

CABIN FEVER
by Peggy Christie

Henry stood on the deck in his back yard and inhaled deeply. The sweet summer air cleansed his lungs and his mind. Two days into his sabbatical and already he could feel the tension and frustrations of the corporate world sliding away. He had at least six more months to enjoy this time off, before he needed to look for work again. He really wished he could retire but at 48, it was a bit too soon, particularly where his finances were concerned. After all, he did have a wife and two kids to support.

He and Cheryl had been married 20 years and had two daughters, Nicki and Angela, aged 10 and 8 respectively. Henry and Cheryl tried for 10 years to have kids but to no avail. They adopted the two girls once they realized they couldn't have children of their own. And he loved them more than anything in the world. Nicki was bright and inquisitive, with shiny blonde hair and dark brown eyes. Angela was more reserved and shy, more often than not clinging to Cheryl's leg or hiding behind her skirt. But her copper hair and ice blue eyes were all that she needed to get the attention she did want.

Cheryl was tall and statuesque, with short brown hair and bright blue eyes. Many people said Angela inherited her eyes, before they knew both kids were adopted. She was soft spoken, with a great sense of humor and an affinity for football. Henry adored her and she was completely enamored of him. They got along better than most married couples, especially for being married for so long. They never seemed to tire of each other. They had a lot in common so they enjoyed spending time together but also had enough separate interests to keep them going when they wanted or had to be apart.

As he exhaled, Cheryl stepped out onto the deck and slipped her arms around his waist, hugging him from behind. He smiled contentedly, reaching around and patting her softly on her rump.

Cheryl giggled, leaning her face against the warmth of his back.

"I know it's only been a couple of days but it's been great having you around all the time, hon."

Henry sighed.

"I know. I've loved every minute of it so far. You know, we should take a trip this summer with the girls. What do you think?"

"I think that's the best idea I've heard today. Where are you thinking of going?"

"Why not Up North? You know my dad's got that house in Gaylord. The girls have never been there. I think they'd love it."

"That's a great idea. When they get up, let's talk to them about it."

Henry glanced at his watch. It was nine o'clock. Since school let out five days ago, the girls had slept in every morning as long as they possibly could. He calculated they'd be up and running full steam within the hour. They had too much energy between them to sleep much longer. Just then a little face appeared at the sliding glass door to the kitchen, a mop of tangled

red hair catching the morning sun. Angela grinned as Henry opened the door and scooped her up into his arms. Two seconds later, Nicki zombie-walked out onto the deck, rubbing her eyes to keep the sun from blinding her. Cheryl wrapped her arm around her and they all walked back into the kitchen to fix breakfast.

Over cold cereal and Henry's favorite vice, custard donuts, they discussed plans for their trip up north. The girls were ecstatic, squealing in excitement and spewing milk all over the table. They planned to go at the end of August, as Cheryl couldn't get time off work any sooner. In the meantime, Henry even volunteered to take the girls shopping for anything they might need. Cheryl, arching an eyebrow at him, wished him luck and took him up on the offer.

By the end of July, Henry had a constant headache. He was continuously popping aspirin to keep it in check but it never left him completely. He figured his body was suffering withdrawal from being out of work for a month and a half. And it didn't help that his car had been in the shop for the last couple of weeks. Cheryl needed the other for work so he was stuck in the house day after day with no relief.

A week before they were to leave on vacation, Henry took the girls to the mall. He'd been feeling a bit edgy that morning and he thought a nice distracting afternoon of shopping would help him feel better. He wasn't prepared for the catastrophe that was to come.

He had no idea how often little girls had to go to the bathroom. He didn't know how loud they could get until they were refused something they wanted desperately. They tired easily and had to inspect every inch of every shiny bauble that caught their eye, which was about every 10 feet. He learned that next time he went shopping with them, he wouldn't take them into the Hallmark store and let them anywhere near the china figurines, two of which he had to pay for after Angela knocked into a shelf and broke them.

By the time they came home, the girls were exhausted and Henry was fuming. He vowed never to do that again, even if his life depended on it. As he put the shopping bags up on the kitchen table, the girls started whining about dinner. He rubbed his temples, hoping that would drown out their high-pitched nasally complaints but it only seemed to amplify them. They started tugging on his slacks, begging to have pizza, then hamburgers, then back to pizza again.

He spun around on them so quickly that Nicki never had the chance to let go of his pant leg and almost went flying to the floor. She stumbled into him and banged her knee on his shin. Her eyes started to well up but before she had a chance to even open her mouth to sob in pain, Henry screamed.

"God dammit! Will you two be quiet?"

He balled his hands into fists and shook them over the two girls. They stood in stunned silence. They'd never heard him swear before and they didn't know how to react. Nicki silently rubbed her knee and Angela hid behind her. Tears rolled down Nicki's cheeks and her bottom lip pooched out but she was trying not to cry aloud. Angela's blue eyes looked like ice as she trembled in quiet fear.

Henry took a menacing step towards them just as Cheryl walked through the door. She arched her eyebrow at the trio.

"So, how'd it go?" she asked.

The girls broke free from their frightened paralysis and ran to Cheryl. They clung to her legs as if they were the last remnants from a sinking ship and would save them from drowning. Nicki buried her face into the folds of Cheryl's shirt but Angela kept a wary eye on Henry from behind Cheryl's hip, as if she didn't know who he was or what he was doing in their house.

Cheryl frowned and looked up at Henry. He looked ashamed and embarrassed but there was a glint of anger behind his grey eyes. His shoulders were slumped, most likely because he felt bad, but it appeared as if he was crouching, like an animal ready to pounce on wounded prey. She led the girls away from him and up to their room, where she quieted them down and promised to order pizza for dinner.

When she came back down, Henry was sitting in the recliner in front of the TV, his head in his hands. She knelt in front of him, smoothing back his hair.

“What happened?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I didn’t think it would be so exhausting, you know? By the time we got home I was ready to scream. Then Nicki banged into me and I lost it.”

“I probably should have prepared you for this. Even I get that way when I take them shopping. It’s hard to control and keep up with two little girls. Believe me, I do know. But the trick is to remember they are just little kids. They can’t help but be exhausting to adults. So don’t worry, okay?”

He leaned forward and rested his head on her shoulder. She wrapped her arms around him and calmed him down, just like she did the girls. When he looked up, Nicki and Angela were standing behind Cheryl, looking nervous. When he smiled at them, Nicki grinned and ran into his arms. He apologized for his outburst and kissed her bruised knee. He released her and turned to Angela, who stood off to the side, chewing on her bottom lip. He opened his arms to her and she slowly walked into his embrace. He hugged her gently, apologizing softly, but she stood limp and unresponsive in his arms.

He cleared his throat, gently pushing her back towards Cheryl, and changed the subject.

“Okay. Who wants pizza?”

Both girls screeched in delight and ran to the phone, their little feet pounding across the vinyl floor in the kitchen. Cheryl raced after them, grabbed the phone before they managed to break it, and held it up out of their reach as they jumped up and down, trying to grab it. Henry rubbed his temples again as they all laughed and squealed in delight at this game. He walked over to Cheryl, who stopped laughing as he loomed over her, and snatched the phone from her hand. She guided the girls outside to the backyard and frowned over her shoulder at Henry.

He punched a number into the phone and barked his order to the poor kid on the other end. When he finished, he slammed the phone down on the cradle and stood at the glass door, overlooking the deck and backyard. Cheryl and the girls were running around, playing tag, enjoying the warm August evening. Henry folded his arms across his chest and glowered at them.

Their trip up north came and went quickly. For the most part, Henry sat on the porch or in front of the TV the whole time while Cheryl and the girls took advantage of the fresh air and explored the forest behind his dad’s house. The only time he took an interest in anything was when Cheryl found a dead deer in the forest, about 20 feet from the house. He stood over the carcass, which had been half chewed by the resident scavengers, after Cheryl dragged him out to see it.

He grabbed a long thick branch from the forest floor and poked the corpse. It was still pretty solid, where it hadn’t been eaten, so he poked harder. He kept pushing at it, harder and harder, until finally, lifting his arms above his head, he rammed the stick through the ribcage. The bones snapped and cracked and gave way to the branch. He let go and it remained vertical, supported by the dead flesh and bones. Henry grinned.

He grabbed the end sticking up and pushed it around and around, grinding the opening he made in the carrion wider and wider. He looked over at Cheryl, smiling like a kid in a candy store. She backed away from him, her lip curled up in an angry snarl, her eyes clouded with disgust. She stormed off, back to the house, and Henry just stood over the dead animal, grinning.

When they returned home, Henry went straight for the basement, where he had built a home office several years ago, and locked himself in. That left Cheryl alone to struggle with the bags and the two girls, who decided they'd rather whine and complain about the vacation being over than help out. By threatening to cut off their TV privileges, Cheryl convinced the girls to bring in the cooler and the bag of dirty laundry.

As Cheryl and the girls put away their vacation things, Henry tested the lock on the office door, making sure no one could come in and disturb him. He had a desk and computer in the back right corner and a couch and TV to the left. There was even a half bath directly to the left of the door. He lifted up one of the seat cushions on the couch and pulled out a rolled up plastic bag. He opened it and took a deep whiff.

"Thank God for Carl," Henry whispered.

Carl, his best friend since high school, lived a couple of miles away and grew his own marijuana. He had a great set-up in his basement, fluorescent lights and all, and kept Henry well supplied throughout the year. He wasn't a druggie by any means but it was a nice way to unwind from a long day's work or just to relax if he was feeling a bit tense. Granted, he didn't have a job now but he seemed more stressed and agitated since he'd been spending all this time at home.

Shrugging his shoulders, he went to the bottom drawer of his desk and pulled out a blue glass bong that he'd made his Senior year of high school. He filled the bottom with water from the sink in the bathroom and packed the bowl, making sure to discard the shake. He pulled a worn gold Zippo from the top drawer of the desk and sat down on the couch.

Flicking open the lighter, he lit the weed and filled the bong with smoke. He slowly inhaled a mouthful of it, pursing his lips to keep it from seeping out too soon. Exhaling, he grinned around the smoke.

"Now that's good ganja."

He took a few more hits, starting to feel the mellowing effects of the drug. His legs and arms always went to jelly first and he flailed them around now, thinking he looked like a giant turtle stuck on its back. He giggled.

"Yeah, a turtle with a bong, man."

He lit the bowl again and filled the bong completely with smoke. He looked around, grinning, and shouted to no one in particular.

"SHOTGUN!"

He sucked all the smoke directly into his lungs, burning the back of his throat, but he managed to keep it all in for 10 seconds. His tongue tasted a bit like ashes after that but as he exhaled, he whooped loudly, sticking his index finger in the air and chanting 'I'm Number One' over and over.

A loud banging sounded at the door and he looked at the computer, confused. When Cheryl called from the other side, he chuckled. He put the bong down next to the computer, asking it to keep an eye on his Mary Jane, and opened the office door. A wall of sweet smelling smoke hit Cheryl in the face and she waved it away angrily.

"Do you have to do that when the kids are home?"

Henry thought about it for a minute. As he was considering his answer, Cheryl huffed and moved into the office, closing the door behind her.

“Oh, for God’s sake, Henry. What is the matter with you? You barely talk to me anymore and when you do, it’s just to bitch or insult me. And the girls. Did you know they’re scared of you, Henry? Nicki just tries to ignore you but Angie is terrified. She’s not sleeping well and she’s having nightmares. Nightmares about you, Henry. Henry? Are you even listening to me?”

Henry stood swaying slightly in front of her, a scowl darkening his features. He caught vague glimpses through his mind of all the fighting and crying of the past few months. Cheryl did nothing but nag him these days and those girls, those little brats did nothing but whine and cry all day long. Nothing was ever good enough. All these damn females surrounding him were wearing him down. They’d beat and tear at him until there was nothing left to call a man.

He looked at the woman he had called his wife, his soulmate, his beloved for the last 20 years. His vision clouded over with red, as if his brain had exploded behind his eyes and all he could see was blood. He reached behind her and pushed open the door. When she looked up at him, frowning, he placed his hand on her chest and shoved her out into the basement. She fell sideways and cracked her right knee against the concrete floor.

“Henry, what the hell...”

He strode over to her and grabbed her by the hair, yanking her to her feet. Her neck popped loudly as he wrenched her head back to look up at him. His eyes were cold and dark with the promise of true pain. He pulled her face close to his and he moved as if he was going to kiss her. Instead, he bit deeply into her bottom lip. He chewed on the tender flesh for a moment, flesh he had once kissed in friendship and love, and then clamped his teeth together and pulled. She screamed as blood flowed down her chin. She stared at him wide-eyed, her fingers fumbling around the raw oozing wound that was once her lower lip.

His high completely gone now and replaced with insane fury, he growled.

“You know, Cheryl, you’re such a kill-buzz.”

He grabbed her head on both sides and placed his thumbs over her eyes. Pushing down, he was surprised as how little pressure he needed to exert to pop her eyeballs. As the vitreous humor oozed over the backs of his hands, Cheryl howled in agony. He tipped his own head back and howled along with her, baying like a wolf at the full moon. Her knees buckled and she started to sink to the floor. Looking down at her, Henry tilted his head to the side, studying her.

“You know, Cheryl, your head would make an *excellent* bowling ball. Hang on a minute.”

He pulled his thumbs from her eye sockets and she crumpled to the floor. As he searched the basement for the proper tool, she tried to crawl towards the steps leading upstairs. Her hand grazed the bottom step just as Henry grabbed her ankle and dragged her backwards. She whimpered softly, not wanting the girls to hear what was happening. But if she didn’t warn them somehow, they may suffer the same fate.

Before she even had a chance to think of how to warn the girls, Henry bent down close to her face, holding something cold against her neck. She winced as he pressed the teeth of the blade into her skin. The bow saw gleamed under the fluorescent lighting of the basement. Henry’s eyes mirrored its sheen.

“Now, you’re going to feel a slight pressure, Cheryl. But once that passes, it’s gonna hurt like hell.”

Cheryl opened her mouth to scream but Henry whipped the saw across her windpipe, silencing her warning cry. Blood squirted out from her neck and open mouth, splattering Henry’s face and pooling onto the basement floor. She choked and gurgled on her own fluids, her arms flailing around weakly, trying to grab for Henry, who was dodging her grasp only after slapping

at her reaching hands. Her arms went limp but she was still conscious, trying to suck in air through the ragged opening in her neck. Whistling, Henry knelt beside her and placed the bow saw in the open wound, causing Cheryl to arch her back in pain.

“Honey, if you don’t sit still, this won’t look right.”

A sob whistled through her torn windpipe, the last sound she would ever make. He swung his arm back and forth, ripping through her flesh with ease, but the blade caught when he reached her backbone. He yanked the blade backwards several times before it came flying out. Pushing her head back, he looked for a space between the vertebrae where he could cut more easily. He felt a sliver of cartilage between two bones and ran the saw through there.

Cheryl’s head rolled off to the right. He picked it up by the hair, turning it left and right. He walked back to his office and into the small bathroom. He rummaged through the shelf below the sink and finally found what he was looking for - the electric shaver. Propping the head up in the sink, he plugged it in and turned it on.

It only took about five minutes to shave the entire head. He held it up, sticking his fingers in the eye sockets and hooking his thumb under the front teeth. He posed for the mirror, stretching out his left arm in front of him and the right, with the head, straight out behind, as if he were about to throw the perfect strike. Laughing, he kissed the head, smearing his mouth with blood, and walked over to his desk and propped it up on top of his computer.

“Now, for the fruit of my loins.”

Searching the basement for the appropriate weapon, he came across a portable nail gun. The compressed air cartridge only lasted long enough to shoot out 20-30 nails, but that should be enough to slow the little rats down. He wanted them alive - for now.

He checked the gun to make sure it was loaded with nails and headed up the stairs. As he entered the kitchen, he could hear the TV in the living room. A few seconds later, Nicki’s tinkling laughter floated over to him and he cringed. To him it sounded like a metal rake scraping across a blackboard. He tiptoed down the hall and peeked around the corner. Nicki was sprawled on her stomach a few feet away from the television, her back to Henry. He wondered why Angela wasn’t with her.

As he was deciding where to shoot her, he heard a soft creak on the staircase behind him. He slowly turned and saw a doe-eyed Angie staring at him from behind the handrail. She didn’t shout or cry. She didn’t ask any “why” questions. But when he took a step towards her she turned and sprinted back upstairs.

“Shit!” he yelled. That got Nicki’s attention and she ran into the hallway to see what was going on. She pointed to the nailgun in his hand.

“Daddy, what’s that and why-?”

Henry spun around and pulled the trigger twice. One nail nicked her right ear and the second sailed through her open mouth, piercing the back of her throat. She collapsed to the floor, gagging on the nail and choking on blood. She seemed immobilized but just in case, he walked up to her and shot another nail into her stomach. She screamed and blood shot out her mouth, staining her white tank top and shorts.

Satisfied she wasn’t going anywhere, Henry turned and ran up the stairs. There were three bedrooms and one bathroom upstairs. He went to the girls’ rooms first. Crashing through the door, he bellowed like a charging bear. Angie had spilled marbles all across the hardwood floor and Henry went down, face first, landing on top of the nail gun. The chunky metal cut into his forehead and scraped the bone.

Growling in anger, he stood slowly, tentatively touching the wound. He winced as he brushed a finger across a hanging flap of skin. He could also feel the exposed bone of his skull, slippery and smooth. His lip curled up in a snarl as he looked around the room. As he was about to look under the bed he heard a door slam out in the hall.

He rushed out of the girls' room in time to see a fiery-red blur, Angie's hair, fly towards the staircase. When he got to the top step, Angie was already halfway down, gripping the handrail to keep from falling. Henry aimed the gun and, with a lucky shot, nailed her left hand to the railing. Angie's legs shot out from beneath her when she could no longer run beyond the reach of her nailed limb. She landed on her backside with her left arm stretched above her head.

Grinning, Henry slowly walked down the steps to her. He bent down, tracing a finger across her face and up her left arm, leaving a trail of blood on her pale skin. She kept silent but watched his hand with her eyes. He gripped her left wrist and pulled, tearing her hand almost in half when he yanked it off the nail. She still did not make a sound but squeezed her eyes shut as tears spilled down her cheeks.

He frowned. Why wasn't she screaming in pain? She wasn't even whimpering, for God's sake. He shook her roughly, causing her head to bang loudly on the railing but still nothing escaped her lips. He dug his thumb into her torn hand, grinding his nail into her raw flesh but she never made a sound. Snarling, he dragged her down the last few steps and over to her sister, who was still writhing in agony on the living room floor.

Angie was struggling in his grip until her eyes fell on Nicki. Watching her sister clutch at her throat, gurgling sobs of pain bubbling out of her mouth, Angie mewled like a lost kitten. She stretched out her bleeding hand to Nicki, who was unaware her little sister was standing over her, and started crying hysterically. Henry yanked on Angie's arm and pulled her close.

"So, this is what gets a reaction out of you, huh? Oh, you're such a big man when it comes to your own pain. But when Nicki suffers..."

He pointed the nail gun at his eldest daughter and shot three nails into her leg. Her hands flew from her throat to her right thigh, gripping at the metal protruding from the muscle. She tried to pull them out but the effort only caused her more pain and she flopped back, defeated. She saw Angie for the first time and reached out to her. Angie tugged and pulled, trying to release herself from her father's grip, but Henry only squeezed tighter. Nicki slowly lowered her hand but her eyes never left her sister's face. As the last spark of life seeped out of her, Nicki smiled softly at Angie and wiggled her fingers goodbye.

As Nicki exhaled her last breath, Angie wailed. Henry was killing her faster than if he took a ball-peen hammer to the back of her skull. Seeing as rendering emotional pain on the youngest of his brood was much more satisfying than physical torture, Henry decided it was time for Angie to see his new bowling ball. Yanking her towards the basement steps, she lost her footing and fell to her knees. She had fallen silent again but as Henry dragged her along the floor towards the basement steps, she arched her back to look over at her dead sister.

When he reached the door leading to the basement, Henry turned around, grabbed Angie's ankles, and walked down the steps backwards so he could watch her body bounce over each one. As her body passed through the open door, Angie suddenly reached for the doorjamb and clung tightly. That quick movement caused Henry to lose his footing. He let go of Angie to try and stop his backward momentum but it was too late. He tumbled and crashed down the concrete steps, cracking bones and bruising flesh, until he came to an abrupt and final stop at the foot of the stairs.

Groaning, he rolled his head to the right and screamed as pain shot down his neck. He couldn't move his legs. He must have broken his back on the way down. As he tried to move his arms white hot pain exploded on each side of him. He looked to the right. Even though he was still holding the nail gun, his humerus was poking through the ripped cotton of his t-shirt, a small swatch of the white fabric hanging limply on the jagged end of bone. To his left, his arm looked fine but the bulge at the shoulder indicated an obvious dislocated joint.

He was truly fucked. He looked up at the ceiling and started to laugh. Each chuckle sent spasms of pain through his upper body but he couldn't stop. What a perfect ending to his rampage. He could just hear the news report: "Local man butchers family and cripples himself in a fall. Coroner determined he lived for hours, possibly days, before his corpse was discovered by police after neighbors complained about a foul stench coming from the man's home."

He sucked in a long breath and guffawed with delight. As tears rolled down his cheeks into his ears, he heard a soft sound above him. Lifting his head and grimacing at the pain, he looked up and saw Angie standing on the steps above him. She was holding her injured left hand in her right, her face like stone framed by her flaming red hair. Henry's laughter died down to soft giggles.

"Holy shit. I forgot all about you, munchkin. Hey, wanna do daddy a favor? Can you go upstairs and call '911'?"

Angie stood stoically over him, her ice blue eyes blinking once. Still grinning, Henry tried again.

"Hey, stupid, I'm talking to you. Get upstairs and call an ambulance!"

She didn't move. She only stood there, staring at him, cradling her ruined hand. Henry's mirth left him completely and he growled at her.

"God dammit, you worthless brat. Get your ass upstairs right now and do as I say or you'll really be sorry!"

Angie blinked at him in response. Henry screamed.

"What the hell is the matter with you? What do I have to do to get you to move?!?"

Her eyes flashed briefly with dark hatred before she whispered her answer.

"Die."

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Sometime in the hushed hour before dawn, a tiny figure stepped out of her front door. She looked up and down the street, holding her left hand to her chest. Her fiery red hair waved in the soft breeze as she made her way down the sidewalk to the neighbor's house and rang the bell.

THE END