

R.M. GREENAWAY

COLD GIRL

A person wearing a dark, quilted winter coat and a hood is walking away from the viewer on a wide, snow-covered road. The road has white dashed lines and stretches into the distance under a cloudy sky. The person is positioned on the left side of the frame, walking towards the center.

A B.C. BLUES CRIME NOVEL

Winner of the Unhanged Arthur Award

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GIRL**

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DUNDURN
TORONTO

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To Daniel

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Prologue

FALL FAIR

SHE WAS THE ONLY PATCH of stillness on the planet, to Dion, the dark-haired girl sitting on the far wing of the bleachers, second to lowest tier, watching the band play.

She wasn't alone, surrounded by people on all sides, but she was a break in the pattern that had caught his eye, her solidity and forward gaze, while all around her the crowd pitched and bobbed in response to the music, volume up so high it vibrated the blood in his veins. Clouds drove across the dimming skies and the lights from the fairground beyond flickered and twirled. People danced on the grassy patch in front of the stage, and above them the Rockabilly Princess leaned into the mic to sing the bouncy refrain. Something about small change and love letters. Much of the crowd sang along.

Seated next to Dion, high up on the bleachers, Penny sang along too, loudly and not so well, arms lifted high to clap. Dion didn't sing or cheer but tried to clap his hands to the beat now and then, following procedure.

Proof that he was as present as anyone. He'd come out tonight determined not to brood or drift. He worked on listening to the music, and it was lively and noisy, but it really wasn't great, and he couldn't stay with it. First his ears went out of sync, then his eyes. He checked Penny's profile, saw that she looked happy, then surveyed the crowd and saw more than heard the chaos and motion, all but the dark-haired girl down there who sat perfectly still, her attention fixed on the band, the singer, the guitar player. Unlike Dion, she was completely in sync. Just another fan, he decided. But one of the silent ones.

He looked down and sideways at the pink denim of Penny's skinny, pumping knees, but the thoughts kept ticking, not in words but little kicks of anxiety. It was all part of the healing process, this constant kicking, ticking, and going in circles, and now he was at it again, watching the girl down there. She was native, he was sure of it, while most of the fairgoers were white. And there was something else that set her apart: baggage. Next to her he could just see the hump of some kind of bag, a large backpack or duffel, which said that maybe she was just passing through, a drifter. From his position seven tiers up he could see little of her face, only the full curve of her cheek. Her long hair was loose and whipping in the breeze. Nothing special about her, a woman in her twenties, probably, on the heavy side, in faded jeans, and in spite of the chill just an ice-blue T-shirt.

He told himself he wasn't obsessing, just whiling away the time as he sat through a long stretch of rockabilly noise he couldn't tune in on. Maybe it was a good thing, a throwback to better days, when it had been his job to

analyze situations, pull out the anomalies and turn them over till he had it figured out. He frowned down at the dark-haired girl. When she turned and glanced up his way, he felt caught out and flicked his gaze away, back to Fling.

The pop and boom of the monster speakers frayed his nerves, along with Penny's pumping knees and the sea-like motion of the crowd. The song came to an abrupt end, there was another round of applause, and in the lull he could breathe easier, like coming up for air. As the band fussed with their instruments, gearing up for the next assault, Penny touched his arm, got his attention, and pointed at the heavy bank of clouds moving in over the mountains. "Snow's coming, I can smell it in the air."

She said it like it was a good thing. He glanced at the heavens and saw them hung with some kind of floating debris catching the last of the sunlight. The only smells he could pick out from the general fairground pong were cow dung and candyfloss, and the occasional whiff of suntan lotion and sweat.

What did snow smell like? What did it feel like? How would he survive it?

A new hailstorm of notes from an electric guitar made him wince and stare back at the stage, at the guitar man working the strings again, hard.

"My lord, he's a hottie," Penny said, "that Frank Law."

Dion leaned elbows on knees, no longer clapping along, no longer trying to fool anybody. He pulled the brim of his baseball cap lower, checked his watch, and did the math. Six songs so far, just a couple more to go. The dark-haired girl was still down there, a stillness in

a choppy sea, but he'd lost interest in whoever she was and wherever she was headed.

Touch didn't come easy to him, these days, but he made the effort, grabbed Penny's hand, found it warm, and interlocked her fingers in his. She responded by leaning her shoulder against his. The music ramped up, and he could feel through his body the thumping of appreciation from the crowd, some three hundred fans shaking the frail structure like they were working together to bring it down. He thought about steel rods criss-crossed and linked to suspend too much weight too high, and about metal fatigue, the chain reactions of a snapped bolt, the carnage that would come with collapse, and his own death, twice in one year.

The next song was slower, its lyrics turning from hanky-panky to slow romance, and the thumping stopped too. Dion took a breath. Penny looked away to the midway rides, the languid revolving silhouette of the Ferris wheel. "It's Kiera's take on 'The Banks of Red Roses,'" she said, sounding distant. "It's song nine on her CD. It's about murder. It's so depressing. I always skip it."

Penny hated violence. She liked romance novels and happy news of rescued animals. She seemed to believe that men were faithful and good, which bothered him. He'd tried to educate her, being a man himself, knowing well how unfaithful and ungood men really were. The average man follows his dick and grabs what he wants, and if he appears to behave, that's all it is, appearances. Rein it in to hang onto the job, or marriage, or whatever he values. He had explained it all to Penny just the other day, and then put it to her: if a man has nothing to lose, then what?

Kiera finished her song of murder and yelled into the mic, "Thank you, Smithers, you're the best, see you next year, hey?"

Penny said, "No way she's going to leave it on that crummy note," as singer and band walked off, and she was right. Enough of the audience came to its feet and demanded an encore that the band filed back on stage. Kiera took up the mic again and crooned, "I love you too. Here's one more for the road. I wrote this one especially for you cow-babies."

She closed her eyes and swayed. Penny recognized the intro and said, "Oh, geez, I love this one. The blown kiss. Watch Frank."

Dion did as he was told. The song was much like all the others, wild and discordant. The Rockabilly Princess was flipping her skirts, showing her legs. The boys in the crowd whistled and cheered. Frank the guitar man leaned into a second mic, and the song became a lovers' duet. Frank stopped playing long enough to kiss his palm and blow that kiss at Kiera. Kiera reached up and caught the kiss and made to blow it back, but Frank missed the obvious cue. Distracted or ill-rehearsed, he failed to catch the kiss but kept strumming at his guitar strings, looking not at his lover but down into the crowd. Kiera twirled and sang on.

"Ouch," Penny said. "She's not too pleased."

Frank was bowing back into his guitar strings, playing hard for the song's climax. Maybe he knew he'd screwed up, or maybe not, but Dion found the missed kiss funny. He looked at Penny to see if she did too, but her eyes were fixed on Frank with what looked like pity.

Frank was the love of Penny's life, on some level Dion couldn't understand. She had a glossy Fling concert poster pinned to her bedroom wall showing the Princess dancing aggressively into the camera lens in denim dress and cowgirl boots, and next to her Frank in clingy tank-top, electric guitar slung across his chest. Penny had pointed to the poster on one of Dion's rare visits to that bedroom and said, "Only in my dreams."

Maybe he should have taken offence, but he didn't then as he didn't now. He looked down again and saw the native girl was gone, and so was her bag. In the middle of a song. Cutting out early struck him as strange for one who'd been watching so keenly, even if it was the last song. But probably he was wrong and she wasn't a fan, was just *here*, like him, drawn into these bleachers by circumstance and killing time. He gave one last look at the spot she'd vacated, and then at the benches just above. One row or maybe two up from where she'd been sitting was now an empty patch, where before there had been a fairly even spread of audience.

He looked westward, scanning the milling fairground crowd, and spotted her as she passed through the blare of concession stand lights, not so far off yet that he couldn't recognize that long hair flipping like a black banner, that ice-blue T-shirt. She moved from one patch of light to another, weaving through the crowd, crossing the midway, carrying her bag, not a duffel but a packsack. He searched for a pattern of motion at her back and saw it, a solitary figure scything through not far behind her, passing beneath those same patches of light and closing the gap. Tall, male, Caucasian, wearing a baseball cap much

like Dion's. Black, he thought, till a spotlight hit it square for a fleeting second, and he realized it was red.

He stood to see better, and Penny tugged his hand, saying, "Hey you, it's not over." He sat and looked down at the stage, but his heart was hammering. The girl was going to meet friends in the beer garden, that was all. Or heading for her car parked on the well-lit lower level plateau. Around him people went on stamping to the beat, and somehow he was sure she wasn't meeting friends, or climbing into the safety of her car, that she was alone and she was on foot and her destination was the highway, either by one of several paths that cut through field or forest, or the long gravel road that led away from the fairground to the west, dark and empty, the perfect place for the man to catch up, reach out, take hold.

"I'll be back," he said into Penny's ear and stood and edged along the bench past a dozen sets of knees until he was on the steps, thudding down, now jogging across the midway, seeking a red cap following a girl in blue.

But she was nowhere, and he stood amongst the fairgoers and listened to the happy din, conversation on all fronts, the music from the rides, screams from the Haunted House. Behind him Kiera cried breathlessly over the loudspeakers, "Thank you, I love you," and she went on to remind her fans of her upcoming CD, on sale by Christmas. "It'll knock your socks off, people, I promise." The applause followed her off stage as Dion made his way back up, climbed the bleachers, edged past a dozen sets of knees, and sat next to Penny.

"You see somebody you know?" she asked.

"Maybe," he said.

A man was on stage now, introducing The Old Time Fiddlers. Some people rose, shuffling toward the stairs, but most stayed seated, bringing out the lap blankets and Thermoses. Penny said, "Well, what d'you think?"

"I think we should go."

"No, about Fling. Now that you've seen 'em play."

A cold missile hit Dion on the nape of the neck, and he stood, mind set on departure. Penny gave a happy shriek as she was hit too. It was an icy rain, not quite the snow she longed for. Holding hands, they made their way along the planks to the steps, and by the time they'd left the stage behind and were heading down the mid-way where the rides spun and clanged, the water came down hard as hail. They took shelter under a canopy by the mini rollercoaster and watched the kids hurling along its rails.

"Have you been to the PNE?" Penny asked. "Bet you rode the big one. I always wanted to but never had the nerve. Did you?"

The noise of the fairgrounds and the rain had drummed out her words, or the meaning of them. He said, "Sorry, what?"

"You grew up down there...." She always did this, pressed patiently on through all his lapses, and he couldn't understand why. He and she were a bad match. She was fun and lively, and he was barely here. Last month he'd arrived in this town, 1,149 kilometres from where he wanted to be, and was down at the post office signing up for a mailbox because they didn't do door-to-door here. She'd been working behind the counter, and gave him the paperwork and key. He'd

been bewildered and emotionally raw and she'd been chatty and welcoming. She'd talked him into a night at the movies, then dinner at her parents' house, and already he was caught, a misconception more than a boyfriend, with no easy way out.

She repeated a question he must have missed. "And you're a big, brave guy, so you must've, right? Rode the giant roller coaster, I'm saying."

He looked down at her in distracted wonder. Penny didn't know, because he hadn't told her, who he was and why he was here. Hardly a big, brave guy, and no new recruit with a rosy future. As far as the force was concerned, he was a rehab experiment with low odds.

A flicker of colour brought him back to the moment, a red ball cap approaching. He studied its wearer but saw this guy was too young and too heavy to be the stalker, which wasn't a stalker at all but a flight of fancy. His temples throbbed, and his back was sticky with sweat. He recalled with regret that other thing he'd done tonight, or failed to do, further proof he was no longer a detective: he had looked away just as she had looked up, the lone girl in the bleachers. His one good chance to see her face, and he'd blown it.

There was a clatter and shriek, and a carload of kids flew by. Penny was still next to him, but she'd given up on conversation. He pulled her into a brief hug then pointed a thumb at the glum roadie at the gate. "I'll get you a ticket, if you want."

He was joking. This was a travelling fair, with break-down rides, and its roller coaster was only fit for six-year-olds. "Thanks but no thanks," she laughed.

Heavy streaks of clouds muddled the night skies, and he sought Penny's hand again, planning to tug her toward the parking lot, but she had escaped. He saw her over at the bumper cars, talking to friends. She beckoned at him and called out, "Hey." He shook his head and flicked a hand at her, meaning *go ahead without me, I'll wait*.

The last thing he needed was another crash. He leaned against the metal rail and turned away from the noise and action. He touched the left side of his head, just over the ear, feeling with his fingers the unevenness of the surgical mend, always worried it would come undone, and whatever he had left in there would come seeping out.

Behind him the cars slammed into each other, set to Def Leppard. He puffed out a breath and couldn't help being there again, driving too fast down the long, straight roads of Surrey — or maybe it was Cloverdale — middle of the night, chasing someone, and it had come out of nowhere, a flash of red torpedoing in off the right out of what had to be a concealed side road. He recalled spiking the brakes, when in hindsight he should have stepped on the gas. He recalled shouting to Looch, but shouting what?

Last words.

Later he found out he'd been comatose for six days. Nobody would answer his questions or show him photos or share whatever the traffic analyst had pinpointed on speed and degrees of fault. They'd asked a question or two, but it was hardly the interrogation he was ready for, and that worried him too. All they said was, why were you in Richmond breaking the limit? Where were you guys going to, coming from? He'd said he remembered

nothing of the day of the accident. He didn't expect to be believed, but they seemed to do just that, believe him.

The flip side of claiming amnesia was that he left himself in the dark. He couldn't ask those pointed questions he wanted to, and now he knew nothing of the investigation except the names of the deceased. He'd missed Looch's funeral. He'd left town without a word to Looch's widow, Brooke, or Looch's mom or dad or sister or brothers. They wouldn't have forgiven him anyway, but at least he should have tried.

So now he was back in uniform, pretty well healed, good to go. There was no brain damage, they said, and they seemed to believe it. He was trying to believe it himself, but he couldn't. He was changed, rearranged, not himself. It would be a while before he could start climbing his way back to the top, be once again that smartass cop in suit and tie, integral, admired, the keenest eye on the team ...

He brought his hand around and found it wet with cold rain, not warm blood, which took his worries in another direction: the winter weather and how he was going to steer his wheels through the coming snowfalls. Aside from training at Regina ten years ago, he wasn't prepared for northern driving. He imagined snow coming down thick, coating the roads, concealing the ice. It would send him into a tailspin, another crash, another coma. How many comas could one brain take?

The knot tightened. He told Penny as she rejoined him that he needed to get home, get some sleep; he had work tomorrow.

On the gravel road to the upper parking lot they joined other fairgoers walking slowly out into the dark.

Holding his hand, Penny said, "It was the best, though, wasn't it?" The colourful fairground lights reflected in her eyes as she looked back, still spinning away in the distance. "Seeing them play?"

"Seeing what?" he asked.

"Them play."

As always, the dots didn't quite connect. "Who?"

"Fling." She'd lost patience, probably for the first time since they'd met, maybe the beginning of the end. "Fling, the whole point of this day, remember?"

They walked in silence toward the vast muddy field that had been turned into a jam-packed parking lot for this fall fair weekend, no longer holding hands, and he kept an eye out for the native girl and the man who followed her, both long gone, leaving nothing to chase but a really bad feeling.

One

FEBRUARY CALLOUT

DAVID LEITH BROUGHT the phone to his ear, standing in his living room by the big picture window, looking out at the winter scenery. Not his personal phone but his work phone, the police-issue BlackBerry, and that meant this Sunday, his day off, was probably shot.

“Leith,” he answered. And sighed, and listened, and continued to watch the falling snow.

He liked snow — maybe even loved it. As a boy he had skated through it, slid on it, built with it. He’d grown up and joined the RCMP and been bumped west from Saskatchewan to Alberta’s Slave Lake, then farther west to B.C.’s Fort St. John, and finally all the way to the coast, to this rugged little city of Prince Rupert. He’d got married, settled down, and until this year had continued to be one with the snow. Till now it represented *fun* to him, and *beauty*, one spoke in the great wheel of life. There was nothing like standing out there first thing in the morning, dazzled by a world cleansed in white, and feeling one with nature.

“Be there in ten,” he said, and disconnected.

Snow in Prince Rupert didn’t hit hard, as it did inland, this being the oceanic climate, and usually melted as it hit the ground, but now and then there was a great dump of the stuff, and it stuck. This last dump was sticking, and it was no longer fun or beautiful to Leith. These days each new snowfall just pissed him off, the way it found its way into his boots and behind his collar and brought him crashing to the ground from time to time as he forged to work and forged out on investigations and forged out to the supermarket and forged home again. Snow tracked into the home with all the other stresses of the day and dirtied the carpet and made Alison bitchy.

No, that wasn’t fair. She was never bitchy, no matter how dirty the carpet got or how low their spirits fell. She would go mute, though, which only made him louder. They had never argued in the Februaries of their younger years, and it worried him that something had gone so badly off the rails — and how bad exactly would it get? Maybe having a child too late in life had upset the balance. Leith was forty-four, Alison thirty-eight, and Izzy was just turning two, and had morphed not into cuteness but into a tiny, blond-ringletted monster with powerful lungs. Ear-splitting lungs. Alison blamed it on the Terrible Twos. Leith blamed it on the species and dreaded the next twenty years.

So this call from the office at midday on this, his first day off in a while, didn’t bother him as much as he made out it did. He cursed aloud and told Alison he had to go out. She didn’t seem disappointed. He pulled on soft-shell, then outer jacket, then sat on the foyer bench

to lace up the waterproof boots. "Bye-bye-bye," he said and stooped toward Isabelle where she stood staring up at him on the dirty grey stretch of hallway carpet. She raised a threatening fist and spoke in tongues. Alison gathered the child up and didn't bother to see him off on the doorstep where she used to stand smiling, back when they were in love.

At noon, Prince Rupert seemed steeped in dusk. He drove to the station, parked underground, walked up into the stuffy over-lit main, and on down to Phil Prentice's office, where he found his boss on his feet, speaking to a stranger. The stranger wore glasses, a black suit, white shirt, no tie. He was bigger than the average cop, and bulky, kind of bear-shaped, head ducked down as if he was self-conscious about his height. He looked to be about Leith's age, maybe a year or two younger.

He was vaguely familiar, too, like Leith had seen him somewhere recently. Maybe on TV? A journalist? Prentice made introductions. "Mike, this is my main man, Constable Dave Leith. A real get-it-done guy."

The stranger looked pleased, shook Leith's hand, and said, "Sergeant Mike Bosko, up from North Van for the border security conference. How ya doin'?"

"Good, thanks," Leith said. A big man himself, he stood nearly eye-to-eye with the stranger, who he now in fact recognized. Couple nights ago Mike Bosko had been up at the podium at the Highliner Inn, talking fluidly about something important. Exactly what, Leith couldn't say, even after taking notes. "Heard your talk, sir. Amazing stuff."

"Amazing what we got accomplished in three days," Bosko said with a smile. Too smart, too self-possessed,

and thankfully soon to be gone, Leith thought. He turned to Prentice to ask why the call-in on his day off.

“Yes, sorry about that,” Prentice said. “Another girl’s gone missing, inland.”

“Hell, no. Where and when? Same place?”

“The Hazeltons. Reported missing last night.”

The Hazeltons lay in the colder, snowier interior of the province, northeast of Rupert by a good four hours’ drive. As Leith understood it, the Hazeltons were composed of Old Hazelton, New Hazelton, and South Hazelton, and the smaller offshoots of Kispiox and Two Mile. Of course that four-hour drive could stretch into eight in a blizzard. He took the bulletin Prentice had thrust at him and looked it over, a photo of a young woman with all the stats typed up below, which he now scanned. “It’s out of his range,” he said, and already felt the ice receding from his veins. The killer he’d been hunting for two years had centred his hits around the Terrace area, so far, which sat midway on the highway between Rupert and the Hazeltons.

“Sure, but what’s a few miles for a man with a truck?” Prentice said. “Thing is, her vehicle was located up on a logging road, Dave.”

A logging road in the winter was bad at best. Linked to the MO of a serial killer, it was dismal. Leith looked at the bulletin again, photograph of a young woman with a dazzling smile, warm eyes, a tumble of glossy brown hair. The image was professionally lit, more a publicity head shot than something out of a family album. The stats said she was twenty-two. The name, Kiera Rilkoff, rang a distant bell. “She’s a bit of a celebrity? A singer?”

Prentice nodded and said for Bosko's benefit, "She's quite the talent, too. Our local pride and joy. My daughters are huge fans. Country and western stuff, I think."

Leith had learned not to take many of Prentice's adjectives at face value. Like *huge*. If asked, those daughters would probably agree that, yeah, Kiera's pretty good, why?

"Oh, sure, the Rockabilly Princess," Bosko said, snapping his fingers. "There was a piece on grassroots music on CBC Radio just before Christmas. She gave a short, man-on-the-street type interview, and they played a track from her first CD. Self-produced, I think. She seemed excited about the future of the band, and they had a second CD coming out. Did it ever happen?"

"No, I think it got nixed for some reason."

Bosko didn't look surprised, Leith noticed, and then it clicked that he'd actually seen the singer play, which was one better than hearing her on the radio. "I caught her act at last summer's Seafest," he said. The event filled his mind, the sunshine and crowds, the barbecue aromas, little Izzy on his shoulders gripping his hair and trying to knock off his sunglasses. He'd been more interested in the food than the music, frankly, but he'd stopped to watch the pretty girl on centre stage. The music itself was fairly run-of-the-mill country yowling, as he recalled, and he hadn't stopped for long.

He shook his head, handing the bulletin back to Prentice. "She's not victim four. He wouldn't go for a celebrity. What's with her vehicle?"

"Parked near a trailhead on Kispiox Mountain," Prentice said. "They got a spare key up there and checked. Engine wouldn't turn over."

“What’s the matter with it?”

“No news yet on that yet.”

“Must be deep snow up there. Any tracks?”

“Mess of tracks, Giroux tells me. Terrace sent two Ident guys over for a look. Should be there by now. Problem is family and friends went tramping about before we were brought in. Doubtful there’s anything left.”

A trashed crime scene was a terrible beginning, and already Leith knew this was going to end up bad. Unless she was incredibly inconsiderate, the girl hadn’t caught a ride with somebody, hadn’t met up with friends, wasn’t simply out having too much fun to call home.

“Why d’you say he wouldn’t go for a celebrity, Dave?” Bosko asked.

The “he” they all spoke of was the so-called Pickup Killer, as dubbed by the press because it was about all the police had on him so far, that he drove a pickup. And even that was little more than circumstantial say-so. Leith eyed the stranger, not keen on this first-name-basis thing — it’s *Leith* to you, buddy — let alone case-note sharing. But Prentice wasn’t objecting, so Leith pulled in his shoulders and gave the stranger the abridged version, just short of rude. “His last two victims were pretty well loners, down-and-outers, which buys him time. Grabbing Kiera is not only way out of his abduction territory — it’s not his style. This is something else altogether, and that means it’s not my file, Phil, and I’m going home. Bye.”

His last few words were directed at Prentice while stepping across the threshold, but Prentice sharply called him back into the room. “It happened in the Hazeltons, where for all we know he’s based,” Prentice said. “What about the

logging road? It's a link we can't ignore, and right or wrong, we need you out there, if only to sign off on a no-go." To Bosko he explained more pleasantly, "Dave heads up the Pickup task force. He's immersed like nobody else. If there's one incriminating fibre to be found, he'll find it."

Leith stood embarrassed, for however immersed he might be and whatever responsibilities he shouldered, he wasn't much of a cop, as his rank pointed out. At his age he hadn't even made corporal. Couldn't pass the exams, couldn't make an impression on those who mattered. He lacked some quality, elusive as charisma. Maybe it was just inherent laziness or a basically crappy IQ, but he wasn't well read (though he tried). Or well travelled (though he dreamed). He wasn't suave, wasn't patient, wasn't lovable. Worst of all, he wasn't intuitive.

If one word could sum him up, it was dogged.

His personal phone buzzed, and he glanced at it, a coolish text from Alison telling him to pick up another bag of sidewalk salt, and he reflected that a few days away from home might not be so bad. "Right," he told Prentice. "I'll go pack. Call Giroux and tell her I'll be on the road in an hour. ETA, no idea."

He was nodding goodbye to the stranger Bosko, but Bosko wasn't done irritating him and said, "Hold on a sec, Dave. I've run this by Phil already, and so long as it's fine with you, it's fine with him. I'm wondering if you'd mind if I rode along with you."

"Rode along? To where? The airport? The airport's that way."

"New Hazelton. From there I could catch the next available sheriff run to Prince George and hop a plane.

Wouldn't mind seeing the interior up close. Never really get the chance. Always flying over." He smiled.

The room's windows looking out to sea were solid grey but for the white bombardments of sleet, and Leith could hear the muted howl of February pressing against the double-glazed window. The roads would be murder, the view obscured by haze, and it wasn't much of a view anyway, a monotony of ice-rimed trees with the occasional glimpse of ice-jammed river.

He tried to send the stranger a *fuck-off* message with his eyes. "It's a hell of a long drive, this time of year. Hours. And in this weather you won't see much but tail-lights. It'll be slow going. Gruelling."

"For once in my life, Dave, I've got time."

Leith shrugged and glowered. "Okay, then. Meet back here in forty minutes?"

"Absolutely."

The only thing worse than a winter drive to the Hazeltons, Leith reflected as he made his way to the parkade, was a long winter drive to the Hazeltons with a man who answered grim propositions with *absolutely*. Damn.

* * *

"Thing is, I don't have to be back at the office till the end of the month," Bosko explained, settled next to Leith in the passenger seat, his specs reflecting the oncoming headlights. Prince Rupert was behind them now at two thirty, and they hadn't yet sped up to highway limits. "The conference wrapped up quicker than we expected, as you know, which opened up this great window of

time for me, a whole week, and my first impulse was to call up admin right away and top it up. But then I got to thinking. I walked down to the harbour, watched the waves crashing in, and it occurred to me how little I know of these parts, and how I wouldn't mind some eyes-on exploration. I've called B.C. home for the last decade, yet I haven't driven north of Cache Creek, would you believe?"

"Huh," Leith said.

"And I'm not the only one. I don't know how many superior officers I've talked to down on the coast who've seen Disneyland but never drove the highways of B.C. It becomes a problem when those who run the show forget about the practicalities of working under conditions such as you guys face on a daily basis. I'm stating the obvious, you'd think, but there's a genuine disconnect, Dave. There's real time and distance involved. It's not like moving the cursor across Google Earth. It's distance you can feel in the small of your back." He grinned, watched the cruddy snow-plastered trees pass for a while, and said, "So what do you know of Kiera Rilkoff?"

Leith could sum up what he knew of the missing girl on three fingers. She was attractive, popular among the local youngsters, and had aspirations. He said as much, padding it out with extra words, trying to sound smart, feeling Bosko's eyes on him.

After a beat Bosko said, "The track they played on the radio back in November was pretty rough on the ears. By the sound of it, I'd say it was done up in a home studio, and not too well. Kiera promised their upcoming CD would be a professional burn, that they had sunk money

into it, and maybe had acquired an agent, I think she said. Or was it a manager? Does that mean anything to you?"

"I haven't been following her career," Leith admitted. "Sorry."

"No, and unfortunately I wasn't really listening at the time," Bosko said. "But if anyone's interested, it can probably be pulled from the archives."

Who needs archives when you have the amazing Bosko's hi-fidelity recall, Leith thought enviously. His own memory was good on things that mattered, but recount some random bullshit he'd heard on the radio three months ago?

Bosko asked more smart questions about the logistics of operations in the area, search and rescue, continuity issues with thin staffing, response times in various conditions. Leith did his best to answer, not so well, and soon enough the big man from the city went from asking questions to a kind of running soliloquy on whatever was on his mind at the moment. Northern demographics, poverty issues, the border security conference and how it had gone down, who had spoken, upcoming shifts in policy and legislation. As Leith was learning now the hard way, Mike Bosko abhorred a vacuum.

Half listening, grunting occasionally, Leith pressed on, away from the ocean, into the bleak wilds of B.C. There was no colour in the sky, no colour anywhere now that they'd left the port city behind and the temperatures had plummeted. The roads were slick but manageable. He drove faster than the traffic pattern, passing when possible, until a line of loaded B-train freight trucks slowed him to sixty on the straights and a

mind-numbing thirty through the curves. And Bosko's low, plodding voice droned on. As well as knowing pretty much everything about the universe at large, he seemed to have the scoop on the local crime scene. He spoke of the Pickup killings, knew the bodies had been found on forest service roads, knew the names, Karen Blake, Lindsay Carlyle, Joanne Crow, and the stories their bodies told of forceful takedown, bondage, and strangulation. Leith wondered if Mike Bosko had gotten hold of the files at some point, and if so, why? He wondered if Bosko was privy to the holdback information that had been kept back from the press, known only to the inner circle of investigators so far, the killer's quirk. He said, "You've done your research."

Bosko either didn't hear or didn't care to answer.

The Pickup Killer case had gone cool, if not cold, and these days Leith only worked it if something new turned up. Nothing had for over a year now, except faint whispers that kept him awake some nights. The whispers said the beast was still in their midst, still crawling the streets of Terrace.

As they passed through that very city, the killer's known hunting grounds, darkness fell and the snow came down in earnest. Terrace fell behind, and they were again in lonely wilderness, with another two hours to go before they reached the Hazeltons. Bosko switched to historian mode, telling Leith all kinds of interesting things about the area, Hazelton being rooted in the Omineca Gold Rush, the sternwheeler that ran the Skeena once open a time, the turn-of-the-century search for Simon Gunanoot, much of it news to Leith.

He shifted in his seat and sighed with relief as the lights of their final destination approached, the broad, slow highway that cut through the main settlement of New Hazelton. Passage through town would take about two minutes if a person drove the speed limit, which nobody did, except Leith now, slowing to sixty, then fifty, losing the tandem trucks ahead, which ploughed through and disappeared up the big dark hill that merged again with black forest, probably heading for the mills of Smithers.

“We’re here,” he said, sounding smarter than ever.

There was scant traffic out and about as he cruised the SUV under the orange glow of tall lamp standards, past a gas station and shut-down supermarket, a few darkened restaurants. He pulled at last down a side street and parked in front of the New Hazelton detachment. He shut off the engine and looked at Bosko, hoping the shabbiness of the place was a crushing disappointment to the man. Bosko looked fresh, pleased, and enthusiastic.

Inside the small RCMP detachment they were met by a sleepy-looking auxiliary constable who told them that Renee Giroux, the local sergeant in charge, was up on the Matax with a small search team. Leith said, “Matax, what’s that?”

“Hiking trail heading off the Bell 3,” the auxiliary told him. “Where Kiera’s truck was found.”

“Bell 3 ...”

“The logging road.”

Leith told the auxiliary to contact Giroux and let her know he was on his way. The auxiliary said, “I’ll try. Can’t guarantee a connection. The airwaves are thin up

there.” She supplied him with a map, marking it with Xs, one for the Bell 3 turnoff and one for the Matax trailhead. Leith thanked her.

“It’s going to be tedious,” he told Bosko as they headed back out to the truck. “You’d be better off checking into your room and kicking back. They’ve got us booked in at the Super 8 over there. I’ll just drop you off?”

“I’ll tag along, if that’s okay.”

They left the town lights behind, and Bosko got a tour of the Hazeltons as they passed through the settlements of Two Mile, Old Town, over a canyon into the heavily forested Kispiox area and beyond, where Leith was soon lost, in spite of map and GPS. With Bosko’s help he did manage to locate the Bell 3 signpost, the words nearly obliterated by driven snow, and took the turn, geared the truck down, and the high-suspension, fat-tired V8 police truck began to climb the snowy road beaten flat by previous tires. The incline steepened steadily and the road narrowed until even Bosko sat mute as the headlights lit the banks falling steeply away inches from his right shoulder.

The second X on the map wasn’t far in theory, a mere 9.7 kilometres of straights and switchbacks, but it was a crawl to get there, and nearly an hour passed before a pylon glowed in the headlights. A moment later a row of vehicles came gleaming into view, a couple of police SUVs and a black four-door sedan that didn’t look fit for the terrain. Leith pulled in behind the sedan and stepped out onto the road, wincing. Crystals fell light but fast, tiny daggers lashing his face. Upslope and deep in the woods a hard light pierced the darkness, a signal to follow.

“Not a good place to break down,” Bosko remarked. He stood now at the nose of the truck, taking in the scene. Leith shone his flashlight toward the man and saw how out of place he looked in urban overcoat, collars turned up, glasses flecked with snow and his short hair flipping about, but no fear on his solid, pale face. Bosko checked his cellphone for signal and confirmed what Leith already knew. “Not a single bar.”

The pylons pointed the way to a parking area for trail users, ribboned off with crime-scene tape, the ground here churned by tires, but no vehicles occupying its space. Leith swung his light about low and caught another line of pylons, and these led him up on a short trek into the woods. Here as everywhere the forest floor was disturbed by foot traffic in every direction, silent evidence of the searchers who would have been and gone, criss-crossing the wilderness, calling out Kiera’s name and blasting whistles.

He and Bosko reached a clearing, a kind of muster zone, and arrived at the lights and action they had seen from afar. Officers were spread out in the trees, marked distantly by the bobbing of their flashlights. The muster zone was lit by heavy-duty portables on stands, and under their raking glare stood a roundish bundle named Renee Giroux.

“My big-city detective at last,” she called out as the men arrived before her. She stared past Leith at Bosko. “And you are?”

Leith made introductions, and the little First Nations CO forgave Bosko for being a stranger enough to shake his hand. “I was just leaving,” she said. “Good thing you

got up here to see what we're dealing with. But this," she said, and scanned about the site, which was a confusion of crime scene tape strung between bushes, "is going nowhere fast." She pointed to where several officers were concentrated, performing a finer grid search. "Possible burial site there, snow heaped about, but no body. Her friends and family from here to kingdom come were up yesterday and spent the night looking for her. Natural enough, but what a disaster. SAR made a couple passes overhead, and they're on the ground now, team of eight, doing the crags and crevasses. Reason I'm up here is Dash drove in from Terrace about half past four and yanked his handler into the bushes, where we got us a game-changer." She pointed to where two constables were searching the forest floor. "Found it over at that marker. Which is, what, a hundred feet from her car. So all of a sudden it's looking not like a girl lost in a woods but a girl taken by persons unknown."

Leith told Bosko that Dash was a tracker dog from Terrace and that actually it was probably the dog's handler who drove, and asked Giroux what exactly the game-changer was.

"A cellphone," she said. "Looks new, and I'd be stunned if it wasn't Kiera's. Haven't looked at it yet, was waiting for Big City to show up and do things proper."

Big City was her nickname for Leith. She grinned fleetingly, not pleasantly, and looked around and again pointed. "Dash said there's nothing of interest beyond that point, so that leaves us with two scenarios. A) She lost or discarded her phone, then got a ride with someone we don't know and is some *place* we don't know, safe

and sound but phoneless and for some reason unwilling or unable to get in touch. B) She was abducted and lost her phone in the struggle.”

She paused, and Leith knew she would be thinking of the faint but frightening possibility that the Pickup Killer had moved in. Here, to her zone of responsibility. Bosko said, “We didn’t see her vehicle on the parking flat. It’s been towed down, has it?”

Giroux nodded. “Fairchild’s call, not mine.”

Leith told Bosko that Corporal Fairchild was head of the Terrace Ident section. He was on scene now, overseeing the search.

Giroux said, “Duncan’s sent their big rig and came and got it. Had my doubts, but got lots of pictures before it was touched, inside and out, and figured we’d be better off giving it the once-over in the garage.”

Bosko scratched his ear as if he had his doubts and looked at Leith. Leith nodded shortly at him. “Life in the outback, sir. They use Duncan’s Auto Repair around here for tows.”

“Anyway,” Giroux said, “Fairchild wants us to get that phone down to a signal and see if there’s any messages. Where’s my exhibit man?” She turned and bellowed at her crew, “I’m taking the phone and going down. Spacey, shoot it over.”

A figure approached from the shadows, and the exhibit man, it turned out, was Jayne Spacey, a regular constable Leith had once worked alongside. Spacey, in heavy fur-lined parka, pulled off a mitt and handed an exhibit baggie to Giroux. She noticed Leith and smiled a crooked hello at him, which impacted him now as it

did every time they met, taking his breath away. That was young Jayne Spacey, her face asymmetric like she'd suffered a stroke, but all the more beautiful for it.

Before he could fumble out a greeting, she turned to go, saying something about another missing person she had to go search for and rescue.

Leith called after her, "What?"

She walked backward a step or two, grinning. "Just kidding. Our temp, Constable Dion, from Smithers. Went off into the woods and didn't come back. Kinda cute but not too bright." She laughed, faced around, and trudged away into the dark.

He watched her go. He heard a murmuring of voices from the possible burial area and looked sidelong to see Corporal Fairchild beckoning him. He left Giroux and Bosko talking and joined the man and a small crew of Giroux's constables, who stood by a square of land about ten by ten, marked into a search grid with pegs and string.

Fairchild was near retirement, shorter than average, with a heavy grey moustache and gloomy eyes. He looked at Leith and said, "We got glitter, Dave."

Which to anyone else might sound silly, but filled Leith with dismay. "Damn," he said. "What colour?"

"Take a look." Fairchild pointed with his penlight beam, and Leith crouched and aimed his own penlight at the same clumps of snow within the grid. He angled his beam this way and that until the light bounced back at him in a pink flash.

It was the holdback info, the quirk, the fact that traces of body glitter had been found on two of the Pickup Killer's victims. Lab work had tracked it down to the

same brand in both cases, and even to the chain store that sold it, if not the store itself. The store was found in just about every mall in the province.

He stood, swearing. Fairchild said, "Doesn't necessarily mean anything. Lotta girls wear it these days. And pink's a popular colour. Could be from lip gloss, or they put it in their hair, on their fingernails. They even glue it all over clothes. We'll scoop what we can, send it in, see if it's Hello Kitty."

Even if it matched the brand, Leith realized, it wouldn't be definitive proof. Up here shoppers didn't have a huge choice in anything when it came to the more esoteric products. If you were after body glitter, as he knew from those earlier investigations, Hello Kitty was pretty well what you were stuck with. Fairchild was right; maybe it meant nothing. But it sure didn't make him happy, those tiny sparkles of pink in the snow.

* * *

Dion was in trouble. He'd lost track and was wandering in circles, every step a struggle in the deepening snow. She had sent him this way, but how far was he supposed to go, and how far had he gone? He ploughed along farther from the lights, farther off the trail and into darkness, until there was nothing but his flashlight beam for company, and the woods were dense, the sky blacker than he had imagined possible. He swore at his own feet that couldn't seem to keep him upright, at the ear-popping elevation, the chill, the gloves he'd left behind. At himself for telling his CO back in Smithers that

he was up for the challenge, and at the CO for believing him and sending him this far north. It had been a murderously long drive on slick roads, where logging trucks barrelled at him like monsters from the darkness, wood bits flying in their wake. He'd nearly lost his life on that road, lost traction twice, fishtailed once, then slowed to a crawl till his cruiser gathered a parade of headlights at its rear. But he'd finally arrived, two hours and fifteen minutes later, not the "one hour max" they'd told him.

The town they'd sent him to was called New Hazelton, about a quarter the size of his Smithers posting. From the New Hazelton RCMP office — the smallest detachment he'd ever stepped foot into — he'd been sent still farther out, twenty kilometres of back roads and then up the scariest mountain he'd ever faced, and now here he was, swallowed in wilderness, searching for a famous person. Famous locally, at least, far as he knew.

He skimmed his light through the trees. He reminded himself how grateful he was for this first real chance to prove himself. "This is fantastic," he said aloud, and his voice came out thin and quaky in the heavy silence. His boots slithered again, this time almost taking him down. He steadied himself and swore again. His teeth started to chatter, and to stop the chattering, he gritted them, but the shivers only moved into his shoulders. The light beam he was scoping through the spaces between the trees flickered, came on again strong, then blinked madly. "No, don't!" he shouted. He banged the torch on his thigh and thought about batteries. How could he forget such a fundamental as putting in fresh ones and packing spares? His heart began to thud.

"No big deal," he said and was reassured by his own adult voice, low and angry. "Walk back, follow your tracks."

He turned to head back to where he thought the distant main lights should be, thinking about wolves, and now his heart banged harder because he couldn't see his own tracks in this dim, wavering light beam. He turned the thing off, in part to conserve what juice was left and in part to make him less of a sitting duck to the nocturnal eyes that watched from the wilderness on all sides. He'd heard the predatory noises, the secretive shifting, the low breathing, the salivating, the circling. The sounds came from here first, then there. He turned, turned again, looked back, looked sideways.

Listening hard, he could now hear nothing but himself existing, the blood coursing through his system, the nylon of his jacket squealing with every shallow breath. Then something else, a distant crunch-crunch climbing toward him. Not a wolf, but maybe worse. He turned with measured speed and breathed out heavily as he saw that it was only her, the local constable, Jayne Spacey, who'd met him on the logging road some hours earlier and given him his instructions. She was following her light beam in his direction, calling out his name. He waved overhead. "Here."

The light landed on him. She crunch-crunched to a stop before him and cast her beam down so it bounced off the snow and lit her up like an actor before the stage lights, the angel saviour with one eyebrow tilted. She said, "What're you doing standing in the dark? Been gone so long I thought you froze to death out here."

"My light's dying," he said.

To prove it he raised the torch and clicked the button. Light flared like a small sun, catching her full in the face, making her squint. He shut it off again as fast as his cold fingers would let him, and Spacey said, "Well, lookit that, hey? It's fixed itself."

"Sorry about that."

He tested the light on the snow, the trees, the sky, and she said, "So I guess we're at a dead end, right?" She was nodding, agreeing with herself. "Yeah, we're on that thing I like to call the unlikely perimeter."

"There's tracks," Dion said, something he'd almost forgotten. With the light strong now, he found his way back to his only discovery, the mysterious, fairly fresh footprints cutting through a small clearing in a strident way. Spacey leaned to see where they went and then waded through bracken and crouched to inspect the boot prints closer. She smiled back at him and said, "I was hoping they're yours. That would be really funny. But they don't match."

She made her way back, looking at him with new interest, maybe concern. She said, "But we're just looking for small stuff, not tracks, remember? This area's been swept. The tracks, they're just SAR doing their rounds. You okay?"

"Fine. I was just heading back."

She stood watching him, scanning for some kind of information he couldn't supply. Her hood was fur-fringed, and the fur was lashing about, along with a stray lock of gold hair. Her cheeks were rosy, her eyes gleaming as she maybe saw through him, saw that he wasn't fine, that he was cold and confused, just a step

away from petrified. "First days are always rough," she said kindly. "But it'll get better, promise."

The words stung, *first days*, but worse was the sympathy. He nodded and tried to sound grateful. "Good to know."

She laughed and reached out to knock him playfully on the shoulder, the punch slowed by too many layers of clothing. She said, "It's getting onto eight thirty. Big meeting at the Catalina Cafe. Did you book accommodations yet? You're just an hour away, Smithers, right? Most staff just day-trip it, but the boss says there'll be no commuting on this one right now. Waste of time, she says. And makes no sense moneywise. She gets a deal at the Super 8, cheaper than manpower miles, even with the per diem. If you like, I'll take you out later, show you the town, all two minutes' worth of it. You won't fall in love, but at least you'll have a map in your mind."

He'd lost most of what she said, except the time. He angled his flashlight to see the hands of his wristwatch, and she was right, it was only half past eight, nowhere near midnight as he'd thought. "Meeting?" he said.

"Basic briefing, not mandatory for you, but you'd better come along, familiarize yourself with our reign of terror called Renee Giroux. I have to tell you, she's nothing like that nice white-haired NCO you got running the show at Smithers. He treating you right?"

Spacey's voice was young but husky, like she'd been a heavy smoker for years. Her speech patterns were snaky and hard to track, almost as bad as Penny McKenzie's, but she seemed nice, and if he was lucky he'd be shadowing her for however long he was stuck here, three days, four, before they found the missing girl, the singer

whose name he'd already forgotten. He almost forgot the name of his NCO too, but it came to him now, as they hiked downslope toward the portable lights. "Willoughby, yeah," he said. "He's great."

Back in the brightly lit clearing, Spacey spoke with some members from the Terrace Ident section who stood by awaiting instructions. There was nothing left to do here tonight, Dion heard. They'd pack up and go, with a reduced crew to return in the morning light. Packing up everything but the crime-scene tape to mark the spot, the team carted out gear bags and went about powering down the lights. The generator grumbled to silence, and the last halogen faded to black. Flashlights came on, and all members prepared to leave the site, leaving only Dion kneeling in the snow, struggling with his designated task, packing a set of mattocks and spades into something like an oversized hockey bag. The task took him longer than it should, because his hands were numb, and the tools had to be laid just so or the zip wouldn't close.

Finally, he bullied the thing into shape and got it half-closed, then stood with it hoisted over his shoulder and gave the darkened scene a final scan, and it struck him with a wash of horror: they'd all leave, and she'd be left alone, if by some freak chance she remained trapped in some hidden nook or cranny. He imagined her reviving, crawling out into these terrifying woods, crying out, being met by silence.

Strange how he'd seen her in person, just a few months ago, at the Smithers Fall Fair. He pictured her now, the pretty girl dancing about the stage, singing her heart out. Kiera, that was her name. As it turned out,

it was Kiera who needed help, not the black-haired girl in the bleachers he'd fixed on so pointlessly. If he'd been looking at the stage, not the crowd, maybe he'd have seen something that would lead to some conclusion now that would save the day.

He snorted at the idea and dug at the trampled snow with the heel of his boot, testing it for give. The ground below was hard as iron, so she couldn't be buried deep anywhere hereabouts. And the mountainside had been combed by dozens of searchers, so she wasn't buried shallow either. She'd been taken away then. He knew it. Maybe on foot, but likely in a vehicle. From what he knew, which wasn't much, he believed she was dead.

Somebody shouted, and he listened, but was distracted by the forest noises, almost voice-like, wordless mutters and whispers, and a low, demented whistling. The flashlight beam guttered again, and distantly, up on the logging road, he heard car doors slam shut and an engine turn over. He could imagine them forgetting to do a head count and departing without him. He saw himself alone in the woods, following Kiera's footsteps into the wildest mystery of all. A moment longer he hesitated, and then shifted the gear bag to his other shoulder and headed up the trodden path, almost at a run, to join the departing team.

* * *

Leith and Bosko arrived at the Catalina Cafe, its big yellow sign a blazing landmark on the highway cutting through town. Leith was tired, hungry, and aggravated.