



SILENT LIGHT

BY JOHN NAA

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CHAPTER ONE

She ignored the sign that told her to please knock before entering and pushed the heavy door open, scowling at the brass nameplate; Dr. Allison Curran.

‘Michaela,’ Dr. Curran looked up from her computer screen. ‘Come in. I’m glad you could stop by, I need to talk to you.’

‘You’ve been ignoring me,’ Michaela said. She stepped into the room and shoved the door closed. ‘You haven’t returned any of my calls. We were supposed to meet on Friday and you didn’t turn up.’ She forced a calming breath. ‘I waited for two hours for you, Allison.’

The other woman looked surprised. ‘Why did you wait so long? I couldn’t make it.’

Michaela shook her head. ‘And let me guess, your cell battery was dead and you weren’t anywhere you could plug a charger in. You’ve been ignoring me, Allison.’

Dr. Curran perched on the side of her desk, legs long and shapely. She cleared her throat. ‘I don’t know exactly how to say this, honey,’ she started.

Michaela suddenly wanted to close her eyes. ‘Don’t honey me,’ she said, feeling tired. ‘Just say it. Just tell me what it is you called me in here for. I know it’s not about my thesis. I got the message that you’ve palmed me off onto Professor Grayson.’ Michaela leaned back against the door, now wanting to just turn around and leave. She did not want to hear this.

‘Michaela,’ Allison was saying, ‘I’m sorry about that really, but it’s for the best. I don’t think this is going to work between us.’

Michaela watched her through narrowed eyes and said nothing.

Allison cleared her throat and carried on. ‘We had a terrific time, you and me. It’s been amazing; you know that. I know that. But it can’t go on.’ She gave a sigh that sounded to Michaela a touch too theatrical. ‘I should’ve known better than to get involved with you.’

Now Michaela was gaping at her. ‘What?’ she said. ‘What are you talking about? You’re the one who made the first move. And now you’re thinking it’s a bad idea?’ She shook her head and stood up. ‘You’ve got to be kidding, Allison.’

Allison smoothed her skirt down over shapely hips. She raised a perfectly shaped eyebrow. ‘I’m not in the habit of this, you know.’

‘No?’ said Michaela. She hesitated, then nodded. ‘Okay, I’ll give you that.’

‘You are an amazing young woman,’ Allison carried on. ‘I’ve never met anyone with so much potential.’ She stood up and took Michaela’s hands in her own. ‘I have

to end this. Do you have any idea what would happen to me here, if people found out

about us? My reputation would be in tatters. I’d be lucky if I managed to keep my job.

‘I’ve worked too hard and too long to risk it this way,’ she said. ‘You’re young, just starting. There’s a different path for you. You won’t have to pretend the way I have.’ She sat down at her desk and stared at the neat piles of paper there. ‘This is the way it is for me, and I’m stuck with it and I’m sorry, but I can’t risk it.’

Michaela leaned back against the door again and stared at the view through the window. ‘Okay,’ she said at last on a sigh. ‘Okay.’

Allison opened one of the desk drawers. She pulled out a key ring and sorted through it, removed one of the keys.

‘I know we’d planned a few days away,’ she said. ‘There’s no reason you shouldn’t go anyway.’ She held out the small silver key. ‘Please. I would feel better knowing you were enjoying the place. It’s beautiful there by the lake. You can go for walks, do some work on your thesis, relax.’

Michaela looked at it. ‘Won’t you and your husband be wanting to go there now?’ she asked, bringing her gaze away from the window and onto the woman’s face.

Allison flushed. ‘Gerald and I are flying out to Paris on Saturday. Please, Michaela, take the cabin for a while. There’s everything you need there, it’s a lovely spot. Drive-up there, pick up some food on the way, and when you get there, just relax. Do a bit of work and otherwise just relax.’ She stood and pressed the key into Michaela’s hand, curled the fingers around it.

Michaela stared at the woman who had been her lover for the last three months. ‘Flying out to Paris?’ she repeated. She held up the key. ‘Sure Allison. That’ll be great. No problem.’ She pulled open the door. ‘Have a terrific time,’ she said and left.

CHAPTER TWO

She packed her books into two plastic crates and hefted them into the trunk of the rental car. Boot it was called back at home, the boot of the car. On the other side of the world. But she couldn't go running home. She had to finish out the year here.

Graduate. She stared at the books in the *trunk*. Slammed it closed and went back inside. Fetched her laptop computer and sports bag full of clothes and went back to the car.

It was fall break. Another difference, she thought. Not autumn here. Fall. Fall, falling, fallen. She had fallen. Right on her ass this time. What an idiot. Her fingers were white where they gripped the steering wheel.

It was late in the afternoon when she reached the town before turning off to the cabin. The air was crisp and she pulled her jacket closer as she got out of the car. She had to buy food, she remembered. Her stomach clenched. She hadn't eaten since breakfast the day before. She stood beside the car and closed her eyes. Not hungry, she decided. Can't eat.

But she walked across the road into the general store anyway. The town wasn't more than a couple of buildings from a Stephen King novel. A bell tinkled as she pushed open the door. A young woman stood at the checkout, snapping gum in a sugar-pink mouth. She didn't look up as Michaela picked up a basket and walked up and down the aisles. It was warm in the shop and Michaela wiped a slick of perspiration from her forehead. She picked up bread and milk, added cheese, bacon, eggs, coffee, some fruit and called it job done. The girl at the counter served her without any attempt at conversation, returning to her gum and magazine before Michaela even let the door fall closed behind her.

She found the turnoff with difficulty. On the map, it followed the curve of the lake for two miles, but there were no enticing glimpses of calm lake water. Only trees. She pulled up in front of the cabin and got out. Thrusting her hands in her pockets she stared at the cabin. It was picturesque. A quaint log cabin amid a clearing, edged by trees making offerings of red and gold leaves to the breeze.

Michaela looked up at the porch, gazing at the reflections in the French doors. She imagined for a moment Allison behind them, coming forward to open them for her, smiling, reaching to grasp her hands. She stood still, waiting.

Letting out a puff of held breath she turned and reached back into the car for her bag and the key. She could hear her boots on the steps as she climbed up to open the door. Overhead a bird shrieked and she looked up, startled. She pushed the key into the lock.

She wished she hadn't come. It was a stupid thing to do.

The main room was large and warmly furnished. Rugs on the floor and Native American hangings on the wall, colorful throws draped over the couch. Pine

shelves along one wall held neat rows of books along with a stereo and large selection of CDs. Everywhere was warmth and comfort. Vivid paintings on the wall and small, dainty carvings on the surfaces.

Michaela shuddered. She was a fool. This was why Allison had left her. She looked around the room again. All this was why. No competition. Outside the damn bird shrieked again.

She went back and sat in the car. Looked through the front windscreen at the cabin. Twilight was falling and shadows were gathering comfortably around the building. She shivered. There was a chill in the air. She hunched round in the seat to look behind her. A slight mist was rising between the trees. Somewhere down there was the lake.

She got out and walked down the track to the lake, footsteps muffled by pine needles. There was a small jetty pushing out above the lake while a stony beach edged its way around the water. The lake was a deep bowl of water, rimmed with trees and brooding inwardly. She shivered at the uncanny mist rising from the lake's surface and stepped out onto the jetty. A small rowboat tugged gently at its mooring. Michaela walked to the edge of the wooden boards and peered down into the water. It lapped against the pilings with slight, animal-like sounds. She looked around. It was a beautiful spot. She breathed in the piney, briny scent. It would be a magical place in the Summer.

She walked back to the cabin. Newspaper and pine cones were in a basket beside a large stone hearth. She laid a fire and looked around for something to light it with. Matches were on a nearby shelf. She took one and struck it, staring at it a moment before setting it to the dry paper. The flame caught and spread. She leaned back on her haunches and watched. She fed the fire from a pile of logs and warmed her hands.

There was enough wood for the night. Tomorrow she would have to find more. There was probably a stack of it somewhere. She walked across the room and tried switching a lamp on. Nothing happened. She tried it again, flicking the switch on and off and on. Nothing. She tried to think of all the books she had read about cabins in the wilderness of America. A generator? A glance at the window told her the sun had set while she'd been busy. She shivered, despite the fire. She went through to the kitchen and looked around. She picked up a torch (*flashlight*). It worked. She shrugged back into her jacket.

Listening to the sound of the night she walked around behind the cabin. The bird from earlier was no longer calling but somewhere there was a softer, haunting sound, an owl hooting perhaps? She pulled open the door to a small lean-to and swung the light around. It was stacked with firewood and had that sweet pine smell again. There was no generator. Must be a mains board somewhere.

'I should have known,' Michaela said out loud. Allison would never go without the creature comforts. She picked up an armful of wood and went back inside to look.

The lights were on and Michaela stood in the kitchen. She wasn't hungry but fixed a sandwich anyway and wandered back through to the couch to eat it. She sat down and chewed slowly. She wondered what Allison was doing. An image of the two of them on the couch here came to mind. Soft hair and soft skin. Whispers and laughter. Leaning back she stared up at the ceiling. Allison was flying out to Paris tomorrow. With her husband. Michaela closed her eyes.

CHAPTER THREE

Michaela zipped up her jacket and walked down the path to

the lake. The sun was caressing the tips of the trees now and she raised her face to catch its warmth. She breathed a deep lungful of the warming air. It was going to be a stunning day out in the country. She would walk for a while, the trail around the lake for half an hour before going back to the cabin. She thought she'd probably do some work for a while then. She needed to map out her thesis, make sure all her notes were in order.

She came back invigorated, high on the smell of pine.

The door to the cabin was open.

Michaela frowned. She was sure she'd closed it when she left. She felt in her pocket. Yes, there was the key. She'd locked the door behind her. Swallowing, her mouth suddenly dry, Michaela walked up the steps to the cabin and looked through the door.

She couldn't see anyone about. Was she sure she'd locked the door? She'd been so taken with the view, maybe she'd forgotten. She shook her head. No. Someone else was here.

Realization hit. Someone else was here – someone with a key. Allison!

She stepped into the room. 'Allison?' she called. 'You changed your mind?' She pushed open the door to the main bedroom and stopped still.

'You're not Allison,' she said.

'No shit, Sherlock,' the stranger said, rummaging around in an old backpack. 'Ah-ha!' she said, pulling a pack of cigarettes from the bag. 'Knew I'd brought another packet with me.' She looked up and saw Michaela there still staring at her. She grinned, a sly feline smile.

'You're Allison's latest then are you, Sherlock?'

Michaela backed up a few paces. 'What are you talking about? And what are you doing here? In fact,' she said, gathering steam now, 'Who the hell are you anyway and how did you get in? I know I locked that door.'

The stranger shook her dark curls and rolled her eyes. 'Steady on there Sherlock, you don't want to go blowing a gasket.' She stuck out her hand. 'Trisha. Our esteemed professor's conquest circa '07. How are you doing? You're her latest, yeah? Cool accent by the way. Where you from?'

Michaela was choking. She ignored the outstretched hand. 'What are you talking about?' she demanded.

Trisha smacked her forehead with the heel of a hand. 'Having a slow day, are you?' She shoved past. 'Place smells good, like coffee, how 'bout you make us some? I'd kill for a coffee.' She rolled her shoulders. 'Been hitching rides since five, trying to get here.'

Michaela was shaking her head. 'I'm not making anyone coffee until I know what's going on here.' She parked herself in the doorway and folded her arms.

Trisha, if that was her name, hoisted herself onto the dining table and fished a cigarette out of the packet. 'Suit yourself then,' she shrugged. She blew out a plume of smoke and eyed Michaela. 'You've been having a good time with Allison, right? Doing a bit of running around behind that poor sap Gerald's back? A bit of dancing between the sheets?' She smiled and again Michaela was reminded of a cat. Trisha took another drag at the cigarette when Michaela didn't reply.

'So,' she continued. 'You're not the first, and you sure as hell won't be the last. Our darling Allison has quite a thing for the girls. She chats them up, beds them until they get boring and whiney, then dumps them and offers them a few days away here as a consolation prize.' She gestured around at the cabin they stood in. 'Most don't take her up on it though. Or at least, this is the first time we've double-booked like this.' She opened her eyes wide and appealed to Michaela. 'Can I have some coffee now?'

Michaela could feel the color leaching from her cheeks. She walked over to the kitchen bench and measured out coffee, not because she wanted to be nice but because she needed to do something. She kept her back turned, feeling a tension headache crawling its way up her neck. She heard Trisha take another breath but didn't turn around.

'Bit gobsmacked, huh?' Trisha said, and a kinder note crept into her voice. 'Hey, don't give yourself a hard time about it. Allison's a pro. She sucked me in.' Michaela turned back around. She opened her mouth. 'I don't believe it,' she said, but she didn't carry on. Because she did believe it. She closed her eyes. 'How

could I have been so stupid?' she asked.

Trisha hopped off the table. 'Don't beat yourself up over it, Sherlock. She's not worth it. Neat cabin though, huh?'

Which reminded Michaela. 'How'd you get in?' she asked.

Trisha opened a cupboard and took out a coffee mug. 'Had the key copied.' She grinned and poured herself a mug full. 'I've had a few holidays here thanks to the professor. You should see it in the summer. Now that's something.'

Michaela was intrigued despite herself. 'Haven't you ever been caught?' she asked.

'Nah. You wouldn't believe it, but Allison hardly ever uses the place. That's why she's so happy to send us all up here. Every time one of us suckers comes to stay, the place gets an airing.' She shrugged and sipped at the coffee. 'There's no one around to ask questions, and like I said, hardly any of us take her up on her offer anyway.' She wandered back to the table, gestured at the laptop. 'You one of her students? What's your major?' she asked.

'English modernist literature,' Michaela replied. 'Yours?'

'Yeah, I was never a student. Just someone she picked up one night.' Trisha stubbed out her cigarette in a saucer and picked up a carved wooden owl. 'Cute fella,' she said and turned to Michaela. 'So Sherlock, what's for lunch?'

CHAPTER FOUR

The low autumn sun drifted in through the window onto the dining room table where Michaela sat bent over her computer. She let out an exasperated sigh and leaned back in the chair. Having trouble concentrating. She needed more of her notes. They were in the trunk of the rental. She shoved back from the table and went outside.

Trisha had disappeared after lunch. Lunch that Michaela had made. Michaela grunted at the memory. Trisha hadn't even brought any supplies with her. Not that Michaela could tell anyway. They'd have to have a word about that later. She was not going to take on the job of chief cook and bottle washer. No way in hell.

She decided as she walked down to the car, she would have to suggest that Trisha left. After all, Michaela was here first, and she wasn't exactly in the mood for company. And certainly not Trisha's company. She hadn't even been able to find

out what Trisha did. Or get her to stop calling her Sherlock. The woman was aggravating.

There were a whoop and a wild splashing from the direction of the lake. Surely that crazy Trisha wasn't in the water? Michaela shook her head. It was too cold for swimming. No one in their right mind would get in the water at this time of the year. Any colder and it would be nice for Christ's sakes.

Michaela hooked her thumbs into her belt and stood to look in the lake's direction. Here in the sun, it wasn't too bad. She walked past the car and down the path to the jetty, the pine needles muffling her steps. She stepped onto the jetty.

Trisha was a pale streak in the water, dark hair fanned out behind her like some pre-Raphaelite undine. The sun danced golden on the surface of the water and Michaela couldn't help but smile when Trisha burst up to the surface, sending gold and diamond droplets everywhere.

'Come for a swim!' Trisha called. 'Water's great!'

Michaela stood on the jetty and shook her head. 'You have to be kidding me,' she said. 'The water must be bloody freezing.'

Trisha grinned and shrugged, launching herself onto her back then suddenly flipping over into an underwater somersault. She burst to the surface again, her skin marbled with the cold, nipples standing erect and brown. Michaela was suddenly conscious of staring.

Trisha swam up to the jetty's edge. 'Come on Sherlock,' she purred.

Michaela narrowed her eyes and Trisha threw her hands in the air and laughed.

'All right already! You win.' She wagged a finger in a come hither gesture.

'Come for a swim. Michaela.'

Michaela gazed down at the mermaid in the water. 'It's cold,' she said.

Trisha laughed again, a throaty purr. 'It's invigorating,' she said, treading water. She threw back her head. 'Oh come on Sherlock! You know you want to. Loosen up a little, why don't you.' She took off, slicing through the water in a smooth breaststroke.

Michaela stood hesitating a moment longer. What the hell, she decided. She'd either die of a heart attack from the cold, or she might enjoy herself. Shaking her head, she kicked her boots away and peeled her jersey off, throwing it down on the jetty and adding the rest of her clothes to the pile. She dived into the water before she could change her mind.

She surfaced screaming. 'Oh fuck fuck fuck it's cold!'

Trisha laughed. 'Not enough to take your breath away, obviously – that's an impressive scream, Sherlock.'

Michaela lunged toward the other woman. Trish laughed and swam away. Michaela dived and twisted through the water. Maybe if she moved around a bit she wouldn't die of exposure. She looked up at the sky from beneath the water, letting the strange underwater silence wrap itself around her. She blew out some bubbles and a hand reached out and grabbed her wrist.

Trisha hauled her to the surface. 'What're you trying to do down there?' she asked. 'Grow gills?'

Michaela laughed. 'Grew up swimming every day at the beach. I could hold my breath the longest of any of my friends.'

'Well,' Trisha said, 'I guess some talents are just never lost.' And rolled her eyes.

Still laughing, Michaela reached out and tugged at a wet lock of Trisha's hair. 'You have mermaid's hair,' she said.

Trisha grinned. 'Would you like to hear my siren song?' she asked, brushing a leg against Michaela's as they paddled to stay afloat.

Michaela looked at her. Then up at the sky, back toward the cabin. 'Some other time,' she said at last. She pushed away and swam back to the jetty, pulling herself out of the water in a sudden cascade. She avoided looking at Trisha and picked up her clothes, walked back to the cabin.

She was dressed by the time Trisha padded in; dressed and sitting back at the laptop, frowning at the screen.

She cleared her throat and Trisha stopped, dripping lake water onto the floor in a spreading puddle.

'I think you should leave,' Michaela said. 'I was here first and I'd rather prefer to be here on my own.' She looked up at Trisha and realized the woman was still naked. She looked away again.

'Get over yourself,' Trisha said after a moment. 'I'm staying. You leave. You're the one with the wheels, Sherlock.' She walked past.

Michaela stood up. 'Stop fucking calling me Sherlock,' she yelled.

CHAPTER FIVE

Michaela sulked in the kitchen for the rest of the afternoon. She knew she was sulking, but didn't care. Why shouldn't Trisha leave? she told herself. She ignored the little voice that asked why exactly should Trisha leave? The cabin didn't belong to either of them.

Finally, as the sun sank below the lake, and the crackling of the fire in the living area drew her, Michaela stood in the doorway and looked at the woman in question, sprawled on the couch, cigarette in one hand, book in another. Trisha didn't look up. Michaela bit her lip.

'What are you reading?' she asked after a minute.

Trisha glanced over. 'Oh,' she said. 'It's talking again. Have you decided I can stay yet?'

Michaela walked over to the fire and put another log on it, stirring the flames until they reached little tongues of fire out at her. She turned around. 'I'm sorry,' she said. 'You're right, neither of should have to leave.' She shrugged. 'It's not our place. I guess we could both stay.'

Trisha cocked an eyebrow at her. 'My word, Sherlock, how generous of you to allow that we can both stay.'

Michaela groaned. 'All right,' she said. 'I was a bit of a bitch to say you should go. Can we leave it at that?'

Trisha stretched on the couch, sleek and languid. 'Sure, apology accepted. This time,' she said, and a sly smile slid onto her face. 'How about you fix us some food and I'll fix us some drinks?' She stood up and moved close to Michaela. 'I might even be persuaded to remember your name if you're nice to me.' She smoothed down Michaela's collar then walked away, throwing a grin over her shoulder.

Michaela smacked herself on the head. 'How come I always get stuck with kitchen duty?' she complained.

Trisha walked back in holding a bottle of bourbon aloft. 'We don't want to mess with a good thing, baby,' she said. 'You've already proved you can do the food thing,

and honey,' Trisha waggled her eyebrows in a parody of suggestiveness, 'honey I know I can do the drinks thing.'

Michaela groaned. 'Better make mine a double then,' she said. 'What're you wanting to eat?'

Trisha plucked a crystal tumbler from a display cabinet and poured a generous measure of bourbon.

Michaela eyed it. 'Mixer?'

Trisha handed the glass over and came back with lemonade.

Michaela held out the drink. 'Ice?' she asked.

‘You like it all, I see,’ Trisha said, disappearing back into the kitchen. ‘I’m spending more time in the kitchen than you so far.’

Michaela followed her and waited while Trisha got the ice cubes. Her glass tinkling, she tipped it toward Trisha in a toast. ‘All or nothing,’ she said.

Trisha laughed. ‘Cheers,’ she said. ‘Now tell me where that gorgeous accent of yours comes from.’

‘New Zealand,’ Michaela told her, taking a sip of her drink. ‘Whoa, that’s one mean drink,’ she said.

‘Better get on with the food then, baby,’ Trisha said, filling her glass. ‘Then you can tell me all about yourself, Sherlock.’

Michaela considered the fact that she was fairly well drunk. She giggled as she tried to find the couch to sit on. Trisha was fumbling around with the stereo.

‘Ah-ha!’ she crowed. ‘Listen to this! We can dance to this, Whaddaya say?’

Michaela groaned and collapsed back against the cushions. ‘I’d have to have feet to dance with,’ she said. ‘I’m not sure I can find them.’

Trisha laughed and came over to pull her up. The sounds of Gary Miller’s band playing ‘In the Mood’ swelled out into the room. Michaela fell giggling against the other woman.

‘You have to be fucking joking,’ she stuttered.

‘No kidding. Come on Sherlock, dance with a woman won’t you?’

They swayed around in front of the fire. Michaela struggled to concentrate through the alcoholic haze, thinking she was doing a pretty good job as they boogied to the music. The song ended and something quieter came on. Michaela pulled Trisha closer and leaned against her.

‘You want to be Watson to my Sherlock?’ she whispered into Trisha’s hair.

They swung almost gracefully around.

‘Shit! What the hell is that?’ Trisha’s fingers tightened on Michaela’s arms.

Sudden goosebumps climbed up Michaela’s neck.

‘What?’

‘Look,’ Trisha hissed, pulling Michaela around to look out the window. ‘That’s fucking freaky.’ Her fingers tugged at Michaela’s sleeves. ‘What is it?’

Michaela stared through the window, feeling suddenly, frighteningly sober. She grabbed Trisha’s hand and stumbled forward to have a closer look. ‘What is it?’ she echoed.

CHAPTER SIX

It was hanging suspended over the lake. Not that they could exactly see the lake.

But between the trees, where Michaela knew the lake was, there, that's where it was.

She strained her eyes to make it out and wiped her breath from the window.

'We have to go outside, get a closer look,' she said.

Trisha backed up. 'No way,' she said.

'Come on,' Michaela answered. 'It must be a ghost light or something.' She was dragging Trisha towards the door. 'I've read about them. Never thought I'd see any though.'

'What are you babbling about?' Trisha said, following Michaela out onto the porch. 'What is it?'

Michaela looked over at Trisha. 'Don't know,' she said. 'Not for sure, anyway. But it looks like a ghost light. You know, caused by gases rising from the ground?'

She stopped a moment. 'Or something like that.'

They stood on the top step watching the light bobbing in the air over the lake.

Almost a perfect sphere, it glowed a soft white.

Trisha reached out for Michaela. 'It's pulsing,' she said. 'Is it supposed to do that?'

Michaela shrugged. 'Let's go closer,' she said and twined her fingers in Trisha's.

They walked down the steps, both of them only in socks. Michaela didn't even notice; she focused on the light, which was bobbing gently as if in a breeze over the lake. They walked down the path to the water.

Trisha squeezed Michaela's hand. 'I'm not going out in the open,' she said. Michaela nodded. 'We'll stay in the trees.'

They veered off the track and kept to the shadows.

'That's spooky,' Trisha said when they were peering out over the lake at the light that hung above it as though suspended from an unseen string. Michaela watched it, wishing she hadn't had quite so much to drink. The fresh, cold air was making her feel a little unsteady.

Even so, she decided, it was the light that was swaying. As they watched, it dipped and dived over the water. Michaela poked Trisha in the ribs.

'Shit!' squealed Trisha. 'Are you trying to give me a goddamned heart attack?'

'What's over the far side of the lake?' Michaela asked.

'Well, there's another place over there. Bigger than this one though. Don't know whose place it is or anything. It'll be empty this time of year anyway.'

Michaela was frowning. 'There's something weird about this light,' she said, shaking her head.

‘No shit, Sherlock,’ Trisha replied in her now-familiar refrain. ‘Something spooky, you mean.’

‘Maybe,’ said Michaela.

Trisha grabbed her sleeve. ‘Let’s go back inside okay?’ ‘In a minute. Look, it’s moving away.’

It was drifting over to the far shore, growing fainter as it moved. It reached the tree line and exploded in a shower of sparks and a loud bang.

The women grabbed each other.

‘Fuck, that was loud,’ Trisha said. She pulled Michaela back toward to cabin. ‘Enough freaky stuff,’ she said. ‘We’re going back inside and I’m going to have another goddamned drink.’

Michaela cast one last glance at the spot where the light had exploded, then turned and let Trisha lead her back inside. She realized her feet had gone numb.

Back inside, Trisha held up the bourbon, waving it at Michaela who shook her head. She put it back and dropped down onto the couch. ‘Yeah, me neither,’ she said.

Michaela sat in front of the fire and put another log on, stirring it back to flames. She felt woolly-headed and her mouth was dry. She got up and went to the kitchen for a glass of water. She stared out of the window, back toward the lake, but the night was dark and quiet. She drank down the water.

‘So that was a... what did you call it?’ asked Trisha when she went back into the main room.

‘Ghost light,’ Michaela replied. She sat down in one of the armchairs and fingered the fringe of a purple throw. ‘I’ve never seen one before, only read about them.’ She looked over at the fire as it spat sparks onto the tiled hearth. ‘I didn’t know they exploded like that though.’

Trisha moved. ‘But you said it was what, caused by gases or something, right? So even though it was as freaky as shit, we don’t have to bolt the doors and stay up all night waiting for giant alien insects to break their way through the windows or anything, right?’

Michaela snorted out a laugh. ‘And I thought you would be wondering about the sort of stuff I read,’ she said. ‘Yeah, it’s a natural phenomenon.’ She thought for a moment. ‘I’d like to go have a look at the spot where it exploded tomorrow though.’

Trisha shrugged and held her watch up. ‘Later today, you mean.’ She stood up. ‘I’m hitting the sack, Sherlock.’ She winked at Michaela. ‘Bit of a shame the night ended the way it did, it was warming up in here.’ She blew a kiss and headed for one of the bedrooms.

Michaela sat back in the chair and gazed at the fire. Something bothered her about the light they’d seen, but she couldn’t put her finger on it. Trisha was right though, it had been spooky for sure. Trisha. Michaela closed her eyes and rubbed her face. Trisha had been right, things had been getting just a little too

warm in here. Michaela groaned, pushing the thought away. Time to get some sleep.

CHAPTER SEVEN

They slept in. The sun was inching towards its noonday position when Michaela squinted out the kitchen window. Trisha appeared behind her.

‘Can’t you keep the noise down?’ she asked Michaela, standing in the doorway her hair falling over her eyes. She groaned. ‘Feel like death warmed up. How much did we have last night anyway? I feel like I drank five large Russians under the table.’

Michaela would have been amused at that if she weren’t so busy agreeing with it. ‘That’s hardly politically correct,’ she said. ‘Got any Tylenol?’

‘No,’ said Trisha, lowering herself onto a kitchen chair. ‘All symptoms, no cure on this end of things.’ She pushed her hair back. ‘Bloody hell, who turned the sun on high?’

Michaela laughed and immediately put a hand to her head. She headed toward the bathroom and sifted through the cabinet in there. Jackpot. Untwisting the lid she palmed two tablets and chewed them, grimacing at the bitter taste. She plonked the bottle in front of Trisha.

‘Water,’ demanded Trisha. ‘They’ll just stick to my tongue otherwise.’ She groaned. ‘Who’s the brilliant idea was it to drink so much anyway?’

Michaela brought her a glass of water and patted her on the shoulder. ‘Yours, I believe.’

‘Huh. Water. You’re an angel after all.’ She swallowed two tablets, looked at the bottle of Tylenol, then took an extra one. She peered up at Michaela through the thick tangle of curls that had fallen back over her face. ‘So tell me why we didn’t sleep together last night?’

Michaela gaped at her, then burst into laughter. ‘God loves a trier,’ she said, shaking her head. She bent down over Trisha at the table and whispered in her ear. ‘You might be bargaining for more than you would get in that area.’

Trisha raised an eyebrow and looked Michaela up and down. ‘Baby, I don’t think so,’ she said.

Michaela laughed again. ‘I’m going to cook up a fry up. My mother swore by it as a cure for a hangover.’ She ignored the sound of Trisha groaning. ‘Then we’re going for a walk. See if Sherlock and her loyal sidekick Watson can do a bit of detecting.’

Trisha banged her head against the table and groaned again. ‘I thought I’d dreamed that,’ she said. ‘Do we have to? I’d rather just lie around here today.’ She propped her head in her hands.

Michaela broke the eggs into a pan. ‘Yes, we have to. Or at least, I have to. I want to check it out. I want to see if there’s anything there, you know, where it went bang.’

‘How are we even supposed to find the spot again anyway?’ Trisha said, drooping even lower over the table.

‘I think I can find it,’ Michaela replied, undaunted. She scrambled the eggs and tipped them onto plates alongside crispy rashers of bacon. ‘Here,’ she said, ‘Wrap your laughing gear around this.’

It took another hour to get a protesting Trisha into her boots and out the door. But the Tylenol was working and it was a beautiful day outside, the sunlight over the lake the color of their scrambled eggs. Michaela grabbed Trisha’s arm as they began their walk around the lake.

‘What’s that?’ she whispered.

Trisha looked upwards where Michaela was pointing. ‘It’s a goddamned squirrel,’ she said. ‘What, you want a guided nature walk, now?’

‘Hey,’ said Michaela, giving Trisha a light punch on the arm. ‘I’ve never seen one before so cut me some slack.’

‘You’re joking? Never seen a squirrel before? Come on, they’re everywhere, those things.’ She rolled her eyes.

‘Not in New Zealand, they’re not.’ She looked out over the lake. ‘How long does it take to walk around it?’ she asked.

Trisha gave up on being grouchy. ‘The lake?’ she asked. ‘About an hour and a half at a guess. I’ve never trekked all the way around but it’s not that big, really, more like an overgrown pond.’ She looked around. ‘Where do you think your ghost ball or whatever went down?’

‘Not just mine,’ Michaela said, flipping a stone over the lake’s surface. ‘You were there too, remember.’

Trisha picked up a stone and sent it bouncing over the water. She grinned at Michaela. ‘Beat ya.’ She shrugged. ‘Yeah, I remember; it was pretty bloody freaky. What I don’t get though, is why we’re going trekking all over the place looking for it, if it was just some gas fart?’

The little beach petered out and Michaela scrambled up the bank. She reached out a hand and hauled the other woman up. ‘I just want to see. There was something about it that didn’t seem right.’ She frowned and shrugged. ‘Besides, it’s something to do, right?’

‘Yeah, so is having an afternoon nap.’

Michaela poked her in the ribs. ‘Come on, admit it, you’re enjoying yourself just a little bit?’

Thirty minutes later they reached the spot where Michaela thought the light had disappeared. Michaela stopped and took a water bottle from the little backpack she was carrying. She took a swig and chucked it to Trisha.

‘So you reckon it was here?’ asked Trisha, wiping her mouth.

Michaela looked around. ‘Yeah.’ She pointed at a tree. ‘See how that one looks like it’s pointing out over the lake? I marked it in my mind last night. I’m pretty sure it’s the one.’

Trisha handed the water back. 'So Sherlock, what are we looking for?' Michaela was already scouting around, examining the ground. 'Residue, I guess.'

You look up and I'll look down.'

'Residue. All righty then. You look up and I'll look down,' she said. 'You're taller than me.'

They hunted around, working backward from the lake's edge. Michaela tried to remember exactly what had happened last night. They'd been peering through the trees and the light had gone dipping and swaying over the lake. Then it had drifted off to the left, leaving the lake, and bobbing up near the trees, especially that one, the pointing tree she'd noticed. So, somewhere around here, there should be some sign of it. Michaela blinked. Or not, of course. Not if it was a marsh light.

'Trisha,' she said. 'You've been here at the lake before, haven't you? You ever have seen anything like that light before?'

Trisha looked up from the ground. 'Never,' she said.

'Hmm.' Michaela thought about it. 'I should have looked it up before we left, but I'm pretty sure ghost lights only show up in marshy areas. That's where the gas is that makes them.'

Trisha stretched and stuck her hands on her hips. 'So how would we see one over the lake then?' Not that I know anything about the lake either. For all I know, it could have gas deposits anywhere. How do you know about this stuff anyway?'

Michaela was still looking upwards at the tree trunks and branches. She shrugged. 'I don't. Not really. I've just always been interested in weird stuff like that. Bit of a hobby, I guess.'

Trisha pulled a face. 'God, you are Sherlock.'

Michaela nodded. 'Yeah. And I've just found something. Trisha! Take a look at this.' She reached out a finger and pointed at one of the trees. 'Trisha, look at this!'

CHAPTER EIGHT

Michaela stretched out a finger and touched the splattering of white stuff adhering to the tree trunk. She rubbed it between finger and thumb and gave it a sniff.

‘Well?’ Trisha demanded. ‘What is it?’

Michaela pulled a face. ‘Don’t know, but it smells slightly sulphuric, don’t you think?’ she held it out for Trisha to smell.

‘Rotten eggs. Great.’ Trisha turned away and threw herself on the ground. ‘So what next, Sherlock?’

Michaela stood frowning at the white smear on the tree. She glanced over at Trisha. ‘Know any chemists?’ she asked.

Trisha looked incredulous. ‘You’re kidding, right?’

Michaela was delving into her backpack. ‘Yeah, but only because I’m not expecting that you know any.’ She pulled out a small plastic bag and a knife. Scraping some of the white smudges of the tree she transferred it to the plastic bag.

‘What’re you going to do with that? Thought you were an English major, not some crackpot scientist.’ Trisha stood up again and looked around. ‘Look,’ she said, pointing through the trees. ‘Another cabin.’

Michaela came over and stood next to her. ‘That’s a cabin?’ she said. ‘Mansion don’t you mean?’

‘Yeah, you got a point,’ Trisha replied. ‘It’s some old family’s hunting lodge, I guess.’

It was at least three times the size of the cabin they were staying in. sitting back in the trees, it had the main building, built of logs, and timber-framed wings where it had maybe been added to at some stage. A veranda ran the length of the front and Michaela could see the wicker table and chairs set out.

‘There are people there,’ she said.

‘Not at this time of the year.’

‘No Trisha, look – there’s a furniture set out on the veranda. And not the sort you’d leave out in the weather. Someone’s staying there.’

‘Okay,’ Trisha conceded. ‘But so what? Let’s go. It’s going to rain anyway; can’t you feel the weather changing?’

Michaela ignored her. ‘They might have seen something.’

‘No way. Come on, we are not going to go ask them, are you out of your mind? For all, we know it was a hallucination from the bourbon.’ Trisha started away.

‘Bollocks,’ said Michaela, but she followed anyway, throwing one last look at the lodge crouching back amongst the trees. ‘There’s no way it was a hallucination.’

Trisha flapped a hand at her and they walked the rest of the way back to the cabin in silence. Trisha disappeared inside to the bedroom.

Michaela made herself a coffee. She considered knocking on the bedroom door and offering one to Trisha. She decided against it. She'd let Trisha sleep off her bad mood.

Sipping the hot coffee, Michaela went back outside and sat on the bench under the kitchen window. The rain Trisha had predicted splattered against the pine needles and the trees turned a deeper green. She leaned back against the rough boards of the cabin and listened to the rain, thinking over the light they'd seen last night. And the residue she'd scraped into the plastic bag this morning. She wished she did know a chemist who would test it for her. Tell her what it was made of.

The rain lulled her though with it came to a damp mist hanging like a curtain over the lake. If the shrubs were trimmed a little, she thought, there'd be a great view. So how high over the lake had the ghost light been, for them to see it from the house? Must have been pretty high.

Michaela sighed. She knew she shouldn't be worrying about the light, whatever it was. She had research to finish, a thesis to sit down and write. But she couldn't help it; the paranormal fascinated her. Ever since she had seen her first ghost. She closed her eyes and remembered. She could visualize its face as well as ever.

The summer she turned eighteen. Sleeping one night, comfortable in her bed in her grandmother's house where she'd lived since she was twelve, she woke suddenly and completely. Looking around the room, she could find no reason for waking.

Perhaps it had been Jess the dog barking or something. She shrugged and lay back down, looked over toward the door.

And there it was. The figure of a man, staring silently into the shadows of her room. She held her breath. He was slightly ragged looking, an incompletely developed black and white print in a darkroom. His legs disappeared into nothing. But she could see his face plainly, his head topped with an old fashioned black hat. He was looking down the length of the room but to her horror, he began slowly to turn around towards where she lay, rigid in her bed. His broad, pale face expressionless, he moved until looking straight at her. And then he faded out, disappeared. Just like that.

Michaela opened her eyes to the rain and mist and lake again. She was getting damp and cold. She stood up and stretched, headed inside. She'd seen the apparition of the man once more after that and ever since the odd and strange had happened to her now and then. Not enough to thoroughly disturb her, but enough so that she studied the subject a bit. She put her coffee cup in the sink and went to build the fire in the main room. Then maybe she would see what she could find online about ghost lights.

CHAPTER NINE

This was the trouble, she thought, with researching on the Internet. The sheer bulk of information. She figured it would take about a hundred years to wade her way through this lot. She rubbed her neck and stretched. Still, she was lucky the place was set up for the Internet, she guessed. Everything here was pretty cozy. An image of Allison came to mind and Michaela felt the dull ache of loss again.

She shook it away. Allison wasn't what she had pretended to be. Michaela was just another sucker. Trisha being here proved that all too well. Michaela sniffed and stood up just as Trisha came into the room.

'Got any coffee?' Trisha asked. She glanced over at Michaela's laptop. 'How come you're so bloody fine and perky today anyway? You drank plenty last night if I remember.'

Michaela poured her a mug of coffee. 'Lot's of water before bed,' she said, by way of explanation, shrugging.

Trisha gave her a disgusted look and took the mug. 'Maybe I'm coming down with something,' she said.

Michaela laughed. 'You look healthy enough to me. Come on; you're just exaggerating. What's the real problem?'

Trisha shrugged. 'No problem.'

Michaela backed off. 'If you say so,' she said.

Trisha sat down at the table. She nodded toward the computer and yawned. 'So what've you found out?' she asked.

'Elementary, my dear Watson,' Michaela said, sitting back down at the table and swiveling the laptop around so Trisha could see the screen. 'I've discovered that ours was a very unusual light.'

Trisha interrupted her. 'Well, we knew that. I told you I've never seen one here before and I've stayed here five or six times. I would have seen them before in all that time, surely.'

Michaela wanted to ask about why she stayed so often, but she stopped herself. It was none of her business. 'I would have thought so,' she said instead. 'And others would have seen them, so I was expecting to find stories of them in this area. But there was nothing. So to my mind, that kind of blows the gas theory. But that's not the real discovery I made.'

Trisha leaned forward and looked at the screen. 'Okay, I'm listening.'

She was too, Michaela realized. 'Well, apparently ghost lights don't explode as ours did. All the sightings I read about, they were lights that blew out like candles after a few minutes or even seconds. No explosions, no sound effects, and no residue.'

Trisha looked at her and raised her eyebrows. 'Interesting,' she said. 'So it wasn't one of these ghost lights, then.' She indicated the pictures on the computer.

Michaela shook her head. 'I don't think so,' she said. 'I think it was something else.'

'What?'

Michaela shrugged. 'I don't know,' she said. 'Yet.'

Trisha slumped back in her chair. 'That's a bit of a letdown,' she said. 'So what now? Do we just forget about it? Or do you know some geeky guy to send your sludge off to?'

'I wish I did. We just keep our eyes open.' She nodded. 'That's it? Shit, Sherlock, that's the crummiest plan I've heard.'

Michaela stood up and leaned over Trisha's chair. 'Got a better one?' she asked.

Trisha stared up at her, the feline smile back on her face again. 'Baby,' she said and drew a finger down Michaela's neck. 'I always have a plan.'

Shivers were sliding their delicious way down Michaela's spine. She smiled and straightened. 'I'll bet you do,' she said.

Trisha stood up. 'What's wrong with you?' she demanded.

'What do you mean?' Michaela stood still.

'You.' Trisha shook her head. 'You come on to me then you back off. Off and on again till I'm getting dizzy. What's with you?'

Michaela opened her mouth then snapped it shut again. Trisha stood in front of her, face upturned and all those wild curls tumbling everywhere. A tiny smile crept onto Michaela's face. Tough chick with the look of a romantic poet's wet dream.

'What are you smiling about?' Trisha said. 'God, you're an asshole.' She went to turn away.

Michaela reached out and stopped her. She swung her back around and cupped her hands around her face. She leaned down and kissed her. She burrowed one hand into that mass of curls and pulled Trisha closer with the other, skimming it over her shoulders and down to her waist. Trisha's lips were soft and unaware at first but within seconds she was wrapping her arms around Michaela, kissing her back with a fiery heat that flashed and burned between them.

The kiss ended and they released each other, stood back and looked at each other. Michaela pressed her fingers to her lips.

'Sorry,' she said.

Trisha gaped at her. 'For what?' she asked and in one smooth movement was pushing Michaela against the table, hands questing after skin, lips opening against hers again.

Michaela let herself go. The rain played against the roof as they embraced, creating their heat. In a minute Trisha grabbed Michaela's hand and led her out of the kitchen and towards the bedroom.

CHAPTER TEN

The sheets were a tangled mess at the foot of the bed. Michaela rolled onto her back and stared at the ceiling, trying to get her breath back. Even her toes were tingling, she thought, smiling. Trisha rolled on top of her.

‘What’s that smile for, Sherlock?’ she asked, running the tip of a finger over Michaela’s lips.

Michaela smoothed her hands down Trisha’s naked back, the skin silken under her hands. ‘Do your detecting,’ she said, smiling.

Trisha laughed and dipped her head, kissing her. ‘You’re pretty damned hot,’ she said.

Laughing, Michaela tightened her grip and rolled them both over. She planted a line of kisses down Trisha’s body. ‘You’re not too bad yourself,’ she said between kisses. She flicked her tongue over a nipple then trailed a whisper of lips up Trisha’s neck until their lips met. Lips joined she lay down and they lay entwined on the bed.

‘What are you cooking for us tonight?’ Trisha asked, licking Michaela’s ear. ‘I’m starving.’

Michaela laughed. ‘I’ve been cooking for the last hour, baby. It’s your turn.’ ‘Well now, that’s a high opinion of yourself you have there,’ Trisha said, giving Michaela a well-aimed poke in the ribs. They collapsed laughing and Michaela dragged herself off the bed.

‘It’s your turn to cook,’ she said, pointing a finger in mock severity as she gathered up her clothes and left. ‘I’ll light the fire though,’ she called from the other room.

Trisha did cook. Michaela sat at the laptop, trolling through more websites, trying to get some ideas about their ghost light. But it wasn’t coming together. She sat back, at last, yawning.

‘Well,’ she said. ‘To sum up, I don’t know what that was about last night, and I’m not likely too.’ She rubbed her eyes.

Trisha placed a bowl of spaghetti in front of her. ‘So maybe it wasn’t anything,’ she said, sitting down at the table with her bowl. ‘Could have just been someone playing around, you know. For whatever reason.’

Michaela tried her spaghetti. ‘This is good,’ she said. ‘You’re probably right, you know. Maybe someone was just experimenting or something.’ She shrugged. ‘Who knows?’

‘Well I think we should forget about it,’ Trisha said. ‘There’s nothing we can do anyway. It’s supposed to be a holiday I’m having here – not some sort of spook hunt.’

Michaela looked over at her. ‘Where do you live?’ she asked.

‘Not far from you I imagine; if you live near the college. Next time you come up here you can give me a lift.’ She smiled and ate more spaghetti.

Michaela shook her head. 'I won't be coming here again,' she said.

Trisha cast her a sideways look. 'Why not? Look around – it's a great place to stay.'

Michaela pushed away from her bowl. 'It's hardly right though, is it?' She shook her head. 'I shouldn't even have come this time. Don't know why I did, really.'

Trisha reached for her cigarettes and lit one. She blew the smoke out through her nose. 'I don't know why Allison always offers the place to everyone when she's

through with them.' She pulled a face. 'Maybe she thinks it makes it all better. Can't be a bad person when you're being generous.'

Michaela stared at the room's reflection in the window. 'What a bitch,' she said.

Trisha stubbed her cigarette out. 'Got that one right, baby. What do you want to do tonight? It's still pretty early. We could go have a drink at the bar.' Michaela groaned. 'Didn't we do enough drinking last night?'

Trisha laughed. 'Yeah, maybe you're right. There's a bunch of DVD's here. We could watch a movie.'

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Michaela woke up and stared hard into the darkness. What had woken her? She strained to listen, but the only sound right now was Trisha's steady breathing. She cast her eyes around the room, watching while the darkness resolved itself into a lumpy grayness. The hairs on the back of her neck were prickling. Something had woken her.

She slipped from the bed and silently cursed the cold floorboards. A white toweling robe hung from the back of the door, looking washed out and limp. Michaela wrapped herself in it and left the room, walking through the cabin towards the front door. The fire was a pile of embers in the grate and the light took on a reddish tint.

She couldn't see anything through the window. But something had woken her. What had it been? A sound? Or just some dream she couldn't now remember? She chewed her lip, thinking about it.

Not a dream, she decided and reached for the doorknob. It was cold in her hand and she turned it, pulling the door open just wide enough for her to slip through. The chill air pressed against her in a damp embrace. She paused on the porch, listening. Nothing. She couldn't see anything either. Her boots were on the porch where she'd left them. Bending down, she pulled them on and walked down the steps and past the rental car. She found the gap in the darkness that was the track down to the lake and listened to her footsteps as she walked down to the jetty.

The water lapped against the pilings like a dog at its dinner bowl. The lake, perfectly shaped like a basin, spread out in the darkness in front of her and she sensed rather than saw the ripples on its surface. She strained to look out over the water, into the trees, wishing the moon was out. What had woken her?

Then, finally, there it was again, and she recognized it immediately from the tattered ending of her sleep. Laughter. Out of the blackness of the night, the laughter rang with childish glee. Michaela shivered. An eerie sound it was if ever she'd heard one. A child's laughter, evoking games of hiding and seek, parties and birthday cake, but Michaela shivered again. There was something wrong about it. She peered into the darkness but all she could see were shadows and dim reflections. And the laughter carried on.

It didn't seem so innocent now, the laughter filling with its shadows; was that an edge of fear to it? What was happening?

Michaela stared down the lake, wanting to see something, anything. Was there a child down there? Why would a child be running around at this time of night? Michaela pressed the light button on her watch and the dial flashed green. Three o'clock. No child would be playing outside at this time.

The laughter rang out again and Michaela started. It was darker laughter now, the innocence and joy gone, replaced with edgy horror. Michaela took a step

backward off the jetty, acutely aware all of a sudden that she was standing out here

alone in the dark, wearing nothing but a toweling robe and a pair of boots. She stumbled back off the jetty and up the path towards the cabin, the laughter ringing in her ears.

She looked back when she reached the path, just a glance. And reached out to grasp the nearest tree. There was the light again. She swallowed, heart, beating rapidly. The light wasn't over the water this time, but flickering in and out of the trees, as though playing hide and seek. Michaela turned and ran.

CHAPTER TWELVE

She crashed into the house, banging her knee on the table. Swearing, limping she ran into the bedroom and shook Trisha awake.

‘Trisha,’ she said. ‘Trisha, you have to wake up. Jesus Christ, wake up.’ Trisha sat up and pushed Michaela’s hands away. ‘Fuck, Michaela, what’s going on?’

Michaela was scrabbling around picking up clothes. She threw them at Trisha. ‘Put these on. You have to come outside with me.’

Trisha was reaching for the bedside light. Michaela jumped on her. ‘No. No lights. Just put something on, will you? You have to come and look at this. Christ,’ she said, panting, ‘you have to listen to it.’

Trisha was pulling on a jersey. She swung her legs over the edge of the bed and tugged a pair of jeans on. ‘You’re freaking me out,’ she said. ‘I don’t want to come and look at anything. And I sure as hell don’t want to listen to anything.’

Michaela tugged on Trisha’s arm. ‘No way, you have to come,’ she said. ‘The light is back again, and this time there’re sound effects too.’

Trisha was on her feet, being pulled toward the door. Michaela didn’t stop to worry about shoes, just dragged her down the porch steps and towards the path to the lake.

‘Fuck, slow down will you,’ Trisha hissed. ‘And let me go while you’re at it. Jesus, have you lost your mind?’

‘Shh,’ Michaela didn’t turn around, and the only concession she made was to take hold of Trisha’s hand rather than the arm. ‘Shh. Look.’

They were by the jetty now and Michaela was pointing over the lake. ‘Oh my God,’ she said. It’s still there. I didn’t know if it would be.’

Trisha pressed herself to Michaela’s side and Michaela automatically snaked an arm around her.

‘That’s over where we were looking today,’ Trisha whispered. ‘Where we found that stuff.’

Michaela nodded and squeezed Trisha closer. ‘Listen,’ she said.

The laughter wasn’t as loud now, but Michaela thought that it made it worse. It was sweet and childish again, tinkling out into the night air. She felt Trisha shiver against her.

‘That’s fucking freaky,’ Trisha whispered. ‘What’s a kid doing out at this time of night?’

Michaela shook her head. ‘I don’t know if it’s a real child,’ she said. The laughter sounded again and Michaela groaned. Something was hiding under the laughter, she thought.

‘I don’t like this,’ Trisha whispered. ‘What’s going on?’

The light was dipping and spinning in between the trees, sometimes out of sight then reappearing. It floated upwards as they watched, then with a bright flash of silver it exploded. They both covered their eyes.

‘What the fuck?’ Trisha said after a moment. ‘It’s gone. Bright shit.’ ‘And loud,’ Michaela added.

They stared over the lake where the light had been. The night seemed dark and heavy with the sudden silence. Trisha tugged on the sleeve of Michaela’s robe.

‘Let’s go back inside,’ she said. ‘If anything’s still out there, you’re a sitting duck out here in this white thing you’re wearing.’

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Back in the cabin, Michaela's hands were shaking as she tipped the coffee grinds into the plunger and took two large mugs out of the cupboard. Trisha was standing to the side of the window, hugging herself. She'd stoked the fire and shadows were dancing in the corners of the room. None of the lights were on. The kettle boiled.

'Can you see anything?' Michaela asked.

Trisha turned away from the window. She shook her head. 'Nothing. I think the show's over.' She leaned against the bench while Michaela poured the coffee. 'You're shivering,' she said.

Michaela nodded. 'I'll put some clothes on in a minute. Not going back to bed. Couldn't sleep if I tried.' She sipped at the coffee. It was good; hot and strong. She wrapped her hands around the mug and looked at Trisha in the shadows of the kitchen.

'We can leave tomorrow,' she said. 'If you want to, that is.' She drank another mouthful of the coffee.

Trisha sighed and walked back to the table, found her cigarettes and lit one. 'I was supposed to be quitting these things,' she said. 'No one likes a girlfriend who smokes anymore.' She looked out the window again. 'But what's another few days?'

Michaela stayed where she was. 'We can drive back to the city tomorrow. I don't mind giving you a lift back if you don't want to stay here.'

Trisha turned and looked at her. The light from the fire turned her dark hair red. 'You want to stay here, don't you?' She took another drag of her cigarette and glanced out the window. 'You would drive me back to the city and then turn around and come straight back. I got it right when I called you Sherlock, didn't I?'

Michaela shrugged. 'Maybe Nancy Drew would be more appropriate,' she said. Trisha snorted and choked on her coffee. She started laughing, leaning helplessly over the table as the laughter shook through her. Michaela widened her eyes, then began to snicker too, until she had to put her mug down as she laughed, holding her sides, unable to catch her breath. Trisha had sunk to the floor, tears streaming from her eyes. Michaela collapsed onto the floorboards and crawled over to her. They wrapped their arms around each other and held on until the laughter subsided.

'Oh man,' Trisha said at last. 'My stomach muscles are aching. I haven't laughed like that since I was a kid.' She hiccupped and giggled once more.

'No way, don't you set us off again,' Michaela said, rolling over until she was sprawled flat out on the floor, her head in Trisha's lap. 'Why aren't we in front of the

fire?' she said. 'This floor is cold on my arse.' She looked up at Trisha. 'So, am I taking you back to town tomorrow?'

Trisha hiccupped again. She stroked Michaela's short hair. 'I'm not going back,' she said. 'I was evicted from my apartment last week.' She sniffed and rubbed her eyes with the heel of her hand. 'I was going to stay here a couple of weeks while I decided what to do next.'

Michaela stared at her. The fire crackled and spat a shower of sudden sparks in the next room. 'Okay,' she said. 'So we're both staying here. Who knows? We might even figure out what's going on over there. But you can be Nancy Drew. I'm sticking with Sherlock.' She waited for Trisha's smile.

Trisha looked down at her, fingers warm on her skin. She nodded. Michaela sat up. 'All right. Can we get off the floor now? This isn't very dignified.' She dragged the robe back down over her thighs and grinned.

Dawn broke in a bruised smear of purple light. Michaela watched it creep in through the window, sending the shadows scuttling for the corners. She pulled the blanket up over Trisha's shoulder and lay down, closed her eyes and slept.

When she woke, there was the smell of fresh coffee and toast from the kitchen. The couch was empty beside her. She stretched and got up, padding onto the kitchen pulling the blanket around her shoulders. Trisha turned around as she came in.

'Hungry?' she asked. 'We're going to need a decent breakfast, I thought. We're going to be walking again, aren't we?'

Michaela looked at the spread on the table and smiled. 'Looks great,' she said, sitting down and reaching for a slice of toast.

'Yeah, hang on a minute, I found a package of sausages in the fridge. They're almost done.' She came over to the table and tipped two skinny, blackened sausages onto Michaela's plate.

Michaela stared at them and began to laugh. She looked at Trisha standing there holding the hot pan. 'Sorry babe,' she said. 'You're just not the domestic type, are you?'

Trisha screwed up her eyes. 'I get by,' she said. 'Now shut up and eat already. It's not everyone I'll cook breakfast for, you know.' She turned away.

Michaela swallowed her laughter and stood up. She took the pan from Trisha and put it back on the stove. Placing her hands on Trisha's shoulder, she pulled her gently towards her. Leaned down and kissed her, a tender pressing of lips.

'Thanks,' she said. Then she gave a big smile and went to eat her sausages and toast.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

This time they walked anti-clockwise around the lake. There was a chill in the air that had their breath puffing out in miniature white clouds and the sun blinked in a watery haze over the tips of the trees.

‘God, I hope it’s not hunting season or something,’ Michaela said after they’d walked a good way.

Trisha, wearing a bright pink jacket, laughed. ‘It’s always hunting season up here. For one thing or another.’ She looked pointedly at Michaela’s clothes. ‘Didn’t I tell you to wear something other than black?’

‘I was trying to keep a low profile,’ Michaela said, looking down at her black jacket and jeans. She cast a glance at Trisha’s brightly colored outfit. ‘But yeah, I think I see your point now.’

Trisha laughed. ‘Stick by me, you’ll be fine.’ She looked around. ‘Where are we anyway?’

It was Michaela’s turn to laugh. ‘Stick by me,’ she mimicked. But she stopped and looked around. ‘We’re still away from where we found that residue yesterday. How long have we been walking, do you think?’

‘Forty minutes,’ Trisha replied. She pointed away from the lake, through the trees. ‘What’s that?’

Michaela stepped over to her side and looked where she was pointing. ‘What’s what? I don’t see anything.’

‘Between those trees. A building or something.’ She tugged at Michaela’s sleeve. ‘Let’s go have a look.’

Michaela followed as they slipped deeper between the trees and the sun disappeared almost entirely. ‘It’s a bit bloody gloomy in here,’ she said, mostly just to say something.

‘You got that right,’ Trisha agreed. ‘Who would want to build something this far away from the lake?’ She was winding in and out of the trees. There was no track. ‘It’s no picnic spot back here.’

The building seemed to materialize out of the shadows, rising almost organically between the trees. Michaela stood and gaped. ‘Oh wow,’ she said. ‘This is a bit spooky.’

Trisha was stepping gingerly over the tree roots up to its walls. ‘What is it?’ she asked. ‘I mean, what’s it for?’

Michaela shrugged. She reached out and touched one of the walls. The building rose from the ground in a circular stone wall, built in a colonnaded Greek style. The wall seemed unbroken by windows, but she couldn’t tell properly – it was covered in a violent green creeper. She walked around to where Trisha was standing.

‘I’ve found the door,’ Trisha said. But neither of them moved forward.

The round building, not tall enough to be a tower, glowed dimly in the green light that filtered through the trees.

‘It looks like some sort of diseased mushroom,’ Trisha said, twisting her mouth in distaste.

Michaela couldn’t help but agree. Even with the columns rising on either side of the heavy wooden door, it didn’t look inviting. Stone steps rose towards the door.

‘We don’t have to go up there and try the door or anything, do we?’ Trisha asked. ‘I mean look at this place. No one’s been here for years. What would it ever be for anyway?’

Michaela eyed those steps. ‘It’s a folly,’ she said after a while.

‘A what?’

‘A folly. People used to build them pretty much just for something to do, I think. Like a summer house, but more elaborate. They were often built to look like pagan temples. This one’s copying the Greek style or something, I’d say.’ Michaela fell silent.

Trisha gave her a strange look. ‘Where do you learn this shit, Sherlock?’ she asked. Then they looked back at the door. ‘So there’s not going to be anything inside?’

Michaela shrugged. ‘I guess we may as well look.’ Trisha grunted. ‘After you,’ she said.

The steps were narrow and made more so with soil and rotting leaves. It smelt damp and Michaela found herself taking shallow breaths. She reached the door, thinking it would be locked and then they could get out of here. She grabbed the handle and turned it.

It wasn’t locked. The door pushed open almost smoothly. Michaela looked back at Trisha still standing at the bottom of the stairs and raised an eyebrow. Trisha climbed the stone steps. They stood together on the threshold and Michaela pushed the door wide open.

The smell hit them first before their eyes had time to adjust. Michaela gagged and clapped a hand over her nose.

‘Oh shit, that stinks. What the fuck is it?’ She forced herself to look inside. Trisha reached for her other hand, standing by her side as they peered into the old building.

The roof was glass, or rather, had once been glass, a vaulted dome that doubled as a skylight. There was only one other window, on the far side of the building, and it was overgrown on the outside with creeping greenery. The floor around the circular wall was littered with year’s worth of debris, leaves and in some places, whole branches, blown in through the broken roof. Michaela shivered as she looked around, and gripped Trisha’s hand tighter.

The worst lay in the middle of the room. Steps led down from the door to a tiled floor, she couldn’t make out the pattern, not with the dirt and the bad light, but she made out the source of the damp, stagnant smell all right.

‘This place is not a nice place,’ Trisha said, breaking the silence. ‘You can’t tell me people used to use this place. No way.’

Michaela had to agree. An errant breeze rustled around the wall and set the water in the center of the room sluggishly alive. The bottom of the building was around a pool, filled now with dark, stagnant water. The light from the roof reflected in it in small eerie movements, as though something lived under the surface of the water.

Michaela stepped back to the door. ‘Let’s go,’ she said. ‘What a horrible, evil place. God, I’m going to have nightmares now.’

She pulled the door shut behind them and they stumbled down the steps, hands still clasped. Trisha’s face was a pale smudge under her dark hair.

‘There’s no fucking way,’ she said, ‘that anyone ever swam in there. You can tell me that but I’m never fucking going to believe it. It would be like being stuck inside a bloody well. Shit Michaela. Let’s go back to the cabin all right? I need a bloody great drink. What an awful place.’

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

They wound their way back through the trees towards the lake, drew deep breaths of the fresh air.

‘This is so much better,’ Trisha said, climbing right down to the little shingled beach rimming the lake. She stared at the reflection of the sky. ‘Who do you think that horrible thing back there in the trees belongs to?’

Michaela wasn’t looking toward the lake. She nodded over to her right. ‘At a guess, babe, I’d say it belongs to them.’

Trisha straightened and climbed back up the small bank to where Michaela stood. She was looking at yesterday’s hunting lodge.

‘It’s a bit of a gloom box too isn’t it?’ Trisha said.

‘Looks pretty old, doesn’t it. We’re going to have to walk past it to get back,’ Michaela added.

Trisha had shaded her eyes, still looking at the old place. ‘Its lawn comes right down to the lake here. We’re going to have to do a bit of trespassing.’

Michaela reached out and tugged on one of Trisha’s curls. ‘Lead the way then Trisha. You’re the expert on trespass I reckon,’ she said, laughing.

Trisha gave a mock scowl and they started walking again. Michaela looked back into the trees, wondering if the folly could be seen. It was hidden by the trees. She turned away, glad.

‘There’s someone there,’ Trisha said.

Michaela looked over Trisha’s shoulder. ‘Has she seen us?’ she asked.

Trisha shrugged. ‘Let’s go introduce ourselves, shall we?’ She moved over the lawn before Michaela could think up an objection.

‘Good morning,’ Trisha called out, waving to the woman sitting at a small table on the veranda.

Michaela followed and watched as the woman straightened and waved back. Trisha bounded up the steps to the veranda but Michaela couldn’t hear what was being said. She picked up the pace.

The woman was old and delicate as a bird. She sat in a wicker chair with a blanket tucked over her knees. Her eyes were bright though, and her smile wide as Trisha turned on the charm.

‘We’re staying a few days at the cabin over that end of the lake,’ Trisha was explaining.

‘Goodness me,’ the old lady said. ‘Then you must sit and share a cup of tea with me. It isn’t often I get a company.’ She gestured them to the empty chairs. Trisha sat down.

‘Are you sure we’re not intruding,’ Michaela asked, giving Trisha a surreptitious poke in the back. Trisha just turned and grinned.

‘Sit down, Sherlock,’ she said and turned to the woman, who was prodding at the teapot with bent fingers. ‘It’s very nice to meet you. We thought at this time of year we would be the only ones here on the lake.’

The old lady cocked her head to the side, looking more and more like a dainty little bird. 'Oh, we're not usually here this time of the year either. It's not warm enough for me.' She gave a dainty shiver and smiled over the table at Michaela. 'Sherlock, was it?' she asked. 'A strange name for a girl, dear.'

Michaela forced a smile. 'Please, I'm Michaela. This is Trisha. I do hope we're not disturbing you.' She turned to Trisha. 'We should leave this lovely woman to have her tea in peace.'

The woman in question leaned forward and patted Michaela's hand. 'Nonsense,' she said. 'This old woman would enjoy the company of two pretty girls.' She shifted round in her chair and called out toward the house. 'Henry! We have visitors. We need more cups.' She frowned at the glass doors. 'I don't know if Henry would have heard me,' she said.

'Oh it's all right,' Trisha said. 'Let me pour your tea for you. We don't need anything.' She filled the tiny china cup and smiled at the woman. 'Is this your place, ma'am?' she asked.

The woman took a sip of her tea. 'Oh please, call me Selena. It's so seldom I get to make new friends now. Let's not stand on formalities.' She looked confused for a moment. 'I'm sorry, dear, what did you say your name was?'

'Trisha,' Trisha said, 'and my grumpy friend here is Michaela.'

Selena leaned forward and peered at Michaela. 'Why is she grumpy?' she asked. 'Why are you grumpy, dear?'

Michaela rolled her eyes at Trisha. 'I'm not grumpy at all, Selena. Trisha here likes to make things up.'

Trisha leaped into the rescue. 'Oh no,' she said. 'We've just had the most horrible experience.'

Selena put down her teacup and leaned forward. 'She does look a little peaky,' she said, looking at Michaela. 'What on earth happened, child?'

Michaela turned to Trisha. 'Perhaps you ought to continue the story,' she said. 'I'd be interested to hear it too.'

Trisha turned back to the old lady and smiled. 'We went for a walk,' she said. 'And there's this awful little building back there in the trees. Michaela said it's folly or something silly and we couldn't resist going closer for a look.' She gave a theatrical shudder. 'The door wasn't locked, we didn't mean to trespass or anything. It's a pool house or something. Or was once. Do you know it?'

The old lady was staring at Trisha round-eyed, mouth open. 'That is supposed to be locked,' she said. Her voice was high, squawking. 'It's supposed to be locked.' She turned toward the house and struggled out of her chair. 'I don't know what's going on,' she said, opening the door. 'Henry!' she called. 'Henry, where are you?'

Trisha looked at Michaela, gave a quick shrug. Michaela stood up, picked the blanket up from where Selena had let it fall. 'I'm sorry Selena, we didn't mean to upset you,' she said. 'The door was open, it was unlocked. We didn't go in.'

But the woman wasn't listening. She stood, supporting herself against the door. 'Mother?' A voice inside the house. 'Mother, what's the matter?' A middle-aged man came to the door and stared at Michaela and Trisha. Selena tottered on her feet and he turned to her and held his arms out. 'Mother, who are these people?' He looked down at his mother. 'You're shaking,' he said. 'Let's get you inside.' He moved to support her back into the house. Glaring at the two women he shook his head, his face flushed red. 'I don't know what you've said or done, but you can leave right now. How dare you come here and upset my mother. Can't you tell she isn't well?'

Trisha shook her head. 'I'm so sorry,' she said. 'We didn't mean to upset her; we were having a lovely time. Then I mentioned the old pool house in the trees, and she became upset.'

The son stopped still and stared at them. Michaela could have sworn she saw the blood drain from his face.

'Get away from here,' he hissed. 'You've no right to come here snooping around and upsetting old ladies. You leave my mother alone; she's old and not very well.' He poked a finger at them. 'Get out of here,' he said. 'We don't want your type around here.'

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Trisha was fuming. 'We don't want your type around here,' she mimicked. 'Fuck I hate it when they bring that shit into it. He was way out of line. We didn't do a damned thing wrong. His old mum was enjoying our company. I know she was.' She kicked a boot at a tree root.

'Until we mentioned the pool house or folly or whatever it is,' Michaela said. 'Did you see the look on her face when you said the door was unlocked? The poor old thing, she doesn't like that place, that's for sure.'

'I don't bloody well blame her,' Trisha said. 'I didn't like it either.'

Michaela was thinking. 'It's supposed to be locked,' she said. 'And when you think about it, that would make sense. You sure as hell wouldn't want to stumble upon that place and take a fall.' The thought of it had her grimacing.

Trisha kicked another tree. 'She was upset about that for sure. I wish I hadn't said anything now. She was a sweet old bird.' She turned and looked at Michaela. 'Didn't like the son though.'

'Yeah,' Michaela agreed. 'Kind of got the impression there that he wouldn't have been happy to see us no matter what.'

Trisha tugged on her hair. 'He was a jerk-off. Went an interesting shade of pale when the pool house was mentioned though, don't you think?'

They'd reached the spot where Michaela had discovered the residue on the tree. Michaela stopped and looked around. 'A very interesting shade indeed, now that you mention it.' She checked out the tree trunks, looking for more evidence. 'I wonder what he knows.'

Trisha stopped trying to uproot a small bush and gave Michaela a considering look. 'You don't think last night was about ghosts and shit at all, do you?'

Michaela finished examining the trees. She put her arm around Trisha and looked back toward the lodge. 'No,' she said. 'No, I don't think that at all.' She looked down at Trisha. 'Unfortunately,' she added, 'that raises even more questions than it answers.'

Trisha stared toward the lodge too. 'Huh,' she said. She grabbed Michaela's hand and pulled her away. 'Bet that asshole's watching us. Let's go. You can get on the case from the comfort of our place, Sherlock because this woman wants a drink. It's been way too eventful a day.'

'I don't think Nancy Drew had a drinking problem, you know,' Michaela said, laughing.

Trisha laughed, and the day lightened a little. 'Get fucked,' she said.

'Okay,' Michaela was laughing too now. 'I think I have a bit of a thing for girl detectives.'

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

There was a police cruiser parked next to Michaela's rental.

Trisha looked up at Michaela. 'What the fuck?' she said.

Michaela shrugged. They walked over to the cruiser. It was empty, the police radio crackling to an invisible audience. 'Where is he, or she?' she asked. There was no one around.

'Did you lock the door?' Trisha asked.

'Yes of course I did. This isn't our place, remember; I'm not going to take any risks with it.' Michaela scanned the front of the cabin.

'So where is the dude that goes with this?' Trisha pointed at the cruiser.

He appeared around the side of the cabin. Tall, well-built, a bit of a swagger under the heavy police utility belt. Trisha flashed a glance at Michaela.

The officer came forward. 'You the ladies been staying here?' he asked.

Michaela nodded.

He hooked a thumb in his belt and towered over them. 'May I see some identification, please?'

Michaela glanced toward the cabin. 'May I ask why?'

The officer narrowed his eyes at them both. 'We've received a complaint of trespass, Ma'am. That identification, please?'

Trisha glared up at him. 'That's bullshit,' she said. 'We're not trespassing anywhere. We were invited to stay here. Who the hell's been saying we weren't?'

The officer trained his gaze on Trisha and curled up his top lip. 'You were trespassing on the grounds of Glimmer Lodge this morning.'

Michaela was shaking her head. 'The lodge?' she said. 'We weren't trespassing there. Selena, the old lady, she invited us to have tea with her.'

The officer folded his meaty arms. 'No Ma'am, that's not the information I have. According to Mrs. Gardener's son, you were there uninvited and you upset Mrs. Gardener mightily. He had to take her away and put her to bed. She's not a good lady, and he is greatly annoyed that you would upset her like that.' He took out a small notebook and consulted its pages. 'He states also that you were wandering unauthorized around the property.' He snapped the notebook shut. 'Now, perhaps you could show me that identification?'

'We'll have to go inside,' Michaela said, shaken.

Trisha was still fuming. 'We weren't doing any harm,' she said. 'We didn't even know we were on their property. I just went for a simple walk. And Selena, Mrs. Gardener, she was pleased to have some company, she said so. We didn't mean to upset her.'

The officer just stared at her. 'Identification, please. And if you could tell me how you come to be staying here?' He indicated the cabin. 'This is Gerald Curran's place.'

They climbed the steps to the porch and Michaela fished in her pocket for the key. 'We're friends of Dr. Allison Curran,' she said. 'She gave me the key and said we could use the place while they were in Paris.' She held out the key as proof.

The officer disregarded the key and followed them inside. 'Paris? That would be Paris, France?'

Trisha rolled her eyes. 'Yeah Einstein, of course, Paris, France.'

The officer turned his gaze to Trisha. 'So there's no way of checking your story then, is there?'

Michaela intervened. 'We have the key,' she pointed out. 'And if it is necessary to take this further, Officer, then Mr. And Dr. Curran can be contacted even in Paris, France.'

'We're sorry we upset Mrs. Gardener, but it was unintentional. And we certainly weren't aware that we would be trespassing by taking a walk around the lake.' She stared at the uniformed man. 'We won't be going for any more walks around that end of the lake. Will that be satisfactory to all parties?'

He didn't answer her question. 'Where are you from?' he said instead.

Michaela crossed her arms. 'New Zealand,' she said.

'Show me your passport,' he said. 'I suppose your visas are all valid and correct?'

Trisha groaned. 'What're you harassing us for? We haven't fucking done anything wrong for Christ's sake!'

Michaela put a reassuring hand on Trisha's arm. 'You'll find everything in order. If you excuse me, I'll get my passport for you.' She turned to Trisha, 'Trisha, why don't you get your ID too, so the officer here can get his information and be on his way?' She looked back at the uniformed man. 'We don't want to keep wasting his valuable time.'

She tugged Trisha away into the bedroom where their bags were.

'What an asshole,' Trisha said, sitting down on the bed.

'Yeah, for sure,' said Michaela. 'It's a bit over the top, don't you think?' She pulled her passport from her bag. 'Come on baby, grab your papers for Big Brother out there and let's get rid of him.'

'Fuck this,' said Trisha, but she dug out her wallet anyway.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

‘That was all such bullshit,’ Trisha repeated.

The officer had left after copying their names and details into his notebook, and warning them he would be back and not nearly so friendly if they went wandering again where they weren’t supposed to go. Michaela stood staring out the window after him.

‘Yeah. Why such an overreaction, do you think?’

Trisha was fiddling around with glasses and bottles. ‘Like the average male, can’t stand gay girls,’ she said.

Michaela turned around. ‘Sure,’ she said. ‘There was some of that with Officer Friendly there, but what I want to know,’ she took the drink Trisha held out for her and held it up in a silent toast. ‘What I want to know is why he was called in at all. Selena’s sleazy boy must have been pissed at us being there this morning.’ She took a sip of her drink. ‘And that’s what’s interesting, don’t you think?’

Trisha planted herself on the table and sampled her drink. ‘Let me get this straight. You’re saying you reckon Sleaze Boy is up to something and he wants us out of the way. So he called Officer Friendly in to warn us off?’

‘Trisha, that’s exactly what I reckon.’

Trisha considered this. ‘Huh,’ she said. ‘Interesting.’ She looked over at Michaela. ‘So are we warned off, do you think?’

Michaela sauntered over to the table and placed her glass down. She smiled at Trisha and leaned close. ‘What do you say, Nancy Drew? Up for a bit of sleuthing?’

Trisha smiled her cat smile back. ‘I’d have to say, Sherlock, that the hunt is on.’ She tilted her head. ‘Wouldn’t you agree?’

Michaela leaned closer, touched lips, licked the taste of bourbon off lips in a quick flick of the tongue. ‘I’d have to say,’ she whispered, ‘that you’re a far more attractive sidekick than Watson ever was.’

Trisha snorted, brushed her lips against Michaela’s. ‘Why Sherlock,’ she laughed, ‘you old devil.’ She ran fingers through Michaela’s hair. ‘Do we have time for some rest and recreation before solving this case?’

Michaela scooped the smaller woman off the table, wrapping Trisha’s legs around her waist. ‘Rest and recreation are essential for healthy bodies and minds,’ she said.

Trisha swung her legs down and landed lightly on the floor. She slipped her hands under the edge of Michaela’s tee shirt and spread them over the warm skin. Michaela moaned under her breath and worked on the buttons on Trisha’s shirts, undoing them one by one, pushing Trisha back against the table as she did so. She planted her lips on Trisha’s and pulled the shirt right off, dropping it

to the floor. Running kisses down Trisha's neck she cupped her breasts in her hands.

'Beautiful,' she whispered. 'Exquisite, gorgeous, beautiful.'

Trisha tipped her head back and leaned against the table as Michaela's mouth roamed down over her hot skin and found her nipples, standing erect under her lips. She dragged her fingers through Michaela's short hair and arched her back. Michaela fumbled blindly with the zipper on Trisha's cargoes, tugging them down over her hips, knickers and all. Trisha kicked them off and allowed herself to be lifted onto the table. Michaela stood and pulled Trisha against her, ripping at her tee-shirt until they had skin against skin, lips against lips, heat against heat. Trisha groaned against her and Michaela slipped down between her legs, pushing them gently wider until she could slip her tongue into the hot wetness there. Trisha leaned back on her elbows and closed her eyes, the head was thrown back, her breath coming in throaty little moans until her whole body tightened and she tipped over the edge with a sudden, sharp cry.

Michaela held her as the orgasm shuddered through her body. She trailed wet kisses up Trisha's smooth belly until lips met again. Trisha, recovering, leaned into the kiss and sent her own hands questing, pushing at Michaela's jeans, seeking and finding the heat between thighs. Michaels moaned and opened her legs, leaning against the table for support. Trisha thrust her fingers deeper, rubbing, pushing, pleasuring until Michaela almost forgot to breathe and climaxed, shuddering, blinded.

They were silent a minute or two, catching their breath.

'Oh my God,' Michaela was the first to speak. She leaned her face against Trisha's neck and licked at the salty skin there.

'Hell yeah,' Trisha agreed. 'I can't believe you just fucked me on Dr. Alison's dining room table.'

Michaela pulled her head back and stared at Trisha in shock. Trisha's face was flushed, damp curls sticking to her forehead, and what could only be described as a triumphant grin on her face. Trisha gave her a quick kiss and laughed.

They leaned foreheads together and Michaela began to laugh too. She laughed harder and in a minute they were clinging to each other kissing and laughing like a pair of lunatics.

Later, stretched out on the rug in front of a roaring fire, Trisha trailed a foot up Michaela's naked leg. She took a sip of her drink.

'So, you have a plan?' she asked.

Michaela tied the belt of Trisha's robe. 'Why? Haven't you had enough yet?' she asked.

Trisha gave her a poke in the ribs. 'Not that, Sherlock. I'm talking about our little mystery. I wouldn't mind a night of unbroken sleep, so I'm just wondering if you're going to have us running around outside again tonight?'

Michaela rolled over and lay on her back, arms behind her head. She stared at the ceiling, thinking. 'It'll be interesting actually,' she said, 'whether anything happens tonight.'

'There's been shit go down last two nights,' Trisha pointed out.

'That's right,' Michaela agreed. 'Which makes me wonder if there's going to be anything happening tonight.' She lay back on her side and traced a hand up under Trisha's robe. 'Because I'm betting that if Selena's son is behind anything, he'll give it a rest tonight because he'll be too worried about us at the moment.'

'Yeah, okay I can get that,' Trisha agreed. 'But if you're right, what's the guy trying to achieve anyway?' She got up to refill their drinks. 'I mean, why would anyone stuff around making up ghosts and shit? It's pretty damned dedicated, don't you think?'

'Thanks,' Michaela took her drink and swirled it so the ice cubes tinkled. 'We need to know more about him,' she decided. 'Because you're right. Why would someone bother with that? What's he trying to achieve?'

Trisha prodded at the logs on the fire. 'We could be barking totally up the wrong tree on this, you know?' she said.

Michaela looked at her. 'I know,' she said. 'But something is going on, and I'll bet anything you like that's no ghost running around out there.'

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The night was sweet and long, spent in front of the fire and between the sheets. No lights or laughter from outside disturbed them. Michaela went to the kitchen for water during the early hours and stood to look out the window towards the lake. Darkness shrouded the world outside, clouds curtaining the stars from view. The air smelled sweet and damp. Michaela thought it would be raining by morning. She went back to bed.

Sure enough, rain drummed against the cabin roof when she woke in the morning. She lay back and listened to it, tucking her hands behind her head and staring up at the ceiling in her favorite thinking position. They were smack bang in the middle of a mystery, for sure, she decided. The visit from Officer Friendly only confirmed it. Mr. Gardener made a miscalculation there. She rolled over and looked at Trisha sleeping next to her. It was turning out to be an eventful vacation in more ways than one. She wondered, with some satisfaction, if Allison was enjoying Paris half as much.

Sighing, she pulled herself from the bed, tucking the blankets back around Trisha, who slept on, her warm breath purring into the pillow. It was cold out of bed. Michaela pulled on jeans and jersey and padded out into the main room. It was a mess. They needed to do a bit of housework. She picked up the glasses and bottles and put them in the kitchen. The fire had to be lit. She wasn't going to be able to type with frozen fingers. Coffee needed to be made. She wasn't going to be able to think with no caffeine lighting up her circuits.

Essential jobs are taken care of, Michaela settled in front of her computer and turned it on. 'Let's see who we're dealing with,' she said, thinking out loud.

The rain fell steadily on the roof as she worked, and the fire crackled in the grate like New-Age music, cocooning Michaela as she waded through her Internet searches, blessing the Mr. And Dr. Curran under her breath for setting up the little log cabin so well. She doubted the town she'd driven through the other day had either a public library or Internet café. She paused and stretched, lifted her coffee mug only to discover it empty. Again. She pulled a face and went to refill it.

She stood in the kitchen sipping at the fresh mug of coffee. Staring at the screen on her laptop. Interesting, she thought. Did what she'd found explain things, or just make them more complicated? She pulled the cabin door open and stepped out into the shelter of the porch. If she angled herself right, she could see down the path to the lake. The water was churned dark green from the rain. There was something primal about it.

She shivered and slipped back inside. Back to work, perhaps. Then later she needed to take a trip back to the store, grab some more supplies. She checked her watch, wondering what the date was. She'd only intended spending a few days here at the cabin. Things weren't quite going to plan. She rubbed at her neck and took another

mouthful of coffee. She needed something to eat. The coffee was sitting sourly in her stomach now. She glanced again at the computer screen. She didn't want to leave yet. Not just yet.

She decided to make a toast. Take some into Trisha, run her hands over that fine body, wake her up, tell her the latest.

There was a muffled sound. A phone ringing. Michaela stood and listened. It was playing one of her favorite songs from back home. Where the hell was it though? She pounced on her jacket and rifled through the pockets, emerging with the phone just as it got to the chorus line. She pressed the button and answered.

'Michaela, darling, I just had to call and see how you're getting on.'

It was from Allison. The voice gripped at Michaela's insides and stirred them around.

She sat down, legs suddenly shaky.

'Why are you calling?' she managed to ask.

There was a moment's hesitation on the other end of the line. Michaela filled it.

'Aren't you in Paris? I don't know why you're calling. You made everything quite clear before you left.' She closed her mouth and waited. The line hummed a little with static and the rain on the roof was suddenly loud.

Allison cleared her voice. 'I've missed you, Michaela,' she said. 'I've been thinking about the way things ended between us.'

'The way you ended things between us, don't you mean?' Michaela interrupted.

'Abruptly and callously as I remember it.' She dropped her head into her hands, face burning.

'Oh baby, I'm sorry.' There was a sniffing down the line. 'I got scared, that's all. I was getting too attached. Please, can't you let me make it up to you when I get back? I'd love the opportunity to make things better between us.' The voice lowered seductively. 'You're something, special baby, I miss you. I miss us, the way we were together. I want that again. You're under my skin.'

Michaela stood up and dragged her fingers through her hair. She closed her eyes. 'Allison, do you know where I am?' she asked.

'No idea, darling. Does it matter?'

Michaela banged her head against the palm of her hand. 'I'm at your cabin by the lake,' she said. Waited through the delighted reply *I knew you'd love the place*. 'Only Allison, it turned out I wasn't the only one coming to stay here.'

'What do you mean?' Allison replied.

'Do you happen to remember a woman called Trisha, Allison? You see, it turns out you gave her a key to the place too. And I have a feeling you and she had quite a thing going too, didn't you?' Michaela could feel the anger building. 'I come up here, broken-hearted over you and find that I'm just one of your many conquests.'

Allison's voice lost its seductive tone. 'Trisha? Why does she still have a key? Damnit, that little bitch, there's going to be trouble if she's helping herself to my place.'

Michaela's heart sank as the anger drained out of her. She sat down again. 'Shut up Allison,' she said. 'You're not even bothering to deny it, are you?' She sighed. 'I'll drop the key off at your office when I get back. I don't think we'll be seeing each other again, Allison.'

'You better get the key off that little slut too, you hear.'

Michaela didn't answer, just lowered the phone and pressed the off button. She put the phone down on the table and sank her head into her hands.

There was a noise from the doorway. Michaela looked up to see Trisha staring at her.

'You bloody bitch,' Trisha said, her lips twisting. 'What did you have to go drop my name in it for? Just couldn't resist, could you? And it's going to be me who gets in trouble for it. That uppity bitch Allison is never going to let me get away with copying her key and coming here. She'll be all over me like a goddamned fucking rash. And it's your bloody fault.' She turned and stalked away. The bedroom door slammed.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Shit. Michaela could have kicked herself. Why the hell had she gone and mentioned Trisha? She could have kept her dignity and just told Allison no thanks no way. She grabbed a handful of short hair and tugged on it. But no, she had to go and lose her temper all hurt and sorry for herself and drop the both of them right in the shit. Trisha was right to be pissed.

‘Trisha?’ she called, outside the bedroom door. There was thumping around and cursing going on inside.

The door flew open and a furious Trisha pushed past.

‘Save it,’ she said. ‘Whatever you’ve got to say, I don’t want to hear it, Michaela. You had no right to anything about me.’ She spun around and poked a finger into Michaela’s chest. ‘I don’t have anywhere to go just at the moment, remember. Not all of us have the cushy little lives.’ She turned and pulled open the door, walked down the steps and out into the rain.

Michaela stared after her. Then bent and pulled her boots on. She slammed the door behind her and followed Trisha into the trees. ‘Wait there a minute, Trisha,’ she yelled into the rain. ‘Since when do you get to assume anything about my life?’ Her temper was back, banking suddenly into a good head of steam. A tree branch slapped into her face. ‘Shit, damnit, wait up, will you?’ She pushed on, eyes on Trisha’s back. ‘How the hell do you know anything about my life? There’s nothing cushy about it.’ She stopped and wiped the rain from her eyes. This was ridiculous. She sounded pathetic. Shaking her head she started moving again, trying to catch up with Trisha who was power walking her way around the lake. She tried again before she ran out of breath.

‘I’m sorry,’ she yelled over the sound of the rain on the lake. ‘You’re right, Jesus; I shouldn’t have mentioned you to Allison.’

Ahead, Trisha stopped moving. Michaela caught up and stood to drip. She reached out a hand and placed it on Trisha’s shoulder.

‘I’m sorry, okay. Allison pushed my buttons and I shouldn’t have lost my temper and dragged you into it.’

Trisha stared at her, the rain pounding down on the both of them, soaking them through to the skin. Trisha was only wearing a thin top; the water plastered it against her skin. Michaela looked at her, ran her thumb across Trisha’s cheek.

‘Come here, baby,’ she said, drawing Trisha closer. ‘I’m such a dumb ass, I’m sorry.’ She sought the other woman’s wet lips. They tasted of rain. ‘You being here is the best thing that could have happened.’

Trisha took a step back, looked at her. ‘You going to pick up again with Allison when you get back?’ she asked.

Michaela laughed in relief. Pulled Trisha into her arms. ‘Not if you paid me to,’ she swore. She smoothed the wet curls from Trisha’s face. ‘I was thinking,’ she

said. 'Maybe we could see each other? Properly, I mean. Do the dating thing; whatever?'

Trisha's eyes widened. She clutched at Michaela's shoulder and Michaela frowned. 'What's the matter?' Michaela asked. 'Come on, I said I was sorry, I want to keep seeing you.'

Trisha was shaking her head. 'Shh,' she hissed. 'Look, over there.'

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

‘What is it?’

Michaela shook her head and realized how the rain-soaked shadows were crowding around under the trees. She chanced a quick look back but the cabin was long out of sight. There were just the rain and the trees and the lake. And over there, the pale form of a child.

‘Is it real?’ Trisha whispered. ‘Is it a real kid?’

Michaela slid a hand up to wipe water from her face. ‘I don’t know,’ she said. ‘It looks a bit weird, don’t you think. Is it moving?’

She peered through the trees at the smudge of cloth. ‘Where is it?’ she asked. Trisha was shivering. ‘What do you mean, where is it?’

But Michaela was creeping forward. ‘I’ve lost track of where we are,’ she said. ‘Oh God, look, it’s moving.’ Trisha’s voice was horrified. ‘No way that’s a real

kid. That’s a ghost or something, for sure. Shit, I’m seeing a fucking ghost.’

‘Where are we?’ Michaela asked again, talking mainly to herself this time. She grabbed Trisha’s hand and wound in and out of the trees, keeping her eyes on the pale form in the distance.

She cast a glance at Trisha, shivering and miserable. She was wearing dark clothes, though. Good. A quick check of Michaela’s outfit, the usual dark jersey. Except for their white faces, they would blend in.

The forest ended in a neat, manicured line. The lawn of the old hunting lodge lay spread out in a limey green in front of them. Michaela crouched down in the shadows and pulled Trisha down with her.

‘Don’t want to be seen,’ she whispered.

‘Seen by who? Seen by what, for fuck’s sakes?’

But Michaela just shrugged and looked across the expanse of lawn to the child standing in the rain. ‘You must have excellent eyesight to notice that from back there,’ she said. ‘I wish we had some binoculars.’

Trisha leaned close, looking over Michaela’s shoulders. ‘Is it moving?’ she asked. ‘Who is it?’

‘I want to get closer,’ Michaela decided.

Trisha tugged on her sleeve. ‘Can’t without going across the lawn. Even if we went down by the lake they would see us from the house. There’s no bank here. And I don’t want another visit from Officer Friendly.’

Michaela had to agree. But she also had to get closer. She looked over her shoulder at Trisha. Trisha was shivering worse, her lips turning blue from the cold.

‘You have to go back to the cabin,’ she said. ‘You’re going to die of exposure.’ Trisha shook her head, but her teeth chattered. ‘We gotta stick together,’ she said.

A movement distracted them. A figure appeared on the lodge’s veranda.

‘Selena,’ Trisha whispered through gritted teeth.

They watched as Selena picked something up off the table and headed back to the door. Something caught her eye and she stood stock still, hand outstretched on the door latch.

Michaela narrowed her eyes, wishing again for those binoculars. Had Selena seen the child too? The child standing over the other side of the lawn, silent under a tree?

Selena let go of the door and clamped her hand over her mouth. But they heard her cry anyway. Trisha grabbed Michaela by the arm. Selena screamed again and they saw her grope around for support. Then she fainted and they watched her collapse to the floor of the veranda as if in slow motion.

Michaela and Trisha leaped to their feet.

‘Go to Selena,’ Michaela ordered.

‘What’re you going to do?’

Michaela was threading her way through the last of the trees. ‘I’m going to see what that thing is.’

But they stopped short just on the edge of the lawn.

‘Get back!’ hissed Trisha.

Michaela threw herself back into the relative shelter of the trees and onto the ground. Trisha was already on her stomach, face white and hair hanging like rats tails in the rain.

They inched backwards into the shadows, eyes fixed on the lodge. The door had opened just as Michaela was preparing to sprint across the lawn to the figure of the child, and as Trisha was heading over to the fainted Selena. The door opened and Selena’s son stepped out.

They watched him as he gazed down at his mother. In seemingly no hurry he bent down and scooped up her slight frame and took her inside.

Michaela turned to Trisha. ‘Okay. Let’s get out of here,’ she said. ‘And fast.’

Trisha nodded and they scuttled back the way they came, boots sodden and clothes wet and muddy.

‘What do you think’s going on?’ Trisha asked when they were almost back at the cabin.

Michaela shrugged. ‘I don’t know,’ she said. ‘But it’s giving me a bad feeling.’

Trisha was nodding. ‘You and me both,’ she said.

They were on the path leading up to the cabin. Michaela stopped and turned Trisha to her, gripping her shoulders. ‘You have to go get changed,’ she said. ‘I’m going around the other side of the lake, see if I can find anything out about that kid. Or whatever it was.’

Trisha was shaking her head already. ‘No way, Michaela. You’re not going out there without me.’

Michaela gave her a little shake, then kissed her. ‘We don’t have time, and you’re freezing. I’m okay, and I won’t be gone long. I need to have a look,

okay. Something weird is going on and I want to find out what it is. I'll be all right, I promise.'

Trisha looked unconvinced.

'Go back to the cabin,' Michaela said. 'Get warm and dry. I'll be back in an hour, okay?' She gave Trisha a little push, a quick grin, then took off around the other side of the lake at a run.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The rain and premature darkness turned it into a nightmare forest. Michaela had been running for a while, keeping mostly to the lakeside, when she began to seriously doubt her sanity. She was wet, cold and crazy, she decided. So what if something weird was going on? That didn't make it any of her business. It was only the merest chance that she was even here.

She slowed, hand planted against the stitch in her side. The rain was heavy and even the thick woolen jersey she wore was no longer any protection. She hoped Trisha was getting the fire burning hot.

She thought she must surely be getting nearer her destination by now. She'd been walking and running what? Half an hour now? That felt about right. She checked her wrist for the time, but her watch was back on the nightstand at the house. And her mobile phone was on the table next to her laptop.

She grimaced and wiped the water from her eyes. On the screen on her laptop was an article about the lodge she was heading right for. An old article, from the local paper of fifty years ago.

Michaela cut back into the trees. She didn't want to be spotted. She was pretty sure she was heading for a bit of trespassing again. She slithered on the muddy ground and caught herself against a tree. Its bark was unpleasantly thick and rubbery. Like skin, she thought before she could stop herself. She righted herself, got her bearings again and started walking again, more slowly now.

Shivering, she edged her way forward through the forest. A sudden movement startled her but it was only a rabbit bounding away through the underbrush. She heard the blood rushing between her ears and took several deep breaths. It was okay. She just had to go slowly. Make sure no one saw her.

Unless Trisha was right and it was a ghost after all. She thought of the newspaper article on the screen of her laptop back at the cabin. Local Girl Drowns, read the headline. She shivered again, more violently.

There was a flash of pale on her left and she stared hard through the trees. It was the folly, the pool house. This time she shuddered. An evil place.

Amelia Gardiner, aged eight, drowned on Saturday in the pool house on the grounds of her parents lodge at the side of Glimmer Lake.

Why would people even need a pool house when they lived right by a lake? Michaela shook her head and crept past the squat, dirty building. She stopped and listened. Was that laughter? Now she was imagining things. Just because the atmosphere here was bordering on toxic didn't mean it was haunted.

She made it past. Of course, she did. The tree line was ahead of her now. The other edge of the lawn. And somewhere here there was a ghostly figure of a child standing under a tree. Or had been.

She wasn't expecting to find anything. It had taken too long to get here, she knew that. But she also had to look. I couldn't just go back inside without investigating. Her grandmother had used to tease her when she was a girl about being an all or nothing person. Do it and do it properly, or don't do it at all. She shrugged as she remembered. It was just the way she was.

She could see the lodge now. She crouched down, hidden by shrubby undergrowth and looked the place over. There was a slightly better view from this angle. She couldn't see inside but she could see lights on in the room with the French doors to the veranda. As she watched, a figure passed in front of the doors and she shrank back. She would have to be quick.

She inched around the bush, unheeding of the mud. Where had the figure been standing? She leaned back until she could see most of the trees along the edge of the lawn. Somewhere over here, she thought. Yes.

But there was nothing there now. The trees stood sentinel in an almost tidy row, spreading their twiggy branches over the darkness that bunched around their trunks. Nothing there now.

Michaela rocked back on her heels. No, she hadn't expected there would be. She glanced over at the lodge. She couldn't detect any movement. She hoped Selena was okay. That was quite a tumble she'd taken when she fainted. Hopefully, she hadn't knocked her head or anything.

Chewing on her lip as she thought, Michaela checked out the tree line again. Where exactly had the figure stood? She tried to play it out in her mind again. That's it, she thought; from now on I'm carrying binoculars. She rolled her eyes at the thought and moved back into the trees. She'd come up at it the other way. She scooted around and approached the approximate area from behind, hoping to hell no one was watching from the house. She stopped and listened, but the only sound was the rain, still falling in steady sheets. She crept forward again. She progressed slowly from one tree to the next, looking as best she could both at the ground and up in the branches. She didn't know who had said it, but she thought she remembered someone saying how no one ever looked up when they were searching. Well, she wasn't about to make that mistake.

She hit pay dirt halfway along. Another glance towards the house, still no movement, and she crouched down to have a better look at the ground by the tree.

It was messed up. Someone had stood here fiddling with something. There was one particularly good footprint. Michaela gazed at it, forgetting for a moment the rain and darkness and discomfort. She was right. Didn't this mean she was right?

So it wasn't a ghost. It was a person. She was almost disappointed. But hang on, she told herself. Selena's son would have come out to investigate, wouldn't have he? When Selena had told him she'd seen someone out here? Yes of

course. She nodded to herself, but couldn't quite convince herself it was that innocent.

The footprints were right under the tree. Not just wandering around but specifically right under this tree. As though someone had stood here, stood here to what? Michaela looked up. A branch hung overhead. If she stood up and stretched she would almost be able to touch it. It would be perfect, she thought. To hang something from. A dummy dressed in children's clothes, perhaps?

Another sound startled her and she fell backward, scraping her face against the bark of a tree.

'Shit,' she said and raised her hand to her face. It was bleeding. The noise was louder now, footsteps on gravel. She rolled away back into the safety of the shadows and crouched under a bush.

It was Selena's son. Joseph Gardener.

Amelia Gardener is survived by her parents and 6-month-old brother Joseph. Michaela shook her head and watched. Her cheekbone was stinging where

she'd scraped it and she was wet through and muddy. A twig poked into her back. Joseph Gardener walked around behind the house and Michaela heard a car door

slam. She looked back at the house, with its lit windows and wondered if she should go in there and check on Selena. Backing out of the bush she stood and decided not to. Not when she was covered in dirt and leaves like this. She brushed pine needles from her sleeves. Trisha would be worrying now. Especially if she'd read the article on the computer. It was time to get back to the cabin.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

She was freezing by the time she walked up the path to the front door. The door opened before she had a chance to put her hand on it and Trisha pulled her in. The house was blessedly warm.

‘Oh my God, I’m glad to see you. You’ve been gone for ages, I was getting really worried.’ Trisha herded her into the warmth. ‘You gotta get out of those wet clothes. Here, start stripping and I’ll get you a robe and a good hot cup of tea or coffee or something.’

Michaela pulled her boots off, ignoring the mud on the floorboards. Every limb was aching and she just wanted to sit down, warm and dry. And then perhaps sleep for a week. ‘I think I have hypothermia,’ she groaned. She pulled off the rest of her sodden clothes and took the robe and towel Trisha was holding out to her.

‘Go sit by the fire,’ Trisha said. ‘It took me ages to thaw out. What do you want – tea, coffee or something stronger?’

Michaela padded on bare feet over to the couch in front of the fire. She collapsed on it, tucked her feet up and pulled the throw over her. ‘Coffee,’ she said. ‘Coffee would be good, thanks, Trisha.’ She closed her eyes and concentrated on absorbing the heat from the fire.

‘Your face is bleeding.’ Trisha placed the mug of steaming coffee next to the couch. ‘Let me have a look at it.’

Michaela shrugged. ‘It’s nothing. I scraped it against a tree when Selena’s son came out of the house. Gave me a bit of a fright.’ She took a sip of coffee. ‘He didn’t see me.’

Trisha sat down. ‘So was it worth running off like that? I was scared shitless waiting here for you. Anything could have happened and I wouldn’t have known.’ She looked closer at Michaela. ‘Your cheek is still actually bleeding. We’ll have to put something on it.’ She disappeared into the bathroom.

Michaela sat still while Trisha cleaned and dressed the scrape on her cheek. ‘Thanks,’ she said. ‘Now I feel like a real dipshit with a huge freaking plaster on my face.’

‘Serves you right,’ Trisha told her. ‘You shouldn’t have a runoff. I hope it was bloody worth it. I read the crap on your computer. That article about the girl drowning? That’s creepy shit, especially when you think that it happened in that God awful building we found yesterday. I wouldn’t be fucking surprised if that was haunted.’ She shook her head.

Michaela rested hers on the arm of the couch. The warmth from the fire was making her drowsy now that there was no longer any adrenaline pumping through her body. She snaked out a hand from under the blanket and found Trisha’s.

‘It was worth it,’ she said. ‘There’s no ghost. It was a con.’ ‘A con?’

‘Yeah, a hoax or something. Someone had hung something from one of the trees, I’m sure of it. My guess is the something was a dummy dressed in child’s clothing.’

Trisha stroked her hand. ‘Not just a child’s clothing,’ she said. ‘Girls’ stuff. It might have been a long way away but even I could see that it was a little girl.’ She stole a sip of Michaela’s coffee. ‘So now we need to know who would do that. And why.’

Michaela prized her eyes open. ‘Someone’s trying to scare Selena. I’ll bet anything you like on it.’ She closed her eyes and burrowed down into the couch. ‘We need to find out more about the son,’ she said. ‘He gives me a really bad feeling.’

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

It was still raining when Michaela woke up. She wrapped the blanket around her shoulders and stood in front of the window. It was dark out; behind the spilled light from the window, the darkness spread like a vicious stain. Nothing out there, except over near the corner of the cabin, a red light. Michaela strained to see. A tiny red light. She looked around the cabin behind her, where was Trisha?

She pulled open the door and the rain hammered on the cedar shingles on the porch roof. Yes, there was the red light, doing an erratic dance in mid-air.

‘Trisha?’ Michaela said.

The red pinpoint of light went arcing out into the rain. Trisha stepped up onto the porch, blowing out a lungful of smoke and carrying an armful of firewood.

‘Sleeping Beauty’s woken up, I see,’ she said. ‘What’re you doing standing around outside?’ She went inside and took the wood through to the fireplace.

Michaela took one last look outside and followed her, pulling the door securely closed and locking it behind her.

Trisha looked up. ‘You warm enough?’ she asked. ‘I’ve just about finished cooking, too. Though it’s nothing fancy. We need to go get more supplies if we’re staying here any longer.’

Michaela sat down and looked at her bare feet. ‘Do you want to stay here longer?’ she asked. ‘We can go back to the city tomorrow if you like. You can stay with me,’ she added.

Trisha sat back on her haunches. ‘What about Selena and whatever’s going on there?’ she asked.

Michaela shrugged. ‘Maybe it’s not any of our business,’ she said.

Trisha appeared to think about this. ‘It might not be any of our business, sure. But you think something bad is going on and for what it’s worth I agree with you. And we mightn’t have talked to Selena for long, but I liked her.’ Trisha stood up. ‘And if she’s in trouble, then we should help her. No one else is going to believe any of it.’

Michaela looked up at her, standing resolute, hands-on-hips, the firelight turning her hair a dark burnished red. She nodded.

‘Okay,’ she said. ‘We get to the bottom of this, then.’ She stood up too. ‘But it’s not a game any longer. There’s no Sherlock and Nancy Drew here. It’s serious.’

Trisha pulled a face. ‘What’s the warning for? You think I’m too stupid to take this seriously?’ She was shaking her head. ‘I liked that old bird, Michaela, and I want to make sure she’s all right. Those lights the other night, that ghost girl we saw today

– someone’s trying out some serious shit. I know it’s not a fucking game.’

Michaela held out her hands in a truce gesture. ‘I’m worried, that’s all,’ she said. ‘I wasn’t trying to say I didn’t think you could take it seriously.’ She sighed.

‘I’m not sure what to do next,’ she admitted.

Trisha shrugged and backed down. ‘Have something to eat then find us out something about the Gardeners. Especially the sleazy bastard one.’

Michaela blinked, smiled. ‘Yeah,’ she said. ‘What’ve you made us eat?’

‘There was a box of Mac Cheese in the cupboard.’ She threw back a grin as they went into the kitchen. ‘I’m somewhat culinary challenged,’ she said.

They ate the Mac Cheese and Michaela ran a search on her laptop, looking for more information on the lodge, pool house/ folly, and Gardener family. Apart from the article about the child’s drowning, they didn’t find all that much.

Trisha was scrolling through the pages while Michaela made more coffee.

‘This looks interesting,’ said Trisha.

‘What’s it say?’

Trisha was reading. ‘Apparently, our friend Joseph Gardener has been having a bit of trouble lately.’ She looked up at Michaela. ‘Financial trouble,’ she added.

Michaela touched her bandaged cheek. ‘Why does it always have to be about money?’ she asked, dispirited by the thought.

Trisha was reading again. ‘Everything’s always about money, didn’t you know that? It ain’t love that makes the world go round, baby.’

Michaela put the coffee on the table. ‘No,’ she said. ‘I don’t believe that. Money allows you to make choices, but it shouldn’t be the determination for those choices.’

Trisha glanced at her. ‘Whatever,’ she said. ‘Our friend over the other side of the lake won’t be making many choices one way or the other for a while. According to this, his company’s facing bankruptcy. And,’ she added, ‘there’s been a suggestion of his diddling his investors out of their hard-earned retirement funds.’ She looked up from the screen, eyes gleaming. ‘I’d say we just found our motive, wouldn’t you?’

Michaela turned the computer towards her and scanned the page. Yes, it certainly seemed Joseph Gardener was in a measure of deep shit. ‘I think we’re onto something here,’ she told Trisha.

Trisha tipped her coffee mug toward Michaela. ‘Cheers,’ she said. ‘So now we have to figure out what exactly he’s up to and what to do to stop him.’ She put the coffee down, untouched. ‘I don’t see us being able to take our suspicions to Officer Friendly, do you?’

Michaela shook her head. ‘I don’t think that’s an option. Even if we don’t get into the whole gay phobia thing of his. Imagine trying to explain that we’ve been seeing ghosts and we think Gardener’s behind it.’ She shook her head again. ‘No, can’t see that going down well. The Gardener family’s been here forever, and against that, who are we? I’d probably find myself with my visa revoked and getting hustled out of the country.’

‘Right, so the long arm of the law is only going to stand around scratching its ass in this particular case.’ Trisha stared at the article on the laptop screen. ‘What can we do, then?’ she asked.

Michaela dragged fingers through her hair. ‘Don’t know. On the one hand, I’m pretty sure we have this asshole who’s trying either to scare his mother to death or at least into being declared mentally incompetent. And the worst thing is, that even if we catch him in the act of dragging freaky ghost lights through the trees, he isn’t doing anything illegal so there’s no way of stopping him.’

‘We have to make sure that Selena is all right though,’ said Trisha. ‘I mean, we have to.’

Michaela shrugged. ‘How? We get seen near their place Joseph’s just going to call the cops in again, do us for trespass, actually lay charges this time. Our hands are tied.’ She got up and put another log in the fire. ‘Not only that, but we can’t stay here for much longer either. It’s not our place, for starters, and I have to get back soon. I have an appointment with the Dean and work to do.’ She watched the embers explode in sparks and tapped her foot.

Trisha joined her, passed her the coffee. ‘There has to be something we can do,’ she said. ‘Maybe if we were able to talk to Selena. We could find out if there were somewhere else she could go, someone else she could have stay with her, at least.’ She sat down.

Michaela thought about it. ‘It’s probably our best bet,’ she conceded. ‘But how do we get in to see her?’

Trisha shrugged. ‘Same way you visit anyone,’ she said. ‘Roll on up and knock on the door. But we gotta make sure the son is out of the house first.’

It was a good plan and probably all they could do. ‘Okay,’ said Michaela. ‘Let’s do it as soon as possible.’

‘Tomorrow,’ said Trisha. ‘As soon as that bastard is out of the house. We’ll watch and wait all day if we have to. And the next. He has to go out sometime.’ She looked at Michaela. ‘I’m not leaving that old bird alone and defenseless with someone trying to scare her shitless. No one deserves that.’

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Michaela leaned over the basin and scrubbed the sleep out of her eyes. She hadn't slept well. Too many dreams about little girls drowning and lights and laughter out of place in a nightmare forest. She examined her reflection in the mirror and pulled a face. She needed a hair cut.

Trisha was in the kitchen, holding up an empty bread bag.

'We need food,' she said. 'We're all out.'

'Bugger,' Michaela replied. 'Forgot about that with all the excitement yesterday. Why don't you go and get some stuff while I clean up here? Won't take so much time that way.'

Trisha was shaking her head. 'Can't drive,' she said. She saw Michaela's look and defended herself. 'Hey, I grew up in the city, okay? Wasn't any need or money for a car.'

Michaela held her hands up. 'I keep forgetting things are different here. At home, every kid learns to drive as soon as they hit fifteen.' She kissed Trisha. 'Remind me to teach you when we have time.' She wrapped her arms around Trisha's slim body. 'We'll both go get some food, what do you say? Then we'll see if Mrs. Gardener is up for visitors.'

Trisha returned the embrace. 'You're a nice person aren't you?'

Michaela laughed. 'You don't have to sound so damned surprised about it.' She gave her another kiss and let go. 'Now where are my boots, woman?'

It felt like a year since Michaela had stopped in at the store on her way to Allison's cabin on the lake. But the same girl was snapping gum behind the counter and looking bored. She cast a glance in Michaela's direction and flicked one at Trisha. Smirked. Michaela looked away. She was used to it. With her short hair, androgynous clothes, she was aware most people picked her for a lesbian. It was just a little disconcerting in a place like this, where the lurking menace of small-town bigotry practically sat on the shelves next to the Heinz baked beans.

She shook off the thought. Overreacting like usual. She trailed after Trisha, who turned and thrust the wire basket into her hands.

'You're in charge of food,' she said. 'I'll get the beer and meet you at the check out.'

There was no chance to reply. Michaela rolled her eyes and cruised the aisles. She was hungry. Shoving a packet of doughnuts in the basket she tried to keep the rest of her purchases sensible.

In aisle three- sugar, flour, and pre-made stuffing mix, two extra well-stuffed women were gossiping. Michaela went to turn back rather than excuse herself and push past, but then she caught some of their conversations.

The younger one was talking, leaning over her trolley and gripping a box of pancake mix. 'You know her son's really worried about her. He's such a nice man, that Mr. Gardener.'

The older one was nodding her head, setting peroxide blond curls bobbing. 'Oh yes, it's so good of him to come down here and look after her while her house is being fixed. Isn't it terrible what happened - her boiler blowing like that? She's so lucky to have got out unharmed.'

They were both nodding now, a pair of fat hens in the farmyard. Michaela took a packet of cake mix off the shelf and pretended to read the instructions.

'So what does Doc Harper think is wrong?' This was the older.

'I really shouldn't be saying you know, patient privacy and all that, but since it's you, well what harm can come? He says she's showing signs of dementia, poor old thing. Keeps talking about stuff that doesn't make any sense.'

Michaela's ears were burning. She put the cake mix back on the shelf and chose another at random.

'What sort of stuff?'

'I don't know. Doc just said she was rambling and it was such a shame to see a strong woman brought so low.' The woman looked up and caught Michaela's eavesdropping. She nudged her friend and they pushed their trolleys away.

Michaela stayed where she was, thinking. It was a cunning plan, she thought. Pretty much foolproof. Scare the old woman, get her raving about nonsense, play dotting son, get the doctor on your side. She shook her head. Diabolical. That's what it was.

Trisha appeared at her side. 'What's taking so long?' she hissed. That silly cow at the checkout keeps staring at me. I gave her a wink and my best smile and now I think she's about to call the police.'

Michaela groaned. 'Jeeze Trisha, ever heard of keeping a low profile?' Trisha grinned. 'Not in my genetic make-up, babe. Sorry. Can we get out of here now?'

Michaela dropped the box of cookie dough into the basket and walked with Trisha towards the checkout. The girl scanned and packed their groceries without taking her eyes off Trisha, as though she expected her to climb over the counter and force herself on her. Michaela pulled her wallet out of her pocket. Trisha was playing up to it, she had to admit, standing there, hip cocked provocatively, a tip of a tongue tracing her lips. Michaela paid for the food and shoved Trisha out the door.

'Are you always this much trouble?' she asked as they dumped the bags in the back seat of the car.

Trisha laughed. 'Oh come on, how am I supposed to resist? She was starting to look scared.' She was cackling now. 'She deserved it. Confronting her prejudices and all that jazz.'

'Sure, except that girl in there is never going to see it like that. All you achieved is making her feel justified in thinking different equal dangerous.'

Trisha stuck out her lip and sulked. 'It was just a bit of fun. I get sick of being treated like a freak.' She looked over at Michaela. 'And I don't even particularly look gay. How do you cope with it?'

Michaela shrugged. 'I avoid places like this,' she said. 'And when I'm in places like this, I keep a low profile.'

Trisha was shaking her head. 'It's the twenty-first century. People gotta learn.' 'Sure, but right here, right now, they don't gotta learn on us.' Michaela scanned the shops along the main street. Yes, there was a hardware store, a little mom and pop

outfit. She sighed. Turned back to Trisha.

'I'm going to the hardware shop for a minute. Grab us that packet of doughnuts, will you? I'm starving. Won't belong.'

She found two nice, solid torches (*flashlights*), hefting them in her hand. Perfect. Light, and if it came to it, protection. God, she hoped it wouldn't come to that. She'd heard how those women had spoken of Joseph Gardener. They'd practically creamed their pants just thinking about him. She went looking for a pair of binoculars.

Paying for the gear, she headed back to the car. She'd fill Trisha in as she drove.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

They stood on the jetty. Sometime during the night the rain had stopped but the trees kept up a steady dripping and the lake at their feet was a deep, dark shadow.

Michaela turned to Trisha. 'Which way round should we go, do you think?' Trisha was gazing out over the lake. She pointed to the right. 'That way,' she said. 'A better view of the place from that angle. The garages and drive and stuff.' She turned and looked at Michaela. 'I hope they've locked that horrible building. It's going to give me the creeps just walking past it.'

'It's back in the trees. We won't even have to look at it.' Michaela took a deep breath. Patted her pockets. Cell phone, check. She picked up the backpack at her feet and shrugged it on. Inside it was the new torches and binoculars, a flask of coffee and some sandwiches. They could be waiting for hours for Gardener to leave the place. Thought Michaela, the whole plan was a bit wishy-washy. She looked out over the lake. At least it wasn't raining.

They trudged alongside the lake without speaking. Michaela took her phone out and switched it to silent. Not that she supposed anyone would be calling her. She tucked it back into her pocket regardless.

Trisha looked over at her. 'What if he doesn't go out?'

Michaela shrugged. 'Don't know. Play it by ear, I guess.' She stopped walking. 'What's the matter?' Trisha asked.

Michaela pulled off her woolen cap and tugged her fingers through her hair in her habitual gesture. 'What're we doing?' she asked. 'I'm not entirely sure this is a good idea. We don't know what we're getting ourselves into here.'

Trisha turned around and stared at her. 'We're saving an old lady from her nasty predator of a kid. That's what we're doing. We agreed it was the right thing to do. What're you getting cold feet now for? It was you who put the whole thing together. If you hadn't bothered to suss out the fact those lights and shit were a con, that old woman would be a sitting duck.'

Michaela groaned. 'That's the problem, Trisha. What if I'm wrong? What if I've got it all completely wrong? Here we go sneaking around, poking our noses into stuff that has nothing to do with us. What if I'm wrong?'

Trisha walked over to Michaela. Looked her straight in the face. 'Michaela, what if you're right?'

Michaela squeezed her eyes shut a moment. Then she nodded. 'Okay, let's go then.'

Trisha nodded. 'Okay?'

'Okay.'

They turned and headed along the lake. Soon the beach narrowed and disappeared and they had to walk amongst the trees instead. The damp air settled around them.

‘It’s a bit bloody quiet in here,’ said Trisha.

Michaela nodded. ‘Creepy isn’t it? A good setting for ghosts, when you think about it.’

‘Especially at this time of year,’ Trisha agreed. ‘I’ve only been here before during the summer. It’s a great spot then. Spent most of my time swimming and sunbathing.’

‘I would have been afraid of getting caught,’ Michaela said.

Trisha shook her head. ‘Nah, easy enough to check the good Doctor’s schedule. Wasn’t a problem.’

They subsided into silence as they got closer to the old pool house and lodge.

They stopped when the pool house squatted in front of them through the shadows.

‘I hope the bloody door’s been locked now,’ Trisha whispered.

Michaela nodded. There was something unhealthy about the place, the way it jutted out of the black earth like a plant growing in a cellar, pale from lack of life. She shuddered.

‘Let’s keep moving,’ she decided.

There were no signs of life at the lodge. Michaela and Trisha planted themselves behind a bush and debated their next move.

‘Let’s just stay and watch a few minutes,’ Michaela said. ‘If nothing’s happening, one of us can scoot around and check out the garage, see if there are any vehicles there. At least we’ll know then if Gardener is home.’

Trisha was nodding agreement. She fished around in the backpack and pulled out the binoculars. ‘Let’s have a squizz then, shall we?’

Michaela tried to get comfortable. She was taller than the bush, had to crouch, contorted, to stay hidden. At least she sure hoped she was hidden.

‘Can you see anything?’ she asked.

‘Yeah, there are lights on upstairs, but that’s all I can tell you. No sign of anyone moving around. Maybe it’s just Selena there and she’s resting or something.’ Trisha scanned the property. ‘Can’t see the garage from here, which is a bummer.’ She handed the binoculars to Michaela. ‘I’m going to go see if the car’s there. If he’s out, then we knock on the door and see if we can talk Selena to getting out of here. Good enough?’

Michaela hesitated. ‘I think we should wait a bit longer. See if anyone is moving around.’

Trisha checked her watch, shook her head. ‘It’s already getting late. There’s nothing to wait for.’ She moved away. ‘I won’t be long; you stay here and keep an eye out.’ She disappeared into the trees.

Michaela peered after her for a moment but the shadows and undergrowth just here were too deep. She turned back to look at the house. Looking through the binoculars, she scanned the windows. Lights were on upstairs but there was no movement anywhere. She moved the binoculars down to the lawn and drive. Trisha had been right; the garage was out of sight. There was no sign of anyone. Michaela checked her watch. It felt like hours since Trisha had crept away into the trees. Coming up twenty minutes. She should have been back by now. It should only have taken her, what? Five minutes? Maybe ten?

Michaela stared through the binoculars again. There was no movement. Nothing had changed. She gritted her teeth and strained her eyes. She would have to go have a look. Something must have happened. Where was Trisha?

She reached for her backpack, tucked the binoculars inside and threaded an arm through the straps. Turning she prepared to slink around to the lodge, approaching it with extreme caution.

She caught a movement in the trees. Trisha! At last. She took a step forward and something hit her. Pain blossomed in her head, and everything went black as she sank to the ground.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Her head was hurting. Stirring, she groaned; her shoulder was hurting too and there was something wrong with her hand. Consciousness returned piecemeal, the overwhelming sensation is that of pain. She shifted and raised her hand to her head. Oh my God, it was throbbing. And her hand was wet, and something smelled bad.

She forced her eyes open, squinting in the dim light, disoriented. Where was she? What was going on?

‘Trisha?’ she called, her voice croaky and unfamiliar to her ears. She rolled over onto hands and knees and the ground gave way under her. She kicked out, thrashing wildly. Dear God, she was underwater. Water swamped her mouth. She choked and coughed, but only swallowed more water. She twisted, frantic. Blinded and choking she struggled to kick upwards. Which way was upwards? Something touched her hand and she grabbed at it, a reflex.

It held onto her, and she felt herself being pulled upwards and in a moment her head was breaking above the water. She coughed and heaved in desperate lungfuls of air. While whoever had hold of her grabbed her more firmly and hauled her out of the water.

She lay on her side, chest heaving, still coughing. Her eyes were tightly closed. She concentrated on breathing. Her mouth tasted awful, a terrible, brackish, stagnant taste. She spat out the slime that seemed to coat everything and leaned over suddenly and vomited.

She groaned. Oh shit. ‘Trisha?’ she gasped. ‘Trisha?’ ‘Yeah, I’m here. It’s all right now, you’re okay.’

Michaela shuddered, her whole body convulsing. She opened her eyes and Trisha’s face loomed over her, pale and wide-eyed.

‘Holy shit, that was close,’ Trisha said.

Michaela rubbed a hand gingerly over her face. ‘What happened?’ she asked. ‘Where are we?’ She was lying on some sort of cold hard floor, and her head was in Trisha’s lap.

Trisha’s hand smoothed her hair.

‘You almost drowned, is what happened. If I hadn’t come round right when I did, I hate to think what would have happened.’

She bent over and planted a kiss on Michaela’s cold cheek. ‘But that bit was the good news. We’re in the goddamned pool house.’

Michaela struggled into a sitting position and looked around. The stagnant pool was right beside them and at the sight of it, twisted green with slime and unearthly plants, she wanted to scream.

‘Fuck!’ she said. ‘Tell me I didn’t just fall into that? Oh God, tell me I didn’t’ She leaned over and spat again. ‘Where’s the fucking door, let’s get out of this hell hole. How’d we get here anyway?’

Trisha stood up, a hand to her head, and walked up the stone steps to the big doors. The light filtering through the branches of the trees above the broken dome sent shadows skittering around her feet. Something splashed in the water. Michaela cringed and staggered to her own feet, almost tripping over them in her hurry to follow Trisha out the door.

But Trisha wasn't opening the door. Michaela's head was throbbing and her probing fingers found a lump the approximate size and shape of Russia. Why wasn't Trisha pulling the doors open so they could get out of here?

As if Trisha had heard her, she turned around. 'They're locked,' she said, and her face was even paler, a white blur in the dim light.

'Locked?' Michaela gaped at her.

Trisha sank on the top step. 'We're trapped in here,' she said. 'It was that bastard, Gardener. He found me snooping around the garage and he knocked me out.' She touched her head. 'Must have hit me with something, brought me here.' She looked up at Michaela. 'Then he must have gone looking for you.'

Michaela was having trouble processing all this. 'Locked?' she said again. 'We're locked in here?'

Trisha sighed. 'Try for yourself,' she said.

Michaela did. She tugged at the heavy doors. They didn't budge. She pulled back at them, putting all her weight into it. Still no joy. And her head was screaming in pain. She stumbled down the steps and vomited again. A purging of brackish water and foul bile.

She sat down beside Trisha and shivered, finally becoming aware of the fact she was wet from head to toe, her clothes completely soaked. She was cold.

'We have to get out of here,' she said. 'I'm going to die of exposure if we don't get those doors open.' Her teeth were chattering.

Trisha looked around the interior of the building they were trapped in. 'What about the window over there?' She got up and walked on unsteady legs around the edge to the window, taking care not to go anywhere the stagnant well of water in the middle. 'My head hurts,' she complained.

The window was too high. 'If I stood on your shoulders I might be able to get out,' she said.

Michaela judged the height. 'Yeah, and break your neck tumbling down the other side. Not happening.'

Trisha walked back to their seat at the door. 'What are we going to do then?'

Michaela closed her eyes and tried to stop shivering. She wrapped her arms around herself and felt something pressing against her ribs. Of course! She should have thought of it straight away.

She tugged her phone out of her pocket and held it up in a shaking hand. She passed it to Trisha.

'You see if it's working,' she said. 'My hands are shaking too much.' Trisha took it, handling it like something precious. 'It won't work,' she said,

even so. 'It's had a dunking in the water.'

'Try it anyway,' Michaela said.

Trisha wiped the phone on her shirt and pressed the buttons, peered at the display. 'No,' she shook her head. 'It's too wet.' She turned it over and began taking it apart. 'I'll see if I can't dry it a bit.' She removed the battery and began wiping the interior of the phone.

Michaela rocked back and forth, trying to warm up. Trisha looked up from what she was doing and concern creased her face.

'Take your wet jacket off,' she said. 'You can wear mine. It might make a bit of difference.'

'Then you'll just get cold too,' Michaela said through teeth clenched to stop them chattering.

Trisha shrugged. 'I'm ok. I'm not wet through.' She took her jacket off and helped Michaela put it on.

The relief was immediate. Michaela watched Trisha fiddling with the phone a moment then cast a wary glance around the building.

'Where's our bag?' she asked.

Trisha looked up. 'Don't know. You had it, didn't you?'

'Yeah, so it must be here somewhere. The gardener wouldn't have left it out there.' She got to her feet and began combing the debris for the backpack. It only took a minute to find. Michaela held it up in triumph.

'Hot coffee coming up,' she said.

Trisha only nodded. 'You wouldn't happen to have a hairdryer in there too, would you? This phone could do with a bit of a blast to dry it out.'

Michaela sank on the step again. 'Do what you can anyway,' she said.

Trisha nodded. 'I'm kicking myself for not bringing my phone,' she admitted.

'But it has no credit on it, so I didn't see the point.'

Michaela thought about that for a minute then opened the backpack and took out the coffee. 'We were hard to know we would get knocked out and locked in this place.' She looked around and shuddered. 'God I hate this place.' She looked at the dank pool and cringed. No way had she almost drowned in that water. If they got out of this she was going to need every shot known to mankind.

She poured two cups of coffee. Trisha was cleaning and drying every inch of the phone she could reach. She put it back together and held it up.

'Here goes nothing,' she said.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Michaela held her breath.

‘You’re not going to believe this,’ Trisha said, her voice full of wonder. ‘It’s bloody well turning on!’ She stood up and grinned at Michaela as the phone powered up. ‘Baby, let’s get out of here. Hell, I never thought it was going to work.’

Michaela was limp with relief. ‘It was in my breast pocket,’ she said. ‘And the jacket’s lined with sheepskin. It can’t have been too badly wet.’

Trisha was almost dancing around. She leaned down and smacked a kiss on Michaela’s lips. ‘I love you, baby, we’re going to get out of here!’ She looked back at the phone. Frowned. ‘The signal’s too weak. The call’s not going through.’ She looked around. ‘Hell, we need to get a better signal. Damn!’

She held the phone up in the air, squinting at it. ‘You’re going to have to give me a boost so I can hang out that window and see if I can get a signal.’

Michaela nodded. At this point, she would do just about anything to get out of here. Except go back in that water. She followed Trisha around the perimeter of the building and crouched down under the window.

‘I’m going to take my boots off first,’ said Trisha, sitting down and unlacing her boots.

‘Good idea,’ agreed Michaela, eyeing the heavy soles.

‘How’s your head?’ Trisha asked her.

‘Bloody awful. Yours must be the same. We’ll have a concussion, you know? God knows how long we were out for.’

‘Okay, hold still, I’m going to stand on your shoulders. You’ll have to stand up slowly and I’ll lean against the wall to help. I hope you’ll be able to lift me.’

Michaela hoped so too. Somehow they had to get a signal on that phone. She gripped Trisha’s ankles and started to stand. It was slow going, and her head felt as though it were swelling with the effort. But they made it.

‘Can you reach the window?’ Michaela asked. She couldn’t lookup. ‘Yeah, it’s right here. Let me check the phone.’ She swayed a little and

Michaela tightened her grip on her ankles. ‘Woohoo! We have a signal. Yeah honey, let’s blow this joint.’

Michaela was trying to hold still. ‘Who are you going to call?’ she choked out.

‘Police be a safe bet, don’t you reckon. They can get us out and arrest that bastard for knocking us out and locking us in here.’ She called directory and asked to be put through to the local police. ‘Hope to shit we don’t get Officer Friendly,’ she said as she waited to be put through.

Michaela listened as Trisha explained the situation to the person on the other end of the line.

‘Yes, that’s what I said already. The bastard knocked us out and locked us in the goddamned pool house. My girlfriend almost drowned and you need to come let

us out of here right now and arrest the shithead.’ There was a pause as Trisha listened. ‘Yes. Gardener. Yes, that’s what I said, why aren’t you listening to me?’ Another pause. ‘Fine. Just get someone down here to open these fucking doors, will you? We’re locked in.’ She snapped the phone shut and slithered down off Michaela’s shoulders.

Trisha handed the phone over. ‘Perhaps,’ she said, ‘you should have called them. I don’t think Officer Friendly believed a fucking word I said.’

Michaela sighed. ‘Perhaps,’ she said, ‘if every second word you said wasn’t fucking, you might have more luck.’

Trisha threw her a dirty look and they walked back around to the doors. ‘The guy’s an asshole. How am I supposed to be polite to an asshole? Fuck me.’

Michaela couldn’t help it, she snorted and started laughing. ‘Just tell me someone’s coming to unlock the door,’ she said and draped an arm over Trisha’s shoulder as they sat back down.

Trisha nodded. ‘Yeah, they’re coming. But I don’t think they’re going to be in a huge hurry.’ She looked around. ‘Do we have any more of that coffee? And weren’t their sandwiches too?’

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The shadows were gathering in hungry clusters by the time they heard voices outside.

‘Oh God, about time,’ Michaela said, standing up and stretching her aching limbs. ‘We’ve been here for hours.’

Trisha was trying to peer through the gap in the door. ‘What did I tell you? Assholes. They could have managed it a bit quicker.’

There was a scrabbling at the door and they heard a key scrape in the lock.

Trisha was pulling at the door before the key had finished turning.

Michaela picked up her backpack and shrugged it on. Grabbed her jacket and followed Trisha out into the waning afternoon. It had begun to drizzle and the tiny clearing in which the pool house stood was draped in a fine mist like a gossamer spider’s web. She walked down the steps and stared at the two men waiting for them.

Trisha was pointing to Gardener and shaking her head. ‘Tell me why that asshole’s not locked up?’ she said.

Their Officer Friendly stepped forward. ‘The door wasn’t locked,’ he said. ‘And Mr. Gardener here didn’t have anything to do with you being stuck in there.’

Gardener broke in. ‘He’s right. The door was merely jammed. If you two had been thinking straight instead of making up these wild stories you would have figured that out and been out long ago.’

Michaela stared at him and Trisha was shaking her head.

‘No way,’ Trisha said. ‘We heard you just then unlocking the door. And you knocked me out. I saw you, God damnit, just before you bashed me over the head with something!’

Gardener spread his hands out. ‘No key,’ he said. ‘The key to this place has been lost. How could I have just unlocked the door?’ He turned to the policeman. ‘I’ll get a locksmith here tomorrow, Bill. Get a new lock put on it.’

Michaela had had enough. ‘We know you’re behind this,’ she said. ‘You attacked us and locked us in there. That’s the truth.’ It was her turn to address the officer. ‘Why aren’t you listening to us? Why would we be lying about it?’

The officer shook his head. ‘I don’t know what you two think you’re up to, but Mr. Gardener here was at the hospital today with his mother. So it couldn’t have happened the way you’re telling me.’ He looked away from Michaela. ‘Joseph?’ he asked.

Gardener nodded and looked at the women. ‘Ladies,’ he said. ‘I’ll leave it to Bill here to escort you off my property. I need to see my mother. She’s not well.’ They watched him walk away. Officer Friendly stepped forward. ‘I’m going to

take you back to the Curran’s place,’ he said. ‘You will be packing your things and then I will be following you out of town.’ He started walking back towards the lodge.

Trisha looked at Michaela. 'Is that even legal?' she asked. 'Escorting us out of town like that? It's like something out of an old movie.'

Michaela shrugged. She took hold of Trisha's hand and they followed the police man.

Back at the cabin, Officer Friendly stood impassively in the kitchen while they sorted and packed their things. Michaela carried their newly purchased groceries down to the car, not saying a word as she walked past the policeman. Trisha followed with their bags.

They stood by the car. Michaela fished her key out of her pocket. She'd changed into clean clothes and bemoaned the fact that she hadn't been able to shower. She could still smell the stagnant water in her hair.

'I wish we'd been able to clean up properly,' she told Trisha. 'Allison isn't going to be impressed when she sees the state of the place.' She looked up at the little log cabin with the friendly yellow light on, glowing a beacon in the gathering darkness.

Trisha shrugged. 'What can we do about it? Officer Nazi there isn't going to let us do some housekeeping. He wants us out.'

Michaela nodded. 'I'll go lock up, then,' she said.

The police cruiser's headlights followed them for five miles down the road, dazzling Michaela in the rear vision mirror. She drove in silence, waiting for the cruiser to turn back. Eventually, it pulled over and sat on the road's verge, headlights like eyes watching as they drove away down the road.

Trisha was the first to speak. 'He was lying through his teeth,' she said. 'You heard him turn that key in the door as well as I did. It was locked.' She fished a battered packet of cigarettes out of a pocket. 'Sorry babe, but I'm gonna have one of these. The day someone tried to kill you is not the perfect day to quit.'

Michaela reached out a hand and stroked Trisha's cheek. 'It's been some sort of a day all right,' she said. She checked the rear vision mirror. Nothing behind them now but the dark unwinding road and trees either side. She slowed and started looking for a side road.

'What're we doing?' Trisha asked, cranking down the window a notch and blowing smoke outside.

'We're turning around.'

Michaela felt Trisha looking at her in the darkness. 'We're going back?' Trisha said.

Michaela nodded. 'I have such a bad feeling. Something's going to happen. We can't let that bastard get away with it. And if he thinks we're out of the way, what's going to stop him?'

Trisha blew out another lungful of smoke. 'You're crazy,' she said. 'What if he catches us again? We won't be dealt with so lightly this time.' She was silent a minute. 'What makes you think he's going to act tonight?'

Michaela found a dirt road and pulled into it, stopped the car. She turned and faced Trisha. 'I saw his face,' she said. 'When he turned to walk away. He had the look of someone congratulating themselves on a plan well laid. I'd bet anything that tonight's the night.' She gazed out into the blackness that blanketed the night. There wasn't even a moon out. 'He going to kill his mother tonight,' she finished.

Trisha pinched out her cigarette between finger and thumb and turfed it out the window. She touched Michaela's arm.

'Okay,' she said. 'Let's go stop him.'

Michaela grasped her fingers and squeezed. 'Just like that?' she said. 'You're going along with it just like that?'

Trisha squeezed back. 'Just like that,' she agreed. 'Let's go do it.'

Michaela stared at Trisha in the dark car next to her. She put her hand behind Trisha's neck and drew her forward into a kiss. 'You're amazing,' she said and nodded. 'Let's go do this.' She backed the car out of the side road and turned back toward the lake.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Michaela drove straight back the way they came, hoping like hell they didn't meet the policeman on the way. They didn't meet anyone. The road was as dark and empty as she could have wished for. She turned off the road that circled the lake and drove back down the lane that served as a long driveway for the cabin.

'Do you think it's safe to park back here?' Trisha asked.

Michaela edged the car around the side of the cabin and out of sight as best as possible. 'Don't know,' she replied. 'But I don't know where else we can park. At least here we know where we are.'

'And how to get where we need to go.'

'That.' Michaela pulled on the parking brake and turned around to grope on the back seat for the backpack. It still had the torches in it.

Trisha watched her. 'Have you thought about what we're going to do if Gardener is up to something tonight?'

Michaela sat back up with the bag in her hands. 'Make sure you have your phone this time.'

'Sure, but there's no money on it.'

Michaela scratched her head. It wouldn't be a problem if they only needed to call emergency services. She thought for a moment. 'Pass it here,' she said, fishing out her wallet and pulling her credit card from it. She took the phone and topped up the account from her credit card. Handed it back. 'In case something goes wrong and we get separated.'

'I don't have your number,' Trisha reminded her.

'Oh for fucks sakes. Pass the damn thing back here.' She programmed the number in. 'Speed dial one, okay?'

Trisha nodded and put the phone in her jacket pocket. 'Okay. All right. So how are we going to catch him?'

Michaela got out of the car. 'We'll play it by ear. See what he's up too, then decide.'

Trisha joined her at the side of the car. 'That's not much of a plan, Sherlock,' she said.

Michaela held out one of the torches. 'It's all I have. You coming?'

Trisha took the torch and they turned to face the darkness. 'Okay,' she said. 'Yeah, I'm coming.'

At least it wasn't raining, Michaela decided. That was about all they had in their favor. 'We must be crazy,' she said.

Trisha touched her arm. 'I think we are,' she said. 'But we're committed now, right?'

'Right. Yeah. Just because it's fucking dark as death and we're chasing a murderer.' Michaela sank into silence as they skirted the lake, listening to the gravel crunch under their boots. Trisha had her torch switched on, shading the

bulb so there was only a patch of light at their feet. It was far too soon when they had to climb away from the lake and into the trees.

They stumbled along the path they'd made from their last few trips. Trisha, eyes on the patch of light at their feet, smacked her head on an overhanging branch.

'Shit!' she swore, dropping the torch. 'Now I have a headache on top of a headache.'

Michaela stepped forward and held Trisha up. She looked at Trisha's head in the dim light from the torch. 'I don't think it's bleeding,' she said.

Trisha leaned against Michaela a moment. 'I'm okay,' she said and stood up. 'Let's get this over with; see what there is to see. I want a hot bath and a soft bed.' She put her face next to Michaela's. 'Promise me a hot bath and a soft bed is waiting for me.'

Michaela kissed her then bent to pick up the torch. 'Consider it done,' she said. 'Let's keep going.'

Michaela wiped the slick of sweat from her face as they continued. She felt sick, her head still throbbing from the bump she'd received earlier. She was aware they both had concussions and probably should be safe and warm at home. Maybe even in the hospital for observation. After all, they'd been knocked out for how long? At least ten minutes, she reckoned.

She tripped on an exposed root and cursed under her breath. Trisha was walking in front, the torch tucked under her jacket so only the ground right around her feet was lit. Michaela hoped she was okay. She hoped they were both going to be okay.

Something caught her attention. Looking around she felt a sense of disorientation. 'Did you see that?' she whispered to Trisha, tugging on the back of her jacket to get her to stop.

Trisha turned around. 'See what?' she asked.

Michaela shook her head. 'Switch the torch off. I'm sure I saw something.' There was a click and the light went out. They stood huddled together in the dark, Michaela straining her eyes to find what she was sure she'd seen.

She grabbed Trisha. 'There, look,' she said.

It was another of the ghost lights. In the distance, dipping in a breeze that wasn't there. Michaela was holding her breath. A child's laughter rang out into the night.

'That is so fucking creepy,' Trisha whispered.

Michaela nodded in the dark. 'I can't believe I was right,' she said. 'Come on, let's move closer.'

'I'll have to turn the flashlight back on,' said Trisha.

They turned and crept forward, skirting the lake's edge, dodging between the trees. 'The pool house is over there somewhere,' Trisha whispered after a few minutes.

‘And the lodge over there. Let’s find somewhere we can hide, watch what’s going on.’

The ghost light was still moving in the trees. Michaela guessed it was across the lawn and in the trees on the other side of the lodge. Where they’d found that sticky residue only a few days ago.

Trisha tugged at Michaela’s arm. ‘Down here,’ she said. ‘There’s an old log we can stand on.’

‘They slid down the bank to the lake. It was steep just here and they crouched on the log, the water lapping underneath them. The ground was eye level. There was no reason they would be seen from here.’

They watched the ghost light, trying to shut out the sound of the child’s laughter. It was an eerie sound. Michaela wanted to block her ears. She supposed it was designed to be heard by Selena and anger pulsed through her. What a cruel thing to do to someone. Anyone. And the fact that someone could do this to their mother – it was too heinous to consider. Whatever she and Trisha did, they had to stop this.

Trisha nudged her. She was looking through the binoculars. ‘Someone’s moving inside the house,’ she said. ‘I can’t see very well, they haven’t turned the lights on, but there’s movement.’

They both jumped. Michaela’s foot slipped off the log and she lost her balance, soaking her leg past the ankle.

‘Fuck that gave me a fright,’ she said. The ghost light had done its exploding trick. ‘Should have expected it, I suppose.’

‘Shh,’ Trisha hushed her. ‘Someone’s opening the door.’ She paused. ‘It’s Selena, I’m sure of it. She’s standing out on the veranda. She’s wearing a dressing gown.’

Michaela peered over the bank. She could see Selena too, the dressing gown was some pale color.

‘What do we do now?’ Trisha asked.

‘Nothing yet,’ Michaela replied, feeling the adrenaline begin to course through her. ‘We need to see what’s going to happen next.’

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

They didn't have to wait long. Amidst the laughter, a figure materialized and began to cross the lawn. It was heading right for them.

'Shit,' said Trisha. 'Stay down.'

'What's Selena doing?' Michaela whispered.

'Freaking out,' Trisha told her. 'And I bloody well would be too. Fuck that's horrible.'

Michaela couldn't have agreed more. What was worse, it looked so much like what it was meant to be – a ghost of a small girl. It had to be a doll, but it was glowing horribly. White skin, white hair, and an odd, greenish glow, as if newly risen from some damp, watery grave... Michaela pinched herself. It was a con, she reminded herself, and swallowed down the sudden taste of the slimy water from the pool house.

Trisha's fingers clamped down on her arm. The ghost doll was coming closer. Drifting about a foot above the ground, but heading their way. And as it came closer they saw something else.

A dark figure was walking behind it. A figure dressed from head to toe in black. Michaela stared over the bank at it. She could barely make him out even from this close. He was lucky the night was so dark. Moonrise was an hour or more off, she guessed, and the sky was cloaked in clouds.

The figure and Michaela had no doubt whatsoever that it was Joseph Gardener under there, had a balaclava pulled down over his head, and gloves on his hand. There wasn't an inch of exposed, pale skin anywhere. And his arm was outstretched, holding out a doll that looked just like a dead little girl.

Got him.

He passed about three feet in front of them and they both tucked their heads down out of sight. Michaela didn't think he'd be looking in their direction, but she wasn't taking any chances. Trisha felt the same. In the darkness, their hands found each other and they held on tight. Michaela wouldn't have been surprised if her heartbeat would give them away. She held her breath.

The two figures, one real, one not, passed away into the trees.

'Where's he going?' Trisha asked.

Michaela had her suspicions and she hoped to God she was wrong. 'Is Selena following?' she asked then looked for herself.

Mrs. Gardener, in her dressing gown, was hurrying across the wet lawn after the ghostly girl.

‘She thinks it’s her daughter, doesn’t she? How could anyone do that to their mother?’ said Trisha, and there were anger and horror in her voice. She started scrabbling up the bank. ‘We have to follow them.’

Michaela climbed up onto solid ground too and they crept back into the trees, Michaela wincing with every twig cracking under their feet.

‘He’s going to the pool house, isn’t he?’ Trisha was talking so quietly Michaela could barely hear her. ‘Where the little girl drowned. What an asshole.’

Michael shushed her. ‘Can you see them?’ she whispered.

She felt Trisha shake her head. ‘Me neither. We’d better move quickly.’

It was hard going, groping from tree to tree. Michaela didn’t dare to turn the light on. They needed a surprise on their side. After what seemed an age, the pool house loomed out of the darkness in front of them.

‘The doors,’ hissed Trisha.

They were standing wide open. A soft shuffling noise came from inside the building. Michaela grabbed Trisha.

‘Quickly,’ she said. ‘Now.’

Michaela bounded up the steps, forgetting completely how her head hurt and her muscles ached. She hesitated in the doorway, then flung herself down the steps, aware of Trisha right behind her.

Gardener stood at the bottom of the steps, the limp form on his mother at his feet. He was holding a flashlight and Michaela watched in horror as he raised a booted foot and kicked the lifeless body of his mother into the dark mouth of the pool.

Michaela screamed, taking the last few steps at a leap, and without stopping to think, she dived into the pool. The water closed around her in a nightmarish embrace and she thrashed out blindly, groping for Selena. She must be somewhere.

Somewhere here. Lungs beginning to burn, Michaela cast around, getting tangled in weeds. Somewhere. Somewhere, where?

Her hands closed on cloth. Relief flooded through her body and she pulled Selena close, wrapping her arms around the unresponsive woman’s waist and kicking for the surface.

Gasping, gagging, she towed the old woman to the side of the pool. She was aware of light somewhere but concentrated on getting Selena up out of the water. The bottom of the pool was too slimy to get a grip on as she tried to live Selena out of the water. She was going to have to get out first and pull her out.

Hands reached down and latched onto the woman’s dressing gown, heaving her from the water. They came back and grasped Michaela’s pulling her from the water for the second time.

‘Trisha!’ Michaela knelt on the edge of the pool, looked around for Gardener. He lay slumped prone on the floor of the pool house, face downwards. Trisha was standing between them. She waved the torch at Michaela and grinned.

‘It was payback time,’ she said.

Michaela couldn't help it. On hands and knees, soaking wet, she started grinning. Until she saw Selena, still lying motionless. 'Selena,' she said and crawled over to her. She checked the woman. 'She's not breathing,' she said. Trisha was shaking her head. 'We have to get her out of here,' she said. 'Gardener might come round at any time.' She bent down and did something to him. A moment later she stood up, holding up something. 'The key,' she said. 'We'll lock him in here.'

Michaela didn't bother to reply. She heaved herself to her feet and bent down to pick up Selena. She didn't like the way the old woman's head rolled against her

shoulder. She hurried up the stairs and out into the dark clearing. She lay the woman down on the ground and checked her airways. Not breathing. Damn it. She tipped her head back, pinched her nose and blew three breaths into Selena's lungs.

Then she leaned over her chest and began compressions, counting them aloud. Trisha came to her side. 'He's locked in. Is she okay?'

Michaela shook her head. 'Ambulance, police,' she said and breathed into Selena's lungs again.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Michaela kept on with the compressions while the medics set up their equipment. She only let them take over when they were ready with the defibrillator. She went and stood with Trisha, exhausted.

‘I hope they save her,’ Trisha said.

‘If she lives,’ one of the medics said, overhearing her, ‘It’s because of your friend’s efforts.’

Michaela didn’t reply. She bent over and planted her hands on her knees. Trisha watched her, concerned, and led her to the steps where she could sit down.

‘What’s happening in there?’ Michaela asked.

Trisha put her arm around her. ‘Police are in there with him now. He came around while you were busy. Started screaming blue bloody murder.’

Michaela indicated the scene before them, with Selena and the Medics. ‘Do they believe this is his doing?’ she said. ‘Do they believe us?’

‘I think you lent some kind of credence to our story by working on Selena the way you did. Besides,’ she said. ‘Officer Friendly is here with his boss this time, and his boss seems like he’s interested in finding out just what is going on.’ She pulled Michaela closer and hugged her. ‘You’re soaked. Again. We need to get you back so you can change and get warm. And I feel like I could sleep for a month.’

There was a commotion inside the pool house and Joseph Gardener appeared in the doorway, flanked on each side by a uniformed officer. Michaela and Trisha stood up and moved out of the way. The gardener was handcuffed and glared at the both of them as he was led past.

‘I guess they believed our story,’ Trisha said as they watched him walked away. Another officer came down the steps and stopped in front of them. He cleared

his throat but a triumphant call from one of the medics interrupted him.

‘She’s breathing!’ he said. ‘She’s going to be all right.’

Michaela closed her eyes, light-headed. Yes, they did it. Trisha’s arm tightened around her waist. The policeman cleared his throat again.

‘Looks like you girls saved the day,’ he said. ‘I’ll get one of my men to drive you to wherever you’re staying. If you can come into the station in the morning so we can make a formal statement. I think that will be good enough for now.’ He reached out and shook their hands, his face serious. ‘Well done,’ he said and walked away, carrying a child-sized doll that still glowed slightly.

Trisha and Michaela followed the medics with Selena on the stretcher. At the house, they slid into the back seat of Officer Friendly’s cruiser.

‘Back to the cabin, please,’ said Trisha. ‘Quite a turnaround, don’t you think, Officer?’

He was scowling in the front seat. Michaela could see his face in the mirror.

‘Guess we were right, after all, weren’t we, Officer Asshole? There’s a lesson to be learned in all this, I’m sure,’ Trisha said in her sweetest voice. Michaela leaned back against the seat and watched the moon rise in a bare patch of sky over the lake. She smiled and linked her hand in Trisha’s.

THE END



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