

# A FISHY TALE

JOHN J JESSOP



## **Praise for A FISHY TALE**

A Fishy Tale is another triumph by John J Jessop. It is a laugh out loud story of the exploits of the private investigation firm run by Dr. Jason Longfellow and his wife Chelsea as they try to solve a series of murders of prize-winning fishermen in rural Virginia. The story speeds along as you follow the hands-on approach to crime solving employed by the intrepid Dr. Longfellow. In addition to the swashbuckling action A Fishy Tale sparkles with the interactions between Dr. Longfellow and his nurse wife. The humorous comments and actions between these two are fun of love and very relatable to anyone that has been married. **Rick Spees, Author, Capitol Gains**

John J Jessop has weaved a tall (fish) tale with unbelievable characters that are as relatable as if they were real. And events are told in a way that makes the reader become part of the story. You'll take the bait and more in Jessop's newest and best work yet. **Ben Berkley, Author, The Selfish Giant**

When a couple of brothers pull a ninety-pound fish out of a Virginia lake, they know that something strange is 'goin' on.' Jason and Chelsea Longfellow, amateur PIs, dive into the mystery of what might connect the soggy body of a businessman, several missing fishermen, and a medical biotech company. John J. Jessop propels 'A Fishy Tale' with the speed of a Nitro Z21 Bass Boat toward its shocking conclusion. **Henry G. Brinton, Author, Windows of the Heavens**

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# **A Fishy Tale**

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## **Other Books by John J Jessop**

*Pleasuria: Take as Directed*

*Murder by Road Trip*

*The Realtor's Curse*

*Guardian Angel: Unforgiven*

*Guardian Angel: Indoctrination*

## **DEDICATION**

To my wife and daughters, who lived with me on a mountain lake for many years and put up with my sometimes-wacky sense of humor. We had a lot of fun, and I hope you have the same fond memories of that time as I do. And to my wife and youngest daughter for all your help and support in the writing of my Medical Biotech Murder Mysteries. If Dr. Jason Longfellow, PI, were a real person, he'd be very lucky to have you all as his family.

## Chapter 1. The Fishing Tournament

Tod Carlson and his brother Bill, professional fishermen known as the *Carlson Brothers*, had heard from kinfolk that record-sized fish were being pulled from Smythe Mountain Lake. Tod figured that was why the Blue Ridge Bass and Beer fishing tournament had over two hundred registered participants this April. The Carlson Brothers never missed this tournament, the event's slogan being *If you don't catch a bass, there's still plenty of beer*. They had placed second last year and were odds-on favorites to win. Tod's cousin had whispered rumors of fishermen disappearing and unknown danger in the lake; the locals were trying to keep this quiet. Tod's gut screamed at him to skip this year, but a fifty-thousand-dollar grand prize would go a long way towards paying off serious gambling debts.

Tod and Bill launched their Nitro Z21 Bass Boat with 300 HP Mercury motor from the SML State Park boat launch at six o'clock on Friday morning. They fished until two in the afternoon, rested, ate dinner, and Tod made sure they were back on the water by nine that night. They raced towards the big water up near the dam at a brisk sixty miles per hour with Tod at the helm. Tod grinned when he saw his brother hanging onto the steel seat frame for dear life.

Bill said, "You crazy bastard. Slow it down. It's too dark to go this fast. Remember last year, you didn't see that shallow marker and tore hell out of our propeller first night out. That cost us precious time, or we might have finished first."



Tod, yelling over the roar of the engine, “Chill out, Big Brother. What the fuck’s your deal? We gotta get to our spot before some other asshole gets there. That’s what the three-hundred horses are for. Besides, I know this lake like the back of my hand.”

“More like the back of your head. Slow the fuck down!”

At that moment, the bottom of the boat skidded over a small shallow spot near one of the islands. Tod and Bill were thrown forward as the boat decelerated rapidly and the large outboard engine bounced once over the sandy bottom. Tod readjusted himself in his seat at the helm as the engine dropped back into position, the propeller caught water, and they continued on their way.

Tod saw Bill get up off his knees, where he had landed when the boat temporarily bottomed out. Bill said, “You really are an asshole. You’re gonna kill us. This is a bass boat, not a freakin’ dune buggy. It ain’t built to go on sand. I’m guessin’ the prop’s okay since we’re still movin’. But I swear, if we have to replace it again, it’s comin’ out of your half of the winnings.”

Tod grinned sheepishly and gunned the large outboard.

Tod’s Uncle Jed had filled him in on the history of Smythe Mountain Lake. Construction had begun in the late nineteen-sixties to form a huge mountain lake by damming up an isolated area of southern Virginia where two major rivers flowed together. When the lake filled, it had formed a forty-mile-long expanse of deep, crystal-clear water with shimmering reflections of sun and blue sky. Upstream the lake was bordered by thick deciduous forest, grassy meadows, and farmland. Downstream towards the

dam where the two rivers met, the deep blue water, up to two hundred feet in some areas, was outlined by the beautiful Blue Ridge Mountains. This included heavily-pine-forested shoreline that rose dramatically into steep, sheer, rugged terrain, ending where the pointed mountain tops reached towards the sky. The result had been a pristine mountain lake filled with spectacular views in all directions, a vacationer's dreamland. As Tod had discovered, the mountainous topography also resulted in shallow areas that devoured propellers and wrecked engines of boat-owners who liked to go fast.

Uncle Jed, having lived there from the beginning, clearly thought the lake was a spectacular thing to behold. But he told Tod that boat and jet ski traffic had increased significantly, and runoff from excessive shoreline housing development had caused algal blooms in a few smaller coves during peak summer heat. The lake was currently healthy, but this could be a sign of bad things to come. Something needed to be done. Tod knew the lake was famous for its fishing, with an abundance of large and smallmouth bass, catfish, perch, muskies, sunfish, and carp. Its greatest prize, the striped bass, or striper, averaged 11-15 pounds, could reach 20 pounds, with the current lake record a little over 50. The Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources re-stocked the lake with stripers periodically to keep the tournaments busy, fueling the local economy. Tod had visions of a first-place trophy on his mantle and prize money in the bank.

The brothers reached their first spot of the night, a deep hole off a large island in the big water near the mountains. Tod jerked the throttle into neutral, and the boat decelerated abruptly.

Bill yelled. “For God’s sake! You’re gonna break my neck. What the hell’s gotten into you? You don’t want to sink us here in two hundred feet of water, Asshole.”

Tod, a big grin on his face, “Quit yer’ bitchin’, Big Brother. You should learn to swim. We caught a couple of big ones here last year. All we need’s a school of shad, and the tail slaps of those stripers comin’ up to feed. I’m startin’ with a bucktail. That worked for me last year.”

“I’m gonna try a redfin. There’s enough moonlight to see, but it’s kinda cloudy. Them stripers like it really dark. But it is what it is.”

Tod could barely see Bill’s silhouette as Bill lowered the trolling motor from the starboard bow and guided them quietly along the shoreline. Tod pointed over the starboard side of the boat.

“Listen, Bill. I hear the tell-tale churning of water, a school of shad. Get us over there.”

Tod felt the boat stop, and heard Bill say, “Hot damn! Did ya’ hear that? Tail slap. The stripers have arrived.”

Tod baited his line and watched as Bill pointed the boat in the direction of the action. As the boat moved forward slowly, they both began casting and reeling.

Bill whispered, “I got one! Feels like a big one. Finally! We’ve had lousy luck so far today, but I think we’ve stumbled onto the motherload.”

Tod could see his brother’s tall, lanky silhouette in the sparse moonlight, his long blonde hair blowing in the cool night breeze. Tod chuckled to himself as he pondered how people had a hard time believing they were brothers. His older brother Bill took after Mom, long, lean, blue-

eyed, blonde-haired form with a pretty face. Tod, on the other hand, favored Dad, brown hair, green eyes, short, stocky, block-shaped form, face more like a boxer who'd lost a lot of fights than a professional fisherman. Bill appeared to be working hard, his pole bent in half. Tod laid his pole down, picked up a flashlight, and shined it on the water.

"Keep the tip up. Get him close to the boat. I'll snag him with the net. You've got a freakin' monster, Big Brother. I'm thinkin' 'bout what I'm gonna do with my half of the prize money."

Bill fought with the fish for several minutes before reeling it in next to the boat. Tod shined a flashlight on the object in the water.

Bill said, "Look at the size of that thing. Get the net on it. We don't wanna lose this one."

Tod bent over to net the fish and almost fell in. He felt Bill grab him by the jacket. They struggled together to haul the large fish into the boat.

"I think you've done it, Big Brother. You've caught the Moby Dick of stripers. I'll bet this one breaks the record. It's gotta be over fifty pounds."

Bill said, "I'd say he's at least sixty, maybe more. Let's get him into the tank and get back to castin'. Maybe he's got a big brother out there."

Tod held the net while Bill untangled the fish. It took them both to load it in the storage tank. Then, they continued fishing.

Bill said, "Damn. Every time I cast, I catch another one. I got four keepers and a couple of little guys I threw back. I'm ready to move on to the next spot."

Tod said, "Give me a minute to land this big boy, and then I'll start her up and we can move on. I've caught three more in the thirty to forty-pound

range, bigger than anything we've pulled out of this lake before. We're gonna clean up; first place for sure. Cha-ching!"

Tod netted his fish, put it in the tank and started the motor. "We've saved the best for last, just around the bend from the dam. Where we caught our biggest striper last year,"

Tod flew between the two islands in front of the dam doing seventy. He smiled when he saw Bill hanging on tight to his seat frame, looking terrified.

"Dammit Tod! You're gonna get us killed. You came awful close to that little island on the left. I wanna win this tournament and live to tell the tale."

Tod rounded the bend, decelerated rapidly, and killed the big Merc. He said, "Chill Big Brother. We're here. Set up the trolling motor. I think I hear shad in the water just ahead."

Tod watched as Bill put the trolling motor in the water and inched the bass boat forward towards the shoreline. Bill pointed and said, "Just over there. I can hear the little bastards."

Tod heard several tail slaps. He said, "More stripers. This must be our lucky day after all."

Tod felt Bill move the boat closer to the slapping sounds. He could barely see the school of shad, what little moonlight there was bouncing off their shiny scales as they skimmed the surface. He saw Bill cast his lure, begin reeling, and his pole jerked so hard he almost lost it.

Bill said, "Jesus! I think I've got a whale by the tail. Feels like it's gonna break my pole."

Todd, excited, yelled from the stern, “Keep the tip up! This one’s bigger than the other one. Do NOT lose it.”

“What d’ya think? I’m gonna let it go on purpose? Get the net ready in case I do manage to get this beast up to the boat.”

Tod watched impatiently as Bill fought with the fish, finally reeled it within sight.

Bill said, “Tod. Shine the spotlight on that thing. It’s a monster.”

“I’m not swimmin’ in this lake anymore. That thing looks like somethin’ from the ocean.”

Bill, exhausted, “Brother, come help me. I can’t hold it any longer.”

Tod moved up beside Bill, took hold of the pole, and helped him pull the fish to the boat.

“Reel like a sonofabitch. I think he’s wearin’ down!”

Together they managed to haul the striper up next to the boat. The fish didn’t have much fight left. Tod shined the light on it, noticeably larger than the fish they had caught so far.

“My God! That thing must be seventy or eighty pounds, maybe even ninety, and the size of a small man. I don’t think it’ll fit in the tank.”

Bill said, “Just help me haul it into the boat. I’ll get it in the tank, no worries.”

It took half an hour of struggling, pulling, and wrestling to get the gigantic striper into the boat. Tod was impressed when Bill finally managed to stuff the fish into the tank.

Tod moved to the stern and sat down to catch his breath. “This is crazy. The fish aren’t supposed to be bigger than we are.”

Bill smirked. “Quit yer bitchin’. We’re a shoo-in for first prize with this monster. And he might be bigger than you, but you’re the runt of the litter.”

Tod said, “We’ve fished here lots of times, and we’ve never caught anything like this. We’ve got a fifty and an eighty or ninety pounder in our tank. There’s something strange goin’ on here.”

“The only thing strange is that we’re gonna win this tournament, and you’re complainin’ about it. You’re not just a ‘glass half empty’ kind of guy. You’re a ‘glass is broke’ kind of guy.”

“Bite me! And I might be the runt, but I’ll kick your ass any day of the week.”

Bill said, “Get your rear in gear, and let’s get to fishing. We’re gonna set the world’s striper record tonight.”

As Tod stood up to cast his lure into the school of shad, the boat suddenly lurched. Tod almost fell overboard.

Tod said, “What the hell? Quit screwing around. You almost put me in the water.”

Tod heard Bill from the bow, “I didn’t do nothin’. Something banged into the boat. Maybe we hit a log or a rock. I’m sittin’ here in the dark trying to untangle my line so I can get this lure back in the water. I’m goin’ for a hundred pounder.”

Just as Bill finished speaking, a large object banged hard against the starboard bow. The boat rocked violently. Tod fell and landed on his knees next to one of the stern seats.

Tod growled, “What the fuck? That came from up front. Did ya’ see anything? I dropped my pole in the lake. Grab the light and see if we ran

into a log, shallows, somethin' up there. I'm gonna try to get my pole before it sinks to the bottom."

Bill grabbed the hand-held spotlight and stood up, looking over the bow into the water for rocks and logs. Tod struggled to get to his feet, found his flashlight, and started looking over the side near the stern for his fishing pole. As Tod scanned the water, something large hit the bow again. The boat listed violently, and Tod saw his brother fall overboard, spotlight still in his hand. Tod bent down, grabbed the side of the boat, and held on for dear life. He heard Bill scream once as he hit the water, another muffled scream near the shoreline, and then nothing.

Tod started crawling towards the bow, afraid to stand for fear of ending up in the water himself. "Bill! Where the hell are you? Are you okay?"

No answer. Just the rustling of the shad, the chirping of crickets, the sound of a light breeze and of small waves washing against the shoreline. Then, Tod saw the battery-powered spotlight, still lit and floating half submerged ten feet from the bow. He stood up, leaned over the side, and shined his high-powered flashlight on the spot. Terror slowly crawled up his spine, along the back of his neck, up the back of his head, and blurred his vision. He saw his brother's body, upper half on the shoreline where he had tried to crawl out of the water. His hips and legs were still in the water, surrounded by a large pool of a dark substance.

*Oh my God! Is that blood?* His eyes started to fill with tears. He yelled, "Bill! Bill! Are you okay? Talk to me, you Bastard! Get up and answer me!"



Something very large crashed into the bow of the boat, and Tod went over the side, his flashlight flying out of his hand. He struggled to swim back to the boat, but a hard object collided with his head. As he lost consciousness, something strong grabbed his pants leg and pulled him underwater. Helplessly sinking deeper and deeper into the cool water, his last thought was, *Are you fucking kidding me? We're supposed to win this year.*

## Chapter 2. Money, Money, and More Money

Dr. Jason Longfellow, pharmacologist and amateur PI, and his wife Chelsea sat at the kitchen table in their home in Northern Virginia. It was late March, on a Saturday night at eleven thirty, and Chelsea felt cold despite the hum of the heat pump working overtime. They were drinking coffee and talking quietly to avoid waking their daughters.

Jason, a forty-eight-year-old man of Dutch descent, had worked for the US Food and Drug Administration as a drug reviewer for twenty years. Chelsea had found herself a tall man with deep blue eyes, now less slender than when they first met. She still found his sculpted chin and rapidly graying sandy-brown hair attractive; she was happy he had any hair at all. His prominent and slightly crooked nose, broken in childhood, gave him a rugged look. They had fallen madly in lust, and then in love, in their first month together and she still found him physically attractive. He had proven to be loyal, protective, a good provider and father to their children. She liked the way he made her laugh with his often-goofy demeanor, most of the time.

“How are you doing, Chelsea? It must be difficult. I know how much you loved your mother. But she went quickly. Probably didn’t feel a thing. You might say it was kind of a blessing.”

Chelsea, Jason’s wife of twenty-three years, was of Swedish descent, a natural blonde with clear blue eyes, a perfectly formed nose, and smooth, unblemished skin. Jason had told her he had at first fallen in love with her full, beckoning lips and dimpled chin. But she knew if he was honest, it

was her perfect ass that had sealed the deal. At the moment her ass was not the issue; her chin quivered as she fought back tears.

“Jason, I know you’re trying to console me. But I’m guessing Mom did feel something when that bus hit her.”

Chelsea still loved Jason dearly. But the lack of a filter between his brain and his mouth could turn from entertaining to infuriating in a heartbeat. Since he'd insisted on a ridiculous second career as an amateur PI, she had become less patient with him. Neurotic and OCD, he sometimes carried on long conversations with himself, sometimes in his head, other times mumbling aloud. He was often better off, and safer, talking to himself...like now. She desperately wanted to whack him one to shut him up.

Chelsea sipped her strong, black, dark-roast coffee. She would never understand why Jason bothered to drink that weak decaf swill he was currently choking down. No flavor, no caffeine, what was the purpose? The stupid coffee wasn't the issue either. She felt overwhelming grief and needed consoling. But was Jason up to the task?

Jason said, “Yeah, but the bus knocked her and her walker half a block. The EMT said she was probably dead before she hit the sidewalk.”

Chelsea sobbed loudly, struggling to keep back the tears. “You’re not helping. The only consolation I can take from this terrible accident is that Mom was miserable and had been drinking heavily again. It’s been years since my father passed away, but she still missed him terribly. She never got over it when he died suddenly from pancreatic cancer. The blood

sample showed that her alcohol content was way over the legal limit when that bus hit her.”

Jason said, “You should sue the medical equipment company that sold her that walker. They never provided any warning about the potential hazards of drinking and walking with a walker. You can also take some consolation from the fact that alcohol is an anesthetic; she was probably so drunk she didn’t feel a thing when the bus hit her.”

“Jason, please stop talking. I tried to get her to stop drinking. I work, so I couldn’t constantly protect her and pour her booze down the drain. I should have put her in a nursing home.”

Chelsea had met Jason’s faults—difficulty dealing with stress, indecisiveness, a lack of understanding of the female gender, and no social skills. She could now add inability to console a loved one to the list.

Jason took a large gulp of his decaf coffee. Chelsea had a fleeting wish that he’d choke on it. That might shut him up for a hot minute. Jason kept talking.

“Well, she’s buried beside your dad now. It was a nice funeral service, with lots of attendees. That *Six Feet Under* funeral home does a good job. I heard their motto is ‘*We plant family more than six feet under, so they can’t come back to haunt you*’. I’m amazed they were able to manage an open casket. Every bone in her body must have been broken. But she looked great. I’d swear she frowned at me when I walked by the casket. She never did like me very much.”

Chelsea knew Jason had grown up with an abusive alcoholic father, and his self-esteem wasn’t all that great. He often needed her emotional support

and assurance. He lived a stressful life—a tedious government job, and a long, daily commute on the Washington Beltway. Chelsea also understood that being married to a strong-willed woman, namely her, could be difficult. It didn't help that their daughters Lizzy sixteen, Lilly fourteen, and Lucy eight, always sided with her. But she *was* always right.

Chelsea said, “Mom liked you okay. She and Dad just didn't think you were good enough for me. To their minds, with a Ph.D. you're not a real doctor. Dad believed he was the real deal, an M.D., a specialty in neurosurgery. Mom wasn't too happy with your part-time PI thing either. It's a good thing Dad was gone before you started on that kick. A fake doctor *and* an amateur private eye? He might have put a hit out on you if the pancreatic cancer hadn't gotten him first.”

Jason sighed, “Good to know your family held me in such high esteem. Again, I'm sorry for your loss. But, on the bright side, you were their only child. Which brings me to the ten-million-dollar inheritance. Jesus, Chelsea! Ten million dollars! Neither one of us need ever work again!”

He mumbled to himself, “That old lady used to call me the ‘idiot son-in-law’. I didn't realize it until now, but I have always been rooting for the bus.”

Chelsea squinted her eyes, gave him a fierce look. “What did you say?”

“Nothing Dear. I was just clearing my throat.”

Chelsea had met Jason at Georgetown University Medical School, he a graduate student in the Pharmacology Department and she a nursing student. She started out as an intensive care nurse, reached ICU burnout after a couple of years, and moved into hospital administration. This

inheritance was a life-changer. Neither of them would have to work anymore. She doubted Jason could pull that off for long though. A workaholic, he often needed work as a distraction to help him avoid uncomfortable feelings from his childhood. Without a job, he'd eventually wander off in search of a murder to solve. She had no idea where he got this obsession with amateur sleuthing. He used to watch that old show *Murder, She Wrote*, but surely that couldn't be it.

“Jason, I know Mom was a pain, especially when she started drinking again. But she was my mother, and I loved her.”

“Me too. I especially loved the way she kept trying to hook you up with single or divorced doctors. She introduced you as a widow, even if I was standing there next to you.” He mumbled to himself, “Yay bus.”

“Jason, in all fairness, she thought you were completely daft when you got your private eye license. She was determined to find me someone sane to replace you. The fact that she was drunk all the time didn't help. That neurologist, Dr. Fanning, was quite the catch. Good-looking, a world class practice, and very wealthy.”

Chelsea had a faraway look in her eyes. She took a sip of her thick, highly caffeinated brew.

“Chelsea! Stop it! He married that Victoria Secret model. You dragged me to the wedding.”

Chelsea smiled when she saw Jason's face redden with a flash of anger. He took another gulp of coffee and spilled some on his T-shirt; another coffee-stained shirt for the rag bin.

“I do. I remember you walking around in your suit and tie with your tongue hanging out at the reception. I’m surprised you didn’t fall over it and break your neck. I couldn’t believe it when I saw her flirting with you right before the wedding ceremony.”

It looked to Chelsea like Jason was about to lose it. Sometimes she liked to poke the bear. Chelsea had a jealous streak. She had noticed that some women found Jason’s combination of height, intelligence, clumsy charm, and child-like innocence to be very attractive. She was often quick to stave off any flirtatious attention directed at Jason by other females.

“Why would I fall over my tie? I’m not that clumsy, and it only hung down to my belt.”

“Not your tie, your tongue.”

“Come on, Chelsea. You saw all those models. I’m only human.” He grinned, “And besides, you like my tongue.”

Chelsea took her last sip of coffee. It always amazed her the way Jason could be angry one minute, then quickly turn it around with humor. She ignored the tongue comment.

“Yeah, too bad you’re only human. I’m thinking I would have liked you better as a monkey.”

Jason raised his coffee cup, mock toasting her last comment. He said, “You gave me the cure. That’s on you.”

Chelsea had a brief and unpleasant flashback of their family road trip the previous year. They were traveling cross country so Jason could interview for a lucrative job in the medical biotech industry. Chelsea approved of the lucrative job thing. But by then, Jason had already

convinced himself that he wanted to pursue the PI thing full-time. Unfortunately, she had discovered that while he excelled at drug development, he lacked the observational skills and attention to detail required to succeed as an amateur detective. Yet in his mind, he might very well be the next Sherlock Holmes, with Chelsea as his “Watson”. Truth be told, in this version, Watson ended up solving most of his cases while struggling to keep Sherlock alive.

“Jason, you certainly were a lot more fun back then. Maybe we should take another road trip. But right now, Mom’s gone, and I need to figure out what to do with my inheritance.”

“Don’t you mean *we* need to figure out what to do with your inheritance?”

Chelsea stood, walked over to the coffee machine, and made another cup of dark roast. She realized she might have trouble getting to sleep tonight. But her grief would probably keep her awake anyhow, that and Jason’s snoring. She sat back down and carefully took a sip.

Chelsea said, “*My* mother, *my* inheritance, *my* decision. I want to get out of Northern Virginia. It’s too crowded here, all the traffic, hustle, and bustle. It’s just too much. I’m exhausted from working and trying to raise our three daughters under these conditions. One of the nurses at work and her husband just bought a second home on a lake in Southern Virginia. Smythe Mountain Lake...something like that.”

Chelsea watched as Jason got up, went to the coffee maker, added water, a K-cup of decaf, and pushed the button. He turned to speak to Chelsea without putting a cup under the dispenser.



Jason said, “Sounds kind of snooty to me. Probably lots of *real* doctors there.”

Chelsea shook her head as she watched him turn around, dive for his cup, and shove it under the dispenser just as it began to spew out scalding hot coffee.

She said, “I looked online. It’s a beautiful lake in the mountains, very isolated and peaceful. After living in this crowded city, it sounds perfect. With the inheritance money, we could buy a place there and retire, at least for a while. We would probably want to get jobs eventually. I’m a nurse and could always get work. There are a couple of colleges in the area. Maybe you could get a job as a college professor, or something. What do you think?”

Jason sat down. He looked flabbergasted, his hand shaking as he put his cup on the table.

“Gee Chelsea, I don’t know. Maybe I could get a job as a Walmart greeter. Or maybe I could do some consulting work. I have an ex-FDA friend who gets hired by drug companies to help them get their drugs licensed through the Agency. You can work out of a home office, and all you need is an airport nearby. I could make good money. But do we really need the money?”

Chelsea said, “I think Walmart greeter is sexier. If I invested carefully, we would likely never have to work again. I just think we’d get bored doing nothing. I’m also not sure I could stand our being together twenty-four seven. We’d need to stay busy...to keep me from strangling you.”

Jason looked sad. Then Chelsea saw him smile, and his eyes lit up.

“Chelsea. I have a great idea. I’ve got my PI license and have already been working cases part-time. I’ll set up my own private detective agency, do it full-time. You could work as my assistant, *Dr. Jason Longfellow, PI, and Associate.*”

Chelsea smiled back. “That’s a thought. Only, since it’s my inheritance, how about ‘*Chelsea Longfellow, PI, and Associate*’? I think that has a nicer ring to it, don’t you?”

Jason, sad again, “Chelsea, the PI thing was my idea. I have a PI license and CCW permit, and I’ve already solved several cases working part-time.”

“Yeah, a PI license off the internet. I could do that too. If I remember correctly, I solved the great cheese caper during our weird cross-country road trip. And you thought an armed mosquito killed that realtor in Florida. I must admit, the idea of investigating murder intrigues me too. Maybe we could work together. But you should be *my* assistant. What d’ya think, Husband?”

Jason said, “Let’s find a Walmart near the lake, and I’ll fill out an application for greeter while we’re down there.”



## Chapter 3. House Hunting at the Lake

As Jason had expected, once Chelsea made up her mind she didn't mess around. She put a deposit on a rental on Smythe Mountain Lake for early June, after school let out for the summer. The day arrived, and the Longfellow family headed for the lake in Chelsea's SUV. Four hours into their trip Jason found himself driving on a narrow, curvy country road in the boondocks. Chelsea was arguing with Matilda, Jason's GPS, as usual.

Matilda said, "Go two miles and turn right on Road."

Jason said, "Turn right on Road? Road as opposed to what? Donkey trail?"

Jason had expected to see some sign of the lake by now. He knew Chelsea didn't trust Matilda. He wasn't surprised when his wife dug a map out of the glove compartment.

Chelsea said, "We've been on this road for over an hour, and I haven't seen any sign of water, or civilization. Matilda's going to drive us into this mystery lake, and my SUV won't float. We need to get settled into our rental before dark. No telling what's in those thick woods."

Jason started humming the theme song to the movie *Deliverance*.

"Jason, stop it. You'll scare the children. And you suck at making banjo sounds."

"Not likely to scare our little angels. Two of them are watching a movie. Lizzy's asleep."

Chelsea pointed at the road ahead.

“Jason, look. There’s a sign that says *White House Corner, 5 miles*. That’s where the realtor’s office is located.”

A few minutes later Jason saw a sign that read *White House Corner City Limits*.

He looked around. “Chelsea, sure you want to move here? All I see is a tackle shop, a beauty parlor, and a country store with a gas pump from the sixties. Where’s this realtor’s office?”

Matilda interrupted. “Turn right in half-a-mile and your destination is on the right.”

Jason said, “Thanks, Matilda. It’s good to see someone’s on the job.”

Jason cringed as Chelsea wadded the map into a ball and threw it at him.

“*Someone’s* on the job? How about you and Matilda sleep in the car tonight?”

Jason turned right and started looking for the realtor’s building.

“Just kidding. You’d have found the realtor. I’m sure you were about to tell me where to go.”

“You got that right.”

Jason saw a small brick building with a sign stating *White House Realty*. He pulled into the parking lot and parked next to the only other car there, a Jeep Wrangler with the top down. He watched as Chelsea got out and went into the building to get the keys.

When Chelsea returned, Jason said, “Do you have an address for Matilda?”

“We don’t need Matilda. The realtor said it’s only ten miles from here, on the water.”

“And it was a real live realtor? Not a character out of *Deliverance*?”

“She was alive, in her late twenties, tall, blonde, and quite shapely. You’d have liked her.”

“I knew I should have gone in to get the keys. I need to stretch my legs. What’s her name?”

“Her name is Julie Thompson. She told me our rental has a spectacular view of the lake. If you’d gone in for the keys, I’d have had to come in to get you. It wouldn’t have ended well.”

Jason started the SUV and turned onto the main road. Chelsea turned off Matilda, gave directions herself. Twenty minutes later Jason pulled into the driveway of a two-story log home. He exited the car, woke Lizzy, and unplugged the other two from the TV/DVD player.

“Come on, girls. We’re here. We need to unload the SUV and get settled in before dark.”

Jason, loaded down with luggage, followed Chelsea. She opened the front door and turned on the lights. He entered and looked around the fully illuminated room.

He said, “I love these log cabin style houses with an open design. This room is massive, a combination dining and living room, and look at that large stone fireplace.”

Chelsea stepped in and said, “I love the cedar plank walls, the vaulted ceiling with those gigantic wooden beams, and all the ceiling fans. Look, the loft runs the full length of the house.”

Jason struggled with three large pieces of luggage. “I’m guessing the bedrooms are upstairs. I’m gonna get a hernia. You ladies do not travel light.”

Jason continued to grumble as he struggled up the stairs. “Chelsea, please turn on the ceiling fans. Your bellboy is sweating like crazy.”

“Oh, Jason. Look at that beautiful view. Quit complaining. I could have packed more stuff.”

Jason turned his head to see the view, missed a step, stumbled, and dropped a suitcase.

Lizzy said from across the room, “Dad, be careful. That’s my bag. It’s got my makeup in it, and you might break something.”

Jason grumbled. “Yeah, like my neck.”

Then he saw the spectacular view. The lake side was all glass, with an expansive view of the lake and mountains in the background. A wooden deck ran the entire length of the house.

At the top of the stairs Jason saw four separate bedroom doors.

He heard Chelsea yell from downstairs, “This place is fully updated, a kitchen with stainless appliances and beautiful granite counter tops located next to the dining room area.”

Jason mumbled to himself, “That would be useful if my wife ever cooked. Only time she fixes a decent meal is when she has bad news.”

Jason heard Chelsea and the girls walk up the stairs. Lucy said, “Where’s Daddy?”

Jason saw Chelsea look in the bedroom. “Jason, it’s not nap time. Finish unloading the car.”

“With all your stuff, I won’t finish before tomorrow’s breakfast. How about some help?”

“Those bags are too heavy for the girls. I’m tired from arguing with Matilda. Suck it up and finish. I’ll get the girls settled. It’s cute you think I’m fixing breakfast in the morning.”

The sun was setting as Jason finished hauling in the last of the luggage. He found Chelsea downstairs sitting on a sofa, looking out the window.

Chelsea said, “I could stare at this forever. We need to find a house with a view like this.”

Lizzy, also sitting on the sofa, chimed in. “Boring. We’re in the middle of nowhere. Isn’t there anything to do around here, besides go bear hunting or fall in the lake?”

Lucy, sitting next to Lizzy, said, “Yeah, boring. We need to play.”

Jason said, “No worries, girls. We’re here to find our own lake house.” *We should buy this one. We’re already moved in since I just hauled everything you own in from the car.* “But we’ll take some time to play. This rental comes with a boat. Maybe you can learn to water ski.”

Chelsea said, “Good idea, Jason. We can also swim off the dock. Won’t that be fun?”

Lilly said, “My friend Lisa told me there’s an arcade store in town with ski ball and bowling. You get tickets when you play, and you can turn in your tickets for prizes.”

Lucy squealed. “Yay, prizes! Let’s go there now.”



Jason cringed. “Calm down, Lucy. Daddy’s tired. Tonight, we’re going to have some dinner, and rest. Tomorrow’s our first big day of house hunting.”

Chelsea said, “It’s very quiet here; almost too quiet. Most of the houses appear to be empty.”

Jason said, “We’re ahead of peak season. This is a one season lake, and people don’t start coming here until late June. Besides, we’re doing this to get away from crowds, right?”

Jason headed upstairs to wash up. With the choice of two bathrooms, he took a hot, relaxing soak in the one with the hot tub with water jets.

In a while, Chelsea informed him through the bathroom door that the hot dogs and beans were ready. He dried off, dressed, and headed downstairs. Everyone sat at the kitchen table.

Jason said, “Hot dogs and beans. Yum. Don’t worry, girls. I’m sure there’s a local pizza parlor around here. Every small town has one.”

After dinner, they watched *The Lion King*, as per Lucy’s request. By ten o’clock, all three girls were in bed. Jason and Chelsea sat at the living room table drinking coffee and talking.

Chelsea said, “My friend, Victoria, recommended a realtor that works this part of the lake near the dam. The lake’s deepest here, with the best views, wide water, and the mountains.”

Jason got up to pour himself another cup of coffee. Chelsea had only made one pot, her thick heavily caffeinated brew. He looked for some milk to make it palatable.

He said, “Just so this realtor is sane. I’m kinda wary after condo-shopping in Florida.”

“Jason, I’m sure everything’s fine. There’s a more laid-back feeling here than in Florida. And by the way, Florida’s another example of why it should be *Chelsea Longfellow, PI, and Associate*. I basically solved the case while you ran around hurting yourself trying to prove how manly you are. I’ll give you one thing though; you were right that Florida is a dangerous place. It ought to be a lot different here on this beautiful, isolated mountain lake.”

Jason reached into the refrigerator, turned to look at Chelsea. “We solved that case together. You just figured it out a little sooner than I did, but I almost caught the killer. More importantly, have you ever heard of caramel-flavored almond milk coffee creamer? I’m gonna give it a try.”

He poured some creamer into his coffee and stirred it with a spoon.

He sat back down. “I’m with you, Chelsea. This lake sounds great. No alligators, crazy manatee, sharks, hurricanes, salt water, or massive rust. I’m not sure about poisonous snakes.”

“Relax, Jason. Vicky gave me a book on Smythe Mountain Lake. There are rattlesnakes that mostly stay on the mountain, copperheads that hide in the leaves, and black snakes that are harmless. Vicky assured me it’s safe to take the kids water skiing, let them swim in the lake.”

Jason said, “Not just the children. Florida tried to kill me too. This place sounds like heaven in comparison. No giant things in the water to eat you.”

“Yeah, you can relax. Your OCD should settle down. No need to do so much counting.”

“That would be nice. But, what about pythons? Are there any pythons in southern Virginia?”

“No, Dear. That’s the Florida Everglades. No pythons in Smythe Mountain Lake.”

“That’s good. If there were pythons, I’d need a bigger gun. I read about this thing called The Judge. It’s a revolver, shoots four-ten shotgun shells and forty-five caliber rounds.”

“Jason, no shotgun-shell-shooting handguns. We’d be safer with pythons.”

Jason took a sip of his coffee, made a face, and poured the rest down the sink.

“That’s awful. I should have known. Almond milk? What’s that about? This is the country. Milk’s supposed to come from cows, not nuts.” He put the cup in the sink and sat down.

Chelsea said, “The thought of you with a handgun that shoots shotgun shells? That’s nuts.”

“No worries. Since there’s no pythons, I won’t need the Judge. I can get shot shells for my little revolver to dispatch rattlesnakes, copperheads, and water snakes. Problem solved.”

Chelsea said, “On a less violent note, I’ve been thinking. We’re planning on quitting our jobs, living off my inheritance, and retiring here full-time. But you’re a workaholic, I like to keep busy, and I’m guessing we’ll get bored after a while. There’re also the winter months. Being stuck

alone with you twenty-four-seven? You can be irritating, and you might not survive that.”

“How is that less violent? But you’re right, we might get bored, and I do like surviving. I could take up hunting during the winter. I’m a wilderness kind of guy.”

“Yeah. I saw how well you did in the Florida swamp. You’re not much of an outdoorsman.”

Jason said, “Am too. We have my jacked-up four-wheel-drive pickup truck. I’m sure we could find some off-road trails out here in the boonies. Snow and mud might be fun.”

Chelsea shrugged, “That’s true. But we’re not going to spend the entire winter off-roading. We need to put some serious thought into this if we’re going to move down here.”

Jason’s eyes lit up. “I could start my own PI business, like we discussed when you first brought up moving down here. There’s the small town of Bedford, only a little over a half-hour from here. I could rent an office there to hang out my PI shingle. People would love to hire me to solve murders, adultery cases, burglaries, meth labs, find lost pets, and who knows what else.”

Chelsea grinned, “Actually, I was kind of hoping you’d say that. I enjoyed solving...I mean helping you solve your previous cases. So, we agree, we’ll rent an office in Bedford and put up a shingle, “*Chelsea Longfellow, PI and Associate*”. We can work together. It’ll be lots of fun.”

Jason was sad. He’d walked right into that one.

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Bright and early next morning, Chelsea stood in the door to Lizzy's room and yelled, "Rise and shine! Today we find our dream house. Start our new life of peace and quiet."

Lizzy grumbled, "Mom! Are you insane? It's eight in the morning. I need at least ten hours."

Chelsea heard movement as Lilly and Lucy climbed out of their bunk beds and shuffled to the door of their bedroom.

Lucy said, "Yay Mommy. Let's go swimming."

Lilly mumbled, "Stupid lake! Stupid house hunting! I wanna go back to bed."

Chelsea heard Jason walk up behind her. He said, "Let's go. Mommy got a big inheritance, and we're gonna live the good life."

Lizzy spoke up. "You mean we don't have to go to school no more?"

Lucy repeated, "No school? Yay!"

Chelsea smiled. "They have school out here in the boonies too."

The girls all said in unison. "No fair!"

After breakfast, Chelsea herded everyone into the SUV, made sure they buckled up. She gave Jason directions to the realtor's office. He started the vehicle and pulled out of the driveway.

Chelsea said, "The realtor that Vicky recommended is Carmen Schlump. She works for *LoveTheLake Realty*. They're a local business. Not one of those giant realty chains."

"Just so it's not *ReallyReally*. I'm done with them."

Chelsea grinned. "There is a *ReallyReally* office here at the lake. Want me to call them?"

Jason shook his head and frowned. “No thanks. Their realtors in Florida were terrible, but that’s a different book...I mean story.”

Chelsea said, “I know, Jason. I was there, saving your butt. And speaking of that, you’re driving too fast for this curvy road. Are you trying to kill us? Please slow down.”

“Don’t worry, Darlin’. I’ve got this...Oh crap!”

Chelsea screamed as Jason hit the brakes and swerved to miss a family of deer. The SUV bounced into the ditch. Jason sat there shaking.

Chelsea turned around and looked at the girls. “Are you all right? Daddy just tried to kill us.”

Lilly said, “Bad Daddy. You almost ran over Bambi.”

Lucy said, “Yeah, bad Daddy. Poor Bambi.”

Chelsea said, “Idiot. I told you to slow down.”

Jason said, “Sorry, but I think those deer tried to kill *us*. Did you see the way the big one with the antlers looked at me? I think he was threatening me.”

Chelsea said, “Well, you did try to run over his family.”

Twenty minutes later, Jason pulled into the parking lot of a small, whitewashed brick building. A large sign read ‘*LoveTheLake Realty. We’ll try to get you the best price, but you can’t put a price on happiness.*’

Jason said, “I don’t know about this Schlump person, but I’m not thrilled with their motto. And Bambi’s parents should teach her not to run in front of cars.”

“Jason, it’s just a business sign. Vicky told me Carmen Schlump found them the perfect house at a great price.”

Chelsea exited the SUV. Jason walked around to meet her and opened the door for the girls.

He said, “Watch out for killer deer. This is a place where the deer and the cantaloupe play.”

Lucy said, “Mommy, what’s a cantaloupe?”

Chelsea said, “Jason, stop scaring the children. There are no killer deer. Just a crazy man at the wheel. And it’s deer and antelope...oh...never mind.”

Lizzy said, “Oh Dad. Isn’t a cantaloupe a kind of fruit?”

The girls exited the car. Everyone entered the building. Chelsea walked up to the counter.

“Hello. I’m Chelsea Longfellow. This is my husband, Jason, and our children Lizzy, Lilly, and Lucy. We have an appointment with Carmen Schlump to look at waterfront properties.”

The young woman sitting behind the counter stood and shook Chelsea’s hand. She was in her late twenties, a tall, slender brunette, dressed for summer in a pink cotton blouse and short dark blue cotton skirt. Chelsea glanced at Jason. He was checking out the young realtor’s ample cleavage and long slender legs. She was clearly displayed in the front of the office to take control of weak-minded men. Chelsea gave her husband her threatening *behave yourself* look.

*I’m gonna kill him.*

Chelsea’s face turned red as Jason stepped forward, bumped her out of the way, and shook the young realtor’s hand.

“Hello. I’m Dr. Jason Longfellow, PI. As this lady...er...my wife...said, we’re here to look at waterfront property. Perhaps this Schlump person is busy, and you could take us on the tour.”

Lizzy turned to her sisters, “Daddy’s in a lot more danger than Bambi was. He’s gonna die.”

The young realtor said, “Pleased to meet you, Dr. Longfellow, PI. I’m Carla Schlump. Carmen is my mother. She will take you on the tour. She’s elderly. You’ll relate to her better.”

Chelsea moved to her left, hip-bumping Jason out of the way, and said, “If Carmen is anything like her daughter, I like you both already. Now that my husband, Grandpa Longfellow, has introduced, and made a fool of himself, please let Carmen know we’re here.”

Carla turned and walked towards the back of the building to a bay of offices.

Jason whispered to Chelsea, “That wasn’t nice. What’s this *grandpa* stuff? I’m only forty-eight. Country folks are known for their friendliness. I just wanted to get off on the right foot.”

“It wasn’t her foot you were staring at. And, if you don’t get your male hormones under control, you’re going to need to have my foot surgically removed from your butt.”

Lucy said, “Ha, Ha. Mommy said *butt*.”

Carla returned with Carmen, a tall brunette, hair graying around the edges. She looked like an attractive but plumped up version of her daughter.



“Welcome to Smythe Mountain Lake. I’m Carmen Schlump. You’ve already met my daughter, Carla.” She extended her hand to Chelsea and nodded at Jason.

Chelsea smiled. *Interesting. The daughter works on the weak-minded man, and Mom here puts me first. These women know what they’re doing. I’m going to have to keep Jason under control if we’re going to get a decent price on a house.* “Pleased to meet you, Carmen. Vicky told me good things about you. I’m hoping you can help us find our dream house.”

“We’ll do our best, Mrs. Longfellow. This is a good time to buy. There are lots of properties on the market. We’ve already discussed what you’re looking for, and I’ve put together a list of things to show you. Let me get my purse. Carla, please get some waters for our guests.”

Carmen led them outside to her giant SUV, built like a tank. The Longfellow family piled in, Chelsea took the shotgun seat and left Jason in back with the girls.

Chelsea heard Jason grumbling. “Already chatted with Mrs. Longfellow about what *she* wants in a house. Put together a list of properties...without asking me. I’m drowning in women...wife, daughters, realtors.”

Chelsea ignored his rant. She said, “So, Carmen. What are we looking at this morning?”

“You wanted waterfront, in the one to one-point-five-million-dollar range. This one sits on a lot with a gentle slope to the water. It’s a six bedroom, six bath, two level cedar log house, three thousand five hundred square feet. It has vaulted ceilings, large, open living space, upgraded

kitchen, a cute sleeping loft, and spectacular view for one point two million.”

Jason yelled from the back. “Money is no object. My wife just inherited a ton of money.”

Chelsea frowned. *Idiot*. “Jason, children and husbands should not be seen or heard.”

“That’s not how it goes.”

“Just ignore him, Carmen. He tends to exaggerate. My mother passed away recently, and I inherited some money. Since it’s my inheritance, I’ll be calling the shots.”

Carmen winked at Chelsea, “Sorry for your loss. And I already figured out who’s in charge.”

Jason started to speak. Chelsea turned her head and saw Lizzy elbow him in the side.

Lizzy said, “Dad. Don’t make Mom any madder. Out here in the boonies I’ll feel safer with you sleeping in the house than the car. A bear might get in. It’d eat you first cause you’re big, old, and slow. Then it’d be full, and we’d be safe. Don’t you want to keep your children safe?”

Jason frowned, “Your concern for me is...underwhelming. I’ll try not to make Mommy mad, so I can sleep in the house and provide foraging bears with a large meal, so they won’t eat you.”

Chelsea was terrified by the way Carmen drove the curvy country roads in her huge SUV. She accelerated wildly through the curves, tossing everyone around like rag dolls.

Jason said, “These curvy roads would be fun to drive in a sports car.”

Carmen said, “Maybe. But I love my giant SUV. At sunset there’re herds of deer out, and I play *dodge the deer*. I’ve already hit four this year, and they just bounce off.”

Just then, Chelsea pointed ahead and yelled, “Deer! Deer! Lots of deer in the road.”

Carmen slammed on the brakes, throwing everyone forward, seatbelts straining. She said, “I told you. And it’s still daylight. There’re whole herds out at sunset, and they’re all suicidal.”

Lizzy mumbled out loud, “No wonder they’re suicidal. The poor things are bored out of their minds stuck out here in the middle of nowhere.”

Jason mumbled, “Note to self. Try to avoid death by suicidal deer.”

Carmen said, “Oh, pish-posh. It’s fine. You just need a large enough vehicle. Even better, my husband is a hunter. He carries a thirty-thirty rifle in his truck. If he sees deer on the road, he stops, shoots a couple, and hauls them home to fill up the freezer. Problem solved.”

Chelsea looked at the realtor out of the corner of her eye. “There’re men around here with rifles in their trucks that stop and shoot at deer? Isn’t that dangerous for other drivers?”

Carmen shoved the SUVs accelerator to the floor. Chelsea was thrown back into her seat.

“Y’all must be city folk. Out here, we do things a little different. If it is a pest, shoot it.” She winked at Chelsea. “That goes for two legged pests too. Jason, do you hunt or shoot?”

Chelsea shook her head. *Oh no!*

Jason smiled. “I am a licensed private eye. I have a CCW permit and a little revolver thingy.”

Carmen laughed, “What caliber is this little revolver thingy?”

“It’s a thirty-eight. I want to get a twenty-two. I understand they’re easier to shoot.”

Carmen said, “You need a real handgun, like a forty-four magnum. If you’re gonna live here, you’ll also need a deer rifle...minimum a thirty-thirty, also good for a coyote, bear, or mountain lion. You’ll need snake shot for that thirty-eight revolver, for the rattlers and copperheads. A twenty-two works on them destructive squirrels. They’re tasty if you fry’em up just right.”

Jason, panic in his voice, said, “Chelsea, did she say bears, coyotes, and mountain lions? Rattlesnakes? Copperheads? And destructive squirrels?”

Before Chelsea could answer, Carmen yanked the wheel to the right. The huge SUV bounced over a shallow culvert and into a gravel driveway. She pulled up in front of a garage and parked.

“Our first stop of the day. Fifty-three Rattlesnake Lane. This is a very nice property. Just came on the market. Give me a minute to find the key, and I’ll meet you at the front door.”

Chelsea watched as Carmen took several small devices out of the back of the SUV.

“What’s she doing?”, Chelsea asked.

Jason said, “I’m not sure. Looks like she’s placing speakers on the ground around the SUV.”

Chelsea saw Carmen walk to the front door of the house, turn, and wave to them to join her. As they exited the SUV, they all heard an electronic high-pitched screeching sound and placed their hands over their ears.

Chelsea winced and said, loudly. “What on earth is that terrible noise?”

When they reached the front door, Carmen said, “Sorry. I’m used to the noise. It keeps the squirrels away. They’ll chew through your gas or brake lines or make a nest in your engine. We’ve had incidents where the pests caused engine fires and a fatal brake failure.”

Jason said, “Mountain lions, bears, snakes...and killer squirrels?”

Carmen opened the front door, and they followed her into the house, into a large foyer.

Carmen said, “My husband, Roy, has a pellet gun. He’s killed at least forty of the little bastards...sorry kids...in the past couple of weeks. Last spring, he took our boat out, got half-a-mile from our dock and the outboard motor died. A squirrel had chewed through the gas line. Took two hours to paddle home. We hate squirrels.”

Jason said, “We tried to buy a condo in Florida last year. There were alligators, sharks, poisonous snakes, hurricanes, and rust. Here there’s dangerous squirrels, and suicidal deer?”

Chelsea smirked. “Don’t forget the lions, tigers and bears, oh my!”

Jason said, “But squirrels? Really?”

Carmen said, “Sorry. I run my mouth too much. You just need a good pellet gun and a great aim. Problem solved. I’ll focus on the positive side of lake living. The fishing has improved dramatically in the past couple of

years. Smythe Mountain Lake is famous for striped bass. The stripers used to average eleven to fifteen pounds. This year record fish up to fifty pounds have been recorded. Are you a fisherman, Dr. Longfellow? There're lots of fishing tournaments."

Chelsea answered. "My husband isn't the outdoors type. He's not much of a fisherman."

Jason said, "Fish? At fifty pounds, that's a freakin' whale. It could eat a small child."

Lucy's ears perked up, and she started to cry. "I'm a small child! I don't wanna get eaten! Daddy, you're mean! I wanna go home!"

Lizzy said. "Oh, Dad. Now you've traumatized poor Lucy. She's gonna need counseling."

Chelsea said, "Jason, stop scaring the children!" *Should have gone with Carmen's daughter, Carla. She'd have distracted Jason, so he wouldn't scare the children away from the lake. Idiot.*

Chelsea shook her head hopelessly as she watched Jason bend down and give Lucy a hug.

Jason said, "Lucy, Honey. I was only kidding. Bass are a kind of fish found in lakes. They don't eat people. Actually, people eat them. You catch them, chop off their heads, cut out their guts, strip off their scales, rip out their bones, and slice them into filets. Then you cover them with butter, breadcrumbs and fry them up in a pan."

Chelsea watched as Lucy's eyes got bigger. She yelped, "Chop off their heads? Cut out their insides, slice them into pieces, and eat them? Poor fishies! Daddy, you're a big meanie!"

Jason gently pushed Lucy towards Chelsea. “Here, take your daughter. She’s hurting my ears. We should rent her out to keep the squirrels away from peoples’ cars.”

Lucy cried harder. Chelsea said, “Jason, I hope you enjoy sleeping in the SUV tonight.”

Chelsea smiled as she heard Lizzy say, “Oh Dad. Now you can’t protect me from bears.”

Chelsea saw Carmen reach into her purse and pull out a chocolate bar.

Carmen said, “Lucy, if it’s okay with your mom, would you like this bar of chocolate? Might take your mind off your father trying to scare you to death.”

Chelsea smiled. “How about that Lucy? A candy bar for breakfast. See, the country’s not so bad. Like Daddy finally said, after scaring you half to death, fish don’t eat people, just worms. Right Carmen?”

“That’s right. Just worms. And worms are icky. It’s good to get rid of all the worms.”

Lucy took the candy bar, “Bad Daddy. Can I sleep with you and Mommy tonight?”

Jason said, “Only if you want to sleep in the car.”

The realtor cleared her throat, started her tour. “Come along, Longfellow family. We’re in the foyer. Next is the living room. Notice the large open space, cathedral ceiling, cedar paneling, large skylights, and all glass on the lakeside to optimize the view.”

Chelsea and family followed the realtor. Chelsea switched into house-hunting mode.

“Jason, this place is beautiful. Look at all the space. We’ll need to buy more furniture.”

Jason said, “Oh boy! Nothing I like more than furniture shopping.”

Carmen continued moving through the house. “Notice the living room with fireplace and big screen TV. There’s the L-shaped kitchen, granite counter tops, and state-of-the-art stainless-steel appliances, and a separate dining area. The master bedroom and two of the other bedrooms are behind the kitchen. The master bedroom’s on the lake side. Great view. There’s a small bedroom loft above bedroom number three, accessed by stairs from the hallway. The county wouldn’t allow a sleeping loft, too dangerous in case of a fire. So, the builder called it a *mezzanine*.”

Lilly said, excited, “I want the loft. I won’t have to share a bedroom with Lucy.”

Chelsea’s face was all smiles as she looked around. “Jason. This is perfect. I love the open feel, there’s plenty of room for all of us, and it’s so clean and bright.”

Carmen said, “Glad you like it. It’s one of the nicest properties available at the moment. It won’t stay on the market long.”

Carmen led them downstairs via a staircase near the front door. She said, “This is another living room with what serves as a rec room attached. The lakeside wall is all sliding glass doors. There’s a pool table in the rec room that conveys.”

They followed her into a large room in the back. “This could be used as another bedroom. The current owner uses it as an office.”



Chelsea saw the realtor open a door and gesture for Jason to walk through. Carmen said, “You’ll love this, Dr. Longfellow. It’s a large, tiled bathroom, with a free-standing seven-foot tub with circulating water jets. The separate luxury shower includes a rainfall shower head and body spray. Note the high-end vessel sink. And I think the Blue Moroccan tile is spectacular.”

Chelsea watched Jason walk through the door. She was startled when he came running back through the door waving his hands in the air. He screamed, “Chelsea, help! Snake! Snake in the hot tub! He forgot to turn on the circulating jets!”

Carmen said, “What on earth? I was just here yesterday. There weren’t any snakes then.”

Chelsea followed Carmen into the bathroom. They both looked in the hot tub. Carmen bent over and picked up a baby black snake.

Carmen laughed, “Dr. Longfellow, that’s the smallest snake I’ve ever seen, not much larger than a night crawler. The little fella must have gotten in through a gap in one of the sliding glass doors. It’s a black snake. They keep rats and mice away. You should turn it loose on your lot.”

Chelsea turned around and saw Jason stick his head in through the bathroom door. He said, “Well, it is a snake. It could have been bigger...a rattler, or even a python. Now I’ll have to carry my snake gun when I go to the bathroom.”

Chelsea giggled. “Jason, you’re being ridiculous. That thing’s so small it isn’t even scaring the children. This bathroom is spectacular. Look at that

gorgeous blue tile. And the tub...it would fit your six-foot-seven frame perfectly. My God, this place was built for us.”

Jason elbowed Chelsea gently on the arm, shook his head, and frowned at her. She could read his mind from his expression. He wanted her to tone down her enthusiasm, or they weren't going to be able to negotiate a good price. Or maybe he was just worried about the snake.

Jason said, “The basement is an odd place for such a fancy bathroom. It's kind of dark. And how'd a snake get in? Maybe his mama's nearby waiting for her turn at the hot tub.”

Carmen reached up, flipped a switch on the wall, adjusted a dimmer. Chelsea had to squint.

Carmen said, “Is that bright enough? And it's a lake, so there's snakes. Get used to it.”

Jason shrugged and said, “I give up. These people thought of everything.”

Carmen said, “There's also two heating and cooling zones, a separate heat pump for each floor, common for these high-end properties. The system's only two years old. The owners also installed a gas stove in the rec room for supplemental heat. You'll actually feel warm in winter.”

On the way upstairs, Chelsea held Jason back to whisper in his ear. “Jason, I'm trying to find something to not like about this place, but I can't. It's perfect.”

Jason whispered, “I admit, it's great. But we can't buy the first house we see. We still need to look at the dock. Also, maybe the snake's a bad omen.”

Back upstairs, Carmen said, “We still need to check out the dock. What do you think so far?”

Jason took the lead. “Well, it is nice. But, that tile in the downstairs bathroom looked kind of cheap. And the mezzanine thing might be a problem.”

Lizzy spoke up. “Dad, when Mom gets mad at you, maybe she’ll let you sleep in the mezzanine thingy instead of in the car. Wouldn’t that be a step up?”

Carmen said, “The porcelain tile was very expensive, a special order from Spain.”

Chelsea looked at Jason, and he just shrugged.

They walked down to the dock, where they found over a thousand feet of waterfront. The view across the cove was extra special, an undeveloped mountain set aside as national park. The dock included a large boat house, a small refrigerator, and bays for two large boats.

On the way to the house, Chelsea whispered, “We can’t let this place get away. It’s perfect.”

Jason answered, “It’s bad luck to buy the first house you see. We need to keep looking.”

“Jason, I know you. You want everything to be perfect. To my mind this property is perfect.”

“But Chelsea. We went through the place so fast; I didn’t get a chance to make sure the closet doors were closed. And I should count the kitchen tiles; has to be an even number. And make sure the faucets work and the toilets flush. On the plus side, there were no dead realtors.”

Carmen obviously heard, did a double take. “Excuse me. What’s this about *dead realtors*?”

Chelsea said, “No worries. We tried to buy a condo in Florida last year and suffice it to say that it did not go well. It has nothing to do with today. My husband is just being a pain.”

Chelsea put on her stern face. “Jason, we’re buying this house. Deal with it. Maybe I will consider letting you sleep in the mezzanine instead of the car when you misbehave, like now.”

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