



Lake Pine

By Tristin Qualey

"If we get arrested, it's your fault," he said, tugging at his button-up. Sweat splashed at the collar in a ring—a tightening noose.

"My fault?" I asked, retrying the key in the ignition. "It was an accident, you saw it happen."

"You killed her, you..." Bobby's voice trailed off, sputtering like the boat's motor.

"Like hell I did."

"We gotta tell someone, Jeanie. We gotta. She's dead and—and we gotta," he said, practically hyperventilating at his own reflection. He wouldn't look at me. He just kept peering into the choppy water like it was a word search and he could find the right answer if he just stared harder.

"It's dark," I shouted. "I couldn't see where I was going." Agitation was rising in my throat, bubbling up like acid. I was going to be sick.

"She was my friend too, you know," I continued.

"Yeah, but *you* did that to her," he said. Once again, the band of sweat circling his jugular grew wider. I imagined it sinking into his flesh and then rippling out again in concentric rings.

"The moon wasn't even out," I replied. He gave me a look that could split a log in two.

The moon *wasn't* out. And if he were driving when it happened, God knows I wouldn't be acting like him, sniffing in the corner. I wondered how I got here in this state, this town, this night. *Lake Pine* wasn't known for much; it never housed fish bigger than the palm of your hand and was hardly pretty enough to be considered a romantic destination. But it was always dark. The water grew deeper, more insidious after nightfall. More than it should, as if an algae bloom erupted every evening and drank the light from the air.

"If you aren't going to be helpful, you can get out right now," I said to nothing but the algae. Bobby wouldn't look at me. His eyes were ripping through the water. I started looking, too. Out of irritation, at first, thinking I could prove that there was nothing to look *for*. But he kept staring.

So I did, too.

It was like glaring at a wall you've seen a hundred times; nothing stood out, at first. Yet as I kept peering, paranoia became a ghost, breathing onto my neck. I've never believed in the supernatural, but that night still haunts me.

Even now, I'd like to think that if I had a chance to go back to *Lake Pine*, I would. But I know that as soon as felt the tug of the backwater—

"You ran Ally over," he whimpered. "You ran her over, and you didn't even turn around."

"Stop."

"No, Jeanie, you ran her over."

His hands were fumbling with the steel lip of the boat. I thought he was about to hurl himself in, tear through the water, and just sink.

I could've said he slipped.

"We were having fun and you just hit her in the water like that," he said, turning to me. His hair loosed itself across his eyes, a canopy shading him from the sight of me. He looked like an animal.

I felt my own collar grow wet. I couldn't keep looking at him like that. It would've killed me. I turned back to the lake.

No.

The trees.

The conifers granting *Lake Pine* its name were full, heavy, ancient trees flush with green. Shadows clung to the bark-scribbled trunks like they were playing. They'd circle the base and wink. I swear to god.

My attention was slipping from the water. The ride back to the boat launch was 3 hours and only punctuated by the ebb and flow of the channel's width. Remote camping wasn't my idea.

"Bobby,"

"No."

Something shifted; the lake dredged tranquility from its depths and Bobby was melting in front of me.

That's when the rain started. It was a drizzle, at first. Then a downpour. I could hardly see Bobby shaking. But he was, hunched, still peering into the water. He looked like a dog shivering in a thunderstorm. I stopped worrying about the sweat gathering on my neck.

Between torrents of droplets, something danced, lurking in the clouds. It was an inaudible wail from Mother Nature. A visceral, drenching scream that sired deeper and deeper into my psyche, hunting.

I blacked out.

Bobby was never found. A body—female—was. But never identified. I slept until sunrise. All I dreamt of was a lake, encrusted with pine. Maternal eyes shining through brush and branch like jade headlights.

A chorus of shadows pulled closer and, in a brackish whisper that wouldn't even disturb the water, said:

Leave.

