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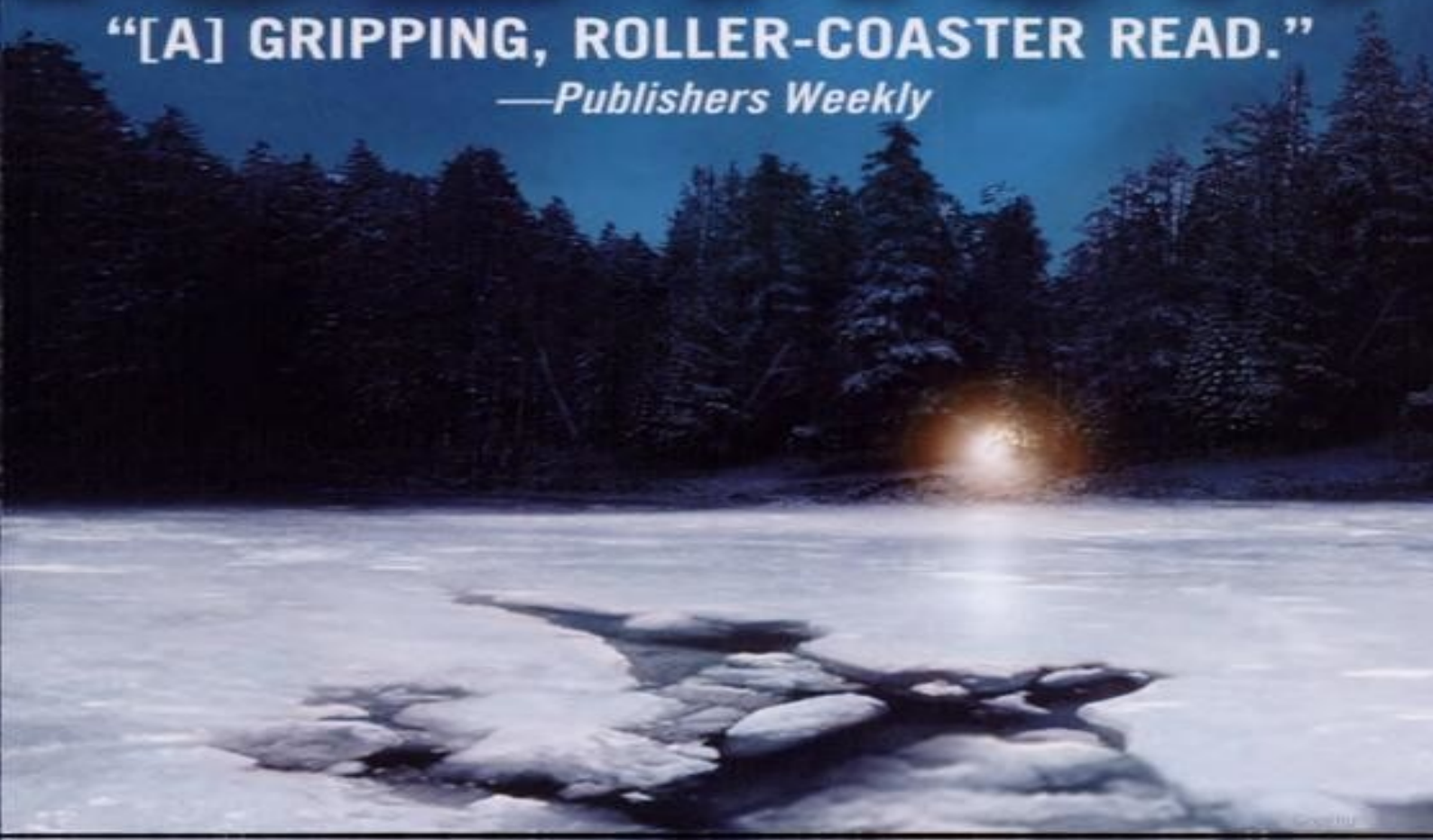
STEVE HAMILTON

Secrets from the past return with a vengeance...

ICE RUN

"[A] GRIPPING, ROLLER-COASTER READ."

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ICE RUN

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To Nonna and Donna

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ICE RUN

Chapter One

In a land of hard winters, the hardest of all is the winter that fills you with false hope. It's the kind of winter that starts out easy. You get the white Christmas, but it's a light snow, six inches tops, the stuff that makes everything look like a postcard. The sun comes out during the day. You can take your coat off if you're working hard enough. The nights are quiet. The stars shine between the silver clouds. You celebrate New Year's. You make resolutions. It snows again and you run the plow. You shovel. You chop wood. You sit inside at night by the fire. You say to yourself, this ain't so bad. A little cold weather is good for a man. It makes you feel alive.

That's what I was thinking. I admit it. Although maybe I had other reasons to believe this winter would be easy. Maybe this winter I could be forgiven for letting my guard down. One good look at the calendar would have put my head back on straight. Spring doesn't come until May, Alex. Which meant—what, winter had ten rounds left in a fifteen-round fight? That was plenty of time. That was a long time in the world.

When the storm finally hit, I was down the road at the Glasgow Inn. Jackie had the fire going and had just made a big pot of his famous beef stew. He had the cold Molsons, bought at the Beer Store across the bridge and stored just for me in his cooler, for the simple reason that American beer cannot compare to beer bottled and sold in Canada. That and a Red Wings game on the television over the bar were all I needed. On that night, anyway. I had plans for the next day. I had big plans. But for now I was happy just to be with Jackie, and to do everything I could to slowly drive him insane.

"Alex, you're gonna tell me what's going on," he said for the third time. He was an old Scot, God love him, with the slightest hint of a burr in his speech. Born in Glasgow sixty-odd years ago, the son of a tugboat captain, he came to Michigan when he was a teenager. He had been here ever since, eventually opening up the Glasgow Inn. It looked a lot more like a Scottish pub than an American bar, which meant you could spend the whole evening there without getting depressed or drunk or both.

"Don't know what you're talking about," I said.

"Like hell you don't. You've been bouncing in here, saying hello and how are you. Smiling and laughing."

"I'm happy to see you," I said. "Is that so bad?"

"Since when are you happy about anything?" He gave me that Popeye squint of his. "It's January for God's sake."

"Almost February," I said. "How many inches have we had?"

"Don't even say that, Alex. You'll jinx it. You know a storm's coming."

"I had another cancellation today. There's not enough snow to ride on." This time of year snowmobiling was the biggest business in Paradise, Michigan. Hell, it was the *only* business. Even the rental cabin in town, and every motel room, was booked months in advance. On most January nights Jackie's place would be crawling with men from downstate, most of them with their big puffing snowsuits zipped down to the waist.

And that sound. The whine of the engines, coming from every direction. It always drove me crazy. But this night was silent.

"Tonight," he said. "We'll get buried. You watch."

I shrugged and looked up at the hockey game. "Bring it on."

“And what’s with the salad, anyway?”

“What salad?”

“Lettuce and vegetables, Alex. That salad.”

“What are you talking about?”

“For dinner. You had a salad.”

“I had the stew, Jackie. Since when can I pass that up?”

“You had a little bowl of stew and a big salad.”

“Okay, so?”

“You don’t eat salads for dinner. I’ve never seen you eat a salad in fifteen years.”

“So I felt like a salad, Jackie. What are you getting at?”

“You’re not drinking as much beer, either. Try to deny it.”

I held up my hands. “Guilty. You busted me.”

“You’re working out, too. I can tell.”

“You’ve been bugging me for years to take better care of myself,” I said. “So now maybe I am. There something wrong with that?”

“You finally decided to listen to me? That’s what you’re telling me?”

“Is that so hard to believe?”

“Yes, Alex. It is. You’ve *never* listened to me. Not once.”

The door opened at that moment, saving me from Jackie’s third degree. It was my friend and neighbor, Vinnie LeBlanc, bringing in a blast of cold wet air.

“Holy Christ,” Jackie said. “You can smell the snow coming. It makes my bones hurt.”

“Who’s winning?” Vinnie said as he took off his coat. It was a denim coat with a fur collar, the only coat I’d ever seen him wear, no matter how cold it got. He was an Ojibwa Indian, a member of the Bad River community. He had moved off the reservation a few years ago, and had bought the land down the road from mine and had built his own cabin. We were friends for a while, and then we weren’t. Then I helped him look for his brother. What we found was a hell of a lot of trouble, but somehow we also found our friendship again. Just like that, without a word.

“Wings,” I said. “Two to one. They just waved one off for Colorado.”

He sat down next to me and asked Jackie for a 7 Up. The man never touched alcohol, going on ninety years straight.

“Jackie’s right,” Vinnie said. “It’s gonna snow. You better not be too far away from home when it does.”

“That’s a good one,” Jackie said. “Since when does Alex go anywhere?”

Vinnie looked down at his glass. He rattled the ice. He had a smile on his face, a smile so subtle you wouldn’t even see it if you didn’t know the man as well as I did.

He knew. He was the only one who knew my secret.

I just couldn’t tell Jackie about it. Not yet. I knew he had strong opinions about some things in life, and this was one thing he’d have a lot to say about. Maybe I wasn’t ready to hear it yet. Or maybe he didn’t want to ruin it. Maybe talking about it in the light of day would make it all vanish like a fever dream.

For whatever reason, I kept my mouth shut that night. I was happy to sit by the fire and watch the rest of the hockey game. The Wings gave up a late goal and after the five-minute overtime had to settle for a tie. Vinnie put his feet up and closed his eyes. There was still white tape on the side of his face, where the bullet had taken off part of his ear. I knew he was spending a lot more time over at the reservation now, looking after his mother. I didn’t see him nearly as much.

We heard the wind picking up. There was a soft ticking at the windows. The snow had started. Outside this building, not a hundred yards away, lay the shoreline of Lake Superior. The ice stretched

out a quarter mile, into the darkness of Whitefish Bay. Beyond that there was nothing but open water—water so cold and deep it was like a cruel joke to call it a lake at all. It was a sea, the Sea Superior, and tonight it would feed the snow gods.

“You’re gonna be plowing,” Vinnie said. He kept his eyes closed.

“I’m ready.”

He opened one eye. He started to say something and stopped.

“What is it?” I said.

He smiled again. Two smiles in one night.

“You’re not going anywhere tomorrow,” he said. “You’re gonna be stuck here.”

“We’ll see about that,” I said. But I knew he was probably right. God damn it.

We finally left around midnight. I said goodbye to Jackie and he dismissed me with a wave of his hand.

“You got him a little worked up,” Vinnie said as we stepped out into the night. There were already three inches of new snow covering the parking lot. “He doesn’t like not knowing what’s going on.”

“A little suspense is good for him,” I said. “It keeps him young.”

“I’m going to my mother’s house,” Vinnie said. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“I’ll plow your driveway. Drive carefully.”

We brushed our windshields off and then we were on our way, Vinnie to the reservation in Brimley and me back up to the cabins. If you ever come to Paradise, Michigan, you just go through the one blinking red light in the middle of town, then north along the shore about a mile until you get to an old logging road. Hang that left and you’ll pass Vinnie’s place first, and then you’ll find my place. My father bought the land back in the 1960s, and built six cabins. I live in the first cabin, the one I helped him build myself, back when I was an eighteen-year-old hotshot on my way to single-A ball in Sarasota. At the time, I never thought I’d be back up here for more than a visit. I certainly wouldn’t have imagined living up here. Not this place, the loneliest place I’d ever seen. But all these years later, after all that had happened, here I was.

I put the plow down and pushed the new snow off as I went. It felt as light as talcum powder. I drove by Vinnie’s place and then mine, and kept going. The second cabin was a quarter mile down the road. There was a minivan parked in front, with a trailer carrying two snowmobiles hitched behind it. The family, a man and his wife and two sons. I’d given them the chance to cancel, but they’d said they’d come up no matter what. Even with no snow, they looked forward to the trip every year. Now it looked like they might get some riding in after all.

Another quarter mile and I got to the third cabin. It was dark. Another quarter mile and then the fourth and fifth cabins together. They were dark, too.

One more quarter mile. The last cabin my father had built. His masterpiece. Until somebody burned it down. The walls were about half rebuilt now, a great blue tarp covering the whole thing, propped up in the middle to keep the snow off. Rising above it all was the chimney my father had built stone by stone.

I stopped and got out of the truck, made sure that the tarp was sealed tight. The wind died down and the pine trees stopped swaying. I took a long breath of the cold air and then got back in the truck. I plowed my way back to my cabin.

I went in and listened to the weather report on the radio. More snow was coming. A lot more. They didn’t even try to guess the number of inches. That’s always a bad sign.

God damn it all, I thought. I’m going to Canada tomorrow. I don’t care if we get three feet. I’ll plow again in the morning, and then I’m going.

I went into the bathroom and looked in the mirror. I ran a hand through my hair, then picked up the package and read the directions one more time.

"I can't believe I'm doing this," I said out loud.

I looked in the mirror again. Then I put on the plastic gloves and went to work.

The phone rang. I took the gloves off and wiped my hands on the towel. I picked it up on the third ring, looking at the clock. It was almost one o'clock in the morning.

"Alex," she said. With that voice. It still hit me in the gut, every time. She was Canadian, so she had that little rise at the end of each sentence. That singsong quality, almost melodic, but at the same time it was a voice that meant business. It had some darkness in it, a smoker's voice without the smoke.

"Hey, it's late," I said. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, but I was just listening to the weather."

"A little snow. No problem."

"A little snow, eh? They're talking like twenty-four inches. What are they saying down there?"

"They're not saying. You never know with the lake. It could be less than that. Or more."

"I don't think you're coming out here tomorrow."

I thought about what to say. There was a distant humming on the line. "I think I can still make it."

"Don't be a dope," she said. "You'll kill yourself."

Out of a hundred different feelings I can have in one minute when I'm talking to her, one feeling in particular came into focus now. It was not the first time I'd felt it, this little nagging doubt, that maybe I wanted something out of all of this. Something real. And that maybe she had woken up this morning not wanting anything at all.

And then the thing that always came right after that. The certain realization that I was being a complete ass.

"Besides," she said. "Don't you have people staying in your cabins? If it's snowing all day, don't you have to stick around to plow them out?"

"I've got one family," I said. "The rest of the cabins are empty."

"Okay, but even so. That one family will need you around, won't they?"

I closed my eyes and rubbed the bridge of my nose. "If there's a lot of snow falling, yeah. I can't be away for too long."

"So maybe it's time to try out your idea."

I opened my eyes. "What's that?"

"You know, about me coming to your place."

"Here?" I looked around the cabin. This was *my* idea? To have her come *here*?

"Yeah, why not? I've got four-wheel drive. And I've never even been there yet. You always come out here. I'm starting to feel guilty."

One single bed. The old couch, sagging in the middle. Two rough wooden tables. This sad wreck of a place, after fifteen years of living all by myself. This is what she'd see. My God.

"I don't know," I said. "This cabin—"

"You don't want me to see your bachelor pad?"

"I'm not sure I'd call it that."

"Yeah, I don't think anyone says that anymore. Bachelor pad, that was from the seventies, right?"

The seventies, I thought. Back when I was playing ball, and being a cop. And you were ... God, were you in grade school then?

"Alex, are you still there?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm just thinking. I don't want you driving all this way tomorrow if the weather's gonna be bad."

"It was just an idea. Okay?"

Think, Alex. Think.

"Hey, I know," I said. "Why don't we do something special?"

“Special like what?”

“Like I’ll meet you somewhere.”

“I thought you had to stay there.”

“We could meet in the Soo,” I said. “That’ll keep me close enough to home.”

“Soo Michigan?”

“There’s a great hotel right on the river.”

“A hotel?”

“It’s called the Ojibway,” I said. “You ever been there?”

“No,” she said. “Never.”

“They’ve got great food. And it’s just... I mean, it’s been there forever. It’s the only fancy place in town.”

“You want us to stay there?”

“I’m just saying...” You’re blowing it, Alex. It’s all gonna fall apart, right here.

“This is a nice place? In Soo Michigan?”

A little jab there, I thought. Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan, is so much smaller than its sister city across the river. Soo Canada has more of everything.

“It’s a classy hotel,” I said. “I’d really like to see you, okay? It’s been a few days, and I wouldn’t mind spending some time with you.”

She didn’t say anything for a long moment. There was the faint hum on the line and nothing else.

“Yeah, why not?” she said. “It sounds nice.”

That’s how it happened. That hesitation, that long silence while she thought about it, I figured that was just natural. Just part of the dance, the getting to know someone new.

Of course it wasn’t that at all. It was something else entirely. But I didn’t know her well enough yet. I didn’t know the way she was, the way she has been for most of her life. The way she *had* to be. Above all, I didn’t know the one most important thing about her— that she never, ever hesitated that long about *anything*. Not unless it was something big.

Really big.

Damn it all to hell. If I had only known.

Chapter Two

Natalie Reynaud. That was her name. Apparently, some of her friends called her Natty, but I never did. Not once. Natty didn't work for me. Natty didn't sound miraculous enough. To me she was always Natalie.

She was a constable with the Ontario Provincial Police, stationed in a little town called Hearst, way the hell up there on the last road in the world, the Trans-Canada Highway. The first time I saw her, she was jumping out of a floatplane, having flown back from a remote outpost to look for five missing men. She had dark brown hair pinned up under her OPP hat. She had green eyes.

She didn't find those missing men that day. Or the next. Vinnie and I found them, in a way I was still having nightmares about. Then a senior constable named Claude DeMers came looking for us. He was Natalie's partner, but he came without her. DeMers ended up dead and Natalie ended up looking like a bad partner. It was something I knew a little bit about myself.

There was something else I knew, too. Natalie's partner didn't leave her behind just to protect her from a little danger. He left her behind because he had a secret of his own out there, buried in the ground with the dead men. So he came out alone to try to keep that secret in the dirt, and he ended up with a bullet in the back.

Natalie took an administrative leave of absence from the OPP. I went back home to Paradise, but I kept thinking about her. I found out she was living in Blind River, just a couple of hours away from the International Bridge. So I went to see her. It was New Year's Eve, with only a trace of snow on the ground. I drove across the bridge and followed the Queen's Highway due east, along the shore of the North Channel. I arrived at her doorstep with a bottle of champagne and something else—what I thought would be a final answer to all the questions I knew she was living with. I had lived with the same questions, after all, with my own partner gunned down right in front of my eyes, on a hot summer night back in Detroit, in that one-room apartment just off Woodward Avenue with the tin foil all over the walls.

I remembered the hell I had lived in for all those years afterward. I knew Natalie was in that same hell now. I thought I could give her a way out, the way out I never had.

Claude DeMers was buried a hero. He was the man who flew out to that lake to try to save the two Americans. When I told her the real story, I knew it would have to stay between us. When your partner's dead, you can't be the one to stand up and defame him. You can't point to his grave and say there lies a dirty cop. I knew that, but I figured what the hell. As long as *she* knew. Maybe she'd be able to sleep at night.

I had another reason to find her. I admit that. I sat in the dining room of that old farmhouse watching what the antique light did to her green eyes, and how it picked up a faint hint of red in her hair. We talked and then we drank the champagne and made an awkward toast to the new year at midnight. She finally told me she wouldn't mind if I stayed the night, just so she wouldn't have to be alone.

"I don't trust many people," she said to me that night.

"But you trust me."

"How do you know that?"

"I can tell," I said. Although, of course, I couldn't. I had no idea what she was thinking. In another

five minutes, I could have been back in my truck, heading home.

“That would be a miracle,” she said. “I mean a real miracle.”

“I think it already is,” I said. “Look how we met. And now here we are.”

“I guess I should thank you for coming out here, Alex. It was a completely insane thing to do. But I’m glad you did.”

I didn’t say anything then. I drank some more champagne and so did she. She had a way of looking up from her glass, eyeing me carefully, not like she was shy but maybe just the opposite. Like she was sizing me up. She asked me what sports I played, because it was obvious I was an old athlete. I showed off the “old” business and told her about my baseball career, such as it was. She told me she was a hockey player, back when a woman who played in college had nowhere to go with it. No women’s hockey in the Olympics, just back to the frozen pond in the backyard. It surprised me a little. I would soon find out that the game of hockey fit her perfectly.

And then, for whatever reasons had brought me to this house, on this one cold night, after the grandfather clock at the top of her stairs chimed twelve times and the new year began, we stood up at the same time and met in the middle of the room. Because of the things that had happened to her, and to me. All these things we had in common. Hell, and maybe a little champagne on an empty stomach. It all came together in that minute after midnight. We kissed first, then she took me by the hand and led me upstairs.

We stopped in front of one room. Inside there was a canopy bed with white lace and stuffed animals all over it. “No,” she said and pulled me past yet another room, with a double bed made up neatly with more white lace. I saw two portraits, one on each end table, but I couldn’t make out the faces in the dim light. “This one,” she said as she pulled me into the third room. She was strong and the way she was pulling me, it felt like she was angry at me, and maybe she was. Maybe that was part of it.

The room she pushed me into was different from the others. The light was on, the bed was unmade and there were two suitcases opened up on the floor with clothes spilling out of them. She turned the light off. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, she struck a match and lit three candles. Then with her back to me she unpinned her hair and let it fall down onto her shoulders. She took her white shirt off and then reached behind and unhooked her bra. She kept her jeans on for the moment, turning around to face me in the candlelight. It’s always been shoulders for me, more than any other part of a woman and hers were perfect. She had small breasts and her nipples stood out erect in the chilled air of the bedroom in the corner of this old, silent house. I took my shirt off as she watched me, and then she came close and kissed me again. I felt her skin against mine. Her hair smelled faintly of smoke and something sweet like cinnamon.

She pulled away and left the room. I stood there, not quite sure what to do. When she came back, her white panties glowed in the candlelight. She put something in my hand, a foil wrapper, and in the half-second it took to register, she knocked me backward onto the bed.

“That’s two minutes for cross-checking,” I said.

“Shut up and take your pants off.” She climbed on top of me.

“I can’t. That’s another two minutes for interference.”

“Just shut up,” she said, and then she slapped me lightly across the mouth. It may have been a love tap, on her scale anyway, but it got my attention. “Okay, no more jokes,” I said. I rolled her over and kissed her hard. She bit my lip and dug her fingernails into my back. Then it got serious.

Somehow, we ended up on the cold wooden floor with the sheets tangled all around us. She grabbed my hair with both hands when she came, holding on so tight it would make my head hurt for the rest of the night. Afterward, she sat back against the side of the bed. She didn’t collapse on me, didn’t put her head on my shoulder. She just rolled away from me and sat there with her eyes closed. In the candlelight I could see the beads of sweat on her neck.

We sat like that for a long time, until she finally opened her eyes. "So talk to me," she said.

"Okay," I said. ~~But then I had no idea what to say.~~

"Tell me more about yourself."

I gave her the whole rundown. Growing up in the Detroit suburbs, my mother dying when I was eight years old. My old man getting up every morning to work for Ford Motors. Going to single-A ball right out of high school, four years in the minors without a call-up. Good hands behind the plate, but struck out too much. Went after too many bad pitches.

And then being a cop in Detroit for eight years. Getting married and living in that little brick house in Redford. I stopped when I got to the part about Franklin, my old partner.

"Can we move to the bed?" she said. "My ass is getting cold on this floor."

We got up onto the bed, under the thick down comforter. She was finally close to me again. I could feel her soft skin and the heat from her body.

I told her about that summer night in Detroit. Tracking down the man who was harassing people at the hospital. His apartment with the aluminum foil all over the walls. Then the gun he pulled out from under the table, the gun he had found in the Dumpster. It was an Uzi, the gun of choice in Detroit in the mid-1980s.

"I watched my partner die," I said. "He was on the floor next to me. I watched the lights go out in his eyes."

"It doesn't sound like you had any chance to stop it."

"I've replayed it in my mind a thousand times," I said. "Ten thousand times. I could have drawn on that guy. I could have at least tried."

She shook her head. "No way. He already had the gun pointed at you."

"He was spaced out, Natalie. I might have been able to beat him."

"Just keep going. What happened next?"

I told her about my own injuries. Three bullets, one in the rotator cuff, the other nicking the top of the lung, the last one bouncing around like a pinball and ending up next to my heart. I showed her my scars. I told her that the last bullet, the one by my heart, was still there.

She touched my chest. "God," she said.

I told her about the bad years after that. Leaving the force, my marriage breaking up. Then those cabins up north, the ones my father had built, in this little town called Paradise, on the shores of Lake Superior. How I had gone up there, thinking I'd sell them off, but then deciding to stick around for a while. Something about the place. The absolute solitude. The desolate beauty.

I went fast through the rest of the story. Getting talked into trying out the private eye thing, and the wonderful experiences that brought me. Getting my ass kicked, almost freezing to death, watching my father's favorite cabin burn down. Right up to the recent business with Vinnie and his lost brother. She already knew that story. She was there.

"So how about you?" I finally said. "It's your turn."

"Tomorrow," she said. "I've got to sleep." She got up, wrapping herself in the sheet and leaving me under the comforter.

"Where are you going?"

"The other room. I can't sleep with someone else in the bed." She left the room, then poked her head back in. "Good night, Alex."

"Good night," I said. I thought about maybe leaving, just getting in the truck and driving back home. Instead I just stared at the strange ceiling for a while. One of the candles burned down to nothing, making it even darker. I fell asleep. That was the first night.

Having made our date at the hotel, all I could do was watch the snow fall and wonder how badly

would bury us. I tried to sleep, but the wind was whistling outside and making the windows rattle. I could hear a million tiny snowflakes being driven against the walls. At four in the morning, I got up and turned the outside light on. The snow was already up over the wheels of the truck.

“God damn,” I said. My breath fogged the window. “We’re gonna get buried.”

I knew what I had to do. I threw on some clothes and my coat and gloves. The snow stung my face as soon as I opened the door. I made my way to the truck, stepping through drifts that came to my knees. It was the last thing I wanted to do at that hour, but I knew I had to get out on the road to stay ahead of the snow. Once it got past a certain depth, I wouldn’t be able to plow it at all. This had happened exactly twice in the years I had lived up here. Both times, I had to wait for the county to send in excavators to dig me out. And a private access road with a few cabins was never at the top of their list.

I knocked most of the snow off the windshield, then climbed into the truck and started it up. The wheels spun a few times until they finally found some traction, thanks to a twelve-hundred-pound plow on the front and eight-hundred pounds of cinder block in the bed. I pushed my way out of my driveway and started up the road, through the snow-covered trees.

My windshield wipers were fighting a losing battle. During the night the snow had turned into thick heavy wet stuff that sticks to everything as soon as it lands. I cranked the defroster as high as it would go and tried to stay on the road, which was nothing but a rumor anyway. When I had finally worked my way to the last cabin, I tried to turn the truck around, got stuck a few times, used every bad word I knew and made up some, then finally got it pointed the opposite way. I pounded my way back, past the rentals, then my cabin, then Vinnie’s, all the way to the main road.

The snow was mocking me. It was dancing in my headlights and covering up my tracks as soon as I could make them.

I turned around and went back in for more. At least I’d go down fighting.

We had breakfast that next day, the first day of the new year. We didn’t talk about what had happened the night before. She went back to her work, wrapping up dinner plates and putting them in a cardboard box. This was her mission in life, she said. She wanted to use this time to pack up the old house, and to finally sell it. She had been putting it off for so long.

Her hair was pinned up again. She had gray sweats on. Working clothes. I offered to help her. She said she needed to be alone for a while.

She came over by the door and gave me a quick kiss on the mouth. Then I left.

By the time I got home, there was a message waiting on my machine.

“Sorry I was a little weird this morning,” she said. There was a pause. “It’s been a long time for me if you know what I mean. Give me a call in a couple of days, eh? If you feel like coming back out, I’ll make you dinner.”

That was it. I waited a couple of days. Three, to be exact. I tried not to think about her. It was one night. You were there and something happened and it was great and so what. You’ve got your own problems and she’s got hers.

When I finally called her, she apologized again, and asked me if I wanted to come back out for her beef stew.

“I think you should know,” I said. “My man Jackie does a beef stew that’ll knock you out.”

“So you’re saying you’ve got some high standards.”

“Yeah, but if you’ve got some Canadian beer in the house, you might win me over.”

“Molson Canadian,” she said. “A case in the fridge. Bottles, not cans.”

“I’m on my way.”

It was two and a half hours in the truck again, across the bridge and down the Queens Highway. C

course, up here that's nothing. You drive two and a half hours to buy your groceries.

~~It was still light out when I got there. She was wearing the same gray sweats. She had a white handkerchief wrapped around her head.~~

"You shouldn't have gotten all dressed up just for me," I said.

She pulled me inside and kissed me hard. A minute later we were upstairs, in the same bedroom. We went slowly this time. She took the handkerchief off her head and shook her hair. I ran my hands up her rib cage, caressing the soft flesh beneath her breasts. She closed her eyes.

She grabbed my hands as she moved against me. She worked at it harder and harder, all the while biting her lower lip. She looked at me once and then closed her eyes again. A great shudder ran through her body. Then she collapsed against me and whispered in my ear. "Oh God," she said. "What are you trying to do to me?"

We lay there without talking for a long time, as the sun went down and the light coming through the curtains changed the color in the room. It was the kind of light that usually makes you feel a little sad and tired, the light of a midwinter day that ends too quickly, with spring a long time away. But on that day it felt different.

"What's this from?" I said, running my finger along her eyebrow. I hadn't seen the scars on her face the first time, not in the dim light of New Year's Eve.

"Hockey, what else? I caught a stick there. Fourteen stitches."

"And here, too?" I touched the long line on her chin.

"I took a dive on the ice. Seventeen stitches."

"Don't they wear face guards up here?"

"In college you have to," she said. "But not out on the lakes. Face guards are for pussies. And Americans."

We rolled around a couple of times over that one. Then she got up and put her sweats back on. I couldn't help thinking, what kind of woman invites a man over and doesn't do anything to get fixed up? Maybe the kind who at the last moment was hoping nothing would happen between them? If that was it, her resolution lasted all of three seconds. Hell if I knew.

She served me her beef stew at the big dining room table, under the antique light with the five glowing lanterns. When she sat down across from me, I finally got her story. It's funny how you can distill your whole life down to a few minutes, telling it like it had a plot and a theme and a moral at the end. Or at least what will pass for a moral for the time being, until your whole life story is done.

"This house," she said, looking up at the ceiling. "It was my grandparents'. But it was my house too. I grew up here. My father ..."

She looked down for a moment.

"He was killed when I was six years old. He was shot in a bar. Apparently he was trying to protect somebody. Some woman was getting roughed up and he stepped in to help her. Anyway, I only have a couple of memories of him. Good memories, I guess. Him holding me up in the air and swinging me around. One Christmas when he bought me this big rocking horse. I think it's still in the attic."

She looked at the ceiling again.

"And your mother?"

She looked me in the eye. "What about her?"

"I'm just asking. I'm sorry, go ahead."

"My mother," she said, sitting back in her chair. "She didn't exactly get along with my grandparents. I guess it was kinda tough, living with your in-laws after your husband is dead, but she didn't try real hard to make it work. We moved out once when I was like twelve years old, but well..."

She stopped.

“What is it?” I said.

~~“Alex, you’ve got to understand ... Some things happened to me back then. I know it was a long time ago, but.. .”~~

I waited.

“Some things you don’t get over,” she said. “Maybe you get better at dealing with them. That’s all.”

“What happened?”

“My mother got remarried for a while. That’s when we moved out of here. My stepfather ... Well for now I’ll just say this, eh? He died a couple of years ago.”

“Natalie, did he—”

“He made a lot of money, too—after he left my mother for somebody else. He became some kind of real estate big shot or something. I don’t know exactly. All I know is that Albert DeMarco had a long and happy life. If there’s any kind of justice in that, somebody is going to have to explain it to me.”

My stomach started to burn. I wasn’t sure what to say.

“I finally ran away,” she said. “I came back here. My grandfather told Albert he’d have to kill him to take me away again.”

“So your mother ... Is she still around?”

“Yeah, she is. Although, hell, when’s the last time I even talked to her? I think it was when she called me to tell me Albert had died. I think she actually thought I’d be happy enough to start forgiving her.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” she said. “My grandparents were great, okay? They were the best. My grandfather, you should have seen him ...” She smiled at the memory. “He was so strong. So kind. He’s been gone a long time now, but I still miss him.”

She took a hit off her beer bottle and then put it back down.

“Anyway, as great as they were, I was still kind of lonely growing up. I was such an awkward kid. And shy, especially after everything that had happened to me.”

I could see it in her. As beautiful as she was on that night, I could see that kid in her face. A tomboy with a slight overbite and big eyebrows.

“But I loved playing hockey. I used to play with all the boys, and I was faster than most of them. When I started playing girl’s hockey in high school and then in college, it was okay, but you could never really hit anybody. I led my women’s hockey team in penalty minutes— I guess that sums me up pretty well, eh?”

I shook my head and smiled.

“After hockey, I wasn’t sure what to do with myself. But you know, whenever I thought about my stepfather ... I said to myself, why not become a police officer? Maybe help stop it from happening to somebody else. So I took the tests and joined the OPP. I don’t know how it works down there, but up here a woman can do pretty well.”

“You never got married?”

She looked at me. “No, Alex. I got close once. There was this other officer, Jimmy Natoli. That’s right, my name would have been Natalie Natoli. But he really wanted me to quit the force after we got married. I didn’t want to do that. Although maybe, looking back on it... I suppose I still have problems getting close to someone. After it fell apart, I was still on the force with him, so things got a little weird. That’s when I got shipped up to the Hearst station. I was thinking, great, look where they stuck me, way the hell up here. They partnered me with Claude DeMers, too, this ancient guy. They must really want to bury me up here.”

She took another drink.

“But then he turned out to be so great. It sounds kind of dumb, but with my grandfather gone ...”

was like I really needed him, you know? He tried to make things good for me. Until that business the lake.”

“Yeah,” I said. That part I knew.

“I swear, I’m cursed, Alex. Wherever I go, bad things happen.”

“Come on, Natalie.”

“But no matter what,” she said, “I always had this place to come back to. When my grandmother died, she left it to me. I hired somebody to come in and keep things working. Run the furnace, make sure the pipes didn’t freeze. But I was never sure what to do with it. I couldn’t bring myself to sell it. It was like my refuge from the world. But now ... I’ve been here for a few weeks, and I’m thinking maybe it’s time.”

“That’s why you’re doing all this packing.”

She nodded her head. “Yeah. But after I sell it, then what? I don’t know what the hell I’m going to do.”

I didn’t say anything. I sat there with her for a while until she got up to do the dishes. I grabbed a towel and dried while she washed. Later, we went to bed and this time we slept together, despite what she had said about always sleeping alone. I couldn’t stop thinking about what she had told me that day about her own scars and how they’d never heal completely. It helped me to understand her a little better, how she could be so close to me one moment and then suddenly a million miles away.

I worked with her on some more packing the next morning. Then I went home. I thought about her all the way home and all that day and that night. I sat at Jackie’s in front of the fire and I thought about her.

I had been alone too long. To a starving man, this sudden feast.

“You’ve got to keep your head on straight,” I said to the flames. “Or you’re gonna be in big trouble.”

I kept plowing. The sun came up, somewhere behind the snow clouds, giving the world a muted glow and no warmth. I rumbled down the main road to fill up the tank. There were a few poor souls out trying to shovel in the dim light, but aside from that it was quiet in Paradise.

I pumped the gas and paid Ruthie, the lady who owned the place. She told me I looked different and I agreed with her. “It’s been a long night,” I said.

“No, I mean there’s something else.”

I knew exactly what she was talking about, but I left before she could figure it out. I got back in the truck and pulled out right behind one of the county trucks. He had his big blade down and he was kicking that snow at least twenty feet in the air. I saw one car get completely buried, and I hoped the guy who had been dumb enough to park it by the road had a good memory.

I hit my road again and ran the plow through for the hundredth time. I had to keep at it, or I’d lose the road completely. With the new snow, the snowmobilers would finally be coming. As long as I had to put up with the noise, I might as well be making some money from it.

The snow started to let up. I finally got ahead of it, and made one more pass, down the road and back, before I stopped at my cabin. I had some coffee and splashed some water on my face. The phone rang. It was Natalie.

“Alex,” she said. “Are you getting a lot of snow?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t noticed.”

“Yeah, right. You still think we should try this today?”

“I’ll be there,” I said. “I promise.”

Then a silence, another hesitation that should have told me something important, but didn’t.

“Okay,” she said. “I’ll see you there. Drive carefully.”

“You, too,” I said. Then I hung up.

~~Now there’s only one problem, I thought. Make that two. I look like shit and I feel like shit. I took most of my clothes off and collapsed on the bed. Plenty of time to grab a little sleep, I thought. A little sleep so I could feel human again, then a hot shower, get dressed, and go over there. Plenty of time.~~

When I woke up, the clock read 2:14 and it was snowing like crazy again. “Son of a bitch,” I said. I got out of bed and looked outside. There was already another eight inches of snow on the ground. “Son of a bitch bitch bitch bitch bitch.”

I called Natalie. There was no answer. I left her a message, told her I was still at home, and that I needed to plow again, and that I’d still try to make it. But hell, if it was this bad out her way, maybe she shouldn’t even try. Assuming she hadn’t left yet.

But if she wasn’t answering her phone, she had to be on the road already. If she was on the road, then I was going to be on the road, too. Just plow a couple more times, I thought. Plow, then come home and call her again. Maybe call the hotel, see if she’s there yet. If she is, get cleaned up, put some clothes on. Hell, go plow a couple more times if you have to, then head to the Soo. If the road gets buried, so be it. I’ll deal with it tomorrow.

I headed out into the snow again. It was getting harder and harder to plow. There was no place to plow the new snow, with the banks already four feet high. The road was getting narrower and narrower, but as long as one vehicle could get through, I figured I’d be okay. It’s not like I’d ever have a lot of traffic.

I went back and forth three times, and then headed back inside. It was hard just to walk to my front door. The snow was up to my knees now, and the wind was blowing everything sideways. I fought my way inside and slammed the door. It was insanity to even think I’d be going anywhere. Absolutely insanity. So of course I’d be going. I called Natalie’s number again. I let it ring a dozen times.

“It’s ringing,” I said. “That means the phone lines are working, right? She’s just not there.”

I pictured her out on the road. I hoped she wasn’t stuck somewhere.

I called the hotel. She hadn’t arrived yet. It was after three o’clock now. God damn it, where was she?

Relax, Alex. She’s on the way. She’s taking her time.

I took a shower and shaved. I slapped some cologne on my face, felt it burning my skin. I put on an undershirt, took one look at it in the mirror and then tried to find a different undershirt. Twenty minutes later, I was finally dressed and ready to go.

I went outside and fought my way back to the truck again. The wind was screaming. The snow lashed at my face. “I’m going,” I said to myself. “I’m going.”

I had to brush the snow off the windshield again. I backed out and put my plow down for one more run. “I’m going. I’m going. I’m going.”

I drove through town. There was nobody, no sign of life until I saw the lights on at Jackie’s place. I kept driving. My wipers were clogged with snow already, and I could feel my tires losing traction every few feet. I fishtailed and swerved and swore at the snow.

There’s a stretch of road a couple of miles south of town—it runs along a narrow strip of land, with the lake on one side and a pond on the other. It was totally exposed to the wind, so I figured it would be a little tricky. As soon as I got close to it, the truth finally caught up to me.

I wasn’t going any farther.

I hadn’t turned my radio on since the day before, so I hadn’t heard it. I didn’t *want* to hear it. But now as I looked at the great expanse of snow—I couldn’t even guess where the snow-covered land lay between the snow-covered ice of the lake and the snow-covered ice of the pond—I knew that there had to be a state of emergency all through the county. Even if I got through this stretch, and broke the lake and tried to get to the Soo, I’d get stuck somewhere else. It was fifty miles if I stayed on the main

roads, and even if most of M-123 was sheltered by the trees, as soon as M-28 broke out of the Hiawatha National Forest, it was all open ground. They wouldn't even try to plow it until the snow lay up and the wind stopped blowing.

I hit the steering wheel with both palms, and then spent the next ten minutes trying to turn the truck around. When I was finally pointed north again, I drove back into town. There was no rush now. I went five miles per hour instead of my daredevil ten miles per hour. When I got to Jackie's place, I looked in again and saw the lights and pictured the fireplace and a cold Canadian. I pulled into the parking lot.

There were six people in the place, all locals who had walked down the road for a little company. They all looked up at me when I opened the door and cheered. It was that kind of night, when walking fifty yards was a cause for celebration.

"Alex!" Jackie said from behind the bar. "Did you walk all the way down here?"

"Can I use your phone?"

"Help yourself," he said, pushing the phone across the bar. As I got closer, he did a double take and stared at me.

"What did you do?"

"Huh?" I dialed Natalie's number.

"You did something."

I shook my head at him. Natalie wasn't answering.

"You did," he said. "Something's different."

I dialed the Ojibway Hotel again. I got the same desk clerk, and this time he told me, yes, Natalie Reynaud was there. I waited while he called her room.

"Alex," Jackie said. "You did something to your hair. That's what it is."

Yeah, I thought. My hair. The box said it would look totally natural, and that nobody would notice. Totally natural, my ass.

"It's just a little thing for my gray," I said.

"Just a little thing? You look like a lounge singer."

I gave him a look and wondered how the day could get any worse. Then I heard her voice on the phone.

"Alex, is that you?"

"Yeah, it's me." I tried to pull the phone off the bar, but the cord wasn't long enough. I waved Jackie away, but he didn't move an inch.

"Oh my God," Jackie said. "Now I know."

"They said the roads are all closed out your way," Natalie said on the phone. "I barely made it here myself. I think they closed the bridge right after I got across."

"This explains everything," Jackie said. "I should have known."

If I could have reached him, I would have grabbed him by the collar and choked him.

"I'm sorry," I said into the phone, trying to wave him away again. "It was a bad idea."

"Don't worry about it, Alex. It's kinda nice here, eh? A nice hotel. It's really good to be out of the house for a while. I was going stir crazy."

"I shouldn't have asked you to come out."

Jackie just stood there watching me, shaking his head.

"Alex, I'm fine," she said. "Really. I'll just go downstairs and get something to eat. Watch the snow for a while. If you think you might be able to get here tomorrow—"

"Yes," I said. "I'll be there tomorrow."

Jackie looked at the ceiling and sighed dramatically. I looked around for something to throw at him.

"Okay, then," she said. "I'll stay here tonight and I'll see you tomorrow. Call me in the morning."

eh?"

~~"I'll do that," I said. Then there was a long silence while I tried to think of something else to say.~~

"I'll see you tomorrow," she said. We both said goodbye and hung up.

"A woman," Jackie said.

"I'm going to kill you."

"A woman. This is why you've been acting so weird lately."

"Yeah, and this is why I didn't mention it before, Jackie. I know how you are about women."

I didn't want to have the whole discussion again with Jackie, the man who lived through the worst divorce of the twentieth century. But it was coming whether I wanted it or not, so I just asked him for a beer and went over to the fireplace. As long as I'd be staying put in Paradise, I knew I should be back out there plowing my road. But a little break wouldn't hurt.

So that's where I was when the sun went down that evening. I was sitting by the fire in the Glasgow Inn, my usual spot, but on this day not at all where I wanted to be. The wind kept blowing and the snow was still coming hard, like it would never end.

This is why the Ojibwas prayed to the winter every year, asking for mercy, asking that the spring would come quickly, and that the old man and the young child would both live to see it.

The snow finally stopped around midnight. But the damage had already been done. I didn't even know it yet. As I slept alone in my bed, I didn't even know what I had done.

Everything that was about to happen would begin that night. And it would all be on my head.

Chapter Three

The time passed between the two of us, leading up to this night at the Ojibway Hotel. I had been going over there three or four times a week, for how long was it then? A month? Five weeks? You add up the actual waking hours we spent together, and it wasn't that much. But she was always there in my head. If I wasn't on my way over there or on my way back, I was thinking about what she was doing and when I'd be seeing her again.

And me, I was virtually the only person she saw, the only person she ever talked to. She'd go down into Blind River, pick up some things, go right back home, work on the house. That's all she did. She said it helped her forget everything that had happened. She had to put it all behind her before she could think about what to do next. That's what she told me.

It made me wonder. Was I just a part of that? Another way to forget?

It got strange sometimes. She'd be doing something and she'd look up at me, like I had just showed up and she had no idea what I was doing there. I wouldn't hear from her for three or four days. Then she'd call me up and ask me how soon I could be there. She was hungry and she wanted to eat dinner with me right away.

Then we'd go upstairs. It was always the same room. The same bed or floor or a little of both. The last couple of times, we'd lain there and she'd be looking off at nothing, like she was a million miles away. She'd snap out of it and give me a quick smile, and then without a word she'd get up and go downstairs.

It wasn't real. That's what I finally started to realize. The whole thing was like a spell, or a daydream, or something you'd make up on a lonely night. Wouldn't it be nice if there were someone right here, right now ...

I've never left well enough alone, not once in my entire life, so I decided it was time to put the thing to the test, to get it out in the daylight and to see what happened. So I asked her if she'd like to come down to Michigan sometime. Just mentioned it. That she'd never seen the cabins, or Paradise, or the Glasgow Inn. She'd have to meet Jackie, and, of course, Vinnie she already knew. But it would be good to see him again, to see how well he was recovering.

She didn't say no. She said, yeah, that would be great. We'll have to do that sometime. Sometime soon. Maybe after she got some more work done on the house.

"Soon" never came, until the night the snowstorm hit and I was stuck here in Paradise. So it got postponed another day. Now, finally, maybe I'd find out if this whole thing was real after all. And maybe I didn't really want to find out.

That's the kind of soap opera nonsense that was going through my mind as I finally made my way out to the Soo. I had called her that morning. She said it was a little strange sleeping there in the kind of sized bed, listening to the snowstorm. Being a cop didn't help. If anything, it makes a woman realize all the more how vulnerable she can be. So she never did like staying in hotel rooms by herself. I told her I hoped we could change the arrangements that night. Just saying that out loud, seeing how it sounded, seeing how she responded to it. She told me to hurry up and get over there.

I had to plow again, of course, so I didn't get out until after lunchtime. Even then the main roads were still a mess. It took me a good two hours to get there, pounding my way through the new snowdrifts and then crawling along behind one of the county trucks.

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