

WATERS AND THE WILD

Jo Zebedee



PROLOGUE

I NEVER KNEW panic could make ice jump into my throat and cold fingers crawl up my spine. That it could change me from a rational, normal mum, unpacking in the caravan at the start of our holiday, into a harridan who screamed at my husband for losing our daughter; at my young, stunned son for needing me; at the police to do something – anything – to find her.

That was the first time, the time when everything changed, and the memory never fades: Phil running through the site, Mark beside him on coltish legs, struggling to keep up. Phil's panicked eyes meeting mine, Phil who'd always been strong. He ran up to where I was, standing on the caravan's step clutching a pair of tiny dungarees, just perfect for a five-year-old girl. Before he spoke I knew he'd been away too long and ... I knew.

"Amy's gone," he said, his words strained. He sucked in a breath. "We need to call the police."

"Gone where?" I didn't scream or yell. Not then. It wasn't real yet.

"From the little glen," he said. "The one at the top of the site."

Amy's glen, where she'd spent the last summer enchanted by 'fairies'. We'd encouraged her game, not knowing, then, what it was really about.

Mark had been the one with the sense to run to the rangers' lodge, and the ranger on duty called the police. All Phil could say, over and over, was that it wasn't possible for her to be gone, that he'd been watching her,

that there was no way out of the glen. Mark agreed and the bile rose in me because – it was possible; they had lost her.

The search went on all night. Helicopters droned over the forest. Floodlights swept the glen. Voices shouted: “Amy! Amy!” An officer gave her description on the radio; they thought someone had taken her. Another asked for a photo, and when I didn’t have one they called my parents. I watched lights dance over the forest, back and forth, and couldn’t focus on anything except the creeping knowledge that I wouldn’t see her again.

They found her after dark, in the glen, curled under an overhang of trees. Someone came to the van where we were having another cup of tea – I’ve never drunk tea since – and I ran across the site, the grass whipping my ankles. I climbed the stile into the glen beyond. A policewoman helped me over; she was shaking her head, saying it was a miracle, that no one knew how they’d missed her. I heard Phil ask where she’d been found, heard him say he’d bloody known there was no way past. Clever Mark checked it really was Amy.

I left all that behind and walked into the circle of police. There, in the middle of the officers, her face dimpling when she saw me, Amy waited. The ice in me broke – shattered – and I ran to her. I picked her up and spun her round until she laughed.

“Where did you go, sweetie?” I asked when I put her down. I crouched in front of her and gave her a box of raisins – I knew she’d be hungry. As she went to take the raisins I saw something in her hand: a golden acorn, perfect except for a crack in its side, its metal catching the moonlight.

“Where did you get that?”

“From the fairies,” she said, her eyes solemn. “I found it.”

My heart stilled. Amy never lied. Phil, now beside me, bent in front of her and stroked her hand. I watched, tense, as he said, “Tell the truth, honey.”

“I did.” She gave a little smile, a dancing one, and said, “I was with the fairies.”

Mark stared at his sister. I saw him taking in her eyes, her hair, the cunning smile. He looked her up and down and then grinned, an eight-year-old’s grin that wasn’t scared like mine.

“Cool,” he said, drawing out the word. “Can I be their prince?”

But he wasn't their prince: he couldn't be anything to them. They only ever wanted Amy.

CHAPTER ONE

THE BRIDGE TO the waterfall was deserted: the last of the tourists were either eating dinner in the nearby restaurant, or away back to their cars. Thank God; if Simon heard once more how cute the glen was or how quaint the Irish, he might throw himself in the river and have done with it. He looped his hands over the railing, his eyes half closing.

The waterfall that attracted the tourists to Glenariff drummed, far in the distance. He was half tempted to wander up one of the two paths leading to it, but even on a good day the wooden walkways were shaded and mossy. After the afternoon's rain and in the falling darkness, they'd be lethal. A dove cooed and settled to roost in the trees, the forest's stillness making its call seem louder than it ought to be. Simon swayed a little and grabbed the railing: he'd definitely had too much to drink.

The sound of footsteps jerked him awake. He turned to see a girl of about eighteen walking past the restaurant's glass windows. Her dress, a gossamer, floral job, stuck to her legs and her dark jacket merged with the surrounding trees, making her look like she'd stepped out of the forest instead of the reception.

She stopped at the end of the bridge and cocked her head. A moment later, she nodded and started to cross, the sharp heels of her sandals making a pit-pit sound on the wood. As she passed

Simon, her hands fluttered at her side. She took no notice of him, intent on an internal conversation. He smothered a smile. The fizzy wine had been flowing just as liberally as the Guinness all day. In fact, one bright spark had combined both to make Black Velvet cocktails, and handed them out as a dare.

The girl half-stumbled onto the well-worn path beyond the bridge. Trees crowded it, making it dark enough for a line of floodlights to illuminate, highlighting the pretty ferns but nothing practical like the path. Speaking of practical – the girl teetered in her strappy sandals.

“Hey!” Simon skidded as he crossed the still-wet bridge. “Wait up!”

She turned. Her eyes widened. “I didn’t see you.”

“No. You were—” Distracted or pissed, which would offend less? He shrugged; best not to go there. “Where are you going?”

“To the waterfall.” She backed away; coltish, tense.

He stopped a few feet from her. Was he scaring her? He didn’t see how he could be. “You can’t go up there.” He kept his voice soft. “Even the yanks aren’t daft enough to go up at night.”

She didn’t smile at his poor joke. “I’ve got good night vision.”

She’d need to be an owl. Disco lights came on in the function room behind him, reflecting in her eyes, making them sharper, more aware. He wasn’t sure she *was* drunk. Either way, there was no way he could let her go up on her own. If she didn’t fall, she’d catch her death of cold, especially if the rain came back on. He opened his hands in a non-threatening way. “Look, Miss... what’s your name?”

“Amy.” She raised her chin, meeting his eyes, almost defiant. “Amy Lyle.”

Ah, now he knew why he’d recognised her. It may have been fifteen years since he’d last seen her but she was hard to forget. Or, at least, the look on his ma’s face was.

“I’m Simon McCormick. You hid under your ma’s skirt at my uncle’s funeral and showed her knickers to the entire church when you came out. My ma still dines out on the story.”

Actually, Ma had talked about the Lyles recently, but he couldn't bring the details to mind. A divorce? Something like that.

"I don't remember you," she said. "All I remember is the skirt incident – Mum never lets me forget." She smiled, obviously not sorry. "So, we're related or something?"

"Something," he said. "Cousins fifteen times removed at best." He nodded up the path. "Do you have to go to the waterfall tonight? It's getting dark."

Her smile fell away, leaving a pinched, set expression. "Yes." She pulled her jacket tight, hands clenched so her knuckles were white. She turned and set off up the path, quicker than before.

"Jesus, be careful." He made to go after her, but stopped. How would it look to someone back at the wedding party, him chasing a slip of a thing up the glen?

The sound of skidding followed by a soft curse reached his ears.

"Fuck it," he said, and headed up the path after Amy. He caught up with her at the bottom of the wooden walkway leading to the waterfall. The noise of the water had changed, growing deeper and louder as it channeled through a ravine on his left instead of burbling over stones. A rail protected climbers from the ravine, and the cliff-face hugged the other side, casting the walkway into a darkness barely broken by the few lights.

Amy had already started to climb a short flight of steps to the first section.

"Amy, stop," he said. "Look how dark it is."

She paused, her hand on the rail. He counted another two sets of steps before the path twisted out of sight.

"What's so important it can't wait until tomorrow?" he pleaded.

"It's...." Her gaze cast over the ravine, skipping from rock to tree, to the river, to the cliff. "I have to go up." He could only just hear her over the water, her voice was so low. "That's all." She looked tense, almost hungry, in her eager stance, as if listening for something in the forest.

The drumming of the waterfall echoed through the glen. The air was dank, and the woods close and still. The moment stretched. She shouldn't be here, not with the forest watching. He couldn't have said why, just that it didn't feel safe. He wanted to get back to the noise and the reception crowd, away from this empty place.

"If you go, I'll have to follow you," he said. "I wouldn't let anyone walk around here in the dark. But it's been a long day, and I don't fancy the trek." Not to mention that going any further into the wooded glen had started to scare the shit out of him. "I mean, I'm all for stretching my legs after the speeches, but not rock climbing." He was babbling, but at least while she was listening she wasn't leaving. "How can anyone talk for that long? Forty-six minutes? I had a bet on eighteen. I'm down a fiver."

"I chose fourteen," she said, surprising him with a short laugh. "All that guff about soul mates and past lives and carrying love on forever.... And they call *me* nuts."

Did they? Something caught at the edge of his thoughts, buried under all the family info his mother had dumped on him.

Amy glanced up the path. "Is it really too dark to see anything? I thought there might be lights at the fall."

For all he knew the place could be lit up like a beacon. "Yeah. Definitely. Pitch black at the top." He held a hand out. "Shall we go?"

Carefully, he closed the gap between them until she was only inches away. Her perfume reached him, a musk that matched the glen's loamy scent. Combined with her cropped hair and big eyes, she had a sense of other-worldliness that made his breath catch, something almost fairy-like. He cupped her elbow with his hand.

The wind shifted. The trees whispered, urging him to take her into the watching forest. He tightened his grip on her arm. If he helped her up to the waterfall, he could make sure she didn't fall.

He jumped at a sudden blast of music from the reception. What had he been thinking? He let go of her.

The trees were still. The wind's noise died away. Unease settled in his bones; a low warning. "I think we should get out of here."

"Yes." Her eyes were wide, her gaze roving everywhere.

"Come on." He started to guide her down the path, frightened to rush in case she broke away; scared not to, in case this respite didn't last.

As they reached the bridge, she stopped and looked back the way they'd come. "You were telling the truth about the dark? You're not just humouring me."

"Of course not," he lied. He set off over the bridge, shepherding her along its narrow length. He led her around the corner to the car park and crunched over the gravel to the restaurant. As he opened the door, music pumped into the night and heat from the bar hit his face. He pushed through, claustrophobic under the lounge's low ceiling hung with the paraphernalia the restaurant was famous for: farm equipment, musical instruments, signage of all sorts. Amy flitted past, light on her feet, and went into the function room at the back. There, huge windows looked out to the forest, reflecting the disco lights.

A small dance floor had been cleared but most of the guests were gathered by the bar or sitting at the hastily rearranged tables. He couldn't have been away more than twenty minutes, but it felt like he'd been in the forest for hours.

A woman crossed the dance floor to Amy, lines etched either side of her mouth. "Where were you?" Her shrill voice was loud enough to carry over the music. "I was about to send out a search party." A bloke standing at her shoulder proved her words weren't a joke. He had the same dark eyes as Amy: a brother, Simon decided, and somehow familiar to him. Work, perhaps, or the rugby club.

Amy hunched into her jacket. "I just went to get some air, Mum." Her eyes met Simon's: *don't tell*.

"Did something happen?" Amy's mother's voice was demanding, almost hungry. "Did you see *them*?"

A muscle in Amy's cheek twitched. "Maybe." A look passed between her and her mother, some kind of common understanding. "But they've gone now."

"Leave it." The brother made an abrupt cutting off motion with his hands. He nodded at the door. "Ralph's trying to get your attention."

"He's giving me a lift back to Belfast," said her mother. "He must want to go."

"I could come too," said Amy. Her eyes drifted to the window. "It might be for the best."

"The car's full," said her mother, her words quick. "Mark will get you home on the bus." She reached for Amy, but her hand caught in the little necklace around her neck, breaking the chain. The pendant slid down the chain, off the end, and spilled onto the dance floor. It would have rolled further but her brother stopped it with his foot.

"Mum!" Amy grabbed the acorn and held it clasped against her. "Be careful."

"No harm done," said the brother, his face strained. "Mum, you had better go before Ralph has an apoplexy." He flashed a quick grin at Amy. "Don't worry. I'll stick close. You won't be able to gallivant off."

Her mother reached out and stroked Amy's cheek. "You can tell me tomorrow all about the night you have." She made her way through the wedding crowd to the door, pushed it open, and left with Ralph and two women. Simon stared after her. Surely the car could take one more?

"Jesus," said Mark, taking his attention. "She's in some form. Except with you, Amy, oh Golden Child." He smiled, and it took the edge off his barbed words.

Amy took a seat at a table close to the window and stared into the blackness beyond, her hand clenched around her pendant. She looked older, sitting there – older and fragile, as if she could break.

CHAPTER TWO

AT MIDNIGHT THE band wrapped up, ignoring a last request for something by the Killers from the drunk, raucous table of women at the front. Or the suggestion the lead singer should take his kit off.

Simon found himself glancing – again – at the table Amy had shared with her brother. Mark hadn't lied about sticking like glue; even when he'd gone to the bar and got chatting, his attention kept going back to her.

Now, both she and her brother were gone. Her jacket and bag – a huge thing patterned with daisies – were hanging on the back of her seat. Presumably the Lyles had joined the toilet queue from hell ahead of the bus to Belfast.

Speaking of which.... Simon shrugged on his suit jacket and removed his buttonhole, leaving the half-wilted carnation on the table beside an empty glass, and joined the queue for the men's. The chat had grown subdued, just the odd comment about the time of night and what a grand day it had been. Somewhere near the front Max, the best man, was loudly slurring his words; now the bride had left he was reverting to his rugby-club form.

Amy's brother emerged from the toilets and looked over at their table. He paled and started to search the room with worried eyes. A moment later, he pushed his way to the queue for the

ladies' and spoke to one of the women at the front. She nodded, went into the toilets, and came out a few moments later. At the shake of her head, Mark's lips moved in an unmistakable curse.

Simon looked out of the picture windows. He remembered Amy's dark eyes looking up the path, fixed on whatever lay at the top, the deep silence as the forest had waited for them. *Oh, crap.* He left the queue and caught up with Mark.

"Has she gone?" he asked.

"Yes." Mark ran his hands through his hair, looking around the room, taking in each table. He set off for the door. "I have to find her."

"I'll help."

"Simon, isn't it? You do web designs?" Finally, Simon placed the other man – he worked in one of the companies he'd designed for. "Check the bar as you go through. But quickly."

Simon followed through to the main bar, and they split up. He weaved in and out between the tables as fast as he could, but there was no Amy. He reached the front door where Mark soon joined him.

"Bollocks," said Mark. "She *has* fucking gone. Jesus Christ, I only left her alone for a minute."

"The waterfall," said Simon. He cleared his throat. "I was chatting to her earlier, and she wanted see it."

"Oh, for Christ's sake." Mark pushed the door open and stepped into the expanse of gravelled car park. He half-ran around the side of the building, stopping on the bridge. His eyes scanned between the two paths leading up to the waterfall. "Amy! Come on, it's Mark! You're not in trouble, I just want to know you're okay."

Nothing came back but the whistle of the wind through the trees.

"Should I get help?" asked Simon.

"No point. You could send a squad after her, and they wouldn't find her unless she wanted them to. She could be beside us and we wouldn't know."

Mark fished a torch out of his suit pocket, and Simon frowned; who in God's name brought a torch to a wedding? Mark must have noticed his surprise, because he gave a quick shrug. "Best to be prepared when you're with our Amy."

The path along the river stretched in front of Simon. He glanced longingly back at the bar.

"You take the left path, I'll take the right." Mark paused. "You got a phone?" Simon nodded. "Right, put in my number. If we get lost we can call." He called out the number, waited while Simon connected with his phone and saved it, and then he was away down the path, shouting his sister's name, cajoling her to come out.

Simon started up the other path. He left the floodlit exterior of the restaurant behind and passed into the full darkness of the glen, only the irregular spotlights lighting his way. The waterfall's noise became a low rumble which settled in the pit of his stomach. From the other side of the ravine Mark continued to call, his voice increasingly urgent. Simon frowned; Amy had only been missing a short time and the two paths followed a loop around the glen. At some point, they had to meet up with her. There was no need to panic.

He kept climbing, alert for any movement. His eyes adjusted to the dark, picking out ghost-grey ferns and the white-foamed water. He clambered up the path. It was less slippery than the other, thankfully, but his feet still went from under him a couple of times, and he kept tight hold of the railing. Finally, he reached the viewing platform. The waterfall crashed on the rocks ahead, floodlit from behind, so the peaty water held a golden sheen.

Mark arrived from the other path and flashed his torch around, picking out rocks and the fine spray hitting Simon's face. The light jerked as Mark pointed it down the river, making no more impact on the dark than the floodlights.

"She's not here," said Simon. "We should go back and get people out to look. Or check the bar again."

No answer, just the incessant sweep of the torchlight. His hair was already soaked through by the spray. He put his hands in his pockets and fought not to shiver. “Come on, mate, she’s not here.”

Mark turned to him, his dark eyes glinting. “Quiet a minute. I need to listen.”

Simon raised an eyebrow but fell quiet in the face of the other man’s distress. Now he was used to the noise, the waterfall dominated a little less. He became aware of another sound under the thundering: a sing-song noise, almost a hum.

“She’s here,” said Mark. “I can hear her.”

Simon leaned over the wooden railing, searching the length of the ravine and along the line of both paths. If she was close enough to hear, he should be able to see her. “Where the hell is she?”

Mark shrugged. “She bolts,” he said. “She’s here, but she’s hidden.” He nodded down the path. “Look, why don’t you head back? You’ll miss the bus, otherwise; there’s no one sober enough to stop and do a head-count down there.”

Simon paused, tempted. He had no business standing here looking for a girl he’d spoken to for barely ten minutes. He shook his head. It would be pretty low to leave Mark standing out here on his own. Besides – she should have been easy to find. The memory of the glen earlier, how it had infected him, nagged. He couldn’t walk away.

“Fuck it. If I miss the bus, it’ll save me an hour of interrogation from Aunt Agnes.” He leaned against the railings. “I’ll wait with you.”

“Up to you.” The terse words held an edge of relief. Mark cast his torch around once again. The humming grew louder, until Simon could almost place it, but faded just as quickly. The only movement, aside from the water, came from moths fluttering around the floodlights. A chill settled into his bones.

“This is crazy,” he said. “She’s not here. Look—” He leaned over the wooden rail, trying not to think how deep the gorge it protected him from was. “Amy!” His voice hit the rock and echoed back.

Mark swung his torch, tracking the river. Its light caught something glinting between two of the walkway's planks. Simon leaned forward to pick it up.

"Mark," he said, and held out the little acorn from Amy's necklace.

"Oh, hell." Mark leaned right over the rail. The torchlight bobbed as he searched the gorge, up the rock walls and along the paths. Finally, his voice heavy with relief, he said, "She's there."

He'd caught Amy in the torchlight, on the turn of the path below. She huddled against the cliff face, shivering in her gossamer dress. Her face was streaked and dirty and her arms scratched so badly long rivulets of blood ran down them, despite the rain.

"Mark." Her voice wavered. "It's happening again."