

**Forlorn Lake**  
By Edith Maxwell

In *Land of 10,000 Thrills: the 2022 Bouchercon Anthology*  
edited by Greg Herren (Down & Out Books)

Geneva Larsen hit the brakes of her old Volvo, peering through the December gloaming at the name of the small store in her hometown of Forlorn Lake.

Ralph's Grocery.

She nearly went into a skid on the icy road. She steered into it, instead. Glad she hadn't lost her Minnesota driving mojo, despite how long she'd lived in balmy southern Indiana.

She shivered at seeing the store sign. Just what she didn't need after having driven for twelve hours like hell itself was chasing her. It kind of was, if hell was embodied in a manipulative, controlling, soon-to-be-ex boyfriend.

Her phone still showed out of range. *Shit*. She didn't need GPS. She could have driven the last two miles to the cabin on Forlorn Lake blindfolded. But she hated not to have a working phone, even though everybody knew there was no reception up here on the North Shore of the Land of Ten Thousand Lakes.

Bodies of water in fact dotted the landscape. But Minnesota could also be called the land of ten thousand takes. Shakes. Makes. How many innocents had been taken advantage of? Shaken down? Made to do what they knew was wrong? She did not want to go inside Ralph's. Too many bad memories lurked there.

Geneva blew out a breath. She had to pee. She desperately needed caffeine. And she hadn't eaten since a quick Culver's butterburger and custard shake in western Wisconsin. The cabin wouldn't have any food. She girded herself to face the past.

"Welcome to Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery," the tall, now snowy-haired man behind the counter said, looking way too cheerful and rosy-cheeked for such a grim night. "How can I help you, ma'am?"

Or maybe it wasn't grim for him. For over-thirty-five Geneva, being called "ma'am" was grim enough, but there was no denying biology. At least he hadn't recognized her.

"Just grabbing a snack." She glanced around as if she didn't remember where the restroom was. "Ladies room?"

He pointed to the far corner, at the junction of the beer cooler and the deli. “Hope the girls left it clean for you.”

She did her business as fast as she could, not thinking, not looking around the small room, not staring at the second door that was always locked—until it wasn’t. Still, her stomach roiled remembering the warm breath, the grip on her arm.

Back in the store, she grabbed a basket near the door and prowled the aisles.

“If you can’t find it at Ralph’s,” he called out, “you can get along pretty good without it.”

She winced, ignoring him. Her basket filled with quarts of milk and orange juice, a package of cheddar cheese and one of sliced ham, a box of crackers, and a loaf of the least squishy bread they had. At the counter, her eyes widened when she spied the small red and green packages.

“Oh, my gosh. Nut Goodies!” She loaded a dozen packets of her favorite chocolate-and-nut candy, made in Minnesota, into her basket next to the register. “I’m going to grab a coffee, too.”

When she returned from the coffee station carrying a large lidded cup loaded with sugar and cream, the man was leering at her.

“If it isn’t Geneva Larsen, all grown up. I’d know that voice anywhere.”

“That’s me.” She lifted her chin. “Hi, Ralph.”

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“Shit.” Geneva lowered her head onto the steering wheel in defeat. Her beloved decades-old car wouldn’t start. She could feel Ralph’s gaze on her through the store’s window. She straightened. One more try. All she got was the futile whining, grinding slower and slower. She gave up, sipping her coffee, wishing she had an IV of it. She couldn’t even call AAA.

She grabbed the keys, locked the door, and trudged down the street. She had no choice. She pulled her red Indiana University watch cap farther down over her spiky platinum do. Short hair was fine in a warmer climate. Right now she wished she still had the long, dark, shiny mane she’d cultivated in high school two decades earlier.

The yellow and orange flashing lights of Jack’s Auto Repair surrounded the name, under which was written, “Complete Satisfaction!” It had been goofy back then, and it was annoying now. This was not fictional Lake Wobegon, but Jack had been an early adopter of the trope, claiming he’d been one of the inspirations for the decades-long public radio show.

Despite the bay doors being closed, light from within pushed out into the increasing darkness of the late afternoon. A bell dinged when Geneva pulled open the door to the office.

“All tracks lead to Jack’s,” a tired voice from behind a car on a lift called out. “Can I help you?”

The voice wasn’t Jack’s. *Good.*

“I hope so.” Geneva stepped into the closest bay. “My car’s down the street, and it won’t start. I think it needs a new battery.”

A woman in dark blue work pants and a navy sweatshirt stepped out from behind the car, wiping her hands on a red grease-stained rag. A long blond braid fell down her back from under a faded Twins ball cap.

Geneva stared. “Angel? Angel Hagen?”

The woman took two steps closer and squinted. “Son of a bitch. What in hell are you doing back here, Ginnie Larsen?”

“Heading out to the cabin. You’re a mechanic now, it looks like.”

“Yeah. It suits me.” Angel shoved her hands in her pockets. “I didn’t get to escape this hellhole to attend college like you did.”

“You know I had to,” Geneva murmured. “Escape, that is.”

“Yeah. I needed to, too, but I couldn’t.”

“How is it, working for Jack?” Geneva hated even saying the name.

“Luckily he’s almost never here.”

*Whew.*

“I manage the outfit while he’s in Florida,” Angel went on. “I didn’t start working for him until he mostly retired. He didn’t even come back last summer. I’m saving up to buy the business from him.”

“Sounds like a plan. Did you ever marry? Have a family?”

“Are you kidding?” Her mouth twisted like she’d tasted a mouthful of lutefisk.

“All I could land were losers. I stopped looking a long time ago.”

“I hear you.” Geneva should have stopped looking, too. “Well, I like the sound of Angel’s Automotive.” She smiled.

“More like Fallen Angel Automotive. But I’ll tell you, first thing I’m going to do is take down those damn flashing lights.” Angel snorted.

The sound reminded Geneva of their years as besties, back before everything blew up. When one snort could lead to a half hour of uncontrollable, pee-your-pants laughter. “Hey, can we talk about something?”

“I thought you needed a new battery?” Angel cocked her head, but she no longer looked suspicious. “Never mind. We can do both. Where’s this dead car of yours?”

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“C’mon, goddammit.” Geneva fanned the newspaper and kindling in the wood cookstove. Her fire-lighting skills hadn’t deserted her either. The newspaper flared up and caught the slivers of wood from the kindling box. She stood, shivering, gradually feeding wood into the hole. The boxy antique stove would be her only source of both heat and coffee. At least the flue hadn’t been blocked by a dead squirrel, or worse.

Bless her caretaker. He’d wiped down the place, filled the kindling box, and the wood box next to the door, and gotten the water running to the hand pump in the kitchen sink. This rustic cabin and the twenty acres of woods it sat in were the only property Geneva owned, inherited after her parents died. She hadn’t been up in five years, though, not since she’d had new windows and an indoor composting toilet installed. Visiting an outhouse in the woods during winter was too ridiculous.

She hadn’t lingered on that visit, though. She’d only made this crazy trip to get away from the latest of her unfortunate choices of men. It was winter break at the university where she taught, so she had time. While Geneva was here, maybe she and Angel could make some changes in Forlorn Lake.

When the fire was roaring, Geneva brought in the rest of her things. Ground coffee, stovetop pot, large bottle of Jim Beam. Electric lantern and flashlight. Down sleeping bag and pillow. Duffle holding warm clothes, TP, essentials of hygiene, books, and snow boots. And her laptop. Its battery would last maybe ten hours. She figured

she'd be spending a lot of time in the town library charging devices and using their internet. If she really needed to use her phone, she'd drive the hour south back to Duluth.

She slid the perishables into the cold box, an ingenious feature her father had added many years ago. Accessed by a thick door in the north wall of the cabin, it was an insulated box attached to the outside of the house that stayed naturally cold but didn't freeze.

Once she was settled, Geneva poured whiskey into a chipped mug, grabbed a Nut Goodie, and pulled a chair near the stove to think. As far as she knew, nothing had ever come out about those dark days. It wasn't right. Angel seemed as scarred as Geneva felt, referring to herself as a fallen angel.

Geneva wondered what had happened to skinny Jimmy Berg. Editor of the school paper and president of the National Honor Society, he'd been bullied by the big blond jocks as well as the popular girls. Did the geeky nerd also still have nightmares about the back corner at Ralph's? There had been others, too.

At a scrabbling sound, she froze. Listened. It was at the door. Scratching.

"Fuck," she whispered, her heart thudding. She shot her gaze at the lock. Yes, she had shot the thick dead bolt. It would hold against an intruder. Wouldn't it? She'd also closed the thick insulated curtains over the windows. The only way someone would get in here would be with an ax or a chain saw.

After a minute of silence, she let out a long breath. It had to have been an animal. A hungry racoon. A fierce fisher. Even a bear, late to its den. She was fine. She was safe. Wasn't she?

Geneva stared at her hands, which were clutching the Nut Goodie. She tore open the candy bag. There was no fear that nuts, maple nougat, and chocolate couldn't soothe, washed down with some booze.

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Geneva blinked the next morning at the sight of the Forlorn Lake Regional Public Library. They must have razed the shabby brick building that had been a refuge to her as a child. This modern edifice had gone up since the last time she'd been in town, for sure. Inside, she found an empty desk and plugged in her laptop and phone, then went looking for the internet password.

She passed an office labeled *James Berg, Director*. And halted. She peered in the open door. A thin man in glasses sat sideways to the entrance facing a big monitor, his long fingers racing over the keyboard.

"Jimmy?" she asked.

His face whipped toward her. He stared but didn't speak.

She smiled and gave a little wave.

He shook himself. Standing, he came toward her. "Ginnie Larsen. How long has it been?" His voice wobbled, and he kept his hands at his sides.

"Almost twenty years. I go by Geneva now." She gestured around. "And you're the director of this gorgeous new place?"

"Yes. We're proud of it." His voice steadied. "We have all the latest technology, with readiness to pivot to whatever innovations come along. I'm the general director, but I also manage the IT."

"Sounds like the perfect job for you. Did you marry? Have a family?"

He shook his head. "You?"

“Not yet.” Who would want damaged goods like her? “Hey, I saw Angel at Jack’s yesterday.”

“Oh?” He didn’t meet her gaze.

“She and I got to talking about the past.” Geneva watched him. “Maybe the three of us could have lunch or a drink later.”

“I don’t drink.” His hands fluttered at his sides. “And I’m very busy here. Eat lunch at my desk.”

“What time do you get off? We can all grab a burger together.”

Jimmy’s shoulders slumped, as if defeated.

“Come on,” Geneva pressed. “For old time’s sake.”

“You know as well as I do those old times weren’t so great. But, yes, I will meet with you. I finish work at five.”

“I’ll be here.”

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Geneva sipped her Imperial stout in the FL Café, with Angel and Jimmy sitting across from her in a booth not far from the door. FL for Forlorn Lake, but who would want to name a restaurant the Forlorn Café?

“This is good.” Geneva glanced at the list of beers. “The name Darkness fits it. What did you get?” She pointed her chin toward Angel’s glass.

“Axe Man,” Angel said. “Surly Brewing likes to go dark in their naming.”

Jimmy sipped his ginger ale in silence.

Their young server arrived with two loaded plates. He set down a mushroom cheeseburger for Angel and the meatloaf supper plate in front of Jimmy. A woman carrying Geneva’s Tater Tot hotdish approached. Geneva hadn’t been able to resist ordering what some called the state dish.

“What, are we having a class reunion and nobody told me?” Tiff Sheridan set the hotdish plate at Geneva’s place. “I heard you were in town, Ginnie.”

Geneva gazed into the same stunning green eyes, honey-colored hair, and white, even teeth Tiff had always had. The beauty had been both valedictorian and Homecoming Queen. And now she was waitstaff in a restaurant?

“I am.” Geneva might as well give up on asking locals to call her Geneva. “Good to see you.”

Tiff cocked her hip and put one fist on her waist as her smile slid away. She narrowed her eyes at the three, lowering her voice. “Or is this a different kind of reunion?”

Geneva checked with Angel, who gave a nod indicating Tiff was also a member of their horrible nightmare of a club. “Can you join us?”

The server still hovered.

“Jason, doll, tell the kitchen I’m on break for twenty minutes, will you, please?”

Tiff slid in next to Geneva. “You guys better eat while it’s hot.”

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“We’re going to need a lawyer,” Geneva said fifteen minutes later, after the four had finally agreed to act. Jimmy had been hard to convince, but he’d come around.

“Tiny’s a lawyer,” Angel said. “He’ll do it.”

“Your giant of a baby brother is a lawyer?” Geneva stared.

Angel snorted again. “Hard to believe, but that lunkhead actually has a pretty sharp brain in there.”

“We’ll need to get the story out, too.” Geneva tapped the table. “Do any of you know a reporter?”

Jimmy pointed at Tiff.

Tiff laughed. “Don’t gape, Geneva. I just moonlight as a waitress to make ends meet. I’m the northeast stringer for the *Duluth News Tribune*. I cover Saint Louis, Lake, and Cook counties. All the way to Canada and to the shores of Lake Superior. I’ll write up an article and send it around to you all for approval.”

“And I have resources for distributing it more widely,” Jimmy said.

Tiff pushed up to standing. “I have to get back to work. You have my number.”

“Yep.” Geneva patted her pants pocket. This afternoon she’d acquired a pay-as-you-go phone connected to the one carrier that offered service in the area.

When Tiff glanced at the door, her nostrils flared.

Geneva twisted to see Ralph staring at them with narrowed eyes.

“Listen kids,” Tiff muttered. “We all need to be careful. Very, very careful.”

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Geneva knocked on Jimmy’s office door at the library the next morning at ten. “Just got a text from Angel. She wants to talk with both of us at the garage. Can you get away for a few minutes?”

“One second.” He finished what he was typing. “She what, now?”

“She wants to see us at Jack’s. She must be there alone and needs to keep working.”

He blew out a breath. “I suppose. I wish this would all disappear, but you ladies clearly aren’t going to let it.” He stood and shrugged into a coat. “Let’s get it over with.”

Outside, Geneva sniffed. “Smells like snow.” The low, unbroken gray sky looked like it, too.

“That’s the forecast. Maybe up to a foot. In fact, here it is now.”

Sure enough, white flakes began to descend on them. As they passed Ralph’s, Geneva gave the store a quick glance.

“That’s strange,” she said. “Ralph’s is closed. See? The lights are out.”

“Maybe he went on vacation and couldn’t find anyone to manage it.” Jimmy shrugged. “Who wouldn’t want to get away from a foot of snow?”

Across the street from Jack’s was the Catholic church, Our Lady of the Lakes, the least original name in this state of lakes. Geneva and Angel used to giggle and call it Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility. Whatever the name, it was closed up tight on this Thursday morning.

At the entrance to the garage parking lot, Geneva nearly tripped on a flapping boot lace. “Go on in,” she told Jimmy. “I’ll be right there.”

He headed inside. She knelt to retie first one boot, then the other. She set her gloved hand on the office door but pulled it back. She couldn’t make out the words, but she heard two male voices, one deeper than Jimmy’s reedy tone.

She stepped over to the window in the nearest bay door. Her breath rushed in at the sight. Ralph aimed a shotgun at Jimmy. Angel was tied to a chair.

“Shit.” Geneva ducked, then hurried around the corner of the building away from the bays in case Ralph came looking for her. Her pulse raced and her breath came fast

and furious. She fumbled for the phone in her pocket, tearing her glove off with her teeth, her hands cold and clammy. She poked 9-1-1 but kept going around toward the back of the building.

“Dispatch. What is your emergency?”

The words tumbled out. “Ralph Knutsen has a shotgun pointed at two people inside Jack’s. Send someone quickly, please!”

“Are you safe, ma’am?”

“For now. I’m outside at the right side of the shop near the back.”

“Do not go inside. Officers are on their way. Get as far away as you can, ma’am.”

How could the dispatcher sound so calm?

“Okay.” Geneva frantically looked around. Behind the shop was a stand of woods. No way was she heading in there. She’d seen a For Rent sign in the window of the storefront next door, although *Ilsa’s Beauty Salon* was still painted on the glass. She wouldn’t find shelter there, either. This side of the auto shop had no windows or doors. She’d stay where she was.

At least she hadn’t heard any shots. Angel and Jimmy had to be alive. They had to be. Had Ralph tied up Jimmy, too? If Jimmy had said Geneva had walked over with him, Ralph would surely come after her. She glanced back along the side of the building, horrified to see her own footprints in the new snow. Except...the snowfall was getting heavier. Her tracks began to vanish.

She had a terrible thought. What if Angel—that is, Ralph—had also asked Tiff to come here? Geneva thumbed a fast text to her.

*Ralph has A and J at gunpoint inside Jack’s. Do NOT obey Angel’s message if you got one.*

But why hadn’t Geneva heard a siren yet?

“Ma’am?” the dispatcher asked. “Are you still there?”

Geneva startled. “Yes.”

“What is your name and address, please?”

“Geneva Larsen. I live in Indiana, but I’m staying at my family’s cabin on the lake, on Lost Beach Road. Why aren’t the police here yet?”

“They’re coming in quietly so as not to alarm the hostage taker.”

Ralph. What if he killed Angel or Jimmy or both when the police busted in? Should Geneva have tried to do more than run away and call for help? But what? She didn’t have a weapon or even any martial arts skills.

She heard a noise. Whirled toward the street. And let out a breath. Two black-clad officers in helmets and thick vests jogged toward her. One, a woman, slowed.

“Ms. Larsen?” She kept her voice low.

Geneva nodded.

“You all right?”

“Yes.”

“Back door?”

“I don’t know.”

“Stay put, please. We’ll let you know when the coast is clear.”

“Those are my friends in there, Angel and Jimmy. Please help them.” Geneva’s last words ended in a sob.

“Yes, ma’am.” The officer vanished around the back.

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It seemed like forever but probably only five minutes elapsed before the female officer reappeared, again from the front. She beckoned to Geneva, who hurried toward her.

“Are Angel and Jimmy okay?” Geneva asked in a rush.

“They’re alive and fine.”

Geneva’s knees wobbled as the tension flooded out of her. She took in a deep breath to steady herself.

“We have Mr. Knutsen in custody,” the officer added. “Your friends would like to see you.”

“Thank you.” Geneva wanted to hug her. Of course, she didn’t. Minnesotans weren’t big on hugs, especially from strangers. “Thank you.”

Around the front, one of the bay doors had been raised. To get there, Geneva had to pass a cruiser. Ralph sat in the back seat, his face a mask of fury staring out the window. She looked away from the vitriol and hurried into the shop.

Angel and Jimmy stood talking with a Vera Stanhope look-alike in a wrinkled blazer and slacks that might have had an elastic waist. Geneva approached the group.

“Ginnie, I am so, so sorry,” Angel began. “He forced me to send that text. He had the shotgun aimed at my head.”

“Don’t apologize. Are you both okay? Jimmy, did he tie you up, too?”

“Yes,” he said. “But it turns out the man is an idiot of the first order.”

Vera, or whatever her name was, nodded her agreement.

“Ralph asked where you were,” Angel said. “Jimmy said you couldn’t make it.”

“I love you, Jimmy Berg.” Geneva smiled at him.

His cheeks turned as red as his chafed wrists. “Once he got me secured to a chair, he set the gun on its end and ranted to us about how he knew we were going to ruin him and Jack.”

“How he couldn’t let us do that,” Angel added. “Plus more blah, blah, blah.”

The woman spoke up. “Such that when the team burst in on all sides, Knutsen wasn’t exactly armed and ready to resist nor able to take out his hostages.” She extended her hand. “Detective Verena Stanton. You are Geneva Larsen, I assume?”

Geneva shook her hand. “I am.” The detective’s name was also almost Vera’s. All she needed was the hat.

“Thank you for being alert to the situation and for calling it in,” Stanton said.

“You saved your friends’ lives.”

Jimmy had certainly saved Geneva’s.

“I’m just glad Tiff didn’t show up, too,” Angel said.

“Tiff didn’t do what?” Tiff strode toward them. “Looks like I missed all the fun.”

“You didn’t get my text?” Geneva asked.

Angel spoke the same words at the same time. She snorted.

“Jinx,” they both said, just like they had when they were still-innocent girls.

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A week later, the four sat around Geneva’s table in the cabin. A bottle of champagne sat mostly empty next to four jelly jars still half full. Even Jimmy was drinking.



Angel held up the *Duluth News Tribune*. ““Victims Expose Small-Town Abusers, by Tiffany Sheridan,”” she read.

“Bravo to Tiff.” Geneva raised her glass and clinked it with the reporter’s.

Tiff’s cheeks pinkened. “Hey, it was all of us working together.”

Angel read on. ““Foursome acts to stop long-running pattern of crimes against children. Ralph Knutsen, owner of Ralph’s Grocery in Forlorn Lake, is behind bars, arrested on multiple charges, included repeated assaults on minors.””

“Ralph’s Very Bad Grocery is what the sign should have read,” Tiff said, arching an eyebrow.”

““Lawyer Timothy Hagen is representing the accusers and other plaintiffs who have since come forward,”” Angel continued.

“Tiny has been great,” Geneva murmured.

“Knutsen’s co-accused, John “Jack” Fillmore, collapsed from heart failure when authorities arrived to arrest him,”” Angel read. ““He died hours later in a Venice, Florida, hospital.””

“Good fucking riddance,” Tiff muttered.

“He was sick anyway,” Angel said. “He didn’t have much longer to live.”

“Still, he was a horrible man, him and his buddy Ralph, and I want to put things right.” Jimmy gazed around the table at them. “Here’s what I’m going to do. I’m single.”

Geneva interrupted. “We all are.”

“I know, but I make a lot of money with my software consulting on the side. I’m going to buy the grocery and make it a co-op. It’ll hire local kids, teach them accounting, provide counseling if they need it, and be a teen center into the bargain.”

“You’re brilliant, James Berg, you know that?” Tiff asked. “I’ll help with publicity, marketing, anything written.”

“And if they don’t want to work at JB’s Grocery, they can be apprentice mechanics at Angel’s Automotive, where we don’t have to brag about satisfying customers.” Angel grinned.

Geneva looked at these old friends. She felt at home for the first time since that awful summer when Jack and Ralph began coercing pre-teens into the room behind the grocery’s restroom, threatening to kill them if they told an adult. An anvil had lifted from her heart.

“You know what?” she began. “Indiana doesn’t have all that much going for it. I think I’ll move back up here. Get some electricity and winterization into this place. Write that book I’ve been thinking about. And be part of the new Forlorn Lake.”

Nobody should ever feel as forlorn as she had for decades. Or be afraid to go into a pretty good grocery store.