

Among the Departed/Vicki Delany
Poisoned Pen Press. May 2011

Chapter 1

Adam Tocek held a match to a pile of crumpled newspaper and twigs. With a soft whoosh the kindling ignited, filling the room with an orange glow. He poked at the fire and placed a birch log on top. The scraps of newspaper burned quickly, and the fire jumped from stick to stick chewing at the dry white bark. He placed a larger log on top of the growing inferno and settled back on his heels to admire his handwork.

"Am I getting old," the woman on the floor said, "or do we start using the fireplace earlier and earlier every year?"

"You're getting old."

"Gee, thanks."

"This place is at a much higher elevation than down in town and the nights get cold early."

He dropped down beside her and nuzzled her neck. She handed him a glass, and red liquid danced in the light of the flames.

The remains of their supper, barbecued ribs, potato salad, fresh greens, were on the coffee table in front of them. The big dog sniffed at the fire and made several circles on the rug before collapsing with a happy groan in front of it.

Tocek massaged the back of her neck. The woman sighed with as much pleasure as had the dog and settled back into his fingers.

"Nice," she murmured.

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His hand drifted down, down her neck, across her shoulders, down her upper back. His fingers found the clips of her bra. He put his wine glass down and brought his other hand up. The bra sprang free and she turned her face. Her blue eyes were soft and moist in the firelight, her lips open, the tip of her pink tongue trapped between her white teeth.

He leaned into the kiss, and then broke away to lift her T-shirt over her head. Her fingers moved towards the buckle on his shorts.

His phone rang.

Constable Adam Tocek was with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the dog handler for the Mid-Kootenay area of British Columbia. He was on call tonight, and so had restricted himself to one glass of wine with dinner.

He could not ignore his work cell phone.

Could he?

He stretched out a finger towards the dark nipple, flushed and hard with the anticipation of pleasure.

But she was a cop too, and Molly Smith pulled away with a laugh. She slithered to her feet and reached across the table for the phone. Her body was long and lean. Her breasts, small and round above a taut belly, moved and he almost said to heck with duty.

She handed him the phone.

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"Yeah?"

He listened for a moment before getting to his feet and snatching a scrap of paper off the table. "Got it," he said, making a note. "Kid missing from a campsite at Koola Park."

By the time he turned around, Molly Smith had her bra fastened and was pulling her shirt over her head.

"Come on, Norman," she said, giving the dog a nudge with her bare toe. "You've got work to do."

She glanced outside. Rain spattered against the windows and it was fully dark. The timbers of the house shuddered in the wind. "Want company?"

"Always."

He pulled on a pair of jeans and his uniform shirt and jacket and got his gun out of the safe. By the time he was ready, Smith had Norman's orange search and rescue vest on him and was loading the excited dog into the back of the truck. Unlike Tocek, Norman was always happy to be going to work.

She got into the passenger seat; Adam started the truck and pulled onto the gravel road. This far out of town, high in the mountains beyond the range of the motion detector lights over the garage and shed, the dark was total.

"How old?" she asked.

"The kid? Five."

"How long?"

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"Less than an hour."

"That's good, right?"

"Who knows, Molly. It's dangerous out there. Little guy, big woods, big animals. Fast-moving rivers, steep cliffs. We won't know 'til we get there, but it sounds as if they called soon as they noticed him missing. Every second counts."

He pulled onto the highway and sped towards Koola Provincial Park.