, and made a face—it must've gone cold. "Just—we're doing this a good way, the methodical way, narrowing in," and Fraser nodded at this, "but it's
time-consuming: we could spend days doing this."

"I'm all right with that," Fraser said grimly. "It feels so good to be finally doing something—"

"Yeah, I'm glad you like drudgery, Fraser, but maybe we can get at this faster. Stop being so anal and maybe make a couple of brilliant guesses, take a couple of wild stabs in the dark." I pulled the laptop toward me and began to click around.

"What are you looking for?" Fraser asked, leaning forward to stare at the screen.

"Reports from the water," I explained. "Instead of looking to eliminate, maybe we should look for something positive—some break in the pattern of whatever's normal around there."

Fraser nodded slowly; he seemed to appreciate the idea. "I see what you mean. A stolen boat, for instance..."

"Well, yeah—that would be great," but we didn't find any reports of stolen boats in the week surrounding Kowalski's murder. Just to be on the safe side, I scanned all police reports from the lakefront, but there didn't seem to be anything weird there. Just the normal weird. "All right, I'm getting more coffee," I said, getting up with my mug. "Why don't you see if we can get access to the Coast Guard? Ninth District."

"Right," Fraser said, and took over the laptop.

When I came back, Fraser was peering over records of maritime incidents. "Eight drownings that day," he read quietly. "Five of them children..."

I grunted sympathetically. "And the other three?"

"Men, all of them," Fraser reported. "Two of them older, both identified—"

"Fishermen, probably," I sighed. "And the last guy?"

"A suicide, it looks like." Fraser frowned at the screen, and I felt suddenly nervous. "Still unidentified. Took all his clothes off and jumped into the water..." I sat up straight in my chair. Took all his clothes off. Kowalski's clothes in the water...

"Wait a minute—just wait!" Fraser shouted at me; he was angrier than I'd ever seen him. "Hang on, for God's sake—there's a description! Let me just see..."

I sat there, braced for it, wondering what on earth I was gonna say to Fraser if this guy turned out to be Kowalski.

"Male," Fraser read in a tight voice, "blond, blue eyes, approximately forty years old, and—" he seemed to go limp with relief, "two hundred and thirty-five pounds." He looked up at me, and we shared our relief. "If Ray's a hundred and seventy-five pounds..."

"Right, okay," I said, rubbing my suddenly aching temples. "He ain't the jumper. That's good, that's real good..."

For a moment we neither of us could do anything; we just stared into space.

"Maybe finish with this site and take a break," I suggested quietly. "Cause I need a break, Fraser. It's been all day with this..."

"Yes, you're right. All right." He blew out a breath and then leaned forward to read through the
"Anything else?" I asked a couple of minutes later.

"Yes—quite a lot, actually," Fraser replied with a frown. "I had no idea the Coast Guard had such a wide brief. There were a number of search and rescue efforts that night—half of them false alarms, apparently; drunkards or kids setting off flares. The others seem genuine: people falling overboard, a small fishing boat capsized in rough water." Fraser continued to scroll downward, licking his lip thoughtfully. "People lost, calling in for directions from various points. Three boats were boarded that night—large quantities of drugs were found on two of them."

I considered this last thing. "Maybe something there. Except the mob usually isn't that sloppy..."

Fraser was still reading, frown deepening. "There were a number of accidents that night. The terrace of a restaurant collapsed, sending all the patrons into the water—"

"Oh, that must've been fun," I muttered.

"—and there was a fire on another boat, two people taken to the hospital. And a derelict vessel ran aground near—well, quite near the harbor where Ray was, actually," Fraser mused.

"Derelict? Meaning what?" I asked.

"Meaning empty, abandoned. They apparently secured it, marked it with a strobe light and left it there—they haven't been able to identify the owners." Fraser sat back in his chair and seemed to think about this. "Well, that might be worth looking into. We could check on that tomorrow..."

"Yeah, okay," I said, and shoved at his shoulder with his arm. "For now, let's give it a bit of a rest. Is there a television in this joint?"

"Yes," Fraser said. "In the parlor."

"So c'mon," I said, getting up out of my chair. "Watch TV with me for an hour. Let your brain rest a little."

I put Fraser in front of the television—not like he was watching it, he was just looking past it, staring into space—and then I stole back into the hallway to unplug the modem and re-plug up the phone. I dialed her office first, and then her home number. She picked up there: at least not everyone in Chicago was working late.

"Stella," I whispered, and I thought I could hear her smile over the phone.

"Hi," she said. "I thought you forgot about me."

"Never," I said. "Not ever ever. I've just been busy, I've been working all day—I'm just taking a break now," I griped, hoping maybe to get a little of her sympathy.

She didn't disappoint. "Oh, I'm sorry, Ray," Stella said. "That sounds rough."

"It is a little, yeah," I admitted, fidgeting a little as I worked up my nerve. "Stella. Listen. I meant what I said: I still want to see you—"

"I want to see you, too," Stella said softly.

"—except I just don't know what time I can—"
I heard the door behind me open and turned around: Fraser was standing in the doorway. He took two quick steps toward me and yanked the phone out my hand. "Stella, I'll send him back when I'm done with him," Fraser said, and then he hung up the phone and pulled the cord out.

I was really and truly shocked. "What the fuck, Fraser!" I yelled. "You said you were okay with—"

But Fraser wasn't paying any attention to me; he'd plugged the cord back into the laptop and was booting the damn thing up again. Hell, this wasn't about Stella; this was about wanting the laptop.

It was only then that I noticed that Fraser'd gone pale.

"Fraser, what?" I asked.

Fraser's fingers were flying over the keyboard. USER: RVECC. PASSWORD: PONTIAC. "I had an idea," he said tightly, "something I thought of and—dear God I hope I'm wrong..."

I sat down slowly in the chair next to him. "An idea about what?" Fraser ignored me, typing furiously and then leaning forward to read when he'd gotten back to the right screen—the Coast Guard log again, I could see that much. "Fraser?" I repeated, getting very nervous now. "An idea about what?"

Fraser slowly turned away from the screen, his face a tense mask. "Fire," he said quietly. "An idea about fire."

I stared at him, mind spinning furiously. Fire...there was a fire on another boat, two people taken to...

"Two people taken to the hospital," I repeated, and Fraser jerked his head in acknowledgment as he fumbled for his red pen and peered down at the printed maps. I watched, stunned to silence, as Fraser moved the tip of the pen carefully around the coast—and then stabbed it down hard and started swirling quick circles around a particular location.

Fraser lifted his head; his eyes were dark with pain. "Say you wanted to hide somebody for a long time with minimum assistance," he said in a low, distant voice. "You don't have many people to help you and you're not sure who you trust. Say, furthermore, that the person you're trying to hide is quite—special," his voice broke a little bit on the word, "someone who would be missed, the subject of a high-priority search, his picture publicized in newspapers and police bulletins. Where might you hide such a person?"

I snatched the paper map from under Fraser's pen, which left a long, ragged red mark like a scar. Calumet Harbor Hospital, Fraser'd circled. USCG—United States Coast Guard.

"In the hospital," I mumbled, finally managing to get the words out of my throat. "You'd put the guy in the—"

"Yes. In the hospital. In the burn unit." Fraser stood, like a man in a dream, and said with eerie calmness: "I'll get my coat."

I watched in a daze as he walked up the stairs and then I practically dived for the laptop. The page was still loaded but the details were sketchy. A call to Calumet Harbor Hospital at 11:04 P.M. The report of a kitchen fire on a boat called the Bella Linda. A request for a Coast Guard ambulance. The team of hospital corpsmen, upon boarding the boat, found two healthy men aboard the Linda—and one man who'd been burned.

"2nd & 3rd dgr burns to left torso & arm," the corpsmen had scrawled. "Minor burns to face,
The owner of the boat identified himself as John Pileggi, and his licenses had all been in order. The other two men on board were identified as Charles and Gary Raymond—two brothers, friends of his, he'd explained, and they'd all just hoped to grill a few steaks, drink a few beers—

If the corpsmen had noticed that Charlie Fish and Stanley Raymond Kowalski looked nothing alike for brothers, they hadn't mentioned it in their report. Then again, Kowalski might not've looked much like much right then, Christ help him. Jesus Christ, I knew what burns could be like. Deliberate, accidental—it was the kind of thing you saw on the job and wished you'd never seen. Wished you'd never smelled.

Fraser came back down the stairs in his jeans and leather jacket—and his hat. It'd been two years since I'd seen that hat, and maybe Fraser shouldn't have been wearing the hat, being as Fraser had retired and was now an ex-Mountie, but—

God, I was glad to see the hat. Like, things could not be this bad if Fraser was wearing the hat. If Fraser was wearing the hat, there was still some kind of order in the universe somewhere. Like everything would have to turn out okay.

I stood up, grabbed my coat off the chair, and followed him out the front door to the car. It was past midnight, now, and the street was silent around us. Fraser stopped on the sidewalk and handed me the keys. "You drive," he said quietly. "I don't think I can drive."

I drove us through the dark night to Calumet Harbor Hospital.

The place was all lit up, bright against the darkness of the streets in the front and the water behind. Quiet, though; only a few cars in the lot, mostly with M.D. plates, and nobody in the waiting room as we passed through the huge automatic sliding doors and headed straight for the desk.

A brisk looking nurse looked up from the counter as we approached. Her nametag said Mary Lansing, R.N. "Can I help you?"

"Yes," Fraser said shortly. "I'm here to see Gary Raymond."

She looked surprised at the request. "It's past midnight."

Fraser didn't so much as lower his eyes. "I'm aware of that. But it's very important."

This would normally be the point where I would sigh wearily, pull out my badge, and shove it up into her face so she could read it. Except I had no badge, nothing at all to give Fraser here except moral support.

"Uh-huh," Mary Lansing said, looking us over critically like she thought we were maybe lunatics, which maybe we even were. "Hold on a moment," she said, and reached for a clipboard thick with paper bound up by huge steel rings on the top. "That name's not ringing a bell for some reason..." She scanned the top sheet and muttered, "Raymond...Raymond...oh, I see," she said, suddenly. "Raymond, Gary..." she murmured and then flipped a thick chunk of paper over until she came to what seemed like the right page.

I saw the very second she put on her most professional, "Oh, I'm terribly sorry, gentlemen, but that's impossible," nurse face. "I'm afraid Mr. Raymond can't be seen," she said firmly. "He's one of Dr. Pileggi's private patients, and we've been given explicit orders not to—"

I jerked my head toward Fraser to see if he'd caught it—Pileggi, Doctor Pileggi, same name as the
guy who owned the goddamned boat!—but Fraser seemed totally not interested in that really interesting coincidence. In fact, he was standing there, quite calmly, holding a gun—fuck, that was Kowalski's gun, the little ankle piece I'd seen him pull out of the rolltop yesterday. Man, the guy must have hands like Houdini, and for the first time I could see why Welsh must've worried about Fast-Hands-Fraser mucking up the evidence chain.

"Fraser, keep your head," I blurted, which was a really stupid thing to say, since Fraser didn't look the slightest bit like he was losing his head. In fact, he looked totally calm, kind of scarily so—like he was some polite, hospital-visiting robot who might suddenly pop a spring and start shooting up the place.

"No, really," Fraser said mildly, like he was just asking which way to the men's room. The gun never wavered, though. "I really do have to see Mr. Raymond immediately. If you'd just tell me the room number..."

"Just do it," I yelled at the woman. "Tell him the goddamned number already—"

"312," Mary Lancing said tightly; and hey, give her credit, her nerves hadn't buckled yet. My own were feeling kinda shot.

"Thank you kindly." Fraser headed up the hallway looking determined. I went after him at a clip.

"I'm calling the police!" the nurse shouted after us, and now there was a tremor in her voice. She'd held it together while the gun was on her, though, which I totally appreciated. "Just so you know! I am calling the police right now!"

I whirled around and walked backwards for a step or two so I could shout back at her. "That's a great idea! That's a first-class, great fucking idea!"

And then I had to turn around to chase after Fraser, who'd given the elevator a miss and was pushing through the door to the stairs. He ran up the two flights of stairs taking them steps at a time, and I panted after him, my overcoat getting tangled around my legs as I climbed.

"Fraser, wait!" I shouted as I pushed through the door onto the third floor. "Fraser, goddammit!"

Down the hall a-ways, Fraser stopped, wheeled, and glared at me. "What? What?"

I gasped for breath as I walked toward him, hand extended. "Gimme the gun," I panted. "Before you go in there. Just let me have it."

He stared at me for a second—and then his lips tightened and he nodded. I stopped in front of him, my palm open, and he put the gun into my hand. I clenched my fingers around it and put it into my side pocket.

"Okay," I said softly, "now just let me say two things to you, okay?" Fraser swallowed hard, then nodded again. "Okay. First thing—it may not be him in there, so take a second to prepare yourself for that. This is a theory, and it's a good theory—but theories have been known to be wrong and if there's some other poor slob behind that door you should maybe think about him for a minute, all right?"

Fraser took a deep breath and nodded yet again; I was reaching him. He was hearing me.

"Okay, second thing," I said, lowering my voice even more. "If it is him in there, Fraser, just—just keep it together, okay? Cause he won't need your shit on top of everything else." Fraser just blinked at me stupidly and I reached out and fisted his leather jacket, shaking him just a little. "You hearing me, Benny?" I demanded. "Capische?"
"I'm hearing you," Fraser repeated. "I'm hearing you, Ray..."

"All right." I let go of him. He turned and curled his fingers around the long steel doorhandle, clutching it so hard I could see that his knuckles were white. He seemed to be steeling himself up, and I tried to do the same—if this was Kowalski, he'd need Fraser to be calm, and Fraser'd need me to be calm.

Finally Fraser pulled downward, turning the latch, and pushed the door open. Instantly I could see a weird blue light from inside, enough to see by without being bright enough to disturb sleep. The room was large and private, containing only one bed—and the figure in the bed was being well-monitored, anyway, if the soft bleep-bleep-bleep noises were any indication.

Fraser was walking toward the bed like the floor was made of glass. I couldn't see his face, only his back, and I wasn't sure what I was supposed to be praying for, here: "Please God, let this be Kowalski," or, "Please God, let this guy not be Kowalski." It was only when Fraser stopped, and stopped breathing, leaving the room silent except for my own harsh gasps and the bleep-bleep of the machines that I knew it was Kowalski, knew it suddenly for sure.

I put a hand out to steady myself against the doorframe, not knowing if this was panic or relief I was feeling, but feeling dizzy with it anyway. *Stanley Kowalski, I presume.*

"Ray?" Fraser'd made it to the bed now, and he seemed to be keeping it together well enough. "Ray?" I saw his head tilt as he studied the man's face. "Ray?" and there was a more desperate edge to the word, now, as Fraser took note of the complex mess of wires and tubes. He trailed his fingers gently over some of them, tracing them back to their various sources—and then suddenly his whole body tightened and his fingers pinched down on a clear plastic tube.

In two seconds I was next to him and grabbing hold of his wrist. "Fraser, don't," I said quickly. "Don't. That's the morphine drip."

Fraser's voice was quiet and furious. "I know what it is—"

I knew what it was, too; I knew all about it, having watched my old man's slow fade out once the cancer got bad. I squeezed Fraser's wrist tightly, grinding the bones together until his fingers eased up. "Okay, then you know what it is, and you know that it sucks—but you do not just yank somebody off morphine after six weeks, do you hear me? He will not appreciate that."

Fraser let go of the tube and I pulled his arm away from the whole mess of it.

"This ain't gonna be a thing of 'pull out the wires, throw him into the back of the car, and go home,'" I said quietly. "This is like—we need a doctor here, a real one, to tell us what the fuck to do about this."

Now, finally, I had a good look at him—my replacement, my namesake, the *povero biondo*. A little less biondo than I'd expected, because the amenities of this private hell-clinic didn't seem to include touch-ups to your dye job, so Kowalski's hair was darkening noticeably brown at the roots. Plus he was real pale—and that just made the red stand out more: deep red like a sunburn. Kowalski had patches of sunburn on his shoulder and neck, spider-creeping up to his face just below the left ear. From the flames licking up, I thought instantly, certainly—because these were the *good* burns, the mild ones, the ones that would heal up.

Kowalski's arm was another story—that was nasty, and that was gonna *stay* nasty, even after the skin graft took. If he was lucky he'd use it again, though there'd be scarring either way and he'd *feel* it most days. Same thing down his left side—I couldn't see all of it, it disappeared under the sheet, but he'd had work done there, too, which meant it was serious.
Fraser pressed his fingertips to the unblemished skin of Kowalski's right cheek and then leaned down carefully to touch their mouths together. When he straightened up again, tears were falling down his face, though he didn't seem to notice them; he was keeping it together, I was proud of him.

"I don't know what to do," Fraser said in a weirdly normal voice, like he wasn't crying and we weren't here and nothing strange was going on. "Tell me what to do, Ray."

"Okay, I'll tell you. I'm gonna find a phone, and I'm gonna call the cops, and I'm gonna call Welsh at home, and I'm gonna get some doctors here, some real doctors, some specialists."

Fraser nodded quickly and swiped his arm across his face like a fly had just landed on his nose. "And Stella," he said, to my surprise. "Call Stella. Because she should know and—and we might need some legal help, too."

"Right, good thinking," I agreed, and then suddenly we both turned at once because there was a sort of groaning sound from the bed, from Kowalski. He'd opened his eyes, and he was staring at the ceiling—and man, his pupils were blown, and that was morphine all over.

"Ray." There was an undercurrent of terror in Fraser's voice and I elbowed him, hard—Kowalski was flying pretty high but he'd still sense fear in the room, which might fuck with his head. Fraser stared at me and I mouthed, "Easy."

Fraser cleared his throat and tried again, and this time he got his normal tone back. "Ray, it's me. Ben."

"Ben...hey," Kowalski said, except it came out like, "Ehnn...ayyy," and that was all about the morphine, too, as was Kowalski's sudden, brilliant smile. High as a kite, totally out of it—the man was feeling less pain right now than either Fraser or me. "Aaayaabeen?" Kowalski asked happily. How've you been?

I wasn't gonna stick around to watch Fraser field that one. I went looking for the phone instead.

**Part Six**

"Ow! Ow! Ow! Ow!—what part of ow aren't you getting, Fraser?!—Ow, I said! Are you fuckin' deaf? Are you fuckin' stupid?"

A second later Fraser walked out of the bedroom and said: "I'm going to kill him. I'm confessing in advance."

Stella looked up at me over her legal pad. "Make sure you mirandize him."

"Check." I stood up and stretched. "Want me to take a crack at him?"

"Sure. With a wrench," Fraser said, pouring himself a cup of tea. "Then you can go to prison."

"Deja vu all over again," Stella muttered darkly.

"Though really, prison's looking very attractive at the moment," Fraser said, sitting down at the table; he looked exhausted. "Small cell, a couple of books, peace and quiet..."

"You know, that's pretty much why I divorced him," Stella said to Fraser.

"Well, yes, I do see the merit of the idea," Fraser said and sighed.
"Where are you guys?" I asked Fraser. "Still stretching?"

Fraser nodded. "Still stretching. Third set of ten."

I snorted. "Oh, well—he's not wimping out too early in the game, is he?"

"I wouldn't use the word wimping in front of him," Fraser advised, rubbing his temples. "His left arm's out but his right arm works fine."

"I could take him," I boasted.

Fraser narrowed his eyes at me. "Ray, right now you can have him, believe me."

"Deja vu all over again," Stella repeated darkly.

I went into the bedroom, and—give him credit—Kowalski was straddling the work-out bench with his left fist curled tight, trying to do the stretch. I wasn't going to take any chances, though. "Kowalski, shut up," I said as a greeting, "and gimme your arm." I sat down on the stool in front of the bench and carefully wound my fingers around his wrist. He didn't complain. "What set are you on?"

"Seven," Kowalski said, gritting his teeth as I braced my other hand on his chest and began to pull his arm outward... extending it... out... slowly...

"Heh," I said grinning. "You fuckin' liar—"

"It's seven!"

"It's three, and you're a dirty, rotten, stinking liar, Stanley."

"You know," Kowalski said, fixing me with a stare, "it's a good thing I didn't know you when I was bein' you because I woulda hung myself from depression."

I rolled my eyes, unimpressed. "Yeah, well, it's a good thing I didn't know you when you were bein' me or I woulda mailed you the rope."

Kowalski grinned. "Heh That's good, I like that. Mailed you the rope."

"That's good, huh?" I said, grinning back at him.

"Very good. Most excellent—ow," Kowalski added, face contorting as I got his arm near full extension, "that would be an ow, and that would be another ow right there. Ow, you bastard!"

"All right," I murmured, "coming back now..." and Kowalski blew out a huge sigh of pain as we slowly began letting his arm fall back into a more comfortable position.

"Where's Fraser?" Kowalski asked; his forehead was beaded with pain-sweat. "He throw himself out the window yet?"

"Nah, he's gonna go up to the roof first," I replied, giving him a second to let him catch his breath. "You know Fraser, he likes a good running jump. Ready?"

"No," Kowalski said instantly.

"Tough," I said and started extending his arm again.
"Christ!" Kowalski shouted. "I don't think I can take this. Not another fucking day of this—"

"I'll make you a hemlock shake for breakfast," I said, keeping the motion nice and steady, nice and steady. "One shake for breakfast, another for lunch..."

"...and a sensible dinner," Kowalski finished through gritted teeth and then he giggled suddenly, gasping. "Except hold the lunch and the dinner."

"Almost," I said softly. "Almost there...okay, now," and we began letting his arm slowly relax again. "You're doing good," I told him, letting him hear it in my voice that I meant it. "You're doing really good, there."

Kowalski was panting pretty hard by time his arm was back in its normal position. "I don't feel so good," he said between gasps, and when he spoke like that, honestly, I knew why he yelled and screamed all the time—it was easier to take than the quiet, simple truth.

"Oh, sorry," I replied, keeping my face neutral. "I meant you were doing good for essentially being a huge pussy."

His face cracked in a smile; Stanley needed me to insult him just as much as he needed to insult me. "Guess that's why they picked me to play you."

"Good one!" I said. "Ready?"

"Just stop asking already," Kowalski said and squeezed his eyes shut. We went through it again, taking it all from the top. "Stella still here?" Kowalski asked tightly, obviously needing something, anything, to distract from the pain.

"Yeah, she's here," I replied. "She's trying to crush the Pileggi brothers' balls for you."

"Oh good," Kowalski gasped. "She's always been good at that..."

"Hey," I said, without any anger at all. "That's my future wife you're talking about."

"My condolences," Kowalski said; his face was like a fist as we approached full extension. "I got some old jackets you might—" His breath came out in a whoosh as we passed the pain threshold and started heading back.

"Forget it," I said. "I've seen your jackets and they all look like they've been chewed on or something."

Kowalski was real pale suddenly; this last round had been bad. "Tell me I get to jump on his head," he said, and I looked up at him. "Pileggi," Kowalski clarified, "and his fucking brother too—"

I let him have a slightly longer break this time; he looked like he really needed it. He was now the same gray color as his exercise shorts, and the sweat patch was spreading from his pits to his chest. "Thing is, Stanley, he actually did a pretty good job on you—"

"He sure did." Kowalski grimaced and braced his palm on his pale, hairy knee. "Gotta love that lighter fluid—"

That wasn't the brother I meant and he knew it. "I mean the doctor," I said, patiently. "He did a pretty good job for a goombah, which believe me his lawyers are capitalizing on. He did a good job fixing you, and he didn't kill you which he could've. His lawyers are claiming he was scared, that he just didn't know what do and so he did nothing—"
"Oh yeah," Kowalski spat. "Nothing except get me addicted to morphine while he collected Charlie's dough week after week. I mean, if I'm gonna be a junkie, Vecchio, I want the whole nine yards: the camaraderie, the hip clothes, having sex for money, maybe Vegas—"

"Sorry, that was my gig," I said wryly. "Look, Stella is on it; she is making the case and hitting the money angle hard, because that's where we'll sink him. And the brother's already nailed," which was true, because all a jury needed to hear was that John Pileggi had held Detective Kowalski down while Charlie Fish soaked him in butane. End of story, case closed. "So nobody's arguing with you, okay? I'm on your side, remember?"

"Yeah." Kowalski looked away, and his voice had gone back to that soft, honest place that I hated so much. "I know. And I'm grateful, really—"

I grabbed at his good arm and held on. "Shut up. Don't you say that shit—not to me. This was my mess, my fault—and you and Fraser and Stella are stuck in the middle of it, paying my tab—but especially you."

"S'not that simple," Kowalski muttered. "Still. I'm grateful, you know, even if I don't always say—"

"Hey, any time you shut up, Blondie, we're all grateful, believe me. Ready?" I asked, and began to pull.

THE END

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