

Excerpt: "The Specialist" ©by Gordon Aalborg

ONE

TASMANIA

[Where there be devils]

The bicycle was the penultimate temptation. It was European, a top-of-the-line touring bike, sleek, exquisitely designed and engineered. The rich crimson of fresh blood, and not a single scratch to mar the finish. Even the saddle leather was pristine, although sensitive nostrils could, perhaps, detect a subtly blended odor of saddle leather and . . . femininity?

The specialist's fingers roamed along the lines of the bicycle with a lover's touch, caressing, flickering, almost as if such a touch could rouse a tactile response from the machine. Temptation surged with all the urgency that a new lover can create, almost explosive in its intensity at one point, before being throttled down, choked off by the coldness of logic.

"Careless," the specialist whispered. Still tempted, still rapt in the sensuality of the machine, but yielding to the power of the mind, the strength of the intellect over the ferocity of emotion.

Still, there was time. Fingers continued to caress, eyes following with a languorous gentleness overlaid with intensity. Nimble fingers plucked at a pedal, ears pricked to the whisper of perfection as the rear wheel spun in a smooth, effortless blur of crimson spokes.

"Careless," the specialist whispered again, and this time the whisper was almost a moan, vibrant with sexual tension as if the bicycle could react to such, could somehow respond, somehow ease the frustration that ebbed and flowed like a great, inner tide.

"No."

And again . . . "No!" Stronger this time as intellect began to win.

"NOOOOO!"

And the frustration took the voice up almost an octave even as one hand released the sleek bicycle frame and grabbed at the handle of the well-padded vise as if to try and crush the ultra-light tubing in a single wrenching yank.

Breath almost sobbing, now, but controlled—always controlled—the specialist forced the hands to become steady; eyes closed with mental efforts aimed at stillness. Slowly the breathing steadied, the sensitive fingers relaxed from an almost claw-like cramping.

“Careless. It would be just toooo careless,” the specialist whispered, and reached out to pick up first the auto-darkening welding mask, then the thick welding gloves, and finally the slender, almost delicate handpiece of the cutting torch.

There was a pause then, because one hand had to be removed from its protective glove to wipe away a single, minute tear before the specialist could fire up the cutting torch and begin the intricate and difficult job of dismembering the bicycle.

The job didn't need to be difficult, of course. But the specialist was, after all, just that—a specialist. Sloppy work could not be tolerated. Nor was it. When the task was completed, there was a carefully-arranged pile of blood-crimson pieces of space-age tubing on the workshop floor. Even the wheels had been first denuded of their spokes, then sectioned into precisely-measured small arcs.

The specialist gave the pile a few final adjustments, then devoted some time to carefully sweeping up the workshop floor until it was as pristine as it had been before the bicycle had arrived. As pristine as it had to be, because a sloppy workplace leads to sloppy work.

No great haste to dispose of the crimson heap, the specialist decided. The hard part of that job was over with, now. A glance at the wrist revealed it to be nearly dinner time anyway, and it was . . . appropriate . . . to have dinner before the fun job, the delightful job of disassembling the bicycle's rider.

A slow smile was followed by a tongue licking delicately at perfect white teeth. Anticipation, the specialist thought—certainly not for the first time—was often the best part. The very best part.

Dinner was simple; a small, hopping-off-the-plate-rare wallaby loin steak, an equally small baked Kennebec potato, and a fresh garden salad with just a tinge of olive oil. Tree-huggers and passionate, ill-

educated greenies might scream blue murder about eating the country's national symbol, but wallaby—and kangaroo meat generally—was essentially cholesterol free and wondrous tasty in the bargain. Especially if personally harvested and properly dismembered into choice segments specific to their purpose. Whole saddles of young wallaby for roasting, loin and haunch steaks for the grill. Too many Tasmanians, thought the specialist, made far, far too much of the ubiquitous wallaby pattie. Vastly over-rated, but then, just about right for most Tasmanians and their decidedly pedestrian palates.

And with the simple meal, of course, the requisite, celebratory glass of Piper's Brook wine, the finest produced in Tasmania and shockingly expensive at least by conservative local standards, but worth it. True quality could never be appropriately priced, the specialist mused, savoring each sip and making the glass last right through the meal.

Dessert was a small salad of hand-picked fruit, which the specialist savored while deciding where to start with the remaining, satisfying but also necessary, task of the evening. First, of course, knives to be honed. Nothing so crude as a meat-saw or cleaver; the specialist was a self-confessed neatness freak, a purist, and where possible always preferred hand-tools for any task they could deal with.

A final, delicious sip of the wine, just to cleanse the palate of the fruit syrup, and the time had come. First there was the vaguely undignified business of climbing into the disposable paper coveralls, but getting the knives perfect took enough time to forget that small issue. Then, out to the other workshop, where the already-occupied stainless steel table and its pleasures awaited.

The specialist stood outside for just a few moments, savoring the pleasures ahead while using every possible sense to scout the surroundings, ears cocked for unexpected sounds, eyes scanning what there was of the horizon for any hint of vehicle lights or some poacher or wallaby-hunter's spotlight. Almost wasted gestures, really; the risk of anyone wandering to this isolated spot even in daylight was remote enough. At night it was almost laughable. Still, the specialist took the time, expended the small, necessary effort. Carelessness has many faces, and succumbing to the lure of the bicycle would merely have been one of the obvious ones.

Field-dressing the body had also contained a modicum of risk, but once done, on an isolated bush

track far from usual human travels, the elements of risk disappeared virtually overnight. This part of the country teemed with Tasmanian Devils, truly world-class scavengers. By dawn, the specialist knew, there would be no sign of the gutting but a thrashed-up area where the devils had fought over the spoils.

Once eviscerated, the human carcass does not significantly differ from that of any other large quadruped. Broken down in meatworks terms, there are forequarters, hind quarters, loins, shanks, and all the other cuts. But the specialist deviated from meatworks procedure in that only surgically-sharp knives were used to dismember the young woman's body that graced the stainless steel table. And it was done, logically enough, with very deliberate precision.

First the head, tidily separated at the base of the neck, then placed on a convenient shelf to oversee the rest of the operation with sightless, ice-green eyes that were partly shrouded by still-splendid, tumbling masses of wavy blonde hair framing a face of once-exceptional beauty. Then . . .

Wrist and ankle joints first, then those of the knees and elbows, then the slightly more difficult shoulders. Each succumbed in its turn to the precision, and each was then placed, almost reverently, to one side as the butchery continued.

When only the torso and thighs were left, the specialist paused to run sensitive fingers down the nubbed spine to the still-remaining soft hollows above the buttocks, admiring the sleek, soft texture of the pale skin there. No nude bather; this specimen's tan paused where bike shorts had snugged the muscular buttocks.

The muscle tone was splendid, clearly the result of years spent cycling. The woman's passport, identifying her as one Hanne Larsen of Esbjerg, Denmark, revealed travels throughout Europe, North America, and northern Asia, and it was not difficult to believe she had done most of her traveling by bicycle.

A great deal of travel for someone only twenty-two, and the specialist's mind went walkabout to speculate about how many men had shared this muscular body in how many countries. Certainly more than a few; the Larsen girl's bush had been pruned to a crisp shortness, edges carefully shaped to accentuate the labial lips.

She had probably enjoyed all the sex, too. At the peak of physical fitness, far from home in what, to her, must have appeared exotic, romantic places. Yes, there would have been men. The speculation shifted up a gear to march into the dozens, then back to precision as a latex-clad finger slipped into the short-cropped fur for a final, suddenly exciting check.

A virgin! Logic denied it; the firm pressure of an intact hymen against the finger shouted, “Yes . . . yes!”

Both disappointed and exultant now, the specialist looked over the dismembered sections of Hanne Larsen with new interest, this time surveying the various joints with the calculating vision of a proper butcher. And a thought.

What might they taste like . . . small medallions of tenderloin from close inside that spine? And could the rounded globes of that rump be properly slabbed into thick, succulent rump steaks with a crisping edge of fat to give just the right flavor? And how difficult might the skinning be? One thing to dismember a carcass, but skinning became an individual issue between species. A sheep, for instance, especially a youngish one, would yield its entire skin to a single knife-cut and a few well-place thumps of a fist on the inside, but a deer did not give up its hide so easily, and a ‘roo or wallaby was more difficult yet to separate from its soft pelt.

But a human was more like a pig, the specialist mused, lips curving at a half-remembered written description of human flesh being termed, “long pig” by some totally forgotten cannibal tribe or another. That accepted, skinning became more a matter, then, of removing the rind just before cooking, or of slashing its edges and rubbing in salt and spices to make it crisp into crackling.

The specialist’s eyes opened, fingers of one hand already reaching for the sharpest, most slender of the knives even as the other hand drew into focus one hip and thigh joint with the rounded knob of bone shining in the clean lamp-light.

The deed was harder than the thought, but . . . do-able. It took a few tries, but the final one produced a perfectly acceptable butterfly chop, if one slightly different in shape to what would be produced from a real pig in a real butcher shop. The rump proved more difficult, and both buttocks were

in one- and two-inch slabs before a suitable, really acceptable, rump steak could be displayed.

The tenderloin was easy, once neatly removed from the surprisingly small lower ribs and the vertebrae. And with no skin to worry about, it sliced as neatly and easily as that of a deer, although the color was subtly different. More like pork tenderloin, which the specialist thought was somehow appropriate.

And the speculation about the skinning proved correct, too, although more difficult to judge now that the carcass had already been dismembered. It might have been considerably easier with it all in one piece and hanging by its heels. That might be the way to go next time—a quick kill, swift evisceration, then immediate hanging to cool and stretch the muscles and sinews. The specialist thought there would be insufficient useful cuts of meat in the forequarters; like those of a wallaby or kangaroo they were relatively minor by comparison to the rest. But . . . perhaps a small shoulder roast?

Not, it quickly became obvious, without a more traditional dismemberment, and probably the use of a meat saw, which offended the specialist's sense of routine. It could be done, but . . .

And the mind switched to the other problem, that of timing. Relatively exact temperature control was required for proper cooling and stabilization of such a large carcass, especially if the skin was to be left intact for later. And that might mean waiting until midwinter, which was far, far too long to wait.

Besides, while the theoretical season for this sort of game was open and year-round, the easiest and best times were certainly the Australian summer months between November and April. These were the months when potential was enhanced by the burgeoning flocks of backpacker and bicycle tourists, who fled the snows and cold of North America and Northern Europe for the warmth and sun of Australia.

The specialist's mind had already begun speculating about the design and specifics of a mobile cool-room as the first trip began to dispose of bicycle and rider into the unknown depths of the abandoned mine-shaft not far from the shack and sheds that had, themselves, only just survived the abandonment.

Essentially, it was a silent if prolonged operation, requiring surprisingly many trips from the dissection room and workshop. A few of the metal parts pinged once or twice off the sides of the shaft, but the meat and bones slid away to oblivion with a satisfactory silence. In no case could the sound of any

actual landing be heard; the bottom was far, far below, where the shaft had encountered a natural fissure that extended God only knew how far below the plateau. And of course there were earlier disposals to cushion the landings. Last to be dropped were the woman's personal effects: the purse, the traveling gear, the jewelry.

The final cleanup, with brushes and brooms and lashings of pure rainwater from the tanks, took substantially longer. It was rising dawn when the specialist—not in the slightest bit sleepy—headed back down off the escarpment. The powerful four-wheel-drive slithered and scrambled and bounced, often leaning precipitously as it descended along the virtually trackless route down a usually dry creek bed, then eventually moved cautiously across an overgrown paddock to where junction with a minor bush track could be accomplished with hardly a trace of its passage.

Once safely home in the large, federation-style house, resplendent with twelve-foot ceilings and far too large for one person living alone, the specialist plopped the tenderloin—the only cut to escape the mine shaft—straight from cooler to proper refrigerator.

Then it was time to shower quickly and change for work. It was while the even white teeth were being flossed and brushed that the mind made the transition to Monday morning . . . with faint overlays of that evening's anticipated filet mignon for tea—dinner, in North American terms. That thought provoked a brief interlude of futuristic planning, but it was only brief. First . . . today. A quick shopping trip would be needed, of course, but the croutons and fresh bacon could be got during lunch break, and it would be unthinkable to consider ruining a good filet with some jazzed-up sauce or another. The specialist wouldn't do that to any good steak, much less this exquisite offering.

TWO

Sergeant Charlie Banes paused his police vehicle at the entrance to the grounds of the newly-renovated estate now in use as a low-level mental health facility. A private facility, one of few in Tasmania, and the only one within his responsibility.

He hated being the bearer of bad news; if there was one element he wished could be removed—cut out like a cancer—from all his years of police work, it was situations like this. This specific one, particularly. One thing to be informing parents of a child's death, or searching for parts of somebody's loved one after an horrific vehicle accident. But this, this was even worse in its way, based not on fact but innuendo; not on logic but on fear and ignorance. And—worse—political. God, he hated politics.

But it had to be done, and done now, today. Running long fingers through his close-cropped hair as he emerged from the police car, he set his cap firmly in place and marched slowly to the front door of the institution, the appropriate words forming and reforming in his mind as he approached.

"I'm sorry, but Dr. Birch is away in America." The receptionist replied to his request in a tone that suggested he ought to have known. Which of course he ought to have known, indeed had known, but forgotten. Just as he'd forgotten the name of the American—no, Canadian—head doctor that David Birch had swapped with for half the year, just as he'd done the year before. He should have remembered; Dave had told him not that long ago.

His mind toyed with the thought, then he grimaced. It had, in fact, been months—not days—ago, and worse, he'd actually met this Canadian doctor the year before, and now couldn't even put a face to the forgotten name. Fortunately, the receptionist—whose name he did know—saved him from further embarrassment.

"So you'll be wanting Dr. Stafford," she said. "Ralph Stafford. I'll just see if I can find him for you."

Easier said than done; the Sergeant stood cap in hand for nearly ten minutes while Gladys Rainbird grew increasingly agitated at her futile efforts to locate the errant psychologist. Her shrill voice grew more and more shrill as she stabbed at the switchboard keys, first asking, then demanding that the institution's new top man be found.

"I'm really sorry, Sergeant," she finally said. "He's . . . he's . . ."

"A vexation, I'm certain. Sorry, Gladys, I was outside watching the weather." The voice came from beneath the Mexican-bandit moustache of a tall, lanky man, far younger than his iron-gray hair suggested. A man who'd approached from behind both of them in an approach so silent neither had noticed.

"But hardly a vexation for the police, I wouldn't have thought," the man continued, a puzzled expression sweeping across his face with meteoric speed.

"Not you, specifically, Sir," Banes replied, reaching out to shake hands as he introduced himself before Gladys Rainbird could begin. The doctor's eyes were hidden behind photo-sensitive lenses darkened by the sun, but his handshake was firm and positive without being overpowering. The fact he was nearly a head taller than the policeman put Sergeant Banes at no disadvantage; he'd been a copper too long to be easily intimidated.

"We met last year, if I remember right. Come on into the office," Stafford said.

They were in the office and the coffee ordered before the doctor's glasses gradually faded to reveal the palest gray eyes Charlie Banes had ever seen, eyes so pale they seemed to glimmer like ice from the tall doctor's well-tanned features. Coupled with the bandito moustache and strong, hawklike features, those eyes produced a strangely fierce effect that miraculously changed to one of empathy and compassion when the doctor smiled or spoke in his slow, deliberate voice, one as thick and soft as chocolate topping. A professional voice, Banes decided, but one used so long it was now the good doctor's natural way of speaking.

"Are you seriously suggesting our clients could be at risk?" Stafford asked after listening to the Sergeant's explanation with an intensity that even with Banes' experience and training drew out more

information than he had originally planned to provide. Another trick; one he, himself, often used, but had never before had used against him so well. Tendrils of caution slithered round the base of the Sergeant's thick neck as he realized just how very good this foreigner was at eliciting information.

"Anybody in the wrong place at the wrong time is liable to wind up at risk," the Sergeant replied. "The whole town—the whole damned district—is all on edge, and that's without us knowing anything more than the fact that three tourists might—might!—have gone missing during the past few months."

"Just 'gone missing,' you say," Dr. Stafford said after a brief silence as he seemed to analyze each word, each nuance. "No evidence of violence, no evidence of unexpected changes in plans? And nobody local apparently affected by the whole thing at all?"

"No evidence of anything. Not one skerrick of bloody evidence," Banes replied, fingers again scrubbing nervously at his scalp. "That's half the bloody problem. It's as if these three women—there is that much common ground, for what it's worth—simply vanished into thin air somewhere along this stretch of coast. No evidence, no remains of them, their camping gear, their clothing . . . nothing!"

Banes paused as their coffee arrived, and stared for a moment into the steaming brew before continuing once they were alone again.

"But of course that hasn't stopped the flow of rumors—the bloody river of rumors," he said. "Whoever is doing whatever's being done, or been done, must, of course, be mad. Which in this country usually means crazy," he added, catching Stafford's flicker of misunderstanding in his peripheral vision.

"And this being the only 'madhouse' in the area, the whole setup is automatically under suspicion of everything from devil worship to mass mayhem and serial murder." The doctor's words could have been Banes' well-rehearsed next lines. "Hardly surprising," he said then with a deceptively casual shrug. "But from that point on I must admit to being a babe in the woods. What is it going to mean to me, to my patients, to my staff? And, of course, what's to be done about it, assuming you can't resolve the disappearances pretty damned quick?"

His radiant smile belied any anxiety at all, but those damned pale eyes were like frozen spit, revealing an unexpected hardness that Banes found himself realizing he probably should have expected.

The next remark confirmed it.

“You’re far more anxious about this than seems logical to me,” the doctor said, voice dipping and slowing just a fraction into true professional mode. “Which means there’s something here that you either haven’t told me or don’t want to tell me or merely just suspect and maybe can’t tell me. Right?”

Banes didn’t try to hide his own grin. Dr. Dave Birch, a friend of long standing, if seldom seen, had often had the same effect of apparent mind-reading, but it was difficult to accept with any ease. Especially from a total stranger. Especially for a policeman.

“Three young women, all foreigners, all either hiking or cycling round Tasmania, have apparently gone missing in this region during the last four months. All have been confirmed as having been in St. Helens or the vicinity just before their disappearances. All were traveling alone, or were alone at the time of their alleged vanishing. Not one has made any contact with family, friends, or ongoing travel destinations in any way. At least the first two had travelers’ cheques and/or charge cards that have not been used since the approximate dates of their disappearance.”

“Right. Too many coincidences. You get paid to be suspicious and it’s probably second nature by now anyway.” The doctor spoke into the silence the Sergeant’s own whirling mind had created. “Well if it’s any consolation I expect you’re right about there being something damned strange going on, but you didn’t come here for that. You didn’t just come to ask me to keep my patients out of the public eye as much as possible, either, so let’s have it out in the open. I only hope to God you’re not thinking I’ve got any FBI-type profiling experience, because I haven’t.” He smiled that slow smile before adding, “For one thing, I’m a Canadian . . . not an American, although I realize the accents sound the same, this far away.”

“Don’t know if you don’t ask,” Banes replied without apology. “To be fair, I’d have expected that if you did, Dave would have mentioned it. He did give me a fairly thorough backgrounder, although to be honest I’d even forgotten when I arrived that you two had swapped jobs again, and the rest is gone from my mind like smoke.”

“I’ll find you a copy of my CV if you think it will help,” Stafford said with a grin of his own. “But it won’t. I’m just a plain old garden-variety psychologist, North American style. Weird, I sort of

understand. Sometimes. Serial killing, or abduction, no.”

“And you don’t read palms or tea leaves or chicken guts, either,” Banes said, finding to his surprise that he was coming to quite like this tall newcomer without having the faintest idea why.

“Not even that,” Stafford said. “The one thing I think I can assure you of, however, is that none of our clients would likely be a part of what’s bothering you. As Dave would have told you, I’m sure, these are people with relatively minor mental problems. Depression; easily treatable schizophrenia; bipolar disorders of course, but really, Sergeant, these people are hardly even a threat to themselves, much less anyone else. And none of them are really in a position to go about abducting or murdering young tourists. They’re all in fairly time-consuming programs of rehabilitation, for starters.”

“You know that and I know that, but this is a small community with more than its share of what you lot call rednecks,” Banes replied. “They’re suspicious of anything different, anything not totally local, anything at all, I sometimes think. That’s one of the problems with Tasmania—if your ancestors didn’t come off a convict ship you’re a newcomer, and therefore suspect. You want to try and find a property to go shooting on if you doubt me.”

“Pass on that, although I’ve done a bit of shooting in my time,” said the doctor. “And I don’t doubt you in the least. I’d only been here three days last trip before I’d heard the archetypical Tasmanian joke at least six times.”

“About the boy who tells his mother that his fiancé is a virgin and she says, ‘If she isn’t good enough for her family, she isn’t good enough for ours?’ That’s a transplanted North American joke and well you should know it,” replied Banes, trying with a laugh to cover the defensive stiffness he felt. “Straight out of their hillbilly country, I suspect, although the parallels are close enough for it to fit here, too. There are things go on in the backblocks here you wouldn’t really want to know about.”

“I probably would, actually, but that raises the question of just what constitutes ‘backblocks’ as you describe them. Inland from here, for example, where I’m told families have lived almost since the first settlement, and with sufficient inbreeding that it seems every second Tasmanian is related to every third one?”

“It isn’t quite that bad. Not anymore, anyway. I doubt we’re any worse than any other part of the country in that regard. But I do take your point, and you can be sure there are people not that far from here I intend looking at quite closely. The problem is that without a shred of evidence, the worst I could do is charge the buggers with poaching, which is hardly even an offence in the ‘country.’ Half the people who live on the outskirts here regard poaching as almost a right.”

“Been there; done that. It’s much the same in B.C.—British Columbia, where I grew up. But let’s cut to the chase, Sergeant. What do you suggest I do about my people here? Keeping them confined to the estate isn’t really feasible, as I’m sure you appreciate. They’ve always gone into town, albeit in groups and usually supervised. And of course, there is not a damned thing I can do if one of them wants to summarily discharge himself or herself; their presence here is voluntary, after all.”

“There isn’t much you can do, I’m afraid. Except maybe stop this business of having them in closely supervised groups. That, without doubt, draws attention. This town is used to tourists, but when you get groups who go about the ways your people do, not really shopping, not really sightseeing, but just . . . wandering . . . well, the locals damn soon get to know who’s who, and that’s what worries me. If nothing else, for God’s sake keep them away from the town at night when the pubs are closing. I fear that will be the time we’ll see trouble, and we are ready for that, for sure, but it will be easier to deal with if all your people are safe here at the time.”

“I doubt if it’ll be as simple as that. Unfortunately we have a couple of very, very attractive young women among our clients, and they have already drawn their share of attention in the town. Usually from men who don’t seem to me to keep normal working hours, if I may say so.”

“You may. And I could name each and every one of them. A girl would have to be madder than I think any of your people are to get within spitting distance of any of them,” Banes said. But there was no grin with this comment. He knew only too well the layabouts who plagued the town’s pubs and byways, usually drunk, usually obnoxious, but seldom sufficiently so that his small force could do much about it.

Of equal concern was the fact it was this same mob of tearaways that provided his most fertile hunting ground when it came to looking into the disappearances. At least three he knew of were convicted

rapists and half a dozen others had been jailed for sexual assaults on women. Worse, several had lengthy histories with the government mental institutions in Hobart and Launceston, and were unstable at best.

“I doubt you’ll find your serial killer, if that’s what it turns out to be, among your local bunch of bad boys,” Ralph Stafford remarked as if reading Banes’ mind, and the Sergeant almost jumped at the shock of it.

“I’d appreciate knowing your logic; it might help.”

The doctor shrugged. “Simply *not* logical,” he replied. “If it was an unexplained murder, complete with corpse and evidence, then perhaps. But what we seem to be looking at here is well-planned, skillfully executed—if you’ll pardon the word—and I simply doubt if your local rednecks would be up to the task. Not three times running. I know ours at home wouldn’t, not without leaving some sort of trail.”

“Okay. I’ll buy that line of reasoning. But what are we looking for, then? I accept you’re no profiler, but still . . .”

“A man, almost certainly. Probably young to middle-aged—unless he’s been at this a lot longer than you know about—probably passably well educated, probably fairly fit, probably a loner, at least by the clinical definition. Don’t have to be an FBI profiler to guess that much. It’s after that the difficulties start, but let’s see . . .

“Maybe another tourist, but it doesn’t feel quite right to me unless it’s a ‘local’ tourist, somebody raised here in the state who knows his way around. More likely somebody who lives here, or works here. Or works *through* here . . . somebody like a realtor, or a traveling sales rep. I mean let’s face it, good-looking girl tourists damn soon learn to be pretty cautious about men they might let get close enough for an abduction attempt.

“I would be almost willing to bet that when you find him—if you can—he’ll turn out to be wearing a tie. But then,” and Stafford shrugged again with a deprecating smile, “he might just as easily be wearing board shorts and tattoos from one end to the other.”

“Well that would make things just a helluva lot easier, I reckon,” the Sergeant replied. “But let’s

not hold our breath. They're sending out a team from Hobart to take charge of that particular investigation, and it will be their problem more than mine, I expect. My problem is that I've only got a round dozen people to maintain control in a town and district where people are starting to get decidedly spooked. I've already got parents driving their kiddies to school and picking them up, stuff like that. And it hasn't really got much of a run in the media, yet, either. Let *that* mob of bastards get the bit in their teeth, and, well . . .”

“Yes, I know,” Stafford said. And there was no grin now. Both men knew what a media circus could manage in creating chaos from mere difficulty. “Well, anything I can do to help, I will, of course. But remember I'm no real expert, although I expect your people will have a profiler involved anyway, fairly soon.”

“They might, but it would end up being somebody from the mainland, because I don't think anybody here has had the training. And the bloody problem is that Tasmania isn't the mainland. It's a unique little place with some very, very unique aspects.”

“Yes, so I've heard. Like blithering idiots chained to trees out on the back forty, or whatever you call it here, being fed like tame bears and treated not as well.”

“If only it was that simple. Here, the blithering idiots are in the parliament, like as not. Or running the media.”

Banes rose and reached out to shake hands. “Not that you heard me say that, of course. Thanks for the coffee, and the chat. I expect I'll be seeing you again before this is over.”

As Banes walked to his car, he let his eyes wander round the spacious grounds, absently noting the security difficulties that would arise if some of the local yobboes did decide to start trouble. It was not a reassuring sight; the institution had never been designed for the task it now had, much less one requiring security.

And as he reached the vehicle, it was to find himself face-to-face with one of the obvious problem people the good doctor had mentioned.

“Can I grab a lift to town with you?” asked a woman that under any other circumstances and in

almost any other place could only have been described as a hooker. Tight bodice, short skirt, stockinged legs that seemed to go on forever . . . and a ravaged, once-pretty face with not-quite-right eyes that suddenly widened at the realization of his uniform before shooting a frightened glance to where needle tracks walked through the inside of an elbow.

“I . . . uh . . .” The voice grew tremulous, then slid into an outright stammer before the woman turned on her three-inch heels and fled toward the safety of the main entrance.

Banes could only shrug and get into the police car. He’d seen worse before. Far worse. But whatever other problems this woman had to bring her here, there was no doubt in his mind that drugs were or had been part of it. Which brought a new concern to mind as he drove back toward town.

THREE

VANCOUVER ISLAND: CANADA

[Where there be . . . devils?]

Kirsten closed her eyes, then opened them again quickly, not wishing to reveal the turmoil that chewed away inside her, making her nauseous, light-headed and—most annoyingly—making her talk too much, too quickly, and with too little sense. What could it possibly matter that she was a jewelry designer and goldsmith, that her sister was something of an actress? That she hadn't seen Emma in nearly two years? She was worried about Emma, yes. But as much angry as worried, and that, too, emerged in the torrent of verbal diarrhea that gushed from her mouth.

Had he noticed? When she'd closed her eyes, the policeman across the desk from her had been looking at the picture of her errant sister, but when she opened them, he was looking at her, his expression calm, but expectant. Seeing . . . what, she wondered? A mid-thirties, underweight strawberry blonde who could neither say anything important nor shut herself up? A genuine nut-case who'd left her workshop on impulse, not bothering to change from her working garb of stained, well-worn t-shirt and jeans?

He said nothing, however, and finally Kirsten spoke, carefully choosing her words, hoping to overcome the impulsiveness that had brought her here in the first place.

“She was supposed to get here early last week, on the Nanaimo ferry,” she said. “That's what her email said. And . . . well . . . she didn't. And now I'm worried . . . very worried.”

The policeman nodded, the expression in his eyes urging her to continue. She thought he'd ask questions, but he merely waited; calm, placid, his eyes revealing nothing. Nice eyes, actually. Warm, a pleasant green-going-on-hazel coloring, and even, perhaps, compassionate. But impossible to read. Her imagination filled in the blanks, certain she must be coming across as some kind of deranged idiot.

Kirsten bowed her head, fighting for composure, willing herself not to break into sobs of frustration and recrimination.

Damn you, Emma! If you walked in this door right now I think I'd kill you just on principle. And then shook her head at the ridiculousness of that thought, especially here . . . in this place, under these circumstances. She had never before set foot in the offices of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in Duncan, and now regretted the impulse which had brought her.

This time, when she looked up, the policeman took pity on her.

“Let’s go back to the beginning,” he said, eyes flickering from the picture to Kirsten. Comparing, she wondered, the photogenic brunette actress with the scraggly woman in his office? Emma’s mane of naturally sorrel hair with her own hastily ponytailed—if longer—cascade of curls neither blonde nor any recognized shade of red? Emma’s enormous sky-blue eyes with her own, which her late husband had described as “shit-brindle” in color? Not that Ed was any judge; Kirsten had very quickly come to realize that a coke-head recognized only two colors—white for the powder and green for the money to buy it with.

The officer picked up a pen, dragged over a scratch-pad, and prepared to write. “Now, your name is spelled just how, exactly? You sort of lost me when you got to the ‘K’ in Nelson.”

She almost laughed; would have under different circumstances. And once again regretted her penchant for irreverent comment. The first time he’d asked her name—clearly with no intention of writing it down at that point—she had flippantly given her usual reply to the question: “Nelsen . . . with a *K*.” Now she was much more circumspect.

“Knelsen,” she said, and went on to spell it: “K . . . N . . . E . . . L . . . S . . . E . . . N.”

“First name?” He didn’t even bother to look up, much less react to the spelling explanation.

“Kirsten,” she said, then rushed on before her traitorous mind could add something stupid about that, too, being spelled with a *K*. “And that’s my sister Emma—that picture you have. Well, her name’s Emma but she goes by Emmaline, and her last name’s not Knelsen, it’s Zelichovsky. That’s her married name, except she isn’t anymore. Married, that is. She’s . . . divorced. In fact, she might even have gone

back to her maiden name, like I . . . did.” And having faltered on that thread to a time better forgotten if only she *could* forget, she clamped her mouth shut, clenched her teeth, closed her eyes against the sudden shaft of bitterness that soured her throat.

If the policeman noticed her rapid-fire, breathless delivery, he gave no sign of it. Kirsten blinked again, and opened her eyes to see him still with the pen poised over the paper.

“Spelling?” he asked, not bothering to look up. Kirsten dutifully complied, then fell silent, not really trusting herself to speak without being prompted. The silence between them seemed to magnify, hovering like a smoke cloud that didn’t dissipate even when he looked up and spoke again.

“Age?”

The abruptness of it startled Kirsten into another blurt of information: she was thirty-five, her younger sister twenty-nine and unnaturally terrified of the approaching the big three-oh. The policeman, who looked about Emma’s age but could have been five years younger . . . or older, didn’t flinch. He didn’t write it all down, either, Kirsten noticed. Just one number—assumedly Emma’s age—and she found herself wondering if members of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police took specific lessons in brusqueness.

“And she was supposed to arrive when, specifically?”

“Early last week,” she repeated, and refrained from adding that to Emma, that vague factor of timing was about as specific as it would ever be. Then, she had to explain exactly that when he asked if she, herself, couldn’t be just a bit more specific.

“So you’re talking . . . say . . . anytime between Monday and, say, Thursday, eh?”

“Yes,” she said, then felt compelled to add that she wouldn’t have been overly concerned even by Friday, her sister being notorious for avoiding punctuality as rigorously as she did her impending thirtieth birthday. She was less inclined to mention this was not the first time her sister had changed plans abruptly and without notice; Emma had been described by their mother as “flighty” even as a child, and maturity—if such a word could even be used in Emma’s case—had done nothing to improve that.

The policeman nodded, still not looking up, giving no indication of whether or not he thought her explanation sounded as disjointed to him as it did to her own ears.

“No phone call, no further emails, no contact at all?”

“Nothing,” Kirsten replied, unaccountably proud of herself for managing a simple, short, direct answer for a change.

“And have you tried reaching her?” A simple, logical question that brought forth an eruption of convoluted explaining. No, she hadn’t tried to reach Emma, because Emma was . . . unreachable. Emma had, indeed, been unreachable almost since the day her divorce decree had been finalized, or at the very least since she had been able to take the money and run, which is what she’d done, in typical Emmaline fashion.

Emma had done what she termed “extremely very well” in her divorce from a former professional hockey player who took his violence from the ice to the bedroom as a waning career gave him fewer outlets for a slap-shot temper. Emma had waltzed into court with a fist full of unfulfilled restraining orders, the still-visible evidence of a black eye, and a portfolio of grim photographs to back up her claims.

She’d taken him for everything but his jockey shorts, she’d said, and would have taken those if they hadn’t been handled by every hooker in downtown Toronto. Kirsten’s baby sister had then embarked on a ‘60s-style journey of fulfillment, globe-trotting in style and luxury and [only half-heartedly, Kirsten thought] seeking to renew her acting career. She now maintained a small apartment in Vancouver, but was almost never actually in residence.

“Well of course I tried to phone her, but all I got was her damned machine, and that doesn’t mean anything because . . . well . . . because it just doesn’t,” Kirsten said.

Emma’s sole discipline [also Kirsten’s opinion] was the maintenance of a pocket-Venus figure that filmed very well indeed. To that end, Emma quite frequently abandoned luxury travel for the rigors of long-distance bicycle touring, often spending weeks at a time on the road.

Which was how Emma had planned to visit Vancouver Island, Kirsten told the policeman, taking the Horseshoe Bay/Nanaimo Ferry with her touring bike, then making her way south to Duncan.

“She should have got here early last week,” Kirsten said, realizing as she did so that she had already told him that, and that the very vagueness of the proposed arrival date gave little credence to her concerns. It wasn’t until he followed up by asking if her sister mightn’t have simply changed her mind that Kirsten’s treacherous tongue once more took control, blathering out a litany of complaints about Emma’s blatant disregard for anyone and everyone, her self-centeredness, rebelliousness, and total lack of reliability. The words just poured out, tumbling over one another in an uncontrollable torrent that hardly made sense even to her. And she couldn’t stop!

She was half-certain his eyes actually did glaze over, at one point, but it didn’t stop her diatribe. Neither did the fact he’d stopped writing, and merely sat there, apparently mesmerized by her outpourings. Finally she just clapped a hand over her mouth, forcing the tide of words to back up into her throat.

“Are you all right?” he said, then. And raised an eyebrow when she—still hand-over-mouth—nodded weakly. He waited patiently, then let a smile flicker across his mouth.

“I’ve a got a sister something like that; I sort of know how you feel,” he said, and Kirsten could have whooped with relief had she dared move her hand. Then he continued, and the relief turned sour on her tongue.

“Now . . . this isn’t going to make you happy, and I’m genuinely sorry about that. But I don’t think at this stage I can help you at all,” he said.

“But . . . but . . . she’s missing!”

He sort of shrugged . . . not an actual movement, but an attitudinal one that was equally clear. “Missing, perhaps, but there’s no law against that. Look, Ms . . . Knelsen, you must understand the constrictions we’re up against here. OK, your sister is overdue, perhaps missing, but she’s an adult, she’s free to come and go as she pleases, and frankly, all I can be sure of here is that she is, as you’ve said, somewhat . . . inconsiderate.”

“Damned inconsiderate!”

Again, that impression of a shrug. “Point is, failure to make contact with your relatives isn’t a crime, and really, you haven’t been able to give me any evidence there’s been a crime of any sort. I understand your feelings, and I sympathize with your feelings . . . I really do. But . . .” He genuinely smiled, then, but it was a sad sort of smile, not encouraging at all. “. . . your sister has every right to go missing if that’s her choice, and I have no right at all to go looking for her just because she has been . . . inconsiderate.”

Kirsten heard the words, but couldn’t . . . didn’t want to . . . let herself believe what he was saying. She could feel the room somehow closing in around her, a ridiculous sensation, because she wasn’t claustrophobic, never had been. Yet now . . . She shivered, feeling disturbingly strange. She had been caught in rat-hole tunnels deep underground while caving and never felt this confined. She shook her head vigorously, sending her ponytail flying from side to side, and blinked to clear her vision.

“But she’s missing,” she said again. “How long does she have to be missing before you can do something, for goodness’ sake?”

This time, the shrug was visible . . . too visible.

“She has the right to go missing forever, if that’s her choice and she isn’t breaking any laws in the process, and hasn’t left any sort of legal mess behind that would force us to look for her. I know that sounds ridiculous, but it’s the . . .”

“It’s a nonsense! Something’s happened to her, or she would have been in touch by now. I know my sister. She might be extremely inconsiderate, but by now . . . well . . .” Kirsten couldn’t hide the evidence of her anger; didn’t try. The policeman clearly saw it, too, but he didn’t, or couldn’t, let it faze him.

“Like I said, it might sound ridiculous, but we are forced to consider her rights in all of this, as well. For all we know, she’s deliberately decided to disappear, as she has every right to do.”

“But she could be in danger. She could have been kidnapped, or in some sort of accident, or . . . or . . .”

“Or just have decided to drop out of sight for awhile, for reasons that make perfectly good sense to her, and are perfectly legal. But let’s be fair, here . . . discussing the philosophy of it all isn’t helping anyone. Have you made any attempt to check the various hospitals along the way, in case there might have been an accident of some kind?”

“No . . . I . . .”

“How about the ferry people, although I realize she needn’t have identified herself, even if she was coming across as a foot passenger?” He glanced down at Emma’s picture, then added, “Still, she’s . . . memorable, eh?”

Kirsten could only shake her head, now beginning to feel increasingly foolish at having even started this with a visit to the police. Of course she should have checked such things, although . . .

“Surely you could check to see if there’ve been any accidents involving a bicycle,” Kirsten said, forcing insistence into her voice, fighting the defeated feeling she could feel growing like a bad weed in her tummy.

“Yes. That I can do,” he replied, rising to his feet. “If you’ll just wait a moment, I’ll do that very thing.” He was out the door before she could even thank him.

She bowed her head, eyes closed, and fought for better emotional control. A losing battle. Around her, the stark, institutional, impersonal flavor of the room did nothing to instill confidence. She wasn’t at all surprised when he returned after a few minutes, shaking his head.

“Nothing at all,” he said.

Kirsten sighed, seeing defeat but unwilling to recognize it, to give it substance. “So what do I do now? Go check the ferry terminal, I guess, but . . . that seems such a . . .”

“Long and difficult and frustrating approach,” he concluded for her. “But no easier if we were to try and do it, and at least you can start now, while memories might be fresher. Otherwise, let’s see . . . Do you have any way to contact any of her friends in Vancouver?”

Kirsten shook her head. “And I don’t have access to her apartment, either. I don’t even know where it is, except of course I have an address. But I don’t know Vancouver at all. She’s often talked about sending me over a set of keys, too, but . . . well . . .”

“The first thing you ought to do is stop beating yourself up over this,” the policeman said. “Whatever’s going on, you won’t accomplish much by blaming yourself.”

He handed back Emma’s photograph as he rose from his chair . . . a clear signal he’d given her enough of his time, and Kirsten was out the office door almost before she knew it. She followed him through to the reception area, even remembered to shake his hand and thank him, but her mind was already out the door and headed to Nanaimo and the ferry terminal as she did so.

Fighting back tears of frustration, she pushed her way through the exit, her eyes blurred and her mind far ahead of her body as she smashed the door into a tall figure approaching the doorway from outside. The impact was a glancing blow; Kirsten recoiled to one side with a cry of surprise while the man she’d run into was sent almost to his knees, one hand still on the door handle.

“Sorry,” she cried. And the word echoed as she repeated it, stumbling past and continuing her flight without even meeting the stranger’s eyes. Out into the street, turning left to where her car was parked, she reeled like a drunkard, oblivious to the people she hardly noticed with her vision misted by tears. It wasn’t until she reached the car, opened it, got in, sat, that she became suddenly aware she was in no shape to drive anywhere, much less all the way to Nanaimo.

All the way to Nanaimo. All of an hour’s drive on the worst day ever! A shorter trip than most big-city commuters faced twice every working day. The sort of trip she had faced—and thought nothing of—before she’d forsaken the prairie winters and the baggage of her own brief, disastrous, long-ago marriage in favor of the milder climate on Vancouver Island. Kirsten sat hunched over the wheel of her disreputable old Honda Civic, her eyes still brimming with tears even though she felt more like laughing. Or screaming at the inanity of her thoughts.

No, she thought. Not Nanaimo. Not today. She would, instead, make the twenty-minute journey home—assuming she could manage that without incident—and tomorrow . . . well . . . tomorrow would

be soon enough. Maybe she'd get home to find some message from Emma on her machine, or even Emma herself, lolling on the front stoop and building herself up for a theatrical arrival scene. Kirsten looked down at her scarred and faded jeans, gave herself a mental shake for having given in to impulse, for having rushed into this without dressing for the occasion.

Mom would turn over in her grave, she thought, and rightly so, too. Certainly Emma would have something to say about it, assuming she was home when Kirsten arrived. Emma—who could spend a week on the road cycle-touring and turn up looking like she'd just stepped out of a fashion advertisement.

Damn Emma!

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