

Snakes

It was baby blue -- just like the pictures had promised it would be. The two story lake house, with its faded and dirty exterior, stood out among the neat and clean white and beige ones neighboring it. As they pulled into the driveway, Annabella's gaze was drawn to an unruly garden surrounded by a shabby picket fence. The grass was unkempt, partially overgrown. Weeds shared the same space as daffodils and pansies; the rose and butterfly bushes looked like they hadn't been trimmed in months. It reminded her of a book -- she couldn't remember -- that she skimmed from her middle school library. It made her want to investigate the garden for pixies and swim in Lake Briar in search of freshwater mermaids.

"Look at all the stains, John," her mother sniffed from the front seat, face twisted into an expression of distaste. "This doesn't look at all like it does in the pictures."

"Fuckin' morons don't know how to take care of their own home... let's hope there aren't any mice or squirrels in there," her father grumbled. "Get out of the car, Bella. We're going to need your help bringing in the luggage."

Annabella took off her seatbelt. "But what if they're friendly, dad?"

"Just get out of the car."

With the help of her parents, Annabella began to move the bags of food, clothing, and beach toys into the spacious, L-shaped living room. The walls were made of dark paneled wood, and contained within those walls were well used leather couches, faded silk flowers on worn wood coffee and side tables, and big hardcover books sandwiched between rocky-crystal

bookends (geodes, she remembered her science teacher call them) on shelves. She liked the bookends in particular; they looked magical.

“Focus, sweetie. Dad can’t bring in those bags in by himself,” her mother said as she yanked a bag of cleaning supplies from Annabella’s hand. “I’m going to clean the kitchen.”

Her dad proceeded to pick weeds for the next half hour. Annabella brought in the rest of the bags during that time, bringing them up the carpeted, creaky staircase and into the bedrooms.

The rooms were cozy and tidied up. Personal belongings of the people who owned the home lay out in the open on the old cedar dressers -- family pictures, medals from soccer games, dreamcatchers. She chose the room with the dreamcatchers to be hers, drawn in by the sight of feathers and beads and the promise of good dreams.

Annabella helped clean the already clean kitchen after her mother started yelling that she wasn’t going to everything and how this was supposed to be her holiday weekend as well. It wasn’t for another half hour that her mother was satisfied with the state of the cooking area, and not for another hour vacuuming, mopping, and checking beds for bedbugs that she found the rest of the lake house just as satisfactory. All personal items of the owners, including Bella’s beloved dreamcatchers, were stowed away in unused drawers or on unoccupied shelves in the closet.

“Now we can finally have some fun,” her mother beamed. Annabella felt a twinge of sadness as she looked upon the very neat living room.

“Bella, go put on your bathing suit. And make sure to put on lots of sunscreen! We’re going down to the dock.”

Her dad fished off the dock, and her mother laid on it on a plush towel to soak up the sun. Annabella kept off the dock entirely. Though her hope of searching for faeries in the lawn and

garden dashed -- "You'll get ticks and other bites all over you. Absolutely not," her father had claimed when she asked, even when she suggested she put on bug spray and shower immediately after playing -- she could at least still search for lake mermaids.

She donned her flippers, goggles, and snorkel and waddled out to the edge of the dock. She held her arms out, before putting them over her head. She wanted to dive like the mermaids did; she thought if she acted like them, maybe they would try to talk to her. But just as she bent her knees to spring off the creaky, sun faded planks, a slender arm wrapped around her waist.

"Not without the floaties, young lady," her mother said.

On went the flowered arm floaties and out went the idea of diving in. She'd surely belly flop if she tried with them on.

To her dismay, not only did they prevent her from diving, but they made it impossible to go very far underwater. They kept pulling her away from the sunfish flitting playfully between rays of late afternoon sun and the gentle sway of weeds and algae farther down below. But she knew better than to ask to take them off. Not even her "Dolphin Approved Swimmer" certificate from her swim instructor, which said she was able to swim without supervision or assistance, had been able to persuade them.

Annabella stuck to the surface of the water instead, swimming face down in order to see what was beneath her. Maybe she'd get a wave, a sign that the mermaids knew she was there to see them. All she ended up seeing was a snapping turtle swimming along about twelve feet below, and a water snake that caused her to be called out of the water by her parents.

"Thank god we got you out. I think that was a water moccasin," her father stated as he towed her hair.

“No it wasn’t,” she said calmly. “We learned about them in my science class. It was too slender to be one, dad. It won’t hurt me--”

“You’re twelve, Bella. I’ve had a lot more experience outdoors. I know what they look like and how they behave. We’re lucky we got to you in time,” he said sternly. “I’ll have to talk to the people who maintain this place and ask if it’s really safe for you to swim here. For now, no more swimming.”

Annabella’s head hung low. Maybe he was right. It was a couple of months ago that they’d had their unit on reptiles and snakes in class. Her parents often said she was forgetful about chores and other things, so who was to say she wasn’t forgetting what she learned about the difference between non-venomous and venomous water snakes, too?

She spent what little time there was until dinner helping her mother make the meal. She made the mashed potatoes and stirred the gravy for the chicken roast her mom had cooked. She set the table and ate her dinner quietly while her parents talked about asking for a refund from the owners. When everyone had eaten, she cleared the table and cleaned the dishes, showered, and was tucked into bed by her parents.

She didn’t fall asleep immediately. She sat solemnly by the window and watched the moon reflecting off Lake Briar. There were no hands waving out in the water, no glowing fairies dancing in the yard.

There were only water moccasins and bugs waiting for Annabella out there.