

Excerpt from the final draft of *News of the Air* (formerly titled *Labor Day*) by Jill Stukenberg

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, more like a flood had washed through than a remodel was underway. A pulled cabinet perched atop the debris like a glacial sheaf ready to slide. Allie bent to extract one wooden handle from the rubble. Could this be the good hammer, subject these last months of a near manhunt in her household?

Jack knife! Screwdriver! Another gust brought the children's voices as if offering guesses.

Now, Allie was in her fifties. She'd lived long enough—eighteen years—in a northern, rural county that she'd learned to guard her energy. Still, *such* screaming. She followed the cabin path to the resort's small beach, tapping the tool. She only frowned a little noting a place at the path's edge where alternating rains and drought had nibbled. 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.

Reaching Maples cabin, 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.

“You supervising this?” Allie turned to her daughter Cassie. The woman she was becoming flickered like a strobe light beneath the girl she’d always been—the one who could track deer, wriggle a hook from a fish belly. Allie tapped the heavy tool she still carried against her thigh. Its mysterious end terminated in short stubby spikes, each like a teenager’s lip stud.

“Not well,” Cassie answered, shrugging.

“Who are these children?” Allie asked.

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 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 tangle in the swirling weeds and knock against submerged rocks—especially these past Augusts.

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. They didn’t usually arrive by canoe, nor did children appear without adults. Allie scanned the water, but it lay flat and empty.

Her daughter stretched her long legs and stood from the chair. Cassie often earned tips entertaining people’s kids, more if they never discovered she was homeschooled. Then they thought she’d be impressed by twenty.

“Are you visiting someone on Big Eagle?” Cassie addressed the boy.

“We *saw* the eagle.” The boy avoided her eyes.

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 figured.

"Can we go swimming?" the boy asked.

"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 the crotch of its back nook the comic completion.

"It has a leak," Allie said.

But Cassie grinned. "It's okay. I'll help them." Despite the money she made off their parents, just as often Cassie "helped" new kids by getting them soaking wet, tripped up in lake weeds or turned around in the woods, shaking from stories of what might have been a bear or crazy ex-lumberjack with a chainsaw. It was something Allie used to admire in her girl—she was fearless and reckless and playful—if lately the trait had come to seem like something other kids would have grown out of by now, by eighteen.

Allie paused by the canoe, its seats of frayed lawn chair netting. Two pairs of battered high tops comingled in a puddle of water at the bottom. No life jackets. Still no sign of any adult in a second canoe out on the lake.

She turned her back on the scene, taking her new tool up to the house.

When they'd first come up here, Cassie only a heartbeat (*already* a heartbeat, highway billboards insisted), Allie had imagined a child who'd know which berries to eat in the woods, who would ski with her through the back country, all that snow falling with no notion as to border. Friends thought they were overreacting to leave the city, despite its heat waves and brown outs, water contamination

and shootings. In response, Allie began saying she wanted to live *less* deliberately. In the story of her and Bud leaving the city, she became the one who wanted it most, pregnant and drawn to the woods and the wild.

And it was true the city hadn't imploded behind them. People still lived and worked and shopped there, more or less as they always had. If masked from time to time. If required to carry documents.

Two decades later, instead of a child who could navigate the El, Allie had 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.

In Maples, Allie set the odd tool near the laptop. It 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? How were the cabins sanitized?

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