

Gone Fishing

by Barry R. Taylor

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“These infractions are very serious,” the Dean pronounced, “Very serious indeed. Truancy to begin with. You were off campus without permission for an entire day. Then there’s theft of a boat. And trespass on Demons Island, which is absolutely forbidden.” He scowled across his big desk at the two students sitting in stiff chairs on the other side. They were both in the college uniform, one properly, the other indifferently.

Dean Powell was a tall, muscular man in a navy blue suit. He had a dark, neatly trimmed moustache and a high forehead. Behind him, a plate-glass window overlooked the Lakeside College campus, sloping gently down to the shore of Longwater Lake. Pictures of college achievements, especially the rowing teams, decorated the oak-panelled walls.

“There will be consequences, you understand,” the Dean continued. “Reprimands on your records. Detention, community service, or other fitting punishments. Possibly expulsion.”

“Expulsion!” gasped one of the students, a compact fellow with a nervous persona. “You can’t –”

“Quiet down, Palmer,” the Dean snapped. Faculty at this small private school still addressed students by their surnames. “I have no idea what got into you, behaving like this. Your college record is exemplary. You were a strong candidate for the Science Prize. Until now.” He turned his attention to the other student, a young woman wearing over-size glasses. Her hair was auburn and untamed. Her tie was loose. “I am less surprised to see you in my office again, Watkins.”

“Always a pleasure to see you, Sir,” she replied. Emma Watkins was editor of the Lakeside Journal, the student newspaper. Her proficiency at digging up, and publishing, unflattering stories about the college and its staff had brought her before the Dean many times before.

“Drown the sarcasm,” the Dean said. “I am going to be reasonable. I am going to give you both a chance to explain your day of truancy and why you stole a college rowboat.”

The young man, Palmer, said, “Sir, we didn’t steal the rowboat, we borrowed it.”

“To go fishing,” his companion finished for him.

“Fishing!” scoffed the Dean.

“What?” said Palmer.

“We were fishing,” Emma insisted. “I needed a boat so we borrowed one of the sailing skiffs, it wasn’t being used. I needed someone stronger to man the oars so I asked Ryan.”

“Fishing,” the Dean repeated. “I warn you Watkins, this is a grave matter. This is not the time to be cute.” He turned his attention to her companion. “Palmer, how did you get involved in this escapade? I thought you had more sense.”

He looked at the floor. “Uhm, she promised I could take her to the Harvest Dance.” He referred to the premier social event of the autumn semester.

The Dean paused. He looked over at Emma, wild-haired and defiant, who wore the school uniform as a cat wears a leash, perhaps trying to imagine her slow-dancing in a ball gown.

“It was very nice of you to help,” she told Ryan. Her voice was sincere. “I couldn’t have rowed all that way by myself. But you’re on the rowing team –”

“I’m the coxswain! I don’t actually row! I’m only on the team because I don’t weigh very much. It practically killed me rowing all the way out to the island.”

“Ah, so you did visit the island,” the Dean said. “I thought as much. There is a first-order rule against trespass on Demons Island. That island is off-limits to Lakeside students and you both know it.”

“I do know,” Emma replied. “What I don’t know is why.” Unlike Palmer, she seemed unintimidated by the Dean’s thundering.

“Then I’ll tell you why, Miss nosy reporter,” Powell replied. “For one thing the island is private property. Landing there is trespass.”

Emma said, “Actually, it isn’t. In Nova Scotia, trespass law applies only to residences and land in use for forestry or farming. Demons Island is uninhabited.”

“Do not dispute with me!” the Dean roared. “The water around the island is unsafe. There are sandbars and shallows, rock ledges you can’t see. Why do you think it’s called Demons Island? Boats have capsized there. People have drowned.”

“People like Laura Roscow?”

The Dean’s face pinched for a second, as if Emma had said something very rude, which indeed she had. He said, “Miss Watkins, the death of Laura Roscow was a tragic accident. And

it was five years ago, before you were even a student here. Your repeated attempts to insinuate foul play are lazy journalism and sully the reputation of Lakeside College. The matter is settled. What has any of that to do with your unsanctioned visit to Demons Island?"

Emma said, "I told you, we were fishing. Following a hunch, I mean. Fishing for evidence in the disappearance of Laura Roscow."

"Oh, I am so dead," said, Ryan, staring at the ceiling.

"I have had enough of this!" the Dean shouted. "You two are dismissed. Get out of my office. I will decide in the next few hours the sanctions congruent with your appalling behaviour, including possible expulsion."

"Don't you even want to hear what we found?" Emma insisted. "Laura Roscow was a Lakeside student. I would think you would be interested in new information about her death."

He was unmoved. "The police closed that investigation five years ago. How could you find something they didn't?"

"Because I knew where to look. You see, there was something about this whole disappearance story that didn't sit right. I looked in to it. Laura Roscow was a fine student. She was bright, athletic, outgoing and popular."

"I can see why," Ryan put in. "I saw her year-book pictures. What a fox!"

He caught Emma's glare. "Uhm, in a shallow, flashy sort of way," he appended.

Emma turned back to the Dean: "Laura was reported missing on 5 May after she missed classes and didn't report for dinner. One of the Lakeside training rowboats was found capsized off Demons Island on 6 May, near one of those underwater ledges you mentioned. It's sail was unfurled. A number of personal items of Laura's, including a cap with her name on it, were recovered nearby. The investigation concluded that Laura drowned while sailing on the lake."

"I know all this," the Dean barked. "Unlike you, I was there at the time."

Emma said, "Yes you were. The question is, when did Laura go sailing? Nobody noticed any missing boats at the end of class time on 5 May. So she must have gone out sometime late on the fifth, in the evening, or very early on the sixth. But by that time she had already been missing all day. And she was under sail when she approached Demons Island, which she must have known was dangerous."

"Accidents happen when people do dangerous things," the Dean retorted. "Which explains why she capsized and drowned."

Emma said, “Let me suggest another possibility. Maybe Laura was already dead on the fifth of May. Maybe the apparent drowning was really a murder.”

“Oh, not this again,” the Dean growled. “Miss Watkins, I am not going to sit here and – ”

“Wait, wait, let me finish,” the student journalist insisted. “This is where it gets interesting. Laura was reported drowned but unlike most drowning victims, her body was never recovered.”

“It’s a big lake,” Dean Powell snapped.

Emma said, “Sure, but drowning is also a clever way to hide a murder because without a body there is no physical evidence of violence. But suppose, just suppose, that somebody did kill Laura. That conjecture leads to two related questions. First, who did it? And second, what did they do with the body?”

“I got to wondering, who would want to kill a sweet girl like Laura Roscow? She was well-liked by students and teachers alike. Very well-liked. Jealous classmates and jilted boyfriends can be nasty, but not murderous. But what if easy, attractive Laura had an affair with someone who had something to lose – like a teacher.”

The Dean’s scowl would kill birds. “Now see here – ” he began.

Emma was not to be stopped. “I’m told that these kind of affairs are very rare, and usually arise where the teacher and student are physically close for a long time. Could Laura have been in that situation? She was on the rowing team. She helped Lakeside win the title that year. You would remember, wouldn’t you, Sir? Weren’t you the coach of the rowing teams five years ago, before Mr. Turner took over?” She looked around at the photos on the walls and the trophies on the filing cabinet.

The Dean’s voice was low, full of menace and indignation. “Young lady, what are you insinuating?” he demanded.

“I insinuate nothing,” Emma replied. “I follow facts. I test hypotheses.”

“We learned that in chemistry,” Ryan put in. “Mrs. Holmes is always on about testing hypotheses.”

The Dean’s glare switched to Ryan. He shrugged. “I’m already dead,” he said.

Emma said, “Ryan, you’re the science guy. Why don’t you explain this part.”

“Uhm, all right, why not. A human body is really hard to get rid of. Big and stinky and full of bones. Sinking it in the lake would be the obvious solution, but what if it came back up?”

Or part of it. Or what if the police divers found it. The lake isn't very deep and the water is clear. Better to bury the body somewhere. Preferably somewhere remote, where no one will stumble over the grave by accident."

Emma smiled at him. "You are so clever! Anyway, I noticed something. It's a cardinal rule that Lakeside students are not to visit Demons Island. For safety, right? But I looked back, and that rule wasn't in the handbook until five years ago. After Laura Roscow supposedly drowned. Maybe there was some other reason for keeping people away from the island? Hey, fun fact: the name Demons Island has nothing to do with demons. It's a corruption of D'eon's Island, because the D'eon family once owned it. Still do, in fact. Oh, Sir, you're wife is a D'eon, isn't she? You married a local Acadian, right? That's very cool, though I wonder what your UEL friends up in Chester think of it."

The Dean had become silent. He glowered at both students from across the desk. Emma was unperturbed. Ryan looked from one to the other, perhaps amazed at how swiftly the accuser had become the accused.

"Well," Emma said, "I decided to row out to Demons Island, you know, to take a look around."

"I did the rowing," Ryan reminded her. "All of it."

"Well, I was steering, right? Anyway, turns out Demons Island is mostly bare rock. There's hardly any trees and the soil is really thin."

"And oh man, the deer flies!" Ryan put in. "Relentless!"

Emma said, "You had a hat."

"Until I gave it to you! Remember? After you promised to wear a strapless gown to the harvest dance?"

"Oh right. That was . . . really thoughtful of you. The flies were awful. Anyway, we figured out that if someone wanted to bury a body on Demons Island the only place would be the area of swampy ground on the far side. The soil there is all mucky, but much deeper. Trouble is, how could we find a grave? Especially one five years old. The whole place is covered in this really tall grass. What did you say it was called?"

"Reed canary grass," said Ryan. "Mr. Pritchard, the biology teacher, identified it for us."

Emma smiled at him. "Ryan had a way cool idea for finding the grave."

“I used my drone!” he exclaimed. “It takes live video in any direction and you can program it to fly on a grid pattern so it covers the whole area. The trick is to fly a little above the tallest vegetation and point the camera sideways so you can see gaps in the grass. It worked, too! Kinda.” He beamed.

Emma picked up the story. “We found three potential spots.” She pulled out her cell phone and flipped through the pictures. “This one is the most likely.” She turned the phone around so the glowering dean could see it.

“Definitely that one,” Ryan said. “See how the grass is shorter, but greener? And there’s other plants mixed in with the grass. Mr. Pritchard says that when a piece of ground is disturbed, weedy plants move in. And a decaying body releases a lot of nitrogen, which makes more chlorophyll, so the leaves are greener. I set my drone to emphasize green wavelengths.”

“We’ve learned so much working on this project,” Emma said.

“I think we should get some sort of course credit.” Ryan agreed.

The Dean leapt to his feet. “Get out!” he shouted, pointing at the door. “Get out of my office and never come back! You are both expelled, permanently and forever. You will leave the premises of Lakeside College within four hours or I will have security toss you out on your ears. I will not tolerate such impertinence from a pair of truant teenagers, do you understand me! Get out! Get out right now before I lose my temper completely! Watkins, if one word of these outrageous lies reach the press I will sue you for slander and character assassination until you regret the day you were born. Now get out, both of you, before I call the police.” He stood with his hands on his hips, as dark and roiling as a thundercloud.

Both students stood up, alarmed. “No dance for us,” Ryan muttered.

They moved quickly toward the door and away from the enraged Dean. Two serious-looking men were waiting outside. “Oh, Sir,” Emma said, pausing at the door. “I saved you the trouble of calling the police. This is Inspector Singh and Corporal Martin. I think they have some questions for you.” She nodded to the policemen as she and Ryan passed by.

“That was fun,” said Ryan, when they were safe in the empty corridor. “I never did like that man.”

Emma said, “It’s too bad the we had to call the police. It would have made a great story for the Journal.”

“Also we’re expelled. Permanently. So much for my fabulous career as a research scientist.”

Emma took off her glasses, rubbed them on a shirt sleeve. Her unspectacled face was open and balanced. “I don’t think we’re going to be expelled very long. So you can still take me to the dance.” She put her glasses back on. Her voice became sheepish. “Though there’s something you should know. I don’t own a strapless ball gown. Or any ball gown.”

Ryan grinned. He said, “Yeah, I knew that.”

