

Dead In A Ditch

By Margaret Robinson

Chapter 1: December 24, Flat Sands, Nova Scotia

Even if he had been sober, Paul Boutilier couldn't have heard the car coming. The snow had been accumulating on the old highway since midnight, and now, three hours later, it was ankle-deep. It would dampen the sound of any vehicle's approach. As drunk as he was, he remembered not to wander too close to the shoulder. One step too far to the right and he'd be in the ditch. A guy could break a leg if he wasn't careful.

"They'll be salting all night, the poor bastards," Paul said aloud, taking delight in the enormous task facing the Highways Department.

He bent forward, nearly toppled, and scooped a palm full of snow in his bare hand. It was moist and heavy, perfect for making stingers—snowballs as hard as ice and as large as a baseball. He prepared his stinger and hefted a couple of times. There was nothing around worth hitting, not even a mailbox. Most of the buildings around were summer cottages. They'd be empty until spring. Momentarily, Paul considered breaking into one of them, just for fun. He'd feel fifteen again.

"Or I'd get stuck in the damn window and pass out," he muttered. He was thicker in the middle than he'd been at fifteen. Was it normal, he wondered, to feel like an old man at twenty-four?

He shook his head to dislodge the thought. He wasn't going to be like those old dipsos at the tavern. He had options. He'd get out. The money made all that possible now. He's move to some place with excitement; someplace where things *happened*.

"Like Montreal," he said, feeling the way the name sounded in his mouth. "Yeah. Montreal."

Using the sidearm throw he had perfected in years of softball tournaments, he hurled his stinger across the highway, toward the water. He hadn't lost his touch. It disappeared among the ice blocks pushed ashore by the tide.

"And it's gone!" he shouted, raising his arms into the air. Grinning, Paul lurched like a sleepwalker toward his home and his bed.

Reaching the top of the crest, the driver of the blue Honda paused momentarily to watch Paul throw his stinger. With everyone using the new bypass, they were alone on the road. The man ahead was drunk, distracted. The car started its descent. Paul Boutilier didn't even have time to turn around. The driver eased to a stop, remembering to pump the breaks so they wouldn't lock up. A few metres behind, the body lay on its front. There was no need to make a second try.

Three hours later Kenny MacInnis was driving his snowplow east along old highway seven. He was in good spirits. The heater in his cab was on full and his portable radio was playing Jingle Bell Rock. He had made good time earlier in the shift, speeding through the empty stretches of road. In twenty minutes he would be back at the Department of Highways depot. He could be home in an hour. He slowed as he passed the sign indicating the school zone. From his high vantage point the area known as Flat Sands lay spread before him. He was the first to find the body.

“Why do people have to be such liars?” Lotty Fisher tossed herself backward into an armchair. The Christmas tree, only two feet away, shook ominously.

“It’s like that when anybody dies,” Ruth Noseworthy said. She heaved her grocery bags onto the countertop. It felt colder inside the cabin than it had outside. At least she didn’t have to hurry to put the groceries away. The milk wouldn’t spoil, although there was a risk it might freeze. Ruth filled the kettle and plugged it in. Her first priority was to have a cup of tea. The second was to light a fire so the room bore less resemblance to a meat locker.

Ruth looked rather as Janis Joplin might, had she lived to be forty-three. She wore her hair long, and refused to dye the grey out. Her clothing had a decidedly liberal style, with a heavy emphasis upon décolletage, usually displaying a flurry of beads or some unusual pendant. Her career as a designer of costume jewellery provided her with an impressive collection.

Since arriving in Flat Sands she’d faced the challenge of feeling stylish while also remaining warm. Her long black woollen coat helped, as did an assortment of unusual winter hats. She might have felt warmer in heavy turtlenecks, but too many layers always left her feeling like an unmade bed.

“Water’s on,” Ruth announced. “Now we need to heat this place up.” She stood there for a moment looking down at Lotty. The nineteen year old had curled into a ball around her tissue box and didn’t look like she was interested in moving. Her eyes were watery and red from the cold that had blossomed inside her overnight. Ruth wondered if trotting around in this frigid weather was going to make the girl sicker than she already was. If it hadn’t been for the accident last night the girl might not be out of bed at all. As it was, she had waylaid Ruth outside her cabin and launched directly into her harangue about the local tragedy.

“I’ll light the fire, shall I?” Ruth asked rhetorically. She hadn’t had to light many fires in her time. Still, she thought, how difficult can it be? She’s seen it done a dozen times. She opened the damper and crouched in front of the fireplace, looking from the basket of kindling to the fireplace and back again. As a rule, Ruth was not one to play the role of the helpless female. Yet she wished briefly that Darcy Noseworthy were home. Despite being ten years Ruth’s junior, he was rife with fraternal protectiveness and eager to be domestic. Ruth’s domesticity was of a decidedly urban strain. She could choose an appropriate wine, she could feed a party of twelve from a minuscule galley kitchen, and she maintained a delightfully useful herb garden on the balcony of her Toronto co-op apartment. Rustic chores were not her forté.

Ruth took up the local newspaper and began to tear the pages. “Local Man Victim of Hit and Run” went into the grating along with “Fisheries Protest Greets Minister.” Ruth piled a handful of kindling on top and looked at it critically. Surely the others had made some kind of pile, hadn’t they? She lit a match and held it expectantly to the paper.

“Light light light,” she muttered. The paper blackened and curled until the match extinguished itself. She leaned back onto her heels and crossed her arms with difficulty, owing to her thick coat. The fireplace was now littered with charred paper fragments, but the kindling remained unsinged. She glanced over her shoulder at the array of tools on the side table that served as her workbench. Surely a few bursts from her Smith Handiheat acetylene torch would get this fire burning brightly.

“People are so stupid,” said Lotty. “He was a real weasel, but to hear them tell it you’d think he was Mother Theresa.”

The kettle began to emit a high-pitched shriek. Ruth gripped the mantle and pulled herself into a standing position.

“Even if he wasn’t...Mother Theresa,” Ruth said, “it is tragic when somebody dies that young.” She prepared the tea and hunted through the cupboard for the cookies she had bought the day before. She had hidden them from herself and now couldn’t remember where. “You’re probably too young to see that,” she added.

“I’m not a child,” Lotty complained. She slammed the tissue box onto the coffee table. “I just don’t think it’s tragic. Not at all.” It came out sounding “Nog a doll.” She blew her nose loudly. “Everyone is so fake!” She tossed a used tissue at the wastepaper basket and missed. “Did you know they’ve even called in grief councillors? As if we’re all suicidal over the loss!”

“I suppose his family could use the support. It isn’t easy, losing someone during the holidays.” Ruth clenched her jaw and breathed slowly and deeply. It had been her father’s death that had brought her back to Nova Scotia, only two months earlier. That had been an awkward Thanksgiving. Losing her last living parent had weighed more heavily on her than she had expected. She’s always been the risk-taker in her family, but suddenly she was left feeling more mortal than she had ever felt before. She was grateful that Darcy had stepped in with the invitation to accompany him to Flat Sands for the winter. It would provide her with the company of a familiar face and the seclusion she needed to complete her current jewellery production contract.

She glanced at the clock on the fireplace mantle. Constable Darcy Noseworthy would be home within the hour. He was on the early shift at the RCMP detachment and would have been one of the first on the scene of the accident. He would have all the latest details. Ruth walked across the room and switched on the radio, which began playing an instrumental version of We Three Kings. She would wait for the news and the weather forecast.

“He hasn’t got a family that needs support. His parents are already dead,” Lotty said. “His closest relative is his cousin, Junior. And he’s got his own family.” She blew her nose again.

Ruth handed the girl a mug of tea and took her own cup over to the fireplace. She sat cross-legged in front of the hearth and looked pensively at the pile of kindling and newspaper. Maybe the torch wasn’t such a bad idea. Just to get the whole thing started burning. And if it got out of hand there was always the fire extinguisher.

“You have to make a tee-pee with the wood,” Lotty said, clutching her mug of tea for warmth. “The fire needs air.”

Ruth tossed her hat on a chair and then twisted her hair into a knot at the back of her head. Surely if Neanderthal man could make fire without a blowtorch, she could. She removed the kindling from the pile of ashen paper and began to stack it into a conical shape over a crumpled ball of fresh newspaper. Once the cone of wooden sticks was complete, she lit the edge of the paper and puffed encouragingly at it. The fire caught. She waited anxiously until the flames began to blacken the wood and throw heat. Ruth stood and smiled upon her work. Lotty had known what she was talking about. Tentatively, she added a larger piece of hardwood to the cone. Nothing collapsed. She turned to Lotty for approval.

“That’s good,” the girl said. “Add another piece in ten minutes or so. It’ll be warm in half a hour.”

Ruth lowered her broad hips into the rocking chair. The cold bothered her more than it used to, but she could still move easily and her joints were pain free. Maybe it the dancing she had done in her twenties, or maybe it was all the yoga she did now. Either way, it made roughing it easier to handle.

“But like I was saying,” Lotty continued, “people are acting all sad about it, but nothing they’re saying is true.” She paused and frowned. “I mean, it’s true, but it’s all...” She motioned with a fresh tissue, searching for the word she wanted. “...twisted. Exaggerated.”

“That’s how people deal with death,” Ruth said. “There’s a taboo against speaking ill of the dead. If he was an alcoholic who neglected his family they say how sociable he was. That sort of thing.”

“They’re doing that.” She wrinkled her nose and spoke in a harsh mimicry. “Paul was so generous. Paul was so kind. Paul volunteered at the nursing home.”

“And did he?”

“Only because he had fifty hours of community service work to do.” Lotty smiled and Ruth smiled back. She hadn’t known the boy personally, but she knew the type well enough.

“What had he done to get that?” She glanced at Lotty over the rim of her cup. The girl’s long parka was now unzipped, revealing a bulky blue sweater and stretch pants beneath.

“He was charged with breaking and entering. Stole some outboard motors from Scott Transport.” The girl sniffed suspiciously at the cup, which she seems to have noticed for the first time. “What is this?”

“Vanilla almond tea. It’s herbal. Are they very valuable, outboard motors?”

“If you know where to sell them they can be.” Lotty yawned unabashedly, like a cat. “If it hadn’t been for the money he probably would have ended up in jail.”

“Family money?” Ruth had visions of a new newspaper headline: Heir to Boutilier fortune run down on deserted highway.

“Oh no. Nothing like that,” Lotty waved the idea away with her tissue. “He’d just won the lottery.”

Ruth raised her eyebrows slightly.

“Really? How much did he win?”

“Only about \$300,000 or so. Still, it’s enough.” She took a gulp of the hot tea and winced. “Now that he’s dead I guess the gloves are off. Everybody and his dog will want a piece. I wonder how they decide who inherits.”

“I know what you mean, Ruth said. “When my father died his sisters came to the house and started claiming things left and right.”

“Were they very nice things?” Lotty asked.

“Oh it wasn’t the stuff. I didn’t mind that. It was really the unfairness that bothered me. We’d hardly seen them when he was alive.”

“But that should have all gone to you and Darcy. You’re his children. Aren’t you automatically the legal heirs?” Lotty seemed genuinely outraged. Ruth thought how easily it was to get enthusiastic over injustices when one was young. In her own day she’d protested against apartheid, police racism, nuclear power, and the clear-cutting of crown land. She’d mellowed since then. It had been years since she’d worked up a good sense of outrage. Things seemed more grey than black and white now.

“Well you see,” she began, unsure of how to explain, “it’s so difficult when there’s no will and no account of the estate. And I was away in Toronto and Darcy was out training in Regina, so we couldn’t easily keep an eye on everything, even with the executor’s help. It’s one thing to freeze a bank account, but it’s more difficult to keep track of objects without an inventory of some kind. Dad wasn’t very detail oriented, I’m afraid. And it’s very easy to say, ‘I lent that to him last July.’ Who’s to know the difference?”

“I suppose.” Lotty looked around the cabin at the old brown chesterfield, and armchair, the braided rugs, and knotty pine kitchen table. “Do people my age often make wills, I wonder?”

“I suppose it depends on the sort of person you are,” Ruth said. Having been a morbidly romantic teenager Ruth had constantly been writing and rewriting her will, disinheriting her friends and crushes as her teenage alliances shifted.

“Do you think Paul Boutilier made a will?” Lotty asked.

“Young men, aren’t usually comfortable thinking about their own death,” Ruth said.

“Still, perhaps after winning the money he might have done it.” Lotty looked hopefully at Ruth. “Otherwise, it’s as you said, people just come and take things.”

“The worst part wasn’t losing the stuff,” Ruth went on. “It was losing the things that reminded me of my father. Do you know what I mean about the difference between material and emotional value?” She looked searching at the girl. Lotty had a tendency to make affirmative sounds and nod her head, presumably to keep you talking, while she tried to figure out what you meant. The habit had probably served her well in high school, but it could make for some embarrassing moments in conversation. She’d once talked to Lotty for ten minutes about The Big Sleep before the girl’s comments had made her realize she thought they were discussing one of Ruth’s dreams. Since then, Ruth had made a habit of peppering her conversation with questions to ensure that Lotty was following along.

“I know exactly what you mean. That quilt was made by my mother.” She nodded toward the throw draped over the back of Ruth’s rocker; small octagons forming green turtles on a blue ocean. “There’s stuff like that all over the place here. Stuff that reminds me of her.”

The cabin became uncomfortably silent for a moment. The radio was predicting another five centimetres of snow during the night. Ruth looked out the window at the tiny flakes, lit up by the porch light.

“It’s been nice having you around,” Lotty said “There’s really no one to talk to here. I mean, there’s Dad but he’s...” she trailed off.

“Is there something wrong with Mr. French?” Ruth asked. Martin French was the only other guest staying at Fisher’s Cabins. Ruth had met him only once, at Gabe Fisher’s Christmas party two nights before. The only bias she held against him was that she believed his tan came out of a bottle.

“He’s okay, I guess, but it’s different having another woman around.”

“Darcy’s placement is for six months,” Ruth said, “so we’ll be here until May at least. I’m not sure if we’ll be staying on. It all depends on where they want to send him.” She paused for a moment, wondering how to phrase her question so as not to suggest that she resented Lotty’s company. “Are there,” she began finally, “many people your own age living around here?”

“Nobody really. Most everyone leaves as soon as they can.” Lotty motioned westward, toward Halifax.

“Are you going to leave too?” Ruth asked.

“Of course I am. I’m not going to be stuck here all my life. I’d like to travel.” She looked into her tea again. “Most of my time is spent working with Dad. I don’t mind. The summers are busy, but summer people don’t stay much past September. Dad’s trying to market the cabins as year round. We had the fireplaces put in last year.” Both women looked at the large grey-rocked hearth that dominated the Western side of the room.

“That was the clincher for me,” Ruth said. “I love a good fireplace.”

Ruth was proud to note that the fire was now burning hotly. She removed her ski jacket, revealing a black v-neck sweater and a poinsettia brooch. The brooch was hammered silver with white cabochon berries. It was really too large and ornate for Flat Sands, but it had been one of her first creations, and she was excessively fond of it.

They sat in silence for a while and sipped their tea. Lotty had glanced at the door several times. She’s waiting, Ruth thought, until Darcy arrives home. She wondered briefly if the girl had a crush on him. Darcy was too old for Lotty, but then the girl was at the age when she would have impossible crushes. Ruth looked at the clock on the mantle. It was nearly four p.m. She drained the last of her tea and stood up.

“Darcy will be home soon,” she said. “We should get the whole story from him.”

She carried her cup to the sink and began to put away the groceries.

Constables Darcy Noseworthy and Bill Ruby had just come on duty that morning when they received the call about the body. A distraught Kenny MacInnis had fled from his snowplow to Guy Poole’s Tavern for the nearest telephone. In his panic Kenny had phoned his wife instead of the RCMP or even his own dispatch office. Mrs. MacInnis, considered by most to be the brains of the family, had phoned the authorities.

Darcy was pleased with himself. He hadn’t gagged or vomited, or done any of the things that the rookie policeman in the films does. He had radioed for the medical examiner and taped off the area.

“Whatever hit him, it was blue,” Constable Bill Ruby said, pointing to flecks of paint left on the jacket. “We’ll know more when they get the body to the M.E.’s office,” he said. “They’ll confirm the cause of death as trauma consistent with being hit by a big blue thing.”

Bill phoned the local garages and asked them to keep an eye open for a vehicle exhibiting collision damage. Then they began the tedious job of checking local vehicles. Several cars were still parked at Guy Poole’s Tavern. They were all under several inches of snow. Cleared off, none showed signs of having been in a recent accident. One after another, they inspected and exonerated local vehicles. By quarter to five that evening it was dark outside.

Bill pulled the cruiser into the driveway of Fisher’s Cabins. “We’ll finish up here and then start again in the morning.” They sat looking at the garage, hesitant to leave the warm car.

“Was that your first time at an accident?” Bill asked. He opened a new tube of throat lozenges and popped one into his mouth.

“My first time professionally,” Darcy said. He removed his cap and ran his fingers through his hair. He was hungry and tired. Ruth would have supper ready by now.

“But not your first time ever.”

“Afraid not. One time a driver in front of me had a heart attack and swerved off the road. I stopped and performed CPR.”

“Good for you. Did he live?”

“Nope.”

“That sucks, eh?” The lozenge clicked against his teeth.

“Yeah. It does.”

“One time I was called to an accident. A guy smashed his car into a vehicle parked on the shoulder of the highway. He shouldn’t have missed it. It had its hazard lights on and everything. Turned out his girlfriend had her head in his lap, get it?”

“I get it. Was anyone in the other vehicle injured?”

“Lucky thing, that. The occupants of the other car had been in a big argument over whose fault it was that they ran out of gas. Seems they both felt whoever was to blame should have to walk to the gas station. Eventually they both went. So the car was empty when it was hit.”

“Lucky thing.”

“You said it.” Bill began to bob back and forth in his seat, as if working up the momentum to leave the car. Finally he said, “Let’s get this thing done so I can go home.” The two men stepped out of the cruiser. Lotty’s purple Chevette sat parked by the house, but from the amount of snow accumulated on the roof and hood it was obvious the vehicle hadn’t been used in at least two days.

“I hope it wasn’t my car,” Darcy said as they trudged toward the long low building where Gabe Fisher and his guests usually kept their vehicles. Their breath surrounded them in a visible cloud.

“Jeez, don’t even joke about that,” Bill said. “I remember one time we were staying up at this hunting lodge in Liscombe. We were eating Salmon that night—ones I’d caught—and we were joking around about how this other guy, Clarence, was late for dinner...”

Bill pulled up the first garage door and pointed his Maglight inside. The interior felt artificially cold and still, like a refrigerator. Darcy reached up and pulled the chain to light the fluorescent bulbs. The floor was slick with ice, and he grabbed the doorjamb to steady himself.

He could see three cars, but it was the one directly in front of him that held his attention. Its front grille work was cracked and its antennae and side mirror were missing. It glittered unnaturally in the bare light.

“Bingo,” said Bill, his story forgotten.

Darcy approached the car slowly, extending his arms like a child learning to skate. Five snowmobiles stood silently in the shadows to the left of the vehicle, and he grabbed one for support as soon as he was close enough. Up close he could see that the car was covered in ice, crystallized into patterns on its hood and windows. Bill slid smoothly across the floor and glided to a stop in the empty parking space on the on the other side of the car. He crouched, put his head to the floor, and played the beam of his Maglight under the vehicle.

“Well I’ll be damned,” Bill said. “The bastard washed the car.”

Now Darcy felt ill. He noticed the coiled garden hose left in the utility sink to drain, the spigot on the wall, likely hooked up to the well, and a large pair of rubber gloves, now lying frozen to the metal shelving in the corner.

“Come on,” Bill said as he raised himself to a standing position, “We’d better call this in.” As he stomped back to the cruiser he called over his shoulder, “Look on the bright side, at least it wasn’t your car!”

It was nearly six o’clock. The cabin was warm and supper was ready, but Darcy hadn’t phoned.

“Can I see some of your jewellery?” Lotty asked. She had removed her coat but remained curled in a ball with her sweater pulled down over her legs.

Ruth walked over to the bookshelf by her workbench and pulled down a large photo book of pieces she'd made over the years. She sat on the sofa next to Lotty's chair and opened it on her lap. The girl leaned in and stared, transfixed at the colourful pages. Ruth told the story of her career, from her beginning as an apprentice through her work with precious stones for private clients and her breakthrough into designing costume pieces for lavish theatre productions. She talked about some of the unique pieces she had made. Her wedding ring of silver and inlaid French jet was of particular interest to Lotty.

"It's beautiful," Lotty said.

"It was a matching set," Ruth explained. "I made one for each of us."

"And who has the other one now that your husband's dead?"

"He was buried with it." Ruth closed the book and stood up. The thought of burying her husband without his ring horrified her, as did the thought of allowing anyone else to wear it. Her last few relationships had been what she called "low potential." Her latest lover had been Derek, the fine arts major, who had moved into her apartment almost immediately, smoked most of her dope, and held moral objections to seeking paid employment. He was currently house-sitting for her, which gave him a cheap apartment in downtown Toronto. It worked out for her too, because it kept her apartment in the co-op she'd occupied for the past ten years.

"Why do you still wear yours if you're a widow?" Lotty asked.

Ruth wasn't sure how to respond. She didn't think marriage should always be "'til death do us part," it had just turned out that way in her case. Despite her casual relationships since her husband's death, in many ways she didn't yet feel single.

"Let me show you some of my more recent pieces," she said, changing the subject. She replaced the portfolio in the bookshelf and pulled out a large flat velvet case, in which she stored

samples. She passed the case to Lotty and then reclined into the sofa and watched her exclaim over the paste jewels in their delicate fittings. As Lotty tried on earring and brooches, the radio began its six o'clock news report. It wasn't substantially different from the five o'clock report. The sofa was becoming seductively comfortable. If she wasn't careful she might fall asleep.

"So, who do you think did it?" Ruth asked. She much preferred to discuss the local goings-on than to answer questions about her love life.

Lotty admired her bejewelled reflection in the mirrored top of the case. "Probably some tourist driving through. They go too fast and they don't watch what they're doing."

Ruth considered this. It didn't seem very likely. She marvelled at how Lotty could claim to dislike Flat Sands so much yet still go to great lengths to protect it. There were few tourists in the area during winter, and those that did drive through would be using the new bypass highway, not the old road where Paul Boutilier had been hit. 'Some tourist' indeed. She may as well have said it was a passing tramp.

"Do you think a tourist would be on the old highway?" Ruth asked. "I would have thought they'd all take the bypass."

"Sometimes they take the old road for the scenic value." Lotty removed the gold starburst earrings and tried on a pair of silver fruit bowls with red and green glass apples.

"But they wouldn't be likely to do that in the dark, would they?" As picturesque as parts of the old roads were during the day, at night they were simply miles of darkness. There were precious few lights on the local telephone poles. Of course the darkness did offer other possibilities. "Could someone have hit him by accident?" she asked. "Not seeing him in the dark?"

“Maybe,” Lotty said. “But if it was an accident they would just call the cops, wouldn’t they? Dad hit a deer by accident once. You know if you hit a deer you can’t keep it? You have to turn it over to Lands and Forests.”

“No, I didn’t know that.”

“Yeah. You can shoot the deer and it’s yours, but if you hit it by accident it’s not. The law is weird.” Lotty unfolded her legs from the sweater and stretched them out. Her eyes darted briefly toward the clock. It was getting late.

Ruth picked up the jewellery case and rearranged the pieces in their proper display order. She had a habit of counting them after anyone had looked at them. It had served her well the few times people had “forgotten” to put a piece back in its case.

“If you don’t get enough sleep you’ll never get over that cold,” Ruth said. She hated to usher the girl out, but she was reaching the end of her sociability for the day.

“I suppose so,” Lotty stood up and began to pull on her parka. Ruth stood up to see her out. Instead of leaving, Lotty stood in front of the bookshelf, looking idly up at the titles.

It suddenly occurred to her that Lotty was stalling her visit, waiting for Darcy to return. Could she be that anxious to pump him for details of the accident, Ruth wondered, or did the girl have a more personal reason for wanting to see Darcy?

The door to the cabin opened and Darcy Noseworthy stepped inside, stomping his feet and slapping his arms. Wet clumps of snow slid off his heavy uniform jacket and plopped onto the rubber mat below.

“Darcy!” Ruth said in a relieved tone. “I told Lotty you’d have all the details about that hit and run. Now you mustn’t disappoint her.”

Darcy looked from one woman to the other, and then at his own gloves.

“I’m sorry, Lotty,” he said. “We picked up your Dad an hour ago.”

Chapter 2: The Arrival, December 10

Darcy and Ruth Noseworthy had arrived in Flat Sands only two weeks before. Their first stop had been Fisher’s Cabins. The main building was a large Victorian style house with a turret and porch. It must be beautiful in the summer, Ruth thought. She could imagine herself sitting in a patio chair or a porch swing, sipping a strawberry daiquiri and watching the sun set slowly into the ocean. Except the sun wouldn’t set that way, she reminded herself as they walked along the shovelled path to the side door. The sun would rise from the ocean and set...she looked around to get her bearings...behind the long horizon of evergreen trees across the highway. That wouldn’t be nearly as picturesque.

The door of the main house entered onto a room vastly larger than had ever been built in a Victorian home. The spacious lobby had once been divided into sitting room and front room, but small claustrophobic salons were now out of style. To the left of the main stairs was a sitting area with a large Christmas tree at one end, a fireplace at the other and a constellation of armchairs in between. The far wall was covered in heavy red drapes, preventing heat from escaping through the windows. The air was warm and smelled of pine. At some point in the inn’s history, someone had decided to label everything. The dark walnut check-in desk had a sign that read, “Please register here.” To the right was a door whose brass plaque read “Library.” Behind the registration desk were two doors, one marked “Kitchen” and one marked “Dining Room.” It made Ruth feel as if she has walked into a board game. The innkeeper, Gabe Fisher, was a big man in his late forties. He wore a cable knit grey sweater a shade darker than his hair. Ruth imagined him sporting a large sign reading “Innkeeper.” He was immediately friendly,

taking their jackets, and making remarks about the driving conditions, and the possibility of another ten centimetres of snowfall.

Upon hearing that Darcy Noseworthy was on placement at the local RCMP Detachment for at least six months, Gabe Fisher had chewed his lower lip.

“Well then... you’ll want to be comfortable. How would rooms here in the Inn suit you? A double?” He looked hesitatingly at the two Noseworthys, uncertain of their relationship to one another, and fearful of drawing the wrong conclusion.

“It’s a beautiful Inn,” Darcy said. “But we’re interested in something more isolated. My sister and I,” he motioned to Ruth, answering Gabe’s unspoken question, “are looking forward to roughing it.”

Ruth would have preferred the Inn, but knew that if she booked a room inside she would spend the entire six months avoiding her work. She had a contract to design and cast jewellery for a costume drama being filmed that summer. She had learned from experience that to free her creative side and direct it to work she needed to reign in her social side.

Darcy was still talking. “I have to say, I really liked the look of your cabins out there. They’d be just the thing.”

Gabe Fisher quickly shifted gears. “We got a cabin called the Grey Pearl. Full amenities. It’s got a bathroom, kitchenette, fireplace, and porch. Very nice. Single beds. You’ll have access to our snowmobile and ski rental, of course. And when the ice breaks up, we’ve got boat rentals and fishing trips. Do you fish, Constable?”

“I’m afraid I don’t,” Darcy said. He looked down at Ruth, who enjoyed fishing and had once tried to teach him.

“Pity that.” Gabe said. “You folks from out West?”

“Halifax, actually,” Darcy said. “I had to go to Regina for training. But it’s good to be home again.” The two men shared a knowing look that assured them they agreed on the superiority of their home province. When Ruth mentioned that she had only recently moved here from Toronto, Gabe looked concerned.

“We ain’t got much of a night life here, Ma’am. You might find yourself a tad bored.”

“I don’t need a night life,” Ruth said. “I’ve got work to do. I’ll need peace and quiet.”

“We’ve got plenty of quiet all right,” Gabe said. “Plenty of that in all directions.”

Like so many other villages on Highway 7, Flat Sands was marked by a rectangular green sign projecting out of the ditch on spindly white legs. The village itself was laid out like a centipede. The highway functioned as a main street, with short residential roads branching off on both sides, if the ocean permitted. The commercial buildings of Flat Sands were boxy, with red brick fronts on wooden bodies. The houses were shades of white, but came in an assortment of cape cod, saltbox, and four square, with a few newer split-levels. Ruth parked at the RCMP detachment, a single storey brick square with a two-storey residence in the rear for the Sergeant. The walkway was well shovelled and salted, and the lawn sported a snowman disfigured by accumulation on his head and stick arms.

Darcy stooped to kiss Ruth on the top of her head.

“I’ve just got to check in today. It shouldn’t take more than a few hours. Wish me luck.”

“Good luck Darcy,” she said as she gave him a reassuring hug. “Show them what you’ve got!”

The RCMP building was nestled among the dozen stores that supplied the entire village. Ruth filled the time by exploring their temporary home. She aimed to acquaint herself with the

village, stock up on necessities for the cabin, and make a positive impression on the locals. The pharmacy, innocently named Best Drugs, was remarkably clean. The dispensary was occupied by an old bald man and a younger balding man, probably Best Sr. and Jr. Ruth picked up a basket and set about collecting the essentials she hadn't bothered to pack. After exiting the drugstore Ruth locked her purchases in the trunk of the car. It was unlikely that the locals locked their cars, but Ruth knew that she would feel paranoid all day unless she locked hers. Besides, she didn't want to embarrass Darcy by having her car looted on their first day in town.

Her next stop was the beauty salon, which boasted that ladies cuts started at \$11. An older woman in a white smock with sunflower blonde hair greeted her as she entered.

“Good morning. What can I do you for?”

Ruth glanced at the row of women sitting in chairs against the wall, drinking tea and flipping through magazines.

“Oh don't mind them,” the blonde said, “they're here for the chatter not the chopper.” She led Ruth into an empty barber chair and swathed her in a large polythene cape. “I'm Sharon Newcombe, and that there is my daughter, Donna.” She motioned to a quiet girl sweeping up hair in the back of the shop. Ruth used the mirrored wall in front of her to make brief eye contact with the girl and smile an acknowledgement of the introduction.

“You're a new face,” Sharon said. “Down visiting relatives?”

“No. I'm Ruth Noseworthy. I'm here with my brother, Darcy, for his RCMP placement.”

“Ooooh.” Sharon nodded, “the new mountie's sister. I hear he's quite a dish.” Ruth wondered how Darcy's dish status had been determined so quickly.

“You should bring him in for a trim,” Sharon said. “We like a man in uniform.” The women in the chairs chuckled lustily.

Sharon ran her fingers through Ruth’s locks appraisingly. “Thinking of dying out the grey?”

“I’m not ready to be hitting the bottle yet,” Ruth said. “What I’d really like is a trim of the split ends and then a shampoo and a set.” Ruth hoped her refusal wasn’t offensive. It would make life a lot easier for Darcy if people didn’t think she was an antisocial hippie.

“No problemo amigo. A trim I can do.” Sharon picked up her spray bottle and began to wet Ruth’s hair.

“Like I was saying before,” she said to the tea and magazine klatch, “that hospital is a damned disgrace. If I didn’t bring mom those care packages she’d likely starve to death. And half them patients ain’t even bathed regular. It’s all corner cutting.” Sharon began to deftly comb portions of Ruth’s hair between her fingers and snip off the ends.

“The government doesn’t care about nursing homes,” said a hefty brunette without looking up from her Chatelaine. “The budget is probably shoestring.”

“I heard they get three grand per patient.” Donna spoke from the back of the shop where she was now cleaning a sink.

“Well Mom ain’t getting any three grand of care. I told that administrator, Mrs. McNabb but she just went on and on about factoring in the overhead. If I were on the board for that place I’d have her arse in a sling.” They talked for some time about the local board members, their lack of attention, interest or backbone, and the consequences of shirking social responsibility.

“You’ve got to factor in the cost of the paid staff,” one woman countered. “They all get union wages.” This spawned a long discussion about the pros and cons of unions, which veered

temporarily into a debate about socialized medicine, the Great Tommy Douglas, and the poor Americans without healthcare before returning to the nursing home.

“Union or no,” Sharon said, “I don’t see any three grand worth of nursing happening there. Of course it may be different once the new building gets put up.” She glared critically as she pulled at the locks on either side of Ruth’s face, assessing their symmetry. “The province is dropping a packet on the renovation.”

“They’re renovating the nursing home?” Ruth asked.

“Oh yes,” Sharon said as she began to trim the bangs. “I expect some of the contractors will do pretty well on that. Be nice if it went to a local company.” She put the scissors down on the countertop and began to undo the protective cape. “You’re done here, Sugar. Let me send you down to Donna for your wash. After that, Ruth caught only snippets of the women’s conversation through the running water. “...every damned election year...shuffle staff...bunch of strangers...not that mom recognizes them anyhow...”

Donna wrapped Ruth’s hair in a towel and transferred her to a chair. Before her hearing was again impaired by the blow-drier Donna said, “If you change your mind about the grey come see me.”

Newly shorn, washed and set, Ruth explored the hardware store and chatted with the salesman about soldering equipment. She made introductory chit-chat at the billiard hall, fire department and post office, and spent a productive hour rooting about in the thrift store. Finally her stomach informed her it was time for food. The closest choices seemed to be fish and chip shop, a pizzeria, and a small teashop called The Cake Wagon. Her need for coffee made the decision for her. The interior of The Cake Wagon smelled of toasted sugar and cinnamon. The

only other customers in the shop were two burly men in work clothes sipping coffee in the corner. They wore vests with reflective orange strips. Ruth guessed they were highway workers.

The pastry cabinet was filled with baked goods on giant silver trays. “You’ve got peanut butter cookies.” The words were spoken before Ruth had time to think how obvious a remark it would seem. The tall dark-haired woman behind the counter leaned forward conspiratorially.

“They’ve got chocolate chunks inside as well.”

Ruth chewed her upper lip. “Yes. That sounds perfect. May I have two of those and a cup of coffee please?”

“They’re cheaper by the half-dozen.” The woman waited expectantly as Ruth’s desire to be economical battled with her promise not to eat quite so many cookies this Christmas.

“Can I get the other four wrapped to go?” Ruth assured herself that Darcy would eat at least half of them.

“Don’t think I’ve seen you round here before,” the woman said as she rang up the purchase.

“I’m here with my brother,” Ruth said. “He’s the new mountie.”

“It’s nice to get to spend time with a brother once he’s grown, isn’t it?” she said.

“Yes, it is nice.” Ruth agreed. But nice didn’t seem to be a big enough word. Ruth removed her long coat and sat at a table by the window. It was ten minutes to four and the sky was already nearly dark. She could hear the two men talking from their corner table.

“He’s not going to make a fool out of me, Kenny. I can tell you that much.” The older man with the grey brush-cut spoke in an angry whisper.

“Aw, let it go. It’s over and done.” Ruth could barely see the younger man, Kenny, out of the corner of her eye. He had a face like a large red moon.

“It ain’t done till I say it is.” The angry man looked around at Ruth who kept her eyes directed at the window, seeing the glass instead of the view.

“You already fired him. What more do you want?” Kenny held his head in his hands and Ruth imagined this wasn’t the first time the men had discussed this issue.

“What does he care if he works or not now? The bastard’s rich now.”

“You could always have him charged.”

“Oh yeah. That’s a great plan,” the older man said sarcastically. “Then he brings one of them big lawyers in from town and then what? I tell you there’s nothing official left to do.” The older man hung his head for a few moments and then jerked it upward to look squarely at his companion. “Don’t you go talking to your wife about this, Kenny. I mean it. It’s just between you and me.”

“I wouldn’t tell anyone,” Kenny said. “Why do you have to say things like that to me?” The men gulped down their coffee and left the cafe. Ruth checked her watch. Gabe Fisher had warned her that most stores closed by six o’clock. If she was going to get any food she needed to hurry.

Inside the squat RCMP building, Darcy Noseworthy was introduced to Constable Bill Ruby, who would train him during his six-month placement. Constable Ruby was six foot two inches, weighed one hundred and ninety pounds, and wore what Darcy called “the police moustache.” It was short, trim, and didn’t extend beyond the corners of his mouth. He showed Darcy around the building and then brought him into the main office, to the desk the two of them would share. He poured two cups of coffee, added milk, and passed one to Darcy.

“I’ve got a list of stuff we’ll want to walk you through,” Bill Ruby said. “Basic stuff like stopping a vehicle, writing a ticket, making an arrest, et cetera.” He sat in the grey swivel chair behind his desk and began to spoon sugar into his coffee. “Here’s where our faxes and bulletins will be.” He nodded toward a large tack board with notices pinned in neat square piles. “You should peruse that at the start of your shift.” He pointed the spoon at a bank of filing cabinets behind him. “That there’s the files. You’ll get to know the criminals here quickly. They stay pretty true to type. That break-in at the liquor store last month, for example. They broke in the back door and left with as many cases as they could carry in one trip. Used a crowbar on the door.” Bill Ruby paused to cough roughly and root about in his desk drawer for a throat lozenge. “Sorry ‘bout that,” he said hoarsely, “I’ve had this sore throat for a week.”

“Have we got a suspect in that case?” Darcy felt relaxed with Constable Ruby. He sipped his coffee and concentrated on getting a feel for the way things were done at the office. The Sergeant was in his office behind a sturdy wooden door. The secretary, a sturdy middle-aged brunette, sat typing at the reception desk. Two of the detachment’s other three constables were on duty and one had the day off.

“Oh yeah,” said Bill Ruby. “We know who done it, all right. Local kid named Vincent Scott. Thinks he’s a real criminal genius.” He snorted. “We’d probably find the crowbar hidden in his room.”

“And there’s been no arrest?” Darcy hoped his question wouldn’t sound critical.

“Well that’s where it gets a little complicated. We know he did it, but we don’t know where he put the liquor. Probably drunk it by now. His folks are local big wigs here.” Bill Ruby sucked on his lozenge and looked closely at Darcy for a few moments. “You from a small town, Darcy?” he asked.

“I grew up in Halifax, but I think I get the idea.”

“It’s a microcosm. In Halifax, the big wigs would be the Mayor, local councilmen, maybe some big business types. Here it’s guys like Harlon Scott. He owns Scott Transport, he’s on the local Board of Trade and president of the Lions Club. Have you met the Scotts yet?”

“Not yet.”

“You will. They like to make a big deal out of welcoming people to *their* village. Especially Olivia Scott. She’ll probably invite you and your sister to dinner, grill you for personal details and then hit on you as soon as you’re alone.”

“Hit on me?” Darcy felt the slight wave of anxiety he always felt at the idea of unwelcome romantic interest. He did just fine if the feeling was mutual, but somehow his attempts to let someone down easy had always ended in disaster.

“Yeah. She’s a right piece of goods. All religious and upstanding in public, then comes onto you like a drunken prom date when you re alone. I avoid her, but suit yourself.”

“No thanks. She sounds awful.”

“Good looking woman, though. For her age.”

“So we need to be...careful...when we deal with the Scotts?”

“Them and a few others. They’ve all got businesses, all doing reasonably well, and they all consider themselves cultured and well bred. They drive into Halifax once a month to see a play,” Bill Ruby said. His grimace shows what he thought of people who watched plays. None of these guys like to get their hands dirty. They’re owners and managers. You won’t catch Harlon Scott driving a Scott Transport truck.”

“And Scott has a lot of money to spend on keeping his son out of jail,” Darcy speculated.

“It’s not just the money, it’s a class thing too. Junior Boutilier probably has more personal worth than Harlon Scott, but you won’t bump into him at a Scott dinner. He’s not their class of people. Runs a softwood business right across from Gabe Fishers’ place. Employs six to ten men, but he does a lot of work himself. That’s why you won’t find him eating with the Scotts. Not up to their standards. He probably doesn’t even own a credit card.”

“So there’s really little chance that we’ll make a charge stick to the Scott kid?”

“Oh we’ll get him eventually,” Bill Ruby smiled widely. “He’s cocky. That type always slips up.”

“What’s his motivation? Not enough allowance, or is he getting back at Mom and Dad?”

“Psychologist, eh?” Bill Ruby laughed. “If you asked the Scotts they’d say he fell in with a bad crowd.” He swallowed his lozenge and took a sip of coffee. “He hangs out with Junior’s cousin, Paul. Both the Boutiliers live across from you, by the by. Have you met them yet?”

“No, I haven’t. Is Paul Boutilier the bad influence?”

“He’s got a record for B&E, but that’s just because he got caught. He broke into Scott Transport. Old Harlon was in an uproar for us to make an arrest. And we did. But personally, I think Vincent masterminded the whole thing.” Bill Ruby broke out in a grin. “I’d love to have told Old Harlon Scott that his own kid broke into his place.”

“So Vincent Scott makes the plans and Paul Boutilier is the sidekick?”

“That’s the way it used to work. Now, I don’t know. The Boutilier kid won about three hundred grand in the Atlantic Lotto. As they say, money changes everything.”

In the Grey Pearl cabin that evening Ruth and Darcy sat across from one another at the small kitchen table. It was snowing outside, but Darcy had lit the fire and the small cabin

warmed up quickly. Supper was vegetable stew. Darcy poked around in his bowl with his spoon and remarked, “There isn’t any meat in this bowl of stew.” Ruth smiled at his precise way of speaking.

“Why do you suppose that is?” she asked. “Use your fabulous skills of detection, Constable Noseworthy.”

“There could be many reasons,” Darcy said, motioning with his spoon in an unconscious imitation of Constable Ruby. “You might be trying to place me on a diet.” Ruth slurped her stew, and he continued. “Or, you might be keeping all of the meat for yourself.” He leaned across the table and poked his spoon around in her bowl.

“Get away!” Ruth slapped playfully at the intruding hand.

“My investigation reveals there is no meat in your stew either. Pending a thorough examination of the pot, I surmise that the stew was prepared without meat for some nefarious purpose.”

“And do you have any suspicions as to what that purpose might be?” She smiled across at him as he picked out a slice of carrot and chewed it.

“My suspicion is that you have joined a vegetarian cult. I’m sure that if I make enquiries into your whereabouts today I can find the ringleader.”

“You’re a very cheeky boy,” Ruth said.

“That’s why you love me.”

Ruth related her adventures of the day, finishing by noting that she’d been disappointed with the quality of meat at the grocery store. Used to having a proper butcher shop two doors down from her co-op, she had found the pre-packaged offerings available in Flat Sands to be distinctly off-putting.

Darcy applied himself to his stew, ate until all the vegetables were gone, and then finished by lifting the bowl to his lips and draining the contents.

“I hope this isn’t going to be too difficult for you,” he said at last.

“Not being able to get decent meat?”

“Living in a small town where you can’t get all the things you’re used to having.” He rose from his chair and went to the sink to rinse his bowl.

“I’m not spoiled, if that’s what you’re suggesting,” she said.

“I would just hate to see you moping around here bored out of your mind for six months. Maybe even longer.”

“I’m certainly not going to be moping. I’ve got work to do.”

“I know that. I also know that sometimes you do anything you can to avoid doing your work. I’m just afraid you may run out of distractions and start to get cabin fever.”

Ruth’s eyes widened, and she hunched her shoulders forward. “Oooohhh...” she moaned in her best Peter Lorre impression. Her hands clawed limply at her face. “I’ve got the Cabin Feeever.”

“Eat your stew, crazy lady.”