

JUNE BUG

By Jess Lourey

Chapter 1

In my dream, I walked days and nights through the woods to reach the clear stream. A tower built to look like a silo loomed at the water's edge, and I knew I was home. The creek gurgled, the moon shone, and the frog sounds of night sang to me. I laid down to rest and was swept with serenity. There was warm breath on the back of my neck and a comforting hand on my shoulder. I felt protected, covered in the safety of night and cozy warmth. But when the hand crept purposefully lower, and I smelled digesting Schlitz on the tepid breath, I knew I wasn't in paradise anymore. My body lurched awake, and I was standing before I even remembered I had been lying down. The vertigo caught up with me, and I clutched at a bedpost as I blinked rapidly.

"What!" I yelled.

"Sunny?" Slurred the voice in my bed.

I shook my head and some REM-spun cobwebs fell out. I wasn't in my apartment in Minneapolis where I had lived for nearly ten years—a little loft on the West Bank where I shared a bathroom with a sexy, blue-eyed horn player in his sixties and a compulsively clean law student. I had moved out of there in March, leaving my cheating boyfriend and my career as a waitress and grad student in the U of M English program, and had been house sitting for my friend Sunny ever since. I was living in her little doublewide on the outskirts of Battle Lake, Minnesota, and there was a strange man in her bed. My bed.

I flicked on the cat-shaped lamp and angled the lit ears toward the intruder still sprawled in my bed on top of the handmade Amish quilt I had lucked on in the Fergus Falls Salvation Army. I yanked it from under him and covered up my body, clad in only my summer pajamas—an oversized, threadbare white tank top. I was usually comfortable with my 5'6", 140-pound frame, but I wasn't a flasher. I pulled my disheveled hair away from my face and stared down my pointy nose at the relaxed drunk.

"Sunny isn't here." I was hoping to conjure a verbal vanishing potion, but my heart was still pummeling my rib cage, and my voice shook. Luna, my foster-dog, barked from outside my open window. "Who are you?"

"Mira?"

I squinted. Happy Hands knew me, and his voice scratched an itch in the back of my memory. "Jason?"

"Yeah. You're not Sunny." He sounded bored.

Yup, it was Jason. I had met him through my moody friend C.C. ten years earlier when my hair had been dyed black, I smoked clove cigarettes, and dark, flowing clothes were my signature. Thank god for evolution.

Back then, C.C. and I were both awed freshman trying to act like we weren't scared by the vastness of the University of Minnesota and its 40,000-plus students. We had ended up as dorm mates through the luck of the draw, two small town girls, and hit it off from the word go. She had brought me to her hometown of Battle Lake on Thanksgiving break of our first year. A few months later I introduced her to the guy who gave her genital warts, so I suppose looking back we're even.

During that first introduction to Battle Lake, I met Sunny, one of C.C.'s close friends. I also met Jason, a high school classmate of theirs. I knew him from the parties C.C. and I would road trip to during college breaks, but he and I never really connected. He was the guy always trying to get in everyone's pants, the one who tried to marry anyone not dumb enough to sleep with him.

He was tall, over six feet, with dark hair and dark eyes, cute in a way that would be hot if he were an actor but was just average since he was a perpetually horny fiber optic cable layer. In small town tradition, Sunny and Jason had slept together in high school, as had most of their friends. Musical beds. I suppose the process evolved out of long winters and bad TV reception.

I hadn't seen Jason in over five years. Word was he had to relocate to Texas to find a woman to marry him since every woman in Minnesota had turned him down. Apparently he hadn't gotten the news that Sunny had moved to Alaska for the summer, and he was making his area horn call.

"What're you doing back in Battle Lake?" I asked. I felt lightheaded and ill. It occurred to me that Otter Tail County had some sort of magnetic pull on people who entered. That's the only way to explain why I was still here, running the library and writing for the local newspaper, after the last month I had lived through. It's a long story, but the short version is that I had just started falling for a guy when I found him shot through the head in the library a couple days later.

When I had first met Jeff, I was impressed with his maturity and character. After he was shot and left for me to find, I learned again the harsh truth that how I feel about someone has no effect on whether they get to live or die. I thought I had learned that one well enough when my dad died in a car accident the summer of my junior year in high school, but in my experience, life keeps dragging you back to the same table until you pick the right food. Anyhow, the whole Jeff ordeal taught me the mental benefits of tying up loose ends. I had also turned twenty-nine last month, but that milestone got lost in the shuffle.

Jason sat up and rubbed a red scrape on his shoulder, his back to me. He had put on about forty pounds since I last saw him, and I couldn't help but notice that he had stripped down to his faded black boxers. Confident guy. "I'm in town to visit the 'rents. Got anything to eat?"

My mouth opened in a yell, but he was out of bed and in the kitchen before I could answer. Apparently, if he wasn't getting laid, he was getting fed. I squelched the urge to hand him a mirror. I had just seen a show on chimpanzee behavior on the Nature Channel and was pretty sure the shiny glass would keep him busy for hours. No, better to get rid of him. As I grabbed for my robe, I hissed at the part of me that was thinking like a schoolgirl, worried that he would get mad at me if I was rude to him when I knew I should be kicking the trespassing bastard out on his ass. Media conditioning is a bitch.

I looked around my bedroom for a pair of shorts to pull on under the robe. The wrought-iron bed was stripped down to its sheets, and I grabbed the quilt off the floor and tossed it on top. The bed was kitty-corner to the wall because I liked angles. Behind the metal headboard was my reading stand on which the kitty lamp stood, next to the William Kent Krueger mystery I had been reading before I fell asleep. The twelve foot by ten foot room also had a dresser with a vanity top, a tiny closet with a cheap door, and a dirty clothes hamper. I dug out the cut-offs I had been wearing earlier today from the hamper and tugged them on.

Now that I was no longer terrified by an intruder in my bed, I could not ignore a black memory that was squirming its way into my consciousness. I didn't want to be overwhelmed by the remembering, but I couldn't sit on it any longer, not now that we were bathed in light and I could hear him making himself comfortable in my kitchen.

It had happened a few years ago, that black memory, the summer before C.C. and I graduated from college. The night had opened with promise—a bonfire by the lake, a keg of Leinenkugel's, and a CD player hooked up to someone's car lighter. I remember feeling pretty that night, and excited to be with friends.

Jason was there, and it wasn't long before he hit on me. His hair was longer then, curling around his shoulders and shiny black. He leaned in to tell me a joke, and his wide grin was flirtatious. He really was cute. I was flattered by the male attention but not drunk enough to latch on to the token male slut so early in the evening. When I didn't bite, he moved on to the next chick, and I forgot about him. He hadn't forgotten about me.

When I walked into the woods to pee, he followed me quietly. He waited until my pants were down to push me back on the ground and cover my mouth with his fist. His hand smelled musty, like composting leaves.

I heard Sunny call my name at the same moment the zip of Jason's pants cut through his fumbled grunting. He jumped off me when Sunny appeared and then staggered back to the party. She was weaving and giggling like we were playing hide and go seek and didn't stop him when he shoved past her. Though she helped to clean me off, she didn't have much sympathy for my situation. She wanted to keep the good times rolling and said he was just drunk and had misinterpreted my interest. She seemed mildly offended that I would even consider that a good friend of hers could be a potential rapist. I started to wonder if maybe I had overreacted.

I saw Sunny laughing with Jason later that night as I sat on the fringes of the party and tried to act normal, chain smoking so I'd have an excuse to keep my hand in front of my swollen mouth. I still don't know what was more of a betrayal—Sunny's lack of support for me or Jason's aggression.

In the small town tradition of German descendants, however, we never talked about that bad night again. Life went on and when I ran into Jason, he was distant and vaguely unpleasant. Everyone else treated him like a loveable goofball, though I did notice that some people made a point to steer clear of him. Myself, I got to the place where I wondered whether I had imagined the whole thing, or maybe he had been too drunk to remember his attack on me.

Despite the passage of time and my own self-doubt, it was still impossible to feel comfortable with him in my house, but I didn't want to work myself into a panic attack, either. I rationalized that there were plenty of people who liked Jason, and he did have a good sense of humor. I stopped just sort of making excuses for his past behavior, and strode purposefully into the kitchen.

The double-wide was set up so I had to walk past the open front door and through the living room to get to the open kitchen, a formica-topped island the only separation between the two rooms. The living room was decorated in Early Cabin, including a secondhand, rust-colored couch, cinderblock and wood plank bookshelves, mismatched lamps, and a 1984 RCA color TV sporting tinfoil-hugged rabbit ears. The floor was carpeted in forest green except where the sun hit it regularly. In those spots it was pale green.

The kitchen was nicer. It came with all new appliances, including a dishwasher, when Sunny had purchased it. A u-shaped counter top consisting of the island, the stove, and the sinks took up one half of the room. The other half housed a glass-topped dinner table with four wicker chairs around it, some freestanding cupboards, and a ficus plant. I had kept the kitchen pretty much as Sunny had left it, other than scrubbing it top to bottom, putting my pictures up on the fridge, and alphabetizing the spice rack.

“So, I bet your parents are happy to see you.” With my thumbs, I was inscribing infinity patterns on the nail of my middle fingers. I shoved my hands into my robe pockets to hide this nervous habit.

“Haven’t been there yet.” He grabbed a pot from the particleboard cupboards, and stuck his hand in the food cabinet all in one smooth move. “You’re gonna need more Potato Buds.”

I sucked in a deep mouthful of air in a trapped sort of way and sat down on a stool next to the island, girding myself for a confrontation. I knew from experience that it would be easier to get rid of him full than kick him out hungry, so I promised myself I would show him the door as soon as he was done eating. This was my house and I wasn’t going to let him intimidate me in it. At least not for longer than half an hour. I slowed my heartbeat, made a mental note of the objects within reaching distance that I could use as weapons if need be—the knife rack was inches away on the crook of the island, and I could touch the nearest lamp with my hand right now if I wanted to—and turned to look into the night.

The June evening was unusually warm, following the precedent set by May, and soaked in the smell of fresh-cut grass and rich, black dirt. If I listened below the sounds of boiling water and clattering pans, I could hear mosquitoes whining. Whiskey Lake’s waves lapped against the rim of its sheltered arm 600 yards from my front door, and the oaks and elms stood still as stone, their fresh leaves hanging motionless and a little too green from the exhilaration of spring. I cocked my head. If there was no wind, there should be no waves. I stood and walked to the open door and peered through the screen. Sure enough, I caught the low hum of a motorboat on the far side of this sheltered offshoot of the lake. I looked at the clock hung by the door. It was 2:34 a.m.

“What’s a boat doing out at this time of night, and with no lights on?” I whispered, my fingertips on the cool screen.

I jumped as Jason answered from directly behind my left shoulder. “Probably looking for the diamond. This lake’ll be crawling by tomorrow.”



JUNE BUG, By Jess Lourey

BUY THE BOOK

Publisher: Llewellyn Publications

ISBN13: 9780738709123

- [Independent Mystery Booksellers](#)
- [IndieBound](#)
- [Barnes & Noble](#)
- [Borders](#)
- [Amazon](#)
- Also available in e-book format.