

PANIC

By Karen Lewis

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Printed online publication at
daileyswanpublishing.com

Written by Karen Lewis

Published by Dailey Swan Publishing, Inc

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Dawn streaked through the travel trailer. Birdsong chirped in the distance. Evelyn Fraser crouched in a corner. Fear clutched at her throat. This couldn't *really* be happening. It was the stuff of nightmares.

She'd looked forward to the trip for so long. They both had. Russell literally marked off the days until retirement. Now this.

She struggled to her feet, heart pounding, nausea rising. Made it into the bathroom in time to vomit.

A vehicle revved up nearby. A dog barked. Another day had begun. What was she going to do?

If only she were at home. Heaven knows it would still be bad enough, but nothing as terrifying as her current plight, in a strange country.

She splashed her face with water. Stared into the mirror: ash blond hair, green eyes, and a pale skin. Decided she felt worse than she looked.

It seemed like ages since they left the UK. Sold up everything for a life of travel. She remembered feeling a tremor of foreboding, as their plane landed in Toronto. *Had they done the right thing?*

She had willed herself not to worry. Russell always told her she fretted too much. Then the sheer exhilaration of being somewhere different soon eclipsed the concerns.

They bought a small travel trailer and a vehicle to haul it. Their plan was to travel across Canada, then down through the United States, and into Mexico. But they'd only made it as far as Vancouver...she tugged the curtain aside, gazed out at the mountains hunched on the horizon.

She was so dependent on Russell for everything. The panic attacks saw to that. They cut her off from having a social life too.

He was her “safe” person. She was okay as long as he was around. Avoided going anywhere—even to the shops—without him.

What was she going to do? Why didn’t he come back? What had happened? She felt frantic. Rocked in misery. Clawed at her arms.

After over twenty years of marriage, she couldn’t remember a time when Russell hadn’t been there. Or, she’d known exactly where he was, how to get in touch.

If only she had a telephone. Regretted most bitterly that they hadn’t bought a mobile one. They’d been meaning to...She dreaded going over to the office and asking to use theirs. Felt dizzy and trembled at the thought. Yet she had to call the police. He had been gone all night. He must have been in an accident.

She screamed inside. *Oh please Russell just come back.*

She didn’t even know how long she could stay here? Were they paid up for just a few nights, or a week? She never asked about those things. Russell looked after it all. If only she wasn’t so alone in the world. No family. No friends. If there was just *someone* she could call on for help. *I’m in a campground in Vancouver. Russell has disappeared. I don’t have any money. Please, please rescue me...*

A knock on the door cut in on her thoughts. “Russell...” She wrenched it open. Winced in disappointed. It was the man from the office.

“Are you leaving today?” he asked. “Or do you want to pay for another night.”

Blood pounded in her temples. Tears sprung to her eyes. “I...I don’t know,” she stammered. “I’m waiting for my husband to get back...”

He nodded. Moved away.

She summonsed up her courage. “I...I need to use a telephone.”

“There’s a pay phone by the entrance,” he said.

She rummaged through her purse for change. Threw a coat around her shoulders. Felt reluctant to leave the safety of the trailer.

Rain drizzled down from a sour faced sky. She felt disoriented and weak. Forced her shaky legs to walk.

The pay phone hung on a post beneath a gigantic totem pole. Its grotesque faces leered down at her, strange, alien, unsettling. A reminder that she was no longer in a land she knew or understood.

There was no Directory. *Oh God...*

She scanned the instructions on the phone. Tried to control her racing, ungrounded thoughts, her trembling hands. Rain dribbled down her neck. She didn't notice. Stuck in a few coins. Punched O. Asked to be connected to the Police Department.

"How long has your husband been missing?" The voice sounded distant, impatient. It was difficult to hear with all the traffic racing past. What a place to have a phone.

"Since yesterday afternoon."

"It has to be at least 48 hours to file a Missing Persons Report."

Evelyn started to protest, to explain, then realised she was talking to herself. The cop had hung up.

"Damn!" She ran a hand over her rain soaked hair. Water trickled down her face. She'd have to start the whole procedure over again. She had to find out if Russell had been in a road accident?

"I'll need the make of the vehicle and the license number." She'd been connected with a different cop this time. He sounded more helpful.

"I...I'm sorry I don't know." She felt so stupid. Inept. Had thought they could locate an accident through Russell's name. "We bought the vehicle in Toronto," she murmured, lamely.

“An Ontario license number. I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thank you.” She waited in an agony of torment. Russell must be in hospital, or heaven forbid—she suppressed a sob—the morgue. There was no other explanation for his disappearance. None. She braced herself for the very worst.

The cop returned. “No accidents reported during the last twenty four hours,” he said, “involving vehicles with Ontario plates.”

She felt relief yet total dismay at the same time. If Russell hadn’t been in a road accident, what had happened to him? In the name of God, where was he?

She hurried back to the trailer, curled up on the floor, and wept. What was she going to do?

Rain lashed against the windows in a fury. She’d have to pay for another night’s ground rent, but how? She only had around twenty dollars in her purse. That wouldn’t be enough. She started to rake through Russell’s clothes. Delved into the pockets. Sometimes he left money there, paper bills. But all she came up with was loose change, a few nickels and dimes. Oh Christ, what was she going to do?

She yanked open his dresser drawer, rummaged through the socks and hit pay dirt, a stack of British money, US bills and Traveller’s Cheques. Saved by the bell, she thought.

* * *

“When was the last time you saw your husband?” The detective had cropped black hair and dark eyes. He’d introduced himself as Neil Slater.

Through the window in his office, Evelyn could see mountains, shimmering through the haze of a sudden rain shower. She’d surprised herself by asking to see someone in authority,

when the counter staff failed to grasp the seriousness and unusual nature of Russell's disappearance. Fear and desperation must be emboldening, she decided.

"Tuesday afternoon," she said. "Around five o'clock." She could scarcely believe it had been that long. That this was really happening. The sense of unreality was overwhelming, the bizarre and terrifying suddenly crashing into the normal and familiar. She shivered. "He was going to the grocery store."

"Was there any trouble between you?"

She shook her head. "No. We were happy together." *Oh God, how I miss him*, she intoned silently. She felt as if she had lost a limb. "We've had our ups and downs, of course, like every other couple." She shrugged.

Slater nodded. "Do you know the make, model and license number of his vehicle?"

I do now, she thought. She handed him the document. She'd hunted through Russell's papers until she found it.

"Good. We'll get an APB out on this, immediately."

"What could have happened to him?" She suddenly blurted out, her eyes desperate. All her most valiant attempts at self control, in vain. "The grocery store is only four blocks from the campground."

She noticed how Slater avoided answering the unanswerable. "We'll do everything we can to find him," he said.

But whether dead or alive, she added silently--willing herself to face the facts--*was the million dollar question*. Russell would never have left *voluntarily*, and stayed away like this. If he hadn't been in a road accident--and it didn't seem that he had--he must be the victim of foul play. She shuddered. Felt perfectly wretched.

"You look as if you could use a cup of coffee." Slater left the office. Returned carrying a tray.

She gulped it down, gratefully. Remembered that she hadn't had anything to eat or drink all day.

"Try one of these." He offered her a donut. "Might as well have a sugar fix along with the caffeine." He smiled.

"Thank you." She wolfed it down. Amazed at how hungry she'd been, ravenous, really.

Slater stirred his coffee. "What line of work was Russell in?"

"A history professor. Edinburgh University, mostly."

"Any known enemies?"

She shook her head. "We've lived a very ordinary and...*sedate* life."

He took a sip of coffee. "Was Russell worried about anything lately? *Unduly*, I mean, any unusual stresses? Had anything out of the ordinary happened?"

"No. Everything was just as usual."

"How about addictions: alcohol, drugs, gambling or..." he hesitated slightly... "women?"

"None at all." She brushed the donut crumbs off her skirt. Drained her cup. "Russell is a *social* drinker. He never does anything to access. And he's *definitely* never been involved in any of the other...*vices* you mentioned." She looked directly into his eyes. "Ever."

"As far as you know."

"I *do* know," she protested. "I suffer from panic attack, Detective. Russell and I have been practically joined at the hip for more than two decades."

He looked thoughtful. "Could he have found this...*suffocating* do you suppose?"

"It wasn't a bowl of cherries for either one of us," she admitted, albeit defensively. "But life isn't exactly easy for anyone."

“But it’s not *everyone* whose husband has suddenly gone missing and under the oddest circumstances,” he shot back.

“Do you honestly think that Russell suddenly got so fed up with me that he ran off like that without a word?” She paused for breath, to slow down her racing heart. “I’m telling you, there was no trouble between us. We were enjoying our trip through Canada. We’d been looking forward to it for so long.”

“Try not to get upset, Ms. Fraser. I understand how difficult this must be for you.” The unexpected kindness in his voice brought tears to her eyes. It was all so strange and new to her here, the accents, the money, the sheer size of the country. She longed for the familiar. Yet had nothing to return to in the UK. They had sold their home. The thought terrified her. She tried to stand up, to escape. But dizziness sent her reeling against the desk. “I’ll have someone drive you back to the campground.” Slater guided her towards the door. “You need to look after yourself,” he said. “Try and get some rest.”

Impossible, she thought, *with my husband God knows where.*

* * *

The Canada Safeway, where Russell had been headed when he disappeared stood at the end of a strip mall. Evelyn showed his picture around, smooth unlined face, blue eyes, white hair. She’d had it enlarged and made into a Missing Person’s poster.

The clerk at Customer Service shook her head. “The police already showed me this,” she said. “Sorry, it doesn’t ring a bell.”

Evelyn knew she was merely duplicating police efforts. Still, she couldn’t just sit around and do nothing. Had to feel she was actively seeking Russell, no matter how futile her actions.

She was struck again by the incongruity of the situation. Only four blocks separated the store from the campground. How could he and his vehicle simply vanish in so short a distance?

She always hovered on the verge of panic when out alone, so kept close to the buildings for a sense of security. Gulls screeched overhead beneath a slaty banner of a sky. She had left a poster at all the stores enroute, from the pet shop to the delicatessen. No one remembered Russell.

The police had no luck finding his vehicle, either. Evelyn called them every day from the phone beneath the totem pole. "Are you sure your husband didn't know anyone here?" Slater asked. "Perhaps someone from his past?"

He suspects Russell was having an affair! Ran away with a girlfriend. The very idea was ridiculous. If he knew Russell the way she did, he'd understand why. Dull, by popular standards, Russell's idea of a good time was fishing or bird watching, and not the sort of birds, Slater had in mind.

A truck roared past, making it impossible to hear. She decided to invest in a mobile phone. She'd always fancied a Blackberry. "If Russell knew anyone here, he would have told me," she assured him.

* * *

Evelyn paced the length of the travel trailer, and back again. Hair wild. Eyes frantic. It had been almost a month since Russell disappeared. She had to face the facts. He must have met with foul play. He wasn't ever coming back.

Yet the thought of returning to the UK without him was unthinkable. Money, fortunately, was not so much of a concern. She had contacted their solicitor in Edinburgh and arranged for the transfer of funds to a Canadian bank. Still, she couldn't stay

on here indefinitely, drawing on capital that should be going towards a permanent home in the UK.

At times like these she wished she still smoked, something to do with her hands. Help calm her nerves. She plugged in the coffee pot. Stared out the window. Rain trickled down from a sky like treacle.

She punched in Slater's number on her Blackberry. Left a message on his voice mail. Drank two cups of coffee in quick succession. He returned her call an hour later.

"I wish I had some good news for you," he said. "But not a thing has turned up. Nothing. This is one of the most perplexing cases I've ever worked on."

"Detective Slater, Russell must be dead." Never had Evelyn felt so gloomy and utterly devoid of hope. "Someone must have carjacked and killed him. It's the only logical explanation."

She hung up before he had an opportunity to respond. She felt convinced the answer to Russell's disappearance lay in that short four blocks between the campground and Safeway Store. She decided to take one last crack at it before selling the travel trailer and returning to the UK.

The pet shop had a new shipment of parakeets. Lovely bright plumed birds that strutted round their cage and squawked.

Evelyn approached the man behind the counter. She showed him Russell's picture. He examined it closely. Nodded. "Yes, he came into the store shortly before I left on vacation."

She felt dizzy with shock and excitement. It was the first time anyone had recognised Russell. She'd almost been resigned to the fact that no one ever would. "What...when...I..." She realised she was spouting gibberish. Not making any sense. "He's been missing for almost a month," she finally managed to explain.

"Oh my God, I wonder..."

"What...what is it?"

“I...well he came into the store that day to have a look at the birds. I had a Mynah that caught his interest...”

“Yes,” she interjected, frantic with impatience. “Russell has always had a special interest in birds...”

“Well that’s just it. We got to talking about the Marbled Murrelet, a rare character in these parts, anywhere for that matter. I told him I’d sighted one recently near Rice Lake. He seemed intensely interested.”

Evelyn tried to quiet her racing heart. “So you think he may have gone there directly?”

“Well I wouldn’t be surprised.”

“How far is that from here?”

“About three miles. It’s near the Mount Seymour Demonstration Forest.”

She punched in Slater’s number. “There’s been a breakthrough,” she stammered. “Russell may have been headed to Rice Lake...”

* * *

“We’ve combed that entire area.” Slater sounded dejected. “Not a thing.”

“But there *has* to be.” Evelyn couldn’t bear the disappointment of seeming so close, only to have her hopes shattered.

“I’ll have a crew out again at first light,” he promised.

She’d have loved to go with them, to be on the spot. To be actively doing something. But realised she’d get in the way. This was unfamiliar and rough terrain. Instead she drank coffee. Paced the floor. Importuned any deity who might be listening to help them find Russell—safe and alive. Although how that could

be possible after all this time...yet even if it was the worst news possible, at least it would be closure of sorts.

Her Blackberry buzzed.

Slater.

She braced herself.

“We found Russell.”

“I...” Her heart hammered. She couldn’t think. Couldn’t speak. Prepared herself for the most terrible news of all...

“He’s going to be fine, Evelyn.”

* * *

“If they hadn’t found me when they did, I’d be a goner. I have your persistence to thank for that.” Russell looked weak, his face shrunken. Pale as the hospital bed linen. “I ran out of food a couple of days ago.”

“God, it’s just so good to see you.” Evelyn hugged him again, careful to avoid his fractured ribs.

He indicated his broken leg trussed up in a plaster. “I couldn’t walk more than a few steps with this.”

“It’s amazing good luck that you happened upon the cabin.”

“I’ll say. It was well stocked with canned food and drinks. It saved my bacon.” He sipped on a glass of water. “Detective Slater is contacting the owners on my behalf. I want to reimburse them right away.”

Evelyn nodded. “How did you injure yourself?”

He looked sheepish. “I climbed a bloody tree to get a better look at that bird, camera poised...”

“And lost your balance.” She shook her head. “It’s been the worst four weeks of my life.”

“I’m sorry, love. It was all my fault. I shouldn’t have gone hightailing it off like that, without first letting you know.”

How right you are, thought Evelyn. And if it hadn’t been for the man in the pet shop remembering about the Marbled Murrelet... “What kind of bird is it, anyway?” she asked.

Russell brightened visibly. “Well it’s a rare species, a small seabird from the North Pacific...”

Evelyn smiled, as he rambled on happily about the Murrelet. Her eyes strayed to the window. The North Shore Mountains hovered on the horizon, beneath a twilight sky full of apricot clouds.

___The End___