

*Shatter the lens and grind it into sand
one measured exposure
"Windpower," Thomas Dolby*

It took the city almost four days to dig itself out of the snow. Diefenbaker made one or two cutting observations but was, for the most part, amazingly restrained, in part, I am sure, because of the vast mountains of snow the plows piled up along the streets.

Ray and I, disdaining mechanised transport, made it into the lab late Monday. The building was deserted; we poked around aimlessly for a half hour or so and then, by mutual albeit unspoken accord, went home to skate. The day after that we skated in the morning and went to the lab in the afternoon; there were more signs of life, but no sign of Carlo or Rebecca.

Dr. Thatcher called me on Wednesday to remind me that the Willsie meeting was Friday and that I was to meet her by the front desk at ten and to leave the wolf with Ray. 'The wolf,' Ray, and I indulged in one more day of skating and one more night of camping out before we returned, myself reluctantly, to the lab and reality on Thursday.

Feeling rather as if she intends to check behind my ears, I present myself at ten, sharp, on Friday morning. The city is still in a deep freeze; the cold front lingers. Dr. Thatcher comments briskly as she fastens her seat belt that it's just as well: "A sudden thaw will back up the storm sewers for miles and we'll have flooding."

"The devil and the deep blue sea."

"The devil and Lake Michigan," she corrects; and I laugh dutifully. We drive in silence after that; after a mile or so, she remarks that my car handles better than its appearance would indicate.

"They're heavy cars," I say. "Rear wheel drive but it seems to be enough."

"You need a new car," she says, and then, surprising me, adds, "Or something. Ray asked me why you didn't have the Zinkernagel. We're putting in the paperwork."

"Th-thank you," I say, not really knowing what to say.

She looks at me, sidelong. "It's three blocks up and to your left. You ought to have a Ph.D., properly speaking."

"I suppose so." I try to keep my voice as light as possible. "The fellowship is really not an issue for me."

"It is for him," Dr. Thatcher says, lighting her second cigarette of the drive: she chain smokes when broaching uncomfortable subjects; but then I suppose all of us smokers do. "For me as well, as I told you some months ago. It would simply be easier if you had your Ph.D. Have you given any thought to trying to finish it here or at Chicago, for instance?"

“No,” I say, still politely, still as lightly as possible. I pull into a parking space near a ploughed snow bank. “You know what they say about over-thirties and Ph.D.s.”

She doesn't return my grin; I wonder momentarily if Ray has put her up to this before dismissing that thought with the scorn it deserves: Ray is not the sort to betray confidences. “You finished all your coursework, didn't you?” she asks. “You must have, you were there almost three years. **You'd need to write comps, of course, but we could accept some of what you've done with Ray already.** And I'm quite sure that Ray would supervise but if not, of course I'd be willing to do so.”

“That's... that's extremely kind of you,” I say mechanically, desperately searching for a polite and noncommittal retreat.

“Nonsense,” she says briskly, leaning forward to tap me on the arm for emphasis. “You're a good scientist. You're a valuable asset to the department. If you had your Ph.D. I could set you to work teaching more than just labs, Ben; believe me, this is not out of the kindness of my heart.”

“Perhaps I'm not interested in a teaching career,” I say, trying to sound as if I'm joking.

“Well, then, we'll set you up as research faculty,” she counters smoothly. “Teaching would be better for both of us, however. Speaking of teaching...”

I sigh exaggeratedly. “Not the freshman lab. Please.”

“If you teach freshman lab I'll give you honours lab too.”

I sigh again.

“And I'll pay you at the faculty instead of the adjunct rate, and that's my final offer,” she says, leaning forward to share my lighter flame. “Speaking of research, will you be around next week?”

“Barring unforeseen genetic revelations, yes.”

“I'd like you to meet with some incoming Ph.D. students who've expressed interest in working with Ray. He won't meet with them; they have to be friends of friends or professors; and I've got funding for students out the wazoo for him.”

“I imagine you do.” I get out of the car; she gets out too and we lean against the hood of the car as we finish our cigarettes. “I can't promise that he'll accept my recommendations, however.”

“Well, it's not quite as, ah, overt as that,” she says with a brief smile, stubbing out her cigarette as she huddles into her coat and begins to walk to the building. “It's that you might have an good idea which personalities could fit with him, the sorts of people he might consider, and if we could tell him that you'd, ah, vetted them, so to speak, he'd probably give them more of a chance. He has a high opinion of you.”

“That bespeaks a significant character flaw in him,” I say, following her. “I trust he'll see the error of his ways in due time.”

“Yes, well, I find it an odd characteristic,” she says, flashing me a grin over her shoulder, “but I know better than to argue with him.”

She fills the air between us with banalities as we await an escort at the reception desk: she has already briefed me, so to speak, and in any case wouldn't

discuss here, in their stronghold, some of the startling conclusions with which she graced me yesterday during our last smoke break of the day.

“The entire situation is unorthodox,” she’d said, then waited for my response. I had none: this was a reiteration of fact.

“But he’s happy and apparently they’re happy. You’ll see for yourself, of course. Dr. Metcalf is usually more involved in these meetings than I am: she’s been their official liaison, as she should be, but she’s evolved into the University’s unofficial liaison, and with your help that will change. It makes the dean uncomfortable. It makes me uncomfortable.”

“How does Ray feel about it?” I asked.

She’d shrugged. “He seems to have no opinion about any of it as long as he’s not expected to go to the meetings; he managed to make that quite clear to me, quite early on, after... well...”

“After the Rodbell?” I said, tactfully giving her an out and wondering still why people seemed to feel it necessary to tiptoe around the subject of Stella with me. Or perhaps with Ray and thus by extension anyone associated with him. Carlo too mentions her not at all; and even Sandor finds her an uncomfortable topic.

“Exactly,” she’d agreed, clearly relieved. “However, OSP¹ is upset that someone who works for Willsie is also on this committee; of course, OSP ought to have asked why on earth such frequent meetings were necessary, I’ve never seen that requirement in any other grant contracts, but all they saw was the money, of course. And to tell the truth, I don’t think Dr. Metcalf’s all that fond of the meetings either; it’s her superior, Dr. McDermott, who runs these. He’s the director of all their academic research, and this may simply be his way of keeping the lines of communication open, but it’s damned inconvenient for me and none of the scientists I’ve ever seen there seem happy about it even though the food’s usually good and the coffee is strong.”

“I’m entirely flattered,” I said then, trying not quite successfully to restrain my sarcasm; but she only rolled her eyes, used to it by this time.

“It’s a sinecure,” she’d said with a very disarming grin. “But the worst that can be said for it is that it’s boring and the best that can be said for it is that if you fly with them, and as long as no one mentions your lack of a doctorate you should, you’ll have earned the gratitude of your department head.”

“Certainly one of my chief aims in life,” I’d said, holding the door for her; and we parted ways in the corridor, nothing more said about the situation. Which situation, as I think about it now, trying to ignore the seductive fragrance of coffee arising from the receptionist’s desk, is somewhat peculiar. I did nothing but write grants and push paper in Cleveland, and while some required quarterly reports, with team meetings occurring once or twice in said quarter, I’d never encountered quarterly meetings for review, let alone these, which can occur monthly, Dr. Thatcher said somewhat wryly, if the head of the academic research programme is ‘bored.’

¹ Office of Sponsored Programs

The head, Dr. McDermott, looking not at all bored, meets us himself, younger than I expected, taller than I expected, with a head of sandy blond hair and a cheerful, ugly face. As we clip on visitor passes, he explains earnestly that “Vicky” was delayed, and I wonder if he calls her that to her face. A few seconds later, as he calls me “Ben” with no warning after Dr. Thatcher introduces me simply as “Benton Fraser,” I decide that he does indeed, and spare a moment or two to delight in her probable reaction to that inelegant nickname. He thanks Dr. Thatcher profusely for coming and says, with an innocence I’d suspect was studied if he didn’t appear to be so earnest, that he’s had a devil of a time organising this meeting. He seems to expect sympathy, so I oblige; and he smiles delightedly and falls in step with me. After a few more minutes he seems to feel comfortable enough with me to ask, somewhat naively, in my estimation, if my appearance at this meeting heralds an interest – “I won’t say ‘renewed,’” he says jovially, from Dr. Kowalski in his team.

I return a noncommittal answer: “He maintains a great interest, but he’s a very hands-on researcher.”

“And he’s quite happy that Ben’s been invited to come along,” Dr. Thatcher interjects smoothly. “He appreciates Ben’s abilities in things beyond the lab.”

“Ah, so you’re his envoy,” Dr. McDermott says, sounding, again and incredibly, quite delighted by that fact. “A liaison, as it were.” We’ve arrived at the conference room and he takes the opportunity to introduce me to the room at large as “Dr. Kowalski’s liaison, Dr. Fraser.”

I begin to correct him; Dr. Thatcher steps on my foot and I amend my explanation to a simple request: “Please, call me Ben,” I say, trying to match his smile and being overwhelmed, a few seconds later, by a slew of introductions. I’m rather good with names and faces, and have managed to acquire both a seat by Dr. Thatcher and a cup of coffee, as well as the beginnings of a conversation with an older woman with silvering hair on the other side of me, a Dr. Pinsent, who’s working in a related line of research at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee?, by the time Victoria comes in. She’s apparently the reason we were waiting: Dr. McDermott smiles broadly and calls the meeting to order in a very Roberts fashion.

The meeting is in fact as boring as Dr. Thatcher promised; no one among the scientists, of course, speaks in less than guarded terms of research, but Dr. McDermott tries, with a praiseworthy effort, to foster general small talk of interest during the break and then again at the end of the meeting. As I stand, somewhat at a loss, I hear him arranging that ubiquity of business, a golf foursome, with two scientists who are, apparently, employed by a subsidiary of Willsie. He catches my eye and I’m invited before I can think of a graceful way to decline. Dr. Thatcher provides no hope of rescue: she’s involved in a very quiet discussion with Victoria. I shrug inwardly: my golf game, learned for Mark and coached intermittently by Mark, is certainly of the quality that will endear me forever and always to my superiors.

The two scientists excuse themselves shortly thereafter, somewhat with the air of schoolboys at the sound of the recess bell, and Dr. Pinsent comes over to

take her leave. We fall sideways into a spirited and impromptu conversation about an article in the most recent *Lancet*, and Dr. McDermott listens with an avuncular air. As she begins to take her leave, she makes an odd reference to Victoria at the last, to Dr. McDermott: "I had expected to see her more often than at these meetings." He laughs and explains that "Vicky" is too busy to spend much time with the research side of things, and looks at me as if I'm to confirm that. I'm naturally startled, and unable to contain my surprise. "We see her rather more often than quarterly," I say, then bite my tongue; Victoria is a friend of Ray's, after all, and does seem to have a proprietary – no, if I must be fair I should say 'friendly' – interest in his research.

"Really?" Dr. McDermott says quietly, sounding startled as well, as soon as Dr. Pinsent is out of earshot. "I hadn't realised she was, ah, involved to that extent."

I hardly know what to say; fortunately, he seems to be capable of saying enough for both of us.

"Well, of course, they knew each other before he came to Northwestern, I think," he says, almost to himself. "Or she knew of him, I've never quite understood..."

A snake might be easier to understand, I think, or perhaps a wolverine. But fortunately I have sense enough not to say it aloud: she and Dr. Thatcher join us a few seconds later.

"Vicky!" He beams at Dr. Thatcher and Victoria; I suppress a smile at the small twinge of resignation I catch in her eyes before she smiles back. "I understand you know Ben quite well; he's been telling us of your interest in Dr. Kowalski's research. Dr. Kowalski's asked him to stand in for him at these meetings. I'm sure you'll be delighted: it should lighten your burden somewhat."

Reluctantly, I must admit, I admire her fortitude: I, watching closely, can barely see her wince. "I'm always delighted to do business with *Mr. Fraser*," she says with a smile as false as her tone.

Dr. McDermott frowns at her and then at Dr. Thatcher, whose hand on my arm is gripping me unpleasantly tightly. I sigh inwardly and step in. "As am I," I say cheerfully. "Dr. Kowalski appreciates being kept abreast of matters that might impact his research, and certainly a closer relationship between his laboratory and Willsie Aebischer can only benefit us all. A win-win, you might say, and certainly rather better than I'll do on the links, I'm afraid."

Dr. McDermott, successfully diverted, chuckles and rubs his hands together. "Ah, yes. Next Tuesday, don't forget! Vicky, you've been so busy recently that I took the liberty of asking Ben to make up a foursome. Perhaps the next time you could join us?"

"Perhaps," she says, a steely glint in her eye and I realise that I have, as I always seem to when it comes to her, misstepped yet again.

"This has been delightful," Dr. Thatcher says, stretching out her hand to Dr. McDermott. "Thank you for letting Ben tag along. He's been a great asset to us in the lab and I'm quite sure he'll be an asset to your team as well."

“Oh, indeed,” Dr. McDermott says. “Thank Dr. Kowalski for sparing him, and I appreciate your time, as always. I’ll see you next week, Ben; Meg, don’t be a stranger.”

I murmur appropriate “Thank you kindly’s” as we extricate ourselves from the room; at the last, Victoria’s gaze is cold and dead and impersonal; and I begin to wonder if she has, perhaps, more than a friendly interest in Ray. It doesn’t seem as if she does; her interactions with him are more sororal than anything else; but to an ambitious scientist Ray could be a huge stepping-stone. I’ve always suspected her interest in his research lay partly in its ability to facilitate her professional ambitions, and who can fault her for that? But her barely concealed dislike for me seems more personal than not. Perhaps I’m projecting: her dislike for me is personal, thus her interest in Ray is personal, and that’s a syllogism of the worst sort.

Dr. Thatcher says absolutely nothing to me until we’re in the car and moving. She’s tightlipped; I glance at her once and then leave her to her mood. I’ve had, over the course of my life, considerable experience with such moods, and have learned a healthy respect for them. It’s one of the things I find refreshing about Ray’s personality: he’s occasionally volatile, but he doesn’t sulk. Once he explodes, it’s over, and he never seems to hold a grudge.

“Let’s stop for coffee,” she says after a few blocks. “You can take some back to Ray. I’m well aware he disdains the department coffee now, thanks to you.”

I’m not sure if she’s teasing; her manner is deadpan. Without comment, I head to my regular shop. She says nothing until we’ve sat staring at our respective coffees for a full two minutes.

“You handled that quite well,” she says without preamble.

“Not at all,” I begin.

“I’m quite angry,” she says conversationally. “Very angry, Ben, and feeling very impotent and wondering where exactly I ought to go on my sabbatical and wishing it was nearer than two years away.”

“I’m sorry,” I say inadequately.

“I’m sorry too,” she says briskly. “You handled it very well. The question is... well, there’s really no tactful way to put this.”

“The question is why did I have to?” I say it for her: it is, indeed, a difficult question: why and how have I, a mere grant writer, managed to put up the back of the primary liaison and overseer of Ray’s chief funding source? And, indeed, it’s a question to which I have no real answer, or at least none that would satisfy a scientific mind.

“I don’t know that I’d put it quite like that,” she says, a glimmer of humour returning to her eyes. “But since you bring it up, *Mr. Fraser*... what’s the deal?”

“I believe we are victims of a mutual and, clearly, ill-conceived, antipathy.” I swirl my coffee absently and then take another sip. “I think we’re both rather possessive in nature.”

“She deliberately tried to undercut you in a situation where she gained nothing from it,” Dr. Thatcher says bluntly. “That’s rather more than antipathy. Nor can I say I’ve noticed you being possessive of Ray’s research. Nor

have I heard anything to indicate that she has any reason to feel that way. I should think – I did think, and I’m afraid perhaps I owe you an apology – that she would welcome your input or, at least, the *cachet* of your presence.”

“There was an incident,” I say tightly. “She wanted to meet with Ray; he told her to make an appointment. She’s used to a more open schedule; in Ray’s defence–”

She mutters something that sounds a great deal like, “Of course...”

“–in Ray’s defence,” I say again, clearing my throat, “some of the research is requiring his actual presence and he cannot dictate the timetable–”

“I understand. And on the face of it,” she says, somewhat more gently, “it doesn’t seem to be an unreasonable request.”

“No,” I say quickly. “On the other hand, she’s simply not used to it.”

“Is that the only incident?”

“Yes, to my knowledge.”

Dr. Thatcher falls into silence again, abstracted and solemn. At last she says, “It doesn’t make sense. Cutting off your nose...”

“No.”

“You handled it well,” she says then, getting to her feet. “She’s not our primary concern, after all; at least, she’s not as long as Dr. McDermott’s pleased, and he seems pleased enough. I imagine he’ll be even more pleased after time spent with you one on one.”

“I imagine so.”

“I trust so,” she says, beginning to walk on and then realising that I’ve stopped at the counter for Ray’s coffee. “Where on earth do you play golf in weather like this? Next week the city will be under water, you know.”

“So you tell me,” I say with an inward sigh of relief – storm averted – and an outward grin, clearly inviting elaboration; and she obliges with Chicago weather stories all the way back to the lab.

The next few weeks pass quickly, though wetly and, later, muddily; Diefenbaker rebels at his third bath in four days one Saturday and we have sharp words. As a result, he takes to spending a good deal of time at the nearby pond, which has become a temporary haven for waterfowl even as it’s expanded its reach. I can’t argue much: he has the sense to come home more wet than muddy, after all. He has, I find later, a kindred spirit in Matthew: when he arrives with his grandmother and his sister for the long-promised visit to Ray’s lab, he’s splashed with mud to his knees. He wanted to see how deep the puddle was, he says, shrugging; and, to her credit, Ray’s mother shrugs too and reminds us all that she raised two boys. When he finds Ray’s Legos it’s the last we see of both of them for quite some time: Carlo and I amuse Ellen and Ray’s mother with the mice and tales pertaining to them – at least, those deemed suitable for a tenderhearted eight year old.

Victoria we see very little of: when I finally manage the golf game with Dr. McDermott, rescheduled because of flooding, as Dr. Thatcher predicted would happen, not just once but twice, I learn she’s taken time off to go to Hawaii, or, possibly, Japan: he was unclear on that point. Ray and Carlo both raise eyebrows at that but I feel nothing save unalloyed relief and find myself wishing, from

time to time, that she would get a job in Japan or, better yet, Australia; and I spend the rest of my free time finding indoor ice for Ray and me to play on now that spring seems to have arrived with a vengeance.

The university has two rinks, but Ray's less than enthusiastic about that prospect. I finally locate one near Lincoln Square, near enough to be reasonable, and it's on a walk home from there that I encounter an odd little art shop. Diefenbaker barks at it, reason enough for me to look. There are prints in the window: Mondrian, Escher, and others. I step closer; Dief barks again. The Escher is a good-sized print and I stare at it for a long few moments. I only realise I am smiling when I see myself in the glass; it's the fatuous smile that frequently accompanies, no doubt, my thoughts of Ray. Ray and Escher are, have to be, a perfect combination. I tell Diefenbaker to wait and he, surprisingly, sits immediately and stares, unblinking, into the window.

Inside is a plethora of choices: framed and unframed prints, ties, gift wrap, post cards, even mouse pads. I end up spending far longer than I intended: each print is perfect somehow, and I'm almost at a loss when, flipping through the last rack of notecards, I happen across the perfect one. Recursive arguments, evolution, man, plant, animal, lizard, black and white and shades of grey...² The clerk looks at me oddly: all this time for one small card; but Diefenbaker barks, approbation evident, when I emerge. "It always is in the last place you look," I agree; and he barks again, trotting off ahead of me, his tail held in an exceedingly smug curvature. I ask him a block or two later if that pose isn't a trifle wearying to maintain; in response he curls it more tightly and pretends to ignore me.

² Escher, M.C. Mosaic II. Lithograph, 1957. All M.C. Escher works and texts copyright (c) Cordon Art B.V., P.O. Box 101, 3740 AC The Netherlands. M.C. Escher (TM) is a Trademark of Cordon Art B.V.

“Since I’m accused of recursive arguments I thought perhaps you ought to see one in action.”

Ray is staring at the print as if he’s never seen it before but I’m fairly certain he would have run across it: Mosaic II is one of the more well known prints, as if any of Escher’s work could be said to be ‘unknown.’

“Jesus,” he breathes, one hand coming up almost involuntarily, touching it gently with his two middle fingers. “Jesus, Fraser. I haven’t – haven’t seen that – haven’t seen any of them in a long time. How – how’d you know?”

“Know what, Ray?” Watching him, I know a moment of happiness. It’s rare that I exist in the moment; it’s something Ray does to perfection, something that I doubt is in my nature; but my hand comes up of its own volition, reaching to touch his hand. Belatedly I become aware of it and snatch it back, but Ray doesn’t notice. He’s still staring.

“I could see it,” he says, his voice almost inaudible. “I could be in it. There’s one – there’s one with a guy looking at a picture and the picture is him looking at the picture³ and there’s – it’s a loop, it’s an even better loop than the one with the monks⁴, it loops around but up too, forever... And there’s a hole. Just a hole in the middle of it – a – a singularity. It couldn’t be done without the hole so it just has a hole, he just – he just put the hole there. He made it work. He made his own rules. And the loop, it’s so ...”

“And there’s the waterfall,”⁵ I say quietly.

“Yeah, and the lizards,”⁶ he says, still in that abstracted, soft voice. “Eviscerate your memory...⁷ Sister Mary Clarence... she had the lizards on her desk, under the glass. And a Möbius strip with ants on it.⁸ I used to use up all her tape making those strips. She had another one... a circle. It didn’t have any right angles. I remember trying to explain to her that it didn’t have any right angles, and that it was – that if you were in it in the middle and started to walk to the outside you’d never get there. It was so cool to look at. It was – she was so cool.”

“How old were you?” I say, barely above a whisper, unwilling to break the spell.

³ Escher, MC. Print Gallery. Lithograph, 1956 . All M.C. Escher works and texts copyright (c) Cordon Art B.V., P.O. Box 101, 3740 AC The Netherlands. M.C. Escher (TM) is a Trademark of Cordon Art B.V.

⁴ Escher, MC. Ascending and Descending. Lithograph, 1960. All M.C. Escher works and texts copyright (c) Cordon Art B.V., P.O. Box 101, 3740 AC The Netherlands. M.C. Escher (TM) is a Trademark of Cordon Art B.V.

⁵ Escher, MC. Waterfall. Lithograph, 1961. All M.C. Escher works and texts copyright (c) Cordon Art B.V., P.O. Box 101, 3740 AC The Netherlands. M.C. Escher (TM) is a Trademark of Cordon Art B.V.

⁶ Escher, MC. Reptiles. Lithograph, 1943 All M.C. Escher works and texts copyright (c) Cordon Art B.V., P.O. Box 101, 3740 AC The Netherlands. M.C. Escher (TM) is a Trademark of Cordon Art B.V.

⁷ Stipe M. Bonus points if you can name the song and the CD.

⁸ Escher, MC. Möbius Strip II. Woodcut, 1963. All M.C. Escher works and texts copyright (c) Cordon Art B.V., P.O. Box 101, 3740 AC The Netherlands. M.C. Escher (TM) is a Trademark of Cordon Art B.V.

“Eight... no, nine, I turned ten that year. Fourth grade. They – I think they tried to hold me back the year before but my mom said no, said all I needed was glasses. It wasn’t the glasses. They helped. It was... disconnects. I had to learn other ways to connect. It took me a while. Patience. And Sister Mary Clarence. She did the math, all the math with me. She taught me plane geometry after school and then other stuff, later, some physics, a lot of calc and trig, she was – she liked math. She got it. She could explain it. And she – she had me talk to a friend of hers. It was IQ tests and things, I know that now; then it was just talking to someone who understood. Someone who didn’t laugh. Someone who had ideas about how to learn that weren’t the way the school kept telling me I had to do it.”

He picks the card up, tilts it to the light, holds it at arms’ length for a moment, then glances at me and smiles briefly.

“Protease activities, huh? Amyloidogenic pathways...” His voice trails off as he squints at the picture and tilts it again. “Recursive arguments,” he says slowly, his voice full of wonder. “Recursive lines, figure and ground, and, oh God, Fraser, the black part is a part of the picture too. What’s not there, what’s not there, it’s just as important as what’s there, if it wasn’t there, there wouldn’t be anything else to see.” He looks full at me then, his eyes blazing. “I’ve been looking at what’s there, Fraser. What’s there. What’s not there? Is that what I should be asking? Where is it, why isn’t it there?”

Two moments of happiness in less than ten minutes, my heart lighted from inside by that smile, those eyes, that mind. I could get used to this. I am used to this. I’m ashamed of myself – Diefenbaker is not the only one who’s gone soft.

“I’ve been thinking in terms of the protease activities, straight ahead, straight, uh, straightforward, enhancing the non-amyloidogenic pathway at the cost of the amyloidogenic,” he says, turning almost blindly towards his drafting table. “What – what else is there, what else could – I’m looking at what’s there, and it’s – maybe it’s defined by what we’re not seeing, there – there could be – Jesus. Jesus God, Fraser.”

It takes me, of course, much longer to work out what he’s talking about: at least three minutes; and, later, when Carlo and Rebecca come in, it’s more than half an hour’s work to get the gist across to them. Carlo has glazed over by the time I come back to myself; Rebecca is still clearly wrestling with the whole idea of and/and arguments as opposed to either/or; but they both understand enough to begin preparing for the deluge Ray, now sketching molecules and formulae, will launch on them in short order.

Carlo and I exchange knowing looks and when I look around again, he and Rebecca are gone; they’ll be back shortly with groceries and massive quantities of coffee in preparation for the state of siege mentality Ray’s concentration tends to engender in us all; and I call Sandor to warn him as well, since he’s often the only person who can bring Ray back to the surface.

I think for a long moment, then lift the phone and call Dr. Thatcher to ask her, among other things, to run interference with Willsie for a time. Once she grasps the fact that we may be on the verge of another breakthrough, the speed with which she assents and the cooperation she offers is almost ridiculous and I

wonder, shamefacedly, if now would be a good time to bring up Carlo's much-longed-for cappuccino machine. I quell that thought, sternly, and make only one reference to the quality of the coffee before I hang up; and I remind myself to move the coffee from the gourmet bags to grocery store tins before her next visit.

I look over at Ray again; the smile on my face is both instinctive and involuntary. As if he feels my eyes on him, he raises his head, still staring at the pad for a moment, and then he turns, looks at me, and smiles, full on, eyes bright and excited. "Batten down the hatches."

"Stand by to repel boarders," I agree, moving closer to him.

He jerks his head at the table, indicating my legal pad. "You write as fast as I talk?"

"Try me."

He grins again, jabs a finger at his pad, and launches into a tumbling explanation-cum-question of his rough hypothesis. I settle onto a stool next to him and begin to scribble. Neither of us is more than peripherally aware of Carlo and Rebecca's return until Carlo sticks coffee under our noses and asks what he needs to start working on first, gels or cell cultures or—

Ray interrupts, feverishly, words spilling out faster than thought, his lists, as always, convoluted, backwards, and even inside out; but I'm used to it now and soon Carlo has a starting place or fourteen, and Rebecca leaves to enlist the help of some of the graduate students who have worked with us before. While I'm answering Carlo's detailed questions, I draw up a note for Ray's class: cancelled, of course, and should anyone wish to 'do dishes' for extra credit – at which annotation Ray, glancing over my shoulder, snickers delightedly – they're welcome to visit the lab at their convenience.

"Okay," Ray says, jabbing two fingers at the legal pad when I finish the note and Rebecca, back with one graduate student already in tow and more promised, has been dispatched again with said note, "do that now, do that here, what you did for Carlo."

"You're not there yet, Ray."

"I am, I am, don't argue, just do that, do that here, fix it."

I laugh at him, slightly incredulously, realise that he's entirely serious, and then crack my neck, hoping desperately and a little wildly that that will cause my brain to engage fully.

Thirteen days later, I pull the door closed, firmly, behind me, and hear the lock click into place. I sigh and look down at Diefenbaker, who looks back up at me with the lupine equivalent of a head shake.

"Intense isn't quite the word," I say. He whines sympathetically, marking a new low in my life: my wolf feels sorry for me.

After snatching bare hours of sleep here and there for days, Ray finally hit his wall. All five of Ray's undergraduate students, shyly ecstatic at having been included, ran errands, kept us in coffee and enthusiastically 'did dishes' before, after, and between classes; Dr. Zhamnova's graduate students, closer to the epicenter, lasted less than a week. Dr. Zhamnova herself then came in for two days and left in her own daze, a prelude to her own immersion, I imagine.

I sent Carlo home early this morning, almost forcibly, after he had gone home for a mere four hours and returned babbling incomprehensibly but excitedly about covalent bonds, and sat Ray down at the table with a bowl of cereal. When I returned from putting away the milk, he was asleep, head on one arm, still holding the spoon. I gave the cereal to my much-neglected and long-suffering wolf and hauled Ray to his cot, locked his laptop in his vault – the first time I had ever seen him neglect that precaution in these eight months we’ve worked together – and washed the cereal bowl in the bathroom sink before readying myself for departure.

Diefenbaker whines again, a different note, and after a few seconds I hear what he must have felt: the elevator, heralded by a soft bell, followed by the sound of high heels clicking.

“Mr. Fraser!” The cheery note in her voice sets my teeth on edge, but then, I too am tired, and not inclined to patience. Briefly I wonder who the hell is on the front desk; Dr. Thatcher has been, up until this moment, remarkably successful at keeping her out of our collective hair.

“Ah, Dr. Metcalf.”

“Heading home, Mr. Fraser?” she asks quizzically, one eyebrow raised, a bare edge of insolence in her voice, as if somehow I forgot to clock out.

“Yes, I’m afraid so. Dr. Kowalski’s asleep, so, I trust, is Carlo, and Rebecca had the good sense to not even attempt an appearance today. I’m afraid none of us is in any state to help you.”

Her smile fades; false as it was, it never reached her eyes. “I’m afraid Dr. Thatcher has been less than clear about some very specific points and my employers are anxious–”

“If Dr. Thatcher is unclear, it is because we are unclear and are feeling our way in the dark.” I try, unsuccessfully, to keep the impatience out of my voice. “We may have made a breakthrough.⁹ We have so many more tests to run that I am probably misleading you by telling you that much.”

“Then I will let Ray tell me instead,” she says sharply, and reaches for the door handle. It turns not quite half a turn and she jiggles it, a little disbelievingly. “It’s locked. Please open it.”

“Dr. Kowalski–” I bite my words off, short, sharp, “–has been up for thirty-six hours. He is asleep. Short of a natural disaster or a true emergency, there’s no reason to wake him to answer questions that I, or Carlo, or Rebecca could answer after we have had some sleep.”

Her lips thin, a hard line. “My employers tend to be slightly apprehensive when they are unable to communicate with Ray.”

⁹ Kowalski SR, Fraser B, Zhamnova A, Chen K, Zhamnov A, Zeffirelli C, Sorbi S, Bruni A, Aebersold R. Inulin modulates prodementin-mediated notch/glp-1 signal transduction and beta APP processing. *Nature*. 1996 Sep 7;407(6800):48-54; and Kowalski SR, Fraser B, Zhamnova A, Chen K, Zeffirelli C, Sorbi S, Naslund M, Hendriks L, Martin JJ, VandenBussche C, Fata R, Aebersold R. A beta peptide immunization reduces behavioural impairment and plaques in a model of Alzheimer's disease. *Nature*. 1997 Dec 21;408(6815):979-82.

"Your employers were informed by Dr. Thatcher that Ray was testing a hypothesis. They were, moreover, furnished with my cell phone number; I believe you—"

"I deal with Ray," she interrupts, all pretense at civility now gone. "I always have. And I will talk with him now."

"No, you will not." I'm already standing partially in front of the door and now I move in front of it fully.

"Mr. Fraser—"

"Dr. Metcalf, please. I have been up as well for over thirty hours. I am not in any condition to carry on a rational conversation at the moment, let alone a civil one."

"Unlock the door, Mr. Fraser, or I will call security and have them do so."

"Be my guest." I cross my arms and shrug. This is extremely childish, as I well know; to my surprise, however, Diefenbaker makes no comment, only stares at her along with me, unblinking.

She holds my gaze as she pulls her cell phone out of her purse. I stare back. She flips the phone open, punches in a few numbers and waits, still staring at me.

"Hello, yes, is this the front desk? This is Dr. Metcalf. Could you send someone to unlock Dr. Kowalski's laboratory? We're having some trouble gaining access. Yes. No. Of course. Thank you."

She snaps the phone shut and drops it back in her purse and the toe of one foot taps once. I wait silently. So does she. Dief stares at her, insolent and unwavering.

We hear the bell of the elevator, a strange déjà vu preceding the next sound: the clicking of heels, breaking a vast and uncomfortable three-minute silence.

"Dr. Metcalf!" Dr. Thatcher somehow manages to sound delighted. Diefenbaker whines, almost inaudibly.

"Dr. Thatcher? I'm very sorry they bothered you. I—"

"Oh, no, it was no bother. I happened to be on my way over with the Zinkernagel paperwork and some grant proposals and Jon told me there was a problem with the door?" Dr. Thatcher looks at me, somewhat quizzically.

"It's 9:30 in the morning and *Mr. Fraser* is labouring under the delusion that my important questions for Ray, whom I haven't seen in almost two weeks, can be answered by him, at his own convenience." She is still smiling but her voice is cold and insolent and her emphasis on the honorific is growing increasingly marked, not to say ironic.

Dr. Thatcher looks from me to her and back again; I haven't moved from in front of the door and I shift only slightly and raise my chin.

"Dr. Kowalski's been running everyone ragged," Dr. Thatcher says. "I'm afraid Ben bears the brunt of it. If Dr. Kowalski's been up all night—"

"Thirty-six hours," I interject, attempting with some success to keep my voice steady.

"—then I imagine no one is in a state to answer your questions right now. I have some very rough, preliminary data on the computer in my office. Let's let

them get some sleep; perhaps I can give you something to go on with until Dr. Kowalski and his team have rejoined the living.”

Victoria, always pale, turns white with barely concealed fury. I’ve seen the reference in books, of course, but here it is in front of me, and it’s very disconcerting. “I must insist that—”

“Would you like to make an appointment?” I ask pleasantly. “Dr. Kowalski’s schedule tomorrow is completely open.”

She flushes now; the enmity is no longer hidden on either of our parts, and all because, as usual, I cannot resist the last word. “Eight-thirty,” she snaps. “Sharp.”

“I’ll make a note of it.”

“Go home, Ben,” Dr. Thatcher says, but to my surprise there’s no condemnation in her voice. A generous spirit, considering that my inability to curb my tongue has made an uncomfortable situation almost untenable: we will, after all, have to deal with each other for the foreseeable future. “You’re wiped out.”

The sympathy in her voice is almost the last straw, I think, both for me and for Victoria, who frowns harder and taps her foot again. I clear my throat and nod. “Somewhat. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

As I begin to turn, Dr. Thatcher says, holding out three interdepartmental envelopes, “Oh, Ben – your proposals. The NSF deadline’s not for another three weeks, you know.”

I turn back, assay a smile. “Yes, I know.”

She studies me for a long moment and then says abruptly, “I’ll put them in your in-box since you’re not racing a deadline. The Zinkernagel paperwork is for your files. Get some rest.”

As I walk away I hear Victoria begin to speak, her low voice breaking into shrill at least twice before the elevator arrives. Oddly, one of the words I make out is “NSF.” It affords me a small moment of elation to think that she is discomfited by the possibility of alternative sources of funding. It is not until there is silence in the corridor that I push open the stairwell door and head downstairs, much more slowly than Diefenbaker, my tired mind trying to comprehend Dr. Thatcher’s unlooked-for (albeit welcome) support on top of amyloid-beta-protein isoforms, prodementin-mediated signal transduction and beta APP processing, and a genuine concern as to whether I can make it home before I fall asleep.

When I do successfully reach my apartment, there is a message on my answering machine: Dr. Thatcher, a single word, but no particular animosity in her voice: “Bastard.” Diefenbaker barks once, a mark of approval.

“You pay and you pay...” I mutter, my face turned from him so he can’t see my lips but he barks a second time, happily smug. I leave him to his complacent assessment of my character and his reassessment of his unexpected new ally and I can’t even remember if I take off my boots before my head hits my pillow and there’s only darkness.

The meeting the next morning is less than productive. Ray's head is still somewhere above the stratosphere and he makes little or no sense, stumbling more than usual, his speech as disconnected as his thoughts; privately I feel sure Dief is likening the situation to prairie dogs popping in and out of their holes, an apt analogy; but as I have pointed out more than once, there is a method to their seeming madness, after all. He agrees, of course, but from his perspective it is infuriating.

That would seem to be the effect it has on Victoria as well. Twice she becomes impatient with him; Dr. Thatcher steps in at one point, and my gratitude, already extreme, begins to approach boundless, since I feel it incumbent on me to curb on my unruly and insolent tongue.

"It's a pity you didn't feel compelled to share that revelation sooner," Victoria says sharply. Ray blinks at her, almost as if he is surprised to see her there; and then he looks at me, enflaming Victoria further, I am sure.

"I'm quite sure Dr. Kowalski—" I begin, only to have Dr. Thatcher cut me off.

"Dr. Kowalski and Mr. Fraser and Mr. Zeffirelli are working, really, as expeditiously as possible given the constraints of the testing and the inherent wait times," she says smoothly, but she looks slightly perplexed, as if she feels that Victoria is being unreasonable. Of course I do but then I am, admittedly, very biased.

"How soon do you expect to have this in some sort of coherent format?" Victoria asks, making no pretense now at politeness with me.

Caught off guard, I look at Ray, who looks extremely alarmed. "All we have is a hypothesis and some very rough, very preliminary results; and those are still being compiled," I say, trying quite hard to sound reasonable. "The mice alone—"

"We need to start verification now," she snaps. "This may not be how you've been used to working, Mr. Fraser, but in the world of real science—"

Ray turns white and then red; Dr. Thatcher sees it at the same time I do and looks as worried as I feel: Ray does have a temper, although its manifestations are quite rare, and it can be as impressive as it is explosive.

"Dr. Metcalf, let's discuss this further over lunch," Dr. Thatcher begins, just as I say, "I can begin compilation—"

"This is m-my research," Ray says, deadly quiet yet somehow overriding both of us; and he stands. "I – I – I don't *have* to do anything. M-my lawyer will let you know when the p-patents are f-filed; the, uh, the data will – will be released to you then and not – and not until then. C'mon, Fraser, we have, uh, we've got fake *science* to, um, to do."

I look at Dr. Thatcher: she looks as stunned as I feel.

"M-Margaret, I'd like to talk to you as – as soon as you're f-free," Ray says, and his voice carries an unfamiliar hardness. "C'mon, day's wasting, our staff's waiting." He departs without any indication that he is aware of Victoria at all,

Dief following, his nose practically in the air. “C’mon, Fraser!” His voice resounds in the hall.

“Ah, I’ll call you as soon as I can, Ben,” Dr. Thatcher says in an urgent undertone. “Thank you, and please thank Ray for taking the time for this meeting this morning. You’d better go.”

“Going,” I say fervently, and manage not to slam the door. Ray is halfway down the corridor already. I break into an undignified run to catch up.

His face is chalk-white, his lips set into a thin line. Behind us I hear voices: for his protection, and, I must confess, Dr. Thatcher’s as well, I quickly pull him with me into the one place she won’t go: the men’s room, urging Dief to follow with a hissed command.

“What?” he says in a thin voice, blinking.

Without hesitation I take him by the shoulder. “She was coming out; she won’t come in here.”

“Don’t be so sure,” he says, still fuming. “I’m n-not afraid of her. I hope she does. I – I want you – will you call that – that guy? The guy you met, the, uh, the golf guy? I’m – I don’t, um, I don’t have to, uh, work like this, you don’t have to – to work like this.”

“Ray...” Remember the nice lady with the grant money, I want to say; unfortunately, however, I’m too in sympathy with his feelings to be sensible and objective. I try again. “Ray, I’m quite sure she’s realised she crossed a line. Calm down.”

“She c-crossed twenty-eight lines, Fraser, starting with – starting with you. I’m... Fraser, I’m sorry. That – that was... Fraser, you, um, you do know, you are doing real, um, real work here... I – I c-couldn’t... I couldn’t do what I do... Fraser, I’m – I’m sorry.”

I’ve already crossed more than twenty-eight lines myself: with nary a pause, I pull him into a quick, hard hug. His body is stiff, tense, but after a few seconds – too few, far too few – he takes a deep shaky breath and relaxes; I release him immediately, before temptation drives me over the line that must not, cannot, be crossed.

“Ray, I’m not at all upset, except that you had to be subjected to this; I’m afraid that I haven’t dealt with her as tactfully as I should have, she’s still clearly upset about that. And she should be, Ray.” I shake him a little for emphasis. “I was quite rude to her yesterday. This is my fault.”

“But... but it... it sounded... it sounded like she’s... like she knows about Sackler,” Ray says, beginning to get distressed again. “F-Fraser, I didn’t t-tell her, I d-didn’t t-tell anyone and–”

“Dear God, Ray, of course you didn’t. It’s quite clear to anyone who’s looked at my CV that something untoward happened at Sackler; given the fact that I’m not currently working on that Ph.D., her conclusions are quite logical, if a trifle uncomplimentary. I’m certainly not the ideal candidate to work with you; you deserve a team of top-notch, superior post-docs and perhaps even an eminent scholar or two to look down their noses at your unorthodox methods and to drool over your NSOM.”

This has the intended effect of making him smile, but it doesn't reach his eyes, still strained and worried.

"I'll apologise to her, profusely, for yesterday; perhaps if you took her to lunch—"

"I will not," he says, flushing angrily again. "You will not. You will *not*. *She* was out of line, Fraser, not you. Not me. I do own the f- the - the—"

"Fucking," I say helpfully, trying not to smile.

"—research, I know that... I hold my own god - my own—"

"Fucking," I say again, letting the smile out this time; his lips quiver responsively but he plows gamely on.

"—p-p-patents and I - I d-don't have to... they've... they've, she's been trying to get someone in here for... since S-Stella and I - I know it's b-because of this, b-b-because I hold my - my patents, they - they want someone they, um, who, uh, works for them—" He stops short, his eyes suddenly wide and panicked; and he shuts his mouth abruptly, firmly, as if he's said too much, and I'm not quite sure why.

"Undoubtedly," I say calmly. "Inappropriate but understandable, Ray; and they haven't succeeded."

"Yeah," he says, his eyes darting to one side for a few seconds. "Yeah, I know. I'm... I'm sorry. I'm... I'm so m-mad. I'm so... *freaking* mad..."

"Fu-cking," I say in an instructive tone; and finally he laughs, a small one, quickly choked off, but a laugh nonetheless.

"Yeah," he says. "I am. And... and I'm, uh, well, Thatcher's going to, uh, tell her that she needs to apologise to both of us or... or I'm going to, uh, to have to go to, uh, to Willsie and have them, uh, tell her that she, uh, needs to, um, b-be, um, more professional."

"Ray, you've worked with her for three years, clearly you two have enjoyed a cordial relationship up until now," I say, beginning to get alarmed, unable to imagine what Victoria's reaction would be at being told, dictatorially, to apologise, especially to me, especially after three years of a friendly relationship with Ray; I've even heard rumours that she'd been chosen especially, either by Ray or by Willsie, Carlo wasn't sure, to work with Ray: she'd been doing graduate work at George Washington, apparently, in conjunction with Johns Hopkins, when he was there on his second postdoc. "You're quite overwrought, this has been a rough fortnight, and—"

"A *what?*?" he says incredulously. "A what? A f-fortnight? God, Fraser! Who - who talks like that?" He begins to laugh; I'm relieved for a few seconds until I hear the edge in his tone. I cast about for a distraction.

"I'm sorry, blame it on my grandmother. I memorised *Paradise Lost* one winter, Ray, out of sheer boredom."

"No. No way." He's staring at me now, fascinated, his anger completely forgotten, or at least pushed aside. "Really? You did? Do it. Do it now."

"What?"

"Do it. Say it."

I stare at him, wonder for a panicked moment how I get myself into these situations, then collect myself:

*Of Mans First Disobedience, and the Fruit
Of that Forbidden Tree, whose mortal taste
Brought Death into the World, and all our woe,
With loss of Eden, till one greater Man
Restore us, and regain the blissful Seat,
Sing Heav'nly Muse, that on the secret top
Of Oreb, or of Sinai, didst inspire
That Shepherd, who first taught the chosen Seed,
In the Beginning how the Heav'ns and Earth
Rose out of Chaos: Or if Sion Hill
Delight thee more, and Siloa's Brook that flow'd
Fast by the Oracle of God; I thence
Invoke thy aid to my adventrous Song,
That with no middle flight intends to soar
Above th' Aonian Mount, while it pursues
Things unattempted yet in Prose or Rhime.*

He doesn't stop me; I plunge onwards, confused but game:

*And chiefly Thou O Spirit, that dost prefer
Before all Temples th' upright heart and pure,
Instruct me, for Thou know'st; Thou from the first
Wast present, and with mighty wings outspread
Dove-like satst brooding on the vast Abyss
And mad'st it pregnant: What in me is dark
Illumin, what is low raise and support;
That to the highth of this great Argument
I may assert Eternal Providence,
And justifie the wayes of God to men.*

“Go on,” he urges softly. “Say first, for Heav'n hides nothing from thy view; Nor the deep Tract of Hell, say first what cause...”

I think, no, I'm quite sure, that my knees tremble; but I join in and we say the next lines together, my brain recalling from some long-forgotten past the rhythm of the words:

*Mov'd our Grand Parents in that happy State,
Favour'd of Heav'n so highly, to fall off
From their Creator, and transgress his Will
For one restraint, Lords of the World besides?
Who first seduc'd them to that foul revolt?
Th' infernal Serpent; he it was, whose guile
Stird up with Envy and Revenge, deceiv'd
The Mother of Mankind, what time his Pride
Had cast him out from Heav'n, with all his Host*

*Of Rebel Angels, by whose aid aspiring
To set himself in Glory above his Peers,
He trusted to have equal'd the most High,
If he oppos'd; and with ambitious aim
Against the Throne and Monarchy of God
Rais'd impious War in Heav'n and Battel proud
With vain attempt. Him the Almighty Power
Hurl'd headlong flaming from th' Ethereal Skie
With hideous ruine and combustion down
To bottomless perdition, there to dwell
In Adamantine Chains and penal Fire,
Who durst defie th' Omnipotent to Arms.¹⁰*

“I love that,” he says softly, wistfully. “Wow. It... how'd you know? It... that gets me through a lot...”

I'm not quite sure what to say: I know he's Catholic, impossible to miss when he and Carlo begin incanting Latin at one another, but he's never seemed religious; and then I think again, and realise that this is personal, quite probably, and not religious at all. This surmise is confirmed by his next words.

“Heaven hides nothing from thy view,” he repeats, musingly. “If... if only that, uh, that worked, huh? But us, we're on our own, to, uh, to fight...to figure it all out. ‘What in me is dark illumined, what is low raise and support...’” His smile, then, is as blinding as it is unexpected. “Like you,” he says; and my knees literally go weak for an instant and I almost lean into him before I catch myself. I could, oh I could, draw parallels to Ray in *Paradise Lost* to time immemorial: but this is not the time and place, there may in fact never be a time and place; and I must content myself, am content, with this particular heaven on earth.

“I love that,” he says again, fortunately unaware of my inner struggles. “The patterns. It's like Shakespeare's sonnets, but the patterns are even more interesting. What – what else do you, uh, do you know? Like?”

“Besides Robert Service, of course?” He grins at that, and mutters something, but waits expectantly.

“My tastes are rather pedestrian, I'm afraid. I'm fond of Kipling.”

“Figures,” he says with another grin. “Good patterns, he has good words, good patterns.”

“Yes, you'd think so, Elephant's Child.”

He laughs, wholeheartedly this time, a delightful cackle. “Ha. Ha. My nose isn't long enough. What about Donne? I like his, uh, his words. His patterns.”

I am somewhat startled: though I can see that Ray loves his work I'd never thought further than that. But of course... of course this man would think about the metaphysical implications of his work, of life, of death... perhaps even of love... Or perhaps not. Not after Stella. And Donne quite suddenly makes even more sense as a stray line or two springs to mind: *And find what wind serves to*

¹⁰ John Milton. *Paradise Lost: Book I*, 2nd ed., courtesy of http://www.dartmouth.edu/~milton/reading_room/pl/note/index.html

*advance an honest mind.*¹¹ Applicable, perhaps, to us both, really, as I hastily recall my wandering mind to the present.

“I always wanted to learn, uh, Greek,” he’s saying, somewhat wistfully. “I had a professor in the ISP who was big into that, classics prof, but I never had the time. Never enough time. He’d, uh, he’d read it out loud sometimes...he was one of the advisors... it sounded cool. Just the sounds were cool.”

I become acutely aware that we are standing in a bathroom discussing poetry. He, of course, is oblivious: his head is cocked, his eyes bright, his anger forgotten, and I’m not quite sure how to get him out of here and back to the lab without bringing the shadow back to his eyes. The decision is taken out of my hands, thankfully, by an influx of students: three young men, backpacks slung carelessly over single shoulders, laughing and swearing good-naturedly. They apologise to me, not to Ray, and that strikes him as hilarious: he begins to laugh as I shepherd him and Dief into the hall and towards the lift.

“See?” he says, jabbing at the button. “See? You, uh, you need to be Dr. Fraser, you know?”

The change of subject, unexpected and shock inducing, takes my breath away: I had thought that this was settled.

“I don’t even look like it, they thought... ha, they thought I was a student, I bet. They always do.”

“Perhaps if you cultivated some dignity?” I suggest.

He laughs harder at that; one of the people in the lift with us gives him a strange look. “I think you have to be born with that,” he says. “Just ask, uh, Carlo.”

“He’s certainly done a great deal of observing the phenomenon,” I say.

Crossing the lobby, we pass Dr. Thatcher, coming back in. Ray stops dead, causing her to stop as well, his face assuming those unfamiliar lines again, stern, even hard. “Margaret,” he says without hesitation. “When are you free?”

She looks equally forbidding, and doesn’t meet my eyes at all. “At your convenience, Ray. I’m free now, in fact, until lunch.”

“How about now, then?” Ray says, not unexpectedly. He turns to me: “See you back at the lab? Don’t go to lunch without me.”

“Of course not,” I say, trying to sound collected: apprehension is coiling in the pit of my stomach, both for him and for Dr. Thatcher. There’s only so much she can do; and Ray’s showing an odd reluctance to let this matter drop.

“Hey, don’t worry,” he says, more quietly, as if it’s just the two of us. “Don’t worry.”

“I’d be less worried if your sense wasn’t drastically inverted in proportion to your intellect,” I say tartly. Dr. Thatcher looks somewhat shocked; but Ray grins, somewhat shy, somewhat proud.

“Getting there,” he says. “See you in a little while.”

I walk back slowly, trying not to be concerned. There can only be two reasons he doesn’t want me in that meeting, and one of them is beyond the realm of possibility. The other, much as I may appreciate it personally, doesn’t bode

¹¹ John Donne. Song from *Songs and Sonnets*, ca. 1631.

well for his short term or, possibly, long term professional future. Dr. Thatcher, on the other hand, has a great deal of sense and no small amount of tact.

Oddly the lab is deserted. Or perhaps not so oddly: Rebecca has taken the day off and Carlo did say he had to run to the main campus to pick up some packages delivered to Central Receiving by mistake. I pace a few minutes, restless; then sit down at my computer. The phone rings and I jump. Diefenbaker whines and I frown at him: it's not as if he's never been startled.

The voice on the other end is as familiar as it is unwelcome: Victoria.

"I'm glad to have caught you... Ben," she says, and her voice is lacking its customary edge.

I respond with a noncommittal "Ah." Her use of my first name, unprecedented, makes me wary, for some odd reason.

"No," she says, and for a moment the edge returns, only to be gone the next instant. "The situation isn't... isn't comfortable. I... well, believe it or not, I didn't intend..."

"Of course not," I say, growing steadily more uncomfortable, unable to tell if this is an apology, an attempt to get an apology, or both, or neither.

"You see, I've... well, it's rather hard to explain. But it would be easier on all of us if we could work together, I think."

"I agree," I say quickly. "I have no objection—"

"Of course not," she says, then pauses again. Then, astonishingly, she laughs, and she sounds... strange. "This is rather difficult... I don't suppose you've got some time to come here, where we won't be interrupted?"

I weigh my options: it makes sense to try to bury this hatchet, if we can, to try to reach an amicable working relationship. And perhaps a rapprochement will help convince Ray that he needn't risk alienating key personnel at Willsie to defend my less-than-spotless reputation. I check my watch: it's just after eleven and Ray didn't sound as if he expected to be back until noon. "Now?" I say.

"Yes, please," she says, and she sounds unaccountably relieved. "Thank you," she adds after a moment.

Diefenbaker whines disgustedly as we exchange goodbyes. "I take it that means you'd rather stay here," I say, pulling my coat on.

A menacing sort of grumble assures me that he would rather have a rabies vaccination than accompany me: a continent would not be far enough, in fact. He's heard, on what he maintains is good authority, that Willsie was involved in using dogs as test subjects in the early eighties, and he grumbles, further, a warning as I depart, leaving a note for Ray on the door.

The lights are against me; she's waiting for me at the front desk but she's clearly impatient. She brushes off my apologies with the bare minimum of civility and I feel my jaw tighten despite myself: the temptation to beg off this meeting is strong, but I quell it sternly.

"Coffee?" she asks on her way to her office, but it's clear she doesn't expect an affirmative response so I shake my head.

Her office is Spartan compared to, of course, the lab, but even to Dr. McDermott's office: she has two generic art prints on the wall, innocuous pastel watercolours; and her desk is spotless, not even a speck of dust marring its grey surface. The only bright spot is an incongruous tropical postcard with "Hawaii" printed across an improbable turquoise sky, tacked to the corkboard under the cabinet on the left side of the desk.

"Have you ever been?" she asks, following my gaze. Somewhat to my surprise, she settles on the other side of her desk instead of taking the other chair on my side.

"Ah, no. I'm afraid my holidays are generally spent in the Northwest Territories."

"Brrr!" She shivers exaggeratedly. "Chicago's too cold for me; if we ever get the Phoenix department off the ground, I'll be first in line to go. Of course, I suppose you haven't been able to afford real vacations."

I wonder for an incredulous moment how much she supposes a ticket to Whitehorse costs and then decide that she probably hasn't been to Alaska since she left and clearly has no interest. "My father's there," I say mildly, "so I imagine even if I had additional time and money I'd spend part of it at home."

Her face darkens; she says, quietly, that she has no family. "My sister died a few years ago in a car accident. She was all that was left."

Inwardly I sigh: I got off on the wrong foot with her and it's been nothing but misstep after misstep since. "I'm sorry."

"She's probably better off," she says, her voice brittle. "She'd never have gotten out. Tell me, have you never wanted out, Ben?"

"Out?" I say, puzzled.

"Out," she repeats. "You got out of Inuvik. Have you ever wanted to see anything else? Anyplace besides New York and Chicago? What about Europe?"

"I imagine so," I say, wondering if this is her version of casual conversation, wondering anew what my father would make of her, wondering why I always feel as if I'm a suspect being questioned. "I'll see it someday."

"The key is to see it now, while you're young enough to enjoy it," she says earnestly, leaning towards me. "It makes me laugh to see the old people on cruises, in the Champs Elysees... They can't enjoy it, but they're the ones with the money to do it."

"I think they do enjoy it," I say, growing increasingly uncomfortable, wondering for a fantastic second if she's trying to pick a fight with me and wondering why I think that. "Perhaps not the way I would, but—"

She shakes her head and sits back. "How would you enjoy it?" she asks. "How would you like to see Europe now? Live there, work there..."

“I can’t,” I say, completely at sea now.

“Think outside the box,” she says, leaning forward again. “There is life beyond Chicago. There’s life beyond cleaning mouse cages. There’s a whole world of opportunity out there... for people with the right education and connections. I have both... you can have both too.”

“What I have is sufficient,” I say, and I can’t keep the frost from my voice; this is too reminiscent of the conversation about my car.

“You haven’t had the help you need,” she says persuasively. “Hear me out, Ben. Ray can’t do the things for you I can do. I’d like to set you up for a job here. I’d like to help you get that Ph.D. you weren’t able to finish.”

“I – my–” I choke on the words; I feel as if I’ve been punched, literally, in the stomach, a strangely physical ache...

“Ben, please,” she says, holding up a hand peremptorily. “Sometimes it’s just who you know... I know people at Utrecht University, as it happens. I’ve pulled some strings on your behalf and spoken to the head of the Bijvoet Centre there, Dr. van den Ackerveken. He’s interested in someone of your quality; he and I think perhaps all you really needed at Sackler was a change of air and, perhaps, a different research direction. All your costs would be covered; and Willsie would hire you, probably at their centre near Utrecht, when you finished.” She sits back slightly, smiling, clearly waiting, expecting... assent.

“I’m sorry you’ve been put to such unnecessary trouble,” I say, glad the tremble I can feel is not apparent in my voice. “I have no interest in a doctorate, nor am I interested in moving, nor do I need anyone’s help in what is a completely private and personal matter. I have no wish to discuss this further. If this is all, Dr. Metcalf, I’ll bid you good day.” I stop short, reining in my temper. I have no idea what she really wants but it’s quite clear that she has no intention of burying the hatchet and I was a fool, and worse, to think she had. My father always pointed out that, in the animal kingdom, only prey changes its spots.

Her smile has faded, and I expect, fancifully, to see her eyes narrow to slits and her tongue, when she speaks, to emerge, forked, from between those lips, thin now with anger or some other, more dangerous emotion, and I feel the adrenaline surge in my own body, a fight or flight response being stimulated.

“I had hoped you would be reasonable,” she says crisply. “I’m not sure that you could finish a Ph.D., but Dr. van den Ackerveken owes me some favours and assured me that it wouldn’t be a problem. That was the easy way, Mr. Fraser. The hard way... has he told you about Stella?”

“I have nothing further to say to you,” I say angrily, pushing my chair back.

“They were together quite some time, you know. I believe that when he got the position here, she actually taught his classes for him. She did... everything for him. He didn’t move a pencil without asking her if it was okay. She thought she had... influence. She’s dead now.”

The overtness of that threat stuns me and leaves me momentarily bereft of words, let alone capable of movement. I feel as if I’m running through a bog, sinking deeper with each step, a nightmarish situation growing worse with each

passing step, and yet unable to quite believe it's happening: such are the stuff nightmares are made of: the unreality increases the sense of horror...

"Let's lay our cards on the table, Mr. Fraser. My employers are, quite frankly, concerned about the quality of work coming from Dr. Kowalski's lab since your arrival. They made enquiries into the situation at Sackler—"

"Dr. Kowalski is *fully* cognisant of the facts of that situation—"

She waves a warning hand at me. "They're not concerned with what the university thinks. They're concerned with their research—"

"Our research," I say reflexively.

"*Our* research," she says, overriding me. "Research we have funded, research that belongs to us. We're very unhappy that someone with your... reputation... was chosen to assist Dr. Kowalski. My superiors have told me, point blank, that they intend to pull the funding for your position; they don't want a repeat of poor Dr. Cahill's situation. They don't wish to make waves at the university, of course, and they're willing to give Dr. Kowalski and Dr. Thatcher the benefit of the doubt: you came well recommended and they probably didn't bother to dig any deeper into the Sackler matter. If you leave quietly they're prepared to let all of this slide. They were, in fact, prepared to finance your Ph.D. in a field where your brand of science could do little or no harm. However, now if you cause a fuss or try to embarrass them in any way, go over their heads or mine, or try to get Dr. Kowalski to intercede on your behalf, they will pull his funding as well."

"There are certain contractual—" I speak mechanically; the pit of my stomach is rapidly heading for China. This can't be a bluff; it's far too easy to call if it is.

"We're aware of the contract; we're prepared to buy you out of it. At this point, the offer in Utrecht can no longer stand: after talking to you, I'm of the opinion you're incapable of doing even the minimum required to satisfy Dr. van den Ackerveken. Unfortunately, therefore, we cannot guarantee you another academic position but it's possible we can help you find a position in private research." She pauses; then with a sly note in her voice, she continues, "Perhaps in Manitoba or Alberta. And if the fuss is minimised we might be prepared to offset some of your moving expenses."

The bile already threatens to choke me. "Under no circumstances would I accept a penny. I can and will make my own way. What I want is a guarantee that Dr. Kowalski's research and funding will not be affected. In writing. From Dr. McDermott."

She looks at me, frowning. After a moment she says, "It will have to be worded... carefully."

"It will have to be worded quickly." I no longer try to hide my sarcasm or disdain.

"You are not in a position to make demands," she says, all the warmth and charm gone from her voice, an icy wind blowing across a widening chasm. "There are other issues. My employers are prepared to go to the wall with me; and you would do well to keep in mind that there are some very large skeletons in your closet, Mr. Fraser, skeletons that a naïve and sheltered scientist from Dr.

Kowalski's background will have a negative reaction to; these...proclivities of yours may be tolerated to some extent in academe but not among the working classes of Chicago."

Mark. The waiter. The pieces fall into place with a dull, sickening thud. Ray knows – but she doesn't know that and he must be protected – scandal is inevitable, both for him and, of course Mark, whom I must protect somehow as well...

She's quick to press her advantage. "You've put him in an invidious position. There are very few people who wouldn't suspect that you used your looks and charm to try to insinuate your way into his life... and his bed. That can only disgust them... and him. As will the fact that you have, in essence, Mr. Fraser, been preying on an innocent man."

I am outraged and react accordingly, without thinking. "Absolutely not." Argument is futile, I realise three seconds too late; I cannot and will not justify myself to her, nor can I allow Mark to be blackmailed through me; and if she senses she can do so, she will go after Mark like a wolf pack after a lamed caribou. "Dr. Kowalski is not concerned in this matter in any way. Nor will he be, no matter what you choose to say. Perhaps you and your employers should address your concerns to him. I will discuss with him and Dr. Thatcher the question of my continued employment. I have nothing further to say to you."

"No?" she says softly, musingly. "Perhaps it would interest Dr. Thatcher – and Dr. Kowalski – and my employers – to know that you have been depositing funds into Dr. Kowalski's account in an attempt to make it look as if he is taking bribes?"

"Good God!" I stand so abruptly the chair rocks. "I have done no such thing!"

She says nothing; the corners of her mouth curl up in a smile-cum-sneer that sends ice down my back.

"It – that was you," I say, my voice barely more than a whisper: realisation and incredulity mingle with horror and for one moment I feel physically ill.

The smile fades; she stands too, and leans forward, her hands flat on her desk, small elegant fingers splayed quite inelegantly. "That was you," she whispers, and a cobra would sound friendlier. "You, Mr. Fraser. The money began to appear there shortly after you began to handle his personal finances. He's not well versed in the ways of the world, but he is able to add two and two and get four."

"No. No." There is a shake in my voice; I quell it sternly, my father's voice, shouting unintelligible words across an ice field, resounds in my head, restores steel to my spine. I straighten. "No," I say, calmly. "He will not believe you." He knew, I think hazily... he knew, he knew all along, but what? What did he really know, what does he know, what are the facts... I can't think clearly, and she is staring at me, a slow and extremely unpleasant smile beginning to stretch her mouth.

Her smile turns falsely commiserative a few seconds later. "Shall we find out? Shall we drag all of this into the light of day, Mr. Fraser? Do you think your

Winnipeg *friend's* career will survive the unpleasant publicity surrounding the revelation of the cozy little arrangement you two have?" Despite myself, I cannot suppress an intake of breath. Her smile becomes predatory; her voice, derisive. "You never know, do you? He seemed like such an All-American boy."

"Canadian," I correct automatically, my tone matching hers, also automatically.

"*Just* like you. Perhaps that explains it." Her smile widens; her venom, like her contempt, is no longer hidden. "So, *Mr. Fraser*. Are you prepared for yet another scandal or three? Are you prepared to have Dr. Kowalski witness your – treachery?"

I close my eyes for a brief second: a vision of his face, pity turning to sadness, flashes behind my eyelids. Pity, yes, he would have that; as well, a sadness, one that would scar his soul, perhaps irreparably this time. He trusts me; he would be loyal; they will turn on him for that loyalty, for his principles, as they did me; he will have no recourse. He loves his work. He loves his life.

In as steady a voice as I can muster, I say, "It's in your interests for me to go quietly, quickly, and, I presume, cheaply, Dr. Metcalf. Therefore I suggest that you acquaint your superior with my stipulation: a guarantee that Dr. Kowalski's research and funding will not be affected. In writing. In return I will leave with minimal fuss and maximal celerity."

Even as I say the words I feel sick despair: how can I leave him? I swallow, stand straighter. I am the son of a Mountie. 'Often there are no good choices to be made, Benton, only bad ones and worse ones.' Logic reasserts itself. How can I not leave him, if by leaving I can protect him, ensure his trust, his safety, his future, his work: his work that means more to him, I think, than life itself.

"Now," I add, allowing some of my father's voice to colour my own.

She blinks, startled for a brief second. "Within twenty-four hours. Dr. McDermott will insist on buying out your lease and these things take time to arrange."

"My..." I bite the words off: too late.

"Your lease, Mr. Fraser. You can hardly stay in Chicago, given the circumstances."

"I will not accept a penny," I say again, suddenly so furious that I want to actually hurt her for a few brief seconds before sanity reasserts itself, before memories of the past return me to reason. I take refuge in repetition, and spite: she doesn't want to do this, therefore I insist. "I want something in writing. Now. Before I leave. Insurance. For us both."

"It may take a few minutes."

"I have nothing but time."

"He may not be in."

"I'm quite prepared to wait."

She gives in then and stalks to the door with quick, sharp taps of her heels; and she closes it after her with unnecessary force.

It is rather more than a few minutes, closer to a half hour, when I hear voices outside the door. Dr. McDermott opens the door, smiles at me in what seems to be a genuine expression of mild pleasure, and follows Victoria in. She is

not smiling; in fact, she seems angrier than before, though it is well-masked. Despite my heartsickness I feel a small pleasure in this inconvenience I have caused her, petty though it may be.

“Ben!” he says heartily. “Wonderful to see you again! Pity we haven’t managed another golf date.”

I nod shortly; his attempt at disguising this revolting turn of events with pleasantries turns my stomach. His smile fades; a small frown begins as he glances at her, puzzled.

“Mr. Fraser would like some assurance that Dr. Kowalski’s funding is secure,” Victoria prompts.

“Well, of course,” he says; the disingenuousness of his hearty manner is wrenching. “Absolutely no question, Ben. I understand you’re doing your part, in fact; so there’s no need to worry about Dr. Kowalski’s funding in the slightest.”

“May I have that in writing?” I ask, clipping my syllables, making no attempt to return his smile, which fades again into a frown, more pronounced this time, his heavy eyebrows drawing together.

Victoria has moved to her desk; from it, she produces letterhead and a pen. “Will a handwritten assurance suffice, *Mr. Fraser*?” She looks at Dr. McDermott and rolls her eyes as she says it; I clamp my lips together: outbursts in situations of this kind, as I know to my cost, can have unforeseeable repercussions.

He looks slightly more puzzled, however; and seems at a loss. He writes the date at the top and then pauses. “Just a notation that his, ah, funding is secure?” he asks me.

“Yes,” she answers for me, impatient.

“Something to the effect that Dr. Kowalski’s current funding is guaranteed through the written dates already agreed on in the contract and will not be affected by external events such as staff turnovers,” I say through my teeth, as civilly as I can under the circumstances.

“Ah,” he says, as if the clouds have opened and angels have appeared complete with harps and wings. “Yes, that’s always unsettling. I trust the turnover won’t affect Dr. Kowalski unduly. This is quite unnecessary, Ben, these grants are contracts, but I’m more than happy to give you additional assurances.”

“Thank you kindly.”

He finishes scribbling and appends his signature with a practiced flourish and the neat grace of a man used to signing his name for a living. He hands it to me and waits expectantly as I read through it. “Does that suffice, Ben?”

“Yes, indeed. I thank you for your time.”

“My pleasure, I assure you. Please give my regards to Dr. Kowalski.”

“I certainly will.”

Somewhat to my surprise, he holds out a hand. At that, my control almost deserts me; but I quell my anger and hold out a hand that has nary a tremour in it. I can’t trust my voice, however, so content myself with a short, hard shake and release his hand immediately. He next invites me to join him and Victoria for lunch; I suppose the near-identical looks of horror that both she and I give him would be amusing under other circumstances.

“Very sorry, but I’ve got to get back to the lab,” I say, even more curtly than has been my wont.

“Oh, quite, quite,” he says, looking slightly dismayed. “You’ve got quite a bit to do and here I am keeping you from it. Thank you for your cooperation, Ben. Perhaps when the dust has settled, we can play a few rounds...” At this, I do choke, stifling it sufficiently as I turn, somewhat blindly, to the door.

“Have a nice day, Mr. Fraser.” The echo of Victoria’s voice, overriding his peremptorily and just this side of an overt sneer, follows me all the way to the lift.

There are other people there; they glance at me incuriously and resume their conversation. I feel blind, deaf, amputated: divorced from reality, their reality, at any rate: who said what to whom, who locked the supply closet and took the key home, whose desk is closest to the window...

I waste no time in leaving their parking lot, though my hands are shaking and there is a painful knot in my chest. I see a park and execute a less-than-polite cut across traffic to gain the entrance, and find therein a secluded place to park. I take the paper out of the inside pocket of my suit and look at it again: probably worth much less than the paper it’s written on, but an assurance, at least, that they are publicly committed to Ray’s funding and that it cannot be stopped without worry that I will, if I must, cause a fuss: at that point neither he nor I would have anything to lose, after all; that leaves only Mark.

Mark.

The issue has always been there, an undercurrent; we were at pains to establish the fact of our long-standing friendship, and Mark made creditable attempts to provide himself with suitable female escorts to his various official functions. I’d always kept a low profile in any event, so his teammates, with the occasional exception, were rarely suspicious: we were so matter-of-fact I think they had little reason to be.

A few well-placed phone calls, however, a few rumours started in the right places, and Mark’s career would definitely be endangered: there is no way to tell how much evidence she has garnered nor how conclusive it is, but she is a scientist; and she was certainly invested enough to have gone to the trouble to find and bribe the waiter on Mark’s last visit.

I get out of the car and pace restlessly around it; then make my decision and pull out my cell phone.

It’s a difficult conversation, given the fact that I am too emotional to be as clear as I need to be and given the fact that I cannot, dare not, tell Mark everything. His ways of dealing with problems are not mine, and he would unequivocally disapprove of my chosen course. He rarely admits the necessity for retreat or the possibility of defeat.

He tells me several more times to calm down, the last in no uncertain terms: “Calm the fuck down!” Finally I take a deep breath and try again to answer his last question: “*Who* is this bitch?”

“That’s not important. She is a scientist at the company providing Ray’s research funding who has taken a violent dislike to me; and she is threatening to, ah, reveal my... proclivities, as she termed it, to Ray.”

“Fuck!”

“Quite. I’ll do my damndest to keep you out of it, Mark, and I think I’ll be able to; but in the event I don’t I want you to be prepared.”

“Fucking Mountie wannabe. How’d you take care of it?”

I swallow hard; tears threaten. “That’s not important, Mark. We reached a mutual understanding. But I believe she was behind the waiter in the hotel that night. I’m not quite sure what evidence she has.”

“Fuck.”

“I’m extraordinarily sorry. As I said, I’m fairly certain I’ve deflected her suspicions enough to make her think that it was not a concern of mine, or yours.”

“It’s not, Ben, don’t fucking worry about it. And quit fucking apologising. Like I said, anyone makes an issue out of it they’ll be picking pucks out of their teeth. Half the reporters on the circuit probably suspect anyway.”

“I’d thought you were rather more careful than that, Mark.”

“Hey, Naïve Boy, some of ‘em are there for more than the hockey, eh.”

“And your teammates?”

He laughs, astonishingly; and for a brief moment my heart lightens at the familiar sound. “You’ve fucking been there, Ben, we call each other ‘faggot’ all the time. What’re they gonna say? ‘Hey, faggot! No, really, I mean it this time!’”

Despite myself, I laugh: so very true. It’s not the players who are the real concern; Mark has, in the course of his career, managed to sleep with someone from almost every team and has joked that expansion teams would expand his horizons.

With his sometimes uncanny ability to know what I’m thinking, he says, “Look, Ben, I’ve been the bad boy for too many years. I’m not going to be doing the Gretzky thing: they might ask me to play for the Olympics again or they might not, but I’m sure as hell not gonna be doing Chrysler commercials anyway. Don’t worry about it. I’ve got my stocks, got my bonds, got my real estate. Might fuck me up for coaching junior but, hell, could you *see* me coaching junior?”¹²

As intended, he makes me laugh again. “Not per se, no. But I am trying to keep you out of it.”

“Hey, I know, Ben, I know. I mean, it’d suck if I got outed after you dumped me: they’d all be laughing at me for letting the hottest ass in Canada get away and that’d be worse than the bad publicity.”

“You’re unrepentant.”

“See your way to a pity fuck?” he asks slyly. “We get outed, I figure you owe me.”

I feel my throat start to close; instead of the flippant rejoinder that is my immediate reaction, I settle for a quiet, “I’m afraid not, Mark.”

“Guess it’s going good with your genius then.”

I am slammed back into painful reality. “No,” I say curtly.

¹² Otsoko Guretxea. Email ca. Jun 2001 in which considerable concern for and hilarious dialogue about Mark was expressed.

“Fuck,” he says, and to his credit he sounds sympathetic. “You still playing hockey with him?”

“We have been, yes.”

“You could try taking off his skates,” he says. “Oops, gotta go, got another call, eh.”

“You do not. You are utterly reprehensible.”

“Pity fucks are us,” he agrees. “Why the hell couldn’t you have fallen for an asshole, Fraser?”

“Been there, done that, got the Winnipeg flag.”

“Ouch! Wicked fucking mouth, some things never change. And that’d be ‘fag,’ Ben.”

“Ah, so it would.”

There’s a long pause; in a completely different voice he says, “Thanks, eh. I miss you, Ben.”

“I miss you as well,” I say steadily.

“We’re still buds.” He is uncharacteristically quiet.

I say nothing; my voice has escaped my control again.

“We’re still buds,” he says again, more aggressively, an edge of concern to his voice. “No doubt.”

“No doubt,” I agree. “I know, Mark.”

“You okay?” he asks. “This is rough, Ben. You okay?”

“I’ll be fine, Mark.”

“Okay. You’re gonna come visit me after the postseason still, right? Bring Ray?”

“I’ll do my best, Mark.”

“I’ll see you in a week, eh. I’ll talk Ray into it, you’ll see.”

I blink back tears; at the same time I hear a beep.

“Shit, that really is a call,” he says. “Gotta go.”

“I hear it,” I say. “I’ll talk to you later.”

“All right, I’ll call you when I get back in town. We’re at home after this one, then back to Chicago. Chin up, Ben, fuck that bitch.”

“So to speak.”

“Ha. Later.”

I hit the end button and stare unseeing into the distance. Hard as that was, it was only a precursor; Ray will not understand, cannot, in fact, understand, lest it put him at risk: if he tries to interfere in any way his funding will be threatened, I have no doubt of that; and I wonder, despairing, if I can do this. Then remember Victoria and know that I must; remember, too, my father’s tale of pursuing a man into a canyon; the man, despite a broken arm, stabbed my father in the leg and left him with a concussion. My father not only got back to the detachment, he brought the man with him, had given him, in fact, the last of his food and had sacrificed his undershirt for a sling. “You do what you have to do, son, not what you want to do.” Of course, this particular memory would be more to the point if I could take down Victoria with a bola and deliver her to the nearest RCMP post but my father’s stories have, unfortunately, little practical application in the urban wilderness.

I stop at the mailroom on the main floor on my way back in: there are invariably empty boxes there, and, sure enough, I collect three, more than enough for the contents of my desk. Quickly and quietly...

The lab is still, oddly and mercifully, deserted save for Diefenbaker, fast asleep: Carlo must have decided to take a long lunch, something he's doing more often of late; and Ray... well, Ray told me to wait for him but I remember now that he had a faculty luncheon scheduled for today and he'll probably be unable to evade it, should he, in fact, want to: he said yesterday that he had things to discuss with both Dr. Zhamnova and Dr. Wellner. I throw away the note I left for Ray on the door and then I type, quickly and quietly, a resignation letter, which I sign and put in an envelope, assuming that two weeks' notice is not going to be acceptable to Victoria and her cohorts. I put the written assurance into an envelope and address it to Dr. Thatcher, along with a brief note about the candidates she's trying to get Ray to consider, hoping against hope that the doctoral students I recommended might be not only acceptable to Ray but competent in more ways than scientific ones; and I blink back, sternly, tears yet again, losing patience with myself, conjuring up my father's voice to stiffen my spine as I begin to sort through my desk, separating the essential from the important, placing sticky notes – “action items,” or so Dr. Thatcher calls them – where appropriate for Ray or, more probably, Carlo, to help make sense of them.

We still haven't heard about the NIH grant; I'm fairly certain we have, or had, an excellent chance of getting it, so I devote two sheets to the progress and disposition of it. I am thus absorbed when I hear the door open; and I feel for a brief, overly dramatic second, as if my heart is being torn in two as I turn to meet Ray's eyes.

He stops short at the sight, empty boxes by my desk, piles being sorted.

“What the *hell* are you doing, Fraser?”

I close my eyes, take a breath, open them again. “Ray, we need to talk.”

“Are you – are you leaving?” As always, he cuts through extraneity with little or no finesse.

“Ray–”

“No,” he says, very firmly. “No. You can't. No. Y-you said you'd stay as long as I n-need you. I-I still n-need you.”

“I know. I'm sorry. I didn't know, when I said that, that I would be forced later to break my word to you. But circumstances have arisen which require me to leave the university.”

“What? Why?”

“Circumstances,” I repeat, firmly, willing him to listen to what I cannot say. “Ray, it's a job. I won't – I promise–” wrong word, oh God, “I won't cease to be your friend. But I must leave the university.”

“B-because – why? Why?”

“Because I must, Ray. Please trust me...” My voice wobbles and I take a breath to try again.

“Why? I d-don't understand... you have to? Is it... is it b-because y-you... you, uh, want me?”

I stare. I'm sure my mouth is open but I can't feel a thing.

“D-did you think I d-didn’t know?” His voice is sober, even sad.

“I thought I hid it rather well.” The words return in a rush but there is no way to hide the crack in my voice. I stare a moment longer and then remember to breathe. He is regarding me solemnly; I feel dread – despair – shame above all – and yet I can’t look away, can’t look away from these last few seconds of our friendship.

He takes a breath; even more seriously, he says, “I told you, Fraser. B-biochemistry. That’s all it is. And I’m t-trained at... at observing...”

“Evidently.” My throat is dry; the word rasps.

He begins to catalogue the points, in his lecture voice, ticking them off on his long fingers. “Dilation of pupils; involuntary inhalations; increased respiration and undoubtedly pulse rate; visible increases in skin temperature...”

“Are you planning to write me up as Exhibit A?” Oddly I am comforted by his matter-of-factness even while I am piqued as well; and I don’t even try to keep the sharp note out of my voice.

He blinks and becomes Ray again. “And the way you looked at me.” Astonishingly, a smile trembles on his lips. I feel an answering smile begin to form on my own mouth.

“I’m... Ray, I’m very sorry. I didn’t mean... well, I certainly meant to spare you the... discomfort.”

“I am not uncomfortable, Fraser. And I don’t see why you have to leave because of this.”

My head is spinning and my brain is torn between confusion, laughter, and fear.

“It’s nothing to do with my – my feelings for you. I simply – I thought–”

“Thought what?” He frowns. “Thought I’d tell you to take off, never darken my lab again ‘cause we’re both, uh, we’re both guys?”

“Well... that’s a major objection for some people, yes.”

“I already told you, not for me. Why should it be for anyone else?”

“If I don’t leave there will be... extremely loud and public negative ramifications.”

“Fraser. You know I got no clue what you mean when you talk like that. Who’s going to make it public? What are they going to make public? And why does anyone care?”

“Ray – I realise you are feigning ignorance but it’s not helping.”

He’s silent for a long few moments. Then he says, simply, completely disarming me, “Please, Fraser, I can’t... I’m ... I’m a different me with you. I – I – I can’t do what I d-do without you.”

“You certainly can,” I say, wincing inwardly at the false heartiness in my voice.

“I-I c-can’t. C-Carlo can’t read my writing. Rebecca’s s-scared to death of me. And C-Carlo won’t argue with me like you do. No one... no one laughs at me like you do. No one cares if you’re gay, Fraser, and for me, anyway, they – they built me a swimming pool. I mean... I don’t mean...”

“I had no idea you were so mercenary, Ray.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s me, livin’ large. Think I’ll go buy a new cot.”

I watch him steadily. "They may say – a double bed."

"Really? You think?" He sounds interested, even amused. His career may be endangered; mine is in all likelihood over; we face imminent separation and loss, which I dread even in a non-romantic sense, because somehow this man has taken up residence not only in my heart but in my brain; and he does not seem to be taking any of this with the seriousness it deserves.

And despite all this I am elated, unquenchably, because my greatest fear, and the cruelest hold over me, was wiped away with his simple acknowledgement, and acceptance, of my feelings.

"Is that – is that fun? I mean, could that be fun?"

"Good God, Ray!"

He frowns again, head tilting. "What?"

Scientific curiosity. The man will, one way or another, be the death of me, probably from sexual frustration but quite possibly from an overdose of laughter as well. I take refuge, as I too often do, in sarcasm. "Obviously I find it... fun."

"You know, I read somewhere that, uh, homosexual men tend to have larger than average penises."

In any other person – any other man – that would be considered not only a come on, but an invitation. Ray, of course, manages to sound merely curious instead.

"I really couldn't confirm that with any degree of accuracy. My sample is in no way extensive enough."

"Oh." He actually has the nerve to look disappointed.

I so far forget myself, and the seriousness of the situation, to snap at him. "I could rectify that in the interests of scientific research, if you'd like."

Now, finally, he's serious. "No. No. I'm sorry, Fraser. I didn't mean –" He licks his lips nervously. "The – the thing is... well, the thing of it is... I j-just didn't – don't know. And... and I want to. To know."

"In the interests of scientific research?"

"Well, if you can tell me how sex ties in with Alzheimer's, maybe you should get in line for the Nobel." He snaps too, the stutter gone again.

"If you can tell me how sex ties in with us–"

"How on – on earth should I know? All I know is – is that I've, uh, I've wondered what it would be like to, um, to, uh, to... k-kiss you."

My brain has undergone too many shocks in the past few minutes to be able to process that statement, beautiful in its brevity, complete in its simplicity, immediately. When I do, words burst unbidden from me, not at all romantic, not even conciliatory. "The hell you did!"

"The hell I did." He grins suddenly. "Yeah. That – that was pretty much how it hit me. I like that. The hell I did."

"Ray, I am not a scientific experiment."

"Maybe not, but you're, uh, an impressive physical specimen." He attempts a smile, trying to... trying, I realise with a sudden and gratified shock, to... flirt with me.

"You're a naïve innocent." My voice softens: I take a step towards him.

He flushes at that, steps back, swaying on the balls of his feet, poised on a precipice. "I... well. Maybe so. Yeah. But I-I want to know. I don't know if I'll like it. So maybe... yeah. Maybe you're right. I'm sorry. It's not... you're not an experiment."

I chastise my libido and leap anyway. "I think my psyche can handle one experimental kiss."

"Your psyche isn't exactly objective, Fraser."

"Very true."

"I might not be any good."

"That's possible."

"Or I might be really good and still not like it and then you would be—"

"Ray?"

"Yeah?"

"Shut up."

"Okay."

We stare at each other for endless moments. He says, finally, rather thickly, "It's probably sexual harassment. And my closet has a lock on the door. So we don't get surprised. By Carlo or that janitor."

"There's a great deal to be said for a firm grasp of the essentials in conjunction with a scientific mind."

"You laughing at me again?"

"Very much so. And while an experimental kiss may be inadvisable I don't believe it could be considered harassment under any circumstances. By me."

"I guess you'd know."

"I occasionally do know my own mind. And I don't work for you."

He says, then, with an abrupt change of mood, seriously, "I mean it. I've been wondering. I... kissed Stella. She kissed me back. It was... Wow. But that was... we never... so..."

"Dear God. I cannot, in good conscience, take advantage—"

He pulls me to the closet, almost slams the door, locks it, and turns to face me. He is trembling. From the other side of the door, Diefenbaker whines. He turns again, unlocks the door, opens it a crack, leaning down to enunciate. "There is no room in here. Pizza later."

Diefenbaker accepts either the argument or the bribe and his claws click as he moves away from the door. By the time Ray has closed and locked it again, I am undeniably in his personal space although not yet touching him. He is still trembling. I realise, detached, that I am too.

I put a hand up to his jaw. He closes his eyes and breathes out, a long slow exhalation, and brings his hand up to touch mine. And if the first touch of our lips is somewhat awkward, falling slightly awry, the second touch, firmer, more confident, is everything I imagined and more. Warm, sweet, soft. The indefinable inextricable scent and taste of Ray. My hands slip from his face to his shoulders and then around to his back, one between his shoulder blades, one in the small of his back.

He makes a small noise in his throat and in a combination of delight and shock I feel his tongue, hesitant, moving over my lips. Evidently Stella was one

to take full advantage of the opportunity afforded her, as am I. My mouth parts willingly and my tongue finds his, licking gently, sucking slightly, my senses of touch and taste almost overwhelmed.

He sighs then, turning his head, breaking the kiss, resting his chin on my shoulder. I hold him.

“Okay. I... liked it. Wow.”

“Could you stand to do it again?”

“Yeah. Oh yeah.”

“Are you all right?”

“No. Better than all right.” He pulls back to look at me, steadily. I reach up to remove his glasses and put them carefully on the sink. His eyes are closed when I turn back, his mouth parted slightly, something akin to need on his face.

“God, Ray.”

“I know.” Barely a whisper. “Please.”

I would be unable to resist that even if I wanted to and I pull him towards me, away from the door now, wanting to feel all of him against all of me. Second kiss as sweet, sweeter than the first, and his hands move hesitantly to my back, echoing the movement of mine. We explore gently, mouths... and bodies. An eternity later Diefenbaker sniffs at the door and makes a noise in his throat, bringing me, at least momentarily, to my senses. Ray blinks, bereft, confused.

“Someone’s coming.”

“So?”

“Ray. God. Here. Splash cold water on your face. Quickly.”

“You look just as kissed as me, I bet.”

“You really ought to shave more often.”

“Really?” He joins me at the sink, splashing water on his glasses.

“No.”

He wipes his face on his sleeve, begins to turn back to me, hesitates. I propel him around and to the door. One of us needs to be on the other side of that door and quickly.

We both manage it and are sitting at our desks when Carlo comes in. I am so confused I can’t think. I was cleaning out my desk. I will still have to leave. But he kissed me. And he liked it. And nothing else seems to matter. I stare sightlessly at the piles, listening with less than a quarter of an ear to Carlo and Ray, who are having one of their usual mumbled indistinct conversations. Ray finally pulls his glasses off, rubs his face. “I can’t think, Carlo. I’m sorry. I’m... tired.”

Although I can’t see his face I can tell by the set of his shoulders Carlo is stunned. The admission is unprecedented and is caused by me. Flattering. Guilt inducing.

“Yeah. Yeah. You’ve been working hard, Dr. K. Maybe Ben ought to take you home.”

“It’s one in the afternoon. And I can take myself home.” Prickly, as always, about his driving. “I’ll get some coffee. I’ll be all right.”

“Ray. Let’s get some lunch. Outside the lab. Coffee.”

He turns, responding instinctively to the reappearance of our normal relationship. And gives in, as he so often does, for me, with a nod and a smile.

“That is an excellent idea,” Carlo says. “Take him to that steak house. He needs a solid meal.”

“You guys treat me like a baby.”

“Yeah, but you’re our baby,” Carlo says. “You’re frustrating, you stay up all night, you’re hard to understand. Good analogy, Dr. K.”

Across the table from me, poking at his baked potato, he says, not looking at me, “So now you don’t have to go. And... what do we do?”

“I still – there is more. We need to talk. I’ll... I will probably still have to leave, I’m afraid. At least leave the university. I’m sorry.”

“Why?”

“Because I am putting your funding at risk, I and my...” My voice quavers unexpectedly: how is it that I can cheerfully tolerate locker room insults but her voice, insinuating and derisive, still echoes in my head? “...proclivities. And there are—”

“What proclivities?” He spits the word at me, suddenly angry. “I have them too. Who cares? No one cares, Fraser, don’t – don’t say it like that. You still haven’t told me what, um, what’s behind all this. I told you, the university won’t care.”

“They will have to if they are made to care.”

“You would not believe what can, uh, get swept under a rug, Fraser. I’ve seen it happen. Well, uh, heck, so – so have you.”

“Ray, it’s a serious threat. And it may not be possible to sweep it under the rug.”

“What, is it Victoria?”

Speechless for the second time in one day, I stare at him, mouth agape.

“Fraser, I don’t know whether to be... well, okay, I’m flattered. You think I’m easy to fool just because I’m d-u-m dumb about life?”

“Well... yes.”

He laughs, short and sharp, then looks around before leaning forward, lowering his voice. “What happened? Did she try to, uh, to get you? You found out she’s on the take?”

“Yes. I mean, she threatened me, threatened to get Willsie involved, threatened – threatened Mark—”

“Mark?” he says, blinking in complete surprise. “Mark?”

“He’s... hockey players are generally, ah, expected to be...”

“I – I know, I mean, I figured, um, but... how – how did she... I didn’t... I knew you and I didn’t...”

“She evidently suspected enough.”

“F-Fraser, I’m sorry,” he says uncertainly. “I – how – did you tell him? You – we need to, uh, warn him...”

“Already done, Ray, and he’s putting a good face on it.”

“Christ,” he says unhappily. “I – can I – I need, to, um, apologise to him. I – I don’t know – I don’t think I have enough money to buy a hockey team.”

Utterly surprised, I laugh; he, of course, does not.

“It’s a Canadian team, you have the exchange rate on your side,” I say, deadpan; he stares at me and then a slow, sweet smile begins to bloom.

“I’ll call Patrick and tell him to, uh, re-, uh, redirect my portfolio.”

I smile at him, quite sure my heart is in my eyes. “You can’t buy a hockey team. This is not something that we can do anything to fix. If we can prevent it, that would be ideal but I don’t know how. If it happens, it happens. He is aware of the risks. He always was. We both were.”

“Yeah, but this because of me,” Ray says.

“In truth, Ray, it’s because of me,” I say steadily. “Not you. It’s because of me and, really, because of Victoria. If she is in fact ‘on the take,’ this situation is of her making, not yours, not mine, not Mark’s.”

He takes a breath, then another. Then he looks sidelong at the door, back at me, then down at the table. Still looking at the table, he takes another breath and says quietly, almost inaudibly, “She is on the take. But... but she’s got the wrong information. I’ve, uh, I’ve been keeping the, um, the real data and conclusions separate, secret...” He glances up at me, tries and fails to smile, then says to the table again, “And you and Carlo didn’t make it easy.”

I sit, breathless, my mind in chaos. His fiercely guarded laptop computer. Not just an affectation, well disguised as such: and I am astounded at how easily he misdirected us, all of us: Victoria, Carlo, Thatcher... me.

The first thing out of my mouth is an accusation: “You could have trusted us.” I think about his security measures, his well-known “paranoia.” The laptop, even more fiercely guarded passwords, changed, I think sometimes, hourly; and the small vault; and the hard drive, in the pocket of his coat even now despite the fact that his computer is in my car, guarded by Diefenbaker. Pride in his common sense wars with chagrin at my own inability to multiply x squared with y squared and obtain z squared. Pride wins. Because it’s him.

“I can... I can trust you. I think. I hope.” He sounds quite unsure, and his lack of assurance competes with and conquers my surge of anger.

“I hope you can too,” I say levelly.

“I mean, I think you can play a double game with the best of them. I think you could even... uh... kiss me... if – if you had to. But I don’t think... I don’t think you could control your... reactions. To – to that extent. And...” He looks at his plate, almost whispers. “I could be stupid... but I don’t think you – you – could... do all this...if you didn’t...”

“Many people can do that, Ray. I think Victoria is eminently capable of it, for instance. But I – I am not.”

“Yeah. That’s what I thought.”

“Or I could be lying right now.”

“Are you?”

“That’s for you to determine, Ray. My protestations of innocence can only be that.”

“I’m... used to being... alone.”

“I know.”

“And maybe wanting to be not-alone is... is affecting me. My judgment.”

“That is not only possible, it’s quite probable.”

“This could be a gigantic double bluff.”

“It could well be.”

“But somewhere inside me... I know it’s not. I don’t know why. I’ve tried to quantify it. I can’t.”

“That’s an enormous compliment. In both senses.”

He asks abruptly, “Did you know about the false data?”

“No.”

“Well, good. If it fooled you and Carlo, it fooled her.”

“But false data will defeat the purpose of the next steps in both the Willsie and the FDA processes, Ray. Their scientists will eventually figure it out.”

“No, the false data’s mostly for her.”

“Ah.” Light dawns; and I wonder, not entirely irrelevantly, how much patience this man must have, his mind going the speed of light and the rest of us pattering along at well below Mach 3. “You doubt that it’s actually being passed on to Willsie at this point?”

“Pretty much, yeah.”

“Do you realise it’s entirely possible that she’s collecting funds from two or three different sources?”

“Yeah.”

“Ray, you are a genius.”

“Nope. I’m just pathologically paranoid.”

“Thank God.”

“Yeah. Stella taught me a lot.”

“Ray—”

“I’m paranoid enough to think it wasn’t an accident, the car accident.”

“Ray. Can I take you home?”

“Home home?”

“My place or yours?”

“Fraser, it’s okay. You don’t have to—”

I lean across the table and pitch my voice low. “I want to... kiss you, Ray.”

“Oh, Jesus.” He chokes, splutters, blushes. “I was... I was hungry.”

“Finish your steak. I can wait.”

“F-finish yours.”

“I’m not hungry any more.”

I've just finished signing the charge slip when we hear, almost simultaneously, a shattering crash and a gunshot. Ray is at my heels as we skid outside to see my car, lacking a passenger window now, and Diefenbaker, lying in a pool of blood on the pavement, struggling to get up.

Ray disappears and reappears in a flash with a handful of cloth napkins from the restaurant.

"We've got to get him to a veterinary surgeon," I say blindly.

"Yeah. We will." Ray is feeling Dief's thigh; he yelps but makes no attempt to bite him. "Why can't I remember my comparative anatomy? I think it's missed most of the vital stuff."

"Where the hell are the police? They got your computer."

"So? They got Dief."

Sirens in the distance. It doesn't take long for the police to determine that no one saw anything but despite that they argue with us about leaving.

"Please," I say, grinding the word. "I will come right back."

"I'm sorry, sir, just as soon as you—"

"He saved my life." My jaw is set; that admission is difficult. Pleading is more so. Ray interferes.

"Fraser, give me your cell phone. I know someone on the force. Went to school with him. We weren't exactly pals but he wasn't stupid. We kinda... we took on some of the bullies. School bullies. We were both scrawny kids but sometimes all you have to do is stand up and be counted."

"That's very true."

"Yeah. So he might help us." He looks over my shoulder, then whistles. "Speak of the devil." He stands up and waves. "F-Frankie! Frankie! Oh, wow — am I glad to see you. I was just telling F-Fraser about St. X and you."

"Ray? Ray Kowalski? I thought you were doing the mild mannered professor gig. What the hell are you doing here in the middle of a mess like this?"

"Research. Look, can we get the wolf to a vet?"

"Is that your car?"

"No, it's his car but it's his wolf. Can we make a statement later?"

"Well, yeah. I guess. Tell you what, I'll drive you to the vet. I'll take your statement while we're waiting."

"Chicago's finest. I appreciate it, Frankie."

"No problem, Ray. Is he gonna bleed all over the upholstery?"

"We've managed to stop most of it. He can bleed all over my pants," I say.

"Oh, hey, sorry. I was kidding. It's not funny. I know. I'm sorry."

"It's quite all right. Thanks for the lift."

"You have a vet?"

I give him the name and address as I climb in the back seat of the vintage black car and Ray heaves Diefenbaker in after me. To my surprise Ray joins me in the back, rearranging Diefenbaker across our laps.

"Zuko Cabs. Hold on!"

He squeals out, narrowly missing one squad car and two pedestrians. Ray grins. I close my eyes.

In the waiting room, after we've given our statements, Ray says, abruptly, "I hope Carlo and Rebecca aren't worried. I should have called them first."

"Ray."

"Where's your cell phone?"

"Ray."

"I don't even know the phone number to the lab."

"Ray."

"What?"

"I think this was a warning."

He stops pacing and cocks his head at me.

"Anyone who knows you knows that you take the hard drive out of your computer all the time."

"Maybe it was just a kid."

"It was a warning."

Detective Zuko comes back into the room, putting his cell phone in his pocket. He's shaking his head. "All this over a laptop? You some kind of bigwig, Kowalski?"

"Yeah, sure." They both laugh.

"Well, you know they won't find it. I hope you had it backed up."

"Yeah. Don't worry."

"I hope the wolf's all right. Is he really a wolf?"

"We got him here in time," I say. "He's half wolf."

"Cool. Can we have the bullet?"

"By all means."

"Hey, Ray, you ever hear what happened to the butterball?"

"Butterball? Oh, Paducci. Oh, yeah. No, what?"

"Last I heard, he was in Vegas." He makes a small, strange gesture. Ray shakes his head, echoes the gesture.

"Translation?" I say.

They both look around. Detective Zuko looks at Ray, who looks at me. "Mob."

"Ah."

"Guess you weren't too surprised, huh?" Ray asks.

"Not really, no. I mean, his old man had it set up from day one, I think. You left St. X – when? You finished sophomore year, I think. Yeah. He started getting uppity in senior year and after graduation – you just couldn't tell him anything."

Ray snorts. "Still beatin' up little kids."

"Pretty much."

"So how's your wife? You got married a few years back, huh?"

"Yeah. Elaine's a civilian aide at the precinct. It's kinda nice – we're double income no kids for now, got a new mortgage."

"Good, glad for you."

“How’s your dad? We see him in the shop every once in a while. When Elaine lets me have red meat, which ain’t often enough.”

Ray tenses, invisibly, but answers, simply, “He’s, uh, fine.”

The veterinary assistant waves me over to the window. “The doctor will be out in a few minutes,” she says. “The surgery was uneventful. He should be fine. He’ll come around soon.”

“I’ll wait.”

“All right.” She smiles at me. I’m used to the effect I have on women. I smile back, relief no doubt apparent.

Detective Zuko listens in on the veterinary surgeon’s report and produces an evidence bag from nowhere for the bullet. “I’m glad the university called my lieutenant,” he says. “Otherwise I can just hear him telling me how glad he is I have the time to investigate cruelty to animals while fifteen real live people cases languish on my desk.”

“Languish,” I say.

“Yeah. He’s a card.”

“Sounds it,” Ray says. “Thanks again, Frankie.”

“Any time, Ray. Nice to meet you, Mr. Fraser.”

“And you as well.”

After assuring Diefenbaker that we’ll return to fetch him in a few hours, although it’s difficult to tell how much he comprehends through the aftereffects of the anaesthesia, Ray and I stand, waiting for a taxi, suddenly at a loss.

He doesn’t look at me; he studies the pavement intently. “I’m sorry, Fraser.”

“It’s hardly your fault—”

“I’m sorry about Dief.”

“He’ll be all right.” Although Ray has proven amply that he needs less protection than I think, I slip automatically back into that mode.

“Yeah. So. Where to?”

“Oh. Ah. Well, we’ll have the taxi drop you at your apartment. I’ll rent a car. I’ll pick you up tomorrow.”

“You can borrow my car. It won’t take long to fix the window. You can borrow my car for a day or two.”

I sigh. “We need to talk.”

“Yeah.”

“The inference is clear, Ray. First Dief. Then... Rebecca? Carlo?”

“That’s ridiculous, Fraser, even if your dad was a cop. It was just a kid. She was just trying to keep you off balance, keep you from connecting, thinking.”

“Well, she’s succeeding.”

We’re distracted by the arrival of the taxi. After we settle in, giving the driver Ray’s address, I ask, “So it is all backed up?”

“Yeah.”

I wait for elucidation but when he fails to elaborate I change the subject to something innocuous. Pathologically paranoid...

Outside his apartment building he stops me with a hand on my arm. We both look at it and then at each other. Certainly even that caused my breathing to speed up.

“Thanks. For dropping that. I... let’s talk. Let’s take a walk. Take you to your place, let you change – I’d lend you some but no way they’d fit you. And then walk. It’s – there’s stuff you should know. Stuff someone else should know.”

“I have a great deal of respect for you, Ray – even more so, after our conversation in the restaurant. But why on earth–”

“Money does funny things to people. Some people. I know it’s paranoid. But the fact remains that no one has any idea but me – and now you – what I’ve been doing. So... if it ain’t broke...”

“Very good point, Ray.”

He grimaces at my pants. “You might as well toss those.”

“Yes. I probably will.”

“Let’s go.”

“Would you like me to–”

“Please.” He hands me his keys. Grins, shyly, evoking the man I feel such a strong need to protect. And he needs me, in ways I hadn’t imagined, and he doesn’t need me, in ways that I thought he did. Still, I appear to be coming out ahead, overall. And so does he. I hope.

I shower quickly. The apartment feels oddly empty without Diefenbaker. Ray is, predictably, looking at the books on one of my bookshelves when I emerge from my bedroom. He’s squinting, as if that helps his synaptic confusion, his glasses dangling from one ear under his chin.

“I think I could listen to books on tape,” he says without preamble as he turns to me, dropping his glasses into his hand and then tucking them in economic, automatic movements into his shirt pocket. “I like CDs. You know that.”

“I imagine the mirror writing and the dyslexia were concurrent.”

“Yeah. Neural reactions to physiological and psychological trauma.”

“What it is, Ray, is that you’re damned stubborn. Left handed or no handed.”

He glances up, grins quickly. “I am that. Nuns’ll vouch for that.”

“Are you ready?”

“Are you?”

“Of course.”

He takes a breath. “Then would you – c-could we k-kiss again? B-Before we go?”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. If... if you liked it. If y-you want to.”

My knees, literally, tremble. “If I want to... my God, Ray. I already told you. You have no idea.”

He smiles, again, simply, shyly. “Okay.”

More eager, this time, his mouth already open by the time our lips meet, and mine as well. The magic is still there, stronger than before, as is the

sweetness. My thumbs brush his jaw, stroking gently. I move my hands up into his soft, awkward, perfect hair, caressing.

“Wow,” he whispers into my mouth.

“Indeed.” There is of course a vague sense of unreality, a certain fear of fantasy, but the taste of his skin under my tongue, the feel of his stubble against my cheek... the soft moan he makes when I lean down to lick his neck, his head pushing back against one of my hands... all these help convince me this impossible moment is real.

“I like that,” he whispers, his hands moving in my hair as my tongue moves on his neck.

“I love that,” I whisper against his skin.

He shudders. “Fraser.”

“Yes, Ray.”

“Don’t stop.”

“I won’t.”

He moans again, not as softly, one hand moving tentatively down to my shoulder, long fingers coming to rest almost curiously on my neck, against my pulse.

“If you are measuring my heart rate, I will kill you,” I say, and bite, gently. He shivers.

“Oh, God, F-Fraser. I’m not. I just wanted to feel you.”

“I know.” I pull him against me again for another kiss, long, hard, demanding, and he responds, joyfully, instinctively, arms holding me as tightly as mine are holding him. I reach slowly for his rear, cupping my hands, pushing him gently against me so he can feel my arousal, feeling his reciprocal hardness. He breaks the kiss on a half-gasp, almost-sob. I release him immediately, stepping away.

“What? Fraser—”

“I’m sorry, Ray—”

He flushes, bright red. “I’m sorry. I – I know I’m not good at – I don’t—”

“Not good at what? You kiss like nobody’s business, Ray.”

He looks up from the floor, startled. “No.”

“Oh, yes.”

“Because I haven’t, uh, had much—”

“You’re a natural.”

“You like it? With – with me?”

“It’s fairly obvious, isn’t it?”

He blushes again, looking down my body, and I feel an answering blush rise in my own face. “I like it so much. I like it with you. I can’t believe y-you like it with me. You’re so... so... and you’re funny. You – you could have – anyone.”

“I have extremely high standards.” I say that as seriously, as steadily, as I can.

His eyes fly back to my face, widening, impossibly large, and then close, as if his brain just overloaded and cut off all external input. I turn him swiftly and pull him against me and hold him. He remains still and quiet for at least a

minute. And then he pulls one arm out of the circle of mine and rests a hand on my arm. I feel him relax.

“I want more,” he whispers.

I succumb to temptation and suck briefly on his earlobe. “As do I.”

“Soon. Now.”

“No.”

He twists to look at me, laughter and panic intermingled on his face. “Never?”

“Ray—” I try, unsuccessfully, to keep the tremour out of my voice. “You have, by your own admission, very little experience. Of any kind. I would do anything for you. With you. But please – be patient. I – I want this – you – and I am so very afraid—” I close my eyes, breathe, willing away the break in my voice. Then I feel his mouth on mine again, gentle at first, and then, quickly, passionate and demanding. He is an extremely quick study.

He moves his mouth to my ear, mimicking my earlier behaviour. “Fraser. I may be inexperienced but I’m not stupid.”

“Please don’t play with me, Ray.”

“I’m – I wouldn’t. I’m not. I – you just – it’s okay, but you think it’s not okay... You know what?” He grins, shy but determined. “You are a romantic, Mr. Benton Fraser. Under that calm Canadian exterior, you are a romantic.”

My turn to blush, hectically. “Perhaps.”

“So if we lit a few candles would that help?”

“And you are a smart ass, Dr. Raymond Kowalski. Underneath that flaky exterior.”

“Flaky. Ha. Is that what you think?”

“Isn’t that what you want us to think?”

“Is that – is that what love does? Does it let you see that? I thought love was supposed to be blind.”

“Not mine.”

“Mine either.”

That particular shock puts my already dangerously high stress levels over the top. I stumble backwards, feel the backs of my knees hit the arm of the couch, and fall. He’s at my side in an instant, kneeling beside the couch, looking very confused. “Fraser?”

“What did you say?”

“Fraser, how can you not know how I feel about you?”

“I thought – sexual attraction – especially for – and, dear God, Ray, you’re a genius, you – one doesn’t think of—”

“You’re the only one who doesn’t treat me like a genius, Fraser. I know you know I am. But you treat me like... a friend. Not like something apart.”

“You are a friend. You are the best friend I’ve ever had.”

“You’re the only best friend I’ve ever had. And I want that. And I want... more. I want... lots more... if you do. If you do.”

“If I do? Don’t be ridiculous, Ray, I want to make love to you six ways to Sunday. There’s no question.”

His blush is fading by the end of the sentence. “I want to too. I want you to...”

I swing around to a sitting position and pull him up on the couch with me so he’s straddling my thighs, our mouths each finding the other almost by instinct this time. Lost in his kiss, in his mouth, in his scent, my hands find warm skin underneath his shirt, fingers finding a nipple, brushing it lightly. He shudders again and moans.

“Fraser. I know all the reasons that that feels... so good. But when it happens... it just feels so good...”

“Good. Lean back.” I push his shirt up and replace my fingers with my mouth. The aura of unreality still lends a surrealistic cast to this entire event but the taste of his skin, the texture of his small hard nipple beneath my tongue and lips, the sounds of his moans, increasingly incoherent words, all combine to keep me grounded, concentrating, loving.

He’s holding my head, almost too tightly, his groin rocking against my abdomen, every muscle in his body tensed and held. I push back against his hands, pull his face back down to mine. “You liked that?”

“Oh, God!” He continues to rock, his tongue questing almost desperately, his hands holding my head in place, not even breaking the kiss for long enough to breathe – instead he drags in untidy breaths through his nose. I try to pull back but he holds me more tightly. I open my eyes to see his, squeezed shut, his face flushed, my vision blurring at trying to focus so closely.

“Mmm.” I push back again and this time he lets me break the kiss, his head falling heavily to my shoulder as he breathes hard. “Ray. Please. Calm down.”

“I don’t... I don’t want calm, you... you idiot.”

“Do you want me to touch you?” I whisper.

“Oh, please, Fraser. Yes.”

I move my hand to the button at his waist. “Here?”

“Where the hell did you think I meant?”

“Some of us need more hard evidence than others.”

“Some of us are apparently blind.”

“I have twenty-twenty vision.”

“I was going to offer you my glasses.”

“Oh, God, Ray. My sample size just doubled – and your hypothesis seems to be supported by the new data. That is, if I can classify you as homosexual.”

He laughs breathlessly. “At this point, I’d say the evidence was conclusive. Don’t you ever stop thinking about data?”

“That was a meagre attempt at a compliment.”

“I know that. But you’re talking way too much.” By way of illustration he thrusts into my hands, his own hands braced on my shoulders.

Ray, as he does in so many areas, surpasses my expectations in this regard too. Long. Hard. Golden skin flushed with blood, the back of my brain recalling the internal cellular structure of the male sexual organ, scientific reality colliding with male beauty here in my hands. The thought of this, in me, makes my mouth go suddenly dry, my breath catch. I lick my lips, unconsciously

remoistening my mouth, staring at the tip of his penis. I look back up at him. He's watching me, breathing hard.

"Fraser, you – you wouldn't..."

"If you'll let me." My voice is hoarse.

"Do you like to—"

"I would love to." There is no mistaking my sincerity. "Not here. My bed is eleven metres away."

"Romantic."

"Comfortable."

"I don't think I can walk."

"We'll manage," I whisper, pushing him to his feet, gaining my own, kissing him again. And we do, somehow, walking backwards, and sideways, shedding clothes, until he is there, at my bed, and fumbled moments later sprawled naked, aroused, amazing against dark sheets, sheets I bought months ago to fuel my impossible fantasies, navy the perfect backdrop for his skin, as I knew it would be. I close my eyes, swallow hard, forcing back the rush of emotion and nascent tears.

"F-Fraser?"

"Yes, Ray?"

"You look so... happy."

"You have no idea, Ray."

He leans up on his elbows. "You gonna stand there all day?"

"I could."

He blushes furiously then and tries to sit up but now – now there is no turning back, no chance for escape, the possessiveness rising in me and overtaking even passion. "I'm sorry," I say quietly, into his neck, covering him with every inch of my body. "This seemed outside the realm of possibility. I'm not sure you're real."

"You think I don't know?"

"Yes." A tiny sigh escapes me. "Stella."

"Not Stella, you moron!" His fist thuds off my shoulder. "You! Are you jealous?"

"Of course not," I say, too quickly, fooling neither of us.

"You, you moron," he reiterates. "You don't need to be – to be jealous. God, Fraser. Been wanting you... wanting you... wishing we could be friends... and – and then friends and that was so – incredible. You liked to spend time with me. With *me*. We laughed. And then... and now..."

Unintelligible as always, his words speak to my heart. Now, indeed. And one answer, out of many, but the preferred answer, now, of my lips and his, our tongues entangling. And time, now, for a long delicious exploration, centimetre by centimetre, Ray joining me, hesitantly at first, his assurance growing with evidence of my wholehearted response. Soon though I abandon restraint and he is reduced to helpless moans and incoherent gasps as I touch him, caress him, recalling everything I ever enjoyed, attempting to duplicate it for him, to make this as unforgettable as possible; and, finally, I take him in my mouth, long, slow sucks echoed by his long slow moans.

“Oh God. Oh God.” He tenses and thrusts, harder, faster, his hands restless on my head, on my face. “Oh, Fraser.” He sounds half-frantic.

Oh God indeed. I stroke one thumb, slick with saliva, down between his cheeks, touching gently, softly, and he jerks, startled, thrusts again, chokes, and then freezes, drawing my name out on a long quiet moan, his hands locked onto my scalp. He seems to come forever and I swallow over and over, never wanting this to end, shifting only once and triggering, almost incidentally, my own release, feeling it pulse into the sheets rumpled between my legs as his hands finally relax and I swallow once more.

Utter silence, the pounding of my heartbeat unnaturally loud, and then I feel his hands moving in my hair. A whisper of sound. “Fraser.”

“Ray.”

“Are you okay?”

A laugh escapes me as I clamber up his body to enfold him in a hug. He pulls my face up and looks at me. Hesitant, his tongue flickers out. My eyes widen. He nods and then blushes.

“Scientific research?” I say softly, pulling him close for a kiss.

“Whatever.” A long kiss, gentle, exploring. “Oh, wow. Do you – do you taste like that?”

“Very similar, yes.”

He reaches, determinedly, between my legs and runs a finger across the top of my spent penis, and then brings it to his mouth. And sucks it, thoroughly, completely, with an eroticism that is both innocent and completely deliberate. And then he smiles at me. “Even better.”

“Ray.” My voice is rough, almost breaking on that single syllable, as I pull him back down.

He sighs and lets his head fall next to mine on the pillow, one hand clasped with mine. “Fraser.”

“I am so glad you didn’t flee into the lab when Dr. Thatcher brought me to meet you.”

He chuckles. “I don’t think a whole lot of people run from you.”

“Ah, so it was my looks? Very shallow, Dr. Kowalski.”

“It was the eyes,” he says, slurring the words, one thumb rubbing hypnotically over the base of my own thumb. “Kind eyes. Smart eyes. And the wolf.”

“Yes, I was convinced that you would have taken anyone just to get Diefenbaker.”

He laughs. “Love dogs. Wolves. I – Dief...”

“Dief is fine now.” I hug him, kiss the top of his head

He sighs again, and then, oddly, snickers.

“Hmmm?” I say on an interrogative note.

“Just... just can’t believe it. Finally – finally find someone... you... and... well, it’s all kind of strange.”

“Are you all right?”

“Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. No question. Just never thought – never occurred to me when you walked into the lab that we’d be here, now, and you’d want to, uh, to do that...”

He stumbles into silence and I don’t need to see him to know that he’s blushing.

“Suck you?” I say, gently teasing. “It was astounding.”

“Heh. Yeah. Never – never knew anything could feel like that.”

The man can reduce me to laughter in seconds... and now, in my bed, in my heart, to tears and ashes after the bright blaze of disbelief burns out. Hoarsely I say, “I have so much to show you.”

“You mean it gets better?”

“I hope.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“I should have known that you would require evidence.”

“I think I’m theorising in advance of the data again.”

I choke and then laugh out loud, reveling in the feel of him, the smell of him, and above all the mind of him.

“I love that,” he says, almost whispering. “I love the way you laugh like you’re so surprised.” He pushes himself up on one elbow and looks down at me, smile fading. “And I love that you like me. That you want me. That you take care of me. Is that – is that stupid?”

“I need that,” I say, equally seriously. “I need... to be needed. Somehow.”

“I need you. Need you. Even though I’m jealous of you. I need you.”

“Jealous? Good God—”

“Yeah. Your brain. I’m jealous a lot, people whose brains work the right way. I try to – to imagine that. I can’t. But you – it doesn’t bother you.”

“Ray...”

“Don’t feel sorry for me, please, Fraser. I just – just thought I could tell—”

“You can tell me anything. But I love your brain. I love the way you think. I love the way your words come out. You make me work for it. And I value hard work.”

“I’m pretty high maintenance, huh.”

I snort. “Where the hell did you hear that?”

“Lab rats.”

“You’re fairly low maintenance, as eccentric geniuses go.”

“You’ve known so many.”

“And I’ve slept with every single one.”

He laughs, his turn to be surprised. “How were they?”

“He was perfect.”

He leans down to kiss me then, warm, soft. “We’re a good team, Fraser. Friends. Partners.”

“Partners,” I echo. “Yes. For someone who claims no facility with words, Ray... yes.”

“So no more of this leaving crap,” he says, seriously, staring at me. “Don’t you see? Now that I know – now that we know – we’re safe. You’re safe. I meant that, earlier. She can’t pull your funding; she sure as hell can’t pull mine. She

can't do anything to you. She's just trying to scare you into leaving, into losing your head."

"There's Dief. And Mark." I hate to bring him to reality.

"Yeah. We... we... okay, we, um, we need to – to figure this out... but I mean it, Fraser, she's – she's trying to scare you, you can't let her do that, scare you into losing your head."

"She nearly succeeded."

"You think I'd let you go? Even if... even if it wasn't like... like this, for you, for me – we work together. We're a good team. You're good at chemistry and you pull things out of me I didn't know were in there."

"Catalyst."

"No." He's quick to correct me, and more than definite. "Reagent. And you're smart enough to, uh, maintain my interest."

"The ultimate compliment," I say wryly, trying not to let him see how his words are affecting me and simultaneously wondering why, because if anyone can accept the reality of my feelings it would probably be this incredibly contradictory man. "And think how much money you'll save on the rent."

"Hey. Exactly. I'm saying. One of us has got to be practical. We'll get you a cot for the lab too."

Another laugh, another triumphant gleam in his eyes.

"I must insist on a closet as well."

"Nah, we don't want to buy into the stereotype, Fraser."

Helpless now, I chuckle, then snort, and then begin to laugh from my toes, gasping for breath, wiping tears from my eyes at last to see him sitting and watching me, cross legged, one hand still resting on mine, still grinning.

"All right, Fraser, I gotta confess it was your looks. And wondering how you looked when you laughed."

"I suspected as much." I pull him back over to me. "So... about the rent..."

He looks at me for a long moment. "Yeah?"

"Well, I don't live like a graduate student. And I have two bedrooms."

"I can afford my rent, Fraser."

"It's not the rent, per se, Ray."

"I know." He ducks his head to his chest. "What if I drive you crazy?"

"You already do."

"What if we – what if–"

"I'm rushing you."

"You're being kind of impulsive, yeah."

How to explain that I can't let him go? How to deal with the fact that he is evidently less sure than I am? Yes, I should back off; I can convince my brain of the good sense in that, certainly, but my brain does not seem to be controlling my tongue at the moment. I gather my wits.

"You're welcome here." I manage to sound more nonchalant than not.

He glances up, briefly, troubled, trying to hide it. "I sleep in the lab anyhow."

"Do you think it – this – won't work, Ray?" I feel compelled to ask this question, driven to know the answer.

“You... you ever lived with anyone? I haven’t.”

“Neither have I, at least not on a long term basis.”

“Short term?”

“Yes. For a month or so.”

“How’d that work out? Not so good, I guess, or you wouldn’t be here now.”

That particular experiment was... successful.”

He glances up quickly and then looks back down, all light gone from his face.

“I’m sorry,” I say softly.

“I’m stupid,” he says gruffly.

“I’ve never – Ray, I love you.”

“Did you love him?”

“...in a way.”

“What happened?”

“You.”

He looks up again, quickly, startled. “Oh, wow. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.”

“Does he hate me?”

“You’re quite difficult to hate, Ray.”

“That’s not an answer, Fraser. I don’t like... the idea... that he – that he hates me because I... because we...”

“He doesn’t hate you, Ray. I’m sorry. I wish I could tell you it was casual but it wasn’t. We cared about each other. We are still friends.”

“Shit.”

It’s not an uncommon expletive; but the fact that it’s coming from Ray’s mouth, more forlorn than angry, is.

“Come here.”

“Fraser...”

“Come here.”

“Fraser.” He takes a deep breath. “What happens when someone else comes along?”

“Are you calling me fickle?”

“No. No. I just... I...”

“Ray. You are the only person to whom I have ever said that.”

He studies me for a long moment.

“I’m in this for the long haul, Ray. As long as you want me.”

“I think... I think I want... but...”

“Would it help if I told you exactly how long I’ve been in love with you? That I was prepared to spend the rest of my life – yes, I was – as your partner and friend and assistant? That as appealing as the fantasy of becoming your lover was, I didn’t think it had a snowball’s chance in hell of actually happening? And that the more time I spent with you – the more I liked you?”

A small smile begins. “Me?”

“Yes.”

“You? Loved me for a while?”

“Since the moment I saw you in my shirt. Before that, I’m sure.”

“Oh, God, Fraser. Oh, God. Oh, God.”

“That didn’t help?”

He chokes and laughs, dragging the back of one hand across his face.

“Sorry.”

“I’m sorry. I am... pressuring you. Rushing you.”

“Yeah. I... you said that. That it’s not real to you. So, yeah... yeah, you want to hold onto me.”

“Yes. I do. I’m sorry. I’ll... I’ll try to relax.”

“Fraser.” He shakes his head. “Fraser. You don’t have to hold onto me. You got me.”

“Then what the hell are you making me say all these things for?”

He smiles, again, bigger this time. “No one ever has,” he says simply.

My heart twists. “Yes, I find the rest of the world curiously insane and quite obviously myopic when it comes to you, Ray.”

“I think they’d say that about you, Fraser.”

“Not to my face, Ray.”

He hesitates and then asks, “What did... he... say... about me?”

“That you were very lucky.”

“That was pretty... pat. He... knows?”

“Of course.”

“Jesus. Yeah. Of course he does. ‘Hockey’s loss,’ huh?”

So much for discretion. “Ray, I’m sorry this bothers you – “

“No. No, it doesn’t. I mean, I’m glad. I’m just jealous. I’m always... jealous. Wish I could be – be normal. Funny. Gorgeous. I’m just – just curious. And – and jealous.”

“The former is incurable and there’s no need for the latter.”

“Did you like it... with him?”

“Yes. Of course.”

“Better than with me?”

“Ray... you *are* certifiable. No.”

“But...”

“No buts. It’s you. It’s you, you’re sexy, you’re gorgeous, you’re funny, you’re you... I can’t think of anyone else. You’re my obsession.”

“Obsessions aren’t... good.”

“This is the first one I’ve had, so I’m rather enjoying it.”

He chokes on a laugh. “What’s... what’s obsessional about me?”

“Perhaps you are high maintenance, Ray. Everything.”

“Yeah, but if you were with him – and if I’m not... and if we don’t – you – you were right. We – we shouldn’t – I shouldn’t have... rushed into this.”

“Stanley Raymond Kowalski...”

“Do not call me that!”

“Raymond Kowalski–” I pull him, roll him, pin him beneath me. “Look at me.”

“I can’t look at anything else.”

“You are hilariously funny. And you... you make my bones melt.”

“Oh... cool...” he breathes, relaxing under me, an enormous grin on his face.

“And I am not exactly normal myself.”

“N-no. You’re nuts, Benton Fraser, you’re a freak.” He shakes me a little, still grinning broadly.

“And you’re freezing. What the hell is the matter with you that you can’t keep warm?”

“No subcutaneous fat.”

“Very little. Diefenbaker will have to get used to a warmer apartment in the winter.”

“Fraser, you feel so good.”

I reach down and pull the comforter up around us with one hand, encouraging him to wrap his legs around me by nudging with my own.

“I thought we were going for a walk.”

“After you get warm.”

“Oh, jeez, that feels good.”

I nuzzle his neck, licking, sucking. “It tastes even better.”

He moves his hands almost hesitantly down my back to rest at the top of my buttocks.

“I like you to touch me,” I whisper.

“You feel good,” he says simply. “Can I – can I do this?” He moves his hands further, caresses, squeezes gently.

“Please,” I say, not as gently, thrusting against him, feeling his hard length pressing into my abdomen. “You can do anything, Ray.”

“Oh.” He laughs, a little nervously. “Okay. The, uh, the thing is–”

“Shall I get you a textbook?”

“I – I learn better... by doing.”

“What do you want to do?”

“I want... more. I don’t know.”

“Does this work?” My voice is increasingly hoarse, my thrusts increasingly uncontained.

“Oh, yeah...” He arches his head back, eyes closing, hands pulling me against him in concert with my thrusts, and his mouth is a drug, too long denied, and now I am unable to resist.

“Fraser,” he breathes, guiding my head down to his neck, arching again, increasing points of contact between my lips and tongue and his skin. “I never *dreamed*... oh, keep doing that...”

I raise my head and look at him, hard. “Ray–”

“What? Don’t stop–”

“Are you–”

“Fraser, you’re talking way too much again.” He tries to pull me down to his mouth but I resist; too late now for second thoughts but perhaps third thoughts should be allowed to surface. “What the hell is wrong with you?” He pushes up against me, his erection hot and hard and slick against me. “What part of this doesn’t look okay?” He frowns, then, and cocks his head slightly. “Fraser – I’m okay. What’s with you?”

"I'm sorry. I had planned... well, I hadn't planned any of this. But I certainly had planned to, ah, take the physical relationship a little more slowly."

"Oh." He drops his eyes. "Oh, man. So... so I've... I – I'm sorry."

"I'm not complaining. I just want to – I know, barn doors, but I want to be sure that–"

"I'm – I am sorry. I just – Jesus God, Fraser, I just wanted to kiss you. And... more... and you didn't... I–" His voice falters; his eyes close.

I lean in to kiss each eyelid and then his mouth, gently, remorsefully. "Ray, what on earth makes you think for one second that I didn't want you?" I iterate the point by running my fingers down his face, his neck, his chest, all the way to his groin, to his penis, shifting my weight slightly to my left elbow, giving us more space. He groans and thrusts into my hand, his eyes now squeezed shut. "I want you. I knew – oh, Christ, Ray, you are so hard and so gorgeous – I thought there might be things you weren't entirely comfortable with."

"I'm – I am so comfortable with that, Frase," he says hoarsely, looking up at me again, a half smile pulling up one corner of his mouth. "Do not stop."

"How about this?" Keeping his eyes locked with mine, I manoeuvre my hand around both of us, stroking, encouraging thrusts.

"You feel... so alive against me..." he whispers. "Oh, please."

"Put your hand down here, Ray," I whisper back, against his neck.

He squeezes his eyes shut as his hand moves, hesitantly, down to mine. I enfold his hand in mine, encouraging him to stroke, to feel, pushing hard against his fingers, imagining the sight of those fingers wrapped around both of us, those fingers covered in...

"Ray, you have an unexpected effect on my libido," I gasp, my hand falling away, my penis straining against his. He opens his eyes and grins, his movements becoming more assured.

"Two is... way different. It's... so good. You – I like this..." He strokes harder, faster, and I close my eyes and let the feelings and the images in my brain take over. It doesn't take long, and I don't know whether to kiss him or strangle him when I catch a glimpse of him peering down our bodies, watching in undisguised fascination as I pump into his hand, all over his penis, all over his stomach.

"Oh, God... wow..." And then he is straining against his own hand, long fingers covered in my semen, hips bucking up against me, hard, harder... and I watch in my own fascination, not the spurts of liquid, but the undisguised open bliss on his face, the absolute vulnerability and joy that he makes no effort to hide, here, now, with me.

*Etch out a future of your own design
Well tailored to your needs
“Windpower,” Thomas Dolby*

I remember all the conversations, Sandor’s earnest protests, Ray’s equally earnest pronouncements. Just the other day, Sandor brought one from a group I’d never heard of and a Hard Core Logo CD¹³. Being Canadian I had, of course, heard of the latter. Ray had given him back the Moody Blues and the Go-Go’s. “Didn’t like that one,” he’d said with a frown, handing the first one over.

“Threshold of a Dream? That’s a classic, Ray.”

“I didn’t like the harmonies. They weren’t full fifths. I liked this one though. Some of it. Kinda funny. The Prozac anthem one.”

“See how you like these. This one’s pretty headbanging. You usually like those.”

Recalled to the present by a brief touch of his hand, I say, “All this time? And you’re sure no one knows?”

“I like the music. No one – no one notices it now, after all this time. Sandor’s been bringing me stuff for a couple of years. We started with zip disks – they’d fit inside the jewel cases – and then when we got the rewritable CD-ROM drive it got a whole lot easier. I pay him under the table – he likes doing it. He likes me. “

“You’re difficult not to like, Ray.” It isn’t mere liking, though. Ray has a knack – a very useful one for a rather flaky genius – for inspiring devotion. Carlo’s. Rebecca’s. Sandor’s. Mine, needless to say. “What format are they in? Raw data or–”

“As finished as I could do. Under the circumstances.”

“You are amazing,” I breathe.

“Slow,” he says with a grin. “So slow they had to give me assistant after assistant.”

“You’ve been doing twice the work – you are truly amazing. Are they safe?”

“Yeah. I’m pretty sure. He takes them to someone else who stores them in a safe deposit box. It was the best we could think of. My name’s not on the box; neither’s Sandor’s; and I’ve only met her once.”

“How do you know she’s trustworthy?”

“She’s – she has no idea. She has nothing vested in it. She’s Sandor’s godmother.”

“Ray, you never needed an assistant.”

“No. I needed a friend. A partner. I – I didn’t know it. But I did. And I got you. Triple bonus.” He smiles, still shy. “And you write a whole lot better than I do. Easier too.”

¹³ J Dick and B Tallent. Hard Core Logo: Hard Knock High. Golden Lick:1981.

We sit in silence for a few minutes. He kicks idly at the dirt beneath the bench. I watch him until he turns to look at me. He smiles, tentatively, and I smile back.

“What – what were you going to do with it all, Ray? How many years, two? Almost three? Is that why all your papers have been how instead of why? Of course. Why didn’t Willsie... well, they had prodementin to go on with, true. And all this time, all those data–”

“I don’t know,” he says simply. ““At first it was just – just paranoia. You know, having a copy of the data in a safe place. Then it was – it was keeping it all away from her. Just – just keeping it s-safe. And it was working, it worked, I think. I’m pretty sure. I didn’t think about the articles then – been thinking about that lately, that’s a problem, publishing research different from what they’ve got, if they’ve got it, someone somewhere’ll notice that. But I didn’t think then and – and then Marta left and then I was – it wasn’t a good time–”

“What about Willsie? Was there anyone there you could have gone to?”

He hesitates and looks down, twisting his hands together. “No. No. My – my fault. I thought... I think they – they think I’m crazy, she probably told them that too but I – when Stella died it wasn’t – and then I started to think maybe they were in on it, maybe someone else there, I didn’t know, Fraser. I just didn’t – and I didn’t know how – how to f-find out.” His fingers are tightly interlaced, white from cold, strain, tension. “If it was the wrong person it was – it was all over. I thought of Thatcher but she’s – I don’t know if I’m just a pet monkey to her or if she’s even in on it, maybe.”

I choke at his simile. “Typing Shakespeare’s plays in your spare time. Very apt.”

He looks me in the eye, then, finally, unhappiness fading. “So – I didn’t–”

“I quite understand. It’s really a mess and you did the important part, actually, the vital part, the only thing that matters: you kept it away from her. The rest will come out in the wash. You’re an amazing man.”

He shrugs, but there’s a light in his eyes again. “Pathological.”

“I wouldn’t go that far. Or if I did, I would say you have reason to be.”

He nods once, tightly; there’s more. I’m bemused rather than surprised; there is, as he indicated when we first met, a definite lucrative aspect to his research, an aspect that more people than Victoria have probably felt the desire to exploit. His voice echoes in my head: “I’m not into exploitation.” I say quietly, resignedly, “Carlo?”

He nods, swallows convulsively, and drops his eyes. “I think so. I don’t – it’s okay. He’s just – you know, me and my safe and he has no idea I know anything – and she can be pretty persuasive – and he’s a grad student, it’s a good stipend but it’s not... Good scientist, that’s all that really – I mean, if I know – and I do – and I know I’m a – a freak, so–”

This is almost the last straw for me but he’s so clearly miserable about it that I stifle my indignation and anger. I can’t however immediately trust my voice so I content myself with a brief negative shake of the head.

“He’s not – he’s not happy about it, Fraser,” Ray says softly. “I can – you can see that. Especially since you came. I – I – the problem is she’s – the problem is how he can get out of it. I don’t know–”

“That’s a decision he has to make,” I say, more harshly than I intend.

“She – she might be dangerous,” Ray says, even more softly, his voice shaky. “Stella – I didn’t know, don’t know – but Marta, when that job at Kaufmann – I thought if Marta took it she’d be safe and she is, she doesn’t know. But I wasn’t able to get Carlo–”

I remember Carlo’s curious insistence and almost-fear when Ray told Victoria to make an appointment, and I relax slightly, squeeze his hand briefly, feeling the anger begin to slowly dissipate. “I think you do have Carlo,” I say quietly. “I think he worries about you. As well he should: how long have you known she was putting money into your bank account?”

His turn to sit back, abruptly, eyes wide. “Since – Jesus, how did – since we met with Patrick. How did you know–”

“I had your bank statements, Ray, I’m not stupid. I thought it was additional paychecks, bonuses, she was quite clever in that respect; but I looked through the past year of your statements and I’m afraid that I went so far as to beseech a teller to find the specific deposit information and those deposits were made in person, not via ACH, and at various branches throughout the city. I didn’t know why... or who. But while I don’t know much about how your mind works, Raymond Kowalski–”

“You know more than anyone,” he whispers, barely audible.

“–but I do know that your dislike for driving is not feigned, nor is it possible for you to be in two places at one time. I don’t think. Unless you’ve also been working on cloning yourself in your, ah, spare time.”

He chokes and laughs, a strained attempt but an attempt nonetheless. “That’s – that’s next, um, after the faster than light travel, okay?” He coughs, then, into the crook of his elbow and looks at me again, blinking, his eyes tired, his mouth revealing strain. “It – it scared me to death, Fraser, she was – she was setting me up and – and you were going to leave...”

“I’m sorry,” I say, feeling as miserable as he looks. “She wanted me... gone. Away from you and Chicago. She was – had bribed a waiter and she threatened – she threatened to involve Mark. Then she was going to tell you – and everyone – that I was putting that money into your account. And she said if – if I told you any of it, Willsie would pull your funding.”

“Christ, Fraser – you – oh, God. You – you didn’t think I’d believe her–”

“No. Of course not. I did, however, think that despite your loyalty, the scandal would be impossible to contain and might spell the end of Mark’s–”

“Christ!” He explodes to his feet in one startling motion and slams his fisted hand into the palm of his other one. “Christ, Fraser, she – she went right for – Jesus, right for the jugular, and you – you were going to – God!” He whirls around, hastily, and hits the tree by the bench hard with his hand. “Ouch! God!”

“Ray, stop!” I’m on my feet seconds too late but I catch his hand in time to prevent a second blow.

“You – you were going to – she was taking you away from me, she was – she was hurting you, Fraser–” He’s breathing heavily; I trust and hope his eyes are bright from rage and not tears, as that would probably be the last straw for him today, overwrought as he is.

“She *is* hurting you, Ray,” I say quietly, trying to calm him.

“Me, whatever, that’s – that’s – I knew about that, I thought – I mean–”

“You did,” I say soberly. “Why did – do you trust me? I want to – Ray, you must have been–”

“I was. Kind of.” He sighs and then suddenly sits down. I sit too; he puts a hand on my leg, looking earnestly at me. “I didn’t – I didn’t trust you... um... soon enough. I... I didn’t know how. But I-I-I wanted to. And – and she – she was interested in you, where – where you lived... trying to... trying to get you, I thought, probably...”

“But you – you didn’t care about the, um, the research. I mean, you did, but not the way... not the way... and the stuff you did... it was all for me. For me. And then when I asked you – asked you about you – you told me, right out, right away – you didn’t know what I’d do but you – you told me the truth and ... and you trusted me. And... and then you were leaving.” He takes a deep breath. “And then... then there was Dief... he... both of you... I didn’t know... I still – I’m still scared, I’m not used to... I’m pretty sure but... but if you wanted to you could lie to me, snowball me, and I wouldn’t know. Instead you... you, um, you defended me and you, um...” Softly. “I just... don’t know.”

Roughly, quickly, I cover his hand with my own and squeeze, too hard: there are no words.

“You were right. I’ve been tired a long time,” he whispers, and he sounds it. “I’m tired. I’ve, uh, I’ve been scared. I’ve been... I’ve been alone and I... I watched you and I... I tried and I didn’t know – didn’t know how to be not-alone. I didn’t know what – what you wanted. What I wanted. What I even was. If – if you wanted... what I wanted... and what that even was, I... I...” He trails off miserably, words as always failing him at critical junctures like this.

“You’re here with me,” I whisper. “That’s all. That’s enough. The rest... the rest we can sort out later.”

“Aren’t you – aren’t you ever scared?” he asks, looking up, finally, curiosity irrepressible, his tone robbing the words of any negative import.

“Frequently. Frequently terrified, in fact.”

“I didn’t – I didn’t really know what – what it was with you until the snowstorm,” he says, turning his body towards me, spreading his arms wide. “I didn’t – I knew you, um, wanted me. I thought you... I was pretty sure, anyway. And, oh, God, I wanted you – it scared me, um, surprised me, not – not scared, not like that, but – but I – I wanted you. But I didn’t – I didn’t know how to tell you. Or what you wanted. Or where – or why – why, uh, Mark – and – and – and–” Frustrated, he stops, takes a deep breath, and tries again. “If Mark – if it was me – or if it was – you know?”

“I do, Ray, and I’m sorry, but I didn’t – I had no way of–”

“I know that,” he interrupts fiercely. “I know that. I *know* you, I got that, I figured that, and then – then that night I heard you tell Dief – do you

remember? Or were you talking in your sleep? I woke up and Dief was there and I thought it was you and I-I-I was s-so happy because I didn't know how to – to tell you but s-so damn s-scared because I didn't know what – what to – and – and then you turned over and – and then you s-said–”

“I remember,” I say wryly, blushing hotly.

“I didn't sleep the rest of the night, Fraser, I was s-so excited and – and happy and s-scared. A-a-and t-too m-much of a c-coward t-to to–”

Throwing caution to the winds, I pull him towards me and kiss him, hard, full on the mouth. It's twilight; the park is deserted; and he needs physical reassurance right now because mere words aren't enough.

His mouth opens under mine, in shock and surprise, most likely, but then he responds, enthusiastically, mirroring the motion of my hand in his hair to pull my head closer to his, to angle us together better.

“You are one of the bravest men I know, Ray Kowalski,” I say against his mouth when we part, reluctantly, for air, the back of his head still cradled in the palm of my hand. “I am proud to call you my friend... and partner.”

“Partner,” he breathes against my lips. “Partners. Huh?”

“I hope so, Ray, considering I just outed us to the world.”

“Three squirrels and a stray cat,” he says, pulling back a little to grin at me. “There are, um, eleven birds in the tree behind us but I think they're asleep.”

“Considering the fact that you generally require lupine character references, I trust the, ah, feline and sciurine ones will suffice for the moment.”

“Sciurine?” he says, disbelieving, and then bursts out laughing, a very welcome sound.

I get to my feet and offer him a hand, grinning back at him, trying to sound as bland as possible. “*Sciurus carolinensis*. Or, possibly, *Sciurus niger*; it's difficult to tell in this light.”

He takes my hand and stares up at me for a moment before he too gets to his feet. He doesn't release my hand, and I don't try to pull away. “Which one's bigger?”

“*S. carolinensis*, if I recall correctly.”

“Sciurine,” he says under his breath, and then shakes his head and laughs again. “They were pretty small. Grey squirrels, huh?” He is still holding onto my hand: I look down at our hands at the same time he does; then, surprising me, he pulls me against him for a quick hard kiss. “Squirrels,” he whispers then. “You kill me, Fraser.”

The nearby sound of a car door recalls us to our surroundings and I pull away quickly, although Ray doesn't look at all discomfited.

“Are you all right?” I feel compelled to say.

He takes a breath, grins again, a slight hint of cockiness back, and says, “I'm good.” The relief that reassurance engenders in me is gone in the next instant: “Take me back to my place?”

Possible reactions tumble through my brain, too swiftly to count, but fortunately I manage to sound quite neutral: “Of course, Ray.”

“All right, okay, good. Are we going to get Dief first?”

“If you don’t mind.”

He looks at me as if I’m crazy, and shakes his head. And then, confusing me further, he slips his hand in mine, squeezing my fingers gently before releasing them again, as we walk to the car.

“Wow,” he says presently. Out of the corner of my eye I see him shake his head, and I reach for his hand again and squeeze it gently.

“It’s a lot to absorb,” I say quietly, carefully.

“Yeah.”

Diefenbaker, groggy and cross, is more than ready to go, and favours us with an extended grumbled whine as I place him in the back seat: his flank hurts, he’s never going to go to lunch with us again, and he has no patience at all with creatures who take things that don’t belong to them. My queries as to the identity of his assailant apparently merit no response. Ray touches my shoulder after a moment or two of silence and says earnestly, “Just let him sleep.”

“He’s really quite good in the field, I assure you,” I say pensively. “His descriptions of humans are generally of little or no use anyway since I have no intention of smelling each and every person in Chicago to placate him.”

Ray laughs, spontaneously, surprised, and insists upon stopping to fill the prescription before heading to his place. Once there, in the parking lot, I turn to him. I want to ask him again to stay, but I don’t want him to feel obligated, and he’s already apparently decided. “Thank you,” I say instead, inadequately. “For... well, thank you.”

His eyes widen. “Th-thank you,” he says, suddenly shy. “Can you wait a few minutes?”

I frown, then shrug. “Certainly. Do you want me to come up and save you a trip?”

“No, no, stay with Dief,” he says hastily. “Be right back.”

I watch him go; Dief mumbles sleepily in the back seat. I stare at nothing, biting my lip and then lean forward, resting my head on the steering wheel, releasing a breath I hadn’t realised I was holding, and with it a great deal of tension. My head is whirling: I begin to try to sort through the events of the day, starting with Ray’s revelations, with the nagging feeling that I am missing something vital. A shadow crosses the light; then the passenger door opens and Ray slides in, a bundle in his arms.

“Okay,” he says simply, closing the door. “I fed Hilda.”

“Okay,” I repeat stupidly as he puts the bundle between us. It’s clothes, I realise, seeing socks on top... more than one pair.

“Thanks for waiting,” he repeats. “Uh, dinner... I’m not sure if...”

“Dinner?” I say, shaking my head violently.

“Dinner,” he says apologetically. “Just, uh, just hit a drive-through or something... if that’s okay? Or, uh, or would Dief get mad? No solid food until tomorrow, right?”

Diefenbaker whines pitifully and I take refuge in familiarity. “No, Diefenbaker. Absolutely not.”

“I’ll buy you a burger and fries tomorrow,” Ray says, turning to look over the back of the seat. “Anything. Bacon cheeseburger?”

Dief's only response is a sad little whuffing sound and Ray turns to look at me.

"No," I say loudly, harassed from both the rear and the flank. "No. And tomorrow it's yoghurt, Diefenbaker, because if you've forgotten your reaction to your last go-round with antibiotics it's only because you didn't have to clean up the mess."

Diefenbaker whines, doing his best to imitate a puppy, and Ray inhales sharply. "I'll – I'll clean it up," he says softly.

"No doubt we all will, save Diefenbaker," I say acidly, as I start the car and put it into gear. "Give him an inch and he takes a mile, Ray, don't say I didn't warn you."

Ray makes no verbal response; instead he reaches over and puts a hand on my leg. After a few moments, I cover it with one of mine, and we ride in silence to a convenient drive-through and then home.

The novelty of another body in the bed with me is enough to wake me well before Diefenbaker does. Should, in fact, and the memories return. I look at the ceiling, contemplate it for a moment, and then turn my head to look at Ray, still sound asleep. Mark and I spent nights together, snatched here and there from our schedules, never often enough, and not much sleeping was accomplished.

He's on his back, one hand upflung next to his head on the pillow, comforter bunched across his midsection, both feet uncovered. He's a beautiful, vibrant man, even in sleep: one corner of his mouth twitches, then his nose, and then he shifts on the pillow. My pillow: he is as much a bed thief as Dief would be, if one were so foolish as to give him the opportunity. Ray shifts again and then rolls onto his side with a grumble, enchanting me anew. I thought perhaps his restlessness would annoy me: I am used to being alone; but not only is it delightful, a vivid reality to feel him twitch in the bed, hear him snore and, later, mutter unintelligibly about proteins, it is... comforting. Perhaps even reassuring; and then perhaps I'm reading far too much into his consent to stay the night and remind myself, for perhaps the ten thousandth time in my life, to enjoy what I have and let tomorrow take care of itself.

The thought conjures up my grandmother, which in turn, in a textbook Pavlovian response, conjures up the smell of coffee always associated with her. My grandfather drank nothing but tea; my grandmother was addicted to stronger-than-mud coffee and at times I think there must be a genetic aspect to such preferences.

I slide out of bed as Ray stirs again, mumbling; but he doesn't awaken. We held each other for a long time last night as he talked; and I drank in each word, avid, wanting his mind and his love and his trust even more than his body, and at last, talked down, talked out, he relaxed enough to fall asleep in my arms, head on my shoulder, and I held him for an even longer time, fiercely happy, until he stretched in his sleep and shifted position. I don't remember falling asleep; all I remember is the warmth and scent of Ray.

When I return with coffee, after having insisted to a recalcitrant and extremely grumpy wolf that "out" was a necessary concept (his revenge was simple: he forced me to carry him both down and up the stairs), and left a message to let Dr. Thatcher know I was taking a personal day, Ray is still asleep, although on his back now. I sit cross-legged on the bed, sipping coffee and reflecting on Ray, trying to put in order the revelations of yesterday and last night. I'm more than a little discomfited; his armor is thick, his disguise is perfect, but nothing seems to have escaped his notice and I wonder, briefly, what he really thinks about love and partners and... me. Ridiculous concern; a large part of it may certainly be long-suppressed sexual urges on his part, but he follows my lead, engages whole-heartedly, and I have already resolved, I remind myself, to stop looking gift horses in the mouth, a lesson I should have already learned from my time with Mark. "Now," I mutter out loud, and take a defiant, scalding gulp of coffee to reinforce the lesson.

Too used to talking to Diefenbaker; Ray's eyelids flicker at the sound. He opens his eyes and looks bewildered, and for a split second I feel the bottom fall out of my stomach. Then he blinks and a slow, gentle, almost bemused smile curves his mouth. "Frase," he says, a small dry croak in his voice, bringing the back of one hand down to brush aside my robe with his knuckles. "Coffee. Perfect."

I reach for the other mug on the nightstand; he leans up on one elbow to take it from me. His eyes, clear, guileless, enchanting, never leave mine as he sips his coffee. Disconcerting eyes, innocent and depthless; how can he hide so successfully behind them? What is he? Who is he? How does he live in this world? Everyone watches him, navigating treacherous shoals of lies and deceit and betrayal with rocks to founder him at every turn, and some of them can't even see the ship, let alone the captain at the helm; all they see is a ship's boy, high atop the crow's nest, his words lost in the wind and unintelligible to the lesser mortals scurrying below. Alone – and impossibly lonely...

"You okay?" he says softly, and I choke at the absurdity of the question. He grins but says again, "You okay? What are you thinking?"

"About you."

"Yeah, I got – I figured. What about me?"

"Who you are. What you want. What you need."

He thinks a moment and then raises his eyes to mine again. "Ray Kowalski. Everything. You."

"You make it sound simple."

"You worry too much."

"I'm not the only one in this room with serious pot kettle issues, Ray."

He laughs, delighted. "You do. Us is simple, Frase. I think. It's just you and me, same as ever."

"I'll defer to your expert analysis of the situation."

"Good." He drinks more of his coffee, puts his mug on the nightstand and then indulges in a stretch, long, luxurious, following it with a moan that would do Diefenbaker proud.

"Breakfast?" I ask. "I'm afraid I have no Speck today."

"Coffee's fine. I don't – you know I don't eat breakfast."

"I'm afraid I do. You should. Oatmeal. Eggs. Bacon. Stick to your ribs."

"Okay," he says. "That sounds – good." He reaches out a tentative hand to touch my chest, pulling my robe open to trace a finger across the bottom of my ribcage. "It's all good. Being here. Touching you. Being able to touch you. I didn't know it would feel like this. It's weird. Cool. Weird. What time is it?" He squints at the dresser.

"Half past six."

"How – how's Dief?"

"Asleep again. I took him out."

"He okay?"

"Yes. The medications haven't quite worn off. I've decided to take the day off, to keep an eye on him, but I'll run you in to the lab when you're ready."

“Okay. Good. Thanks.” He rolls over on his side, closer to me, and puts a hand on the bulge of my calf. I drain my coffee in one quick gulp and set it down next to his. He raises his eyes to mine as he rubs his palm up and down my leg. “I like – you don’t mind, me touching you? – I’ve wanted to feel you for a long time. I wanted to know.”

“I’m less than surprised by that revelation.” I slide down next to him and put one hand on his rib cage, caressing gently with my thumb. “You want to know everything.”

“Yeah,” he says softly, pulling me closer. “I want to. Want to feel you.” The kiss that follows is coffee-flavoured and yet sweet, gentle and warm. He bears me down onto my back and deepens the kiss, stroking one hand into my hair, keeping the other on my jaw where he first rested it.

When he breaks the kiss, finally, too soon, I stroke his hair as well. “You are amazing.”

He looks down my body at my rapidly hardening penis and smiles, and to my surprise there is a trifle of devilment in that smile. “So’re you,” he says, husky, and then bends his head to lick my collarbone, then my chest, pushing my robe out of the way, straying to one nipple and licking it in short, soft licks, rather like a cat, his hands rubbing and stroking me wherever he can reach: chest, abdomen, shoulders. His penis, hard, warm, juts against my thigh and when I move slightly he catches his breath, looks at me again, and then moves a tentative hand down my abdomen, still looking at me as if for permission.

I smile at him and slide my hand down his stomach.

“No,” he whispers, and tugs at my shoulder. “No, let me feel you. Me. I can’t – can’t concentrate, let me–”

Astonishingly he flushes again but he is still tugging at me, determined.

“All right, it’s all right,” I say, softly, as if gentling a horse. I roll onto my side, back to him, removing him from the sphere of my own temptation, and then I slide back against him as his arms enfold me. “Like this?”

It takes him a few seconds to respond and then I feel his breath on my ear as he leans in to kiss me on the neck, pulling me back against him. One arm slides around my chest to pull me close; the other resumes its interrupted journey to my groin, stroking around the tangle of hair there, around the aching weight between my legs. “*Just* like that,” he says intently, and then: “Can I – can – will you–” and I can feel the heat of the flush that sweeps up his chest and into his face through the skin of my back. I twist slightly, lick his jaw, reach for his hand to guide it.

“I thought you’d never ask,” I whisper back, and he laughs a little against the hair behind my ear and then grows completely serious: I can feel the tension in his body, the excitement almost palpable, and that surprises me: I knew he wanted this, even me – but he wants to give to me, to please me, and that’s a thought that could go to my head – either one – and does, in a mad rush, as his hand closes around me, strokes briefly, and moves further down to cup my scrotal sac, long fingers manipulating my testicles gently. Odd, unexpected, and more than arousing: I’m not able to hold still and I writhe almost involuntarily under his hand.

He chuckles softly, and I'm surprised to hear a note of confidence there. His hand moves, more self assured, to the muscle behind my scrotum, fingers stroking, pushing upwards, and I choke on his name as my whole body jerks and my hand closes around his wrist.

"Basic anatomy, Fraser," he whispers, and there's more than a hint of smugness in his voice: well deserved.

"I'd never given much thought to the obvious advantages of sharing a bed with a biologist." I manage a credible, I hope, nonchalance.

He laughs then and leans in to lick and then suck my jaw as his hand moves back, too slowly, to my erection, my own hand still on his wrist, feeling his tendons, hard and strong, shift under my fingers. "It's time you did," he whispers, and it takes me a moment to work out that that's a response to my comment and nothing at all to do with the matter at hand, as it were, because he's incredibly good at the latter and coherent thought is becoming increasingly difficult.

He's obviously fascinated with my foreskin: he gently slides it up and down, over the now slick glans, his cheek resting against mine, and I don't need to see his face to know the expression on it: I'm more than familiar with the intense and serious curiosity with which he approaches new ideas, even relatively minor ones like the physical differences between our genitalia.

He forms his thumb and forefinger into a small tight circle and pushes it down over the head of my penis and then back up again. Over and over, sudden and intense stimulus, and I jerk against him, feeling my orgasm begin to build.

"No," he whispers, and flattens his palm against the underside now, stroking slowly. "We haven't even gotten started."

"Ray..." Frustrated, I pull at his wrist, attempting to force a return of that delightful friction.

"Fraser..." he mimics, and I feel him smile against me as he turns his face to mine for a heady, deep kiss, his hand completely still, his wrist like iron under my fingers, resisting my pull. "Let me do this," he says against my mouth. "I can do this."

"Then do it," I say, trying to sound reasonable and sounding merely impatient; and he laughs again.

"God, Fraser, I love this. Don't rush me."

"There are certain basic urges that you presumably understand, Dr. Kowalski, and instinctive drives are close to autonomic reactions—"

"Fraser."

"Understood."

"Drives," he says musingly, beginning to stroke me again, thrusting against me gently in that same slow, quiet, altogether maddening rhythm. "I understand those."

"I imagine you do. I wonder if – do *not* stop that – if you understand my frequent drive to strangle you—"

"I think that's probably a subconscious urge."

"I think it's rather more than that right now."

"I think it just means you sublimate too much."

I choke then, laugh, twist to draw him close and kiss him; and he laughs back, eyes mischievous and alive, breath warm against my mouth, in my mouth, as his hand forsakes me so that he can return my hug measure for measure.

“It’s perhaps fortunate that I’m so good at it,” I say when we finally emerge for mundane necessities like oxygen.

Ray makes no verbal response, but there’s a light in his eyes I’ve never seen before: excited, warm, luminous, outshining even his smile.

“Yes,” I say meaninglessly.

“Yeah,” he echoes. “Where were we?”

“We were attempting to train your mind to maintain a firm grasp of the essentials.”

Finally my turn to catch him by surprise: a split second of bemusement followed by a gust of laughter. “You’re so subtle, Benton Fraser.”

“Well, we all have our faults. You were saying?”

“Where were we,” he says musingly. “I need – do you have any, um, lotion or–” Astonishingly he blushes even as his hand moves down my stomach to enclose me again in a warm firm grasp that in anyone else I would construe as possessive, and that thought simultaneously pleases and discomfits me.

I have to think a moment: the sight of Ray, blushing, is in itself distracting even without the gentle motion of his hand between my legs.

“Have – oh.” I hope I don’t look as startled as I feel, but I’m sure he knows anyway; and he confirms it with a lift of his eyebrow and a wry twist at one corner of his mouth. “What on earth do you use at the lab? Or does – no, of course not.” I lean over to scrabble in the nightstand drawer. “Why can I suddenly not rid my mind of the image of denuded Petrie dishes?”

He loses it then, completely and loudly, burying his head on my shoulder in helpless guffaws. When he can speak again, he says, “Don’t think – don’t think I – don’t think it didn’t occur–”

“Ray, nothing you think surprises me. Give me your hand.”

He sobers abruptly, watching the liquid drizzle into his palm, rubbing it onto his fingers together wonderingly. “Holy cow. What is this, Teflon? God, Fraser, this is–”

“I know. Will that suffice?” I close the cap and toss the bottle in a gentle underhanded arc and miss the drawer altogether because my hand is shaking slightly. “Or do you need to try it on yourself first?”

Rapid indrawn breath and his eyes are closed, squeezed shut, and I feel his penis jerk against my rear. “No,” he says, not quite steadily. “Not – not if you’re willing to be the guinea pig.”

“I am well past willing and rapidly entering impatient territory,” I say, grasping his wrist again, pushing it down my body.

“For me?” he asks wonderingly, seriously. “For me? You can do this yourself.”

“It’s you I want,” I say, equally seriously, holding his gaze with my own. “However, whenever, wherever, whatever.”

“Slow?” he says, an enchanting grin spreading across his face. “Fast?”

“At the moment, anything at all,” I growl, and push into his slick warm hand just as he closes it around me.

He laughs again, delighted. “This is so cool. Impatient Fraser. Carlo would never believe it.”

“Ray, don’t take this personally, but while I’m quite prepared to gratify your ego in any possible way, at the moment I would prefer a little more in the way of physical gratification and a little less – oh, God!”

“I think I prefer slow,” he says quietly, humour lacing his voice, and then words are lost in sounds of satisfaction, wordless pleas, mine and, surprising me again, his, as he loses us both in these maddening caresses. Fast, slowing, slower, then fingers just grazing the top. I never would have thought I could be brought to the brink and not over so many times: he accomplishes it five times in under ten minutes, knowing with an unerring instinct exactly where I am and not permitting fruition, until I’m writhing in his grasp and his name is the only coherent sound I’m capable of making.

Long unutterably decadent strokes of his hand, teasing; irrelevant and completely necessary sounds against my shoulder: he likes touching me, likes this; and if there had been any doubt in my mind, the throbbing presence of his own erection against me, sliding between my thighs in an echo of his hand’s rhythm, is all the reassurance I need, a familiar and welcome sensation.

“I can do this for *hours*,” he whispers, and in my mind’s eye I see him sprawled, tangled in a sheet, on his back on his antiquated little cot, his long fingers stroking himself slowly, maddeningly slowly, as he stares at the ceiling, his eyes closing from time to time to open again in lazy, supine pleasure, cat like...

Out of habit and memory, I reach between us, position him and push backwards, nothing but need between us now.

“Fraser!” His voice rises, breaks off in a gasp, and I freeze, utterly horrified, beginning to pull away: have I lost my mind? “Oh, God!” He thrusts forward, stops, breathing hard, and his next words take a long time to filter through the molasses that my brain has suddenly become. “I thought – oh *God*–” He thrusts again, sinking deeper, and says, after an audible swallow, “I thought – are you – no, um, lubricant – can we?”

I’m fairly certain that my oft-felt conflicting and simultaneous urges to strangle him and kiss him senseless would have been of great interest to Dr. Freud, but right now, despite those urges, there is a much deeper and more compelling one, itself warring with the constant surprise and delight he evokes in me, and I unfreeze, turn my head slightly so he can see my face, and relax, consciously, pushing slightly backwards against him.

“It’s... it’s all right.” I manage somehow to sound less choked than I feel. I ought to have known that curiosity only killed the cat when it couldn’t defeat Ray Kowalski; and I wonder exactly what articles he found at Medline to facilitate his research in this area; and then I stop wondering altogether as I feel his breath on my face and his hand on my hip as he utters a small soft moan and pushes harder, then withdraws slightly, unsure. I reach for his hand, move it between us to surround his penis briefly. He understands instantly, stroking

himself, pulling back to cover himself with the slickness still on his hand, leftover lubricant, jerking at his own touch, causing him to push, then, more deeply into me than he's gone, as yet, and I relax again, bear down, push backwards.

"Jesus *Christ*, Fraser, I didn't *know!*" he says explosively, and the next moment his teeth are in my shoulder and his hand is back on my hip as he fills me in one deliberate, complete thrust, and then stills, trembling, throbbing.

A small warm wetness rolls from the corner of my eye to quickly disappear into the pillow beneath my head, and I turn slightly so he can't see it: he mightn't understand it's not caused by pain but by happiness; well, no, Benton, be honest: ecstasy, unbelievable and irrefutable.

"Fraser..."

His voice recalls me to myself; unsure, it's trembling as much as he is. I take a deep breath, reason fighting to the fore; selfish desires need to be pushed away.

"It's all right," I say again.

"Now?" he says, still a question, his hand moving up my chest to my chin to turn my face. "I – I just – I – I – I don't – can't–"

"I thought you learned better by doing," I say quietly, allowing the barest hint of tease to colour my voice.

He chokes again, drops his head to my shoulder, and pulls in a deep breath. "How – God, how can you – talk? I want – I want–"

"Do it, then," I say, and reach back to pull him firmly against me. "Stop thinking and feel. I know what I'm doing."

"Never – never felt *anything* like this," he gasps.

"You're still thinking." I rock away and back again and he groans and his hand comes back down to my hip, holding me so hard I may well bruise, and then he moans again in concert with a small, successful thrust. He does it again, and again, slightly harder, and then he begins to pant, very close to my ear, as he catches a stuttering rhythm, faltering for a moment and then riding it, thrust for thrust.

Disjointed words: "... *anything*..." he says again. And: "Christ, so tight..." And: "Not hurting?"

"No!" I say, and growl, and brace back against his next thrust. "Just feel, Ray. Feel. Feel me. I won't let you hurt me."

"Want you," he chokes out. "Never – never – oh God!" His next words are lost in a whimper conjoined with a hard thrust, and I feel his belly press against my back as he arches backwards, a new assurance in the rhythm now, no sounds at all now except our mingled pants and gasps, his right foot pressing down on my left ankle, holding himself and me steady, in place, unerring instincts. I slide my own hand to my groin, so hard I ache, knowing in the brief seconds before I succumb to the temptation to touch that orgasm is inevitable and rapidly approaching.

He feels me stiffen, feels the first random pulse begin deep in my body, joined to his. He gasps and leans over me, his eyes wide and amazed in the dazed periphery of my vision, and then tracks the path of my hand down my body and,

quicker than thought, reaches with me to grasp my penis as I begin to shake. "Oh, my God," he says in a low astonished voice. "You – want – wanted–"

"Ray, please!"

Quick on the uptake, as always, he begins to move inside me again and tightens his hand down around me as glorious inevitability overtakes me, and I'm momentarily lost to all thought, host only to sensation.

When I come back to myself, he's gasping, wordless moans, his forehead pressed into my shoulder, our skin where it's touching sweat slick and heady. I shift beneath him, aware of the control he's maintaining, wondering only briefly why he's trying to prolong it – "I can do this for *hours*," echoes in my head – and I move my left leg, turning half onto my stomach, giving him a different angle, a different sensation.

"Too much," he says then, very simply, as if he's giving up. He pushes with me, and then he drives hard: one thrust, another, followed by his teeth in my shoulder and then a long, shaken, almost despairing moan, and I'm not sure if I heard or only imagined his words: "Too *soon*."

Oh God. Oh Christ. I lay utterly still, my heartbeat thundering in my ears. He gasps again, one more convulsion inside me, and collapses, breathing hard, his pelvis still rocking minutely against me. I try to gather my scattered-to-the-horizon wits, try to formulate some apology, some reassurance, pushing down my horror at my own behaviour: that can be dealt with later.

"Ray."

"Mmmm." He's still breathing heavily against my neck, boneless on top of me.

"Ray."

"Mmmm."

"Ray."

"Fraser, shut up."

That startles a laugh out of me, quickly and guiltily stifled. "You need a shower–"

"Shut up," he says again and, astonishingly, laughs and gives me a little shake. "I kind of forgot who I am and if you shut up it'll come back to me. I hope." He strokes me, almost idly, and then stills, the tension in his own body suddenly echoing that in mine.

"Fraser, you're – oh God, Fraser, you're – are you okay?" He lifts up on one arm, trying to peer into my face. "You're all f-frozen solid, hell, F-Fraser, I – you said you – you said I wouldn't hurt–"

"You didn't!" I twist to look at him and at that inopportune moment he slides out of me completely, causing an involuntary intake of breath.

"Jesus, Jesus," he says, almost frantically, burrowing around, trying to pull us together, panicked, jerky motions. "*Christ*, Fraser, God, I don't – I didn't–"

"Ray, damn it, calm down! You didn't hurt me, you know that; it was quite the reverse."

He stills then, staring at me, troubled, worried eyes. He opens his mouth but I forestall him.

"Shower now, please?"

“Fraser, tell me – I–”

“Shower,” I repeat firmly, kindly, trying to bank his panic. He swallows and nods and lets go of me. He stands, unresisting, when I pull him to his feet and is equally unresisting when I pull him across the room and push him into the shower. He makes no effort to clean himself, however, only stares at me, unblinking, upset.

“It’s all right,” I say quietly. “Everything’s all right. You’ll feel better after a shower.”

He frowns then and says, incredulously, “Better? Better? I’ve never felt better, Fraser, except I did it wrong and you – and you–”

“You. Were. Perfect,” I say, and I am surprised at the harsh note in my voice. “I pushed you well beyond where you were ready to go and–”

“Ready? I was ready!”

“You had no idea–”

“I did too, damn it, and – and – and–” His voice drops to a whisper; his eyes drop too. “All I can think is – is when can... if we can – again – and – and maybe longer next... if...”

I stare at him. The human brain can only process so many novelties at a time and mine has had a surfeit in the past two days. He looks up, a quick glance, then drops his eyes again. His shoulders slump. Three seconds later I am in the shower with him and have him pinned against the wall, my hands sheltering his shoulder blades from the tile, his mouth opening in surprise under mine, surprise that rapidly turns to reciprocation as I kiss him, hard, deep, no holds barred, loosing all restraint.

“Whenever, wherever, however you want,” I growl into his mouth. “Whatever you want. Damn it, Ray.”

“Now?” he says. “Right now? Or, well, in twenty minutes maybe – because, damn you, Fraser, how can you be so stupid? You’re so stupid. You’re an idiot. Idiot!” He punctuates the appellation with a rough shake of my shoulders and then pulls me in close to him.

We stand together under the spray for a few long moments, heartbeats calming, breath being recaptured.

“I’m not stupid,” he says then, very quietly. “Damaged, maybe. Not stupid. As soon as – as soon as I figured it out – figured me out – and you – I found out... things. But I can’t – couldn’t – you’re the – the only one I can – the only one I can talk to, can ask, and – and you have to – to let me ask because I don’t know all of it, they don’t tell you all of it, they don’t tell you how it feels here–” he puts a hand on my chest, “–and here–” he moves the hand down between my legs and presses gently, “–they only tell you the stuff in here.” He bumps his head against mine. “I need you – I need you to tell me whether here and here is right because I don’t know.”

I blink rapidly: shower spray is accumulating in my eyes. “You know. Listen to yourself.”

“I’m listening,” he says angrily. “You’re not listening. I wanted that – I didn’t know how to ask. I want that again. I don’t know how to say that.”

“You just did. And you are not damaged.”

“Yeah,” he says quietly. “But it’s okay. I don’t care. Not now. So – so you – will you tell–”

“Anything, Ray.”

He pulls back, looks seriously at me, and then returns to the embrace. After another minute or two he sighs and says abruptly, “Okay. Okay. It – does it hurt?”

“No. There’s usually a momentary twinge upon penetration, but it’s transient and penetration can be facilitated by relaxation and–”

He interrupts me. “Okay. It’s so – it’s so hot and smooth and – and tight, it’s just – are you sure?”

“Yes. As you’re aware, there’s an outer ring of muscle–”

“God. Um. Okay. Is that – are women like that?”

“It’s my understanding that women are somewhat, er, looser and, of course, a great deal more slippery.”

“You – your under – understanding? You never – you never–”

“No.” He tries to pull back, to look at me, but I refuse to release him: it is taking all my control to remain calm and to sound scientific and if he looks at me I may well lose even this semblance of control.

He stills for a moment and then says, “It’s – was it always guys? For you?”

“I think so. I simply pretended otherwise for far too long.”

“It – I – I wanted Stella. And – and you.”

“That’s perfectly normal, Ray.”

“I know that,” he says, slightly irritated. “I just don’t know why.”

“One of the mysteries of the universe, Dr. Kowalski.”

“You’re not sounding too scientific-like, there, Fraser.”

“No, I’m not.”

He laughs at that, hugs me slightly tighter. “So – so when did you know? That it was guys for you?”

“Ray, I think we’re in danger of exhausting the hot water.”

“Wash and talk, we can do both.”

“Not with any degree of efficiency. I found out in rather a dramatic way when I was at Columbia that my attraction to men was neither transient nor temporary.” I reach around him for the shampoo and hand him the bottle.

He grins at me and steps backwards, wetting his hair thoroughly. “Was it – mmf – was it a fun dramatic way?”

We switch places, moving in concert easily in such a tiny space, more easily than we should. “In some ways, yes. In other ways it was rather like the bottom dropping out of my life. Readjustments, mostly mental, some physical. I’d been aware for years that I found other men attractive, of course, but at university there was no room for those sorts of thoughts. I was a chemistry major but–”

“You were a hockey jock,” Ray finishes, nodding wisely, his shampooed hair sticking up in clumps of lather. We switch places again. “At grad school you didn’t have to be.”

“Precisely. And in New York City, to boot. It was somewhat of an epiphany.”

“Hah.” He laughs, cackles really, and rinses his head again, spluttering against the water in his mouth. “Did you date guys? Do guys date?”

I smile; I can’t help it. “After a fashion. I tend to be rather monogamous, however, so I didn’t do much dating, or not-dating, as the case may be.”

“Yeah, I can see that. I was, uh, un-ogamous.”

“I wish I’d known you then,” I say without thinking, and then wish I could bite the words back, asking again for more, never satisfied with an already full plate. But no one has ever asked me these things, no one has ever wanted to know these things about me, and he... does.

“Nah. Nah, you didn’t.” Astonishingly he takes my confidence in stride. “Geek-o-rama. And I read – oh, man. I was just – I was just a head on two legs, that’s all, just a brain – I don’t even remember half my classes, you know? Just pow pow pow – get it in, get it down, move on, like there was a timetable inside me, like there was somewhere I had to be.” He moves again, standing aside to let me rinse my own hair.

“I wish I had,” I say again, turning slightly to turn off the water. “All the same, you know.”

“You are a romantic,” he says, reaching for a towel, handing me mine. “I knew it.”

“Not in the least,” I say, reaching over to dry his back.

He turns to me, and his smile fades as he looks at me, head to toe. His pupils dilate and so, I am sure, do mine, as we lean together for a kiss, naked, wet, altogether satisfying.

“So... cool,” he breathes. “I thought–” he moves his face to my throat, suddenly tense again, mumbling slightly – “I thought, you know, thought at first that I was going nuts. I thought, look at Carlo, he’s, I guess he’s cute but I don’t – and then with Patrick, I thought, yeah, wow, really attractive and maybe you – and then you told me that you were, um... but then he was married and then – then I thought, then I knew it was okay because you – your reactions were – were mine and it was me after all, for you, and it was starting to be you for – for me. And it was all okay after all. But I’m glad he was married. And I wish – wish I’d – I’d said something, done something, sooner.”

“Like walk through a blizzard?”

He pulls back and looks at me, wide-eyed, surprised. “Oh. Oh yeah. Oh.”

“I thought *I* was insane, Ray, reading what I wanted to see into your signals. Good God.”

“It was – I was trying to see–”

“Testing hypotheses.” I smile at him, openly, and he relaxes visibly. “Believe me, Dr. Kowalski, I understand *that* facet of your personality all too well.” I wrap the towel around my waist and go back into the bedroom. He follows me, wrapping his towel as well, and we both stop short at the sight of the bed, rumpled and messy, and the smell of semen, still pervasive, in the air.

“Messy,” he says and to my delight sounds halfway to smug.

“That’s what washers and dryers are for.” I move to one corner of the bed and pick up a pillow. Mark never complained about the mess but he didn’t revel in it. I doubt he noticed.

“Let me – let me help,” Ray says, moving to the other side of the bed.

“Ray, it’s no great–”

“Fraser.” Something in his voice brings me up short: resignation, a slight hint of impatience. “Let me help. If I’m – if we’re going to – to, um, to do – this, to be partners... partners means sharing, Benton Fraser.”

I stare at him, too long to be comfortable, but he remains clear-eyed, confident, looking back at me. Finally I clear my throat. “Understood, Raymond Kowalski.”

“Okay. Okay. But – okay, not – I mean, not all the time, not every – if there’s lab stuff and–”

“The important thing, Ray, is that you believe that.”

He stops, his turn to be startled, and then he laughs out loud, over and over. When he sobers, he says, “I *do*,” and throws a pillow at me. “I want to – I want to – do you think my cot would hold us both?”

I choke, splutter, and cough through my laugh. “Dear God, Ray. No. Emphatically not.”

“Shoot. Guess it’s the double bed after all.” He grins at me slyly and then adds, still in a bantering tone, “And a Ph.D.”

I drop the stripped pillow on the bed. “Conditions, Dr. Kowalski?” I try to keep my voice steady but it comes out sounding unnaturally serious.

He looks back at me from under his brows and then he raises his chin, slightly defiant. “Maybe.”

“You have no right–”

“I have every right–”

“No right,” I repeat, “to dictate to me–”

“Every right,” he says, louder. “Every right, Fraser, every right as your friend and your... partner.”

I stare at him, fulminating.

He stares back.

“I have no thesis,” I say, aware even as I’m doing so that I sound childish.

“Enzymatic action, amyloid plaques, neurodegenerative diseases. Again with the excuses.”

“Not an excuse, Ray, I simply have neither the time nor the inclination to waste any more of my life in pursuit of a piece of–”

“If you say paper I’m going to pop you.”

“Paper.”

He stares at me, eyes narrowed. “Take it back,” he says at last.

“No.”

“Take it back.” He moves onto the bed, kneeling in the pile of sheets, too quick for me to back away: he grabs my hands and pulls hard so I’m kneeling too, awkward, off balance. “Take it back.” His eyes reflect misery. “Take it back,” he says again, low, insistent. “I know you, if you don’t take it back you never will just because you said so. Take it back, now, Fraser.”

“Why is this so important to you?”

“Why can’t you see how important this is?”

“I thought it was important once. I learned the error of my ways, well and truly.”

“It’s important for us, Fraser, don’t you get that?”

“I’m good enough without—”

“Fraser, damn it, you’re not listening!” He releases one of my hands to slice through the air, his hand flat, chopping at nothing. “For us, you and me, this – this part of this that’s outside here. Inside here, nothing matters but outside here – if you – we could go all the way, you and me, but you need the damned piece of paper. You can’t let them beat you and stop you. It’s something you have to do for yourself. It’s something you should do for us. But mostly for yourself.”

I stare at him. There’s a knot in my chest, Gordian in character, being pulled ever tighter by the tug of war: pride, love, pain, anger, and, again, pride. He slides his hand down my arm to my wrist and then grasps my hand again.

“I’m here now,” he says quietly. “I won’t let anyone do anything to you. Not on my watch. You have to trust me.”

“I—”

“Trust me.”

“I do—”

“Then listen to me. You think I don’t know what I’m doing? Trust me. Where are you going? Where do you want to go?”

“I..” I take a breath. “Perhaps I.. I don’t know.”

“Trust me,” he says again, staring at me as if hoping to imprint himself on my soul. He has. “Do it. Do it my way.”

“Your way may not be right for me.”

He stares at me, anger beginning to be apparent. “I told you before, you should have your own lab, Fraser, not – not picking up my laundry, not—”

“I don’t want my own fucking lab, Ray!”

“How can you not want – you don’t get it, Fraser, you can’t get tenure, you can’t get—”

“I don’t want tenure, I don’t want a lab, I don’t need the damned piece of paper, Ray!”

He stares at me, baffled, hurt, frustrated; my heart twists inside me.

“What do you *want*?” he asks, and he sounds... lost. “How can you not—”

With great finality, as firmly as I can manage, I say, “It’s over, Ray. I’m not the person I was three years ago. It’s too late—”

“You’re afraid of it, Fraser.” His voice trembles slightly; with a shock I realize he’s angry. “Afraid to face it, face yourself. Of course you don’t want it. Then you might have to – have to, I don’t know, admit you’re smart, admit you’re good at what you do, admit that you belong here.

“You – you don’t know what – what you want. You still – you still want to be a Mountie. You still want to play hockey for Cornell. You’re always – always looking backwards, Fraser, and you’re missing all the stuff in front of you. And then you pretend it’s all about, you know, big ethical things and – and principles – all that – that romantic stuff.” His grip on my arm tightens. “You’re not a Mountie, you’re not a pro hockey player. You – you’re Benton Fraser, a – a scientist, you’re my colleague, you’re my friend... you’re m-m-my – lover.” He

swallows hard, gives my arm a little shake and then drops it, pushing it away. “You – you shouldn’t settle for half when you can have it all. That’s just stupid, Fraser.”

“That goes without saying,” I say coldly. “Extremely stupid. I don’t know how to make you understand that it means nothing to me, no more than hockey means to me, no more than being a Mountie ever meant to me. They sold out, Ray; and if I betray my principles, I have nothing left.”

“That’s stupid,” Ray shouts, startling both of us. “Those aren’t your principles, Fraser, those are – those’re their principles, you’re letting them define the argument and then trying to – to win it and you can’t, so – so you quit. You just – you just quit.” He’s so angry he’s shaking; there’s a vein throbbing in his temple and the tendons of his throat are pulled taut, so taut I feel a sympathetic ache in my own neck. “It’s not just a piece of paper, it’s important, it’s so goddamn important for what you chose – you chose to do this, you chose it, Fraser, and you’re s-sab-s-sabo-sabotaging it, walking away from it. It’s not *just* a goddamn piece of paper, Fraser, it’s your future, it’s your life, it’s all that stands between you and your dreams and if you have it, if you have it, no one can stop you, and you don’t get it!”

I feel sick dismay, dreams crashing around me, air castles, to be sure, but the walls fall like brick. How did we get here, from there, so quickly?

He’s still talking, quieter now, but still angrily. “You let them do that, you’re letting them do that, they never should have done that but you can fix it, fix yourself, make it right, and you’re not. You make me crazy, Fraser, once you have it they can never take it away, don’t you get that? And I can – I can help you.” His voice drops; involuntarily I glance up to meet his eyes, though I am ashamed beyond belief: I’ve suddenly realized that I have hurt him, I have discounted everything he holds dear, in my own egomaniacal pursuit for self-justification and my stubborn pride.

“I can help you,” he repeats, and he reaches for my hand, tentatively. “You’ve only – maybe you’ve only ever seen it from the outside, looking in. Me – let me – I know the inside. I’ve been on the inside, looking out, I know – I know how it works, where – what – let me show you that–”

I stiffen, involuntarily, and begin to pull back; this is what she did, and he can’t, must never know that... I pull harder, trying to temper the ache inside me; his grip tightens. “Not – not special – just – it’s just, I know this, Fraser, I’ve – I’ve been here, I’ve been inside for – for years, I know where – how – what–”

I take refuge, despite myself, in sarcasm: “So you call Sackler and tell them to give me my Ph.D. back?”

He grabs my other hand; holding both, he shifts closer to me. “If that’s what it takes,” he says, slowly, almost caressing each word, letting the hurt roll off the words, transforming them into a promise.

“You’ve decided to expand from omniscience to omnipotence?” I say, still sarcastically, wanting desperately to trust him, despite my hard-won wisdom; wanting more desperately to believe that he can change that past and knowing that he cannot; knowing, too, however, that he thinks he can, in some measure – and I should not be the one to undermine his faith in himself... yet I am.

“No,” he whispers, releasing my hands, settling back on his heels, looking down at the rumpled sheets, all the anger gone from him now, a defeated set to his shoulders. “Not – not omniscient. I – no. Not – not...”

I would sooner cut out my tongue than say anything to hurt him and despite that resolve have managed to accomplish it thrice in less than thirty minutes. I sit back on my own heels, resting my hands on my thighs, staring too at the sheets, their disorder a painful reminder now. I take a deep breath and try to calm myself, something I should have done at the start of all this. The hurt is vast: apologies won't begin to encompass it.

He takes a deep breath too, an unconscious echo, perhaps. Then he takes another. “This is bad,” he says softly, shakily. “Bad. Very...”

“I know it's not just a piece of paper,” I say, equally softly, an attempt to begin amends.

“I can help you,” he says, still shakily. “You can trust me.”

“I want to,” I say truthfully. “Ray, I...” I breathe, stroke the back of my thumb over my eyebrow, a nervous habit and one I try to be conscious of. “There was – Ray, they tried to–” I take another breath: something I've tried desperately to forget, bandaged with that much vaunted but less than reliable impermanence of memory, something Victoria cut wide open, and now... now the pain wells up as if it was yesterday, raw, open, bleeding... but he is bleeding too and somehow – somehow I must... “–they – he offered me a different line of research, a lucrative one, one that he said had... patent potential, one that I could finish my dissertation with, and all I had to do was submit his... version of the second report and move on to a more, ah, ‘productive’ line of research. And... they did it as a matter of course, Ray, as if – as if it were... I called it a bribe, at the time, though I'm sure it was nothing so overt as that; they were simply trying to offer me a reasonable alternative and I was too stubborn, arrogant...” I attempt a smile, to lighten the atmosphere, but his expression remains stricken.

“When – when I said no, he became incredulous, and then very angry. He pulled the funding, my stipends... said that I hadn't exhibited mature and rational scientific judgment, that clearly I was unable to work in an unsupervised and advanced research capacity, that it was fortunate they'd found this out now. And I was so confused and, well, angry, and I said things... well, to be honest, I-I lost my temper, I called it a bribe. And I still don't know – I don't know how much of this I caused, Ray, by–”

His eyes are wide and shocked; his face, paper-white. “None of it,” he says sharply, breathless with anger.

“Not–”

“None of it,” he says again, cutting off my words with a slash of his hand through the air. “For God's sake, Fraser, I know – I know from second-guessing, but that's – that's not even – who – what kind of man would take a bribe, Fraser?”

“It wasn't necessarily a–”

“Oh, the hell it wasn't,” he says. “Carrot and stick, Fraser, like your dad – see? And the junior faculty too scared to say ‘Boo!’ to the guy and the rest of them too worried about their damn funding, their grants, their reputations... How can

you even – God, Fraser, I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry. I didn’t know, I thought – I thought you were being stubborn.”

“I am,” I say steadily. “I’m very stubborn. Please don’t apologise, Ray.”

“So they – so they punished you for not playing,” he says. “It was – it was pure spite. God, Fraser, we have to – you have to get your Ph.D. You have to get it, you have to, you can’t let them win.”

“It’s... too late. By all the rules, they’ve won,” I say, and suddenly I feel very tired, too tired to feel more than a slight dismay at the weary resignation in my voice.

“Their rules,” he says, and the confidence is back in his voice. “I play by my own rules. Kind of a wild card, kind of kooky.”

The utter and absurd truth of that statement surprises a laugh out of me. He laughs as well, but there’s very little humour in it: it’s simply echoing mine.

“It’s not just a piece of paper,” he says. “It’s so much more than that for – for you.”

“For you too,” I say, and crack my neck and, finally, dare to meet his eyes. “I’m sorry, Ray.”

“Okay,” he whispers, and then he smiles, and my world miraculously and unexpectedly rights itself. How can this man be this way, stabbed in the back at every turn and yet so ready to forgive and excuse? Irrationally I feel a twinge of anger: don’t let me hurt you, Ray, don’t let me do this to you, hurt me back, you’re going to get hurt if you...

“... trust,” I say, hoarsely, suddenly realising my own inconsistency, not to say irrationality. I regard epiphanies, in general, with a jaundiced eye, but...

“Yeah,” he says eagerly, mistaking my meaning. “I can – let me try to help you, okay, I can – just trust me, Fraser, it’s that simple.”

For you, I think; but those words would also hurt and are unnecessary: of course we are different, different men shaped by different forces, different worlds. I content myself, and him, with a different sort of assurance, the sort I can give unreservedly: “I’ll try.”

“Give me a chance,” he says, catching my hands in his own, the light returning to his eyes, the vibrancy to his voice. “Give me a chance.”

I’m not worthy of his trust, or his love, am an unfit repository for the confidence he places in me; I repay it all the only way I know how. “Anything,” I say.

“Okay,” he says eagerly, leaning forward. “Okay, then. Let’s–”

Suddenly, startling us both, his stomach rumbles loudly; as if in response, mine does too.

“Let’s talk about this later, Ray,” I say, laughing; but he doesn’t laugh.

“This is important, Fraser, I have to–”

“Ray. Please.”

“Fraser, please,” he says almost at the same moment, still earnest, still so very serious. “This is important, we have to – I have to tell you–”

His stomach rumbles again. I lean forward and kiss him gently, on one corner of his mouth. There will be time, later, for reality; but at the moment, I’ve done more than enough, far too much, in fact, in reminding him of some of

life's harsher realities. Ivory towers, I learned four years ago, were an apt metaphor: cold and slick and impenetrable; and almost unbearably painful to run into, headlong. "Anything, Ray. Let's eat now."

Squeezing my hands, he closes his eyes briefly, and when he opens them, the sun has emerged from the clouds. "I was fifteen when I went to Northwestern," he says. "It was the scariest day of my life, except the time Randy Grzejka said he was going to wait for me after school in fourth grade. But I did it and it – and I found a place where I belonged, where all that – all the hoops, all the – all the idiocy, where it was still there but it didn't matter because the rest of it was – the rest of it was un-unbelievable. That's – it was the first time in my life I had people – people around me who – and I think I knew then."

"I know," I say. "It's not just a piece of paper, Ray, especially to you."

His smile is grateful. "To anyone, but... but yeah, I'm... I'm not objective enough about it. And it didn't matter there, there, there everyone got why I wanted – what I wanted – they were doing it too, I wasn't the only triple major in my entering class."

"How the hell did you do it with the dyslexia?" I ask, impelled by curiosity to point blank rudeness.

He blinks and smiles; and slides off the bed and begins to rummage through his clothes, left in a pile on my tall dresser. I move to join him, clearing a drawer quickly for the rest of his clothes – temporary measures, I'll free half the dresser later. I extract my own socks and underwear from the top drawer and begin to dress too.

"I learned how to – to compensate. I don't know exactly, I didn't think what they were doing was for the dyslexia, in – in, uh, in retrospect, I just think they were trying things... one thing was speed reading, I learned to skim, I learned to recognize patterns and – and I wanted to, Fraser, I couldn't – I couldn't let that hold me back."

"No," I say, pulling on my jeans. "You have no equal when it comes to sheer doggedness, Ray Kowalski."

He blushes, awkward, endearing, and almost drops his shirt. He fumbles with it and then pulls it on. I find it hard to believe that no one has ever said even these sorts of things to him, and wonder, again, exactly what his relationship with Stella was really like, in day-to-day terms. After my second lover, who was very undemonstrative, Mark's frank appreciation (and good nature), was reassuring and thus my inevitable awkwardness was much more transitory than it could or, probably, should, have been.

"I'm starving," he says, colour still high, transparently changing the subject. "Oatmeal or – or what?"

"Oatmeal, certainly." I lead the way to the kitchen.

He stands with me and watches: I suspect old-fashioned oatmeal preparation is a novelty to most Americans in this day and age. I rummage for brown sugar; I have a fairly shrewd grasp, after all this time, of odd American customs, and sugar on oatmeal is one of them.

He spurns the sugar and opts for the salt and butter, like me. I'm very certain he'll want sugar as soon as he tastes it but to my surprise he sits and eats with intense curiosity. "It's good this way," he says finally. "Little weird, but that's maybe, uh, cultural conditioning?"

"I daresay."

His next statement is completely unexpected. He swallows a mouthful of oatmeal and then says without preamble, "That – that stuff, that Teflon – lube? – that's amazing. Is that what you usually – where do you get that?"

"Mail order," I say firmly, and finish my coffee.

"It's so – so – wow." He grins shyly. "I thought – I thought there were different, um, kinds for different things but it seemed to..." He blushes fiery red and stumbles quickly into his next thought. "D-Do you – is that what you usually use? Used?"

"Yes."

"So the, um, the thicker kind, is that – is that just, um, marketing or–"

"It's my understanding that, yes, it is more – efficacious – for certain acts."

"But you don't – you don't mind the, uh, the Teflon?" He's stopped eating, spoon poised over the bowl, and he's staring at me, quite unselfconsciously.

"Not at all. I'm used to it."

"Used to it..." He sounds utterly fascinated. "That's – how do you do that? What do you do? Would I like it? You really like it."

"Apparently so."

"I love this," he says, then, happily. "It's – it's so easy, with you, it's cool. It's – I know what I like and so I know what you like, kind of, you know? I mean, you know, both of us are guys, we have the same... um..."

"Equipment," I supply.

He nods eagerly. "Exactly. Equipment. I didn't – I mean, I knew I wanted you but I didn't think it would be this – this easy."

"I think you're responsible for some of that ease, Ray – at least, you make it easy for me."

He ducks his head and then looks up again, cocking it to one side. "Yeah? You think?"

"Very much so, yes."

He grins again and shakes his head, his colour high, but I can tell that he's pleased – with himself, with us, perhaps – and I smile, myself, at the oatmeal in my bowl, half gone already.

Suddenly he gets to his feet and dashes into the bedroom. He's back within seconds with the bottle. He sits again, picking up his discarded spoon, eating

absently as he squints at the label¹⁴. I watch him and then make my own foray into the bedroom, returning with his glasses. He takes them with an absent-minded, “Thanks.” A few more seconds and he turns his attention back to me.

“I want – can I try that? Can we – can we try it? I want to know – I want to know how to do that, how it feels. Do you want to – have you done that?”

I feel my colour rise: my turn, now, to blush. Easy, yes, but he also makes it difficult for someone who’s not used to such frank curiosity in these matters. I feel for a moment as if I’m misleading him, his trust in my experience misplaced: the blind leading the not-so-dumb blond. “No. Not – not as such.”

“Really?” His surprise is either extremely flattering or extremely annoying, I’m not sure which. “You really never – do you know – do you know how?”

“It’s not that difficult,” I say. It’s more of a snap, before I can help myself, and his eyes widen slightly and he sits back quickly, looking down at his bowl.

There’s a rather long silence after that statement, during which time we both finish our oatmeal. I look up to see him watching me and he flushes and looks back down.

“Ray.” I put my hand on the table and turn it over, palm up. He glances at it, looks at me from under his eyelashes, then flashes a quick, tentative smile and puts his hand over mine. “I’m sorry. I’m not used to – to talking about these things but that’s my own discomfort, not yours. No one has ever – I simply – at any rate, I apologise.”

“I – I, uh, I just never, uh, shut up with you, just, bam, pop it out and then–”

“Please continue.” I say this firmly, without smiling. “I will endeavour to–”

“Don’t treat me – if it – if you don’t want to, don’t, just tell me.”

“I do want to,” I say, more softly than before. “I enjoy your mind, Ray, your relentless curiosity. I am sorry. I’ve never had someone who – with whom to discuss these things, and I’m afraid I’m somewhat inclined, in any case, to reticence.”

His fingers tighten on my hand and a small smile begins. “Somewhat? I’d say constitutionally, myself.”

I smile back, then take a deep breath. “So. No. I haven’t done it that way. Yes, I am familiar with the, er, procedure.”

“Okay.” He studies me for a moment. “You’re so – so together, I just – sometimes I forget that you’re not, you know, um, Answer Man. I’m sorry. It – it was something – I just wondered. That you don’t know how it feels–”

“I certainly do,” I say, and wink.

A huge smile breaks across his face. “I – God, yes,” he says, a trifle thickly. “That, yeah. You – yeah. Do you... no. Sorry.”

“Ray. You can talk to me about anything. Anything.”

“Okay, I – yeah, I know. Okay.”

“Ray. I mean it.” I get to my feet. “Are you ready to go?”

¹⁴ ID Millennium, Westridge Laboratories, Irvine, CA.

“Yeah.” He looks at me again, swallows audibly, and says in a low, quick mumble, “Just – just a second.”

I stare at him, frowning slightly. He glances up at me, tries to smile, but his eyes, pupils dilated, belie his mouth: in them I see... shame?

He shifts uncomfortably in his chair and the pieces fall into place.

I smile, suppress, with difficulty, the impulse to laugh – relief always strikes me in odd ways – and say, gently, “Ray. That’s normal. Very much so. My first – my first lover and I spent more than one weekend in bed.”

He looks up, slightly wild-eyed, wholly relieved. “I just – really? Wow. I mean – I want to – I should want to – we’ve got this stuff, too much stuff to do but all I can – I want to – I’m not used to feeling, you know, feeling this. Feeling. It’s – it’s not like... It’s not even like Stella. It’s – having you, touching you – it’s like when you see the solution to a problem, the problem’s not even real any more, it’s – it’s inconsequential, the solution just changed it all, made it – and now, you, you and me together, together, God, and that’s all-”

I cut off the remainder of his highly flattering explanation through the simple expedient of pulling him to his feet and into my arms. Two or three intense minutes later, he breaks off the kiss, breathing hard, the sparkle restored to his eyes.

“I feel it too,” I say, although I don’t have to. “It’s simply not the, ah, novelty it is for you.”

“It’s not a novelty, you’re not – it’s not that,” he says indignantly. “It’s more than, uh, endorphins, it’s not just-”

“Well, Ray, brain chemistry can have an effect on the, ah, frequency-”

He begins to laugh, shaking his head, then nodding as he pulls me into his arms, unexpectedly, firmly, still laughing against my mouth as he claims another kiss. “Yeah,” he breathes finally. “Frequency. What’s the frequency, Fraser? Not fair, no, I know. No. We can’t. Need a – a cold shower, yeah? And that – that weekend, in bed, I am all over that.” He kisses me again, quickly, closed-mouth, then sighs and begins to turn away, almost unconsciously adjusting his jeans.

I pull him around, push him backwards, up against the table, and I say, as I sink to my knees, sliding my hands down his torso to his waistband, “However, whenever, wherever, whatever, Ray.”

“Oh *Christ!*” he says, sounding both exultant and near-terrified, bracing his hands against the edge of the table. “I didn’t mean – don’t – Fraser, you don’t have to-”

“However. Wherever. Whenever. Whatever,” I repeat firmly, matching the words to my actions, freeing him in four economical movements. “Please, Ray. Please let me do this.” Rather unfairly, I close my hand around his penis after those words; he makes a small sound, half-gasp, half-moan, that I, certainly, am willing to interpret as assent, as I lean in to taste him.

Mark was uncircumcised, as am I, and thus I can’t help the near-automatic comparisons my brain makes. Ray’s penis, beautiful and unfamiliar, a peculiar combination of strength and vulnerability, bare and proud, is

somehow more than the sum of its parts. Or perhaps the first sign of insanity is anthropomorphosising genitalia.

And perhaps insanity should be embraced, I think, somewhat fuzzily, as I open my mouth wide and take him in. There's a faint aftertaste of soap on his skin, but that fades quickly as I move my mouth up and down a few times, sucking hard for a moment on the head, inciting a groan, then licking the pre-ejaculate, savouring his taste combined with the scent of his musk.

He groans again, tugging at my hair. "Fraser – Frase–"

I hear the couch springs give as Diefenbaker jumps down and, with a small whine, limps over to investigate us. He sniffs a few times, refrains from comment, and proceeds to the kitchen. I look up at Ray, still holding his penis in my right hand; he grins at me and pulls at my shoulder. "Are we not supposed to do this in here?"

"He's still under the influence of medication. Ordinarily he's capable of more discretion."

Ray tugs me again; I tug back, pulling him to his knees with me for a brief kiss and then push him down further. He grins again, simply, delightedly, raising his hips off the floor to push his pants down. "Anywhere the wolf lets us?" He sits up again, reaching up to the table, feeling around with one hand. I have the sense that things have progressed beyond my control. I'm confirmed in that supposition when he opens his hand and triumphantly displays the bottle of lubricant as he slides back down to the floor, coming to rest on one elbow.

"What do you intend to do with that?" I ask, slightly shakily, as I attempt to unobtrusively shift my own erection to a more comfortable position.

He pops the lid open and the grin on his face has progressed from simply mischievous to positively wicked in the course of a half second. "What do you want to do with it?" he asks, and then blushes beet red and drops his eyes.

I'm surprised to hear a growl emerge from my throat, one worthy of Diefenbaker, and equally surprised to find myself on top of him, kissing him, touching him, cupping him, stroking him. My carefully ordered world is topsy-turvy: I have no self control where this man is concerned, none at all, I cannot even indulge him in a relatively simple and quick blowjob without wanting more and he, innocent that he is, allows me, even encourages me, to take what I will.

Breathless, restless moments follow as we attempt to get undressed without letting go of one another, but the awkwardness new lovers face is mitigated by the fierceness with which he responds and the earnestness with which he participates. An elbow in one eye, a knee in the small of my back: these are small prices to pay, and his breathless apologies make my heart swell almost past bearing. Being here, with him, evokes feelings that are almost too intense, frightening in their newness, but wonderful all the same, unique and perfect.

"You're going to be – late," I gasp as he pushes me onto my back, his turn to cover me, his mouth on a nipple, suckling, again, earnestly.

"Not gonna go in," he breathes against my skin. "I – I can't, I'm sorry, please–"

"I'm not – but we should call–"

“Later,” he says, moving between my legs and pulling off both my socks at the same time. “All those guys on the internet, they do this with their socks on, is that mandatory, is that some—”

I begin to laugh helplessly, stopping abruptly as his hand closes over my penis and then, unbelievably, incredibly, his mouth. Thank God, I think hazily, as I reach for his head, thank God I already came once this morning, thank God – thank God for mouths, and tongues, thank God for Ray’s limitless curiosity, thank God for Ray –

“Oh God,” he says hoarsely, suddenly lifting his head, his eyes squeezed shut; and I come back to myself with a jolt that is almost physical. “Oh, God, Fraser, how do you – I’m gonna – oh, God, gonna—” He sounds terrified again, terrified and exultant, and by the time I’ve shifted position enough to pull him close, it’s already over, all over my thigh and hip, and he’s lying on top of me, breathing hard, his heart racing.

“Sorry, sorry, sorry,” he’s murmuring between breaths, sounding deeply chagrined. “I wanted – I want to—”

“Ray.”

“I’ll—”

“Ray.”

“I want—”

“Ray.”

He breathes in, then exhales; I feel him relax. “What?”

“That’s why you wear socks.”

He goes absolutely still for a split second and then rolls off me, laughing so hard he is gasping for breath again, so hard tears come from his eyes, so hard Diefenbaker lifts his head from the couch behind us and moans plaintively.

“You – you have to – see, you have to tell me this stuff,” he says, wiping his eyes, rubbing his elbow where he knocked it against the leg of the table. “It’s not fair, not if I don’t know the secret handshake.”

“It’s a secret handjob, Ray, just so you know.” That sets him off again, of course, and I can’t keep the smile off my own face, ridiculously: I am so hard I yearn, so happy I ache, and yet I can’t stop smiling and I know I must look utterly absurd.

Still giggling, he rolls back, half onto me, and kisses me. “After I learn the secret handjob, will you show me how to do the secret blowjob without, um, uh, blowing it?”

I don’t try to repress my laughter any longer. After I compose myself, I say, solemnly, “Practise.”

He kisses me again, saying thickly, incoherently, and with considerable emphasis that he is all *over* that, and then he raises his head and says roughly, “Bed. C’mon. I can’t – I want—”

“We need to call—”

“Later, okay?”

Somehow we stumble to our feet, divesting ourselves of the remainder of our clothing. I stop short at the sight of the bed: rumples, tumbled, one stripped

pillow still lying in a corner. Ray pokes me in the back, protesting the sudden cessation of forward motion.

“The bed is—” I say, somewhat confusedly.

“Sheets are fine, leave the sheets, they’re already messy,” he says into the back of my neck, rubbing both his palms in a circular motion on my stomach, somewhat hypnotic.

“All right,” I say, grinning foolishly, allowing myself to be propelled to the bed.

The phone rings, making both of us jump: concentrating on one another, we’ve forgotten the outside world, and that’s as it should be. Mark used to unplug the phone; I can see, now, his point, as I break free from Ray’s grasp and answer on the third ring.

As I half-suspected, it’s Carlo: “Ben? Have you seen Dr. K? Dr. Thatcher said you wouldn’t be in but she didn’t say – and Dr. K’s not here, didn’t sleep here, he’s not answering the phone at his place and—”

It takes me a few seconds to regain my temper and not immediately dress him down for his indecisive loyalties. I mouth, “Carlo,” at Ray, who grins shamefacedly and leaves the bedroom.

“–he was with you yesterday, right?” Carlo’s still talking. “Do you know where he is?”

“Not his, ah, precise whereabouts,” I say quickly before Ray returns and I can no longer claim ignorance.

“We have to get him a damn cell phone,” Carlo says, frustration evident. “If he calls you will you tell him to call me?”

He sounds disproportionately worried, and in turn I worry at that for a moment, reality calling, until I realise that it’s quite possible that Ray has never taken a day off in all the time that Carlo has worked with him, barring the occasional snow day. “Certainly,” I tell him. Ray comes back into the room and holds up the bottle of lubricant triumphantly. My erection returns in the space of three heartbeats and I almost drop the telephone. Carlo is asking after Diefenbaker.

“He’s fine,” I say, utterly distracted by the sight of Ray sliding into bed. “I – I simply felt it prudent to – to keep an eye on him today. No, no, not at all. Thank you kindly.”

I drop the phone back into its cradle and roll over onto the bed, into Ray’s arms, then into, surprisingly, his mouth, sucking me in earnestly, determinedly.

Maintaining a tenuous grip on reality, I say, “Ray – Ray! You should – you need to call—”

“Not *now*,” he says thickly. “Later.”

“Ray—”

He sucks me in again, farther than before, harder than before, catching a rhythm astonishingly quickly: but then, he’s very observant about such things as causal relationships. He chokes a few times, stutters between his hand and his mouth once or twice, and moans around me more than a few times, an

astonishing feeling, not least because I infer from that reaction that he's enjoying this wholeheartedly and isn't motivated by mere reciprocation.

The phone rings again; he raises his head and stares at me blindly for a moment. He clambers over me with a muffled exclamation and, before I can react, unplugs it. "Later!" he growls at the phone, and pushes the base and the handset off the table to the floor with a loud and satisfying clatter, then turns back to me, settling in on top of me for a demanding, hungry kiss. I taste him eagerly – I have dreamed for too long of tasting his mouth, tasting him, and to taste my sex in his mouth is beyond even the wildest of those dreams.

"This is so *cool*," he mumbles, licking my jaw between his words, shuddering then as I lick him too. "This is so fun, I want to – I want to – I want to taste you and feel you and – and turn you inside out, Fraser–"

"You already have," I say, my voice harsh with emotion I'm still – idiotically – suppressing. I breathe deeply, relax my throat, say it again, say it louder: "You already have." My voice wavers slightly on the second syllable but he just grins and hugs me hard.

"Me too," he says, and his voice drops, and his eyes, as shyness returns momentarily. "I'm inside out and – and it's so – it's so much, I feel so – so much, I'm scared and I'm – and everything is just – it's just so much more, the oatmeal even tasted new, different – and it's hard to–" he looks at me again, eagerness returning to his voice, to his face, "–hard to believe it's all, um, brain chemistry, isn't it, it doesn't feel that way, but, well, of course it wouldn't because that's how it works, the perceptions are – are – they're the reality, so which is really the–"

I burst out laughing; so does he. "Turn it off," he mutters wryly. "Shut up, Kowalski."

"Never," I say, capturing his mouth, twisted in self-deprecation, for a kiss, rolling him so we are on our sides. "Please, never shut up."

"God," he says, blushing furiously. "Don't–" The remainder of his protest dies in my mouth; I want to say to him, I want to shout to the heavens, I love you I love you I love you, I love *all* of you but these words are too new, too sudden, too intense for even this man, now, as unused to the concept – that he is lovable and desirable – as he is.

He moans softly and pushes his burgeoning erection against mine, interlocking our legs, trying to pull me closer. One hand skims down my rib cage, down my waist, past my hips, and then he hesitates and continues lower, pulling me against him, still tentatively, his fingers moving over my rear to cup me, pull me closer still... and then, very gently, one finger dips momentarily into the crevice there.

He's blushing again when I look at him in wonder and shock combined. I take a deep breath – my wits have gone so far afield wool-gathering that even a border collie would have trouble shepherding them into any semblance of order. Another breath. "Ray." I lean in to kiss him firmly, attempting to reassure him, feeling for the lubricant. "We can – you don't have to–" I find the bottle, pop the cap open again, one handed. "You don't have to do that. All you need is this."

“But on the, uh, on the web, they said you – they said lube, fingers,” he objects, astonishingly, blushing anew but sounding very determined. “I thought–”

I don’t know whether to laugh, cry, or just roll over. “Ah. I – I – I don’t need that, that’s all, Ray – I’m accustomed to–”

“Oh my God,” he says, in a low and amazed voice. “Oh, God, you – I never thought – I never thought you – you do that to – you do that? I never never thought – shit, Fraser!” He sounds honestly alarmed, and I panic for two seconds before I realise his alarm is entirely physical distress and not at all emotional.

“Grab–” I position his hand, quickly, fumbling, awkward, not quite the same angle as doing it to myself – “–here, squeeze. Hard. It hurts slightly–”

He rolls onto his back, eyes shut tightly, fingers squeezing almost too hard beneath my fingers, harder than I would. He gasps and then pants a couple of breaths, opens his eyes and looks at me, and, stunningly, smiles, happy, innocent. “Oh man. Wow. Thanks. That’s – that’s the secret handjob?”

“In your case, it would appear so.” I smile back, wholly relieved, no longer trying to encompass the miracle that is Ray in my bed – I’m well beyond reason now.

“Great. That’s so cool.” He exhales hard, sighs, and rolls onto his side again, pulling me against him. “Where were we?”

I laugh, beyond shock now, beyond fear.

He laughs too. “So you – you do that – to yourself?” He doesn’t wait for an answer; my blush is confirmation enough. “I never thought of that, I never – can I try? Can I feel you there? I want to – even if you – if you don’t want me to, I mean–”

“Please,” I say, and my voice is past growl.

“I don’t know why – why I never–” he drips lubricant onto two fingers, no, I should have known he would never neglect necessary research, “–thought of it, it’s – what do I do now? like this? – the prostate is there, it feels so good on the outside, I just – I can see, it makes sense now–” He breaks off, echoing my gasp as one finger slips inside me.

“Two is... two is easier,” I croak, barely coherent. “Carpal – carpal strain, metatarsal angles–”

“Got it,” he says seriously, and I feel the knuckle of his second finger as he tries to slide it in without pulling out the finger already inside. A couple of twists and he figures it out, and I pass into mindlessness as he finds my prostate within seconds.

I open eyes I don’t remember closing to see him looking at me, still very serious. I manage a grin and then moan loudly, startling us both, as his fingers find a new and even more exciting configuration.

“God, I wondered how – how you would look,” he says hoarsely. “All of you. Can you come this way?”

“Very possibly,” I say through gritted teeth, trying desperately to hang on.

“Do you want to come?” he asks earnestly, no artifice, and my heart leaps.

“Yes – no – not yet,” I say, and he doesn’t laugh, simply nods, seriously.

“Yeah,” he says then, almost sympathetically. “Can I – can you move, um, on your stomach, so – so I can do this better?”

I feel my back arch; feel the rush begin; and then, shockingly, there is a hand on my penis, squeezing hard, lesson well learned.

“Not yet, huh?” he says after I gasp my thanks. “Ha. Not yet.”

Beyond words, I nod and roll onto my stomach, disengaging his fingers for a moment. He readjusts quickly, settling between my legs, spread wide, as he pushes both fingers in again, smoothly and quickly. I begin to move with his rhythm against the sheets, unaware I’m doing so until he halts and tugs at me.

“You’ll come that way,” he says breathlessly, and I realise he too is almost beyond rational thought, but not quite. “C’mon, Fraser, can you–”

He tugs again and I come with him this time, up on my hands and knees, removing my penis from the seductive stimulus of sheets.

“So good,” he whispers. “It’s all so good...”

A few more strokes and I feel him trembling with me, and know suddenly that he is waiting, that he won’t simply take... “Ray.”

“Yeah?” His voice is trembling too.

“Fuck me.”

“Oh, God, please,” he says, and swallows so hard I can hear it in the breathless moments that precede his entry, his fingers barely withdrawn before being replaced by the much thicker, blunter length of him.

He slides in, almost too quickly, and then leans forward, resting his forehead on my back, wrapping his arms around my waist, gasping for breath.

“You want to come?” he says against my skin. “God, I want to come.”

“Not yet,” I whisper. He snickers, and the sound and the motion ripple from his body to mine.

“Not yet,” he agrees, and takes another deep breath. We stay that way for a few moments, motionless. I can feel the throb of the pulse in his penis; I can feel my body synchronising until my penis is throbbing in concert with his.

“Okay,” he says, and begins to pull back. “I think... I think I can do this...”

I push with him and, startled but game, he holds onto me, pulling me up so I’m kneeling in front of him, still joined, able to feel even more and now he feels impossibly larger.

“Oh yeah,” he repeats, and his voice cracks. “I can – I can do this.”

“Yeah,” I echo. “Do it, Ray. Fuck me.”

A wordless sound and he licks my shoulder and then begins to move, slowly, far too slowly, exquisite torture. I moan and throw my head back; he licks my shoulder again, then begins to suck the skin there in rhythm with his too-slow thrusts. I catch his rhythm and begin to press it, pushing against him, speeding us up. He pulls me closer, his right hand on my chest, my nipple hard beneath his warm palm, his left hand moving to my groin unerringly, and I feel first his breath and then his warm tongue on my earlobe. The triple sensations of his penis rocking inside me, his hand stroking me, his tongue suckling... everything is Ray and everything is me, as if we’re one... I pull the hand on my chest up to my mouth and suck his fingers in, one by one. He releases my ear to

groan and strokes faster, thrusts harder, and then takes my earlobe back into his mouth and sucks, then bites.

Release approaches, blessed, finally finally finally... I cannot hold my head up and I let it fall back on Ray's shoulder, pulling his hand from my mouth, covering it with my own, letting him hold me up, arms warm and strong around me, safe here, safe to finally... finally let it go, let it go, let it all go... Ray's chanting the words in my ear, "Let it go, oh God, come on, let it go..." As the first pulse hits, I squeeze my eyes shut so tightly I see red and yellow and white points of light. "Oh God... oh *wow*," Ray says fervently, his muscles tense, his hand stroking me in an abbreviated motion now. "Oh, fuck..." He jerks hard within me, setting off a few more spasms, leaving me gasping for breath, a dead weight in his arms as I try to regain my breath, my bearings. "That was so cool," he says breathlessly. "That was so fucking *cool*—" he thrusts hard on the word 'cool' and groans, "—so fucking cool so fucking — fucking — oh *fuck*, Fraser—"

I've never heard the word out of his mouth, never dreamed I would, and it spurs me to renewed energy, driving me backwards, matching him again, thrust for thrust, trying to repay some of the ecstasy with which he just gifted me. He's pushing harder, faster, still gasping, lost to the world, lost to all sensation except that centred in his groin. I can feel it in him almost as if I am him, the tightening, the lift of his scrotum, the muscles of his stomach rippling; I push backwards, harder too, and feel his thighs tremble, the weight of me too awkward now for what he wants, what he needs.

I summon strength from somewhere, push back slightly for leverage and fall forward onto my hands, pulling him with me. He stutters, stumbles, catches himself, braces his hands on my hips and with a loud, wordless moan begins to drive hard again, harder than before, better now, and I move with him again, back into that odd sensation that I am somehow in him and can feel what he feels, so exquisitely attuned I think I feel him go over the edge almost before he gasps my name and then stills, buried deep, and then, finally, surges inside me, over and over, filling me.

"So cool," he repeats after a few moments. "I never — never saw it like that, you know — I think — I bet it went two feet, Fraser."

The only response that seems to require is a chuckle, so I oblige.

He chuckles too, then kisses the back of my neck. "So cool," he says a third time. "Some time — would you — could you—"

"Anything," I say, my eyes closed, smiling at nothing and everything.

"Would you do — do it, let me — let me watch?" He's slightly tensed: he's embarrassed but determined, despite my previous snappishness he's brave enough to try again, and I bite back the incredibly sentimental words that rise, unbidden, to my lips.

"Anything," I say instead. "As long as there are no rulers involved."

He laughs delightedly and says, demurely, "I'm good at eyeballing."

"Sloppy scientist."

He laughs again. "Oh yeah," he says, and kisses the back of my neck again before letting his head fall against mine, his body relaxing.

“So tell me,” he says, drowsily, hypnotically, after he softens to the point where, although neither of us has moved, he still slips out of me. I turn my head a little; he shifts across my back so that his head can rest near mine on the pillow, still half atop me, one arm and one leg draped over me.

“Anything,” I whisper.

He grins sleepily, his eyes closed. “Everything,” he says, and it’s part plea, part command. “Everything. Tell me – tell me about – tell me the fun dramatic way, tell me about him. How – who–”

Ancient history, in so many ways. “What do you–”

“Everything,” he repeats firmly. “How old were you? What – what did you look like?”

“Twenty-two. Twenty-three that year. And much the same as I do now, I imagine, although in the course of my first few months there, I became so busy that I reached up one day and realised my hair had gotten somewhat long.”

“Oh, God!” he says, opening his eyes, looking amazed, delighted, putting one hand up to my hair.

“My father would have been appalled, but my girlfriend shrugged and lent me a ponytail holder. I left it that way for years. I even tried to grow a beard but I decided fairly soon that it looked as if I had been attacked by a roll of duct tape¹⁵.”

He snickers and threads his fingers in my hair. “You have any pictures?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Let your hair get long again, Fraser, can – will you? I want, wow, I want to see that.”

“Nonsense, Ray, it would look ridiculous with suits.”

“Nonsense, Fraser, quit wearing the suits. You look – they look great on you but – but–” he blushes but continues, “in – in those sweaters, and the flannel shirts, you look – they look – you look... hot.”

The simple word goes straight to my heart; I pull him close for a lingering kiss.

“Will you?” he breathes. “You said...”

We grin somewhat foolishly at one another. “So I did.”

“Good,” he says, satisfaction evident. “So tell me – tell me about him? The – your first guy? You had a girlfriend?”

“I usually did,” I say, a somewhat embarrassing admission.

“Camouflage?”

“Well, no. Not consciously, not then. Mostly it was protection. I – I told myself, at Cornell, that I had no time for a sexual relationship, and I dated, desultorily, a succession of earnest science majors. At Columbia, I had, theoretically, even less time; but there was another graduate student in the department. She was shy, and serious, and intelligent. Too shy to, ah, pressure me; but her existence, and presence, usually sufficed to protect me from – well – from – you know, American women can be very aggressive in matters of the bed, Ray.”

¹⁵ Kellie Matthews. Email, Feb 2001.

“Oh.” He looks quite surprised; I’m not explaining it well. “You mean it was – it was to protect your – um, your–”

“Ah, chastity, as it were?”

He snickers again. “I gotta say, Fraser, that’s, um, that whole, uh, concept is highly overrated.”

“I heartily concur.”

“So – did you – did you like her?”

“As a person, certainly.”

“Okay. So. You’re there, you got a girlfriend – fast – so you wouldn’t get, uh, what does Carlo say? Tripped and beaten to the ground in Central Park, right? Then what?”

Many things, too many things, pieces falling into place, finally, when I was in a different place, when I was no longer required to be who I had been, when those furtive longings began to see the light of consciousness. The guilt was strong, of course; the confusion stronger. Women, always a concern, continued to be; but no longer sheltered by a reputation and a circle of friends, men became a concern as well.

“Fun dramatic way,” he prompts quietly. “Was it really fun?”

Propelled into memories...

“We met in the GSAS office when both of us were waiting to see the financial aid officer. Coincidentally we’d each received the same letter of appointment – the wrong one, of course–” Ray rolls his eyes knowingly – “and even more coincidentally, we were both Canadian. He knew a bar that carried Molson’s Ale just across Amsterdam Avenue. We ended up talking most of the afternoon. He’d been in New York a while – he was about a year from graduation. He knew... he knew everything: where to get Canadian cigarettes, for instance, and a friend of a friend who had a very reasonable sub-sub-let coming open... and he knew... he knew poutine, and he missed it... and the wide open spaces...”

“Yeah,” Ray says softly.

“Real winter,” I say, feeling tired and nostalgic all at once. “You Yanks have no idea.”

Ray snickers again and nestles – no other word for it – against me. “Was he from the – the Territories?”

“No, those odds would be little short of astronomical. He was from Montreal. In fact...” I don’t try to suppress the laugh that arises from the memory, “when he found out I was from Inuvik he was impressed. The serious boonies, he said, not the Americans-on-holiday boonies so popular in his province.”

“Tuktoyaktuk,” Ray says dreamily. “I love that.”

“Indeed. You’re easily amused. At any rate, he impressed me – surprised me, in fact – by asking me if I spoke Inuktitut. In Inuktitut.”

“Wow. Oh, cool. Do you?”

“Enough to get by.”

“Wow. How’d he know it? He wasn’t – was he in biology? Chemistry?”

“No, oh no. No, he’d done his bac in linguistics at McGill.”

“So you found a friend. Cool.”

“Yes. Well. It was an enjoyable afternoon, though it left both of us homesick, I think, because a few days later he tracked me down through the department office and dragged me out for a hike, a quest for Canadian cigarettes – I’m afraid my smoking habit dates from then – and then more beer.”

“Nice to be off the hockey team, huh?”

“Halcyon, in some ways. He eventually found the lab and became somewhat of a fixture there, even coaxing Jin, my girlfriend, to have the occasional beer with us. I don’t know what the hell he was doing: theoretically finishing his dissertation. However, he always claimed he wrote better when he was walking.”

“Absolutely,” Ray says, nodding enthusiastically against my shoulder. “I like this guy. What – what was his name?”

“Steve.” I suddenly crave a cigarette: nostalgia and nicotine are a powerful combination.

I fall silent for a few moments, recalled to myself only when Ray nudges me. “Ah. Yes. Where was I?”

“Drinking with Steve.”

“Yes. So. One afternoon he showed up with tickets in hand: the Holly Cole Trio was playing in the village. Jin and I had plans, but she insisted I go; I compromised by promising to stop by the party after we were finished. And I did. And they invited Steve, of course. And we ended up talking again, far into the night. Jin left at some point, and I regret to say I didn’t even notice. We left too, when our hosts decided they’d had enough, and went to our usual place and...”

“Yeah...” Ray says, an interrogative note in his voice.

I clear my throat. “Certain things... fell into place. In... in, ah, my head.”

“What’d you do?” he asks, his eyes wide.

“I... I had another beer.”

Ray pokes me in the ribs. “Quit stalling.”

“All right. I, ah, I said to him, ‘*Angirraqsiqpunga*.’ And he looked at me for a long time. And I thought perhaps I had... but then he leaned over and asked, ‘*Kissipi*?’ And he was very quiet... and so was I... but we were probably the only two people among eight million who understood Inuktitut.”

“What’s that mean?” Ray says. “Say it again.”

I repeat it. “I told him I wanted to go home. And he said, ‘Alone?’”

“Wow.” Ray’s eyes are shining. “And you said no?”

“*Akka*, yes. Which means ‘no.’”

“*Akka*,” Ray repeats, rolling the word off his tongue. “*Akka*. Cool. What’d he say? Were you scared?”

“Terrified. But then he said ‘Thank you.’”

“Say it, say that – did he say it in Inuktitut? I want to hear it.”

“*Qujannamiik*.”¹⁶

¹⁶ Otsoko Guretxea is entirely responsible for the preceding conversation, as if you couldn’t have guessed...

Ray repeats it, tongue tripping over unfamiliar syllables. He tries again; then says, quietly, after a few heartbeats, “That was... nice. Was it... was he nice?”

“Very.”

“Is he the guy you, um, you spent all weekend in bed with?”

“More than once, yes.”

“What happened? What happened then?”

“He left New York when he finished his doctorate; I stayed, of course.”

“No more girlfriends?”

“No.”

“Did you miss him?”

Unbearably, I want to say: that was the first intimation I had that my nature was somewhat... possessive. “Yes.”

“You ever see him again?”

“Ah, no. He did various postdocs. We kept making plans to meet for a weekend but something always interfered.”

“Wow. Yeah, that – I can see where that was, um, fun. Scary too, huh?”

“Yes, to both.”

“I’m – I get that,” he says, shy again. I coax his head up so he’s forced to meet my eyes.

“Your turn,” I say gently. “Tell me. Everything.”

“I got nothing to tell,” he says, grinning, moving his head to one side. “Nothing. I’m Barney Boring, Frase.”

“Tell me,” I say again, quieter this time. “Tell me about you.”

The grin leaves his face, chased away by shadows: an effective mask, that cockiness, but I’m learning now to recognise it. “Really, um, not much, Fraser. No – no Inuktitut, not even a Lisa Loupner. Just – just me. And...”

“I’d like to know, all the same.”

He tells me, then, in halting sentences, his face buried firmly in my neck: his first wet dream, age thirteen – “I knew – I mean, I’d read enough by then – but man, it still scared me... and then I wanted to know what it was like when I – when I was awake...” – and lonely years at university – “It felt so good to – to get there, to be with people – people who understood, um, books, people who read, um, more than Reader’s Digest Condensed Books – but I was – I was scared, never – the only women I knew were, um, nuns and aunts and the little girl down the street who ran after me and teased me – glasses – I didn’t know how to – to talk to – so-” – and then, inevitably, Stella.

“She looked at me. Looked right at me. Talked to me – she made it easy, I didn’t have to – I mean, she talked to me and then I could – I could talk back. Sometimes she asked me stuff about – about me. She... she met my mom once. Mom... Mom liked her. And she knew – she could do stuff in the lab, she was – well, she wasn’t like – but she was-” He stumbles, tense, conflicting loyalties. I hug him hard, rock him slightly.

“Effective,” I say in a quiet voice. “Efficient?”

“Effective, that’s – yeah. Yeah, she was – she was kind of – kind of like you, not so organised, not, um, funny... but at least... but she liked me. You

know? And I – I was – I thought – I guess I wasn't very subtle... she – finally she, uh, she asked me out. A date. Wow. I was – I was freaked. And – a few days later she kissed me. I was – I don't know what she – how she – but... wow. I thought – I started thinking... We – dated more. She was... she was everything. To me. And sometimes she'd get angry, I – I told you. That was... that was... um... I never knew if – where I stood, never knew if it was the end when that happened, how to make it better and then I'd – I'd – she'd – we'd make it up, she'd forgive me and, um..."

I swallow a lump in my throat, hug him again, fiercely, wishing, for the ten thousandth time, that I could curb my own tongue with him.

He hugs back and his voice is stronger. "And now I know – I know what real is," he says, almost quietly. "You're so real. And we can talk... and we can fight and you come back and I come back and it was – it's the same as it was before, you like me and I can – I know that, I can count on – I can – you don't play games. I – you know – you don't know what... how that makes me – makes me feel, Fraser."

"I know," I whisper. "I feel it too."

"You can't," he says. "C-can't, can't possibly... I thought, when she – when she died... I thought I'd never feel – never find – and then you came and you showed me – you showed me all... all this..." He swallows hard and says, in a very small voice, "I – I – I keep waiting to – to w-wake up."

I turn my head, try to pull his face up to mine. He fights me; I kiss his cheekbone and taste salt and damp.

"So do I," I say against that angular bone, and then I kiss his skin and then lick him, warm, careful, attentive, as thorough as I can be at such an awkward angle. He chokes and bats at me, and then sits up, suddenly deadly serious.

"And if – if she was killed – what do we do, Fraser?"

I sit up too, pull the blankets up to us, wrap one around him, another around me, and pull him back to lean against the headboard with me. He comes willingly and holds onto my arms, wrapped tightly around him.

"We find out," I say slowly. "We find out and we bring her killer to justice, Ray."

"What about you?" he says harshly. "What if they – what if – if they try to kill you?" A shudder wracks him. "Or... or Dief?"

"Even the most cunning criminal makes mistakes, Ray, leaves clues. My father could track a man across bare ice, or so they said."

"It was years ago–"

"It goes back to Victoria, we know that, Ray."

"We think that, Fraser, we have no evidence that she would... that she'd really..."

"She said – she said to me, Ray, that..." I screw my eyes shut, try to replay her voice in my head, the last thing I want to do right now, and the first thing, because reassuring Ray is paramount.

"What?" he says, tense again, twisting to look at me.

"Just a moment, Ray, I'm trying to remember what exactly it was that she said... She said you and Stella were together quite some time; that she

taught your classes for you. She did everything for you and you didn't move a pencil without asking her permission. She thought she had influence. And now she's dead."

"God, Fraser," he says, his hands clenching on my arms. "That's – I thought – what if she did kill her? And – and, oh God, then Dief and then – then you–"

"Calm down, Ray," I say, injecting a note from my father's repertoire into my voice, and he quiets immediately. "What did you say to me earlier? We need to plan, not panic."

"She – she threatened you, Fraser," he says, the very neutrality of his voice indicating pain he doesn't want to show. "I – she made you leave, she – I–"

"I was panicking, Ray," I say simply. "I was worried and frightened and... and I wasn't thinking. A great deal has changed in the past forty-eight hours." I wince inwardly: I have certainly mastered the fine art of understatement. But he only nods and even relaxes against me slightly. "The only way to nullify her threat is to expose her. If we expose her first – if we find the evidence we need first – then she can't carry out any of her threats, she can't hurt you any more, she can't hurt..."

"Mark," Ray says softly, when my sentence remains unfinished. "It's okay, Fraser. We have to – to protect him too."

I clear my throat. "Thank – thank you. Therefore, a plan would seem to be our immediate priority."

"How do we find out how she killed someone?"

"We have a link to her, Ray," I say slowly.

"No. Oh, no."

"Carlo. We could – we could tell him–"

"No! We're not – we're not going to use him, he didn't ask for this, Fraser, no. Please, no."

"Ray, it's simply feeding him false information, which you've been doing all along–"

"No, Fraser. No. This isn't – this is life and death, this isn't the same... If – if – only if we tell him. Only if we tell him, only if we tell him what we're doing and he – and he agrees to work with us. Only if he knows, Fraser. We're not going to use him, not any more, not if – not after Stella..."

"If we tell him and he tells her we know then we lose our advantage–"

"Then we don't tell him and we don't use him," Ray says in a voice that brooks no argument.

My mind is racing: if we tell him and he tells her we know and we watch her, she might panic, will quite probably panic – she has grossly underestimated Ray for, literally, years; and yet she thinks she knows him better than anyone. She's very likely to make a mistake or four...

"All right. If we take him into our confidence and he tells her we know, Ray, then she may panic. Either way, I think you're right. We could try to enlist his help and see what he chooses to do – and then what she chooses to do."

He twists to look at me, clearly surprised, and I'm not sure why. "Um... yeah. She might – she might panic. Not plan. I didn't think of that. But what if she tries to hurt Carlo?"

"We can go to the police as well. We should. We will. And of course we need to make him aware of the threat she poses, whether or not he agrees to help us try to stop her."

"Oh God damn it all to hell!" he shouts and launches himself off the bed, a maelstrom of arms, legs, and sheets. I'm too bewildered to respond for a few moments; he barks at me, sharply: "Get dressed, damn it, she's listening to every word we say, she's bugged my apartment, she's probably bugged my car, your car – the only safe place is the lab–"

I feel panic, followed swiftly by utter sickness and heartfelt anger: she heard us, invaded this, our life, our love, everything... she heard Ray as no one else has, Ray with his guard down, Ray in all his infinite complexities... and then I remember, too, his odd behaviour the night of the blizzard, his curiosity about cell phones and radio waves...

I take a deep breath, sort the tumbling, spinning thoughts in my head, one after the other, like building blocks. "Ray. Ray!"

"What?" He pauses, one sock on, pulling on the other, balancing on one leg.

"I don't think so," I say carefully, calmly. "I don't think so. Think, Ray. Don't react. Carlo called me. Looking for you." Even as I say the words I feel the overwhelming relief: this is ours, remains ours, ours alone, thank God: I had not thought it possible that I would want to rip out someone's throat simply for listening to Ray in his vulnerability.

"What?"

"Carlo called. Looking for you. If you are right about this, about the bugs – and I'm sure you are, Ray – think about it. I didn't go in with you last night when you went in – she didn't know that you were, necessarily, with me. Your car may not be bugged either. Mine, perhaps; but you rarely use yours. If she called Carlo this morning and he told her you weren't at the lab..."

"Then she told him to call you," he says slowly, coming back over to the bed where I am still sitting with one foot on the floor and one foot on the bed. "See if I was here – she didn't know where I was going, thought I was probably going back to the lab and then I wasn't there this morning. Maybe you're right."

"I think I am." I lean down and pick up the telephone and plug it back in, listen to the dial tone. "Voice mail."

He sits next to me, wearing nothing but socks, as I dial in to retrieve the messages.

"Three," I say, and skip ahead to the third. The computer voice informs me the last message was left fifteen minutes ago; I listen only long enough to hear Carlo's voice come on, asking roughly if I haven't seen Ray yet, and then I hang up.

"She doesn't know," I say. "It's all right. She didn't hear anything." I nod at his feet. "I see you're practising."

It was the right thing to say: he stares at his feet, then at me, puzzled, and then bursts into laughter, tinged with the near-hysteria of relief. I slide off the bed and strip them off, then get to my feet and hold out my hand.

“Let’s start with a shower. And then coffee and a plan.”