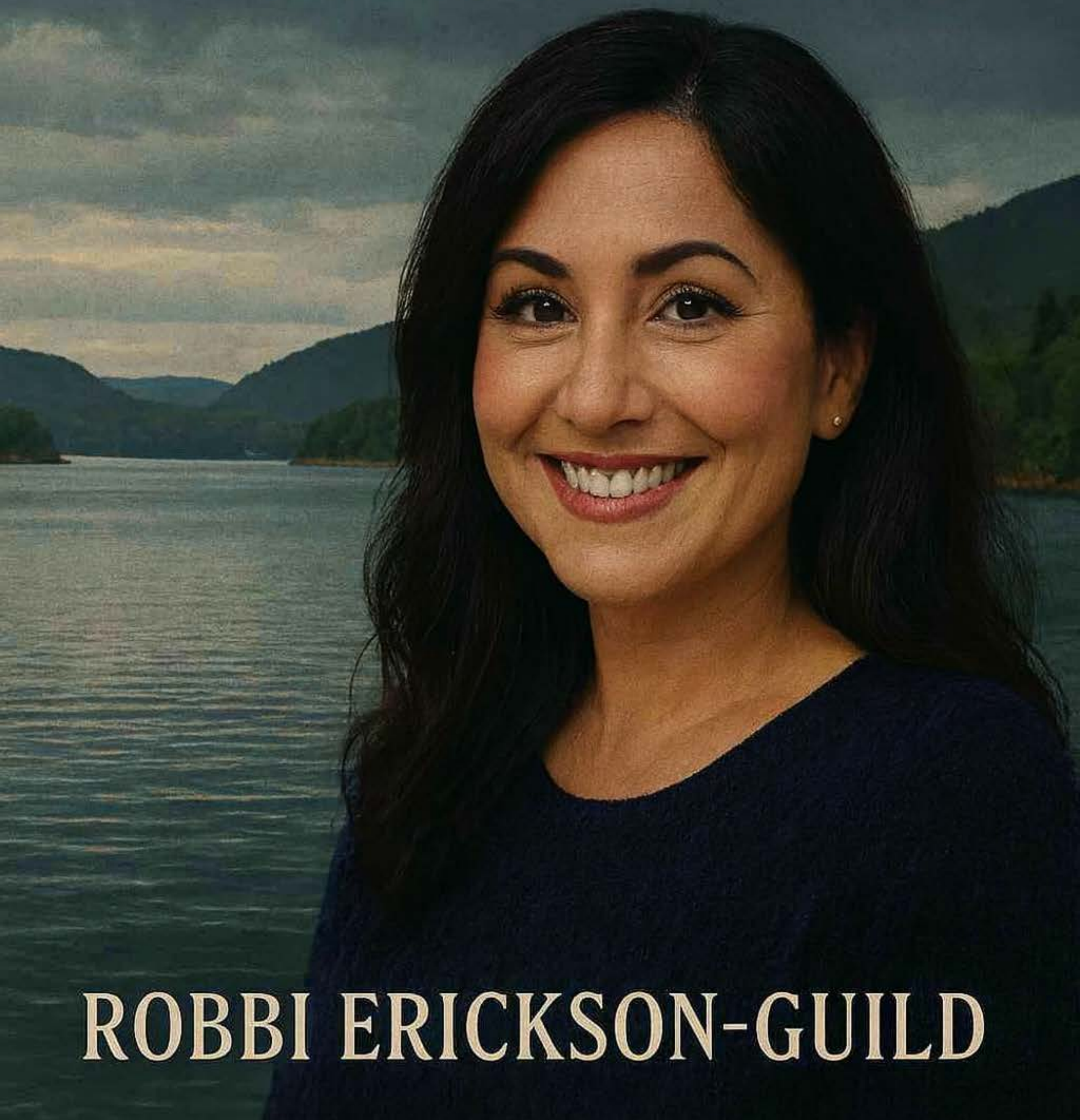
A FAMILIAR FACE

A NOVA SCOTIA MURDER MYSTERY



ROBBI ERICKSON-GUILD

A Familiar Face:
A Nova Scotia Murder Mystery

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WITHOUT A VILLAGE, YOU'RE SIMPLY A FAMILIAR FACE THAT IS ERASED BY TRAGEDY AND TIME…

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Chapter One: A Haunted Halloween Cruise

The highlands of Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, celebrate a season all their own: Celtic Colors. This is when the trees blaze with the glories of fall sunset, in deep auburn, amber, and gold, painting the region's backdrop. Blacktop winds through the mountains, providing a dedicated path to the last spectacles nature has to offer, revealing the beautiful contrasts of sea, air, and land, and providing a miraculous tapestry of beauty. Still, despite the warmth of the colors splashed across the landscape, the land's breath is chilled and wet, signaling the season's last call.

At the heart of this explosion of color lies Bras d'Or Lake, spreading across the landscape with 621 miles of restless shoreline. Its brackish waters lap at the beaches, catching the last light and coaxing lingering visitors to wade in and feel its cool embrace.

However, this late in the season, the lake's invitation carries a tremor of desperation for connection and engagement. Ignoring this plea, swimmers retreat to higher ground, pulling on sweaters and rain gear, while mariners haul their boats into dry storage for the winter. The lake does not take abandonment lightly. As the crowds withdraw, its mood darkens, making any encounter with it something wild, wounded, and increasingly unforgiving.

Night descends quickly in these weeks, its shadows stretching sooner than expected, turning the evening on the water into something spectral. A purple veil drapes across the heavens, and the lake seems to breathe mystery.

Though many have fled to the mainland in recent days, the ones who stayed, the hardy souls who keep to the lake through the cold months, welcomed the Celtic blaze of color, celebrating Samhain with fierce joy.

The Village Waterfront

Costumed figures wandered the streets, each corner alive with a carnival of shadows, a glorious macabre. The final tourists of the season, those who understood the fleeting splendor of these last autumn hours, drifted toward the waterfront, drawn to the promise of enchantment. Each year, the Haunted Halloween Cruise awaited the fortunate few who had secured passage. At the pier, pirates, witches, and ghouls offered sweets, with an occasional playful fright slipped in, just for fun.

The Seagull, the crowning jewel of the lake, loomed two decks high, stretching nearly a third of the dock, tethered to its pylon by a thick, blackened rope. A narrow gangplank bridged the gap, inviting guests aboard. Draped in spider webs, lit by orange and black fairy lights, and dressed in Halloween finery, the boat vibrated with ghoulish delight.

Celtic music rose and twined through the night air, urging all who stepped aboard to shed the weight of the mortal world, including its stress and seriousness, and surrender, for a few enchanted hours, to another realm.

Despite the lighthearted mood that danced through the crowds, the air was heavy with an ominous weight. Swifts, small sparrows with a crescent-shaped tail, swooped and swirled above the boardwalk. They snacked

on flies stirred up from the underbelly of the dock by the Halloween excitement, which, in and of itself, was not uncommon. But tonight, something broke the rhythm. The swifts' cries were wrong. They were thin, sharp, distressed. They wheeled in confusion, then vanished suddenly, descending beneath the pier, as though fleeing from something unknown. Then silence. They huddled, not wanting to be seen, not wanting to draw attention, not wanting to be there.

The hostess of the Haunted Halloween Cruise, Tansey, stepped forward. She was a petite woman with an intense positive energy that radiated from her, enchanting everyone lucky enough to enter her sphere of influence. No one could escape the pull of her personality, elfish, sprite-like, and magical. Her smile, practiced to perfection over 150 days of repetition, her motions automatic yet not without grace. With a steady hand, she raised the gangplank and locked the rail. Guests climbed the steep ladder to the upper deck, laughter spilling into the night as anticipation grew for a fun-filled adventure.

The engine roared awake, *The Seagull's* horn blasted a brief warning to shore and passing vessels that it was about to disembark. Ropes fell slack, and the boat slid backward, leaving the pier and the mortal world behind. The wake churned, a trail etched across the water, a path even the laziest scavenger could follow. Beneath the dock, the swifts huddled, their black eyes fixed on the lake's surface as it deepened into shadow.

Then, faint lights burst into flames. Small flickers rose from the depths, bubbles of brilliance drifting upward, bursting as they touched the air. They shimmered like souls

breaking free, as if the lake itself exhaled a luminous breath. What manner of ghoul was this rising from the dark waters to greet the living?

Onshore, children in costume raced along the boardwalk, chasing the treats offered by vendors. At the pier's end, the great pirate statue loomed, its stony gaze unyielding. From the cauldron hanging in its hand, the children drew their prizes, unaware of the strange lights pulsing on the water behind them, or of the swifts that had fled into the shadows, unwilling to watch what came next.

"What's that?" one of the boys asked, his voice edged with curiosity as a flicker of light caught his eye.

One of the local barmaids emerged from the crowd dressed as a crone. Her hair was wild and sprayed a frosty gray and silver, her skin graven, her eyes shadowed with insidiousness, her dress dark, colonial, twisted around her body, falling harshly to the dock, concealing her feet, which were harnessed in pointy boots. Never one to miss a chance to "educate" young minds about the hidden world, the world they were taught to ignore, the crone relayed a warning (but all in good fun).

"That's the will-o'-the-wisp," she croaked, her tone steeped in witchy theatrics. "Dangerous, me lads, dangerous they be. Never follow them. They'll lure you out upon the water, where you'll find your death…or perhaps someone else's."

The boy's eyes widened, anxiety washing across their faces. The crone retreated from her wicked persona,

realizing she had pressed too far. With a playful chuckle, she patted their backs.

"All in good fun, boys. Nothing to be afraid of. See? They've already drifted on."

But one boy lingered, gaze fixed on the strange lights. He studied their path, his brow furrowed in thought. "It looks like they're following *The Seagull*," he said at last. "Do you think they'll be okay?"

"Of course," the crone replied quickly, her voice lighter now. "It's only a story. Nothing to worry about. Off you go. It looks like more candy's coming out. You'd better hurry."

The boys scampered away, their fears forgotten in pursuit of candy. Yet the crone remained, her eyes drawn back to the water. A chill slithered up her spine.

The lights were no harmless trick. They were omens, harbingers of something dark stirring beneath the lake's surface. Death was here, and it carried a soul with it.

Still, it was Halloween. Whatever the lights intended, whatever they meant to reveal, would rise in their own time. With a shiver, the crone pulled her brimstone-colored crocheted shawl tight around her shoulders and returned to her role, weaving enchantment for the visitors, while the lake churned out its own Halloween entertainment.

Bras d'Or Lake

The Seagull bobbed along in the water, its engine chugging steadily as it carried the passengers away from the falling sun. Dusk stretched across the lake, pulled like a heavy curtain, casting long shadows that swallowed the shoreline. The twilight wrapped itself around the vessel, cloaking the passengers in a phantasmic shroud that glowed faintly with the last embers of day.

In the lounge, tucked into a dark recess near the bar, a fortune teller presided over her table. A thin breath of incense curled from a vase, winding across the velvet cloth, coiling around the ankles of curious onlookers, drawing them closer with its hypnotic pull. Her eyes were ringed in dark makeup, thick purple shadow with silver sparkles swept across her gaze like the night sky itself. Long, slender fingers ringed with semi-precious gemstones and gold rested on the black velvet draped over the table. Silver and gold bracelets danced up her arms from her wrists. She sat stoically, silently, still, emitting the intent to summon something from the other side.

She caught the eye of a woman lingering nearby. With a slow, deliberate motion, she spread the cards before her, each one falling like a whisper of fate.

"Come closer, my dear," she beckoned, her voice low and velvety. "I have a message from the beyond for you."

The woman smiled, eager for a Halloween thrill, and slid into the chair opposite. The fortune teller's lips

curled into a knowing grin. “Let’s see what we have for you tonight.”

Her fingers slipped under the corner of the card, lifting it from the table to reveal the message.

The boat jolted.

Gasps rippled through the cabin. The card slipped from her hand, stolen by a mischievous draft that carried it out the open window and into the air. Another gust slapped it against the side of the boat, pinning it with an invisible hand. The fortune teller, leaning out the window next to her, searched for the wayward card. Sensing its path, she looked down near the water line, and just above it, the card’s identity revealed: Death.

While the passengers continued to react to the jolt, the fortune teller scanned the water for other signs from the other side. Tiny lights, faint and deep beneath the water, fluttered, telling her that the veil between worlds had been disturbed. She pulled her body back inside the boat, nestled herself back on her perch, and carefully placed her open deck back into a silver case.

She took out a fresh pack of cards. Blessed them. Shuffled them. Spread them before her. Drawing in a deep breath, she exhaled her suspicions, closing the portal to the other side. It was not safe to leave it open. They were floating through Styx, and she needed to be very careful about how she engaged with the supernatural at this point.

Nervous laughter bubbled up and spread across the boat, as people tried to ward off their fears about the

“minor disturbance.” The merriment returned, however, when Tansey, the cruise hostess, burst onto the deck, her voice bright and lilting, her British accent carrying like a bell across the crowd.

“Alright, my darlings, eyes up! You’re about to meet the king and queen of the sky!” She twirled playfully, her spritely energy infectious, pulling the passengers’ attention away from all mortal concerns.

She gestured grandly toward the tree line where the local eagles perched in regal silhouettes.

“They’ve been waiting for us all afternoon. Not for me, cheeky things, but for their supper.” She winked, earning a ripple of laughter.

The first mate, a young Gaelic lad of 22, tossed a piece of frozen fish high into the air, letting it plop into the dark water. Tansey leaned conspiratorially toward the guests, her grin wide.

“They’re clever creatures. They hear the engine long before you see them, and they know this show by heart. Watch closely now, this is their grand entrance.”

The crowd leaned forward, eager, as the first eagle spread its wings, circling past the viewing windows in a sweep of majesty. The first dip down was a miss, but the eagle seemed to look at the crowd, waiting for the reaction. It was playing to the human faces staring at its performance from the boat, engaging them, getting them to root for its success on the next try.

The next eagle launched, circling past the viewing windows, wings spread wide. It dove, talons outstretched, but it too missed. The fish bobbed defiantly, and the passengers cheered as though watching a favored athlete. On the second attempt, the eagle plunged again, and rose clutching not one item, but two.

The captain frowned. “How many pieces did you throw?” he asked the first mate, considering the business’s tight operating margin.

“Just one,” the first mate replied defensively.

The second object slipped free and fell back into the water. Long, pale, maroon-streaked, nothing like a fish. The captain swung a light over the side, but before its beam could settle, the other eagle swooped in and carried it away.

“Whatever it was, it won’t go to waste,” the captain announced.

The passengers watched as the eagles returned to their nest. Then, something tumbled from the branches, crashing into the brambles below. Gasps and whispers circled through the cabin space, but Tansey quickly redirected attention.

“Well, wasn’t that exciting? These birds nest here for a reason. Like in human real estate, it’s all about location, location, location.”

A clunk reverberated through the hull, rocking the boat. The passengers barely noticed, but Tansey glanced at

the captain. He checked the radar, then spoke over the intercom.

"Nothing to worry about. We just grazed the sandbar. The water's low this year."

A young girl leaned out the viewing window, eyes wide.

"Look! Is that a shark?"

A pale figure slid beneath the hull.

Tansey peered out.

"No sharks this far into the lake…maybe a big fish?"

She drew out her phone and began snapping photos in rapid succession, hoping to capture an image that would satisfy the child's curiosity.

She quickly screened the images, pressing on the one with the most promise, and enlarged it by pressing her fingers on the screen and spreading them into a V. The image stretched in response, revealing a blur of white that floated just under the surface of the water, indistinct, hidden by the fading evening light. Passengers crowded the windows, cameras clicking furiously.

The girl pressed close, excited by the possibilities.

"Could it be a great white? They have them here, you know," she said, giddy with the thought she'd see, not just any shark, but a GREAT WHITE.

Tansey smiled faintly, trying to ease the tension.

"Perhaps a mermaid," she said, giving the girl a comforting sideways squeeze across the shoulders, not understanding that this was not an acceptable alternative.

The girl's face crinkled in disappointment. But, shaking that off, she plunged her head back out the viewing window to see for herself. Her body balanced on the bar, her legs bent and lifted off the floor, cantilevering her body weight.

"Be careful," Tansey said, encouraging her to at least put her feet back on the floor.

The girl's mother finally intervened. She pulled the girl back into the cabin and directed her to go back to their table and sit down.

Tansey breathed out heavily in relief, satisfied that the girl was safe from falling overboard, and she turned her attention back to the other guests.

The captain's voice broke in. "Time to head back. Wave to the kids on shore, it'll make their day."

Engines revved, dragging the boat off the sandbar. A crunching sound echoed, bubbles rising in the wake.

The captain muttered, "We're clear."

He pushed the throttle forward, and the boat picked up speed, putting forward and away from danger.

Music swelled as Tansey urged the onboard musician to play, distracting the crowd. Yet as the boat circled back into deeper water, the lake betrayed its secret. Will-o'-the-wisp lights bubbled up in the wake, glistening across the surface like oil, glowing, bubbling, chanting the horrors of what lay beneath the surface.

On Shore, Caulley Point, Biddle's Bay

A couple of children dressed in Halloween costumes frolicked on the shore. Their arms waved frantically to capture the attention of the boat's passengers and to get feedback on their costumes. They always came out to wave at the boat when it passed by. However, as the boat puttered off, the lights on the water caught the children's attention.

"Cool, what is that?" the little girl stated, pointing out a dark shape silhouetted against the dancing lights, her voice muffled by the plastic mask held to her face by rubber bands that secured to her ears.

"I don't know," Kaleb, the older boy said, pulling his zombie mask off and letting it fall to the ground. "Let's get a closer look. Leave your mask here," he directed.

The little girl pulled off her mask and let it fall next to her brother's, as they scrambled to drag their rowboat through the grass to the water's edge.

Squinting hard, they tried to make sense of the shadows and light before them. Curiosity won. They leapt into the boat and paddled out, waves lapping against the

hull. But as they drew near, the lights dimmed, shifted away, and flickered out.

"Dang it, I can't see anything. The lights are gone. Can you?"

The girl leaned over the side, peering into the black water.

"I can't…wait. I think I see something." She plunged her arm beneath the surface, feeling blindly.

"Do you feel anything?" the boy asked, shifting his weight to steady the boat.

"Just seaweed…and—AWWWK!" she shrieked, jerking her arm back and collapsing into the belly of the boat.

"What was it? What did you feel?"

"I don't know. A body I think," she revealed with a shiver of disgust.

"A body?!" he exclaimed.

Overtaken by a dark impulse he dove overboard.

Suspended by the salt, he hovered, giving him the chance to scan everything that stretched out beneath the boat. A shape settled at the bottom, just beyond reach. He surfaced, gasping for a breath of air.

"There's something down there. Maybe a dead seal. Let's get a rope and haul it back."

They paddled excitedly to shore, hearts racing with excitement.

Their parents were marine biologists who taught at the local university. This would be a prize specimen, a treasure for the fall semester. They gathered ropes, nets, a grappling hook, and returned to the site.

The anchor dropped, scraping across rocks until it caught. The boat steadied. Kaleb tied a line to the mooring cleat and then turned to his sister.

“I’ll swim down and tie it off. Keep watch. Hold the light high.”

Removing his shirt, already heavy and wet from his prior dive, he tossed it to the nose of the rowboat, where it settled in a lump, water draining from it, forming a puddle.

“Alright, Kaleb. Be careful.”

He slipped silently into the water, descending into the darkness. His eyes spasmed in response to the salt and limited availability of light. He blinked fiercely to clear them and help them to recalibrate to the pressure. His vision slowly focused, allowing him to see what lay beneath him. There, in a heap lying in the sand was the body, daring him to come closer.

Seaweed waved like beckoning fingers. Small fish darted in, nibbling at the mangled flesh that shifted with the current. The body lay heavy, smaller than expected, its shape strange. Cold, firm skin met his touch. A wound gaped, bone protruding. The moonlight above was too faint

to reveal details. He looped the rope around it and rose back to the surface.

Panting, he flopped aboard. “I’ll need your help to haul it up.”

Together they pulled, the rope straining, the form rising from invisibility. It surfaced.

“Kaleb?” his sister whispered. “I don’t think that’s a seal.”

He shone a flashlight. The beam revealed the mangled remains of a human body, lurching grotesquely in the water. Their eyes widened, hearts pounding.

Kaleb reached to shield his sister from the horror of the situation. As he hugged her tight, she let out a giddy breath, “Cool.”

The Village Pier

Back at the dock, the cruise boat returned. Engines whirred, ropes tied, passengers disembarked with cheerful chatter.

“Thank you for joining us on the last cruise of the season! See you next year,” Tansey called out brightly, relieved that the season was finally over.

Engrossed in their recapping of the adventure, no one noticed that with each rise and fall of the boat, the lake sipped at a smear of blood along the side of the hull, drawing it out in a long, languid streak.

Chapter Two: The Body

The streets of the village were dark, yet alive with motion. Shopkeepers shuttered their businesses, families packed boxes, and neighbors carried out the last of their trash before the annual migration back to the mainland. Winter on the island was merciless, with both the weather and the economy turning frigid overnight, forcing most to flee before the season's grip tightened. Amid the bustle, a refrigerated truck rumbled down the narrow lanes, weaving past costumed stragglers still lingering from the night's festivities.

Inside the truck, the corpse of an unknown victim lay cradled in plastic and ice. The driver kept his eyes fixed on the road, following the curve of Bras d'Or Lake toward Sydney, the island's lone hub of size and consequence. Only there could local law enforcement access what they lacked at their station: a forensic team, proper equipment, and, most importantly, a morgue.

Normally, the dead were stored in walk-in freezers or even the ice rink, but this body was different. This body demanded answers. Was it a tragic accident, a suicide, or something darker: murder?

Cape Breton was small and quaint, a place where doors were rarely locked, and car keys often left in the ignition. But it was not untouched by death. Each year, ten to twenty suicides scarred the region, alongside a handful of murders. With limited resources, nearly a third of cases went unsolved. This one, however, was already marked as being difficult for investigators, as the body was dismembered, its top half missing.

The driver's eyes flicked toward the passenger seat. The police officer assigned to lead the case, Brian Carter, sat rigid, staring into the distance with a silence that discouraged questions. The night's darkness concealed his features, with only the dashboard lights illuminating key traits: a pale complexion, a sharp profile, a broad face, and a golden glow from the red and blonde hair in his stubble.

The paleness of the officer's skin triggered the driver's mind. It wandered back to the crime scene. The paleness of the flesh on the corpse, the images, grotesque and unforgettable.

The leg had been smooth, supple, well-formed, until the curve of the hip ended abruptly in ruin. Flesh dangled, bone jutted white from the socket. When the officer rolled the remains, the buttocks revealed tissue damage and discoloration. Efficiently, he wrapped the body in plastic, sealed it in a bag, and ordered the team to move the body onto a stretcher. The driver had opened the truck's rear door, offering the vehicle's cold, sterile space for transport.

A sudden flash of movement snapped him back. A deer leapt across the highway. He slammed the brakes, horn blaring, a curse escaped his lips. His heart thudded, but he masked the jolt with bravado. He didn't want the officer beside him to think him shaken by a deer, or by the body in the back. Clearing his throat, he steadied the wheel and pressed on through the night without uttering another sound.