



SAVAGES

ROSALYN WRAIGHT

Savages
Lesbian Adventure Club: Book 3

Rosalyn Wraight

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A Don't Waste Daylight Publication

Chapter 1

The July sun beat through the car windows, turning my dark jeans into an overzealous branding iron. I cranked up the air conditioner a notch and looked at Claudia as she drove us deeper into the boonies.

“Why the heck would they make us dress in dark clothes in this heat?” I beseeched. “Jesus!”

“Kate, you know every one of these club meetings is simply payback for every other one,” she reasoned. “Maybe they just didn’t like our silly classes so they’re throwing us into the hotbox or something.”

“*Something* is right. I guess I just figured that Maggie and Susan were a bit nicer than the rest of us.”

She shook her head at me and rolled her eyes. I knew; I was probably wrong to overestimate anyone in this group.

“At least we can figure that it’s camping,” she furthered. “Maybe they’re just protecting us from mosquitoes.”

She referred to the fact that Maggie and Susan stopped by our house the day before to collect our camping gear. In that respect, the searing cat burglar clothing made a bit more sense, but it still did nothing to cool us down.

Claudia suddenly slowed the car down considerably and pointed to a sign in the distance. Off to the right, a white cardboard sign read: *DWD Meeting*. That acronym came in handy. God only knew what sorts would stop if Dykes Who Dare were spelled out in all its glory.

She turned the car into the driveway that wasn’t really a driveway— simply a very small patch of dirt that immediately dumped us into a field butting a forest. In front of us a green beater of a pickup sat next to another cardboard sign: *DWD Parking*.

Maggie and Susan were apartment dwellers who did not live together. In the month since the last meeting, both Claudia and I had wondered if they dared throw this obnoxious group into the smallness of an apartment with the extreme nearness of neighbors. Apparently, they fathomed the

possible consequences of that and decided to put us out in the middle of nowhere—where we could be neither seen nor heard. There was indeed wisdom in that.

Claudia parked and turned off the ignition. She grabbed her cup of Earl Grey just as I went for the remainder of my latte. Then, we just stared into the thickness of the forest. I envisioned spiders and snakes and bandit raccoons. I suckled the last of my gourmet coffee, fearing it was my final taste of civilization.

I pointed to a sign on a tree, and we left the safety of our car. We neared it and read: *DWD this way*. Before we stepped foot on the path ahead of us, Claudia's hand seized my arm. She pulled me near and said, "Whatever happens, I love you. Good luck."

I laughed, but somewhere inside I knew it lacked humor. It was virtually impossible to predict these things. Even our innocent little classes last time ended up in drama and drunkenness. The activities were never the variables. It was us, together: a bunch of unruly kids.

We followed cardboard arrows through the forest, its canopy so thick that my jeans finally started to cool. In the eerie quiet, we spied yellow and green tape threaded between trees. It reminded me of something Laura might encounter on a crime scene, and I shook my head to dispel such thoughts.

Soon, we came upon a clearing to the right of the winding path. We turned to face it, somehow unable to quite fathom what was before us. First, we saw Maggie and Susan sitting at a small picnic table. Next to them stood a tiny camper. Behind that, a small rocky mound reached upward and sported a rainbow flag with a DWD on it. In front of it all was a well-worn, dirt circle that held a fire pit and lawn chairs. Not what we expected, but what had we expected? The unexpected.

"Names, please," Maggie ordered from across the distance. "What are your names?"

Claudia and I looked at each other and laughed. It felt surreal: this familiarity that pretended to be one-way.

"Claudia," she responded with a chuckle. "Claudia Kitterman."

She elbowed me, and we laughed harder, watching Maggie check her name off a list while Susan looked on so very seriously.

"And you?" Maggie said, casting an emotionless look in my direction.

"It's me, humdinger!" I pleaded, fully convinced that I could elicit a smile. "Your bud from the nerds, misfits, and troublemakers table. Remember?"

"Your name please," she stoically ordered as Susan quickly moved a hand to conceal her own beginnings of a smile.

“Kate,” I conceded but still in search of my friend. “Call me Kate. Just please don’t call me ‘nerd’ like they did in school. That hurts my little feelings.”

“And last name?” she asked, still unsmiling.

“Sutter!” I yelled. “Kate Sutter.” I stuck my tongue out at her.

“You can both take a seat,” Susan said. “We’re still expecting others.”

Again, Claudia and I laughed between ourselves as we sought the lawn chairs that encircled the empty fire pit. I sat and tried to comprehend what we had walked into this time. I noticed that the plastic crime scene tape came in four colors and divided the scene into four distinct areas. In every direction, there was only forest and more forest. I had no clue what they were up to, but whatever it was they took it to heart.

Suddenly in the distance, nearing voices sang “If I Were King of the Forest,” trying their best to mimic a cowardly lion. Then they came into view, each couple in a row. Holly and Laura, the artist and the detective, led the arm-in-arm parade. Alison and Janice, yoga teacher and massage therapist, were in the middle. Kris and Ginny, the two professors, brought up the rear. Their song dwindled into silence as they entered the area the same way that we had: speechless and feebly attempting to assimilate.

“Names, please,” Maggie ordered anew.

The businesslike process began, and it ended with us all seated and staring at them for clarification.

“Okay, get it out of your systems,” Susan said, twirling her hands upward in exorcising gesticulations. When we just stared at her, she added, “You always have to gossip, crack jokes, go through every detail of our last meeting. So turn into your little schoolgirl selves and get it out of your systems.”

Ah, permission from the seasoned grade school teacher! And we did, rather loudly. Kris and Ginny gave us all a few more details about their trip to Paris. A few insults were tossed about our weekend of classes, as was a sincere desire for a margarita. There were jokes, bantering, laughter, and above all else: discrete questions about what Maggie and Susan were up to. Curiosity soon brought the chatter to a halt, and all eyes again turned to them.

Maggie began, “First of all, I’m not too sure we lucked out getting the Fourth of July weekend, but we followed tradition. You are now stuck with us until Sunday.”

I, too, wondered if that was fortune or not. We usually met on Saturdays, sometimes just for the day but usually overnight. In July, however, we had taken to tacking on Friday night, as all the teachers among us were already on vacation and the rest of us ended up with a long holiday weekend. It

made sense; in many ways we were like family, and this became our family outing.

“As you were told in the invitation, we’ll be camping,” Susan said. “Everybody’s stuff is here like we promised. And there will be a game involved, but we’ll explain that later.”

Alison piped up, “Who gets the camper? It doesn’t look like we’d all fit. It might be fun to try, though.” She snickered.

“The camper is ours,” Maggie corrected. “You are welcome to its bathroom, but other than that, it’s off limits. We’re the grownups this time.”

“That’s not fair,” Ginny said. “You’d put an old woman on the ground in a tent?”

Susan dared in a way that stunned me, “First of all, Ginny, you are only old when it’s convenient for you, and second of all, you are not one to be talking about fairness.” She smiled; it was the first from either of them.

Indignation took Ginny’s jaw and threw it to the ground. A round of applause ensued, and we all gained a bit more respect for whatever they were concocting.

“Like I was saying,” Susan continued and cleared her throat. “We’ll explain the game later, but for the moment, we have some business to get take care of.”

Then Maggie cleared her throat in readiness, and I remembered that feeling of receiving the imaginary mic from my partner.

“First, we took Kate and Claudia’s suggestion to include a do-gooder activity.”

For ones who had supposedly gotten *it* out of their systems, they all dove headfirst into juvenility and chanted “do-gooder” with a few quick and groaning references to stray panties and glow-in-the-dark condoms.

When the outburst ended, Maggie said, “My brother, Denny, owns this land. He never quite grew up, so he uses this place as a paintball arena with his friends. In the fall, it turns into a place where they slaughter deer during hunting season. Barbaric, but like I said, he never quite grew up.” She made a quick scan of the landscape, and I was certain that our favorite vegan wanted to hurl. “Anyway, a couple of years ago when they were up here hunting, one of his friends fell out of a deer blind down the path a ways. His rifle bag handle got stuck on the blind, and he was accidentally hanged. Denny found him. He tried to resuscitate him, but it was hopeless.”

Suddenly, the mood became very somber, out of respect and out of utter creepiness.

“I marked off the area with tape and a lunar triple goddess symbol.

Just avoid the area with the white tape,” Maggie said. “But anyway, Denny loved Bub like a brother. Denny has a hard time coming here anymore, so I thought a moment of silence for Bub—and Denny—might be a nice do-gooder thing we could start with.”

She didn’t need to instruct us. We were already quiet, feeling terrible for the both of them. Calling it “a moment of silence” was redundant but gave it dignity nonetheless. Claudia’s hand instantly made its way to mine, and we held onto each other. She, of all sitting there, had been the most intimate with Loss lately.

Maggie finally broke the silence, “Thanks, girls, for putting positive energy out there. I am sure it will find them both and come back to you three times.” She quickly looked away; shaken or merely thoughtful, I wasn’t sure.

Susan nobly wrested the attention away from her. “So let’s take care of the business side of this before we settle into a pleasant evening. Fire will be important this weekend,” she explained. “It’s what will keep us warm at night and give us light. It is also needed for food. So your first task is to collect enough firewood to keep it going.”

No one seemed thrilled by the idea, but regardless, we stood to begin the mission. Before we could, however, Maggie added, “And as long as you’re out there, you might as well spend some time searching for your camping gear.” She looked to Susan, and they both chuckled. “We’ve scattered it throughout the forest. If you don’t find it, you’ll be sleeping without shelter.”

Moans and groans erupted. *They* were the grownups? We were in trouble. At least now I knew why we had to put silly labels on our stuff before they came to get it. It made it seem as though we were little kids headed off to summer camp. I half-expected them to demand we write our names on our undies.

“And,” Susan repeated several times before anyone paid attention. “And so you know where to put your stuff *if* you find it, I need each couple to grab a piece of paper from the bag here. Whatever color you get designates which area belongs to you.”

She extended a paper bag, and one partner plucked. Claudia and I were green. Ginny and Kris saw red. Alison and Janice felt yellow. Laura and Holly turned purple.

“For now, you can be in any of the areas while you’re out on your hunt,” Maggie instructed. “Try to get a feel for the land, too. It will help you tomorrow.”

What the hell were they doing?

We spread out and moved deeper into the forest. Everyone was unusually helpful and non-competitive. We called out names when we

stumbled upon another couple's gear. We repeated the moment of silence when we happened upon the hunting blind with its white tape and lunar triple goddess symbol—three interwoven crescents—sitting high upon a stake planted in the ground. We worked together to create an enormous pile of wood and tinder. Within an hour, we completed the tasks. Couples began setting up camp while Susan and Maggie got the fire roaring.

After our tent was set up, Claudia and I sat inside it, trying to organize a bit. We ended up prone and whispering.

"Any idea what the deal is?" she asked. "They make me nervous. There's something evil in the way they look at each other."

"I think we shouldn't assume the worst. It's Maggie and Susan, after all. Maggie couldn't hurt anyone, and Susan wouldn't," I reasoned confidently. "But, make a vow, here and now, that no matter what happens, we're on the same side. We are a team. Promise?"

She nodded in agreement, just as "Sutter! Cigarette?" came loudly from our new next-door neighbor. I looked to Claudia to make sure acceptance of the invitation didn't stall our setting up shop. She said it was okay, as long as I asked the grownups if non-grownups were allowed a cup of tea. I happily did so, and Susan yelled in response, "Already took care of it, Claudia. We knew it was coming on teatime. Earl's waiting for you."

See, they were nice.

Claudia made her way into the clearing with Holly. Laura and I shared a smoke and theorized to no avail.

Eventually, we were all assembled around the fire, relaxing and feasting on the spread that Maggie and Susan had prepared. The menu boasted some grilled and ungodly good eats despite being out there in the boonies: steak, chicken, and tofu kabobs; veggies of endless variety; the biggest damn portobellos I had ever seen; pineapples; and cinnamon apples. We swilled coffee, tea, juices, and sodas. We talked. We laughed. We simply enjoyed the moment and each other.

After we cleaned up and took to the circle again, Maggie asked me to help take the garbage to the pickup they had apparently borrowed from Denny. She said we also needed to remove the DWD signs so we didn't end up with unwelcome visitors. It was a pleasant walk, and I knew better than to try to weasel any information from her. She wasn't smug, but I just knew that she was trusting me. That was a big thing, and I tried to make it obvious that I trusted in return.

We put the bags in the trashcan sitting in the truck bed and made it animal-proof. Then, we headed to the road to retrieve the biggest sign. Speechlessly, we savored the vista. We were on the high ground, and the view in front of us seemed to go on for miles. The sun slunk in the midst of its disappearing act and turned the sky into a palette that Holly would

appreciate. Peace was abundant and free for the taking; I greedily filled my inner pockets.

After making sure all the vehicles were locked, we headed back through the darkening forest to rejoin the circle.

A calm seized the group, keeping the obnoxiousness at bay. Partner hand joined partner hand, except for Alison's and Janice's. They were not at that point yet. I could tell by the way they looked at each other, though, that they teetered awfully near. Their looks still harbored discomfort and uncertainty, but an intense sparkle was there, too. Trust strengthened itself with chin-ups as they smiled coyly at each other. I liked what I saw, and it made me squeeze the partner hand a little tighter.

In the very far off distance, the sound of fireworks became audible. We imagined residents in the nearest town's park huddled within inches of each other, faces skyward, in the name of independence. I looked to the others and instead felt a dependence that made me truly grateful for what these women were to me. I loved each of them, and again, I knew reciprocity.

Chapter 2

The utter peacefulness shattered into a million pieces when Maggie suddenly appeared from the periphery and pulled the trigger of an air horn. It startled us all to immediate attention.

“Starting tomorrow,” she said, “the air horn is your friend.”

My ears made me doubt that, seriously.

She explained, “Whoever holds the air horn in this area—the inner sanctum—has the floor, and everyone else must listen.” She looked to us in challenge as she held the horn high.

No one dared object, but I think fear masqueraded as respect. I figured we were about to find out about the game.

Maggie handed the horn to Susan, and she said, “We’ve decided that a civilized game of Capture the Flag might be fun.”

We looked at each other as Maggie sat down next to Susan.

“There are a lot of rules to go over so listen up,” Maggie said. “First off, your designated area is yours to defend, where you will hide your flags. Each couple gets three flags in their color, worth one hundred, two hundred, and three hundred points. The object is to sneak into enemy territory and steal a flag. You must then run back to the inner sanctum with it, and we’ll record your points. Then you take the flag to your own territory and guard it. All flags can be stolen back by their respective owner. Fair is fair. You only get points for flags you capture that are not yours. No points for recapture.” She smiled.

That sounded basic enough to me. Everyone else seemed to concur.

Susan continued, “You cannot hide flags under anything. They must be visible and within reach. That’s important. Does that make sense to everyone?”

There appeared to be no confusion, but Alison asked, “How do we defend our flags?”

Maggie explained, “You can capture anyone who is in your territory. Simply touch them or hit them with a paintball, and you can haul them

off to jail.”

“Paintballs!” made its way through the crowd, and I felt uneasy with the thrill that it garnered.

“Yes, paintballs,” Maggie said. “But only one team member gets a paintball gun. That would be Janice, Ginny, Claudia, and Holly. The other four of you are not allowed to use it or even touch it.”

The soon-to-be-armed ones chuckled, suddenly feeling very omnipotent. Laura looked at me with a sheer refusal to believe that they posed a real threat. Kris gasped. Alison laughed. Me? I did not know what to think. A laughing gasp of refusal to believe, maybe.

Susan continued, “If you get hit with a paintball in enemy territory, you are automatically captured. Anytime you are captured, by a paintball or otherwise, you are at the mercy of the jailer. The jailer has three choices. She can tie you to that jail tree over there.” She stopped and pointed to a tree near the clearing. “You must stay tied to the tree for fifteen minutes. The jailer can instead choose to ask you one question that you must answer honestly. ‘I don’t know’ is permissible as long as it is the absolute truth. The jailer’s last option is to take one item from you. If it’s a concealed item, the jailer has to name it properly, and then you have to hand it over if you have it.”

They went on to explain safe zones: The inner sanctum and one’s own territory were the only places where harm could not come to us. Further, at any time we could blow the air horn in the inner sanctum, and everyone had to report immediately for assembly. The person with the horn could rat on rule-breakers, and the group could decide on punishment. Also in the inner sanctum, rules could be renegotiated, and items could be traded.

Then Maggie explained charms. “We have three small beanbags with names on each: Goddess, Retaliation, and Probation. These will be scattered about. If you find one, you can keep it until you’re ready to use it. After you use one, you have to come back here and throw it into another couple’s territory. Goddess allows you to stun everyone in your line of sight for a total of five minutes, in which time you can either capture them or head into their territory without their defense. Retaliation allows you to capture a player within her own territory. Probation will get you out of jail immediately.”

Susan took the imaginary mic and said, “We also have four spells for you to use on your enemies. Each team gets a spell sign and can tie it to a tree anywhere within their own territory—as long as it is not within ten feet of a flag. You can also move it around as often as you like. We have Alarm, which means that when you see this word on a sign you must *loudly* make an alarm sound until you can get out of enemy territory. If you see Freeze on a sign, you have to sit down where you are for five minutes. If

you see Humiliation, you must sing the words to 'If Feel Pretty' at the top of your lungs while you run from the territory. And the last one is Damsel. When you see that one, you have to scream your partner's name and tell her to rescue you."

Maggie and Susan high-fived each other, obviously proud of themselves for setting adequate traps for the lot of us. Then Maggie said, "Now here's the hard part."

We shuddered to think.

Susan said, "The following are the *most* important rules. Violators will be dealt with harshly."

Maggie said, "One, absolutely no head-shots with the paintball guns."

"Two, no entering enemy territory without goggles on."

"Three, you cannot steal or ask anyone to surrender their camping gear or paintball supplies."

"Four, be honest."

"Five, do not hurt anyone or anything."

"And six, have fun!"

Laura, who was already planning her victory celebration, asked, "And what does the winning team get? I think we should be clear about that after what Kris and Ginny pulled with paying for free breakfast."

Mean looks careened toward both of them. As they laughed, I saw Maggie make a beeline for the camper. She returned carrying something behind her back and said, "We got duped by Kris and Ginny, too, and so we decided to make the prize *very explicit*. The winner gets a trophy ... and if we all agree ... it can be used for any future competitions we may have."

"Let's see it!" we all started chanting while we stomped our feet in rhythm.

Maggie backed up a couple feet and turned toward the picnic table. When she turned again, we beheld the coveted prize. A hot little dame with gigantic bobble boobs shook her stuff on a black pedestal. As we inched closer to get a good look, the engraving became apparent: *#1 D-Double-D*.

As tacky as she was, we all wanted her. I would put her on the mantelpiece if we had one, show her off, while I was certain Claudia would banish her to the spare bedroom with Lover Doll. Regardless, I had to have her. I elbowed Claudia and said, "She's ours, partner."

She rolled her eyes at me, but I knew she wanted her, too. Not because she was a bobble boob but because she wanted to win.

Maggie and Susan then handed out bandanas to each of us in our respective colors. We turned them into headbands, except for Claudia, who said hers looked stupid pushed up in back by her French braid. She settled for a hair tie but still wasn't quite pleased with it. My comments about turning into a biker chick did not help the matter.

Then came the goggles: small clear numbers that would not make us look like flies or aliens.

Then came the flags, plastic things in team colors stuck on six-inch bendable sticks.

Then came the large envelopes that contained our spell signs.

We got a bit more hyped with each item we received, but to our deflation, Susan announced, "The game begins at sunrise. And if the paintballers will follow Maggie, she will give you some instruction on loading and shooting."

The four of them took off with her. Susan went back to her list at the picnic table, and Laura, Kris, Alison, and I sat around the fire. As Laura lit a cigarette, she asked, "What's that saying about not being able to hit a barn?"

I replied, "Couldn't hit the side of the barn from the inside with all the doors shut."

"That's it, and that's them," she said. "I don't think we have anything to worry about."

I tried to imagine Claudia armed. Her looks were lethal, and they scared me far more than the idea of her pointing a gun at me. Holly, I figured, would be more enthralled with the actual paint than anything else. Ginny? That was iffy. She had a thin streak of b-word running to her core, but she liked to filet with words. I thought about Janice, and I wasn't sure, so I asked Alison.

She snickered, barely. "I really have no clue. But, I guess we'll find out, won't we? My luck, she'll go berserk."

She seemed distracted, and I was uncertain whether or not to ask. Once a conversation got going between Kris and Laura about an armed Ginny, I tapped Alison on the knee. "You okay?" I asked.

She shook her head but nonetheless replied, "This Bub and Denny thing bothers me. It doesn't seem right."

"I don't think Maggie would have had us here if it wasn't all right. I figure if he was a friend of Denny's then he'd be happy we're all here, having fun like he used to do. It's kind of a gift, you know?" At least, that's what I told myself.

"I know what you mean," she said. "It's silly."

I was about to tell her to relax and not worry about it when Laura started her usual ribbing.

"How are you going to deal with being a loser again, Kate?" she teased.

"I won't have to deal with it, but if you need some help with it, I'll be happy to oblige." I wanted to beat her more than I wanted the trashy trophy. It was time she got taken down, if even by a peg.

“Here come the little women. Quick, put your hands up,” she urged, and we did.

Our effort to give them a hard time failed miserably, as each went to their partner and silently lowered the upraised arms. I got a kiss on the forehead, which I thought was a better deal anyway.

“Are we all educated on the proper use of firearms?” Laura asked.

“It seems pretty easy,” Holly said. “I think I can do it.”

The others concurred, and Laura rolled her eyes in my direction.

The mood was strange—or strained, maybe. It was unusual to have it be like that. Maybe we were all just tired or thinking about tomorrow. Something. I didn’t like it.

Soon, we all decided to hit the sleeping bags since we would have to rise with the sun. I felt better as soon as Claudia and I were alone. We tried to negotiate the hard ground with bodies that were accustomed to cushion. Once settled, we held each other in silence. We listened to the nightbirds, the steady chorus of crickets, and an occasional frog belching in the distance. We could hear Laura and Holly talking in their tent, but they were far enough away that it was nothing but muted babble. It had all the makings of peace, and yet, it was disquieting. It seemed like we were waiting.

“Something’s not right. Do you feel it?” I asked her.

“I think we’re just tired, hon,” she replied, pulling me closer. “Since we got here, it’s been all business, as they called it, and now we’re tired but still anticipating the game. Maybe it’s like being in limbo.”

That made sense, kind of.

“I suppose, but do you feel lonely? I just got this horrid feeling of being so alone. Even with you right next to me.”

Again, she pulled me closer, but it didn’t change what groaned inside.

“I love you, Kate,” she assured. “I’m right here. See if you can lose yourself in my fingertips.”

She started gently scratching my head, the way my mother did when I was little. She knew that fond memory, and she perfected the art. It always made my mind stop and caused my soul to plunge into the now. No future worry. No retrospect. Just the moment.

I concentrated on her fingers, and soon, I felt sleepy.

* * * * *

I woke with a start. My subconscious obviously knew what had happened, because I instinctively listened for something. Claudia was sitting up, doing the same, her head tilted to hear.

“Denny!” A slow, moaning cry filled the night. *“Denny, help me!”*

I flew to the tent door and unzipped it. I stuck my head out to steal a brave glimpse. Across the path in front of me, I saw Alison and Janice doing the same. I saw Susan by the fire, putting down a book she had been reading. Maggie was half out of the camper, frozen. I looked to my left, and I saw Laura’s head in her tent door.

“What the hell was that?” she whispered with force.

“Deeeennnnnyyyyy!”

Laura yell-whispered to Maggie, “Who would be out there? Do you have somebody out there?”

“No!” she quickly replied. “I swear! There shouldn’t be anyone out there.”

Susan shot to her feet and ran to Maggie.

I felt Claudia on my back, squeezing tight. I could feel her heart beating into my back, or maybe it was my own trying to make a hasty getaway.

“I’ll go have a look,” Laura proclaimed before popping her head back into the tent.

“I’m going, too. Claudia, you stay here,” I instructed and then attempted to wriggle out from under her.

She slapped me a good one on the shoulder, more for effect than vengeance. “You are not the goddamn Dykeworld 911! Let Laura take care of it. She’s a cop!”

“Denny, help me!”

“I’m going!”

“Then I’m going with you!”

With that, we both exited the tent, only to find everyone making a cautious dash to the inner sanctum and its fire.

“Denny, help me. It’s Bub!”

Everyone froze in her tracks after that one, even the brave detective with the artist glued to her neck.

“Do you have your gun, babe?” Holly whispered loudly.

“You think I’d come to a club meeting with a gun?”

“I don’t think a gun would work anyway, Holly,” Janice said.

“Everybody get to the fire,” Claudia ordered. “Just get to the fire.”

In great strides, we did so. As we got there, we saw Kris and Ginny exit their tent and scoot under their red tape in what seemed like a mere two seconds of motion.

“Deeeennnnnyyyyy! It’s Bub!”

With a massive heartbeat, the lot of us clung together in one tight knot of bodies. Everybody began talking simultaneously. Nothing made sense. It was all emotional blabber. Frustrated, I grabbed the blessed air horn and pulled the trigger. All eyes turned to me.

"I know what you guys are thinking, and it's stupid. I don't believe in ghosts!" I said indignantly. I didn't. Well, maybe I did or maybe I didn't, but things were descending into chaos.

"Who cares what you believe, Kate?" Laura snapped uncharacteristically.

"I've got the goddamn horn, and I can say what I want," I yelled right back at her.

"Then give me the stupid horn," Claudia said, pulling it from my hand. "Everybody needs to get a grip. We don't need to be talking about ghosts!"

"Perhaps that's exactly what it is ... a ghost," Janice said. "It's fear. We could be—"

"Denny, help me!"

"This is insane! I'm going to go have a look," Claudia said. "Kate, it's like you say: look for the facts. So, there's some reasonable explanation or somebody's messing with us."

"Or we're messing with ourselves," Alison interjected.

Claudia started for the path, and I grabbed her arm to stop her. "You're not going! I'll go!"

"No, Kate. You just stay here. Mind the stupid horn and keep an eye on everybody."

"I'll go with you, Claudia," Laura offered.

"Fine," she said. "Everybody get a grip, and the two of us will go have a look."

Maggie started running toward the camper, yelling, "Wait! I'll get you a flashlight."

When she returned, Claudia grabbed her shoulders and looked her squarely in the eye. "Are you sure you don't have somebody out there? Little helpers? Stoolies?"

"There's nobody out there. I swear."

Claudia grabbed the flashlight, turned it on, and ordered, "Okay, Laura, let's go."

I followed them to the path and watched as they walked into the darkness. Soon, I could not even see their scanning flashlight. I did not like this one bit.

Everyone huddled around the fire, whispering things that I could not hear and probably did not care to hear. I ran to our tent and retrieved our flashlight. Then, I stood in the middle of the path, shining the light into the darkness and helplessly waiting. I paced.

Finally, I saw their light again, and I ran to meet them. "Anything?" I eagerly asked.

"Nothing really," Laura said. "Did you hear the voice at all?"

As I thought about it, I realized we hadn't. The nightbirds, the crickets, and the frogs filled the night again. Those makings of peace would certainly not be there if something evil were out walking. "No," I affirmed. "It's been quiet."

We headed back to the fire. Claudia slipped her arm around my waist about the same time Holly lunged at Laura. That began the unraveling of the tight knot of people. Couples began to separate. Thoughts began to slip out of the clutches of fear.

"Let's just all head back to our tents. Things are quiet. We'll be okay," Claudia said.

"We did this to ourselves, everybody," Alison said. "We made the fear. Don't be afraid. There's nothing to be afraid of. Just let go of it."

After several bathroom trips into the poor little camper, it seemed that normalcy had returned. Couple by couple, we cleared the area and returned to our sleeping bags. It was coming on three o'clock.

After we sat in silence for a few minutes, Claudia said, "I think it's that symbol Maggie put up. It glowed, Kate. It f-ing glowed."

She described what she had seen outside the deer blind where Bub died, and I could tell that it scared her.

"You really don't believe in ghosts? *Are there ghosts?*" she asked, but I wasn't sure if she was questioning me or herself.

"There can't be ghosts," I reasoned. "Too many things wouldn't make sense then."

"*This doesn't make sense,*" she emphasized as she pulled us both down.

"It will. We will make it make sense," I stated, trying to convince us both. "And you were very brave tonight. Everyone listens to you and trusts you. You are a good little manager." I kissed her and then scooted us nearer the door so that I could keep an eye out. I pulled the inner cover back, exposing the screen.

One might have guessed that the mood was even more apprehensive than when I couldn't fall asleep. It wasn't, though. The sounds of the night brought comfort this time. The muted chatter from our neighbors was a welcome presence.

I had nearly fallen asleep when I heard footsteps. I moved quickly to the door and saw Alison and Janice running down the path in the same direction Claudia and Laura had taken on their search. I roused Claudia and told her that I was going to have a look. This time I had enough sense to throw on my shoes. I grabbed our flashlight and hightailed it.

After several minutes, I saw them in the distance. Both were kneeling in front of the deer blind. I knew then what Claudia meant about the glow. It was creepy, the way the crescents intertwined, leaving spaces that

formed eyes, a nose, and a mouth. *Shit!*

Alison and Janice were speaking, but I could not make out what they were saying. At that moment, it really didn't matter. I approached slowly so as not to startle them. They heard me, and their heads turned in synch.

"What are you guys doing out here?" I demanded. "It's not safe! Come back."

"It's safe," Janice assured. "There's nothing to be afraid of. You have to keep the balance. The heart of man: waxing, waning, full."

Froot Loops. Cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs. Snap, crackle, pop. That was all that made sense to me at that moment.

"Just come back with me then. Get some sleep. And please don't come out here in the dark again. Please!"

They both rose, and each grabbed one of my hands. Slowly we walked back. I felt like a child they would suddenly swing between them. They would put flowers in my hair and cure my lack of insight. I quickened the pace, admittedly more fearful of them than of glowing crescents.

We stopped in front of my tent, and I waited for them to finish the next yards that would take them to their own. Janice snuck in, and as Alison knelt down for her trip through, she turned and smiled at me. I saw the good soul I knew her to be, and visions of sweet cereal crumbled in my brain. I smiled back. I knew her. I trusted her.

"Inside not outside," she said. "That's where it's coming from."

"Are you saying we all just had a mass hallucination?" That seemed the only assumption I could jump to from what she said.

"We *are* a mass hallucination! It's just fear. Fear makes us see things incorrectly." She smiled again, gently blew me a kiss, and ducked inside the tent.

I contemplated cereal again while I made my way back to Claudia's arms.

"Is everything okay?" she asked, her voice sleepy.

"It is inside. Just not out there." I laughed and snuggled into her.

The complete book can be purchased in ebook or paperback. Please visit the [LAC Bookstore](#). Also available from other retailers.

About the Author

Rosalyn Wraight is also the author of three Detective Laura McCallister lesbian mysteries: *Woman Justice*, *Secrets and Sins*, and *Corpse Call*. These novels feature several characters from this book.

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