

SILENT LITTLE ANGELS by Jennifer Chase

EXCERPT

The luxurious dark-gray sedan crept along the rural road that led up to where Eagle Ridge Camp was nestled in the beautiful, wooded hills of Sequoia County, California. In places along the track, large pine tree branches arched downward creating makeshift tunnels. As the car climbed, the views of the rolling hills and the picturesque town of Pine Valley became even more spectacular.

William and Jane Faulkner grew increasingly uncomfortable the closer they approached the property. They watched from the car as the beautiful forestry hills turned into a heavily wooded area that was almost impassable. The attraction of the potential investment property seemed to become less valuable the closer they got to Eagle Ridge Camp.

Mr. Faulkner glanced at the real estate agent Daniel Green, who had been highly recommended, and watched him grip the steering wheel tighter as he navigated around road hazards. He turned to the backseat and observed his wife as she strummed her long, polished nails on the door handle: sour expression with a downturned mouth. It was clear that she was not happy about being dragged this far out of town. He had second thoughts too.

“We’re just about there,” Daniel said, forcing a smile.

“The road is... barely passable,” said Mr. Faulkner. He gripped the handle of the door to steady himself.

“It’s nothing that couldn’t be easily cleared in a few hours with some bulldozers. It would be a cinch to clear the heavy brush—maybe remove a tree or two. The road itself is in pretty good condition, so it wouldn’t be difficult to scrape and level with a good construction company. There’s also another utility road that comes into the property from the other side. But...” he continued, mustering some zeal, “this road gives you the best view of the most beautiful fifty acres in the county. It’s an amazing investment opportunity.”

The couple stared silently out the windows—seemingly not convinced.

Daniel pushed the high-performance car up the last incline to where the land then leveled out and opened into spectacular views of stunning meadows and groupings of trees.

“Wow,” Mr. Faulkner said under his breath. Finally, he could see past the overgrowth and grasp the potential. “This is amazing. And thank you for making time for us today. We’re on a flight to France tomorrow.”

His wife leaned forward to get a better look through the windshield. Her face softened in wonder as she gazed at the rolling countryside unfolding around them.

Daniel pulled to the left and parked. “You ready for a bit of a walk? You brought your hiking shoes, right?”

The couple nodded.

“Great,” he replied and opened the car door while the couple changed their shoes.

He checked his pockets to make sure he had the keys that opened the main buildings. Filled with nervous energy, he jingled his own car keys against them as he paced in front of the car, surveying the area.

The pines arched and swayed around them in the breeze, blowing their sweet scent through the air. Daniel turned to look down the valley at the various towns he could see in the distance: pretty as a postcard. Fresh air, birds fluttering in the trees, and the warmth of the gentle rays of sun upon his face.

Mr. and Mrs. Faulkner emerged from the car and slowly closed the doors.

“How about we check out the main buildings and then have a look at the lake?” Daniel said.

“Sounds good,” Mr. Faulkner said, still surveying the area. “So, how long has this camp been closed? It’s been on the market, for what, almost two years?”

They began walking along a narrow trail. Before them were some large buildings, clustered around the main clearing, the gentle rolling hills visible behind them. Weeds crunched underneath their shoes as they weaved along the unkempt path.

“It closed about five years ago,” said Daniel.

“I see.”

“We’ve had several interested parties, but something always went wrong with the escrow. Investors pulled out. Money didn’t get transferred. Things like that. We’ve even had a foreign investor wanting to turn it into a family theme park for a while now, but it’s moving slowly.”

As they walked around the area, Mr. Faulkner felt his enthusiasm grow. He glanced at his wife, and she, too, smiled and raised her eyebrows in growing expectation.

Daniel made an abrupt left turn on the path and began to move downward. The trees clustered closely again around them, before the huge trunks opened into another serene clearing surrounded by gently rolling hills. "This is the south end of Echo Valley, where the lake begins."

"Echo Valley?" Mrs. Faulkner asked.

"*Hello, hello,*" he called out, letting his voice resonate around them before fading away.

All three of them stood for a moment and listened. The calmness and beauty of the area was worth a moment of silence.

"C'mon. You're in for a real treat," Daniel said. He quickened his pace around two large trees. An enormous lake glistened before them, surrounded by the hills. There was not a ripple across the surface, and the reflections of the nearby trees, grasses, and the partly cloudy sky were cast back at them like a visual echo. Just to Daniel's left, a little boathouse and wharf sat at the lake's edge.

"I told you," said Daniel. "This is only *one* of many amazing views on the plot. Can you imagine taking a kayak out at sunset? Or building a dream house here? Just breathtaking." He paused and took a gentle deep breath.

The Faulknors walked over to the dock to get a closer look at the birds swooping and diving around the lake. Daniel followed silently behind them, as the weathered boards creaked gently underfoot.

A soft bumping sound could be heard from within the boathouse at the end of the jetty, and curious, Daniel took a detour to take a quick look. He pushed open the door, which hung cockeyed off its hinges. They gave way with a prickling screech. Inside was revealed a long wooden deck along with several well-worn hooks, used to secure canoes and kayaks.

Hearing the couple behind him, he called out, "Watch your footing, one of the planks is missing."

The couple followed him inside.

Mr. Faulkner looked closely at the structure. He wondered how much it would cost to build a proper boathouse. He saw Daniel looking down into the water at something dark, something that bumped against the underneath side of the deck with the lapping of the wavelets created from the mountain breeze.

“What is that?” asked Mr. Faulkner, straining to see.

Mr. Faulkner watched Daniel awkwardly kneel down to grasp the end of a piece of rope that was floating nearby. It appeared to be clean and new, totally out of place in a boathouse that had been abandoned for years. The agent pulled at it until there was a resistance.

The dark mass came closer into view with every tug of the rope. As it broke the surface, it rolled to one side and, to Mr. Faulkner’s horror, they stared at a woman’s face; dark eyes fixed open, skin opaque and shiny like artificial rubber. Brown hair swirled in the water around her pale cheeks, framing her face.