

# The Haunting of M.E. by Brenda L. Murray

## Chapter 1

*I'm not going to scream*, I told myself although panic shot through my body like a jolt of lightning.

My heart pounded. My throat tightened. I peered intensely in every direction but there was no sign of the Comfort Station and no sign of my tent.

*It's so dark.*

Without thinking, I began stumbling through the woods, my arms outstretched, my eyes wide. I stopped and stared but could see nothing.

*I'm not going to scream. I'm not going to scream.*

I began running in another direction. Branches scraped my face and tugged at my flannel pyjama bottoms. I pushed them aside. My breath came in gasps.

*How did I get myself in this situation?*

It started with mosquitoes in the tent; relentless, droning, loud, then quiet, then loud again, as if someone was playing with the volume control.

*Stupid mosquitoes*, I thought. *They're really bugging me.*

My hands groped the gritty tent floor for my iPod.

*If I listen to some music, it'll take my mind off the mosquitoes.*

I felt around the edges of the tent. Nothing.

*This is stupid. I need a flashlight.*

I wiggled out of the tangled sleeping bag. I felt sweaty and frustrated. I couldn't wait for the weekend to be over. I remade my bed and straightened out my stuff but my iPod didn't turn up. No sign of a flashlight either. I felt the tent floor again and found a bottle of mosquito repellent.

I gave myself a good spritz.

*Great, now I smell like a lemon meringue pie.*

Scrambling through the woods a lingering waft of citron hit my nose. I pushed aside a branch wet with dew. Random thoughts bounced around my mind. I remembered hearing Dave, my new step-father, snoring like a jack hammer through the thin wall of our tent.

*He should get that fixed,* I remembered thinking at the time.

Dave, “Mr. Outdoorsy”, made the worst campfire chili I’d ever tasted. It was mushy, brown and tasteless.

*Why did my mother have to fall in love with a camper?*

Then mom’s big genuine smile flashed across my mind—duh—dumb question.

*At least he married Mom and he’s sticking around. Not like my real dad who just disappeared.*

I remembered sitting behind Dave on the drive up to Algonquin Park. “Did you know that bug spray will remove tree sap?” he was saying over his shoulder.

“Fascinating, Dave,” I said.

“Mary Elizabeth”, mom said quietly. She saw me roll my eyes and gave me a warning look.

“Always keep a clean campsite,” Dave went on. “Burn all food scraps and even the dishwasher goes into the fire so you don’t attract wild animals.”

But I was only half listening. I was trapped in the back seat of our station wagon next to a pile of khaki camping junk that filled the entire back end of the car. Camping advice was the last thing on my mind.

*Where did I put my iPod?* I wondered, glancing around the car.

“Wolves—now they’re the worst,” Dave said. “They hunt in packs. But generally, wild animals will stay away if you have a fire burning. Need a pee-break, M.E.?” he asked as he pulled into the Lake of Two Rivers General Store.

Without answering I jumped out of the car, slammed the door behind me and headed straight into the building.

*I look terrible,* I thought glancing in the bathroom mirror.

I was the first back at the car. It gave me the chance to dig through the camping equipment.

*Tent pegs, pots, rubber boots, pack of batteries, food box, flashlight, air mattress pump thingy...ah-ha!* I found my iPod.

*Now I won’t have to listen to any more of Dave’s boring outdoor survival tips.*

Hours later in the tent, there I was once again searching for that dumb iPod when I realized that I really needed to go to the bathroom but, of course, couldn’t find a flashlight either.

I thought about waking up my mom so I could borrow hers but I hadn’t spoken to her since our big blow out at the campfire. I knew I was wrong but I wasn’t about to wake up my mom to apologize just so I could borrow her flashlight.

Instead, I pulled on my hoodie, unzipped the tent and peered into the blackness in the direction of the park Comfort Station.

Then I spotted a glow between the trees.

*That must be the Comfort Station,* I thought and headed in that direction.

In the clearing of our campsite, I could only see a few feet in front of me by the light of the moon. The ground was fairly level and strewn with pine needles but when I passed between some trees I tripped on a root. After that, I walked with my arms held out in front of me.

As I got closer to the glow, I could see that it was definitely not the Comfort Station. The light was moving. It was a cloud of many tiny twinkling lights hovering between the trees.

*Fireflies!*

If I'd had a glass jar I would have tried to capture some. I remembered the "Lightning Bug" presentation that someone at school made last year. The light they produced had something to do with a chemical reaction that occurs in specialized light-emitting organs on their abdomens; but for me, they were magical. They reminded me of pictures of glowing fairies in the fairy tale books my mom used to read to me.

When I was little, the Tooth Fairy used to leave a loonie under my pillow and a tiny note written in a spindly, miniscule script. The Tooth Fairy's note was always very polite and formal. It would talk about what she did with the teeth and it always included a map of our backyard and directions for a scavenger hunt. One of the notes said that fireflies kept the Tooth Fairy's home lit up at night.

I loved those notes and saved them in a shoebox I kept under my bed along with the loonies and some baby pictures. Fireflies were the only kind of insect I've ever really been able to tolerate. Surrounded by them, I tried to catch one in my hand but each time I reached for one its light went out and it disappeared. I tried a few more times to catch one but it was no good.

Gradually I realized that the cloud of fireflies was thinning out. Soon, only a handful flashed their little lights.

I looked back in the direction I had come. It was inky black and unfamiliar. Without realizing it, I'd followed the cloud deeper into the woods.

*No! No, no, no, no, no!*

I stood in complete darkness with no tent and no Comfort Station in sight. I had no idea from which direction I had come. I was utterly and profoundly lost.

## Chapter 2

*I'm not going to scream. I'm not going to scream.*

I looked around with wide eyes but could see nothing. Then I tried squinting. That wasn't any better.

*I'm not like those drama queen girls at school who are always screaming and drawing attention to themselves. They're so lame.*

My heart was racing but I resolved to be logical.

*No way am I gonna start screaming, I kept telling myself.*

I tried to think clearly and not get emotional.

Just when I thought I couldn't hold in the scream any longer, I heard a sound--voices.

Straining, I heard voices but not words, suffixes and prefixes, clips of disjointed phrases, and laughter. The words floated in the air faintly sparking then disappearing like the fireflies. I listened hard but couldn't decide from which direction the voices were coming. I stumbled forward but the words got fainter then vanished altogether.

There was something else, something closer.

*Water...trickling!*

Picturing the Comfort Station, I ran toward it. Dense undergrowth pressed in on me. Branches reached out to scratch my face and scalp.

Suddenly the ground dropped away and I tripped and fell flat out across a tiny stream. I wasn't expecting that to happen and I didn't even have time to use my hands to break my fall. A large pointed rock stabbed me in the ribs and I heard a crack. It was the worst pain I'd ever felt. I wanted to throw up. I maybe even blacked out for a moment.

"Mom!" I screamed when I was finally able to get a big enough breath.

I forgot all about my firm resolve to not scream and I yelled "Help!" over and over until my voice was hoarse. In between I stopped to listen but no one heard me. No one came.

Then I had a horrible thought: *Mom won't even notice that I'm gone until the morning. No one will be looking for me before then.*

Curling up in a ball next to the stream, I pulled my hoodie over my head and hugged my aching ribs. I didn't want to. I tried to be brave but I couldn't help myself--I cried.

*I should stay where I am, I thought. Then my mom will find me.*

I shivered in fear and from being wet. Soon exhausted, I drifted in and out of a sleep that brought no rest. I dreamed of our visit earlier that day to the Algonquin Park Museum. I dreamed of the stuffed mother Black bear on display in the museum with her two taxidermal babies.

*They weren't so big,* I told myself.

Still, I wouldn't like to meet up with them.

"Hang your packs so bears can't get them," Dave had said. "Don't leave scraps around."

"If attacked, don't play dead. Fight back," the Park Naturalist had said.

I whimpered in a tormented half-sleep.

*How could I have gotten myself in this situation?* I wondered. *What are the chances that a bear will find me?*

I pictured what I would look like from a plane through infrared goggles. I'd be just a small, glowing dot on a huge landscape. I pictured my infrared dot and the dots that would represent wild animals in the park. I pictured those dots very far away from my dot. But this game brought no consolation.

Still, I shivered, cried and dreamed.

In my dream I was reliving being around the campfire earlier that evening with my mom and Dave.

"And then they found Tom Thomson's bloated and decomposing body days later floating face down in the water," Dave was saying.

He grimaced as he told the story, looking from me to my mother, his eyes wide and his fingers clawing the air for emphasis.

My mom's laugh echoed in my dream and the light from the campfire danced in her eyes.

Then I saw myself roll my eyes and look away from Dave. I was sulking and pretending not to listen to his story. I didn't want to go on this dumb camping trip and I was going to make my mom and Dave feel the pressure of my displeasure at every opportunity.

Still, there was something about the story of Tom Thomson that bothered me.

*He was so young and talented. It doesn't sound like a canoeing accident to me,* I thought in my dream.

Whatever happened it couldn't have been his fault. There had to be a bad guy.

*Smashing his head on his own canoe and falling out is too ridiculous. Yes, Tom Thomson was definitely murdered,* I thought, *by someone who was jealous of him.*

“Then,” Dave was still talking, “the Thomson family hired a mortician to exhume his body and bring it back to Owen Sound to be buried in the family plot. So this creepy guy in a long black coat gets off at the Canoe Lake train station and goes up to the graveyard at night.”

I dreamed of my mom. She was leaning forward as she listened to Dave’s story. Her elbows were on her knees, her smiling face in her hands, her eyes shining.

“Come back in three hours, the mortician says. So three hours later the driver comes back and the mortician’s done. Can you imagine?” Dave asked looking from me to my mom. “At night? Digging up a grave, pulling the rotting body out and putting it in another casket, then filling in the old grave all by yourself?”

In my dream I remembered that Dave howled like a wolf and reached over and grabbed my shoulder to make me jump.

It worked. I jumped but then pushed him away.

“It’s so lame, Dave,” I told him.

Dave laughed but it wasn’t a real laugh. He was just trying to cover up how disappointed he was that we weren’t close. It was the laugh of resignation.

I moaned and whimpered in my sleep. My dreams agitated me. The memory of my response to Dave haunted me as much as thoughts of Tom Thomson. I wrapped my arms around myself even tighter but couldn’t stop myself from shivering.

“So then about twenty years later,” Dave continued, “four guys decided to try to find the old grave of Tom Thomson. There was a rumour that Thomson’s friends moved the body before the mortician got there and that the coffin was empty. So they go up in the middle of the night and start digging in the area. Well, they dug the first hole six feet down. Nothing. Then they picked another spot nearby and dug the second hole. Again, nothing. They dug a third hole and still nothing. They were just about to give up when one of them noticed a depression in the ground. So they started digging, digging, digging and they hit wood! A coffin! ‘There’s something here!’ one of them yelled. Then he saw that it was a box and the top was caved in. He could see a hole in the box. So he reaches down, down, down,” Dave said reaching down into the imaginary coffin, “and he pulls out...”

Here Dave paused for emphasis.

*Pulled out what?*

“Down, down he reached and he pulled out a foot bone!”

“Eeewww,” Mom shivered.

“So then, the four guys called the OPP because the coffin was supposed to be empty. And the OPP did some tests and they discovered that it wasn’t Tom Thomson’s body! It was someone

else! It was the body of a native man! So how did the body of another man get in Tom Thomson's grave?"

I just shrugged my indifference but the truth is that I couldn't stop thinking about it.

*Something funny was definitely going on.*

"And all this happened right here in Algonquin Park," Dave concluded.

"How far away?" I had to know.

"It's just the next lake over, on Canoe Lake."

"So you brought us camping to a murder scene?"

"Well it did happen almost a hundred years ago. Although," he said lowering his voice, "they say his spirit still roams the park. Listen to this part of the story: someone who said he knew where Thomson's friends moved the body was about to show everyone the spot when he died in a fluke accident. He was crossing Canoe Lake in the winter, dragging supplies in a sled behind him when he broke through the ice on the exact spot where Tom Thomson's body was found! So what do you think of that, M.E.?"

*Wow, Algonquin Park is haunted--cool,* I remembered thinking but instead I just rolled my eyes as if Dave's story was the greatest bore and said, "Lame."

It was the "final straw" as they say.

"That's enough!" my mom said and jumped to her feet.

I knew I'd touched a nerve. My rudeness and eye rolling had been piling up on top of my refusal to like or even accept Dave.

"It's just rude! Apologize right now!"

"What for?" I shouted back.

"Mary Elizabeth!"

"Okay, just forget it!" I remembered yelling. I stormed off toward the tent. I figured if I yelled back my mother would be stunned just long enough for me to make it back to the tent before being forced to apologize.

It worked.

I remembered thinking about running away as I stomped off.

But at the moment, running away was such a repulsive thought that it jolted me out of my dream. Shivering on the ground, clutching my fractured rib, itchy and bleeding, my only thought

was that I wished I was still sleeping in my warm tent next to my mom and Dave—even if he did snore like a jackhammer.

“Mom!” I cried.

I’d never felt so sorry for myself in my life. Then a dreamless sleep mercifully carried me to the dawn of the next day.

## Chapter 3

I bolted awake with the morning light.

“Mom!” was my first thought.

A fierce stab of pain pierced my ribs and I could hardly get up.

The truth of my situation washed over me but overhead a cacophony of chirping, cheeping, cawing, and squawking announced the start of a new day.

I staggered to my feet and looked in every direction. Nothing was familiar. There was no sign of the campground or the Comfort Station. There was no sign of civilization whatsoever.

“Hello!” I yelled. “Help me!”

There was no reply. I listened hard to hear any human or man-made sound. There was nothing.

*Wait! What’s that?*

A *tock-tock-tock* filled me with hope. It sounded like a hammer tapping lightly. Maybe it was a workman fixing something.

*Maybe he has a truck with a two-way radio.*

But high up a tree I spotted a woodpecker pecking at a hole-filled trunk. I could see a red patch of feathers on the back of its head. Then it flitted to another tree calling *ki-ki-ki-ki-ki* and my hopeful vision of a worker flew off with it.

“Hello!” I yelled again. “Is anybody there? Anybody?”

I strained to hear or see anything. But there was nothing except the wind and trees in every direction. Still damp from falling into the creek the night before and from the dew, I hugged myself to try to quell my violent shivering. Then, scooping some water from the cold creek, I took a little drink.

The spot on my ribs ached. I lifted my hoodie to have a look. An ugly purple bruise had formed. I touched it tenderly. It felt painful beyond belief.

*It’s broken. It feels like it’s broken. I gotta get outta here. What am I gonna do? What am I gonna do?*

I looked up and down the creek but one direction looked exactly like the other.

*I should follow this creek. It must come out somewhere.*

The forest seemed full of birds this morning, each one warbling a happy song. It was annoying.

A Gray Jay landed on a nearby branch. *Whee-ah, whu-whu-whu* it sang fluffing its gray wings and white belly feathers before it shot off to another tree.

*If I follow the creek, it must come out somewhere.*

I stumbled along beside the creek ducking under branches and climbing over rocks. The creek snaked its way along the lowest crevices of land.

“It has to come out somewhere,” I kept repeating out loud.

Then, climbing over baseball-sized rocks that clacked like billiard balls, I turned my ankle and cried out in pain. Tears poured down my cheeks.

*I’m okay. I’m okay,* I thought as I rubbed my ankle and rotated it.

*It’s not broken,* I told myself yet tears of self-pity poured down my cheeks.

I forced myself to continue following the creek.

*I gotta keep going. This creek has gotta come out somewhere.*

After a couple of hours I noticed that the trees in this part of the forest were different from the ones that surrounded me that morning. Now it was mostly spruce trees.

The squawking of birds seemed to get louder. Suddenly I came upon a circular opening in the forest. It wasn’t man-made. There were no tree stumps. It was just a sunny area clear of trees. Short grasses and moss or something like lichen covered the area.

*Bizarre. It’s like a crop circle.*

Stepping out of the shade of the forest, I felt warmer. I lifted my face to the sun to take in the warmth. I noticed steam lifting off my damp hoodie sleeve as the sun evaporated the moisture.

The ground underfoot was soft and springy like a waterbed.

*This is a bog,* I realized.

I remembered the Park Naturalist describing bogs to us on our museum tour. I looked around. Sure enough, sphagnum mosses, sedge and Labrador tea bushes grew around the edge. I took a step and felt the ground bounce back. Black spruce trees stood like sentinels around the edge of this springy meadow. They let off a faint menthol smell. Most of the spruce trees were grey and dead-looking at the bottom but the top six feet or so were green and healthy.

I jumped on the bouncy turf a couple more times and noticed that it caused a slow ripple that spread out from where I jumped in an ever-widening circle.