

1 Frank Logan trudged toward his isolated cabin, led not by the winding trail he should have been more than familiar with at this point, but the single stream of smoke drifting forlornly from his chimney. He'd started the fire only an hour or so earlier, expecting to be gone for half the day and not wanting to return to a cold living room. Instead he'd lost, snagged, dropped or sat on every fly he'd spent the last two weeks tying in the same living room he was now trudging back to.

His trout box was empty, his rod bent, his mood sour and his belly empty. He'd gone without breakfast—and was planning on skipping lunch—in the hopes of downing three or four fresh fish for dinner with a bottle or two of pale ale. Now he'd have to make do with some canned tomato soup and stale peanut butter crackers.

Maybe he'd have a beer or two, maybe not. Such were the dimensions of his choices for the day. To fish or not to fish; to cook or not to cook. To drink or not to drink; to watch TV or not to watch TV. He sighed, stomped the ground to get rid of the jelly-like river mud still slowing him down, and trudged onward, watching as the plume of smoke grew closer and thicker as he neared the tiny cabin he'd gotten for a song using his first royalty check way back when.

The fierce October chill penetrated the seat of his blue jeans, which were still damp from a slimy spill on some mossy rocks. The stream that ran behind his cabin was already dangerously cold with stiff-running mountain water, and the afternoon temperature dip did little to improve his equally frosty mood.

As he neared the cabin, he listened subliminally for the sound of a ringing phone or running car engine, maybe even the

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telltale swoosh-swoosh of rotor blades from a hovering chopper. For so long he'd lived his life connected to such sounds; every absence he'd ever made—an afternoon matinee, a late-night dinner, even a 45-minute trip to the gym—meant an impatient collection of voicemails and open doors awaiting his return. Now he was greeted with only the mind-numbing silence of his isolated summer cabin, at which he'd stayed far too long this year.

He ditched the fly-fishing gear on top of a pile of other failed hobbies now taking up most of the shingle roof garage to the side of the cabin proper. He smiled blandly at the sedimentary layer of his summer shenanigans: the rock-climbing gear, barely dented from its single use, the moldy kayak, the horse-shoe set for one, the kites, the pup tent, the golf clubs, the spelunking helmet.

He thought idly about selling the pile of crap on eBay as he closed the garage door, then thought better of it. The self-image of him sitting for hours in front of a glowing computer monitor waiting for some egghead in Alabama to bid on his pile of failed adventures filled him with dread.

Frank sighed while standing over the primitive cabin stove, waiting for his dented pot of soup to bubble up. He stared at the congealed pink-red mass until it gently oozed into a more soup-like mixture, then continued staring until he realized he wanted toast with his soup. Then, halfway through waiting for the toaster to pop up, he smelled something burning and, sure enough, it was his tomato soup. Just as he was cleaning up that mess, he smelled something else burning and, sure enough, it was his toast. He swore a blue streak, but ate them both. (Each was far better than he'd expected.)

After lunch Frank did what he always did after lunch: sat in his favorite chair, the one with the best view, and held a crocheted throw pillow on his lap as he stared out at the sloping crest of the mountain on which he lived. He'd made sure some light jazz was playing in the background, but other than that it was just he and the mountain.

He and the mountain and his memories. Dark memories, at that. Dark, disturbing, bloody memories that made him realize why he'd retreated to the cabin in the first place. Although his had not been a particularly bloody career, it had been an exceedingly long one by FBI standards, and the pain kind of added up over the years.

Dead bodies, broken bones, twisted lives, warped minds, copper bullets; the memories, the images, had piled up in his mind much like the expensive hobbies he'd tried, and failed at, had piled up in his tiny garage all summer.

It slipped in without him ever realizing it. There was no catalyst for his meltdown; no smoking gun for his extended leave of absence. Neither he nor his superiors could point to one significant moment in a career worth of significant moments and say, "That, Frank, that's the one that pushed you over the edge."

No, it was more like that pile of broken hobbies in the garage. One heaped on the other piled against the next, until one day you opened the door and there was no room left for another addition to the pile. He'd gotten up one morning in late June and could barely get out of bed. The phone rang, the email buzzer on his laptop buzzed, the cell phone vibrated itself off the nightstand and, still, he was paralyzed. His mind and body frozen on overload.

By late afternoon he'd finally loosened his limbs enough to shower and shave, dress and leave the house. By evening he'd gratefully handed over his gun and badge. No one had requested them, nor had he volunteered them. It just seemed like the right thing to do. He'd left for the cabin the very next day.

He thought idly of his partner, Vinny, sorting out a rough patch in his own life back in DC. Thought about his failed private eye business, the spacious office he'd so lovingly decorated and had such high hopes for currently sitting empty as he waited for the lease to expire. He thought about...

Halfway through his daily reverie of regrets, the phone rang. It was his new literary agent, an overly officious, particularly young woman named Monica Potter, calling with her

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weekly nudge to get Frank to do some of that writing he'd promised her way back in July.

"Hi, Frank," sang her sing-song voice from the answering machine, "I know you know who this is, I know you're sitting there, staring out that beautiful window at that beautiful view, screening calls from people back in the world like yours truly. Actually, I wish you'd pick up because I have good news. Frank? Mr. Logan? Oh Fraaaannnnkkkkk???"

"Okay, well, anyway, the publisher has moved back your release date to next summer versus spring, so you won't be hearing too much from me over the next few months to bug you for those new pages. And you might get a break on word count, too, Frankie Boy. Doubletree is talking about skipping the hardcover route and going straight to paperback, so it won't need to be as thick to boost that added value quotient. So, I thought this would be good news.

"Anyway, I'm out of the office the rest of the week. Halloween, you know. Big holiday for my fiancé. I think he's going as Darth Vader this year... again. Hope I can still fit into that Princess Leia costume. Anyway, enjoy the crisp fall weather, Frank. I'll catch up with you next week, you know, only if you feel like it. Bye."

It was only after the message was over and silence once again filled the cabin that Frank realized he'd been strangling the poor throw pillow in his lap. He released his grip, mentally translating Monica's cheery, if chilling, message. No doubt the publisher had moved back the release date of his new book because summer sales of his last book had just come in. Frank knew from his thinning royalty checks that the news would be disappointing at best, sobering at worst. Monica's message, so full of hidden meaning that it didn't take a mystery writer like himself to figure it out, confirmed his suspicions.

And straight to paperback? They couldn't have insulted him more if they'd Fed-Exed him a bouquet of dead roses overnight. All of his previous books had been released in hardcover. Now this? Next Monica would be telling him (in that

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perkily cheery way of hers) that they were foregoing bookstores in favor of grocery stores to stock the paperbacks.

He could hear her perkily lame excuse already: “But Frank, this is GOOD for you. Don’t you get it? Your kind of reader doesn’t go to the bookstore anyway. Here’s a great opportunity to catch them where they live, in between the cat food and frozen food aisles!”

Frank felt the sourness of his burnt lunch settle in his stomach and closed his eyes to shut out the beautiful view. He didn’t feel like looking at beauty anymore; the blackness of his closed eyelids suited his mood far better.

Soon enough Frank felt the inevitable pull of his afternoon nap drawing him into himself, his arms curling around his chest and his legs sliding closer together as he sunk into his overstuffed easy chair. The gray light outside his window did little to dispel his sleepiness, and before he nodded off his only thought was of what to have for dinner that night.

“Christ,” he snorted, almost—just almost—interrupting his impending nap, “I might as well be in a nursing home....”