

Outside the Law

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JULIA NOUSSAIR & MARKO PIPPURINEN

IN

OUTSIDE THE LAW

WRITTEN BY **THOMAS LIUS**

PROLOGUE

PIPPURINEN STRIKES BACK

It was a sunny, frigid February day, and Marko Pippurinen had climbed up into a tall pine tree.

From twenty meters up, a beautiful forest vista spread out before him, disappearing on the horizon on the open ice of Lake Höytiäinen at the north end of Kontiolahti Province in eastern Finland. The limbs of the trees hung forlornly under a heavy glaze of hoar frost.

However, Pippurinen wasn't perched in the tree with a safety harness and utility pole climbing boots for the impressive landscape. He was there under retainer as a private investigator for the Kontiolahti environmental protection authorities gathering evidence of violations of environmental regulations.

Because there was no police service in Finland that specialized in investigating and exposing environmental crimes, the risk of a professional getting caught pulling off a job was relatively slim. Processing cases took a long time, and it was difficult to convict suspects. Only about one-third of environmental offenses that came to the attention of the police were ever solved.

With an eye to rectifying these grievances, Marko Pippurinen had been tasked with delivering a hefty stack of watertight evidence to his employer to help the police and prosecutors in their work.

Marko squeezed a pair of binoculars coated in thick rubber in hands protected by woolen half-finger gloves.

"Well now, what do we have here..." Marko murmured, shivering from the cold, as he peered through his binoculars at a pickup truck creeping along the narrow forest road. His stocking cap was thick with hoar frost, as was the scruffy hair protruding from underneath his cap, and the ample beard on his face. Sitting in his harness at the snowy top of the pine tree, Pippurinen looked like Santa Claus fallen from his sleigh, with the

only difference being that Saint Nicholas was less frequently seen with a flask full of cut brandy sticking out of his breast pocket.

He focused the binoculars on the man walking next to the Mitsubishi, which was outfitted with a snowplow. Olli-Pekka Ojala, a veritable bear of a man, ran a property maintenance company in Kontiolahti along with his wife Krista. As a side business the couple sold dumping services to building and demolition subcontractors.

The giant was lumbering along in a hunting getup as the truck crawled slowly through the snow. Suddenly he slapped his palm against the side of the truck and yelled something to the driver. The brakes, stiffened with cold, squealed as the vehicle came to a stop and stood growling at an idle.

A sedate looking forty-something woman climbed out of the Mitsubishi wearing a snowsuit a couple of sizes too large. She pushed the fur cap that had slid over her eyes to the back of her head and looked around nervously. Krista Ojala was not at home in the heart of the winter forest.

Olli-Pekka unfastened the cords of the tarp that had been stretched over the bed of the truck with forceful motions.

“That’s one big boy,” Marko said with a laugh as he watched the behemoth work. The fleshy, yet stout, face was frozen in a hard expression: thick black eyebrows angled sharply over cold blue eyes, and the grooves in his face were deep, like a mass of machete slashes. Ojala’s upper lip was distended into a half ball by a hefty wad of chewing tobacco, and he was constantly spitting all around him the goo it excreted.

The Mitsubishi was parked next to a pit that was serving as a DIY landfill. The bed of the truck was full of miscellaneous building and demolition waste from wood products to insulation batts and PVC. Whoever hired the couple to hide their problem waste in the forest was saving a pretty penny on landfill fees and refuse taxes. During the economic recession, the threshold for dumping activities had been lowered, and illegal dumping sites had started to pop up with increasing frequency all over the country. The Ojals alone had several similar waste stashes at various spots around the forests in the province.

Pippurinen shoved the binoculars into the thigh pocket of his pants and unzipped his winter coat. Under the warm lining of the coat rested a digital camera hanging from a carrying strap. He removed the lens cap, but the cold plastic disc slipped from his numb fingers and fell to the base of the tree. Marko didn't get hung up on worrying about a little lost property. He just hoped the cold weather hadn't sucked all the life out of the camera's batteries.

An image of the married couple bustling about in the middle of the forest appeared on the LCD display. Pippurinen operated the camera with his stiff fingers, zooming in for a tight close-up of the pair.

"Say 'Fuck the trash tax!'"

Click.

Pippurinen doubted Olli-Pekka and Krista's wedding picture had turned out so well.

"That's it for you."

The private investigator lifted his gaze from the camera display and grinned the entire width of his frost-reddened face. *Marko Pippurinen takes care of business.*

Ojala didn't waste any time emptying the pickup, and each stage of the work was recorded on the memory card of Marko's camera. Krista finished up the job by throwing a few shovel-fulls of snow on the trash. The Ojala's didn't bother to cover their tracks very thoroughly. The changing of the seasons would do it more effectively for them.

"Let's go," Olli-Pekka said to his wife, opening the driver's side door to climb in.

Krista tossed the shovel toward the bed, but it hit the side of the truck. The shovel bounced into a snow drift.

"Shit," she groaned and waded after the shovel.

Olli-Pekka slammed his fist against the roof of the truck. "Damn it, watch the paint! This truck is brand new."

Following the situation from his pine tree, Pippurinen chuckled maliciously into his snowy beard.

"Morons..."

The snow suited Krista picked up the shovel, which had sunk deep in the drift, and then bent down to inspect the scrape that had appeared in the side of the truck. “You can’t even tell,” she huffed. The scratch was small, but Krista knew her husband was going to raise Cain over it.

“Did it take off any paint?” the head of the Ojala household yelled irritably, rubbing his face. “Just tell me. It took off the paint.”

Krista didn’t reply. Olli-Pekka craned his neck over the truck and saw his wife frozen in place.

The smile on Marko Pippurinen’s face also showed signs of stiffening.

Marko examined the woman frozen in the display of his camera. She seemed to be staring right back at him.

“Come look...” Krista Ojala said in an uncertain, almost whispered voice.

“You’re paying if we have to get it pounded out,” Olli-Pekka grouched as he tramped over to his crouching wife. Krista ignored her husband’s complaining, just keeping her eyes glued to something in the distance.

“Look over there,” she said, peering into the forest and pointing to a pine tree rising out of the snow a few dozen meters away.

“Bugger,” Marko Pippurinen groaned, hanging in the tree. Mrs. Ojala, in perfect focus in the camera’s display, was pointing straight at him. Suddenly there were three morons.

“Where?” Olli-Pekka demanded indignantly as he stroked the barely visible dent in the side of his truck.

“There’s someone there.”

Suddenly alert, Ojala turned in the direction his wife was indicating. “Where?”

“There, in the pine tree,” Krista whispered. “Almost at the top.”

Olli-Pekka had to squint to make out the human figure concealed by the snow covered branches.

“You’re right. Shit.”

“Flippin’ heck,” Pippurinen cursed. There was no way he would have time now to get himself unhooked from the trunk of the tree and get to the ground. He would have to stay put and see how the situation developed. Maybe the Ojalas would be frightened away by the eye witness and decide to flee the crime scene.

“DOWN FROM THERE, GODDAMN IT!” the stout-limbed man bellowed, setting off striding determinedly toward Pippurinen’s hiding place. Krista trotted after.

Well, so much for that, Pippurinen thought as he weighed his limited options.

“Hey!” Olli-Pekka’s roar felt like it shook the tree’s branches. “You up there!”

Now he was standing at the base of the tree staring up. “HEY!”

“Ahoy there!” Marko yelled back.

“Come down!” Olli-Pekka ordered. “Come down and we’ll talk!”

Ojala didn’t get any answer.

“Is it a cop?” asked Kristina, who had run up next to her husband.

“Shit,” Ojala said with a snort.

“Well, what is it?” Krista hissed. “A bird watcher?”

“No...” Olli-Pekka shook his head. “Maybe some damn eco-hippie.”

Krista ran to the other side of the tree and tried to get a better view of the skulking Pippurinen. Something glimmered in the snow at the base of the tree. Krista bent over and retrieved the lens cap from the snow.

“Olli,” Krista said, showing her find to her husband. “He photographed us.”

“A journalist hack,” Olli-Pekka muttered, scratching his brow and weighing what to do. They had to shut this spy up one way or another. If he was a reporter, then lowbrow tactics like intimidation wouldn’t work.

“Throw your camera down here!” Ojala yelled. “I’ll leave some dough here in the snow for you to buy a new one and a little extra for your trouble. You’ll have better luck on a story at the biathlon meet just down the road.

I’m running out of options, Marko thought nervously. *I’ll have to try one last time to put one over on this guy.*

“Incoming!” a warning yell came from the top of the tree.

Ojala jumped back a few steps. The falling digital camera smashed into the branches as it fell, thudding to the ground at Olli-Pekka's feet as spare parts. A light dusting of powder floated from the tree over Ojala.

"Leave enough so I can get a couple of pints at the local!" Marko yelled down from the tree.

Olli-Pekka turned the crushed camera over in his hands and opened the memory card door. Krista shot a questioning glance at her husband and got a shake of his head in response.

Aw hell. Waiting in the tree, Pippurinen knew his gamble had gone south.

"Should we stay and wait?" Krista asked. "He'll have to come down sometime. The weather called for snow showers tonight..."

Olli-Pekka turned angrily on his heels and marched brusksly toward the truck. Marko put the binoculars to his eyes and watched Ojala's movements worriedly.

"Damn," Pippurinen said, his voice strained—Ojala had just pulled a chainsaw out from behind the seats of the Mitsubishi.

Marko glanced around as if hoping to find a previously unnoticed escape route or a weapon hanging from a branch. Neither was visible.

Ojala returned to the base of the pine tree and started the chainsaw with one forceful yank on the pull cord.

Pippurinen felt the saw bite into the tree and tightened his bear hug grip on the trunk.

Olli-Pekka sawed a notch in the side of the tree and then sauntered to the other side of the tree to continue his lumberjacking. The chainsaw hanging in his hand chugged away, belching smoke that stank of burning motor oil.

"Hey! Cut it out!" Marko screamed in panic from within the snowy branches. "STOP!"

The man laboring at the base of the tree didn't hear the shouts over the loud snarling of the saw.

“You can have the pictures!” Pippurinen brayed in increasingly desperate straits. “Did you hear me?”

Ojala gritted his teeth and offered the tree for his voracious saw to devour. Without any change in expression he took a blasting spray of sawdust to the face.

Shivering high up in the tree, Pippurinen could smell the odor of pitch and chain oil. “Not a good day,” he groaned as he unlatched his safety harness.

Marko wrapped his arms over a branch curving above him and kicked his climbing spikes free of the trunk. The tree began to creak and sway. He braced his feet at the base of a branch and turned in the direction the tree was falling. “Now comes the impact.”

After lowering the chainsaw to the ground, Olli-Pekka Ojala let out a bestial roar and pressed with all his might against the tree.

And then it went.

The tree broke with a sharp crack and began to lean, quickly picking up speed.

Hanging from two branches, Marko stared ahead and yelled with all the strength of his lungs.

The top of the tree slammed into the branches of the adjacent trees. Snow and twigs flew at Pippurinen’s mouth as he dove toward the earth. He knew he would break most of the bones in his body if he hit the ground along with the trunk. The only possibility was to get off the train before the last station, and that wasn’t going to be an easy trick either.

The base of the tree jumped free from the ground, lending the falling trunk more speed.

Marko gathered all his strength and pushed away from the branches toward the unknown.

The tree crashed to the ground. Like an enormous whip the impacting top of the tree ejected a thick cloud of snow into the air.

Pippurinen thudded onto a gently downward sloping hillside and rolled out of control through the deep snow.

Total silence fell over the wintry forest. The light of the sun shining in the cloudless sky glittered on the snow and the trees, which looked like they were covered in a thick coating of sugar.

“Is he dead?” Krista asked in hushed tones, peering into the white haze hanging over the slope.

Olli-Pekka shrugged his shoulders and lowered the chainsaw to his feet. “Let’s get that memory card.”

“You get it,” Krista said.

Ojala laughed gruffly and waded off toward the tree resting in the snow.

“Jesus,” Marko panted, stupefied, and sat up. He was covered all over in snow, and his hair, now revealed from beneath his stocking cap, stuck out in every direction. He sported a cut on his forehead from which brilliant red blood ran down along his nose.

The hillside down which Marko had rolled offered sufficiently cover in the direction of the Ojalas. He unfastened the spikes that were lashed to his winter boots and threw them over his shoulder.

“Jesus,” Marko repeated, still short of breath, and felt his extremities. Both of his legs had similarly-sized, large bruises, but the bones weren’t broken. “Jesus.”

Olli-Pekka loped around the tree, a look of intense concentration on his face. He crouched down next to the trunk and peered under it. There was no sign of the man who had been hanging from the top of the tree. *Did he grow fucking wings?* Ojala looked around, enraged. *How on earth could a simple dumping job have turned into such a train wreck?*

Pippurinen stood up, unzipped the inside pocket of his coat and extracted the memory card with shaking fingers. He studied the piece of plastic and found that it had made it through the crash in one piece. Marko slid the card back in his pocket and laughing, raised his middle finger in the direction of the Ojalas. *I’m a fucking Jedi Master!*

At the same moment the silhouette of a large man appeared at the top of the slope. Pippurinen felt his insides contract. The defiantly projecting middle finger lost its erect stance and sunk slackly back into the protection of its fist.

Standing with powder snow whipping around him in the wind, the blocky Olli-Pekka Ojala was a dead ringer for the psycho killer Jason on the poster for the latest *Friday the 13th* movie.

Marko dashed down the slope and set off running toward the forest road where he had left his car parked a couple of kilometers away.

Ojala watched Pippurinen run for his life. As a local outdoorsman he knew the area's forests like the back of his hand and knew exactly where the road going down the hillside led. The fleeing man would either charge straight into a dead end or end up at a crossroads where it would be easy to grab him.

Olli-Pekka spewed his wad of tobacco out onto the ground and wiped the excrement colored brown bits out of his teeth.

The whole time Krista had been waiting next to the tree stump. "Well?"

"That's one tough dude," Ojala laughed mirthlessly as he strode past.

He threw the chainsaw into the bed of the pickup and climbed behind the wheel. The vehicle lurched into motion before Krista had really managed to get in.

Out of breath, Marko Pippurinen dashed along the road cutting through the idyllic landscape. Every step brought the taste of blood to his mouth. Every step made him regret his decision to become a private investigator.

Was my gig at Moilanen's garage really so dull? Marko had had flexible hours and a regular paycheck. People valued his work, and after getting back out of the gaming circuit onto dry land, he hadn't needed to be afraid of his debts. Everything had been going swimmingly.

Then Pippurinen had gotten mixed up in the big boys' games and been an unwilling party to saving the world. Buoyed by that success, he had given up messing around with cars and set himself up a private detective.

I thought I was so cool playing at Matt Houston, Marko thought, kicking himself. *You bloody tool, was this what you wanted? Spying on litterbugs, falling out of trees, and running for your life from the Kontiolahti chainsaw killer in the middle of, well, Kontiolahti.*

Marko felt like his lungs were about to burst. He stopped and spat out the phlegm rising from his throat as he gasped for breath.

“For Christ’s sake...” Marko panted, his breath wheezing. He looked back, but couldn’t see Ojala anywhere. Before him loomed the bend in the road on the other side of which Pippurinen had left his faithful Lada.

Marko wiped his nose and set off jogging toward the last leg. The red back of the station wagon slowly came into view behind the trees. “Yes!”

Ojala’s Mitsubishi shot onto the road out of nowhere.

Pippurinen slid in shock and collapsed on his well-padded posterior.

Engine roaring, the pickup truck smashed its snowplow into the side of the aged Lada. Metal screeched and the side windows exploded in a shower of glass shards.

Marko climbed back to his feet with some effort and started jogging back the way he had come.

The Mitsubishi backed up, tires spraying snow. Ojala spun the wheel and turned the machine, screaming like a demon, toward the escaping Pippurinen. All Pippurinen could hear was his own heavy breathing.

Ojala pumped the gas pedal violently. The four-wheel drive vehicle swerved back and forth on the road, but charged toward the running man with determination.

The snowplow blasted snow high into the air. The truck was invisible behind the dense hail of snow; it looked like Marko was being chased by a horizontal avalanche.

The road wound along the bank of the Venejoki River. Pippurinen glanced down the bank that led to the river and then dove headfirst over the berm of snow along the side of the road. The bank was steeper than he had thought. He spun around violently and seized the trunk of a birch tree growing at the edge of the ice.

“Not there!” Krista screamed hysterically at her husband, who, lost in the thrill of the chase, was spinning the wheel like a maniac.

Olli-Pekka rammed the gas pedal to the floor and the Mitsubishi shot over the low snow bank.

Marko pulled himself behind the tree just as the four-wheel drive smashed down next to him.

Ojala hit the brakes, but couldn't stop the front-heavy vehicle from sliding into the river.

The snowplow broke through the layer of ice on the shore. The prow of the Mitsubishi sunk into the ice and the rear wheels rose into the air.

Marko peeked from behind the tree and saw the Ojalas trying to open the doors. The vehicle wasn't going to sink any farther, but there wouldn't be any way to get it out without a tow truck.

"Hey!" Olli-Pekka yelled through the back window at Pippurinen, who was standing shakily next to the birch tree.

Marko took a couple of calm steps toward the icebound truck and looked Olli-Pekka straight in the eyes as he carried on behind the glass.

Marko's face was covered with sweat, ice crystals, and the blood that had run from his forehead. Frozen spit and snot sparkled in his beard. Despite all this, Ojala had never in his life seen such a sincerely impudent grin on any prankster's face. He stopped the racket he was making and stared, deflated, at the man standing on the bank. **Put this guy in a t-shirt and shorts, and he'd just be an overweight beach bum.**

"Who the hell are you?" Ojala groaned.

The answer could be read in the man's self-satisfied smirk.

I'm a fucking Jedi Master!