

GRANITE OATH

A Seamus McCree Novel

James M. Jackson



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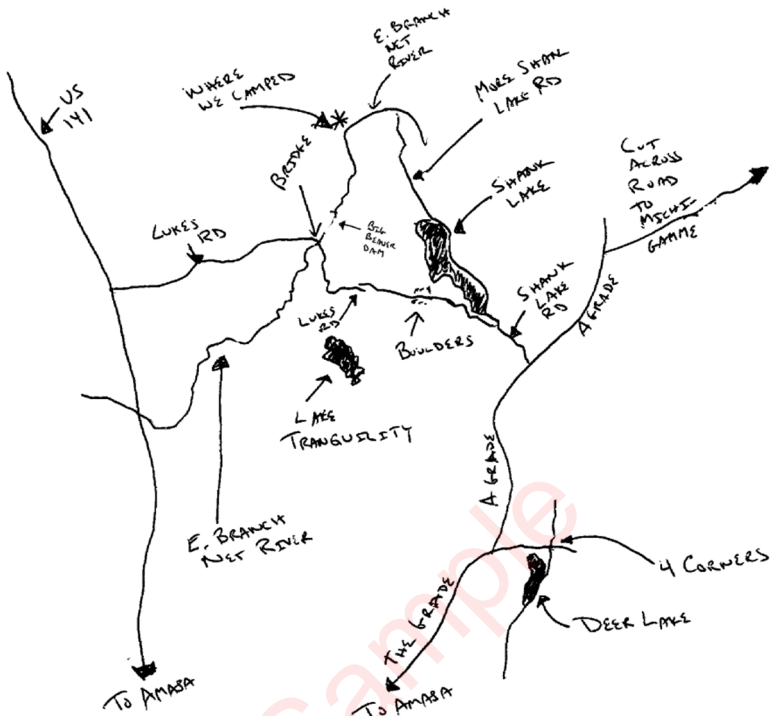
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DEDICATION

For Jack Olson and his tractor.

Sample

VALERIA'S MAP



ONE

MY WORDS FROM THE MORNING shamed me. “Megan,” I’d said when my granddaughter was dragging her feet. “People are late for two reasons. Either they think their time is more valuable than the other person’s, or they don’t care about breaking their promise.” She looked at me like I was speaking Urdu. “Which one are you going to tell Mrs. Belanger when you’re late?”

That got her moving. Now, I was late to pick her up at the Amasa Summer Creative Arts Academy. I boiled up the long gravel driveway and skidded to a stop in a parking area next to Kim Belanger’s backyard, where she held the Academy. Megan and another girl sat at a picnic table in the shadow of an ancient yellow birch, their backs to me.

Kim was perched on the other side. At my approach, she folded a page corner of the book she was reading and shaded her eyes from the sun. “Seamus McCree.” She drew my name out: Shay-mus Muh-kree. “You’re the last person I *ever* expected to be late.”

“I’m so sorry. I got stuck behind logging trucks coming down The Grade. That’s no excuse. I should have left earlier. And I couldn’t call because the card with your phone number is sitting on my refrigerator, and I never entered it into my contacts. Can I pay you for your extra time? Come on, Pumpkin. Put away your coloring book and pencils. We need to get out of Mrs. Belanger’s hair.”

Megan looked up, surprise painting her face. “Grampa Seamus, look at my unicorn.”

She had finished the horn and was working on the mane, each lock of hair a different color. “Beautiful,” I said. “How did you become such an expert?”

Megan laughed at our joke. She adopted a solemn face, wove her torso back and forth, and deepened her voice. “Practice. Practice. Practice.” Then she giggled. “Can we wait with Valeria until her mommy comes?”

Kim said, “You know I was just busting your chops. You don’t owe me anything. But you could do me a big favor and take Valeria home. Her

mother works in Iron Mountain and sometimes can't get here until five. Problem is, I can't wait that late today because I have to cart my own kids to the library. The Friends of the Crystal Falls Library is sponsoring a YA author they want to see."

"I'm a little uncomfortable driving someone's kid without her parent's permission."

Kim waved away my worries. "I've taken her before. I'd do it again, except the road's tough on my Prius. If we could take your Subaru, I'll go with you." She asked if that was okay with Valeria, whose answer was a squeal of delight that she and Megan could play longer. We sent the kids in to use the bathroom before we left.

Kim handed me the coloring materials and Megan's backpack. "I'll be sorry when your granddaughter's visit is up. Before Megan arrived, Valeria was pretty much the outsider. You know, everyone else grew up together. Megan bullied her way past the cliques and brought Valeria with her. Those two are besties."

My face broke out with grandfatherly pride. "Megan is a force of nature. I was worried how to keep her entertained for an entire month while her parents are rafting down the Colorado. Your summer academy is perfect for giving her time with kids her own age. Before I forget, let me get your number into my contacts."

Kim dialed me, allowing me to capture her information, and then she called Valeria's mother. Her brow furrowed, and she left a message to say she was bringing Valeria to the trailer.

"Problem?" I asked.

"It's probably nothing, but Kat—that's what Valeria's mother wants me to call her—usually lets me know if she'll be late, which she hasn't this time. And she *always* picks up my calls."

Two

THE KIDS HAD A WHEE of a time bumping and thumping down two miles of a long-abandoned logging road to get to Valeria's trailer. Frost-heaved rocks threatened to dent a rocker panel or remove a muffler. How Kim brought a Prius in was beyond my comprehension. We drove through parklike areas of mixed mature hardwoods. As the road worsened, I slowed further and marveled at a stand of majestic hemlocks so large that, even with joined hands, the four of us couldn't have circled their trunks.

A mile in, we crawled through a section of road gullied by past spring flows from the surrounding tamarack swamp from which the dry spell had sucked any sign of standing water. Another mile of dodging rocks the size of Gibraltar and potholes deep enough to swallow a VW Bug brought us to a spot used as a turnaround.

Valeria called, "Mister, Mama stops here."

I pointed to the rutted tracks straight up a hill. "I can drive that. How much farther?"

Kim said, "She's right. It's maybe four hundred yards, but there's no place to turn around at the trailer."

Valeria unlocked her door. "I can get out here."

Not on my watch. Plus, we had the minor matter of the four gallons of water Kim had brought with her. I released everyone to bathe in mosquito dope and parked the car with one side scraping encroaching tag alders to allow Valeria's mother room if she returned while we were here. A horde of mosquitoes attracted by the car's exhaust buzz-bombed me before I could spray. I hate bug spray smell, and if I had known I'd be tromping through the woods, I wouldn't have worn shorts and sandals. Megan and Valeria skipped up the road. Kim and I split the water jugs and trudged after them.

The road curved past a vernal pond, then bent around a knob covered with mature popple. I smelled the woodsmoke before I saw the camp. Hidden in a dense thicket of white birch was a rusted travel trailer with an extended awning roped to the trees. A curl of blue smoke rose from a firepit

with a saucepan on a grill perched on four legs. Sitting on rocks were a cast iron frying pan, a coffee pot, and a ten-quart kettle. Nearby was a stump with a hatchet embedded in it and a stack of branches lying beside it. A smaller pile of chopped wood waited, ready to burn.

The trailer looked level and had a couple of hundred-pound propane tanks covered with spider webs attached at the rear. Two card tables and four camp chairs had pride of place under the awning. Three settings of glasses with water, empty bowls, and spoons occupied one table. The other held a dish rack with various plates, silverware, and cooking utensils. Sitting in one chair was a knife, whetstone, and a maple burl partway to becoming a bull moose walking past spruce trees.

“Nana,” Valeria called. She rapid-fired several sentences of Spanish. I caught only “*amiga* Megan” and “*señora* Belanger.”

A middle-aged woman’s distant voice responded in Spanish.

“Grampa Seamus,” Megan said. “Valeria’s grandmother won’t come out while you’re here.”

Kim gave my hand a reassuring squeeze. “Megan and I will make sure Valeria is safe and meet you back at your car.”

THREE

SOMETHING WAS BOTHERING KIM, BUT I couldn't ask because I needed to concentrate to avoid road obstacles. Once I was on pavement and no longer worried about damaging my car, I said, "Is their only source of water the containers you fill for them?"

"I know, right?" Kim glanced over her shoulder at Megan in the backseat. "When I found out Kat was using an artesian spring she found somewhere between here and Iron Mountain, I insisted she get water from my place. Each day I fill the empties Kat leaves with Valeria. Nana—Valeria's grandmother prefers I call her that—is worried. Kat came home in the afternoon all agitated. Refused to answer why she left work early. Changed clothes and drove away. I've found Kat very responsible. It's not like her to not call. I hope she wasn't in a car accident or something."

I sent a prayer skyward.

Kim continued, "Why was she home early? She should have been at the motel. She works like three different jobs."

I agreed it seemed strange. "You want to call hospitals? The police?"

Kim let loose a long sigh. "I'm just being a mom and worrying. She wouldn't want me to contact the police. She's a Dreamer, and she fears the authorities. Nana brought her here from Nicaragua when she was ten. Last year ICE raided Valeria's husband's job site. He was also working legally under DACA, but there were several illegal immigrants. ICE decided he had not reported a juvenile misdemeanor. Kat says the courts erased it from his record when he turned eighteen because he had graduated from high school and kept his nose clean. But ICE deported him anyway. The family didn't have the money or the wherewithal to fight it. Kat paid for a coyote by borrowing from one of those paycheck lenders. Her husband got caught crossing the Mexican border and deported again. Now he *does have* an immigration record.

"Long story short, the lender garnished her pay. Nana caught Covid and lost her job. Despite the national moratorium, Kat's landlord evicted them. How they ended up in that trailer, I don't know. Kat works all the time,

has a truck that's held together with duct tape and prayer. The minister at my church is paying for Valeria to attend the academy. I can't imagine this will end well."

I supposed not. Given Kat was a Dreamer, Nana was obviously here illegally. Their concerns about police probably extended to any government agency. I doubted they were getting any of the assistance she and Valeria were entitled to—made harder by finding herself stuck in the U.P., where locals considered you a newcomer unless your great-grandparents were born here.

"Maybe you shouldn't have told me, Kim. If the wrong people learn about this, the family could suffer more heartbreak."

"I knew you'd think like that. I don't know how I feel about this illegal immigrant thing. It's complicated. But kids in poverty? That's easy to understand. My dad worked hard his whole life. Even so, I sometimes wore cardboard inserts in my shoes because we didn't have money for new ones." She rubbed her temples. "This is so not like Kat. I have a bad feeling, and so here I am, running at the mouth."

I suggested she try Kat's cell again. Still no answer.

Kim was not a bleeding-heart liberal, and I didn't think it worthwhile discussing my approach to solving the problem, which would be to put business owners who hired illegal immigrants in jail and fine them enough bucks to make it unprofitable to hire undocumented workers. And while she and I might vote for opposing candidates, she was a survivor whose instincts I trusted. My gut told me she was right to worry.

"Grampa Seamus?"

How much had Megan heard? "What, Pumpkin?"

"Can we invite Valeria for an overnight this weekend?"

"We can ask, but it might not work for them."

"Why not?"

How to explain to an eight-year-old that people might not trust a single man to take care of two young girls? "We'll have to talk with her mother, Pumpkin."

"Okay. Bring me early tomorrow. You can talk to her momma, and I get more time to play with Valeria. Win-win."

Yeah, two wins for Megan. Still, I liked her idea. Until I knew Kat was okay, I would worry about Valeria and her grandmother. Little did I know.

FOUR

I FIGURE PART OF MY grandfather responsibilities are to spoil Megan in ways that drive her parents nuts but don't do her any harm. We dropped Kim at home and stopped at Tall Pines Grocery. Dinner would be late and having dessert first made sense. Megan did not object to this plan and ordered a double-dip blue moon cone. No longer having the metabolism of my youth, I chose a single scoop of black cherry in a cup.

I held her cone above my head. "You promise to eat all your veggies?"

Megan raised a curled pinkie. We solemnly performed a pinkie swear, and I handed her the cone. The temperature was eighty-plus in the shade, and Megan's tongue worked hard to stay ahead of the melting ice cream.

The husband of the couple who own Tall Pines stepped outside for a breath of air. He asked Megan if she was enjoying her ice cream and received an enthusiastic "Yum."

"Me, too," I said. "What's news on the Amasa grapevine?"

"You heard about the break-ins over by Cable Lake?" I had not, and he filled me in. "Someone broke into nine camps. Took a generator, ATVs, some rifles and fishing gear, and propane tanks—the twenty and hundred pounders, not the big pigs we sell."

"I remember Sheriff Bartelle telling me a few years ago that neighbor kids are often responsible for clusters of camp break-ins. This sounds a lot more serious than that. How long has this been going on?"

"Couple of weeks. Trail cams caught two masked guys wearing night goggles—one big, the other small. Cops are holding information close to their vests, but I heard rumors of a truck towing a trailer. Maybe a side-by-side."

"Grampa Seamus, is my tongue blue?"

It was. As were her hands from the ice cream leaking from the cone's bottom. "Finish that up. You driving us today?"

"Grampa." She drew out the word and rolled her eyes. "You know my feet can't reach the pedals." She popped the stub of the cone into her mouth and smacked her lips.

“Okay, then I’ll drive and you navigate. Now go wash up while I buy some double-A batteries for my trail cams. We’ll check them tonight. Maybe we’ll have a picture of a moose.”

“We already had moose this year. I want a bear.” Megan sprinted to the store, stopped at the door, and shouted, “And a wolf.” She wrenched the door open, sending the bell tinkling, and burst inside.

I smiled after my little whirlwind of a granddaughter. “Whenever she visits, I sleep very well at night.”

“I hear you, but if I were you, I’d have my eyes peeled. Cable Lake is no farther west of the highway than you are east.”

Sample