

## **Concepts 2: Cold-Hearted Concept**

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## Chapter One

In Beck's opinion, the only thing worse than investigating the homicide of an unidentified victim was working it with the guy who had dumped him last summer.

The dumping part didn't matter; Beck had gotten over that long ago. What did matter was deeply closeted Van's attitude about his upcoming marriage—to a woman. In a matter of weeks he'd say *I do*, and the closer the nuptials got, the surlier Van became. On top of that, Van seemed determined to have one last man-on-man fling, and his wandering eye had settled on Beck.

Major denial and a major pain in the ass. And Beck was stuck collaborating with him on a case.

"So..." Van leaned toward Beck across their facing desks in Denver's robbery/homicide department.

*Here we go. "So?"*

"It's getting late. Maybe we could break for dinner and then work on the case some more at my place. Alone."

*What a complete ass. Van knew about Beck's relationship with Zach, knew it was serious, and knew Beck was aware of Van's engagement to Vice Detective Katie Coleman. None of that seemed to matter; the guy's dick appeared to be in charge these days, and it was flying the rainbow flag. Come one, come all, Van needs a good hard man.*

Work had become an exercise in endurance. The week had passed with glacial slowness. Thirty minutes to go; five o'clock couldn't arrive fast enough. Thank God there was a moratorium on overtime.

Beck kept his expression neutral. "I have plans for this evening. And I'd prefer to work on the case here."

“A drink, then?” Van’s attention wandered to Beck’s mouth.

Did the guy not listen? “No.”

Despite Van’s straight-guy charade, he let the innuendos flow thick and fast every time they were alone, which was too often lately. It’d be laughable if it weren’t so slimy.

“You sure? We could do whatever you want.”

*Count to ten...*

“No. Thanks. I need to head home right after work.” Beck waved a hand at the missing-persons folders. “Let’s get through these and then work up an interview list.”

“From a pile of bones? Good luck.”

Beck gritted his teeth. Twenty-five minutes until he could leave. The question was whether he’d strangle Van before then.

Two weeks ago, a hiker had shown up with a bone that turned out to a human humerus. A week later another man brought in a tibia, stating his dog had retrieved it on a walk through the woods. The shaft of each discovery bore multiple marks. Two bones constituted a problem to the higher-ups, and Beck had found himself assigned a homicide case consisting of a tibia and a humerus.

Combing the area had yielded nothing: no more bones, no bodies. Beck had concluded nothing would develop, but he’d started a murder book anyway. The file was exceptionally thin.

In the meantime, Van had caught a case, a skeletonized body. The clothing had suffered from exposure to the elements. Animals had scattered the bones, and they’d discovered a pair of eyeglasses nearby—with an unidentified fingerprint. Scouring the woods with dogs and ground-penetrating radar came up empty.

Then the medical examiner had called on Monday to report he was confident Beck’s bones went with Van’s skeleton. Sara Jane Fisk, their new captain, had combined the cases, assigning Beck to toil alongside Van. And voilà. Working as a team for the past five...endless...days.

Voice low and suggestive, Van said, "Why don't we wait until we get the report back on the glasses? It might help narrow it down. In the meantime we could...relax."

Beck stared. What had he done to offend the homicide gods enough to get saddled with Van? "We can't wait to see if an optometrist calls us with an ID." The faster they cleared the case, the sooner Beck would be free of Van's seduction attempts. Beck tapped a stack of papers. "We've got enough information to cull cases from missing persons."

"We don't know anything—"

"We've got Elmo's report."

Elmo was Elmo Quick, the chief medical examiner. Beck and Van had spent part of Monday with him, getting briefed about their skeletonized victim and the distinct lack of evidence.

"There are too many possibilities." Van's gaze trailed down Beck's chest.

"Hey." Beck divided the files on his desk and pushed a stack across to Van. "Let's work on them separately—it'll go faster."

"Suit yourself." Van opened the top folder and turned toward his computer.

*About time.* Good thing Beck had a relaxing weekend planned with Zach. Otherwise Van might be on the receiving end of a foot to the ass.

Unfortunately, there were plenty of missing-persons statements for young females over the past year. With the ME's report, they could eliminate anyone from the most recent four months, but there were still too many. Of those, the ones requiring glasses or contacts might be the best possibilities, but there was no guarantee the glasses belonged to the victim.

The weather hadn't been kind to the clothing. Elmo had determined she'd worn jeans, a cotton sweater, and some sort of silk scarf—nothing too remarkable there. A lot of the missing girls had on similar items when last seen.

Beck glanced up and caught Van studying him. Frowning, Beck turned his attention to another pile of printouts littering his desk. If Van didn't watch out, someone would notice him noticing Beck, and Van would give away his hidden proclivities.

Beck was out of the proverbial closet. He and Zach had gotten together while working the Olivetti murders last fall, and they had segued into a long-distance situation. When their relationship moved into deeper waters, Zach had insisted Beck live life in the open. It hadn't been easy, and it hadn't been all at once, but he'd managed. By Christmas, everyone who mattered knew. To Beck's great surprise, the entire robbery/homicide division had taken it in stride, carrying on with business as usual. Van had ignored the declaration—and Beck—until this case threw them together.

On the other side of the bull pen, Richfield's dark eyes met Beck's. The rookie detective blushed and looked away. Was he a closet case? Richfield had unruly carrot-colored hair and freckles and possessed no fashion sense. Tall and whip thin, he tripped over his feet as well as his tongue around the more experienced detectives in robbery/homicide.

Some of the cops called him "Glitchfield" due to the guy's ineptitude at scenes. Smart when it came to books but not so much when it came to the street. The rumor mill claimed Richfield had influential family connections, but no one seemed to know what they were.

So far, they'd all taken turns showing him the ropes, but eventually he'd be partnered with someone for a year. SJ hadn't made the assignment yet.

The door to the captain's office opened, and the boss stepped halfway out. Captain Sara Jane "SJ" Fisk's rust-colored hair fell below her shoulders. She wore stylish glasses and minimal makeup. Like the men in the division, she sported a gun, a badge, and dark dress pants, but that was where the similarity ended. None of the guys paired their slacks with a lavender silk blouse and heels.

In a serene tone of voice, she said, "Beck, Van, can you step in here for a minute?"

No bellowing of *Stryker and Gates, get in here*, like McManus would have done. Nope, first names and a respectful tone.

Beck pushed away from his desk and headed for the glass cubicle. Since Captain McManus's heart attack and retirement two months ago, things had been...different. Fisk wasn't abrasive, but she wasn't soft. More intuitive, less political, and blind to personal differences—like male versus female or straight versus gay. "*We're all cops,*" she'd told the assembled detectives on her first day. "*All on the same team.*"

Beck let Van enter first and then stepped in and closed the door. The room smelled faintly of cinnamon and vanilla. Gone were the dark paint and framed political photographs that had characterized McManus's lair. The light-colored walls and framed Colorado landscapes gave the office a more optimistic feel.

"Have a seat, Detectives." Captain Fisk settled at her desk. On one corner was a picture of her with two young boys in soccer uniforms. There was no Mr. Fisk in the picture. Word was SJ had skipped marriage and gone straight to motherhood.

Beck took a chair. Van did likewise.

"Okay, gentlemen," SJ said. "Where are you on the skeleton?"

"The ME puts her at somewhere between fourteen and eighteen years old," Beck offered. "She probably died months ago, maybe around Christmastime."

"Cause of death was possibly manual strangulation, but the hyoid bone was intact," Van said. "There was nothing left of the soft tissues to know for sure. There were marks on multiple bones consistent with animal activity."

SJ steepled her fingers. "Any matches with missing persons?"

"We have too many." Van straightened the crease on his pants. "Runaways, alleged parental abductions, a few where foul play was suspected but nothing proven."

Beck added, "It's possible the clothes might help. The best bet might be the prescription glasses found with the body. Elmo says the lenses are for someone who's farsighted, which isn't as common as nearsightedness in kids."

Pushing up her own glasses, SJ asked, "Anything on the fingerprint?"

"No match in AFIS," Beck said. "If we can get a lead on a suspect, we can compare. So far, nothing has panned out. No suspects. The hiker, the dog owner, and the woman who found the skeleton all cleared. We need to identify the girl and go from there."

"Mmm." SJ said slowly, "ID her and then determine suspects?"

"Yes." Beck had learned that approach from Zach. It worked. He'd seen it in action.

SJ moved on. "Dental records?"

"Braces," Van said. "If we have a good candidate for the victim's ID, it might help. Otherwise, no. There are over two hundred orthodontists in the Denver area. Elmo didn't turn up evidence of any old fractures or medical appliances, so medical history is probably out as a possible lead."

"DNA?"

Beck shook his head. "Still waiting on DNA from the clothes and the bones. It could help identify her and/or the one who killed her."

"Okay." SJ looked at papers on her desk. "Keep me in the loop."

"Yes, ma'am." Beck stood and led the way out of the office.

Van brushed past him. "New aftershave?"

*Will it never end?* Five more minutes and Van was history until Monday.

Five more minutes.

\* \* \* \*

Beck was going to kill him.

It wasn't like Zach *wanted* to cancel their meet-up. Again. He'd much rather be with Beck. Murder-scene survey or making love? No contest. But it didn't matter that Zach wanted no part of another case, or that he'd promised for the past three weekends

to be in Denver. Zach's FBI profiling unit was based in Minneapolis, and it wasn't a nine-to-five gig. It was too damn bad there was no BSU in Denver. If there were, he'd transfer there in a heartbeat.

The open case file on his screen waited with blinking cursor. Call Beck now or complete the report?

Beck had to understand that disengaging from the FBI wasn't as simple as handing in a letter of resignation—not when they'd invested time and money to turn Zach into the best profiler in his unit. Cases sometimes remained open and required further attention. It was an ugly fact of Zach's soon-to-be-former career.

What had started out as “a few more weeks” last December had progressed to months. He'd been working on an exit for the past three of those and kept getting sucked back.

Spears of late-afternoon sunlight poked through the blinds, bisecting the shadows on Zach's desk and across the floor. He took a sip of coffee and grimaced. Tepid.

Zach picked up his phone, set it down. It'd be better to finish up and then call in private.

Across the office, Ruskin muttered something under his breath. Like Zach, the other agent sat at his computer, working on a narrative summary.

Everyone else had managed to escape for the weekend, including Director Sands, head of the FBI's Minneapolis unit, who had given Zach a jaunty wave on his way out the door. Despite looking like Steve Martin, Sands was anything but humorous. He considered the solving of serial murder to be a priority over having a personal life. Especially when it came to Zach's personal life.

That was one of the things about profiling Zach couldn't deal with any longer. Underneath it all, Zach wasn't career FBI; in less than two years Zach had had enough of work messing with his personal business. He wanted someone waiting when he got home, wanted a life outside profiling. His coworker, on the other hand...

Krell Ruskin went by his last name. Never Krell, never Rus, always and only Ruskin. At ten paces anyone would peg him as a Fed, with his military-short black hair, white dress shirt, and dark suit.

In contrast to Zach, the man hadn't tired of serial murder. After five years in behavioral, Ruskin still chased unknown subjects—unsubs—with gusto. Also, Ruskin had done a stint in the marines after graduating college, and then had risen through the ranks of the bureau instead of coming to it after a different career. Zach's background was forensic psychiatry.

Lastly, Ruskin had no one to go home to. Zach did. That was, he would if he were in Denver. As it was, "home" was currently the spartan Minneapolis apartment the FBI maintained for agents classified as "in transition."

Zach classified it as "in limbo."

Not a career profiler, but not out of it. Sands called it "discretionary reserve," code for "if a previous case heats up, your ass is mine." Every time Zach had had enough and planned to say adios, Sands found a way to convince him to stay.

And now Sands had once again managed to pull Zach into the vortex of a serial murder. Yep, Beck was going to be furious.

Working for Sands could inspire a sane man to lose it. Zach pulled off his glasses and rubbed his eyes.

A chair squeaked across the room. "You about ready to go?"

*Hah. If you only knew.* "Have to finish this file."

"You've been staring at that report for the past hour," Ruskin said. "Thought you were out of here this weekend. Denver?"

"Change of plans. A callout to a small town in Nebraska."

Ruskin grunted and rocked back in his seat. "Something on a case?"

Wasn't it always? Zach pushed away from his desk. "Yeah."

"I've got your files pretty well memorized at this point. Anything I can do?"

“No. Sands wanted me to take a look. But thanks.” Zach had discussed his open cases with Ruskin weeks ago, back when disengaging from the FBI had seemed plausible.

“Zach...” Ruskin looked away, then back. “I know you haven’t asked for advice, but as someone who’s been there, I’m going to give it to you anyway. There’s more to life than profiling. Sands won’t let you go without a fight, but you’re not legally obligated to stay. Every time you give in, it’s easier for him to hang on. And it seems to me you’ve got something important with Beck. Don’t throw it away.”

Despite knowing next to nothing about Ruskin’s personal life, Zach could hear the unspoken *like I did* loud and clear. “*Don’t throw it away.*” Was that what Zach was doing? Beck was frustrated—hell, they both were—but would it reach a point where Beck didn’t think the wait for Zach was worth it and would move on?

Maybe it was time to throw away his pride and get his ass to Colorado.

Right after this case.

## Chapter Two

Beck sat in Friday night rush-hour traffic on I-25, sandwiched between an out-of-state RV and a pair of motorcycles. Despite the rolled-up windows, the cosmopolitan aroma of exhaust and hot asphalt slithered into the car. The usual commuter traffic had swelled with the addition of individuals headed somewhere for the weekend: out to the bars in LoDo, off to a mountain retreat, a trip to another town.

Ordinarily the delay wasn't more than mildly frustrating, but tonight he wanted to get home. He had things to do.

It had been over a month since he'd seen Zach, and after three reschedules, they'd finally managed to set up a badly needed weekend together. Not that Beck had anything against the Twin Cities per se. Or the FBI. Or profiling. It was the logistics; all three meant literal distance. Phone calls instead of physical contact. Virtual visits.

Ever since he and Zach got together the past October during the Olivetti homicides case, Beck had been impatient to have Zach to himself. Seven months later, Olivetti was in jail and Zach was still based in Minneapolis, flying hither and yon working cases for the FBI. There had been too many aborted visits, too many interrupted phone calls. Nights alone hadn't bothered Beck before he'd had the luxury of someone to spend them with. Now he craved Zach's companionship.

The RV came to a halt and put on its right-hand blinker. *Really?* They were in the far-left lane. Three queues of vehicles sat between the camper and the highway exit a quarter of a mile down the road. Denverites weren't likely to take pity on the tourist and let him cross.

"Damn it." Beck hit the brakes as cars coasted by on his right. "Just ease over, guy."

The RV continued to sit like a metallic beached whale. Beck snapped on the radio to Denver's Eye in the Sky.

“—accident on southbound I-25 at Alameda blocking two lanes. Police and an ambulance at the site. Southbound Broadway off-ramp traffic is backed up into the I-25 exit lane.”

Beck hit Off. No point in getting mad. Zach's flight wasn't due until ten, and that left plenty of time to get things settled at home before leaving for the airport. Zach would walk off the train from the concourse, blond hair too long, golden scruff on his jaw. His blue eyes would light up, and he'd melt Beck with one of those heartbreaking smiles. They'd indulge in a one-armed bro hug in public, and a more intimate lovers' kiss in the car.

His lover...yeah. He liked the sound of that. Beck grinned.

They had a lot of making up to do. Beck had anticipated this reunion all week. In front of him, the motionless RV's taillights glowed like red eyes.

*Enough.* Beck flicked on the grill flashers, and the red-and-blue lights reflected off the RV's silver skin. He nosed his unmarked into the next lane and stopped, motioning the RV over. After a confused second, the driver steered the beast to the right and managed two lanes before forward-rolling traffic swept it away.

Okay. He'd leave the flashers on and exit the highway. Perk of the job, right? Home for a shave, a shower, and clean sheets on the bed for his lover.

\* \* \* \*

“I'm not going to make it this weekend,” Zach said.

The pleasant expectation Beck had built all week collapsed into a black hole of disappointment. *Not again, damn it.*

A month of relative solitary confinement—thirty days without a visit. Beck stalked through the warren of packed boxes cluttering the house. *Damn it to hell.* He struggled

to keep the accusatory tone out of his voice. "This is the fourth weekend in a row you've canceled."

"I know." Instead of an explanation, there was silence.

*This could only be... Aw, fuck.* "Don't tell me it's a callout case."

"ViCAP got a hit matching one of my assignments." The words were filled with apology.

Beck felt the need to punch something. He tried to avoid sounding pissed off. "Christ, they've got other profilers. Can't Ruskin handle it?"

Zach heaved a sigh. "Look, I'm sorry. I did the original profile, and Sands is insisting. It's just one more case."

*One more case.* The same refrain, fracturing their time together.

In the first four months of their relationship, Sands had canceled Zach's leave half a dozen times; a handful of stolen weekends was all they'd managed. Zach had discussed leaving with Sands but decided to continue with the FBI until his Colorado medical license came through—and it was taking forever. No letting Beck support him, uh-uh, no way. Damn bullheaded shrink.

In response to Zach's announced plans to leave the bureau, Director Sands had come up with a strategy Beck called "one more." One more profile. One more case. One more murder that no one but Zach could manage. "One more" had now added up to six.

It was always one...more...fucking...case.

It had worn on Beck. He was lonely, irritable, and horny, not to mention tired of making do with phone sex. Hell, they'd spent more time together on the notorious Olivetti murder case than they had since.

Beck held back the urge to spill that into the conversation. Instead he adopted a reasonable tone. "Why don't you say no? You quit. End of story. If you keep giving in, he'll never let you go."

"I'm obligated to work on any of my previous cases while I'm still with the bureau."

"That's a load right there. I know at least two of those cases had never involved you originally. He dragged you in to help and then used that 'previous case' bullshit to keep you tied up."

"I can't practice in Colorado—"

"Without a medical license. I know. Quit anyway and enjoy some time off. God knows you've got enough unused leave built up."

"We're shorthanded."

"What law enforcement agency isn't? They'll manage."

"Sands needs me."

*Jesus Christ.* For a psychiatrist, Zach sucked at self-examination. Couldn't he see the manipulation at work here? "Fuck him. *I need you.*"

"I know. I need you too."

Beck was tired of diplomacy. "Then don't put up with this bullshit. Just walk away, damn it. Please."

The silence said everything Zach didn't. All the usual gibberish about *I owe him* and *continuity of case* had already been said when they discussed the previous delays. Yeah, the FBI had their claws in deep.

But underneath it all, Beck wondered if the real issue might be that Zach couldn't give up profiling. "Your Colorado medical license should come through anytime. You can start work here as soon as it does. And Jay is counting on you to be here by June first."

Jay Armentrout was a twenty-five-year veteran of the DPD who had gotten a PhD in psychology. For the past three years, he'd spent his days as the department's sole mental-health provider, counseling Denver's finest. Through his efforts, DPD had a better retention rate and a reduction in job-related divorce and disability. Zach had

committed months ago to cover all psych duties while Jay attended a two-week forensic psychiatry seminar in London.

“I’ll be there.” Zach’s promise sounded heartfelt.

“I wish I could believe that.”

“Sweetheart...”

A garbled mix of anger, disappointment, and longing churned in Beck’s gut. “Please. I miss you. I need you here. Just get on the plane and fly to Denver.”

“This should wrap up over the weekend,” Zach said. “I’ll disengage, fly to Denver, and stay for good. I swear, no more cases after this.”

The promise was as tangible as the breath that formed the words. Zach sounded sincere. Hell, he was sincere. Beck was the cynic. For once, he wanted Zach to tell Sands where to stick it.

Heading down the hall to the bedroom they were supposed to be sharing, Beck said, “After the case you can come straight here. Don’t tell Sands you’re leaving, or he’ll dredge up something. When I get my hands on you, I ain’t letting go. Possession is nine-tenths, Littman.”

Springs squeaked, and Zach chuckled. “Trust me, I’m not going to jeopardize my escape. I’m sick of sleeping on a mattress that feels like cement.”

“You have options other than that boardinghouse for wayward boys.” In Beck’s opinion, the FBI’s so-called temporary housing sucked. It was more like a series of dorm rooms with a common bath and kitchen. The place was a health hazard.

“I don’t want to impose on Dean.”

In mid-February, Zach had rented his Minneapolis house to his ex-boyfriend Dean, who was a cute blond nurse. In a way, Beck was pleased Zach had refused Dean’s houseguest invitation. Beck felt uneasy just contemplating Zach sleeping under the same roof as Dean.

“There’s a perfectly comfortable bed waiting right here for you. Comes equipped with a hot guy and everything.” Beck leaned against the doorjamb and pinched the bridge of his nose. Evening sunlight fell in blocks of brightness across the king-size bed, rumped on one side. Only on one side.

“I’m frustrated too,” Zach said, voice full of sympathy. “I know it’s been a long haul.”

Long? Spring had sprung. April showers had brought May flowers but not Zach. Beck still rattled around the half-unpacked house on his own. Zach had wanted this, and he wasn’t here.

Beck had pictured camaraderie over yard work, cozy dinners for two discussing their days, and nights full of marathon sex. All the perks of partnership.

Instead, they’d become mired in a long-term long-distance relationship, minus any of that. Beck had unpacked most of his stuff, but Zach hadn’t. There was no feeling of permanency here. He rubbed at the scar on his left shoulder. “I’ll come out there this weekend.”

“The case is a callout.”

The words dropped like rocks on Beck’s already precarious mood. Wasn’t it always? Sands never assigned Zach a case requiring only a profile—no, that would mean Zach could work the case from Minneapolis. The director knew if Beck had Zach in person, the FBI would lose him for good. It was like playing a game of chess. Did Zach even want the move to Denver? “What is it this time?”

“A body with an MO matching one of my open cases. I can’t—”

“Talk about it. Protocol and all that.” Beck couldn’t keep the bitterness out of his tone. “Yeah, I know.”

“I realize this has been tough, but it’s almost over. I can’t wait to get to Denver and settle in.” Softly Zach said, “I miss you so damn much.”

That bedroom-rough voice made Beck's heart give an optimistic surge. Another part of him gave a hopeful twitch as well. He crossed the room and sat on the end of the bed. If he squeezed his eyes shut, he could pretend Zach was here in person. "Just get it over with and come home."

"I love you, Beck."

"Love you too."

## Chapter Three

Zach tossed aside the crime photos and lay back on the generic bed in his generic motel room. How in the hell had he ended up spending his Saturday night like this? If he never saw another ruined body, it would be too soon.

The reality of what could happen between exiting a mall at Christmastime and a car a hundred feet away...horrifying. A beloved daughter and sister unaccounted for, the family left hanging for months, trapped between hope and dread as the case went cold. Now she was found, and their worst fears had been confirmed. It made Zach sick.

The victim had been kidnapped last December in North Platte, Nebraska, a town two hundred eighty miles west of Omaha. A farmer had found the body in a rural area twenty miles farther west. The coroner had apprised the state police of his suspicion that the girl was the one missing since last winter. North Platte confirmed her ID and wanted the case. It was a jurisdictional nightmare, with both state and local authorities laying claim.

The girl's father was a Nebraska state legislator, and he'd insisted on FBI involvement. After Quantico made the connection with the Crossroads Killer, one of Zach's open cases, he had been tapped.

Police and politics had collided head-on. The teams of law enforcement officers opposed involving a profiler. Neither group had been happy to see Zach, but this wasn't an isolated crime. ViCAP, the FBI's Violent Criminal Apprehension Program, had scored a hit, tying the murder to Omaha's Crossroads Killer victims uncovered the past September. After six women had been discovered buried in a wooded area, Zach had been called in to help. Despite his detailed profile, the killer still remained unidentified eight months later. It was beyond frustrating, and Zach had spent many

hours going over the case, searching for the key to the unsub's identity. No more bodies had been found—until now.

The current victim had been discovered on a riverbank. Her strangulation by necktie fit with the Omaha cases. The peculiar knot in the silk was the same; the expensive brand of tie was the same; and the vestiges of the elaborate design cut into the bathed, wrapped, and nude body were the same.

Victim number seven of the Crossroads Killer. Other than locale, the main difference was that the killer had buried this girl close to a river. The snowmelt had led to particularly heavy spring runoff. Nature had uncovered the killer's handiwork.

It was hard to know what else might come to light as the floodwaters continued to recede. A search for others wasn't feasible.

Yet.

Zach shuddered. First Omaha, and now this western Nebraska college town. The monster could have traveled all over the Midwest. Or maybe he'd stuck to towns dotting the East-West Highway along the Platte River. In September, Zach had been certain the killer was associated with the University of Nebraska at Omaha. Now he wasn't so sure.

*Where are you, you son of a bitch?*

If they pinpointed a new mass-burial site, Zach would be mired in a case that straddled several jurisdictions. Who knew where it might end? The only hope was to catch the predator. The profile needed a relook, and—

A couple of sharp raps on the door brought Zach upright. What the hell? He wasn't expecting company. Quietly, he gripped his SIG, approached the door, and glanced through the fish-eye.

A man. Dark clothes, porkpie hat, head tilted down. His hands were stuffed in his pockets. It was impossible to tell if the stranger had a weapon. Standing to the side of the door, Zach rested his thumb over the safety. "Yeah?"

“Zach?”

*No way.* Zach whipped around and took another look through the lens. The stranger pulled off his hat and grinned.

Zach slid the chain free, snapped open the dead bolt, and swung the door wide. “My God. What—”

Then Beck had him in a clinch, mouth crushed to Zach’s in a ruthless attack. Zach kissed him back, forgetting about the lack of privacy and the SIG still clutched in his hand.

When they broke for air, Beck nodded at the gun. “You going to shoot me?”

“No.” Zach flicked on the safety. “Just wasn’t expecting anyone.”

“I wasn’t going to miss another weekend.” Beck bent and grabbed a duffel bag. “I missed you too much.”

Pleasurable warmth washed over Zach. He tugged Beck inside the room, closed the door and locked it. “I can’t believe you’re here. How did you find me?”

“Ruskin. He gave me your top secret location.”

Zach laid the gun on the nightstand. He’d have to buy Ruskin a bottle of good whiskey.

Beck’s brows drew together as he nodded at the photos scattered across the bed. “I know I’m interrupting—”

“In the best possible way.” Zach scooped up the pictures and dropped them facedown on the desk. “I can’t believe you came.”

“I haven’t yet, but it’s looking good.”

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Want to know what happens next?

<http://www.loose-id.com/coldhearted-concept.html>