

Dark Lake

Clare Revell

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Dedication

For Ceryn, who has inherited her mother's love of
everything disaster related.

Glossary

Tender up for grabs – contract to be applied for

Balaclava – woollen mask worn over the face to hide it. Only the eyes are visible.

Butchers – cockney rhyming slang butchers hook meaning take a look

Knickers in a twist – get stressed or upset over something

Kibosh – wreck, destroy, ruin

Put paid to (something) – prevent you from doing it

What People are Saying

Dark Lake – Chock-full of intrigue and suspense, *Dark Lake* forges into uncharted territory, chilling and thrilling with equal measure. With complicated characters, elements of sweet romance, and a surprise ending that satisfies, Clare Revell continues to write with imagination and panache.

~ Jan Elder, Author of *Love, Lies, and Fireflies*

Down in Yon Forest – She writes books like Alfred Hitchcock and M Night Shyamalan direct and produce engrossing and captivating movies. A hint of an answer here, a red herring there, light here, dark there—*Down in Yon Forest* shines a bright light on her skills as a storyteller

~Marianne Evans

1

After the brightness of the afternoon sun, it took Lou Fitzgerald's eyes several moments to adjust as she stepped inside the communications van on the far side of the archaeological dig. More than a little irritated that she'd had to break off what she'd been doing for this interruption, she tucked her sunglasses over her shirt pocket and strode to the desk. It had better be important, or the person on the other end of the phone would get the full force of her wrath. She picked up the phone, tossed her cap to the desk, and glanced at Bill. "Which line?"

The communications tech didn't look up from what he was doing. "Three."

Lou punched the button. Hopefully, this wouldn't take long. There was only one person she could think of who'd ring and declare it urgent enough for her to stop work. "Dr. Fitzgerald speaking."

"You're a difficult woman to get ahold of, Lou." A cheerful male voice echoed down the line. And definitely not the one she was expecting. "Did you lose your phone again?"

Lou grinned. "Jim, you know very well you're the one who loses phones, not me." She tugged over the computer chair and sat. Captain Jim Kirk, all joking about the TV program aside, was one of her best friends. She'd always hoped they'd end up together, that her teenage crush would be reciprocated and

progress into something more, but that hadn't panned out.

The friendship however had remained, cemented by their teenage jaunt across the world.

"Hah," Jim snorted. "You still haven't answered yours in days. Did you drop it overboard a ship?"

"Again, I repeat myself, dropping phones overboard a ship is your habit, not mine. It's a good thing you joined the Air Force and not the Navy after all." She shoved down the giggle. "To answer your question, no, I didn't lose my phone. I know exactly where it is, and that's in my bag under the desk, thus out of my way on the dig site. Work's been hectic and I can't afford a distraction. I'm barely getting five minutes to myself these days, and I'd rather use those to catch forty winks. Besides, the phone signal out here can be rubbish at times."

Jim snorted. "You're in Wales, not Egypt. Hardly the back of beyond."

"And that makes a difference because...?" Lou left the question hanging. "You know as well as I do that lots of things affect phone signal. Mountains for example, of which we have a plethora in Wales. The lack of phone towers. Distance between the phone and said phone towers. And I know you didn't call because I haven't written, because I know you too well." She glanced at her watch. "What time is it where you are?"

The line crackled and Jim yawned. "It's almost eleven at night. I'm about to go to bed. Paul is up to no end of mischief. You taught him well with that saucepan trick."

Lou chuckled. "It's what aunts do. And how is Ailsa?" Despite the fact Jim's affections had gone elsewhere, Lou was very fond of his wife.

"She's pregnant. Baby's due in five months. We're hoping to be back stateside for the birth, but if not, the base here will do just as well. She'd prefer to have Nichola and Mum around to look after Paul when she's having the baby." He paused. "And admittedly, as good as the Air Force docs are, I'd prefer to be back at home as well."

"Congratulations." A surge of jealousy flooded her before she tamped it down. She'd always imagined a family of her own by the time she reached her mid-thirties. But some dreams were never to be. Choices made early on in life put paid to that.

"Thanks. And speaking of Nichola—have you spoken to your mum recently?"

Lou shook her head, knowing he couldn't see her. "Not for a few days."

"You should give her a call while you have a signal."

"Sounds mysterious. Is something wrong?"

"She's just forgotten what you sound like."

Lou scoffed. "Yeah, right, of course she has. OK. I'll ring as soon as I get home tonight. Well, back to the hotel anyway. She should be up by then. Las Vegas is eight hours behind me. I get confused with the date line as to where they are compared to you. Is it strange not having Dad as your CO now?"

"A little, but most people agree that he's one of the best generals out there. People fight to get posted to Nellis these days."

A lot of noise came from outside, and Lou frowned. They knew she preferred silence on a dig. Rowdiness led to mistakes and precious objects being damaged. Running footsteps crossed to the van and the door flung open, letting the heat and light into the

darkened room.

One of the archaeological team stood silhouetted against the sunlight. "Dr. F.?"

Lou glanced up. She'd long given up trying to stop the nickname and went with it. "What's up, AJ?"

"Sorry to interrupt. But we need you. You have to come and see this. Now."

His enthusiasm was catching. "Be right there. Jim, I gotta go. I'll leave my phone on tonight. Call me when you get up, and we can chat properly. Yes, there is a phone signal in town before you ask. Give Ailsa my love. Bye." She put the phone down and stood, tugging her cap on firmly. Reaching behind her neck, she tugged her long ponytail through the gap at the back of the hat.

She headed outside in several rapid strides, putting on her sunglasses. "So what's up, AJ?" She pulled her cap down over her eyes, the peak shading them from the bright sunlight.

"We found something you need to see." He set off at a trot towards the trench.

Lou hurried after him, grateful this prosthesis was a better fit than the last one she'd had, and she could keep up. No one on her team knew about the disability, and she intended to keep that information to herself. The last thing she needed was to be called Long-Lou-Silver or Hop-a-Long Louisa. Her stomach churned, and her mind whirled. There was an underlying current to the dig site that hadn't been there ten minutes ago.

Had they finally found what they were searching for?

AJ pointed to the trench. "Down there."

"This had better be good," she teased. Resisting

the urge to jump, Lou climbed down the ladder, her breath hitching with every step. She crossed to the uncovered stones she'd been working on the past few weeks and dropped carefully to her knees. She pushed the last remaining earth away and stared in wonder.

Then she closed her eyes.

This was it. Her very own 'Eureka!' moment.

Joy bubbled through her, and it was all she could do not to leap ten feet in the air and punch the sky. "This is it," she whispered. Tears pricked her eyes. "We did it."

"You did it, boss." AJ grinned. "You were right."

Lou blinked hard. "Team effort, AJ. We did it." She sucked in a deep breath, forcing herself to think logically through what would be the next steps. "OK. I want this whole area cordoned off and tented. It's essential we keep the place dry. I need my camera and case. We have to record everything. And someone get ahold of that local councillor, Jordan Brown. This should change his mind about developing the area."

An hour later, Lou scowled as someone blocked her light. "Do you mind?" she grumbled.

"No, actually I don't." Varian Sparrow's voice made her jump.

She glanced up to find her boss standing behind her. "It's nice to see you too, Varian. Your timing is impeccable. I planned to call you later. You should take a butcher's at this. It's amazing. It proves everything I've been saying."

"Lou, we need to talk. Is there somewhere we can go?"

"Sure, there is, but it'll have to wait. I need to get on with this while we still have daylight."

"This can't wait. I need to talk to you now."

Lou resisted the urge to roll her eyes. He may be her boss, but he sure knew how to pick his moments, and nothing he ever said was that urgent. "So talk while I work. What's up?"

He jerked his head and held up a hand. "Not here. It's important."

"For this it had better be." She accepted his hand up and brushed the dirt off her jeans. "Fine, you can have ten minutes." She glanced at the other members of the team. "No one touch this while I'm gone."

~*~

Lou leaned back in her chair, glad she was sitting down. Her heart raced, cheeks burned and her stomach clenched. "You're kidding me," she finally managed past the huge lump in her throat.

"No. I'm sorry. I'm not kidding. I'm deadly serious." Varian certainly didn't appear sorry, and he definitely didn't sound apologetic. He both looked and sounded smug, as if this had been his plan all along.

"I can't leave," Lou insisted. "Didn't you hear me? We found it. Proof that I was right all along." She waved a file at him. "This is my work. My discovery. You can't just replace me."

Make that replace her *again*—the same way he always did, right when she was on the cusp on proving something or on the brink of another discovery.

"I'm sure your team is more than capable of carrying on without you."

"Uh, no, they're not," she spluttered. Were they really having this conversation? "They need me as much as I need to be here."

"Are you saying you don't trust them?"

“No. I’m not saying that at all! I trust them implicitly. Well, most of them anyway.” She sucked in a deep breath, her hands curling into balls under the desk. She tamped down her temper and tried to put a lid on her emotions. “I’m saying I’ve put years into this and I want to—”

“—be the one to finish it?” Varian completed her sentence in that annoying manner, which only served to irritate her further.

She scowled, fingers drumming on the desk. “Yes. Is that so wrong? It’s my work, my paper, my blood, sweat, and tears, not to mention sleepless nights that have gone into this and you want to ditch me in favour of some up and coming lackey so you and he can take the glory? Again. It’s not fair.”

“Life isn’t fair. You’ve got an hour to get your notes and files together before you brief us—”

“I don’t believe I’m hearing this!”

“Then you leave and don’t look back.”

Lou scowled harder, wishing she could give him the “stink-eye” as Jim termed it when they were kids. “Who is he anyway? This person you’re replacing me with.”

“Monty is coming down to...”

She almost yelled aloud in frustration, reining it in at the last second. Monty was Varian’s son. It made sense he’d be the one taking over now that they were so close to a discovery that would make her name and put this corner of Wales on the map right up there with Stonehenge and the Grand Canyon.

Lou resisted the urge to hurl something across the portacabin. “What a surprise. You know, it’s so nice to see that nepotism is alive and well and flourishing in Wales. The exact same way it does all over the country

wherever the Sparrow Foundation can be found.”

She paused, counting to five slowly. “Are you sacking me?” she muttered.

“On the contrary, I have a nice simple job for you.”

“Tell you what. Send Monty to do your nice simple job. See if he can do that without messing it up. We all know what happened on the Tumbrel dig. How he was responsible for those deaths.”

Varian’s expression darkened, and Lou wisely shut up before he really did sack her. “Have you heard of Dark Lake?” he asked.

“Should I have?”

“It’s a reservoir up in the Pennines. The villages of Abernay and Finlay were flooded in the first half of the last century to make the Aberfinay Dam, shortly before the start of the Second World War. It’s now known as Dark Lake, as is the new village that sprang up next to it. The dam provides water for one of the large towns. It doesn’t matter which one. The whole area is owned by an old family friend, Evan Close.”

Her fingers drummed her irritation on the desk. “And? What does this have to do with the price of fish?”

“The water levels have dropped enough to see the church spire above the level of the reservoir. A few unusual artefacts have washed ashore. I want you to go up there and see what’s going on.”

“Why?”

“As I said the land is owned by a family friend. Neither of us wants this getting into the media. We’d prefer it be handled quickly and quietly. I can get you permission to dive once or twice. And arrange for a diving team to meet you up there.”

“Can’t it wait a few weeks?”

"No. It has to be done now."

"Send *Whatshisface* up there."

"Monty can't swim. You can. You have a gold medal to prove it."

Lou chewed her bottom lip. "That was a lifetime ago. I had to make a choice over careers, and I chose archaeology. I finally get my big break, and you're taking it away from me. When I've done all the leg work, all the research..."

Varian handed her a file. "I'd shut up about now if I were you. Assuming you want to keep your job. I'm sending you to Dark Lake. End of discussion. I'll see you in an hour."

Lou stood. Part of her wanted to quit on the spot, but the other part of her had more sense. "You know what? Brief yourself. These are all my files and notes. I'm sure my team can tell you anything else you need to know if you can't read my writing."

"Lou..."

"Don't you Lou me. I've spent the best part of ten years working for you, and this is how you repay me. Every. Single. Time." She stomped over to the door and slammed it hard behind her.

Tears burned her eyes for the second time in an hour. But for a totally different reason. She tugged her hat down firmly so no one else would see. She ignored AJ calling her name as she hurried to her car. He'd find out soon enough where she was going in such a hurry.

She had to go back to the hotel and pack. Then she needed to find out where along the Pennines Dark Lake was located. But first, she had to research Evan Close.

Slamming the car door shut behind her, Lou took several deep breaths before tugging out her phone and

bringing up the search engine app. She tapped in Evan Close's name and images.

Wow. Her anger was forgotten as she gazed at the photo. He was a hunk. Tall and thin, rather austere features, with ice blue eyes and short dark hair that stood up a little on top.

Lou had to giggle despite herself as she realised she used the hunk scale she and Staci had invented as kids to rate him. He'd score seven and a half, maybe even an eight, just on looks. No man ever rated a ten as that was perfection and wasn't possible.

It was time to get this show on the road. The sooner she got up there, the sooner she could meet the bloke and do what Varian wanted her to do, whatever that was, and the sooner she could go home. He'd been more than a little vague. Maybe once she stopped being mad at him, she'd be intrigued.

But right now, as she started the car, she was too annoyed for anything else. She dropped her phone into her bag and shoved the gear stick into first, wincing as the gears ground in protest. She leaned her head against the steering wheel, forcing herself to calm down. Crashing the car, or being stopped for dangerous driving, would only inflame her already stretched nerves and wouldn't help one iota.

2

Evan Close eased back onto the plush red leather sofa in his London office and lifted the glass of whisky from the silver tray on the side table. He had very few vices, but this was one of them. The amber liquid sparkled in the late afternoon sunlight. His nerves had been on edge since the phone call after lunch, and now he was tauter than a violin bow.

He had spent years building up Xenon, his civil engineering company, and had finally begun to reap the rewards from years of hard work. And he now stood on the cusp of losing everything.

Thanks to Varian Sparrow. There was a family connection somewhere in the past. He and Varian were cousins several times removed, but he didn't pay any attention to that. The less he and Varian had to do with each other the better, as far as he was concerned. Especially now Varian was sending a woman to dig into a past he needed kept buried.

He could have done the research into this woman by himself, but that was why he paid other people.

Besides, he'd had work of his own to do. A new tender was up for grabs, and he had to polish his pitch and make sure his offer was better than anyone else's. Files were spread out over the table in front of him. Facts, figures, running costs from his other projects, including the jewel in his crown—the Thames Barrier.

The tap and the door opening occurred simultaneously. He glanced upwards. Only one person

had the authority to do that. And it wasn't his secretary either. He nodded to the tall, dark haired man standing opposite him. "So, what do we know about her, Ira?"

Ira Miles, his head of security, opened the file and handed Evan a photo. "Quite a bit."

"Take a seat." Evan studied the picture as Ira folded himself into the chair on the other side of the coffee table.

The woman in the photo was pretty. Long black hair, sparkling blue eyes, dimples in her cheeks, and perfect teeth that shone. She appeared young, but he didn't suppose she was.

"Her name is Dr. Louisa Willow Benson Fitzgerald. She's thirty-two and was born in Southampton. She won swimming gold in the Paraworld championships thirteen years ago in the four-hundred meters freestyle, setting a new world and commonwealth record in the process. She gave up swimming to pursue a career in archaeology. B.Sc., M.Sc., Ph.D., ending up as one of the top archaeologists in her field." He paused and looked expectantly at Evan.

"What did I miss?"

"Archaeologist...field...digging..."

Evan groaned. "That's a terrible pun. Even by my standards. Go on."

"Her father, Robert Benson, died when she was twelve. Her mother, Nichola, was remarried five years later to an American pilot, Jack Fitzgerald. He's now the General in charge of Nellis Air Force Base. Dr. Fitzgerald has two siblings from that marriage, a brother, Robert, aged fourteen, and a sister, Emily, who is twelve. She took her stepfather's surname when he adopted her. Before that, she and two friends ran

away. According to what I discovered they sparked a worldwide search after they left Southampton on board a cabin cruiser. They were finally found seven months later on Agrihan where they'd been shipwrecked."

Evan raised an eyebrow and snatched the offered paper as he snorted in disbelief. "Really? And Agrihan is where exactly?"

"It's part of the North Marina Islands in the Pacific. That's a distance of around seven-thousand, two-hundred and twenty miles from where they set off. And that's going as the crow flies east to west. Though I imagine they'd have gone west to east, so the mileage could be out by a fair few miles."

"Hmmm. And these kids were how old?"

"Dr. Fitzgerald was fifteen; her friends Jim and Staci Kirk were seventeen and thirteen respectively."

Evan tossed the paper to the side, discounting the story as totally implausible. "Yeah, right." He swallowed a generous sip of the whisky and waved a finger over the top of the glass. "Go on."

"She has a prosthetic left leg due to injuries received when she ran away. No more details on that. She's sidestepped the question on every interview she's ever given. If it is a matter of public record, it's been well and truly sealed. Her reputation as an archaeologist is formidable. By all accounts, she's like a dog with a bone, as the cliché says. Once she starts uncovering something, she keeps going until she's found all the answers. There is a list of her papers and so on attached to that document I gave you."

Evan shifted on the sofa, a gnawing starting in the pit of his stomach. "Is she a threat?"

Ira shook his head. "She is ambitious, but a threat?"