

Mountie Times Two

by Sheila Paulson

At the sense that someone was behind him, Ray Vecchio jerked his head up, and purely by instinct, flung himself flat. The bullet shattered the mirror behind him before he could see more than a faint shadow of movement in it. Rolling sideways away from the shards of scattering glass, he came up to his knees, ducked behind a table, and tried to get his bearings.

The house was eerie, vaguely medieval and vaguely Spanish at the same time with stone arched doorways branching off the vast central hallway. Lights at distant intervals cast long stretches of passageway into deep shadow, making silhouettes stretch out to giant size when one of the shooters passed them. It was the only thing that warned Ray someone was moving.

"Fraser?" He couldn't really raise his voice because it would give away his position. He and the Canadian had been separated and the occasional shot in the distance made him stiffen with tension. He was sure there were at least two men here, two of them shooting at him, shooting at Benny. There was no way to warn him, and he knew Fraser didn't have a gun, or at least not a loaded one. The shooters didn't know that, though, and Fraser could be sneaky; he might wave it around as a threat.

Edging his way down one of the long, narrow hallways, Ray stopped when he saw a staircase curving up away from him. Nothing stirred in the darkness at the top of the stairs, but the sense of a presence Ray felt was palpable. Someone was nearby.

The Chicago cop shivered, his memories full of recent shootings – Fraser running directly into the path of Ray's bullet at the train station, taking the shot Vecchio had meant for Victoria. Then there was the shot at the hospital, when Ray had jumped in the way of the bullet meant for Fraser. His shoulder still ached.

Fraser wasn't a hundred percent, either. He'd just gone back to work, and they didn't have him standing out in front of the Consulate like a cigar store Indian yet. Nice, peaceful desk work, except when he joined Ray on one of his stakeouts. So why was he here now?

Something moved down the long hallway and Ray turned toward it quickly, but the shadows hadn't stirred. Nothing remained.

"Fraser?" Ray said quickly under his breath. "Where the hell are you? Don't do this."

The motion on the stairs was real, threatening. Ray whirled in one smooth, economical motion and fired. Even as his finger squeezed the trigger he knew he'd blundered. The vivid red serge of the RCMP uniform abruptly sported a darker stain of red in its middle. Fraser clutched his stomach with both hands, then collapsed sideways and rolled head over heels down the stairs.

"Fraser!" Ray screamed, his stomach twisting with horror . . . and he woke up.

For a long, shaky moment he sat in the darkness, his fingers twisting the sheet so tightly they went numb. It was the third time he'd had the same dream that week. The police shrink they had insisted he see after he'd shot Fraser, and after he himself had been shot trying to save Fraser, had said it was simply a result of his guilt. An echo of his inability to forgive himself for having shot his best friend, however inadvertently.

But he'd accepted the guilt, and he'd worked his way through it by spending most of his spare time at the hospital with Fraser, ignoring such unnecessary things as sleep and meals. The doctor who had treated him after he'd been wounded had remarked on how run down he was, and they kept him in the hospital longer than ordinarily needed, to build him up again. At first he'd felt good, and he went along with it simply because eating and sleeping had become enjoyable again. He'd atoned for his accidental shooting of Fraser not by winning his forgiveness, but by saving his life.

He knew Fraser had forgiven him, but he hadn't truly believed it until he woke after surgery and found Fraser at his bedside, waiting for him to wake. The look of sheer concern on his friend's face had warmed Ray to the core. He realized then that the shooting had done something more than injured Ray and save Fraser. It had shocked his friend out of his obsessive preoccupation with Victoria Metcalf. Oh, Benny was still torn up over her, and probably always would be to some degree, but he'd finally looked past it.

They had talked briefly, come to terms with each other, and finally resumed their old, banter-riddled relationship that Ray enjoyed so much. Even when he prodded Fraser, and the Mountie admitted that he'd felt a kind of perverse pleasure at seeing Ray shot, the detective knew it was a large step back to their old, easy relationship. And the rest finally gave Fraser a chance to react to his shooting apart from his feelings for Victoria. So Ray had provoked and teased him all the more, and gradually they became comfortable with each other again.

Victoria was gone – she'd made no attempt to contact Fraser – and he was gradually allowing himself to put her behind him, though Ray knew if she ever returned it might be all to do over again. She'd played Fraser for a sucker, but he couldn't convince the man of that. The Mountie could see the best in anyone, and to Ray's surprise, a lot of people Fraser had expected to take the money and run had lived up to that. Maybe he had expected Victoria to live up to his expectations too, even though he knew she was a criminal and always had been. Maybe a part of him was coming down on himself because he hadn't gotten through to the one person who really mattered to him.

It was the one subject they rarely discussed. Ray was happy enough with that. He thought he was comfortable with Fraser again, especially after their trip to Canada, and the plane crash, and mostly he was, but why then did he keep having the dream?

The shrink suggested delayed stress syndrome. He suggested that Ray was still punishing himself for shooting Benny, but Ray wasn't so sure. The damn dreams were so real. . .

The door opened, a streak of light from the hall cutting across his bed. "Ray?" It was his sister, Francesca. "People are trying to sleep. Some of us are even being virtuous and sleeping alone. But you're in here yelling your head off." She paused in the doorway, looking at him. "Did you dream you shot him again?"

Ray nodded. He wasn't sure about his sister and Fraser; neither would tell him what, if anything, had passed between them. Part of that was because Fraser was an old-fashioned gentleman, and part of it was because he knew it bugged the hell out of Ray. But Francesca believed she had a "relationship" with the Mountie, and she took a proprietary interest in him.

"Was it just like last time?" She had been more sympathetic toward Ray after he'd been shot saving Fraser.

"Just the same. It was just so real. It was like I was really living it. Nothing in it to tell me it was a dream." He mopped his sweaty brow and admitted reluctantly, "The shrink says it's delayed stress, or guilt, or maybe both."

His sister shook her head. "I don't think so. The shrink might know shrink stuff, but he doesn't know my brother."

"So now you've got a Ph.D. in psychology?" Ray snapped.

"No, but I've known Ray Vecchio a lot more years than that shrink has. It's okay. You never meant to shoot Fraser in the first place. You were trying to *save* his life. I know that, even if he doesn't. Besides, you were shooting at that bitch, and she deserved it."

Francesca's feelings toward Victoria were considerably less than kind. Some of it was jealousy, but most was simply that she didn't like what the other woman had done to Fraser. Not to mention that it had created a decided setback in Francesca's own plans, and she wasn't happy about that.

"It's okay to have a few bad dreams," she continued. "They'll go away, in time. Besides, you're doing okay with him again, aren't you?"

Ray nodded. He and Fraser were back to normal, or almost back to normal. They didn't discuss Victoria, but in a way that was good. Ray would have been happier if he thought Benny had put her completely behind him, but he wasn't convinced of that yet. It would take time. The plane crash and wilderness trek had helped. But the distance that had existed between them while Fraser was in the hospital, passively recovering, had vanished.

"Good. You hang in there. If nothing else, it gives me a way to him." She gave Ray a wicked, teasing grin that made him groan in mock disgust. She leaned forward and ruffled his thinning hair before she headed for the door.

Ray eased back against his pillow and closed his eyes. It took him a long time to go back to sleep.

Diefenbaker cocked his head and watched the young woman who stopped in front of him and Constable Benton Fraser as the Mountie stood his first guard since he'd been injured outside the Canadian Consulate. Fraser's job required him to stand unmoving, virtually unblinking, and to ignore the people who stopped to stare, make occasional rude comments, and take pictures. Diefenbaker, however, was under no such constraint.

This woman had come by before. Like Diefenbaker, she was deaf, and she had been fascinated to learn of the wolf's condition. Ever since, she had been talking to Diefenbaker in ASL. Fraser, who could see a lot more than one might expect with his eyes focused directly in front of him, knew that Diefenbaker already understood more signs than the woman realized. He was glad when she came by; it provided considerable amusement for his lupine friend.

"Yo, Benny, get a load of this." Ray planted himself directly in the Mountie's line of sight. "Your buddy here is sharing secret messages with a lady friend. Better watch out. Before you know it, they'll be sneaking off for quiet little romantic dinners, and who knows what'll happen next."

Fraser controlled his desire to smile with the ease of long practice. He saw Ray check his watch to see how much longer the Canadian would be on duty, then the Chicago cop dropped down on his haunches beside the young woman and began to sign to her, though he was obviously new to it and not very fluent. Interested that Ray was learning sign, Fraser tried to make out the conversation that was taking place between the two, but the angle was wrong. He could tell they were both enjoying themselves, though, as she reached out and corrected a mistake by guiding Ray's hands through the proper movements. Even if he couldn't smile, Fraser liked the idea. He'd have to ask Ray to work with Diefenbaker, who could read lips quite well, but who needed practice on understanding sign. Fraser had taught himself how to sign from a book and was fairly proficient. And who knew, it might be helpful if he and Ray could communicate that way when they were working together.

Ray waved the woman on her way and Diefenbaker gave her a friendly, departing yip, then the cop straightened up again and checked his watch once more. "Okay, buddy, time's up. You can stop playing statue now and talk to me."

When Fraser didn't respond, Ray bent over and tried to read the Mountie's watch. "Come on, Benny, your watch is probably thirty seconds behind mine. Nobody's gonna count thirty seconds."

Fraser did count them, in his mind, and when he had worked his way down to zero, he relaxed, stretched slightly and wiggled his shoulder blades. Not as stiff as he'd feared; he was doing better. With a hope that Ray hadn't noticed, he said quickly, "Precision is important, Ray. It doesn't do to get into the habit of being slipshod."

"I've noticed. Come on, you're off duty and it's a great time for relaxing over a brewsky. I've got the afternoon off. What we're going to do is—"

Before Ray could announce his plans, a car pulled up at the curb and two men got out. They were similar in type, extremely clean-cut, with short hair, and wearing raincoats that almost looked like uniforms. Although one of them was a redhead, and the other sported blond curls, they could have been mass-produced. They stood, looking Fraser up and down as if evaluating his red uniform.

Fraser had been in Chicago long enough to recognize Feds when he saw them.

Then they came forward, one of them pulling out his badge and displaying it in front of Fraser – FBI.

"Constable Benton Fraser? You're under arrest."

"Whoa, hold it right there," Ray said, jumping between Benny and the two officers. "What's this about?" He produced his own badge. "Ray Vecchio, CPD. Fraser's innocent. He's just got out of the hospital. He hasn't had *time* to do anything illegal."

"He's had plenty of time to pull a bank heist," the red-haired detective announced. "I'm Special Agent Fagin, FBI."

"He's a *Mountie*," Ray insisted stubbornly, fiercely prepared to defend Fraser's innocence. "He's one of the good guys."

"He's an known associate of a wanted felon," the blond Fed stated clearly. "And we've got a film of the heist, in which he's been identified. I've seen the tape and I recognize him myself."

Fraser stiffen, knowing that the agent was referring to Victoria. "I am innocent of bank robbery," he defended himself. "When you compare me to the man in the tape you'll be able to tell the difference."

"And just how many Mounties are running around Chicago?" prompted the second Fed. "Special Agent Sikes. We're taking you in."

"You can't take him in. He didn't do it," Ray insisted. "I know he didn't. When did it happen? He'll have an alibi."

"Last night, shortly before six p.m. at the Norwest branch on Allison. It's within six blocks of his reported address. All right, Constable, where were you at the time of the robbery?"

"I was at Ray's home," Fraser replied. "His mother had invited me to dinner. His entire family was present – his mother, his sister Francesca, his brother—"

"And they'll all testify you were there?"

"Of course. It is the truth. I arrived at the same time as a delivery of flowers for Mrs. Vecchio. The delivery man can also account for my presence in the house. And Ray's neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Catalfo were walking past the house. Mr. Catalfo and Ray discussed baseball statistics. And Diefenbaker was also present and can vouch for me."

"Who's Diefenbaker?" demanded Sikes, scribbling in his notebook.

"He's the wolf," Ray said with relish. "He gets pretty upset when somebody tries to dis Fraser. So I'd be careful about what I said if I were you."

Sikes' eyes narrowed. "Is that a threat, Detective Vecchio?"

"No, just a warning. Diefenbaker can probably testify as well as any witness. He can read lips."

"I don't *believe* this," snapped Fagin. "Enough. Back off, Vecchio or we'll haul you in for interfering with a Federal investigation."

"Ray, I'll go with them to see what this is about. I'm sure it will be sorted out quickly," Fraser replied. "You take Diefenbaker home and feed him. But no ice cream. He had too much after dinner last night and the cholesterol isn't good for him."

Diefenbaker whined in disappointment.

"I'll take him home, but I'll be down to pick you up as soon as I do," Ray replied with stubborn determination. "I know you didn't rob any banks, especially since the entire Vecchio clan can vouch for you."

"You'd better come along, too, Detective Vecchio," instructed Fagin. "We'll check with your family before you have a chance to coach them."

"So you're sayin' we're both liars, and so is my entire family?" Ray looked mad enough to spit. "You're gonna apologize for that."

"Calm down, Ray. It will be easy to prove I couldn't have committed that bank robbery," Fraser said. It wasn't difficult to frame someone for a crime. If he were a suspect, it meant the actual criminal looked enough like him to be his double. But how had one been found so quickly? He straightened his tunic and adjusted his hat, then he let the two FBI agents guide him back to the car. Ray slid in next to him. Diefenbaker scrambled across Ray's feet and settled himself on the seat between them. It would be a difficult interview.

The tape that Fraser and Ray watched at the FBI branch office was very disturbing. It showed a man of Fraser's height and build, clad in a genuine, official RCMP red serge uniform, complete with hat. The bank customers were clearly stunned when the "Mountie" drew his gun, fired one shot at the ceiling to get their attention, then waved them all to the floor. He presented a paper bag to one teller, directing her with gestures to pass it along to the other three tellers, and waited while they filled it. When he was finished, he turned smartly, looked directly at the camera and gave an official salute.

Fraser's mouth dropped open. He was looking in a mirror. If he hadn't known for certain that he was innocent, he would have arrested himself at once. He stared at the wall-mounted television set in disbelief. Ray muttered something extremely profane.

"You were saying about it being a mistake?" Fagin's voice was smug. "Wait a minute. Back it up, Bill."

Sikes complied with a grin. *Bill Sikes?* thought Fraser, momentarily distracted. *Are their names genuine?* When he realized what had caught Fagin's eye he stiffened, his own eyes going wide. The camera hadn't really caught the second bank robber until that moment. He stood out of the way, covering the customers. The angle was from above, but it was possible to see thinning hair and the dramatic slant of the nose. Fraser blinked in utter disbelief. It couldn't possibly be Ray, but from the angle shown on the tape, it looked very much like him.

"Son-of-a-bitch," Ray said involuntarily.

"Vecchio," Sikes muttered in astonishment and considerable satisfaction. "I missed that the first few times around. Nice one, Matt. So it was a team effort. I heard the two of you were recently under suspicion. You were cleared, but now I'm beginning to wonder if you might've been just a little smarter than they thought you were. We'll get the records of that incident."

"I'd hardly be fool enough to wear my uniform on a bank robbery," Fraser said with some indignation. "And to look directly at the camera . . . I am an officer of the law. If I were inclined to commit a crime, I would hope my experience in law enforcement would not permit me to make such foolish mistakes. Unless I had a desire to be apprehended, why would I march boldly into a bank in full regalia, bringing my best friend with me

when we're known to be a team? Considering, of course, that I was not, in fact, involved in something else at the time the crime took place."

"He's got a point there, Bill," said Fagin, frowning, then his expression cleared. "Not that it matters. Every person in that bank will testify that he or she saw you. For whatever reason, you *were* stupid enough to do it, and stupid enough to get caught. Maybe you were trying to emulate your lady friend, the one that got away. Maybe you were despondent enough about that whole mess to throw everything away."

"Despondent, perhaps, but not unethical," Fraser replied honestly. "And even if I were inclined to become a criminal, I would not take my friend into it with me. You can't prove that's Ray. The angle is bad."

Sikes shook his head. "It looks like him to me."

"We're both innocent," Fraser insisted, sure they wouldn't believe him. If he didn't know better, he wouldn't believe himself either. While it was possible that every man could have a double, how would that double know to wear a RCMP uniform, unless this was a plot against them personally?

"You bet we're innocent," Ray insisted. "We've got witnesses. You haven't even bothered to check."

"There are witnesses at the bank, too," Fagin pointed out. "Oh, don't worry. We're checking your witnesses."

"But, don't you see?" Fraser began. "We weren't there and we can prove it. However, someone obviously knows that I'm a Mountie, and that I work with Ray. Someone went to a considerable amount of trouble to set us up, to commit a very public crime in the hopes that we would be blamed."

"Somebody tried to frame us," Ray translated. "Because nobody would wear a bright red outfit that would attract all kinds of attention to commit a robbery. This was aimed at us, personally. And when I find out who tried to pull this—"

"Calm down, Ray," Fraser expostulated. "Who would do this?"

"Besides the obvious answer?" Sikes demanded.

"You check our witnesses before you tell us what's obvious," Ray insisted, still fuming. "This is a set-up."

"Sure, Detective. Somebody out there has the pull to find exact doubles for the pair of you? Most criminals you bust are sleazy little two-bit hoods. You think they've got that kind of support?"

"We've made some enemies, I'm afraid," Fraser admitted. "Given time, we can amass a list of names. Remember, it need not be someone who desires revenge on both Ray and myself. It could be someone who has it in for only one of us, but who knows we often work together. Much easier for us to be identified as a team, especially since my double is wearing an RCMP dress uniform. Americans always associate that particular uniform with the Mounties, although we do wear others."

Fagin and Sikes exchanged a glance that asked, "Is this guy for real?"

Someone knocked at the door. Fagin, the senior agent, went over to answer it. He slipped into the hall to converse with someone. After a moment, he returned, his mouth twisted as if he'd just sucked on a lemon. "Their alibi stands up," he admitted reluctantly. "Not only did the flower delivery man ID them, but the neighbors were very specific. Apparently Mr. Catalfo made reference to a childhood incident that only the real Ray Vecchio could

have understood. He knew the exact time, too, because he and his wife watch a television program that comes on shortly after the time of their conversation, and his wife checked her watch several times while they talked."

"You don't have to sound so disappointed," Ray chided. He bolted to his feet. "We're out of here."

"Just a moment, Ray," Fraser said, remaining seated. "Two men robbed a bank, trying to appear as if they were you and I. This wasn't chance." He turned to the two special agents. "The odds of two anonymous bank robbers looking exactly like Ray and I is astronomical. Factor in the uniform and it becomes an obvious frame. It becomes personal. You two are officers of the law. We are your brothers in arms. Doesn't it anger you to know that someone out there is framing police officers?"

"He's got a point, Bill," Fagin conceded reluctantly. "Not only that it's an obvious frame, but the rest of it, too."

"Yeah, and when whoever did it finds out we could prove we didn't do it, they're gonna pull another heist," Ray added. Arching an eyebrow at Fraser, he muttered, "Brothers in arms?" under his breath.

"I realize that," Fagin said as he ran an hand over his red hair. "We need information. Who hates you so much that they'd go to so much trouble? Most crooks who have it in for you put a hit out on you. Or they follow you around and ice you themselves. Whoever did this gambled that you wouldn't have an alibi. That says that they don't want you dead. They want you in trouble." He didn't look any friendlier than before but he'd grown interested in the problem.

Diefenbaker tilted his head and watched the man consideringly.

Fraser saw recognition flash across Ray's face, but his friend smoothed it over and presented a bland, if irritated expression to the two FBI men. "I'll have to check my files," he said.

Oh dear, Fraser thought. That could mean that Ray had an idea, but he wanted to investigate it on his own. Ray had never been very good at working within the system, and he didn't like the Feds on general principles.

"You don't make a lot of friends when you're a cop," Ray continued hastily. "At least not the kind of people who could put this together. Benny and I will check it out and get back to you."

"They might strike again," Fraser offered. "If this were an attempt to frame us, the mastermind behind it might attempt another crime. I wish we had a better view of Ray's double so we could see how exact the match is. I am inclined to believe that it is not as accurate as my double."

"How do you figure that?" Sikes asked.

"My double made a point of looking directly at the security camera, but Ray's double did not. While that need not mean that he was not an exact match for Detective Vecchio, it is one possible interpretation."

"Or maybe framing me wasn't as important as framing you," Ray offered.

Fraser stared at his friend, but Ray's face was inscrutable. "You think this is an attack on me, personally, rather than the two of us?"

"I don't know what I think – yet. We don't know enough to think anything. All I know is, if that guy wasn't wearing a Mountie uniform, nobody would've thought of us at all. Well, at least not right away."

"He has a point," Fagin agreed. "Listen, they could strike again, and do it when you don't have such a good alibi."

"If they were hired to frame us, the probability is that they will try again," Fraser mused. He wished he knew what Ray was thinking. Vecchio was a loose cannon, and sometimes the bane of Lt. Welch. And right now all the man's idiosyncrasies were bubbling to the surface.

"So you're saying we should never be alone until this is solved?" Ray demanded. "We're the ones who can figure out who has it in for us. We have to check it out."

"*We'll* check it out," Fagin insisted. "We'll be talking to your Lt. Welch to make certain of it."

"Another thing we'll do," Sikes added, "is to assume that you're being watched. You've been brought in. The longer the perp thinks you've been arrested, the better. So you'll leave via the back door in an unmarked car. And we have to assume that someone is watching your places of residence, so other than your two immediate supervisors, everyone else will have to believe that you've been arrested."

Ray shook his head. "If you made it look like Fraser was arrested, then they wouldn't go on with the frame. I can leave here looking really disgusted, and you can sneak Fraser out to a safehouse. Then I can check it out and whoever is doing it won't dare pull another heist because Benny would have an alibi. He can't be robbing banks if he's in jail."

"Ray, if this is intended as an act against me, I feel I need to be involved in the solution," Fraser objected. "You don't know who my enemies are."

"Unless it's somebody from the great white north who just tracked you to Chicago, it's probably somebody we both dealt with. Maybe they want both of us and they only could find one perfect double. I can go through the files, and if I don't find anything there, then I'll get together with you and we can brainstorm the Canadian connection." He turned to Fagin and Sikes. "What do you think?" He avoided Fraser's gaze, sure the Mountie was unhappy with the approach.

Fraser was. Ray was just trying to protect him. "I don't believe this is a good plan," he objected.

"On the contrary," Fagin said, "I think it's an excellent plan. What's more, we'll send the wolf with Vecchio. That ought to convince anyone who might be watching that Fraser's under arrest. We'll contact you later, Vecchio. But listen up, I don't want you going out to check on any suspects. You give us the names and we'll take it from there."

Uh oh, Ray doesn't like that, Fraser thought. Vecchio had that particularly mulish look that the Mountie recognized. The one that meant Ray was going to do things his way. Once Ray had departed, Fraser would have to warn the Feds to contact Lieutenant Welch immediately.

"Sure, anything you say," Ray replied easily.

An outright lie. Fraser would have taken Ray to task for it, but he couldn't do that in front of these men. Instead he tried to catch Ray's eye, but the detective avoided him. He had a plan. Worse, he had an idea. And Fraser was sure he wouldn't like it.

"Ray, be careful," Benny said. "I don't want you to risk your life on my behalf."

Ray looked at him then, and somehow the words evoked a brilliant smile that came and went so fast that the Mountie wasn't completely sure that he had seen it. Not a devious smile, either. That reminded Fraser that

Ray had just recently risked his life for him in the hospital. Surely Ray didn't believe he had to keep on atoning for the shooting at the train station?

That was not a happy thought. Fraser pushed all thoughts of Victoria out of his mind.

"My reputation's at stake here, too, Benny," Ray pointed out. "I'll figure it out. I'll even make nice with the Feds. But you do what they tell you. You wouldn't like prison. Lousy place, lots of old enemies in there."

"I don't want you to risk it, either, Ray."

"I won't. Look, I'll even take Huey and Louie with me if that'll make you happy."

Oh dear. That was another lie. Or at least a half-truth. Ray might take one of them if he felt that he needed backup. But Fraser was sure Ray meant to work alone on this one. That was bad. He could only hope that Fagin and Sikes would watch him so carefully that he didn't have a chance of getting into any trouble. Knowing Ray Vecchio as he did, Fraser wasn't sure the Feds had a prayer.

Ray did go to the precinct. He knew Fagin would have him followed, and if he didn't go there – to presumably look through his files – the Feds would probably haul him into protective custody. Besides, Sikes was already on the phone to Welch when the Chicago cop, a disconsolate Diefenbaker at his heels, arrived at the station.

So he sat at his desk, ignoring his fellow cops, and tossed a stale doughnut to the wolf to keep him quiet. He pretended to look through his files. He didn't need files, though. He was almost certain he knew who was behind the scam. There was only one person who would enjoy taking them down in this way – Victoria.

Fraser should have known it, too, but then he had a little problem with denial in that area. Ray wasn't sure if Benny would have actually have gone with the woman or not, but he did know that if Benny had, if he had turned against the law, it would have destroyed Fraser in the end. And when he had thoughts like that, Ray almost was glad he'd found a way to stop Fraser from having to make the choice. Almost. He couldn't be glad he'd nearly killed his best friend. Neither could he be glad that he had, in essence, taken away Fraser's choice. Now the man would never know if he really could have gone through with it.

Ray might have saved him from a fatal mistake, but he hadn't saved his friend from the knowledge that he was about to throw away everything he stood for. He liked to hope that, when the chips were down, Fraser's integrity wouldn't have permitted him to follow through, but Fraser loved her. In spite of what she'd done to him, he still loved her. If it hadn't gone away after what she'd done so far, it probably wouldn't this time, either. But if Ray could prove she was behind this latest frame, it might help.

How long could love go on taking the hard knocks and still survive? An ordinary guy might have cut his losses long ago. But Benton Fraser was *not* an ordinary guy.

Ray shuffled through files when he became aware of Welch standing in the door of his office watching him, but the Lieutenant didn't come over to talk to him or call him in.

Diefenbaker sat, his head resting on Ray's leg, and whined unhappily every so often.

"Yeah, you know it's a crock, don't you, Dief?" Ray muttered to him. He was aware of the other detectives, shooting doubtful looks at him. Even Elaine, who brought him a cup of coffee, didn't stay, scurrying quickly back to her desk. This wasn't good. They all knew about it. They were all speculating.

If Victoria was behind the bank robbery, how could he find her? Where could she find doubles for him and Fraser? Could a person actually hire doubles? Maybe for a party? A Sinatra look-alike to sing at a wedding reception? A Harrison Ford double to show up as Indiana Jones? But where could you hire doubles to rob a bank? That was pushing it.

Ray snatched the phone book. He found two listings for doubles for hire. Could Victoria have convinced the pair to rob a bank? Did she tell them it was a trick set up to test the bank's security program? Even assuming such an agency could find people who looked like them, why would they go for it? How much had Victoria paid them?

This is nuts. There had to be an easier answer. She found a couple of thugs who just happened to be his and Fraser's doubles? Or was it done with good make-up, like the way the characters used to change their appearance in the old *Mission Impossible* TV series. A little make-up and Martin Landau looked like anybody you needed. Who did that kind of thing? Stage actors? Movie special effects guys?

Okay, so that gave him some choices. But the bottom line was to find out who had hired the men. He was sure it was Victoria – it reeked of her – but he didn't want to pass up any other possibilities. He made a couple of carefully worded calls to a few of his snitches. They didn't admit to anything, but then, maybe they really didn't know. Victoria was hardly local talent, and if she was recruiting from a non-local source the word might not have spread. One said that he'd heard a vague rumor about a plan to take down a cop, but he couldn't be any more specific. He'd call back later and meet Ray wherever he wanted to. Probably so he could get his money up front. Ray was okay with that.

When he hung up, he noticed Welch was watching him again. The Lieutenant beckoned him into his office.

"The Feds clued me in," he said when Ray closed the door to the outer office. "I know you, Vecchio. No grandstanding. Who were you calling just now?"

"My snitches. If somebody's out to frame us, I thought the word might be out. I wasn't going out to investigate on my own." He did self-righteous well, but he could tell Welch was wise to him.

"You'd better not go off on your own," the man growled. "The feds laid down the law. Their case. They don't want you tramping all over it."

Ray grimaced.

Welch saw it and grimaced, too. "Look, Vecchio, I don't like the thought of anybody setting up one of our own – or Fraser either – any better than you do. I don't mind if you follow it up, but if somebody's trying to set you up, I want you to take somebody with you when you go out, and I don't mean Constable Fraser. Whatever you do, you take someone with you who can vouch for you. I mean it, Vecchio," he insisted when Ray opened his mouth to object. "It's common sense. I want to take down whoever's behind this, but I don't want to have to come to visit you in the slammer if you don't cover your ass."

That was common sense, and Welch was being pretty indulgent with him. But Ray knew that if he mentioned Victoria, Welch would bury him so deep in paperwork that he wouldn't get out of the precinct until the millennium. Okay, so he wasn't exactly objective here. Maybe there was a chance this wasn't her newest scheme – and maybe grizzly bears could dance the ballet.

With Welch's warning hanging over his head, Ray knew he didn't dare take off unless he could sneak out unobserved. He'd have to time it pretty carefully. While biding his time, he phoned a couple of theatrical shops and discussed make-up with them. "Something really good, like they used to do on *Mission Impossible*," he explained. "It's for a gag for my brother-in-law's birthday. I want to really fake it. Could make-up get my sister to look like Sandra Bullock, for instance?"

"Well, close," the man on the other end of the line replied. "If her face shape was relatively close to begin with, and if you had someone professionally make an appliance. It wouldn't change her teeth, but things could be constructed to change her general appearances. Even simple things can make a huge difference – look at Brando in *The Godfather*. Of course you can get really professional, like special effects and make-up artists who work in the movies. Rick Baker, for instance, he's won Academy Awards for his work. But that won't come cheap. Depends on what you want to spend for this birthday."

"What if money was no object?"

"Then you could probably get your sister to pass for Sandra Bullock in the street, unless there's an obvious difficulty that would be hard to mask – a chin like Jay Leno, for instance, or a nose like Cyrano de Bergerac."

"So where do I find somebody who does this kind of work?" Ray asked. "The party's in two weeks, and I know this will probably take time."

"Yes, it will. An expert will probably need to take a mold of her face, then work on building the appliance. Look, this is going to run you some major bucks."

"Money's no object," Ray repeated.

"Okay, then I can give you the number of the best guy in Chicago. Not saying he can take you, of course, he keeps pretty busy, but he has a lot of satisfied customers."

Ray took the number and thanked the guy. Then he took a deep breath and phoned.

"Bradley Disguises."

"Hey, Mr. Bradley, this is Jack Kerwin, and I was recommended to you by Ralph Marvin at Costumes 'R Us. He said you could build a mask or appliance like the pros."

"Well, I like to think I can," Bradley replied. "How soon do you need it?"

Bearing in mind that Marvin might talk to him, Ray went into his spiel about his sister and Sandra Bullock. "The thing is, could she pass in a crowd? Somebody looks at her, is the first thing they're gonna think mask?"

"Well, the longer she's in the mask, the more chance there is of someone catching on. Especially when you consider that the people at your party won't believe it's really Sandra Bullock."

"Okay, but say my sister's with some strangers for about half an hour. Would they guess?"

"Probably not. They'd probably start asking for autographs. Put her in with strangers and it would take someone who knows about appliances to catch it right away. Too much time, though, and the way the face moves might give her away, but for a party joke, it should work just fine."

"Perfect. That's exactly what I need. Do you do a lot of this kind of work?"

"Well, enough to keep my hand in. I don't just do appliances, though, I do other costuming things, and I play around with a lot of other stuff. The local community theater keeps me pretty busy."

"Any satisfied customers who could give me a recommendation? What was the last thing you did, for instance? Marvin said it wouldn't come cheap, and if I'm shelling out the bucks, then I kind of like to get a look at what I'm paying for."

"Naturally. You can stop by, I'll show you the models I did for the last five customers. I keep pictures of all of them. Last one I did was a guy who wasn't famous. It was a prank; his girlfriend did it."

"Sounds like fun." That sounded like Victoria. He'd have to be careful. If the guy had just done a mask of him, he'd be sure to recognize him. "Somebody did a mask of me recently," Ray said smoothly. "They wouldn't tell me where they had it done. That's what made me think of doing this for the birthday party. Maybe you're the guy. Okay if I come over tonight? I don't get off work until later."

"Sure, come on over. That's the way my business works, word of mouth. I'll be here all evening." He gave Ray the address.

Vecchio hung up and looked around carefully. Huey was giving him the eye. He probably knew all about it. They probably all did.

Okay, Vecchio, don't act suspicious.

He dug back into the files and started to make up a list for Fagin and Sikes. *Just call me Oliver Twist. Are those names for real?*

He turned over the list to Welch at the end of his shift. But not one name on it was as likely as Victoria Metcalf.

Half expecting to be followed, Vecchio went directly home from work and had dinner with his family. He endured a barrage of questions. His mother was sure he was in trouble. And the fact that he hadn't brought Fraser with him, just Diefenbaker, convinced Franny that the Mountie was also in trouble, maybe even in jail. She was working up to storming the Bastille to rescue him when Ma intervened and made them all sit down for dinner.

Ray tried to act like nothing was wrong, but he had to be careful. If Francesca got one whiff of Victoria's involvement in this, she'd turn into a one-woman crusade. The last thing Ray needed was her butting into the case and complicating everything. And he could just imagine Fagin's and Sikes' reaction to his gung-ho sister.

When it was thoroughly dark, Ray sneaked out while his mother and Franny were doing the dishes. Dief wasn't happy about being deserted, but Ray squatted down in front of the wolf and said, "Come on, Dief, I'm doing this for Fraser. I'll be a lot less conspicuous without a wolf at my side."

God, now he was talking to the wolf like he was a real person. If he didn't come out of this mess crazy as a loon it would be a miracle. Worst of all, Dief actually looked resigned, and he stood back and didn't try to follow Ray. How much did he actually understand, anyway?

Ray went out the back door and circled around the block, approaching his car from the opposite direction. If anybody was watching the house, they were damned good. Hovering in the darkness beneath a large tree, he made sure no one was sitting in any of the parked cars along the street. No movement, no glow of a burning cigarette in any of the cars. They all looked deserted. When a car came down the street, he saw no one duck away from the glow of headlights.

Ray had shut off the dome light in the Riv before he got out of the car earlier, so it didn't come on when he slid in. Quickly, he closed the door and stuck the key into the ignition. He pulled into the street without his lights and left them off until he turned the corner. No cars followed him.

"I think you should turn your lights on, Ray."

Fraser's voice from the back seat nearly sent Ray jerking into a parked SUV. "Fraser!" he screeched. "What're you doing there?" He did turn on the lights, though.

"I had a feeling that you meant to go investigating this evening," the Mountie replied without rising from his position on the floorboards. "Since this is perhaps more my problem than yours, I felt it incumbent on myself to accompany you."

"You're supposed to be in a safehouse. If the baddies pull another number now, you'll only have me for an alibi and nobody'll buy it. Besides, how did you get in here?"

"I picked the lock."

Ray was flabbergasted. "You broke into my car. You broke into my car? Mr. Law and Order, breaking and entering?"

"It was done in a worthy cause, Ray. However, it took real determination on my part even to attempt it. Only the fact that your life might be in jeopardy if I did not weighed the scales enough for me to try it."

Ray had been trying his best to protect Fraser from Victoria's plans. He was so sure it *was* Victoria's plan that he'd acted without hesitation all the way down the line. But Fraser didn't know that. He probably couldn't even let himself conceptualize it. But he had still rushed to Ray's aid without hesitation, overriding a moral qualm to do so. Ray's determination to save him from his vindictive ex-girlfriend strengthened.

"You broke into my car," Ray repeated, stunned.

"You already said that." Fraser sounded slightly embarrassed. He added hastily, "Where's Diefenbaker?"

"Making nice to my ma for a piece of apple pie. I told her he was on a diet, but I think he'll talk her into it anyway."

"Oh dear." Fraser was silent a moment, then he asked, "Where are we going, Ray?"

"To talk to a guy who makes professional masks."

"Ah. Do you think it was masks, rather than doubles?"

"This guy I talked to said he could do miracles with them, as long as the general body shape and bone structure was in the ballpark. All our enemy had to do was find somebody with the same general body and facial type as either of us, somebody who wouldn't mind scoring off a cop. She probably let them keep the heist money, too."

There was a very pregnant silence from the back seat. "She, Ray?"

Damn, damn, damn. "Or he. Whoever it is," Ray said hastily, but the damage was done.

"You think it's Victoria."

Not even a question. And from the tone of his voice, Fraser had already suspected her, too, no matter how much he'd been fighting the idea.

"I don't know *who* it is," Ray insisted desperately. "But from the way the fake Mountie was center stage at the bank, it is a possibility. And I'm trying *not* to close my mind to the other possibilities. But this guy might recognize her picture."

"I have her picture in my wallet," Fraser admitted in a quiet voice.

Ray winced. After everything she'd done, he still carried it. "Benny, if she did this to you, you don't owe her a thing."

"Understood, Ray."

But Fraser didn't sound convinced. In fact, he sounded like a guy who was ready to let her walk all over him again, trample him into the dust, if only she would come back. Ray wanted to take her down so hard she'd bounce. And he wanted to do it in such a way that Fraser would finally recognize her duplicity and maliciousness.

"I know there's a part of her that really touches you, buddy," he said quietly. "But it's not the main part. The part of her that's dangerous is the part that risks innocent people. She would've destroyed my career in a heartbeat and not even cared. She used you like crazy. She stabbed Dief, for Pete's sake. Guess none of that matters, not if it gets in the way of true love."

Fraser didn't answer for a long moment, and Ray held his breath. Then the Mountie said slowly, "I know, Ray. I know what you're saying, and I understand it entirely . . . in the rational part of my being. But in the part of me that cannot help myself, I still . . . care."

"Okay, I get that. I do. It's easy to fall in love with the wrong person. But you're a cop. Your whole life – and your father's life – has been dedicated to stopping criminals. You're the most ethical man I've ever met. How can you let one woman who doesn't even deserve it destroy everything that makes you you? There isn't anything more important than your integrity."

"Yes, there is, Ray," Fraser said quietly. "There are the people I care about. Of which you are one, which is why I'm here. I turned Victoria in before. I . . . would do it again, if she is, indeed, behind this. But. . ." He was silent again and Ray didn't interrupt. Then Benny finished softly, ". . . but it would hurt."

Ray's heart softened. "I know."

"Tell me about the mask maker," Fraser said briskly. He sat up and climbed into the front seat. He was still in the red serge uniform he was wearing when the Feds had picked him up. That would be nice and subtle. The mask guy wouldn't have any trouble remembering their visit. "What makes you so sure he's our man?"

"Because he was right up front with me. Told me how he did it and everything. Huey called some places where you can hire celebrity doubles. They said that they only recruited people who looked like famous people; they didn't have a way to recruit lookalikes for the man on the street. Besides, he was pretty sure they were on the up and up.

"We did all that up front. Welch was okay with some phone questions, but he wouldn't let Huey go over there. The Feds are breathing down his neck. None of those places panned out, unless they were snowing him, but that doesn't sound likely. They could get people to look like President Clinton or Barbra Streisand, but not your average person."

"No, I believe your mask idea makes the most sense, unless whoever is behind this—" He still wouldn't quite acknowledge that it was Victoria. "Just happened on a double for me, who also happened to be a criminal. The odds of that happening are astronomical." He was silent a moment. "Did you find anyone in your cases who might try something like this?"

Ray was silent, thinking. "No, not this kind of elaborate deal. If somebody was out to get us, they'd set us up, but not like this. I gave a list of names to Welch to hand over to the feds. He didn't think any of them made sense either, and a couple of them are still in prison."

"That's what I thought," Fraser replied, then abandoned himself to brooding.

"Ah-ha, I knew it," Dave Bradley said when he let Fraser and Ray into his shop. All around him were mounted sample heads resembling the celebrities who were most in the public eye. There was an O.J. Simpson mask, one of Brad Pitt, and beyond them was one of Dolly Parton. There was the inevitable Elvis, both in his younger days and the later, gaudier version. The Three Stooges sat in a row, and beyond them was a mask of Richard Nixon. Anybody you could imagine was there. Some of them were just rubber pull-on masks, while other samples were more elaborate. There were also heads with gore makeup, scars and fangs, and fright wigs. Ray could tell from the look of the place that Bradley knew his trade.

"You knew what?" Fraser asked. "My name is Benton Fraser and this is . . . Mr. Vecchio, who telephoned you."

"I knew you'd tracked me down because of the masks I did of you," Bradley crowed. "That's always my best advertising." His gaze traveled over Fraser's red serge. "I even had to track down one of those Nelson Eddy outfits for her. Are you really a Mountie?"

"Yes," Fraser said. "I first came to Chicago on the trail of the killers of my father—"

"Not now, Benny." Ray's mind worked quickly. He knew from what the guy had said on the phone that he was the one, but Vecchio hadn't expected him to admit it just like that. Either Bradley was just hired by Victoria,

and had no further involvement beyond the creation of the masks, or she *wanted* to be found. He wasn't sure which option he liked better. Bradley could be a target if it were the former, and if it were the latter . . . they could end up playing Victoria's game.

"That's it," Ray said quickly. "Which is why I wanted to do the thing for my sister Franny. We never did find out who did our masks, but I've been checking it out."

"She didn't tell you? She said it was an elaborate practical joke, and that you'd figure it out eventually."

"She." Fraser stiffened, but the reaction was so minuscule that Bradley didn't notice.

"That's right, she said you'd know," Bradley replied with a smile. "She had a lot of pictures of you, Mr. Fraser, but she didn't have as many of you, Mr. Vecchio. I can see that I didn't get you quite right, now that I have you here in person. But you, Mr. Fraser, that was one of my best. With regular features like yours, it's much harder to do the work right – there's nothing to slightly exaggerate, but the guy she brought in to play you wasn't too far off. Blond guy, so I had to use a wig, too. She said she got the idea when she saw him and thought he looked a little like you. That's when it works best."

"How long does it take to make something like this?" Ray asked, gesturing at the masked heads. He could see that Fraser didn't want to believe, even though he knew deep inside that this was Victoria's kind of scheme.

"Depends. She wanted a rush job. I did it in a week. Takes time just setting up the mold. You've probably seen that done on TV."

Ray nodded. "Straws up the nose to breathe with? Not my idea of fun. I'm probably not a good candidate to wear a mask myself, not with this beak."

"It would be a little harder, but we could build up the appliance and tone it down if you ever want to have me make a mask for you. Add to the brow ridge, pad out the cheeks, fill in the bridge of the nose. It'd give you rather deep-set eyes, but it could be done. Now, you said you wanted to have your sister made up. Did you bring her picture?"

Ray dug out his wallet and handed over a picture of Franny. He'd figured he'd better have one with him if they didn't want the guy to get suspicious.

Bradley ogled Francesca's picture. "Not bad, not bad at all."

Ray stomped down the urge to deck the guy. His big brother protective instincts were strong, but right now saving Fraser had to take priority. "The lady who hired you . . . did she have a mask made for herself?" he asked.

"Miss Metcalf? No, she thought about it, but she hasn't done it yet. I wouldn't be surprised if she comes back to have one made, a lady for practical jokes such as her."

Fraser ground his teeth.

Ray wished there was something he could say to help, but he knew nothing would ease Fraser's pain. It was something his friend had to work out for himself. After all, the more he heard about Victoria the more he'd realize what she was really like. And maybe he'd finally be forced to admit it to himself.

"She is quite the joker," Fraser said stiffly.

"She did tell me to give you a message if you got this far," Bradley said with a grin. "I think she enjoyed knowing you two would find out she was the one who played the joke on you." He chuckled reminiscently, then he went over to the cash register and rang it open. When he came back, he held a small business card. "She said to give you this if you showed up."

Ray reached out and snatched the card before Fraser could. It read, "Cheddar Hills Estate," with an address on Lake Michigan, over the border with Wisconsin. He turned the card over and found a note in handwriting that he guessed Fraser would recognize. It said, "You didn't expect I'd go away, did you?" If Bradley wasn't in on her scheme, it was as much as she could say.

Fraser craned his neck to read it, then sucked in a soft breath and raised hollow eyes to meet Ray's. He looked like he'd taken a hard kick to the solar plexus.

Vecchio made an appointment for Franny to come in. If he had to go through with it, he'd pay for the mask for her. She'd probably get a charge out of it, and her birthday was coming up. Let her pick the actress she'd like to emulate; maybe she could flirt with Fraser in it and cheer him up. They left without Bradley figuring out that something was wrong. If he was in on the plan, he'd probably be on the phone to Victoria the second they walked out the door.

"So, what do you think?" Ray asked. "We go up there?"

"Neither of us have jurisdiction in Wisconsin, Ray."

"No, but I'm not gonna hand this over to Fagin and Sikes without a fight." He knew he was probably only a minor annoyance to Victoria, someone she'd happily take down after the incident at the train station, but she wanted revenge. The fury of a woman scorned and all that, even if Fraser hadn't scorned her. Ray was nervous about taking him along. It would be safer to take him to the safehouse, grovel a little to the feds and make sure they kept their eyes on him. But Ray was sure that Fraser, having seen the address on the card, would only sneak away again and follow him. If they went together, at least he could keep his eye on Fraser and guard him from himself.

"We can find out what she's up to," he concluded. "We don't necessarily have to go in."

He turned the Riv north and aimed it for Wisconsin. It was going to be a long night.

"Miss Metcalf? This is Dave Bradley from the mask shop. You were right, your friends managed to track me down. I gave them your business card the way you asked me to. I'm glad it worked out for you. And I wanted to thank you."

"To thank me?" asked the woman on the other end of the phone. She sounded surprised.

"Yes. They liked the prank so well they're going to have me make a mask for Mr. Vecchio's sister. I appreciate the business."

"And I appreciate the call," she said. "I'll recommend you to all my friends, Mr. Bradley. Thank you. I like the way you do business."

Dave Bradley hung up feeling very pleased with himself. He let himself remember the sound of her velvet voice as it poured over the line. He couldn't help wondering if there was any future in asking her out. He'd have to think about that one. A remarkably beautiful woman – and she had a sense of humor. That was a combination that couldn't be beat. He closed up the shop for the night, imagining the reunion between Victoria and her two friends. . . .

The mirror shattered when the bullet struck it and Ray ducked into shelter, his breath coming in harsh pants. They were stalking him, and he'd lost Fraser somewhere in the depths of the house ten minutes ago. The Mountie could already be dead. Ray had heard plenty of gunfire, and Fraser wasn't answering his calls.

With a struggle to control his rasping breathing, Ray crouched behind the table and tried to get his bearings. The house was ancient, or it looked that way. It brooded in the quiet night, heavy with menace. At the end of the corridor where he sheltered, a great stone arch led into a hallway with a staircase curving down at the far side.

Gun at the ready, Ray edged into the room, then jerked to a halt at the sight of a shadow on the stairs. He jerked up his gun and fired at the movement.

Halfway down the flight, Fraser jerked when he was hit. A darker red spread across his uniform right in the middle of his chest, then, without a sound, he pitched forward, crashing down the stairs to land in a sprawled and broken heap at Ray's feet. Sightless eyes were turned reproachfully on the detective.

In the darkness at the top of the stairs, Victoria's cruel laugh rang out. She stepped into the light and aimed her own gun at Vecchio.

"Nooooo!"

Ray erupted from his restless sleep. Startled, Fraser jerked the wheel of the Riv and nearly put them into a ditch along the road. While Ray sucked in several urgent breaths, the Mountie fought the wheel, finally managing to gain control over the car.

Fortunately for them the road was deserted. The headlights created a tunnel of light into the darkness, where Victoria waited.

Fraser risked a concerned glance in his direction. "A bad dream, Ray?"

"Yeah, I guess," he confirmed edgily, unwilling to discuss it, not even with his best friend. He didn't want anybody digging around in the dark corners of his psyche. The shooting at the train station might be behind them, but Ray couldn't help thinking that Fraser still harbored some deeply buried resentment.

The Mountie's determination to find Victoria only intensified Vecchio's doubts. No wonder he had dreamed. He should have driven the entire way, then he wouldn't have had the chance to sleep and risk the nightmare. With the stark terror of the dream so fresh in his memory, he would be in lousy shape to confront Fraser's *bete noir*, and his own, especially since Fraser would probably need him to keep his head.

"Do you want to discuss it, Ray?"

Vecchio shook his head more violently than he meant to. "Just a dream," he said, trying hard to sound offhand. Bad enough admitting to a bad dream, even worse to tell this particular one to Fraser – especially when the body lying sprawled and broken at the foot of the stairs recalled the reality of Fraser lying near death on the platform in the snow. He really had almost killed his best friend. He didn't want to keep

doing it endlessly in his dreams. How long did he have to keep paying his dues? Would stopping Victoria finally put an end to it?

Fraser gave him a quick, sidelong glance, then turned his attention back to the dark road. They had left the highway.

"Where are we?" Ray asked.

"Just past Kenosha. I was about to wake you."

"Good, pull over and we'll switch places." Ray hadn't been crazy about letting Fraser handle the Riv in the first place. The Mountie wasn't the world's greatest driver. One of the few things in the known universe that Benton Fraser didn't do well. But they'd agreed to take turns, catching catnaps on the way. Ray had driven through Chicago, then let Fraser take over once the traffic thinned.

When they were on their way again, Ray glanced over at the Mountie. "You gonna be okay with this, Benny?" He hated to ask. It would've been easier to just pretend that everything was fine. But he was going into a dangerous situation, and with someone he wasn't a hundred per cent sure would back him up. Not that Fraser would hurt him, or allow anyone else to, but when Victoria appeared, all bets would be off. Ray could feel the muscles in his neck tightening into rigid steel cords.

Fraser didn't immediately reply. Ray caught his breath as the silence stretched out. And just when it would have become unbearable, Benny said flatly, "I must. I can't allow crimes to be perpetrated. I can't allow my friends to be made victims on my behalf." Justice was probably pretty cold comfort. He added, "I'll do what is necessary, Ray, but I don't want to talk about it."

Ray let it go. He wasn't comfortable talking about it either, but a part of him felt that maybe they should. But there wasn't time for a long shrink session, even if Fraser was open to it. They were nearly there. He'd just have to be very careful and watch Benny's back. He had to make sure that Victoria didn't get the upper hand.

Abruptly, a driveway loomed ahead, a signpost proclaiming "Cheddar Hills Estate." Huge grilled gates stood ajar. Ray's taut muscles grew even tighter at the sight of them and he sucked in a sharp breath. Beside him, Fraser jerked slightly. His face was rigid and as expressionless as Vecchio had ever seen it.

Ray cut the lights and pulled into the driveway, glad that there was an almost full moon. At least he wouldn't drive them off the road in the dark. No one came out to greet them, or to stop them. A small gatehouse at the end of the driveway was dark and silent.

As the driveway curved around, the house came into view and Ray nearly put the Riv into the shallow ditch. It was the house he'd been dreaming about. He caught his breath and stared, eyes widening in disbelief. It *couldn't* be the same house. He'd never been there before. It was crazy. He wasn't psychic. But it was the same house, of that he was absolutely sure. In spite of the chill in the air, he felt the sweat begin to bead on his forehead. This was going to be bad.

"What's wrong, Ray?" Fraser asked. Even with his thoughts on Victoria, he noticed Ray's involuntary flinch and sensed the detective's galloping tension.

"Nothing. We just have to play this one careful," he said as he stopped the Riv in the shadow of the trees that enclosed the driveway and shut it off.

The two men sat, staring up at the huge Spanish-style house that waiting for them like a giant beast of prey. Lights blazed in nearly every window.

"Will you step into my parlor," Ray muttered, *sotto voce*.

Fraser sounded as tense as Ray felt. "Indeed."

With an abrupt motion, Ray leaned over and opened the glove compartment. He removed the Beretta 9mm that he kept there and passed it to Fraser. "You take that."

Fraser drew back and spread his hands. "I have no authority to use a gun in this country, Ray."

"Well, it's not gonna kill you to *point* a gun, is it? The bad guys won't know you've got this little ethical issue. And they're sure gonna be shooting at you." At least they would if the scenario played out like the one in his dream. He couldn't let Fraser go in there unarmed. He couldn't. "I'm not backing down on this one, Benny. Take it, damn it."

"Victoria will know I won't use it," Fraser said, his mouth twisting with the mention of her name.

"Yeah, but it's not the first thing she'd think to tell her sidekicks. So, let's just hope that you don't have to use the thing. Come on, Benny, take it. I know how you feel about this, but at least you can *look* like a threat and cover the bad guys until I can get there. This'll be tough enough without you being unarmed."

Fraser could see the grim determination in Ray's eyes and recognized it for what it was. He took the gun and checked it expertly to make certain it was loaded, then tucked it into his belt.

Ray could almost imagine him swearing to himself that he wouldn't use it. *Damn it, Fraser.*

The front door stood open, awaiting them. Ray shivered as they entered the now familiar hallway. He had walked it countless times in his nightmares. The vast stone archways and the mirrors gave it an eerie feel, and their images reflected back at him. He drew his gun and his reflection in five different mirrors copied his action. If only he were still dreaming. . . .

No matter what happened, he vowed he wouldn't shoot without knowing his target. He would *not* shoot Fraser again.

"No one's here." Fraser's words were no more than a breath.

"Oh yeah, someone's here," Ray countered softly. "Someone's here waiting for us. You be careful, Benny. We don't want to get separated." If Benny's double was running around it could lead to real trouble. His own double didn't bother him so much. If they were separated, though, Ray's double might take Fraser down while he hesitated, unwilling to shoot. They had to stay together.

They stood, listening, but there was no sound in the house, only a vast, waiting silence. But someone was there. Someone was stalking them. Ray knew it like he hadn't known anything else in his life. It was pure certainty. All hell was about to break loose.

They crept down a silent corridor, past another row of mirrors, past a giant chest large enough to hold a body or two. Fraser paused, glancing down at it like he expected Victoria to fling open the lid and spring out like some dancer might pop out of a birthday cake.

A bullet whizzed through the space where Fraser would have been if he hadn't slowed to look at the chest.

As one, the two men dove for cover. A mirror exploded behind Ray, one of the shards of glass nicking his ear. He scarcely felt it as he watched Fraser duck into a shadowy hallway. When Ray tried to follow him, another shot drove him down a different passageway, forcing them apart.

Just like the dream.

Vecchio's breath whistled out in harsh pants, and he stood gasping, half-trapped in the dreamscape setting. For a blind instant, he wasn't even sure if this was real. Then another shot rang out in the distance and he felt his stomach knot in panic.

"Fraser!"

No reply.

Shit. A bullet chased him down the corridor, and he came to a dead stop before it joined another passage. Cautiously, he peered around the corner. His own image met him, gun in hand.

Ray fired automatically, and a mirror shattered. Damn. Now he was shooting at shadows, blasting away at his own reflection. Victoria wouldn't hesitate to kill him, but what she would do to Fraser would be worse than death in the long run. She might claim to love him, but it was a sick, possessive love that was tangled up with revenge. Ray had to stay alive so he could stop her. *Don't freeze up, Vecchio. Keep going. You have to play this out.*

He ducked around the corner and edged along the passage, hugging the wall. Another bullet came from behind him, but he kept on going, ducking into another passage. "Where are you, Fraser?" he muttered under his breath. Had Victoria found him? Had she urged her men to separate them, to drive Ray away from Fraser?

Probably.

That meant he had to go back. In his dream, he circled around and found himself in a corridor with a flight of stairs. Better to go back the way he'd come instead of covering new ground. Fraser had to be back that way.

When he turned, another shot whizzed past his cheek and he ducked, whirled, and fired. He missed. Just for a second, he got a glimpse of the gunman, who was dressed like he was in a raincoat, his head bare to reveal thinning hair. And there was the Vecchio nose. At least it was his own double shooting at him, somebody he knew was one of the bad guys. Not that Fraser would shoot at him.

But the false Fraser would.

Ray ducked behind the limited protection of a huge oak cabinet with wrought iron ribs and traded shots with his doppelganger. He couldn't hear any other shooting, or any other voices. He couldn't hear any other sounds except the crash of gunfire and the occasional shattering of a mirror that lined the hallway walls.

"Fraser!" he yelled again. The guy shooting at him knew exactly where he was; he wasn't giving anything away.

Fraser still didn't answer. *He might be protecting his position, Ray thought. He might've gone to cover.* But Fraser would never go to cover when Ray was in danger.

Unless Victoria has him.

Ray's stomach congealed into a sick, twisted knot. He knew Fraser wouldn't hurt him, but Fraser might be helpless before Victoria. He might be unable to act.

Ray might be on his own.

Another shot just missed him. Vecchio leaned out and fired again.

With a choked-off cry, the false Vecchio pitched forward and landed with a soft *thud* on the burgundy carpet, his blood only slightly brighter than the rug. His gun fell from nerveless fingers. Ray kicked it away from him before he knelt to check on his double. Not dead, but down for the count with a shoulder wound. Ray scooped up the extra gun and tucked it into his waistband. God, the guy looked a lot like him. It was uncanny to gaze down at the unconscious face that looked so much like his own. Vecchio felt for the mask and ripped a corner of it away just in case the guy staggered up and went after Fraser. He couldn't pass for Ray with his mask in tatters.

Ray moved on.

No sign of Fraser, no trace of movement, nothing but his own reflection in the mirror shards he passed, creating a hodgepodge of odd angles and corners. There was blood on Ray's forehead from a cut, and more on his left ear. He looked about as intact as the broken images, his expression grim and taut with strain, his face white, sweaty. He looked shaken and desperate.

Oh yeah, he was in great shape to take on Victoria.

He moved on instinct, his feet leading him to the stairs as if he had been pre-programmed to go there by his repetitive nightmares. Ray tried to stop himself, but it felt like he was wading through freshly poured concrete. The coming climax was as inevitable as the sunrise.

He emerged into the passage where the stairs curved up and away from him toward a shadowed second floor. As Ray entered the vestibule, he caught an abrupt movement at the top of the stairs. Fraser started down, only to stop part way down when he saw Ray standing there. He was a dead ringer for Benton Fraser. He even had Ray's 9mm in his hand. Fraser, or the guy at the bank? Which? From this far away, Ray simply couldn't be sure.

But then, Fraser couldn't be sure, either. For all the Mountie knew, he was looking at the fake Ray.

"Benny?" Ray ventured without lowering his gun.

"Ray?"

God, it was even Fraser's voice. He hadn't expected that. The double wouldn't sound like Fraser, would he? Could he mock the Mountie's voice for one word? Would Fraser know it was him?

Benny raised the 9mm and aimed it right at Vecchio's chest.

What would he need to be convinced? The dream superimposed itself over reality and Ray saw Fraser falling, saw the light slide out of his eyes as he pleaded softly, "Why, Ray?"

Time sped up – or slowed down – as the fatal scenario played itself out in Ray's mind. He couldn't shoot Fraser. He couldn't possibly take the chance or making the dream a reality, not after the train station. He simply couldn't shoot his best friend again.

He started to lower his gun.

The fake Fraser's bullet took him hard in the arm and dumped him onto the carpet with what felt like massive G-forces. Stunned, shaking, and as cold as ice, Ray saw malice spread across the too-familiar features, transforming them into those of a stranger's, who just happened to be made up to look like Benton Fraser. The double leveled his gun for a killing shot.

The second shot was loud in the breathless silence. Ray flinched, expecting it to impact his body and finish him off, but instead, the false Mountie gasped, dropped the gun, and clawed at his chest before he tumbled down the stairs in a long, bumping roll, head over heels, exactly like in Ray's dream.

Ray forced his head around and saw a white-faced Benton Fraser standing in the archway, just lowering the 9mm he held in a white-knuckled grip. "Oh dear," he said inadequately, then started for Ray. "Ray, how bad —?"

Movement at the top of the stairs froze the Mountie like a deer trapped in the on-coming headlights of a car.

Victoria.

She was beautiful, and evil as Cruella DeVil: gloating, confident, utterly certain of Fraser. "Hello, Ben," she said. The seductive, compelling tone turned his name into a deadly lure.

"Victoria." The word made no sound. Fraser's lips moved, but his voice was silent.

Ray's fingers tightened over the wound in his arm. He didn't move or speak. He even held his breath.

Victoria smiled. There was a glint of triumph in her eyes. "Now you must join me," she said. "You killed a man, Ben. I know you have no authority to use a weapon in this country. Come with me, like you meant to in Chicago."

Would he have gone? Would the decision have held if Ray hadn't fired and hit his best friend by mistake? Ray wasn't sure even Fraser knew the answer to that.

Fraser looked at the gun in his hand and made to throw it away.

"No, Benny, don't," Ray said softly.

"Oh, is it still alive?" Victoria shifted her gaze to the downed man and Ray saw utter remorselessness in them. He was a fly to be swatted, a pebble to be removed from her shoe, nothing more. She lifted the gun she held and pointed it at the center of Vecchio's chest.

To Ray, it looked as big as a cannon.

"Don't," Fraser insisted desperately. "Victoria, don't."

"You love me. You want to come with me. You don't want to stay with him. Come to me, Ben, leave him, and I'll let him live."

Oh, God, would that work? Would she even keep her promise once Fraser gave his? Ray struggled to sit up, but his muscles refused and it felt like he was trying to push jell-O up the wall. He couldn't move, couldn't

do anything to help. "Benny, no," he breathed, stricken. It wasn't his own life he worried about now, it was just the acute need to keep his best friend from making the worst mistake of his life.

Fraser flashed a desperate glance at Ray, his gaze lingering on the reddened sleeve of Ray's raincoat and the fresh blood that oozed between clutching fingers. If possible, he went whiter than before.

"You don't want her . . . on those terms," Ray gasped. "You can't. Not and be . . . the man I know . . . you are."

"Come with me, Ben," Victoria crooned. Her aim never wavered, and Ray knew with cold, icy certainty that she would shoot him no matter what choice Fraser made. She would just wait until he made a choice . . . when it would do the most possible damage.

Fraser stood utterly rigid, as if he knew that to move or to make any decision at all would end a part of his life forever.

Ray tried again. "She's gonna kill me."

Vecchio thought he'd spoken aloud, but the words came out as nothing more than a breathless gasp of sound. But Fraser had heard him. A muscle bunched in the Mountie's jaw. Ray stared up at the man, feeling cold and weak. He was going to die and here was nothing Fraser could do would stop it.

But Fraser didn't look in Ray's direction.

That was it. He had chosen Victoria over honor. None of this, "I could not love you half so much, loved I not honor more" kind of thing for Fraser. Ray would have sworn that such values were his friend's banner and creed. But no. He was going to fall for it, for the woman, for what he believed was true love. But Victoria meant to use him up and throw him away. Kipling had it right all along. The female of the species *was* deadlier than the male.

The silence spun out, only Ray's harsh breathing and the nearly-audible thud of his heart shattered it. Fraser stood like a museum statue, frozen in place. Victoria moved, a vision of icy beauty, the gun steady in her delicate hand.

Her finger tightened on the trigger.

Ray braced himself for the fatal impact. He knew he was going to die. "Fraser," he pleaded. "Don't—"

Almost simultaneously, two shots rang out. Ray jerked and tried to fling himself sideways. When he didn't feel the final impact, he dared to lift his head.

Victoria still stood on the stairs, but the gun was gone from her hand, her fingers red with blood. Fraser lowered the 9mm, his face impossibly whiter than before. Her expression was one of pure loathing. "I'll kill you," she said, not even raising her voice.

Her good hand clasping the rail, she rushed down the stairs and flung herself at Fraser, her fingers curled to claw at his face. Her mouth twisted in fury, her eyes glittered coldly, she was a complete stranger.

Fraser caught her by the wrists and restrained her. A string of vicious profanity spilled from her lips as she writhed in his grip.

"Handcuffs, Ray," Benny said in the flattest tone he'd ever used.

Ray let go of his bleeding arm long enough to tug them out of his pocket and toss them to the Mountie.

Fraser secured Victoria with her arms around the newel post. Then he turned his back on her and knelt beside Ray. Once he turned away, he never looked at Victoria again. It was almost as if she had, at that moment, ceased to exist for him. The part of him that had loved her was gone, and in its place was nothing but a hollow emptiness. Ray's heart ached for him, in spite of his overwhelming relief that the spell was finally broken.

"How bad is it, Ray?"

"I don't think my arm is broken." He was shivering though, cold.

With great care, Fraser worked Ray's arm out of his coat and wrapped a handkerchief around it as a temporary bandage. "Why didn't you shoot?" he asked. "I was too far away. I saw what happened, but I was too late. I yelled, but he fired and the sound of the shot must have covered it. Why did you just stand there?"

Ray, already more than half out of it, he lifted his eyes and focused on Fraser's face. "I thought he was you," he said. "I couldn't be sure. He even had the same kind of gun." He shivered.

"Why?" Fraser repeated without comprehension. "Why didn't you shoot, Ray?"

"I guess I figured . . . if one of us was . . . gonna take a bullet . . . I'd rather it was me."

Fraser stared at him for an endless moment. Behind them, Victoria made a scornful, sneering sound.

Then Fraser's expression crumbled and, for a horrifying instant, it looked as if he might cry. The moment passed and the Mountie put his arm around Ray's shoulders, holding onto Vecchio like he was the prize at the end of a long, hard-fought game.

"I didn't deserve it," he murmured almost inaudibly. "I wanted to go with her, Ray. A part of me still does."

"But you aren't gonna," Ray replied, leaning contentedly against his friend's shoulder. "Are you?"

"No, Ray, I'm not."

"Fraser! Vecchio!"

The two of them jumped at the shout. Before they could reply, men poured into the passage, led by Fagin and Sikes, their guns at the ready. Spotting Victoria and the fake Mountie at the bottom of the stairs, they converged and started yelling questions.

"You followed us?" Ray asked woozily as Fraser collected himself enough to move back and secure the temporary bandage.

"All the way, from the moment Fraser left the safehouse," Sikes proclaimed. "That character over there is a double for Fraser, all right. We also talked to the man who made the masks. He was pretty upset; didn't realize what he was getting into. He even warned her you were coming, with all the best intentions in the world. We thought we'd get here too late."

Fagin waved his badge in Victoria's face. "Victoria Metcalf, you're under arrest."

Ray decided that was enough for the night. He let his head fall back against Fraser's shoulder and slipped into the peace of unconsciousness.

Ray woke in a hospital, conscious of the throbbing in his arm and the feel of an IV running into the back of his hand. The first thing he saw when he opened his eyes was Fraser, who was sleeping in a chair beside his bed. Diefenbaker was curled up beside him. Traces of strain still showed on the sleeping man's face, but he seemed more peaceful than Ray had expected. Maybe knowing it was finally over made a difference.

Dief hadn't been there before, had he? Ray remembered moments of chaos from the night before in the hospital. Was he still there? Yep, it looked like the same room. He remembered his mother and Francesca arriving, forcing their way in to see him even though visiting hours were over. Their voices were raised, strident in their determination to rush to his side. Maybe they had brought the wolf. Dief had probably insisted. How had Fraser gotten him past hospital security?

"Benny?" Ray said softly.

Fraser jerked awake. He looked neat and tidy despite his unshaven state, but he paused automatically to straighten his uniform. Talk about a conditioned response.

"Oh. Ray."

Uh oh. I don't like that penitent look in his eyes, Vecchio thought. "Hi, Fraser. What's going down this morning?"

"Nothing. You'll be discharged in a few hours. They are very pleased with your arm. I'll drive you back to Chicago."

"Good. I hate hospitals." He hesitated. "What about the Feds?"

"They were not happy with us. Fagin and Sikes lectured me extensively last night. I think they wanted very badly to arrest me. I believe they had the right. I did fire a weapon, and I have no authority to do so in America. Evidently they were willing to accept that I did it to save your life. They did say they would speak to Inspector Thatcher. I'm certain the reprimand I shall receive from her will make the FBI's version appear quite tame by comparison."

"I suppose Lt. Welch knows about this?" Ray asked warily.

"Yes. I spoke to him by telephone. He was very angry, but worried about you as well. You will have to endure a lecture, too, I'm afraid, when we return to Chicago. He said he would like to 'bust you to crossing guard,' I believe was how he phrased it, but since we caught the bank robbers, and stopped any further crimes, he said he wouldn't actually do it."

Ray shifted against the pillows. His arm still hurt, but it felt a lot better than it had the night before. Now it was just a dull, muted throb, rather than a sharp, jangling agony. He hesitated, then took the plunge. *Come on, Benny, you can do this.* "What about Victoria?"

"Your double talked. He's also in the hospital here, under police guard. He implicated her completely. My doppelganger is dead; the wound I inflicted would not have killed him, but he broke his neck when he fell down the stairs. Fagin and Sikes were astonished when they pulled the mask off of him and discovered one of the men on their most wanted list. A bank robber from the East Coast named Seth Robinson. He had served time, and was suspected of a murder in Newark. When Fagin and Sikes saw his face, they actually became quite benevolent toward us. We've been completely exonerated in the bank robbery, of course."

Well, that was certainly a lot of information, but it didn't have anything to do with Ray's original question. This might be hard. "And Victoria?" Ray didn't want to push, but he had to know.

Fraser heaved a sigh. "I find that I am quite disgusted with myself. I've been a fool. All along, I believed that I could redeem Victoria – that I could find the real person underneath the woman who had been forced to take up a life of crime. I believed that woman was real, and that she was the one I fell in love with, but I'm not certain she actually exists. I've deluded myself, Ray, for far too long. I owe you a most sincere apology. I almost allowed her to kill you."

"Well, you didn't." It was an awkward answer, but the whole subject was awkward. "I always knew you'd do the right thing in the end, Benny. Even if you'd gone with her the last time."

Fraser bowed his head. Sensing his mood, Diefenbaker whined softly and pushed his nose up under Fraser's hand. Absently, the Mountie stroked the wolf's ears. "I was going to, Ray," he admitted without looking up.

"I know. But I don't think you would've gone very far." Ray wasn't entirely certain of that, but he knew Benton Fraser, and he knew the honor and integrity that were so basic to his friend's make up. He would have come to his senses. Ray had to believe that, and this time he had reason to believe it. Fraser might have gone if he was the only one involved, but he wouldn't let her hurt another person. The fact that she had been willing, even eager, to do so, must have been the last straw.

Ray added hastily, "You're running up quite a rap sheet here. Breaking out of a safehouse. Breaking *into* my car. Firing weapons in the United States."

"Yes, Ray. I feel terribly guilty about all of it."

"Oh, thanks." Ray grimaced comically.

"Not guilty for saving your life, of course." Fraser's tensed muscles eased slightly. "But for not being able to do it without resorting to an illegal use of firearms."

"Come on, Benny, I've got no jurisdiction in Wisconsin, either," Ray reminded him. He took a deep breath and realized one more thing. The sensation of ominous foreboding that had hung over him since the dreams started, since he'd shot Benny, was gone. Really gone. He felt purged and new, safe and confident, for the first time in a long time. When the chips were down, Fraser had chosen honor over temptation. He had chosen to save his friend's life rather than to surrender to the temptation of Victoria. Later on, when the pain faded, Fraser would realize that too and he would be glad. He'd done what he'd done to maintain the right. He could live with himself, and look at himself in the mirror, without loathing. For that, Ray could take a bullet wound. It was a cheap enough price for a man's soul.

It would be a long time before Fraser would think of Victoria without that special shiver of pain and rapture. Maybe he never would. But at least he was still what he'd always been, a man of great integrity and loyalty. And Ray's best friend.

"You know, Benny, I think we did okay for ourselves," he said with a tentative smile.

Fraser hesitated, then he returned it. If there was sadness in his eyes, there was also warmth. "So we did," he said. His hand absently stirred the fur on Diefenbaker's head.

"Vecchio." It was Fagin in the doorway. "I've got a lot of things I want to say to you, and you kept passing out last night, so I didn't get the chance. I've been talking to your Lt. Welch and I want you to know—"

Ray wiggled his eyebrows comically at Fraser, then abandoned himself to his reprimand.