

Chapter 1

When Paige told me all about it, it was well over a year since the shit had hit her fan, but those solemn brown eyes don't lie, and she had forgotten nothing. Still, she asked "You do believe me, don't you Chloe?"

I assured her I did. "That would happen to you, Paige. It should."

She nodded. "Thank you," she said. She tucked her dark hair behind her ears and smiled a smile of one peeking around a corner at something enticing. She looked past me, into space. Around the corner. Into the new room.

On a sweltering Saturday in June, David Davenport announced to his wife Paige that he had purchased a vacation home for them in Wells Lake, a town in northern Pennsylvania that Paige had never heard of. Philadelphia had been hit by an early heat wave, but they had left their air-conditioned condo on Rittenhouse Square to sip sauvignon blanc at a wrought iron table outside Café Rouge. The table teetered every time Paige set down her glass, and she was so absorbed by it tilting her way, and then David's way, and then her way again, as if switching loyalties, that she barely heard what he said about taking her to see the house the following weekend. She wiped cold condensation from her water glass onto her napkin and held the icy glass up to her face, pressing it to each cheek. "What are we talking about?" she murmured, not looking up. She set her glass down and fingered around the table for something to tuck under the table leg.

"...About a four hour drive from here, Tioga County," David was saying when she finally gave up her search and looked up at him. He was wearing a yellow polo shirt, which was not his color. The collar was neatly pressed, and his Ray Bans rested on top of his full, sandy brown hair that he liked to gel and tousle. Women found him handsome. Over the course of their ten year relationship, Paige had watched them flock and twitter. He was like a colt, Solid, broad in the chest for his height, always tossing his head and chewing the bit. But now she could barely hear him. He was talking into the stifling breeze and looking through her. "We'll leave around noon on Friday to miss the weekend traffic."

Paige squinted through her sunglasses. "There's traffic headed that way?" she asked, words sticking in the thick air around her. "We'll see. I have to check my calendar. I'm not sure what's going on next weekend." She picked through her purse for her phone, mentally thumbing through potential escape plans. She was certain that she could figure out some excuse for not going. If David needed a weekend getaway to go fishing or bushwhacking, or to attend a tractor pull, or whatever one did in places like that, he could go by himself. Or, god forbid, if he felt the two of them needed a romantic pick-me-up or a literal roll in the hay, she was absolutely not going.

Not that he had even vaguely attempted a single romantic gesture in ages. Not that she wanted him to. Not that. No.

He stared at her across the table, expressionless, but she felt a sudden cool ripple of trepidation run through her blood. David was never still. He picked up his water glass and took a swig from it, catching an ice cube and chewing it crudely in his whitened teeth. “We’re going,” he said, practically dropping the glass back down, forefinger and thumb splayed in the air for a moment longer. “You have nothing else to do.” Then he smiled, forced and tight. Paige could do nothing but nod in terse agreement. Damn, she thought.

Damn.

The waitress approached their table and inquired if they had looked at the menu but neither of them was hungry. She left them the check for the drinks, which they sat and sipped for a while longer, silent, watching the city stream by.

The journey to Wells Lake was long and tedious. Heavy quiet mixed with carsickness. Paige settled back into the leather seats of David’s Lexus SUV, their weekend bags carelessly packed and tossed in the back. It was only two days, she reminded herself, but why did he have to buy a vacation house there, of all places. Why not a beach house in Brigantine or Margate, even though she loathed the Shore, or simply somewhere that she had seen and agreed to beforehand. She was extremely annoyed with David, and she was not about to put on a cheerful face and make the weekend pleasant for him. He was not inclined to chat either, and so they drove over highways, then through towns steadily dwindling in size and civilization, just your average acrimonious married couple, getting away from it all. The sun shone on her bare legs through the sun roof. She stretched them out and leaned her head against the leather head rest, studying the passing scenery.

The trip stretched on, leading them over highways flanked by stubborn-looking trees and hills, and roads that rolled out through vast farm land of weather-beaten barns and mud-spattered grazing cows. The smell of manure hung in the air. They crossed bridges, and wound through flat towns with tiny churches and diners, towns that seemed to end as quickly as they began. And yet, the great open sky above and the unfamiliar, unwieldy land stretching before and behind them made Paige’s big city home seem like something miniature, encased in a snow globe. It was wild and unsettling.

Welcome to Wells Lake, white lettering on a pine green sign declared, as David pulled into a small gas station on the edge of another miserable little town that appeared at first glance to be all on one road, straight ahead of them. She expected a few blocks up, where she could only glimpse a wall of forest, there was a sign that read “Come again, if you’re sure you want to.”

David filled the tank and Paige walked up to the small shop

attached to the service station. She spotted a handful of town brochures on the rack by the register that held newspapers, and a few tabloids. She perused one of the brochures, which was more like a single-sided bookmark. It explained that Wells Lake, named for an original settler, had in the early twentieth century been a trade center for a large surrounding area, and had been the site of several mills, including a saw mill, a flour mill, and a milk-condensing plant. Now, Paige discovered as she read on, the town boasted no such exciting amenities. From what she could see, as she stepped outside and squinted up the main road, it even lacked any sort of quaint village charm. No cobblestones, no flower baskets hanging from old fashioned street lamps, no visible evidence of a bed and breakfast, or antique shops. There appeared to be only two traffic lights on the entire stretch of road, dangling from black wires, one swaying along side a pair of shoes, tied together and hanging from their laces. Paige looked back down at the bookmark. The remainder of the story of Wells Lake was summed up in one line, offering nearby fishing, free camp grounds and hiking trails in the nearby wooded park land. There was a small sketch under the blurb of a deer and a few trees, and some random black dots that she assumed represented ticks.

Paige jumped as David honked the horn. She stuffed the brochure into her purse and hurried back to the car.

David steered them off of the main strip. The trees and shrubbery lining the narrow road that he sped along – *what the hell was his hurry?* - appeared to be a jungle of weeds and bramble. Paige nervously dabbed sunscreen onto her fingertips from a tube and patted it onto her cheeks and nose.

David drove around another bend and crunched up a rutted dirt and pebble driveway leading to a dilapidated house with a sagging front porch and peeling lime-green shutters. The siding looked like it might have been white at one time, but was now the color of dingy mop-water.

“Gee, David, couldn’t you have had it renovated *before* we came out here?” Paige asked. She leaned her head back wearily. “What were you thinking? This place is clearly unsalvageable. Did you even have it inspected?”

David sprang out of the SUV and slammed his door. Paige sighed and stepped carefully out her side, wary of where she set her shoes down. She shaded her eyes with one hand, taking a longer look at the house. God, it was terrible. She would have to convince David to sell it. She certainly was not coming back for any more weekend getaways here. But who would buy this mess? Finally she turned toward him, and nearly tripped over her bag which was on the ground beside her. David was standing by the front of the car, arms folded across his chest.

“What’s the matter with you? Where’s your suitcase?” Paige snapped with fresh annoyance. “We might as well go in. It’s too hot to stand around out here all day.”

“I’m not staying,” he said.

“What? What do you mean?” Paige asked, feeling her heart begin to jump against her rib cage.

“You’re staying. I’m going home. This,” he tossed a set of keys onto her suitcase, “is your home now. There is a bank card in your purse. Your account is with the local branch on Cherry Street. I had the utilities turned on, and I arranged for some supplies to be stocked in. That should get you started. Good luck, and goodbye.”

Paige felt light headed and there was a faint ringing in her ears.

She reached for the passenger-side car door handle and grasped it to steady herself. David was already climbing back in on his side. He snapped on his seatbelt and powered down the passenger window. In that instant, she saw a man she barely knew. He seemed to be wearing a mask of himself. “I’ll send you the rest of your clothes and things,” he said. “We’re through. Feel free to see other men.”

“You feel free to see other men, too,” Paige squeaked. But she was drowned out by the revved engine as the Lexus lurched backward, forcing her to yank back her hand. The car bumped down the driveway, jerked into forward and sped around the bend and out of sight.

Driveway dust hung around her in a cloud, suspended in the stagnant summer air as if time had slowed to a near standstill. A couple of bees circled lazily nearby and she could hear the faint buzzing. The sun burned into the top of her head. She blinked up at it like a bewildered bird pushed from its nest. Then she dropped to the hard, dry ground and sat watching the dust shimmering above the road where her husband’s truck had disappeared. The Lexus was gone, but she stared at that empty road for a long time.

Why was this happening? Hadn’t there been happier times? A gray memory or two to make them reconsider the end? She focused on drawing in air and pushing it back out, until she could hear nothing else. The screaming inside her head ceased. Reality buzzed off with the bees, and she suddenly laughed out loud. Of course, this is one of David’s hijinks, she thought, desperately craning her neck and listening for the car, which would surely come roaring back around the bend at any moment. She had learned a long time ago that in a refreshing sort of way, David loved these tricky moves. He possessed a debonair devil-may-care attitude that Paige had both admired and envied, early into their courtship. David loved nothing more than to buck rules and manipulate systems, especially when no one was the wiser. It became clear later that the last thing David wanted to do was change the world or bring down the corrupt. He was just a tricky rich child, and his antics made him feel taller. Paige

was an extension of his outward appearance, and they could laugh at the world together in private, but in public he expected her to keep the secret, and dress, speak and act appropriately.

This was a simple role for Paige. She was a seasoned actress in the world. She played her role expertly. For a while.

The stream of thoughts slowed to a trickle and then a drip. It was dusk when Paige began to fade back from her stupor. She was seated cross-legged on the sparse grass of what was now her lawn – *oh god, oh god, this is my lawn*, it was all rushing at her, images flashing through her mind, scenes and conversations leading up to this point. Teetering table, David staring her down, long, hot drive, gas station, David driving away. Paige clapped her hands over her eyes and sucked in a deep breath. As her mind sank into bleak quiet, she dropped her hands to her knees and focused on them until she was left with only a slow, pulsing ache in her temples.

Her gaze shifted to the house keys on her suitcase beside her. She would have to go inside. Eerie evening life was stirring around her. A twig snapped in one corner of the yard, as from another corner came the deep croak of what could only be a giant, mutant frog, answered by another in the shadows under the porch. Oh hell, was the house built on a swamp? She hugged her knees. They were gathering. Advancing. The shriek of hundreds of crickets pierced the evening air, and a mosquito the size of a tarantula floated an inch from her face. Heart pounding, Paige swung into action, leaping to her feet and scrambling across the yard and up onto the porch, her suitcase bumping behind her, breaking a few spindles in the porch railing as she pulled it up the steps.

With jangly fingers she reached to jam the key into the lock, and saw with fresh horror that the front door was already slightly ajar. Her fear quickly gave way to adrenaline, and in a fit of maniacal bravado, she raised a kitten-heeled sandal and gave the door a roundhouse kick with all the strength she had. Maybe whatever was inside would be frightened and jump out a back window. The door banged open with such force that the doorknob embedded in the wall inside and stuck there. Paige hurled her suitcase into the front room, wrenched the door free of the wall, and pushed it shut. There was no lock except for the keyhole, and to her deep dismay the key kept turning in it, round and round, catching on nothing.

Gingerly flicking on an uncovered switch in the wall, Paige looked around in the dim light and spotted a chair against the wall. She dragged it over and propped it under the doorknob. She had seen that done in movies. It always worked. Next she had to find and turn on every other light in the house and, canister of Mace in hand, she would check through every room for squatters, human or otherwise. Paige looked around the archaic living room, furnished only with a threadbare sofa and armchair in lurid pink floral. The room

contained no carpet, no coffee table, no high-definition flat-screened television, just a milk crate in front of the sofa that held a small, old-fashioned box TV, attached to a black cable that ran across the floor and into the wall. In the corner was an iron wood stove. The living room spilled into what she could only guess was a dining room, because it was completely bare. Well, that's a shame, she thought. So much for dinner parties. The wood floors were dinged and scuffed, dotted with small, splintery holes.

Beyond the dining room was a square, eat-in kitchen, the design of which appeared to be circa 1960s, because everyone involved had clearly been on quite the acid trip. The cabinets were a disturbing sunshine yellow, and every cabinet door was hung on a crooked angle. She opened the refrigerator and found bottled water, a can of ground coffee, a carton of milk and a few other food items that David must have had stocked in. How kind of him, she thought, gnashing her teeth. She grabbed one of the bottles of water and turned to face the ugliest kitchen table she had ever seen. It was oval, with four brown chairs surrounding it. Its prior owner had painted it nearly the same vile yellow as the kitchen cabinets, only brighter, making its ugliness even more startling. Its surface was made uneven by dried globs of paint and dips and dents under the paint. The splintered edges had been painted over rather than sanded. Paige shuddered and looked past it to a kitchen door, which mercifully had a key in the lock that worked when she tried it. She peeked behind a dusty gingham ruffle covering the door's half-moon window but it had grown too dark to see anything outside.

Her adrenaline supply was drained, and she suddenly felt deflated and weak. If there is anything scary in this house, it can have me, she thought. Leaving her suitcase where she had dropped it by the front door, she crept up the creaky stairs off of the living room and skulked through three small bedrooms and a dollhouse-sized bathroom, leaving lights on everywhere she went for some small comfort. The bedrooms were sparsely furnished, two with single beds and one with a queen sized bed, all made up with linens and blankets. Whoever had prepared the house for human occupants had assumed a family was coming.

Paige decided numbly that she would sleep in the room with the largest bed, and in a final flailing safety gesture, she peeked under the bed, and then yanked open the closet door to see what was living inside. The door promptly broke off of its one rusted hinge and banged to the floor. Paige looked down at it for a moment, then walked around it and fell into the bed.