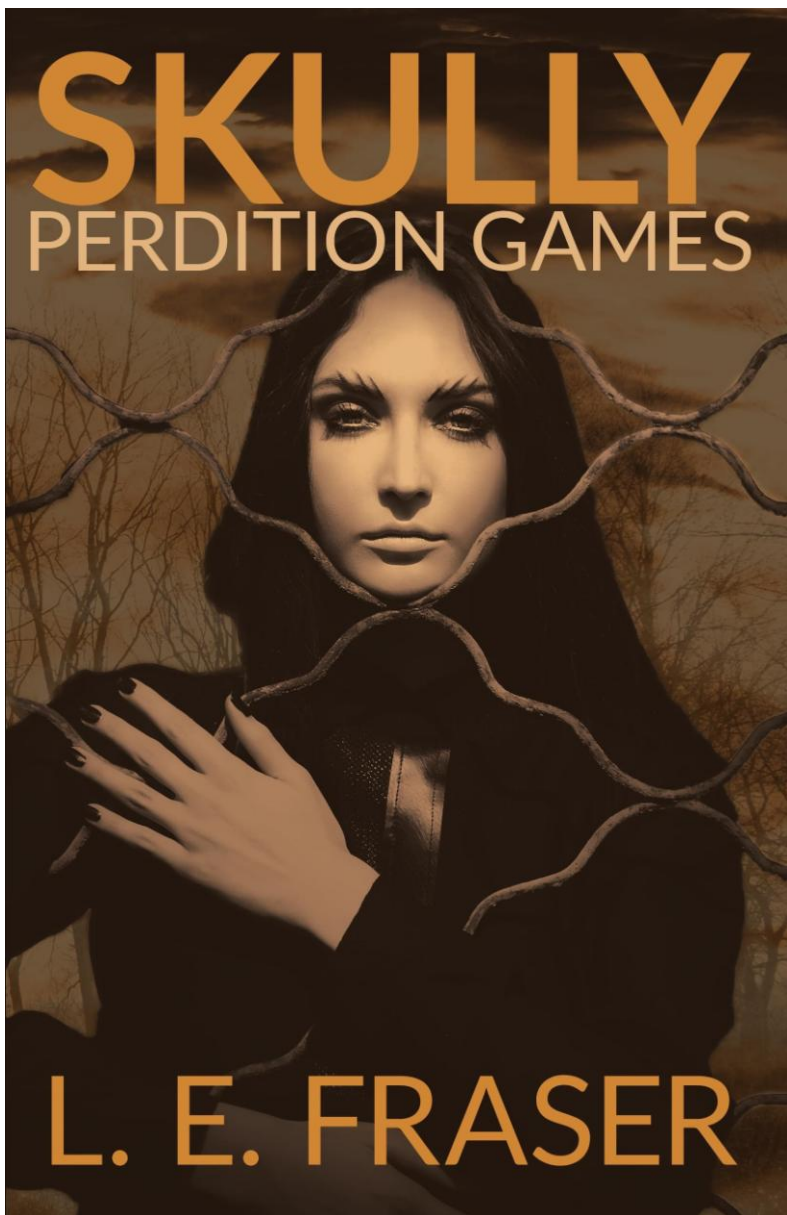


SKULLY

PERDITION GAMES



L. E. FRASER

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In loving memory of my grandmothers,
Estelle Leadbeater and Gladys Fraser.

*What do you see my daughter, when you gaze across the water?
The carnage on the whitecaps is your empathy's collapse.
Inner wars halt salvation with destruction and damnation,
because your cacodemon's bait twists around eternal hate.*

*Everything that you have done and all the things you have become,
you camouflaged with etiquette, seldom seen as counterfeit.
So lie about your monster and let the poison fester
but fallen angels lie in wait, as hope rots and dreams mutate.*
L.E. Fraser

PART 1: Vacation from Hell

CHAPTER ONE

July 1980: Batchawana Bay, Ontario

Nina

AFTER NINA AND Gabriella had hiked through the forest for half an hour, the woods grew dark and ominous. It was tough to tell if the weather was turning nasty or if a single cloud hid the sun, because the branches of the towering trees created a canopy that hid the sky. Nina knew she should turn back but wanted to go a bit farther. She picked her way across jagged rocks and exposed roots along a narrow path winding through dense shrubs and large evergreens. Without a care in the world, her five-year-old daughter, Gabriella, skipped along beside

her. She was dropping pinecones, wildflowers, and pretty stones into a small wicker basket.

Thunder rumbled in the distance and Nina stopped. Raindrops hit her face when she gazed up at the sky. She hoped it was a brief summer shower, but within moments, it was pouring rain. Gabriella cringed by her side with her face hidden in Nina's skirt. Torrents of water soaked them, and the sound of the wind whipping through the trees mimicked children screaming.

There was a fork in the road, and she didn't know which way to go. Confused, she turned around in circles. They were lost. How could she have gotten lost? Her daughter was crying, and Nina took her hand. She tried to speak but heard her grandmother's voice. "Life is a path with forks and corners. You don't know what's around the corner, or down either path. Life is blind faith."

Gabriella tried to pull her hand free. Tears stained her pale cheeks, and her eyes widened with fear. "Mama?"

"Someday you'll find the path that leads home."

Nina let go of her daughter's hand and ran away, leaving her child lost in the forest and abandoned in the storm.

WITH A YELP, Nina jerked awake. Her child's screams of terror were ringing in her ears.

"No! I'd never do that." Crying, Nina fumbled in the pockets of her shorts for a tissue.

"Hush now, you were dreaming." Quentin patted her leg. "I hope you didn't wake Gabriella."

She twisted in her seat to glance into the backseat at her daughter. Gabriella's wet thumb pressed against her chin, and she clutched a stuffed puppy to her chest with her other hand.

"She's sleeping," Nina told her husband.

"Was it the same dream?"

She nodded.

"Do you remember anything?"

For just a moment, the time it takes to exhale, she remembered a white dog. Just as fast as it materialized, the image disappeared and her mind fogged over. “It’s the same as always. All I remember is abandoning Gabriella alone in the woods in a storm.”

“Babe, it’s nothing to worry about. Lots of pregnant women have vivid dreams.”

“But Quentin it’s always the same. Grandma would call it *An Da Shealladh*, the ‘two sights’.”

He pushed away the hair in his eyes. “I loved your grandma, but she was wacky. Remember your sixteenth birthday party when she told everyone you’d inherited the ‘Scot Highlander’s prophetic vision’?” He shook his head and chuckled. “You’re the one who insisted it was impossible because you aren’t a Highlander.”

She gazed at the book on her lap. “Grandma was a Highlander and said *An Da Shealladh* stays in the blood, passing from mother to daughter.”

“That’s ridiculous. You’d never abandon Gabriella. You’re the best mom in the world.”

She rummaged in the bag from the gift store where she’d bought the book and took out a small pair of moccasins, turning them over in her hand to admire the beadwork. “The storm, the woods, Gabriella crying — it must mean *something*.”

“It’s just a bad dream. Come on, babe. I’ve looked forward to this vacation for months. Shake it off and enjoy the fantastic scenery.”

Outside the car window, the view was spectacular, but Nina didn’t care. She wasn’t feeling well, and the flashes of sunlight peeking from between the boughs of the evergreens made her head ache.

Quentin was coaxing the Volkswagen Rabbit along a dirt road lined with towering pines. As he concentrated on navigating the twisting turns, the tip of his tongue poked out from the corner of his lips, a gesture she loved. At over six feet tall, he hunched over the steering wheel, although he had sufficient headroom to sit upright. They hadn’t seen another car in over an hour, yet his dark

eyes roamed across the mirrors. Another cute habit. His long black hair hung across one eye and stubble shadowed his square jaw. Sexy.

“I can feel you staring at me,” he said.

She put the book into the empty bag and jammed it into the narrow space beside her seat. It slithered down and disappeared into the dark wedge between the gearshift and the bottom of the passenger seat. “Have you ever had the same dream over and over again?”

“No, but I don’t dream.”

Tears welled up in her eyes again. “Why would a mother dream about abandoning her child?”

He sighed. “I get you’re upset, and I’m sorry. Babe, it’s a dream. We saved all year for this vacation, and I want you to have a good time.”

She put the moccasins in her purse and stared out the window. “I have to pee. Are we nearly there?”

Quentin hated to stop, driving from point A to point B, period. She was surprised he hadn’t made her pee in a cup.

“Yeah, around the next bend.”

She tried to arch her back in the uncomfortable seat and the seatbelt strangled her belly. Her panties felt wet. She hoped she wasn’t bleeding again. The spotting had started ten weeks ago, along with a pulsing abdomen pain.

This pregnancy wasn’t the same as last time. She was seven and a half months and felt awful. Her doctor told her she was fine, but she didn’t feel well. She worried about something happening to the baby all the time.

A year ago, their neighbours’ baby had died of sudden infant death syndrome. Nina didn’t know how Grace McNamara was coping. The marriage wasn’t doing well, even though Grace was pregnant again. Everyone in the neighbourhood suspected Detective McNamara was sleeping with Megan Shannon. Nina would die if Quentin cheated. She wouldn’t want to live if he left her.

“We’d have cut time driving through Michigan instead of taking the Trans-Canada Highway. Will you consider going home that way, worrywart?” Quentin grinned.

She shrugged, feeling a little foolish but refusing to commit. What if they drove through the States and she went into early labour or Gabriella had an accident? There wasn’t any government health care in the US. How were they supposed to pay? Did hospitals take credit cards?

“Well, look at that,” Quentin said.

Tucked into a clearing was a cute brown cabin with dark green shutters and white gingerbread trim. Dense evergreens shielded the back and sides, and the scent of pine perfumed the air. It was pretty but Nina couldn’t see any other buildings. The cabin was sitting alone in the woods.

“It’s isolated,” she said.

“Sure, that’s the point. There are two other cabins, but they’re not renting them out this summer. The owners are getting ready to sell. It’s busy during the day. Local fishermen rent dock space.” He undid his seatbelt and scrambled from the driver’s seat. “Hey, look who’s awake.”

Nina looked into the backseat. “How long have you been awake, sweetie?”

“You woke me up. You screamed. You were being mean to Papa, too.”

“No, I wasn’t,” Nina said. “You should have said something so we knew you were awake.” She hoped her daughter hadn’t overheard them talking. It would be horrible to find out your mother was dreaming of leaving you.

Gabriella studied her solemnly and Nina smiled. Her daughter’s eyes were the colour of violets. Shiny, dark ringlets stuck to her pale, chubby cheeks and she was the most beautiful child in the world. Nina couldn’t believe she was lucky enough to be the mother of such a gorgeous little girl.

Quentin opened the back door to the car. “Get out here and explore with your papa.” When he was too slow in undoing the

seatbelt, Gabriella's forehead wrinkled and her lip lowered to a pout.

"I want out," her daughter whined in the pre-tantrum tone Nina dreaded.

Quentin unlatched the belt. "As my princess requests." He stepped back to bow before scooping Gabriella into his arms.

"I want to see the water," was the next demand.

Quentin complied, as usual, leaving Nina alone to waddle after them. "Quentin, wait," she said. "Where's the key to the cabin? I have to go to the bathroom."

They were running toward the water, and Gabriella's squeals of delight drowned out Nina's words. She trotted around the car and shaded her eyes. Gabriella was on Quentin's shoulders, and he was leaping in and out of tiny waves hitting the shore. In the late afternoon sun, the dark blue lake was still and smooth. The lapping water made her desperate for a bathroom. Frustrated, she scurried to the trees.

While squatting in the bushes, she looked to her right at the ridge circling the lake and saw a buck poised on the top of the escarpment. His head was high with large antlers reaching to the sky. He was all alone in a clearing of land jutting thirty metres above the lake. Nina pulled up her shorts and stood to see the animal from a better angle. The stag was so still that the scene reminded her of a Robert Bateman painting. He was staring at her.

She walked to the beach, and the buck's head shifted to follow. As a child, her Gaelic grandmother had told stories about how a stag — *damh* in Gaelic — was a protector. Raised with Scot Highlander superstitions, Nina often needed to remind herself not to place too much stock in the old myths. It wasn't working today. She was experiencing a creepy premonition that the animal was warning her to stay away from the beach.

"What are you looking at?" Quentin asked.

"Nothing." She turned to him. "For a minute, I thought..." She glanced at the ridge, but the buck was gone. "Never mind, I had to pee in the bushes. You have the key."

“Oops, sorry.”

“Where’s Gabriella?” she asked.

He gestured over his shoulder. “She’s fine. Stop being such a worrywart. She’s old enough to play on the beach with us a couple of metres away. Speaking of which, how do you like it here?”

She scanned the ridge. No buck. *Get a hold of yourself*, she thought. Wrapping her arm around Quentin’s waist, she snuggled her cheek against his chest, breathing in the familiar scent of his cologne. “It’s wonderful.”

“My God, look at how beautiful she is,” Quentin said.

The beach was empty and Gabriella was skipping across the sand toward the long dock. Her arms swung at her sides with a touching lack of inhibition.

“Did you talk to her about going into the water?” Nina asked.

“Yes, she knows to have one of us with her.” Quentin tugged her around. “How do you like the cabin?”

“You checked to make sure there’s a phone?”

“Yes, babe, stop worrying. It’s a twenty-minute drive to town for groceries and less than an hour to Sault Ste. Marie.”

Nina swatted at a horsefly. “Sorry. It’s a great location.” A sudden muscle spasm gripped her hamstring, and the ache in her stomach turned to a stabbing pain. “Let’s go in, I need to sit down.”

Gabriella was at the end of the dock, balancing on the tips of her toes while bending over to peer into the water. She leaned a little too far forward. Her arms rotated while she struggled to keep her balance. Nina sucked in her breath, tightening her grip on her husband’s arm.

“Easy does it.” He held her hand on his arm, never moving his eyes from their daughter. “Don’t yell for her. Wait a minute until she has her balance.”

Gabriella’s arms propelled wildly. She tipped backwards to gain her balance and took a step behind her. Nina let her breath out in one long sigh.

“Ella!” Quentin hollered. “Come on back, princess.”

She skipped down the long dock and ran into her father’s arms.

“I saw a fishy,” she said. “A big fishy, and I heard a doggy, too. Does a doggy live here? I want a puppy, Papa.”

Quentin rolled his eyes before reaching down to pick up their daughter.

“Let’s go see our castle. How does that sound?” He balanced Gabriella on his hip and rummaged in his pocket for the key. He caught Nina’s eye and frowned. “You okay? You look pasty.”

She took a compact from her pocket and checked her reflection. He was right. Her complexion was white with spots of high colour across her cheekbones that made her face appear gaunt. She’d always been thin, but it was unhealthy for a five-foot-five woman to weigh one hundred twenty-eight pounds this far along in her pregnancy. Her nose was too long and sharp, but her large brown eyes compensated. Quentin called them ‘bedroom eyes’. Today, they were bloodshot and lined with tiny wrinkles, and her shoulder-length black hair was greasy.

“I’m okay, just tired.” She closed the compact and avoided his eyes.

She wasn’t okay but didn’t want to spoil everyone’s fun. The more she studied the dense forest surrounding the cabin, the more anxious she felt. She didn’t want to be here and longed for home so much it was a physical ache.

Quentin flung open the door to the two-bedroom cabin. “Wow, it’s nicer than the pictures.”

Inside was a large space with rooms off the centre. A kitchen and bath ran along the back with bedrooms on either side of the living area, built as additions to the original structure.

The cabin was hot and stuffy and smelled of fresh cut wood, plaster and a hint of paint. The furniture was shabby but clean, and there was a television. Hopefully, colour. There would be complaining if Gabriella had to watch *Sesame Street* in black and white.

Nina inspected the kitchen while her husband opened the cooler and grabbed a beer. He finished it in four long sips, belched, and opened a second.

Together, they checked out the bedroom Gabriella would use. It was nice and had a small closet, a chest of drawers, and twin beds. The room had a large window facing the forest. Nina's prickle of dread returned. The window didn't have any drapes or shades. She felt watched again.

Get a grip, she scolded herself. Was she going to be spooked every time a squirrel peered at her from a tree branch?

Quentin stood behind her and wrapped his arms around her huge stomach, kissing the back of her neck. "I'm sorry. It was too long a drive to do in one day. It was thoughtless."

"It's okay," she repeated, for what felt like the tenth time since they had left the house at four-thirty in the morning.

Leaving Gabriella to organize her stuffed menagerie, they went to find their bedroom.

Standing inside the room, they gaped at the stained glass covering the lake-facing window.

"Wow," Quentin said, "how did we miss that from outside?"

Dark red, dirty orange, and mucky brown panes of glass painted dismal ribbons of colour on the white bedspread. It looked like streaks of dried blood.

Nina crinkled her nose. "It's awful."

"What's that going to look like during sunset?" Quentin ran his fingertip across the lead outline.

"Gross. Why would someone do that?"

"Maybe the owner's an amateur artist." He sat on the bed. "Comfy." He wiggled his eyebrows at her. "Not too close to Gabriella's room."

She laughed and sat beside him. "Do you ever think about anything but that?"

"Sure, lots of things, when you aren't around." He kissed her before getting to his feet and stretching. "You stay here and rest. Gabriella and I will unpack the car."

She kicked off her flip-flops. "Make sure the lasagna goes into the oven at 350 degrees. It'll need about an hour."

Nina lay on the bed, feeling stressed and uncomfortable. "Too long a day," she mumbled. "Everything will be better after a nap."
She dreamed of a storm, a fork in the road and a white dog.

CHAPTER TWO

Nina

QUENTIN LEFT THE lasagna in the oven too long. The edges were overcooked, and the cheese top was hard and brown.

Gabriella whined and refused to eat it. Nina was strict about eating what was served or doing without. Quentin, on the other hand, hustled to the kitchen and made their daughter her favourite. She wouldn't eat the peanut butter and jelly sandwich either.

Gabriella had her elbow on the table, another no-no, and her chin was perched in the cup of her open hand. With the other hand, she poked the tip of her index finger into the sandwich. "What are we going to do now?"

The smell of peanut butter was upsetting Nina's stomach. Saliva filled her mouth, and she closed her eyes and breathed through her mouth to keep from vomiting.

"What are we going to do?" Gabriella repeated in a shrill voice. The five-year-old was cranky, tired, and probably hungry. An explosive mix.

Quentin grinned. "Now, we do the dishes." He picked up their daughter's plate and rubbed the top of her head. She swatted away his hand, crossed her arms on the table, and threw her head on top.

Gabriella was old enough to clear her own dishes. She certainly shouldn't be slapping at her father.

"Sit up, please," Nina said, "and take your arms off the table. Why don't you help Papa clear the dishes?"

Her daughter ignored her. "Why can't Mama do the dishes and we play? It's boring here." She didn't lift her head from the table.

"After the dishes," Quentin continued, as if she hadn't spoken, "we'll play a game. Hey, I know, maybe Mama could give you your treat."

Nina glared at him. She was saving the gift as a distraction when boredom turned Gabriella into a troll.

Gabriella sat up straight. "I want a treat. Give it to me"

"Ask nicely," Nina told her.

"Can I *please* have it?"

"May I," Nina automatically corrected.

Quentin leaned down to whisper in her ear. "Pick your battles. Don't poke the bear cub. It was a long drive."

She studied her child from the corner of her eye and decided he was right. It had been a long drive and everyone was tired. If Gabriella saw the craft material, maybe she'd be excited about the project.

"If I give it to you tonight, you have to promise to go to bed when Papa tells you. No shenanigans."

Gabriella frowned and there was a belligerent expression on her face, but she nodded.

Nina went into the bedroom to fetch the box. When she returned, she'd barely managed to let go before her daughter pounced on it.

"We're going to make a memory book for the baby," Nina explained. "We'll collect things from the woods and shells from the beach and add the items to the book. Every day, we'll write about what we did. After the film is developed, we'll add photos."

Gabriella crossed her arms and said in a haughty voice, "We did crafts in kindergarten. They don't do that in grade one. It's for babies."

“This is a big girl craft. You didn’t write on your crafts in kindergarten.”

Her daughter gave her a steely glance. Other than displeasure, Gabriella’s eyes rarely showed any expression. They were violet spheres devoid of emotion.

“We’ll put it away for now. Tomorrow morning, while Papa’s fishing, we can gather things you’d like to add.”

Gabriella studied the stickers and coloured pens. “I wanna play with them now.”

“We’ll start tomorrow,” Nina repeated.

“How about I clean up, and you guys start?” Quentin suggested.

Nina shook her head. “No, we’ll start tomorrow. We can take a nice hike in the forest to find neat things.”

Bits of her nightmare flashed before her eyes. She carried the box to the bedroom and shoved it under the bed.

When she returned to the living room, Gabriella announced, “We’re gonna play skully.”

Nina raised an eyebrow at her husband. “May as well since we have lots of beer caps.”

He laughed. “Lighten up, I’m on vacation. Besides, I grew up with skully.”

She pulled her daughter onto the sofa. “Papa was born in New York City. We played a similar game called caps, but Papa brought skully from the streets of New York to little old London, Ontario.”

Quentin bounced eight beer caps in his hand. “We have extra, in case we lose one or two. Did you bring candles?”

Deciding to ignore the amount of beer he’d consumed, she nodded. “Emergency candles. They were in the box with the dry goods.”

“Why do we need candles?” Gabriella asked.

“We melt wax into the bottle cap to make it slide faster,” Quentin said. “You slide your cap so it lands on a number.” He demonstrated by flicking one across the coffee table.

Gabriella caught it and flicked it back. Quentin grabbed it before it flew off the table.

“What numbers?” she asked.

“We use chalk to mark off a big box on the cement patio. Inside the box, we draw smaller ones with the numbers one to twelve. In the centre is a box for thirteen, with four rectangles around it, like a skull and crossbones,” Quentin said. “We can pretend we’re pirates, *arr*.”

Nina grinned. “When you’re sliding your cap, don’t get stuck in the skull. I spent most of the game in the skull when I played.”

“No way, I always hit your cap to set you free and protected you from the killer.” Quentin winked.

“What’s a killer?” Gabriella asked.

“After you’ve landed on all the outside numbers, you go to each box around the number thirteen. When you land on one, you say a word until you complete the phrase ‘I am a killer’. Once you’re a killer, you knock players’ caps off the board until you’re the last one and win the game.”

“I want to play now.” Gabriella scrambled out of her seat and raced to the door. “I want to be a killer and I want to use the chalk.”

The cement patio was at the front of the cabin, facing the lake. Together, they watched the sunset colours bleed across the horizon. They’d built a small campfire in the pit, and Nina was enjoying the sweet smell of burning wood and the crickets’ evening sere-nade. Quentin was taking her turns. Lounging in a wicker patio chair – cocooned in a woolly blanket and sipping tea – was much more her speed.

Quentin was letting Gabriella win the game. She’d completed the twelve board numbers and was flicking her cap around the skull. She lay on her stomach, her eyes wide, and her face pale, while she focused.

“I,” she hollered, “am...” her lips tightened in concentration and her eyes narrowed when she flicked the cap, “a... killer.”

She jumped to her feet and turned a flushed face toward Nina, beaming. “I am a killer,” she said. “I won. You and Papa lost. You’re losers!”

Quentin crouched so he was eye level with her. “Princess, that’s not nice. Besides, you haven’t won yet. You still have to hit me to take me off the board, remember?”

She slapped him hard across his face and shoved him in the chest. He rocked on his heels and fell backwards.

“Gabriella!” Nina pushed on the chair arms so she could stand.

Looking dazed, Quentin sat up and waved his hand. “It’s okay. I didn’t explain it properly.” He rubbed his elbow, which he’d skinned on the patio.

“It’s not okay. Gabriella, we do not hit. We do not push people,” Nina said.

Gabriella’s lip lowered to a pout, her forehead wrinkled, and her eyes blazed. “I am a killer. I won.”

“Say you’re sorry this instant.” Nina struggled to keep her voice calm. “You’re sorry for hitting, for being a poor sport, and for talking back.”

“Chill out, it’s not a big deal.” Quentin climbed to his feet and brushed chalk off the back of his shorts. “It’s late and we’re all tired.”

Nina ignored him. “We’re waiting for you to apologize.”

“Sorry.” She studied the skully board. “I did win. Papa’s cap isn’t on the board.”

Quentin laughed. “Guess my big bum knocked it off.” He leaned down and lifted her up. “Mama’s right. It was naughty of you to hit your old papa.”

She touched his cheek, and for an awful moment, Nina expected her to hit him again. Instead, she giggled. “Your face is scratchy, Papa.”

“Papa bear, *grr*. Time to get Goldilocks to bed.” He carried her into the cabin.

Nina wrapped the blanket around her shoulders and poured a bucket of water on the campfire, staring at the red-hot centre.

“She’s just high-spirited, it’s nothing to worry about,” she murmured to the dying embers.

After the last wisp of smoke drifted from the dead campfire, she trudged inside to tuck her daughter into bed.

IT WAS AFTER eleven by the time they settled Gabriella. It was two-thirty when her screams woke them.

Quentin put his hand on Nina's shoulder. "It's another nightmare. Stay here."

"Bring her in with us," she suggested.

A moment later, he tucked a moist, sleepy Gabriella between them on the bed.

"It was a dream," Quentin said to the sobbing child.

"Mama, you left me," she said. "It was raining and the woods were scary."

Nina's blood ran cold and a shiver raced up her spine. She looked at her daughter's tear-streaked face in the dim light, unable to speak.

"Why, Mama?"

Quentin sat up. "Has Mama been telling you silly ghost stories, princess?"

Ignoring him, their daughter said, "I want a doggy."

He smiled and hugged her. "It wasn't such a scary dream after all. Want some of Papa's water?" He held the glass to her lips.

"A big white doggy." She shoved the glass aside.

Quentin tucked her against his side. "Sorry, kiddo. No doggy, Papa's allergic." He squeezed Nina's hand a little too hard. "Too bad Mama can't shake off her bad dreams as fast as you can."

Gabriella must have heard them talking in the car. Nina was positive she'd never said anything about her dream in front of their daughter. Laying silent and uncomfortable in the dark, she felt anxious and out of sorts. Something was tickling the back of her mind. When she peeked at Gabriella, her daughter was fast asleep between them.

"Quentin, are you sleeping?" she whispered.

"No," he mumbled.

“Why does she want a big white dog?”

He rolled over with a sigh. “I don’t know. Didn’t we see a picture of a dog sled team at the Ojibway store we stopped at on the way up?”

She relaxed. “Right. That’s probably where Ella saw the dog from her dream.”

He studied her in the distorted moonlight from the ugly stained-glass window. “She didn’t say anything about a dog being in her dream. She said she wanted one, and she’s been asking for months.” He paused. “That dream you’ve been having, is there a dog in it?”

She slowly shook her head. “No, I don’t think so.” *Was there?* “Let’s go to sleep.”

He yawned. “Have pleasant dreams for a change.”

Watching the moon through the ugly window and feeling the baby kick, Nina listened to her husband’s breathing even out and waited for sleep.

They’d saved all year for this vacation. Nina wished they’d stayed home and camped in the backyard.

CHAPTER THREE

Nina

“GET UP! GET UP! Get up!”

She locked eyes with her daughter, who was leaping up and down on the bed. Gabriella was already dressed in an embroidered peasant top and a cute pair of denim shorts.

Groaning, Nina rolled over and glanced at the travel clock. It was five-thirty in the morning. When she tried to sit up, a wave of dizziness knocked her back to the pillow. Her mouth was dry and a headache throbbed in her temples. Worse, she was having cramps. The contractions had started a few weeks ago. The first time it happened, they’d raced to the hospital to have an ER nurse inform them – condescendingly – that Braxton Hicks contractions were ‘normal and nothing to worry about’.

“Where’s Papa?”

Bounce, bounce. “Getting ready.” *Bounce.*

He was going fishing. Nina moaned and tried pulling Gabriella down to a seated position.

She could sense the tumbling movement of the baby. While she lay still and waited, the baby kicked, so she didn’t think her illness had anything to do with her pregnancy. But her body felt sluggish

and achy. It was probably a twenty-four-hour bug. Gabriella had had it the week before.

“Sweetie, go get Papa for me please.”

Gabriella leaped off the bed and hollered for her dad.

A moment later, he glanced through the bedroom doorway. “What’s up?”

He looked so relaxed and happy in his fishing kit. Quentin was an eternal optimist and seldom complained about the extra hours he put in at the office. Fishing was the only activity that separated him from the family, and he needed the solitude to unwind. She wasn’t stealing his fun because of a flu bug that would be gone by evening.

“Just wanted to wish you happy fishing.” She smiled. “Don’t forget your hat. The afternoon sun will be hot.”

He grinned and placed a crimson hat decorated with colourful lures on his head. “Pretty spiffy, eh?”

“You bet. Can you help me up?”

He lifted her out of bed and put his lips on her forehead. “You’re warm.”

“No worries, it’s just sleep sweat.” Another stabbing cramp assaulted her stomach.

“Babe, you’re pale.”

“I’m fine.”

“Gabriella can come with me, we have the life jacket,” he suggested. “She said it’s yucky and doesn’t want to go, but she’ll enjoy herself once she’s on the boat.”

She’d be cranky if they forced her and would pout. Quentin would have to bring her back. There wasn’t any point. Instead, Nina would relax her TV rule and nap on the sofa while Gabriella watched cartoons as a treat. “No, it’s okay.”

“Did you have that nightmare again?” he asked.

She nodded.

“You know, you’ve always had wild dreams.”

He was right, but usually she remembered the details and could figure out the dream’s origins. This time was different.

Because An Da Shealladh is a vision of what's to come, not a memory of what has been, Grandma's voice warned.

Gaelic nonsense. Her subconscious was dragging out the dream every night because of guilt, a mother's best friend.

"Do you think Gabriella is excited to be a big sister?" she asked.

"Sure, what little girl wouldn't want a baby to play with?"

"I suppose." Nina reached for her housecoat. "She's spoiled. Maybe she's worried the baby will take attention away from her."

He crossed his arms over his chest. "She is not spoiled. Kids need to feel loved and safe."

She sighed and wrestled with her housecoat.

He helped her navigate her arms through the sleeves. "Babe, you're warm."

"I'm fine. It's an oven in here."

She wasn't fine. Now she was standing, the room was lurching. Her legs felt rubbery and her bowels felt loose.

"It's cooler in the front room, but it's going to be a hot one today. Maybe I'll wait until a little later to go out. I don't want to leave if you're sick."

She'd rather have a quiet day watching TV and laying on the beach with Gabriella than a wild, rambunctious day filled with high-octane Quentin fun. "Seriously, I'm fine. It's supposed to rain for the next two days, and we'll be stuck inside. Go."

"Want me to come ashore at noon to check-in?"

"If you want, but you don't have to."

For a moment, he seemed torn. Then they heard the calls of the anglers from the dock.

"I better get going or all the good spots will be taken." He winked.

In spite of how awful she felt, Nina laughed. Lake Superior was over eighty thousand square kilometres of clear blue water. There would always be good spots.

"How about a trout or northern pike dinner?" he asked.

"Probably bass," she said. "Whatever the catch of the day is, it better be cleaned and filleted before it hits my kitchen."

She waddled to the front room and watched him close his tackle box and kiss Gabriella.

The second Quentin was out the door Gabriella pouted and said, "I'm hungry."

"How about cereal? There's Count Chocula." Nina rubbed her hand across her sweaty face.

"I want bacon."

The idea of bacon frying made her stomach flip. "Not this morning. Maybe we can do bacon and Cheese Whiz sandwiches for lunch."

Gabriella grabbed a bowl and the cereal box from the cupboard and sat at the scratched wooden table. She looked at Nina. "I can get juice," she said.

It was rare for her to be helpful. If Nina was honest, her daughter could be a brat. Gabriella's teacher had described her as 'precocious', but the judgment in her eyes had suggested it wasn't a compliment. The teacher had also used the words 'submissively non-compliant' and 'impertinent'.

"Thank you, juice would be great."

Her daughter took the carton from the fridge, put it on the table, and sat down.

Nina sipped the orange juice. The acid churned in her upset stomach, and she felt chills. Gabriella nibbled on her cereal, and they sat in silence.

"What are we going to do?" Gabriella spun a feather from an abandoned lure between her fingers.

"Well, we could make a sand castle."

Her daughter frowned.

"I think *Sesame Street* is on television."

The frown deepened.

"We could make cookies later." A bubble of bile rose in Nina's throat, and she grasped the table edge and closed her eyes.

"I want to go with Papa," her daughter said.

If she slept a little longer, she'd feel better. Quentin could bring Gabriella back for lunch and have the afternoon on the lake alone.

“Okay,” Nina agreed. “I’ll get dressed, and we’ll go down to meet him before he leaves.” She struggled to her feet.

“No! He’ll leave without me. You’re too slow.” Gabriella’s pug nose crinkled and the crimson bow of her lip jutted out to a pout.

Part of the dock was visible from outside the cabin, and it was a short walk down the beach. She thought about the last parent-teacher meeting, when Gabriella’s teacher implied Nina was overprotective.

“Well, if he’s not there, come straight back. I’ll watch from the patio.”

Her daughter bolted through the door and raced to the beach. Nina spotted Quentin in his red hat standing with the other fishermen. She waved and pointed at the running child. He raised his hand.

When Nina walked across the patio to get a better look at the dock, the orange juice shifted in her stomach and her mouth filled with saliva. She clamped a hand over her mouth and shuffled to the bathroom as fast as she could, just making it. Sitting on the cool linoleum, she took shallow breaths. Just when the nausea was passing, her bowels churned. She scrambled for the toilet seat and sat panting and sweating through the awful cramps. Yes, it was the flu. The best solution was to go back to bed.

On her way to the bedroom, she stepped out the screen door and looked toward the dock. Gabriella was gone. A scattering of boats was heading to the deeper waters of the lake, and the dock was empty. Relieved, Nina plodded inside, returned to the bedroom, and fell asleep.

CHAPTER FOUR

Quentin

WHEN QUENTIN STEERED his boat to the dock, he had to hunt for a spot to tie it off. It was seven-thirty, and the sun was low on the western horizon. Everyone else had left hours ago, and the beach was deserted.

It was late because he'd lost several hours of fishing. Anglers had invited him to a fish fry at a secluded beach up the coast. Lunch was fantastic and the spot was stunning. The sandy beach hugged the rocky base of high escarpments that rose thirty metres above the water to crests dotted with rolling evergreens. The scenery was simultaneously wild and elegant, and the tiny beach was a luxurious oasis. Perfect for his girls. He'd take them for a boat ride and a picnic tomorrow to make up for being so late.

Quentin pulled his cooler from the boat, tossed his empty beer cans into a plastic bag, and removed his copious catch. His prize was a salmon, and Nina would be thrilled. The cold, deep waters of Lake Superior were ideal for salmon, but tackling the aggressive fish was difficult.

He set to work cleaning his fish and decided to polish off the last two beers before going up to the cabin. He brushed a fly away from his nose and winced. He'd been on his way back to shore to

retrieve the forgotten zinc cream when he caught the salmon. All thoughts of sunburn had evaporated under the euphoria of the catch.

Quentin glanced at his watch. It was after eight. He put the fish in the cooler, rinsed the table, and headed to the cabin.

When he arrived, the closed door surprised him. He wondered why Gabriella and Nina weren't enjoying the fine weather. He moved his fishing hat to a rakish angle, pulled open the door and strutted into the cabin, imitating Jimmie Walker from *Good Times*.

"*Dyn-o-mite!* The fisherman king returns." He waved his catch over his head and swayed his hips, waiting for their giggles.

The cabin was musty and quiet.

"Hello?"

No answer. He looked around the living room on his way to the kitchen. No sign of them. They must have gone for a walk. Quentin put the fish into the fridge and rinsed out the cooler.

An acid and unpleasant odour hung in the stale air. Rentals often had odours from the ghosts of past tenants hanging around, but this smell was downright funky. Maybe fish guts had spilled on his shorts.

Nina wouldn't take Gabriella on a long hike this late. He'd change clothes and set up the campfire so it was ready when they returned.

At the doorway to the bedroom, Quentin stopped abruptly. Nina was asleep in the bed. The room reeked of vomit and diarrhea.

He stumbled to the side of the bed and pawed at his wife's body. "Nina? Nina, wake up. What's wrong, what's going on?" He knelt by the bed and shook her. Her flesh was burning beneath his fingers and dried vomit soiled the bodice of her nightgown.

He put his hand beneath her nose and felt her breath on his fingers. He shook her harder. "Nina, please! Wake up, babe."

Slowly, she swam up to consciousness. She blinked at him and mumbled something incoherent. Her breath was rancid and her eyes were dull. He was ashamed but had an overwhelming urge to

drop her hot, stinking body back onto the bed. He put his hands under her armpits to lift her into a sitting position. Holding her with one arm, he stuffed pillows behind her back and tried to pull away the blankets. He loosened the neckline of her nightgown and saw clammy sweat rolling down between her large breasts.

“Nina,” he shook her gently, “where’s Gabriella?”

No response.

He ran to his daughter’s room. Empty. He checked the bathroom and sprinted back to Nina.

A wave of cold white panic took hold. “Babe, what’s wrong? Where’s Gabriella?”

No answer. He wiped strands of hair from her face, tapping her cheek with the tips of his fingers.

“Where is she, where’s Gabriella?”

Quentin’s throat was dry and there was a ringing in his ears. His stomach flopped and adrenaline rushed through his body, making his legs rubbery and his heart race.

“So hot,” Nina whimpered, and he didn’t recognize the weak, willowy voice. Her tongue poked from between dry lips.

He grabbed water from the side table.

Suddenly, her eyes opened wide. She gasped in pain and curled inward. Water sloshed across her chest, accentuating the stench. Beneath the smell of vomit was something else, something metallic and nasty, like spoiled fish.

She must be in early labour. Where was their daughter? He hadn’t seen Gabriella outside. She must have gone for help when Nina started having contractions. But where did she go and how long ago?

Quentin took a deep breath. “Babe, you’re in labour. Is that what’s going on?”

Her left hand snaked down to her abdomen. She feebly kicked at the tangled blankets.

“Nina, where’s Ella? Did you send her for help? Why didn’t you call the police or the ambulance?”

Through the ugly stained glass, the setting sun painted wide red stripes across her fingers. His mind was sluggish when he gazed at her hand. He held up his own fingers, and the diffused light cloaked them in a red shadow.

Just a trick of the light, he thought, but he felt the sticky, congealing blood and smelled the thick coppery odour.

His heart careened into his stomach. "Hold on, I'm calling help."

He ran to the living room before remembering the phone was on the kitchen wall. He slipped and grappled for the doorframe. The middle finger on his right hand smashed into the wood. His finger bent to the back of his hand. With a roar of pain, he scrambled to his feet and grunted when he seized the phone. Emergency numbers were on the wall. His fingers trembled while he dialled.

His mind was blank. He couldn't remember the name of the cabins or the road they took.

"Sir, give me the number you're calling from and describe the cabin," the calm dispatcher requested.

"It's white. No! It's brown with white trim and green shutters. It's on the lake. There's a dock and a cleaning table and—"

"Break the window," Nina yelled from the bedroom. Her voice was full of pain and terror.

"Sir, stay with me. I need your help. Where did you exit off the Trans-Canada Highway?"

Conversations from their drive raced through his mind, all mangled together. *Okay girls, watch for Havilland Shores Drive.*

"Havilland Shores Drive," he shouted.

"Please stay calm. Try to remember the name of the rental. Who did you make the deposit out to?"

"Run," Nina screamed.

Quentin sobbed. "Redington, I think. Something Pines. Please, my wife is bleeding and my daughter is gone. The baby—"

"Sir, I know where you are. I've dispatched paramedics. Stay on the line with me, and—"

Nina screamed again. He dropped the phone and sprinted to the bedroom. She was squirming against her tangled, blood-soaked sheets.

“Run,” she mumbled.

Quentin tried to loosen the sheets, bending his dislocated finger in the struggle. With a yelp, he switched hands, fumbling with the sheets while his wife twisted and turned, rolling against his efforts.

“Skully, killer.”

The hair on Quentin’s arms stood on end. His balls crawled up and were tight against his groin. There was a ringing in his ears. His vision distorted and the sunset colours bled together. Through the stained glass, the dying sun bathed the bed covers in a macabre spiral of red and orange, resembling Dante’s rings of hell.

QUENTIN DIDN’T KNOW how long he sat in the stinking room holding his unconscious wife before he realized people were in the cabin.

“We need you to step out, sir,” said a calm voice, the owner of which was tugging at his arm. “What’s her name?”

Quentin climbed to his feet. When he stumbled, the man supported him.

“Sir, what’s your wife’s name?”

“Nina.” Quentin cried harder. “My daughter, I can’t find my daughter. She’s only five.”

“The police officers will help you find your daughter. Let us take care of Nina.”

Quentin staggered through the doorway, listening to the emergency medical team speaking to Nina in quiet tones. When they released her body from the nest of linen, blood dripped from the sheets and pooled on the plank floor.

“*Ganawenim*,” she screamed at the top of her lungs and swatted at the paramedic’s hands.

“Yes,” the man assured her, “we’ll protect you.”

“Nishiwe.”

The Aboriginal paramedic frowned and followed Nina’s eyes to Quentin. She reached a hand that dripped with blood toward her husband and pointed her index finger at him. *“Nishiwe,”* she repeated. *“Nishiwe. Nishiwe.”* Each time she said the word, her voice grew louder and more hysterical.

Quentin lurched through the bedroom door, reaching for his wife. A cop clamped a hand on his shoulder, roughly pulling him away and shoving him into the other room.

The officer asked the medic, “Did I hear that right?”

“Yes,” came the clipped reply.

The paramedic and cop stared at him with hard expressions. Quentin struggled in the officer’s steely grip. “Let go of me. Why aren’t you helping my wife?”

“Ganawenim Nishiwe.” The colour ebbed from the medic’s face. His eyes blazed with fury. “I can’t believe you. You sick fuck.” The man spit and the gob of phlegm hit the side of Quentin’s face.

For a moment, he was too stunned to move. When he raised his hand to wipe the spit from his cheek, the officer grabbed his wrist, twisted his arms behind his back and threw him into the wall with such force that two pictures fell off the wall.

Glass smashed against the floor. Jangling handcuffs forced his wrists together. The officer shoved aside his dislocated finger and tightened the manacles until they pinched skin. White-hot pain flooded down his finger and bathed his hand.

“What’s wrong with you? Why are you doing this?” Quentin thrashed against the restraints. “We have to find my daughter.”

The officer squished his face into the wall. The man’s breath was hot and moist in Quentin’s ear. “What did you do with your daughter? Where is she?”

Quentin sobbed in frustration, pain, and fear. “I don’t know. That’s what I’m trying to tell you. Why are you doing this?”

“Your wife,” the officer snarled, “asked us to protect her from the killer – to protect her from you.”

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