

A winter scene featuring a snow-covered road winding through a dense forest of evergreen trees. The trees are heavily laden with snow, and the sky is a pale, overcast blue. In the distance, a dark car with its emergency lights on is driving away on the road.

TAMARACK COUNTY

A NOVEL

WILLIAM KENT
KRUEGER

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *TRICKSTER'S POINT*

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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Writers are often beggars, especially those of us who work in the crime genre. There's so much that we don't know. When we need some vital information on a subject about which we're ignorant, what do we do? We go begging, of course.

In writing this book, I was so very fortunate to have had the generous help of folks with long experience and great expertise in areas where my own knowledge is next to nothing.

Thanks, first of all, to Deputy Julie Collman, of the Cook County Sheriff's Office. Her advice and counsel concerning search and rescue procedures and other details of rural law enforcement proved tremendously helpful in all my thinking in this story. If I've made any errors in this regard, they are, most assuredly, my own.

Thanks as well to my friend the orthopedic surgeon Dr. Greg A. Brown for his good guidance in emergency medical procedures, gunshot trauma, thoracic surgery, and surgical recovery.

As many of my readers know, I do all my creative writing in coffee shops. Is there a more creative atmosphere? So a huge thanks to Steve and Christine Finnegan and their staff at the Java Train, and to Dave Lawrence and his baristas at The Coffee Grounds. Not only do these folks serve up a great cup of joe, but they always make me feel so very welcome and never give me a hard time when I commandeer a table and chair for way too long.

Finally, I can never thank the Anishinaabeg enough for their generosity and their inspiration. I hope that in some small way my stories repay a portion of the debt I owe them.

Like many men and women who've worn a badge for a good part of their lives, Corcoran Liam O'Connor was cursed. Twice cursed, in reality. Cursed with memory and cursed with imagination.

In his early years, Cork had worked for the Chicago PD, the South Side. Then he'd spent a couple of decades in the khaki uniform of the Tamarack County Sheriff's Department, first as a deputy and finally as sheriff. He'd seen the aftermath of head-on collisions, of carelessness or drunkenness around farm or lumbering equipment, of bar fights with broken bottles and long-bladed knives, of suicide and murder in every manner. And so the first curse: he remembered much, and much of his memory was colored in blood.

The second curse came mostly from the first. Whenever he heard about a violent incident, he inevitably imagined the details.

And so, when he finally understood the truth of what happened to Evelyn Carter, he couldn't keep himself from envisioning how her final moments must have gone. This is what, in his mind's eye, he saw:

It was seven o'clock in the evening, ten days before Christmas. The streets of Aurora, Minnesota, were little valleys between walls of plowed snow. It was snowing again, lightly at that moment, a soft covering that promised to give a clean face to everything. The shops were lit with holiday lights and Christmas trees and Santa figures and angels. There were people on the sidewalks, carrying bags and bundles, gifts for under the trees. They knew one another, most of them, and their greetings were sincere good wishes for the season.

Evelyn Carter was among them. She was small, not quite seventy. All her life she'd been a good-looking woman and had taken good care of herself, so she was attractive still. She wore an expensive coat trimmed with fox fur, purchased when she'd visited her daughter in New York City in October. On her head was a warm gray bucket hat made of rabbit's fur. In her left hand, she gripped a shopping bag filled with little gifts, stocking stuffers. A cell phone was cradled in the gloved palm of her right hand, and she stood on the sidewalk, looking at a photo of her grandson dressed as a shepherd for the church pageant this coming Sunday. When the door of Lilah Buell's Sweet Shoppe opened at her back, the smell of cinnamon and cider ghosted around her, and she smiled in the wash of the good spirits that seemed to her a beacon of hope in an otherwise dark winter season.

Her big black Buick was parked on Oak Street, and by the time she reached it and set her shopping bag in the passenger seat, she was tired. Evelyn had a good but troubled heart. She carried nitroglycerin pills in a tiny bottle in her purse. She was feeling some uncomfortable pressure in her chest, and when she'd finally seated herself behind the wheel, she sat for a moment, letting a nitro pill dissolve under her tongue. She hadn't yet started the engine, and as she sat, the window gradually fogged from her slow, heavy breathing.

She didn't see the figure approaching her door.

She was thinking, maybe, about her grandson in Albuquerque, or her daughter in New York

City, saddened that all her family had fled Tamarack County and moved so far away. She knew the reason. He was at home, probably staring at the clock, complaining aloud to the empty room that she'd been gone too long and had spent too much. And if it was, in fact, her husband she was thinking of, she probably wasn't smiling and perhaps her chest hurt a little more. The windows were heavy with condensation, and maybe she felt suddenly isolated and alone, parked a block from the bustle of Center Street and the welcoming lights of the shops. So she finally reached out and turned on the engine. She was undoubtedly startled when the shadow loomed against the window glass near the left side of her face. And that damaged thumper of hers probably started hammering a little harder.

Then she heard the familiar voice. "Hey, Evelyn, you okay in there?"

She pressed the button, and the window glided down.

"Hello, Father Ted."

It was the priest from St. Agnes, Father Ted Green, bending toward the window and blowing foggy puffs from where he stood on the curb.

"I saw you get in and then nothing," he explained with a smile that conveyed both reassurance and concern. "I was afraid maybe you were having some difficulty."

He was young and wore a black leather jacket, which looked good on him. To Evelyn Carter there'd always been something a little James Dean about him (she was fond of saying so over coffee with her friends), and although that unsettled her a bit during Mass, she didn't find it at all unpleasant.

"Just tired, Father," she replied.

His gaze slid to the shopping bag in the passenger seat. "Busy afternoon, looks like. I hope you're planning on going straight home and getting a little rest."

"A little rest would be good," she agreed.

"All right, then. See you Sunday. And please give my best to the Judge." He straightened and stood erect, smiling a kind of benediction, and he watched as she pulled carefully into the street and drove slowly away. Later, when he reported this conversation, he would say how wan she looked and that he continued to worry.

She headed past the high school and the gravel pit and took County 6 into the low, wooded hills west of town. The snow was coming down more heavily than, and maybe she was concerned that it began to fall in earnest, the way it had so often that December, she'd be trapped, alone with her husband until the plows cleared the rural roads. If this was what she was thinking, there was a good chance she was frowning.

Two miles out of Aurora, she approached what everyone in Tamarack County called the Orly cutoff. It was washboard dirt and gravel, but it was the quickest way to get to the tiny crossroad known as Orly, if you were in a hurry. Evelyn Carter and her husband, Ralph, whom everyone except Evelyn called the Judge, lived on the cutoff, whose official name was 127th Street. Through a thick stand of birch and aspen long ago blown bare of leaves, Evelyn could see the lights of her home, which had been built a good hundred yards back from the road at the end of a narrow tongue of asphalt. Their nearest neighbor was a full quarter of a mile farther north, and to Evelyn, the lights of her home looked cold and isolated and uninviting. When the Judge finally passed away she was planning to sell the house and move to New York City, to live where she had family and where there were people all around her instead of trees and emptiness.

As she approached her driveway, she slowed. It was a difficult angle, and the Buick was enormous and felt awkward in its maneuvering. She always took the turn with great care. When

the Judge was with her, he usually complained that she drove like an old woman.

Once she'd negotiated the turn, she stopped abruptly. Someone was kneeling in the middle of the drive. In the headlights, the snow was like a gauzy curtain, and what lay behind it was vague and uncertain. She couldn't quite make out who it was on his knees on the snow-packed asphalt. Her head bowed as if in prayer. But then she recognized the red wool cap she'd knitted for her husband the Christmas before, and although she couldn't make sense of the whole scene, she relaxed and rolled down her window and called out, "What are you doing there, Ralph?"

The figure didn't move or speak.

"For heaven's sake, are you all right?" Evelyn was suddenly afraid. Not for her own safety, but for the well-being of her husband. The truth was that, as his faculties had declined and his reliance on her had increased, she'd often imagined his passing, imagined it as if it were the pardon of a long prison sentence. But faced with the actuality of some crisis, her natural response was concern. She unsnapped her seat belt, opened the door, and slid from the car, leaving the engine running as she hurried toward the kneeling figure.

Too late, she saw, in the glare of the headlights, the flash of the knife arcing upward to meet her. The blade, large and sharp and made for gutting deer, sliced easily through her fox-fur-trimmed coat and lodged deep in her belly, where the ice-cold steel quickly warmed. And although she was probably too stunned to speak, maybe with a final bewilderment in a life that she'd never really understood anyway, she looked into the face she knew well and asked herself the unanswerable question: *Why?*

That Christmas, Anne O'Connor came home early.

Cork was working in his office in the back of Sam's Place, his burger joint housed in a Quonset hut on the edge of Aurora, along the shoreline of Iron Lake. She walked in unannounced. When he heard the door open, he figured it was Jenny bringing Waaboo to see his grandfather, or maybe Stephen, although it was too early for his son to be out of school yet. Anne standing there surprised him.

"Hey, kiddo," he said, rising from the table where he had documents scattered. "Didn't expect you for another week."

She was shouldering a backpack, and her hair and dark blue peacoat were dusted with snow. She smiled as Cork came to her, but it wasn't the kind of smile that told him she was happy. He hugged her, felt the chill of that December day on her coat and hair and face.

With her still in his arms, he asked, "How'd you get here?"

"I walked from Pflugleman's." Which was the drugstore that doubled as a bus depot in Aurora.

"You should have called."

"I tried home. No answer," she said.

He felt her wanting to pull free, and he let her go.

"Jenny and Waaboo are in Duluth for the afternoon," he told her. "Christmas shopping. They should be home anytime now. You could have called me here."

She let the pack slide from her shoulder to the floor of the old Quonset hut. "I've been on a bus for two days. It felt good to walk."

"Take your coat off," he said. "Sit down. Would you like some coffee?"

"Thanks, Dad."

She hung her peacoat on one of the wall pegs near the door and took a chair at the table.

The Quonset hut was divided into two parts. The front housed Sam's Place, which he operated from the first of May until mid-November, more or less, and from which he served the best burgers in the North Country. The back was a kind of living area and office space for his work as a private investigator. It had a little kitchen, a bathroom, a table with chairs, a couch that made into a bed for those nights when he worked late. On a small desk in one of the corners, he kept a computer with an Internet connection.

He went to the kitchen counter, where there was still half a pot of hot coffee, and took a mug from the cupboard. As he poured, he studied his younger daughter.

When she was growing up, Anne had two dreams. One was to be the first female quarterback for the Fighting Irish. The other was to become a nun. She never played for Notre Dame, but as she sometimes put it, she was working hard to make the God squad. After early graduation from St. Ansgar College, she'd been accepted as a pre-affiliate by the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, an order well known for its activism in issues related to justice and peace. She'd spent six months working at St. Bonaventure, an Indian mission and school in Thoreau, New Mexico, while she

prayed and meditated on her calling. Last summer, she'd been accepted for affiliation and had gone to San Jose, California, to have the experience of the religious community located there and learn more about the mission and spirit of the sisters as she continued to prepare for the novitiate. The whole O'Connor family was looking forward to seeing her at Christmas. And now here she was, early. But Cork wasn't sure that was a good thing.

"Still take it black, Annie?"

She nodded, wordless, which was unlike her.

He brought her the mug, moved some papers to clear a space, and set it down. She just looked at it.

Anne had always reminded her father of a leather bootlace—lithe, slender, tough. That dream of hers to become a quarterback for Notre Dame? If she'd really wanted to pursue it, Cork knew absolutely that she'd have given it one hell of a good shot. She had red hair, which she'd begun keeping closely cropped. Every year, by summer's end, her face was a field of freckles. She had light brown eyes that could be the softest things you'd ever gazed into or, when she was angry or fired up, could be hard as flint. At that moment, staring into her coffee mug, they just looked lost.

Cork took the chair he'd been sitting in before she arrived. "So," he said. "They let you leave early? Time off for good behavior?"

Anne didn't smile. She didn't lift her eyes either, just shifted them to the papers that littered the table. "A case?"

He nodded, but didn't explain. "Everything okay?" he asked instead.

Then he simply waited. One of the things Cork had learned in his days of interviewing suspects was that silence alone could often get what a dozen questions couldn't.

Anne, apparently, knew the same thing. Probably she'd heard her father say it at the dinner table when she was a kid. Cork was always surprised to find that his children actually listened to what he said. She finally looked up at him. "I'm not ready to talk about it."

When she was younger, he might have pushed her more, used his authority as her father to pry from her the secret of whatever was clearly troubling her. But she was a grown woman now, twenty-three, and her life and the secrets that life held were her own. Although he couldn't push aside his concern, he stuffed his questions away, at least for the moment.

He reached out and put his hand over hers. "It's good to have you home."

* * *

It was full dark by the time Jenny and Waaboo came home. Cork had begun to worry just a little because the snow, which had been falling lightly and intermittently during much of the day, had become an honest to God storm. He was at the house on Gooseberry Lane and had dinner going, chili, one of the things he knew how to make without much fear of disaster. As night had drawn on and the snowfall had become heavier, he'd found himself peering out the kitchen window more and more frequently. He was relieved when the lights of Jenny's Subaru finally swung into the drive.

They came in a couple of minutes later, little Waaboo in the lead. He was almost two and a half years old, big and floppy-dog clumsy, always running everywhere full-bore, like a fullback. He wore a stocking cap and a thick, quilted coat, and little red sneakers. In just the time it had taken for him to walk from the garage to the house, he'd been covered with snow head to foot. He ran straight at Cork and almost knocked his grandfather over when he grabbed Cork's legs in a hug.

"Baa-baa," he said. He could, by then, have called Cork "Grandpa" if he'd wanted, but he liked Baa-baa, which, when he was younger, was all he could manage. His legal name was Aaro.

Small dog O'Connor. His Ojibwe name was Waaboozoon, which meant little rabbit. Generally, the O'Connors simply called him Waaboo.

"Hey, big man." Cork lifted him and could smell peanut butter and crackers on his breath.

Jenny was right behind him, closing the door against the storm. "Whoa," she said, stamping snow onto the rug in front of the entryway. "It's getting serious out there. This wasn't in the forecast."

"I was beginning to worry," Cork told her and put Waaboo down.

"I thought about calling, but I didn't want to pull over." She shed her coat and hung it beside the door, then said, "Waaboo, come here, guy. Let's get you out of those snowy things."

He barreled back to her. She caught him up and, as she removed the outer layers, said, "Where's Stephen?"

"Took Trixie for a walk. With Annie."

"Anne? She's home?"

Cork went back to the stove to stir the chili.

"Wonderful," she said. When her father didn't immediately agree, she looked up from unzipping Waaboo's coat. "Isn't it?"

He shrugged. "She doesn't want to talk about it yet. To me anyway. I'm sure you'll know what's up before I do."

They ate dinner around the table in the dining room. It felt a lot like the old days, when the kids were younger and their mother was still alive, except that Anne was noticeably quiet. Nobody pressed her. After dinner, she and Jenny volunteered to do the dishes while Stephen finished his homework. Cork gave Waaboo a bath and got him ready for bed. He sat with his grandson on his lap in the rocking chair in Waaboo's room and read *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* three times. Then Jenny stepped in and took it from there.

Downstairs, Stephen and Anne were talking quietly at the kitchen table, the cookie jar between them and each with a tumbler of milk. They shut up when Cork came in, and he figured they were discussing whatever it was that had caused Anne to come home early and that she was reluctant—or maybe afraid—to tell him. Cork didn't think of himself as an ogre, but he knew he could come on too strong sometimes. And the kids had always been close. So it didn't surprise him that Anne would have confided in them already while she figured out how to spill to her father whatever it was that weighed on her. But that didn't mean he liked being left out in the cold.

"Can I join you?" he asked.

"Sure," Anne said. "There's something I want to talk to you about."

At last, Cork thought and reached for a chair.

Before he could sit down, the phone on the kitchen counter rang. He answered it with "O'Connors."

"Cork, it's Marsha Dross."

The Tamarack County sheriff.

"Hey, Marsha, what's up?"

"I'm calling out Search and Rescue. We've got a woman missing in this storm."

"Who?"

"Evelyn Carter. She was supposed to be home several hours ago. Didn't show. A snowmobile found her car abandoned over on the Old Babbitt Road. No sign of Evelyn. We're going out looking."

"I'll be there in fifteen minutes." He hung up and turned back to the kitchen table. "I've got to go."

go."

"What's up, Dad?" Stephen asked.

"Evelyn Carter's lost out there in that storm. The sheriff wants Search and Rescue on it."

And that's when Cork understood that something was really wrong in Anne's world. Because normally she would have been concerned about this woman they all knew and would have promised to pray for Evelyn's safety and well-being. As it was, she simply stared at her father and looked greatly relieved to have him gone.

There was a poem by Robert Frost, the only poet whose work Cork really got, which talked about the debate over whether the world would end in fire or in ice. In Minnesota, in late December, folks usually hoped for fire.

It wasn't end-of-the-world cold, not yet, but they were dressed for it, those who'd responded to the call from Sheriff Dross. They gathered five miles outside Aurora, on the Old Babbitt Road. It was rural, narrow, a winding track through alternating stands of thick pine and poplar. There were some good-size hills in the area, slopes of exposed rock almost as old as the earth itself. No illumination, not even starlight on that snow-blown night. It was like being locked inside a deep freeze, and if Evelyn Carter was out there somewhere, Cork didn't hold out a lot of hope for her.

Her car had been pulled to the side of the road, the keys still in the ignition. The gas gauge read empty. Dross had Deputy George Azevedo try to start the big Buick. Nothing. Bone dry. Why, on a night like that, Evelyn Carter had driven an automobile without sufficient fuel down a godforsaken road, no one at the scene had a clue. Nor did the Judge, who was at home but in communication with Dross. Where the Judge was concerned, communication usually meant listening to him rant, and Cork could tell from Dross's end of her cell phone conversation and the expression on her face that the Judge was giving her an earful.

She ended the call and stared at the Buick. "He says she filled it up yesterday and hasn't driven it much since. At least, not as far as he knows. He's got no idea why she would have driven out here."

"Lost?" Cliff Aichinger, a member of the S and R team, offered.

"Maybe," Dross said. "Or maybe confused. She's almost seventy."

"Hell, that's young," Richard Lefebver, another team member, said. He was well into his sixties himself. "She's still one sharp cookie."

"My uncle had a stroke last year," Aichinger replied. "Didn't show anything, but he started getting lost whenever he went outside the house. Couldn't keep track of where he was. Young guy too, only seventy-one."

"A possibility," Dross said.

"Does she have a cell phone?" Cork asked.

"In her purse, which she left on the passenger seat in front."

"She didn't call anyone?"

"We checked it. The last call in or out was five-fifteen this evening, from her son in Albuquerque. He sent a photo of her grandson. Nothing after that."

They stood in a cluster a good fifty yards away from the abandoned vehicle. Dross didn't want any of the S and R team any closer, at least for the moment. She had a couple of her deputies trying to find tracks that might have been buried under the new snowfall, and she didn't want the searchers messing up the scene with their own boot prints. There were no homes along that particular stretch of road, no summer cabins, nothing to offer the hope of shelter to an old woman.

lost in a storm in a gasless car.

"Any idea how long the Buick's been here?" Cork asked.

"Adam Beyer found it almost two hours ago. He was on his snowmobile, heading toward the Vermilion Spur trailhead, a quarter mile north. He said the snow on the hood was already a couple of inches thick, so the engine must have been cold for quite a while. If she's wandering out there in the woods somewhere, she's been lost a good three, maybe four hours now."

"Could be she just took off walking down the road looking for help," Cork suggested.

Dross shook her head. "I had Azevedo drive a fifteen-mile stretch. No sign of her. If she used most of a tank of gas and ended up out here in the middle of nowhere for no reason that anyone can discern, she's probably disoriented, for some reason. Since she's not on the road, my bet is that she's stumbled into the woods or down a lane that she hoped might lead to a cabin."

"You pulling Gratz in on this?" Cork asked.

Orville Gratz kept and trained search dogs. A number of agencies in the heavily forested North Country relied on him and the sensitive noses of his canines.

"He went to Duluth to Christmas-shop. He's on his way back now. He'll come as soon as he can."

* * *

The wind had picked up, and in the beams of the lanterns and flashlights, the snow had begun to dance in a way that, if the situation had been less serious, might have made Cork think of sugarplum fairies. As it was, he was reminded of wraiths.

Lefebver said, "We should've brought our snowmobiles."

"If she's in these woods," Dross said, "she probably hasn't gone far. And if she calls out, the racket of a snowmobile will drown her voice. I want this done on foot first."

Since Thanksgiving, plows had already mounded the snow a good three feet along the edges of the road. Beyond those ragged barriers, what lay on the ground would have reached above Evelyn Carter's knees. In any of the deep swales common to the area, the drifted snow might easily have buried her up to her belly or chest. With the wind that had risen, if she'd fallen, the snow would have swallowed Evelyn Carter whole.

Azevedo and Deputy Pender came back down the road from the Buick. When they got to Dross, Azevedo said, "Nothing."

"Whatever tracks there were, the snow's filled them in and covered them," Pender added.

"Okay," Dross said. "Let's begin at the car."

There were a dozen involved in the search, most of them members of Tamarack County Search and Rescue. Dross had called the State Patrol, who'd promised a couple of troopers, but they hadn't arrived yet. She assigned Azevedo and Pender to walking the Old Babbitt Road, checking for any sign of Evelyn along the shoulders. The rest of the men put on their snowshoes, spaced themselves about fifty feet apart, and moved into the woods to the south. They all had good lanterns or powerful flashlights and went slowly, sweeping the areas ahead of and between them. Six inches of new snow had already fallen that evening, and it was still coming down hard. In the woods, the wind wasn't so strong, but if Evelyn Carter had stumbled and just lain there, Cork knew she could easily have been covered. So he looked not only for the woman and for her tracks but also for any unusual contour of the snow that might indicate something beneath.

They didn't talk. As it was, the forest was alive with noises. The big wind ran through the pine trees and spruce and poplar with a sound like the rush of floodwater, and the branches creaked and

groaned and scraped against one another, and it made Cork think of skeletons going at it in a free-for-all. He'd worn his down parka but kept the hood off his head so that he could hear better in case Evelyn tried to cry out.

They went a quarter of a mile, then Dross had them turn back and regroup at the Buick. Azevedo and Pender were already there with no good news. The deputies joined the others, and everyone entered the woods to the north.

The wind was stronger now, and even in the protection among the trees, the snow moved like something alive. Cork found himself thinking about another search he'd been a part of many years earlier, when a young woman named Charlotte Kane had gone out on a snowmobile on New Year's Eve and never come back. The search had been hindered by a blizzard that had roared out of the Dakotas, and Cork had been caught in it, caught in a whiteout, and might have become lost himself except that he'd been guided by a presence that had remained hidden in the storm, something of someone he'd never been able to identify but who'd shown him the way. When Cork was a boy, an old friend named Sam Winter Moon had once told him that there were more things in the forest than a man could ever see with his eyes, more things than he could ever hope to understand. It was a piece of wisdom that, as a grown man, Cork believed absolutely.

Charlotte Kane's body hadn't been found until the snow had begun to melt the following spring. And it had been clear that a force of nature hadn't claimed her. Charlotte Kane had been murdered.

As he made his way carefully through the woods with the full weight of the storm muscling against him, Cork said a silent prayer for Evelyn Carter, prayed that she'd be found, found soon, and found alive.

They came to a clearing, where the wind, unhindered, lifted and blew the snow into an impenetrable wall. They paused before moving forward, regrouped so that no one was out of sight of anyone, and then they went ahead. They hadn't gone far when Azevedo let out a shout.

"Found something!" came his voice above the wind.

They all moved his way. In the flood of the beams from the lights, they saw what the deputy had found. It was an elongated mounding of snow, but there was more to it than that. The dynamics of the wind had produced an oddity. The snow on the lee side had drifted, creating a smooth downslope, but on the windward side, a small section of what lay on the ground was blown nearly clear. Beneath the thin white of the snow layer that remained, they could see the red stain of blood, the blue-white marbling of flayed flesh, and the dark maroon of spilled entrails, all the result of a recent, brutal evisceration.

Cork arrived home well after midnight. Stephen was still up, sitting on the sofa in the living room, texting on his cell phone. Trixie was asleep at his feet. Cork stood in the kitchen doorway, exhausted and cold to the bone, staring at his son, who seemed oblivious to his presence.

"School day tomorrow," Cork said. "Shouldn't you be in bed?"

Stephen looked up suddenly, caught by surprise. "Just a sec, Dad," he said, finished his text message, and laid the phone down next to him on the sofa cushion.

"Marlee?" Cork asked.

Stephen looked chagrined. "Marlee."

Stephen had been seeing a good deal of Marlee Daychild lately. Cork wasn't certain what the status of their relationship actually was, but in Stephen's parlance they were "just, you know, talking."

"She has school tomorrow, too," Cork said. "You both need your sleep."

Stephen didn't respond to that directly. He'd become adept lately at detouring a conversation when it wasn't going in a way advantageous to him. He said, "Did you find Mrs. Carter?"

The truth was that Cork wanted to talk with someone, it was already well past time for Stephen to be in bed, and a few more minutes wouldn't matter, so he said, "Let's go into the kitchen. I need to eat something."

Trixie roused herself, stretched, and trotted along behind them. She went directly to her water bowl near the side door and lapped awhile.

Cork went to the coffeemaker. The pot still held enough for one cup of cold brew. He got a mug from the cupboard, filled it from the pot, put it in the microwave to heat, then turned back to Stephen, who'd sat at the table with his cell phone in easy reach.

"So," Cork said, leaning his butt against the counter and crossing his arms over his chest, "did Annie tell you why she's leaving the sisters?"

Stephen's eyes went wide, his whole face a momentary bloom of surprise. He recovered quickly and said, "What makes you think she's leaving?"

"She's home too early. She's clearly in emotional distress. She won't talk to me about it. And I'm pretty sure she didn't kill anybody. Am I wrong?"

Stephen considered a moment. "I should let Annie tell you."

"So I'm right," Cork said. "Has she told you why?"

Stephen seemed to realize denial was useless. He shrugged. "She hasn't told me or Jenny. She just said that she's decided not to stay with the sisters. She's pretty torn up about it. Don't tell her I told you, okay?"

"We're good," Cork said.

The microwave beeped. Cork took out the hot mug, grabbed the cookie jar from the counter, and brought these things to the table. He lifted the lid of the jar, pulled out two chocolate chip cookies, and slid one across the table to his son.

Stephen took the cookie and repeated his earlier question. "Did you find Mrs. Carter?"

Before Cork could answer, Jenny stepped into the kitchen. She wore a white chenille robe and fluffy white slippers, and her hair was mussed from sleep.

"Thought I heard you guys," she said.

She came to the table and sat down next to Stephen. Cork plucked a cookie from the jar and handed it to her.

"Any coffee left?" she asked with a yawn.

"I killed the pot," Cork said.

From the kitchen doorway, Anne said, "I could make another."

Cork let out a dramatic sigh. "Doesn't anybody in this house ever sleep?"

"Waaboo," Jenny said. "He sleeps like a dream."

"Anybody else hungry?" Stephen piped up.

Cork said, "The truth is I'm famished."

"I'll make us some eggs," Anne offered and went to the refrigerator. "Did you find Mrs. Carter?"

Cork took a sip of his coffee, then lowered his mug. He meant to set it gently on the tabletop, but the cold and fatigue weighed heavily on all his muscles, and the mug went down with a startling bang.

"Sorry," he said. "No, we didn't. All we found was a yearling deer that looked like it had been brought down by wolves. No sign at all of Evelyn."

"Will they try with rescue dogs?" Jenny asked.

"Already did. Gratz brought out two of his best. They picked up nothing."

"No scent?"

"That's right. Nothing at all leading away from her car."

"What does it mean?"

"The conditions were difficult, lots of wind, so that might have been the reason," Cork said. "But Gratz insists his air dogs are good enough that shouldn't be a problem. So the only thing that seems to make sense is somebody stopped and picked her up."

Jenny said, "In which case, she'd be home by now."

"That would be the assumption. But clearly incorrect. When Marsha called an end to the search tonight, Evelyn still hadn't come home. The Judge was pretty insistent that we keep looking."

"Will you?"

"We'd still be out there right now, but the storm's officially a blizzard. We lost Able Breen for a while, and when we finally found him, Marsha didn't want to risk losing anybody else. We'll go out again first thing in the morning, but the storm will have covered up everything by then. We've already searched the most logical areas, so I don't know where else we'll sweep."

"What about a helicopter or something?" Stephen suggested.

Which was how he and Cork had searched for Stephen's mother when she, too, had gone missing in a snowstorm. In the end, the helicopter hadn't made any difference.

"That's a good idea, and Marsha's already on it," Cork told him. "The Forest Service is loaning us one of their Bells and also a De Havilland Beaver. They'll join us tomorrow, provided this storm has broken."

Jenny propped an elbow on the tabletop and rested her chin on her fist. She frowned. "Was Evelyn's car stuck in the snow?"

He shook his head. "Out of gas."

"On the Old Babbitt Road? What was she doing out there on a night like this?"

~~"Question of the day. And it gets even curiouser,"~~ Cork said. ~~"She filled up her tank yesterday~~ and, according to the Judge, hasn't really gone anywhere since. That Buick of hers probably holds twenty gallons."

"So she covered a lot of ground tonight," Jenny said.

"It certainly appears that way. One speculation is that she was disoriented for some reason. Just drove and drove until the gas was gone."

Stephen said, "Disoriented why?"

"I don't know. Maybe a stroke or something."

"Prescription drugs?" Jenny offered. "Some kind of bad reaction?"

"Possibly," Cork said.

"Where all did you search?" Stephen asked.

Anne had the eggs going in a frying pan, along with several precooked link sausages. The smell intensified Cork's hunger to the point of distraction. He was dead tired and didn't want to go over all the details of the failed search again, so he said, "Let's talk about this tomorrow, okay? I'm bushed."

Stephen's cell phone chimed.

Jenny gave him a playful nudge with her elbow. "Marlee?"

"Tell her good night," Cork said firmly.

They ate the eggs Anne had scrambled and the sausage and talked about Christmas and Christmases past, and by the time they turned out the lights and went to bed, it was very late. Cork was exhausted. It had been an unusual night, Anne mysteriously home too early and a good woman mysteriously gone, but as he settled gratefully into bed, with all his children gathered around him in his house once again, he found himself unusually happy.

They regrouped at sunrise in the parking lot of the Tamarack County Sheriff's Department. Every man who'd been there the night before was there again, and more. A number of women showed up, too, because Evelyn Carter had been well liked in Aurora, and also deeply pitied for having lived her life under the loveless eye of a man like the Judge. While they drank steaming coffee from thermoses and talked among themselves, there were some grumbled speculations that Evelyn might simply have had enough of the old bastard and given herself over to a frigid and purposeful end.

The sky was searing blue, wiped absolutely clean of clouds. In the heavens, there was no hint of the weather that had battered the North Country for much of the night. The storm had moved south and east and was creating havoc all across Wisconsin and the UP of Michigan. But with the clear sky had come plummeting temperatures. In Tamarack County, the predicted high for the day was one below.

Those who owned them had hauled their snowmobiles on trailers, anticipating that the dangerous temperature and the deepened snow and the long time lapse since Evelyn's disappearance all added up to the need for a wider and more mechanized approach to the search. Sheriff Marsha Dross had a different idea. She thanked everyone for coming but directed those who were not officially a part of the Sheriff's Department or Tamarack County Search and Rescue to return to their homes. They went but not happily. Then she explained her thinking and her intentions to those who remained.

The Old Babbitt Road had been plowed regularly since the snows began weeks earlier and was like a little canyon walled on both sides by three-foot mounds of snow. It would have taken significant effort to mount one of those walls and walk off into the woods. Unless Evelyn Carter intended to lose herself that way, it made more sense, despite the fact that Gratz's dogs had found no scent, that she'd left the car and followed the road. How far she might have been able to walk in the storm was anyone's guess. So their plan was to search the road in both directions, looking for any sign of the woman—a dropped article of clothing perhaps, or a mounding that stood out against the regular contour of the snowbanks and that might indicate a body beneath. Four snowmobiles would work in each direction, two on the road and two along the shoulders beyond the banked snow. The helicopter and the De Havilland Beaver provided by the Forest Service would fly a grid around the area of her car, then up the road and back down, keeping low and searching for anything farther afield. Gratz had brought several dogs, one of them a cadaver dog, and would be working the area as well.

Cork had never been fond of snowmobiles. He understood their attraction, but he believed anything that made that much noise in the woods didn't belong there. Still, he owned one, a Bearcat 570, which he'd finally purchased for two reasons. The first was for his volunteer work with Tamarack County Search and Rescue. The second was to be able to get quickly out to the cabin of his good friend, the very aged Ojibwe Henry Meloux, should Henry need help in the long winter

months.

~~Gratz, Dross, and Azevedo went ahead to the place where Evelyn Carter's car had been found.~~ Gratz didn't want a lot of people around to confuse the scents while his dogs tried once again to pick up any trail Evelyn might have left. The others split into two teams and headed toward opposite ends of the Old Babbitt Road. Cork was with the group that would come in from the north. They began at a crossroad nearly ten miles from the parked car and slowly made their way south. Cork took the shoulder on the far side of the snowbank that edged the west side of the road. The storm had dropped nearly a foot of snow, and sunlight came off that clean white powder in a blinding glare. He wore tinted goggles. He had on a ski mask, Klim snowmobile pants, a Canada Goose down parka, mitts made of moose leather with wool liners, two layers of socks, and good Sorel boots, and after an hour he was still cold everywhere. As the snowmobile cut over the rugged terrain and broke through drifts, he thought Search and Rescue would be lucky to find Evelyn at all, and if they did, what they would bring back to Aurora would be her frozen corpse.

They checked every branch off the road, most of which were narrow lanes that led to private cabins or small resorts, all of them closed for the winter. They found no sign of Evelyn, nor indication at any of the buildings that she'd managed to make it that far and had tried to break through for shelter. They reached her car a few minutes behind the group who'd come from the south. That bunch had also arrived empty-handed. The chopper and plane had spotted nothing, and the dogs, once again, had picked up no scent. Gratz had walked his cadaver dog, a German shepherd named Violet, along the road a couple of miles in both directions, to no avail.

Dross's next step was to send both groups off-trail into the woods. It was her last best effort at finding a woman who, if she was in the area, should already have been found.

They regrouped several hours later, cold, tired, hungry, and unsuccessful. Dross thanked them all, and told them to go back home. If she needed them again, she would let them know.

As he was getting ready to mount his Bearcat and return to where he'd parked his Land Rover and trailer ten miles north, Dross called to him, "Cork, would you mind sticking around?"

Dross said something to Deputy Azevedo, who nodded and headed toward his cruiser. She walked to where Cork stood waiting beside his Bearcat, eyeing her in the long slant of the late afternoon sun. She stood five-ten, and although her cold-weather outerwear didn't show it, she was lean and muscular. The hair hidden by the hood of her parka was a dull auburn hue and cut to a length that fell just below her jawline. Her face was red from the daylong exposure to the bitter arctic air, and Cork knew she had to be every bit as bone-numb cold as he. Nearly fifteen years earlier, when he was sheriff of Tamarack County himself, he'd hired her as a deputy, a decision he'd never regretted.

Dross removed her goggles and blinked a moment at the sudden brilliance that seemed to have ambushed her eyes. "How well do you know Judge Carter?" she asked.

"Well enough not to like him at all. Why?"

"I've talked with Social Services. Without his wife at home, he's pretty much a mess. He tried to cook himself dinner last night and nearly set the stove on fire. Luckily, your parish priest had come out to be with him or he might have burned the house down. Father Green agreed to stay with him again today. Apparently there's nobody else willing to give him . . ." She searched for the word "Comfort," she finally settled on.

Although he'd pretty well lost all the feeling in his toes, Cork waited patiently for her to get to the point.

"We've asked the folks at WMRZ to keep broadcasting our request for anyone who might have

information about Evelyn's whereabouts to contact us. All the adjoining counties and the State Patrol have been notified to keep an eye out. I've talked myself blue with the Judge trying to find out if there's somewhere Evelyn might have gone, someone she might have gone with, but it's clear he doesn't have a clue about her." She shrugged. "It's possible she's just left him."

"Most people who just leave someone drive somewhere. They don't circle until they run out of gas."

Dross nodded. "Some folks this morning suggested to me she might have decided on another way to leave the Judge."

"Killed herself, you mean? Walked off into the woods and gave herself over to the cold? How well did you know Evelyn?"

"Almost not at all."

"She and the Judge have been parishioners at St. Agnes as far back as I can remember. She's devout. For devout Catholics, suicide is an unthinkable sin. Besides that, she's a pretty strong woman. For reasons of her own, maybe that Catholic ethic again, she's stuck it out with the Judge for a lifetime. Why suddenly decide to exit now? And if she did that, why didn't she leave a trail the dogs could find?" Cork removed his goggles and looked at her steadily. "You don't believe she killed herself."

"No," she said. "I've checked her list of medications. There's nothing there that would have caused her significant disorientation. I've considered a stroke, always a possibility, but if that was the case, we should have found her body, or like you said, the dogs should have been able to pick up her trail. So, my best guess is that someone stopped, picked her up, and for whatever reason, hasn't delivered her home or bothered yet to let anyone know where she is. I'm still hoping that might happen."

She purposefully looked away from him, looked toward the sun, which was a fluorescent tangerine hanging just above the jagged line of the treetops to the west. The woods cast a long blue shadow across the snow toward the Old Babbitt Road. After half a minute, she turned her face again to Cork and came to the point. "There was a case in Tamarack County before you brought me into the sheriff's department. A woman with car trouble picked up by a man who stopped to help, and then raped and murdered her. Charles Devine."

"Ruth Wheeling was the victim," Cork said. "Long time ago, and Devine's still in prison. At least last I knew."

"I'm just thinking that that kind of thing has happened here before."

"So maybe again? I suppose."

"I'm going to have my guys go over her vehicle for prints."

"Worth a try," Cork said. "But weather like this, business like that, a perp would be a fool not to wear gloves."

She was quiet, and it was clear to him that she'd already considered this.

"So, have you checked out Devine yet?" he asked. "Is he still in the supermax at Oak Park Heights?"

"I told Azevedo to do that as soon as he gets back to the department." She glanced at the sun again, her face a pale orange fire of reflection. "Evelyn Carter's daughter is flying in."

"Justine?"

She nodded, then dabbed a gloved finger against her nostrils, which were runny in the bitter cold. "She should be here in the morning."

"What are you going to tell her?" he asked.

"The truth. That we're doing our best."

~~"But that you don't really have a clue? Good luck with the reception you get on that one."~~

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly, misting the air in front of her face. She looked tired. Probably she hadn't slept much the night before. "Any suggestions?"

"On what to tell Justine?"

"On anything."

Cork studied the road, the powdered snowfall stamped hard by far more traffic than was natural in that season, the deep woods on both sides a maze of snowmobile tracks. "You've done everything out here I would have done. And your current thinking seems pretty reasonable to me. In your shoes, I'd seriously consider foul play."

"Motive?"

"Maybe like Devine, just a sick mind and a crime of opportunity."

"If that's the case and her car's clean, then we're at a dead end."

"Unless someone who listens to WMRZ saw something and gives you a call," he offered.

"Folks who knew her and loved her, her family, they're going to think there's more I should be doing." It wasn't a plea for his sympathy, just a statement of fact.

"You got any idea what that might be?"

"Not at the moment."

"Want my advice?"

She laughed, and that seemed to relax her a little. "Why do you think we're standing here freezing our butts off?"

"Put Azevedo in charge for the night. Go home. Take a hot shower. Then meet me at the Four Seasons. I'll stand you to a steak and some good scotch. We'll relax a little, and then think about all this again."

"Folks see me relaxing with Evelyn Carter still missing, what are they going to think?"

"The worst. But you don't have to worry about that until you're up for reelection. By then you'll have this whole case wrapped up with a bow. Trust me."

When he came home from school to the house on Gooseberry Lane, Stephen found Anne alone in the kitchen. Normally, he'd have been delighted, but there was an air about his sister since she'd come home, something dense, like the atmosphere around an alien planet, slightly poisonous.

She was sitting at the table, writing in what looked like a journal. When he came in she glanced up, a little annoyed, it seemed to him.

"Hey," he greeted her with a smile.

"Hi," she replied with a clear lack of enthusiasm.

He hung his coat on a peg by the door and went, as he always did the minute he got home from school, to the refrigerator to grab something to eat. He pulled out a plate of cold fried chicken and a half-gallon plastic jug of milk.

"Want anything?" he asked.

"No," she said and closed her journal. "I'm fine."

That morning, before he'd gone to school, they'd shoveled the walk and the driveway together but not like they had in the old days. When he was a kid and hated the chore, Anne had always made a goofy competition out of it—who could shovel the most? She was six years older than he and could easily beat him, but because things like that mattered to him, she always managed to make it a close race and frequently lost. That was the old Anne. The young woman at the table was someone else. Something that had always been essential to her was missing. As he put a couple of chicken legs on a plate for himself and poured some milk, Stephen thought about what that was.

At seventeen, he understood a lot about people and about life. When he was just seven years old he'd been kidnapped, along with his mother, and had seen his father take a bullet in the chest and been certain he was dead. For a long time after that, he'd worked with the old Mide, Henry Meloux, in order to heal in mind and spirit. A few years later, he'd lost his mother in a tragedy caused by the greed of others. Two summers ago, he and Jenny had had their lives put in peril because they'd taken little Waaboo into their care. He thought of these things often, but never dwelled on them in a way that brought darkness to his thinking. This was the influence of Meloux, who'd taught him that, although human beings were often blind to the ultimate purpose of the Great Mystery, the Great Mystery never acted blindly.

He turned from the counter toward the table, studied his sister, and thought he understood what was missing from her. It was joy. He wanted very much to know what terrible thing had happened to take that essential element from her. But one of the other important lessons he'd learned from Meloux was the virtue of patience, and so he simply sat at the table with her and began to eat.

"Where are Jenny and Waaboo?" he asked.

"A playdate with Claire Pilon and her son. She'll be home in time for dinner. She was wondering what you planned on fixing."

"Shoot," Stephen said. "My turn to cook. I forgot."

"I'd be glad to put something together."

"Really? Thanks."

Anne left the table, ~~eagerly it seemed, as if she was uncomfortable just sitting there with him~~ She went to the refrigerator to take inventory. To her back, Stephen said, "We've got everything for macaroni and cheese and hot dogs."

"Is that what you'd like?"

"One of Waaboo's favorites."

"Okay," she said, and when she turned back to him there was, at last, a hint of a smile on her face. "For Waaboo, then."

She began to pull things together. "How come you haven't put up a Christmas tree yet?" she asked.

"Dad wanted to wait until you got home. He wanted you to be a part of that."

The sun was on the horizon, a red ball in the cold blue western sky, and the light that it sent through the window above the sink and that bathed Anne as she worked was the color of fresh blood.

"Dad knows," Stephen said.

"Knows what?" She turned to him with a small note of panic.

"That you're leaving the sisters."

"Oh," she said. "Did you tell him?"

"He figured it out. You know Dad. He wanted to know why."

"What did you say?"

"That you'd let us know when the time was right."

"Really?" She seemed surprised and pleased. "Thanks." She looked at her hands, bathed in the sanguine evening hue. "Some things change, Stephen. They just change."

"What are you going to do now, Annie?"

She leaned against the counter and thought a moment, deeply. "I'd like to go somewhere . . . away . . . for a while."

"Like Africa or someplace?"

"It doesn't have to be that far. Just someplace by myself, someplace I can think some things through."

"How about Henry's place or Rainy's?"

"I don't want to impose on them."

"You wouldn't. They've both left Crow Point for the winter. Their cabins are empty."

"Really? Why? Where'd they go?"

"Rainy's son is having some problems with drugs again. Rainy thought she needed to be there with him. He lives in Arizona now, so that's where Rainy is."

"What about her and Dad?"

Stephen shrugged. "Dad doesn't talk about that. Some kind of understanding, I guess."

"So who's taking care of Henry?"

"He's gone to Thunder Bay to stay with his son. It's something he's been wanting to do for a while, and now he's doing it."

"How long?"

"He says he's coming back once the snow's gone. Late spring, maybe."

"Did he take Walleye?" she asked, speaking of the old dog who'd been Meloux's companion for as long as Stephen could remember.

"Walleye died last fall," he told her gently. "He just lay down one day and didn't get up. I've

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