

“KC, stay.” The years of training showed as KC immediately became motionless.

“Good boy,” Jake reinforced as he quickly clipped on the dog’s leash. Jake didn’t know what to expect, but he sure didn’t want KC running headlong into the cabin and trouble he couldn’t handle.

Jake pulled his shotgun from its case in the back of the truck and chambered three shells. Rather than approach the cabin directly, however, he circled. The cabin was situated one hundred feet from the lake on a two-acre clearing in the forest, giving Jake plenty of room to observe, but he was losing light rapidly.

He moved slowly.

KC continued to bark and tug at the leash.

Rounding the corner of the cabin, Jake saw that the front, lakeside door was open as well. He’d been meticulous in closing up when he left in September, just two months ago. Besides, the Millers would have called if something serious had occurred—and if not them, then someone else. The few people who lived on Arrowhead Peninsula were always looking out for each other, making sure that damage from weather or vandalism didn’t get worse by going unchecked.

As Jake and KC approached the open lakeside door, a big gray squirrel ran from inside the cabin across the wooden deck.

“Terrific!” he murmured under his breath. While squirrels were the least of his worries, he knew this was not a good sign.

Moving closer to the elevated cedar deck, Jake called out, “Is anybody here?”

No answer.

By now it was almost dark and the shadows of an emerging moon low on the horizon made it difficult to see inside the cabin.

Jake decided to take KC back to the truck, which would free him to approach the cabin with both hands on the shotgun. An open cabin in the deep forest could mean a lot of things—none of them good.

As he returned to the Yukon, Jake instinctively checked for fresh vehicle tracks in the soft dirt of the driveway. He saw nothing in the truck’s headlights that would indicate another car or truck.

“KC, kennel!” The dog responded immediately and jumped back into the cargo area of the truck.

“I’ll be back in a minute, boy. I want to check this out by myself. You’ll be okay.”

New batteries for his big flashlight were on tomorrow’s shopping list. He tried anyway. Click. Dead, just as he thought.

Jake walked back around to the lake side of the cabin under the remaining light from the water’s reflections. Visibility was marginal.

Quietly, he moved closer. He detected a rotten aroma but could not clearly identify the smell. Stale garbage, maybe? The screen door hung on one hinge, in pieces, as if someone or something had ripped through it.

This is not good, he thought.

Once he was on the deck, the stench became overwhelming. Peering inside, Jake saw the living area in total shambles. The place had been ravaged, but there was more. The sickening smell came from rotting parts of a deer carcass, partially eaten and strewn across the floor.

“Aw, shit!” He repositioned himself to get a better look.

“How could this happen?”

His heart left him when he heard bobcat-like growls from the upstairs loft. Two large raccoons lurked in the deep shadows at the top edge of the stairs leading to the bedrooms. Jake knew they were harmless so long as he stayed out of reach. But raccoons would attack and do severe damage to a dog, even one KC’s size. He regarded his decision to kennel KC as a good one.

Jake backed away and reached for the wall switch. Everything became clear with a flick. He gasped in horror. The raccoons and squirrels might account for some of the damage, but not for the chaos that lay before him. The deer carcass and its grotesquely disjointed parts looked like an insane massacre had taken place.

Staying clear of the raccoons, Jake cautiously checked the rest of the cabin, praying for no more surprises. He found none.

He knew the raccoons must be evicted tonight. Locking the doors with them inside would only create panic and inevitably more damage. Leaving the doors open in the hope they would leave would be just plain stupid. He had to get them out now, he thought, and tackle the bulk of the cleanup tomorrow. Other than removing the remains of the deer carcass, there was little else he wanted to do tonight.

He remembered a trick using gasoline, rags, and a pole and started toward the garage. He would gas the rag, stick it on a long pole, and jam the pole into the raccoons' faces—a sure formula for sending them on their way.

Detached from the cabin by about forty feet, the garage stood in the darkest shadows of the yard near the forest. Jake laid down the shotgun and tried the door handle. It was locked, a good sign. He pushed inward after unlocking the door, but it was impossible to see anything. The garage had never been wired for electricity, and Jake had become used to fumbling for things he needed in the dark. The noticeable smell of mice droppings permeated the air. Mice seemed to prefer the garage to the cabin for their winter stay.

Jake knew the gas can sat in the far-right corner of the garage just as he knew his socks were in his bedroom chest of drawers, second drawer on the left. Things had their place in his world. The rags lay on the workbench to his left. Several long poles were propped near the side garage door. Jake groped his way across the garage in a Pin-the-Tail-on-the-Donkey fashion, both hands straight out in front of him. The garage was home to piles of stored summer items—boat stuff, boxes of household items infrequently used, various tools and equipment and a disassembled Hobie Cat. Airtight containers for food and bedding were on several metal tables out of reach of the mice. Better go slow, he thought, don't want more of a mess.

Extending electricity to the garage was one of those projects that never got done. Minnesota summer nights never got really dark until about ten o'clock or so. Late fall and winter were different. It was barely six o'clock and completely dark in the garage. The priority of this project would have to be moved up, he thought.

With his mind and extended hands focused on successfully navigating to the gasoline can, his face ran straight into something heavy and soft.

"What the hell," he said, as his hands instinctively rose to protect himself.

Surprise escalated to horror in an instant when his hands felt the legs of a body—a human body! He stumbled backward, nearly losing his balance, knocking tables and summer supplies over in his panicked retreat.

Once outside, he ran to the cabin to get the kerosene lantern off the fireplace mantel, his mind whirling from the chain of events. He avoided the raccoons, retrieved the lantern and matches, and returned quickly to the garage. He struck match after match, trying to light the lantern with shaking hands. Finally the mantels lit and a cascade of light flooded the garage.

"Oh my God!" Jake cried out as he saw the man, an Indian, hanging from the rafters. Stunned, he cautiously moved closer.

He did not recognize the corpse. Was this a murder or a suicide? Whatever it was, it had to be recent. The body had no smell of decay. He remembered only the scent of the mouse droppings when he opened the garage. What is going on? Who is responsible for this? Questions raced through Jake's head.

Reaching for the man's wrist, Jake tried to get a pulse; there was none. The deep purple color of the man's face and neck offered further proof that he was dead. Jake touched nothing else as he got the gasoline, rags, and poles from the garage. He would call the police from the cabin and then deal with the raccoons.

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After several rings, an officer answered. "Chippewa Lake Police Station."

"Officer, my name is Jake Lorenz and I want to report a dead man in my cabin." Jake's voice shook.

"This is Sheriff Betts you're talking to. Slow down. Tell me first, are you in any immediate danger?"

"No, I'm not."

"As near as you can tell me, do you expect to be in any danger?"

“No, I don’t think so, but I really don’t know. I do have a loaded shotgun if I need it.” He recognized the potential consequences of the sheriff’s comment.

“Is there anyone else there with you?” Sheriff Betts was purposely measured in his speech, encouraging Jake by example to slow down.

“No, I’m here alone with my dog. We just arrived at my cabin and found this guy hanging from my garage rafters.”

“Did you say *hanging*?”

“Yes.”

“We’ll have a car there as fast as we can. What’s the fire ID number?”

“84B.”

Without an address or a mailbox, the fire code was required on all driveways for emergencies. It would be easy to spot with only one road leading onto the peninsula. The sheriff said he would be there in less than thirty minutes.

While waiting, Jake went about the task of evicting the raccoons. The first left quickly, but the second was cornered under a chest of drawers in the upstairs bedroom. It hissed viciously as Jake approached. The room was small, making the long pole awkward to handle. Finally, he was able to position the gasoline rag with a wire hanger from the closet. The raccoon’s coat bristled in defense as it flashed its razor-sharp teeth. Jake was closer than he wanted, but thankfully the raccoon chose to oblige his efforts by leaving. Deciding that it would be wise not to move anything in the cabin, Jake closed the lakeside door, opened some windows for ventilation, and left everything else the way he had found it.

As he walked around the cabin to the open windows on the three-season porch, he noticed something completely out of order. The hold-open washer on the pneumatic door-closing mechanism had been set to keep the screen door open.

“*Why would someone do this?*”

Jake had no enemies, but this destruction and the death of that poor Indian were certainly premeditated. He was beyond bewilderment.

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“This is no suicide,” Sheriff Betts said after taking his time to survey the scene. “Our local Indians can be very self-destructive, but they never commit suicide like this. Drugs, alcohol, and guns, yes; but hanging, never. Besides, this man was clubbed from behind,” he said, pointing to the blood and matted hair on the man’s skull. “Nope, this man was murdered.”