

BLACK
WOODS
BLUE
SKY

A Novel

EOWYN
IVEY

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING
AUTHOR OF *THE SNOW CHILD*

BY EOWYN IVEY

Black Woods, Blue Sky
To the Bright Edge of the World
The Snow Child





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A Novel

EOWYN IVEY

*Botanical illustrations by
Ruth Hulbert*



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Now are the woods all black, but still the sky is blue.

May you always see a blue sky overhead, my young friend;

*and then, even when the time comes, which is coming now for
me,*

*when the woods are all black, when night is fast falling, you will
be*

able to console yourself, as I am doing, by looking up to the sky.

—MARCEL PROUST, *Swann's Way* (translated by C. K. Scott Moncrieff)

PART ONE



FAIRY SLIPPER ORCHID
Calypso bulbosa

Chapter 1

Birdie knew her mistake as soon as she cracked open her eyes. She was wholly sick, like she had the flu or been clubbed all around her head and body and, in the confines of the one-room cabin, she was increasingly aware of her own stink, how her skin was emanating the odor of cigarette smoke, digested alcohol, and vomit. She slid her arm out from under her daughter's head, and Emaleen rolled onto her other side but didn't wake. Little Emaleen, with her messy blond hair and her warm, pink cheeks—Birdie wanted to cuddle with her and go back to sleep. But the pounding in her head was only getting worse. She eased into a sitting position on the side of the bed and slowly stood up. A cold sweat trickled down the small of her back and from her armpits. She put a hand on the wall when it felt like her knees might go out from under her. When she looked down, she saw she was still wearing her same blue jeans and T-shirt.

The Wolverine Lodge had been packed last night. A dozen or so of the regulars had driven from Alpine and Stone Creek, a couple of long-haul truckers had stopped for the night, and Charlie Coldfoot and his buddies had come out from Anchorage on their Harleys for the first ride of the season. Nearly twenty people crowded into the small roadside bar for no other reason than to chase away the darkness. The jukebox played Billy Idol and Emmylou Harris. Outside, the spring puddles had iced up and a light snow had fallen across the mountains, but Birdie remembered feeling on fire. Her hips brushed against the men's legs as she handed out shots of hard liquor and cold bottles of beer. Everything she'd said, everything she'd done, had been effortless and flawless, like she was a perfect flame dancing across the wooden tables, a touch of heat reflected in the men's faces. The music rose

up into her feet through the plank floor. She'd let Roy twirl her like a ballerina. Even Della had laughed. Every single one of them—the entire goddamned world—golden and beautiful.

It was tempting to blame it on Roy, but it wasn't a big deal, the cocaine. In fact, she'd hardly gotten a rush from it, so she and Roy had gone back a few more times. Each time they tumbled with laughter out of the bathroom, Della was watching them, unsmiling from behind the bar. Birdie remembered her tongue and nose going numb. Then even her teeth, so that her face felt like it belonged to someone else. It wasn't the coke that tripped her up, though, as much as the drinking. It was as if she had been granted a superpower—the ability to down tequila like it was water.

And that's when she'd made her mistake. She hadn't stopped. When she should have called it a night, counted her tips, and helped Della hustle everyone out of the bar, instead she had doubled down. True, she'd been goaded by Coldfoot or somebody calling her a lightweight, and the coke made it tricky to judge just how drunk she was getting. But the real problem was her bizarre sense of hope. Maybe, somehow, this time, she would be able to suspend herself in that perfect moment when you've had enough to fly, but not so much as to be sick with yourself.

In the cabin bathroom, Birdie put her lips to the faucet and drank several gulps of water and splashed some on her face. She needed a shower and a cup of hot coffee. First, she picked up her lighter and pack of cigarettes from the dresser and stepped outside in her bare feet. The single wooden step was cold and damp with dew. She folded her arms tightly against the chill as she smoked. After months of winter with no direct sunlight, the sun had finally risen high enough in the sky to shine down on the lodge. In all directions, the mountain peaks were sharp white with snow against the blue sky, but the air smelled green, like cottonwood buds and blades of grass and creek water.

Birdie put out the cigarette, went back inside, shoved her feet into her sneakers, and pulled on a sweatshirt. Emaleen was a heavy sleeper. She'd be out for another hour or two. Birdie closed the door quietly as she left.

The small guest cabins didn't have any storage space, so she kept some of their belongings in a back shed. Crammed in a corner, beside Emaleen's bicycle and sled, was the spinning rod that Grandpa Hank had given Birdie years ago. One eye had been duct-taped back onto the rod, the line was brittle with age, and the reel had a hitch in the mechanism. But in the beat-up tackle box, she found a few Mepps spinning lures still in their packages and a tangle of snap swivels. No matter how much her head hurt, Birdie always remembered how to tie a fisherman's knot. *Best cure for a hangover.* That's what Grandpa Hank had always said. Carrying the rod and tackle box, Birdie walked around the back of the other cabins and the lodge, past the picnic table and firepit. Della would still be in bed. Clancy was probably just now brewing coffee and heating up the grill for breakfast in the cafe.

The trail into the woods led to Syd's place, but she wouldn't pester him this early in the morning. Instead she followed it a short way through the trees, and then she left the path and set out for the creek down in the ravine. The summer birds—thrushes and warblers and ruby-crowned kinglets—were returning after the winter, and they fluttered and trilled through the birch and spruce boughs. She had to climb over a storm-fallen spruce tree, but the wild grass was still low to the ground and the devil's clubs hadn't grown to their full, spiny height, so the walking was fairly easy. When the mosquitoes found her, she pulled the hood of her sweatshirt over her head. Even with her ears covered, she began to hear the murmur of the creek before she could see it.

It was only as she was fighting her way through an alder thicket that she realized she'd forgotten her rifle. She'd fallen out of the habit of carrying it on her walks because there was no need in the winter. But the bears would be out of their dens now. She stood quietly in the dense brush, held her breath, and listened. There was only birdsong and the creek, and farther away, the low, steady roar of the Wolverine River.

"Hey bear!" she shouted and clapped her hands. Just in case.

Most often, bears behaved the way you expected, when they came around at all. They avoided people and, when they heard your voice or caught your

scent, they gave you a wide berth. Black bears were often spotted on the hillsides, grazing among the soapberry bushes. The more mischievous among them would raid the garbage bins behind the lodge. A shot fired into the air was usually enough to chase them off. The larger, more fearsome grizzly bears were rarely seen, leaving only paw prints or piles of scat in the woods. But now and then, a bear would surprise you. They were too smart to be entirely predictable. Jules lived just down the highway from the lodge, and several years ago a black bear had stalked her as she walked along the power line picking cranberries. Whenever she turned her back to the animal, it loped more quickly at her. When she faced it, it stopped and paced side to side, as if trying to build up the courage to go after its prey. This went on for more than a mile, and Jules said it was like a hellish version of red light, green light, with the bear steadily gaining on her. She was only saved because Stan heard her shouts from his house and came out with his .375 and shot the bear.

Jules had told and retold that story, and others would pipe up with their own. It was a favorite pastime at the lodge, telling bear stories. Part of the fun was frightening the wide-eyed tourists who might overhear, but in truth, you were an idiot to not be somewhat afraid. The most terrifying stories were about grizzly bears, because of their astonishing size and force. Hunters told of grizzlies circling their camps at night, huffing and clacking their teeth in displays of aggression. A surveyor said it was like being hit by a silent freight train when he was attacked by a sow near Alpine. He still bore the scars on the back of his neck and scalp where the bear had clamped down on his head and shook him fiercely, before running off with her two cubs. Just last summer, on the tundra north of the Wolverine Lodge, a grizzly bear had dragged an elderly man from his tent, killed him, and partially eaten him before caching the body under a pile of moss and dirt.

All these stories ran through Birdie's mind as she waited and listened. But how many times had she hiked through these woods and seen nothing more than a spruce grouse or porcupine? Not once had she come across a bear

near the creek. In her entire life growing up along the Wolverine River, she had seen only a few, mostly at a distance through binoculars.

Just 'cause you don't see them, doesn't mean they aren't around, Grandma Jo would say. And she'd argue an alder-choked creek is the worst kind of place to be without a firearm. The brush is too dense to see far and sounds are drowned out by rushing water. Nothing is more dangerous than a startled bear in close quarters.

If Birdie turned around and hiked all the way back to get her rifle, though, the morning would be lost. Emaleen would wake up. Birdie would take a shower, then they'd go over to the lodge cafe for breakfast. In no time at all, Birdie would be back at the bar for the evening shift, her head still hurting and her brain in a sick fog.

Birdie pushed on. Once she'd gotten clear of the alders, the trees were sparse and the land gently eased down to the creek. The fiddlehead ferns were just beginning to uncoil. The lady ferns on their thin stems seemed to float like pale green lace just a few inches above the ground. If there was a bear nearby, she would be able to see it.

The creek, which flowed out of Juniper Lake and into the Wolverine River, was narrow enough for Birdie to leap from one side to the other as she followed it downstream. A month ago, there had still been ice at the water's edge and snowdrifts along the banks. That was all gone now, and among the moss and boulders, tiny white-and-purple bog violets bloomed.

Downstream Birdie spotted the old cottonwood that had fallen across the creek long ago. The water pooled deep and dark behind the log and then cascaded over the wide trunk. This had always been the best fishing hole, but the rainbows overwintered in Juniper Lake, and Birdie wasn't sure they were in the creek yet. She hadn't noticed any swimming in the shallows.

Birdie crouched on the bank and opened the tackle box. She found the hunting knife she kept in there, and she used it to cut the old, rusty swivel off the line. After she tied on a new swivel and clipped on a lure, she walked out onto the cottonwood log, careful to not slip on the wet, rotten wood where the bark had fallen away.

Her first casts were duds. One caught on a willow bush until she yanked it free, and the other smacked clumsily into the water directly in front of her. She reeled in again, flipped the bail, and tried an underhand cast, and the lure dropped perfectly into the far eddy. She let it sink for a few counts, gave a tug to get the spinner working, and reeled slowly. She could feel the lure bumping against something, but it was probably only snagging on a sunken tree limb or the bottom of the creek.

She varied where she cast and how fast she reeled. She knew she might be fishing an empty hole, but it didn't matter. It was enough to be out here, to let the sunlight and the green of the forest, the sound of the creek and the summer birdsong, wash over her. What if she could stay out here all day, walking along the bank and casting her line, not thinking about anything but finding the trout? Moss under her feet, birch branches and blue sky over her head, no one demanding anything of her. Why couldn't that be her real life? But it wasn't. Eventually she'd have to go back and face Della, who would still be pissed off about last night. And she would need to call Grandma Jo to see if she could watch Emaleen because it was Saturday and the bar would be busy again. Birdie should have asked sooner, but lately Jo seemed put out whenever Birdie needed something. To make it worse, Jo would have to drive to the lodge and pick up Emaleen. Birdie's car was still broken down, something with the transmission that was going to cost more money than she made in a month. She found herself doing the math for the umpteenth time. Twice-a-month paycheck plus her average tips, minus monthly expenses and the pile of fees she still owed at the bank for the checks she bounced a while back—if she had to pay for childcare, she might as well quit her job and go on food stamps. As it was, even if she scrimped here and saved there, she couldn't see being able to get the car fixed until fall. She was sick of begging rides and money, shuffling Emaleen around like a piece of luggage. It was like trying to win a dull, monotonous game someone else had invented, a game that, in the end, didn't matter one lick. The drinking and partying, she knew it was stupid, but it was just a way to feel some excitement at being alive.

As soon as your thoughts drift away, that's when the fish strikes. Birdie felt a sudden tug on the line, and as she yanked upward on the rod, her right foot slipped, so that she nearly fell. She caught her balance and continued to reel, letting the trout take line when it swam hard away from her. The fish leapt and splashed, and then there was nothing. She was sure it had broken the old line, but as she reeled, she saw the lure dragging across the water. She just hadn't set it well enough. She reeled all the way in, untangled the line from the lure, and checked that the hook hadn't been bent or damaged. She cast again.

In that moment, the ache in her head began to fade and that other sensation—the mess of guilt and resentment that made her want to gasp and thrash and fight—vanished. It was as if her mind narrowed to a point that ran down the clear line and into the cool, dark water. She cast to the far side of the creek again and again, poised to feel any bump or tug.

And then she had it. This one was bigger than the first, and it bent the tip of her rod and took out line, but she worked it lightly, pulling up, reeling down, keeping the line taut. *Don't horse it in*, Grandpa Hank would say. *You got it, you got it.*

Birdie jumped down from the log and carefully reeled the fish up onto the bank. It was a beautiful rainbow trout, easily eighteen inches long and in its vibrant spawning colors—a dark, iridescent greenish brown with black flecks that reminded Birdie of hazel eyes, and a distinct blush stripe down its sides. The hook came easily out of its mouth. She could slip the trout back into the creek and let it swim away, but she would keep it. It'd been a long time since she and Emaleen had fresh trout to eat.

She took the hunting knife and stabbed the trout through the top of the head to kill it, then crouched at the water's edge to clean the fish. As she pulled out the entrails, the mosquitoes and gnats began to swarm. She wiped them away from her face with the back of her hand. Inside the trout's body cavity, she ran her thumb along the backbone to remove the dark-red kidney, and then she rinsed the fish and her hands clean of the blood.

She glanced at her watch. It'd been nearly two hours. She needed to get back. She hadn't brought a backpack or sack to carry the fish—she hadn't truly expected to catch anything—so she hooked an index finger through the gill plate and out its bony mouth, and with the same hand picked up the fishing rod, and with the other the tackle box. She pictured sneaking into the cabin and holding the trout's cold lips to Emaleen's cheek as she slept. Emaleen would wake with a gasp. *Hey, Sleeping Beauty*, Birdie would say, *you're going to turn into a frog now*, and Emaleen would laugh. *No, Mommy. You're all mixed up. A prince! A prince! That's who kisses Sleeping Beauty.*

But what about the frog?

Ummm, you have to, you have to kiss it and then maybe he's a prince?

See! So we should give him a kiss, don't you think? And she'd hold the trout up to Emaleen's face again, and Emaleen would wrinkle her nose and shake her head and giggle.

Okay, okay, we don't have to kiss him. How about we eat him for lunch instead? Maybe Clancy will cook it up for us? And Emaleen would cheer.

Partway into the alder thicket, the tip of the fishing rod caught in the bushes ahead of Birdie. She'd forgotten to carry it backward, the way Grandpa Hank had taught her, with the tip following her through the brush. As she tried to pull it free, the line wrapped around the end of a branch. She set down the trout and the tackle box and began to untangle it, swearing quietly as she worked.

When she was done and she bent to pick up the tackle box, the sound of breaking branches continued. Something large was moving through the alders toward her.

Before she could decide to run or yell, a man appeared out of the bushes. It was Arthur Neilsen. He looked just as startled, and when he tried to step back, he stumbled over a low alder bough and nearly fell.

Birdie laughed. "Scared the hell out of each other, didn't we?"

He gave no reassuring laugh or smile and continued to look as if he wanted to flee in the opposite direction. He was a big man, well over six feet,

but he'd leaned out since Birdie had seen him last fall. His choppy, golden hair looked like he'd cut it himself with a dull blade, and his beard was full, except where a deep scar ran down the side of his head and cheek. All that remained of his ear on that side was a small flap. Maybe because of the disfigurement, or his awkward behavior and strange way of speaking, people tended to shy away from Arthur. Birdie had always been more curious than anything.

Arthur looked down at the fish and moved closer. "The trout," he said. "I come here to see if they are in the creek again."

"Yeah, me too. I thought I might be too early, but I ended up catching two. Lost the first one." She picked up the gutted trout and tried to wipe away the leaves and grass that had stuck to its drying skin.

"Got this one, though." She held it up for him to see, and his expression took on an intensity, like a man moving in for a kiss, or a cat winding up to lunge at a mouse. Birdie became aware of how deep they were in the woods, how if anything went wrong out here, no one would hear her shouts.

"Okey dokey," she said with a little laugh. "Well, I'd better get back. Everybody's expecting me."

He tried to step out of her way but there was no room in the tight bushes. As she brushed against him, she was fairly certain she heard him take a sharp breath in through his nose, as if he were sniffing her.

Birdie walked quickly, looking back over her shoulder. Once she saw that he was continuing toward the creek, she called out, "Good luck fishing!" A few strides later, though, she felt stupid for saying it—he hadn't been carrying any fishing gear.