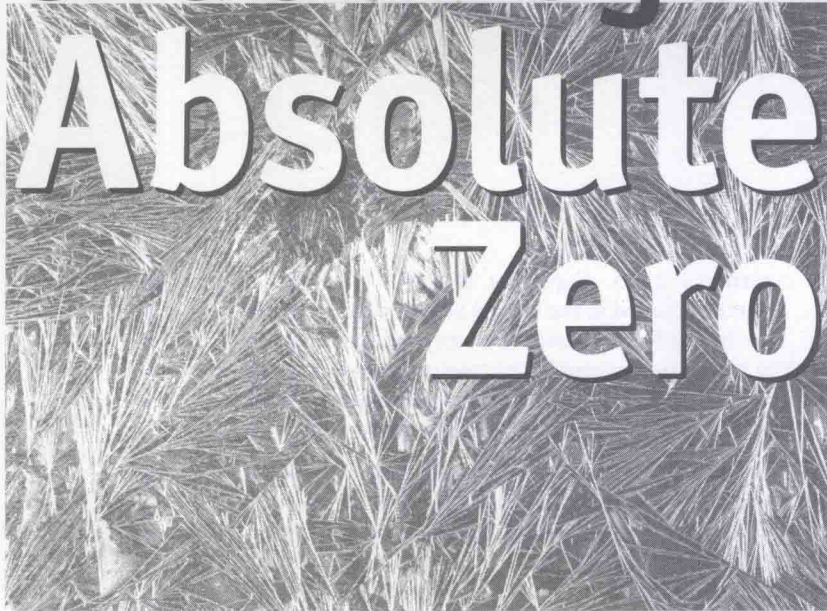


**Chuck Logan**



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# **Absolute Zero**

**Books by Chuck Logan**

*Hunter's Moon*

*The Price of Blood*

*The Big Law*

*For Aunt Betty and Aunt Louise, the Siegrist twins*

**absolute zero:** *Physics.* The temperature at which substances possess minimal energy, equal to  $-273.15$  degrees C or  $-459.67$  degrees F.

—*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*

# **Absolute Zero**



# Prologue

*The beep-beep-beep was a reassuring sound that brought him back like the sing-along bouncing ball; if he were safe at home the sound might be the soft cricket in the clothes dryer downstairs signaling that the load was through. If only life had not speeded up . . .*

*But it had, and now they'd put the pain on mute, along with everything else—the up, the down, the light—and they'd set him adrift in the dark with nothing but the beep. So he tried to scan along but the rhythm kept slipping away. Which figured, because he'd been thrown out of high school band—alto sax—on account of he couldn't keep the beat.*

*Then he coughed and sparks lit up a corner of his mind, enough to get him oriented and he knew that he was waking up, and he understood that the dogged beep was the pulse of his heart hooked to a machine.*

*Which meant he was still here.*

*He was alive and laid out flat on his back with his eyes shut tight and he didn't have the strength to open them, so he'd just lay back for now, all alone in the dark, waiting for the lights to come up.*

*Surfacing, he flashed on chemical nondreams and artificial sleep. His lips were gummed together, and when he parted them a parched numbness puffed his mouth and his throat and it felt like he'd been French-kissed by the creature in Sigourney Weaver's*

Alien. *Then a sharp electric pincer prodded his right wrist four times—jit-jit-jit-jit—and made his fingers jump.*

*Now he was being moved because he felt the stale hospital air slide over his face, and he heard splashes of sound like underwater voices that became clearer until distinct words spilled down and trickled on his face.*

*“Train of four,” the first female voice said.*

*“Doesn’t that hurt now that he’s coming around?” a second female voice asked.*

*“This guy, with his neck; I want to make sure he’s back before we medicate for pain.”*

*Then they splashed away and there was more motion and then they came back.*

*“He’s breathing well, sats are good, rhythm is good.”*

*“Okay, let’s rouse him, get him to raise his head, squeeze a finger, swallow. And wait for the eyelids; the littlest muscles are always the last to come back. Who’s got the Narc keys?”*

*“Got them right here. I’ve got everything today.”*

*“Sign out twenty-five milligrams of Demerol and give it IV.”*

*The voices faded, the shapes acquired edges, then fluttered away, and tile-lined the walls and was dotted with stainless steel, and it all shimmered in and out of focus. Latex fingers carried a slender plastic syringe with green markings across his vision. A fluorescent light hovered overhead, and from its center materialized the face of a blue-gowned young woman with white-blond hair. She had serious gray eyes and copper freckles on her cheeks and she smiled.*

*He enjoyed the colors of her face and her hair. He found them vital, feline. He thought: a happy lynx.*

*“Hello there,” said the happy lynx. “Can you squeeze my finger?”*

*He squeezed the cool finger in his hand.*

*“Good,” she said. “Now can you raise your head?”*

*A stiff sensation laced tight up his middle and warned him not to move, but he made the effort and got his head up a little. Which was a mistake. Oh, wow.*

*“Take it easy.” The nurse patted his forearm with long, cool fingers. “You’ve got a few stitches in your belly.”*

*Pain jogged his memory and he tried to talk but no spit came. All he managed to get out was a single cotton word: “’peration.”*

*“That’s right. You’ve had an emergency operation that went just fine and now you’re in the recovery room,” she said.*

*“High,” he said slowly, finding some spit.*

*“Hello, yourself.”*

*“No. Stone . . .” He took a breath, wheezed, “Grog . . .”*

*“Yep, we gave you something. We’re about to give you some more of the good stuff.”*

*“Hi,” he said.*

*“Right. Stoned, huh?” she said.*

*“No. Hel . . . lo. You’re . . . pret . . . pretty.” His eyes probed around on the front of her blue tunic and focused on the laminated picture ID alligator-clipped to her pocket, and he read the printed title: Amy Skoda CRNA. “You’re pret . . . ty, Amy,” he said.*

*“Thank you, and you’re lucky to be alive.”*

*He blinked at the blue shapes circling around him. “Where?”*

*“It’s all right now. You’re in a hospital.”*

*He nodded and the beep speeded up and he caught a panic flash of jagged black sky coming down, and frigid gray water rising up in ranks of whitecaps. He swallowed and muttered, “Storm.”*

*Amy nodded. “Mister, you’ve had quite an adventure.”*

*“Others?”*

*But she disappeared and the question hung unanswered. He waited and waited as it all slowed and went dim. Then the blue shapes above him startled and retreated. He heard shouts.*

*“Heads up, gang! We got another one!”*

*“C’mon, they need help.”*

*The blue commotion surged away.*

*Then someone.*

*A hand appeared and held up a syringe. This syringe was thicker, a dull gray plastic, not skinny like the other. It moved up and out of sight.*

*“There you go,” a voice said—a different voice. “It should be better now.”*

*Jesus God. No. Ow. Not better. They’d jacked him back into the storm. Black waves flooded from his arm, into his chest, drowning him on the inside. His lungs . . .*

*“Oh, fuck, oh, no,” said the voice, backing away.  
Hey, come back . . .*

*. . .*

*He felt his thoughts seep away like the last bubbles of oxygen escaping his brain. And the commotion in the hall faded off and all he heard was the beat of the heart monitor until it slipped off key: Beep beep . . . boop.*

*Boop.*

*Boooooop.*

*Boop.*

*And he lost the goddamn beat . . .*

*And his eyes took one last picture of muscles undulating down his arms, and just like he thought, the relentless waves from the storm had followed him right into this hospital room and were rolling under his skin.*

*Then he just—stopped. Nothing. Nothing erasing him line by line.*

*.....  
.....  
.....*

*“Oh shit! Call a code. He’s arrested in here.”*

# Chapter One

**Broker was used to** sleeping alone because his wife was in the army and, except for her pregnancy and a short maternity leave, she had been absent on deployments to Bosnia during most of their marriage. And he was used to waking up in a freezing sleeping bag because he'd grown up in Northern Minnesota. What he was having trouble adjusting to was waking up alone in the cold bag and seeing the pale stripe on the third finger of his left hand where his wedding band had been.

So he coughed and rubbed his eyes, and the absent ring cued up the agnostic rosary in the back of his mind: *You just never know . . . never know . . . never know . . .* and it was, *yeah, yeah*, and he was talking to himself and his lips moved to dismiss the thought, but he had to appreciate the irony. *Mister Serious Student of the Unexpected.*

*Didn't see it coming, did you, dummy?*

She'd left two weeks ago and took their three-year-old daughter, Kit, off to army day care somewhere in Europe.

She said he could come along and take care of Kit. He said she could quit the army and stay home. So it stuck there between them. Their daughter watched nervously as Mom and Dad agreed to take an informal time-out, removing their rings and storing them in the top drawer of the bedroom dresser.

His reaction to the standoff was to exile himself from people he

knew and retreat into the North woods. He'd purge himself with fresh air and hard work. Specifically, Broker volunteered to close down his uncle Billie's outfitting lodge at the end of the canoeing season.

And now, as he greeted the ice-water dawn, the subject was still fragile as glass. Carefully, he held it by the stem and tucked it away.

So.

Uncle Billie and his golf clubs had hopped a Northwest Airlines flight to Broker's parents' condo in Arizona. Broker had hung a CLOSED sign across the driveway of the small resort he owned in Devil's Rock, north of Grand Marais, on the Lake Superior shore. Then he'd driven down Highway 61 to Illgen City, turned on Highway 1 northwest to Ely, in the Minnesota Iron Range. Arriving at Billie's Lodge, he found a list of instructions next to the telephone. The canoe trip was at the top.

Broker had looked over the permits and perused the clients' backgrounds. He'd be playing wilderness guide to Milton Dane, a lawyer; Allen Falken, a surgeon; and Hank Sommer, who called himself a writer. All three were from the Twin Cities area.

Broker told himself guiding was no big thing, that he'd done it lots of times.

But that was more than twenty years ago.

In the intervening time the canoes had been upgraded from aluminum to lighter Kevlar and fiberglass. The freeze-dried food and camping gear were much improved. But otherwise, the drill was the same. He studied the itinerary, selected the proper maps, and packed for a party of four, going in by canoe to shoot a moose among the lakes of the Boundary Water's Canoe Area, BWCA for short.

And now it was the third morning of the trip.

Broker blew on his chilled hands and rubbed them together. He'd gone to bed breathing in damp lake water, lichen, and pine needles moldering on granite bedrock. A mild rain had tapped on the tent walls and eased him off to sleep. Now a loud winter silence replaced the patter of raindrops and his breath clouded in the chill air.

Hank Sommer bumped him as he rolled over in the narrow tent and snored. He lay on his back, half out of his sleeping bag, with his

mouth open. He had buckteeth and a receding chin disguised under a short, unruly beard. When Broker reached over and jabbed him in the ribs, Sommer rearranged himself and stopped snoring. His cell phone, which had caused so much debate on the trip, was nestled next to his cheek.

It became clear from the start that Broker had been hired to carry the load for Sommer and to paddle his canoe. “Sorry, I’ve got this little medical condition,” Sommer had admitted at the start.

“What medical condition?” Broker had asked directly, since it could affect their travel.

“This, ah, little hernia thing,” Sommer had said, patting his side. So every portage on the way in, Broker had humped the boat and went back twice to haul all the packs while Sommer eased along with just his rifle case and a small shoulder bag.

Allen Falken, the doctor, appeared none too pleased that Sommer had put off elective surgery to go on this trip. But, Allen conceded, it was a routine inguinal hernia, a painless minor bulge. For half the century, men just wore trusses. It should be all right as long as Sommer took it easy.

“How easy?”

“He shouldn’t lift over forty pounds.”

“So if you get a moose, Sommer will take the picture and I’ll carry the meat.”

“Something like that,” Allen had said.

It meant that Sommer was the weak link, so Broker wanted him in his canoe in case anything went wrong. Besides, he was curious. Sommer was a Minnesota fiction writer and Broker—strictly a non-fiction guy—had the feeling he should have heard of him. But he hadn’t. He figured Sommer wanted to shoot a moose so he could write about it.

Broker was doing some hunting himself, but not for a trophy moose. Running from his marriage, he spent the days scouting the treelines and lakes half hoping to catch a younger, more resilient reflection of himself.

And he wasn’t alone. By day three it was clear that marital discord paddled with them as Sommer conducted a nasty long-distance feud with his wife on his cell phone.

As they canoed deeper into lake country, Broker overheard enough of the terse conversations to gather that Sommer and his wife were fighting over money.

### **Onward.**

Right now Broker needed a fire and a pot of coffee, so he shivered into trousers, a fleece sweater, and a pair of old tennis shoes. Carrying his stiff boots, he unzipped the tent and hunkered outside.

Well, he'd wanted the rain to stop.

And nothing stops water like ice.

The campsite, and probably all 140,000 square miles of the BWCA, wore bridal white. Brocade, lace, floss, and fluff—the tents, the gear, the hulls of the two canoes, every pine needle, clump of moss, and boulder were gilded with frost.

He watched his breath condense, then tatter off gently in the still air; he estimated the temperature at 34 degrees. He was not distracted by the beautiful fantasy spun in the trees. They were still twenty miles from Ely traveling on water cold enough to kill them.

But Broker had to grin. Even with hypothermia as a risk, Sommer's cell phone became an issue with his buddies because it violated the first rule of the wilderness, which was: You are on your own. Allen and Milt wanted a clean break with the hyperconnected world they'd left behind. Sommer wasn't impressed by such purist conceits. Older, crusty, he'd pointed out that he'd once spent a year sleeping on the ground, and he'd muttered a few profane references to the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne and 1969 and a place Allen and Milt had never heard of called the Ashau Valley, and he *would* bring his god-damn cell phone, thank you very much.

So.

Broker toed a hoary clump of grass. Maybe the sun would come out and melt this fairyland. And maybe it wouldn't. If this cold snap continued they'd have to be careful.

He stirred the banked coals in the fire pit, added tinder, and built up the fire. Then he placed his boots near the flame to thaw. He walked a hundred yards into the brush to where he'd hoisted the food packs on the branch of a tall spruce beyond the reach of prowling black bears. He carried the packs back to the campfire and set out utensils and ingredients for breakfast.



You could still drink from the lakes along the Canadian border, so he took the coffeepot to the shore, poked through a wafer of shore ice, and filled it. Then he scooped up a handful and brushed his teeth. A few minutes later he had a blue flame hissing on the small Coleman camp stove.

He stretched, rotated his neck, and gauged the stiffness in his back and shoulders from two days of paddling and portaging. Starting to show streaks of gray in his forty-seventh autumn, Broker still looked like he could knock a man down or pick a man up, and like he wouldn't talk about it either way. His dark, bushy eyebrows met over the bridge of his nose, his eyes were quiet gray-green, and he wore his thick, dark hair trimmed just over his ears. At six feet tall and 190, he was ten pounds over his best weight. A few more days on the trail would pound down the kinks and trim off the flab. But he had to admit, as he scanned the white solitude, that he was starting to feel his age. For the last two years his chief workout had been chasing his daughter around.

He stooped, attended to the fire, and when the coffeepot perked he withdrew a cigar the size of a fat fountain pen from a Ziploc bag and carefully nibbled the plug. When the coffee smelled done, he turned off the camp stove, poured a tin cupful, and wedged the pot in the coals. Then he went down to the shore and found a seat on a granite ledge. There would be no sunrise today to go with his morning coffee. Not even a shiny spot in the overcast.

A match flared and migrant smoke from Spanish Honduras mingled with the steaming Colombian bean. Cigars were a weaning vice—all tease and foreplay—no inhaling. They got him off the cigarettes and now he worried that the thing that would get him off the cigars would be Ben and Jerry's ice cream.

“Good morning, I think,” announced a voice that ended in a cough. Turning, Broker saw Milton Dane's short salt-and-pepper hair poke through his tent flap. Milt was nursing a cold, which did nothing to diminish his childish delight as he looked at the forest made over into frosted parsley.

Milt at forty-five stood six foot one in pile underwear and felt boot-liners. Broad shouldered, deep-chested, and deliberate in movement; he collected a cup of coffee and joined Broker on the sloping rock beach. He drew his knuckles across the stubble on his square chin and shivered. “Jesus, it's *cold*.”