Fire and Spark

A Romance
by L.H. Singer



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Chapter 1

The phone rang.

Jenni looked up from sorting fishing lures, eyed it suspiciously, then looked at Emilia. "You can get that," Jenni said.

"Could be a man," Emilia said. "After so long without one, I figure you're checking out any that come by."

"You think I'm nuts?" Jenni said. "Men are something I'm going to avoid for a while. At least till my divorce comes through."

"Avoid men at a fishing lodge? I wouldn't count on it." Emilia reached for the phone, smiling. "You know, it's darn hard to get good help these days."

"Isn't that the truth." Jenni added. "Technically, of course, *you're* the help at the lodge, and I'm just the helper's help."

"And lippy, too," Emilia laughed. "I guess I'll let you clean cabin 12. Besides, it's probably just your ex calling anyway."

"That," said Jenni, leaving the rest of the lures on the glass countertop, "isn't funny. It makes cleaning up cabin 12 seem like a picnic." But Emilia was already on the phone, saying "Two-and-a-Half Pine Resort; how may I help you?"

A bald man who'd been inspecting maps in the lodge store nodded to Jenni as she headed for the door to the lodge deck. He had gray curling hair around an expanse of baldness and a short, curly beard. Jenni remembered that her father had once made a joke about bearded bald guys, "He's not bald; he just has his head on upside down." Jenni looked down the lake sadly; her father had died the year before, not, as he'd wished, fighting a monster fish on some remote lake but slumped over his desk at work. He and Jenni had had a lot of good times on the lake, when she was young, and once she'd got past her teenage years. Her father had known small boats, wilderness craft, and men – and he'd advised her not to marry Julio. Jenni missed him.

"Has the place changed hands?" the bald man asked. He was wearing a green checked sports coat with things sticking out of various pockets. His glasses were on top of his head, and he caught them as they fell off (*bald guys shouldn't put glasses on their heads*, Jenni decided). "I'm used to Bob and Ellen being here," the man said, still holding the map." He seemed rather concerned. Must be a regular, Jenni decided, but wondered why he needed a map, then.

"Oh, an aunt of Bob's died and left him a small place in Florida," she said. "They've gone down there for a couple of weeks to check it out. And besides, I guess Bob hurt his back a couple of weeks ago, so he's glad of the rest and relaxation."

"Kind of hot down there in September," the man smiled, still holding a map of Hawk Lake. "But I suppose they'll have air conditioning." He waved at the lake. "Can't get a prettier place than this. Anywhere."

Jenni looked at the view. A lake, sparkling in the sunlight. There were a few scattered islands and a shore mostly lined with fallen logs and branches, the forest leaning over the water.

A few cottages, with docks and boats, poked out of the woods. Part of the shoreline was done in granite cliffs. Some birds doing things only birds understood.

There were most of a million lakes in Canada, and most of them looked much the same. A few hundred had cottages and fishing lodges on them. To Jenni, it was all very familiar. Personally, she thought Bon Echo or Weslemkoon lakes were at least as pretty, but wasn't going to say so. "Got that right," she said. "Now I've got a cabin to clean up." She took a deep breath of the fresh air.

"That's the one with the party last night? My sympathy."

"That's the one." Jenni shook her head and sighed. "They seemed like such a peaceful bunch, too." A seagull squawked at something and a bluejay yammered warnings from a tree while watching the lodge's cat nose his way through the tall grass.

"And you're taking care of the place until Bob and Ellen get back. Well, I don't envy you the cleanup."

"Actually," Jenni said, "Emilia's a friend of Ellen's, and she volunteered to take care of the place for a couple of weeks. I'm just helping her. I figured September's kind of slow, so I could fake it that long."

"Ah. So you won't know where the fish are biting this week?"

"I suspect you'd be a better judge of that than I would. I've never fished this lake."

"Well, I have," the man said. "Every September I come here. I buy a new map and mark on it the places I go and the places I catch fish. Then I tack the map to the basement wall. Brings back a lot of memories." He looked around conspiratorially. "I don't often catch anything, but that doesn't bother me any more. Peace and quiet, you know." For a moment Jenni thought he was going to wink.

Jenni stuck out her hand. "I'm Jenni, and on behalf of Bob and Ellen, who I've never met yet, I welcome you back to Hawk Lake."

The man laughed. "Lenny Everson. A pleasure to meet you." He shook her hand. "Is Lonnie around?"

"Lonnie," Jenni said. "our handyman. He said he'd be a bit late today, but he should be here any minute. If you don't want to wait, just take a boat and go."

"All my stuff's in boat 19," Lenny said. "All I need is some gas."

"Take the gas can from boat 8," Jenni said. "We had it ready to go yesterday for the guys in cabin 12, but they left."

"Thanks!" The bald guy put on a bright hat and started down the steps to the docks. She watched as he more or less fell into his boat, spilling most of his fishing tackle. His new map fell into the water, and he fished it out and shook it off. Seeing Jenni on the deck, he waved, then got the motor going. For a moment he went nowhere, but then remembered to untie the boat from the dock. It was worth watching.

It is pretty, Jenni decided, but it's not as peaceful when you can't get out on the water, as she promised herself again that she'd take the canoe out for half an hour just around sunset. She

watched the lodge's cat stalking sparrows by the birch grove. For a moment she couldn't decide whether she was happy that the lake was so pretty, or sad that the days of fishing similar lakes with her father were gone. She decided not to think of the canoeing trips she'd done with Julio before her marriage had all gone wrong.

In the end, she decided to accept the whole scene for its peace and get on with cleaning up cabin 12. Down at the shoreline, a motor roared to life, and the bald guy backed his boat away from the docks, then turned it towards the east shore of the lake. He turned and waved at Jenni; she smiled and waved back, hoping he caught at least a few bass.

Cabin 12 was across the creek by way of a small bridge and up the hill, with a partial view of the lake. The rooms attached to the lodge all had a front-on water view, but the cabins were further back, and most were back in the trees. You could walk from the lodge to the cabins, but if you wanted to drive, you had to go back down the road a bit and take a smaller driveway to one side.

The guys who'd rented the cabin the day before had paid cash in advance. They seemed like a nice pair of middle-aged fishermen, eager to get to bed early so they could get onto the lake early the next morning. Lonnie had nodded wisely as they signed in, but after the two men had gone to the cottage, he said, "Drinkers, not fishers." Lonnie wasn't big on long conversations. "You'll need a mop," he'd added before going home for the night.

Lonnie'd been right, of course. It had been party time at the cabin, and one of the guys had phoned the lodge the next morning saying they'd changed their minds about fishing and were checking out.

Jenni carried some extra cleaning equipment as she walked to the cabin. She passed the fish-cleaning station, with its old sink and its pail for discarded fish parts. From the smell, she concluded that at least some of the lodge's guests had caught fish.

They'd left the key in the door. Jenni looked inside, sighed, and started the cleanup. *Well*, she said to herself, *you wanted to get away from things for a while*. She turned on the radio and got out a couple of plastic garbage bags, one for the bottles and cans, and the other for the rest of the stuff scattered around.

It was a typical cabin, both the structure and the interior dating back several decades. People who wanted more luxury than old appliances and linoleum flooring could find it at other lakes, but not at the Two-and-a-Half Pine Resort.

It was almost relaxing, once she got past the mess, because there weren't many decisions to make. There wasn't significant damage to the cabin – nothing Lonnie couldn't patch – and nothing more than a couple of rolls of toilet paper stolen, so there'd be no hunting down the two "fishermen". But their license plate number would be added to The List, and shared with other cottage rental owners. These two jokers would be paying by credit card for a long while.

Eventually Jenni had the cabin in a reasonable shape and had left a note on the table for Lonnie, listing suggested repairs. Her back aching a bit, she straightened up then dragged the two

garbage bags to the porch overlooking the lake. She put the cleaning stuff back into the closet, and began the walk back to the lodge office.

In the office (which was also the store) Emilia was behind the counter poking at a laptop. A couple of boys not yet into their teens were trying to decide whether to buy a magazine or just peruse it to death. Emilia had an opened bottle of ginger ale beside her; she looked up as Jenni entered. "How was it?"

Jenni made a face. "I've seen worse. Couple of patches by Lonnie and it'll be fine for the hordes who'll show up on the weekend."

Emilia laughed; in early October serious fishing types showed up, but in September the summer crowds were back at jobs and schools, and there was a quiet space. "Sad to report that your ex didn't phone. and no blue Buick SUVs showed up, so you must have lost him. I wouldn't have known what to tell him, anyway. How lonely you were, maybe?"

"Well, tell him if he shows up, I'll use his balls for catfish bait."

The phone rang. "Two-and-a-Half Pine Resort; how may I help you?" Emilia said, still laughing. She listened a bit. "Okay. No, we haven't seen him yet, but I'll pass the message along if we see him. You're welcome."

"Customer coming?"

Emilia shrugged. "Somebody named Annie Canning. She says a guy named Matt Canning is planning to put a canoe in the water this afternoon, and go camping. She thinks he's going to park here and be gone for a couple of nights."

"Keeping track of him, is she?"

"Probably making sure he's actually going fishing. Alone. Not," she added, "that I can imagine a guy sneaking off to go fishing with a love interest. Actually, she seemed concerned that there might be a storm coming in. Wanted to warn him."

At that point Lonnie came in. A tall skinny guy missing a couple of fingers, Lonnie had the ability to look shifty and threatening at the same time. His habit of wearing brightly checked jackets didn't add anything to his level of sophistication, but Jenni had learned that people who knew him would trust him with their lives. He was endlessly helpful and dedicated not just to the lodge but to the satisfaction of its customers.

"Hey, Lonnie," Emilia asked him. "Is there going to be a storm tonight?"

Lonnie scratched his leg. "Maybe. There are a few nasty thunderstorms coming in from Michigan. They'll probably miss us – they're small, and they're supposed to go south of us, but you never can be sure of these things. How's things here? Sorry I'm late today; son-in-law problems I couldn't avoid."

"There's a bit of patching in cabin 12," Jenni told him, "and I told boat 19 he could have the gas from boat 8."

"Told you those guys weren't going to fish," Lonnie said.

"That you did," Emilia admitted. "Are there any catfish in this lake?"

"A few. Why?"

"Oh, Jenni says if her ex shows up, she'll use his balls for catfish bait." Emilia looked at Jenni, who was just a bit embarrassed.

"Sounds like a plan." Lonnie said. "Let me know if you need me to hold him down for the gelding." Lonnie was on whatever side Jenni was on, simply because Bob and Ellen trusted her. He left to check out cabin 12 and to do whatever other chores needed doing.

"How will I know if Julio shows up?" Emilia asked. "Or shall I get out the baseball bat for every guy driving a Buick in case he's your husband?"

Jenni looked around the room. The two kids were contemplating the ceiling. "If there's a guy with a blue Buick and a blue canoe on it, just call me."

"You never did tell me what you happened between you and your ex, you know. How long since you two parted?"

"About six months before you and I met at that night course in Spanish. That's a few years back." Jenni looked uncomfortable. "I was with Julio for almost two years, I guess."

"Turned out to be incompatible, did you?"

"Well," said Jenni, "if you meet him, you'll like him. Most people do. He'll probably tell you how much he loves me and how he can't live without me." She hesitated.

"Sounds like a winner, so far." Emilia called over the two boys, who approached nervously. "Look," she told them, "I usually catch a small fish for Hank Dayton about this time of day." Seeing their puzzled looks, she added, "Hank's the cat."

"The big yellow one?" one kid wanted to know.

"That's the one. I'll trade a big bag of chips for a small fish for the cat. Has to be less than this long." She spread out her palm and indicated the distance between the tip of her thumb and the tip of her little finger. "But not much smaller. Think you can do it?"

"I guess we can give it a try," the chubby kid said. "Do you care what kind?"

"Nope. Hank's a pretty easy cat that way. Do you need a fishing rod?"

The kids both shook their heads. "Dad left a spare one up at the cabin," one kid said. In a moment they were gone, calling each other names and pounding each other on the shoulder.

"I don't remember you catching fish for the cat," Jenni said.

"Made that up. Just trying to keep those kids out of trouble. Cruel of their father to go fishing without leaving them a computer connection. Child abuse, it is. Anyway, I think Hank'll eat fish. Hope so, anyway."

"Surprised they didn't go out with the father."

"I'm not. The guy's a bit compulsive and I imagine going around in circles for a few hours in a small boat loses its excitement pretty quick for a kid. Now where were we?"

Jenni smiled. "Julio thinks he loves me."

"Still?"

"I get a message from him from time to time, or did till I got an unlisted number. I was going to get a court order to keep him away, but it's been quiet for the last few months."

"Too much love for you, was it?"

"Wrong kind." Jenni stared over the trees. "He told me I was all his world. He also told me I was stupid. And ugly. And had no talent." She looked Emilia in the eyes. "Not to mention a lousy lay and a poor excuse for a cook."

"He said those things?"

"Oh, yes. He'd say them, and apologize, but it was as if he was sorry for pointing them out, not sorry that he ever thought any of those…. thoughts… were wrong or anything."

Emilia shook her head. "I've heard of guys like that, but I never dated one, that I know of. I knew a lot of guys in rehab, but addicts tend to be a little more self-absorbed."

"Aren't addicts interesting?"

Emilia shook her head. "Pretty much all the same. A few exceptions, maybe, but they're so tied up in their own world that everybody else's problems are way down the scale. Other people seem a bit shadowy and unreal to a drunk. There are a few exceptions, as I said, but fighting addiction's like living in a house with a dragon; other things seem less important than not being eaten for supper."

"You seem to have survived it," Jenni noted. "And you and Jack seem pretty happy together."

"Had a lot of help. Some darn good people and a friend or two." Emilia laughed. "And Jack, of course. Hey, here comes somebody with a canoe." She pointed outside, where a tan-colored Hyundai with a yellow canoe was just pulling up to the lodge.

"A customer!" Jenni squinted. And he's got a new windproof jacket and a pair of new clean pants with pockets everywhere. Business is looking up."

"Maybe a bit, but canoe people aren't big spenders as a rule. Anyway, what do you instantly know about a well-dressed man? His wife is good at picking out clothes. My compliments to Annie" She laughed. "Then again, he didn't bring her, so maybe your love life is going to pick up." She watched as the man stretched, then started up the stairs to the office.

"Gee," Jenni said. "Do I have time to get a boob job?"

"You don't need one," Emilia chided her.

"Okay, a nose job."

"There's nothing wrong with your nose!"

"Good nose; for the wrong face. I figure changing the nose would be easier." Jenni laughed and picked up a magazine as the man came into the office, the door tingling the bell mounted above it.

The man hesitated, looking at Emilia, then said with a smile, "You must be Ellen."

"Actually," Emilia said, "Ellen and Bob are away for another week. I'm handling the desk till then. My name's Emilia." She pointed over towards Jenni. "The chick over there is Jenni, and she's hiding behind a magazine because she needs a nose job."

Jenni laughed, lowered the magazine, then said, "Matt! My gosh, I haven't seen you since grade six!"

Matt looked a bit confused, until Emilia said, "She also needs a brain transplant to rework her sense of humour. We got a call from Annie that a guy named 'Matt' would be showing up, and Jenni's just trying to pull a fast one on you. Right, Jenni?"

Jenni laughed again. "It seemed a good idea at the time. Welcome to Two-and-a-Half Pine Resort. How can Emilia help you while I'm doing as little as possible?"

"Ah… Okay. What did Annie want? Is there a problem?"

"Apparently, she's concerned that there's some nasty weather coming in tonight, and felt you should be warned before going off canoeing all over the darn place. That's all."

Matt looked relieved. "Okay. Had me worried for a bit. I have a phone, but I'm planning on not turning it on unless I need to." He looked around. "Is there any way to confirm the weather?"

Emilia tapped on the keyboard, then turned the screen towards Matt. "Here's the King City radar plot; it's as close as we can get." She pointed. "This is a band of thundershowers coming our way. Probably get here about dark, maybe a little later."

Matt nodded. "Sure looks like it's got Hawk Lake in its sights."

"You'd probably be okay," said Jenni, "if you've got a good campsite by the time it gets here. Assuming it doesn't deke to the south." She looked at Matt. "You wouldn't want to be out on the water unless you're a good canoeist."

Matt looked lost for a moment, then said to Emilia. "I know motorboats pretty well, but I don't know much about canoeing." He pointed out the window. "Just rented that canoe for a few days." He seemed to reach a decision. "Got a room for the night?"

"No problem." Emilia got out the registry. "In the high season we ask for a minimum of three nights, but at this time of year, we'd probably book people in for a couple of hours." Matt didn't laugh, so she added, "Just joking."

There was a noise at the door and the two boys came in with a plastic bag. "Three fish," said the larger of the boys. We only got little ones, so we caught three." The fish in the bag weren't much bigger than guppies.

"That'll do," said Emilia. "Grab yourselves a bag of chips, and I'll throw in a couple of cans of ginger ale if you'll find the cat and feed him the fish." The process of decision took a few minutes. Matt took the opportunity to make a call.

"Hi," he said, "it's me. Look, I'm at the Hawk Lake launch place. Yes, Two-and-a-Half Pine Resort they call it. I'm going to spend the night here. I'll take off in the morning. Sure. Thanks for the warning. Bye."

Men, thought Jenni. *Such great conversationalists. And so darn affectionate*. She turned away and rolled her eyes. "Your personal weather warning unit," Jenni said, but Matt just looked away.

"You," Emilia told Matt, "have the choice of a cabin or a lodge unit."

"What's the difference?"

"Cabins are roomier and have more facilities, but they don't have as good a view of the lake. And they cost more, because poor Jenni here, the one who thinks she needs a nose job, has

a tougher time figuring out how to clean them. She's a professional when she's otherwise employed, and without instructions, well, she's just lost." Emilia winked at Jenni. "

"I'll take a lodge unit, then." Matt took a quick look at Jenni's nose, then looked away.

"Great. We'll give you the one with the best view, at our best rate." Emilia brought out the registry. "Jenni; would you get the raccoons out of number three?"

Jenni groaned. "Are the coons in there again?" She was almost laughing.

"Be gentle with them; we were saving them for tomorrow's supper." Emilia looked at Matt. "A person can get tired of fresh fish at this place."

"Well," said Matt, "If the fish those kids had are typical, I can see why you're eating raccoons."

"Should we turn the electricity on, or will a candle do you?" Jenni laughed, but Matt just looked away without response. Jenni shrugged and left. As she went out the door, she could hear Emilia and Matt talking about the weather.

Room three wasn't large, but it would have all Matt would likely need. There was a stove, fridge, and TV. Jenni checked for signs of invasion by any critters and found none. She opened windows and doors at each end, to air the place out, then put clean linen on the double bed. Matt's reaction to her annoyed her, but not much. He was, after all, just another married man passing through. She did pause to wonder why Annie didn't come with him. Maybe Annie had other interests.

She took a last look around, then, on impulse, gathered some late-season asters from behind the lodge and put them into a glass, which she set onto the table. She couldn't figure out why she did it, except that maybe Matt what's-his-name was annoying her by ignoring her. She was, after all, not flirting or anything like that; she was just trying to be friendly.

When she got back to the lodge office, she saw Emilia and Matt out on the deck overlooking the lake. They were talking and watching the cat stalk another sparrow. She was trying to decide whether to join them or not when she heard cars tires crunching on the gravel in the laneway. She was at the desk when two boys and two girls, came in. Two men and two women, she tried to correct herself, but even though these were in their late teens or early twenties, somehow, with a past marriage and an impending divorce coming up, Jenni felt she was now on the other side of some line.

"We'd like to launch a couple of canoes and park here for a couple of nights," the tallest boy said.

"Going camping," a girl added. "How much is it?"

Jenni smiled. "We don't charge launching fees for canoes," she said, "but the parking's five dollars a day per car."

"Only one car," the tall boy said. "That'll be fifteen dollars, then?"

"Ten dollars," said Jenni. "We charge for twenty-four hours of parking, depending on when you get here. And if you're a bit late when you get back, we'll never notice."

"Sounds good. It's nice to find a place where they don't charge for canoes."

"Some places do; some don't," Jenni said. "But if you're going to camp, there's a couple of things.…"

"Camping permit?" the one girl said.

"Not here; this is mostly crown land. But the township needs a name and a phone number to contact in case you don't come back. And an idea of where you're planning to camp, so the rescue teams know where to find you."

"I suppose that makes sense." The tall boy began writing in the book Jenni slid over to him.

"You might want to leave a cell phone number in case we need to contact you, but that's up to you. You do know," Jenni looked around, "that there's a thunderstorm coming in tonight."

"Most of us have been canoeing and camping before. We plan to camp up at Ingrey Lake tonight. That's only one portage in, and we can get there before the weather changes. Besides, last I heard they think the storm may miss us."

"Good enough. Take this." Jenni handed him a large green garbage bag. "You can put your garbage in the bin behind the lodge when you get back."

"Clayton," said the blonde girl. "I'd like to leave them both phone numbers. You never know.…" She seemed a bit shy.

"I think so, too," said the other girl. The girls were obviously more nervous than the boys. "Here." She wrote a number into the book. The other girl did the same. They looked at the boys guiltily but quickly, then at each other for support. Jenni figured out this trip was a test of something or other between the boys and girls, or at least between one of the pair.

Reluctant to go onto the deck with Matt and Emilia, she watched the foursome unload two canoes from a rather small car – it must have been an interesting drive up to the lake – and the boys lift them to the lake. Jenni thought how the boys always got the job of carrying the canoes and paddling at the rear – control – position. One of the boys and one of the girls seemed to know what to do, directing the others as they loaded a pile of camping stuff into the middle of the canoes. She nodded as they covered the camping goods with a tarp; that would help if they got caught in a rainstorm.

Jenni checked the driveway to be sure no more cars were coming in, then set the phone to ring on the portable outside by the deck. Taking a deep breath, she went out to the deck and dragged a Muskoka chair over beside Emilia. Nobody said anything for a while, watching the teens in the canoes paddle away.

"I guess they're not worried about the storm," Matt observed.

"Starting to wish you were out there?" Emilia asked.

Matt shook his head. "I've been out in bigger boats in a storm and was scared silly. I wouldn't want to try it in a canoe, especially before I figure out which end is the front. I'm just as happy to spend the night here." He leaned forward and looked over in Jenni's direction without making eye contact. "Emilia says you're a good canoeist."

"I can canoe pretty well. Or run a small boat – dad would want me to run the motor when he thought he'd found a good place to fish." Jenni looked at Matt, but he was watching a pair of

loons on the lake. "Not that we caught many fish. We'd usually get enough for a lunch and a supper when we camped, but not usually anything big enough to bring home or brag about."

"I guess he found it relaxing, though."

Jenni smiled, remembering what her father had said. "I guess so. He told me that when he was out on the lake things seemed right; the way things were supposed to be. Everything else seemed sort of slanted in some crooked way."

"Well," Matt said, "that's what I hope to find out there. Tranquility, even if I don't catch a fish."

"Don't look too hard," Jenni said, "or it'll get away. Better off just to let things happen sometimes, and maybe happiness will sneak up on you." Matt didn't even look around at her, and there was a short silence.

"Easier said than done," Emilia said. "Sometimes it's the storms that sneak up on you. Let's hope the guys in those canoes don't find out the hard way tonight." There was a pause, then she pointed out a heron flying slowly along the lakeshore. The whole lake was becoming calm, and the sun was sinking low enough behind the lodge that the base of the shoreline was in shadow. "Anybody hungry?" she asked.

"I brought some food, but I expected to be camping tonight, so it's mostly freeze-dried stuff," Matt said.

"You can save that," Emilia said. "We'll barbecue some hamburgs. Lettuce and tomatoes on them, and we've got all the food groups covered, except chocolate."

"Ah…" Matt started to say.

"No charge," Emilia said. "Part of the privileges of being the boss here. I'll get the burgers, and Jenni can get the barbecue going."

"I can do that," Matt said.

Emilia snorted. "This is a woman-run joint. You just sit here and watch the lake."

"Tell you what," Jenni said. "You both sit here and watch the lake; if I need help, like figuring out which is the lettuce and which is the tomato, I'll ask."

"Seeing as you got the privilege of cleaning out cabin 12, I guess you owe me one." Emilia scratched her knee then put her feet onto a chair. As Jenni went into the lodge, she could hear Emilia telling Matt about cabin 12. She looked back through the door and caught Matt taking a quick look in her direction. *Strange*, she thought. *There's obviously something wrong with one of us*.

She defrosted a package of four frozen burgers in the microwave, then started the barbecue at the corner of the deck. Out on the lake a boat was coming in. She squinted: probably the father of one of the two boys who'd caught the fish for the cat.

On the deck, Emilia was explaining the name of the resort. "The man who built the place, ninety years ago, was a fan of the big pines around here. He decided to call it Lone Pine Lodge." Emilia laughed. "Then he discovered how many Lone Pine Lodges there were. And twin pine lodges and three pine lodges. So he decided to name it Two and a Half Pine Lodge, after the

pines on the island there. The one that's only half there was hit by lightning all those years ago and is still growing. And there's not another Two and a Half Pine Lodge anywhere."

Jenni came back with a tray of buns and condiments. The burgers were almost done, so she put the buns on to warm. She could hear Emilia and Matt talking about cars and tires, but her mind wandered a bit, and she missed exactly what they were talking about. For a moment, she felt unbearably lonely, more than she had since she'd walked out on Julio. She could hear the banging of the aluminum boat as the fisherman unloaded his gear. Evening was creeping across the lake and it was getting cooler. She looked towards the docks, and noted that the fisherman had three good-sized fish on a stringer.

She set everything onto a table in front of Emilia and Matt. "You," she said to Matt, "get two burgers. Emilia never eats more than one, and I'm watching my weight these days, so I'll have the last one." She frowned. "Something's missing. Oh, yes, would you like a beer?"

Matt seemed surprised. "Actually," he said, "I would." Emilia was about to get up, but Jenni told her, "I'll get the beer. You want one?"

"Oh, I think a ginger ale will suit me just fine." Somewhere in the distance thunder rumbled.

By the time Jenni got back with a couple of bottles of beer, and a ginger ale for Emilia, her own burger was getting cool. She didn't mind, much. Matt and Emilia were into a conversation about federal politics. *Two married people*, Jenni thought, *away from their spouses, and happy to talk to each other*. Once or twice they tried to get Jenni into the conversation, but she found she didn't have much to say. Far out across the lake, the sky grew black and several flashes of lighting lit the clouds. The flashes grew more frequent and there was a steady rumble now.

"I hope those kids made camp before they got the storm," Emilia said.

Jenni shook her head. "If they're out for a party, they'll have made a camp, lit a fire, and have got happy an hour ago. Wouldn't you say?"

There was a silence as everybody listened to the thunder.

"Common sense," Emilia added. "I bet they've made camp."

"And, if not?" Matt asked.

Jenni shook her head. "Sometimes they want a real remote experience. Then they'll go in a couple of portages and push the time till dark. Impress their partners with raw nature."

"They said they were going to Ingrey Lake," Emilia said.

Jenni pondered the storm, which was moving close to them. "At that age, with my attitude toward what I regarded as silly authority, I'd have lied. There was a wall of darkness, punctuated with flashes of light, coming in from the west now.

As the deck lights came on, the fisherman, a guy named Charlie, came down with the two boys. "Tell him," the one boy said. "We caught three fish, just like he did today!"

Emilia was up to the task. "I can assure you," she said to the fisherman, "that these two boys caught three fish today, and fed them to the cat."

The fisherman laughed. "Was that enough for Hank?"

"Along with a half can of cat food."

"See," the one boy said, "I told you!"

They departed, laughing. "Too bad the cat got your fish," the man said. "I guess the pickerel I got will have to do us."

Just before they got to the stairs going up the hill, one of the boys ran back, and looked at Jenni. "I heard you say something about a blue Buick with a canoe. Well, we saw one going down the road this afternoon."

Jenni frowned. "And the canoe?"

The kid thought a bit. "Light blue canoe."

Jenni shrugged, thinking *having a crazy husband makes a girl skittish, sometimes.* "Do I feel rain?"

A bright flash not far away, followed by a tremendous bang, settled the matter. Emilia and Jenni ran for the office. The other people ran for their various shelters. From inside the office, Jenni and Emilia watched the two boys and the fisherman almost get to their cottage before getting caught in the rain. The fisherman finally found his keys and they all disappeared inside, presumably to a good pickerel dinner, assuming the power didn't go out.

In the middle of the storm, the phone rang. Emilia checked the call display and rolled her eyes. "That's Carol, from Kitchener. She lives alone with her cat, Cinder. I'm her sponsor, and it's my job to talk her out of hitting the rum again."

"She has personal problems?"

"The cat." Emilia reached for the phone. Every time Cinder escapes from the apartment or snubs the cat food she gets him, Carol calls me." She picked up the phone. Jenni watched the rain beat against the window.

Five minutes after starting, most of the lightning and thunder had disappeared and a light but steady rain softened the world. "Like a glass of wine?" Emilia offered.

"I don’t think so. I think I'd like to go to my room and watch TV for a while, maybe work on a crossword puzzle."

"You sure? We can watch TV here, you know; maybe share a bag of Fritos."

"Thanks, Emilia. You're a good friend, but I'll go upstairs where the temptation of calories isn't so much. Never going to have the thighs I want by eating Fritos, you know."

Emilia tilted her head, then gave Jenni a hug. "See you in the morning, then. I'll see if I can get a couple more guys to drop in so you can check them out. Just remember you can always drop over by my cabin if you can't sleep."

It turned out that Jenni couldn't get much out of the TV either. Or the book she'd brought with her. Or the out-of-date women's and fishing magazines.

She could hear the rain drumming on the roof and she felt inconsolably sorry for herself. At one point she looked out. The lake and the woods were a sea of darkness, but the deck was dimly lit. She saw Matt, covered in a rainproof coat and hat, go to the office, then the lights on the deck were turned off. Matt's flashlight led to a deck chair overlooking the darkness. He was barely lit

by lights from three of the rooms, and seemed to be sitting there, watching the darkness. After fifteen minutes she saw another flashlight. As far as she could tell, it was the bald guy, Lenny. He seemed to have brought a can of beer or something for each of them. They sat there for one beer, apparently talking about fish or sports or whatever men talk about when they sit in the darkness in the rain. Then Lenny left, and Jenni's room phone rang.

"Hi, Jenni. It's Tanya. How are things going?" Tanya always had a quizzical note in her voice, like you'd better not lie to her.

"Pretty good. Not bad. Can't complain." She paused. "Raining outside right now."

"You sound a bit down. Not getting along with Emilia?" There was concern now in Tanya's tone.

"Oh, Emilia and I get along just fine. Like I told you, we were good friends in high school before she got into parties. And stuff."

"Lots of stuff, I hear, but she got past that, you said."

"Oh, she did. Rehab and Alcoholics Anonymous meetings twice a week, and she's cheerful, chipper, and married."

"They have AA meetings up there in the deep woods?"

"She's part of an online group, and she's driven into Bancroft twice for afternoon meetings there."

"Well, I guess you've only got a week or so before you return to civilization, and get your divorce at the same time, so hang in there. If Emilia's not treating you right, I'll have a word with her."

Jenni rushed to say, "Oh, Emilia's good. We talk a lot and laugh about things."

"But?"

Jenni thought about it a bit. "She was my best friend once. It seemed like a good idea to get back together."

"It's not the same, now is it? Couldn't be, of course. Not with what you two have been through."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, she's not going to be the same person after having come through her bad years. You had to expect that. And divorce is hard on a woman. You're going to have a callous on your heart for an incarnation or two."

"I think you're right about that. And how are you doing?"

"Fine. Met any good-looking fishing hunks up in the woods, or a sasquatch who's taken a fancy to you? Unless you've been doing things you don't tell me about, you've been waking up alone longer than a person should."

"The people who come here are families with kids and bald old guys who probably make out with the fish they catch. Handsome dudes have big boats and fish bigger places than Hawk Lake."

Tanya laughed. “Sorry to hear that. And since Emilia’s married, I guess she’s not going to be making any passes at you.”

“She’s married to a guy who’s good looking, bright, friendly, and loves her like crazy.”

“But she puts him down, I bet.”

“Well, yeah. She doesn’t appreciate what she’s got.”

“Seen that before.” A pause. “So what’s making you blue, Jenni? Need to come into town and do the singles bars?”

“Oh, I’m not looking for love for a while. Happier on my own.”

“You don’t sound happier. You’ve got to find a companion eventually, you know.”

“Next summer for sure.”

“Old bald guys who like to fish aren’t all that bad, you know. I think. Probably.”

“Maybe,” Jenni said, “I can get fitter this winter. Join an exercise group or something.”

“Feeling Out of shape. Hm. Who is he?”

“What?”

“Don’t kid me, old friend.”

“There’s this guy who came in this afternoon. Planned to go canoeing, but stayed overnight because of the storm. He’s out in the dark sitting in the rain right now.”

“Been making obscene suggestions, has he? Men are such pigs.”

“Well, he’s married…”

“Married men are worse. At least for more than a night.”

“No, no. He hasn’t said anything to me. Matter of fact, he ignores me and talks to Emilia instead.”

“Ah. You’re feeling ugly and old and rejected. And about to be divorced. And soon to come back to the big city to join the unemployed.”

“Maybe that’s it.”

“Trust me, any guy who ignores you needs better glasses. Or a shrink. Or a boyfriend.”

“I’ll be fine in the morning.”

“I’ll *call you* in the morning. If I can.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Jenni said.

"Oh.... I should tell you; Julio called a few days ago, asking about you. I told him you'd already run off to Australia with a surfer dude."

Jenni shook her head. "As long as he gets the message to keep away, it'll be okay."

Afterwards she looked out into the rain, but Matt wasn’t out there anymore. It took a long time and a the last half of a really bad movie on TV, but Jenni eventually drifted off to sleep, dreaming of ads for exercise gizmos that would reshape her thighs, if not her soul.

Chapter 2

Jenni didn't set the alarm, so she slept late in the morning; she figured Emilia and Lonnie could handle things if any customers came in. She felt like she'd finished off a case of beer, but figured it was just a bad night's sleep. There was light pouring through the window, so she stood at the window a few minutes watching the lake. A trio of loons – most likely two adults and their annual young one – cruised silently on the calm water out by the island. Overhead a string of geese circled, strengthening their wing muscles. Maybe they knew that there would be a lot of hunters in the marshes between them and their winter refuge when the winter came in. and only strong wings could help a goose when the shooting started.

She made a cup of coffee, then had toast and jam for breakfast. Tanya didn't call.

She walked past the wooden Muskoka chairs on the way to the office. The beer bottle, only half finished, sat on the table next to the chair Matt had used. She looked around, but didn't see him. Or anybody else, for that matter; for the moment, the world was down to just her and the loons. For a moment, treasuring her privacy, she thought of sitting down in the chair, but it was, of course, covered in morning dew.

"Good morning, recluse!" Emilia greeted Jenni. "Did you finish off a bottle of rum and now I have to take you to the next AA meeting?"

Jenni smiled. "I had a fine quiet time watching old cowboy movies on channel 10 and contemplating the universe." It was time to change the subject. "Are you glad to see the sunlight?"

"Certainly glad the storm wasn't any worse. We'd better check to see if the roof's leaking in cabin 8. Bob left a note about that."

"I'll check that."

"Great. We have a couple of fishermen from Pennsylvania coming in about noon, and somebody phoned about rates, so we might get another couple. Matt took off in his canoe about daybreak turned down an offer of breakfast with the gorgeous yours truly. And someone should take a tour of the property just to be sure the storm didn't knock any branches down."

"I can do that when I check cabin 8." Jenni's urge to be alone was getting stronger.

Emilia tilted her head. "Well, then." She paused. "I'm really glad you're here. I know we're not the people we used to be, but without you to talk to, I'd be miserable. You know that, don't you?"

Suddenly, Jenni did. Her mood brightened, and she smiled a real smile. "I'll be back in a jiffy. We can sit on the deck in the sunlight and slander everyone we know and tell each other secrets we've sworn to take to our graves."

"Sounds like a plan." Emilia hesitated. "Secrets, eh? Maybe so…."

"Now you've got me worried."

Emilia waved her out. "Begone with ye, wench." The door opened and the two boys came in, probably angling to offer to trade more minnows for junk food.

Cabin 8 was one of the newer cabins, but that still meant it had been built before Jenni was born. Jenni walked down the gravel driveway among pines and birches, crossed the little bridge over the creek, and made her way up the steps to the cabin. The steps were stone, set into the hillside. *If I owned the place*, she decided, *I'd put in a handrail.* People were getting older, and less steady.

The cabin was musty, but there were no signs of water. She opened a couple of windows just a bit to provide a bit of air flow without letting in any rain. She made herself a mental note to come back later and close the windows again.

Before going back to the lodge, she stopped to clean up the cabin Matt had been in. He hadn't left much of an impression. He'd made a breakfast of toast and bacon. *Must have bought supplies from the lodge*, Jenni figured, since bread and meat weren't normally taken on a canoe trip. She checked the fridge, but it was empty. *Maybe*, she thought, *he knew enough to keep handy only enough for breakfast and to freeze the rest; with a bit of insulation, the food would last at least till the first campsite.*

The flowers were gone. The dishes, including the glass, had been washed and were in the drying tray. She checked around for the asters, but couldn't find them, either in the garbage bin or outside behind the lodge. After cleaning the room. she came back to the lodge office with the sheets in one bag and the mostly empty garbage in another.

By eleven fifteen Jenni was ready to sit down on the deck with Emilia. They poured themselves a cup of coffee from the Maker of Bad Coffee machine in the office, broke into a package of date squares ("slightly out-of-date squares", Emilia corrected), and watched invisible winds kick up tiny wavelets on Hawk Lake. The sky was overcast with thin clouds that cut the brightness down a bit, but left enough light that both women wore broad-brimmed hats and sunglasses. They talked about nothing in particular for a while. Jenni wondered what Emilia was debating on telling her. Something, she was sure.

A great blue heron came in low over the water, skimming the dock as it made a gronking sound like something leftover from the Jurassic. Turning for the marsh, it spread its huge wings to drop onto the shore, then waded in among the lily pads.

The two boys stopped chasing dock fish with a net and a fishing line just long enough to watch the heron. Their father was obviously out behind some islands or in a bay somewhere. There are worse ways to spend a few boyhood autumn days, Jenni figured, wondering why they weren't both in school. "You've got them hunting for cat food again?" Jenni asked.

Emilia nodded. "I told them I wanted one larger fish, not two or three minnows. That'll take them longer." There was a longer pause, then, "What was your impression of Matt?"

"How about," Jenni asked, "we ask ourselves why, when we've got a whole world out there, we're spending our time talking about the one guy we've seen in a week who's in our age range, regardless of his looks, marital status, or possible attraction to little boys or sheep?" It didn't come out the way she meant it, but that didn't seem to bother Emilia.

"It's natural," Emilia said. "Like little boys hunting fish off the docks and under trees fallen into the water. Doesn't matter much about the guy. Can you wonder that travelling salesmen and wagon driver boys ran off with housewives in settlement farms? The infinite charms of novelty and possibility."

"And what do you think I think of Matt?"

"You brought him flowers, Emilia pointed out.

"Hey! He told you that? Anyway, I just thought the room looked a bit… cold."

Obviously, Matt and Emilia had done some talking about her. Perfectly normal, of course, but still…. Jenni would have given a lot to know exactly what was said. Probably agreed she was too quiet and unsociable. Things usually went that way.

"That's for sure. I just hope you didn't set a trend around here. Most of our guests don't care about flowers. When a woman shows up with a woman, flowers might be a good idea – the poor biddy's probably been hauled off from the city to a place where the men can fish and the kids can play, and she'll get to cook and wash." Emilia laughed.

"I'm not likely to do it again." Time to change the subject again. "I wonder how the teens made out; I mean, survived the storm. You think we should call them?"

Emilia ignored the lead. "You seem to have had a dramatic effect on him."

Jenni shook her head and closed her eyes. What world was Emilia in? "Coulda fooled me. Maybe I'll try one call to the teens."

"They've got at least two phones. Probably four; you never know. Matt," – Emilia was like a bloodhound on a trail – "Matt said…."

Jenni was short on sleep. She just let it hang there.

"You remember when you had that crush in grade ten on that Graham Frommat boy?"

"A big one. Heartbreaking at that age."

"You remember what you said to him?"

"Never spoke to him. I'd get all hung up just being anywhere near him."

"I had a few like that. Even got drunk enough once to tell one fellow how much I liked him. That was a mistake."

"Are we going somewhere with this?" Jenni got a sudden urge to go help the two boys go down and chase sunfish. Or take a drive into town and buy a coffee and read a newspaper in a café.

Emilia took her time, watching the lake.

"Ever had an experience like that as an adult?" Emilia asked.

Jenni thought about it. "Not in the same way. A bit, sometimes. I can remember a couple of times, but it doesn't happen like that when you get older. We get more cynical, I guess."

"It appears it happens to adults, too, sometimes."

Jenni looked carefully at Emilia. "You've taken a fancy to this Matt dude? You didn't seem too tongue tied yesterday."

"Not me, you idiot. Matt."

“He’s madly in love with you and wants you to run off to his campsite? A meaningful overnight relationship on an air mattress? Two married people under the stars?” Jenni started to giggle.

“Well, for one thing, he doesn’t have a ring.” Emilia turned to watch Jenni.

“Some guys don’t like them. Some guys take them off when they leave home. I’m still married to a guy like that. For a week more, anyway. What did he tell you?”

Emilia observed the sky, which was spreading with mare's tails. “Good try, but it wasn’t me he was interested in.” She looked over and pointed at Jenni.

Jenni watched Emilia’s face for some kind of a joke. “He sure didn’t show it, you know,” Jenni said.

“Look,” said Emilia, “I told him I wouldn’t say a word, but so much for promises. He said he met you and was flabbergasted, tongue-tied, mind-blanked, and couldn’t remember his own name.”

“My legendary beauty, that had to be it. And my famous wit.” Jenni smiled. “You’re making this up, aren’t you. A man wants a camping companion, you’re going to make the list long before I do.”

“Probably right. But he wasn’t asking about throwing you over his shoulder and paddling away with you. According to him, all he wanted to do was get as far away as he could from the situation, which, I suppose, means you.”

“Men!” said Jenni.

“Men!” echoed Emilia. “But you never know; it might even be a compliment.”

“You ever got such a compliment?”

Emilia laughed. “Utter devotion and undying love from a guy almost speechless. Sure, but not from anybody sober.”

“You sure he was sober when he said that?”

“Oh yeah. I can tell. He was sober. Besides, I searched his garbage for recyclable stuff, and there were no bottles in it. I think that one beer is all he had."

“Well, I understand that is the sort of thing some guys – like Julio – would say to the innocent young things when I wasn’t around.”

“He sounded sincere, and I’ve known a lot of liars.”

Jenni looked at her. “You have?”

“Every addict is a polished and habitual liar. It’s how they’re made.”

“Well, that isn’t any better. A guy who latches onto a girl without knowing anything about her is just working his way up to being a stalker.” Jenni went into the lodge and came back with two Diet Pepsis and a big bag of salt-and-vinegar chips. She opened the cans and the bag, and set them between the two. “Stalkers; wasn’t that what we were talking about?”

“Married stalkers,” Emilia agreed. “But you’ve been so jumpy thinking of Julio showing up; maybe we can get them to fight over you.”

“Not a solution, if I have to go with the winner. Besides,” Jenni said, “Julio might not be as tall as Matt, but he was always working out and has more muscles than a man needs.”

“I could get a video and put it on YouTube.”

“Another besides; I’d be tempted to shoot them both.” She swallowed a large handful of chips then said, “It would be really nice to know a guy who likes me for me, not some version of something in his brain. Had enough of that with Julio.”

Emilia sighed. “All those years I wanted guys not to know the real me. Seemed safer.”

“Jack seems to know the real you pretty well.”

"Let me tell you about men. One of the first things you have to learn is that a frypan can do wonders for adjusting a man's personality, but it doesn't actually improve his intelligence much. Always remember that." She laughed, then changed the subject. “I think you’re right; you should see if you can get those teens on the phone. Just in case.”

Jenni went into the office, checked the registry, then called the two numbers the four teens had left. Both came back with a “phone disconnected” message. She frowned; it wouldn’t be unnatural for the group to have a no-phone vacation. These were becoming more common, although the usual rule was a half hour in the morning or evening, then the electronics would be turned off. That was about the only sensible way to camp nowadays; otherwise you had a campsite in which everyone was on their iPads or phones, and their brains were back in the city. In a way, Jenni thought allowing a half hour a day was an improvement on the old days when there was no way to get a break from the group except by walking into the woods and hoping you could find your way back.

But there’d been a storm, and someone’s parents or friends might have been worried about them. Messages might have been sent, so a group leader would probably leave one phone on. *Maybe*, she thought, *they put down phoney numbers, or they had another phone or two*. She knew that leaving them alone was the logical thing to do, but she and her father’d once spent a night in a storm, and she remembered the terror as tree limbs fell all around and lightning hit a pine all too close to the tent. She and her father had hung onto the tent as the wind had tried to blow it away.

She went to look for Lonnie. As usual, his pickup was by the shed, and the shed door was open. She knew he didn’t ever sit around – there were always things to be fixed, or improved, and Lonnie would find those and do the work without being asked. Eventually, she found him, up a ladder leaning against cabin 6. A small branch came down, followed by a few handfuls of mixed pine needles and cones. Then he came down the ladder. “Hi, Jenni” Lonnie said, “can I help you?”

“I’ve come for your advice.”

Lonnie adjusted his hat. “In that case, let’s sit. I’m too old to be giving advice standing up.”

“Oh, you’re not that old.”

Lonnie squinted sideways. “If you were me when I wake up in the morning or climb a ladder, you’d know how old I feel.” He led the way to a couple of chairs on the tiny veranda of the cottage, and settled in.

“Lot of branches from the storm?” Jenni asked, politely.

“Not as many as I thought. But the eaves have to be cleaned in the fall anyway.”

“Oh,” Jenni said. “With all the pines around, I wouldn’t think fall would be a problem.”

“Pine trees shed needles in the fall. They shed dead needles all year round, but mostly in the fall. But you didn’t come to hear that.”

“We had those four people come in yesterday. Two canoes on that Corolla over there.”

“Okay.” Lonnie put his feet up on the railing.

“There was that storm.” Jenni looked at Lonnie. He nodded. “I got worried and tried to call them this morning.”

“No answer?”

“There was a ‘phone disconnected’ message. From both numbers.”

“How long ago was that?” Lonnie took his feet down.

“Twenty minutes ago.”

“And where did they say they were going?”

“Ingrey Lake’s what they put in the register.”

“Well,” Lonnie said. “I can see why you’re worried. That neck of the woods got quite a hit by the storm. Can’t imagine anything that would kill a cell phone, though.” He saw Jenni looking at him. Unless of course, they didn’t get camping and lost them from the canoes.”

“I wondered about that.”

Lonnie sighed a long sigh. “Tell you what, I’ll finish this one section of eaves – take me about five minutes, while you try again. If we don’t get them on the phone, we’ll take a boat and one of the canoes. I can drop you off at the portage to Ingrey. I’ll head back, but you can phone me if you find anything wrong.”

Jenni felt relieved. “Sounds like a plan." She took out her phone.

“Done.” Lonnie got up and went back to the ladder. Just when he got top, he looked down and saw Jenni at the bottom. “Did you get them?”

"Phone disconnected. Same message."

"Well, I guess I can take you up to the end of the lake to have a looksee. I can't wait around, though, so you'd better phone me from Ingrey."

Jenni didn't leave. “Do you believe in love at first sight?” she asked.

Lonnie scratched his head, and kept cleaning the eaves with a long pole. “I’ve been around long enough not to be sceptical about everything. I’m a guy. I can’t go to the mall for a new hat without falling in love, with a dozen women before getting home.”

“I understand about that. I mean something more.”

“I had a friend claim it happened to him. Married the girl. Seems happy.” He paused.

“Okay,” Jenni said, about to turn away.

“Once,” Lonnie said, “I went into the bank to cash a check. New teller. Young enough to be my daughter.” He paused again. “That was before Mae died. I’d have given up everything I owned on the spot to run off with that kid.”

“What did you do?”

Lonnie smiled. “Moved my account to a different bank. Told Mae I didn’t like the attitude of the old bank. Never went back there again.”

“Okay…." Matt's actions started to look a little less bizarre.

“Don’t know where it came from. She wasn’t any better looking than average, but I was lucky to be able to get out of there without walking into doors and walls.” He shuddered, and looked down. “How’s that?”

“Thanks, Lonnie.” Jenni headed back to the lodge.

Emilia was behind the desk, looking at a magazine. "What's up?"

"Going to see if those kids are okay. Lonnie thought it was a good idea. We'll take the boat and tow a canoe behind up as far as the portage to Ingrey."

Emilia just snorted. "You're just planning to chase this Matt guy. Probably going to listen to him read his poetry to you."

"What are you talking about?"

Emilia took a crumpled piece of paper from her pocket. "Found this in his garbage."

"Just how carefully did you check his garbage, Emilia?"

"Hey, I told you, I was looking for recyclables. Bottles, cans, paper. The county dump is pretty tight on that sort of thing."

"Right." Jenni rolled her eyes.

"Ahem," Emilia said, putting the paper onto the counter, and flattening out some of the wrinkles. Then she read:

Come and spend this night with me
There’s ashes on the wind
In our tiny tent, we'll find
Where love and time begin

"Doesn't sound like a poem to Annie," Emilia said. "Annie's obviously already spending her nights with him, and not in his tiny tent."

"In the first place," Jenni said, annoyed, "you don't know he's not quoting another poem."

"And in the second place?" Emilia was smiling.

Jenni didn't feel like smiling at all. "Sounds like lechery at first sight, if you ask me. He wants whoever he's writing to for a one-nighter. We should have suspected that all along. Men have a hard time telling the difference between lust and love. With the problems I had with Julio, I sure don't need any more nutcases after me."

"Well, it's been a long time, I bet, since you've shared a night with anyone but your cat."

Jenni was working up to some strong language when she saw that Emilia was just teasing her. She decided that she herself had teased enough people that she should learn to take it. "Well, if I'm not back in a week, go looking for his tent."

Chapter 3

Jenni got out her canoe from beside the shed. It was bright yellow – like sunshine, she told people who asked. *Like Matt's*, she noted. In the seven days since she'd come to the Two-and-a-Half Pine Resort she'd been out in it exactly zero times, despite the promises she'd made to herself. It was light enough for her to carry on her shoulders, but she found it easier to drag it across the grass and sand by its rope.

She left the canoe by the lakeshore while she went back to her room and arranged a pack for a day trip. Snacks, water, a couple of cans of real (not diet) Pepsi, and a warm jacket, just in case. She changed into her red-and-green plaid shirt and most comfortable jeans. They were worn, but loose enough to make sitting in a canoe comfortable. At the last minute, she squeezed a plastic raincoat into the pack, then borrowed a tarp from the lodge supplies. Her father had told her, and she'd learned the truth of it later, that you never know when it's going to rain.

When she got back to the canoe, Lonnie was backing the lodge's boat in towards her. He tossed her a rope, and she spent several minutes tying a proper canoe-towing rig. Canoes have a place at the front for a rope, and that's good for tying a canoe to a dock or walking the canoe up a fast river, but if a power boat pulls the canoe from that point the canoe will do anything but follow meekly. Mostly it runs from one side to the other, leaps around, then plays submarine. A proper canoe-towing rig runs from the power boat to a point under the front of the canoe, so the pulling lifts the canoe's bow well up. Lonnie waited patiently as Jenni made the harness.

Even then she threw her pack and the tarp to Lonnie, just in case the canoe overturned.

Lonnie gently pulled the yellow canoe into the water, then drove the boat to the end of the dock to wait for Jenni to get in. "Ready?" he asked her. She nodded, and he put the 125-horsepower motor into gear, watching the canoe as they gained speed.

Once they reached full speed and Jenni assured herself that the canoe was trailing properly behind the motorboat and that her pack hadn't fallen into the little pool of water that most boats have, she threw an oar onto the tarp, which was threatening to blow up and out of the boat. She took off her cap and let the wind ruffle her hair and the sun squint her eyes. She looked at Lonnie for a moment, thinking, why can't I find a guy like him, but a few decades younger? The resort handyman was often gruff – she'd been warned about that – and was usually a total loss at carrying out a conversation, but he was honest to a fault and you could bet your life on him, Emilia had told her.

"Fast boat," she told Lonnie.

"Not used to one quite this fast?"

Jenni shook her head. "Dad had nothing bigger than an 18-horse, and we spend most of our time in the 9.9. An old Evinrude; noisy but reliable."

"You did a lot of fishing with your dad?"

"We'd go out a dozen or more times a year. Fishing and camping."

"Young girls usually hang around with other young girls. When they're not chasing young guys."

"Oh, I did enough of that. Hanging around with my friends was pretty much my focus in life. But I discovered that I got a lot of perspective when I was fishing or camping and got a chance to relax a bit."

"Talked a lot to your dad on the water?" Lonnie did a wide loop around a patch of weeds. *Must be a shallow spot*, Jenni figured. *Maybe some pike in there, or walleye along the drop-off*.

"Not about important things," she said, "or not about things that seemed important to me at the time. Dad, though…." She paused. "He seemed to know enough not to ask me about that stuff. He'd talk, and every now and then he'd tell me something, then say, 'That's an important thing in life; remember it.'"

Lonnie chuckled. "And did you? Remember those things?" A pair of loons disappeared underwater ahead of the boat.

"Mostly the ones I thought were a crock of old-guy crap."

"And were they? In the long run, I mean?"

Jenni shrugged. "Some of them. But a lot of them… well, I wish I'd taken notes or something."

"Your father's dead, I guess." Lonnie'd probably been told before Jenni got to the resort.

Jenni nodded, then, seeing that he was looking away at the lake ahead, said, "Heart attack, at his desk, trying to deal with another irate customer and probably wishing he was out fishing." She cleared her throat. "He should have died falling out of a boat trying to get a muskellunge in or something."

"Yeah." Lonnie kicked at a bailing can that was rattling its way to the steering console at the middle of the boat. "I see you have a tarp."

"Liberated it from the resort," Jenni acknowledged.

"Good idea. Have you got rope?"

"A little. Mostly pretty light stuff."

Lonnie reached into a bin beside him and hauled out a hank of yellow cord. "Take this with you. It won't add much on the portage, and you can always use it and the tarp to make a tent if it rains."

Jenni added it to her pack. "Think it's going to rain?"

He nodded. “Might. They’re talking about some more thunderstorms later, mostly pop-ups that you can’t predict until they’ve formed. You wouldn’t want to be on the lake in a thunderstorm.”

Jenni looked around. At the north end of the lake there were few cottages; the shoreline was just an unbroken line of trees. “I should be back before dark, unless the wind gets up. I can take care of myself; I’ve been through thunderstorms before. I’m pretty quick to get off the water when things look bad.”

“Well, I have to go back to the lodge, but it’s only a twenty-minute ride in this boat, so I can come back and get you. Just phone the lodge.”

“Shouldn’t take me more than an hour to find those kids and embarrass them all to heck.”

“Doesn’t matter. Phone me anytime, even after dark. I’ll come get you.”

“I appreciate that.” The boat slowed as they approached the shore. The spot was indistinguishable from most of the rest of the shoreline except for the yellow portage sign fixed to a tree. Still there, Jenni noted; people used to steal them as souvenirs, before the Ministry of Natural Resources learned to use a couple of hundred staples on each sign.

Lonnie cut the engine and raised it up. The boat drifted to the shore, with the canoe arriving at the end of the rope and bumping the boat a couple of seconds later. Lonnie steered the canoe around to the side of the boat and held it still as Jenni loaded her pack, life preserver, paddle, tarp, and herself (carefully) into it.

She looked back; Lonnie watched her till she reached the shore and got out. Then he waved to her, gunned the engine, and disappeared down the lake. *Nice guy*, she thought again, then shook her head to clear her brain, and laughed. *I must be getting pretty lonesome,* she decided, *when fifty-year-old guys who can barely hold a conversation are starting to look good.* A small brown bird chirped at her. She looked at the canoe, and looked at her pack, then looked at the portage trail.

Jenni had long ago come to the conclusion that there were a lot of good things to say about canoeing and camping, but that there no good things to say about portaging a canoe and pack. A steep trail, full of boulders, wasn’t going to help, nor was the mud that had formed on the trail since the rain the night before.

Again, she looked out onto Hawk Lake. The lodge was invisible, behind islands and the curve of the lake, and Lonnie was almost gone behind one of the islands. In the sky above his boat were a few new thunderhead clouds that had passed to the south of the lake. A quiet putt-putt-putt meant a fishing boat was coming. *It could be from one of the lodges or one of the dozen cottages on the lake*, she thought. Or maybe someone had found the free public launch on the west side.

She turned towards the portage again, a bit reluctant to leave what little civilization there was. There were several lakes that could be reached from Hawk Lake by portage, but only two that were likely to be sought out by weekend campers, Ingrey Lake and Poplar Lake. And Ingrey was the lake the teens had said they were off to, according to the register at the lodge.

On an impulse, Jenni checked the shore and walked a bit of the portage.

She looked around. There wasn't a human in sight. A sense of something between loneliness and peace came over her. A white-throated sparrow sang out its "sweet sweet Canada Canada Canada". Jenni wasn't sure she'd ever seen one of the birds, but she'd heard their song since she was a kid.

Somewhere beneath the surface of the lake, a few bass were circling back to their favored resting sites, having probably already forgotten Lonnie's boat and why they left. Jenni could see the last remnants of the wake from the boat, making a trail on the shores of an island.

I wonder, she thought, *what wake I've left on this planet and on other people. Just a fading ripple probably. Gone like summer, her school days, and her marriage*. She felt a bit of a pang; she'd been so happy with Julio for a while. Christ, what she wouldn't give to get those days back. Then she shook her head; Julio had best beware Jenni Williams. She wasn't the fool he had married.

She had just decided to ignore the impulse to sit on a rock and check her messages and to soak up the peace, when, of course, her phone rang.

Evil little bastard, she thought, taking it out of her shirt pocket. But the call was from Tanya, so she answered it. "Glad you called," she lied. "I'm out on the north end of Hawk Lake all by myself and about to start talking to the trees. What's up?"

"Just checking on you," Tanya said. "Sorry I couldn't call earlier, like I promised, but a senior manager rounded up the whole lot of us and we sat through a time and efficiency lecture in the cafeteria for a couple of years this morning."

"Get anything out of it?" Jenni looked at the aspen leaves by the shore, and watched another small brown bird watching her.

"They started twenty minutes late and ran a half hour over the scheduled time." Tanya laughed. "If the people from the floor hadn't needed the cafeteria, we'd probably still be there, learning about the efficient use of time and resources. "

"Makes me glad to be here alone."

" Trying to get away from Emilia before she sets you up with the local postman? Or looking for that married man?"

"Sure getting some 'me' time. " Then she added, "Well, he is supposed to be up here somewhere, actually…."

"Aha! Finally taking my advice. A quickie under the pines, is that what it's going to be?"

"Hemlock," Jenni said. "Hemlock needles are softer than pine needles."

"Well, then…."

Jenni interrupted her. "I'm not here chasing a married man. After I get my divorce, and after I wait a year, well, who knows. But not a married man. Not after I came so close to hitting Julio with a baseball bat when I found out about him and those…. Anyway, all the advice columnists say to wait a year."

Tanya snorted into her phone. “You’ve already been a year without more than a teddy bear to talk to in the morning, or so you tell me.”

“Cuddles is a very warm teddy bear.”

“So if you’re not seducing fishermen – oh, always wait till after they’ve caught something for supper before doing anything; that way you get fed, too. So, if you’re not up in the erotic woodlands for that, then what the heck are you there for?”

“There were four young people. Launched at the lodge yesterday to go camping up here somewhere. We had a big storm last night, so I tried calling them this morning and couldn’t get an answer.”

"Ah...."

I’m at the portage they’re supposed to have used to get to Ingrey Lake."

"Got it. Young people. Camping. Forced to spend time in the woods and they’ve turned their cell phones off. Granny Jenni comes to see what they’re doing? Is that about it?”

“I guess.” Jenni sat on a log.

“Probability one, they turned their phones off for good reason. Probability two, they’ve got cheap phones and the reception’s bad. Although you’ve got the cheapest phone around and I can hear you.”

“But if….”

“But sometimes even pessimists are right. Go find them. And say hello to that married guy.”

“Tanya!”

“Almost time to get back to work here. What are you thinking?” Tanya often closed off a conversation with that question. Jenni always tried to answer it.

She said, “Well, actually, I was wondering where my life would go from here.”

“Right on,” Tanya said. “September comes, and Canadians realize how short summer really was. Get all philosophical instead of getting a bed and a bottle and a warm butt and breakfast the morning after. And,” she added, as Jenni was about to interrupt, “I’m thinking of taking my own advice on that. Gotta go. Good luck.”

Jenni studied the site for a moment. She looked at the ground but didn’t see any trace of footprints or grooves in the mud where canoes had been dragged ashore, at least not recently. There were the usual colored marks on the stones just under the water, where canoes had scraped off a bit of paint, but the recent marks showed nothing of the pink color of the canoe one pair of the teens had used or the white the other pair used.

She shook her head. Maybe the rain had erased their footprints. Maybe the pink canoe had landed carefully, so as not to scrape the bottom on rocks. It was possible, but not easy, to miss all the rocks on the way in.

What am I really doing here, she asked herself. Finally found some peace and solitude, did I? She took a deep breath and looked up at the pine tops by the lake. *It does feel good*, she thought. *It really does*.

Then of course, the phone rang again. She looked at her pocket, and tried to ignore it. *One ringy-dingy*, she counted, two ringy-dingies…. Maybe the teens had contacted Emilia. She answered the phone on the fourth ring.

"Aha," Emilia said. "I thought maybe you'd drowned or gone feral."

"Or was carrying a canoe through the woods and dropped it on my head while trying to answer the phone."

"You didn't!" Emilia seemed to be trying to suppress laughter for some reason.

"I didn't. I wasn't. I'm at the portage to Ingrey, wondering if there's been anyone here for a week or so. Did you get in contact with the group? I'm getting no response on mine." Jenni was starting to realize calling the four people "teens" was a bit patronizing.

"Well, there's no connection with their phones, and they sure haven't phoned me."

"I'll take a walk down the trail," Jenni decided. "I might try one of the other portages, if I can find them."

"The only other portage the group is likely to take is west of you about a kilometre. It goes to Matts Lake and from there there's an easy portage into Poplar.

"Matt's Lake?"

"Slip of the tongue. Bass Lake, but it's where Matt said he was camping."

Jenni paused, then, "Okay; if I see him I'll ask him if he's seen any sign."

"You got flowers," Emilia announced.

"Flowers?"

"Roses. Long stem roses. Very nice."

"Julio!" Jenni closed her eyes tightly and wrapped an arm around herself.

"Matches the description," Emilia chuckled. "Even mentioned you by name. How's that make you feel, seeing as he brought flowers."

"Queasy," Jenni said. "What did you tell him?"

"Oh I told him you'd gone into town with a friend. Best I could think of, seeing as your car was there in the parking lot."

"I guess…."

"Then I told him how we were planning to chop him into hamburger and feed him to the fish off the end of the dock. Actually, I added a few more details. That's when he out and busted into tears."

Jenni shuddered a bit. "He would."

Oh, yes. Lots of tears. All down his face. Started shaking all over."

"And told you how much he missed me….?

"Damn right. Piteous, it was. Woulda brought tears from a statue. He told me about how lonesome he was and couldn't live without you and how he'd changed and wasn't the same man as before and he'd never wanted to hurt you, ever…."

Jenni sighed, "Look, God knows, he might actually believe…."

“Believe it?” Emilia asked. Noises on the phone indicated she was doing something else at the office at the same time. “Of course he believes it.”

“Don’t fall for it!” Jenni was shouting a bit loud.

“Jenni, my friend, don’t forget who you’re talking to. I’m a recovering addict, remember? I’ve seen a thousand performances of that scene and done a few myself, every bit as good, if not better. They’re always sincere at the time.”

“Okay.” Jenni felt a bit of relief.

“I gave the roses to Lonnie; he’s going to put them on his wife’s grave tomorrow.”

“Is he gone?”

“Julio? Yup. Took off in a cloud of dust when I explained a few facts of life to him.” Emilia paused a bit. “Is he on steroids?”

“Don’t know,” Jenni said. “I heard he’s got a job at the gym, and he always was into muscles, but….

“Something about him seemed a bit off. Anyway, I’ll let you know if anything happens. Not counting a thunderstorm.”

Jenni nodded, even if Emilia couldn’t see it. "I can see some thunderheads in the distance. Lonnie gave me a tarp; I’ll just crawl under it if it rains.”

“Gotta go. Take care.” Emilia disconnected suddenly.

Jenni took a look at the list of text messages on her phone. Just over a dozen, none of them all that important. She had the urge to get onto the social networks and tell everybody where she was, but she fought it down and put the phone away.

She looked at the canoe and the pack, then decided she’d just walk the portage trail once without carrying anything.

She’d been told the portage trail was about two hundred meters, but it was harder than she expected, with some steep sections that had rocks. As well the trail was littered with branches and there were a couple of fallen trees she had to go around. There were, at least, not many flying bugs at this time of year, but that hadn’t stopped the spiders from building webs across the pathway. She broke off a thin dead branch and waved it in front of her as she walked, clearing webs ahead of her as she went. Surprisingly, the wet sections weren’t flooded out, and she realized that there hadn’t been much rain in the storm, just a lot of wind at this end of the lake.

There were no footprints anywhere, and no other marks that indicated someone might have passed. Finally, just before she got to Ingrey Lake, sliding a bit on some loose stones, she realized something that should have been obvious; the spider webs. Jenni didn’t know how long it took a spider to build a web across a path as wide as the portage trail, but she suspected it took more than half a day. She inspected one of the larger webs, watching the owner scuttle away to a corner. There were enough dried carcases of small bugs, mostly mosquitoes, to convince her that the web had been up for some time. So she was not surprised when she got to Ingrey Lake and saw neither footprints nor a tent on the island that was, she’d been told, the only marked campsite on the lake, and the only campsite big enough for more than a small tent.

She turned back, glad she hadn't carried the canoe over.

First thing she did, was call Emilia to tell her there was no sign of the missing campers at Ingrey Lake.

"Told you," Emilia said, forgetting that it was Jenni who had told her. "Those guys are on a getaway trip, probably skipping classes at some college somewhere, and they're not likely to be following any rules but their own. Probably figure if they need help they can call."

"But they're still not answering."

"Not answering the two phone numbers we were given. Want me to send Lonnie up to get you?"

"I was going to have a look at the portage to Bass Lake, just in case they went there."

"Okay. Say hello to Matt if you see him. Just a second," There was a few seconds pause, then. "Got the map. Bass Lake's got a couple of campsites on it, but there's an easy portage after that to Poplar Lake, and they might have gone there. Or Matt might have gone there if he didn't find himself alone on Bass. Can you see it on your map?"

Jenni sighed. "Actually, that's one thing I forgot to bring."

"I see. Much too optimistic, were you?"

"That's the best interpretation."

"Well, it's about a kilometre west of you. Did you bring a compass, or is that a silly question?"

"Compass? What's this thing called a compass? Is it round? Does it have feet?" Jenni was starting to feel foolish.

"Thought so."

"But I can figure out west. I'm not that stupid."

Emilia laughed. "Of course. Let me know if you need help. Oh, and watch for thunderstorms. There are a bunch just popping up around the area."

"I'll call you if I get lost or killed, okay?"

"Got that. I'll try phoning the campers again, and see if Matt's turned his phone on. If I get either, I'll call you back."

"Good." Jenni put her phone away, then pushed the canoe into the lake. Once, she stopped to listen; she could hear the sound of an outboard motor.

She followed the shoreline towards the main part of the lake. At water's edge, the shore was a mixture of mossy rocks and old trees that had fallen into the water at some time in the past. For a minute or two she saw a mink along the shore, weaving in among the logs, looking for clams, frogs, or crayfish. It looked at her, once, then ignored her.

At the end of the little bay she paddled through a patch of lily pads. There was one white flower still blooming on the water, and she carefully paddled around it, feeling somehow a bit sorry that it had no friends. *Silly of me*, she thought; *some things don't care if they're alone or not*.

As she was rounding the end of the point; and the motor noise was very close, she found herself being approached by one of the lodge's aluminum fishing boats. The man in the boat slowed the motor when he saw Jenni and waved. Jenni recognized Lenny, the man who bought a new map every year. She waved back, and Lenny stopped the motor; the fishing boat and the canoe drifted together. Jenni turned the prow of the canoe then grabbed the boat. "Hi, Lenny," she said."

"Good to see you," he said. "You're a long way from the lodge in a canoe. Must be a fast paddler."

"Got a tow with Lonnie." Jenni adjusted her hat. "You wouldn't by chance have a map, would you?"

"That'll be the day I'm anywhere without a map." He reached into a knapsack, drew out his recently purchased map of Hawk Lake, then handed it to her. "Lost?" he asked.

"Just trying to find the portage to Bass Lake." Jenni squinted in the sunlight.

Lenny pointed behind him. "It's at the end of a small bay about twenty minutes paddling that way. There's an inukshuk on a rock at the end of the bay, and an osprey nest in a dead pine." He paused. "And this lake is totally devoid of fish. I don't know how the osprey lives."

"Ah," Jenni said. "I see it here."

"I can let you have the map, if you want."

Jenni smiled. "Thanks, but I think I can find it now."

"I'm not sure I'd want to go camping with all these thunderstorms around, Lenny noted."

"Probably safer than being in a metal boat on the lake." Jenni pointed out. She sighed. "Well, this is probably a stupid thing, and I'll probably end up canoeing all the way back, for nothing…. Or I could see if Lonnie can come get me."

"Upwind," Lenny said.

"Pardon?"

"If you paddle, it'll probably be upwind. I used to canoe a lot. Seemed like it was always upwind, except maybe for once a year."

Jenni laughed. "I think you're right. Anyway, to get back to why I'm here, those young people in the two canoes went camping up here yesterday and I figured that was that bad storm last night, especially at this end of the lake and they didn't answer either of their phones and so I thought…." She stopped for breath. "I must seem like a mother hen or something."

Lenny worked on detaching his fishing lure from his fishing net. "Makes a lot more sense than catching fish, if you get right down to it."

"Well…."

"But I'd say there's a bunch of storms coming around today, and you wouldn't want to get caught in one."

"If I can't get Lonnie to come get me, I'll keep to the shoreline. It's not too hard to haul a canoe into the woods. Easier than with a boat, I imagine."

“Storm’s a-coming, I just run the boat against the shore, throw the anchor into the trees and follow the anchor rope.” Lenny had got the lure loose from the net, only to have it catch immediately in another part. “As for keeping to the shoreline, well, when you get to Bacchus Bay, you’ll have the choice of following the shoreline along the bay and back, maybe three miles, or cutting across, maybe half a mile.” He squinted at her. “Then what would you do?”

“Same as a guy in a fishing boat: take up religion on the spot and watch the clouds and go for it, of course. Don’t make it, you can have the search team look for my canoe. Shouldn’t be hard; I’m probably the only canoe on the lake right now.”

“Oh, you’re not the only canoe on the lake. I saw another one in the distance coming up the west shore.”

“What color?” Jenni asked, cautiously.

Lenny shrugged. Just a silhouette at that distance.”

“Anyway, thanks for your help,” Jenni said, releasing the boat. “I’ll see you again at the lodge.”

“Say hello to Matt for me,” Lenny said, as the two drifted apart.

“You know him?” Jenni asked.

“Spent an hour in the rain with him last night on the deck. Talked about life and love and poetry and why all the freaking fish seem to avoid me.”

“Male bonding. Us girls like to do it over tea and chocolate.” She paused and watched the water, breaking in little waves against the boats. "You talked poetry?"

"Well, yeah. Not all of us men like to talk about it, but some of us write poetry. Even a hard-assed executive type like Matt writes poetry. I read him one of my hard-luck fishing poems and he gave me a poem he was working on." He stuck his hand into a couple of inside jacket pockets and eventually came up with a crumpled piece of paper. "It's a love poem, so it's probably more woman stuff than my poems. I'll read you a fishing poem sometime." Lenny handed her the piece of paper. "It got wet because we were sitting in the rain when he read it to me and I had to dry it out. You can give it back to me at the lodge when you get back. If you want."

"Thanks." Jenni put the paper into her packsack. Then she put a paddle into the water, waved, and started out.

Lenny waited till she was safely away, then started his motor. As he moved away, he let his fishing line trail behind the boat. In a minute he was gone behind the closest point of land, but the sound of the motor kept Jenni company.

It was, indeed, about twenty minutes when Jenni recognized the inukshuk. She followed the narrow bay through increasingly dense weeds until she saw the yellow portage sign at the end.

Within a stone's throw of the portage, her canoe started hitting rocks. *Canoes*, she thought, *always seem to be attracted to rocks.* She used the paddle as a pole to skim through the shallows, watching the rocks, and changing direction a bit every time she hit one. She felt vindicated; she

could see the streaks of pink from one of the kid's canoes. And, of course, the yellow from Matt's canoe.

A few feet from the shore the canoe refused to move any more, stuck into mud. Jenni grabbed the rope at the front of the canoe, stuck the paddle in the mucky lakebottom, and made the leap to solid ground without getting her feet wet. She looked around. There were a few grooves in the mud at the shoreline. A couple were a bit smoothed by the previous night's rain, and a sharp new one was sure to be from Matt's canoe. A quick glance around showed that there were no fresh pieces of litter around, and Jenni nodded in approval. She sent a quick text message to Emilia.

Sure, now, that the canoe group had gone over the Bass Lake portage, she put her pack onto her back. She tucked the tarp under her arm, and, using the paddle as a walking stick, started up the steep trail among the trees. Sensible canoers made one trip carrying packs, then second trip carrying the canoe. Carrying everything at once was possible, and brave young men did it, but it was awkward. Carrying a canoe on your shoulders had one big problem: it was hard to see where you were going. So most people took the packs first, memorized the bad spots on the trail, and came back for the canoe. Which is what Jenni did.

The trail was only 350 metres, but it hadn't been a friendly one to start with, and the storm hadn't done it anything but harm. There was a steep boulder-strewn scrabble up from Hawk Lake, then a series of ups and downs. A small creek drained from Bass Lake, and the path generally followed the creek bed. Jenni stopped at the first muddy crossing point when her phone rang. She set down the things she had under her arms.

"Hi, kid. Just checking in." .

"Hang on," Jenni said, waiting for a blue jay to stop its yammering in a tree above her. "Noisy bird," she said. "I'm on the portage to Bass Lake."

"I hope I didn't make you drop your canoe on your head."

Jenni laughed. "I'm taking the loose stuff first. Glad I did." She paused.

"Problems?"

"No….. It's just that it's been a while since I portaged into the woods," Jenni said. "There's something a bit unsettling about it, like I'm leaving something I know behind and moving into…."

"It's because you're portaging alone," Emilia said. "You can't cover up by talking to other people."

"You think?"

"How are the trees?"

"Beautiful," Jenni admitted. "The leaves are waving to me."

"Atta girl. You're on a bridge. Whatever's ahead, go for it. Much storm damage?"

"Lot of branches down, and a few trees on the trail. I could step over most of them, but there's one I had to detour around. Looks like they got more wind than rain."

"And all that from last night."

"Most of it. I found one place where the teens' footprints in the mud were under the tree, so they went past before the tree fell. Matt's footprints showed he went around the tree, like I did."

"Well, be careful. Don't want trees falling on you. And the thunderstorms are getting closer, according to the web."

"There's a couple of swampy parts; once I get the canoe past them, I should be okay. Oh, and I met Lenny the fisherman with the map. He told me how to get here. And he passed me a poem that Matt wrote. It seems to be more of the same one you found?"

"Hm." Emilia said. "I'd be suspicious if I were you. Men don't normally go passing that stuff around."

"That's what I was thinking."

"Remember the old saying," Emilia asked. "Why is it so hard for women to find men that are sensitive, caring, and good-looking? Because those men already have boyfriends." She laughed at her own joke.

Jenni ignored that. "Here it is. Two stanzas this time. " She pulled out the paper and read:

Come and spend this night with me
There's ashes on the wind
In our tiny tent, we'll find
Where love and time begin

Come and share the night with me
Warmth on warmth in dark
When the wind shakes the tent
You are fire, I am spark

"Sounds like he's planning on more storms. Well, I won't keep you. Ta ta."

"Bye," Jenni said, but Emilia had already disconnected. She took a deep breath; the air smelled heavy, like a storm was coming.

The rest of the trail was easier, and Jenni soon got to put her load down at the edge of Bass Lake. It looked peaceful. There were a couple of old boats that duck hunters had probably left there for the fall season, but otherwise she could see no sign of anyone. She took in the scene for a moment, then headed back to get her canoe.

If it was a hard trail with the pack, it was harder with the canoe on her shoulders. Not only did the weight make her slip more often on muddy slopes, but she was nowhere near as agile when crossing a creek by hopping from one rock to another. And, of course, there was the usual problem of coming to an abrupt halt every time the bow of the canoe hit a branch she hadn't seen coming; her feet moved a step or two anyway, then danced backwards each time.

This, Jenni decided, *is why women go canoeing with men most of the time*.

The phone rang twice, but she ignored it. When she took the canoe off her aching shoulders at Bass Lake, she checked. Two calls from Tanya. She decided to ignore them.

Bass Lake still looked very peaceful. Not a sign that there was anybody on it, and she wondered if Matt had gone on to Poplar Lake, or if she'd been wrong and he hadn't come this way at all. But, of course, there were bays and islands in the lake, so there were corners she couldn't see yet.

She rolled the canoe upright, then pushed it into the water. A couple of minnows darted away, a crayfish scuttled under a rock, and two chickadees checked her out from an overhanging branch; she wished she'd brought some sunflower seeds for them. Out on the lake, four loons (probably parents and two almost-grown chicks) watched her.

From what she remembered from Lenny's map, the portage to Poplar was across Bass Lake and slightly to the left, behind an island.

For a moment she wished she'd downloaded the map application to her phone, then decided she was being silly. Truth was, Bass Lake was pretty small. Still, she was hesitant, expecting to get nothing for her trouble but annoyed looks from the five people she was likely to meet.

She listened to the two phone messages from Tanya: neither was important, She looked at her text messages – nothing she cared to answer or think about. Then she sighed and pushed the canoe into the water. After bumping over and around the usual floating and submerged logs, her will to paddle came back and she headed straight towards the middle of the lake. From far away came the rumble of thunder.

As she came around the one big island, she saw three things in one glance. First was the triangular yellow sign that marked the portage to Poplar Lake. Next was a maroon-and-gray tent on a point of land. That, she knew, was probably Matt's, since there was only the one tent. Third was Matt, in his canoe, straight in front of her, a stone's throw away. He was reeling in a yellow Jitterbug lure that burbled on the surface of the water, obviously hoping for a bass, or perhaps a pike.

Jenni stopped paddling, and let the momentum and a light wind take her canoe close to his. She figured she'd better speak first. "Hi, Matt."

His attention apparently distracted by Jenni's abrupt reappearance into his life, he stopped reeling the lure in. When the burbling of the lure paused, there was a significant splash beside it, as a fish attacked. Matt jerked the rod tip, but the fish must have been less than serious. The lure took off into the air, missed Matt's head, kept going, and stopped behind his canoe, wrapping itself around a tangle of dead cedar limbs along the shore.

There was a silence, as Matt looked at Jenni, then back at his snagged lure, then back at Jenni again.

"Hi," Jenni said again. "I'm Jenni, from the lodge."

"Ah, yes." Matt paddled backwards towards the shore. The canoe seemed to want to go every way except towards the lure. After much splashing and a bit of mumbling, he got there, reached up, and broke off the bare twig that held the yellow Jitterbug. He shook off one of the

spiders that nest in twigs over water, then carefully got his line free. Then he turned towards Jenni. "Is there a problem?"

"Sorry," Jenni said. "I'm… we're…" She took a deep breath.. "Remember those four people in two canoes that launched from the lodge yesterday? We tried to contact them but there's no… their phones are out of service." There was a silence, so she added, "I came up to see if they were all right."

"You must paddle fast; I just got here half an hour ago."

"Got a ride from Lonnie."

"And you think they're here?"

Jenni was starting to get annoyed, but whether at Matt or herself, she wasn't quite sure. "They said they were going to Ingrey Lake, but there's no sign they went that way. This is the next logical place for them, either here or over the next portage to Poplar Lake."

"Ah," Matt said. "I circled this lake, so they're not here, but they could have gone on to Poplar."

"I'll check it out," Jenni said, moving the canoe out and away. "Thanks."

"Wait a minute. Do you have a pen and paper?"

Jenni checked her pack, and came out with a pen. "Pen," she said.

"Take down this number." Matt gave her a phone number. "It's my cell phone. I'll turn it on, and you can call me if there's a problem."

"That's a plan." Jenni looked at the number she's written on her arm. It should last if she didn't sweat too much. "I'll call you only if I need help."

Matt waved goodbye, and went back to fishing as Jenni paddled towards the portage.

She took a deep breath and smiled. *That went better than expected*. She'd been hoping to avoid Matt, but at least he didn't ask her to share his tent for an hour or so. She would tell Emilia sometime that Matt had obviously been teasing her the day before at the lodge. Probably just a way for a man, free for a weekend from his wife, to get a long conversation with Emilia. A lot of men liked to have long conversations with Emilia, if you didn't count Lonnie, who wasn't into conversations much, or Lenny, who was probably at that moment marking his map with another place he'd tried to catch a fish.

As she approached the shore, she thought that Matt at least knew what he was doing, fishing-wise. Until the lake waters cooled a bit more, a surface lure under the trees near shore was as likely as anything to bring up a bass or two, and less likely to get lost on a bottom snag. She wished him good luck and a couple of bass for his supper.

A rumble of distant thunder made her look up. *If*, she thought, *he gets to eat them before it rains*. She was glad Lonnie had made her take a tarp; a person had to be pretty thin to stay dry under a canoe in a thunderstorm.

She found a nice flat rock near the shore and was able to step right onto the dry land, then drag her canoe up onto the landing spot. Looking back, she could see Matt with a small net,

landing a fish. *Maybe*, she thought, *he should have included a fish fry in his poem; that might have helped get him company for the night.*

On impulse, she took out the copy that Lonnie had given her, and read the whole thing one more time.

She looked back at Matt again, frowned, then folded the poem neatly and stuffed it into her shirt pocket. Then she put the pack onto her back, raised the canoe over her head, and managed to grab the loose stuff and start over the portage. It was awkward; the paddle caught in brushes and the tarp tried to slip out from under her armpit, but Lonnie's map had said the portage was only 50 meters, and it looked pretty flat, so carrying everything in one trip might be possible.

The trail was easy, although she dropped the paddle once, discovering again that it's not easy picking anything off the ground when you've got the weight of a canoe on your shoulders. For one thing, it often means you drop something else, such as the tarp. And the various small birds seem to be twittering laughter at your troubles while it's easy to mistake the noise from a bluejay as the forest equivalent of posting your problems on Facebook. There were already enough leaves on the ground to give a crackle to her footsteps. Autumn was getting very close, Jenni realized.

Jenni was getting herself increasingly upset as she walked. She'd hoped for a break from the long divorce procedures and from looking for a new job, but the time at the lodge was becoming anything but relaxing. For a moment she started to believe that people were playing an elaborate joke on her; running across the same poem twice in a day was just too much a coincidence, she decided. If it was Matt's, if he had written it rather than borrowed it from somewhere, it would have been for his Annie, wishing she were sharing his free time with him. Or it might be for Emilia, with whom he'd had a nice long conversation the night before. Emilia had once shown Jenni a poem that a high-school boy had written for her, Emilia. That was back in grade nine, but Emilia had been eye-catching even then.

Jenni sighed as she saw the shores of Poplar Lake appear through the trees and the trail sloped down to the water. I'm going to become a hermit, she determined. No men, no women, just a couple of cats and a goat. Especially no men. Maybe when she was old…. The phone rang again, and she considered throwing it into the lake, but decided to just ignore it.

Poplar Lake was not much bigger than Bass Lake had been, and when she got onto the water, she could see a campsite on her side of the lake, separated from the portage by a swamp. A thunderhead rose over the trees behind it. Jenni squinted at the campsite – there was another canoe there, but only one tent was up. Meanwhile, a pink canoe was coming towards her, a bit awkwardly. She recognized it as one of the canoes the teens had used.

Chapter 4

Jenni paddled a little bit towards the other canoe, then let the momentum and a slight breeze carry her the rest of the way.

The guy in the pink canoe stopped paddling too late, drifted past her, and had to paddle backwards. “You’re from the lodge!” he said. “Have you got your phone with you?”

“You’re Allen?” Jenni guessed. She had read the names in the lodge register but did not know the people themselves.

“I’m Clayton. Allen’s got a broken leg. We need to call for help. Liza’s injured, too.” Clayton looked like he hadn’t slept for a week.

“Let’s get back to your camp and I’ll phone from there.” Jenni didn’t want to take a chance on dropping the only phone into the lake.

“Ahh, sure. Follow me.” Clayton gave her a look like he was used to people doing anything but the obvious.

When she arrived at the campsite Jenni got her first hint of what had happened. One of the tents was propped up rather haphazardly. Lying by the other tent was a recently fallen pine; couple of branches lay on top of the flattened tent.

Clayton helped Jenni out of her canoe, talking all the while. “We got caught in the storm out in the lake. We should have gone right to shore, but we thought we could make the campsite and maybe get the tents up. One of the canoes rolled over in the wind, and when Saundra and I tried to help, the others rolled our canoe, too.” He shook his head as if bewildered and waved at the lake. “We lost both phones somewhere out there.”

“But you managed to get to shore.” Jenni climbed the steep shoreline with the aid of Clayton, who grabbed her wrist.

“We rescued the tents. They were all wet. But the sleeping bags were dry.”

“And then the tree fell….”

“On Allen and Liza’s tent. About dark.”

“Let me have a look.” Jenni didn’t have much first-aid training, but she knew enough to check a few things. “You’re right,” she told Clayton, while Saundra and Allen looked at her. Liza seemed to be out of it, but she was breathing steadily. “Allen’s leg is probably broken. “You are certainly going to need help.”

First, she called the emergency line to Bancroft. When she explained the situation, the operator transferred her to emergency services.

“Bancroft. Emergency Services here. How can I help you?” The woman’s voice sounded like she knew what she was doing.

“My name’s Jenni Williams. I’m at a campsite on Poplar Lake….”

“Poplar Lake?”

“North of Hawk Lake by a couple of portages.”

“Got it. Continue.”

Jenni took a deep breath. "We have….There are a couple of people here who need medical help. A tree fell on their tent last night."

"Can you tell me the nature of their injuries?"

"Sure. The boy – the guy – has a broken leg. They've put a splint around it and wrapped it with duct tape, so maybe it's okay if he doesn't move too much." She paused. "The woman got a lot of bruises and a couple of puncture wounds that don't look too deep, but she's only semi-conscious."

"I don't like the sound of that. I'm going to try to arrange an evacuation lift, okay? The bad news is that the same storm banged up our one and only helicopter here."

"Oh."

"First I'm going to see if we can get a chopper in from Trenton, from the rescue unit at the air base. If not, I'll see if we can get a float plane in. Can you give me your number? I'm Olivia, by the way. Do you have any medical training?"

"Thanks, Olivia. A couple of first-aid courses a while back."

Then Jenni called Emilia at the lodge, and explained the problem. Emilia was a bit shocked. "Good thing you went there," she said. " But I'm going to let you call me when you need me; I suspect your phone's going to be busy. I'll get hold of Lonnie and tell him the situation."

First things first, Jenni thought, after talking to Emilia. She asked Clayton to get wood for the fire. Allen was suffering, but coherent, but Liza was starting to shiver; not a good sign on a warm afternoon.

With Saundra's help, Jenni managed to pull another sleeping bag from under the squashed tent, and wrap it around Liza. Then the phone rang.

"Jenni? This is Olivia. I haven't got any good news for you yet. Our helicopter's still out of commission for a few hours at least, and the two they have at Trenton are out over Lake Simcoe looking for people in the water. I guess they got hit pretty good yesterday and drowning people take priority over injured people."

"I've got a fire going," Jenni said, "but Liza's starting to shiver and I'm afraid she might be going into shock."

"Damn. I'm trying to locate an available float plane, but most of the owners seem to be away. I'll keep trying. There's another storm coming our way, Jenni, and I'm not sure if anyone will be able to take off till the weather settles down a bit. Anyway. do your best to keep the girl warm and I'll see if I can get a nurse or doctor on the line to help."

"Will do. Thanks, Olivia."

With the fire going better, Jenni, Saundra, and Clayton moved Liza closer to the warmth. Then, after Saundra lay down beside Liza, Clayton and piled on anything, including the lifejackets, that might help keep in some warmth.

That done, Jenni went and sat on a rock overlooking the lake, holding her head in her hands. It all seemed a bit too much. Clayton was quiet, nervously walking around.

Finally, reluctantly. Jenni decided to call Matt, if only for the reason that it couldn't hurt and maybe he could help. On the first try, she got a repair shop in Waterloo, but that was because she'd written Matt's number on her arm and, what with sweat and all, she mistook a nine for a four. But on the second try, she got through. It took while for him to answer the phone.

"Sorry." Matt sounded a little breathless. "By the time I put down the paddle and the rod, and I find where in heck this phone is in some pocket under the lifejacket, it's a wonder I'm still in the canoe. So, hi."

"Matt?" Jenni didn't know why she phrased it as a question. "This is Jenni, over at Poplar Lake. You said to call if I needed help."

"Jenni. Sure. Yeah. Did you find the people you were looking for?"

"Sure did." Then Jenni gave him a run-down of the situation and the problems getting a rescue. "I'm feeling a bit lost and overwhelmed," she said, "and I couldn't see how you could help, but I thought we might have to portage at least one of them out. If I can get to Hawk Lake, Lonnie might be able to meet us."

"You're worried about the girl?"

"I am really worried about her."

"Then hang on. I'll be over as soon as I can get my first-aid kit."

Jenni was still trying to figure a better way to keep Liza warm, and had just settled down, lying beside Liza when she heard Clayton, say, "Hi, man." She got up to see Clayton holding Matt's canoe as Matt stepped ashore. She was surprised at how fast he had seemed to get there.

Matt got up the steep bank and strode up to the campsite carrying a small red bag. "Hi," he said to Jenni, then knelt to inspect the two injured people. Clayton, Saundra, and Jenni just watched as he did.

"Do you know any first aid?" Saundra asked.

"Not much." Matt opened his first-aid bag. "I took a short course with the company a year ago, but I've probably forgotten most of it." He looked up at Saundra. "Unless anybody thinks otherwise, I think you've got Allen pretty well stabilized with that splint. Allen; would you like a strong pain killer?"

"Jesus, yes!" Allen tried to move then his face contorted. "Whatever you've got, I'll take it."

Matt opened a little plastic container and took out two pills. He looked to Jenni. "Can you help Allen swallow these?"

"Sure. You think they'll work?"

"A doctor friend gave them to me, under the table more or less. In twenty minutes Allen will be offering to take the canoes back, and portage them as he goes." He looked around. "You'll have to make sure he stays still until help gets here."

Jenni took the pills from Matt and found a bottle of water. "That might take a while, you know," she said as Allen swallowed the medicine.

"We'll see. Can you check Liza all over to make sure she's not bleeding? And while you're doing that, roll her onto her side; we don't want her to choke if she vomits." Matt took out a

phone and pressed a couple of buttons. "Kevin? Right; Matt again. How's it going?" He explained the situation at the campsite. "Yeah, I see the thunderheads coming, and I don't want you risking your neck." A long pause. "Well, the company won't want to have to train a replacement helicopter pilot, so take care. Right, hang on." Matt squinted at the phone, then read off a series of numbers that Jenni recognized as GPS coordinates. "Good luck. Thanks."

"Helicopter?" Clayton asked.

Matt was about to reply when Jenni's phone rang. "Yes. Oh, hi, Olivia. We're still here."

"I may have lined up a pilot with a float plane," Olivia said, sounding tired, "and he thinks he can get there before the next storm, but he can't guarantee he can land on Poplar Lake. Says there's not much room for error because there's some rocks right in the middle."

"Oh." Jenni had never thought of checking that. "We might have another solution, anyway, Olivia. I'll let you talk to Matt here. He was over on Bass Lake and came to help." She passed her phone to Matt. "This is Olivia at the emergency response in Bancroft."

Matt took the phone. "Hi. I'm Matt Canning. I was camped over at Bass Lake when I got the call…. Yes, the guy looks like he's just got a broken leg but the girl is only semiconscious and we're trying to keep her warm." He looked at Jenni who gave him the thumbs up. "Yes, we've just checked her and there's no sign of bleeding. It looks like shock, but I'm no expert….. That's right; but I've got a guy with a helicopter who tells me he's on his way from Stony Lake…. It's got floats, so we don't need a solid place to put down…. Great; I'll keep your number and let you know if it doesn't work out. Thanks, Olivia. Bye."

For a while there was nothing to do. Six people at the campsite, and with Allen now asleep and Liza still semiconscious, it looked for a moment as if it might come down to casual conversation. Then Matt asked Clayton what had gone wrong. When he hesitated, Saundra spoke up. “We were halfway across the lake – this lake – when a big gust of wind came up.”

“We were trying to get to the campsite before the thunderstorm,” Clayton said.

“The guys thought we could make it,” Saundra said. “There were big clouds everywhere and there was a lot of thunder and lightning.”

“We were paddling as fast as we could.” Clayton seemed like he blamed the storm for playing unfairly or something. “We should have made it but….”

“Whoosh,” Saundra said. “You could see the waves just pop up from the lake and the next thing we knew, we were all in the water.”

“But we got to shore,” Clayton said. “And Liza and I swam back to get the canoes and the paddles and the other stuff.”

Saundra nodded. “They’re good swimmers, and they got the tents and sleeping bags. The tents were wet but the sleeping bags were in plastic bags so they were dry.” This time Clayton said nothing, so she continued. “We got the tents up and crawled in just before it started to pour.” She looked around. “We lost one of the cell phones when the canoes tipped. We were only supposed to bring one, Clayton said, otherwise we’d be on them all the time.”

“I brought another one, anyway,” Clayton said. “But it got wet and didn’t work at all.”

“Allen said to wait till the storm blew over and we’d make a fire, but it rained and there was lightning all over the place, and blam….” She shook her head. “A tree came down right on the one tent. We could hear it crashing as it came.”

“It took us a long time in the dark to get the branches off their tent.”

“We thought Liza was dead.”

“It was pitch dark and the saw was out in the lake. We had to wait till morning to know if Liza was alive or not.”

“That’s the way it goes,” Jenni said. She felt there was some blame for recklessness, but saying so seemed a bit pointless. She couldn’t bring herself to find praise, though. Thunderstorms and canoes were not a good combination. It would have been a good idea to sit out the last portage until the skies had cleared. *But then*, she thought, remembering her marriage, *youth and being optimistic go together all too well*. The thought was interrupted by rumbling thunder and a darkening of the skies. Little winds danced in various directions on the lake and the tops of the poplars started to sway. There was a hissing sound among the branches.

There was no phone call. "Maybe," she told Matt, "we'd better put up a rain shelter, in case." They strung a rope between two trees, then threw the tarp over it. Jenni was still tying the edges of the tarp to trees when Matt looked up. "I think that's Kevin coming." She listened, as the sound of the helicopter rapidly grew louder, the noise competing with the thunder.

The bright blue and yellow machine bounced a bit in the wind, rocked backwards just a bit, then put its pontoons onto the water so close to the campsite that Jenni's canoe filled with water and the tarp blew loose.

"Jesus!" Clayton shouted over the noise. "That was either crazy or good."

"Guys," Matt yelled as the helicopter blades slowed, "meet Kevin Gawne." A big guy stepped onto one pontoon then threw a rope to Matt, who hauled the floating machine to the shore then tied the rope to a cedar. Across the lake, a bolt of lighting hit a treetop.

"You going to fly?" Matt yelled at Kevin. Kevin just nodded, then slid open a side door, but he was watching the sky all the while.

Matt shrugged and turned to Clayton. "Let's get our patients." First they helped Allen down the bank and into the helicopter, then they carried Liza, still in a sleeping bag over, where Kevin slid her inside.

"One more." the pilot shouted. "I may need help." He looked at Matt, and Matt looked behind him. Saundra pointed to Clayton. "He can help move them better than I can." Clayton looked like he was about to object, but the other three didn't seem to have any better idea, so he ran down, leapt onto the pontoon, and scrambled into the helicopter. Kevin slid the cargo door closed, cut the rope with a knife, and fired the engines to full throttle, chopping a few branches with the tips of the rotors.

Rain came walking across the lake in a curtain, but the helicopter dodged it and was suddenly gone into a dark cloud, the sound vanishing abruptly as rain hit the campsite. The big stage that was Poplar Lake was set for the next act, as the hissing of the rain grew closer. The

lake had become a riot of waves and flying spray while along shore the trees were writhing in the wind.

Matt looked at Saundra and pointed to her tent. She dove inside the door, then stuck her head out, but Jenni had already rescued the tarp from some bushes and beckoned to Matt. He didn't hesitate, but crawled under the tarp with Jenni, wrapping it tightly around them. Together they sat back to back as the wind flapped loose edges and the rain drowned out all possibility of talking. Whenever an edge got loose, one of them would reach out and haul it in.

"Kinda hoping a tree doesn't fall on us," Jenni said after a couple of minutes.

"I think…" Matt paused for a roll of thunder, "that most of the loose stuff must have come down last night." That was followed by the thump of a branch close enough to the tarp that a few twigs and leaves slapped the plastic near Matt's foot. "I take that back," he added. That was followed by a tremendous flash and bang and the acrid smell of burnt ozone, but the bolt at least missed the camp by a bit.

When the noise let up for a minute, Jenni yelled, "You okay, Saundra?"

Saundra's voice came back, "I'm starting to lose my affection for this particular campsite!"

"You and me both," Jenni yelled. *Odd*, she thought. *Me and this guy sitting back to back under a tarp. Probably as close as I'll get to sharing a tent with him*. For a moment, she couldn't decide whether to giggle or cry. She started making a list of people to call after the rain stopped. Lonnie, for sure, to get the lodge's boat. And Emilia because she'd be worried. And Tanya…. Well, maybe she'd wait a bit. Tanya didn't know she was where she was, and Jenni couldn't really ask for any advice at the moment.

"Sounds like that's it," Matt said, and Jenni realized that the rain had stopped and the thunder was moving away. She and Matt pushed the tarp up and away at the same time. Matt stood up first, then offered her a hand to help her get up. She was about to refuse, then realized she was stiff from sitting still, so she took it, wondering what he felt about that, but he let go abruptly and went over to Saundra's tent. "Anybody in there?" he asked.

Saundra's voice came from the nylon tent. "Has it stopped raining?"

"That's just water dripping from the trees. It's not as bad as it seems." Jenni was glad she had a Tilley hat on; every breeze brought a shower of drops onto their heads.

The last remnants of the storm left a sky full of shafts of sunlight slanting through torn clouds. The air was cool and fresh and the larger waves were already starting to fade from the lake. There was the smell of ozone and wet leaves.

Saundra unzipped the door and came out on hands and knees onto the wet pine needles. She turned, reached into the tent, and hauled out a rainproof jacket and a hat.

"You managed to keep those dry, yesterday?" Matt seemed surprised.

"Nah," Saundra said. "They got wet when the canoes rolled over, but we had a fire this morning and some of the stuff got dry." She shivered. "Just glad we had the tents and sleeping bags all wrapped up so they'd float." She looked up. "Is that the sun over there?"

"We're either between storms or it's over for the day. Hopefully." Jenni stretched and caught Matt deliberately not watching her, walking away. "We've got a few calls to make. I'll call the lodge, then you can use my phone." Matt, she saw, was already on his phone, facing the lake.

While Saundra hauled things out of her tent, Jenni pulled the tarp over the rope strung between trees again. There was lots of rope left, so she made another line between trees and threw anything wet over it. That included various lifejackets that had been left outside.

Then she walked to the canoes, hers, Matt's, and the two brought by the teens. All had water in them, from the rain and from the waves kicked up by the helicopter. She tilted her canoe to the side and began hauling it out of the water to dry it out. When she felt someone grab the rope, she turned and saw Matt helping her, and Saundra, brushing her blonde hair, just approaching.

For a few minutes they worked together, draining the water out of the canoes then dragging the canoes away from the lake. Jenni's canoe had been almost empty, except for the paddle and the legal kit (bailing bucket, whistle and rope), and the teens had emptied their boats. Matt's canoe had been only partly awash, but that had been enough to drench his tent. His sleeping bag and other stuff, Jenni noted, were safe in plastic garbage bags.

"Should have bagged the tent, I guess," Jenni said.

Matt looked annoyed. "When you called, I came as fast as I could. I didn't bother to do a proper job of packing up."

Jenni sighed. "You're right. Sorry. Thanks."

"No problem."

"Did I see you with a phone?" Saundra sat onto a stump, squeezing her hands together.

"Sorry," Matt apologized. "You must have a bunch of questions. Yes, I got Kevin on the phone. He says he got to Bancroft alright, although there were a bunch of thunderstorms he had to dodge."

"How are Allen and Liza doing?" Saundra was starting to show her exhaustion.

"Kevin says the doctors are looking at them now. He won't know much till later. You can use my phone to call whoever you need to call, if you want."

"Thanks. How much time can I have?"

"I've got a spare power unit; a 'juice pack'. You can have ten or fifteen minutes, but try to keep it to that."

Saundra took the phone and went over to the other side of the campground.

"I'm going to call Lonnie. The helper at the lodge. See if he can get a boat up to the portage before it gets dark," Jenni said, taking out her own phone. "It'll be nicer than spending the night in a wet tent. Trust me on this one." She frowned. "Especially since I don't have a tent, wet or otherwise." She got Emilia on the phone.

“Emilia?” As if someone else was going to answer Emilia’s phone.

“Jenni!” Emilia sounded surprised. “How are you? Where are you? What’s happening? Give me the scoop, but you'll have to shout; it's raining like crazy down here.”

“I’m still at the campsite.”

“Alone?”

“There’s Matt….”

“You’re going to share his tiny tent!”

“Cut it out. Saundra’s here. The others got helicoptered out an hour ago.” Jenni gave her a summary of the situation. She could hear thunder coming over the phone. "I'm beginning to suspect that asking for Lonnie to come get me wouldn't be a good idea," Jenni said.

"Sorry about that," Emilia said. "By the time this is over it'll be dark, I imagine, and Lonnie told me the outboard is acting up. Can you stay there till morning?"

"Looks like I'm going to have to." Jenni sighed. "I'll make a tent out of the tarp I brought."

"You can always snuggle up to Matt, you know."

"Sure," Jenni said.

"Where'd you guys get a helicopter?"

"Beats me. I'll phone you back if I need anything else."

"I'll have a root beer and chips and think of you all night." Emilia didn't sound too concerned. Jenni didn't know whether to take that as a compliment or not. "Oh," Emilia added, "Here comes that Lenny guy; he just got in. Boy, does he look wet!"

"Glad to hear he made it back safely."

“Hey, you rescued somebody. Two somebodies, actually. Congratulations!”

“Well, Matt did the rescuing, mostly.”

“Able assistant he was. If you hadn’t got mother-hen worried, those kids would be in serious trouble by now. How are they doing, by the way. Heard from the hospital in Bancroft, yet?”

That stopped Jenni. “I have to check with Saundra. She called them I imagine, but I didn’t ask her. She’s over talking to Matt.”

“I’m sure glad you phoned. This has been a wild afternoon across Ontario. Thunderstorms and downdrafts and maybe a tornado south of Orangeville. You going to try to make it back tonight?”

"I don't think so. It's too late even if we had good weather and no wind. The portages will be slippery by now." She was feeling tired. "And another storm might come up.”

"Do you want me to call Lonnie anyway? He’s home, but I can bail the boat if it stops raining before he gets here.”

Jenni closed her eyes, feeling tired and no longer in control of things. “No, Emilia. Don't do that. We have enough tents and sleeping bags here, and probably enough food, and I don't want to risk lives out on that lake."

"You sure you'll be okay?"

"Well, I was expecting to be back long before dark, and I brought only light clothes and a couple of sandwiches. But I can scrounge and maybe borrow from anything left behind by the guys gone to Bancroft. Anything that's not too wet, anyway."

"I'll phone back to check. We're all following your adventures here."

"And who is 'we all', I'd like to know…."

"Actually, it's me and Lonnie and Lenny and Hank Dayton the cat so far, but who knows what'll happen after supper. Oh, and did you catch the name on the helicopter?"

"Tanglewood Surveying and Consulting. Never heard of them before," Jenni said.

"Let me write that down." A pause. "Okay, Jenni, lost out in the deep dark woods with nobody between you and a man but one sweet young redhead."

"She's a blonde."

"Worse. Much worse."

"You're a blonde," Jenni noted.

"That's how I know so much. "On the good side," Emilia began.

"Yes?"

"You've got another woman to talk to."

"That's true."

"You have no idea how little sensible conversation there is with just a man at a campsite. It's all computers or cars or engines. You ask them about washing or toilet facilities, and all you get is a blank look and a guy waves his hands vaguely somewhere. But I gotta go. Bye."

After disconnecting, Jenni turned to Matt. "We're going to have to spend the night here. Can't get a rescue boat in till morning. Got another helicopter? And where the heck did you get that helicopter from, anyway?"

“That was handy,” Matt acknowledged.

“Well, yeah. I can’t remember the last time I called in a private helicopter to do me a favour.” Jenni bent her head and looked sideways at him. “Can I get Kevin’s number?”

“Right. Kevin and I go way back. We worked together in a couple of previous companies before we got jobs with Tanglewood.” Matt looked up at the clearing sky before continuing. “He’s doing some geological survey work in the area for a mining company.”

“Mining company?”

“Yeah. You know. Those people that rip up the land and pollute the waters and leave the taxpayers to pay the cleanup bills after making a few people rich.”

“Hey, I wasn't going to say that….”

“It’s not usually like that any more, at least it doesn’t have to be. And Tanglewood does a lot of contract work for ecological organizations at the same time.” Matt smiled. “The company sometimes makes money from both sides before a decision is made.”

“And they think there’s something worth looking for up this way?”

Matt looked at her for a moment. “That’s one thing I can’t talk about or I’d be in deep trouble with the boss. Don’t want to have to find another job if I can help it.”

“Kevin seems to know what he’s doing.”

“Kevin,” Matt said, “can fly that thing anywhere, anytime. I’ve taken up every religion known to man flying with Kevin. Rumour has it a guy can be peeing off a dock and Kevin can

give him a circumcision.” Matt stopped abruptly and blushed. He looked like he was about to apologize, but didn’t.

Jenni changed the subject. “Did he notify the air force?”

Matt nodded. “Kevin doesn’t forget details – its’ one of the things that keeps him alive, I guess, even if people in the air with him get heart attacks the way he flies.” He had another thought. “He said that he had to cut over the north end of Hawk Lake. He said he saw a fishing boat and a guy in a canoe. He thought they were nuts, with all the storms around.”

“The fishing boat would have been Lenny, trying to get back to the lodge. Emilia says he made it safely.” Jenni went quiet. The canoe was probably just some cottager running for home, but she was wondering just how crazy Julio was. "Did he say what color the canoe was?"

Matt gave her a quick, puzzled, look. "No, but you usually can't, in a helicopter. You're seeing it from above, and you're seeing the inside. Canoes look pretty much alike on the inside." He looked across the lake, where a trio of loons helped the scenery without really intending to. "If you get close enough to a canoe in a helicopter, it gets the canoe in trouble."

"You know this from experience?" Saundra's voice announced her arrival.

Matt looked at Saundra and smiled. "The guy in that canoe was an old friend who'd been making an ass of himself lately, and the guys at head office had, for sure, asked us to see if that was him in the canoe."

"Was it him?"

"Of course. The bottom of the canoe was readily identifiable…. " He turned to Jenni. "Was there someone you were looking for?"

Jenni paused a long time. "No. I don't think so." The silence got longer, so she said, "Like I said we have to spend the night here."

"I never thought of that!" Saundra seemed concerned.

Jenni shrugged. "It would take us at least an hour to reach Hawk Lake over the two portages, and what, two hours the length of Hawk Lake?" She looked at Matt.

"I took more than three, but I was exploring."

Saundra said, "We took a little less than two hours, but of course, our group's younger and half of them were running on surplus testosterone."

"We might make it before dark, but it'll be close." Jenni pointed to the sun, which was getting low in the sky. "Unless you've got another helicopter ride for us?"

Matt shrugged. "If you want to break an arm or leg, I can try, but otherwise, no. Kevin said the storm was coming in there pretty fast, and helicopter time is very expensive. Besides," he waved his hand around, "how would we get all this stuff out?"

Saundra dug Jenni's phone out of her pocket, then handed it over like her fingers didn't want to let go of it. *Kids today*, Jenni thought, and grabbed the phone with relief. She checked the battery, frowned, then walked to the firepit area, where Matt and Saundra were talking about motorcycles. They stopped when she waited. Into the sudden silence, Saundra asked, "Can I borrow someone's phone again?"

Jenni hesitated a moment. "It's getting low on battery. I'd like to save a bit for emergencies." She wondered if Saundra was going to protest that notifying people that she'd be another night in the woods constituted an emergency.

Before that happened, Matt interrupted, taking out his phone. "Take mine, Saundra; I actually brought two juice packs for it." He seemed a bit embarrassed. As he handed the Blackberry to the blonde, he said, "I can loan you one of the juice packs, Jenni. It'll charge your phone again in an hour or so."

"I'd like that Matt. How come a guy brings extra power for a phone he didn't want to turn on?"

Matt laughed. "Overanxious maybe? A bit of a Nervous Nellie? Unsure of my convictions? Or just like to be prepared? A cub scout who never quite grew up? I don't know…. What's your theory?"

"No theories on men from this chick any more," Jenni said firmly. I'm a slow learner, but I get there, as my grade two teacher used to say." She had a sudden daydream of herself dressed up in a strappy top and some high heels, having made an effort to be looking utterly casual without having tried at all.

"Rather matches my conclusions about women, I guess. But while Saundra's phoning everybody she knows and posting everything on her sites, maybe we can do an inventory of what we've got for the night."

"You're thinking of camping here? Rather than going back to Bass Lake?"

He looked over at Saundra-on-the-phone for some reason (other, Jenni assumed, than that Saundra was well worth a guy looking at). "The thought of being alone over there has its appeal, I guess. A lot of appeal. And I know that you two are both campers…. You'd do fine."

Jenni waited him out.

"I guess," Matt said, "it just somehow seemed like fate and circumstance put us three here and we might as well stay and see what happens." He pursed his lips tightly. "I've learned not to stupidly hang onto plans when things change."

"Gotcha. Makes sense to me. Personally…. Yeah, it's the best thing to do. Let's get on with that inventory." He handed Jenni his power pack; she connected it to her phone and set them on a stump.

Chapter 5

Tents were the first thing Matt and Jenni looked at. Matt's tent would hold two, in a pinch, but that didn't seem like a good idea.

"How come your stuff is all dry, except for the tent?" Jenni wanted to know.

Matt shrugged. "When I got to the Bass Lake campsite I put up the tent and threw everything inside, still in waterproof bags, and went fishing. When my fishing got so crudely interrupted…."

"I didn't see you catching much." Jenni noted.

"I was still figuring out the lake. When your call came, I just rolled the tent around everything else and threw it into the canoe. Everything but the outside of the tent is dry." He almost seemed proud of himself. "You can share a tent with Saundra," he added.

So much for romantic poems, Jenni thought. "Or I could sleep under the tarp, you know."

Matt considered that. "If you want. Probably not too many bugs at night this time of year."

"I'm kidding. Saundra will have to put up with me. It sure looks like the other tent," Jenni pointed at the flattened tent where Allen and Liza had camped, "isn't going to be of much use to anybody."

"Oh, I think every support rod is probably broken." Matt looked pensive. "What have we got in sleeping bags?"

Jenni's mood was brightening even as the sun got lower. Taking inventory of camping equipment was so much easier than taking inventory of one's life. "I can use Clayton's sleeping bag, assuming Saundra doesn't mind. And assuming she doesn't try to cuddle me all night since I'll be in Clayton's place and in his sleeping bag."

Matt said nothing, but Jenni figured he was imagining the benefits of cuddling with Saundra. "That does that," Matt said. "Let's see what we have in the way of food."

Saundra spoke up, which startled Jenni. *Must be the pine needles*, Jenni thought, *that made her approach so quiet*. "We lost a lot when the canoes rolled over. Most of the food and cooking gear was in one bag, and that went to the bottom. We only saved the snacks that were in Allen's bag. And we already ate those last night."

"I brought enough food for me for three days," Matt said. And we just have to have enough for supper and breakfast. Assuming you don't mind beans and dehydrated stew."

"Beans?" Saundra asked. "On a camping trip?"

"It was supposed to be a solo trip." Matt shrugged. "I was only sharing the tent with myself."

They spread the food onto the ground, around the firepit. Aside from the three packages of dehydrated food Matt had brought, and a bag of chips Jenni had brought, they had some cereal and granola that Saundra's group had brought packed into plastic bags. They had floated to the surface after the canoes overturned, Saundra told them. Finally, there were two colas and two cans of ginger ale, and five large chocolate bars.

"More than enough," Jenni said. "We need food for supper and something for breakfast, basically. Lonnie will pick up any of us who wish to go back to the lodge tomorrow morning, I imagine." She looked at Matt.

"I'll be getting back to civilization just as fast as I can," Saundra said. "I'm getting fond of places with roofs." She yawned. "I'll have all the chocolate; you guys can fight over the horse food." Then she laughed. "Just kidding. And, I meant to tell you, Clayton got another phone. They're keeping Allen and Liza in North Hastings Hospital in Bancroft. Apparently they're doing so well they'll be out in a couple of days. Clayton and Liza have already signed Allen's cast."

"So you'll be wanting to stay here for a few more days," Matt suggested, with a smile.

"I'll be wanting," Saundra said firmly, "to get into Bancroft and rent a motel room or a nice cabin by the lake. Somewhere that's dry when it rains, and warm in the nights."

Matt laughed. "Can't blame you for that." He sighed. "Myself, I don't know. I came here to catch fish and enjoy the solitude. Can't say I've had much of either, but then again, I hadn't been camped – or fishing – for very long before Jenni here showed up." He shrugged broadly, arms out and palms up. "I'll think about it and let you know tomorrow. Would that be okay?"

"Sure," Jenni said. "You going to camp here tonight, or go back to Bass Lake?"

"Oh, here, for sure." Matt seemed surprised at the question. "It's too late to go back to the other campsite anyway, so you two will just have to put up with me and the beans I had for breakfast this morning."

"Glad of it," Jenni found herself saying. Then felt she had to add something. "Always good to have a man around to chop wood and protect us from bears."

"That's right!" Matt raised a thumb. "It's national Sexist Stereotypes Week. I'd completely forgotten. Well, if you girls will put some supper on, this boy will go get some firewood. Anybody have an axe or saw?"

"Axe," Saundra said. "Saw." She pointed at the lake and raised her eyebrows.

"Just as well I brought a little folding Swede saw." Matt sorted through his backpack and hauled out the tool.

Jenni turned to Saundra. "What do you think? Stew and beans for supper?"

"You going to share my tent?" Saundra wanted to know.

"I might have to."

"Then we'll save the beans till tomorrow. We'll split the two packs of stew into three parts, and have granola with it." We can eat the beans tomorrow morning."

"I like that idea." Jenni looked over her shoulder. Matt had made a small pile of twigs and some birch bark to start a fire going again."

"You were in the scouts." She noted.

"Got a badge for making a fire in a pouring rain," Matt said. "It's wet here, but not that wet." He went into the forest looking for better fuel. Jenni knew it was always harder finding firewood at the end of a season, after summer campers had taken all the loose and nearby deadwood.

There were three old grates at the campsite – campers tended to bring a stove or fridge grate, prop it on some stones over the fire, then leave it, blackened and bent, when they left for home. Jenni also knew that you didn't want to cook food, such as meat or vegetables right on a grate; fridge grates were high in nickel and not good for the human system. But Matt's cooking pot was big enough to hold the stew and the water needed to rehydrate it, so Saundra added a few more twigs to the flames and they took turns stirring the result while trying to avoid the smoke, which circled inconsistently from the fire.

"You've had a long day," Jenni said. The rock she was sitting on seemed to be slanted to one side.

"That's for sure." Saundra said forcefully, using a twig to pick a piece of ash out of the pot.

"How's Clayton handling things?"

"He texted me a couple of minutes ago. He'd like to come back, get his stuff, and spend another night here. I told him he'd have to find a way to the lodge, then rent a canoe."

"Sound like a plan?"

Saundra snorted. "Got any lip balm? It's one of the many things I forgot."

Jenni fished a tube of Carmex out of her pack. "You sound like you're looking forward to civilization."

"Believe me, most of human history is men killing each other and women improving on creature comforts. First thing I want is a warm shower that comes from a water heater and has shampoo and conditioner nearby. I do have a comb. Would you like to borrow it?"

"For sure." Jenni smiled, and said, "I think I'm ready to go home before a tree falls on me, too. Get back to civilization. Find a real toilet."

Saundra got a far-away look in her eyes. "Oh lordy, a toilet that's got a dry seat and no spiders. And lights, and…."

"You've only been here two nights," Jenni pointed out.

"Next year, rent a cabin. Tie the canoe up in front. Paddle in the morning; go shopping in the afternoon. Cripes, I'm starting to look forward to my job, believe it or not."

"You have a full-time job?" Jenni, unemployed at the moment, felt a pang of envy.

"Just a data entry job at an insurance company to help pay my way through school. Pretty dull, but I like the people." She shook a wrist, accidentally flinging a rehydrated carrot chunk into the bushes. "I'll probably end up like my aunt, with carpal tunnel syndrome."

"I had that." Jenni shook her head at the memory. "My advice is to get surgery if your doctor says to. I waited a lot longer than I should have to get mine."

"I've already got tendonitis in my mousing elbow, but I work out a lot and that seems to help."

Jenni wondered where Saundra found the time to work out. But it did sound like a reasonable thing to do. "I worked out pretty regular," Jenni said, not specifying how often "regular" was. "Then I got married, and, well…."

"Married, eh? Darn. I was going to introduce you to Bentley, my stalker-guy."

"You have your own personal stalker?"

"At work, I do. Bentley's always sending me emails that aren't related to anything to work. The way I look in my tight jeans is a favorite subject of his."

"Yuk."

"Well, I didn't get to wear jeans except on Fridays, but I had to stop that too. He probably thinks he's complimenting me. He keeps pretending to be my best buddy, even when I tell him I don't need one."

"Let me guess, short and wide."

"Actually, except for his bizarre taste in clothes and military haircut, he's okay-looking." She paused to taste the stew and move the pot to a cooler location on the grate. "I don't know who he thinks I am, but it sure isn't me.

"You think?"

"Biggest problem with men. Can't get the bastards to see a woman like she is, instead of how he'd like her to be. Might be different after I get married."

"Maybe not. Julio – he's my husband for a few days more – spent the entire marriage trying to remake me into the girl he really wanted."

"I hope he was polite about it."

"No." Jenni suddenly realized why she reacted to Matt so badly. He couldn't possibly have a clue about the real Jenni. *Someday, if I don't get stupid again*, she thought, *I'll find someone who wants me for myself after he gets to know me.* Someday. She wasn't optimistic, the way things were going. "You have a cat?"

"Cat?" Saundra seemed puzzled by the change in topic. "Nope, but I'm going to get one as soon as I can. Probably inherit one when my grandparents get put into the nursing home."

"I've got one now. Quarto's a bit nervous because he never knew when Julio was going to pet him and when he was going to throw something at him."

"Poor cat. I intend to have a dozen when I get old and my knees get bad." Saundra paused to look down at her current wrinkled outfit. "Actually, I think with all this rain, I'm starting to wrinkle already. And look like a bag lady."

"Some women," Jenni said, "look dressed to the nines no matter how many days they've been out in the bush. I never managed that."

"I could go on a month-long canoe trip," Saundra said, "if they'd let me spend every third or fourth day in a nice hotel room. Including one just before I got back to civilization."

"Doesn't look like we're going to get that chance here." She looked up at a bird passing overhead, as if she were suspicious it might drop something on her head.

About twenty minutes into the process, the food, according to a taste test by Saundra, was ready, and Matt had returned with a substantial load of branches.

"Problem," Jenni announced. "We have a pot of stew, but only one plate and one bowl, one fork and one spoon. All of which are owned by one Matt the Lone Fisherman of Bass Lake."

"No problem," Matt said. "Put one third of the stew onto the plate for Saundra, one third into the bowl for Jenni, and leave one third in the pot for me. I'll wash the spoon off when I get back with more wood."

"That'll probably take him a while," Saundra said, serving Jenni a bowl of the stew and herself a plateful. A chipmunk made a brief appearance from behind a tent. "We spent a few hours dancing naked around the campfire yesterday after we swam ashore and the rain had gone. Had our clothes strung on a line near the fire on the downwind side. They dry quicker that way, but they'll smell of smoke for a long time."

"Sounds primeval," Jenni said, "but a little lacking in privacy."

Saundra settled onto a piece of plastic from a garbage bag, legs out and her back against a big rock. "No problem about that, although Liza seemed a bit uncomfortable. Not like we hadn't seen each other naked before anyway." She looked across the lake, where the few clouds left were turning pink with the approaching sunset. "There was an unspoken agreement that we might switch tent partners for the second night."

"Okay…."

"And then halfway through the night, boom, the rain and wind and lightning branched and trees falling and Liza screaming. I think she thought the branch had broken most of her bones and killed Allen."

"Wow!" Jenni tasted the stew. It wasn't bad, or maybe it was just because she hadn't eaten much other than snacks since breakfast.

"And we didn't have any flashlights, except a little one on a keychain that Clayton had in his pocket. We got the branch off their tent, then Clayton cut the tent open to get Liza and Allen out. It was still raining, and we sort of dragged them into our tent."

"Crowded tent."

"Full of wet people, hardly any light, and two people in terrible pain." Saundra shook her head. "It was a long time till morning." Then, because Matt hadn't got back yet, she pushed the pot back towards the flames. "I'm thirsty," she said, looking at an almost empty plastic water bottle. "And very tired."

"Thirsty?" Matt said from across the campsite, dragging back another dead tree branch. Or maybe a tree; Jenni wasn't sure. Since all they'd need would be enough firewood for the morning's breakfast, she began to wonder if he was planning to stay longer, or if he had security issues. Maybe he lived with Annie and his mother or something. Or maybe staggering through the woods with big logs was as much wilderness experience as he figured he was likely to get. Still puffing, Matt appeared again with a small bag. He extracted a water purification pump, and said, "Give me a few minutes and a container and I'll get you some drinking water from the lake."

Jenni got up. "No you won't. I know how to run one of those things. Eat the stew your harem made for you while you were out pulling up trees by their roots."

"Bears," Matt said, sitting down and reaching for the stew pot. "I fought off a herd of bears, too, and a couple of mountain lions." He looked around, then inspected the spoon Saundra had used. "Any known social diseases?" he asked. When Saundra shook her head, he wiped the spoon clean with a few pine needles, then cleaned it on a tail of his shirt. "Remind me to wash this shirt when I get home," he said, and started in on the stew.

Jenni found a spot along the shore where she could kneel in a position that wasn't totally painful, and pumped water from the lake, through the filter, and into a plastic container Matt had brought with him.

It was a slow process, forcing lake water through a porcelain filter to remove giardia and other icky living things, but they needed the water, and Jenni was glad to be alone. Or not; she could hear the other two talking and laughing back near the tents.

She switched hands to give some of her muscles a rest. It was still hard finding a good place to kneel, but she had the big water container almost full. The call of a loon out on the lake, and its echo by another loon further away, caught her attention. Who are they laughing at, she wondered. The only trees still lit by the sun were on the tips of a far-away hill. The water was dark and still, and the trees across the lake started to look like fangs. *My life, so far*, she thought. *Maybe next year things will be looking better*. She started up towards the campsite.

Saundra was talking up a storm about schoolwork and Matt was feeding small sticks into a growing fire in the firepit. Saundra was, Jenni noted, looking young and shapely. Obviously she was wearing more expensive camping clothes, but a better figure didn't hurt her any. *I wonder what would happen if I left them alone*, she wondered.

Matt turned to Jenni. "Our water girl! Thanks, Jenni."

Saundra said, pointing, "look what Matt found.

"Lawn chairs?" Jenni said. "We have lawn chairs?"

"He found them over behind the cedars," Saundra said. "They were hidden."

"Life is indeed looking up," Jenni acknowledged, then decided that that sounded like she didn't appreciate it, so she added, "I mean it. Dad always said that finding a comfortable place to sit was the biggest problem in camping. We sometimes took lawn chairs in the fishing boat," she added. "I have to agree with him," she tacked on. "How many?"

"Only two," Matt said, so we'll have to, ah, change around. Share."

"No you won't." Saundra shook her blonde hair. "I was up most of last night and need some sleep so bad I'm getting giddy. Next thing you know I'll be dancing around the fire."

That image, Jenni figured, probably did something to Matt's brain, after a bit of masculine editing. "Are you sure?"

"I am very, very, sure," Saundra said. "When you're ready just crawl into the tent if you want. I'll leave Clayton's sleeping bag unzipped so you can get in without waking me up." She turned on a flashlight and handed Jenni her phone. "First a visit to the facilities." She disappeared in the direction of the pit toilet further back in the woods.

"I'll see you in the morning, then, I guess," Matt said. "I'm going to stay up for a while and watch the fire." He opened a lawn chair and sat down, using a stick to poke at the fire.

Jenni looked at Saundra's tent. She looked at the lawn chair. The rest of the world was pretty dark. *What the hell*, she thought, and sat down maybe a third of the way around the fire. The smoke, of course, drifted around and she held her breath until it had changed direction again. Somewhere inside her, she heard a warning: *beware of moonlight and firelight; the woods brings out the primitive instincts*. She decided to ignore it.

"You're staying up?" Matt waved at the smoke, but a small breeze had come up, and it was taking the smoke plume out over the lake and dropping the temperature a bit.

"Sorry to spoil your solitude. Again." With the brightness of the fire the rest of the world seemed nothing but blackness. Somewhere across the lake a loon laughed again.

"Well, you didn't have much choice this afternoon." Matt shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

But I did have a choice this evening, Jenni thought. "I'm a bit keyed up and I don't think I could get to sleep anyway. If you don't mind, I'd like to stay up for a while." *What the heck*, she thought, *it could get interesting*.

"Pleased to have you here." That was followed by a long silence, interrupted only by the crackling of the fire and the shifting of burning logs. The night was cooling fast, Matt broke a branch over his knee and threw the two parts into the flames.

Just what, Jenni wanted to know, *is he thinking?* "Am I making you uncomfortable?" she asked. "I can go into the tent – Saundra's tent – and try to sleep if you need some time alone." She scratched an itch on her leg. Something scuttled in the bushes behind her.

Around a fire legs always get hotter than the rest of a person. Melted toes and drifting smoke are the big hazards of a campfire. Both Jenni and Matt shifted their legs to the side at the same time.

"Actually, yes, you are making me uncomfortable. Or I'm making me uncomfortable." Matt scratched his own leg. "But I'd prefer you to stay. Might as well deal with it." He tossed another branch into the fire, but the fire really didn't need it, Jenni observed. She hoped he wasn't getting symbolic with the fire.

"Okay. Do you own a cat?" Jenni looked at him but he was watching the embers.

"Pardon? No."

"Damn. I was trying to introduce a conversational gambit," Jenni said. "A person can always start with comparing cats."

"So you own a cat?"

"Well…. One."

"So much for that conversation." Matt shifted legs. "Jenni's short for Jennifer?"

"Jenni. Two n's and an i. Short for Jennifer."

"Most Jennifers are Jenns, as far as I've seen."

"That's the number one reason I don't call myself 'Jenn'".

"Sounds like a plan. Why the i at the end? Instead of a y?"

"Jenny with a y is a female mule." Jenni found a twig and tossed it onto the fire, sending up a few sparks which Matt dodged. "On the other hand, my mother always said I was stubborn like a mule. She might have been right. Sometimes I hang on to kite strings I should let go of."

"Join the club." There was a longer pause. "I guess your friend… Emilia? I guess she told you about my reaction to you."

"Of course. We're women, you know."

"Well, let me first apologize for whatever bizarre part of my brain does such a thing."

"I guess my beauty overthrew ya. Understandable." Jenni was starting to relax a bit. Not much, but a bit. Maybe it was because however uncomfortable she felt, he seemed to feel worse.

There was no laughter or snort of derision. "Don't think so. Every day in the city I see one or two women more beautiful." Matt even sounded sincere.

At least one or two, Jenni thought. *How tactfully phrased*. Maybe if she could put on some eye makeup and a cocktail dress and get a push-up bra, she'd look better. She shook her head; *why would she want to look better for Matt? Obviously primeval forces at work.* "Emilia's better looking than me."

"She is."

Truth is cheap, Jenni thought, then realized it wasn't all that common. "Then why me?"

Matt looked away. "I'm a man," he said, assembling his thoughts slowly. "I fall in love with five women who pass me on the streets of Oshawa every day. For a whole four seconds each." He kicked the fire. "I have impure thoughts, as the preacher would say, more times a day that I'd ever admit to."

"And this isn't that?"

"This isn't that. I've met women so physically beautiful that I get tongue-tied and can't say anything but gibberish. And I've had heart-tearing crushes on girls since I was old enough to ride a bike."

"Not those either."

"And I've fallen in love a couple of times. Real love, with someone I got to know." he paused. "Or thought I knew."

"And I'm not in that file, either?"

"This never happened before." Matt stirred the embers and this time it was Jenni's turn to dodge the flying sparks that rose into the air.

"So," she said. "That leaves us with love at first sight, just like they say."

"Don't be silly!" Matt looked at her, angrily. "Whatever you feel about someone you don't know might be called something, but I'm damn sure it isn't love." He stared into the darkness. "Just how could you love someone you know nothing about?"

"The newspapers tell about people who fell in love at first sight," Jenni pointed out.

"I have no doubt," Matt said, "that there are a lot of cases where two people noticed each other, smiled, and got married a year later. After getting to know each other. That's an attraction

that turns into love. Of course that happens. Of course." He kicked the fire. "Love grows like a flame. The conditions have to be right. Otherwise, you're just living in delusions."

"You'd know that?" She seemed to have made him angry, but that was fine. She was sure that was just fine.

"You hear about love at first sight. A lot. My parents always said it happened to them. But if you ask about the details, you find that their eyes met in a room full of other people they weren't interested in. They smiled at each other and thought, "that person looks interesting. He walked over, and talked. That went well enough that they had a coffee together, and another a couple of days later. Half a year later they figured they were in love and a few months after that they got engaged."

"I've seen that happen." *That's pretty well how it went with Julio*, she thought, but decided it wasn't the time to tell that to Matt.

"For the rest of their lives they told people it was love at first sight. but it wasn't. It was interest at first sight, and they spent months falling into love." Matt shifted. "I've never heard of people rushing into each others arms, prepared to abandon everything else after a ten-second glance. Have you?"

"Not anybody sober," Jenni said. She decided not to mention Lonnie's encounter with the same phenomenon.

"That's right. That's exactly right."

"I must admit it never happened to me. I've taken my time getting to think I knew somebody before getting it all wrong." Jenni, got up, found a branch to break off, and tossed it onto the fire.

"I've been in love," Matt said. "Real love. Grew it like a rhubarb bed in spring. Like you said, I took the time to get to know someone before getting it all wrong."

"How did it turn out?"

There was a silence, then Matt got up and dragged more branches near, He broke some of them up, snapping them in his hands. When he sat down again, he just said, "Ashes. Ashes in the wind. Maybe next time, if I get a next time, I'll take a bit longer. Hand out some psychological tests or something." He turned to her. "You've done better in life, I suppose?"

Jenni ignored the question. That must be some marriage Matt had, she thought. They had something in common, but she had no desire to tell him about her marriage. "And then I wandered into your view."

"The first thing I thought," Matt said, "was that you probably reminded me of someone else. A girl I had a crush on in grade eleven, maybe, or my mother, or a fairy tale my mother read me when I was too young to know better."

"Makes sense." Jenni thought that maybe that's why she took to Julio. Not just a desire to get away from her family. She decided she'd work on that idea later. "Which was it?"

"I went through my memories and came up with nothing." Matt sighed. "Either my memory is bad or that isn't the solution."

"So what now? I get my own personal stalker? Doesn't sound like fun to me."

"Hardly that, Jenni. All I feel is annoyance."

"Not anger."

"Close, sometimes. I'm not enjoying the process at all."

"I won't have to be watching over my shoulder?"

"Well, right now, if you asked me to give up everything and go live in a trailer outside Dawson City, I'd probably do it, knowing every second it wasn't right. But," Matt added, "I think I'll just get away as fast as I can and hide as well as I can."

"Great. I'm becoming a gargoyle."

"Whatever works for you." Matt looked at her. "Look, I can't apologize enough for this whole thing. If I were you, I'd be nervous of the guy sitting over here."

"Oh, you think I should be?"

"Nope. Totally harmless, regardless."

"All the serial killers say that." Jenni was getting depressed, not at Matt, but at the distance between them.

"You got a point there." Matt went silent.

"It would be different if you had a cat." They stared into the fire for a while. The silence lengthened, and Jenni thought maybe she'd better go to bed anyway.

"You like canoeing, I guess," Matt said. "Wouldn't a motorboat be more fun?"

"I do," Jenni acknowledged. She thought a bit. "I like the independence. I like following the shores, watching the forest. If I see a creek leading into a swamp, I can push the canoe up there for a bit. through the weeds. Hard to do that in a motorboat.

"That's true."

"If I think there's another lake not far away, I can carry my canoe over, and see what it's about." She looked up as a couple of early fall leaves drifted down. "When I see rocks under the canoe, I can just watch them drift by, instead of frantically trying to save the prop."

"Sounds more peaceful than a motorboat, for sure. Ever done canoe-camping?"

"With my father a couple of times. With Julio a couple of times, but he generally found it boring. I guess he liked having people around to impress. Three or four times by myself?"

"By yourself? That's not usually a girl thing to do."

"I was a bit nervous the first couple of times, but I found I liked the silence and the peacefulness. You?"

"I like to camp on the hilltops," Matt said. I like hills. I see a hill, and I'll climb to the top. Sometimes there's a good view; most of the time there isn't. I'm happy either way. I like the outdoors, and I wanted to try canoeing, so as soon as I was sure my mother wasn't going to haunt me, I rented that canoe."

They both listened to the fire crackling and the night sounds of the forest. The smoke drifted around again, full of cedar smells. Then Matt said, "Who's stupider, men or women?"

"Women," Jenni said without thinking.

Matt looked over at her. The firelight lit half his face, with its puzzled expression. "What about the wrecked cars and the silly macho games?"

"Women believe in love. Sooner or later they believe in the dream, and the smoke, as the old song says, gets in their eyes."

"Aren't some women happily married? I know some that seem okay with their choice."

Jenni thought of Emilia. "So do I. Can you see the stars tonight?"

"Not with this campfire going. Is that your point?"

"Yeah. Too much flame, too much light, blinds women. Attracts them. Outside it, they feel like they're missing something essential. Inside it, they can't see much."

"And yet?"

"There are a lot of good men on this planet. Some women get lucky. Bound to happen." Jenni watched him as he turned his face back to the fire and put another stick onto it. The fire, by this time, was mostly embers.

"Happens to men, too, you know."

"Not as often."

"But it happens."

"Blinded by love? Are we about to elope?"

"Not me," Matt said. "You might have made me crazy, but I'd hate to think I was that crazy."

"What I want," Jenni said, "is a marshmallow and a camp song. And some of the years I've lost. Maybe I'd like to be with my father at some lakeside campsite with the future still ahead of me."

"You miss your father?"

"Why would it be crazy to elope with me? Leap into the great unknown. A whole future on a sudden whim, or a shot between the eyes by Cupid's arrow. Assuming I were crazy enough to go along with it."

"Did that," Matt said. "Not suddenly, but in a year or less I was in love. Real love."

"Marriage?"

"The whole thing. Big wedding, nice house…."

"Love?"

"She probably thought so, at first. I like to think so."

"And you?"

"Stubborn. Bit of mule in me, too, I guess. Too much a sense of commitment and not enough common sense. One day I realized I was trying to warm myself by ashes."

"And you were out of there, of course."

A silence. "I turned out to have more of a stupid sense of commitment than I knew." Matt kicked at a stick near the fire.

"You learn things when you get married, or so I found out, too." Jenni poked the fire. "Is there any more wood?"

"Lots. I seem to have planned for a very long night." He got up.

"I guess love is a lot more complicated than we thought it would be."

Matt shook his head. "I get the feeling that it's pretty simple. We just don't know the rules."

Jenni thought about that one, then shook her own head. She was sure that if the rules of love had been simple, she'd have figured them out. But she wasn't going to say that to Matt. "It must have been pretty hard," she said.

"I don't like to talk about it. Sorry about that. I much prefer denial. The more I concentrate on a problem, the worse it seems to get. A guy thing, I think."

Jenni figured he must be doing it all wrong, but she also figured it wasn't a good time to get into a debate. "Looks like we'll both be canoeing alone, at least for a bit."

"I might just prefer it that way."

"Annie doesn't mind?"

"Oh, until they can fit a wheelchair into a canoe, it's going to be me alone. We used to canoe, way back when, but after the accident…. You're married, did Emilia say?"

Was he just trying to make conversation? Jenni wondered. *Did he himself know why he asked?* She made a sudden decision. Enough of being something in the back of his brain. She'd just talk until he figured out the real Jenni. Or got bored and ran off to his tent.

"Julio and I went canoeing a fair amount. He wasn't much of a fisherman, but he liked challenging the wilderness or something like that. We met on a group canoeing expedition."

"And you took to him."

"He had confidence. He believed in himself without any doubt. I had none of that. And he's a good-looking guy." Jenni wondered if she should have said that; maybe Matt would feel she was comparing men. But she went on. "He's into muscle building. Not in a competitive way; just enough to turn a girl's head."

"That," said Matt, "is the combination I've put in for in my next incarnation."

It was true. Jenni knew a few muscles and a lot of confidence was what most men needed to stand out. She didn't detect a surplus of either in Matt. Matt was a reasonably good-looking guy, but a bit low on animal magnetism. "I was pleased that he noticed me. He wasn't much of a brain, I guess, but that wasn't what most girls were after."

"I don't think people should be allowed out of school without some older people telling them the truth about love and marriage."

"We were kids. We wouldn't have believed them anyway. Did you have any kids?" It was, Jenni realized, a beautiful night to fall in love, to make an appointment for whenever and never and talk about children and stars. But…

"No." Matt poked at the fire again. "She didn't want any. You?"

"My father was getting pretty sick by the time I married Julio. He didn't approve at all, but I was getting stubborn about it, so he made me promise to wait three years before having kids."

"Smart man."

"Yeah, I guess he knew something. He died when I'd been married a year or so. If he'd lived beyond my teenage years we could have gone fishing again. I think about him a lot."

"I don't. Look back, I mean. I see an old wizard talking to me. He says, 'Never look back; that way madness lies'".

"I don't know how you do that."

"You're a woman. Men think of one thing at a time. Well, two things. But once you've got them in your mind, the rest of the world gets shoved away."

"Must be nice."

"Is."

Jenni looked up. "At least, with the woods this wet, we're not going to start a forest fire."

In the long silence that followed, Jenni thought about her father and Emilia and Tanya, and a few other things. She wondered how she looked by firelight. Candles were supposed to make a girl look better, but Jenni suspected that firelight wasn't as good. *Darn shame*, she thought, and made another resolution to take up jogging. She might not ever get to the standards that Emilia and Saundra set, but it couldn't hurt. *Anyway*, she decided, *the worse I look, the better chance I have of getting rid of this guy before any damage is done*…. She looked away from the fire and up. After her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she saw a few stars. *Beautiful*, she thought. *I've always liked the night stars. I wonder how they look from a hilltop.*

"You seem to get along with Emilia," Matt said.

Jenni nodded, although Matt was looking the other way, out into the darkness. "She's a good friend. I'm just helping her for a couple of weeks at the lodge, then I'll go back to looking for another job. Got caught in the layoffs at the last one. Emilia's a teacher, mostly contract, but about to get a longer job this year, when some woman goes on maternity leave in a couple of weeks. Her husband works in Oshawa. Am I boring you?"

Matt actually laughed. "No, I like to find out what other people think; I obviously know too little, Spent my time studying rocks instead of people." He sounded happy thinking of that. "My wife always knew what I was, I suppose, but she just assumed she could change me. Into what, I'm not sure."

"But you got a job studying rocks?"

"I turned out to be good at visualizing real landscapes by looking at maps, and made a few good guesses. Now I work as a consultant. It's not like being paid to walk the hills alone, like I used to do, watching the sky and being wild as the spring wind when the flowers first come out, but it pays a lot better." He looked into the fire. "What happened with you and Julio?"

Jenni had no desire to tell him the details. "I blamed myself for every problem we had. Figured it must be something I was doing wrong, in spite of what my friends told me."

"I've seen that happen to other women. There's not much you can tell them."

"One day I woke up with a picture of my father in my mind, saying it wasn't my fault. And I realized he was right. "

"And your friends all thought you'd finally taken their advice."

"Of course. Now they're on my case a lot. You hadn't more than left the car before Emilia was sending the two of us off to the Bahamas." More silence. "All ashes in the wind," Jenni said.

"Pardon."

"You were saying that a minute ago. A poet, I understand."

Long pause, then, "Ah, Lenny. Did he tell you that?"

"He showed me a couple of stanzas you wrote."

"Sometimes I write things to dismiss them."

"Sounds like a plan," Jenni said.

"I'm guessing," Matt said, "that Julio never ever saw the real Jenni. All he saw was something else. And you're pissed off at some dude who is attracted to you without knowing you. Déjà vu all over again."

"And you're not ready to let go of someone who didn't want you either. There's a lot of anger somewhere in all that."

"You might be right. Or not."

"We could get paddles and beat each other for a while," Jenni said.

"And each of us would be substituting for someone else. Sounds like misdirected bruising."

"Yeah."

"We could try to be friends."

"Not yet." Jenni stretched a bit. "Someday."

"I think you're right."

I'm bitter, Jenni thought. *Those times I caught Julio cheating on me hurt me too much. Maybe if and when Matt's single, I'll look him up*. "How did you do in school," she asked. *He'd be happier talking to Saundra or Emilia,* she thought.

"Quiet, solitary. The gloomy poet."

"Some girls find that attractive."

"Maybe. None of them managed to find me." Matt got up, brought a few more branches close to the fire pit. "I have a good and interesting job and a nice house. Five years ago I was wondering what I'd be doing."

"Hobbies?"

"I go sailing with some friends sometimes, and I write poetry. Annie and I travel a bit, sometimes together, sometimes not. I do a lot of swimming. I used to swim a lot in high school. Mostly just to prove I wasn't a complete nerd."

"That's okay?"

"Just fine with both of us."

"And you live together."

"Same house, different sections."

"You must be the type of guy who's strong on commitment or something." Jenni scratched an itch on her lower back and hoped it wasn't something alive.

"Could be that, or just stubborn. Like a mule. I know one."

"A mule?"

"A mule named Johnson. I do volunteer work at a donkey sanctuary out in the country once or twice a month."

"Do you like that?"

"I do. They save up some of the heavy work, like moving hay around. Johnson's the only mule, and we get along well. The rest are all donkeys that people have abandoned or mistreated."

Jenni shook her head. "Why would anybody mistreat a donkey?"

"Most of the time they don't mean to. But people try to treat them like a horse, and their health suffers. Worse than that, donkeys suffer in silence, and people can't understand what's wrong. So, eventually, the sanctuary gets them."

"Sounds like you're doing fine." Jenni wondered how happy he was.

"Being with Annie doesn't cover everything. A bad marriage leaves a few lost spaces. Sometimes I'm like an old piano, out of tune and missing some notes that will never be played again. A harbor full of boats afraid of the storms." He smiled ruefully. "Do you miss love?"

"I'm a woman. I feel like one of those donkeys in your sanctuary, wondering how I ended up there and why someone didn't try harder to figure me out."

"Still married?"

"Separated."

"What advice would you give a younger girl about love? After all you've been through?

Jenni shrugged. "The logical thing would be to tell her to listen more to her head and less her heart. To find some friends who can look around the smoke and fire and give her some advice."

"You think that would work?"

Jenni laughed. "Give up the magic for logic? What young girl would ever listen?"

"Tell me about yourself."

"Like what?" Jenni wasn't sure where to start, or if she should start.

"How'd you end up at the Two-and-a-Half Pine Resort, for example."

Well, thought Jenni. *I can talk. I guess, if nothing else, I can bore the guy till he runs screaming into the lake*. So she started. She talked about her job, and how it ended with company layoffs six months ago and of where she grew up. And her friends. Every job she'd had since she was a kid, and everything else from political opinions to the movie stars she liked. Strangely enough, she got more cheerful as she went through it. Partway through she was telling funny anecdotes about most of her life and laughing out loud.

After about twenty minutes she ran out of things to say. When the silence got long, Matt started to describe how he got his lure undone from the tree after Jenni had left. He made the story very funny. Jenni, who had had similar episodes while fishing with her father, laughed. Encouraged, Matt told a few more stories about the consulting business that were almost as funny, then seemed to wear down.

"That's what you do?" Jenni asked. "Read maps for a consulting company?"

"That's it. Maps and landscapes. The company owns the helicopter that took away Clayton and the rest."

"Mining consulting?"

Matt nodded. "That and things like tracing underground water streams for municipalities, and providing information for environmental groups opposed to the mining groups or what the municipalities want to do. They work for anybody willing to hire people like me and a helicopter."

"You sound like you like it."

Matt shrugged. "A person likes work he's good at, if people tell him he's good at it."

"But that's all outdoor stuff. And you don't seem… in a canoe...."

Matt laughed. "I've done lots of boating, but not in a canoe. My uncle – my mother's brother – died while fishing from a canoe, and my mother made it clear she didn't want to see me in a canoe." He paused. "She died about five years ago…."

"You miss her," Jenni noted.

"So here we sit, both of us disappointed in love," Matt said, changing the subject. "Where did we go wrong?"

"Just unlucky?" Jenni shifted in her chair. "And stubborn. Me the patient donkey and you the mule that won't change."

"Yeah," Matt said. "I'm a slow learner sometimes." He seemed far away.

"And you say you never walked out?"

"Maybe I should have." He looked at Jenni, the light from the fire playing on his face. "How did we get so lost in the jungles of love?" he asked. There was a moment when a possible sympathy hand squeeze seemed possible, but the moment came and went.

Jenni thought, suddenly, *I like him*.

Matt asked her, "What happened to your marriage? Did you wake up one morning and discover a note on the table or something?"

"I walked out. It was Julio who got the note."

There was a long silence. "Why?" The fire was down to a red glow, but Matt didn't make any move to get more wood.

"Some things…" Jenni said, "Some things just don't work out." She changed the subject. "But you're still living with Annie, aren't you?"

"That's a long-term relationship."

A man who doesn't know when to let go, Jenni thought. *Noble, but stupid sometimes.* "Not about to walk away."

He smiled. "Not me. Not from Annie."

What was that poem about? Jenni wondered. She took it from her pocket. "I got this from Lenny. It's a poem of yours."

He seemed to recognize it instantly. "Ah," he said. "Ah. I…."

"I wondered if you wrote it for Annie."

The thought seemed to surprise him. "Annie? Oh, no. Not for Annie." He hesitated a long time. "Can I have it?"

"Of course," Jenni said. "It's yours, in the end."

"I'm sorry. It was meant to be a three-stanza poem, and I only finished the first two." He crumpled it and threw it into the fire, where it flared briefly.

Good, Jenni thought. *Who wants an unfinished poem?*

"It's late," Matt said, getting up and heading into the woods. Jenni's eyes followed his flashlight among the trees then stood up and found the fold-up bucket Matt had brought. She made her way carefully down to the lake, grateful that the moon was bright enough to see, once her eyes had adjusted from the firelight. It was beautiful with the moonlight on the lake. She lugged a bucket of water to the firepit and dumped it onto the coals. There were still hot spots, but the landscape was so wet that she wasn't worried the fire would spread. Matt hadn't returned, so she found Saundra's tent, unzipped the front, and crawled in. Saundra didn't move as Jenni zipped the tent up and crawled into Clayton's sleeping bag.

Sometime in the night, Jenni woke up. For a moment Jenni imagined that she heard Julio whistling “The Shadow of Your Smile,” a tune he’d always insisted was “their” song. She listened carefully, but heard nothing but an owl across the lake and the usual crashing of whatever somewhere in the bush. When you camped at night, there was always something making noise somewhere. You let your imagination do the rest, her father had once told her, or you went back to sleep. A whippoorwill called from somewhere close.

Then she figured out what had woken her: Saundra was crying. Jenni reached over to wrap her arms around Saundra, holding her for a moment. "You've had a rough couple of days," Jenni said. Saundra just nodded, then curled up and went back to sleep. It took Jenni much longer. *Just what had gone wrong with her life*, she wondered. Then, of course, she remembered what Tanya had once told her. “Any thinking you do in the middle of the night is a product of your inner demons,” Tanya had said. “Don’t let them do your thinking for you. Things will usually look different in the morning.” Jenni lay down again, adjusted her body to accommodate a thick pine root that ran under the tent, and wondered if Matt was still up, and if so, what he was thinking about. Then, quite unexpectedly, she fell asleep.

When she woke up, it was light, and she was cold. Saundra wasn’t beside her, so she unzipped the front of the tent. There was a dense mist on the lake, and it wasn’t possible to see further than past the canoes, but already the wind was starting to move tendrils of the fog around. Matt and Saundra were sitting in the lawn chairs by the fire, and a pot was on the grate above the flames.

Chapter 6

She was a bit achy from a night spent on a thin sleeping pad, on lumpy ground at a slight angle but otherwise Jenni was ready, more or less, to face the day. After a trip to the toilet, she discovered the inflatable washbasin Matt had set up on a stump. and washed her face without a facecloth or towel. Since she hadn't expected to be out overnight, she hadn't brought even a comb. If this doesn't send Matt running for the hills, she decided, nothing would. The Witch of the Woods. The Phantom of Poplar Lake. She brushed her hair with her fingers as best she could and went to face Matt and Saundra. Somehow she felt she didn't quite get all the twigs and leaves out of her hair, but she knew that was an illusion. Still, she would have liked a mirror to confirm it. Her first priority was borrowing that comb Saundra had.

Saundra was, of course, looking a heck of a lot better than Jenni was. *I'd be glad of a bear attack right now,* Jenni thought. Then she remembered the hug in the night and felt guilty. "Hi," she said cheerfully, interrupting a conversation about the role of the classics in dramatic theatre in Toronto. Or something like that.

Someone had already got a pot of beans and stew on the grate. Someone had already pumped enough water through the filter to give everyone a drink. Jenni began to think she'd been skipping out on some obligations, foolish as that thought might be. Both Saundra and Matt offered her their lawn chairs, but Jenni declined, sitting instead on a log that wasn't quite dry or quite level or entirely without knobby parts. With a sharing of cutlery and eating pots, they managed to finish the breakfast. Jenni pulled out her phone and called Lonnie. After a lot of "sures" and "no problems", she told the others, "Lonnie will be at the portage with the boat at eleven or so, assuming he gets the motor fixed and a couple of new guests set up for fishing. I told him that would be alright. Is that okay?"

"No problem," Saundra said "Gives me more time to imagine a real bed and real food." She looked at Matt. "What about you? You coming back to civilization? Or you going to stay here and try to reclaim the delights of a woman-free existence?" She paused. "Like you planned in the first place."

Matt laughed. "I've still got a few hours to make that decision." He scratched himself in a few places and tipped his hat back. "I think I'll spend an hour fishing this morning and decide after that."

"We might get fish for brunch?" Jenni asked.

Matt thought about it. "It could happen. Maybe the fish bite better after a storm."

"They often do," Jenni said. "The rain washes food into the lake and the fish get into a feeding frenzy." Then she added. "Not so much in the fall, though."

"But we wish you luck anyway," Saundra said. "Take your canoe and get away for an hour or so."

"That," Matt said, "sounds like the best idea I've heard in a while." He began to whistle as he went to his tent.

"Do you know *The Shadow of Your Smile*," Saundra asked, raising her voice to catch Matt's attention. Jenni froze.

"Not one I've ever done," Matt said, collecting his fishing gear. "Maybe I'll learn it some day. What brought that up?"

"I thought I heard it in the middle of the night," Saundra said.

"Maybe from whoever's across the lake," Matt said, as he put the fishing gear carefully into his canoe. "I saw a campfire over by the portage to Bass Lake after the fire died down. Didn't hear any whistling, though." He got into the canoe hesitantly and not well, rocking it back and forth before backing away from the shore.

"You might want to put your life jacket on," Jenni found herself saying.

"I like to live dangerously," Matt said with a smile. "Besides, I'm a good swimmer, if not much of a canoeist." He waved goodbye over his shoulder, rocking the canoe again, and paddled out of the bay and out of sight around the trees.

Saundra saw the expression on Jenni's face. "Problems?"

"No. Maybe not. I hope not." Her heart was racing. "Julio, my husband. He used to whistle that song. He said it was his song for me."

"You think he's here?" Saundra looked concerned. "Would that be a problem?"

"We're getting a divorce," Jenni said. "All done in a few days ".

"Is he likely to make trouble?" Now Saundra was getting concerned, too.

"No. I hope not. Probably, not anyway. I don't know how he'd find me here anyway." Jenni did some deep breathing and tried to calm herself. "Maybe we can pack up the camp."

"Good idea." But Saundra was keeping one eye on the lake and occasionally surveying the woods.

All Jenni could see on the lake was a family of mergansers along the edge of the bay, mother duck followed by six almost-grown offspring. "You know what I'm grateful for?" Jenni said, as they started dragging the sleeping bags out of Saundra's tent. "I'm grateful I don't have a mirror with me right now."

"Amen to that sister," Saundra laughed. "I was going to look at my reflection in the lake, then I decided it wasn't fair to scare the fish like that. I'm glad nobody's taking pictures that could end up on the Web."

"Scary thought. Glad Matt didn't comment."

"He's either very tactful," Saundra said, "or he's like most men at a campsite; just happy to be there. I can't imagine a man ever bringing a mirror out camping." Together they rolled and tied the sleeping bags, then started pushing air out of the sleeping pads. "You two seemed to have a long conversation last night. For a while, I began to wonder whose tent you'd end up in."

"It wasn't that cold last night; I didn't need to share a sleeping bag." Jenni managed to tie her sleeping pad before it could spring back. "Besides, you have to remember that both Matt and I are married people."

"Doesn't sound like that should be a problem on your part, if I can believe the look on your face when Julio's name comes up."

"Well, I'm waiting for the papers to come through, then I'll be free of the bastard." Jenni stood up, her hand on the part of her back that ached most. "Then we'll see what I do with my life, if I don't become a recluse and go live on a mountain or something."

"You say Matt's married. Were you by chance thinking of his wife, last night?"

"Bingo. I can remember the pain when I found out Julio was cheating on me the first time. I wouldn't wish that on any other woman. Ever." Jenni surveyed the camp, then began untying ropes from various trees, while Saundra began scooping miscellaneous things into various bags.

"So we won't see you back here next spring with Matt? Unless you found out something about him that you can't live without?"

"Oh, aside from the usual male attitudes, he seems like a nice guy. But I don't think he's going to remember this experience positively. We got a bit crabby at each other last night." Jenni stood and watched the lake for a few minutes. The bay stayed quiet. "How did you end up here?"

"Allen and Liza were going camping and they invited me. I invited Clayton. It seemed like a bit of freedom and adventure before classes at the university got us too busy. I used to go camping with my family before mom died, and thought I'd try it for myself."

"Obviously, you could have chosen a better weekend."

"Comes to that, I should call Clayton and see if there's anything new. Can I borrow your phone again?"

"No problem." Jenni surveyed the site. Aside from the lawn chairs and Matt's stuff, they were almost done. She was just deciding to sit down and pretend she had a coffee, when she saw the look on Saundra's face.

Saundra put the phone on pause, and pointed. "That isn't your Julio, is it?"

Jenni turned. "Shit! You might want to find a place to hide."

"Kinda muscled, isn't he? And likes tight clothes."

"Probably on steroids, now. I don't think all those muscles came from lifting weights."

Jenni walked toward the water. She looked back, to see that Saundra had taken a long piece of branch designed for the fireplace and had pulled Matt's knife out of the stump where he had left it. She then started sharpening the end of the branch. *I should have done that*, Jenni thought. She considered picking up a rock, but even in a canoe Julio could dodge anything she threw.

Jenni watched as Julio stopped paddling, letting the canoe's inertia bring it in closer to shore. The world seemed to grow quiet. The osprey and the heron had disappeared.

Julio spoke first. "Jenni!" he called, "I love you."

Saundra appeared beside Jenni, holding her makeshift spear beside her. "He says he loves you," Saundra commented.

"It was never love and it was never any me that I ever knew," Jenni said, then shouted, "Go away, Julio. Leave!" At that moment, just when she thought the tension couldn't get any worse,

she saw Matt's canoe come around the point and enter the bay. He was paddling as fast as he could, but she could see the canoe tended to wander a bit.

"I need you!" Julio shouted.

"Ain't that sweet?" Saundra said.

"None of his needs were very sweet," Jenni said. "And he didn't care if he met any of mine." She put her hands on her hips. "You need a new girl," Jenni shouted. "I can't think of one of your expectations I ever met."

Julio was getting closer so he didn't have to speak as loudly. "I spent a long time thinking about it. About us. I've lowered my expectations. I'm ready to love."

"Nice compliment," Saundra laughed. "He figures you'll do if he lowers his expectations enough."

Jenni said, "Judging by the women you were sleeping with, you lowered your expectations a long time ago." Jenni could see Matt's canoe closing in quickly. She hoped Matt wouldn't say anything.

"I don't like to beg…" Julio said.

"He doesn't like to beg?" Saundra asked.

"He doesn't," Jenni acknowledged. "He prefers to apologize after he's done his damage." She looked Julio in the eye. "It's over. Go away."

"Jenni," Julio said, plaintively, "I want you. You complete me."

"I don't think so," Jenni said. "You were a pretty complete asshole long before you met me."

Into the silence that followed, Matt spoke up, firmly and loudly. "Hey, fella, I think you'd better leave now."

Julio twisted around in the canoe very quickly, to see Matt's canoe come alongside and bump into his own.

"Matt!" Jenni shouted, but Julio had grabbed the side of Matt's canoe with one hand and pulled up. Both canoes rocked violently, but it was Matt's canoe that rolled over, upside down. When it rolled back up, Matt wasn't in it, and Matt's paddle and lifejacket floated away. *I told him to wear a lifejacket*, Jenni thought. *I told him*.

Julio waited a moment, but Matt didn't appear.

"That's it," Julio said. "That's it. I'm through arguing." He reached into a packsack ahead of him and hauled something out.

"Saundra," Jenni said, "that's a sawed-off shotgun. Run!"

Saundra flung her makeshift spear at Julio, but it wobbled in flight and bounced off the front of Julio's canoe. However, she allowed the momentum of her throw to topple her sideways, where she crawled behind a rock, only her feet showing past it.

As Jenni stood there, trying to do something, anything, Matt's head abruptly appeared beside Julio's canoe. He put both hands on the gunnel, and pulled down. The shotgun went off as

the canoe rolled over, covering both Matt and Julio. Jenni ran to the water as Julio's canoe rolled back upright. *I hope he drowns*, she thought, I do. *Serve him right not to wear a lifejacket*.

She watched as a light wind slowly pushed the paddles, lifejackets, and canoes, half filled with water, away. a couple of pebbles rolling by her announced the presence of Saundra, who was now carrying a piece of wood like a club.

"You okay?" Saundra asked. "He missed?"

Jenni explained. "Judging by the branches that came out of the trees over my head, Julio had that gun loaded with heavy shot. He really meant to kill something today."

The upper bodies of Matt and Julio, as far as the shoulders, popped out of the water, side by side. Both men took a couple of deep breaths before Matt pushed Julio back underwater, then disappeared after him.

For a long minute or more there was only the motion of the canoes, then Matt's head broke the surface again. He gasped, then hauled up Julio by his hair. Jenni ran to the shore as Matt found his feet on the rocks, then the two of them dragged Julio up and onto the bank. She breathed a sigh of relief as her husband coughed up some water for a bit before closing his eyes and just breathing.

"I thought I'd killed him," Matt whispered, looking shaken, as he sat himself onto the ground. " He wouldn't stop fighting." Water dripped off both men.

"That's Julio, for you," Jenni said. "The bugger just won't give up when he should." She was still shaking. "You were down there a long time."

"Long?" Saundra said, seating herself on a stump. "Jenni and I paddled back to the lodge for a beer while you were under." The others looked at her. She added, "Seriously, guys, we're glad to see you."

Matt caught Jenni's look. "I did mention that I was good at swimming." He looked almost apologetic, but he was still gasping for air.

"Not a problem," Jenni said. "You kept me from getting shot."

Matt looked up. "I thought I heard a noise."

"Sawed-off shotgun, Jenni says," Saundra noted. "Don't know what kind of life she's been leading that she knows one, but that's what she says it was."

"What kind of shot?" Matt watched Jenni.

"From what it did to the branches over my head," Jenni said, "probably buckshot." She found her hands shaking uncontrollably. "He was certainly trying for a kill."

"We call the police on this one," Matt said. He turned to look at a noise from the water's edge, but Julio was already up and running at them. Jenni backed up a step and Matt put himself in front of her.

Matt said something that Jenni couldn't understand, then Julio was on him, two hands around Matt's neck. Matt was taller than Julio but Julio was far more muscled. Jenni could see Matt struggling. He tried and failed to remove Julio's hands, then tried kicking and hitting. Nothing seemed to work.

Turning, Jenni stepped to the fire and pulled out a log as long as her arm, still burning. Three big steps brought her back to the two men. Julio had backed Matt against a pine and Matt's eyes were starting to glaze over. She pulled the back of Julio's wet pants and stuffed in the burning end of the branch.

Julio's clothes were still wet, and steam escaped, but she could see him flinch from the contact with the hot embers. He screamed and let go of Matt.

Jenni gave Julio a push that sent him halfway down the bank. He was still trying to get his balance when Saundra bounded over to him, then head-butted him on the chest. Julio lost his balance, waved his arms, and went into the lake, one arm hitting Matt's canoe on the way. He came up almost at once, amid a small cloud of steam. By that time Matt had found a paddle and was stepping down to the water. Jenni and Saundra found more paddles and followed him. Julio climbed ashore, then looked up at the three facing him.

"On the ground, face down," Matt said. "Saundra, can you bring some rope?"

"This is all a mistake," Julio said as he got down. "I would never hurt Jenni."

Matt tied Julio's arms behind his back, then his feet together. Finally, he tied Julio to a tree. It all looked, Jenni thought, like something out of a bad western movie. When he was satisfied with his knots, Matt spoke. "I think the police will decide that."

"We don't need the police. I was just trying to make a point." Julio was getting angry and straining at the ropes.

Matt simply ignored him, and walked back up to the firepit, still dripping water. It was September cool and there was enough of a wind that he was shaking. *At least*, thought Jenni, *he's most likely shaking from the cold. He could also be so full of adrenalin that he'll need to wait till some burned off.* "Do you have dry clothes?" Jenni asked, walking after him.

"One set, and a jacket. No dry shoes, though. I'm going to change now. Keep an eye on that man of yours, would you?" Matt crawled into his tiny tent and zipped the door closed. "Oh," he said, from inside the tent. "Would you phone the lodge and get them to call the police? Thanks."

Down the slope Julio, guarded by Saundra and a paddle, was getting louder, trying to convince everybody that this was all a mistake.

Jenni noticed that her phone was low on power, even with Matt's juice pack attached. She wondered just how much texting and phoning Saundra had done.

Emilia answered. "Jenni? Is everything okay?"

"Not bad at the moment." Then Jenni gave her an account of the last half-hour's events.

"Holy crap! Are you sure everybody's alright?"

"Except for some bruising on the guys and a big burn on Julio's backside, I think we're just shaken up. Can I ask you a favor?"

“You want me to call a counsellor and paddle him out to talk to you and Matt – I mean you and Julio? Or ship some underworld hit guy out to adjust your current husband? I warn you, those guys can’t paddle well carrying a violin case.”

“Matt thinks the police should get involved about now.”

“No shit. That’s the most sensible suggestion I’ve heard in a while. I’ll give them a call.”

Jenni had another thought. “Tell Lonnie, too. He might have to give the cops a ride up the lake.”

“You’re a couple of portages in. Should I suggest Lonnie tow another canoe?”

Jenni laughed. “I count five canoes out in front of me. No, we’ll figure a way to get Julio over the portages somehow. We’ll meet Lonnie and the cops at the lake.” She’d already disconnected when she suddenly realized she wasn’t at all sure how that would be done.

Matt was over by Julio, holding him face down. “Can you hold your husband steady while I get a dressing on him. The burn we put on him must be a bit painful.”

“Emilia’s going to call the cops,” Jenni said. “It might mean waiting a bit longer for Lonnie.”

Matt nodded as he sat on Julio’s shoulders and exposed the burn. “Thanks, Jenni. Can you put the dressing on; this guy wants to wiggle a lot.”

“No problem. I had some first aid training a few years ago.” Jenni dumped a fair amount of alcohol onto the wound, waited till Julio finished screaming and bucking, then carefully covered the wound with a bandage. “You always bring a first aid kit with you?” she asked Matt, as Julio was tearfully thanking both of them.

“Naturally clumsy I am. It's best to be prepared.” As soon as Jenni was well away, Matt let go of Julio, who lay panting on the pine needles.

"Are we sure we want the cops involved?" Jenni didn't know why she said that.

"Too late now," Saundra said. "Besides, it did look as if he was trying to kill you both, you know." She scratched a couple of places on one ankle. "And I'd say he came pretty close to doing just that. When neither Matt nor Jenni said anything more, she added. "Let's get this show on the road."

That seemed like such a logical and positive thing to do that Jenni immediately started packing things into bundles, with help from Saundra. Saundra tried to make conversation, but Jenni was getting more depressed by the minute. She kept her back to both Julio and Matt, and found herself at a loss for words.

Matt came to help move the last branches off the one wet and flattened tent. Since most of the tent frame was broken, they just wrapped everything into a big loose roll. Jenni decided they were doing this more to leave a clean campsite behind them than for any other reason. A blue jay overhead began haranguing them for no apparent reason.

"I guess we'll try to get all this in the canoes," Saundra said, but Matt raised his hand. "There's one thing to do yet," he said.

"Put the lawn chairs back where they came from," Jenni said. She realized part of her wanted to leave no evidence of anything related to herself or the events of the morning.

"Two things, then," Matt acknowledged. Into the silence, he said, "There's a very good fishing rod down underwater. It was hand-built for me by a close friend when he was recovering

from a very serious illness." He looked up at the jay. Out on the water a loon laughed briefly. "These are my last dry clothes and I don't want to get them wet." He was holding a towel.

Saundra began to laugh. "We'll keep our backs turned, won't we, Jenni?"

Jenni smiled, too. "We'll take our time putting the lawn chairs back in the woods."

"I'll be quick. The water's colder than I'd like."

Saundra turned to Jenni. "He's trying to tell us some things shrink in cold water."

"Ah," Jenni said.

Matt shook his head. "Your phone, please," he said to Jenni. He walked down to the water, set the two phones by the water, and began removing his clothes. If he said anything else, it was lost in the sound of Julio starting his pleading again. Matt started into the water with his back to the campsite, but looked around to check on the women. They were sitting on the lawn chairs with their feet up on a log, watching him. Saundra waved. Matt slipped in and slid under the surface.

"Does your man ever stop talking?" Saundra asked?

Jenni shook her head. "He used to be quieter, but not much. He's probably been taking steroids for a while and he's used to getting his own way."

Matt's head reappeared shortly. He was holding a fishing rod, which he put on the shore. Then he went back under.

"I think he's gone back for the fish he didn't catch," Saundra said. But Matt came up with Julio's shotgun, which he set beside the fishing rod. "Turn your backs, now," he called.

"When hell freezes over," Saundra shouted back.

Matt sighed and came out of the water, wrapping a towel around him as soon as he could. When he looked up, the women were going into the woods, carrying the lawn chairs. As they put plastic bags and pine branches over the chairs, Saundra remarked, "I guess that water wasn't as cold as he thought it was."

Jenni just laughed.

"You owe him a kiss," Saundra said on the way back.

"Pardon?"

"He saved your life, risking his own. Your husband could have drowned him."

"I saved his life, too."

"Then *he* owes *you* a big kiss."

Jenni was still thinking about that when Saundra added. "I understand some of your conflicts here. Give him a kiss that will keep him awake for a couple of days."

"You know," Jenni said. "You're right."

And so it was that while Matt was getting dressed and trying to solve the problem of how to transport Julio Jenni walked up to him, wrapped her arms around him, pulled his head down and kissed him on the lips. For just a moment, she thought he'd panic and maybe make a leap for the lake, but he turned out to be quicker than that, and returned the embrace and kiss long enough for Saundra to get a picture and Julio to roll his eyes like he knew it all along.

Jenni pulled loose, looked Matt in the eyes, and said, "Thanks for saving my life; we'd better get going."

"Yeah," Matt said, "Yeah. I'll have a word with, ah, Julio, and tell him his options." He was still shaking his head as he sat down by Julio.

Jenni looked around. Saundra was holding her hand over her mouth to cover a laugh. She held up the phone and shook it. Jenni felt like laughing, too, but didn't want to take the chance anyone would misinterpret it. She tried a scowl but an inner glow prevented it.

Twenty minutes later they were crossing Poplar Lake. Jenni and Saundra paddled the canoe Saundra and Clayton had come in, towing Jenni's canoe. Matt and Julio came next, in the canoe Allen and Liza had brought, with Matt paddling at the stern and Julio, somewhat more loosely tied, sitting on the front seat. They were towing Matt's canoe and Julio's canoe.

It took them half an hour to do the portage to Bass Lake, and another half hour to get across that lake and onto the portage to Hawk Lake. Jenni was leading the group, carrying her pack, when they finally got to Hawk Lake. The first thing she saw was the lodge's boat, with Lonnie in it. Just beyond that was a larger boat, with a couple of police in it.

Chapter 7

Jenni waved. Lonnie waved back, then took out a paddle to move the boat closer. A policewoman in the other boat tossed a rope; Matt caught it and pulled the boat in close enough for both the constables to make a leap onto a somewhat squishy part of the shore.

"So what's going on here?" the male constable asked. "And why is this fellow tied up?"

"Tried to kill us. He's yours now. Who are you?"

"Constable Mike Moran, Bancroft O.P.P." He pointed to the female officer. "Constable Cassie Dunleavy." Then he said, "Everybody find a place to sit, away from each other. We'll do this as quick as we can."

Lonnie whistled. When he saw he had the attention of the people, he began slinging folding chairs over the front of the boat. Saundra grabbed the first couple and gave one to Jenni. Matt got one for himself. Constable Dunleavy took three, giving one to Constable Moran, setting one aside and taking one to Julio. She whispered something that Jenni couldn't hear. Julio nodded, and Constable Dunleavy used a small knife to cut the ropes from Julio's hands and feet. Julio rubbed his ankles and wrists, then sat down, looking out across the lake.

Jenni watched as both officers talked quietly to Julio. *He's certainly talking up a storm*, she thought. *None of this get me a lawyer business.* When she looked back towards the lake, she saw that Lonnie had set up a nice lawn chair lounge for himself, and had lifted a cooler from the boat.

Then he lugged the cooler from one person to another, offering cola, ginger ale, salmon sandwiches, and bags of potato chips. When he got close to Jenni, she told him, "Lonnie, you're an angel."

Lonnie smiled. "I kept telling that to my wife, but her memory was always too good."

In the end, the chairs were hardly necessary. They provided someplace to sit, but several of them tended to sink one leg into the soil more than the other legs, leaving the sitter the choice of sitting on a crooked chair or continually chasing after more solid ground. *Maybe Lonnie brought them to watch the comedy*, Jenni thought, but that seemed unlikely, knowing him. It would have made a great bit of video to post,

After talking to Julio, the officers came and talked to the others. Mike Moran talked to Matt, and Cassie Dunleavy talked to Saundra. Then Constable Dunleavy brought her chair over to Jenni. She put it onto the nearest solid ground and ate a half a salmon sandwich before getting out her notebook and asking questions. Jenni gave her name and address, her reason for being at the lodge, and her reason for being at that end of the lake.

Then Constable Dunleavy asked Jenni how long she'd known Matt and Saundra, checking that she got the answers right by reading then back. She asked, "You sure?" about how long she'd known the others.

"That's all," the policewoman said. "If you leave the lodge permanently, let us know where you're going to. We might have more questions in a day or two."

Five minutes later the police boat was disappearing down the lake, Julio sitting beside Constable Moran. Jenni watched it disappear with a dozen mixed feelings, but mostly relief.

"I guess we'd better get those canoes and the rest of the packs," Emilia said, starting down the trail that led to Bass lake. The rest of the group, including Lonnie, followed her.

For reasons of her own, Saundra led the other three as the trail rose up from the lake, dipped once into a swampy area, then went steeply down to Bass Lake. "Looks like a canoe convention," Lonnie said as they came to the water, where five canoes were lying among the rocks and logs. Packs, both wet and dry, were piled along the path.

"This could put me right off canoeing," Matt said. "It takes all the fun out of portaging."

"There's fun in portaging?" Saundra asked.

"I think he was being sarcastic," Jenni said.

There was a pause, then Matt said, "I think Julio's made up a story for the police. He's a bit louder than he thinks, so I got the gist of it."

"He never accepted responsibility for anything, ever," Jenni said. "If he had to lie his way out, that wasn't a problem. What's he telling them?"

"From what I could overhear, he was just a lonesome husband trying to reconcile with his wife," Matt said. "He discovered Jenni with her lover – that's me, of course – and tried to reason with her. That's when I pulled out a shotgun, fired a shot into the air and threatened him. Saundra tied him up, and the three of us concocted the story we told the police to put the blame on him."

Jenni tried to say something, but felt sick. "They'll never believe that. I imagine they'll be able to trace the gun to him."

"I doubt that it's connected with him," Lonnie said, "but I can't imagine the police taking his word against ours. Easy enough to show that Jenni and Matt never met before the day before yesterday, I'd imagine."

"Hey," said Saundra. "Trust me. Not to worry. Nothing to worry about."

But as Jenni carried her canoe back over the portage trail to Hawk Lake, she wondered if this wasn't a nightmare with no ending. Behind her Matt, as the strongest one, carried Julio's canoe.

It took three trips to get everything over to Hawk Lake, although on the last trip there wasn't much to bring. Jenni spent the whole time thinking, which was a waste since mostly her thoughts kept going in circles. Twice Saundra told her to stop worrying, but Jenni just thought that was easy for her to say, More than anything else, she wanted a hot shower and a couple of hours to talk things over with Emilia.

Even Matt saw the worried look on her face, and told her she had nothing to worry about. But Matt had never been married to Julio. Matt knew nothing of Julio's ability to convince people that black was white.

At one point Jenni looked up at Matt carrying a canoe and a pack over the portage, and thought, again, *I like that guy.* Which didn't cheer her up at all, but did lead to some speculation on her part about just what a guy's mistress had to do, other than the obvious. In between, every now and then, she'd suddenly get the picture of the shotgun swinging around her direction. The first time that happened she ran into a tree with the canoe she was carrying, and the second time she got the vision she stepped, ankle-deep, into a soft bit of the trail, and her shoe made squishy noises for a while after.

When the last of everything was on the shore of Hawk Lake, Jenni showed the rest how to make a towing chain of the five canoes, putting all the packs into the lodge boat. Saundra started to laugh, and when Jenni asked her what was funny, Saundra said, "It looks more like a comedy circus act than anything else." Jenni had to admit that that was true. She had followed close behind Matt on the portage, listening to her one shoe making squish noises and his two doing the same.

Matt sat in the lodge boat beside Lonnie, and Saundra and Jenni rode behind them, among the packs, watching the canoes as Lonnie got the string of boats moving out into the lake. Just before Lonnie moved into high speed, Matt reached over and pulled a white water lotus flower from its floating lily pad. He handed it to Jenni. "That's for the flowers you put in my room when I got here," he said.

Jenni took it without comment. A minute later, while they were making speed down the lake, Jenni put the pretty white flower over the side and watched it disappear in the wake behind the boat. Saundra just shook her head. "Did you make a wish?" Saundra asked.

"Of course," Jenni said. Then she did make a wish.

In the half hour it took Lonnie to take the boat back to the Two-and-a-Half Pine Resort, Jenni reached a few conclusions. First, her marriage was definitely over; it might take a few more days for the paperwork to come through, but when a guy points a shotgun your way one can reasonably assume the relationship's at a dead end.

Secondly, she was more attracted to Matt than she'd been admitting, but that could be just a reaction to the events and the moonlight, not to mention too little sleep. She texted Emilia: "On our way home. Maybe another fifteen minutes."

She got back: "Will be good to see you again, stranger. Will have hot shower and clean clothes set out so Matt can see the real you before he's got out of the parking lot. Will block the exit if necessary. Shall I tell Matt you want to shower with him?"

Jenni smiled for the first time in a while, and showed the text to Saundra, who laughed and said, "Go for it!"

Yeah, right, Jenni thought. *I imagine he'll be gone in a shower of gravel from the back wheels, trying to get away from crazy women in a crazy place.*

She was about to text more, but her phone was flashing a battery warning. *Strange,* she thought. Most of the time she'd been using Matt's juice pack, the plug-in power unit, so there should have been enough power left, no matter how much conversation Saundra'd had with her friends. Unless she used it to take pictures; that used up more battery. She turned to Saundra. "Were you taking pictures with my phone?"

"I certainly got one of you and Matt kissing," Saundra said.

"That's not good," Jenni said. "If they believe Julio that Matt and I knew each other before, that picture…."

"Not to worry, like I said." Saundra tapped her head. "I immediately sent it to a friend and deleted it from the camera."

What happens, Jenni thought, *when we get to the lodge? Matt's booked another night away from work; will he stay another night at the lodge? If he does, how will I feel?* She still thought that she'd been wise to use the campfire conversation to put some distance between herself and Matt. But a growing part of her wondered if she hadn't made another great mistake in her life. If Matt stayed, they could sit on the deck, watch the lake, and talk about things. Jenni wasn't quite sure about *what* things, but she was sure everything had changed since the attacks by Julio.

On the other hand, maybe getting any closer to Matt would be as big a mistake as she'd made with Julio. She might be a bit older and wiser, but she'd only known Matt for a couple of days. And Matt had confirmed he was "in a long-term relationship" with Annie. The possibility of being the mistress didn't look as bad as before.

In the end, it was a lot more anticlimactic than that. Saundra called out to her, "Heads or tails?" Jenni chose tails and lost. "You," Saundra told her, "get to help the guys with the canoes. I just won first right to a shower." Jenni accepted this anyway, no matter how much she wanted Matt's last look at her to be something other than the scraggly wreck she felt like. After all, she was working for the lodge, and Saundra wasn't.

“Can I borrow your phone again?” Saundra asked. Jenni handed it over, again wondering just who Saundra was talking to so much.

Lonnie expertly put the string of five canoes up against the shore, disconnected the rope, and let the lodge boat glide, unpowered, to its place at the docks.

Saundra hopped out, waved to the rest, and headed in long loping strides to her car. She pulled a bag from the trunk and went into the lodge. *Next life,* Jenni thought, *I want legs like those.”* She waved to Emilia, who was coming down the steps wearing a bright orange dress and matching hat. *Damn,* Jenni thought, *I’m running a distant third around this place*, and made a resolution to get work at a seniors’ home next time.

Matt was out tying up the back of the boat while Lonnie did the front. Jenni let them; men always thought women could never figure out knots. The boat rocked as she stood on a seat to step onto the dock. She’d gone from wobbly boats to docks a lot, but Matt reached out anyway with his hand. After an imperceptible hesitation Jenni took his hand to get herself back onto the dock. *I guess I’m going to have to kill Annie,* she thought, then laughed at herself. *Silly girl I am; still a silly girl.*

Lonnie came over, ready to help, but Jenni told him they could handle the canoes, and to check to see if there were any customers with needs first. Reluctantly, he left.

Emilia never quite made it out of the lodge; Jenni saw her go back inside when Saundra came to the door and called her back in. Matt reached for Julio's canoe, but Jenni said, "We can carry this together." It was time to get the canoes. They piled Julio's stuff into the canoe, then Jenni took the back end and Matt took the front, and they walked and dragged it over to Julio's car. "Just roll it over on the ground," Jenni said, "and push the rest of his stuff under it. It's his problem now."

They left Jenni's canoe on the shore and were about to start on the other three, when the two young boys showed up. "Want to make some money?" Matt asked them and soon had them assigned to haul canoes and camping gear over to Saundra's car. Jenni left all Saundra's stuff beside her car, figuring Saundra knew the best way to tie them on. Putting two canoes onto a car was a bit trickier than one, and besides, all the tie-down ropes were locked inside the Toyota.

Matt took his own canoe to his car, Jenni following behind. Efficiently, he tied the canoe down, and turned to get into the car. He stopped when he saw Jenni standing there.

Jenni wished he could have seen her looking like something other than a tired, sleep-deprived, windblown refugee from the forest, but she couldn't see any way to make that happen. "Thanks again," she said, and then ran out of words.

"Well, It's been an adventure, hasn't it." He paused and looked up. "I wanted to tell you my heart still skips a beat every time I hear you speak. Maybe we'll email each other sometime."

"I guess," she said, then added, "That's the nicest thing I've heard in a long time."

"Who knows"" Matt said. "There's always 'someday', isn't there?"

"Well then, someday."

"A kiss for that someday?"

"Darn right," Jenni said, thinking, *a kiss for all that might have been. A fleeting glimpse of mornings, children that would never be*. She put her arms around him. *But this is a mistake*, she thought. They made it a brief kiss, then Jenni turned towards the lodge, running her fingers through wind-tangled hair, as Matt started his car and backed out. From the steps of the lodge, she saw Emilia and Saundra waving goodbye to Matt. Saundra was wearing a blue dress. *What the hell is this?* Jenni thought, *national wear-a-dress day?*

Jenni was in no hurry. She spent long enough in the shower that she figured she must be pushing the limit of the lodge's water heater. She spent a long time in front of the mirror brushing her hair. There was, she decided, a lot to think about.

She had, for example, succeeded in a half-assed way, in making sure Matt had more than a superficial view of her. Apparently that had done it; he had driven away quick enough rather than spend another minute at a place with three women. Although, she countered to herself, Emilia was firmly married and Saundra was going to get off to pick up Clayton in Bancroft as soon as she could. Dressed, it seemed in a nice blue dress.

She was reluctant to go downstairs, feeling a need to be alone after a day in which intense social interaction had been the only choice. Maybe she could sit on the deck, watch the birds on Hawk Lake, and tell everybody else to bugger off for a while. Saundra had probably already described the kiss at the campsite in detail. And Emilia wouldn’t have missed the goodbye kiss in the parking lot a half hour ago.

Jenni sighed; there really wasn't much choice but to go downstairs and face the other two. She hoped they'd keep their advice to an ignorable minimum. She put on a white skirt and pink blouse. She looked, she decided, like a spring flower. In autumn. But the rest of her shirts were almost in the flannel plaid I-can-wrassle-a-grizzly category, so she decided that there wasn't anybody around that would notice or comment. Lips pursed, Jenni made her way to the office.

To her surprise, Saundra was seated by the front desk and Emilia was just opening the door. Jenni could see Constable Cassie Dunleavy getting out of a police car. Emilia turned to Jenni. "Just in time," she said, and arranged another couple of chairs in front of the computer screen.

"What's going on?" Jenni wanted to know.

"Nice outfit," Saundra said.

"Thought it must be mandatory."

Emilia laughed. "I felt like dressing up, probably because the cops are around." When the others looked puzzled, she went on. "Addicts and drunks don't dress up much; you never know if you're going to wake up in the ditch next morning. And the cops know it, and can pick out drunks by the clothes they wear." She twirled. "And so I dress up sometimes to celebrate the fact that I'm seriously sober instead of giggling drunk."

Jenni wasn't sure when Emilia was serious about things like that.

Saundra spoke up. "I had three outfits. Two never quite dried out from the swim in Poplar Lake, and this was in the car, in case Clayton and I wanted to go out to a nice restaurant after the camping."

"We'd make a great ad for this place," Emilia said, "although I don't know what sort of impression we'd set." She turned and said, "Welcome to the show, Constable Dunleavy. Come in and sit down."

"Sounds like a plan," the policewoman said.

"Jenni here," Saundra announced, "has no idea what's going on here."

"You," Jenni said, "are exactly right about that."

"Tell her," Emilia said to Saundra.

"I had your phone when Julio's canoe came around the bend," Saundra said. "I used it to take a movie of the action."

Jenni was stunned. "Why? Why would you think of that?"

"My mother," Saundra said, "had one boyfriend who treated her badly. Mostly verbal abuse and threats, but it was always his word against ours when we complained to the police, so not much… could… get done. Then one day I borrowed a video camera and hid it in the kitchen. Showed the tape to the police once, and we never saw him again." Saundra smiled. "It came naturally back to me when I saw the look on your face."

There was a moment's silence, then Jenni said, "Well, then, let's see what you got."

Constable Dunleavy asked, "What's the source of this material?"

"I had Jenni's phone," Saundra said. "When I saw Julio coming, I turned the video on and propped it on a stump. Up against a cooking pot. Then I went down to be near Jenni."

"And this is a direct and complete copy?" The cop didn't smile.

"The original's still on Jenni's phone. This is a direct copy I sent over so we could watch it easier." There were no other comments, so Emilia started it playing.

It was shaky at first, then a hand came and moved the camera. There was Saundra's butt, before she moved aside. The action happened off-center, but it was all there. Julio was loud enough that his comments and pleas were clear. There was the tipping of Matt's canoe, then just Julio and Jenni shouting at each other. Saundra stepped into the picture again with her spear. Emilia stopped the picture a moment and pointed to a spot behind Julio's canoe. "That's Matt's head; he came up for a breath." She started the movie again, and captured Julio's threat and the raising of the gun.

"That's me, diving behind a rock," Saundra said as the view was momentarily blocked by somebody moving by. Then there was Matt pulling Julio's canoe over and the sound of a shot, followed by a slight tremor in the picture. Jenni could see herself scrambling down the slope to the water, reaching for Matt's hand as he came up dragging a rather limp Julio.

Saundra came back into the picture and there was a pause in the action as Matt left Julio by the water's edge and came uphill gasping for breath. In the picture Jenni saw what she'd missed at the time; Julio getting up and coming after Matt. Both disappeared off screen, with Julio's muscular hands around Matt's neck and Julio's voice saying, "You die first." Jenni hadn't remembered him saying that. The part where Jenni shoved the burning branch down Julio's pants

was off-screen, but Jenni and Saundra shoving Julio into the water was nicely captured. At that point, a hand covered the lens and the screen went blank.

"I figured we should save the rest of the battery in case we needed it," Saundra said. *Maybe*, Jenni thought, *in case Julio got drowned*, but she decided not to say it.

The policewoman got up. "I'll need the phone, for evidence."

"Of course," Emilia said, taking Jenni's phone from the desk and handing it to her.

Constable Dunleavy turned as she got to the door. "We'll be contacting you if we need you." Then she left.

"Holy crap," Jenni said.

"Got that one right," Emilia said. "I think Saundra here might just have saved you a lot of trouble."

Saundra smiled and shrugged. "Always glad to help." She looked out the window. "Hey, Lonnie's back from whatever he was helping real customers with. I'll see if he can help me load our canoes."

There were a couple of minutes of goodbying with laughter and hugs and promises of sending each other messages and keeping in touch, then Saundra said, "A picture; we need a picture. Emilia – have you got a camera or phone we can borrow?"

Emilia did, and Saundra set up a camera on the picnic table on the deck. They set the self-timer and took a few shots of the three of them arm in arm. Then Saundra rushed off to catch Lonnie before she lost track of him. Emilia and Jenni watched her go. "I could go help," Jenni suggested.

"With that dress on, I don't think Saundra will have any problems," Emilia said. "Lonnie may be getting old but his eyesight's pretty good. You need a bit of rest and relaxation for the rest of the day. Or longer."

"I should be doing something to help around the lodge," Jenni said. She felt she was in need of something to do, and something to calm her down.

"Well Lenny, the bald fisherman with the map, he'll be checking out this afternoon. He was supposed to be out by noon, but I gave him an extension since we've got lots of vacancies." She looked out the window to the parking lot. "Lonnie seems to be getting real helpful in his old age. Hope he doesn't throw his back out."

Jenni leaned to see the action. It sure looked like Lonnie was doing the heavy work and Saundra was looking pretty and appreciative in her blue dress.

"Maybe she'll kiss him by way of thanks," Emilia suggested.

"He might just have a heart attack, depending how close she got," Jenni laughed.

"Well, if they got as close as you and Matt, it's a definite possibility."

"Pardon? What? What did Saundra tell you?"

"Didn't tell me a thing. Before she erased it from your camera at the campsite, she sent a picture to me. Want to see it?"

The look on Jenni's face was enough of an answer.

"Good picture, eh?" Saundra asked as they sat on the deck a few minutes later.

"Saundra takes good pictures," Jenni said. She was wondering if she'd keep it, then decided, hell, yes; you don't forget an event like that anyway.

"You going to tell me what that was all about, or will I have to beat it out of you with a bag of taco chips?"

"Bring on the chips, and a ginger ale, while you're up. You don't have any bottles of liquor hidden around here, do you? I could use a bottle of scotch and a straw."

"If I had one around, I'd be on the line to my sponsor."

"Freakin' drunks. Ex-drunks. Sanctimonious ex-drunks. I gotta learn to avoid them."

"You still want a bag of taco chips and a ginger ale?"

"I want the ginger ale in a glass with ice cubes." Jenni knew she had the upper hand at the moment, with Emilia's curiosity at a peak, and she didn't intend to waste a bit of her advantage. *Probably*, she thought, *just as well there isn't any alcohol around*. "And the taco chips still in the bag."

"Yes, your majesty."

While Emilia was inside the lodge, Jenni heard Saundra's car drive away. Almost immediately afterwards Lonnie came up the long stairs to the deck. He looked at Jenni and said, "I feel like I'm a bit underdressed for this place."

Jenni laughed and explained how the girls had ended up dressed more for a party in the park than for a fishing lodge. "I'm about to tell Emilia the whole story of what happened since you let me off. If you want to stay, I'd be happy to tell you too. You can get something from the lodge – Emilia and I are having taco chips and pop – and put it on my tab if you want." Jenni realized she would feel better with Lonnie there; with only Emilia to listen, she might say more than she wanted to, and regret it later.

"I'll do that, but I keep a running tab of my own, so I'll add it on there." Lonnie got up, and Jenni took to watching the lake. It was September weather, cool and a bit cloudy, but very still.

Lonnie and Emilia came back together. "Sorry I took so long," Emilia said. I had a couple of things to do and somebody phoned and asked whether the leaves had turned yet. I told him that only the poplars had changed colour and he could try again in a week or so.

"That would be about right," Lonnie said, settling into a Muskoka chair with a can of Pepsi and a bag of salt-and-vinegar chips.

So, with Lonnie and Emilia munching and listening, Jenni told them the story, from the time Lonnie had let her off at the upper end of Hawk Lake. She described her futile trip to Ingrey Lake, and how she'd met Lenny and his map.

She told how she'd canoed up to Matt on Bass Lake, and how she'd met Clayton on Poplar Lake, and found out the condition of Allen and Liza.. How she'd got Matt to come and how he'd called in a helicopter.

"We heard a helicopter yesterday!" a young voice said. Jenni looked around to find that the two boys were sitting on the deck behind the adults and had been listening in.

"There aren't many helicopters around that can land on water," Lonnie noted.

Jenni told everybody about the storm that afternoon and sharing a tent with Emilia that night. Then of course, came the story of Julio's arrival, and how he was eventually turned over to the police. "And that's about it," she said.

"Well, thanks for telling me; I was kind of curious," Lonnie said, getting up. "Just glad I could help."

A couple of minutes later the two boys wandered off. That left Jenni and Emilia on the deck. "More taco chips and ginger ale?" Emilia asked.

"Screw the soft stuff; bring me a Pepsi. I don't need any more chips."

"I'll be back," Emilia said. "Then I've got a few questions I'd like to ask you. Things you didn't mention."

"What makes you think I'll answer your questions?"

"We can trade information." When Jenni looked up, Emilia winked at her. "I got lots of stuff on a guy named Matthew Canning."

For a moment, Jenni drew a blank. Then "Matt," she said.

"The very guy."

Chapter 8

For a moment Jenni's paranoia came back to her, the same feeling that she'd had when Lenny the fisherman had given her a couple of stanzas of Matt's poem way out at the other end of Hawk Lake. Then she shook her head. She wasn't the star in a secret TV show about her life; she was just surrounded by some nosy, pushy people with too much time on their hands.

"And what sort of questions did you want to ask me."

"Oh," Emilia said, "the usual nosy, none-of-your-damn-business girl stuff."

Jenni nodded and watched a couple of loons on the lake. "Okay," she said, "but it doesn't mean you're going to get the answers you want. Or that I'll take any advice you have to offer. You go first."

"Tough kid. Well, take a look at this." From a large manila envelope Emilia took out a color print and handed it to Jenni. Just printed this last night." When Jenni raised one eyebrow, Emilia put out her hands, palms forward. "Hey, didn't want you spending the night in the bush with a man I knew nothing about."

"You got this off the net?"

Emilia nodded. "This is one reclusive guy as far as information goes, but I got my sources."

Jenni looked at the picture carefully. It showed four men, dressed in tuxedos, at a cocktail event somewhere. Two of the guys looked like they were born to be in tuxes, but Matt and one

other man looked a bit uncomfortable and not at all glad to have a camera pointed their way. It was a knees-to-head photo, and somehow Jenni pictured Matt wearing the same wet outdoors boots she'd seen him in at the campsite.

"Business event?" Jenni asked Emilia. "Wedding party or something?"

"Ha!" Emilia laughed. "Not so fast. My turn."

"Go for it." Jenni waved one hand in the air, but didn't take her eyes off the picture.

"How do you feel about Matt?" The question hung in the air for only a second before Emilia changed it. "Wait," she said. "That's a bigger question than a picture of a guy in a tux deserves. Here's a better question. How much do you like Matt?"

"Isn't it the same question?"

"It's a simpler one, if you want. You can just whip out a number between one and ten."

But Jenni didn't want to even try to simplify it that much, even for Emilia. "I like him," she said simply.

"Okay…. Well, then…."

But Jenni wasn't finished. "He's a bit shy, mostly gentle, and fights if he has to, but not before." She looked briefly at Emilia, then away. "He seems to be smart and caring. He can make me laugh by making fun of himself." She turned back to Emilia. "How's that?"

"That," said Emilia, looking away, tells me a lot. I knew a boy like that once, a lifetime ago."

"Did you want him?"

"With all my heart. But I was too shy to say so until I was nicely drunk. And by then it was too late."

Jenni watched a heron land in the shallow waters where the lake had a small, lily-filled bay. There were still a few flowers on the water, like the one Matt had passed her. The late afternoon stillness stretched a minute, then the phone rang inside the lodge.

"Shoulda brought the portable," Emilia said. I'll be right back." As she left, Lenny the fisherman came down the steps from the cottages, map tucked under his arm.

"Jenni!" he said. "I hear you've had an adventure since I last saw you." He held up a hand. "I've just come to say goodbye; you'll need more of a rest than retelling your story again. Here – look at my map." He spread it on the table.

"Okay…." Jenni knew the map; she'd taken a good look at the copy posted on the lodge wall the day before.

Lenny's copy was sprinkled with checks and x-marks along the edge of Hawk Lake. "An x means there are no fish at that point willing to take my bait," he said. "Sometimes I could see them diving for cover or signing a pledge to starve to death before taking a chance that something might be one of my lures." There were lots of these marks on the map. "The check marks show where something actually made a strike at one of my lures. I use mostly surface lures, so I can see when a fish actually makes an effort by the splash near it. Of course, some of them are just teasing me, but that's better than nothing."

"And the double check marks?"

"Those," Lenny said triumphantly, "are where I actually caught a fish."

"Well, that's good. Did you bring any back?"

"No, but I took a picture each time, and as soon as I get home I'll adjust the, ah, clarity a bit with Photoshop, so I have a record."

Jenni smiled. "Did you have a good time, all in all?"

Lenny grinned widely. "It's a beautiful lake and I had a fine time." Then he turned serious. "Look, I don't know if I should have given you that poem. Maybe Matt didn't want… anybody… to see it. And besides, it was unfinished. I just sort of thought…." He looked decidedly uncomfortable."

Jenni gave her best smile. "I'm glad you did. But I can't give it back; it sort of got.... Well, it's not available, but if I ever see another copy, I'll forward it to you."

Lenny said, "I like maps. I like poetry. A map looks like it's all there, everything's laid out for you and there's nothing to find out. But when you actually get to the place on the map, there are a thousand things you didn't expect. Mysteries, delights. A map's only half truth. When you think you've got things mapped out, always be prepared for surprises."

"And poetry?" Jenni remembered that Lenny and Matt had talked poetry in the rain that first night.

"A poem's the opposite. Half the time it looks like a mystery, but there's a map hidden in it. Find the map and you can find a route to take." Lenny stood up. "I had a great time here, and it was a pleasure to meet you."

"Thanks, Lenny. I'll remember you too." She made a mental note to check the web for his poetry, as he rolled up his map and headed down the steps to his car.

Jenni got another ten minutes of watching the lake before Emilia came back. "Sorry," Emilia said, "I had a couple of things to do."

"No problem." Jenni kept watching the lake. There was a ripple in the water that spoke of fish hidden under the surface. A lake surface, a map, a poem, the thoughts of people; there was so much under the surface. How was a girl to know enough to make her way anywhere? "Gave me time to think."

"And what were you thinking?"

"Lenny came to say goodbye. Showed me his map."

"Okay. Sure. What was on the map?"

"It wasn't what was on the map. He warned me not to trust any map because they don't mark where the surprises are."

"I brought you a diet Coke."

"Thanks."

"You seem far away."

"For a moment, every now and again, I see that gun barrel turning in my direction. Then everything stops."

"Geez."

"What have I done?" Jenni burst into tears. "What in God's name did I ever do that a man should point a gun my way and pull the trigger? Try to kill me? Hate me that much? I wanted to be loved! I loved that man all I could and he still brought a gun. He sawed off a shotgun just for me!"

Emilia knew enough just to hold Jenni tight for a while. Then Jenni said, "Where's that Coke? Oh, here. Get me one of those sandwiches in the cooler. And a bag of… no just the sandwich."

"I'll be right back. You'll be okay?"

"I'll be just freakin' great." Jenni said.. "Go." She tried to focus on the lake, but failed. A minute later she heard Emilia come back.

"Tuna and lettuce. I warmed it a bit."

"Thanks. You got more?"

"Food?" Emilia seemed confused.

"Questions. And facts to trade for the questions."

"Well, of course." Emilia picked up the package. "You're sure you're up for this?"

Jenni shrugged. "Easier than being shot at."

"Okay. I want to know about the kiss. It looked pretty good on the screen."

Jenni thought it over a long time. "Saundra's idea. Said I owed him at least a kiss for saving my life. Or he owed me one for me saving his life."

Emilia said, while eating a sandwich of her own, "Makes sense to me. Did you consider that maybe he didn't intend to save your life?"

"You mean, he was just getting back at Julio for flipping him out of his canoe, and might not have even noticed the gun?"

"Something like that."

"Well, you could ask the same question of me? Did I save Matt's life or was I just doing the next best thing to stuffing a burning branch up Julio's ass?"

"I doubt," Emilia said, "that anyone will ever know for sure. Which brings us back to the kiss."

"Always the kiss. Maybe," Jenni said, "it was just me on impulse, taking Saundra's suggestion."

"Oh," Emilia said, putting her palms forward in front of herself. I have no doubt of that. None at all." The statement would have had more effect if Emilia hadn't winked and laughed. "I just want to know what the effect was."

"I think he liked it."

"You know what I mean." Emilia tapped her foot on the deck.

"Do I get another sandwich first?"

"Dream on."

Jenni sighed. "Let's just say I've been a while without a kiss, and this guy had just saved my life and I was a bit short on sleep – maybe a *lot* short on sleep – and I was running on post-traumatic stress and there's something just so primitive… about the wilderness…."

"Too bad Saundra was there." Emilia stifled a laugh. "Without a witness you two mighta been out in the bushes doing it like they do on the Discovery channel."

"Hey! You got your answer. Now I get to see what I traded for. I paid in advance, too."

"You deserve it." Emilia swallowed the last of her sandwich, washed it down with a root beer, then drew some sheets out of the package. "Matt," she said, reading the papers, "was dressed up for a combination fund-raiser and art-show opening."

"How is that?"

"Matt is part owner of Tanglewood Surveying and Consulting." She pointed at the photo of the guys in tuxes. "It looks like – I can't trust all my sources, of course – it looks like Matt was a genuine nerd with a tendency to like climbing, sailing, and hiking by himself, when he discovered he had a talent for seeing patterns where others didn't and seeing outside the box, as they say." She shuffled the papers. "He spotted something on a geology map on a wall somewhere, and the next thing you know he'd made someone a bundle of money on a mine of some sort, as well as getting himself a reputation and more money than he'd dreamed." She raised her eyebrows. "Maybe he decided making money writing poetry wasn't going to fly."

"The poetry thing isn't new?" Jenni had an urge for another sandwich, but didn't want to interrupt.

"He's had poems published in a bunch of artistic journals that nobody reads. But with the reputation he got for this first mapping success, he joined a mining exploration for a year, then left to form Tanglewood, with a fellow he knew. That's the other guy." Emilia pointed to a shorter guy to the left of Matt. They needed money, I guess, and were at the opening of some financier's wife's painting show, trying to look interested."

"He's got money?"

"He's got a working company, of which he owns a bit less than half. It's deep in hock for office space, technicians, and that helicopter, but doing well. They'll probably be out of debt in a year or two, some people say."

"Good for him."

"His business life is doing better than his love life."

"You have stuff on that, too?" Jenni was amazed.

"Being a drunk, or even an ex-drunk, gets a person contacts. It's like a secret club, filled with people you talk to, even if you can't depend on them.

"And what's that going to cost me?" Jenni actually smiled. The sun was throwing long shadows across the lake. Jenni reached for a sweater.

"The other kiss. That one in the parking lot." Emilia opened a plastic bag, took out a pipe, stuffed it, and lit it.

"What are you doing?"

"Just tobacco," Emilia said. She saw the look on Jenni's face. "You'll find a lot of ex-alcoholics smoke, or eat themselves into hippohood. We feel quitting our addictions was accomplishing something harder than regular people could ever imagine, so get off our backs if we don't want to give up some minor pleasures. I smoke this pipe once a week, for relaxation."

Jenni could see it wasn't going to be wise to comment, so she said, "I don't know what that last kiss was about."

"Or maybe you don't want to ask."

"That," Jenni said, "is probably the truth. It was an impulse. Maybe a way to say goodbye."

"To Matt?"

"What else?" Jenni watched Hank Dayton, the cat, walk to the end of the dock and look into the water. *He can see what he can't ever get,* she thought. "Sorry. It was a farewell to what never will be."

"Because of Matt not being free?"

"That, yes. I had enough of Julio's little adventures. I developed a few moral scruples there."

"You're still married. Your divorce isn't till next week. Or do you think the gun incident this morning advances the date a bit?"

"Wouldn't you say it did?"

Emilia puffed a couple of big clouds of smoke. "Damn right." There was more silence, except from cabin four, where the two boys were obviously playing some loud video game. "Does Matt know that?"

"That I'm married? Sure. I told him that by the fire last night."

"Did he know about the divorce?"

Jenni shrugged. "Look, I was still trying to get him out of any delusional fantasies about me. I didn't want that. So I didn't want him to think I was about to enter the singles market again."

"But you did mention the divorce?"

"Yes, but I implied that it wasn't certain. Actually, I implied that there was hope I'd get back with Julio."

"Ahhh… And that's what you left him thinking?"

"I tried to. It was my objective. At least at the time."

"Did you tell him you left Julio, or why?"

"I did, I guess."

"And?" Emilia reached for her jacket.

"Things seem to cool off about then. Shouldn't I have told him? Was I right to leave Julio?" Jenni looked at Emilia.

"Cripes, Jenni, from what I've been able to gather, your biggest mistake in life was hanging on as long as you did. Whatever Julio wanted in life from a woman, you weren't it. You sure didn't love him by then, and…."

"He kept telling me how much he needed me."

"Need isn't love. Us drunks know that much, even in the gutters."

"I guess," Jenni said, "part of me wanted to win Julio back." She raised a palm. "Not because I could stand him any longer, but because it might say that I hadn't been all that stupid in the first place. A little naïve, maybe, a little too young, but not just an idiot not to have seen what Julio was."

"I can see how you might have pissed Matt off about then?"

"By implying I was trying to get back with my husband?"

"No. By saying you left him. Especially if you mentioned that any of that was because you felt Julio didn't understand you. Did you say that?"

"Well, look at it from my point of view." Jenni raised her voice a bit, for a moment. "This guy drives into camp, takes a shine to me, and obviously doesn't know me or understand a thing about me. Been there; done that!"

"That explains a few things. It's getting cool out here. Did you want to go inside, or should I bring out some hot chocolate and a couple of blankets?"

Jenni shook her head. "I didn't get much sleep last night. Maybe I should just go to bed."

Emilia shook her manila envelope. "Fine, but you'd have to wait for the tragic tale of Matt and Denise."

"Denise?"

"Matt's wife. She left him."

"He's not married to Annie?"

"Nope."

"Outside, then. I like looking at the stars as they come out. Hot chocolate, and another of those day-old sandwiches from the fridge, thawed a bit."

"Two-day-old, I'd guess, even being charitable. But I'll deliver them in a jiffy." Emilia got up and went into the lodge, turning on lights as she went.

Jenni didn't look up as Emilia came back with a tray of microwave-warmed ham-and-lettuce sandwiches and hot chocolate. From over her shoulder she unloaded two wool blankets, one for herself and one for Jenni.

"So?" Jenni said, after getting warmer.

"Are you going to answer a question for me first?"

"Not this time. You go first this time. Tell me about Denise."

"Okay. Matt and Denise got married about four years ago, in a nice wedding in Kingston."

"How long had they known each other?"

"Not a clue. I'm an internet snoop on this one, but haven't achieved godhood yet."

"I gather it didn't last."

"Just over two years, or so one of my snoops thinks, but he wouldn't bet on it. But it's probably close."

"So we don't know what happened?" Jenni looked up. The stars had gone and there was only a faint brightness in the east where the moon was coming up, shielded by clouds. A chill wind picked up and she pulled the blanket closer to her.

"We know she's now with Harry."

"Harry?"

"Short for Harriet. They march in the rainbow parade in Toronto."

Jenni laughed, then stopped. "That's not funny, is it?"

"Tells us things about Matt, by inference, I think." Emilia finished her sandwich and made a face.

"Like, he's going to figure he didn't know his wife at all. He'd been married to a stranger."

"That's what I was thinking," Emilia said. "You see what this means about you."

"That's not hard." Jenni finished the chocolate before it got cold. "He was ready to run as fast as he could from a woman he was attracted to but knew nothing about."

"Until she showed up at his fishing lake in a canoe, at least."

"That wasn't intended!" Jenni protested. Then she thought a bit and said, "Do you think Denise suddenly realized she preferred women?"

"We'll never know, will we? But, sudden or slow, it's likely she abruptly told him one fine day, packed up, and moved out. That's the usual pattern."

"Which means…. ah; that explains a lot. When he found out I left Julio, he saw me as just another woman who dumps her man."

"Worse than that if you even implied that Julio didn't understand the real you and that was the main cause of your marriage breakdown."

Jenni thought back. "I might have… implied something like that. It was the truth, you know."

"Oh, I know that. Saundra told me some of the things Julio said about you, as well as those comments that got videoed. In any case," Emilia said, "it's a wonder Matt didn't embrace your husband as a brother when he showed up."

Jenni thought about that a long time. "But let's remember that I wasn't trying to get closer to Matt; I was working on setting up a few barriers between us." The night got colder and darker.

"It's going to rain," Emilia said, looking up. Let's go inside."

"We'll wait till the rain actually starts, then I'll just go to my room."

"In summary," Emilia said, tamping another wad of tobacco into her pipe and lighting it, "you didn't want to get anywhere near a guy who liked you without knowing you and Matt didn't want to hang around a girl who attracted him when he didn't know anything about her. So he goes paddling frantically off into the wilderness, portages into a remote lake, and damned if the two of you don't end up camped out together. Sound about right?"

"Sounds like a bad comedy. It wasn't very funny."

"Then, when you two are about to fall in love over a campfire in the moonlight, Matt reminds you of your cheating ex-husband and you remind Matt of his runaway ex-wife."

"Close," Jenni admitted.

"And if you hadn't saved each other's life, you've probably have parted forever by now."

"But we have parted forever."

"That remains to be seen. As Dustin Hoffman said in the movie *Stranger Than Fiction*, the difference between a comedy and a tragedy is how it ends. If the guy gets the girl, it's a comedy; if not, it's a tragedy."

"So who gets to push Annie in her wheelchair off the dock?"

Emilia laughed. "Maybe Annie can share Matt with you. They're not married, you know."

"Not in my lifetime." Jenni wasn't actually sure of that, but she went on. "Matt told me theirs was a long-term relationship, which, in my mind is as good as married. If he stays there just from a sense of duty, that's still more sharing than I want."

"Regrets?"

"I wish I could have said goodbye without looking like something the cat dragged in. I wish I could have given him a better picture of me."

Emilia shifted, and watched the moon peek through dark clouds overhead. "Actually, Matt didn't go home today. Apparently he went to Bancroft to meet what's-his-name, the helicopter pilot."

"Kevin. That's the pilot's name. Come on. How would you know that?"

"It seems Saundra and Clayton were having a supper some place called Mirrors Cafe when Kevin and Matt walked in. They shared a table for quite a while." When Jenni just gave her a blank look, Emilia added. "She got hold of me on the phone and I sent her the picture of the three of us. The one we took this afternoon."

"You didn't!" Jenni said. Her tired mind had two thoughts, The first was that at least Matt had a better picture of her to look at, and the second was that, compared to Emilia and Saundra, she wasn't going to come off as anything but third-best anyway.

"I did. And all of them will be staying in Bancroft for another day at least, thanks to Saundra."

"Saundra?"

"The police have hired the helicopter to take them back to look at your campsite. Matt thinks it's to check out whether to upgrade the charge against Julio from reckless endangerment with a firearm to attempted murder."

"Oh…." Jenni's mind was wearing out. The first drops of rain hit the deck. "I'm going to bed. I can't focus any more."

"Run off. I'll take the stuff in." Emilia was already on the move with the blankets. "I'll see you in the morning." The phone rang. "That's probably Carol in Kitchener again. Wonder what the cat did this time, and if she's already into the rum."

Fifteen minutes later Jenni, who was sure she'd get insomnia, was drifting off to sleep to the patter of the rain on the roof. Her last thought was that, after seeing what Julio was really like, maybe Matt realized she'd had a good reason to walk out on her husband.

Chapter 9

Jenni woke up the next morning feeling much better. She took her time getting dressed in jeans, a T-shirt, and a wool sweater, then went for a brisk half-hour walk along the road. There were few people in the cottages by the water, and the woods were damp with a heavy dew. A couple of dogs barked once or twice and a string of geese flew over, but there weren't many bugs out and most of those ignored her. There seemed to be a lot of spider webs, but she realized that they'd always been around; it was just the moisture from the dew making them visible. They were so pretty in the first light that she wished she'd brought a camera.

When she got back to the lodge, she walked to the end of the docks and watched the water for a few moments. The last of the morning mist was almost gone. Seeing a large feather in the water, she knelt and picked it up, examining it. Heron feather, she decided, from the size and color. She took it with her.

Back in her room she made some instant coffee and a bowl of cereal, then sat on a chair in front of her room. Through the screening she could see mists rising from the lake. The heron was back, looking for fish near the shallows, and a boat from one of the other lodges was trolling the usual spots out by the island.

Jenni knew she would have to face Emilia eventually, but she was worried that Emilia and maybe Saundra had got up to some more meddling. That would have been fine, Jenni figured, if there had been any hope that she and Matt would get together, but she couldn't see any way ahead in her current situation. Anything she and Matt could do would be wrong. The thought depressed her, and she really didn't want to meet anybody who would tell her, as they had when she left Julio, "You'll find love again." *Yeah, right*.

She got out her tablet and checked out her various email, text and social network sites. There were a few things to deal with but nothing she felt like posting at the moment. Eventually, she took a picture of the lake with the heron flying by, and posted it. Then she tried to figure out something worthwhile to do, and couldn't, so she grimaced and went to the lodge office.

Emilia, who was looking bright and cheerful in a red Two-and-a Half Pine Lodge sweatshirt and jeans – a sensible outfit for a person who might have to lug a tank of gasoline to a boat or show someone where the fish-cleaning station was – greeted her with a big smile. Jenni's heart sank a bit lower; she probably didn't want to know what that smile meant. "Good morning!" Emilia said. "Have you had breakfast, or can I make you something?"

Jenni, suppressed an urge to say, "I think I'll find someplace where I can get an omelette, maybe Nicaragua, like," and merely said, "I ate. I had a coffee."

"Well, are you up for a few items of news?"

"Look," Jenni said, "I'd really like to just relax a bit today, if you…."

"Tough," Emilia said. "Too much happening." She checked to be sure there was no one else in listening distance, and said, "the police called. They're going to upgrade the charge against Julio to 'attempted murder.'"

"I'm not sure…."

"They were there – at the campsite – yesterday, and remember when there was that bit of jiggle in the picture when the shotgun went off? That was a pellet of buckshot hitting the stump where the camera was. They dug it out. From the angle, most of the buckshot went over your head, but the closest piece couldn't have missed you by much."

"Oh." A vacation from her vacation was looking like a better bet every second.

"That's right. And the second news is that Saundra and I agreed that you and Matt were running on misunderstandings of each other. So we decided to straighten him out."

"I think I'll take a drive about now. A long drive to somewhere." Jenni couldn't tell whether she was more hurt or angry.

"Sorry. Chained your car to a tree, just in case. Just joking. Matt thought it was funny, and sent us his poem, completed this time." She pulled a piece of paper from the desk, and motioned to a chair beside the little table. "Let's look at this thing together."

"You're meddling," Jenni said.

"Damn right. Someone has to straighten you two out. What would have happened if someone had stepped in to help out Romeo and Juliet?"

"Someone did," Jenni said. "They fell in love instantly, realized they were in trouble, but a well-meaning priest stepped in with a plan."

"Really? I don't remember that part."

"In love, married, dead and buried. Took maybe three or four days from one to the other, thanks to the meddling priest." She paused. "We aren't teenagers, Emilia. We can handle things ourselves at our age."

"I doubt it. Here's the poem."

Jenni tried to ignore it, but couldn't, and read it.

Come and share this world with me
The night is full of fears
And on tomorrow's trails, we'll place
Our footprints on the years

Come and spend the night with me
We'll listen to the dark
Beneath the vault of endless sky
For you are flame, I am spark

You are flame, I am spark
And in the velvet night
In torch and touch and sudden flame
To find, then hold on tight

"So I'm to share the world, am I," Jenni said. "I suppose that's supposed to be an upgrade to sharing his tiny tent. Big promise, but he doesn't own the world. At least he owned the tent."

Emilia sighed. "I think he just means to share his experience of the world. His world. He's offering."

"Like I shared Julio's experience of the world. I'm not seeing much of an offer."

"Okay, now. Calm down. Poets abbreviate a bit. It probably means he's offering to share what experience two people can make of this world.

"And all he wants is me to spend the night. I guess that's direct enough. Does Annie get a copy of this poem? And what's this about him being a spark? He's down to a spark now, is he?" Jenni shoved the poem aside.

"Well, you're his flame; that sounds promising." She added, "Matt's going to phone sometime this morning."

Jenni shook her head. "I can't see any reason to talk to him." *I can see a reason to take a walk off the end of the dock about now, with an anchor*, she thought. "He thinks the whole thing is a misunderstanding. Well, maybe not everything is a misunderstanding, you know. There's that long-term commitment to Annie, or was that a fib?"

"It's a very long term commitment, for sure." But Emilia was smiling. "And they love each other dearly."

"Duty, then, is it? She's in a wheelchair and he's not going to abandon her? And she's so incapacitated that she'll let him play around? I don't think that's something I can accept."

But Emilia suppressed a giggle. "You remember saying he didn't react well to learning you'd walked out on your husband? At the campfire?"

Jenni said nothing.

"Well, it seems that about that time he figured out you thought his telling you about his bad marriage… that you thought it was a marriage to Annie. But he was disappointed enough in you that he just encouraged you to believe that."

"Just what damn difference does it make!" Jenni was getting red.

"We told him about your concern about his… lack of faithfulness to Annie, and how badly you reacted to such shenanigans after your husband went around picking up strays."

Jenni gave Emilia her coldest stare.

"Ah, well, Jenni, we both made an assumption from the beginning."

"Which was what?"

Emilia spoke slowly. "Jenni. Annie is Matt's *sister*."

There was a silence in the lodge. Outside, a couple of seagulls argued over something. "What?" Jenni said. "Say again?"

"His older sister. Injured in a car accident maybe ten years ago. She lives with him now."

"He's…."

"Free, as far as we can tell." Emilia began to laugh.

"Well, then…." and Jenni began to laugh, too. She laughed till she hurt her side and tears ran down her cheeks. Then she got the hiccups.

Then the phone rang. Jenni waved her arms, to tell Emilia to get it.

"Hi, Matt," Emilia said into the phone. "Yeah, she's here, but when I told her about your sister, she started laughing her guts out. Now she's got the hiccups so bad she can't talk." Emilia laughed at something Matt said, then, "You sure? She's a bit, ah, flustered right now. I'll ask her, if you want. You're sure you don't want to wait for a week or two to see if she survives the hiccups?" Emilia listened a bit while Jenni tried a couple of tricks that were supposed to stop hiccups, but didn't work, then Emilia said, "Well, okay, then."

Jenni tried to say something, but burst into laughter and hiccups again.

Emilia waited till Jenni was a bit quieter, then said, "Matt would like to ask you out to lunch. Personally, I think he's probably out to lunch to ask you, but that's up to him." Jenni's laughter stopped, but the hiccups didn't. After a long pause, she nodded.

"Well, she stopped laughing, at least," Emilia told Matt, but you won't get much conversation out of her till the hiccups stop. But she nodded; yes she did, so I guess I'll have to clean all those cottages myself this afternoon." Emilia nodded and said "okay" a couple of times while she took notes on a piece of paper." She turned to Jenni. "Try a spoonful of sugar, while holding your breath and pulling on your tongue while crossing your toes. Matt says he'll pick you up at noon and take you to …" she read the notes. "to the Blue Roof Bistro. Banana crepes, if you want. Nod your head, if that's all right."

Jenni nodded, and Emilia said to the phone, "she seems to be agreeable to that. Okay. You're welcome; just one of my many services. Bye." After she put the phone down, she turned to Jenni and raised her eyebrows. "You've got," Emilia said, looking at the clock, "less than an hour and a half.

"Omigod!" Jenni said. "What have I done? What will I wear?" It took two hiccups just to get that out.

"Well, if nothing else, you can wear yesterday's outfit. He seemed to like that. Of course, he'll figure out that you only have two outfits then, the skirt and the one you wrassle bears in the back woods in. But I have a different blouse that will probably fit you, if you want."

"Thanks." Jenni ran up to her room before she remembered that she should have taken Emilia's blouse with her. She closed the door, put her back against it, and tried to think. While she was taking another shower, she noticed that the hiccups had stopped.

The shower was a good idea; she did a lot of thinking in there.

When she came down to the office, wearing the skirt and a jacket, she was a lot calmer. The first thing she said to Emilia was, "Let me see that poem again." Emilia handed it to her. Jenni read it, folded it, and put it into the backpack she was carrying.

"You understand," Emilia said, "I think I've been a bit pushy on this thing. Probably just bored with life at the lodge. I mean, men are like blenders; a woman thinks she needs one, but isn't quite sure why."

Jenni laughed and shook her head. "You were right. Matt and I have both been pushing ashes around for a while. It's time we took some chances."

"You're sure?"

"It's time to take a chance or two."

"Scared?"

"Freakin' right, but I like Matt. After all, I've known him almost two days now." She smiled. "I'm going to trust my instincts; maybe this time it'll work."

"I wish you all the best. What are your plans?"

"Well," Jenni said, "maybe we'll have a good lunch. Maybe I'll be back in a couple of hours after I decide I was mistaken about him. Maybe we'll sing in the sunshine, pick daisies, fall in love and have a dozen kids and climb a few hills. Or maybe not, but I like the odds. And sometimes you don't get much time to make a decision."

"Fall in love?" Emilia gave her most shocked look. "Is that possible?"

"Could be. Every flame starts with a spark, you know."

"Maybe Annie and you will be close friends."

Jenni nodded vigorously. "Maybe we'll laugh a lot and I'll bring her over to meet you."

"You still need that blouse?"

"Sure do."

"What's in the packsack?"

"Odd and ends," Jenni said. "In case…."

"In case?"

"In case I don’t get back till tomorrow, like. Think I'm nuts? I plan to be prepared." Jenni felt happier than she could remember.

Emilia brought Jenni a brown blouse and gave her a big hug. Then she looked out the window. "Tell me that's not a helicopter I hear!"

"Sure sounds like it" Jenni ran out and was at the end of the dock by the time Kevin had landed the helicopter and was paddling it in to shore. He took Jenni's hand, as she stepped onto the float. Matt, reaching from the doorway, helped her into the aircraft. He looked, she noted, very happy. A couple of minutes later, as they lifted off, Jenni waved to Emilia, who was standing on the deck.

END

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