

The First Two Pages: “For Love or Money” by Marcia Adair
From *Minnesota Not-So-Nice: Eighteen Tales of Bad Behavior*,
edited by Barbara Merritt Deese, Pat Dennis, Michael Allan Mallory,
and Timya Owen (Twin Cities Chapter, Sisters in Crime)

An Essay by Marcia Adair

Ever since I moved to the Twin Cities several decades ago, I’ve wanted to poke a sharp stick in the cultural icon known as “Minnesota Nice.” If you’re not familiar with it, the phrase is a local shorthand for the alleged virtues of being particularly polite, emotionally controlled, friendly, and conflict avoidant. Many of us, however, see it as code for being passive aggressive. If someone smiles and tells you your outfit is “interesting,” for example, it means they wouldn’t dress a scarecrow in it; if your partner tells you everything is “fine,” trust me, honey, it’s not.

I finally got my chance to sharpen my stick when the Twin Cities Chapter of Sisters in Crime invited submissions for its latest anthology, *Minnesota Not-So-Nice*. My story, “For Love or Money,” pulls back the curtain on what darkness lies beneath a couple’s “interesting” and “fine” life together in the Land of 10,000 Lakes.

I usually start stories by having a character and a conflict in mind—something dark and twisty, preferably. For some reason, however, that approach

felt flat as I brainstormed story ideas. Every plot and character I thought of felt generic and lifeless.

Eventually I realized why: If I was going to poke my stick at a cultural icon, I needed to anchor it to an iconic setting for maximum effect. I figured it this way: If the same “character-conflict story” could be told with Manhattan as the setting, it wasn’t the right story for this anthology. I needed organic integrity.

Once I understood that, it didn’t take long to realize that the crucible for this Minnesota tale had to be the state’s iconic Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness—a million acres of pristine forests, glacial lakes, and streams along the Canadian border where campers, hikers, and canoeists portage their way to a primitive adventure in the wild. No motors, no cell service, no ATMs. Just you, your gear, and your wits. And maybe a murderer or two. But I’m getting ahead of myself.

Here’s where I confess, dear reader: I have never camped in the Boundary Waters. I’ve skied across a frozen lake into it and dogsledded into it on day trips, but have never laid my head to rest under its whispering pines. Does that make me a fraud? Does it cheapen the story?

No. At least I don’t think so. Admittedly, I did struggle with those questions and whether I could pull this piece off with any authenticity. But then I remembered, I don’t have experience with lots of things I write about. I’ve never killed anyone, I’ve never been an amateur sleuth, I’ve never been a sheriff. What I

am is a writer with the ability to research well and cultivate expert reviewers who let me know when I hit a false note. Fortunately for me, my husband is a veteran Boundary Waters camper. He kindly helped me plan the route for my hapless characters and let me know when I swamped my literary canoe.

In a delightful bit of serendipity, the location not only set the themes of man against nature and man against man (or woman, in this case), but it offered up a pretty sweet metaphor I couldn't resist. The tale takes place on one of the Boundary Waters' jewels: Disappointment Lake. That's really its name. You can't make this stuff up.

So who was I going to send into this wilderness? To keep with the anthology theme, I needed main characters with a superficial amity that's eroded by a deep undercurrent of conflict and resentment.

Enter Miranda and Carl Finn. My primary aim for the first two pages was to lay out the tensions between them that would drive the story: suspicion, distrust, anger, resentment, manipulation, fear, regret. The growing friction between them creates heat, which ignites the tinder of greed that fuels the story.

I also wanted the first pages to create a hint of foreboding. To accomplish that, I made them unevenly matched for a wilderness experience. My hope is that the tension between the couple and the rumble of foreboding will have the reader screaming, "Don't go, Miranda!" But will she listen?

Well, you'll just have to read the story.

The First Two Pages of “For Love or Money”

Miranda Finn slowly circled her husband’s Toyota Highlander and frowned. Two canvas Duluth packs, a fishing pole, paddles, life jackets, and more filled the back. The Winona canoe was strapped on top.

“So...you’re going camping?”

“Not me,” Carl said. “We. A week of wilderness camping in the Boundary Waters. We leave on Saturday. Surprised, darling?”

“Surprised is hardly the word — darling. You know I hate camping. No thanks.” She spun to walk inside.

“Remember that camping trip we took when we first started dating?” he called after her. She stopped.

“It was so much fun. I thought this trip would take us back to the good times. Before, you know....”

Before you made all that money and became a philandering social climber, she thought. Before you decided it was beneath you to have a wife who’s a diner waitress. Before you humiliated me with all those women.

She turned to face him. “This is really strange, Carl. What are you up to?”

He gave an awkward laugh. “Miranda, it’ll be great. You won’t have to do a thing. I’ve packed everything we need. I took the SUV in last week, and it’s ready for a road trip. You already have next week off work, and I can take some time, too. And I’ll do all the work — portaging, everything. It’ll be a real vacation for you. You can sit back and be the Goddess of the Lake.”

“Goddess my foot. We’ll be living like animals. Where exactly do you propose taking me?”

He smiled. “Let’s go inside; I’ll show you the route.”

They entered the marble foyer and crossed to the formal dining room. Carl made coffee and brought two piping mugs to the table.

“How about that? I’m the one waitressing today. Be sure to give me a good tip, Sugar.” He wiggled his butt flirtatiously and winked. “Be right back,” he said and headed for his study.

Miranda flipped him the bird. She’d lost count of the demeaning jokes she’d suffered from her husband. When he was a clerk at the hardware store working his way through community college, he’d admired her work ethic. After they married, he got his

real estate license and made it bigger than they'd ever dreamed possible. What a difference a decade made.

Carl returned and spread his McKenzie Boundary Waters maps on the mahogany expanse. Miranda stirred her coffee with her finger and gave him a gaze as deep and cold as a northern lake.

“Ahem. Okay. Here’s the plan. We’ll leave St. Paul at 6 a.m. and go up I-35 to Cloquet. That’s only a couple of hours. From there, we’ll zip over on Highway 33 to Highway 53, and bang! We’re in Ely by ten a.m. Plenty of time to paddle to our campsite for the first night. A million acres of pristine wilderness and gorgeous fall colors waiting for the two of us. The weather forecast is even good.” He traced his finger along the route to their put-in at Snowbank Lake and a loop through Parent and Disappointment lakes.

“You’ve got to be kidding me. Parent and Disappointment? After all our failures to conceive? Do you really need to rub my nose in the fact that you don’t even want children?”

Carl smacked himself on the forehead. “Oh, man. I’m such an idiot. I didn’t even think of that. I picked a route that would be fairly close to get to and an easy trip for you. I swear. Forgive me?”

Miranda glowered. “I still don’t get why you want to do this,” was all she said.

Carl reached across the table and took his wife’s hands. “To end all the tension between us,” he said solemnly. “It’s killing us. Don’t you agree?”

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Marcia Adair’s short story “For Love or Money” appears in the 2020 anthology *Minnesota Not-So-Nice* from the Twin Cities Chapter of Sisters in Crime. She also is the author of several mystery stories in a variety of anthologies, including *Dark Side of the Loon* (2018), *Malice Domestic 14: Mystery Most Edible* (2019), *Restaurant in Peace* (Cooked to Death, Vol. 5, 2020), and *The Fish that Got Away* (coming in 2021). She received the 2018 Dorothy Cannell Scholarship and is a member of Sisters in Crime and Mystery Writers of America. She has a master’s degree in journalism and had a career as a writer and editor before turning her efforts to mystery fiction. <https://www.facebook.com/MarciaAdairAuthor/>