**The Joker's Revenge**

Chapter one

Darci bolted upright, her lungs expanding and contracting like an accordion on steroids. A trail of perspiration saturated her faded pillowcase, streaking like endless trails across an open meadow. That dream again. No, not a dream, a bone-chilling, bona fide nightmare is what it was. And it was always the same⎯a trail meandering through prickly blackberry bushes, across a babbling brook and past a huge maple tree. Footsteps snapping dead branches until the young girl, who bears a striking resemblance to her late mother, trips over a root and finds herself lying on the ground. A sinister figure with dark steely eyes glares down at her, his pasty white face resembling a depraved clown. He's dressed in bright colors of purple and green, but that part's a bit hazy. His lopsided grin bursts into malevolent laughter.

Darci pulled a tissue from the box and dragged it across her clammy forehead, glancing at the alarm clock perched upon her aging dresser. 5:00 a.m. A puppy graced the front, and two keys in the back set the time and wound it up. It was a birthday gift from her parents on her tenth birthday, one of the last she would have with her mother. She stared at the framed picture of her mother kneeling in front of her prized lilac bushes, the sweet fragrance of the blooms still fresh in her memory. Now it was just Darci and her dad, doing their best to make ends meet and keep the meager farm going.

"Darci! Time to get up. Breakfast doesn't make itself, you know. I did you a favor and collected the eggs this morning, but don't get too spoiled 'cause I'm not gonna do that every day."

She wrapped her flannel bathrobe over her pajamas, staring at her feet as she pounded down the stairs. "I'll start the coffee."

"Get up on the wrong side of the bed this morning, did ya? If you don't stop shakin' you'll dump more water on the floor than in the pot. What's the matter?"

"I had that dream again, you know, the one I told you about. It's freaking me out! You should see this monster, he…"

Mr. Miller held up his palm. "Darci, stop. We don't have time for such nonsense. Dreams are for dreamers, you know. Now please scramble those eggs and do your chores before the bus comes. You don't want to be late for school."

She dumped cream into the eggs, whipping them into a frenzy before pouring the remaining cream into her father's coffee cup. "I won't be late."

Taking a seat at the table, her father noticed something poking out from underneath her chair cushion. "What's THIS?" He ripped the magazine from the chair. "Teen Magazine?" Cheryl Ladd graced the cover. He started flipping through the pages. "How to apply makeup? Belly dancing? Birth control? Don't you have more important things to do than waste your time on this garbage?" His eyes narrowed as he unfolded a newspaper clipping hidden between the pages. "Well looky here…it's that horoscope baloney again."

"It's not baloney! All my friends read their horoscopes. There's nothing wrong with it. It's *1972*, not 1952!"

"Don't sass me, young lady. I know perfectly well what year it is. You know, I thought time would heal the hole your mother's death left in my heart, but each year seems to get harder, not easier. If only you hadn't…" Mr. Miller squeezed his eyes shut.

Darci's stomach clenched. "Hadn't what? Killed her? That's what you were going to say, wasn't it? Don't you think I'm hurting too, losing mom when I was only eleven? The last six years haven't been a picnic for me either. I don't think you even care how I feel." She bit her lower lip, drops of blood spilling onto Cheryl Ladd's blonde hair, melding with a trickle of salty tears.

Mr. Miller lowered his head into his hands. "Of course I care how you feel. I know it wasn't your fault. It was an accident. A terrible, stinkin' accident. I guess the stress of being both a father and mother to you and putting food on the table has been getting the better of me." He ran his hand through his thinning hair. "Maybe I have been pushing you too hard. I'm sorry Darci. I'll try to make it up to you." He picked up the magazine and dabbed a napkin over the damp cover, avoiding her eyes as he handed her the magazine. "Make sure you read the article about money making ideas, we could sure use some."

She slowly tapped a fork against her chin, her eyes fixated on an expanding crack in the wooden table. "Thanks Daddy, you just gave me an idea."

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Darci chewed her lower lip on the bus ride home from school. Her money-making idea just got some wings. Her teacher, Mrs. Beale, announced that Camp Chickadee for girls was looking for a high school student to run the office for the summer. *Maybe those boring typing classes will finally pay off.* Her heart raced at the thought of spending her first summer away from home, even though her stomach was in knots.

She dashed into the house and called her cousin. "Sandy, what should I do? I want this job wicked bad, but I know my father will never let me go. He says I'm wasting my life away in a dream world and to buckle down and work even harder around the farm."

Sandy shoved the phone under her chin while she drained a pot of spaghetti. "I hear you Darci, but here’s the skinny. You've got to set your foot down and don't take no for an answer. All you do *now* is go to school and work day and night. He won't even let you wear makeup or go to a school dance. What kind of life is that?"

"I know, but the farm's not making much money and his carpenter jobs are scarce, so I get why he's short with me. He even said he was sorry."

"Get out! Really? You mean there's hope for Uncle Charlie?"

"Very funny. He does have a heart under that crusty exterior, you know."

"I guess. Hey, you said he wanted you to earn money. If you get this job, he won't have to feed you for a couple of months, plus they pay your room and board. It's worth a shot. You need to see something besides cows and chickens."

"Ha, I guess you're right, I'll put an application in. Hey Sandy, remember those nightmares I told you about?" She looked around and lowered her voice. "I think they have something to do with my mother when she worked at Camp Chickadee. The girl in my dreams looks a lot like her. I've heard whispers about something happening to her when she worked there, but I don't know exactly what it was. Bits and pieces I've heard pop up in this nightmare. She's running from this creepy-looking clown until she trips and falls, then stares into his evil eyes. I wake up in a cold sweat every time. I have to find out what happened."

"Wowzers! My dreams are dull as dishwater compared to yours. But be careful what you look for…sometimes the truth is scarier than the dream."

Chapter two

"You couldn't find your way out of a cardboard box, Darci Miller," she mumbled to herself. The familiar words from her father echoed in her mind. A wave of fear spread through her as she gazed in all directions. *Nothing but overgrown pine trees and thorny bushes*. Her father taught her how to read a compass; a lot of good that would do, since she didn't bring it with her. The sun drifted westward, a reminder that darkness would soon be closing in. But she needed to come here⎯she had to find out what happened to her mother in these woods many years before*. Something bad.*

She still couldn't believe her father let her apply for the summer camp job. She was ready with a well-prepared defense, but her knees buckled when he not only said yes, but offered a full-fledged apology. *Talk about a change of heart.* *He loves me after all*.

The sound of gushing water snapped her back to reality, as the remnants of a snowy Maine winter cascaded over moss-covered rocks. *This stream was only a few feet wide where I crossed it an hour ago. Where am I?*

She dragged her hand through her hair as she gazed around the unfamiliar terrain, her thoughts turning to Ryker, her boss. It was her first week on the job but he kept popping up in her thoughts. His dark brown eyes were like deep pools of chocolate you could immerse yourself in, while his thick black hair fell loosely around his perfect earlobes. And when he smiled, his upper lip curled in an Elvis sort of way. But he also had a short temper and she quickly learned not to rile him.

"Ouch!" she cried, slapping her left shoulder. Mosquito-tainted blood trickled down her arm, blending with the bloody scratches from scads of thorny blackberry bushes*. I should have worn long sleeves. And boots!*

She found a long stick and jabbed it into the bottom of the stream, holding on tight as she planted her right foot on a protruding rock. But as she stepped forward, the frail stick snapped in half, propelling her sideways along the edge of a jagged stone. A trail of blood oozed down her arm as she struggled to cross the frigid stream, conquering the slippery rocks on her hands and knees.

A horde of black flies greeted her on the other side, adding to the bloody mess under her fingernails. But her eyes lit up as she turned the corner⎯a plume of smoke rose high above the trees. *A campfire?* Pressing ahead, she trampled through the bushes, sweeping them aside with a vengeance as spider webs tangled through her fingers. A bright flash illuminated the menacing trees, as loud rumbling echoed in the distance. *Thunder!* she quivered, tearing through another patch of menacing thorns.

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"Why do I let you talk me into these things?" Kayla grumbled, as Jessie scanned the path leading to the beach.

"Chill out, it's a canoe, not a rocket ship," Jessie said. "They won't miss it for a couple of hours. Besides, what could happen? There isn't a cloud in the sky. Well, at least there wasn't. Come on, help me launch this baby!"

The girls had been friends since Kindergarten, growing up in Greenwich, Connecticut. They always looked forward to spending summers at Camp Chickadee, though at times they got on each other's nerves. But their parents seemed to relish their eight weeks of freedom⎯golf anyone?

"Shhh...did you hear that?" Kayla whispered, her feet grinding to a halt.

Jessie nearly tripped over the canoe. "Hear what? It's probably a squirrel burying his nuts or something."

"Well it must be one gigantic squirrel because I heard twigs snapping. I think someone's watching us," Kayla said.

"Now you're imagining things. Stop being a fraidy-cat and let's get out on the water. We both agreed this would be more fun than making rope jewelry in the arts & crafts center."

"I know, but I swear I heard something," Kayla said, taking one last glance over her shoulder as they shoved off.

An obscure figure peered out from behind a tree, casting an eerie shadow over the white sand. *I should've sharpened my knife yesterday. You never know when you're gonna need it.*

Paddling toward the middle, the girls soon became engrossed in conversation about boys, fashion and movies, unaware of how far they had traveled⎯or the cluster of black clouds billowing in from the west. A sudden breeze swept across the placid water, shattering the looking glass image beneath them.

Bolts of lightning zig-zagged across the sky, followed by a rolling boom of thunder that reverberated through the distant mountains like a bowling ball striking its target. Pine trees swayed under the strengthening gusts, surrendering their needles without a fight.

"Jessie, I'm scared!" Kayla screamed. "We're out too far. I can hardly see the beach and my feet are getting wet!"

"Calm down, Kayla. We'll be fine," Jessie assured her, masking her concern about the water pooling around their feet. Her thoughts drifted back to that frightening day four years ago when her mother was struck by lightning while washing dishes in the kitchen sink. They got her to the hospital in time, but it left Jessie pretty shaken.

"Follow my lead," Jessie shouted, as the blackening sky closed in on them like a boa constrictor sizing up its prey. "And keep paddling!"

Chapter three

Ryker's first week at camp tested his patience, and he couldn't wait to unwind with an Italian sandwich and a cold beer, watching his favorite crime fighter, Columbo. It was exactly what he needed after a long day that began with a productive trip to the gym, then morphed into a chaotic day filled with hyper kids and their parents. As the new manager of Camp Chickadee, it was his job to make sure everything ran smoothly. But he hadn't planned on Emily. When her parents turned their backs, sweet Emily turned into evil Emily. He knew he shouldn't have lost his temper, but when she hid a hairy spider in his notepad, he lost his cool. Spiders gave him the creeps, even fake ones. Her parents accepted his apology, obviously not detecting the insincerity of it.

So, relaxing with a beer was just what the doctor ordered. And the fact that Maine lowered the drinking age was a bonus⎯his first "legal" beer tasted pretty good. Placing his can on the thin metal tray, he leaned back in his tattered recliner until a loud clap of thunder jolted him upright. "Shit!"

Grabbing his L.L. Bean rain jacket, he rushed down to the beach to check on the equipment. Jagged bolts of electricity lit up the sky like fireworks on the Fourth of July. He counted six kayaks, two sailboats and three canoes. The canoes and kayaks were stored upside down on the beach, but the sailboats rocked back and forth as growing waves battered their hulls. His gaze focused on a furrow traversing through the sand, ending at the shoreline. "What the hell is that?" he mumbled. A set of footprints on each side of the groove gave him his answer. *Two people are out there in this storm.*

Kayla and Jessie trembled as the thunder roared closer.

"Remember what we learned in science class, Jessie? If you count the seconds between the lightning and thunder, that's how far away the storm is. I counted to three, so the storm must be three miles away."

"We also learned not to panic," Jessie reminded her, as angry waves slapped the sides of their canoe.

"Look Jessie, there's the beach!" Kayla cried, oblivious to the rising water level in the canoe. "I see someone. Hurry!"

The girls paddled furiously, but as they got closer to shore a powerful wind gust flipped the canoe, propelling them into the turbulent water.

"Jessie! Help me!" Kayla screamed, her arms flailing through the air.

"Hold onto the canoe, Kayla. And don't let go!" Jessie cried.

"Help! Over here!" they shouted in Ryker's direction. The cold water numbed their senses as they splashed and fought to stay afloat amidst the whitecaps surrounding them.

He recognized the girls from meeting them a few days earlier. They were the first campers to check in and were bubbling over with excitement. He kicked off his sneakers and bolted toward the frantic voices, diving head-first into the chilly water.

"Hold on girls! Don't let go of the canoe!"

The girls struggled to hang on as robust waves battered their capsized canoe, their heads bobbing in and out of the churning water. He swam toward them, swirling waves flooding his throat.

"Kayla, grab my hand NOW!" he shouted. "Jessie, hold on to the canoe and I'll be back for you. Whatever you do, don't let go." He wrapped his arm around Kayla, struggling to stay afloat as he pulled her toward shore. The choppy water tossed them around like kids on a carnival ride.

"Just ten more feet. You can do this," he said, as they inched toward the sandy shoreline. He froze at the deafening clap of thunder, then regained his composure as he hauled Kayla onto the beach. Racing back in, he pulled Jessie through the choppy water. They collapsed onto shore next to Kayla. "You girls wait here."

Sand squalls stung his eyes as he rushed back to retrieve the vanishing canoe. Another blast of wind propelled the canoe toward him, his right hand snagging the rope. The skies put on a light show as he hauled it onto shore.

"What were you girls thinking? Taking a canoe without permission? No life jackets? You could have drowned!"

Kayla and Jessie pulled their legs toward their core, dropping their chins to their chests. "We're sorry," they said as the first drops of rain teased their senses. Then the clouds opened up and unleashed a torrent of water, illuminated by flashes of lightning.

"Hurry back to your cabin and get into dry clothes before you shiver yourselves to death. Come by my office at nine tomorrow morning and we'll discuss it." He dragged the canoe onto higher ground.

Slender birch trees swayed in the gusty wind, snapping branches like matchsticks. He dodged a falling tree limb as he flipped the canoe over. His eyes grew wide as he bent down, slowly sweeping his palm over the long narrow slit snaking through the bottom of the canoe.

"What the ...?" he mumbled.

Chapter four

Darci slid the back of her hand across her drenched forehead, swallowing hard as she hid behind a tall birch tree a few yards from Ryker. The heavy clap of thunder sent her racing toward camp after spotting smoke from a campfire. She caught a glimpse of him as she came tearing over the knoll, stopping dead in her tracks. *I can't let him see me.* The last couple of hours hadn't exactly prepared her for a beauty pageant*.*

Her nails dug deeper into the rain-soaked bark as Ryker continued to slide his hand over the bottom of the canoe. *What is he doing?*

Her fingers slithered down the white bark, the paper thin layers peeling off like the skin of an onion. She watched him finish up and head back to his cabin. And that's when she saw it...carved in deep, jagged letters on the side of the tree⎯**SPADES ARE BLACK, BETTER WATCH YOUR BACK**. A shabby ten of spades was nailed next to the carving. Her jaw went slack as she pulled the card off the nail and flipped it over. A hand-drawn red joker graced the bottom, an evil grin stretching across his face. Her pulse raced as she gazed around and tucked the card into her pocket. *My nightmare is coming true!*

Her heart pounded as she tore through the woods, arriving at her cabin sight unseen, which was exactly how she wanted it. *What does that mean? Who should watch their back? Why a joker? The face in my dreams looks like a joker. Who did this? Why?*

A quick shower and shampoo eased her mood a bit. She slipped into her pajamas and opened the deck of playing cards her mother gave her many years before. They were faded and tattered, but she wouldn't trade them for the world. Her "birth card" was a four of diamonds, signifying a determined and focused person with a desire for change and adventure, along with a determination to succeed. *If only I were as courageous as the cards portray me to be.*

She also loved astrology, and could pick out someone's sign by studying their mannerisms. "Ryker's a Leo, I just know it. He's a take-charge kind of guy, a real leader," she surmised, ignoring the tugging feeling that he was also arrogant and self-centered. "Hmmm…Leo and Pisces, fire and water," she mumbled, a slow smile building on her lips.

She shuffled the aging deck, spreading the cards on her small table. Memories of her mother dragging the cards across her old maple coffee table came flooding back, along with the aroma of warm oatmeal cookies that followed the readings. A tear slipped from the corner of her eye.

She cut the deck three times, then spread the cards face down across the table in an overlapping pattern. Choosing seven cards from the spread, she flipped them over and arranged them in a horseshoe pattern. Her eyes widened as she stared at the cards. In the first position was the jack of spades, representing a young man who is emotionally immature, untrustworthy and unreliable. He has a few tricks up his sleeve, so those who are wise will steer clear of him.

Chapter five

The next morning Darci struggled to get the office up and running. The staleness of the long cold winter wrapped itself around the furniture like an invisible blanket, while the recent rain enhanced the musty odor. She fanned the curtains, anxious to dig into a thorough "spring cleaning" regimen. But it would have to wait, as more campers would be arriving in two days and Ryker was in a frenzy. She wanted to tell him what she saw the night before, but he was on the phone.

She wiped dank mold from the credenza while dusting the typewriter keys with her free hand. *Difficulties will plague you at work today. Though challenging, try to remain optimistic and the stars will shift in your favor,* she remembered from reading her horoscope the night before. "I need to find out his birth date," she muttered, tapping her fingernail against her teeth.

Darci jerked her head around as the cabin door slammed and Brynn Burns brushed mindlessly past her.

"Okay, where's Ryker? I need to talk to him right now!" Mornings were brutal now that her parents forced her to work at the camp. She barely had time to style her hair and do her makeup. "Who in their right mind gets up at six in the morning?" she grumbled, waving her newly-polished fingernails through the air.

"I do," Ryker said. "You got a problem with that?"

Brynn pivoted around to find Ryker's­­­­­ intense brown eyes bearing down on her.

"Uh, no, of course not. I wanted to welcome you to my parents' camp, um, I mean our camp," she stammered. She was caught off guard by his striking good looks. She'd seen him around but they had yet to meet, and seeing him up close sent a heat wave coursing through her veins. She wet her lips. *Think fast!*

"Uh, some of us are getting together for a bonfire by the lake soon and thought you might like to come."

 "I'll think about it," he quipped.

"Okay, well, great," Brynn said, tossing her hair back. "I'll get back to you with a firm date." She smiled her way out the door, forgetting the real reason for her visit⎯to berate Ryker for scolding one of the incoming campers, even though she deserved it. Word travels fast at camp. Now she had to come up with a bonfire plan. *Maybe that spot on the beach where Gunnar and I fooled around the other night would be a good place for a party*, she thought, as her right brow shot up.

"Can you believe her?" Ryker chuckled, shaking his head as he picked up the phone.

Darci wasn't sure if he was amused or upset by Brynn, but hoping it was the latter. When he hung up, she took a deep breath and marched straight toward his office to tell him about her discovery down by the beach. But a faint knock on the outside door diverted her attention. Kayla and Jessie were fidgeting on the doorstep.

"Come in girls, have a seat," she told them, pointing at two antique wicker chairs beneath a dated photo of the Burns family.

Ryker moved stacks of paperwork and a recent Sports Illustrated swimsuit issue from the chairs in his office. He met the girls with a weak smile and told them to go in and sit down.

"You look hungry, Darci. Why don't you get yourself some breakfast? I'll handle things while you're gone," he said.

*So much for eavesdropping on THAT conversation.* But she was hungry, so headed toward the dining hall.

Savory aromas wafted from the kitchen where DeAngelo, Camp Chickadee's head chef, was whipping up another batch of his world-famous blueberry muffins. They were the kids' favorite.

"Something smells g-o-o-d," Darci said, peeking around the kitchen door.

"Well, I did splash a little Old Spice on my face this morning," he teased, slapping his cheeks. His signature white chef's hat and coat were the perfect contrast to his dark skin and wire rimmed glasses.

"You crack me up, DeAngelo," she laughed, shaking her head.

"Jill, are the blueberry muffins ready yet?" he called.

"Just about!" Jill hastened to pour milk for the stray cat that took up residence at the camp. She called her Lovey because she liked to snuggle up to her at night. She grabbed a couple of potholders and pulled the pan from the oven. A faded green T-shirt emblazoned with "Camp Chickadee" stretched across her solid frame, while strands of frizzy blonde hair poked out from her hairnet. A pair of frayed cut-offs and a stained white apron completed the outfit.

"Have you met Jill yet?" DeAngelo asked.

"No, not yet," Darci said.

Jill hurried over with the pan of muffins.

"Jill, Darci. Darci, Jill."

Darci liked the pleasant smile of the girl in front of her. Jill looked to be a year or two older, but close enough in age to be someone she could hang out with, if only for the summer. Smiling broadly, Darci offered her hand to her new friend.

DeAngelo told Jill to take a break, so the girls pulled up chairs at the long maple table in the corner, and chatted over muffins and coffee.

"When did you start working here?" Darci asked.

"Last summer. I was in the culinary arts program in high school and DeAngelo was looking for an assistant." Jill reached for another muffin. "I graduated this month and want to become a chef someday. How about you?"

"I started last week. I still have senior year to complete so I'm not sure what I want to do⎯I like detective work. My mom was a policewoman. Now it's just me and my dad on the farm. This is my first experience away from home, so I'm excited and a little nervous."

"What happened to your mother? *My* mom's a real piece of work." Jill pressed her palm against her forehead. "I'm *so* glad to be out of there for the summer."

Darci ignored Jill's question about her mother⎯she seemed to forget she even asked it. "You're lucky you have a m⎯"

"Break's over my ladies," DeAngelo interrupted, handing another pan of raw muffins to Jill.

A pinched expression washed over Jill's face upon hearing Darci's comment, but they made plans to meet up the next night.

"Your muffins are amazing DeAngelo, but I'm going to gain ten pounds this summer." Darci patted her stomach.

"No worries my dear. I run everything through my calorie-busting machine," he said with a hearty laugh.

Chapter six

Darci scooted back to the office, chuckling to herself about DeAngelo and his so-called calorie machine. *If only.*

She bumped into Kayla and Jessie coming out, their eyes focused on the ground.

"Excuse me," they mumbled, hurrying back to their cabin.

"I hate to bother you Ryker, but I need to talk to you," Darci said, catching a glimpse of him running a comb through his thick black hair. Her eyes were drawn to the tattoo on his upper arm. A lovely woman with soft curls and captivating eyes graced his right arm, with the caption 'I will never forget you' stenciled beneath it. *Who is that?*

"I found this nailed to a tall birch tree down by the lake last night." She handed him the wrinkled card, pointing out the message and joker on the back. "A carving in the tree said **SPADES ARE BLACK, BETTER WATCH YOUR BACK.** Maybe it has something to do with the canoe."

His eyes narrowed. "Now let me get this straight. You found evidence of a prank and waited until now to tell me? Do you realize I chastised those girls for damaging the canoe? They denied it but I didn't believe them. Now I'll have to apologize. *And* talk to the Burns." A vein in his neck was about to pop. "Why were you spying on me?"

Darci's brows drew together. "I wasn't spying on you. I was coming back from a walk. And I *had* planned to tell you, but you were busy and I was waiting for your mood to improve." She lowered her head. "I'm sorry."

"My mood is terrific! Okay, maybe I'm a little on edge, but next time see me first if anything like this happens," he said, softening a bit. "Any idea who did this?"

"No."

"Did you see any footprints?"

"Yes, but they were probably yours."

He poked his tongue into his cheek, inhaling a deep breath. "Does the ten of spades have any significance?"

Darci pulled up a chair. "The ten of spades signifies a past plagued with problems and challenges. There's a lot of negative influence with this card, so precautions should be taken to avoid danger. I noticed Brynn down by the beach with Gunnar the other night. You know, the maintenance guy who works here. There were a few other guys too, probably friends of his. They were sitting on the canoes, just hanging out." She swallowed hard as she watched him massage his chin, his gaze locked onto her timid blue eyes.

"For someone new, you sure know a lot about the goings-on here. Anything else you want to tell me?"

*Yes! You're a rude, insensitive, hot-headed, conceited human being! So why do I feel like butter on a hot plate when I'm around you?*

"No, nothing else right now."

"Maybe I'll have a chat with the bosses' daughter. By the way, how do you know so much about fortune telling?"

"My mother used to tell my fortune with cards when I was a kid. Many of the spades have a negative connotation. The ace of spades can mean misfortune, and even death, while the joker is a wild card. The joker indicates something unexpected and uncontrolled may occur. Would you like me to tell your fortune? When's your birthday? Astrology's another hobby of mine."

"I don't have time for all that foolishness."

"You sound like my father."

"Your father sounds like a wise man. Look, we need to stay on this troublemaker's path before he or she does any more harm. If cards or astrology help solve this, then go ahead with it. I don't know why I'm telling you, but my birthday's August 15th."

*I knew he was a Leo*, she smiled to herself.

Chapter seven

DeAngelo wrapped the leftovers from dinner and placed them in the refrigerator. His pizzania was an instant hit with the girls. They were still debating whether it was pizza or lasagna.

"Keep 'em guessin'," he chuckled. He let Jill go early so she could meet up with Darci. *Nice girls.*

In his homeland of Jamaica, DeAngelo was a cook at a local eatery, preparing popular dishes like jerk chicken and spicy Jamaican rice and peas. He also had a curious imagination, which led to some interesting inventions⎯mostly kitchen gadgets like his hands-free potato peeler. But he had a dream to someday strike it rich and go back to Jamaica and buy his family a new house. He missed his family. He might even look up Camilla, the girl he left behind.

He turned the key as the lock to his cabin clicked open. *I should have opened the windows this morning.* The musty remnants of winter permeated his nostrils. He locked the door and glanced around the cramped cabin.

His kitchen table, adorned with a bright green and yellow flowered tablecloth, sat off to one side. A frail wooden chair occupied one end, with an overstuffed chair situated on the other side of the room. It faced his small black and white TV, not that there were many channels to watch. His tiny bedroom was just as he left it, the homemade afghan in vivid colors draped over his twin bed. He opened the bedroom window and inhaled the fresh air, then slid the faded yellow curtain that served as a closet door. His three shirts and two pairs of pants hung neatly on hangers. He pushed them aside as he delicately pulled back the old Army blanket in the far corner. His limbs tingled as the aging wooden box stared back at him. The box that contained his dream...his ticket home...his family's new house. DeAngelo really *had* invented the calorie-busting machine.

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Most of the campers had arrived and a semblance of order was taking place. Daily schedules and activities were finalized and posted. Captain Bill, the sailing instructor, stopped by the office to verify his class schedule. Although he now needed the aid of a cane, he was always on the docks bright and early to greet his incoming sailing students. His trademark white captain's hat gave him an air of distinction, some comparing him to the captain of the Titanic.

A "Welcome to Camp Chickadee" campfire and cookout was planned to kick off the season and get everyone acquainted. Hot dogs and campfire-fried dough, followed by a marshmallow roast, were on the menu. Darci worked through lunch to get everything finalized for the big event. Kayla and Jessie volunteered to help, stringing up balloons and making signs to welcome the campers. They hoped it would get them back in the good graces of Ryker and the Burns.

DeAngelo ordered a case of red hot dogs, but the order was too big for his main cooler, so he stored ten pounds in the spare refrigerator located in the out building next to the dining hall. *I wish these buildings had locks*.

Chapter eight

Darci and Jill met down by the lake. The balmy evening breeze brushed their skin like soft, silky sheets. They watched the breathtaking beauty of the setting sun as it slowly disappeared, a shimmering wake of pastel colors glowing in the water. Jill snuck a couple of ham and cheese sandwiches and potato chips from the kitchen, while Darci brought two cans of Tab from the small fridge in her cabin.

"Hey, let's run these chips through DeAngelo's fat-busting machine," Jill joked, spitting her wad of gum onto the ground.

"Yeah, can you imagine if he actually had a machine that took the calories out of food? He really would be 'rolling in dough'," Darci chuckled.

They spread out a blanket and munched on the sandwiches.

"So, is your father mean?" Jill asked, brushing aside a troop of ants approaching her chips.

Darci stiffened at the abrupt question. "Uh, no, but he's very strict. I'm not allowed to wear makeup, my skirts can't be more than one inch above my knees, and he wants to know where I am and who I'm with every minute."

"Sure sounds mean to me."

"He cares about me, so I don't look at it that way." Darci put down her sandwich. "Why do you ask?"

"Sorry, it's just that I've never had a father, at least not a good one. My mother worked at home sewing shoes, and seemed fairly happy. But one day when I was seven, my father left and never came back. No warning. That's when my mother started drinking. He married the woman he was cheating on my mother with, and that's the last I ever heard of him. My mom remarried twice, but her third husband who was the worst. He...he abused me." She turned away, a thickness forming in her throat. "He's dead now, but my mom's a mess. That last one sent her over the edge. Sorry to burden you with this right after meeting you."

Darci rubbed Jill's shoulder. "That must have been so horrible for you…I can't imagine living in a home like that. But things will get better, you'll see."

"You sure are an optimist, Darci. Thanks for the shoulder to cry on," she said, twisting her watch as she changed the subject. "Hey, do you like astrology?"

"I love astrology. I'm Pisces, the fish. According to the stars, I'm kind and compassionate. What's your sign?"

"Gemini, the twins. I can handle multiple things at once, plus I'm fun and outgoing, so it says. Speaking of fun, have you ever tried a Ouija board?"

"No, but I always wanted to."

"I brought mine. Let's plan to do it soon. By the way, did you hear about those two girls nearly drowning in the lake the other night?" Jill asked.

"Yeah, it was pretty scary." Darci hadn't planned on discussing it. "I wonder what the carvings in the tree mean."

"What carvings?"

Darci swallowed. She had said too much. Jill pushed her for more details but Darci said she needed to turn in early. Then all hell broke loose.

Chapter nine

"Call 911!" Mrs. Burns screamed as smoke and chaos surrounded the campfire on the opposite side of the property. The fire had reached the perfect temperature for roasting hot dogs and "fried" dough at the welcome cookout and sing-a-long. Mrs. Burns and the girls were in the middle of a classic rendition of the Banana Boat Song when hot dogs exploded off the fire grates, igniting a box of additional hot dogs next to the fire pit.

Screams filled the air as rocks and soot rained down like tiny, lifeless bugs. When the smoke cleared, Jessie was lying face down, her silky hair matted with blood and soot. Two other girls cried out in pain⎯Kayla suppressing the blood oozing from a gash on her leg and Susan sobbing over the burn on her neck.

"Get clean towels from the laundry room. Hurry!" Mrs. Burns shouted, as the distant wail of sirens inched closer. It would take several more minutes for help to arrive, as they weren't exactly situated on a main highway.

The police arrived first, followed closely by the paramedics. They tended to Jessie first, as her injuries were the most serious, then whisked all three girls to the hospital.

The police were questioning Mr. and Mrs. Burns when one of the counselors noticed a package of hot dogs lying amongst the ashes. There was a hand-printed label taped to the back⎯**NEXT TIME WON'T BE FUNNY, UNLESS I GET MY MONEY.** Mrs. Burns shuddered as she peeled back the label to find a faded jack of spades hidden underneath. A message was printed clockwise around the jack⎯**DID I NOT WARN YOU?** A joker sporting a creepy smile was drawn on the bottom in red marker.

Mr. Burns told the cops about the previous prank involving playing cards. "This game is getting serious. What do you fellas plan to do about it?"

"We'll scour the area, take a look around. In the meantime, you let us know if you find anythin' like maybe a knife or a package of firecrackers. Don't you worry Bill, we'll get to the bottom of it all right," Officer Jones said.

An emergency meeting was called the next day. The head counselors, along with Ryker, Darci, Brynn, DeAngelo and Captain Bill gathered around the long table in the far corner of the dining hall.

Mrs. Burns failed to mask the circles under her eyes with makeup⎯the fine wrinkles fanning the corners of her eyes were on full display as her soft, naturally wavy hair hung limply around her face. It was a long night at the hospital. Mr. Burns brought Kayla and Susan home at 3:00 a.m.; Kayla brandishing six stitches in her leg. Running full speed with her eyes shut, she hadn't seen the stump in time. Susan was nursing the burn on her neck. Mrs. Burns stayed with Jessie until five in the morning, forgoing sleep in exchange for a quick shower. Her condition remained serious, with second-degree burns on her right arm.

"We've called all of the parents. You can imagine their reactions, many of whom are on their way to pick up their daughters and bring them home. I assured them we are doing everything we can to resolve the situation," Mrs. Burns said. "Jessie's parents drove through the night, arriving at the hospital this morning."

She slapped the ten and jack of spades onto the table along with the handwritten warnings, chewing her bottom lip as she gazed around the table.

"We could have lost a child last night! Someone got hold of the hot dogs and hid firecrackers in them. We don't know who or why. Let's start with the clues right here. Anybody?"

Ryker drummed his fingers on the table as he leaned forward. "It appears that he⎯or she⎯is trying to tell us something through the cards, like fortune telling. The ten of spades is associated with misfortune and danger. The jack of spades is..." He rubbed the back of his neck, turning to Darci.

She sat up straight. "The jack of spades symbolizes a young man who is emotionally immature and tends to live in a world of his own. He is untrustworthy and insincere," she said, returning Ryker's gaze. The corners of his mouth turned up slightly.

"What about the drawings of a joker? Is that some kind of cryptic message?" Mrs. Burns asked.

"Seems to be. The joker is a mysterious character. He's in costume, that of a court jester, a buffoon who is supposed to make the king laugh. But it's just a disguise to fool people, which is the joker's secret," Darci explained. "He's smarter than people think."

"Looks to me like the joker is someone living right here with us. Someone who knows a thing or two about cards and astrology. I'd look for someone familiar with fortune telling," added Brynn, shooting a frosty glance at Darci. "Someone who hasn't worked here very long. They might even be clever enough to frame somebody."

Ryker's mouth tightened as he fought the urge to curse. "Well Brynn, maybe you can enlighten us about your friends. I heard you were down by the beach with Gunnar and his friends the other night. Can you shed any light on that?"

Brynn's face twisted as she shoved her chair away from the table. "How DARE you suggest my friends had anything to do with this! And I suppose little miss goody-two-shoes here is the one who filled you in on my activities," she said, shaking a finger at Darci.

Ryker shot out of his chair, toppling it over. "Leave Darci out of this Brynn! If you've got something to say, say it to me!"

Darci leaned forward, the tension building in her fingertips. "It's okay, Ryker, I can handle it. Brynn, no one's accusing your friends of anything, but just because I enjoy fortune telling doesn't mean I committed these horrible acts."

Mrs. Burns slapped the table. "Please, that's enough. All of you! Right now we need to figure out what this person is after. They mentioned money. We keep the money in a locked safe. Do they mean extortion? What if there's a kidnapping? And where did the firecrackers come from? Who knew where we put the hot dogs? There's nothing else of real value here, is there?"

She instructed DeAngelo to get a lock for the out building and asked everyone to be vigilant.

DeAngelo shifted in his seat. *Nothing of real value? I need to find a better hiding place.*

Chapter ten

A murder of crows resting on a hundred-year-old pine tree jolted Darci awake. *Wouldn't you know the crows would be up at six o'clock on a Sunday morning?* "Please shut up for ten minutes," she muttered, pulling the covers over her head until the creak of the cabin door rattled her into consciousness. She held her breath as heavy footsteps in the hallway moved closer to her door, accompanied by a rhythmical tapping sound.

"Who…who's there?" she cried.

"It's your old cabin mate, Darci."

"Captain Bill? Is that you?"

"It's me. Just getting home from my other job. Sorry if my cane woke you."

"That's all right, the crows had a head start on you anyway. What's your other job?"

"Night watchman at a motel in town. Needed something to supplement the big bucks I make working here," he chuckled.

"Well, get some zzz's so you don't conk out in the middle of a sailing lesson."

"That's right where I'm headed. Goodnight, or better yet, good morning."

"Sleep tight Captain Bill."

She relaxed with a glass of orange juice, feeling safe knowing Captain Bill occupied the back bedroom of the cabin, but wished he was there during the night. She gathered her bathrobe, towel and shampoo and headed to the bathroom. It was pretty rustic, not to mention in the far back corner of the cabin. The steamy hot water empowered her as she showered and lathered her long brown hair with the delightful coconut-scented shampoo she brought from home. But when she started to rinse, a blast of cold water shot out of the showerhead. *I forgot you need to shower quickly at camp!* She pulled her damp hair into a high ponytail, choosing her favorite purple T-shirt, denim bell bottoms and her Keds Champion sneakers. Six months of babysitting jobs got her the shoes, and they always put a smile on her face.

She heard about a horse farm with a half-mile racetrack only five minutes from camp, so decided to check it out. *Who knows, maybe I'll run into Ryker.*

The last fifty feet was a steep climb over rocks and dead branches, but when she crested the hill her eyes lit up. Surrounded by lush gardens and magnificent views of Lake Secobee, the expansive ranch-style house was nestled amongst majestic hardwood trees and immaculate shrubbery. Abundant green lawns surrounded the impressive home and attached white horse barn. An oval racetrack with a double wooden fence bordered the grass paddocks and lighted outdoor riding arena.

Darci squatted behind a thicket of juniper bushes. She had a special fondness for horses, and imagined herself galloping on the beach, high atop a powerful white stallion. *I wonder if Ryker likes horses too?* Her thoughts were disrupted when a barn door swung open. She shuffled over a few feet to get a better look, cautiously making her way down the hill. A young girl with long dark hair pulled through a baseball cap was leaning on the most beautiful black Morgan Darci had ever seen. Sitting high atop the horse with his head turned toward the girl, was a dark-haired young man who looked eerily familiar. The horse burst onto the track, tearing across the oval course as it whizzed past her, leaving a trail of dust in its wake.

"Ryker?" Darci gasped.

He finished his lap around the track, circling back to her. "What are you doing out here?" he asked, dismounting his horse. "Spying on me again?"

A flush crept across her cheeks. "Of course not! I didn't even know you were here. I was taking a walk. It's a nice morning, and I love horses." *Did I just say that? Oh, this can't be happening.*

"Taking a walk again, huh?" His eyes glinted with amusement as he tied his horse to a tree. "Here, sit down," he motioned, patting a spot next to him on an oversized log.

Darci's gaze bounced between Ryker and the log before she cautiously sat down.

"Geez, I don't bite…or do I?" he growled, feigning a Dracula-like attack.

She leaped off the log. "Stop it! Are you crazy or something?"

A laugh escaped his lips. "Me? You're the one who's acting like I have the plague. What's the matter, do I scare you?"

"No, of course not. There was a wet spot on the log and I didn't want to get my pants dirty."

He cocked his head as a crooked smile spread across his face. "Oh come now, you can do better than that."

"That's my story and I'm sticking to it," she said, pretending to wipe the dirt off her back side. She quickly changed the subject. "Tell me about yourself. Where are you from? What was your childhood like?"

He leaned back, crossing his arms. "Typical woman, changes the subject."

Her eyes narrowed as she swatted his shoulder. "Typical male chauvinist."

"Now that we're even, I'll answer your questions. My dad's a lawyer and I grew up in the city. We had a maid to clean up after me, so my mother had idle time on her hands. She filled the time by going to the racetrack and would bring me with her. My dad put an end to her toxic habit, but I fell in love with horses at an early age. So when I learned about this horse farm, I asked the manager if I could volunteer in exchange for riding privileges. It's not a glamorous job, but it has its perks."

"Wow, so you went from having a maid clean up after you to cleaning horse poop?" Darci couldn't suppress a smirk. "Who's that girl?"

"Don't you recognize her? That's Brynn. The Burns own this place. I didn't realize they owned it when I spoke with the manager. She can be a spoiled brat, but she knows her stuff when it comes to horses. She's taught me a lot already."

"Yes, I'm sure she has," Darci said with a tinge of sarcasm.

He rested his chin in his hand, staring into her eyes. "So what's the deal with you? Are you still in school?"

"Yeah, I'll be a senior this fall. I live on a small farm, and we have every animal *except* a horse. I begged my father many times, but he always says we can't afford one. So when I heard about this farm, I wanted to check it out."

"What about your mom, did you ask her for a horse?"

She lowered her head and closed her eyes. "My mother died a few years ago."

He pressed his lips together as he placed his hand on her shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Darci. I had no idea."

"That's okay, it's not your fault. My mother was a policewoman. I know that sounds weird living on a farm, but it worked for them. I don't have any brothers or sisters, so I do the chores and housework. My dad says it keeps me out of trouble."

"That sounds like something I would've needed. Do you want to talk about it, I mean, about your mother?"

She shook her head. "No, not right now. It's a subject I rarely talk about. But my dad does his best and still works ten hour days on the farm. After school I milk the cows, clean the barn, gather eggs to sell, whatever needs to be done. In my spare time I babysit for the neighbors or watch their pets while they're away." She wanted to tell him she felt like Cinderella dressed in hand-me-downs, waiting for her prince to sweep her off her feet. Or how she dreamed of shopping for a pretty new dress with white lace around the collar. She smiled instead.

"Wow, that sounds like a grueling schedule. What do you do for fun?"

"I play with my cards." *Do I sound pathetic or what!*

He chuckled, then grabbed her hand and pulled her toward him. *Is he going to kiss me?* Darci's heart leaped into her throat.

"Let's go for a walk."

She masked her slight disappointment and eagerly joined him. Holding hands was a start.

"So what do you want to do in life, I mean outside of this exciting career you have at Camp Chickadee?" he teased.

"I'll admit it would be hard to top this," she laughed, "but someday I'd like to be a detective and maybe even join the FBI, sort of a similar path to my mother's. You?"

"My father thinks I should go to law school and become a lawyer like him. He can't get it through his head that I have no interest in becoming a lawyer. I'd rather be solving crimes too, or maybe playing in a rock band like I do now."

"Wait…you're in a rock band? Where? What do you play?"

"Mostly guitar, sometimes the harmonica. It's a local band with a few guys I went to school with. We play a couple gigs a month. My dad thinks it's a complete waste of time but I love it. I took this job for the summer to please my father until college starts in the fall."

"You'll never be happy following someone else's dream. You should follow your own heart," she said, wondering if he picked up on the double meaning.

He changed the subject. "Hey, I'm teaching a few girls how to water ski this week. Have you ever tried it?"

"No, but I'd love to learn; that is if you think you can teach me," she teased, raising her eyebrows.

He gave her a sideways glance. "We'll see how well you behave. I'll let you know the time soon," he said, hopping onto his horse.

She wanted to ask him about his tattoo, but he quickly disappeared. Her throat tightened as she stared at Brynn twirling her hair by the barn door.

Chapter eleven

"I'm going in town for an ice cream," Brynn yelled to her mother as she sprinted toward her fiery red Trans Am.

"Okay, have one for me."

*Sorry mother, there's no ice cream where I'm going.* She left a trail of dust behind as her car muscled its way down the long driveway. Pulling into the gas station where Gunnar worked nights, she spotted him leaning against a powder blue Mustang with Massachusetts license plates. Sporting a dirty grin on his face, he propped his elbow against the driver's door. The young girls were falling for all of his bluster.

"So whadda you gals do for excitement in Massachusetts?" he asked, turning on the charm until he recognized the sound of Brynn's car approaching. "Uh, you girls have a nice day," he muttered, tapping the roof of their car. "Hi honey, what brings you here?"

"Don't you 'honey' me, you miserable bastard!"

"Now don't go gettin' your panties in a knot. Those girls were just passin' through⎯it was just a little harmless flirtin'. C'mon," he said, grabbing her hand and pulling her closer. He planted a quick kiss on her neck. "I'm goin' on break now, come with me."

She crossed her arms and planted her feet firmly on the ground. "Go by yourself."

He flashed his best playful grin as he tugged on her hand. "Oh come on, you know you can't resist me. Besides, those girls were dogs compared to you, you know that."

She tossed her hair back as they headed toward the back of the station. "Now you're making sense."

He snatched a couple slices of pepperoni pizza and glanced around as he swiped a beer from the cooler. Pulling Brynn toward a dirty picnic table, he handed her a slice.

"No thanks, I'm dieting," she said, pushing his hand away. *Maybe Ryker could teach him some class.*

"Hey, why don't we run the pizza through DeAngelo's calorie-zappin' machine you told me about?" he chuckled. "Then you could eat all you want. Do you know where he keeps it? Probably a hoax anyway."

"Probably, since he likes to joke around a lot. But man, if that thing is real it would be the best invention on the planet. I'd go a day without makeup to have a machine like that. Darci might know something. Her cabin is so secluded she could be hiding something in it."

"Maybe," Gunnar grinned, licking his lips. "A machine like that would be worth a fortune. Think of the fun we'd have with all that money." He pulled her to him. She shook her head, but was in a forgiving mood as they moved up against the wall.

"Gunnar, customers are waiting!" yelled Kris, the station manager. Break was over.

Brynn returned home in a foul mood, slamming the door as she came face to face with her mother sitting in her rocking chair.

 "Was the ice cream that bad?"

"Uh, no Mom, the ice cream was delicious. I'm just tired, so think I'll shower and go to bed early. Goodnight, Mother." Brynn bit her lower lip as she headed toward her bedroom. "I wonder what Ryker's doing tonight," she murmured, quietly dialing the phone.

Chapter twelve

Darci couldn't stop humming, let alone wipe the smile off her face as she tidied up her cabin. Ryker opened up to her, revealing parts of his childhood and a window into his feelings. *What did he mean, "she's taught me a lot already"?*

A gentle knock on her door snagged her attention.

"Don't forget to lock your door, Darci," Captain Bill reminded her as he headed out to his night watchman job. "Remember, our cabin sits far back from the others."

"Okay, will do Captain Bill." She never locked her doors, not even at home. There hadn't been a crime in her town since, well, ever.

Feeling refreshed after a brief shower, she changed into her cotton pajamas with the tiny purple hearts. She pulled down the sheets and grabbed her latest Harlequin romance, but her eyelids felt like two lead weights as she nodded off between pages. Suddenly remembering her promise to Captain Bill, she dragged herself out of bed and clicked the lock, closing the book and collapsing back into bed. *Two horses galloping side by side, getting closer and closer as their riders stare longingly into each other's eyes...*

RAP...RAP...RAP. Her captivating dream quickly vanished.

"Is that you, Captain Bill?" she mumbled, her eyelids refusing to respond to the precarious sound of someone pounding on her cabin door. The doorknob slowly turned, then rattled and shook violently.

"LET ME IN!" shouted a slurred voice as Darci sprang into consciousness. The clock read 2:30 a.m.

"Who are you? What do you want?" she choked, noting movement on her front steps. She peeked through the blinds to see three more disheveled guys shuffling around on her front porch. Squinting through the darkness, she could make out baggy pants and torn flannel shirts. They were also drunk. *Should I scream for help? No, that might get them angry.*

"Let me in, Darci!" Another rattle of the door knob.

*Oh God, he knows my name?* She shivered under the covers as the tired wooden floorboards in the hallway creaked under heavy footsteps, the sound fading toward the back of the cabin. She tiptoed to her door, double-checking the lock. The sound of raucous laughter and an empty can smashing against the wall, clanging along the floor like coins dropping into a slot machine, reverberated down the hallway. A waft of cigarette smoke hung in the air.

Her trembling body curled in the fetal position, she longed for her mother more than ever. She missed her smile and the way she tucked her into bed and read stories from her favorite books, The Little Golden Books. *Why did she have to die?*

The floor creaked again, the sound inching closer to her door. She held her breath as she heard another violent rattle of her doorknob.

"I know you're hidin' it in there. You're gonna be sorry you didn't open this door, bitch!" was the last thing she heard as the footsteps shuffled toward the outside door. Through the tiny slit in the blinds she watched the four drunks stagger up the hill, never getting a good look at their faces.

She poured herself a glass of milk, spilling some onto the table as she tried to steady her hands. *I know you're hiding it in there? Hiding what? What do they want? Why me? How did they know this was my cabin?*

She dozed off as the first rays of sun filtered through the blinds. Vigorous pounding on her door jolted her awake.

"Darci get out! The cabin's on fire!" Captain Bill hollered.

She threw on her robe and bolted out the front door toward the dining hall. Mr. and Mrs. Burns were going in for breakfast when she came barreling through the front door.

"Hurry! Our cabin's on fire!" Darci screamed. DeAngelo heard the ruckus and joined them as they scrambled toward the smoking cabin.

Captain Bill grabbed the fire extinguisher in his room and sprayed the flames. Fortunately, it was contained to the bathroom, and other than a nasty mess and a few boards needing replacement, no major damage was done.

Darci dressed and joined the others at the breakfast table, relaying the night's events to Mr. & Mrs. Burns and everyone else at the table. Mrs. Burns' hand flew to her chest as she squeezed her eyes shut. Mr. Burns asked Darci if she could identify any of the intruders but she told him she didn't get a good look at their faces.

"The voice sounded familiar, though, a lot like Gunnar, the maintenance guy." She also told him she didn't know what he meant when he said, "I know you're hidin' it in there," which elicited a slight gasp from DeAngelo.

Jill questioned the cigarettes. She said she'd seen a discarded Marlboro box down by the fire pit on the beach.

"We'll take a good look through the cabin. Thanks for the tips, girls," Mr. Burns said.

After breakfast, Darci, Captain Bill and Mr. Burns went back to the cabin to clean up the mess. Captain Bill sat on an old wooden chair as he chucked a dozen beer cans into a trash bag.

As she was about to leave, Darci stopped mid-stride, spotting a cigarette lighter on the ground. She picked it up and turned it over. The initials "G.W." were engraved on the back. *Gunnar Watson!* She knew his last name from the payroll register. A crushed Marlboro box and deck of playing cards were lying nearby.

"I think this is where the fire started," said Captain Bill, pointing to a charred floorboard. "Someone didn't put their cigarette out. Bunch of thugs if you ask me."

Mr. Burns clenched his fist. "Time for a talk with the maintenance boy."

"Gunnar's not working today," Darci said. "Maybe you can catch him at the gas station. He works there part-time." She turned to Captain Bill. "Can I see the deck of cards, please?"

She carefully removed them from the threadbare package and flipped them over. They matched the design and color of the cards used in the pranks. They were also faded. A shiver ran down her spine as she thumbed through the deck⎯no jokers, ten or jack of spades…and in an ominous twist, the king and ace of spades were also missing.

Chapter thirteen

"Darci, wait up!" Jill hollered, gasping for air as she chased her toward the office. "What did you find? Is the cabin ruined? Was Gunnar involved?"

"They found a Marlboro box and a lighter, plus a deck of cards and a dozen empty beer cans. The cabin's fixable, but thank God for Captain Bill! He not only alerted me about the fire, but if he hadn't told me to lock my door last night…" Darci massaged the goose bumps traveling up and down her arms. "I don't want to think about what might have happened. And yes, I think Gunnar might be involved."

"I knew it was him. He's no good, I tell you," Jill warned.

Darci raised her shoulders. "Maybe, but I don't really know him. Let's talk soon. 'Gotta get back to work."

Jill's thoughts were a thousand miles from the bowl of tuna salad she was preparing for the lunch crowd. She left the empty cans outside for Lovey⎯tuna was her favorite.

*Gunnar's finally* *gonna get what he deserves. Good! Maybe he'll drag Brynn down with him; down in a foxhole where the sun never shines.*

Soon the first batch of kids would be charging into the dining hall, laughing and chattering. *Someone should teach them manners⎯maybe their maid or butler at home? Lord knows it's not their parents. They're probably drinking champagne on the deck of their yacht now they got rid of their kids for the summer. Poor kids.*

DeAngelo came through the door carrying a tray of freshly baked bread. "Here's the bread for your sandwiches, Jill."

"Hey DeAngelo, did you know they found a lighter and Marlboro box in the bathroom of Darci's cabin? Brynn's boyfriend Gunnar smokes Marlboros. They also found a deck of cards. What do you think it means?"

DeAngelo fiddled with his wire-rim glasses."I don't know, Jill. But you'd better get moving on those sandwiches. Kids will be coming in soon."

He scooted back to his cabin, yanking the shades down. "They're getting closer by the minute," he muttered, his pulse quickening. He rushed to his closet and pulled back the old Army blanket covering his calorie busting machine⎯Buster, as he called it. Holding it close to his chest, he darted around the cabin in search of a better hiding place. He placed it on the table while he tossed chair cushions like Frisbees. But it didn't fit under the cushions.

"Aha!" he said, wrapping it in the blanket before stepping outside. Glancing in every direction, he nonchalantly walked across the grounds to the dark, crumbling root cellar. When the original owners built Camp Chickadee, they created an underground bunker to store their fruits and vegetables. It was abandoned years earlier, now barely visible as the crumbling stone face blended with the surrounding rocks and dirt. Most people didn't even know it existed. But the empty wooden crates used to store potatoes made the perfect hiding place. He placed Buster inside a burlap potato sack, carefully lowering it into the wooden potato crate. He tossed a couple handfuls of dirt over the crate for extra security. Whistling as he strolled back to the dining hall, he kept his eyes peeled for any movement in the area.

Chapter fourteen

Mr. Burns' Cadillac DeVille tore across the broken pavement and screeched to a halt just shy of the overhead garage door. *So this is where Gunnar works at night.* He paused, glancing around as he passed an old Dodge Dart parked off to the side. Rust spots culminated on the dented fenders. He jerked his head around as he caught a glimpse of something⎯a body was stirring in the back seat.

Kris, the station manager, was coming out to pump gas when he spotted Mr. Burns.

"Hey Mr. Burns. How ya been?"

"I've been better, Kris. You know anything about the break-in at Camp Chickadee last night?"

"Break in? First I hear of it. What happened?"

He ignored Kris's question. "I want to talk to these guys in this Dodge Dart right here."

"Huh? Uh, sure, go ahead." Kris opened the driver's door. The tall one had vomit on his torn plaid shirt; the short one smelled of stale beer and cigarettes, and the third had yellow teeth. They were still drunk.

Mr. Burns planted his legs wide apart, nostrils flaring. "Get out of the car!"

They scrambled out, trying to steady themselves on the loose gravel.

"What's THIS?" he demanded, yanking a box of Marlboros from the short guy's pocket. He shoved the crushed box found at the cabin into his face. "Does this look familiar? There was a break-in at one of our cabins, along with a fire last night. I want answers, and I want them NOW! Was Gunnar with you?"

They shuffled gravel back and forth, kicking loose rocks from side to side. Their eyes never left the ground.

"Yeah, Gunnar was with us," yellow teeth admitted, adding that Gunnar also smoked Marlboros. "We didn't mean nothin' by it⎯we'd been drinkin' and lookin' for excitement. This town's pretty dull, ya know. But we didn't start no fire, that's for damn sure. Right guys?"

"Hell no, none of us started any fire," the other two chimed in as Mr. Burns' eyes narrowed.

"You wanna press charges Mr. Burns?" Kris asked.

He worked his jaw back and forth. "No, but if any of these losers come near Camp Chickadee again I'll haul their asses into the police station myself!"

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Darci couldn't wait to tell Ryker about all the action he missed. She charged through the door, but the normally bustling office was vacant. *Where is he? Probably with that little hussy.*

She spent the morning typing the Camp Chickadee newsletter, but her mind was on other topics, the least of which was her chilling ordeal the night before. She needed to repay Captain Bill somehow. She couldn't stop thinking how the night might have turned out without his fatherly advice.

*Get your mind back on your work, Darci. That bottle of Liquid Paper will be empty before the newsletter is finished.* She was startled back to the present by the shrill ring of the telephone.

 "Ryker?"

"No Darci, this is Mrs. Burns. We got a call from Jessie's father at the hospital this morning. She's doing much better. She asked for a hot fudge sundae yesterday, so that's a good sign. Her father told me they wanted to take her home, but she begged to come back here and finish the summer with her friends, so they relented. She's being released tomorrow. Can you ask DeAngelo to whip up one of his signature cakes with 'Welcome Home Jessie' written in fuchsia, her favorite color? I want to surprise her, but considering what's happened, let's keep it low-key."

"That's great news about Jessie. I'll get right on it Mrs. Burns," she said, gently securing the receiver in its cradle. *And while we're at it, please keep your daughter away from Ryker.*

Chapter fifteen

Sweat trickled down his temples as DeAngelo picked up the mail. There it was, the letter he'd been waiting for. Ten years and sixty-thousand dollars ago, he embarked on a journey of invention, achieving what no one else had. Millions of people wanted to do it, but no one had ever succeeded. Until now! Until now, that is, if the letter told him what he wanted to hear.

Over the last year, he ran everything from meatballs to cupcakes through his calorie machine. He tasted everything, then sent it to the testing lab. For the final test, he bought two small apple pies. They each had 350 calories and twenty-two grams of fat⎯enough to scare off half the counselors at camp. He ran one through his calorie machine and shipped it to the lab.He ate the other pie. He needed the extra calories.

With trembling hands he opened the envelope, sucking in a deep breath as his knees went slack⎯eighteen calories and one gram of fat, a ninety-five percent reduction.He tossed the letter high in the air and danced a jig. As soon as the patent office grants his patent, he can sell his machine and help his family.

"Hel-lo! DeAngelo, are you here?" Darci asked.

He crammed the letter back in the envelope, quickly shoving it into his desk drawer. "Hey Darci, over here. What brings you to see 'ol DeAngelo?"

"Can you make me a large sheet cake with pink rose petals and 'Welcome Home Jessie' in fuchsia frosting? She's coming home from the hospital tomorrow and we want to surprise her with one of your world-class cakes."

"Why sure, little lady. I'll have Jill start on it. Glad to hear Jessie's comin' home. What time's the party?"

"We're not calling it a party, but we'll need the cake by nine in the morning. The get-together will be at eleven. I'll get an announcement printed up tonight. Hope you can make it."

"I'll be there with bells on. I hope everything goes well, you know, because of what happened at the cookout."

"You and me both. Thanks DeAngelo, you're the best. By the way, feel free to run the cake through your calorie busting machine," she winked.

"No problem." *No problem at all.*

*\*\*\**

Darci finished typing the announcement but couldn't get Ryker and Brynn out of her mind. *She's taught me a lot already. Yeah right, what's she teaching you right now? I don't think it involves horses. How can a girl like me ever compete with a hustler like her?* She slammed the announcement on the desk a couple seconds before the door squeaked open. Ryker shuffled past her, his feet dragging beneath his downward gaze. She took a step back, drawing in a long breath.

His rumpled shirt hung loosely over his muscular frame, partially obscuring the red stain on his jeans. His normally sexy hair tumbled erratically over his bloodshot eyes. He plopped in a chair, his head between his hands.

Darci gritted her teeth as a heat wave flushed through her, adrenaline pumping through her like an erupting volcano. He massaged the back of his neck as he cautiously looked up.

"You should be ashamed of yourself! I know, she's the boss's daughter, and she's rich and sexy, and it's none of my business, but damn it Ryker, you could have at least called. Look at you, you're a mess. We've been through a lot here, not that you seem to care!"

He stared at her, his mouth hanging open as he stood up and walked toward her, his eyes locked onto hers. He took her hands in his. "Are you finished?"

She looked at the floor and nodded. *What have I done?*

"Good." His lips curled into a smile. "I didn't know you had it in you."

"Huh?"

"Sweet, meek little Darci can be quite a tiger when she's riled." He wriggled his eyebrows.

She turned and covered her mouth, a chuckle escaping. "I don't know what came over me. I have no right to interfere in your life. If you want to see Brynn that's entirely your business."

"You're right, and if I *had* been with Brynn, it wouldn't be any of your business."

"What? You…you weren't with Brynn?"

"Darci, I was at the hospital last night. My father had a heart attack. I've been up all night, then grabbed a jelly donut this morning," he said, looking down at the strawberry stain on his jeans.

Her legs wobbled as she pressed her palm against her forehead. She wanted the floor to open up and swallow her. "Oh Ryker, I'm so sorry." *And sorry I doubted you.* "Is he going to be all right?"

"It was touch and go most of the night, but he made it through. The doctor did an EKG and blood tests, the usual procedures. My father told the nurse a joke this morning⎯it was a little off-color but at least it's a good sign. It's my mother who's a pack of nerves. They put her on more meds than my dad," he said with a slight chuckle. "So tell me, what did I miss here?"

She filled him in on the attempted break-in, Captain Bill's advice, the fire, the beer cans, cigarettes and playing cards, and the fact that Gunnar was probably involved. She concluded on a positive note, telling him about Jessie coming home.

He cocked his head, raking his fingers through his hair. "Are you kidding me? Thank God you listened to Captain Bill. If anything happened...I mean, what were they looking for? Can they prove Gunnar was involved? Do you think he's connected with the incident at the beach and the firecrackers at the campfire?"

"Maybe...it looks suspicious. Mr. Burns is going to talk to him, and given his mood, I wouldn't want to be Gunnar right now."

"I'd like to get my hands on him myself!" he said, clenching his fists.

"Don't let your emotions get the best of you."

"Look who's talking," he smirked, suddenly remembering the message on his answering machine when he came home. It was garbled and she didn't leave her name, but he was pretty sure he recognized the sultry voice as Brynn's.

Chapter sixteen

Gunnar dragged his eggs back and forth across the plate. Whoever named this The Greasy Spoon knew what they were doing. But no amount of food could cure his hangover. *What the hell was I thinkin', breakin' into Darci's cabin like that. Brynn will probably never speak to me again, and her father will make sure I go back to jail, let alone fire me.*

Holding his pounding head in his hands, memories of his childhood came flooding back⎯hiding in the closet when he heard his father's drunken footsteps coming home, peeking through the crack to see his father backhand his mother when she asked where he'd been; slapping him and his little brother Tommy for no reason; the divorce when he was eight and the series of foster homes; his father's second marriage and the year he lived with them and his stepsister⎯a year he'd rather forget; running away at fifteen when his father died a suspicious death, even though nobody pressed for an investigation; spending six months in jail for petty theft; playing cards in jail and telling fortunes to other prisoners. Yes, he was pretty good at fortune telling, but his fortune wasn't looking so hot right now.

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Mr. Burns ran his hand through his thick, graying hair as he headed back to camp, dodging potholes that appear every spring. But his mind was on everything *but* driving. He wondered what his daughter sawin that Gunnar character, and what happened to the sweet little girl he used to bounce on his knee.

He turned down the long gravel driveway bordered by majestic pine trees, cutting the engine at the maintenance building. Years of decay and chipped paint overshadowed the original white clapboards covering the building, and a slight bow in the roof served as a reminder to shovel more frequently. Long Maine winters took their toll on the buildings as well as the roads.

The sweet fragrance of spring turned foul when he opened the door. "Ugh, who died in here?" he muttered, tripping over a garden rake thrown on top of a worn-out push broom. He clenched his fists. *If I ever get hold of that kid!* He flicked on the light switch as the stench of decay surrounded him. He poked around, moving paint cans and shoving tools aside, looking for anything related to the pranks.

"Okay Gunnar, I know you're not that bright. You must have left a clue in here somewhere," he mumbled as he picked up the broom. Stretching on his tip-toes to hang up the broom, he bumped the top shelf, its contents cascading down on top of him. A scream ripped through the air as his hand shot up, furiously brushing the top of his head. A handful of firecrackers lay scattered around the dead rat.

He put on a pair of gloves and picked up the decaying rodent, heaving it deep into the woods. *Breakfast for the crows.* He gathered the firecrackers and placed them in his pocket. *Time to take out the trash.*

Chapter seventeen

Brynn sat on the dock as her group of girls practiced their swimming lesson. Her parents decided she would make a good swim instructor, since she began swimming at four years old. At least it was one of the better jobs at camp, and gave her plenty of time to work on her tan. She wondered if Ryker knew she was the one who left the message, and if so, why he hadn't called her back. *And* why he jumped at the chance to defend Darci. She couldn't fathom the possibility that he found Darci more desirable than her.

"Okay girls, hurry up! In a couple of days we'll have a lesson on treading water. Grab your towels and dry up. Come on, let's go, I don't have all day," she said, clapping her hands. *Don't look at me like that, you little brats.*

Her stomach was growling, so she headed to the dining hall for a snack. The place was eerily quiet. She poked around the kitchen and found a tray of warm cookies, grabbing a couple and wishing she had a calorie machine to run them through. But something caught her eye on the way out⎯the corner of an envelope sticking out of DeAngelo's desk drawer. Glancing over her shoulder, she opened the drawer, noting the return address⎯Simon Food Testing Services. She glanced around, then covertly lifted the flap. Her pupils flared as she licked her lips. Submitted by DeAngelo Johnson - NUTRITIONAL TEST RESULTS: 4 OZ. APPLE PIE - 18 CALORIES - 1 GRAM OF FAT

"Holy shit, it's true! I've got to tell Gunnar!"

Gunnar's one-room apartment overlooked an alley that separated one brick building from another. The scratched wooden table and two chairs sat in the center of the kitchen, while a lumpy green futon that served as his bed inhabited a spot beneath the lone window. So far he'd kept Brynn away from his decrepit apartment, but that was getting harder by the day. Even *he* couldn't understand what she saw in him. As he took his TV dinner out of the oven, the phone rang.

"Gunnar, you'll never believe what I found!" Brynn cried, filling him in on the test results.

"Wow, you mean DeAngelo's machine is for real? Let's talk about it when I come to work tomorrow. I'm headin' to my job at the gas station."

The next morning Brynn debated going to Jessie's party, but dashed over to the maintenance building instead. She couldn't stop thinking about DeAngelo's machine. She wanted it for a different reason than Gunnar did, but maybe together they could strategize. She burst through the door.

"Gunnar, I can't wait to talk to you." But the face that popped up from behind the work bench wasn't Gunnar's. A line etched between her father's brows.

She took a step back. "Um, hi Dad. I was, uh, looking for Gunnar. Is he here?"

"No Brynn, and he won't be here anymore. I fired him."

"You fired him? When? Why? How could you?"

"Last night. At the gas station. He admitted he was one of the guys who broke into Darci's cabin the other night. He said he was sorry, that he drank too much and it wouldn't happen again, but I don't believe him. Besides, I think he's the one committing these pranks, even though he denies it." A mental image of Gunnar collapsing into a chair when he accused him confirmed his belief. *Guilty.*

"I'm sure he's not the one doing those pranks. Maybe it's Darci, did you ever think of that?"

"Darci? Why on earth would you accuse Darci?"

"Wasn't she the one who reported the incident down at the beach? Maybe she's trying to divert attention away from herself. All I know is that none of this started until *she* showed up. Gunnar's had a rough life, you know. You don't understand him. His father was a monster, did you know that? It's not fair!"

"Sometimes life isn't fair, but he's a grown man now and people can't go through life blaming everything on their past. He needs to grow up, but right now that's his problem, not mine. I don't know what you see in him Brynn, but I don't want you seeing him anymore, is that clear?"

Brynn smacked her lips as she blew out her cheeks. "Sure Daddy, whatever you say."

Chapter eighteen

Darci headed over to the rec center to prepare for Jessie's party, but her mind was on Ryker. What was that Beatles song, *Yesterday*? How she wished for yesterday morning, before she made a complete ass of herself. *I'm surprised he's even speaking to me...and even more surprised that he found my outburst amusing. He said "If anything happened..." then stopped. Was he going to say what I think he was going to say?*

She recruited Kayla and Susan to blow up balloons and hang decorations. Their wounds were still visible, but healing well. Jessie would be arriving soon and Mrs. Burns assured Darci that she would keep her away from the party until it was time.

Jill put the finishing touches on the cake, adding a few extra rose petals. She placed it in an opaque carrier in case Jessie showed up early. "Hey Darci. I've got the cake. Where would you like it?"

Darci finished smoothing out the red checkered tablecloth. "Right here in the middle," she said, tapping the spot. "It looks delicious. Jessie will be so surprised! She should be here in a few minutes. Can you stay?"

"Sorry, I have to finish breading chicken nuggets for dinner tonight. Why don't you stop by later so we can talk a little more?"

"Okay, I'll try. Thanks Jill."

Kayla and Susan were joined by the rest of Jessie's camp unit and their counselors, along with a few staff members. Darci looked around for DeAngelo, but didn't see him anywhere. S*omething must have come up.* She held her finger to her lips as Mrs. Burns came around the corner with Jessie.

"SURPRISE!"

Jessie gasped as her hand flew to her mouth. Kayla and Susan dashed ahead and flung their arms around her as everyone applauded. Jessie winced as pain shot through her arm. Kayla and Susan jumped back, but Jessie shrugged it off.

 "Don't worry about it," she said. "I'm so happy to be back. I love you guys. Thanks everyone!"

Mrs. Burns cut the cake while Darci made a short announcement, then turned it over to Kayla.

"We're so happy to have you back, Jessie." Kayla cleared her throat, recalling a dreadful class on public speaking. "I...I wrote you a poem."

*There once were two friends named Kayla and Jessie*

*One was neat, the other was messy*

*They laughed and cried, they played jokes and they fought*

*But at the end of the day, they never got caught*

*Together from the start, together 'till the end*

*There is no one I would rather call my best friend*

Tears welled up in Jessie's eyes as her fellow campers applauded. The girls hugged.

"Cake for everyone!" Mrs. Burns cheered.

Darci stayed after the party to help her clean up. "Say, Mrs. Burns…I read that Camp Chickadee was built in 1938. What year did you buy it?"

"In 1958, when Brynn was four years old. The twelve buildings needed repairs, but the rustic charm of the old pine logs won us over, along with that massive stone fireplace in the dining hall. We kept a cabin for ourselves so we can crash there when we're too tired to go home. Don't you love the beautiful lakeside bluff and views of Pincushion Island? Did you know there's a pair of nesting bald eagles there?"

"It's beautiful, Mrs. Burns. So what does Brynn think about it?"

She shifted her feet, fiddling with her wedding ring. "Brynn was a happy child growing up here, Darci. She loved swimming and the horses we kept at home, but now…I don't know, something's changed. I think it has to do with Gunnar, that boy she's been seeing. I can't put my finger on it, but there's something about him that makes me uneasy."

Darci nodded. "I know what you mean. I don't know his history, but he is a loose cannon. But hey, the party was wonderful, and Jessie looked so happy."

"*And* it went off without a hitch. No explosions, no crude messages. I'm SO grateful! Thanks for all your help, Darci."

"Happy to help, Mrs. Burns."

As Darci took down the balloons, one of them popped, generating loud cries from both women. Mrs. Burns chuckled, and soon they were both holding their bellies.

"Hey look!" Darci called out, pointing to a folded piece of paper lying next to the torn balloon.

"Maybe one of the girls left Jessie a sweet little note," Mrs. Burns said. "What does it say?"

Darci nodded, her expression tight. She picked up the paper, slowly opening the flaps. Her hand flew up to her mouth as she stared at the king of spades, covered by the words⎯BE AFRAID, BE VERY AFRAID. The red joker was in the corner, an evil smile plastered across his face. She handed the card to Mrs. Burns.

The blood drained from Mrs. Burns' face as she gripped the sides of her chair. Darci placed her hand on her shoulder.

"I can't take it anymore. What's happening? What's this joker all about? I'm so scared," she said, her voice shaking.

"Don't worry, I'll get to the bottom of it. The first thing I'm going to do is find out where these balloons came from and who had access to them." *Mom, what would you do?*

"Thank you, Darci. I feel better know ing you're working on this. To tell you the truth, I thought Gunnar might be involved, but he doesn't work here anymore. I don't know what to think."

Darci wasn't convinced of Gunnar's innocence, but didn't mention it. "Please get some rest and try not to worry. Detective Miller is on the case," she said, patting Mrs. Burns' hand.

Chapter nineteen

Darci sprinted over to the dining hall, only to find a dark, deserted room. "Hel-lo? DeAngelo? Jill? Anybody here?" She glanced over her shoulder then poked around, opening cupboard doors and drawers. Snooping wasn't a habit of hers, but she owed it to Mrs. Burns to play sleuth for a while. She checked the refrigerator, finding Jill's chicken nuggets, but nothing of significance. But on her way out she noticed a partially opened drawer in DeAngelo's desk*. I shouldn't look in his personal space. Well, maybe just a peek.* Sitting on top of the pile of papers was the envelope from the food testing lab. Her jaw dropped. *You mean it's true?*

She chose to keep the information to herself and made her way to the back of the building, stopping in front of an oversized broom closet. She cautiously opened the door, finding old brooms, mops, and a dirty dustpan. She wet her lips, glancing around the room, but remembered her promise to Mrs. Burns. Pushing the mops and brooms aside, she noticed a high shelf in the back with a box marked "**decorations**." Stretching every inch of her five foot eight inch frame, she pulled down the box then turned to find a curious figure staring straight at her.

"Jill?" she shrieked, dropping the box on the floor, its contents scattering around their feet. "Oh my God, you scared me!"

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. I heard a noise and came in to check it out. What are you doing?"

Darci's heartbeat slowly decelerated. "I promised Mrs. Burns I'd investigate who's playing these awful pranks. The latest one was a message in one of the balloons at Jessie's party. I'm hoping to find the balloons and think they might be in this box. Want to help me sort through this mess?"

"Another prank? What was the message?"

Darci handed her the piece of paper.

Jill's eyes bugged as she stared at the message. "King of spades? The king of spades is ruthless and a tyrant…he'll stop at nothing to get what he wants. But it's all a façade, like a suit of armor covering up his insecurities, for which he has many," Jill explained. "What's the deal with the joker?"

Darci shook her head. "I'm not sure yet, but I know Mrs. Burns is about to have a nervous breakdown if these pranks keep happening."

The girls sorted through the debris⎯ribbons, banners, napkins, crepe blindfolds, even a unicorn piñata…but no balloons.

"C'mon, I'll help you repack it," Jill said.

Darci closed the lid on the box and shoved it back onto the shelf. She sank against the wall, her hopes dashed. "Poor Mrs. Burns. She's a mess. I have to find out who's doing this. Wait, what's that?" She picked up a small box under the chair and opened it.

"Wow, looks like we found the balloons. The box must have slid under the chair when you dropped the big box," Jill said. "What do you think it means?"

"I'm not sure, but I'm more interested in this red marker lying on top of the balloons. All of the messages, including the joker, were written in red. Who has access to this closet?"

"Pretty much everyone. Somebody was in here yesterday, because there were two cookies missing from my tray. I'll bet it was Brynn."

"But Brynn wouldn't be sabotaging her own parents." Darci shook her head. "That doesn't make any sense."

"Maybe not, but she could be helping Gunnar. She's got this sick devotion to him." Jill stuck her finger down her throat.

"I know, it's weird. But I'm hanging on to the marker and balloons until I get to the bottom of this."

"Good luck. Let me know if I can help." *Drop dead, Gunnar.*

Chapter twenty

Brynn let out a harsh breath and closed her eyes. Her conscience was playing games with her.

*So, Daddy says not to see Gunnar anymore. Ha! Guess he doesn't know me that well, does he?*

You should listen to your father. What kind of daughter are you, anyway? Your parents have always been there for you, given you everything.

*I know, I know. Oh, shut up. Sometimes I hate you!*

That's because you know I'm right…you just don't want to face the truth**.**

*Leave me alone!*

She shook her head and shoulders. *Ugh! I have to talk to Gunnar.*

She revved up her Trans Am, far exceeding the 40 mph speed limit on the back roads to Gunnar's apartment. Her melodramatic flirting and macrame halter top got her only a warning from the silver haired cop who pulled her over. *Lay* *it on thick, works every time.*

She pulled into the driveway and killed the engine, double-checking the address*. Maybe I copied it down wrong. Nope, this is it.* The row of run-down brick buildings resembled remnants from an old textile mill⎯cracked windows, missing bricks, overgrown front lawns. *Oh Gunnar, how can you live like this?*

She climbed the narrow staircase to the second floor, following a long hallway to Apartment #4. She knocked on the door.

Gunnar put down his beer and shoved a pile of dirty clothes under the couch*. "*Who the hell is that?" he muttered.

"Brynn? Hey, what're you doin' here?" He massaged the back of his neck.

"A simple 'hello' would have been nice."

"Sorry. I wasn't expectin' anybody. I would've cleaned up, but…"

Brynn snickered. "Yeah, right. Hey listen Gunnar, my father shouldn't have fired you. He thinks you're the one causing trouble with all the pranks. It's not you, is it?"

He avoided her eyes. "Me? Hell no! How could you even think that?"

"He found firecrackers in the maintenance shed and there were firecrackers in the hot dogs at the welcome celebration. Three girls got hurt, and one of them ended up in the hospital."

"That sucks, but I swear my cousin gave me those firecrackers. He got 'em in South Carolina. I thought they were cool so I kept 'em, thinkin' we could blow off a few down by the beach this summer. That's all."

"Well they're the same type that were in the hot dogs, so it doesn't look good for you. I believe you, but good luck convincing my parents. At least my father didn't press charges, not yet anyway. By the way, I've been ordered never to see you again."

"No shittin'?" Is that what you want?" He took a swig of his Budweiser.

Brynn paced back and forth, shaking her head. "I don't know what I want, Gunnar. Sometimes you're a pain in the ass, then other times you're hard to stay mad at. I just hate to prove my parents right."

"Ya know, you never did listen to your parents anyway." He held out his arms. "C'mere."

They picked up where they left off at the gas station.

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Brynn had a bounce in her step as she headed toward the docks. The afternoon sun illuminated the tranquil water, while three turtles soaked up the sun on a log protruding from shore. A fleeting wave of remorse passed through her, but didn't stick around long. If she got caught, her parents would have to accept the fact that she would still see Gunnar, whether they liked it or not.

Her mood darkened as she thought about the day's lesson on treading water. The group of girls wasn't bad, as girls go, but she could be doing something more fun, like waterskiing or napping. *Oh well, let's get this over with.*

"Come on girls, gather 'round. You'll be treading water for one hour, or until I tell you to stop. Any questions?"

"I have a question," Emily said.

Brynn crossed her arms over her chest. "What is it, Emily?"

"Why do your toes look so weird?"

The girls snickered as Brynn sucked a deep breath through her teeth. The hammer-toe on her right foot was an embarrassment she kept hidden whenever possible.

"Never mind about my toes." More giggles. "Now hit the water!" she bellowed, pointing to the lake. *Stupid kids.*

She set her timer for sixty minutes and opened the folding beach chair, slathering on plenty of suntan lotion.

"Why don't you ever come in with us?" Emily asked.

"Because I just fixed my hair, and I don't want to get it wet."

Several of the girls turned so she couldn't see them roll their eyes.

"You could put on a bathing cap," Emily suggested. "I saw one in the bath house."

"I told you girls to hit the water. Now GO," she barked, pointing to the lake.

*Maybe the little pest is right, the cool water would feel good.* She tucked her long hair into the cap and dove into the crystal clear water. She splashed around, letting the water numb her senses as she eyed the girls, making sure they couldn't touch bottom while treading water.

"Keep your arms and legs moving. You still have forty-five minutes to go," she yelled, reaching up to scratch an annoying itch under her bathing cap. A couple girls put their hands over their mouths to hide their giggles. Brynn narrowed her eyes toward the girls, her mouth dropping open as she yanked off her bathing cap. A primal scream pierced the air.

"GET THIS THING OFF ME YOU TWERPS!" she wailed, thrashing around in the water, arms flying in every direction. A slimy blood sucker, about four inches long, squeezed the skin on her neck, while another one clung like a suction cup inside her bathing cap. The screams grew louder as a small crowd gathered on the beach.

"Who did this? Somebody's going to pay dearly for this!"

"I'll get a salt shaker!" Emily yelled as she ran to the dining hall. She grew up on a pond, so knew that salt kills leeches*. Sneaking down to the water early this morning with a pair of tweezers was genius. Serves her right. But maybe if I help her now, my punishment won't be so harsh.*

Brynn's screams continued to resonate across the water as Emily returned with the salt shaker, sprinkling a generous amount on the blood suckers. Their slimy bodies dried up and fell off, as a chorus of "ewww's" broke the silence.

"Everybody OUT of the water!" Brynn ordered. "NOW!"

A mad scramble ensued, followed by further instructions.

Brynn stood straight, hands on her hips. "Emily, care to tell us what happened?"

Emily's eyes darted back and forth. "Geez, why are you asking me?"

Brynn cocked her head as she stared her down.

"Okay, I did it. I thought it would be funny." Several girls snickered. "It *was* pretty funny, wasn't it?" she boasted, a lopsided grin spreading across her face.

"So, you find this amusing do you, Emily?" Brynn scowled as she scanned their now somber faces. She had their punishment ready to dole out⎯no movie or snacks tonight, and for Emily, no movies for the rest of the month. But when she opened her mouth, she inadvertently burst out laughing. The mood quickly shifted, and soon all of the girls were doubled over in laughter.

Brynn cleared her throat and pulled herself together. "Now go back to your cabins⎯quick, before I change my mind. Go!" she hollered, clapping her hands. "What are you looking at? Show's over," she snarled at the crowd that had gathered.

Chapter twenty-one

Ryker said a prayer as he sat by his father's hospital bed. Until now, he hadn't been a man of faith, but he thanked God for bringing his father back from the brink. It didn't matter that he was a strict disciplinarian; and not exactly open-minded. But he had a sense of humor and enjoyed a good joke, though sometimes a little risqué. Ryker stared at him in his hospital bed⎯really looked at him for the first time, and came to realize how much he loved him, faults and all.

When his father started to stir, Ryker took his hand in both of his.

"Hey Dad, it's me. It's about time you wake up."

"Huh? Hey, where's my nurse? I have a doozy to tell her." Dad was back.

Ryker relaxed his grip on the wheel as he headed back from the hospital. His father might be released in a couple of days. His conversation with him replayed in his mind. Having a life-threatening illness tends to jar people into revealing past secrets. He'll never forget the image of his father reaching out from his hospital bed, his voice cracking.

"Son, I need to tell you something."

"What is it, Dad?"

"When you were too young to remember, I got into trouble. Your mother and I were starting out and like many young people, money was tight. Our financial struggles spiraled out of control, and I wrote checks to cover electricity, phone, medical bills, stuff like that. They started bouncing, so I opened a second checking account and wrote checks to cover payments in each account. Both accounts were empty, so when it caught up to me I was sentenced to nine months in jail, with all but three months suspended."

"You spent three months in jail?" He forced down a sick feeling. "That must have been a horrific time for you and mom."

"You have no idea. Your mother even pawned her engagement ring. She bought it back later, but it was one of the darkest periods of our lives. You don't want to answer the phone because it's likely a bill collector, and going to the mailbox only brings overdue bills and bank notices charging you for another bounced check. It was a nightmare and I never wanted to live like that again, so I finished law school. I managed to keep all of this hidden. I was too ashamed to tell you."

"Don't be ashamed Dad, you didn't deliberately do anything wrong. Besides, look how you turned things around. We all make mistakes. Is that why you want me to become a lawyer, for the money?"

"Yes, I guess it is. I never want to see you go through what we did."

"I won't Dad, but you already know I don't want to be a lawyer. I haven't made up my mind, but I like detective work and you know I like music, so I'm leaning toward one of those careers. Who knows? Maybe I'll be the next Elvis," he said with a grin.

"There's only one Elvis, son. I'd prefer you pursue the detective career, but no matter what you decide, your mother and I will be there for you. Just make sure you have a backup plan."

"Fair enough, Dad," he said, tapping his shoulder.

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Darci twirled the red marker in her hand. *Jill said anyone could get into that closet. That would include her. What possible reason would she have? Besides, she wasn't anywhere near the firecrackers…but Gunnar was. And he tried to break into my room. "I know you're hidin' it in there." Wait a minute…DeAngelo's calorie machine. Is that what "it" was referring to? That machine would be worth a ton of money, money Gunnar would love to get his hands on. And whoever put the note in the balloon could have done it anytime, even before Gunnar got fired. Maybe Jill was right, Brynn might be helping him.* *But why? She's attractive, has plenty of money and isn't shy about going after what she wants. She could do so much better than Gunnar.*

The phone rang as she put the finishing touches on the camp newsletter. Mrs. Burns said they always have an end-of-season finale, the planning of which fell on Darci's shoulders. The party would include the children and their families, since the kids would be returning home the following day. She glanced at the calendar, quietly exhaling as she pondered yet another party, even though it was at the end of the season.

The door opened a crack. Jill was holding a plate of warm brownies, the delightful aroma wafting through the air.

"Surprise! I thought you might like dessert⎯they just came out of the oven."

Darci looked at the clock…2:30. "Oooh, they smell delicious. I didn't realize how late it was. I forgot to stop for lunch, but who says you can't have brownies for lunch?"

"I'll set the plate down on Ryker's desk. Hey Darci, why does Ryker have a framed four leaf clover on the wall?"

She giggled as she bit into the warm brownie. "He won't admit it, but he's superstitious. I've seen him step through puddles to avoid walking under a ladder."

"I guess that explains why his key chain is a rabbit's foot," Jill laughed. "Hey, I got my Ouija board out the other day. Want to try it with me after work?"

"That sounds like fun. I don't know when Ryker's coming back, but I'll plan to come over to your cabin tonight."

"Okay, but remember, the spirits are coming for you," Jill teased, wiggling her fingers in Darci's face.

"Out with you," she said, chuckling as she waved Jill toward the door.

The late afternoon sunlight illuminated the towering pine trees as Ryker traveled down the long driveway, tapping the steering wheel to the John Denver classic, "Take Me Home, Country Roads." He was anxious to tell Darci about his father's change of heart.

"Hey Darci, want to hear some good news?" he said, charging through the office door.

"I can always use good news," Brynn purred, emerging from Ryker's office with a brownie in her hand. Darci was nowhere in sight.

Chapter twenty-two

Darci stopped by her cabin after work to freshen up and make a sandwich, hoping Ryker hadn't discovered her early departure. The brownie she had for lunch was long gone, and the ham and cheese she kept in her fridge was perfect for times like these.

Her pulse raced at the thought of trying a Ouija Board. *Do they really work? Will it spell out my future? Will we contact a spirit or is Jill full of it?* She gulped her milk and finished her sandwich then dashed over to Jill's cabin, wondering if it looked like hers.

"Come on in," Jill announced, sweeping her arm like a model on the Price is Right. Darci's smile vanished as she entered Jill's cabin. It was bigger than hers and had a separate living room, but a hoard of dirty shoes, old magazines and a pizza box that never made it to the trash littered the floor.

"Sorry, I didn't have time to clean up," Jill said, noting Darci's dazed expression. "Would you like a snack or something to drink?"

"No!" she answered a little too quickly. "I mean, no thank you," she said, forcing a half-smile. "Uh, where's the Ouija Board?"

"It's over here on the kitchen table," Jill said, removing a grimy plate. "But let's go in the living room. The spirits will be more comfortable there. Besides, I already lit lavender incense and am burning a black candle."

Darci took a step back and absently rubbed her arms. "A black candle?"

"The black candle absorbs all the bad energy," Jill said, waving her arms in a circle as if cleansing the room. "Before we begin, I'll blow it out and light a white candle⎯they attract good energy. Grab a chair and we'll face each other with the board resting on our knees."

She showed Darci how to place her fingers on the heart-shaped pointer, while she placed hers on the opposite side. "Relax your fingers and keep your wrists up. Don't push or pull it. Let the spirits do the talking. We'll slowly move the pointer around in a circle to get it warmed up. You can suggest questions, but I'll ask them. Only one person should talk to the spirits. Is there anyone you'd like to contact?"

Darci swallowed as goose bumps spread over her like raindrops in a pond. "Um, my mother?"

Jill nodded. "Okay, sure. What's your mother's name?"

"Kathy Miller⎯Kathy with a K."

"Do you have anything from your mother with you?"

Darci reached up to her ears. "My mother gave me these earrings for my eleventh birthday." A wave of sadness washed over her. "They're amethysts, my birthstone. The stones are small, but it's all she could afford. They're priceless to me."

"They're beautiful," Jill said, leaning in for a closer look. "Gently rub them for a minute, and think back to a special memory you had with your mom. It'll help connect you with her spirit."

Darci closed her eyes and massaged her earlobes, the scent of lavender enveloping the room. Soon a warm breeze sweeping over fields of wild strawberries came into focus, their bright red hulls hidden beneath a sea of white blossoms and green leaves. The young girl gripped the dented metal cup in her hand as she bent down to pick the luscious berries.

"Mommy, look over here! I found some big ones," Darci squealed as she popped a couple in her mouth. "They're yummy!"

Her mother's eyes sparkled. "Honey, they're perfect. But try not to eat too many, we want to save them for a snack at home. And if you peel the stems off in the field like I do, you won't have to do it when we get home."

Darci shrugged. "I'll peel them later; that way I can fill my cup quicker."

Her mother smiled and shook her head. "You're just like your father…stubborn, but in a good way." She wrapped her arms around her daughter.

A warmth spread through Darci as they stepped around the strawberry plants on their way home, their cups filled to the brim with juicy berries.

But the sky soon darkened, overshadowing the tender scene like a beastly serpent lurking around the corner. Darci bolted upright, knocking the Ouija Board to the floor. "I..I'm sorry," she said, her trembling hands reaching down for the board. "I'm ready now."

Chapter twenty-three

Ryker narrowed his eyes. "What are you doing in my office?"

"I was writing you a note, see?" Brynn teased, waving a pen and notepad with the word "Ryker" written on it. "So, tell me the good news."

He raised his eyebrows. "Wow, you managed to write my name on a notepad? How about you tell me what you're *really* doing in here? I don't buy your explanation."

Brynn slammed the pad on the table, slashing a line through "Ryker" and writing "MR. PEARSON" in all caps. No one talks to her like that!

 "For your information, Mr. Pearson, I was writing you an invitation to the bonfire. It's next Saturday night at seven. We're inviting all of the staff, well at least those under twenty-five. Never mind that I baked you a plate of delicious brownies."

"Mr. Pearson?" he chuckled. "Sorry, I shouldn't have jumped all over you." He stepped back and held both hands up. "I'll try to be there. And thanks for the brownies. By the way, the good news is that my father is going to be okay. He had a heart attack." He didn't elaborate on their conversation.

"Heart attack? I didn't know. Glad he's going to be okay," Brynn squealed as she threw her arms around him. Ryker tensed as he pulled away, but her greedy hands caressed his back as she pulled him closer. Her hair smelled of coconut and citrus, while her smooth, sun-kissed skin and pouty lips created an internal struggle deep inside him. A struggle he was losing. He slid his hand through her hair, sending sparks down her spine. She pulled his mouth to hers, sweeping her tongue across his lips as he responded with an intensity that tore through him like a lightning bolt. He pulled her closer, lost in the heat of passion until the loud bang of a door broke the mood.

"Mr. Burns!" Ryker gasped, jumping back from the flaming torch.

"Daddy?" Brynn shrieked, smoothing her shirt. "We were just, uh…"

"Cut the crap, Brynn. I may be old, but I'm not blind." He pointed his finger at Ryker. "I hired you to manage this camp, not canoodle with my daughter! As for you, young lady, I'll deal with you later." He walked away, shaking his head. "At least she traded up," he muttered under his breath.

Ryker shook his head as he ran his hand through his hair. "Phew! That was close."

Brynn slinked toward him. "Not close enough," she whispered.

"Whoa, back off Brynn. This isn't going to happen. I lost my senses for a minute⎯glad your father burst in when he did, even though he embarrassed the hell out of me."

"Yeah, daddy has such wonderful timing," she snarled.

Chapter twenty-four

"Are you all right?" Jill asked.

Darci managed a weak smile as she caressed her earrings. "I'm okay now. Go ahead."

Jill placed the pointer on the letter G and closed her eyes. "Feel the energy⎯focus your mind."

Darci took a deep breath and concentrated on the pointer.

"Hello, Mrs. Miller? I'm here with your daughter, Darci. She misses you very much. Are you in the room? Please talk to us." The pointer remained still. "Mrs. Miller, please give us a sign that you are present."

Out of the corner of her eye, Darci noticed the flame on the white candle begin to flicker, growing more erratic by the minute. She held her breath as the pointer slowly moved to YES. Her eyes grew wide. "Ask her if she forgives me," Darci whispered.

A puzzled expression swept across Jill's face. "Mrs. Miller, Darci wants to know if you forgive her."

The pointer started moving across the letters. T-H-E-R-E I-S N-O…Then it stopped.

"There is no…no WHAT? What is she trying to say?" Darci rubbed her teeth along her upper lip as the pointer started moving again.

…T-H-I-N-G-T-O F-O-R-G-I-V-E. Darci looked up as a sense of relief filled her heart, but when she opened her mouth to ask a question the pointer took off, zig-zagging across the board like it was possessed. T-R-U-T-H T-O C-O-M-E O-U-T S-O-O-N. B-E C-A-R-E-F-U-L.

Her hands trembled as she tried to hold them on the pointer. "Mom? Is that you doing this?"

A-S-K B-A-B-Y-F-A-C-E…GOOD BYE. The pointer whizzed off the board just as the candle went out.

Jill's jaw dropped as she stared blankly across the room. Her eyes exuded a haunted look.

"What was *that* all about?" Darci shrieked, scrambling away from the table. "Was that my mother? Who's Babyface?"

Jill shuddered as she stood up and turned toward Darci. "That was my mother's dead husband, Harold. He always called me Babyface."

Darci was gasping for air when she reached her cabin. Never had she experienced anything as bizarre as what happened at Jill's. Her key trembled in the lock. *Click*. She jumped into bed, yanking the covers over her head while her mind raced like a car on an oval track. Did her mother communicate with her? Or was it Harold the whole time? She checked her alarm clock on the nightstand every hour, as haunting dreams flooded her subconscious until the sun rose over the distant mountains.

"Happy Birthday to you," her friends and relatives sang on this festive day. Colorful balloons adorned the living room, surrounding a special birthday cake her mother made for her. "Happy Birthday Darci" was written in pink and purple frosting, with eleven candles burning brightly around the message. Many of Darci's friends and cousins came to the surprise party, bringing gifts such as a transistor radio, a flying saucer for snowy days, a purse with lipstick and blush, and a hand-held hair dryer. She could finally get rid of that ugly bonnet dryer. But best of all were the gifts from her parents. Her dad, 'Mr. Practical', bought her a new shovel to clean out the barn, which elicited giggles from everyone. The last gift was a tiny box wrapped in gold foil paper with a beautiful gold ribbon. Darci glanced at her mom, drinking in the proud expression on her face.

"Well, aren't you going to open it?" her mother asked.

Darci giggled and pulled off the cover, gasping at the most beautiful amethyst earrings she had ever seen. Her birthstone. "Thank you! I love them. And I love you and dad more than anything in the world!" She made a wish and blew out the candles.

The kids played games outside until everyone left⎯everyone except her cousin Sandy, who was spending the night. The girls were excited to try out the new hair dryer. They laughed as they washed their hair in the bathroom sink and took turns blow drying new hairstyles on each other. Darci rushed downstairs while Sandy put the finishing touches on her lips and cheeks. The Wonderful World of Disney was coming on, so making popcorn and Kool-Aid was an urgent issue. They weren't allowed to wear makeup yet, but this was a special day so trying the new lipstick and blush was a fun experiment. Sandy ran down to join Darci in the living room.

"Hey girls, glad to see you're enjoying yourselves. I finished the dishes and dad's still out in the barn. I'm going upstairs to unwind in a hot bath," her mother said.

"Okay, have fun," they mumbled through mouthfuls of popcorn. Sandy's mother and Darci's mother were sisters, and the girls were more like sisters than cousins, fighting one minute and laughing the next.

Mrs. Miller dropped her towel on the vanity, then poured floral-scented bubble bath under the gushing faucet. She laid back and closed her eyes as the luxurious foam surrounded her, the hot water soothing her aching muscles. The constant chatter and commotion of the party slowly drifted away, leaving her relaxed and content until the shatter of breaking glass and loud voices jarred her back to reality. "What are those girls up to? she muttered, reaching around the curtain to grab her towel.

"What's going on?" Sandy asked Darci as the lights flickered and the TV went out. Darci stepped over the red Kool-Aid splattered around the broken glass.

"Maybe we blew a fuse," Darci said. "It's happened before but my parents usually fix it. I'll go ask my mom how to check it."

An earsplitting scream tore through the room as Darci bolted upright. She could still see her mother's eyes staring blankly at the ceiling, the hair dryer submerged beneath the foamy bubbles.

Chapter twenty-five

Darci lathered her hair in the shower, hoping to cleanse her mind of the morbid memories that plagued her the night before. She was sure she had unplugged the hair dryer, but second thoughts flooded her mind. *I was in such a hurry, it must not have come out all the way. If only I would have gone back and double-checked.*

She forced herself to think of something else. *At least I haven't had that horrible clown dream since I got to camp*, she reminded herself, toying with a bag she brought home from the drugstore. Her father forbade her to wear makeup, but in a moment of rebellion she stopped and bought some lipstick, mascara and blush. She stared at her new face in the mirror, smacking her shimmering lips together. *Will Ryker even notice?*

She took advantage of the early morning lull to type invoices and tackle a stack of filing that had grown into a mini-mountain. Humming a popular tune, she cleared the stack of papers, popping into Ryker's office to tidy it up before he got there. She put her hands on her hips. *Wouldn't you know, he'd leave brownie crumbs all over his desk.* As she wiped the crumbs into the trash can, her eyes narrowed when she spotted a notepad lying on the edge of his desk. *Hmmm…why would someone cross out "Ryker" and write "MR. PEARSON" in all caps? Angry maybe?*

The familiar creak of the outside door startled her. She hastily replaced the notepad, knocking the pen to the floor. Spotting something shiny lying next to the pen, she slipped the gold, heart-shaped earring into her pocket.

"Hey Darci, you in here?"

"Morning Ryker. I got here early to catch up on my filing and bill paying. Your office was begging for a cleaning."

He cleared his throat. "Oh, well thanks. I guess I am pretty much of a slob, you know, with the brownie crumbs and stuff like that. Hey, what did you do to your face? I mean, it's great, don't get me wrong, it's just that I'm not used to seeing you all made up like that."

She faked a smile, her teeth sinking into her lower lip. "You like it? Gee that's nice. I see you also liked Jill's brownies."

"Jill's? I thought Bry…I mean yeah, they were great. Tell her thanks. Thanks a lot."

"You're a terrible liar, Mr. Pearson! Here," she said, dangling the earring above his nose. "Did your brownie baker drop this?"

Heat crept into his cheeks. "Uh, it's not what you think…well, not exactly."

"Hey, it's none of my business. Now if you'll excuse me, we have kids that will be coming in to learn water skiing from the master."

"Darci, listen. Yes, Brynn was here and she told me she made the brownies. I was stupid to believe her, but nothing happened. Well, except…"

"Look, you don't owe me any explanations. We're not dating, let alone a couple, so you have every right to do as you please, as do I. Now, why don't you teach me how to water ski like you promised?"

His pulse raced. *What does she mean, she has every right to do as she pleases?* He forced a smile. "Make sure you wear a one-piece suit. You never know what might happen if you take a tumble," he winked.

Chapter twenty-six

Brynn kicked rocks as she shuffled along the path to her house. *Who does he think he is? No one turns me down! Am I losing my touch? Maybe I'll give him and his "girlfriend" a little scare⎯hey, two for one.*

She decided to keep the bonfire low-key, choosing to invite people in person or by phone. No posting bulletins or sending invitations. As promised, she invited all of the seventeen to twenty-five age group, even those she'd rather skip. In light of the last hot dog disaster, she settled on sandwiches, chips and soda, and of course, a marshmallow roast. *I'll keep it lame and tame, that should appease my parents.*

Darci finished getting the bills in the mail, then dashed back to her cabin to change into her two-piece swimsuit. *That'll show him I don't take orders from him.* She reminded herself to focus on her water skiing lesson, not on what Ryker may or may not have done with Brynn. *He looked like the dog that swallowed the king's supper.* She threw on a black lacy cover-up, applied a layer of sunscreen, pulled her hair into a ponytail and headed to the docks.

Ryker was on the dock talking with Ryan, who replaced Gunnar in maintenance. His blonde hair, blue eyes and muscular build was eye candy to the ladies.

Darci whistled as she bounded toward the water, stopping mid-stride at the sight of Brynn in a bright yellow flowered bikini, rounding up a group of six girls in front of the ski boat. She forgot that Brynn was in charge of the girls.

"One at a time girls. Grab a life jacket and wait on the lawn until I call you. Brenda, you're up first," Brynn ordered, glancing at Ryker as she suggestively massaged Coppertone onto her thighs.

"Got a minute?" she asked, waving him over. "I can't reach my back⎯would you mind?" she pleaded, handing him the bottle of lotion. Darci rolled her eyes as she observed the nauseating scene.

Ryker shook his head. "You beat everything, you know that? I should dump this on you," he threatened, but instead rubbed her back with it.

"Temper, temper," Brynn smirked, wagging her finger. "What are you worried about, that your girlfriend will see you with me? Oh look, she has another subject to pursue."

"I don't have a girlfriend," Ryker snapped, turning his head toward the water. Darci and Ryan looked cozy, laughing and pointing. He clenched his teeth. "Let's get started."

He signaled for Brenda to get in the water first, jumping in right behind her. Ryan asked Darci if she wanted to be the lookout person in the boat, so she grabbed a life jacket and sat facing the rear, as Ryker got Brenda into position. When he felt she was ready, he yelled "GO" and Ryan pushed the throttle. They repeated the process five times until she maintained her balance and got up on the skis, a huge smile beaming across her face. The process played out over and over throughout the afternoon, with half of the girls making it up on skis. The other three never got up.

"Okay Darci, jump in. Brynn, why don't you get in the boat and be the lookout person. Darci's going to try it," Ryker said.

Brynn shrugged her shoulders, then hopped into the boat with Ryan. Darci jumped into the water, her thoughts fluctuating between good and bad⎯Ryker holding her up or falling flat on her face.

Ryker's thick muscles tightened as he put his arm around to steady her while she attempted to place her feet in the skis. The waves kept toppling her to one side, but he held her tight.

 "Keep the tips above the surface and press down with your heels." He snagged the handle as the rope came around the back. "Bend your knees and pull hard, like you're trying to pull the boat toward you," he instructed, placing the handle in her hands. She wasn't sure if she wanted to get up on the skis or topple over so he could hold her.

"When you're ready, yell GO." He gave her a squeeze.

Her hands trembled as she tried to steady herself in the waves. She took a deep breath. "GO!"

Ryan pushed the accelerator forward, pulling her upright. She pulled on the rope with all her strength, remembering to bend her knees. But she lost her balance and crashed into the water.

"Holy sugar! I almost made it!"

"Holy *sugar*?" Ryker laughed. "I've got to teach you how to curse."

She slapped him on his bare shoulder. "You're TERRIBLE!"

But the second attempt was successful, and Ryker stood tall, a satisfied grin stretching across his face as he watched her hold her own behind the powerful boat. Ryan made wide turns so she wouldn't go outside of the wake, but Brynn had other ideas.

"She's doing great. Why don't you speed up and narrow your turns? She might get bored staying within the wake."

"I don't think she's ready for anything like that, Brynn. I told her I'd take it easy."

"Come on Ryan, don't be a wuss. It's only water for Pete's sake." She reached past him and pushed the accelerator to full throttle.

The boat shot ahead at breakneck speed, colliding with a massive wave that threw it off course, sending it veering sharply to the left. Darci screamed as she flew over the wake and zipped like a blue streak across the water, nearly passing the bow of the boat.

"What the hell is he doing?" Ryker shouted, observing the action from shore. "I'm gonna kill him!" he yelled, pacing back and forth like a caged lion. He ran to find a pair of binoculars.

"Get back there!" Ryan yelled, shoving Brynn out of the way as he fought to control the erratic boat. "What the hell's wrong with you? SIT down and don't take your eyes off Darci!" he ordered.

Brynn fought the urge to smack him. "Look, she's fine. Here she comes, she's gonna cross the wake now. So don't get your trunks in a bunch."

But Darci wasn't fine. The wave looked more like an ocean swell as she approached it at high speed. She hit it with a force that sent her soaring into the air, crashing down on her right ski as the left one flew off. Ryan quickly pulled the boat around, then cut the engine. A red pool surrounded Darci as her head bobbed above the waves.

"Damn!" Ryan cried, jumping in. "Hold on Darci, I'm coming to get you. Brynn, hold the boat steady and pull the rope when I shout to you." This time Brynn didn't pull any stunts.

Darci stared blankly at Ryan as he swam toward her. She saw the red streaks in the water but felt no pain.

"Darci, hold on to me, we're going back to the boat. You're going to be fine," he said in a shaky voice. "Put your foot on the ladder and Brynn, you pull her in." Brynn jumped back as blood dripped from Darci's leg onto hers. "Hold onto her!" Ryan yelled, bitterness filling his mouth.

He laid her in the bottom of the boat and examined her leg, then grabbed a towel and wrapped her leg in it. "Keep an eye on her, and no funny business this time!" he hollered at Brynn as he powered the boat back to camp.

Ryker shook his head as he stared through the binoculars. He ran up to the nurse's station, finding it empty.

 "Go find Jenny, tell her to get down to the docks right away. There's been an accident," he told a couple of the camp girls as they passed by. He ran into the changing shed and grabbed clean towels and a first aid kit, then rushed down to the dock as Ryan approached. Darci clutched herself, her eyes avoiding her bleeding leg. Ryker wanted to punch Ryan, but focused his attention on Darci instead. He scooped her up and laid her on a lounge chair, soon aware of the crowd gathering around them.

"Everybody get back," he said, waving his arm. He smoothed her hair as he looked deep into her eyes. "How do you feel? Are you in a lot of pain?" he asked, stroking her hand as he carefully lifted the towel to peek at her injuries.

Darci smiled. The sight of Ryker looking into her eyes alleviated most of the pain.

"My leg burns a lot, but I don't think anything's broken. I don't know what happened. I was skiing pretty good, then all of a sudden the boat took off and then went sideways before turning the other way. First thing I knew, there were huge waves in front of me and I was airborne."

Ryker bit his lip and clenched his fist, but put his anger on hold when Jenny approached.

 "Here comes the nurse, let's get you fixed up and we'll figure out what happened later."

Jenny pulled off the towel and examined Darci's leg. A foot-long gash swept across her thigh, but the wound was superficial.

 "It looks worse than it is, Darci. The ski grazed your skin and created a pretty long scratch, but it should heal up quickly. Sometimes the blood is scarier than the wound. I'll put antibiotic cream on it and I want you to take it easy the rest of the day. You shouldn't have any scarring," Jenny said, letting out a shriek when Ryker scooped her up, twirling her around. He practically dropped her when he caught a glimpse of Ryan down by the docks, cleaning up the boat. Brynn was nowhere in sight.

 "What the hell, Ryan? You trying to kill her out there?"

"Now wait a damn minute," Ryan said, raising his palm toward Ryker's face. "Calm your horses and listen."

A guttural roar emerged from Ryker's throat as his veins strained against his skin.

"That's it. This time Brynn's gone too far!"

Chapter twenty-seven

Brynn escaped before Ryker could find her. She sped through town toward Gunnar's apartment, the image of Ryker's eyes shooting daggers infiltrating her mind. She found Gunnar sitting at the kitchen table, a spread of cards called the Horseshoe of Fate laid out in front of him.

"What are you doing?"

Gunnar jumped up. "Brynn! Uh, what're you doin' here?"

She gazed at him, her arms crossed. "I asked you first."

"Well, in case you haven't noticed, I live here," he mocked. "But right now I'm seein' what my future holds. See this eight of spades? It means there's an obstacle in my path, and I need to get rid of it."

Brynn wrinkled her brow, shaking her head. "You create your own obstacles, Gunnar. Hey do you know anything about DeAngelo's cabin? I heard it was ransacked."

Gunnar shifted his feet. "Ransacked? Why would I know anything about that?" he swallowed.

"Look Gunnar, I want that calorie machine too, but just to borrow it. You know, until I lose five pounds. Then put it back. Not steal it!"

"Hey, I'm not the one who grew up with a silver pacifier in my mouth. You don't know what it's like to live dirt poor with a crazy son-of-a-bitch for a father. Well I do, and I want to get out of this hell-hole of an apartment. I'm not sayin' I'd steal the machine, but I can't say I don't think about it."

"You know, everybody says 'What does Brynn see in him'*?* I hate to say it, but I'm starting to ask myself the same question. You spend most of your time goofing off, drinking and smoking." She threw her hands in the air as she turned to leave, stopping by the end table to pick up a note lying on it. "What's this phone number?"

"Phone number? Uh, that's just a cleanin' lady. I wanted a price on gettin' this place cleaned up. It's pretty messy, don't ya think?"

"Cleaning lady? Here you are crying about how poor you are, and you expect me to believe you're hiring a cleaning lady? How stupid do you think I am?" Brynn said as she dialed the number.

"H-e-l-l-o" answered a sexy voice. Brynn slammed the receiver down, hurling the phone at Gunnar. The note fell to the floor⎯the note written in red marker.

Brynn tore down the gravel driveway, nearly clipping a tree on the curvebefore arriving at camp. *I've had it with Gunnar! He had a horrible childhood but that doesn't excuse what he did⎯or DID he ransack DeAngelo's cabin? He never admitted anything. Ugh, I'm so confused.* She focused her attention on the upcoming bonfire, heading to the dining hall to check on supplies.

"Hi DeAngelo. Hey, what are you doing?"

"Hey Brynn. I'm packing up my things. This will be my last summer here. Time to move on," he sighed.

"What? You can't go! Who's going to bake that amazing baklava for us? Besides, you have that secret calorie busting machine we're all dying to try."

"Awww, you know that's just a joke, Brynn. There's no such thing as a calorie busting machine."

She took a step forward and looked him in the eye. "Come on DeAngelo. Let's not play games. It's real, and we both know it," she said, poking him in the belly.

He shuffled his feet, looking at the door as he shifted from foot to foot. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Cut the crap, DeAngelo. I saw the letter from the testing lab. It works, doesn't it? Where are you hiding it? Is that why you're leaving?"

His knees buckled as he collapsed into a chair, burying his head in his hands. "I poured my heart and soul into this invention, not to mention all my money. I even missed Jessie's party to go to my lawyer's office. He said there's nothing I can do until my patent comes through. I thought it would bring me joy and provide a future for my family in Jamaica. But ever since I invented it, it's been nothing but trouble. I forgot to lock the door, and while I was out somebody rummaged through my cabin looking for my machine. I keep moving it to different places, but it's no use. I can't sleep, I can't eat. If I lose any more weight I'll have to invent a calorie *adding* machine."

*Was Gunnar causing all this trouble?* "Don't worry, everything will be all right. Now how about helping me get the menu finalized for the bonfire Saturday night," she said, surveying the contents of the refrigerator.

"You're all right, kiddo. I don't care what they say about you."

"Thanks. That's better than what most people say about me."

Chapter twenty-eight

Mr. Burns slammed the receiver into its cradle. The police told him to lock their doors and be vigilant, and they would make out a report and keep an eye out for any trouble. *A lot of good that will do*. But it was his daughter that sent his blood pressure into overdrive. He couldn't believe she'd deliberately put Darci in danger, but the evidence said otherwise. When he confronted her, she said it was meant to give Darci a more thrilling ride, not to hurt her. A tender hug and smooth apology got her off the hook once again.

Darci woke up early and poured herself a bowl of Corn Flakes. She tugged at her hair, trying to make sense of what happened out on the water. Ryker barely left her side after the accident, bringing her dinner and picking her a basket of wildflowers. He kept his voice calm when he explained what happened, but the look in his eyes was clear⎯that was no accident. *Why would Brynn do that to me? What have I ever done to her?* She concluded that it may have backfired on Brynn, as it was pushing her and Ryker closer and leaving Brynn out in the cold.

Now that her leg was almost healed, she thought about heading into the woods to resume her search. One night, when she was ten, she heard her mother crying downstairs. She snuck out of her room and hid behind the railing at the top of the stairs. Her mother and father were on the couch, his hand stroking her back. Kathy's shoulders shook as she buried her head in his shoulder, mumbling something about a carving in a big red maple in the woods near Camp Chickadee and an assault that took place there. She also mentioned a large boulder. Darci couldn't make out anything else and quietly returned to her room. She came close to asking her father what happened, but never mustered the courage to bring up the subject.

She grabbed a basket and headed down the path, passing the beach along the way. *I'll pick a basket of berries for Captain Bill. It's the least I can do.*

She followed the winding path past the brook, stopping near the second beach when she noticed the sun illuminating the top of a large boulder protruding through the trees. A shiver surged through her as she gazed at the big rock. She left the path to trudge through the brush, ignoring the nasty scratches accumulating on her skin. *I need to find the big maple tree.* She jumped when a feisty red squirrel clipped her foot while playing a game of chase with another squirrel. Providing a moment of comic relief, she giggled as the pair frolicked in a zig-zag pattern before racing up a tree⎯a big red maple. Her basket tumbled to the ground.

Dread twisted in her gut as she stared at the tree, its saw-toothed green leaves dancing in the slight breeze*. Could this be it?* She glided her hand over the once-smooth bark, the surface now riddled with ridges and moss-covered blemishes. *Maple trees were once believed to repel demons and evil spirits. So much for that myth.* Inspecting every inch with her eyes and hands, she noticed something partially obscured by green moss⎯*something odd.* Carefully scraping the moss with her fingernails, she inhaled a deep breath as beads of sweat formed around her temples. As the moss fell to the ground, a cryptic message carved deep into the tree many years earlier emerged. She squinted as she uncovered the partially decomposed carving. Her shriek pierced the empty forest when she recognized the drawing⎯a capital "J" with a check mark gouged on the side.

She backed away in quick, jerky steps. *No, this can't be happening. Is this connected to my mother? What's the check mark for? We've had three pranks with the joker left as his calling card. I need to talk to my father!*

Arriving at the office, she dialed her father’s number with a trembling finger.Hello?"

"Hi Daddy, it's me. Can I talk to you about something?"

"Sure honey, what is it?"

"Um, I can't talk over the phone. Can you come here?"

"Why? Are you in trouble? Do you want to come home?"

"No, I just need to talk to you. It's about mom. Please?"

"Mom? Uh, well okay, I can come tomorrow night after the chores are finished."

"Okay, thanks Daddy. I love you."

"I love you too, sweetheart. See you tomorrow."

She debated telling Ryker about her latest discovery, but decided to hold off until she heard what her father had to say. He didn't question her when she said her father was coming to visit, and kept their conversations work-related. She knew he was angry with Brynn, but had no idea why he was being so distant with her. Her mind drifted back to the day of her water skiing accident, and how he gently smoothed her hair and stroked her hand. Her heart sank as she wondered what she did to upset him.

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A plume of dust shrouded the setting sun as the '68 red Ford pickup wound its way down the long, narrow driveway. Her father was right on time, even bringing her a plate of chocolate chip cookies he baked the night before.

"Hi Daddy, come on in," she said, waving him into the cabin. "You made cookies?"

"I felt bad about the way I treated you before you left. It's not much, but I hope you'll find it in your heart to forgive me," he said as he set the plate on the table, taking one for himself.

"I know you've been under a lot of stress lately, so of course I forgive you. The cookies look delicious, thanks. Sit down, Daddy. We need to talk."

He put the cookie down, focusing his attention on her.

She twisted the pearl ring on her finger. "When I was ten, I heard you and mom talking on the couch. I was hiding at the top of the stairwell and only caught a few words. Mom was crying and I heard her say something about an assault and a carving in a big maple tree in the woods near Camp Chickadee. The tree was near a large boulder. I know she used to work here, so yesterday I went looking for the tree. I found it…and I found the carving."

Charlie Miller gripped the sides of his chair, the room spinning as he abruptly shot up. "NO, I don't want to hear any more!" he shouted, massaging his forehead with his right hand.

"Calm down. I didn't mean to shock you. It's just that I've been wondering about this for seven years and now that I found this carving I need to know what connection it has to mom. Please tell me what you know. I'm not a baby anymore."

Mr. Miller's eyes grew moist as he took Darci's hands in his. He exhaled a long breath. "You're right, you're not a baby anymore. I love you SO much and so did your mother." He massaged her hands with his thumbs, his head bowed as he spoke. "You deserve to know the truth and believe me, I've agonized over telling you since before you were born. "Here, sit down," he said, tapping the seat next to him. She nibbled her fingernails.

"You see honey, I loved your mother for as long as I can remember, way before she even noticed me. She was so beautiful, smart and funny too. She was one of the popular girls and liked me as a friend, someone to confide in, joke around with…you know, a pal of sorts. I guess I wasn't exactly Mr. Excitement, and there were lots of boys who were better looking and much more interesting than I was." He went on, relating the story as it was told to him by Darci's mother, Kathy…

Chapter twenty-nine

"C'mon girls, hop in," Linda shouted to Kathy, the new office secretary, and Monica, the camp counselor from Germany. "Let's go in town and get an ice cream. I'm paying!"

Linda was the camp owners' teenage daughter and had just gotten her driver's license, seizing any opportunity to drive her father's shiny new '54 Ford convertible. Monica sat up front with Linda, while Kathy jumped into the back seat. Linda put the top down to let the warm summer breeze sweep through, the radio blasting "Mr. Sandman" on high volume while they cheerfully sang along.

She pulled into the local ice cream shop and ordered large cones for everyone. Giggles erupted as the ice cream melted, running down their hands and dripping onto the seats.

"Oops, I forgot napkins. Daddy's *not* gonna be happy when he sees his car," Linda worried as daylight began to fade. She also noticed the gas gauge was on empty. "I'll stop at the gas station to fill up and we'll get something to clean up this mess."

As they pulled up to the pumps, the young attendant approached the girls. His flashy grin and swagger of pure bravado distracted from the slight limp in his walk. A couple of questionable tears in his T-shirt exposed his muscular physique.

"And where are you lovely ladies from?" he grinned, taking notice of the lone girl in the back seat.

"We're from Camp Chickadee," Kathy responded.Linda gave Kathy a scolding glance.

"Give it a rest, hot shot," Linda huffed. "We're just here for a fill-up. Oh, and I'll take a roll of paper towels too," she added, rolling her eyes as she glanced at the girls.

"Okay, sorry. Didn't mean to get your dander up. I'll fill 'er up and get your paper towels."

He took Linda's twenty and shuffled toward the register, glancing over his shoulder as he exhaled a deep breath. The girls snickered but admitted he was intriguing.

He gave Linda her change and the paper towels, asking if they lived in town or at Camp Chickadee. When the question was met with silence, he told her the car was really hip and offered to wax it free of charge any time. Keeping the girls in front engaged, he discreetly slipped a note to Kathy in the back seat.

"Have a great evenin', girls," he winked.

Kathy debated telling the other girls about the note, but simply slipped it into her pocket. She cleaned up the back seat and thanked Linda when they got back, sprinting toward her cabin. She retrieved the note from her pocket as soon as she stepped in.

HEY BEAUTIFUL, COULDN'T HELP NOTICING YOU. CALL ME SO WE CAN TALK. His phone number was scribbled at the bottom. She shook her head. "He looks like trouble," she mumbled to herself, crumbling the note and tossing it into the trash can. A smirk formed on her lips.

She gathered her supplies and turned the shower on full blast, hesitating to jump in until the water warmed up. She lathered herself with the strawberry scented soap she brought from home, humming as she imagined her prince charming sweeping her off her feet. But her thoughts drifted to Charlie. She'd been friends with Charlie since Kindergarten, and now that they were older he worshipped the ground she walked on. Charlie was kind and thoughtful, always offering to carry her books and even asking her on a date, but she only wanted to be friends. She felt guilty accepting his friendship bracelet. It had a small diamond set in gold, along with an inscription⎯"You have my heart Kathy Wilson−C.M." But he'd insisted she keep it, so she made it clear they would only be friends. As sweet as he was, she found him a bit, well, dull. But the prince charming that kept appearing in her thoughts was anything but dull. In fact, he looked a lot like the guy from the gas station. Her mother would never let her go out with a guy like him. But her mother wouldn't have to know, would she? He was kind of cute, what harm would it do to call him? It would be rude not to, wouldn't it?

Kathy slipped into her freshly-laundered pink pj's and jumped onto her bed, turning her attention to the trash can staring back at her. Glancing around as though someone was watching, she reached over the side of the bed and picked the note from the can. She stared at it until perspiration dampened the paper. "Why, I don't even know his name," she squeaked.

Closing her eyes and taking a calming breath, she pulled on her robe and slippers, grabbing the key and a flashlight as she snuck out to the office. She dialed the number.

"Hey there," answered a sexy voice.

"Um, hi. Uh, you gave me your number tonight at the gas station?"

"Oh, hi! Yeah, yeah, you were the cute one in the back seat."

Kathy cleared her throat. "I'm sorry, I didn't get your name."

"Hank. My name's Hank. What's yours?"

"Kathy, Kathy with a K."

"Well, Kathy with a K, how about meetin' me tomorrow night? I keep a canoe about a quarter mile down the beach from your camp. We could take a ride, watch the moon come up or somethin'."

"Tomorrow night? Uh, okay, that sounds good," she said, nibbling her fingernails. "What time?"

"Seven." The dial tone droned in the background.

Kathy bit her bottom lip as she paced around the moonlit office. *What am I getting myself into?* she pondered, the corners of her mouth lifting.

The morning sun filtered through her blinds as she peeked at her alarm clock. Another five minutes and it would be blaring, so she dragged herself out of bed. Nightmares ripped through her sleep like a tornado through Disney World. Something about Hank, something alluring yet unsettling gnawed at her, but she couldn't put her finger on it.

She tackled the office workload, but her mind was elsewhere. Dialing his number twice, she hung up each time it started ringing. She used her break to call her best friend Mary, who was intrigued but cautious. Mary suggested meeting him at a public place, like the burger joint in town. Get to know each other a little. But Kathy didn't want him to think she was skittish. After all, it was a simple date. *I'm being silly*, she reassured herself.

Around six that evening, she pulled her hair into a pony tail and dressed in denim pedal pushers, a red gingham button down shirt, and blue sneakers. *Cute, but respectable*. She headed toward the beach, glancing at the friendship bracelet dangling on her arm. A twinge of guilt stung her.

Not sure how far a quarter mile was from camp, she passed the first beach and came upon a rugged trail that cut through lots of brush and thorny berry bushes. Her ears perked up at the babbling sound of a nearby brook. She crossed the stream and made her way south toward the second beach, abruptly stopping as her eye caught a glimpse of something poking through the tall grass. She bent down and spread the grass apart to find a dented fiberglass hull covered with dirt, pine needles and spider webs. She walked around the perimeter of the rotting canoe, a formidable feeling spreading through her body. She rubbed her shivering arms, gazing in every direction.

"I see you found my stupendous yacht!" a voice bellowed, followed by hysterical laughter. Kathy pivoted around as a bizarre-looking figure stepped out from behind a broad tree. His hair was tousled; his face smeared with white makeup, eyes laden with black eye shadow and a sinister smile exaggerated by bright red lips. He wore a purple suit, black and purple silk tie and shiny black Oxford shoes spattered with mud. Kathy's eyes grew wide as her hand flew up to suppress a scream.

"Don't be afraid, the Joker's very friendly," he teased, extending his arms as he looked her up and down.

Kathy took a step back, her vocal cords emitting a high-pitched tone. "J-J-Joker?"

"Yes, Kathy…in the regular world, my name is Hank but sometimes when I'm feeling a little, you know, wicked, I become the Joker. People think the Joker is a joke, not too bright, a fool if you will. But I'm no fool, Kathy. In fact, I'm quite clever, some might even say ingenious. So, lucky lady, you get to spend the evening with the magnificent Joker," he cackled.

"Oh my God. You're sick!" she screamed, bolting through the brush and ripping her shirt on a blackberry bush next to a large boulder. But he was bigger and faster, quickly closing in and tackling her to the ground. She punched and clawed him, but was no match for his powerful arms.

He took a bow and applauded himself before carving his signature calling card into a big red maple, whistling "Hold me, thrill me, kiss me," as he sauntered away, the friendship bracelet clutched tightly in his hand.

Chapter thirty

Darci wrapped her arms around her body in a loose hug, vigorously massaging her arms as she squeezed her eyes shut. "Poor mom. She must have been scared to death."

Mr. Miller hung his head and nodded. "When you're ready, I have more to tell you."

She tugged at a loose thread on her shirt. "There's more?"

He paced back and forth, his hands clasped behind his back. "Your mother was ashamed and embarrassed about what happened, so she never reported him to the police. She knew she shouldn't have called him that night, but it was one of those rebellious things teenagers do. Who'd have thought he'd turn out to be a complete wacko? She never saw or talked to him again. We've all done things we regret, but this one had big consequences."

Blood rushed to her face as she rocked back and forth, clutching herself. "You mean?"

"Yes, Darci. Hank is your biological father."

She leaped from her chair and opened her mouth but the words stuck in her throat. The news from her father washed over her like a tsunami.

"I don't believe you! I can't believe you, Daddy! Or should I still call you Daddy? You've been lying to me my whole life? And mom lied too? How could you do this to me? I don't understand. If you and mom were just friends, how did you end up getting married?"

"You can't imagine how many times I've wanted to tell you, but there was never a good time. But I want you to know something⎯I was there when you were born and I loved you from the moment I saw your dainty little face. You looked so much like your mother, and I loved her from, well, forever. I taught you how to ride a bike, swim, even milk a cow. I know I've been rough on you lately, and I'm truly sorry. But as far as I'm concerned, I've always been your father and always will be…or for as long as you'll let me."

She hung her head, unable to look him in the eye. "Oh Daddy, I'm sorry I accused you of lying. I've been so selfish. I understand why telling me was so hard. I know I'm lucky to have you for a father. But you still haven't answered my question⎯how did you and mom end up getting married?"

"Your gram and gramps were embarrassed and ashamed that their unwed daughter was pregnant, even though it wasn't her fault. Remember, this was 1954, and an unmarried girl having a baby was considered scandalous. They came up with a plan to send her away to a home for unwed mothers in Connecticut, have the baby and give it up for adoption. The story they planned to tell people was that Kathy was attending a private school for a year in preparation for college. But your mother fought against the idea and said she wanted to keep the baby. I also wanted her to keep the baby, so I asked her to marry me. I knew she didn't love me, but hoped over time that would change. Faced with her dilemma, she agreed to marry me and we got married two weeks after she found out she was pregnant with you. When you were born, her parents said you arrived a few weeks early, and no one questioned it, at least not that I know of. Anyway, I'm sorry it took so long to tell you."

"Wow, I could have ended up in an orphanage or a bunch of foster homes. Thank you for being so unselfish. I love you so much."

"I love you too, sweetheart," he said, wrapping his arms around her. "And by the way, she did learn to love me, or at least I think so," he chuckled.

Her chest tightened as she thought about her mother's life being cut short…cut short because of her*. I'm so sorry, Mom. Sorry for what you went through, sorry for what I did. I don't know who Hank is, and I don't consider him my father, but he needs to pay for what he did. Dead or alive, I plan to find out what happened to him.*

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Ryker glided his paddle alongside the canoe, the morning sun shimmering like gold dust across the winding stream. His bobber floated about fifty feet behind, the night crawler dangling beneath the surface, challenging a trout to a tasty meal.

It was Saturday and he had the day off, so fishing alone in a quiet stream was exactly what he needed. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, letting the pleasant breeze rejuvenate his inner soul. The wail cry of the loons only enhanced the serenity of the moment. They used this call to locate one another, which was fine if you were a loon. But he wanted to be alone.

He thought about the upcoming bonfire. He didn't feel like going, but something told him he should be there. With Brynn doing the planning, anything could happen and he would never forgive himself if something bad happened…especially to Darci.

He stared at his feet, rubbing the back of his neck. *Darci must think I'm a real jerk.* *I've barely spoken to her, and she didn't do anything wrong. What the hell is wrong with me? I've never had a problem with girls before.* His thoughts turned to Melissa, his girlfriend in high school. They dated for two years. Melissa was a sweet girl and had a lot in common with Darci, but when she started talking about marriage and children, he put on the brakes and broke it off with her. Since then he'd been playing the field, with no serious commitments. And that's the way he liked it. Or did he? Ever since Darci entered the picture he's had to battle his feelings. Keep her at a distance. He's single after all, and there's a huge pond of beautiful fish out there.

His bobber danced around on the smooth surface, its taunting movements testing his patience. He grabbed his fishing pole, reeling the line as the fish pulled and tugged, fighting with all its muster. He placed his net under the finest trout he'd ever seen, holding it steady as the fish glided in and out, teasing around in circles. *Come on beautiful, it's all right. You're the one I want.* The fish gave one final yank and shook the hook from its mouth, disappearing beneath the cover of green lily pads. He stared into an empty net and felt the pain of an empty heart.

Chapter thirty-one

Brynn recruited a few girls to stack firewood and set up tables for the bonfire that was starting in a few hours. The menu consisted of finger rolls stuffed with chicken salad and a couple dozen with lobster salad. Chips, pretzels and marshmallows rounded out the menu. Brynn set up a punch bowl in the middle of the table, ready to fill with DeAngelo's secret-recipe fruit punch.

"Looks good, girls!" Brynn said, rubbing her hands together. "Now go back and get ready for your sailing lesson with Captain Bill."

A slight rustling behind the trees caught Brynn's attention. She gazed around, peering behind the brush as a handful of chipmunks scurried about. *It's just stupid rodents,* she thought, scanning between the trees one last time. She missed the empty Budweiser can lying on the ground.

Gunnar peered out from behind a large pine tree, watching Brynn make her way back to camp. *Why did she come to my apartment?* *And who does she think she is, accusin' me of ransackin' DeAngelo's cabin, like I'm sendin' him over the edge or somethin'. And preachin' to me about drinkin' and smokin', like I'm a piece of shit? I've had it with that woman…she needs a wake-up call.*

He scoured the area, looking for signs of a wild and crazy party, something Brynn would plan. But it looked more like a scene from Mister Rogers' Neighborhood. "This is bullshit. What's goin' on with her, she turnin' into Goldilocks or somethin'?" he mumbled to himself. "This party needs serious help or it's gonna bomb⎯and I've got just the thing to kick it up a few notches," he said, raising his eyebrows.

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Darci stirred her coffee as she gazed out the window, thinking about the bonfire. It was practically mandatory that she attend, but given the circumstances over the past couple of days, she was in no mood for a party⎯or to see Ryker. She planned to go home tomorrow, her day off. She only had her driver's license for three months, but the old beater her father bought her got her where she needed to go. She wanted to go through her mother's belongings⎯files, diaries, journals, newspaper clippings, jewelry boxes, whatever she could find. *There must be something about Hank in there.* She had a strong suspicion Hank and the pranks were connected, yet it made no sense. He would be around her father's age, she assumed. She never saw any man hanging around the camp grounds that would fit that description. In fact, she didn't know if he still lived in Maine or if he was even alive. But the obvious connection was the Joker. *Is there a connection between Hank and Gunnar? A relationship? Is Gunnar the Joker now? Am I related to Gunnar?*

As she contemplated those questions, an eerie thought jolted her. *The bonfire!* That would be the perfect setting for the Joker to strike again. She wanted to tell Ryker everything, but the way he'd been acting, she wasn't sure she wanted to talk to him. *Why is he freezing me out?* She needed to talk to someone, so decided to go over and see Jill. They hadn't talked since the Ouija board episode.

She walked into the kitchen to find Jill squeezing blue frosting onto a batch of vanilla cupcakes. She was in a patriotic mood, so split the cupcakes into thirds and frosted one batch in red, one in white and one in blue, topped with tiny American flags.

"Hey Darci! I'm almost done, just need to clean up. These are for the bonfire tonight but you're welcome to have one."

"They look super yummy, but I'll have one later tonight. Do you have time to talk?"

Jill moved the tray of cupcakes onto the counter and motioned Darci toward the table and chairs. "I was hoping you'd come by. I know we haven't spoken since that night with the Ouija board, so I wasn't sure if you were mad or something. I heard your father came to visit?"

"I'm not mad, and yes, my father came to visit. That's what I wanted to talk about. You can keep a secret, right?"

"Do I look like someone who'd betray a friend?"

"No, but this has to stay between the two of us."

"You have my word…I won't tell a soul. Pinky promise," Jill said as she held out her little finger.

Darcy obliged. "Jill, does the name Hank ring a bell with you?"

Jill stiffened. "Hank? Yeah, he was one of my mother's husbands. He was a real jerk, but then again, most of the men in her life were. Why?"

Darci ignored her question. "How long ago? And what did he look like?"

Jill looked down, twisting the ring on her finger. "I don't know, a few years ago I guess. He was probably cute when he was younger, but when I knew him he looked like he'd been through the wringers, if you know what I mean. He had bags under his eyes and his hair was thinning, with streaks of gray on the sides. His eyes were dark and steely, like the glistening blade of a knife. It was like he was related to the devil," Jill recalled, massaging shivers racing up and down her arms. "He gave me the creeps."

Darci could feel the hair on the back of her neck rise. "Jill, did Hank walk funny, like with a limp?"

Jill sat stone-faced, nodding. "I think he had what they call clubfoot, because one foot pointed inward. And one of his legs was shorter than the other."

Darci's chest tightened. Gunnar also walked with a limp. It was barely noticeable, but she had observed a slight limp, like one leg was a little shorter than the other. "Do you recall ever seeing or hearing anything about a joker? I mean, when Hank was around."

"A joker? You mean like in a deck of cards?"

"Yes. But I mean, did he ever dress up or act like the joker?"

Jill squirmed as she looked at the clock. "Gee Darci, I need to get more flags for these cupcakes." She scanned the room, knocking over a chair before darting toward the door.

"Hold on Jill. I can tell you're hiding something, and I'm not leaving here until you tell me what you know."

"I don't know anything except DeAngelo was mumbling something about Gunnar and the world coming to an end. If you want to know about Hank, ask Gunnar. He seems to be the linchpin in this whole thing. Now if you'll excuse me, I need to get those flags."

Darci stood with her hands on her hips as Jill fled out the door. Her mind raced with thoughts of Hank, Gunnar, Jill, and now DeAngelo. The pieces were starting to come together but there were so many unanswered questions. *Jill was uncomfortable when I mentioned Hank, and evasive when I pressed her. She never answered my question about the Joker…which leads me to believe Hank DID dress up⎯what else did he do? If this is the same Hank, that would mean he was Jill's step-father. She obviously knows more about Gunnar than she lets on. And why is DeAngelo talking about the world coming to an end?*

Chapter thirty-two

The aroma of freshly baked cupcakes did nothing to improve Brynn's mood as she entered the kitchen. "Where's DeAngelo?"

Jill cast her a veiled glance. "I don't know, but I have everything done for your party. Here, take these," she said, shoving two Tupperware containers full of red punch into Brynn's hands. "DeAngelo made the punch yesterday. If you pull up the golf cart I'll help you load the food. I put the sandwiches in a cooler."

Brynn eyed Jill suspiciously, pulling up the lid on the punch container and taking a whiff. "I'll get the golf cart."

"Seriously Brynn? You think I spiked the punch?"

"I'm responsible for this party so I'm not taking any chances. With everything that's happened lately, I'm double-checking everything."

Jill's pulse throbbed in her neck. *That spoiled brat, who does she think she is, coming in here insinuating I spiked the punch. It would serve her right if I did.*

Brynn pulled up to the beach tables, her golf cart piled high with food and supplies. The tray of cupcakes teetered on top of the cooler, providing a harrowing trip down the trail, but she didn't spill anything. The party would start in thirty minutes, so she poured the punch into the bowl and took another whiff. *Damn, I forgot napkins and matches,* she thought, making a quick trip back to the dining hall.

The guests began arriving at the same time Brynn returned. She also forgot to bring newspaper to start the fire, so crumbled napkins and asked the others to gather kindling wood. As the fire took hold, she set up her boom box and popped in the Rolling Stones' Sticky Fingers 8-track tape and cranked up the volume, drowning out the natural music from the nearby frogs and crickets.

Darci arrived alone, wishing the party was ending instead of beginning. *Well, I'm here, might as well make the best of it.* She threw a few sticks on the fire and asked Brynn what she could help with. Brynn pointed to a couple of plastic bowls and bags of pretzels and chips, with instructions on what to do with them. *Wow, a detailed explanation on how to pour chips into a bowl…I'm surprised she didn't type out instructions for me,* she seethed. A tap on the shoulder broke her thoughts.

"Hey Darci. I wanted to apologize for the way I acted earlier. The mention of Hank stirred up bad memories and I froze up."

"I get it Jill. He sounds like a monster." A chill swept through her. "But let's not talk about him tonight, we're here to have fun. Good music, don't you think?"

"Yeah, I love the Rolling Stones. I even got to see them once when they played Madison Square Garden. My mom won tickets and brought me with her. It's one of the few good memories I have of her." Jill shook her head and smiled. "Well, enough reminiscing. Let's get some punch."

Jill poured a cup for Darci and one for herself.

"So, this is DeAngelo's secret punch recipe. What kind of fruit does he put in it? Has a bit of a kick to it…uh, he wouldn't spike it would he?" Darci asked.

"DeAngelo? Ha, no way. He doesn't even drink eggnog. I know he uses pineapple and strawberries, but whatever his secret is, I guess we'll never know. Tastes good though!"

"Yes, it sure⎯"

Jill followed Darci's wide-eyed gaze. In the distance she could see Ryker with his elbow propped up against a tree, smiling alongside a long-legged blond with lustrous shoulder-length hair and creamy bronze skin. She was wearing a low cut yellow tank top, denim cut-offs and expensive-looking Italian sandals. She was laughing at everything he said.

"⎯is tasty," Darci coughed, turning to shield Jill's view of the moisture gathering in her eyes. "I'm going to mingle if you don't mind."

"Good idea, Darci. Stay out of trouble!" Jill teased.

Chapter thirty-three

Ryker shifted his feet as he caught a glimpse of Ryan talking to Darci. *Something must be hilarious,* he fumed. Watching Darci's animated gestures sent Ryan into a full-blown laughing jag.

"Why that miserable⎯"

"What did you say Ryker?" the blond interrupted.

"Huh? Oh, nothing. I need to move some chairs...too close to the fire." His muscles strained against his skin as he picked up a rock and raised his arm toward Ryan, but came to his senses and slammed it into the ground. A swift kick sent it zipping past the trees like a golf ball in the Masters tournament. The blond marched off, shaking her head as she made her way to the punch bowl.

Ryan was doubled over as Darci continued to reenact a scene straight from Brynn's real-life playbook. She had caught the "Brynn has leeches in her cap" show from the front porch of her office a few days earlier. Her shy demeanor was nowhere in sight as she tossed an imaginary bathing cap high in the air and vigorously scratched her scalp, exposing her cleavage as she bent forward in Ryan's direction. Jill was in hysterics as a crowd gathered, laughing and cheering Darci on.

Flames of rage coursed through Brynn as she watched the spectacle unfold. "Why that miserable little witch, she's got some nerve making a fool out of me in front of everybody. She's going to be sorry she ever set foot on this property!"

The ground began to spin as Darci tried to focus on the crowd, but the image was a blur. She detected faint laughter but the crowd was mostly silent now, with all eyes on her. A wave of panic gripped her as her eyes darted through the group, catching a glimpse of a figure barreling toward her. Brynn shoved through several people, knocking a counselor to the ground as she marched forward, her hands planted firmly on her hips as the crowd turned toward her. Her mouth twisted as she grabbed the back of Darci's hair with one hand and yanked her by the arm with the other, turning them face to face. A blur of wide glaring eyes and flaring nostrils stared back at Darci as she tried to focus, but a swell of nausea surged through her, erupting in a volcanic explosion that cascaded down Brynn's face.

An ear-splitting scream tore across the sky as Brynn grabbed Darci's arm, sinking her long nails into her skin. "I'll get you for this, you plastered moron! You wait and see!" Brynn stormed off, dragging her bare arm across the nasty mess.

Ryker rushed over to Darci after watching the episode unfold. "Move aside," he said, shooing the startled onlookers away.

"There's only one thing to do." He picked her up and trudged down to the lake, tossing her into the cool water.

"Wh…what are you doing?" she hollered, floundering and sputtering unintelligible English.

 He pulled her under with him, massaging her hair underwater until they both surfaced. Water spilled from her mouth like a broken fountain.

"I'm cleaning you up. You look like hell," he retorted, clearly amused at the situation. As Darci's world came into focus, she assessed the situation with a clearer understanding of what just took place.

"Oh Ryker, what have I done? I'll never be able to face these people again. How'd I get so drunk? I've never had a drink in my life."

"Looks like somebody spiked the punch. Whether or not it was Brynn I don't know, but she got exactly what she deserved. After what she did to you on that water skiing trip, she had it coming. Who made the punch, anyway?"

"Jill said DeAngelo made it. It's his secret recipe but she couldn't find him this afternoon. I even asked her about it, you know, if he might spike the punch and she said no way, he doesn't even drink eggnog. Do you think it could be Jill?"

"Maybe…you say DeAngelo is missing?"

"I don't know if I'd call it missing, but Jill didn't know where he was so she ended up making most of the food for the party. She could have spiked it, but it also could be anyone here tonight."

"That's true. *Anyone like Brynn.* Come on, let's take a look around." He extended his hand. "Now that you look halfway presentable."

"I look like a drowned rat, thank you very much."

"Yeah, well at least now you're a presentable drowned rat," he chuckled.

She covered her forehead with one hand, slipping the other into his. "Do you think I'll get fired?"

He squeezed her hand. "I doubt it, but if you do, they'll have to find a new manager."

Warmth filled her chest. *Ryker would quit his job for me? But why was he so cold before?* She decided to keep her mouth shut and enjoy the moment. She covered her mouth and held her hand over her stomach as Ryker approached the food table, stopping at the punch bowl. A thin layer of fruity liquid covered the bottom, which might explain why the music and crowd were getting louder. He ladled some into a cup and took a sip, nodding at Darci as his suspicion was confirmed⎯it was spiked with vodka.

Chapter thirty-four

Darci turned away as Ryker dumped the remaining punch onto the ground. She struggled to keep from puking.

"Jill was drinking it too. I wonder if she got sick?" she asked, when out of nowhere a lobster roll sailed past her head, missing her by an inch but nailing Ryker right in the eye.

"What the…?" he muttered, digging lobster meat out of his eye. The blonde was teetering on a chair, her head rolling back in laughter until the chair toppled backwards, sending her tumbling into the tall grass.

"What was *that* all about?" Darci said, a smirk forming on her lips.

He cleared his throat. "Never mind. I had it coming. Let's leave it at that."

He grabbed her hand and pulled her close before plunking breath mints into her hand.

"Gee thanks. Just what a girl wants from a guy."

"They might come in handy, you never know," he winked.

Her heart skipped a beat as they walked hand in hand, putting as much distance between them and the party as possible. The trail through the woods was eerily familiar, which sent shivers through her as she thought about her mother's ordeal years earlier. She held her breath when they passed the tall birch tree, the site of the first prank.

"Are you okay? Your hands are shaking."

"Ryker, this is the tree I told you about." She guided him to the other side of the tree. "See the carving?"

**SPADES ARE BLACK, BETTER WATCH YOUR BACK.** Goose bumps cascaded across her arms as she gazed around the forest, illuminated by the full moon. Ryker ran his hand across the carving, then searched the ground for any sign of a knife or carving apparatus.

"I hope he doesn't pull any pranks tonight. What if he puts something in the fire, or has a gun?" Darci asked.

"Let's not panic. I think we're getting skittish because this tree brings back bad memories. Let's get away from it, okay?"

"Yeah, you're probably right." This time she grabbed *his* hand, and laid her head on his shoulder as they walked along, going about a hundred feet until the tree was out of sight. He stopped and pulled Darci so close their hearts were beating in unison.

"I want to apologize for the way I've been acting lately. I know I've been a real jerk, ignoring you and flirting with other girls. I've been single quite a while, playing the field, and I guess I got scared."

She swallowed, but kept staring into this eyes. "Scared? Of what?"

"Of you, silly! I mean, not *of* you, but how I feel about you. Boy, this isn't easy to talk about." He wiped his brow. "I hope I didn't make a complete fool of myself," he said, a silly grin spreading across his face.

"You can make a fool of yourself any time you want," Darci giggled. "But I might have you beat in the embarrassment department tonight."

He pulled her closer, bending down to meet her trembling lips. The soft, gentle kiss gave way to a more passionate embrace…until the moment was shattered by the sound of rowdy voices, and an empty bottle tumbling down the hill.

"What the hell was that?" Ryker shouted, catching sight of the bottle resting against a tree. Darci was on his heels as they dashed up the hill, empty Budweiser cans dotting both sides of the path.

"Look!" she said, as four shoddy-looking characters fled deeper into the woods, splitting into different directions. They tried trailing them, but quickly lost sight.

"Those miserable bastards," he grunted, kicking an empty can.

"Gee, that helps a lot," Darci said. "If it's any help, I'm pretty sure I saw Gunnar, or at least that looks like a shirt he always wears."

"How many guys tried to break into your room the night of the fire?"

"Uh, four. Yeah, that adds up, doesn't it?"

"It sure does. And we can add one more name to the punch-spiking suspect list," he added, examining the empty vodka bottle. "We'd better get back to the party in case they plan to pull another prank tonight."

Her heart sank as she hoped for a repeat kiss, but knew he was right. The safety of the others came first.

"Why don't we cut through the woods? That might save time," she suggested.

"It looks pretty thick, but hey, we can give it a try. Follow me." He took her hand once again as they struggled through the thick brush, breaking branches and climbing over dead trees. Darci maneuvered around the branches until her foot caught under a dead root, propelling her onto his back. They both tumbled to the ground, laughing hysterically. "You sure you didn't plan this?" he teased.

"You'll never know, will you?" Darci taunted, as he turned her face toward his. Her eyes searched his. "Ryker, can I ask you something?"

"Sure, anything."

"When are you going to tell me about that tattoo on your arm? Who's the pretty girl?" She stroked the image on his arm.

"I wondered when you were going to ask me about that," he said, gliding his hand over the image.

"You didn't answer my question."

"Her name's Barbara. She lived next door and we grew up together, went to the same schools, even worked on the school newspaper together. Stuff like that."

"How long did you go out with her? Where is she now?"

"I never said I went out with her. We were good friends, always had each other's back, you know? She was a year older than me and wanted to be a journalist, so after graduation she moved to Boston and got a job with a local TV station. She called me one night, all excited because they were doing a report on the Vietnam War and she was going as part of the team covering the story." He stared down at his hands. "While they were interviewing wounded soldiers, the hospital was attacked. She never made it home." He raised his eyes to heaven.

"Wow, I…I don't even know what to say. I'm so sorry."

"Thanks, but you don't need to say anything." He stroked her hair. "You're beautiful, you know that?"

She gave a dismissive wave as a smile danced on her lips. "Thanks, but you know I just threw up, my hair's a mess and if you hadn't given me a breath mint…hey wait a minute. You had this planned all along, didn't you?"

"I guess you'll never know, will you?" he grinned, looking at his watch. "I think we lost track of time…we'd better hurry," he reminded her as he grabbed her for a quick kiss.

Darci closed her eyes, relishing the moment as though all time had stopped. But she remembered they had a job to do, so reluctantly opened her eyes only to catch sight of a scene up ahead that shook her to her core. The gut-wrenching scream resonated through the party crowd on the beach.

"What's wrong?" he yelled, grabbing her shoulders as he scanned the forest. "What did you see? What is it?"

"It can't be. It just can't be!" she cried, pointing to a hill in the distance.

 A body in a white chef's coat and hat dangled from the noose.

Chapter thirty-five

"What in God's name was that?" Jill shouted, the crowd following her as she raced toward the woods. "Over there!" She pointed to a hill overlooking the thick brush.

"Hey wait for me!" the blonde yelled. Her Italian sandals kept coming off in the rugged terrain.

"What idiot wears fancy sandals to a bonfire?" Jill huffed, scrambling over downed trees and prickly brush.

"Hey, if I wanted to look like you I'd wear my mother's clothes she empties the trash in," the blonde fired back.

Jill shot her a nasty look but dropped the exchange. She didn't have time for such petty nonsense.

Ryker held Darci's trembling body. He knew DeAngelo was depressed, but couldn't wrap his mind around the scene he just witnessed*. Who was with him last? Darci said Jill couldn't find him. Does Jill know something? What about Brynn? And Gunnar…did Gunnar have something to do with this? What if it wasn't a suicide?*

Darci sobbed as she buried her head in his shoulder. "I talked to Jill earlier today. She said DeAngelo was mumbling something about Gunnar and the world coming to an end. She thinks Gunnar is the key to solving these pranks. Do you know about DeAngelo's calorie-busting machine?"

"His WHAT?"

"DeAngelo always joked that he's going to run our food through his machine and take out the calories, so we can eat his rich desserts without feeling guilty. It's been a joke around here amongst the girls, since we're always on diets. Well, it turns out it's no joke. I saw the letter from the testing lab⎯the machine is real. He was paranoid about someone stealing it. After all, if it works, it would be worth a fortune. He probably hid it someplace and believed the pranks were attempts to scare everyone and steal his machine. Remember the fireworks message⎯**NEXT TIME WON'T BE FUNNY UNLESS I GET MY MONEY?** By 'money' they could mean something worth a lot of money, like his machine."

"Why didn't you tell me this?"

"I didn't think it was all connected, but it's starting to look that way. Remember when those guys tried to break into my room? One of them, and I'm pretty sure it was Gunnar, said 'I know you're hidin' it in there' and I didn't know what he was talking about? I bet it was the machine. For some reason he thought I was hiding DeAngelo's calorie machine in my cabin. He could have only known that through Brynn, since she was dating him at the time."

"You know, as crazy as it sounds that actually makes sense. But I can't imagine DeAngelo getting so stressed about a machine that he'd take his own life. He was always so cheerful and happy, joking with everybody," Ryker said, craning his neck at the sound of snapping branches and boisterous chatter. "Uh oh…they must have heard your screams…we can't let them near the body."

"Hey, there they are!" Jill called out, stumbling forward as her foot snagged a large root. The others raced past, leaving her sprawled on the ground. Only the blonde trailed behind.

"Wow, thanks everybody for your help," Jill snapped.

Ryker told Darci to go on ahead and check out the situation while he held up his hand like a stop sign.

"Hold it right there. I need your attention. There's been an incident out here, and I've instructed Darci to investigate." All eyes turned to Darci, who kept some distance between herself and the party guests.

"What incident? What happened? Where's she going?" Questions were pouring in like reporters reeling them off at a news conference.

He shuffled his feet, massaging his forehead as he tried to find the right words. "I don't know how to tell you this, but⎯"

"RYKER! Come quick!" Darci screamed.

"Stay here!" he ordered, dashing toward Darci at breakneck speed. "What is it?" Struggling to catch his breath, his eyes grew wide as he stopped dead in his tracks. "Oh my GOD!"

Chapter thirty-six

"Did you hear that? Something's happening over there, and like it or not I'm gonna find out what it is. Who's with me?" The others joined Jill, racing up the hill.

"What the heck is *that*?" Jill shrieked, stopping mid-stride as she caught a glimpse of something dangling from a tree as it swayed in the breeze. Everyone followed her gaze, which ignited a multitude of curious shouts and questions.

"What the hell's going on over there?" Brynn muttered, jerking her head around at the commotion coming from the woods. She got back to the party after a quick shower and change. The stench of her party clothes sent them straight into the dumpster*. I've got to find out what's going on*, she thought, dashing toward the voices.

Darci trembled as she raced toward Ryker, her arms waving frantically. "It was a prank, Ryker. DeAngelo's not dead!"

He scooped her off the ground and twirled her around, smiles spreading across their faces. "I never thought I'd be happy to see a horrible prank, but in this case I'm thrilled," he added, taking her hand as they ran toward the uncanny replica. The chef's coat and white pants were stuffed with polyester filling, while dirty white sneakers dangled from the pant legs. The tall chef's hat sat squarely on top of the perfectly formed head, the wire rim glasses securely in place.

"Whoever did this put a lot of time and effort into it. It sure fooled me. Too bad they couldn't use their talent in a better way," he said.

"Do you think Gunnar's capable of creating something like this?" she asked, tracing her fingers across the face.

"I don't know…but he knows a lot of people. Maybe he got someone to help him."

"Maybe. Hey look at this!" Darci pointed to a handmade sign nailed to the back of the dummy. **THE GAME WAS PLAYED WITHOUT A FLAW…BUT THE ACE OF SPADES IS THE FINAL STRAW**. A joker was drawn in red marker; his arm holding up the ace.

"This is the worse prank yet, and I'd say the last one. The ace of spades is known as the death card," Darci said.

A chill ran down his spine. "I hear the others coming. Hurry, hide the sign. It's bad enough they'll see this dummy without adding that sign to the mix."

Jill stopped to catch her breath as she crested the hill, which allowed some of the others to pass her. Mayhem ensued as all eyes focused on the body hanging a short distance away, as screams and cries of disbelief echoed through the trees.

Brynn ran toward the voices, her heart pounding wildly as she caught sight of the group. "What's going on?"

"Look!" Jill said, pointing to the body hanging from the tree.

A blood-curdling scream resounded across the forest as Brynn collapsed onto the ground. "No! It can't be! I told him not to go, that we needed him here. But he was so upset. Now look what happened!" Brynn cried.

Ryker was halfway down the hill when he heard Brynn's comments. "Calm down everyone, it's not what you think," he said, pressing his palms down in a calming motion. "This was just another stupid prank, done by some idiot who thinks he's funny. That's NOT DeAngelo; it's a stuffed dummy made to look like him."

Wide eyes and gaping mouths stared back at him.

"But why? Why would anyone do this?" Jill cried, shaking her head. "I freaked out when I saw this because DeAngelo was missing this afternoon."

"A dummy? It's just a prank?" Brynn freaked out, upset and relieved at the same time. "Even Gunnar wouldn't sink this low, would he?"

Ryker thanked everyone for their concern and asked them to remain silent about what they saw. He didn't want the children to know any more than they already did. They lost a third of the kids after the firecracker incident, though he didn't blame the parents. He'd have taken his kids away too.

"Thanks again everybody, now please go back to the bonfire. I'm sure there's plenty of cleaning up to do. Darci and I will take care of this. Remember, mum's the word."

Darci marched over to Brynn. "Don't go anywhere, I have some questions for you."

Brynn's muscles tensed. "I see you finally sobered up?"

Darci gritted her teeth, sauntering toward Brynn until they were face to face. "What do you know about DeAngelo's state of mind? I heard you say he was upset and you told him not to go. Go where? Why was he upset? What did you two talk about? Do you know who spiked the punch? And what do you know about Gunnar's possible involvement in this? I thought you two were an item."

Brynn gave Darci a frosty stare. "Who died and appointed you lead detective? I don't know anything about Gunnar's involvement in this, and my relationship with him is none of your business. I don't know who spiked the punch, but I can assure you it wasn't me. Probably Jill. As for DeAngelo, I saw him a few days ago and we talked about the menu for the bonfire. He seemed depressed; said it was his last year here, might be moving on, stuff like that. I encouraged him to stay."

"What was he depressed about?"

"He was paranoid about someone stealing his calorie machine, said it's been nothing but trouble and he was going to leave. Happy now? I'm going back to the party to clean up."

Darci clenched her fists as Brynn stormed off. "DeAngelo might be quitting? What else does she know? Ooh, she makes me so mad!"

"Here, kick this can. You'll feel better," Ryker said.

Darci pulled her leg back and gave the can a swift kick, sending it tumbling down the hill.

"Feel better now?"

"A little," she laughed.

It took them over an hour to cut down the dummy. With no ladder available, Ryker hoisted Darci up to the first branch. Using her tree-climbing skills growing up on a farm, she scaled the tree and cut the rope with Ryker's pocket knife.

"Is there anything you can't do?" he asked, clearly impressed.

"I can't play the guitar."

"Remind me to take care of that. Now let's get you down from there."

 "What should we do with the dummy?"

"I've got an idea. Let's finish cleaning up here, then I'll show you. It's a perfect hiding place, at least until we figure out what to do with it."

They picked up the beer cans, then helped clean the mess from the party. Most of the guests left, including Brynn, leaving Jill and the blonde to do most of the cleanup.

"They make an interesting team, don't you think?" Darci chuckled.

"Yeah, they should audition at the local comedy club."

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Gunnar and his buddies crashed on his lumpy futon and lounge chair covered in frayed goldenrod fabric.

"Man, did you see that crazy bunch tonight? And what about that blonde, eh? She was one foxy mama. Spikin' that punch really livened up Brynn's deadbeat party, don't ya think?" Kevin roared.

"Yeah, she owes you one for that little gift, Gunnar. And what about that creepy dummy of DeAngelo? How the hell did you make that? That was bitchin', man. I never knew you had any talent," Joe chuckled.

"Yeah, what was that all about Gunnar? Why didn't you let us in on your brilliant scheme? You been hidin' all that creative genius stuff or somethin'?" Kevin jeered, closing his eyes and pressing his palms against his cheeks. "You scared the livin' shit out of us!"

"Ha, well it's about time somebody scared the shit out of you clowns," Gunnar said, shifting his eyes toward the clock. "You guys hungry? Maybe I'll use my creative genius and make us a gourmet pizza with all the fixins'."

"Well Mr. Fancypants, go ahead, but I usually throw a frozen pizza in the oven," Kevin teased.

Gunnar stuck out his tongue and flipped him the bird. But he couldn't get the image out of his mind⎯what if that really *had* been DeAngelo?

Chapter thirty-seven

A woodpecker seeking an early breakfast woke Darci before sunrise. She swallowed a couple of aspirin, splashed cold water on her face and ran a brush through her hair. Her father would never forgive her if he found out she got drunk the night before. *How did I let that happen? How embarrassing, especially around Ryker. Who spiked the punch?* She was pretty sure it was Gunnar, but hadn't ruled out Jill or Brynn. It was a night she would always remember, or at least most of it.

A chill in the air called for a long-sleeve pullover, blue jeans and sneakers. She hopped in her car and headed home, not knowing what she might find. Her limbs tingled with anticipation, but pangs of guilt gnawed at her. *I've always been honest with my father, but he'll worry himself sick if I tell him about the pranks, especially my part in investigating them. I know* *I shouldn't be going through my mother's private things. I wouldn't want my kids doing that to me.* But she had to know what secrets the past held and what connection she may have to Gunnar.

"Daddy!" She wrapped her arms around him, planting a quick kiss on his cheek.

"Well that was some greeting," he said, returning the hug. "Did you miss me that much?"

"Of course I did. And I've been missing mom more than ever. Would you mind if I poked through her things, and maybe bring a few things back to camp with me?"

"Sure honey, if it makes you feel better, go right ahead." Mr. Miller stayed out of her way, preparing chicken and dumplings for dinner. He went to the garden to dig onions and carrots while Darci went straight to her mother's dresser.

She bit her lower lip, raising her face toward the heavens. "Forgive me, Mom. I know you'd want this despicable monster caught, and I'm hoping you'll trust me to solve this case. I'm doing it in your honor, so I hope you'll understand. I know you'd do the same for me."

The dresser and most of the closet remained untouched since her mother died. Her father used one small section on the far end of the closet, and had a small chest of drawers for his meager wardrobe. He still couldn't bring himself to part with any of her belongings.

She took a deep breath, then proceeded to search through the drawers. Nothing unusual⎯mostly underwear, old jeans and T-shirts. Long-forgotten birthday and Christmas cards were buried beneath the bras and panties. She spread the cards out on the bed, taking note of one in particular. It was a card she made for her mother's 28th birthday, her last birthday before the accident. A tightness wrapped itself around her chest as she stared at the silly card, drops of salty tears smudging the words written in magic marker. *I* *want to grow up to be just like you! Happy Birthday Mommy, I love you. Darci Miller.* A drawing of Darci and her mother picking berries took up the bottom half of the card*. I can't believe I signed my whole name⎯and she kept the card.*

She finished by going through her mother's jewelry box, finding mostly costume jewelry. But in the corner was a gold wedding band, along with an engagement ring. The diamond was modest but she remembered her mother proudly wearing them. *I'm sure she loved dad. She was always fiddling with her rings with a smile on her lips.* But there was no sign of the friendship bracelet.

Next was the closet. Thomas Kinkade jigsaw puzzles, books and magazines on home decorating, and all sorts of board games occupied the top shelf. A well-worn Monopoly game brought a smile to her face as she dragged her hand across the cover. They kept a table in the corner of the den for their Monopoly games, some lasting for three months before declaring a winner. Darci always chose the car and her mother the thimble. *Precious memories.* After moving several games and boxes, she spotted something in the far back corner⎯her mother's other jewelry boxes. She kept everything *but* jewelry in the second-hand boxes she found at yard sales and thrift stores.

She smiled upon finding a 1963 concert ticket for Chubby Checker sitting atop the pile of items, pictures of her first Christmas, a receipt from the jewelry store where her parents picked out their wedding rings, and a letter sized envelope with "Kathy" written on the front. She looked upward, a twinge of guilt spreading through her as she opened the envelope. She unfolded the paper, gently spreading it out on her thighs.

*Dear Kathy,*

*I remember the first time I saw you. It was sixth grade, and I was late getting to class because Mrs. Jipsum asked me to pick up a supply of fountain pens and ink for the inkwells. I saw you sitting at your desk, the corners of your mouth turned slightly upward as you looked at me, which raised my heartbeat a few notches. I later realized you were probably holding back a giggle. But when I passed your desk, I accidentally stepped on my shoelace, propelling me onto your desk, the ink splattering all over your pretty new dress with the lace collar. I'll never forget the look on your face as the classroom erupted in laughter. My cheeks burned like hot coals as I scrambled to pick up the pens, wishing a deep, dark inkwell would swallow me up. But you didn't scream at me⎯in fact you stayed composed even though your dress looked like a dark blue version of a Dalmatian. You refused my offer to pay for the dress, saying I had suffered enough for one day. From that day forward, I knew I wanted to be with you forever, Kathy Wilson.*

*Later that day I stared at your long blonde hair, neatly braided and adorned with a pink bow. I remember lightly touching the bottom of your braid, my eyes darting around the room in search of Mrs. Jipsum catching a glimpse of this little misdeed. Your hair was only a few inches from the ink well on my desk, and I thought about the other boys who dunked their classmates' braids and pigtails into the ink wells. They paid a steep price, getting whacked on the fingertips with a ruler…not to mention staying after school to write "I WILL NOT DIP HAIR IN THE INKWELL" a hundred times on the blackboard. It was a mean, foolish prank, one I vowed never to pull on you or anyone else.*

*And now we come to this. We all make mistakes, but now you're pregnant and your parents are threatening to send you away to have the baby, then give it up for adoption. I know that's not what you want, and neither do I. I'll admit I'm concerned about the genes that monster may pass to his offspring, but if you'll let me, I'd like to help you raise the baby. I'll do my best to raise him or her as my own, and this child never has to know I'm not his or her biological father. I hope you can learn to love me someday⎯even if it's a fraction of my love for you, I will be one happy man. So, Kathy Wilson, will you marry me?*

Darci squeezed her eyes shut, exhaling as she tipped her head back. She folded the letter and tucked it back in the envelope, deciding not to tell him she read it. She put everything back in the box and reached on her tiptoes, placing it back on the shelf.

Weaving her hand through her hair, she dragged a chair to the far end of the closet shelf, pulling down the other two boxes. Rifling through the first box, she dumped its contents onto the floor⎯more greeting cards, ticket stubs and obits. She crossed her arms, then opened the last box*. Please let there be something in here I can use.* Her eyes widened as several newspaper articles, yellowed by the passage of time, occupied the box. She spread the first article on the floor. It was dated March 5, 1955, two weeks before her birth date. The headline blared like a bull horn⎯**MAN DRESSED AS JOKER ATTACKS WOMAN IN HER HOME.**

She held the article in her jittery hands. The story detailed an incident that took place on the other side of town. It happened in broad daylight on a Thursday morning…

A young man, appearing polite and well dressed in a red jacket with the letter "H" stitched on the front, knocked on the woman's door. He was carrying a canvas bag and said his car broke down and asked to use the phone. Although she was alone, the woman always helped anyone in need, so invited him in. She asked what he was carrying in the bag. He said it was full of keepsakes he was returning to his mother, but his car didn't lock so he couldn't leave them in it. She directed him to the phone in the hallway. Several minutes later she discovered the receiver dangling by its cord, the dull hum of a dial tone invading the silence.

Her scream tore through the air when the hallway mirror depicted a painted white face with bright red lips and a striped purple bow tie fastened to an orange cuffed shirt. Upon his head sat a three-pronged crown with balls of red, white and blue dangling from the points. His sinister laugh coursed through her veins. as he ordered her to the floor, brandishing a hunting knife close to her neck.

The article summarized the relentless attack that left the poor woman traumatized, but alive. He took his original clothes and makeup with him, leaving nothing behind for evidence. She summoned the courage to call the police, but the investigation never garnered any suspects.

Darci forced down a queasy feeling, thumbing through more clippings and articles in the jewelry box. *Why didn't my mother tell the police about her own encounter? Because she was too ashamed, that's why.*There were a couple other stories that followed within the same year, then everything seemed to stop.

"Darci, supper's ready. I made your favorite, chicken and dumplings."

"That sounds yummy, Dad. I'll be right down." *Be patient Mom, I won't give up until I find Hank.*

Chapter thirty-eight

DeAngelo collapsed onto his bed, his eyes following a spider roaming across the tarnished ceiling. He thought about his life⎯like that spider's, a long, slow journey with no direction. And his family in Jamaica…and Camilla. Did she forget about him? Is she married now? Is she happy? So much time. So much money. Maybe he'd see her again. His trip into town the day before gave him hope. His patent had been granted.

Now he wanted to leave. Take Buster and leave everything behind. Hit the road and get as far away from Camp Chickadee as possible. The Burns treated him well, but he was a basket case knowing someone was after his machine. The $550 he withdrew from his bank account was enough to buy a bus ticket, but that old Falcon might not get him to the bus station. Where would he go? Where would he live and work?

He stirred as the late afternoon sunlight streamed in from the window. "Did I doze off?" he muttered, rubbing his eyes. He packed his clothes, closing the lid on his aging leather suitcase. *There! I'm all packed, now all I have to do is get Buster and hit the road. My lawyer helped me get my patent, maybe he can help me sell it. I'll have to convince him to work for a cut of the profits, 'cause I know he won't work for nothing.*

Looking over his shoulder, he placed the suitcase in his car, leaving his small black and white television set and the furniture behind. He headed to the root cellar, keeping his eyes and ears open to any sign of motion. The sun was going down as he approached the door, casting a shadow over the old concrete steps spattered with dirt. He pushed his glasses up and squatted down to take a closer look. A partially eroded footprint on the step caught his attention. Glancing around, he opened the door, scanning his flashlight in every direction. The hard-packed dirt floor made it nearly impossible to determine their size, but there appeared to be a large and small set of footprints. *Probably a male and female.* *Gunnar and Brynn?*

He pointed his light in the other direction, jerking back when a mouse scurried across the floor, barely missing his foot. Shivers spread through him as he spotted the wooden potato crate that housed his invention, taking note of a large spider that set up residence there.

"Shoo," he whispered, taking a swat with his flashlight. After a final peek around, he squatted down, lightly dusting the top of the lid. *I could have sworn I dumped more dirt on this when I put Buster in here.* A cold sweat crept through him as he guardedly pulled up the lid. It creaked like an old wooden door in a haunted house. His stomach knotted as panic gripped him.

 "What on earth?" He vigorously brushed his fingers over the burlap sack. "What's going on? Buster better be in here!" he cried, yanking off the sack and tossing it to the side. Agonizing screams filled the stagnant air as DeAngelo glared at the mystifying body crumpled in the crate⎯a dead ringer of himself.

Captain Bill heard the screams as he was heading back to his cabin. He just finished securing the sailboat following his last sailing lesson of the day. *What was that?* Hindered by his cane, he wished his legs moved like they did twenty years earlier.

Ryker was strumming "Let it Be" by the Beatles. He was mulling over the idea of composing a song for Darci when he heard a loud noise outside. *What the hell was that?* He raced toward the direction of the screams, bursting into the root cellar. DeAngelo was kneeling on the ground with his head in his hands. The flashlight lay on the bare floor, illuminating the aging wooden box.

Ryker bent down beside him. "DeAngelo? What's going on? Are you all right? Why were you screaming?"

He wiped his forehead with his sleeve as he looked up at Ryker. "Buster's gone! You know, my calorie busting machine. I hid it right here, in this old crate, and now it's gone. And look what's here in its place!" DeAngelo grabbed the dummy by its throat and held it up to Ryker's face. "Do you see this? It's me! Somebody put this horrible look-alike of me in this box when they stole my machine." He paced back and forth, tugging at his tight black curls, the dummy raised high above his head. "You think it's Gunnar? Who else would steal my machine? Why is he doing this to me, Ryker, why, why?"

"Calm down, DeAngelo," Captain Bill interrupted, pressing his palm toward the ground as he entered the root cellar. His bewildered expression told Ryker he didn't know about the DeAngelo look-alike. He stared at him, waiting for an explanation.

"Sit down, please…both of you," Ryker said. "It's time someone filled you in on what's going on." They sat on the wooden crates. "Darci and I went for a walk in the woods the night of the bonfire. We discovered an empty vodka bottle in the woods⎯someone spiked the punch served at the party."

"Somebody spiked my punch?" DeAngelo interrupted.

"Yes, but there's more," Ryker said, holding up his palm. "Darci noticed something swinging in the breeze up on the hill. Now DeAngelo, I didn't want to tell you this, but enough people know already, so I'm sure it'll get back to you. I’d rather you hear it straight from me."

"You don't need to say anymore, Ryker. I can add two and two. This dummy was hanging from a tree on that hill, wasn't it?"

"Yes DeAngelo, I'm sorry to say it was. Darci and I cut it down and brought it back with us that night. We didn't know what to do with it⎯we couldn't throw it away since it was evidence, yet we didn't want you to find it. I discovered this old root cellar a few weeks earlier, and thought it would be a good hiding place until we could figure out what to do with it. So we brought it here and placed it behind some old crates on the other side of the cellar," he said, pointing to the opposite end of the root cellar. "But I have no idea how it got into the crate your invention was in, or what happened to your machine."

"So that would explain the two sets of footprints I saw when I came in," DeAngelo said. "If you didn't come over to this side of the cellar, whose print is near the crate? It's hard to make out, but the size looks somewhere between yours and Darci's. Now who has feet smaller than yours, but bigger than Darci's?"

"Lots of people. Gunnar comes to mind⎯his feet *have* to be smaller than mine," Ryker said.

"Don't look at me," Captain Bill said, looking at his size twelve feet.

DeAngelo rubbed the back of his neck. "I hid Buster in here earlier this summer, thinking it would be the perfect hiding place. I was coming to get it today, and planned to go to my lawyer's office. I think he can help me sell it. My suitcase is packed and on the front seat. But now, I've got nothing. NOTHING! And someone wants me dead. I put everything I had into this invention." Dirt flew in all directions as he kicked the crate, slamming the dummy onto the burlap sack. An image of himself lying in a wooden box at his own funeral flashed through his mind. "He won't get away with this. I don't care what happens to me, but I'm gonna make sure Gunnar pays for what he did."

"Now hold on, DeAngelo. We don't know for sure that it's Gunnar, so don't go doing anything foolish. These pranks are being investigated, so give it a little more time. We should know soon who the culprit is," Ryker said.

"DeAngelo, you're the most loved person at this camp," Captain Bill said. "Why, all the girls and staff adore you, not to mention how much they love your cooking. You're witty and sharp, always making everyone laugh. You brighten everybody's day. Now I don't want to hear any more foolish talk about having nothing. You've got everything to live for."

"He's right, DeAngelo. Darci's crazy about you, and the Burns wouldn't know what to do without you. We're all working on this case, and something's going to break soon," Ryker assured him.

"Thanks for the pep talk you guys. I appreciate it, I really do, but I can't go on like this. I can't eat, I can't sleep, I jump at every little noise. I know what I have to do," he said, nodding to no one in particular. He squeezed Captain Bill's shoulder then fled out the open door.

"What do you suppose he meant by that?"

"I'm not sure, but he's pretty depressed. Who can blame him? Can you imagine someone hanging a replica of you from a tree in the woods? And now his calorie machine, Buster, as he calls it, appears to be stolen. It doesn't make any sense…*unless*, whoever did this is trying to send DeAngelo over the edge so they can run off with his machine and he'll be declared insane and put away or, God forbid, even kill himself." Ryker looked out the cellar door. No sign of him. DeAngelo's nimble feet could outpace anyone on the grounds.

"We need to tell Mr. Burns, but I can go alone," Ryker said, remembering Captain Bill's cane.

"You go ahead. I won't be far behind. This old cane keeps up with me pretty good."

Ryker pounded on the Burns' cabin door. The color drained from Mr. Burns' face upon hearing the news.

"You think he might go after Gunnar? He doesn't have a gun, does he? No one's allowed to have guns on this property. He's flipped, that's what I think!"

Chapter thirty-nine

DeAngelo flinched at the chirp of a robin or the howl of a lone coyote, his bony finger wrapped around the trigger like a hunter on his first safari. *They're attacking from all directions!* It hadn't taken him long to retrieve the gun from his suitcase and load the bullets, but that was the extent of his weapons knowledge. His uncle Stanley gave him the Smith & Wesson revolver but he'd never fired it⎯just kept it handy should he ever need to use it in self-defense…or some other reason.

He massaged his arms as the chilly evening breeze penetrated his cotton T-shirt. *Darn.* *I forgot my jacket in the dining hall.* Grabbing his jacket off the chair, he paused, noting a peculiar scent. It smelled of burning smoke, not the kind a fire would produce but with a sweetness to it, something you might find in a church or spiritual ritual*. What's that smell?* He followed the scent, gun in hand, to the door of the back room. The sound of a woman chanting filtered through the door.

"COME TO ME ANGELS, CLEANSE THIS CRYSTAL BALL OF EVIL SPIRITS. FILL OUR SOULS WITH POSITIVE ENERGY, AND RID US OF THE DARKNESS THAT SEEKS TO INVADE OUR MINDS."

"What the…?" DeAngelo glanced around, looking for answers. He guardedly opened the door. A woman sat back-to, dressed in a long flowing black skirt, long-sleeve silk blouse and multiple layers of beads. A black veil covered her hair. Her hands were wrapped around a crystal ball centered on the table. Two candles provided pale light, while smoky Sandalwood smoldered in a tiny log-cabin incense burner.

DeAngelo squeezed his eyes shut, then opened them wide. His gun vibrated against his leg as he dropped his jacket on the chair. "HEY! WHO ARE YOU?"

The woman shot out of her chair. "DeAngelo? Holy mother, you scared me!" She pressed her hand against her chest, doing a double-take when she spotted the gun.

"Jill? Is that you?" he asked, rubbing his forehead. "What are you doing here? And why are you dressed like that?" he asked, tilting his head to one side.

"I, uh…" she stammered, glancing around for an escape. "DeAngelo, you caught me. This is so embarrassing!" She held up her arm, hiding her face. "I do this for fun, you know, conjuring up some positive energy and seeing what my future holds. I like to dress up, kind of gets me in the mood. I came in here because this room is private, plus it's far from any living area so the energy is pure. You understand, right?"

"Uh, yeah, sure." He scratched his head.

"Why are you holding a gun?"

"Listen Jill, things aren't going too good right now. Somebody stole my calorie machine and put a despicable-looking dummy in the box instead. A dummy that looks like me! I think it was Gunnar, that crazy kid who likes to cause trouble. I'm going over to his apartment right now, then we'll see who's the crazy one," he shouted, waving the gun around like a flag at a parade.

"Watch it with that gun, DeAngelo!" Jill said, bracing her arms in front of her face.

"Sorry, I got carried away. Not thinking straight right now."

"You say he put a dummy that looks like you in a box? That's sick. Gunnar is a loser and I wouldn't put it past him to pull these stupid pranks. There's nothing I'd like better than to see him get what's coming to him, but are you sure you want to go over there? You could get in a lot of trouble, or even get yourself killed."

"My mind's made up, Jill. I'm not living like this anymore. Either Gunnar goes or I go."

A few minutes later, DeAngelo sped off in his rust bucket, with Jill riding shotgun.

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"DeAngelo! Open up!" Ryker turned the knob to find his cabin door unlocked. He flicked on the light and scanned the room, but only the basic furniture and his TV set remained. He ran to the side of the building where DeAngelo parked his car. Fresh tire tracks led to the main road. *He must be heading to Gunnar's.*

Footsteps crunched in the gravel as Mr. Burns arrived at DeAngelo's cabin. He beat Captain Bill by only a few hundred feet.

"Where is he? Did you find him?" Mr. Burns asked.

"His cabin's cleaned out and his car's gone. Do you know where Gunnar lives? Maybe we should call the police," Ryker said. "If DeAngelo *has* gone off the deep end, there's no telling what he'll do."

"He lives in town, 212 Oak Street, Apartment #4. But I hate to get the police involved. They'll be here checking out his cabin and it creates so much havoc amongst the girls. I've known DeAngelo for years. He can't even kill a squirrel, right Captain Bill?"

"A squirrel?" Ryker interrupted. "He made it pretty clear he's going after Gunnar. Who knows what he'll do. He must have left a few minutes ago, and by the looks of the tire tracks, he took off like a dog chasing a rabbit. I'm going to Gunnar's, see if he's there."

"Hold on, Ryker. Let's not get ahead of ourselves," Mr. Burns said.

Captain Bill put both hands up. "I agree. I've known DeAngelo a long time, and he's normally a kind, harmless person. But right now he's a nervous wreck thinking someone's out to steal his machine, and his paranoia appears to be coming true. The fact that he was shocked by a bizarre dummy of himself in a wooden box doesn't help matters. What depraved moron creates a replica of a man and hangs him in the woods? Is that supposed to be funny? But I think Ryker has a point⎯the police should be notified."

"Before we call the cops, why don't we head over to the kitchen," Mr. Burns said. "I think I saw a light on." A smoky scent greeted them upon their entry. "What's that smell? Where's it coming from?" They followed the scent, finding two burning candles and the little log cabin emanating a smoky fragrance. The crystal ball sat alone in the center of the table. "What in blue blazes is going on around here? Candles? Incense? Crystal ball? Next thing we know there'll be voodoo dolls with pins stuck in them. I don't like it, I don't like it one bit!" Mr. Burns grunted, blowing out the candles. "We're lucky this place didn't burn down."

"You don't suppose DeAngelo's into weird psychic stuff do you?" Captain Bill questioned. "You know, like séances, the occult, stuff like that?"

"Not that I'm aware of," Mr. Burns said, taking a final look around. "Wait, what's this?" He picked something off the chair in the corner. "Isn't this DeAngelo's jacket?" He dialed the police while Ryker raced to his car.

Chapter forty

Darci headed to the office early the next morning. She found nothing more in her mother's memorabilia, but would finish the rest tonight. She needed to work on the upcoming end-of-season parents' night, so began drafting ideas on the typewriter.

Ryker tiptoed behind her chair, clamping his hands over her eyes. "So, is that about me?"

She shot out of her chair, raising her hand in defense. "Don't ever do that to me! No, it's not about you. What do you think I do, sit around thinking about you all day?"

"Yeah, I was hoping anyway, " he said, cocking an eyebrow.

"Well, maybe a tiny drop," she giggled, squeezing her thumb and index finger together.

"I'll take what I can get. By the way, where were you last night?"

"I was at my father's house. I needed to go through my mother's things, like old newspaper articles, stuff like that. There might be a link between the current pranks and my mother working here years ago."

"Really? You think there's a connection to your mother?"

"Maybe. I'll let you know when I find out more."

"You'd better! Hey, you missed a lot of action here last night."

"Why, what happened?"

He filled her in on the previous night's happenings with DeAngelo and the room in the dining hall filled with incense and a crystal ball.

"Oh my God! You think DeAngelo has a gun? Where do you think he is?"

"I went over to Gunnar's last night, thinking he might be there. But the place was dark and I didn't see any sign of a car. We can't find Jill either. Mr. Burns was livid when I got back."

"Jill's gone too? Did anyone call the police?"

"Mr. Burns did. They put out an APB on DeAngelo's car."

"He might not get far in that old clunker. Ryker, about this crystal ball and incense...what did the incense smell like?"

"I don't know, sort of a sweet, smoky smell? And there were two candles burning when we entered the room. Mr. Burns was upset, said they could have burned the place down."

Darci raked her hand through her hair. "I'm pretty sure I know who that crystal ball belongs to." She wet her lips. "Jill burns those incense."

"Jill's into all that witchcraft stuff? What's *with* all you people?"

"Ryker Pearson, you don't know what you're talking about! You of all people, who can't walk under a ladder and has a rabbit's foot on his keychain."

A flush spread through his face as he mounted his defense. "That's totally different. We're talking crystal balls and voodoo spirits here."

"You look like a voodoo spirit," she shot back, hands on hips. "Being superstitious and this so-called "witchcraft," as you call it, aren't much different. Besides, it's fun. And by the way, I don't appreciate your phrase 'all you people'."

"Well, the whole thing is stupid if you ask me."

Darci held her index finger up to Ryker's face as adrenaline pumped through her veins. "Nobody asked you!"

"Look, let's not get into a sparring match right now. For the record, I'll strike the 'all you people' phrase from my comments. All I know is that DeAngelo and Jill are missing and he might have a gun."

"All right, I'll let it go this time." She removed her hands from her hips. "Do you think DeAngelo kidnapped her at gunpoint? I can't imagine him doing such a thing. He's so sweet and kind."

"Yeah, but when someone goes off the rails it can alter their personality. Even some serial killers have a good side."

Chapter forty-one

Darci vigorously tapped her pencil on the desk as she struggled to get through the parents' night preparations. Where would the food come from with DeAngelo and Jill missing? Should she make it herself? Where were they? What was taking the cops so long?

*Maybe we should cancel it. No, then everyone would be asking questions and we'd have a widespread panic on our hands. Better to keep everything running smoothly. Yeah, right.*

She entered the kitchen to find Mrs. Burns chopping onions, her shoulders sagging as she stared at the wall. Her pretty blue eyes were shrouded in a ruddy mist. Darci hoped her tears were caused by the onions, and not the dismal situation they were in.

"Darci dear. How are you? Are you holding up okay?"

"I'm fine, Mrs. Burns." she said, giving her a warm embrace. "Why don't you get some rest, I'll take over the kitchen duties. I'm pretty handy with a mixing bowl. After all, I do most of the cooking at home. I'll recruit some of the girls to help, so don't worry about it."

"Thanks so much. I would offer Brynn to help out, but, well…" Mrs. Burns shrugged her shoulders and shook her head.

Darci nodded, giving her shoulder a squeeze when suddenly the door burst open, sending Darci's fingernails into her flesh. "Sorry!"

"Jill! What's going on? Where were you? Why are you all dirty?" Mrs. Burns asked.

Jill glanced down at her smudged skirt and blouse. "It's DeAngelo. He kidnapped me at gunpoint. I was never so scared in my life!" She buried her head in her hands. "He kept the gun pointed at me while he drove like a madman, going around curves on two wheels. He told me not to move, that if I tried to escape he'd shoot me. It was terrifying, I tell you, just terrifying!"

Mrs. Burns threw her arms around Jill. "There, there, it's going to be all right. Nobody's going to hurt you now." She put her hands on Jill's shoulders and looked her in the eyes. "Can you tell us what happened? How did you escape? What happened to DeAngelo?"

Jill closed her eyes and took a calming breath. "We…we were driving on these back roads, you know, and this gray squirrel was on the side of the road. So DeAngelo slowed down and hollered at the squirrel to go home. But then the squirrel double-backed and ran right in front of the car. DeAngelo hit the brakes so hard I thought I was gonna go through the windshield. But it gave me an opening, so I pulled the door handle and rolled out onto the side of the road. I scrambled up and didn't look back⎯just ran faster than I ever ran in my life. I wasn't sure where we were, somewhere out in the country. So I ended up walking in the dark until I recognized a street name. I walked all the way back here. Other than my feet killing me, I'm okay."

"You walked all night?" Mrs. Burns asked.

"Most of it…I found a decent spot under a grove of trees so laid down to rest. I must have fallen asleep because the sun woke me up."

"You poor thing. I can't imagine DeAngelo acting that way. Do you have any idea where he was going?"

"He kept ranting about killing Gunnar. I don't know where Gunnar lives, so I'm not sure if we were headed toward his place or not. I have no idea what happened after I jumped out."

"The police are looking for him. They put out an APB with his license plate, so hopefully someone spots the car," Darci said. "But you need to tell the police what happened to you. Do you want me to drive you to the police station?"

"I'm too shook up right now, but give me time to calm down and then I'll talk to them."

"Why don't you take a hot shower, and we'll make you something to eat and leave it in your cabin. Then take a nice nap," Mrs. Burns said.

"I have to admit that sounds good, but there's so much to do here. I have to cook for the parents' reception."

"Don't worry about that. We've got it covered. You need time to recuperate," Mrs. Burns said.

"No, I'm coming to work as soon as I take a shower. No arguments, okay?"

"Okay Jill, if that's what you want."

"That's what I want." Jill nodded firmly and walked out the door.

Mrs. Burns and Darci exchanged glances.

"Why is she dressed like that? Does it have something to do with that crystal ball? Bill told me what they found, but never mentioned Jill," Mrs. Burns said.

"Yes, I think it belongs to Jill, which would explain her unconventional outfit. Maybe DeAngelo stumbled onto her session in the back room of the dining hall, and in his state of panic didn't know what to do after she saw him with the gun. Maybe he felt he had no choice but to take her with him so she wouldn't tell anyone."

Mrs. Burns shook her head. "I had no idea Jill was into stuff like that. And I still can't believe DeAngelo would do such a thing. But, like Bill said, people do strange things when they're backed into a corner. Poor DeAngelo, I hope when he gets caught they can get him some help. That is, if he's not charged with murder."

"I don't think he's capable of murder. At least I hope not. Why don't you get some rest and I'll make a nice turkey and cheese sandwich for Jill."

Chapter forty-two

Jill lathered her hair and body, savoring the hot water cascading over her aching muscles. The last twenty-four hours tested her in ways she'd never dreamed possible. She'd worked with DeAngelo for a while now, but never got to know him like she did during their trip together.

She wrapped a large beach towel around herself and took delight in discovering a large club sandwich with a dill pickle and barbecue chips awaiting her at the kitchen table. A glass of fruit punch accompanied the sandwich, along with a bowl of red Jell-O and whipped cream. A folded white napkin was placed on the side. *How thoughtful of Mrs. Burns.*

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Brynn pulled on a pair of faded jeans and white cotton T-shirt. It felt good to sleep in now that the season was nearly over, especially since her sleep was disrupted by images of DeAngelo going after Gunnar. Today was Gunnar's birthday and even though she vowed to write him out of her life, her conscience wasn't buying it. *He deserves a chance to explain himself.*

She headed to his apartment carrying a chocolate cake with butter cream frosting. "Happy Birthday Gunnar" with one candle was centered in the middle. When she'd encountered Jill in the kitchen instead of Darci it stopped her in her tracks, but rather than engage her she simply requested the birthday cake. Jill rattled on about DeAngelo kidnapping her and how she'd barely escaped with her life. Brynn listened with her mouth gaped open but remained silent. She knew DeAngelo had issues, but refused to believe he'd stoop that low.

Gunnar rubbed his eyes as he stared at the clock. Three in the afternoon. The previous night's birthday shenanigans was taking its toll. When did he get home? *How* did he get home? He stumbled to the kitchen, pouring himself a glass of cold water. He debated pouring it on himself or drinking it, choosing the latter. *The boys were really fired up for mischief last night. Good thing we were a step ahead of the cops.* A loud rap on the door captured his attention.

"Happy birthday, Gunnar." Brynn shoved the cake toward him, gritting her teeth under the spurious smile. "Can I come in?"

"Uh, yeah, sure, Brynn. Wow, a cake? You didn't have to do that. You know I don't deserve it."

"You're right, you don't, but everyone deserves a second chance. It's chocolate, your favorite."

"Thanks, I'll have some later." *Much later, when my stomach can tolerate food. "*Come in, sit down." He motioned toward the lumpy green futon.

Brynn bristled, but plopped down on the cushions. "Listen Gunnar, I don't know where you were last night, and to tell you the truth I don't want to know, but were you home?"

Gunnar stared at a small bug crawling near his foot. "No, I was out with the guys. We were celebratin' my birthday. A day early, I might add. I guess you could call it a rough night. I don't know how or when I came home."

Brynn sighed but maintained her composure. "Well, in this case your reckless lifestyle might have saved your life. I don't know if you're aware of what's been happening, but DeAngelo kidnapped Jill yesterday and was heading over here last night, apparently with a gun. His calorie machine was stolen and he thinks you did it, along with the mean pranks, including the dummy hanging in the woods. He's gone off the deep end and he's out to get you. Jill escaped by jumping out of his car and now the police are looking for him. So you'd better keep your door locked, and if I were you, I'd hide out somewhere until they find him. And if you *did* do those things, you should turn yourself in to the police right away."

Gunnar bounced around, his voice rising like a screeching cat. "What? That's so wacked! DeAngelo? I don't believe it. I don't think he even knows how to fire a gun."

"So what are you saying? Did you steal his machine? Did you do those pranks? I want the truth. You know, I've been on your side when everyone else wanted to convict you and put you away. So you owe me this, Gunnar. Now what is your involvement in all of this?"

He cleared his throat. "All right, I guess I owe you an explanation. I was watchin' you set up your bonfire party the other night. I was hidin' in the woods, and I thought your party looked pretty lame. So when you went back to get supplies, we dumped a fifth of vodka into the punch. I know, it was stupid."

"We? You mean you and your loser sidekicks? Yes, it was stupid, but at least you're being honest about it. Now, about the other things…"

"As for the DeAngelo dummy⎯" A knock on the door disrupted his apparent confession.

"Don't open it," Brynn whispered. "Ask who it is first."

"Who is it?" Gunnar asked, glancing at Brynn.

"It's Darci. Can I come in?"

"Darci? What on earth is she doing here?" Brynn muttered. "Well, go ahead, let her in."

Darci took a step back when she saw Brynn in the living room. They exchanged glances, unsure how to handle the awkward situation.

"I have to go. Let's finish our talk later," Brynn told him, her tone sharp. She marched out the door, flashing a menacing glance at Darci.

Darci closed her eyes and smacked her lips. Gunnar was alive and well. O*r maybe not all that well by the looks of him*. She spotted the cake*. It's his birthday?* She wasn't even sure how old he was.

"May I come in?"

"Yeah, sure. If I'da known all this company was comin' I woulda took a shower and cleaned up. Heard I'm bein' hunted by DeAngelo? Man, this day's gettin' crazier by the minute. Didn't know I was so popular."

"This isn't funny, Gunnar." She sat on a wooden chair, instructing him to sit down. She was in no mood to wait for an invitation. "Brynn told you about DeAngelo and Jill?"

"Yeah, that's some crazy shit. She said I should hide out somewhere, but I'm not scared of DeAngelo. He's a teddy bear. I used to sneak into the kitchen at night and grab a snack, ya know? Nothin' too much, just cookies or leftovers. But one night the lights came on and SURPRISE, there he was. Caught red-handed. I thought I was toast. But ya know what? He didn't turn me in…instead, he poured me a glass of milk. Told me if I was hungry to let him know, instead of sneakin' behind his back. I never forgot that, 'cause it's not often somebody does somethin' nice for me."

Darci's throat thickened as she placed her hand on his. "That's a nice story, but not surprising. DeAngelo's a good man, at least up until now. Gunnar, does the name Hank mean anything to you?"

He shot out of his chair, nearly knocking her to the floor. Blood drained from his face as he turned away.

She grabbed his arms, swinging him around. "Look at me. I know this is difficult, but there's something you need to know about Hank."

"I know all about Hank. He was a miserable bastard. He hit me and my brother, and did other things, really bad things to us. My mother was no help, she was usually strung out on drugs or booze anyway. How do you know about Hank?"

She ignored the question for the moment. "Gunnar, was Hank your father?"

He stared at the ground for a long time. "Yeah, he was married to my mother when she had me and Tommy, my younger brother."

Darici's knees began to buckle. "Did he ever dress up weird, like a clown, or joker, anything like that?"

Gunnar's body went numb. "Darci, he *was* the Joker."

She extended her trembling hand. "Gunnar, I'd like to introduce myself. I'm Darci, you're half sister."

Chapter forty-three

Gunnar paced back and forth, scratching his head. "Hank? That lunatic son-of-a-bitch is your father too? I don't believe it. You're way too smart to be his kid."

"I'm no smarter than you, Gunnar."

"Yeah, *right*."

"Now listen. I don't know much about your childhood, but I know you grew up in a dysfunctional home with an abusive father, which would give anyone a low opinion of themselves. I was fortunate that my mother had someone who loved her and cared enough to marry her, even though the baby belonged to another man. I could have grown up in the same environment you did. So I don't want to hear any more about your being dumb or inferior, okay?"

Gunnar stared at his feet. "I guess, but I know what you must think of me Darci; what a loser your brother is. I just can't get my life on track, ya know? I always blamed everything on my lousy home life, abusive father, all that kinda stuff. Nobody cared about me, so I never cared about nobody else."

"Well, somebody cares about you now. I think you have a lot of potential. You just need to steer your energy in the right direction." She wrapped her arms around him, and he returned the gesture.

"My allergies must be kickin' up," he grinned, rubbing his eyes.

"Here, have a seat." Darci motioned toward the shoddy wooden chair at the kitchen table, then took the seat next to his. "You asked me how it's possible that I'm your sister, so listen up. My mother used to work at Camp Chickadee, at the same job I have now. Eighteen years ago she agreed to meet Hank, this cute guy she met at the gas station. I think it's the same station you work at."

Gunnar's eyes widened. "No kiddin'? I don't remember him ever talkin' about workin' at a gas station, but he never told us much anyways, except to boss us around."

"He promised to take her for a canoe ride, so she went down to the beach to meet up with him. When she spotted an old, rotting canoe and got suspicious, this hideous figure sprung out from behind a tree. He was dressed like a joker in a three-piece purple suit. He attacked her, then carved a "J" for joker in a large maple tree, along with a check mark next to it. I found the carvings, Gunnar. I think you can figure out what the check mark meant. My dad told me the whole story. It was difficult for him to do that."

"Your dad?"

"Yes, Charlie Miller is my father. Maybe not my biological one, but in every other sense he's my real father. My mother died in an accident on my eleventh birthday and since then it's been just him and me. I'm glad I never met Hank, although I'd like to find him. In fact, I'm not sure if he's dead or alive. I've been digging through my mother's things, and found some interesting articles."

"Sorry about your mother, that must'a been horrible for you. But Hank is dead, Darci. He died when I was fourteen, kinda mysteriously I might add. They found him at the kitchen table around nine in the mornin', his head slumped on the table. I guess he was throwin' up all night, I dunno, we were all sleepin'. We had beef stew the night before, but nobody else got sick. They had him cremated, and it wasn't long before I got the hell out of there."

"He's dead? You think somebody poisoned him? Did anybody call the police? Where did you go?"

"My stepmother called the funeral home. I guess she figured since he was already dead, why call the cops? Besides, she was already drinkin' her screwdriver from the night before, so that tells you where her head was at. So anyway, the funeral home guy called the police, and they were all at the house together. Quite a scene. They questioned us about what we ate the night before, and like I said, they weren't suspicious 'cause nobody else got sick.

"Wait a minute. You said your stepmother? Weren't you living with your mother and father?"

"No, 'cause by then they were divorced and Hank had remarried. So me and my brother were livin' with our 'new' family. It was almost worse than livin' with our own mother and father. I wasn't gonna stay there any longer than I had to after the old man died. I thought about runnin' away lots of times, but I figured he'd find me and beat the shit out of me. I was gonna take Tommy with me but he wanted to stay. I told him he was nuts. Anyway, I lived on the streets for a month or so 'till it got really cold. I was hungry, so I stole some food from the market. Nothin' much…a few crackers, candy, bottle of soda, stuff like that. I woulda liked peanut butter, but it don't like me. I got away with it the first time, but the second time the owner caught me and called the cops. I spent six months in jail, but it was better than livin' on the streets. We had food, a bed, hot showers. We called one of the guys Stinky 'cause he refused to take a shower until they forced him. We didn't have much to do and they let us have a deck of cards, so that's where I learned to play cards and tell fortunes. One guy…we called him Elf 'cause he was so friggin' short...he'd shuffle the deck, then place it in the center of that little table we had in the middle of the room. One of us would cut the deck into three stacks, using our left hand."

"Why the left hand?"

"'Cause it's closest to the heart," he said, tapping his heart. "Well, at least that's what Elf said. He'd spread the stacks on the table, overlappin' the cards. Whoever did the cuttin' would pick a certain number of cards, dependin' on which spread you were doin'. Say if you were doin' 'The Pyramid', you'd pick ten cards. He'd tell our fortune through the cards we chose."

She leaned forward. She was familiar with the fortune telling process, but played along to assess Gunnar's knowledge. "So you learned about cards from your time in jail, not from Hank?"

"Yeah, I never got into any of that stuff with him. Sometimes he'd go downstairs at night and I'd smell weird stuff comin' up through the floorboards. But I had no desire to go down and see what he was doin'. I stayed clear of him the best I could."

"What did it smell like, the weird smell you mentioned?"

"I dunno, a burnin' smell, like candles or incense, somethin' like that."

She remembered a strange item on the shelf in Gunnar's apartment when she walked in. It looked like a wooden coffin.

"Gunnar, what is this?" she asked, lifting the lid.

"Uh, that's pretty neat, huh? It's the only thing I have that belonged to my father. I didn't want nothin' of his, 'cept I thought this was kinda cool so I went back after I got out of jail and asked my stepmother for it. She was glad to get rid of it. It's an incense burner hidden inside a coffin."

She shuddered. "What kind of incense do you burn?"

"All kinds, but I like the sweet, woodsy ones the best."

"Do you happen to know the date Hank died?"

"Yeah, I guess some dates stick in your mind, especially when they're a good memory. It was October 17, 1969."

"Was anyone else living with you? I mean, besides your brother, father and stepmother?"

He lowered his head. "Yeah, my stepmother had a daughter. She was a piece o' work. I don’t want to talk about her, if it's all right with you," he said, placing his palms on the table as he rose from his chair.

She wanted to question him further but held off.

"Gunnar, who made the stew?"

He stared at his feet. "Uh, I think my stepsister did. She did most of the cookin'."

Chapter forty-four

The bright sun streaming through the blinds roused Darci, interrupting her disturbing dream about Gunnar and his childhood, and the fact that he was her brother. In her dream, she visited him in the hospital, gasping at the myriad of machines hooked up to him as he was clinging to life. *What was that all about?*

Skipping her morning shower, she splashed cold water on her face but it did little to relieve her anxiety. *Did Gunnar poison his father? He had plenty of motive. And was he telling the truth about the cards, or did he learn to tell fortunes from Hank? And who was this stepsister that got under his skin? What was it about her that flustered him so much? Did she make the stew, or did Gunnar? The library must have old newspapers on microfilm.*

She dashed to the office and got a head start on her work, skipping lunch in favor of perusing the newspaper archives at the town library.

Following a brief lesson from the librarian, she familiarized herself with the microfilm machine. Her pulse quickened as she stared at the numerous file drawers, hoping some answers were hiding in them.

*Gunnar said Hank died on October 17, 1969. Let's see what comes up around that time.* She located the drawer containing the local newspapers from 1962 - 1969 and checked the library catalog, retrieving the first film. The machine whirred into action as she rotated the dials, scrolling around to bring the images into focus. U.S. Government bans artificial sweeteners known as cyclamates because they cause cancer in rats; Nixon Administration proposes lighter marijuana penalties. *There must be something in here, at least an obituary.*

A coldness swept through her when the following article popped up on the screen. MAN BELIEVED TO DRESS LIKE JOKER FOUND DEAD AT KITCHEN TABLE. The story was dated October 19, 1969, but gave few details other than to say he was found deceased at 9:00 a.m., and that he may be tied to several attacks that occurred years earlier. Said it was a developing story. She checked the obituaries for the week following his death, but came up empty. *I guess he was so evil no one wanted to dignify his death with an announcement.* She glanced at her watch again*. Mom, if you're watching, please point me in the right direction.*

She squinted at the screen, fiddling with the focus dial while scrolling through several more newspapers. Something caught her eye as she navigated around page two of October 24, 1969. She rose from her chair, her face only inches from the screen. It was an update to the original article, indicating a possible poisoning. Investigators discovered a small chunk of mushroom in the back corner of the family's refrigerator. It was a "destroying angel," a form of deadly white mushroom found in Maine, especially during late summer and early fall. The remaining family was questioned but no one could explain how the mushroom ended up in the refrigerator. It was impossible to prove he was poisoned because his body was cremated. She hit the print button and tucked the paper in her purse.

She then retrieved another microfilm and located the articles from her mother's belongings. She found the 1955 piece titled, MAN DRESSED AS JOKER ATTACKS WOMAN IN HER OWN HOME. She wanted to be sure her mother saved the entire article. She located the other two stories but they were all the same as the ones in her mother's collection, with one exception. The last story had a photo on the back page⎯it was grainy and a bit fuzzy, but she could make out the image⎯someone took a picture of the Joker.

When she got back to the office, Ryker was pacing the floor.

"Where have you been? It's almost 5 o'clock and the parents will be arriving any time. Mrs. Burns was here looking for you. She was helping Jill and they needed more hands, so I went in your place. I told her you'd be back soon," he said, his features tightening.

"I'm sorry Ryker. I've been at the library. There's too much to explain right now." She kept her head down, shuffling papers back and forth on her desk. "What did you help out with?"

"They were cooking a bunch of stuff and asked if I could help with the food or decorations. Such a choice…but I chose the decorations. I can hang balloons like nobody's business," he cracked.

"What were they cooking?"

"I don't know, I saw meatballs and appetizers. All I know is that it smelled good."

"Appetizers?" She tugged at her bottom lip. "I've got to change my clothes then get over there. Thanks for helping me today."

"Hey wait. Why were you at the library? Does it have something to do with DeAngelo?"

"Maybe. I'll explain later. Sorry, gotta go."

Chapter forty-five

Mr. Burns gritted his teeth as he drove to the local police station. *How long does it take to find an old beat-up Ford Falcon? Is DeAngelo still in Maine? That old jalopy wouldn't even make it to the turnpike exit.* He barged through the department doors to find Sergeant Donovan and Patrol Officer Jones sitting across from each other, black coffee and honey-glazed donuts in their hands.

"Is this how you couch potatoes conduct an investigation? Has anyone even looked for DeAngelo? What about the APB on his car? Is that what my tax dollars are doing, buying you more donuts?" Mr. Burns threw his arms up in the air.

Sergeant Donovan set his cup down, dragging his hand over his bald head. Officer Jones stroked the end of his handlebar mustache.

"Now simmer down, Bill," Sergeant Donovan motioned with his palms. "I don't blame ya for gettin' all riled up, but trust me, we're doin' all we can to find Dan Jello."

"His name is De-An-gel-o."

"That's what I said, Dan-Jell-O. Bet he ain't really an angel, am I right?" he snickered. Patrolman Jones chuckled as he took another bite of his donut. Mr. Burns glanced up at the ceiling, exhaling a deep breath.

"Hey listen, Bill," Sergeant Donovan continued. "We've got bulletins posted all over the place, contacted the Missin' Persons Bureau, checked with all the local hospitals, even notified the Turnpike Authority. Don't worry, we're doin' plenty. Nobody's seen his car or any sign of him yet. But like I said, we're doin' all we can."

"I know you are. Sorry fellas, it's just that I'm pretty short-tempered right now. I can't imagine how he vanished into thin air like he did."

"We see things like this all the time. He'll turn up, you wait 'n see."

"I hope you're right. Let me know the minute you hear anything."

"Sure thing, Bill. Don't you worry none 'bout it, ya hear?"

Mr. Burns nodded, drawing in a long breath. *Keystone Cops.* His thoughts turned to the parents' reception.The notion of facing a room full of anxious parents churned his stomach.

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Captain Bill took up his position in the parking area around the southwest corner of the dining hall. Directing visitors to their parking spots was a welcome change of pace. He enjoyed greeting the people, doing his best to project a carefree, happy persona. *If they only knew everything that went on here this summer.*

"Good evening, folks. I see you came all the way from New York. How was your trip?" he asked, flashing a warm smile. His cane made an excellent pointer as he greeted people and directed them to their parking spaces.

But a few parents didn't return the warm greeting. When a black Mercedes with Connecticut license plates pulled into the driveway, the father, his hands gripped around the wheel, shot an icy stare at Captain Bill.

"Do you know where I can find Mr. Burns?" he snapped.

"I don't know where Mr. Burns is right now, but he should be back any minute." Captain Bill recognized the family. "I'm sorry about what happened to Jessie. She's a wonderful girl and loved by everyone. She did so well in her recovery that she became one of my top sailing students. But I understand if you're upset. It was a terrible accident."

"I'm not sure I'd call it an accident. We insisted she come home from the hospital, but she begged us to let her finish the summer here with her friends. So we caved. But I still want to know exactly what happened and if you've caught the perpetrator," Mr. Edwards said.

"I'm going to defer that to Mr. Burns, but I appreciate your concern. Like I said, he should be here any time." Captain Bill smiled and nodded as he proceeded to help the next car in line.

The dining hall came alive in a colorful array of crepe paper, balloons, American flags, and a large sign that read "Welcome to Camp Chickadee. Your children had the time of their lives this summer." Ryker wrote the original message which said, "Your children had a summer they will never forget," but Darci challenged the wording, and he conceded.

Brynn acted as the official greeter as the parents streamed in. Her yellow flowered dress with the lace collar, bright yellow pumps and a matching bow in her hair gave her an all-American girl-next-door persona. She smiled politely, welcoming the families and uniting them with their daughters.

Music played softly in the background as the families hugged and shared stories of their summers apart. The Edwards' family was reunited with Jessie, and were laughing and talking with Kayla and her family. Emily, Susan, and a few other girls were helping out, serving cups of punch and trays filled with cheese and crackers. Jill and Mrs. Burns remained in the kitchen, churning out the last of the appetizers.

"Thanks so much for all your help, Mrs. Burns, but you need to get out there and mingle with the parents. I can handle the rest."

"Are you sure, Jill? You've been through a lot today. You should take it easy."

"Believe me, I'm fine, Mrs. Burns. Now you scoot out there and charm the families." Jill put her arm around her and escorted her to the door. "Don't worry about a thing," she assured her, patting her on the shoulder.

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Mr. Burns entered the dining hall through the back door. He wanted to observe the crowd before facing the mob of angry parents. But to his surprise, he saw lots of smiles and people talking and laughing. Mrs. Burns was talking with Emily's parents when she spotted him. She excused herself.

"Bill, where have you been?"

"I went over to the police station. Nothing new on DeAngelo. They say something will break, but they always say that. "Where's Jessie's dad? Captain Bill said he was looking for me."

Mrs. Burns pointed him out. He was talking with Kayla's father, his hands held out in front of him about two feet apart. "I think they're talking about fishing," she whispered.

"Right up my alley," he winked. "Hey Tom, done any fishing lately?"

"Oh, hey Bill. As a matter of fact, I was just telling Eddie here about this beauty of a trout I caught," he said, once again holding out his hands.

"I think he exaggerates a little, don't you Bill?" Eddie nudged him with his elbow.

"I'm staying out of that one," Bill said, holding up his hands. "Uh, Tom, I heard you were looking for me?"

"Yes, I was. And I'm sorry to say I was a bit rude to Captain Bill. I was upset about Jessie getting hurt, and not knowing if you caught the person or persons responsible."

"I don't blame you one bit Tom, and I apologize for not doing a better job of keeping you informed." He provided more details about the firecracker incident, focusing on the quick response and expert treatment Jessie received. "We've been following this closely, and I assure you we're close to solving this mystery," he said, clearing his throat.

"I certainly hope so," Tom said "You let us know the minute you hear anything, okay Bill?"

"Sure thing, Tom."

The Burns mingled with the other guests, while Brynn cornered a hot new guy, Susan's older brother, Kyle.

"I'm so happy Susan healed quickly from the firecracker incident. We rushed her to the hospital, and I stayed with her the whole time. I wanted to be sure she had the best care," Brynn boasted. Kyle eagerly bought into her embellished story.

Jill scrambled to finish up the hors d'oeuvres and get everything laid out on trays. A satisfied smile swept across her face. No, she wasn't a loser like her mother. *I'll never be like her, that worthless piece of garbage.* She was going to make something of herself⎯big dreams, big plans. She needed a break, that's all.

Chapter forty-six

Darci dragged a brush through her hair, applied a fresh coat of mascara and a dab of blush. Her father's no-makeup rule didn't apply at camp. At least that's what she told herself. She pulled on a pair of dark blue pedal pushers. It was one of the first projects she made at home on her new sewing machine, and if she said so herself, they came out pretty good. She topped it off with a white polyester blouse and open-toed sandals*. I wish I had time to do a reading. I have a bad feeling about tonight.* She scrambled out the cabin door.

Ryker and Captain Bill finished their car-parking duties and joined the others in the dining hall. Ryker scanned the room in search of Darci, but instead caught sight of Brynn and Kyle in the back corner. *Poor sucker, whoever he is.* His stomach was growling, so he grabbed a plate and napkin when the sight of bacon-wrapped scallops on Emily's tray was more than he could resist. He sampled everything⎯meatballs, shrimp puffs, salads. *How did they ever pull this off? Jill must be a miracle worker.*

Darci mingled with the guests, exchanging polite greetings. Everything looked in order, the atmosphere positive and happy. She spotted Ryker talking with Jessie's parents, his plate piled high. The food looked delicious, so she tossed her healthy habits aside and crowded her plate with all the taboo stuff.

"Hey, there you are! Looks like somebody's hungry," Ryker said, steering her to a table in an unoccupied corner of the room. "So what's going on? What did you find out?"

She glanced around. Nobody was within earshot. She gave him the rundown on Gunnar, and their relationship to Hank. Also about the incense and the information she found on microfilm, including the piece of mushroom.

"Holy shit! You mean to tell me you and Gunnar are⎯"

Before he could finish, she leaped up and slapped her hand over her mouth. "HAROLD!"

"Harold? What are you talking about?"

She dropped her plate on the table and shoved her way through the crowd, heading straight for the kitchen. The stunned onlookers stopped in their tracks as Jill barged through the kitchen door carrying a large tray filled with crab-stuffed mushrooms.

"DON'T EAT THESE!" Darci screamed, swinging her right hand up and under the tray, sending the mushrooms cascading through the air.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING?" Jill shrieked. "ARE YOU CRAZY OR SOMETHING?"

Darci glanced around the room. Time stood still as a sea of bewildered eyes were laser focused on her. Emily stood by with another tray of stuffed mushrooms.

"Uh, is there something wrong with these?" Emily gulped.

Darci swallowed hard, regaining her composure. "Has anyone eaten any of these mushrooms?" she asked, pointing to Emily's tray.

"I have," someone answered, followed by several others who had either taken a bite or eaten an entire mushroom. The crowd began to shift around, rubbing their throats. They grabbed cups of water as panic ensued.

"STOP IT! EVERYONE! LISTEN TO ME!" Jill shouted. "There is NOTHING wrong with these mushrooms. I don't know where Darci got this harebrained idea, but I can assure you the mushrooms are fine. They were delivered two days ago by our food delivery service. Emily, come here," Jill motioned to her. She took a stuffed mushroom from Emily's tray, held it up for all to see, then took a bite. She tossed the remainder in her mouth, chewed and swallowed it. "There, you see? Perfectly fine." She shot an icy stare at Darci.

An intensity radiated through Darci as the walls closed in, choking each breath into more silence than the one before. Her life flashed before her like a giant movie on the big screen, conjuring up old demons that held her back for so long. *Be a good girl Darci, be polite, be kind, be respectful, don't talk back, do as you're told, do your chores, do your homework, aim to please, no one likes a sassy girl.* She planted her feet in a wide stance, hands on hips. Heat of a different kind poured through her, circulating through her veins like fire through a furnace. Beads of perspiration dotted her skin, her eyes wide with determination. She raised her hand, pointing her index finger at Jill.

"JILL, I DON'T KNOW WHAT GAME YOU'RE PLAYING, BUT⎯"

Mrs. Burns burst through the kitchen door carrying another plate of stuffed mushrooms, but this plate was small and covered in plastic wrap. "Jill, what is this plate, and why is GW written on the bottom? I remembered seeing it in the back of the fridge when I placed the shrimp in there today."

Jill's face paled as her mouth hung open. "Uh, that's for me, I was planning on taking it home after the party. I wrote GW to remind myself to go home with it, you know, 'GO WITH me'. I'd forget my head if it wasn't attached," she laughed nervously, lightly smacking the side of her head.

"May I see that plate, Mrs. Burns?" Darci asked.

"Of course."

"Go ahead, Jill. Since you like these mushrooms so much, why don't you have another one?" She pulled back the plastic wrap and held the plate in front of Jill's face.

"No, I'm full now. I've had enough mushrooms today. I'll throw them away," she said, reaching for the plate.

Darci yanked it back. "What's the matter, Jill?" She held a mushroom up to her lips. Jill backed away, her eyes wild with fear.

"Oh, come on. Surely you have room for one more?" Darci taunted, flashing a cold smile. "So tell me, what does GW *really* stand for?"

Jill glanced at the door. "I already told you."

"It wouldn't stand for Gunnar Watson would it? Gunnar, your stepbrother? The one you tried to *frame* for all those horrible pranks this summer? The one you planned to kill with these poison mushrooms? The son of your stepfather Harold, the one you *did* kill with these mushrooms? The man they called Hank? Or better yet, the Joker? *That* Gunnar, Jill?"

"You're crazy!" Jill's body shook with fury as she lunged at Darci, knocking the plate to the ground. Darci jumped to the left as Jill's foot came down on a greasy mushroom, sending her skidding across the room. The loose knot in her apron let go, sending a metal object skidding across the floor.

"She's got a GUN!" Mrs. Burns shouted. "Somebody call the police!"

Darci dove for the gun, but Jill grabbed it first, scrambling to her feet. Her eyes darted back and forth as panic gripped her. *Hostage! I need a hostage.* She spotted Emily and yanked her by the arm, pressing the gun against her temple.

"Back off, all of you!" Jill shouted, waving the gun back and forth, then returning it to Emily's head. Her eyes bulged as she kept a tight grip on the young girl. Emily squeezed her eyes shut as her parents frantically pushed through the crowd.

"Hold it right there." Jill pointed the gun at Emily's father.

Darci took a deep breath. *Stay calm. Talk to her.* "Jill, why are you doing this? What do you want? Let Emily go! Take me instead. I'll do everything I can to help you."

"I don't need your help. I have what I need. I'm going to be rich soon, and live in a mansion and drive a fancy car. Then everybody will look at me and say, 'Hey, look at Jill. She's somebody. She made it. She's not a good-for-nothing lowlife like her mother and stepbrother. Yeah, that'll show them!"

*Keep her talking.* "You're going to be rich? How?"

"DeAngelo's calorie machine, what do you think? It's worth millions and *I* have it," she gloated. "I'm going to sell it and move away from here, start a whole new life. Maybe even get married, who knows?"

"That all sounds great, Jill." Darci chewed her bottom lip. "But you don't need Emily for that⎯why don't you let her go?"

"Security, dummy. I'm not stupid."

*Yeah, right. Your plan is brilliant.* "Jill, what did you do with DeAngelo?"

"I already told you, don't you remember? DeAngelo kidnapped me and I escaped."

"I don't believe you. I think that's DeAngelo's gun you're holding. Wasn't it the other way around? I think *you* kidnapped DeAngelo."

Jill began to shake. "You think you're so smart, all slim and pretty with a boyfriend on your arm." She waved the gun around. "You don't know what it's like to be me. Look, there's plain Jane, followed by giggles from the girls and snickers from the boys. Well, you want to know the truth? Yeah, I did kidnap DeAngelo. Happy now? And this *is* his gun. Pretty smart, huh?"

Darci shivered. "Where is he? Is he all right?"

"He's okay, the last I saw of him. If you find him in time, he might make it. But I'm not telling you where he is."

A loud POP sent Jill crashing to the floor as the gun fell from her hands. Emily's father reached around and grabbed his daughter while Darci dove for the gun. The cast iron frying pan dangled from Ryker's hand as he stood in the kitchen doorway.

Darci kept the gun pointed at Jill as Mr. Burns and Ryker pulled her from the floor. Jill massaged the bump on her head.

 "Jerk!" she snarled, spitting on Ryker's face. He tightened his grip on her arm.

"Ryker, that was brilliant," Darci said, slipping the gun to Mr. Burns. He kept it pointed at Jill.

"Not as brilliant as you. How did you know the mushrooms were poison?"

"Remember my trip to the library? I was researching old microfilms and found a story from 1969 about a man who dressed like the Joker and died after eating a bowl of beef stew. The police found a piece of mushroom in the bottom of the family's refrigerator that turned out to be a destroying angel, a deadly mushroom found in Maine. No investigation was conducted because no one else got sick from the stew and Hank had already been cremated. I knew Hank was a nickname for Harold, so simply put two and two together.”

"You did a little more than add two and two," Ryker gushed. "But the question remains, what happened to DeAngelo?"

Chapter forty-seven

"LET ME GO!" Jill hollered, furiously jerking her arms as Ryker squeezed tighter.

"Where's DeAngelo?"

"I want my lawyer. I have a right to a lawyer!" Jill exploded with a swift kick to Ryker's left shin.

"Ouch! Damn you, Jill! You'll get your lawyer, but first tell us where DeAngelo is." He dug his fingers into her flesh while sirens wailed in the distance.

"All right, all right, I'll tell you. Just ease up, okay?"

Ryker loosened his grip.

"He's at my house, or should I say, my mother's house."

"Is he tied up?"

"Yes."

Ryker and the Burns exchanged anxious looks.

"You got a key?" Ryker asked, holding out his hand.

Jill stared at the floor.

"THE KEY, DAMMIT!"

"You think I walk around with a key in my apron?"

"You walk around with a gun in your apron," he snapped.

Jill flashed a cold smile. "Here!" She slapped the key into his hand.

The sirens went silent as six uniformed officers took up positions around the perimeter of the dining hall, while four more barged through the door, including Sergeant Donovan.

They arrested Jill and read her her Miranda rights while slapping on handcuffs and shoving her into the back of the police cruiser.

Darci told Sergeant Donovan everything she knew about the case and the mushroom poisoning of Hank. Then in a surprise move, asked him to go easy on Jill.

"She might benefit from counseling. She's been through a lot, living under the same roof with that monster."

"Well young lady, that'll be up to the courts to decide. Right now we're gonna haul her down to the station and get her booked and fingerprinted."

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Ryker and the Burns arrived at Jill's house, greeted by a curious cat peering through the lopsided broken blinds. When the door opened she joined the other three cats, scurrying out for a taste of freedom.

The rancid odor of cat urine greeted them as they stepped into the slovenly kitchen. Black mold thrived on the walls, while a bounty of dirty dishes crammed the sink and counter. Shoes, boots, and an array of household items were scattered in the corners; the litter box overflowing with decaying feces.

They covered their mouths, trying to suppress the bile in their throats.

"DeAngelo? Are you here?" Mrs. Burns hollered. No response. They ran from room to room, opening every door.

"Shhhh…" Mrs. Burns held her finger to her lips. "It was faint, but I swear I heard something, like a muffled groan. There it is again. Sounds like it's coming from the cellar."

When they reached the bottom of the stairs, Mrs. Burns inhaled a sharp breath. "Look Bill. There he is!" She ran over to untie the gag around DeAngelo's mouth. His eyes were closed and his head hung low, but he was alive. They battled the urge to vomit as a foul odor encompassed them. Ryker and Mr. Burns untied him, flinching at the rope marks on his arms and legs.

DeAngelo stirred, surrounded by a foggy sea of faces staring down at him. Mrs. Burns rubbed his arm.

 "It's okay DeAngelo, you're safe now. Mr. Burns and I are here, and Ryker too. Ryker, can you hurry and get him a glass of water, please?"

"It's no use, Ms. Burns," DeAngelo said, shaking his head. "Jill took everything. She stole my calorie machine, my gun, probably my money, I don't know. She's crazy, that one. She tied me up, then she'd come back at night and feed her cats and give me a peanut butter sandwich. My hands were tied so she'd put it on this little tray and I'd have to bend over and eat it with no hands. Then she'd bring me a glass of milk with a straw. But she never bothered to take me to the bathroom," he said, hanging his head as he gazed at the soiled floor.

"Don't worry about it. We'll get you cleaned up," she assured him as Ryker handed him the water and untied the ropes.

"Jill said you kidnapped her, but when you swerved for a squirrel she jumped out and ran back to camp. She then recanted her story and admitted she kidnapped you. So that *was* your gun Jill was carrying?" Ryker asked.

DeAngelo looked away. "Yeah. I planned to go over to Gunnar's and confront him. I thought he stole my machine and hung that dummy of me in the woods. I wasn't thinking straight, I'll admit that. Jill wanted to come with me so I said okay, but told her I'd drive. She was telling the truth about the squirrel, but when I skidded to a stop, she jumped me and grabbed the gun out of my pocket. Then she hijacked the car and held the gun on me, driving like a crazy woman all the way here, to her mother's house. When we got into the house she must have hit me over the head, because when I woke up I was tied to this chair. And there's a lump on my head," he said, rubbing the spot.

"You poor thing. Well, I have news that might cheer you up. Jill is sitting in the back of a police cruiser as we speak," Mrs. Burns said. "She admitted to stealing your machine and tying you up. She was planning to poison Gunnar and run off with your machine."

"No kidding? She was going to poison Gunnar and leave me here to die? Then run off with Buster? Boy, she had me fooled. And I thought she was one of the good ones."

"She figured she could get a ton of money for it, then live like a queen the rest of her life," Mr. Burns added. "I'm still not sure why she wanted to kill Gunnar, but it appears she committed all those pranks then tried to frame him for them. Guess we'll have to dig into that further."

"I bet Darci has the answers," Ryker said, his eyes glinting with pride. "She's pretty smart."

Mrs. Burns took DeAngelo's hand and brought him upstairs to the bathroom. "Why don't you get washed up and we'll take you to the hospital so they can check you over. There's plenty of time to find out the whole story of what happened this summer."

"Thanks Ms. Burns. By the way, do you know where my machine is?"

"Not yet, but don't worry, we'll find it."

Chapter forty-eight

Darci washed the small plate after the cops bagged and labeled the mushrooms as evidence. Pausing halfway across the kitchen, she saw something on the counter that caught her attention. She ran back into the dining hall. "Hey Brynn, Gunnar mentioned he liked peanut butter but it didn't like him. Is he allergic to peanuts?"

"Yeah. One time we were at a party and he took a bite of a brownie⎯turned out it had peanut butter in it. His face got pale and his throat starting swelling up. He had trouble breathing, so we called 911. They gave him oxygen and he was okay. Why?"

"The cake! That birthday cake you brought him. Did Jill make it?"

"Yes, but there's no peanut butter in it. It's chocolate with butter cream frosting."

"Are you sure? There's an open jar of peanut butter on the counter."

Brynn's eyes widened. "Jill would know he has a peanut allergy! I'll call him right now."

Brynn let the phone ring a dozen times but no one picked up. "I'm going over there."

"Wait. I'm going with you."

Brynn exhaled a harsh breath as Darci followed her out the door.

The apartment was unlocked, but no one was home. They went straight to the kitchen where they found two plates on the table, one with cake crumbs and the other with a partially-eaten piece of cake. The chair was tipped over with a trail of vomit splayed across the floor.

"This looks bad. I think he had company, and they left in a hurry. Let's check the hospital," Darci said.

The woman at the information desk directed them to a room in the emergency department. Brynn grabbed Darci's arm to steady herself. The sight of Gunnar lying in a hospital bed nauseated her. His face was pale, an oxygen mask secured around his nose and mouth.

*My nightmare about Gunnar is coming true,* Darci shuddered.

"They brought him in a couple of hours ago," the nurse said. "We weren't sure if he'd make it. His color was ghastly and he could barely walk. But he's coming around now. Looks like our fine team of doctors are pulling him through. I'll see if we can remove the oxygen mask."

"Thank goodness he's going to be okay. Who brought him in?" Darci asked.

"It was another young fellow, probably a friend of his. Oh wait, there he is." The nurse motioned toward Gunnar's friend.

They both recognized him⎯Brynn from her time dating Gunnar, and Darci remembered seeing him with Gunnar the night of the mock DeAngelo hanging.

"Kevin! What happened? Did Gunnar have an allergic reaction?"

"Oh, hey Brynn. Yeah, he sure did. I went over to have a few beers with him, ya know, like we always do. But he said he wanted to cut down on drinkin', somethin' about getting' his life together and stuff like that. Man, I didn't see that comin'. But hey, more power to him, if that's what he wants. Then he brings out this birthday cake and a couple a plates. It was like a scene from Disney World or somethin'," Kevin laughed, shaking his head. "So he cuts me and him a piece a cake, then gets two glasses of milk. Milk, can you believe it? So anyways, we sit down and start eatin' the cake and shootin' the breeze, then all of a sudden he puts his hand around his throat like this," Kevin said, wrapping his hand around his throat. "He started breathin' hard and turnin' pale, then puked on the floor. I knew he was allergic to peanuts but I didn't taste any in the cake. But that's probably because I didn't eat the frostin'...never cared too much for frostin'. Anyways, he started sayin' he couldn't breathe so I brought him to the 'mergency room."

"Thank God you got him to the hospital in time! I'm Darci. We've never formally met, but I believe you've been to my cabin. And I saw you with Gunnar the night DeAngelo was strung up in the woods," she said, emphasizing DeAngelo with air quotes.

He hung his head. "Yeah, sorry about that night, comin' to your cabin. We were all pretty out of it. Guess it's time we grow up, huh? Looks like maybe that's what Gunnar's plannin' to do."

"That sounds like a great idea, Kevin. Did you guys help Gunnar make that dummy of DeAngelo?"

"No, none of us had anything to do with it. I'm not even sure Gunnar did it. He spiked the punch, but now I think about it, he never actually said he made that dummy."

Darci and Brynn looked at each other. "Jill!" they cried in unison.

The girls took positions on each side of Gunnar, holding his hands as they watched him breathe on his own. He began to stir, then slowly opened his eyes, glancing back and forth between Darci and Brynn.

"Wha…what's goin' on? Where am I?" he mumbled.

"You're in the hospital, Gunnar. That cake I gave you had peanut butter in the frosting. Jill made it that way on purpose. I had no idea," Brynn explained.

Gunnar stared blankly at the ceiling. "I'm not surprised. She's had it in for me ever since I started workin' at Camp Chickadee." He looked into Brynn's eyes. "I never told you, but Jill's my stepsister. And I just found out that Darci's my half sister. Man, what a week it's been."

Brynn's mouth dropped open. "What? I knew about Jill's relationship with you, but I never knew you and Darci were related. Why don't you people tell me anything?" she whined.

Darci stiffened. "Calm down, Brynn. Gunnar didn't know he and I had the same father until I told him yesterday."

"I'm so confused!" Brynn wailed, tugging at her hair.

"I don't blame you, I'm still unraveling it all myself. But I'll tell you what I know, and hopefully Gunnar can fill in some of the blanks."

Darci explained how her mother met Hank, and the incident at the beach that produced her; how Darci's mother married Charlie while Hank went on to marry Gunnar's mother and have two children, Gunnar and his brother, Tommy; how Hank was a twisted man with a split personality⎯charming and engaging one minute, a cunning devil the next, sometimes disguised as the Joker; how the marriage failed and he later married Jill's mother, making Jill and Gunnar stepsiblings, living under the same roof for a period of time.

"Gunnar, can you shed some light on this? How old were you when you lived with Jill? And why did you say she had it in for you? What was all the fortune telling about? What the heck *happened* in that house?" Darci asked, stepping aside to let the nurse come in.

"Here's something to help you sleep," the nurse said, reaching for the IV bag.

"Can he wait a few minutes? We were discussing something important," Darci pleaded.

"No, dear. He's still very sick. But the medicine won't kick in for fifteen minutes, if that's any help. Then I want you to leave. He needs his rest."

Gunnar propped himself on his elbows. "I was almost fifteen and Jill was a little older. She was quiet at first, guess she was shy, I dunno. She didn't talk much, mostly played with her Ouija board, cards, stuff like that. She was heavy into that stuff."

"What about Hank? Did he bring cards, or any other occult-related items into the house?" Darci asked.

"Yeah, he was weird, man. He'd light candles, incense, all that crap, then he'd turn out the lights and make us all sit around the table and hold hands. He'd start chantin' and callin' to his dead relatives, tryin' to bring 'em back. What do they call it? A séance?" Gunnar sat up straight and massaged the goose bumps on his arms. He lowered his voice. "One night, me an' Jill, we was lookin' out the picture window, sorta lookin' in the opposite direction from the others." He took a deep breath and gripped the bedrails. "All of a sudden we screamed at the same time, and everybody looked at us like we were nuts or somethin'. But we both saw it…this hideous, ugly clown face wearing a freaky-looking hat appeared in that window. Only for a couple seconds, then it was gone. When we told them what we saw, Hank said that was his dead father."

Brynn shook her shoulders as if to dispel the spirits.

"Wow, so you mean Hank's father dressed up like a joker too?" Darci asked.

"I guess so. I heard Hank and my mother talkin' a few times, usually when he drank too much and started talkin' about his past. I remember one time he said his father had on this crazy hat full of colors with three spikes and little bells hangin' from the ends, and he had this rusty old pocket knife. So one night the old man pulled my grandmother around by her ear while she screamed, cuttin' off pieces of her ear and droppin' them in a bloody trail around the house, leadin' to the back door. Told her they were Hansel and Gretel, leavin' a trail behind so they could find their way back through the house. I think Hank was so scared of his father that he accepted him and tried to, ya know, act like it was normal. So he ended up like him. And I think that's where Jill picked up his habits too. She's kinda unstable herself, so maybe that's why she copied some of the things he did."

"But what happened between you and Jill? Why the animosity?" Darci asked.

"An-i-mos-i-ty?" he said, his voice beginning to fade.

"That means a strong dislike of each other."

"Oh. Well, I'm not gonna lie. Some things happened that shouldn't have." He gazed at the IV pumping drugs into his vein. "But what Jill never knew was that…" Gunnar's head bobbed to the side.

"Jill never knew what?"

Gunnar's eyelids drooped, then opened a sliver before he fell asleep.

Chapter forty-nine

"Take your hands off me you perverted leech!" Jill snapped at Sergeant Donovan, twitching her shoulders with a vengeance. She wanted to reach out and smack his shiny head, but the handcuffs prevented her from carrying out her wish. "I'm entitled to a phone call."

"Now hold on there, missy. Don't you be callin' *me* no perverted leech! Why I wouldn't touch you with a ten foot pole, 'cept I gotta keep you under control. Now SIT DOWN and SHUT UP!"

Heat coursed through her veins as she plopped into the chair. "So, what are you charging me with?"

Sergeant Donovan glanced at Jones, then turned to Jill. "You're bein' charged with murder, attempted murder, kidnappin', multiple counts of theft and aggravated assault. And if you don't watch it, we'll add resistin' arrest to the list. Once we've completed the bookin' process you can make your phone call."

Jill leaped from her chair. "Murder?"

"That's what I said, murder. Now sit down. Remember a few years ago when your stepfather died? All mysterious like? And they found a poison mushroom in your fridge? Yeah, we know all about your past."

Jill's eyes hardened as she stared at the ceiling, shifting from side to side in her chair. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I think you know exactly what I'm talkin' about. Harold, or Hank, whatever name he went by, died kinda sudden-like, wouldn't you say? Got sick *real* fast⎯then died real fast. But nobody ever investigated, ain't that right?"

She chewed her bottom lip, eyeing the door. "You have no proof of anything. Besides, he was cremated." Jill realized she was talking too much. "I have nothing more to say until my lawyer is present."

Sergeant Donovan slid his glasses onto his nose and glared straight into her eyes. "Now why don't you save us a whole heap 'o trouble and tell us what happened. We already know you killed him, and I can't say I blame you, s'far as that goes. He sounds like a mean sum'bitch if you ask me. And look what you did to good 'ol Dan Jello, kidnappin' him and stealin' his gun. Not to mention that calorie machine he worked most of his life on. Hell, you already confessed to all that in front of hundreds of people over at the dinin' hall." He slapped his thigh and took a deep breath. "Yeah, we got more'n enough evidence to put you away for life, Jill."

She sat there stone-faced. *Oh my God, he's right. I did admit kidnapping DeAngelo and a bunch of other crimes, all right in front of the kids and their parents. What have I done?*

"If you want to call your lawyer, that's your right. But let me tell you somethin'. If you plead not guilty and your case goes to trial, there's a good chance you'll never see the light o' day again. If I was you, I'd work out a plea deal, maybe they can get you some help, you know, like a shrink. You think about that while we finish gettin' you booked into custody. There's paperwork to do, gotta get your picture taken, get you searched and fingerprinted, do a medical exam, get you some fancy new clothes, stuff like that. Hope you like orange. Then there'll be a bail hearin' where the judge will decide whether or not you can post bail. Once we complete the bookin' process, you'll be able to make your phone call."

Jill yanked her arms as the deputies escorted her away. "I want to go home!" she cried.

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Mr. and Mrs. Burns met Darci and Ryker at the police station the next morning. Mr. Burns called Darci after receiving a call from Sergeant Donovan, saying Jill confessed to everything. She broke down during the strip search, crying about how her life was over and she should have killed herself when she had the chance. She blamed Hank for ruining her life. They taped her confession, then put her on suicide watch.

"Here, have a seat," Sergeant Donovan said, waving his hand toward the chairs around the oval table. "My assistant, Mrs. Gaven, will give you a recap of the conversation."

Mrs. Gaven cleared her throat. "Sergeant Donovan told Jill to start from the beginning. She confessed to all the pranks, explaining how she slit the canoe, took firecrackers from Gunnar's stash in the maintenance shed and hid them in the hot dogs, planted the deck of cards and started the fire in Darci's cabin and ransacked DeAngelo's cabin. She also stole DeAngelo's calorie machine from the root cellar and hid it in her mother's basement. She threw a blanket over it and placed it right behind the chair he was tied to. She also admitted that she was the one who made the DeAngelo look-alike and hung it in the woods.

The sergeant asked about her stepfather, Hank. How and why did she kill him? And why did she create pranks to frame Gunnar?

She told him how Hank would sneak into her room in the middle of the night, the smell of beer and cigarettes inching closer and closer. She pretended to be asleep, but nothing she did made any difference. The only solution she saw was to get rid of him. When she made stew for the family, she only put the mushrooms in Hank's stew. She said he was drunk as usual, so he wouldn't know the difference.

She then talked about Gunnar. She never dreamed he would participate in anything as sinister as his father did, but he snuck into her bedroom. Only once, but once too much. She also told Sergeant Donovan about Oreo and her six kittens. She was going to keep the shy one and name him cream puff, then find homes for the others. But Gunnar showed up with a burlap sack thrown over his shoulder. She warned him not to touch them, but he pushed her aside and scooped up the kittens. She knew he would drown them. She said she would never, ever forgive him for that."

Darci rubbed her forehead, shaking her head. "I can't believe Gunnar would do such a thing. I know he's no saint, but I can't imagine him being so cold and callous."

Ryker squeezed her shoulder and pulled her closer. "I'm sorry you had to hear that. But Gunnar *is* Hank's son, so he does have his genes. If anybody can bring out the good in him, it's you."

"Um, aren't you forgetting something? Hank is my biological father too, so what does that make me?"

"Oh, you definitely take after your mother."

Mrs. Gaven continued…

"Jill confessed to pulling the pranks in order to shift the focus to Gunnar and get him in trouble, then while no one was looking she stole DeAngelo's calorie machine. She wanted to show the world she wasn't a nobody like her mother. She planned to sell it for millions of dollars and then thumb her nose at the people who bullied her in school.

She said she regretted setting the fire in Darci's cabin and hurting DeAngelo, that all she thought about was hurting Gunnar and now wished she could end her own life."

Darci spoke up. "Jill did some terrible things, but I think she deserves a chance to get help⎯psychiatric help. She's one troubled girl."

"I agree," Ryker added. "I'm not excusing what she did, but her childhood played a major role in her 'life of crime' and she does seem remorseful."

The Burns agreed.

"We'll have to see what De-An-gel-o says. There, did I get it right this time?" Sergeant Donovan held up his hands. "See if he wants to press charges or not."

Chapter fifty

The Burns went straight to Memorial Hospital. "Oh Bill, I can't wait to tell DeAngelo about his machine."

The receptionist told them he was in Room 323. The elevator pinged and they stepped onto the third floor, quickly locating his room. But the bed was empty. They flagged down a nurse and asked her about the patient in Room 323. She told them that DeAngelo was moved to intensive care.

"Intensive care? Why?" Mr. Burns asked.

"He was weak and dehydrated when he arrived, so we gave him water and Gatorade. He was coming around pretty well⎯even had a few bites of egg and toast⎯then he developed a high fever and started vomiting. He was deteriorating rapidly, so we moved him to intensive care. You can go to the ICU and check with them. I'm sorry for the bad news."

"Bill, can you believe this? Poor DeAngelo. He can't catch a break."

"You're telling me. If he makes it through this, I'm going to help him get that machine sold or licensed. He's been through so much already."

"That's a good idea, Bill. See, that's why I love you," she teased, squeezing his hand as they approached the ICU.

"We're Bill and Carol Burns, and we'd like information on one of your patients, DeAngelo Johnson. We brought him in yesterday and they moved him into the ICU," Mr. Burns said. "How is he doing? Can we see him?"

"Hold on. I'll check to see if he's awake," the nurse told them. She waved them toward her and met them in the hallway. "He's doing much better now. The doctor believes he contracted Rat Bite Fever, a disease caused by rodent bites. They found a bite mark on his right ankle. Do you know if he has any allergies to penicillin?"

"None that we're aware of. You mean he almost died from a rat bite?" Mr. Burns asked.

"If you hadn't brought him in when you did, it could have been fatal, especially given his weakened state. We're giving him antibiotics through an IV, so he should recover soon." The nurse peeked in again and motioned them in. "No more than ten minutes," she warned.

A feeble smile greeted them as they walked to the bed. Mrs. Burns placed her hand over his, gasping at the touch of sheer bone. "DeAngelo, we're so happy to see you. How are you feeling?"

"Better, Ms. Burns. Doc said I'll be running a marathon before you know it," he chuckled. "Well, maybe if I get rid of this headache. Did they tell you I got bit by a rat? I didn't even know."

"Yes, and we did see a rat when we got you out of the cellar but didn't mention it to you. Were there many down there?"

"Yeah, it was pretty creepy. I must have seen five or six. Thanks again for getting me out of that nasty place."

"We're thankful you're going to be okay. By the way, Jill confessed to everything and told the cops where your machine is. It was right behind you the whole time, near the furnace with a blanket thrown over it. Can you believe it?"

"It was? Oh wow, if I could get out of this bed, I'd kiss you," he whooped, a huge grin spreading across his face.

She bent down and pointed to her cheek. "Plant one right there."

"You two are the best. But you know, I still can't believe Jill did those things. She was always helpful in the kitchen, never giving me any trouble. It's like she was leading a double life."

"Speaking of that, the police asked if you planned to press charges," Mr. Burns said. "You don't have to decide right now, just let me know later."

"I don't need to think about it. I don't want to press charges against Jill. She needs help. But hey, you found Buster. That makes my little vacation here even better. Is it still there? Did anyone go and get it?"

"We called Ryker and he went over and picked it up. As soon as they discharge you we'll take you to it. And I want to help you get "Buster" on the market. No more talk about leaving, okay?" Mr. Burns said.

"I don't want to leave anymore. I'm feeling better by the minute."

The nurse popped her head in. "Time's up."

Chapter fifty-one

Darci and Brynn arrived at the hospital to find Gunnar strolling down the hallway in his robe and slippers. Brynn ran to him first. "Gunnar, you're all better," she cried, kissing him on the cheek. Darci followed with a warm hug.

"Hey you guys. Thanks for comin'. Yeah, they said I can go home today. Wanna help me pack?"

"Sure. But can we talk first, maybe someplace private?" Darci asked.

"Okay. They got a place downstairs, with tables and chairs."

"You mean the solarium?"

"I guess, if that's what you call it."

The solarium was stylish and beautiful, its cherry wood furnishings giving it an earthy flavor. The natural light from the multitude of windows provided energy to the numerous hanging plants, giving the entire room a calming and peaceful vibe. They pulled up chairs in the corner.

Darci spoke first. "Gunnar, Jill confessed to everything at the police station. All the pranks, kidnapping DeAngelo, even killing Hank with poison mushrooms. And she tried to frame you for the pranks, that is, before she tried to kill you with peanut butter." She closed her eyes and took a calming breath. "But she also blamed you, said you abused her and killed her kittens. She said she would never forgive you for that. She was hoping you'd get caught and be punished."

His head dropped as the color drained from his face.

"Gunnar, before we left the last time, you started to say something before you fell asleep. You said, 'What Jill never knew was that…' and then you nodded off. What were you going to say?"

He chewed his bottom lip. "Jill was right, I did do some stuff to her, but what she didn't know was that Hank forced me to do it. He said I should man-up, that it was time I stopped being a sissy. I didn't want to do go in her room, but he said he was gonna cut off one of Tommy's fingers if I didn't go through with it. He was watchin' from behind the door the whole time."

Darci stood up, massaging her temples as she paced the floor. "Gunnar, did you…?"

He jumped out of his chair like it had a disease. "NO! I don't wanna go into details but I sure as hell didn't rape her, if that's what you mean."

Darci breathed a sigh of relief. "I'm sorry, but I had to know. Thanks for clearing that up. I still can't believe that monster is our father, Gunnar."

Brynn kept her hand over her mouth, her gaze bouncing between Darci and Gunnar.

Gunnar inhaled sharply. "Yeah, I still have nightmares about that bastard. And what he made me do to those kittens." Gunnar pushed his chair away from the table, lodging a back-sided kick that sent the chair tumbling across the floor. "He said he'd cut a live kitten into pieces in front of me and my brother if I didn't do what he said, and believe me, he would have. He was that crazy. I love animals, and in a way, that was even worse than the thing with Jill. I felt sick about it, but he said if I told anyone, he'd pistol whip me. So I kept my mouth shut. Even workin' at Camp Chickadee, me and Jill never talked or told anyone we were related. Nobody wanted to open up that can o' worms again.”

Darci rubbed his shoulder. "I know it's tough to relive those horrible memories, but I'm glad you cleared that up. Jill needs to hear that from you. Once things settle down, I'll bring you to the jail. Are you willing to talk to her?"

Gunnar massaged his chin. "Yeah, I suppose it wouldn't hurt, maybe we can patch things up, who knows?"

Darci wrapped her arms around him. "I knew you had a heart. We have a lot to talk about⎯let's get you home."

Chapter fifty-two

DeAngelo closed his eyes, his fingers laced behind his head as he sat at his kitchen table. He'd be moving into his old room at the Burns' horse farm in a few weeks, once the weather turned cold. But right now it felt good to be in his cabin, even though he still had a rash from the rat fever and enough medicine to fill a cabinet.

His calorie machine rested on the table. Ryker praised his ingenuity and wished him great success when he'd handed it over to him. *Yes, it was a marvel to see, one for the books,* DeAngelo reflected as he walked around the table, gliding his hand over the masterpiece. *Simple, yet so powerful.* Mr. Burns was picking him up in the afternoon for a meeting with his lawyer. He said he had connections, and told DeAngelo to bring cookies plus the lab results and testing data with him.

The gray brick building sat alone on a quiet downtown street. Brandon D. McAllister, Attorney at Law, showcased in gold Calligraphic letters hung next to the scarlet red door with the gold-plated doorknob.

Mr. McAllister extended his hand. "Welcome Mr. Johnson. Come in, come in," he greeted them warmly. "Hello Bill, good to see you." He turned to DeAngelo. "Now let me see this infamous machine I've heard so much about."

They placed it on the table, while Mr. McAllister stalked around, scratching his head while peering at the novel invention. "Interesting…how does it work?"

"Here, let me demonstrate," DeAngelo said. "As you can see, it's about the size of a microwave oven. The lid opens upward, allowing easy placement of the food inside." He laid one chocolate chip cookie on the inside plate. "A calorie is a measurement of energy needed to raise the temperature of one kilogram of water to one degree Celsius," DeAngelo informed them. Mr. Burns pursed his lips and raised his eyebrows. "So I thought, what if I could extract that energy without changing the flavor or integrity of the food? I can't reveal my trade secret, but here, let me show you." He closed the lid and flipped the switch. The machine lit up and hummed to life, while two gauges on the side measured activity such as temperature and energy. The machine came to a stop thirty seconds later.

"Be my guest," instructed DeAngelo, pointing to the cover. "Open her up."

Mr. McAllister shrugged at Mr. Burns, then pulled up the lid and slowly picked up the cookie. It looked exactly the same.

"Go ahead, try it," DeAngelo said.

Mr. McAllister rubbed the back of his neck. "Uh, you first."

"What's the matter, don't you trust me?" DeAngelo snapped, his features tightening.

"I'll try it," Mr. Burns said, breaking off a chunk. "Tastes fine to me."

The others split the remainder, everyone agreeing nothing was sacrificed. "But how do we know the calories are gone?" Mr. McAllister asked.

"Good question. Right now we don't have any way of measuring the fat and calories, but these companies do." DeAngelo handed over the lab results from his previous experiments.

"Brandon, I've got a buddy whose father owns a food service business," Mr. Burns said. "They make meals for the airlines. Maybe they'd be interested in trying out the machine, then if it goes well, we could work out a licensing arrangement. And if that works out, DeAngelo could retain the patent and license the machines to restaurants or food manufacturers. Why there's no end to the places that could use this technology. What do you think?"

"I see amazing potential with this Bill, but I'm sure the FDA will have to approve this technology first, which means a series of tests to determine if the food is safe for human consumption. If you want to proceed, I can make some calls and get the ball rolling. This could get costly and it won't be a quick process, so you'll need to have patience," Mr. McAllister said.

DeAngelo's head slumped as he shuffled his feet. "I don't have any money, Mr. McAllister. I wanted to sell the machine and use the money to help my family in Jamaica."

"Listen, DeAngelo," Mr. Burns said. "Even if you could sell the machine, the next person would have to go through the same testing process, so I'm not sure if anyone would be willing to pay much money unless they were sure the machine could be utilized. I mean, what if the food *isn't* safe to eat?"

"Of course it's safe. I've been eating it all year and look at me, I'm not dead."

"Well, for what it's worth, *I* think the food is safe to eat, but that doesn't mean squat to the folks at the FDA." Mr. Burns placed his hands on his thighs and stood up, facing DeAngelo. "I'm willing to work with you, and I believe in you and your machine. I'm sure I can pull some investors together. If you're willing to be patient and work with us, I think there's a lot of potential here."

"Would I make much money?"

"Are you kidding? We'd all make money. But it won't be quick, and there may be bugs to work out along the way. What do you say?"

"Thanks, partner," DeAngelo said as they shook hands.

Chapter fifty-three

Jill remained on suicide watch. She refused to eat, instead choosing to lie on her cot and count the bugs crawling across the drab ceiling.

Gunnar flinched as he and Darci made their way through the jail. Images of being pepper-sprayed for any little infraction, showering in community showers where urine and feces gathered around plugged drains, and a host of other incidents from his own incarceration flooded his mind. "Darci, we gotta help Jill."

"I know. Let's start with you talking to her."

"Jill, get up," barked the guard. "Ya got company. I'm takin' you over to the visitin' room."

"Visiting room? Who'd want to visit me?"

"I ain't got the slightest idea. C'mon."

Jill took a step back when she spotted Gunnar. "Wh…what are you doing here?"

"He has something to tell you, Jill. It's important," Darci said.

Jill turned away.

Gunnar cleared his throat. "Uh, hey Jill. I'm sorry about…uh, you know, your situation. I wanted to talk to you about what happened between us years ago, when we were livin' with Hank."

Jill kept her back to Gunnar. "Don't try to apologize, Gunnar. There's nothing you can say that will make things right."

"I know how you must feel but hear me out. Look at me. Please."

Jill took a deep breath, then turned around. Her eyes remained focused on the floor.

"When…when I came to your room that time, you didn't know it, but Hank was standin' behind the door and he had a knife in his hand…watchin' everything. He threatened to cut off Tommy's finger if I didn't do what he said. Same thing with the kittens, he threatened to chop up one of the kittens if I didn't take them. Believe me, I didn't want to." Tears welled up in Gunnar's eyes. "I'm sorry, Jill, really I am. I hope you can forgive me."

Jill clamped a hand over her mouth. "I didn't know Hank put you up to it. But it makes sense…I should have figured it out. Now I'm the one who's sorry. I did all those rotten pranks to punish you. I wanted you put away forever." Tears flowed as they embraced, while Darci dabbed a tissue under her eyes.

"Well, ain't this a cozy li'l scene," the guard said. "Guess I shoulda brought me a mop to wipe up all that salt water floodin' the hallway," he snickered. "Visitin' time's over."

Darci and Gunnar had a long talk on the drive home. "Gunnar, if you could choose any career, what would you choose? What do you love to do?"

"Ya know, I've been so busy wastin' my life I never gave it much thought. But now that you ask…there is somethin' I enjoy doin' even though I hardly ever do it."

"And? Don't keep me in suspense!"

"Cookin'…yeah, I like to cook but I never take the time to do it."

"Really? Gunnar, that's perfect. My cousin is in a culinary arts program. I'll call her. But you'll need to get your GED first…and I'd be more than happy to help you study for it. There is something else, though. I'm afraid you might fall back into your hard-partying lifestyle. I know you care about your friends, but it's time to break free and start fresh. I'd like you to consider coming to live with my father and me...at least until you're ready to be on your own. I'll warn you though, my father will give you plenty of chores to do on the farm, but you'll also be free to cook any time you want. So, what do you say?"

"Before I say anything, I wanted to tell you I'm sorry about breakin' into your cabin. It was wrong and stupid. I wish I could take it back. I can't believe you'd be so nice to me after what I've done to you."

"Everybody deserves a second chance. This is your chance."

"Thanks Darci. You know what? I'm sick of livin' this kinda life, feelin' like a worthless bum. I want to change. I want to change real bad."

Now all she had to do was ask her father.

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"Honey, you've got a big heart, but we don't have any room here," her father said, surprised by her request. "We've only got two bedrooms. Where's he going to sleep? And money's tight as it is. How are we going to feed him?"

A muscle in Darci's jaw twitched. *Why does he have to be so practical?*

"He can sleep on the sofa. He's willing to do chores and cooking in exchange for room and board. Remember Dad, when mom was in trouble? You didn't hesitate to help her, even though you didn't have to. You always taught me to put others before myself, so that's what I'm doing. We'll find a way…we always do."

He massaged the back of his neck. "You're right, honey, we do manage to find a way. You say he knows how to cook?"

"Well, let's just say he wants to learn. I'm going to call Sandy tonight to talk about getting him into the culinary arts program." Later that evening, Darci called her cousin.

"Hey Darci. What's cookin'?"

"Hey Sandy. You're still in the culinary arts program, right?"

"Yeah, I just started. Why?"

She explained the situation with Gunnar and gave Sandy a brief synopsis of the summer antics at Camp Chickadee.

"Your father told my mother about some of the things that happened. Boy, plenty of action there this summer, huh?"

"You don't know the half of it!"

"Give me the lowdown, Darci. Say, want to grab a coffee…or dessert? Maybe even tonight?"

"Sure, I'm free tonight. Want to meet up at the ice cream parlor around seven?"

"Sounds groovy. See you then."

Darci drove to the office. She placed her personal belongings in a box, pausing at the framed photo of herself at four years old. She was standing between her mother and father, surrounded by two hearty lilac bushes. She recalled the sweet aroma of the fragrant purple blossoms, still amazed that her mother found time to nurture the plants. *Give of yourself, and you will be richly rewarded,* she always said. She glided her fingers over the image as an icy chill spread through her. *I'll never forgive myself. If it wasn't for me, my mother would be here today, guiding me through these difficult times. I love you Mommy. I'm SO sorry!* Sobs escaped through the cabin walls.

Ryker rushed in, grabbing her by the shoulders. "Darci, what's wrong? Are you all right?" She buried her head in his broad shoulders, then held up the picture.

"You don't understand. I…I didn't tell you everything. I was too ashamed. You see, my mother's death was my fault." He sat quietly as she told him the story. "I can't shake this agonizing shame. My mother would be alive today if it wasn't for me."

He pulled her closer. "It was an accident. It wasn't your fault. You've got to let go of the guilt." He stroked her hair. "Your mother wouldn't want you beating yourself up like this. She'd expect you to be strong and resilient⎯like you said she was. Which you are, by the way. Trust me," he chuckled, squeezing her tighter.

"Thanks. You always know how to make me feel better." She laid her head on his shoulder, savoring the warmth of his arm around her. "By the way, I'm meeting up with my cousin Sandy at the ice cream parlor tonight. We have a lot to catch up on."

"Have a triple-decker caramel sundae with mountains of whipped cream and a cherry on top. I won't be home. I'm playing a gig with my band tonight."

"I don't know about that sundae, but I wish I could go to your gig. Hey don't forget, you owe me a guitar lesson."

Chapter fifty-four

The girls met in the parking lot, then took a booth toward the back of the ice cream parlor.

"Hello ladies." The waitress handed them menus and placed two glasses of ice water on the table. "Do you need a few minutes?"

"Yes, thank you," Darci said. She gave Sandy an abbreviated version of the events that took place over the summer, ending with the prospect that Gunnar would likely be living with her and her father.

Sandy's hand flew to her chest. "Wow, you mean Uncle Charlie's not your real father?"

"Shhhh…" Darci glanced around as she held a finger to her lips.

"Sorry," Sandy whispered. "But oh my God, I never knew that. How did you make it through this crazy summer? You obviously have your mother's genes," Sandy said, flexing her muscles. "You're nothing like that horrible Joker!"

Darci's finger flew up to her lips again as the waitress cautiously approached the table. "Are you girls ready to order now?"

"I'll have a strawberry frappe please," Darci said.

"And I'll go hog wild and have a hot fudge sundae in a tall glass. Wish we had DeAngelo's calorie machine," Sandy said, winking at Darci.

The waitress narrowed her eyes, shrugging her shoulders as she walked away.

Darci glanced around the room, fiddling with her earrings.

"Are you all right? You seem distracted. Is something wrong?"

"Sorry Sandy…it's just that I've been feeling a bit down lately. Right before I came here, I was packing up my office and had that picture in my hand. You remember the one with mom and dad, when I was four and we were standing next to mom's lilac bushes? It hit me hard, you know, about the accident. Sorry I'm such a wet blanket tonight."

Sandy's chest tightened. She stared at her class ring, twisting it around her finger. "You mean about your mother."

"Yes. I can't let go of the guilt, it's eating me up inside. Maybe I need to see a shrink or something."

Sandy closed her eyes and took a deep breath, laying her hand over Darci's. "There's something I've been holding inside all these years. Believe me, I've wanted to tell you a thousand times, but I never had the guts."

Darci's head drew back. "Tell me what? What are you talking about?"

Sandy struggled to look her in the eye. "Remember the night of your birthday party, how we washed our hair and used your new dryer to create fancy hairstyles? And you went downstairs but I stayed a few minutes longer to put on lipstick and blush?"

"Yeah, I remember," Darci said, subconsciously pulling napkins from the dispenser.

Sandy inhaled, biting her bottom lip. "Darci, you *did* unplug the hair dryer. I plugged it back in to touch up my hair and forgot to unplug it."

Darci's mouth fell open, her chest rising and falling with rapid breaths. She shoved the table forward. "WHAT? You mean, all this time, all these years, I've been beating myself up thinking I killed her? And my father thinking the same thing? Do you have any idea what you've put me through? The nights I've laid awake reliving that horrible bathtub scene and thinking I caused it? How could you do this to me?"

Darci lowered her head, sliding down in her chair as the waitress approached with their orders. She set their glasses on the table and quickly turned away.

"I'm so, so sorry, Darci," Sandy whispered, clasping her hand. "I don't blame you for hating me. I should've had the courage to tell you." She hung her head. "So many times I picked up the phone, then chickened out. I didn't even tell my own mother. I know it was wrong, so if you never speak to me again, I'll understand. But some day I hope you'll find it in your heart to forgive me."

Darci dropped her head in her hands, shaking it back and forth. "I don't hate you, Sandy. But it *is* a huge shock. I understand why you couldn't tell me, but that doesn't make it any easier. You should have."

"I know." A tear trickled down Sandy's cheek.

"Sandy, we've been through a lot together, and it *was* an accident. A horrible accident. But I can't stand the thought of losing my best cousin, and I'm sure my mother would want us to be close and move on with our lives."

"Oh Darci, I can't tell you how much that means to me. You've always been like a sister, so the thought of losing you was tearing me up inside."

"I think we both got rid of some guilt tonight, Sandy." She raised her frappe and the girls clinked their glasses. "Here's to the future⎯may it be a new beginning," Darci toasted, as the waitress laid their slip on the table.

Chapter fifty-five

Darci awoke to the chatter of high-pitched honking overhead. The geese were practicing for their upcoming flight south. Normally an annoying wake-up call, but today it felt like a thousand butterflies were freed from the prison of her soul.

She thought about last night and her father's reaction to Sandy's admission⎯chuckling at the memory of her father's pitchfork flying out of his hands when she told him the news. It almost nailed Eleanor, their Holstein cow. But it led to a real heart-to-heart talk, culminating in an apology from her dad. Maybe now the healing could begin.

She showered and changed into a long sleeve pullover and jeans. The mild mornings were now few and far between, and the dream she had the night before replayed in her mind like a movie marathon⎯Jill and her mother kept opening doors, trying to find each other. *Jill never mentioned where her mother is, or if she even knows where she is. Does she know her daughter is in jail? Would she care?*

She formulated a plan. *I need to find Mrs. umm…Watson? Hank's last name was Watson, but did Jill's mother take his name? He was her last husband as far as I know. I can't ask Jill. She'd go off the deep end if she knew I was trying to locate her mother. Jill said she has a substance-abuse problem, might as well start with the hospitals and detox facilities.*

She scanned the yellow pages, starting with the local hospitals. Morning gave way to lunchtime before she hit upon something. A nurse at the rehab center recalled a patient by the name of Watson being released about a month earlier. Though not sure where the person went, she remembered something about a nursing home. She called every nursing home in the directory. *Finally, a hit!* Evergreen Pines had a patient by the name of Helen Watson. They told her not to wait too long if she planned to visit, as Mrs. Watson was in frail health. She ripped the page from the phone book and headed to the address listed for Evergreen Pines.

A row of perfectly trimmed pine trees lined the property, the lawns and hedges manicured to perfection. She pulled up the drive and parked in the adjacent lot. *I wish I'd have given more thought to what I'm going to say. Hello Mrs. Watson. My name is Darci Miller, and in case you're not aware, your daughter is in jail for murder. And she hates you. Yeah, great opening Darci.*

She opened the large green door, instantly recognizing the smell she remembered from visiting her grandmother years before. *Does every nursing home smell like antiseptic trying to disguise the stench of human waste?* She peeked into the front parlor as the sound of piano music diverted her attention. Two nurses' aides were gently dancing with the patients, bringing long-forgotten smiles to their faces. Even the ones in wheelchairs got in on the action. Darci's eyes sparkled as she observed the happiness on their faces, knowing it was the highlight of their day.

"May I help you?" a nurse asked.

"I'm looking for a Mrs. Helen Watson. Is she in this room?" Darci gestured toward the music.

The nurse shook her head. "Goodness no. Mrs. Watson is much too sick to participate in such activities. And she rarely, if ever, gets any visitors. May I ask who you are?"

Darci's heart sank. *Poor her⎯no visitors.* "My name is Darci Miller. I'm a friend of her daughter's and I was hoping for a short visit. I promise I won't stay long."

The nurse studied Darci's face then pursed her lips. "Follow me."

She followed the nurse down a long corridor, the floors gleaming from a recent buffing by the night custodian. The nurse stopped in the doorway of Room 242 and signaled her to enter. "Keep it brief…she tires easily."

"I will, thank you," Darci said as she reluctantly walked to the edge of the bed. A few remaining strands of silver lay strewn across the pillow, a sad reminder of what used to be. She shuddered at the skeletal figure with the dark, sunken eyes, her fragile skin mottled in purple blotches. She placed her hand over the feeble woman's.

Mrs. Watson turned and opened her eyes a sliver. She nibbled her bottom lip but no sound came out.

Darci smiled and rubbed her hand. "Hello Mrs. Watson, my name is Darci Miller. I work with your daughter Jill at Camp Chickadee."

Mrs. Watson's eyes perked up. "You…you know my Jill?" she whispered hoarsely.

"Yes, she's a friend of mine." Given Mrs. Watson's condition, she didn't tell her about Jill's situation. "We've spent a lot of time together over the summer. She's an excellent cook."

Tears welled up in Mrs. Watson's eyes. "She likes to cook. I…I haven't seen her in a long time." The elderly woman stared at the ceiling for several minutes. "We…we had a falling out. I asked her for money and she got mad."

 "What was the money for?"

"There's a van that comes⎯sort of a beauty parlor on wheels⎯and I was hoping to get a perm." She squeezed Darci's hand. "But I never got to tell her. She bolted out the door and never came back."

Darci gritted her teeth. "I'm so sorry. If I could arrange it, would you like to see her?"

"Oh yes, I would. It's lonely here. She's all I've got left in the world."

"I promise I'll do my best. Uh, Mrs. Watson, there's something else I think you should know. Your late husband, Hank Watson…he's…he's my father, well at least my biological father. I never met him, but I wanted you to know."

Mrs. Watson's eyes turned dark as her breathing intensified.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you. But I felt it was important that I tell you."

She pushed herself off the pillow with her elbows and gripped Darci's hand. "He was a monster Darci. Why, that must mean you're related to Gunnar?" Mrs. Watson collapsed onto the pillow.

The nurse popped her head in. "I think it's time you go."

Darci squeezed Mrs. Watson's hand. "Yes, Gunnar is my half brother. I know Hank was terrible, but don't think about him. I'll see what I can do about bringing Jill to see you," she told her, giving her hand a gentle tap. "You rest now. I'll be back soon."

Chapter fifty-six

Darci's stomach was in knots on the drive home. *I never should have mentioned Hank to her, at least not that soon. I hope I don't screw things up even more by bringing Jill to see her. Will they let her out of jail to visit her dying mother?* She was about to find out.

She drove straight to the jail and asked to meet with the warden, Sam Clayton. He was a tall, husky, middle-aged man with a well-trimmed beard. He motioned Darci to sit across from him in his crowded office. "What can we do for you, Miss…?"

"Miller…Darci Miller," she said, extending her hand. "Mr. Clayton, I just returned from Evergreen Pines Nursing Home. I went there to visit Mrs. Watson, the mother of one of your prisoners, Jill Chase. Jill and her mother had a falling out a while ago, and they haven't spoken in a long time. Mrs. Watson's condition is fragile and she would like to see her daughter before she…you know…passes. I don't even know if Jill would be willing to see her, but I came to ask a favor. I know it's out of the ordinary, but would it be possible for Jill to leave for a short visit with her mother? I realize she'd need security, but it would mean the world to her mother, and hopefully do Jill some good too."

Warden Clayton massaged his beard. "This is highly unusual, Miss Miller. Miss Chase is believed to have murdered her stepfather by poisoning him."

"Mr. Clayton, I'm familiar with that case. Her stepfather, Hank Watson, was an evil man who called himself 'The Joker'. I know vigilante justice is illegal, but there were no tears shed by anyone in that house when he died. I also believe he is largely responsible for the situation Jill is in. She's had to deal with demons from her childhood, and hopefully she can get the help she needs to overcome the pain. Maybe clearing the air with her mother would be a good first step."

Mr. Clayton took a deep breath. "Well, you do make a compelling point. Okay, but she'll have to remain handcuffed. She can wear regular street clothes though. And there will be two armed guards standing outside her mother's door."

"Thank you, Mr. Clayton. You won't regret it!"

"I hope you're right." He shook her hand.

"May I see her now?"

"You're on the visitor's list, but you still need to go through Security." She breezed through Security and was once again led to the dismal visiting room. She waited until the door swung open and two guards escorted Jill inside.

A flush of adrenaline tingled through Jill at the sight of a visitor. "Darci? What are you doing here?"

Darci had a sudden urge to run, but put on a brave face. "Hi Jill, how are you doing?"

She shrunk back and scuffed her shoe on the dirty floor before taking a seat at the table. "I've been better. But I did call my lawyer, and he suggested I change my plea to 'innocent by reason of insanity'. Maybe he's right. No one in their right mind would do the things I've done."

"Your lawyer sounds like a smart man. But, uh, Jill, there is something else I need to talk with you about." Jill sat up straight, her gaze focused on Darci. "I visited your mother at the nursing home today."

"You *WHAT*? My mother? How did you find her? Why would you do that? You know how I feel about her."

"It's okay, take it easy. When was the last time you saw her?"

"I don't know, a few months ago. She was in a rehab center, drying out again. I went to see her, and you know what she asked me? If I had any money to lend her. Probably to buy booze and cigarettes when she got out. I don't know, since I didn't bother to ask her. I told her no, and that I was through coming to see her. So maybe you can see why I don't jump at the chance to visit her. But I knew she was in a nursing home because they contacted me about the financials and stuff."

"She didn't ask you for money to buy booze and cigarettes. She wanted the money for a perm. She told me you got angry and bolted out the door before she had a chance to explain."

"A perm? That's what she told you?" Jill leaned back, rolling her eyes. "Did she also tell you about the time she left me sitting in a hot car to go into the store to buy me an ice cream bar? And coming out with a cold beer instead? I've got lots of stories. Want to hear more?"

Darci leaned forward, placing her hand on Jill's. She shook her head. "I'm sorry for what you've been through, but it's not too late to make amends. I really believe your mother has changed, and I believe her about the perm too. Have they told you about her condition? She's very frail, and to be honest I don't think she has much time left. She wants to see you. She knows she's nearing the end."

Jill closed her eyes, exhaling a deep breath. "Well, I guess I can go see her. At least it's an excuse to get out of here for a day. Do you think they'll let me go?"

"I already cleared it with Warden Clayton. We can go tomorrow morning. I'll get everything arranged with the home. What do you say?"

"Tomorrow morning? Uh, yeah okay. It's not like I'm doing much anyway."

Chapter fifty-seven

Darci kicked off her sneakers and slipped into her flannel pajamas before collapsing into the oversized chair across from her small black and white TV. Arrangements were all made for tomorrow morning. Now it was time to relax with a cup of hot cocoa and the Mary Tyler Moore show. She envied Mary Richards, the strong and independent newswoman who lived an exciting life as a single woman in Minneapolis. A tap-tap-tap on the door caught her attention as she quickly assessed her dismal appearance. *Who on earth could that be?*

She cracked open the door. Captivating brown eyes met hers through the crack. A guitar hung loosely across his muscular frame. "Are you going to let me in?"

An urgent desire to pull him inside and lock the door washed over her. "Uh, I wasn't expecting company tonight," she stammered, glancing around for her bathrobe.

"Awww, you're sexy no matter what you're wearing."

She turned off the television and slowly opened the door. "Give me a little warning next time, Ryker. Geez, look at me."

"Believe me, I am looking at you, all sexy in those flannel pj's with the missing button in the front."

"Missing button?" She quickly checked the front of her pajamas. "There's no missing button, you numbskull."

"Hey, I can dream can't I?" he laughed. "Now if I recall, you asked for a guitar lesson. You never said when, so I thought I'd surprise you."

"I'm surprised all right. But before we start the lesson, let's catch up on what's been happening around here. You go first."

"Well, DeAngelo's out of the hospital and we found his machine. Did you know he contracted Rat Bite Fever from being bitten by a rat while he was tied up in Jill's cellar? They said he could have died if the Burns hadn't brought him to the hospital in time."

Darci's hand flew up to her mouth. "Holy sugar! Thank goodness they got him to the hospital when they did."

"There you go with the sugar again," he taunted, rolling his eyes.

"Never mind that." She gave him a playful swat on the arm.

"*Anyway*, when he got out, Mr. Burns brought him to see his lawyer. They're working on getting a trial run with a friend of Mr. Burns who owns a business that makes food for the airlines."

"That's great. I'm so happy for DeAngelo."

"Me too…except they'll have to get FDA approval first, which could take a long time. But DeAngelo's pretty excited about the whole thing. Now, what's going on with you?"

Darci filled him in on the situation with Jill and her mother, and their scheduled visit in the morning. She also told him about Gunnar coming to live with her and her father, and her conversation with her cousin Sandy.

 "There, you see that. You've been carrying around all that guilt for nothing." He kissed her on the forehead. "Your mother's looking down right now with a smile on her face."

Darci looked up. "Mom, I've got a good one here." She gave her mother a thumbs-up.

He pulled her closer for a long, passionate kiss. She stumbled back a few steps.

"Wow. Maybe you should go now. My mother's still watching."

He gazed at the ceiling, waving hello. "Uh, hi Mrs. Miller…sorry, but I think you'll need to draw the blinds for a while."

Darci whacked him on the shoulder. "Shame on you! Now I *know* you need to go!"

"Awww come on. We haven't started your guitar lesson yet."

"Leave it here and I'll practice on my own. It's getting late."

He reached for her but she held her hands up like a stop sign. "I'm serious…you really need to leave now."

"Well that sucks. But before I go, I think we should make plans to go on a proper date. How would you like to go to the county fair with me this weekend? We can fill up on fried dough and cotton candy and puke our guts out on the rides."

She rubbed her stomach. "Oooh, sounds like a blast. Then maybe you can win me a giant teddy bear."

"I'm more cuddly than a stuffed teddy bear," he said, wriggling his eyebrows. "See you Saturday."

She broke into a smile as she thought about Saturday. *I'll bet you are!*

Chapter fifty-eight

Jill's hands vibrated in her cuffs as she approached the large green door. "I feel sick…I don't think I can go through with this, Darci. My mother doesn't know I'm incarcerated. You didn't tell her, did you?"

"No, but she' going to find out in a minute…just get everything out in the open. Here, take this before we go in." Darci slipped Jill a twenty. "Give it to her so she can get a perm."

"Wow, thanks Darci. You're the best."

"Mrs. Watson, you have visitors," the nurse informed her as she led the girls into the room. The guards agreed to stand outside in the hallway.

Jill's mother turned slightly, then a faint smile spread across her parched lips as she extended her arm toward her daughter. Darci took a seat along the wall, while Jill abruptly stopped halfway across the room, a slight gasp escaping her lips. The change in her mother over the past few months left her breathless.

"It's okay honey, c'mere," Mrs. Watson said, rotating her hand toward herself. Jill shot a wide-eyed glance at Darci, then reached out to take her mother's frail hand.

 "Hi Mom. I'm sorry I haven't visited lately. I guess you can see I've been kinda busy," she said, looking down at her hands. Shame stabbed her like a knife.

Her mother looked up from the cuffs. "Jill, whatever trouble you're in, it's my fault. I tried to be a good mother. I think I was for the first part of your life anyway. But things went downhill after your father walked out. Then when Hank came along, I, you know, kind of went off the rails. I've asked God for forgiveness. I know it's too little too late, but I don't know what else I can say or do. I'm so…so sorry, and I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me." She pressed Jill's hands between hers, and the tears flowed from mother and daughter as Jill got up and hugged her for several minutes.

"I forgive you Mom. And it's not your fault I got into trouble. I'm a grownup now and need to take responsibility for my own actions. But there is something I need to tell you. The night Hank died…I put the poison mushrooms in his stew. That's why I'm in handcuffs, well at least that's mostly why. But I'm not sorry. He deserved to die."

"I kind of figured that's what happened, Jill. You're right, he did deserve to die. You were brave to do that."

"Sorry to interrupt, but I have an idea," Darci said. "Mrs. Watson, would you be willing to give a statement to the authorities? It's called a Victim Impact Statement…something to the effect that Hank was an abusive and dangerous husband and father, and that Jill was justified in poisoning him."

Jill's mother looked at Darci, then Jill. "You mean like when he'd hold a cigarette to my skin until it blistered?" she asked, lifting the sleeve of her nightgown to expose ugly burn scars. "Or why I only have partial vision in my right eye because he smashed his fist into it? Why, it's the least I can do."

"Oh Mom, I knew he was bad, but I didn't realize the extent of his abuse. Is that why you starting drinking more?"

Mrs. Watson nodded. "I was scared, Jill. I wanted him to go away but I was afraid if I said or did anything, he'd kill me or you. So I stayed and drank to cope with it. I'm sorry and ashamed." She patted Jill's hand then motioned for Darci to come to her bedside.

She took Darci's hands. "You told me yesterday that Hank was your father. It was a shock to me, but I got to thinking about it yesterday. I have something I want to give you. Close your eyes and hold out your hand."

When she opened her eyes a loud gasp filled the room. "Is that…is that my mother's bracelet?"

"I found this after Hank died. He had a little box hidden in his dresser, where he collected his so-called memorabilia." Mrs. Watson lowered her head, shaking it back and forth. "When you told me about Hank, I put two and two together. Or at least I hoped I was right. I remembered the bracelet and the inscription to Kathy Wilson. It was such a lovely bracelet. I assume "C.M." is your father?"

"Yes, Charlie Miller married my mother, Kathy Wilson. He was in love with her and wanted to adopt the baby and be a family. Unfortunately, my mother passed away a few years ago, so now it's only my dad and me. You don't know how much this means to me, Mrs. Watson." She clasped it around her wrist, slowly gliding her fingers over the gold-plated bracelet.

"I'm sorry to hear about your mother, Darci. I hope this gives you some comfort."

"It's priceless to me, and I know my dad will be overcome with emotion when he sees it. Thank you so much!" she said, giving Mrs. Watson a heart-felt squeeze.

The girls wrapped up their visit and Darci said she'd arrange for someone to get Mrs. Watson's statement and take pictures of her scars.

Jill placed the twenty in her mother's hand. "You'll look nice with a perm," she whispered, planting a gentle kiss on her forehead.

Chapter fifty-nine

Rays of sunlight streaked through her blinds as Darci rubbed her eyes and stared at the geometric pattern splayed across the wall. She bolted upright. Saturday!

She made herself a cup of instant coffee, but it tasted like dish water and looked about the same*. I need to clear my mind and focus on my date with Ryker.* The crisp late-summer day called for a warm sweater and blue jeans. She rummaged through her tiny closet, choosing her warm and fuzzy red turtleneck and slim fitting jeans. She draped her favorite gray and red plaid scarf over her sweater. *There, you look mighty dapper, Darci Miller.*

 Ryker tapped on her door at precisely 10 o'clock.

 "My prince charming is timely," she grinned.

"Your coach is waiting, Cinderella," he said, sweeping his arm toward the car.

She giggled. "C'mon, let's go and get some of that wholesome fair food."

He opened the passenger door of his blue Mustang Boss 302 with black hockey stick stripes. Although she'd seen it parked in the yard, it was her first ride in it, so she tried to play it cool. "Hmmm…nice car," was all she said, secretly wishing it didn't have bucket seats.

"You like it? It's got 300 horsepower and goes from zero to sixty in seven seconds," he boasted, his arms waving excitedly.

"Well, how about we give those horses a peaceful day and stay *under* sixty on these narrow, winding roads," she chuckled.

"Now you sound like my mother."

Darci jerked her head around. "Your *mother*? Oh, I can see where this date is headed."

The line of cars was already backed up a half mile from the gate. Signs dotted both sides of the road announcing five dollar parking. Ryker preferred to skip the extra walking and pay ten dollars to park on the grounds.

"Are we the only ones here without kids?" he muttered, as scores of rambunctious children and their families scooted past them.

"Hey mister! Win a giant teddy bear for that pretty little gal you got there!" yelled the carnival worker manning the shooting range while several bands played in the distance.

"Later," Ryker shouted back. The aroma of sausages piled high with peppers and onions drifted through the air.

"Look Ryker, a photo booth. I saw wigs and novelty items at a vendor we passed. Let's do some silly pictures." Following a few goofy faces and silly hats, they donned wigs and posed as Sonny and Cher. Ryker squatted down to make Darci look taller.

"That was a riot," she laughed, pulling him to the exhibition halls. Something caught her eye while poking through the selection of antiquated books. "Ryker, look at this," she squeaked in delight, holding a faded book up to his face.

*The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.*

 "Yeah, so? Looks pretty worn out to me."

She rolled her eyes. "This is a famous book by Robert Louis Stevenson. They've made several movies out of it. When I was talking with Captain Bill this summer, he was reading *Treasure Island* by the same author, and said he loved *this* book but lent it to someone years ago and they never returned it. It's the perfect gift."

"Well, how about that? Hey, see that ferris wheel over there?"

"No you don't!" She took a few steps back. "I'm not getting on that thing."

He grabbed her hand, pulling her toward the giant wheel. "Close your eyes when we're on the top, 'cause you're going on it right now. No arguments!"

The sun was dipping below the horizon as they made their way to the gigantic wheel. She held her breath as the bucket lurched forward then came to a stop. The attendant exchanged amused glances with Ryker as he locked the safety lever.

"Relax, it's only 200 feet high," he reminded her as the ride resumed. "And if you reach your arm up like this you can almost touch the clouds. But the fun *really* begins when the bucket starts to rock, kind of like this," he demonstrated, rocking the seat back and forth.

"STOP IT! What's wrong with you, are you crazy? Don't ever do that again!" She slapped his shoulder with all her strength.

He leaned away with his arms shielding his face, rubbing his shoulder but unable to hide the smirk on his face. "Geez, lighten up. Where's your sense of humor?"

"I left it on the ground with my internal organs. You know I don't like heights."

"Well, sometimes you have to face your fears. If you want to be a good detective, you can't let fear get in the way⎯you've got to tackle it head on."

"Yeah, well, I'll tackle it with both feet on the ground." She was too busy arguing with him to notice they'd already crested the top and were circling around a second time. The fairground lights came on, a sign that daylight was disappearing earlier each day. He wrapped his arm around her back, pulling her closer. She collapsed into his muscular arm.

"Oh Ryker, isn't it beautiful?" The wheel was a myriad of colorful lights, flashing on and off in perfect unison, while music flowed from the speakers. "Look, a full moon." It's amber glow illuminated the darkening sky as bright, shiny stars emerged around it, twinkling in its moonlight.

"It's almost as beautiful as you," he said, pulling her closer as the wheel came to a stop at the top. Her eyes grew wide, not sure if he was going to rock the bucket or kiss her. Her breathing came to a halt when his lips merged with hers.

Chapter sixty

"Gunnar, you're starting school next week, so I think it's time you kick your new life into high gear," Darci said. "Close your eyes and wait here a minute." She returned holding something behind her back. "Open your eyes."

Gunnar's jaw dropped when she held out a book called *The French Chef* by Julia Child. She saw it at the fair when she bought Captain Bill's book, and couldn't wait to give it to him. She knew he watched her cooking show.

He quickly flipped through the pages, his eyes lighting up as he scanned the recipes. "I want to make everything in this book," he beamed.

"That's admirable Gunnar, but keep in mind we have a limited budget⎯in fact, it might be a good idea if you got a part-time job at a local restaurant. It would bring in more income to buy food and supplies, plus give you experience. I know you've been cramming for your GED, and once you pass that, Sandy's going to work on getting you into the culinary arts program. Do you think you can handle a part-time job *and* cooking classes?"

He tapped his fingers on the table, his mind searching for answers when his eyes lit up and he smacked his palm on the table. "I can do it, Darci. I know I can! I'll start lookin' for a job right away."

"That's the confidence we've been waiting for, Gunnar."

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Darci showered and styled her hair, opting for loose curls and side-swept bangs. She chose a red turtleneck sweater and bell bottoms. A touch of makeup and dab of white musk perfume put her in a pleasant mood. Ryker was set to pick her up any minute. She was going back to camp to get her things and say goodbye to everyone.

She turned around at the sound of gravel crunching as the Mustang came into view.

"Hey there, sunshine. Wow, you're looking like a million bucks."

"Not bad yourself," she echoed, raising her eyebrows. "You look almost as cuddly as that furry teddy bear in the corner."

"So that's where you're hiding him. You know, I spent a ton of money to win you that thing."

"I know you did…maybe this Christmas Santa will bring you shooting lessons."

"Very funny," he smirked.

She tucked the book for Captain Bill under her jacket as they made their way to camp. A brisk wind brought a chill to the air as they watched a colorful array of leaves float to the ground. But the camp looked deserted without the kids and counselors.

"Do you think Captain Bill went home already?" she asked.

"No, he's still here. After the kids leave, he stays on for a while to help repair the docks, paint boats, stuff like that. He'll be here a couple more weeks. DeAngelo does that too, since there's plenty to do after the kids are gone."

"What about you? Have you decided on a career?"

"My last day was yesterday. I haven't told you yet, but I enrolled in a state college⎯I'm going to study criminal justice."

"Criminal justice? What about your music career?"

"I'm gonna do that as a hobby. My father always says you need a backup plan, so this gives me something more stable. I could be a cop, detective, FBI, who knows? But I've got to start somewhere."

"Where's the college? Have you told your parents yet?"

"It's less than an hour from here. And my parents were happy that I found something I want to do." He pulled her closer and ran his fingers through her hair. "And somebody I want to be with."

Their lingering kiss was interrupted by a booming voice. "Hey there you lovebirds, trying to keep warm?" Captain Bill hollered as he emerged from the dining hall.

Darci dashed toward his outstretched arms. "Captain Bill!"

"We already miss you," he said, returning her embrace.

She reached under her jacket and handed him the book. "Just a little something I picked up at the fair."

His mouth fell open. isHi"*Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*? You remembered? I love it, Darci. You're the best." They promised to stay in touch.

Mrs. Burns came running up to invite them for lunch in the dining hall. "It's just sandwiches, since most of the equipment is cleaned and put away for next year. Ryker, would you mind giving DeAngelo a hand? He's stacking heavy boxes and could use some muscle⎯we thought you'd be a good choice," she said, tapping his bicep.

"Happy to oblige Mrs. Burns," he said, walking straight and tall. Darci shook her head, rolling her eyes.

"Darci, I do have bad news though. Sergeant Donovan called this morning. Jill's mother passed away last night. But it was very peaceful. I haven't spoken with Jill yet, but he told me she was upset. He also mentioned that the statement Mrs. Watson gave to the police will go a long way in helping Jill's defense. It's ironic, isn't it? You figured out Jill was doing the pranks and murdered her stepfather, which landed her in jail. Yet if it weren't for you, Jill and her mother would never have repaired their relationship. To show our appreciation for everything you've done, Mr. Burns and I want you to have this." She handed her an envelope.

She gazed at the envelope in her hands.

"Well, go ahead, open it."

She peeled back the flaps. Her eyes grew wide, her voice shaking. "Wow, I can't believe this! You did this for me?" she shrieked, staring at a check for $5,000. It was accompanied by a hand-written note titled, 'Tuition Money'.

"We heard you wanted to study criminal justice so this should get you started on your education. That is, if you go to a state college," Mr. Burns winked.

"I know *exactly* which college I'll apply to. You two are beyond wonderful, thank you SO much!" she said, tucking the envelope into her pocket. They exchanged warm hugs. "Is Brynn here? I'd like to say goodbye."

"No, but she's probably at The Greasy Spoon."

"The Greasy Spoon? That's where Gunnar got a job."

"I know…Brynn has a renewed interest in the 'new and improved Gunnar'," Mrs. Burns chuckled, shaking her head. "Time will tell."

"No kidding? Well, I hope it works out for them. I think Gunnar will stay on the right path, I hope so anyway."

After lunch she said goodbye and thanked the Burns again, then saved her final hug for DeAngelo, making him promise to keep her informed about his calorie machine.

Tapping her fingers on the front seat of the Mustang, she fixated on the rolling hills and remaining corn crops dotting the countryside. The colorful leaves provided a picturesque backdrop against the numerous farms and cow pastures lining the back roads. Ryker maneuvered around the winding roads toward the jailhouse.

"You're awfully quiet. Well, except for your fingers. Everything okay?"

She jerked her hand back and cleared her throat. "Ryker, can I ask you something? It's personal, but it's been bothering me for a while now."

His stomach tightened. "Uh, sure."

"When you and Brynn were alone in your office, what really happened? And why did she call you Mr. Pearson?"

He wet his lips, trying to come up with a truthful, yet gentle explanation. "She was in my office when I got back from the hospital, supposedly writing a note to me about the bonfire. I told her I didn't believe her and she got all bent out of shape. That's when she called me Mr. Pearson. Anyway, I ended up apologizing and she flung her arms around me." His throat thickened as heat radiated through his cheeks. "Next thing I knew we were kissing, then the door burst open and her father was standing there. Talk about embarrassing. After he left she wanted to continue but I told her no. And that's the truth⎯I'm sorry if I hurt you."

She thought about what might have happened if Mr. Burns hadn't barged in, but said nothing. "Thanks for being honest. Now I know why Brynn doesn't like me. She wants *you*, not because she likes you, but just to say she can get anything or anybody she wants."

"Yeah, but I wouldn't worry about it. She likes to shoot her mouth off. I think it makes her feel important or something."

They pulled into the parking area and Darci went into the jail while Ryker waited in the car. The prearranged visit took place in the same room as before. Jill's shoulders slumped as she flipped one card over another.

"Who's winning?"

"Oh, hey Darci. I am. I always win at Solitaire."

"I'm sorry about your mother. Mrs. Burns said she went peacefully."

Jill shrugged. "I guess so…life is strange, don't you think? You have all these years to make things right with somebody, then when you finally do, they croak on you. But I guess it's better than never making up. Thanks for that, by the way."

"Glad it worked out. Any news on your future? How long will you be in here?"

"At least another thirty days. After that, they might move me to a mental hospital, you know, wrap me in a straight jacket and haul me off," she laughed.

"I hardly think it'll be that dramatic. Let's stay in touch and I'll visit you often."

"Thanks Darci. You're a true friend."

Chapter sixty-one

"Darci, please stand and read the paragraph I dictated," Mrs. Joplin instructed, her soft white curls framing her mature face. A flush swept across her face as she looked around the class, slowly standing to face Mrs. Joplin. But her mind was on the phone call she received the night before. Ryker wanted to see her tonight.

She stumbled through the shorthand class, getting about half of it correct. Mrs. Joplin's eyes narrowed as her lips puckered, shaking her head.

"Now Darci, I know you can do better than that," she said wagging her finger. "You're to stay after school today for an hour of extra practice."

She opened her mouth to protest, then thought better of it. She hung her head and nodded. Senior year was going to be a long one.

Ryker took her to a popular pizza place in town, right next door to the ice cream parlor she and Sandy went to. He requested a booth toward the back of the dining room. They ordered Cokes and a large pepperoni pizza, bringing each other up to date on the latest happenings in their lives. Darci filled him in on Gunnar's new job as a cook at The Greasy Spoon and Brynn's sudden urge to patronize the restaurant.

"Oh man, I didn't see that coming. If two people deserve each other, it's them."

"Ryker Pearson, is that what you think?"

"Why? You think Brynn's too good for him?"

"No, I was thinking Gunnar's too good for *her*. Business has nearly doubled at The Greasy Spoon since he started. *And* he got his GED in record time. He plans to start at the culinary school in two weeks."

"Wow, talk about a turnaround. Let's just say they're free to explore whatever twisted relationship they want and leave it at that."

She took a deep breath but couldn't hold back a giggle. The waitress placed their pizza and Cokes on the table. He separated the pieces so they would cool faster.

"So how many songs can you play on the guitar?"

"Don't be a wise guy…I'm still waiting for my teacher to give me a lesson."

"Next time don't kick me out, and maybe you'll learn something."

"If I didn't know better I'd think there's a double meaning there."

"There's only one way to find out."

She changed the subject. "So how are your criminal justice classes going? What's the male to female ratio?"

"That's your burning question?" he laughed. "Oh, at least ninety percent male."

"Yeah, I'll bet."

"If you don't believe me why don't you enroll, even up the odds a bit."

"Maybe I'll call your bluff and do that," she said, pulling the check out of her pocket. She waved it in his face.

"What the hell? The Burns gave you $5,000?"

"I know, I couldn't believe it either. It's strictly for tuition, so don't get any ideas," she said, pulling a slice onto her plate.

"If you only knew my ideas," he winked, his fingers sliding over hers. "But hey, you really mean it? You're going to the same college?"

"I'm going to apply. We'll see if I'm smart enough to get in."

"If I got in, you'll be a shoe-in. I see you're wearing your mother's bracelet?"

"Yes. I asked my dad if he'd mind if I wore it. He broke down when I showed it to him, and said he'd be disappointed if I didn't."

"The diamond sparkles, kind of like you," he said, biting into his second slice.

Darci chuckled. "Would you mind if we went for a ride?"

"You read my mind. Let's get out of here," he said, grabbing a slice for the road. "Any place in mind?"

"This might sound odd, but I'd like to go to the cemetery. I want you to meet my mother."

"Well, this will be a first, but sure, I'd be honored to meet her."

Ryker suggested stopping at a roadside greenhouse to pick up a bouquet of lilacs to place on her grave, eliciting a tender hug from Darci. Fog gave way to a light mist as they meandered three miles through country roads, a weathered sign stating Highland Greens Cemetery appearing up ahead. The narrow dirt road wound through rows of aging tombstones, with geraniums poking out from numerous ceramic flower pots, many toppled on their sides.

"Over there," she pointed, causing him to make a sharp right past the mausoleum. "There it is," she said, pointing to a granite tombstone. **Kathy D. Miller 3/8/38 - 4/11/66.**

She slid her hand into his as they walked to the grave, clutching the bracelet while Ryker carried the flowers. She delicately placed the lilacs in front of the tombstone.

"Hi Mom, I hope you like the flowers. Look, I have your bracelet," she said, tracing her fingers around the gold band. "I'll take good care of it for the rest of my life. I promise. And this is my friend, Ryker. The lilacs were his idea. I know you'll like him. He's good to me, Mom."

"Friend? Oh come on, you can do better than that. Hello, Mrs. Miller. I want you to know you have a strong, smart, confident, and stubborn daughter⎯you should be proud. And let me clarify something…I'm more than a friend."

A flush crept across her cheeks. "Ryker!"

"She'll understand, trust me," he chuckled, taking her hands. "Now close your eyes."

"My eyes? Why?"

"For once, don't question anything. Just do it."

She slid him a suspicious look, then closed her eyes.

"No peeking," he ordered, dashing back to the car.

"What are you doing?"

"Hold on," he hollered, scurrying back to her. He got down on one knee. "Now open your eyes."

Her eyes widened as she sucked in a deep breath, then burst into laughter. A guitar hung loosely over his chest, a goofy grin stretching across his face. He strummed the first verse…

*When I first laid eyes on you*

 *I didn't know what to do*

*You were a little bit shy*

 *I was a smart-alecky guy*

*Leo and Pisces, they best never mix*

 *But then you got tough*

*And solved a big puzzle*

 *I knew by then, you might be trouble*

*But trouble is fun and a little bit sassy*

 *When it's feisty and smart like my sweet little Darci*

"Oh Ryker, that's so corny it's cute," she laughed, wrapping her arms around him. "But your guitar's still at my place."

"I have two of them. Always prepared, you know. Here, I have something else for you. Turn around and close your eyes again." He dug into his pocket, then gently laid the gold locket around her neck, fastening the clasp before turning her around. "SURPRISE!"

She lifted the locket to get a better look. "Holy shit!" Her hand shot up to her mouth as a heat wave flashed across her face. "I mean⎯"

"Well what do you know, my hard work finally paid off!" He burst out laughing, pumping a fist in the air.

"In front of my mother, no less. You're terrible," she scolded, slapping his arm. But a smile resurfaced as she read the inscription on the heart-shaped locket. "Keeper of my heart".

"Here, let me open it for you."

"Oh Ryker! It's our Sonny and Cher picture from the fair. You look so funny in those love beads and that mop of hair. I love it. Thank you!" She jumped in his arms, wrapping her legs around his waist.

"I should've bought the locket before," he said, raising his eyebrows.

Her heart pounded as his thumb gently wiped the mist collecting on her delicate features.

"Have you ever been kissed in a cemetery before?" he asked, as their lips melted together. Kathy Miller could finally rest in peace.