

Chapter 1

Lettie Marin and her parents had been planning a camping trip to Owl Lake for the past year. It was meant to be a family celebration. Lettie would be graduating from high school. Her brother, Jacob, would be finishing up two years of community college. Now it was late June. At last the family was headed for the mountains in their rented RV. Dad was in the driver's seat, carefully rounding each curve of the steep, winding road.

“I hope we get a decent campsite,” he said. “We probably won't be by the lake, though. You have to reserve those spots early. I should have called a lot sooner.”

The campground was just ahead. Dad

slowed and turned onto the dirt road. He drove toward the lake, hoping they might see an open spot. It looked like a family was packing up to leave. They were hurriedly loading their gear into a van. Could it be possible? The spot was perfect. It was a beautiful, isolated campsite. There was a clear view of the lake through the pine trees.

“Are you leaving?” Dad called out.

A man looked up. He had a grim look on his face. “Yeah. We sure are,” he said. “You’re welcome to this place!”

Mom laughed. “It looks as though someone just remembered they left the stove on back home.”

“This is great!” Jacob said.

“Wow!” Lettie said as she looked around. “I can even see snow on the mountain peaks. This is like paradise.” She was too distracted to notice the panicked campers.

The van backed up and spun around. Now the Marins could see that the family

had left some things behind. There were two sleeping bags and an ice chest.

“Hey!” Dad yelled at the driver. “You left your—”

He was cut off mid-sentence. “Keep it,” the man called back. “We’re out of here.”

By now Mom was no longer laughing. She was concerned by this family’s reaction. “What’s the matter?” she called out to the man. “Did something bad happen?”

“Bad? Yeah, you could say that. There’s something really bad going on in those woods,” he said. Then the van sped forward, tires screeching and gravel flying. In seconds it had vanished.

Jacob laughed. “Talk about stressed out.”

Dad backed the RV into the campsite.

“That’s too bad,” Mom said. “I can’t imagine wanting to give up this spot. But for some reason they felt they had to.”

“A skunk probably came out of the

woods and scared them,” Jacob said. “Some people aren’t used to being out in the wild. It could have been anything that freaked them out. I’m just glad we were the ones to get this place. I can’t wait to go fishing.”

“And I can’t wait to take pictures,” Lettie said. “Look how the water sparkles. It’s like the lake is covered in diamonds.”

The Marin family had been coming to Owl Lake for years. Lettie and Jacob had good memories of this place. They’d had nothing but fun here. The family couldn’t imagine anything bad happening.

Jacob pulled the fishing gear from the RV. “Get ready, everybody! Tonight we’re having trout for dinner.”

“Cooked over an open flame,” Mom said. “I can’t wait.”

Dad was focused on the woods. “I bet there’s a lot of wildlife around,” he said. “I’m hoping to see some deer.”

“Ooh. Maybe we’ll see a bear,” Lettie

said. “I bet there’s one checking us out right now from behind all those trees. He’s thinking about dinner.” She laughed.

“Actually, we do need to be careful,” Mom said. “Bears know when there’s food around. And they’ll come right up to a campsite to get it. So let’s not leave anything out.”

“That might be what scared those people away,” Dad said. “Maybe they were hiking in the woods and a bear chased them. I could see how that would be a bad thing.”

“Well, something scared them,” Mom agreed. “No one would leave behind such nice gear unless there was a good reason.”

“Did you see what they left on the picnic table?” Jacob said. “It’s a knife. A really good one. It’ll be perfect for cleaning the—” Jacob took a step backward. “Whoa! There’s blood on it.”