

CLAW

KATIE BERRY

Copyright © 2019 Katie Berry

All rights reserved.

ISBN: 9781712867860

No portions of this book may be reproduced without permission from the publisher, except as permitted by Canadian copyright law.

Published by Fuzzy Bean Books

Cover Art Copyright © 2019 Fiona Jayde Media

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

For Frances Amelia, who always believed.

Acknowledgements:

Special thanks to Paulina, Thomas, Terry, Jen, Tara, Michael, Marcie, Erin and Shana. Your support and enthusiasm have been a constant comfort to me as I have brought this story through to completion. I am forever grateful to each and every one of you.

-Katie Berry

Preface

This book is the culmination of several years of work and hundreds of hours of research. I have taken liberties here and there with how certain jobs are done in a small town. In addition, I hope the Conservation Officer Service of British Columbia will allow me my flights of fancy regarding how their officers actually operate. But most things you will read are based upon factual information. There are certain elements, of course, that are more of a fantastic nature, but that's why you're here, to read something where the everyday meets the not so everyday. I hope you enjoy reading this book as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Katie Berry
November 28th, 2019

CHAPTER ONE

The towering bonfire crackled in the centre of the large clearing, the fresh-cut firewood drying out as it burned. Huge plumes of smoke billowed into the cold night air, blending with the thick fog that surrounded the camp, adding to the limited visibility. Every once in a while, a new pocket of resin in the unseasoned wood would explode, shooting out yet another red-hot ember seemingly in search of the first flammable thing it could find.

Jerry Benson noted with frustration that he still seemed to be one of those flammable things and scooted his camp chair back from the blazing fire another metre. He cursed under his breath and brushed the remains of the latest smouldering, red fleck from his neon-blue parka, not wanting it to burn through the fabric and ruin his new winter-wear.

“Hey, Jer! You look low! Incoming!” Tyler said, lobbing another beer. Jerry snapped out of fire suppression mode and deftly caught the canned beer in one hand. He placed it in the snow beside his chair, next to the other beer he’d barely touched.

“Gotta keep up, bro! This booze isn’t going to drink itself!” Tyler took a large gulp from the huge bottle of bourbon he held. He placed it into the snow next to his chair and picked up a fresh can of beer that had been chilling in the snow. Cracking it open, he washed the burning remnants of whiskey down his throat in a long, thirsty swallow. After a belch loud enough to shake the snow from the overburdened trees

around them, Tyler smiled contentedly, closed his eyes for a moment, then took another small sip of beer, savouring his barley beverage.

Jerry shook his head slightly in disbelief, saying, “Thanks, Ty, but I think I’m okay for now. I’m not in the mood tonight.”

Tyler’s eyes popped back open, and he leaned drunkenly toward Jerry, almost falling out of his chair in the process. A look of incredulity crossed his face, and he said, “Not in the mood? We’re out here in the great Canadian outdoors, bombing around on our sleds, enjoying nature and getting drunk! How in the hell can you NOT be in the mood?”

Jerry yawned. “Just tired, I guess. It was a long drive.”

Tyler belched loudly at this news, then settled back into his chair once more.

When Jerry had learned that his college brothers were heading out on a snowmobiling expedition into the Kootenay region of BC for their yearly vacation, he’d been all over it and jumped at the chance to join them. But his excitement this year wasn’t because he still enjoyed coming along on these annual booze-fests with the boys. No, it was for a different reason this year. After a decade and a half, he was tired of coming home from a week of drunken debauchery and feeling like Ray Milland from *The Lost Weekend* for several days afterward. This year was supposed to have been the year he told the guys he was done with the party animal thing.

But it seemed as if fate were egging him along on this particular frat-brother vacation in spite of his reservations. The real reason he’d been excited this year was the fact that their destination just happened to be near the site of a recent seismic event in the interior. And this event was in a region with a rich history of gold strikes, making it an opportunity too good for him to pass up.

As a Professor of Geology at The University of British Columbia, Jerry Benson had been studying the Cascade Mountain Range for over a decade. The amount of gold mined from the area in the late nineteenth century and into the early twentieth had been phenomenal. As a geologist, Jerry also knew there was still much more just waiting to be discovered in the region. Thanks to a significant earth tremor that occurred in the Cascadia subduction zone just after the new year, he hoped that it might have exposed some potential new sites in which to hunt for the valuable yellow metal.

Earlier that afternoon, with camp set up, GPS unit in hand and a few other tools of the trade thrown into his backpack, Jerry had set out looking for the fault line at the epicentre of the recent earthquake on his rented snowmobile. The machine was equipped with an eye-poppingly bright paint job that seared the eyeballs on contact. He'd dubbed it the 'Waspmobile' as soon as he'd laid eyes upon it, thanks to its neon-yellow and black colour scheme along with its high-pitched, droning engine. Just looking at the damned thing made his temples throb.

Departing much later than he'd wanted, Jerry knew he was operating under a time constraint — the hours of daylight left to explore were precious few. But he praised serendipity once more, when only five and a half kilometres along, at the base of the Kootenay Glacier, he discovered the opening to a promising cavern in the cliffside. According to his GPS, it was centred almost directly over the new, quake-causing fault line.

Gold Ridge was usually spared much of the fog and low cloud that had been socking-in the city of Lawless and the valley below for the last few weeks. Up until now, Jerry had enjoyed a beautifully clear afternoon as he'd searched for the source of the fault. But his delightful day came with a bit of a caveat: despite being located high above the valley cloud, quite often in late winter, just as the sun set behind the local mountains,

rapidly dropping temperatures created a freezing ice fog. It crept down off the Kootenay Glacier, a pellucid presence that coated everything it touched in a slippery crystalline crust — any attempts at travel were a very difficult and dangerous time. The last thing Jerry wanted, was to be caught off-guard by the freezing frost. He knew he needed to leave enough time to get back safely to camp to avoid this hazard.

Tumbling out of the cavern's entrance was what appeared to be a geothermal aquifer. Jerry knew there were already several hot springs located around Lawless, making it a popular destination for people looking to soak away their aches and pains. This new hot spring would add to the Province of BC's already impressive total, which boasted eighteen out of the twenty-one confirmed to be in Canada.

Kneeling, Jerry measured the aquifer's temperature. At just a hair under one-hundred degrees Celsius, it was an excellent example of the province's true volcanic nature. It was far too hot for human use, and anyone unfortunate enough, or stupid enough, to try using this hot spring for skinny dipping would find their skin sloughing off like a blanched tomato before canning — definitely a 'look but don't touch' situation.

He took one last, quick look into the aquifer before entering the cavern and froze in his tracks. Glinting enticingly in the middle of the boiling stream was several of the largest looking gold nuggets he'd ever seen, some of them easily the size of golf balls. He grabbed a broken branch from the base of a nearby tree and fished a few of the nuggets out, examining them once they'd cooled enough.

As a geologist, without even having to break the ore open, Jerry Benson knew that what he held in his hands wasn't pyrite, but real gold. The rounded edges and corners of the nuggets in his hands were the telltale sign of authenticity as they had none of pyrite's harder, more angular surfaces.

Jerry was now officially more than a little bit intrigued as to what lay inside this cavern. Standing, he added the nuggets to a plastic sample bag, then placed them almost reverentially into his backpack. He adjusted the shoulder straps of the pack and prepared to enter the steaming black underworld in the rock face before him.

Suddenly, Jerry's mind registered what his eyes picked up only moments before — the trees in the surrounding forest were casting lengthening shadows. Time had gotten away from him while he'd been examining this golden aquifer and the sun was now almost kissing the rim of the glacier — the remaining daylight was growing short. Above, the first probing tendrils of ice fog began cascading off the ancient ice toward him. "Looks like I've overstayed my welcome." He turned to face the cavern's entrance, saying, "You'll have to wait until tomorrow to get your turn."

Several small rocks tumbled off the rock wall near the opening, as if to show it was paying attention to Jerry's promise. They bounced along the narrow ledge leading up to the cavern's entrance for a moment before tumbling with a splash into the sizzling stream below.

In spite of his precautions, he'd been caught off guard by the rapid movement of the fog, and soon found himself enveloped in a swirling grey cloud. Carefully turning the snowmobile around, he sat in the icy mist a moment longer and pulled out his GPS unit. With a couple of quick button presses, he tagged the precise location of the cavern in the device's memory. He smiled, knowing he could relax this evening with the boys, his GPS receiver assuring him he would have an easy trip back in the morning to explore the inside of this potentially valuable new find.

Jerry yawned again and smiled sadly as he looked over toward Tyler. The man was now slumped sideways in his chair, temporarily unconscious due to too many trips to the watering trough over the last

few hours. A small drift of aluminum beer cans was piled high next to Ty's chair, a silent testament to his powerful thirst so far this evening. Over the years, Tyler had fancied himself as the de facto leader of the group, and when they were out on one of their yearly 'Four Bros' adventures, it seemed inevitable that he would make sure there was plenty of alcohol available. He constantly monitored everyone around him, making sure they were as well-lubricated as he was, and if they weren't, he'd keep pestering them and pushing the booze on them until they were.

This year, Jerry's other college brother, Nick, had decided to buy a Texas Mickey-sized, three-litre bottle of Jack Daniels. It was the kind that came with a handle to help you steady the big jug on your shoulder, just like Granny did on the Beverly Hillbillies, while you sloshed some of Tennessee's Finest, Old No.7 down your parched throat. Usually, Jerry knew Nick only brought along a forty pounder, but this year he'd decided to super-size it for some reason, most likely at Tyler's behest.

Jerry closed his eyes for a moment, but every time he did, visions of dollar signs danced behind his eyelids as he envisioned the golden nuggets he'd found. That was the other reason he wasn't drinking tonight; he didn't want to get smashed and then have to get up early tomorrow morning with a throbbing head and try to navigate the treacherous, ice-slicked path back to the cavern on his high-pitched, droning Wasp-mobile. Just the thought of spelunking around a cavern half-tanked was scary enough, but when you threw in the fact that it could easily have dormant lava tubes scattered throughout, some of them possibly dropping thousands of metres into the darkness below, it was just insane.

No, stumbling drunkenly into one of those black holes was not an appealing idea. He knew he'd have to add the concept to the ever-growing list that comprised the bulk of his pet project, a book he planned on self-publishing later in the year called, "Darwin's Herd Thinners" (working title only) — falling into a seemingly bottomless pit

while inebriated would have to be at least death number two hundred and thirty-five according to his calculations. He'd have to check his notes to verify it when he finally got back near a cell tower and was able to access the cloud-saved data on his cell phone once more.

Jerry loathed taking notes on his iPhone when his four-thousand-dollar laptop was just sitting at home, keeping warm and dry. But he wasn't about to expose his MacBook Pro to the foggy, icy air he'd seen floating around Lawless recently, so home is where it was going to stay, and he knew he'd just have to suck it up. The last thing he needed was Tyler trying to play World of Warcraft on his laptop in the middle of sub-zero temperatures and have him bork his computer because of some condensation issue shorting-out the motherboard.

The smoke and fog parted momentarily, and Jerry saw Nick sitting across the roaring fire, looking a little green around the gills. Nick wobbled back and forth in his chair for a moment, then looked down in disgust at something in his lap, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

Jerry worried that when he wasn't paying attention to Nick at some point, perhaps during a moment of limited visibility due to the smoke and fog, his friend might choose that time to ooze off of his camp chair and roll into the blazing bonfire like a large, drunken log. If something so unfortunate came to pass, he figured it would be death number two hundred and thirty-six for his new book. Nick had been doing his wobbling routine next to the flames for the last half hour now. So far, every time he'd wobbled, he'd wake up just enough to stabilise himself, then take another gulp of beer from the can jammed between his thick legs, and also maybe a chug of bourbon if the bottle of Jack were nearby. After a few minutes, his buddy would begin to doze off again, wavering back and forth in his seat near the fire as he swam in and out of consciousness, threatening to immolate himself accidentally once more.

Mostly with Tyler's help and a half dozen or so of the aforementioned beers, Nick had downed almost a third of the bottle of whiskey over the last couple of hours. Now, when he wasn't perched precariously on the precipice of passing out, he was constantly getting up and staggering through the shortcut that lead to the forest behind his chair. Each time he disappeared, he'd invariably hollered out that he was, "Unrenting some more beer!" When Nick was coherent and sober, he usually said, almost sagely, "You can never truly buy beer, you can only rent it."

Looking across the fire at Nick, it appeared to Jerry that some of the beer and whiskey might have come back out the wrong end of Nick and found their way onto his lap. He shouted over the colossal blaze to Nick, "You doing okay, buddy? It looks like you're having some issues!"

Nick's head snapped up. He looked through the smoke and haze for a moment at Jerry with bleary eyes, as if considering an answer, then leaned forward and puked into the campfire. It hissed and sputtered as the vomit vaporised in its searing heat as if Nick's stomach spew was an affront to its blazing dignity.

From his vantage point at the head of the fire, Tyler saw this latest occurrence and hooted with delight, tossing another can of beer toward Nick, saying, "Glad to see you made more room brother, here's another!"

With red-rimmed eyes, Nick watched the beer roll through the brown-coloured slush. It came to rest against the side of the air mattress of Jerry's other college brother, Matt. Already sound asleep, Matt was stretched out on top of his air mattress near the campfire, basking in its warmth. He'd taken several hits off of Nick's bottle of JD, in addition to a couple of the 'special' medicinal cigarettes he'd also brought along. Jerry glanced at his watch and saw that it had been at least fifteen minutes since his friend had last been vertically oriented. With his purple toque pulled down over his eyes, Matt was using his backpack as

a pillow. His long, dark, dreadlocked hair spilled out over the pack's sides like a dead octopus on a rock.

To aid in their camping experience, when the Bro-Squad (Tyler's idea) had first arrived at the clearing that afternoon, they'd driven the snowmobiles back and forth across the clearing several times. Ty's plan was to flatten down the snow so that they would have a relatively level spot in which to camp and not have to slog back and forth as they traversed the site. When they were done, Ty told them to make sure they all backed their sleds in, so that they were all facing skis-out and ready to go for the next day's activities. That way they'd be able to blast out into the snow in the morning without wasting any of their valuable time jockeying them around.

Jerry yawned and glanced over his shoulder with longing toward the tent where his sleeping bag lay but couldn't see it through the heavy fog. They'd erected the six-man structure at the backside of the clearing, safely away from the bonfire's shooting embers, next to where they'd parked the snowmobiles. At Tyler's back, the trail the four sleds made on their way into camp that afternoon disappeared and reappeared like a mirage, occasionally obscured by the smoke and fog that rose in serpentine coils into the night air. Wide and spacious, the trail was almost like a road in the snow, easily marking their progress into the centre of the clearing. Off to Jerry's right, through the undulating mist, he caught the occasional glimpse of his own, single snowmobile trail, coming in from the direction of the forest that backed onto the campfire.

Trying to get comfortable, Jerry felt something lumpy digging into his side. He reached into the large, outer pocket of his jacket and probed around for a moment, then pulled out his GPS receiver. Surprised to see that he'd left it on, he checked the battery level indicator and was relieved to see its charge still appeared to be almost full. He turned the unit over in his hands, marvelling at the technology. Though he had GPS on his cell phone, it wasn't the same as this device. His cell phone used Assisted GPS, not true GPS like the unit he was holding. At any given

time, this GPS receiver linked directly to a minimum of four Global Positioning Satellites circling the planet. His cell phone, on the other hand, relied on cellular repeater towers to assist its location-tracking capabilities with no direct link to any satellites. Out here, without a single cell tower in sight, the phone now acted as nothing more than a glorified camera, alarm clock and flashlight combination. If something happened to one of them while they were out here, in the middle of nowhere, they were on their own.

Jerry jumped as another bubble of sap in the green wood exploded with a pop, sending more embers churning high into the shifting fog. He was happy to see that he was now far enough away to no longer be a target of flying cinders, but still close enough to feel the warmth of the fire. He turned off the GPS unit to conserve its battery and placed it back in his jacket pocket.

Leaning over, Jerry reached down and grabbed the beer in the snow next to his chair. He took a small sip and watched the wandering fog rolling in waves out of the darkness toward him. It washed over him and merged with the billowing smoke from the green wood burning on the fire, making him cough. Looking around the camp with somewhat watery eyes, he saw that apart from the circular oasis of light and warmth that the bonfire provided, the rest of the camp now lay encrusted under a glistening white frost of ice.

Jerry placed the almost full beer back into its snowy cup holder. Thanks to his current lack of interest in pounding back the booze like the rest of the Bros, when he'd informed them of his new, healthier lifestyle, they had enthusiastically nominated him as the designated driver for the trip before they'd even left Vancouver. Jerry had no problem with that.

On the drive up from the coast, they'd encountered a little bit of thick, patchy, low cloud on a couple of the mountain passes as well as some

compact snow and slushy roads. It was nothing too concerning as Tyler's massive Dodge Ram 3500 pickup was a four-wheel drive. Still, Jerry was glad the roads had been good. He wasn't a huge fan of driving through inclement weather in a monster truck loaded with loud, sloppy drunks, so that had been a relief.

But it had been a long trip. The drinking and rowdiness had started almost as soon as they'd left. Tyler had brought along a flask to share with Nick and Matt, getting them pre-lubed for the party like he was. When they stopped that afternoon at the Osoyoos Holiday Inn, Jerry had felt relieved to be out of the pickup truck and the eye-watering whiskey fumes that filled the cab. Almost before the truck stopped, Tyler and the boys were stumbling out the door and heading to the hotel bar for a few dozen more drinks and an evening of partying. Of course, trying to get everyone awake and moving before five o'clock the next morning had been quite a challenge. But thanks to the three large double-doubles from the local Tim Hortons, he'd managed to pour the boys back into Tyler's Dodge and had them underway again before sun-up.

After several hours of following scenic Provincial Highway #3, Jerry turned off onto Highway #3C and headed north toward the Kootenay Glacier and Lawless. Just after nine o'clock, they crested the apex of the Golden Mile pass. Taking a break, Jerry pulled off of the highway onto an adjacent viewpoint overlooking the valley.

The view was breathtaking. Snow-covered mountain peaks jutted like broken teeth through the dense fog that filled the valley bottom — a blanket of grey that smothered the city of Lawless below. Sitting majestically in the distance at the back of the valley, the Kootenay Glacier poked its head through the clouds, its ancient ice shining a brilliant white as it bathed in the morning sunshine.

Continuing their journey, they descended into the grey twilight toward Lawless, heading for the sporting goods outlet where they'd

reserved their snowmobiles. After a few wrong turns in the fog, they arrived at an ageing aluminum Quonset hut on the outskirts of town.

As they finished up the rental paperwork, the tall, bald-headed proprietor behind the counter asked Tyler, “Did you boys come prepared?”

With amusement, Jerry watched Tyler, who had been at the cash register preparing to pay. Ty greeted the man’s question with a blank expression as if he were wondering whether the guy behind the till was also trying to sell him a pack of prophylactics or something.

But then the shopkeeper had continued and clarified things by saying, “Despite the many standout geographical features of Lawless and the lovely Kootenay Glacier area, using any of them to navigate in the middle of winter around here is about as helpful as a driver’s licence to a blind man, thanks to all this goddamned fog!”

Tyler continued to stare at the man.

“So I’d recommend you carry, at the minimum, at least one other GPS unit for redundancies sake, in case something happens to your friend’s there,” the proprietor finished, looking over at Jerry, who had been fiddling around with his own GPS unit while he waited.

Caught off-guard, Jerry took a second and then agreed, explaining to Ty that his cell phone-based GPS was crap out in the backcountry and that he’d better listen to the man.

Tyler stared at the shopkeeper and then Jerry with the same blank expression for several more seconds as if deciding whether they were bullshitting him or not — or perhaps thankful that he hadn’t said the first thing that had popped into his head about the pack of condoms. He sighed as if relieved, saying, “All right, add one on to the bill.”

The smiling shopkeeper said, “A wise decision, my friend.” He turned and looked at the small inventory of shrink-wrapped GPS receivers hanging on the wall behind him and grabbed the top unit, which, from what Jerry could see, was also the most expensive one. Ringing up the total on the till, the proprietor said, “These things sell like hotcakes every winter when the fog hits. You’re really lucky you came when you did since I just got more of these units back in stock last week!”

Looking rather unimpressed with his good fortune, Tyler briefly glanced out the foggy window toward the last stop they would be making before heading up into the mountains for their vacation. Barely visible across the street, a tall blue lotto sign revolved atop a black and white marquee advertising a small, squat cinder block convenience store next to it. The flickering letters proclaimed The Gas ‘n Gulp to be the proud purveyor of 'Liquor, Lotto and Groceries'. Tyler was no doubt already checking off items on his mental shopping list once they got across the road to the convenience store. Jerry looked through the window himself, thinking without a shadow of a doubt that when Tyler checked out at the convenience store, there would be plenty of the first two advertised items in his basket and very little of the third.

Tyler turned his attention back to the shopkeeper and said, “Gee, thanks. Seeing as I’m that lucky, maybe I'd better pick up a couple of 6-49 tickets across the street.”

The shopkeeper said nothing, and only grinned, ringing up an impressively high total on the cash register’s LCD screen.

Smiling lightly as he recalled their morning at the rental shop, Jerry reached down and grabbed his beer in the snow once more, taking another small sip. He grimaced from the Lucky Lager’s slight aftertaste and placed the can back on the ground. A twinge in his lower back

reminded him how stiff he currently was from the long drive over the last couple of days, and he was paying for it now. Thinking of the day ahead of him tomorrow, he started making mental notes of things to check the next day. His eyeball-searingly yellow snowmobile was at the top of the list. If there were any mechanical problems with the machine, he didn't want to be in a situation where he'd be snowshoeing it back to camp. Number one, he didn't have any snowshoes, and number two, the snow was quite deep, easily up to his waist and over his head in some places. GPS unit or not, he'd be slogging through kilometres of this clammy crap if something happened, and that was definitely not on his list of fun things to do on vacation.

Looking to his left, Jerry saw that Tyler was nodding in and out of consciousness as well now. Sprawled in his camp chair, Ty's legs stuck out, his head nodding forward onto his chest. Every few seconds, his head would snap up, and his eyes would fly open. After a brief, myopic glance around the camp, he would gradually close them once more as his chin slowly sank back down onto his chest.

Though he'd moved farther back from the bonfire that the boys had built, thanks to the comforting warmth of the blaze, Jerry felt like he, too, might just fall asleep if he weren't careful. He stifled a yawn. This wasn't where he wanted to sleep tonight; no, he'd rather be in the warm, cosy confines of his sleeping bag, which just recently began calling to him with its siren song of sleep.

Jerry's eyelids began to droop, on the edge of nodding off himself, when he heard what sounded like someone struggling, quickly followed by the rustling of dry brush. His eyes snapped back open, and he looked across to where Nick had been doing his wobbling act moments before. A brief gap opened in the swirling smoke over the fire. Nick's camp chair was laying on its side in the snow, with Nick nowhere in sight. "Nick!" Jerry called, thinking that his friend may have finally succumbed to alcohol and gravity and tumbled into the campfire.

“Shit!” Jerry jumped up from his canvas chair and stood to see if Nick’s smouldering body lay in the muddy slush next to the fire, but the fog and smoke had stopped cooperating — he couldn’t see anything through the haze.

Moving quickly, Jerry rounded the fire, calling out, “Nick! Where are you, brother? Are you okay?” Next to Nick’s overturned camp chair, the bottle of JD lay on its side in a small pool of its golden contents, most of which had already disappeared into the slushy mud. Only a few drops of the tan fluid from Tennessee remained in the jug now.

Jerry righted the bottle, saying “That’s going to put a damper on the party!” Standing, he called out to the forest, “Nick! What’s going on, big fella? Did the Jack catch up with you finally?”

The thick brush behind the campfire remained mute to his enquiry. Sighing, Jerry decided to give Nick a few more seconds, just in case he was puking, or maybe back there playing with his bait and tackle in the dark. In the meantime, he would walk over to Tyler, give him a good swift kick and tell him it was time to pack it in for the night. As he turned, another rustling noise came from the bushes at his back, followed by what sounded like muffled screams of pain.

Jerry moved toward the gap in the brush that lead to the forest beyond. The grey mist seemed to thicken as he approached as if trying to foil his investigation. “Nick, what in the hell are you doing, man? Are you trying to scare me? Cause it’s not work...” His voice faltered as he moved beyond the fire’s light, the frigid fog enveloping him as he edged forward into blackness.

The light from the campfire had given Jerry temporary night blindness, and his eyes were having a hard time readjusting. He thought briefly of using his phone’s flash as a light source in the fog but knew from experience it would only illuminate everything around him as a diffuse grey mess, making it even more difficult to see.

Reaching out with his hands in the hope of touching something bush or tree-like, he paused for a moment when he felt twigs scraping along the back of his right hand. He continued moving forward using that as his guide and edged into the thickening mist. After seconds that seemed like minutes, Jerry's eyes gradually started adjusting to the lack of light, and he was able to discern the vague shapes of trees and brush in the swirling fog ahead.

“Nick! Stop screwing around, bro!”

After taking several more slippery, stumbling steps, the churning mists parted for Jerry, seeming to draw back like the curtain at a carnival sideshow. It was as if an invisible barker were showing him an amazing new attraction, saying, “Hey! Come check this out, my friend! You won't be disappointed!”

Jerry stopped, his mouth dropping open as he rubbed his eyes in disbelief. “What in God's name?”

It looked like something had fallen on Nick. Jerry moved a bit closer and could see his friend's snow boots sticking out from under the edge of this humongous, grey rock, his legs spasming in pain. “Jesus, Nick...” He inched forward, hesitant, knowing that what he was seeing was impossible. How could this slab of stone have fallen on top of his friend out here in the middle of this forested plateau, with no rocky overhangs anywhere in sight? There was no way this could be happening! It just Did-Not-Compute. He moved forward to aid his friend.

A sudden spasm of movement shuddered through the slab of stone and Jerry stopped dead in his tracks, his breath catching in his throat. He finally saw the thing for what it was. The rough, stone-like texture of this ‘boulder’ was actually grey, matted fur. The thing on top of Nick had a rough, angular head the size of a Mercedes-Benz smart car. Broad, sinewy muscles contracted beneath the creature's tangled, filthy pelt.

Gore-stained fangs nearly twice the length of the World War One bayonets that Jerry collected at home tore into Nick with a savage fury. Jerry knew he should be running, but he stood transfixed and rooted to the spot.

The beast slowly rose from the ground, revealing legs the diameter of thick tree trunks. Nick's torso hung from the corner of its mouth, a river of bloody drool washing over it and splattering onto the frozen ground below. In one practised motion, the creature flicked its mouth open, jerking its head up and back at the same time, drawing Nick's body deeper into its nightmarish maw. Now, only a single, blood-soaked leg hung from one dripping corner of the creature's mouth. Finishing its current bite with a brief, snapping crack of its jaws, dozens of razor-like teeth amputated Nick's protruding leg as surgically as any scalpel. The severed limb, still encased in Gortex, dropped to the frozen ground with a soft thump as dark, venal blood flowed out of it onto the red-smearred snow.

As Jerry struggled with his rising gorge, he began paying attention to a small voice inside his head. The little voice was very quiet at first, but it gradually became louder and louder, growing ever more insistent that he listen to it. Jerry's brain finally provided him with a bingo and he realised that this little internal voice was trying to tell him to get his ever-loving ass out of this place, while the getting was good and the monster was still ignoring him, preoccupied as it currently was eating Nick (no offence, bro — RIP).

Spinning on one boot heel, Jerry tried to speak a single word of warning aloud, but his fear-tightened vocal cords refused to cooperate, and the word remained dammed-up inside. But fear demanded that he keep trying, and after several more desperate seconds, he found his voice, and the word gushed from his mouth, "Monster!"

With his verbal dam ruptured, Jerry was finally able to access the rest of his fear-flooded vocabulary, and a string of colourful metaphors poured out, growing louder and louder the closer he got to camp.

“Holy shit! Jesus Christ! Sweet Mother Mary! It’s a goddamned monster!” Scrambling and slipping in the ice-covered snow, he could barely see his hand in front of his face. He ran for his life toward the sanctuary of light and safety that the glow of the campfire promised.

“Tyler! Matt! Wake up! Something just ate Nick!” Jerry crashed through the brush, stumbling to a stop near the bonfire between the two men. He wasn’t particularly surprised that his verbal early warning system had had little effect, seeing how drunk everyone currently was.

On Jerry’s right, Tyler was now completely slumped over sideways in his chair, snoring loudly. To his left, Matt was still out cold on top of his air mattress, drool coming from one corner of his mouth.

Panic made Jerry decide to upgrade his attempts to rouse his friends from verbal warnings to feats of actual physical violence, at no extra charge to either of them. He grabbed Tyler, pulling him upright in his chair at the same time. “Ty! Wake up! There’s some kind of monster here, and it’s eaten Nick!” He gave Tyler several hard shakes. The man stirred for a moment and grumbled something to the effect of Jerry going away and leaving him the fuck alone; then his head dropped forward onto his chest once more.

“Shit!”

Jerry sprinted around the edge of the fire to check on Matt, squelching through the mud, almost slipping and falling into the fire himself. He jammed his muck-covered boot into his sleeping friend’s thigh several times with increasing vigour. “Matt! Wake up, dude! We have to go! Nick’s dead!” Matt continued to rock his impression of a dead octopus at the beach, snoring softly.

“Son of a bitch!” Jerry said, looking back over to Tyler. He saw that the man was slumped sideways in his chair once more, showing no signs of consciousness. Giving Matt one last, good kick, he ran around the fire and grabbed Tyler, this time by the collar of his parka. Pulling the man upright with his left hand, Jerry began slapping his friend repeatedly with the open palm of his right.

Sputtering and swearing, Tyler came back around, grabbing at Jerry’s hands. “Shit! What in the goddamned hell do you think you’re doing, bro?”

“There’s a huge goddamned monster over there, bro, and it’s eaten Nick!” Jerry shrieked at his friend.

“What? What kind of gag do you think...” Tyler said, feeling pissed at Jerry’s goofing around after everyone had already started chilling for the night.

“Ty, it’s not a fucking gag!” Jerry said in exasperation. He turned around and saw Matt still sound asleep. “Goddammit!” Jerry raced back and proceeded to kick his comatose comrade once more, this time with a renewed fervour, alternating between shouting, then kicking, “Wake!” — Kick — “The!” — Kick — “Fuck!” — Kick — “Up!” — Kick.

No response.

Jerry shouted over his shoulder to Tyler, "Do something to help me! We’ve got to get the hell out of here!" Bending down, he grabbed Matt’s legs and tried to drag his friend off of the air mattress, but he was too heavy. Jerry knew if he tried to roll Matt off the mattress, he'd end up rolling the unconscious man directly into the fire, much like he'd been worried about Nick doing to himself about a half a lifetime ago, or so it seemed.

Looking back, he saw Tyler now sitting upright in his chair, elbows on his knees, grinding the palms of his hands into his eyes as he simultaneously tried to wake up and sober up. Jerry stumbled back around the fire and yanked Tyler's hands away from his eyes. Kneeling in the snow, he placed his face directly in front of his friend's and tried to speak in as calm a voice as he could manage, but it still came out all at once, in one quick breath like some sort of scream-speak. "There is a gigantic monster over there, and it's eaten Nick! And you and me and Matt are going to be next unless we get our collective asses out of this frozen hell!"

From behind Jerry and Tyler, on the other side of the campfire, a dry, thirsty voice said, "What have you been doing, bro? My side here is as sore as shit! And I think you might have busted one of my freaking ribs!"

Jerry turned, a smile rising on his face when he saw Matt finally awake and communicative. His friend was propped up on one elbow, glaring across the fire at him. But Jerry's half-baked smile quickly deflated as a massive, gore-covered paw shot out from the tall brush over Matt's head.

Four sabre-like claws gleamed in the firelight, each one easily a half-metre in length. Matt looked up at this claw-tipped paw, still half-stoned. "Man, that must have been some potent shit!"

At the sound of Matt's voice, the taloned appendage paused, hovering over him, as if unsure what to make of these strange noises coming from its prey. It suddenly slammed down onto Matt's prone body with an ear-ringing pop that ruptured both the man on top and the air mattress beneath. Jerry winced as Matt's arms and legs shot out to both sides as he was crushed, a final, breathless, "Gak!" escaping from beneath the grotesque, bloody paw. With frightening speed, the gargantuan limb yanked back into the bushes, clawing its prizes of Matt's body and the now claret-soaked air mattress along with it.

“Holy shit!” Tyler yelled in disbelief. He jumped up, pushing away from Jerry’s grasping hands and ran toward the tent, stumbling and sliding in the ice-slicked snow, then slipped inside.

Stunned, Jerry said, “Tyler! Where are you going? What are you doing?” He was left standing alone near the crackling fire, the fog and smoke swirling like phantoms around him.

“Just hang on a sec!” Tyler hollered from inside the tent. Moments later he came tearing back out and stumbled to a halt next to Jerry in the ice-covered snow. “Bring it on, motherfucker!” Tyler shouted defiantly. Clenched in his right hand was one of the biggest handguns Jerry had ever seen.

Using his left hand, Tyler firmly pushed Jerry back behind him by a couple of feet while he pointed the pistol into the fog, saying, “Stand aside, brother!”

Jerry backed up a bit more, a hysterical giggle building in his throat as he wondered if Tyler was going to inform the monster that he was holding one of the most powerful handguns in the world and that it was capable of blowing its head clean off? Perhaps also asking if it was feeling lucky? No, he doubted that very much.

Tyler aimed at the brush where Matt had been dragged and started shooting, emptying the entire clip from the .44 Auto Mag into the thicket.

The sound of the gun was enormous. Jerry felt like he’d lost the hearing in both ears from the concussive blasts of Tyler’s hand-cannon. He watched the bullets shred the fog as they travelled to their mark, slamming into the thick brush, a shrapnel of twigs and small branches flying in every direction.

“Son of a bitch!” Tyler whooped, still pulling the trigger on the now-empty magnum. He looked over at Jerry, “Do you think I got it?”

“I think you can volunteer to go and take a look for yourself since you’re the one holding the howitzer there,” Jerry said, looking at Tyler’s handgun.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.” Tyler reached into his pocket and pulled out another magazine of ammunition. He ejected the spent one and slammed the fresh clip home in a single, fluid motion. “You can back me up.” Tyler moved toward the bushes once more.

“Whaa...? With what? Harsh language?” Jerry asked incredulously as he fished around in his jacket pockets for something to use as a weapon. He pulled out the only thing he could find, his GPS unit. He turned the screen on, pointed the device toward the bushes and said in a quavery voice, “You want me to tag its location for you or something? It’s right the hell over there!”

Holding his left hand up toward Jerry asking for silence, Tyler edged toward the thick brush, hunched slightly forward, the knuckles of his right hand growing white from the death-grip he held on the pistol. Tyler now cupped the bottom of the gun with his left hand and angled his right foot slightly back and to the side across from the other. Jerry thought it was called the ‘Weaver Stance’. He didn’t know why that particular bit of information would pop into his head right now, but he was pretty sure Tyler didn’t need him riddling him with shooting stance questions at the moment.

Tyler moved slowly forward. A metre from where Matt had been dragged off, he stopped, froze and shouted, “Whatever the fuck you are, if you’re not dead yet, you’re going to be soon!” He stepped through the break in the brush and disappeared into the swirling smoke-filled mist.

“Tyler! Where are you going? Don’t go in there!”

“I’m fine,” Tyler called back. “I think I got it or maybe scared it off!”

“That would be great,” Jerry said, relief flooding his voice.

“Shit, I don’t see Nick or Matt’s body,” Tyler said, then added after a pause, “Holy Christ! What the fuck did that thing do to them? Oh my God! The blood! There’s so much goddamned blood!” Tyler retched hard, sounding repulsed by the signs of the slaughter.

Jerry started to move toward the bushes when Tyler suddenly popped out of a gap directly in front of him. He leapt backward, saying, “Christ! Don’t do that!”

“Sorry, Jer, but I think it’s gone,” Tyler said, wiping the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand. “I saw what looked like tracks heading the other way in the snow. I must have scared it away, thanks to this baby.” He patted the gun lightly as he held it in his hands as if it were a good little guard dog that had done its job.

“Thank God! Then let’s just get the hell out of here and call the RCMP or the marines or something. Speaking of which...” Jerry pulled out his iPhone. The signal strength bars were still at zero. “Shit!”

“Well,” Tyler said, nodding toward Jerry’s phone, “first of all, we’re at least fifteen clicks from civilisation in the middle of the fucking nowhere. And second of all, like you pointed out, there aren’t any cell repeater towers anywhere nearby for a signal. So, unless you’ve suddenly found a satellite phone, good luck with that, brother.”

“Can’t hurt to check,” Jerry said with a shrug.

Taking charge once more, Tyler said, “Okay! let’s get the fu...” His words were cut off in mid-sentence by the sound of something slicing through the air at his back. His eyes went wide, and he fell to his knees,

the magnum dropping onto the slush in front of him. Tyler began shrieking in agony, slumping forward into the snow, his hands spasming in tight knots of anguish.

Jerry gagged when he saw the four ragged furrows that had been carved diagonally across Tyler's wounded back. Each one welled with blood; long strips of mangled white flesh dangled from the wounds like pieces of overcooked lasagne. He had been eviscerated from behind, and most of his skin, clothing and internal organs now lay in a spreading crimson bloom on the frozen ground at his back. As Tyler bled out, he did the only thing he was capable of doing now, and he screamed, and screamed, and screamed.

Jerry held his hands up to his ears to block out the blood-curdling sound of his friend's anguish. "Ty! Oh shit! Oh my God!" He couldn't move and felt his mind begin to slip, losing its traction from the unreality of the situation before him.

With a crack of snapping branches, the beast burst through the fog-shrouded bushes in front of Jerry and dropped down onto Tyler's writhing body. The huge, grey creature tore into the squirming, screaming man, as Jerry staggered back in horror. Right in front of his eyes, his best friend was being devoured by this monster from hell, and he could do nothing to stop it because Tyler had fallen on top of his pistol. As Jerry backed away through the smoke and fog, he caught a glimpse of sword-like claws, crimson-covered fangs and great gouts of steaming blood spraying everywhere into the misty darkness.

"Jesus Christ, holy shit, sweet mother..." Jerry backed up toward where the snowmobiles were parked, never taking his eyes off of the spot in the fog where the beast was ravaging Tyler. Almost falling over the closest machine as he stumbled backward into it, Jerry spun around and jumped on board without looking — Tyler's ride, it turned out, but the keys were missing.

“Son of a bitch!” he muttered. There was no way in hell he was going back now to look for the keys in Tyler’s pockets and threw himself toward the next sled only to find the same result, no keys in the ignition.

“Shit! Jerry rasped. Sprinting toward the next sled, he was delighted to see it was his blinding yellow Wasp-mobile, and apparently, he’d left his keys in the ignition. “Yes!” He hopped on board and turned the engine over. The machine roared to life, and Jerry twisted the throttle so hard he thought he might snap it off. Looking back over his shoulder, he regretted it almost at once.

The giant predator ploughed through the bonfire, red-hot embers and burning logs exploding into the darkness like flaming matchsticks as it raged toward him.

Jerry gunned the engine. The snowmobile rocketed into the grey void of fog as he attempted to put as much distance between himself and the beast as he could. He followed the trail that they had forged through the snow on their way into camp that afternoon. There were hazards up ahead, but he knew he couldn’t slow down, or he’d risk having the beast catch up to him. Still, he knew he was pushing his luck.

Glancing down at the glowing speedometer, Jerry saw he was ripping along doing almost eighty kilometres an hour in the darkness, surrounded by ice fog on an unfamiliar trail in the middle of nowhere. A sense of self-preservation kicked in, and Jerry made himself back the throttle off just a little bit. He didn’t want to miss a turn and have a rollover, or god-forbid hit a tree. If that happened, then he’d be royally screwed.

The fog seemed to coagulate around him. He gradually slowed his speed and felt his sense of panic increase. The farther he got from camp, the thicker the fog became. Soon, he couldn’t see his hand in front of his face, let alone the trail from the edge of a precipice. He finally stopped, feeling stymied as to what he should do next. Blue light bathed his face

as he turned on his cell phone, checking for a signal once more. “Shit! Still no bars!” he complained.

Perhaps sensing a change in the air pressure around him, Jerry wasn't sure, but he glanced to his right just as something whisked through the mist with the speed of a locomotive toward his head. “Jesus Chr...” Jerry ducked down and leaned forward into the windshield of the snowmobile as some of the longest and sharpest looking claws he wished never to see again sliced through the space his head had been occupying only milliseconds before.

Still hunched down and leaning so far forward he thought he might break his nose on the windshield, Jerry Benson aimed the snowmobile for the centre of the trail and twisted the throttle to the max. He shot blindly forward into the freezing fog, praying that the nightmare was now behind him.