

KILLING LOVE

by Sheila Paulson

Ray didn't have the slightest premonition of trouble when the telephone rang. Not that kind of trouble anyway. The morning had produced its own share of petty irritations and grievances, but he almost enjoyed the battle against his credit card companyⁱ. It gave him something to vent about, something to yell about, something to pit his wits against. Besides, he'd always liked complaining. It was a good Vecchio trait. His paperwork was even progressing, partly because Fraser had showed up early—it was his day off—and had encouraged him to get it out of the way. Something about the Mountie, even when he was out of uniform like today, always made Ray feel like his tie was crooked, when he wore one, or there were spots on his shoes, so a part of him tended to get stubborn and dig his heels in and not change, while the other part relished the masculine rivalry and led him to rise to the occasion. He hated paperwork and put it off long past the tolerance of Captain Welch. But today, Benny just sat there and looked at the jumble of Ray's desk, and he found himself creating a little order in the middle of chaos.

Diefenbaker sat at Fraser's feet, but the white wolf's attention was not on his master, but instead on the abandoned Peanut Butter Cup that sat in the middle of a torn wrapper on Detective Jack Huey's desk. Huey had a suspect in the interrogation room and was probably not even thinking about Peanut Butter Cups, but Dief was. If Fraser's attention slipped one inch the candy bar would be history. Ray knew Fraser had seen it, and Dief knew Fraser had seen it. It was a question of waiting for the perfect opportunity.

"I understand what you're contemplating," Fraser said to the wolf, turning his muzzle up so the animal could read his lips. "It is beneath your dignity. Theft of food is a crime. While I might possibly understand, if not condone, it in a starving child, you are far from starving. You have put on two pounds in the last two weeks, and if this continues, you will be unable to climb the steps to my apartment."

Dief whined. "No," Fraser replied. "You *can't* use the elevator, because I will not push the buttons for you."

Dief edged an inch closer to Detective Huey's desk.

"So then the credit card company sends me this nasty letter," Ray continued, ignoring the wolf's antics. "And they say I'm over my limit but I *can't* be over my limit, because I didn't buy any classical guitar. I told them I didn't buy it. I told them my card had been stolen, but what do they do? They charge me anyway!" He waved his hands in disgust. "I called them, I said, 'Do I have to come over there with my badge and wave it in their faces?' I said I reported it stolen two weeks ago, but nooooo! Instead I get billed for a stupid guitar, and a couple hundred dollars worth of *rabbit food*, for chrissakes! Do you know how many pounds of rabbit pellets that is? Over five hundred pounds! One pound will last forever. I think somebody's planning for a *Night of the Lepus*. If you ask me, I think there's a conspiracy on."

"*Night of the Lepus*, Ray?"

Vecchio ground his teeth. "Didn't you ever see *any* movies in the Great White North?"

"Not that many, Ray."

"Figures. Probably never even saw *Star Wars*." He grimaced. "They still stole it. They've got no *right* to use my credit card, and the company's got no right to bill me for it! Rabbit food!"

"Actually, Ray, you shouldn't have left your jacket, with your credit card with it, on the seat of your car while we chased after those three naked men in the Plaza last week."

"It was nearly a hundred degrees outside. I would've melted in my jacket, chasing those clowns for six city blocks. I could almost see why those three idiots took everything off, but there's a limit!" He heaved a great sigh. "It couldn't have been three naked *women*, no. It's three naked guys who should ordinarily go around covered from head to toe. They should be *monks*, Fraser, maybe even wear masks. So I'm not gonna chase people around the city in the heat of noon in my jacket. Is it too much to ask! And whoever did it broke a *window* on the Riv. I swear, Benny, there's a curse on me and my car!"

"Very likely, Ray."

He broke off in mid rant and stared at his friend. "So now you believe in curses! Any other little unexplained phenomena? Table tilting, palm reading?"

"Of course not, Ray. But there does seem to be a considerable, er, jinx on you and the possession of 1972 Buick Rivas." "

"*Enough*, Fraser. I don't want to hear it. I want to go over to that credit card place and bust a few heads. Guitars! *Rabbit food*, dammit!"

"Evidently, you are after a suspect who likes music and raises rabbits in great quantities," Fraser pointed out.

"Sure, and I'm gonna tell Elaine to find me somebody who fits that profile on the computer?"

"That does seem logical to me. It might even be more entertaining to Elaine than the usual perpetrators she runs for you."

"I still think I'm gonna go over there and knock heads together," Ray growled, determined to cling to his grievance. "I'm not paying it. I *told* them it was stolen. They didn't listen! It takes an act of god to get justice from these credit card places."

"On the other hand, Ray, you could be like me, and not use them."

He stopped and stared at Fraser darkly. "Some of us have to furnish our own wardrobes on the job, Benny. Some of us have upkeep of our property and vehicles."

"Actually, Ray, I must purchase my own uniforms," Fraser began, determined to make his point. The phone rang, causing Ray to burst out, "At last. They're finally calling me back. Now I'll see some justice or know the reason why." He snatched up the receiver. "Vecchio."

"Ray, she's here."

He jerked as if he'd been gut-punched. He knew the voice without identification. It was Barney Milton, one of his snitches, known to all as Ripe Barney because he didn't particularly favor bathing as a regular habit. For Barney to call wasn't particularly unusual. He called every other week or so with tips, some largely useless, others occasionally mildly helpful. But his words made the point more quickly than Ray wanted to hear it. Every muscle in his body tensed. "You sure?" he demanded.

"Yeah, man, I got that picture you showed me. I waited like you said, and made sure. I seen her five times, all of 'em in Grady Park, you know that big place over not too far from Market..."

"Yeah, I know it. A *park*, Barney?" He looked over at Fraser and covered the mouthpiece. "Uh, Benny, this is one of my snitches, if you don't mind. It's sorta, er, confidential."

Fraser lifted an eyebrow ever so slightly as if he suspected *something* but didn't know precisely what. "Understood, Ray," he said, rising. "Come, Diefenbaker." He led the wolf sternly around Huey's desk and the unbearable temptation provided by Reese's Peanut Butter Cups, and sat down in the visitor's chair beside an empty desk across the squad room. But his eyes lingered speculatively on Ray, who couldn't help thinking, 'Oh shit,' and mentally cursing the call's timing.

Victoria. Ever since she'd vanished on that train leaving Fraser down in a pool of his own blood from Ray's shot, the cop had believed she would return. Even through the anguish of knowing he'd nearly killed his best friend, the guilt, the anxiety, the misery of his friend's slow, unwilling recovery, he'd worried the woman would come back for the Mountie. Worried that this time Ben would go away with her, ruin his life, throw away everything he'd ever worked for—leave Ray behind. Even if he could look past the sorrow and regret at the loss of the best friend he'd ever had, he couldn't allow Fraser to throw his life away for one conniving bitch who knew how to push all his buttons and twist him around until even his sense of honor got lost in the shuffle. Ray *knew* one day down the road Victoria Metcalf would come creeping back, would make contact with Fraser, would drive him so nuts he didn't know which way was up any more, and Ray would never see him again. He couldn't let that happen.

So as he lay in the hospital bed recovering from the injury he'd gotten saving Fraser, he'd finally been able to think. It was as if taking the bullet for Benny had somehow atoned for the bullet he'd put into his friend. It freed him from the guilt that had driven him to spend every spare moment with Benny while he sacrificed such things as sleep and regular meals so his work didn't fall behind. During his recovery, he started to plan, and when he got back to work, one of the first things he'd done was to get pictures of Metcalf to all his snitches. He didn't tell them who she was beyond her name, though if she returned she probably wouldn't be using it publicly. He simply told them she was armed and dangerous,

a wanted felon, and he'd pay double his usual rate for anybody who spotted her and tipped him off.

Months had passed and nothing had happened. He'd almost forgotten about the threat, not quite, but almost. There had been a few times when Fraser had fallen silent in conversation in such a way Ray feared he'd spotted Victoria in a crowd, but each time, the Mountie had collected himself and the distraction had proven to be something else entirely. As much as was possible, Ray thought Fraser had come to terms with what had happened, but he was positive if she came back, it would all be to do over again. Victoria had Ray's measure by now. She'd be careful, knowing Ray meant what he'd said when he'd warned her against hurting Fraser. The Mountie had his own job and was not under Ray's constant eye. She could get to him without alerting Vecchio. So he'd planned, set the stage as best he could. Now here was one of his snitches, telling him what he'd long feared had finally happened.

"You sure about this?" he asked Ripe Barney. "You checked?"

"I checked the picture, Ray. You know I don't mess up. Most observant guy in town."

"Yeah, like the time you warned me that character at the Hilton was actually the Unabomber," Ray reminded him, aggrieved. "You said he had all that fancy equipment to make bombs, and I get there with a SWAT team and full backup and it's one of the Ghostbusters with all his ghost-catching equipment, here to speak at some physics conference," Ray reminded him. "You nearly had me bust a Ghostbuster."

"Could happen to anybody," Ripe Barney dismissed the mistake. "Never mind Ghostbusters, and besides, they caught the Unabomber so we don't have to worry about him no more. This is for real."

"So where is she now?" Ray asked, lowering his voice and curling his hand around the mouthpiece so no one would overhear him. Across the room, he saw Fraser watching him curiously and nearer at hand, Diefenbaker, taking advantage of the Mountie's distraction to gobble down the unattended Peanut Butter Cup. Ordinarily Ray would have smiled, but he didn't feel like smiling now, not even when the wolf glided back to his place at Fraser's side and flung himself down in hopes of going unnoticed, a look of utter contentment upon his lupine face.

"Right this minute? I followed her to an address." He rattled off Fraser's address, causing Ray's heart to twist then sink into his feet. "But she didn't stay. She left a note there, and I grabbed it." Ray could see the smug satisfaction in the man's face without having to actually see him. "I read it. It said, 'Benton. I'm here. Wait for me.' No signature. So did I do good, Detective? Is she your woman?"

"She's the one," Ray confirmed, feeling sick. "And you did great. Snatching the note was a stroke of genius. I'm gonna pay you double for this one. So, you still on her, Barney?"

"She's having coffee across the street. No, she's coming out. She's heading back to the park, Vecchio. You want I should follow her?"

"Don't let her out of your sight. I'm gonna come to meet you, and I'll bring a cell phone." He rattled off the number. "If she goes anywhere else, you call me. But I'm gonna head for that park." Huey crossed the squad room, poked his head into Welch's office for a quick comment, then headed for his desk, reaching out for the Peanut Butter Cup. Discovering it gone, he looked around sharply, his eyes falling knowingly on Diefenbaker, who promptly pretended he was somewhere else. Fraser didn't notice. Fraser was watching Ray like a hawk. He probably suspected. Hell, maybe he even *heard* both ends of the conversation. Mounties were presumably trained to hear things other people couldn't hear, went along with finding out about clues by tasting them....

"Gonna blow her away?" Ripe Barney asked, a little eagerly. He had a penchant for blood and gore.

"If I have to," Ray replied, his jaw taut, carefully avoiding Fraser's eyes. Maybe Benny could read his mind. He only knew planned to stop her. Blowing her away was extreme though he could do it if he had to. He *would* do it, if necessary. Looking up, he found Fraser's eyes still on him and he looked away quickly. He wouldn't go over there to do that, although a part of him called for Victoria's death. If it happened, it wouldn't hurt him, and in the long run, it would be better for Fraser. But he wasn't a crummy executioner. She was wanted, after all. A wanted felon. And he was going to take her down one way or another, and make Fraser safe from her. Even if Fraser ended up hating him for it. In the long run, he'd thank him. Ray sighed.

Finishing his arrangements, he hung up, an act that drew Fraser back. "Are we going somewhere, Ray?" he asked, noticing Vecchio check his gun.

"No, Benny. *I'm* going. My snitch won't talk to me if anybody else is there. Real secretive. He's got a lead on a case for me."

"Which case, Ray?" asked Fraser, who knew about Vecchio's current caseload just because Ray had a habit of complaining about them.

"An old one. Look, Benny, I've gotta run. He won't wait if I'm not there on time. Besides, you don't want to see this character. They call him Ripe Barney."

"Ripe Barney, Ray?"

"He's constitutionally opposed to soap and water, Fraser."

"Understood." He turned to his wolf, who was still avoiding the scowls of Jack Huey. "Diefenbaker. No, look at me. I know what you did."

Taking advantage of another lecture on the evils of candy, chocolates and junk food, Ray headed for the door, almost running. At once he could feel Fraser's eyes on his back, but he didn't dare turn around. He was afraid his expression would give him away. At the door, he paused and cast one quick look over his shoulder. Fraser was in the process of reimbursing Huey for the candy bar. The two men seemed to be arguing about it. Perfect. It gave Ray the lead he needed. Not that he thought Fraser would follow him, but it didn't pay to take chances. The last thing he heard was Fraser's comment in response to something the wolf had 'said'.

"Quite right, Diefenbaker. Now, Detective Huey, I think we should..."

Ray stopped listening.

* * *

He reached his car without evidence of pursuit and heaved a sigh of relief. Ray slammed the car door and pulled away. He was careful to watch his rear-view mirror all the way to the park where the woman had been spotted. He didn't want Fraser following him this time, knowing things could go wrong quickly if Fraser and Victoria were ever to come face to face. Fortunately, he wasn't followed, at least not that he could tell.

Ripe Barney rang him up once on the cell phone. She was definitely heading for the park. Ray decided to confront her there. It was probably safer than on a public street where innocent passers by might get in the line of fire. On a working morning, with school in session, there shouldn't be that many people in the park. Much safer that way.

"You going to kill her, son?"

He was learning not to flinch when his father arrived. This time, his hands merely tightened on the steering wheel for a moment before he turned and saw his father's spirit, looking all too solid, sitting beside him where Fraser usually sat.

"What do you know about it?" he temporized. He could always trust his dad to show up just when he needed him least—well, what was unusual about that? The old bastard had never been around when Ray had actually needed him there, or wanted him there. Now he planned to spend the afterlife showing up with his usual flair for bad timing.

"I know you blow her away and you won't see the Mountie for dust," Vecchio Senior told him with utter certainty. "Supposed to be your best friend but if you blow away his little jailbait, he'll be gone. You've gotta learn to rely on number one, son. Don't worry about the other guy. Just take care'a yourself. It's the only game in town. Why not just forget about her, turn your back, walk away?"

"And so she gets Fraser? Is that what you want, pop?"

"What's the dif? Either way you lose him, don'tcha? I've told you and told you. People let you down. Look out for yourself. It's the only way to get ahead. Forget Fraser. Forget the babe."

"I've gotta stop her," Ray insisted, all the more positive he was doing the right thing because his father opposed it. Oddly enough, this time he was almost grateful for his father's presence. He needed to work out what he meant to do, and how better to do it than to have someone to pit his conscience against.

“Why?”

“Why? Because she’s a wanted felon, for chrissakes. Besides, she’s bad for Fraser. The guy’s the most honest man I ever met and she wants to take him down.”

“Let her. If he falls, he falls. You can’t be his conscience, and you sure as hell can’t live his life for him. Either way this falls out, you won’t see him for dust. You collar her, nice and legit, and she goes to jail, and he’s there every day visiting her and next thing you know he’ll break her out. He could do it, too. The Redcoat’s got some nice moves. You could learn from this man. But don’t learn to trust him. Only idiots do that.”

“Didn’t you ever trust anybody, Pop?”

“Are you kidding?” Ray’s father proclaimed as if his son had accused him of a sick perversion. “No way.”

“And look where it got you,” said Ray sourly. “Pop?” When there was no answer, he turned his head. His father was gone again.

But Vecchio Senior had been right about one thing. No matter how this went down, he was probably going to lose Fraser’s friendship. Fraser would hold it against him forever if his best friend killed the woman he loved. It didn’t have anything to do with trust either, because Ray still trusted Benny and always would.

But Ray couldn’t let Fraser go off with her. A part of him suspected Fraser had wised up a little since the shooting, that he *wouldn’t* go with her this time. But it was too big a risk to take. He knew he’d probably get Welsh’s footprints all over his face for going out alone like this, without backup, but he had to do it. It was his responsibility. He’d missed her, had failed to take her down before, had let her walk all over Fraser and twist him up so tight he didn’t know which way was up. Ray had told her what to expect if she hurt Fraser and then he’d blown it—god, he’d blown it so bad. He could still feel the way his stomach had knotted up when Fraser went down on the railway platform. Even now, months later, he still dreamed about it. They hadn’t been easy months either, what with Guardino, then Irene... He pushed those memories away and concentrated. He had to do this. He had to stop her. Not blow her away unless there was no other choice, but stop her. Somehow.

The park was nearly deserted. He parked the Riv down a side street where he hoped she wouldn’t see it, and took the cell phone with him. Ripe Barney called once more to report she was entering the park, heading northeast. Ray had to smile. She was coming right toward him. Only a few people were about, passing quickly on business of their own. None of them paid attention as he stuck the cell phone into the inner pocket of his jacket and turned to survey the terrain. He didn’t see Victoria yet. Maybe he should hide and jump out at her, surprise her? Those trees over there by the overpass might make a good hiding place. If she was heading northeast, she had to be coming his way. Carefully he moved in that direction.

Ray felt the gun jam into the small of his back and he didn’t have to so much as turn around to know it was Victoria. He hadn’t meant to let her get the drop on him, but perhaps he should have expected it. She was just too good. Maybe she’d even picked up on Ripe Barney trailing her. Probably smelled him.

“Hello, Ray,” Victoria purred, jamming the gun more tightly into his back, right against his spine. He froze, knowing the heartless bitch would probably blow him away without a moment’s hesitation if he tried anything. He glanced around quickly, not so much trying to see her; he would have been happy if he’d never had to see her again; but looking for anything that would help him out. They stood in a particularly remote section of the park, but whether she was hiding out *in* the park or simply near it, or had even let herself be seen here in hopes of luring Ray or Fraser to a private confrontation didn’t matter now. What did matter was that he’d been stupid enough to let her get the drop on him. He didn’t think he’d underestimated her—he knew what the bitch was capable of—but it didn’t matter in the long run. He braced himself, prepared to take advantage of the slightest relaxation of pressure.

“Victoria,” he said as matter of factly as possible. “I knew you’d be back.”

“You had men out watching for me,” she said as if she had seen them all and led them on, on purpose. “Did you think I’d be fool enough not to notice?”

“I thought maybe you’d realize you were pushing your luck,” he snapped. The mouth of the gun

felt cold against his spine. "What are you doing here, Victoria? He's not going with you. I won't let him."

"And I say he is. Threaten me all you like, Detective, but I hold the winning cards, because, you see, he loves me, so deeply into his bones, that I only need crook my finger and he'll come."

"He doesn't love *you*," scoffed Ray, determined to defend Fraser with words since he was temporarily denied any other way. "He loves what he thinks you are or what he hopes you can be. It's not the same thing. You've got him so turned around he can't see the dif. But underneath all that crap, he's the sanest man I ever knew, and I'm not gonna let you twist him to suit your own weird games." In the distance, he could see two little boys throwing a Frisbee back and forth, evidently playing hooky from school. He hoped they wouldn't come in his direction because the woman with the gun rammed into his back would shoot and never think twice if they got in her way. He tried to edge a step closer to the viaduct tunnel, away from the kids, but she rammed the gun even harder.

"He *does* love me," she said fiercely. "You don't understand, you pathetic little man. You don't have it in you to love like that or to inspire love. He does."

"Yeah, he does," Ray replied without a moment's hesitation. "And he's got it in him to find the best in *anybody* and turn them into something they didn't know they could be. Most of the time it works. He lends perfect strangers money when they feed him a sob story. And then they show up and pay him back afterwards. What I can't figure out is why you happen to be so immune."

"Immune," she cried, furious, jabbing him harder with the gun. "You think I'm immune? Why do you think I came back? Not only for revenge on you—you shot him. Your best friend, probably your *only* friend, and you shot him. Yes, I'm going to leave you dead or disgraced and I'll enjoy it. But I came for him because I love him. And I don't expect you to understand."

"I don't expect *you* to," Ray returned immediately. "You haven't got a clue about love. If you really gave a damn you'd want what was best for *him*, but you only want to grab him for yourself and dig your claws in tight. You're... drawn to him like the rest of us, but you only want to own him. You want to take him and twist him into something he was never meant to be, so you won't have to feel guilty for being such a cold-blooded bitch."

"I love him." She shifted so quickly he missed it and whacked the gun against the side of his head. He went down on his knees but didn't lose consciousness, though it was a near thing. He leaned forward, his hands in the dirt, trying to stop his vision from fading in and out. After he'd blinked a few times, he could see again but his head throbbed and he knew he didn't have the strength yet to take her. He had to keep her talking until he could get the drop on her. Twisting around, he looked up at her through pain-blurred eyes. She was watching him so intently he knew he didn't have a hope of going for his gun, not unless he could provoke her or distract her into lowering her guard.

"You don't love him," he persisted in hopes of inciting a response. "You're not capable of love."

"And *you* are?" Scorn rang in the challenge.

"More than you," he replied, trying to keep his voice steady and stay alert. "Because I didn't come here to twist it around to suit my purposes like you did. I showed up to take you in. Okay, so a part of me was hoping you'd try something stupid so I could blow you away, even if it'd make hate me for the rest of my life. Because if you were gone, he'd finally get you out of his system. I didn't really come out here to kill you. He'd hate that. I've learned a few things from him and that's one of 'em. He could see past everything I'd been, made me see my dad was wrong—life's *not* about every man for himself. Because for Fraser, it isn't. If you really loved him you'd get it, Victoria, and you just don't. 'Cause if you really cared want to drag him off with you into a life of crime. Whatever you've got for him might be sex or lust or even revenge, but sure the hell it isn't love." His head pounded in a jagged beat that made him stutter over his words. He wasn't concussed, quite, but he was down and she was watching him with eagle eyes, ready to fire at his slightest move. He didn't think he was clearheaded enough to take her out but a part of his mind was clear as crystal.

"And you think he loves *you* instead of me?" She laughed abruptly.

"I'm not competing with you, Victoria," Ray said. "And I *don't* think so, not the way he loves you. But he's my best friend. He's backed me when he didn't have to. He's expected more from me than I thought I had to give, and it nearly blew me away when I found I could live up to him. I never meant to come between him and people he loves—unless they mean to hurt him, and you know you're here to

trash him as hard as you can.”

“No, I mean to go away with him. It’s *meant*, for us to be together. You know that. Even someone like you must be able to feel it.”

“Sure, Victoria. If you want to be followed because you’re a bitch in heat and he wants to go to bed with you, fine. If he wants to change you, you ought to level with him and let him know that you’re not going to change. You’re rotten to the bone. He doesn’t believe anybody can be evil, and he saved your life up North in that blizzard so he thinks he’s responsible for you. But then he thinks he’s responsible for everybody. Do you want to be just one of the herd?”

“You don’t understand a thing.” She glanced around uneasily as if she expected Fraser to pop out from behind a tree and end their fierce dialog. “Does he know where you are?”

“No. I told him I was coming to see a snitch who would only talk to me.” He didn’t want her expecting Fraser and he didn’t believe he’d been followed. Would it have been better to lie, to tell her Fraser was nearby in hopes of distracting her? “I didn’t want him to have any part of this until it was over. I came out to bring you in, Victoria.”

“And a wonderful job you’re doing of it,” she sneered at him, her eyes cold.

“I knew I couldn’t get you to listen.” Could he sneak his hand inside his jacket without her noticing? “Because you only love one thing in the universe, and it’s not Benton Fraser. It’s Victoria Metcalf. You want him to add to your collection. You’re fascinated, sure. You’re turned on. And you’re possessive as all get out.” He continued with fierce intensity, the right words coming as if he had written them out beforehand. “But if you really loved him, Victoria, you’d leave him alone and let him live the life he was meant to live, not drag him on the run and condemn him the way you’re already condemned. I’ll do anything I can to save him from you, even if it means I lose his friendship for it. Because, you see, Victoria, I do know what love is. And the only thing that means more to me in the world than his friendship is the knowledge that he’s safe and free—free of you.”

He could have sworn he felt eyes on the back of his neck, but when he glanced around, he saw no one who could help him. Even the boys with the Frisbee were gone. Victoria leveled the gun at him, right between his eyes, and moved it closer, though not close enough for him to jump her for it with even the slightest chance of success.

“All right,” she said. “It doesn’t matter to you. He won’t find your body; he’ll never know I killed his best friend. But I’ll be rid of you, and I’ll have him, and I’ll make him mine. Once he’s on the run with me, he can never go back and I’ll have him for good. You don’t like my methods but they work. And I’ll pay him back for turning me in that time. I’ll make him pay and pay and pay, and I’ll twist him up so tight he won’t even know he’s paying. And then, one day when I grow tired of him, the spell will end, and I’ll walk away. And he’ll have nothing left, no honor, no friends, nothing but me, and he’ll have to beg me to take him back. He’ll have to *grovel*.” Her face was twisted and ugly, but the icy beauty shone through, and Ray’s heart sank. He couldn’t let her destroy Benny like that. He had to stop her, but there was nothing he could do. Unless...

It was the oldest trick in the book. His fingers moved in the dust, grasped a handful, tried to fling it in her face. All he needed was an edge, a second when he could get the drop on her and put her down like the mad dog she was. Fraser would hate him for it, but it would be worth it if Fraser finally was free of her.

Even as he threw the dust she was firing. His own movement spared him the head-shot she had intended, but he felt a hot sting sear across his outflung arm, burning from elbow to shoulder.

Rolling frantically sideways, he landed hard on the injured arm and cried out involuntarily, dazed with pain. He saw her leveling the gun at him again, saw her finger tighten on the trigger, and though he scrambled backward feebly in the dust, the wound in his arm a giant furnace of agony, he knew he couldn’t move fast enough to get away. The dust had caught her, not full in the face as he’d hoped, but near enough to partially impair her vision, or she would have killed him with the first shot. But she could see now, and she was aiming for him. His hand tried to close around his own gun but his fingers didn’t want to work right and the weapon spilled from the shoulder holster and fell on the ground in front of him just out of his easy reach. He groped for it as she brought the gun up, aimed it right between his eyes...

When the shot rang out he flinched and jerked, expecting to feel its impact in his body. After a stunned moment, he realized it hadn't hit him. Opening his eyes, he looked up at Victoria. She stood above him, the pistol still outstretched, her face twisted. Then, as he watched in helpless disbelief, the gun slid from her hand. He let out a yelp and jumped as it went off on impact but it missed him, the bullet slamming into a tree just inches above his head.

Victoria made a faint, surprised sound, then she said, very softly, in words Ray Vecchio would never repeat, not if they tried to pry it out of him with torture, "I did love him."

And she fell flat on her face at his side, a blossom of red staining the back of her blouse.

Ray scuttled forward, cradling his wounded arm, and touched the side of her neck. He felt nothing beneath his fingers, no pulse, no life. She wasn't breathing.

Stunned, he lifted his head and saw two people on the overpass above. One was Detective Huey, a shocked look on his face, his mouth open, his hand outstretched, and the other, still gripping Huey's gun in his shaking hand in place of his own unloaded one, was Constable Benton Fraser. His eyes were hollow with shock, but there was a twist to his mouth that told Ray he'd heard every damning word Victoria had said at the end. What Ray saw in Fraser's eyes was the death of a love that hurt him even more in its going than it had in its presence.

Huey's hand closed over the barrel of his gun that Fraser must have wrestled away from him before he could fire it. Ray heaved a vast shaken sigh.

Pushing himself to his feet, Vecchio shook his head to let Huey know he didn't need to come down and cuff her, trying hard to ignore the dizziness the unwary gesture caused him. Then, supporting his bleeding arm in his other hand, Ray trudged wearily up around the side of the hill to the top of the overpass while Huey took back his gun in a very careful movement and backed up a step or two, starting down the other way to examine the body and probably to retrieve her weapon and Ray's.

Ray walked up to Fraser, ignoring the fact that his knees wanted very much to buckle and the whole sleeve of his jacket was saturated with blood. He forced starch into his trembling legs.

Fraser said, "Oh dear," as if he didn't have a clue what he was saying or didn't realize how woefully inadequate the words were. His eyes looked stunned and hollow.

Ray gulped. "Fraser," he said and stopped dead as if he'd run the Riv into a brick wall.

"I—" Fraser swallowed and tried again. "Ray, I—"

"God, I'm sorry, Benny," Ray breathed. "I wanted to bring her in before she had a chance to use you again. I let her get the drop on me. If I'd just grabbed her and cuffed her..."

"No, Ray," Fraser said numbly as if his lips and tongue were wooden, making speech difficult. He looked like his own knees were doing a much worse job than Vecchio's were in holding him upright. Blindly he put out a hand for the railing, as if it would take something outside himself to stay on his feet. His knuckles whitened.

Ray walked forward without thinking and although it wasn't really his nature to be that demonstrative, he put his arms around Fraser and held onto him tightly. After an endless moment when he thought Fraser might push him away, he felt the Mountie's arms close around him and hold on with a fierce desperation as if he didn't dare let go of what he had left.

"She...could have been...what I wanted her to be, Ray." It was a desperate plea.

Ray knew she couldn't. Not even Benny could have made her into the woman he had seen whenever he looked at her, not even the Pope could have done that. But Ray couldn't say so, just as he couldn't repeat her final words. They would be more than Fraser could handle. "I know, Benny," he said soothingly, one hand patting his friend on the back. "I know." He felt himself begin to black out and he muttered fuzzily, "Too bad..."

"Too bad what, Ray?"

"Too bad you're not...wearing the...red serge..." he mumbled. "Wouldn't...show the...blood as much." Then the darkness took him somewhere safe and far away, and Fraser caught him as he fell.

* * *

There followed a confused, vague interval that was dotted with moments of clarity, the sight of a

paramedic bending over him as he administered some type of IV. Fraser in the background, his face the color of parchment, his eyes full of distress. The wail of a siren that went with the feeling of movement and that brought the dark back again. Periodic glimpses of people clad in white, or green, and always in the background glimpses of Fraser. Sometimes a nurse talked to Ray and he answered, and sometimes he heard voices speaking his name and didn't have the energy to move or respond. Time passed because he remembered once opening his eyes and focusing briefly on a dark window, then an interminable time later seeing sunshine again. But everything was too vague for him to try to swim to the surface. He wasn't even sure he *wanted* to....

"No, Diefenbaker. You may not have a doughnut. Those are for Ray, when he wakes up."

The words penetrated Ray's haze and he cranked open his eyes to find Fraser sitting at his bedside, his head bent as he lectured his wolf. It was a hospital room. Ray wasn't sure he wanted to know how he'd managed to persuade the hospital to let him bring a wolf inside. But then he noticed the stubble on Fraser's jaw and the way his hair stuck at odd, spiky angles, and he realized Fraser had simply come with him to the hospital and had probably stayed ever since. Something inside him that he hadn't realized was cold began to thaw.

Diefenbaker whined a protest.

"You are on a diet. An Arctic wolf should not eat doughnuts. They are very bad for you. All that sugar. If it comes to that, I'm not sure it will be good for Ray either, but—I know you love them too, but that's different."

Diefenbaker interrupted with a different tone of growl that made Fraser jerk his head up as if the wolf had announced that Ray was awake. Probably he had. He always knew things like that.

The Mountie's eyes still looked hollow and a little puffy—Ray didn't want to think about the reason for that—but there was more balance in them than there had been on the overpass. It was as if a part of him had been pared away, and he was just slowly learning that although it was gone, the best part of him was still here. It would take him time and distance to acknowledge that in his heart but Benny was too honest with himself not to admit it eventually. *And too strong not to survive*, Ray insisted to himself.

"Ray. You're awake. How do you feel?"

"About as good as you look. When did you sleep last?"

"I believe it was the day before yesterday," Fraser admitted immediately. "Your mother has been here. Francesca, too." He winced slightly at the mention of Ray's sister, causing Ray to imagine Frannie's sympathy and how it must have distressed the Mountie, especially when he looked determined to stay until Ray woke up. "And Lt. Welsh came by last night, as did Elaine, and Huey and several others from the precinct. You lost a great deal of blood, Ray. That's why you've been unconscious."

Reminded of his arm, he felt it throb, though the pain was muted and far away. "How bad?"

"Actually, it's not a serious wound, but for the blood loss. The bullet ran the length of your upper arm, but it was in fact no more than a long cut. If it hadn't bled so freely, you probably would not have needed to stay here. There were only six stitches." He shook his head. "I blame myself. I saw your wound, but I was not functioning at peak efficiency. There can be no excuse—"

"Benny. Yo, Benny, listen up, here." He waved his good hand in Fraser's face, pulling back only when he noticed the IV that ran into the back of his hand. "Cut yourself some slack. It wasn't that long."

"I could have stopped her before she shot you."

Ray looked him straight in the eye. "No, you couldn't," he said, and knew it to be as true as the sun rising in the east. "Not in cold blood, Fraser. Not Victoria." He wanted Fraser to know he didn't blame him for not shooting sooner.

"Even after what she said, a part of me believed it a lie, something she said to infuriate you, until she shot you and then I knew every word was true." His eyes fell away from Ray's. "I have been...a fool."

"No, Benny, you've been human. And that puts you in the same boat as the rest of us. You can't just turn off your emotions when it's convenient. Nobody can."

"But she shot you."

"Yeah, six lousy stitches," Ray replied, though from the way his arm felt, he'd be stuck with desk duty for a few weeks, a prospect that didn't remotely please him. He looked at the Mountie's bent head and saw how his shoulders slumped with more than fatigue. Dief, quick to sense the mood, pushed his nose up under Fraser's dangling hand and whined softly. Fraser stroked the thick fur automatically as if it were a talisman.

"Fraser?"

"Yes, Ray."

"I—halfway went out there hoping she'd try something."

"I suspected that, Ray."

"I knew I might have to take her down, even if it meant you'd have walked away and never talked to me again." That made Fraser's head come up, and his eyes seemed bluer than the sky ever shone over Chicago. "It would have made a difference," the detective persisted.

"It might then. It wouldn't now," said Fraser with his customary honesty. "I heard what she said, Ray. I do understand. It...still hurts, but I understand."

"I couldn't let her take you," Ray persisted. He was tired and achy and knew he wanted nothing so much as to go back to sleep; well, almost nothing. "I meant to do it the way you'd do it, legit. And even if she fought me it would still be legit. And even if you walked away in disgust, I'd have known you were okay." He had to be awfully weak or he wouldn't be babbling like this. But he had to say it. He had to know it was all right, that Fraser was all right, and that the best friend he had ever had was still his.

A hand clasped his good arm, avoiding the IV, and squeezed gently. "I have no plans to...walk away, Ray," Fraser said quietly. "I *know* you're right, and I know why you went out there."

"And I hope you know you did the only thing you could do," Ray persisted, inordinately pleased by Fraser's words and the touch.

"Yes, Ray. I know that, too." But it hurt him, even knowing the truth about her, it hurt him. Ray was glad of the reassuring way Dief leaned against Fraser's leg. When the Mountie let go, clasping instead the rail of the bed, Ray reached out, trailing the IV tube, though he was weak enough to make it feel like hard work, and patted the other man's fingers gently in return.

"You okay with it all? I mean with the police and everything?" Ray suddenly worried. Grabbing a cop's gun and shooting someone, even a wanted felon in the process of committing murder, was not something CPD would approve of.

"There will be a hearing," Fraser admitted. "Lt. Welsh doesn't expect trouble, though I suspect I have made him quite angry at Detective Huey. However, he doesn't know Inspector Thatcher." His mouth twisted wryly in something that was almost a smile.

Noting that first evidence of Fraser's letting go, Ray grinned. He was starting to be glad he had awakened after all.

"I have something for you, Ray," Fraser said and reached into his shirt pocket, taking out a small plastic rectangle and displaying it in front of Ray's eyes.

"My *credit card!*" Ray yelped in sheer delight. "How did you find it?"

"Angoras, Ray."

"Angoras? Sweaters?" He wasn't quite alert enough for the usual word games.

"Rabbits. I had Elaine run a search for people who kept quantities of rabbits, and I found Chester Denton, a young man who raises Angoras for fur. They produce a fine quality pelt."

"And this entrepreneur decided he needed *my* credit card to buy food for them?" Ray demanded hotly.

"He was in crisis, Ray. He's also a musician—I was sure the juxtaposition of music and rabbits would prove useful, so this morning, I went to see him. The doctor assured me you were not quite ready to awaken. Mr. Denton explained his car had been totaled, his insurance had lapsed, he had to hock his guitar and the pawnbroker sold it, apparently an illegal act. Mr. Denton performs in a local club and without his guitar, he has no money and no job. He didn't want his rabbits to starve."

"And you bought all this?" Ray asked in disbelief. A more unlikely sob story he had never heard.

"It was true, Ray. Besides, he got a new, er, gig, one that pays better, and he's promised to pay off the debt on your credit card. He gave me one hundred dollars as a guarantee of his honesty. I'll hold

it for you until you're discharged; it would be safer. He feels quite bad about the credit card."

"And does he feel bad about breaking the window on the Riv?" Ray demanded, irritated.

"He's already arranged for his uncle to repair it," Fraser explained. "He has a repair garage."

"I don't know how you do it," Ray sighed, too tired to argue any more about the unlikely string of events that led to the return of his credit card. Only Benny could have managed to get his card back, and only Benny could have arranged for the bill to be paid off. What was there about the Mountie anyway? Whatever it was, Ray wasn't the only one to feel it. Even Victoria had been drawn, in her own perverse way.

Reminded of Victoria again, Ray also thought of more problems that could await them, though he was sure the worst of them were over. Ray shook his head. "The dragon lady's gonna have you standing guard duty double shift?" he asked brightly.

Fraser didn't quite grin back, but his eyes were warmer than they had been, not quite so empty. "Possibly triple," he admitted.

"Oh well, once they let me out of here, I'll come over and help out," Ray volunteered. "I can probably pull some sick leave, you know, sit on the hood of the Riv and keep away kids with drippy ice cream cones, and little old ladies whose toy poodles want to do a number on your boots." He was talking faster than usual and finding it much harder work, but when Fraser actually smiled, Ray's heart settled down and started beating normally. It was a lost, sad smile, but there was the beginning of genuineness behind it.

"Thank you kindly, Ray," Fraser said, and Ray knew in that moment that his friend would be all right. "Though I rather doubt Thatcher would approve."

"Hey, it's a public sidewalk," Ray challenged, beginning to hit his own stride. "Doesn't belong to Canada. Property of the City of Chicago. I can sit there if I want to. Maybe I'll even bring a lawn chair... And some soda. And a bag of doughnuts for Dief."

The wolf yipped approvingly.

iHow about: He almost enjoyed the battle with the credit card company? That way we could avoid the passive tense here.