

Cabin Fever: A Novel of Horror
By Kate Spofford

Chapter One

Rosella

Outside the train window, all I could see was darkness, stretching out over vast plains of nothing. Sleep would not come to me on this night, anxious as I was to get to our destination, somewhere in Nebraska. Already I missed the bustle and buildings of Boston.

Henry moaned in his sleep somewhere beneath me. Better him than Mother, whose dreams back in Boston were tormented or would not come at all. I had only been home from the academy one night and I'd heard her pacing the hallway outside my bedchamber door, and later heard her cries. Father told Lee and I that Mother needed the peace and space of the country, and that we were to keep charge of her in our new home until he could wrap up his business and meet us there. I could not fathom why we could not have moved south to the country in Virginia or Kentucky, or why the openness of western Massachusetts was not enough space for her, but these were not my decisions to make.

As the steady clacking of the train over the rails lulled me into sleep, I imagined what my new classmates, in their dusty pioneer dresses, would think of my collection of gowns. I imagined I would be quite popular.

Lee

I could hear Rose sighing in her sleep, daydreaming about balls and shopping in Paris, no doubt. Father must truly despise me. In only one more year I would have been ready for Harvard, where I might have become someone truly respectable. Dr. Lee Montgomery, surgeon. Of course Father had always talked about Montgomery and Son, being blind to the fact that I had little mind for business or interest in stocks or accounting, but I hadn't dreamed that he might find me totally unsuitable for any higher education whatsoever. There might have been universities out in Nebraska, but none as prestigious as Harvard.

Never mind that my final year at Lawrence Academy was interrupted. One could only hope that Harvard admissions would be able to overlook this, but Father hadn't mentioned any provision about continuing my education out on the edge of the frontier.

"You'll have to be the man of the house until I can tie up all the loose ends," Father told me.

I supposed it meant that I'd have to give up my education and become Mother's caretaker. Certainly Rosella would be better suited to the task, what future did she have? Without a debut, which she would have made next year, she'd be lucky to find a man. She was clever enough, and sociable, and could have landed a good marriage. Who might she find in Nebraska but some poor farmer? I understood that Father could not have sent Mother and Rosella off into the wilderness alone. I only wished it hadn't be me chosen to chaperone.

Henry

In my dream Momma was singing her strange song, and the monsters crept out from the shadows to hear it. I wanted her to stop stop stop but even when I covered my ears she was still singing, and the monsters were still creeping creeping. I could feel their sharp fingers on my ankles, prickly and cold like icicles. I kicked but they had too strong of a grip.

Then they pulled me under.

Chapter Two

Lee

This morning in the breakfast car everyone seemed to be staring at our family. It could have been Mother, looking half-asleep with circles dark as bruises under her eyes, but I was certain it was Henry they all stared at. He ate his eggs and toast with gusto, showing no sign of the night terrors that had surely kept everyone awake last night.

Though I found the taste of coffee bitter, I ordered several cups and drained them all. My stomach felt too twisted in knots to eat much more than the crusts of Henry's toast. I had never heard screams such as Henry's, even if I had heard of the phenomenon of night terrors from my reading.

I was lying awake, listening to Henry's restless slumber, when he sat bolt upright in bed and began screaming uncontrollably. It was difficult to understand his speech, although he seemed to be trying to speak, and even when I tried to calm him, he kicked his feet and pushed me away, his eyes unable to recognize me. Mother could not be roused, not a surprise given her medications, and Rose received a slap to the face for her efforts and then refused to help again, cowering in her bunk with her hands over her ears.

Our neighbors began grumbling and complaining and who could blame them, hearing screams like that. I might have been attempting to murder Henry the way he carried on.

"Aren't we all chipper this morning," Rose said.

"Some of us are tired," I snapped.

"You might be grumpy, but it's hardly too much to ask for a pleasant conversation."

"Is this what they teach at your school? How to make pleasant conversation over breakfast?"

Rose glared at me and I turned back to my textbook.

"No one had to teach me that it's considered rude to read during a meal."

I did not bother to make a reply, but after reading the same paragraph five times I slammed the book shut and focused my attentions on Henry.

"What were you so worked up about last night, Henry?" I demanded.

"Humh?"

"Don't speak with your mouth full, Henry," Rose said, glancing at Mother.

Mother sat with her head propped up on her hand.

"Last night," I repeated. "You had a nightmare?"

Henry thought for a moment, then shook his head. "No."

"Yes. You had a nightmare. You woke us all up with your screaming."

"I didn't!" Henry said. His eyes flickered over all of our faces, lingering on Mother's. "I didn't have a nightmare!"

"We all heard you, Henry," I said, feeling anger now boil up in my chest. "Don't lie, now."

"I'm not a liar, you're a liar!"

"Lee, leave him alone. You're only tormenting him."

I pounded my fist on the table. "He should learn not to lie. Father would have beaten me with a switch if he knew I lied."

"Just let him be," Rose insisted. "He was fine before."

I wanted to yell at her and make her see reason, that Henry should not be allowed to lie, and this sudden anger surprised me. Looking around, I saw the averted eyes of the diners around us. What would Father say to me if he'd seen this display? Among my classmates I was the logical one, the one who never overreacted.

"I'm simply tired," I grumbled, and took another swallow of coffee. "That's all."

Rose

I never thought I'd be glad to see the train pull into the Burlington Station in Omaha. After four days and three nights aboard, my ears were ringing and I felt grimy and nasty no matter how often I washed and sprayed perfume. All I wished was to take a hot bath and scrub myself clean and put on a new dress, and to quit watching field after endless field pass by. I had some books to read, and some needlework, but the motion of the train made me feel nauseous when I tried to read or embroider. And though I felt tired I could not sleep for all the commotion.

My company on the train was less than could be desired. Lee just stared out the window sullenly or read from thick texts with type so small I felt tired just looking at it. Henry, being a young boy barely grown tall enough to wear trousers, had enough energy for all four of us. Father had given him a new toy when we left Boston, a wheeled train with a pull string, and he raced up and down the aisle with it until the conductor reprimanded him, then he was trapped in our compartment annoying us. Annoying me, anyway – Lee was off in his own world it seemed, and Mother slept most of the day. In her valise she had a number of small bottles of medicine, pills and syrups both, though I never saw her take any of them. I could hear the bottles clinking.

Lee said the pills were only making her worse, and that's when I told him he was not yet a doctor and what did he know about it anyhow.

The station was not swarming with people, but I expected nothing more from Nebraska. Only a few people were left to get off the train, most having disembarked in Chicago or St. Paul, and those remaining seemed to have many loads of cargo.

"Fresh air!" I exclaimed as I finally set foot on firm ground. My moment of exhilaration was cut short when Henry shoved me aside and bolted up the platform.

"Henry, come back," I called, too weary from travel to raise my voice enough for him to hear it. With my hands on my hips I turned and waited for Mother to climb down from the car. She moved like an infirm and blinked in the sudden sunlight.

I sighed and marched off down the platform to where Henry was observing some workers unloading cut trees.

"Henry Arthur Montgomery." I used my best mother voice, but the boy did not turn around at the sound of his own name. He stared openly at two brawny men with shirtsleeves rolled up wrestling with a team of Clydesdales. They backed the workhorses up to a log and secured the harness to chains. The moment the hook latched on, the horses surged forward, pulling one of the great logs behind them. These looked like New England pines, eighty feet tall at least.

It was somewhat fascinating in its own way. At first the men appeared older, but up close I could see at least one of them still had a smooth chin. His muscles pushed out against his linen shirt, sweat making the fabric cling to his back. Boys in Boston didn't have a build such as these men.

He turned and saw me watching and immediately winked.

My face burned and I dropped my gaze. "Henry, come along now, please," I said sharply, grabbing his shoulder.

Henry's shriek pierced my ears and the horses'. The two drafts spooked and staggered sideways, dragging the young man who'd winked at me with them. His hand was wrapped in one of the harness traces.

"Whoa, whoa!" Two other men attempted to calm the horses, but the damage had already been done.

The logs still on the car began to roll and topple in horrifying slow motion. I watched the young man pull frantically at his hand, which had been cut by the rough leather traces. Blood streamed down his arm and dripped from his elbow. He had yet to notice the avalanche begun behind him; he was only concerned with avoiding the sharp, heavy hooves pounding the ground about his feet.

My voice ached to call out encouragement to him, to tell him to hurry, but feared I would only distract him.

He jerked his hand free along with a strip of his own flesh. For a moment my heart leapt to see his relief, and I knew for that one instant that everything was going to be fine.

Then a log bounced off the ramp and took off his head.

Lee

Father could have sent one or two of our servants along with us, that might have saved my back from carrying our luggage off the train myself. After hauling out my own trunk, which I didn't trust anyone else to handle, I dug in my pocket and found an idle man in threadbare clothes, who was clearly hanging about the platform just to make some money. For some reason he seemed put out by my asking, but all that was required was a few more bills and he perked up.

Just one servant. Father did indicate that there would be servants in our new home, but surely one of the people who had served our family for at least seventeen years would want to stay with us? The lack of loyalty astounded me.

Mother was standing there alone on the platform, swaying and staring up at the bright blue empty sky. I cast about for Rose and Henry, feeling that surge of anger again. Rose should be caring for Mother while I brought out our luggage. For a girl of nearly fifteen, that girl was completely irresponsible. I pitied the man who would marry her.

Finally I located my two siblings, but only because I heard Henry started shrieking.

"Not again," I muttered, and guided Mother to sit on my trunk. I made as much eye contact as I could with her vacant stare and said firmly and loudly, "Mother, stay here. I just need to get Rose and Henry."

She made no indication that she heard me.

I hurried down the platform, where there was some kind of commotion with a group of men and horses unloading timber from one of the train cars. When I saw the logs start to fall from the car, I broke into a run and grabbed Rose and Henry, who stood there motionless and silent, completely oblivious to the danger.

I didn't see the man get decapitated, I was too busy trying to grab at my brother and sister. But I heard the sickening crunch and the small sound of a round object dropping to the ground, not quite as loud as the smack of the log slamming into one of the horses. By that time I had managed to get my hands over Rose and Henry's eyes so they didn't have to see the gore. They fell back against me as I pulled them from this scene, as easily as one can lead a blindfolded horse from a fire.

"Don't look," I told them. "Keep walking."

Behind me I heard the cries for help, the men shouting at each other to clear out, to control the horses, to get a doctor, but we just hurried away toward Mother, oblivious to it all, as passers-by on the station platform either ran to help or watched on in horror.

Henry

The log was so big, a whole tree. When it bounced it sounded like a monster walking, a really big monster taller than a house. At first it was slow but then it was so fast. It was like rain, the blood, one minute his head was where it should be and then it wasn't, it was rolling on the ground, rolling like a ball until it stopped.

The man's eyes were still open, and he was smiling.

I wonder who he was smiling at?