

GHOST IN THE MACHINE

by Sheila Paulson

Ray Vecchio heard the familiar purr of the engine in his dreams, tuned just the way he liked it, the way he'd worked to perfect for years, before he'd been forced to blow up his dream car to save his life and Fraser's, before he'd found the second one, the replacement. That one was gone, too, gone to far less purpose and more grief, taking with it the life of Detective Gardino. But the engine that revved in his dreams was not the second Riviera or even the one he owned now, the one that still needed work to make it feel right when he drove it. The engine in his dreams was his original dream car, and it was so real that when he awoke he could still hear it idling softly outside his bedroom window.

Ray woke amid twisted sheets that spoke of restless sleep and nightmares, rubbing his eyes with one hand and massaging his forehead with the other. He hadn't dreamed of his first Riviera for a long time, probably almost a year. But he could still hear the fading dream echoes, the way the engine would sometimes catch if it idled too long, the faint hiccup of sound before it settled into its reassuring, well-tuned purr.

This was crazy! He couldn't hear it; it was long gone. It must be another engine that sounded just like his old Riv. An identical engine just outside his window. How could that be? Ray might not know everything about every car, but he knew *that* car. And it was *that* car he was hearing now.

Flinging back the covers he raced to the window and looked down.

Beside his current Buick Riviera, a second one sat idling, lights on. He couldn't see the driver, but he knew that familiar sound. It was his old car come back, and that was impossible. His old car had been in fragments scattered across the landscape, too many fragments to reassemble.

"I must still be dreaming," he muttered, but the floor was cold under his bare feet and, away from the covers, he could feel goose bumps rising on his arms. "This is just a crazy dream."

The car horn tooted at him, the same old sound, so familiar he closed his eyes, still feeling the loss of his beloved car. In the darkness behind his eyelids, he could still hear the engine, then, it was gone, not abruptly as if it had been turned off, and not gradually, as if the car had been driven away. Just...gone.

Ray opened his eyes. The street was empty.

"You seem distracted this morning, Ray," Fraser stated four hours later. Ray had swung by the consulate to pick up his unofficial partner to ride along with him on what would otherwise be a boring stake-out of an abandoned--and likely to stay that way--warehouse. It had once been a hide-out of prison escapee, Ronnie Bledsoe. Bledsoe was reputed to be heading back to Chicago to get his girlfriend, who had testified against him. The girlfriend was safe and protected, in another state, and Bledsoe's family was being watched, but a snitch had reported Bledsoe had previously hidden out in a certain South side dump of a warehouse. Being at present low man on the totem pole in Lt. Harding Welsh's estimation, a position Ray seemed to achieve every other

week, he had been assigned to watch it, and at the same time keep himself, Fraser, and Fraser's wolf, Diefenbaker, out of the precinct house and Welsh's hair. It was only a step above crossing guard duty in Ray's estimation, but at least it was better than being stuck behind a desk.

"Nah, I'm not distracted," he said hastily, trying to stuff the memory of the ghostly Riviera back into the realm of dreams where it belonged. "Just didn't sleep very well last night, that's all. Ma's lasagna was a touch too spicy for me." He thumped his chest with his fist to indicate world-class heartburn, though it took more than spicy Italian food to bring on such a complaint in a Vecchio.

"Your mother makes excellent lasagna," Fraser remarked. "Dief was asking me just the other day to find out if she would share her recipe."

Ray cast an involuntary glance into the back seat where the white wolf sat at attention, head moving back and forth like a spectator at a tennis match as he apparently attempted to follow the conversation by lip-reading. There were times when Ray half believed Fraser's contention that the Arctic wolf could read lips, and others when he suspected Fraser had a dry and wicked sense of humor and said things with a straight face because he knew a lot of people would accept them when spoken in such a tone. The latter would have been a much more comfortable belief, but Diefenbaker kept surprising him. Ray preferred to keep his options open.

"I'll ask her," Ray promised. "You ought to come over for dinner more often. Ma says you're the most polite friend I ever had, and she just loves to see people—and wolves—eat."

"Perhaps," Fraser temporized and Ray hid a grin, knowing the source of Benny's hesitation; Ray's sister Francesca, who had the hots for the Mountie. Every time Ray had coaxed Fraser over for dinner, Francesca had made a dead set at him. While Fraser could pretend complete innocence and ignorance of her motives, he knew them very well. The question, "So, you wanna have sex?" was explicit enough even for Fraser, especially as it had been directed at him at choir practice. If Ray didn't know that it wasn't the Mountie's way to encourage casual bed-partners, he'd have been very worried about his sister's virtue, especially knowing she had once turned up very skimpily clad at his fleabag apartment at least once. Just as well. He'd hate to have to punch out his best friend.

Ray ran an idle hand over the steering wheel. It should have felt just like the steering wheel in his original Riviera, but it didn't. There was a slight difference, and today it seemed more noticeable than usual. Fraser saw the gesture and his brow puckered slightly. "Is there something wrong with the car, Ray?" he asked.

Ray had just started to answer when he saw the other car in the rear-view mirror. His eyes narrowed and he reached up to adjust the mirror, staring in disbelief. It was his Riviera. His *first* Riviera. It was just behind him, and no one was driving it. Worse, it looked a little fuzzy around the edges. Open-mouthed with disbelief, Ray could only stare, then he jerked around and peered behind him. There was no ghostly Riviera in sight. When he glanced in the rear-view mirror again, it was still there.

Fraser and Diefenbaker both watched the performance with considerable interest, and Fraser turned to stare out the back window, his expression proving he saw nothing astonishing there.

"Are we being followed, Ray?" the Mountie asked.

"No," he said quickly. "I was just making sure."

"I see," said Fraser in the tones of one who does not entirely believe the story he is being told but it prepared to accept it, at least for now, for the sake of politeness. Fraser was always polite. He was Canadian, after all. It went with the territory.

"You didn't see anything odd back there?" Ray asked warily.

"Define 'odd'," Fraser instructed, his eyes narrowing slightly as he studied Ray.

"Anything that shouldn't be there, all right?" Ray couldn't help snapping. "Anything out of place."

Fraser turned and stared out the window again while Ray watched the ghost car in the rear view mirror. Diefenbaker turned his head and looked, too, making a faint, whining sound that caused the Mountie to stare at him in surprise. "Really?" Fraser demanded.

Dief turned around quickly, staring out the window, and Ray had the uncanny feeling the wolf could see his former car as clearly as he could. Didn't they say animals were sensitive to the spirit world?

"What do you mean, really?" Ray stalled. "Come on, Benny, we both know Dief isn't the world's greatest conversationalist. We're nearly there. I'm gonna see if I can find a way around so if Bledsoe's watching for us, he won't spot us. This close to the hideout I want to make sure we don't run into him by accident."

"Dief believes we are being followed," Fraser explained. "However, I have been watching and have observed no evidence of a tail."

"Maybe it's just some wolf thing," suggested Ray. From the way Fraser looked at him, it was clear he suspected something was wrong, but Ray couldn't tell him he was seeing a ghost Riviera any more than he could tell the Mountie he sometimes saw the ghost of his own father. There were some things that simply couldn't be said. Besides Fraser would probably start to wonder if he was crazy. Ray couldn't help wondering that himself.

He turned down a side street, slowed down, with quick glances in the rear view mirror. The other car hadn't followed them. He heaved a sigh of relief as they came around a final corner, and lifted his foot from the accelerator to slow them down. There was the warehouse ahead of them, cut off from easy sight by a stack of garbage pails. Gliding to a halt behind them, Ray shut off the car. "They won't be so quick to notice us here," he said.

"I'm sure you're right, Ray."

He cast a look in the rear-view mirror. No ghostly Riv. Could he have imagined it all? Had Dief really seen it? Did Dief see his dad when he made one of his periodic appearances? Was there actually anything to see?

Cop, Mountie, and wolf settled in to wait. The atmosphere a little strained between them. Fraser was slightly hurt that Ray would keep a secret from him. Ray himself was worried and embarrassed. If all this ghostly stuff kept up, he could hire himself out to the Ghostbusters, point out ghosts to them that no one else could see. It was crazy! Had to be his imagination.

The warehouse looked deserted. "Maybe we should check it out," Ray suggested. "If I climbed up on those crates, I could get a look in that window up there."

"You would also be in full view of anyone who drove up once you'd started your climb," Fraser pointed out. "Bledsoe killed two police officers. I doubt he would hesitate to make sure you were an innocent bystander before he fired at you."

"Good point," Ray agreed. Besides, the building just *felt* safe, unthreatening. While it would be good to check it out, he didn't want to check it out in full public view. "Maybe if I worked around behind the place, I could find a window that wasn't so exposed."

"Surveillance, Ray. It means waiting and watching. Lieutenant Welsh didn't instruct you to go inside."

"Well, can Dief sniff the place out and check if anybody's in there?" Ray hazarded. He didn't think Bledsoe would be as quick to shoot at a stray dog--or stray wolf--as he would a man, who might possibly be a cop.

"Hmm. A possibility. Diefenbaker." The Mountie turned in his seat and caught the wolf by the chin so he could make eye contact. "I want you to sniff around that building, and report back here to let me know if there are any men inside."

"And he's gonna do it? Bark once for each man?" Ray asked skeptically. Although it had been his own idea, he realized it was a very long shot. If he hadn't seen the ghostly Riv he might not have been so quick to suggest such an idea. But he was uneasy, as if something was about to go very wrong. He had a crazy feeling about the place, not that Bledsoe was in there, not that they were in danger at the moment, but something... Cops got hunches sometimes, and this one was a lulu.

Fraser opened his door and Dief leaped out, padding over to the warehouse and sniffing at the double doors. Ray took a pair of binoculars from his glove compartment and studied wolf and doors. There was a padlock on the doors, a shiny and new. Without speaking, he passed the glasses to Fraser, who observed the door.

"I see," the Mountie replied. "Someone has been here recently. This warehouse is in current use. Notice the new lock and the tire marks leading up to the door."

"What tire marks?" Ray snatched back the glasses and frowned. Tire marks were there but they were so faint on the dusty concrete he would never have noticed them, or even have thought to check for them. "Oh, *those* tire marks," he said hastily as if he'd known about them all along. "Good thing we're keeping a low profile; otherwise next thing I'd know, you'd be tasting them to see where the car had been."

Diefenbaker abandoned the door and vanished around the side of the building. It was perhaps a good thing he did. A moment later a late model Taurus rounded a corner and pulled up in front of the warehouse door. Automatically Ray and Fraser sank down in their seats so they weren't visible. A parked car might not be a threat, even if they were noticed here behind the garbage pails. After a moment, they heard the car start up again and Ray risked a look. He got a quick glimpse of the man behind the wheel as he pulled the Taurus into the building, then climbed out to close the doors behind him.

"Bledsoe," Ray exulted in triumph. "That was definitely Bledsoe." He reached for the radio to call it in. This stake-out had just become interesting. If only he didn't have that crazy feeling something was about to

happen. Glancing in his rear-view mirror as he identified himself and explained what he'd seen, he was disappointed not to see the ghost Riv idling behind them.

When he had finished requesting backup, he turned to Fraser, who was opening the door for Diefenbaker again. The wolf jumped into the back seat and barked softly once, turning his eyes to Ray as if to say, "One man in there."

The cop nodded. "Yeah, we saw him."

"You did well, staying out of sight," Fraser told the wolf then he spun around in his seat and exclaimed in alarm, "Ray! What are you doing?" as he saw Ray had unfastened his seatbelt and reached for the door handle, gun in his other hand.

"He's in there now," Ray replied, still unsure of what prompted him. "I'm gonna have a look."

"Backup will be here in five minutes," Fraser reminded him. "I think it best if you wait in the car until they arrive."

"Yeah, I know. I'm not going in there. That'd be nuts. But I want a look in the window, see if I can tell what kind of armament he's packing. Come on, Benny, there's no windows on the ground level on this side." He wasn't sure why he was pushing so hard but the feeling inside him was going off like an alarm. He couldn't leave it until backup arrived. He wasn't sure why, but he knew he had to move now.

"Which is precisely my concern," Fraser replied. "If he is concerned about being followed, the first thing he would do is go up there and check. You might find yourself face to face with him; not an ideal situation."

"Then I'll stay down below. I'll do a circle of the building. You honk once if anybody comes. I'll know the sound, know it's not from another car. I've just..." he hesitated, reluctant to admit to something so nebulous. "I've got a feeling about this place. Something's going to go wrong."

"It's more likely to go wrong if you don't wait for backup," Fraser pointed out. "Ray, he's a cop-killer."

"I know. I'll stay low." He wasn't sure why he had to go out there, he simply did. He knew it wasn't procedure, but something was driving him to do it--and time was running out.

Fraser frowned. "Then I will come with you."

"No!" That wasn't right, either. He couldn't risk Fraser's safety on a crazy hunch. "Just sit tight. I won't take a minute." Then he was out of the car and running, head down, keeping low, heading for the building. The window overhead was dirty and caked with dust but it wasn't thick enough to block the outline of a watcher. He made it to the side of the building without alerting Bledsoe. So far, so good.

When Diefenbaker whined unhappily Fraser glanced quickly back at the wolf. "Quite right, Dief. This is very dangerous. I think I should go after him."

Instantly Dief leaned forward and grasped the Mountie's shirtsleeve in his teeth. It was as definitive an answer as Fraser was likely to get, but he tugged anyway. "I don't understand why he feels the need to go there," he said. "Did you really see someone following us? Is that what this is about?"

Diefenbaker whined but his answer was unsatisfactory. Fraser glanced over his shoulder to make sure no one was sneaking up on them, though Dief would have alerted him to an unfriendly presence, especially

when the air was so thick with tension. Fraser checked his wristwatch. At least four minutes before the backup could arrive. He found himself wishing he had a loaded gun. He was in uniform, the brown serge, since it would be less noticeable on a stakeout than the red. But the gun he carried was empty, of no use to Ray should he come under fire. Fraser looked around for something that could serve as a weapon, should he need one. Would a garbage pail lid repel bullets. Fraser doubted it. The metal was too thin. Behind several pails, he might be safe, but he couldn't get to Ray that way.

Vecchio vanished behind the building, and Fraser tensed, holding his breath. He opened the door just enough that it wouldn't hinder him if he needed to get out in a hurry. Another glance at his watch. Three minutes. Time felt like it had slowed down, stretched out. As though, if he spoke, his words would spin out like a phonograph played at the wrong speed, like the old .78 records his grandmother liked to play, and the way they had sounded when Fraser had bought her a new phonograph that played at 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ and 45. The unlikely memory of Bing Crosby mooing *White Christmas* at the wrong speed flashed through his mind and was gone as he dispensed it. "Where are you, Ray?" he asked aloud, uneasy and worried.

Two minutes. Ray edged around the far corner of the building fast enough to alert the Mountie to trouble. As he did, Fraser noticed one of the double doors sliding open fractionally. It could have simply drifted open because it was unfastened. To call out would be to alert Bledsoe as well as Ray. Fraser opened his mouth to yell, just as Ray noticed the door and started to sprint across the open space toward the nearest shelter, a pile of crates fronted with another collection of garbage pails, filled full to overflowing with plastic trash bags.

He didn't make it.

The door slid open all at once, crashing with such force against the side of the building that even Dief jumped. Fraser couldn't see Bledsoe; he was using the Taurus for cover, but he could see a hand holding what looked like an Uzi, taking aim at Ray.

"Get down, Ray," he bellowed at the top of his lungs, jumping out of the car, conscious of Dief racing past him, heading straight for the open warehouse doors. Close at hand Fraser heard the squeal of tires and thought, *backup*. Then he was running flat out, though he knew he couldn't get there in time to help.

As the sound of firing rattled out, Ray's whole body jerked and he was lifted right up off the ground. propelled backward by the force of the bullets that struck him, his body jerked and folded in on itself. He landed hard a considerable distance away from the spot where his feet had left the ground, crashed through three more garbage pails, slid down into the pile of garbage bags that fell out. He lay still, one arm outflung amid the spilled garbage. No blood appeared on the front of his shirt, and Fraser, thudding forward, his heart stampeding up his throat into his mouth, realized the first shot must have hit him full in the heart. There would be little blood if he'd died instantly, and Fraser was too far away to see it. Tires screamed again, but their backup hadn't arrived yet.

"RAY!" he screamed futilely, then had to fling himself flat when Bledsoe altered his aim and started shooting at him. He could hear bullets striking metal, but he couldn't see what they were hitting, only that nothing plowed into his own flesh. Fully exposed to the gunman, he tried to dig himself into the pavement, wiggling backward as fast as he could.

With a savage growl, Dief launched himself over the Taurus, his feet barely touching the lid of the trunk, his teeth closing around Bledsoe's right wrist. The last few shots went wild, one of them striking a streetlight overhead, raining down glass on Fraser's unprotected body. He flung his arms over his head until the glass ceased falling, then he pushed himself up, running before he had his full balance, glass scattering in all directions. He could hear screams and curses coming from the warehouse, intermingled with savage growls. With a cry, Bledsoe dropped the Uzi and it skidded across the pavement. Fraser scooped it up on the run, not to use it but to prevent Bledsoe from getting his hands on it again.

"Guard him, Dief," he instructed, pausing only long enough to see his wolf plant himself on the downed man's body, front paws on his shoulders to hold him down, fangs poised inches from the murderer's throat. "He will rip your throat out if you struggle," Fraser told him, so furious with the man he could barely speak the words. "You killed my friend. I will hardly intervene on your behalf. If you are wise, which I very much doubt, you will make no motion other than breathing, until I come back." Dief growled menacingly. "He *is* an Arctic wolf," Fraser added. Bledsoe's eyes rolled wildly but the terror in his face kept him from speaking a word.

Fraser turned to go to his friend.

Ray hadn't moved from his tumbled position. Fraser hadn't expected him to move, but a part of him had held onto hope. Now he felt a strange numbness slide over him as he started toward Ray, taking away all his feelings and leaving a hollow void in their place. It was as if his feet had been weighted down with lead and he could scarcely lift them; if he went over there, he'd confirm Ray's death. But if there was even the slightest chance Ray lived he had to try to help him.

Abruptly squad cars and unmarked vehicles swung around the corner, brakes squealing as they pulled to a stop in an uneven row. Detective Jack Huey erupted from the first one, gun in hand. He started toward Fraser at a dead run only to jerk to a stunned stop at the sight of Vecchio's body sprawled lifelessly amid the garbage. Fraser didn't pause to greet him. The arrival of the police meant nothing to him. "Get Bledsoe," he called and waved his hand at the warehouse. He didn't pause long enough to see if the police obeyed him or not. Instead he raced over to Ray and flung himself down on his knees in the garbage beside his friend, feeling in a distant way something rotten and sticky squish beneath his left knee as he landed. Stretching out his hand, he paused, his fingers inches from the side of Ray's neck, half afraid he would feel cooling flesh beneath his touch. "Oh, Ray," he muttered, aching with misery, still too numb and stunned to think clearly. His eyes blurred momentarily with moisture. He dashed it away impatiently and took a second look.

Wait a minute! There was no sign of bullet wounds, no tears in the fabric of Ray's shirt. But he'd been hit! His body had jerked with the force of the impact; he'd been flung so far, so hard. Even if he'd been wearing a bulletproof vest, there should have been holes in the fabric of his shirt to mark where the bullets had struck. But there were none. Fraser ran his hands over the detective's arms and legs, searching for wounds. He found none, at least nothing beyond a swollen knee and one slight tear in the sleeve of his sports jacket that might have been caused by a near miss. The skin beneath it bore a long red scrape as if a bullet had barely grazed him; it wasn't even bleeding. Impossible! Ray might have faked being shot and falling to the pavement, but he certainly

couldn't jump backwards a good ten feet from a standing position. It was impossible. Not even an Olympic gymnast could have done that.

Fraser's fingers finally pressed against the side of his friend's neck, feeling for a pulse. Just as he touched the flesh, Diefenbaker edged up beside him with an uneasy whine, and Fraser realized the police had relieved him and taken Bledsoe into custody. Then Ray's pulse beat beneath his fingers, sure and strong and normal, and Fraser bent his head, eyes squeezing shut in overwhelming relief at the miracle that lay before him, although he still didn't understand it. He didn't risk moving Ray; the fall itself could have caused a spinal injury. But his hand slid up to lay against Ray's cheek, feeling the warm and living flesh beneath his hand and for an astonishing moment simply reveling in it.

"Thank God," Fraser breathed, shivering with reaction. He didn't understand it, not when he had been so sure he had witnessed Ray's death. "He's alive, Dief. He's alive."

As if Fraser's heartfelt words had freed him from constraint, Dief nudged his way under Fraser's arm and licked Ray's face, whining happily.

At the wet, sloppy touch, Ray stirred and moaned, raising his hand to push Dief away. His fingers tangled in the fur of the wolf's neck, paused, moved inquiringly. Fraser reached out and caught his hand, stilling it. "Ray?"

Vecchio's eyes popped open, and though there was a blurring of confusion and pain in them, he was clearly alert. "Did you get him, Fraser?" he asked anxiously, returning the grip and tugging at Fraser's hand to encourage an answer. "Did you get Bledsoe?"

"Actually it was Diefenbaker who got him," Fraser returned. "Don't worry, Ray, he's in police custody."

"I had to stop him," the detective insisted, pulling his hand free and gesturing vaguely at the warehouse. "He had her in there. He was going for her with a knife. I pounded on the window to make him come after me instead."

"You pounded on the window?" Fraser echoed in disbelief.

"I had to stop him. I didn't have a clear shot through the window, but I had to stop him killing her," Vecchio insisted. "He didn't get her, did he?" He gazed up at Fraser urgently. "He can't have got her."

"Her, Ray?"

"He had a hostage in there. I don't know if he'd found his girlfriend after all or if it was somebody else, but he had her in there all tied up and he had the knife right up against her throat. That's why I knocked on the window, to get him away from her. Is she okay?"

The Mountie turned and stared at the warehouse. Two uniformed officers were escorting a shaken woman from the building. "She's alive, Ray," he informed his friend, shifting so Ray could see past him and reassure himself. "You saved her life."

Ray eyed the woman then relaxed. "Hadda stop him," he muttered, the adrenaline rush that had prompted the question fading away. "Knew I had to check the place out. I just had a hunch..."

"Your hunch saved that woman's life, Ray," Fraser told him.

Ray grinned wearily then he stared up at Fraser. "You look about the way I feel. You didn't get hit, did you?" he demanded in sudden alarm. When Fraser didn't instantly answer, he reached out and grasped the Mountie's sleeve. "Come on, Benny, what happened? Level with me here. What aren't you telling me?" His eyes caught and held Fraser's, demanding an answer.

Fraser said automatically the words he couldn't hold back. "I thought you were dead." He controlled himself immediately, but he knew Ray had seen the sick worry he'd felt when he saw his friend go down in a rain of bullets and heard the last final quiver of his voice.

As if he knew without one more word of explanation what Fraser had just gone through he spoke quickly and reassuringly. "Hey. I'm fine. Nothing but a headache and a knee that's telling me it wants to be a balloon." He fell silent, realizing how he might have felt, had the circumstances been reversed. Freeing Fraser's sleeve he reached up to clasp his shoulder. "I'm fine," he repeated. "It's okay, Benny. Nothing you could have done except what you did, sending Dief to stop him." His fingers tightened reassuringly. "Are *you* okay?"

Fraser paused, running a brief mental evaluation. Actually he felt weak and shaken with relief but Ray was all right and that was what mattered. He'd seen near-misses before, but this one had been much more dramatic than those and it had hit him hard. It would take him a few minutes more to regain his equilibrium. "It was simply--Ray you had to have been hit. You were flung backward much further than you could have jumped, yet there isn't a mark on you except for a graze on your arm. I can't explain it, but it looked...very bad. From where I was standing, there was no possibility you survived. You were only out a few minutes, but I assure you those minutes felt like *weeks*." He had to stop and swallow hard around a lump that rose in his throat, and as if he knew, Ray squeezed his shoulder once more before letting go.

The detective's face puckered in a frown as he ran through the incident in his mind, then his eyes widened in astonished disbelief, remembering what had happened to him. "It saved me! It saved me, Benny. The Riv saved me."

"I don't understand, Ray."

Pounding footsteps announced the arrival of Jack Huey, who jerked to a halt at the sight of Ray half sitting up and talking. "Omigod, he's alive! I thought he was dead. We heard the shooting but we were too far out. When we came around the corner and saw him down, and you with the perp's gun in your hand, running for Ray. We thought you and Dief had stopped Bledsoe too late."

"I thought we had, too." Fraser's voice quivered one last time and he firmed it up with all his willpower. "I saw him hit. I saw Bledsoe fire, and Ray was jerked backward. He was over there when he was hit, but there isn't a mark on him except for a slight scratch on his left arm."

"The Riv saved me," Ray insisted dazedly. "Did you see it, Fraser?" He grabbed at Fraser's hand with both of his. "You had to see it. It just swooped in and caught me with the hood and drove me right back out of range." His eyes were wide with awe. "It was *incredible*, Benny."

"Ray, the car didn't move. I didn't even think of using it to come between you and Bledsoe, especially since you had the keys in your pocket." He exchanged a worried look with Huey. "Did you hit your head when you fell?"

“Did I hit my head when I fell?” Ray demanded in outrage, sitting up completely and rubbing the back of his head with a careful touch. “Of course I hit my head when I fell. It’s got rockets going off like crazy inside there.” He winced and sagged again. Fraser caught him and supported him against his shoulder, brushing away pieces of rotted garbage very carefully as if he would be graded on his actions.

“How did you fall, Ray?” he asked, making sure Vecchio was as comfortable as possible. “You mentioned you injured your knee. Does your back hurt? Can you feel your legs?”

“Of course I can feel my legs,” Ray replied. “I can move them too, but I won’t. I can feel my knee and I think it’s ballooned up twice as big as usual. And I bet my ribs are turning purple already.” He ran his hand over his ribcage, flinching at the touch. “Ow! It wasn’t as hard as when it was real, and it gave when it hit me like ... like ectoplasm, but it still hit hard enough to hurt, though it beats bullets any day of the week.” He stared up at Fraser, eyes huge with wonder. “You didn’t see it?”

Dief made a faint confirming sound. “You saw it too?” Fraser asked the wolf. Dief yipped in agreement.

“See,” Ray cried, vindicated. “Dief saw it, too. Fraser, it was my old Riv--my original, the one I had to blow up to save us. It was back, and it was all in one piece again. Only ... it wasn’t solid.”

“Wasn’t *solid*?” Huey echoed. He exchanged a doubtful look with Fraser, obviously believing Ray delirious as a result of a blow to the head. Noticing the glances passing between them, Ray looked extremely uncomfortable but he didn’t back down from his claim.

At the sight of that expression on Ray’s face the Mountie felt his own internal shivering start to ease. Ray was alive, if somewhat confused, and didn’t seem to be badly hurt. After seeing him flung backward, supposedly by bullets, and the belief he’d just witnessed Ray’s violent death, Fraser was prepared to take him, confusion and all. He had come so very close to losing his best friend. If Ray wanted to claim he’d been rescued by pink bunnies from outer space, Fraser would have said, “Yes, Ray, I understand,” and let it go.

“Come on, Benny, you saw it,” Ray insisted, though he lowered his voice. “Even if you didn’t see the car, what do you think happened? I felt it hit me right here.” He patted his ribcage very carefully. “And it carried me back about ten feet, then it reversed enough to let me down, and shielded me until you guys got him.”

“A ghost car, Ray?” Fraser asked. He couldn’t entirely disregard the possibility of ghosts, but it seemed unlikely, at least until he remembered flinging himself down with no actual shelter and hearing the bullets hitting metal just beyond his prone form. Could it possibly have been...

Ray turned to look up at Huey. “Is the woman all right?”

“She’s been tied up in there for a day,” Huey replied. “She says Bledsoe was coming for her and actually had his knife against her throat when somebody pounded on the window, and he dropped the knife and took off.”

“You did save her, Ray,” Fraser lauded. He added to Huey, “The reason Ray didn’t wait for backup was because he sensed trouble in the warehouse. If not for him, that young woman would have died. I’m sure Leftenant Welsh will want to know that.”

“Come on, Benny,” Ray muttered, embarrassed by the praise. “Anyway, I hope Welsh will take it that way. I was supposed to stay put and wait for backup.”

“Of course he will, Ray,” Fraser said so positively he could feel his friend relax. “You saved her life. He can hardly reprimand you for it. Who was the woman, do you know?” he asked Huey.

“She was Bledsoe’s girlfriend’s best friend. Her name’s Susan Harriman,” Huey replied. “She said Bledsoe meant to use her as bait to lure the girlfriend here, but when he showed up, he said the girlfriend was gone and no one knew where she was. Apparently he was so angry he meant to kill Ms. Harriman. That was when Ray pounded on the window, and Bledsoe felt he had to get rid of the witness before he killed her. The paramedics are treating her for shock right now.”

Huey gestured at the paramedics van as if to reassure them. “We thought Ray was dead...”

“Get them over here to look at Ray,” Fraser instructed, and Huey obeyed automatically, trotting off in the direction of the paramedics.

“Fraser,” said Ray when Huey moved away.

“Yes, Ray.”

“It smells here.”

“It does indeed, Ray. You landed in a pile of decaying garbage.”

“And you knelt in it,” Ray replied, pointing at Fraser’s knee. Abruptly the Mountie remembered the squishy sensation he’d felt when he first knelt beside Ray. It seemed worse now. Inspector Thatcher would have fits--lengthy, wordy fits--at the sight of his uniform.

“The Dragon Lady’s gonna say that’s improper use of a Mountie uniform,” Ray told him as if he could guess without difficulty what Fraser was thinking. He sounded happy and contented, not to mention delighted with the very idea.

“I’m glad you appreciate my position,” Fraser returned, grateful for a return of banter. He’d had some very bad moments and needed the release of tension.

“Oh yeah,” Ray replied. “If my boss looked like yours...” He let the words trail off very suggestively and leered at Fraser before the smile came back to his face. “Isn’t it great, Benny?”

“Isn’t what great, Ray?” He knew Vecchio wasn’t talking about Inspector Thatcher any longer.

“The Riv,” Ray said sleepily against his shoulder. “My original Riv. It doesn’t hate me for blowing it up like that. It saved me, Benny. It’s forgiven me.”

“That’s very nice, Ray.” Fraser had a feeling that when Ray was treated and his knee bandaged and he’d had time and distance to recall the incident, he would make more sense about it. More likely he’d clam up and fail to mention it--he’d certainly been unhappy about Huey overhearing his statements. There was something about personal ghosts that didn’t bear talking about. Fraser couldn’t quite doubt the existence of Ray’s ghost car, because he could think of nothing else that would explain how Ray had emerged unscathed from a shooting that should have ripped him in half, and of course he had his own personal experience to draw upon. “I believe it protected me as well,” he added with a touch of reluctance.

Ray’s head came up and he gazed at Fraser with the most guileless expression the Mountie had ever seen on his face. “How?”

“I was trying to get to you...”

“Let me guess. You ran right out in the open without a gun. Don’t they give you *brains* in Canada?” he ranted. “You could’ve been *killed*, Fraser. He had an Uzi, and there wasn’t a scrap of cover.”

“As you can see, Ray, I’m unhurt. Dief was there and I was only under fire a moment. But I could hear the bullets hitting something... I couldn’t see what it was.”

“All right!” Ray lauded. “It was the Riv! This is great!” He relaxed against Fraser’s shoulder again, perfectly comfortable there in spite of the smells that surrounded them. “Hey, Benny?”

“First thing I’m gonna do when I get out of here,” Ray said quietly, a big, satisfied grin on his face. “I’m gonna have a bath. And even if you’re my best friend, Fraser, I’ve gotta tell you--you need one as bad as I do. And when it comes to the wolf...” Diefenbaker whined unhappily.

Content, Ray closed his eyes, and Fraser tightened his arm around the friend in a moment of protectiveness. Then paramedics came rushing up, faces twisted in disgust at the smells, and bent to examine Ray.

Fraser was smiling as he stood back to allow the paramedics to check out Ray’s knee.

“Fraser?”

“Yes, Ray?”

The Mountie was behind the wheel of the Riviera, driving Ray home; he’d been instructed by the doctor to take the rest of the day and all of the next day off because of the blow to his head. He was fine; the concussion was so mild it was barely a concussion at all, and his knee had been twisted rather than actually sprained. He’d be able to get around more comfortably about the time he’d be allowed back to work. But Fraser had appropriated the car keys, an act that made Ray extremely nervous. So far, they hadn’t hit anything but maybe that was just good luck. He’d have to pay extra attention; a little back seat driving was called for here. Fraser couldn’t possibly be used to Chicago traffic. Ray doubted there was *any* traffic in Tuktoyaktuk; well, maybe dog sleds, and, if they were lucky, snowmobiles.

Easing his leg into a more comfortable position Ray tried to sit up straighter to take the pressure off his bruised ribs--fortunately they weren’t broken. “You know what I said back there, about my first Riv?”

“Yes, Ray,” Fraser replied again.

“Well, do you think we could pretend I didn’t say it? I mean especially around people like Lt. Welsh? Because I can just imagine what he’s gonna think of that.”

“Detective Huey heard you,” Fraser pointed out.

“Yeah, but let’s say it was the concussion. Say he started shooting and I jumped and fell and he thought he’d got me, and then before he could make sure, Dief got him.” Ray was embarrassed about the whole thing. It would be too hard to explain to the people at the precinct. It was hard enough that he’d talked to Fraser about it in such detail, even if the old Riv had saved Fraser, too.

“It would be lying, Ray.”

“So, for once, lie. You didn’t see it anyway, so if anybody asks, you can tell the truth. Come on, Fraser, I bet there have been Mounties who lied before, *sometime* in the history of the RCMP. I betcha even Thatcher does on occasion. Come to think of it, I know she does.”

“You’re joking, Ray.”

“Wanna bet?” Ray grinned. “I can give you instances, if you’d like them, case by case. How about that time on the train...” He let his voice trail off suggestively.

“What time on the train?” Fraser asked as if he’d never been on a train in his life. He pondered the subject a moment, then his expression changed. “Oh dear,” he said.

“Exactly.” Ray grinned. “About the car, Benny. Keep it quiet, please. I have enough trouble with my rep at the precinct anyway.”

“And if the car comes back?” Fraser prompted. That made Diefenbaker whine and glance uneasily out the rear window as if to check for the ghostly car. From the way the wolf turned back to watch the two men in the front seat, he had seen nothing. It wasn’t visible in the rear-view mirror either.

“I don’t think it’s gonna come back,” Ray said, suddenly certain of the fact. His original Riv had come back for one purpose, to save his life, though he couldn’t tell how he knew it. It had done what it meant to do, and more. It had saved Fraser, too, though the Mountie was still somewhat doubtful about that. Come to think of it, he’d bought into that a lot quicker than Ray had expected him to. Maybe he was used to ghosts, Inuit spirits and the like, up in the great white north. “I think it did what it was there for, and that’s it. Wasn’t it great, Benny?”

“Wasn’t *what* great, Ray?”

Vecchio stared at him a moment before he caught on. “Hey, you do that fibbing better than I thought you would. Maybe Thatcher’s not the only Mountie who can tell a little white lie...”

“In this instance it would be a big green lie, Ray,” Fraser said, deadpan.

Ray started laughing.