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Part I

Chapter 1

Pencil! Scissors! Can opener!

At first the children's cries were only vaguely alarming. Allie heard the shrieks from inside Pines, where the late summer breeze ferried their voices, isolated and individual, like lost birds or straggling summer tourists.

The old cabin's wooden floor was strewn with the detritus of the project she'd begun at the start of the summer. From the doorway she surveyed the wreckage, more like a flood had washed through than a remodel were underway. A pulled cabinet perched atop the debris like a glacial sheaf ready to slide. Allie bent to extract one wooden handle from the wreckage. Could this be the good hammer, subject these last months of a near man hunt in her household? *Jack knife! Screwdriver!* Another gust brought the children's voices as if offering guesses. But the tool that emerged was a thing she'd never seen before. Its heavy, meat-tenderizer-like base conjured the distant past and the tasks that had vanished with it: churning, ironing, applying sunscreen to children topically rather than spraying it on with an aerosol.

Allie hadn't been expecting a family with children—though multiple arrivals had been slated for this Friday afternoon of Labor Day weekend, end of a summer nearing another end of a year with numbers on it like from a sci fi novel. Who would have thought that in the future she'd live this way? *More* simply than she had decades ago. Allie spent her days mowing the lawn and wiping spiders from canoes with rags salvaged from tee-shirts. In winter, snowed in, her small family might

go a week without seeing other humans, only their tracks and the bunnies' leading down to the frozen lake.

There were so *many* bunnies. And deer.

At the next cry from the direction of the beach, Allie rose from the rubble of her project, tapping the new tool against her palm. Her feet knew each toe-stubbing root of the zigging path that wound between the cabins on their side of Little Eagle Lake, the width of which through the unchecked undergrowth matched that of their Radio Flyer, bringer of plastic-wrapped linens and taker of plastic-bagged trash. The breeze carried smell, too, piney woods and lake algae stewed by the swirling lassitude of mid-day, late-summer heat. She only frowned a little noting a place last spring's rains had started to nibble at the path's edge, eroding the small dune. Pines cabin, as well as the cabin her family had made their home, Maples, was slowly sinking into the resort's sandy soil. Only thin strands of swaying grasses and the rash of spike-rush that Allie was encouraging held everything—the one small clearing of their lawn with its swing set, horseshoe pits, bonfire circle—from ruin.

Or most things from ruin. Reaching Maples' water-facing lawn, Allie understood what had been nagging her in the children's cries: they weren't followed by *splashes*.

Corkscrew! The girl called, twisting as she dropped not into the water—glittering in the near distance with the inviting sheen of a Leinenkugel's commercial—but from the top bar of the swing set into the grass.

“You supervising this?” Allie turned to her eighteen-year-old daughter. In Allie's hand, the short spikes at the end of the strange tool she'd pulled from Pines cabin took on resemblance to a teenager's lip stud.

“Not well,” Cassie answered.

“Who are they?” Allie asked next.

Since buying the Northwoods resort nearly two decades ago, Allie and her family had grown accustomed to meeting strangers in their yard—people who found their own way from the parking lot to their assigned cabin or walked out on the dock before ambling up to Maples for official check-in. Still, Allie usually possessed a sense of who was arriving.

A glint of metal, a canoe that wasn't one of their own, caught her eye on the beach.

Cassie saw her looking. "They came in that."

Meanwhile, the children had come to inspect what Allie held in her hand.

"What is it?" said the boy, reaching. For a minute, Allie imagined winging the thing. It had just the right amount of heft. (Perhaps it was a tool that was meant for throwing?)

"They came by canoe?" Allie asked her daughter.

"Alone." Cassie hadn't yet risen from her chair, her naked foot bouncing on the opposite knee.

Little Eagle wasn't a large lake—in fact Eagle's Nest was the only resort on it, unless you counted the very first place Old Ferdy, original proprietor, had attempted to build, the remnants of which lay directly across the water from their lawn and beach. Thousands of such interconnected lakes pockmarked the Northwoods of Wisconsin. At its far narrow end, Little Eagle connected to Big Eagle Lake, though by low water in August even kayaks in the narrow passage would scrape the tops of the swirling weeds growing from the sandy bottom, paddles knock against submerged rocks.

"Are you visiting someone on Big Eagle?" Allie addressed the boy.

"We *saw* the eagle." The boy avoided her eyes as he weighed the tool in his hand.

Clearly siblings, the children had similar dark hair and eyes. Both wore swimming suits, the boy's the baggy style that fell past his knees, the girl's a one-piece with straps that crossed at the back like the X-shaped bars that ordered marionette strings. For it being the end of the summer, they seemed particularly pale.

Video games, Allie diagnosed.

“Can we can go in swimming?” the boy asked.

Cassie looked to her mother and then rose. “Sure.” She dusted the back of her suit.

Allie’s daughter often enough made tips by entertaining people’s kids, their parents at the end of the week asking if they could add something on to the bill for the girl, eyeballing Allie as if to ascertain the money would get to Cassie. For her part, Cassie had conducted a long running experiment: she almost always made more if the parents never discovered she was homeschooled too. Then they thought she’d be impressed by twenty.

“Kate always makes us wear our life jackets,” said the girl. “Like if we’re *near* water.”

“Could we play with that paddleboat?” The boy was already in motion, calling over his shoulder. The paddleboat had spent the summer tipped against the grass bank, its white belly a beached sea creature’s, the flap of rudder in its tiny back nook the comic completion.

Like raccoons with garbage cans, the kids had it flipped in a minute.

Look at that, said Cassie. Naturals.

Cassie herself was a natural, in so many ways. She had no siblings, but an easy way with kids. She remembered their guests from year to year, and funny things like pet names and vehicle makes, which couple had pitched too-loud arguments over too-small problems, stained sheets, stolen towels, left behind embarrassing prescriptions.

That Cassie, raised here alone in the last wilds of the northern Wisconsin woods, knew which prescriptions were embarrassing and could differentiate between SUV models and their knock-offs (sometimes by their arriving engines) had been inevitable, Allie supposed.

Still, it had caught her off guard. Like anything arriving slowly, and from a long ways off.

Allie walked over to the canoe in which the mystery children had arrived, the seats in the front fraying hammocks of lawn-chair netting. No life jackets. At the bottom of the canoe rested two pairs of shoes, one with a logo Allie vaguely recalled from her old life, when she’d lived in the city and known brands.

“Who’s Kate?” Allie asked. That was the name the girl had mentioned—their supposed guardian, requirer of life jackets. “Is she your nanny?”

“Ha!” the girl laughed.

“We don’t know where she is,” the boy said, as if picking out a truth.

“You want to call her?” said Cassie.

The girl laughed again. “Kate’s not a *phone* person.”

Cassie swept her long hair from her neck. She was taller than her mother—all legs in that new tank swimsuit, the one that had looked sensible in the online catalogue but on Allie’s daughter’s body had become something different, exotic, even stylish. Had she known she would look that way?

At least she had never looked like a homeschooler; everyone north of highway 29 wore the same brand of Fleet Farm jeans.

Cassie turned to regard her mother. “Speaking of phones, am I getting mine back today?”

It was the first either of them had referred to the punishment directly since June.

“Is it the end of the summer?” Allie asked.

“Orchestra meets tomorrow morning.”

She’d consider it, Allie told her daughter, and then on her walk up to Maples, absently swinging the new, still-unnamed tool by its handle, realized that she was.

When they’d first come up here, Cassie only a heartbeat (*already* a heartbeat, highway billboards insisted), Allie’d imagined a child who’d know which berries to eat in the woods, who’d ski with her through the back country, all that snow falling with no notion as to border. To some degree, Allie’d got that—a rugged child—and more. She’d got a Northwoods girl. Give Cassie a wheezing car engine or outboard motor and she’d get in there with her bare hands and a screwdriver and nurse a sputtering turbine back to health. She baited hooks for thick-fingered tourists, for herself in winter for lines dropped through holes in the ice. She used to be as good too with scaling and filleting.

More often these days, with catch and release, guests were as satisfied anyway with the selfie as with the hors d'oeuvre.

And there were so many times she'd surprised her mother. The time with the dog.

It had been a few years ago now, Cassie just newly a teenager. It had been a hot, busy weekend with kids and parents and strangers in swimsuits in and out of inner tubes and kayaks and lawn chairs. A group of women, members of a scrapbooking club who still came every year, had spread their work over picnic tables for the better drinking margaritas while they pinking-sheared. Another family—a set of adult children with their own children, proud of themselves for returning to the rundown place their father had always taken them—took over the scene with a ranging croquet game. There were lit grills, attempts at sandcastles, a kid practicing a tuba, and through the midst of it, from somewhere where she'd been working, cleaning, Cassie had come running at full tilt. She'd pounded the length of the dock and dove. She'd emerged with a small quivering dog in her arms, someone's pet that had been quietly struggling in the water, drowning in the midst of the party.

Quintessentially Cassie, the story almost always worked to calm Allie, to remind her of just who her daughter was. They hadn't denied her human interaction. In addition to resort guests there'd been a best friend, a country neighbor, the daughter of a woman who tended bar through the woods. And Cassie had taken classes in first aid, in boater's and hunter's safety (though Allie and Bud did not hunt). She was able to think for herself, to *see*, alone in that crowd of people, the drowning dog—or so her mother had always thought. It was true that since the hunter's safety course, Cassie spoke of getting *her* concealed carry the way Allie'd known people in the city to talk about their graduate degrees—as if they were already printed with their names.

It was also true that Cassie'd been caught in the thick of things with the orchestra girls last spring, caught up in accusations, with various video and social media evidence not on her side, of bullying a younger girl who had later killed herself.

And now, starting Tuesday, there'd be high school. Cassie had elected a senior year down in Satuit last spring before all of the trouble had come to a head—but she hadn't changed the plan since. She was going to continue with the orchestra too—a plan Allie was not necessarily against (they lived in this community and couldn't avoid everyone forever; plus, it was no secret that the girl who had died had other problems too), which wasn't to say she wasn't confused.

Maybe Allie shouldn't allow Cassie to rejoin the orchestra or attend school in Satuit. Maybe she shouldn't return the phone, even if the summer had passed, if Cassie had turned eighteen.

In Maples, Allie set the odd tool near the laptop. They'd first aimed to keep resort business to the small office off the family kitchen, but the work had crept into their home. The laptop on the kitchen counter had hiccupped all morning with incoming messages from guests trying to find their way, or who were just now as they were leaving wondering what to pack. Should they bring their own towels? There *was* air conditioning, right?

This weekend, Labor Day, would be their last with guests, and Allie took a minute, eyes closed, to anticipate that end. If she never knew if she were ready for the onslaught of winter—its long white shock and breathlessness—she increasingly welcomed it as their true season, the life or the resort's, hers. By its end she'd be ready for people again, to greet them as fellow survivors.

She picked up the business cell to call Bud. Her husband had chosen this week of all weeks for a trip to Minneapolis.