

Frank lay shivering in the mud for over an hour, until he was sure they had not taken the road around to this side of the lake. Perhaps they thought he was the first to go through the ice and never made it out from under it. Or maybe they were only after Sal, and either arrogantly or foolishly ignored him. Whatever the reason, he couldn't take unnecessary chances now, and even though they probably did not know where his cabin was, he decided not to risk going to it. Slowly, stiffly, he got to his knees and gently pushed the reeds aside to look at the lake. It was as black and empty as before, nothing stirred. Tomorrow the hole would be iced over, and Sal would be sealed there until spring, with his pockets stuffed full of money, legal papers, and a gun.

Frank's hands had numbed to the point where he could not feel the mud that he scraped from his clothes, and his feet were like solid blocks of wood. He started up the hill, careful to place his feet on firm ground. The reeds had given way to thick forest.

He hooked his arms around tree trunks to pull himself along. By the time he reached the dirt road on this side of the lake, he was beginning to get some feeling back into his extremities.

He remembered once, when he was a young and hungry charter pilot, waiting outside the locked operator's office in twenty-degree weather for his passenger to return. He couldn't waste precious aviation fuel just to keep warm, so he spent most of the night sprinting up and down the runway, working up body steam that would soon be drawn away by the cold. Cold was like death. It was always trying to get at you, seeping in under doors, through windows, always drawing life-giving heat out of your body.

Frank reached the road after one last struggle with the mud and snow. He knew that there was a house several miles down the road. He didn't know the people, but that didn't matter now. All he could think about was the cold that threatened to kill him.

He started to run down the road, flapping his arms like a grounded bird in an absurd attempt at flight. The movement warmed him a little but running in this kind of total darkness was impossible. The road was muddy and invisible beneath him. Trotting worked a little better, and nothing interfered with flapping his arms. He pumped up a little more body heat and concentrated on his arms to forget about the cold.

How far was the farmhouse? He had always judged the distance from his cabin. He was not completely sure of his position on the road. He kept trotting, planting his feet firmly in the soft surface of the road, occasionally stumbling but never quite falling.

The glow of car lights appeared behind him. They were hidden by a curve and had not caught him in their direct beams yet. He reached the edge of the road in three long strides, grabbed a small fir tree at the top as he would have grabbed an adversary by the hair, and jumped off the road. The tree bent over ninety degrees and checked his momentum. He released it, and it snapped back upright. It would take more than Frank to break off its maturity.

He worked his way down several feet below road level, digging the toes of his shoes into the ground for support. The car came very slowly, the tires grinding by him overhead. He hoped they were only locals

who knew the condition of the road, maybe even the people who lived in the house that he was looking for. But Frank wasn't thinking of that by the time the car passed.

He was thinking of Baja, California in July. He could almost feel the blistering sun, smell the dry desert air. He could see the blue Pacific glittering all the way to the horizon and hear the refreshing sound of Pacific waves breaking on the rocky shore.