

## EARLY WINTER

Six frigging inches, the most ever from an October storm. Jamie clicks off the radio to preserve the batteries and stares out the living room window. Thousands of flakes float down from a curdled-milk sky, blanketing the remnants of his garden.

He shivers, dressed only in his underwear. The power's gone out—almost certainly a fallen limb, part of the price you pay to live out here in the woods. The center of town is three miles away, placing Jamie's house at the very bottom of CMP's priority list. A generator's the logical solution, but even second-hand they cost a shitload and a half, money they don't have. And Karen insists the racket would drive her crazy. Even more crazy.

If only it was just the noise. Karen's petrified of everything these days. Her ridiculous fear of generators gets re-stoked every winter by local TV news accounts of tragedies. All you have to do is vent the fumes properly, and Jamie's a professional builder, for chrissake—or would be if he could find a job. Unlike the newcomers to Southern Maine, the wealthy morons from Connecticut and New Jersey, Jamie knows what the fuck he's doing.

The house contains two working fireplaces. Even if the power stays out all week—always a possibility thanks to goddamn CMP—his little family won't freeze. And the weather's supposed to warm tomorrow; the pasty snow covering the yard will turn to mush and evaporate, although the damage will already have been done. This early snow is spoiling most of the crops that remain in the garden. Jamie has harvested the beets, carrots, and squash; the pumpkins will be fine despite the cold and snow; it's the leftover tomatoes, chard, and green beans that have been ruined, food they desperately need. Hopefully he'll bag a deer or two, in or out of season—the damn things are common as mice and do a fuck-load more damage—but venison won't feed a family of three through the long Maine winter. They'll have to face the embarrassment of using the EBT card again. More accurately, Jamie will. Even when well, Karen can't bear to use the card, not even in distant grocery stores where no one knows her from a hole in the ground. She'd even hesitated about signing up for WIC—the nurse from her shrink's office practically had to force her to apply.

Noise comes from the bedroom. Footsteps. Karen's finally up, maybe checking on the baby. Jamie walks across the house to see how they both are doing.

His wife is nowhere near the crib. She's standing at the window, staring at the snow outside. She looks completely miserable. Blonde and thin but with those terrific curves, even stinky from bed she still inspires desire: one of life's cruel jokes. Jamie can't remember the last time they had sex. He steps over a pile of dirty—he hopes—laundry.

“I can't believe it—just what we need.” Karen doesn't turn to look at him as she speaks; she continues staring out the window. “I'd hoped we wouldn't have to tap into the woodpile for at least another month.” Her voice sounds worried and it takes great

effort to recall her sounding any other way. At least she's not sobbing; nothing makes Jamie feel more helpless than when Karen's crying.

He goes to the crib to check on the baby. Aimee, the only contented member of the family, is still fast asleep. Jamie listens to her little baby snores then sniffs the warm air surrounding her body. Aimee probably is wet, but nothing worse; he'll change her when she wakes. He strains to remember what hour he'd last fed her, sometime in the middle of the night. Thanks to WIC there's plenty of powdered formula and jars of baby food in the cupboard—even if the power stays out awhile feeding Aimee won't be a problem. He watches Karen hurriedly dress. She hoists on three additional layers of clothing over the sweats she hasn't removed for the past two days, an excessive touch, with the house still solidly in the fifties. Cool, maybe, but far from frigid.

"What are we going to do? There's no way the wood's going to last through the winter." A note of dread creeps into Karen's voice, and Jamie feels his stomach clench. "What will we do when February arrives? Things are different now, Jamie; we have to keep the house warm for the baby."

He studies his wife, trying not to be too obvious. The circles around her eyes aren't deep, and so far at least Karen's expression suggests anxiety rather than despair. Maybe the new pills are working. Early that morning he got up to piss and asked in a low voice if Karen was awake. She hadn't responded: a good sign, a very good sign. Insomnia is the most concerning of the red flags; lack of sleep is what pushed Karen over the edge last time.

"I'll chop more wood today. If we store it near the fireplace it should dry out by Christmas."

Karen doesn't answer so Jamie laces up his boots. He might as well start right away. According to the radio the snow will end soon and his taking action might help Karen relax. Since her suicide attempt, keeping her well is Jamie's number one priority. Keeping them both well, Karen and Aimee. A little strenuous labor will warm him better than a working furnace.

"Make sure Starbucks doesn't get out," Karen warns. "He doesn't realize winter has arrived."

Starbucks is Karen's useless marmalade, an aging orange cat predating their relationship. Karen adores the damn thing, insists his purring helps her fall asleep. She didn't allow Jamie to replace Boris when he had died the previous winter; barely pregnant, but already heading downhill, Karen worried a new dog might attack the coming baby, something Jamie's never heard of in his entire life, even though virtually all his neighbors keep at least one or two mutts. Boris was a big help; he used to alert them to visitors and kept the foxes and raccoons out of the chicken coop. Starbucks won't even chase mice from the kitchen.

Karen's not a country girl. She was born and raised in Maplewood, New Jersey, which Jamie figures is the reason she's willing to keep such a useless pet.

"Why are you taking your gun? It isn't deer season." Karen points to the lever-action twenty-two he always brings along on trips to the woods.

"I might come across that damn fox."

A hen went missing the previous week and Jamie found fox scat near the coop. Karen hates killing anything: she only tolerates his deer-hunting because they need the free meat and she's scared shitless of ticks. The local news often warns against Lyme

disease.

“He’ll stand out against the snow. It will be an easy shot.”

*“I don’t want you to shoot the fox, Jamie. I don’t want any more bad karma.”*

Jamie closes his eyes and shrugs. It’s futile to argue this or any other point with Karen since she’s become ill. Arguments of any sort—even a brisk discussion—can easily push her over the edge. Last week she’d remained in bed three solid days after Jamie begged her to try feeding Aimee just once. Karen didn’t shower or change clothes the whole three days; she didn’t even eat. She just lay under the covers, crying.

“I’ll fire a warning shot if I see him. Maybe I can scare him over to the Spinneys’ land.” The Spinneys, their nearest neighbors, have plenty of money—they can afford critter problems. Next month will make a full year since Jamie received a paycheck. He turns to go. “Bye, hon. I’ll be back in a couple of hours. Three at the most.”

He pushes open the door and Starbucks, who has slunk to the back of the house during the discussion of the fox, bolts into the snow-covered yard.

“Fuck!”

“Try to coax him back in!”

Though Karen’s voice sounds hopeful, they both know how unlikely this is. Jamie peers outside. The stupid cat is nowhere in sight.

“He’ll come back when he’s hungry.”

He calls Starbucks’ name throughout the walk to the section of land where a copse of white birch can stand some thinning. Karen will freak out if she has to sleep without the cat, so Jamie will have to do his best to get the damn thing home.

The snow stops falling halfway through his trek into the woods. Jamie stays on the old dirt road as long as possible. After the snow melts he’ll drive his truck in to pick up the logs he downs today. The walk is relaxing; he’s ashamed of how good it feels to be out of the house, away from Karen’s depression. Jamie was born in the house; it’s the only place he’s ever lived. Dad worked in a bakery two towns over until he dropped dead one chilly autumn evening, five years ago almost to the day, and Mom had followed two years later after losing a six-month battle with ovarian cancer. Since her death, Jamie’s been entirely on his own. With no brother, sister, cousin, aunt, or uncle to help out, *he* should be the one who’s depressed and anxious, rather than Karen, but Jamie can’t afford to fall apart. *Someone* has to cook and clean, *someone* has to feed Aimee and change her diapers. And *someone* has to figure out a way to pay the fucking bills without any money coming in....

They’d met at USM when Jamie tried his luck at an evening biology course. Karen seemed perfect, a girl so pretty you could look at her all day for the rest of your life, but not the least stuck-up, unlike the other attractive girls at the school. Jamie only lasted half a semester before giving up on his studies; by then he’d succeeded with Karen in performing that most crucial biological function. She dropped out soon after discovering she was pregnant, though she sometimes still talks about returning to school. Between the baby and her illness—initially diagnosed as hormonal, then as post-partum, now the shrink feels certain it’s some form of bipolar disorder—this doesn’t seem likely. Not unless things greatly improve. Which absolutely *has* to happen, with the property tax due in January, and Jamie unable to leave the house to work even if he found a frigging job....

He’s grown up on this land. Jamie is familiar with every knoll and hollow. He

tips his gun when he passes the spot where he shot his first deer, and stops to reflect at the thick circle of mountain laurel behind which he did it for the first time with Debby Spinney. She'd been two years younger, but a whole lot more experienced. Those were carefree, happy days, days he'd love to have back. Jamie's glad for Aimee—having a child ensures the fragile family line will continue—but what kind of life can they give her when they can't even feed themselves without assistance from the state? Karen had found herself pregnant at the worst possible time, just days after Jamie was laid off.

Dan assured him there'd be plenty of work once spring came around, work that never materialized. The economy sucks everywhere in Maine; before Karen's suicide attempt Jamie would drive to Bangor and beyond in search of employment. Despite excellent references and above average construction skills, nothing panned out. Karen assures him she won't do it again, but he knows better than to rely on her word. Last month the shrink added a mood stabilizer to the mix; if the new pill works Jamie will return to looking for work. If it doesn't, he has no idea what he'll do. Maybe rob a fucking bank....

A flash of red catches his eye. Jamie lays the heavy chainsaw down in the snow and shoulders his gun. Recalling his promise to Karen, he hesitates then raises the sight half an inch. The fox leaps into a nearby thicket and is gone before he can get off the shot.

"Bastard!" Jamie picks up the saw and continues on his way. He could have had the fox easy. If any other chickens go missing he'll feel stupid for having listened to his wife.

In the next hour he downs a dozen trees. The chainsaw whines as he cleans off the side branches and cuts the trunks into four-foot logs. After a few minutes work he's thoroughly soaked in sweat. Jamie strips down to his tee shirt to complete the job. When he's done, he relaxes a few minutes before hauling the logs through the woods to stack them neatly in the road where they'll be easy to find when he returns with the truck. The sun's still clouded over and the sweat covering his body is cold by the time he decides he'd better return to the house. All he can think of is how great a hot shower will feel. Then Jamie remembers the power is out and there isn't going to be a shower. A cup of tea brewed on his Coleman will have to do until CMP gets around to fixing the line.

It's possible of course the power's restored while he's been out cutting wood; possible but unlikely. Jamie's no optimist; he hates getting his hopes up. The sting of disappointment that usually follows hurts too goddamn much. These early snowfalls are the worst; they catch the trees still laden with leaves and snap more branches than otherwise would break. The radio had warned of power outages throughout New England—the electricity could be out an entire week, something that's happened before. Power or no, Jamie prays Karen's doing better when he returns to the house. Her illness makes his own frustration that much more difficult to endure.

Throughout the walk back he calls Starbucks' name, but doesn't get a single glimpse of him. The lazy cat likes to eat every couple of hours and may already be home. If not, Karen will insist Jamie go out again to look for him, and Jamie will be stuck searching the snowy woods for hours, even in the dark. He'll have to do it; he has to do everything he can to keep Karen from going over the edge. The memory of her limp body after the overdose still haunts him. The new pills aren't supposed to be lethal even if taken all at once.

Halfway back to the house Jamie notices a reddish streak staining the snow. He puts down the chainsaw and shoulders his gun. Paw prints surround the stain: fox prints. Jamie follows them to a small wetland bordering the Spinneys' property. On the ground before a pine thicket he spies an orange shape. Starbucks, half-eaten. Jamie walks slowly backwards until he reaches a tree big enough to crouch behind. Shivering beneath his moist shirt, he waits to see if the fox will return.

Dan had hired his eighteen-year old nephew instead of Jamie the previous spring. The kid couldn't do half what Jamie could, and Dan didn't have the guts to tell Jamie about the hiring; he'd learned of it while sharing a beer at the Rusty Nail with Ron, a high school friend who'd been kept on at the construction company. News of the hire wounded Jamie deeply; he'd known Dan all his life, had liked and trusted him. As a kid, he'd mowed Dan's lawn, raked his leaves, cleaned his gutters—performed all the chores not worth the time of a master carpenter. Dan had given Jamie a paid week off when his mother died and Dan's wife sent food over the whole next month. Jamie was a steady, reliable worker, and his boss had known about the coming baby. Overnight it seemed, the world stopped making sense. People you trusted for years no longer were trustworthy; without warning, a beautiful, fun-loving woman became depressed and fearful. It's scary how quickly Jamie's happy life fell apart.

Karen's family won't help the young couple. They've been opposed to the marriage from the start, have predicted—even hoped—it would fail. *"You did this on purpose,"* Karen's father accused Jamie when informed of the pregnancy. *"You'll do anything to keep her stuck in those goddamn woods."*

They blame him for Karen's breakdown as well. *Who wouldn't get depressed living in the woods like a hillbilly? Without even a small shopping center nearby?* Even at her worst though, Karen never mentions returning to New Jersey. She likes the peacefulness of the woods and had liked Jamie until she got ill.

Without a family to support them, there's nowhere to turn for help. A thousand dollars in property tax is due in January and they haven't put a dime towards the bill. What the fuck is Jamie supposed to do? The only thing he owns of any value is the land, and he's sworn never to sell a single acre. That's a solid line he'll die before crossing. Karen just has to get better...

The fox reappears and Jamie waits until its jaws are about to close on what's left of the cat. He aims carefully, sighting a perfect target in the center of the predator's head. As if aware of his peril the fox peers over at the rifle, its eyes a suddenly familiar shade of brown. Jamie lowers the gun from his shoulder. "Stupid fucker!" he screams. The fox flies into the bushes carrying Starbucks' carcass in his mouth. Everyone does what they can to survive; the fox is no different from the rest of them. Jamie resets the safety on his rifle and walks back to the house, picking up the chainsaw along the way. Karen hates the winter; even if the new pill works it will be months before she visits this part of the property. By then any trace of Starbucks will long be gone.

"Cat back yet?" he asks when he opens the door and enters the cold house.

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