

A Winter Runaway

by

Peter Schaffter

The Percheron mare snorted. Her eyes slewed back, revealing white crescents. Cameron inched away, his boot heels sinking in the spongy straw. The mare regarded him uneasily. He took another step. This time, he struck the concrete of the aisle outside the stall.

The mare blew through her nostrils. *She smells blood*, Cameron thought. *Why can't I smell it, too?* He sniffed. Ammonia, manure, the mouldy funk of last year's hay—nothing but the odours of a damp, unheated stable.

Outside, the sun found an aperture in the clouds. The stable brightened, like a dimmer going up. The iron pipe in Cameron's hands grew warm. He backed into the aisle and set it on the floor. The metal clinked hollowly. The mare twitched. Big beasts shuffled in the other three stalls.

"Easy, girl, easy," Cameron cooed. The words came out hoarse but steady. The mare wasn't fooled. Soothing sounds weren't going to take away the dead man on the straw beneath her. She whinnied and danced sideways, hugging the outer wall. Cameron slid the stall door shut and pressed his forehead to the grate. The wire mesh felt good—cool, rough,

substantial. He pressed harder. The mare glared, wild-eyed and accusing.

The stable dimmed again as the sun slipped behind another cloud. Cameron straightened up. What now? Call Sclater? He couldn't hide, couldn't backtrack. The icy calm that had come over him while Linda spoke had served to make him more, not less, aware. He could have stopped himself. Instead, he'd let his limbs take over, observing while his body acted on its own.

The big door at the end of the stable framed a view that looked washed out, overexposed, even with the sun in hiding. Cameron stared out. A runnel-ridden drive veered to the right. Tattered remains of April snow lined the shallow ditches. Swallows pecked at the scant gravel. As Cameron watched, a large, black starling landed. The small birds rose and vanished. Seconds later they were back, streaming into the stable in a flurry of wings and noisy chittering.

The mare neighed, high and loud, a sound that tore through Cameron's guts. From the corner of his eye, he saw her body rise, forelegs bent. The floor shook when she crashed to earth. Cameron turned toward the stall. Inside, the corpse had shifted. The mare's left hoof had landed on his skull. The shock had rearranged his limbs. The hoof pick he'd been using when Cameron had struck him from behind had flown out of his hand.

The mare tossed her mane, shaking off her fear. It was as if her leg, planted on the skull, had claimed the body for her own.

Cameron began to tremble. Emotions that had gone on hold coursed through him like forgotten passion. Sinking down, he leaned his back against the stall and took a ragged breath.

Minutes passed in the stable's oddly incandescent gloom. Cameron rose and checked the stall. The mare's hoof hadn't moved. She seemed to have forgotten where it was. She lifted her tail and let loose a powerful, unhurried stream of piss.

Cameron pressed his forehead to the grate again. The urine smell was sharp, like overcooked spinach. He breathed deep and felt it bite his lungs.

Evidence of the blow he'd struck was gone, crushed beneath six hundred equine kilos. There'd be no questions, then. No police. After all, the horses here were known to kick, right? Cameron massaged his jaw, the irony too grim for smiling.

The sun did its now-you-see-me act again. Light flowed through a hay-flecked window in the stall. Cameron's gaze wandered past the mare's silhouette. Outside, the milky luminescence grew. Cameron closed his eyes.

Peace, like a weightless mantle, settled over him.

* * *

In an early memory, Donald Cameron snuggled up beside his mother on the chesterfield. From a nearby chair, his father belched.

“Motherfucker,” he muttered. “Goddamn little motherfucker. Betcha like it there, don’t you? Trying to get a lick of those tits again.”

He rose and staggered over, leering. Up close, his breath smelled sweet and putrid, like rotting grass. “Little motherfucker,” he swore again, and cuffed Cameron across the ear.

When Cameron was ten, his father got laid off. Cameron sat with his mother in the kitchen while she touched an ice cube to her cheek.

“He doesn’t mean it, Cam,” she said. “You know that. He isn’t always like this. He’s upset is all.”

Cameron listened while she salved herself with words. It seemed to help. She probed her jaw with cautious fingertips.

“Never try and stop him, Cam. Remember that. He’s too strong.”

At fifteen, Cameron came between his father, his mother, and the handle of an axe.

“Fell down the stairs,” the triage nurse wrote, eyebrows arched. A doctor fed him Demerol, bound his ribs, and set his collarbone. “There’ll be scarring,” he heard as a needle

stitched from brow to temple.

“Why, Cam?” his mother pleaded, driving home. “You can’t fight him. You know that. Just be there afterwards. It’s all I ask.”

* * *

Thirty years later, the memories flitted across Cameron’s mind. He batted them away and skied to a stop.

“See something?” he called to Orien Sclater.

The young constable pointed. “Over there.”

Cameron followed his gloved finger. A fenced-off hydro right-of-way descended the ridge they were on, crossed the valley floor, and climbed the facing hill. Halfway up, a prick of light winked through snow-clotted firs and cedars.

“Could just be mica in the granite.”

Sclater raised his binoculars. “I don’t think so. You see where it is, up off Dead Elk? We could have missed it before.”

The two men had covered Dead Elk Trail on ski-doo’s earlier that morning. When their search had turned up nothing, they’d gone back to Cameron’s, strapped on skis, and taken Spruce Bend, a trail higher up on the far side of the valley.

“Check it out?” Cameron suggested, hoping Sclater would decline. His call for help searching the Paxton Regional Ski-Doo Association trails for Rudy Geller’s missing Arctic Cat

had come at nine that morning. It was now two-thirty. Cameron had tests to grade for Monday. He didn't want to bring them on the bus to High River tomorrow. The Paxton Eagles played better when they forgot their coach taught geography as well.

Sclater slid big yellow goggles over his eyes. "Yeah, we'd better take a gander." He dug his poles into last night's storm-soft snow.

"Want to cut across?" Cameron suggested.

The right-of-way fell sharply, but would save three clicks of skiing along the ridge, down into the valley, across Six Mile Creek, and over to the back of Holtrop's farm where the Spruce Bend trail joined up with Dead Elk. A Do Not Enter sign warned against the shortcut—needlessly, since no ski-doo could squeeze around the sturdy Frost fence. Similar signs—diamond-shaped, yellow and black, half the size of their highway counterparts—advised of curves, intersections, bridges and cul-de-sacs the length of PARSA's trails. The markers went up as soon as the snowmobile season started, and came down once patches of mud started showing through the April snow.

"Your call, boss," Sclater grinned. Cameron had headed up the trail maintenance committee for three years. Sclater was new to the region, hired six months ago to the fledgling regional municipal police force.

Cameron watched while Sclater attacked the right-of-way, schussing cockily around the pylons as if he were at Whistler. His police-issue parka gleamed, as crisp and out-of-the-box as the man himself. *He's gonna land on his ass*, Cameron thought, and took off at a speed better suited to the edges of his cross-country skis.

Sclater didn't fall, but when Cameron caught up, he was doubled over, one hand on a metal fencepost, breathing hard.

"Steep," Cameron observed, nodding at the slope they'd climbed to get to Dead Elk from the valley floor.

Sclater grimaced. "Right." The word left a rueful puff of condensation in the air.

Cameron skied off. The sun had burned a layer of snow off features shrouded earlier that day. A few metres past a fallen birch, Cameron spotted a gap between two boulders.

"About here?" he yelled.

Sclater straightened up. "Looks right."

He skied over, breathing easy now. The opening, just right for a ski-doo, rose and widened to a path that disappeared behind a clump of cedars. Cameron knelt and unsnapped his bindings. Sclater ventured on, looking for a skiable way up. When he returned, Cameron was already punching through the knee-deep snow.

"It's here, all right," Cameron called over his shoulder. "I can see the windscreen."

Sclater removed his skis and high-stepped through Cameron's footprints.

The glossy purple of the chassis was visible, but powdery drifts cambered over the seat. Cameron walked around, kicking them away.

"At least it wasn't an accident," he said. "Looks like he just parked it here."

Chaco Geller, Rudy's son, had made off on his father's Cat the night before. Rudy had waited till morning to report him missing, sounding more pissed off than worried.

"Jim Holtrop heard someone coming 'round from the Geller place around six," Sclater had told Cameron. "About twenty minutes later, Chester Bennett heard someone on that stretch of Dead Elk at the back of his pasture where it heads over your way. And Wilma, his wife, says she saw lights a couple of hours later, going the other direction. Folks were staying in on account of the storm. It must have been the Geller kid."

Kid, Cameron thought. You're what? Twenty-two? You can't have more than five years on him.

Sclater knocked snow from the idler wheels with the toe of his boot. "Breakdown, you think?"

"Hard to say. Did you get keys?"

Sclater extracted a yellow-tagged keyring from his breast pocket. Cameron legged up over the seat and tried the

ignition. The motor rolled over without complaint. He revved experimentally, listening to the roar crash back across the valley, then shut it off and dismounted.

A metal bracket with hinged clips dangled open from the luggage rack behind the seat. Cameron nodded toward it.

“His shoes are gone.”

“Shoes?”

“Snowshoes. A lot of guys have these things welded on the back to carry them. The farrier out by Dawe’s Lake does it.”

“You think he just walked off?”

Cameron pursed his lips. The right-of-way mounted the hill they were standing on and decanted into Rudy Geller’s sugar bush. But it also went the other way, climbing over Spruce Bend Ridge and down to Highway 40. *Shortest distance between two points*, he thought.

“We can take look around if you want,” he replied halfheartedly.

The storm had obliterated any tracks. After twenty minutes of circling, Cameron parked his butt on the ski-doo’s lushly padded seat.

“We should get this thing back to Geller’s,” he said.

Sclater glanced up from clearing snow off the path between the boulders and the cedars. “You don’t think we’ll find anything?”

“Nope.”

Sclater seemed torn. *What’s he thinking?* Cameron wondered. *There’s a body someplace?*

“Chaco’s run off,” he said. “Not much we can do about it here.”

“You sure?”

Cameron looked across the valley, following the white swath of the right-of-way.

“Yeah, I’m sure.”

* * *

The two split up, Sclater skiing back to Cameron’s for his cruiser, Cameron taking the Arctic Cat to Geller’s by way of Dead Elk.

The sun was with him on the hill’s southern face, but when the trail snaked around the eastern slope, Cameron knew the folly of riding suitless and without a helmet. He throttled down, cutting the wind by half.

The trail split in two at the base of the hill. The right branch crossed Jim Holtrop’s fields, toward Bourne and Clough; the left meandered through Rudy Geller’s sugar bush and joined up with the High River Trail, heading north to Paxton.

PARSA had permission to cross the hydro right-of-way

here, where it nicked a corner off Geller's property. Twenty metres past the pylons, Cameron turned into Geller's pasture. Four shaggy-coated horses looked up from nuzzling the snow for last year's grass. He stopped outside the stable beside a tarted-up sleigh and yelled inside. No one answered. Unhitching a wire gate, he carried on down to the house.

The two-storey needed paint. In places, layers of white had flaked back to the siding. In contrast, a Kubota near the garage sported a fresh coat of Men-At-Work orange. Cameron parked beside a pickup with block-and-tackle scaffolding mounted over the cavity where the motor had been.

The storm door still had its summer screen, flapping loose in one corner. Cameron opened up and knocked. When no one answered, he peered through the window. The kitchen was dark. He rapped harder and stood back.

A moment later, a woman's face appeared, pale and unmadeup, half the features obscured by limp, blond hair. The door opened a crack.

"Yes?" The inflection was flat and incurious.

"Linda Geller? Donald Cameron. We found your ski-doo." He tilted his head back at the gutted pickup.

"Where?"

"Off Dead Elk, near the right-of-way."

She nodded, a barely perceptible movement, as if confirming something to herself.

“Is Rudy around?” Cameron asked.

“Delivering wood out Bourne way.”

Like many locals, Geller supplied cottagers in the area with pre-split, corded firewood. The same part-time residents provided him with construction jobs and plumbing contracts. In February and March, they paid for tours of his sugar bush.

“Mind if I come in? That new constable, Orien Sclater, should be here soon.”

She flipped on a light and stood back. The kitchen was big, furnished like most others around Paxton: a chipped gas range, round-shouldered fridge, and a scarred pine table weekenders would pay a fortune for. Patterned linoleum covered the floor, split and lifting under the counters. A game freezer—obviously new—took up most of one wall. A Lay-Z-Boy held pride of place beside it.

Cameron stepped in. The air was hot and close, heavy with the smell of last night’s steaks.

“You want coffee or something?” Linda asked.

Cameron shrugged out of his coat. “Sure.”

He pulled out a chair, watching her spoon coffee from a Folger’s tin. She lit the stove with a kitchen match and turned around. Her hair still hid the right side of her face, but Cameron thought he recognised her. Four years back in Paxton and he was still running into people he hadn’t seen since high school.

“You’re Chaco’s teacher?” she asked, staying beside the stove.

“And coach.”

“You look familiar. From around here?”

“Used to be. Guess I am again. And you—Paxton High, right? Won the county-wides in math two years running?”

“Didn’t get me very far. Marks don’t mean shit if you can’t get out of Paxton.” She’d said it before. Often. So often it no longer sounded bitter, just tired. “You an ex-Paxie too?”

He shook his head. “Clough Secondary.”

“You had a lousy hockey team.”

The jibe sounded apathetic, a reflex from the past when things like school spirit mattered. She tried for a smile, brushing the hair off her face. An angry purple bruise came into view. She saw the flicker in Cameron’s eyes.

“Horse got me,” she said, toying with her hair as if she weren’t trying to conceal the bruise again.

Cameron felt himself go still, retreating to the numb place where all he could do was sit and listen.

The percolator burbled, experimentally at first, then in earnest. Linda got milk out of the fridge. “Sugar?”

“Yeah.”

She set the fixings on the table. “Where’d you go?”

At first, he thought she meant his silence. “La Grange,” he said, figuring it out. “Northern Saskatchewan.”

“And now you’re back.” She made it sound as if no one ever escaped.

“Seems so.”

“Why?”

“Reasons.”

She doesn’t ask about Chaco, he realised. The little nod earlier, at the door: she knew—the right-of-way led directly to the highway, but you had to hike across.

The heat of the kitchen seeped into him. A memory from La Grange unthawed in the soporific warmth: a kitchen, smaller than this, stuffier. The acrid smell of day-old tea stewing on the back of the stove. The old Cree woman, Mrs. Charles, a paper trembling in her weathered hands. *He asked for your help, Mr. Cameron. My daughter read me this. Danny’s note. He asked for your help. Why didn’t you give it?*

Linda brought his coffee in a thick, faded mug. It smelled weak, not much good against his loginess. He added milk and double sugar, tasted it, and nodded thanks.

“There’s more if you want,” she said. “I’ve got dishes to do up.”

* * *

Sclater’s knock came sooner than expected. *Either he’s a biathlete or he drove with the flashers on*, Cameron thought.

Linda answered, letting in a blast of cold air.

“Mizz Geller? Constable Sclater. I have to ask you some questions.” He sounded as earnest as a kid in a school play.

She opened wider. Cameron greeted him with a one-finger salute.

“I guess Mr. Cameron here filled you in?” he said, staying on the plastic runner inside the door.

“Yeah. You want to take your coat off?”

“Sure, thanks.”

He shucked off his parka, careful to keep his boots on the narrow runner. He was a big guy, probably six-foot-three; the constraint made him look like a mime doing “stuck in a pool of glue”.

“Don’t worry about the floor,” Linda said. “Needs washing anyway. You want coffee or something?”

“No, thank you, ma’am.”

Cameron half-expected him to add *I’m on duty*. The regional police hired young, figuring a rookie would be grateful for any job, even one at twenty-four thou a year. It was a one-way ticket to corruption, but the regional council had decided, in its wisdom, to underpay the police and rebuild the town hall.

Sclater stepped over to the table, checking behind for puddles. Linda stayed near the door, hugging her ribcage.

“Mr. Cameron thinks your son ran off,” he said, taking the

chair Cameron had pulled back.

Linda nodded.

“Has he done it before?”

She shook her head.

“Any reason he might now?”

“He and my husband had a fight.”

“They do that often?”

She made little sound like *pfft*.

“You want to tell me about it?”

She rubbed her arms. It looked as if her teeth were chattering. “Family stuff,” she said. “Teenage stuff.”

Sclater glanced at Cameron—*Why isn't she helping?* Cameron kept his expression neutral. Sclater had a lot to learn about family disputes.

“They were out in the stable,” Linda said. “Chaco came in, got suited up, and took off.”

“You didn’t try to stop him? It was blowing pretty hard last night.”

“He was hurting. Nothing much I could do.”

“Did he say where he was going?”

A sound outside caught Linda’s attention. A truck was rattling up the drive. Her eyes darted to the door.

“Some friend in Paxton. He didn’t say, so’s Rudy wouldn’t come after him. The Cat’s new this year. Rudy wouldn’t let him near it.”

The truck rumbled to a halt. Linda edged into the room.

“The Holtrops next door say he rode out around six,” Sclater carried on. “We think he headed back this way around nine. Mr. Cameron says he would have had snowshoes with him, but they’re gone. You think he hiked over to the highway and thumbed a ride?”

She shook her head as if she hadn’t heard him.

“If he made it to the city, is there anyone he’d stay with? Friends? Relatives?”

“I don’t know. Really, I—”

The door swung open before she could finish. Rudy Geller stood on the stoop, taking in the visitors to his kitchen. Linda hugged herself tighter.

“I see you found the Cat,” he said, kicking his boots on the doorstep. “You get that boy of mine, too?”

“No, sir,” Sclater replied.

Geller shot him a look like *Who the hell are you?* and went on cleaning his boots. “Colder’n’a witch’s tit out there,” he said, finally coming in. “My wife get you something?”

Cameron held up his coffee mug. Geller nodded, unzipped his windbreaker, and made for the Lay-Z-Boy. He was about Cameron’s age, but moved with the stiffness of a man who’s driven his body hard. He sat down and pulled off an orange “Powered by CASE” cap, scratching the back of his head. His hand came forward with a blood-caked square of gauze. He

looked at it with disgust.

“Linda, what the fuck is this? I don’t want the goddamn thing coming off every two minutes. It’s supposed to stay put. Get it? *Stay there.*” He tossed the bandage at her and addressed Cameron and Sclater. “Horse got me. Bitch couldn’t stick a Band-Aid on a rat’s cunt.”

Linda bent and picked the gauze off the floor. Her hair fell away from her face when she stood. “Same horse as got you, Linda?” Cameron asked *sotto voce*.

She coloured.

“Do something about this,” Geller ordered, jerking his thumb at the back of his head. “And get me a beer while you’re at it.”

She obeyed silently.

“Don’t!” he yelled when she made to open it. “You always fuck it up. I hate it when there’s foam in the neck.” He grabbed it away from her.

Linda retreated while he popped the bottle and polished the lip on his sleeve.

Sclater cleared his throat. “I was just asking your wife, Mr. Geller, if Chaco knows anyone in the city.”

Geller sucked back half his beer. “Whatcha wanna know that for?”

“It looks as if he may have run away—”

“No shit. But the little pussy don’t have no friends in

town. Can't say's he's got any around here either. Little fucker sure picked his time. I got a gang booked for rides out back, *and* I gotta be up at Dawe's Lake to plough out cottages. How'm I supposed to be two places at once?"

"You don't know where he might be, then?"

"Around heres someplace, you can bet on it. But you find him, he's gonna wish he'd hightailed it all the way to fuckin' China." He downed the other half of his beer. "Leastways he didn't wreck the Cat. Linda! You gonna be all fuckin' day?"

Sclater opened his mouth. From the look on his face, he was about to make an enemy. Cameron cut him off.

"Orien," he said smoothly, "I think it's time we got going. Rudy here's got a lot of things to do. Right, Rudy?"

Geller raised his empty bottle. *Here's a man who knows how things are.* Cameron pushed back from the table. Sclater rose, blindsided by Cameron's unexpected, easy use of manners to avoid, deflect, defuse.

* * *

"He couldn't tell you anything," Cameron said out in the cruiser. "Chaco's not the first kid from around here to run away. Most times, the parents haven't got a clue."

Sclater turned the ignition. "They didn't seem all that worried, either. What's the matter with them? Don't they

care?”

“If Chaco’s in the city, he’ll show up at Testament House sooner or later. They know that.” *And they care. At least, one of them does.*

Sclater adjusted the heat and waited for the windshield to clear. The rush of air smelled of new car. Cameron watched the frost retreat up the glass. The sun was getting low, flushing the snow pink and casting long blue shadows. *Just like in La Grange*, he thought, *except there, it would be earlier in the day*. For a moment, he was back in the tribal school, staring at a winter afternoon through frost-edged windows. “Mr. Cameron? We have some news about Danny Charles...”

Sclater slipped the cruiser into reverse, backed into the drive, and headed down to the road. “You get a load of that bruise on her cheek?” he asked, turning left at a plywood sign advertising Geller’s sugar bush.

Cameron’s mouth tightened. “Looks like she fell down the stairs again.”

Sclater shot him a puzzled look.

“He beats her,” Cameron explained.

“Yeah?” Sclater fixed his eyes on the road, trying to hide his reaction. *He wants me to think it’s old hat*, Cameron realised.

Sclater wasn’t good at dissembling. “The kid, too, you think?” he asked farther on.

“They teach you anything at police school?”

Sclater’s cheeks reddened. Cameron felt an unexpected stab of affection, a real fondness for this rookie constable half his age.

“Nothing you can do about it, Orien, whatever they told you,” he said. “The law’s on the victims’ side, but not much else.”

The next kilometre slid by in silence. Snowbanks lined the road, high and fresh, hugging the asphalt. It was like driving through a private winter wonderland.

Sclater turned south on High River Road at the boarded-up Riverview Motel.

“I hear you taught on a reservation,” he said. “You see a lot of that kind of thing up there?”

“Some.”

Cameron rarely talked about La Grange. Nothing had been proven—there’d been nothing to prove—but he’d agreed with the tribal board when they suggested he resign. Danny’s note, implying a relationship that wasn’t there, would stick in people’s minds. *Right. As if that’s the reason the place was dead to me.*

He sought a way to make up for his uncommunicativeness. “Where’re you from?” he asked.

“Down east. Nova Scotia.”

“What part?”

“Annapolis Valley. Near Wolfville. My dad grows apples.” Sclater’s chest puffed up.

“Big family?”

“Six brothers, two sisters.”

Cameron nodded. Sclater’s brand of naive decency could only come from strong ties forged around a crowded supper table.

“You, Mr. Cameron?”

“Cam. Even my mother calls me that. And I was an only.”

“Your folks still around?”

“Mom’s with a sister out west. The old man died a couple of years back.”

“You miss ’em?”

Cameron shrugged, not sure whether Sclater had said “him” or “them”.

The sun had sunk behind the hills across High River when Sclater turned into Cameron’s. Dusk painted his four rented hectares an inky, surreal blue. The cedar-beam house was nearly invisible against the trees. Sclater pulled up in front, his lights hitting the lean-to where Cameron kept firewood and his two ski-doo—the

“About Chaco?” Cameron said, not wanting to leave the cruiser right away. “A kid doesn’t run away unless he’s got something to run from.”

“I have to file a report.”

“I know. Just don’t go looking for him too hard. It won’t be better where he ends up, but at least it’ll feel like his choice.” He thought of Regina, Winnipeg: teenagers, mostly Cree, selling themselves for a few bucks—more if clients wanted to ride them bareback. They didn’t love the life, but they didn’t want to go back, either.

“It doesn’t seem right,” Sclater said.

“I know.”

Cameron chewed his lip; he’d said as much as he could. He opened the door and got out. The cold brought water to his eyes.

“Do what you’ve got to do, Orien, but don’t go gangbusters on this, okay?”

* * *

Sclater didn’t follow his advice. Too young and green to know the many sides of mercy, he couldn’t let go of Chaco’s disappearance.

“How’d he get that name, anyway?” he asked a few weeks later in Cameron’s kitchen. “Sounds like something you’d expect in a movie where every second guy is called Bubba.”

Cameron cracked a beer. It seemed natural, somehow, for Sclater to have started dropping by, weekends, or after a shift of highway patrol.

“At school. You know that game, murder ball? Two teams either side of the gym knocking out opponents with volleyballs? Team with the last man standing wins?”

“We called it dodge ball.”

“Depends on how hard you play.” Cameron handed Sclater the beer. “Wayne—Chaco—hated it. Refused to pick up a ball and throw it. Games used to end with him and some bruiser on the other side trying to cream him. There was an *X-Files* rerun one night about a chicken franchise serving up body parts along with drumsticks. *Chaco’s Chicken*. Chaco ... chicken... The guys started chanting it, and the name stuck.”

Sclater pulled out his wallet. He’d taken to carrying Chaco’s yearbook photo around.

“Good-looking kid, though,” he commented.

“You mean he doesn’t look like a sissy.”

Sclater didn’t even look up. He’d figured out Cameron was gay, mentioned it once, and hadn’t cared since.

“He’s good at sports,” Cameron said. “Plays on the Eagles. Better on defence than offence, but he’s strong. And he’s a good outdoorsman, too.”

“Yeah?”

“Doesn’t go in for shooting, but he knows the trails like nobody’s business. Took his first group of hunters out last fall. And he keeps Rudy’s winter trap lines.”

Cameron enjoyed these visits. For a man who gauged his affective life by the distance he'd travelled from the past, it was like a new experience, investing in companionship this way. The two men had already buddied up on PARSA trail grooming.

Uprighting a toppled Bridge-Narrows-To-One-Lane sign one Sunday, near where Chaco had abandoned the Arctic Cat, Sclater asked about Geller's traps.

"Marten and hare, mostly," Cameron replied.

"And you get to the lines from here?"

"Most of them. You know Geller owns this hill? From the sugarbush, right over the top and down to the orange flag there on that hydro pylon. I hear he's got traps on other folks' property, too, but no one's ever found them. Brush is too thick to go exploring unless you know where to look."

"Chaco would know, though, right?"

Cameron gave him a hand jamming the sign into the snow, then stepped back, eyeing the post's plumb.

"What are you thinking?" he asked Sclater. "Chaco got lost in the hills?" He shook his head. "You remember Geller's Cat when we found it? If Chaco'd been out checking lines, he'd have hitched up a trailer. That, and he wouldn't have made off on his dad's new toy."

Sclater looked over valley, at the right-of-way arching whitely over Spruce Bend Ridge. "And you figure he hiked to

the highway from here? It's how far, you think?"

Cameron pursed his lips. "He'd do it," he answered obliquely.

"Wouldn't it make more sense to take Spruce Bend and leave the ski-doo over there? The highway's just the other side."

Cameron couldn't come up with an answer to that.

A week later, over pizza at The Rainbow Grill in Paxton—Sclater's twenty-third birthday—Sclater brought up the highway again.

"You remember the storm that night? There were road crews clearing that stretch of highway nearly every half hour. Nobody remembers a kid thumbing a ride."

Cameron mmmph-ed through a mouthful of pepperoni.

"And if he made it to the city, why hasn't he shown up? The volunteers at Testament House have been showing his picture around. Nothing."

Cameron wiped his mouth and sat back, staring long at Sclater. *Do I tell him this?* he wondered. *And how much do tell him?* A fragment of Reba McEntire separated itself from the din of the stuffy diner:

*In anger he strikes out and she starts to cry
How much more can she take?
How much more can she lie?
And she fell down the stairs again...*

“Maybe he didn’t make it,” Cameron said.

Sclater looked up, an oily slice of pizza halfway to his mouth. Cameron never voiced doubts. It was a game, a friendship ritual: Sclater queried, Cameron parried.

“Five years ago,” Cameron said, “up in La Grange, one of my students disappeared. Danny Charles. His family situation was bad. Dad beat the shit out of the kids. Got so I hardly ever saw Danny without a mouse under his eye.

“He used to hang around after school, talking, putting off going home. One day he just never showed up. Everybody knew what was going on at home, figured he ran away. Even in winter, there’s always timber going out of La Grange.

“He didn’t run away, though. Not like that. They found him and his dad’s twenty-two on an island in the middle of the lake. He didn’t do a very good job. They say he bled to death.”

Sclater’s eyes went wide. *Shit*, Cameron thought. *He doesn’t need to hear this. The worst thing to hit this guy’s life is that he isn’t married yet with a thousand kids.*

“I don’t think that’s what happened here, though,” he said, backtracking.

“How can you be sure?”

Cameron tried for a smile, taking the edge off. “The universe wouldn’t be that nasty. Not twice.”

* * *

Telling Sclater about La Grange, Cameron knew he was edging nearer to another disclosure, one he should have made sooner, back when Sclater had started dropping by. But he hadn't known then that they'd become friends, any more than he'd known that Sclater would sustain his interest in Chaco Geller.

In the end, what Cameron hadn't told him, Sclater figured out for himself.

"I've been thinking," he said some time later, ensconced in Cameron's recliner while Cameron stirred up a fire. The dying orange light and a saved-up birthday bottle of Crown Royal had kept him quiet for the past few minutes. "Linda Geller said Chaco had a friend in Paxton, right?"

"What you'd expect," Cameron said over his shoulder.

"So why'd he ride out on Dead Elk? The shortest route to Paxton is through his Dad's sugar bush."

"Linda didn't know exactly where he was going, remember?"

"I know. But except for where it comes out at your place, the only properties along Dead Elk are Bennett's and Holtrop's. They don't have any kids Chaco's age."

Cameron closed the firescreen and rose. Sclater waved at the rye, telling Cameron to help himself.

“What’s even weirder is,” Sclater carried on, “he came back the same way. That is, if the lights Wilma Bennett saw around nine were him.”

Cameron poured two fingers and stretched out on the couch. Shadows danced between the crossbeams of the ceiling. Sclater drained his glass. When he spoke again, he almost sounded sorry.

“He came here, didn’t he, Cam?”

* * *

Snow swirled in the blackness behind Chaco Geller. With his helmet off, big flakes were already caking in his hair.

“I was out was checking my Dad’s traps,” he said, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

Cameron took in the idling Arctic Cat, the absence of a trailer for kill. Students dropped in as a lark from time to time, but not at night, not in heavy snow.

“You want to come in?” he asked. “You can put the Cat over by the woodpile. There’s a spare cover at the far end.”

He watched while Chaco parked the machine. He had his snowshoes clipped on back; the rawhide lacing at the tips had been mended with fluorescent green plastic strips that glowed in the light from the door.

“Can I get you something?” he asked inside as Chaco

struggled with his suit. “Beer?” At seventeen, the offer would sound man-to-man, even if coffee or hot chocolate made more sense.

“Sure.”

When Cameron came back, Chaco was lowering himself into the recliner, using his arms for support.

“Been out a while?” Cameron asked, noting the stiffness.

“Yeah.”

Cameron cracked two cans of beer and handed one over. Chaco reached for it and grimaced.

“Hurt yourself?”

“It’s okay.”

Cameron started laying kindling for a fire, taking his time. He wasn’t going to pretend that Chaco Geller wasn’t a good-looking kid; that on some level, his showing up like this didn’t have potential for something he’d never act on.

He touched a match to the wood, adding birch logs when the flames caught. Behind him, Chaco was silent. Cameron balanced a hunk of split spruce on top and turned around. Chaco’s eyes were on him, but unfocused.

That’s more than thawing out, Cameron thought. Chaco’s beer was on a sidetable. When he noticed Cameron watching him, he twisted round to get it. A hiss of pain escaped him. Cameron raised an eyebrow.

“Horse kicked me,” Chaco said, upending his beer, trying

to sound tough. The effort cost him. He looked as if he might throw up.

“When?”

“Tonight.” He scowled, as if he hadn’t wanted to admit it.

“You want me to have a look?”

“Sure.” He smiled weakly. “Coach.”

He had on a checkered chamois shirt. Cameron undid the buttons and peeled back the thick material. A sick feeling washed through him. The left side of Chaco’s ribcage was awash in mottled blue. Cameron knew bruises, the difference between what a check against the boards looked like versus a stick in the ribs. A stick might have done this—or several—but no hoof.

He probed the ribs, keeping his thoughts to himself. Chaco had lied—without much conviction, if he was letting Cameron see this. He’d explain. Cameron could wait. For a second, his mind delivered up an image of Danny Charles.

“Must hurt,” he said, deftly palpating below the ribcage for other injuries.

“Yeah.”

“You want me to bind it for you?”

The colour suddenly fled Chaco’s face. “I don’t feel so good, Mr. Cameron,” he said through clenched teeth.

Cameron helped him to the bathroom, where he vomited into the sink. Tears rimmed his eyes when he straightened

up. He sniffed a couple of times. "Sorry."

Cameron handed him a facecloth, allowing him space to gather his dignity, and hunted up tensor bandage and butterfly clips. Chaco bent over the sink, splashed water in his mouth, then passed the cloth over his face and stood, arms out, so Cameron bandage him from behind. Thick welts plaited the bruises on his back. He flinched and muttered "Sorry" when the fabric tightened over them. Cameron touched his shoulder, telling him to turn around. Chaco shivered violently.

"Better get that shirt back on," Cameron said, fastening the tensor.

Chaco nodded quickly.

The fire was throwing off too much heat. Cameron adjusted the draught and kneed the recliner closer. By reflex, he wiped a smear of grime from the leather seat. When he rubbed his fingers together, he saw that it was blood. He glanced at Chaco, dressing by the hearth. A damp spot darkened the back seam of his jeans. *Right. Show me the horse that did that.*

"I'll fix you something," he said. "Just try to make yourself comfortable."

He came back with a mug of weak tea. Chaco was in the recliner, eyes closed. Cameron studied the rise and fall of the chamois shirt, and went for a blanket instead.

A half hour passed. Cameron drank the tea, wondering not if he should ask, but when Chaco would volunteer. He knew how it worked: the need to talk, the sullen resentment if you pried. He saw Danny Charles' face in the fire, heard his excuses—fell out of a tree, walked into a door, tripped, got in a fight—begging Cameron to call the lie, ashamed to tell the truth.

The spruce log slipped, sending up a shower of sparks. Cameron hunkered down and poked at it with an andiron.

"I know about you, Mr. Cameron."

Cameron looked over his shoulder. Chaco's eyes were half-open; he might be talking in his sleep. "Know?"

"What you are."

Male, forty-five, unmarried, no girlfriend. Boys would rumour even if it weren't true. He turned back to the fire.

"It weren't no horse."

Cameron replaced the andiron. "I know."

"He found some stuff in the stable. My dad. Stuff I hid there. Magazines. Pictures of guys." The words sounded lazy, drugged. "He'd had a few beers. He took me out to the stable and started in with a two-by-two. I couldn't do anything. I wanted to hit back, but I couldn't."

Cameron nodded, a movement more for himself than Chaco. He fought the urge to change position. *Better to stay this way, immobile, as if invisible.*

“I thought it was over. Then he undid his pants. Said if I wanted to be a fag, he was going to show me what it was like.”

Frozen by the revelation and aroused by its intimacy, Cameron could find no words.

“I want to kill him.”

Danny Charles rose in the flames again, his long hair falling forward over black, defeated eyes. *I want him dead, Mr. Cameron. You gotta help me. I can't do it. Please. I want him dead.*

Cameron turned around. Chaco's eyes were closed. The blanket had fallen off. His hand was shoved into his jeans, seeking solace like a little boy, but inside the denim crotch, his body was responding like a man. Cameron moved to cover him again. The eyes drifted open. Chaco laid his free hand on Cameron's wrist, pulling it to his belly.

“You could, if you wanted.”

Kill Rudy? Or was he saying something else? *Comfort me, slide your hand to where mine curls inside my jeans.* Either way, Cameron heard only trust. *Trust that I will, trust that I won't.*

He extracted his hand. “I can't, Chaco,” he said. Then again, declining twice: “I'm sorry. I can't.”

Chaco's lids slid shut. His lips parted, taking on the fullness of sleep. “S'okay,” he muttered. “S'okay.”

* * *

Cameron twisted his head and looked sideways at Sclater. "He left an hour later. I watched him go. Last thing I saw was the snowshoes. He must have used something reflective on the tips. I could see them, green, like two eyes, all the way to the edge of the bush."

He waited. In the firelight, Sclater's features had taken on sombre shadows.

"You wondering why I let him go?"

Sclater shook his head. "You knew he wasn't going home."

"He seemed strong enough. I figured he'd be okay to manage the ski-doo."

Sclater held up his tumbler, squinting through it at the fire. "Still doesn't tell us why he went back the way he did. Along Dead Elk."

Of all the things he could have said, the questions he could have raised, he'd chosen the one least loaded, the one that didn't pry—a bit of unfinished business, a puzzle two guys could gnaw on over beers, after work, out on the trails.

Cameron raised his glass in a silent toast.

* * *

Winter lasted long that year. A big snow hit in the middle of March, then again in April. It wasn't till the fourth week of spring that Cameron and Sclater, along with others, started rounding up the PARSA trail markers. By that time, Chaco Geller had receded to a face on the IGA corkboard. *Have you seen this child?* Sclater's queries had eased up, too; Chaco was "the Geller kid" now. Agencies in the city knew that if Chaco showed up, they should call him before setting wheels in motion.

Cameron was alone the day he found Chaco's snowshoes. Sclater had been called to Bourne to investigate a break-in; Cameron was finishing the last of the trails, the one that went through Rudy Geller's sugar bush. A flash of green caught his eye, one that didn't fit with the dappled trout lilies pushing up the length of the hydro right-of-way. Propped against a pylon, the shoes, with their fluorescent plastic caning at the tips, were unmistakable.

Cameron crouched down. The tapered tails pierced the spongy April loam. Unwilling to disturb them, he touched the rounded tips like a person reading Braille.

Chaco had come back. He'd parked the Cat over the hill where no one would hear, then hiked across. He'd removed his snowshoes so he wouldn't waste time close to the house. He'd crossed the pasture on the track laid down by the ski-doo. He'd been after something, obviously. What? Money?

Cameron removed his hand. The lingering sensation of tensile wood on his fingertips wasn't going to tell him any more.

He already knew.

* * *

Linda didn't seem surprised to see Cameron. She stared through the door, then mutely opened up. He stooped to remove his boots and went directly to the table. She watched as he drew back two chairs.

"Coffee?"

He shook his head. "Rudy around?"

"Out in the stable."

She joined him, not bothering to pull in her chair. Up close, he could see her face was blotched with fatigue. Or maybe her bruises had been refreshed a few times.

"I found Chaco's snowshoes," Cameron said.

"Yeah?" Her voice held little interest. "Where?"

"Bottom of the right-of-way, near the pasture."

She nodded. Her eyes were dull, as if they'd lost their connection to the soul.

"Where is he, Linda?"

She might not have heard.

"I know he's dead," Cameron persevered. "I just want to

know where he is.”

She looked away. “He’ll kill me.”

“Rudy?”

“Yes.” In profile, her face held no expression. The lack of animation could have passed for serenity. “He said he’d kill me.”

“Then don’t say where he is.”

She understood. *Tell me, but don’t say anything that will put you in danger.* She turned back.

“Rudy was out in the stable. One of the mares had split a hoof. He wanted to tar it up. I didn’t know Chaco had come back.” She spoke tonelessly, as if she’d rehearsed the lines. Perhaps she had, against the day someone showed up, like Cameron.

“Rudy came in with a gash on his head. I thought he’d been kicked. Or maybe fallen. He’d been at the bottle before he went out. He said Chaco attacked him. Came up from behind and whacked him with a pipe. Chaco was going to kill him.”

“You know why?”

A spark rose in the lifeless eyes. “Yeah.”

“What happened?”

“He didn’t hit Rudy hard enough. He wanted to kill him, but he couldn’t. He didn’t know how to hit.”

Cameron studied the smudges under her eyes. *You, either.*

“Rudy kept calling him a pussy. Kept saying Chaco was such a fuck-up he couldn’t even sneak up on his old man and kill him right.”

“Where was Chaco when Rudy came in?”

Something in the question brought forth an exhalation, a mocking sound that could have been directed at herself. “Outside,” she said, looking down.

A chill brushed Cameron’s skin, like the breeze from an open window on his neck at night.

“Rudy got the pipe away and started in on him. I don’t know how long he was at it. He ended up stringing Chaco from a hook outside the stable. Naked. I don’t know what he was planning.

“He came in, bleeding, swearing at me to fix his head. I got the Mercurochrome, but when I put it on, he flinched. I dropped the bottle. That’s when he hit me.”

She looked up, asking reassurance that Cameron understood, that this was somehow in the normal course of things.

“I don’t remember much else. You get good at forgetting the details.” From somewhere, she called up a smile. Cameron’s chill turned to ice.

“He must have knocked me out. It was near five when I woke up. He was at the table here, snoring. Chaco was outside all that time.”

Against the far wall, the fridge shuddered on, rattling at

first, then settling down. Cameron felt himself drawn in, trapped by its steady hum. His thoughts went to Chaco. *You could, if you wanted. Danny. You gotta help me. Please.* His mother. *You can't fight him.* An image formed: three trains on separate tracks all headed for the same junction.

"He made me take Chaco down," he heard Linda saying. "He stood there, yelling all the time like it was Chaco's fault."

In Cameron's head, the locomotives met; the collision dislocated him. He watched himself watching Linda, saw the way he tried to stop her when she spoke again.

"Rudy put him in the manure pile out back. It was the only place that wasn't frozen solid."

He felt his lips move. "Why are you telling me?"

Her voice reached him from a growing distance.

"He said he'd kill me."

A void opened up, a silence louder than the droning of the fridge. Cameron sought some way to fill it, to obviate the meaning of her words.

"I think I'll take that coffee, now," he went to say.

Instead, his mouth made different sounds.

"And you say Rudy's in the stable now?"

Linda nodded.

—END—