

Chapter 1 *The Lakes*

There was a crash. A long, loud scream. Then silence.

Robert heard the crash and the scream as he came out of the woods and drove past the lake. Every day he hoped that he would get past the lake without it happening. But here it was again. The sound of an ambulance. Blue lights going on and off. He began to shake in fear. To his left, out of the corner of his eye, he could see that the water was red with blood.

He stopped the car. He was still shaking. He put his head in his hands. When he looked up across the lake, there was nothing. There never was.

‘So why, why can’t I drive past this place without the same thing happening again and again?’ he wondered angrily.

When he was calm again, he started driving, slowly, towards the pub.

Robert often stopped there on his way home. It was easier than cooking for himself after a long day at work. The pub food was good, local and organic. But the real reason Robert preferred to eat at the pub was that it meant less time in his house, the house that was silent now.

This evening he wanted to go to bed early. He was a vet and he was on call. He hoped to get as much sleep as possible before the telephone rang. There were some nights at this time of year when he didn’t get woken up, it was true, but often someone wanted him. Perhaps there was a sick sheep or cow. In the spring the phone never stopped

ringing. Sheep were having lambs and he was up all night. Those were the important calls – from working farmers who needed their animals. There were some people who phoned, however, when it wasn't really necessary.

For example, the other day Mrs Fellows had phoned Robert at midnight because her cat, Harry, was sneezing. It wasn't really an emergency, but Mrs Fellows was worried. So Robert got up and went to the surgery.

Robert told Mrs Fellows that Harry only had a cold and was perfectly healthy. But Mrs Fellows talked about the cat until past one o'clock. Robert nodded, but he was thinking, 'This isn't really about your cat. It's about you, Mrs Fellows.'

He didn't say anything. He understood that Mrs Fellows was lonely. It was Mrs Fellows who needed him, not the cat.

Local people thought of Robert as a kind man who always listened. These days he no longer spoke very much, but that didn't matter. They liked his quiet face, and the time he gave them. They called him 'the silent animal doctor'. They wondered about his private life, but nobody asked.

Now, Robert drove away from the lake, and put his foot down as he reached the straight road through the woods. He didn't often meet another car at this time of year. The tourists had mostly gone, and all the locals were at home by now on a September evening. He came out of the woods and tried to think about the good food that was waiting for him. He tried not to think about the lake, or the jet-skiers, or the water slowly turning red as the sun went down.