
THE
DREAM
LISTING
CRAIG MARTELLE
& ANGELIQUE FAWNS

The Dream Listing

A Psych Thriller in The Echo Loon Lake Series

By Craig Martelle
And Angelique Fawns

OceanofPDF.com

Craig Martelle Social

Website & Newsletter: https://craigmartelle.com

Amazon: https://www.amazon.com/author/craigmartelle

Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/AuthorCraigMartelle/

Angelique Fawns Social

Website: https://www.fawns.ca/

Newsletter: https://angeliquemfawns.substack.com

Amazon: https://www.amazon.com/~/e/B07ZHJGCX1

Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/amfawns

This book is a work of fiction.

All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Sometimes both.

The Dream Listing is Copyright © 2026 by Craig Martelle and Angelique Fawns

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of Craig Martelle.

Version 1.0

Cover by Juan Padron

Editing by Mia Darien of LKJBooks.com

Published by Craig Martelle, Inc,
PO Box 10235, Fairbanks, Alaska, 99710
United States of America

OceanofPDF.com

DEDICATION

To those who support any author by buying and reading their books, we salute you. We couldn't keep telling these stories if it weren't for you and for the support team surrounding us. No one works alone in this business.

The Dream Listing team Includes

Beta Readers and Proofreaders—with my deepest gratitude!

James Caplan

Kelly O'Donnell

John Ashmore

OceanofPDF.com

Contents

DEDICATION
CHAPTER 1
CHAPTER 2
CHAPTER 3
CHAPTER 4
CHAPTER 5
CHAPTER 6
CHAPTER 7
CHAPTER 8
CHAPTER 9
CHAPTER 10
CHAPTER 11
CHAPTER 12
CHAPTER 13
CHAPTER 14
CHAPTER 15
CHAPTER 16
CHAPTER 17
CHAPTER 18
CHAPTER 19
CHAPTER 20
CHAPTER 21
CHAPTER 22
CHAPTER 23
CHAPTER 24
CHAPTER 25
CHAPTER 26
CHAPTER 27

CHAPTER 28
CHAPTER 29
CHAPTER 30
CHAPTER 31
CHAPTER 32
CHAPTER 33
CHAPTER 34
CHAPTER 35
CHAPTER 36
CHAPTER 37
CHAPTER 38
CHAPTER 39
CHAPTER 40
CHAPTER 41

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 1

Eighteen Years Ago

The housekeeper put one trembling hand over her mouth, fighting the urge to vomit. Her heart beat double-time as her mind raced. The most important chore on her list and she'd almost forgotten.

She took a few steps down the stairs toward the dock, but then heard a clanking echoing up from the water. Was the harbormaster home already?

Her legs almost gave out as she shivered. Not now.

It was so late in the day, and she was supposed to have dealt with the boathouse hours ago. In fact, the instructions were explicit. Do the boathouse first thing in the morning.

Windex the windows, mop the boat, tidy the life jackets.

But she'd put it off because it was chilly in the mornings, the wind coming from the north. The humidity added an icy edge to the breeze. Even now, she felt an ache in her bones.

Every day was a fight to keep up.

"You're only thirty," she chastised herself, rushing down the stone steps from the log-and-beam home. "Too young to feel this dang old."

She couldn't avoid it any longer. She followed the pink glow from the setting sun to the lake's edge, stumbling down the rough staircase with her bucket of supplies banging against her thigh.

The Homeowners' Association rules dictated that all non-resident workers had to be off the property by 5:00 p.m. or else immediate termination. She ground her teeth together as she took the steps two at a time. It was stupid to even have a residents' association. Wasn't this the true north, strong and free?

But rules were rules, and she knew what they were. She hoped no one would care if she left while it was still daylight. The surge of adrenaline would help her finish quickly and get on the road.

She drew in ragged gasps of air. Judging by how low the sun was in the sky, it was almost 7:00 p.m. She wiped the sweat off her brow as she hopped off the last stone chunk. She couldn't emphasize enough how much

she needed this job. Her daughter had just turned eight and ate enough for an entire hockey team.

The housekeeper began with the first thing she saw, the filthy back window of the boathouse. She pulled the cleaning fluid from her bucket and attacked the streaks until she could see inside. And groaned inwardly.

Something was missing.

The big rowboat wasn't in its slip. Sound drifted from the dock, close and hushed. Voices, low and male. The clunk of something heavy set down on metal. She peeked around the edge of the structure, trying not to make a sound. If she could clean and leave without being caught…

Her stomach sank when she saw an older man working with a young man at the end of the dock. Then she blinked, trying to make sense of what was there.

There were three people, but the third was wrapped in chicken wire. A woman, pale and naked, constrained with the galvanized mesh.

The missing rowboat bobbed against the side of the metal dock, a rhythmic thud that was as loud as the beating of her own heart. The men pushed their captive into the boat, and the woman screamed. A muffled, dull shriek, but the housekeeper knew she'd heard it.

The poor woman was alive.

The housekeeper covered her mouth, holding back her own scream. What was going on? She knew she should go but couldn't stop staring. For her, time slowed, and her legs felt like they'd rooted into the boards beneath her feet. Her mouth hung open in the terror of a voiceless scream.

Was that the harbormaster? She wasn't sure in the terror that gripped her. He nodded to the young man as he undid the knots on the mooring line. The younger man jumped into the boat.

A new kind of chill rushed through the housekeeper. One that froze her limbs and stabbed her brain. Every instinct told her to run. Ignore this. She couldn't take on two grown men. The way she felt right now, she couldn't take on a strong toddler.

The dock creaked under her sneakers as she turned to go.

The older man looked up and caught her eye.

“Hello, Jenny,” he said casually. “You should have thought longer and harder before deciding to break the HOA rules.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 2

MARLA

Present Day

I pushed my kayak into the fast stream of the creek, cringing as water seeped in from the bow. Hopefully, my latest patch job would hold.

Monday morning paddles were the perfect way to start a new week, and there was a storm forecast for later this afternoon.

It didn't take long before I left the trailers and the broken-down cars behind and hit the narrows of the rapids. My kayak bucked and skimmed by rocks, with light shrieks from the plastic, and I went into the zone: that place where you have to concentrate on every stroke. Shifting my body with the current, I paddled through the froth, nimbly avoiding the jutting granite chunks.

“That would leave a mark,” I mumbled to myself when I’d managed to scrape by.

This bit of wildness was nature’s way of limiting access to what lies beyond.

Nirvana.

After bobbing over the final bubbling rapids, my boat shot into the lake. I powered along the shoreline, ignoring the water sloshing around my feet. As long as more water stayed out than in, this kayak would stay afloat.

It only took a few moments until the narrows were behind me. The only sounds now were the relentless whispering of my dreams, the odd call of a loon, and, of course, the dip-splash of my double-bladed kayak paddle.

Breathing deeply, I pulled in the smell of pine and dirt and something undefinable. Something so fresh that only an area unsullied by smog, gasoline from boats, and exhaust from commuters could create. This was pure and beautiful.

Unlike anything else in my life.

But things were going to change. *I am going to manifest it*, I vowed to the universe right then and there, even though my commitment was to

myself, to be the best version of me that I could be. That I would get what I wanted by taking it with my own two hands.

As I headed past the untouched shoreline, there was a rustling in the vegetation, and I stared in anticipation. A Canada goose burst out at me, squawking. Her beak was wide open, her wings pounding the water, disturbing the lake's calm and mine. I jerked the kayak right, toward the middle of the lake. They were jokingly called the Canadian cobra chicken, and they were assholes. You didn't want to encroach on their territory, especially when they had half-grown goslings. I could see three of them vying for breakfast among the water lilies.

I had no interest in fighting a goose. They were perfectly happy to attack. Seemed like it was in their nature. Elbows up, I didn't scare that easily!

"All right, Mama," I cooed, hoping to soothe her. "You're just protecting your babies."

I had that brief moment of angst I always had when I saw a mother being a good mother. I hadn't been raised with one. Mine disappeared when I was in elementary school. The court ordered that I be raised in a group home in North Bay.

Oliver Twist, move over. Being hungry was the tip of the horrors I'd had to forget from that child mill.

When I turned eighteen, I inherited everything my mother had owned. The sum total of $500 in the bank and a shitty trailer in Bog Creek Park.

But you could change your destiny. Every dip and swish of my paddle was meditative, luring me into a state where I could envision a perfect future. There was a reason I'd hoarded tip money, commuting the long distance to North Bay, one hour each day, so I could get my real estate license.

My life was changing. Flowing like weedy Bog Creek did into beautiful, clear Echo Loon Lake.

My shoulders ached, and despite the cool air, there was sweat trickling down my back. But it felt good. You had to become comfortable with being uncomfortable. That's how I learned to stay one step ahead of my so-called peers, even though I had none. I had grown up knowing only obstacles. As an adult, the decision to put that behind me was mine alone. I had to look

forward. The rear view showed a terrible place that threatened to haunt every thought.

I paddled, searching, as always, for little peeks at the beautiful homes tucked behind the trees. It was miraculous how the houses blended with their environment. The architecture flowed seamlessly with the pine trees, rock, and shoreline. Several had kayaks or canoes resting on their docks, but no speed boats or Sea-Doos. Nothing to destroy the peace of perfection.

This wasn't an ostentatious community, like the Hamptons or the Muskokas. The wealth here was subtler. Log-and-beam cottages or Cape Cod-style homes that had been there for many years. I continued on, admiring the rocks jutting out of the surreally blue-green water. For a moment, you could imagine you were in the Caribbean. Most Northern Ontario lakes had a black look to the surface, as though they were hiding secrets.

My favorite home was a little different from the others. It sat up higher than the rest, the sun reflecting off the copious glass facing the water. It was a pre-fab Viceroy build, with its dramatic A-frame and panoramic windows. As I neared, I blinked at the glare off the metal dock. When my eyes adjusted, I envisioned myself sitting in one of the two Muskoka chairs positioned perfectly for sunsets.

And then my breath caught. More than a daydream. It struck me as a summons.

There was a sign perched between the Canadiana loungers. Usually, I stayed well off the shore, but I had to know what it said. I paddled closer…

For Sale by Owner. 705-555-2345.

Written in block letters with a red Sharpie. FSBO was a way to avoid realtor fees and something rich people didn’t do. Why was this one different?

Excitement traveled up my spine and ignited my brain. This was a closed community; the only way in or out was the single-gated road, or along the dangerous narrows I’d kayaked.

I knew I could never afford to buy a house like this.

But I was a real estate agent now, wasn't I?

Maybe there was a way I could be the listing agent if I could convince them their by-owner effort would take too much time and energy. I was trained and licensed to sell houses. We'd simply raise the price to cover my commission. I could advertise their house much better than they could with a handwritten sign on a lake that was closed to outsiders.

A cloud passed over the sun, casting a shadow across the exclusive homes in their pine shrouds. It couldn't be a coincidence that the house I coveted the most happened to be…

For Sale by Owner.

This was a sign from the universe.

This was an opportunity.

And if there was one thing Marla Briggs never let pass her by, it was opportunity.

My adrenaline was intense. Normally, I was calm. That came from getting jerked around so much in life. I splashed some water on my face to cool down as I thought about my best approach. That newish license was sitting on the dirty Formica counter in my trailer. I was a real estate agent, and I had to envision my face on the sign. My last two sales were tiny properties in the rundown portion of North Bay. My commissions barely covered the gas for my car and a couple meals. This was a big step up. But I was ready for it.

For Sale, by Marla Briggs. Lake Homes Realty.

I was with a brokerage in North Bay, and the signs were a beautiful coffee brown. That would stand out nicely against the metal of the dock.

I performed a J-stroke and turned the kayak around, catching sight of a tall man with salt-and-pepper hair standing outside the only boathouse farther down the lake. He made a finger pistol and air-shot me, ending with his arm straight over his head.

What in the holy hell? A sudden chill gripped me.

Maybe they didn't like strangers, but that was because they had not yet met me. I lit the fire within to reward my soul. *I'll be back, my friend. You'll see*, I thought.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 3

I wanted to finger-shoot him back, but I didn't.

Obviously, with the whole gated road thing, visitors were discouraged. But that didn't give anyone the right to intimidate me. I'd had enough of that at the group home and got several black eyes when I finally stood up for myself. Maybe the rich owned those cottages, but they didn't own the water. No matter how hard it was to get here. I waved as cordially as I could.

"This is a private lake," he yelled.

I considered giving him a piece of my mind but decided to ignore him. Telling the air pistol sheriff off would feel good in the moment, but I wanted that listing.

"Sorry, I'm on my way out," I called and fought the current back to Bog Creek Park.

The water inside the kayak was now deeper. I groaned. There was no way to manifest away the leaks in the stupid thing. Navigating the rapids backward was far harder than going forward. It was the most punishing part of the trip, and probably the reason you'd never see a day-paddler tackling this route.

I headed in, fueled by anger and desire. A man who didn't want me standing too close to a home that did. I refused to quit when I hadn't even started. I powered the kayak forward with each stroke, unleashing what I was capable of. If they could only see, those miscreants I was grouped with. Ne'er-do-wells with no future and no hope. I had both in my hands. It looked like a kayak paddle, and the rapids looked like ol' salty's face on one side and his finger gun on the other.

Even with my internal motivation, I barely made it. My arms ached, and my back screamed its discontent. I yanked the boat through the weeds and onto the muddy bank, where I collapsed to gather my ragged breath.

Time to make a plan.

First things first, I had to borrow a car. If I showed up in my rusty Pontiac Sunfire, no one was going to believe I was a successful agent. I bit my lip. I had some room left on my credit card. Maybe I could rent myself a luxury ride.

After securing the kayak on the rotted wooden rack, I grabbed my phone from the trailer and climbed onto the roof of the moldy old thing. Old twigs crackled underfoot as I stood up on the edge. I could just make out the blue-green of Echo Loon Lake. The scenery couldn't be beat this far north, but the cell reception suffered.

Balancing carefully, I stuck my phone in the sky, and sure enough, I got a bar.

There was a rent-a-car place in North Bay, and I asked for their fanciest luxury car. I made a little fist-pump when they told me they had a Porsche on the lot. When I asked how much the rental was for a day, they told me five hundred dollars. I gasped. But I could just do it.

"We'll need a major credit card in your name. There'll be a three-thousand-dollar security deposit held until the vehicle is returned."

My stomach dropped as I double-checked my credit card limit on the app. There wasn't enough room for a security deposit on a Kia, much less a luxury vehicle.

Damn it.

I put the phone down, frustrated. I could not show up at Echo Loon Lake in my rusty Pontiac. A wave of disappointment settled over me as I sat on the trailer's roof.

"Marla, what you doing up there?"

I looked down and groaned. It was the trailer park Casanova, Earl.

Earl looked exactly like you'd think the hottest guy at a place called Bog Creek Park would. He rocked the Canadian mullet. Short on top, party at the back. Of course, he'd been the best local hockey player growing up. He had a bit of a limp now. And the tats. Gorgeous, full-arm tats. I mean, he was sexy as hell, and I'm not going to lie, I might have indulged in that for a night or two, but he wanted more, and that wasn't for me. He also thought the trailer park was the epitome of one's life. I most assuredly did not aspire to live there one minute longer than I had to.

"Hey, Earl. How are you?" I was always cordial. Burning bridges was for people who had other options.

"Want me to come up there? You looking for some company?" He gave me a wink. "Got some cold Bud right here."

As much as I'd have liked to sit on the roof with my ex and drink a Bud, I had more important things to do. Like figure out how I was going to get a nice car, and—

I stopped.

Earl wasn't only the best-looking thing in the trailer park. He drove a vintage 1969 Ford pickup truck. He loved that thing more than he loved anyone. He'd certainly loved it more than he loved me, and he was nicer to it, too. If he'd treated me the way he treated that pickup truck, we might still be together.

But we weren't. Old news. Plus, my future wasn't ending up preggers in a trailer park selling mosquito-infested swamp lots. I needed a stockbroker or an oil tycoon for a husband in the life I envisioned.

All this manifesting was making my mouth dry.

I grinned at him. "I'll come down and have that beer with you."

Sometimes you've got to mix a little honey with the spice to get what you want in life.

I shinnied down the trailer, Earl oh-so-gallantly helping me down by putting his hands on my butt.

"There you go, little lady. Be careful."

Normally, I would have mule-kicked him.

"Thanks, Earl. I've got it. Where would little old me be without a man like you?" He was also easily manipulated when I put my mind to it, but I didn't want to get in too deep. Don't cross into the danger zone.

We walked together to his trailer, where he had a nice shady spot set out under an awning. I did realize it was only noon and far too early to be drinking beer.

But I had my eye on that baby-blue pickup truck sitting under a do-it-yourself garage awning.

I gave Earl my best smile.

And I did have a good smile.

Genetics, I guess. Not that I remembered too much about my mother or ever met my father. But I had white, straight teeth.

That wasn't true. I remembered a lot about my mother.

“Earl, can I borrow your truck this afternoon?”

He frowned as he drained the last swallow of his beer.

“Why? Is there something wrong with your Pontiac? You know I can fix that for you.”

I smiled at him again. If it wasn’t for Earl, the Pontiac probably would’ve been off the road years ago.

“No. I need something that makes me look...” I searched for the right word. “Like I have some presence. Like I have some money.”

He looked over at his baby-blue pickup.

“You think driving my old jalopy will do that for you?”

I shrugged. Not wanting to make his big head any bigger, but... I told him the truth. “That’s an antique truck. Usually only owned by rich men and eccentric collectors.”

His brows furrowed. “Which do you think I am? Rich or eccentric?”

“Neither, but people don’t think pragmatic and resourceful when it comes to classic rides.”

He laughed.

“Come on. Can I borrow it?”

“Okay.” Then a mischievous glint lit up his face. “What’s in it for me?”

“My everlasting gratitude.”

“Ugh.” He rolled his eyes. “I’ve got IOUs for everlasting gratitude from you that’ll last me from this life into the next four. Too bad I don’t believe in reincarnation.”

I didn’t even know what to say to that. “Come on, Earl. Can I borrow it? I’ll even put gas in it.”

“Don’t bother. She’s filled up already. And you know I only put premium in her.” He wagged a finger at me. “Take good care of her.” He looked at me again. “You gonna tell me what you’re doing with her?”

“Nope. I don’t want to jinx it.”

He let out a deep sigh as I leaned over and gave him a little kiss on the cheek.

“Thanks.”

I went back to my trailer and put on my best suit. A pink number with a blazer and pencil skirt. The one I'd used for all those job interviews I didn't get.

Turns out a high school education can't get you very far, even in North Bay. I'd applied for a few office jobs, but they wanted a university degree. Selling real estate was easier. You just had to complete the courses and pay the fees. Of course, when I began my certification, it was the tail end of COVID, and realtors were raking it in like millionaires.

Now they were just as hungry as the rest of us. But if I could get an exclusive listing, like one at Echo Loon Lake, that would pay me more than what I made now.

Which was exactly nothing.

I'd lost my last waitressing job by slapping a handsy guy at exactly the wrong time. Marla of the past had no impulse control, but new and improved Marla rocked power suits and sold exclusive listings.

Manifesting. See? It was already working.

I dabbed on a little lipstick and mascara, liking what I saw in the mirror. A lady in a pink suit with shiny brunette hair pulled into a no-nonsense bun and a face that was pretty, but not too pretty.

Earl gave a low wolf-whistle when I grabbed the keys from him. "Don't you clean up nicely."

My cheeks pinkened, and I gave him a little nod as I climbed into the pickup. When I turned the key, the truck fired up and settled into a low growl. Earl was good with cars and trucks. He could have been great if he saw them as an opportunity. That would always mark the difference between people like him and people like me.

I had to hand it to Earl. He kept it in good shape. Even the insides were immaculate, and I ran my hand over the soft, cream leather. Hoping I still remembered how to drive a stick shift, I pushed in the clutch, slipped the transmission into first, and bumped my way out of Bog Creek.

Even though I could kayak there in half an hour, it was nearly an hour's drive to go all the way around the lake. They'd certainly made it difficult to get into that community.

I cranked up the tunes, enjoying some old country music as I envisioned whoever answered the door saying “yes” before I even finished my pitch.

Signing the paperwork, putting up my sign, and then seeing my bank account hit five digits. All clear in my mind’s eye. All it would take was to make that first sale.

And really, I was doing them a favor. Nobody was going to see that handmade sign sitting on a private lake that hardly anyone could get to. With my help, the listing would be online, plus maybe some advertising in the *North Bay Nugget*.

I was happily envisioning all of that when I came around the last bend.

And all my dreams came to a crashing halt.

The gate.

How was I going to get through it?

Saying a little prayer, I took a deep breath and pressed the buzzer. A deep voice, slightly distorted, boomed out of the speaker.

“State your business, please.”

“Hi. My name is Marla Briggs.”

“What did you say your last name was?”

“Briggs. Marla Briggs.”

There was a pause on the other end.

The voice, a bit deeper and more impatient, repeated, “State your business, please.”

“I’m a real estate agent, and I’m—”

Click. The speaker went dead, and I pulled a few hairs out of my bun. I needed to get in, so I stabbed at the button again.

Nobody answered, and I could feel my cheeks burning red.

I smoothed my skirt and judged the height and length of the fence. There were little spikes along the top of the main metal gates and that horrid, curled razor wire on the chain-link fence extending into the forest on both sides. Even if I could climb the fence in my heels, that wire would rip my outfit to shreds.

What was that phone number on the sign again? I closed my eyes and pictured it. 705-555-2345.

I got my phone from the truck and dialed. Nothing. No reception. I clenched the useless cell and fought the urge to throw it into the woods. Instead, I put the phone into my purse and noticed the bright striped Hudson's Bay blanket sitting on the passenger side of the bench seat.

When things are meant to be, the universe provides.

The iconic wool item was thick and could be flung over the spikes. That just left my high heels. I definitely couldn't climb in them. Good thing Earl had left a pair of construction boots sitting under the glovebox.

They were enormous. At least a size thirteen. I slipped them on and pushed my Louboutin knockoffs through the iron bars of the main gate. The red paint on the bottoms was only chipping off a little bit because I rarely wore them. They were my 'closing the deal' shoes. And so far, I'd only used them for picking up boyfriends. Now, they were needed for my first real estate deal.

The boots kind of ruined my look, but I only needed them to get from this side to the next. I draped the blanket over the sharp spikes and swung one leg over, rolling over the top and dropping to the ground. In the same motion, I pulled the blanket down with me. It had a couple of rips in it, but my skirt was intact.

It took only a minute to put my fancy footwear back on and throw the boots and blanket over the fence into the bed of the pickup truck. I groaned. Maybe I was on this side of the fence, but my purse and phone were still in the truck.

Along with my new business cards.

No going back now. Earl's truck was parked safely on the shoulder of the dirt road, and I was officially inside Echo Loon Lake. Hopefully getting out would be easier. Most of these gates opened automatically to exit. You only needed a keycard to get in.

I fixed my bun, which was now half out, and set my sights on my favorite house.

The peak of the A-frame was just visible over the tallest trees.

The Viceroy.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 4

I took a deep breath once I was on the other side of the gate and began walking, only teetering slightly in my knockoff high heels.

“You can do this. You’ve got this.” I was my own best cheerleader, at least in my own mind. I’d had to be from a young age.

Things were more perfect on this side of the fence. The scent of the pine was fresher. The trees reached for the sky in perfect conformity, standing like soldiers in steadfast ranks.

My blood tingled in my veins as energy coursed through me. It was like a Group of Seven member had painted this vista. Ontario wilderness idealized by Canada’s most famous artists. Evergreen forest broken up with granite rocks alongside a pristine lake was art gallery perfection.

I’d been walking for almost ten minutes, and I hadn’t even seen a cottage yet on the winding road. For a second, I wished I’d kept the construction boots on, if only for this stretch. My fake Louboutins were rubbing the back of my feet and there’d be blisters there in no time. Clenching and unclenching my fists, I geared myself up.

“I am a multimillion-dollar real estate agent. The listing is coming to me. The sale has already happened. They’re going to love…”

The roar of a chainsaw erupted from the forest to the right, followed by an ominous crack. An enormous spruce teetered and like a slow-motion train wreck, it started to fall. I watched in horror as it came toward me. I tried to dodge, but with my heels, there was no finesse in my attempt. One of the branches caught me across the rear and flung me several feet, down onto a patch of moss.

Sharp pain lanced across my calf, and my ankle throbbed. A branch, seconds after the rest of the tree, bounced inches from my temple, and I screamed as needles sprayed my head. Blinking, I tried to clear the black dots from my eyes. The pain in my calf intensified. I twisted around and saw a bit of blood trickling down my leg. I gasped with the memory of the near miss and the pain of how close it had actually been.

A deep, gravelly voice called out, “Ma’am, are you okay?”

I rolled over and eased to a sitting position, blinking as an apparition came out of the forest. For a second, all my aches and pains were forgotten as I looked at this god of a man. His black T-shirt was damp with sweat, and chainsaw chaps were strapped over his jeans. Huge muscles. Black beard, black hair, and a slightly crooked nose. He wasn't conventionally handsome. More what I called sexy-ugly. His pale blue eyes were a little too close together, and his lips were a little too full.

Maybe I was dreaming. Maybe I was dead right now, lying in the forest, killed by a falling tree, and this was my angel of death, come to guide me to Heaven.

He reached me and crouched down until he was eye-level. "Are you all right? Can you get up?"

"Yes, yes, I'm fine."

He sucked in a sharp hiss of breath when he saw the blood seeping from my leg. "Ooh. That doesn't look good. Can I see it?"

I nodded, and as he picked up my calf, I couldn't help myself; I swooned. The heat of his palm on my skin was doing strange things to my heartbeat. With one hand, he slipped off my heel. "These are not practical footwear, ma'am. Not for a walk in the woods."

"Stop calling me ma'am. I'm Marla."

"Okay… Marla. I'm Parker." He furrowed his eyebrows and pressed his full lips into a line. "One minute."

Parker spun, as nimbly as a coywolf, walked up the small hill to a satchel, and pulled out a metal water bottle, offering it to me. My tongue was like sandpaper. Either because I was thirsty or because of the proximity of this alpha male. I gulped, the water cool and soothing as some dribbled onto my chin. He gently used one thick finger and wiped it away.

A bit bold, wasn't he?

When the water hit my stomach, I immediately felt a little better. Calmer.

I gave him back the bottle, and he dumped some of it on my cut, which was hardly bleeding anymore. As he pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and tied it around my leg, heat rushed into my cheeks.

Was Parker an employee or someone who could afford to live in a place like Echo Loon Lake? If he was rich, he was too good to be true. A man who could fell a tree, tend to a woman's wounds, and smell like sandalwood and cedar while soaked with sweat.

I was already thinking ahead and knew exactly what to manifest. Not only was I going to sell this house and make a huge commission, I was going to capture the heart of this incredibly sexy man.

And then my thoughts went completely off the rails when I saw it.

There was a ring on his left hand. Gold, simple, and obviously expensive. He was married.

I broke eye contact and swallowed hard. I couldn't have a day quite that perfect, could I? That wouldn't be a balanced universe. If you were going to manifest, you at least had to keep it in the realm of possibility.

"There. The cut's not actually that bad." The man tightened the handkerchief one final time. "Now, tell me why you're here? This is a closed community. You could have been killed."

"I had an appointment."

He frowned. "I didn't see anything on the books today, or I would have been there at the gate, rather than thinning the woods."

I tried to distract him from the whole trespassing thing. "What were you cutting that down for, anyway? It doesn't look diseased."

He widened his eyes. "You think it grows like this naturally?"

It took me a moment, and then I saw how the pines were planted in perfect rows. Almost a geometric chessboard. Each one positioned for maximum privacy without crowding the next. It wasn't nature's work at all. It was a man-made construct, dressed up to look wild.

"I'm surprised they let you do that," I said. "Isn't this whole area environmentally protected?"

He just shrugged. "Seriously, though, ma'am. I don't know how you got past the gate."

"Marla, not ma'am, and a woman's got to have some secrets."

He threw his head back and roared with laughter. "A woman with mystery. I kind of like that." He gave me a toothy grin. "Do you think you

can get up? Are you all right?" He reiterated his point. He'd dropped a tree on a person. Trespasser or not, that meant a certain amount of negligence on his part. It behooved him not to have to explain how he injured an innocent bystander.

I stood, gasping softly as he brushed the twigs and dirt off me—especially as his hands ran over my backside. Was it my imagination, or did they slow just a little?

Parker looked at me, all business again. "I think you're okay. Can you walk?" He put a hand on my elbow.

I took a couple of steps. My ankle was a little sore, and my calf throbbed, but I could walk to the nearby house for sale. I decided that I was okay, even if I did get a little stiff later. He could simply owe me for not causing him any grief. "I think I'll live." I gave him a little smile.

"Okay. Well, who are you visiting? I really do need to know why you're here. As much as I'd love to let gorgeous women roam through our forests, it can be dangerous, as you can see. And it's definitely against the Echo Loon Lake Association rules." He shrugged. "It's my job to uphold them."

I tilted my head coquettishly. "Do you live here or just work here?"

"Both." He ran his hand down from my elbow and squeezed my hand. "And your last name?"

"Briggs. Marla Briggs."

Unlike whoever had answered the buzzer at the gate, he didn't seem to react to it.

"Well, Miss Briggs, it's been a real pleasure. And I do apologize again. It's pure luck I didn't schmuck you with that spruce." He gave my palm a final squeeze and released my hand.

"Was it pure luck?" I said. "Or was it meant to be?"

A moment of confusion crossed his face, then he laughed it off. "Look, I've got to finish getting this tree off the road, or I'd offer you a lift. Where are you headed? It's either back to the gate or you give me the real reason you're here."

"I have an appointment." My muscles tensed, and I thrust my chin up a little. "To talk to the owners of the house that's for sale."

This was the make-it-or-break-it moment, and I held my breath.

Something in Parker's face changed. He reared back a little, as though he'd been slapped, and the teasing light in his eyes went dark. I crossed my fingers and tried to keep my expression confident.

He rubbed his jaw. "All right, then. Be on your way. But watch for falling trees."

Speaking almost too quickly with relief, I asked, "Are you going to be cutting down more?"

"No." A pause. "But there are dangers in these forests. Even ones you can't see."

"Okay," I replied with some hesitation. The darkness that fell over him threatened to consume me, and I needed to stay sunny and positive. It was a trait needed by all successful realtors.

"You have a nice day, ma'am. The house for sale is just around that bend, past the first two cottages, and you'll be there."

"Thank you."

I slipped my shoe back on and even though my ankle throbbed, I managed to keep a steady gait as I strode away from the hard pack beneath the trees on a beeline for the safety of the road. A light peal of thunder clapped to the north, and the sky was darkening in the distance. I'd have to get a move on.

Though I was still optimistic, something in my perception had changed. The shadows of the trees seemed less protective and more ominous. The perfect rows of evergreens were manipulated to be that way. That lizard part of my brain was on high alert. But that was okay.

We all have secrets, don't we? Darker parts of our personalities. I could accept that Echo Loon Lake was the same. What rich person didn't have secrets? Mine were nothing compared to theirs, but that didn't matter. Only the house for sale. I would be the agent for that listing. Period.

The whir of the chainsaw, once again, disrupted the peace in its short sprints of sharpened metal versus wood. Parker must have been cutting the spruce into manageable lengths for firewood or disposal. I felt a little dizzy, and I couldn't tell if it was the lingering effect of meeting Parker or the fact that a tree had nearly killed me.

When the saw finally fell silent, I heard a tiny chirp. A little yellow bird was lying on a mossy rock. My heart leaped to my throat.

I fed all the stray cats around the trailer park. If I saw a lost dog on the side of the road, I'd pull over and help find its owner. And yes, if I saw a baby bird knocked out of its nest, I'd try to put it back.

Its tiny body shivered in my palm as I examined it. The baby seemed uninjured, and I believed it was a pine warbler. It had the typical yellow color with black-and-white striped wings. There was a nest a few feet away. Had it been tossed from the felled spruce?

I stroked the soft down on its back. "You and me both, little bird. That tree almost got the both of us. But we're survivors."

I picked up the nest, made of little twigs and dried branches, and set it in the crook of a nearby pine, as high as I could reach. The baby warbler settled comfortably back into it and chirped with reassuring strength. Hopefully, the mother would find it.

My own mom went missing when I was small, and there was no father figure. I remembered much about my childhood, although most of it was vague flashes of Kraft Dinners and warm hugs in front of the television. I remembered when the cops came to the door of the trailer with a social worker. They dragged me out, kicking and screaming. I'd been fine. Cooking my own mac-n-cheese while I waited for someone to come home.

"You'll be fine, little bird." That's what I heard from one of the people who took me away.

Positive thinking. I continued around the curve of the road, following the shoreline of the lake. Impossible palettes of cerulean blue peeked through the trees. I'd admired how perfectly natural this community was from the water for years. Now I knew there was an HOA controlling everything, and it seemed a little less magical.

The first cottage lot blossomed up on my left, a log-and-beam home with a garden full of red and yellow nodding bells of wild columbine. Limestone steps led up to the front door from the road in one direction and on the other side, the staircase ended at a metal dock with two Muskoka chairs, positioned for sunsets.

Like almost every dock on the lake.

The second home I passed by was nearly identical, but it had a larger, screened-in porch. I imagined it was useful for avoiding bugs, like the deerfly that buzzed around my ear. I swatted and killed it in a fist.

This was my first time seeing these homes from the road instead of the water. It reminded me of the time I went to Cape Cod with Earl. It was his gift for one of my birthdays, a few years ago. My ex loved any excuse to take his old truck on the road. The richest people in America live on that part of the coast. Presidents. The Kennedy Compound in Hyannis. Most of the homes were old, modest, and classic. Nothing screamed old wealth quite like not having to scream. This was the same sort of community.

The base of my neck tingled as a realization dawned on me. There were no signs of children anywhere. No floaties sitting on docks. No basketball nets. Not a single bike tossed at the side of the road.

Perhaps this was an adults-only community?

Even better.

My trailer park was loud. Kids screaming during the day and parties at night. Earl was known for blaring old 90s hair band songs from his retro boombox. If I heard Guns N' Roses one more time…

In my paradise city, there was no hard rock.

I turned the corner, and there it was. The Viceroy. It didn't blend like the neighbors with its towering glass windows. It seemed to say, look at me. How had they managed to convince what was obviously a very strict HOA to approve a house just a little flashier than the rest?

It was my spirit house. The one I'd always wanted. A place that stood apart from the crowd—just a little more special than the rest. No longer was I the little yellow pine warbler, torn from my home and flung into a rough, indifferent world. This was my future.

Frowning, I noticed there was no For Sale sign on the road front. Only that one on the dock. Curious…and something I would fix as soon as I got this listing. Few would see it and only those who already lived there, but maybe they had rich friends they wanted as neighbors! With a deep breath, all the aches and pains of my calf and ankle forgotten, I took my first step up the granite stones to my dream house…and noticed Parker's blood-soaked handkerchief.

Not a good look.

I undid it and clenched it in my palm. Thankfully, my calf was no longer bleeding. As long as I sat down and crossed my legs in a way nobody could see, I wouldn't look like a vagabond. Like the wounds of my childhood, I preferred to keep my flaws hidden.

This was the first day of my new life. Everything was going to change now. Adrenaline charged through my body as I climbed onto the elegant porch; hanging baskets of flowers formed a perfect arch of welcoming.

I knocked on the frosted glass door, embossed with an antlered deer.

No one answered.

I banged a little harder when I couldn't locate a doorbell.

Nothing.

My shoulders sagged as a sharp pain lanced my brain. No way I had borrowed Earl's jalopy, climbed that fence, and narrowly survived being crushed by a spruce only to show up and find nobody home.

How could this be possible?

I doubted many of these people had jobs. At least not the kind that required a daily commute. Who but someone as desperate as me would drive an hour to North Bay every morning? These were the rich and idle, whiling their summers away in paradise. And then, when the season was over, they went back to their real lives in Toronto, or Montreal, or Ottawa.

No one was home.

I dropped the handkerchief on the deck and tried to control my breathing. It was getting ragged, so I took a few long, slow, deep breaths. I couldn't even leave a card since my purse was in Earl's classic truck. No purse, so no cards. How could I be so stupid?

It wasn't like they'd left a pen out on the porch for me.

I stumbled back a step and gave a giddy giggle when I heard a splash from the lake. Of course. The owner was enjoying the water. I walked around the side of the house on the flagstone path till I had a clear view of the dock. A woman pulled herself out of the water, wrapped a towel around her waist, and settled in one of the red chairs.

As I started down the steps, I could see she wore a polka-dot bikini. Perfect bronze skin. And as I got closer, I couldn't find an inch of cellulite, though she was obviously several years older than me. Her brunette hair, a few shades lighter than mine, was pulled up in a wet, messy bun. Her fingernails were perfectly shellacked. I wondered where she'd had them done. There weren't any good nail places where I lived.

She was the kind of toned you got from yoga, whereas my flat belly came from missing the odd meal and trying to keep the grocery bill down.

My heels made little metallic clicks when I stepped on the dock, and the woman turned her head lazily.

"And you are?"

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 5

My mouth opened, but nothing came out. I felt like a lake perch flopping on the dock, gasping for air.

“Pardon me.” The beautiful bikini woman repeated the question, “And you are?”

She turned in the chair and tipped her sunglasses down her nose. Her hazel eyes caught the light, warm golden brown with tiny flecks of green.

This shouldn’t have been a tough question, but my focus had already gone past her. To the spot between the two red Muskoka chairs.

The sign was gone. The For Sale by Owner that had gotten me so excited this morning and ignited my vision of a new future had vanished. A tremor ran through me. Had I imagined it? Had I wanted this house so badly that I’d conjured a sign out of sunlight and wishful thinking?

I shook my head. I knew what I’d seen.

“Well?” She tilted her head, water still beading down one bronze shoulder. “What can I do for you? Are you new around here?”

I forced myself to look back and smile. “My name’s Marla. Marla Briggs.”

There it was again. That flicker. The same catch I’d heard in the voice at the gate, except this time, it was a flash behind the golden depths of her eyes.

She recovered faster than I had. “I’m Cheryl. What can I help you with, Marla?”

“Are you thinking of selling this lovely place?”

Something crossed her face then, a slight furrow between her immaculately plucked eyebrows. “What makes you ask that?”

“I like to kayak in the mornings, and I thought I saw a sign.”

She nodded, her lips now thin and strained. “You did see it. I was asked to remove it.”

“By who?” The question popped out of my mouth before I could edit it. I wasn’t here to interrogate her. I was here to get this listing.

She hesitated but answered anyway. “The HOA. They’ve got their fingers in everything.”

Of course they did. I thought of the grizzled man at the boathouse, his finger cocked into a pistol.

“But you still want to sell?” I asked.

Cheryl drew a slow breath. Her bikini top rose and fell before she finally answered. I couldn’t help but check out her perfect chest. Were those fake? Perfect, uniform C-cups. If I had the cash, I would buy myself a set just like them.

She caught my gaze. “They’re real. Now, let’s go up to the house.” With a languid stretch, she knotted her towel around her perfect abs and brushed by me. The scent of her sunscreen was heavenly. Coconut and lavender.

I’d left Parker’s bloody handkerchief on the front deck, and I felt a little clutch of worry, but we didn’t go around the front. Cheryl steered us through a side door that opened straight into the kitchen, and I forgot all about the handkerchief.

The whole back of the house was glass. Light poured in off the lake, and the water twinkled that incredible blue-green, more surreal from up here than it ever looked from my kayak. White leather couches. A grand piano in front of the windows. Not a single thing out of place. Not a magazine, not a coffee cup, not even a Hudson’s Bay blanket.

It was the most beautiful home I had ever stood in. You could fit three of my trailers in the great room alone.

“Your home is stunning” I managed to say.

“Thank you.” She said it the same way she’d told me her boobs were real. Like she was bored of hearing about it.

“It’ll be an easy sale,” I added, letting a little hope ride the end of the sentence.

Cheryl gave a short laugh. “Are you thirsty? You look kind of… sweaty.”

I put a hand up to my disheveled bun. Sure enough, my temples were damp. “Sure. I’d love some water.”

I expected her to fill a glass at the tap. Instead, she crossed to a fridge the size of my trailer's bathroom and pulled out a glass bottle of the latest designer water. SpringBrisk. Filtered and guaranteed to be free of microplastics.

"I thought the water up here was supposed to be pure as anything?"

"I only drink bottled." Cheryl handed it over with a little shrug.

I drank, the expensive water freezing my throat as I gulped. If I was honest, I'd liked the taste of the plain lake water Parker had tipped into my mouth in the forest better.

"So." Cheryl leaned against the counter. "What can I do for you, Marla?"

"I'd like to be your real estate agent."

A little frown creased her forehead. "Really. It's difficult to sell a house in this area. The HOA has to approve every single person who buys in. That's why I was trying to sell to one of the neighbors."

"But you want out anyway?" A forward question, but I sensed Cheryl's motive. She detested the HOA and had had enough. I could help with that.

She hesitated and took a drink from her own water bottle. Wiping her mouth, she seemed to make a decision that she could confide in me. "Small communities can be…suffocating." She looked out at the water. "Though I do love it here."

I looked again at the surreal view, noting the storm clouds I'd seen earlier creating a dramatic backdrop to the still-sunny lake. "If I lived here, I'd never want to leave. How did you get in?"

"We bought it five years ago." Something flattened in her voice. "I just think it's time to move on." She set her bottle down and sighed. "And what makes you think you could be the agent here?"

I gave her my best grin. "Because I know I can find you the perfect buyer and get top dollar."

"Do you have a card? References?"

Panic clutched my stomach. My new business cards. Sitting in my purse in the blue Ford. "I'm with Lake Homes Realty, out of North Bay. Forgot the card because of the challenge in getting through the gate!"

Suspicion crossed her face. “How did you even get in here? We’ve never had an outside realtor set foot on this lake.”

“Oh.” I waved a hand, breezy. “Somebody let me in at the gate.”

“Who let you in at the gate?”

“Just give me a chance.” The sweat was beading at my temples again. “I’d love to take this listing. I’m discreet, and I promise you, I’ll find you the right buyer.”

Cheryl pressed her lips together. “This is something I’ll have to talk over with my husband. And he doesn’t even want to sell. So there may be problems there, too.”

She turned toward the piano and nodded at a photo sitting on the polished top. My jaw almost dropped, and I hoped I kept my expression under control. There, in a silver frame, was a wedding photo of Cheryl, dipped back in a fun posture by a man with black hair, a crooked nose, and a drool-worthy body.

Parker.

The forest cowboy. My angel of death. The married man whose handkerchief was still knotted and bloody, on the front deck of this house.

Her husband. His house.

If I’d been jealous of the yoga body, glass walls, and mind-blowing view, it was nothing next to what moved through me now. It wasn’t a stab. It was a wave, and it splashed over me in a rude awakening.

For one dizzy second, I saw my own face where Cheryl’s was in that frame—held by a hot husband, on an Echo Loon Lake deck. I deserved to be in a picture like that. I wanted it more than anything else I had ever wanted in my life. Selling this house would be my first step to a new life.

“So.” My voice came out tight. I made myself look away. “Your husband works here?”

“He doesn’t have to.” Cheryl smiled, but it held no warmth. “He likes to keep himself busy.” A shadow moved across her face. “Like most men. If he isn’t kept busy, he finds his own kind of trouble.”

I blinked, not knowing what to say to that. Was she not keeping her husband happy and at home?

“Well.” Her voice changed, brusque and quick. “I do have things to do.”

“Of course. Here, let me leave you my number.” I looked around for something to write on.

Cheryl tipped her chin at the fridge, where a slim dry-erase board hung, blank and white.

I picked up the little felt marker and wrote my number, then a fresh worry seized me. It was the kind of board you wiped clean with a thumb. One careless swipe and I’d be a stranger again.

“Text me instead,” I blurted. “You know how reception is up here.”

Cheryl nodded, already half-turned away. “Have a nice day, Mar—”

A sound cut her off.

Raised voices coming up from the road and under them, the whine of a vehicle.

Cheryl went to the front window, and I followed. Two guys in a golf cart. One was Parker. The other was the grizzled man who’d made a gun of his hand and shot me across the water that morning. His face was contorted in anger.

Cheryl turned on me, and her eyes had gone bright and panicked. “How did you get in here? The truth. Don’t lie to me.”

“I climbed the fence,” I admitted.

“Oh, no. You do not want to break the rules here.” She caught my wrist. “Be honest with me right now. Where do you come from?”

“Bog Creek.”

“But you’re really a realtor?”

“Yes.” My heart was thumping so hard, I thought I might pass out. “Yes, I am.”

And here was the strange part. It wasn’t the two men making my pulse jackrabbit. It was Cheryl. The fear rolling off her changed her scent from coconut to chicken soup perspiration.

“Give me those shoes.” She was already toeing off her sneakers. “We’re about the same size. Take these.”

I didn’t argue. I stepped out of my ruined heels and into her runners, still warm, and she scooped up my knockoff Louboutins.

“My neighbor keeps a kayak,” she said, steering me toward the stairs to the back of the house. “You can’t see their dock from here. Go down, take it, go around the far side of the lake, paddle home to Bog Creek. I’ve seen you out on the water. You know how to handle a boat.”

“I can’t steal a boat!” I was also worried about the weather. The lake could turn in moments from calm to whitecaps.

As if to punctuate my fears, a clap of thunder shook the house.

Cheryl gave me a slight shove on the back, and I went down the first step. “I’ll tell the neighbors I borrowed it. They aren’t even up this week. You’ll be fine.”

“But…”

“Please.”

I was confused and terrified, but I scurried downstairs just as the front door banged open. The angry voices came inside the house now, filling it.

The lower level was a game room. A pool table under a low light, leather loungers, and the wall was decorated with aerial shots of the lake from years back and old newspaper clippings.

I was gently sliding open the patio door when something caught my eye on the nearest wall.

A newspaper clipping, yellowed behind glass.

LOCAL WOMAN GOES MISSING.

And under the headline, a photograph. A woman. A face I only remembered in dreams. The caption gave her name.

Jenny Briggs.

My heart kicked me in the chest. Mom.

Upstairs, the voices rumbled in low dissension, and I couldn’t hear what they were saying. Plus, I could not, for the life of me, make myself move.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 6

I stared at the framed newspaper clipping while the voices upstairs dissolved into meaningless noise. Like the adults in those Charlie Brown cartoons I'd loved as a kid. Wah-wah-wah. I was as confused as Charlie himself, not knowing how I got into this predicament.

I'd never seen the clipping before. It was from the *North Bay Nugget*, and although I'd done a little digging over the years, the newspaper's archives were behind a paywall. I already knew my mother was gone and wasn't about to pay to read about the worst day of my life.

How had Cheryl gotten this copy?

Upstairs, another voice cut through the argument. Cheryl's. High-pitched and pleading. A rough voice, one I didn't recognize, barked back.

I still couldn't move.

My mind scrambled desperately for a reasonable explanation. Cheryl obviously collected local history. The walls were covered with old aerial photographs of Echo Loon Lake, pictures of the abandoned mine before it closed, and newspaper clippings that looked like they stretched back decades. Northern Ontario had more than its share of intriguing stories. Mining accidents. Murders. Disappearances. Tragedies people talked about for generations.

My mother disappearing could simply be one more story. Just a piece of local history.

That had to be it, because I couldn't think of any other explanation that made any sense.

The clap of thunder overhead rattled the windows so hard, I jumped. Whatever was happening in this place, I wasn't going to figure it out standing here staring at the wall.

I tore my eyes away from my mother's photograph, slid the patio door the rest of the way open, and stepped outside.

My brain was in a whirl as I hurried down the narrow path Cheryl had pointed out, disappearing into the trees that bordered the property.

These sneakers were a gamechanger. My knockoff Louboutins might have looked the part of a successful realtor, but they would have been useless on the pine needles and exposed roots. Even in Cheryl's runners, my heels were already protesting. By the time I got home, I'd need to soak my feet in Epsom salts.

I kept my head low, hoping the forest hid me from anyone looking through the windows. The wind picked up, that blackness I'd clocked earlier rolling toward the lake. The pines shook and rustled, bending with the breeze. A sharp crack of thunder echoed across the lake that was rising to mirror the weather's dismay.

I looked at the darkening sky as panic crawled up my throat. Forks of lightning flashed in the distance, followed several seconds later by another rumble.

"No, no, no, hold off," I hissed as I tried to run faster, but only managed to stumble. My injured calf was aching, and my blisters were screaming.

Everyone knows you don't want to be the tallest thing on a lake during a thunderstorm. What made Cheryl so nervous? I knew I wasn't thinking straight anymore. I was running on instinct, and instinct was screaming at me to keep moving. Logically, I should have run for the truck, but they could catch me easily in the golf cart before I made it to the gate.

A little voice inside me insisted that I didn't want to be caught.

The little trail finally curved toward the shoreline, and the Viceroy disappeared behind the trees. From here, the house was completely hidden. Even if Parker or that grizzled man came tearing outside, they wouldn't see me.

I could just make out the neighboring cottage farther up the shoreline. Another flash of lightning, and the bolt of blue light was closer this time, just over the tops of the trees on the other side of Loon Lake. Metal docks were a great way to get electrocuted during a storm. But that wasn't why my stomach dropped to the ground.

That wasn't a kayak resting on the dock. It was a green Kevlar tripping canoe built for two. The kind of canoe people bought when money wasn't an object. It probably cost more than my Pontiac.

I let out a long breath and reassessed. The water was getting choppier, and the first fat drops of rain were falling. I'd paddled plenty of canoes before. Earl and I had rented them more than once on camping trips, and I'd even soloed one a few times. But there was a world of difference between a nimble little kayak and handling a full-sized canoe alone.

Especially if the weather was ugly.

I stood there chewing my lip, weighing my options. Maybe I could sneak through the woods, circle the house, somehow make it to Earl's truck before anyone saw me.

The idea had barely formed when I heard the whine of the golf cart. My stomach tightened. They were looking for me, and no one knew I was here. Women went missing all the time in Northern Ontario. Why didn't I at least tell Earl where I was going? Between the finger gun across the lake this morning and the anger I'd heard in the grizzled man's voice upstairs, every instinct I had told me not to let him catch me.

I looked back at the canoe.

It wasn't my first choice, but unless I wanted to march back up to the Viceroy and explain why I'd climbed the fence and lied my way into a private community, it was my only one, because trespassing was a crime from which my realtor license wouldn't protect me.

The rain came down harder, and I ran to the canoe, rolling it into the water while holding the rope so it didn't float off without me. It rode the waves like a bull rider, balancing on the whitecaps that had formed in the last few minutes. The black clouds roiled directly overhead, and the breeze had turned cold enough to lift the damp hair off the back of my neck.

A beautiful wooden paddle, embossed with a dreamcatcher carving, had been sitting under the canoe. I put it crosswise over the boat and hitched up my pencil skirt. It wasn't the best gear for freedom of motion. Wiping the rain out of my eyes, I lowered myself to face the back of the canoe. It almost tipped, but I immediately got low on my knees. I knew that if I was going to solo, facing the stern was the more stable choice.

I pushed away from the dock and dug hard into the water, moving along the shoreline. The rain was really coming down now, and a crack of thunder made me jump. Within seconds, the lake was stippled with rain

disappearing into the waves. The canoe bucked some more, and I paddled with determination, leaning forward with each stroke.

“Oh, come on,” I groaned, looking toward the sky. “Give me ten minutes.”

As if in defiance, the rain became torrential, and lightning arced into the forest on just the other side of the lake. This was now officially very dangerous. I left confidence behind me in a house that I wanted to represent and fear surrounded me.

It made me think for a moment that maybe I was in over my head.

That was a thought one didn’t need while on a lake during the violence of a thunderstorm. I focused on the only thing in my control.

Paddling.

The wind strengthened, and I stroked with all my might, but the canoe moved at a glacial pace. I considered turning around. Surely whatever was happening back at the Viceroy couldn’t be worse than being caught on open water in a storm?

Then Cheryl’s face flashed through my mind. Not the calm, beautiful woman stretched out in the Muskoka chair. The frightened one who had given me her shoes and pushed me out the back door. She was afraid.

But I did have to get off the lake. Another sharp rumble and flash of lightning confirmed my lack of choices. Plus, a canoe would never make it upstream through the rapids. I studied the shoreline through the tapering curtain of rain.

If I guessed correctly, I should be somewhere near the front gate, and therefore close to where I’d stashed Earl’s truck.

The next rumble of thunder was quieter, and the rain slanted sideways. Was it growing less intense? The roar of the wind had also diminished, but I heard something else. A low mechanical growl.

I twisted awkwardly on my knees and looked back.

A small aluminum fishing boat had pulled away from the only dock with a boathouse. The one where I’d seen the grizzled man this morning and ignored his warning.

I forgot to paddle for a moment, and the canoe twisted alarmingly. He was coming after me. Snap decision. Time to go to shore and run for the

Ford, so I rode the current in and aimed for a less dense section of the forest. I was just pushing up onto the muddy bank when the Canada goose exploded out of the bushes.

She hit the water with her wings spread wide, her three goslings hovering at the edge.

“Sorry, Mama Cobra Chicken,” I pleaded. “Let me by and I promise you no harm.”

She slowed and answered with an angry hiss. Raising my hands in front of my face, I prepared for impact.

A strike of goose fury that never came. Instead, she rushed by me, her rage directed at the aluminum fishing boat behind me. The man—the same one I’d seen with Parker in the golf cart—cut the engine and was drifting into shore.

Mama Cobra Chicken hit the side of the boat flapping, hissing, and snapping, while the three little goslings stayed a few feet from my canoe, hidden under the dripping leaves of a fern.

The rowboat rocked violently, and the man fell to his knees as he threw both hands out to steady himself. The rain was barely a drizzle now, and I didn’t stick around to see how he dealt with the bird.

“Thank you,” I whispered, leaving the canoe wedged just far enough up the bank that I hoped it wouldn’t float off. I tossed the custom paddle inside and ran.

The underbrush scratched my bare legs, and I didn’t bother to pull down my skirt as I dodged branches hanging heavy and low with water. Pinecones caught in my hair, and needles scratched my cheeks.

When I felt a safe distance away, I tucked behind a tree and caught sight of the rowboat. It was pulling away from the shore and towing the canoe behind it. In the eerie quiet after the storm, I could hear the chug-chug-chug of the motor.

Watching him disappear into the mist, I finally let myself breathe. If my guess about the Echo Loon Lake HOA was right, putting things back where they belonged ranked somewhere between religion and law around here. At least the neighbors would get their canoe back.

With a shuddering breath, I finally wasn't running for my life. Turning back into the thinning trees, I headed toward the lake. I found the end of the fence line and climbed around it. It made me question whether climbing over it might have been better, but I didn't have the truck bed on this side to get to the top of the wire.

The light blue of the truck was visible on the edge of the county road. I had hit the shore outside of the confines of the housing area, beyond the fence line. I stumbled out onto the asphalt and climbed behind the wheel.

Desperate for some heat, I turned the key and twisted on the blower fan under the dash. And then I saw it. The glove compartment was open. I closed it, frowning. My purse was on its side, a ChapStick and a few Kleenexes spilled onto the soft leather of the passenger seat. A little prickle worked its way up my spine.

The little silver holder that held my real estate business cards was gone. I riffled through my purse and checked under the seat, but it was truly missing. Nothing else was. Who breaks into a truck during a storm...just to steal a realtor's business cards?

I put a finger to my nose. Something else was off. The truck still smelt like leather, oil, and decades of faint cigarette smoke. But there was another faint odor.

Sandalwood.

Or was I imagining it?

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 7

It was the worst way in the world to wake up on a Tuesday. With the buzzing of a dreaded text from my boss and broker. Tina. A woman who'd been selling homes longer than I'd been alive.

We need to talk. Come to the office for 10.

My stomach tied in knots, and I couldn't even choke down a coffee. Was this it? My real estate dreams might be dead in the water before I even made my first big sale.

Someone had stolen my cards from Earl's truck yesterday. That same someone had probably called Lake Homes Realty to complain about my adventures at Echo Loon Lake.

Thinking of it made me want to puke. Forget losing my license, I could be arrested. Rather than panic, I put on my lucky pantsuit, the white one with the orange horseshoes on it, and prepared to fight for my career.

When I climbed into my Pontiac Sunfire, the rust bucket wouldn't even start. So much for my lucky outfit.

Earl—dependable, sweet Earl—offered to fix it for me, but there was no time.

That's how I found myself being chauffeured to North Bay in the vintage blue Ford truck. The single cab bench seat was missing the Hudson's Bay blanket, and I felt a little guilty about that. Using it to help me over that fence had probably ruined it. Nerves tingled in my legs, and there was a throbbing pain in my forehead, made worse by the AC/DC pumping from the truck's crackly radio.

"Can't you get any other stations other than 101.9 Rock?" I grumbled, rubbing my temples.

"Nope!" Earl said, slurping on a Tim Hortons coffee.

The smell of the mild brew, normally so enticing, turned my stomach.

He patted my thigh. "Hey there, babe. Relax. It's gonna be okay."

"You don't know that."

He laughed, running his fingers through the curly brown hair at the back of his neck. "Ya, I do, you've always come out on top. No matter what

life throws at you, Marla Briggs rises. It’s not gonna be any different now.”

I groaned, wishing I had his optimism. Even my manifestation skills had abandoned me. My days normally began with positive-thinking meditations, not a scary summons from work. This was just trouble.

The view out the window failed to calm me, so I did some breathing exercises. Inhale for three seconds. Hold. Exhale for five. The surefire way to settle your vagus nerve.

Earl turned up the radio when the ominous chords of “Master of Puppets” from Metallica came on.

“Must you?”

“Oh, I must.” He jerked his head and pretended to play guitar.

Reason #182 that I left Earl. Any guy who played air guitar to thrash metal was not in my future.

He turned it up. “You used to love this music. Remember that time we stole that homemade wine and parked in that farmer’s field and watched the stars? We played the entire Metallica Collection. Twice.”

“Don’t remind me.”

“So, tell me why you gotta go into work so urgently again?”

“I snuck into Echo Loon Lake yesterday. I was trying to get a listing.”

“What’s the big deal?”

I sucked my teeth. “What’s the big deal? It’s called trespassing. I could be arrested.”

Earl thought for a moment, taking a slow sip of his coffee. “I don’t think anybody from that stupid community’s gonna call the cops on you. Bad for their image to have the boys in blue investigating their inner sanctum.”

“You really think so?”

He nodded. “I know so. I know what it’s like to be looked down on by those sorts. They don’t want the publicity.”

For a moment, I forgot that I wasn’t attracted to him. He’d shaved and put on a fine, plaid navy-blue shirt, which brought out the color of his bright blue eyes. His energy was always very calming for me, ever since I

was a kid. I'd be waiting for my mom to get home from work on those days she was late. He distracted me with video games and goofy stories.

Till the one day she didn't come home. Child services hadn't ripped me just from my home. They'd also taken me from my best friend.

Earl frowned. "Why do you even want into that Stepford Wife ward anyway?"

"If I get the listing, it'd be a huge commission. Life-changing. I could move out of Bog Creek Park."

"Why would you ever want to move out of Bog Creek Park? It's heaven on earth."

"As if." I snorted. "An old, falling-down double-wide is not my idea of heaven."

Earl went quiet for a moment. "You realize it's one of the only trailer parks where you actually own the land? Most places, it's a lease. You've got more than you think, Marla."

"Yeah? What do I have?"

"Ma Briggs worked hard to keep that."

"How would you know?"

"So, you know how my mother has a touch of the dementia?"

I nodded. Karen was the sweetest woman, but her memory was going sideways. Earl spent a lot of his time taking care of her.

Earl didn't look at me as he turned off the radio. I could tell he was treading carefully. "So, she's been talking a lot about the past lately, and she told me a story about your mother being knocked up by a wealthy guy."

"Maybe my mom was just a slut," I said, hating myself even as the words left my lips.

"Don't say that."

My cheeks were hot. "Well, I never even knew who my father was. Could've been any fella at the North Bay dive bars."

"You want to know what Karen said?"

"No."

He ignored me. “I heard maybe your mom got knocked up by one of her clients. One of the ones out at Echo Loon Lake. And that’s how she managed to buy the trailer in Bog Creek.”

“So, your point?”

“Babe, you ever think if you talked about her, it might be easier? Might help with all this...desperate need to figure out who you are.”

Now, he’d pissed me off. I felt the red rise up behind my eyes. “Don’t tell me who you think I am. And don’t call me babe.”

“I know you better than anybody.”

“Yeah, you’ve got your own issues, failed hockey boy.” Why did I want to hurt him? It would be easier to drive him away and then leave Bog Creek. No ties whatsoever to a previous life I both loved and hated.

Earl pressed his lips together. I’d gone too far. If my sore spot was my mother, his was that failed hockey career. Of course it was. Hockey was the Canadian golden ticket for boys. Other countries had soccer or basketball. The NHL was how a kid from a place like ours ever afforded a home like the ones on Echo Loon Lake.

There was silence between us.

“Even if she was given the land and trailer…” Earl tried again, choosing to ignore my barb. “She still had to pay the property tax and keep the hydro on. Your piece of property is worth more than you think.”

“Good. Because the second I’ve got enough money, I’m buying a cottage.” I forced a laugh, thankful we’d gotten by our little landmines. “Maybe on Echo Loon Lake itself.”

I turned the radio back on as a distraction and was punished with some Alice Cooper. Earl took the hint and thrashed his head to the music. I joined in for old times’ sake.

Okay, maybe I liked old rock more than I let on. But that was old Marla. The new Marla listened to classical.

For a minute, I forgot my whole life was about to get ripped out from under me and just let myself enjoy the moment with my good friend Earl. The guy knew me better than anybody and liked me for exactly who I was. That was a rarity in life.

We left the highway and rolled into North Bay, the dread growing in my stomach the closer we got to the downtown core. Earl parked right in front of the rundown coffee-brown storefront of Lake Homes Realty. I cracked my neck and looked over at him.

“Here goes nothing. Let’s hope I’ve still got a job when I come out.”

“You’re good, babe.”

I hugged myself and nodded, looking inward for the brash, bold Marla who was going to save her career. There were luxury homes waiting for me to sell.

He nodded toward the coffee shop across the street. “I’m gonna grab a Timmy’s and a breakfast wrap. You want anything?”

I put a hand on my stomach. Flipping and swirling.

“No. I don’t think I could stomach a thing.”

Leaving the comfort and cool of Earl’s truck behind, I walked into the office and knocked on Tina’s door. Tentatively, at first. No answer. So I knocked a little louder.

The office was too small for a receptionist, and most of the furniture looked secondhand. It wasn’t a great time for real estate in Canada, especially up here, where half the market was luxury cottages and the bottom had just dropped out of that. I knew Lake Homes Realty had been feeling it.

“Come in,” Tina barked.

For a second, I thought I might pee myself and wished I’d hit the bathroom first. I hadn’t even had a coffee that morning, so it was just my bladder reacting to my nerves.

I walked in, and there was Tina. Cigarette hanging out of the corner of her mouth and gray hair yanked up into a messy bun. Her eyes were framed by crow’s feet, and she was pushing two hundred pounds on a five-foot-three frame. Tina was rough, tough, and could drive a deal like nobody I’d ever met. I’d been grateful she’d taken on my license. A broker willing to give me a chance, at a time when most of them were cutting agents loose or shutting their doors for good.

“Sit down, Marla.” She shook her head and put a hand over her eyes. “What have you done now?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I tried to grin. Tried to play innocent as I took the wood chair, perching on the edge.

She took another big drag, then stubbed it out. I tried not to cough. The air hung hazy and thick, and she sat behind an old desk that looked stolen from a 1970s cubicle farm.

“So. I got a call.” She pursed her lips. “From the Echo Loon Lake Homeowners’ Association.”

“Oh?” It was getting harder and harder to play innocent.

“Yep. Turns out somebody trespassed and tried to land a listing out there.” She scowled at me.

I didn’t say a word. Just looked at her. She knew. Who else would it be? It certainly wasn’t her.

“Marla, what are you trying to do to me? My ticker’s stressed enough as it is.”

I shrugged.

“You know it’s illegal,” she said. “They could’ve called the cops. They didn’t.”

“They didn’t?” I could hear the hope in my voice. Maybe Earl was right. The HOA didn’t want the attention.

She scowled harder now, her face like an apple doll. All wrinkles and judgment. “At the very least, I should suspend you. Revoke your license. You absolutely cannot be breaking into properties. And what’s this about a chase? That you stole somebody’s boat and took off across the lake in a storm?” Her eyebrows climbed almost to her hairline.

“I’m not gonna say I’m guilty.”

She looked at me, her face going blank. And I knew in the pit of my stomach that this was it. I was about to lose my job. Any hope of that listing gone.

And then, shocking me, Tina leaned back and burst out laughing. Big peals of it, tears running down her round cheeks. I finally sat back in the chair and giggled a little along with her, because her laughter was infectious. The giggle was pure nerves. I wasn’t the type for that.

“Well, girl, I’ll give you one thing. You’ve sure got chutzpah.” She lit another cigarette, took a deep breath, and shook her head at me, wiping the tears from her eyes. “I have always wanted to get into that community. But those houses and land almost never sell. Last time one did… I think it was back in, what, 2008? A woman bought a plot in there. Paid half a mil just for the land.” She gave a low whistle. “Can you imagine?”

I sucked in a breath. And that was almost two decades ago.

Tina shook her head. “And then she went and built a monstrosity. A Viceroy, I heard. Broke every rule they had. Whew. Somebody finally daring to defy the Loon Lake Association. That was quite the scandal.”

“That’s the house. It’s a Viceroy. I saw a For Sale by Owner sign on the dock.”

Tina’s eyes went wide. “How on earth did you see that? Nobody gets into that community.” She leaned forward. “How the heck did you even get in there?”

“I was kayaking on the lake, and I saw the sign. So I went back.”

“And how’d you get in that time?”

I let my voice go small, almost a whisper. “I climbed the fence.”

Tina blinked. Then she erupted in laughter all over again. “Well, I gotta hand it to you. You might be a little stupid, but you’re brave.” She gave another low whistle. “And if you could actually land a listing in there...”

“Am I okay?”

“Yes. Consider this a warning. They’re not calling the cops.” She tapped another cigarette out of her pack, lit it, and puffed with enthusiasm. “These are tough times, and you’re going above and beyond, I’ll give you that. Just…no more breaking into properties. No more trespassing.”

She shoved an MLS printout across the desk. “Here. A hundred and fifty grand. Old apartment building above the shut-down beer store. Maybe you can move that for me.”

I wrinkled my nose. Two-point-five percent of a hundred and fifty grand wouldn’t fix my cranky old car, much less buy me a new home, but I knew better than to look a gift horse in the mouth.

“Thanks, Tina.” Knowing full well the last thing I wanted to do was sell cheap apartments over a shuttered beer store. Though I had sold a

couple of little properties, and the commissions were currently keeping me alive. I needed a big score. Something to move the needle.

"Now get out of here, kid. But good on ya for trying." She shook her head. "I always did want a listing in that community."

She'd lit a third cigarette by the time I made it to the door.

I spent the rest of the afternoon in the local library, using their fabulous free Wi-Fi. Time for some serious Cheryl Calder stalking. Perfectly justified as doing research on a potential client. As I scrolled through her Facebook and Instagram, a smoldering envy ignited in my prefrontal cortex. Every photo could double as an ad for L.L. Bean. Serene cottage scenes, beautiful beaches, and most obviously…fantastic shots of her and Parker looking insanely gorgeous and in love.

Though I knew people only posted carefully curated moments online, that didn't stop me from coveting the lifestyle. I touched one of my do-it-yourself manicured fingernails to Cheryl's face in each photo, picturing mine there instead.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 8

My belly rumbled as I cataloged the contents of my fridge. A mostly empty yogurt container. Cranberry juice. Some suspect lettuce in a yellowing bag. And three beers.

As Earl had pointed out in our drive to North Bay, I didn't have to worry about paying a monthly lease at Bog Creek or pay off my trailer, but I did need to feed myself and keep the lights on.

Though I'd stuck the MLS listing for the beer store apartment on the fridge, I ignored it, instead grabbing the juice and climbing onto my roof.

Time for Wednesday's daily morning meditation.

In life, you've got to keep your eye on the prize. You can't be distracted by subpar sales properties with tiny commissions.

There's a mantra I repeat to myself every day.

"Where focus goes, energy flows, and money grows."

So even though I wanted to keep Tina happy, I had to figure out how to get the Viceroy listing.

Granted, it was going to be a little tougher now after my *Mission Impossible* trespassing adventure.

Thank the universe Cheryl had helped me escape. And that's what I was sending into the universe. Gratitude.

The old garbage bag sat next to the roof air-conditioning unit with my yoga mat rolled in the plastic, dew-free. I settled into my lotus position after taking a few swallows of the juice.

There were two reasons I meditated up here.

One. The view was priceless. Echo Loon Lake sparkled with dancing fairy lights, capturing rays from the rising sun. The burble of the Bog Creek rapids was the perfect soundtrack.

Two. If anybody had texted or called me during the night, my phone could finally register them. The trees blocked the cell towers, which were few and far between up here.

The screen remained dark on my phone, and I shoved the disappointment away. Closing my eyes, I repeated it to myself. “You already have the sale. In the quantum universe, it’s already happened.”

Sometimes, meditating means clearing your mind of all thoughts and concentrating on your breathing. That was proving to be impossible this morning. Visions of Cheryl’s concerned eyes. Those clippings in her game room.

My missing mother.

A familiar darkness flooded over me. A well-worn train track of thought leading to depression and confusion. Catastrophizing. An unhealthy habit.

Deep breath in. Hold. Release.

I let that subject float away and concentrated on my breath.

A new thought floated in. There was a connection with Cheryl. She obviously wanted to move, and I obviously wanted the sale. And when there were two strong forces like that, sometimes things just happen. The vision was becoming clear…

A buzzing from my cell phone brought me back to the present. A text from an unknown number.

Meet at Echo Loon gate for 2 today?

I responded instantly.

KK

A thumbs-up emoji on my reply. I swallowed. I texted again.

Who is this?

No response. I rolled my neck. Of course it was Cheryl. Who else had this number? Though I had written it on that quick erase board for both Parker and the cranky man to see…

No more catastrophizing. Action over indecision.

Time to roll up the yoga mat and shove it back in its bag. I had a meeting at two o’clock to sell the most gorgeous house in the most exclusive neighborhood in Northern Ontario.

Perhaps there was some yogurt left in that container, and it would settle my stomach? I climbed down from the roof and saw Earl underneath my

car. His big construction boots poked out onto the grass, and I kicked one. He wiggled out and gave me a big grin.

“Think I got it running for you, Marla.”

He turned the key, and it took a couple of coughs, but the old Sunfire lived again. He shut it down and handed me the keys with his eyes glowing, like a dog wanting a treat. I saw myself patting him on the head, but instead, I gushed. “Earl, you are absolutely the best. Thank you.” I reached out and touched his arm, lightly stroking the tribal tattoo on his elbow. “But I have another favor to ask you. Can I borrow the trusty old Ford this afternoon? They’re giving me another chance to sell that Viceroy.”

Earl raised his eyebrows. “Didn’t you just get chased out of there for trespassing? Why would they invite you back?”

“I don’t know. But I’m not gonna look a gift horse in the mouth. Appointment today at two!” I bit the side of my cheek. “But the Sunfire doesn’t exactly give the image of a successful real estate agent. I need to put my best foot forward.”

As Earl rubbed his temples, looking uncomfortable, another thought occurred to me. My best pink suit was ruined after being soaked in the storm, and I didn’t have my heels anymore. This was going to be challenging. There was a nice pair of flat leather sandals at the back of my closet and a blue sundress I could wear.

Never mind. I’d figure out my wardrobe later. First, I had to figure out why Earl was giving me that look.

That pinched lip, slightly mischievous thing where he tilted his head to one side. The one he used to give me when we were dating, and he was going out for a boys’ night. Reason #204 that I broke up with Earl.

“Babe—”

“Don’t call me babe.”

“I’ve got a date this afternoon. I can’t give you the truck.”

“You have a date?” My voice cracked and went up a register. “What do you mean, you have a date?”

“I met somebody at the coffee shop when I was waiting for you. We’re going to the Cookhouse, get a little drink, maybe a snack.”

There was a burning sensation in my chest. I didn't want Earl. But I also didn't want anybody else to have him. A bullfrog in the bush croaked, as if he was admonishing me. This wasn't a rational reaction. It also wasn't my biggest problem right now.

"Let's swap vehicles. You can take the Sunfire—thank you for getting it running, by the way—and I'll take the Ford." Said with my most hopeful, luminous smile.

"Marla, sometimes I feel like you walk all over me."

The bullfrog interrupted again, as if agreeing.

"What's this new chick gonna think when I show up in…" He stopped himself from insulting my ride. Another nice thing about Earl.

I pouted, something that used to work on him. "What can I give you? I can promise you anything. Just please make this trade with me."

He rubbed the stubble on his chin. "Okay. I'll give you the Ford. But you have to promise me something."

Success. My lips trembled with the effort not to smile triumphantly. "Anything. What?"

"That you'll be careful, Marla. I don't really like what's going on over there. That place has always been kind of…eerie. And now you're telling me they chased you out. I don't know that you're safe there."

The smile died on my lips. "I'm gonna be fine."

His eyes flashed and then, in an instant and somewhat violently, he twisted me a hundred and eighty degrees and put his arm around my throat. "Do you remember the self—"

He didn't get a chance to finish. I hooked my elbow into his ribs, spun, and reversed the hold so my forearm pressed into his neck. "There. Were you gonna ask if I remember the self-defense you taught me? Yes. Yes, I do. I'm good, Earl. And thank you. I'll owe you forever for the truck." I released him.

"This time, don't ruin anything. My Hudson's Bay blanket was toast."

"I won't."

Relieved, I went inside to see if the blue sundress was clean. Nothing could get me down, even if I had to wear flat sandals with it. And I made

sure to put Cheryl’s sneakers in a bag.

I’d asked the universe for something, and it delivered.

Time to get that listing.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 9

When I saw the golf cart trundling toward me, my first instinct was to reverse the Ford and roar back to Bog Creek Park.

Instead, I took a deep breath and tucked a wayward tendril into my sleek bun.

This wasn't the same. I was invited this time.

My fingers trembled as the hair popped out again, curling around my neck. My heartbeat accelerated. What proof did I have? A text from an unknown name and an unknown number? No reply had come to my 'Who is this?' text.

This could be a trap. Another chance to catch me trespassing. I gulped down the little bit of bile rising in my throat.

Oh, my God, I was going to get myself arrested. And lose my real estate license.

As the golf cart got closer, I saw only one figure. Tall, lean, black hair. But I had a text inviting me this far. As long as I stayed outside the property, I was fine.

Sheer relief as the spiked gate of Echo Loon Lake swung open and I drove through. A smile pulled at the corners of my mouth. This sure beat scaling the razor-edged fence.

Parker climbed out of the golf cart and knocked on my window. My heart did a double-thud as I rolled it down.

Those pale blue eyes, just slightly too close together, were unlike anything I'd ever seen. They were hard to look away from. And that slightly crooked nose. So damn sexy-ugly. He might not be everybody's type, but he sure was mine.

"Hi." He grinned. "My wife sent me down to get you."

"You couldn't have just buzzed me in?"

He pointed to a little parking lot off to the side of the gate. "We don't allow guest vehicles crowding the view. HOA rules. Homeowners are supposed to escort their guests in, or they can walk."

Shrugging, I parked the truck in the designated area, made sure to grab my soft leather briefcase, and climbed in beside Parker.

Charisma radiated off the man, and as he put the golf cart in gear, a waft of his scent tickled my nose. Once again, sandalwood and the faint smell of sweat. What I remembered from our first meeting in the woods when he nearly killed me with a tree. Not an unpleasant odor.

Then another memory.

The faint waft of sandalwood in the Ford after my canoe escape. But there was no way it was the same cologne. Why would Parker break into my truck and steal my real estate cards? It made no sense. In fact, maybe I'd imagined that smell. My system had been in shock.

My tongue teased my lower lip as I fought my reaction to being so close to him. He was taken, and I did have rules. When I climbed into bed with somebody, I didn't want to share the space with an invisible wife.

As we bumped along, I enjoyed the view of the lake until the trees parted and revealed the salt-and-pepper-haired man. Ice raced up my spine.

He was standing at the edge of one of the docks, doing some sort of patrol. He had a clipboard in one hand. I stiffened, half-expecting the finger-pistol thing again. But this time, he just gave a wave.

Rather than wave back, I crossed my arms over my chest.

Parker tapped my thigh. "So, how's that leg of yours? That was quite the adventure last time." Electricity through my body.

"It's fine. It healed."

"Good. That scared both of us."

I twisted my calf to show him, and his eyes dropped, and we actually veered a little off the road.

"Whoops." He corrected the cart. "You've got to be careful where you flash those things. They're weapons."

Red rushed to my cheeks. Parker was definitely flirting with me. But did he have intentions? Maybe he was just one of those guys who used compliments as a way to communicate. Either way, it was a fine line between charm and leading someone on.

Tilting my head, I asked, “So, you’re interested in selling the Viceroy?”

The light in his pale eyes turned stormy. As stormy as the sky had been on my first visit here.

“I don’t want to sell.”

My jaw dropped.

“But my wife does.” He grumbled, almost under his breath, “Happy wife, happy life.”

Treading carefully, I asked, “Where would you move to?”

“Cheryl thinks the house is too big. Even though we have a housekeeper.”

“You have a housekeeper?” A roil in my belly.

“Yeah, she comes in once a week, in the mornings. She does all the cottages. We only let one housekeeper in. Exclusivity, rich people’s stuff. There’s lots of original art here, you know? You’ve got to be careful who you let in.”

A heaviness squashed my spine. I was just a housekeeper’s daughter.

Stay in sales mode…

“Your Viceroy is huge for just the two of you. It should be an easy sale in such an exclusive enclave. Any children planned?”

“This is an adults-only community.”

Explained the lack of kids’ toys and floaties, despite the cottages that had plenty of room for extra bedrooms.

“So, where would you be looking to move to?”

“Cheryl heard that maybe the Hendersons, on the other side of the lake, want to move into a retirement home soon. Even though they don’t have to do much of the upkeep…” He caught my eye and winked. “That falls on me. They need a bit more care, and we don’t allow help in the enclave after five.”

“So, the Hendersons are going to list their place?” I asked hopefully. Two listings in Echo Loon Lake would be a boon!

“No. These places usually sell by word of mouth. But ours is a harder sell internally. It breaks some of the building codes around here.”

“Well, I certainly hope to help.”

“I’m sure you can.” His eyes dropped back down to my legs. And I was conscious for a moment of just how short the sundress was, hiked up on the golf cart seat.

Blushing, I shifted the conversation. “Why didn’t Cheryl come to the gate?”

“Oh, she needs to make her lemonade. From scratch—only with her special water.” He shrugged. “This is the purest water north of Lake Michigan, yet she insists we waste money on fancy SpringBrisk water.”

We fell silent. I was relieved when the Viceroy finally came into view, and we parked next to the white Range Rover in the driveway.

***

Once again, the house sent bolts of serotonin into my brain. Just looking at it was a shock of pleasure.

I was totally okay with it being the most ostentatious place on the lake. It stuck out like an architectural aberration. That’s how I’d always felt. Just a bit too tall and a tad too pretty for where I’d grown up. Being attractive wasn’t rewarded in first, foster homes and later, the court-ordered group homes. Predators loved helpless beauties…

That was my past. No room for those dark thoughts. And now I had killer self-defense moves. Some thanks to Earl. Some thanks to desperate times.

I was like this home. Built under adversity, yet magnificent. I allowed myself a moment of pride. I wouldn’t let those thoughts escape into the outer world. Not yet. After success, maybe.

The Viceroy managed to belong, even if it stuck out. These were all the things I wanted. When you’ve belonged to a community like a trailer park, that marked you. And I wanted a different kind of branding. High-end water like SpringBrisk. Not cheap cola.

Parker danced around the side of the golf cart and opened my door.

“There you go, ma’am.”

Oh. I thought I detected just a little bit of a Scottish accent. It was the first time I’d heard it. It seemed like the flirtier he got, the stronger the accent was.

“Are you from Scotland?”

He winked. “Aren’t all the best sorts from Scotland?” He really laid the brogue on heavy now.

I felt something inside me melt, just a little bit more. If there was one thing about the Scottish accent, they could be telling you off in the rudest way, but the accent sounded so beautiful you almost didn’t care. It made me want to see him in a kilt of his clan’s tartan.

I followed him through the etched glass door and sure enough, he’d predicted correctly. Cheryl was in a sundress that put mine to shame, pure white, lace at the edge, hugging her beautiful frame. The yellow lemonade glistened, ice cubes clinking against the side of the glass. My nerves had made me thirsty.

“Thank you so much for coming,” Cheryl said. “And I see Parker got you in the gate.”

“Yep. The perfect chauffeur. Thank you.”

I took the drink she offered and gulped it down. I noticed my number was no longer on the quick erase board, replaced with a grocery list: caviar, scallops, Dom Pérignon. Any wariness I’d seen in Cheryl last time seemed to have dissipated. She was bright and welcoming.

Her smile was blinding when she asked, “Let’s put a house on the market, shall we?”

Getting right to the point.

I grinned and brought out the paperwork from my briefcase. “So, let’s talk value. It’s hard to find comparables. Almost nothing sells on this lake. Last sale I found was when you bought this place in 2021 for four million. Other than that, no MLS listings.”

“Maybe we don’t sell,” Parker muttered.

The flirty guy was gone.

Cheryl spun and gave him a death-glare. “Parker. I thought we discussed this. I want the Hendersons’.”

I tried to interrupt. “You do know real estate prices have fallen a bit since then. Post-COVID crash.”

Neither of them was paying any attention, and Parker spoke over me.

“You don’t even know for sure the Hendersons are retiring to a home.” The charming husband was definitely gone now. The tension in the kitchen could be cut with one of the Miyabi knives hanging on the wall.

Cheryl said softly, “I want to move. And I bought it in the first place with my inheritance.”

Parker took a step back and then growled. “Well, I think I’m going to go over to the Morgensteins’ and see if they need anything.”

Her eyebrows shot up so high, they fought the Botox in her forehead. “Oh. Is Elena Morgenstein over there alone? I’m sure there’s a lot she could use your help with.”

He barked, “Cheryl, stifle.” He left the room without giving either of us another glance.

The back of my neck was itchy. Was Parker a trophy husband? He did seem closer to my age than hers.

She sighed and smiled apologetically. “You know boys. They like to play.”

I nodded as if I was in on the joke. But that hadn’t been my experience. Even with Earl’s three hundred and seventy-four flaws, cheating wasn’t one of them. But I put that aside. Earl’s mullet and bright blue eyes were not my future. This was. I wanted to be like Cheryl, breezing around my custom kitchen and offering fancy lemonade to guests. There wasn’t even any cranberry juice left at home.

“Are you hungry? Can I get you anything?”

My stomach growled. I’d skipped breakfast, not trusting the expired yogurt.

Not waiting for an answer, she brought out a plate of perfect little bakery pastries from the SubZero. “These are called Muskoka clouds, and they’re to die for. Cranberry and cream.”

I picked one up; it was probably the most delicious thing I’d ever put in my mouth. It positively melted on my tongue.

Cheryl nibbled on one herself. “I have them delivered fresh.”

“So,” I asked through a full mouth, “do you want my help when it comes time to put in your offer on the Hendersons’?”

Her face paled. “I’m not certain that’s the move I want to make.”

“It’s just an option.” I left it dangling there.

Once again, an undercurrent of something in my hostess. Something in her eyes, similar to the day she ushered me out the back door. Was it fear?

“Let’s sign that paperwork,” she recovered.

I pushed the documents over. I could hardly contain my glee when she inked her name on the bottom line.

“Aren’t you going to need Parker’s signature as well?” I asked. “Usually with married couples, both have to sign.”

She shrugged and proceeded to forge a signature on the spouse line.

Parker Calder

My insides tightened. What had I just witnessed? I didn’t want to offend her and lose the sale.

“Won’t he mind?”

She gave me a slow wink. “He won’t. Parker’s the kind of man who never has time for things like paperwork. Or a wife.”

I blinked. There was definitely trouble in paradise. I reminded myself not to look a gift horse in the mouth as I folded the paperwork and put it back in my purse. “Should we have an open house?”

Cheryl’s eyebrows challenged her Botox for the second time. “This place will not allow open houses.”

I nodded, knowing that had been a rookie mistake, and dug my nails into my palms. Exclusive, true luxury properties never had open houses. I knew that.

“I’m sure, being a part of Lake Homes Realty, that you have some exclusive buyers just waiting for a place like this.”

I nodded eagerly, even though, of course, I didn’t. Lake Homes Realty might sound exclusive, but it was really just a dirty little office run by a single woman who currently had one other real estate agent on her roster. Me. But I smiled confidently. The universe had placed this listing before me because I had manifested it to be, and the universe would send me the perfect buyer.

“This is a very unique property. An exclusive listing. Sometimes that takes time.”

She nodded. “Of course. Let me see what you can do.”

No pressure whatsoever. None.

“I’ll give you a ride back to the gate.”

The meeting was over. I had the listing I demanded from the universe. Now what? I hoped Tina had ideas. This property might just resurrect her business, and it would do wonders for my financial health. We had a starting price of four million dollars, and I sure hoped it would still sell for that even in a down market. Two-point-five percent of that was a hundred grand. That was life-changing money, for me anyway.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 10

I dialed Tina on my way back to the trailer park, cell phone tucked between my ear and shoulder.

No hands-free on the old Ford pickup.

“I got it. 3 Echo Loon Lake Drive.” It was hard to keep the smug out of my voice. “The client has agreed to a listing price of four million.”

The raspy-voiced broker coughed like a piece of lung was caught in her throat. “Say what again, girl?” She managed when she could talk again.

“Paperwork is signed for the biggest house on the most expensive lake in Nipissing District.”

“Well, damn. I’ll dust off the least dinged signs in the storage closet.”

I winced. “Or maybe order a couple of new ones.”

“Good plan. We’ll have to be careful marketing this one. Maybe keep it off Realtor.ca. Can’t have all the tire-kickers from Toronto to Temagami booking appointments to do a lookie-loo. Maybe we’ll require pre-approval for at least four mil to schedule an appointment.” I heard a ragged inhale of breath. No doubt, another puff on her cigarette. “Damn! This is huge.”

She hung up.

When I parked my lucky borrowed truck back at Earl’s, his trailer windows were dark. No TV blaring a Blue Jays’ baseball game. Must still be on his date. I clenched my teeth but then had to laugh. No point being jealous. Earl wasn’t mine, and I didn’t want him to be.

There were still a few hours left before sunset, and the excitement coursing through my veins couldn’t be contained. If I didn’t do something active, I was going to explode.

It wasn’t wise. Or smart. But I had to take another look at my very first elite listing. Throwing on my favorite tracksuit and grabbing a bottle of bug spray, I shoved my kayak into Bog Creek.

Soon, my shoulders burned from enthusiastic paddling, cutting through the water like I was racing to my future. Which I sort of was. Every stroke was a balm to my soul and an outlet for my combustible energy.

The absence of a life jacket wasn’t noted until I was already bobbing in the rapids.

Whoops.

The knocks and bumps as my kayak careened between the rocks barely registered because I was riding the glow of success straight into Echo Loon Lake. It wasn’t every day that you added rungs to the ladder of destiny.

The Canada goose mother must have had her goslings bedded down, because nothing flew out at me from the bushes. The sky was just starting to turn pink, and the water was as still as glass. My nerves vibrated the closer I got to the Viceroy, beckoning me from its vantage point on the hill. It was even more blatantly obvious from the lake that the glass monstrosity didn’t fit with the more classic cottages. Backyards were empty of tall trees that might impede the view, different from the pine-soldier-guarded front entrances. And this time, I wasn’t an interloper.

Marla Briggs was the real estate agent of record on this listing, and the only one currently selling anything in the most exclusive pocket of real estate north of Lake Rosseau.

I was thoroughly enjoying myself, feeling my muscles glide under my skin. The sensation of skimming across the blue-green water. Envisioning my life as a millionaire real estate agent. Money pouring in as I sold exclusive properties…

Then I heard it. A call across the water, “You don’t listen, do you?”

I turned, and my heart sank. The salt-and-pepper-haired man was pointing his finger gun at me again. This time in the rowboat he’d chased me with before. No engine, though. Just two paddles hooked into rings on the sides.

No storm to cover the sound of the engine, was my guess.

He’d managed to launch and get broadside of my kayak while I’d been daydreaming. He let his bow nudge my kayak, and it almost flipped. I gasped and held onto the sides as it righted itself.

Surely, he didn’t do that on purpose?

“This is a private lake.”

He was only a few feet from me, and Salt and Pepper wasn’t as old as I first thought. Maybe in his late forties. For some reason, that gave me

courage.

“Careful, you almost tipped me!”

“Lady should have a life jacket on.”

He was right about that, but I took the offense. “I was invited here this time. I know you saw me earlier this afternoon.”

“It’s past five. No employees or guests allowed on the grounds.”

“I’m on the water. Who are you, anyway? The cottage police?”

“I’m Amos. Harbormaster, president of the HOA, and this community is my responsibility.” He gave me a look like I was gum on the bottom of a shoe. “And you don’t belong here.”

For a moment, I felt like believing him. Apologizing, slinking off, as I used to when I was a child.

But I didn’t. I stayed strong. I pushed my shoulders back and said, “You know, they’ve hired me to sell the Viceroy, and I’m not sure you can do anything about that.”

His eyes narrowed. “What did you say your name was again?”

“I didn’t. Marla Briggs.”

There it was again. That reaction to my last name. His eyes widened, just a bit.

“I knew your mother.”

“What do you mean, you knew my mother?”

“She worked here. Back in the day. What makes you think a housekeeper’s daughter should be allowed to sell real estate here?”

He said it with such derision, I wanted to take my paddle and smack it across his head.

“Hereditary occupational division has been gone since the Middle Ages. So, I’m not sure my trade is up to you to decide.”

Amos leveled a gray-eyed gaze that chilled me to the very core. Then he abruptly dug in one paddle and turned his boat, the stern clipping my kayak.

This time, I wasn’t able to right it.

The water was shockingly cold as I sank. The kayak flipped above me.

I froze for a few seconds, my tracksuit absorbing the water, making my body heavy and pulling me downward, every ounce of wet cotton becoming an anchor.

Blinking, my brain screamed at my legs to kick.

Though the water was shocking, the most shocking thing of all was that this man, this Amos, had just knocked me into the lake. Deliberately, knowing I wasn't wearing a life jacket.

I looked up, eyes open in the water, which was clearer than it should have been. Usually, Ontario lakes were murky and dark, but through the clear blue-green, a shadow passed over me.

Was Amos rowing directly on top of me?

I swam toward the surface, trying to go sideways, but he rowed in the same direction, his paddles causing ripples in the water. I reached the base of his boat, my palms beating an SOS on the slimy metal hull.

Nothing. No movement.

Diving back down, I swam sideways, hoping he couldn't see me. This was insane. Was this how it all ended? Was I going to die on the best day of my life?

Swimming desperately, my lungs burned because I hadn't even had a chance to take a deep breath before I went under. Panic overwhelmed me as black dots swam in front of my eyes. I wanted to open my mouth and pull in the water, but I knew that would be death.

So I calmed myself. There was a documentary series I'd watched about extreme freediving. Five to eleven minutes underwater. Take a few seconds to think. So, I looked at the shadow, saw the direction it was moving, and then swam the other way—directly behind the boat. There was no way he could turn a hundred and eighty degrees and get back on top of me before I could surface and get some air.

Stroking with every ounce of my strength, I swam underneath the stern of the rowboat and hit the surface, gasping for air.

When the dots in my vision cleared, I sputtered, "What the heck were you doing?"

Amos leaned over the edge of his boat. "People die in this lake all the time. Do you know it's one of the deepest in this region? You can sink and

never be found."

Treading water, I moved away from the venom in the man's expression, I bumped into my kayak with mounting horror at my vulnerable situation.

He never took his eyes off me. "It is ultimately up to me who comes and goes in this place."

I kept my face deliberately blank and looped an arm over the kayak, trying to think.

Amos continued, "I can make your life very difficult."

Well, I was used to that. Hello, horrid childhood. Now, I didn't let myself get bullied by anybody. Not the husband at the group home, who tried to corner me in my bedroom… Not the probation officer after that shoplifting incident… Not the chemistry teacher who promised me an A if I did 'extra experiments' with him after school…

I'd take a beating, jail, or an F first.

I went to that place. That cold, hard place that ignited the survival part of my lizard brain and grinned at him.

Amos's eyes widened in surprise.

Though I was shivering, every word was enunciated with force. "I can also make your life difficult. I can talk about how you attacked me out here."

"It was an accident," he said with absolute insincerity. The arrogance returned to his expression. "It's your word against mine. Nobody will believe you."

"Doesn't mean it won't make your life difficult." We had a bit of a stare-down. On land, I'd never drop my gaze, but I had a hypothermia issue here. Forcing the words through bluing lips, I added, "But I'll make a deal with you. You leave me alone to sell this place, and I'll keep my mouth shut. This never happened."

A tremor ran all the way through my body, and my teeth chattered. Amos watched me, his face unreadable. Negotiating should be done from a position of power, and I was on a very limited timespan here. My legs were so heavy and tired, each kick twice the effort. The seconds drew out, feeling

like hours as I battled my desire to plead for help. Beg him to pull me into his boat, give me a blanket, and let me call Earl to pick me up.

The paddle home was going to be tough and chilly. The sun was also on the way down, the sky streaked with blood-red clouds and orange haze. It was time to head back before it became too dark to do those rapids.

I held his gaze and tread water as slowly as possible to conserve energy.

Amos drummed his fingers on the edge of the rowboat. “All right. But you follow the rules. No viewings after five.”

“That’s not reasonable. Most real estate showings during the week happen after buyers are done working.”

He just shrugged. “Not my problem. We have rules for a reason.”

“What’s the reason?”

“Order. Consistency. And the rest isn’t really your business.”

I nodded. “Okay. Fine.”

“And I approve anybody before they come in.”

I gritted my teeth. That was too far. “I’ll agree that no viewings happen after five. But having you approve people before they come would be very complicated.”

He grinned. “Also not my problem.” He picked up his oars and stroked back toward his dock.

I desperately wanted to splash after him, to continue the argument. My tracksuit was heavy with water and making it increasingly difficult for me to tread water. Plus, the sun was now above the trees, sinking like a red basketball. I kicked the pants off, a pang as they disappeared beneath me. This real estate listing was costing me some of my favorite wardrobe pieces. And almost cost me my life.

What had I gotten myself into? This was something I’d have to think on.

Later.

First thing was to grab my paddle before it floated too far away. Flipping the kayak was also a challenge, and then I somehow pulled myself in, arms trembling as the adrenaline left my system.

Hunched over and trembling like a lily pad in a storm, I made my way back to Bog Creek.

This was going to be tougher than I thought.

Amos was an adversary. I just had to figure out his motivation and then how to work around him. He knew my mother and looked down on her. I hated him for that alone, never mind how he'd ruined my day.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 11

Tackling the narrows after nearly being drowned by a mad HOA harbormaster was one of the most challenging moments of my life.

And I'd had a few.

Soaking, freezing, and exhausted, I somehow made it. I hauled the kayak just far enough onto the pebble beach that the creek wouldn't sweep it away and then fell onto my back and looked into the sky. The stars were just emerging in the dusk, and the ground was damp, though it wasn't bothering me in my soaking-wet hoodie.

My pants were still somewhere back in the lake. As were my thoughts. What was with that Amos monster? My would-be murderer. The gatekeeper of the HOA. And someone who had known my mother and the work she did.

I could see her face. The pretty curves of her cheek, the soft smile as she tucked me in.

Mom. I did have memories of my mom, though normally they were kept locked way deep inside, only pulled out when I could stand the pain.

Amos had confronted me with Jenny, leaving me with no time to guard myself.

I could never believe that she'd left me. My mother loved me, and that was the knowledge I held tight during those dark days at the foster homes. We might have only had the trailer, but we had each other, and she always kept me fed and looked after.

When my mother had to work, she left me with Karen. And she'd been a wonderful substitute parent.

Those were the happiest days of my life.

I dug my hands into the stones beside me, letting the hard pebbles sift through my fingers. This was wrong thinking; the happiest days were still to come. The past was beneath me. Like the beach. Look to the stars and the future.

The rest of my life was going to be full of abundance and bright like the burning balls of gas above me. I'd gotten the listing after all, hadn't I?

I dragged myself up off the wet ground and pointed my frozen body toward home.

***

By the time I'd peeled off my soaked hoodie and pulled on my coziest jammies, the ones with the little ponies on them, my brain was still buzzing. I took a moment and filled up the bowls of cat food I kept on my back porch for the feral strays.

Then, I drifted over to Earl's.

I wasn't sure I'd ever felt so tired in my life, but there I was, sitting beside him with a cold beer in my hands, and I barely find the energy to bring the bottle to my lips.

Earl was grinning, already on his second.

The bit of beer had already gone straight to my head, making me dizzy. I leaned back in the lawn chair on his nicely stained deck.

"How was the date, Earl?"

He grinned. "It was nice. Linda was sweet."

"Yeah? It went pretty long."

"It did. And she wants to see me again. But I don't know." He shrugged. "She's not right for me."

"Why not? Oh, man, you need to get yourself a stable girlfriend. I don't think you've had a long-term relationship since me."

"Since you," he repeated softly.

"Yeah. Since me."

"Well, you haven't either."

"True. I've been busy getting my real estate license and building a career. I haven't had time."

"Same." He deadheaded a few of the geraniums from the flower basket on the railing. "Maybe I haven't had time."

"You obviously have time, Earl. You have time to garden here." I nodded at the daisies and petunias overflowing from the other baskets. "You

only work part-time at your garage down the road and are done by two every day."

"Okay. Another subject." He wiped the dead petals from his palms. "Let's talk about you. Did you get the listing?"

"Yes." I pumped my fist.

"Congratulations." He clinked his beer against mine. "Now what?"

I frowned, thinking. "Well. Staging. Photography. Finding billionaire buyers."

"All right. You've done it before."

Beer flew out of my nose with a snort. "Exactly that, except the billionaire part. Those were nine-hundred-square-foot apartments. This is going to be a whole different thing. This is going to be a production."

"A John Hughes film?"

"Just about. This can't be your average video and photography. This has to tell a story."

Earl nodded, and then his tone got serious. "Speaking of a story. I saw you staggering up from the lake, soaked. You never tip over. What happened?" He paused. "And you didn't have any pants on."

"Pantless kayaking is a thing." My joke landed flat.

"What happened, Marla?"

This was one of those times it was best not to share too much with Earl. He could be a little protective, the alpha-male thing. What would he do if he knew Amos might have deliberately tried to kill me? Even now, I was questioning my memory. Was there real intent? Or had his boat clipped me by accident, and it was coincidence his boat moved over me in the water?

As for his threats, maybe he was just an asshole. No doubt about it. He was a grade-A, raging butt-wipe.

I shivered.

"Hey. You okay?" Earl got out of his chair and came back with a ripped, slightly stained Hudson's Bay blanket.

The one I'd ruined using it to climb the fence to get into Echo Loon Lake. He laid it gently over my lap.

“Aw. Thanks, Earl.”

“Okay. Tell me more. How’d you end up tipping? You’re the best kayaker I know.”

I looked at him a beat. “Even a duck can drown.”

Earl laughed. “You know what, Marla? That’s probably the worst metaphor I’ve ever heard. Usually, you’re wittier than that.”

“I’m just exhausted.”

He leaned over, removing the beer from my hand and tucking the blanket under my chin.

I held his hand for a moment. “Remember when Karen used to do this for us? We’d crash after school and have a quick cat nap on the rug.”

He squeezed my fingers lightly. “She never gave up.”

“What do you mean?”

“After child services took you, my mom put up signs around town. Kept calling the cops. She didn’t believe Jenny would ever leave you. She was a dedicated mother, your mother.”

I let his voice wash over me, warm under the blanket. But instead of pulling me toward sleep, it tugged something loose.

Though I’d kept those repressed memories buried deep, seeing those clippings on the wall at the Viceroy had triggered something. Then Amos talking about knowing my mother gave it more life. I needed to figure out what had happened to my mother. The universe was manifesting this in my direction, and I was the only one to do it.

I knew she cleaned houses. I'd always known that. And I knew that some of that work was at Echo Loon Lake. Where else around here could someone afford a housekeeper?

But there was something… Something Amos had said…

“People die in this lake all the time. Do you know it’s one of the deepest in this region? You can sink and never be found.”

Was my mother’s body at the bottom of the lake? Or were those rumors I’d heard in town, but ignored, true? That Jenny had been sleeping with someone in the community and had run away with them? One of the

owners. A woman. That was on top of the whispers that I was the illegitimate child of another…

Karen had been around back then and had been my mother's friend. The link I needed was sitting right inside this trailer.

My eyes flew open. "Can I talk to your mom?"

"She sleeps a lot, you know? It's the Alzheimer's."

A sharp pain in my chest. "Oh, no. Is it getting worse?"

"It is. I don't know how much longer I can keep her at home." He caught himself. "But she's still okay. She still knows where she is, where her things are."

"Too bad your father isn't still alive. You could use some help."

"The old goat was at the shop fixing cars twenty-four/seven. He'd still be there if his ticker hadn't given out."

Earl had inherited the mechanic shop in Kestrel Falls, a mere ten minutes away, along with the care of his mother. I'd read a few things about dementia. It was a terrible strain on the family, especially the caregiver.

"The long-term memory stays, doesn't it?"

"You can try. But don't get your hopes up."

I followed him into the trailer. There was Karen, sitting on the couch, her jaw slightly slack, her eyes glazed, watching reruns of *Wheel of Fortune*. Earl muted the TV, and a flash of anger crossed her face.

"I was watching that."

"Marla has some questions for you, Mom."

At first, she looked at me blankly. Zero recognition. I felt a sinking in my belly. Then she blinked a couple of times, and it flooded back in. "Marla. Honey, come give me a hug."

I went over and hugged her. She smelled like body odor, baby powder, and tea.

"It's been so long. I never see you."

That wasn't quite the truth. I used to visit her every day, before I started at Lake Homes Realty. She always told me the same stories: how cute Earl and I had been, playing with Lego, watching Saturday-morning

cartoons while she fed us box after box of Froot Loops. She was embarrassed by the loss of her memory, so I kept the conversations light.

But this time, I needed to probe a little.

“You’re my granddaughter.” Karen beamed.

I didn’t correct her. “Do you remember much about when my mother worked at Echo Loon Lake?”

Something flashed in her eyes, bright and anxious. “Something happened to your mother. I knew it. There’s no way she would have left you. She loved you more than life itself.”

“What do you think happened, Karen?”

She lowered her voice and leaned in. “Dodgy things were always happening at that lake, you know. She wasn’t the first one to go missing.”

“What did you just say?”

Karen curled her lip. “She wasn’t the first to walk in those damn gates and not come out.”

“Who else went missing?”

Her voice went hard. “The kind of women hardly anyone would notice.”

I tried again, “Who?”

Then a glaze came over Karen’s blue eyes, the same color as Earl’s. She looked at her son querulously. “Why isn’t my show on? I like to watch *Wheel of Fortune*. I always watch *Wheel of Fortune* at this time.”

I gripped her hand. “Karen. We were just talking about the people who went missing out at Echo Loon Lake.”

She shook her head, ripping her hand from mine. “Put *Wheel of Fortune* back on.”

“Okay, Mom. Will do.” Earl unmuted the TV, then took my elbow and guided me back outside.

If I’d been tired before, now I was tired and depressed.

“I’m so sorry, Earl.”

“Yeah.” He blew out a breath. “You know, she’s usually pretty sweet. But she gets really angry if she’s knocked off her schedule. We try to keep

everything the same."

"How much longer can you take care of her?"

He put his hands up and shook his head. "I don't know. It's getting tougher. I've got support workers coming in every other day to help with her baths and take care of her. But I don't know how long I've got before she'll have to go into a home." He mustered a small smile. "Let's talk about brighter things, though. I want to hear more about your new listing."

We settled back into the lawn chairs. Earl pulled the blanket up over me again. I meant to tell him about the Viceroy. How gorgeous it was, the clippings in the game room…

But instead, I closed my eyes and drifted halfway into slumber land. Earl was nattering on about something—the food he ate on his date—but my body was shutting down on me, completely out of gas. Everything drifted away. I felt myself lifted, blanket and all. Cold night air. Then the closeness of my own trailer, the smell of my own pillow. I was laid down carefully and the duvet draped over me.

My mom used to tuck me in like this. A soft smile. A hand smoothing the blanket flat. For once, I didn't chase the memory off. I let it carry me under.

"Night, Marla," Earl said, from somewhere very far away.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 12

Tina looked like one of my rescue cats after catching a big rat for breakfast, though it was closer to lunch by the time I managed to make my way to the office. My outfit consisted of the last decent thing in my closet—a serviceable navy-blue dress with a V-neck. It was a tad short, but it was only a few inches above my knees.

“Marla, this is Robert Berger the Third.” Tina nodded at the man sitting in the leather chair across from her, a chair that had been conspicuously cleaned for this meeting. The office was still messy, but nowhere near what it had been two days ago. It also smelled like potpourri that struggled to mask the cigarette smoke.

Tina looked fantastic. Her frizzy hair was pulled into a sleek chignon, and she even had make-up on. Dramatic bold sweeps of mascara and ruby lipstick. At seventy, she was gorgeous when she took the time to clean up.

Her guest didn’t bother to stand or shake my hand, but he did swivel in his seat.

“Pleased to meet you,” I said, taking him in.

He was on the corpulent side with burst blood vessels in his nose and a loud designer Hawaiian shirt. Everything about him screamed rich and obnoxious. “Call me Bobb-O.”

Bobb-O gave me a slow once-over, pausing at my beige sneakers and lingering on my cleavage. “It’s a long drive from Toronto, so let’s get on with this.”

My shoes failed, but the rest of me passed.

Tina tapped the top of her desk with newly gelled nails. “He’s here about the place on Echo Loon Lake.” Her working space was absent of the usual overflowing ashtray and scattered papers.

“It’s not even listed yet,” I said with some surprise, letting my voice rise like a question though it wasn’t. I was new to this business and selling properties that weren’t listed was part of the advanced curriculum. It looked like I was going to get a crash course in realty for experts.

“I made a couple of calls. Like I said, these homes are never available.” She turned her smile on Bobb-O. “This is a very exclusive listing. Smart of you to drive right up.”

His chest swelled. One of those men who took every compliment as his due. “Hmm. I’ve been looking in this area for years, and I have never seen one of those homes come up for sale. Tina here tells me it’s the biggest house on the lake. Exactly what my beloved Buffy and I are looking for.”

I looked at my boss behind her client’s back, popping my eyes at her. The property wasn’t ready to show yet. “It’s not ready for viewing…”

Bobb-O interrupted me. “No worries. I’m happy to take a look at it off-market. I can overlook a tea towel askew or something.”

I gulped as he went on, his voice loud and self-important.

“So, tonight, seven o’clock. Buffy and I will be by to see it.” He looked at his Rolex. “She can have the driver bring her here after she closes the gallery.”

Tina clicked her nails together. “That should be—”

I talked over my boss. “No, I’m sorry, Mr. Berger. Echo Loon Lake has a very involved HOA, and there are no viewings after five.”

He stood up from his chair, eye-to-eye with my five-foot-eight but attempting to look down his bulbous nose at me. “That’s preposterous. If I’m going to drop four million dollars, or I’ll even pay over asking for the right place, I’ll see it when it’s convenient for me.”

He let that sit there, confident he’d made his point.

Tina gave a high, nervous titter. “I’m sure we can find an accommodation.”

I kept my stare locked on Bobb-O. “Four is the latest we can book.” Amos had made his point clear to me last night. Dead clear.

The man’s face flushed, red spots joining the burst blood vessels. “Tina, I thought you told me this was going to be an easy purchase?”

“Look, Mr. Berger, I’ve got you.” She handed him a gift certificate. “Why don’t you go across the road and get yourself a drink at the Cookhouse? On me.”

He tossed the coupon back on the desk as though it were used tissue paper. “You have my number. I expect to see that house tonight.” He flounced out, letting the door slam behind him.

Tina’s face crumpled as she pulled out her cigarettes and lit one, puffing aggressively. “Marla, what the heck?”

I shrugged. “Outside of normal hours isn’t possible. The only way we show this is with the approval of the HOA. I was talking to Amos last night; there is no way anyone sees that house after hours.”

“Amos, the old harbormaster? That guy is a dick.” Her dramatic movie-star eyes flew to mine. “And you managed to be in the gates after hours?”

“I went for a kayak, which is how I found the listing in the first place. I bumped into him on the lake. Literally. He was in a rowboat.” I didn’t tell her all the details. Why worry her? I was used to pretending the dark moments didn’t happen.

She nodded slowly. “I seem to remember that. But surely they can make an exception.”

“There are no exceptions. Amos made that painfully clear. Why can’t he just come earlier?”

“His wife, Buffy, runs an art gallery down in Yorkville.” Tina lit her next cigarette directly off the first. “Plus, Toronto traffic and all. It’s a long drive.”

Leaning away from the smoke, I asked, “And she can’t close the doors for a day? Or why don’t they book a viewing on the weekend?”

“Look, I don’t tell the clients what to do. They’re always right, remember? Find a way to get Bobb-O and Buffy into Echo Loon Lake.”

“The quote is, the customer is always right in matters of taste. If he wants to paint the wood sides of the house after he buys it, he can be right about that, but he’s wrong about bullying his way into a viewing. It’s not going to happen tonight.”

“Marla, you’re not helping me out here.”

“You’re just going to have to hold the Bergers off. I have an appointment at noon to talk to Cheryl about the staging. No matter what your client said, nobody wants to see dirty underwear on a bedroom floor.”

“True.” Tina’s ashtray was rapidly filling up with lipstick-stained butts. “I’ll do my best to delay. But call me as soon as you have something figured out.”

“Will do, but you need to be up front with them. Viewings scheduled between nine and four only. No exceptions.” I left the office, coughing from the acrid burn in my lungs.

Tina hadn’t been doing well since her wife died, right before I joined the brokerage. Erica had been the one to keep Tina exercising, well fed, and on the nicotine gum. But as soon as she died, I watched it happen: Tina became a stressed-out chimney and packed on the pounds at an alarming rate.

The current real estate market in Canada was also a factor. A big sale would help both of us.

***

The old Sunfire was waiting right where I left it, parked on the street. It was turning out to be a lovely day, with the sun almost directly overhead and beaming possibilities. Earl might not have let me borrow his Ford again —claiming it needed the oil changed—but he had left a gift. Grinning, I wiggled my butt into my new seat cushion. It came with a note:

An ass like yours deserves comfort.

Crude but adorable. Earl was always doing stuff like this. One of my favorites was when he built a little shelter on my back porch for my cats.

It was ready when I came home from my real estate training for a break.

He said, “You’re spending way too much on cat food. If you’re going to feed every damn stray from here to Toronto, you might as well keep the kibble dry when it rains.”

The guy was right. My Frisky Bits cost me less now.

The freshly tuned-up Sunfire drove beautifully for the hour drive to Echo Loon Lake. I put on some old rock and envisioned how I was going to stage the Viceroy.

When I got to the gate, my cheeks hurt from grinning. How good did it feel to tap the card Cheryl had given me?

For now, I was in. The iron gate swung open with a clang. And bonus, I didn't have to worry about Cheryl seeing me in the Sunfire, because visitors parked in the little lot. The walk to the Viceroy was the reason for those beige sneakers Bobb-O had sneered at. I kept my ears tuned for chainsaws, half-hoping I'd see Parker again.

No lumberjacks, falling trees, or scary harbormasters on my way to 3 Echo Loon Lake.

Cheryl opened the door with fresh lemonade in a glass and a bright smile. "Marla, I'm so glad you could make it." She wore a short white dress with matching sneakers, and her glossy hair was pulled back into a high pony.

The house looked flawless, like last time. There wouldn't need to be too much staging work done here. There was only one thing out of place. A shoebox sat with its lid off and tissue paper folded on the kitchen table. A pair of black Louboutins. Brand new, the soles a bright, unmistakable red. The real thing, not the knockoffs I'd worn, and left, on my first visit.

"I hope that's not too forward," Cheryl said, catching me staring. "Yours were done for after last time, and we're about the same size, aren't we? Consider it a listing present."

"Thank you! You shouldn't have." I left them there on the table. Had she known mine were fakes the whole time? Was this a gift or a polite correction?

"Okay." I took a couple swallows of the lemonade. It was cold and refreshing. "The first thing we do when we stage is remove any personal items." I nodded to the photo of her and Parker on the piano. "That should go. Of course, the house is already decorated beautifully, and the paint looks fresh."

Cheryl shrugged. "I had the whole thing redone when we moved in five years ago. Light, bright colors."

"Well, it's perfect." I frowned at the fireplace, which had natural stone around it. "You might want to paint that white. That's the latest trend."

She opened her eyes in mock horror. “I don’t care what the trend is. Nobody’s painting my stone.”

I laughed. “Fair enough.” And I kind of agreed. “Can you follow me to the game room?”

We both went downstairs, and I pointed to the news clippings on the wall. “I’m afraid these have to come down. They’re a little disconcerting.”

The tendons on Cheryl’s neck strained. “Those are actually the truth of this place. People who buy here should know what they’re buying into. I sure didn’t.” Her voice had a new edge to it.

I asked carefully, “What do you mean, you didn’t know what you were buying into?”

She shrugged, brushing it off. “Well, do they all have to come down?”

Arms crossed, I examined some of the aerial photos. They were interesting and incredibly beautiful. Echo Loon Lake before the community—the only things marring the wild landscape were a few mines, black spots in the green.

“The photos can stay.” I walked to the clipping about my missing mother. “But these news articles should probably come down. Where did you find this one, for example?”

I tried to keep any emotion out of my voice. If Cheryl didn’t know my backstory, so much the better. Though she didn’t present like a class snob, she very well might not want a housekeeper’s daughter to sell her mansion.

Her hand fluttered to her chest. “I fancy myself an amateur historian. Before I got my inheritance, I used to work at the *Toronto Reporter*. Reporting’s in my blood. But there’s not much to report on up here, and the *North Bay Nugget* wasn’t looking for anybody new.”

“You don’t have to work,” I said.

“No, but I do like to write.” She nodded at an old-school typewriter by the bar, and I followed her over. “I’m thinking about starting a book about the history of the lake.”

The hair on the back of my neck stood up. My instincts told me Amos probably wouldn’t love that. Little communities loved their secrets. Absently, I ran a finger over the boxy keyboard. This was a classic Hermes 3000 seafoam green manual typewriter, and it looked brand new.

“You use a typewriter? Not a computer?”

“Yes. With AI and all the distractions on the internet, I prefer the old-school approach.”

She took my elbow and steered me away.

“Anyhoo, I have a meeting with the tennis pro and must skedaddle.”

That was right; I saw the tennis courts and shuffleboard area from my kayak. Cheryl was already halfway up the stairs when I called, “Oh, before you go. There’s somebody interested in seeing the place.”

She turned and frowned. “Oh, so soon? We’re not ready.”

“Just remove a few things off the wall and you are good to go. Do you mind if somebody comes by?”

“I mind. Frankly, I’m not showing the place till it’s perfect.” She flapped her hand at the wall. “Feel free to take down what you think doesn’t belong. I’ll be a couple hours, just lock up when you leave. Toodles.”

She left, and a strange feeling came over me, like euphoria. A tingling up my spine. This was my house, and I was alone. Where did that thought come from? It was Cheryl and Parker Calder’s house, and I was the real estate agent. But there was still a childish glee bubbling through me.

The novel was intriguing. Were there any details in it that might teach me more about my mother? I took out my cell phone and snapped photos of the pages and the article on the wall. Some reading for later.

Then I ran back to the kitchen to step into those Louboutins. They fit like they’d been molded to my feet. Expensive shoes made all the difference. I’d never had a real pair on in my life for the simple reason that they cost more than my car. I took a slow turn across the living room, four inches taller and strutting like the carpet was a catwalk.

This was Christmas in July. Alone in my dream house, with the perfect opportunity to snoop. Back downstairs, I took a couple of the articles off the wall, frowning when I looked at the nails that had been holding them up. Those would have to be patched. Parker was supposed to be the handyman; perhaps he’d have time to fill them in and paint over.

For now, I put them back up and began exploring. Time to really drink in the view, envisioning myself on the perfect metal dock, sitting in one of the two uniform Muskoka chairs, perhaps a rich sugar daddy beside me.

Flowers tumbled around the perimeter of the house. Earl would love the landscaping here. The man might be a mechanic, but when he wasn't under a car, he loved to dig in the dirt. If he hadn't inherited his business from his dad, I wondered if he'd have become a gardener instead.

Biting my lip, I vanquished thoughts of my ex. A rich, handsome banker was what I needed. Not a Bog Creek hockey boy.

What I really wanted to do was check out the bedrooms. The Louboutins clicked on the hardwood stairs, and I took my time staring at the photos hanging above the banister. Shots of Cheryl playing tennis effortlessly. Parker in a sports car. The two of them on a sailboat in the Caribbean, looking like a Lotto 6/49 ad.

I blinked and envisioned my face instead of Cheryl's in every frame. This should be my life. Now I knew what to manifest. Exactly this.

In their bedroom, a little thrill flipped my stomach at the king-sized bed and white linens. Before I even knew what I was doing, I'd thrown myself onto the bed and put my hands on my stomach. Imagining Parker beside me…

Slightly inappropriate. Okay, really inappropriate.

Jumping off the rumpled comforter, I smoothed the wrinkles and went into the bathroom.

Medicine cabinets were always an eye-opener. There were several prescriptions on the shelves. Lorazepam, Xanax, Valium. All the typical 'mother's little helper,' as the Rolling Stones would say. Plus, there were more products than you'd normally see for a man. Parker obviously took good care of himself. The whole Hommage line. Creams, hair products, and shaving items. A Hommage razor alone could run thirty thousand.

This was real money.

Moving on to the den. Definitely Parker's space, though there were no books in it. Pictures of classic cars, heavy leather furniture, and a big mahogany desk gave the room that masculine feel. Plopping into an ergonomic chair, I swiveled, enjoying the feeling of sitting where he had been. It was strangely intimate. This was fun.

I absentmindedly opened a desk drawer, and the joy, the bubbles, and contentment I'd felt vanished.

There were my real estate cards.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 13

CHERYL

Cheryl had a tennis lesson every Thursday afternoon at 1:00 p.m., and she'd deliberately booked her new real estate agent's staging appointment for noon. One aspect of the strategy was to leave her alone in the house.

All part of the master plan to flee this Greek tragedy. Cults had nothing on this place. At least cults had charismatic leaders.

The tennis courts were something Cheryl would miss when she moved. The playing surfaces were perfectly maintained, shaded by the pines and catching the breeze off the lake. The Hendersons were nowhere near ready to move, but her husband didn't have to know that.

She smacked the ball across the net, using her flawless backhand. Years of tennis camp as a teenager had left her with almost perfect muscle memory.

"Good one," Chad called, volleying it in a gentle arc.

She smiled and sent it back to the far-right corner. It was satisfying watching her instructor run for it, those muscled calves pumping and blond hair flying. Chad was another perk of this place. Michelangelo's David come to life with a wicked serve.

He managed to swipe the ball back with a satisfying thwack, and she moved quickly to her left, catching the next one just before it bounced twice.

"Nice," he called.

Cheryl smiled and sent it straight down the line. There was something wonderfully civilized about the rhythm of tennis.

Chad Claybourne was just a bonus. He was married to Denise, of course. They were the Barbie and Ken of Echo Loon Lake, and Cheryl suspected they had an open marriage. Not in public, of course. Every resident had to maintain the facade of domestic bliss.

Parker spent an awful lot of time working on Denise's gardens while Chad gave lessons.

The ball bounced in front of her, and she missed. Distracted by thinking of her husband’s infidelity.

“Sorry,” she called.

“No problem, let me just collect some balls.”

Cheryl chewed on her bottom lip as he bent over, gathering up the loose balls at the base of the net. For one brief, delicious moment, Cheryl imagined what it would be like to sleep with him.

Two could play the cheating game. But it wasn’t her thing. Too much effort, and the double standard was alive and well, even in this day and age. Parker was the stud, and she’d be the slut. And the sex might not even be worth it. That was the thing with super-gorgeous men. They thought they didn’t have to try as hard to please. At least that was her experience.

Parker was the wham, bam, thank you ma’am type and seemed to have an endless supply of energy for it. She’d left the real estate agent alone in the house on purpose.

Her husband normally came home for lunch, and Marla would look tasty. She was his type.

“Ready?” Chad sent a fast one zipping right to center court. That immaculate serve.

Cheryl returned the ball and thought about the real estate agent. She liked her, and she hadn't expected to. Online research didn’t reveal a person’s energy. And Marla had a remarkable aura… One of those personalities that drew people in.

She reminded Cheryl of herself when younger. Ambitious, beautiful, and a bit naive.

It was hard not to be envious of that glowing skin and young, healthy curves.

Cheryl was expecting a fast-talking salesperson, full of promises and half-lies. But Marla had a natural way about her that was very appealing and honest. Hopeful.

As she sent the ball back again and again, she tried to reconcile her feelings. Some guilt made the back of her neck ache. Had she left a lamb in the lion’s den? There was something in Marla's eyes Cheryl recognized immediately. A guardedness beneath the enthusiasm hinting at young

trauma. Like sees like. She'd been a poor little rich girl once. People didn't understand that such a thing existed.

Money didn’t buy love or attention. Her parents had been busy, and the endless string of nannies cared even less.

Cheryl whacked the ball with all her might, thinking of that one nanny with the little pinches.

It struck Chad in the groin, and he dropped to the ground.

“Are you okay?” she called, rushing over.

He rolled over on the court and gasped. “Tennis lesson is over.”

“Let me at least get you some ice?”

Chad staggered to his feet, his face pale. “I’ll survive. That’s some drop shot you got.”

She grinned. “Literally.”

Cheryl checked her watch. Parker should be arriving home for lunch any minute now.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 14

MARLA

The mystery of who stole my new real estate cards was solved. There they were. The whole stack of them. Ten light brown business cards with the Lake Homes Realty logo. The design featured a grinning photo of myself in the pink suit that got destroyed in the storm when I made my escape after trespassing at Echo Loon Lake.

Heavy footsteps thudded up the stairs, and I froze.

Immediately, I was twelve again, caught stealing food out of the kitchen. There never seemed to be enough dinner at the foster homes. Being in the wrong place at the wrong time meant a beating. Years later, the same icy torrent raced up my spine, and my heartbeat went berserk. I was tempted to climb out the office window, even though this was the second floor. My nervous system screamed, *Run!*

I clamped my shaking hands together, taking a breath before I reacted and did something stupid… Like diving into the hosta garden. A real estate agent doing a staging visit has every right to be in the listing house. Though pawing through office drawers wasn't normally part of the process.

The office door flew open, and there was Parker.

His pale blue eyes widened in shock and his face wrinkled in suspicion. "What are you doing in my office?"

He loomed in the doorway, a hulking figure. My guess was six-foot-three, and maybe a hundred pounds heavier than my hundred and thirty. Damn. The desk drawer was still open, and I saw him clock it.

He asked the same question again, but this time with a hint of menace. "What are you doing in my office, Marla?"

Another holdover from my group home days: if you didn't want to be victimized, you didn't act like a victim. Better to go on the offensive.

I pulled my cards out of his desk and tossed them on top.

"What are these doing here?" I asked the question innocently, like I'd found candy.

“Were you going through my desk?” His eyebrows furrowed. “First you break into the compound and now this? Tell me what you really want.”

“I’m staging,” I said, simply. There was no point in denying his accusations. They were true. Divert the conversation to somewhere I wanted to go.

He took a few steps closer, pausing on the other side of the desk. “Looks like you’re snooping.”

It took everything in me not to flinch. “The drawer was left open.”

“No, it wasn’t.”

“Yes, it was.”

“Can’t prove it.”

We sounded like twelve-year-olds.

Parker’s face broke into a smile, as if he realized we’d descended into ridiculousness. “Fine. I admit it, I took the cards.”

Before responding, I slipped my cards from the desktop into my pocket and shut the drawer. “Why did you break into my truck? Looks like we were both guilty of going too far.” A non-admission. It put us back on an even playing field.

Parker leaned forward, now only inches from my face. I held my ground. “Because Amos told me to check out the truck that had been abandoned on the side of the road.”

I bent at the waist so that we were now nose-to-nose and said softly, “It wasn’t abandoned. It was parked.”

“You’d left your purse right there on the seat. The door unlocked.” He was so close I could smell him. Sandalwood and cedar. I hadn’t imagined that lingering scent in the Ford. Parker had been in the cab.

My heart raced. This felt more like seduction than a reprimand.

“Who locks their doors up here?”

He was now firmly invading my personal space, and something arced between us.

Parker paused, his lips practically on mine. “You can never be too safe these days. Not that being safe is any fun.” I inhaled his minty breath.

“So you took my cards. Why?”

With a devilish, sexy grin, he moved his face to my ear. “Maybe I wanted your number.” His hot breath tickled my neck. And the hint of a Scottish accent was back.

“Well, your wife has it now,” I said as I stood up.

That broke whatever weird spell was brewing between us. Though I couldn’t deny I was attracted to this man. High emotions turn into intense interactions.

Wasn’t this exactly how a nineteen-seventies porn movie went? All we needed was tacky music and a blue light. He caught me in his office and winked. Our lips would mash together, and he’d throw me back onto that desk.

Sweat trickled down my back, despite the air conditioning. I had to get out of here. Where was my brain going?

“Well,” I said, in an overly cheery voice, “this looks like a pretty good space. Just make sure there’s nothing on the desk for showings.”

I brushed past him and ran down the stairs, nearly tripping in my ridiculously high heels and stumbling down the last few steps.

“You okay?” he called as he followed me.

“I’m fine, I’m fine.” My ankle throbbed and my cheeks burned. I definitely wasn’t fine.

We both landed in the kitchen, and with trembling hands, I poured myself a glass of lemonade and kicked off the Louboutins.

Parker looked amused. “Can you pour me one too?”

He took his drink and sat at one of the stools, all flirtation gone. “You know, I don’t really want to sell this place.”

“Then why are you?”

“The wife would rather have the Hendersons’. She thinks this one’s too big and too ostentatious. I think it’s perfect. She bought it right after we got married. The house hadn’t been on the market a day, and we were the first ones to see it.”

Of course, Cheryl bought the dream house right after snaring the hot husband. Women like her always did. Jealousy was a bad look for an agent. *Keep it professional.*

I nodded sagely. “Homes in this enclave are rare. I couldn’t find any other sales at all.”

“This one was different. The owner disappeared. Did you hear about that?”

“Just rumors.”

“Cheryl’s totally obsessed with it. You saw all those clippings in the game room, right? She’s trying to piece together what happened. It was tied up with the banks for ages. The owner had to be reported and declared dead after seven years, and then there were legal battles on top of that. Finally, it went to market. If it had gone through a regular seller, it never would’ve hit the MLS, but because there were courts and banks involved, it went up as a power of sale, and we snapped it up.” He gave me a big grin. “She originally liked the back story, saying it gave the house character. Now, she’s changed her mind.”

“What did your wife find out?”

His eyes narrowed. “Sometimes, the best way to stay happy is to avoid going too deep.” With that, he finished his lemonade. “Well, I gotta go. Trees need cutting, gardens need pruning, lawns need mowing.”

“Why do you even work, if you have that kind of money?”

“Cheryl likes to keep me busy, and I like to get out and about.” He pointed to a decanter of liquor on the sideboard. “Booze used to be my problem. But I can keep myself in check if I’m not sitting at home. Too much leisure makes it too easy to fall into bad habits.”

I nodded, my gut clenching with another dark memory. That was something else I’d seen in the group homes. Some of those foster families made their whole living off the kids, paid by the government. Once they had the older kids raising the younger ones, there was no real job left for the adults, and I’d watched more than a few of them turn to drink. The women and the men.

“Well, I’ll let you get back to it. But do me a favor…” He shook a finger at me. “No more snooping.” The sexy smile was back. “But if you ever want the real tour, I’m happy to give it to you.”

With that, he left, and I let myself collapse onto the counter. What had just happened?

I splashed cold water on my wrists at the sink until my pulse settled. Shaking my head, I decided to get on with my staging plans and padded downstairs in my bare feet.

The game room had so many things on the wall, usually a no-no for sales viewings. I read a few more of the articles, and some went back so far the paper was yellowed.

A few were about deaths and boating accidents. That wasn't unusual. There were always drownings in lakes. People who hadn't watched the weather, tourists who couldn't swim, the usual. But Echo Loon Lake was different, because so few people ever got out onto it in the first place. Maybe that was exactly why it stood out to me. I counted at least four separate drownings going back to the 1940s.

This time, I stayed away from the piece about my mother and focused on the article next to it. It was from 2008, and the headline jumped out at me.

Echo Loon Lake resident Sally Dobbin still not located

I read the article, and it stated the police claimed no evidence of foul play. It seemed fishy to me. The Viceroy's original owner, gone the same year as my mom and never found. Sally Dobbin. I stood there a second and mulled it over. Two women, same lake, same summer, both just gone. Private investigators on TV shows are always blustering that there are no coincidences.

I did believe in coincidences. The universe created them. But this time, a nagging pulsed at the back of my brain. My mother wouldn't leave me, and why would Sally leave a home she built herself?

There were other things on the wall too. HOA notices. Condemnations citing the Viceroy for building code violations: too tall, didn't blend with the landscape. Then a new decree: no more prefabs.

That made sense. This Viceroy hadn't been built stone by stone. It had been shipped in pieces on a transport truck and assembled on-site. That was what made Viceroy famous. Gorgeous homes, fast and relatively affordable to build. Sally Dobbin had it standing before the HOA could do a thing about it.

This home hadn't been forged and built the same way as everything else around it, which resonated with me. Echo Loon Lake was my dream,

and I was built different from the residents here. If the Viceroy could belong, maybe I could too.

Standing in the middle of the room, I made a decision. The clippings should stay up. The history of the lake and this house were important. Maybe I could finally understand what happened to my mother. And now I had access. The card to the gates, the key to this house, and a reason to be asking questions.

Becoming part of this community was how I'd finally get my answer.

My legs were trembling. Worn out from my dunking in the lake yesterday. Shaken by the intimate encounter with Parker in the office. Exhausted by dealing with Bobb-O that morning. What I really needed was a meditation.

On the pretense of checking the landscaping and outdoor spaces for staging, I made my way out the sliding glass door to the dock. If the house didn’t sell off-market, I’d need to book a photographer. Thank goodness the gardens were in great shape. Chalk one up for the HOA.

Sitting in one of the Muskoka chairs, I relaxed and stepped outside myself.

There are different kinds of meditation. There’s the kind where you breathe in, breathe out, and envision your future. And then there’s the next stage—when you become aware of being aware. You go outside your body and hover over yourself, just taking a look without judgment.

That’s what I did now.

I closed my eyes and observed outside of consciousness, seeing a beautiful twenty-six-year-old woman relaxing in a red chair. On the lake, a canoe drifted by with a couple of residents paddling through the water. They gave me a lazy wave, and I watched myself raise a hand back.

This was where I belonged.

This was the life I wanted, and I could see it clearly from where I sat.

A sexy, dangerous husband. A man who made me feel like I wanted to be sprawled out on a desk and taken.

A beautiful, immaculate house. Water access.

Meditating here every day, instead of on the roof of my trailer.

I could taste the fresh, tasty lemonade I'd made from scratch. My closet would be full of shoes that cost more than a used car.

Then my phone buzzed, and I zipped back into my body.

It was Tina:

Bobb-O is here and PISSED. Come back!

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 15

CHERYL

A delightfully evil grin spread across Cheryl's face as she jogged home along the lakeside road.

What if she walked in on her husband in flagrante delicto with the real estate agent?

Parker didn't want to sell, and actual proof of an affair would give her some leverage. Of course, she knew her husband cheated, even if she turned a blind eye. He was basically female crack.

Cheryl had been addicted once-upon-a-time herself. Now, she thought his face looked more like his personality. Poison.

Amos popped out from the trees, and Cheryl tripped, just catching herself before she tumbled into the wood chips.

"Amos, you just about gave me a heart attack. Why are you creeping?"

He scowled, looking just like one of the crankier nuns at her boarding school in England. "I'm just doing my patrol. And good thing I ran into you." He pointed toward the front gate. "Your real estate agent's vehicle is leaking oil in the guest parking lot."

Cheryl bit her tongue, swallowing the "who gives a shit?"

Not the right way to deal with the rule-keeper of Echo Loon Lake.

He leveled his gray gaze at her, waiting. Amos was like a goose. He might look calm on the outside, but underneath the civility, anger was churning.

He spoke slowly when she didn't immediately answer. "As you know, we have a strict no-stains-on-the-asphalt rule here. It's unsightly."

She couldn't help herself. "How do you know my agent's vehicle dripped the oil? Did you crawl under the car while it was parked?"

Amos curled his lip. "She's gone. And her ancient Pontiac Sunfire left a dollop of filth behind."

Cheryl's stomach dropped. So much for catching her husband bare-butt and in the act. Marla might be smarter than she looked. "I really have to get going, but I'll mention something."

She wouldn’t. Stained parking spots? Asinine.

Amos put his hands on his hips. “Your guest, so you’re fined. That will be a hundred dollars.”

Ugh. She gritted her teeth. No sense getting into it with him. The HOA never bent, and Amos loved his rules.

Cheryl suspected very bad things happened to people who didn’t follow the rules. And even though she’d abandoned her journalism pen years ago—being fired from the *Toronto Reporter* iced her career instantly—that spidey sense that something was off still remained. And there was definitely something not quite right with Echo Loon Lake.

When she first bought the Viceroy, she thought it was the perfect location and inspiration for writing her first novel. Wasn’t that what most disgraced journalists did? Write a novel? Now, she wondered if she’d stumbled onto the true crime story of the century. The more research she did, the stranger things got.

Especially the story of the very house she lived in. When they bought it under power of sale, she’d assumed someone just couldn’t meet their mortgage payments. A little bit of digging unearthed something else entirely. The past owner, Sally Dobbin, had gone missing without a trace. She’d been a builder back in Australia and had moved here in 2008, throwing up the Viceroy in record time.

Dobbin was known for ignoring building codes, which was why Cheryl assumed she flew the Aussie coop in the first place. But there was no mortgage. The house had been owned outright.

Cheryl bounced up her steps, brain racing with the next chapter she would type…

Parker waited for her in the kitchen, standing by the granite counter. And he was angry. A half-drunk beer was clenched in his hand, never a good sign.

Life was better when Parker got laid on his lunch hour. Obviously, the real estate agent hadn’t put out, or he’d have been his usual relaxed, grinning self. Some vestige of guilt made him treat her better when he’d been dallying with others.

“I don’t want to sell the place,” he said as he pulled a bottle of red out from the rack beneath the island and put it beside the beer.

She gulped.

“You’re not supposed to drink, Parker.”

“Who are you? The alcohol police?” He uncorked it and poured a glass of wine, then poured one for her as well.

“We’re gonna drink, and we’re gonna talk.”

“Well, can we at least do this romantically, down on the dock?”

He looked her up and down, then mimicked her. “No, we can’t do this *romantically* down on the dock.”

Cheryl felt herself shrink inward a little. That appraising, half-disgusted look from her husband. After Parker had been with a younger, hotter Marla this afternoon. Cheryl kept herself fit, but she was over thirty.

Taking the glass, she shrugged off the insecurity. Who was he to make her feel bad? “So, talk.”

“We worked hard to get here,” Parker said, almost belligerently.

“I bought the house.”

“Your trust fund bought the house. I do all of the work around here, tending gardens, fixing stuff, taking care of all the annoying little chores.”

Cheryl rolled her eyes. “I know about some of your annoying little chores.”

Parker ignored his wine, slurping at the beer. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing.”

“And you have a real estate agent in here already?”

“She was here to stage.”

“I didn’t see her do a thing.”

Cheryl sighed, finishing her wine, the fortification needed for a conversation this uncomfortable. “She’s not supposed to do anything, just advise. She says we should take some things down off the walls.”

“Well, I’ve been telling you that for ages. I hate all those stupid, depressing articles about women who go missing.”

“It’s my research, Parker. For the book I’m gonna write.”

“Yeah, right. At least my job actually gets things done. You just sit down there—tap, tap, tap—for a book that’s probably never gonna see the light of day.”

“What do you mean?”

“The HOA isn’t going to let you publish a book on the history of this place. People pay for the privacy. You get that? Privacy.”

Cheryl chewed on the inside of her cheek. Parker wasn’t nice when he was drinking. Whatever veneer kept him charming disappeared the second he had alcohol in him. That’s why she encouraged him to work when they first moved in. It was also why she turned a blind eye to the cheating, if it kept him in a good mood and off the sauce.

She tried sugar instead of spice. “I think we need to change. There’s been some tension between us. Maybe a new house. A different part of the lake. A different view.”

“You love the view.”

She couldn’t argue that. She was absolutely in love with this house and the view. Plus, Parker didn’t know she never actually intended to buy the Hendersons’ place. She needed an out. The HOA didn’t allow for ugly divorces, and her research had found that inconvenient women tended to disappear.

Cheryl reached for his untouched wine, but he moved it and poured her a fresh one. She shrugged and took a swallow. It was a lovely red from California, oaky and redolent of strawberries.

She slurred, “Paarker, we’re going through with this…” She trailed off. What was wrong with her?

“Cheryl, if you can’t stand the heat in the kitchen, then get out. I’m not leaving.”

There were two Parkers talking to her, blurring in and out. She’d only had two glasses of wine. That shouldn’t have been enough to touch her vision.

She staggered, tried to get up off the stool, and couldn’t.

“Take it easy, honey,” he said.

She fell, crashing onto the Italian tiles she'd loved so much when they first moved in. They were so pretty close up…

She tried to reach for the cell phone in her skirt pocket, but her fingers wouldn't grip it.

Her last thought was a journalist's search for truth. This was it. This was how it ended when someone got too close to people's secrets. Parker had drugged her, and she fell for it.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 16

MARLA

I hustled back to my car and got back to North Bay in no time. Rather than worry about Bobb-O, I fantasized about the upgraded kayak I would buy if I owned the Viceroy.

It would be over-the-top. One of those racing models, with pinstripe tape along the sides.

Kind of like the Hummer parked on Main Street alongside the pickup trucks that most North Bay natives drove. Earl gushed over this particular model. Extreme off-road gear and tires came standard, along with a Neptune Blue Matte paint job and sky roof panels. It took up two spots, including part of a handicapped zone, even though no permit was on display in the windshield.

There was even a blood-red-on-black logo wrap on the door, *Buffy on Bellair*.

I parked the Sunfire in front of the Cookhouse and read Tina's message one more time before I crossed the road and went in. ALL CAPS. Tina wasn't normally into shouty texts.

There was no way to prepare myself for the scene in the brokerage. I'd never seen Tina intimidated by anybody, but there she was, standing with her back against the front window, her hair frizzing out like she'd poked an electrical socket.

Meanwhile, a platinum blonde with so much filler in her face that she looked like a plastic blowfish stomped around the office while her Birkin bag swung like a bat and knocked into things. Pictures were askew, magazines were scattered, and even a fake plant arrangement was littered over the floor.

Even Bobb-O, so arrogant the first time I met him, looked a little cowed. "We tried to drive by that community, and there was a gate, and nobody would let us in."

I tried to hide a smile.

The woman who I assumed was his wife, Buffy, stopped her pacing. "We want to go see the place. Now."

I checked my watch. Sure enough, it was just after five. “That’s not gonna happen.”

“We came all the way up from Toronto,” Bobb-O started.

His wife cut him off, striding over like the mad queen from *Alice in Wonderland.* Her designer red-and-black block dress helped with the comparison. I half-expected her to command, “Off with her head!”

Instead, she poked a gnarled finger in my face. “We want to buy that place, and we want in now. I just cannot believe they wouldn’t let us in! No guard or human to talk to. Disgraceful!” As if to punctuate her verdict, she swiped a tissue box off a side table with the Birkin. The same Neptune Blue color as the Hummer.

“Well, it’s by appointment only.” I held up my hands, just in case she aimed the purse my way. “Doesn’t it make you feel good, though? Knowing there’s that kind of security? Once you’re on the other side of that gate, nobody’s getting in.”

“I always get in!” Flecks of saliva flew from Buffy’s overly plump lips, speckling my cheeks.

I knelt and grabbed a tissue from the floor, wiping my face and catching Tina’s eye. She looked at me like a deer in headlights, shaking her head.

Being rich didn’t necessarily translate into being classy. Especially when they weren’t getting their way. This time, my smile did break through. Despite her rudeness, I kind of liked this lady. Buffy was a caricature and very entertaining.

“It’s after five now. Come back up tomorrow and we’ll make an appointment.” I bowed obsequiously, enjoying myself.

Buffy stomped a veiny foot, bulging out of her black Jimmy Choos. “We’re here right now, and I demand you get us in. I demand it.”

My smile stretched to my ears. “It’s honestly not in my control. That’s the HOA you’d need to talk to. They gave me very strict rules, the same rules that everyone within lives by. This is the ultimate private community. You can trust that your neighbors won’t be throwing parties late into the night. No one who’s not a resident will be there after five. And all your neighbors are just like you—wealthy—and this is the one place they get

complete privacy. I guarantee someone else will buy this property who understands what the HOA rules mean, especially when they are enforced to this degree."

Buffy huffed like a buffalo about to charge, completely indifferent to my well-spoken argument. "Well, how do I talk to somebody in charge?"

Tina peeled herself off the window and stood beside me, shaking her head. "I called the number on the Echo Loon Lake Homeowners' Association website. Didn't get an answer."

Buffy reached over to her husband and squeezed his elbow with a grunt. Bobb-O winced and squeaked, "What kind of small town, piss-ant brokerage is this? Perhaps we would have more luck with a different agent."

"By all means…" Tina began.

I spoke over her. "You won't have better luck with anyone else, though you are welcome to try. Closed community means just that. Closed."

Buffy gritted her veneers. "I want that mansion."

Bobb-O peeled his wife's fingers off his arm, rubbing the spot while sending me a desperate look. "What can you do?"

Tina brushed by me. "I'll leave you to it!" She escaped into her office with a slam. That wasn't something I'd ever seen before: my boss beating a retreat. Sure enough, a bit of cigarette smoke curled under the door in seconds.

Leaving me alone with the rich, hungry wolves. Well. I wasn't on the menu tonight. In fact, I thought I might have liked that lady, but I realized I didn't. I didn't like this couple at all. But I was a professional.

"I have an idea." Thumbing through my recent messages, I found the one from Cheryl and sent a text.

Do you have Amos's direct cell?

I held my breath. Sure enough, the three little dots came up—someone typing a reply.

How did staging go?

I typed back:

Great, but do you have that number?

The three dots again.

Buffy smacked her purse off her veiny calf while Bobb-O muttered a prayer. He looked exhausted, like a man who'd been a nitpicked old rooster for most of his life. I almost wanted to hug him. Almost.

Then the number came through:

555-625-5555.

I turned to the couple, watching me with expectant expressions.

"Okay. Let's see if this works," I said.

I dialed Amos's number, half-expecting the old crank wouldn't even pick up. I was shocked when his gravelly voice came through. I tapped the button for the speaker.

"Echo Loon Lake Homeowners' Association. How can I help you?" A pause. "It's after hours. But I picked up because I recognize the number as yours, Marla."

A frisson of fear wiped the smile from my face. Was this another subtle display of power? I thought only Cheryl had my number.

Keeping any tremor from my voice, I asked, "Well, I've got some clients from Toronto and want to see the Viceroy tonight. Is that possible?"

"You know the rules," he snapped.

I thought of how he'd knocked me into the lake and parked his rowboat over my head. This was not a man to be trifled with.

Maybe I could use that to my advantage.

"Here, let's have you talk to the client," I said and shoved the phone into Buffy's hands.

"Hi," she said, her voice suddenly sugary-sweet. "I'm Buffy, wife of Robert Berger the Third. We would love to just stop by and see that house on the lake, if it's not an inconvenience. We're hoping for a very quick, easy sale."

"Not after hours," came the expected reply.

I watched Buffy's face go from bright pink to an alarming red. She reminded me of one of those Bugs Bunny cartoons I used to watch on Saturday mornings with Earl, where the character turns into a mercury thermometer and blows their top in a flood of red.

“Fuck you!” she screamed, throwing my phone down onto the carpet.

Push someone far enough and you saw what was beneath the surface. No amount of Birkin bags or designer clothes could hide a lack of class.

“Well, there’s your answer,” I said, picking up my phone—one of the older-generation iPhones, since I couldn’t afford anything newer.

Tina’s door flew open, and her eyes were narrow, a cigarette in the corner of her mouth. “What’s going on out here?”

Buffy wheeled on her. “This town is full of morons and idiots. You’re treating us like we’re immigrants, that’s what!”

I gulped. If there was one thing Tina didn’t stand for, it was any hint of racism. Her wife was originally from Tanzania, and they’d dealt with more than their fair share of judgment being a mixed-race lesbian couple in a northern, predominantly white community.

“You are immigrants,” Tina said quietly, with that edge I recognized. “We are all immigrants here except for the indigenous. I suggest you take your business elsewhere.”

One thing I knew for sure: these people did not belong in that beautiful house. And they better get out of here before Tina brought out her curling broom. She was the town champ and had a mean sweep.

Buffy’s mouth hung open as she sputtered, and I wondered if she was about to have a heart attack.

“I don’t think that community deserves us, dear,” Bobb-O said. “Let me take you to Hy’s Steakhouse for dinner, love.”

“I’m getting the porterhouse,” Buffy snapped, letting him lead her out. “Let’s check out Lake Joseph or Rosseau. These people are all hicks.”

“Don’t let the door smack your ass on the way out,” Tina said as she flopped into one of the chairs in the waiting room.

She looked too exhausted to even light another smoke. I sat beside her and giggled. I hadn’t expected it, but for once, Amos was actually working in my favor. Nobody wants people like that in the community. Rich and rude. The Viceroy was too good for that.

“They were a mistake,” Tina said. “We need a new plan. I have a few more old clients, but sadly, that attitude isn’t rare.”

“Well, maybe we slow down,” I said. “Make sure we’re only bringing in the right people. Like you said, we’re going to have to vet them.”

She shook her head. “I hate self-absorbed screamers.”

“Just because somebody’s rich doesn’t mean they’re classy.”

“Exactly,” she said as she reached behind her ear and pulled out another cigarette. Except this one was hand-rolled. “Time for a toke. Want some?”

“Not my thing.” I tapped her polyester pant leg. “But you go ahead.”

She took a deep drag, and the sweet, sickly scent filled the space. “Those two just took years off my life.” Tina rolled her neck and relaxed into the chair. “Listen, I gotta tell you something. Marla, be careful dealing with Echo Loon Lake.”

“Why’s that?”

“Erica had a run-in with them a few years back.” She took another pull, letting the smoke drift lazily above her head. “She was an interior designer and tried for years to get into that community. At first, we figured it was the way she looked. But that wasn’t it, turned out. She used to say the HOA discriminates against everybody the same. Didn’t matter what you looked like, they just didn’t want outsiders. Period.”

“So, what happened?”

“Erica wasn’t a quitter. When she put the pressure on, things started to happen.”

“Like what?”

“We could never prove it. But there were a few threatening notes, and a dead fish left outside our door one day. She backed off… Not because she wanted to. She was fierce. But because I begged her to. They’re dangerous, but damn, that’s a lot of money sitting right there. Let’s get this thing done and put it behind us.”

I kissed Tina on the cheek and left her to her joint. The Sunfire started up on the first try, and I thought over my boss’s warning.

The idea that Echo Loon Lake was dangerous wasn’t new to me. I’d already been almost drowned. But I’d been told my whole life where I couldn’t go and what I couldn’t do. This time, I wasn’t going to let anybody stop me.

Though one thought did give me pause. What if Amos wasn't just protecting the community from outsiders, but protecting the rest of the world from the lake?

I turned up the radio and let that thought float away on the riffs from Prince's "Purple Rain." It was all about moving through emotional pain.

The future was mine to create. And I was more and more convinced it wasn't to sell that house.

Selling the Viceroy had been the start of the dream. Owning it was the end.

I had some manifesting to do on how I was going to achieve that, and I hummed to myself as I drove back to Bog Creek.

My cell rang while I was on the highway, and I turned down the radio. That same number, and now I was certain it belonged to my new client.

Cheryl.

I picked it up and had to strain to hear over the crackling of a bad connection.

For a moment, there was nothing but odd noises and static. The hair on the back of my neck rose. "Hello? Anyone there?"

The crackling got louder, then the line went dead.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 17

CHERYL

Mists and haze greeted her as if walking through a nightmare. She struggled to breathe, like she'd been buried under a dozen weighted blankets.

Her brain swam. *Get angry*, she counseled herself. *Find what's wrong and fix it.*

It's what she always did when life served her lemons on a silver platter. Fix things. Like selling the house and escaping.

That was it. The catalyst that led her here, but where was here? She tried to force herself upright, but her hand slipped. Her head pounded.

She was barely able to open her eyes. She felt weak, so weak that lifting her head was beyond her, at least for right now. Cheryl focused on opening her eyes, starting with a small slit and then just a little more.

She was lying sideways where she'd been sitting and had fallen over. Tears stung her eyes. Had she been crying? Lord knew it wouldn't be the first time she awoke with tear-filled eyes.

That wasn't it.

Heat. Overwhelming heat. The smell of cedar.

She was in the dry sauna, portable and freestanding in the corner of the game room. But why? She didn't remember getting in it.

She rolled her head sideways to look up. The control panel was dark, but the temperature had to be the highest she'd ever seen it. She'd been inside at a hundred and thirty-five degrees Fahrenheit before and that was hot, but this was stifling. The control panel inside had always worked. It mirrored the one on the outside.

Dark. Someone had disconnected it.

I have to get out, she thought. *Do or die!*

That was a rallying cry for all the sports she'd participated in starting from a young age. She'd never been in a life-or-death situation before, but this felt like it. Her body wasn't cooperating. It was like watching a horror

movie where she was the star. The final girl. A slow-motion train wreck. Characters frozen on the tracks. Imminent death.

Hell no! she rallied.

She pushed herself upright. The bench was slick with sweat, but her grip was tight enough to keep her steady. She pushed on the door, but it was blocked. Through the mirrored glass, she could see a chair wedged under the handle. The door wouldn't budge. She threw her body against it, weakly. It was like slamming into a brick wall.

"Help!" she croaked. No one would hear that.

The only person would be Parker, and she doubted he'd come to her rescue. All those muscles and testosterone, but he was no Disney prince.

Parker! He'd put her in the sauna and cranked the temperature to the maximum.

I already knew that, she thought. *Brain is boiled. Think!*

The infrared heating elements glowed bright red in their efforts to drive the temperature even higher.

Freestanding.

The sauna was only one imbalance away from toppling over. Parker had warned her not to lean too heavily against the sides when he installed this years ago. He'd insisted sweating was the best way to bring out definition in his abs. Two sides were against the home's walls since it sat in a corner, but the front and other side were not.

She stumbled in the direction of where the couch should be, the side opposite the wall. The sauna moved slightly.

Cheryl was running out of what energy she could summon.

Now or never!

She drove forward with every last bit of strength the rubber of her legs allowed and hit the wall. The sauna leaned heavily, a parallelogram of life or death. If it didn't fall over, that was where they'd find her.

Sweat ran off her body, dripping and pooling on the cedar planks.

Cheryl panted, fighting for every breath. Her heart pounded a staccato in her chest, waging its own battle to keep her alive.

A scrape and creak as the sauna straightened.

She gasped in futility. It hadn’t worked.

Something was different.

Through the tiny window of the sauna.

The chair had tipped over.

Cheryl let herself fall against the door, and it popped open.

She fell through into the shock of frigid air, but it wasn’t that cold, only cold relative to the hundred and sixty-five degrees showing on the outer control panel.

She pushed away from the sauna and crawled, so slowly. It collapsed behind her, the cedar planking tearing itself apart after the assault upon it from the inside. Cheryl was lucky to have gotten out when she did.

The battle was not yet won. Water. She’d lost how much in the heat over how much time?

She crawled to the game room’s wet bar and pulled herself up to the sink. She turned the cold-water handle and let it run on full, splashing it to her face. She leaned close, letting it run over her cheek and past her lips.

Cheryl drank against the complaints of her swollen tongue.

The mirror behind the sink showed a terrible sight. Skin flushed bright red. Bedraggled hair, soaked from her own sweat. Sunken, dark eyes.

Heat exhaustion, not heat stroke.

Thank God for good hydration.

What if Parker was home? He’d tried to kill her! She had no doubt about that.

She could trust no one in the HOA. She had no friends who lived there. One woman had resisted Parker’s charms. That made her the closest thing to a friend that Cheryl would have while living in this God-awful place.

Parker had stripped her before tossing her into the sauna. She would have been found naked and dead like Marilyn Monroe. The tennis outfit lay on a bar stool, folded exactly the way she would have left her clothes. Observant bastard. She searched the back pocket of her skirt and pulled out her cell.

Her mind was starting to work again. What was that number? She recalled the image of it from the dry erase board and dialed.

“Hello? Hello?”

Nothing. Just a crackling on the other end. She ended the call and slipped the tennis outfit on.

Her heartbeat slowed and with each breath of fresh and cool air, she felt better. Wouldn’t Parker be surprised to find her alive?

She had to figure out how to play it…

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 18

MARLA

It was probably a butt-dial, and I dropped the cell phone onto the passenger seat. Tina and Earl received mistaken calls from me all the time.

But unease sat in my stomach, and I'd learned over the years to trust my gut. Through the crackling, I thought I'd heard a distressed, desperate "Hello?"

Back in my foster home days, I'd had a friend who'd been bullied by one of the other kids. She'd been suffering silently, but I'd heard something in the tone of her voice every time she had to deal with him. So I went and kicked the piss out of her abuser.

Problem solved.

There was a hint of the same thing in Cheryl's voice. Though I loved Echo Loon Lake, there was a pattern of inconvenient women disappearing. Sally Dobbin. My mother. Maybe even me, if Amos had his way.

Cheryl was researching history that might want to stay buried. Did that make her inconvenient to the HOA? I checked the time on the Sunfire's dashboard. Just after six. Definitely too late to go back to the community and use my gate card. No outsiders after 5:00 p.m.

My instinct said Cheryl might be in trouble, so I tried calling back, but it didn't even ring. Not surprisingly, considering there were zero bars of service.

I turned the car around and pointed it toward Echo Loon Lake, though I had no idea how to bypass the gate. Worst came to worst, there was always climbing over it again.

The setting sun was throwing its first pink glow across the sky as I drove through the shitty little hamlet of Kestrel Falls. The entire town was made up of Earl's garage, an LCBO, a convenience store, and a roadhouse saloon simply called "The Bar."

Which had exactly six vehicles parked outside its stained wood exterior. Three Harley-Davidson choppers, two rusty pickup trucks, and a white Range Rover. The only people I knew with a luxury SUV like that?

Cheryl and Parker Calder. Yanking on the wheel, I skidded into the parking lot and parked far from the hogs.

The Bar was a hole-in-the-wall. A rough honky-tonk that featured out-of-tune cowboys singing on Friday night and catered to the motorcycle trade. Tourists and patched alike. I'd never been in the place before, but Earl sometimes grabbed a drink after work. He was friends with the bartender. He and Hank had some sort of barter system going on. 'You do my brakes, I'll pour free beer.'

I walked into the space, noting the pool table in the corner, old jukebox by the bar, and huge deer antler lighting fixture. A low stage was surrounded with chicken wire, just about what you'd expect from the outside. Garth Brooks crooning in the background set the ambiance perfectly.

Only two tables were taken. A couple of old farmers drinking at the back and some bikers at the other. One man at the bar. Tall, muscular, black hair, sexy-ugly. Parker.

The man I'd fantasized about having nineteen-seventies porn sex with on his desk just that afternoon.

I felt like Ingrid Bergman in *Casablanca*. "Of all the gin joints in all the world…" I murmured as I slipped onto the stool beside him. The vinyl was cracked and itched the bare skin on the back of my thighs. This dress was too short.

He turned and grinned. "Was your father a thief?"

I barked out a laugh. "Because he stole the stars from the sky and put them in my eyes?"

"That's the one." He winked. "What are ya drinking?" The Scottish lilt was back.

"I'm a beer girl, myself."

He lifted a finger toward the bartender. "All right. Another Molson Ex right here, please."

Hank raised his eyebrows as he took down a smudged mug. He was a lanky guy around the same age as Earl and me. Mid-twenties and trapped in Kestrel Falls like I was in Bog Creek. He was probably passing judgment. Most reputable women avoided this place.

As he drew the yellow drink from the tap, the bartender asked, “Aren’t you Earl’s girl?”

“I’m nobody’s girl. But I am his friend.”

Using a ruler to swipe off the extra foam, Hank nodded as he slid the drink over and I caught it in a fluid motion. The first swig went down harshly. Ex was a strong, old-timers’ beer.

Parker clinked his glass to mine. “Slàinte!”

“Cheers,” I said, taking another sip. It went down better this time.

His pale blue eyes were doing that funny thing to my insides again.

“I got a call from Cheryl. A hang-up,” I said casually.

He frowned, shifting on his stool. “When did you get that call?” All traces of the accent were gone.

“I don’t know. Ten minutes ago?”

It was as if someone prodded Parker with a cattle prod. He shot straight up, nearly knocking his drink over. “You sure?”

“Umm. No? But it was from her cell.”

The man was definitely agitated. He threw a couple of twenties down on the bar. “Gotta go.”

“Is Cheryl okay? What was she doing when you left?”

“Oh, she’s fine.” He blinked several times and seemed to re-orient himself, easing back onto his stool. “Cheryl likes a sauna after her tennis lesson. She was just getting ready to go in when I left her.”

“And you like to drink alone?”

He gave me a tense grin, all hints of flirtation gone. “Me and George Thorogood. We like to drink alone.”

“You don’t strike me as a man who prefers his own company.” I was still trying to sort out the change in him.

His fingers drummed on his cash. “Well. I’d better get going.”

“Okay. Can you ask Cheryl to give me a call?”

“Will do,” he said, not meeting my eye. He added another ten to the pile. “Bartender, another beer on me.”

I protested, “Oh, I shouldn’t—”

“Go on.” He patted my shoulder and made his exit, not looking back.

Well. That was strange.

“Hey, Hank?”

He gave me another beer, this time in a bottle, even though I’d hardly touched the first one. “What is it… Marla, right?”

“Can I borrow your landline? My cell gets zero reception here.”

He nodded toward a relic at the end of the bar, one of the squat, corded numbers. “Have at ’er.”

I walked over and dialed. It rang and rang, and finally, “Hello?”

Cheryl’s voice. Sounding perfectly ordinary.

“Hi, Cheryl, it’s Marla. Did you call me? Is everything okay?”

She was quiet for a moment. Long enough for my heart to climb into my throat. Then an awkward giggle. “No, everything’s fine. Everything’s fine. I must have butt-dialed you.”

This was one odd couple.

“Well, I’d like to come back tomorrow. Talk photography, a few more staging things.”

“Tomorrow is Friday? I don’t think I have anything.” She paused. “That would be fine. Absolutely fine.”

“So you know, I just saw your husband, Parker.”

Her voice sharpened. “Where was he?”

“At the old kick-and-punch in Kestrel Falls. I saw your Range Rover and thought it might be you.”

“No, tennis wipes me out. I like to relax after a lesson.”

“Parker said you were in the sauna?”

Another long pause. “Yes, I was. Good way to relax. Get rid of the toxins.”

There was something in her voice. Memories of that foster friend again.

“Do you need me to come up there, Cheryl? I’m happy to, if you’ll just let me in the gate.”

“No, no. I’m fine. We don’t need to spin Amos up any more than he already is.”

She could say ‘fine’ all she liked, but she didn’t sound fine to me. But what was I going to do? The client’s always right. I put the phone down, shrugged at the bartender, and took a sip of the fresh beer, leaving the warmer one. It was paid for, after all.

I looked around the place again. This was one place Earl would never take me. When we went out, he always insisted on the Cookhouse in North Bay, or even one of the restaurants in Mattawa. He’d order steaks and nurse a drink or two, careful so that he could drive us home.

Now that I was alone, I understood why. One of the bikers was staring at me from his table. Rough, scarred face, a long beard. ZZ Top with a hundred extra pounds.

I caught his eye and immediately regretted it when he came over. “What’s a pretty little lady like you doing in a place like this?”

“Just on my way out,” I said, looking straight ahead.

“What’s the rush? Bartender, get this lady some tequila shots.”

Hank stood with his hands on his hips. He made no move to pour drinks.

I would have gotten off my stool, but the man was looming over me. Using a clear, pleasant tone, I said, “No, thank you. Gotta drive.”

His friend came around to my other side. “I’m Stain. This is Brutus.” This fellow was much thinner than his buddy, in that does-too-many-hard-drugs way.

Brutus looped an arm around my stool. Not touching me yet, just possessive.

Stain went on, showing me a lovely set of meth teeth. “Brutus and I were having ourselves an argument over there. Trying to decide which of us you’d find more handsome.”

“Neither,” I said. “I’m into girls.”

Brutus chuckled. “Whoo! Don’t believe you. I saw you with that fancy big fella.”

“Gotta go, guys. Remove your arm.” I pushed my stool back, but Brutus shoved it back in.

“We’re not harassing you,” he said, this time putting his hand on my lower back. “Just being hospitable.”

I tried to catch Hank’s eye, but he was looking at something under the bar. This probably went on all the time, and I should’ve hustled out after Parker. But then, why should I have to? Why couldn’t a woman go to a bar and have a drink by herself? A little voice in the back of my head answered: she could. She just had to pick the right kind of bar.

“Well,” Brutus said, “if you won’t choose, I’ll choose for you.” He tightened his grip, squeezing the flesh at my waist.

It took me a second. I broke my bottle on the counter, twisted his arm up behind him, and put the jagged edge to his throat. As always, I half-surprised myself, leaping into action before I even considered my actions. Something that had saved me a few times in my life.

Brutus gave a little squeak. His friend jumped back and pulled a gun.

At the same moment, Hank reached for something under the bar.

“Don’t do that,” I hissed at Stain. “I’m going to walk out of here, and you two are going to stay and finish your drinks.”

Hank came up with a shotgun and leveled it at Stain. “All right, you’re gonna let her go peacefully. She’s a local. We don’t want any problems. And you’re gonna forget you ever saw her.”

Stain shrugged and put his gun away. “She’s not that hot.”

Of course one of Earl’s friends would look out for me. Sometimes being tied to a small town had benefits. I set the broken bottle back on the counter. “Sorry about the mess.”

As I backed away, Brutus spun. “You bitch—”

Hank poked him with the shotgun. “No, no. None of that. Let the lady leave and I’ll pour each of you a shot of my finest tequila. How’s that?”

Both men nodded.

That took the edge off the indignity of being taken down by a woman. I scurried out of the roadhouse and got into my car, catching the faint smell of chicken soup coming off me—stress sweat.

That whole situation was very uncool. And I knew I'd hear about it from Earl. And speaking of uncool behavior, you'd think a man like Parker would know better than to leave a woman alone in a bar like that.

Unchivalrous.

I was going to have to reassess my opinion of him, but there was something about those bad boys…

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 19

CHERYL

How does one welcome home a spouse who just tried to roast his wife alive in a sauna?

Cheryl peeled off her tennis outfit and stood naked in front of her bedroom mirror. Rather than cast a critical eye on her cellulite and tiny pouch developing on her belly, she was cataloging cooked skin.

There were a few red splotches on her sides and thighs, but in general, she looked okay. With a hand that was surprisingly steady, she drained the rest of her SpringBrisk water bottle.

You'd almost never know she'd just survived a murder attempt.

Her heart was a cold, hard stone. Any emotions sparked by her husband trying to kill her were shoved to the back of her brain. To be examined later. Or never.

She wasn't going to become a blubbering mess over this, no matter how much it was called for. She was going to make him pay for the indignity and the gall to think he could get away with that.

She bit her bottom lip till she tasted blood. Parker had almost succeeded.

What if she'd drunk just a little more of that wine? It was obvious he'd spiked it with something. Lorazepam. Or some of her sleeping pills. That was the only deduction that made sense.

He clearly never imagined she'd be able to bust out of that sauna like the Incredible Hulk. It was amazing how motivated a person could get when it was literally life or death.

Attempted murder was a surefire way to lose that loving feeling. Only yesterday, she would have said that she was still in love with him. Yes, frustrated with his infidelity. Yes, absolutely looking for a divorce. But she still cared about him.

Now, she felt nothing. Just a pit of emptiness and the low burn of rage. But she couldn't tend that fire yet. She needed to be calm and calculating.

Reacting without thought could be suicidal. She needed to get out of this alive.

After rubbing some aloe on her burned skin, she stood on the balcony overlooking the lake from their bedroom. The cottages were so private that only someone in a boat would see her nudity. The call of a loon echoed across the still water.

There was rarely anybody on the lake. That's how Cheryl had noticed Marla in the first place. An unfamiliar kayaker who always paused in front of their property. A bit of research into who the interloper was…

And Cheryl decided to sell the Viceroy.

She breathed deeply of the fresh, fragrant air. Pine and flowers. It would be terrible to leave the lake. None of her unhappiness was the lake's fault, or the loon's fault, or the forest's fault, or even this home's.

Her beautiful home.

She blamed the HOA. They were controlling and annoying, but she wouldn't have said, even yesterday, that they were deliberately murdering women. Even with those suspicious disappearances. But how to explain what just happened to her?

There was no way Parker could plan an 'accidental' murder on his own. He was emotional, and frankly, not that bright. Now, Amos was a different story. Cheryl had become a thorn in the HOA's side by ignoring the pushback on her historical book about Echo Loon Lake.

It was more important than ever that she write it, which meant getting away from here.

Her sense of self-preservation advised against confronting Parker outright. That would probably earn her a second attempt on her life. And this one might succeed. There was no gun in the house, and she certainly didn't think she could stab a man to death.

So her best plan, her only real move, was to pretend it hadn't happened. She stepped back inside and selected her nicest green dress. The one that brought out her eyes.

Parker's favorite.

There was, she figured, a fairly wide window of doubt to work with. The sauna incident could be construed as her own fault. Probably Parker's

plan, even if he didn’t come up with it on his own.

She imagined the story:

Parker would call the police, red-eyed and distraught. He would remove the chair wedging the sauna door shut and cry about how his wife had too much to drink and passed out in the sauna.

The dangerous heat must have been a malfunction.

Her husband was entirely capable of tweaking the safeguards to hike the temperature to an unsafe level while simultaneously disconnecting the inside control panel.

Humming to herself, she pinned up her hair, letting a few tendrils fall to her shoulders.

All Cheryl had to do was pretend it was all her fault and that she’d never seen the chair wedged against the handle. Play ignorant. She could act. There were those drama classes at boarding school.

Then she could continue with her original plan and have Marla distract Parker and sell the Viceroy. The agent was already doing a delightful job distracting her horny husband. His eyes had lit up the first time he saw her. Marla was exactly his type, like Cheryl had been. They did look remarkably similar.

It took only a few moments to apply a light but seductive face of makeup.

The best plan now was a sweet offense: make him his favorite meal, give him her brightest smile, and convince him everything was a-okay.

A final look in the mirror, and she was impressed with her handiwork.

But from now on, she’d have to be vigilant at all times. Fall back on the habits she’d learned in bars in college. Keep her drink in hand. Pour her own. Keep it in sight, always.

Speaking of… Dinner would have to be bubbly water since there was no food prepared or easy to prepare.

The more Parker drank, the worse he behaved. And though he’d been almost sober, Cheryl noticed he’d fallen off the wagon lately.

“You got this,” she said to her reflection and went downstairs to prepare.

***

Cheryl sat at the dining room table, perfectly set. She'd lit candles and had beef bourguignon cooking on the stove.

It was hardly an hour before she heard his work boots thundering up the front steps. She folded her hands in front of her and plastered a grin on her face.

It took everything in her not to laugh hysterically when she saw the shock on his face.

Yes, asshole, I'm still alive.

He quickly rearranged his expression into one of fake delight. "Hey. What's all this for?"

She gave him her most dazzling smile and poured him a glass of sparkling water. "Oh, I just thought we needed something substantial for dinner." She shook her head. "I got in the sauna, and for the life of me, I must have passed out. Maybe not eating enough."

Parker didn't say anything, just looked at her, his eyes narrowing.

She let her hand flutter to her neck. "Goes to show, I shouldn't drink red wine while dehydrated." She let the smile drop off her face. "Funniest thing, though. The door was jammed."

"Was it?" Parker asked, still assessing.

Cheryl had a moment. One where she wanted to toss her drink in his face and scream. Instead, she went to check on the beef, the delicious smell of the cooking meat filling the room. "I guess you're going to have to call a repairman," she said, stirring and not looking at him. "I had to break the sides to get out of the sauna."

"I'll do that."

The skin on the back of her neck crawled. It took everything in her not to spin and make sure he wasn't slinking up on her, kitchen knife in hand. Instead, she forced herself to stay at the stove and ladle out two bowls of the beef. "This is my favorite meal, you know. Cooked in red wine."

With a deep breath, she turned, thankful her husband was still on the other side of the table.

She popped her mascaraed eyes, wide and innocent. Parker turned a little green, his Adam's apple bobbing.

"Oh, I opened a new bottle," she said airily. "I dumped out the one you gave me. I figure it must have gone bad, to make me feel so unwell."

"Well, not every bottle's good." There was a slight slur in his voice.

He'd been drinking. She could smell it on him. Was he creating an alibi at a local pub? It rose up her throat again. That need to scream at him. Rake her nails across his face. But she better not accuse him. Honestly, what proof did she really have? No photos. No witnesses. Just his word against hers. If she accused her husband of trying to kill her, he'd say she was crazy and needed to be put away. That she was too stressed out. She knew exactly how it would go.

She served the meal and sat down.

"Well, I'm not really hungry," he said, moving the food around in his bowl as if checking for bugs.

Or poison.

Cheryl dug into her dish and shoved huge bites into her mouth. "Yum. This is delicious."

Reassured, he took a couple of bites. "It's good." She saw him looking at her, appraising her.

She wiped her mouth on a napkin. "So, we should have Marla come by tomorrow and talk about photography."

Parker scowled, speaking with his mouth full. "I don't want to sell."

"I'm not sure you can stop me." She fluttered her eyelashes at him. Her first veiled jab at his failed murder attempt.

He looked at her, and something unspoken passed between them. A knowing.

He got up abruptly from the table. "I'm going out."

"Oh, again?" Cheryl said, almost singsong.

"Yeah, I think there's a flooding issue happening over at the…"

She finished it for him. "Let me guess. The Morgensteins. Elena Morgenstein needs some help. I know her husband's out of the country right now. Another one of those lawyer conventions."

“Toilets don’t leak on a schedule,” Parker growled, almost running out the front door.

“I guess they don’t,” she said to the empty kitchen.

Seeking solace in another woman’s arms. Good for him. Whenever he got home smelling of Chanel No. 5, he’d find the master bedroom door locked. She wasn’t having him hover over her while she tried to sleep. She knew it would be fleeting. Maybe he wouldn’t come home at all. That would be the best answer.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 20

MARLA

Stupid, stupid, stupid. That could have ended so badly.

My fingers gripped my steering wheel so tight, my knuckles were white.

But man, did I ever handle those bikers. Where did that come from? You'd think I was some kind of action hero. Busting the beer bottle and putting Brutus into a submission hold. Thank Earl for those self-defense lessons he gave me. Nothing like having a best friend not afraid to pummel you a little bit, all in the name of fun.

It was the strangest feeling. Being proud of yourself while also self-flagellating over putting myself in that position in the first place. I should have left when Parker left, but I was raised not to waste anything. I put my life in jeopardy over a beer in a cheap bar. Even the trees, casting ominous shadows over the highway as the sun set, seemed to be judging.

But it all ended well. At least on my end.

I still had a funny feeling about Cheryl, and I hoped she was okay. She sounded a bit off on the phone, but I was seeing her tomorrow to make final arrangements for photography. Maybe we could even get a drone in there for some aerials.

There was no rush for me to get back to Bog Creek, though that encounter in The Bar definitely left me shaky and exhausted. What I really wanted to do was drive to Echo Loon Lake, in the direction of my new life. This road was taking me back to the same old.

Instead of heading straight to my trailer, I parked at the edge of the park and sat at the creek for a bit of meditation. This was one of my favorite times of day…when the sun disappeared and night reset our hopes and dreams for tomorrow.

It was time to re-envision. Parker had been intruding on my future fantasies, in a few sweaty and sexy dreams, but the more I got to know him, the less I liked him. An unchivalrous cheater was emerging.

Really, I didn't need a man at all, did I?

It would be nice to find a partner someday, but for now, I had to get out of Bog Creek.

When the damp started leaking into my bones, I made my way back to my trailer. Part of the reason I was dawdling? Earl. And sure enough, there he was. Waiting by my porch. Ripping weeds out of my sorry excuse for a garden.

Mad as a whole kicked nest of hornets.

Even his mullet looked electrified, all that energy coursing off him.

I had to chew on the side of my cheek not to giggle. He had grease smeared on one cheek from work, and his hair put Kramer from Seinfeld to shame.

He launched right into me, tossing a clump of dandelions at my feet. “What were you thinking, going to that bar by yourself? There’s a reason we always drive so far. It’s not a place for a woman, any woman, especially one like you.”

That offended me. I tilted my chin up. “One like me?”

“Someone so beautiful. I just mean someone not accompanied by a guy with more balls than brains!”

“I can take care of myself.”

“No, no, you can’t. Not against a group of bikers or a whole bunch of armed men. That place is where criminals hang out.” He shook his head. “There you were, naive little Marla, just sitting there—and now Hank had to quit his job.”

“What do you mean?”

“Had to quit. You think those bikers aren’t gonna go after him? He quit the second you left, shut up the bar, and now he’s gotta move.”

I was genuinely perplexed. “Where’s he going?”

“Toronto. He’d been offered a job last week as a hockey coach, but he wasn’t going to go.”

That’s right. Hank and Earl had played triple-A hockey together. Hank had almost made the NHL. He just never got drafted.

“That’s wonderful,” I said.

Earl blinked. “What do you mean?”

“Well. Not wonderful that he had to quit, but wonderful that he’s finally getting out of Kestrel Falls and out of his parents’ basement. Hockey’s always been Hank’s whole life.”

He looked at me like I’d grown a second head and a tail. “Well, you kind of made the decision for him!”

“Or was it fate?”

He rolled his eyes. “Marla!”

“Look, let me get you a beer.”

I went inside my trailer while Earl unfolded two of my lawn chairs and got comfortable on the porch. My deck wasn’t half as nice as his, but it’d do.

There were still those chilled Bud Lights in the fridge, and I got myself a water.

“Look,” I said, sitting beside him. “Sometimes the universe works in mysterious ways. Hank was stuck here, and I’m sorry I put him in an awkward, dangerous—”

“—you sure did,” Earl cut in.

I rolled my eyes back at him and kept talking, “But they say when a door shuts, a window opens. I think this is gonna be good for him.”

Earl shrugged, still glowering.

Whoa. He was mad. I kept making my case. “Where was he going, stuck in Kestrel Falls? No girlfriend. Working the shittiest bar in Northern Ontario.”

“True. But you forced the issue.”

“Maybe I saved his life. If it wasn’t me, it could have been some other woman some other day. Or he’d have caught a stray bullet in the crossfire between rival biker gangs. Full-out brawls, all the time.”

Finally, Earl’s shoulders dropped, and he took his first gulp of beer. “There’s a reason it’s called the Kick-and-Punch. Should be the Kick-and-Punch-and-Shoot.”

“Look…” I patted his knee. “I believe life’s like that.” I nodded toward Bog Creek, running past us. “You go with the flow. Things happen for a reason. So, if Hank had to quit and finally get on with his life because I—”

“What were you doing in there, anyway?” he interrupted. Earl was easily spun up, but he also had a keen eye when he took the time to exercise his critical thinking skills.

“I thought my client from Echo Loon Lake was in trouble. I saw her Range Rover, so I went in to check on her.”

“Obviously, she wasn’t there.”

“Nope, it was the husband.”

Earl raised his eyebrows. “Why’d Hank have to pull his shotgun if you were in there with another man?”

“The husband left.” I didn’t want to name him because I didn’t want that taste in my mouth.

“He left you alone in there? By yourself? A single lady?”

“Yeah. He did.”

“Makes me want to punch the guy out.”

“I don’t need you punching out my clients.” I shook my finger. “I’ve got a career too, you know. One that has to grow.”

“Be more careful, Marla.”

I leaned over and kissed his bristly cheek. “Look, as always, I appreciate the concern. But I’ve gotta get to bed. Back to Echo Loon Lake tomorrow. I’ve got a house to sell.”

He got up from his chair, stretched, and then gave me a cute little bow. “Good night. Try not to put yourself in a compromising position tomorrow, will ya? No matter where you think the stream of life or whatever is leading you. Stay the hell out of biker bars, even when you’re with me.”

So, Earl didn’t believe in manifesting or trusting the universe. He was more of a get-off-your-ass-and-make-it-happen kind of guy. Reason #36 we didn’t work out.

“I’ll do my best.” I gave him my most innocent smile.

After Earl returned to his trailer, I climbed onto my roof to get some reception for my cell.

Sure enough, the little bubbles popped up with a few messages from Tina.

Call me.

When are you gonna get Starlink? This is ridiculous.

New client wants to see Viceroy.

Hold off on photography! Might not need to spend $$$

I called her back. “Sorry! Who’s this new client?”

Tina spoke a little faster than usual. Her tell for excitement. “It’s a French-Canadian investor. Just the realtor and his interpreter want to come by. They’re driving from Quebec tomorrow.”

“Okay…” I said slowly. There was a sinking in my chest. I didn’t want anyone else buying my dream home, especially not an investor. There was no way the HOA would approve that purchase, but I had to trust Tina’s intuition, even though Bobb-O was a bust.

Tina went on, “I’ll text you the number.”

I hedged. “I thought we were gonna put it on MLS. Maybe we can even trigger a bidding war.”

She sighed. “You know how much it’s gonna cost to get good photographs and drone footage of a place like the Viceroy? And I don’t even know if we’re going to be allowed to bring a drone in.”

That was true. That enclave was all about privacy. “I have a meeting to talk about marketing tomorrow.”

“That HOA is a pain in my ass. The faster we can sell, the better,” she stated categorically. She would only be so tolerant of my delays.

Tina hung up. I lay on my roof, calming my anxiety by counting stars. My boss and I were not on the same page anymore. It just felt wrong. I didn’t want to sell the place to anybody else, even though the chance of me buying it outright was zero and living there with Parker after he kicked Cheryl out was also no longer an option. Parker was scum. He wouldn’t even be a fun ride for a short while if it meant getting into that house. I just couldn’t do it.

The Viceroy should be mine. The metaphysical stream was leading straight to Echo Loon Lake.

They say to live your life as though it’s already happening.

So tomorrow, I’d drive to Echo Loon Lake as if I already lived there, because this was the closest I was going to get. They say to dress for the job

you want. That’s exactly what I was going to do. Be the master of the house, if only in my dreams, when I set foot on those perfect floors.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 21

CHERYL

Marla's face displayed absolute shock as she stood looking at the mess in the game room. Cedar planks and volcanic stone were scattered all over the floor. Mid-morning sun streamed through the windows, highlighting the chaos.

The agent asked, "What happened here?"

"Um…" Cheryl didn't know how much she should share. Parker hadn't come home last night, and she'd been planning to let him clean up the destroyed sauna. "Bit of an accident."

Marla looked at her with one raised eyebrow. She clearly didn't believe a word of it.

Cheryl searched the other woman's green eyes. Could she trust her? Another cold thought froze her. What if Parker had bugged the house? Hoping to hide her internal turmoil, she walked over to her writing desk and picked up a few of the pages that had fallen to the floor during her violent escape the previous night.

Marla followed. "This is your research? And your novel about the history of the lake?"

Cheryl nodded.

"There might be forces that don't want some stories told," Marla said, lowering her voice. "I get a feeling Echo Loon likes to keep its secrets."

She whirled on the agent. "So I should stop my work? Just let the sleeping dogs of history lie?"

The other woman put up her hands. "No. Not at all…" She surveyed the wreckage of the room again. "What really happened here?"

"A bit of a fight with Parker," Cheryl said, her voice trailing off in a whisper. "I don't think he wants to sell the place."

Marla hesitated, then kicked a rock into a shredded cedar board. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." Though Cheryl suspected her faint aroma of body odor told a different story.

“So, are you taking the place off the market?”

“No. No, I want to sell.” She straightened her shoulders, wincing at the soreness in her muscles. “And I am writing about the mysteries of this place.”

“Maybe you should turn it into fiction. At least tell them you’re not writing the real history. It’s too dangerous.” Marla pointed to the article about the missing housekeeper. “What if they, the HOA or someone else living here, killed Sally Dobbin? And Jenny Briggs?”

“I don’t know.” She eyed Marla Briggs with an awareness she hadn’t shown before. “I do know one thing. The police don’t like to reopen old investigations. I already tried. Once they’ve ruled that somebody’s just gone missing, the last thing they want to do is unearth their own bad police work.”

“And who really cares about a cleaning woman and some builder from Australia who disappeared eighteen years ago?” The younger woman’s face screwed up in thought. “Where’s the backup of your research, if you’re writing it all on that old typewriter?”

“I don’t have one.”

Marla’s eyes went wide. “That’s it? This pile of paper right here, that’s all you have?”

“Yep. Yeah.”

“You don’t even have a copy of it?”

Cheryl shook her head. “If an old school typewriter was good enough for Jane Austen, it’s good enough for me.” She finished gathering her papers and put them in a desk drawer. Jane Austen had probably handwritten her stories, but Marla graciously didn’t correct her.

Marla touched the article about her mother. “They could send a drone down into the lake. Look for bodies.”

“But they won’t.”

“Let me guess, there’s a strict no-drone policy here.” She put her hands on her hips. “But the cops could still do it.”

“Same thing. They’ll never admit fault or approve the expense.” Cheryl nodded at the sliding glass doors. “Let’s continue chatting on the dock. All this doom and gloom. I need some sunshine.”

They went down to the dock, and Marla slipped off her sneakers. Cheryl noticed she wasn't wearing the Louboutins anymore. Her realtor looked more comfortable in general today. She'd gone from the prim, slightly uncomfortable dresses to a pair of jeans and a nice shirt.

Cheryl had the feeling she was seeing the real Marla. Now she just had to decide if she was going to let Marla see the real her. She slipped off her own shoes and sat beside her on the dock, both of them idly stirring circles in the water with their toes. The lake spread out calm and blue-green in front of them.

"What really happened?" Marla asked quietly. "To your game room?"

Cheryl pursed her lips, considering. Her only acquaintances around the lake were the Hendersons, and she couldn't burden them with this. She needed someone on her side. A witness if she disappeared. "My husband drugged me," she said, keeping her focus on the water. "Locked me in the sauna. I think he tried to kill me."

Marla gasped and put her hand on Cheryl's. "That's what he was doing at a dive bar last night. Giving himself an alibi."

"I think so." Cheryl shuddered, a strange mix of emotions flooding her. Part relief, like a weight coming off her shoulders, and a fresh string of nerves. Had she made the right call? Could she trust this woman?

"This is a strange place," Marla said. "Beautiful but infected."

"It's not the lake's fault. The HOA is corrupt."

"Do you really want to sell?"

"No. I don't. But I need to get out… Inconvenient women tend to disappear."

Neither of them spoke for a moment. Cheryl was going to say it, but she didn't have to.

"Like my mother. And Sally Dobbin." Marla kicked the water, causing it to splash both of them. "And the Hendersons aren't moving to a retirement home?"

"No. But I needed to tell Parker something. He isn't going to let me just sell and move out of the enclave. He works here."

"And you can't divorce him?"

“Divorce doesn’t go over well here. The women are ostracized. I wanted the cleanest exit possible. And if that meant selling, then so be it.”

Marla looked at her. “I do have some interesting clients… French-Canadian investors.”

“It’s only old money they want here. That might be an issue.”

The agent’s phone buzzed against the dock boards. She glanced at it and pursed her lips. “It’s Tina.” She was already pulling her feet out of the water. “The French-Canadian clients left Mont Tremblant early. We’ve got maybe an hour.”

Cheryl stood up and looked at the sliding doors that led straight into the wrecked game room. “Right, okay. I’ll get garbage bags.”

Marla slipped her sneakers back on. “Where do we even put a demolished sauna?”

Thinking for a moment, Cheryl pointed to a mini cabin that matched the facade of the Viceroy, minus the windows. “There’s a storage shed in the pines at the edge of the property. There should be room there until Parker makes a run to the dump.”

They worked fast, scooping shattered cedar and chunks of volcanic stone into contractor bags. After the first haul down to the shed, Marla gasped in astonishment at the two sleek yellow kayaks racked against the wall. They were slender and long. A fraction of the width of the one Cheryl had originally seen her in. “Those are gorgeous. You race?”

“Parker and I bought them when we first moved here. I thought it would be a nice couple thing.”

“And?” Marla stroked the keel of the closest one reverently.

“We used them once.”

They went back to the house for a second load and shoved the splintered pieces into more garbage bags.

Marla paused to wipe her brow. “I don’t even want to know what breakfast cereal gives a person the strength to do this.”

“Spinach,” Cheryl said. “If you think you’re going to be cooked to death, you can channel your inner Popeye.”

“He locked you in?”

“Wedged a chair against the door and cranked the heat.”

“Shouldn’t we call someone? The police?”

“And say what?” Cheryl pushed out of the sliding glass door with three bags. “I have no proof that I didn’t drink too much and pass out. It’d be my word against his. I’d be just another hysterical woman. I could see the authorities sending me for a psychiatric evaluation.”

Marla followed her with more trash and said nothing.

They’d just swept the last of the grit off the game room floor when Cheryl’s phone buzzed. She listened and responded. “Look, Parker knows all about it. Take it up with him.” She hung up and turned to Marla. “Amos is out on his boat, doing a patrol, and says someone buzzed the gate. They say they are your clients.” She grinned. “He’s pissed.”

The younger woman tucked a strand of sweaty hair into her bun. “Well, the house is as good as it gets. The rest of the place looks flawless.”

“I’ll drive down and get them,” Cheryl said.

“I’ll come.”

They took the Range Rover to the gate, and Marla hopped out of the car and directed them to park. Cheryl put a hand over her mouth when the huge van pulled past them, and the door slid open.

“Oh no,” she heard her real estate agent say under her breath.

It was like watching a clown car at the circus. Out came a woman in a business suit, a grandmother, a middle-aged couple, and a kid who was no older than ten.

“Amos is going to love this,” Cheryl said and snorted back a laugh. “I can’t imagine what my fine will be.”

“Sorry!” Marla shot her a bemused look. “Tina said just the investor and an interpreter.”

“There are no children allowed, so this will be interesting.”

Marla only shrugged and approached the woman in the business suit. Cheryl guessed she was the agent. Very pretty. Early twenties.

“You’ll have to walk in from here. No vehicles past this point, association rules.”

The agent smiled and jiggled, bouncing a head full of blonde curls. “Bonjour—Sorry, hello.” She dropped the H, her accent heavy. “The Benoits wanted to bring Grand-maman. And little Théo.”

Marla tilted her head, and for a moment, Cheryl wondered if she was going to turn them away. Then her agent’s shoulders dropped, and she said, “All right, then. Allez. Let’s go see a house.”

“Cheryl,” Marla said, in the bright, empty voice she used for open houses. Marla didn’t continue. Cheryl expected she was trying to do damage control over what was a slow-motion train wreck and would be an inevitable disaster.

As they started the walk through the trees, the French agent babbled to Marla, “They think of it as an investment, mais oui? The Airbnb, as you call it.”

“Non,” Cheryl called, using one of the few French words she knew. “The association doesn’t allow short-term rentals. Or long-term ones, for that matter.”

The agent dropped back to talk in low, rapid French to the father.

He shrugged and said, “Peut-étre.”

Mr. Benoit, the father, lit a cigar and knocked the ash onto the cedar chips of the path. Cheryl covered the evidence as she followed behind them, cringing at Amos’s reaction if he saw it. She had a sinking feeling she would be hearing about this later and not in a good way. She would enlist Marla for moral support to limit the browbeating Amos would deliver.

“Oh, c’est belle!” Mrs. Benoit said when they rounded the bend and approached the Viceroy. “Let’s start with lake, oui?”

Cheryl’s throat tightened when she saw Amos watching the parade from the water. He rowed right up to their dock.

Théo spotted him and took off at a dead sprint, shrieking, “Le bateau! Le bateau, je veux monter à bord, s’il vous plaît!”

Sheer horror crossed the harbormaster’s face. He paddled frantically and shot out toward the middle of the lake.

Théo skidded to a stop at the edge, wailing after him. “Arrête! I want BOAT!”

“Je suis désolée, mon petit,” his mother said.

Marla gave a nervous laugh. “This is a wonderful lake. Very quiet. Let’s check out the house!” She led them around the side to the front door.

The family trooped into the Viceroy without removing their shoes.

Grand-maman dragged some cedar chips from her cane into the kitchen, and the father ran some water on the cigar and left it in the sink. The faint smell of tobacco hung around him and permeated the kitchen.

Marla was giving the fastest tour Cheryl had ever seen an agent give, as Théo yanked open every cupboard in the kitchen. Her chest was already tight, but then her heart started thudding extra fast when she heard Parker roar up on the golf cart.

He came through the door already furious. “Cheryl. Amos walkie-talked me…”

“Not now,” she said, low and flat. “Let’s wait till our…guests leave.”

It was the French agent who turned back and greeted Parker. “Bonjour. You must be man of the maison!” She rested a manicured hand on his forearm. “You show me?”

He nodded, a sideways grin on his face. A bit of bile rose up Cheryl’s throat. Parker was nothing if not predictable. The two of them disappeared down the stairs, and Cheryl—herding Théo away from her China cabinet—was relieved that her husband was distracted.

When the Benoit family followed Marla upstairs, Cheryl chose to go down to the game room, curious what was taking them so long.

It was the light thumping that sent her down the hall, like the washing machine was dealing with a load out of balance.

Cheryl opened the laundry room door a crack.

Parker and the real estate agent were communicating in the most basic way there was between woman and man. With groans and their pants off.

She closed the door and stood in the hallway for a moment with her hand still on the knob, just breathing.

Of course he would. The dog.

She went back upstairs and waited for the Benoits to return to the kitchen.

Marla gave her an apologetic grin and then turned to the glowing couple. “Our hour is up. Thank you so much.”

Their son whined about missing the boat ride. “Je veux faire du BOAT!”

The agent reappeared with flushed cheeks. Parker was nowhere to be seen.

Mrs. Benoit rushed over to her and said, “J’adore! We must have.”

“We love it. We love the house,” Mr. Benoit said to Cheryl.

Marla intercepted. “There is an HOA approval process here. I’ll email your agent the application package.”

“Okay,” said Mr. Benoit. “We are very…how do you say…interested.”

She nodded. “I’ll take you back to your car.”

Cheryl watched them go. The grand-maman, Théo, the parents, and the hussy of an agent. Parker followed them out, taking a card from his latest score and then hopping back onto his golf cart without saying a word to her.

Cheryl walked back into her kitchen, poured herself a glass of lemonade with hands that only shook a little, and drank half of it before Marla came in, looking like a bedraggled cat toy.

“I am so sorry,” the agent said. “I’m going to talk to Tina about vetting people properly before they ever get near this gate.”

“It’s okay.” Cheryl poured Marla a glass of lemonade. “Parker gave that agent the real tour. Every cycle on the washing machine.”

Marla spilled a bit of her drink. “Downstairs, with all of us here? You’re kidding me!”

“I wish I was.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 22

MARLA

So much for Parker being my dream man. Besides making the fatal error of leaving a woman alone in a dodgy bar, he was the dirtiest of horndogs.

In my fantasies, he only cheated with me.

What do you say to a wife who just discovered her husband giving another woman a spin in their laundry room?

Cheryl sensed my discomfort and gave me a conspiratorial grin. “The guy’s only capable of a very short cycle.”

We both burst into laughter.

“I’m guessing you want to sell the house before you give him the boot?” I asked as our grins faded.

She shrugged. “It would certainly make things easier. I wish I’d had the sense to get him to sign a pre-nup, but I didn’t.”

We both turned and stared at some clouds gathering in the north. The tops of the pine trees across the lake were tipped in gold from the sun, and the contrast against the dark sky was dramatic.

“Such a shame…” I began.

Cheryl interrupted me, looking at her Cartier watch. “Well, it’s just after four, and you have to be out of here shortly. And looks like some bad weather is rolling in.”

The connection between us fizzled as I was reminded that we were not friends. She was the rich client with the fancy house, even if it came with a cheating spouse. I was the help and had to be out the gate by five.

My mood was just as stormy as the oncoming weather as I drove back to Bog Creek. The first drops hit the windshield somewhere outside Kestrel Falls, fat explosions that the windshield wipers could hardly keep up with. The squeal of rubber on glass gave cadence to my thoughts.

You are not rich.

But I want to be.

The Viceroy is not yours.

But I want to live there.

Parker is not yours.

Who would want him?

I want someone like him, but decent.

The way Cheryl had dismissed me with a quick glance at her fifty-thousand-dollar watch put me in my place. It was who I really was. A newbie real estate agent, poor, desperate for a good sale, and hoping to upgrade her life.

She had gifted me a pair of Louboutin heels. That was no small gift. Maybe it was charity.

Not the successful apparition I was manifesting in the quantum field. Sometimes reality was a loud slap, like the thunder booming ominously in the distance.

This storm was going to get much worse, and I wanted to be tucked into my trailer before it really hit. Better yet, sharing a drink with Earl.

The windshield wipers screeched a reminder of my situation as they fought with the torrent of water.

The viewing was a disaster.

You need to be better.

The clients were all wrong.

You allowed a child into the compound!

The homeowners shouldn't be there.

You are a failure.

You are a failure.

You are a failure.

Tina was going to want to have a few words with me tomorrow, and I wasn't looking forward to it, but I needed to have a few words with her, too. Those clients were there on her recommendation. She knew Echo Loon Lake was an adults-only community. It was one thing to blame her for not vetting the clients, but ultimately, the selling agent was supposed to control

the situation. If I turned a second set of potential clients around before they even made it through the gate, what would that say about me?

Next time, I would talk to the buyer's agent well before anyone traveled and set some ground rules. Where was my head?

It certainly wasn't on the road or checking my rearview mirror, or I would have seen the trouble before it was too late.

I'd just passed The Bar and didn't notice the motorcycles until they were right on my bumper.

Two huge Harleys. My stomach churned with acid, and I swallowed down fear. No need to catastrophize. Lots of bikers drank in Kestrel Falls, especially on a Friday night. This wasn't Brutus and Stain, chasing me down in the pouring rain for humiliating them.

One bike pulled up beside me, and my heart sank. The rider was huge and had a long ZZ Top beard. Brutus. His buddy accelerated, water spraying from the tires in a fan as he yanked his bike in front of me. A thinner, smaller man.

Now I was boxed in, both bikes way too close for comfort, and Brutus banged a fist on my window. Stain slowed his chopper, and I had to slam on the brakes not to rear-end him. The layer of water on the road caused my bald tires to hydroplane, and the car fishtailed. For a horrid, breath-stopping moment, I thought I was going to slide right off the road into the ditch.

I eased off the brake, and the Sunfire gained traction. My knuckles were as white as snowcaps on the wheel.

Brutus slammed his fist on my window again, and I screamed.

They were forcing me off the road. They were actually, for real, coming after me. My brain raced through all the worst-case scenarios. Beat me to a pulp? Rape? Leave me for dead in the watery ditch?

This was payback for the broken beer bottle at Brutus's throat. You cross the wrong people, and your best case is to flee town. Hank had the right idea. But my future was here, and I wasn't going to tuck tail and run. Not yet.

They must have seen my Sunfire in the parking lot and been looking for it. I should have known this town was too small to let an insult like mine go. Bikers had reputations to uphold.

For a mad moment, I considered flooring my gas pedal and hitting the guy in front of me. Couldn't I argue justifiable homicide? No. I would end up in jail.

Brutus kicked my door, the sound louder than the rain and the intermittent thunder. Stain had slowed me down to a crawl, so I pulled off to the side of the road, hitting the lock button before I engaged park.

My hands were shaking so badly that it was tough to grab my phone.

"Please let there be bars. Please let there be service."

My mouth went dry as a desert. None.

I screamed again when Stain tapped on the passenger-side window. He pushed his mouth against the glass, giving me a view of his broken teeth. When your dentist was Dr. Meth, it affected your pearly whites.

Brutus slammed both fists against my door. "Open up, Miss Marla." The rain poured down his bearded face as lightning flashed, making him look more demon than man.

"Go away!" I shook my purse at him. "I've got a gun."

He roared with laughter. "No, you don't. Open the door and let us in. It's a little wet out here, and I'm getting cranky."

Stain tapped the passenger window. "Let us in. Let us in. Let us in."

I shook my phone. "I've called the cops. They are on the way."

"Don't believe that one either, lying Miss Marla." He kicked the door, and it dented; the bent metal nearly reached my thigh. "Last chance to do this civilly."

"No, thank you."

Stain returned with a crowbar in his fist.

My bladder loosened, and electricity raced through my body. This was it. I was going to die. As my passenger window shattered, I reached into the back seat, my brain grasping onto the one thing I had that might work as a weapon.

Bear spray.

There was a little bottle tossed back there with my spare life jacket. I took it with me when I went kayaking a little later in the year. The bears

were doing their getting-fat-for-winter thing and got aggressive. You might have to protect your peanut butter sandwich.

I managed to cup it in my palm just as the passenger window glass safety chunks littered the inside of the Sunfire. My cheeks burned from the impact of little shards, and my hair captured more.

Pain radiated through my upper arm as I was wrenched out of the car and bent at an unnatural angle on the hood.

Brutus was an inch from my face, gagging me with beer-and-garlic breath. The positioning was pseudo-sexual, his massive body pressed against mine and his hands on either side of my shoulders. “Remember me?”

Though I wanted to struggle and freak out, I forced myself to be still. “Please let me go. I’m sorry.” My spine felt as though it was going to break.

“Sorry, are you? Would it have killed you to have a drink with me? Are you so much better than we are?”

Brutus eased up a fraction, and I slipped down the hood a bit to give my back some relief. “I’m no better than anyone.”

Stain, who shivered slightly behind his buddy, stomped in the puddle. “That’s right, bitch. You are no better. And we’re going to show you. And get paid for it.”

Paid for it. That was like a knife-strike to my brain. This was an overreaction to a bit of rough play in a bar.

“Who’s paying you?” I asked.

“Shut up, Stain!” Brutus hissed and then slammed me against the hood. “There are some places you just aren’t welcome. Stay out of Echo Loon Lake.”

Another bolt of lightning lit up the sky, and the thunder rumbled as if echoing Brutus’s ominous warning. Was Parker at that bar for more than just an alibi? Hiring goons to scare me off?

The intensity of the rain eased off a bit into a steady shower. Mother Nature had been the soundtrack to my bad choices recently. I was scared but not cowed. A bunch of bullies would not scare me away from selling that Viceroy. Assuming I survived this.

I clenched the bear spray in my hand. How was I going to get myself in a position to use it? There was no way for me to get my arms in front of me so I could aim at Brutus's face. And then would I have enough time to take down Stain?

"Work meets pleasure." Brutus yanked me to an upright position, his hands pulling my soaked collar. "I'm looking for another old lady."

I wanted to puke. But I had to play this right. "Well, how do I audition?"

He pulled back and grinned at me. "That's a girl."

That little bit of space was all I needed. With a scream, I sprayed him directly in the face with the toxic pepper mixture.

Brutus screamed like a choir boy as he staggered backward. High C.

Stain raised the crowbar over his head, and I aimed the bear spray at him and fired.

Nothing came out. It was empty. I covered my face with my hands and prepared for the blow when I heard the revving of an engine and the spray of water from an approaching vehicle.

Then the crash of a bike tumbling into the ditch. The sprinkle of glass and the splash as the Harley submerged upside-down into the rushing culvert water.

"Holy fuck!" Stain shouted.

Earl leaned out of a rusty old farm truck, the front corner of it caved in. "Get in!" he screamed at me. I didn't need to be told twice, but I did dive through my open door to grab my purse and phone.

I wasn't leaving my license, credit cards, and whatever cash was still rattling around in the bottom of my purse for Brutus and Stain to find. They didn't need to know where I lived.

I scrambled through the passenger side of the truck just as Stain's crowbar smashed onto the hood. "Go!"

Earl slammed the truck into gear, and the old vehicle lurched forward, tires spinning for a second before they caught the wet pavement.

I twisted around to look through the rear window.

Brutus was wiping his eyes on his jacket, while Stain tossed the crowbar after us.

“Thank you,” I gasped.

Earl’s voice was funny. Tight and controlled. “Are you hurt?”

I was cold, soaked, and it would take hours to get all the glass out of my hair. “Not really.”

“Did they…” he spoke through clenched teeth.

“Did they?”

“Touch you. That way.”

My stomach lurched. It could have gone that way. “No.”

The muscles along Earl's jaw quivered. “You have to be smarter, Marla.”

He was right. I didn’t know what to say to that.

For several seconds, the only sounds inside the cab were the wipers beating back and forth across the windshield and the diesel roar of the old truck.

“I’m going to have to call in some favors to get those bikers off your back. And now I am going to have to fix this truck for free.”

“This is a client’s truck?”

“Just what I happened to be working on when I saw them force you off the road. You’re really lucky I was working late.” He slammed his hands on the wheel. “This is getting ridiculous.”

I looked down at my lap, brushing a few glass pieces off my pants. “I’m sorry.”

“Maybe sorry isn’t good enough. You ruined Hank’s life—”

“I didn’t! Moving to Toronto…”

He ignored my protest. “And now you are going to get yourself killed. Maybe both of us.”

“I’m sorry. It’s not like I went back to the bar.”

“I don’t want to hear it, Marla. When is enough, enough?”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 23

CHERYL

Now that Marla was gone, Cheryl dumped her lemonade into the sink and pulled out a cold bottle of Chardonnay. She only poured a couple of fingers' worth, because she needed her wits about her.

The storm was rolling in quick and black across the lake, making it seem far later than four o'clock. She hoped Marla made it home before the skies opened up.

Heavy regret blanketed her as she drained the glass in a noisy gulp. Privilege could be an invisible hammer. She hadn't meant to knock Marla down a few notches by rushing her out of the compound, but it was unwise to break more HOA rules.

Especially after the sauna incident. Had Parker's attempt to kill Cheryl been born out of rage or the desire to be single again, even though being married didn't affect him in any of the ways that mattered? Or had Parker been instructed by Amos? He'd been in this community from the start. She started to think that Amos might have been the one consistent thread that ran through the tapestry of Echo Loon Lake.

Her research on the lake's history, putting the house on the market, hiring Marla… All of those activities earmarked her as an inconvenient woman. She had a lot to think about. A lot to process.

The sauna horror aside, she had to figure out how she felt about Parker screwing that French-Canadian agent in the laundry room.

It was one thing to know your husband was cheating.

It was another thing entirely to walk in on him plowing a stranger in your own house shortly after attempting to kill you. What had happened to her life?

She'd always known Parker was charming. Those good looks and Scottish accent were panty-droppers. In really rich circles, the wives often turned a blind eye. Heck, the women played with pool boys and tennis instructors themselves.

But seducing someone while she was in the house? During a real estate viewing? He was sending her a message. The gloves were off, and he had

no limits.

She poured herself another two fingers and swallowed the dry vintage just as quickly as the first time. The rain began pelting the picture windows, and thunder growled like a transport truck. When had their marriage actually begun to come apart?

Was it when she'd started digging into the history of the lake?

Or when she encouraged him to start working for the HOA?

She'd thought staying busy would keep him closer to home and away from the booze. More faithful. It had done the opposite. It had given him opportunity that he seized with a clear mind, free from alcohol. Booze-addled, he was a terrible person. Sober, he was just as bad but in a different way.

Working for the HOA. That was when he'd launched the thing with Elena Morgenstein.

Did he think she was stupid? At first, Cheryl had been hurt. The stories. Like those nights when he came home reeking of perfume and claimed Mrs. Henderson had hugged him for helping her with the garden. Or when he said working the chainsaw all day sapped his libido.

Cheryl remembered walking over to the Hendersons one evening to double-check on Parker's excuse. She also loved the Hendersons' cottage. It was perfect. Cozy, immaculate, and just the right size for a retired couple. She loved the wood accents in the house and the swing on their back porch.

Glenda, at seventy years old with her perfect gray bob and surgically young face, had poured her a glass of the best lemonade she'd ever had, sat her down on the swing, and told her gently that her husband hadn't been there.

Pushing the swing with yoga-firm legs, Glenda had shared a story as the sunset cast a red glow on her Audrey Hepburn cheekbones. "My husband has a thing for the housemaids. I think he even got one pregnant many moons ago. I turn a blind eye. Boys will be boys at any age."

Acceptance of the lifestyle over the life. Don't upset the apple cart. Divorce was unseemly within elite circles. The wife always came out with less. Less money. Less prestige. No invites to social events. Forced to move

away. Abandon everything that made their life worth living and realizing that the husband was a means to an end, not the end itself.

Cheryl had thanked her for the drink, taken home a recipe card for the lemonade, and made a decision.

That was the day she stopped caring. And started making her own fresh lemonade. Cheryl wasn't in love with her husband anymore and probably hadn't been for years. That much she was sure of.

But that didn't mean she didn't feel shock, disgust, and a little heartbreak anyway. Having a subtle affair with a housemaid was one thing. Not that it was right. But blatantly cheating with a visiting realtor? Animalistic. Abject disdain for his wife. He probably wanted her to see them to put Cheryl in her place.

She allowed herself one more glass of wine, and then cleaned up the kitchen, keeping an eye out for headlights pulling into her driveway. Her gut churned thinking about her husband's return. How was she going to handle it without scratching out his eyeballs?

The ties that bind a marriage ran deep. But attempted homicide and a carnal engagement within forty-eight hours had a way of dousing even the smallest remaining ember of affection.

It was time to leave Parker, and she had to manage this correctly. The HOA did not like divorces. It caused ugliness and conflict not welcome within these hallowed gates. When the Morgensteins were having that spat last year, all sorts of strangeness began happening. Keycards not working. Their little Zodiac boat sprung a mysterious leak. Elena's brakes malfunctioned…

All of a sudden, their marriage was rosy again. And Parker was spending an inordinate amount of time there. Fixing stuff.

Cheryl put the last remaining dishes away from the dishwasher, stacking them a little too loudly. Half-hoping one would break. She needed to sell the Viceroy first, then serve Parker his divorce papers.

Her very life might depend on it.

A rumble from her stomach reminded her that she'd had nothing to eat all day, so she nibbled on a bit of three-year-old cheddar and paced.

Today’s viewing had been a disaster on every level. A kid? Intergenerational family? Not allowed.

Lake Homes Realty should have vetted them better.

The cheese wasn’t sitting well in her belly.

Cheryl went downstairs and worked on her novel, tapping the plastic keys aggressively. This Hermes typewriter cost more than her Hermes scarves and was worth every inherited penny. She’d thrown her last computer out of her condo window when it’d crashed and she’d lost all her research and resources on that exposé she’d been writing on the Canadian COVID vaccine scandal near the end of 2020. Her editor had been waiting on the feature, so she’d been fired from the *Toronto Reporter*.

Thinking about it still raised her blood pressure. Hard copies for the win. That humiliation was in her past. A dark time that moved on, just like the current storm leaving behind the last rays of a spectacular sunset, colors dancing off the water and sprinkling the trees with majesty.

She concentrated on the visceral feel of the concave keys, and the soothing clacking sound they made, as she added details she’d learned about the original settlers.

The lake had belonged to the mine owners in the nineteen-fifties. The families of the owners stayed in log cabins on Pegmatite Bay—renamed Echo Loon Lake when the developer purchased the land—while their workers were kept in an encampment closer to the lithium mine. The community had grown from there, but information was no easier to find. There was surprisingly little on the disappearances in 2008, and even less on the history. Once the community went private, information conduits locked down tightly. An idyllic community cut off from the rest of the world. As the residents wanted it, or so they were told.

But Cheryl was nothing if not determined. And since she didn’t have a job, she had tons of time to dig. Thank goodness for her trust fund.

The more she explored the microfiche in the Toronto Reference Library, heading to the big city for weekend trips once a month or so, the darker the story became. The very seeds of this community were corrupt: worker abuse, environmental damage, all of it covered up. Or at least that’s what was alluded to. Real data was lacking.

Cheryl was also using these trips to check out the condos along Lake Ontario. When she did sell, she needed someplace to go, and she'd liked Toronto when she worked there. Though it was nothing like this paradise. She turned and looked out at the lake, glistening blue and innocent out of her sliding glass doors. A water view was necessary for her soul, even though the great lake along the edge of Canada's biggest city didn't have the same feel as Echo Loon.

After an hour of typing, she slipped the new pages into her locked drawer. No more hackable computers for her. Right next to her recently drafted divorce papers.

Cheryl couldn't settle. But one thing did give her some satisfaction. Her novel was almost done.

She decided to go for an evening swim, hoping that would settle her. The foamy waves were just tiny white heads now. There was nothing more peaceful than gliding silently through the water after a storm. Even the cicadas and crickets fell quiet, leaving only the odd eerie call of a loon as she moved along.

The water was cold and shocking when she dove in. Changing body state was a good way to clear her mind. Better than drinking. Less brain exhausting than working on the novel.

Cheryl swam toward the harbormaster's boathouse, enjoying the stretch in her muscles as she front-crawled along the shore. Two people walked onto the dock, and she switched to a silent breaststroke. The HOA's weathered rowboat knocked against the metal as their feet shook the structure.

Amos and Parker.

The two men were involved in a hushed, intense conversation, and though she strained, Cheryl couldn't hear a word. A tickle of danger ran up her spine. Nothing happened at the lake without Amos's approval, so he must have known about the sauna incident.

She dove under the water and kicked hard to get under the dock where they couldn't see but she could hear.

She bumped into the metal stanchion supporting the planking and eased herself upward. She raised her head out of the water, slowly. No

splash. She gasped for breath as silently as she could. When the pounding in her ears stopped, she heard Amos.

“Take care of it already! No more screwups.” Amos stormed off.

Parker stood there for a moment before strolling away, head down.

Amos’s tone was enough to put Cheryl off. It was time to run for her life.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 24

MARLA

Biting my tongue, I endured Earl's silent rage as we drove through the tail end of the storm. The brilliant sunset reminded me that there could be something beautiful after ugliness. But now wasn't the time to remind Earl of that. The old farmer's truck only had one operating headlight, the other taken out by crashing the Harley into the ditch. My jeans were soaked, and I shivered, hugging myself. This wasn't the first time Earl had saved me from dodgy decisions.

There was that field party I'd gone to alone at nineteen. The cops had raided the place minutes after Earl had dragged me out of there, doing a donut in his old Ford and commanding I jump in. But back then, we'd laughed as he sped away.

Now, Earl was fuming. His shoulders hunched and jaw tight. Nickelback was blaring from the radio. Angry music.

I stayed silent until he drove past the entrance to Bog Creek Trailer Park. "Where are you going?"

He gritted his teeth. "We're going to the Northern Drillers Clubhouse."

"Where?!"

"The Northern Drillers Clubhouse."

My chest tightened, and a frisson of fear ran from the top of my head right down to my soaked toes. "Why?"

"Because, Marla, this has to end." He floored the truck, going dangerously quick for the conditions. "Now, not only do you have a target on your back, but me, too. You think they're gonna let me just knock one of their hogs into the ditch?"

He took a shuddering breath. I wisely stayed quiet. Mad Earl was a rare and dangerous creature.

His voice went up an octave. "Stain saw me come from the mechanic shop. They know who I am. I fix all their bikes. My dad's account. When he was alive, he was a friend of the club."

I nodded, trying not to cry. “Why am I coming with you?” The lights of North Bay beckoned several miles up the road.

He slammed on the brakes, making a hard right onto a gravel road and heading into a wooded area. Wet rocks smacked into the wheel wells. Earl shouted over the racket, “This is your mess, and you have to help clean it up. And…” He looked over at me as we careened over potholes. “I need Derrick to get a good look at you.”

He took off, and we skidded into a parking lot outside of a long, low building. It looked like a restaurant that had gone under. Boards on the window. Half a sign dangling from the eaves with a painted chicken promising, EAT.

He parked and took several deep breaths after he turned off the engine, never looking my way.

I had never felt this way with Earl. His body language was all wrong. The way he was tilted away from me, the curl of his lip, the squint of his eyes…

This was the first time in my life that Earl hated me.

I reached over and stroked his neck under his mullet, something I knew he used to love, hoping to spark a reminder of why we were friends, of why we were once much more.

He just about jumped out of his skin, jerking away from me. “Marla, don’t do that. Keep your hands to yourself, so help me.”

I shoved my hands between my knees. This was probably the worst I’d ever felt in my entire life. It was as if the bottom of this pickup truck had dropped out from under my feet, dangling me above the dark void of the unknown. Earl was the one constant in my life. I’d taken him for granted and didn’t feel comfortable in my skin or in the situation. I’d alienated the one person who I could always count on. Without Earl, I would be left with no one.

“Sorry,” I tried.

“A little late for that.”

“Should I stay inside?”

“No. Derrick has to see you in the flesh and promise me his protection.”

He jumped out of the truck, and I followed him, knowing I looked like a drowned rat.

The front door was reinforced steel, the one modern piece of a broken-down structure.

Despite wallowing in misery, I gasped at the interior.

It was surprisingly nice. I didn't know what I was expecting, but I'd watched *Sons of Anarchy*. Maybe a dive bar with dirty tables, a long bar, and lines of coke everywhere. Instead, the place looked like a country club lounge. There was even an extensive library against one wall with old leather-bound collector-item books. It also featured a new pool table with fresh felt, heavy leather chairs, and historical photos of bikers from the early 1950s onward, all wearing the Northern Drillers patch.

The same patch that Brutus and Stain wore on their cuts. A design featuring a skull wearing a miner's cap with two drills crossed beneath it like swords. Rather than drunk men sprawled on stained couches, the place was nearly empty. Just two fellows in a corner, nursing beers and typing on laptops, and one gorgeous, older woman in a leather dress with Cruella de Vil hair. And a man at the bar with pomaded dark curls and wearing a navy Savile Row suit. His patch, with the designation President, sat on the back of his stool.

Earl moved through the space like he was comfortable with it. He walked up to the man and cleared his throat.

The man turned but didn't smile. He was in his late fifties or early sixties, clean-shaven, and had heterochromia. One blue eye and one brown.

"Earl. I have already heard from Brutus and Stain. What art thou doing? Thou art supposed to be fixing our bikes, not tossing them into a ditch."

This was too much. The leader of the Northern Drillers spoke in Elizabethan English? I slid onto a stool, afraid my legs would give out.

Earl didn't react at all, obviously familiar with the quirk. "I know, and I apologize. I've come to negotiate a truce. They're after my friend Marla here."

The biker leader turned his mismatched eyes on me, and I felt another shiver go down my back. The literary quirk aside, those were the eyes of a

killer. Cold, calculating, and with keen intelligence behind them.

He ran a hand through his shiny, black hair. “Yes, rare is her beauty and known to the club. She doth offend those with the gold to pay for silence.”

I crumpled in my stool. If I understood Derrick correctly, there was a hit out on me. “Wha…”

Earl grabbed my wrist and squeezed hard. Signaling me to shut up. I did.

He addressed Derrick. “Who wants her dead?”

“Secrets are the coins of silence,” the president’s voice frosted.

I wanted to scream, plead for my life, but Earl shot me a look. One I recognized. Trust him.

He leaned backward against the bar, so he was facing Derrick. “Then perhaps we might speak of coin. Can I buy out the hit? And earn forgiveness for knocking one of your Harleys into the ditch?”

Derrick sat back, thinking about it, and then raised a finger to the Cruella de Vil bartender.

She pulled back her black-and-white hair into a ponytail, lined up three pewter shot glasses, and brought down a bottle of top-shelf Canadian whiskey.

Crown Royal Reserve.

She poured a healthy amount into each glass, cleanly etched with the Northern Drillers’ logo.

Derrick raised his shot. “A bargain is best struck with a cup in hand.” He pushed one of the drinks my way with a manicured hand.

I didn’t feel like any alcohol, but I didn’t need Earl’s urgent, quick look to let me know that I didn’t have a choice here.

The three of us clinked our little metal shots together and drank. I’m not a whiskey drinker, but it went down quite smoothly. The faint taste of apple lingered in the back of my throat.

“Remain here. Thou hast been granted another dawn,” Derrick said to me and then led Earl over to a side table.

“You’re a lucky woman,” Cruella said to me as she gathered up the glasses. “Earl is one of the good ones, and I’ve never seen Derrick reverse a

contract before.”

“Who would put a hit out on me? I’m hardly…”

She walked away, leaving me talking to myself. Turning on the stool, I watched Earl’s face go pure white and then bright red. That wasn’t good. He leaned back in his leather chair and covered his face.

Derrick smiled, his teeth so white and bright that I assumed they must be dentures.

After a moment, Earl stood up and shook his hand. “All right, we have a deal.”

The leader nodded, and the two of them returned to the bar. “Will you remain in our employ and lend your skill to the brotherhood?”

Earl’s face was tight and drawn. Like it used to be when he lost a Matchbox car when we were young. “Well, I’ll promise you at least three to six months. And then, if it’s not working out, I would like the freedom to leave.”

A frown creased Derrick’s face, and the Shakespearean charm fell away. The expression on his face was pure Macbeth. For a moment, it looked like Earl’s request might be a problem, and I didn’t even know what he was talking about.

But then Derrick nodded. “Freedom is not the gift of kings, but the right of every soul.”

He nodded to the emblem on his patch. And sure enough, there it was —FREEDOM OR DEATH—underneath the skull and the drill bits.

“Thank you.” Earl stomped toward the exit, not even looking at me as I trailed behind him like a lost puppy.

Fighting nausea, I asked, “What did you give up?”

“Hush, Marla.” In several long strides, he was back in the borrowed truck and had his head on the steering wheel.

“What just happened there?”

“I had to give him ownership of my mechanic shop. That’s what happened.”

I wanted the floorboards to open up so I could fall into the abyss. Just not exist at that moment.

My voice cracked, “You can’t do that. That’s your father’s company, and you love that mechanic shop.” This was the worst thing that could have happened. Well, second worst. But if I were dead, I wouldn’t have to see the pain I just inflicted on my best friend.

He whirled on me, choked with emotion. “Marla, what was I supposed to do? They were going to rough you up real good. I had to buy out the contract. Somebody paid fifteen thousand dollars to have you removed. It’s not a coincidence this all happened after you started poking around that stupid lake.”

“You think someone at Echo Loon Lake wants me dead?”

“Not dead. Out of the way. You’ve obviously gotten under somebody’s skin, ‘cause you’re actually really good at that.”

It seemed unreal to me. “So you gave them ownership to the shop?” My brain was still trying to process.

“Yes. How else was I going to find fifteen thousand instantly and pay off the damage to Stain’s bike?”

“I’m so sorry, Earl.” The words felt cheap even to me.

“Sorry doesn’t cut it this time. I just… I don’t know what to do with you, Marla. I don’t think that my friendship with you is serving me anymore. First, you break my heart, and then you take what’s most valuable to me.”

I swallowed.

“So, I think we’re done.”

“Earl, you don’t mean that,” I pleaded, trying not to cry. The man couldn’t handle tears.

He didn’t answer, and the silence between us was unlike any I’d ever experienced before.

I’d lost Earl.

When we pulled into Bog Creek, he disappeared into his trailer, and I climbed onto my roof. The rain was done now, and my yoga mat was still dry in the garbage bag tucked by the air conditioner.

Though I tried to focus on my breath and relax, I couldn't get into the zone. The night was full dark, no stars. Like my soul. This was terrible, and

there was no calm place for me to retreat to. Earl was angry at me. So angry, he was done with me. How was he going to exist without his shop? It was his identity and livelihood.

On a more selfish note, they were going to do horrible things to me tonight. That encounter with the bikers could have ended so badly. Originally, I'd assumed they were out for revenge because I'd held a beer bottle to Brutus's throat.

Then I found out there was more to it. A little cash to see me out of the picture. Would they have killed me?

What?

Was it possible that Parker had been in that bar to hire the bikers as well as establish an alibi? Was that why he'd ordered me that beer right beforehand and left so quickly, not even offering to escort me home?

Cheryl was nearly boiled alive in her sauna, and two bikers ran me off the road. I'd call the cops, but there was no proof. The ravings of pretty girls. No one paid them any attention. Not in this part of the world. Plus, the biker gang was rumored to have ties to the local force.

I stared up at the sky and tried to float above my body, but I was tethered to my misery.

How was my manifesting working now?

For the first time in years, since I'd started my practice, I had doubt. This quantum universe seriously sucked. I'd been envisioning my ass off and trying to live the life I wanted.

Big fail.

Maybe it was all just hogwash. A fake way for people to believe they had control in a chaotic universe.

I repeated the mantra. "Life is happening for you. Not to you. Victimhood is a state of mind."

It didn't help. Right now, tonight, I felt like a victim.

Parker didn't want me. I was convinced he wanted me mauled and left for dead on the side of the road.

Then there was Cheryl. For a moment, I'd thought we were becoming friends. I'd felt something between us—a camaraderie—but then she'd

glanced at her Cartier watch and told me I had to get out before five. The rules for the help.

Not wanted at Echo Loon Lake and not welcome at Earl’s.

I didn't feel like I belonged anywhere.

A few tears gathered in my eyes, but I refused to let them roll down my face.

Marla Briggs might not always be on top, but I wasn't a quitter. I would find my way through this. Maybe even meditation wasn't a salve for a truly, horribly, awfully bad day.

Earl would forgive me. Or he wouldn’t. I couldn’t control that.

Tomorrow would be better. Tomorrow, I would get back on track. I'd talk to Tina, apologize for letting the homeowner remain inside the house during the showing, make the sale, and get back on trajectory.

There had to be a way I also could help Earl.

I would get back to believing life was happening for me.

At least the sky was clearing. The clouds broke apart, and I could see a few stars winking at me, holding the promise of better days to come.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 25

MARLA

Bleary-eyed and broken-hearted, I made my way to North Bay on Saturday morning. There had been a summons on my phone from Tina. A simple text.

Get in here.

My Sunfire was still sitting on the side of the highway with a broken window in Kestrel Falls, so I borrowed Earl's old Ford. He kept the keys in the visor. I knew he hated me, but the windows on his trailer were still dark at nine, and desperate times called for desperate measures.

As always, I loved driving the old truck, and the morning was bright and beautiful. The mist curled up from the grass as if I'd just missed the burning of a vampire. The visual made me smile.

Everything would be okay. With some old country as accompaniment, I let myself believe last night was just a blip.

Things are darkest before the sunrise and all that.

North Bay was quiet on a weekend morning, and I bought a Timmy's coffee for Tina before I entered the office.

Tina had two cigarettes going, pacing in front of her desk, when I walked in. "Marla, what were you thinking?" She didn't even wait for the office door to shut. "Why were both the husband and the wife in the house during the viewing?"

I pushed my lips together. Honestly, there was no good answer. Cleaning up the smashed sauna had been a massive distraction, and the French Canadians had arrived far sooner than expected. But those were excuses, and I was about taking responsibility.

"It won't happen again." I held up the extra-large red cup.

She stubbed out one cigarette and grabbed the coffee from my hand. Double-double. Tina wasn't sweet, but she liked her caffeine full of sugar. "They want to make an offer," she said after gulping half of it.

"So let them."

Tina slammed the coffee down on her desk and stubbed out the second cigarette with fury. “There’s no way. HOA rules, no kids! Apparently, they have a ten-year-old.” She glared at me like I’d birthed Théo myself.

“It was supposedly an investment property. What the fuck, Tina? You set me up to fail. You sent them to me. Are you telling me that I have to vet *your* contacts?”

Hadn’t Tina told them it was a child-free community?

One skill I’d had to learn in life was when to keep your mouth shut. Tina went back to pacing, pulling another cigarette out of the never-ending pack on her desk.

She pointed it at me, not lighting it. “Amos called me directly. Again. He’s about to ban you from going there.”

“No!” It burst from me before I could stop it. Then I asked more calmly, “Under what grounds?”

“Under what? He says your car leaves oil. There was no request to approve a viewing. You let a kid in…” She finished her coffee. “You didn’t trespass this time, I’ll give you that.”

“I swear, I’ll fix it. You know—”

“Marla.” She cut me off. “Apologizing after the fact doesn’t fix things.”

I was furious. It was like she’d joined the biker gang and was doing her best to cause me pain.

“You sent that pack of clowns to me. Why don’t you take some responsibility for this shitshow you’re running?”

“What did you say to me?”

I waved at the property listings. I ignored her question. “The Viceroy is the biggest property this company has ever listed. I did that. No one else. It came with a lot of baggage, but we can work with that. One viewing and two offers. Doesn’t that tell you something about the property? You have to help me to help you if we’re going to sell this thing and bring home a couple hundred grand.”

Tina put the cigarette back in the pack without lighting it and stuffed three pieces of Juicy Fruit in her mouth. She slurred around the wad of yellow gum. “There’s another viewing request. A retired couple this time.”

It was as if my blood turned to champagne. Bubbles lifting me. “Excellent! When do they want to visit?”

Tina spat the gum into her Tim Hortons cup. “I’m going to handle it.” She picked up another copy of the beer store listing and shoved it into my hands. “Sell this.”

The ugly photo of the abandoned store taunted me from the page. A hundred and fifty thousand asking. One of three units above the shut-down beer retailer. A poor listing for a poor agent.

No way. I put it back on the desk like it was infected. “Give me the Echo Loon Lake viewing. This is what I’ve been working for my whole life. I literally found the listing while kayaking and sold myself to the owner. Let me show it.”

She gritted her teeth. “I’m not taking your commission. But I’m doing this showing myself. Let things cool off over there. You’ve caused some waves, honey.”

I wanted to cry, but Marla Briggs never cried. I pretended to be clearing something out of my eye. “Do me a favor. Don’t you dare smoke in that house. It is pristine.”

“Here.” She put the apartment listing back in my hand. “Sell this, and then maybe I’ll let you back on the Viceroy. But for now, there’s a couple coming up, and this one’s good. Referred by the Hendersons. Cash sale.”

I blinked. “The Hendersons?” Hadn’t Cheryl told Parker that the Hendersons were moving and she wanted to buy their house with cute wood accents and porch swing? It was her excuse for the whole sale, and it wasn’t real. This could blow up in her face.

Tina went on, chewing on some fresh gum. “Friends of theirs. Old money, moving up from the Bridle Path in Toronto. No children, and they want the quiet. I think they’ll fit in perfectly. I’ve got the viewing set for Monday at one. There’ll be no problem.”

“But—”

“No buts. Take some time off. Get yourself together. And sell this place.” She pointed at the listing. “They’ve added the actual store to it now, too, selling the whole building.” She went to the printer and added another few pages to my pile. “The three apartments up top are all for sale for a

hundred and fifty grand each, and the whole ground floor for half a million.” That vein in her forehead throbbed.

I groaned. But I knew better than to argue. I could tell when I’d pushed someone right to the line, and I’d pushed Tina as far as she’d go. Especially if the nicotine level in her blood was falling.

She pointed a bright purple fingernail in my face. “Give that lake a break.”

Grumbling, I walked out of the brokerage and decided to cool off on foot, heading over to where the beer store sat. Looked like Amos had found another way to keep me off the lake, but I wasn’t going to be bullied or chased off. By anyone.

I’d sell the stupid beer store and then get back to the Viceroy.

The orange sign still hung above the square building. The beer store had once been one of those unavoidable facts of Canadian life. If you wanted beer, you went there. Liquor and wine meant the LCBO. Simple.

Then the government started letting grocery stores sell booze in 2024, and suddenly these little beer stores weren’t quite so necessary.

Like this one. Right on the main strip.

The facade was in decent shape. Huge windows. A big parking lot. The apartments had newer windows. It was a bit of an eyesore positioned right in the core of the downtown strip. Tourists were plentiful in North Bay during the warmer months.

It’d be better as an art gallery or something.

Eureka. My jaw dropped. I was a genius.

What if we changed how this was marketed? Forget selling everything individually. What if it went as a commercial package? A gallery on the ground floor, the apartments upstairs as offices and a place for a resident artist? I knew people in the art business.

Bobb-O and Buffy.

They’d still be talking about moving up north to one of the exclusive lakes. Why not move their gallery as well? Cottage traffic from Toronto to anywhere was brutal.

I took the key out of the lockbox and let myself in, a new kind of excitement ticking at the base of my spine. High ceilings, lots of wall space, the floors in good condition. I loved the exposed HVAC vents and cooling pipes. An industrial feel. This would make a perfect gallery. Most of the old shelving and equipment were already stripped out. Pull the rest, add a few comfortable benches, maybe a little bar in the corner.

My cheeks hurt from grinning.

Forget a million. I'd call the sellers now, just an investment firm from what I'd seen on the listing. As a package deal? Two million. Fifty to a hundred thousand dollars in commission. I could buy Earl's shop back.

And then get back to where I really wanted to be.

Echo Loon Lake.

***

When I returned to Bog Creek, I gasped with delight to see the Sunfire sitting in front of my trailer. A new window where the smashed one had been. It had even been washed.

I opened the door and could smell the new-car scent that Earl used to wipe down all his clients' vehicles. Attention to detail mattered, especially when you worked for organized criminals like the Northern Drillers.

The lights were on in his trailer, and shadows moved behind the curtains. For a moment, I considered thanking him. But I knew Earl. When he was this angry, it was best to give him time to cool off.

Even the interior of the Sunfire had been detailed; the upholstery vacuumed, the empty coffee cups removed, and there was even a fresh can of bear spray in the rear cup holder. Hope flared in my chest. He still cared about me. Might even forgive me.

I didn't deserve it. I had treated him like a second-class citizen.

I climbed onto my trailer to meditate—loving-kindness, gratitude, and good vibes for Earl. After a half-hour of lying on my yoga mat, I used the better 5G from up on the roof and checked online for the hours of Buffy's art gallery. It wasn't hard to find; I remembered seeing the name on the Hummer door. *Buffy on Bellair.* Sure enough, it was open Sunday mornings.

There was no time like the present to visualize it and then to make it happen.

The Sunfire drove like a dream to Toronto. I had to get an early start, because it was a good four or five hours to the Big Smoke. I'd be lucky to miss traffic, but on a weekend, I hoped it would be okay.

Traveling down the 400-series highways to get to the province's capital had my blood pressure up and nerves fried. People drove like maniacs, passing without signaling, tailgating, and general assholery.

After the peace and quiet of Echo Loon Lake, I'd forgotten just how much Toronto could be. I shuddered, even though I'd spent some of my youth here, in some of the shittier parts of the city. One of my foster homes had been in Parkdale. Yorkville was far fancier, and there was plentiful parking. You just had to pay for it. I swiped my credit card at the machine and went into the gallery.

It was your typical retail space in the upscale neighborhood. A narrow, long shop, with only room for a few paintings in the front window, and soft orchestral music droning throughout. Buffy had done a wonderful job with the limited space, and though the walls were crowded, the modern art pieces flowed in a natural way.

A loud laugh echoed from the back, and I saw Buffy, this time in a blue-and-yellow block dress, flitting amongst her customers.

The art gallery owner had seemed too much in Tina's office, but her eccentric, over-the-top personality seemed to work perfectly here. I edged sideways past the statues and sculptures and made my way to her side.

At first, there was no recognition on Buffy's face, but then she smiled, and I was glad I'd worn my best pantsuit, the one with the little horseshoes on it. At least I looked the part: a little eccentric, a little bit wealthy. Exactly the look I wanted as a real estate agent.

"Your name again, dear?"

"It's Marla Briggs from Lake Homes Realty."

Recognition dawned, and the friendly smile disappeared. "You. The one who wouldn't show us the Echo Loon Lake mansion." She tried to scowl, Botox stretching her eyebrows a fraction.

The same expression on her face when she trashed Tina's office. "Some things aren't meant to be," I said gently, putting myself behind a skinny sculpture that looked like a Pegasus mated with a snake.

I doubted Buffy would take a swing at me with some priceless art between us.

She lifted her nose. “Well, we found a place we like even better. In Callander. Close to restaurants and directly on Lake Nipissing. Offer is already in.”

There was a jolt up my spine. Callander was only twenty minutes, tops, from North Bay.

Buffy’s face turned sour again, as if she’d sucked on a lemon. “How was your drive down? I’m not looking forward to that weekend commute from the gallery.”

“Actually, that’s what I came here to talk to you about,” I said. “This is a really impressive gallery, but it’s cramped. Wouldn’t it be nice if you had more room?”

“Space is at a premium in Yorkville.” She tilted her head like a sparrow, her eyes beady and assessing. “What are you suggesting?”

“What if you could have a gallery right in North Bay?”

“That would certainly be more convenient.” Buffy took her time with the word ‘convenient,’ drawing it out like she was tasting it. “Bobb-O does complain about how busy the city’s getting.”

“Do you have a moment?” I brought out my cell phone and held it up to her. “There are some photos I want to show you.”

“Certainly.” She nodded to a young woman, the type who probably modeled part-time. “Here, take over the store, would you, Juanita?”

Juanita nodded.

I followed Buffy into a cramped office with stacks of paintings and sculptures piled haphazardly.

She waved her hand at it. “Never mind the mess. It’s for our next show.”

I licked my lips with growing hope. “I know the space looks a little rough right now,” I said, showing her the photos I’d taken of the beer store. “But look at the potential.”

Buffy took the phone from my hand and flipped through the photos, her fake eyelashes fluttering as she scanned.

“Oh. Oh yes,” she said when she paused on some photos I’d altered with AI to show how it could look with some renovations.

“The refrigeration units and shelving are already gone. And there are empty apartments upstairs that would be perfect for office space and even an artist-in-residence.”

“And where did you say this is? Right on the main drag?”

“Almost across from the real estate office. The one you went to.”

“It looks perfect.” Buffy pressed her puffy, filled lips together. “I’m going to have to talk to Bobb-O about this. But we spent a lot less on the cottage than we thought we would, and our lease here is coming up.”

“It’s a premium offering. Not even available as one unit yet.” I winked at her. “But I can make it happen by way of an apology for not being able to put you into the Echo Loon Lake listing.”

Buffy’s eyes were bright and excited. “I knew there was a reason we didn’t get the Viceroy. I believe that things happen for a reason. And we are buying that lovely place just down the road!”

“So you want to come see it?”

“Don’t need to. I’m a woman who knows what she wants. My intuition is telling me this is perfect.”

I nodded enthusiastically. Buffy was like me, as bizarrely odd as that seemed.

She hit a button on her cell, giving me a wink. “Bobb-O, it’s time for you to retire…”

Seeing myself out, I couldn’t hide my stupid grin. I’d just made a sale.

Gloria Gaynor sang with me on the way home. “I will survive!” My endorphin rush was so intoxicating that I hardly noticed the long drive back.

Sundays were made for religion, and I thanked God and the universe that I seemed to be back on track.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 26

CHERYL

Cheryl was enjoying a peaceful Sunday afternoon on the deck with the latest Freida McFadden thriller. The sun was warm on her skin, the cool breeze scented with pine, the eerie, musical call of the loon…

Parker hadn't come home after his conversation with Amos on Friday night, and that was a relief. How could she look him in the eye after witnessing him cheating? Plus, with him out of the house, she didn't have to worry about being murdered in her sleep.

In general, it was a great day. Narrowly escaping one murder attempt gave her an appreciation of every minute she was alive.

A surprising side effect. She was happy.

She finished the last page of her book, satisfied with the ending. She loved it when women joined forces and overcame evil. Cheryl closed her eyes and relaxed back into the Muskoka chair. Life was better on the dock than floating under it and freezing.

If Parker booked a vacation… She wanted him out of her life. She wouldn't feel safe with him anywhere near her.

Beyond the optics of divorce, the real threat was her novel. It seemed to be on Parker's mind, and Amos would never in a million years allow an exposé on the lake. Not that he had any choice, if she published it, but he was already doing a magnificent job of making her life miserable.

Why? Was Amos implicated in the disappearance of either Sally Dobbin or Jenny Briggs?

Or both?

Researching the lake's history had begun as a lark. Her favorite part of working for the *Toronto Reporter* was the research. Unearthing tidbits of the past to solve a puzzle. She'd nearly had a full exposé on the vaccine scandal when her hard drive had been wiped…

She'd received threats in Toronto but ignored them. No one pulled her off the scent when she found an interesting story.

And the history of Echo Loon Lake was an interesting story. Cheryl didn't have all the pieces yet, but she was a beagle on the trail.

Amos and Parker didn't know who they were messing with. Small dogs could still bite. And she had an unlikely ally in Marla. The real estate agent was tied to this lake in ways Marla didn't even know yet. Cheryl was holding that bit of information she'd gleaned from Glenda like a locked diary. She wasn't sure it was her story to share. Or if it was even true that Henry Henderson had knocked up his cleaning lady and the result was Marla.

Her musings were interrupted by an unusual rattle and banging as a vehicle backed into their driveway and headed down to the water. Violating the HOA rule against driving on the lawn. She got up from her chair and shielded her eyes for a closer look.

Parker was driving the HOA's green pickup truck in reverse, pushing a big white rowboat on a trailer, grinning behind the wheel like a kid who'd just unwrapped the most marvelous gift at Christmas.

He hopped out of the truck and shoved the ridged, wood-accented rowboat off the trailer, holding onto a rope attached to the bow. It hit the water with an enormous splash. Running along the edge, he tied the boat to the dock.

He turned to Cheryl, whose jaw had dropped. "I bought myself something," he said proudly.

"What is that?"

"It's the classic Whitehall seventeen-foot expedition with heirloom-quality construction."

"Okay," Cheryl said. "Sounds like a fancy boat?"

"Practically unsinkable!" He touched the bronze nose reverently. "I'm going to take over Amos's job one day. I need to be the man in the rowboat in the harbor."

"Parker, you don't even like to swim. You're never on the water."

"That's all gonna change now. I see you've already got your bathing suit on. Let's go for a row."

A frisson of fear chased her calm away. She looked at the brand-new boat and the still, quiet waters of the lake. There was no way he'd try to kill

her in broad daylight, was there?

“Come on, Cheryl!” His blue eyes sparkled. It was hard to believe he was the same man who had attempted her murder.

“Are you sure?”

Parker hated the water like a cat. He’d never even learned to swim. Even when he sat on the dock with Cheryl, he kept his feet far from the edge.

“It’s not like I’m going in the lake. This boat is as safe as they come. A sturdy elephant of marine history!”

She didn’t bother to correct his terrible metaphor. “Alright…” She pulled one of the brand-new life jackets from the bottom of the Whitehall and was careful to fit it correctly.

Parker did the same and untied the boat.

As they settled into the teak woodwork benches, her husband kept babbling. “It’s a rowboat that can be converted to a sailboat. We don’t get much wind out here unless it’s stormy, I know. It’ll be mainly for rowing.”

She gave him a tentative smile. “This is so romantic.” She reminded herself to act normal, as if he hadn’t tried to kill her.

Talk about a complicated relationship.

His Scottish brogue sang through his words as he put the oars in the water. “Well, my dame, I’ll be taking you out for a wee jaunt about the lake, I will.”

When her husband wanted to be charming, he sure could turn it on. If he hadn’t been wearing that life jacket, she’d be tempted to push him over the edge. The Whitehall might be unsinkable, but Parker sure wasn’t. The one time he had tried to swim with her, he’d flapped like a panicked toddler and sunk to the bottom. Too much muscle for buoyancy.

Starting with a few awkward swipes, Parker soon found a rhythm. As usual, there was no one else out on the water. Cheryl held the side of the boat in a death grip. Echo Loon Lake would make the perfect setting for a *Twilight Zone* episode. This wasn’t a real community; they were just toys in a giant alien’s playset.

Parker seemed to be genuinely enjoying himself, grinning at her as they lurched through the water, his muscles flexing and bulging under his T-

shirt. The whole scene was surreal.

It was the strangeness of normal. She had to remind herself that the chair hadn't wedged itself underneath the sauna handle, and she hadn't turned it up to a hundred and sixty-five degrees.

Her husband had tried to kill her. That same guy grinning at her. And now she was in the middle of the lake with him. As the clouds passed over the sun, Cheryl shivered. He stopped rowing and wiped some sweat from his brow.

Parker stared at her. "You know, this is the deepest part of the lake, according to Amos."

"Oh," was all she said.

He brightened. "So, tell me more about your novel. Almost done?" He picked up the oars and began rowing.

A question her life could hinge on. Cheryl forced her expression to remain placid. "It's one of those lifelong projects that will never be done. I can't find anything new."

She held his gaze, willing him to believe her.

Though she was nearly done. Just a few more puzzle pieces to fit…

But hopefully, he would report back to Amos that the novel wasn't a threat and life could go back to normal. Even as she had the thought, she knew it wasn't true. Nothing would ever be normal again.

Parker was quiet, so she kept babbling, even though she should shut up. Her nerves were on edge. Even the family of ducks floating by them seemed to sense it, flying away as they passed.

"There's nothing in it that isn't public record. The police here in North Bay are useless. They've changed staff so many times. Most of what I found came from the Toronto Reference Library."

"That's good," he said, finally. "Because, you know, Amos likes to keep this place secret. Nobody wants their dirty laundry aired, Cheryl."

She sensed the double meaning. It was a threat and a promise. Her neck hairs rose, and she snapped back, "Maybe you should get Elena Morgenstein to do your laundry."

All pretense of kindness left his face. He rowed with more vigor, slapping the water. “Be careful, Cheryl. You don’t know who you’re dealing with.”

She wanted to say she had some idea, but this time managed to stay silent. She wanted him to feel some of her pain. He was the root cause of her problems. She tried to think beyond him and couldn’t. He was the source of *all* her problems.

Scowling, he rowed back to shore, like he was battling the lake itself.

As soon as they docked, she grabbed the rope, tied the Whitehall, and tossed the life jacket back in the boat. She never felt so relieved to be standing on their slightly crushed lawn. What was Parker going to tell Amos about that?

Even the mechanic/gardener wasn’t supposed to break the rules.

She paused at the base of the granite stairs. “Are you coming up for dinner?”

“I have to get the truck back to the supply yard.” His face changed, something cold frosting his pale blue eyes. “I’ve got some important business to go over with Amos tonight. I’ll be late. Don’t stay up.”

I wasn’t planning to, she thought. *I’ll be in the bedroom with the door locked and a chair under the knob.*

As she walked up the steps, he called after her, “And I hear we have a showing on Monday.”

She stopped, taken aback. Why didn’t Marla tell her? She cupped her hands to holler back, “That’s tomorrow? Who told you?”

“Amos. Get the house clean, will ya? The housemaid doesn’t come till Thursday.”

Cheryl watched her husband return the HOA’s truck, leaving the new rowboat slapping against the dock. Her brain was a whirl of confusion. How had her peaceful Sunday afternoon been so disrupted?

It made no sense that Amos had set up a viewing of her house.

She immediately texted Marla.

There’s a viewing tomorrow?

She waited for the three dots, hoping her realtor was in a good service zone. She got a quick response.

Yes. Tina set it up.

Cheryl ran her hands through her hair.

???

Marla responded:

I got caught up in another sale, sorry!

Cheryl immediately typed back:

Can you be there tomorrow?

There was a pause, and then the reply:

No.

Cheryl put her phone down and lost all appetite for dinner. Maybe she didn’t have an ally.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 27

MARLA

There was a little guilt for not being there with Cheryl for the Warners' viewing, but Tina would take good care of them. Plus, this beer store/art gallery conversion could be a big sale, which would alleviate a lot of financial stress in my life.

On Monday morning, I got the call at six o'clock, and I scrambled to the roof of my trailer so the reception wouldn't drop. Mental fingers crossed that Buffy was interested in the beer store for her next art gallery.

"We would be delighted to put in an offer," Buffy said, reminding me once again of the mad queen from *Alice in Wonderland*. An imperious command. "I know they're asking two million. We'd like to start at one-point-eight. That's a fair offer."

"Absolutely," I said, careful not to fall off the edge as I danced with glee. "I think it's a very fair starting point. I'll start the paperwork now." This was going to be wonderful. I couldn't wait to let Tina know.

I looked down at Earl's. He was the first person I wanted to share my news with, but they were obviously still asleep. And he might still hate me.

Plenty of time to catch up with him later, so I hopped in my newly tuned-up Sunfire and sped to North Bay. Of course, I took the time to go through the Timmy's drive-through. The wonderful smell of the coffee joined the new-car smell.

I knew my broker would be in the office early. Since her wife died, she practically lived there, so seven-thirty was not too early to get her to draw up sales paperwork.

Tina was initially crabby but took the coffee gratefully. I noticed a nicotine patch on her arm and no cigarettes or chewing gum on her desk.

"Buffy wants to make an offer on the entire beer store! Apartments and all," I blurted.

"Remarkable." Tina's eyes bulged, and she cracked a half-smile. "I knew you could sell the local stuff. There is life beyond Echo Loon Lake, you know."

“There’s just something about that place…” I gave Tina my most winning smile. “So, when’s the next showing?”

“Today.”

Outrage washed over me. I had known this, but it was different hearing it directly and what I considered cavalierly. “It’s my listing. Are you sure I can’t do the showing? I’ve obviously proven I’ve got my real-estate wheels back on.”

Tina shook her head. “No. It’s all set up. Amos still isn’t very happy with you. Like I said, you’ll still get your full commission. I’m just going to show the property. Maybe you can take me out to dinner for it, if it goes through.”

I bit my lip to not keep arguing. It wouldn’t get me anywhere with Tina. “Who’s coming?”

“Friends of current residents. A lovely couple called the Warners.”

I nodded. “Being connected with people already on the lake should help them shoot right through the approval process.”

“That’s right. The Hendersons recommend them highly. Can’t wait to do pickleball doubles.”

My knees almost gave way. If Parker found out that the Hendersons weren’t planning to enter a retirement home, that destroyed Cheryl’s cover story. There would be no cottage for them to move to on the lake. Would he sign the final sale if he had to move out of Echo Loon Lake?

I tried to joke, “And you’re going to make sure the family isn’t in the house this time.”

She rolled her eyes. “Obviously.”

My gooey legs solidified. So there would probably be no way for Parker to find out the Warners were buying to hang out with the Hendersons.

“Give me a moment, let me call the owners of the beer store. I know they are eager to sell. Since the government lease ended, they’ve had no income.” Tina gestured me out of her office, and I paced in the waiting room.

It didn’t take long.

“All right, then,” Tina said, grinning at me. “Congratulations, they’re actually going to take the offer with no sign-backs. That was fast. They didn’t think they’d ever move it, much less for the amount you just got them. Congratulations! Let your clients know.”

“When’s the close?”

“They want a quick close. Thirty days.”

“That should work,” I said, remembering that Buffy and Bobb-O had recently bought a house in Callander. Who wouldn’t want to be up here for the rest of the summer?

Tina drank her now-cold coffee. “All right. Things move fast around you, Marla.”

“Yep,” I said. “That’s what happens when you put your mind to something. It’s called manifesting.”

“I don’t know about that woo-woo stuff,” Tina said, “but I’ll take whatever works.”

Grinning, I floated back to my car. This was it. I was finally living my future and making big real estate dreams. The money was coming in thirty days, and I was going to have almost fifty thousand dollars. I couldn’t wait to tell Earl I was going to be able to get him his shop back.

When I pulled into Bog Creek, I took a few deep breaths to gather my bravery. We hadn’t talked since the night he saved me from the bikers. Time to put on my big-girl panties and make amends.

As I made my way over to his trailer, I didn’t even need to knock. Earl came out carrying a box and put it in the back of the blue Ford. He didn’t look happy. His shoulders were hunched, and then I saw Karen at the door, distraught. She had on one of her fanciest house dresses and her going-out sun hat. She hardly ever left the trailer.

I rushed over. “What’s going on?”

Earl looked at me, his eyes clouded with moisture. Though this wasn’t quite crying, it was as close as I’d ever seen him get.

Karen walked in circles on their little porch. “I don’t know. I don’t know. Why are we doing this? I don’t know.” She stopped and sniffed his poppies in the flower boxes on the edge, then began her circles again. “Why are we doing this? I don’t want to go on vacation.”

“What’s going on, Earl?” I asked again, this time more gently.

He shuffled his feet and finally met my eyes. “Mom finally got her place in one of those special dementia homes. Full care. Government paid.”

“Has it gotten that bad?”

“Yes. Most days,” he said, looking back at his mom, circling in confusion. “We want to get her there while she can still make memories.”

Karen called from the porch. “My son’s moving me out, Marla. My son’s moving me out.”

This was one of her good days. She knew who I was.

“It’s like a big vacation, Mom,” Earl said. “All your meals made. Lots of friends. Even shuffleboard. You love shuffleboard.”

“I do love shuffleboard!” Karen laughed—the old laugh I remembered from my younger days. “I know, honey. It is a good thing. It’s been very hard for you, taking care of me.”

This conversation was killing my heart, and I walked up the steps to her. “Karen,” I said, “why don’t you show me some of your favorite things?”

Earl shot me a grateful look as he slipped by us to grab another box.

“Oh, okay, dear. I’ve unearthed the most marvelous items.” A gleam came into her eye, and I spontaneously hugged her.

When someone you loved had dementia, there were days you had them, and there were days you didn’t. This was, luckily, one of the good days. It could be the excitement of something new.

“Look what I found.” She took my hand and led me to the back bedroom.

Her meager belongings were already in boxes. She’d always kept her wardrobe and her life simple. Karen pulled out a delicate wooden jewelry box and opened it.

I gasped. The pendant was familiar, but I couldn’t quite place it.

She took out a silver necklace with half a pine tree dangling from it. “Do you remember this, dear?”

My breath came faster, and I had to sit on the edge of the bed. Did I remember it? That was my— I held out a trembling hand, and she put the

necklace in my palm.

Karen's voice took on a singsong quality. "This was the necklace, dear, that you used to wear every day."

My breath came a little faster as the memories flooded back. My mother. "That's right. I remember it now. My mother wore the other half."

I stroked the warm silver and heard her voice. Mom's voice, warm and soft. She used to joke that we lived in the forest and were little forest sprites, each of us half of a whole. She wore one side of the pine tree, and I wore the other. She said we were rooted together and would always be connected.

My mother would never have left me. And here was even more proof. I put the necklace on, and it felt right at home on my chest, where it used to hang permanently.

Karen put an arm around me. "You gave it to me when child services came to take you away, honey, and I've kept it safe ever since. For when you came back. For when your mom came back… How is she doing, dear?"

The brightness had dimmed a little in her eyes.

"Um, Mom's fine." There was no point in letting her know she was gone. Dementia was cruel that way. Every tragedy was fresh.

"That's nice." She frowned. "Do you know where my husband is? Is that him out there packing the boxes?"

"No, Karen. That's your son, Earl."

"Right. I'm going on vacation." She gave me a bright smile.

"Yes, you are. Why don't you show me the flowers in the garden?"

I took her out as Earl continued packing things into the truck. Karen pointed out Earl's begonias, sunflowers, and daisies, naming each one. It was a beautiful wild garden—more aesthetic than the ones at Echo Loon Lake, where every plant was so carefully manicured.

The perfume of each flower soothed both of us. Karen giggled when I got some yellow pollen on my nose.

Earl quickly finished loading her things into the back of the truck, helped his mother climb in, and did up her seatbelt.

I took his hands when he came back to me. “Thank you so much. This was far easier with you here.” He folded me into a hug, squeezing me like his old teddy bear.

“You should have just told me,” I whispered into his ear. “I could have helped with the packing.”

“Well, we weren’t really on speaking terms, were we?” He pulled back and held me at arm’s length.

I looked up at him, not sure where I stood. “Oh, thank you for the Sunfire.”

“Couldn’t have you stealing my Ford all the time.”

I nodded at the loaded pickup bed. “Do you want me to come with you?”

“Could you?” He frowned at the single cab. “It might be a bit squishy.”

“That’s okay. I don’t mind being close to you…or her.”

“Good! Karen loves a road trip.”

I gave him my most brilliant smile. “Where’s the home?”

“Luckily, we found one in North Bay so that I can visit often. It’s full care—locked doors.”

I thought about my commission money that was coming in. “How are you affording this?”

He shrugged. “It’s not a problem. Like I said, we’re government-assisted, and the monthly cost isn’t much.”

“That’s good. Well, I have some news for you. I didn’t just sell the apartment above the beer store; I sold the whole damn building.”

“You what? Tell me about it on the way. We have an appointment at half past noon for orientation.”

All three of us got cozy on the leather bench, and we were on our way.

Karen adjusted her hat and patted my leg. “My husband is a very good driver.”

I didn’t correct her this time.

“So, tell me all about it!” Earl said.

“It’s a quick close. My commission’s going to be a good chunk, like fifty grand. I can pay you back for your mechanic shop and maybe help with Karen’s care.”

“No need, but thank you.”

The smile he gave me was genuine. A little bit of the old Earl returning. Karen hummed and looked out her window, not paying any attention to us. This felt like home. My chest warmed, even though the day was tinged with sadness. But Karen would get better care, and Earl would be freed up and not have to stress that his mother would get lost or hurt when he had to work.

“At least let me pay you back for your mechanic shop.”

He frowned. “Did you ever find out who put out the contract?”

“No, but my guess is Parker.”

“It’s gotta be more than that. At least the Northern Drillers can’t be hired again.”

I snorted. “At least there’s that.”

He ground his teeth. “Marla, stay out of that compound.”

“You know I can’t be bullied or intimidated. I have to sell that house, otherwise it was all for nothing.”

Earl sighed as he navigated the tight turn off of the county road to the highway. I slid into Karen.

“Wheeee!” she called, putting her hands over her head.

Once we were zooming down the highway en route to North Bay, Earl said in a low, choked voice, “You did me a favor. I don’t want the mechanic shop back. The weight’s off my shoulders now. That shop was always my dad’s dream. His life, not mine. I’ve always wanted to landscape and garden, and now I can hang out my shingle.”

“You’re a wonderful gardener.”

That was the truth. His trailer could be featured in *Better Homes & Gardens*. Those thumbs of his were pure green.

He laughed and winked at me. “Maybe you can get me into Echo Loon Lake. If you won’t stay out, I better be there with you.”

“Maybe,” I said, smiling. “Let’s visualize that one together.”

“You and your manifestation, Marla.” He shook his head, but he was smiling.

I was silent for a moment. “So, do you forgive me?”

“I can get past it. It’s not like you set out to get beat up by a bunch of bikers. And you didn’t ask me to rescue you.” He took my hand and looked over at his mom. “You and Karen are the only family I have left.”

The familiar grip reminded me of those young days when my mom would come home late, and he would lend me his teddy and hug me in a couch fort. Karen and Earl had always been there for me, and I was glad that, today, I could be there for them.

Goes to show the universe works in mysterious ways. I’d thought it was the worst thing in the world, being pulled off that Echo Loon Lake showing. It turned out to be the best thing that could have happened. I needed to repair this relationship. This time, I had to make sure that I didn’t do anything to damage it. He was right. We were the only family left.

I was needed more here. And for that, I was grateful.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 28

CHERYL

Cheryl had been too tired to clean Sunday night, so she'd frantically run the vacuum around and tidied most of Monday morning.

The viewing wasn't supposed to be until one.

That's why she was still wearing her cleaning apron and rubber gloves at noon when Amos pulled a golf cart into their driveway. He was chauffeuring a short woman in a flowered muumuu.

Cheryl hastily pulled off her cleaning outfit, smoothing her knee-length shorts and slightly wet blouse, and watched out the window.

The woman huffed and struggled to navigate the armor stone on the way to the front porch as Amos drove off. The visitor's hair was pulled up into a gray, messy bun, and she was mumbling to herself as she surveyed the outside of the property.

There was a sharp rap on the door. Cheryl opened it, her eyes wide.

"I'm Tina, from Lake Homes Realty, and I'll be here for the showing today." She gave Cheryl an appraising once-over like a strict schoolmarm looking to deduct demerits.

"Ummm. Okay. Thank you."

"Well, are you going to let me in?"

Cheryl moved aside, Tina entering like a gale-force wind.

The broker looked around. "Well, the place looks great," she said, begrudgingly. "Usually I like to get here early and make sure the house is shown correctly. Turn on all the lights, make sure any shampoos or soaps are off the counters."

She walked up to the oven, where Cheryl's perfectly matched little sailboat hand towels hung. "These should be put away. Nothing on the tables, nothing hanging from the appliances."

"Okay." Cheryl nodded and put the towels in a drawer. "I've already removed everything from all my counters."

Tina hesitated as if reassessing. Had she assumed Cheryl was a cleaning lady? Cheryl didn't like how she was talked down to. "Good. So.

You know you can’t be in the house when they come by.”

“All right.” Cheryl’s grimace suggested she wasn’t comfortable with the idea but accepted it, nonetheless.

Tina realized she needed more of an explanation. Her expression softened. “People want to envision themselves in a home. They want it to be theirs.” She glanced around. “Can you take me on a tour, please? I’ve only seen Marla’s pictures, which were fabulous, but I don’t have a feel for the layout.”

Cheryl led her through the rooms, and Tina opened closets while making strange humming sounds and fingering an unlit cigarette behind her ear. She was all energy, crackling like a bowl of Rice Krispies, her joints popping, her mumbling constant.

Finally, she nodded, hands on strong hips. “Well, the house looks great. Take me to the walk-out basement, please.”

“We call it the game room.”

Downstairs, Tina stopped short in front of the wall where Cheryl had pinned up her research articles. “Oh, no. Didn’t Marla tell you to take those down?”

“They’re part of my work. They go with the history of the place.”

“They need to come down.”

“They’re not coming down.” Cheryl stood between Tina and the wall.

They had a bit of a stare-down, but Cheryl was not going to be pushed around.

Tina dropped her eyes first. “All right, then.” She tromped upstairs, talking over her shoulder. “We need to make the place smell good. Do you have any cookie dough? We could put some baking on.”

“No.” Cheryl patted her flat stomach when she joined her in the kitchen. “I had to give up sugar treats long ago.”

Tina raised her eyebrows, amused. “Well, you can tell I still have a healthy cookie habit.” She laughed. “I need all the sweetness I can get.”

“I can light some vanilla candles?”

“It smells fine.” Tina checked her watch. “It’s time for you to vacate. They should be here in half an hour.”

“I wasn’t given much heads up.” Cheryl shrugged. “Look, I really don’t have any place to go. Perhaps I can sit on the dock?”

Tina gave her a look that showed how little sympathy she had for the problem. “Okay. Suppose that’s the way it has to be. But don’t get involved or talk to them, please. Homeowners think they are helping. They rarely do.”

“Who are these people coming to see my house?” Cheryl let her veneer of niceness drop. “And why did this viewing go through Amos and not myself?”

Tina laughed. “I know who’s really in charge at the lake. I’m sorry. Marla should have relayed the news to you.”

Cheryl’s cheeks flushed. “She didn’t. So, who is coming by?”

“A nice couple called the Warners,” Tina said, having no realization of the effect that one name had on the other woman. “They’re friends of the Hendersons. They want to retire up here and like the community.”

Cheryl’s vision blurred.

Tina nattered on, “There’s good shuffleboard. I hear the tennis club is great. Is there an instructor?”

“There is a tennis pro giving lessons,” Cheryl managed to stammer.

“They like the fact that this is exclusive.” Tina’s tone shifted, grew a little less businesslike. “I lived in North Bay my whole life. I’m familiar with the Echo Loon Lake legacy.”

A rumble came from outside, snapping Cheryl out of her horrified daze.

The golf cart was back in the driveway, this time with an elderly couple in the back seat. But it wasn’t Amos behind the wheel. It was Parker.

Cheryl gasped.

Tina looked at her curiously, as Cheryl descended into pure internal panic. She was no longer standing in a beautiful house on a lake. The windows were bars, and she was trapped in a cage.

Her heartbeat was thundering, and it was hard to breathe. Salvation came in the form of a fairly rude ball of energy and sugar treats standing

before her, jonesing for that cigarette behind her ear.

Parker was hunched over the wheel as he parked, his posture rigid with fury. The elderly couple were talking animatedly to the back of Parker's head; Cheryl guessed they had no idea they were fueling a fire of rage.

He stormed up the front steps ahead of the couple. They followed, fit and spry, exactly the type of people Echo Loon Lake liked to attract.

After throwing the door open, his eyes were full of pure venom. A snake sizing up the meal he was going to engulf and swallow later. Cheryl's bowels went loose.

She excused herself, hurried to the bathroom, and vomited into the toilet. While rinsing out her mouth, her pale reflection greeted her in the mirror. What was she going to do? The cat was out of the bag.

Staying in the bathroom forever wasn't an option.

She walked back to the kitchen like she was walking the gangplank.

Parker spoke in clipped, short sentences to the visitors as he leaned on the granite island. A steady pulse throbbed visibly in his temple. Tina and the couple listened with bewildered expressions.

"I am so sorry. There's been a mistake. We're not looking to sell." He grinned at Cheryl as she came out. "Are we, dear?"

Mrs. Warner tried a half-smile. "I'm confused. Glenda Henderson said this was definitely for sale and…"

Mr. Warner interrupted. "This is a disgrace." He whirled on Tina. "What kind of realtor are you?"

Tina put her hands up. "It is my understanding that it is for sale. We have a contract."

"No, it's not," Parker said, slamming his hands on the counter. The bull was about to charge. Cheryl was familiar with the signs.

She cleared her throat.

Parker's pale, livid eyes focused on her. "I'd like to talk to my wife." His voice cracked with rage. "These are the Warners, dear, who want to see our house because they'd like to move to the same community as their close friends, the Hendersons, who don't appear to be going anywhere. What do you think of that?"

“I have no idea.” A hesitation. “So, the Hendersons aren’t selling?” Cheryl asked. “I thought they were.”

“The house is not for sale. The viewing is called off. Get these people off my property,” Parker shouted.

“This is highly irregular—” Tina started.

“It’s not for sale. You can’t sell it out from under me, no matter how much you’d like to.” He slammed both fists on the island again. “Get out!”

Cheryl mouthed ‘sorry’ to Tina.

Tina hesitated. “I’m not sure I feel comfortable leaving.”

“I’m not going to hurt my wife.” Parker took a couple of deep breaths. “But the house isn’t for sale.” Then he smiled.

It was as if a transformation had come over him from Mr. Hyde back to Dr. Jekyll.

“It’s going to be okay. I was just surprised. We can’t really leave the lake. I work here. I’m sorry for the misunderstanding.” All charm and reasonableness.

The man could act.

Tina shot Cheryl a look. Cheryl just nodded. What else could she do?

“Looks like my husband and I have some things to discuss. Sorry, and thank you for coming.”

“In that case, I’m sorry, folks,” Tina said and pulled out her cigarette, shredding a bit of it on the counter.

“Well!” Mrs. Warner said. “I never.”

“This is your lucky day.” Tina drew herself up to her full stature. “There’s a wonderful cottage that’s just come up lakeside on Lake Nipissing. I was planning to show it to you after this…” Tina’s recovery was quick, but Cheryl was also painfully aware of what it was like trying to sell a property on Echo Loon Lake. Marla being removed as the viewing agent wasn’t Marla’s fault, and now Tina was stained by the Echo Loon nightmare, too.

Tina herded the Warners out the door. The husband grumbled, and the wife clutched her purse. Cheryl watched the three of them climb into the golf cart, the real estate broker behind the wheel.

If only she could scream for them to come back.

Cheryl was alone with Parker, and she kept her eyes downcast and the island between them. Her stomach threatened to toss its contents again.

Parker curled his lips and growled, “So... What’s really going on, dear?”

She swallowed and tried to sound strong. “This marriage isn’t working.”

“The marriage is working perfectly fine. You just have to keep your nose out of things that don’t affect you. Just be a good wife.”

“A good wife!” She brayed with laughter, shocking herself. “Sure. I’m the problem.” She went to the fridge and got a bottle of SpringBrisk, glad to see her hands were steady.

Parker said in a hushed, dangerous tone, “Maybe you should be drinking the water from the lake. I hear it calms people down.”

“Calm me down? I noticed a bunch of my lorazepam is missing.”

Parker waited a beat, his jaw tight. “What are you trying to say, Cheryl?”

She took a deep breath. Not the time to accuse him of attempted murder. She didn’t want to escalate this, despite the rage that burned within. He didn’t need to know she was looking into a divorce. She gave him her sweetest smile.

“Look, I just want to move and start over. This lake is poison.”

As if in agreement, clouds rolled over the sun, making the lake’s surface seem black.

Parker was silent.

Cheryl kept trying. “Let’s move to that new community on Lake Nipissing. You and I, together.” She was lying, but he didn’t know that. She’d rather live in a Turkish prison than stay with him.

“I’m not leaving this place.” He grinned at her. A ghastly smile with zero warmth. “Ever.”

Parker met her eyes, and Mr. Hyde was back.

“So, Cheryl. Why don’t you tell me what’s really going on.”

She decided to counter on the offensive. Time to escalate. “Why don’t you tell me what happened to my sauna?”

“You got drunk, you old lush.”

“I got trapped. That’s what happened.”

“Too sloshed to open the door.” Pure derision laced his words.

Cheryl’s hands trembled with the desire to slash his face. “Yeah? And the chair under the door?”

“Stop changing the subject.”

“What’s the subject?”

“The shit you’ve been up to, wifey dear. Let’s go downstairs, shall we?”

He basically herded her toward the game room, and she was afraid he’d shove her if she didn’t move quickly enough, so she went down ahead of him.

Parker pointed at the pictures on the wall. “You are stirring up things that should be left alone.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Tell me about your novel.”

“Why do you care about my novel? I’m probably never going to finish it. Not at this rate.”

“Nosy, inconvenient women,” he muttered. He went to the desk and kicked it.

She flinched as her typewriter clattered onto the floor.

“Open these drawers, Cheryl.”

“No.” She would stand up to him. This was her space.

He kicked the desk again. A drawer popped open, and Parker’s face went white. And then red.

He pulled out the divorce papers and crumpled them in his fist.

“When were you going to tell me about this, Cheryl?”

She gulped and never felt more alone in her life. Not a single friend. Not a single family member. She could see herself ending up at the bottom

of the lake, and no one would come looking for her. Cheryl stared with her mouth open, unable to form a single word.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 29

MARLA

When we got back to Bog Creek, Earl looked as exhausted as I'd ever seen him in his life. All his usual swagger and attitude were gone, and he drooped outside his trailer, looking again like that little boy I'd known so many years ago.

"It's gonna be so strange," he said, wringing his hands. "Sleeping in there without Karen."

Everything in me went out to him.

"Why don't you bunk in with me tonight?" I said. "It can be a sleepover. Pop some popcorn and watch *The Mighty Ducks* or *Goon*. They used to be your favorite movies, right?"

He grinned at me, his eyes brightening. "I was always a better fighter than a hockey player."

"Not quite true, but you have a wicked right hook." I put an arm around his waist. "As always, I've got your favorite beer chilling in the fridge."

He came in, and we got cozy on my couch. Each of us had a beer, and I snuggled into his side. It felt so comfortable, being here with him. Earl kissed the top of my head, and I looked up at him, meaning to make some wisecrack about the movie.

Instead, our eyes met, and the atmosphere between us changed.

Both our defenses were down, and we'd been in this position before. We'd let our chemistry override our friendship during that brief dating stint before I went for my realtor's license. It had been fun while it lasted, but I couldn't get trapped with the trailer-park boy.

I wasn't better than he was, but I had to move beyond where I came from, no matter what my hormones were telling me.

There hadn't been anyone since him. I was a healthy, twenty-six-year-old woman. I had needs, and Earl still had all the charm and sex appeal that drew me in the first time. His taut, muscled body, those bright blue eyes, and his thick dark hair.

Even if the northern mullet wasn't my favorite hairstyle.

I brushed my fingers over his five-o'clock shadow; he obviously hadn't shaved in a couple of days. I thought it made him look even sexier, although the reason for not shaving—stress—wasn't a good one.

"Marla," he said, his voice strangled.

I leaned forward and kissed him.

And it was...so amazing.

He tasted like the beer he'd been drinking, with mint underneath. When had he snuck off to brush his teeth? I swung my leg over his hips and straddled him so that we were face-to-face. He deepened his kiss, and I didn't care how his breath had become so wonderfully minty any longer. I just enjoyed it.

Earl pulled away for a moment, running a finger along my lower lip, loosening my hair from the ponytail it had been in all day.

"Is this what you want?" he asked.

I was honest, looking into his eyes. "I don't know."

"Do you want me to stop?"

I felt the pressure of his thighs against mine, and I hadn't been this turned on in a long time. He was so incredibly attractive. I'd always wanted Earl. He just wasn't right for me.

I put my hand flat on his chest. "I just can't go there, Earl."

"It's just a kiss," he said in a low, husky voice.

"Yeah. We both know this would be more than just a kiss."

It was so familiar. God, I would have loved to go back to that place, back to all the good times we'd had together. We fit together like two pieces of a puzzle—my rough edges smoothing into his, his into mine.

I shook my head, trying to make him understand. "I just can't do it."

"Why?"

He cupped my face in his hand, looking into my eyes.

"I love you," he whispered into my ear. "I always have."

He knew that was my weakness. I got off his lap and stood up. No sense being more tempted than I already was.

“And I love you, too. But it has to be as a friend. Not as your girlfriend. Not as your wife. I don’t know how to explain it, but if I got back together with you, it would feel like going backward. I need to go forward in my life.”

“That doesn’t make any sense to me,” he said, pouting. “Plus, it’s a little insulting.”

The last thing I wanted to do was upset Earl. I tried again. “If I marry you, it’s going to hold me here. And there are places I want to go.”

Earl sighed. “And where, Marla? Where do you want to go?”

“To Echo Loon Lake.”

“And how’s that working out for you? Didn’t someone put a contract out to put a real hurt on you?”

“We don’t know for sure it came from there.”

“And what other nefarious, controlling HOA cults have you been offending recently?” He gave a rough laugh. “There are worse futures than being with me. Stay away from there.”

I drew myself up, even though I knew there was some truth in what he’d said.

“You don’t know where I’m supposed to be,” I said, a familiar outrage raising the hair on the back of my neck. “The last thing I need is someone mansplaining to me what I should be doing with my life.”

“Oh my God, Marla,” he said. “Don’t do this. Don’t fight with me. Not tonight.”

He was right. He’d just put Karen into a managed facility. It was the worst day for emotional outrage. I settled myself down, taking a few deep breaths, and sat back down on the couch. Making sure to keep at least a foot between us.

“Even if it’s dangerous, I’m drawn to Echo Loon Lake in ways I can’t even explain. My mother worked there. Jenny, right?”

“According to Karen, yes, that was her job when she disappeared.” Earl inched a little closer, taking my hand. “Every Thursday at Echo Loon Lake. She cleaned in North Bay the rest of the week.”

I rested my head on his shoulder, the sexual tension between us thankfully doused. “I feel like I’m tied to that community, probably because of my mother. I don’t think she ran away.”

He squeezed me in a sideways hug. “So, it’s about more than the big commission.”

“If I’m there, in the community, maybe I’ll understand what happened to my mother. She didn’t just leave me, Earl.”

“No, I don’t believe she did, either. Something happened that day in 2008 that stopped her from coming home.”

“And I need to go forward. I need to find out why. I need to be at Echo Loon Lake.”

“I don’t like it, Marla.” He squeezed me even harder. “I understand it. But that doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

We watched the rest of *Goon*, and he stayed on the couch when I finally crawled into bed.

***

I woke up Tuesday morning to the scent of frying bacon and wondered where Earl had gotten the food. He must have gone back to his own trailer, because my fridge was empty. I’d basically been subsisting on Tim Hortons’ donuts and chicken wraps.

“Hey, sleepyhead,” he called from the kitchen.

I got up, yawning, and pulled on one of my hoodies and a pair of cutoff sweatpants shorts. The smell of chicory coffee made my mouth water, and I gratefully took the cup he handed me.

Earl looked adorable with tousled hair and pillow lines marring his cheek. “So, what are we manifesting today?”

“Same thing we manifest every day, Pinky. Trying to take over the world.”

He laughed as he stirred the eggs he was scrambling. “I miss our Saturday-morning cartoons.”

“I know!”

He served me a platter of breakfast and sat across from me at the little table with his own fry-up. “So, it’s not the right time for us?”

I ate a bite of salty, delicious bacon and egg on toast. “It’s never the right time.”

He paused mid-chew and winked at me, speaking with a full mouth, “I know Linda wouldn’t mind getting together again with me.”

Earl was trying to make me jealous, and it was working. “That hussy you met at the coffee shop?” Even as I said it, I knew it wasn’t fair.

“She’s not a hussy.” He pointed his fork at me. “I can’t wait for you forever.”

“I know. So stop waiting. I want you to be happy.”

He blinked at me, and I knew I’d done it again. I had to stop hurting Earl’s feelings.

“Look, you are the most important and stable relationship in my life. I can’t frig that up. You are too valuable just as you are.”

“Pricelessly sexy,” he said.

I groaned and threw a crust of toast at him. “I’m going to sell that Viceroy and hopefully figure out what happened to my mom.”

“Not that you’ll listen,” Earl tried again. “I want you to just stay away from there.”

“Yesterday, you wanted me to get you a gardening job.”

“Only so I could be near you with a shovel, in case something goes wrong.”

“Sir Earl, riding to the rescue with fertilizer and a really sharp rake.” Okay, so I’m not always funny.

“Anyway, I’ve gotta go.” Earl ignored my attempt at gardening humor and took our dishes to the sink. “I’m interviewing a client at the new development in Callander. Lots of buyers looking for landscaping.”

“My newest clients just bought there.”

“Lots of rich, wealthy people moving up from Toronto to that new place. Gonna be gorgeous.”

“I’m gonna have to check it out,” I said. “Maybe I can help sell more units.”

He pointed at me. “You do that. Stay away from gated communities.”

Earl left before I could demand he stop telling me what to do.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 30

CHERYL

The tennis racket was still clenched in her hand when Cheryl awoke from a sweaty, nightmare-filled sleep. Parker kept most of his tools locked away at Amos's boathouse, so next to a kitchen knife, the racket was the most lethal thing she could think of. But she'd been afraid she'd slice up their four hundred thread count Egyptian cotton percale sheets with one of their chef's knives.

As the morning sun streamed in through the blinds, she could laugh at herself. What was she going to do? Swat her husband to death like an oversized fly? A mosquito buzzed by her ear, and she squished it, wishing she could do the same with her problems. Parker wasn't going to be calmed this time with a nice beef dinner and a sweet smile. That had been abject fury darkening his normally pale blue eyes when he found the divorce papers.

The way he gripped the stapled package in his fist…

The dent in her writing desk from the vicious kick…

Thankfully, her Hermes typewriter had survived the indignity of being catapulted to the floor.

As she unwedged the chair she'd tucked under her bedroom doorknob, Cheryl kept an ear out for sounds of someone else stirring in the house. Perhaps Parker snoring on the couch. Nothing. Just the chirping of the crickets and the trill of a few doves through the screens of cracked-open windows.

She contemplated taking one of those chill-out pills from her bathroom cabinet, if Parker had bothered to leave her any after dosing her wine for the sauna incident. A bit of numbness might be welcome, and she turned to go back to the ensuite. And paused, reconsidering. She needed her full faculties and an extra dose of awareness to tackle whatever her husband planned to throw at her next. Straightening her back, she decided not to drug herself to survive the day. Instead, she crept down the stairs with the tennis racket held high over her shoulder, ready to backhand any intruder, known or

unknown. Relieved when she didn't have to grand-slam anyone into submission, she put the racket on the counter and made coffee.

Her phone buzzed with a text from Marla.

How did the showing go?

Cheryl's shoulders sagged. Marla clearly hadn't talked to Tina yet. She sent back an unhappy-face emoji.

Uh oh. I guess we should strategize?

Cheryl thought about it for a moment. She could use some company, and she liked Marla's energy. It might pull her out of this funk. Next to writing, what was her favorite thing to do? She sent a quick message back.

Come over and play some tennis.

Marla sent back a laughing-face emoji.

I'm no good.

No judgment. When can you get here?

One hour. I need a racket, if you can spare one.

Cheryl, feeling buoyed, got dressed, ignoring her whites and pulling on casual terrycloth shorts and a light pink tank top. A quick brush of mascara and some blush freshened up her face. She practically skipped down the path to meet Marla at the gate with two rackets. The sun was shining and her husband hadn't tried to kill her last night, so all in all, it was turning out to be a good day.

She stopped for a moment to contemplate how low she had set the current bar. Husband didn't kill her, so it was a good day. She snorted and continued her walk to the gate.

The agent was just pulling her Sunfire into the community parking when Cheryl arrived. Marla was dressed in cutoff denim shorts and a plaid tank top, tied into a knot at her belly, like an upper-class Daisy Duke.

"I don't have any tennis gear, so I hope this outfit is okay?"

"You look adorable, and it's perfect."

Cheryl gave her a hug, which was funny, considering their more strained professional relationship. But it felt right, and Cheryl breathed in the faint smell of bacon clinging to Marla's hair.

The younger woman pulled back and studied her face. “Are you alright? You look like you didn’t get much sleep.”

So much for the makeup hiding the bags under her eyes. “To call the viewing a disaster would be understating it.” Cheryl began walking down the road to the courts.

“You aren’t supposed to be in the house during viewings,” Marla admonished. “That was my mistake the last time. So, how do you know?”

“The clients showed up early, before I got out of the house.” Cheryl put some extra emphasis on the next bit. “And so did Parker. He crashed the viewing. Basically caused chaos.”

Marla fell into step beside her. “Did Parker sleep with a real estate agent again?”

“What? No. There was no buyer’s agent.” Cheryl laughed, a genuine gut-busting roar that felt good. “The Warners just showed up with Tina.”

“Don’t tell me he slept with Tina.” Marla also began laughing, her ponytail bobbing.

“No, though wouldn’t that be a sight?” Cheryl mock-whispered, “I get the sense Tina plays for the other team.”

“She does. Your gaydar is operating at peak efficiency.”

“At least something is.”

They rounded the bend of the lake, walking past a few more of the cottages, waving to residents sipping morning drinks on their porches. A crow scolded them from a nearby pine, as if their frivolity was disrupting his guard.

Marla touched Cheryl’s elbow. “So, tell me what happened at the viewing?”

“Well, the buyers were friends of the Hendersons…” Cheryl began and then trailed off, remembering that she’d told Marla that she wanted to buy their smaller cottage. That the whole move was about downsizing.

“It’s okay,” Marla said, though it clearly wasn’t. “When Tina told me that the Warners wanted to retire at Echo Loon and join their friends, it reinforced what you’d already told me.”

Cheryl stared across the lake at the Hendersons' perfect log cabin, fully visible from this part of the path. It was shaded by the magnificent pine trees scattered on the generous plot of land with waterfront access, like nearly all the properties in the Echo Loon Lake community.

Marla remained quiet, all joking abandoned. The expression on her face was pinched.

"Sorry for the lies. I've forgotten which ones I've told to whom." Cheryl sighed. "I need to get out of my marriage, and the HOA doesn't like any domestic drama."

"So, what would they do?"

"Make my life very, very difficult."

"After meeting Amos, I can understand that." Marla nodded. "But that still doesn't explain how the viewing went sideways?"

"Parker figured out who the Warners were, that the Hendersons weren't moving, and kicked them out."

"Oh…" Marla slowed down, tapping her racket on her chest. "That's not good."

Cheryl used her fingers to count. "Tina wasn't happy. Parker wasn't happy. The Warners weren't happy. Yup. A shitshow. That means I'm batting a thousand when it comes to showing disasters."

Marla let that go because it was true, but there was nothing anyone could do about it. "So, Parker isn't on board for selling anymore?" He was never really on board. They both knew it.

"That's putting it mildly!"

Marla was quiet for a moment and then almost whispered, "So, the Viceroy is off the market?"

She felt a pang of empathy for the agent, her chest tightening. She was getting the impression that Marla needed a good sale. There was the ancient Sunfire she was driving now. Marla must have borrowed the show truck she first arrived in. And those terrible knockoff high heels she'd worn on the first day… Cheryl had gently replaced them with the real thing, hoping the woman hadn't taken it as a slight.

She took Marla's hand and squeezed it. "I'm still hoping to convince Parker that we need to sell. It's the only way to a clean split."

Marla nodded, but lagged a bit, dragging her sneakers through the cedar chips on the path. The only conversation came from a chipmunk chirping from the base of a pine.

They reached the mid-apex of the lake community and paused at the picture-perfect tennis courts. The activity center had a gob-smacking view from the top of the lake. The iron gates at the base looked like Lego-sized toys.

Marla moaned, and this time it was with appreciation. “This is absolutely gorgeous.”

“I know,” Cheryl said. “And you should see the tennis pro who teaches a few times a week.”

“Delicious?”

“Delightfully so.” Cheryl waggled her eyebrows. “Let’s hit the court, shall we?”

It was a beautiful day, not too warm, and eleven o’clock was the perfect time for a set. Cheryl slipped on her sunglasses and took the side facing the sun. Marla took up her spot on the other side of the net, and Cheryl sent over a light underhand serve.

As if she truly was Daisy Duke, Marla swung at the ball, missed completely, and spun in a circle. “Told y’all I can’t play!”

Cheryl sent another over, this time letting it arc high into the sky. “You weren’t kidding! Keep your eye on the ball.”

This time, Marla managed to hit it but drove it into the green surface inches from her sneakers.

“Let’s get a little closer.” Cheryl moved a few feet from the net and noticed Marla’s face was pink, a blush crawling up her neck. “Don’t feel bad. You’ll get the hang of it. Ignore everything and say to yourself, hit. That’s all you need to do. Hit. Reduce the complexity to one single thing.”

She sent another gentle volley over, and Marla managed to hit it back. They got a rhythm going, sending the ball back and forth with firm pops and thwacks.

Marla asked, “Couldn’t you leave the lake and let Parker stay?”

Cheryl hit the ball a bit harder. “Why should I be the one who has to leave my own home?”

The agent sliced back, running across the court. “I thought you wanted out.”

“I do, but I don’t want him to win.” She had to strain to make the next hit, impressed with Marla’s learning curve. “You’re getting this!”

Trying a backhand and missing, Marla said, “You spoke too soon.” As she retrieved the ball, she called over the net. “So, you don’t want to leave Echo Loon Lake?”

“I’m conflicted,” Cheryl said. “This place is beautiful, and the rules are annoying. But when you look at everything else going on in the world today, forced civility might not be the worst thing.”

Marla started another volley. “Is your husband being civil?”

“That’s not the word I’d use.” Cheryl fired the ball back, aiming for the far back corner.

Marla ran for it but missed. “Getting a little competitive?” She tripped and almost fell.

Cheryl cringed, reminding herself to dial back the power. “Can’t help it! It’s my nature.”

Marla wiped her brow. “I need a water break.”

They retired to the side of the court, and Cheryl took a couple SpringBrisk bottles from her bag. “Here.” She took a deep gulp and then wiped her mouth. “We should have picked Thursday to play. Then you could have met Chad.”

Marla drained half her bottle and then asked, “And he is?”

“The hot tennis pro I mentioned earlier. I take lessons every Thursday.”

“I need lessons. I told you, tennis is not my sport.”

“What is your sport?”

“Kayaking. Cornhole.” Marla feigned tossing a beanbag. “I’m a toss master.”

“Better than being a tosser!” Cheryl blinked. “Oh, there’s a cornhole set up just above Amos’s place.”

Marla collapsed onto the grass and looked up at the other woman. “How long does it take to develop tennis elbow?”

Cheryl sat next to her. “More than one game, I think.”

“So, have you gotten any further with your novel?”

“Well. The more I research, the more questions I have. But I feel like I’m getting close.”

“Are you sure the HOA is going to want the stories out there?”

“They don’t control everything,” Cheryl replied, wondering how much her husband had shared with his boss. “But it’s mostly history. Nothing that isn’t already in the public record.”

“Have you found anything new about the disappearing women? Jenny Briggs?”

“They were able to declare Sally Dobbin dead, since she never reappeared after seven years, but…”

Marla finished the sentence. “But they never declared Jenny Briggs dead. Just missing.”

Cheryl put her hand over Marla’s. “I’m so sorry. I know it must be tough not knowing what happened to your mother.”

“And I never knew my father. Though there are rumors.”

“Rumors?” Cheryl leaned forward.

“That my mother got knocked up by one of the rich assholes here and that’s who bought her the lot in Bog Creek Park.”

Cheryl heaved a sigh. It wasn’t her place to share Glenda Henderson’s suspicion that her husband was Marla’s father. And she didn’t even know if it was true. Rumors only served to keep Echo Loon in the cesspool of civility.

They both gazed out at the lake, watching a family of Canada geese swim in single file by the shoreline.

“Those birds are cute but can be so aggressive.” Marla smiled and changed the subject. “You know, there’s a wonderful new place going up in Callander. You might want to look at the development there.”

“Maybe.” Cheryl got up and wiped a few blades of grass off her hands. “But the more Parker pushes me, the more I want to stay. How does spite sound as a motivator?”

Marla hopped up as well, a pinecone stuck in her ponytail. “So, what are we gonna do about your house?”

Cheryl pulled it out for her. “I think the viewings are off for now. I can’t have Parker sabotaging every showing or going full bone-fest in the basement. We’ll have to come up with another plan.”

“Tell the universe what your ideal outcome would be.”

Cheryl surprised herself with the harsh bray she gave. “What, that Parker magically disappears from my life? Never to be found again?”

Marla walked back up to the path, her shoulders tense and movements jerky.

Cheryl trotted after her. “I’m sorry, that was insensitive.” Damn it, they’d just been talking about her mother doing the exact same thing. She bit her tongue and promised to think before talking.

“It’s okay.” Marla bit her lower lip. “There may be a better solution.”

They walked at a brisk pace along the lake path, past quiet cottages with expensive cars parked in the crushed stone drives.

“Maybe I should move out. Just temporarily.”

“How would that work?” Marla asked, her voice bright again. “You could rent a place in the new Callander development. Get you out of this hotbed of nastiness while things get sorted out. You’re on the deed. It’s not like he can sell the place without you.”

“That’s true.” She tapped Marla on the butt with her racket. “Does the development have courts? You could certainly stand to learn a better game of tennis.”

“Yes, they do. I’ll make you a deal. You teach me tennis; I’ll teach you cornhole.”

“That’s the best offer I’ve had in a while.”

“I should get going,” Marla said. “I’ll start sending you some listings; see what you think.”

“Okay. It’s a plan.”

“I’ll be back tomorrow,” Marla said when they approached the gate.

Cheryl was relieved to see the Sunfire hadn’t left a dollop of oil on the parking space this time.

She was in enough trouble with the HOA.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 31

MARLA

I was humming along to *The Chicks* as I pulled up to the Echo Loon Lake gate, singing about two women who were the best of friends. The sky had that special kind of light that happened during the late afternoon in summer. A luminosity to the clouds as the rays of sun descended toward the horizon. It was later in the day than I'd wanted to arrive, just after four, but I got caught up talking to Buffy and Bobb-O. They were making final arrangements for their new waterfront purchase and wanted to show me all the amenities.

The card got me in, the gates swinging open like the Red Sea for Moses, and I felt that little spark of serotonin in my brain. I belonged to an elite group of people with access.

That tennis session with Cheryl had been a lot of fun yesterday, and I was excited to show her the listings I'd gathered for the rentals at the new Callander development.

She could easily get a short-term lease while she sorted out the Parker situation.

The clouds had completely covered the sun by the time I parked. It was a wise choice to put on a power outfit. The new Louboutins and my best pantsuit. Yes, the one with the horseshoes. The first thing I saw when I climbed out of the car was Amos. I'd let Cheryl see a flash of the old me yesterday, and maybe that was a mistake. There were a few flashes of empathy in her expressive hazel eyes, and I didn't want anyone feeling sorry for me.

When it came to the harbormaster, what I really wanted him to show was respect.

So when he knelt at my feet, I literally gasped. Until I figured out he was checking under my car. For oil leaks, no doubt. Cheryl had told me about the fine she got before Earl fixed up my ride.

Not that I offered to pay the fee.

Amos got up, looking like a kid who lost the fat panda bear by failing the pop-the-balloon game at a local fair. The man wanted to find a drip.

He had an old ballcap emblazoned with Nipissing Outfitters and touched the brim. “Marla Briggs.”

I recognized the way he said the name. This was the tinny voice on the other side of the gate. The one who repeated my name with recognition and then refused to let me in.

Well, you uptight creep, look at me now.

Amos whistled, like I was a dog, and nodded toward the path. He wanted me to follow him as he walked away. I did. It’s not like there was any other direction to go. Just like Cheryl had mentioned, there was a cornhole game set up on the lawn. When he reached the crest of his cabin, the boathouse a few feet below us, he stopped and put his hands on his hips.

They say the best defense is a good offense. At least in Earl’s hockey circles.

“You knew who I was the first day.” I said this as a fact. Not a question.

Amos raised his thick eyebrows and pulled a toothpick out of a pocket to chew. And said nothing. The guy acted like he was in his seventies, but I could tell, especially this close up, that there was no way he was even in his fifties.

I repeated myself, “You knew who I was.”

Once again, he didn’t answer, instead picking up a beanbag lying in the grass near one of the boards, testing its weight in his palm.

“I knew the name was familiar. I knew your mother, you know.”

I also picked up a bag, slamming it back and forth between my hands. “And what happened to her?”

“She was a very beautiful woman.” He looked out at the water now, not at me. “And a few of the men around this lake noticed.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

He didn’t answer that. “Did you ever find out who your father was, Marla?”

“Wait.” I looked him up and down. He was too young to be my father, or was he? “Are you saying you’re… Is that your hand going up?”

“No. Of course not.” He tossed the bag; it landed short of the board. “She could have run off with one of the men here. Or even a woman. One of the homeowners disappeared around the same time.”

“Rumor or fact? What’s your source?” I tossed my bag, and it went into the center hole. Like I’d told Cheryl, I was a great tosser, even in high heels.

Amos rubbed his hands together, dust from the bag falling from them. “These waters are still and deep, and they hide their secrets. Maybe your mother is doing the same. Maybe she’s living a life somewhere else.”

I picked up another bag and resisted the urge to toss it at his groin. Instead, I threw an airmail shot that sunk through the hole without touching the board. “My mother would never leave me. What game are you trying to play, Amos?”

I put my hand to my neck and grasped my half of the pendant. His eyes flicked to it. I saw his eyebrows lift, just a little.

He checked his watch. “It’s almost five,” he said. “It’s time for you to leave.”

“I’ve got half an hour. And the five o’clock rule is ridiculous.”

“Look. This place isn’t logical. Echo Loon Lake is a reminder of the past. It’s a shield from change. It’s a place where you can rely on things being the same. Always.”

“That’s not real life, Amos.”

“Who says this isn’t? We’ve been like this for twenty years. More, so I hear. Anyways, we make our own laws here. This is an unincorporated area. Our bylaws. Our governance. We can do what we want.”

Did Cheryl have that tidbit incorporated into her novel? She probably did.

Amos looked over my shoulder. His dark expression turned even more thunderous. “Damn Parker.”

I spun and saw a bonfire raging at the Calders’. Shooting six feet above the pit, the flames licked at the overhanging pine trees. Two figures stood dangerously close.

“The fire is way too damn high,” he growled and pulled out a walkie-talkie. “Every firepit has to be ten feet from the nearest tree. No bigger than

four feet across. And the flames aren't supposed to go any higher than three feet."

As if agreeing with Amos, a loon called from across the lake.

"Well, that's a reasonable rule, at least."

Amos was clicking his handset. "Parker, come in. PARKER!"

Nothing. Parker was not answering. "Goddamn it." The harbormaster seethed, his jaw tight and a pulse throbbing below one ear.

Then I gasped, pointing at the water. A cluster of kayaks and canoes left some of the docks simultaneously, heading out across the lake. "What's that?"

"That's for our emergency HOA meeting. Meant to start precisely at five."

"Emergency? Like what? For an oversized fire?"

"No. Just when we have special business we need to confer on." He was visibly agitated now. "This is one of those times. And you're not a member of Echo Loon Lake. It's time for you to leave." He took a deep breath. "I'd ask Parker to escort you out, but he seems otherwise engaged—obviously enjoying an oversized bonfire with his wife."

"And they aren't members of the HOA?"

"Not everyone who lives here is a member of the HOA. But everyone who lives here abides by the rules."

The kayaks were converging on the harbormaster's dock now. It looked surreal, like an aquatic roulette wheel, each boat gliding toward the center.

"It's time." He glowered at me.

I didn't move.

He smiled, an evil, cruel grimace. "I don't think the Calders are going to be selling. There's no more need for your services here. Your keycard, please." He held out his palm.

"Well, I think I want to speak to my client first about that."

He gripped my wrist, and I couldn't help flinching. He was strong and not being gentle. "Your card. I am hereby revoking your ability to sell property here."

I pressed my lips together. But what choice did I have? I'd have to call Cheryl tomorrow and sort this out.

"Can I check on her? That's why I came. I have something to give her."

"She's fine. You can see her right there." He squeezed my wrist a little tighter, but this time, I refused to flinch. If he didn't let go in a microsecond, I was going to stomp on his foot with one of my very expensive heels.

He released me, but there was no getting by him. And it was true, Cheryl seemed to be fine, standing motionless in front of the fire as the flames burned even brighter.

"I have a meeting to oversee," Amos said. "I trust you will leave."

He held his hand out, and I reluctantly pulled out my card and placed it in his palm. There went my exclusive access. I was one of the plebs again.

A stream of people was gathering on his dock now, but I couldn't make out individual faces. Defeated, but not beaten, I went back to my car.

I'd return even if I had to scale that spiky fence again.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 32

CHERYL

This was the single worst moment of Cheryl's life. She stood frozen, even as the heat from the fire scorched her face. Parker was burning her novel. All that work. Every one of her lovely words, painstakingly tapped into her Hermes typewriter. Up in smoke.

She wanted to launch herself into the wicked orange flames and grab the charred pages. Try to reassemble them, save something. Anything!

But Parker had a firm grip on her bicep, his hold part of what prevented her trembling knees from giving way.

"Parker, stop…"

He gave her a little shake. "Shut up, Cheryl."

There was a maniacal grin on his face. The bastard was enjoying every minute of this. He stirred the fire with a stick he held in his other hand to make sure each page burned. How had she ever loved this man?

"Why…"

He interrupted. "This is for your own good."

The fire crackled and smoked as it consumed another chunk of paper. The edges curled, burning from the outside in. The tales of mines, missing women, and community discrimination became blazing particles and then nothing as they dissipated above their heads.

Regret, sharp and icy, stabbed at her brain. She'd thought she was so clever. Keeping her work out of the digital sphere. Safe from hackers. Off-line. Fancying herself like a turn-of-the-century journalist. Writing explosive truths on a manual machine to drop like a nuclear bomb when the time was right.

Her husband never paid any attention to what she'd been doing or expressed any interest. He thought of it as a hobby, asking off-handedly how her "little book" was coming. Cheryl had been lulled into a false sense of security that he didn't think it important besides something that whiled away the time. It was her project while Parker grew flowers, felled trees,

and bedded lonely housewives. She had looked the other way and concentrated on her research.

Now she had nothing but ash and remorse.

The flames licked higher and higher. Way too big for the HOA's fire regulations. But what did Parker care? The rules never applied to the alpha males. He was a caveman. But he wouldn't best her. As her work went up in smoke, a new resolve melted the ice of horror in her heart. Cheryl had been contemplating allowing Parker to stay in the Viceroy while she rented someplace else. At least until the divorce went through.

She'd even gone to visit that development Marla had told her about in Callander earlier today. It was right on Lake Nipissing and genuinely lovely. All new builds with fantastic views and a friendly community.

But it just wasn't Echo Loon Lake.

Callander was an actual town, with tourists and traffic. The odd drunk staggering down the street, rough sorts hanging around the corners, and over-sugared kids screaming at the beach. It had a completely different feel than the peace and magic of this lake.

Cheryl tilted her head up as the ash of charred paper rained down on her face. Through the process of her research, she had become more connected to the lake. The tales, living, breathing things that became embedded in her imagination. Every time she dove into the water, she absorbed its essence and life through her pores. A trace of the lake on her always. The very minerals of the place lingering in her bones. Even the loon that called from the shallows was speaking directly to her. Joining her in grief.

This was her home.

Even though the new development was lovely, she wasn't going to be run out of the house she'd come to love. Its very existence spoke of the courage of Sally Dobbin. The woman who wouldn't abide by rules that contradicted her vision of her dream home.

Visiting Callander had clarified things for Cheryl. She'd hopped back into her Range Rover and driven back to Echo Loon Lake, determined to keep the Viceroy. Let the HOA be offended by her divorce. Screw 'em.

She pulled through the gates at half past four and noted the Sunfire parked in the visitor spot. Cheryl wondered how she was going to break it to Marla that she no longer wanted to lease another home. As she drove around the first bend, she saw the real estate agent talking with Amos on his lawn and, of all things, playing cornhole.

Cheryl slowed down and watched as Marla sunk a bag with ease into the slanted board. Amos took a turn and missed. Neither of them noticed her.

Maybe Marla and Amos were becoming friendly, which could only help Cheryl's cause. The HOA harbormaster could be charming when he wanted to be, as surprising as that sounded, but only when he wanted something. When she'd interviewed some of the long-time owners here, the consensus had been that his father, Harold, had been a far harsher taskmaster. In fact, rumor had it he'd retired somewhere near Mattagami because even Echo Loon hadn't been remote enough for him. She didn't want to live in North Bay, and she certainly didn't want to live in some gated community in the little town of Callander, just south of North Bay. Or the wilds of Mattagami. Echo Loon was her home.

Pulling into the driveway, Cheryl sighed, sat back, and admired the tall, glass house she was going to fight for. It felt good to be home.

Exiting the car, she first smelled the smoke and then noticed the bonfire roaring down by the lake. Way over the three feet or less dictated by the HOA. But her manuscript was excellent fuel.

Now here she was. Standing by the most depressing bonfire of her life as the burning paper made her cough, and her face cooked from the heat.

She should have stayed home today. Maybe she could have prevented this. But shoulda, coulda, woulda. Going backward was not possible.

Cheryl wrenched her arm from Parker, and he let her go this time. There was nothing she could do now. There were no pages left to save.

She wanted to cry.

She wanted to scream.

She wanted to punch him.

But she did none of those things.

She simply stood there, numb.

“I know you don’t have a backup,” Parker said when the fire burned low enough to talk. “I remember all your rants about cybersecurity.”

She fought to speak with a thick tongue. “I understand the divorce papers, but why the novel?”

He kept his eyes on the fire. It was settling down to a constant crackle now that the paper fuel was gone. “I did it for you.”

She gritted her teeth, clenching her hands together so she didn’t slap him. “Pardon me for not understanding how destroying my book was you doing me a favor.”

“Are you sure there are no other copies?”

Cheryl whispered, “Yes, I’m sure.”

She felt sick. Absolutely nauseous. It was on her to-do list as soon as the book was done. A plan to take the pages into North Bay to get a photocopy at one of the office supply stores. This wasn’t about their marriage. This was about making sure no secrets ever got told.

“So, Amos told you to burn my book.” She said it flatly, with no emotion.

Parker shook his head. “No, I never said a word.”

Cheryl snorted.

“Look, we’re married. What you do reflects on me. I knew you were researching the lake, but I had no idea how deep you were going. It’s safer just to burn it.”

“So you read it?”

“Enough to know I had to get rid of it.” He put his hands on his hips and faced her. “If I hadn’t found those divorce papers, I wouldn’t have known.”

“You never once paid attention to what I was writing. You never paid attention to me at all.”

“So, you went right to divorce, my beloved wife? No counseling? Maybe discussing an open marriage?”

She snarled at him. “It’s not like you talked to me before burning my book!”

“How could I? You weren’t here today.”

“I was shopping in Callander.”

“Yeah? Or were you looking at real estate down there?” He smiled thinly. “Don’t think I don’t know about the new development. I heard Tina tell the Warners about it.”

“I like to explore options.”

Parker allowed his Scottish brogue to flavor his next insult. “A wee lass like yourself should explore less.” He stared at her, his voice returning to normal. “And you should keep your nose out of other people’s business. That includes Echo Loon Lake’s history.”

“Parker,” Cheryl said through gritted teeth.

“Like the pages of your book. Charred, forgotten history.”

She stood there hugging herself, and she had never hated her husband more than she did in that moment. It wasn’t as though she could push him into the fire. Cheryl took a deep breath, deciding that she could slap him, when she saw a bunch of kayaks and a canoe or two launch simultaneously from private docks arrayed along the water, like swans swimming as one away from the shore.

Her hand paused in midair.

It was surreal, watching them converge on Amos’s dock.

“What’s that?” she asked. “In the years we’ve been here, have you ever seen the like?”

“No, but I’ve heard of this.” Parker took a step toward the shore. “That’s an emergency meeting of the HOA committee. And I wasn’t even invited.” He checked his phone. “I missed a call. Damn it.” He clicked on the walkie-talkie app they used around the HOA. “Parker here. Is there an HOA meeting? Over.”

A dead silence came back through the speaker for a few moments.

“Parker, you’re clear. You’re not invited to this one.”

“Why?”

“You’re in violation of our firepit rules. Your household will be levied a fine. In the meantime, don’t worry about the meeting. Just clean up your mess at home. Amos out.”

This time, it wasn't fury on Parker's face. He looked like every child who'd ever been left on the sidelines of a sports team—picked last or not at all.

"I wonder what that's about." Cheryl felt the old curiosity itching her journalistic bone. "Did you tell Amos you found divorce papers? You know this community doesn't suffer divorce easily."

"Damn you, Cheryl."

"They're probably having a meeting about us right now. Divorces are messy."

Parker picked up the bucket of water sitting beside the fire and doused the flames. The pit was engulfed in white smoke as it hissed like an outraged snake.

Clumps of wet, balled pulp stuck to the logs. All that was left of her passion project. If she hadn't been an inconvenient woman before, she certainly was now. It was even possible the HOA was having a meeting about her.

Her kidneys ached, as if she was anticipating a kick.

"I'm going over to…" Parker started.

"Elena Morgenstein's," Cheryl finished for him. "Yeah. I get it."

Parker double-checked that the fire was out and then headed out on foot to his mistress's cottage.

Cheryl sighed, walked down to the dock, and sat in her chair to watch the late-arriving canoes and kayaks glide silently across the water. The loon was still plaintively commiserating with her, its eerie call drifting through the pines.

It was hard to tell who was attending the meeting. There were seven boats on the way to the boathouse, and the man in the yellow kayak looked like Henry Henderson. The only one Cheryl could identify.

This could be judgment for her and Parker without jury or trial. Or they could be talking about the distant wildfires in Thunder Bay and evacuation plans if they continued to spread. Apparently, the last big meeting of the HOA was during COVID, a year before they bought. Glenda Henderson had told her all about it and how they didn't have to worry about masking

and distance rules. It’s not like the community was social beyond the tennis courts and the odd shuffleboard or cornhole tournament.

Apparently, a divorce ranked right up there with a pandemic and hectare-destroying wildfires, at least that’s what Cheryl’s imagination told her.

She closed her eyes and tried to enjoy the sunset as the last of the figures filed into Amos’s boathouse. Maybe she should try that thing Marla was always talking about. Meditating and manifesting.

She counted her breaths and tried to clear her mind. But the flames continued to leap in her memory, eating years of work. It was odd that her husband said he burned them for her. Was he also afraid of the HOA?

Not possible. Besides water, Parker wasn’t afraid of anything. She tried to embrace how Amos had put him in his place, but that was little consolation.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 33

MARLA

I got into my Sunfire, seething, the pack of undelivered MLS listings for Cheryl sitting beside me on the passenger seat. Part of me wished I could leave a huge oil splotch on the pavement just to give Amos something else to worry about. Of course, I knew exactly how that would play out. The fine would end up landing on Cheryl, and I didn't want that. Not anymore.

I was beginning to like her. We'd had genuine fun on the tennis courts, and maybe she was even becoming a friend. A friend that needed help getting out of a bad marriage, so that cranky harbormaster wasn't going to get rid of me easily.

The main road around the lake was quiet. There was barely such a thing as rush hour up here. My grip on the steering wheel tightened as I put more pressure on the gas pedal. There were so many thoughts swirling through my brain that I couldn't think straight. It was definitely time for a meditation session to focus and reassess.

What the hell was that weird procession of boats on the lake? Why boat to a meeting when you could just walk? It must be part of a ritual of some sort. That HOA worked in the strangest ways. Amos had said it was an "emergency meeting." What qualified as an emergency for an organization that freaked out over bonfires and oil stains?

As I drove, an even more disquieting thought crept into my mind. If Echo Loon Lake had a way of silencing inconvenient women, was Cheryl becoming a problem? A place that guarded its secrets might be leery of a tell-all history book.

Cheryl had said it was all in the public record, but who bothered to dive that deeply into something so obscure? An unincorporated patch of lake country in Northern Ontario wasn't exactly the subject of casual tourist research. And who cared about a housekeeper who disappeared in 2008? Or an Australian homeowner with no relatives?

The people who would care were few and far between, like me and Cheryl.

Unease crawled up my spine as I drove through Kestrel Falls, past the bar I knew better than to ever go into again and Earl's mechanic shop. Though there was a string of Harleys parked outside, the lights were out in the garage, so he must be done for the day already.

My heart gave a little twist. He didn't own it anymore, and it was all my fault. Even if he claimed he hadn't wanted it, he'd been forced to abandon a piece of his own legacy to the Northern Drillers bike gang. Just to save my butt.

What did Earl have now?

A mother in a long-term dementia home. No mechanic shop. Just a trailer in Bog Creek Trailer Park.

And me.

We'd just survived the toughest moment in our friendship. Even when we ended our brief romantic stint, there hadn't been the kind of tension I'd felt from Earl when he drove in like some sort of *Mad Max* hero and rescued me from Brutus and Stain. Thank the universe we'd patched that up.

The truth was I needed the guy. I'd lost my mother and was slowly losing my second mom to dementia. My fingers went to the halved necklace pendant sitting on my collarbone. The missing half of the pine tree jagged under my fingers. Earl was my family.

When I pulled into Bog Creek Trailer Park, the evening sky was resplendent with pinks and reds as the sun dipped below the trees. The air had that heavy stillness that comes before a storm.

Earl's truck wasn't there, and I pressed a hand to my abdomen. There was no one to bounce my concerns off. Losing that listing made my ribs tight and my head ache. Plus, something was bothering me about Cheryl's posture at the bonfire… But I couldn't define what.

I parked beside my trailer and climbed out, noticing he'd planted lavender along the side of my porch. It smelled heavenly. Sweet and aromatic. A folded piece of paper was tucked beneath the edge of my door. It was scrawled in blue crayon. Earl's favorite color.

Went to see Mom. She's a little scared about being in a new place. I'm staying with her tonight. Enjoy your new garden!

I smiled. Of course, he was making sure Karen was okay. The trailer park was unusually still, even for a Wednesday night. No kids yelling. No radios blaring. No one arguing over a barbecue.

Just the distant rumble of thunder.

When I had the Viceroy listing, I felt like I had a clear path to my future. Now my vision was muddled, even with the sale of the beer store property. That money would be welcome and give my strained finances a break, but it wasn't life-changing. So, I climbed onto the roof of my trailer and rolled out the yoga mat.

Breathing was a good place to start.

In. Hold for four seconds.

Out. A longer breath.

I stayed there for hours. Perhaps even fading in and out of sleep, although meditation wasn't supposed to result in sleep.

The thunder rolled somewhere far away, low and deep, and I let it lull me into a deeper state of introspection.

A mosquito landed on my cheek, and I slapped it, looking up at the stars. Normally, I focused on a manifestation for my sessions. But what to visualize? The sale was off the table. I was sinking into the quantum field without direction.

Part of meditating was letting the sound pass through you, noting it and letting it go. The burble of the river, the wind in the pines, the odd call of a loon, and the crickets. Even the bats were out, the low swoosh of their wings wiping away my conscious thoughts.

A voice whispered from deep within, "You are exactly where you are supposed to be, right now."

I frowned. That didn't seem right. Who wanted to be on the roof of a slightly sagging trailer at the poor end of a lake? That was thinking, so I let the thought pass by and went back to the state of listening. The voice was still there.

"Pay attention. You are in the right place."

A buzzing began in my brain, growing louder until it became a roar.

The roof vibrated beneath me, and my eyes fluttered open.

Directly overhead, flying with no lights, a little twin-engine float plane passed over Bog Creek Park.

I could just make out the high wings and blur of the two propellers. It was low, too low. It had to be coming in for a landing.

I sat up. Who would fly a float plane in the dark with no lights? In all the years I'd lived here at the trailer, I'd never seen a float plane land on Echo Loon Lake. I was pretty sure planes violated their no-engine rule, no engines except for the harbormaster, who could use one in case of emergencies. But someone was flying in, and I heard the low roar and the splash as it landed.

My curiosity raged, so I picked up my cell phone and texted Cheryl:

What's with the float plane?

There was no answer. She was probably fast asleep. Maybe even curled up with Parker after sorting out their differences over a bonfire.

The hair on the back of my neck told a different story. Strange things were afoot. First there was that swan-like procession of kayaks and canoes heading for the harbormaster's dock, and now a float plane. If I was exactly where I was supposed to be, then there was something I needed to do.

I couldn't drive back in, not without a keycard and definitely not so late.

One more attempt to reach Cheryl:

You okay?

No three dots appeared.

She was obviously sleeping, and that was what I should be doing. Except that little voice from my subconscious was still talking. And it said I had to do something.

Like get in my kayak and paddle over. A dangerous idea. Shooting the rapids in the dark and trespassing fell firmly into the kind of behavior that got me into trouble. Amos was crystal clear about that the last time I paddled over. Sometimes, you have to trust your intuition, and it was telling me to go.

But not empty-handed. If Amos came at me with his little motorized rowboat again, I would be prepared. Hadn’t Earl left a fresh can of bear

spray in my car? Plus, he'd given me a headlamp once, worried about my nighttime paddles.

I went and changed into slightly warmer clothes. I looked at the aged life jacket in the bottom of the closet and grabbed it. Amos wasn't going to drown me. I pulled my kayak into the water, feeling a slight disappointment in my gut. I'd secretly hoped I'd never have to launch from here again to get into Echo Loon Lake.

The wind blew a few leaves past my water sandals, and an ominous roar of thunder came from the north. Another storm was brewing. I'd have to fight the narrows and paddle in whitecaps if the rain came this way. A flash of lightning lit up the sky. Sometimes, my inner voice didn't align with other realities, but I had to go and didn't have much time.

I needed to hurry.

I started paddling.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 34

CHERYL

Cheryl had fallen into a deep sleep, fairly certain her husband wouldn't be coming home. Lately, when Parker went to visit Elena Morgenstein, he didn't come home till the sun was up. The whole divorce paper/novel burning had been her personal Ray Bradbury *Fahrenheit 451* nightmare, leaving her so drained she hadn't even shoved the usual chair under the doorknob.

At first, she thought it was a nightmare.

The sheets yanked off her body, the rough hands, the invasion. It wasn't. The horror was real.

She woke with a gasp when the wad of material was shoved in her mouth and a hood pulled over her head. She couldn't breathe… She couldn't breathe!

Nostrils flaring, she managed to pull air in through small holes in the hood. Her fuzzy, REM-interrupted brain grappled to come to terms with what was happening. Hands were lifting her out of bed. Thrashing and punching, she tried to fight, but it was like being at the bottom of a rugby scrum, a game she'd played briefly at boarding school. The same feeling of claustrophobia hit her now, but way worse. She couldn't see, and her chest heaved as she hyperventilated.

Parker hissed in her ear, "Don't struggle. It'll be easier that way."

Her hands were wrenched together and zip-tied, hard plastic biting into the flesh. Sharp, acrid body odor penetrated through her hood. The kind of funk that came from an older man who didn't do laundry enough. Who was helping her husband?

Cheryl redoubled her efforts, managing to kick something or someone.

"Ooofff. Get those ankles secured," a gruff voice commanded. It sounded like Amos, but high and breathless. "Control your wife, for once."

The same hard plastic looped around her calves. She couldn't kick or hit, but she wiggled and writhed. Parker had her shoulders; she could tell by

his sandalwood cologne. Someone else had her feet, and a third person supported her bottom as she was carried down the stairs, the thudding of multiple sets of feet on the steps. The offside, wild thought occurred to her that they hadn't bothered to take off their shoes. Where were their manners?

Her left shoulder banged against a doorframe, sharp, shooting pain, and her scream came out like a muffled groan.

"Sorry," Parker said. "Why did you have to write that novel? Stupid woman. I thought burning it would help."

"Shut up." The voice was older and rougher and came from the man holding her ass. Like someone who had drunk a thousand whiskeys and smoked even more cigars. A voice she didn't recognize. "She could just write it again."

There were three men. Parker, Amos, and Whiskey Voice.

A chilling thought froze her. She could write it again. Parker had brought these men into her home to kill her. This was going to be her last day on earth. She was about to become one of the inconvenient women. Like Sally and Jenny. Was she finally going to learn what had happened to them? Not through her book, nor through her research, but by living it herself? If she stopped struggling, the two men she'd grown to hate would win.

This couldn't be real. She struggled to wake herself up, kicking, trying to scream.

"Quit it," Parker hissed.

She dolphin-kicked to break herself free. She was going to come at a high price. Her feet broke free of Amos's grip for just an instant and managed to slap his chin with her toes. His grunt and snarl restored her pride, if only for a moment before her bruised foot was clamped under an arm. They stretched her to her full length to keep her from gaining leverage.

The three men carried her outside; she could tell by the cooler air and the distant rumble of thunder. Cheryl forced herself to relax and breathe slowly. There would be another chance to free herself. They were heading downhill toward the lake.

If she continued hyperventilating, she would pass out and lose any hope of saving herself. Think! She wasn't sure she could swim away with the hood over her head and her hands and feet tied.

They laid her down on the lawn, and something hard pressed against the backs of her calves. Metal? Small, box-like shapes poked through her nightgown.

Then they started rolling her.

For one bewildering second, Cheryl felt as though she was a snowball being pushed down a hill. But instead of gathering snow, something was wrapping around her—layer after layer, tightening with every revolution. Her arms and legs were pinned against her body. She couldn't kick, couldn't twist, couldn't even draw a full breath as whatever they were using cinched tighter around her.

The char of the bonfire still hung in the air as she rolled down the gentle slope. Her best guess was chicken wire. Pliable enough to wrap around her but rigid enough to trap her inside it.

Easy for the fish to eat her flesh through. She pictured herself trapped in the weeds at the bottom of the lake, her body slowly picked clean by trout, perch, and whatever else lurked at that depth.

She'd missed her chance to escape. No matter what she told herself, it didn't work. This wasn't a ruse. It wasn't an attention-getter. This was the real thing. She couldn't scream. She couldn't move. Her chest heaved with the effort to breathe. Tears rolled down her face. The helplessness of it all.

Bile filled the back of her throat, and her stomach lurched. She couldn't puke, not with the gag; it would suffocate her. If she was going to drown, better in water than from her own vomit.

The rolling stopped when the ground leveled out.

The water slapped against the pilings, and there was the constant thud of something against the dock, rocking with the waves. Her best guess was Parker's new rowboat, the Whitehall, knocking against the wood.

Like a drumbeat. The soundtrack of her doom.

She tried to scream again, but what came out was little more than a strangled mewl.

They laid her into a boat. It smelt new, like fresh wood and paint. Definitely the Whitehall. There was a lump underneath her, pushing whatever wire was wrapped around her into her kidneys. It was excruciating. The tears continued to flow.

Whiskey Voice: “Take her out to the middle. The deepest spot.”

“Someone else take her,” Parker said, a lick of fear in his tone. “Harold, you know I hate the water.”

Understanding flooded through Cheryl. Harold. The third man was Amos’s father, the previous harbormaster and the one in charge when Sally Dobbin and Jenny Briggs went missing. This was her definitive answer, but it had come at the steepest price. The same man was supervising her death.

The same killer.

Harold’s voice came from above. “This is something you do alone. It’s a rite of passage. I did it. My son did it. And you can do it. Your deeds will tie you to the lake and the association forever.”

She heard the hesitation in Parker’s voice. “Uh… Oh my God, we put her on the life jacket. Can we get another?”

Another rumble from the sky.

“There’s no time,” Harold said.

Parker whined in that tone Cheryl was all too familiar with. The one he used when he didn’t want to help her with tidying the house. “I’m really not comfortable…”

“Your wife, your mess,” Amos said sharply. Something heavy was thrown into the boat, making it rock. “Tie this to the chicken wire; it will drag her down and keep her there.”

Her cage trembled as Parker quickly looped a rope to something near the bottom of her legs.

“Good luck,” Harold grunted, and uneven steps moved off down the dock, as if the man had a limp.

Parker tried once more. “Amos, come with me, will you? You’re a better boater.”

“This is yours to do alone,” Amos said, and more footsteps tracked away from the boat.

Cheryl sensed it was just her and Parker now.

“Damn it,” he swore, yanking at the life jacket under her back. “I’ve got to get this thing…out from…under you.”

Cheryl bore down, hoping her weight and the added bulk of the wire would make it impossible for him to get the jacket free. Anything to make him more scared of taking her to the middle of the lake. Would he still go without a life jacket? If he went for another, could she work herself free?

He quickly dashed any hope of that as she heard him untie the boat, the hiss of the unraveling rope like the death-rattle of a snake.

Parker rowed, tentatively at first, and then he gained momentum and rhythm. How long would it take to get to the middle of the lake?

“I didn’t mean for it to come to this. I do love you. Did you have to be so nosy? And why did you want a divorce? Fuck, we were happy, weren’t we?”

She couldn’t answer. The damn cotton, or whatever, was in her mouth. But if she could talk, she’d let him know he was a delusional asshole. Make that a murdering delusional asshole.

Thunder rumbled, closer now. A flash of light penetrated her hood. Lightning.

“Fuck,” Parker mumbled. “Fucking perfect. That’s all I need, a downpour.”

Cheryl tried to find the tiniest shred of silver lining in this moment. The single worst moment of her all-too-short life. Who imagined their time would end this way? A victim of an abusive husband. It was a story that was far too common from her journalist days.

At least she wouldn’t disappear without a trace. That was her only consolation.

She’d told Marla about her research and how inconvenient women disappeared around Echo Loon Lake. So, when Cheryl disappeared, this time the party line of “she ran away” would be questioned. They could send an underwater drone to the bottom of the lake and find her body. Maybe even the bodies of Sally Dobbin and Jenny Briggs. Her watery grave would be found.

This was not how she'd ever imagined her life ending—in the middle of the night, in the bottom of a rowboat, at the hands of her husband. The one she'd once thought was such a catch.

He was still mumbling, "I told you to keep your nose out of things. Do you think I want to be doing this? God, I hate the water."

A few more strokes. The thunder, closer this time. The flash of lightning brighter through the haze of her hood.

Cheryl caught the edge of fear in Parker's voice. "Can't have regrets, can I? Get this done and get back to shore. Wifey, you were getting a little long in the tooth. Time to trade you in for a new model." He forced a laugh, harsh and heartless.

Even wrapped in what felt like chicken wire, flat out at the bottom of a boat and being rowed to her death, her anger flared. She squeezed her eyes shut and envisioned scratching his face off.

Her dark fantasy was interrupted by a new sound. A droning, impossibly loud in the night. The lake splashed, as if water was cascading off the wings of a plane.

The boat shook.

"Oh, shit," Parker said as the wake rocked them.

The oars clattered against the gunwales, one whacking her across the stomach. The roar screamed by and tore into the night sky. Calm returned to the water. Once the boat stopped rocking, Parker took a few more digs with his oars. She lost sense of time as he stroked, stroked, stroked. If he never stopped, she could keep living. Endless purgatory in the bottom of a rowboat.

Until he stopped rowing and the boat drifted to a snail's pace.

"I think this is it. As deep as it gets. Well, Cheryl, I'd say it's been a slice. We had some good times, didn't we?"

Fear, pure and raw, ran through her. She couldn't move, scream, or do anything to save herself. This was it.

His hand slipped underneath her back, and he groaned with effort. "Damn, you've gotten heavy, woman." He laughed. Still forced. He was still a coward, unable to do the hardest job, only able to bully women. Seduce and bully.

She hated him with a visceral white heat. If only she could get a hand free. Or a foot. But no. She was wrapped too tightly.

Cheryl was about to take the final swim of her life. Every muscle in her body tensed.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 35

MARLA

I dipped my kayak paddle into Bog Creek as though I was racing for the Olympic gold medal. I'd forgotten my cell on the trailer roof in my haste and reckoned it was around midnight. Leaning forward and straining, the water splashed like a metronome, each of my strokes propelling the boat with maximum thrust. The water rippled like black silk, and crickets serenaded from the shore.

Normally, these paddles were my calm place, my happy place. But tonight, urgency gripped me. This wasn't entertainment. This was a mission.

I hit the narrows going faster than I normally did.

The closer I got to Echo Loon Lake, the more I could feel the wrongness. The stars and the moon were hidden behind clouds, leaving only my headlamp to keep me from smashing into the rocks. This was the first time I'd ever navigated them in pitch-black. No sane person would.

Luckily, I'd done this passage enough times that I had it memorized. My boat went quicker and quicker, and I found myself talking through the familiar obstacles: big rock on the left, lean to the right, paddle hard, pause, drift around that corner.

The water splashed, soaking the interior of the kayak, and there was a dodgy moment when I careened off a drifting log. It was a new hazard I couldn't anticipate, and I bit the inside of my cheek as the boat rotated ninety degrees. Grunting with effort, I threw my weight to the offside as half of my body submerged in the froth. No. I wasn't capsizing, not tonight. The boat hung there, teetering, taking in water…

And then righted. My heart hammered from the near-dunking as I guided my boat past the final rocky portion of the narrows and out into the relative calm of the lake.

I clicked off my headlamp.

There was a squawk from the bullrushes along the side of the shoreline, and there she was—Mama Goose, quiet and calm. Almost as

though she monitored my passage, making sure I didn’t threaten her babies. She fanned her wings wide, a silent sentry and witness to my quest.

“Hey, Mama,” I whispered. “Keep watch.”

Then I saw it. Something white in the middle of the lake, at the deepest part. I stuck close to shore while I methodically drove myself closer to it, thankful I'd worn black, and that the clouds hid the moon, the stars, and me.

Paddling fast but silently, the white blob morphed into a rowboat with each glide across the top of the water.

There was a single person in it, a big figure, obviously male. My guts contracted, and panic weakened my strokes. Was I too late? Where was Cheryl?

Then I heard grunting, and as I drifted closer, my oar hovered above the water. It was Parker. The dark hair, the muscular V-shape of his body. He was hunched over something… Why was he on the lake at night? Could he swim? What was he struggling with inside the boat?

I heard him speak, the sound carrying over the water like it was whispered in my ear.

“I think this is it. As deep as it gets. Well, Cheryl, I’d say it’s been a slice. We had some good times, didn’t we?”

I could only hope he was speaking to a living Cheryl. There was no way I was letting these dark waters claim her. A friend of mine, whose only crime was marrying an abuser. She couldn’t have known before, and she couldn’t have known how far he would go.

The sound of sobbing reverberated through the hull of the boat and onto the water. I could feel it in my soul.

Energy rushed into my limbs, and my purpose honed to an all-consuming goal. Parker would not get rid of his wife tonight. Not while I was living and breathing. He was going to be interrupted by the most inconvenient woman of them all. Marla Briggs.

I dipped my paddle in faster, hoping he'd be too occupied to notice me. When I was almost broadside, I considered ramming him, like how Amos had rammed my kayak on the evening I’d secured the Viceroy listing and then hovered over me while I tried to surface. Killing inconvenient women

seemed the modus operandi at Echo Loon Lake. It was too beautiful to be consumed by such evil.

As I considered driving into him, I knew it wouldn't work. The rowboat was a steady, heavy model and could take an impact. My only choice was a full attack with the benefit of surprise. I twisted and turned my paddle, slowing my approach, when Parker turned. Our eyes met, his widening in recognition.

There went my advantage.

"Marla, another nosy…"

I didn't think about it; I rotated my trunk like it took to get the most from a kayak stroke and turned it upward. I swung my paddle with everything I had, aiming for his exposed face.

The blade caught him across the side of the head with a solid crack. It reminded me of playing tennis with Cheryl, how the impact traveled up my arm. Parker's limbs went slack. His eyes rolled back in his head, and he fell. He hit the oarlock and rolled back into the boat.

I grabbed the side of the rowboat and pulled myself up, taking care not to tip us both over. I hooked one end of my paddle under the seat and wrapped the rowboat's anchor line around the other end.

A bundle lay in the bottom of the boat.

My headlamp! I turned it on. "Cheryl!" I thought I was ready to find her, but she was wrapped up in chicken wire with a hood over her head. I reached in the end to pull it off. The wire scratched my arms, but that was nothing compared to the torment my friend was suffering. I gripped the hood with the only three fingers I could get far enough in and tugged it free. It snagged on her chin. I shoved my fingers through the wire to untie it where it had been tightened around her mouth and neck.

I pulled it up and over her nose, throwing it behind me. Cheryl coughed and gagged, trying to spit out a bandana that had been stuffed into her mouth. I pulled on it with a couple fingers shoved through the wire. Cheryl gagged again like she was going to throw up. I turned her on her side.

The chicken wire had been twisted around itself, tying end to end. I started near Cheryl's head, untwisting and freeing the wire, strand after

strand. I made it to her hands and using my small pocketknife, I cut through the zip tie. I put my knife back and continued undoing the wire. There were multiple layers but only one was tied off. I tried to unroll her, but there were too many rolls.

I made it halfway down her back when a heavy fist slammed into the side of my head, tearing my headlamp off and sending it overboard.

“Parker!” Cheryl screamed.

With her hands free and the coil of wire loosened, she was able to reach over her head and grip Parker’s ankle. She rolled across the boat while maintaining her grip. Parker lost his balance and fell beside her.

Cheryl rolled until the sharp ends of the chicken wire gouged into Parker’s body.

I could see what was happening from where I was curled up in the bow but could do nothing. She had his ankles and worked them while moving back and forth.

Death by a thousand cuts, but it wouldn’t be. Parker screamed at the pain, at first, but then he grew angry. His wife, much smaller than him, was doing this to him. Maybe he was reluctant to murder her before, but this was putting him into a killing mood.

Even in the darkness, the spittle flying from his face while he raged was clear. The white foam of a rabid dog.

My senses were coming back to me, but my headlamp was long gone. The smell of sandalwood drifted past, of all things.

I pulled my kayak oar free just as Parker wrenched himself loose. He picked up Cheryl with one hand, balancing in the rowboat, and roared in triumph.

I jabbed the oar at him, hitting him in those perfect abs, and pushed. He lost balance and went over the side. Parker disappeared instantly under the water.

Cheryl rolled over the side after him, dragged by a rope tied to a weight that had been beneath her.

I dove after her and caught a handful of chicken wire, dropping low to leverage myself like an anchor caught on rocks. A hand reached up and

gripped the oarlock. I could do nothing. Parker was coming, and we would both die.

Inconvenient women who disappeared in the middle of the night.

Cheryl's face appeared.

The pain! The wire was cutting into my fingers.

"Keep hold!" I shouted, even though she was barely two feet from me.

"I have it," she gasped.

I let go, and Cheryl kicked free of the wire. The weight wrapped around it took it down. I helped her into the boat.

Her body spasmed. She hunched over and dry-heaved.

I put my hand on her back. I wasn't sure what else to do. I had my paddle, but my kayak had drifted away. I could see its outline when lightning flashed in the distance.

"We have to get off the lake," I said.

Cheryl sprawled in the bottom of the boat. "I can't feel my arms."

I took her hands. They were cold, but she squeezed my hands.

"Shock. Let's get you back to the house." I looked over the side of the boat but not too far. I'd watched too many horror movies where a hand reached up and pulled the person into the water. That wasn't going to be me. Not this night.

There was a second life jacket in the boat. Cheryl had been lying on it. "Put this on." I forced it into her hands.

I started rowing the big boat. It was heavy and my weak strokes didn't drive it quickly, but slow and steady won the race, or so I'd been told.

We neared the kayak. Cheryl was in no shape to paddle it. I tossed the anchor into the seat and looped the line tightly around the rowboat's breasthook. I returned to rowing, this time aimed in the general direction of the Viceroy.

The wind kicked up, and the usually calm lake gained waves and whitecaps. I pulled as hard as I could. We needed to get ashore for both our sakes.

Cheryl whimpered, breaking into sobs occasionally.

She'd survived another murder attempt. Had she been a cat, she would have expended eight of her nine lives. Every day of life after this was a bonus.

"You're okay, Cheryl. You're alive, and Parker is gone."

"Is he? Is he really?"

"Deepest part of the lake, and he can't swim, if I'm right on both of those things."

"Yes. He was going to dump me in the deepest water. A hundred feet straight down." She shivered uncontrollably.

"Hang on. We'll be ashore soon enough."

I redoubled my efforts. My head throbbed from where Parker had punched me, but I was on a mission. Finish this!

The lightning walked closer, over the nearby hills and down to the lake.

With a final surge of strength, I brought the heavy boat up to the dock, where I tied it off. I helped her to the dock and then pulled the anchor line to me. I guided the kayak to the shore and pulled it onto the grass.

Cheryl still sat where I'd left her. The light drizzle was turning into a full-on downpour. We were both soaked, her in her nightclothes and me in my dark outfit. I may have thought I looked like a ninja, but I surely didn't feel like one. I was stiff and sore while half-carrying Cheryl to her house. The basement door had been left open. We went through, and I locked the door behind me.

I prayed that no one was in there. I didn't have enough energy for another fight, and she was defenseless.

We went up the stairs. I knew the layout, so I guided us unerringly to the kitchen. Lemonade and SpringBrisk were in the refrigerator.

"Here." I shoved a bottle of water in Cheryl's hands. "Drink that."

She sat on a barstool and laid her forehead on the cool granite of the counter.

"Please."

Cheryl sat up and took a drink. She looked at the bottle.

“I could use something stronger,” she murmured. “Over there, in the cabinet. Dalmore, thirty years old.”

I found the bottle she referenced. It looked expensive. I didn’t ask. I only did as she wanted. I could use a drink, too. There was no way I was leaving her alone tonight. Looked like I was staying here so might as well give myself a pour, too.

I raised my glass to Cheryl whose face fogged with shock. “Here’s to new life.” The emotions of the past hour weren’t lost on us. A dark cloud hung over both of us. I’d experienced too much trauma in my life, but this was on a different level, however the way to deal with it was the same. A little humor, a smile, and a firm commitment to the road ahead.

The road behind was filled with traps and potholes that would steal every bit of today’s joy and the potential for a wonderful future.

“You can say that again.” Cheryl clinked her glass to mine and then drained it. She held it out for a refill.

I sipped it and found it was the smoothest liquor I’d ever had.

“The road ahead is filled with sunshine and peace,” I told Cheryl.

She brightened from beneath the storm clouds hanging over her. “What happened to Parker?”

“He went over the side. He was caught in the chicken wire and there was something tied to that, I think. It all deep-sixed together.” Facts not emotions. It was the only way through.

Cheryl snorted. “I tied the rope to his ankle that he was trying to tie to me. Keep me on the bottom. Along with the chicken wire. There would have been no coming up from that.”

“So I couldn’t let you go down in the first place.” I held my glass up for another clink.

“You are an angel, Marla. I don’t know how or why you were on the lake this night, but I can’t thank you enough. Whatever you want, it’s yours.”

“Stop it. You’re my friend. I don’t have many, but the ones I have are worth fighting for. I don’t need anything… Well, there’s one thing. I need a place to stay tonight. I came by kayak, and if I learned one thing tonight, the lake’s not safe when the weather is like this.”

Cheryl laughed. “It is beautiful, though, when the weather’s not like this.”

Neither one of us was talking about the weather, and we both knew it.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 36

MARLA

Had a morning ever been this beautiful?

Echo Loon Lake was stunning from the top of my trailer in Bog Creek Park. But sitting right here, on a dock at the expensive end of the lake? A little smile played on my lips, appreciating the quiet of Echo Loon Lake, the surreal blue-green of the water.

Superlative.

The Muskoka chair was at the perfect angle, the sun warming my face, and the post-storm breeze ruffling my hair. Like Snow White, all the birds were singing for me, a chipmunk chattered at my feet, and the fish dove around the moorings of the dock. The smell of pine had never been so comforting.

The view was so spectacular, I was meditating with my eyes open. And it sure beat the lumpy roof of my trailer. This was it. I didn't have to manifest the perfect moment; even with the events of the night, that was past. This was now.

I was living it. I'd arrived, if only for a day.

The Calders' guest room had a downy mattress and soft duvet. That was the best night's sleep I'd ever had. I belonged here.

Cheryl was still sleeping, obviously exhausted after her ordeal.

My kayak bobbed, caught in the reeds, right where Mama Goose had kept watch. It had drifted right to her nest.

Once Cheryl was up, we'd take the rowboat over so I could get it and bring it back to the dock. Who knew she had it in her? It was incredibly smart of her to tie that weight to his ankle. But did she do it deliberately? Was Parker's death a happy accident, or did Cheryl knowingly send her husband to a watery grave?

Either way, the man deserved it. The universe had its checks and balances. If I was Cheryl's angel…

Speak of the devil.

She came down yawning, bringing me a cup of coffee.

“Morning, sleepyhead,” I said.

“Hi.” Cheryl nodded at me. “It’s a gorgeous morning and a great day to be alive.” She plopped into the Muskoka chair beside me.

My new friend was bruised and cut up but seemed in great spirits after her brush with death. Sometimes a taste of mortality did that.

“What do we do now?” I asked. “Feel up to helping me drag my kayak back?” I nodded at it, captured at the far end, held by the reeds.

“Absolutely.” She groaned. “I kind of liked having you here. I slept better than I have in ages. It’ll be a lot harder to get rid of two of us.”

“Do you know who put you in that boat?” I asked.

Cheryl nodded. “It was Parker, obviously. Amos. And then another man.”

“Another man?”

She spoke slowly, as if trying to reconstruct the horror of last night. “I heard him called…Harold. That was Amos’s father.”

“He must have come in on the float plane.” I took a sip of my coffee. Fresh and pungent. “In a way, you should thank him. The plane landing in the middle of the night was my clue that something was wrong.”

“Apparently, he’s holed himself up like a hermit in Mattagami.”

“And he came back just for you?”

“Apparently.” Cheryl nodded. “So, how do we make sure they don’t try and make one of us disappear again?”

“Harold and Amos?” Then I saw him, on his dock, hands on his hips, staring at us.

That feeling of dread he used to give me? Gone. I shaped my fingers into a pistol and air-shot him. He jolted. And I laughed. “We’ve got some dirt on them. Maybe it can be leveraged.”

“Maybe…” She drew out the word. “It was self-defense, you know.”

I met her eyes, and they had uncertainty in them. She knew our story had a few holes in it. Chicken-wire-shaped holes.

“That might be a hard fight to win. Parker literally had a weight tied to his ankle.”

“So, what do you suggest?”

I watched as Amos got into his rowboat and headed our way. Cheryl’s posture tensed.

“We might be better off adopting the story Echo Loon Lake always uses when someone inconvenient disappears.” I grabbed her hand and squeezed. “Parker just ran away. He was promiscuous, wasn’t he?”

“He sure was.”

“So maybe he had a secret lover, and they ran away to Mattagami or something. We don’t know. We don’t need to know, but we must never admit to anything. We didn’t go out on the lake last night. I paddled my kayak straight here from Bog Creek and joined you for a nightcap because Parker had gone and you needed a friend. Period. That’s it. I arrived at eleven.”

“You’re right.”

I grinned at her. “You can print up your divorce papers again.”

“I could go to my lawyer, get another copy.”

“Didn’t I see you forge the original real estate papers? Can’t you do the same on your divorce papers?”

She nodded slowly. “I can. But...” She paused. “It’s not like I need the money. I could just stay married, knowing Parker will never be back to haunt me again.”

I looked at the water, out at the dark center—the only part of the lake that didn’t glisten blue-green. “You hope he won’t haunt you?”

“He can’t be worse dead than he was alive.”

Amos’s rowboat bumped up against our dock. I got up, grabbed the rope, and tied it for him.

“Ladies,” he said, crossing his arms over his chest and furrowing his brows. “Surprised to see you both here.”

I swallowed down some completely inappropriate hysterical laughter. I bet he was. Cheryl was supposed to be dead. I had been locked out of Echo Loon Lake. Neither of us was supposed to be here.

“Hi, Amos,” I said super-cheerily, taking my seat again.

He shifted his weight from foot to foot, paused, and then drew himself up and pointed at my face.

“How are you here? There is no crummy Sunfire in our parking lot, which means you broke a cardinal rule. No help or outsiders in the compound after five.”

“Yeah, that’s not going to be an issue anymore,” Cheryl said.

“What do you mean?”

She reached over and grabbed my hand. “Marla’s moving in. I need a roommate.”

Amos’s lips thinned, and he asked the question. The big one that hung between us all. “Well, what will your husband say about that?”

She gave him a smile that looked more like a snarl. “Somehow, I don’t think he’s gonna care.”

I nodded, also giving Amos my most ghastly smile. “I’m pretty sure Parker isn’t going to have an opinion.”

His ears grew red. “Perhaps I should call the police in.”

“You do that,” I said. “Because we might have a few things to say to them as well.”

A standoff. Silence. Amos standing on the dock, us remaining comfortable in our matching chairs. For the first time, I felt a glorious sense of power and rightness.

Try me, old harbormaster.

His throat bobbed. He stared at us.

We ignored him.

Finally, he cleared his throat and said, “Welcome to the lake, Marla.”

“Thanks, Amos.”

When he’d boated off, I couldn’t help it; I squealed with joy.

“Cheryl, did you mean it? Do you want me to be your roommate?”

“Absolutely,” she said. “I love this house. I don’t want to move. And with Parker gone, there’s no issue. I could use somebody to watch my back, and I need a tennis partner.”

“You’re on.” I sipped my coffee.

Who says manifestation doesn’t work?

“But there’s one thing, for my own peace of mind…”

I thought for a moment. “Oh, no.”

“Yes. We have to make sure Parker is dead.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 37

CHERYL

Her new roommate rolled her eyes. “Have you not heard of letting sleeping horndogs lie?”

Cheryl sighed. “I’ve watched too many horror movies. You think the bad guy is dead. And then BANG!” She jumped out of her chair, slapping her hands in Marla’s face. “He’s baaaack.”

Marla startled in her seat and shot her an exasperated look. “You just took a decade off my life.” She took another sip of her coffee, though Cheryl was sure it was cold by now. “What are you thinking?”

Cheryl walked to the end of the dock. “I was thinking of going fishing.”

“Fishing?”

“There’s some super-long fishing line in the shed and treble hooks for salmon snagging.”

“I didn’t know Parker fished.”

“He didn’t, but I summered in Cape Cod. And fished. Maybe one day, I’ll take you.”

Marla stretched. “Okay, when is this fishing expedition happening?”

“ASAP.” Cheryl pointed at Amos, who had just tied his rowboat to his own dock. “Unless you think he’s going to be a problem. The HOA likes to keep their secrets buried.”

She had a novel turned to ash to prove it. Her shoulders dropped. It was going to be so much work to redo it.

“I don’t think we’re going to have to worry about him again,” Marla said. She caught Cheryl’s expression. “Why don’t you look happy? Maybe we haven’t won the war yet, but we sure kicked ass this battle.”

“The HOA did win in one combat zone.” Cheryl put a hand on her mouth, a sudden sob surprising her. “Parker burned my book.”

Marla’s eyes popped. “The entire thing? That was the bonfire?”

Cheryl nodded. “Years of work and research. Poof. Up in flames.”

“That’s brutal.”

“And I thought I was so smart, keeping it off my computer and safe from hackers. Now, I’ll have to start from scratch.”

Marla giggled while doing a chair dance.

Cheryl blinked. “Are you a sadist?” Had she misjudged this woman entirely?

“One minute.” The younger woman reached into the beach bag beside her chair and scrolled through something on her phone.

Cheryl felt her temper begin a slow burn, crawling up her spine. “Really? I tell you I’ve lost years of work, and your reaction is to check social media?”

“No!” She thrust her phone into Cheryl’s face. “Look!”

Cheryl took the cell and swiped through page after page of typed text. “Oh my god. Oh. My. God!” They were pictures of her book. It was like Christmas, her birthday, and Easter all wrapped up together. “How? Why?”

Marla grinned. “I wanted to see what you’d discovered about my mother, so I took pictures. Not sure you’d let me read your rough draft. It’s not like we were friends yet.”

“You’re an angel and my hero! Devious, too, but in a good way.” There were a few days of work missing, but the majority of it was there. On her new roommate’s phone!

“So, are you ready to go fishing?” Marla stood up, stretching. “Let’s take the Whitehall. It’s a beautiful rowboat, and it did help save your life. I’m feeling particularly attached to those oars and how stable it was through a three-way fight and going overboard. And just in case the dead come alive.”

“Don’t even say that!” Cheryl shuddered. “Now you get to choose. The rowboat, your kayak, or even those racing kayaks we have in the shed. You are moving in.”

“Yes...” Marla hesitated. “I’ll keep my trailer, but I’m happy to live here. I can even pay you rent. Those commissions are going to be rolling in from the beer store sale.”

“We can worry about that later, or never.” Cheryl walked toward the shed. “For now, we’re going big game fishing.” She hugged herself and

stared at the dark spot in the middle of the lake. She needed closure, although she didn't want to see his bloated and dead body. She only wanted to be sure.

Marla followed her. "Isn't this like looking for a needle in a haystack?"

Cheryl shrugged. "I know exactly where he went down. See that black spot in the middle of the lake? The only area not tinged aqua?"

Marla nodded slowly.

"That's it. The deepest part of the lake."

"Are you sure we want to do this in broad daylight?"

"It'll just look like we're fishing," Cheryl said and pulled out two poles with open bails loaded with heavy fishing line. "Did you forget where you are? No one cares. They keep to themselves, and who knows, we might catch something else."

They climbed into the Whitehall, wearing life jackets, and headed out toward the middle of the calm lake. In the sunshine, it felt like an entirely different body of water. In different circumstances, this would seem like a holiday. A wonderful throwback to the best part of Cheryl's life. She may not have seen her parents during the school year, but those weeks spent on the Cape were bittersweet memories.

Marla seemed to be thoroughly enjoying herself, dangling her fingers in the water.

Once they'd reached the middle, Cheryl cast a line over the side.

"Are you sure you have enough length?" Marla asked.

"This rod is used for deep-sea fishing. Plus, it's a weighted hook for salmon snagging; some of those fish are massive. It'll reach the bottom."

They let it drop…down, down, down. Cheryl moved the rod from one side to the other, hoping to catch something of substance, like a man caught in a chicken-wire cage with a weight tied to his leg.

Then something caught. Cheryl started reeling it in, hauling like she used to as a kid. Marla grabbed the bent rod and helped pull. It wasn't as heavy as she expected, but that could have been residual buoyancy that dead bodies tended to have as gases built up inside. Cheryl tried not to think about it, but whatever it was, it was coming up and wasn't a rainbow trout.

As it got closer to the surface, the chicken wire flashed with the sun. But it had clumps of weeds streaming from it, like siren hair, like it had been down there a long time.

They looked at each other.

When it broke the surface, it wasn't Parker.

It was a cage of bones. They held it there, right at the surface.

Marla's face went sheet-white. She reached a finger through the wire and touched something snagged in the edge of the mesh, around the bones of the neck, and intertwined with weeds from the bottom.

A necklace.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 38

MARLA

As I gripped the corroded silver necklace, I couldn't speak. A tightness swirled in my core, spreading to my limbs like a tornado. It was the other half of a pine tree. Identical, but the mirror image of the one around my own neck.

I had finally found my mother. Jenny Briggs. The bones had disconnected and stained a deep brown from the muck at the bottom of the lake.

"Marla," Cheryl asked and put a gentle hand on my shoulder. "Are you okay?"

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. Touching the pendant was like gripping an electric fence. Like the time I'd tried to pet the horses at the farm on the other side of Bog Creek. A full charge ran from the top of my head to my toes.

This chicken-wire cage of bones was all that was left of my mother. That and this pendant, a promise that we'd always be together. Two halves of a whole. A promise my mother couldn't keep because of something that happened here almost twenty years ago on Echo Loon Lake.

The sob bubbled out of my throat before I could contain it.

"What is it?" she asked softly.

"This is my mother."

She reached for my arm, but I shrugged her off. "How do you know? They're just bones. It could be anybody."

Leaning over the side of the boat, I tried to detach the necklace from the place it was snagged, intertwined in the bits of bone and caught on a sharp curl of wire. I tried to undo the latch, but I couldn't. It was corroded and stuck. My trembling fingers had no hope, and my throat closed. I rotated the cage a few degrees and showed Cheryl: half of a pine tree, the delicate silver eroded to a rusty patina.

Then I let it go, swallowing as the necklace caught the sun, the only bright thing in the cage.

I pointed to the one at my own neck. “She wore one half. I wore the other. Mom was here the whole time…” My voice trembled, trailing off.

Jenny had never left me.

I didn’t know whether to cry, scream, or sob. Finally, I had my answer. My mother had never left me. She’d been murdered and tossed like trash to the bottom of the lake.

“What should we do?” Cheryl whispered.

She released the cage, and I hooked my fingers through the top. Bits of metal sloughed off, floating red and crusty on the water’s surface. There was silence as we contemplated the remains of Jenny Briggs. These dark bones and the necklace were all that was left. That and my memories.

Mama Goose swam by, with her three babies swimming in a line behind her. I smiled at the cute antics of her brood, bumping into each other and squawking indignantly. I let them take my mind away for a brief moment.

“Do we pull her up?” Cheryl asked. “Bury her?”

I thought about it, feeling buoyed by the visit from the goose. It was as if my mother was sending me a message. The circle of life went on, and she was far past caring where she lived.

“My mother always loved the lake,” I said slowly. “Spending the rest of eternity here, perhaps... I don’t think she would have minded that.”

Cheryl nodded. “Sally Dobbin is most likely keeping her company. She and Jenny can gang up on Parker in the afterlife.”

Two ghosts forever beating Parker with oars was a delightful image. A more practical thought took over.

“Parker’s body must be in this area. If we report the finding of a body…”

“The police will be called in. They will dredge the lake or send down a drone,” she finished my sentence.

I took a deep breath and let my mind clear for a moment. It was important to see this as a whole, untainted by personal feelings or desire.

“Parker has a weight tied to his ankle. I don’t know how we’d sell self-defense,” I said.

Cheryl shook her head. “We wouldn’t.”

With that, I let my fingers slowly release their grip on the cage, and we both watched it sink back down to the deepest part of Echo Loon Lake.

“Are we done fishing for today?”

I felt weightless. Reborn. As I stretched my arms to the sky, I said, “Yes.”

Cheryl joined me, the two of us reaching for the sun. “Now what?” she asked.

“Are you going to be able to sleep, satisfied that Parker’s no longer a threat?”

“There’s leverage now.” Cheryl picked up the oars. “We literally know where the bodies are buried. If Amos, or anyone on the HOA, tries to bother us again, we threaten to blow the lid on everything.”

She began to row.

“I thought we decided no law?”

Cheryl chewed on her lower lip. “They don’t know we killed Parker. Remember, the story is we were never out on the lake at all, except for your quick trip here in your kayak. And nobody knows any different. Parker ran off with some woman.”

Something in my chest expanded; the threat would be enough to keep us safe. I relaxed into my seat, focusing on the Viceroy, which got closer with every stroke.

It loomed, unique and tall on the shoreline. The many windows reflected the blue-green lake and the clouds traveling across the sky. A mirror image of paradise.

My new home.

As we drew up to the dock, I saw a form moving in the game room through the sliding glass doors.

“Cheryl!” I gasped.

My friend went completely still, and neither of us got out of the boat. Then her shoulders relaxed.

“It’s Thursday. That’s just the housekeeper. If she’s in the basement, she’s almost done.”

I climbed out of the boat and looped the rope to the ring while a tingling touched my temples. My mother had been a housekeeper.

If I was going to live on this lake, part of my mission would be to make sure no more inconvenient women joined Jenny. They'd all be treated with dignity and respect.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 39

CHERYL

Cheryl was enjoying coffee with her new roommate, loving how sparkly clean the house was. Friday mornings were the best because the housemaid had just scrubbed every nook and cranny.

“I can get used to this,” Marla said, taking a particularly loud slurp. “There aren’t even any smudges on your windows.”

“We’ll have to devise a chore list later,” Cheryl said, pouring herself a second cup.

The current cleaner was an older lady and even had grandchildren. Looked like the HOA had learned a lesson about dangling temptation in front of their entitled residents.

Marla held out her mug for more java, grinning like a teenage girl after a sleepover. Her cheeks were pink and her brunette hair, so like Cheryl’s, was mussed.

They’d spent all of last night drinking wine and talking about their discovery in the lake; they had a solid plan going forward. Parker had no family in the country and wasn’t that popular back in Scotland. Better yet, he was an illegal. Not even registered in Canada and working under the table.

The story was he’d run off with a new sugar mama.

There was a knock at the door, startling them both, and Cheryl glanced at her watch.

“Who’d be knocking on your door this early?” Marla asked, raising her eyebrows.

Cheryl’s stomach flipped. Solid story aside, there was always that little bit of fear that the police might show up anyhow. “Do you think…”

The younger woman shook her head. “What happens at the lake stays at the lake. I can tell you that almost no news ever trickles out of those locked gates. I’ve been obsessed with this place for years. I know.”

Cheryl went to the door. Through the window, she saw the irritated, pretty face of Elena Morgenstein, arms crossed over her chest, tapping the

deck with one high-heeled Croc sandal.

“It’s Elena Morgenstein, and she’s wearing the most ghastly footwear,” Cheryl said. She felt bad instantly for acting like the gossipy type. “Sorry. She’s Parker’s most recent little love fling.”

“Parker!” Elena pounded on the door. “I know you’re in there. You were supposed to come do some weeding last night, and I never saw you.”

“Is that what she calls it?” Marla murmured.

Cheryl opened the door.

“Oh,” Elena said, letting her eyes travel over Cheryl’s body. She curled her lip. “Do you know where your husband is? My garden looks like a highway ditch.”

“I’m sure your garden is fine,” Cheryl said.

“It’s not,” Elena snapped.

“Parker didn’t come home last night.” Cheryl leaned against the door frame, giving Elena a conspiratorial wink. “You know, I think he’s cheating on me.”

The other woman’s face went white, her lips puckering into a tight little ‘O.’ “Is that so?”

“The man is never home.” She leaned forward to sniff in front of Elena’s chest. “And when he does show up, he smells like Chanel Number Five.”

“Does he?” Elena took a step back.

“Hey, Marla,” Cheryl called over her shoulder, “didn’t you say you saw Parker in town, in North Bay, at the Cookhouse, with some devastatingly attractive black-haired woman?”

“Oh, yes,” Marla said. “They looked pretty cozy.”

Elena’s face went red.

Cheryl turned back to the flustered woman at her door. “Just between you and me, his passport is gone, his wallet is gone. We’ve been having some problems in the…” She pointed upstairs to the bedrooms. “You know, boudoir. I suspect he might have left me for this other woman. And I’m okay with that.”

They had a bit of a stare-down. Elena opened her mouth, then shut it again, then finally said, “Well. Maybe it’s time I took up tennis.” She started down the steps, then spun back. “I still need my garden done. If Parker’s not going to come pull weeds, who is? We pay a ridiculous maintenance fee here, and I still expect my landscaping to be done, even if the help has run off with some tramp.”

Stomping her Croc sandals, Elena stormed down the road.

Cheryl and Marla giggled, collapsing into hysteria, holding their sides at the kitchen island.

Marla recovered first. “Wow, that’s a pretty detailed cover story. You think well on your feet.”

“I am good at writing stories.” Cheryl smiled, then paused. “Speaking of, I’d like to get back to reconstructing my novel. They’ve got AI tools now, don’t they? That can take a picture and transcribe it back into text?”

“I believe they do.” Marla pursed her lips. “But aren’t you afraid of cybersecurity?”

“I am. But I have a new plan.”

“Oh, do tell.”

“Follow me.”

Cheryl led the way to the basement and stopped in front of the newspaper clippings of Jenny and Sally’s disappearances.

“I’m thinking the best way forward might be for me to tell the story from a fictional point of view.”

“Why’s that?” Marla asked, lightly touching her mother’s news story.

“The true story might bring the Mounties to Echo Loon. And fiction allows me far more latitude.”

Cheryl started taking the pictures off the wall. Marla kept a palm on her mother’s story, but then she took it down herself. They piled them into a storage box.

“We still have one pressing need,” Cheryl said. “Elena was right. Who’s going to do Parker’s job, which will forestall any questions? You have to know people as a realtor who do landscaping and gardening.”

Marla laughed. “You know what? I might know a good candidate.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 40

MARLA

Cheryl picked up the box of clippings and looked over the brim of the cardboard. “Who are you thinking of? This is a busy time of year. Most landscapers are booked up for months.”

“That’s true.” I couldn’t help my wide grin. “But I know of someone who’s been at it a long time, yet is just now turning to professional work because his previous job ended.”

Earl would be the perfect choice for the new landscape manager at Echo Loon Lake.

He sacrificed the ownership of his mechanic shop for me and confessed he’d rather garden.

Here was my chance to pay him back.

“I’ll head home and grab some clothes and talk to the best handyman I know. He can even fix equipment.”

Cheryl put the box of old newspaper clippings into a storage room by her furnace and wiped the dust off her hands. “Excellent. That should help sell him to the HOA. Someone has to fix the golf cart; it’s ancient.”

“Can you set up an interview for him this afternoon?”

“Sure, I’ll head over to Amos’s place and tell him I’ve found someone who can begin work immediately,” she said hopefully.

“Think Amos will go for it?”

Cheryl puffed out her cheeks and did a fairly terrible Marlon Brando *Godfather* impersonation. “I’ll make him an offer he can’t refuse.”

I snorted. “Alright, I’ll send my friend over. Be ready to buzz him in. And get me a keycard while you’re at Amos’s house.”

“Will do.” She glanced around to make sure no one was nearby, even though they were alone in the house. “Although I have Parker’s, which he won’t be using.”

We paused for a moment to study our handiwork. The maps of the lake and photos of the old mines were still on the wall. It looked more like a regular game room and less like an investigator’s war room.

Cheryl gave me Parker’s keycard, and I held it for a moment before tucking it into my purse. Access to Echo Loon Lake around the clock. Not only until five. Not as the help. Here was a card that Amos couldn’t take from me.

As I drove through the gates, I had mixed feelings about moving out of the trailer park. It wasn’t going to take much for me to change addresses. There was no need for me to bring any of my sad, thrift store furniture. None of it would fit with the Viceroy’s decor, anyhow.

It would be my last night sleeping in Bog Creek Trailer Park. All I had to do was pack up my few clothes, my favorite books, grab my yoga mat off the top of the trailer, and that’d be it. I’d be on my way.

Was it really that simple?

Yes, but only if Earl was able to take the landscape position at Echo Loon Lake. I realized that I needed to see him frequently if I were to maintain my sanity.

Bubbles of excitement filled my stomach. I really hoped Earl was home, because I had a proposition for him. The only thing that would have kept me at the park was Earl, but maybe I could take him with me.

As I parked the Sunfire in the gravel driveway next to my mother’s home, my throat tightened. Rather than go straight into my trailer, I walked to Bog Creek, letting the rush of water and sound of burbling calm me. As it always had. This was the place where I’d grown up until I was eight. It had seen my saddest moments, like when my mother disappeared and child services took me. It also held some of my fondest memories, like the wild and innocent time when I dated Earl, when I could count on Karen for meals that tasted far better than anything I could cook.

How many nights had I sat on the roof of my trailer? Counting the stars, meditating, and attempting to manifest a lucrative future? One where I lived someplace like the rich enclave on the other side of the lake?

Now here I was, making it happen, although that route wasn’t one I ever wanted to travel again. The fight on the boat might haunt me forever, were it not for the evil that seemed to emanate from Parker. How could someone who looked like that be so rotten on the inside?

Earl joined me, so silently I didn’t notice him until he was touching my elbow.

“Hey!” I jumped half a foot.

“You didn’t come home last night.” He tilted his ballcap back. Though he was grinning, his blue eyes couldn’t hide the hurt. “Is there a new man in the picture?”

“No, nothing like that.” I slipped an arm around his waist. “But there is a new woman.”

“Don’t tell me you switched teams.”

I laughed. “No, but she’s gorgeous, and I’m moving in with her.”

His face screwed up in confusion. “What? Sometimes you confuse the hell out of me, Marla.”

“Turns out my client, Cheryl Calder, isn’t selling that Viceroy at Echo Loon Lake.” I tried the new story out. “Her husband ran off with another woman, leaving her in the lurch, and she asked if I could move in with her. We’ve become good friends.”

“You don’t say.” The confusion disappeared. He smiled.

Earl could always tell when I was lying, and he gave me that look now. The one where he lifted one eyebrow while scrunching up his nose.

I held my breath.

He coughed, but he didn’t challenge my tale. That was another great thing about Earl. He knew when to let things slide.

“Well, if you’re living at Echo Loon, maybe you can get me over for a visit. See what all the hubbub is about.”

“I can get you in, but not as a guest. What do you think about starting your landscaping company right now and getting to work?” I picked up a stone and tossed it into the creek. “Cheryl’s husband was the general laborer for the Homeowner’s Association, so with him gone, the position is open and they kinda sorta need it filled right now.”

“It might be a fast kayak, but it’s almost an hour by road.” Earl picked up a much bigger rock and tossed it in. It splashed both of us. “Not interested in that commute.”

I jumped back, wiping my cheek. “What if a boathouse came with the position?”

“More interesting.” He wiped a few missed drops from my nose.

I caught his hand and let my voice soften. “I know it’s been hard living here without your mom. How’s Karen doing?”

“As well as can be expected. She’s got good days and bad. But I’m visiting her regularly.” He squeezed my palm and then let go.

“Well, Echo Loon Lake is no farther from North Bay than this is.” I pointed down the narrows. “What’s keeping you here?”

“You,” he said bluntly.

“So…we could both move to Echo Loon Lake. We’d be together. We wouldn’t have to break up the band.”

Earl pretended to play air guitar, and I played along with him. It was our favorite Bob and Doug McKenzie imitation.

He curled one side of his mouth. “Good day, eh?”

“Take off, you hoser!” I laughed.

When we were done with our skit, I asked, “Do you have to keep working at the mechanic shop for the Northern Drillers?”

Earl shook his head. “Turns out Derrick has a nephew who needs a job.”

A bit of anger flared through me, even though this worked in my favor. “So, he’s kicking you out of your own shop?”

“It’s his shop, and that’s not how he put it.”

“How did he put it?”

Earl raised one hand, baby finger out, like he was holding an English teacup. “My nephew, having apparently exhausted the considerable opportunities afforded by idleness, is in need of gainful employment. He can wield a wrench. Henceforth, he shall be running the garage.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Sounds about right for that guy. Eccentric bugger.”

“So, how do I apply for the job?”

I slapped my thigh. “Got that set up already! Hop in the old Ford and head on over now. Cheryl will meet you at the gate. Perhaps you can take a few of my boxes over while you’re at it? Two birds with one stone?”

“Absolutely,” he said. “And once the job’s mine, I’m happy to move. You’re my family.”

I checked my watch. “Excellent. Well, I have a standing appointment with Tina every Friday afternoon, and I better show if I want to keep my job.”

“If I’m going to move out of here, I better make arrangements for someone to feed the feral cats. Just in case I get the job,” Earl said. He was already seeing himself working in landscaping at Echo Loon Lake and enjoying his time outdoors, somewhere other than the trailer park where he was raised and where his fondest memories were behind him.

***

Tina’s office didn’t smell like smoke anymore. Instead, the sweetness of potpourri fought with the sharpness of bleach. She was running a vacuum over the tired rug, her wild hair tied up in a bun with a handkerchief.

She clicked off the Hoover and wiped her brow when I walked in.

“Wow, what happened here?” Even the windows weren’t smudged, which let the afternoon sun beam into the normally dank room.

“I’ve kicked the darts,” she said, putting the vacuum in the closet. “And this time, it’s for good. I just have to keep myself busy.”

I noticed not one but two nicotine patches on her arm. She kept speaking, the words coming quickly, even for her.

“Have a seat, Marla. Good news. The beer store sale’s going through for sure.” She scowled at my Sunfire parked in front of the office. “Get a new vehicle. What you drive does matter for a real estate agent.”

She pushed a check across the desk. “I’m giving you your commission early. Go directly to the car dealership. They know you’re coming and have a five-year-old, but good-as-new, Escalade set aside. They’ll even take your rust-bucket as a trade-in. I had to call in a few favors for that.”

At first, I was a bit miffed that Tina was being a tad controlling. But an Escalade was a fantastic vehicle for our climate and would fit right in at my new home. I could also load it up with signs for future properties I was responsible for. “Okay. Will do.” It was hard to say more. I didn’t know why.

“There’s a lot of opportunity in that new development in Callander.” She took a handful of listings from the printer. “Here’s a few. See if you can

find buyers.”

“Will do.” I tucked the papers into my purse. Challenge accepted. “You have to change my address on my employment record.”

Tina fingered behind her ear, looking for a cigarette that wasn’t there. “Why is that?”

“I’m moving into Echo Loon Lake. The Viceroy is officially off the market.”

“What?” She popped a piece of gum into her mouth.

“Cheryl’s husband took off with another woman.” The lie was getting easier already. I almost believed it myself. “I’m her new roomie!”

Tina scratched her nicotine patches. “That’s Echo Loon Lake’s legacy, isn’t it? People disappear. Same rumor, always. Running off with other people.”

I didn’t say anything else. I didn’t need to. Tina was a smart woman.

“So, what happens to your trailer?” A calculating expression crossed her face. “Because I’ve got clients looking for places to lease. Waterfront is at a premium.”

“Well, mine comes furnished. And Earl’s might be up for rent as well.”

Tina smiled like the Grinch who stole Christmas. “Good. Let me handle it. It’s too weird for you to rent out your own place.”

“You got it. And, Tina?”

She looked at me, her hands resting calmly on her desk. Something I’d never seen before. “Yes?”

“Thank you for the opportunity. You’ve made a difference in my life.”

Tina’s cheeks went pink. “You’re welcome, Marla.” It was almost as if she was embarrassed. She didn’t take compliments well. “Lots to sell, lots to do. We’ll be seeing you.”

I was dismissed.

Grinning, I made my way out with the biggest check I’d ever seen in my life. I had an Escalade to buy.

I didn’t need to manifest the perfect life. I was living it.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 41

MARLA

ONE WEEK LATER

I fit into the rhythms of Echo Loon Lake like I'd been living this song forever. Amos had been surprisingly gracious about hiring Earl and granting him the boathouse. I think he'd been dreading doing the maintenance all by himself.

Earl moved in the day after I did and had the place looking spiffy in no time. He dove into the community, beautifying it the same way he fixed cars. Not afraid to get his hands dirty, and at all hours of the day.

You could practically see the tongues hanging out of the female—and some of the male—residents of the community as Earl mowed lawns and improved gardens.

Tina hadn't been exaggerating. She had both our trailers rented instantly. Some nice extra income while I organized open houses for my new listings.

There was one thing nagging at me, and I brought it up to Cheryl after our meditation session that Friday evening.

I wanted to say good-bye to my mother and Sally Dobbin in a proper way. Though we hadn't dredged up the Australian builder's bones, I knew in my heart that she was at the bottom of Echo Loon Lake with Parker and my mother.

Even if there would never be a real tell-all book with guilty parties going to jail, I wanted to say a final good-bye.

Cheryl had switched over to a computer since the first ninety percent of her book had been converted into digital form. She spent most of the week reworking her book as fiction, her typewriter-style keyboard clacking for hours every day, but the truth would never be official.

After rolling up our yoga mats on the dock, I told Cheryl my idea. "I'd like to hold some sort of vigil. A way to say good-bye to Sally and my mother, Jenny."

I looked up at the sky. It was clear and beautiful. Perfect conditions for a sunset boat ride.

She was immediately on board. “Why don’t we take those racing kayaks? I saw you eyeing them last week.”

“Ooh, yes. I’ve always wanted to try one.” My kayak was sitting on the side of the dock, but it was like comparing my new Escalade to the Sunfire. A completely different ride.

We packed a cooler with champagne.

The boats were so light, it was easy to carry them down to the dock from the shed. They were sleek, gorgeous, and extravagant. I knew they were used for surfing rescues in Australia, so it seemed fitting that we were using them to say good-bye to the Aussie builder of the Viceroy.

The two of us paddled side by side, our boats slicing through the water like a sharp knife through melon. As far as sunsets went, this one might have been the most stunning one I’d ever seen, maybe because of the circumstances or because of the new direction in my life. The horizon was a mix of blue, pink, orange, and red.

When we got to the deep middle, we glided to a stop. The sun was just dipping behind the trees, and the colors were at their most brilliant. Cheryl brought out the cooler from where she’d tucked it at her feet and poured me a glass of champagne. Veuve Clicquot. No messing around with sparkling wine for Cheryl. We clinked glasses and took a sip. It was delicious—bubbly and dry.

After my first swallow, I poured a little into the lake.

“This is for you, Mom,” I said. “I wish we’d had more time together. And I promise you, I’ll be watching over you from now on.”

“And to Sally Dobbin. Thank you for our beautiful home.” Cheryl poured some of her golden liquid into the water. “No more women are going to vanish without a trace. Not on our watch.”

We sat there silently, each involved in our own memories of the past.

It was a fitting memorial. Quiet, beautiful, and secretive. Just like their final resting place.

As we paddled back, Cheryl slowed her boat at the harbormaster’s dock.

Earl was watering newly planted hostas and wildflowers around the boathouse, the waning light of the day illuminating his fantastic physique. His muscles bulged out of his cut-off tank top, and he was just sweaty enough to highlight the tight skin around statuesque musculature.

Cheryl gave a low whistle. “What is that? Is he wearing a wife-beater?”

“That’s what city folk call it. But north of Toronto, it’s just a shirt with no sleeves.”

“He’s quite easy on the eyes.” She allowed her boat to drift even closer. “And what is that hairstyle?”

Earl’s long black hair curled around his neck, and he’d recently shaved the top of his head.

“That is called a mullet. Also something sported with pride by some fine Northern Ontario hockey players. Short on top, so you don’t sweat too much in your helmet, and then it’s a party at the back. He was an NHL prospect.”

I assumed Cheryl heard the pride in my voice. “So, what’s the story between you and Earl?”

“What do you mean?”

“There must be history between you. Have you knocked uglies?”

“Cheryl!”

She laughed. “Well, you’d have to be blind not to notice he’s gorgeous.”

I pointed my paddle at the other man standing on the hill. Someone I’d almost not noticed.

Amos stood in the shadows of the pines, hands on his hips. But instead of watching us, he was watching his new hire water an assortment of brightly colored tiger lilies, irises, and sunflowers. Splashes of gold, purple, and red.

They were fully in bloom, so I assumed Earl had dug them up from a ditch or field somewhere and transplanted them. I snorted at the scowl on Amos’s face. “Are those HOA-approved flowers?”

“Nope.” Cheryl put a finger on her lip. “Looks like some things might be changing around here.”

“Earl has a way of doing that. He writes his own rules.” I dug back into the water with my oar. “Let’s go.”

Cheryl wolf-whistled, and Earl turned, saluting us as we paddled by.

She leaned over and grabbed the side of my kayak. “If he’s not spoken for…”

“We’re just friends.”

“Right,” she said. “Well, I wouldn’t mind swinging a leg over.”

“Don’t be a dirty old lady.”

“I’m only thirty-two.” She laughed. “Does it look bad if I move on from Parker before his side of the bed is even cold?”

I splashed some water at her with my paddle. “Well, they say the best way to get over a man is to get under a new one.”

“Now who’s the dirty one?” Cheryl splashed me back. “I’ve been noticing Elena Morgenstein hanging around. She’s an actual cougar.”

The last woman I wanted near Earl was Elena Morgenstein, but I had to play it cool. “Well, if I look as good as her at that age, I’d happily be called a cougar.”

“Goals!” she chirped.

I absolutely loved Cheryl. We’d found such a great friendship.

As I stroked, I thought about Earl. He had always loved me, and those were some fun times when we’d dated. But he had been stuck in the trailer park, working on greasy motorcycles. Now, he was right where I was. At Echo Loon Lake. No longer a trailer-park boy.

That was dangerous thinking.

I had properties to sell and a new life to build. Then again, so did Earl.

Maybe there was room in my bed for my best friend. I’d have to think about it, maybe over some fine wine that I had added to Cheryl’s spendy wine cooler. I better decide soon before Cheryl tried to take Earl for a test drive. I could feel the hackles rise on my back. Jealousy? My decision was getting easier. But first, the wine.

***

Pick up the next book in the series – all new characters, same lake…

Ride the Odds (https://geni.us/RideTheOdds) by Craig Martelle and Angelique Fawns

THE END of The Dream Listing

Look for the return of Echo Loon Lake with *Ride the Odds* and what that lake does to humanity, magnifying both the best and worst traits in those blessed to live along its shore.

Author Notes - Craig Martelle

Written August 2026

I can't thank you enough for reading this book to the end. Holy cow! You're still here.

I put out a call in early July of 2026 looking for unique ideas to co-write. Angelique came at me from Canada with the full strength of one of those polar vortices. I couldn't deny her energy. I'm usually skeptical when someone appears so motivated to get an opportunity, but as it turned out, Angelique and I were able to write this book in less than six weeks, which was years quicker than her previous titles and a book that I wouldn't have been able to write alone. Not in six weeks. Not ever.

When you have the backbone of a story, the start, middle, and end, all that's left is to fill in the details. That went quickly. I heard that's where the devil is, but not when it comes to writing books. That's the fun part—fleshing out those characters and the verbal jousting of every dialogue. That's the fun part of storytelling and where one's imagination has to be up to speed. Embed yourself in a world of your own creation and write what you see.

We weren't supposed to finish this book until December. When a story flows, it simply flows. You write it while you're all the way into it and keep writing until the story ends. That's how I've been able to write so many books over the years, me and in many cases, with my co-authors.

I’m a fan of a good psych thriller as long as it doesn’t come with the jump scares and brain melts with twisted reality. That’s too much like horror for me. Families with secrets on top of secrets buried beneath more secrets? That’s more like it.

There we are. The first book in the Echo Loon Lake Series. You might get a cameo appearance from one of these characters in future books of this series, but each will stand full on its own with the central element being Echo Loon Lake, the entire lake surrounded by communities both good and bad.

Keep reading and we’ll keep writing.

Peace, fellow humans.

***

If you liked this story, you might like some of my other books. You can join my mailing list by dropping by my website, or if you have any comments, shoot me a note at craig@craigmartelle.com. I am always happy to hear from people who’ve read my work. I try to answer every email I receive.

If you liked the story, please write a short review for me on Amazon. I greatly appreciate any kind words; even one or two sentences go a long way. The number of reviews an ebook receives greatly improves how well it does on Amazon.

Amazon— https://www.amazon.com/author/craigmartelle
Facebook— https://www.facebook.com/martelle2
BookBub— https://www.bookbub.com/authors/craig-martelle
My web page— https://craigmartelle.com

Thank you for joining me on this incredible journey.

Author Notes – Angelique Fawns

Hello fellow psychological suspense fans,

I just love a book where it all comes together at the end. The good gals win and the universe delivers.

Kind of like how my co-writer Craig Martelle delivers. I can still hardly believe how quickly and easily this book came together. This is the fourth novel I've written and the only one that took me less than two years!

Like Marla in this book, I believe that things happen for a reason. And Craig came into my life at precisely the right time.

Though I've been writing all my professional life (television producer and journalist) I didn't start penning fiction till 2018, starting with short stories. My very first murder mystery sold to *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, and I've since sold over 140 tales in total to a variety of comics, podcasts, magazines, and anthologies.

But the dream is to go loooong. Novels. When I saw Craig's call for co-writers, I responded immediately, and luckily I did, because he only had his window for submissions up for a very short time.

In fact, I sent him two pitches. Breaking his rules. (Also, like Marla, I believe sometimes you have to toss caution to the wind.)

First, I pitched a space opera, because Craig has mastered that genre and has a zillion fans. Then, almost as an afterthought, I sent him a story idea that had been living at the back of my brain for a couple of years.

The Dream Listing was inspired by a time when my husband and I were considering moving north to a lake community. We visited the most stunning house up north, and I hauled my kayak up to the lake to stalk the property from the water.

That's when the idea was born. What a concept for a stalker thriller! A woman who doesn't just fall in love with a house, but with the seller's entire life.

We didn't end up buying that house. It got taken off the market. But the story stuck around and Craig gave me the keys to unlock it and finally get it on paper.

Another obsession of mine? Horse racing! Hint, hint, you'll want to watch for it.

I hope you enjoy all the future adventures at Echo Loon Lake.

Happy paddling,
Angelique

OceanofPDF.com

Other Series by Craig Martelle

#—available in audio, too

Terry Henry Walton Chronicles (#) (co-written with Michael Anderle)—a post-apocalyptic paranormal adventure

Gateway to the Universe (#) (co-written with Justin Sloan & Michael Anderle)—this book transitions the characters from the Terry Henry Walton Chronicles to the Bad Company

The Bad Company (#) (co-written with Michael Anderle)—a military science fiction space opera

Judge, Jury, & Executioner (#)—a space opera adventure legal thriller

Shadow Vanguard—a Tom Dublin space adventure series

Superdreadnought (#)—an AI military space opera

Metal Legion (#)—a military space opera

The Free Trader (#)—a young adult science fiction action-adventure

Cygnus Space Opera (#)—a young adult space opera (set in the Free Trader universe)

Darklanding (#) (co-written with Scott Moon)—a space Western

Mystically Engineered (co-written with Valerie Emerson)—mystics, dragons, & spaceships

Metamorphosis Alpha—stories from the world's first science fiction RPG

The Expanding Universe—science fiction anthologies

Zenophobia (#) (co-written with Brad Torgersen)—a space archaeological adventure

Battleship Leviathan (#)– a military sci-fi spectacle published by Aethon Books

Glory (co-written with Ira Heinichen)—hard-hitting military sci-fi

Black Heart of the Dragon God (co-written with Jean Rabe)—a sword & sorcery novel

Starship Lost – a hard-science, military sci-fi epic published by Aethon Books

Veracity of Failure – a hard-science technothriller, the race to Mars

I, Soldier – military sci-fi

Merchants of Light (co-written with Robert G. Williscroft)—hard science fiction

End Times Alaska (#)—a post-apocalyptic survivalist adventure

Nightwalker (a Frank Roderus series)—A post-apocalyptic Western adventure

End Days (#) (co-written with E.E. Isherwood)—a post-apocalyptic adventure

Defiant (#)—an Alaska-based post-apocalyptic series. The rise and the fall of society.

Successful Indie Author (#)—a nonfiction series to help self-published authors

Monster Case Files (co-written with Kathryn Hearst)—A Warner twins mystery adventure

Rick Banik (#)—Spy & terrorism action-adventure

Ian Bragg Thrillers (#)—a hitman with a conscience

A Medical Thriller (co-written with James Toouli) – Medical thrillers set in Australia

Echo Loon Lake (co-written with Angelique Fawns) — Psychological Thrillers

Published exclusively by Craig Martelle, Inc

The Gygax Odyssey – Luke Gygax and J. Clifton Slater – son of the legendary co-creator of Dungeons & Dragons™ retells the stories his father used to tell about the origin of the Gygax family

A Couples Travels—a nonfiction travel series

Love-Haight Case Files by Jean Rabe & Donald J. Bingle—the dead/undead have rights, too, a supernatural legal thriller

Mischief Maker by Bruce Nesmith—the creator of Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim brings you Loki in the modern day, staying true to Norse mythology (not a superhero version)

Where the Waters Fall by Brian Walden—a coming of age story

For a complete list of Craig's books, stop by his website—https://craigmartelle.com

Other Books by Angelique Fawns

If you enjoy adventure-filled fiction with suspense and flawed heroines worth cheering for, you're gonna love my other books. You can join my mailing list by visiting my Substack at angeliquemfawns.substack.com or visit my website at www.fawns.ca. Always happy to chat at angeliquefawns@icloud.com.

City Lights to Country Nights – A cowgirl adventure romance, perfect for Christmas.

The Chronicles of Roxie Vega – Join the serial adventures of a gambling space trucker.

The Horror Lite Anthologies – 13 short stories in each that will chill and delight.

The Selling Stories Series – Ever wanted to sell stories yourself?

OceanofPDF.com