

Misery Bay by Steve Hamilton
Chapter One

It is the third night of January, two hours past midnight, and everyone is in bed except this man. He is young and there's no earthly reason for him to be here on this shoreline piled with snow with a freezing wind coming in off of Lake Superior, the air so cold here in this lonely place, cold enough to burn a man's skin until he becomes numb and can no longer feel anything at all.

But he is here in this abandoned dead end near the water's edge, twenty-six miles from his home near the college. Twenty-six miles from his warm bed. He is outside his car, with the driver's side door still open and the only light the glow of the dashboard. The headlights are off. The engine is still running.

He is facing the lake, the endless expanse of water. It is not frozen because a small river feeds into the lake here and the motion is enough to keep the ice from forming. A miracle in itself, because otherwise this place feels like the coldest place in the whole world.

The rope is tight around his neck. He swings only slightly in the wind from the lake. The snow will come soon and it will cover the ground along with the car and the crown of his lifeless head.

He will hang here from the branch of this tree for almost thirty-six hours, until his car runs out of gas and the battery dies and his face turns blue from the cold. A man on a snowmobile will finally see him through the trees. He'll make a call on his cell phone and an hour later two deputies will arrive on the scene and the young man will be lowered to the ground.

On that night, I know nothing of this young man or this young man's death. Or what may have led him to tie that noose and to slip it around his neck. I am not there to see it, God knows, and I won't even hear of it until three months later. I live on the shores of the same lake but it would take me five hours to find this place they call MiseryBay. Five hours of driving down empty roads with a good map to find a part of the lake I'd never even heard of.

That's how big this lake is.

"It's not the biggest lake in the world. You guys do know that, right?"

The man was wearing a pink snowmobile suit. He didn't sound like he was from downstate Michigan. Probably Chicago, or one of the rich suburbs just outside of Chicago. The snowmobile suit probably set him back at least five hundred dollars, one of those space-age polymer waterproof-but-breathable suits you find in a catalog, and I'm sure the color was listed as "coral" or "shrimp" or "sea foam" or some such thing. But to me it was as pink as a girl's nursery.

"I mean, I don't want to be a jerk about it and all, but that's all I hear up here. How goddamned big Lake Superior is and how it's the biggest, deepest lake in the world. You guys know it's not, right? That's all I'm saying."

Jackie stopped wiping the glass he was holding. Jackie Connery, the owner of the place, looking and sounding for all time like he just stepped red-faced off a fishing boat from the Outer Hebrides, even if he'd been living here in the Upper

Peninsula for over forty years now. Jackie Connery, the man who still drove across the bridge once a week to buy me the real thing. Molson Canadian, brewed in Canada. Not the crap they bottle here in the States and criminally try to pass off as the same thing.

Jackie Connery, the man who wasn't born here, who didn't grow up here. The man who still couldn't cope with the long winters, even after forty years. The one man you did not want to poke with a sharp stick in January or February or March. Or any kind of stick, sharp or dull. Not until the sun came out and he could at least imitate a normal human being again.

"What's that you're saying now?" He was looking at the man in the pink snowmobile suit with a Popeye squint in his right eye. The poor man had no idea what that look meant.

"I'm just saying, you know, to set the record straight. Lake Superior is not the biggest lake in the world. Or the deepest."

Jackie put the glass down and stepped forward. "So which particular lake, pray tell, are you going to suggest is bigger?"

The man leaned back on his stool, maybe two inches.

"Well, technically, that would be the Caspian Sea."

"I thought we were talking about lakes."

"Technically speaking. That's what I'm saying. The Caspian Sea is technically a lake and not a sea."

"And it's bigger than Lake Superior."

"Yes," the man said. "Definitely."

"The water in the Caspian Sea," Jackie said, "is it saltwater or fresh?"

The man swallowed. "It's saltwater."

"Okay, then. If it's technically a lake, then it's the biggest, deepest saltwater lake in the world. Apples and oranges, am I right? Can we agree on that much?"

Jackie turned, and the man should have let it go. But he didn't.

"Well, actually, no."

Jackie stopped.

"LakeBaikal," the man said. "In Russia. That's fresh water. And it's way deeper than Lake Superior."

"In Russia, you said? Is that where it is?"

"LakeBaikal, yes. I don't know if it has a bigger surface area, but I know it's got a lot more water in it. Like twice as much as Lake Superior. So really, in that respect, it's twice as big."

Jackie nodded his head, like this was actually an interesting fact he had just learned instead of the most ridiculous statement ever uttered by a human being. It would have been like somebody telling him that Mexico is actually more Scottish than Scotland.

I was sitting by the fireplace, of course. On a cold morning on the last day of March, after cutting some wood and touching up the road with my plow, where else would I be? But either way I was close enough to hear the whole exchange, and right about then I was hoping we'd all find a way to end it peacefully.

The man in the pink snowmobile suit started fishing for his wallet. Jackie raised a hand to stop him.

"Don't even bother, sir. Your money's no good here."

The man looked over at me this time, as if I could actually help him.

"A man as smart as you," Jackie said, "it'll be my honor to buy you a drink."

"Well, okay, but come on, don't you-"

"Are you riding today?"

"Uh, yeah," the man said, looking down at his suit. Like what the hell else would he be doing?

"Silly me. Of course you are. So why don't you head back on out there while we still have some snow left."

"It is pretty light this year. Must be global warming or something."

"Global warming, now. So you mean like our winter might last ten months instead of eleven? Is that the idea? You're like a walking library of knowledge, I swear."

"Listen, is there a problem here? Because I don't-"

"No, no," Jackie said. "No problem. You go on out and enjoy your ride. In fact, you know what? I hear they've got a lot more snow in Russia this year. Up by that real big lake. What was it called again?"

The man didn't answer.

"LakeBaikal," I said.

"I wasn't talking to you, Alex."

"Just trying to help."

"I'm leaving," the man said, already halfway to the door. "And I won't be back."

"When you get to that lake, do me a favor, huh? I'm still not convinced it's deeper, so can you drive your snowmobile and let it sink to the bottom with you still on it? You think you could do that? I'd really appreciate it."

The man slammed the door behind him. Another drinking man turned away for life, not that he'd have any other place to go in Paradise, Michigan. Jackie picked up his towel and threw it at me. I ignored him and turned back to the fire.

They have long, long winters up here. Did I mention that yet? By the time the end of March drags around, everyone's just a few degrees past crazy. Not just Jackie.

The sun was trying to come out as I was driving back up my road. It was an old unpaved logging road, with banks of snow lingering on either side. When the snow started to melt, the road would turn to mud and I'd have a whole new set of problems to deal with. By the time it dried out, it would be time for black fly season.

I passed Vinnie's cabin first. Vinnie "Red Sky" LeBlanc, my only neighbor and maybe my only true friend. Meaning the one person who truly understood me, who never wanted anything from me, and who never tried to change me.

I passed by the first cabin, the one my father and I had built a million years ago – before I went off to play baseball and then become a cop – then the next four cabins, each bigger than the one before it, until I got to the end of the road. There stood the biggest cabin of all, looking almost as good as the original. I'd been rebuilding it for the past year, starting with just the fireplace and chimney my father had built stone by stone. Now it was almost done. Now it was almost

as good as it was before somebody burned it down.

I parked the truck and went inside. Vinnie was already there, on his hands and knees in the corner of the kitchen, once again working harder and longer than I ever did myself, making me feel like my debt to him was more than I could ever repay.

"What are you ruining now?" I said to him.

"I'm fixing the trim you put down on this floor." He was in jeans and a white T-shirt, his denim jacket hanging on the back of one of the kitchen chairs. He had a long strip of quarter round molding in his hand, the very same strip I had just tacked down the day before.

"You're ripping it up? How is that fixing it?"

"You used the wrong size trim. You need to start over."

"It's not the wrong size. Damn it, Vinnie, is it any wonder it's taking me forever to finish this place? You wanna rip the ceiling off, too?"

"You got a good half-inch gap here," he said, pointing to the gap between the floor and the lowest log on the wall.

"That's a quarter inch."

"Here it might be, but over on the other side of the room it gets wider. You have to measure the gap at its longest before you go out and buy your trim."

"Vinnie, what the hell's wrong with you?"

"I told you, you bought the wrong size. And as long as you're buying new molding, get something with a little more style, too. Quarter round is boring."

"Nobody's going to notice it. It's on the floor, for God's sake."

He turned away from me, shaking his head. He grabbed another length of molding and ripped it up like he was pulling weeds.

"Something's eating at you," I said. "I can tell."

"I'm fine. I just wish you'd do things right for a change."

First Jackie and now Vinnie. Such a parade of cheerful people in my life. I was truly a lucky man.

"It's actually trying to get nice outside," I said. "We might even have some sunlight soon. Will that make you feel better?"

He didn't look up. "You know one thing that bothers me?"

"What?"

"How long have you been living in this cabin?"

"Ever since I've been working on it. It just makes things easier."

"I think you're done now, Alex. You've got the floor down. You've got the woodstove working. As soon as I redo your trim, this place will be ready to rent out again."

"It's been a bad winter for the snowmobile people. You know that."

"You could have this place rented right now. It's your biggest cabin. You're just wasting money."

"Since when are you my accountant?"

He stopped what he was doing and sat still on the floor. He finally turned to look at me. "You need to move back into your cabin. You can't keep avoiding it."

"I will." It was my turn to look away. "As soon as I'm done here."

Vinnie didn't say anything else. I got down on my knees and helped him tear

up the remaining strips of floor molding. An hour later I was on my way to Sault Ste. Marie to buy the new strips, five eighths instead of half inch, cloverleaf instead of quarter round. As I passed that first cabin, I made a point of not even looking at it.

That was how the day went. That last day in March. It started with breakfast at the Glasgow Inn and ended with dinner in the same place. It was like most every other day in Paradise. Vinnie had helped me finish the baseboard trim, then he'd gone over to the rez to sit with his mother for a while. She'd not been feeling like herself lately. Maybe just one more person who was tired of winter. I was hoping that was it, that she'd feel better once the sun came back. That we'd all feel better.

Vinnie gave me a nod as he came through the door. Back from the rez, then a shift at the casino dealing blackjack, stopping in now because that's what you do around here. Every night. Jackie was watching hockey on the television mounted above the bar. Vinnie went over and stood behind him, just like I had told him to do.

"Hey, Jackie," he said, "I heard something interesting today."

"What's that, Vin?"

"Did you know Lake Superior isn't really the biggest lake in the world? Or the deepest?"

Jackie turned and glared at me.

"I'll throw you right out on your ass," he said. "I swear to God I will."

Finally, something to smile about, on a cold, cold night. I looked back into the fire and watched the flames dance. My last hour of peace until everything would change.

We're not supposed to believe in evil anymore, right? It's all about abnormal behavior now. Maladjustment, overcompensation, or my favorite, the antisocial personality disorder. Fancy words I was just starting to hear in that last year on the force, before I looked into the eyes of a madman as he pulled that trigger without even blinking.

In a way, I've never gotten past it. I'm still lying on that floor, watching the light in Franklin's eyes slowly going out. My partner, the man I was supposed to protect at all costs. Later, in the hospital, they pulled two slugs from my body and left the one that was too close to my heart to touch. It's been with me ever since, a constant reminder of the evil I saw that night, all those years ago on a warm summer evening in Detroit. You'd never convince me otherwise. No, I'd seen evil as deep as it could ever get.

But like Jackie and his beloved lake, you'd never know there was something deeper out there until somebody came to you and told you about it. A deeper lake. A lake you've never seen before. Even then, you might not believe it. Not unless he took you there and showed it to you.

It was about to happen. Minutes away, then seconds. Then the door opened and the cold air blew in and the last person I expected to see that night stepped inside, carrying a big problem and looking for my help.