

EMPTY PROMISES

A SEAMUS MCCREE NOVEL

ADVANCED READING COPY

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James M. Jackson



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ONE

EVERYONE AGREES THAT MY DECISION to go into town that day cost one person his life. Attribution for the other deaths wasn't clear-cut, although I thought I also bore that guilt. And it so easily could have been otherwise.

I was pulling my seatbelt over my shoulder when I had second thoughts. Muttering an apology, I left my family cooling their heels in the car and hustled back inside. Elliot was where I had left him, watching a morning financial show in the TV room. "You're sure you're okay being here by yourself? I—"

"Seamus, we discussed this. I'll be fine." He waved me away with both hands. "Have a good time."

"You're positive?"

He leaned back in the chair and looked at the ceiling. "Go, already."

"Okay, okay" My misgivings melted before his certainty. "We'll be back in four hours. Tops."

As it turned out, we both had lied.

I jogged back to the car. Paddy had plugged earbuds into his phone. Megan, my three-and-a-half-year-old granddaughter, was belted into her car seat in the back, "reading" *The Little Engine That Could* to Raff, her stuffed giraffe.

"All aboard for Crystal Falls," I called like a conductor. Paddy shot me a questioning look and Megan ignored me.

Starting the car engine brought up Dylan's "A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall" from my MP3 player's random queue—appropriate, given the glowering skies in the southwest. As a teenager struggling to find my way in the world, I had thought of myself as the blue-eyed son being asked by my dead father where I was going. After I became father to Paddy, my own blue-eyed son, the song pivoted to me asking the questions.

I was very contented with the family part of my life. Paddy and his wife were settled and doing well, and they'd given me the most wonderful

granddaughter in the world. The business aspects were something of a challenge, but I put thoughts of Elliot behind me and hummed along with Dylan. Life was good.

A couple of miles down Shank Lake Road, right before the switch to the A Grade, a broad-winged hawk flashed through the trees. I followed its flight, taking my focus from the road. Paddy's "Watch out!" startled me back to attention. A blue pickup towing a trailer steamed toward us, punching a dust cloud into the air. We were both taking our half out of the middle. I slammed on the brakes, steered right, and skidded to a stop at the edge of a drainage ditch. He flashed his lights at me and swept past, enveloping me in his dust.

"Asshole," I muttered under my breath so Megan couldn't hear. My heart thumped wildly in my chest, echoed by beating pressure in my ears. After the dust cleared, I drove through the switch and onto the A Grade.

"That's the guy from the mining company," I said. "I've seen him around, towing his ATV. Driving like that, the only pit he'll find is his own grave. Unless he kills someone first. What a—" I cut myself off. No reason to introduce Megan to words she shouldn't repeat. "I went to a big meeting at the library in Iron River a few weeks back to hear about their plans. Half the audience favored anything that might mean a return of the old mining jobs. The other half worried mining will ruin the woods, pollute the water, and destroy everything they value. Feelings ran pretty high."

"What's your take, Dad?"

I puffed a blast of air, feeling my frustration. "I'd force them to post a bond large enough to cover possible environmental damages. Never happen though, so the taxpayers get stuck paying for their empty promises."

"You going to protest it?"

"I'd prefer it somewhere else, but I'm not a NIMBY. We rely on minerals and need to extract them. My issue is I want the full costs to be borne by the mining companies, not the taxpayers. I understand they've been collecting samples, but there's a long road before anything will happen."

The next song was a Judy Collins classic, and I switched to falsetto and sang along. Paddy replaced his earbuds. Megan hadn't stopped reading her story to Raff, which is how we traveled for several miles until Paddy startled and pulled his earbuds out.

“Dad, listen to the radio.” He punched the FM button, silencing Grace Slick in full wail, and hit the preset for WIKB, the local station in Iron River. I wondered what treasure he had heard about on *Telephone Time*, the local swap show he had been listening to. It had better be good for him to interrupt my duet with Grace, asking if you want somebody to love. Paddy increased the volume.

“. . . severe damage. Winds up to eighty miles an hour. This storm is fast moving, traveling at more than forty miles an hour. Take shelter. The national weather service gives this system its highest alert status. To repeat, this is not a tornado. It is a front of direct wind currently located in Bates Township and heading northeast. Accompanying the wind is heavy rainfall. Areas likely to be affected are Amasa, Deer Lake, Witch Lake, Republic, and points between. Reports are coming in of massive forest destruction.”

We were right in the path. Two miles from Deer Lake. Seven from Amasa.

My first reaction was to race the eight miles back home and hunker down. But with a better road going in, I’d reach Amasa quicker than I could return home, and I wasn’t sure how fast the storm was moving. If we were caught in the woods, one decent-sized maple or popple or evergreen hitting the car, and we were goners. The Amasa Post Office, squat and brick, would protect us from the wind—if I could get there. I jammed down the accelerator, causing us to fishtail.

“Careful,” Paddy said, looking back at Megan. “The road’s a giant washboard. Don’t lose control.”

Behind us, the dust cloud thickened. We hit a dip and went airborne. Megan squealed in delight. “Do it again, Grampa Seamus!”

My mouth was dry with the taste of fear, but at least one of us was having a good time. I eased off the accelerator a titch.

Using *Telephone Time’s* frenetic outpouring of information about damage, I tracked the storm’s path. It would be close whether I’d get us to Amasa in time. Through a break in the forest, I glimpsed a southwestern sky that reminded me of boiling black clouds over Tolkien’s Mordor.

Two miles from safety, the first drops of rain smacked the windshield with fat plops. The treetops were barely moving. Picturing the stretch of straight road ahead of me, I accelerated to sixty-five and forgot the little rise caused by a new culvert under the road. The Subaru became airborne

again. My stomach tightened and I squeezed the steering wheel to control the wheels as we slammed to the ground.

Megan clapped. Even while I fought to keep the car on the road, a piece of me smiled in recollection of encouraging my father to take hills fast enough so we could feel our stomachs rise and fall. The lumber mill came into view, and in my relief that we were almost out of the trees, I forgot how bad the stretch immediately before the first blacktop could be and nailed a pothole. The car juked left and skidded right, nearly going off the road on both sides. The ABS prevented the brakes from locking, which probably avoided an uncontrolled skid into the trees. I white-knuckled the steering wheel and we rattled through until finally the tires gripped the hardtop in front of the mill.

Skidding with too much speed through the turn onto Corral Road, Paddy and I had our first unrestricted look at the storm front. Coal-black clouds boiled directly in front of us. Pale blue showed at the edges. In seconds we would meet the southern edge. I blurted the words as the realization came to me, “The post office is too far.”

I slammed on the brakes and skidded into a wide arc, barely missing a pile of logs waiting to be loaded onto railcars. Rain changed into a steady downpour. Even with the wipers on high, I could barely see well enough to weave past the piles of logs to an open area next to the mill. The heavens unloaded a torrent of water, turning day into night. I stopped and keyed off the engine.

“Grampa Seamus?” Megan often spoke my name with a question mark. “Raff’s scared.”

“We’re perfectly safe in the car, pumpkin. This will be over soon.”

Megan held her stuffed giraffe close to her and told him not to be afraid.

The winds hit with a howl; the rushing air pulsed from around the piled logs, rocking us from side to side. Megan cried in fear. Paddy unbuckled and reached back, caressing her hand. A sixty-foot spruce succumbed to the wind, falling directly across the road we had just taken, its impact so heavy we felt the reverberation.

“Ho-ly mack-er-el,” Paddy intoned under his breath.

Lights outside the mill flickered once and went black. The disk jockey of my mind offered the first verse of Dylan’s “Shelter from the Storm,” with its references to darkness, mud roads, and coming in from the wilderness. At least we were safe, but if these winds struck camp, it would

suffer major damage. My earlier glimpse of blue edges to the storm suggested the band was not wide. But how broad was it, and exactly what direction was it taking? Would my house be okay? It had a metal roof—plenty strong to repel a flying branch or two. But it wouldn't survive if the large trees surrounding the house crashed onto it. My guest cabin didn't even have the protection of a metal roof.

Would Elliot, the guy I was supposed to be protecting, know what to do in a wind storm? His accent sounded Midwestern. Maybe he understood tornadoes and was smart enough to take Atty with him to the safety of the basement. What if he'd gone to the cabin where he liked to read? Had I told him he could access the four-foot cement crawl space from the screened porch? I didn't think so.

Twin rivers ran down the street. Any direction I looked, the woods provided rain-blurred images of downed trees. Time crawled until eventually a shaft of sunshine split dove-gray clouds and illuminated a massive pine tree still standing tall. Although it felt like a decade, the meteorologist timed the path through Amasa at under five minutes. The rains petered out. The sun returned in full glory. The rivers on the road narrowed to streams.

I drove to the downed spruce blocking our way to camp. It had taken two maples with it. Beyond that, a mess of broken popple trees splayed across the road. *No way we can get back to camp anytime soon.* I wanted to kick myself. "I should have given Elliot a burner phone in case of emergencies."

"Didn't you tell me that Abigail specifically ordered you not to allow Elliot anywhere near a phone to protect him from himself?"

"Right. Boss's orders. Nothing we can do until the loggers clear a path." I gave Megan's foot a tug. "That's enough excitement for one day. Right, pumpkin?"

"Right!" Megan parroted.

Except it wasn't. Not even close.

TWO

JASON GRAHAM'S WHOLE BODY RELAXED once Seamus and his family left. Not that he didn't appreciate what they were doing for him, and he'd surely go stir crazy if he were out in the woods all by himself. Despite how much he had loved his wife, they had gotten along best when they were both working. Wasn't there one of those humorous country and western songs, something like "How Can I Miss You If You Won't Go Away?"

He clicked the TV volume ten levels higher to hear it wherever he was in the house. How to enjoy this time? He'd promised to be circumspect and make sure no one had any opportunity to even sense his presence, let alone actually see him. He wanted to return a book to the cabin. Maybe he could extend that jaunt to the cabin to include a hike around McCree's property. Where was the danger? He'd be able to hear a truck or ATV from a mile away and have time to hide. It's not like anyone could sneak up on you in this forsaken wilderness.

Atty came into the room, circled a spot on the rug twice, and settled down with a big sigh. Jason gave her a couple of pats, stroking the long, soft fur. Golden retrievers were such satisfactory dogs.

At a commercial break, Jason trotted upstairs to use the bathroom he considered his. While he took a dump, Atty started barking and he heard tires crunching gravel in the driveway. The engine rumble marked it as a diesel. The dog's deep woofs might scare the intruders away unless they saw her. Then they'd discover her tail wagging, as friendly as could be.

He wiped his butt and silently lowered the lid, not daring to flush. Even though no one could see in through the bathroom's frosted bottom window, his shadow might give him away. He lay on the floor and wriggled pants over his hips, zipped up, and fastened the button.

On the first floor, Atty charged from the TV room to the kitchen. Soon, knocking came from the back door by the kitchen. Even with the dog's barking, they could no doubt hear the TV blaring and know someone was here. Would they go away if no one answered? The doors were unlocked; they could walk right in and he'd be trapped.

Loud knocking resumed from the kitchen door. To tamp down his fear, Jason worked up some saliva and forced the fluid down his constricted throat. Had to be a neighbor or someone driving by. They could not possibly know he was here. Unless there was a leak—then they could know.

To give himself more options, he snaked his way from the bathroom to the bedroom. He'd heard the thunk of one vehicle door shutting, and the dog would have reacted to someone on the deck. He'd risk it. He climbed onto the bed and stood to see out the eyebrow window facing the driveway and garage.

Atty and her bark returned to the TV room, so the visitor must be leaving the stoop and heading back to the truck or around to the screened porch. Leaning against the wall, Jason rose on tippy-toes to increase his chances of seeing the intruder walking close to the house. No go. He eased down and checked the truck, a blue Dodge Ram with a white decal or logo on the passenger door, towing a trailer with a matching blue ATV. This looked like a local working rig. Jason told himself to calm down and make a mental picture so he could describe the vehicle to Seamus.

The truck had a light coating of dust. Its bed contained two aluminum cargo carriers, like construction guys use for tools, and another much larger container of unknown use. Attached to the trailer sides were digging tools and pointed wood stakes with variously colored flags blowing in the wind. Sure felt like a local stopping by to visit. If Seamus saw the guy later, he could make a proper excuse to explain the weirdness of the TV being on with no one home: kid had forgotten to turn it off when they went to town, or he'd been in the basement working on a project with ear protectors on—whatever Seamus decided.

Atty's barking stopped. Jason caught a glimpse of a baseball cap heading toward the kitchen door again. The dog's toenails clicked through the dining room into the kitchen, but she continued to be quiet. In the relative silence, he heard footsteps: one, two, three up the steps to the landing. Two more to the door. Then nothing but the TV commentators talking about the sell-off in Asia and how it was spreading to Europe. So far US stocks were shaking it off, down only a tenth of a percent.

The screen door creaked open. Jason forced himself to breathe through his nose. He was sure he'd puke if he opened his mouth. He closed his eyes to hear better. If the door opened, Jason's only hope was to get onto the deck outside the bedroom, climb down the six-by-six posts, and slip to the

other side of the garage while the person was occupied inside. Using the garage as a shield, he could disappear into the woods. He looked down at his bare feet and realized how unprepared he was.

Why had he been so complacent? McCree had harped at him to keep the TV sound turned down to make sure he could hear anyone on the road and have time to go silent. Like a rebelling teenager, the first thing he'd done after Seamus and family drove away was to crank up the damn volume. The screen door squeaked shut. Footsteps on the porch, down the stairs. He raised himself on tiptoes to try to get a look at the intruder. Ball cap, hair down to the neck of a blue T-shirt, blue jeans, wide leather belt, work boots.

Just a guy working in the woods.

The visitor knelt and removed a stick wedged under his truck's chassis. With stick in hand, he turned and Jason got the first view of the intruder's face.

Jason's knees wobbled and he nearly fell off the bed. He ducked below the window, leaned into the wall for support. His mouth was a desert. His armpits an ocean. His vision grayed and a tinny ringing assaulted his ears. Never had he felt fear like this.

Frank Cabibi. In McCree's driveway. Just the kind of sycophant the big dogs would send.

THREE

EVERY STORE WE ENTERED IN Crystal Falls had WIKB on. *Telephone Time* reported massive damage north of Amasa. The storm's path had crossed US-141 north of town—we'd witnessed that—traveled north of Deer Lake before hitting Witch Lake head-on. Since my place was eight miles mostly north and west of Deer Lake, I had hopes the storm had missed me entirely. Sketchy information suggested another front had crossed US-141 south of Covington. That might have struck a direct blow. Only being there would answer the question, which didn't stop me from constantly worrying about Elliot and my place.

We ate lunch in town. Paddy and Megan chowed down, but I worried my food around my plate, not feeling hungry, and anxious to return to camp. Lunch done, Megan reminded me that I had promised her moose tracks ice cream. We stopped at Tall Pines in Amasa.

I chatted with the proprietors while Paddy made the ice cream purchase. They didn't know how far north the damage extended. They had two rooms available in their motel if we wanted them. A group of loggers had heard the storm warning in time and returned to town before it struck. They were cutting a path up the Grade toward Deer Lake. If I couldn't drive to camp, I'd send Paddy and Megan to Tall Pines and I'd hike in. Not getting back to make sure Elliot was okay was not an option.

While Megan was finishing her ice cream outside the car (I had already made the mistake of thinking my granddaughter would be neater with food in the car than my son had been at her age), I monkeyed with the chainsaw stored in back, making sure it started and was full of fluids. If we caught up to the crew, Paddy and I could at least help clear the way.

Talking to the folks at Tall Pines gave me a little hope, which drained in a flash seeing fifty trees down next to US-141 right before our turnoff onto Corral Road. Evergreens with huge root balls lay on their sides or stretched out at a low angle. Maples had snapped off twenty or thirty feet up. Seventy-five feet past that massive blowdown, the forest appeared unimpacted. The damage hadn't been caused by a wall of wind, but by a

series of microbursts along the front. But where the wind hit, the damage was much worse than I had expected.

Dread joined us in the car. Even normally bubbly Megan grew silent.

Loggers had cut a narrow lane through the sixty-foot spruce I had watched come down at the beginning of the Grade, leaving most of the tree in place and towing the cut section to the side. They'd wasted no time on smaller branches littering the road and were opening up a one-lane path. I tiptoed the Outback over the debris and moved through the gap.

At first the downed trees were scattered, although limbs and branches dotted the entire road. But the further north we drove, the worse the damage became until the downed trees were a nearly continuous hazard. Paddy frequently left the car to remove branches with sharp breaks that might puncture a tire. I was regretting we hadn't taken my old beater truck into town with its multi-ply tires. The Outback carried a donut spare, which wouldn't last thirty seconds on the gravel roads. We had yet to see any other cars or people.

By the time we passed the five- and six-mile markers without any letup in the damage, tightened metal bands had taken up permanent residence around my chest. I feared for Elliot. I feared for my property. I worried whether I'd get a flat. Whether there would still be a hotel room if I had to send Paddy and Megan to Tall Pines. Megan, on the other hand, had given up her concerns and was in the back seat, singing along with a CD, a cheerful canary amidst the devastation.

As we continued up the Grade, I made a concentrated effort to channel her lack of concern. Eventually, we reached a recent clear-cut that provided a quarter mile of respite from the carnage. I never thought I would see any positives in a clear-cut, but not having any trees to push onto the road was definitely a good thing today.

"Thank God for the loggers," Paddy said. "What's your guess, will they follow the road toward Deer Lake or take the A Grade up toward camp?"

"If they headed toward Deer Lake, I'll send you and Megan to Tall Pines, and I'll hike in. If we did get hit, Elliot might need help, and even if we didn't, he'd likely panic if we didn't show until tomorrow. He must be wondering where the he—" I remembered Little Miss Big Ears was riding with us. "Where the heck we are. I told him four hours tops, and we're already past five. Even if the road is open, it will take us the better part of another hour. I just hope he doesn't do something stupid."

“Like what?”

I crept through the detritus of a white pine. “He’s a city boy and I sense he gets panicky without me around. I can’t tell you how much better his mood has been since you and Megan arrived. He’ll be depressed when your two weeks are over. I’ve taken him ATVing a bunch of times. He bristles because I make him use the helmet with the smoky glass to prevent anyone from seeing his face, and I won’t tempt fate by leaving the house Friday night or the weekend. Too many people wandering in the woods. We’ve argued about his going anywhere alone, which I forbid. I hope he remembered everything I told him and didn’t do something dumb.”

“He seems like a smart person to me.”

“Paddy, there’s book smart and there’s life smart. Elliot is book smart, which I suspect is what got him into trouble in the first place.”

“You don’t know?”

“Abigail’s reasoning is, the less I know, the less I can accidentally give away. Given the way he reacts when I call him Elliot, I’m sure it’s not his real name. And I don’t know where he’s from or exactly why we’re protecting him. He’s to be a witness in a trial, so I assumed bad people don’t want him to testify. Abigail’s going to be pissed that I left him alone.”

“You talked it through with him. It even sounded like he was looking forward to a little time by himself.”

I offered a wry smile. “All true, but I’m telling you, Paddy. She’s going to be ticked off even if nothing bad happens. She’ll say I should never have left him by himself. I put family ahead of the job.”

“Papa, I have to tinkle.”

“Sweetheart,” Paddy said, “on a scale of one to ten, how bad do you have to go?”

“Papa. I need to go now!”

I suppressed a giggle at their exchange and pulled the car to the side of the road. “I stuck a roll of toilet paper in the side door pocket.”

Paddy extracted Megan and scooted into the woods. Megan thought peeing in the woods was a fine thing. She hadn’t mastered squatting, so after pulling down her panties, she held onto Paddy’s hands, leaned back, and peed.

I’m not sure which she enjoyed more, the novelty of doing it outdoors or kicking dirt to bury her few sheets of used toilet paper. The process fascinated her. Walking the woods, she could get Grampa Seamus to stop

five times in an hour to allow her to squeeze out a few drops and bury her toilet paper.

Nothing can take my mind off concerns more quickly than spending time with my granddaughter. I wondered if she would soon have a brother or sister, but I wasn't the kind of father to ask. They'd let me know if they became pregnant again.

Paddy fastened Megan into her car seat and started an audio book. Whispering behind his hand, he said, "She's ready for a nap but doesn't want to admit it. This will do the trick."

Good news: the loggers had worked up the A Grade. Bad news: the devastation continued. With each obstruction we passed, my concern heightened—would it continue all the way to Shank Lake or would we luck out? A mile before we reached our turn, we ran into the road-clearing crew heading our way. I parked at the side and hopped out to get the scoop.

I plugged my fingers into my ears until one of the four guys spotted me. Two guys were using heavy-duty chainsaws, and the other two were lugging debris to the side of the road. A quarter mile behind them, I spotted Dick Tanni, one of my Shank Lake neighbors. Looking like a toothpick in hunter orange sitting on his John Deere tractor, he was using its bucket to push smaller branches to the side of the road. The air smelled of freshly-cut wood infused with chainsaw exhaust.

One of the loggers noticed me and they killed their saws. Three of them were loggers I had used to selectively cut my property several years ago. The fourth guy was Owen Lyndstrom, an ancient coot I had become friends with the year I wintered up here.

Owen, senior to the others by at least forty years, was my model for how active I wanted to be in my eighties. Choppers had replaced his teeth decades ago, but he still had all the rest of his original parts and his back remained as straight and strong as a pine. He'd been handling one of the saws. "Howdy, Seamus. Helluva mess." He waved vaguely at the woods.

Owen's elephantine ears were useful for catching all the gossip for miles around, so it wasn't a surprise that he wanted me to relate our harrowing race against the storm. Owen had been out Lukes Road west of Shank Lake when the storm hit, and the logging crew had been working an area near Ned Lake. Between them, they had cleared more than a mile and a half of Shank Lake Road, leaving me only three-quarters of a mile to home. If need

be, we could leave the car and walk in, although transporting the groceries might be problematic.

“Look,” Owen said. “Damage by youse is scattered, but youse need to check your woods pronto and see where you need cuttin. Wait too long and the big owners’ll tie up all the loggers. Unless you get them trees before rot sets in, you’ll lose most of their value.”

Good advice, but while hiding Elliot, I didn’t want people working close to the house. I’d have to deal with my eighty acres once Elliot was gone. Owen’s advice triggered another thought. In a generation-skipping estate tax move, I had given Megan several sections of land that might have been affected. I asked Owen about damage on Lukes Road where those properties were.

The logging crew was resting nearby and saw an opportunity: if I let them know by the end of the weekend, they’d be happy to put me at the top of their list.

Owen said, “I dang near forgot you bought them sections. I got nothin else planned. I’ll come by first thing tomorrow and we’ll scout that out, eh? Then I’ll give these boys an estimate of how many cords of work they got.”

“Paddy’s actually the trustee.” I pointed to my car. “He’s here with my granddaughter. You won’t believe how much she’s grown. Let’s lock it down with him.”

Owen followed me to my car. We used the opportunity to let Megan run around.

“Growin like a weed, she is,” Owen said. “Where’d she get the carrot top from?”

“Mailman,” Paddy said. “Actually, most of the gray in Dad’s hair used to be red highlights, and her mom’s family also has some redheads, though Megan’s is the most prominent.”

Megan ran circles around us, arms stretched, pretending to be an airplane or fairy or who knows what. Her squealing abruptly ended. “Does it hurt?” She pointed to a dried bloodstain the size of a russet potato at the bottom of the wool shirt Owen wore in the woods regardless of the weather.

Owen tugged his shirt around to see what we were looking at and removed a work glove. “Cut myself changing the chain on the saw.” He showed me the still-oozing wound on his hand. “Didn’t have no hankie, so I used the shirt. Good I got me a tetanus shot last year. Ain’t got no time to go to the clinic.”

One of the loggers fired up his chainsaw. Break time was over. We quickly agreed to meet Owen first thing in the morning, meaning around six o'clock central time—or seven o'clock eastern time, which was what I went by at camp. Since they would evaluate Megan's land, I'd send Paddy with Owen, and I'd stay home with Megan and keep Elliot under wraps.

We do-se-doeed past the loggers, and I stopped to talk to my lake neighbor. Dick had come up for a long weekend of fishing. After the storm blew through, he cleared his driveway and eventually linked up with Owen.

"It mostly missed me," he said. "Maybe ten trees across the driveway, but nothing near the house. It's real spotty though. I knew you were up and figured I'd motor over to your place to make sure you were okay."

"Are trees down between us?" I asked.

"I figured there were, which is why I used the boat. Anyhoo, your house and cabin are both fine, though you got a bunch of trees down here and there. I've tried to scrape the road pretty good, but drive careful, 'cause I might have kicked up some gravel. You know what them sharp edges can do to a tire. And if you can't get in all the way, go ahead and borrow the boat."

What a relief knowing the house and cabin had survived unscathed. That brief respite was followed by a new fear. Where were Elliot and Atty when Dick Tanni had stopped at the house and cabin?

FOUR

OUR PROGRESS TOWARD HOME STOPPED at a downed tree a half mile from the house. The massive hemlock had uprooted. It would take forever to clear with the little chainsaw I had in the car, and I'd run out of fuel before I succeeded. My anxiety over Elliot was increasing by the second, and I decided our best bet was to turn around and drive to Dick's and take him up on his offer to borrow his boat. Megan would like the ride and, once home, I'd have access to my larger chainsaws and could fire up the Bobcat to help clear the road from the house.

For all the wind we'd had earlier, the lake was dead calm. The trolling motor started on the first pull, and we were glad to leave the cool of the shady shore and feel our skin warm under the full sun. The motor's drone blocked the whine of the mosquitoes accompanying us onto the lake. The first we knew of them was the prick of their sting. Megan's hand-waving to ward off the mosquitoes rocked the boat, leaving Paddy to steady it with hands on both gunwales while I steered with one hand and slapped with the other.

I'm sure we looked like crazy idiots flailing our arms in our war with the mosquitoes. After a couple of minutes, we settled in to enjoy the slow boat ride. Megan dragged her hand in the lake, soaking her arm and half her shirt. Soon enough, I brought us into the dock without incident. After tying up, we left the borrowed life jackets in the boat, and Paddy and I each grabbed two bags of groceries. Megan led us up the path carrying her library books cradled in both hands and Raff's long neck tucked under her chin. Cute, very cute.

"Hey, pumpkin," I said once I could see the cabin wasn't damaged. "Why don't you run ahead and see if Mr. Elliot is in the cabin."

With her arms full, Megan's dash was more like a fast waddle. I wished I could take a video of her, but our hands were full and the moment lost. Elliot wasn't in the cabin, nor did I catch any whiff of his aftershave. The picnic table still covered the trapdoor to the half-basement, so he wasn't there. "My guess," I said, "is he's in front of the TV watching one of his financial shows."

Megan asked if she and Raff could race to the house. Permission granted, they took off, and I tucked her books under my arm and followed. Through the trees we watched Megan open the door and seventy-five pounds of golden retriever bound down the steps and into the wildflowers to relieve her bladder. Atty ran up the path and greeted us with her big grin and wagging tail. She led us to the house, where we found Raff propping open the screen door, letting in the last of the season's mosquitoes. From inside came Megan's call, "Mr. Elliot. Mr. Elliot. Come out, come out."

Elliot wasn't answering Megan's hide-and-seek calls. The dog had desperately needed to pee. The TV was blasting. The only way he was in the house was if he were dead or comatose. Leaving Paddy to put away the groceries, I raced after Megan, confirming Elliot was not on the first or second floor. On the way to check the basement, I turned off the TV, which was indeed tuned to one of the financial channels.

Megan followed me to the basement where we double-checked the nooks and crannies. She lost interest and plopped down on the rug to play with the wood blocks I kept in a box stored underneath the futon.

His leaving the TV on made no sense to me. He understood the need to conserve energy with my solar panel and battery system. I supposed they might have interrupted the show for the storm warnings, and Elliot was worried enough to forget the TV. Or he could have turned the TV up to hear the bulletins while he hid in the basement. But that was hours ago and didn't explain his continued absence.

My growing anxiety produced an image of my charge killed or trapped by a toppled tree. Had Elliot been curious about the storm damage? He'd taken walks with me in the woods, but preferred ATVing. With the trees down, though, he couldn't have gotten far, and again, it didn't explain the TV.

He sometimes read down by the lake, so I checked the likely spots and hollered his name in case he had somehow missed our arrival. Nothing. On my return to the house, I passed the pole-barn garage where I stored all the "toys." The garage doors were open, as we had left them, but inside a bare section of the gravel floor highlighted that the yellow Polaris ATV was missing. Anger replaced anxiety as I realized the fool had disobeyed my instructions and gone off on his own.

I followed the tracks in hopes of determining which way he went. Fifteen feet from the garage, they crossed marks made by a truck, or at least

a vehicle with truck-like tires towing a trailer, which had made a three-point turn in front of the garage.

Through it all, the ATV tracks remained visible, meaning they were the most recent. I followed the various tire marks up the driveway. The truck had come in and gone out from the direction of town. The ATV drove the opposite way, heading up Shank Lake Road toward its end at the Net River.

The teeter-totter of my emotions dropped anger and embraced anxiety, combining it with embarrassment about how quickly I had become angry at Elliot. What had caused him to leave the safety of the house so abruptly that he hadn't turned off the TV? Had the visitor's arrival spooked him? Maybe something on the TV caused his panic. I had no clue how to tell the age of tire markings. I ran to the garage, hopped on my other ATV, the red Honda, and zipped up the driveway, following Elliot's trail. Great idea until in less than a quarter mile I encountered a tangled mess of hemlock, maple, and popple pushed down across the road.

I clambered around the blowdown and confirmed the tracks continued on the other side. Whatever Elliot's reason for leaving, he left before the storm blew through. Another blowdown blocked the road a couple hundred yards ahead. I could track Elliot and my ATV by foot, but that might take too long. Using the other ATV, I could find a way through the woods to skirt the roadblocks, but that wouldn't be fast, either.

I slapped my head with my hand. *Think, Seamus, think.* Elliot's gone. Tracking him would take time and effort. With Megan visiting, my priority had to be to open my road so we could get out in case of an emergency. Once we accomplished that, we could return Dick Tanni's boat and retrieve my car. With luck, Elliot would have returned from his jaunt to wherever.

I briefly considered calling Abigail to let her know I had lost the person I was supposed to be protecting. To what end? It would just upset her, and she couldn't help find him. Once Elliot showed up, I'd learn the whole story and then consult with Abigail.

What a mess.

ATTY WHIMPERED WHEN PADDY, MEGAN, and I left her in the house again. Paddy operated the chainsaw. I kept Megan on my lap and she

“helped” me run the Bobcat, pushing debris to the side of the road. We finished clearing our path to town shortly before dinnertime. I hoped we wouldn’t need it.

Elliot remained a no-show.

I still had daylight and intended to use it to try and find him.

“I hate you going into the woods with all those widow-makers waiting to fall,” Paddy said. “Let’s eat dinner and then Megan and I can return the boat and pick up your car. While we’re there, I can ask your neighbor to go with you. He seems like a nice enough guy.”

“I understand your concern, but I can’t let anyone know Elliot’s here. I’ll take a come-along to extract myself if I get stuck. And a gas can in case he ran out. And the first-aid kit. And I’ll have my cell phone and a walkie-talkie. Man, I wish I knew where he was.”

I filled two water bottles and grabbed several granola bars to gobble while I loaded the ATV. Dinner. When I went to fill a two-gallon traveling gas can, I made a disconcerting discovery. Elliot had taken the full five-gallon gas can with him, leaving me with only a gallon sloshing in the bottom of the other container. Huh. Sure enough, the funnel had been recently used and smelled of gasoline. A full tank would take him eighty miles or so, well beyond the range of any place I had shown him. Why did he need extra gas?

He hadn’t thought to turn off the TV, but he had found time to fill up the Polaris’s gas tank and take an extra five gallons. This felt more planned than I originally thought. What else had he taken?

Back inside the house, I checked the mud-room closet. The ATV helmet with the smoky face guard and a pair of work gloves had grown legs. Also missing were his lightweight jacket and my wool one, which would look ridiculous on him. Our chests were roughly the same size, but he was four inches shorter than my six-two, and the sleeves would swallow his arms. Besides, it was too warm to be wearing wool.

That perplexed me until I discovered empty spaces in the bedroom closet: missing were the new clothes Abigail had purchased for him on their way to meet me in Green Bay, as was a large backpack I stored there.

I told Paddy of my discoveries while he washed dishes from their supper.

“He got curious and is lying injured someplace?” Skepticism poured from him. “That’s your theory? What if the mysterious truck and trailer had two guys and they snagged him. Their trailer was pulling ATVs. With

Elliot they needed a third. Maybe they threw Elliot in the truck and one of the guys stole your ATV. And they had a long way to go, which is why they grabbed the extra gasoline.”

“You’re suggesting someone found him and kidnapped him? But the ATV went in a different direction from the truck.”

“Kidnapped or he didn’t want to stay hidden anymore and staged his own rescue. They could have taken the ATV in a different direction to avoid being seen together. They’d meet up later. As long as you’re standing around, let me heat up some leftovers for you. Won’t take a minute.”

I didn’t think Elliot left voluntarily and I wasn’t hungry. “He’s the one who wanted protection. He could have asked me to take him home any time he wanted. He wasn’t a prisoner. What else would you take?”

“I’d take my blankie,” Megan said.

I leaned down and ruffled her hair. “What else would you take, pumpkin?”

“Raff and Momma and Papa and Suzie. Can Suzie come here?”

Paddy wiped his hands on the dishtowel and gave her a big hug. “Thanks for taking your Momma and me. We’ll see your friend Suzie when we get home.”

“Megan’s blankie got me thinking,” I said. “If I were running away, I’d want a sleeping bag and a tent and food.”

Megan tugged at Paddy’s pant leg. “Can we FaceTime Momma?”

“I need to get her ready for bed or she’ll have a meltdown.” Squatting to Megan’s level, he tousled her hair. “Bath first and then we’ll FaceTime Momma, okay?”

Megan solemnly nodded and marched to the bathroom, disrobing along the way. Paddy followed and I soon heard the tub filling with water.

“Dad?” Paddy called down while I was checking the first-floor closets. “He left a turd in the upstairs toilet.”

The Elliot I had known had been fastidious. Even using the outhouse by the guest cabin, he threw in lime.

Revised conclusion: he left in a hurry—TV on and unflushed toilet—but not so much of a hurry that he hadn’t provisioned his trip. Further sleuthing revealed we were missing a sleeping bag, plus several boxes of various flavors of granola bars, a large bag of gorp Paddy had concocted to take on walks in the woods with Megan, and two water bottles. He’d taken both a flashlight and a headlamp, found a hunting knife, and added a can

opener to his provisions. Empty hooks revealed he'd scarped up my hatchet and bolt cutter.

Face it, Seamus, this is not the behavior of someone about to go for a walk. These are the acts of someone so panicked that he left the TV on and didn't flush the toilet, but somehow had enough time to think about and collect supplies. Who or what had arrived with that truck?

Paddy had come downstairs during my internal musing and interrupted my thinking. "Maybe you should talk to Abigail and get her take on the best approach."

"It's clear that Elliot intentionally went on the lam and left before the storm hit. Regardless of why he left, he might have been injured by the storm. I owe it to him to use every second of daylight to rescue him if he's hurt. There's plenty of time to talk to Abigail."

Paddy held up his hands in surrender. "I just thought . . . she is the senior partner and the one who picked him up. She might know something."

"Give Megan a goodnight kiss for me and say hi to your lovely wife. I'll be careful. I promise."