After Boxing Day

“Absolutely no doubt about it. It was her. I saw her,” said Jim. He stood in the doorway his eyes wide, face twisted into a grim scowl. He glanced quickly over his shoulder at the dark corridor before stumbling into the room, and sinking into the chair closest to the fire.

The other two stared at him and then glanced at each other. Daisy leant forward and poked the fire. “Come on Jim. It’s not funny to make jokes about the dead. Especially here.”

For a moment the sound of the hissing crackling wood filled the room.

Jim’s brow flickered with annoyance. “I’m not joking, I swear. It was Sally.”

Suddenly the fire dipped low, the flames bowing under a cold chill and Daisy spun round to look at the open door, knocking her glass to the floor. Mulled wine spilled. The deep red liquid disappearing down the cracks in the floorboards. She cursed.

Paul laughed nervously. “See you’re making us all on edge Jim. Stop this nonsense and have a drink.”

He filled Jim’s glass and watched as his friend cupped it with trembling hands.

The boys hadn’t even wanted to come but Daisy had insisted. This would be the last time they would all be together as a three. They had been coming to the old cottage on Boxing Day since they were in their late teens. They would stay a few days in the dead time between Christmas and New Year, sharing their Christmas presents, reading books, watching films on the old set in the den. They used to take long wintry walks and throw pebbles across the frozen lake, watching as they skittered into the distant white haze. That was a long time ago. They’d stopped coming when Sally had died and now, ten years later, Daisy had insisted they come back one last time, before they all grew up and went their separate ways.

Jim took a slow sip of the warm spicy wine, and licked his lips. His eyes met Daisy’s briefly.

“I’m sorry, it’s just my imagination. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“No it’s fine. I’m sure she is here, in spirit.” She smiled weakly and looked around the room which was bathed in a warm orange glow. The heavy curtains were pulled across the dark wintry night and the Christmas tree shimmered in the corner. The fire flickered and a dark shadow appeared to run across the walls. Daisy shuddered and pulled her chair closer to the fire.

“Let’s plan our walk for tomorrow.”

It was gone midnight before they all retired to bed. Another Boxing Day had passed in the cottage. They’d finished off the mulled wine and gone on to the whisky, reminiscing about the times they’d shared at school, when Jim had got hold of some fake IDs, trying their first cigarettes, bunking off school, student pranks, music they’d loved, hairstyles they’d hated.

Daisy slipped into the cold sheets feeling for the hot water bottle she had put in there an hour before. Its warmth wrapped around her and she lay for a few moments letting sleep slowly shut her body down.

She woke suddenly. It was still dark and for a moment she felt the terrifying blindness of not knowing where she was, her mind stretching as far as it could to reach the truth. Eventually through the thickness of sleep she remembered. The cottage. A pang of fear made her sit up. She could hear the boys snoring in the next room and she reached for her phone. It was 2.30am. She’d only been asleep for a couple of hours but something had woken her. And then she heard the laughter. A shrill laugh, fading suddenly in the wind. She strained her ears, her heart thumping so loudly she wanted to grab hold of it, still it, so that she could listen. There it was again, but further away this time. Perhaps it was revellers leaving the local pub after a lock-in. The wind could carry voices for miles. But the cottage was in a gully on the other side of a wood, far away from the road.

She heard someone moving in the next room and a creaking of mattress springs. And then the hall light came on.

Two dark shadows appeared in the crack of light under her door. Someone was standing on the other side.

“Jim, Paul?” She whispered loudly, her voice tight in her throat.

The shadows didn’t move. She slowly reached for the lamp on the table, and turned it on. In an instant the shadows were gone, and moments later she heard water splashing in the bathroom. The familiar domestic sound somehow made the room seem warmer, and she snuck down back under the covers.

“Did you sleep well?” Jim was yawning as he spoke, stirring scrambled eggs quickly to stop them sticking. A plate of smoked salmon lay nearby ready for the final touch.

Daisy appeared at the door already showered, hair wrapped in a towel like a turban. Paul was pouring tea from a huge leaky teapot into tiny cracked tea cups. “I did. Slept all the way through, despite you snoring.”

“Me too. Must have been the whisky.” Jim turned and divided the eggs onto the four plates.

Daisy looked at them, about to speak, when she noticed the table.

“There are only three of us Jim.”

They all looked at the extra plate. Jim shared it out. “More fuel for our big adventure” he winked.

They set out just after 11am. It was a perfect winter day. Blue sky above, frozen ground underfoot, and a feeling of hope. They had got through another Christmas and the New Year was not far away. A sprinkling of snow highlighted the furrowed fields. A rabbit dipped up and down. Paul had made them turkey and cranberry rolls and was carrying a flask of hot tea, Daisy had boiled sweets and brandy, and Jim had somehow managed to save his Toblerone from Christmas day. He picked up a stick and was stabbing the hard ground as he walked.

“We’re like the Famous Five.”

“Without the hunks of bread and chunks of cheese,” said Paul.

Daisy felt a surge of warmth towards her two old friends. They walked for an hour, skirting around the woods and dipping down into the valley until they reached the old Oak tree, its crooked branches stripped of its green summer coat.

Here the path divided in two. The higher path led to the lake, the lower path looped back in a short cut to the cottage. Daisy looked at them both with a small smile.

“Who’s up for a bit of pebble skimming on the lake?”

She saw both of them tense up.

Paul took off his gloves, flexing his fingers. “I thought the deal was we don’t go near the lake.”

His blue eyes looked diluted in the cold air.

Jim pushed his stick into the ground. “I don’t mind going. I think it might help.”

Daisy touched Paul’s arm. “It’s fine if you don’t want to but I think Jim’s right. It might help us all feel closer to Sal.”

They continued in silence, the sun making a low trail across the sky, until the lake was before them. They stood close together passing the brandy between them.

Daisy felt the moment flood back. The laughter. Sally laughing. Pretending to skate, pretending it was dangerous. The three of them calling at her to come back in, but laughing at her antics all the same. The shock of the splash, the surprised scream and then the desperate thrashing of the water, the ice creaking and cracking. The bubbles. The silence.

“We should have gone in after her,” said Paul suddenly.

“We couldn’t. The ice was breaking up.” Jim coughed and prodded the frozen water with his stick, small cracks spreading as he applied pressure.

“OK” Daisy clapped her hands. “Come on let’s skim some stones for Sal.”

Sally always said the other side of the lake was another world and strange creatures were collecting their pebbles as if they were rocks from out of space. She used to mark her pebbles with funny faces in an effort to communicate with the other side. They all bent down scrabbling around for the right size pebbles, filling their pockets. They watched as the ice became marked with their efforts, thin lines disappearing into the white. They finished the brandy.

“I do feel a bit better” said Paul as they all turned, arm in arm, back to the path.

And then they all heard the sound. A skittering scraping noise. A clink of ice. They turned back to the lake. A pebble was spinning on the ice.

“It’s Sal” said Jim, his face red and blotchy with the alcohol. “She wants to play.”

Daisy punched him playfully. “Don’t be stupid. I know you threw that stone. Come on, it’s time for some serious food,” and she dragged the boys away from the water.

By the time they got back it was getting dark and the first flakes of snow had started to fall. Paul stoked the fire while Jim and Daisy sat on the sofa peeling vegetables. “We still have some gifts to open,” Jim nodded towards three small presents underneath the tree.

Daisy smiled. “We’ll save them for after dinner.”

It wasn’t until much later, when they’d slumped in their chairs, full of Christmas pudding and brandy cream that they remembered the presents.

“I’m surprised you remembered it was your turn,” Daisy said as she reached under the tree.

Jim looked at her and laughed. “They’re not from me.”

“Nor me,” said Paul.

They all looked at each other. The fire flickered.

“Give it to me I want to open it” said Jim suddenly. He turned the gift over, and shook it gently. The others watched him closely.

He tore the paper carefully. Inside was a small box. Jim lifted the lid and then closed his eyes suddenly, breathing heavily.

“What is it?” Daisy and Paul both said at once.

Jim pushed the box towards them. Inside was a pebble with a funny face drawn on it.

“I told you Sal wants to play. She wants us there with her,” said Jim his eyes burning in the dim light.

Daisy picked up the other two boxes and hurled them at the fire, the paper catching instantly.

“Right that’s it. You think this is funny Jim, but it’s not. It’s sick. All you’ve done since you’ve got here is stir up the past, when we were just meant to come here to find peace.”

“Peace? How can we find peace when we watched a friend drown? Christmas will never be the same again. I’m going to play with Sal.”

He stood up and grabbed his coat pushing the pebble into his pocket.

Paul stood. “I’m coming with you, you’ll get lost. It’s blowing a blizzard out there.”

Daisy stayed, staring into the fire. She heard them talking in low whispers and then the door slammed. She sank deep into her chair pulling a blanket round her. Suddenly she heard the toilet flush and footsteps in the hall. She jumped up from the sofa and backed into the corner, feeling the Christmas tree’s spiny branches pushing against her.

The door opened. It was Paul. “He wouldn’t let me go with him.”

Daisy ran to the window and recoiled, her face white. Paul peered out into the night. He could just make out Jim’s footprints heading out towards the lake. And another set of prints, a few steps behind.