

CLAW

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## CHAPTER ONE

The towering bonfire crackled in the centre of the large clearing, the freshly-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, there would be a loud popping noise as a new pocket of resin in the unseasoned wood exploded, shooting out yet another red-hot ember which seemingly went 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 chair back from the blazing campfire 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.

When Jerry had found out that his college brothers were heading out on a snowmobiling expedition to the Kootenay region of BC, Jerry had been all over it and jumped at the chance to join them. But his excitement had not been because he treasured these trips and wanted to come along for the yearly booze-fest with the boys. No, though he still loved his friends dearly, he'd had enough of the yearly, alcohol-soaked binge-fests, and this was supposed to have been the year he told the guys he was done.

But serendipity had provided for Jerry this year. His three college brothers had chosen a place that he not only found interesting and exciting but a place he actually wanted to visit, albeit, not for the same reasons that they did. What his buddies didn't know, or give a rat's ass about, was Jerry's keen interest in the recent seismic activity around the Kootenay Glacier near the historic interior town of Lawless, BC. The shake-up had resulted in some very intriguing datasets being collected by the Canadian National Seismic Network sensors in the area. Jerry, a geologist at the University Of British Columbia by trade, had been exceedingly excited to explore the site of the quake further to look for any physical manifestations of what, up until now, he'd only experienced as a series of numbers and lines on a graph, back at the university.

The Cascade mountain range surrounding Lawless and Kootenay Glacier Provincial Park was part of the ‘Ring of Fire’, a group of mountains and volcanoes that were constantly active in one form or another, forming a ring around the Pacific Ocean. It was an area that stretched from Krakatoa, Indonesia to the West Coast of North America, and estimated to be responsible for ninety percent of the world’s earthquakes.

Many of the residents in the interior of BC had finally woken up to the fact that they were just as prone to feeling the earth move as the Lower Mainland of the province. After the recent moderate trembler near Lawless, they now knew it was just a matter of time before the West Coast’s long overdue megathrust earthquake struck, one which would devastate the lower mainland and cause significant damage to the interior of the province as well. They now shared the same reality as everyone else living on the ‘left coast’ of North America, who, every day had to make peace with the possibility of the ‘Big One’ occurring at potentially any moment and yet still going on with their everyday lives — just part of being a West-Coaster, they’d say.

Jerry knew he could tell his friends he was going ‘rock hunting’ to look for some more rocks and minerals for the university, and that they would be more than happy to leave him alone to explore away the rest of the day. Nothing bored them quicker, he found, than geology lessons. This was always a bonus when he wanted to be left alone, especially when his reasons were a little bit more duplicitous than they usually were.

As a Professor of Geology at The University Of British Columbia, Jerry Benson had been studying the Cascade range for years and had always been impressed with the amount of gold that had been mined from the area in the late nineteenth century and into the early twentieth. And as a geologist, he also knew there was still much more just waiting to be found in the region. He was hoping that the latest tremor around Lawless may have exposed some potential new sites for him to hunt for the precious yellow metal.

There were literally thousands of major fault lines that crisscrossed the province of BC, with dozens intersecting the Kootenay region near Lawless. When he’d gone online to access the sensors from the Canadian National Seismic Network, he’d been expecting to find the cause of the quake to be one of the existing faults. But according to the sensors, none of them had triggered the local event. It seemed that a new, undiscovered fault was the cause of the quake this time, and Jerry’s inner gold-hound knew he should investigate the occurrence further.

It had been as if fate were egging him along to go on his annual college frat-brother vacation. The fact that it just happened to coincide with the aftermath of a major geologic event in a region that had such a rich history of gold mining — it had seemed an opportunity too good to pass up.

So, after helping the other three Bros set-up camp earlier that afternoon, with GPS unit in hand and a few other tools of the trade in his backpack, Jerry had set out looking for the fault line on his eye-wateringly yellow, rented snowmobile. He'd departed much later than he'd wanted and had known he was operating under a time constraint as there weren't too many hours of daylight left to explore.

As luck would have it, he'd found the fault's source relatively quickly. And much to his delight, he'd also discovered the opening to a promising new cavern in the cliffside near the base of the Kootenay glacier. It had been centred almost directly over where this new quake-causing fault had appeared.

The ridge where the cavern was located was at the base of the Kootenay glacier and was usually spared much of the fog and low cloud that had been socking-in Lawless in the valley below for the last few weeks. Up until now, Jerry had enjoyed a beautiful clear afternoon as he'd searched for the source of the fault. But in the back of his mind, he knew his time was limited.

The delightful day came with a bit of a caveat; despite being located above the valley cloud, sometimes, later on a winter's afternoon, just as the sun set, the rapidly dropping high-altitude temperatures created a freezing ice fog that would creep down off the glacier. The fog coated everything in sight with a slippery crystalline crust — something that made travel difficult and dangerous. Jerry had been warned about it and didn't want to be caught off guard, so he wanted to make sure that he left enough time to get back safely to camp and avoid the fog and knew he had to manage his time accordingly.

Meandering out of the cave entrance in the rock face was what appeared to be a new geothermal aquifer. There were already several hot springs located around Lawless, making it a popular destination for people looking to soak away their aches and pains. He knew this new hot spring would add to the province's impressive total, which already boasted eighteen out of the twenty-one confirmed to be in Canada.

As he knelt to measure aquifer's temperature, Jerry noted that it was an excellent example of the province's true volcanic nature. His infrared thermometer pegged the water at just a hair under one hundred degrees Celsius, making it far too hot for human use. Anyone unfortunate enough, or stupid enough, to try using this hot spring for skinny dipping would find their skin sloughing off of them like a blanched tomato before canning — definitely a 'look but don't touch' hot spring.

Speaking of which, as Jerry took one last quick look into the aquifer before entering the cavern proper, he froze in his tracks. There, in the boiling stream, glinting enticingly, were several of the biggest looking gold nuggets he had ever seen, some of them easily

the size of golf balls. Grabbing a broken branch from the base of a nearby tree, he fished three of the nuggets out and examined them once they'd cooled down. As a geologist, without even having to break the ore open, he immediately 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.

To say he was now more than just a little bit intrigued as to what lay inside the cavern was putting it mildly. As he stood, he added the nuggets into a plastic sample bag and placed them almost reverentially in his backpack and then slung the pack back over his shoulders.

Just before entering the steaming black void in the rock face, Jerry's mind registered what his eyes had picked up moments before — the trees in the forest nearby were now casting lengthening shadows. Looking up, he saw the sun was almost kissing the edge of the glacier and realised that time had gotten away from him while examining this golden aquifer.

The remaining daylight was now growing short, and he could see the first probing tendrils of ice fog beginning to drift down off the glacier toward his location. "Looks like I've overstayed my welcome," he said aloud, then turned to face the cave entrance and finished, saying, "You'll have to wait until tomorrow to get your turn."

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

In spite of his precautions, Jerry had been caught off guard by the rapid movement of the fog and soon found himself enveloped in a swirling grey cloud. After carefully turning the snowmobile around, he sat in the icy mist for a moment longer and pulled out his GPS unit. With a couple of quick button presses, the cavern's precise location had been geotagged in the device's memory, and he knew he would have an easy trip back in the morning to explore the inside of this potentially valuable new find.

"Hey, Jer! You look low! Incoming!" Tyler said, lobbing another beer. Jerry snapped out of his reverie and caught the canned beer deftly in one hand, putting it down in the snow beside his camp chair, next to the other beer he'd barely touched.

"Gotta keep up, Jer! This booze isn't going to drink itself!" Tyler took a large gulp from the huge bottle of bourbon he held, then cracked open another can of beer and washed the burning remnants of the whiskey down his throat with a long, thirsty

swallow. After a belch so loud Jerry thought it might shake the snow from the overburdened trees around them, Tyler smiled contentedly and settled into his camp chair, while taking another sip of beer.

Tyler had always fancied himself 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. 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-size, 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 on the Beverly Hillbillies, while you sloshed some Tennessee brewed Old No.7 down your throat. Usually, Nick only brought along a forty pounder, but this year he’d decided to super-size it, most likely at Tyler’s behest.

“Thanks, Ty, but I think I’m okay, just not in the mood tonight.”

“Not in the mood? We’re out here in the great outdoors, bombing around on our sleds, enjoying nature and getting drunk! How can you not be in the mood?”

“Just tired,” Jerry lied, already itching to get back to the cavern and explore further in the morning, visions of dollar signs dancing in his head every time he closed his eyes. But there was another reason Jerry 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-glazed path back to the cavern on his high-pitched, droning wasp-mobile.

Just the thought of spelunking around the new cave system half-tanked was scary enough, but when you threw in the fact that it could easily have dormant lava tubes scattered throughout its interior floor with some of them possibly dropping thousands of metres into the darkness below, it was insane.

No, stumbling drunkenly into one of those lava tubes was not an appealing idea. He thought he would have to add it 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 or so 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 his cloud-saved data once more.

He 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. He knew he'd have to suck it up until he got home. The last thing Jerry needed was Tyler trying to play World of Warcraft on his laptop in the middle of subzero temperatures and having him bork his computer because of a condensation issue or something.

The smoke and fog parted momentarily, and Jerry saw Nick sitting across the roaring fire from him, looking a little green around the gills. He wobbled back and forth in his chair and looked down in disgust at something in his lap, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. Jerry had been concerned about Nick. He 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, Nick 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, it would be death two hundred and thirty-six for his new book. Nick had been doing his wobbling routine next to the flames for about the last half hour now. So far, every time he'd done it, he would eventually stabilise himself just enough so that he could have another gulp from the can of beer between his legs, and also maybe a chug of bourbon if the bottle of Jack were nearby. After a few minutes, he would begin to doze off once more, wobbling back and forth in his seat next to the fire as he swam in and out of consciousness.

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 into the shortcut between the bushes to the forest behind his chair. As he disappeared, he'd invariably hollered out that he was, "Unrenting some more beer!" When he was coherent and sober, Nick almost always said, "You can never truly buy beer, you can only rent it."

Watching Nick from across the fire now, it looked to Jerry like some of the beer and whiskey had come back out the wrong end and found their way onto his lap. He shouted over the colossal blaze to Nick, "You doing okay, buddy? Looks like you're having 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 he 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 and hooted in delight, tossing another can of beer to Nick, saying, "Glad to see you made more room brother,

here's another!"

With red-rimmed eyes, Nick watched the beer hit the ground near his feet and roll through the brown-coloured slush. It came to rest against the side of the air mattress of Jerry's other college buddy, Matt. Matt was already sound asleep, 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 before Jerry had gone on his geology field trip, they'd driven the snowmobiles back and forth across the clearing several times. The 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 through the deep snow as they traversed the site. Then, just when they thought they were done, Tyler had told them to make sure that they'd backed the sleds in so that they were all pointing skis-out, ready for the next day's activities, allowing them 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 machines had made on their way into camp 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's trail, coming in from the direction of the forest that backed onto the campfire.

Shifting uncomfortably in his camp chair, Jerry felt something lumpy digging into his side and reached into the large, outer pocket of his jacket. He probed around for a second, then pulled out his GPS receiver, surprised to see that he'd left it on. Checking the battery level indicator, he 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 held. 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, in the middle of nowhere, without a single cell tower in sight, the phone now acted as nothing more than a glorified camera, alarm clock and flashlight combo. If something happened to one of them while they were out here, 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 debris, 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 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. Looking around the camp again, 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.

Back when the ski hill had still been open, as a child, Jerry had vacationed in the area with his family. Thinking back, he never remembered it being like this with the fog so constant and thick, or there even being any fog at all for that matter. But it seemed that it was going to be a regular thing now, thanks to assistance from a new, warmer, more unpredictable Mother Nature. As a result, the incidence of freezing fogs at higher elevations over the last few decades around Lawless had dramatically increased. It was a dangerous phenomenon that occasionally found its way down to the valley bottom around Lawless.

The double-whammy of the whole situation was that in addition to the threat posed by the ice fog in winter, the area also had a much higher incidence of temperature inversion fogs as well. The unique shape of the valley seemed to welcome them, much more so than any other region in the interior of BC. And it was something that only seemed to be getting worse, making it a less than ideal destination for a winter vacation these days.

Thanks to his current lack of interest in pounding back the booze like the rest of the guys, when he'd informed them of his new, healthier lifestyle, he had been enthusiastically nominated by the other three Bros as the designated driver before the trip had even begun. Jerry had no problem with that.

On their drive up from the coast, they'd encountered a little bit of thick, patchy, low

cloud on a couple of the mountain passes along the way with a bit of slush. 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.

And it had been a long trip. The drinking and rowdiness had started almost as soon as they'd left Vancouver that morning. 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 for the night at the Osoyoos Holiday Inn, Jerry was relieved to be out of the pickup truck and the eye-watering whisky fumes that filled the cab. Almost before the truck had 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.

When morning had come, just trying to get everyone awake and moving before five o'clock had been quite a challenge. But thanks to the four large double-doubles from the local Tim Hortons, he'd managed to pour the boys back into Tyler's Dodge and get them underway again before sun-up.

They'd driven east for several hours on Provincial Highway 3 before turning off and heading north toward the Kootenay Glacier and Lawless. It had been just after nine o'clock in the morning when they'd crested the apex of the Golden Mile pass. Taking a break, Jerry pulled off of the highway and onto an adjacent viewpoint that overlooked the valley.

The view was breathtaking. Snow-covered mountain peaks jutted up like broken teeth through the dense fog that filled the valley bottom — an ocean 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 shop where they'd reserved their snowmobiles. After a few wrong turns in the fog, they arrived at the rental shop, located in 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?"

Jerry watched Tyler, who had been at the cash register preparing to pay. Tyler 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, 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 is 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 had taken a second and then agreed, quickly explaining to Ty that his cell phone based GPS was basically 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 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. From what Jerry could see, it was the most expensive one, of course. The man rang up the total on the till, saying, “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 little babies back in stock last week.”

Looking rather unimpressed with his good fortune, Tyler glanced out the window of the shop toward the small local convenience store across the street called, Everything But The Kitchen Sink. According to its big, blue neon sign, it was a proud purveyor of 6-49 tickets, and more! “Gee, thanks,” Tyler snarked. “I guess seeing as I’m that lucky, I’d better pick up a ticket across the street when we’re finished.”

So, after renting the snowmobiles, Jerry had driven them across the street to buy a few groceries at the store. Conveniently, it wasn’t just lottery tickets that the market sold. Tyler had been in his glory, and his shopping cart looked like a bachelor’s dream come true. Filled to the brim with, chips, jerky, Twinkies and God knew what else, he made one final stop at the section of the store that really mattered, the liquor section. It was well stocked, and Ty looked like a kid in a candy store, Jerry noted. After throwing a few healthier choices into the cart, like bread, lunch meat and cheese, Jerry decided to loiter around the outside of the while the boys shopped, and catch up on the latest at the local bulletin board out front.

It was there that he met one very cantankerous senior struggling to exit the building with his two-four of Kokanee under one arm. Jerry grabbed the door for the man who

grumbled his thanks as he limped out of the door. He paused, turned toward Jerry and said, “Feels like we’re livin’ in the friggin’ Twilight Zone most of the winter now, don’t it?”

Jerry nodded in agreement that it must be rough, saying, “I wouldn’t have believed it could be this thick if I hadn’t seen it for myself.”

“Yup, it’s goddamned crap, eh?” the old man grouched, spitting on the ground precariously close to Jerry’s boot-clad foot. It was as if the very act of talking about the mist had put a bad taste in the man’s mouth.

Jerry watched in amusement as the snarky senior, apparently in the running for Local Grump Of The Year Award, ambled across the foggy parking lot and stopped at one of the biggest four by fours Jerry had ever seen. The old man wrangled open the driver’s side door to the huge truck, threw the beer up onto the seat ahead of himself and then slowly climbed into the cab via a small chromed ladder that had been bolted to the truck’s side.

At the same time as the truck’s throaty exhaust system roared to life, its illumination system flared alive as well, and Jerry was forced to shield his eyes from the blinding glare. He stood there smiling, wondering if the senior rented himself out as emergency backup lighting for the city of Lawless during the times when they experienced power outages from ice and snow storms.

The senior nodded at Jerry as he rolled by, giving him a small salute with two fingers from the hand holding the steering wheel. Jerry nodded back as the truck passed, reading the bumper-sticker that had been placed on the rear window of the cab, just below the fully loaded gun rack, ‘Please Honk If You’ve Never Seen A Gun Fired From A Moving Vehicle Before!’ The old man looked prepared for whatever mother nature might throw at him — even if he couldn’t see anything because of the fog, at least he could still shoot at it, Jerry figured. Smirking to himself, he finally wandered back into the liquor store just as the boys were piling their ‘supplies’ onto the counter.

The clerk made the mistake of attempting small-talk with Tyler and said, “Hope you found everything you were looking for, mister.”

Tyler, being Tyler, said, ‘Yeah, apart from cheap whores and cheaper booze, I guess I found everything.’

The clerk had just stood there with his mouth open for a moment before he finished silently ringing in the rest of the order.

Jerry shifted in his camp chair and shook his head as he recalled Tyler's constant urge to be a smart ass to anyone he met, whether he was actually funny or not never seemed to matter to Tyler. Smiling lightly, he took another small sip of his beer and started making mental notes of things he wanted to check in the morning before he went back to the cave system. He decided to add his eyeball-searingly yellow snowmobile to 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. 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 sloggng 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 over to his left, Jerry saw that Tyler was nodding in and out of consciousness as well now. He sat sprawled in his camp chair, legs sticking out, 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 head slowly sank back down onto his chest.

With a yawn, Jerry stretched out his own legs and leaned back in his chair, meaning to close his eyes for just a moment. Though he'd moved farther back from the bonfire that Tyler and the boys had built, he was still able to feel the comforting warmth of the huge blaze on his face and felt like he, too, might just fall asleep if he weren't careful.

But this wasn't where he wanted to sleep tonight; no, he'd rather be in the warm, cosy confines of his sleeping bag, which had just recently begun calling to him with its siren song of sleep. As his own eyelids began to droop, on the edge of nodding off, Jerry heard a brief scuffling noise over the fracas of the fire. It was quickly followed by the rustling of the dry brush behind Nick's chair.

Jerry's eyes snapped 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 out of 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?" Near the fire, 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 was left in the jug. He righted the bottle, saying “That’s going to put a damper on the party.” He stood and called out to the forest, “Nick! What’s going on, big fella? Did the Jack catch up with you?”

The thick brush behind the campfire remained mute to his enquiry. Sighing, he 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 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 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 as he 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, man!”

After taking several more slippery, stumbling steps, the churning mists parted for Jerry, seeming to draw back like the curtain at a carnival sideshow, like an invisible barker were silently showing him something as if to say, “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 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 as he finally saw the thing for what it was.

The rough, stone-like texture of this perceived 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 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 even farther into its nightmarish maw. Now, only a single, blood-soaked leg hung from one, dripping corner of its mouth.

Finishing it’s 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- smeared snow.

As Jerry struggled with his rising gorge, he began paying attention to a voice in his head. It was a quiet little voice at first, but it gradually became louder and louder, growing ever more insistent that he listen. He realised that the 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 finally burst from his mouth, “Monster!”

With his verbal dam ruptured, Jerry was 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 monster!” He slipped and stumbled in the heavy, ice-covered snow, barely able to 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 was.

On Jerry’s right, Tyler was now slouched 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 rushed over and grabbed Tyler, pulling him upright in his chair at the same time. “Ty! Wake up! There’s a goddamned 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 now slumped sideways in his chair once more, still showing no signs of consciousness. Giving Matt one last, good kick, Jerry ran back around the fire and grabbed Tyler by the collar of his parka. Pulling him upright with his left hand, Jerry began slapping Ty repeatedly with the open palm of his right.

Sputtering and swearing, Ty 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 almost 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 over and proceeded to kick his comatose comrade again, this time with a renewed fervour, alternating between shouting and then kicking, "Wake!" — Kick — "The!" — Kick — "Fuck!" — Kick — "Up!" — Kick.

Nothing.

He knelt and shook Matt as well, but he was still unresponsive. Jerry shouted over his shoulder, "Ty! Do something to help me! We've got to get the hell out of here!"

Bending down, Jerry 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 him directly into the fire, much like he'd been worried about Nick doing, about a half a lifetime ago, or so it felt.

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 in one quick breath, out all at once, 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 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. Jerry's half-baked smile quickly crumbled away 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, and then it slammed down onto Matt's prone body with an ear-ringing pop that ruptured both the man and the air mattress beneath. Jerry winced as he watched Matt's arms and legs shoot 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 was 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.

"Tyler! Where are you going? What are you doing?" Jerry was left standing alone near the crackling fire.

"Just hang on a sec!" Tyler shouted 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 it 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 Automag 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 down at Tyler’s magnum.

“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 quavering voice, “You want me to tag its location for you or something? It’s right the fuck 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 had on the pistol. He now cupped the bottom of the gun with his left hand and angled his right foot slightly back and to the side of his left foot. Jerry thought it was called the ‘Weaver Stance’, but wasn’t sure. Jerry didn’t know why that particular bit of information would pop into his head right now, and he was sure Tyler didn’t need him grilling him with shooting stance questions at the moment.

When Tyler was about two metres from where Matt had been dragged off, he stopped 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.

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

“I’m fine,” Tyler called. “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!”

Jerry could hear the sound of retching coming from the bushes as Tyler was overwhelmed by the signs of the slaughter. He started to move toward the bushes when Tyler suddenly popped out of a gap in the brush directly in front of him. Jerry leapt back,

saying, “Shit! Don’t do that!”

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

“Thank God! 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, but his hope faded when he saw the no signal strength bars on the screen.

“Well,” Tyler said, nodding toward Jerry’s cell phone, “first of all, we’re at least fifteen clicks from civilisation in the middle of the fucking nowhere. And second of all, as you pointed out a while ago, there aren’t any cell towers anywhere nearby, so good luck with that, brother.”

“Can’t hurt to check,” Jerry said.

Turning to face Jerry, Tyler said, “I suppose so if you figure they’ve might’ve somehow thrown up a cell tower in the last twelve hours or so.”

Jerry shrugged.

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 behind him. Tyler’s eyes went wide, and he dropped to his knees, the gun falling into the slush in front of him. He began shrieking in agony and slumped forward into the snow, his hands clenching spasmodically and balling into tight knots of misery.

Jerry gagged as he saw the four ragged furrows that had been carved diagonally across Tyler’s back. Each one welled with blood, long strips of mangled white flesh dangling from the wounds like pieces of overcooked lasagne. He had been eviscerated from the back, and most of his skin, clothing and internal organs now lay in a spreading crimson bloom on the frozen ground behind him. As he bled out, Tyler 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 the horrific sound. “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 creature burst through the fog-shrouded bushes in front of Jerry and dropped down onto Tyler’s writhing body. The huge, grey beast 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 the 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. He kept backing up until he almost fell over the closest machine. He spun around and jumped onto it — Tyler’s ride, it turned out, only to discover that the keys were missing.

“Son of a...” he muttered. He knew there was no way in hell he was going back now to look for the keys in Tyler’s pockets. He threw himself toward the next snowmobile only to find found the same result, no keys in the ignition.

“Shit! Jerry rasped. Sprinting toward the next sled, he was delighted to it was his blinding yellow wasp-mobile, and apparently, he’d left his keys in the ignition. “Yes!” He hopped on board and turned over the engine. It roared to life, and Jerry twisted the throttle so hard he thought he was going to snap it off. He looked back over his shoulder as he pulled away, regretting it at once.

Despite the shifting fog, Jerry saw that the beast was now coming for him. The monster plowed through the bonfire, red-hot embers and burning logs exploded into the air and flew through the darkness like flaming matchsticks as the creature raged through the blazing fire toward him.

Jerry gunned the engine, the snowmobile rocketed away from camp and into the grey void of fog as he tried to put as much distance between himself and the beast as he could. Following the trail that they had forged through the snow on their way into camp that afternoon, Jerry knew that there were hazards up ahead, but didn’t want to slow down and risk having the beast catch up to him — he knew he was pushing his luck.

He looked down at the speedometer and saw he was ripping along doing almost eighty kilometres an hour in the darkness, surrounded by ice fog on an unfamiliar trail. A sense of self- preservation kicked in, and he made himself back the throttle off a just a bit, in case he missed a turn and had a rollover, or god-forbid, hit a tree, then he’d really be screwed.

The fog seemed to coagulate around him. As he slowed, his sense of panic increased.

The farther he got from camp, the thicker the fog had gotten. Soon, he couldn't see his hand in front of his face, let alone the trail from the edge of a precipice. He slowed down further and further and finally stopped, feeling stymied as to what he should do next.

Blue light suddenly 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 came at him out of the mist with the speed of a locomotive. "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 that 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.

Captain Claw, (also known as Captain Nathaniel Joseph Claw or N. J. Claw) by Monolith Productions, is a classic-type platform video game that features a two-dimensional platform world featuring a main character at its focus and enemies roaming around. There are traps, secret areas and treasure. The story is similar to many pirate films, games and other sources: a famous cat pirate, Captain Nathaniel Joseph Claw, is imprisoned by the Cocker-Spaniards (a dog species, a pun on Cocker Spaniel) after they Claw definition: The claws of a bird or animal are the thin , hard , curved nails at the end of its feet . | Meaning, pronunciation, translations and examples.Â Word forms: plural, 3rd person singular present tense claws , present participle clawing , past tense, past participle clawed. 1. countable noun [usually plural]. The claws of a bird or animal are the thin, hard, curved nails at the end of its feet. The cat tried to cling to the edge by its claws. 2. countable noun [usually plural].