

sample chapter from

**THE MYSTERY OF THE MISSING
BAGPIPES**

by

Kathy Lynn Emerson
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CHAPTER ONE WELCOME TO PIPING CAMP

Maine, 1988

"I hate the sound of bagpipes!" I shouted. Nobody heard me. No one could. My dad was making too much noise tuning up. I covered my ears with my hands, staggered over to the picnic table, plopped down on the bench, and bent over until my head was no more than an inch from the rough board tabletop. My hair fell forward to cover my face but the screeching was as loud as ever. Nothing could block it out.

Bagpipes playing music can be stirring, but bagpipes tuning up sound like someone is trying to kill a cat—a big cat, one that's fighting for its life with every ounce of breath in its body and might just be winning. I glared at my father through scraggly clumps of thick brown hair.

He was standing on the shore of a small lake, erect as a palace guard. He was completely wrapped up in what he was doing, which was twisting his drones, the three long wooden pipes resting on his left shoulder. They each have two sections, and in order to tune them, he has to adjust the joints while blowing air through the mouthpiece into the bag under his left arm. No, not a dying cat, I decided—fingernails scraping across a chalkboard!

Abruptly Dad stopped playing. I took my hands away from my ears, but I kept on watching him. I wondered what it was that he and Mom were keeping from me. Somehow it was connected with coming here, to Maine, where Dad was going to attend a special bagpiping school. The school itself was a little odd, but if there was one thing I'd learned in all the years Dad had been playing, it was that once you're into piping, other pipers pop up everywhere. So do people who want to learn, and people who think of their dear old Scots grandmothers and start to bawl at the sound of skirling bagpipes.

Dad reached down to the lower end of the bag to detach the chanter, the section he fingers to produce a tune. His reed needs moistening, I thought, even before he stuck one end of the chanter into his mouth. I was about to make some witty comment like "Yuck!" or "Bleak!" when an eerie cry rose from the lake and echoed in the stillness.

That sound gave me the shivers. It made me realize how thickly forested the opposite shore was, and how isolated we were even in the campground, where trees and underbrush closed in each site on two sides. Our site was at the end of one of the dirt roads, so it had woods in back, too. I didn't like to think what wild creatures might be our close neighbors.

"It's just a loon," a voice said from behind me. I swung around to face the owner of that voice and she laughed. "Sorry. I didn't mean to startle you. I'm Shelly Blaine. Did you know that some people call loons the bagpipe bird?"

She looked older than I am—maybe fifteen to my eleven and two-thirds—and reminded me of an overweight golden retriever I once met. Both of them were big and friendly, with trusting brown eyes that looked out from under a fringe of hair. When she smiled I saw she had a gap between her front teeth. I read somewhere that's supposed to be sexy, but I don't believe it.

"I'm Kim Hanlon," I told her.

To my surprise she stuck out a hand for me to shake. As I scrambled up from the picnic table I managed to give my own a quick wipe on my cutoffs. It was streaked with dirt from helping Mom and Dad put up our rented camper. Shelly didn't seem to notice. She grabbed it, pumped it once, and let go.

Her palm was soft and fleshy, like the rest of her, and if she hadn't been the only person anywhere near my own age that I'd seen since reaching this wilderness, I'd probably have thought twice about taking up with her. Her friendliness to me was a surprise. Teenagers don't usually want to hang out with anyone younger.

I have too much imagination. Mom and Dad are always telling me that. Shelly Blaine's handshake made me think of Morgan Gerber's. Last year, when he was running for president of the sixth grade, he took to shaking everybody's hand, sometimes both hands at once, and his sister told me he put his mother's hand lotion on them every night to keep them soft. He got elected, but he was the worst class president we ever had, and I've been suspicious of pudgy palms ever since. I told myself I was being silly and was about to ask Shelly where she was from when the cry of the loon came again.

As if in answer, Dad filled his bag with air and squeezed, drowning out all conversation. A curious chipmunk dove for cover behind a bush, and I looked expectantly toward the dirt road that led to the other campsites. We hadn't camped out very often, but every time we had, the sound of the bagpipes had drawn small children to our site in droves. This time was different.

My father stood alone at the edge of the water, playing for the loon. In the shadow of a huge pine, he looked like some strange and wonderful creature with spikes growing out of his head.

The music wove a spell around us. Most people either love the sound of bagpipes, or hate it. I'm the only person I know who swings back and forth and feels equally miserable either way. For just a moment I forgot that I was in a "hate" phase. Then, remembering, I kicked viciously at a stone, sending it spinning toward the lake. Shelly stepped back in alarm.

I stooped to pick up a second stone. This time I hurled it overhand toward a low branch. I've got pretty good aim. I'm relief pitcher for the baseball team at school. I hit my mark and left a scar in the white birch bark.

At the same moment Dad blew a sour note. It echoed across the lake, just as the loon's cry had, toward twin peaks rising against a northern sky. He tuned the bass drone and began again. This time he marched as he played, although the ground was uneven down there by the water's edge. He launched into a tune he often played with his band. I didn't know its title. Bagpipes only have nine notes, so a lot of the songs sound alike.

Shelly nudged me. "Here come my parents," she shouted over the din. Two more campers with pipes emerged from the road.

As soon as my father spotted them he switched to "Scotland the Brave" and they joined in, playing it twice through before they stopped to introduce themselves. That tune I could recognize. I could hardly help it. Every pipe band plays "Scotland the Brave," and it must be on every tape or record a bagpiper ever made, too.

"I'm David Hanlon," Dad said when they stopped.

"Ted Blaine. My wife, Nell. We've got a little hometown band in Massachusetts."

My mom came out of the camper, where she'd been rearranging clothes and supplies for our three-week stay. She's little and pretty and I wished I looked like her. I especially liked the way her blonde hair caught the sun.

"Did you want to come here?" I asked Shelly as our parents were saying all the usual introductory things to each other.

She shrugged.

"Well, I didn't. What on earth is there to do in a place like this?"

"Want to find out? We could explore."

"What's to explore?" I figured I'd seen just about all of the campground when we drove in. It was built around two small, connecting lakes. The other one had a float for swimmers, but the water looked awfully cold to me. We were almost to the Canadian border.

"There's Old Ben's mansion," she said. "You know, the guy who owns this campground. He's supposed to have this really awesome place."

"Here?"

"Come on," she urged. "They won't even miss us."

She was right. Her parents and my dad were already deep in a discussion of bag seasoning. Mom, although she didn't play, knew all about maintenance, and was just as interested as the others. Part of me wanted to stay, but Shelly was pulling at my arm.

We slipped quietly away, following an uneven dirt road until we came to a corner where two trails branched off. Although we passed a dozen campsites along the way, we saw no one else of interest. They were all pipers, or pipers' spouses, or real little kids.

"I think the estate is this way." Shelly pointed to the dirt road that led sharply upward and disappeared around a bend at the top of the hill.

"Who is this Ben Orseck, anyway?" I asked. "I mean, I know he's the sponsor of the piping school and that this is his campground, but I can't figure out why anyone would want to close a place like this to paying tourists for three weeks, especially three weeks that include the Fourth of July. He must be losing a bundle."

Shelly just shrugged. "My mom's met him. She says he's a real character. An eccentric. He donates money to every pipe band in Maine."

"And he lives here all year round?" I knew there wasn't a town for miles.

"That's what Mom says."

We kept on along the path to the estate, in spite of signs that read PRIVATE PROPERTY: KEEP OUT.

"I wonder if there are any cute boys in the campground." Shelly said. "Lots of the pipers must have done what our parents did and brought their families."

"There's my brother," I told her.

"How old is he?"

"Eight. The same age as my sister. They're twins. They disappeared five minutes after the camper was set up, but they'll turn up again. They always do. They're tagalongs, and sometimes it's a real pain."

"I'm an only child."

"You're lucky."

"Oh, I don't know," Shelly mused. "An older brother might have been nice. To introduce me to all his good-looking friends."

I hoped she wasn't going to ask me any more about my family. There's one thing I don't tell people until I get to know them. It's not that I'm ashamed of it, but you can never tell how someone's going to react to the news that you're a cop's kid. I learned that the hard way on my first day in the fourth grade. A girl I'd never seen before came up to me at recess and asked me if Officer Hanlon was my father. Like a dummy, I said yes. She gave me a shove that landed me in the biggest mud puddle in the schoolyard and said, "That's for my Uncle George!" I found out later that Dad had arrested him the day before.

We had reached the gate that led to Ben Orseck's estate. A high brick wall stretched in both directions as far as I could see. The iron gates themselves were set back a few feet and there was a little curved section of wall, like a sentry post, on either side. There was no one standing guard, and the gates were not locked, but I had a strong feeling that they usually were.

I stopped. Being the kid of a detective in the New York City Police Department means I'm law-abiding, most of the time. "Do you suppose we should go in?"

"The piping classes are going to be at the house, right?"

I nodded. "Still, there *are* 'No Trespassing' signs. Maybe he doesn't want anyone else."

"Then this is too good a chance to miss."

She stepped lightly forward and opened the gate. No alarms sounded. Growing bolder, she kept walking.

I was right behind her. Detectives' kids tend to be curious, too. Together we made our way up the long, winding driveway. It was rough going, and trees grew close to the edge on both sides, but we kept on until the house came into view. That stopped us both in our tracks.

The building was low and sprawling. I wondered how long it had taken to truck in all those red bricks. The place was huge. "How rich is this guy?" I asked. Eccentric might explain organizing a piping college in his own backyard, but a setup like this one took big bucks.

"He must be a millionaire, the way people talk about him. He was in computers and video games until he retired."

That made sense. Mom is the data processing coordinator for a small private college, so I know what a money-maker computers are.

Six chimneys rose from the gray tiled roof. Facing us was a similarly roofed portico that covered the main entrance to the building. There were windows everywhere, some of them with insets of stained glass. The house and grounds made a beautiful picture, but I was uncomfortable. It wasn't just that we were trespassing. An unpleasant stillness hung over the place. Nowhere was there any sign of life.

"You don't suppose it's haunted, do you?" I whispered.

"Of course not," Shelly said.

"Then where is everyone?"

"Probably down at the campground." Shelly went right up to the house and peeked through a window. "Probably Ben's talking to our parents. You know: 'Welcome to piping camp, boys and girls. Swimming at ten and arts and crafts at eleven.'"

I grinned, but I felt uneasy. "Sure is isolated."

Shelly was still trying to see into the house, but most of the curtains were drawn. I wished she wouldn't. This was the kind of place that usually had burglar alarms, and I could see her setting them off. She even tried one of the windows, but it was locked.

"I guess he doesn't have to worry about neighbors," I said, "complaining about the noise."

"Do they where you live?"

"They used to. We have an apartment in Manhattan. Now, when Dad wants to practice, he goes into the walk-in closet in my parents' bedroom and closes the door. We can still hear him, but the neighbors can't.

Shelly tried a door, but it was locked, too.

"Some place," I said. There was a wide expanse of lawn before the woods closed in again. On our left was a wooden fence and Shelly veered toward it across the closely mowed grass. A gate stood open, so of course we went through. We came out on the edge of a cliff. A steep flight of wooden stairs led to the lakefront below. I glanced back at the house.

"This must look like a fort from out on the water."

"You want to go down? There's a dock."

"I don't think so. Look."

On the beach below, which had been as deserted as the rest of the grounds when we first saw it, there were now two Dobermans.

"Guard dogs!" Shelly paled. "I don't like dogs."

I love both dogs and cats, but I also know that trained guard dogs are dangerous, and these black Dobermans were good-sized. I didn't want to run into them up close, either.

"Let's go," I whispered, but it was already too late.

The Dobermans looked up. A split second later they were bounding toward the foot of the stairs. We didn't wait. In a panic, we both turned and ran back toward the driveway. That was the first mistake. The second was that neither of us stopped to close the gate.

"Shelly, wait!"

I could feel the blood pounding in my ears as I raced after her. My heart beat faster and faster. My breath came in short gulps, but even as I ran, my brain started to work again. I knew running was no good. There was no way we could reach the house ahead of the dogs, and even if we could, we wouldn't be able to get inside. We had to stop running and stand very still, with our arms tight against our sides. If we did, the dogs might just guard us instead of attacking.

"Shelly, stop!" I yelled.

She had just reached the flagstone-paved dooryard. She heard me and looked back, and as she did, she tripped. I saw her lose her balance and start to fall, but I was too far behind to catch her. Shelly went down, twisting her foot beneath her, with a sharp cry of pain and fear.

I tried to help her up, but it was no use. She was too heavy for me and the dogs were almost upon us. As they reached the edge of the dooryard, I let go of her and froze. Shelly threw her arms in front of her face and screamed.