



Rebecca Upjohn

The Last Loon



ORCA YOUNG READERS



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REBECCA UPJOHN

ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS

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Summary: When city-boy Evan realizes that a loon is about to die in the middle of a fast-freezing lake near his aunt's cottage, he decides to rescue it, risking his own life in the process.



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CHAPTER 1

Alone in the Wilderness

The sound of Mom's car faded into the freezing wind as she drove away. I still couldn't believe she'd left me here. A zillion miles from anywhere. Alone.

I wanted to stand on the dirt track until Dad picked me up again. But Dad was in the Northwest Territories at the diamond mine. He wouldn't be back until his two-week shift was over.

"Come on in, Evan," said Aunt Mag. "You must be hungry after your trip. Boys are always hungry." She strode away. I didn't have any choice. I followed.

Okay, so I wasn't exactly alone. I was with my aunt. But I barely knew her. And she had a shady past. She'd been in jail. I was sure that's why she lived so far from civilization. Dad said she was a bit loony.

I guess he can say that because he's her brother. When I said it to Mom, though, she got mad.

"Evan," Mom said, "just because someone marches to their own drummer, doesn't mean there is anything wrong with them." Then she said that being up here with Aunt Mag would be good for me. Whenever she says stuff like that, I know I won't be having any fun.

Mom could have taken me with her to England. She just didn't want to. She'd said she couldn't look after me and Granny at the same time. Especially after my recent behavior. I asked her why Granny couldn't stay in the hospital and rest her hip until after Christmas. Mom got all squinchy around the eyes, the way she does when she's really steamed.

"You're eleven years old, for goodness sake," she'd said. "It's time you thought of someone other than yourself, Evan Kemp!" When she adds my last name, I know I'm in trouble. And so here I was at Aunt Mag's for the whole Christmas break.

My aunt disappeared into her house. I paused and looked around. I'd only been here once before, when I was really little, so I didn't remember much. The house was small, more like a cottage, with light brown sides and a red metal roof. It stood in a clearing

surrounded by a forest of giant trees. Not too far from the house, six big blue panels tilted to the sky. I got a bad feeling in my stomach looking at them. Was she trying to communicate with aliens? What if she *was* an alien?

There was also a tall pole with a little propeller on the top whirling in the wind. A windmill? What the heck was that for? I remembered Dad saying that Aunt Mag lived off the grid. It had something to do with how you got your electricity, but I wasn't paying too much attention at the time. Now I wish I had.

A Canadian flag flapped on a flagpole by the door. At least that was normal. The trees at the edge of the clearing shook their shaggy selves, and something in the forest creaked. I shivered. The forest was dark and eerie, perfect for an ex-con avoiding the eyes of the law. I heard a whooshing noise beyond the house. I could see water through the trees. I had forgotten that Aunt Mag lived on a lake. I hated lakes. The water was always cold, and creepy things lived there. Things that wriggled and squished and brushed up against you when you went swimming. Not that I planned to have anything to do with this lake anyway. It was way too cold for swimming. I shuddered and ran for the house.



CHAPTER 2

Respect

I shoved open the door and walked into a small room with a tile floor. On my left was the glass wall of a sunroom crammed with plants. It looked like a jungle. I guess my aunt didn't have enough forest outside. She needed it inside too. A couple of raggedy coats and a parka with duct-tape patches hung on hooks on the other wall. Gloves and mitts lay on a bench made from branches. Lined up under the coats were boots and shoes. It was all disgustingly tidy. I hung my jacket next to the parka and shoved my boots in with the other ones. I found Aunt Mag in the kitchen, peering at the lake through an enormous pair of binoculars. She didn't notice me.

“Aunt Mag?” I said.

She jumped. “Crikey, Evan! Don’t sneak up on me like that. You’ll give me a heart attack.” She waved me over to the table.

I went and sat down. “What were you looking at?”

She looked back out the big window. “There’s a loon out there. It’s been hanging around the last few weeks. Usually they’ve all migrated by now, but the weather has been so warm this fall.” She shook her head and frowned. “I’m a bit worried that the lake will freeze over suddenly and the loon won’t have enough open water to take off.” She offered me the binoculars.

“A loon?” I said.

“You know. The bird on the one-dollar coin? That’s why it’s called a loonie.”

Duh! Everyone knew that. But why was she so interested? I took a look. Everything was blurry. I felt Aunt Mag’s hands helping me adjust the focus. A black bird with a white band around its neck and a pattern of white spots on its back jumped into view. Its head turned and I could see it better. It had a white chest, a long sharp bill and... “Whoa! Red eyes?” I lowered the binoculars and stared at my aunt.

Aunt Mag grinned at my surprise. “Some researchers think the red eyes may be a type of camouflage for loons underwater.”

“To hide from lake monsters?”

She laughed. “More so they can sneak up on their food.”

“Oh,” I said.

“Also,” said Aunt Mag, “only adult loons have red eyes and usually only in breeding season, so we think it may be something to do with breeding too. We don’t really know for sure. It’s kind of exciting.”

I glued my eyes back to the binoculars and watched the bird bob on the waves. Then it dipped headfirst into the water and slipped out of sight. I watched and waited, but there was no sign of it. “Where is it?”

“It’s probably diving for food,” Aunt Mag said. “It can stay under for a minute or so, and it may come up quite far from where it dove. Loons are master swimmers. And they can be pretty tricky if they don’t want to be seen.”

I scanned the water. Nothing.

Maybe this one had learned how to turn invisible. That’s what you get in the wilderness. You think you’re going to see moose and beavers and stuff,

but all you get are bug bites and boredom. Grown-ups get excited if they find animal poop. Proof that there is wildlife around, my dad says, even if you can't see it. I didn't need the wilderness to see animal poop. There is plenty of it in the park near my house. Same with birds. I could see them any day at home. I put down the binoculars.

"Wish I knew why it was hanging around," Aunt Mag muttered. Then she looked at me. "I'm forgetting myself. You must be starved. I made some soup."

She brought two steaming bowls to the table.

I looked down and swallowed hard. It was full of mystery stuff, all mooshed together. No way I was eating that.

Aunt Mag frowned. "What's the trouble?"

"I don't like this kind of soup," I said. Then I remembered Mom telling me a million times to be polite at Aunt Mag's, so I added, "Thank you."

Aunt Mag's eyebrows snapped down. "How on earth do you know? You haven't tasted it."

"I know," I explained. "I can tell."

"I see," she said. She nodded and then shrugged. "Okay." She took my bowl to the counter and came back to the table. She continued eating.

I couldn't believe it. Was she going to starve me? "Mom usually gives me pizza or pasta if there's something I don't like," I said.

"Your mom isn't here," said Aunt Mag.

That did it. Forget being polite. I jumped up. "No, she isn't, but that isn't my fault! I didn't ask to come here. I didn't want to. But since my parents decided to abandon me, I'm stuck here. If you make me eat your soup, I'll barf. Is that what you want?" I ran to the mudroom, grabbed my jacket and bolted outside.

"Evan—" I heard Aunt Mag call. I slammed the door with all my might. The whole house shook. I ran down the steps and along a stone path to the sandy beach, where I yelled at the sky. I snatched up some rocks by the shore and heaved one after the other into the water, throwing and throwing until my arm hurt.

I found an old wooden chair on the beach and flopped down into it. The wind slapped spray into the air. The waves couldn't make up their minds which way to go. I felt the cold air poking its nasty fingers through my jacket. But I couldn't go back inside.

Aunt Mag arrived and sat down on the ground next to me. "This is a good spot to think," she said.

I didn't answer.

She turned a little to face me. "Look, Evan. Your mom and dad didn't abandon you. Your grandmother didn't mean to break her hip. And your dad is new at the mine so he's got the shift no one else wants. Your folks just figured that you'd have more fun and be happier up here than if you stayed in the city with a new sitter." She stopped.

I knew what she wasn't saying. I had heard Mom talking to her on the phone. "I don't know what to do with him, Mag. He keeps getting sent home from school. He isn't a bad kid, he's just...well, he has a lot of energy. He gets bored and that's when he gets into trouble." And that's why Mom wouldn't take me to England. I don't mean to get into trouble. I only went on the school roof because the caretaker wouldn't get the ball down. It wasn't really dangerous. Unfortunately the principal didn't agree. And Mom didn't agree. And even though Dad laughed about it, he said I had to show some respect.

Respect. As if they respected what I wanted.

Aunt Mag sighed. "I know you didn't want to come here."

Yeah, she had that right. I stared out at the lake.

“We’re having a bonfire on the beach tomorrow night,” she said. “The neighbors are coming. They have a boy about your age, named Cedar. Once you meet some other kids, I’m sure things will be better.”

A bonfire sounded pretty cool, but I wasn’t about to admit it to Aunt Mag.

She waited for a moment; then she stood up. “Come on up when you’re ready.”

I sat there until she disappeared. I was about to follow her when the loony bird popped up in the cove. It glided back and forth as if it was looking at me. Then it came closer. It was bigger than I first thought, way bigger. It slipped through the water, checking me out. It was close enough that I could really see its weird red eyes. Cool and creepy at the same time.

“Hello, bird,” I called.

It turned and dove. I waited for it to come back up, but it didn’t. I scanned the whole lake, but it never showed. Great. Abandoned by a bird too.