



NEAR THE BONE

“A TRUE PAGE-TURNER”

PAUL TREMBLAY
*on *The Ghost Tree**

CHRISTINA
HENRY

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE GHOST TREE*



1

There was a dead fox in her path.

At first Mattie only saw it as a streak of scarlet across the fresh snowfall. Her initial thought was that some predator had gotten a rabbit from the traps she'd come to check.

Then she saw the orange fur matted with blood, and the place where something sharp had torn through the fox's middle. Viscera were strewn over the snow, the scent fresh and strong despite the cold air.

There weren't many creatures that would eat a fox—a bear would, of course, a bear would eat anything. Maybe a mountain lion, sometimes an eagle, but almost no creature would take the trouble of killing an animal and then not bother to eat it at all. None, as a matter of fact, except people, but there were no people at the top of the mountain except for Mattie and William.

Mattie crouched down to get a better look at the animal, but she didn't see any prints or claw marks that would give her a clue. She stood again, brushing the snow off her heavy

wool skirt, and paused for a moment, irresolute.

Perhaps she ought to go back and tell William about the fox straightaway. Then she decided she ought not to until she checked the traps. That was why he'd sent her down to the creek in the first place, and if she didn't do as she was told then she would pay for it.

Mattie stepped around the fox and paused again. There was a strange track in the snow beside the fox's body. She couldn't quite make sense of it.

The track seemed to be from a bear, but if it was a bear then the animal was much larger than any bear Mattie had ever seen—maybe twice as big as the biggest grizzly in the area. The print appeared to be a rear paw—she could make out the curve of the heel and the five toe pads. But the claw marks at the front were much longer and deeper than usual. The size of the print made her think it must be the biggest bear in existence.

Mattie glanced around the path, checking for more prints. The path she followed wasn't a man-made one but a deer trail. The trail was flanked by the trunks of tall mountain pines and the remains of scrub from the summer. She found another print—another rear paw, and some distance away from the first. That was strange, too. It was like the bear was up walking on its hind legs like a person. They might do this for a few moments, especially to intimidate another creature, but not as a general practice.

Mattie shook her head. This wasn't anything she should worry about. She could practically hear William's voice saying, "Get a move on, girl. It isn't any of your concern. You're always curious when there's no cause to be."

Yes, she should check the traps before William had to come down and find out what was taking her so long.

Mattie continued on, kicking up some of the powdery snow with her boots as she went. It wasn't proper winter yet—summer was barely over, in fact—but they'd already had several days of snowfall and unusually cold days. William worried that they might not have enough food set by if the winter was especially harsh. There wouldn't be very many animals about. They'd all be snug in their dens.

That made Mattie wonder—what was a grizzly doing, leaving fresh meat behind like that? This time of the year most of them were getting ready to bed down for the winter. Those bears still active wouldn't pass up an opportunity to put on a little extra winter fat. If the grizzly wanted to save the kill for later it would have cached the fox—though it was hardly worth caching what amounted to a mouthful.

She had to stop worrying on it. William was waiting.

They had three snares set apart in the brush by the creek. All three were full, which meant rabbit stew with carrots and potato. William would be pleased.

Mattie put the rabbits in her canvas sack, carefully reset the snares and started back to the cabin. A few flakes of

snow drifted down as she walked and she stuck her tongue out to catch one—

(holding hands with Heather with our heads tipped toward the sky, catching as many snowflakes as we can, our eyelashes coated white)

No. She was not to think of that, either. That was only a dream. William had told her many times that it was all something she'd made up in her head and he didn't want to hear about that nonsense.

She shouldn't dwell on the dream or the strange bear print or the dead fox. She should hurry home with the rabbits, because her husband waited for her. He expected her to be a good wife.

When she reached the dead fox again on the way back, Mattie carefully stepped around the corpse and the prints in the snow. William might want to come and see them later, but she wasn't going to trouble herself about it anymore. She wasn't going to think of how strange it was, because William told her what to think and she was sure he wouldn't like her thinking on this.

William was outside the cabin chopping wood when Mattie hurried into the clearing.

The clearing was large enough to accommodate their two-room cabin, a storehouse for meat, an outhouse and a small garden in the summer. William had cleared away extra trees so that there was fifteen or so feet of open ground in

front of the cabin before the forest. He said this was so nobody could sneak up to their home without him knowing.

Her husband was a tall, powerfully built man—more than a foot taller than Mattie, with broad shoulders and large hands and feet. His hair was dark, streaked with gray, but his eyes were bluer than ice on a frozen creek bed. William's back was to her but he immediately turned as if he'd sensed her presence when she stepped into the clearing, the heavy wood axe in his left hand.

He said nothing as she approached, only waited with that expectant, impatient look that told her she'd made a mistake.

"There was a dead fox," she said by way of explanation. "But the traps were full."

Mattie thought the evidence of a good night's supper would be enough to distract him, but she should have known better. "Why should the fox be any of your concern? I told you to check the snares and come straight back."

Mattie bit her lip. This was the trap. If she didn't answer, he would be angry. If she tried to explain, he would be angry.

"Well?"

She should try, at least. Maybe he would understand this time.

"Something killed the fox and left it there," she said.

His gaze sharpened. "A person? Someone in the woods?"

"No, no," she said quickly. She knew how careful he was about keeping the location of their home a secret, how upset he

got if there was any sign of people nearby. “There was a track, like a bear track, but much bigger than any bear I’ve ever seen.”

William’s jaw relaxed a fraction. He did seem relieved that she hadn’t found evidence of a person.

That slight unclenching deceived her, though—she wasn’t braced when he dropped the axe in the snow and his fist flew out.

Stars shot across her vision and she tasted blood on her tongue. Her bottom felt cold.

You’re sitting in the snow. Get up before your skirt gets wet, she thought.

“You know if you find anything unusual you’re supposed to come get me immediately.” William didn’t sound angry, but then he never did. There was never any yelling, any warning that the blow was about to fall.

“I thought it would be better if I checked the traps first,” she said.

She knew she ought to stand up, but if she stayed on the ground she was harder to reach.

“That’s your trouble, Martha,” he said, using her Christian name—always a bad sign. “It’s not your role to think.”

“Yes,” she said. “I’m very sorry.”

He stared down at her, and she could tell he was deciding whether or not he’d punished her sufficiently for her transgression.

“Take those rabbits inside and skin them,” he said. “When

you're finished you show me this dead fox."

"Yes," she said, pushing out of the snow.

Her stockings were wet just above the tops of her boots. It would be nice to change them when she went inside but William might come in with the firewood and find her doing something other than the task he assigned.

Mattie hurried toward the door of the cabin, her shoulders hunched. She didn't relax until she heard the whistle and thud of the axe again. That meant William wasn't following her.

She put her boots away and set about the task of skinning and dressing the rabbits for cooking later. Rabbits were small and not much work, and Mattie knew that William would expect her to finish quickly.

Don't make him angry again. Do your job as you're supposed to.

But her mind wandered away, as it often did, and she had to call it back so that William wouldn't find her woolgathering. Her hands made quick work of the rabbits even as her thoughts drifted elsewhere, to that place they weren't supposed to go.

William came to the door of the cabin and called in. "Are you finished?"

Mattie knew he didn't want to remove his snow-coated boots only to put them on again. This was less about saving her the trouble of wiping up the water on the cabin floor and more about saving himself the effort of lacing and unlacing.

“Just about,” she called back.

“Don’t take too long,” he said, and shut the door again.

In truth she was finished, but she wanted an extra minute or two to wash up and compose herself. She’d been thinking about the dream again, thinking that she heard a song playing (*something about a dove, there are these big black things and the music is coming out of them, coming from a silver disc, but that seems silly. Something from a dream like William always says*)

William believed music was sinful so she knew it wasn’t anything she’d heard since she’d come to live with him.

Mattie plunged her hands into the cold water in the basin and scrubbed the blood away, trying to scrub the dream away with it. William seemed to be able to sense her dreams on her, like a scent that clung. He was already irritated. If she went outside with those strange images still in her eyes, he’d be even angrier.

A few moments later she was outside again, bundled in her coat and mittens and boots. William had his rifle in his hand.

“Show me,” he said.

Mattie indicated the deer path she’d followed earlier. William didn’t like Mattie to walk in front of him and she was careful not to do this. Her tracks were still visible in the snow, in any case. Only a few flurries had fallen since Mattie returned home.

There were crows gathered around the fox corpse, picking

at the exposed meat. William shooed them away and they flew off, cawing loudly.

Mattie stood behind him and a little off to the side, so she could see his face. She hated being surprised by his moods. He might decide she was silly for mentioning the fox to him in the first place, and that would stack on top of his earlier mood to create a fury she could not escape.

Sometimes Mattie wondered why he married her, why he'd chosen her in the first place, especially when he always seemed to find fault. He could have picked a different girl, one with more of the qualities he seemed to desire—someone less curious, more biddable.

Mattie watched her husband closely as he scanned the area around the fox. His eyes widened when he saw the paw print. "Did you find any more of these?"

She pointed toward the scrub to their right. "There."

William went to take a closer look, and it was only then that Mattie noticed the scrub was broken, like something very large had blundered through it. The bark on one of the trees had long, deep claw marks, as if the animal had scraped it as it went by. William ran his hand over the marks, a thoughtful expression on his face.

"If it's a grizzly, it's the biggest damned grizzly there ever was," he said. "I wonder where it came from. Something that big would need a lot of game."

Mattie remembered then just how sparse game had been

over the last few weeks. Both she and William had attributed this to the early cold snap. But maybe it wasn't the cold at all. Maybe it was this bear, this monster of a bear that was out in the woods eating up all the moose and deer that William wanted to kill and hang in their storehouse for the winter.

"I'd like to think it's gone from the area," he said. "The footprints seem to indicate its going down the mountain, anyway. Some lucky fellow is going to shoot it and end up with his name in the newspaper, not to mention the best trophy anyone has ever seen."

Even if some man did shoot the bear, Mattie would never see his name. She was expressly forbidden from reading anything except the Bible. On the rare occasions that William went into town and returned with a paper he would always lock it in his trunk.

Mattie was not permitted to be in the bedroom when he opened the trunk, and he kept the key on a key ring that was on or near his person at all times. The keys to the cabin and the storehouse were also on this key ring, as well as two strange keys. Mattie didn't know what these were for, and the one time she'd asked about the keys he'd given her two black eyes so she never asked again.

"Big bear like that would be a lot of meat, though," he mused. "We could eat all winter on that bear."

If you can kill it without getting killed yourself, Mattie thought.

William glanced at her, and not for the first time Mattie

had the idea that he could hear what she was thinking.

“You don’t think I can kill it?” he said, and there was a glint of something in his ice-chip eyes, something that might have been humor on another man. “Well, you might be right this once, Mattie girl. I’m not going to get a bear that size with this.”

He indicated the rifle, which he mostly used for deer hunting.

“It might be gone anyway, like you said,” Mattie offered tentatively. “Gone down the mountain.”

He looked at her, then back at the claw marks. “I’d like to be sure. But if it’s still around I don’t want you wandering on your own. Stay with me.”

He pushed through the broken scrub, expecting Mattie to follow. She did, carefully lifting her skirts so they wouldn’t snag on the broken branches.

William strode ahead without pausing, and Mattie hurried to catch up.

“There,” he said, pointing to another print in the snow. “This is the darndest bear I’ve ever seen. Doesn’t it ever go down on its forepaws?”

Mattie didn’t answer. She knew he didn’t expect her to do so.

They followed the prints for a good while longer. Every step they took gave Mattie a tiny thrill. She wasn’t allowed to go down the mountain, only to places close to the cabin that William approved. It had taken a long time for her to earn that privilege, too. At first she wasn’t allowed to go

anywhere without him, not even to the outhouse.

The forest didn't look any different but Mattie was still deeply aware that she was in a place that was forbidden and new.

After some time her mind began to wander, as it often did, and the tune for that song drifted over her again, but she couldn't quite catch the words. If she knew the words then she could grab another part of the dream, a hazy thing that was just out of reach.

William halted abruptly and Mattie noticed just in time, jolted out of her reverie before she plowed into his back.

"Where did it go?" he said. "The prints just stop here."

They stood in a small clearing, the towering pines surrounding them like a fairy circle.

(but how do I know that when I've never seen one except maybe I have there's Heather crouching in the grass pointing at the mushrooms saying it's a fairy circle)

William stood still for a moment, his eyes darting all around the clearing, but there was nothing to see except unbroken snow.

"What did it do, fly away?" he said.

"Maybe we turned in the wrong direction," Mattie said tentatively.

"There's a print just outside the clearing and it's facing this direction," William said. "I'm not a fool, Mattie, not like you."

"Of course," she murmured. Her heart pounded faster,

because when she made these kinds of mistakes he had to correct her.

But William was far more interested in the mystery of the bear at that moment. He continued scanning the area for any sign he might have missed.

Mattie backed out of the clearing, retracing her steps to the last print. It was another rear paw, and it was certainly odd that there was only evidence of rear ones. The animal was definitely not behaving like any bear that Mattie had ever seen. She inspected the trees that surrounded the clearing.

“There!” she said, pointing to the claw marks high up on the trunk of one of the trees.

William came to stand beside her, his gaze following the direction of her finger. They both looked higher, into the thick cover of pine needles. Mattie half-expected to see a bear sleeping on a branch high above, but of course there wasn’t one. That was a foolish thought she’d had. The bear that went with that paw print would surely be too large to sleep on a tree branch.

William was checking nearby trees now for any other signs. “Nothing,” he said, and then seemed to come to a decision. “That’s enough of this foolishness. There’s work to be done.”

That meant William had decided Mattie had wasted his time with her information about the fox, and that if she didn’t do her chores exactly right the rest of the day she would pay for it.

Mattie thought of her sewing basket, filled with William's clothes that needed mending, and felt a little thrum of anxiety. She was not a natural seamstress. Her stitches were neat but she took a long time about them. William blamed Mattie's mother who, he said, "should have taught you the proper arts of a woman instead of leaving them to me."

Early in their marriage William had given her some ancient pattern books, their edges yellowed and frayed. By painstakingly following the directions, Mattie was able to slowly teach herself how to make and mend their clothes. She remembered spending many nights hunched over scraps of cloth, the tips of her fingers raw and bleeding, while William watched her in the flickering candlelight.

He always watched her, even when she thought he wasn't.

They started back toward the cabin, following their own boot prints in the snow. Mattie could tell from the hunch of William's shoulders that he was irritated. He hadn't been able to solve the mystery of the print and now he was realizing just how long they'd wasted on this fool's errand.

Because of me, Mattie thought resignedly. *Maybe I shouldn't have told him about the fox after all. But if I hadn't then I would have been in more trouble for taking too long checking the snares.*

There wasn't any correct answer for Mattie. There never was. All she could do was gnaw on her thoughts like a nervous little chipmunk.

A strange cry shattered the still air.

It wasn't quite a bear's roar, or a mountain lion's call, or an eagle's screech, but a nerve-shattering combination of all three, mixed with another sound—something almost, but not quite, human.

Only then did Mattie realize they'd heard no sounds since the call of the crows William had shooed away from the dead fox—that is, nothing except their own voices. No bird cries, or skittering of little things searching for one last nut for the winter. No crack of falling branches, no whisper of wind.

All the forest had been a hushed and waiting place, and she and William had fumbled into it like two clumsy bulls. She felt eyes on her then, the eyes of the trees and birds and squirrels and rabbits, eyes that watched in pity at the two foolish humans in their midst.

The cry sounded again. It echoed in the air, bouncing off the trees, making it impossible to tell exactly where it was coming from.

“William, we should hurry,” she said, tugging at his sleeve. “We shouldn't be out here.”

He'd stopped dead again when the first cry came, his body still but alert, searching for signs of his quarry. Now he brushed Mattie's hand away, too preoccupied to hurt her for presuming to tell him what he should do. That was almost always a punishable offense.

“Quiet,” he said in a low voice. “Get away from me so I can get a clear shot.”

He was going to try to kill it, whatever it was, and Mattie was certain now it wasn't a bear. No bear sounded like that. No bear acted the way the animal that made those prints acted. But if it wasn't a bear, then what was it?

Whatever the creature was, William would fail. It was too big for her husband to kill with a rifle. Even she, with her limited knowledge, could tell from a print in the snow.

Terror washed over her, cold and sure. What would happen to her if William were killed? She'd be all alone on the mountain. She didn't even know how to reach the nearest town, for she'd never been away from their cabin since they came here.

William took a few steps away from her, raising the rifle to his shoulder. “It's somewhere ahead of us. Stay behind me.”

She nodded. Her lips and tongue were numb—not with cold, but with fear. Her body shuddered underneath her coat.

Don't let anything happen to him, Lord. Don't let me be left alone.

Then she realized that if the giant bear-creature killed William, it would kill her, too.

Relief shot through her body like a jolt of lightning. No more trying and failing. No more questions without answers. No more dreams. No more pain.

Mattie walked in William's footsteps, calmer now. Whatever happened would be God's will, just as it had been

God's will for her to be chosen by William in the first place.

Branches cracked somewhere in front of them—many branches breaking in quick succession like a gun going off, *pop pop pop*.

Mattie glanced over her shoulder, a part of her expecting to discover the creature had dropped out of the sky and loomed behind them. But there was nothing behind, and nothing ahead, either, at least that they could see.

William crept forward for several more minutes, the rifle braced at his shoulder. For the third time that day he came to a sudden halt, and this time Mattie did run into him.

He was too distracted to scold her. "What in God's name?" Mattie peeked around his arm and gasped.

Before them was a scarlet pool of blood, sinking into the powdery snow. Something very large had been killed, and recently. There were no remains, however, and no sign of the thing that killed it. The only prints nearby were their own.

"It doesn't make any sense," William muttered.

Mattie tilted her head back, saw the bent branches overhead, and thought that perhaps it made more sense than William thought. But she wouldn't say that aloud. It was never a good idea for her to contradict him.

But I do wonder what it might be. Even if I'm not supposed to wonder about anything at all.

William was preoccupied for the remainder of the day. He appeared to hardly notice what Mattie did—and this was

certainly a blessing, since the only time he ever cared about her work was when she did it wrong.

He brooded all through supper, saying not a word, shoveling the rabbit stew into his mouth without seeming to taste it. After supper he stared into the fire while she carefully mended a ripped sleeve and a torn trouser hem and darned two pairs of socks.

She began to hope that he might forget about her daily duty, that he might be so lost in thought she would be allowed to go straight to sleep. But the moment she put away her needle and stretched her cramped fingers he seemed to waken.

His ice-chip eyes caught hers as sure as a rabbit in a snare. "A man has to have sons, Mattie."

She stood silently and went into the bedroom.

Mattie woke some hours later with the song she'd been trying to remember on her lips. *A dove sings . . .* she thought, but she couldn't catch the rest of it and it slipped away again.

William snored beside her. The noise must have woken her—it often did, though she'd never dare complain about it. She slowly climbed out of bed so as not to disturb him with sudden movement.

Mattie went into the main room of the cabin, closing the bedroom door behind her. The room was freezing. She hadn't stopped to put a dressing gown over her nightgown. She wrapped a quilt over her shoulders like a shawl. Her breath made a cold fog in front of her face.

She didn't feel tired anymore, though she knew she ought to sleep. There would be more work in the morning, and if she was tired or slow or clumsy then William would notice and . . .

And the same thing will happen that always happens, Mattie thought, tears pricking her eyes.

Once, when she was younger, Mattie asked why he had to hit her so often and so much. He'd hit her again for this impertinence and then explained that it was his duty as a man and her husband to discipline her, that he did it so she would learn the proper obedience of a wife.

Then he handed her the Bible and told her to read aloud from Ephesians.

She did, though there was blood in her mouth and her cheek swelled and tears streamed out of her right eye. "Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her."

He'd taken the Bible from her then and knelt before her, gently cradling her head in his big hands. "God wishes for you to obey me. I don't want to hurt you, Mattie. I get no pleasure from it. If you would only listen and perform your duties properly, I wouldn't have to. Do you understand?"

She nodded, even though she didn't, even though she

thought William should do some more contemplating on the part about husbands loving their wives.

He'd kissed her forehead and said, "I chose you out of all the girls in the world to be my bride. You're my special, special girl."

William didn't celebrate birthdays, and the days seemed to run into one another here, but Mattie tried to keep track of the years as best she could. She thought she was about twenty, maybe a little older. William was older than her, but that was because it was right and proper for an older man to guide his younger wife.

She went to the window that faced the woodpile and the storage shed. There was a long narrow table under the sill where Mattie prepared food and did other tasks. Earlier she'd skinned and dressed the rabbits there, all the while keeping a wary eye on William as he chopped wood.

Mattie kept a jug of water and a cup for drinking on one end of the table. There was a thin crust of ice on the water. She broke the crust with the handle of a spoon and poured out a little water. It was so cold it made her gasp.

She stared blindly out into the shadows of the forest. What would happen if she just pulled on her boots, opened the door and ran out into the night? William would never know. He slept so hard these days that he might not notice she was gone until hours from now. She might be able to make it as far as the town by then.

Mattie wasn't certain where the town was but surely she

could find it. It was at the bottom of the mountain, and William always managed to go there and back in the same day.

But . . . Mattie's thoughts stuttered to a halt, her momentary hope dying on the vine. The people of the town knew her husband. They would only send her back to William.

He had always told her that if she tried to run away they would return Mattie to him, for she was his property and they knew where she belonged.

Besides, Mattie thought hopelessly, you can't run away in just your nightgown and a blanket. You'll freeze to death.

The cry of the bear-creature came out of the woods again, distant but still close enough that she shrank from the window.

And if you don't freeze to death you'll get eaten by that thing.

It wasn't a bear. It didn't sound right, the way a bear sounded. But it almost didn't matter what it was. Mattie didn't need to see it to know it was a killer.

She knew she should go back to bed, that sometimes William woke up in the night and reached for her. If she wasn't present there would be hell to pay.

Her feet wouldn't move, though. She stayed there at the window until the first pink light of dawn showed above the treetops.

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