

CABIN FEVER

A SEAMUS MCCREE NOVEL

James M. Jackson



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Second Edition

Trade Paperback Edition: April 2017

Cover Design by Karen Phillips

Wolf's Echo Press

PO Box 54

Amasa, MI 49903

www.WolfsEchoPress.com

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ISBN-13 Trade Paperback:

978-1-943166-08-4

ISBN-13 e-book:

978-1-943166-09-1

Library of Congress Control Number:

2017902392

Printed in the United States of America

10987654

DEDICATION

For three of the greatest animal friends I've ever had:

Orestes (1994-2008)

Electra (1994-2012)

Morgan le Fay (2000-2013)

ONE

FACING NORTH INTO A BRISK wind, I searched for signs of the aurora borealis but spotted only a front forming in the distance. *It's probably nothing.* The skies above were so clear the Milky Way seemed almost within reach. I never worried about getting lost on nights like this. As long as stars were shining, the reflective snow made it easy to follow my old tracks home.

I checked the northern Michigan sky again. *The stars are bright—stop making excuses, Seamus, and get crackin'.* With my breath crystalizing around me, turning my beard and mustache white, I strapped on snowshoes and began my trek, the snow squeaking in protest with each step.

I was six miles into an eight-mile loop when I exited the shelter of a cedar swamp. The evergreens had been holding much of the snow in their branches, making travel relatively easy. Deep in thought, I had paid only passing attention as snow-laden clouds from the north brought with them a howling February snowstorm that threatened to erase any trace of my tracks.

That was a stupid mistake for someone living all alone, miles from his nearest neighbor.

To the snare drum rattling of hardwood treetops, I climbed the rise from the frozen swamp to the head of the lake following faint indentations. At first, the trail headed the way I expected, but soon it veered off and I realized the tracks had drifted in. *No problem, I'll cut straight up the hill to the lake.* I pushed through the brush border at the lake's edge and met a fierce blast that tore my breath away. A thousand hypodermic snow needles jabbed my exposed face. I ducked my head into my parka, pulled ski goggles from my knapsack, and fastened them over my mink hat.

I could take the safer approach: go back down the hill and partially retrace my sheltered steps to a road that would eventually lead me home. Or I could move forward and strike directly over the lake toward my property. The wind on the lake would be terrible without cover. The wind also meant there would be less snow, and what there was would be hard-

packed, allowing better footing. Walking up the middle of the lake would lop off considerable distance and time. Not wanting to retreat, I rationalized that if conditions worsened, I could cut over to the shoreline and follow it home.

I turned to consult Abigail, remembering in a flush of regret that she'd been gone for a month. To the wind I muttered, "Mad wolves and Irishmen go out in the dark winter storm."

Realizing I needed to stop channeling Noël Coward and get with the program, I strode onto the lake. After ten labored steps, I turned around to block the wind and wipe the snow from my goggles. The shore, a scant twenty-five feet away, was almost invisible. I could picture the headline in the *Iron County Reporter*: "Snowmobiler Finds 'Tourist' Frozen on Shank Lake." I retreated to the shoreline and followed it around toward my place.

An hour later, I located the gaps in the wild cherry bushes marking the start of the path leading past my guest cabin and up to my house. Sections of my dismantled dock stacked next to the path for winter served momentarily as a windbreak while I gathered my strength. I stuffed my mittens between my legs and fished a Petzl headlamp from my knapsack. Flipping the red filter down so I wouldn't lose night vision, I fastened it around my head. Almost home.

Halfway to the cabin, I entered a group of hemlocks blocking the wind. Not paying enough attention as I left the trees' shelter, the wind whipped a maple branch across my nose. Jerking away from the sting, I staggered a step into the unpacked snow and buried my left leg up to my crotch in powder. I threw both arms forward to cushion my fall, bucking as my sleeves filled with snow. It took me two tries to regain my balance. If coyotes were watching, they would howl for hours at my bipedal comedy. I wiped the snow from my nose with bare fingers, felt a dribble of warmth, and licked away the salty blood.

The guest cabin was rustic: no electricity, no plumbing. I periodically shoveled the stoop to allow access to the bookshelves my son and I had built years ago when it was the only building on the property. I dithered at stopping to get something new to read—I was almost through a Rex Stout collection—or getting to the main house to take care of my nose. The dithering itself was a sign I was overtired and not thinking clearly.

An arc of smoothed snow on the stoop formed a single angel wing.

Someone had recently opened the door to the screened porch. Squatting down, I flipped up the headlamp's red filter and spotted prints of bare feet.

Now I knew I was going nuts. Occasionally holding conversations with a disappeared Abigail was one thing, but phantom footprints meant my imagination was reaching a new level of desperation. *Get a grip, Seamus. No one walks around barefoot in this weather.* At the thought, my arms reminded me they were freezing from my nosedive into the snow. My teeth started chattering.

I knelt to inspect the tracks: all faced forward; no departures. Must be guys from one of the nearby camps playing a trick. Peering into the swirling snow, the track of partially filled footprints disappeared down the driveway.

A frisson of disquiet struck me. Although only sixty-five yards away, the house and garage were invisible with their lights off. What if it wasn't a joke? What if someone found this cabin and took refuge? I yanked open the screen door and tromped in, ignoring the scrape of snowshoe claws on the porch floor. I peered in the glass door to the cabin proper. No one had lit the fire preset in the wood stove.

A shiver running from my toes to the top of my head reminded me I needed warmth. A book could wait for morning. Turning from the door, I caught a flash of two bare legs dangling below the chair hammock attached to a porch rafter. I laughed so hard my sides ached and my lungs hurt from the frozen air.

In a place where winter lasts half the year, jokes and jokers get odd. The jerks must have stepped a blow-up doll onto my porch to make the footprints and posed it in the swinging chair. They had concealed their tracks well. In this dark, I couldn't figure out how they did it, but I'd find the evidence in daylight.

Fine. Like pink flamingos mysteriously congregating in front lawns of townies about to return from vacation, this babe was definitely going to show up in someone's sauna in the near future. *Might as well drag it to the house so it'll be close at hand for future revenge.* I grabbed the plastic legs to haul the thing from the chair.

The legs were real.

Two

HER BREATHING WAS SHALLOW AND slow. Her breath warm and odorless. Her pulse erratic. I moved her to the house using a fireman's carry. It felt about the same as lugging a couple of fifty-pound bags of sunflower seed to the basement so I could feed the birds all winter. After shucking my snowshoes, I deposited her in the tub and ran a tepid bath to defrost her.

First thing I thought of was drugs. Her body was athlete-thin. Her hands and feet were callused. She sported fresh scrapes on the bottom of her left heel, probably from walking barefoot. A chipped fingernail on her right hand added to my impression that her work was physical. A recovering hickey on her neck showed she had recently spent time with someone. Most disconcerting, fresh rope burns on her wrists and ankles had left them raw. I had never been interested in bondage games and these had to have hurt. No needle tracks.

Her cropped hair looked as though she'd run a beard trimmer over her scalp. Or maybe she had shaved her head and let it grow a few weeks. She had three holes in each ear, but no earrings. I found no other punctures, but she had a rose tattooed above her left breast and a Celtic braid on her right ankle. She was not wearing contacts.

I replaced cooled water with hot to return the bath to room temperature. After forty-five minutes her skin tone changed from milky white to mottled pink. I shifted her weight to check her pulse again and her eyes fluttered to consciousness. She jerked away from my hovering hand, cracking her head against the faucet. "Ouch." She closed her eyes and shook her head several times as though trying to shake out cobwebs. "Who . . . the fuck . . . are you?" Her voice rose. "Where the hell . . . am I?"

"I'm Seamus McCree." I slowly and clearly enunciated the "Shay-mus." Most people haven't heard the name and, if I say it too fast, they usually ask me to repeat it. "And you're . . .?" I released her shoulders. She slipped into the water, caught herself, and raised her body on extended arms. Her face took on a quizzical expression. She looked at herself in the tub, then at the cathedral ceiling, and finally pinned me to the wall with her glare.

“I . . . don’t remember . . . shit. Roofie? Why’s this . . . bath so . . . damn cold?” She pointed to my outerwear left strewn on the bathroom floor. “Where are mine?”

She tried and failed to get out of the tub. “Too tired . . . to move. Cold.”

“You were frostbitten,” I said. “Doesn’t look too bad. Only your fingers and toes appear chapped. The rest of you . . .” I realized I was about to say “looks pretty good,” which she could easily take the wrong way. “The rest of you was preternaturally white. We can make the bath a little warmer, but not much or it will be really painful—at least that’s what I remember from Boy Scouts. You don’t remember anything?”

She closed her eyes and furrowed her brow. She was either concentrating intensely or putting on a great act. “No frostbite. I . . . was really . . . hot.” In apparent frustration, she slapped the water, spraying me and the floor. “Where . . . am I?”

Hot made sense. People in the last stages of hypothermia sometimes think they’re really hot and strip off their clothes. “You’re at my camp on Shank Lake.” No glimmer of recognition in her eyes. “It’s in the northeast corner of Iron County.”

Her eyes briefly widened. “Wisconsin?”

“The Upper Peninsula of Michigan.”

“You don’t sound like a Yooper.”

“I wasn’t born in the U.P. I found you on the screened porch of my guest cabin. I’ve been thawing you ever since. You still haven’t told me your name.”

“Want to . . . call the cops.”

“I wish we could,” I said, using what I hoped was a nonthreatening voice. “Problem is there’s no cell phone coverage. Let me get you some clothes.”

“I’m tired.” She released a long sigh that appeared to back up her claim. “Need sleep . . . alone.”

After lifting her out of the tub and holding her steady while she towed off, I threw a ratty bathrobe around her. On my six feet two inches, the bathrobe nearly touched the ground; on her slight frame, the robe hung like an Elizabethan gown, fanning out on the floor around her. I led her to the main bedroom, which was next to the bathroom, and pulled back the down comforter. “I can put on fresh sheets if you want.” She waved away the offer and crawled into bed still wearing the bathrobe. I tucked the

comforter under her chin. From the bureau I pulled a pair of flannel pants with a tie string and a T-shirt advertising the Nature Conservancy's Pine Butte Guest Ranch. "These are way too large, but it's the best I can do."

"Leave them." She pointed to the chair. "My head hurts." She twisted her head back and forth. "Not a hangover. Flu or something. You got pain meds?"

I brought two Advils and a large glass of water. "It would be good if you drink it all. I think you get dehydrated with frostbite."

She downed the tablets and several slugs of water. "Maybe later." She placed the half-emptied glass on the nightstand. Her eyes narrowed. "How is it you're the only person in a thousand miles who uses 'preternaturally' in a sentence, but's too dumb to check my ID to find out who I am?"

I took the hint of humor and the compound sentence as a good sign. "I found you freezing to death on my porch," I said. "No clothes. No purse. Just you. I have no idea where you came from." I heard a testiness entering my voice. Why was that? I consciously lightened my tone. "You're probably suffering from shock. You want a nightlight in the bathroom?" I was talking to a sleeping woman.

I stood at the foot of the bed and watched the comforter rise and fall with her breathing. She looked nothing like Abigail, and yet the memories of standing helplessly next to her hospital bed buckled my knees. Abigail had been shot protecting me, and I almost lost her then. Now I had.

I left the bedroom door ajar, hung the wet towel above the bathtub, and plugged in the nightlight. The house elves were on strike. The fire in the great room stove had burned down to coals. The outside temperature had dropped to minus fifteen, and I needed to keep the fire going to maintain sixty-five indoors. I placed kindling and two logs into the wood stove. Distracted with worry, I cleaned the tub, mopped the melted snow I had tracked in, and returned the coat, snow bib, mittens, and extra socks to their assigned pegs.

Concern for her blurred into concern for myself. Her blurted accusation about roofies and what that implied left me wondering what kind of trouble I would be in if she didn't recover her memory. The cops sure weren't going to believe I found her *au naturel* on the cabin porch. Is that why I had started to lose my temper with her?

I poured a glass of red wine from my favorite box and curled into the chair next to the wood stove, trying to anticipate what tomorrow would

bring. Whatever it was, it would wreak havoc on my normal routine. Where had she come from? The closest neighbors were miles away. Was she taking a late snowmobile ride and broke down? Riding by yourself midwinter was dangerous, but so was walking miles away from home, which I did both day and night. Maybe someone would follow whatever tracks the storm hadn't covered and show up here, saving me the trouble of sorting out what happened.

I didn't feel like making up the futon in the guest bedroom, so I laid my sleeping bag on top of the Oriental rug nearest the wood stove. From there, I could easily tend the fire and hear her if she called. Before I crawled into the bag, I tiptoed upstairs and listened at the open bedroom door: her breathing was regular, but raspy.

Stripping off my thermals, I snuggled into the sleeping bag and watched reflections from the wood stove dance on the pitched ceiling. Even if she seemed fully recovered tomorrow, she really should have a doctor examine her, and, depending on what had caused the restraint abrasions, she might need the cops. My next expected visitor was the supply man who came on Tuesdays, five days away. Not exactly timely. *Maybe I should have bought a snowmobile, after all.* Tomorrow I'd have to cross-country ski the eight miles to the permanent residences on Deer Lake and use someone's computer to request help. On that decision I fell asleep.

And awoke to someone shaking me.

Her strong fingers dug into my shoulders with the force of pliers. Sleep vanished. "I'm burning up," she said. Firelight twinkled in the glistening sweat covering her body. "I can't find the Advil."

My mother never gave me anything to reduce fevers. She said fevers are our body's way of burning out what ails us. I wasn't sure if that applied to someone recently frostbitten or, for that matter, why frostbite would cause a fever. Maybe her body was overreacting.

"Let's take your temperature and make sure what we're dealing with," I said. "Turn around and let me get some clothes on."

"I don't give a shit about your body. Just get me the drugs." She plopped down on the couch and braced her head on her hands.

I shucked off the sleeping bag, donned a pair of briefs, and rummaged in the closet containing medical supplies. Found a red thermometer with a pear-shaped tip, a rectal one from when Paddy was a tyke. I was not going to go there if I could avoid it, so kept searching for an oral thermometer,

which should have a long, blue tip. Finally, in the medicine cabinet over the sink, I turned up one with numbers on a strip. Not perfect, but preferable.

She didn't open her eyes while I held the thermometer strip on her brow. To my hand she was steaming. I watched the tape's digits start with 94 and rapidly light up the 98.6, 100, 102 and finally settle somewhere between 104 and 105. Paddy, at around three, had a fever that high. Bad for a kid, terrible for an adult. I dressed while she sat up to choke down two more Advil—it had been almost four hours. She slumped onto the couch and coughed a long dry rattle. Pneumonia?

I gathered several self-help medical texts from the nonfiction library in the basement. All agreed I needed to cool her down. If she had viral pneumonia, there was nothing else to do. If bacterial, treat with antibiotics. What did I know about viral versus bacterial pneumonia, or if it was pneumonia at all? A doctor friend, learning Abigail and I were going to spend winter at my isolated camp and would only have someone come in once a week to bring supplies and mail, insisted I fill a prescription for erythromycin. The seal remained unbroken. The girl raised her head and took a dose. Better safe than sorry, as long as she wasn't allergic to the stuff.

"Back in the bathtub, kiddo," I said once she finished the water chaser to the drugs.

She looked at me with glassy eyes. I helped her upstairs and ran another tepid bath, making sure to point her feet at the faucet. She was sufficiently coherent to sit up this time, so I grabbed a washcloth and gave her a sponge bath, without soap and without any rubbing. I was still a little concerned about frostbite, although that didn't seem to be a problem. She had mentioned earlier she had been hot; I wondered if her fever had mitigated the frostbite.

I replaced her soaked sheets with a fresh set. She crawled into bed and quickly fell asleep. The bath had dropped her temperature to a hundred; how long before it spiked again, I didn't know. I added wood to the stove and turned off the two ceiling fans so more heat would stay upstairs. The best place to monitor her was the bedroom, so I scooted the rocking chair away from the bed and wrapped myself in a Hudson Bay blanket.

What am I going to do? I had been either sanguine or fatalistic about my chances living so far from help. Abigail maintained it was necessary for her as a bodyguard to either recognize that life could end at any time or to find another profession. I'm not sure she ever really accepted the

philosophy as it pertained to living in the middle of nowhere, but that wasn't why she left me.

This situation, however, didn't affect my mortality. This woman needed medical attention. Unless her fever broke, I didn't think I could leave her for the time it would take to ski the eight miles to Deer Lake and my closest neighbor. If someone was around to snowmobile me back, it was one thing; but if they weren't—and I had to assume the worst—I'd also have to ski back. I could do it, but it would take several hours. I'd given her the Advil at four a.m.; she could have more at eight. By then it would be light enough to see. I closed my eyes.

From the depths of sleep I heard, "Mister, Mister. Snakes are all over the walls." Her forehead was again on fire. She drained the water from the glass I proffered. "No snakes," she said. "Just a bad dream."

Hallucinations, more likely. I gave her a second glass of water. "Drink while I draw a bath."

She latched onto my arms for support as we shuffled from bedroom to bath. She caught sight of herself in the mirror, fingered the hickey, and closed her eyes.

"Does that help you remember anything?" I asked.

Her eyes exhibited a series of flickers, as though she were in REM. She popped them open. Looking straight at me, she mumbled, "No."

The bath again dropped her temperature, and this time I wet her head to help keep her cooler longer. It was too soon to give her more medicine, which left me crossing my fingers. While she towed off, I put my third and last set of sheets on the bed. Abigail had last washed this set, and the faint scent of the dryer sheets she used remained on them.

The woman placed a fresh glass of water on the end table and slid back into bed. Any thought of leaving her alone while I got help vanished with her renewed fever spikes. I threw the soaked sheets into the washing machine and plunked into the chair next to the wood stove. Gazing into the fire, I prayed for inspiration. Ideas were slow in coming. The most likely possibility was for snowmobilers to pass by. They would travel by road or lake; I needed to mark each route to alert passersby to the emergency and get them to stop.

Another possibility occurred to me. The previous week, a mining company had flown magnetic imagery runs somewhere west of here. I heard them all that day, running a series of parallel courses towing sensors

designed to find places where the magnetic direction of the rock layers change, indicating a possible fault into which gold or copper may have flowed. To catch the attention of any planes flying nearby, I wanted to put a distress signal on the ice.

I turned on the radio to NPR. The world still existed, but the bad news/good news ratio was nineteen to one. The weather forecaster predicted an end to the snow by dawn, clearing by afternoon, and winds less than five miles an hour. Predawn slowly arrived. I flicked on an outside light—a whisper breeze juked a few flakes through the bright cone. My guest was sleeping again, so I put on snow gear and retrieved the can I used for ash from the wood stove.

Most people think the Northwoods are dark in winter. They're actually darker in the summer because the maple, birch, and aspen are fully leafed out. At its worst, we do have only eight hours of daylight. But by now in early February, we had around ten; I could easily work outside without a flashlight. The storm had increased our snow depth to more than three feet. Unlike in civilized areas where snow quickly turns dirty, ours would stay luminous white until it melted away in the spring thaw, better known as "mud season."

With snowshoes strapped over boots, I carted the ash bucket up the driveway to the road. The wind had smoothed away any evidence of civilization except for faint traces of one of my cross-country ski trails. A lone coyote had painted the snowy canvas with its characteristic track as it wandered down the middle of the road, occasionally checking something on the edge before returning to the center. For a moment, I forgot why I was standing in the road with an ash bucket in my hand. The air smelled fresh and clean and the silence was so complete that the only sound I heard was the whoosh of blood coursing near my ears. The tickle of a single snowflake reminded me I was outside for a reason.

I stamped HELP in block letters taking up the width of the road. It might work to stop a snowmobiler, but often they traveled forty, fifty, or more miles an hour. At those speeds the tramped area would be a blur. I darkened the letters with ash. Initially, the ash melted the snow with a hiss of steam; soon cooler ash from the can silently covered the bright snow. I stepped away to look at the completed project: it should stop any passing traffic.

Back inside, I checked on the girl—still sleeping—and despite the room

smelling of a mixture of Abigail's shampoo and the dryer sheets, this woman was not Abigail, nor would she ever be. No one could be, and I missed her like crazy—maybe the reality was that I was crazy with the missing.

The road was only twelve feet or so across; the lake spanned three-eighths of a mile. Unless I guessed the right spot on the lake, a snowmobile could easily pass by my message, and I had to make it large enough to attract a pilot's attention from a long distance. From the garage I retrieved three blue tarps and cut them into footwide strips.

Light tinted the tips of the evergreens across the lake. Isolated patches of pale blue pockmarked the clouds, providing promise of a clearing sky and warming temperatures. I snowshoed onto the lake and, using the blue tarp swatches, displayed SOS in six-foot letters, finishing with an elongated arrow pointing to my house. The letters and arrow covered as much of the lake between my house and the opposite shore as possible. From the air, the message would be clear; I hoped a snowmobiler would notice at least a flash of blue tarp and slow down to figure out what was going on. I weighted down each letter's corners with packed snow. Without fresh snowfall, they should remain visible. I didn't expect enough sun to cause the tarp to act as a heat trap and melt snow beneath the letters, but, periodically, I'd have to make sure.

I checked on my guest—still sleeping, albeit more fitfully—and I returned outside to unbury my woods truck from the winter's accumulated snow. A serviceable Ford Ranger, I had pulled its battery shortly after Christmas once snow had closed the local roads for the duration of winter. To institute the third component of my plan, I reinstalled it and shattered the silence with three long horn blasts: the universal signal of distress. I figured the sound would travel at least a couple of miles since the leaves were off the trees and the wind had died to a gentle breeze. I planned to repeat the blasts every half hour.

I sent a silent message in all four directions asking someone, anyone, to find me before I had a dead woman on my hands.

THREE

SHORTLY AFTER NINE IN THE morning, Jimmie Heitzmann arrived at Boss's rented cabin accompanied by the roar of a finely tuned snow machine. Attached to his canary-yellow Arctic Cat was a utility sleigh. He circled the camp and parked next to Brett's truck.

Jimmie dismounted and removed his helmet and black balaclava, exposing a clean-shaven face, squashed nose, eyes the color of a Caribbean bay, and a ruffled mess of mud-brown hair. He left the snow machine running and checked to make sure the long gun was still firmly bungee-corded to the sled. He patted the Ruger strapped to his side and followed his breath cloud to the front door.

Inside, his glance took in the nearly empty rum bottle on the table and the inert form under the quilts. He tiptoed to the bed, leaned down, and yelled as loudly as he could, "Wake-up, fuck face!"

Brett groaned and tugged the covers further over his head. Jimmie walked to the sink and started running cold water into a bucket. Took off one glove and tested the water. *Damn near to grabbing ice cubes.* He blew on his hand to warm it, and replaced the glove.

"I'm up, goddamn it. I'm up." Brett threw off the covers and heaved out of bed. "Don't you start with that water shit again. We got time for breakfast?"

"You drank it last night. We need to get tracking. Boss already filled me in. You got three minutes."

"It's freezing in here. What's the hurry? There wasn't hardly any gas in the snow machine she stole. That's why I was in town when she escaped—to get gas, y'know? She's frozen someplace not far. Alls we got to do is follow her tracks. She didn't have long anyway, her fever was way up there."

"Save your excuses for Boss. You did get rid of the guy, right?"

"He's anchored with concrete and feeding fishes." Brett finished dressing and opened the door to the wood stove.

"Leave it," Jimmie commanded. "Pipes won't freeze before we get back. We need to find the girl."

Brett pulled his first beer of the day from the refrigerator—“hair of the dog”—and downed it before they got to Jimmie’s sled. Even with the new snowfall and the night’s high winds, it took no skill to follow the girl’s trail for several miles. Wind had drifted in the runner lines, but the packed center track was still visible. She had followed the main road west, then cut south, skirted a gate, and headed up a camp road.

Brett tapped Jimmie’s shoulder and he slowed to a crawl. “This leads into a guy’s camp on Long Lake. He wasn’t up a few days ago when I got rid of Brandon.” Jimmie dipped his head in understanding and sped off, shooting snow rooster tails behind him. They followed her trail to the camp, a two-story log edifice. The yard was a mess of tracks.

Jimmie stopped the machine and both men hopped off. With face masks up and gloves off, they studied the tracks and decided she had backtracked a hundred feet and followed a frozen lead down onto the lake where the track disappeared. “Now what the fuck do we do?” Brett said. “I didn’t think there was that much gas in the sled.”

“Keep your eyes peeled, asshole. If she ain’t in the lake, she musta cut into the woods. We need to find where she came out. If I was her, I’d try the little log cabin across the lake.”

They followed the shoreline down to the outlet and started back up the far side. In short order, Jimmie found the state’s boat landing, which he remembered led to an old trail. They got off, walked up the bank, and saw recently disturbed dead ferns. *Gotcha, girlie.*

A distant automobile horn honked three times. “Fuck’s that?” said Brett.

Jimmie held up his hand for silence. They waited a minute, but heard nothing other than chickadees and a red-breasted ass-up feeding in a gnarled yellow birch. Gunning the snowmobile, Jimmie followed the girl’s trail around a bend and saw the stolen sled. She had run it smack under a chain running across the access to the smaller cabin. It must have knocked her ass over teakettle. The snow machine zoomed off without her and buried itself in a snowbank. Written in the snow was her struggle to extract the machine, but it was too stuck and too heavy for a small woman.

“Leave it for now,” Jimmie said. “We’ll get it on the way back. She can’t have gone far in this snow without snowshoes.” They remounted Jimmie’s snow machine and slowly followed the occasional dimple in the snow that indicated her path. Wherever the woods opened up, everything drifted in and they had to guess which way she went. The problem became more

acute once they entered a Plum Creek clear-cut. Whenever their first guess didn't quickly pan out, they strapped on snowshoes and walked arcs until they restruck her trail.

Fifteen minutes into the process, they hit a larger road and again followed the shuffling tracks south. Brett tapped Jimmie's shoulder and pointed to a blue knit hat hanging on a tree limb. Jimmie gave it a good sniff—smelled like the aloe in her shampoo—and pitched it into the sleigh's storage compartment. They soon discovered a glove decorating a bush.

Brett began to bounce up and down on the seat like he was five and about to get Jell-O with canned fruit for dessert. "Can't be much farther," he shouted over the engine. Jimmie ignored him, stared down the road, intent on glimpsing a spot of color or toe sticking up.

Her coat was next. Then her snow bib.

They entered another clear-cut and found her boots perched on a giant white pine stump, tops rising above the four-inch mound of snow, under which they discovered socks, long underwear, bra, and panties neatly folded.

A car honked. Three long blasts: still distant, but closer and in the direction they were heading.

"Fuck *is* that?" Brett asked using the whine that drove Jimmie bonkers. "Ah, man, with all these stumps and piles of snow, she could be lying dead anywhere."

Jimmie left Brett to check the immediate vicinity. He glided down the road searching for tracks. The more he considered those car horn blasts, the more he thought it unlikely they would find a body. At a fork, he followed the wider road to the left. Snow was heavier in this area, and he didn't find either a corpse or her tracks. The road teed at Shank Lake where he struck a well-traveled snowmobile route; nothing had passed by since the storm. Jimmie checked his plat book. There were several camps on this lake and more along the route into town. Taking a left onto Shank Lake Road, he followed it to the head of the lake, where Lukes Road, unmarked by snow machine tracks, came in from the right. He backtracked to the original fork and took the less-used direction. Thought he might have spotted a footprint or two, but never anything he could convince himself was a trail. No body. Hit Shank Lake again and stopped to consider his options.

Three blasts on a car horn. Closer this time. Exactly half an hour since the last three blasts. Jimmie now knew for certain that someone had already found her and that she was alive. He needed to execute Plan B.

He roared back to Brett, motioned for him to hop on, and buzzed their trail to Brett's snow machine that the girl had left stuck in the snowbank. Jimmie parked next to it and told Brett, "Fill 'er up with gas. Let's see if we can blast her out."

Brett hauled one of the gas cans to the trapped sled and poured. Jimmie followed, leaned close, and brought the Ruger an inch away from the hollow in the back of Brett's neck marking the spot where spine entered skull.

IF SOMEONE DIDN'T SHOW UP soon, I was screwed.

With a combination of Advil, erythromycin, and lukewarm sponge baths, I kept the woman's temperature under 102 for most of the day. She wasn't getting better; stabilized was the best I could convince myself about her condition. Before the end of each Advil cycle, her temperature spiked and her skin turned clammy. She spoke little. Each time she tried, a wracking cough doubled her up like a rag doll. She vomited breakfast of toast and jam. I had to hold down my gag reflex while I cleaned up the mess.

She tried to gargle, but it caused her to choke. I gave her a new toothbrush and from then on she smelled like Tom's of Maine's fennel toothpaste. Because she had felt worse the last time she ate, she refused solid food. Throughout the day I needed to coax her into slurping bouillon with its faint taste of chicken overwhelmed by sharp brine. I did get her to drink three glasses of water.

Early in the morning, I thought I heard a snowmobile's buzz, but it never came close. Back inside, I tuned the radio to "Telephone Time" on WIKB in hopes someone would call the talk show to report a missing woman. No luck and nothing on their hourly news report either. A plane flew past shortly after noon, but was probably too far away to spot my signal. I mostly sat outside the bedroom and worried.

I would feel terrible if the woman died on me. It would be one more person I had let down. Besides, I had no doubt the police would suspect

me of something— unlawful imprisonment at the least. *Come on, girl. You've got to get better.*

I set an alarm to remind myself to honk the horn every half hour. At the start of the three-thirty routine, she was sleeping soundly. After hitting the truck horn three times, I snowshoed up to the guest cabin to see if I could follow her tracks. The snow and wind had done a fine job of filling in any footprints, although close to the cabin I could pick out what appeared to be a small indentation here and there. Unfortunately, a light breeze was dumping the remaining snow from the trees, producing a minicrater with each plow of snow. I gave up before I got to the end of the driveway. I'd been away no more than ten minutes, but it was enough time for the woman to reprise her Lady Godiva act: walking up the driveway wearing only a hat from the hook by the kitchen door and a pair of work gloves I had left on a nearby counter. I corralled her and asked what she was doing. "Brandon honked for me," she said. "I'm late for school again."

She did remember who I was; she didn't remember how she got here; she didn't remember who she was. She couldn't tell me who Brandon was or whether he was responsible for the hickey or the rope burns. Yet she was not without memory. Propped into a sitting position in the bed by several pillows, an hour before dark she spotted a mature bald eagle cruising the lake, head and tail as pure white as fresh snow. "Size marks her as female," she said. "She's shopping for carrion." She coughed, finally controlled it, took several long glugs of water, and whispered, "If I don't make it, just haul me to the middle of the lake. Everybody out there's a little hungry this time of year."

I protested. She raised her hand to cut me off. "Joke," she whispered. "Just a joke." Minutes later she was asleep.

Her pulse remained strong, but her breathing was increasingly labored and featured a wheeze that sounded like someone sucking air through the wrong end of a reed instrument. I worried that if her fever spiked and I wasn't around, she might hallucinate and walk away, as she had earlier looking for Brandon. Equally treacherous, she might go into convulsions.

With time on my hands and not daring to go out to ski or snowshoe to burn off all the nervous energy, I polished off the Rex Stout. The thought of reading another mystery didn't feel right—I was living a mystery. I pulled a John McPhee from the nonfiction shelf in the basement, thinking that would occupy my brain. Nope.

I reread the letter from Paddy that Owen had delivered earlier in the month along with the weekly supplies. Paddy, a natural networker unlike his dad, packed the letter with news of friends and acquaintances. He filled me in on what his girlfriend, TV investigative reporter Cindy Nelson, was working on. My eyes stuck on his passing mention that while he and Cindy were in a Chicago nightclub they ran across Abigail. *Who was she with? Was it for business or pleasure? Did she at least say hi?* The printed note gave no hint.

I tried journaling about the last few days, but lost focus. Writing about the woman's rope burns got me thinking about the body police had found in my Cincinnati home the previous spring, and how that had touched off a series of events leading to all kinds of things I didn't want to remember.

One lesson from that experience certainly applied here: police were predisposed to focus on the initial suspect long past the point when other evidence—evidence that they didn't find because they weren't looking for it—should have directed them toward the real perpetrator. If she died at my home, how could I prove I had done nothing wrong? With such an improbable story, why would cops spend much time trying to find alternative suspects?

It was Friday, and I had half-convinced myself that one of the locals with a camp on the lake would come out after work to spend the weekend ice fishing and drinking. If so, I'd hear their snowmobile roar down the lake after dark and could risk leaving her for the short time it would take to ski to their camp.

It didn't happen that way.

FOUR

THE SUN HAD SET AND the wall thermometer read minus four by the time Jimmie finished at Boss's rented camp. He was surprised how good he felt. In the movies, they showed a first-time killer getting wobbly knees and puking his guts out. Bullshit. This was easier than putting down his old hunting dog. He'd loved Bomber; Brett was a pain. Besides, no one paid him for putting down Bomber, whereas Brett was worth decent bucks.

He kept his gloves on except to wash the dishes. He dried those and neatly hung the dishtowel on the rack by the sink. After draining the water lines, he cleaned the wood stove of ash—good thing dumbass Brett had let the fire die—stripped all the linens, and shut off the propane. Brett's gear piled on the sleigh provided cover for the girl's stuff underneath. Camo tarps served as wrappers for foodstuffs, which he also tied down on the sleigh.

Using rubbing alcohol and shop rags from a box, he wiped down every surface where fingerprints could be found. Always liked the smell, maybe because it reminded him of cleaning guns? Although, thinking about it, he concluded gun oil smelled heavier. He let the rags air dry and stuffed them in his parka pocket to toss into his home burn barrel. Using a million-candle torch, he checked the cabin and grounds one last time. Satisfied, he padlocked the cabin and generator shed, pulling on the locks to make sure they were secure even after hearing the satisfying click of the lock engaging. He then used Brett's shotgun to blow off the door hasp, leaving the lock burnished by twenty-gauge shot and buried in the snow.

The shot brought a pair of gray jays from the woods to investigate, their conversation alerting Jimmie of their presence. "Nothing for you camp robbers today," he told them. "Gonna be slim pickings around here for a piece."

Eight long hours after he had dispatched Brett, Jimmie pulled his snow machine and sleigh onto the trailer he'd attached to Brett's truck and left the camp. His stomach protested the lack of food. His only break had been to force down cold pasties, which tasted like shoe leather when they weren't

warm. Twenty minutes later, he had cell coverage and called Boss. “She’s still missing, but I think I know where. Everything else is cool.”

“Meet me tomorrow at eleven,” Boss said. “Sooner we solve that problem, the better.”

NEITHER THE WOMAN NOR I slept much during the night. Her fever held steady at around a hundred degrees, so maybe the drugs were helping keep it down. The dry wheeze of her cough morphed into a wet rattle. Those episodes occurred more frequently, each one lasting longer. After one particularly long and violent coughing jag she waved me to her. “Am I going to die?”

“Of course not,” I said too loudly to fool myself with the false confidence.

“I think someone already has, but I just can’t remember. Will you hold me? I need someone to hold me and my mother isn’t here.” Talking sparked another long coughing spree. “Please?”

I kicked off my shoes and got in the other side of the bed, sliding over to spoon against her muscled back, laying my arm around her warm shoulders. Again, the scent of Abigail surprised me, even though I was the one who had washed her with Abigail’s lavender soap.

“Thank you,” she whispered into the pillow.

She calmed down and slept. I didn’t. Wrapped against her, I measured every shallow breath she took against the previous one, worrying she was getting worse. Despair grew as I held this nameless woman and recognized I had no clue what to do. All my years of education, all my years in business, all my years as a parent, provided no preparation for this moment.

Who was Brandon? What did she mean by someone already died? Did that relate to her rope burns? I wished for so very many reasons that Abigail were still here. If she hadn’t left, one of us could have stayed and the other gone for help. This woman would be in a hospital, getting real care.

And I missed Abigail. I’d screwed it up again and lost her for good.

“Do the best you can, and let go of the results,” my mother had often told me when I was fussing over something I couldn’t control. Had I done my best for the woman today? What did I need to do tomorrow? The dueling calls of barred owls outside interrupted my contemplation. Even if

hunting was tough for them with so much snow on the ground, they had it comparatively easy, worrying only about food and sex. Just two days ago, I had stood at the window for the better part of an hour watching a snowshoe hare inspect the clearing around my house. That once-idyllic life now seemed a fantasy.

Lying on my back, I marked the passage of the nearly full moon as it slunk toward its setting an hour before official sunrise. My guest was wasting away. If I didn't get her medical attention, I might justly be accused of letting her die. I had no choice but to act, but what if I made the wrong choice?

JIMMIE FIGURED BOSS HAD ALREADY arrived for the meeting: a curl of white smoke drifted into the bluing sky from the single-wide trailer set on top of the hill. He checked for company—no traffic on Rock Crusher Road in either direction—and pulled into the plowed gravel driveway around the single-wide and into the second stall of a pole barn building at the rear of the clearing. In typical Yooper fashion, the pole barn was quadruple the size of the trailer home.

He left his keys in the Chevy Blazer, walked to the edge of the trailer, and listened for traffic. Still nothing, so he slipped around to the front and let himself in. He pulled off his gloves and hat, but left his coat on. The propane furnace was clacking away, but it had some work to do to raise the temperature from fifty—Boss's setting while away—to something comfortable. He grabbed a mug from a tree—they all advertised Hematite National Bank, no surprise there—and poured coffee from the pot left cooking on the hotplate. He liked it plain and black, no mochaccino crap for him. Maxwell House "good to the last drop" was still best in his book. As the boss said, "The closer to diesel fuel, the better." The warmth tumbled down his gullet and into his stomach.

Boss emerged from the bedroom. "Prompt as always, Jimmie. I appreciate that. Set your ass down." Boss waved toward the gawd-awful orange plaid couch in the living room and plunked down in the La-Z-Boy. "Tell me what transpired with Brett."

Typical. Flaunts that college degree using words like "transpired" when "happened" would have done just as well. Well, Jimmie knew all those words

too; he just didn't use 'em. He took a couple slurps of the coffee, sagged into the couch feeling it envelop his hips as the springs stretched with pings and pops. Once everything settled, he related the previous day's activities.

"Couldn't you make it look like a hunting accident? Shot himself?"

"Didn't you ever read that book, *The Sweater Letter*? They'd never buy it. I made it look like a drug buy gone bad. Left a stash of blow in a baggie in the tank of his snow machine." He added, in case Boss thought he was asking for more money, "Part of my full-service package." Tried a smile, got nothing back, and plowed on. "Here's the thing. I'm pretty sure someone around Shank Lake found the girl. Every half hour, some guy's nailing his horn three long honks."

"Distress signal, sure as shit."

Boss rustled around in the bookcase and opened an Iron County plat book. "Lukes Road comes in from US 141. That's the only other way in other than up The Grade from Amasa. There are only a few camps on Shank—forty-acre zoning. We hold the mortgages on a couple. Thing I can't get my head around is why they were honking their horn instead of packing her into town."

Jimmie tried out his theory. "What if the girl's alive and somebody staying by themselves didn't figure he could leave her to get help?"

Boss looked up sharply. "I kinda figured maybe you were gold digging me with your suggestion she was alive, her walking around naked in below zero temps and all. But now I hear you telling it, well, shit, you might be right." Boss tapped the plat book. "Looking at that section, I seem to recall something about a guy name of McCree planning to overwinter, and I see a McCree family trust owns an eighty. Neither of those biologists ever laid eyes on you, right?"

"Even so, if I rode into someone's camp, it might tie me to them. If I found only one guy with the girl, which is what I'm now thinking is the case, I could take care of both of them. But I didn't think of that at the time, and if it was a group up for the weekend, I'd have been totally fucked. Besides, you told me if the girl escaped, I had to take care of Brett . . ."

Boss nodded a few times, which led to a hacking fit. Boss pulled out a handkerchief and coughed something into it. Jimmie was clearly not supposed to see or ask about. Supposedly the lung cancer was taken care of, but maybe it was back? Jimmie pretended to concentrate on the plat book, noting it smelled a bit musty.

“Point taken,” Boss said. “By now if she were a stiff, she’d be parked in some funeral home and ‘Telephone Time’ would be chatting away helping the cops figure out who she was—and there wasn’t a peep. You’ve taken care of Brett’s stuff?”

“And the girl’s. Burned everything except his truck. That’s a cube of crushed metal sitting in a recycler’s lot in Duluth. He ships the stuff to China. I’ve never heard of anyone named McCree.”

“Tourist, not a local. You’ve done a good job, Jimmie, but we’re not finished by a long shot. You and I need to check the Shank Lake camps. We’ll start with McCree. I got an extra sled you can take. You got a choice of weapons.” Boss pointed to a gun rack lining one wall of the living room. “You got your snowmobile duds in the truck, right? Let me get changed while you prepare the sleds. Gas is stored in the pole barn.”

Jimmie realized he was jazzed—like before playing a high school football game. How would it go down when their two snow machines drove into McCree’s camp? He chugged the last swallow of coffee, cleaned his cup, and hung it on the tree, making sure to wipe off his prints in the process. Never can be too careful.

THE SUN BACKLIT THE EASTERN hill, and I had finally reached the crap-or-get-off-the-pot point regarding how to handle the woman. My style had always been to take in as much data as I could and put off making a decision for as long as possible—but not a moment longer. The good news was that her fever had abated overnight. The bad news was her cough was much, much worse. I needed to get her help, but I needed to minimize the chances she would wander off while I was gone.

My strategy was to tire her out so completely that she would sleep until I returned. I bundled the woman in warm clothes, sleeves and pant legs bunched to the right length with elastic bands. A binder clip cinched in the waist of the old snow pants I had managed to wrestle over pajama bottoms that kept riding up her limp legs. My feet were seven thousand sizes larger than hers, so I stuffed newspaper in the toe boxes and around the heels of the boots.

By the time I finished dressing her, she reminded me of some children in the winter that are clothed in so many layers they can’t move—all they

can do is stand or fall. I carried her outside and settled her onto my son's old wooden Flexible Flyer, which I towed down to the lake. Across the way, a pair of ravens entertained us with an aerial show and the accompanying soundtrack of raucous croaks before flying away. With the exception of a couple of small snowdrifts I had to dust off, the blue SOS was still okay.

I dragged the sled from the lake to the road and inspected the HELP sign. The dark ashes had absorbed some of yesterday's wan sunlight and caused the message to melt a bit, but it would do for another day.

The house seemed stuffy after our hour-long outing. I cracked open a couple of windows and fixed lunch of split-pea soup laced with chunks of salty bacon. She ate tentatively at first. Once she decided it wouldn't come back up, she wolfed down a bowl and, after a terrible coughing spell, asked for more.

Fortunately, the cold air and warm soup did the trick, and she soon fell asleep. Praying her slumber would last until my return, I attached a note to the back door: "Gone for help. If you get here first, please take the woman to the hospital in Iron River. VERY HIGH fever and possible pneumonia." I strapped on cross-country skis and took off.

At the edge of my property, an old logging road meanders toward a clear-cut. A snowmobile had come down the road and turned around at that intersection. They had been so close; if only they had made it onto my road they would have seen the HELP sign and the woman would be in treatment. My Irish luck was on holiday, probably in a warmer clime.

Birds, normally active feeding in the brief daylight hours, became silent at my approach, no doubt wondering at the intrusion. Only the swish of skis cutting through fresh snow marred the woods' silence. Ice crystals stuck to my mustache and beard and coated the long wool hat that wicked sweat and heat away from my head. After a mile, I was in a zone, having found a strong, easy rhythm that ate up the distance.

The sun was as high in the sky as it was going to get. Even through yellow-tinged goggles, snow sparkled as though laced with diamond chips. Trees lining the road cast blue shadows, giving form to the otherwise smooth landscape. Several camps had access from these roads, but only deer, coyote, and wolf tracks marred the palette of whites.

Skiing through new snow tired me more than I expected, but the thought of the woman waking up with no one around spurred me on. At first, I sensed a ticking clock in my head, but that morphed into an

hourglass leaking sand from the realm of the living to the dead. I pressed forward as fast as I could. Trucks had plowed the last two miles of my trip and I didn't have to break trail. I glided around the final corner and spotted both a blue car and red truck parked in a cleared driveway I knew belonged to a couple who lived year-round on Deer Lake. Relief caused a chill to run across my skin with the tingle of a weak electrical current. I'd lucked out; they were home.

I pounded on the door and the woman, dressed in sweats and a heavy wool sweater, informed me her husband had taken off on their snowmobile and was ice fishing with his buddies. She used her satellite internet and tried to find an email address for the Iron County Sheriff's office in Crystal Falls. No go. She promised to drive the ten miles to Amasa, the nearest town, and call them.

My hourglass was leaking faster. Thoughts of the woman waking up and spacing out drove me to maintain a punishing pace toward home. Reusing tracks I'd made coming to Deer Lake helped speed my return since I didn't have to fight new snow, but my age was starting to tell. I huffed and puffed with the look and sound of an old steam locomotive. For an old fart, I was in outstanding shape, but this exertion proved there was no way I could ever be a professional soccer player again.

Turning onto the A Grade, I discovered snowmobiles had obliterated my path. Their tracks followed mine onto Shank Lake Road, and I gained extra energy from the sense of relief. The cops must have already been in the vicinity when the Deer Lake woman contacted them. By now they were certainly taking care of the woman.

Unless it wasn't them.

I pressed on at top speed. At the head of the lake the snowmobile tracks took Lukes Road instead of staying on my side of the lake. They hadn't made it to my house. My mood crashed and drained my energy.

The steepest hills in the entire eight miles were on my property. By the time I reached them, my legs were whipped; I had to herringbone up them. From the top of the last hill I glided down to my driveway, turned in, and spotted two snowmobiles I didn't recognize parked outside my house.