**How I Spent My Summer Vacation by Justin Taylor**

**By Brie (smittenkitten27)**

Warning: This is AU where Brian and Justin are younger boys. It’s not a high school fic There are sexual acts between minors so if that bothers you, please don’t read.

Part One

Everybody has a story about their summer vacation, so here’s mine –the story of a boy named Brian Kinney, me and the house on the lake where all of what I’m about to tell you took place.

It was officially summertime in Pittsburgh. For me, this meant it was time to goof off, stay up late and sleep in. For my parents, this meant it was time to go on vacation, but first they needed to find someplace to ditch my sister and me.

“Why do we have to take him along?” a dark-haired boy whined. It was Michael Novotny, my neighbor, but we weren’t friends. He was older than me, but acted much younger sometimes.

“Because his parents are in Hawaii, and now that your mom’s in the hospital, someone needs to watch him.” Michael’s uncle, Vic, sighed.

“Yeah, well I don’t see why it has to be you!”

“I’m afraid it does, Michael, so get used to it. Justin is coming with us.”

Michael sulked, crossing his arms against his chest and kicking at the dirt with the toe of his sneaker, pouting like a child.

I stood behind Vic, feeling like I wanted to scream, or even cry. I was just as miserable with the situation as Michael was –maybe even more miserable. Up until a few weeks ago I couldn’t have been happier. Then my parents announced their vacation. Michael wanted to spend the summer alone with his friend; well, too bad. I wanted to be with my parents in Hawaii, too, but like my dad always told me, 'you don't always get what you want.'

Since my parents refused to take me with them on their vacation, they had to find someone to watch my sister and I. Grandma offered to let Molly stay with her on the farm for the summer, but she couldn’t watch us both. When I suggested staying home by myself, my mom said that I was too young to be left alone for a summer, so our neighbor, Debbie Novotny, had offered to let me stay with her.

Which wouldn't have been too terrible. Michael was Debbie’s son, but I wouldn't have had to worry about him much since he was going to be spending the summer with his uncle. I wasn’t thrilled with the situation, but I had little choice in the matter. Everything had been set -until Debbie’s appendix ruptured. Plans had to be changed quickly after that.

Now the plan was for Vic to take me to his lake house with Michael and his friend. I knew Michael didn’t like me, and I wasn’t too fond of him either. This summer was going to suck.

After helping Vic pack our things in the car, we reluctantly got inside and fastened our seatbelts. Vic pulled out of the driveway, heading across town to pick up Michael’s friend.

A few miles away, Vic pulled off the road in a rundown neighborhood and parked in front of a small, shabby house. Seconds later, a tall, lean form burst through the front door, loud shouts trailing behind him. Ignoring the voices, he hopped into the back seat of Vic’s car next to me, slamming the door behind him and never looking back.

I didn’t know why I was surprised that Brian Kinney was the friend Michael was bringing along. They were best friends, after all. Whenever I saw Brian, Michael was usually with him, but considering the way my summer had been going, I thought the friend would be some nerd like Michael. Never did I imagine the possibility of spending a summer with Brian Kinney. I’d had a crush on him since the first time I saw him at the Novotny’s playing baseball with Michael. He was beautiful. I couldn’t take my eyes off him. And I’m sure I had some goofy smile on my face.

He just rolled his eyes at me and looked out the window.

I wasn’t offended. That’s just the way Brian was. I just shrugged and let my head rest against the back of my seat and drifted off to sleep, thinking that maybe I’d been wrong and this summer wasn’t going to suck.

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“Ugh!”

My eyes flew open and I sat straight up. Beside me, Brian grinned broadly.

“Don’t worry, kid, it was just a bump.”

We were on a narrow, winding road. Trees brushed the car windows, and the headlight beams bounced against a curtain of leaf-laden branches.

“Are we there yet?” I couldn’t help but ask.

“Are we there yet?,” Michael mimicked, turning in his seat. “You are such a baby. Do you have to go potty too?”

“Give the kid a break, uh, Mikey? He just woke up.”

Michael’s face turned bright red, and he abruptly turned back to face the front.

I was happily surprised when Brian stuck up for me and I’m sure the expression on my face said that loud and clear, but before I could say ‘thank you,’ the car made another jouncing turn and stopped on a wide stretch of overgrown lawn.

“We’re here,” Vic called out happily.

We just stared. Before us was one of the spookiest houses I had ever seen. It had towers and gables, and carved trimmings over every window. The whole house was painted a sickly gray-green. It looked like moldy cake.

“This is your house, Uncle Vic?” Michael asked. “Um, I thought you were staying in a log cabin on the lake.”

“I do live on the lake, Michael.”

Sure enough, metal-colored water glimmered beyond the house.

“I don’t know what your mother told you, but I never said I had a cabin,” Vic went on. “I’ve been house-sitting for my friend. He inherited this place from his uncle. It was the old home of the Howell family. Something happened –something pretty bad, I guess –and they moved out.” Vic began lifting boxes and suitcases from the trunk of the car. “The uncle looked after the house for the last thirty years –tried to sell it, but there weren’t any buyers. My friend’s going to renovate it this fall, as soon as he gets back from Europe.”

Vic looked at the house again. “He’s got his work cut out for him,” he said thoughtfully.

That was an understatement. I couldn’t imagine anyone buying this spooky old place. We picked up our suitcases and followed Vic across the grass and up the rickety steps. The key to the back door was big and it turned with an eerie scratchy sound. When the door opened, Vic muttered, searching for the light switch.

After Vic’s story about the Howell family and the haunted-house-look of the place, I felt a moment of panic in the dark before the overhead light flicked on and illuminated the huge old-fashioned kitchen. The floor was made of stone and the air smelled musty.

“Cozy as a tomb,” Brian whispered. I agreed with him and stayed close as we followed Vic through the downstairs. I was so close at one point that I accidentally stepped on Brian’s heels.

“Justin! There’s plenty of room in here. No need to walk on me.”

“Sorry.” I blushed, feeling silly, and fell behind Michael and Vic. We walked down the hall, passed a tiny bathroom tucked under the stairs, and into a wide foyer. On the left was a room crowded with furniture. On the right was a formal dining room. Even with the lights turned on, the corners were filled with shadows.

Across from the dining room was a smaller room with a fireplace and a desk. Books lined two walls and part of a third. “This is my study,” Vic said, sitting down heavily in a leather armchair behind the maple desk. “You guys can run along upstairs and pick out a bedroom. Take your suitcases with you, please.”

So we went back to the front hall for our suitcases and looked up the stairs to the darkness above. I couldn’t help it. My earlier panic returned, and suddenly the house seemed to close in around me. It was hard to breathe so I ran to the door, struggling with the knob until it opened; I stepped outside just as Vic came into the hall.

“I think this place is haunted,” I told him through the screen door.

Brian started laughing and Michael soon joined him. Vic just smiled and shook his head. “Don’t be silly, Justin. There are no such things as ghosts. Don’t let your imagination carry you away.”

“Yeah, Justin. Don’t be such a crybaby!” Michael taunted.

Sick of Michael, I fled across the wide porch and down the steps. A flagstone path led to the shore, ending at a pier built of concrete slabs. My sneakers made a soft 'slap-slap' sound as I darted to its end and sat on the very edge. The concrete was still warm from the setting sun.

For the second time that day, I wanted to scream. “Haunted?” I groaned at my own stupidity. I was so gullible. Vic had probably made up the whole story about the family and whatever terrible thing happened in the house just to scare us, and I’d fallen for it.

After a while I looked down at the water licking the pilings. It made a nice sound, like wind-chimes. Two ducks skittered across the surface of the lake; then settled peacefully in the water. On either side of the lawn, trees crowded down to the shore.

I took a deep breath. The lake was beautiful and my fingers itched for sketching supplies. Well, the lake was nice, even if everything else was horrible.

Feeling eyes on my back, I tensed up and looked behind me, hoping it wasn’t Michael coming to pick on me some more.

But it wasn’t Michael standing at the shore end of the pier. Brian was standing there with a crooked smile on his face.

“Hi, Brian,” I hollered and scrambled to my feet. I hurried along the pier back to shore.

“Hey, kid. Whatcha doing out there?”

“Nothing. Just looking at the water.”

“Michael picked his room out already, but I thought I’d wait and see what room you liked before I picked out mine.”

“Really?” Brian was so much cooler than Michael. “Thanks!”

“It’s no big deal. I don’t care which room I have.”

I looked up at Brian’s beautiful face as we walked side-by-side back to the house. Not wanting him to think I was as immature as Michael, I had to tell him it didn’t matter what room I had. “Yeah, I don’t care either.”

Brian shook his head and smirked. “I didn’t think you did.”

I wondered why Brian had come looking for me. Was it possible he’d been worried about me? No, of course not. He probably got bored.

I was walking happily beside Brian when all of the sudden a gust of cold air blew off the lake, making my skin break-out with goose bumps. I turned around and my eyes widened. There was someone on the edge of the pier.

Where did he come from? I wondered. I reached over to tug on Brian’s arm, but when I looked back at the pier, no one was there.

“What?” Brian asked with a slight touch of irritation.

“Brian,” I began, “there’s someone out there. I mean, there was someone, but it’s like he disappeared!”

“Don’t try to trick me. It won’t work. Vic told us that there isn’t another house on this side of the lake and no paths going from one side to the other.”

“I’m serious, Brian. It’s not a trick. I saw someone!” Without thinking, I whispered, “Maybe it’s a ghost!”

Brian sighed and began walking ahead. “Don’t be such a child, Justin.”

Feet dragging, I followed Brian. A ghost! Why had I said that? Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. Just the kind of thing to make Brian think I was a silly kid.

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“Justin! Telephone!” Vic’s voice carried up the stairs to my room the next morning, waking me from a restless sleep.

“I’m coming!” I yelled and jumped out of bed, hurrying down the stairs in my pajama pants and nothing else.

Vic handed the phone to me and went to the kitchen. “Justin are you there?”

“Hi, mom.”

“How are you, honey? I’m sorry we didn’t call you back right away. We had a terrible time getting Vic’s number. I’m so sorry about Deb, honey.”

I cleared my throat. “She’s going to be okay.”

“That’s what the people at the diner told me. How about you? How are you and Michael getting along? Is the house nice?”

“It’s fine.” Yesterday, in Deb’s front yard, I would have given anything to be able to tell my mom just how miserable I was. Now that I had a chance to do it, the words wouldn’t come. There was nothing she could do to help way off in Hawaii, and besides, I had something exciting to think about now. Brian was here.

“Well, I’m glad. Your father and I are going to do some sightseeing today. It would certainly put a damper on the trip if you and your sister were unhappy.”

Oh yeah, that’d be a real shame. I thought bitterly.

By the time I said goodbye to my mom, Vic, Michael and Brian were all in the kitchen, sitting at the table and ready for breakfast. Rain was falling in a gray sheet beyond the open back door, and the room was dim in spite of the overhead light.

Once I took a seat, Vic passed a large plate loaded with pancakes around the table.

“I suppose with the weather, you boys won’t be playing outside today.”

Brian rolled his eyes. “I wasn’t going to be playing anywhere, today, Vic.”

“What about you, Justin?” Vic turned to me as I stuffed part of a fourth pancake in my mouth.

“Me? Oh, I…” I swallowed and took a napkin to wipe my mouth before speaking. “I wasn’t going to play either. I was going to draw the lake, but since it’s raining, can I just look around the house, Vic?”

Vic nodded. “Sure. Just don’t break anything and it’ll have to be after we all clean up the breakfast dishes.”

“I won’t break anything; I promise.”

“Good. What about you Michael? Do you have any plans today?”

“Me and Brian are going to read comic books in my room, right Brian?”

Brian nodded, but I could tell he wasn’t excited about it. “Okay, Mikey.”

I was going to ask Brian to explore the house with me, but one look at Michael’s face convinced me not to even try.

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As soon as the breakfast dishes were washed and dried, I headed to my room. I’d chosen it the night before after inspecting several rooms full of heavy furniture, thick, musty carpets, and velvet draperies. My eyes had watered and my nose had itched in them all.

The room I finally chose was a little brighter with simple white-painted furniture and a faded rag rug. I hoped this room wouldn’t bother my allergies, at least not as much as the others. Well, there wasn’t much I could do about it, even if it did.

I smoothed the blue bedspread getting rid of as many wrinkles as possible. The contents of my suitcase were on the dresser top and the floor. I gathered things in armfuls and dumped them into dresser drawers. Then I opened the bedroom door, peering out in the hall, listening for sounds of activity. I could hear Brian and Michael laughing from Michael’s room and the sound of Vic’s study door closing.

After several silent minutes, I ran downstairs to the kitchen where the house keys were hanging on a hook next to the back door.

The night before, I had discovered one locked door out of all the ones I tried. It might be nothing but a storage closet, I guessed, but then why lock it? I had to find out.

The locked room was across from my own. I tried one key and then another, shivering a little; the hallway felt chilly and damp. At last the key turned in the lock, and the door swung open.

I stepped into a room so different that it seemed part of another house. The floor was covered with a bright, multi-colored carpet. Most of the furniture was maple and child-sized. Huge posters of cartoon animals covered the walls, except where floor-to-ceiling shelves were crowded with books, toys and board games.

It was a happy room –the only happy room in the house. I tiptoed across the carpet to the little bed. The covers were neatly folded back as if waiting for someone. But the sheets and pillow cases were yellowed with age, like an old newspaper.

I went to the closet. A low rod held shorts, short-sleeved and long-sleeved shirts, plus a little yellow rain slicker. The clothes were very out-dated. A little boy must have lived here long ago, I thought. Maybe he was still here, somewhere, watching! My imagination once again taking over, I slowly began backing out of the room. Before I reached the doorway, I felt hands grab my waist and I screamed. As quickly as I was grabbed, I was released.

“Fuck! Kid, calm down; it’s just me,” Brian laughed. He reached out his arm and clasped his hand on my shoulder. “You are such a drama princess.”

I turned bright red, embarrassed to have screamed like some little girl. “Sorry, Brian. It’s just I…I was…” I stammered, unable to think of a good excuse for being afraid. There wasn’t any.

I saw Michael glare at Brian’s hand where it was holding onto my shoulder. Then he swung his angry gaze back at me. “What were you doing in here, Justin? Did you break in here? Uncle Vic isn’t going to be happy about this.”

“Geez, Mikey. Relax! It’s just a kid’s bedroom.” Brian muttered.

“Oh, yeah. I guess Justin will want to move in here right away, then. I mean, since it is perfect for him.” Michael grinned smugly.

I glared at Michael and growled, “Shut up and butt out, Mikey.”

Michael’s smug grin faded, replaced by an angry scowl. “You little…”

“Easy, Mikey,” Brian put his arm out, keeping us apart. “You’re the one acting like a little kid, Mikey, and you're sixteen-years-old!”

This time it was Michael who turned red and looked away in embarrassment. “Fine. Let’s go back to my room, Brian.”

“Wait,” I remembered something I saw on the shelves.

Most of the toys and games were too babyish for me to bother with, but on the bottom shelf there was a stack of comic books. I picked up the top one to show Michael and Brian. “Look what I found, and there are a lot of them, too.”

Michael ripped the comic book from my hand and quickly flipped through it. “These are so old. Come on, Brian. Let’s go back to my room,” Michael said, shoving the comic back at me.

“Come on, kid. Grab some comics and let’s go.” Brian tousled my hair.

“Briiian,” Michael whined.

“Miiikey.”

“I thought it was going to be just us?” Michael pouted.

“What else is the kid going to do?”

I’d had enough. “I’m not a ‘kid,’ and I don’t want to hang out with you anyway, Michael. I’ve got stuff to do on my own.” I put the comic back, leaving the room in a huff. Although, I couldn’t help but stand outside and listen in on what they were saying.

“What is your problem, Mikey?” Brian sounded annoyed by Michael’s attitude.

“He’s such a brat, and I don’t know why you insist on being nice to him. It’ll just encourage him, although seems to me you wouldn’t mind that at all.”

Brian scoffed. “You think I have a thing for the boy? Ha! That’s funny. You know I don’t do boyfriends or any of that shit.”

It’s not like I was going to ask him to be my boyfriend anyway, but he sounded so disgusted by the idea, I couldn’t help but feel rejected.

“You could have fooled me with the way you’re always staring at the little runt.”

“You are being stupid, Michael.”

I could tell Brian was through talking, so I slipped quickly back in my bedroom, keeping the door open a tiny crack. Brian left first; then Michael came out pouting with his arms crossed against his chest.

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Later, I sat on the pier for a long time, watching the raindrops hit the lake in overlapping ripples. The air was warm, and the rain was soothing. By the time it had slowed to a drizzle, I felt oddly comforted. The lake, the gentle rain, the line of dark, green pines edging the water helped take my mind off of Michael. I couldn’t understand why the older boy seemed to hate my guts.

But if I wasn’t thinking about Michael, then I was thinking about Brian. I wasn’t sure how to act around him. I wanted to be his friend, but I also wanted something more, something I knew was wrong. But I was going to go crazy if I didn’t find something fun to do -something to take my mind off Brian and Michael.

I narrowed my eyes and looked out over the water. What could I do? What would keep me busy during the long hours while Brian and Michael were hanging out together?

Suddenly I had the answer. I would teach myself how to swim. I had taken lessons at the YMCA at home, and I could swim around a little, but I’d never been able to build up to real distances. Now was the perfect time to learn. If I stayed in the shallow water all the time, Vic couldn’t object. And by the time my parents came home, I’d be an expert. I might even be a lifeguard some day.

I kicked off my sneakers and slid into the murky brown water. It barely reached my shorts. Carefully I waded across the sandy bottom, heading toward the little point of land that marked the end of the lawn. The water was waist-deep; I could pretty much see the bottom all the way, and there were no holes or drop-offs to worry about. This would make a great training course.

That afternoon, and for the two days following, I worked hard, with disappointing results. I could swim barely half the distance from the pier to the point without standing up. Over and over I tried, until my arms and legs ached. At night I could hardly stay awake through supper, and afterward I dozed in a chair while the others watched TV.

“What’s the matter with you?” Brian asked me one night toward the end of the week, when I yawned noisily at the table. “I thought you were the Energizer Bunny –you keep going and going and…”

“I’m learning to swim,” I told him. “In very shallow water.” I added quickly, wanting to reassure Vic so he wouldn’t object. I needed this project. Swimming tired me out so I didn’t lie awake at night thinking about Brian.

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The next morning, a remarkable thing happened. From the moment I slid off the end of the pier, I felt confident. My arms and legs moved, cleanly, crisply, through the water. I raised my head to gulp air in an easy rhythm. Almost before I knew it, I was at the point and scrabbling up on the beach.

I did it! I rolled over and lay back, thrilled with my accomplishment. I wish Brian was here.

As if I made him appear with just a thought, Brian stood at the end of the pier.

“Hi, Brian!” I shouted.

I jumped up and waded into the water, my eyes on Brian. “Watch this!” I yelled and plunged forward to show Brian my new swimming skills.

When I stood up again, seconds later, the pier was empty.

A cloud passed over the sun. I sat down on the sandy lake bottom, confused. Why had Brian run off? Wait a minute. He couldn’t have gone anywhere that fast. The pier was too long, and beyond it was a wide lawn with no place to hide. Maybe Brian had fallen into the water on the other side. Panicked, I began swimming again, moving faster than I would have ever thought possible. On the far side of the pier, I stood up and waded quickly through the shallow water. While I was looking across the lawn, Brian sneaked up behind me and picked me up in the air.

I couldn’t help it; I screamed in shock as Brian tossed me into the middle of the lake. I surfaced, coughing and sputtering and saw Brian laughing. With a growl, I jumped at Brian, knocking him off his feet. After fifteen minutes of wrestling and attempting to drown each other, we got out to rest.

Brian and I walked out to the end of the pier and sat on the end, dangling our feet in the water. Brian looked over at me. I was hard, and I knew he could see the tent in my shorts.

"Justin," he started, kind of serious, “Do you have a girlfriend?”

“No.” I couldn’t hide my repulsion to the idea.

Brian smiled. “What about a boyfriend?”

“A boy…boyfriend?” I stuttered. Why was Brian asking me this?

“Yeah, a boyfriend.”

“Um…I…no.” I was about to ask Brian if he had a boyfriend when I noticed Brian was adjusting himself, and I could see his hard dick through his loose shorts. Stunned, I watched as Brian gripped and stroked himself a couple times before putting his hands back on the concrete and sticking his chest out, like he was trying to show off for me or something.

"Wanna go back to your room?" Brian asked quietly.

"Yeah," I answered just as quietly, but my eyes never left the bulge in Brian’s shorts.

Somehow we managed to avoid Michael entirely and snuck up the stairs into my room. I hadn’t ever been naked with another boy, so I was nervous when Brian suggested slipping off our shorts and climbing into the bed, but I went along once Brian dropped his shorts, revealing that he wasn’t wearing any underwear.

Quickly pulling off my shorts and briefs, I scurried under the sheets naked, and couldn't help but giggle a little. I had to struggle not to laugh. I was so nervous, but I managed to calm down, and the room got very quiet.

"I want to see you, Justin." Brian finally broke the silence.

"Okay," I squeaked as Brian pulled the sheets down.

Only a few inches separated our two naked bodies. Brian was more developed than I was, and my eyes were drawn immediately to his hard cock jutting up from a tuft of dark hair. Without asking or being told to, I reached for it and grasped it firmly.

"Yesss," Brian hissed, lying back with his hands behind his head.

I took my time stroking my hand along Brian’s cock. I took my other hand and rolled Brian’s balls in my palm. I watched in awe as a dribble of clear fluid eased from the tip. Curious, I bent my head over Brian’s cock and licked the drop away. The flavor was okay, so I took another lick, and another, like I would a lollipop, causing Brian to moan in pleasure. Seeing the effect my mouth was having on Brian, I wrapped my lips around the hard flesh and sucked. More fluid leaked out, and I swallowed it.

Brian was moaning, and in a few minutes he was coming in my mouth.

I sat up and looked at Brian while licking my lips. He groaned. “Come here,” he signaled with one hand. I crawled up the bed and lay beside him. He took my cock in his hand and began stroking. I couldn’t believe how good it felt, so much better than my own hand, and came quickly.

Afterwards, we got dressed again and Brian made me promise not to tell anyone, especially Mikey.

Scrunching my face up in disgust, I said, “Don’t worry. I’d never tell him anything.”

Brian grinned and chuckled. “I know, kid.”

I frowned when Brian called me, ‘kid,’ but I couldn’t say anything because Michael was right outside the door yelling for Brian.

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For the next couple of weeks, Brian, Michael and I swam together every day, read comic books while lying on the pier and even fished some, which was really just an excuse for Brian and I to get away and fool around with each other since Mikey hated to fish.

One really hot day later that summer, Brian and I were lying on our towels on the sandy beach of the lake, looking at the water and sipping from ice-cold cans of Coke.

Brian’s skin was smooth and tan, making him look all the more beautiful to me. I didn’t think my own body was all that bad, but Brian’s was perfect.

Brian must have felt my eyes on him and looked over, letting his sunglasses slip to the edge of his nose. “See something you like, kid?” He smirked.

I had gotten used to Brian calling me ‘kid’ and didn’t mind it so much anymore. As long as Brian still wanted to do stuff with me, he could call me whatever he liked. “Maybe,” I answered with a grin, leaning over and pinching his waist.

"Ouch! Knock it off. Let’s go back to the house.”

I eagerly followed Brian back to Vic’s. Vic had taken Michael into town, and they wouldn’t be home for another hour, so Brian and I had the house to ourselves. A couple weeks ago, the idea of being alone in the spooky house would have scared me, but fear was not the emotion I was experiencing at the moment.

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In my bedroom, Brian and I stood staring at each other. Brian made the first move, putting his hands on my shoulders and looking at me for a moment. Then his hands trailed up to cup my face in the palms of his hands. His fingers curved slightly around the back of my neck and tugged gently on the soft hairs at the base. I didn’t resist as Brian brought our faces closer, bringing our mouths together for a deep kiss. My knees grew weak, and I almost fell to the floor, but Brian held me tightly.

Brian released me from the kiss and rested the side of his head against mine while drawing our naked bodies together. At the moment our bodies touched, we pushed slightly into each other, and my cock twitched. We both pushed in harder, moving slightly against one another, enjoying the incredible friction of skin against skin.

My hands slid from Brian’s back down to his thighs, easing them in between our bodies. Brian moved back slightly –just enough to allow me to cup his balls with one hand and grasp his cock with the other.

As I stroked him, Brian kissed me again, and with his head slightly tilted to one side, drove his tongue into my mouth. It was incredibly sexy.

After a few minutes Brian’s hand joined mine between our bodies and rubbed our erections against each other. His eyes closed while his thumb rubbed back and forth over the head of our cocks.

Moving to the bed, we lay on our sides, alternately kissing and touching each other. Face to face, our cocks were almost touching. Brian’s fingers traced along my jaw line, to my collarbone; then Brian flicked his tongue playfully over my nipple.

Brian’s mouth continued its trail down my stomach until he reached his goal. His lips slid down the length of my penis until he reached the base. Then he moved his mouth back up to the very tip again. I moaned at the new sensations Brian was creating in my body.

Brian moved his body around so that we were head to foot. Stretched out on the bed side by side, we sucked and licked one another until we both were on the edge. Our bodies tensed, and we came in each other’s mouths.

When we were done, Brian turned around and pulled himself up beside me again, faces inches apart. He kissed me gently on the lips and ran his fingers through my hair. An unspoken tenderness filled the air.

I had no idea what would happen after the summer was over, but I was going to enjoy every second while it lasted.

Part Two

One morning that summer I was up early and outside, wandering restlessly around the yard. I walked along the shore, and all around the edge of the lawn, peering into the woods. When I reached the big garage behind the house, I hesitated; then tried the door. It opened revealing shadowy depths crammed with piles of junk.

In the light form the tiny windows the garage loomed as large as a church. Some folding chairs, bicycle tires, and old license plates hung from the walls, and shoved to the far side was a small rowboat.

I started to back out before I noticed a board propped against one wall. It took a minute for me to realize it was a swing. The seat was sanded, and the heavy ropes were firmly tied.

Maybe this could be fun. I tugged the swing out into the fresh air and sunshine, finally finding something to do to ease my boredom.

Once again I circled the yard, this time searching for a tree with straight, strong branches. The best one was close to shore. I climbed up the tree’s lower branches. Then I pulled up the swing and tied it to the biggest branch, using sturdy knots my dad taught me to make.

The seat of the swing hung high, so I would have to stand on tiptoe to get on. I wonder if Brian will want to swing.

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“What is it?” Brian asked in a bored tone as he followed me to the lake.

“I want you to see something.”

“You’ve shown me just about everything there is to see, I think.”

I frowned. “This is completely innocent.”

Brian laughed. I joined him because whenever we were together lately, something sexual usually always happened. “Come on; let’s go.” I grabbed Brian’s hand and kept holding it down to the shore.

“A swing?” Brian’s eyebrow rose in question. “Where did you find this?”

“In the garage.”

Brian looked up, surprised. “You went into that garage?”

“Yeah. So?”

“Well, I thought it’d be too scary for you.”

“I’m not scared,” I murmured, head bowed.

“Right. So are you going to swing or what?” Brian asked while inspecting the knots I made.

I could tell Brian was getting impatient with me, so I cautiously climbed on, testing the knots, then began pumping my legs, flying higher and higher. With blue sky above me, sparkling water below, I felt as free as a bird.

When the swing slowed to a stop, I was surprised to see a little boy watching from the edge of the woods. He smiled shyly and faded back in the shadows.

I turned my head hoping Brian had seen him, but Brian was just staring at me. “What?” I asked, puzzled at the look on his face.

“You’re so…” Brian cleared his throat and tore his eyes away from mine. “You’re so childlike sometimes.” He tried again.

I forgot about the disappearing boy at Brian’s hurtful words. My smile fall away and I couldn’t help the tears welling in my eyes.

“Look, Justin. I didn’t …”

“It’s okay, Brian,” I mumbled, hopping off the swing and landing on my feet, brushing the seat of my shorts off. “I know you see me as just a kid.” I studied the toes of my sneakers.

“I don’t see you as just a kid. I…”

“Hey, you guys! What are you doing?” Michael’s shout distracted Brian and when he looked back at me, I was already on my way back to the house.

“Shit, Mikey!”

“What?”

“Nothing.” Brian shook his head in defeat. “What do you want?”

“I wanted to see if you wanted to hang out. We hardly spend any time together anymore.”

“Fine, Mikey. What do you want to do?” Brian slung his arm around Michael’s shoulders and the two boys made their way back to the house behind me.

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Midnight. I peered at the red glowing numbers of my alarm clock. I didn’t know what had woken me up. Maybe it was the tuna salad Michael had insisted on making for supper. Gross.

I tiptoed to the door and peeked out. Trembling, I felt for the light switch, hoping I didn’t wake anyone.

The hall was chilly and damp. At the far end, beyond the row of closed bedrooms, the attic door stood open.

What should I do? Call Vic? And tell him what?

I started down the corridor, pressing close to the wall. If there was some thing on those steps, I didn’t want to see it. With every step, I felt colder. My teeth chattered.

As I edged around the chest that stood just beyond the last bedroom door, there was a thud from above. It could have been a footstep. With a whimper of fright, I flung the attic door shut. Then pulled the chest from its place against the wall and shoved it hard against the door.

Brian’s bedroom door shot open. “Justin! What the fuck is going on out here?”

I felt dizzy. “The door…open…” I gasped. “…I closed it.”

“Yeah. I heard.” Brian said tiredly. “Are you okay? You aren’t going to have some kind of attack are you?” I could tell my ragged breathing was making him nervous.

I took a long shuddering breath. “I’m fine. Just cold.”

“Why come out in the hall if you’re cold? Why not get another blanket? Or better yet, why not sleep with me?” Brian’s eyes darkened.

I caught my breath at Brian’s not-so-innocent suggestion. After the scare I’d had, I wanted nothing more than to sleep in Brian’s arms where I felt safe. Of course, Brian made me feel lots of other things too –things that made my cock twitch in my pajama pants.

Inside his bedroom, Brian pulled me close. He ground his hips, pushing our clothed erections together. I grabbed at Brian’s hips, sliding my fingers beneath the waistband of his white briefs, and stroking his bare skin.

With bodies pressed tightly together, our lips met in a deep kiss. The taste of peppermint Colgate from when we’d brushed our teeth before bed lingered. Brian’s hands moved from my hips to my bottom, massaging and squeezing.

Then Brian pushed me onto my back on the bed, climbing on top. His knee wedged between my legs as his hips moved rhythmically. My legs fell apart, allowing our bodies to fit together perfectly.

My hands roamed wildly over Brian’s chest, shoulders and back; then finally to his tight ass. The bed bounced and the springs squeaked in protest so Brian rolled us onto our sides.

“Feel good?” Brian panted.

“Very.” I gasped.

Our bodies continued to move against one another in a sensual dance. Brian’s hands guided me so I was resting on my stomach; then he began humping his erection against my butt. After a couple of minutes, he rolled off.

“Let’s jerk off,” Brian said as he pulled his briefs down freeing his hard cock.

I didn’t need to be told twice. It was strange at first watching Brian touching himself. We’d always touched each other. But soon the pleasure wiped away any shreds of embarrassment I may have had.

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I hadn’t thought I’d be able to sleep the rest of the night, but once in my own bed, with the covers tucked up to my ears, I slipped quickly into uneasy sleep. First I dreamt that my mom and dad had been in a plane crash. Then I dreamt that my grandma was moving to Hawaii and taking Molly with her. And then I had the worst dream ever –Brian lying dead in the study with blood dribbling out of his mouth.

“No!” I woke with the word straining my throat. The room was still dark, except for the circle of light form the dresser lamp I left on the night before.

Out in the hall, something scraped across the floor. The chest! The chest was being pushed aside. I sunk deeper beneath the covers, but I couldn’t close out the slow, heavy footsteps coming down the hall. As they drew closer, damp cold seeped into the bedroom.

There was a ghost or monster outside my door. I knew it. In the morning, Vic and Brian were going to find me lying here, frozen solid, a look of terror on my face. He looks so pitiful, they’d say. Why in the world didn’t he get himself another blanket?

The footsteps moved away.

I lay rigid, afraid to move. Time passed, and my muscles ached, but I stayed hiding under the covers. When I peered out at last, the first gray light of morning was touching the windows.

I stayed in bed another half-hour, listening to the world wake itself up. A cardinal sang. A squirrel squeaked. The lake made its soft, lapping sounds.

When I opened the bedroom door, the house was very still. The attic door was closed.

There was nothing unusual to see, except for the chest. It stood out from the attic door at an angle, as if it had been roughly thrust aside.

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Brian peered around the box of corn flakes. “How’d you sleep last night?” He had the sexiest smirk on his face.

“Okay.” I had been trying to decide whether to tell him about the pushed-aside chest. He might accuse me of moving it myself. He might get angry and call me a child again.

No. I couldn’t tell Brian. But something scary was happening in this house. Something bad! I almost forgot to eat, trying to figure out what it was.

Uncle Vic closed the book he’d been reading and announced, “We’re going to see your mom today, Michael.”

All thoughts of the attic door were swept away for the moment. What if they were going to leave me with Debbie, now?

“I called the hospital this morning, and she said she’s feeling much better. But the doctor wants her to stay a while longer. She still has a slight fever.”

“How much longer will she have to stay there, Uncle Vic?” Michael asked.

“A while, maybe two days or two weeks.” Vic pushed back his chair and began picking up dishes. “Anyway, we’re going to see her today,” he said. “I thought you’d be thrilled to see her, Michael.”

“Oh, I am.” Michael said. “Can we go right now?”

“After we wash the dishes and make our beds,” Vic answered. I don’t want to come back to a mess.”

I didn’t care what I came back to, as long as I was coming back. I didn’t want Debbie to have to stay in the hospital, but I didn’t want to leave Brian either, especially in this house.

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By the time the four of us made our way through the hospital lobby, taken the elevator to the third floor, wandered down one long hall and then another, I felt sick. The hospital made me uneasy. People sat around in wheelchairs or walked up and down the halls in their bathrobes. All the nurses were in a hurry. And when they finally found Room 247, Debbie didn’t look like the Debbie I remembered. Her usually bright face was pale, and the glossy red wig was gone. Only her loud voice was the same.

“Michael! I’m so glad to see all my boys.” She held out her arms and Michael was embraced first. Then she hugged and kissed me and Brian, then finally, Vic. “You all look wonderful. So healthy!”

“I’ve learned to swim longer distances, Debbie,” I bragged, making the other two boys roll their eyes.

“Good for you, Sunshine!”

Vic sat on the edge of the bed and took Deb’s hand. “How are you feeling, Sis?”

“Fine, except for some nausea,” Deb said. “Bored. Hungry for my own cooking.” She brushed off the rest of their questions after telling them she could go home as soon as the fever broke. “And you’ll be there,” she said, giving me another squeeze.

I felt like crying. “I can’t wait.”

“Don’t sound too excited, Sunshine,” Deb laughed.

In the car, Vic turned slightly in the driver’s seat to tell us we were stopping in town for groceries, but first we were going to check out the library. Michael and Brian both groaned at the mention of the library, but I was excited. The library was the perfect place to find out whether Vic’s story about the house was true.

Off Main Street sat a tiny, one-room building marked Public Library. Vic was as disappointed as I looked. “Not a chance they’ll have anything I need,” he grumped, “but I suppose they can order for me. I’ll be out in a few minutes. Do you boys want to come in or wait in the car?”

Michael and Brian answered at the exact same time, “In the car!” Then they broke out into laughter.

Meanwhile, I got out of the car and was trailing behind Vic.

“Hey, kid, where you going?” Brian shouted after me.

“I’ve got to look something up.” I shouted back.

“Can you believe that dork?” Michael asked Brian and laughed. “It’s the middle of summer, and he’s going to look stuff up in the library.”

I ignored Michael and kept walking.

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Walking up to the front desk, I looked around. A skinny, glum-looking man was behind the desk. One fist clutched a telephone; with the other hand he was jotting additions to a long list of items. He had an odd glazed expression, and his glance flicked over me without seeing me.

After what seemed a very long time, he mumbled a good-bye and hung up. “Liberated women,” he snarled into the air above my head.

“Excuse me?” I took one step closer to the desk.

“Women!” the man snapped. “Wives!”

I looked over my shoulder, ready to run if necessary.

“When you grow up, boy, stay away from women. Nothing but nagging harpies, all of them.”

I cleared my throat. “Okay,” I said cautiously. Little did he know that wasn’t going to be a problem for me.

“It’s not okay! My wife calls to tell me to go grocery shopping. She calls to tell me to pick up the dry cleaning. She calls to tell me what to fix for dinner.” He shook his head so hard the pencil perched behind one ear hurtled through the air. “What do you want?”

“I’d like to see some…some old newspapers,” I said. The request sounded silly, even to me.

“How old?” The man glared at the phone as if he was daring it to ring again.

“About thirty years,” I said. “If it isn’t too much trouble.”

“It’s trouble,” the man said. “What week do you want? The paper is published once a week.”

“I –I don’t know.” Why had I thought this would work?

The man scooped up his pencil and thrust it back behind his ear. “Then I can’t help you,” he said, sounding pleased. “You certainly don’t expect me to pull out a whole year’s worth of papers, do you?”

That was exactly what I had hoped he’d do, but I didn’t dare say so. Clearly, this man was not the least bit helpful. I shifted from one foot to another. “I –we’re staying at the old Howell house,” I said. “It’s a big house on the lake, way out in the woods. My…um…uncle says something happened there about thirty years ago. I want to find out what it was.”

The man scowled. “No need to get out a pack of newspapers to tell you that,” he muttered. “Murders –that’s what happened at the Howell house.”

“Murders?”

“Two people –woman and boy.” The man pursed his lips. “It’s not a nice story, and you shouldn’t even want to know about it. You should be out playing.” He narrowed his eyes. “Nobody does what they’re supposed to anymore. Nobody.” He turned away and hunched over the list on his desk.

I waited. When the man looked up to see if I was still there, I forced a smile. “Just one paper, then,” I pleaded. “Or two. That wouldn’t be much trouble would it?”

The man glared at me. “Do you want to know something?” he demanded. “You remind me of my wife.” He turned away so fast that the pencil flew off again and arced over the desk. “One paper,” he said. “And that’s all.”

“That’ll be fine,” I said quickly. “Thanks a lot.”

When the man returned from the back room, I could see that he’d chosen the single newspaper with care. Howell Murders Solved, the headline said in big letters. Under it were several stories concerning the case.

I thanked the man again and carried the paper to the only table near the window.

The first article was a background piece on the Howell family. They were wealthy Pittsburgh people who had built the house on the lakeshore and lived there quietly for several years before their only child, Matthew, was born. There was a grainy picture of Matthew next to the article.

In the spring of 1975 Mr. And Mrs. Howell went to Europe on an extensive business trip. They hired a nanny to stay with the boy while they were away. She’d come with very good references from other families she’d worked for. Six weeks later, she and Matthew were found shot to death in the big house.

The Howells were devastated. After their return from Europe, they stayed in the house only a couple of weeks; then closed it up and moved away from the painful memories it held.

A second article consisted of an interview with the sheriff after the capture of the murderer. The killer had confessed at once, admitting that he and Gillian Burke, the nanny, had been involved in the theft of an extremely valuable painting in New York.

Burke had run away, taking the painting with her and leaving her partner with nothing to show for their crime. She’d taken the position with the Howell family in order to hide out for a while. When her furious partner caught up with her, she had refused to tell him where the painting was hidden. He had killed Burke; then killed the little boy as well, because he’d seen and heard too much.

I read as fast as I could. According to the sheriff, the painting still had not been found, and he thought it was gone for good. Burke might have sold it on her way to Pittsburgh; she might have even lost or destroyed it.

A hand on my shoulder startled me and I looked up panicked, but it was just Vic telling me he was ready to go.

I hurried back to the desk, scooping up the man’s pencil on the way.

“Here’s the paper,” I said. “Thanks again.”

The man at the desk glared at his list of to-dos as if it might bite him. When he looked up, his expression was mournful.

I rolled the pencil across the desk and turned for the door. “Good-bye,” I called over my shoulder and ran outside before he could accuse me of something.

On the drive back to the lake, I couldn’t stop thinking about all I’d learned. Matthew I thought. That’s the boy’s name. And he really and truly was a ghost. I even knew when he’d died. And now I could guess as to the presence in the attic. It has to be Gillian Burke up there, I thought. The ghost of a woman who stole a valuable painting and cheated her partner. The ghost of a woman responsible for the murder of an innocent boy.

Part Three

The next day was my turn to make lunch. I set the table with peanut butter, jelly, bread, and tall glasses of milk.

When everyone sat down to eat, I pulled out a riddle book I’d found in Matthew’s room. “What do you think is worse than finding a juicy green worm in an apple?”

Brian looked up. “What kind of question is that?”

“It’s a riddle. You’re supposed to guess the answer.”

Brian thought for a minute; then shrugged. “I have no idea. Riddles aren’t my thing. Sorry.” He went back to eating his sandwich.

“Half a worm,” I said.

Brian looked up again. “Half a worm what?”

“It’s worse to find half a worm in your apple than to find a whole one. If you find half of one, it means –“

Brian groaned. “Yeah, I get it. You don’t need to explain. I told you, riddles aren’t my thing. And I’d really like to finish my lunch in peace, if it’s okay with you.” He resumed eating.

Michael grinned smugly at me.

My face felt hot. I made a double-decker peanut butter and jelly sandwich and ate it fast. What was wrong with Brian today?

That afternoon, I wandered around muttering to myself. It took a long swim –to the point and back without stopping –to make me feel better. I went to sleep that night without seeing or talking to Brian.

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The next morning, I was in the mood for pancakes. I went to the kitchen, searching the cupboards for pancake mix. Finally deciding that I’d have to make the pancakes my mom’s way, I put some flour into a bowl, added milk; then broke an egg into the mixture. What else? I was pretty sure my mom added other things, but couldn’t remember what they were. Maybe a little sugar for flavor, I decided.

The batter was the right thickness and color. I put the skillet on the stove and dropped a big dollop of butter. Just wait till they taste these, I thought, as the butter sputtered and browned.

When Michael and Brian came out to the kitchen a little later, I was just lifting the last pancake to the platter. Because they were watching, I gave it a little extra flip. The pancake flew through the air and landed on the floor.

Before I could stop him, Brian had stepped on it and fell to one knee. “What’s this?” he grumbled and picked up the pancake as if it were a dead mouse.

I stared. The pancake was undamaged. There wasn’t even a dent where Brian had stepped on it.

“Jesus, Justin! What if he’d hurt his knee? He could have broken his leg!” Michael started ranting.

“It’s a –it’s a pancake,” I mumbled. “A surprise.”

Brian sat down, his eyes on the platter heaped with pancakes. “That was a nice thought,” he said sounding strained.

“They may be a little stiff,” I said. “But if you use lots of butter and lots of syrup…” I gulped. “I’ll show you.”

I put a pancake on my plate, dropped a pat of butter on it, and poured on maple syrup. “Like this,” I said, and took a big bite.

“Ugh!” The pancake was like leather in my mouth. Watching my expression, Brian began to laugh. He went on laughing while I chewed and chewed.

“Give up, Kid,” he advised when he caught his breath. “It isn’t going to go down.”

I ran to the garbage can and spit out the pancake. When I looked up, Matthew was at the window. He smiled in at us and then he was gone.

I whirled around. “Did you see?” I asked. “Did you see him, Brian?”

“See whom?” Brian asked. “Is this another riddle?”

I opened my mouth and closed it. Brian was still chuckling, but his smile would fade in a hurry if I told him a ghost had been enjoying his laughter. Now that Brian was in a good mood again, I didn’t want to ruin it.

“It’s not a riddle,” I said. “I’m sorry about the pancakes.”

Brian went to the refrigerator. “How about French toast?” he asked. “As long as the syrup’s on the table.”

“Okay.” I watched the window, but Matthew didn’t return. I dumped the pancakes into the garbage can while Brian mixed eggs and milk for the French toast.

“Maybe I just threw away a great invention,” I said when we returned to the table. “Those pancakes might have been terrific for fixing holes in the roof.”

To my amazement, Brian leaned across the table and kissed me gently on my forehead. “You’re a good sport, Kid. I’m sorry I laughed, but the look on your face …”

I could have told Brian it was worth making the world’s worst pancakes if it meant displays of affection like that. I could feel the heat of Michael’s glare burning my skin, but he didn’t comment.

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Several nights later, a mist had rolled in off the lake and the air had turned chilly, so Vic built a fire in the study fireplace. I sat cross-legged on the floor, enjoying the coziness of firelight and crackling logs while stealing glances at Brian and sketching him in my book.

Brian was lying beside me while Michael was sprawled on the study’s couch.

“What kind of train will make you put on your glasses?” Some of the riddles I’d read, I remembered.

The room filled with groans. “Could you knock this riddle stuff off, Justin?” Michael asked annoyed.

“Eyestrain. Get it?” I snickered at Michael’s furious expression.

“Justin,” Vic interrupted. “Will you go out to the kitchen and make some hot chocolate? I bought some cocoa; it should be in the pantry.”

Actually, I didn’t want to go in the kitchen by myself, but stood up to do what I was told. Then I froze. Across the study, and well outside the circle of firelight, a little boy stood watching.

“You guys!” I tried to keep my voice steady. “Look over there, in front of the closet door. Please, just look.”

Vic, Michael and Brian all looked. For what seemed a very long time, I held my breath as they stared at the little wavering figure. Then a log snapped, sending a shower of sparks up the chimney.

“Who’s there?” Vic called out, striding across the study and throwing open the closet door. “Where is he?” he yelled. “Where did he go? Justin!” Vic turned back from the empty closet. “What kind of trick was that?”

“It wasn’t a trick,” I told him. “It was Matthew Howell. He lived in this house a long time ago. I’ve seen him lots of times.”

Vic shook his head as if he was trying to wake himself from a dream. “You mean he’s a ghost?” he said. “That’s what you want us to believe?” He jumped up to look again into the closet. When he came back to the fire, his face was pale.

“I don’t believe in ghosts,” Michael finally spoke up.

“Yeah, I don’t know what that thing was standing there, but it couldn’t have been a ghost,” Brian agreed.

“Yes, it was,” I insisted. “I saw him the very first day we got here, Brian. I tried to tell you about him then, remember?”

The words tumbled over each other as I described the other times I’d seen the ghost boy, and how I thought the little boy liked it when he heard laughter.

“He’s lonesome,” I said. “And I think he’s scared, too.”

“This is ridiculous!” Michael shouted.

“What’s he scared of?” Brian asked.

“You aren’t taking this seriously are you, Brian?” Michael was shocked.

“Go on, Justin.” Brian encouraged.

I described how the attic door had opened by itself, even with the chest pushed in front of it. I told about the footsteps, and the terrifying cold. And then I filled them in on what I’d learned at the library. “I think the ghost of the little boy’s nanny is up there in the attic,” I whispered. “Her name was Gillian Burke, and she was evil. Matthew must be scared of her.”

Brian sat up and gave me a weak grin.

“You really are something, Kid,” he murmured. “Worked it all out, have you?”

“So?”

“All through time, people have taken facts and added fantasy to make the facts more interesting. That’s what you’re doing. You’ve discovered we’re living in a house where two murders took place a long time ago, and now you’re seeing the ghosts of the victims. You’re letting your imagination get out of hand, Justin,” Vic added.

“Yeah. This isn’t a camp where we sit around telling ghost stories,” Michael threw his two cents in as well.

I clenched my teeth. “You all saw him too,” I ground out.

“We saw something –a trick of the firelight—“

“A little boy! You saw him!”

“All right, we saw something that looked like a little boy. But there has to be a reasonable explanation. I just haven’t thought of it yet. So let’s not overreact.” Vic tried calming me down.

“I am not overreacting!” I jumped up. Just when I was beginning to feel like an equal, and not a little kid. “I’m not lying either!”

“No one’s calling you a liar,” Brian said. “I know you think you’ve been seeing a ghost or ghosts, but…” he closed his eyes as if he suddenly was very tired. “What about the hot chocolate?”

“Forget the hot chocolate!” I snapped. “I’m going to bed.”

“No cocoa?” Michael shook his head in dismay.

I left them in the study and ran upstairs to my room, slamming the door shut behind me.

I lay across my bed and fought back tears. It was too early for sleep –only eight-thirty –but I wasn’t going downstairs again. Every time I thought of Brian, Michael and Vic sitting there smiling at me in that superior way, I wanted to hit something.

How could they refuse to believe in Matthew when they had seen him? If they wouldn’t believe their own eyes, what would convince them? For just a moment, I considered calling them upstairs and then opening the attic door. Maybe if they felt that dead-cold rush of air…

And what if they didn’t feel it? What if I dragged them down the hall, threw open the attic door and nothing happened? No cold, no wind, no voice warning them to go away. How they’d laugh at me then! They’d tease me forever.

I rolled over on my side and put a pillow over my head. Think good thoughts. Think about being a famous artist one day. Think about being Brian’s boyfriend one day. Think about…

The pillow must have kept me from hearing the telephone. Suddenly a shaft of light cut across the room and I sat up. Vic was at the door, squinting into the dark.

“On your feet, Justin,” he said. “Telephone!”

I got up slowly and went downstairs to the phone in the hallway. “Justin, honey, are you there?” This time, my mother’s voice sounded very far off. “How are you sweetie? Are you and the boys managing all right?”

“Mom,” I didn’t know what to say. It seemed as if my mom must have known, somehow, how much I needed a caring voice right now. “I’m glad you called.”

“We think about you and Molly so much.” The telephone line crackled fiercely. “You are having fun, aren’t you?” There was a pause, while my mom waited for me to say something. “Are you there, hon?”

I wondered if Michael was at the top of the stairs listening to my part of the conversation. I realized that talking about my problems would be like tattling –and what could she do even if I told her? I couldn’t expect them to come racing home just because I believed in ghosts and no one else did.

“I’m fine, Mom,” I said. “Are you and Dad having a good time?”

“Absolutely fabulous. We’re taking lots of pictures so we can share it with you and Molly. And we’re picking up some nice presents, too…What are you doing to enjoy yourself?”

“I’m swimming every day,” I told her, glad to have something I could talk about freely. “And I’m getting really good. I go exploring. And I’ve been doing lots of sketches of Brian.”

“Brian?”

“Yeah, Michael’s friend.”

“What’s his last name? Do we know his parents?”

“Kinney, and I don’t think you know them.” The less I talked about Brian the better.

“What have you and Michael been doing?”

“Nothing.”

“Honey, did you and Michael have a fight?”

“No. Why?”

“Well…”

There was more crackling on the line, and I heard my dad’s booming voice. “Hey, Justin,” he shouted like he always did when he talked on the phone. “Take care of yourself, kiddo. And tell Vic we said hello.”

“Sure, Dad.”

I wondered if my parents had talked to Vic before he called me to the phone.

Maybe he’d told them I was making up wild stories. I thought about it and decided that he wouldn’t do that. He wouldn’t tattle anymore than I would.

We said good-bye, and I put the telephone back on the hook. It had been wonderful to talk to them. Now that they were gone, I was alone again, but I didn’t feel like crying about it. I wondered if I’d told them about the ghosts if they would have laughed at me.

A floorboard creaked behind me, and I whirled around. Brian was standing at the foot of the stairs. His face was peculiarly pale, and as I watched, he sat down on the bottom step with a thump. He looked frightened.

“Wh-what’s the matter?”

He cleared his throat. “Someone –something –in the attic,” he said in a low voice. “I heard footsteps –while you were talking.”

“Oh,” I said, putting my hand on the telephone as if I could bring back my mom and dad.

“I’d think it was Michael or Vic, except,” he ran his fingers through his hair, “except I know they’re both in the study playing Scrabble and it’s getting very cold upstairs. Colder by the minute. It doesn’t make sense.”

I gulped. “I told you –“ I began, but he interrupted me.

“Don’t say I-told-you-so. It’s rude.” Brian leaned forward tensely. “We have to do something.”

“Do what?”

“Find out what’s going on. We’ll have to look around up there.”

“No way!” I protested. “Not tonight.” Brian couldn’t be serious.

But he was on his feet again and looking up the stairs. “Now,” he insisted. “I can’t just go to bed if there’s something prowling around overhead or walking up and down outside my bedroom door.”

In spite of what I was about to face, a wave of relief washed over me. “You believe me now,” I said. “You do, don’t you?”

Brian turned away from me and started up the stairs. “I didn’t say that,” he said tightly.

I shivered. I could actually feel fear in the air around me. “Please, let’s not go up there,” I begged. “Matthew doesn’t want us to.” But I might as well have kept quiet. Brian was already at the top of the stairs, and there was nothing to do but follow him.

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The air in the upstairs hall was both cold and clammy. Brian waited for me to catch up with him. Then he strode down the hall.

“Promise me you’ll never tell anybody about this –this ghost hunt,” he said. “I can’t believe I’m taking this seriously.”

I gave his sweatshirt a little tug. “We can wait until tomorrow morning,” I said. “It’s okay with me.”

“Well, it’s not okay with me.” He put his hand on the knob of the attic door. “You can stay down here if you want to,” he said. “I’ll just go up and take a quick look –“

He turned the knob. The door flew open and crashed against the wall. An icy blast poured through the hall. “What the fuck?” Brian staggered backwards. I flattened myself against the wall, trying to escape the icy fingers that tore at my clothes.

Brian grabbed the door. “Stay here, Justin,” he yelled over the roar of wind. “I’m going up.”

“Wait for me!” My cry was lost in the fierce wind, but I wasn’t going to let Brian out of my sight.

As we mounted the first steps, the rush of air grew even stronger. I clutched the banister with both hands. Brian switched on his flashlight and pointed the beam toward the top of the stairs.

Crouching against the wind, I peered around him. At first I saw nothing but shadows. Then the shadows came together into a single gigantic figure –a woman looming at the top of the stairs. The flashlight illuminated her deathly pale face, creating an eerie glow.

Brian stopped. “Who –who’s there?” he shouted.

The figure stood unmoving. The wind roared down at us, and Brian seemed to be having trouble holding the flashlight steady.

“Look!” I screamed. “Brian, look! The light shines right through her!”

Everything suddenly happened at once. I let go of the railing, and the wind seemed to lift me down the steps and fling me into the hall. Brian was right behind me. We landed in a tangled heap on the floor.

“Close the door!” I cried. “Close the door! Hurry!” I could hear the thud of footsteps coming down the stairs.

Brian got to his feet, put his shoulder against the door and pushed against the wind with all his strength. The door swung shut with a bang. In the same instant, the raging wind stopped.

Brian leaned against the door, panting. Then he grabbed my hand and pulled me down the hall to his bedroom. Together, we pushed and shoved his heavy oak chest of drawers out into the hall and up against the attic door.

“I’ll say this much, Kid,” Brian gasped as we stepped back from our barricade. “I believe you now.”

I didn’t even think of saying I-told-you-so. It was enough that Brian believed me. He wouldn’t accuse me again of being a silly kid.

“What do we do now?” I asked. “Do we tell Vic and Michael so we can leave and go stay somewhere else? I’d like that. I’m scared here.”

“Me, too,” Brian whispered.

He gave the chest another shove to make sure it was resting heavy against the door, and then he put his arm around my shoulders. “We’ll talk about it. Let’s get something to drink.”

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“Wipe your lip, Kid,” Brian said. “You have a cocoa mustache.” He sounded amused, more like his old self.

I rubbed my mouth with the back of my hand, forgetting the manners my mother pounded into me. The hot chocolate was warming my insides, and the goose-bumps were fading from my arms.

“I say we get out and go back to Deb’s,” I suggested immediately.

Brian shook his head. “It isn’t that simple,” he said. “How will we reasonably explain to Vic and Mikey why we want to leave? Besides,” he hurried on, “we’re mixed up with something strange here. Something incredible. We have to deal with it, not run away.”

“How do we deal with it?” If he said he was going back up to the attic, I was leaving by myself.

“You told us your ideas of what’s happening here,” he said. “And I guess I have to agree with you. The boy –the ghost –we saw in the study was so sad. But that…thing up in the attic was something else. We have to do something about that bitch.”

“What?” I didn’t like this conversation one bit.

“She clearly wants something. Or else she wants to keep us away from something. It seems to me those are the usual reasons given for ghosts. I wonder if it could be the painting?”

“Yeah!” I started excitedly. “They said the painting was never found. Maybe it’s still somewhere in the house. That’s why Gillian is still prowling around. She’s keeping an eye on the treasure she stole.”

There was a moment of silence. “So what do we do? Look for the painting?” I was afraid of what Brian’s answer would be.

Brian looked at me with approval. “Exactly right, Kid,” he said. “Starting tomorrow, we’ll go over the entire house. We’ll save the attic for last,” he added hastily, seeing my expression. “If we can find the painting and turn it over to the police, there won’t be any reason for that bitch to stick around. We’ll have some peace, and get back to enjoying our summer.”

“I guess.” I wondered how he could expect to find anything in this huge house, but I was willing to try.

We finished our hot chocolate and rinsed the cups. Brian turned out the lights and together we went into the front hall and looked up the stairs.

“Are you going to be able to sleep up there?” Brian said after a minute.

“I don’t think so.” My goose bumps were coming back.

Brian ran his fingers through my hair. “How about camping out in Vic’s study tonight? Both of us.” He sounded like he hoped I’d say yes.

“Okay!” I agreed. This would be fun.

I used the little bathroom under the stairs and then curled up on the old couch in the study. Brian settled in the big chair next to the couch so that he was within reach. We were both too exhausted to do anything but fall right to sleep.

It was amazing how much better I felt, just knowing that Brian was here. He’s not very big, and I guess he’d been as scared as I was, I thought, but he’s brave. He opened the attic door and started up the stairs, when all I wanted to do was run.

I didn’t think anyone could have been any braver.

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“We’ll start our search in the study,” Brian announced after breakfast. Vic had gone into town to pick up his order from the library and Michael had gone with him to look for new comics to read. He had absolutely refused to look at any from Matthew’s room.

“I’m sure the police did a pretty good search at the time of the murders. But there’s a good chance they missed something.”

“Okay.” I moved my shoulders in circles, trying to loosen the knots. The couch had made a bumpy and uncomfortable bed.

I was surprised Brian could sound so full of energy. Twice during the middle of the night, I’d opened my eyes to see him leaning forward in his chair, listening intently. Each time I’d held my breath, wondering what he’d heard. When he leaned back and closed his eyes, I’d had to force myself to close mine too. My dreams had been full of dark, towering figures thumping down distant halls.

“You like this!” I exclaimed suddenly. “You like ghost hunting, Brian.”

“Right, Kid. I just want to get this thing figured out so we can go back to fooling around.” He smirked at me as we washed our cereal bowls.

It was strange, I thought. I’d been badly frightened the first time I’d opened the attic door, and again the night I’d heard footsteps in the upstairs hall. Still, I never wanted to run away; I’d wanted to solve the mystery. But that was before I’d seen the spirit of Gillian Burke. Now I couldn’t stop thinking about that huge threatening figure at the top of the attic stairs. I wanted to leave, but Brian wanted to solve the mystery, no matter what we had to do.

By four o’clock that afternoon, Brian and I had searched Vic’s study and two of the other downstairs’ rooms filled with sheet-covered furniture. We hadn’t found anything.

“Let’s quit,” I begged. “My allergies are killing me.” And they were. My eyes itched like crazy and I was sneezing every other minute.

“Oh, shit. I didn’t think about that. You should have said something, Kid.” Brian looked worried.

“I’ll be fine. Let’s go see what’s for lunch.”

When we got into the kitchen, Michael was sitting at the table with a new comic book and Vic was stirring something on the stove.

Michael smirked at me. “Have you been crying?”

“No! I haven’t been crying, Michael. It’s allergies.”

“Oh.”

“Brian, Justin, I’m making chicken noodle soup. Is that alright?” Vic asked.

“Sure, sounds good, Vic,” Brian told him.

“Yeah,” I answered; then I excused myself to the bathroom.

When I came back, Vic was setting bowls of steamy soup on the table and my stomach growled.

“Come sit and eat, Justin,” Vic motioned me over.

“What were you guys looking for all day?” Michael asked as I sat down, propping my aching head with one hand while I ate.

“Nothing special,” Brian said, slurping soup from his spoon, which made me laugh.

“That’s a lot of time to be looking for nothing. I thought we could have played a game or something.” Michael looked so sad; I felt a little sorry for him. But I couldn’t guess what his reaction to ghosts would be. I decided he’d most definitely freak out, and that wouldn’t help the situation. I hoped Brian didn’t tell him what was going on.

“Sorry, Mikey. If you wanted to play a game you should have come asked us.”

“Since when do I have to ask you to hang out with me? You should want to!” Michael stood up and shoved away from the table, running up to his room.

Brian started to follow, but Vic stopped him. “Let him throw a little fit, Brian. He’s got to learn to share you with other people. He’s not going to have you all to himself forever.” Then he stood up and rinsed his bowl in the sink. “I’m going to get back to some reading. You boys, clean up the dishes okay?”

After Vic left and Brian and I were alone, we filled the sink with soapy water. Brian washed the dishes; I rinsed and dried them. “What are we going to do now?” I asked after a few second of silence.

“There’s more rooms to check,” Brian said. “And that’s just downstairs. We may still find it, Kid.”

I groaned. “Not tonight, though,” I protested. “I can’t look anymore tonight.”

“Alright, not tonight. You wanna watch some TV?”

“Okay.” Maybe it’d take my mind off the ghost in the attic.

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Later that night Brian and I were in Vic’s study watching The Tonight Show. Well, The Tonight Show was on, but Brian was reading some book and I was sketching Brian. Vic and Michael had gone to bed almost an hour ago. But Brian and I had insisted we weren’t tired.

“You think Vic and Michael are in any danger, Brian?” I asked, slightly worried.

“Nah, if they were, they’d have heard or seen the ghost.”

I wasn’t sure if that made sense or not, but didn’t have too much time to think it over. “Justin,” Brian whispered, staring at a corner of the study. There was the slightest of movements, and suddenly Matthew was there.

“He came back,” I breathed. “I’m glad.”

But this time Matthew wasn’t smiling. His small face seemed frozen in panic. As we watched, he raised a hand and pointed at me. Then, as silently as he’d come, he was gone.

“Something’s wrong,” I cried. “He never looked like that before.”

“Maybe he’s trying to tell us something.” Brian was breathing fast. “He was pointing to your sketch. Are there any other sketches in the house?”

I thought hard, trying to remember all I’d seen in the house. “There are some animal pictures in Matthew’s room, but they aren’t really sketches. They’re more like…”

“We have to go look at them,” Brian interrupted, heading for the stairs.

I reluctantly followed behind him. “I don’t think this is such a good idea, Brian. What if she comes after us?”

“She’s not going to come after us. Why now when she hasn’t before?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted quietly.

“Come on,” Brian said. “Let’s go check out the kids’ bedroom. We’ll do it real fast.”

“Okay.” I made sure I was glued to Brian’s back. He’d looked over his shoulder at me and gave me an annoyed look, but he didn’t say anything.

The upstairs was cold as usual. Matthew’s bedroom door was closed and I hoped we didn’t have to run downstairs for the key. As it turned out, the door was unlocked, so Brian and I tiptoed quietly inside and began inspecting the animal pictures.

In the farthest corner of the room hidden in shadows, I found a framed sketch of Matthew hanging on the wall. His parents must have hired someone to do it. “Brian, I think I found it.”

“Found what?”

For crying out loud. Found what? “The painting, Brian,” I whispered. “I didn’t see this last time I was in here. It’s a sketch of…”

I stopped as a loud scraping sound cut through the quiet house. It came from down the hall.

“The chest,” Brian said. “That chest is being pushed away from the door.”

“No,” I whimpered. But even as I said it, I heard the attic door open, and heavy steps coming towards us.

Part Four

The chill in Matthew’s bedroom deepened. Brian crossed the room in one long leap, his heavy breaths making white puffs in the icy air. He grabbed the frame from my hands and began examining it, turning it over, on its side and upside down.

“She’s coming!” I shrieked. “Listen!”

The footsteps had stopped. “She’s right outside the door,” I whimpered. “We’ve got to get out of here.” My teeth started to chatter.

“We can’t –not yet. Do you know why she’s coming to get us now?” Brian demanded hoarsely. “It’s got to be because we’re getting too close to her secret. Matthew was trying to tell us something.” He pried the backing off the frame, revealing an old canvas painting hidden behind the sketch.

“This is it!” he shouted. “I found it!”

“Brian,” I croaked, staring at the doorknob slowly being turned.

Brian rolled the painting up, letting the sketch flutter to the floor. Before I could pick it up, an icy wind swept the room. The sketch blew across the carpet. I wanted to get Matthew’s sketch; I didn’t want it to be ruined. For some reason, it was more valuable to me than the stolen painting.

But Brian held me back. There wasn’t any time; we had to get out of there. Together we looked around for an escape route. Obviously the doorway was out since the ghost was waiting for us on the opposite side. I ran to the window. The nearest one was painted shut. I struggled with the second one until Brian pushed me aside and jerked it open.

“Out!” he shouted. “Move!”

The cold wind roared around me, and I could feel the ghost getting closer. I tumbled through the window out onto the roof over the front porch. Brian was right behind me. At the edge of the roof he grabbed my hand, and we jumped off together. There was no time to worry about the distance.

We hit the ground hard, but luckily unharmed. Michael and Vic came scurrying out the front door still in their pajamas. “What in the hell is going on?” Vic shouted.

“It’s like a hurricane is tearing through the house!” Michael trembled, his eyes wide with fear.

“We have to get out of here!” Brian yelled. “Vic do you have the car keys?” I hoped he did because there was no way anyone was going back in the house.

“I…uh…I think they’re in the ignition,” Vic stammered.

“Around the back,” Brian panted. “Head for the car.”

I felt as if I were running through a swamp that sucked at my feet and held me back.

“Can’t –can’t run!” Michael gasped out beside me. “Some…something’s holding me back.”

I pulled him along beside me the best I could. “Yes you can, Michael,” I assured him. “Just keep moving.”

We reached the car and Vic swung open the door on the driver’s side and shoved Michael across the seat. Then he jumped in after him and slammed the door. Brian opened the back door on the driver’s side and pushed me inside before climbing in after me.

There was a heart-stopping moment when the motor stuttered, quit then roared to life.

“That’s it,” Vic muttered. “That’s my girl!”

“Vic! We’ve got to go!” Brian yelled.

Vic swung the car around so that the headlights rested full on the house. Curtains and draperies billowed furiously at every window. Lights flicked on and off, all over the house. Then the back door flew open, and the towering figure of Gillian Burke’s ghost was silhouetted in the headlight’s beam.

“She’s coming!” I screamed. “She’s coming after us!”

“What the hell is going on here?” Vic screamed back, but pulled hard on the wheel, making the car shoot onto the narrow, winding road that led to the highway. The trees formed a tunnel around us, and as the car bounced through it, the branches ahead seemed to bend down. Something struck hard on the roof.

“It’s trying to stop us,” Michael cried. “What are we going to do?”

Vic clutched the steering wheel like a race car driver. “Hang on,” he said through clenched teeth. “Somebody tell me what is going on!”

Brian and I looked at each other. What could we say? I shrugged helplessly.

“It’s a long story, Vic, and we’ve got to get away from here, fast,” Brian answered.

I saw Vic wince as a branch scraped against the windshield. “We’re almost back to town,” he said. “When we get there, I want to know what’s going on, and I mean every detail.”

As he said it, we shot out onto the highway. A semi swerved around us with startled blasts of its horn.

“Yeah, yeah,” Vic muttered. He followed the truck. Other cars were coming towards us now, their lights reassuring in the forest dark. Far ahead, the lights of a cheap motel twinkled.

“We’re okay!” Vic said. “We’ve made it!” But I noticed that he didn’t slow down. Not until a few gas stations, bait shops, and small shingled homes began flying past did he take his foot off the gas.

“There’s a little diner right smack in the middle of town,” he explained. “We’ll go there.”

Good I thought. Ghosts didn’t haunt diners, did they?

When we parked in front of the little restaurant, I noticed my knees were still trembling. I shook as I followed Vic, Michael and Brian into the restaurant where we settled in a high-backed booth. Brian set the painting on the table and we all stared at it for several moments.

Across from me, Vic wiped his face with his handkerchief. He took deep breaths, like a swimmer coming up for air. “So, let’s start from the beginning, shall we?”

I shuddered and glanced out at the quiet street, imagining tourists strolling by, eating ice-cream cones and enjoying the hot summer days. Walking down the street eating an ice-cream cone would be enough adventure for me after this.

All eyes were on me, so I started to explain. “It’s like I told you the first day, Vic. The house is haunted.” Didn’t that explain everything?

Vic and Michael looked at me with blank stares. “What?”

Brian sighed and said, “I didn’t believe it either, but it’s true.”

Michael’s jaw dropped. “You…you’re saying that the house is actually haunted?”

“Is this some big joke you kids cooked up?” Vic scowled.

Before we could answer, the waitress came to take our orders. She looked strangely at Michael in his pajamas and Vic in his robe, but she didn’t remark on it. She probably saw a lot of weirdness this late at night.

When she was gone, I started explaining again. “No. It’s not a joke. It’s like I told you before, the ghosts of Gillian Burke and Matthew Howell are haunting the house. Brian and I guessed that Gillian’s been in the house watching over the painting she stole.” I began carefully unrolling the painting we’d taken from Matthew’s room. It was a portrait.

“Who is it?” Michael asked.

“I don’t know much about art,” Vic said slowly, “but this looks very valuable. It’s got to be over 100 years old.”

“Look,” Michael pointed to the bottom corner. “That’s the date right? 1827?”

We all looked and he was right. Our food would be out soon, so Brian rolled up the painting again.

Just as he finished, the waitress brought our orders: Vic’s coffee and cinnamon apple pie, my chocolate milkshake with a grilled cheese sandwich, Michael’s chocolate shake with cheesy fries, and Brian’s Coke with a club sandwich. I didn’t realize I was even hungry until the food came; then I realized I was starving. The others seemed just as hungry. We ate in silence, but it was nothing like the tense, gloomy silences of our first meals together.

A couple of times, I saw Brian reach out to touch the painting, as if he was making sure it didn’t disappear.

When his pie was gone and his cup had been re-filled, Vic leaned back with a sigh. “Now let’s take another look,” he said. He laid the painting out on the table.

“Do you realize how close we came to missing this?” Brian asked me.

“If I hadn’t been drawing in the study,” I said.

“And if it weren’t for Matthew Howell,” Michael added.

“Poor little kid –caught up in something he wanted no part of.” Vic shook his head.

“I wonder what’ll happen to Matthew now,” I said. “And what’s going to happen to that awful Gillian Burke? Do you think she’s going to go on haunting the house forever?”

Brian rolled the painting up. “All I know,” he said, “is that we’re not going back tonight to find out. Right Vic?”

Vic nodded, still looking a bit dazed.

“Unless you want to go back, Justin,” Brian teased, leaning over and raising an eyebrow at me. “We can go if you want to.”

I shook my head back and forth furiously. “No way, Brian!” He just laughed, and soon, Michael and Vic joined him.

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After checking, we discovered that the only hotel on Main Street was filled with tourists. So we went back to the motel we passed on the highway.

We got a room with two double beds. Vic and Michael slept in one; Brian and I slept in the other. Since the diner, we’d been quiet, lost in our own thoughts about this strange night. The silence remained as we climbed into bed.

Thirty minutes later, Vic was snoring like a chainsaw and I was wide awake staring at the ceiling, watching as car headlights swept across the motel room walls.

“Brian?” I whispered, checking to see if he was asleep.

“What?” He whispered back.

“I can’t sleep.”

“Me either. Vic’s snoring could wake the dead.”

“Brian!” I gasped. “Could we not talk about waking the dead now?”

I couldn’t see it, but I could hear the smirk when he said, “I guess.”

“It’s not Vic that’s keeping me up. I can’t stop thinking about what happened. I keep hoping I’m going to wake up and all this will be a nightmare.”

“Yeah. It does seem like one strange fucked-up dream,” Brian said softly, rolling on his side so we were facing each other. I could barely make out his face by the glow of the motel lights outside.

“What do you think is going to happen now?”

“Well, Vic will probably turn the painting over to the police, and then I don’t know what’ll happen after that. He’ll probably take us back to the Pitts.” Brian’s hand came up to stroke my cheek.

As scared as I was, I didn’t want to go back to Deb’s. “Brian?” I wiggled closer to him.

“Yes?”

“What’s going to happen when we go back to the Pitts?”

“I don’t know. Same stuff that always happens I guess.”

“I meant, what will happen with us?”

Brian sighed, “I don’t know.”

I was hoping for a different answer, but at least Brian was honest. “Are you going to ignore me?”

He pulled me against him. “I don’t think that’s possible. You’re very hard to ignore, Kid.”

I moved closer so that our bodies were almost touching, and Brian kissed me gently on the lips. “Hey, I’ve got an idea,” I said, voice soft and low.

“Mmm…”

“Not that kind of idea! Vic and Michael are right over there!”

“So?”

“Eww, Brian! I know you’re teasing.”

“You’re so easy to tease!”

“Well, I was talking about the house. We could have tours. People could come and pay to walk through a real haunted house.”

“And what if the ghosts don’t appear?”

“We can dress up, I guess. Oh, I know! We can hide in closets and jump out to scare them,” I giggled, but Brian hushed me. “Shhh, we don’t want to wake up Mikey and Vic, now.”

“Sorry,” I whispered, snuggling closer to Brian’s chest. I fell asleep with my head nestled under Brian’s chin with his arm slung over my waist, and my dreams were not troubled by haunted houses or ghosts.

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The next morning we all got back in the car and Vic drove to the police station. We waited in the car for what seemed like hours before he came out again. “The sheriff was mighty surprised,” Vic said, as he drove back to the diner for breakfast.

“Did you tell him about the ghosts?” I asked.

“Of course not,” Vic said. “I told him we found this painting accidentally and thought it looked valuable. I did not tell him about Matthew Howell or Gillian Burke, or about cold winds blowing through the house or lights going off and on by themselves. I don’t want to be committed, you know.”

“But it did happen,” I said, a little doubtfully, afraid Vic was going to say I made everything up. In the bright light of morning, last night was beginning to seem unreal.

“It did happen,” Brian assured me. “You know it; I know it; we all know it. But there’s no reason why anyone else needs to hear about it. Agreed?”

“What about my mom an…”

“No one.”

We left it at that. An hour later, after breakfast, we were on our way back to the house, and I was struggling to ignore a whole flock of butterflies in my stomach, wishing I hadn’t eaten so much.

I wasn’t the only one who was nervous. Michael had begged Vic not to go back, but Vic assured us that if anything was strange or off, we’d grab our stuff and leave right away.

I held my breath as the car made its final turn into the yard behind the house. From the outside, everything appeared normal. Slowly, we each exited the car, walking towards the front steps.

Standing on the front porch, I hesitated. It felt so safe outside. Birds were singing in the woods, and the air buzzed with insects. There were no ice-cold drafts or musty odors.

Vic entered first with the rest of us right behind him. The kitchen was warm and full of light. The worn brick floor seemed to glow, and the white painted cabinets shone in the sun. The musty smell was gone as was the gloom.

We followed Vic as he led a search of the house, down the hall, through the dining room, into his study and back to the front hall. Except for a pile of books knocked over on the floor of the study and some wind-blown papers, there was no trace of the terrifying events of the night before. The rooms were bright and still.

Once we’d searched the rooms downstairs, it was time to tackle the upstairs. At the top of the staircase, I noticed immediately that all the doors except that of my bedroom were closed. The chest was back against the wall at the end of the corridor where it was supposed to be. And the air was fresh and sweet, with a warm lake breeze blowing through my bedroom window.

I started to relax slightly, until we approached the door to Matthew’s room, then I tensed up again, but when Brian opened the door, I knew there was nothing to be afraid of anymore. The bed covers, which had been turned back and waiting for thirty years, were pulled up and neatly smoothed. And the sketch of Matthew Howell was back in its frame hanging on the wall.

I felt a moment of sadness. Goodbye, Matthew. I touched the pillow knowing that I wouldn’t see the little boy again. He could rest peacefully now that the painting was found and the last mystery surrounding his death was solved.

After all the rooms had been checked, only the attic remained unexplored. When Vic opened the door, I cringed and shut my eyes, but when I opened them and forced myself to look up, I only saw dust motes floating in bright beams of sunlight. Brian and I looked at each other and smiled. I was amazed at how much could be said without uttering a single word. Everything seemed back to normal.

“Hey, guys!” Michael called from his bedroom doorway. “Want to go for a swim?”

Okay, so not everything was back to normal. Michael’s attitude towards me had obviously changed a lot, but in a good way. “Sure. Let me change first,” I said, already heading to my room.

Once in our swim trunks, the three of us took off for the lake, running through the grass with towels slung over our shoulders, laughing. At the pier, we threw down our towels and ran to the edge and jumped off, making the biggest splashes we could. For the first time, Michael, Brian and I all got along and had fun together.

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One night towards the end of summer, Michael, Vic and I were doing the dishes while Brian was setting up the Monopoli game on the kitchen table. It was his favorite game, and we’d finally agreed to play with him, mainly to get him to shut up about it.

“I was thinking about becoming a detective,” he said out of nowhere.

I handed Michael a plate to dry and we shared a look. “Why?” I asked.

“Well, let’s face it; I did a kick-ass job figuring out the mystery behind Matthew’s and Gillian’s ghosts. I mean who else would have had the guts to do what I did? Right Justin?”

Oh brother! I couldn’t argue with him though. He was full of himself, but I had to accept some blame for that; I told him all the time how brave he was and what a strong person he was. And it was the truth. I put Brian Kinney on a pedestal where he remains to this day. There have been countless times he’s been in danger of falling off, but he always manages to do something to redeem himself, like letting me sketch him for hours without complaining or going to comic book conventions with Michael even though he hated them.

“Sure, Brian. You’d be an awesome detective,” I confirmed.

He smiled smugly. “Okay, let’s play; I’m the top-hat.” The top-hat was a symbol of wealth and importance; I didn't know it then, but it fit Brian perfectly.

“I’m the race car!” Michael piped in.

And I was the Schnauzer, man’s best friend, but tenacious. Several hours later, when Michael was out, having spent all his money quickly, I was managing to barely stay in the game thanks to some lucky dice rolls and a couple of tiny loans from Brian, who owned 19 of the 22 properties.

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The rest of the summer flew by. Deb got out of the hospital, but since we were all getting along, I was allowed to stay at the lake. Although because of our newfound friendship, it was hard to ditch Michael. Any private time Brian and I had together was usually interrupted. The day before we returned to Pittsburgh, Michael caught Brian and I kissing behind the pier. Instead of going crazy like I thought he would, he just smiled and shouted, “I knew it!”

Vic’s friend returned from Europe and they decided to renovate the house together. They even invited us back the following summer to help them work on it.

I wish I could say that Brian and I lived happily ever after, but that didn’t happen. Our strange relationship has taken many different twists and turns over the years –some good, some bad –but that’s another story entirely.

The End