



At the
Water's
Edge
a novel

HARPER BLISS

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AT THE WATER'S EDGE

Preview

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All information here: harperbliss.com/at-the-waters-edge

CHAPTER ONE

Driving past the yellow sign for West Waters instantly takes me back to a time when I was happy. It's not so much a single concrete memory as a tangled-up rush of them flooding my brain. My sister and I running barefoot in the grass around our cabin, dipping that first toe into the water on a carefree Saturday morning, bright-colored candy from the improvised shop by reception, the intoxicating smell of suntan lotion, Dad wearing the same pair of faded beige shorts for the entire weekend.

I pull into the parking lot and find a space close to the entrance. Even though the middle of August should be the peak of the vacation season, I count only two other cars in the lot. Everything looks satisfyingly familiar: the grassy curb, more neatly trimmed than I remember, the cabin roofs dotted against the mass of green surrounding the lake, a strip of water flickering under the midday sun in the distance. Yet as if belonging to another lifetime.

When I deposit my city-girl case on the uneven concrete, I realize I'll look like a fool if I try to roll it down the rickety path to reception. I grab the handle and lift the case, which is not very heavy. I only brought a few sets of clothes. Some books and a laptop—not for work, only for self-improvement. And only one blazer.

There's something about the air in this place. It takes me back to a simpler time, a time when it was a given that air was clean and pure, a time when I didn't worry so much. It's only a short walk to the wooden shack where I need to pick up the key. Through my parents, I know that both Mr. and Mrs. Brody are no longer with us, and that Kay is running things now.

I see her before she realizes I'm there. Crouched down, studying something on the ground, poking her finger into the soil. I clear my throat to announce my arrival.

I watch Kay shoot up, rubbing her hands on her shorts. "Hey." Her eyes light up when she recognizes me. "Well, I'll be damned. Little Ella Goodman."

Growing up, I was always shorter than the other kids my age. Now, I stand just as tall as Kay, whose build is stocky and muscular.

"Mom should have notified you that our cabin will be occupied—" I stop mid-sentence. Unable to shake the sensation that, somehow, she knows. That the reason I came here is plastered across my face.

Kay tilts her head, regarding me with some sort of glint of expectation in her eyes. Of course, she doesn't know. Hardly anyone does.

"Yep. Dee warned me." Her voice is matter-of-fact, with the delivery of someone who never questions her self-confidence. "Let's go in."

I follow her inside the shack—or 'the shop' as my family called it when I came here as a child. From the outside, I hadn't noticed the extension to the side.

"I spruced it up a bit." Kay must have noticed the look of surprise on my face. "We

even have a laundromat in the back these days.”

“Fancy.” I scan the neat aisles, all pleasantly lit and shiny, and what looks like a brand new fridge and freezer against the back wall.

“It isn’t the eighties anymore, Ella. We have wi-fi now.” Kay leans against a proper reception desk—laptop and all—and grins at me. “Let me get your key... card.” She taps a few times on the laptop’s keyboard, opens a drawer and produces a key card like in a hotel. “Have you liked our Facebook page?” she asks, a grin slipping across her face as she hands me the card.

“I will,” I stammer.

“Don’t worry, it’s not mandatory, but a check-in on Facebook is always appreciated.” She leans her elbows on the counter. “Unless you’re here on the down-low, of course.”

I don’t immediately know what to say, so unprepared am I by seeing Kay—whom I haven’t seen since I last visited West Waters many years ago—so quickly after arriving and the unexpected topic of conversation that’s making me feel uncomfortable.

“I’m just screwing with you.” She rests her almond-shaped eyes on me—again, that sensation that she is looking right through me and seeing all my scars. “Welcome to West Waters. I hope you enjoy your stay with us. It can get quite busy over the weekends, but you should be fine out there in the Goodman cabin. You should see what they’ve done to the place.”

I vaguely remember my mother mentioning remodeling the cabin a few years ago, but I was probably too busy to take in the details. Listening to her with one ear, while scheduling a lecture in New York and going over a research report.

“Can’t wait.” I flip the key card between my fingers a few times, desperate to make more small talk—not because I’m so eager but because it’s what expected in a situation like this. “Is it just you running the place?”

Kay shrugs. “Most cabins are privately owned, so not too much fuss for me.”

“What about the off season?” The next question comes easily because I’m genuinely interested in the answer.

“People come even when it rains. It’s only in the depths of winter that it goes really quiet. Then I take the time to think of ways of improving West Waters, usually over a few beers at The Attic.” Her chuckle comes from a deep place, like an old man’s laugh.

A bell that I hadn’t even noticed when I followed Kay in, goes off, as a man with wild white hair walks in. He tilts his chin when he spots me and, out of nowhere, winks at me.

“Uncle Pete,” Kay says in a loud, booming voice. “Here’s your reading material for today.”

As the man shuffles to the counter I make my way to the door. Kay presents him with *The New York Times* and *The Northville Gazette*.

“See you later, Ella,” she shouts.

I give her a quick wave and exit the shop. Once outside, I need to scan my

surroundings to orientate myself. My family's cabin is situated on the edge of the grounds, near the most western tip of the lake. I breathe in a large gulp of air, then another, enjoying the quiet, sun-drenched hum of a summer afternoon in Northville, Oregon.

* * *

Kay was right. From the outside, our cabin looks the same, but the inside could easily appear in *Life & Style*, the 'maximizing a tiny space in a semi-fashionable way edition'. The wooden boards lining the walls and ceilings are new and light-brown, giving the interior a shiny, but cozy feel.

The kitchenette—taking up half of the lounge area—boasts new appliances, but the true stunner is the bathroom. A dark-gray tiled walk-in shower, flanked by one of those modern water basins, the kind of which you can never be sure where the water comes from.

I remember an unanswered email from my mother containing pictures of this overhaul. If it weren't for that, I'd be suspicious that, somehow, they did this all for me.

The second bedroom, too narrow for more furniture, still houses bunk-beds, but the old closet has been replaced by a built-in one, made with the same planks as the rest of the cabin.

I stopped joining my parents for weekends here as soon as they allowed me to stay home with Nina. She was seventeen—and up to no good—and I was fourteen, and already so at odds with the world. Today, I deposit my suitcase in the room where my parents always slept, and even though it doesn't feel quite right, I don't particularly feel like crashing on the bottom bunk in the room next door. For all the times I came here as a child, I never once slept in the master bedroom.

More than anything, I'm drawn to the lake. I kick off the sneakers I wore for driving and head to the porch running around both sides and rear of the cabin. From the porch, it's easy to reach the landing that leads directly to the lake. I sit and let my feet dangle in the water, instantly transported back to the hours I spent here as a child. Observing the water creatures, watching the sun climb until it was almost perfectly on top of the lake, making the surface glimmer like a mirror broken in all the right places, waiting until it dipped behind the trees on the other side, in the early dusk of summer, and painted the lake orange.

Judging from where the sun now hangs in the clear blue sky, already having started its descent, I figure it must be around four. A beer would be nice. I'm sure I can pick some up in the shop, and some snacks that will have to do for dinner tonight.

* * *

Later, when the sun has completely disappeared behind the dense tree tops, and I sit overlooking the water with a cold beer in my hand, a rustling to the left of the porch startles me. I'm so used to city noises—a constant buzz of traffic, road works, and endless construction—that now, when all around me an unfamiliar sort of quiet reigns, I start at the slightest ripple of sound.

“Hey.” Kay materializes in front of me. “Didn’t mean to give you a fright.” She sports that smile again, the one that indicates a friendly but don’t-mess-with-me attitude. In high school, she was three years above me, leaving us in decidedly different social circles. But I saw her around at West Waters sometimes, running on the sandy track on the other side of the lake, or—a more distant memory—just once, canoodling with Jim Straw behind a tree only a few feet away from our cabin. “You left this in the shop.” She holds up my wallet. “Figured you might want it back.”

“Oh, shoot.” I hadn’t even noticed it was missing. “Thank you so much.” She climbs the two porch stairs and holds it out to me. Gratefully, I pocket it. “The least I can do is offer you a beer.” It’s my first night here and I’m not really in the mood for small talk, but politeness always wins.

“I won’t say no to that.” She winks and parks her behind unceremoniously in the wicker chair next to mine. “How’s that sister of yours doing?”

She doesn’t waste any time asking the hard questions. I grab her a beer from the cool box next to my chair and offer it to her, avoiding her piercing glance.

“Dee and John never really mention her when they come here, you know? While they can’t shut up about Little Ella, fancy professor at Boston U. What is it again? Chemistry?”

“Biology,” I’m quick to correct. “Plant and microbial ecosystem ecology, to be precise.”

“Damn, sounds complicated.” Kay brings the bottle to her lips and drops her head back. “Is that why you came here? To study our shrubbery?” She gives that deep, rumbling laugh again.

I shake my head. “I’ve taken a leave of absence.”

“Sounds like a fussy name for a vacation to me.” With a few quick draughts, Kay empties half her bottle. “So how about Nina? Where is she hanging out these days.”

“Last I heard, she was in New Zealand, but we’re not really in touch that much.”

Kay nods as if she understands, as if my evasive answer is more than enough explanation. She drains the last of her beer and plants the bottle on the wooden table in front of her. “I’ll leave you in peace. Thanks for the beverage.” She rises with unexpected elegance. “You know the drill, right? Dial 911 for emergencies.” She grins. “If you were to need me personally, I’m still in the lodge behind the shop.” She gives me a quick nod of the head. “Night, night, Little Ella.” The last I see of her face, before she spins on her heels and leaves, is a crooked smirk.

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Any questions: harperbliss@gmail.com