

MARY HIGGINS CLARK

A
Cry in the
Night



SIMON & SCHUSTER

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In happy memory of my parents and brothers, Luke, Nora, Joseph and John Higgins, who did, indeed, give joy to my youth.



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SIMON & SCHUSTER BUILDING
ROCKEFELLER CENTER
1230 AVENUE OF THE AMERICAS
NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10020

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Prologue

JENNY BEGAN LOOKING for the cabin at dawn. All night she had lain motionless in the massive four-poster bed, unable to sleep, the stillness of the house oppressive and clutching.

Even after weeks of knowing it would not come, her ears were still tuned for the baby's hungry cry. Her breasts still filled, ready to welcome the tiny, eager lips.

Finally she switched on the lamp at the bedside table. The room brightened and the leaded crystal bowl on the dresser top caught and reflected the light. The small cakes of pine soap that filled the bowl cast an eerie green tint on the antique silver mirror and brushes.

She got out of bed and began to dress, choosing the long underwear and nylon Windbreaker that she wore under her ski suit. She had turned on the radio at four o'clock. The weather report was unchanged for the area of Granite Place, Minnesota; the temperature was twelve degrees Fahrenheit. The winds were blowing at an average of twenty-five miles per hour. The wind-chill factor was twenty-four below zero.

It didn't matter. Nothing mattered. If she froze to death in the search she would try to find the cabin. Somewhere in that forest of maples and oaks and evergreens and Norwegian pines and overgrown brush it was there. In those sleepless hours she had devised a plan. Erich could walk three paces to her one. His naturally long stride had always made him unconsciously

walk too fast for her. They used to joke about it. "Hey, wait up for a city girl," she'd protest.

Once he had forgotten his key when he went to the cabin and immediately returned to the house for it. He'd been gone forty minutes. That meant that for him the cabin was usually about a twenty-minute walk from the edge of the woods.

He had never taken her there. "Please understand, Jenny," he'd begged. "Every artist needs a place to be totally alone."

She had never tried to find it before. The help on the farm was absolutely forbidden to go into the woods. Even Clyde, who'd been the farm manager for thirty years, claimed he didn't know where the cabin was.

The heavy, crusted snow would have erased any path, but the snow also made it possible for her to try the search on cross-country skis. She'd have to be careful not to get lost. With the dense underbrush and her own miserable sense of direction, she could easily go around in circles.

Jenny had thought about that, and decided to take a compass, a hammer, tacks and pieces of cloth. She could nail the cloth to trees to help her find her way back.

Her ski suit was downstairs in the closet off the kitchen. While water boiled for coffee, she zipped it on. The coffee helped to bring her mind into focus. During the night she had considered going to Sheriff Gunderson. But he would surely refuse help and would simply stare at her with that familiar look of speculative disdain.

She would carry a thermos of coffee with her. She didn't have a key to the cabin, but she could break a window with the hammer.

Even though Elsa had not been in for over two weeks, the huge old house still glistened and shone with visible proof of her rigid standards of cleanliness. Her habit as she left was to tear off the current day from the daily calendar over the wall phone. Jenny had joked about that to Erich. "She not only

cleans what was never dirty, she eliminates every weekday evening."

Now Jenny tore off Friday, February 14, crumpled the page in her hand and stared at the blank sheet under the bold lettering, Saturday, February 15. She shivered. It was nearly fourteen months since that day in the gallery when she'd met Erich. No that couldn't be. It was a lifetime ago. She rubbed her hand across her forehead.

Her chestnut-brown hair had darkened to near-black during the pregnancy. It felt drab and lifeless as she stuffed it under the woolen ski cap. The shell-edged mirror to the left of the kitchen door was an incongruous touch in the massive, oak-beamed kitchen. She stared into it now. Her eyes were heavily shadowed. Normally a shade somewhere between aqua and blue, they reflected back at her wide-pupiled and expressionless. Her cheeks were drawn. The weight loss since the birth had left her too thin. The pulse in her neck throbbed as she zipped the ski suit to the top. Twenty-seven years old. It seemed to her that she looked at least ten years older, and felt a century older. If only the numbness would go away. If only the house weren't so quiet, so fearfully, frighteningly quiet.

She looked at the cast-iron stove at the east wall of the kitchen. The cradle, filled with wood, was beside it again, its usefulness restored.

Deliberately she studied the cradle, made herself absorb the constant shock of its presence in the kitchen, then turned her back on it and reached for the thermos bottle. She poured coffee into it, then collected the compass, hammer and tacks and strips of cloth. Thrusting them into a canvas knapsack she pulled a scarf over her face, put on her cross-country ski shoes, yanked thick, fur-lined mittens on her hands and opened the door.

The sharp, biting wind made a mockery of the face scarf. The muffled lowing of the cows in the dairy barn reminded her

of the exhausted sobs of deep mourning. The sun was coming up, dazzling against the snow, harsh in its golden-red beauty, a far-off god that could not affect the bitter cold.

By now Clyde would be inspecting the dairy barn. Other hands would be pitching hay in the polebarns to feed the scores of black Angus cattle, which were unable to graze beneath the hard-packed snow and would habitually head there for food and shelter. A half-dozen men working on this enormous farm, yet there was no one near the house—all of them were small figures, seen like silhouettes, against the horizon. . . .

Her cross-country skis were outside the kitchen door. Jenny carried them down the six steps from the porch, tossed them on the ground, stepped into them and snapped them on. Thank God she'd learned to ski well last year.

It was a little after seven o'clock when she began looking for the cabin. She limited herself to skiing no more than thirty minutes in any direction. She started at the point where Erich always disappeared into the woods. The overhead branches were so entangled that the sun barely penetrated through them. After she'd skied in as straight a line as possible, she turned right, covered about one hundred feet more, turned right again and started back to the edge of the forest. The wind covered her tracks almost as soon as she passed any spot but at every turning point she hammered a piece of cloth into the tree.

At eleven o'clock she returned to the house, heated soup, changed into dry socks, forced herself to ignore the tingling pain in her forehead and hands, and set out again.

At five o'clock, half frozen, the slanting rays of the sun almost vanishing, she was about to give up for the day when she decided to go over one more hilly mound. It was then she came upon it, the small, bark-roofed log cabin that had been built by Erich's great-grandfather in 1869. She stared at it, biting her lips as savage disappointment sliced her with the physical impact of a stiletto.

The shades were drawn; the house had a shuttered look as though it had not been open for a time. The chimney was snow-covered; no lights shone from within.

Had she really dared to hope that when she came upon it, that chimney would be smoking, lamps would glow through the curtains, that she'd be able to go up to the door and open it?

There was a metal shingle nailed to the door. The letters were faded but still readable: ABSOLUTELY NO ADMITTANCE. VIOLATORS WILL BE PROSECUTED. It was signed Erich Fritz Krueger and dated 1903.

There was a pump house to the left of the cabin, an outhouse discreetly half-hidden by full-branched pines. She tried to picture the young Erich coming here with his mother. "Caroline loved the cabin just as it was," Erich had told her. "My father wanted to modernize the old place but she wouldn't hear of it."

No longer aware of the cold, Jenny skied over to the nearest window. Reaching into the knapsack, she pulled out the hammer, raised it and smashed the pane. Flying glass grazed her cheek. She was unaware of the trickle of blood that froze as it ran down her face. Careful to avoid the jagged peaks, she reached in, unfastened the latch and shoved the window up.

Kicking off her skis, she climbed over the low sill, pushed aside the shade and stepped into the cabin.

The cabin consisted of a single room about twenty feet square. A Franklin stove on the north wall had wood piled neatly next to it. A faded Oriental rug covered most of the white pine flooring. A wide-armed, high-backed velour couch and matching chairs were clustered around the stove. A long oak table and benches were near the front windows. A spinning wheel looked as though it might still be functional. A massive oak sideboard held willowware china and oil lamps. A steep stairway led to the left. Next to it, rows of file baskets held stacks of unframed canvases.

The walls were white pine, unknotted, silk-smooth and covered with paintings. Numbly Jenny walked from one to the other of them. The cabin was a museum. Even the dim light could not hide the exquisite beauty of the oils and watercolors, the charcoals and pen-and-ink drawings. Erich had not even begun to show his best work yet. How would the critics react when they saw these masterpieces? she wondered.

Some of the paintings on the walls were already framed. These must be the next ones he planned to exhibit. The pole-barn in a winter storm. What was so different about it? The doe, head poised, listening, about to flee into the woods. The calf reaching up to its mother. The fields of alfalfa, blue-flowered, ready for harvest. The Congregational Church with worshipers hurrying toward it. The main street of Granite Place suggesting timeless serenity.

Even in her desolation, the sensitive beauty of the collection gave Jenny a momentary sense of quietude and peace.

Finally she bent over the unframed canvases in the nearest rack. Again admiration suffused her being. The incredible dimensions of Erich's talent, his ability to paint landscapes, people and animals with equal authority; the playfulness of the summer garden with the old-fashioned baby carriage, the . . .

And then she saw it. Not understanding, she began to race through the other paintings and sketches in the files.

She ran to the wall from one canvas to the next. Her eyes widened in disbelief. Not knowing what she was doing, she stumbled toward the staircase leading to the loft and rushed up the stairs.

The loft sloped with the pitch of the roof and Jenny had to bend forward at the top stair before she stepped into the room.

As she straightened up, a nightmarish blaze of color from the back wall assaulted her vision. Shocked, she stared at her own image. A mirror?

No. The painted face did not move as she approached it. The dusky light from the slitlike window played on the canvas, shading it in streaks, like a ghostly finger pointing.

For minutes she stared at the canvas, unable to wrench her eyes from it, absorbing every grotesque detail, feeling her mouth slacken in hopeless anguish, hearing the keening sound that was coming from her own throat.

Finally she forced her numbed, reluctant fingers to grasp the canvas and yank it from the wall.

Seconds later, the painting under her arm, she was skiing away from the cabin. The wind, stronger now, gagged her, robbed her of breath, muffled her frantic cry.

"Help me," she was screaming. "Somebody, please, please help me."

The wind whipped the cry from her lips and scattered it through the darkening wood.

One

IT WAS OBVIOUS that the exhibition of paintings by Erich Krueger, the newly discovered Midwest artist, was a stunning success. The reception for critics and specially invited guests began at four, but all day long browsers had filled the gallery, drawn by *Memory of Caroline*, the magnificent oil in the showcase window.

Deftly Jenny went from critic to critic, introducing Erich, chatting with collectors, watching that the caterers kept passing fresh trays of hors d'oeuvres and refilling champagne glasses.

From the moment she'd opened her eyes this morning, it had been a difficult day. Beth, usually so pliable, had resisted leaving for the day-care center. Tina, teething with two-year molars, awakened a half-dozen times during the night, crying fretfully. The New Year's Day blizzard had left New York a nightmare of snarled traffic and curbsides covered with mounds of slippery, sooty snow. By the time she'd left the children at the center and made her way across town she was nearly an hour late for work. Mr. Hartley had been frantic.

"Everything is going wrong, Jenny. Nothing is ready. I warn you. I need someone I can count on."

"I'm so sorry." Jenny tossed her coat in the closet. "What time is Mr. Krueger due?"

"About one. Can you believe three of the paintings weren't delivered until a few minutes ago?"