

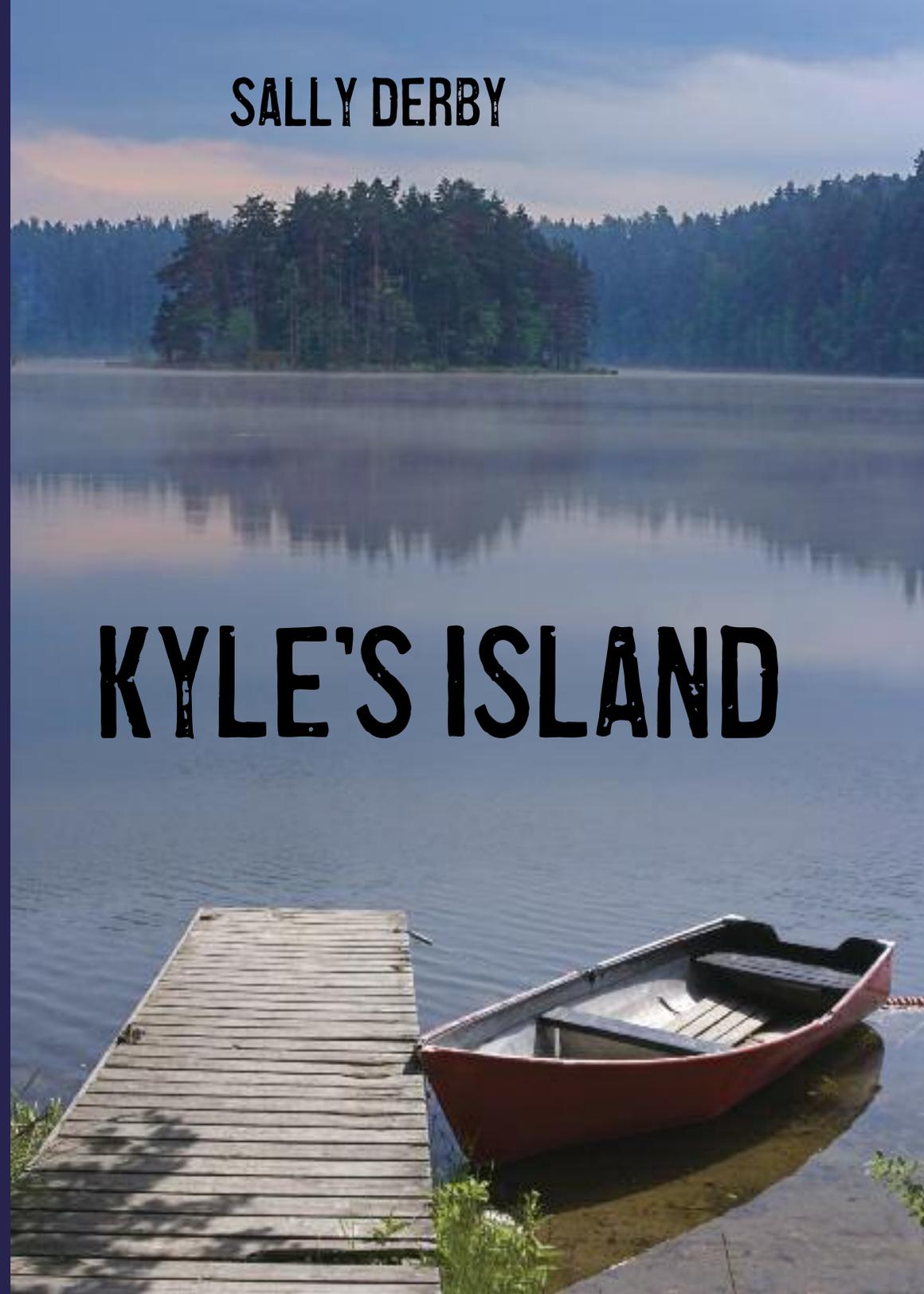
SALLY DERBY

# KYLE'S ISLAND

DERBY

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I STOOD LOOKING OUT AT THE WATER, at the shadowy mound of the island, at the lights on the opposite shore. It was so beautiful. A tight knot in my chest that I didn't know I'd had just sort of melted away. "We're back," I whispered to the lake. Then I sat down on one of the benches and stretched my legs out and tilted my head back to look up at the sky. I was as happy at that minute as I had been for months. At least this part of my world, the lake, the cottage, hadn't changed, wouldn't change, I thought. Life up here would go on the same as always.



With love and pride, I dedicate this, my first novel,  
to David, my first son, whose love affair with water  
began at the lake.—S. D.

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# CHAPTER ONE

**I JINGLED THE CAR KEYS**, tossed them up and caught them, ran my finger over the bumpy silver chain. There's something about having car keys in your hand. All you have to do is slip the key into the ignition, turn it, and you're in charge. Speed, direction, final destination—you get to decide. But you have to be sixteen. Almost thirteen doesn't cut it.

So I couldn't start the car, but I could blow the horn. I did—loud and angry. Mom stuck her head out the front door. "Vicki back?" she asked.

"No, she isn't. And neither is Josh. What's with this family? We were supposed to leave an hour ago."

"A half hour. They'll be here. Is the car all packed?"

She was trying to change the subject, so I ignored the question. "Why don't we call Josh home, and as soon as he gets here, we all wait in the car? Then when Vicki gets dropped off, we can just start up and leave."

Okay, so that was a dumb suggestion, but she could have answered me. Instead she gave me the Look—I think the Look is the first thing teachers learn in college—and went back in. Grumbling to myself, I opened the car door and slid into the driver’s seat. I sat there with my eyes closed, imagining I was in one of those new passenger vans instead of our ’69 wagon. I shouldn’t have had to imagine. Dad always said a car’s got only five good years, and then you should trade it in. So, ’69 to ’74—that’s five years, right? But Dad was gone. Long gone. No Dad, no new car. On Valentine’s Day—how’s that for timing?—he’d kissed Mom and the girls good-bye, hugged Josh and me, and said he hoped he’d be back soon. He had to “think things out.” Well, he could think all he wanted. He could stay away forever, as far as I was concerned.

I got out of the wagon, slamming the door behind me, and headed down to the park to get Josh. If Mom wouldn’t get things going, I would.

I could hear the voices before I got through the gates: “Here! Here! Pass it!” Josh and a bunch of other six- and seven-year-olds were kicking around soccer balls.

“Hey, Josh! Come on—we gotta leave,” I called.

“Already? Can’t I play a little more?”

“Come on!”

Josh mumbled something to another boy, ran over to grab his ball, and left the field. He walked past me and out the gate, his head down, his arm wrapped around the ball. He didn’t look at me.

For a minute I felt bad for him. I knew he didn’t want to go to the lake. Where he did want to go was to soccer camp with his friends. But with Dad gone, there was no money for that. So he was sulking. Josh could hold a sulk for a long time. Maybe the whole summer.

“Listen, Josh,” I said, catching up with him. “The lake is fun, remember? We’ll swim, fish . . .”

“I don’t like fishing, and I’m no good at swimming.”

“That’s only because you won’t put your face in the water. Once you learn to do that, you’ll be lots better. I’ll work with you this summer, teach you some strokes.”

“You will?” He looked at me sideways. “Dad was going to teach me. He’s a good swimmer.”

Another broken promise. “I’m a good swimmer, too,” I said. “C’mon, let’s run.”

As we got home and started up the driveway, the front door opened and Andrea came out on the porch. “Is Vicki back?” I called. “It’s time to leave.”

“Not yet. But Mom and I are ready.”

“About time,” I grumbled.

Andrea just grinned. "Don't be a crosspatch, Kyle." She kind of skipped down the steps, a pencil case in her hand and a sketchbook under her arm, as usual. She kept coming until she stood nose-to-nose with me. "Crosspatch, draw the latch, sit by the fire and spin." She recited the old nursery rhyme in a singsongy voice that made me laugh. "That's better," she said. She moved an inch closer. "I'm taller than you today. Isn't that right, Josh?"

Josh checked us out. "Nope, Kyle's still taller," he said.

"It's going to stay like that, too," I told Andrea. "No way you're getting ahead of me again." Andrea and I are twins, but she'd always been a little taller than me. This past Christmas Day, though, we were even, and I passed her up in January.

Just then a car drew up, and Vicki hopped out. "Thanks," she called back over her shoulder. She hurried over to us. "Sorry I'm late, guys. Andrea, wait till you see my suit!"

"How come you waited till today to decide you needed a new one?" I asked. "At least you're here now. Finally, we can leave."

"I just have to go to the bathroom and get my books."

"More books? Why don't you bring the whole library?" I asked. But you can't argue with Vicki, not about books.

Not about anything else, either, now that she's fifteen. She just raised an eyebrow and flipped back her hair. "Well, hurry up," I said.

Mom came out as Vicki went in. We might as well have had a revolving door there. Mom beckoned. Now what? It was time to go, darn it. Past time.

"Dad's on the phone," Mom called. Her face was shining the way it always does when she talks about him. "He wants to talk to everyone before we leave. First Kyle."

"Sure he wants to talk to us." I put all the sarcasm I could into my voice. "That's why he's not here. Tell him I'm busy."

"Oh, Kyle. You wouldn't talk last time. I wish you weren't so angry at him."

"I'm not angry. I just don't have anything to say. Are we ever going to leave?"

She didn't push, just turned away and hurried back in. Josh hurried after her. Why should they hurry? If Dad didn't love us enough to stay with us, why should we bother with him? Every time they talked, Mom ended up thinking about him for hours. You could tell. You'd ask her a question, and she'd just say "Hmm?" and not listen. It made me sick. It was a good thing we were going to the lake. Maybe up there she could get him out of her mind.

Andrea told me, “If I wanted to draw a scowl, I’d draw your face right now.”

“Is this better?” I pulled down the corners of my mouth and stuck out my tongue. She laughed and made a face back. I gave her a little shove. “Go hurry up Josh. He’ll talk to Dad for hours if you let him.”

I leaned against the wagon, tossing the keys up and down, up and down.

## CHAPTER TWO

**FOUR HOURS LATER I HAD** counted twenty-eight bug cars and Josh had forty-five. I was still trying to get used to seeing Andrea up in the front seat. I’d planned to sit there, of course, but Vicki said she should because she was the oldest, and Josh said he should because he was the youngest. (I don’t know how he thought that made sense.) Then Mom said, “I’ve already decided. I want Andrea up here with me—she’s the one who likes to read maps.”

“You don’t need a map to get to the same place you’ve been going every summer for years and years,” I pointed out, but Mom said there might be a detour or something, and she’d feel better if Andrea was beside her with the map. I was going to argue, but Mom’s voice got a little shaky on the word “detour.” I took a quick look at her and saw her left eyelid begin to flutter. It only does that when she’s nervous. The way she hates to drive, I figured we’d better get going

before she chickened out. “C’mon, Josh, we’ll get in the back with Vicki,” I said. “We can count bug cars on the way.”

“Okay!” His voice was cheerful. He’d known he didn’t really have a chance at the front seat. He just likes to argue.

Vicki had climbed in on the driver’s side, so I took the middle, letting Josh sit by the window, which was very mature of me. Other years Andrea and I would have had the whole “way back” to sit or lie down in, because our suitcases would be up in the luggage rack. Dad always stowed them up there, along with extra boxes and stuff. He made lifting even Vicki’s suitcase full of books look easy. Mom would worry that things would fall off, and then Dad would say, “Are you doubting my prowess, Woman?” That would make her laugh, and start the trip off happy. But this year when we’d gotten all the bags lined up on the curb, she opened the back and said, “In here,” like it was no different than usual. But it was.

Mom started the car. Andrea unfolded the map, and Vicki picked up her book. I figured we wouldn’t hear anything from her for the rest of the ride, but to my surprise she didn’t begin to read right away. “Jen and Tracey are seeing *American Graffiti* at the drive-in tonight,” she said. “I’m going to miss so much this summer.”

“Yeah—Cincinnati heat and humidity. You’ll really miss

those. Are you crazy, Vick? Think of Michigan nights, think of diving off Marshalls’ float.”

“I suppose so. . . .” She’d opened her book. I looked over at her—what was with her this year? Her long hair hid her face as she bent her head over her reading. Whatever was bugging her, she’d get over it when we got to the cottage.

“Fifty-one!”

“I give.”

“Okay. Want to play alphabet?”

“Sure,” I said, although I didn’t.

Mom actually turned her head away from the road long enough to flash me a smile. “Thank you,” she mouthed.

So I played two games of alphabet with Josh, then he talked me into playing tic-tac-toe. Do you know how many tic-tac-toe games you can play driving through Indiana? I lost count around three hundred. (And if you think that’s an exaggeration, let me just say that even Josh wasn’t heartbroken when the pencil broke and we couldn’t find another.)

The ride seemed longer than usual, and no one was in a very good mood, not even me. Other years Dad had kept us all laughing and joking. He’s a really good storyteller, even if he is a jerk, and he used to tell these long, involved stories about Isabel and Ike—twins (of course) who lived on a lake and kept getting into trouble in weird and funny

ways. The stories made you forget all about being cooped up in a car. When he wasn't telling a story, he was acting the part of tour bus driver, calling out the names of all the little towns we were going through—Churubusco, Ligonier, Dunlap—and making up crazy “points of interest” like “the oldest two-story building in Elkhart County.” Andrea did her best, but she doesn't really have a tour-director voice. And when Mom drives, that's all she does, drive—her hands so tight on the steering wheel I'm surprised she doesn't have to be pried loose when the car stops.

In Elkhart we stopped for sandwiches and groceries, and now we had brown paper sacks on our laps and plastic bags at our feet, and the car smelled of apples and cheese. As soon as we crossed the border into Michigan and Cassopolis County, even Josh knew we were close. He started to put away the Matchbox cars he had scattered all over the seat and floor. (I had threatened to throw them out the window if I sat or stepped on another one.)

The narrow road went straight and level like an arrow pointed at the lake. Trees crowded in on either side till it felt like we were driving through a long green tunnel. We rolled down the windows and let the summer air take the place of the air-conditioning. Much better. I forgot about the way Josh was hogging most of the seat and leaned

forward to look through the windshield. Pretty soon we would take a curve to the right, and I'd get this summer's first glimpse of the lake.

Suddenly, there it was. It was greenish-gray tonight, with whitecaps as far as you could see. There was just that one glimpse, and then the car was climbing the hill, and a line of cottages blocked the view. The road ran along the backs of the cottages, and in front of them the land sloped steeply down. I saw that the Dieners were here. And the Wilks. Most people I didn't know by name, only by sight from years back. But anyone who was out waved as we went by, and it felt like a homecoming.

We turned the last curve, and there was our cottage, small and gray with red trim around the windows and along the edge of the roof. Over the back door was a wooden sign. “Gladimere,” it said. That's what Gram had named it: “Glad I'm here.” lame, I know, but it was like Gram, and it always made me smile when I thought of it. Even though Gram hadn't stayed at the cottage while we were there, we always knew she was just back in Cassopolis. We'd take a couple of days to visit her there, and often she'd drive over to see us. But she'd died in December. For some reason, that made the cottage look lonely. I guess because it was still boarded up from the winter. Other summers, she'd have been out here

before us, raising the shutters that were hinged at the top and acted as awnings once they were propped open, and airing out the cottage. Funny, I hadn't thought much about missing her, but suddenly I realized I did.

I climbed over Josh so I'd be the first one out of the car. It felt so good to straighten my legs. I opened the front door and smiled at Andrea, wondering why she hadn't moved. "Hey!" I said. "We're here!"

She kind of wrinkled her eyebrows and gave her head a little jerk toward Mom, who was just sitting there, not moving. "Mom?" I asked. "Mom, you all right?" She turned her head toward me, but she didn't seem to focus exactly. "You made it," I told her. "Another fine job of driving."

That kind of woke her up—it was what she always said to Dad at the end of a trip—and she smiled, but it was a tired smile. Maybe she was thinking of everything we still had to do before we were really settled in. "Well, might as well get started," she said.

We never unloaded right away. First we'd file around the cottage on the pump side and go straight to the flight of steps leading down the hill. From the top you could see the lake stretched out in front of you, with the opposite shore only a blurry line. Nothing but the pier and the water and the island about halfway across. We stood there and

looked our fill, then Mom unlocked the padlock on the door of the screened-in porch.

"I get to sleep out here!" Josh called, pushing ahead.

"Mom?" Vicki appealed.

But this time things went my way. "Kyle will sleep on the porch," Mom said as we went on into the main room. "Vicki and Andrea will sleep in the big bed, and Josh can have the roll-away or the upper bunk. I'll take the lower."

"The bunk! I want the bunk!" Josh almost mowed Vicki down on his way to the bunk. He started up the ladder.

"First, we unload," Mom said firmly.

"I'll prime the pump," Vicki offered. I should have been quicker. I like to be the one who primes the pump. The cottage had no indoor plumbing, just the outhouse down the hill—and the less said about that, the better—but the water from the pump is the best-tasting water there is.

"Guess we'd better get busy," Andrea said, smiling at me. She grabbed Josh by the waistband of his jeans and pulled him off the ladder. Then the three of us went out to the car while Mom started setting things up in the kitchen. It wasn't long till I smelled coffee. For some reason, smelling the coffee made me feel almost like crying. Dumb. But in my memory the blue pot on the stove at the lake is always perking, and the cottage is always filled with the

smell of coffee. I don't know how something that tastes so bad can smell so good.

It took us a couple of hours to get the car unloaded, the beds made up, and the suitcases stowed away under the beds. By then it was way dark, and Josh was so tired he climbed straight up the ladder to his bunk, with his copy of *Billy and Blaze* under his arm. I'll bet he didn't read two pages before he went to sleep. Andrea and Mom were sitting at the kitchen table talking, and Vicki was lying across her bed reading (what else?), so I let myself quietly out the front door and went down to the lake. As I walked along the pier, I smiled at the hollow, drumlike sound of my footsteps on the slats. By the benches at the end, I stopped and looked up at the night sky.

There are a million stars in the sky above the lake that you never see in Cincinnati. The moon was out, and its light lay on the water like a stream of spilled milk. Crickets chirped. An owl hooted. A damp breeze lifted the hair hanging down to my collar, and I was glad I was letting it grow. I pulled my jacket close. I stood looking out at the water, at the shadowy mound of the island, at the lights on the opposite shore. It was so beautiful. A tight knot in my chest that I didn't know I'd had just sort of melted away. "We're back," I whispered to the lake. Then I sat down on one of the

benches and stretched my legs out and tilted my head back to look up at the sky. I was as happy at that minute as I had been for months. At least this part of my world, the lake, the cottage, hadn't changed, wouldn't change, I thought. Life up here would go on the same as always.

## CHAPTER THREE

**I WOKE TO THE SOUND OF** hammering nearby. Cripes, it wasn't even full light yet. Who was working at this hour? The hammering stopped, then started again, a little farther away, and I realized—a woodpecker, that's what it was! I'd forgotten how loud woodpeckers can be. I didn't mind, though. Thanks to him or her, I'd get an early start on the day. Now I heard other birds stirring and chirping, and the light beyond the screens seemed to brighten by the minute. I lay under the warm covers a bit more, then stretched my arms over my head. Right away goose bumps puckered my skin. I could feel a smile stretch across my face. I threw the blankets off and jumped to my feet, pulling my jeans on in a hurry. Sweatshirt and sneakers, and I was ready to go.

I opened the door to the cottage proper. It was warmer in here, dark and still except for quiet whispers of breath. I tiptoed through to the kitchen, opened the fridge, and

grabbed the milk carton. I raised the carton to my lips and took long gulps. Naturally I couldn't do that when Mom was around, but I figured, why dirty a glass—washing dishes up here was a real production. You had to pump a teakettle of water, carry it inside to heat on the stove, pour a pan for washing and a pan for rinsing . . . you get the idea. I put the milk carton back, grabbed an envelope of Pop-Tarts, and went out into the morning, careful not to let the screen door slam. At the pump I splashed cold water on my face. My toothbrush, along with everyone else's, was waiting in the cup on the shelf outside the door. But I didn't see any point in brushing if I was going to eat Pop-Tarts in a minute, so I just swished some water around in my mouth, then hurried down to the lake.

The reeds to the west were still wrapped in mist, and the Wilks' sailboat, bobbing at anchor a few cottages down, was only a ghostly shape. From the fields behind the cottages a crow cawed, and another answered from farther away. I took off my sneakers and rolled up my jeans, got the oars and life jackets from the shed, and laid them on the pier. Then I dragged the rowboat down to the lake, which wasn't easy, believe me. I was sweating by the time I got the boat into the water. I gave it a strong shove, then jumped in after it. The shallow water felt warm on my legs,

compared to the chilly air, and the bottom was squishy under my feet. I tied the boat to the pole sticking out of the water, then waded to shore, watching out for clamshells—they weren't sharp enough to cut, but it hurt to step on them. Back on the pier, I maneuvered the oars down into the boat and buckled on my life jacket. Then I stepped into the boat, untied the rope, and pushed off.

This was the second summer I was allowed out in the boat by myself. First I'd had to pass a zillion swim lessons at the Y, and then I'd had to promise faithfully never to fish without my life jacket. And still Mom hadn't wanted to say yes. I remembered standing at the cottage door last June and seeing Dad put his arm around her. "Let him go, Dorrie," he'd said. "He's sensible and careful, and you've got to let go sometime."

She'd given him a long, funny look, and I kind of held my breath until she shook her head a little and smiled. "Go on, then," she told me. "I can't hold out against both of you." And Dad had walked down the steps with me and handed me my bait can, then stood on the pier watching as I rowed away.

Today it took me just a few minutes to row past the end of the pier and head toward the island. Later on I would get bait, and Josh and I would fish. Right now I just wanted

to enjoy being almost alone on the lake. It was "almost," because out beyond the point of the island the serious bluegill and bass fishermen were already hunched over their poles. The water was deep there; they wouldn't be disturbed by small fish nibbling at their bait. When a fish took the bait, pulling the bobber under with an I-mean-business downward tug, a cry of "Socko!" would go up, and the other fishermen would glance over with brief interest.

I rowed steadily, watching the cottages on the hill grow smaller as I got farther from shore. When I was about fifty feet from the island, I turned the boat and let it drift while I studied the tree- and bush-covered shoreline. This was the year, I promised myself. This summer I was finally going to explore the island. By myself. Dad had said it was uninhabited, except by birds and maybe a snake or two, but I wanted to investigate anyway. It wasn't a large island, only about the size of a football field, and it rose from the water in a gentle mound like the back of a giant turtle. Did that border of crowded trees and bushes extend clear to the other side? Maybe someplace in there was a clearing or two you couldn't see from the water. Maybe there was a cave. Could you have a cave on an island? Sometimes I was sure I could see the trace of a path leading into the trees from a point on the southwestern tip, but Dad had said I was

imagining it. Well, I wasn't taking his word for anything anymore. I'd find out for myself if he was right about the island. Soon.

After I'd rowed around the island, I headed back toward the cottage. I thought it would be nice to put on a pot of coffee for Mom while she was still asleep. But when I climbed the steps, I found her sitting on the bottom of the two steps to the porch. A cup of coffee sat on the step beside her, and she was smoking a cigarette. That was Dad's fault. She'd quit years ago, but the day after Valentine's she'd gone out and bought a pack of cigarettes, and she'd come home and lit one in front of all of us with a look that just dared us to complain. None of us said a word, but I'd seen tears in Andrea's eyes.

"Been out around the island?" Mom asked me now.

"Yeah."

"We'll get some bait this morning."

"I know."

I sat down beside her, and we just stayed there listening to the birds and the sound of the water lapping the rocks along the shore until the door behind us creaked open and Josh threw his arms around Mom's neck and twisted around into her lap. "Brrrr. Keep me warm," he said.

That was the end of the quiet time. Mom fixed break-

fast while Andrea played catch with Josh down by the lake and Vicki folded up the roll-away bed. "I thought you and Andrea were going to share the big bed," I said.

"Sleeping with Andrea is like sharing a lifeboat with a puppy," Vicki said grumpily. "It's no wonder she's so skinny—she doesn't lie still for two minutes straight. She turns, and she shifts, and the springs creak, and the mattress moves up and down constantly. It's enough to make you seasick, so I pulled out the roll-away. I don't see why I can't have the porch. You've got a reading lamp and everything. Just because . . ."

She was winding up for her Just Because You're a Boy speech when we heard Mom's warning—"Victoria!" She was quiet then, but she threw a dirty look at the kitchen doorway. Vicki doesn't wake up well. At home she'd sleep until eleven, but even she couldn't sleep with four other people moving around in three small rooms.

I went into the kitchen to start making toast, and Vicki went outside. "I'm going to take a little walk down the road," she called through the screen door. In just a bit she came back with a handful of purple flowers she put in a glass on the middle of the table.

Andrea came up from the lake just then. "How pretty!" she said when she saw the flowers.

“Aren’t they?” Vicki answered. “Hey, maybe you could begin with them!” She and Andrea exchanged what a book would call a “significant” look. It bugged me a little—what could be significant about a handful of flowers?

“Begin what?” I asked, but Vicki said only, “Oh, just an idea Andrea and I had last night. Nothing important.” She paused. “We’ll have to throw them out if they make me sneeze, though,” she went on. “I don’t know why I have to have hay fever when none of the rest of you do.”

Just then Mom brought over bacon and eggs, so we dug in and began to make plans for the day. We had plenty of time to plan, because we all ate a lot. Food tastes really good at the lake, even things you don’t ordinarily like. I don’t know why that is.

We’d cleared the plates when Mom brought over a box of glazed doughnuts. “Dessert?” she asked with a smile. While we ate the doughnuts, we made a list of things for Mom to get from the little store on the way to Cassopolis. I asked, “Who’s going to go with you?”

“I’m going by myself,” she answered. “I’ve a couple of things to do that won’t be interesting to any of you. Victoria, if you’ll watch Josh very carefully while I’m gone, I’ll see that you have time to sunbathe and read this afternoon. Andrea and Kyle will clean up the kitchen, then check to

make sure the fishing poles are ready to use. I won’t be gone more than an hour or two.”

“An hour or two!” I said. “You can’t spend an hour or two at that little store. Not even picking out bait and getting your fishing license.”

“I’m going on into Cassopolis,” Mom said. “I told you I had a couple of things to attend to.”

Mom had a lot of business details to look after when Gram died. She was an only child, so she had to close all Gram’s accounts and pay her bills and things like that. Maybe she had more of that stuff to do. Still, an hour or two! I probably wouldn’t get to fish before lunch, and after lunch was the worst time of day for fishing. I might as well wait until suppertime. “Cripes,” I muttered. Mom gave me the Look, but I ignored it. “Why can’t—”

“Hey, Kyle, look sharp!” I raised my head when I heard Dad’s old phrase, and my hand shot up to grab the half-doughnut flying toward me.

“Andrea!” Mom protested.

“I can’t eat any more,” Andrea said, sort of fake-innocently.

“That’s not the point and you know it.” Mom was glaring, but her lips were twitching.

“Thanks, Andy,” I said, smiling. Andrea the peacemaker, at it again.

“No problem.” She smiled back at me, and for the millionth time I thought how much I like being a twin.

When Mom came back from Cassopolis, her eyes were red and her face was kind of blotchy-looking. I’d thought she was over grieving for Gram, but I guess it takes a long time to quit missing your mother. I don’t even like to think about things like that. Anyway, she looked so unhappy I didn’t complain when I found out she’d forgotten to buy the bait.

“That’s okay, I can walk down to Clyde’s,” I told her. “Or I can just go dig some worms across the road.”

“Not until I’ve asked the Dieners if it’s still okay for you to dig there. I suppose it is, but it won’t hurt to check. Besides, Clyde will be glad to see you.”

Clyde’s Bait Shop was just down the road half a mile or so. He was a nice guy, and his prices were fair, but we never bought bait after the first day. By the time it was gone, I’d have dug enough red worms and found enough night crawlers to keep us supplied. I even caught crickets sometimes and put them in Gram’s old cricket cage, but I didn’t like using them. I wouldn’t tell everyone, but I have kind of a soft spot for crickets. It seems a shame to drown that pretty song.

The road to Clyde’s is the one that runs along the backs of the cottages, the same one you come in on. It goes all

around the lake, I think, but we’d never driven down the other way. Once you got to the lake, the last thing you wanted to do was get into a car and leave, even for a little while.

Walking along the road, kicking at stones and watching the dust cloud around my sneakers, I let my ears fill with peacefulness. The birds were quieter than they’d been earlier, and there was no breeze. Now and then you’d hear a screen door slam, and sometimes you could hear voices from down at the water’s edge, but mostly it was so quiet I felt as if I were the only one around.

When I got to Clyde’s and stepped inside, it took my eyes a few seconds to adjust to the dimness of the shop. There were only two people there—Clyde, and Tom Butler. The shop wasn’t much, just one room, with an old cash register on a countertop, some shelves, a couple stools, and two refrigerators. One refrigerator was for bait, and one was for beer and soft drinks. For such a little place, it was amazing how Clyde’s shelves always seemed to hold what you needed, from candles and fuses to playing cards and dish towels.

“Afternoon,” said Clyde when I came in. “Kyle Chester, isn’t it?”

“Yes, sir,” I said. “Afternoon. Afternoon, Mr. Butler.”

“Sorry about your grandmother, Kyle,” Clyde told me. “We all miss Hazel Cook. I thought she was one of those who’d go on forever. Well, you never can tell.”

“Thank you.” That seemed a funny answer when someone said they missed your gram, but I couldn’t think what else to say.

“You here for the summer?”

“I hope so. Mom won’t say for sure how long we’re staying. The longer the better for me.”

“What’s your dad say?”

“Dad’s not with us. I’d like a pint of red worms,” I added in a hurry, hoping to avoid any more questions about Dad.

Clyde seemed to take the hint—at least he moved over to the refrigerator and took out an old dirt-filled cottage cheese carton. He came back and plopped it on the countertop. “Lucky you came early,” he told me. “I’m having trouble keeping up with the demand these days. You dig your own worms most of the time, don’t you?”

“Yeah, back behind the cottage the soil’s full of them.”

“Well, if you want to make some spending money, I’ll be glad to buy some off you. Whatever you can provide. Boy who used to supply me is off to college this year, and his younger brother’s as lazy as an old sow.”

“That’d be great,” I said. “I could use a little money.”

Tom Butler spoke up then. “Tell your momma I said hello, will you?” It must have been the first time in my life I ever heard Tom Butler speak. He was known for his silence, and if I’d ever heard his voice before, I sure would have remembered it. It was an announcer’s voice, deep and kind of husky.

It was hard not to stare at him. He was the fattest man I’d ever seen. Not just fat, enormous. The pouches of fat under his jaws made whatever neck he had disappear. His stomach bulged out over his thighs. Even his hands were fat—his wedding ring cut into his finger like a rubber band wound around once too often. It was kind of disgusting. It wasn’t a Santa Claus kind of fat; there was too much of him for that. But his eyes were Santa Claus eyes. Blue, and crinkly around the edges.

“Yes, sir, Mr. Butler, I’ll tell her,” I said.

I paid for my red worms and started to go, but then Clyde opened the door to the second refrigerator. “Here, have one on me,” he said, handing me a bottle of root beer. “In honor of our new partnership.”

“Thanks,” I said. I started back to the cottage all light-footed and excited. I wondered how much I could earn selling red worms. Anything would help, I thought. Mom

didn't talk a lot about money, but I had noticed the worry on her face whenever she went through the mail, pulling out the bills. I suppose by the time she paid the mortgage and bought food and stuff, there wasn't much of her paycheck left. It wasn't as if we'd had a lot extra even when Dad was with us. Schoolteachers, which is what Mom and Dad are, don't earn very much money. What made him think it was fair to have an apartment all to himself? I'll bet his rent cost him more than Josh's soccer camp would have.

There I went—Dad again. Think of something else, I scolded myself. I began planning the afternoon. As soon as I got back, I'd change into my swim trunks and start coaching Josh a little.

I was almost at the cottage when I noticed it. A sign, stuck in the dirt of our parking space. What was a sign doing there? I drew closer, close enough to read the writing. "For Sale," it said. "Dave Becker Realty." And it had a telephone number and a Cassopolis address below that.

Somebody had made a mistake. I'd better tell Mom. She'd want it moved right away. I ran into the cottage and set my bait carton on the kitchen table. Where was she? I found her on the porch in the old wicker rocker. "Mom?" I asked.

She turned her face to me. "Back already?" She smiled,

but there was something wrong with her smile. I didn't take time to try figuring it out.

"Mom, some dope's put a For Sale sign by our cottage. It's out in back. You better tell the real estate people to move it—their telephone number's on the sign."

"A sign?" she said. "Dave's already put up a sign? Damn." I saw the pity in her face then, and I knew. I knew before she said another word. "I'm sorry, Kyle. I was sitting here trying to think how to tell you. I didn't know Dave had put a sign up. You shouldn't have found out this way."

## CHAPTER FOUR

**SO IT WAS TRUE. I STARED** at her, and she stared back. I went through the doorway, sat down on the footstool in front of her. “You’re selling the cottage?” I could hear my voice getting louder. “Gram’s cottage? Our cottage? The first year it’s all ours and you’re selling it?”

“I am.” Mom’s voice trembled, but I’d heard that tone before. There was steel in it.

“Why?” I didn’t think I was shouting, but maybe I was, because Mom flinched.

“We can’t afford to keep it, Kyle. The taxes alone are eight hundred dollars a year. And there’s upkeep. When Mom was up here, she could keep an eye on things, hire someone to put the pier in and out, lime the outhouse, cut down weeds. . . . You can’t manage a property when you’re two hundred miles away.” I didn’t want to listen. I tried to

answer, but she didn’t give me a chance to say anything. She just plowed ahead. “Besides,” she said, “The money we’ll get from the sale can go into the college fund. That’s always been a worry, how we could afford to send all of you, and now that your dad—” she broke off, swallowed, began again. “Vicki’s already a sophomore, and when you and Andrea go, too . . .”

“Forget about college—I’m not going.”

That stopped her. “Not going to college? Oh, Kyle, of course you are. These days . . .”

“Not if we have to sell the cottage to get the money, I’m not. And I’ll bet Vicki and Andrea won’t go either. Where are they? Do they know?”

“I told them just before you got back. Do you know what Andrea said? ‘Poor Kyle.’ She knew, we all knew how hard this would be for you. And I was planning how—darn Dave!”

“What did Vicki say, and Josh?” I asked bitterly. “I’ll bet they’re glad. They didn’t want to come anyway.”

“They aren’t glad.” Mom pulled a cigarette out of the pack beside her on the table. “They’re sorry, too. We’re all sorry, Kyle.”

“Sorry doesn’t help. Why don’t you do something?” I

stood up so fast my elbow knocked against the big flashlight we kept on the table for trips down the hill at night. It banged to the floor, but I didn't bother to pick it up.

"There's nothing I can do." Mom said that so quietly I could hardly hear, and for some reason that made me angrier than ever.

"There's gotta be something! You give up too easy." I was shouting again.

"Kyle, if you'll just look at this reasonably—"

"The hell with reason!" My voice bounced off the cottage walls. "First you can't hold on to Dad, and now you want to take the cottage away from us. This stinks!"

Mom didn't answer. Her hand flew up to her cheek, like I'd hit her. For a moment I was sorry, then I wasn't sorry at all. She wouldn't fight for anything, not the cottage, not Dad. She'd just let Dad leave, let him have everything his way. I'd heard her tell him he could come back whenever he wanted. She'd be waiting, she said. But maybe he'd never want to, maybe he'd want a divorce instead. Had she thought of that?

I had to get out of there. I was a time bomb ready to explode. She had no idea. I wanted to throw something, hit something or someone, run until I dropped. I moved back from her, stumbling a little. My foot bumped against the

flashlight, and I kicked it, hard. It spun crazily across the room, hit the opposite wall. I had my hand on the door when Mom's voice stopped me. "I couldn't help what happened with your father, Kyle. And I can't help this. Regardless of what you think."

I went out then. I let the screen door bang behind me.

\* \* \*

Down by the lake I saw Vicki, Andrea, and Josh just sitting on the pier, dangling their legs over the side. Andrea's head turned when the door banged. She waved for me to come down, then said something to Vicki. Vicki moved over and patted the place where she'd been sitting, like she was coaxing some little kid. Well, I was coming, wasn't I?

"Are you okay?" Andrea asked as soon as I came near.

It took me a minute to get calm enough to answer. "Mad, that's all," I muttered.

"We heard you yell," Josh said. "Kids aren't supposed to yell at grown-ups."

Just what I needed: a lecture from my little brother. I took a deep breath, all set to blast him, but then I saw the way he was looking at me. He looked so sad—pathetic, really. I shut my mouth. Josh sat there between the girls, soccer ball beside him like always, fooling with a clamshell. He didn't look at me again.

“I’m sorry about the yelling,” I said. “Don’t worry—things will work out somehow. We’re staying right here in the cottage, the way we planned. If anyone wants to buy it, they’ll have to buy us, too.”

“Can they do that?” He sounded really alarmed.

I laughed. We all laughed. After a minute, Josh did, too. It was like laughing was something we needed right then. Josh handed me the clamshell. “I’m going to start a collection of lake treasures right away, so I’ll always have them,” he said. “This shell is my first. Do you want me to find one for you, too? There are lots.”

I held the shell so tight its sharp edge dug into my palm. I felt like throwing the dumb thing into the water. I didn’t want a treasure collection. I wanted the cottage. But when I looked at Josh’s face, I could tell he really wanted to make me feel better. “That’s a great idea,” I told him. He can be a good kid sometimes.

He jumped down into the water and started wading around, bending over every so often to run his hands along the mucky bottom. I sat down in his place, and Vicki scooted over to make a little more room for me. “I’m sorry, Kyle,” she said. For once, she didn’t have a book open. She’d taken off her glasses, too. Without them she looked a little like Mom. “I really am,” she went on. “We all know

how much you like it here.” Andrea had been quiet, just looking at me. Now she said, “You don’t look as bad as I thought you would. More mad than sad.”

“You’re damn—” I noticed Josh look over at me and corrected myself. “Darn right I’m mad. It was going to be so good, coming up here—now it’s like someone gives you this great birthday present and then takes it away two seconds later. Why did she even bother bringing us up here? Just so she could sell it?”

“Maybe she wanted us to have this one last time. We are here, Kyle. And maybe it won’t happen—maybe no one will want to buy it. Don’t let this spoil the time we have.”

“It’s already spoiled.” But as usual, Andrea had made me feel kind of better. Ever since we were little kids, she’s always known how to do that.

As we all sat together on the pier, I stared out at the island. One thing was for sure—this summer I was going to get on that island, explore it properly. I wondered how much time we had.

“Someone’s coming to look at the cottage tomorrow,” Vicki said, as if in answer to my thoughts. “The Realtor called Mom at the Morleys’.” We didn’t have a telephone at the cottage, but the Morleys, in the cottage next door, did. They’d always taken any calls for us and let us use their

phone if we had to call out. In return we let them use our pier any time they wanted. They were nice people, but they were pretty old. Mr. Morley still fished a little, but his wife hardly ever came outside.

“Kyle, you want to kick the soccer ball for a while?”  
Josh called to me.

“Just a minute, Josh. Somebody’s coming to look at it already?”

“Mmm-hmm. So Mom said we have to be sure our suits and wet towels don’t get left on the floor.”

“Huh,” I scoffed, getting to my feet. “I’m not going to clean the cottage for anybody. They can just see it as it is.”  
Josh climbed back up on the pier and looked at me hopefully. I grabbed him around the neck and gave his head a Dutch rub with my knuckles. He hunched his shoulders and squealed, and I remembered how I used to feel when Dad did that to me—kind of safe and scared at the same time. “Okay, Josh,” I said, letting him go, “we’ll kick the ball around a bit.”

“We’ll play, too.” Andrea held out her hand to Vicki. Vicki looked uncertain, then laughed and said, “Okay, Andrea and I against Kyle and Josh. Losers do the dishes.”

It’s funny how sometimes a silly game you’ve played a thousand times turns into something special. That’s the way

it was that day. It was like I was playing, but I was watching at the same time. I saw the determined way Josh clenched his jaws when he was dribbling the ball. I saw Vicki’s long blond hair kind of floating behind her as she took the ball toward our goal. I saw the tiny beads of sweat on Andrea’s upper lip as she tried to dribble past me. I even saw the scab on my knee as I passed the ball to Josh. Our voices seemed to float out over the water. The day was so beautiful, and things were so right between us all.

It’s not like this at home, I thought. At home we’re all separate and busy, each of us going our own way. Here we’re together. Close. We can’t lose all this just because of a little money. Why can’t Mom see that?