

HEART OF STONE

ALSO BY JAMES W. ZISKIN

Styx & Stone

No Stone Unturned

Stone Cold Dead

HEART OF STONE

An Ellie Stone Mystery

JAMES W. ZISKIN



SEVENTH STREET BOOKS®

AN IMPRINT OF PROMETHEUS BOOKS

59 JOHN GLENN DRIVE • AMHERST, NY 14228

www.seventhstreetbooks.com

Published 2016 by Seventh Street Books®, an imprint of Prometheus Books

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Cover design by Jacqueline Nasso Cooke

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20 19 18 17 16 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Ziskin, James W., 1960- author.

Title: Heart of stone : an Ellie Stone mystery / James W. Ziskin.

Description: Amherst, NY : Seventh Street Books, 2016.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016006974 (print) | LCCN 2016011563 (ebook) |

ISBN 9781633881839 (softcover) | ISBN 9781633881846 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Women journalists—Fiction. | Murder—Investigation—Fiction

| Nineteen sixties—Fiction. | BISAC: FICTION / Mystery & Detective /

Women Sleuths. | FICTION / Mystery & Detective / Historical. | GSAFD:

Mystery fiction.

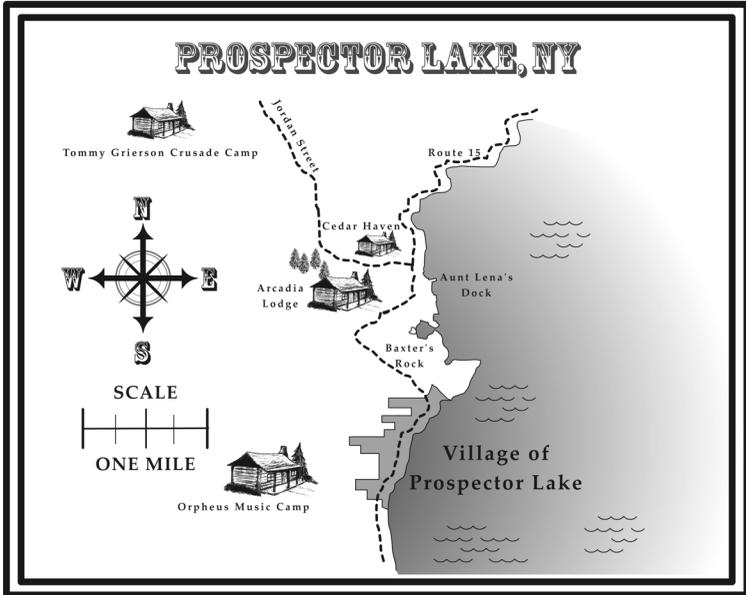
Classification: LCC PS3626.I83 H43 2016 (print) | LCC PS3626.I83 (ebook) |

DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2016006974>

Printed in the United States of America

To Kunda, for support and encouragement beyond compare.



I remember the cool breath of the night woods on my neck. I see the glow of moonlight on the highest boughs, filtering down in a pale cast, weak and washed-out, fading into darkness. I smell the moss and the decay of the forest floor, heady, damp, musky. And I can taste the earthy mushrooms and bitter berries on my tongue. But most of all, I hear the pines whisper and sigh, their needles, like millions of tiny blades, carving voices into the breeze.

CHAPTER ONE

FRIDAY, AUGUST 18, 1961

That night I was at the wheel of my car, nosing my way through ever-narrowing Adirondack back roads, in search of a dirt-and-grass lane leading to my aunt Lena's cabin, Cedar Haven. It was past midnight, and the woods were deserted. At least I hoped they were. When I was a girl, the deep north woods had filled me with alternating sensations of awe and fright. Even in daylight, the forest hid mysteries, always just out of sight, but never out of earshot. If ever I was caught out after dark, I would sprint back to our cabin *à toute vapeur*, as my polyglot father was wont to say. Other dads would have simply said "at full speed."

I must have missed a turnoff, perhaps two or three miles back, so I pulled to a stop to consult a map. The night was still and pitch dark, with the moon either below the horizon or obscured by clouds. Silence all around me. I switched on the radio. Nothing but static. I was out of range of the Albany stations, so I fiddled with the knob and found a crackling voice barely audible at 800 on the dial, but the man was speaking French. Montreal. I hunted some more, finally locating a faint bit of music that might have been Del Shannon. Then an announcer broke in and issued a bulletin. I missed the first half, due to the low volume.

"... escaped this morning from the maximum security Great Meadow Correctional Facility in Comstock. It is not known if Yarrow is armed, but Washington County Sheriff T. T. Buckley advises the public to exercise extreme caution if confronted by the escaped prisoner: Donald Yarrow, a convicted double murderer . . ."

The radio reception faded out, and I didn't wait for it to come back. I floored it, shooting forward into the night—*à toute vapeur*—tires spinning on the gravel shoulder in search of a firm foothold.



SATURDAY, AUGUST 19, 1961

I lay reclined on the wooden slats of the dock that stretched some fifty feet from shore into the lake. The water rolled gently in the breeze, and I closed my eyes, letting the warmth of the afternoon sun spread over my cheeks and my bare limbs. I imagined the world slipping away. Nothing to disturb the calm but the buzz of an outboard motor passing close by as it headed to shore. I ignored it, concentrating instead on the sound of water lapping against the wood. A shadow crossed my face, and I opened my eyes. A bird hovered on the wind above me for a brief moment before alighting on the edge of the dock a few feet from my toes. He folded away his wings. A seagull. Or rather a ring-billed gull, to be precise. My late father's cousin Max, bird-watcher and amateur water-colorist, was a font of knowledge in such matters. I was, in fact, spending a week on the western shore of Prospector Lake in the Adirondacks with him and my aunt Lena, my father's younger sister.

The gray-and-white gull regarded me with one eye, then ducked his head to view me with the other. I drew a lazy breath and made the most momentous decision of the day: ignore the bird and soak in the sun. Time for a nap.

But just then my friend leapt into the air, taking flight, frightened away by a gentle splashing nearby: Aunt Lena. I shielded my brow from the sun with my right hand to see as she reached the ladder and climbed aboard. A low gasp caught in my throat. Of course I had known of her preference to swim *au naturel*, but the actual witnessing of it gave me a jolt.

"We've discussed this, Ellie," she said in all her naked glory, towering over me, obscuring the sun as she dripped cool lake water on me.

I squinted up at her, my face surely betraying feelings of discomfort and embarrassment. She stood there wearing nothing but a white rubber swimming cap festooned with multicolored flowers atop her silvering head. She was fifty-five, nearly ten years younger than my late father, and well preserved. Which only made the experience even more troubling.

"I've been swimming nude here since I was a young bride," she said.

“It’s healthy, and I’m not putting on a suit for you. Since when did you become such a prude?”

For my part, I was tastefully decked out in a navy maillot with white piping. Two years out of date, perhaps, but hardly prudish. It did, however, provide some measure of modesty, which appeared not to concern my aunt. At least not until she noticed the thump of advancing footsteps on the wooden boards beneath us. She turned to see a man approaching from the shore. While perfectly happy to parade about in the altogether in front of her late husband, me, and even her cousin Max, Aunt Lena seemed determined to maintain the veil of mystery between her nudity and the eyes of strangers. She grabbed my beach towel and yanked it out from under me, nearly flipping me over the side of the dock and into the lake.

“Is this pervert one of your friends, Ellie?” she asked, wrapping herself in the towel.

I sat up cross-legged and squinted at our visitor. A large man in dungarees and a sleeveless undershirt was lumbering toward us like a bear emerging from his cave after a long winter. About forty, unshaven, and unwashed, he’d been beached somewhere between portly and flabby on the physical continuum. And he could have used a little sun. His oily, graying hair flapped stiffly in the breeze, like a loose shingle on a roof, while his boots tramped over the planks, trailing wet laces behind him. As he drew nearer, I noticed the stock of a handgun squashed between his considerable belly and the waistband of his trousers, as if it had been trapped and suffocated trying to squeeze its way out.

“You know that nude bathing is prohibited here on Prospector Lake,” he said as he came to a stop and stared us down from ten feet away. He spoke with a slow upstate twang. I thought perhaps he’d suffered an aphasia of some kind. Then I realized he’d been drinking.

“And what about voyeurism?” asked Aunt Lena in her unthreatening way. She wielded a stinging wit, but her delivery was so sweet you hardly realized she was cutting you down to size. “I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure. Who are you?”

The man squinted at her, then glanced down at me, allowing his eyes to linger a second or two over my bust before running down my legs. His lips spread into a contemplative grin, and he blinked slowly before turning his gaze away.

“I’m the chief of police,” he said, almost expecting applause. “Not that I have to answer to nudists.”

Aunt Lena chuckled. "Oh, I know who you are. Max told me we had a new chief of police on the lake. So you're Tiny Terwilliger."

"Ralph Terwilliger," said the man as if it pleased him to say it. "Tiny is a pet name from my younger days."

"*Homo habilis* with scabby knuckles, according to Max," Aunt Lena said to me, cupping a hand over her mouth.

"What's that?"

"What can we do for you, Mr. Terwilliger?" she asked, ignoring his question.

"For starters," he said, "you can stop swimming nude in the lake. And for seconds, I want to ask you ladies if you seen or heard anything out of the ordinary earlier today."

"I saw a gull," I said. "Just a minute ago."

Terwilliger rolled his eyes and sighed. "Did you happen to see anything over toward Baxter's Rock or the Hebrew kee-boots?"

"*The Hebrew kee-boots?*" asked Aunt Lena. "What kind of thing is that to say?"

"The Arcadia Lodge," he said. "The Jew Communists. You know what I mean."

"Mr. Terwilliger, my niece and I are Jews."

"That's real nice," he said. "Anyways, I didn't come out here to talk religion or politics. I wanted to know if you seen or heard anything unusual in the direction of Baxter's Rock."

"I heard those drag racers again last night," said Aunt Lena. "Why don't you do something about them? They're a menace."

There had been a spate of loud cars speeding through the village and surrounding areas for the past week, she'd told me that morning. It was getting on her nerves.

"We're working on that, don't worry," he said. "I've set up a speed trap about a half mile south of here on Route Fifteen. I was there for three hours this morning watching for them. We'll catch them."

"Please do," she said.

"Now back to my question. Did you see or hear anything over by Baxter's Rock?"

"When?" I asked.

He consulted his wrist and, discovering he wasn't wearing a watch, asked me for the time.

I dug into my canvas bag to retrieve my watch. "Just after two," I said.

He did some calculations in his head, then double-checked on his fingers. "Maybe about an hour and a half ago."

"I swam a bit when I got here," I began. "Then I ate my lunch."

"Did you happen to see or hear anything from that direction?" he repeated, pointing to the southwest.

"I was probably dozing on the dock around half past twelve. I heard some motor boats off in the distance, but I can't say for sure which direction or when."

Terwilliger nodded knowingly. "That makes sense," he said but didn't explain why.

"How else may we help you?" asked Aunt Lena, clutching my towel ever more tightly to her breast.

"I noticed that the young lady had a camera," he said, indicating me with a jab of his left forefinger.

Even from my vantage point ten feet away, I could see that the digit was missing the tip, fingernail, and distal joint, surely lopped off while disemboweling a squirrel for Sunday dinner. Or perhaps he'd lost it in a drunken game of mumblety-peg.

"How do you know I have a camera?" I asked.

He looked me up and down a second time. "I seen you taking pictures with it this morning before you came out here for your sunbathing."

That was a lot of creepiness to process in one go. I certainly hadn't seen him, and I wanted my towel back from Aunt Lena. I had risen early on my first day on the lake to shoot some Kodachrome of the sunrise. Then I'd headed back to Cedar Haven for breakfast. I packed a basket with some lemonade and sandwiches and returned to the lake around eleven for my rendezvous with the gulls and my naked aunt. And now a horrid man named Tiny Terwilliger was polluting the air in the general vicinity. He asked if I still had the camera.

"Yes, in my bag."

"Is photography also prohibited on Prospector Lake?" asked Aunt Lena, still in her saccharine voice.

"No, ma'am," he said. "I don't have a camera, you see. And I don't know how to use one. At least not a fancy one like she's got. So I need the young lady to help me take some pictures over there below Baxter's Rock in the cove."

"Pictures of what?" I asked.

The chief turned back to me. "Two dead bodies."