# Death on a Small, Dark Lake

Lenny Everson

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by Lenny Everson

# Chapter 1

At first, I thought I'd snagged a log.

Oh, I had no problems with that. If I'm going to drop a fishing line into an isolated Ontario lake, I've got to expect to catch a few dead trees and maybe lose a few lures and say a few words that children shouldn't hear.

"Gol darn it all to heck," I said politely. Or words to that effect.

Isolated lake? We're talking Ontario granite-edge tree-lined body of water. The bottom is full of rocks and trees and bits and pieces of trees and bits and pieces of rocks. If I'm not using a surface lure for bass, odds are I'll catch a branch or a trunk down in the dark holes, assuming I miss the rocks, of course. It's a great country for rocks.

I had a small spinner on the other end of the line, with a lead weight to get it down quickly, hoping for perch even at mid-day. It was lunch time, there were fish down there, and it was time we got together.

"You," I said to the mysterious waters, "had better be a log. I want no rocks." Like I had a choice. I pulled.

But the line wasn't coming in to me. It disappeared into those dark waters and stubbornly stayed there.

Wedging the small fishing rod between my knees, I started paddling toward the point where my line disappeared into the water. There was a light breeze, and the canoe slid sideways and around, spinning on its axis.

The key in a situation like this is to keep the line tight enough to see where it goes, without drifting away from the snag point and having the line snap. Or letting the fishing rod leap out from between your knees and do a backflip into the water.

Ideally, it takes four hands: one to hold the fishing rod, one to reel in the line as you get closer, and two to paddle the canoe. You can paddle a canoe with one hand, but it isn't easy, especially when the wind wants to push the canoe one way, the paddling wants to turn the canoe another way, and the snag is in yet a third direction. It would be a good question on a physics exam, if you wanted to drive the class mad.

I didn't want to drive anybody mad. Not even me. I mentioned to the canoe (politely, of course) that it might be better to cooperate.

I was all alone on a truly isolated lake, drifting under a September afternoon sun, and losing a lure wasn't going to make much difference to an experience like that. I smiled. With me, it's hard to tell. Aisha (The Wife) says she watches for crinkles around the eyes. Otherwise, I look the same in all moods.

When there is only one person in the canoe, it's generally best to alternate paddling and reeling in the line. I did. The canoe drifted and rotated, and slowly got closer to the place where my snagged line entered another realm.

I didn't want to lose the spinner if I could help it. Not only was it one of my favorites, but I disliked leaving the glittery objects of civilization in this wild area, even on the bottom of the lake.

So I swirled water with my paddle and pulled on the line, and eventually got the canoe more or less over the snag. More or less is all you get in a canoe. A few quick jerks on the line didn't free it, so I reeled in as much line as I could, and reached down and grabbed the line.

Pulling the line tight, just below its breaking point, I waited. Either the line would start to come up, or it wouldn't. If nothing happened, I'd have to break the monofilament with a quick, definite pull.

The canoe spun slowly in the September afternoon breeze as I waited.

There are two particular joys in a canoe. One is the responsiveness of the vessel. A canoe never stops being a part of the wind and the water as much as a part of the human intent, through the extension of a paddle. Only

when the human mind learns to understand the air and water movements will the paddle move the canoe in the right direction.

It's a wild religion, this canoeing, where you have to build winds and water into your desires.

Mind you, some people just paddle like crazy and get there anyway.

The other joy of a canoe lies in the places it can go. A snake is made long and thin, to go where other creatures cannot. A canoe is made to go where other boats don't go.

You may curse the weight as you lug it on your shoulders, but on your shoulders, it will snake its way through dense brush and up steep hillsides. And the moment you break through to the water, to the blue sun-lit shimmer of water, you have begun another portion of a ride you know you were meant to take.

Your canoe slides over shallow weeds and old logs, between the branches of a fallen spruce, and gently pushes through bulrushes to open water. It’s like getting to heaven.

I’d portaged so far in, I figured I’d have to start back out just to reach the middle of nowhere. Only way to live.

I was pleased when the line began to come slowly up to me. It had been an outside chance, and it had worked out.

I knew how much deep-sunken wood seems reluctant to see daylight, so I watched the landscape as I put loops of fishing line in front of me, in the canoe.

Picture this: I was near one end of a small lake. Most of the shore was a line of trees and rocks, with willow bush and half-sunken logs at the water line, and pines behind. At the other end of the lake, a slant of pink granite made a small cliff, looking hot in the sunlight, like a stone-giant's toe cooling its bunion in a dark-rimmed footbath.

I could paddle around a lake like this in half an hour without hurrying much. Aside from a lily-pad-choked bay or two, I could also see the entire lake from the canoe. There were no signs of humanity at all.

It is said, somewhere, that there are some twenty million lakes in Canada. Most of them look very much like this one did. Take a picture of one, and you've got a picture of them all, with minor differences. This one was a tad darker than the average, with more dark pine on the edges and less exposed rock.

Twenty million lakes. The ones near Toronto or Ottawa are lined with cottages. As you go further north, the cottages get fewer.

Millions of lakes in the far north bear not the slightest trace of people.

But even within a short drive of the farms and factories of the heartland of Ontario, there are lakes too small to attract cottages and roads. I was on one of these.

I'd found it on the map, small and nameless, and not on any canoe route. I'd come to look at it, maybe take a couple of pictures, nothing more. It had taken me some rough portaging to get here, but I was enjoying the September solitude.

Above me, a couple of clouds drifted by, pondering whether or not to become thunderheads somewhere downwind. A trio of turkey vultures swung lazily above the rock cliff. The rest was a deep blue that might have gone on forever.

It wasn’t silent. The late-season cicadas in the trees made sounds like tiny circular saws cutting off branches. Squirrels made chattering noises somewhere along shore. And there was a steady background eeeeee of thousands of crickets.

I spotted the white glitter of the spinner as it rose slowly to within a couple of feet of the surface. You can see about an arm's length into the water, when the light's on it.

I leaned forward a bit more, to try to grab the lure itself, then paused, peering into the water.

I could see a boot, rising towards the water surface. Then the lure, firmly snagged in a pair of jeans below the boot. A sock, folded towards the boot. A bit of white skin between the sock and the end of the pant leg. A dark mass disappearing into the dark water.

The mind refuses, at first, to accept something like this. It stops, entirely, at the "say, what?" stage, while it tries to process the data in a reasonable way.

Eventually, it decides, there is only one reasonable interpretation.

I knew I had a corpse on my line.

I found this particularly disturbing, once I had started breathing again and I was sure my heart was still keeping my own middle-aged body going. Because there weren't supposed to be any people on this lake. Alive or dead. That had been part of the point of the trip.

Away from people. Away from humanity and progress and economics and computer-controlled toaster ovens. Out to the small lakes, off the regular canoe routes, where a retired economics professor could find something closer to elemental nature. Away from people, especially.

But there was this body, dangling gently on the end of ten-pound- test monofilament line, connected to a five-foot fold-up fishing rod at one end and held by a treble hook to Win Szczedziwoj, would- be escapee from society for a few days.

Once the obligatory nausea had receded a bit, my first feeling was of anger and of inadequacy. I'd always felt a pang of annoyance when I tracked down another lake that I thought would be mine alone for a day, only to meet other people there.

But living people came and went. They went; I went. In a matter of minutes both parties could be on their way somewhere else. Living people didn't hang, mute and accusing, like the corpse of Jacob Marley, on the end of one's line, waiting for you to do something.

My brain, fully capable of explaining abstract economic theory to undergraduates, was having trouble deciding what to do with this thing.

I took a heavy breath, and looked around the lake again.

It had changed a bit in the warm September afternoon. The darkness of the shores seemed a bit more pronounced, and the shores seemed more clogged with old tree trunks than most lakes.

I decided I preferred lakes with more bare rock along the shore. More places where the sunlight could grow a few blueberries. More white birch in the forest mix, and a lot less of silent, dark pine.

I didn't know the name of this lake - the topographical map didn't always name lakes this small - but I didn't like it any more. It was full of corpses.

One corpse, maybe, but it filled the little lake and made it dark.

For a moment, I thought about cutting the line. I hated this dead thing that had come into my life and ruined my expedition to wilderness. I owed it nothing.

But that was obviously and totally out of the question. I had to report this to whomever one reported dead people to, and things would be a lot simpler if I could tell those people where the body was. Other than just somewhere at the bottom of this small, dark lake.

That left the problem of how to remain attached to this dead thing. The fishing line was close to its breaking point, so there was no hope of towing the body to shore with it. The strain would snap the line at once.

I leaned back, grabbing the yellow polypropylene rope coiled behind me. One end was attached to the end of the canoe; the problem was to get the other end around the leg.

It quickly became obvious, even to an economist, that I would have to grab the leg. For one thing, the line could snap at any moment, as the wind was picking up and the canoe beginning to rotate around the line. For

another, there was just no reasonable way to get a line around the leg without hauling at least the foot out of the water.

Nor could I hope to use the rod to raise even the dead man's foot above water to attach the rope. Not with the thin fishing line I was using. I'd have to grab the leg with my hand, in spite of my reluctance to do so.

Easier said than done, in a canoe. Canoes range from fairly stable, in a canoeish fashion, to downright malevolent. This canoe was an ultralight model with a greater tendency to roll than I would have preferred. I'd had it built specially light, but hadn't known much about canoe shapes. So I'd casually asked for a "Peterborough" style. Peterborough was a nice place, once famous for canoes.

A big mistake, I eventually learned. Round-bottomed, it could roll over quite easily. I'd got used to it, but I never trusted it.

And I had no desire to find myself swimming with that cold dead thing.

So there I was, in a tippy blue canoe in a small and remote lake on a September afternoon. The canoe held all my camping equipment and photography case, and I, dressed in jeans, a red plaid shirt, and a dark green Tilley hat, was leaning forward to see what could be done about my catch of the day.

I knelt against the bottom of the canoe, and slowly pulled the line closer. Then I leaned forward, draping myself over the canoe portage yoke ahead of me, trying to keep my weight as low in the canoe as I could. I stuck my arm over the side, my hand slowly feeling its way down the fishing line until it got close to the lure. I grabbed a handful of cold, wet, sock, and pulled it close to the canoe.

When the foot appeared above the gunnel of the canoe, the canoe began to tremble, as I tried to keep it from turning over. I needed two hands for this, one to hold the leg and one to throw the loop of line. Both hands needed to reach over the same side of the canoe. I wished I had a free hand to shove my camping gear to the other side, to balance.

With one hand, I held the entire foot out of the water. With the other, I slipped the rope over the foot, and over my line, lure and all.

Above me, the trio of turkey vultures circled in the warm afternoon sunshine.

There is a suddenness to the whole thing that is puzzling at first. Above you, there is a silver sky. In that sky, a long dark cloud waits. Below you there is a dark coldness. For some reason, your lungs refuse to work.

Your mind abruptly figures the whole thing out, and you claw your way to the surface, gasping as your head gets back into the element it was designed for.

Now I was angry. My exploration, my time away from the obligations and rules and procedures of my society had just been terminated. I was now under obligations to people I had never met and probably wouldn't like if I did meet. Worse yet, I was swimming with a corpse. My foot kept pushing against it and it kept bobbing back at me on the end of the rope and getting between me and the surface. Any minute I'd get snagged by my own lure, and be mated with the dead guy.

My head broke the surface thinking of the corpse in the unkindest of terms. I remembered, vaguely, a line in "The Cremation of Sam McGee" about hating a corpse.

I rolled the canoe upright and swam to shore, dragging it behind me. It was slow; the canoe was dragging a submerged dead guy and was full of water. But it wasn't a big lake, and I hadn't been too far from a reasonable landing point.

My feet touched a cold, muddy bottom, and sank into the black debris of the Canadian forest on the lake bottom. I scrambled through the arrowhead plants, through the willow underbrush, over some slippery smooth rocks, and into the pines at the shore.

I hauled the canoe over the rocks, scraping blue paint, until I could turn it over, and empty it.

Then I hauled it onto the shore, and reached for the rope attached to the corpse of someone I didn't know.

The rope came in until the body was a dark shape floating among the green arrowhead plants that had once formed the staple diet of the natives. Win Szczedziwoj (that's Chehgeevoy, more or less), former economist and present-day photographer-in-the-rain and finder-of-small-lost-lakes sat down, dripping, on a log, and tried to still his mind.

The universe we inhabit is full of boundaries. There is night and day. There is air and water. There is life and death. The corpse at the end of the rope had crossed at least one boundary I didn't like to think about.

A canoeist traveling through remote country is skirting the edge of the boundary between civilized life and the seemingly random layout of the wilderness. One twist of an ankle on a portage, and you're there until someone finds you. One bad move on the water, and you cross the boundary into the world of fish. And maybe the final boundary, like this person obviously had.

I removed my soaking shirt and pants, took off my socks and shoes, and laid them on a rock in the sunlight. I tied the corpse-rope to a branch, and took the canoe back onto the lake, paddling with an old branch.

I found my paddle, then collected my camera case, the packsack with my camping equipment, and the miscellaneous material I'd brought with me. This included my lifejacket.

Odd items, such as my fishing rod and bailing bucket, were somewhere on the bottom of the lake.

Then I circled the lake, finally finding a dark canvas-and-cedar canoe, filled to the gunwales with water, barely visible among the lily pads on the far shore. There was no sign of any other equipment from the Dead Guy.

My circuit of the lake done, I returned to the Dead Guy and contemplated my options. While I thought, I spread out my map to dry. I'd fished it, a standard topographical, out of the lake. I knew I should have kept it in a plastic case, as I should have been wearing my lifejacket. Maybe next time.

I knew that, by rights, I ought to see if the fellow had a wallet with identification, but I was reluctant to approach the dark shape still out among the shore weeds. Behind me, in the woods, birds sang and the cicadas continued their buzzsaw noises in the treetops. A couple of mosquitoes settled on my back, where I couldn't reach them, and began probing into my skin. A trio of deerflies began their persistent circling around my head, waiting for a chance at my neck.

Out on the lake, the afternoon wind had picked up, making diamonds of the wavetops. Three loons, probably a mated pair with this year's chick, were dark marks on the surface near the small granite cliff. A crow appeared and disappeared in the forest by a small boulder-studded bay. A red-tailed hawk circled slowly, very high above the lake.

A few puffy cumulus clouds drifted in the blue September sky. One of them obscured the sun for a moment.

God, I hated this lake.

I looked at the Thing in the lake, the thing that said I had just acquired a long string of unpleasant things to do.

I realized that what bothered me most was that the thing on the end of the rope was a drowned canoeist of remote lakes. Aisha always worried about her husband on my remote lakes. It would be too hard to find me if anything happened to me. I always assured her that I'd be careful, but accidents could happen. I could too easily have been inhabiting the bottom of this dark lake myself.

Abruptly, I got up from the rock, waded into the lake, and grabbed the yellow rope. Pulling the Dead Guy in a bit I reached into the hip pocket, and, after a struggle, removed a soggy wallet. Further out, I could see a

mass of long blond hair. I rolled the corpse over, and the pale face appeared. The corpse had a blond beard as well, shorter than my gray one, and not as curly. Two half-opened eyes stared from the pale face.

I waded ashore, my feet again getting muddy from the black ooze. On the rock, I opened the wallet. There was about twenty dollars, a couple of credit cards, and, finally, a driver's license.

George Aden was a tall, blonde, yellow-bearded male of forty- one, currently residing at Hawk Lake Lodge, on Hawk Lake. Or at least, he had been, up till the time he took up residence under the surface of a small, dark lake.

The map was still wet, but usable. I found Hawk Lake to the north; presumably the "marina" marked at the west end of the lake was the lodge.

The normal and obvious way out was via Cedar Lake, to the east; it was on the canoe route from Hawk to McFriggit Lake.

Going back to McFriggit the way I had come would be shorter, but I remembered the struggle through swamp and dense brush between these and this lake and had no desire to repeat the experience. It would be faster to find a way to Cedar, then decide whether to go north to Hawk Lake, or south to McFriggit.

Even though this former Aden fellow was from Hawk Lake, I would have preferred to phone the police from McFriggit, where my car was.

That left the problem of what to do with Aden's earthly remains.

I decided that there was no way I would haul George over the portages, so he'd just have to remain here.

Underwater, I decided. If I hauled the body onto the shore, the ants and crows and maybe foxes would start to work on it. In the lake, that left only the snapping turtles. And they probably couldn't eat more than a few external parts in the next day or two. Anyway, George’s external parts were surplus now, whatever they once related to.

Once back in the canoe, I explored the shoreline nearest to Cedar Lake, looking for a good portage route.

There was one obvious choice, and the grassy shore held the remains of an old wooden dinghy. Years ago, hunters had probably left the boat here.

I packed everything I could onto the pack frame, then eyeballed my canoe. My impulse had been to take the canoe and the packs at the same time, but I’ve always considered that the methodology of nut cases. I decided to leave the canoe for a second trip.

Much of the portage was through dense brush, but at one point I came into an old-growth hemlock forest. Hemlocks tend to kill everything under them, so the effect of a grove is that of a cathedral, with a multitude of pillars holding a green ceiling far above.

I was leaning my pack against a tree trunk when a figure carrying a canoe came up a small hill and into view. Without pausing, the man walked up to the tree I was resting against, rolled the canoe onto the ground, and looked me in the eye.

"So George is dead," the stranger said. "Did you kill him?"

## Chapter 2

When I'd recovered my senses enough to get my jaw closed before too many mosquitoes got in there, I managed to look at the stranger and say, "No. I just found him. I mean I found his body, that's all."

There was something strange about all this. The canopy of dark hemlock far overhead, the rows of trunks rising like pillars around us, and beams of yellow sunlight tinged with green cutting the air and patterning the brown forest floor.... I felt for a moment like I'd been caught doing something unmentionable in a corner of the church.

The stranger stood, looking down at me, for what seemed like an eternity, then set his light backpack on the ground, walked to his aluminum canoe and kicked it solidly, adding another dent to the side. He turned and sat on the canoe.

"Where'd you find him?" The stranger was in his late twenties, I figured, slim, maybe a couple of inches taller than me. The long, dark braids and brown eyes meant he was probably native, maybe from the Ojibway reservation to the south. He wore a black leather jacket, a fluorescent green shirt, and black jeans.

"Snagged him while I was fishing. There's a little lake back there," I answered. "Did you know him?"

"Drowned, then?" asked the other.

"Yup." I was beginning to get annoyed. "Who are you, anyway." "Then I repeated, "Did you know him."

"I knew him. Who are you?"

"Younger guys gotta go first." I made that rule up on the spot.

The stranger smiled a bit. "Kele Marten."

That sat me up. "The painter?" Kele nodded, and I added, "I have your painting of the turkey vultures over Hawk Lake - the one with the man in the canoe watching them." I suddenly realized that the man in the painting resembled George Aden.

"I wondered who bought that one. They said it was a photographer. I thought it was strange that a photographer would buy a painting. You?"

I got up and held out my hand. As Kele took it, I said, "Win Szczedziwoj. Rain pictures."

A light dawned in Kele's eyes. "We've got a print of yours at the lodge, in the dining room. A canoe in the rain, with the paddle floating away."

"Poplar Lake, about six years ago," I filled in.

"Did the paddle really float away?"

"It did," I said. "After I took the picture I had to use my hat to paddle the canoe to get it."

We two artists stood in silence, looking at the trees. "Are you sure it's George," Kele asked.

I handed him the wallet, still soaking. Kele extracted the driver's license, and said, "That's him. Now what do we do?"

"Well, I thought I'd get out of here, and call the police. Let them handle it."

Kele looked away through the trees, then said, "Good idea."

"I've got to go back for my canoe," I pointed out. "Do you want to come?"

"Not unless you need help. Us Injuns aren't big on dead people."

Neither was I, when it came to that. Leaving Kele Marten sitting beside his pack, I started back to get my canoe on the lake where the Dead Guy - he still wasn't George, to me - where the Dead Guy floated.

My canoe, while tippy, had at least been built very light, and I could handle it myself, even in dense bush. At least most of the time.

It was just as well Kele didn't come back; he might have offered to help carry it. But having someone else help carry your canoe is worse than doing it yourself, unless the canoe is too large for one person. For one thing, the portage yoke, which fits on your shoulders, is in the center of the canoe. If you have one person at each end of the canoe, neither has a yoke, both people alternate between holding the canoe up with aching arms, and letting it rest on their heads.

As well, two portagers don't walk at the same pace. Maybe they would, over flat ground, but a portage trail isn't normally flat. While the guy in the front is accelerating down a mound, the guy in the back is slowing to climb it. When the guy in the front is slowing to step over a rock, the guy in the back is trying to make a giant step over a patch of wet ground. The canoe tends to shift back and forwards, banging a pair of heads at random intervals.

Finally, a man carrying a canoe alone normally tilts the canoe up at the front, so he can see where he is going. With two people carrying the canoe, this isn't possible; the canoe rides level. This means the fellow at the front can't see very well and often runs into branches, bringing the canoe to a sudden stop. The portagers then come to a stop a half step later.

On the way to get the canoe, and all the way back to the hemlock grove where Marten waited, I worked up a number of puzzling questions in my mind.

Why, for example, was the painter here in the first place? This was well off the regular canoe route. I'd seen no sign of sketching materials, but these could have been in Kele's pack.

And how did he know about George being dead?

When I broke through to the open hemlock woods again, canoe on my back, Kele was sitting against the aluminum canoe, smoking a pipe. He merely nodded when I showed up. I tried to read his face, but it was absolutely blank. He didn't appear to be the type to blither on about his feelings. I can understand that, since I'm the same way myself, but it doesn't lead to a lot of information being bandied about. He didn't ask me why I was wet; I didn't ask him how he came to be in this woods.

"How far to Cedar Lake?" I asked, dropping the canoe and taking the opportunity to flatten a couple of deerflies that had been cutting small circular holes in my neck.

"Twenty minutes, one way. You want to do it all in one trip?"

"I'm not that young, anymore," I told him. "One trip for the pack, then I go back for the canoe."

"Could you do it with my pack?" Kele indicated his lighter packsack. He'd obviously packed for a day trip only.

"If the trail's not too rough."

"A lot of open rock. You didn't come this way?"

"Up from McFriggit," I said, pointing to the south. "Across by way of Casey Lake."

"That's one tough way to come. The route to Cedar should be easy after that."

"I'll try it. You think you can carry that canoe and my pack at the same time?" I remembered the days when I might have been able to do it.

"No problem," said Kele, getting to his feet. "Young buck. Heap strong."

We set off generally eastward with Kele in the lead, his heavy aluminum canoe resting on two paddles, which had been strapped to the canoe to act as a yoke, the traditional method of carrying a canoe. I carried my lighter canoe using a padded yoke I'd made for my own shoulders. I always think of people who use the paddles for a yoke as masochists.

Kele, of course, carried my heavy pack as well.

Something over half an hour later, Cedar Lake appeared through a row of birches as a patch of blue in the early evening sunlight. We dropped the canoes gratefully onto the shore, scaring a host of dragonflies into darting flight, and earning the melodious screams of a red-winged blackbird, whose late-season nest was in the cattails of a nearby bay.

It had been a couple of years since I'd been to Cedar Lake. It was still a pretty place, even if I didn't appreciate it right then. We loaded the packs into our canoes and pushed into the lake.

We followed the shoreline, rock and trees, northwards.

In one lily-pad-rimmed bay, we paused again, artists both, to measure the worth of the sky, lake, and trees in our eyes, framing the scene automatically. A bright blue dragonfly landed on Kele's hand. He watched it for a moment, then shook it gently back into the air. The sun was behind us. Tell me, I thought, why you were on that portage trail and why you knew Aden was dead. But I didn't ask, and so got no answer.

As the canoes drifted apart, he reached forward and crushed an ant with the tip of his paddle.

Ants always get into a canoe. Every time the boat rests on the ground, a few ants climb aboard. You just have to hope that they don't wander up your leg, panic under your pants, and bite you in the crotch.

"You treat dragonflies a lot better than ants," I pointed out.

Kele Marten, landscape artist, looked me in the eyes. "The ant was headed for death. All that was ahead of it was a few hours of suffering as it tried to find its way back to its nest. I don't mind death. But nothing should suffer."

"Light and dark," Kele said as we got into the lake. From my canoe, I gave him a puzzled look.

"The shore on that side," - he indicated the western shore, where we'd come from - "it's a dark shore." It was, too. Lined with the pines that made the corpse lake so gloomy.

"The shore on the other side is bright." I noticed he didn't like long sentences. But he had a point. The eastern shore was made of rolling rock hills scattered with sumacs and odd bunches of trees. The bare rock, a pinkish-grey color, brightened the shoreline. This was a shore that a man could climb and have something to see from the top. It beckoned; it had possibilities. I could have climbed those hills, low though they were. I could well have climbed them and let possibilities and skylines take the place of what lay behind me.

I nodded. "Which way's the next portage to the lodge?" I wanted to know. The lodge was now the logical place to report to. I was tired from the portage, and still under a feeling of oppression from the day's events. My clothes were mostly dry, although a lingering dampness from my pants had chafed the insides of my thighs during the portage. Kele pointed across the lake.

My mood lightened a bit with the paddle across the lake. Cedar Lake had several rocky islands, and the inevitable pair of loons paddled and dove ahead of the canoes. In the distance, above the cliffs, clouds were building into thunderheads.

Besides, there were probably no Dead Guys down there scaring the fish.

Our canoes rounded a small headland with the slap of waves noisy against the aluminum canoe in the lead. Ahead I spotted the triangular orange sign that marked the start of the portage out of Cedar Lake.

A pale green tent stood near the portage; above it, the sign for an official campsite. Smoke from a campfire drifted through the trees.

As we beached the canoes, a red-faced man in a green shirt and green pants started down a rough bank to meet us. "Hi!" he called. I just waved.

I waited for Kele to drag his canoe up onto the shore, then edged my own canoe closer. Being in a tippier canoe, I had to edge closer to the shore before getting out. By the time I was on shore, and dragging the canoe up over a couple of rocks and a slippery log, the red-faced man had arrived, and was standing close. He was a bit taller than myself, with a ruddy complexion and small, round glasses. I handed him a pack. The man looked a bit taken back, but took the pack, and set it out of the way.

I glanced over at Kele, who was once again sitting on his canoe, smoking a pipe.

"Can I help you?" I said.

The stranger blurted, "We've lost our guide. Have you seen him?"

I looked at Kele, who said nothing. I turned to the other, and asked, "George Aden?"

The man seemed taken aback. "You know him?"

“I found him. He's dead."

There was a long pause. The man looked back up the hill where his partner waited at the tent. "Patrick!" he yelled. "Come here. He turned to me and held out his hand. "I'm Ned DeVincent. This is awful." His partner had arrived down the slope, kicking out a rock and a couple of dead oak branches. "This is my friend, Patrick Ireland." Ireland looked a lot like Jesus, aged a bit from too long on some cross.

I shook both their hands; it seemed the thing to do. Patrick seemed a bit stunned. "How?" he said, then "Where?"

A little lake, just to the west of this one. Seems to have drowned." I hated long explanations, and I had the feeling I'd have to do this one a lot in the next while.

“Thomson Lake,” Kele spoke up. We looked at him in unison. “The lake George drowned in.” He went back to his pipe.

Patrick and Ned looked at each other, then Ned said, "He's been gone for two days now. We didn't know what to do."

I heard a voice beside me; I turned to see Kele now standing next to me.

"One thing we can do," said Kele,” is make camp." Three pairs of eyes turned again to the artist. "It's only an hour till dark," he continued, "and I really don't like portaging in the dark.

I had to agree. I really wanted to get this whole thing behind me, but a dead body is in no hurry to get anywhere, and while I'd done a portage in the dark more than once, I had no desire ever to do it again.

"There's room for a tent beside us, if you don't mind a couple of guys who snore," Ned said.

"I guess we'll take it, then." Kele and I hauled our packs up the slope. There was indeed room for at least one more tent just up the slope a bit. The site was at an angle, but better than some I’d put up my tent on.

I looked at Kele. It was obvious from the size of his pack that the painter had carried only a day pack, with no tent, supper, or sleeping bag. "You're welcome to share my tent," I told him. "I snore, too, and the tent's small, but we can squeeze in."

Kele hesitated. Then Patrick Ireland spoke up. "I guess you could use George's tent. If it doesn't bother you."

"Dead guys bother me a lot, but I've slept in that tent many times. Even used that sleeping bag when George lent it to me." Abruptly, Kele became silent, looked out over the lake, then turned to put his pack against a tree by the tent.

My small hemisphere tent went up quickly. There was a patch of crushed weeds and the ground had dried from the previous day's rain. I stuffed the sleeping bag into the tent, unrolled the self-inflating mattress, and opened the pack. It had been a long day, and I was getting hungry.

As I got my cooking materials out, I looked at the others. Kele had his head in the green tent George Aden would never need again. Patrick and Ned were sitting by the fire, on a cut log, talking quietly.

I took it all with a stoic sense of endurance. This picture-taking weekend into the remote lakes had turned into this crowded campsite, filled with people I didn't know.

There were other campsites on the lake, I knew. While the Ministry of Natural Resources - or whatever the last change of government calls it now - hadn't spent a great deal on the canoe route, it had at least marked the portages and cleared and marked a few campsites.

Most of the canoe traffic in Ontario seems to go to Algonquin Park, a couple of hours to the north. Campsites there are well maintained and the park rangers try their best to keep people from camping anywhere

else in the park. People know about Algonquin. You have to make reservations for a campsite in summer in Algonquin.

I examined this lake as the shadows got longer. It's part of the rest of the province. There are enough lakes, close enough together, to make a canoe route, but not enough for anyone to make a park out of them. Hunters come in here in the fall, to hunt deer, bear, and ducks. A couple of the lakes are even big enough for a floatplane to bring in bass fishermen in the summer, when the wind is right.

And someone from the ministry has prepared a little brochure on North Kawartha Canoe Routes. The line of lakes makes a canoe route from Hawk Lake to McFriggit Lake. The ministry keeps the portage signs in place, and clears and marks a dozen or so campsites. People used to steal the portage signs for souvenirs, until the ministry took to using about six hundred staples on each sign.

Unlike the campsites in Provincial Parks, there are no toilet facilities in these parks. In Algonquin, there is a "box" located in the woods behind the campsite. To use it, you raise a lid to reveal a wooden seat over a pit toilet. The raised lid provides a semblance of privacy.

It gives you a good view of the woods, too. You can watch the squirrels overhead and the people at the campsite and the loons on the lake, if the place is so situated.

Not that you ever do. A man using one of these is generally in a hurry. The place is a round hole with spider webs into which he dangles some of his more valuable bodily parts. Everybody runs a stick around first, to clear the webs, but everyone also suspects this just makes the spiders annoyed. Those are the Algonquin toilets.

Not on these campsites in the Kawartha Lakes. Here, you wander in the woods until you find some place where a scattering of tissue paper from previous campers declares a suitable place. Just watch where you step.

You're supposed to bury your shit, but it would take fifteen minutes with an axe just to get a hole big enough to put it in, if you didn't break the axe on a rock first. The ground is a twisted mass of intertwined roots, covered with leaves and pine needles. And the best places are habitat for great quantities of mosquitoes.

The best you can do is cover the biologicals with leaves. Caring people take the tissue paper out with them, so at least the place looks wild again.

The fact that the ministry marks and clears campsites on these lakes is no small matter. The country around is so rough that finding a place to camp can be difficult at best. My first campsite, on Casey Lake, had taken me an hour to decide upon. Even then, it was spongy, and tilted, and a little too close to a swamp for comfort.

The rest of the lakeshore had been a tumble of rocks and fallen trees, hopeless for a tent.

No one who is experienced with the Canadian wilderness brings a tent that needs pegs. Getting a peg into the ground is too much of an unlikely miracle; either the peg shatters on a rock, or it slides loosely into soggy moss - and comes out just as easily.

My first tent was a triangular orange thing that used pegs. I remember one summer trip in Algonquin, years ago. After trying to get the pegs into the ground, I tied some guy ropes to twigs, and put rocks on the others. In the night, of course, a thunderstorm blew the whole thing over, so I spent the rest of the night wrapped in a wet tent, breathing through a rip in the nylon.

I was hungry by this point. I hadn't had lunch at the other lake, catching Dead Guys instead of perch or bass, and my stomach was growling. It was getting on toward seven.

So I took my pot and food and went over to the fire. Ned and Patrick had got it going again, and a rusty grate perched between the rocks that enclosed the flames. A grate is real handy for cooking food, which is why so many people bring their own, usually racks from old refrigerators or stoves. Then they leave them at the campsite, blackened and rusty in the morning.

"Hey Kele," I called, "I've got enough for two, if you don't mind rice."

"You're sure?" He hesitated.

"I'll be cutting this trip short, anyway," I said. "Anything you eat I won't have to carry back."

Now there are campers who bring gourmet food on a canoe trip. They bake muffins and fry carefully dried morsels in cast-iron skillets along with eggs and vegetables. I'm not one of those.

My basic meal is instant rice, with fresh fish, and a bit of hot sauce or soy sauce. Here's how you do it:

First, you put a pot of lake water over the fire. When it's boiling, add instant rice in bags. You can buy these at the supermarket. After five minutes you fish out the bags and dump the rice onto your plate - which was, a minute ago, the lid to the pot. Add sauce from a plastic bottle or package, stir, and eat.

Of course it's awful. But it's quick, light, and healthy. It also gives a person a great incentive for catching bass or perch, or for finding wild blueberries, in August. And it really makes you appreciate civilization when you get out of the woods.

Most of all, it’s virtually decision-free and quick. You can do it in the dark, or when it’s just starting to rain.

The rest of the water in the pot? It's now sterile, and you can use it for tea, instant soup, or washing up. You can let it cool, and pour it into your canteen, for tomorrow’s water (if you don’t mind slightly flavored water).

While Kele Marten and I ate in silence, Ned DeVincent and Patrick Ireland brought another pot over. They were cooking special dried backpackers' meals. Aisha (The Wife) says these are too expensive for what they give you. I also find them a little bland and oversalted. If I get too much salt in my meal, or too much wheat I'll wake up the next morning with the impression someone with a 3/8-inch drill is operating on my skull, just under my left ear.

Now I want you to understand, I really wanted to know why Kele was heading for a meeting in a small, remote lake. And why he'd asked me if Aden was dead. And how these two guys at this campsite could lose a guide and not know where he’d gone. They’d obviously had some camping experience.

But I wanted, even more, to pretend they didn’t exist. Any of them.

We sat on the rocks by the fire and stared across the lakes. Ned and Patrick also put on a pot to heat, which surprised me, since I'd assumed they'd eaten. After all, the fire had been almost down to ashes, but still going, when we'd arrived.

They cooked up a chili meal from one of the commercial packets, supplemented with dried fruits.

As the shadows got longer, I turned to Patrick and asked him, "When did your guide leave?"

But it was Ned who answered. "The day before yesterday. He left in the morning. Said he wanted to look at a little lake he hadn't seen in years. Took my fold-up fishing rod. Said he might bring us back a couple of lake trout." He looked at Patrick. "We've been waiting for him since then."

Patrick said, "That's right. We were planning on going back to the lodge tomorrow if he didn't show up." He looked as depressed as a human could get, taking his hat off his bald head and staring into it.

"What do we do now?" Ned asked, looking around at the other three. We were gathered around the fire like cavemen, huddled against the coming dark, our backs to the unknown portage from which George Aden would never return. Three of us were middle aged, and aware of every day.

Mind you, if I have to go, falling out of my canoe would be one of my chosen ways. But not yet. Not yet at all.

I turned and indicated Kele with a wave of my plastic spoon. "This," I said, "is Kele Marten, famous artist. I just met him, on the portage to whatever lake that was George died in. I don't know the name of the lake. It's a half-mile west of here."

Kele scooped the last of the Szczedziwoj Feast into his mouth. “It’s called Thomson Lake, as I mentioned before.” Little as that was, it seemed enough for him. Three pairs of eyes kept on him, waiting like malamutes for the next scrap.

Eventually, he figured the silence out and continued, “Was going to meet George there.” Then, “I heard the owl call my name.” He pointed at me. "He's a photographer. Takes pictures in the rain. He found George. I never got to see the body." He was not the king of long explanations, I could tell.

"Snagged his leg with a number 1 Blue Fox." I looked around. "That's a spinner. I was fishing."

"What do we do now?" Ned DeVincent repeated his question.

"I figured on going back to the marina on McFriggit Lake and reporting it," I said. "Then I met Kele, here, and we figured we'd go back up to Hawk Lake and call the police."

"I think that's reasonable," Ned said.

Once more, four non-communicative males stared into the fire and wondered about things. Men things. Like how Kele knew he was supposed to meet George there, when they'd left days apart. Or why these guys felt they needed a guide on a canoe route that high-school kids regularly took with only a photocopied map.

The sun had gone down, and dusk had turned the lake surface into a silver mirror. The trees on the far shore were turning to silhouettes, and the first star was out.

Kele abruptly stood up. "I hear somebody!"

I listened. Yes, there were voices. "At another campsite?" I asked. The map put out by the ministry showed three other sites on Cedar Lake

"They're all empty." Ned looked at Patrick. "We paddled around the lake looking for some sign this afternoon."

We all stood up together. It was obvious there was someone coming south along the portage trail from Fox Lake. Fox is the next lake on the route to Hawk Lake. The portage was 800 meters: a fairly long one.

There was a man's voice, and a woman's one. The glint of a flashlight.

I suspected whoever was coming would be having trouble; you can't carry a canoe and shine a flashlight very well. And setting up a tent in the dark is no fun. I got my flashlight from my pack and started up the trail to meet them. Kele and Ned followed, Ned carrying a larger flashlight.

We met them not far into the woods. They were standing on a stretch of flat rock looking for the trail when we got there. The man looked to be in his early twenties, the woman a couple of years younger. She was obviously leading, since she had the flashlight. Both were obviously tired, although the woman smiled when she shone the light on us.

"Hello there," she said brightly, "Is this the way to the lake?" I assured her it was. She was carrying a large pack, while her partner had both a canoe and a slightly smaller pack on his back.

They followed us to the edge of the water, where the man eased the canoe off his shoulders and placed it beside the other canoes. Then both of them got their packs off their shoulders.

"Thank you for your help," the woman said. "I'm Belinda Lalonde. This is Bob Tucker. Which to way the nearest campsite on this lake?"

"Put a sock in it," her companion said, angrily, shaking the map out. "I'll find one. Just pass me the torch." He had an accent a lot like like John Lennon's, so I assumed he came from the same part of Olde England.

I looked out at the lake, black on black. The trees made a sawtooth silhouette horizon. The sky was a field of diamonds on purple, but the rest was just undifferentiated ebony. I've crossed lakes in the dark and made camp, and I feel sorry for anyone who tries it.

"You can put up a tent beside ours," I said. "There's enough room, if it isn't too big." She looked at him. Before he could reply, she said, "We'll do that. Thank you."

He said nothing, just took his pack and scrambled up the slope to the camp. I reached down to take her pack. It was large, but not as heavy as its size would indicate; probably it contained the sleeping bags and tent.

She took it back from me. "I'd better take this. Bob's pretty good most of the time, but when it comes to me, well... he doesn't like other guys showing too much interest, if you get my drift." She slung the pack over one shoulder. "The guy at the lodge was flirting with me the other day. I thought Bob was going to kill him." Her green eyes reflected the campfire light.

I stopped her. "What guy was that?"

"You know. The owner's husband. George. I just hope he's not there when we get back."

## Chapter 3

Now you've got to understand, I was in a bad mood, or I wouldn't have said all the things I said.

And why was I so pissed off? I'll tell you; it was because I was supposed to be camped all alone on a wild lake, sitting around a campfire, contemplating the wind or my old wild mind, or the hair growing out of my ears. Or whatever I needed to contemplate.

By myself.

I was, instead, sitting around a campfire by a wild lake, with a bunch of people I didn't know.

And probably wouldn't have liked if I did know them.

It wasn't the same.

Oh, don't get me wrong. I'm good for pleasant conversation in the pub with a couple of friends. I'll do my duty and go to weddings and funerals and afternoon teas and God only knows what else. I'll live through it all.

But I need my bush time. I need my lonesome lakes. I look forward to them. Getting away from it all is like taking a girdle off my mind.

I did not, repeat, not, want to be with these people at this time.

I had nothing against humanity at the time. It was just people I wanted to be away from.

Part of my mind was contemplating going down by the lake, hiding among the canoes, and watching the stars until everybody went to bed or died of old age. Or whatever.

But I couldn't get away with that, so I waited till Bob and Belinda were feasting on some dehydrated mush, and said, "Hey, Mr. Tucker, I hear you and some guy at the lodge won't be sharing a tent anytime soon."

He looked up from his gruel, which, I suppose, was some sort of pasta mix. He gave me a look that was cold as a train rail on a January night on the dark side of Etobicoke, and said, "Place is full of nosy Parkers." Then he went back to eating his noodles, rolling them around a plastic fork. He was wearing a tight T-shirt with short sleeves; it was a warm night, and the muscles in his arms glistened with sweat. His movements had the grace of someone who could move quickly when he wanted to.

"Even out here in the colonies people talk," I added. I watched the lovely Belinda Lalonde. She was watching Patrick and brushing her hair. It shone red in the firelight, reflecting or maybe creating fire.

"It seems to take bloody little to keep the locals amused," he said, doing the cold look thing again. "Besides, all I did was tell him what might ‘appen to him if he didn't let my girl alone. Serve the bastard right if ‘e fell out of ‘is damn canoe and drowned."

I cheerily said, "Your troubles are over, I guess. He fell out of his canoe and drowned."

Bob's wiry body went rigid. "Bloody ‘ell. What are you on about?" His eyes, and the girl's eyes, turned towards me. Kele watched all of us, in sequence. Ned whispered to Patrick, who got up to saw off another chunk of firewood. Like sensible campers, they'd dragged a sizable log out of the forest and had a good saw.

I repeated, "Fell out of his canoe and drowned."

"’ow?" An odd question.

"Mr. artist here thinks I offed him," I said. I nodded my head over towards Kele.

Kele had a very quiet voice. "The photographer man came out of the water carrying George's wallet."

"Bumped off a total stranger for twelve dollars and his library card." I reached for the wallet.

"Oh, you keep it," Kele said, holding his hands in front of him. You might need it to get a book from the mobile library in Burleigh Falls. Gets in every couple of weeks."

"Hey!" Ned spoke up. "Nobody's accusing anybody of murdering George. It was obviously an accident, and perhaps we should show more respect to the dead." His balding head and deep voice seemed to carry authority. I was impressed; I wondered how he'd look at the end of a fishing line with a perch checking out the reflection from his head.

But I was all for ending the conversation. I don't like to talk. And, I guess, showing respect to someone I didn't know, just because he got himself drowned, never made much sense to me. It was just the sort of strange unwritten rule that drives me to remote lakes in the first place. Mosquitoes and frogs have their own rules, but at least they don't expect me to actively participate.

"Just how did you come to be in the water with George? That's right, isn't it? He" - Belinda indicated Kele with her finger - "he said you were in the water."

So I provided another rendition of my time that afternoon fishing on a small, dark lake. I didn't add any details from the telling I'd given Kele; I figured I'd be telling the story a lot in the next few days.

Kele broke the following silence with, "Consistent story, anyway."

He was beginning to annoy me.

"Gormless bastard might ‘ave wanted to learn ‘ow to ‘andle a canoe better," Bob said.

Belinda stopped brushing her hair long enough to look at Kele and say, "Bob's gotta be a bit nervous, right now. He's the one most likely to be asked questions if it wasn't an accident. I imagine the police were probably keeping an eye on him even before he told George he was going to mail George's balls to Los Angeles. In separate envelopes." She put her hairbrush away and took out a nail file, inspecting her nails by the light of the fire.

"He looks tough enough to do it," I said.

Bob Tucker set his food down. He was a slow eater, unlike me. A black cylinder appeared suddenly in his hand. A shiny blade snicked out of it. The blade winked in the firelight, then disappeared back into the knife handle. In one fluid motion, his arm went down and came back up with his food bowl.

It was an impressive show. "That's one way to stay alive in Liverpool, I guess," Kele said.

"Manchester." Bob looked at me. "You can be a rabbit or you can be a fox." He put his bowl down. "In England, come to that, it don’t make any odds; both get done in the long run."

"You have to practice that evil look?" Kele poked at the fire with a long stick. The burning logs rolled a bit, and a cloud of sparks rose into the sky to join the constellations above. An opening, glowing orange, appeared in the logs, like the gateway to hell. It made the trees surrounding us all the darker.

"You run once, you run always after that. You should ‘ave people wondering if you're going to slice them. Otherwise you watch your back all the time."

"Slice many?" Patrick broke his silence, and brought out a couple of bottles of imported dry sherry.

"Ned’s mouth dropped open. "You've been carrying those since we left?

"I was saving it," Patrick said. "In case. Like, in case we needed it."

Belinda dumped the water in her blue plastic cup onto the ground, and held it out. "I'll have some. And yes, I understand that slicing people is how Bob learned about canoeing."

"Explain." Patrick poured some sherry into Belinda's cup and some into his own. Then he passed the bottle to Ned, on his left.

"In the ‘ope of reforming us bad ‘uns, some very kind social agencies gave us suspended sentences. Without a by your leave, we’re gadding about in a canoe in Canada. Canoeing to save our souls." Bob hesitated with his cup, then declined the alcohol. "We were part of a group from Scotland, Germany, and Sweden. Three years ago. We went up a bit farther north." Bob paused, then added, "Not everybody who’s blotted ‘is copybook gets to ‘are off canoeing, but I guess the guy I cut ‘ealed pretty quick."

"And you came back?" Ned carried the first bottle over towards Kele, without taking any. Patrick was already opening the second.

"First time I clapped eyes on this country, I wanted to stay. Just wanted to do it without the aggro of knocking about with a crowd of stupid berks."

Kele also declined the alcohol, so it came to me. I pondered it a long time while the loons laughed in the dark on the lake. It had been a long day, and alcohol and campsites seem to go together.

You'd think it would be the opposite way around. That, surrounded by pristine nature, you'd want to do without liquor. But it doesn't work that way. The appeal of a drink at a campsite in the dark can just about overwhelm a guy.

Maybe it’s that wilderness can relax a person, almost to the point of euphoria. All that stands between you and total escape are a few thoughts, flitting like night mosquitoes, in the back of your mind. So close.... A couple of drinks to drown those nasty thoughts, and you’ve got nothing to do but watch the waves of night in the sea of darkness.

On the other hand, alcohol, especially sherry, does interesting things to a migraine sufferer. I would probably wake up with some god of the underworld smacking me on the side of the head with a crowbar, and yelling, "Good morning, Win! Have a Fun Time last night, did we?" I sighed, and declined. One cup wasn't going to make me forget my practice session for the Synchronized Swimming with a Corpse event. Maybe if they had offered me the whole bottle and a straw....

I passed the bottle back to Patrick, who poured a generous amount into his cup. I watched him. He'd seemed a bit hesitant and shy at first, but he'd transmogrified back into a university professor's "I'm your intellectual superior but I guess I'll talk to you anyway" attitude. I had been pretty good at it myself, years back, when I was teaching first-year Economics. But I didn't need that protective coloration any more.

"No more slicing up the youth of Manchester?" I asked. "The treatment must have worked."

"Well enough. I found a place where I didn't ‘ave to be a fox or a rabbit."

"So why'd you have a fight with our late guide?" Patrick poured himself another round and held the bottle out.

We all waved our hands "no". Patrick placed the bottle beside him. I watched the bottles carefully, the way the light from the fire rolled back from green glass. When I looked up, I could see Bob and Kele keeping one eye on the bottle.

I knew what it was to me; there's nothing a migraine victim craves more than something that will give him a real monster of a headache. If they're ever going to hang me, I want a pound of chocolate and a bottle of sherry before I go. Then I can yell at the hangman, "Hurry up, dammit! My head hurts."

Belinda laughed at the question. "Bob's got a jealous streak. And George and I were an item for a few months a year ago - no - make that two years ago.

"That's where I remember you from." Kele tilted his head. "Why'd you bring Bob back here?"

"He asked me if I knew some quiet lakes. So we came here. George talked about these lakes. He was in love with this country, you know."

"You didn't go camping with him?" Bob watched the spear-point tips of pine branches that shifted in the dancing firelight above the tents.

"Oh, no. Sally would have found out about us." She looked at me. "Sally's his wife. Her father actually owns the lodge, so George has to stay married to her."

Sounded like a reasonable thing for a man to tell a young redhead, I figured.

"And why are you here?" Belinda sipped at her sherry and looked at Kele.

"George and I had an appointment. With destiny, it turns out." Kele smiled.

“The owl called his name,” I added.

"Out here?" Belinda asked.

"No finer place. No other place."

"But really?" Belinda was curious about something, either about Kele or about his motives. She seemed to have a curiosity about people that I lacked entirely.

"Like the man said, I heard the owl call my name." Kele kept on smiling, but his eyes had a look closer to the one Bob Tucker could do so well.

Now I knew that he was doing the Indian mystery stuff on us, but I thought it a good idea. As far as I was concerned, it was nobody's business but his own. He didn't have to tell anybody about his time.

The fact that I had been asking people personal questions, too, meant nothing; if people wanted to answer them, that was their hard luck. But I was wearing down, and my need to get some quiet time was getting stronger than my desire to needle strangers.

The redhead turned towards Patrick. "And you. We might as well find out why you two came here with... George."

But it was Ned who answered her. He put another log onto the fire, dodged the inevitable sparks, and looked around. "We" - he indicated Patrick - "we hired George because he knows this country. And we wanted someone who could help with the portaging and all." He waved at the tents. "He could get the tents up and supper on while we were still trying to decide what lake we were on.

"Besides, it's nice to be able to relax a bit. Patrick and I haven't done much camping since we were both younger. He's a geographer, and I'm a geologist by trade. But we're analytical types, rather than field people, so it was good to have someone who could do the routine camp stuff for us.

"He carried both the canoes for us. Saved me, at least, from getting a coronary or two on the portages."

"Especially on that last portage from Fox," Belinda Lalonde said, looking at Bob."

"Well, yeah. Having someone local, someone who knows the routes... That's always useful."

"Prospecting for gold?" Kele's quiet voice slipped into a moment of silence. I thought, "Like they'd tell, if they were."

But Ned answered right away. "Oh, there's no gold around here! This is a geologist's holiday." Seeing several pairs of eyes on him, he kicked at the fire again and explained.

"Picture a pot of gravy, that you're reheating on the stove. Got that? A disk of fat has hardened on the surface. The fat is a solid mass for a while, with the gravy heating under it. You poke it to break up the fat, and the gravy begins welling up between the chunks of fat."

Now, this country is like those floating blocks of fat." Ned reached towards the rocks that circled the fire. He tested one near the edge, then picked it up. It was an angular piece of stone about as large as his fist. He passed it to Kele, on his right. "Most of this country is granite, floating on lava. The lava's got the good stuff, the minerals, but it's down there." He pointed straight down. "A long way down.

"What you've got to find is where the lava spouted up, millions of year ago, carrying minerals up to the surface. The edges of the blocks." He smiled and nodded at us, firelight gleaming off his head.

"So we're not about to start mining Cedar Lake right away?" I asked.

"The nearest edge is about thirty miles to the east. It runs from Bancroft to Nephton Mines. These lakes are safe, thank God."

Belinda tilted her head, and asked, "Why so thankful? Don't you make your living telling people where to cut up the landscape?"

"I got into geology because I liked rocks. But I also like the land, and there's just too little of it left unspoiled." He seemed to be getting quite serious about it. His voice was a bit louder.

"So, if you found gold here, you wouldn't tell anybody? Like your employer, for example?" I decided Miss Lalonde needed a bit of help bothering people who could be bothered.

"No! If I didn't die from the shock of finding anything in this country, I'd never tell. This country's had enough of its beauty spots gouged and torn in the name of money. When the industry learns to respect something besides the sound of dollar bills being sorted, maybe then it'll deserve the right to the minerals in the ground." He looked at me, then around, the sweat on his balding head catching the firelight.

Abruptly, he leaned back again. "That's where George and I got along. We just came by it from different directions. To him, this land was as much beauty as he ever needed."

"So how did you manage all those years in the mining industry," Kele Marten wanted to know?

The geologist looked up at the sky. "I retire in a year. An early retirement."

I looked at Patrick? "And you?"

"He smiled a deep professor's smile. "I deal in glacial geology. I'd be finding gravel pits for the highways if I hadn't stayed in the academic world. Now my ambition is to make full professor and nurture my tenure."

"Glacial?" Bob had his knife out, and was carving something into a piece of wood.

"This country used to be covered with a glacier. It came from that way," the geographer pointed to the northeast, among the trees, "and ground its way that way." He pointed across the lake. "It scooped out all these lakes and pushed most of the soil south. What used to be here," he pointed down, "is now part of the hills around Peterborough.

"I guess you don't want to hear about glaciofluvial deposits and ice-contact stratified drift." He smiled a professor's smile and sucked back the last of the sherry in his cup.

There was a silence as we tried to imagine a giant white bulldozer scraping the land.

Abruptly, Patrick reached for the remaining sherry bottle. But Ned got it first. He stood up and, moving quickly around the group, poured some into each person's cup without asking. We all had cups - sitting around a

campfire requires something to hold and fiddle with, and drinking tea or soup or water gives you something to do with your hands. So the sherry created some strange mixtures. Tea and sherry, hot chocolate and sherry, soup and sherry, or just watered-down sherry, depending on whose cup it went into. I took some - it didn't seem worth fighting about.

Bob was the first to react. He stood up, held the cup up looking at it carefully. Then he poured the contents of the cup onto one of the rocks surrounding the fire. Sherry steam rose and disappeared into the night. "This is for my father," he said. "God knows ‘e loved the stuff."

Kele followed suit, standing up, then pouring his cup onto the rock. He turned to face Bob. "You father couldn't possibly have been as big a drunk as mine."

"’Ung ‘is ‘at very night at the local. Spent every penny getting keg-legged."

"You had money? My father traded beaver skins for his booze."

"You ‘ad beaver? We ‘ad to trap rats to get enough to eat."

"You got to eat meat? We lived on the inner bark of the white pine."

"You got greens? We never washed the dishes, so we could ‘ave a bit of mold every now and then."

"Wait!" It was Belinda who spoke. "It's getting late, and I'm tired. You guys can do the rest of the shtick tomorrow if you want." She drained her cup, made a face, and said, "Where are the facilities in this hotel?"

Patrick pointed at the woods. Bob picked up the flashlight, and handed it to Belinda. "Here's the torch. Good luck." We watched the light wander into the woods, then blink off.

I poured my sherry, most of a full cup, onto the most convenient place, my tonsils, and got up, too.

"Too late to wash the dishes, I guess." Patrick dumped his cutlery into the cookpot.

"I never do, on the last meal," I said, dumping all my cookware into a white IGA bag and tying it closed. "A lot easier to wash stuff at home."

"What about breakfast?" Bob wanted to know. "They always made us wash everything."

"Eat out of the cans, or finish the granola. I want to get out of here early." I looked up to catch the glare of the flashlight announcing Belinda Lalonde’s return.

"You’re bang on there, squire," Bob Tucker said, rattling his stuff into a green garbage bag.

Ned was down at the water, then coming back with a bucket of water. The bucket was a collapsible camp bucket, made of nylon. He poured the water onto the fire, and darkness came out of the woods and swallowed us. Flashlights flicked on. Civilized people that we are, we all had battery-driven light-swords to wave in our battles against the shadows of night.

A second bucket of water went onto the fire. Patrick's light picked out Ned DeVincent on his knees, stirring the ashes with a stick and feeling for warm spots with one hand.

At the edge of the campsite, a flashlight picked out a place where Bob was having his before-sleep pee. All the men would be doing that, one at a time, separately. Only close friends pee together. I handed my flashlight to Kele, who nodded an appreciation and disappeared uphill.

Bob's flashlight lit the inside of his tent, providing a brief silhouette of Belinda loosening her brassiere. Not that I noticed.

By the time Ned and Patrick had returned from their time behind a bush, Kele was unrolling the dead man's sleeping bag inside the dead man's tent.

Me, I followed a loon cry down to the edge of the lake.

Loons have many sounds, but the most basic of them is like a laugh made by a goose that's been worked on a bit by Dr. Frankenstein. It comes out of the night as if to say, good-bye, you who are just passing through. Good-bye.

The smooth rock sloped down to the water, and, walking slowly onto it, I was free of the forest. I shone my light ahead, its beam picking out the line where water met rock that was old when North America ground itself apart from Europe.

For a moment the beam slid into the water. Like most of the northern lakes, the water was very clear, almost totally transparent in the shallows near shore. A variety of bugs, creatures of the night, swam in the random dance of chaos that runs the universe.

A variety of leech, probably not a bloodsucker type, swam casually like a tiny snake suspended just above the bottom. It was brown, with blue and orange spots along its rippling edges.

I turned the light out, and let my eyes adjust to the dark. It took a moment, as I lay back on the rock. A mosquito or two came out of the night and settled on my neck. I got them both with one hand. "Better luck to your sisters," I thought.

There was no moon, and the stars were bright, becoming brighter as my eyes adjusted.

I don't know the constellations. I had a telescope when I was a kid, but the old brain isn't what it used to be. It was still a hot night, so the stars weren't all they could have been; on cool nights, this far from the city, they can be awesome.

This night, they quivered above the darkness. A meteorite died in silence somewhere around Cygnus, the swan. The sky was a deep blue- black, getting a bit lighter towards the horizon. The lake was a well of blackness without a break to the tops of the trees. For a moment it was a jagged-edge velvet bowl overflowing with sky.

Then the lake was a black mouth trying to swallow the universe. The treetops were dark teeth ringing a lightless maw, waiting. Among the teeth and into the indigo the movements of tiny bats appeared and disappeared, zigzagging silently.

I wondered if George Aden had a spirit, and if it would haunt a small, dark lake not far west of this one.

A twig snapped and some bushes swished behind me. Someone tripped on a pebble and rolled towards the water. A small splash and a "goddamn" announced that a hand or foot had made contact with lake water, undoubtedly causing consternation among the inhabitants of this end of the lake.

"Indians are supposed to sneak up silently," I said.

"I was out sketching when they held that course in the wigwam," Kele said. The flashlight went on briefly. He was pouring water out of a boot.

For a while we sat there in silence. Another meteor died trying to wipe out planet earth.

A whippoorwill called “whip-poor-will” several times. An owl hooted, but it didn’t seem to be anybody’s name. The loon laughed again. A couple of bullfrogs started a “jug-o-rum” chorus. Something made an odd noise in the lake.

"A Mishipizheu, maybe," the painter said. After a long pause, he added, "Like a large wildcat. Swims through water and rock. Eats eyeballs. Drives a Buick. Will protect you if it looks at you."

I let my mind encompass the stars and their faint reflections on the water. "A Buick?"

"Okay, so I lied about the Buick. The Ojibway used to have a saying, 'Stupid as a white man'."

"I passed?" I asked. "What do I win, you racist pig?"

Kele laughed. "You get your flashlight back. I found George's." He turned my light on, and handed it to me.

"So he didn't take it with him?"

"Makes you think."

I was too tired for thinking. "Not me," I said.

I could hear him getting up. His light touched the rock. "See you in the morning," he said.

"If the whazzit doesn't eat my eyeballs in the night."

"Or you don't get hit by a Buick."

But I had a hard time getting to sleep. Something seemed to be biting me on the neck and I started sliding off my mattress. The self-inflating mattresses are light, but they're thin and slippery. Since the outside of a sleeping bag is slippery too, and the floor of the tent was on a slope, gravity took over.

It's a fact that there are few flat campsites in the country. God seems to have left all the flat ground in Saskatchewan and around Chatham. Leastwise, in an Ontario woods, the landscape planners seem to have decided that any flat area more than a foot across would attract undesirables.

I had slid down till I was bunched up against the side of the tent. I'd made the rolled-up air mattress as a pillow by stuffing it into a bag, but it didn't slide like I did, and only a death grip kept it under my head.

I turned on the flashlight, swatted a couple of mosquitoes hanging onto the walls of the tent, and threw a daddy-longlegs outside. Then I settled against the downhill side of the tent, thinking of everything and nothing. Dead men and bats, redheads and stars, age and instant rice.

## Chapter 4

I woke up dreaming that group of nasty people had taken my canoe and were trying to burn it. In the dream, I was telling them that I needed the canoe to get back to my car, and besides, kevlar doesn't burn. But I couldn't seem to make them understand. They insisted that the canoe was a god and they had to destroy it.

It wasn't a promising way to greet the day.

But I woke up, for the usual reasons. Out in the true wilds, huddled in a small nylon tent, there's one thing that wakes the average middle-aged Canadian in the morning.

Pain.

My back hurt. My hips hurt. My arms hurt. My bladder was talking to me. I felt like I'd been sleeping on a rock.

Actually, I had been sleeping on a rock.

Most of all, my head felt like someone was testing a 3/8 inch Black & Decker cordless drill on me. They'd obviously got past the skull just behind my right ear, and were tunneling merrily and industriously inward.

I sat up. The pain in my back dropped off a notch, migrating up into my skull.

I reflected that I was probably in better shape than George, and reached for my medical kit. I dug out two white pills. Each contained 300 milligrams of acetaminophen, 15 milligrams of caffeine, and, most important, eight milligrams of codeine phosphate. All mixed in with microcrystalline cellulose, sodium starch glycolate, and zinc stearate to hold it in pill format.

They're available in house brands at fifteen bucks for 200 pills at your local pharmacist. Non habit-forming, don't take more than two at a time, six times a day, and very constipating. Available only by prescription in the States, but in Canada, the pharmacist will hand you a bottle if you ask.

Illegal in any form in some European countries. And generally capable of mitigating the malevolent migrating migraine.

They also seem to make me cheerful, even beyond the relief from pain, which is only partial at best. I swallowed a fruit bar, because the pills make one's stomach feel a bit nauseated. Then I extracted myself from my sleeping bag like some overweight butterfly.

With my shoes and jacket on, I unzipped the tent, and shuffled off through the underbrush to have my morning pee behind a spruce. The morning sun, poking through the beeches and maples, turned the stream to gold.

When I got back to the camp, Belinda was sitting on one of the logs beside the firepit. She had her sleeping bag wrapped around her and was watching the lake. It was cold enough to see her breath above the charred logs of the fireplace.

The surface of the lake was brass with whirls of mist rising off, like the ghosts of a million snakes reaching for the sunlight. A loon sounded from somewhere in those mists. It was beyond words.

I sat on the opposite side of the firepit. "You can see the lake better from the rock by the shore."

She turned, pretty enough that she didn't need to smile. "If I sit here, someone might make a fire."

"You could make one yourself."

Then she smiled, because she had something to smile at. "I tried that a couple of times. Guys get edgy when women make fires. They seem to think women shouldn't be messing with matches." She squinted into the sun. "I guess men can't make babies, so fire is the next best thing."

"I thought maybe we could just get off without a fire this morning," I said. "The sooner we get all this over with the happier I'll be."

She indicated the tents. "They're in no hurry, I guess."

She was right, so I hunched myself through the dew-damp woods to get some small branches from a large spruce for kindling. Belinda marched into the woods in the direction of the toilet area.

There was enough wood that I didn't have to cut anything but the kindling.

No, we didn't need a fire, I thought, as I knelt to light the match. I never have a morning fire when I camp alone, preferring to cook my food on the little white-gas stove I take with me.

But a community seems to prefer one, and I was first up, so I made one. Not a big one, like the night before. "Hi, son," I said to the first good flame.

There's a movement in many parts of the world to go without campfires of any kind. Campfires start forest fires. They use up biomass and slowly clear out the forest around the campsite, as campers steadily cut any usable trees.

They also leave a human mark on the area, a circle of stones around blackened logs. To the true eco-huggers, no human mark on the landscape is acceptable. That includes the campfire rings.

When I was young, campers were told to throw their cans into the fire. The cans rusted quicker after that, and blended in with the landscape better.

Later, that became a no-no. People were told to sink their debris into the lake, where it would go to the bottom. Presumably to sink into the muck forever.

I think the no-mark freaks are a bunch of crazies who will probably save the planet. In a few years people like me, who were found to have built fires in fire pits on the shores of remote lakes, will be put in the same category as those who hunted the last mammoths to extinction.

So I got the fire going, and when it was crackling and dancing Belinda and I stared into it. I didn't have a mammoth haunch to roast over the flames.

"You're probably wondering why I'm hanging out with him," she said abruptly, nodding towards the tent where she and Bob had spent the night. She spoke just above a whisper, and I figured Bob wouldn't pick it up.

Just as well. I wasn't quite ready to flee screaming across the hills pursued by a jealous switchblade-waving Brit.

I didn't reply. No, I wasn't wondering, actually. I don't wonder about other people's motivations; in fact I refuse to wonder about them. I somehow feel it's my way of respecting their privacy. I've often wished people would do the same for me.

I tried staring off across the lake and praying someone else would get up. I looked for a pot or can to accidentally knock over, noisily. I went down to the lake and got a pot of water, which I set on a grate over the fire.

"It was the danger," she went on. "I wanted to walk with the tiger. Play with the cobra. Run with the crazy lone wolf."

She looked up and blinked her wonderful eyes at me. "I'm searching, you see. I've been searching for something or someone all my life."

I suffer from the Teddy Bear syndrome. People, especially women, want to squeeze me. Since most of them don't have the nerve, they often tell me their life stories, instead. A hug would be quicker, at least.

I said nothing, having a spine like jelly. I didn't really care if she'd been searching for the ideal crunchy peanut butter since she was three.

"I've never known what it was I was looking for," she went on, still looking at me. I kept looking across the water, as the mists faded. By now I could see three loons in the middle of the lake.

"But I always figured, I guess, that someone would show me something, and a great big white light would flash, and I'd find a path with my name on it." She turned to watch the fire, and poke at it with a stick.

"Not him?" I asked.

"I found out how petty danger can be," she said. "It wasn't the edge of some giant cosmic evil. It turned out to be all insecurity and bluster. Don't get me wrong." She shook her head. "He's dangerous enough. Push him and he'll slice you up. But he'll be doing it because of a bad childhood, not a satanic soul."

"Must have been quite a contrast with George," I said.

Her face scrunched up for just a moment and her voice quavered. "George was Mr. Gentle," she said. "That's what I liked about him. He should have been a flower-power kid from the sixties. But I guess he was born a few years too late and a few miles too far north. So he took up a love affair with the lakes and trees around here." She had beautiful, sad eyes. For a moment, I would have followed her anywhere.

I nodded at the lake. She looked, and knew what I meant. There were some things worth loving.

"So you tried to tap into a big and gentle love."

"Yup."

"Did it work?" I asked; she was going to tell me anyway, short of my grabbing my canoe and paddling frantically across the lake.

"Hell yes. I joined his list of things to be loved."

"So what happened? No great big white light?"

"No great big white light. Nice person; wrong path."

"So you didn't come back to ditch Bob for George."

Her forehead furrowed, as if she'd never understand how someone could ever conceive such a thing. Me, I wondered why she would drag current boyfriend back to the home turf of previous boyfriend. Natural shit disturber, or true innocent, or what?

"Of course not. George was past history. I figured he would help outfit us because he knew me. Besides, Bob wanted to go out into the wilds, and these are the only wilds I knew." She poked at the fire with a stick, another activity I figured was restricted by law to males. "I don't know why Bob got so uptight."

"Maybe he sensed you were going to ditch him, too, and didn't know you weren't returning to George."

A long pause. "Maybe. I've never understood men all that well."

Myself, I always figured all women should take a night course on the True Nature of Men. But nobody listens to me.

"You were George's girl for a while?"

"Almost a year, give or take a bit. That's a long time, for me. He was a good person, whatever his wife might say about him and me."

"But you didn't love him enough to stay."

She turned to me. "I don't love, Mr. Szczedziwoj. I won't let myself. We need some more wood on the fire. And somebody has to wake the rest of those putzes up."

While I was poking at the fire, a crackling sound came from behind me. I turned to see Kele Marten coming through the woods. "Hi, folks," he said without smiling.

"Been up long?" Belinda asked.

"Gotta see the sun come up, you know," the artist answered.

"In the woods?" I asked.

"From the top of the hill."

"Worshipping the sun?" I was kidding, and not stopping to think.

He turned away. "Actually, yeah. Or close enough."

I didn't know what to say. Political correctness reaches Cedar Lake on a sunny September morning. Don't get lippy with the natives, I thought. I went to get something to eat from my tent. This campsite seemed to be full of people looking for their gods. I hoped they had more luck than I'd ever had. I thought that Kele had a better chance at the top of a hill than Belinda was likely to get.

I figured I'd wait till someone found a god, then get its address.

About this time Bob Tucker appeared yawning and ungodlike at the mouth of his tent, and someone in the other tent began to move around.

In a few minutes, the rest of the party was gathered around the fire, scratching and muttering and desperately trying to be polite to each other.

While other people poured themselves coffee, I went over and hauled my gear and sleeping bag out of my tent. Then I folded the tent as tightly as I could, after brushing the usual collection of twigs and pine needles off the bottom.

Ned DeVincent, the bald geologist, looked at me, then rolled his own tent onto its back to let the morning sun dry the bottom a bit. It had obviously been put down on damp ground. You get a lot of needles stuck to the plastic that way. Kele subsequently took the hint and did the same with George's tent.

It's one of the best aspects of self-supporting tents; you can roll them over like a half-ball onto their backs.

The coffee seemed to revive everybody. I can remember when I used to love that morning coffee. But I can't, anymore. The principal cause of migraine headaches is the expansion of arteries in the head. Caffeine actually shrinks the arteries again, so it provides relief from the headache. But after a few hours, the headache comes back, worse than ever.

I didn't need that. Not with the way my head felt already. I had weak tea.

We ate cold breakfasts, mostly fruit and granola, without talking about anything of consequence. The National Society for Study of Depressed Group Interaction should have showed up for a case study. It would have got a Nobel Prize for something or other.

An hour later, we were portaging to Fox Lake, through a grove of maples and oak. Kele had offered to carry my pack again, but I knew the geobuddies were going to make two trips, so I figured I'd not build up any sort of moral debt load.

"Don't like having the natives carrying the white man's burden? he asked with a quizzical expression, as he swung the heavy aluminum canoe onto his shoulders.

"Independent," I said. "Don't like owing people favors."

"Damn," he said. "But you owe me most of Scarborough for that portage I did yesterday."

"I'm moving onto the reservation until you pay the fourteen hundred beaver pelts you owe me for the granola this morning."

"Cold granola," he said. "Eight hundred pelts, max."

"How's the portage?" I asked, changing the subject before we got into treaties that were good as long as the sun shone and the rivers ran.

"Fine. I once knew a guy who said there were no portages. There were only goddamn portages. But this one's not bad. One steep section. Five hundred meters, total." He paused to think. "Make that six hundred meters. The water's down on Fox Lake, and you have to carry a bit further."

I followed him along the portage trail, he carrying everything he came with. I figured he planned to come back for George's stuff.

I carried my pack. The canoe would be the second trip.

Now, I'd like to explain that it was a damn fine portage, as portages go. Part of the way was on open rock, in bright sunlight, and part was through a dandy grove of aspens, just starting to turn yellow for the autumn.

It was awful, especially the beauty. I love the planet and I loved this woodland, but I had slipped suddenly into a black- dog depression deep enough to swallow the Titanic, let alone one retired economist-turned-photographer. It was Eden without the hope of redemption.

It was sudden, as usual, but not unexpected. I'd been trying to remain in the normal range of human emotions throughout this ordeal, and had been doing pretty good for quite a while.

So I crashed, sunk through twelve mud-layered strata of depression. That old black dog just loped out of the deep pine forest and snuffed my optimism and cheer down its throat.

Now I was hauling the goddamn pack over the goddamn portage trail with a bunch of goddamn strangers. On the way to you-know- what kind of lake.

I trudged steadily along the trail, willing myself into the ground.

"We could kill them all, I suppose." Kele's voice came cheerfully from right behind me. I stepped aside and let him trudge past me carrying his canoe and pack.

"Then," he added, "we could make a pact to stay a couple of miles apart at all times." He tilted the canoe back to look at me.

"Antisocial canoeists of Ontario," he explained, "Charter member."

"Can I join?" I asked. "As a mascot or something."

"You're in," he said. "But I want to tell you something; anyone who shows up at the annual meeting is chucked out of the club."

I laughed, just a bit. It was enough to cheer me up. I could go on. I went on. I could hear Bob and Belinda coming up the trail.

Not far ahead Kele left the trail and headed into the woods. He paused as I caught up.

"Gotta go this way," he said.

"Short cut?" I asked.

"Remember how I told you the lake's down a couple of feet?" he explained. "This way saves dragging your canoe through a quarter mile of mud."

It did mean a quarter mile of pushing through some pretty heavy bush and up a rough slope as high as a garage. I could hear Bob's English accent encouraging Belinda.

When we got to the lake I saw what he meant. The bay leading to the lake by the normal path was a tangled mass of water plants on top of brown shining mud. The creek wandered through it, too small and shallow to canoe. At the other end of the bay, under the yellow portage sign, the geobuddies stood. We waved. They waved, then started back.

Bob and Belinda were traveling light, of course, as well as being young. They settled in while I went back for my canoe and Kele went back for George's camping gear. Part way back we met the geobuddies, lugging their canoe and a pack up the rock face.

"I used enjoy this more when I was younger," Patrick said to me in passing. I knew what he meant. "Can you wait for me," he asked. I glanced at Kele, but he was already disappearing into the trees, on the way back to get George's stuff. It was a distinct pleasure to know someone who really was a loner.

But I waited for Patrick, anyway.

He appeared, without Ned, five minutes later. I'd spent the time watching the mushrooms, so the time wasn't a total loss.

We started back in total silence. Silence on my part. Patrick, of course, gabbled like a chicken at feeding time.

## Chapter 5

Going back to get the canoe, with the geographer trailing behind, was one of the fastest portages I've ever made. It just seemed a lot longer. About an eon longer.

Once I got the canoe on my head, I tried to get onto the trail before Patrick could get his stuff. But he was younger and quicker and caught up to me after I'd tripped on a pine root. The pulse of blood through the head of someone with a nasty headache is an interesting thing. You don't want to know.

But I'm stocky and short and slow, so I had to hear his entire analysis of the political infighting, plotting, triumphs, machinations, funding, and disasters of the geography department at the University of Peterborough.

A play-by-play of a brawl involving a pack of Pekinese dogs would have been more entertaining. A couple of the dogs might have got romantically involved. And been more attractive than some of the members of the geography department, including my Patrick ain’t-my-name-cute Ireland.

As we did that trail amid the noises of the crickets and birds, skipping over logs and little creeks, I learned more than I wanted to know about every member of the faculty. I was practically running, but he kept up nicely.

I had this vision of Associate Professor Patrick Ireland floating dead in Thomson Lake and nobody caring. Especially the intimate and surreal world of the Canadian Small University.

I'd been there, and done that. It might have been one of the reasons I was so content with my feet sore and mosquitoes feeding on my epidermals, happy watching the sun go down all by myself in remote lakes. Eight years of teaching economics had been just over seven years too long.

There had been enough Patrick Irelands in the Economics department of the university I taught in.

I'd had no respect for economics at all, which, I understand, made me a good teacher. And I'd often been fascinated by the students. But if you think camping alone is an escape from reality, you ought to try being part of a liberal-arts university staff.

We arrived at Fox Lake practically at a run, despite the dense brush at the last part. I tried my best to let the branches I pushed aside snap back at him, but he just dodged and kept on yammering.

We soon got within sight of Fox Lake, with Patrick right beside me explaining how the head of the Geography department was determined to keep working till he died and would probably live forever. But the situation at the lake had changed.

There were at least three people yelling at each other. We got closer before we could catch the words.

I grabbed the canteen from my pack and downed a couple more codeine tablets. The conversation continued without me.

"Not bloody likely you're not going back with me, you stupid bitch! Walk back, for all I care!" Bob was obviously not in tune with his environment. On the other hand, he might well have figured out Belinda's future intentions. He was also trying to haul the rental canoe into the water.

"Calm down! Calm down! Calm down!" Ned DeVincent's voice went on and on. I wasn't sure his advice was working very well. For some reason he was holding on to Bob's canoe. Not something I would have recommended. Far as I was concerned, letting Bob go away by himself was a heck of a good idea.

Kele must have thought so, or maybe he was letting the white folks entertain him. He leaned against an oak, holding a paddle and saying exactly nothing.

As for Belinda, she was red-faced, sitting on someone's pack.

When the shouting died down a little, she said, more or less calmly, but very clearly, "I could tell them where you were yesterday."

Bob let go of the canoe, whipped out his knife, and stood up.

Kele was swinging his paddle almost at once, but Bob merely flung the knife far out into the lake and ducked under the paddle. Then he twisted forward and upended the artist. Kele went face-first into the moss.

In the silence that followed, Bob stepped over Kele and stomped noisily up the hill, away from the lake, the crackling of dry twigs marking his passage after he was out of sight.

There was a definite silence, broken by the cry of a bluejay somewhere above us. I helped Kele up.

"This moss," he said. "It's full of twigs." He spat a couple out.

"A noble effort, nonetheless," I said.

"Forgot my throwing tomahawk, you know," Kele added, brushing various natural components off his clothes. "I usually carry one for emergencies."

When we looked around, the bright red canoe Bob and Belinda had been using was out on the lake. Belinda was in the middle, obviously capable of paddling solo. Maybe, I thought, she should give it a try as a lifestyle.

Ned put the last of the geobuddies' material possessions into their canoe, and stepped carefully into the stern seat. Patrick looked a bit confused. He looked into the woods, then around at Kele and I, then wordlessly, got into the canoe.

The canoe grated against a rock, then moved out across the lake.

That left two artists, two canoes, and a mad Brit, somewhere in the Canadian woods.

But not for long. Kele slid the aluminum canoe into the water, tossed his pack into it, and kicked it out into the lake. Just before it was too late, he used the paddle as a pole vault, and landed in the canoe. The canoe shook a bit, but didn't roll over.

He backpaddled for a moment, then said, "Toss me your pack."

I took the camera equipment out, then threw the pack to Kele. He stowed it just ahead of him, then swung the canoe out into the lake.

"Let him walk, eh," he yelled from out on the lake. "He can learn to eat moss. I did."

I sat down and watched him get out of sight around a bend in the lake.

Then I watched the bluejay make a nuisance of himself in the cedar tree, for reasons known only to bluejays.

Finally, I closed my eyes and had a brief catnap. At my age, you take naps when you can get them.

So I don't know how long it was before I was woken up by the sound of footsteps in the debris of the forest floor. I'm always disoriented when I wake. Someday I'll wake up with a bear gnawing on my leg.

It was just Bob. I looked up, without saying anything. I figured he could do the conversation bit. After all, it was my canoe.

He sat down and leaned against the next tree. Handy things, those, trees. Billions of the suckers and hardly any get leaned against. Seems a waste, sometimes. Good thing the squirrels and bluejays use the trees while they're waiting around for people to lean against them.

I tend to blither a bit when I don't have anything to say.

I looked at Bob. He looked at me. I'd have traded anything for his youth and health, even my canoe. But I didn't want his hangups.

"So are you going to kill me?" I asked.

"Bloody unlikely," he said, his eyes finding a loon far out on the water. "Bloody knife's at the bottom of the bloody lake."

"There's always the paddle," I said.

"Sure. We used to use them a lot in bloody Manchester. After the bloody football, we'd ‘ave an argy-bargy on streetcorner and bash each other with canoe paddles. Had a real knees-up, we did."

"Figured you'd just keep going south," I said.

He snorted, and said nothing. Too many swamps; too many lakes between here and the nearest road. He either knew the country, or didn't have a compass in his pocket.

"Shall we go?" I asked.

"Might as well. Spare me the aggro of walking back." He got up, and got his pack.

We slid the canoe into the water, loaded his pack and my camera pack into it, and got in. There wasn't much spare room in the boat.

"This thing safe?" Bob asked, as the boat wobbled its way into the lake. My small canoe has kept the attention of many people who've been in it.

I was in the stern position, of course. My canoe. The guy in the back gets to steer the canoe. It's like being the captain on a ship. The pilot on a plane. It's the dominant position.

You might see women driving a car with a man as passenger, but I've yet to see a woman steering a canoe with a man in the front. Out in the back woods us males show our true colors.

There's an organization in the States called Women in the Wilderness. It's a women-only organization. I think they do it just so women can get a chance to paddle their own canoes. Make their own fires. Set up their own tents.

So we paddled down Fox Lake and I didn't ask him why he threw his knife in the water. Or what Belinda had meant when she said, "I could tell them where you were yesterday."

Astonishingly enough, it was far from a silent trip. As we passed close to the shores of the lake, Bob carried on a non-stop description of the plants we passed. He could, it appeared, identify three separate species of lily pad where I just knew them as "lily pads."

He also seemed to know most of the trees and even the shrubs, And he could identify almost all of the bird calls we heard.

I was very impressed, so I asked him.

"Always loved living things," he said. "Used to have a sketchbook where I'd draw things like the bark of trees and feathers from birds. Then I'd go to the library and identify them, if I could."

"You surprise me," I said, knowing he expected that. Then I added, "Just where were you yesterday?"

I didn't expect him to answer, but he did, after a small hesitation. "I'd done a flit. I was gadding about the other end of the lake, fishing and gawping at an otter."

"That's a problem?" I asked.

"Think about it," Bob said, as we pulled into the portage to Gull Lake, "Tough bastard convict kid from England threatens to scrag a local wally. Same silly local bastard is found dead a bit later. I just 'ope to bloody 'ell they can say he died by accident."

"But you weren't even on the same lake" I said.

He tossed me the map as he got out of the canoe. I looked at it. He had a point - Fox Lake wasn't all that far from Thomson Lake, especially if he had been at the west end of Fox Lake. It might be possible.

I stuck an oratorical pose and said, in voice as deep as a well:

"Made of kevlar, or carved from a tree
A canoe is a fine place to be.
But caution, my friend
Lest you meet a damp end
Never, ever, stand up to pee."

Bob laughed. "Stranger things 'appen at sea. Everybody stands up in a canoe at some time or other. And I've seen a couple of blokes fall out that way."

We made the rest of the portage with Bob trying to teach me how to identify the white-throated sparrow by its call, "sweet sweet Canada Canada Canada."

Halfway across Gull Lake I asked him if he still loved Belinda.

He told me the difference between white birch and black birch. We were too far from shore to identify either.

I'd spent half my life in the forest and knew a pitiful fraction of what he knew.

We made the portage to Hawk Lake, at the dam, then started on Hawk Lake. It was almost two hours down Hawk Lake, to the lodge. Upwind all the way of course.

Once we saw one of the canoes ahead of us, just disappearing behind an island. It was a long way ahead. For the rest, there were a few cottages along the shore, mostly uphill a bit, with wooden stairs going down to the docks. Many places had "Peterborough Pelicans", white bleach bottles tethered and floating, marking shallow spots for motorboats to avoid.

As I paddled, I reached a sort of a calm within me. A canoe is almost ideal for that. The rhythmic dip and swing of the paddle is the only noise other than the small waves against the hull. The shores move by in silence,

bringing rock and pine and oak past. The boat rocks slowly, and the small wake closes behind you. You feel you could paddle this spot forever and let the moments, days, years, and infinities disappear without a trace behind you

I began to think.

What bothered me was the possibility that George's death really hadn't been an accident. It's easy to kill yourself in a canoe, but Bob Tucker had been too close for my liking.

And what had brought the painter on such a run straight to the lake his friend died at? Or had he been there longer than he let on?

## Chapter 6

He was big and he had a mustache and we sat on the deck and I talked.

He was a cop. Of course.

We were squeezed onto the seats of a picnic table outside the little restaurant at the Hawk Lake Lodge, facing each other.

I guess "restaurant" is going a bit far. You could get a hamburger there, and fries, and a toasted bacon-and-tomato sandwich, which is the third most wonderful food on the planet.

And soup of the day, of course, which was mostly "no soup today,", or canned or soup with some local additives (like whatever hadn't sold yesterday).

I longed for the toasted sandwich with the passion that Romeo longed for Juliet, but I still had the headache I'd woken up with, and there was nothing in a bacon-and-tomato sandwich but the tomato that wouldn't aggravate my headache, so I had an order of French fries.

Good French fries, actually, which I didn't expect.

And I had an interview with the cop. He was being polite to me because he was supposed to be. I was being polite to him because he was a cop, and could take this mess out of my hands.

If my head weren't pounding and my canoeabout hadn't been shot all to hell, I might have even smiled.

He made notes in a little notepad. I spelled my name for him, and he held out the pad for me to check it. "How did you pronounce that?" He asked.

"'Win' for 'Winter'," I told him. "'Szczedziwoj' I usually pronounce 'Cheh - Gee - Voy'," I said, "although adding an "sh" at the front makes it a bit more accurate." He raised an eyebrow, meaning how many times have I had to spell that one out in my life, a question I couldn't answer.

Then I told him about George and Thomson Lake and my catch of the day. He took notes. I told him about the people I'd met and our route back. He took more notes.

When I stopped talking there was a long silence at the picnic table. In the restaurant someone was asking for ketchup. Two guys were filling a gas can at the pump on the dock. A motorboat was coming down Hawk Lake.

The lodge was made up of a motley collection of buildings scattered between a gravel parking lot and the lake. The center was a two-story building containing a general store and café on the ground floor and living quarters above. Some of the items in the general store were cheaper than you could get them in town, because

they'd been sitting on the shelves, prices unchanged, for years. There were a lot of desperation items, like anchors and gas tanks, for people who lost or arrived without them.

A small gasoline shed sat beside the gas pump at the main dock. It leaned a bit, but had been painted purple for some unknown reason. A cracked concrete ramp, the boat launch, dipped into the water beside the shed. Various signs warned against blocking the ramp.

Along the shore and up the rock hillside, among the trees were six rustic cabins. They may not have started out rustic, but they were getting more so each year. There was a small parking area for the two larger cabins.

Beyond the parking lot and beyond the launch point, across the bay rose a ridge of land. It looked like a carefully-made rock garden on a large scale. Green pine trees stood among orange-leaved oaks and a few small bright red maples. Cottages dotted the shores of the lake, with wide gaps between them.

A blue garbage-and-recycle truck was emptying the lodge's garbage.

Tied to the docks were several aluminum fishing boats, most with 20-horsepower motors and small windshields.

An inner tube lay on the tiny sand beach among a scattering of toys. Around the parking lot were faded signs: STOP AND REGISTER AT STORE. GOOD CAMPERS ARE CLEAN CAMPERS. AVOID NOISE AND LITTER. NO SOAP IN THE LAKE. USE AT YOUR OWN RISK. CAMPERS MUST REGISTER AT HAWK LAKE INFORMATION BEFORE STARTING OUT. PARKING $25 FOR ALL SEASON, $5 FOR ONE DAY. ATTENTION BOATERS; DON'T TRANSFER ZEBRA MUSSELS.

There were birds. No doubt Bob could have identified them. There were still a few dandelions and buttercups along the edge of the parking lot.

In the parking lot, Ned DeVincent and Patrick Ireland were loading their canoe onto a gray Volvo. They seemed to know exactly what they were doing, and didn't need to talk.

The cop looked across the lake and said. "This Mr. Marten; you met him when you were coming from Thomson Lake?" I nodded.

"So Mr. Marten was on his way to the lake?" I nodded again.

The cop was still looking down the lake, more or less over my shoulder, so I guess he could see me. He nodded, and closed his book. "You'll be here?"

"I just live in Lakefield, I pointed out"

"We'll need you to help us find the body." He folded the notebook and put it into an inside pocket.

"When does that happen?" This was going to be a long day.

"As soon as we can get a helicopter up here. They're trying to get one from the air base."

I reached into my pocket and hauled out a folded piece of paper and a pen. "I'd better get your name."

"Seth Daily. Sergeant Seth Daily. Golden Lake O.P.P."

I held out my hand across the table. "Pleased to meet you."

Expressionless, he shook my hand, like an ambassador from a far-off country.

We got up. As he started back towards the cruiser, I followed. He stopped. "I'll get back to you. When we get a copter."

"It's not that." I didn't know how to put it. He waited in the brown-dirt parking lot. A pickup with an aluminum boat came in. A late-season mosquito circled in, looking for lunch.

"Well," I began. "I'd like to make sure it was an accident."

He lifted one eyebrow. "There'll be an autopsy, of course. Do you have any reason to think it might not have been an accident?"

"No. I just want to be sure, before all these people leave."

He turned to look me in the eye. "When you met Kele. Could he have been coming from Thomson Lake, too?"

That gave me pause. I thought a bit. "I was resting by a tree. I suppose he could have been just ahead of me and done a U-turn. I didn't think so at the time."

When I didn't offer any more, he folded himself into the front seat of the cruiser and started talking on the radio. I went back to the dock and watched a small bass.

At the end of the dock the world was a slightly better place. A dock reaches into the wilderness as far as it can. It points like an arrow away from civilization. It reached away, in this case, from a cop calling for a helicopter.

The helicopter would lift a dead man high into the sky. This so human hands could lower him deep into the ground. Two journeys he probably had not intended to make.

The dock was also a long way from whatever back room of the lodge the widow of George wept in. Somewhere she was being comforted, no doubt. It was more than I could do; I'd known her husband only a short time. Our interaction had been brief and unsatisfactory.

A small white cat nuzzled me, then lay down beside me. I rubbed its head.

It was getting close to supper by this time, so I ambled back to the restaurant, ordered some more fries, and opened a can of cola. Then I phoned Aisha.

My wife answered on the second ring.

"Hi," I said.

"Oh! Hi. So who drowned."

My mouth dropped. "What?"

"Nobody drowned?"

"Well, yes. But how did you know?" A brief vision of my wife eliminating people who interfered with her husband's quest for solitude.

"You never phone without a reason. If you were dead, you couldn't phone. If you were hurt, someone else would phone. Or at least your voice wouldn't sound like you were in a restaurant somewhere pigging out on French fries.

"So I figured someone must have died, and you thought I might hear about it. And assume it was you. So drowning in a canoe seemed a good guess. Close?"

"Oh, yes. I'll tell you about it when I get back." In the distance, a female voice called out, "Your fries are ready."

"Knew that was French fry guilt in your voice," she said. "They're not good for you, and they won't help your headache."

I got off the line before she could tell me to change my damp shoes.

Daily got back to the picnic table just as I got my fries. I offered him the plate. He took one.

"They've got a helicopter coming in from Trenton a couple of hours," he said.

I ate a fry.

"We need you to come with us," he said, reaching for another fry. I nodded, and he took one. He put a squirt of ketchup on it. I don't use ketchup, being a vinegar man.

I nodded again, not having anything else to say.

"To show us where the body is," he added, unnecessarily.

"I'll be around. Somewhere." I added a bit of vinegar to the last of the fries. Aisha says I use the fries to hold the vinegar. "I'm not about to put the canoe on my head and go running down the road." He raised his eyebrows. "My car's down at McFriggit Lake," I explained.

"I'll drive you there after the helicopter," Daily said.

There wasn't anything I could think of to say, so I went back to the lodge, thought the better of it, went out to the parking lot, thought the better of it, almost ordered some more fries, then went back to the water near the dock. At least there I was a little closer to an escape.

Do I sound like a restless person? Do I sound like I could write a book on the joy of French fries? I found my change purse, sorted through the nuts and bolts and "You Won a Free Coke" tabs, and found a couple more codeine tablets I'd stashed there.

I bought a Pepsi in the machine, because I didn't want to win any more free Cokes, and washed the pills down. Then I went to the end of the dock.

There was an old orange tabby cat there, sleeping in the sun. He looked mean enough to bring down a moose, and wise enough to know better. He blinked one brown eye at me, then went back to sleep. I took my shoes off and sat beside him, my feet hanging over the edge, just above the water. A couple of small sunfish and a tiny bass darted out from under the dock, then retreated.

I looked at the sky. It was a better sky than I'd seen for a couple of days. It was a better place. It had no dead men in the water and no turkey vultures in the air.

I'd been there only a couple of minutes when some footprints pattered up the dock to me. I wasn't in the mood for looking around, so I didn't. They were short-step footprints, and I figured some kid might have come out to try for the bass. One thing about kids; ignore them and they'll go away in a week or two.

"You don't want me here," said a woman's voice. A cloud drifted in front of the sun. "But I don't have any ethics, so I'll join you anyway." There was a laugh, and a pair of feet, sandal-clad and pale, appeared beside mine.

I looked around. I'd thought she'd be in her teens, from the sound of her voice, but now I guessed she was in her mid twenties at least. She was very short, and very pale, with bright red hair. She wore faded jeans, a red T-shirt, and round glasses. She was slightly pudgy. She had a tiny mouth, puckered up as part of a questioning look at me. I said nothing.

"People," she said, "who sit alone at the end of the dock do so to get away from other people. It's a fact. I mean, Hawk Lake's a getaway as it is, that's a fact, and the end of this dock's the getaway's getaway, which is another fact. End of the line, sort of."

"But you're not going to let me get away." Suddenly Thomson Lake didn't seem so bad. You can always keep your conversation on the right track with dead people, and they don't interrupt.

"Nope, I'm not," she said, smiling brightly. "I have no feelings for people, for anybody but myself, so I'll just amuse myself in your antisocial despair."

I gave her the eye. I'm good at that. It didn't work. I thought about hiding under the dock with the bass, but I'm not great at holding my breath.

"It's true," she said, putting her hand on my arm. "I'm basically your sweet little psychopath. I'll lie, cheat, steal and kill if I think I can get away with it. No feeling, no morals, no ethics."

"And you like to tell people about it, I see."

"Keeps me laughing," she said, then looked down and added, "I wish I had bigger tits."

"Kill many people lately?" I asked, changing the subject and pulling my arm free at the same time. Her tits were just fine for her body.

"Haven't killed anybody since I was fifteen. Too hard to get away with it nowadays. You see, I'm smart, and I'd really have to want something bad to kill for it. It's a fact. A lot of things amuse me, but prison wouldn't, and that's why my parents send me up here every summer. It's easier to keep an eye on me, and if anybody gets killed, well, I'll be the first person they check out."

"You're not lying to me, I hope?" A bass came up beside my foot and took a struggling insect off the surface of the water.

She laughed. "Of course I am! I lie half the time, more or less. It drives people nuts because they can't tell when I'm doing it. You can't tell, either." She took off her sandals and set them beside her.

"I hope that amuses you." I found I was smiling. I'd been in a mood so downright... off that this bubbly nut case was actually doing me good.

"Oh hell, yes!" She giggled and looked at the sky. "They won't let me torture cats any more, so I get my kicks out of people's misery." She picked up a beetle and dropped it into the water. The bass took it in a swirl.

"Anybody ever tell you you look like a fuzzy bear? A teddy bear?"

""About three hundred," I said. "Anybody ever comment on the black nailpolish you put on your fingers and toes?"

"A lot of people, " she said. "But I like the way it goes with my red hair and pale complexion. Makes me a bit spooky, which isn't easy for a short person. You've got to be tall to be properly spooky. Uncle George was tall, but not spooky. Did he look spooky when you found him?"

I tried my best scowl.

"Good scowl," she said. "A seven point five on the scowl meter at least, but I'm afraid it doesn't affect me. Can't scowl down a psychopath, that's a fact, you know. We're above all that."

"Or below it," I added.

"Nope. Way above. You see," she said, "I figured it out. God's a psychopath, just like me."

"Oh." I'm good at monosyllables, but there had been times in my life when I'd thought the same about the Old Guy Up There. I guess most of us have.

"Sure. Look at it. A few billion years of evolution and ninety-nine point nine percent of the time on this earth, what's it been? It's been stupid animals killing other stupid animals. And to what point, I asked myself. Why would God spend a billion years watching a show like that? Because it entertained him! It's obvious, once you think of it."

"But look," I said, turning to her. "You think people are part of God's... soap opera?"

"Seems to fit. The Old Bastard got tired of watching Animal Kingdom and created Days of our Lives. Intelligent animals are a lot more entertaining than stupid ones because they think up really creative ways of suffering.

"Take Aunt Sally, back in the lodge." She waved vaguely down the dock. "There she is, crying her eyes out over Uncle George, and she's been screwing the Indian for at least a year now."

This was news. "Kele?"

"Damn straight. That's a pun, by the way. He could probably paint a landscape of Aunt Sally's bottom from memory."

"You're sure about this?" I asked.

"I peep in windows, among other things. They were together half the time Uncle George was out guiding people who don't need guides. I'm surprised she's not too sore to walk, considering all the humping they did."

While I was trying to think of something appropriate to say (and it was hard to think of anything), she changed the topic by reaching for the cat and hoisting it onto her lap. It didn't seem to object.

"Here," she said. "Pet my pussy."

I figured the safest thing to do was to scratch the cat under the chin and say nothing. So I did. He swung his big orange head around and closed his eyes. He looked like he seriously considered purring for a moment.

"You're a quiet one," she said. She might have meant me or the cat. "My name is Pica, which is an unusual name, I know, but my father was a printer and when I was born I was very small, and my mother didn't have any idea what to call me since she was convinced I would be a boy, so my father named me the first thing he could think of. The cat here is named Hank Dayton, which is also a strange name, at least for a cat. People around here say that a hot-air balloon came over this way once, and dropped off the cat to lighten their load, or maybe because the cat was biting people every time the gas furnace fired. The name was around his neck, on a tag, and by a vote of five to three they decided that it was the name of the cat, not the owner. So that's what they called him."

"You never found his owner?"

"Nope, not that anybody ever tried very hard, seeing as Aunt Sally always said anybody stupid enough to go hot-air ballooning in the middle of a forest didn't deserve a cat. He's happy here, anyway, as far as we can tell, since it's hard to be sure when a cat is happy or not. Hank Dayton drinks beer at night, when people have evening parties on the lawn, in the summer, and he mostly sleeps in the day and hardly every bites anyone anymore, so I guess he's happy."

"Beer?"

"O, God yes. He loves the stuff and will drink half a bottle if you let him, although it'll take him an hour to do it, between going pee so much. But it's the only time he purrs, even if he's got a purr like a sick calf. Of course, some nights he walks off the dock and we have to drag him out of the lake and dry him off while he's trying to take a chunk out of your arm. I always laugh when he comes in soaking wet.

"He was Uncle George's cat, mostly," she added. "Now somebody else will have to empty the litter box in the winter."

"You're going to miss your uncle?" I asked.

She gave me a sideways look. "Don't be silly. I don't know how to miss people. We had a couple of good times in bed, but a nine-inch dick isn't everything."

"Excuse me," I said. "You slept with your uncle?" A motorboat appeared around the island in the lake, and buzzed towards us, towing a kid on an inflatable tube.

"Why not?" Pica said. "I'm totally amoral and one hundred percent omnisexual and that's a fact. I've done Kele and that big geologist and even Aunt Sally a couple of times until Kele made me stop. Some of the clients at the lodge come back every summer just so they can undress me out in the blueberry patch. It's better than going into to town to watch a film." She watched the boat approaching.

Now, I'm inclined to take people at their word, but this was getting a bit unlikely, even to the non-skeptical among us. And she'd boasted she told a lot of lies. She had a definite Peterborough accent, where a "film" becomes a "fillum" and an "elm" becomes and "ellum" and any "un" becomes "on".

"I bet you're a virgin."

"Hey!" she said. "Who told you?" Then she started laughing again.

From far away, I heard the thwopping of a helicopter. "That'll be my taxi," I said.

# Chapter 7

"I never got to ride on a helicopter," Aisha said. "Not in my whole life." She put a tofuburger in front of me.

It was just what I needed. Like I needed an ingrown toenail. I lifted the upper part of the corn bun when she had her back turned, making tea out of some weed that someone decided was a herb. There was a slice of zucchini on top of the slab of tofu.

In the spring I'd tried pouring gasoline on the zucchini plants as they came up. Only one survived, so we had zucchini only twenty-eight times a week at the end of the season. I sighed; the green slice was bound to taste better than the tofu. I added some hot chili sauce and ate. I was right; the zucchini was the best part.

There are helicopter rides, " I said. "And there are, I suppose, helicopter rides. You wouldn't have wanted this one."

"No? Why not?" She poured the tea. It smelled like dead weeds. "I'd think you'd get a nice view of the forest."

"In the first place," I noted, "the view isn't worth much. The helicopter flew so low that all I could see was a blur of treetops going by. Most of the time I had no idea where we were. In the second place, the pilot got drunk and scared the bejeezus out of me."

"They're not supposed to drink on the job! Aren't there police regulations?"

"Well, this was air force, not police. And both the regular rescue helicopters were out saving people. At least the pilot was air force. The diver was a civilian volunteer, I think. And, technically, they didn't drink anything."

Aisha waited for me to explain.

"Just as we were getting ready to take off, Pica ran out with a gallon jar in her hands. She said it was pickled plums, and we could eat them on the way there.

"Well, the diver opened the jar as soon as we got away from the lodge. I think he was going to dump them into the lake.

"That's when he discovered they were pickled in overstrength vodka. So they set the jar between them, and proceeded to suck down plums all the way to Thomson Lake.

"It was only a fifteen minute ride, including the time I took to locate the lake, which wasn't easy with the hills and trees whipping by in a blur. By the time we got there, they were halfway through the jar."

Aisha sat down at the kitchen table, facing me. I continued, "There wasn't any place to land nearby, so the diver just jumped out of the helicopter over the water. He yelled 'Geronimo!' as he jumped, and had two of the plums in his pockets and one in his cheek.

"He found the body, just where I pointed, and strapped it to an aluminum sled. Then we went right down to the water, and the diver and I got George's body into the helicopter." I paused to decide whether I should try another cup of weed-water.

"I pulled the body in, while the diver, Glen, pushed."

"I should think," said my wife, serving me some zucchini bread, "that you'd have had enough of wrestling with George by that time." She wrapped her purple housecoat around her, and got up to pour herself another cup of tea. I drained mine into the cat's dish, which was under the table.

"You haven't heard the half of it," I said. "Glen, the diver, didn't want to come back into the helicopter. He said he was going to swim across the lake and that the pilot, named Harry, was a goddam weenie for not joining him.

"Harry, in turn, yelled that Glen was going to be court-martialed if he didn't get back in, and he had a good mind to leave him in the lake."

I thought you couldn't court-martial a civilian," Aisha said. She poured me another tea. The cat looked at his dish and backed away.

"Harry," I said, "wasn't running on all cylinders by this time. Next thing I knew, he took the copter up and around the nearest hill. There I was, in the back, trying to keep George and myself from falling out the door.

"He went once around the hill, then back to the lake and tried to kill Glen. At least that's what it looked like. He kept trying to smack him with the wheel. Maybe he'd decided to rescue him after all.

"Sometime in there, when a few hundred gallons of water sloshed into the copter, Glen got back on board, took off the wet suit and tried to strangle Harry with it. I had to offer him the jar of plums before we all ended up in the trees. Then they decided to make up and got all weepy.

"I'm surprised they got you back to your car," Aisha said, patting my hand and pouring me some more tea. It went into the cat's dish as soon as her back was turned. The cat hissed, and tried to claw me. I made a vow to get a dog sometime soon.

"Oh, they didn't want to! They were going to take me and George back to the air base, but I told them I was going to push George out over the back woods and they could damn well find him again themselves.

"They told me they didn't give a shit and to go ahead. Harry was buzzing a boat with a blonde in it on Stoney Lake, and Glen, who was stark naked, was mooning the world. About that time I grabbed the jar of plums, which was mostly empty, and told them I'd throw it out the door if they didn't get me to McFriggit Lake. So they did."

Aisha eyed me. "How many plums did you eat?"

"Four. But by that time I needed them."

"I'm surprised you made it home." Aisha said. "And by the way, the cat's drinking out of the toilet. I don't think he likes herbal tea."

"I had to go back up to Hawk Lake to get my camera and camping stuff and canoe, "I said. "It was almost dark by the time I got there. Belinda asked me if I'd seen Bob. I guess he hadn't come back yet."

"Welcome home," Aisha said.

"What?"

"Welcome home."

"Why thank you, light of my life," I said. "It's been a long day."

Aisha reached into the fridge and hauled out a cold beer. She twisted off the lid and chucked it over her shoulder, where it bounced off the stove and scared the cat into running for the basement. Then she slapped it onto the table in front of me.

I raised it to my mouth, swallowed about a third of it, and burped loudly.

"Good?" Aisha asked.

"Goddam right. Glad to be home."

There was a long pause while the darkness gathered around outside. Aisha lit a candle, and poured herself some zucchini-apple wine she'd made the year before.

"You think somebody killed him?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said. "I just don't feel comfortable with the whole thing."

"You find the accident unlikely?"

"Oh hell, no. Easy as pie to fall out of a canoe, especially when you're fishing. He had a lure in his back." Aisha was about to say something, but I continued, after another swig of beer. "Picture this; you're fishing and you catch a branch down there. You give a good yank - here, I'll demonstrate."

I pulled up a footstool and sat down, with my feet out, canoeing style. "You yank on your rod, and the lure lets go, suddenly. Your canoe rolls backward, and you haven't the time to avoid the lure, which comes out of the water, swings around on your pole, and snags you in the back."

I stood up. "'Youch,' you say. 'Gosh darn!' or words to that effect. Then you jump up in the canoe to reach behind you. The canoe rocks..." - I wobbled onto my feet and tilted sideways.

"Careful!" Aisha said, reaching for my arm.

"And suddenly you're falling backwards. Stupidly, you hang onto your paddle and your rod..." I flailed my arms and almost got the remnants of the tofuburger.

"Then you smack the back of your head on the gunnel, and kerplop, you're in the water, face down." By this time I was face down on the floor.

There was a long pause as I got myself up. Aisha started to pour me a tea, then decided against it. "You," she said, "would never stand up in a canoe. You wouldn't even think of it."

She didn't put it as a question, so I didn't answer it. "I've seen it done," I said. "People make mistakes."

"But you're not sure about this one," Aisha observed. "Why?"

I squirmed. "I don't really know. Maybe it's just that there were suddenly so many people around who might be happy if he died."

"Murder." She said it with finality.

"No," I said. "On second thought, it just couldn't be possible. Things just don't happen that way."

The phone rang.

Aisha looked at me. I looked at her. "I want to go to bed. With you. Now," I said.

"Fool," she said, picking up the phone. Then she handed it to me.

"Win here," I said.

"This is Sergeant Seth Daily."

"I'm out of French fries," I said.

"Tough. I'm wondering if George Aden was murdered."

"I didn't do it," I said.

"That's what I figured. But you're the only one home. That sounds suspicious to me."

"What," I asked, "do you mean when you say I'm the only one home?"

"I can't find Kele Martin. His canoe's gone. So's Bob Tucker and his canoe. And Patrick and DeVincent never showed up at their places with our without their damn canoe."

"Probably out drinking somewhere," I said. Or, I thought, in bed with their women and not answering the phone.

"Probably," he said, flatly.

"You're sure it was murder? I asked.

"I'm not sure of anything, but I asked the coroner to take a preliminary peek, and she's willing to bet Mr. Aden was dead when his lungs filled with water. She says he may have been held underwater after he was dead to get water in the lungs."

"Does she know what killed him?"

"She'll know for sure tomorrow, but it looks like a blow to the back of his head."

I sighed, "Are you going to arrest me?"

"Should I?"

"I heard the guy who finds a body is the main suspect."

"That's right. But I don't want to arrest anybody. Not yet. How about we talk."

"Can't this wait till tomorrow?"

"It's only nine."

"That's my bedtime after a day of paddling. You're going to ruin my sex life."

“I'll be over to your place in a hour. I need to get a meal somewhere anyway."

He arrived at ten. Aisha made him a tofuburger with zucchini relish.

He was still in uniform. We sat in the living room and talked. I did the whole story again, in more detail. Aisha and Seth drank herbal tea, and I had a glass of ice water.

"Why'd you do it?" Seth asked, when I was done.

"He was catching more fish than me," I said. "I hate people who interrupt my contemplation of solitude. I've killed every tall person I've ever met. I'd just dug up a chest full of doubloons and he claimed them. He questioned my love of humanity. He insulted my zucchini pemmican."

"The two geology types," said Aisha.

"Why them?" I asked.

"They hired a guide. Why? Did they look like they needed one?"

"Actually, no," I said. "They knew what they were doing camping and paddling."

"Very suspicious," Aisha said.

"And you?" Seth said.

"Bob," I answered. "He reminds me of kids that used to pound the crap out of me when I was in high school. He threatened George, and he was probably close enough to do it."

"I'm going to try to find Kele first," the policeman said. "Did you know he was having an affair? With George's wife? And I want to ask him what he was doing there."

"You think he and George decided to settle accounts out in some remote lake? I asked.

"As good a theory as any, to start with. Or was, till I heard about the zucchini pemmican. You really carry that stuff?"

"It's good for him," Aisha said. "I make it for him in my food drier. Our food drier."

"Well," said Seth. "I doubt if any of them are going to skip country. I'd like to take a look at the site. Would you take me there?"

"Me?"

"You'd spot a clue faster than I could. I'm a city boy. Grew up in Toronto. Been in a canoe maybe twice in my life. I could keep an eye on you. Wouldn't have to lock you up. We could bring George's canoe back."

"Maybe I'll push you into a bog and chuck rocks at you," I said.

"Civilian brutality," he said. "Rampant nowadays."

"You want to take my light canoe?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

I hesitated. Aisha broke in. "It's tippy," she said. "You've got to keep perfectly balanced all the time. Blink both eyes at the same time. Wiggle both feet at the same time."

"It's not quite that bad," I said. "You've just had a couple of bad experiences in it."

"What's its advantages?"

"It's light," I said, "And fast."

"If you have a safer one, I'd prefer it. I'll paddle a little harder," Seth said. I'll meet you at Hawk Lake at eight."

"Make that six," I said. "It'll give us enough time to look around there."

"You're the captain," he said. "Six o'clock at the lodge."

## Chapter 8

The stars shone through the window, distant and diamond.

The bed creaked a bit as Aisha turned to me. "What are the odds?" She asked.

"Huh?"

"Of snagging a body with a fishing lure."

"It wasn't a big lake."

"Nonetheless…."

"Pretty small," I sighed. "I wouldn't bet the house on it ever happening again."

"And how many people paddle cross that lake in a summer?"

"In my mind, only one. Me." My back itched in a place I'd never get it.

"Obviously not."

"Not this summer, in any case."

"Do the police suspect you?"

"I don't think so." I thought about it. "I would."

"Maybe you're a psychopath, making sure the portages don't get too crowded."

"Ha," I said, "Ha. You'd have known."

"The wife never suspects." Aisha reached around me and scratched my back. "I could have sold my sad story to all the papers."

"Thanks," I said, "but we don't even know for sure it was murder."

"The coroner thinks it's quite possible, although the autopsy isn't compete yet."

"Aren't you sleepy? It's after eleven." I yawned broadly, but in the starlight she might have missed it.

"My husband's probably been out killing strangers in the woods, and I should go to sleep with the bastard right beside me?"

"Have I mentioned he was quite dead when I caught him?"

"But was he dead when you first met him? That's what we all want to know."

I sighed again. "Maybe I didn't get enough sleep the night before."

"Is that a threat?" Aisha laughed. "I can't actually imagine you killing anybody."

I took that as an insult to my manly pride. "Oh, I don't know…."

She rolled onto an elbow. Mine. "I think," she said, "that those two geologists did it."

"The geologist and the geographer. I'm sure they lured George out into the middle of nowhere for the pleasure of killing him." I yawned again.

"I can't see why they needed a guide, anyway." Aisha shifted in bed, and I scratched her head.

"It does seem a bit strange. But what do I know? Maybe it's standard practice to hire a local when they go somewhere."

"Maybe they found a gold mine and he threatened to talk."

"Doubt that," I said. "He'd just want his share. Maybe they were engaged in some bizarre sex practice with a moose and he took their picture."

"With a moose? What an idea! Now I'm wondering what you really do on all those canoe trips."

I ignored the implication. Besides, moose are harder to catch than you might think. "The police think Kele, the artist, did it," I mentioned.

"That seems pretty farfetched, if you ask me."

"Why." I reached over and dragged her closer. She snuggled in, putting her head on my shoulder.

"Because," she said, "there must be a million easier ways to kill someone than trekking miles through swamp and bush with a canoe on your head. And when you get there, you'd have to separate the guy from the other people."

"Without them knowing," I added. I began scratching her head again. That usually puts her to sleep.

"That's right," Aisha said. "If anyone knew you were there, you'd be the only suspect."

"If it wasn't him, then you think maybe it was Bob?"

"The Brit with the knife?" Aisha squiggled a bit. "Was he anywhere near?"

"Maybe," I said. "We'll check that out tomorrow."

"It still doesn't seem much of a motive. A fight over an old girlfriend." Aisha sounded sleepier. There was hope.

"Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men?"

"Still think it was the mad photographer who just wanted to be alone." Aisha was almost asleep.

"You're sleeping on his shoulder," I pointed out.

"Mmmm hmm."

I thought by this time that I wasn't going to get to sleep. I was wrong.

## Chapter 9

"I have been," Seth Daily told me, "in a canoe twice." He looked at my orange craft tied to the end of the Hawk Lake dock. "But I only fell out of one once."

"You're thinking...?" I asked.

"I'm thinking," he said, "about the canoe I fell out of. It didn't look a hell of a lot safer than this thing." He was wearing civilian clothes, a plaid shirt, jacket and jeans, but I could see that he had a shoulder harness and pistol under his jacket.

I raised one eyebrow at him and dropped the daypack into the middle of the canoe. It shifted under the weight. "You'll be happy to know that few canoes on the planet are more stable than this one." I'd taken the big Coleman plastic canoe. It was heavy, but stable.

"At least the water's warm."

"I hope we won't have to find out." I held the canoe steady while he stepped carefully into it, setting himself onto the front seat. I lowered myself just as carefully onto the rear seat and reached for the rope. A hand came down over mine. I looked up.

"Good morning," Pica said, with a disarming smile. Her hand was small and warm.

Seth started to turn around, and the canoe shifted dangerously.

"Here," Pica said," I've got this bag of pickled mandarin oranges." And she smiled so sweetly, too.

"From the bottom of my heart, I thank you," I said. "These would have made our feet light and the portages short. They'd have put a gleam in our eyes and made the birds sing more sweetly. But I'm afraid we must travel light and fast today, so we must regretfully decline your offer."

Seth sat in the front of the canoe, wearing civilian clothes. The birds sang, for no particular reason. The sun considered coming up. Everything was damp with autumn dew, gleaming in the floodlights on the dock. A few late-season moths battered themselves against the glass.

"Have a good morning, Pica," I said. "We really have to go now." I wiggled my hand, but she kept hers firmly on top of it. The sun came up.

"Without me? That's a cruel thing to do. Hey!" She looked at Seth. "You're the police guy, aren't you? Have you come to arrest anybody? You're too late for Kele; he left last night. Him and Samuel Small Legs. So did the other two guys, Ned and Patrick. They left even before Kele did. I almost didn't recognize you in those logger clothes. Hey. You must figure maybe George was killed by somebody. Why else would a cop be here?"

She went on, looking out across the lake, then at me. "You'd really like me to go with you, you know. You're trying to be all male polite and buddy-buddy with this cop, but you know he's probably got you on a list of suspects and there have to be other things to talk about except the thing you don't want to talk about and I'll do nicely, won't I?"

"He's top of our list," Seth said. "I thought I'd lynch him in the parking lot. Save the trial for later. Then I remembered he's got the map."

"Mister cop," Pica began.

"Call me 'Seth'," he said.

"Seth," she said. "You're going to spend the day with someone who'd rather be alone." She looked right at him. "And you're wondering if he's going to roll the canoe and stand on your head when you come up for air, if you find any evidence. Wouldn't you like to have a witness along? And I know a lot of useful gossip about the lodge."

"You've got a point," he said. "Hop in."

"Don't I get a vote?" I said.

"No," Pica stepped lightly into the canoe. She even had a lifejacket with her.

"My canoe," I pointed out.

"Look," she said, settling in on the bottom of the canoe near the middle, "I knew George better than either of you and I might spot something you miss."

I shoved off into the lake. "You're probably going to kill both of us," I said. "You probably did George, anyway."

"I didn't do it," she said, "Belinda did it. She came back to this place just to kill him. Her and Kele, and now he's gone, Kele, you know. He took off before sunup and nobody knows where he went to, but maybe he took his sketching stuff and we'll find out in a month or two when does a painting."

"And Bob?" Seth asked. "I hear he's gone too."

"Oh heck yes," Pica said. "He's like the wind; you'll never see him no matter how hard you try. He left this morning at dawn and wouldn't tell me where he was going. It was a lonesome bed without him, but what's a poor girl to do?"

"Any idea where he went?" Seth asked without turning too much.

"I know exactly where he is. We had a rendezvous planned for lunch. If I'd shown up. If you didn't take me with you. Maybe he went with Ned and Patrick: I noticed Ned's car in the parking lot this morning."

"I think," I said "that Sergeant Daily here should look into those preserved oranges you have."

"It's such a beautiful morning," Pica said. Just look at the mist on the water and the loon out by the island."

"That," I said, "is a seagull. And there's no mist on the water." I pushed on the dock, and the canoe drifted away from Hawk Lake Lodge.

The lake is edged with rock shores and trees along the tops of the rock cliffs. A boat left the lodge shortly after we did, a kid in a bright-red lifejacket at the front hanging onto a propane tank, a pile of goods in the middle of the boat, and a guy in a blue coat at the back, hand on the motor.

A parliament of crows vanished into the distance, cawing. From one of the cottages, the sound of a lawn mower, even though it was past summer, and the lawn was tiny and tilted at a rough angle. We kept to the shore at first, hitting the occasional rock, and having to back off a couple. We scooped the hitchhiking spiders into the water, and squashed the token ant.

Some of the cottages were so well hidden that only the dock on the water gave them away. Others defied the wilderness in bright colours.

It was a beautiful day.

I should have known better.

The sun came out from behind a cloud just after we passed the island, and the breeze dropped. The day began to warm up. Pica shrugged herself out of her sweater, then pulled off her shirt and brassiere.

"Hey," Seth said, gripping the sides of the canoe, "who's rocking the boat?"

"You know what," I said to the two people in front of me, "if neither of you turns around, this canoe will probably not flip over."

"I thought you said it was a stable canoe," Seth started paddling again.

"It is," I said. "I'm not so sure about me, though."

Seth took a quick look back, said, "Oh," and turned his eyes to the front again. Pica laughed.

"I guess it's warmer than I thought," I said.

"I always take the chance to get in some sun," Pica said, stretching her arms up. "There's enough dark and cold in this country."

"Not to mention bugs in the spring," Seth added.

"You're making me uncomfortable," I told her." Speaking only for myself."

"Of course," Pica laughed again. "But remember I have no feelings for other people. You shouldn't be surprised at sexuality out here; the whole outdoor experience is just alive with it."

"You think so?" Seth asked, paddling strongly. Actually, I was paddling faster than usual, too, I noted.

"Oh yes. Just ask Win here. The woods are full of life and death; life making life and piling itself in clumps and heaps all over each other. Lift up the moss, and you can find the bones of plants and animals, and other plants and animals madly having it off, trying to make new life before something kills them.

"Everything's growing and eating living and dying and spouting spores and seeds and eggs and gobs of semen and little babies." She turned to look at me. "And Win here stumbles across the rocks and through the woods trying to pretend it's some sort of esthetic experience.

"And when I offer myself on a bed of moss, he'll tell me thanks but no thanks. But he'll toss and turn in his sleep for weeks after. No wonder he takes pictures in the rain; he's watching nature cry in frustration." She leaned back into the sunlight and closed her eyes, her lips curved in a smile.

"Is that true?" Seth asked.

"Of course," I answered. "Every word of it. I only killed George because he was having an affair with a pine tree I'd got especially fond of."

Seth laughed. "Watch you don't get sunburn," he told Pica.

"A bit late in the season," she said sleepily, “a bit early in the day.”

We paddled in silence for another twenty minutes, till a cloud covered the sun and a wind came up. Pica put her top back on, and watched the shoreline go by.

"How much further?" Seth asked.

"Just beyond the next point." Ahead of us, a few rocks held three living spruce, and a fourth that had fallen into the water. When we rounded the tiny peninsula, scraping against some underwater rocks, the dam was visible not far away. Beside it, nailed to a tree, the yellow triangle portage sign.

When I die, maybe it'll be just like going over a dam.

When I die, maybe it'll be because I canoed over a dam.

Pica was surprisingly helpful. When the canoe hit the mud bank at the marked portage trail, she scrambled out after Seth, helped him drag the canoe up enough for me to get out, then gathered up paddles, lifejackets, and the day pack, and was gone down the portage trail singing to the world while Seth and I were still stretching our legs.

"Who gets to carry the canoe?"

"Both of us," I said. "Just grab an end. It's a short portage."

We launched below the dam.

When we were well out on the lake, Pica spoke up. "The woods ahead of us could be a bit crowded."

"How do you mean?" Seth rested his paddle on the thwart ahead of him. Like most novice canoeists, he had paddled too hard at the beginning and was starting to take breaks.

"I heard that Kele's not in his cabin. Bob left this morning. And those guys that hired George were seen launching a canoe just before dawn."

"You think they came this way?"

"It's the most exciting place around, it seems. Did you bring any sandwiches?" Pica opened my daypack. "Hey, there's enough here for a week! What kind are they?"

"Tofu," I said, "and zucchini. The tofu's healthy, and Aisha had a big zucchini crop this summer."

"I'm glad," Seth remarked, "that I brought roast beef sandwiches."

"I recommend we kill the cop for his sandwiches," Pica said. She poked at the sandwiches. "It must be love."

"Love?"

"Or inertia. I'm not sure most people would stay married to someone who sent them into the wilderness with tofu and zucchini sandwiches." She examined one with a critical eye. “I guess someone’s showing how much she cares for your health, but if it were me, I’d be eating leaves and sneaking Harveyburgers into my pack. Some things in life are justified, even if you have to conceal them for the sake of local politics.”

"There's a big bag of beef jerky in the outside section of the pack," I said.

"Does Aisha know about this?" Seth watched clouds gathering in the west.

I sighed. "I think not, but maybe she's just not letting on."

“You have to eat these sandwiches, of course, " Pica said, "since she may ask. Then you have to eat what you like to satisfy your inner desires. The compromises we make with ourselves," Pica said, "in the name of getting along with other people.”

"Even our wives and husbands," I said.

"Mostly them. That's why I'm never getting married. I'd have to compromise what I am. I don’t want to do that." She smiled a huge smile at me.

"Could get lonesome at night," I offered.

Pica laughed. "When I get lonesome at night, I'll let you know."

"But won't you get a bit lonesome when you get old?"

"I got old, really old, last year, in my soul. Now, every year, I let myself get a bit younger. My body's going to age, but my mind will get younger as the years go by. It's a plan. Can't see why other people don't do that. Can I have a sandwich?"

I was going to point out that it was only ten in the morning, but I wasn't sure how far that would get me. Besides, there were more than I was likely to eat. "Sure. Have three."

By this time we were getting near the end of Gull Lake.

It was a bright day. The little waves caught the sunlight on Gull Lake and shone diamonds at us. The trees along the shore looked about as remote and mysterious as they were supposed to.

Ahead, three loons warbled at us, then disappeared abruptly underwater, to appear further down the lake after a minute. It was a perfect day to be in a canoe with a nut case and a cop who probably wanted to have me making license plates for the next twenty years of my life.

"You don't like us very much, do you?" Pica asked, laughing again a bit.

There was a long paddling silence, then I said, "Which of us are you talking to."

"You of course. It's your canoe. Seth, our policeman friend is trying to figure out which of us is lying the most, or at all. He's paid to not like anybody."

"Is it always this noisy out on the lake?" Seth asked me.

"Not when he's alone," Pica answered for me. "Are you going to shoot me to shut me up?" She was talking with her mouth full of sandwich and it came out muffled a bit.

"Not till we get to shore," Seth answered.

"He shoots people," Pica observed.

"Anybody?" I asked, "or only known criminals?"

"You should watch people more closely," she answered, "instead of watching water and rain."

"What would I see, do you suppose?" The shore was getting closer as we neared the south end of the lake. I slowed my paddling.

"He has a sadness in his eyes, like an old soldier." Pica began trying up the packs, stuffing sandwich wrap into an outside pocket. "He got transferred here from Toronto. He shot someone."

Seth missed a beat in his paddling, but said nothing.

"Oh yes," she went on. "I looked it up."

"A long time ago," Seth said, "and a long ways away."

Pica turned her head to me. "The kid was fifteen years old, and a member of a very visible minority and he had a big stolen pickup and was driving it right through some of metro's finest cops. Well I guess the kid broke a few cop bones before our friend here nailed him with one shot between the eyes."

Seth said nothing, so I said, "On the other hand, he's very quiet."

"Hell," she said, "you don't want quiet. If you've got to be among people, you'd rather they did all the talking, so you don't have to. Otherwise you're going to be looking at the sky and the leaves and the water that other people would find so lovely and all you'll be thinking about is how very very very much you don't want to be here with us." She fished out another sandwich and started in on it. "Tofu," she said, "is good for you."

"I can see the portage sign." Seth pointed ahead. The lake narrowed into a thin channel, choked with lily pads and logs.

Beyond, nailed to a tree, was the triangular yellow sign.

"What are those birds?" Seth raised his paddle to point just above the trees ahead.

"Vultures," I said. "Turkey vultures."

"We have vultures in Ontario?"

"They used to be common, last century. They've been brought back, I guess. Mostly they live on roadkill, but there are a few out in the bush."

"I like vultures," Pica observed. "They're honest. The wild is all about dying. Living and dying. Most people just pretend it's about living, but it's not. You gotta participate in the whole thing."

"And poor George was a participant?"

"We all participate," she said, looking into the trees. "Sooner or later, we all participate."

A few minutes later, out on the waters of Fox Lake, I asked Seth, "Do you mind a little detour? Maybe an hour's worth?"

Seth turned around to look at me. Or maybe to look at Pica; she had her top off again and was sunning herself. He sighed heavily. "A detour?" One of Pica's eyes came open and looked at him. He turned back to face the front.

"Well," I said, "I remember a comment Belinda made about Bob. Something to the effect that she could tell us something interesting about what he was doing that day. The day George died."

"And you just remembered this?" Seth spoke very evenly.

"Oh," Pica spoke up, putting her top on again, "he doesn't like company very much. So he files anything people say away in his mental filing cabinet and hopes he won't have to look in there again and see what he put there."

"Yes," I said. "I did just remember it."

"And what do you want to do?"

"I was wondering," I looked at the clouds, once again gathering, if Bob could have got to Thomson Lake from here."

"How do you mean?"

"By taking a shortcut from the west end of the lake. Thomson Lake flows into Fox Lake. It's a tiny creek, I imagine, but I'd like to see if there's any way a person could either paddle or walk through."

"Let's do it."

I turned the canoe to the west, and we followed the lake west, then south. The lake ended in a shallow bay. We finally rammed against a submerged log, not far out from shore.

"Now what?" Seth pushed against the log.

"We keep going." Together we pushed over the log, and over a few more, until the nose of the canoe was firmly wedged into bushes growing out of the water. There was no sign of the creek and no sign of any previous canoe.

"Now what" Seth said again.

"The creek's somewhere in these bushes."

"I can't see it."

"I can't, either," I said, leaning on the paddle to keep the canoe in place. I pointed at a notch in the hills ahead of us. "That's where the creek comes through from Thomson Lake. You might be able to walk it, but you sure aren't going to canoe it."

"You're sure about that?"

"He thinks he's wild and brave," Pica said. "And he's tried taking shortcuts like that more than a couple of times. Trust him."

"I do."

"He goes where nobody else goes, so he can find places where there's nobody else." Pica pulled up a late-season lotus and set it into the canoe.

"Who made you queen of the personality profiles," I asked.

"Hey, Mr. Policeman, watch this guy; I think he's going to brain me with his paddle." Pica laughed so loud we got the echo back from one of the cliffs.

"He'll have to wait in line."

"Darn," she said. "I feel threatened all to heck."

We got back onto the lake, then followed the shore a bit. I pushed the canoe into a more solid piece of shore, then swung the back around and stepped out.

"I'll be back in a bit."

"Wait for me," Seth said. "I'd like to come, too."

I looked at Pica. "Not me," she said, settling back into the canoe. The clouds were still in the west, and the canoe was in sunshine. "I'll stay here and eat all your sandwiches."

I led the way through the dense brush. For fifteen or twenty minutes we followed the creek, which was small enough to step over, up into the hills. We dodged swamp and dense underbrush, then made good progress through a beech and maple forest.

Finally, I paused, puffing.

"How far did we get?" Seth rested against a moss-covered rock face.

"About a quarter of the way to Thomson," I reckoned.

"Could he have done it? Could he have got to Thomson Lake in the time he had?"

"Possible," I said, "but very unlikely. Even if he had a bloody murdering drive to kill George, how would he know George was at Thomson Lake?"

Seth just looked at me, breathing heavily and leaning on a maple tree. A crimson leaf fell onto his head.

"They'd been gone for a couple of days. They could have been anywhere. And probably as a group. How would he know that George was alone at Thomson Lake?"

"You might have thought of that before we climbed those last thousand rock faces," he said, scratching at a cut on his arm.

"I had to know."

"You just wanted to get away from that character in the canoe."

"You have a point there," I said.

"Nice nipples."

I couldn't disagree with that. "Can't you arrest her? She's playing hell with my blood pressure."

"Not in this province."

I pondered that a minute. "I guess I'll live."

"Figured you'd say that."

When we got back to the canoe, Pica was sleeping, curled up awkwardly between the seats, with a couple of sweaters pulled over her and her head on a packsack.

Less than an hour later, we were coming in to the other end of the lake. "I can see the portage sign," Seth called. We were entering a long, narrow bay, choked with lily pads, logs, and rocks.

"The water's down this year," I said, "you can't get to the portage point by canoe." I pointed to the nearby shore. "We can land here. It's a little longer."

"Seth," said Pica, "is thinking that things here are not what they seem to be."

We were on the portage to Cedar Lake. Seth and I were taking turns carrying the canoe and a pack, and Pica and I were leading. She carried the daypacks.

I watched the birds and the leaves against the sky.

As the burly cop tromped along the trail, I asked, without pausing, "You mean what? That he's thinking about all this living and dying and killing going on under our feet?"

"He's thinking that the portage sign was pointing at the wrong place, now that the water's down in the lake. Now he's wondering how many other things out here are telling him lies."

"Like you."

"Me, he's not worried about. He knows I lie as much as I can get away with. It's you and the rest of the creatures hiphopping through these woods. Kele's not much of an Indian, you know. I've gotta go pee."

"Ready for a break?" I called to Seth.

"Uhhh," he answered.

I led him to a tree with a canoe branch. A canoe branch sticks out from a tree, high enough to lean the front tip of the canoe on it. Saves having to put the canoe onto the ground. Seth stepped out from under the canoe, and straightened up, slowly. I directed Pica to an evergreen bush off the trail. "There," I said. Then I added, "Behind the bushes, if you don't mind."

"No problem," she said. "You go out of your way to get into the natural world, then want to hide some perfectly natural functions, that's your hang-up. Shall I try to pee quietly, so you don't hear me?"

Within couple of minutes we were on our way again, me carrying the canoe, and the other two walking behind me, talking.

"What did you mean when you said Kele wasn't a real Indian?" Seth asked.

"Born white," she said, "and raised white, but now he hangs around the reservation hoping some red will rub onto him. Even his name's one his mother picked from a book. It means 'sparrow hawk' I think, in Navajo or something."

"And who's this Samuel Small Legs he's got with him?"

"Real Indian from the rez. He's a medicine man type who spends his time trying to get the young guys to listen for the spirits. They just ignore him, of course."

"Was Kele really boffing George's wife?"

"Not more than twice a day, except on Sundays."

"And I can believe you?"

"Oh, I've never lied to you before, have I?"

About this time, we came down a muddy slope to Cedar Lake. I got there first, and dropped the canoe with a thump onto the ground.

As the other two came up, I was looking up at the campsite by the trail.

Seth came up, and watched me look around. "Tell me what you see," he said.

I huffed my way up the slope. The day had got quite warm, and I was sweating a bit. At the top, I gave the cop as clear a rundown as I could of the previous night's group camping social event.

“Bob had a knife?” Seth asked me. “What kind of knife?”

“A switchblade, I’d say. But I can’t be sure. It was pretty quick, and I’ve never actually seen a switchblade.”

“Does he still have the knife, do you think?”

“Chucked it into the middle of Fox Lake.” I told him about the altercation with Belinda at the portage.”

“Most people here have knives?”

“You’d be silly to go into the woods without one,” I said.

“We’ll keep that in mind when the coroner’s final report comes in.”

When I looked around again, Pica was out on the point, sunning herself. Her clothes were piled neatly beside her.

"Still glad you asked her to come with us?"

He sighed. "She was more or less local. She knew the victim and all his friends and enemies. And she could give me a rundown on the situation at the lodge, just in case I really wanted to know. I figured I'd have most of the day to talk to her. "Besides," he went on, "she knows there's no place else she could do this so safely. Her aunt won’t let her take off her clothes near the lodge any more."

What could I say? "Pica," I yelled, "we're getting ready to go now."

She opened one eye, then reached for her clothes.

When we paddled up to the portage to Thomson Lake, I pointed ahead. There were two forms there, moving around an upturned canoe.

As we got into shore, they stood up, and I could see the geobuddies, Patrick and Ned. They had a small fire going, its smoke drifting into the trees.

Ned helped pull us up to the shore.

"Good to see you," he said. "Someone bashed a hole in our canoe. We were trying to fix it with birch bark and pine tar."

"That could take a while," I said, looking at a hole the size of my fist."

"Especially with one of us standing guard all the time," Patrick said, looking around. "Whoever did it stole our rifle, too."

## Chapter 10

Sometimes you need someone basically unflappable. Seth, at least, was. He got out a small notebook from his daypack, and started asking questions.

"When did this happen?"

The Geobuddies both started talking at once, then Patrick fell silent, and Ned took over. "We found it like this when we got back."

"From?"

"We went to the lake, the one where George was killed."

"Without your canoe."

"We decided to scout the path first." Ned waved at the forest in a vague way.

While Seth was taking notes, I glanced around. Patrick was shuffling his feet and looking at the woods. Pica caught my eye and winked, then rolled her eyes upward.

It suddenly became a very funny thing. Here I was, in the middle of nowhere, a policeman taking notes over the body of a canoe, and someone out in the bush with a rifle, probably sighting in on my head as I stood there. I winked back at Pica.

No doubt about it, I was still the prime suspect. A guy dies a violent death on a small dark lake, and some other guy (me) shows up with the wallet of the deceased, claiming he accidentally snagged the body.

But what about Ned and Patrick? They'd hired George and had been with him before his death. Maybe they'd had a nasty little argument, and things got out of hand. It happens.

Then there was Bob, our British tourist. He'd threatened George and was known to be short-tempered and occasionally violent. And he'd been in the area, although not close enough to make him a better suspect than me.

And Kele - he was sleeping with George's wife, at least according to Pica. That could lead to a confrontation, or just to a quick resolution of someone's problems.

As for Pica - nah. She may have claimed to be a psychopath, but I didn't really feel psychopaths ever admitted it. She was just weird, nothing more.

Besides - who had the rifle?

Pica was right about one thing. In the ground, in the water, in the trees, there was a constant battle as living things stalked and killed and ate each other. The forest was a battle that made Stalingrad look minor. I figured if people would just stop talking I could hear the tiny screams and the gnawing sounds.

I shivered, then decided to return to my previous view of the wilderness as something of an Eden. Denial. I liked that.

Then, somehow, I got the feeling that I was missing something, but I didn't know what it was. I looked at the policeman taking notes, and the two geobuddies inspecting the hole in the canoe. I began to think that God was playing chess and Seth had been dropped, like a random pawn into the wrong game.

No, I thought, not a pawn. Maybe a castle, high walls and straight lines, and belonging in his own corner.

I turned, to find Pica looking at me, solemnly. "If I had a wish," she said, I would wish you a good space, your own space, out in the wildest of the wild." She thought a bit. "A little lake, maybe only a beaver pond, with evening coming on and your tent set up, and a loon or two. And a light rain, of course." She smiled. "I know about your photography."

I didn't know what to say. I just blinked a few times.

Pica leaned over and whispered, "If you want to add a wild and naked woman to your next few pictures, just let me know." Then she smiled. "But of course, you've got your own places to go and things that just have to get done."

But she knew darned well that nothing I did actually had to get done, except maybe dying someday. I gave her my biggest smile, and said, "If I change my photography, I'll give you a call."

"It's a wide and lonesome planet," Pica said, "and some nights you'll want to sleep with your hand on a warm breast instead of your cold camera." She looked over to the others. Seth was coming back towards us.

"Done?" I asked the policeman.

"Oh, yes." He folded up the notepad and put it into his pocket.

"What are they going to do about their canoe?" I could see the hole in it was about the size of a baseball.

“They think they can patch it with a piece of birch bark and some pine tar.” The cop sounded skeptical.

“It can be done,” I said. “What were they doing here, anyway?” They’d obviously left even earlier than we had.

“Said they were coming back to try to figure out things themselves. Said their knowledge of the backwoods might be an asset.” He got the pack, paddles, and lifejackets. “Maybe figured a city cop wouldn’t know much.” He grunted. “Trip on a tree root or something.” Looking at Pica, “are you ready to go, young woman?”

“Sure am.” She looked at me, put her arms behind her head and stretched. “Shall we get this canoe on the move?”

I didn’t reply, just grabbed the forward end of the canoe and put it onto my shoulders. I wanted to take the front end so I didn’t have to watch her while we walked. My male imagination was already going into fantasy mode. Young enough, I thought, to be my daughter.

Pica and I led the way, carrying the canoe, with Seth following with the pack.

With only a couple of wrong turns, I led the way to Thomson Lake, making it there in reasonable time.

It was as quiet and dark as I’d remembered it. We sat the canoe down on the shore.

“This is it?” The policeman’s question seemed redundant to me, but, like he said, he was a city boy.

I pointed out the direction I’d come from, and the area where I’d caught George.

“Might as well have a look.”

“Guess so.” I slid the canoe into the water. “You coming?” I asked Pica.

“I’ll just sit here and swat deerflies,” Pica said.

“Okay.” The big cop looked a bit disappointed.

We went out on the lake. I showed him approximately where I’d done everything. He nodded a lot and took notes. He surveyed the water, eyeing the trees, the lily pads, the little afternoon waves. We had sandwiches and snacks that we’d brought with us.

We found George’s canoe on the downwind side of the lake, overturned. It was dark green, and only a couple of inches of it were above water. Until you got quite close, it looked like another mudbar among the water weeds.

We rolled it over, and Seth held it while I leaned over and scooped most of the water from it using my required-by-law bailing bucket. Then we tied it to the back of my canoe and paddled into open water.

“What,” he said, “do you think are the odds of you actually snagging George’s body.”

I could see his back, but not his expression.

“Given,” I said, “that we have a few acres of lake, a body that has to be at the right place and the right depth, a tiny hook.” I paused, then went on. “The chance that on a lake normally deserted virtually the whole year, two men should cross it on the same day and one should find the other on the end of a hook?”

“When a person drowns,” he said, “we sometimes drag the lake with lots of boats. Lots of really big grappling hooks. And most of the time they don’t come up with a body on a patch of water smaller than this. After dragging the damn place half the day and most of the night.”

“And I got it the first time, with a half-inch hook.”

He didn’t reply. I watched his back.

“Makes you wonder,” I observed.

“What are the odds?” he asked. He nodded out at the lake. “A lake this size. Probably never had a body in it before. Body would come up in a day or two.”

“One in a gazillion?” I offered.

“That was my thought.”

"Then again," I noted, "I was fishing the downwind end of the lake, just at the drop-off point. Any suspended object would drift with the lake currents until it got to this end, then just sit there for a while."

He seemed to ponder this. "What's that do to the odds?"

"One in a million, maybe. You going to read me my rights? Or does the hanging come first."

"You planning on rolling the boat? Maybe standing on my head till I quit annoying you?"

"Nope. But I'm still suspect number one, aren't I."

"There are some people I know who might think so."

"I can understand that."

"There was the incident with your neighbour's dog..."

A knot formed in my stomach. A decade or so before, I'd been found in my neighbour's back yard with a baseball bat, trying to catch a noisy dog. A good lawyer had convinced the judge that, having gone almost three days without sleep, I wasn't really aware of what I'd been doing. There'd been a lot of stress at the time. But it was in the records.

"No doubt."

"Some might say you have a history of violent action. Especially against things you don't like."

"So I might get off with manslaughter if I claimed I killed the guy thinking he was an angry bear or something."

"Just saying what other people might say. They might say you don't always remember things you just did."

"I still didn't do it, you know."

He sighed. "One in a million, you claim."

"First guy I ever caught, so I can't be sure."

"I don't really like this lake," he said. "Let's get back to shore."

"Worried I might try to down you?"

"More worried about that missing rifle."

"You got a point there." I leaned into the paddle.

Now I've got to say that I'm a loner a lot of the time. I've made my way through this life as best I could, not always making the best choices, but at least the ones that seemed best to me at the time.

I get annoyed at people who step into my space and don't care, because I like my space and I try not to step into other people's personal space.

Aside from that one incident, which, as I said, was at a bad time in my life, I've had little to do with the law.

I've never intentionally harmed anyone. Or none that I can remember.

When we got to the shore, Seth got out of the canoe, then helped me out of the canoe. We dragged George's canoe onshore.

Seth inspected George's canoe but didn't seem to find anything. He turned to me and shrugged. There were no handcuffs in his hands.

There was also no sign of Pica.

However, a man was sitting at the base of a tree, whittling something with a honking big knife.

'Hi," he said.

"Hi, Kele," I replied, looking around.

"Lost something?"

"Pica. She was here when we launched the canoe."

"Pica's not here?" Seth looked around, then at Kele.

"What," I asked, "is the difference between a friggin canoe expedition and a friggin French bedroom farce?"

"Beats me," Kele answered. "What's the difference?"

"I don't know either, in this case," I yelled.

"Calm down," Seth said. He turned to Kele. "Which way did you come?"

"The back way, over the hills." He pointed to the west end of the lake.

"Then maybe she went back over the portage. I'll go see if I can find her." The cop stomped off towards Cedar Lake.

"Over the hills?" I asked.

Kele nodded.

"Aren't you Indians just supposed to grunt or something, if you're being uncommunicative?" I asked, sitting beside him. "Do I have to get into the firewater?"

"You brought some?"

"No."

"Just as well. Nothing worse than a drunken whiteskin."

"Amen to that."

"There are three ways to get to this lake," Kele said.

I raised my eyebrows. I can be pretty uncommunicative, if I want. Most of the time, that's exactly what I want.

"First," he went on, "is the portage from Cedar Lake. Your cop friend's busy checking every bush on it for signs of his girlfriend."

"His girlfriend?"

"You didn't know?" Kele observed me for a moment. "I guess you couldn't, could you? Oh, yes, the nice policeman spends more than his due time making sure Hawk Lake Lodge is safe and secure. Especially on Wednesday evenings, after his shift's over. Not that I know what Pica sees in him."

"I thought they didn't hardly know each other," I said.

"An Oscar to both of them, I guess. They know each other really well, if you get my drift. Anyway, the other way here is the way you came, assuming you're not lying about that, from McFriggit Lake, just before you killed George." He looked at me. "You'd have to be pretty nutso to come that way, and nutso people kill other people."

"We tried to get in from Fox Lake," I started to say.

"Interesting," he said. "Why would you do that."

"To see if Bob could have done it when Belinda wasn't looking."

"And I bet you didn't get too far. It's rough country in there."

"You got it, Redskin. So what's the third way in?"

"Red Lake."

I got out the map. "Even more nutso." There's rough country between the end of Red Lake and Thomson Lake."

"But no swamps. And if you get on top of this hill, there's a lot of bare rock. Not bad walking, in parts."

I pondered. "But you didn't carry a canoe all that way."

"That," he said, "would be rough. It would be nice to have someone to help you carry stuff if you really wanted to go there."

"A guide?"

“Someone who know the country pretty well would come in handy.”

I got up. It was getting late and you can sit on a rock only so long. “George?”

“He knew every bit of this area.” Kele got up, too. “We might want to make a fire.” He indicated the sun. “It’s getting late. And the cop might not find Pica.”

“Where the heck would she go?”

“She’s a wood sprite. She comes and goes in the woods like you wouldn’t believe. If she doesn’t want to be found, she won’t be.”

We had the fire going when Seth got back.

“A fire?” he asked.

“Pica?” I asked.

“No sign of her between here and watzit - Cedar Lake.” The cop leaned against a tree.

“Lawn chairs,” Kele observed.

“No sign of the geobuddies?” I asked.

“Not them or their holey canoe,” Seth said. “I guess they got it fixed.”

“Lawn chairs,” Kele repeated.

“Any chance Pica went with them?” I stretched and walked around. Seth shrugged.

“The lightweight, aluminum lawn chair,” Kele said quietly, “is the second most important invention in back country travel.”

“After…?”

“The canoe, of course. First you paddle, then you gotta have a place to sit.”

“He’s got a point,” Seth observed, looking around for someplace to sit down. “Why the fire? And where could Pica have gone?”

He did have a point about lawn chairs. Out in the bush there is wonder and loveliness and wildness and danger and peace and calm, but damn near no comfortable place to sit. You can walk across swamps and rocks and beaver dams, and you can sleep on pine needles or even rocks. But sitting is a pain most of the time. Rocks are covered with moss and are never flat and never in the right place. Logs would be nice to sit on, but most of them are either half-decayed or part of a forty-foot tree. The ground is damp. You can warm yourself in front of a fire and get crotch rot at the same time.

I once hauled a lawn chair camping, and God, it was great. Sitting on it, I mean. Not hauling it. Someday I’ll invent a lawn chair that’s really light and will fold up enough to be worth portaging. I tried once. Spent a lot of time in the basement, but didn’t end up with something that was safe enough to sit on.

Once or twice I’ve come to a campsite where someone’s left a lawn chair, and I always felt guilty about enjoying it so much.

While I’m at it, I might as well say that comfort in camping is one of my goals. As the guy said, “I don’t go to the wilderness to rough it. I go to smooth it; things are rough enough in the city." I’d be more than happy if a helicopter dropped a cabin every night where I chose to camp. Then left.

I have sought my freedom wherever I could, in this short life. I am barred and locked and chained by seasons and fragile flesh and my own ignorance and the collective insanity of my society. Out in the woods, I never think, “this is great”. I think, “this is how it should be.” That’s all.

“We’ve got to have a fire, because we’ll be spending the night here,” I explained.

“We can’t make it back to the lodge?” Seth wanted to know.

“Can’t leave Pica, for one thing,” Kele said.

“Yeah.”

I was glad it was a warm September. I'd planned to be back at the lodge about dark, and hadn't brought any warm clothing, let alone tents and sleeping bags. I knew Seth hadn't brought anything for overnight, and Pica's pack hadn't looked big enough to carry more than a lunch.

So we stood around and mumbled male things around the fire for a couple of hours, then Kele got a fold-up saw out of his packsack and we all went off to find enough firewood to last the night.

As with any area that hasn't been overrun with humans, there was lots of dry deadwood, even if most of it came in the form of branches too big to break. We took turns sawing them into six-foot lengths. With wood that long, you put one end into the fire, then push it in as it burns.

Finally, we cut one maple (please forgive us) and propped it between a couple of trees. If a person were careful, he could sit on the maple and lean his back against a tree.

Seth and I had brought more food than a day trip would have required, but it was still going to be a thin time before we got back to the lodge. Seth asked me about foraging off the land. Far as I knew, I pointed out, the only real food was acorns from the white oak trees up on the hill.

"They're edible?" Seth asked.

"Shell them and boil them in many changes of water, till most of the tannic acid's gone, and you can eat them. Takes a while, though."

Kele passed around some commercial energy bars. I hoped he had brought lots.

We leaned against our various trees, and ate much of what was left of our food and watched the sun get lower and every now and then called out to the woods, "Pica!" The sound bounced off the cliff at the far end of the lake, but there was no response, except just after the sun had gone behind the cliff, there was a splash in the water, a buzzing sound in the tree branches overhead, and then the echo of three rifle shots.

I looked around for the other two. They were hiding behind trees, just like me. Seth had drawn a small automatic pistol from his shoulder holster.

"I don't feel popular anymore," Kele said. "I think that was a rifle."

"A twenty-two," Seth said. "Maybe the one that got stolen from Ned and Patrick's canoe."

We waited, and it got dark. Kele said, "Someone better add some wood to the fire, before it goes out."

There was no answer from Seth, or me so Kele said a few unkind things and went to the fire. He pushed in a bunch of logs and sat down against a tree. "You guys planning on spending the night crouched behind your trees?"

I had to admit the idea seemed pretty good to me. But Seth put his gun away, and sat beside Kele, so I joined them, wondering if I'd be aware if I suddenly became, like, dead.

"Not much chance of anybody hitting anything in the dark," I said. But I didn't know, really.

"Not with a twenty-two, not at that range," Seth said, getting up to get more wood from the pile.

"Maybe they got closer," I said, hoping for someone to contradict me.

"Doubt it," Kele said. "Just too uncomfortable running through the woods in the dark."

"Don't you feel like shooting back?" I asked Seth.

"Can't hit anything at this range with a rifle. Let alone a pistol," he said. "So there's no point in letting whoever it is know I've got one."

I had to concede the point. We might need that element of surprise, I figured.

"Can we sneak up on the guy?" Kele asked. "Not me," he added, "I haven't improved my skills since the other night."

“Might as well eat, then,” I said. I dug into my pack and came up with my bag of sandwiches. Somehow I hadn’t managed to finish them. I offered them around, but Seth hesitated, which made Kele ask, “What are they?”

“Tofu and zucchini sandwiches,” Seth said.

“Good memory,” I noted, biting into one.

“Some things you don’t forget.”

“Isn’t tofu a bit squishy?” Kele asked.

“Aisha cuts it into slices and dehydrates them a bit,” I said. “I got her one of those food dehydrators for Christmas.”

“Why?” Kele asked.

“I was hoping she’d make some beef jerky.” I mumbled.

“Jerky?” Seth asked.

I took out the bag that Aisha didn’t know about and traded my store-bought jerky with the others. I got a can of Pepsi from Kele and a roast beef sandwich from Seth. I figured the tofu and zucchini sandwiches could keep till morning.

“Wish we had some of those pickled mandarins Pica had,” I said.

There were a couple of grunts of agreement.

“Where the hell did Pica get to?” Seth said, abruptly.

“And who’s shooting at us?” Kele added.

“Maybe she went off with Ned and Patrick,” I said. “The geobuddies. After all, we came in from the lake and Kele here came in from the west, so she must have gone east, towards Cedar Lake. And,” I added, “those two were there, patching their canoe.”

“Why would she do that,” Seth asked.

“She’s Pica,” Kele said, “she does whatever she wants to do. You ought to know that.”

“We still don’t know,” I said, “who broke the geobuddies canoe and stole their rifle.”

“Or who’s shooting at us,” Kele said. “Or why?” He seemed to have a large supply of those energy bars, and a big bottle of bottled water. As well as a nice warm jacket.

“Well,” said Seth, “we’re not shooting at us, so that leaves Ned and Patrick.”

“But their rifle was stolen,” I noted.

“So they said,” Seth said, putting a log a bit further into the fire, and taking a drink of Pepsi.

“And someone broke their canoe.”

“So they said,” Seth said again.

“Or it could be Bob,” I said. “There’s not that many people roaming these hills. And nobody’s seen him since last night.”

“But why would anyone shoot at us?” Kele wanted to know.

“From that distance?” Seth got up to get more wood. “Probably just to scare us off.”

“Like they don’t want us to go to the west,” I said.

“Guess what,” I said. “I have no plans to go to the west when the sun comes up.” I turned to Kele. “You didn’t see anyone on that hill? You came from that way.”

“So he claims,” Seth said.

“I didn’t see anybody up there,” Kele said. “But there’s a lot of room to hide up that way.”

“It could be,” Seth said, that Ned and Patrick are out gunning for us for some reason. Or that Pica found the rifle. Or that Bob stole the rifle. Or that either or both of you killed George or one or both of you is in cahoots

with either Bob or Ned or Patrick. Or Pica or all of them, or any combination thereof." He paused for a bite of a sandwich. "That someone is trying to keep us from finding out something. Or trying to keep us away from the hill. Or shooting at us for no particular reason. Maybe George died for no particular reason."

Or," he added, "maybe one of us killed George and someone out there is out for vengeance."

"You even suspect Pica?" Kele asked. "I'd think you knew her better than that.

"I know her," Seth said, "well enough to know that almost anything's possible with that woman."

Somewhere an owl hooted. Or maybe, I thought, some commando force was sneaking up on us, ready to slit all our throats before we could even stand up. Or maybe the loon call on the lake was a secret signal.

Have you ever thought how much uncertainty there is in this world? Or is it mostly when that most dangerous of killers, the human being, is on the loose?

I have wandered through a lot of beautiful hemlock groves and slugged through mud-clinging swamp. At what I charge for my pictures, I'm almost getting up to the legal minimum wage in income for my art.

God, what a human being will do to feel free for a few days. Those of us who haven't a clue what they really mean by freedom, out there hauling canoes through the bush.

I'd have told you that my freest freedom was getting away from people. And here I was, once again, sitting around a campfire with people I barely knew. Only this time, guys with guns were all over the frigging woods.

"I gather that you know Pica fairly well," I said. "Almost as well as Kele, here, knows George's wife."

There was a long pause in the conversation. I got up and got some more wood for the fire, then tried to get myself comfortable on the log. My guestimate was that, if I fell asleep, I'd fall sideways onto the log, then backwards into a small pine. But I was getting sleepy.

"I can see why George tried to kill you," Kele said. "Say Seth, can I borrow your gun for a couple of seconds."

"I get the first shot," Seth said, looking at me.

"When I was young, or at least much younger, I was a believer," Seth said. "I believed that there was order in this universe. I believed God kept it that way. I had good grades, a nifty girlfriend, and most of my future planned out."

"And then."

"It all went to hell. I found out the planet was breaking all my rules. And most of the people were breaking them too. Even the machines wouldn't give me change. The cars didn't stop at the corners to let me cross."

"Ran over your foot." Kele shifted and a few leaves dropped from the tree, from out of the dark into the firelight, dead, dead, dead, onto the impersonal forest floor, breaking no rules at all.

"Only people break the rules," I said, as the fire flared with new wood.

"What?"

"It's overcast," I noted. "No moon; not even stars."

"How's Sally Aden, in a bed?" Seth asked.

"How's Pica, in the back of a cruiser?" Kele asked.

"I hope there's a warm front coming in," I said. "Might rain, though. What do you think?" An owl hooted. "Maybe it's calling your name," I said to Kele.

"Actually, Sally is just fine in bed," Kele said. "Not especially adventurous, but happy most of the time. It's darn nice to have a genuinely happy person in your arms. When she laughs, her tits jiggle so nicely. So, about Pica."

"Like having a harem, and you pick one in the dark and spend all night trying to figure out which one you're making love to," Seth said. "Did you kill George for his wife?"

“There’s three ways you can approach the wilderness,” I said. “You can be an observer, a predator, or you can be prey.” A loon laughed in the dark on the lake. The owl hooted again. A night bug crawled across my hand. Pica remained out there, somewhere in the dark.

“No need to,” Kele said. “George knew all about us. He approved, actually. Strange, you think, don’t you.”

“Why the hell would he approve of somebody sleeping with his wife?” Seth was sounding tired.

“Most people,” I said, “are observers. Painters, like Kele, or photographers, like me. Or just walkers and lookers. And it’s all just like a big TV screen to them. But when you’re a hunter, the whole wilderness is completely different. You see it through a different side of your personality. You process it through a different part of your brain.”

“They’d reached an arrangement,” Kele said, sounding like the only one of us still wide awake. “He’d had a girlfriend on the side for a couple of years, and Sally had me. She owned the lodge, but he knew how to run it. If they broke up, they’d have lost the lodge and they’d both have been miserable.” He paused to kick the fire into a rising cloud of sparks. Seth and I moved our legs out of the way. “And in the last year, he couldn’t do anything in bed anyway. He had cancer, you know.”

“No,” said Seth. “I didn’t know. Maybe it didn’t show much.”

I was thinking about Kele and the bugs, the dragonfly he’d gently blown off his hand, and the ant he’d crushed in the canoe. He’d said, at the time, “The ant was headed for death. All that was ahead of it was a few hours of suffering as it tried to find its way back to its nest. I don’t mind death. But nothing should suffer.”

I remembered how he’d said those things when I first met him. And I wondered if he’d put George into the same category as the ant. If he’d decided to spare his friend a few months of suffering. If George had wanted to die out somewhere in the landscape he loved.

It was just a thought, of course.

“He didn’t tell you?”

“We only talked couple of times,” the cop said.

“He didn’t seem to mind about you and Pica.” Kele got a couple of energy bars out of his bag and passed them around.

“He had a heart-to-heart talk with me, and he had a serious talk with Pica, but I don’t suppose it made much difference to either of us. Talking to Pica is like talking to the wind, and I was a little too involved with my own problems.”

This was news to me. Maybe Seth, the cop, had had a fight with George and had gone running through the woods for miles and miles and found him at this little lake and killed him. And maybe a bloody fucking werewolf had come out of the hillside and killed George. I didn’t care. I just wanted to be somewhere else. Somewhere alone and away from these oversexed maniacs who somehow surrounded me out here away the hell and gone out in the goddamn bush. And it was real late and I was real tired and when I get tired I hate everybody and if George had shown up dead or alive I’d probably have beat him with a paddle on the spot.

Why did I think George had been beat with a paddle?

“Once,” I said, “I went on a camping expedition with nothing but chocolate bars. I was young then. I figured all I needed for the three-day trip was energy. I figured I’d catch up on nutrition when I got back.” Then, before they could reveal any more about the continuing serial, “Sex at Hawk Lake Lodge” (In every bed! In every car that stops there! Behind every hemlock bush!), I went on, “Took me years to work up an appetite for chocolate bars again.”

Unfortunately, I ran out of brainpower at that time.

“Why Pica?” Kele tossed the energy bar wrapper into the fire. It formed an agonized little face in the coals and vanished.

“Her choice.” Seth paused. “She seemed like the reincarnation of my first girlfriend, and my wife left me for a while after the trouble in Toronto, so I was pretty lonely out here.” Seth dug some bags of peanuts out of his pack and passed them around. “Are you a real Indian, yet?”

How far does one have to go into the forest to get away from junk food? I closed my eyes and pondered this. Eventually I found my face in a small pine. I seemed to be clutching it.

For a moment I thought I’d been shot, but eventually my foggy brain figured out that I’d fallen sideways onto the log, then backwards into the pine, as I’d thought would happen. I missed the part where Kele told us whether he was a real Indian or not, I guess.

“Look,” Kele said, “we’ll take turns standing guard. You two have a piss, then go to sleep for a couple of hours.”

“Do you think we need guarding?” I asked.

“No but if you don’t have someone on guard, you probably won’t sleep. Besides, the person awake can keep the fire going and put out any embers that land on the other guys while they’re sleeping.”

Sounded good to me. Ten minutes later I was curled up on rocks and twigs and wet soil and dry soil and with a backpack for a pillow and Seth on the other side of the fire. It wasn’t very comfortable, so I must have stayed awake for over a minute.

## Chapter 11

When Seth shook me into consciousness, I was dreaming about having fallen off the back of a small truck that was taking me to the dump.

Reality wasn’t much of an improvement, even when I warmed a tofu and zucchini sandwich over the fire on the end of a stick. But when I wandered down to the lake, I could see the sky getting a little brighter in the east. Somewhere over Newfoundland, the bright edge of the morning’s sunlight was creeping our way. Somewhere above, the cold and inhospitable stars shone against the blackness. Somewhere above the clouds the faint whine of jet engines told me another load of overseas passengers was on the final approach to Toronto. Somewhere on the lake, in the utter darkness, something splashed on the surface of the water. We were camped here like aliens, and would pass through tomorrow leaving little mark on the land.

I wondered about Seth, and Pica. They had acted like they hadn’t known each other all the way here. To a small, dark lake where life met death, truth met fiction. The sky was still overcast, because there were no stars, and the line where the sky met the tops of trees was hard to make out.

No loon called, no owl called anybody’s name, and to the west, where the hill rose in the blackness between lake and sky someone with a rifle might be sleeping, waiting for dawn.

I went back to the fire and added a couple of branches. There weren’t many left. Sparks flew up, and a couple landed on Kele, like migrating souls. They went out at once, so I didn’t have to pour water on his sleeping form.

I checked my watch, and it was five-thirty. Officially Almost Morning, at this season. A half-hour later I stumbled again to the water. Once my eyes had adjusted to being away from the fire, I could see that it was possible to tell trees from sky. I shivered. It was just possible to see mist crawling in tendrils on the surface of the water.

I went back and woke up Kele.

"Jeez," he said when he'd figured out where he was, "this is just a bit too primitive for me."

"Hurt?"

He thought a bit, and got another couple of energy bars from his packsack, and offered me one. "Not everywhere," he said. "I think there's a small muscle in behind one ear that doesn't ache much."

"What did you mean," I asked, "When you told me you were going to meet George and heard the owl call your name?" I kicked at the fire, but didn't add any wood.

""Sounded mysterious, didn't it?" he laughed. "But you didn't have the nerve to ask me what it meant."

I grunted.

"You white guys grunt a lot, you know." He passed me a hard-boiled egg. "Everybody called George 'the owl', because he sort of looked like one and didn't talk much." When he finished his egg, he went on. "George called from his cell phone. I was, ah, busy showing Sally my stamp collection, so I didn't get the message till a couple of hours later. George said - let's see how he phrased it - something like, 'Kele, get your Injun hands off my wife's ass and get the hell over to Thomson Lake as fast as you can.' So I grabbed a canoe and off I went."

Seth's voice came from his form curled up on the other side of the fire. "Just when were you planning on telling this to the authorities?"

"Bout time you got up," Kele said. "I had a couple of, ah, misunderstandings with the law when I was a teenager in Toronto, and now I generally don't volunteer information unless asked." He stretched and yawned. "Especially to quick-draw cops."

I've always loved the way a few guys on a camping trip could bond so well. Maybe that's why I usually travel alone.

"Well," Seth said, getting out some food and ignoring the comment about his past, "that might just answer the question of what you were doing around these parts when George died."

"Assuming," Kele said, "I got there after he died, and not before."

"Yeah, assuming that."

"Well," I said, then ran out of thought. I guess I was still running short of sleep.

"Anybody bring coffee?" Seth asked, stretching the kinks out of his bones and looking at the fire, which was down to a small flame and a lot of ashes.

"Kele reached into his pack and pulled out a bag. "Chocolate-covered coffee beans," he announced, giving some to Seth. I declined.

"It's getting light," I observed while the other two noisily gnawed their beans.

"We've got two choices," I said. "We can all go back to the lodge, or one of us can stay here while the others go back." They eyeballed me. "Someone should wait for Pica, in case she shows up," I offered.

"I'll stay," Kele and Seth said at the same time.

I liked the thought of going alone. Anywhere, exactly.

"You'd wait for me?" a voice said. "How nice!"

We looked up. Pica was coming down the portage trail, her pack slung over her shoulder. For a short and slightly pudgy woman, she moved remarkably silently through the leaves and twigs on the trail. Wherever she'd been, she looked remarkably chipper.

“And, to answer your question, I’ve been where I’ve been, and nowhere but.” She came up to the remnants of the fire to warm her hands.

“Okay,” I said. “But did you see anybody when you were there?”

“Nope,” she said. “But I found Ned and Patrick’s canoe hidden behind some spruces just off the trail.”

“They didn’t leave?” Seth looked around.

“Not by canoe,” Pica said.

“They’ve gotta be over there on the hill,” Kele said. “Maybe they fired that shot at us.”

“Somebody’s been shooting at you?” Pica asked. “I thought I heard a shot or two last night.”

“From the top of the hill at the end of the lake,” I said. “At least that’s where we think it came from.”

“Now what?” I asked. I was always asking the obvious. “Back to the lodge, I presume.”

They looked at me.

“We can either fit four into my canoe,” I added, “or we can borrow Ned and Patrick’s patched canoe.”

Kele said, “Personally, I plan to go back the way I came.”

“Over the hill,” I said. “Where there’s guys with guns. I’m guessing that shot was just a hint that maybe we should go home the way we came.”

“Maybe it was just a hunter, taking a shot at what he thought was a deer,” Seth said.

“Count me out,” Seth said. “This place needs the long arm of the law, and one guy’s arm isn’t nearly long enough in these woods. I suspect the odds are somebody else will get shot, and I’d like to be sure the reinforcements are called in.” He looked at Pica.

“Can’t leave me here all alone,” she said. “I’m going back with Seth. Who’s got a map.”

I got out my topographical map and my compass. Kele picked a map from his packsack; it was the same as mine.

“Can I borrow that thing?” Pica asked. Kele handed it to her. “I’ll give it back when we meet again,” Pica said, looking it over. “I’m lost without a good map.” Then she looked at Kele and me. “Seth and I will wait at the lodge. If you’re not back by tomorrow afternoon, we’ll call in the army or something. Besides, I always wanted to take a hike with this cop,” Pica said. “And four’s a crowd.”

I expected some awkward moments, but surprisingly, Kele agreed at once. “Good idea.” He turned to me. “Let’s get off, then.” He started through the woods, and I followed him, with a goodbye look at Seth and Pica, who had gone to get my canoe.

Pica came over to us, and rummaged in her pack. She came out with a plastic bag weighing a couple of pounds, and handed it to me. “Might as well take these,” she said.

I undid the bag and looked in. “The apricots,” I noted.

“You two are more likely to need them than we are,” she said. “You can feed them to the guy with the rifle,” she said. “Then you can outrun him.”

“Can’t outrun a guy with a rifle,” I said.

“Well,” said Pica. “If it’s their rifle that fired the shot, it’s a single-shot fold-up survival rifle.” She smiled and scratched her side. “Not too accurate and you gotta reload after each shot. I saw it last week, when those guys left the dock.”

That didn’t sound like good enough odds to me. But there’s a time and there’s a time, like. “Okay,” I said, “I’m with you. Do we walk all the way to the lodge?”

“Halfway,” Kele said. “I’ve got a canoe at the end of Red Lake.”

“How are we doing for water?” Seth asked. “I’ve finished mine.”

“I’m out,” I said, shaking my empty canteen.

“Almost out,” Kele said, peering into his packsack for more of the plastic bottles.

“No problem,” Pica said. From her packsack she took out a couple of pill-sized bottles. “Water purifiers.” She handed out a round of the small purple pills. I threw one into my canteen, walked to the shore, and reached out far enough into the lake to get relatively clear water. Nobody shot me, so the others did the same.

Kele and I set out along the south shore of the lake, four people with daypacks and the sun behind them. Kele went first, because he’d come that way the day before.

Life’s a lonesome journey. Even with other people around. We all crawl up our own version of Calvary.

Once, when I was younger and didn’t know as much, I took my first solo overnight into the bush. I paddled and portaged not far from this area, and camped on a point of land in the long April evening.

There wasn’t much sleep that night. Just when I’d almost drift off, I’d hear a sound like a trig snapping, or a mammoth going “garumphh” or a lake monster snorting water or something. I think I slept half an hour that night, and got up at daybreak to discover that nothing had eaten my canoe in the night, much to my surprise.

When you’re with another person - even someone who doesn’t know anything about the wilderness, you feel safer. You can snore all night in a feeling of safety.

I certainly wouldn’t have walked towards the west end of the lake alone. It’s hard dodging bullets - they’re a lot quicker than I am.

We pushed through cedar bush and climbed rock faces and walked a beaver dam that made a small pond. The aspens were yellow and the first of fall’s reds were in the maple trees. Where the lake met rocky shores, we stuck pretty close to the water. Where weedy bays led inland, we clambered uphill through the fallen trees. Generally, Kele led, but we got spread out a bit on the climbs and going around the damp parts.

And so we made our way along the south side of Thomson Lake. We crossed the place where I’d come in from Casey Lake a million lifetimes or just days ago. I pointed it out to Kele.

No one shot at us, and I managed to avoid having conversations with Kele.

We paused at one place. “Has someone camped here?” I asked.

“Jeez,” said Kele. “It looks like someone was here not long ago.”

We puzzled at it a bit, then went on.

There was a nice bit of upland forest after the end of the lake, then got to the edge of the hill.

There was a hesitation for leadership, but Kele stepped forward and up we went, grabbing onto trees and branches and moving around boulders.

At the top of the hill, he paused to let me catch up.

It was a lot more open there. A lot more. Individual maples and groves of evergreens separated large areas of bare rock. Boulders the size of televisions were scattered at random. Except for the presence of people, it was all like some northern Eden.

From one open area we could see Thomson Lake, including the portage point on the far side. Wordlessly, we pointed it to each other. Kele came up with a couple of old red shotgun shell casings, then three bright brass .22 shells. We both nodded wisely, and shrugged our shoulders and looked around.

Then we just headed west, along the top of the hill.

Which is where we came across Ned DeVincent and Patrick Ireland. We’d just come through a grove of bizarre spruce trees, all black and knobby and obviously in need of better soil, and were clambering down a small cliff face when a voice called out, “Hey! We sure are glad to see you!”

Kele slipped off the mossy rock he was on and must have come close to spraining an ankle when he hit bottom.

# Chapter 12

Up stepped the geobuddies, coming into a sunny patch. Ned was smiling broadly, but Patrick looked like he could use a night's sleep and a case of beer. They had backpacks, but no sign of a rifle, fold-up or otherwise.

"Good to see you're all still in one piece," Ned said, shaking hands all around. "Some son-of-a-bitch took some shots at us last night, and we've been afraid to put on a fire."

"What are you doing up here?" I asked.

"We figured maybe we'd see if anyone came this way before George got killed." Ned looked around at us and the landscape, while Patrick leaned against a tree and closed his eyes. "So we hid our canoe and took a hike up this hill. We were going to spend the night up here and come back in the morning."

"And someone shot at you?" I asked.

"Probably with my own rifle," Ned said. "Sounded like it, anyway. We were just picking out a campsite near the top when someone started shooting." He put his pack down and leaned back against the rock face. "We took off and eventually spent the night hidden in a gully."

"We found your canoe," I said. "And one of those shots came pretty close to us."

"Well, we didn't hide the canoe all that well, I guess." He looked at me carefully. "I bet you thought it was us doing the shooting. Well, we wondered if it was one of you." He went on, hurriedly, "It couldn't have been, though, if you were all together last night."

Actually, except for Pica, we were, but neither of us seemed inclined to mention that fact to Ned.

"Any idea who it was?" Kele opened his pack and took a long drink of water.

"Beats me." Ned shook his head. "Unless it was that English kid, Bob. I don't know where he went yesterday."

Or unless you're lying, I thought, I wouldn't mind looking in your pack. I remembered how my wife, Aisha, had said, "those two geologists did it." She'd wondered why two experienced woodsmen had needed George for a guide. She had a point.

And where had Pica been when those shots were fired? She'd been with us when the geobuddies had had a hole knocked in their canoe and the rifle stolen, but I wondered where she'd spent the night.

Bob was the wild card. Where was he?

"So what do you plan to do now?" I asked Ned.

"Oh, we're heading back. We'll get our canoe and go back through Cedar and Fox Lakes. Someone up here is either stupid or crazy and has a gun." He looked at Seth. "We'll let the authorities deal with this guy. You might want to do the same."

"How many bullets were stolen?" I asked.

"There were a couple of dozen inside the stock."

And they headed off, through the trees, back the way we'd come.

"Well?" I asked.

"Whoever's shooting doesn't seem to hit anybody," Kele observed. "Bad shot, or just trying to scare people?"

"Might get more serious if we keep heading this way," I observed. "Lots of bullets left."

My legs started to ache; they do that if I stand in one place too long. I wavered a bit in trying to decide what to do.

Kele got up from the tree he'd been leaning against. "I'm going on," he announced. My canoe's on Red Lake." He turned to me. "Coming?"

I made my mind up. “Damn right. I’ve never seen Red Lake.”

We crossed the top of that hill, stumbled down the far side, then helped each other across a beaver dam at the bottom. The next hill was steeper on the slope, but flatter on the top, except for a deep little chasm near the beginning.

We stopped to drink water at odd intervals, and to chew on the energy bars that Kele had in his packsack. Concentrated fruit juices and fruit pulp, dried blueberries, and even dried beans, tomatoes, and broccoli.

“I’ve been thinking,” I puffed, clambering up another slope. “Maybe we can rest just a bit.” I grabbed onto a dead aspen branch. A mistake. Don’t trust aspens.

Kele, who was puffing as hard as I was, looked back at me lying on the ground. “In a couple of minutes. We’re almost there.”

“Almost where?” A gnarled oak helped me better. “It’s a long way yet to Red Lake.” When I got to the top Kele handed me another of Pica’s apricots.

“You’ll see,” he said, and started off across a remarkably pretty stretch of bare rock and mosses, and into a sumac grove.

When I caught up to him, he’d got to the edge of the plateau, and was leaning against a large boulder. He wasn’t alone.

“Hello,” said a large man. He was sitting in a blue lawn chair that faced over the cliff edge. He wore a Blue Jays baseball cap, from the back of which two dark braids hung over his shoulders. A small, almost smokeless fire burned in a depression in the rock in front of him.

He had the soft voice of the native person, and a friendly smile. “Samuel Small Legs,” he introduced himself, getting up slowly and reaching out his hand.

I shook his hand, but my brain wasn’t working all that well, so my jaw tended to hang open a bit. Especially since I was still breathing hard.

“Oh,” I said suddenly. “I’m Win Szczedziwoj.”

“Rain photographer,” Samuel acknowledged. “Kele here told me a lot about you the other day. I’ve seen your work.”

“Ah,” I said.

“I’m the resident medicine man,” Samuel said. “I’ve been teaching Kele here how to be an Indian.” He shook his head at the ground. “Lot of work.”

“Big deal,” said Kele. “So far all you’ve taught me his how to make fry bread. And you’ve already eaten more of that than you should in one lifetime.”

“See what I mean,” Samuel said to me. “These young ones just don’t have any respect for their elders.” A long sigh. “I taught him lots of things; he just doesn’t listen too good.”

I nodded, and checked out the view. It was a good view, to the north and east. The red sumacs and the first yellow leaves of aspens put color into the many smaller hills. I could see Red Lake to the left, and at the base of the hill, a small lake, almost round. “Isn’t that the way it goes?” I said.

“I think he’ll get there,” Samuel said. “He’ll close the Medicine Circle in his own time. But he’s got to use his heart more and his eyes less.”

I couldn’t argue with that, not having a clue what he was talking about.

“You believe in God?” Samuel asked me.

“Speaking of work,” Kele said. “I was the one who hauled his lawn chair up here.” He turned to me. “Samuel here came with me in the canoe.”

Samuel turned towards me. “Good thing I brought matches. This young guy said he’d be gone maybe four hours. That was yesterday afternoon. Gets kinda cold here about midnight. Nothing to do but sit here and watch the stars.”

“It was overcast,” Kele said, handing Samuel another of the energy bars.

“So you couldn’t watch the stars,” Samuel said. “You were using your eyes again. Got any tobacco?”

Kele fished out a pinch, held it to the four directions, then put it into the fire.

I sat down. The rock was cold and hard, but I was tired. I slung my pack onto the rock beside me. I rummaged in it and pulled out the plastic bag of apricots. I took a couple, and passed the bag to Samuel. He took a couple and passed the bag to Kele, who just passed it back to me without comment.

“Damn fine,” Samuel said. “These taste like Pica’s work. Can’t figure out where she gets alcohol that strong. Whoo! You could light fires with these.”

I had the same opinion. You could wake right up swallowing one of these. I had a couple more, and passed the bag to Samuel, who took a handful.

“That improves life,” Samuel said. “Now how about you guys tell me what’s been happening while you were gone. Then I’ll show you a couple of things I found.

Kele filled him in with the night’s adventures.

Samuel looked thoughtful. “You think maybe George was murdered.”

“The coroner’s thinks it’s possible,” Kele said, “and we know someone around here’s careless with guns.”

“Could it have been Pica?” I asked. They looked at me in puzzlement. “I mean, could she have fired the rifle at us.”

“Ah,” Kele said. “I thought of that. But she’d have had a hard time getting to the far end of the lake in the time she had. And she often goes off for a night by herself.”

“She does?” I was surprised, for some reason.

“Quite often. She’s got one of those survival blankets that fold up small. I guess she rolls up in it under a spruce tree or something, then comes back in the morning. Drives some people nuts, but there’s nothing anyone can say to her that does any good.”

“Interesting,” Samuel said. “Now follow me.” He took a couple more apricots, stood up, and started down the steep rock face, hanging onto birches as he went. “My feet are a bit unsteady,” he noted. “A couple more apricots and I could just roll down here.”

## Chapter 13

At the bottom we stopped and caught our breath.

“What the heck were you doing down here?” Kele gasped.

“Young brave leave old medicine man to die of thirst on remote hillside. Sad old story,” Samuel said, hanging onto a tree. He turned to me. “Thought I’d get some water, make myself some spruce tea.”

“Good idea,” I said.

“Samuel looked at me. “You watch Never Cry Wolf one time too many?” He stepped forward, surprisingly agile for a big man, then knelt near the edge of the water. He reached out to a rock that poked up from the shore. Using a round stone, he knocked off a piece and handed it to Kele and me. It was blue-green and crumbly.

“Okay,” I said. “It’s a rock.”

“It’s got special powers?” Kele suggested.

“If I were a white man, I’d call both of you ‘fartheads’,” Samuel said with a huge smile. “This stone is kimberlite.”

A lost memory surfaced through the haze of Pica’s alcohol-soaked apricots. “Diamonds?”

“Got it.” Samuel grinned and pointed to the original rock face. “You can see where someone chipped away at this, then covered it with dirt and pine needles. Makes you think, doesn’t it.”

Kele and I thought. It wasn’t easy, hunched over hanging onto a tree and trying not to slide one foot into the cold lake. I looked around at the lake. It looked like any other tiny lake in this country, with marshy areas around most of the shores, and a deep blue in the middle.

“Are you two guys just going to hang around here, or can we go back up the hill?” Samuel laughed.

At the top, Samuel and I had a couple more apricots, as he settled into the lawn chair, and we all inhaled oxygen to make up for the climb.

“Someone,” I said, “came this way fairly recently. A couple of good rains would have cleaned that rock off.”

“Someone,” Kele noted, “expected to be back here before too long.”

“How did you know it was kimberlite?” I asked Samuel.

“When I was a kid,” Samuel said, “I learned the story of the Peterborough diamond, and when I was hunting, I kept an eye open. ”

“What’s the Peterborough diamond?” Kele asked, putting a few more twigs on the fire.

“Woo, I think I’ve had enough of those apricots,” Samuel said. “All that vitamin C is getting to me.” He reached into his pack and drew out a small leather pouch.

I watched as he got out a few things, some of which I recognized as bones and tobacco.

“Well,” he said slowly, “when I was a kid I wasn’t the genius I was now. I didn’t know a lot of things.” He chuckled and looked out over the lake, then got a kleenex and wiped his glasses.

Myself, I kept looking around in case someone with a rifle was lining up on my head. I noticed that Kele was doing the same.

“Stop worrying, boys,” Samuel said. “There’s evil around here, but it’s still a couple of miles away.” He said with a smile, “Unless someone’s got a really good rifle, we’re probably safe for a bit.” The wind was picking up and it was hard to hear him. From far away came the sound of a motorboat, maybe from Hawk Lake, or maybe from McFriggit Lake.

“Anyway,” he went on,” when they were building the railway from Ottawa to Peterborough in the 1890s, they were using gravel from local gravel pits. Somewhere a few miles east of Peterborough some working guy picked up a good-sized diamond, 33 carats, from the gravel. It wasn’t a good-quality gem, but he sold it to a jeweler in the town.”

“It came from here?” I dodged the smoke from the fire.

“The gravel is stuff the glaciers scraped off this area during the ice age. Most scientists think it didn’t go more than a few dozen miles.” Samuel indicated the little lake below us. “Diamonds usually come from a circular hole in the ground. This lake could be the top of a diamond pipe.”

“What would that mean?” Kele squinted at the lake. The wind was switching to the north, and getting colder.

“A diamond pipe is shaped like a carrot,” Samuel said, “and this would be the top.”

“I meant, what would that mean to the land claim,” Kele corrected.

“Land claim?” I asked.

“We have a land claim in court for this land.” Samuel said.

“Oh,” I said, picturing having to ask someone to canoe the lakes I’d crossed so freely in my life. “How does it look.”

“There wasn’t much hope,” Samuel said, “so it’s been bubbling along on the back burner for a couple of decades.” He waved at the lake. “Even if there are no diamonds in that ore, this would probably kill it for sure. In the excitement, the place’ll be torn up and crawling with prospectors before anyone remembers that we claimed it.”

I nodded. Too often the courts had their eyes on the law and their ears open for whispers from economic powers. I taught economics long enough to know the political realities behind decisions like that.

“Us Indians,” Samuel said, “never did trust things that came from underground. Most of the nastier manitous come from underwater and underground. Bad spirits if you don’t know how to treat them right.”

“Like the one with the Buick,” I said.

“Mishipizheu,” Kele said.

“Darn,” Samuel shook his head. “There are some secrets white guys aren’t supposed to know. And you told him about the Buick….”

“Just slipped out,” Kele laughed.

“Anyway,” I said, “mineral claims have lost a lot of Indian land. That’s for sure.”

Samuel reached for a large piece of fungus from his bag, and set one end to burning. He chanted something I didn’t understand, and inhaled some of the fumes.

“Is your heart pure?” he asked me.

“Nope,” I said. “But I put on clean underwear and socks yesterday morning.”

He laughed long and hard. “Guess that’ll have to do. Here.” He handed me a piece of bone of some sort, looking like it had been partly carved into something I didn’t recognize. Then, with a sigh, he got out of the lawn chair. “Follow me.”

We followed the ridge a bit, then stopped. Small spruce, mostly dead, alternated with thick moss on the ground. “Not enough soil for trees,” Samuel said. “They die if they get a couple of dry years. “Moss survives, though.” He leaned over and pointed to a place where bare rock met moss. “Lift that edge,” he told Kele.

Kele knelt and lifted inch-thick moss, a mixture of gray and green.

I could see a carved figure. “Holy shit!” I said, then wished I’d chosen a better phrase.

“Darn right,” Samuel said, “at least to us, it is.”

“How many drawings are there?” Kele whispered.

“Well,” said Samuel, “I checked a couple of places over there” he pointed behind a clump of tiny spruce - “and over there” - he indicated a place closer to the edge of the hill. “Same story. Lots of pictures.”

Kele put the moss back into place and stood up. “This makes things a bit different.”

“It sure is gonna do interesting things to your land claim,” I said.

“Yeah,” said Samuel. “Yeah.”

I lifted up a piece of moss. “What is it?” I asked, pointing at the drawing etched into the rock surface.

“The stick figure,” Samuel said, “the guy with one eye, is a medicine man, a shaman. The animal beside him is a bear. The lines that connect them are power lines, coming from the bear to the man.”

I grunted.

“You white guys grunt a lot, you know,” Samuel said. “I guess that means you think it’s pretty primitive art. Something like a six-year-old kid might do.”

“Well,” I said. Kele stood up and watched through the trees for something.

“Actually,” Samuel said, “a six-year-old kid could do a lot better, from a representational view.”

“But this isn’t representational?” I said.

“Indian religion teaches us that what we see,” Samuel waved his arms around, “isn’t the real thing. It’s just God’s stage set.”

“Dreams?” I asked.

“They’re better,” Samuel said. “But when I dream of some woman on the Kettle Point First Nation I can tell you that’s my gonads talking, not the Great Spirit.” He leaned against an oak. “The time the spirits, the manitous, the representatives of God’s power speak to you is in that moment between waking and sleeping. Guess what?” he asked. “You draw what you see there, and it’ll look like this stuff.”

He stretched and walked back to the campfire and his lawn chair. “If you drew a really good bear and a really good man, it’d just show you got fooled by the stage set.” He settled into the lawn chair and poked at the small fire.

I was going to grunt again, but thought the better of it. As a photographer, I’m a little closer to reality in art than whoever scratched those pictures.

“Now, you’re thinking, that picture was a guy sharing power from a bear, or getting power from a bear. Right.”

I nodded.

“It might be that. Or it might be that he saw an eagle and felt some power in the wind, but the bear is his family’s totem and he wanted power to deal with the Grandfather Wind.”

“Then how do you know?”

“You can’t. Ever. If the picture has meaning to you, then you’ll get power from it. If not, it’s just a funny picture.”

“How did you find the pictures?” I asked.

“I was taking a leak while waiting for this young guy to get back, and noticed that someone had been fooling with the moss. So I took a look.”

“You think someone else’s seen them?” Kele ran his fingers through his hair.

“And had a campfire here.” Samuel indicated the fire. “Someone recently had a fire here. I just used the same spot.”

Now I was getting really nervous. “You know,” I mentioned, “It might just be time to get a move on, unless you can deflect bullets.”

“I gotta agree,” Kele said.

“You young guys want to live forever,” Samuel said, but he picked up his pack and his chair. “Somebody going to put this fire out?”

We looked at each other. The top of the hill was dry as desert, and it was a hell of a climb back down to the water and we didn’t have much drinking water in our packs. We could have opened our flies and peed the fire out, but this didn’t seem like a good place for that.

Eventually we managed to stomp the fire cold, and headed west, through the trees.

After a tougher-than-usual clamber I said, “There’s a good reason to kill somebody, back there.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” Kele said, looking winded. “Two good reasons, if you want.”

“They go together,” I said. Anybody going to work on a diamond mine would pretty well have to mess up the drawings.”

“The drawings would pretty well mess up any white guy’s claim to the ore for a long time, if not forever,” I said.

“Let’s make a few guesses,” I said. “Whoever made the campfire back there spent the night on the rock, and found both the pictures and the kimberlite outcrop.”

“And spent the next night on the south shore of Thomson Lake, at that campsite,” Kele said.

I looked at Samuel. He just nodded.

I told them how my wife, Aisha, had said, “those two geologists did it.”

“Makes the most sense,” Kele said. “They’d recognize kimberlite right away if they found it, and would realize what the drawings could do to a claim.”

“But I thought they came down by way of Gull Lake and Fox Lake,” I said.

“Maybe you two just assumed that,” Samuel said. “Maybe they lied; they had reason enough.

“Hey,” I said. “Remember when we made the portage from Cedar to Fox Lake? Kele here knew Fox Lake was down a foot or two and we couldn’t launch at the usual point on Fox. But those two didn’t know that. If they’d come that way, they would have.”

“I remember them at the mud flats - we had to wave them on to the portage bypass.”

“So they didn’t come that way.” Kele said.

“And I’m pretty sure they didn’t come the way I came, from Casey Lake. I’d have spotted some marks or footprints on the trail, I think.” Unless, I thought, they walked pretty carefully.

“But they told us they came by way of Fox Lake,” Kele said.

“So they lied,” I said. “First thing to know.”

“We going to sit here all day?” Samuel wanted to know. “Can I build a sweat lodge while you guys are doing some thinking?” He sat on the lawn chair and dug out a Mars bar from his pack.

“One other thing,” I said. “Just thought of it now. Remember when we packed up the tents on Cedar Lake? All the pine needles stuck to the bottom of their tent?”

“And George’s tent too,” Kele noted.

“Right,” I said. “That tent was put onto wet ground. Yet they told me they’d been camped there for the previous two nights.”

“And,” Samuel said.

“And the only rain was the day before. I know, because I was counting on wet weather for pictures.” I stretched and stood up again. “If they’d camped before the rain, the bottom of their tent would have been dry. So they moved that tent to Cedar Lake and put it up a day after they said they did.”

“We can suppose they were on the shore of Thomson Lake the day before.” Kele got up, too.”

“Makes sense. At that campsite we saw today.”

“So George might not have gone off to Thomson Lake fishing.”

Kele stopped. “They told you he went fishing?”

“That’s what they said. Supposedly he took Ned’s rod and promised them some lake trout.”

“George didn’t fish,” Kele said. “He’d let other people hunt and fish, but he was a strict vegetarian and refused to kill any animals or fish himself.”

“I guess those fellows didn’t know that,” I said. “I sure as hell wish one of us brought a cell phone.”

Samuel spoke as he led us across an open stretch of flat rock. “I got one.”

“Geez!” I said. “Let’s call the cops.”

“I think we can talk about that at the canoe,” Samuel said.

“If we get that far,” I said, annoyed.

“If we don’t, we don’t,” Samuel said, laughing. Even hauling the lawn chair, he kept well ahead of us.

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They were waiting for us, of course.

We came down the faintest semblance of a trail to Red Lake, and there, sitting on Kele’s canoe was Patrick Ireland, smoking a pipe.

I looked around, trying to keep my mind on the thought that the rifle was a single-shot and it takes a while to shoot three people. But Ned was down by the shore, cleaning a string of fish.

Samuel looked at the campfire burning on a flat space well above the shoreline, and the man cleaning fish, and said to Patrick, “We gotta talk.”

Patrick took a puff on his pipe, and said, “We found our rifle. It was under the canoe.” He looked nervous.

We set down our packs. Samuel found a good place for the lawn chair. When he was comfortable, he spoke to Ned and Patrick. “Kimberlite,” he said. “Pictographs.”

“Shit,” said Ned, setting the fish on a rock. Patrick looked even unhappier, if that were possible.

Myself, I was watching the packsacks that lay on the ground. I knew that one of them had a rifle in it, folded up and with maybe twenty rounds in a package.

“Time to talk,” Samuel repeated. “We got lots to talk about, I think.”

“Like what,” Patrick blurted, spilling a bit of burning tobacco on his pants. With a practiced motion he swept the offending matter onto the ground and stepped on it.

“I think it’s going to be a long talk,” Samuel said. “We might be here for a while.”

The thought didn’t comfort me. I was tired from lack of sleep, hungry from lack of food, thirsty from conserving my water supply, achy from the hard ground the night before, and edgy from watching all day for speeding bullets to dodge.

“It’s afternoon,” Kele pointed out, “and it’s three hours to the lodge even if we get a tail wind.”

Like a canoeist ever gets a tail wind. Besides, already there was a stiff north wind and the temperature was falling.

Samuel turned to me. “You might want to phone your wife and tell her you’ll be away another night.” He dug into his pack and came up with the cell phone. “Don’t tell her exactly where you are, just that you’ll be home tomorrow.”

I took the phone and made the call. Middle of the freaking wilderness and some tower somewhere got my signal and put me through. God, I hate/love technology.

“Aisha,” I said, when she answered.

“Late tonight would be fine,” she said. “But otherwise I’ll see you tomorrow. Don’t freeze to death on the ground if you do stay over. You and the other guy can take turns keeping a fire going.”

“Fine, thanks,” I said. She’d probably figured out from the lack of panic in my voice that I wasn’t in immediate danger, but she knew I wouldn’t call if I were to be home quite soon. So it would be after dark or tomorrow that I’d show up. She knew I didn’t have a cell phone, so someone else had to be with me. She knew I hadn’t packed for an overnight stay, so keeping a fire going would be necessary. And she watched the weather channel enough to know it would be getting chilly after dark.

“Where are you?” She didn’t sound worried, but she had a set of maps in the house.

"Ah," I said, watching the others watch me. "Way out in the woods somewhere. No place you could find on the map."

"It's like that," she said. "Want me to call the cops?"

"Oh, no," I said. "I'll be fine."

"As long as those geologists aren't around. I told you they've been killing people over a lost gold mine or something."

"Well," I said, "they've got some fish cooking and have to go now. See you tomorrow."

I wondered if I'd said too much. I'd just told her that I was beside a lake or river, and they all had names, so she could figure out I really did know where I was, and couldn't say."

"Sleep with your eyes open," she advised.

I looked around to see four pairs of eyes watching me. "We should call the lodge," I suggested. "Otherwise someone's sure to send in the troops."

There was a moment of silence, then Ned said, "Good idea." I handed him the phone.

I don't know who he got on the phone, but it was obvious that Seth and Pica hadn't got back yet. Ned assured whomever that we were fine and Patrick and Kele and Samuel and I were happy to spend another night outdoors and we'd be back in the morning.

Before he hung up, Samuel indicated that he wanted the phone. "Marie," he said. "Samuel here. Yeah, I'll be back tomorrow. Tell everybody not to worry. Tell Seth, when he gets in, that the stolen rifle's been found. We're all okay. There was no problem."

"You're on the list of suspects in George's death," he told Ned and Patrick. "If I didn't get on the phone someone might assume you'd killed us all."

Ned didn't look happy about it, but what could he do? Samuel made sense.

"Supper?" Ned asked. There was general agreement, so Ned took out some cooking utensils and I curled up on some moss and put my head on my packsack. And went to sleep.

Maybe twenty minutes later, Kele woke me. I came back to the world from wherever I was with Kele handing me a birch-bark plate with fried fish and potatoes on it.

Kele pointed at the potatoes. "Dehydrated. The geobuddies came prepared."

The food was good. I finished up my water when Kele pointed out that Patrick's pack had a water-purifier pump in it. Patrick and I went down to the edge of the lake and pumped water through the purifier. He held a collapsible canvas bucket and pointed the end of the hose into a relatively clean area of the water. I pumped, water gurgling as I moved the handle up and down. My arms ached. My knees ached from kneeling. My feet ached from trying not to slip into the lake. But we pumped enough water for all of us for a night.

The sun was getting low above the trees when we had finished a polite but enjoyable dinner. A Canada Jay explored the camp and stole a piece of fish. A family of mergansers made their way along the shore of Red Lake, a string of a dozen smaller mergansers following their parents in a perfect line.

Several leaves fell off the trees, and a flight of Canada geese went overhead, flying north. Canada geese fly the wrong way a lot of time.

The geobuddies had a folding Swede saw, so we gathered a real pile of wood, and prepared for a long night. We even improvised chairs of a sort for everybody but Samuel, so there was no need to kill him for his lawn chair.

The shadows got long, and a stiff north wind picked sparks from the fire and blew them at Samuel and me. But Samuel brought out some tobacco and waved his bag of mysterious things a bit, and the wind stopped dumping so much ash his way. Me, I moved over, and held my breath when the smoke came to visit me.

“Why is there power in petroglyphs?” Ned wanted to know. “They weren’t made by the gods, the manitous, you know.”

Samuel took out a cigar from his pack and lit it. “There’s nothing sacred about pictures. Not the pictures on that rock, and not Michealangelo’s Sistine Chapel painting. They were all done by people.”

Ned started to go on, but Samuel blew out a big cloud of tobacco smoke and continued. “The place, well, that’s different. That’s holy.”

“Why would a place be holy?” Patrick had a hat pulled low over his head and was watching the water. But he’d obviously been paying attention.”

Samuel laughed and blew a perfect smoke ring, but it vanished at once into the breeze. “We haven’t a clue, actually.” He raised a hand. “Let me give you a quick lesson in total illogic.

“You white guys spent a long time studying matter. Solid matter.” Samuel reached down and tapped the local granite. “Then you learned enough to start studying energy. We Indians were out killing moose and sitting in spirit circles. Then, of course, Einstein taught us that….” He held out a hand to us.

“Matter is energy.” Patrick spoke from under his hat.

“Got it.” Samuel smiled. “My physics courses weren’t wasted. Matter is a form of energy. And energy can be manipulated by the mind.”

I spoke up. “Only at the smallest level, and only in the slightest degree.” The sun was behind the highest trees on the hill on the other side of the lake. The temperature dropped some more.

“Ah, my friend,” Samuel chuckled, blowing cigar smoke into the wind. “The human mind can decide something at the subatomic level every now and then.” He leaned forward to the fire. “But God, now. That’s different. Our Great Spirit.” More cigar smoke, and he shook off some ash. “Picture this universe as a creation of the mind of God.” He looked each of us in the eye. “God is energy and he directs energy in strange ways. In ways that aren’t logical.”

“To some rock in the middle of the bush?” Ned seemed skeptical, but he had a lot at stake.

“To some dry land in the Middle East maybe, rather than to a field in Norway? To a cave at Lourdes rather than a peninsula in Wales? To a city in India where they say heaven comes closest to the earth? Who knows the way of God? Our God or your God? Maybe the same God.”

“You’re saying it’s not logical,” Kele said. Patrick had put on a pot of tea and Kele was serving it in birch-bark cups someone had made, probably while I was asleep. It tasted bitter.”

“Like I said,” Samuel said. “Total illogic.” He tossed the cigar stub into the fire. “Look. Picture a bearded prophet named Moses standing on the top of a mountain. God tells him everybody in his tribe has to cut the ends of their dicks off, now and for all generations. Make sense? No way.

“Or maybe everybody’s got to travel to a desert town and throw rocks or something. It’s not logical. We Indians figured that out. There’s God-power here and there and you just got to work at where it comes out.”

“What about George?” I asked, but everybody ignored me. My butt hurt and my head hurt from the smoke or the fish or maybe God was mad at me.

Samuel went on. “Some of our holy men figured out that bears have lots of God power but wolves have hardly any. We don’t know why, even if we make up a few good stories about it. Moose, now. Loaded with God power. Deer - they’re weak in it. Most of those hills over there - they’re just hills. But sometimes the power pours out of some hillside for some reason and the holy men mark the spot. You gotta just find these places. Like you find diamonds.”

“Any connection?” I asked.

“Depends on how much of a sense of humor God has,” Samuel said.

I'd often wondered about that. It would have explained a lot. "If the land claim goes through," I asked, "wouldn't the, ah, First Nation that owns the land get the money."

"Well," Samuel laughed, "it hasn't worked that way so far. Right now, the mining company owns whatever it can find under the ground."

"The landowner gets payments, though?" It seemed reasonable to me.

"Tell him," Samuel said to Kele.

"The mining company pays fees that go to the government," Kele said.

I looked at Ned. He nodded.

"You don't get anything?" I was astounded.

"Tailings."

"But you can stop people from mining on your land?"

"Not bloody likely."

"A diamond mine isn't going to do you much good, then."

"Really screw things up I think. But then, what do I know?" Samuel smiled. He turned back to Ned and Patrick. "Your first diamond mine?"

"There aren't many around," Patrick said. "When I was young, they told us that no diamond mine had ever been found in North America." He tapped his pipe against a rock and poked at the fire with a fresh-stripped spruce branch. "Now they've got diamond mines in the Northwest Territories and maybe in Labrador."

"And here," Kele said, undoing his braids. "You've got one here."

"Could be," Ned said. "No way to say for sure at this point. Might be nothing in that ore." He stood and stretched, looking to the west, where only a rosy glow silhouetted the trees across the lake. "And there'll be the problem of preserving those petroglyphs."

"Put them under a glass cover, and charge the Indians a few bucks to take a peek?" Kele asked. "Like down at the provincial park?" We all knew Petroglyphs park. The carvings there had a nice building around them and busloads of tourists.

"Arrangements could be made."

"And we could shut down the mining machines a few minutes a day out of respect?" Kele went on.

"What about George?" I said.

"George," Ned said, while Patrick suddenly got up to get more wood for the fire. "George. Poor bastard died in the country he loved."

"He was murdered," I said.

"Really," Samuel said, with a big smile. "I thought he fell out of his canoe."

My eyes popped. "The coroner thinks he was dead before he hit the water." I looked around. There was a lot of head movement. "That's going to affect a few things."

The wind died and an owl hooted. The temperature dropped a couple of degrees.

And what do you think happened?" Ned asked, breaking the silence.

I hesitated. "One might wonder," I said, "what would happen if George found out about a set of petroglyphs and a lode of diamond ore. I didn't know him, but I imagine he'd have been upset at the thought of trucks rumbling through the hills he loved." I kicked at a rock. "There'd have to be a lot of roads built."

No one said a blithering word.

"Suppose," I said, "George came with a group of people not by way of Fox Lake, but across this way. Suppose they found all these things, and were talking about ore sorters and truck roads and maybe a rail line. I

can see a fight breaking out, if someone told him about this scene. I can see a fight breaking out if someone asked him to keep quiet about the petroglyphs," I suggested. "And things can happen."

No one said a blithering word.

"But if there were a murder charge, details of both the petroglyphs and the kimberlite would come out."

"He's quick, for a retired economist," Kele said.

"I think," Ned said, "that there's a lot to lose if a murder charge comes out." There was a general shuffling around the fire, and the wind picked up again, blowing ashes in my direction. Patrick added a few more twigs, but they burned quickly.

"I've seen a lot of accidents in my time," Samuel said. "People stand up in a canoe, bang their heads, fall out." He put some more tobacco into his pipe, first holding some to the air then putting it into the fire.

"Sometimes," he went on, "Your canoe can roll over on top of you, and it'll hold you underwater." He shook his head. "Tragic."

"Hey," I said. "There were campsites at the petroglyphs and on the south shore of Thomson Lake."

"Lots of hunters here in the fall," Samuel said. "Some guys come in just to scout out the country first." He blew a spiral of smoke into the air. "I used to do that."

"Someone shot at us!"

"Maybe," Ned said. "Or maybe someone was shooting at rabbits."

"Someone put a hole in your canoe."

"Mighta been that rock we hit, coming across Cedar Lake," Ned said. "Sometimes you don't notice these things till later."

"You said George left to do some fishing." I was getting hoarse from strain.

Kele leaned forward towards Ned and Patrick. "George didn't fish. He didn't believe in it."

"Well, he did tell us he was taking a trip to see a lake somewhere. We just assumed he took my rod and did some fishing." Ned scratched his chin. "I liked that fold-up rod. I'd hate to think I lost it myself somewhere."

And their rifle got lost and found and they just forgot that the Fox Lake portage was unusable and maybe the dew crept under their tent on Cedar Lake and maybe I was nuts.

And maybe I was the only one who thought it mattered if murder had been done. Or that it mattered more than land and diamonds and crazy pictures on rock.

And maybe, if I fell out of a canoe, things would get a lot less dicey. Or maybe two deaths would look even more suspicious. I liked that thought. It mitigated against a wall of depression the size of Hawk Lake and deep as my soul. My head, of course, hurt from any of three hundred causes and I was tired.

So I reached into my pack and brought out Pica's bag of preserved apricots and passed them around. Kele, of course, refused them, as did Ned. Samuel took two, and I had one. There were still lots left.

Then they talked about the weather and about fishing and even some politics, and laughed a lot. They didn't talk about good ol' George and his untimely death. Eventually, Kele told me to take a nap. "I'll watch out for you," he said. I didn't believe him, so it took me at least a minute to drift off.

I woke up a few hours later, cold, and the stars were out, wavering in the wind. The fire was crackling and the lake was getting noisy against its shores.

I yawned and stretched, still tired and achy, and Patrick handed me a mug of tea. I knew that geologists work with cyanide and mercury and things like that, so I thought about other things and drank the tea.

Everybody was watching me.

"Best thing for Ned and Patrick," I said, "is the rest of us die now and a blasting crew turns them petroglyphs into road work before anybody else sees them." I got up and leaned over the fire for warmth. "And

nobody will find out if they think George died accidentally." Interesting thing about warming your toes is that your boots start to melt just before your toes get warm.

"Best thing for Samuel and Kele," I continued, "is the rest of us die now and National Geographic does a feature on the petroglyphs. And someone covers up that ore exposure, so nobody finds out about it. And maybe nobody will find out if they think George died accidentally."

"Might someday need them diamonds," Samuel said. "Might someday the courts turn over mineral rights to the tribe."

"Someday and maybe," I said. "But none of you guys can count on anything if some damn economist spills the beans about petroglyphs and diamond mines."

"I liked George, Samuel said. "He was a good man. He was one of Kele's best friends. They canoed and walked a lot of this country together. Kele would do sketches and George would talk about his view of the world." He puffed on his pipe. "It hurt Kele a lot when he found out George had cancer."

"It's true," Kele said. "He used to tell me how he didn't want to die in some hospital room with tubes sticking out of him."

"Luckily," I said, "he had maybe some wonderful people who were willing to help him die somewhere nice. Just a little sooner than he'd probably planned it."

"What's done is done. The past doesn't change. We've got to think about the future." Patrick spoke up, looking intently at me, then everybody else. Nobody nodded. Especially not me.

"I think," Ned said, "that the accident story is the most acceptable explanation."

"But not necessarily the right one." I poked at a log with my boot. The wind was fondling the coals at the base of the flames, and I figured we might run out of firewood before morning.

"You get to choose right and wrong?"

"Someone has to. We're not getting much guidance from the stars lately."

"Maybe they have judges for that. And laws." I looked into the darkness where invisible trees nudged and wrestled in the night wind. I could hear the topmost branches of the trees whipping, but the firelight had blinded me to the world around.

"And maybe a judge doesn't know much about this wilderness," Kele said. "And maybe us Indians haven't learned to trust judges a lot."

It was a dark and windy night. Who knew how many feral eyes stared at me from the darkness? I could count four pairs in the firelight, and decided the darkness was starting to look friendly. "There's a law for we'uns and a law for you'uns," I said.

There was a bunch blank looks. "Got that from Bonanza," I said. "Or maybe the Beverly Hillbillies."

"We're talking practicalities," Samuel said. He started a new cigar.

"Let's talk practicalities," I said, the caffeine in the tea making me crazy. My body ached in the way a middle-age person's does, at every point it had touched the cold hard ground in the last 24 hours. A hammer-drill worked at the right-front side of my head. Love them migraines - they move around here and there like buses on a historic tour.

"Let's talk practicalities," I continued. They liked that. The practical thing to do would be to kill me, then figure out a deal between themselves. I was the only one that didn't want anything. I wasn't even sure I wanted justice. Actually, I wanted to go home. God, I wanted to go home.

"Our policeman friend," I said, sipping on tea (God, I hate tea - it always tastes like dead weeds to me), "thinks that someone shot at a cop. That promises lots of people in flak jackets walking these hills tomorrow." I checked my pack. There was no more beef jerky or even tofu. I wouldn't have shared it, anyway.

“A big bunch of cops wandering these hills isn’t going to do any of you any good. You both need something hidden, and people beating the bushes are going to find things. Including kimberlite and petroglyphs.” I paused, while Patrick lit up another pipe, and Samuel lit up another cigar.

“So you’ve got to get rid of the storm troopers from the Provincial Police,” I said. “That’s first thing.

“Then you’ve got to decide what to do about canoes.”

“Canoes?” Kele asked. He shook his long black hair.

“There is one canoe here at Red Lake,” I said, waving my hand towards the darkness and the sound of waves. “It’s not going to hold all five of us in this wind. And there are two canoes back there” - I pointed back towards Thomson Lake “George’s canoe and,” I indicated Ned, “your canoe. Someone’s going to have to go back the other way.”

Kele, at least, nodded. “Is there anything else?”

“Call it an accident, if you want. But if any more accidents happen, you’re not going to be able to hold back the police. As for the rest, well, that’s not up to me.”

There was a lot of movement in the next while, people shuffling around to keep the fire going and to keep warm without being in the path of the smoke. I nodded off, and the others did, one at a time.

Sometime (I had a watch, but didn’t want to look at it) in the night I was adding wood to the fire, drinking tea, and keeping sparks off the sleepers, when I noticed it was getting light and the wind was getting stronger.

Sometimes I fear the wind. Not the way it’s always against me in the canoe, making me bend forward, making paddling a chore. I expect that. Not even the big wind, the way it raises waves on the lake, making me eye the land lovingly, longingly. I know that wind.

I fear, instead, the more intimate wind in the deep of the night, the way it touches my cup as I sit by the fire. It feels inside the pack by the tree, then with transparent fingers tries the tent, not respecting my property or privacy. It touches my cheeks, riffles the hairs left on my head and pushes smoke into my eyes.

Way deep in the dark of the morning, I’m afraid the wind is after my soul.

Samuel saw me looking at the sky. He was down to a stub of a cigar. “Ready?” he asked, getting up. He tossed the stub of his cigar into the fire.

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” I answered.

We stood outside the firelight for a few minutes, letting our eyes adjust to the darkness. It half worked.

Then we stumbled down lichen-slippery rocks to the edge of the inky lake. The wind was still making for noisy shores and a whispering in the treetops. Leaves danced around us as we flipped the canoe upright and set it into the water.

I expected some questions from the three back at the campfire, but there wasn’t a sound as we pulled away. The wind caught us, but we straightened out the canoe. Samuel took the front seat. Two old Hawk Lake Lodge lifejackets and our small packs lay between us, getting splashed every time a paddle caught a wave tip.

## Chapter 14

Half an hour later, an overcast dawn found us partway up Red Lake, paddling steadily into the wind. It was a big canoe, and stable, but the wind made for hard paddling.

We kept close to the shore, which was lined with basalt rocks and driftwood. The odd cardinal flower still surprised with its intense red flower, bright against the black rock. Once I saw a mink, no bigger than a squirrel, nosing among the driftwood looking for crabs and clams. He looked up, then ignored us, paddling into the waves.

These many small lakes sit on a land that's almost as old as the planet. Raised as mountain ranges more than once, the land was finally ground down by time to a knobby plain. Four ice ages left lakes between the hills.

When Europeans got here, many of the lakes had long since become swamps and beaver ponds. When they took the beaver, more lakes became swamps. Then they came for the tall white pines that covered the province, and started building dams to make the swamps back into lakes again. In the winter the lake surface would be covered with pine logs, and in the spring the men would make a hole in the dam and let the water, logs and all, out in a rush. Many of the small lakes still have dams made of boulders at one end.

There were no cottages along Red Lake. Any lake that has road access has a number of cottages, but few of the others do, There was a small hunting cabin along the north shore, but it was empty, awaiting the deer-hunting season.

The phone rang. Samuel set his paddle into the canoe, reached behind him, and hauled the phone out of his pack. I kept paddling, but the canoe stopped moving forward.

"Hello," Samuel said into the phone. "Sure, right here." He turned. "It's for you." He put the phone onto the floor of the canoe behind him, then gave it shove. It slid down the canoe till I could grab it. It must have been a little noisy at the other end of the phone line.

Samuel kept the canoe pointed into the wind as I picked it up.

"Win here," I said. The voice came through against the headset, tinny and far away. I don't know how much of my conversation came through, what with the wind in the mouthpiece. It seemed to be Seth, but I couldn't quite make out what he was saying.

"Hey," I said. "We're out on the middle of Red Lake, and there's quite a headwind. Can you phone back in ten minutes or so? We'll find a place out of the wind." I didn't hear anything more than "okay" before I put the phone under the seat.

At that point Samuel stopped paddling, and we started drifting backwards and sideways. Sideways isn't good; the canoe tends to rock with the waves.

As I worked to get the canoe facing into the wind again, Samuel reached into a jacket pocket and flung a handful of something into the air. They made an arc as the wind caught them, spreading them out as they hit the water. One hit the thwart of the canoe, then rolled down to my feet. I picked it up. It was a .22 cartridge, one of the tiny "long rifle" type, with a soft nose for hunting small game.

Samuel looked at me. I looked at him. I tossed the cartridge into the water. Ned's rifle worried me a lot less after that.

It took more than ten minutes to find a sheltered spot along the shore of the lake, but we got in behind a rock face and Samuel grabbed onto the nearest cedar branch. It had been a hard paddle, and we both stretched as much as we could, then waited for the phone to ring again.

When it did, I found it was, indeed, Seth on the line.

'Where the hell are you," he asked.

"I'm in a canoe on the shore of Red Lake. Samuel's in the canoe with me." Samuel was staring at the rock face.

"Can you talk?" he asked.

"Far as I know," I said. "Red Lake's a more direct way to the lodge," I said, "but there's a lot of portaging." I felt I had to explain that I was coming home, not running away to hide for life somewhere or being hunted like a mad dog. Or whatever.

"Where are the others?"

"Far as I know, Kele and Ned and Patrick went back to Cedar Lake to come back the way you did." The canoe drifted a bit and I leaned forward into a flurry of cedar needles.

"And you're in a canoe with Samuel Small Legs?"

"Yeah," I said. "He paddles pretty good for an old guy."

"Hey," Samuel said, "I'm probably younger than you."

I said into the phone, "He's hanging onto some cedar branches right now, to keep us from drifting back down the lake. I don't know how long he can hang on there."

"Well," said Seth's voice, amid a bit of crackling, "is there anything more about the shots someone fired at us?"

"The other guys think it was probably just rabbit hunters or something like that."

"You don't think so?"

"Pretty flukish to have a bullet get that close to us." I was still kneeling on the bottom of the canoe, and my knees hurt more than my head. "Can I tell you all this when we get back to the lodge?"

"Look," Seth said, "the coroner says George may have burst a blood vessel in his head, so it may have been an accident. If there's nobody out there trying to kill people, then I won't have to call out the forces. I can wait till you get back to the lodge."

"I think you can wait till we get back," I said. "I've been waiting all morning for a float plane full of Special Forces to take me back to the lodge."

"Getting lazy?"

"Paddling upwind is no joy," I said.

"See you at the lodge," Seth said.

I slid the phone back to Samuel. He let go of the cedars and stuffed the phone into his pack as the canoe floated away from the shore.

Wind flows over lake lands like a series of rivers. When a current of wind reaches a lake, it follows the lake, one way or the other. When a west wind meets a lake that runs north-south, it has to decide whether to flow north or south. It's a tough decision. Years of research have taught me that that decision is made entirely dependent on whether or not there is a canoe on the lake. If the canoe is heading north, as we were, the wind will blow from the north.

Just thought you'd want to know.

We reached the narrows at the middle of Red Lake and took a breather out of the wind in behind some trees. We could see whitecap waves crowding into the narrows from the north.

A bit of sun would have helped, but it remained steadily overcast, with dark clouds rolling over us from the west.

"You forgot your lawn chair," I noted. There was no food, but we had a bit of water left.

Samuel, still facing away from me, shook his head. "I figured the place needed a lawn chair."

What could I say? I have a white man's silly notion on maintaining the pristine, natural quality of everything wild while my compatriots rip up the rest. But there are often relics left from previous campers. I've called damnation on people who left trash. I've shaken my head at those who left metal grates. At one site I counted seven rusty metal grates, all obviously taken from fridges or stoves.

But I've never been able to condemn people who leave lawn chairs at campsites. At least, not usable lawn chairs.

The north section of Red Lake wasn't any improvement over the south end, except that it started to rain off and on, and I changed my fantasies from strawberry milkshakes to hot chocolate and warm apple pie. And, of course, those fries at the lodge. I kept my mind on the fries as I counted. Two hundred strokes, take a break, two hundred more strokes, keep my mind on the fries.

Don't let anyone tell you paddling into the wind is worse than a bad portage. Paddling into the wind is probably better than a good portage, and the portage from the north end of Red Lake to Hawk Lake wasn't a good portage.

Most of the lakes are linked with creeks, but these are almost always uncanoeable. In fact, most of these creeks, even if the map uses the word "river", won't float a canoe, let alone a canoe with people in it.

Lining a canoe from one lake to another is possible on bigger rivers - you walk along the shore and float the canoe in the water. A rope keeps you and the canoe together. But even on bigger rivers, this is difficult.

On the smaller creeks that join the lakes, there just isn't enough water. The typical creek is at the bottom of a V-shaped ravine filled with angular black boulders. In dry months, the creek may be ankle deep and as wide as the canoe. But it jags back and forth around each slippery boulder, spreads out in three channels, rejoins, and pours over a tiny dam. All within the length of a canoe.

And the whole channel is littered with the corpses of trees that were carried there in the spring high-water days.

Occasionally, however, the creek enters a marsh at one end of a lake. Then it spreads out among the cattails, and wanders in loops until it gets to the lake. You can take a canoe down one of these sections of creek, using your paddle as a pole, and pushing through the shallow parts.

Normally, though, a portage is the only option. It's a path, of varying visibility, linking one lake to another. Often it parallels the creek. Sometimes it's almost invisible. At other times, in popular areas, it has wide and smooth portions. Just as often, in popular areas, it has sections that are muddy boot-suckers.

You might think that a set of wheels would be a good idea. And you can buy such things: carriers that sling a canoe between two-wheels. Algonquin Provincial Park finally put a ban on wheeled canoe carriers - too many were being abandoned, broken, along the portage trails.

People who enjoy portaging a canoe should be locked up, for their own protection.

Simply getting the canoe up onto your shoulders risks tearing muscles that were never designed for such contortions. After you've managed to get the canoe onto your shoulders, upside down, and braced your legs and contemplated hernia operations, you start off with a bit of enthusiasm that belies memories of previous portages.

That lasts till the first hill.

With your head stuck inside the canoe, your visibility is limited, and you're watching your feet. So it is that you walk into trees occasionally. The first few times this happens, you try to use a variety of explicatives, but eventually you settle down to the same set every time.

When you've got tired and need a rest, you contemplate how difficult it was getting the canoe onto your shoulders, so you go on. Eventually, you start looking for a canoe-leaning branch. That's one you can set the front of the canoe onto. Then you can step out and see if your shoulders will ever move again. When you've rested, you can step back under the canoe without having to pick up the entire canoe.

Unfortunately, you really need a horizontal branch for this, and nature doesn't really like horizontal branches in deep woods. Often, you set the front of the canoe into a notch in a tree and step out from under it. Then the canoe usually twists its way free and rolls onto the ground.

Then you look at it, and say, breathing heavily, “Okay, Samuel, it’s your turn.”

There are light canoes and heavy canoes. Hawk Lake Lodge rents heavy canoes, built wide and stable and solid enough to withstand the abuse of people whose first knowledge of a rock is when they hit it. Even then, the lodge reinforces the front, since many people like to hit the shore at full steam.

That makes for a heavy canoe. Maybe the lodge wants to make sure people don’t portage too far and get lost. People who portage into the interior have learned to bring their own canoes. Lightweight canoes.

So it was with a light heart and shaking legs that I let Samuel take the canoe, while I took the packs, paddles, lifejackets, and legally-required bailing bucket.

I led, warning Samuel about low-hanging branches, slippery slopes, and oozy places where rivulets crossed the path. And I followed the path, which ranged from barely visible to not visible at all. We lost the path a lot, found it a lot. A series of ridges separated Red Lake from Hawk Lake. Steep-sided angles of rock, as hard going down as coming up. Between the ridges water had pooled into swampy soil or had been made into beaver ponds.

In a birch forest we came into a storm of falling yellow leaves. It was nice, while Samuel carried the canoe.

Samuel carried the canoe at least as far as I did, then I took my turn for a couple of eternities, and so we took turns until we eventually reached the shores of Hawk Lake.

I set down the canoe. I looked at Samuel, who was surveying the water. “Say something profound and spiritual, medicine man,” I said.

“Holy fuck, that was a miserable portage,” Samuel said.

We’d come to a bay that required us to paddle downwind a ways, away from the lodge, round a bend, then back upwind. It started to rain, then stopped, and we came in sight of the lodge pushing our way into rolling waves.

“Keep paddling,” I said, digging the phone out of Samuel’s pack. “What’s the number of the lodge?”

I eventually got Pica on the phone and made sure the café at the lodge had the French fry cookers heating up.

We came up to the docks at Hawk Lake Lodge bone-tired. It was early afternoon. Pica, in a yellow rainsuit, met us and helped tie up the canoe. Samuel and I staggered down the docks to the café.

“You want fries?” I asked. Samuel nodded and we ate fries and drank hot chocolate for a while. I like lots of vinegar on my fries, but Samuel is a ketchup man. Vinegar makes my right big toe ache. The doctor calls it “gouty arthritis” whatever that is. Must look it up again someday.

My car was out in the parking lot, so I went out, put the seat back, put on a tape of flute music, and covered my eyes with a folded-up facecloth. I was asleep almost at once.

## Chapter 15

I woke up alone, aching and disoriented. It was raining lightly, but the wind had dropped to almost nothing.

I got out of the car and determined from the moss on the trees, the aches in my bones, and the clock on the dashboard that it was after three in the afternoon. I was still in the parking lot of Hawk Lake Lodge.

There are four Factors of Misery in canoeing. They are rain, wind, cold, and bugs. You can have a good trip in spite of any one of these factors. Sometimes, in spite of two of them, if you're eager, and if they don't last too long. It didn't look like a good day for canoeing. It was chill, it was raining, and the wind was getting up again.

I phoned Aisha.

"No more fries," she said, after I said hello. "Have a toasted bacon and tomato sandwich or something."

I erased fries from my mind. The last bunch was probably sticking themselves to my arteries anyway. "I'll do that," I said.

"I've always been concerned about you paddling alone," she said, "but I'm not sure the company you're keeping lately is any better. Did they find out who killed that guy?"

"Actually," I said, "they might just decide that George died accidentally"

"You don't seem to believe that."

"Can I tell you about it when I get home?"

"You're coming home tonight? I'll have to throw all my boyfriends out."

I did as Aisha suggested, finding someone to cook and then talking her into frying some bacon. It was just as well; Kele paddled George's canoe up to the dock as the toast popped. Ned and Patrick paddled their duct-taped canoe right afterwards. They were wet and cold. And tired. I told the cook to keep the griddle hot - there were customers coming in. The cook, who was very pregnant, wore a shapeless polyester dress with faded palm trees on it. She had a long face with bright blue eyes and straight blond hair tied behind her head. She smiled and nodded, but said nothing.

The three of them came into the café still not fully straightened up from the long paddle. They didn't have much to say to each other, I noticed. Kele looked around, then came over to my table. He looked me in the eye. "I'm cold," he said. I got up and got him a hot chocolate. While I was waiting at the counter, Patrick came up and ordered two bowls of soup. Patrick looked at the hot chocolate and ordered a couple, for himself and Ned. And hamburgers.

I called to Kele, "you want a hamburg?"

"Two," he called back. I ordered two hamburgers for him and a small Pepsi for me, and returned to the table to wait. Ned and Patrick came over and joined us.

"Where's Samuel?" Ned asked, sipping his hot chocolate. Before I could answer, the cook called, and Ned went up to get two bowls of straight-out-of-the can Scotch Broth soup.

When Ned and Patrick were working on their bowls of soup and I was on my Pepsi, I told Ned, "I haven't seen Samuel since we got back. I guess he went to rest, same as I did."

"Rough route?" Kele asked.

"Upwind, of course, and a long portage."

"I've always wanted to try that way," Kele said, "but I heard it was rough."

"Swamp," I said, "and hills and mud, then more of the same. How was your trip back?"

"We got headwind most of the way to Hawk Lake," Ned said, "then the wind stopped and it started to rain."

There was a moment of silent commiseration among fellow canoeists before the cook called that the food was ready. Kele and Patrick got up to get it, and came back with hamburgs for the other three and fries for me. Surprisingly, the phone didn't ring at that moment, so there was a faint hope Aisha might not find out.

There was silence as we ate. Not being social, I looked out at the lake, where a light but steady rain was falling. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught Kele stealing some of my fries.

“Is that the Mounties?” I asked, nodding towards the door that faced the parking lot. When the others had turned, I grabbed Kele’s second hamburg and took a bite out of it.

“Must have been mistaken,” I mumbled when they turned back, still trying to swallow the chunk of Kele’s hamburg. Kele looked at his mutilated burger then went back to eating.

Some women might look at four guys, tired from canoeing, sitting at a plywood table covered with a red-check plastic cover. They might see these guys all rugged and silent huddled over their food and think, “Jeez, wonderful how them guys can sit there in almost total silence and male-bond like that.”

It certainly wasn’t true in this case. I took my mind as far as I could get from that table, recalling quiet summer nights beside small lakes bright with starshine and the sparks from my campfire rising into the velvet sky. Alone.

And curling up to sleep inside my little tent, wondering if it would rain the next morning so I could get some pictures.

Outside the window, a big Toyota sport-utility with provincial-police markings backed up towards the dock. Two cops in yellow rain gear got out. One went to the dock, while the other came up to the lodge.

“Hi,” Seth said, looking around. “Anyone want to tell me which canoe was George’s?”

Kele got up, put on the wet jacket that he’d had over the back of his chair, and went out with Seth.

“I’ll go see if I can help,” I said abruptly.

I watched as Seth, Kele, and the other cop loaded the canoe onto the Toyota, then tied it down. I supposed it was going to be tested somewhere, for an inquest or whatever, but nobody bothered to tell me anything, and a few minutes later the police drove off and Kele headed up towards the cabins. Alone by the dock, I watched the rain dapple the gray lake waters, and had no desire to take a picture.

I headed back to my car.

My car was where I left it. I got in.

“Hi,” said Pica from the passenger seat.

“Jesus suffering Christ almighty!” I commented.

“Nope,” she said, “just me. You’ll get to Jesus in your own time, I suppose.” She looked at me, tilted her head, and said, “It doesn’t look like you’ve been finding Jesus out in the bush.”

“I’m going home,” I said, staring ahead through the rain-soaked windshield. “I’m tired and I want to go home to my wife.” The inside of the window was foggier than my brain.

“You want salvation first.”

“Pardon?” I started the car, and turned on the heater.

“There’s something about you that says you camped in Eden one night and found it full of snakes.”

“Are you going to get out?”

“You can’t run away from your problems.”

“I was planning on driving.” I leaned back against the seat and watched the fog clear away from the inside of the window. “If I drive fast enough, maybe I can outrun a few cliches.”

“George is dead. His problems are over. Yours are going to fester in your brain. What are you going to do, pour alcohol on them?”

“Got any more of those preserved apricots?”

“Won’t work.”

“What the fuck do you know?” I raised my voice a couple of decibels.

“Ooo. Bad language and volume. Does that work most of the time?”

“Not lately. Not enough. Why don’t you go off and diddle the cop while I go home and make some popcorn and put my feet up?”

“I’ll diddle anybody I want to diddle. But Seth’s just a friend. I ride around in his cop car and he tells me about his wife and his ex-career. I told him to tell anybody who asked that I give him blow jobs while he drives. Did he tell you that?”

I said nothing, which was probably the wisest choice under the circumstances.

“He had a breakdown, you know,” Pica said. “A couple of weeks in the funny farm even. You know why? Because he really believed he could do something good for this planet. He’d be better and smarter and wiser than anybody on the police force. He’d know he slaughtered a few dragons and saved a few princesses. He’d be one of the good ones. It’s a chronic problem with men, you know. Now he just wants to avoid stress of any kind.”

“Young woman, I greatly fear you do not always speak the truth.”

“Finally, you’re catching on. Like Seth and all men, you’re waving your rusty sword against the universe of mistruth, aren’t you? Do you carry old poems from lost loves in your wallet, too? Do you cry in the night over lost lovers and empty bottles? I heard they’re likely to say George died by accident.”

“You think so?” I shifted in my seat.

“You don’t.” Pica turned to stare out the side window towards the lodge. “I can tell you don’t.”

“Maybe I can just tell Seth, and he’ll go out and arrest somebody.”

“Not likely,” Pica said.

“Oh?” I got a bag of peanuts that Aisha didn’t know about. I turned down the heater a bit: it was getting hot in the car.

“He’s still afraid I somehow fired those shots,” she said.

“Did you?”

“Sure,” she said. “I found the poor shepherd who’d stolen the rifle, drowned him and his flock in the lake, and popped off a few shots at Kele.”

“But Seth might look good if he solves a murder.”

“If there was a murder. If not, he’d better not say so. Otherwise, he’s liable to be posted up north guarding the railway to Moose Factory while his wife gets the house.”

“That would be a problem.”

It would. He was very good at his job, top of his class, when he popped that boy in Toronto.”

“What can I do? No.” I had had enough. “Out.”

“Call me sometime,” Pica said. “You’ll need to know things sooner or later. And I have the answers. Like maybe, where Bob’s been the last few days.” She got out, smiled brightly, and left.

I drove out of the lodge parking lot faster than I should have, but slowed down on the long, slippery road to the highway. It was getting late, and Aisha would be wondering where I was.

# Chapter 16

Aisha was glad to see me. I could tell. She said, “What? Tired of sleeping on rocks or something?”

But she gave me a big hug and a passionate kiss, and didn’t ask me a thing. She got me out of my clothes, led me to my recliner, and set a cup beside me. Into it she poured a large whallop of Jamieson’s Irish Whisky. Then she put a fire on in the fireplace, cooked me a massive steak, and handed me the remote control for the TV. “I recommend you become mindless,” she suggested.

It suited me. I did, naked as a jaybird in that hot room, sipping whiskey and flipping channels while Aisha read a book. When I was done the steak, she brought me a bowl of chocolate ice cream, and a large pitcher of water.

I woke up the next morning beside Aisha. I had the requisite headache. I have a tendency to get depressed when life overwhelms me, and there’s a strange link between a nasty headache and a nasty case of the blues; I can’t be depressed when I’ve got a headache. Don’t ask me why.

“You poisoned me,” I mumbled to my wife.

“I could have given you soy spaghetti with tomato sauce and tofuballs,” she said. “And a nice glass of organic apple juice. Your pills are on the table.”

After breakfast, we went for a walk along the river to the grocery store. While we walked and looked at the ducks, I told her the whole story. Actually, Lakefield’s not that big, so we had to go around the block a few times, dragging an empty two-wheel grocery cart.

“So you think the geobuddies offed George for a diamond mine,” Aisha said, as we approached the IGA grocery for the fourth time.

“Makes the most sense to me,” I offered, “and you told me to watch out for those two.”

“Oh, you’re probably right, but you don’t know for sure.” She kicked at a pile of maple leaves on the sidewalk. “And that’s going to bother you.”

“Hercule Poirot I am not.”

“It won’t matter. It’ll bother you.” She held open the glass door to the grocery. “And that’ll bother me.”

She was right. I thought about going back to some lake and taking another picture, and it just didn’t seem worthwhile. I had bins full of great negatives and drawers of great prints. But not many sales. If anyone wanted a print of a the wilderness in the rain, I already had more than a lifetime’s worth.

Then I thought about putting a new cedar gunwale on the canoe, and decided, what the hell, it would last for another season. Or maybe I could do it in spring when I had more ambition.

Then I thought about putting some more apples into the shopping cart, and I decided I didn’t really want any more apples. I’d probably eaten a lifetime’s worth already.

Then I tried to think of something that was actually worth doing, or maybe a distraction, like visiting somebody or renting a movie. And I couldn’t name a friend I actually wanted to see or a movie that didn’t promise to annoy me.

By that time, Aisha had cornered the store’s supply of acorn squash, and most of their tofu.

Aisha was silent as we walked home.

She served me some mysterious soup with mysterious chunks in it. Some chunks wiggled when I pushed at them, some didn’t. It helped my stomach a bit, and I took another couple of codeine pills for my head.

I wandered down to the basement, but there didn’t seem to be anything worth doing there. All my projects promised discouragement rather than inspiration.

For a while I stared out the big patio doors to the backyard. But the idea of raking leaves didn't appeal to me. I sighed a few times and tried to decide what to do next.

Aisha appeared beside me, and I found myself raking leaves after all. We have two large maples in our back yard, and they drop lots of leaves onto the ground, the patio, the goldfish pond, and my canoes.

The more I raked, the more fresh air I breathed, the more my circulation improved, and the grumpier I got. By the time I'd hauled my fourth wheelbarrow load to the leaf pile in the back, I was planning on chainsawing both trees. But if I didn't clear out the leaves, the grass would die. I thought of paving the whole back yard.

Eventually, I checked my watch. It was almost noon. I leaned the rake against the garage and took off downtown before Aisha could see me.

I bought a copy of the Globe. The fish and chip shop was open. I ordered a large plate of pickerel and chips, and sat in the most remote corner of that tiny shop, hoping nobody would talk to me. I didn't want to make eye contact with anybody, so I scowled at the walls, and tried to read the paper.

There was nothing in the paper. Same old news, recycled. I divided the paper into two categories, "that's not news" and "who cares". All that was left was the margins and the comics, which weren't funny.

I started on the crossword, but suddenly I thought, what am I doing this for, and put it away.

After I'd finished the fish, the fries didn't appeal as much. But I ate them anyway, out of spite for life or something.

I became aware of someone standing beside me. I looked up; it was the cook.

"Your wife called," he said. "She said she's made an appointment for you to talk to Bob." He hesitated. "Whatever that means." He shrugged, and went back to the fryer.

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"You what?"

Aisha continued to stir whatever was in the slow cooker. "I called the lodge. Bob the Brit is still there."

"Why would I want to talk to him, for God's sake?"

"Because you're bothered by this thing. And you're going to eat yourself into a quintuple bypass if you don't do something."

"And I'm supposed to talk to Bob? What the heck does he have to do with this thing?" I refused to sit down.

"You've got to talk this out. You've got to answer a few questions and be sure about a few things." She turned to me. "Let's start with Bob."

"You think he might have killed George?"

"Not likely. He did have a fight with George, you said, and he was missing when George died. So there are some questions he can answer."

"And," I said, "we don't know where he was when the shooting started."

"Now you're getting it," Aisha said.

"You really think this is going to help me?"

"Oh, I don't know. But you're either going to have to go to the police about the spirit drawings and the diamond ore or else you're going to have to suppress it. You know that. You can't tell the police you think someone killed George unless you tell them why someone would want to kill George." Aisha added a few chunks of something yellow to the mix.

I took a chair, sighing. She'd got to the point, as usual. I couldn't stand the thought of no one looking into George's death. But I really hated to bring out the whole story. I didn't want anyone controlling that country,

but if I had to choose, I'd have preferred to have the Indians control the petroglyphs. Diamonds (if there were any in that lake) might help the economy, but they're basically rather useless items to rip open a country for.

And that was a nice hill. I liked the view.

But if the facts about the diamond ore and the petroglyphs became known, who might know where it would end? The only real loser would be the solitude. That was the only real certainty.

On the other hand, if I suppressed the whole story, I wouldn't be responsible for what eventually happened. But I might be helping hide a deliberate killing.

On some other hand, George hadn't long to live anyway. And he'd have wanted the land without mining roads built into it.

Then again, on the other hand, someone was certain to build a road to the petroglyphs anyway. Maybe a smaller road, but still a road.

Like a good economist, I'd run out of hands long ago. My head still hurt. Aisha was right; I had to do something, however senseless.

## Chapter 17

"It's a crock of shit," Bob said, then picked up a menu and said, "but it's your shout," and sat down.

We'd met in a small restaurant in Fenelon Falls. "Had enough of the lodge for now," he said.

"What's a crock of shit?" I wanted to know.

"Whatever this do is about."

"Have you ever camped alone?" I asked.

"What?"

"Have you ever camped alone?"

"I've camped on my own tod all the time. Even with all sorts in the same tent."

"That's not what I meant. I meant by yourself, with nobody else for miles."

"I could use a cigarette." He had a bowl of chili in front of him. I had a pot of tea and a piece of toast and had not ordered fries.

I waited.

"Yes," he said. He thought. "Three - no - four times, all in the last year." He added pepper to the chili. "Not counting the time I did a bunk from the rest of the bad 'uns on the penitentiary camping trip and they spent the night looking for me. But sure, four times."

"There are noises," I said, "in the night that you don't hear during the day."

Bob said nothing, so I went on. "After you've dismissed every creature in the woods, you've got to conclude that either something has wandered in from the Galapagos, something has survived from the cretaceous, or some creatures from a UFO are singing in Arcturan."

"I got maybe an hour's kip that first night," Bob said.

I nodded. "About the same. And it's completely different if someone's with you. Anyone, however helpless, and I can sleep like a baby."

“One sound I heard was like something was tearing small trees up, stuffing them up its nostrils, and choking on them.” He laughed. “I expected to ‘ave a bear chipping it from my tent. I didn’t ‘alf use up my torch batteries on that one, and didn’t find nowt.”

“You never find anything.” I scowled at the toast, then ripped open a peanut butter cartridge and spread it on.

“I ‘ear you got shot at.” Bob reached for a spoon for the chili. He was wearing a plaid shirt, a plaid jacket, and very clean jeans, as well as a tractor hat with a wolf logo.

“Official word is that it was a rabbit hunter being careless.”

“Official word,” said Bob, “is that the gormless bastard popped ‘is clogs by falling in his bloody canoe.”

“You don’t believe that?”

“Beats me, but I have a feeling someone might have cock-‘anded the fratchy bastard with a paddle.”

I raised my eyebrows.

“No,” he said. “Not me. If I want to get at you, I’ll fist you. If I want to be serious, I don’t faff about; I use a knife.” He stared me straight in the eye. “I’m not a gun person, and I sure as bloody ‘ell would never ‘it anyone with anything but my fists. Don’t need to, ever.”

“Gotcha.”

“You doing this for the old Bill?”

I raised my eyebrows. This one missed me.

“For the cops?”

“Just for myself.”

“Why?”

“Bothers me.” I scratched at my head.

“You ever find George’s paddle?”

“Pardon?”

“George was a tall yob. ‘e always took ‘is own paddle. Same as the others, but longer. I checked - it never came back to the lodge.”

I thought about it. “There was a paddle in the water, but it wasn’t any longer than any of the others.”

“Well, they’d ‘ave taken a spare paddle, so it wants finding.”

“You’re thinking one that might have blood stains on it?”

“That’s right. But come to that, it’s dead easy to ‘ide a paddle in the bush.” Or burn it.”

“When I came to that first portage camp, where Ned and Patrick were,” I told him, “they had a fire going in the middle of the afternoon. It seemed strange to me at the time.”

“Still think I’m trying to pull a stroke on you?” Bob finished the chili.

“Nope. But what did Belinda mean she said, ‘I could tell them where you were yesterday’?”

“We’d ‘ad a right barney. I’d slung my ‘hook. I was gone ‘alf the day. I guess she figured I’d ‘iked over the ’ills some way and offed the nutter.”

“You didn’t like him?”

“Toffee-nosed asshole. I don’t know if I could have ‘iked over the ‘ills and beat the crap out of ‘im. It’s not ‘alf rough country from the look. Even if I’d known where ‘e was, which I didn’t.”

“You couldn’t have. We checked. Just too far”

‘So now what?”

“I don’t know,” I told him.

“Do you ‘ave any idea why anybody, especially the two who ‘ired him as a guide, would want to scrag ‘im? Although it seemed to me they could shift for themselves dead easy.”

I hesitated. “I’m not sure it deserves to be told.”

“A wink’s as good as a nod to me.”

So I told him about the petroglyphs and the ore body. And the land claim. For some reason I wanted to be free of the whole thing. Nobody had sworn me to secrecy, and I liked the feeling of being free of the burden. It occurred to me again that it would have been to someone’s advantage if I died before I told anybody. So I told people.

“You think the Indians ‘ave their feet under the table with the geologist?”

“Or they’re going to have a duel over it.”

“Well,” he said. “To say fair, if I was a geologist and ‘ad a lot of mining friends, I’d know where to get a few sticks of dynamite that fell off the back of a truck.”

“Dynamite?”

“If those Indian drawings disappear, a lot of someone’s problems would get solved.”

“Holy shit,” I said, “I never thought of that.”

“Yeah,” Bob said. “Holy shit.”

“I talked with Bob,” I told Kele.

“And just what did Bob have to tell you? Where he was when people were shooting at us?”

“Well, not that, but I can’t see a city kid skulking through the woods for miles, stealing people’s guns from them and disappearing like that.”

“Gotta agree with that one. Any word from his redheaded girlfriend?”

“Belinda? No, I didn’t ask about her.”

Kele squinted over his coffee. We were at a Tim Horton’s donut shop in Peterborough, where we’d met by agreement. I couldn’t get over the number of people anxious to get away from the woods and into the towns and cities. He was wearing a big leather cowboy hat and a brown leather jacket. “Did you miss all the important things?”

“Speaking of important things, has anybody decided what to do about the big problem on that hill?”

Kele picked up a chocolate donut. “Samuel’s working on it.” He looked out the window, where a constant stream of cigarette-smoking drivers waited in line for the take-out window. Since municipal law had made smoking indoors illegal, the drive-through windows had got really busy.

“What would be the ideal solution?”

“A car accident with Ned and Patrick and a transport carrying concrete. That would give us more time.” He smiled. “I’m not serious, of course.”

“Well,” I said, “it seems to me that the best compromise from your point of view - the First Nations, I mean - is that you get the land because of the petroglyphs. Then, a few years later, Ned and Patrick get to do some mining, under contract with the band.”

“That’s been mentioned. In fact it’s more or less what came up at the campfire while you were snoring.”

“Bob suggested a solution from the geobuddies’ point of view.”

“You and me and Samuel all have a traffic accident?” Kele sipped from his cup. The coffee, it seemed, stayed hot quite a while.

“The Brit’s got a devious mind. He suggested the petroglyphs might have an accident.”

Kele sat up. “Like?”

“Like maybe geologists have access to explosives and rock-smashing stuff.”

Kele pondered that one for a long, long time. He looked out the window, where a blonde with a bright red coat was fighting the wind to open the door. He went to the counter and bought six donuts, a chocolate-chip cookie, and a coffee.

"I have a question for you," I said, when his mouth was full.

"Mmmph?"

"You couldn't have shot at us, because you were with us. Pica couldn't have stolen the rifle, because she was with Seth and me."

"Mmmm."

"But you could have stolen the rifle, passed it to Pica, and let her do the shooting."

He ate in silence, his brows furrowed. He pushed the plate of donuts closer to me, and I took a honey-glazed.

"Why?" he asked.

"To keep people away from the hill." I took a maple donut, put it on top of the honey-glazed, and discovered, with a bit of a stretch, that I could eat both at once.

"But I didn't know anything about the site at the time."

"So you say."

"Mmmmm."

"Or,' I said, "Samuel could have been involved. Or both of you."

"Ah. Of course. There's a secret society at the lodge and Samuel and Pica and I are the leaders. Our mission is to protect the Great Secret."

"It seems a bit unlikely," I said. "After all, Samuel told me. And I've spread the word around."

"If there's a chance those bastards have dynamite, then perhaps it's time to spread the word a bit."

"You could lose on this thing." I could still see a large mining operation in the area, with a tiny space fenced off around the petroglyphs. Or perhaps someone would pry them loose and take them to a museum to protect them.

"It might be time to go public." Kele was in thought. "I should phone Samuel."

"Samuel's the boss?"

Kele shrugged. "He's the one that found the carvings, at least for our side. He gets input."

"Not that I care," I said. "Whoever gets that stretch of woods is going to make it off-limits to this photographer."

"We could adopt you into the tribe. Give you a real name, like Dodges the Bullet, or something."

"Unless it comes with tax breaks, I think I'll pass."

"So what are we going to do?" Kele asked, eyeing the last donut.

I broke the donut in half. "Like you said, let's phone Samuel."

I sat in my car while Kele talked on the phone for a long time. I watched the cars come and go. Canadians have more donut shops per capita than anybody else in the world. It's facts like that that made me give up economics for photography. When he came out, he looked cold. "It's only September," I told him. "Just wait till winter comes."

"When winter comes, I'll dress warmer. Anyway, there's supposed to be a warm front coming in tonight." He turned up the car heater.

"As long as you didn't get that from the CBC," I said. The CBC, the national broadcaster, has weather forecasts that are at variance with everybody else. I think they take the forecasts that come in, crank the paper one turn to the left, then try to read it.

"Weather channel."

"I guess that'll do. So what did you and Samuel decide?"

"We're going to announce the discovery of the petroglyphs, then try to set up some sort of camp on them. Maybe get a bunch of people to hold a ceremony and invite the press. Until that happens, we'll go guard the place."

"You and Samuel?"

"You and me."

I thought about it. "Try again, bucko."

"Well, I'm going, and I thought you might want to share the action."

"I could race motorcycles," I said, "but I take pictures of quiet waters. I could climb mountains, but I take pictures of quiet waters in the rain." I paused to turn the car's heat back down. "Are you getting the basic idea?

"I'm going out there by myself, then. Samuel's got a lot of organizing to do, and someone has to be on that rock pretty soon."

I thought about it. "It would be better if you got some other Indians, I think." I could see the first high clouds from the coming front. There would be rain, I thought, but warmer weather.

"I'm not all that popular on the rez. There are a couple of guys that might come, but…."

"But?"

"We don't want this to look like an occupation or something. That just brings out the opposition."

"You need a token white guy."

"That's right." Kele scratched his head.

"Then you occupy the place."

"Would be nice if it weren't all renegade natives, you know."

I knew. "Let me talk to Aisha, first."

He got up to get out of my car. "I'll phone you at home."

"I'd like you to drop by in an hour or so. Aisha'll want to meet the guy who wants to have her husband go out and face bullets and dynamite." I handed him a business card.

He nodded, and left for his car.

I sat in the parking lot and thought about the whole thing a lot. I didn't like any of my options, and thought that I was being manipulated by somebody or maybe life itself.

I drove home in a sudden and heavy rain that pulled the dead leaves off the trees and onto the streets like last year's hopes.

Aisha was a little concerned. "Personally," she said, "I've always thought that camping alone was pushing your luck a bit." She passed me an apple, which I had to eat so she wouldn't know how many donuts I'd had. "And I've always thought you would be safer with someone along with you," she went on. "But gun-toting dynamite chuckers might not be as good for you, if you get my drift. On the other hand, if you eat any more donuts, it won't matter much who else is after you."

"I don't have to get involved," I noted.

"Someone has to get involved. Those petroglyphs are irreplaceable. I'd go myself, if I could."

"Listen," I said. "There's no evidence whatsoever that anyone's going to blow up anything. That was just Bob's speculation. Nothing more."

"You'll need enough food for a week," Aisha said.

The doorbell rang. Aisha let Kele in.

We sat around the kitchen table and talked strategy over herbal tea and tofu-and-zucchini muffins. I don't like muffins. Muffins are woman food. Take my word for it. But Kele said they were great.

"Interesting mug," Kele said of the cup Aisha served the tea in. So she told him where she'd got it and introduced him to the rest of her mug hoard. Aisha doesn't collect mugs; she just takes a fancy to them when she sees them, for reasons unknown to me. Most are just brightly coloured but some have bizarre shapes like a moose or a dozen centipedes having an orgy or something.

We've got so many mugs the cups and glasses finally had to be stored in the attic, carefully packed in boxes against the time, perhaps, when she'd lose her fascination with mugs or I would remarry or something. The windows are full of tiny plants desperately trying to survive in mugs with cracks or missing handles.

We agreed that a week would give Samuel time enough to arrange a sit-in. And that we wouldn't inform the police, in case they stopped the sit-in. We'd leave it to Samuel to inform the media.

"One more thing," I said. Into the silence, I added, "I'm going to call Bob."

## Chapter 18

"This is not the stupidest thing I've ever done. But it must be close." Bob threw another pack into his canoe. "I need my head felt."

"Win said the same thing,"

"And I was right," I said. "My only hope is that we'll stay far apart, since we're all basically loners. Or so it seems."

We were taking two canoes. Kele and I were in one canoe, a large but relatively lightweight one I'd rented. Bob insisted on going alone. He took most of the gear we figured we'd need, tents, sleeping gear, and food. As far as I knew, none of us had a gun. I'd tried to borrow one, a shotgun, but nobody would lend me one, not in this country with its gun laws. Then Aisha found out and I figured it would be safer without a gun.

But I hoped that Kele had one. Bob probably had only his knife. I figured he wouldn't be long without one, and that he'd got a dandy at the hardware store somewhere. But I didn't figure he'd faced many guns in the rabbit warrens of Manchester, so a knife didn't comfort me at all.

What can I say? We took the short route through Red Lake and the Portage From Hell. We took turns carrying the canoes and the goods and the stuff we probably wouldn't need and the stuff we probably needed more of. We marked the best routes as we found them, so Samuel's people could follow, using red ribbon on the tree trunks.

I've done stupid things before, but I usually didn't know until I was in the middle of them.

But it was warm. The light rain ceased as we started the portage, then a south wind came up as we headed south on Red Lake, so, as usual, we paddled upwind. Bob, with the tubbier canoe and most of the camping gear, did surprisingly well in keeping up with Kele and me.

What's to be gained by wandering in the wilderness with people you barely know? Beats me. I couldn't see any benefit to myself from the expedition, and I guess I showed it at first in my attitude. Oh, I was helpful enough, and made a few funny jokes. But my heart wasn't in it. I wanted to be back in Aisha's arms, watching TV and eating toast and peanut butter.

That lasted till we got out on the water. The sun came out and a warm south wind made the autumn leaves dance. Somehow, the whole thing seemed…. right.

Bob was unusually cheerful. I guess he needed something to do. Kele was, well, efficient, like he'd finally found his opportunity to get the approval of the right half of his ancestors.

Not that we were any more than guys on an adventure. We hadn't the slightest evidence that Ned and Patrick or anyone else was going to do anything to anything. When we left the lodge we were the only ones on the water, and there was no sign in the parking lot of any car that they might drive.

Nonetheless, we left our women (not that Bob, as far as I could tell, had a woman to leave anymore) and loaded up canoes and paddled off into the wilderness like the lost boys returning to neverland.

Unshaven (I have a beard because I can't stand shaving) and wearing an assembly of light jackets and hats, we arrived at the south end of Red Lake, scouted it for signs of activity, and disembarked. On the flat space near the portage, Samuel's lawn chair stood, folded up, against a small maple with intensely-scarlet leaves. The ashes of the all-night fire were wet with the recent rains.

I snapped off a lone milkweed plant along the shore, then blew its seeds into the air. A stray air current lifted some into the trees. I'd started my trip with a plan, and had started every part of this last week with a plan, and now here I was, supposedly by plan again. But I wondered how much I was like the milkweed seed, drifting in unseen currents.

We left the canoes up away from the shore, upside down, with the paddles and lifejackets under them. Shouldering the packs, we started up. I've been camping with people who like people, groups of guys that like each other and really get off on doing guy things. That, I can't stand, and it makes me utterly and devastatingly depressed.

But Bob and Kele were loners, like me. They had an instinctive sense of respect for the private mental and physical spaces around each of us, defending their own and taking care not to intrude on anybody else's. Many opinions were offered, but responses were never requested, except for the necessities of the trip - "Can you carry that pack, or should I take it?" Even questions like, "Isn't that tree pretty?" imposes on another person, and were not asked. Rather, Bob looked at the bright maple, said "Spot on," and turned away to pick up a pack.

So we went up the hill, packs on our backs and camp goods under our arms.

We'd carry the stuff a ways, then go back for more stuff. Westerners aren't particularly good at living without "stuff" nor willing to go without comfort.

We'd dumped the last load onto a flattish area at the site, and were just starting to unpack when the phone rang. Three guys looked at each other, looked at the packs, then Bob handed me my small pack. "Phone's for you, I think."

I dug into the pack, pulled out the phone, and inspected it. Taped to the cover were the words in Aisha's handwriting, "Unfold, then press ON then SPEED then 2". I did.

"Glad you figured it out," Aisha's voice came through the tiny speaker. "Anybody shot you yet?"

"Nobody's shot me yet," I said, letting the others in on the conversation as much as I could. "We've just arrived."

"First things first," she said. "See if you can find a petroglyph that hasn't been found yet."

I walked over to the mossy area, waving the others to come. "Want to find a drawing that hasn't been found before." I reached down and lifted a piece of moss. Nothing.

"Got one here," Bob said.

"Bob found one," I told the phone.

"Check it," Aisha said.

"For what?"

"To make sure it wasn't made last week," she said. "We've got to be sure of that."

"She wants to make sure it's not a fake," to told the others. I put the phone into my shirt pocket and leaned over to inspect the rock. The phone fell out, and I put it back into my pocket. It fell out again, so I handed it to Kele. "Hello," he said into the mouthpiece. "This is Win's secretary. Mr. Szczedziwoj is busy at the moment, but your call is appreciated."

I picked at the moss. I inspected the drawing under it. I reached for the phone. "Hi," I said.

"Have you got a good grip on the phone this time?"

"Like you wouldn't believe," I said. "The wind is light, the oak leaves are waving at me, and there's a blue patch in the sky."

"And the carvings?"

"The carvings, as far as I can tell, are genuine. The moss on the one I'm looking at was stuck to a picture of something or other. And there's a corner of the carving exposed, and it's got lichen on it." Both of us knew that lichen takes decades to grow.

"Well, then, that's one question down. I've called a reporter at The Review."

"You've called a reporter?" I looked up. Kele and Bob stared at me.

"Yup. Told them about the petroglyphs and that there would be a sit-in at the site."

"Someone will be coming out here? What about Samuel and his group?"

"Samuel, it appears, is having trouble getting a vast mob of people. Seems he's on a minority side in a long-standing political debate back on the rez. Even those who like him are hesitant to actually stand up and say so. But he might get a few people. Just not right away."

"So as far as the paper knows, there are three guys out here camped on a rock painting, probably drinking beer and thinking they've discovered the meaning of life?"

"That's about it. I think the paper's planning on waiting till you come out and sending down a cub reporter to interview you, if she gets her car going."

"No helicopter?"

"Nope."

"No United Nations delegations?"

"Doesn't look like it."

"Shit."

"Hang in there. I've got a couple of plans to raise the profile of this thing to new heights."

"Now what if nobody shows up with dynamite?" I walked in circles.

"Count yourself lucky. You guys made that up anyway. Take lots of pictures."

Then Kele phoned Samuel. While they talked, Bob and I scrambled down the hillside. I showed him the green rock outcropping.

"You're sure this is kimberlite?" Bob asked.

"I can't tell one rock from another, but Ned's a geologist, and he seems to think so. Close enough to be dangerous, I guess."

"And there's no way to have a go at it and still 'ave the Indian carvings 'ome and dry?" Bob looked up the hill, then out across the small, swamp-ringed lake.

"Far as I understand, you'd have to pump the lake out, and bring in heavy equipment. That would mean a substantial road. Then you'd have to build a road to haul the ore out, unless you wanted to build a sorting plant right here. Not that I know much about it - that's just the impression I got."

Bob found himself an uncomfortable seat on a rock. “I wonder ‘ow much it’s worth?”

“Aisha says millions just on speculation. Lots more if there actually are diamonds in the ore.”

“When do we start skragging each other over it?” Bob kicked at a piece of deadwood. It broke loose and he tumbled down, just saving himself a dunking by grabbing onto a cedar.

“Aren’t we supposed to dig out a few pounds of jewels first?” I’d seen the movie.

“Not nowadays. We’re all in an ‘urry.”

“Well, who gets to go first?”

“Not me. I don’t want to do that portage alone.” Bob started back up the hill.

Kele had most of the camping stuff spread out when we got back up.

“We can expect a stampede of redskins on pinto ponies?” I asked.

“Samuel thinks he’s got three guys. But they won’t be able to start till next week.”

“Could be a long week.” Bob turned away to shuffle his feet. But he didn’t sound overly bothered. “We’ll marking each other’s cars after a few days, no danger.”

“Maybe we’ll be lucky and someone will blow us all to sawdust in a couple of days.”

“I suppose there’s that to look forward to. I’m going to put my tent up now. I’ll make some tea later.” I felt it best to announce what I was going to do. It’s best. Otherwise, everybody’s running on a different agenda, and is convinced the others are stupid, lazy slackers, when all they’re trying to do is make supper before putting the tent up or something.

Actually, we all put up small tents. Kele’s was just a plastic tarp strung over a line tied to two trees. That made sense - there’d be no bugs out at this time of year.

Tents used in Canadian canoeing must be bug-proof. About the time the weather warms up enough, even in this southern part of Canada, the bugs come out. About the time the first leaves appear on the bushes, in the middle of May, the blackflies hatch out of their creekbed homes.

These look like very tiny houseflies. In other parts of the world, they spread river blindness and other parasitic diseases. In Canada, they seem to be disease-free, unless you count being driven nuts as a disease. They go for the eyes, ears, and wrists as their first choice. I guess those are the weak areas on a moose or something, and they’re programmed to start there. For every biting female, there are eight males waiting around for sex.

The effect of blackflies is of a cloud of tiny black dots in front of your face, and bugs crawling into your neck and wrist areas and biting. They take tiny little bites out of you. Aisha finds a blackfly bite itches for a week, but they don’t’ affect me much. Insect repellent helps quite a bit, and people in desperate times wear bug-proof clothes and a net over the head. I hate the nets: it makes the world outside seem like something seen through an aging TV screen.

Some biologists think blackflies are the reason the caribou of the Northwest Territories migrate to the woodlands in the summer and American tourists stay out of Canada in June.

In June the mosquitoes, first of several varieties, hatch from the standing water, puddles, and swamps. Lately a few have been carrying something called the West Nile virus, but generally, like the blackflies, they’re just a nuisance. Unlike blackflies, they can stick their bloodsucking tubes through light clothing.

By the first of July the blackflies are mostly gone in this part of the world, and there are few mosquitoes. This leaves only the horseflies, mooseflies, deerflies, and no-see-ums to bother you. The deerflies are a nuisance in August, when the others are mostly gone. The deerflies circle you, seemingly endlessly, while you walk in open areas. Then, when you’re not looking, one will pounce, looking for the underside of an elbow or knee, or the back of your head. They take chunks out of your skin.

In the fall, however, the bugs are pretty well gone here. Further north, bug season lasts until the freeze-up. There, you can be bitten while getting snow in your hair.

So I was admiring Kele's simple tarp, and wishing I'd thought to do the same.

We lit a fire on a stretch of bare rock, and discussed priorities while we took turns cooking supper. I used a camp stove, a lightweight white-gas unit that hissed out a hot flame, with a cast-iron Paavo-pan. Kele and Bob heated a couple of pots over an open fire.

Then we spent a couple of hours gathering enough wood for the fire for the night.

Autumn can be such a fine season, if it's not too cold. But darkness comes soon, and the evenings can be long. There are hours to put in between dusk and the sensible time to go to sleep, and not a lot to do in those hours. If you've got some talkers and some listeners, you can have a talkfest. But none of us were big talkers, and there was no booze out, so the night went pretty slowly.

The dusk came in as I ate my steak and mushrooms. I always take something frozen for the first night's meal. By the time I get to the evening meal, it's usually thawed, and I know the following meals will be made from dried packages and local water, so I enjoy it that much more.

Kele and Bob had dried food, and I think they envied me my he-man steak.

We took the food and sat on the rock by the edge of the hill. The shadows were long and the sky turning violet as we sat in silence and watched. A trio of turkey vultures circled the landscape for a few moments, staying below the rim of the hill, and coming quite close to us on the turn.

I saw lilac colors in the northern sky as the darkness increased, and my mind went back to lilac bushes I'd played in when I was young. Then, suddenly, there were too many years gone and too few to go, and I wanted to be home holding my wife. Or maybe I could use a bottle of Skyy vodka and a Pepsi mixer and the hell with all my tomorrows, hangovers and all. What the hell was I doing out in the bush at my age, I wondered, running away from old age? I looked at Kele and Bob and would have killed them for their youth, if I could have found a way to take it.

Where were all the years of teaching economics at the university? The students had forgotten most of it, and the rest had changed. Now I camped beside remote little lakes while the rain beat on my tent and denied the reasons I was there.

What was I doing here with these kids, I thought. I should be at home in a rocking chair with a blanket and a good book.

"Gonna get chilly tonight," Kele said.

"If you think I'm coming over to snog you, you'd better think again," Bob said.

"Maybe I can find a lonesome bear or something."

"Put out salt. You can end up with a bed full of porcupines."

"Would be friendlier that some girls I've snuggled up to."

From sundown till sometime just after nine we sat around the fire making small talk. There were no stars and only a fuzzy glow where the moon hid behind clouds. I wanted a drink about as much as I wanted oxygen at that point, but nobody had brought any booze, so we contemplated our silences and the various bird sounds in the trees.

At nine Bob and I went to our respective tents, while Kele took Bob's watch with the luminous dial and took first watch.

I'd like to say that we approached this as a military operation or something, but that wouldn't be true. We approached it like boys guarding a treehouse. With only the smallest likelihood that anybody would actually come to the campsite, and an even smaller likelihood that anyone would try it by night, standing watches

seemed a bit foolish. But we all, I think, felt better about it with someone on guard. For my part, I figured I wouldn't sleep as well without someone awake out there.

Even then, it took me forever to get to sleep. I could hear Kele moving around from time to time, and the creak of the lawn chair. I could also hear Bob snoring in his tent. Even with the pad under me, there were too many rocks and twigs to be comfortable.

I guess I fell asleep not long before Kele woke me. He passed me the watch and I saw that it was almost one in the morning. "You snore any louder," he told me, "and nobody'll need dynamite. This hill will just slide into the lake."

I sat in the lawn chair by the fire for the next three hours, wrapped in my sleeping bag for warmth. There were no stars, and if there were any night sounds, the snapping of the burning wood drowned them out. No spirits came out of the hill, and no bears came to make me into supper. I made instant hot chocolate using hot water from the pot hanging over the fire and I read a book about a woman trying to cross the Australian desert with a camel. Bob continued to snore, but Kele either didn't snore or didn't get to sleep.

I could have spent the time thinking, but I've found that's not a good idea at night. Things tend to look dismal and impossible in the small hours of the morning. At night, I'm a different person on a different planet. I have no doubt that Columbus and Neil Armstrong both woke up in the night thinking, "Changed my mind; let's go home." But the book was pretty good. Certainly convinced me to avoid Australia.

Around four in the morning the first stars came out from behind the clouds. I poked the fire and sparks rose up into the air, and some hung there for a second or two, indistinguishable from the star overhead. I saw a bright moving star and thought for a moment it was a spark. Then I realized it was probably the space station.

You could look out the space station windows, I thought, and see the lights of Toronto and maybe Burleigh Falls if you had a good set of binoculars. But nobody there was likely to see our tiny fire in the dark area that marked the Kawarthas. I shivered, and pushed a couple of logs further into the center of the fire.

I woke up Bob and took myself to bed. I must have gone to sleep almost at once.

I woke up when the sun came up, and joined the others around the campfire, getting out an apple to keep from getting hungry. There was a morning chill that went through the light coats we wore. I had a thick sweater underneath, but still had to warm my fingers by the flames to keep them from hurting.

We got out a video camera and a couple of small automatic-focus cameras and began taking pictures of the petroglyphs. One of us would peel back enough moss to expose a carving, and another would take the best photo he knew how. We did this at first light because the drawings were incised into the rock and the low sun gave the best shadows to accent the lines.

We took turns with each of the cameras, making sure that each of us starred in a few photos, in case the newspaper wanted a human-interest photo. We also took close-ups of the individual carvings.

Afterwards, we made breakfast, with coffee for the other two and tea for me. I made instant oatmeal with added dried berries and raisins on my camp stove. The other two fried sausages and eggs in a frying pan on a rusty grate over the fire. The wind shifted a lot so there was a lot of coughing and dancing around during the process.

As the sun came up, we set our sleeping bags to air out, and went to sit on the rock and look out over the lake.

"We're going to have to draw straws," Kele said.

Bob took out his knife and began to whittle another snake out of a piece of wood. "What's that when it's 'ome?"

"The object of this exercise," Kele went on, "is to make sure nobody can just get rid of the carvings." He looked around. We nodded. "Well," he said, "we've got to get those pictures out to a safe place."

"Meaning?" Bob whittled a scale into the branch. He was getting better, but had a long way to go.

"Meaning," I said, "that it would be best for one of us to take the videotape and the film cassettes and get them the heck out of this area. Like maybe to the lodge."

Bob nodded. "I can see that."

"Get the pictures developed, get the video copied to VHS format, then spread copies around. The papers would be interested, as well as that fellow at the university." Kele watched a flock of mallards land in the lake.

"On the other hand," I said, "we could get rid of the pictures, make some stakes, and stake a claim on the lake."

"And all become right millionaires," Bob said.

"I could be the richest Indian in Canada," Kele said, "after I killed you guys off."

"I thought it was always the Indians that got the stick."

"Not any more. Seen the movies lately? It's usually a Brit that gets it."

"And I get left out of the whole thing," I said. "Maybe I can kill both of you."

"If I were a betting man," Kele said, "I wouldn't put my bet on you, old fart."

"Old age and treachery," I said.

"Outnumbered," Kele said. "Back to the basics. One of us has to run the film out to civilization. I'm an Indian, and have limited knowledge of civilization."

"I'm from Manchester," Bob said, still whittling, "and that's not 'alf far from civilization."

"I taught economics at the university," I said. "Got you both beat."

"Time to draw straws," Kele said.

Kele cut some straws from the thin grass that grew in the hollows. I drew the short straw, which meant I had the responsibility of setting up the draw for the next stage, to determine who would handle the final draw. Bob drew the short straw, which meant he had to cut some straws for the final draw.

By that time, it was coffee break, so we postponed the draw for a while. We talked and put away the sleeping bags that had been airing, and got some campfire wood.

Then we drew straws. Bob held out three in his hand. I drew one, and Kele drew one, and when we were done, we compared them. The one left in Bob's hand was the short one.

"Shit," he said. He looked around. "Should I take my bloody camping gear?"

"You might want to leave it, if you're coming back."

"I'd like that. I can be back by in quicksticks, if I 'op it." Bob stuck his carving into the branch of a tree.

We packed up the dozen film canisters and the single one-hour videotape into a sealed plastic bag and stuffed it into the middle of a daypack.

"I do 'ope I don't run into anyone," Bob said.

"Depends on which way they come." I pointed west. If they come the way we did, you'll meet them on the way back. If they come either by way of Cedar or McFriggit, you'll miss them."

We shuffled around a bit, and Bob said, "Well…." and Kele said, "Wait! Someone's coming."

"You're sure."

"Unless the squirrels have taken to cussing in English when they trip on a rock."

# Chapter 19

We listened in dead silence for a moment, during which some damned bird started yelling at us and a noisy oak started shaking its leaves in the wind and I wanted to rip the oak out by its roots and beat the bird over the head. But eventually we all heard some words,

"You think it's Ned and Patrick?" Bob looked around trying to figure out which direction the voices had come from.

"Could be. Sounds like a couple of guys, anyway. It might be hunters, but most of the hunters I know won't come this far up the hill. There's not much game on top of it."

Bob strode over to his tent, and came out with a sheet of camouflage cloth. "I'll be over there" - he pointed at a jumble of fallen trees and weeds - "toffed up like a bush." I thought he should take off into the woods, but I could see his logic. Running in the autumn is a noisy business, and he might run right into whoever was coming.

I reached into my pack and handed him the cell phone. He nodded and dialed somebody, then left, talking quietly into the phone. I watched as he settled into the background, and drew the cloth over him. It seemed perfectly obvious to me that he was there under cover, but I knew what camouflage could do if you weren't looking for it.

A few years ago Aisha and I'd been driving along a road in Colorado. I'd just been watching the fields go by in a high valley outside Aspen. As the car passed a gravel side road, a small movement caught my eye. Abruptly, I saw a soldier, sitting beside the road, not fifty feet from my car, lighting a cigarette. No sooner had he come into focus than so did a whole lot of soldiers, obviously resting after an exercise of some sort.

I mentioned it to Aisha, but she'd never noticed the soldiers, although they had been on her side of the car and hadn't been trying to hide, just wearing camouflage.

Nonetheless, Bob looked like a lump under camouflage cloth, about as hidden as a submarine on a baseball field.

In a couple of minutes we could hear that the voices were coming over the hill from the south. My old route from McFriggit, I thought, but up the hill.

Patrick Ireland came into sight first, carrying a large pack on his back, a hiking stick in one arm, and a shotgun slung over his shoulder. From the way he walked, the pack was heavy. He still looked like Jesus, except for the shotgun. Ned came into sight from behind a spruce a few seconds later.

I didn't like the way they didn't seem surprised to see us there.

"Hi," Patrick grunted, slinging his pack against a tree. He set the hiking stick against the same tree, and tried to sit down on the lawn chair. At the last second, he realized the shotgun slung over his shoulder would be a problem, so he remained standing, stretching his shoulders and back. "Glad to get that off my back," he said, smiling.

Ned had a pack almost as large, and somewhat heavier, it seemed. He looked around then slung his pack beside Patrick's. He eyed the lawn chair, then sat on a log we'd cut. "Been here long?"

"Welcome," I said.

"Ah," he said, sitting back on his heels, "a camp out on the rock. Did you know," he said, touching some exposed rock, "that this 'rock' is among the oldest material on the planet? Precambrian, formed where a gabbro-diabase mispickel invaded the Hastings hornblende shist along a felsite dyke." He pointed along the ridge. "Over there we have a gradual impregnation of the granite boss into the schistosity, and these are associated with actinolite and pistacite, as well as magnetite." He waved to the north. "A syenite porphyry just beyond the

lake and some albitized country rock mark an intrusion of successive pillow lavas and perodotites." He frowned and looked very, very serious.

I knew what Ned was doing. He was setting us up as a bunch of schoolboys having fun on a campout and himself as the professional-great-white-geologist. It was designed to make the rest of us feel like city-bound amateurs. I mean, what could you say to a spiel like that?

But I knew the trick, and fought back with my professor talk, designed to make the audience feel like intellectual inferiors. I hadn't totally wasted those years teaching at the university.

"Ah," I said with a slow, deliberate smile. I didn't have a pipe to smoke, but I didn't need one. All I needed was the look that said I should be smoking a pipe and be walking around wearing a tweed jacket and a turtleneck. "Ah, we thank you for the lesson. It enlightens us beyond measure." A small chuckle, for effect.

"But we must, ah, travel beyond this rock concert," I waved casually around, "to get to the truth. Let's just move from the structuralism of geology, in which ore heuristically understood, perhaps capriciously, perhaps in error, to be the metaphysical equivalent of power. This is too structuralist, too Althusserian, to be more than a problematic inaugurate of the human interaction between the tactile and the quasi-eternal. We are, after all, short-term creatures on this ball of rock, eh?

"Humanity created perhaps the inevitable dialectical imbalance of power and result of power, a convergence replete with the hegemony of superidealism that faces us here on this hill. Attaching temporality and structuralism to theoretical objects serves us better, in the long run, than tailings and sawdust, I suspect." I paused to stare into the trees.

I maintained the look that says, God, I'm superior even in my humbleness, and aren't you lucky to have run into me.

Actually, I was keeping one eye one Patrick and his shotgun. If he were a sensible man, he'd have done away with both Ned and I somewhere in mid-speech.

"Father sky," Kele said, and we turned to look at him. He had his arms spread in the general direction of the sun. "Father sky, my heart is sore. The winds have come to ask me questions and I cannot answer them." He closed his eyes.

"Where have the spirits gone when strangers walk the hills of my ancestors? Where my fathers walked lightly with moccasins, heavy boots crack the forest floor.

"Where have all the old trees are gone, the pines that touched the autumn clouds? No one who lived here could have taken them, only strangers who came, and left, and saw nothing. Nothing.

"We fall in our own autumns like dead leaves, and your winds sing sad songs to us, for there are no children playing here now. I look for laughter and I see only plastic wrappers and a rusting beer can.

"Father sky, there my heart is sore and my eyes are wet with tears. I cry for the land." he bent his head back and fell to his knees.

Not bad, I thought. Not bad at all.

I was rather hoping that Bob would keep his silence behind his camouflage netting, and he did.

After a moment, we all looked at Patrick Ireland, who was sitting on the lawn chair, shaking his head and rolling his eyes. It looked like Pleistocene geology wasn't about to enter the lecture circuit here, so I offered, "Chasing the wily rabbit?

Ned looked at me, puzzled.

"Deer and bear seasons aren't open yet," I noted. "And duck hunting's going to be difficult unless you have a boat in one of those packs."

Kele was edging towards his tarp tent. “Nice lodgings,” Patrick said, “if it doesn’t snow.” But I knew what Kele was doing, keeping our visitors’ eyes on a moving man, and one moving in a potentially threatening direction, rather than letting those eyes rove out around towards Bob’s hiding place.

“We’ve started to document the rock art,” I said. I could see Ned’s eyebrows go up. I added, “We’ve brought a video camera and some still cameras. We’re just waiting for some good light. You should see this” I turned by back on them and started out for the edge of the hill. Don’t look back, I thought. Don’t pretend there’s a choice.

I wondered if they’d leave the packs behind. They must have seen that there were three tents and Samuel’s lawn chair and they must have wondered if another person was in the vicinity. But when I got to the edge of the hill, Kele was behind me and the geobuddies right behind him.

I showed them the most elaborate of the carvings, peeling back the moss and scooping out a bit of dirt. It showed a one-eyed human figure, wavy lines radiating from his head, and what might have been a snake in one hand. Partly painted over this in red ochre was what looked like a boat or canoe with three distinct masts.

“Interesting,” was Ned’s comment. Patrick walked to the very lip of the hill and looked down towards the tiny round lake. I wondered if he saw it full of currency, like Scrooge McDuck’s money bin. He still had the shotgun over his shoulder. It pointed a small dark hole at the sky, like a symbol of the hole that was the lake below.

After Kele and I had showed them twenty or thirty carvings and a couple more ochre drawings, I stood up, wincing a bit from back pain. “Have you had a lunch, yet?” I asked.

“Sounds like a good idea to me,” Ned laughed.

As we walked back, I looked over to where Bob had been hidden. The camouflage covering was gone. So, it seemed, was Bob.

We got the fire going again, and Kele put a frying pan and a water pot onto the rusty grate. Ned and Patrick broke out some sausages, cheese, and sandwiches.

I got my camp stove hissing like a proper snake and heated up a pot of water. When the water started to boil, I poured some over a teabag in my cup, then put broken spaghetti into the rest of the water.

We all sat on the ground at that point, no one wanting to use the lawn chair.

Sometimes you’ve got to wonder where Big Brother is when you need him. Somebody’s got microphones in half the hotel rooms on the planet and spy planes checking out the license plates of cars in Yemen. Where were they when I wanted them? There were two guys across from me that I suspected might have killed a guy. They might or might not have something I didn’t like in those two heavy packs. They had a shotgun, which Patrick had leaned against a tree behind him. And nobody watching us but us.

“I presume that gun is unloaded,” I said, finishing my tea and fishing the strands of spaghetti out of the pot and into a plastic bowl. I added some dried spaghetti sauce and mixed it in. “We always go by the old rule that nobody brings loaded guns into camp.” As if Kele and I had been hunting buddies for years or something.

Ned swallowed what looked like the last of a peanut butter and jam sandwich. “Not loaded,” he said, getting out another sandwich and an apple.

Patrick raised his eyebrows towards Ned, then nodded. “Empty,” he said. He had what seemed to be a salami sandwich. He removed his boots when a bit of sunshine fell across his feet. He seemed perfectly comfortable sitting on the ground, more so than the rest of us. I think Ned had a hip or leg problem, since he shifted a lot. Every few minutes Kele and I tended to stretch whatever part of us was aching.

There was a long silence while we ate. I wondered where Bob was. At best, I figured, he was on the shores of Red Lake, just getting into the canoe.

“Is Samuel here?” Ned asked.

“Pardon,” Kele said. He was eating some reconstituted eggs, mixed with green pepper and pepperoni and fried into an omelet.

Ned pointed at the lawn chair. “That’s his lawn chair, if I remember correctly, and you’ve got an extra tent and sleeping bag.”

“Oh,” Kele said. “Those are Bob’s.”

“He’s not here?”

“Left this morning,” Kele said. “Planning on being back tonight before it gets too dark.”

“Gone hunting?” Ned put the last of his food back into his small pack.

“Express courier,” Kele said. “Taking our pictures back to civilization. Hope to make the front page of The Review tomorrow.” He nodded at me. “Win’s a professional photographer, so we think we might have got some good shots.”

There was a deep silence, broken by Patrick. “I thought you said you were waiting for proper light to take the pictures.”

“More pictures. We’ve got more to take,” I said. “Evening light accents the pictures differently.” A fib. It wouldn’t have taken much to figure the whole angle of the slope would be in the shadow of the hills and trees.

“I think,” said Patrick, “that a drink would go down good right now.” He reached into one of the sacks and brought out a bottle of Bushmills and two cups. He put a good whallop in each cup.

Good God, I thought. He was planning a day hike and he brought a bottle of whiskey? This was going to be a party, just the five of us - four guys and a shotgun - and a bottle of liquor.

“Damn right,” Ned said, taking one cup. “You guys want any?”

Kele declined, but I emptied the tea out of my cup and held it out. I knew it wasn’t a good idea but I’m not much good at social events that include guns and was a bit stressed out. I had the feeling that if my blood pressure got any higher, I’d start spurting blood out of my ears.

We sat and drank a bit. The afternoon wore on a bit. A couple of sparrows investigated us. A couple of long skeins of geese flew over, going somewhere for reasons I didn’t understand. Gravity held me firmly to the rock on this hill and the sparrows flew away for reasons I didn’t understand.

Kele made some more tea and passed around some chocolate chip cookies.

The day was wearing on, so I said, “What do you guys want?”

“Fucked if I know,” said Ned, pouring out the last of the liquor. He seemed as low as a man could be.” He began to rub his neck and forehead.

“Ned,” Patrick said.

“Yeah?”

“I got another bottle.”

“Gonna need it, I think.” Ned turned to me. “I think I want that ore down there. That’s what I think. I think that’s what I want.”

“Why?” asked.

“What do you mean, why?”

“Why do you want the ore?”

“It’s worth millions, maybe.”

“More whiskey for us drunken white guys,” I said, holding out my cup. Patrick came out with a new bottle, chewed the foil cap off, unscrewed the lid, and poured some into the three cups.

“Blood,” I said. “What would you do with the money.”

Ned thought a bit, and answered. “I don’t know.” He got up and got the lawn chair, unfolded it, and sat in it. “Tell Samuel thanks,” he said, straightening one leg slowly. “I grew up a few years in Holtyre,” he said. “You probably haven’t even heard of the place. Up north, between Kirkland Lake and Timmins. Between two of Ontario’s biggest gold-mining areas in those days.

“Holtyre had a gold mine. Not a big one, but enough for a few bars of gold a week. They named the mine after the Hollinger and Mackintyre mines, maybe hoping for good luck. There were maybe fifteen hundred people in the town. A couple of churches. An eight-room school for the French kids and a two-room school for us English-speaking kids. One barber. Three little stores. One gold mine.

“On Friday evenings they’d set up the sixteen-millimeter projector in the town hall and show movies. The adults would sit on folding metal chairs and the kids would sit on the floor at the front. There would be a newsreel before the movie, and usually a cartoon.

“Everybody had wood stoves. For ten dollars the ministry gave you rights to a few acres of bush outside town. The first year we were there dad took us out into the snow and we cut a trunkload of poplar. There wasn’t much else but poplar and tamarack. When he found out that green poplar won’t burn, we went back out and cut tamarack. All that winter we mixed tamarack and poplar in the stove and we got through. My parents would warm bricks in the oven, then wrap them in towels. They put the bricks in our beds, at our feet, because the beds were cold as ice in the winter.

“Dad worked for the county maintaining roads or something. He lost his job when I was in grade four. We stayed there four more years, poor as you can imagine. I wanted desperately to transfer to the French school, where there were other kids as poor as we were, but my parents wouldn’t let me.

“I figured out money real early, and what the world was like when there wasn’t enough of it. It made my parents old.

“Event though I was young, I knew where lots of money was. In the hills, hidden away in lines of rock. So I listened to the kids whose fathers were geologists. I read books from the local library about rocks, and had the older guys explain core samples for me.

“I walked a lot of bush in those four years, picking at rocks and looking for pay ore.

“My parents died before I found my gold or tin or lead. Or diamonds. I was in my twenties when my father died, in his car on a winter night. I’d just got a job with one of the bigger mining companies. My mother died in the hospital ten years later to the month. I was out in the bush at the time. I’d got a couple of promotions from some finds I’d made, but nothing I could write a book about.

“I retired after my wife died. But I always wanted to find something they’d name after me. Some hole in the ground with a shaft running into it and money coming out of it.” Ned reached into his packsack and came out with another sandwich. “I met Patrick four years ago, on a beach in Florida, and we’ve been walking the hills for the last couple of summers.

He paused, then continued. “I’ve been worth millions to the mining companies I worked for, but turned down management positions because a desk job is the last thing I want. You ask me what I want? I want wealth. I want fame. I want people, including a ghost or two to say Ned DeVincent finally found a big one. And I never want to be poor again.” He looked away into the trees. “I’ll be back,” he said, and went into the bush a hundred feet to pee.

Kele and Patrick and I shifted around but didn’t say anything for a while. Kele got some more wood for the fire. Patrick leaned against a tree, his eyes closed.

“And what do you want,” I asked.

Patrick opened his eyes to make sure I was talking to him.

“Out,” he said. “Out of this whole thing. Out wandering the hills and watching the clouds go by. Alone. I shouldn’t be here.” He closed his eyes and said nothing more.

“So what do you want,” I asked Ned when he’d settled back into the lawn chair.

He picked up his cup, sipped a bit more whiskey. “I want a story.” He closed his eyes. “I want a story from you before it gets dark. Then I’ll tell you what else I want.”

## Chapter 20

I put some hot chocolate mix into my cup. The sun was behind the trees and it was getting chill. I settled as comfortably as I could against a rock, and pulled on my plaid jacket.

“It was,” I said, “getting on past midnight, the wind had picked up, shaking the tent, and I knew I’d have to kill the guy in the next sleeping bag.” I paused to look around at the others. Patrick opened one eye.

I went on. “I knew, too, that I shouldn't have eaten all those beans for supper. Maybe, if I’d been asleep, I could have ignored it. I wasn’t asleep.”

“Two feet away, the Other Guy was snoring steadily and noisily.

“Now, Ned, there are snores and there are snores. There are quiet snores and there are loud snores. There are snores with the rhythm of the clockwork of the universe, and there are snores that live by their own rules. The Other Guy was a champion of the truly independent snore, an athlete of the vibrating palate.” I looked at Ned and he was looking into the trees. I continued.

“Some of his snores were loud, and probably kept wolves from the local hilltops. Some were so quiet that it hardly seemed worth bothering to make them. But no two were the same. They were the audible snowflakes of the black night, with pauses and volumes and varieties that seemed endless. There was no way of adjusting to the sounds.” I poked the fire with my foot and checked Patrick. He still had his eyes closed, but was smiling a bit.

“Listen to me,” I said. “It is a terrible thing to haul a canoe, two fishing rods, paddles, lifejackets, one tackle box, binoculars, insect repellent, sunscreen, a canteen of water, a vitamin C jar full of scotch, dry socks, a first-aid kit, a spare hat, paper towels, toilet paper, matches, a portable cookstove, a good paperback, maps, a filleting knife, two lengths of rope, a pot for boiling water, a frypan, some oil for frying fish, various snacks, a couple of frozen steaks, plastic bags, sleeping bags, dried rice, one tent, inflatable mattresses, spoons, teabags, three cans of beans, headache pills, plates, an inflatable pillow, raincoat, sweater, soup mix, cups, bowls, whistles, forks, small fishing net, duct tape, camera, can opener, bailing bucket, and overpriced yuppie folding saw over a set of really snarky portages for a weekend’s fishing and then to realize you’re going to be crabby and miserable because you didn’t get any sleep. It gets you to frothing at the mouth, and drives you into thoughts you believed your ancestors had evolved out of.”

I could see Ned nod. He’d been there at some time. “At first,” I went on, “I nudged the Other Guy, gently, of course, because I’m a polite and civilized kind of person, who respects life and companionship and the bonding that comes with sharing the great outdoors with a good buddy.

“He muttered ‘whasstk’,” I went on, “and rolled over and stopped snoring.

“For ten full minutes.

“For nine of those minutes I was awake, waiting for sleep. One by one my piano-wire muscles relaxed and my eyes closed and my ears took in the far-off sound of a loon. In the last minute I was drifting into an oblivion so gentle that it could be used to stuff pillows.

“Then, of course, the Other Guy started to snore again.

“Oh, it was no problem telling myself that I should have been able to sleep anyway. I knew that. I reasoned with myself with a logic that would have shamed Aristotle and a passion that would have put Billy Graham to shame. But it didn’t work. It never works. All I ended up doing was arguing with myself in my head. And getting wider awake.

“By midnight, I’d figured out that stuffing my jacket over my head and tossing the packsack onto that wouldn't work. Nor would rolling up my sleeping bag and wrapping my head in it, even with the jacket, lifejacket, packsack, tackle box and paper towels. I decided that maybe I’d go out and sleep on the rock by the shore and let the bears gnaw on me in my sleep. Or stuff my ears full of pine tar and worry about being deaf later.

“The thunder ended all that. There would be no sleeping outside, that night. There would only be endless hours of listening to the wind in the trees, the rain on the tent, and finally the awful sound of the Other Guy trying to breathe with my knee on his windpipe.

“Did I say that? Did I even think it?

“Cancel that thought. He'd come canoeing with me. He’d carried the canoe over three miserable portages. He’d gone back for the last packsack. He’d kept me from stepping on the garter snake on that first portage.

“On the other hand, he’d dropped his steak into the fire, so I’d had to split mine with him. Which wasn’t much of a meal. Which is why I’d opened the cans of chili beans and heated them up while he was getting more firewood. Then, wouldn’t you know it, he turned out to hate chili. So I’d eaten the whole potful, simply because it wasn’t as good as the steak I’d schlepped over those portages and had been looking forward to ever since I’d told my wife I wanted to have less meat in my diet.

“And, come to think of it, he’d used up most of the matches trying to get a fire lit, and by morning the ground would be wet. I just might be eating cold oatmeal and unheated coffee.

“There was only one logical conclusion: he deserved to die. I deserved to sleep. The thought crawled out of pits in my soul I didn’t know I had.

I got up to put some branches on the fire, then resumed my story.

“I spent the next half hour planning how I could kill him without getting so worked up about it that I wouldn’t be able to sleep anyway. Would I just sleep with the body in the tent, or would I drag it into the rain? What time was it? Two in the morning, for God's sake, and he was still snoring. It was obvious no jury would convict me. I’d tell the world he fell out of the canoe while having a pee.

“Which, of course, only served to remind me that I’d been ignoring my own bladder for an hour or so.

“It started to rain, about then, drumming on the tent. The sort of sound that would put a guy to sleep, if the Other Guy weren't snoring. If I didn’t have to take a leak myself. If he hadn’t saved the garter snake. (Even if his shout of warning had caused that unfortunate encounter with that birch tree and the canoe I had on my shoulders. He’d helped me up, though. I gave him that. He wasn’t all bad.)

“Isn’t civilization a curse? It gets you used to certain things. Like indoor facilities. The more I tried to ignore my bladder, the louder it shouted at me. It was as bad as the snoring, and it was inside me. I tried to reason with it. I pointed out the thunderstorm. But having a conversation with one’s prostate gland and bladder is another waste of time, even if you’ve got lots of time, what with being awake at two twenty-eight-and-a-half

in the morning. One's internal organs of the nether regions always win. Mine did. I decided to never drink anything after three in the afternoon.

"And those chili beans. There was now a large bubble of gas in my gut. I began to fear for the safety of the tent.

"By now, it was definite. I just couldn't wait for the rain to be over. Something in me was going to explode, and I was running out of time.

"But I was determined not to get my clothes wet, so I stripped. Wet clothes ruin a camping trip quicker than anything except not sleeping. I contemplated stuffing my socks in the Other Guy's open mouth, but I remembered the snake, and decided maybe he could live if he carried all the gear back over those portages while I watched for snakes.

"Taking the flashlight, I unzipped the tent and stepped out. One thing about a good rainfall, you don't have to go far from the tent to relieve yourself. Somehow, there's water falling everywhere and a bit more won't make any difference.

"The rain was freezing cold on my skin, and the lake was lit up like a disco, with the strobe light of lightning hammering the world. A quick pee, and a noisy bit of gut relief that would make a DC-10 proud, and I was running for the tent. I had a sudden thought that if lightning hit that last fart, this whole end of the lake could disappear.

"Once inside, I noticed two things. One, I had nothing to dry myself off with. Except my clothes. Two, the Other Guy was awake.

'Did you hear that thunder?' he said. "Are we safe?'"

"I mean, what could I say. It was such a stupid question. We were camped, you might know, under the tallest set of pines left in Ontario. These are pines Temagami would be proud of. They were waving their upper needles in the Clouds of Death and they had roots that crawled into the lake. They might as well have had a sign, "Fry Me" on them.

"I figured it was the Other Guy's fault. In fact, I was absolutely sure of it. It must have been his suggestion. We were about to depart this vale of snores together, me, him, and his damn flapping palate. I almost smiled.

"But I dried myself off with my underwear and crawled into my sleeping bag, saying sweetly, "We're dead meat, pal. Dead and fried." The lightning increased and the ground shook."

"And then you slept," said Patrick. He knew.

"Then suddenly," I said, "it was morning, and light was pouring through the tent. I lifted my head, groggily. The Other Guy was outside, putting more wood on the morning fire. It was just after sun-up. I could smell the coffee."

"'You're up early,' I told him."

"He gave me a dirty look. He poked at the fire with a bent stick. "I was awake. I've been awake since three in the morning." He paused. 'Did anyone tell you that you snore?'"

"I ignored him," I told Patrick and Kele and Ned. "I ignored him. It was indeed the most wonderful of mornings."

I got up and put my sleeping bag back into my tent. It had aired out most of the day, and it was time to prepare for night.

When I heard the shotgun blast, I backed out of the tent right quick.

Patrick had the shotgun. He was looking into the sky. "Geese," he said. "Thought we might have some for supper." He looked around. "Missed, I guess. Calls for a drink."

I thought so too, so, so I made Kele and me a tea. Ned and Patrick had another cup of whiskey. Kele made some instant coffee for each of them. Ned mixed his into his cup of whiskey, but Patrick just set his cup of coffee onto the ground and ignored it. He set the shotgun on the ground beside him. So much for making sure the gun was unloaded, I thought. But I didn't think it was time to make a point of it.

Shadows had enveloped the world and the last rose cloud faded into gray.

"What do you want?" I asked Ned again.

Kele sat down beside me. He'd been quiet for a long while. "Aside from the only lawn chair," he said.

"What he wants," Patrick said, "is to be famous. He's got enough money." He picked up the shotgun and pointed it at Ned, sighting along the barrel, but not too steadily.

"He's a mean drunk," Ned explained. He took a small sip from his cup. "I'm a mellow drunk, like my father was." He ignored the gun barrel pointed at him, although Kele rose to his feet and I backed away from Ned. "Can't hit the broad side of a barn when he's been drinking, though. He should stay in his university, where he's warm and safe from the world."

Patrick launched into a description of Ned that included a lot of words I don't use except when trying to start an outboard motor. "This whole fucking thing is your idea," he finished, getting up, and advancing on Ned. "Now what do we do?" He flicked the safety on and off, and I could see tears in his eyes.

"Well," said Ned, "you could always kill me and spend the rest of your life making license plates and dreaming of the hills outside the prison. They might let you out when you're too old to walk." He poked at a log with his foot, sending sparks up. He looked up at Patrick. "Boom," he said, "and you'll walk no more eskers." He took a big sip, the only sign of unease I had noticed.

Ned looked up at Patrick. "Tomorrow morning," he said, "we go home, old friend. Away from this place that you never expected to find anyway."

"I have a proposition," I said. I looked at Ned, then Patrick. Patrick set the gun against a tree, carefully, then sat down again. "Would you like some chocolate tofu mint jerky?"

"First Patrick, then you," Ned said. "Will I never be safe?" He closed his eyes and looked up at the first star overhead. "What's your proposition?"

"I'm in no position to negotiate anything," I said, holding out my cup for more whiskey, "but it seems to me one of you has made two big discoveries in the last week. You can get famous, at least, for those."

"Sure," he said.

"Famous," I said, "as the man who discovered world-famous petroglyphs and a diamond mine, and chose history over wealth." He raised a hand, but I kept on. "It's a gamble. If you think you probably won't get the wealth, you can go for the fame. You'll be on the cover of all the magazines."

"Ahh, well…."

"When we met, you said this country has had enough of its beauty torn and gouged out for money. You said that if you found gold around here you wouldn't tell anybody. 'The mining industry should learn to respect other things than money, you said, or words to that effect." I squinted into his eyes, thinking I'd gladly toss him off the edge of the hill for the lawn chair. My butt hurt. "You keep up that line, and you can be famous."

There was a long silence. Patrick fell asleep, his breathing getting deep and regular.

"A diamond mine." Ned got up, went into the woods for a pee, and came back.

"One you might never get. But the lake could be named after you." I poured the last of the water into the pot over the fire, and added a couple of branches to the flames. "On the other hand, maybe the police might want to look a bit deeper into where you were when George died." I explained a few of the inconsistencies in Ned's story.

“The coroner,” Ned said, “thinks that George’s cancer may have weakened his blood vessels and a small bump could have triggered an aneurysm. Besides,” he looked up at me, “if not, you’re the number one suspect.”

“I don’t have to worry about a witness,” I said, nodding toward the sleeping Patrick.

“DeVincent Lake.” Ned laughed. He laughed long and hard. He stopped suddenly. There were tears running down his cheeks. “How the hell did I end up here? How did I end up here.” He got up, shakily. “We’re going to bed, if you can lend us some blankets and something to sleep on.”

“You can have one of mine.” Bob’s voice came from the trees. “I brought two sleeping bags.”

## Chapter 21

Kele and I were on our feet at once. “How’d you get here?” I was trying to calculate paddling times and distances.

“Easy on.” Bob sat down beside the fire. “I did my whack. I phoned Pica. She met me at the edge of ‘awk Lake. Motorboat, you know. Great bloody inventions, eh wha? Far as I know the pictures will make the front page of The Globe tomorrow afternoon.”

“I thought they wouldn’t be concerned about a few more Indian carvings,” Kele said. He walked over to the sleeping Patrick and took the gun. He ejected a couple of shotgun shells and pocketed them.

“Your missus,” Bob turned to me. “She’s got some barmy professor quoted as saying these carvings are going to make the United Nations world ‘eritage list. She’s got all her chairs at home, that one.”

“Want some chocolate tofu mint jerky?” I asked him.

“Not in this lifetime,” Bob said.

“I’ll have some,” Kele said. I raised my eyebrows. “A test of courage,” he said.

I turned to Ned. “You guys can have one of my sleeping bags, too. We brought extra in case the weather turned cold while we were camped here,” I explained.

He nodded. It was dark, although it couldn’t have been much past eight by this time, but we woke Patrick and got him into a sleeping bag and settled onto a mossy area. He fell asleep again.

The rest of us returned to the fire. “How old are you?” Ned asked me. I told him. “Shit,” he said. “You’re a year older than me. You can have the lawn chair.”

What the hell. I took it and let Ned settle uncomfortably onto the log I had vacated.

Ned and I looked at the bottle beside the fire. I looked at Bob, and he nodded, so I poured him a half cup. I did the same for Ned. Myself, I’d had too much already.

We talked about life and geology and gold mines and how different trees like different landscapes. Bob knew more than any of the rest of us about the trees, but Ned knew how each tree fit into the soil it lived in.

I drank herbal tea that Aisha had packed for me and talked about my years in the corporate world. Economics is a dismal science with 20-20 hindsight, but large companies are willing to pay people like me to tell them what just happened.

Then I told them about my years in the Economics faculty of the university, with some amusing anecdotes. I got a lot of laughs, but it might have had something to do with the tension on the hilltop.

Bob told us about his first court-encouraged canoeing trip with a bunch of other delinquents. His mimicry of some of the others on the trip had me snorting tea up my nose.

Then we all got to talking about the places we'd canoed, and all the funny stories of canoeing and camping, spills and bears and the things we took and didn't need and the things we'd discovered too late that we'd forgotten.

Patrick got up once, swore at us, then crawled back into his sleeping bag and went back to sleep. We ignored him.

About ten or so, a thin layer of clouds covered the stars, and I started yawning like I'd never stop. I took to my sleeping bag, and slept pretty soundly all through the night, not counting the seven times I got up to take a leak, or the one o'clock and five o'clock rousals to take some codeine pills for my pounding head. At one, there were only Kele and Bob around the fire, talking quietly. I wondered what Ned and Patrick had brought in their heavy packsacks, but both packsacks were stashed between the two of them.

My morning came late, and when I got up Ned and Patrick were gone, packs and all. Bob and Kele were still asleep. I started the fire going again, then got the big pot to get some water.

I ambled over to the edge of the hill, and spotted the geobuddies along one shore of the lake, tying yellow ribbons to some trees, and making slash marks on others. It looked like they were working their way around the lake, so I clambered down the slope and dipped a pot of the cleanest water I could find from the lake. Lake water is never perfectly clean, even in fall when the cool temperatures precipitate out some of the solids. You do the best you can, pick out the more obvious debris, then hope boiling takes care of the rest.

There was a bit of mist on the lake, and some birds were getting noisy in the trees beside me. Another skein of geese went overhead, going west. The hill was damp with dew, a dampness that seemed to soak into me. I headed back towards the soul-healing warmth of the fire. The country was Eden, but the year was getting old, and so was I.

Kele crawled out from under his tarp as I was starting the pot on to boil over the fire. He walked past Bob's tent, shook it and called out, "Morning time, you Limey Bastard."

"Me ma told me if I came to Canada the Indians would kill me. She was right," came Bob's voice from his tent. But he was up in less than a minute. He looked at me. "You were dead on about your snoring. You spent 'alf the night driving pigs to market."

By the time they were at the fire, I had a cup of tea, and my stove was cooking up some dehydrated camp food Aisha had made for me. I added some oatmeal and chips of beef jerky.

"They're gone," Kele said, indicating the place where Ned and Patrick had been sleeping.

I pointed to the edge of the hill. "They're staking a claim on the whole lake, it looks like."

Both Kele and Bob went to check on this, and came back shortly after. "They're up to their nuts in swamp at the far side now," Kele said.

I finished my tea and called Aisha to tell her about the latest developments.

"Let them stake a claim," she advised. "There'd be hell to pay if someone else did it now. If I were them, I'd do the same thing. Are they claiming the hill?"

"Doesn't look like it," I said.

"Don't worry, then. They're just covering their bases."

"I hear you got some professor quoted as saying these carvings are really important."

"That's old MacAdam. He owes me a couple of favors , and anyway he's got tenure. Aside from being a bit senile, if you remember. He's happy to say you've got pictures that prove the Aztecs or Egyptians or whatever helped carve the pictures. By the time we work through that, someone'll be calling for protection."

"Has he seen the pictures?" As far as I could tell, this place wasn't nearly as big a find as the famous petroglyphs not far to the southeast.

"They'll be back from the photo shop in an hour or so. We'll find something good on them. If not, you'll have to carve a Roman trireme real quick-like."

"Ah…"

"Just joking. I've got the video copied to VHS and the TV station is going to pick it up in a few minutes, I hope. Who shall we put down as the discoverer?"

"I might have made a deal," I said, "with Ned. We might have to give him discovery rights. And name the lake after him."

"Oh?"

"We talked about it last night. In return for him promising to protect the site."

"You obviously had too much to drink last night," Aisha said. "Is your head a bit sore?"

"A bit." I felt like a couple of octopoid aliens were having it out above my right ear.

"You're a slow learner."

"I am, that."

"Well, I think it's a good idea, anyway. Got any quotes for me."

"Got a pencil?"

"Always." This was true.

"He said that the mining industry's finally learning to respect the land. That history is more important than money." I was thinking as fast as my hammering brain would let me. "That he's claiming the diamond site to protect the petroglyphs and intends to be their guardian till the province decides what to do with them."

"We didn't tell anybody anything about the diamond ore."

"It's time. Don't be more specific. It'll come out soon enough. It should make a good story, and if we don't rush the details, it'll give Samuel enough time to organize a sit-in."

"What's the name of the lake you're at."

"I don't know of any name," I said. "I told Ned we'd name it after him."

"I'll say you guys have temporarily named the lake DeVincent Lake. But it probably won't stick," Aisha said.

"I figured that out, but it'll keep Ned happier for a while."

"Do you think he planned to destroy the carvings?"

"I don't know," I told her truthfully. "They brought a couple of heavy packs that they haven't opened except to get food and booze out of."

"Well, I'd keep those packs away from the fire, if I were you," Aisha said.

I explained the developments to Bob and Kele. "Damn," Kele said, "Samuel isn't going to like this at all."

We made tea while we waited for Ned and Patrick to return from staking a claim on the lake. I took some video footage of them struggling through the rougher areas just for the heck of it, though.

Ned and Patrick arrived back at the campfire, cold, wet, and muddy up to their chests. We built up the fire to help them dry out and poured them some tea.

Then I laid it on Ned, the whole thing, from my throne on the lawn chair, while Patrick made his way down the steep hillside to rinse the mud out of their clothes. Ned stood by the packs, buck naked and covered with goosebumps, and listened to me. He slowly rotated by the fire, getting ashes in his hair.

While I was talking Bob brought over the empty shotgun shell from Patrick's blast last night. I looked at it, nodded, and passed it to Kele, who passed it to Ned. The shotgun, it appeared, was loaded with buckshot.

Buckshot's good for larger animals, and not much good for ducks. And nothing but ducks and rabbits were open season. Ned tossed the shell into the fire. I looked over towards the tree where the shotgun still leaned untended.

"So I'm to be the hero," he said, his eyes tight and more ash settling on his shoulders, chest hair, and dreams. "The protector of the petroglyphs. The man who doesn't care about money." The wind picked up, dumping more ash on him, and making him shiver. Patrick came back up the hill, still in his wet clothes, although I could see that he'd gone for a dip to get most of the mud off. Ned took his wet clothes, wrung some of the water out, and hung them over branches and twigs to the wind. Patrick added a few branches to the fire, and stood carefully to one side, shivering a bit.

"If you've got mud in your pants," Kele pointed out, "You'll have a sore crotch by the time you get back to your boat." Patrick nodded, but didn't disrobe.

"Have you guys reached a decision?" Patrick asked, looking around to Ned.

"They're offering me fame instead of fortune," Ned said, who was now drying his shorts and socks on a stick over the fire. "I get credit for finding everything, and maybe the lake named after me. I repeat my offer to you to share everything." He looked up at his partner.

"Maybe I'll change my mind," he said. "But I don't think so right now."

There was a long silence. The morning got older, the year edged closer to cold white snow, and across miles of hills and golden woods and past some small blue lakes an old, old man was going into winter watching his diamond dream slip through his fingers. We made tea for both of them, and served it into the cups they hauled out of the big packs.

The morning dragged on. Ned eventually put his underwear and socks on, then checked the rest of his clothes, shrugged, and put them on. He hauled a bottle, half filled with good Irish whiskey, out of a pack. "It's all that's left," he explained. We followed him when he set off for the petroglyphs, Patrick following right behind.

At the petroglyphs, he poured a little bit onto the rock, then handed the bottle to Patrick, who took a very large swallow. I passed Ned some pipe tobacco. He set it onto the ground, then stood up.

"I guess us protectors had better get going," he said, "take good care of these fine pictures."

"We should get some pictures of you, standing near these," I said. "Someone might want them someday."

"One picture," he said. He looked at Patrick, who finished the bottle and shook his head.

I took a good one. You could see a bit of the ash in his hair, and a sad look on his face.

They shook hands all around. "Send me a copy of the picture, when you've got it developed," he said.

"Don't forget the shotgun," I reminded him.

"You guys keep it. I designate you three as my assistants to guard the place."

He turned to follow Patrick, who was already disappearing into the bush. He didn't look back.

"Anyone for a cuppa?" Bob asked, when we were sure they were gone for good.

"I've got some apples," I said. "I think I'll take a couple over to the edge of the hill and eat them." And a couple more codeine pills for my head, I thought.

We sat most of the afternoon making small talk, and watching the turkey vultures circle in the wind. They didn't understand autumn. To Kele and Bob, half my age, there would always be more winters, more summers. The turkey vultures were just birds.

I wondered if they were the same birds I'd seen circling over Thomson Lake, the day I found George.

"This is life, as I'd like to live it," Bob said, lighting a cigarette. "Don't I just. I'm 'aving the best cracking great time I've 'ad in donkey's years. Have a deco at that 'ill over there." He waved out past the circling birds. "Done up like a dog's dinner, it is."

“This guy, he speaks English too?” I asked.

“And Canadian when he feels like it,” Kele said.

“And this is it?” Bob asked, looking over the lake to where hills in the colours of fall stood in the forest. “We’re ‘ome and dry? Nobody gets charged with owt? Nobody gets killed, except maybe for poor George? Nobody uses ‘igh explosive to blow away ‘alf a flippin’ ‘ill? Not even an ‘ey-lads-‘ey with knives and guns? Maybe nobody ever finds out if there are diamonds under our feet?”

There was a long pause. I looked at Kele. Kele looked at me. Kele shrugged: “Welcome to Canada.”

=====End =====

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