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A KILLING COLD

A NOVEL

KATE ALICE
MARSHALL

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *WHAT LIES IN THE WOODS*

A Killing Cold



KATE ALICE MARSHALL



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For Darryl, who read every one



In the house in the woods, the girl waits for the monster to come.

She crouches down, hiding as best she can, making herself small and quiet. She's good at that. She has to be. When the monster comes, you don't want to be noticed. You don't want to be found.

We're going to a special place, the girl's mother told her, not long ago. *A forest.*

An enchanted wood, the girl said. *And we're going to live in a castle and all our wishes will come true.*

That's right, her mother said, and pulled her in tight. *Everything is going to be better now.*

The door opens.

The monster is here.

I've never liked the way snow makes the world go quiet, stifling sound and creating the illusion of stillness. I can't shake the feeling that the silence is one of waiting. Of watching.

The car crunches implacably along the narrow road. The trees around us are mostly hemlock, wearing capes of snow to conceal their green. Beech and sugar maple appear here and there, branches winter-stripped and grasping. Connor's family owns this land, all the way to the mountain peak.

"Not far now," Connor says for the third time since we left the small town at the base of the mountain. "Once you're out of Datura, it's only about twenty minutes, even with the weather."

"It's a flower, you know," I note idly. "Datura. Also known as devil's weed. The Victorians said it represented deceitful charms."

Connor gives me a look I've come to know so well—half-pleased, half-puzzled.

I've always liked to know the names of things. It's the next best thing to knowing my own.

I'm bunching my scarf in my hands again, twisting it up like a cheap rag. It was a gift from Connor, which means it's anything but. Sometimes I play a game where I guess how much something cost, and then I double it, and then I look up the actual price. I'm usually still a bit low. Red cashmere and wool blend scarf, \$490. I wad it up in a ball in my lap.

"They'll love you," Connor says, noticing my expression. Connor is a man used to being loved; I've known it since the moment I saw him. *No scars on that heart*, I thought at the time, though later I discovered I was wrong.

"I'll settle for grudging approval," I tell him, flicking him a smile to show I'm not nervous, though of course I am. There's a diamond on my

finger that cost as much as a down payment on a house, and I've never met my fiancé's family—other than his sister, Alexis, who swooped into town two months ago for less than twenty-four hours and greeted me with plastic politeness. We'd been together only three months at the time, which makes this not even half a year and already engaged—I'd be worried if Connor's family *wasn't* skeptical.

Hell, I'm skeptical.

"The person you have to impress is Grandma Louise," Connor says. His voice thrums with nerves despite his words, his fingers drumming on the wheel in an uneven rhythm. "Mrs. Dalton to you, obviously. Granddad's in charge of the business, but Grandma's in charge of the family. If she likes you, you're in."

"And if she doesn't like me?" I ask.

"Oh, we just take you up to the top of the mountain for a ritual sacrifice," he assures me, deadpan, and I roll my eyes at him. "Don't worry, Theo. She'll like you."

My heart thuds hard, just once, and I'm sick with a feeling that might be dread or hope. I need Connor's family to like me because I need Connor. I need the soft touch of his hands and the smell of his skin, and it feels impossible that I didn't know him at all this time last year.

Connor hasn't had to worry about impressing my family—there isn't anyone to impress. I told him that my parents are dead. It's what I tell everyone.

It might even be true.

"The only thing you need to worry about—" Connor begins, and then he swears as a dark shape bursts from the tree line. Connor slams on the brakes, twists the wheel, instinct overtaking sense. The wheels lose their grip and the car swings sideways, sliding alarmingly before coming to a lurching stop two feet shy of the thing we nearly hit. A deer.

The buck's antlers branch to ten long points. Steam rises from its heaving flanks. It stands with its legs splayed, head down, and for a moment I think it's going to charge the Jeep, but then I see the bright crimson rimming its nostrils. Pattering onto the snow beneath it. The black

shaft of an arrow protrudes from its ribs, a slash of red and yellow fletching at the end.

Connor's arm is outflung in front of me. I grip the door, white-knuckled. Mist plumes with every forceful exhale from the beast; its dull eyes stare at nothing.

"Theo. Are you okay?" Connor asks.

The deer lets out a low stuttering moan. It collapses—its front legs first, then the back. I unbuckle myself.

"Theo," Connor says again.

"I'm fine," I say. I open the door, stepping out onto the snow. Connor, with the slow reflexes of a man who has never needed to be wary, catches at my sleeve but doesn't get a grip. He fumbles for his own seat belt as I skirt the edge of the Jeep, approaching the deer. Its eyes are closed. Its sides hardly move. Maybe don't move at all. Blood trickles sluggishly from its side.

There is a strange feeling in my body. A tightening in my stomach and up my spine. A need to run. A need to see. The polished prongs of the buck's antlers are the length of my hand.

"Theo, be careful," Connor says, and at the sound, the buck's eyes flash open. It heaves upward, rising to its feet with a horrible bellow, antlers raking upward. I stumble back. My heels catch snow and then I'm on the ground, staring up at the glistening bloodstained muzzle of the deer. Connor shouts.

The buck runs, a broken lope, tracks filling up with blood; it won't run far, but I will it to. *Run. Don't stop*, I think, half-wild. *Don't let them find you.*

Connor hauls me to my feet, knocking snow from my fleece as he checks that I'm whole. I brush his hands away, pulse galloping, and stare after the buck. It vanishes among the trees.

The image remains: branching antlers. A splash of red across achingly white snow. That tightening in my stomach returns, and with it the strange echoing feeling of a memory half-lost.

"Theo, I asked if you're okay," Connor says, and my focus snaps to him.

“I’m not hurt,” I assure him, though my bones didn’t exactly appreciate being knocked together like that and my elbows are smarting. “That was an arrow in its side.”

“It’s bowhunting season,” he says. “Granddad lets a few locals hunt on the land.”

Three sharp barks sound nearby. I start to look toward the noise, but Connor catches my chin with one finger.

“You could have gotten yourself killed,” he chides.

Connor thinks I’m reckless. It alarms him, how little care I sometimes take for my safety, but I’m much less valuable by the pound than Connor Dalton. A few dents and dings won’t make a difference.

“I didn’t,” I reply. I squeeze his hand. “But you’re right, that was stupid.”

A man in a bright orange vest with a matching beanie jammed over his gray curls tramps through the snow toward us. He carries a hunting bow in one hand, a complex contraption outfitted with a scope and pulleys. Beside him trots a large black dog.

“Mr. Vance,” Connor says, raising a hand. The dog pricks its ears. The man—Mr. Vance—fixes his eyes on Connor but doesn’t say anything as he crunches closer. My pulse quickens. I tell myself there’s nothing to be afraid of. Connor knows him, he’s not some stranger.

“Everyone all right?” Mr. Vance asks. His voice is gravelly, and nicotine stains his fingertips with yellow. He nods toward our car, still sitting crookedly in the middle of the road.

“We had a close encounter with what I’m assuming is your quarry,” Connor tells him. “No damage done.” His eyes cut to me, as if to confirm it. I manage a thin smile.

“Sorry about that. Didn’t think he’d run toward the road,” Vance says. Stray snowflakes cling to his beard.

The dog stands perfectly still at his side, watching us. I force myself to look at Vance, to keep my hands from folding into fists. I’ve had a fear of dogs for as long as I can remember. There might be a reason for it, some trauma, but like most parts of my early childhood, it’s a big question mark. *Good doggy*, I think.

“You’re heading up to the camp?” Mr. Vance asks.

“That’s right. This is Theo—Theodora Scott. My fiancée.” Connor glows; Vance grunts.

“Heard about that,” he says. He nods to me in greeting. “Daniel Vance. I work for the family. I’d stay to chat, but...” His hand waves to indicate the blood, the battered snow.

“It didn’t seem like it would get much farther,” Connor tells him cheerfully. “We’ll see you up at Idlewood?”

“I imagine so,” Mr. Vance says to Connor—but it’s me he’s looking at, and I don’t like the expression on his face. It’s like he’s sizing me up. Or like he already has, and he isn’t impressed. He walks past us. The dog stays put, nose twitching, glistening eyes still fixed on me. My fingers curl. I try not to think about the white of its teeth. Then Vance whistles. “Duchess, heel.”

She bounds forward, rejoining him, her every step matched to his. They move at a steady clip, following the trail the buck left, and soon it’s just us again.

Connor rubs the back of his neck. “Mr. Vance takes care of the grounds for us. Makes sure everything’s all right when we’re not here.”

This sprawling retreat on the mountain waits empty through the spring and fall. The family converges only twice a year—for a month in the summer and two weeks over Christmas. They never rent it out, even to friends. A firm rule, Connor tells me, as his grandparents didn’t want to deal with constant requests. Occasionally, one of the teenagers is allowed to bring a friend along for the summer. Other than that, the only people to step foot on the grounds are the Daltons and those they employ.

And now me.

For the next two weeks, I will be far from civilization, alone in the woods with my fiancé’s family. And it will be fine. All I have to do is convince them that I love him, that I’m charming, that I’m not just interested in his money.

All I have to do is ignore the text on my phone, buried in the bottom of my purse. The text that arrived last week from a number I’ve never seen before.

Stay away from Connor Dalton.