

WATCH **WILL TRENT** ON 

KARIN SLAUGHTER

THIS IS WHY
WE LIED

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

THIS IS WHY WE LIED

Karin Slaughter



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Dedication

To David – for his unending kindness and patience

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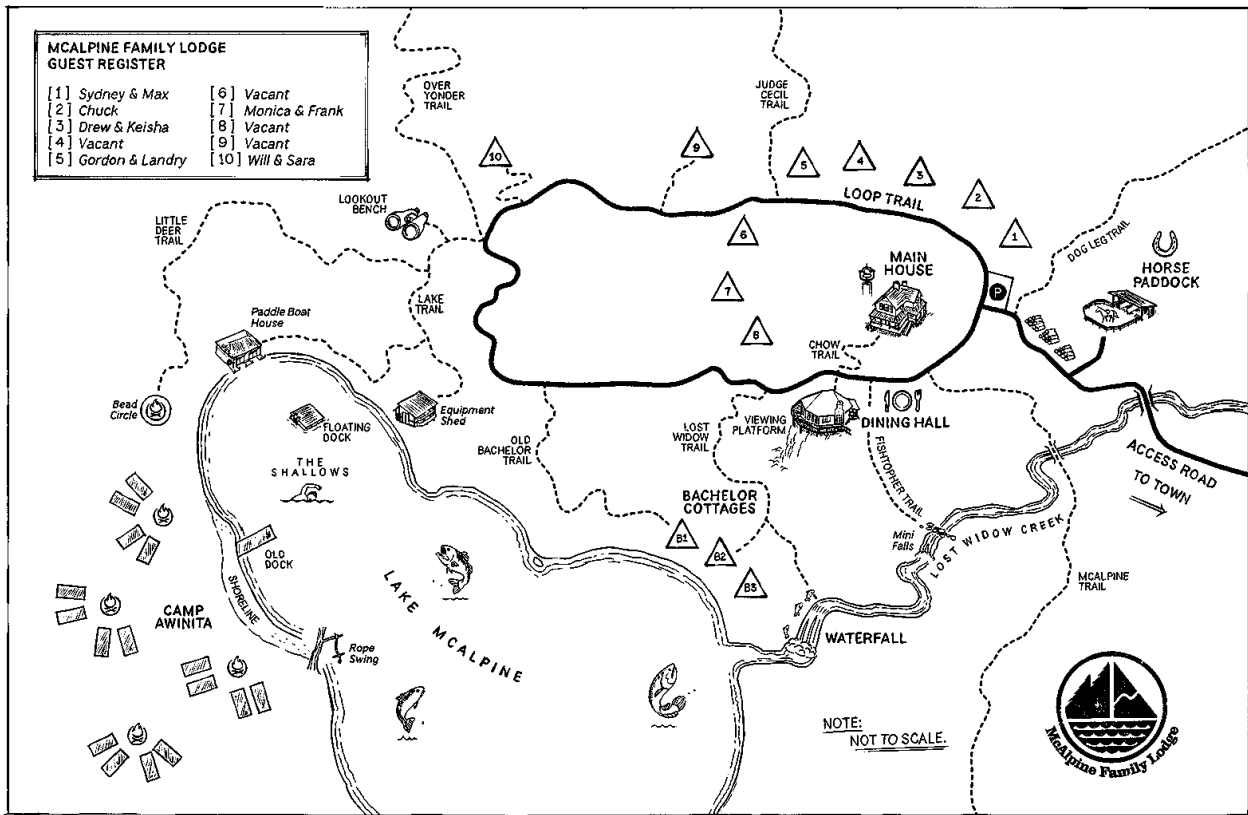
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Map



PROLOGUE

Will Trent sat down at the edge of the lake to take off his hiking boots. The numbers on his watch glowed in the darkness. An hour away from midnight. He could hear an owl in the distance. A gentle breeze whispered through the trees. The moon was a perfect circle in the night sky, light bouncing off the figure in the water. Sara Linton was swimming toward the floating dock. A cool blue light bathed her body as she cut through the gently rolling waves. Then she turned, doing a lazy backstroke as she smiled at Will.

“Are you coming in?”

Will couldn't answer. He knew that Sara was accustomed to his awkward silences, but this wasn't one of those times. He felt speechless just looking at her. All he could think was the same thing everybody thought when they saw them together: what the hell was she doing with him? She was so damn clever and funny and beautiful and he couldn't even get the knot out of his shoelace in the dark.

He forced off the boot as she swam back toward him. Her long auburn hair was sleek to her head. Her bare shoulders were peeking out from the blackness of the water. She had stripped off her clothes before diving in, laughing at his observation that it seemed like a bad idea to jump into something you couldn't see in the middle of the night when no one knew where you were.

But it seemed like a worse idea not to follow the wishes of a naked woman asking you to join her.

Will took off his socks, then stood so that he could unbutton his pants. Sara let out a low, appreciative whistle as he started to undress.

“Whoa,” she said. “A little more slowly, please.”

He laughed, but he didn't know what to do with the feeling of lightness inside his chest. Will had never experienced this type of prolonged happiness. Sure, there were times that he'd known bursts of joy—his first kiss, his first sexual encounter, his first sexual encounter that had lasted more than three seconds, graduating from college, cashing an actual paycheck, the day he had finally managed to divorce his hateful ex-wife.

This was different.

Will and Sara were two days out from their wedding, and the euphoria he had experienced during the ceremony hadn't subsided. If anything, the feeling was heightened with every passing hour. She would smile at him, or laugh at one of his stupid jokes, and it was like his heart turned into a butterfly. Which he understood wasn't a manly thing to think, but there were things you thought and things you shared, and this was one of the many reasons he preferred an awkward silence.

Sara gave a *whoop* when Will made a show of peeling off his shirt before he stepped into the lake. He wasn't used to walking around naked, especially outdoors, so he ducked under a lot more quickly than he should've. The water was cold, even for mid-summer. Chills prickled his skin. He could feel mud unpleasantly sucking around his feet. Then Sara wrapped her body around his and Will had no complaints.

He said, “Hey.”

“Hey.” She stroked back his hair. “Have you ever been in a lake before?”

“Not by choice,” he admitted. “Are you sure the water’s safe?”

She thought about it. “Copperheads are usually more active at dusk. We’re probably too far north for cottonmouths.”

Will hadn’t considered snakes. He had grown up in downtown Atlanta, surrounded by dirty concrete and used syringes. Sara had grown up in a college town in rural South Georgia, surrounded by nature.

And snakes, apparently.

“I have a confession,” she said. “I told Mercy we lied to her.”

“I figured,” Will said. The incident between Mercy and her family tonight had been intense. “Is she gonna be okay?”

“Probably. Jon seems like a good kid.” Sara shook her head over the futility of it all. “It’s hard being a teenager.”

Will tried to lighten things up. “There’s something to be said for growing up in an orphanage.”

She pressed her finger to his lips, which he guessed was her way of saying *not funny*. “Look up.”

Will looked up. Then he let his head drop back as a sense of awe washed over him. He had never seen actual stars in the sky. Not stars like these, at least. Bright, individual pinpricks in the velvety black expanse of night. Not flattened out by light pollution. Not dulled by smog or haze. He took in a deep breath. Felt his heartbeat start to slow. The only sound was literal crickets. The only man-made light was a distant twinkle coming from the wrap-around porch on the main house.

He kind of loved it here.

They’d hiked five miles through rocky terrain to get to the McAlpine Family Lodge. The place had been around so long that Will had heard about it when he was a kid. He had dreamed about going one day. Canoeing, paddle boarding, mountain bike riding, hiking, eating s’mores by a campfire. That he had made the trip with Sara, that he was a happily married man on his honeymoon, was a fact that brought him more wonder than every star in the sky.

Sara said, “Places like this, you scratch a little bit under the surface and all sorts of bad things come out.”

Will knew that she was still thinking about Mercy. The brutal argument with her son. The cold response from her parents. Her pitiful brother. Her total dick of an ex-husband. Her eccentric aunt. Then there were the other guests with their problems, which had been amplified by the liberal amount of alcohol poured at the communal dinner. Which reminded Will again that when he’d dreamed about this place as a kid, he hadn’t anticipated that other people would be here. Especially one asshole in particular.

“I know what you’re going to say,” Sara told him. “This is why we lied.”

That wasn’t exactly what he was going to say, but it was close.

Will was a special agent with the Georgia Bureau of Investigation. Sara had trained as a pediatrician and was currently serving as a medical examiner with the GBI. Both occupations tended to elicit long conversations from strangers, not all of them good and some of them very bad. Concealing their jobs had felt like a better way to enjoy their honeymoon.

Then again, saying you were one thing didn’t stop you from being the other. They were both the kind of people who worried about other people. Particularly Mercy. She seemed to have the entire world against her right now. Will knew how much strength it took to keep your head up, to keep moving forward, when everyone else in your life was trying to pull you down.

“Hey.” Sara hugged him closer, wrapping her legs around his waist. “I have another confession.”

Will smiled because she was smiling. The butterfly in his chest started to stir. Then other things stirred because he could feel the heat of her pressing against his body.

He asked, “What’s your confession?”

“I can’t get enough of you.” Sara kissed her way up the side of his neck, using her teeth to tease out a response. The chills came back. The feel of her breath in his ear flooded his brain with need. He let his hand slowly travel down. Her breath caught when he touched her. He could feel the rise and fall of her breasts against his bare chest.

Then a sharp, loud scream pierced the night air.

“Will.” Sara’s body had tensed. “What was that?”

He had no idea. He couldn’t tell if it was human or animal. The scream had been high-pitched, blood-curdling. Not a word or a cry for help, but a sound of unrestrained terror. The kind of noise that made the primal part of your brain kick into fight or flight.

Will wasn’t built for flight.

He held onto Sara’s hand as they quickly made their way toward shore. He picked up his clothes, gave Sara her things. Will looked out over the water as he put on his shirt. He knew from the map that the lake spread out like a slumbering snowman. The swimming area was at the head. The shoreline disappeared into the darkness around the curve of the abdomen. Sound was hard to pin down. The obvious source of the scream was where the people were. Four other couples and a single man were staying at the lodge. The McAlpine family was in the main house. Leaving out Will and Sara, the guests were in five of the ten cottages that fanned away from the dining hall. That brought the total number to eighteen people on the compound.

Any one of them could’ve screamed.

“The fighting couple at dinner.” Sara worked the buttons on her dress. “The dentist was wasted. The IT guy was—”

“What about the single guy?” Will’s cargo pants skidded up his wet legs. “The one who kept needling Mercy?”

“Chuck,” Sara provided. “The lawyer was obnoxious. How did he get on the Wi-Fi?”

“His horse-obsessed wife annoyed everybody.” Will shoved his bare feet into his boots. His socks went into his pocket. “The lying app guys are up to something.”

“What about the Jackal?”

Will looked up from tying his bootlace.

“Babe?” Sara kicked over her sandals so she could slide them on. “Are you—”

He left the lace untied. He didn’t want to talk about the Jackal. “Ready?”

They started up the path. Will felt the urge to move, picking up the pace until Sara started to lag. She was incredibly athletic, but her shoes were made for strolling, not running.

He stopped, turning to her. “Is it okay if—”

“Go,” she said. “I’ll catch up.”

Will left the path, taking a straight line through the woods. He used the porch light as his guide, his hands pushing away limbs and prickly vines that caught at his shirt sleeves. His wet feet were rubbing inside his boots. It had been a mistake to leave the one lace untied. He thought about stopping, but the wind shifted, carrying an odor like copper pennies in the air. Will couldn’t tell if he was smelling blood or if his cop brain was throwing out sense memories of past crime scenes.

The scream could’ve come from an animal.

Even Sara hadn't been sure. Will's only certainty was the thing that had made the sound was in fear of its life. Coyote. Bobcat. Bear. There were a lot of creatures in the woods that could make other creatures feel that way.

Was this an overreaction?

He stopped trudging through the overgrowth, turning around to locate the path. He could tell where Sara was, not by sight but by the sound of her shoes on the gravel. She was halfway between the main house and the lake. Their cottage was on the far end of the compound. She was probably trying to form a plan. Were there any lights on in the other cottages? Should she start knocking on doors? Or was she thinking the same as Will, that they were being overly vigilant considering what they both did for a living, and this was going to be a really funny story to tell her sister about how they heard an animal give a death cry and rushed off to investigate rather than having hot lake sex.

Will could not appreciate the humor right now. Sweat had pasted his hair to his head. A blister was rubbing on the back of his heel. Blood trickled from his forehead where a vine had ripped open the skin. He listened to the silence in the woods. Not even the crickets were chirping now. He slapped at an insect that bit him on the side of his neck. Something scurried in the trees overhead.

Maybe he didn't love this place after all.

Worse, at a very deep level, he blamed the Jackal for this misery. Nothing had ever gone right in Will's life when that asshole was around, dating back to when they were kids. The sadistic prick had always been a walking bad luck charm.

Will rubbed his face with his hands like he could erase any thoughts of the Jackal from his brain. They weren't kids anymore. Will was a grown man on his honeymoon.

He headed back toward Sara. Or at least in the direction he thought Sara had gone. Will had lost all sense of time and direction in the dark. There was no telling how long he'd run through the forest like he was tackling a Ninja Warrior set. Walking through the overgrowth was a lot harder without the adrenaline pushing him to run face-first into hanging vines. Will silently formed his own plan. Once he reached the path, he would put on his socks and tie his bootlace so he wasn't limping through the rest of the week. He would locate his beautiful wife. He would take her back to the cottage and they could pick up where they had left off.

"Help!"

Will froze.

There wasn't any uncertainty this time. The scream was so pronounced that he knew it had come from the mouth of a woman.

Then she screamed again—

"Please!"

Will bolted away from the path, running toward the lake. The sound had come from the opposite side of the swimming area, toward the bottom of the snowman. He kept his head down. Legs pumping. He could hear the blood rushing through his ears alongside the echo of the screams. The woods quickly turned into a dense forest. Low-hanging limbs slashed at his arms. Gnats swarmed around his face. The terrain suddenly dropped. He landed sideways on his foot. His ankle rolled.

He ignored the sharp pain, forcing himself to keep going. Will tried to get his adrenaline in check. He had to slow his pace. The compound was at a higher elevation than the lake. There was a steep drop-off near the dining hall. He found the back end of the Loop Trail, then followed another zig-zagging path down. His heart was still pumping. His brain was still reeling with

recriminations. He should've paid attention to his instincts the first time. He should've figured this out. He felt sick about what he was going to find, because the woman had screamed for her life, and there was no predator more vicious than a human being.

He coughed as the air turned thick with smoke. The moonlight broke through the trees just in time for him to see the ground was terraced. Will stumbled into a clearing. Empty beer cans and cigarette butts littered the ground. Tools were everywhere. Will kept his head on a swivel as he jogged past sawhorses and extension cords and a generator that had been turned on its side. There were three more cottages, all of them in various stages of repair. A tarp covered one roof. Windows were boarded up in the next. The last cabin was on fire. Flames licked out between the log siding. The door was half-open. Smoke ribboned from a busted side window. The roof wasn't going to hold for much longer.

The screams for help. The fire.
Someone had to be inside.

Will took a deep breath before he ran up the porch stairs. Kicked the door wide open. A blast of heat snatched the moisture from his eyes. All but one of the windows was boarded up. The only light was from the fire. He crouched down, keeping himself below the smoke as he made his way through the living room. Into the tiny kitchen. The bathroom with space for a soaking tub. The small closet. His lungs started to ache. He was running out of breath. He inhaled a mouthful of black smoke as he headed toward the bedroom. No door. No fixtures. No closet. The back wall of the cottage had been stripped to the studs.

They were too narrow for him to fit through.

Will heard a loud creak over the roar of the fire. He jogged back into the living room. The ceiling was fully engulfed. Flames were chewing away the support beams. The roof was collapsing. Chunks of burning wood rained down. Will could barely see for the smoke.

The front door was too far away. He ran toward the busted window, jumping at the last minute, hurtling past falling debris. He rolled to the ground. Coughs racked his body. His skin was tight, as though it wanted to boil from the heat. He tried to stand up, but could only make it to his hands and knees before he coughed out a wad of black soot. His nose was running. Sweat poured from his face. He coughed again. His lungs felt like shattered glass. He pressed his forehead to the ground. Mud smacked at his singed eyebrows. He pulled in a sharp breath through his nose.

Copper.

Will sat up.

There was a belief among police officers that you could smell the iron in blood when it hit oxygen. This wasn't true. The iron needed a chemical reaction to activate the scent. At crime scenes, that something was usually the fatty compounds in skin. The odor was amplified in the presence of water.

Will looked out at the lake. His eyes blurred. He wiped away the mud and sweat. Silenced the cough that wanted to come.

In the distance, he could make out the soles of a pair of Nikes.

Blood-stained jeans pulled down to the knees.

Arms floating out to the sides.

The body was face up, half in the water, half out.

Will felt momentarily transfixed by the sight. It was the way the moon turned the skin a waxy, pale blue. Maybe joking about growing up in an orphanage had put it in his mind, or maybe he

was still feeling the absence of any family members on his side of the aisle at the wedding, but Will found himself thinking of his own mother.

As far as he knew, there were only two photographs that documented the seventeen years of his mother's short life. One was a mugshot from an arrest that had taken place a year before Will was born. The other was taken by the medical examiner who had performed her autopsy. Polaroid. Faded. The waxy blue of his mother's skin was the same color as the dead woman lying twenty feet away.

Will stood. He limped toward the body.

He wasn't under any illusion that he would see his mother's face. His gut had already told him who he would find. Still, standing over the body, knowing he was right, etched another scar in the darkest place of his heart.

Another woman lost. Another son who would grow up without his mother.

Mercy McAlpine lay in the shallow water, rippling waves sending her shoulders into tiny shrugs. Her head rested on a cluster of rocks that kept her nose and mouth above water. Floating tendrils of blonde hair gave her an ethereal effect—a fallen angel, a fading star.

Cause of death wasn't a mystery. Will could tell that she'd been repeatedly stabbed. The white button-down shirt Mercy had worn at dinner had disappeared into the bloody pulp of her chest. Water had washed clean some of the wounds. He could see the angry gouges in her shoulder where the knife had been twisted. Dark red squares showed the only thing that had kept the blade from going deeper was the handle.

In his career, Will had seen more horrific crime scenes, but this woman had been alive, walking around, joking, flirting, arguing with her sullen son, warring with her toxic family, less than an hour ago, and now she was dead. She would never be able to make things right with her child. She would never see him fall in love. Never sit in the front row as she watched him marry the love of his life. No more holidays or birthdays or graduations or quiet moments together.

And all Jon would be left with was the aching loss of her absence.

Will allowed himself a few seconds of sorrow before he summoned his training. He scanned the woods in case the killer was still around. He checked for weapons on the ground. The assailant had taken the knife with him. Will studied the woods again. Listened for strange sounds. He swallowed down the soot and bile in his throat. Knelt beside Mercy. Pressed his fingers against the side of her neck to check for a pulse.

He felt the quick jolt of her heartbeat.

She was alive.

"Mercy?" Will gently turned her head in his direction. Her eyes were open, the whites gleaming like shiny marbles. He made his voice firm. "Who did this to you?"

Will heard a whistling sound, but not from her nose or mouth. Her lungs were trying to draw in air through the open wounds in her chest.

"Mercy." He grabbed her face in his hands. "Mercy McAlpine. My name is Will Trent. I'm an agent with the Georgia Bureau of Investigation. I need you to look at me right now."

Her eyelids started to flutter.

"Look at me, Mercy," Will ordered. "Look at me."

The white flickered for a moment. Her pupils rolled. Seconds passed, maybe a minute, before she finally focused on Will's face. There was a brief spark of recognition, then a rush of fear. She was back in her body now, filled with terror, filled with pain.

"You're gonna be okay." Will started to stand. "I'm going to get help."

Mercy grabbed Will's collar, pulling him back down. She looked at him—really looked at him. They both knew that she would not be okay. Instead of panicking, instead of letting him go, she was keeping him here. Her life was coming into focus. The last words she had said to her family, the fight with her son.

“J-Jon ... tell him ... tell him he h-has to ... he has to g-get away from h-huh ...”

Will watched her eyelids start to flutter again. He wasn't going to tell Jon anything. Mercy was going to say her last words to her son's face. He raised his voice, yelling, “Sara! Get Jon! Hurry!”

“N-no ...” Mercy started to tremble. She was going into shock. “J-Jon can't ... he c-can't ... stay ... Get away from ... from ...”

“Listen to me,” Will said. “Give your son the chance to say goodbye.”

“L-love ...” she said. “Love him ... s-so much.”

Will could hear his own heartbreak in her voice. “Mercy, please stay with me for just a while longer. Sara's gonna bring Jon here. He needs to see you before—”

“I'm s-sorry ...”

“Don't be sorry,” Will said. “Just stay with me. Please. Think about the last thing Jon said to you. That can't be the end of it. You know he doesn't hate you. He doesn't want you dead. Don't leave him with that. Please.”

“F-forgive ... him ...” She coughed, spraying out blood. “Forgive him ...”

“Tell him yourself. Jon needs to hear it from you.”

Her fist twisted into his shirt. She pulled him even closer. “F-forgive him ...”

“Mercy, please don't—” Will's voice broke. She was slipping away too fast. It suddenly hit him what Jon would see if Sara brought him here. This was not a tender moment to say goodbye. No son should have to live with the evidence of his mother's violent death.

He tried to swallow down his own grief. “Okay. I'll tell Jon. I promise.”

Mercy took his vow as permission.

Her body went slack. She let go of his collar. Will watched her hand fall away, the ripples as it splashed into the water. The trembling had stopped. Her mouth gaped open. A slow, pained sigh left her body. Will waited for her to take another raspy breath, but her chest went still.

He panicked in the silence. He couldn't let her go. Sara was a doctor. She could save Mercy. She would bring Jon and he would have his last chance to say goodbye.

“Sara!”

Will's voice echoed around the lake. He ripped off his shirt, covered up her wounds. Jon wouldn't see the damage. He would see his mother's face. He would know that she loved him. He wouldn't have to live the rest of his life wondering what might have been.

“Mercy?” Will shook her so hard that her head lolled to the side. “Mercy?”

He slapped his palm against her face. Her skin was ice cold. There was no more color left to drain. The blood had stopped flowing. She wasn't breathing. He couldn't find a pulse. He had to start compressions. Will laced together his hands, placed his palms on Mercy's chest, locked his elbows, squared his shoulders, and pushed down with his full weight.

Pain sliced through his hand like a lightning strike. He tried to pull back, but he was caught.

“Stop!” Sara had come out of nowhere. She grabbed his hands, trapping them against Mercy's chest. “Don't move. You'll cut the nerves.”

It took a moment for him to understand that Sara wasn't worried about Mercy. She was worried about Will.

He looked down. His brain had no explanation for what he was seeing. Slowly, he came back to his senses. He was looking at the murder weapon. The attack had been frenzied, violent, filled with rage. The killer hadn't just stabbed Mercy in the chest. He'd attacked her from behind, driving the knife into her back with such force that the handle had snapped off. The blade was still embedded inside Mercy's chest.

Will had impaled his hand on the broken knife.

1

TWELVE HOURS BEFORE THE MURDER

Mercy McAlpine stared up at the ceiling thinking through her week. All ten couples had checked out of the lodge this morning. Five new ones were hiking in today. Five more would arrive on Thursday, giving them another full house over the weekend. She needed to get the right suitcases put into the right cottages. The shipper had dumped the last of them on the parking pad this morning. She would have to figure out what to do with her brother's idiot friend, who kept showing up like a stray dog on their doorstep. The kitchen staff needed to be notified he was here again because Chuck had a peanut allergy. Or maybe she wouldn't notify them and the level of bullshit in her life would be cut roughly in half.

The other half was grinding away on top of her. Dave was huffing like a steam train that was never going to reach the end of the tunnel. His eyes bulged in his head. His cheeks were bright red. Mercy had quietly orgasmed five minutes ago. She probably should've told him, but she hated giving him the win.

She turned her head, trying to see the clock by the bed. They were on the floor of cottage five because Dave wasn't worth changing out the sheets. It had to be close to noon. Mercy couldn't be late for the family meeting. Guests would start trickling in around two. Phone calls needed to be made. Two of the couples had asked for massages. Another couple had signed up at the last minute for white water rafting. She needed to confirm the horseback riding place had the right time for the morning. She had to check the weather again, see if that storm was still heading their way. The supplier had brought nectarines instead of peaches. Did he really think she didn't know the difference?

"Merce?" Dave was still chugging away, but she could hear the defeat in his voice. "I think I need to call it."

Mercy patted his shoulder twice, tapping him out. Dave's tired cock flopped against her leg as he collapsed onto his back. He stared up at the ceiling. She stared at him. He'd just turned thirty-five years old and he looked closer to eighty. His eyes were rheumy. His nose was crisscrossed with burst capillaries. His breath had a wheeze. He'd started smoking again because the liquor and pills weren't killing him fast enough.

He said, "Sorry."

There was no need for Mercy to respond because they'd done this so many times that her words existed like a perpetual echo. *Maybe if you weren't high ... maybe if you weren't drunk ... maybe if you weren't a worthless piece of shit ... maybe if I wasn't a lonely, stupid moron who kept fucking her loser ex-husband on the floor ...*

"You want me to—" He gestured downward.

"I'm good."

Dave laughed. "You're the only woman I know who fakes not having an orgasm."

Mercy didn't want to joke with him. She kept harping on Dave for making bad decisions, but then she kept having sex with him like she was any better. She pulled on her jeans. The button was tight because she'd put on a few pounds. She hadn't taken off anything else but her shoes. The lavender Nikes were beside his toolbox, which reminded her, "You need to fix that toilet in three before the guests get here."

"You got it, boss lady." Dave rolled onto his side in preparation to stand. He was never in a hurry. "You think you can cut me some money loose?"

"Take it out of child support."

He winced. He was sixteen years behind.

She asked, "What about the money Papa paid you to fix up the bachelor cottages?"

"That was a deposit." Dave's knee gave a loud pop as he stood. "I had to buy materials."

She assumed most of the materials came from his dealer or his bookie. "A tarp and a used generator doesn't equal a thousand bucks."

"Come on now, Mercy Mac."

Mercy gave an audible sigh as she checked her reflection in the mirror. The scar that sliced down her face was an angry red against her pale skin. Her hair was still tightly pulled back. Her shirt wasn't even wrinkled. She looked like she'd had the least satisfying orgasm given to her by the world's most disappointing man.

Dave asked, "What do you think about this investment thing?"

"I think Papa's gonna do whatever he wants to do."

"It's not him I'm asking."

She looked at Dave in the mirror. Her father had sprung the news about the wealthy investors over breakfast. Mercy hadn't been consulted, so she assumed this was Papa's way of reminding her that he was still in control. The lodge had been handed down through the McAlpine family for seven generations. In the past, there had been small loans, usually from long-time guests who wanted to keep the place going. They helped get roofs repaired or buy new water heaters, or once, replace the power line from the road. This sounded a hell of a lot bigger. Papa had said the money from the investors was enough to build an annex to the main compound.

Mercy said, "I think it's a good idea. That section of old campsite sits on the best part of the property. We can build some bigger cottages, maybe start marketing to weddings and family reunions."

"Still gonna call it Camp A-Wanna-Pedo?"

Mercy didn't want to laugh, but she did. Camp Awinita was a one-hundred-acre campground with access to the lake, a stream full of trout, and a magnificent long-range mountain view. The land had also been a reliable cash cow until fifteen years ago, when every organization that rented it out, from the Boy Scouts to the Southern Baptists, experienced some kind of pedophile scandal. There was no telling how many kids had suffered over there. The only option had been to close it down before the taint spread to the lodge.

"I dunno," Dave said. "Most of that land's in a conservation easement. You can't really build out past where the creek hits the lake. Plus, I don't see Papa giving anybody any input on how that money's spent."

Mercy quoted her father, "'There's only one name on that sign by the road.'"

"Your name's on that sign, too," Dave said. "You're doing a great job running this place. You were right about upgrading the bathrooms. That marble was a pain hauling in, but it's sure impressive. The faucets and bathtubs look like they came out of a magazine. Guests are spending

more for extras. Coming back for repeats. Those investors wouldn't be offering any money except for what you've done here."

Mercy resisted the urge to preen. Compliments were not handed out lightly in her family. No one had said a word about the accent walls in the cottages, the addition of coffee bars and window boxes overflowing with flowers so that guests felt like they were walking into a fairy tale.

She said, "If we spend this money right, people will pay twice, maybe even three times, what they're paying now. Especially if we give them road access instead of making them hike in. We could even do some of those UTVs to get to the bottom of the lake. It's beautiful down there."

"It surely is beautiful, I'll give you that." Dave spent most of his days on the site, ostensibly remodeling the three ancient cottages. He asked, "Bitty have anything to say about the money?"

Her mother always sided with her father, but Mercy said, "She'd talk to you before she talked to me."

"Haven't heard a peep." Dave shrugged. Bitty would confide in him eventually. She loved Dave more than her own children. "You ask me, bigger ain't always better."

Bigger was exactly what Mercy was hoping for. After the shock from hearing the news had worn off, she'd come around to the idea. The influx of cash could shake things up. She was tired of running in quicksand.

Dave said, "It's a lot of change."

She leaned her back against the dresser, looking at him. "Would it be so bad if things were different?"

They stared at each other. There was a lot of weight to the question. She looked past the rheumy eyes and the red nose and saw the eighteen-year-old boy who had promised to take her away from here. Then she saw the car accident that had split open her face. The rehab. The rehab again. The custody battle for Jon. The threat of falling off the wagon. And always the constant, unrelenting disappointment.

Her phone pinged from the bedside table. Dave looked down at the notification. "You got somebody at the trailhead."

Mercy unlocked the screen. The camera was at the parking pad, which meant she had around two hours before the first guests completed the five-mile hike to the lodge. Or maybe less. They looked like they could easily handle the trail. The man was tall and lanky with a runner's build. The woman had long, curly red hair and was carrying a backpack that looked like it had been used before.

The couple shared a deep kiss before they headed toward the trailhead. Mercy felt a pang of jealousy to see them holding hands. The man kept looking down at the woman. She kept looking up at him. Then they both laughed, like they realized how ridiculously in love they were acting.

"Dude looks dick drunk," Dave said.

Mercy's jealousy intensified. "She looks pretty tipsy herself."

"BMW," Dave noticed. "Those the investors?"

"Rich people aren't that happy. Has to be the honeymooners. Will and Sara."

Dave took a closer look, though the couple's back was to the camera now. "You know what they do for a living?"

"He's a mechanic. She's a chemistry teacher."

"Where're they from?"

"Atlanta."

"Real Atlanta or metro Atlanta?"

“I don’t know, Dave. Atlanta-Atlanta.”

He walked toward the window. She watched him stare across the compound at the main house. She knew something had set him off, but she didn’t have it in her to ask. Mercy had put in her time with Dave. Trying to help him. Trying to heal him. Trying to love him enough. Trying to be enough. Trying, trying, trying not to drown in the quicksand of his aching need.

People thought he was Mr. Laid Back Easy-Going Life-of-the-Party Dave, but Mercy knew that he walked around with a giant ball of angst inside his chest. Dave wasn’t an addict because he was at peace. He had spent the first eleven years of his life in the foster care system. No one had bothered to look for him when he’d run away. He’d hung around the campsite until Mercy’s father had found him sleeping in one of the bachelor cottages. Then her mother had cooked him dinner, then Dave had started showing up every night, then he’d moved into the main house and the McAlpines had adopted him, which had led to a lot of nasty rumors when Mercy had gotten pregnant with Jon. It didn’t help that Dave was eighteen and Mercy had just turned fifteen when it happened.

They had never thought of each other as siblings. They were more like two idiots passing in the night. He had hated her until he’d loved her. She had loved him until she’d hated him.

“Heads-up.” Dave turned away from the window. “Fishtopher’s comin’ in hot.”

Mercy was tucking her phone into her back pocket when her brother opened the door. He was holding one of the cats, a plump ragdoll that flopped over his arms. Christopher was dressed the way he was always dressed: fishing vest, bucket hat hooked with fishing flies, cargo shorts with too many pockets, flip-flops so he could quickly pull on his waders and stand in the middle of a stream all day throwing out lines. Hence the nickname.

Dave asked, “What lured you here, Fishtopher?”

“Dunno.” Fish raised his eyebrows. “Something reeled me in.”

Mercy knew they could go on like this for hours. “Fish, did you tell Jon to get the canoes cleaned out?”

“Yep, and he told me to go fuck myself.”

“Jesus.” Mercy shot Dave a look, like he was solely responsible for Jon’s behavior. “Where is he now?”

Fish placed the cat on the porch alongside the other one. “I sent him into town to get some peaches.”

“Why?” She looked at the clock again. “We’ve got five minutes until family meeting. I’m not paying him to ass his way around town all summer. He needs to know the schedule.”

“He needs to be gone.” Fish crossed his arms the way he always did when he thought he had something important to say. “Delilah’s here.”

He could’ve said Lucifer was dancing a jig on the front porch and gotten less shock out of her. Without thinking, Mercy grabbed for Dave’s arm. Her heart was gonging against her ribcage. Twelve years had passed since she’d faced off against her aunt inside a cramped courtroom. Delilah had been trying to get permanent custody of Jon. Mercy still felt the deep wounds from the fight to get him back.

“What’s that crazy bitch doing here?” Dave demanded. “What does she want?”

“Dunno,” Fish said. “She passed right by me on the lane, then went into the house with Papa and Bitty. I found Jon and sent him off before he saw her. You’re welcome.”

Mercy couldn’t thank him. She had started to sweat. Delilah lived an hour away inside her own little bubble. Her parents had brought her up here because they were up to something. “Papa and Bitty were on the porch waiting for Delilah?”

“They’re always on the porch in the morning. How would I know if they were waiting?”

“Fish!” Mercy stamped her foot. He could tell the difference between a smallmouth and a redeye from twenty yards, but he couldn’t read people for shit. “How did they look when Delilah pulled up? Were they surprised? Did they say anything?”

“Don’t think so. Delilah got out of her car. She was holding her purse like this.”

Mercy watched him grip together his hands in front of his belly.

“Then she walked up the stairs and they all went inside.”

Dave asked, “She still dressing like Pippi Longstocking?”

“Who’s Pippi Longstocking?”

“Hush,” Mercy hissed. “Delilah didn’t say anything about Papa being in a wheelchair?”

“Nope. None of them said anything at all, now that I think about it. Strangely silent.” Fish held up his finger to indicate that he remembered another detail. “Bitty started to push Papa’s chair inside, but Delilah took over.”

Dave mumbled, “Sounds like Delilah all right.”

Mercy felt her teeth clench. Delilah hadn’t been surprised to find her brother in a wheelchair, which meant she already knew about the accident, which meant that they had talked on the phone. The question was, who had made the phone call? Had she been invited here or just shown up?

As if on cue, her phone started to ring. Mercy slid it out of her pocket. She saw the caller ID. “Bitty.”

Dave said, “Put it on speaker.”

Mercy tapped the screen. Her mother started every phone call the same way whether she was calling or answering. “This is Bitty.”

Mercy answered, “Yes, Mother.”

“Are you kids coming for family meeting?”

Mercy looked at the clock. She was two minutes late. “I sent Jon into town. Fish and I are on the way.”

“Bring Dave.”

Mercy’s hand was hovering over the phone. She had been ready to hang up. Now her fingers were trembling. “Why do you want Dave there?”

There was a click as her mother ended the call.

Mercy looked at Dave, then at Fish. She could feel a fat drop of sweat rolling down her back. “Delilah’s going to try to get Jon back.”

“No she ain’t. Jon just had his birthday. He’s practically an adult.” For once, Dave was the logical one. “Delilah can’t snatch him away. Even if she tries, it won’t go to court for a couple years, at least. He’ll be eighteen by then.”

Mercy pressed her palm to her heart. He was right. Jon acted like a baby sometimes, but he was sixteen years old. Mercy wasn’t a serial fuck-up with two DUIs trying to ween herself off of heroin with zanies. She was a responsible citizen. She was running the family business. She’d been clean for thirteen years.

“Guys,” Fish said, “are we even supposed to know Delilah’s here?”

Dave asked, “She didn’t see you when she came up the lane?”

“Maybe?” Fish was asking, not telling. “I was stacking logs by the shed. She was going pretty fast. You know how she is. Like she’s on a mission.”

Mercy thought of an explanation that was almost too awful to speak. “The cancer could be back.”

Fish looked stricken. Dave took a few steps away, turning his back to them both. Bitty had been diagnosed with metastatic melanoma four years ago. Aggressive treatment had put the cancer into remission, but remission did not mean cured. The oncologist had told her to keep her affairs in order.

“Dave?” Mercy asked. “Have you noticed anything? Is she acting any different?”

Mercy watched Dave shake his head. He used his fist to wipe his eyes. He’d always been a mama’s boy, and Bitty still doted on him like a baby. Mercy couldn’t begrudge him the extra affection. His own mother had abandoned him in a cardboard box outside a fire station.

“She—” Dave cleared his throat a few times so he could speak. “She would get me alone and tell me if it was back. She wouldn’t spring it on me at a family meeting.”

Mercy knew this was true, if only because Dave had been the first person Bitty had told the last time. Dave had always had a special connection with her mother. He was the one who’d nicknamed her Bitty Mama because she was so small. When she was fighting cancer, Dave had taken her to every doctor’s appointment, every surgery, every treatment. He was also the one who’d changed her surgical dressings, kept up with her pill regimen, even washed her hair.

Papa had been too busy running the lodge.

Fish said, “We’re missing the obvious.”

Dave was wiping his nose with the hem of his T-shirt when he turned back around. “What?”

Fish supplied, “Papa wants to talk about the investors.”

Mercy felt like an idiot for not thinking of this first. “Do we have to call a board meeting to vote on taking the money?”

“No.” Dave knew the rules of the McAlpine Family Trust better than anyone. Delilah had tried to force him out because he was adopted. “Papa’s the trustee, so he gets to make those decisions. Besides, you only need a quorum to call a vote. Mercy, you’ve got Jon’s proxy, so all he needs is you, Fish and Bitty. No reason for me to be there. Or Delilah.”

Fish anxiously looked at his watch. “We should go, right? Papa’s waiting.”

“Waiting to ambush us,” Dave said.

Mercy figured that was what her father was planning. She was under no illusion that they were about to share a warm family moment.

She told them, “Let’s get this over with.”

Mercy led the boys across the compound. The two cats trotted alongside them. She struggled against her natural state of anxiety. Jon was safe. Mercy was not helpless. She was too old for a spanking, and it wasn’t like Papa could outrun her anymore.

Heat rushed into her face. She was an awful daughter for even thinking such a thing. Eighteen months ago, her father had been guiding a group up the mountain bike trail when he’d flipped head-first over his handlebars and plunged into the gorge. An air ambulance had winched him out on a stretcher while the guests watched in horror. His skull had been cracked open. Two vertebrae in his neck were fractured. His back was broken. There was no question that he would end up in a wheelchair. He had nerve damage in his right arm. If he was lucky, he would have limited control of his left hand. He could still breathe on his own, but in those first few days, the surgeons had talked about him like he was already dead.

Mercy hadn’t had time to grieve. Guests were still at the lodge. Even more were coming in the following weeks. Schedules had to be made. Guides had to be assigned. Supplies had to be ordered. Bills had to be paid.

Fish was the oldest, but he’d never been interested in management. His passion was taking guests out on the water. Jon was too young, and what’s more, he hated it here. Dave couldn’t be