



## The Frost and the Belle: One Man's Terrifying Journey to Keep His Son Alive

**Mark Christopher Mathis**

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*A chilling story about a family struggling to survive in the frozen mountains—and to overcome the challenges of their pasts.*

Mark Mathis's *The Frost and the Belle* is a sobering story, replete with chilling truths, about a family's struggle to survive the elements.

Hoping to bond with his estranged older brother and to share some quality time with his own twelve-year-old autistic child, James McAllister reluctantly agrees to a five-day hunting trip in the Sierra Nevada, but the trip goes dreadfully wrong.

At almost forty, James is a divorcé and the father of two children. He is also dealing with the sudden death of his mother. He is reunited with his older brother, Rob, at her funeral. The narrative comes via James's diary entries and begins midway through the action, with flashbacks fleshing out these previous events. This diary device is used to mark time throughout the book, with the exception of a few chapters focusing on James's youth and marriage.

James's son, Amble, and his service dog, Belle, are along on the ill-fated trip. James is portrayed as being a good father, and his main concern is always Amble's welfare. Rob, a big bear of a man, works to make amends with the family he walked out on years earlier. Much of the backstory focuses on the McAllister brothers' dysfunctional childhood, on their opposing reactions to their Uncle Shaw, and on James examining his ten-year marriage to Lee and how having a special-needs child affected their relationship. These characters dig deep, and there is much to appreciate about these backstories, despite a devastating and almost unbelievable conclusion.

Dialogue reads as authentic, especially the interactions between the two brothers and between father and son. When hunter and woodsman Rob explains in detail that a dead deer was probably attacked by a wild animal, James chuckles, "A little In The Woods CSI huh brother?"

The characters are also imbued with very real and identifiable human emotions. At one point in the cabin, James riffs sardonically: "My thoughts turned to Lee and I wondered what she would be doing if she were here with us now. She'd likely be praying. Praying in between slapping me around for getting all of us in this situation to begin with."

Adult topics and language abound; neither brother is averse to swearing. There are numerous descriptions of blood and gore, and hunger is viscerally detailed in the frozen terrain of the Sierra. This book is definitely not for the squeamish or faint of heart. The text includes some irksome lapses in syntax, spelling, and punctuation, as well as one or two odd floating names that are not referenced at any other point in the story.

This gripping novel will appeal to those who enjoy "man versus the elements" situations, or to those who like to read and learn about the psychology of another's life story.

ROBIN FARRELL EDMUNDS (February 11, 2016)

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