

BLUE NORTHER

Eric Wilder

Outside, dark clouds gathered on the horizon. Inside, Linda Stevenson watched her husband pace ever-widening circles around their living room floor. Despite her worried glances out the window, she held her tongue until husband Ted noticed her watchful gaze. Then she could take it no longer.

"Please don't go out tonight," she said. "The weather's awful and getting worse by the minute."

Ted stopped pacing and said, "No option. Big meeting at the bank."

"At seven on Friday night? Really Daddy."

Both Ted and Linda glanced up at their daughter Britta who was staring back at them from the top of the stairs. She was naked except for a skimpy pair of lace panties, covering her bare breasts with her hands.

Glancing first at Ted and then at her precocious daughter, Linda said, "Really, Britta! Put some clothes on."

Britta stuck out her tongue and pranced back to her room, returning with one of her father's starched white shirts over the panties.

"Hot date, Dad?"

Britta's jesting implication caused Linda's gaze to return to the pot on the stove. Ted didn't seem to mind.

Grinning, he said, "I have an important meeting at the bank, young lady."

"Even Gramps wouldn't call a meeting on a night like this." "Your grandfather may own the bank but he doesn't run it any longer. I'm president now and I called the meeting."

"Whoa!" Britta squealed.

"Have you done your homework?" Linda said, sternly.

"It's Friday, Mom. I have a date with Freddy."

"You can't go out on a night like this. I won't allow it."

Britta eyed her father and said, "Dad?"

Again Ted glanced at his watch before replying. After winking first at his daughter, he said, "Britta's seventeen. We have to allow her some freedom."

"Thanks Dad," Britta said, blowing him a kiss and disappearing into her room before Linda could protest.

Ted cracked the curtain and peeked out the window, continuing to pace.

"Fix me a drink?"

Linda swallowed her annoyance on the way to the liquor cabinet, pouring a drink for herself as well to help steel her advancing case of nerves. Then, in supplication, she

gently touched Ted's hand as she handed him his drink.

"You know I don't sleep well when you're not here."

Ted pulled away, ignoring her distress. "How did the weather turn so bad, so fast? The sun was out when I left the office."

Linda drew a crack in the living room curtains and gazed at out at drifting snow, already beginning to pile up against fences and houses.

"It's a blue norther," Linda said. "They say they can turn a hot day cold in the blink of an eye."

"Amen to that," Ted said, saluting the snow with a raised glass.

"You see how bad it's getting. Surely, you're not going out in this," Linda said.

Ted didn't bother answering and she turned away from his cold stare and returned to the kitchen. Linda was different than her daughter, soft and milky smooth compared with Britta's lithe body and all-over tan. Long frosted hair draped Linda's shoulders; Britta's was cropped short and surfer blonde. Their differences went even further.

Britta was a chatterbox. Not so, Linda. Around most people, she was introverted to the point of angering Ted. He inwardly resented her icy translucence that concealed her real feelings like a frozen cloak.

"At least eat something before you go," she said.

Rattling ice in his glass, Ted just stared out the window. "If the weather doesn't get any worse."

Ring of Britta's upstairs phone interrupted their conversation and in a minute

she returned to the banister. "I'm staying home tonight after all. Freddy's battery is dead."

"Good," Linda said.

An unexpected knock at the front door halted her in mid-sentence. Ted glanced at Linda for an explanation, then opened the door. He found a tall stranger waiting in the doorway, his fur-lined jacket pulled tightly around his neck.

"Can I help you?" Ted said.

"Car broke down about a mile down the road. Mind if I use your phone?"

"Let the poor man in and close the door," Linda called from the kitchen. "You'll lower the inside temperature twenty degrees."

Moving aside, Ted watched the man remove his gloves and blow on his hands to warm them. Linda rushed into the living room to see who it was, any distress she may have had instantly calmed by the young man's clean-cut good looks. She took his coat and pointed to the kitchen.

"Go stand by the stove. You look half frozen."

The man's dark eyes transfixed Linda, but Britta shattered her concentration when she hurried downstairs to satisfy her own curiosity.

"Now I'm glad Freddy has a dead battery," she said, staring wantonly at the stranger.

Ted frowned and said, "Britta, put some clothes on."

Britta pouted but trotted back upstairs as Linda followed the stranger into the kitchen.

"Cup of coffee or hot tea?"

Looking at her nearly empty glass, he said, "I'd rather have what you're drinking."

Linda stared at the floor, smiling nervously. But despite her nervousness, she was somehow deeply attracted to the stranger. Feeling suddenly foolish, she hurried to the liquor cabinet to fix him a drink.

"The phone is by the coffee pot," she said as she handed him the scotch and water.

Without taking his eyes off her, the storm stranger raised his glass in a silent toast, bringing a flush to Linda's face, then picked up the receiver.

"Phone's dead."

"That can't be," Linda said, concern replacing her facial flush. "Britta just had a call."

"On her own line," Ted said, coming up from behind.

Linda jumped at her husband's unexpected appearance. Regaining her composure, she called upstairs.

"Britta, is your phone working?"

"No -- it's dead."

Apparently gratified by their inability to assist the stranger, Ted smiled and said, "Guess you're out of luck. Sorry we can't help."

Linda frowned at Ted's thinly disguised animosity as Britta called from the banister, "Dad can take him into town when he goes. Invite the poor man to dinner."

Linda said, "Pardon my rudeness. Will you have dinner with us?"

"Why not?" he said, before Ted could protest.

Again, Linda felt her neck grow warm. "Then make yourself comfortable in the living room. The pot roast is almost ready."

When the stranger smiled, Linda's face flushed again. This time she noticed Ted's frown and quickly looked away.

"How rude of me not to introduce ourselves. I'm Linda Stevenson and this is my husband Ted. The sassy teen is my daughter, Britta."

Grudgingly, Ted shook the man's hand. For an extra moment, the man continued to stare at her, refusing to let go of her hand.

"I'm Dan Savage," he finally said.

"I'm going upstairs to listen to the weather band," Ted said, ignoring the obvious eye contact between his wife and the handsome young man.

"Well," Linda said, embarrassed but unable to move. "Guess we'll soon find out about the highways. Dinner won't be long."

Dan Savage let go of her hand and went into the living room. Linda soon heard the rattling thump of logs being added to the barren fireplace and peeked through the door, watching him from behind until he felt her gaze.

"Thought I'd heat things up a little."

Before Linda could reply, Ted rushed down the stairs, already dressed in coat and gloves.

"Can't wait for dinner. Gotta go now. Storm's worsening by the minute."

Dan Savage hurriedly placed the last log in the fireplace and grabbed his coat hanging by the front door. Before he could button up, Britta came rushing up from the basement.

"Wait, Daddy. We have a broken pipe downstairs. If we don't do something now, we'll have a frozen house before morning."

"Dammit!" Ted said, banging the door with his clenched fist.

"No need missing your appointment," Dan Savage said. "I'm handy with pipes. I'll fix it for you."

"Fantastic! You go ahead, Dad," Britta said. "Mr. Savage can fix the pipe and stay the night in the spare bedroom. You can give him a ride to town tomorrow."

Ted didn't answer but his dark expression revealed an intense inner turmoil. Then he studied the cut of Savage's clothes and hair, searching to assess the young man's trustworthiness. In doing so, he disregarded Linda's unmistakable look of concern.

"Sounds like a good idea to me," he finally said.

Without waiting for a protest Ted kissed Britta's forehead, ignoring Linda's tightly folded arms as he went out the front door without a backward glance.

"Show me the pipe," Savage said, interrupting the moment.

Eagerly grabbing Savage's hand, Britta led him to the basement. Linda watched them leave the room. Despite her concern, she found she was experiencing an almost forgotten flush of sexual excitement. The feeling embarrassed her as she returned to the kitchen, trying to focus her thoughts on cooking dinner.

Despite her concern, Linda soon found she could not shake her growing sexual fantasy for the young man. Succumbing to the feeling, she fixed him another drink and took it to the basement.

When her eyes adjusted to the dim fluorescent glow, she saw Dan Savage, stripped to the waist, making final adjustments on an exposed pipe. Britta was also watching Savage's every move. She was sitting on the floor, her arms wrapped around her knees, licking her freshly glossed lips.

"Thought you might need this," Linda said.

Sweat trickled down Savage's muscled rib cage. Unnerved by his physical presence, Linda almost spilled the drink.

"Thanks," he said with a knowing grin.

Again their eyes locked. Linda admired Savage's angular face and brown curly hair. Six inches taller and at least fifteen years younger than herself, the young man had dark, brooding eyes. Britta was also staring, watching intently as Dan Savage tipped back the glass, rubbing its icy surface across his forehead. Then he licked his lips and put away the wrench.

"Fixed," he said.

"You are so good!" Britta squealed, wrapping her slender arms around his neck.

Linda's face flushed, realizing the emotion she felt was jealousy as she watched Savage and her daughter embrace.

"Follow me, Mr. Savage, I'll show you the guest bedroom. You can shower and I'll

find some of my husband's clothes for you to wear."

"Call me Dan," he said, untangling himself from Britta and following Linda up the stairs, into the spare bedroom.

"Towels are in the cabinet, Dan. Take your time."

Linda waited in the kitchen for twenty minutes before selecting shirt and pants from her husband's closet. Returning to the guest bedroom, she tapped lightly on the wall, then entered without waiting for a reply.

Through the partially opened bathroom door, she heard Savage humming a discordant tune to himself. She grasped the handle and eased it open, senses sharpened as she stared into the steam-filled room, her eyes finally focusing on Savage's hazy shape.

Standing with his back to Linda, Savage studied his image in the mirror, shaving cream on his face and razor in his hand. For a long moment Linda watched, riveted by his naked backside. Until he stopped humming and turned around, grinning and seemingly unmindful of his nakedness.

"See something you like?"

Linda's face flushed bright red. After hurriedly placing Ted's clothes in a chair by the door, she backed out of the bathroom.

"Dinner in ten minutes," she said, ignoring his blatantly sexual remark.

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Twenty minutes later Dan Savage, dressed in Ted's clothes and making no apologies, joined Linda in the kitchen. Linda's face flushed when he smiled at her.

"Britta," she called. "Dinner is ready."

Wearing a sexy blouse and tight leather skirt, Linda's pretty daughter appeared. Too sexy for Friday night with mom, Linda thought, raising an eyebrow.

"Where you from, Dan?" asked Britta.

"Here and there," he said, ladling corn from a bowl. "Mostly there."

His reply made Britta giggle and Linda smile. Dan Savage regaled them with tales of the road as they ate. When they finished eating, Britta went upstairs to wash her hair and Savage helped Linda with the dishes. After straightening the kitchen, they went into the living room to bask in the warmth of the fireplace.

"Does your husband always have meetings on Friday night?"

Savage's question brought a nervous titter from Linda and she said, "I've wondered that myself."

"And what's the answer?"

Reclining on the couch with bent knees, she rested her head in her palms. The posture caused her skirt to slip down her thighs and she soon realized Savage was looking down her dress. More than looking. He was staring. She sat up abruptly.

"You didn't answer my question," Savage said, grinning.

Linda's face was on fire, but the fire felt good and she realized she didn't want it quenched. "Britta suggests he's having an affair," she said, looking away from Savage's glance but unable to suppress her own grin.

"Is he?"

Staring again into his mesmerizing eyes, she said, "Yes. I'll get you a robe and a

pair of Ted's pajamas."

Dan Savage stretched out on the couch until she returned.

"You're bigger than Ted," she said, handing him the robe and pajamas.

"Your husband has excellent taste," he said, winking as he climbed the stairs to the bedroom. "I'll put these on. See you later."

Savage's barely disguised implication seared Linda's soul and she flushed with sexual warmth. She waited ten minutes and when he didn't return downstairs, she went to her own bedroom, shutting the door but leaving it unlocked.

After an hour had passed, Linda tried to sleep but her body blazed as she rolled beneath the sheets. Sometime later, still wide awake, she went to the window, drawing open the curtains. The storm had arrived and she stood at the window, touching herself as she watched snow pile up against the house. Then she returned to bed, still filled with unbridled lust and unable or unwilling to stop fantasizing about Dan Savage.

In the midst of the storm, perspiration beaded Linda's forehead. Like green wood in a fireplace, she smoldered, ready to explode, soon slipping into a restless, multi-colored dream:

Again she stood in the bathroom with Dan Savage; this time they were both naked. Savage extended his hand and Linda moved toward him. When he touched her breast, the sensual caress caused her to awake. She found herself sweating, tangled in the sheets and desperately needing a drink.

Linda didn't bother with her robe and slippers as she went to the kitchen for a

glass of ice water. She found something amiss along the way -- Ted's office, its door gaping open. Peering inside, she switched on the desk lamp. Papers lay scattered on the floor like drifts of snow. Ted's heavy floor safe stood open and empty. With trembling fingertips to stifle a scream, she touched her open mouth.

"My God!"

When Linda discovered Ted's gun was missing from its usual spot in the desk, her hands began to shake. Despite warmth of the house, she shivered and hurried upstairs, halting outside the guest bedroom, trying desperately to decide what to do. Grasping the doorknob, she pushed it open, almost fainting when she heard the unmistakable sounds of love-making.

Not only had the brazen stranger stolen their money and jewels. Now he was raping Britta under their very roof. Impulsively, Linda reached for the light switch.

"Leave my daughter alone, you monster!"

Britta sat bolt upright, resolute shock on her pretty face. Dan Savage grinned back at her, bringing a gasp of distressed comprehension to her already horrified expression.

"Mother, how could you?" Britta said, beginning to cry.

"Get out of that bed," Linda yelled. "Now!"

Grabbing Britta's arm, she yanked her to the floor. Britta curled up in a ball in the corner to hide her nudity. This time, Linda screamed at the stranger.

"Thief! How could you rob us and then rape my daughter?"

"You kidding me, lady? The little bitch loves it."

"You liar."

Hot with emotion, Linda threw herself at him, scratching and flailing with arms and fists as Savage deftly blocked her blows. Then he slapped her and shoved her against the wall. Linda sank to the floor, wiping tears from her eyes and blood from a split lip.

Britta's sobbing moans came from deep within her chest as she lay crumpled in a naked heap beside the bed. No longer smiling, Savage wiped blood from three parallel scratches on his face. Linda took the opportunity to crawl to her daughter. When she tried to put her hands on her shoulders, Britta wrenched away from her grasp.

"How could you do this to me?" Britta said, her voice low and filled with barely subdued ire.

"Britta, you don't understand. This man is not who he claims. He's a thief."

"You did this because you want him for yourself," Britta said, her tears returning.

"That's not true."

"I hate you," Britta cried, springing up from the floor. "I hate you just like Daddy hates you."

Slamming the door behind her, Britta hurriedly exited the room as Linda's face flushed with hopelessness. Then she caught her breath, glaring at the thief on the bed.

"Get out of here, or I'll call the police."

Savage only laughed and it chilled her. "Phone's dead. Remember?"

Linda reached for the phone. "You cut the line, didn't you?"

Savage didn't answer.

"How did you know about the money and jewels we keep in the house?"

Laughing again, Savage said, "Maybe you should ask your lovely daughter about that."

Linda froze. "What do you mean?"

"You think I just met Britta tonight. We've been going at it like cats in heat for a month, now. We're going to take the money and blow this state."

"Liar."

"Am I? Surely you know I cut the phone line, but how do you think I managed the broken pipe in the basement?"

Feeling dizzy, Linda sank slowly to the dark carpet, senses floating just above the edge of reality. After watching him dress, she followed him out of the bedroom and down the stairs. There they found Britta, suitcase packed, dressed for the storm. Savage grabbed his coat from the closet, took the suitcase and opened the front door. Icy wind quickly filled the hallway with blowing snow.

"Stop it! Where do you think you're going?" Linda demanded, grabbing Britta's elbow.

"Away from you," Britta replied angrily, shaking loose from her grasp.

"Please Britta," Linda pleaded. "You can't leave like this. What will I tell your father?"

Pivoting on her heels, Britta glared defiantly. "You never loved Daddy. Don't bother telling him anything. He'll know why I left."

"Don't go," Linda said as her daughter trudged through the snow after Savage.

Britta kept walking without turning around and Linda followed her into the brunt of the storm. When they reached a car parked on the street, Savage opened the door, tossed the suitcase into the back seat and cranked the engine. The front door slammed shut in the wind.

Linda grabbed Britta's arm, but Britta pulled away and climbed into the passenger seat, locking the door behind her. Banging on the window, Linda pleading with Britta to open the door. Britta simply folded her arms and stared across the car's hood, refusing to look at her mother.

Savage cranked on the ignition until it became clear the battery was dead. Sliding across the front seat, Britta grabbed Savage's hand and led him to the garage. Minutes later, Linda's silver Mercedes screamed away through misty darkness, Linda chasing after them down the road, begging her daughter to come back.

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Ted Stevenson returned home next morning, easing his car into the driveway and straightening his tie before switching off the engine. In front of the house was a red Chevrolet he hadn't noticed when he left. From the snow lying thick on its hood he realized it must have been there all night.

Then something glinted in the sun. Something at the front door of the house. At first he thought it was a snowman, a child's early morning creation. It wasn't. Racing to

the front door, he found Linda's body, clad only in her sexy pink nightgown. She was on her knees in the snow.

Ice covered Linda's exposed body and it glistened like broken diamonds in morning sunlight. One frozen hand clutched the locked door handle in a deadly embrace. The other was raised to the sky, as if signaling for help that had never come. Paralyzed by dissociated horror, Ted stared at his wife's lovely face.

Linda's lips were frozen in an ironic smile and Ted thought he saw her eyes move, deciding finally it was only an icy reflection. Then, realizing there was nothing more he could do, he dropped his coat and rushed to check on Britta, abandoning his beautiful ice princess for the final time, leaving her frozen body to bask in the gloomy cloak of morning.

For once it didn't matter. Like darkness at dawn, Linda was gone, reclaimed for eternity by the blue norther's icy embrace.

END