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THE HOUSE

ACROSS

THE LAKE



RILEY

*A Novel*

SABER

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*The Last Time I Lied*

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*Home Before Dark*

*Survive the Night*



**THE  
HOUSE  
ACROSS  
THE LAKE**

A NOVEL

**RILEY SAGER**



**DUTTON**



DUTTON

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# CONTENTS

*Cover*

*Also by Riley Sager*

*Title Page*

*Copyright*

*Dedication*

Prologue

Now

Before

Now

Before

Now

Before

Now

Before

Now

Before

Now

Later

*Acknowledgments*

*About the Author*

I think he did it, but I just can't prove it.

—Taylor Swift, “No Body, No Crime”

***T**he lake is darker than a coffin with the lid shut.*

*That's what Marnie used to say, back when we were children and she was constantly trying to scare me. It's an exaggeration, to be sure. But not by much. Lake Greene's water is dark, even with light trickling through it.*

*A coffin with the lid cracked.*

*Out of the water, you can see clearly for about a foot beneath the surface before it starts to get cloudy. Then inky. Then dark as a grave. It's worse when you're fully submerged, the shimmer of light coming from above a stark contrast to the black depths below.*

*When we were kids bobbing in the middle of the lake, Marnie often dared me to swim past the point of visibility until I touched bottom. I tried many times but never succeeded. Lost in the darkness, I always got disoriented, turned around, swam up when I thought I was headed down. I'd emerge breathless, confused, and slightly unnerved by the difference between water and sky.*

*On the surface, it was bright day.*

*Just below, the night waited.*

*On shore, five houses sit beside the dark water of Lake Greene, ranging in style from comfortably quaint to conspicuously modern. In the summer, when the Green Mountain State is at full splendor and each house is packed with friends, family members, and weekenders, they glow like beacons signaling safe port. Through the windows, one can see well-lit rooms filled with people eating and drinking, laughing and arguing, playing games and sharing secrets.*

*It changes in the off-season, when the houses go quiet, first during the week, then on weekends as well. Not that they're empty. Far from it. Autumn*



*lures people to Vermont just as much as summer. But the mood is different. Muted. Solemn. By mid-October, it feels like the darkness of the lake has flooded the shore and seeped into the houses themselves, dimming their light.*

*This is especially true of the house directly across the lake.*

*Made of glass, steel, and stone, it reflects the chilly water and the gray autumn sky, using them to mask whatever might be happening inside. When the lights are on, you can see past the surface, but only so far. It's like the lake in that regard. No matter how much you look, something just beneath the surface will always remain hidden.*

*I should know.*

*I've been watching.*



**NOW**

I stare at the detective on the other side of the table, an untouched mug of coffee in front of me. The steam rising from it gives her a gauzy air of mystery. Not that she needs help in that regard. Wilma Anson possesses a calm blankness that rarely changes. Even at this late hour and soaked by the storm, she remains unperturbed.

“Have you watched the Royce house at all this evening?” she says.

“Yes.” There’s no point in lying.

“See anything unusual?”

“More unusual than everything I’ve already seen?” I say.

A nod from Wilma. “That’s what I’m asking.”

“No.” This time a lie is required. I’ve seen a lot this evening. More than I ever wanted to. “Why?”

A gust of wind lashes rain against the French doors that lead to the back porch. Both of us pause a moment to watch the droplets smacking the glass. Already, the storm is worse than the TV weatherman said it would be—and what he had predicted was already severe. The tail end of a Category 4 hurricane turned tropical storm as it swerved like a boomerang from deep inland back to the North Atlantic.

Rare for mid-October.

Rarer still for eastern Vermont.

“Because Tom Royce might be missing,” Wilma says.

I tear my gaze from the French doors’ rain-specked panes to give Wilma a look of surprise. She stares back, unflappable as ever.

“Are you sure?” I say.

“I was just there. The house is unlocked. That fancy car of his is still in the driveway. Nothing inside seems to be missing. Except for him.”

I turn again to the French doors, as if I'll be able to see the Royce house rising from the lake's opposite shore. Instead, all I can make out is howling darkness and lightning-lit flashes of water whipped into a frenzy by the wind.

"Do you think he ran?"

"His wallet and keys are on the kitchen counter," Wilma says. "It's hard to run without cash or a car. Especially in this weather. So I doubt it."

I note her word choice. *Doubt*.

"Maybe he had help," I suggest.

"Or maybe someone made him disappear. You know anything about that?"

My mouth drops open in surprise. "You think I'm involved in this?"

"You did break into their house."

"I *snuck* in," I say, hoping the distinction will lessen the crime in Wilma's eyes. "And that doesn't mean I know anything about where Tom is now."

Wilma remains quiet, hoping I'll say more and possibly incriminate myself. Seconds pass. Lots of them. All announced by the ticking of the grandfather clock in the living room, which acts as a steady beat backing the song of the storm. Wilma listens to it, seemingly in no rush. She's a marvel of composure. I suspect her name has a lot to do with that. If a lifetime of Flintstones jokes teaches you anything, it's deep patience.

"Listen," Wilma says after what feels like three whole minutes. "I know you're worried about Katherine Royce. I know you want to find her. So do I. But I already told you that taking matters into your own hands won't help. Let me do my job, Casey. It's our best chance of getting Katherine back alive. So if you know anything about where her husband is, please tell me."

"I have absolutely no clue where Tom Royce could be." I lean forward, my palms flat against the table, trying to summon the same opaque energy Wilma's putting off. "If you don't believe me, you're welcome to search the house."

Wilma considers it. For the first time since we sat down, I can sense her mind ticking as steadily as the grandfather clock.

“I believe you,” she finally says. “For now. But I could change my mind at any moment.”

When she leaves, I make sure to watch her go, standing in the doorway while being buffeted by rain slanting onto the front porch. In the driveway, Wilma trots back to her unmarked sedan and slides behind the wheel. I wave as she backs the car out of the driveway, splashes through a puddle that wasn't there an hour ago, and speeds off.

I close the front door, shake off the rain, and go to the kitchen, where I pour myself a supersized bourbon. This new turn of events requires a kick coffee can't provide.

Outside, another gust of wind jostles the house. The eaves creak and the lights flicker.

Signs the storm is getting worse.

Tail end, my ass.

Bourbon glass in hand, I head upstairs, into the first bedroom on the right.

He's exactly how I left him.

Splayed out across the twin bed.

Ankles and wrists tied to the bedposts.

Towel stuffed into his mouth to form a makeshift gag.

I remove the towel, sit on the identical bed on the other side of the room, and take a long, slow sip of bourbon.

“We're running out of time,” I say. “Now tell me what you did to Katherine.”



**BEFORE**



I see it out of the corner of my eye.  
A breach of the water's surface.  
Ripples.

Sunlight.

Something rising from the water, then sinking back under.

I've been watching the lake at a mental remove, which happens when you've seen something a thousand times. Looking but not really. Seeing everything, registering nothing.

Bourbon might have something to do with that.

I'm on my third.

Maybe fourth.

Counting drinks—another thing I do at a remove.

But the motion in the water now has my full attention. Rising from the rocking chair onto legs unsteady after three (or four) day drinks, I watch the lake's glassy surface again break into sun-dappled circles.

I squint, trying to emerge from the bourbon haze long enough to see what it is. It's useless. The movement is located in the dead center of the lake—too far away to see clearly.

I leave the back porch of the lake house, step inside, and shuffle to the cramped foyer just beyond the front door. A coatrack is there, buried under anoraks and rain slickers. Among them is a pair of binoculars in a leather case hanging from a frayed strap, untouched for more than a year.

Binoculars in hand, I return to the back porch and stand at the railing, scanning the lake. The ripples reappear, and in the epicenter, a hand emerges from the water.

The binoculars drop to the porch floor.

I think: *Someone's drowning.*

I think: *I need to save them.*

I think: *Len.*

That last thought—of my husband, of how he died in this same deep water—propels me into action. I push off the railing, the movement jiggling the ice in the bourbon glass next to the rocking chair. It clinks lightly as I leave the porch, scurry down the steps, and spring across the few yards of mossy ground between the house and the water's edge. The wooden dock shudders when I leap onto it and continues to shake as I run to the motorboat moored at its end. I untie the boat, wobble into it, grab a paddle, and push off the dock.

The boat twirls a moment, doing a less-than-elegant pirouette atop the water before I straighten it out with the paddle. Once the boat's pointed toward the center of the lake, I start the outboard motor with an arm-aching tug. Five seconds later, the boat is gliding over the water, toward where I last saw the circular ripples but now see nothing.

I start to hope that what I saw was merely a fish leaping out of the water. Or a loon diving into it. Or that the sun, the reflection of the sky on the lake, and several bourbons caused me to see something that wasn't really there.

Wishful thinking, all of it.

Because as the boat nears the middle of the lake, I spot something in the water.

A body.

Bobbing on the surface.

Motionless.

I cut the motor and scramble to the front of the boat to get a better view. I can't tell if the person is faceup or facedown, alive or dead. All I can see are the shadows of outstretched limbs in the water and a tangle of hair floating like kelp. I get a mental picture of Len in this very position and yell toward the shore.

“Help! Someone's drowning!”

The words echo off the flame-hued trees on both sides of the lake, likely heard by no one. It's the middle of October, and Lake Greene, never

crowded to begin with, is all but abandoned. The only full-time resident is Eli, and he's gone until evening. If someone else is around, they aren't making their presence known.

I'm on my own.

I grab the paddle again and start to row toward the person in the water. A woman, I see now. Her hair is long. A one-piece bathing suit exposes a tanned back, long legs, toned arms. She floats like driftwood, bobbing gently in the boat's wake.

Yet another image of Len pushes into my brain as I scramble for the anchor tied to one of the cleats on the boat's rim. The anchor isn't heavy—only twenty pounds—but weighty enough to keep the boat from drifting. I drop it into the water, the rope attached to it hissing against the side of the boat as it sinks to the lake's bottom.

Next, I snag a life vest stowed under one of the seats, stumble to the side of the boat, and join the anchor in the water. I enter the lake awkwardly. No graceful dive for me. It's more of a sideways plop. But the coldness of the water sobers me like a slap. Senses sharpened and body stinging, I tuck the life vest under my left arm and use my right to paddle toward the woman.

I'm a strong swimmer, even half drunk. I grew up on Lake Greene and spent many summer days more in the water than out of it. And even though fourteen months have passed since I've submerged myself in the lake, the water is as familiar to me as my own bed. Bracing, even on the hottest days, and crystal clear for only a moment before darkness takes over.

Splashing toward the floating woman, I search for signs of life.

There's nothing.

No twitch of her arms or kick of her feet or slow turn of her head.

One thought echoes through my skull as I reach her. Part plea, part prayer.

*Please don't be dead. Please, please be alive.*

But when I hook the life vest around her neck and flip her over, she doesn't look alive. Hugged by the life vest and with her head tilted toward the sky, she resembles a corpse. Closed eyes. Blue lips. Frigid skin. I

connect the straps at the bottom of the life vest, tightening it around her, and slap a hand to her chest.

No trace of a heartbeat.

Fuck.

I want to shout for help again, but I'm too winded to get the words out. Even strong swimmers have their limits, and I've reached mine. Exhaustion pulls at me like a tide, and I know a few more minutes of paddling in place while clinging to a maybe/probably dead woman might leave me just like her.

I put one arm around her waist and use the other to start paddling back to the boat. I have no idea what to do when I reach it. Cling to the side, I guess. Hold on tight while also holding on to the likely/definitely dead woman and hope I regain enough lung power to scream again.

And that this time someone will hear me.

Right now, though, my main concern is getting back to the boat at all. I didn't think to grab a life vest for myself, and now my strokes are slowing and my heart is pounding and I can no longer feel my legs kicking, even though I think they still are. The water's so cold and I'm so tired. So scarily, unbearably exhausted that for a moment I consider taking the woman's life vest for myself and letting her drift into the depths.

Self-preservation kicking in.

I can't save her without saving myself first, and she might already be beyond rescue. But then I think again about Len, dead for more than a year now, his body found crumpled on the shore of this very lake. I can't let the same thing happen to this woman.

So I continue my one-armed paddling and numb kicking and tugging of what I'm now certain is a corpse. I keep at it until the boat is ten feet away.

Then nine.

Then eight.

Beside me, the woman's body suddenly spasms. A shocking jolt. This time, I *do* let go, my arm recoiling in surprise.

The woman's eyes snap open.